

In Defense of Her Solitude: The Inner Vistas of Emily Dickinson

It is doubtful any would dispute the reclusiveness of Emily Dickinson. Her persistent spinsterhood, her rare acceptance of visitors, and her physical retreat from society are verifiable biographical facts. She seldom left the spacious Dickinson family homestead in Amherst, Massachusetts, the physical place in which she felt most comfortable. "I do not cross my father's ground" (Higginson 17), she wrote in a letter to a correspondent she had not yet met. This seclusion, however, is not indicative of restriction of vision. The interior world of mind and soul in which Dickinson chose to dwell was more vast than any outer sphere she could have traversed and more creatively fulfilling than any tangible relationship. This essay will explore Emily Dickinson's inner vistas and demonstrate that her preference for solitude was not a lonely detriment to her well-being or to her creativity. Quite to the contrary, her solitude provided the 'room of her own' which Virginia Woolf would have championed. Dickinson's own room was both literal and metaphysical . . .

Recognizable aspects of Emily Dickinson's poetic form are also indicative of openness and expanse, rather than confinement. Instead of ending lines and sentences with periods, or any other type of closing punctuation, Dickinson is known for often using the dash. By not being shut down or abruptly end-stopped, the reader senses a continuation into a vast unknown. What is to come next? Where will it end? An indicative example is the last line of Dickinson's "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" that states, "And Finished knowing – then – " (20). The mystery of knowing this information, and when it will be known, continues. Dickinson's prevalent use of enjambment adds a similar touch. The reader must continue on in order to get to the intended point, as in the first stanza of the poem just referenced when she tells the reader, "And Mourners to and fro / Kept treading – treading – till it seemed / That Sense was breaking through" (2-4).

The enjambed third line into the fourth causes the reader to go forward in order to answer the question “What did it seem like?” Had Dickinson been narrow in thought due to her narrowness of life experience and physical space, such forward thinking could not have been depicted in her poetry, and it can be surmised that end-stops and confining punctuation would have been more her habit . . .

There is a widely held belief among literary scholars and critics that Emily Dickinson’s reclusiveness limited her experience of life. However, if considered more closely, it can be seen that this is not necessarily the case. Her reclusiveness did not limit her poetry, and poetry was her life. The solitude she chose was her own poetic space, which, as evidenced herein, was more expansive than the physical realm from which she chose to seclude herself. The inner vistas of her mind, heart, and soul as revealed in her poetry provided the space necessary for her creative inspiration. She did interact with others, but at her own discretion. That the interaction chiefly took place on paper rendered it no less meaningful. Emily Dickinson’s well-being and creativity were not endangered, and therefore, her solitude is defensible.

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---. "The Heart is the Capitol of the Mind." Juhasz 24.

---. "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain." Baym 85-86.

---. "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died." Baym 89-90.

---. "One need not be a chamber to be haunted." Linscott 149-50.

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