
Dickinson's Poetry in the Context of the Romantic Era

“Whenever a thing is done for the first time, it releases a little demon” (Dickinson, n.d.). At first glance, this utterance by Emily Dickinson conveys a negative attitude towards the unique and the new. However, upon second interpretation, this quote manages to perfectly encapsulate the very essence of the Romantic Era as well as Dickinson’s immense influence on literary schools of thought at the time. This essay will discuss in detail this influence. First, a brief explanation of the Romantic Era and a definition of Romanticism will be provided for the sake of context. Then, the forces at work during the Romantic era will be explained with reference to a number of Dickinson’s poems.

Simply put, Romanticism is the “establishment of human life on a pure basis of feeling” (Sreedharan, 2004: 128). To the Romantic, the medium of feeling or emotion did not replace the medium of thought. Instead, the medium of feeling was the medium of thought. Historical context is key when discussing the Romantic era. During this time, the world and, more specifically, the literary community experienced a surge of freedom in terms of ideas and schools of belief. One of the most prominent schools of thought was the reaction to the rationalization of science and the rise of individuality in artistic works. Such themes are brought across in Emily Dickinson’s *Wild Nights* (Dickinson, 1999), a poem written in a time when the liberation of women, specifically the sexual liberation of women, was very much taboo. In the poem, the speaker fantasizes about nights she would spend with her lover. Besides the blatant sexual overtones of the short poem which are conveyed through words such as “our luxury!” (Dickinson, 1999:1: IV), Dickinson’s work also speaks to the changes experienced by the intellectual community at the height of Romanticism. One of these changes is the rise of individuality and personal perspective in literary works. The lines, “Done with the compass – Done with the Chart!” (Dickinson, 1999: 2: VI-VII) suggest that the poet, like a representative Romantic intellectual, is blazing her own path without the help of literary works that have come before. And Dickinson’s personal writing style and unique use of grammar stand as testaments to the Romantic emphasis on experimentation. For example, her poetry makes extensive uses of hyphens, as is seen in lines such as, “Rowing in Eden –”, (Dickinson, 1999: 3: IX) and, “Ah – the sea!” (Dickinson, 1999: 3: X) in *Wild Nights*. What could be interpreted as a mere pause is instead Dickinson conveying the speaker’s apprehension towards the almost infinite liberation (the sea) that lies before her.

Besides its emphasis on feeling and emotion, the Romantic era also influenced individuals to focus less on rational experience and turn their attention to aesthetic experience instead. A major component of this experience was a newfound interest in nature; fittingly, references to nature and all its wonder can be found in almost all of Dickinson’s poems. Her use of the sea

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as a metaphor for personal liberation in *Wild nights*, *Wild Nights* is just one blatant example. But Dickinson's use of natural imagery did not end with the environment. She made extensive use of animal imagery in her poems in order to convey her themes. A prime example would be the figure of a minuscule bird as a representation of the persistence of hope in her poem "*Hope*" is *the thing with feathers* (Dickinson, 1999). This image, when combined with the imagery of inhospitable environments such as "the chilliest land" (Dickinson, 1999: 3: IX) and "the strangest sea" (Dickinson, 1999: 3: X), suggests that Dickinson had a more intimate and unique understanding of nature than did most of her peers at the time.

No discussion on Romanticism or Dickinson would be complete without reference to mortality or death. After all, Romanticism was fueled by emotions. Terror and horror, especially towards the thought of the afterlife, were just some of these strong impulses. Yet Dickinson incorporates other emotions in her meditations on death, including confusion and morbidity, as seen in her poem *Death sets a thing significant* (Dickinson, 1999). These feelings are brought across in lines such as "To ponder little workmanships" (Dickinson, 1999: 2: V). Dickinson was no different from other individuals, as she felt the desire to reflect on traces of a lost loved one after that loved one's death (O'Sullivan, 2010: 1). Indeed, Dickinson's confusion towards death is further explored in her short poem *Is Heaven a Physician?* (Dickinson, 1999). Here, she ponders the healing power of Heaven and how useful it really is if it only occurs after a person has died (Dickinson, 1999: 1: III-IV). Her satirizing of the afterlife is given even more gravitas in the second half of the poem, when she questions the debt she owes to God. Her words, "But that negotiation I'm not a party to –", (Dickinson, 1999: 2: VII-VIII) suggest that she is not only displeased with God, but also angry at Him. However, it is interesting to note that the poem ends on a hyphen. This could mean that the speaker is still indecisive with regard to her opinion about the afterlife, or even that she hopes that the reader will not share her decidedly cynical attitude towards Heaven.

"That it will never come again is what makes life sweet." (Dickinson, n.d.). While perhaps oversimplified, this quote by Emily Dickinson seems to perfectly encapsulate the ever fleeting mortality of the human condition. However, it also speaks to the pure uniqueness of the Romantic era. Although Romanticism shaped Dickinson, our current understanding of Romanticism would not be possible without Dickinson's influence, specifically her penchant for nature, her near obsession with morbidity, and, above all, her love for the individual.

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