

## Emily Dickinson: A Preview



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### ABSTRACT

*Born on December 10, 1830 at Amherst, Massachusetts in the United State Emily Dickinson is one of the most significant American poets and generations after generation of readers have been charged with her poetry. Emily Dickinson's poetry is a rich treasure trove of her response towards life, towards death and towards nature. As we explore her poetry we realise that she is a highly individual and sensitive poet who is endeavouring to understand the meaning of life and everything allied to life in a manner which is not rational but mystical. This lends a special quality to her poetry which can be called almost spiritual and puts her on a par with great mystical poets like Walt Whitman. Emily Dickinson's poetry, in fact, is a poetry wherein we encounter a soul in agony struggling to come to terms with the brutality and savagery of life and in the process attaining a sense of enlightenment. As she grapples with the brutal heart breaking realities of life, she transcends from the world of gross reality into a world of spirituality. The quality of transcendence creates in her poetry a highly imaginative and symbolic fervour and translucency thus lending to it an indefinable charm.*

Most of her poems were concerned with God, Nature, Death, Love and Renunciation. Emily Dickinson emerges as a tortured soul who tried to make an endeavour to understand herself through the triangle of Man, Nature and God.

Born on December 10, 1830 at Amherst, Massachusetts in the United State Emily Dickinson is one of the most significant American poets and generations after generation of readers have been charged with her poetry. Emily Dickinson's poetry is a rich treasure trove of her response towards life, towards death and towards nature. As we explore her poetry we realise that she is a highly individual and sensitive poet who is endeavouring to understand the meaning of life and everything allied to life in a manner which is not rational but mystical. This lends a special quality to her poetry which can be called almost spiritual and puts her on a par with great mystical poets like Walt Whitman. Emily Dickinson's poetry, in fact, is a poetry wherein we encounter a soul in agony struggling to come to terms with the brutality and savagery of life and in the process attaining a sense of enlightenment. As she grapples with the brutal heart breaking realities of life, she transcends from the world of gross reality into a world of spirituality. The quality of transcendence creates in her poetry a highly imaginative and symbolic fervour and translucency thus lending to it an indefinable charm. In this sense her poetry emerges as a fine combination of thought and sensibility wherein sensibility seems to dominate thus, according a poetic balance in her poetry. It may be said that she relied more on intuition rather than reason. However, it may be clearly pointed out that in spite of the Christian religious influence her poetry is not religious in nature as is the poetry of

Milton. But we may still understand that in spite of the religious content of the poetry of her nature is essentially spiritual with mystical undertones. Due to some unfortunate familiar and social circumstances Emily Dickinson turned into a recluse and as her poetry indicates she was a non-toiler. She creates her own rules, learnt the hard way and never was hungry for publicity. Since there were not many friends, she worked almost under no literary guidance except perhaps from E.W. Higginson with whom she had a regular correspondence. Her second mentor was Charles Wadsworth, a clergyman in Philadelphia about whom it is speculated that she had fallen in love with him. The third man in regular contact with her was Samuel Bowles, about who also is a speculation that Emily Dickinson was hopelessly in love with. In spite of all this conjunctures, Emily Dickinson was more or less an uneventful one. She did not have an active social life and preferred an almost total seclusion isolation and alienation. This living aloof perhaps activated and energised her imagination which resulted in her minute observation about life, death and nature.

Most of her poems were concerned with God. The Creator, the Redeemer, with death and immortality. They seem to be a result of a deep insight and emotional nature. There is faith and religious conviction with a complete identification with divine spirit. Death and heaven were the objects of constant speculation of her poems. With her religious bent of mind, and her Calvinistic upbringing, her faith, the identity of the soul, and the reality of God and immortality are considered as the "flood subject". She believed that love endured beyond the grave and this confidence supported her hope of immortality, which was threshold for death and

