
Discussion of Symbols in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson wrote many poems throughout her life; however, very few were published. Emily wrote her poems to be encrypted and enigmatic for the reader. She valued her abilities to create a deeper meaning in her poems; she also loved to make not only small part of her poems, but the whole poem symbolic. Emily Dickinson's use of symbolism is what made her poetry so touching to the readers, because symbolism is a very important part of literature.

Symbolism gives readers a connection to their own lives. A symbol could even serve as a lesson for the reader, much like the theme or moral of a story. In Cuéllar Cajiao's paper, *Disentangling Emily Dickinson's Riddles and Encoded Voices in "My Life had Stood a Loaded Gun" and "I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed"*, Cajiao states "Each reader has his/her own way of making meaning out of texts according to a complex mix of personal experience, training and sensibility" (Cajiao 28). This quote expresses the fact that the symbol of a piece of literature may be different among different people based on their life; one may see a symbol different from another in the same piece of literature. With that said, authors like Emily Dickinson crafted their literature work with symbols based from their life. By doing this, authors are able to give the readers a connection to their own life. Though symbolism is everywhere in literature, especially poetry, it can be slightly difficult to find from time to time. Michael Farber noticed how hard it was to find both symbols and their meanings when he sent one of his students to find the reason why myrtle was a symbol. Farber, after noticing the difficulty of finding symbols and their meanings, created a book called *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. In it, he wrote: "But where, exactly, do you send a student to find out the symbolic meaning of [anything]" (Ferber 1). Emily's poems, much like other works of literature, can have symbolism that is difficult to locate. However, knowing a little bit about Emily's background can make it a little easier to find what Emily's intended symbolism is.

Emily lived a very simple, and to the naked eye, boring life according to Gerhard Brand's *Biography of Emily Dickinson*: "[Emily] was born in the town of Amherst, Massachusetts, on December 10, 1830, spent almost her entire life in her family home, and died there on May 15, 1886. She graduated from Amherst Academy in 1847, then attended nearby Mount Holyoke Female Seminary for one year. She traveled occasionally to Springfield and twice to Boston. In 1885, she and her family visited Washington and Philadelphia. She never married" (Brand 12). Brand states that this small quote is Emily's life summed up; however, Brand also writes: "Yet her interior life was so intense that a distinguished twentieth century poet and critic, Allen Tate, could write, 'All pity for Miss Dickinson's 'starved life' is misdirected. Her life was one of the richest and deepest ever lived on this continent.'" It is a life that has proved a perplexing puzzle to many critics and biographers." (Brand 12). Despite her seemingly boring life, Emily wrote

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many poems, around two thousand to be exact. She only published ten in her local library, however. In Roseanne Hoefel's analysis of *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, she states: "After Emily Dickinson's death in 1886, her sister Lavinia found forty-nine fascicles, or packets [...] These were well received and led to the publication in 1891 of 161 additional poems and, in 1896, of 168 more [...] In 1914, Dickinson's niece and literary heir, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, compiled other poems [...] Millicent Todd Bingham in 1945 published the remaining 688 poems and fragments" (Roseanne).

This is how we have been able to see all of Emily's known work, rather than only the ten that she published while she was alive. Many of her poems were about her favorite thing: nature. In terms of her religion, Emily attended a Congregational church; however, her view of God was very odd. She did believe and fear God, yet at times in her poetry she would give up on God. Emily's death is marked on May 15, 1886. In Thomas Arp's book, *Perrine's Literature: Structure, Sound & Sense*, twenty-one of Emily's more popular poems are listed. Included in this list are: *A Light Exists in Spring*, *I Heard a Fly Buzz- When I Died*, *Apparently with no surprise and I taste a liquor never brewed* (Arp XVIII-XIX). In Dickinson's *I Heard a Fly Buzz- When I Died*, most of the symbolism can be found as the fly and the people in her room. In this poem, the narrator is lying on his or her death bed, with her friends and family surrounding her. In Christopher Nesmith's analysis of this poem, he writes: "Although it may seem I am placing myself on the side that the fly's appearance is an evil omen or at least a negative symbol [...] I differ with [those who believe this] in emphasizing that the introduction of the fly into the scene suggests a kind of natural chaos amid the imposed artificial order and propriety of the scene" (Nesmith 165). Not only does this express Nesmith's view on the symbolism of the fly in Emily's poem, it also expresses that not everyone will view a symbol the same way. Another poem by Emily, *Apparently with no surprise*, shows one example of how Emily used a whole poem to express a symbol. This poem has been deemed one that expresses Emily's feelings of God. In Richard Brantley's analysis of this poem, he states: "In 'Apparently with no surprise' the speaker sarcastically gives up on God and triumphantly spurns him without denying that he existed in the past or waiving the right to speak with him again" (Brantley 24). This poem symbolizes a struggle that Emily had with God. The struggle was probably fairly large and upset Emily with her relationship with God. Emily's poem *I taste a liquor never brewed*, shows an example of both her love for nature and her symbolism through multiple parts of her poetry. Emily's poem is written: "I taste a liquor never brewed- From Tankards scooped in Pearl- Not all the Vats upon the Rhine Yield such an Alcohol!"

Leaning against the- Sun-" (Dickinson in Arp 737-738). The speaker of this poem has been discovered to be a hummingbird. The hummingbird is drinking from a flower that is "From inns of Molten Blue" (Dickinson in Arp 737). The quote: "From Tankards scooped in Pearl" refers to the inner part of the flower that the hummingbird drinks nectar from (Dickinson in Arp 737). Another quote, "I taste a liquor never brewed", is talking about the nectar in the plants; nectar is

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sweet and nutritious to both humming birds and butterflies, and nectar is naturally made. The two lines that mention “Bee” and “Butterflies” is speaking about how now the humming bird is the only animal or insect collecting the nectar from plants; therefore, the humming bird doesn’t have to battle any creatures for a turn at each flower (Dickinson in Arp 737). The last stanza of the poem can be slightly confusing; however, all the last stanza means is that the humming bird will continue to drink nectar from the plants until it finally dies. Each of these symbols help Emily to express her meaning of the poem to each and every reader.

Lastly, another of Emily’s poems is A Light Exists in Spring. This is one of the most difficult to understand of Emily’s poems, as much of the comparisons and contrasts don’t make much sense. In Singrid Renaux’s analysis of this poem, he states: “It has yet to be established why Emily Dickinson chose the word “Trade” to contrast with “Sacrament” so as to suggest the violation felt by the speaker with the loss of spring light” (Renaux 132). Emily’s symbolism of this poem also hasn’t been determined yet; however, some people believe that this poem is a reference to possibly the devil. Yet, others believe the exact opposite; the poem is a reference to her relationship with God. Either way, no one has found what Emily’s meaning to this poem is quite yet; however, people will still be putting their skills to the test to try and determine Emily’s symbolism of this poem. Symbolism was a critical part of Emily Dickinson's poems, and it continues to be an important part of literature. Though Emily seemed to live a boring life, she made the most of everyday and wrote like she loved to do. Emily created some of the most enigmatic poems that we have today. Emily's poetry also helps to inspire others to write their own symbolic poetry and literature. Thankfully, Emily's family has found her poems and has since published them so that all may enjoy Emily's great mind and symbolic poetry.

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