

## EMILY DICKINSON

### A Case Study in Reading, Energy, and Imagery

#### POEMS

“He showed me Hights I never saw –” and “Before I got my eye put out –”

#### READING AS A WRITER

Reading like a writer involves reading with an eye to technique, putting yourself in the writer’s shoes, and thinking about why they made specific choices. If you feel that a story or poem is unsuccessful, then it is important to re-read it, thinking about what effect the author might have been trying to achieve. Likewise, if a piece of writing moves you to laughter or tears, you also want to look at how the story is constructed. The goal in both cases is to learn from others’ successes and/or mistakes.

Readers who are able to gain insight into a piece of literature generally use a similar set of strategies. *The Practice of Creative Writing* does a good job guiding you through these steps. I want to underline, however, the necessity of annotating (taking notes on) as you read and re-read a text. I have scanned two poems by Emily Dickinson as a touchstone.

In “He showed me Hights...,” I was interested in not just the text of the poem itself, which I had read many times before. I wanted to take my analysis of the poem further, and went back to the original copy of the manuscript handwritten by Dickinson (she never published her poems, so the handwritten copy is considered her final draft). In looking at this, I noticed how different her version is from the printed version. There are significant changes that alter the way that I think about the poem, including line breaks and punctuation. One significant example is the use of the word “larger” in line 11. In Dickinson’s handwritten poem, she uses the word “steadier” and indicated “larger” as a possible substitution. This not only complicates a critical reading of the poem, but as a writer it gives me insight into the decisions she was making as she composed. I can also study the use of meter, rhyme, etc., thinking about their effect on me, and *how* she accomplishes this technically.

The second poem, “Before I got my eye put out,” is one that I have annotated as I read and re-read it. A key to successful reading is reading a poem or story *multiple* times. In general, you should expect to read a story twice in order to be able to think about it intelligently, and to read a

poem at least four times. While I am not going to go through a detailed reading of the poem, I am interested in having you see how I take notes alongside the poem. The margins of a poem or story are the place to jot questions, underline moments that seem particularly moving, some thoughts about analysis or simply noting a technique (in the first line, I scanned the meter of the line and wrote “pun,” in order to remind myself to look for that type of play later in the poem).

In addition to reading silently, it is crucial with poetry that you *read it out loud*. Many musical effects, puns (I and eye), and a general sense of tone depend on the orality of verse. Remember in a poem that you pause very briefly at the end of a line (about a half-comma’s rest).

## ENERGY

Let’s return to “Before I got my eye put out –” and think about the way Dickinson manipulates energy in the poem. In terms of subject matter, she is grappling with the speaker’s (the “I” is called a speaker in poetry, to distinguish it from the poet) keen sense of perception and the danger of such exposure. The self/soul is literally blinded by the intensity of feeling, and retreats, even as she simultaneously desires to venture forth again. This ambivalence is called tension, and all good writing has it. The power in the poem comes from the fact that there is no answer. This is the “strong mixed feelings” that Heather Sellers identifies in the textbook.

The poem also makes leaps that force us to fill in the gaps, and engages us actively as readers. One of the reasons that Dickinson is considered a major poet is because she is a master of the leap. In this poem, there is a gap between nearly every line. Often she indicates such leaps grammatically, with dashes. In the first stanza (the first four lines; a stanza is somewhat like a paragraph in prose), each pause and gap between phrases disorients you briefly, forcing you to actively make meaning. Immediately in line one, there is the question of how the speaker’s eye was “put out.” What does that look like? It seems violent, but we have no sense of the agency behind the action. It isn’t until we reach the end of the poem that we can look back, and determine if we think it was the sun that blinded. There is the play with “put their eyes” (again, placing them on the glass of the window seems a strange image, and rather violent itself) and “put out” that links them both to the sun. The poem also seems to propose that the eye and the soul are not altogether different, but does it in an utterly new way.

The last area that generates energy in Dickinson’s work (there are too many to discuss here!) is her careful and effective word choice. In many ways, the words that she uses (called “diction”) are not that out of the ordinary. While she is an intricate poet, the energy does not come from difficult

words (how many of the words would you need to look up in this poem?). It is the way in which she uses them, and the sparing use of more “exotic” words. These exotics gain energy because they are unexpected, and generally used in a slightly different way than usual. One example of this type of play is “Stintless stars.” Set off by dashes, we pause over it, wondering what exactly a stintless star is, or looks like. But the word “stintless” alters an otherwise typical landscape (mountains, meadows, forests). Dickinson further draws our attention to it musically – the “st” sound is used at the beginning of both words (this is called alliteration), and the end of both words end in “s.” This line is also the turning point of the poem, falling in the exact center.

## IMAGES

Strong imagery is a crucial element in poetry and fiction. There are two primary modes of imagery: descriptive and figurative. Descriptive imagery aims to help us experience something via sensory detail. This is not just visual imagery, though that is often the first thing we think about. But unlike painting or photography, writers are able to evoke all five senses. When you rely too heavily on visual imagery, a poem or story can lose energy. Remember to try and include as many of the senses as possible in your descriptive imagery: taste, touch, sound, sight, smell. Images of smell are often particularly effective; just think of how often a specific smell can transport us back to a memory or physical experience.

The two types of figurative imagery we will focus on this semester are metaphor and simile. Both create new meaning by forging a connection between two things that readers had previously not thought of as linked. You need to be sure and avoid using metaphors and similes that have been used before. The power of figurative imagery springs from the suddenness of the connection, how it clicks. It is like a joke. If you have to explain it, it’s no good. And if you’ve heard the joke many times before, it’s no longer funny. “Love is like a rose” is a wonderful figurative image (simile, in this case). Linking the idea of love to the rose’s scent and petals captures the beauty of it. But the rose is also transient by nature; it will bloom and then die away. Roses take a great deal of effort to cultivate. Finally, the fact that roses have thorns also complicates the idea of love: it is beautiful but painful to the touch. Unfortunately, however, this phrase has become a cliché. It’s not that it wasn’t a brilliant image. It’s just that we’ve heard it so many times that we hardly stop to even think about it. You need to avoid clichés and hackneyed language if you want your writing to be experienced vividly by readers.

In Dickinson's poem, "He showed me Hights I never saw —," she makes heavy use of figurative imagery (her poems are often sparse in terms of sensory details — her contemporary Walt Whitman, considered a "poet of the body," made great use of them, however). The "Hights" (her spelling) are both mountain and heaven. She then describes earth as morning's nest. Our world (both planet and plane of existence) become a nest, a place of beginnings (morning and before death), where we are nurtured before we can move on/fly (death). He then shows the speaker "The Rope the Nights were put across —." Night is portrayed as a sheet on a line, much as one might believe that a sheet or veil separates the living from the dead (at least as Dickinson often surmised). All in 13 words. I've only begun to paraphrase and try to explain how those words function, and that is precisely the power of figurative imagery. It hits us instantaneously, and in a very small amount of space.