



## Struggle with God and Individual: A Study on Emily Dickenson Select Poems

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**Introduction:** Emily Dickinson, a sensitive but isolated poet, considered to be the one of the best poets of United States of America. Her poems reflect her life in different manner. Her contribution to the literature is immense and also thought provoking to the lovers of poetry. Most of the researchers reveal that her poetry is full of complexity of her position as a woman situated within a large social and economic class. Emily Dickinson led one of the most prosaic lives of any great poet. At a time when fellow poet Walt Whitman was ministering to the Civil War wounded and traveling across America—a time when America itself was reeling in the chaos of war, the tragedy of the Lincoln assassination, and the turmoil of Reconstruction—Dickinson lived a relatively untroubled life in her father’s house in Amherst, Massachusetts, where she was born in 1830 and where she died in 1886. Although popular myth often depicts Dickinson as the solitary genius, she, in fact, remained relatively active in Amherst social circles and often entertained visitors throughout her life. However, she was certainly more isolated than a poet such as Whitman: Her world was bounded by her home and its surrounding countryside; the great events of her day play little role in her poetry. Whitman eulogized Lincoln and wrote about the war; Dickinson, one of the great poets of inwardness ever to write in English, was no social poet—one could read through her Collected Poems—1,776 in all—and emerge with almost no sense of the time in which she lived. Of course, social and historical ideas and values contributed in shaping her character, but Emily Dickinson’s ultimate context is herself, the milieu of her mind.

**Explanation:** Dickinson devoted a great amount of her work to exploring the relationship between an individual and a God. Many poems describe a protracted rebellion against the God whom she deemed scornful and indifferent to human suffering, a divine being perpetually



committed to subjugating human identity. In a sense, she was a religious poet. Unlike other religious poets, who inevitably saw themselves as subordinate to God, Dickinson rejected this premise in her poetry. She was dissatisfied with the notion that the poet can engage with God only insofar as God ordains the poet as his instrument, and she challenged God's dominion throughout her life, refusing to submit to his divine will at the cost of her self. Perhaps her most fiery challenge comes in

“Mine by the Right of the White Election!”

in which the speaker roars in revolt against God, claiming the earth and heavens for herself or himself. Dickinson's poetry criticizes God not by speaking out directly against him, but by detailing the suffering he causes and his various affronts to an individual's sense of self. Though the speaker of;

“Tell all the Truth but tell it slant”

never mentions God, the poem refers obliquely to his suppression of the apostle Paul in the last two lines. Here, the speaker describes how unmitigated truth causes blindness. In the Bible (Acts 9:4), God decides to enlighten Paul by making him blind and then healing him on the condition that thenceforth Paul becomes “a chosen vessel” of God, performing his will. The speaker recoils from this instance of God's juggernaut-like domination of Paul in this poem but follows the poem's advice and tells the truth “slant,” or indirectly, rather than censuring God directly. In another instance of implicit criticism, Dickinson portrays God as a murderous hunter of man in “My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun” (754), in which Death goes about gleefully executing people for his divine master. These poems are among the hundreds of verses in which Dickinson portrays God as aloof, cruel, invasive, insensitive, or vindictive.

In her work, Dickinson asserts the importance of the self, a theme closely related to Dickinson's censure of God. As Dickinson understood it, the mere act of speaking or writing is an affirmation of the will, and the call of the poet, in particular, is the call to explore and express the self to others. For Dickinson, the “self” entails an understanding of identity according to the way it



systematizes its perceptions of the world, forms its goals and values, and comes to judgments regarding what it perceives.

Nearly all Dickinson's speakers behave according to the primacy of the self, despite the efforts of others to intrude on them. Indeed, the self is never more apparent in Dickinson's poetry than when the speaker brandishes it against some potentially violating force. In

“They shut me up in Prose—”

the speaker taunts her captives, who have imprisoned her body but not her mind, which remains free and roaming. Because God most often plays the role of culprit as an omnipotent being, he can and does impose compromising conditions upon individuals according to his whim in Dickinson's work. Against this power, the self is essentially defined. The individual is subject to any amount of suffering, but so long as he or she remains a sovereign self, he or she still has that which separates him or her from other animate and inanimate beings.

