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Critical Perspectives on Selected Poems by Emily Dickinson

Overall Approaches to Dickinson

1. William Shullenberger, "My Class had stood--a Loaded Gun" (post-structuralist, Deconstructionist approach)

Shullenberger tends to set aside the cultural and historical background; he also sees feminist critics as sometimes risking "a disproportionate attention to her femininity (Pollak; Mossberg; C. Miller)" and relying too heavily on biographical assumptions. Instead, he says, his "stress in introducing Dickinson is to put the legends, the intellectual background, and the assumptions aside, to begin only with the assumption that Dickinson a poet who took poetry very seriously, more seriously than anything else."

2. Christanne Miller, *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar* (linguistic and syntactic analysis)

Miller focuses on what she calls the essential features of Dickinson's writing: punctuation, compression, nonrecoverable deletions (that is, material omitted or elided that cannot become clear from the context), lack of inflectional markings for verbs, disjunction, repetition, and unspecified or ambiguous pronouns. These, she says, create language patterns that are by choice disjunctive and unconventional to render Dickinson's meaning in the complex ways in which she intended it.

3. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *Emily Dickinson* (psychobiographical). Wolff combines close readings with feminist psychobiographical insights.

4. Joan Burbick, "Dickinson and Economics of Desire" *AL* 58 (1986): 361-378.

Through what may be called her "economics of desire," Dickinson describes longing in terms of poverty and wealth, loss and gain, producing poems that both mimic and deprecate the mercantilist vision of her social class.

In general, Dickinson's writings can be seen as expressing four logical, not chronological, visions of desire that imply a specific theory of use or economy. The first dreams about an extravagant wealth and joyful consumption of pleasure without regulation: delight becomes an end in itself, producing nothing other than its own "greedy" enjoyment. The second ponders the tension of not-having: loss and restraint promise greater "gain" by deferring possession and, at times, by embracing asceticism. The third analyzes and renders ironic patterns of not-having until they assume nightmare proportions of need: the "true cost" of restraint is revealed to be the mutilation of the body. The fourth pushes even further into irony: desire is denied until only the "dead" body remains as the "price" of wanting.

**341 "After great pain, a formal feeling comes"**

I. Anderson: Its three stanzas faintly shadow forth three stages of a familiar ceremony: the formal service, the tread of pallbearers, and the final lowering into a grave.... As the images of the funeral rite subside, two related ones merge to body forth the victim who is at once a living organism and a frozen form. Both are symbols of crystallization: "Freezing" in the snow, which is neither life nor death but both simultaneously; and "A Quartz contentment" for the paradoxical serenity that follows intense suffering.

2. Wolff.

Similar in essential ways to the other poems upon this subject, "After great pain" is the best of the group, deriving its haunting power from the radical compression of several subjects. The themes of violation and disorder persist throughout. Yet here, it is not only the integrity of mental processes that suffers, but art as well, and the two are conflated into a single, grotesque trope—a social gathering of some sort that is being held in the

speaker's consciousness. The initial guests seem gathered for a funeral: a "formal feeling comes," and when the speaker's own "Nerves" prepare for the unnamed ritual by sitting "ceremonious, like Tombs," the outside world of disaster and death can be felt in the sanctuary of the brain.

Still, a reader can follow the gist of the poem thus far: suffering so profound that the affective self becomes disordered and its components are splintered apart and personified as separate entities. Yet, when the second stanza introduces "Feet" into this array of internal parts, a tone of madness intrudes-as if the speaker's lower extremities had been brutally shoved into the head or as if some of the participants, "Nerves" and "Heart" perhaps, had begun to dance. In fact, the introjected "Feet" announce a second theme-poetry that has been fatally wounded by the pain of its creator. The "mechanical," circular motion of the "Feet" may recall the ratchet wheel of the clock that ticks us toward doom, but these "Feet" have not even the click of metallic precision, and they stagger "A Wooden way," without vitality or purpose. If God's engine were behind this passage toward oblivion, a reader could expect the insistent beat of parataxis or at least the imperative forward movement that time infuses into so many other Dickinson poems. Instead, this speaker declines to orient the motion to any fixed, external entity, "Ground, or Air, or Ought-."