the soul's identity could not be lost. She uses the word 'soul' whereas an ordinary poet may have used "person" or human being. In her poems instead of saying that a person selects the society she says the soul selects her own society. Emily Dickinson's views on God are expressed in a number of poems. Often she speaks of divine love in terms of sexual, and it becomes difficult to say whether the object of love is God or some earthly being. This has been the traditional way of the mystics. This ambiguity is in the Calvary group of poems and in the Bridal poem. In one of her Bridal poems she feels she is too spotted or too stained with sins to be wholly worthy of being the bride of Christ. Human life has been compared to a garden where one has to watch against the growth of rank weeds and to remove them whenever they show their ugly face. In fact, a mystic ponders on the question of life, death, nature of human soul, and its life after death in other world, He believes in the immortality of the soul and its pre-existence. Emily Dickinson is also concerned with such fundamental questions and from a study of her poetry, one can form a clear idea of her view on (a) God (b) Death and (c) Immortality. However, it should also be remembered that she was first and foremost an artist, a poet as such her writings are mood-dictated, and contradictions and divergences are frequent.

In her poetry death has been an interesting and compelling topic. Other poets and writers have shown their fear of death. Mortality has been treated as a crisis by some; while others have taken it as a destination with significance. Another group has taken it as a goal. Death provides a wide spectrum of ideas than can be expanded upon with dignity or a magnanimous idea. Poets have delved deep into this topic from its grotesqueness to its humbleness. They approach or meditate upon death with disgust as well as nonchalance. But Emily Dickinson depicts death with the endearment of romantic attraction. Many poets like Sylvia Plath attempt to deal with death in an objective manner from a third person's point of view whereas Emily Dickinson describes it from her own outlook.

Emily Dickinson studied death from every conceivable angle in poem after poem. She presented death as who would cringe from it or run away from it in terror. She rather presented it with philosophical detachment and blatant realism. She accepts death as a physical fact, as a material truth. This leads to philosophical or theological thoughts. However, her immediate interest in the poems is to dramatise the event to bring out the tension or inner drama that such a catastrophic event will have on the minds of the readers. The result of this in her poetry is a close attention to details, of utterance, observation of particulars and a dynamic and explosive use of language. This explains

why there is little consistency in her pronouncements on death, on its physical or philosophical impact

Her death poems can be broadly taken up into groups

- 1) Dealing with death and immortality
- 2) Dealing with physical aspect of death
- 3) Dealing with personification of death
- 4) Dealing with an elegiac note

There is no doubt that much had been written about Nature before Emily Dickinson started her poetic career. Nature had been studied from all possible angles. Nature as an analogy of God, as a mode of escape from the materialistic world, as a healer and moral teacher, as a manifestation of divine spirit- all these aspects have been dealt by the poets before her. In her passion for originality she manages, on the whole, to avoid the risk of derivativeness in her nature poetry. She rejects the conventional approach towards nature. She treats it as mere spectacle to run off into fantasy. However, she achieves real success.

There is no doubt that Emily Dickinson is a keen observer of various aspects of Nature. Her poetry becomes a sort of chronicle or noting of keen observations of sights, sounds and smells. Emily Dickinson observes nature in all her hues- the beautiful and the ugly, the calm and the fiery. She neither follows Wordsworthian pattern of Nature as a friend, guide or guardian nor does she follow Whitman's principle of the triangle formed by Man, Nature and God. Though they may be in relation but soon they tend to move in three different directions. She has a runaway imagination with the help of which she is able to carve out beautiful figure images. These images sometime occur in a recurrent manner and turn into symbols of life and death. There is no doubt that there is a touch of mysticism in Emily Dickinson's poetry and this seems to be the robust outcome of her fancy with beautiful metaphors, similes and other figures of speech.

On reading her poems, we realise that there is an overwhelming presence of an element of love in her poetry. Initially, Emily Dickinson seems to be vaguely romantic and writes poetry heavily tinged with love with individuals whose identity we may not know for certain; we may speculate about various objects of her love. Her love poetry depicts her lover for her absent lover. She pours her love without any hopes of its being reciprocated. These poems are not meant for being communicated but for her relief and satisfaction. Her lovely life enabled her to analyse the emotion of love and to observe its various complex and varied shades. The second group of love poems may be called the poems of separation and suffering. As fate had planned that she should not have bliss of union. Thus, she wrote her poems of sorrow with assured competence. She thought nature would be different after the

crisis and sympathise with Queen of Calvary as she called herself. But everything was usual except herself who felt the loss. Realising this, the gulf, that separates them, cannot be bridged. She writes about her unhappiness time and again. She is sad to understand that bliss in life is a fiction which seems plausible but not real. To die for him was easier than to live unhappily without him.