Though Dickinson sequestered herself in Amherst for most of her life, she was quite attuned to the modern trends of thought that circulated throughout Europe and North America. Perhaps the most important of these was Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, published in 1859. Besides the tidal wave it unleashed in the scientific community, evolution throttled the notion of a world created by God's grand design. For Dickinson, who renounced obedience to God through the steps of her own mental evolution, this development only reinforced the opposition to the belief in a transcendent and divine design in an increasingly secularized world.

Dickinson began to see language and the word, which were formerly part of God's domain, as the province of the poet. The duty of the poet was to re-create, through words, a sense of the world as a place in which objects have an essential and almost mythic relationship to each other. Dickinson's poems often link abstract entities to physical things in an attempt to embrace or create an integral design in the world. In these poems, Dickinson employs metaphors that assign physical qualities to the abstract feeling of “hope” in order to flesh out the nature of the word and what it means to human consciousness.



For Dickinson, seeing is a form of individual power. Sight requires that the seer have the authority to associate with the world around her or him in meaningful ways and the sovereignty to act based on what she or he believes exists as opposed to what another entity dictates. In this sense, sight becomes an important expression of the self, and consequently the speakers in Dickinson's poems value it highly. The horror that the speaker of "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—" (465) experiences is attributable to her loss of eyesight in the moments leading up to her death. The final utterance, "I could not see to see" (16), points to the fact that the last gasp of life, and thus of selfhood, is concentrated on the desire to "see" more than anything else. In this poem, sight and self are so synonymous that the end of one (blindness) translates into the end of the other (death). In other poems, sight and self seem literally fused, a connection that Dickinson toys with by playing on the sonic similarity of the words I and eye. This wordplay abounds in Dickinson's body of work. It is used especially effectively in the third stanza of "The Soul selects her own Society—" (303), in which the speaker declares that she knows the soul, or the self. She commands the soul to choose one person from a great number of people and then "close the lids" of attention. In this poem, the "I" that is the soul has eyelike properties: closing the lids, an act that would prevent seeing, is tantamount to cutting off the "I" from the rest of society.

**Conclusion:** Dickinson is simply unlike any other poet; her compact, forceful language, characterized formally by long disruptive dashes, heavy iambic meters, and angular, imprecise rhymes, is one of the singular literary achievements of the nineteenth century. Her aphoristic style, whereby substantial meanings are compressed into very few words, can be daunting, but many of her best and most famous poems are comprehensible even on the first reading. During her lifetime, Dickinson published hardly any of her massive poetic output (fewer than ten of her nearly 1,800 poems) and was utterly unknown as a writer. After Dickinson's death, her sister discovered her notebooks and published the contents, thus, presenting America with a tremendous poetic legacy that appeared fully formed and without any warning. As a result, Dickinson has tended to occupy a rather uneasy place in the canon of American poetry; writers and critics have not always known what to make of her. Today, her place as one of the two finest American poets of the nineteenth century is secure: Along with Whitman, she literally defines the very era that had so little palpable impact on her poetry. Dickinson's greatest achievement as



a poet of inwardness is her brilliant, diamond-hard language. Dickinson often writes aphoristically, meaning that she compresses a great deal of meaning into a very small number of words. This can make her poems hard to understand on a first reading, but when their meaning does unveil itself, it often explodes in the mind all at once, and lines that seemed baffling can become intensely and unforgettably clear. Other poems—many of her most famous, in fact—are much less difficult to understand, and they exhibit her extraordinary powers of observation and description. Dickinson’s imagination can lead her into very peculiar territory—some of her most famous poems are bizarre death-fantasies and astonishing metaphorical conceits—but she is equally deft in her navigation of the domestic, writing beautiful nature-lyrics alongside her wild flights of imagination and often combining the two with great facility.

References:

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