



The Poetry of Dickinson

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In contrast to many of her contemporaries Dickinson had minimal experience with the world, spending almost every day of her life in a single house in Amherst, Massachusetts. Yet her poetry displays a range of perception and emotion that few poets have matched.

She might be called a miniaturist, since most of her poems have fewer than 30 lines, yet she deals with the profoundest subjects in poetry: death, love, humanity's relations to God and nature.

Her poetry impresses by its constantly amazing freshness and vitality. Not only does she approach her subjects in unique ways, but her use of language itself is highly idiosyncratic. She makes nouns serve as verbs, adjectives as nouns, and abstractions as concrete objects.

Her images startle by their unexpectedness and their supreme rightness as well. For her, death can be courteous ("BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH") or terrifying ("I FELT A FUNERAL IN MY BRAIN"); it can be perceived through what the dead person has left undone ("HOW MANY TIMES THESE LOW FEET STAGGERED") or through the trivial details one might focus on while dying ("I HEARD A FLY BUZZ WHEN I DIED"). Nature has its terrors (the snake in "A NARROW FELLOW IN THE GRASS") as well as its glories ("THE DAY CAME SLOW") and sensual delights ("I TASTE A LIQUOR").

Her dramatic monologues, always with herself as persona, convey rich complexities of human emotion--elation and depression, faith and doubt, hope and despair.

Her direct, first-person voice makes much of her poetry easily accessible, yet her unusual word usages and oblique approaches to a subject call for multiple readings and sometimes multiple interpretations. Her density and imaginativeness hark back to the Metaphysical poets of the 17th century, while her play with language and her psychological and philosophical insights, many quite unusual for the largely conservative 19th century, brought her a wide audience only posthumously.

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