The Third Group of poem may be called poem on Renunciation. After the realisation that the object of her love is as distant as the moon and there is no hope of union with him, she consoles herself with the idea that he exists somewhere in silence to surprise her. Apart from this, she has mocked her broken heart with metaphysical conceits. It provides charm to the poem wherein she would not hesitate to transform herself into a rhinoceros or a mouse Ultimately with the passage of time the element of love takes a spiritual tinge and thus, there is a presence of symbols and images which may be taken as suggestion of a mind wherein the poet seems to have embarked upon a journey away from the realism of romantic or carnal love and seems to embark upon a spiritual voyage where God or sometimes death emerges as the ultimate lover.

Most of Emily Dickinson's love poetry had its source in her own experience of passion, but she also considered the subject from a philosophical viewpoint. As a prosodist experimenting in meters, rhyme, capitals, grammar and punctuation; Emily Dickinson exhibited curious boldness, which is responsible for her remaining unknown as a poet during her life time. Her innovative, unorthodox writing exhibits a notable adaptability of language. She uses dashes and capitals as a means of emphasis. Her readers have been greatly accommodating themselves to the eccentricities of a private poet who deliberately violated grammar to achieve special effects. Just to add variety and suppleness to poem and to provide musical effect she has given metrical and rhyme patterns. Her punctuation is eccentric. Her use of dash is varied- long, short, high, low standing up, down at initial stage they may battle but its use seems justified. She did not care for grammar, rhyme or meter. Her capitalisation of nouns, adjectives cannot be reduced to principle. The dash is almost exclusive mark of punctuation. It sometimes stands for comma sometimes it indicates the pause of anticipation or suspense. Her use of capitals and dashes was mean-

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ingful to her. She breaks loose from formal mechanics as from all other formalities. Like Blake she used private symbols as they were self-evident. Her capitalization was to emphasise the words. Her poetic technique depended upon 'language of surprise' nit, paradox and irony to reveal the naked soul in dramatic conflict with established conventions. She omitted phrases, cut through syntax to achieve conciseness and to capture spontaneity and excitement of her thoughts. Her technique was telegraphic.

To conclude, the whole argument it may be said that Emily Dickinson is an exceptional individual and exceptional poet as revealed in the corpus of her poetry. She is a product of her times yet she moves ahead of her times breaks new path. She moves into the realm of the unknown and unknowable with her intuitive apprehension of the truths and the half truths and in the process transcends the world of cross-material reality. However, it may also be understood that this intuitive apprehension of the human world, Nature and God does not make her loss over the beauties of Nature that lies shattered around her. Nor is she oblivious of the passions of human love though there is always a tinge of spirituality rather than carnality in her poetry. As a sensitive poet Emily Dickinson goes through the experiential truths of pain and suffering and through them she comes to realise their intrinsic nature and significance in the human situation. This acceptance gives her strength to accept the reality of pain and regain human balance. She, as a post romantic deal with, is rather obsessed with the theme of death nevertheless; she is not obsessed with death in the Keatsian sense. In fact, she grapples with the phenomena of death in a half-cerebral and half emotional manner and thus to a great extent is able to demystify death almost in the manner of John Donne.

In the final analysis, Emily Dickinson emerges as a tortured soul who tried to make an endeavour to understand herself through the triangle of Man, Nature and God. Her approach to all the three was tintured with the tools of intuitive apprehension which would be called mystic intuition through which she tried to transcend the palpable reality of the human world and reach a paradise of her own where there would be no pain, no suffering, no loneliness and perhaps no death. It would be a place full of peace, love, harmony and contentment- 'a sort of state of immortality' even if it were a mere an island of her own idealism or imagination.