

Emily Dickinson: Writing it 'Slant'

American poet Emily Dickinson [1] (1830-1886) is today best known for her use of slant-rhyme, conceits, and unconventional punctuation, as well as her near-legendary reclusive habits. She was part of a prominent Amherst, Massachusetts family. As neither Emily nor her sister Lavinia ever married, they remained at home and looked after their parents. Dickinson became very reclusive with age, sometimes speaking to guests from behind a door, but she also maintained close, intellectual friendships through her correspondence with literary men Samuel Bowles and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, as well as her best friend, neighbour, and sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson.

Dickinson has perhaps unfairly earned a reputation for being a rather morbid poet, focused intently on death. Death was certainly a preoccupation of Dickinson's, especially as her New England culture was permeated with evangelical Christian questions of salvation, redemption, and the afterlife. However, Dickinson also wrote powerfully about nature and questions of knowledge, faith, and love.

When Dickinson did write about death, she wrote it 'slant', coming to the subject with her own distinctive twist. In the 1863 poem 'I heard a Fly buzz ? when I died' (in *Poems, Third Series* [2]; Chapter 4:46) Dickinson enumerates the elements of a conventional and pious deathbed scene: 'I willed my Keepsakes ? Signed away | What portion of me be | Assignable?'. The speaker has completed her earthly business while the watchers wait for 'that last Onset ? when the King | Be witnessed ? in the Room ?'. But, as the first line of the poem hints, the watchers and the dying speaker do not witness the coming of Christ the Bridegroom but that of a mundane housefly.

The fly diminishes and ironises this commonplace and sentiment-laden moment of death. It is not what the watchers, the speaker, or the reader expect. While the fly diminishes the lead up to the speaker's death, its appearance also creates a break, coming between 'the light' and the speaker at the very moment of transition: 'And then the Windows failed ? and then | I could not see to see'. In the end, the speaker sees the fly and the abyss of oblivion, not the promised salvation or Christ the King. Dickinson uses her trademark dash and carefully placed line breaks to indicate the moment of death, the sudden shift from sight to blindness, light to nothingness.

Dickinson has taken the deathbed scene, elsewhere played for melodramatic value such as Little Eva's death in Harriet Beecher Stowe's immensely popular *Uncle Tom's Cabin* [3] (1852), and used it to consider the reality of death and possibility of annihilation. Emily Dickinson's poetry is characterised by such moments of sudden shifts, arresting imagery, and carefully considered 'dashing'.

Emily Dickinson did not become known as a poet until after her own death. She had asked Lavinia to burn her papers after her death, but when Lavinia discovered the massive number of poems in a drawer, she passed them instead to Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd (in fact, the mistress of Dickinson's brother) who published three volumes of Dickinson's poetry [4] in the 1890s.

Dickinson's poems are small things, most very short, but they hold a world of beauty within them, if you are willing to read them 'slant' and tease out her meaning.

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[1] <http://writersinspire.org/writers/emily-dickinson>

[2] <http://writersinspire.org/content/poems-third-series>

[3] <http://writersinspire.org/content/uncle-tom%E2%80%99s-cabin-or-life-among-lowly>

[4]

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