As the final stanza pulls away from the increasingly macabre concatenation of images to offer a general conclusion, there is a fatalistic settling into cold, not the frigidity of death, but the atrophy of all mental processes. Elsewhere, cold is one of God's weapons, yet such is not the case here. Now the menace is entirely internal-lassitude, inanition, and finally the utter relinquishment of will. Dickinson wrote a number of poems that bring the speaker to the verge of madness, poems that deal with the stark reality of death or with the unstructured chaos of some amorphous Heaven.... The tension in such works derives precisely from the juxtaposition of two forces: the speaker's determination to understand the outrage, thereby perhaps to subdue it, and the destructive energy of some exterior power, process, or event that defies human comprehension and control. Here, however, the speaker recounts no struggle, there is no external adversary, and the poem records nothing more than a process of yielding.

#### **465 "I heard a Fly buzz--when I died"**

1. Cynthia Griffin Wolff. The "King," God or some regal ambassador, is ready to take possession of the spirit; and the carrion fly rumbles its impatient anticipation of the feast of flesh. Both are present; neither is yet empowered. Nonetheless, a quasi-legal transaction has already begun to take place, the fulfillment of that dread phrase, "Thy will be done"; and the presence of onlookers assures that this "will" may be duly "witnessed." One more mortal going to the grave; dust to dust without exception.

Throughout, the "eye / I" of the speaker struggles to retain power. Ironically, although the final, haunting sentence has to do with sight, "I could not see to see-," at no time in the course of the poem can the speaker maintain an ordered visual grasp of the world. "The Ear is the last Face," Dickinson wrote to Higginson. "We hear after we see." Thus is it in this work. We begin this poem about seeing-with sound.

In the first stanza, the "I" can still assert straightforward utterances of fact in a comprehensive manner; however, the faculty of sight has already begun to slip away. In the following stanza, "Eyes" belong only to others-ghostly, anonymous presences gathered to attest to God's action. The speaker no longer retains either an autonomous "I" or the physical power of eyesight.

A volitional self is recollected in stanza three, but the memory is one of relinquishment, the execution of the *speaker's* last "will" and testament. Indeed, one element of the poem's bitter contrast is concentrated in the juxtaposition of the ruthless will of the Deity, Who determines fate, and the speaker's "will"-reduced by now to the legal document that has been designed to restore order in the aftermath of dissolution. And at this moment of double "execution," when tacit acknowledgment of God's ineluctable force is rendered, identity begins to fritter away. The speaker formulates thought in increasingly strained synecdochic and metonymical tropes. The possessions of the dying Voice are designated as the 'portions of me [that] be / Assignable-,' not as discrete

objects that belong to someone and are separate from her, but as blurred extensions of a fraying self that can no longer define the limits of identity.

The "uncertain" quality that inheres in the speaker's eyesight is assigned to the "stumbling Buzz" of the fly; it is the speaker's faculties that have 'failed," but in the verse, the speaker attributes failure to the "Windows." The confusions inherent in this rhetorical finale of the poem aptly render the atomizing self as the stately centrifugal force of dissolution begins to scatter being and consciousness.... It is centrally concerned to posit "seeing" as a form of power: "to see" is to assert authority and autonomy-the authority to define life in ways that will be meaningful not only to oneself, perhaps, but to others as well.

## 712 "Because I could not stop for Death"

1. William Galperin (humanist/feminist approach): This poem is about immortality, about the prelapsarian grace where "labor" is tantamount to "leisure." The immortality that the speaker achieves for refusal to "stop for Death" is preceded by a recognition . ~ . that the subject's suitor was death: that in marrying him, as she presumably intended, the house or domestic sphere to which she would have been consigned was equivalent to a grave, "A swelling of the ground." In this way, the immortality to which the speaker is subsequently privy was no longer immortality per se any more than death so-called signified the end of life. Rather, by redefining death so that it meant a woman's co-option by culture, the poem similarly redefined immortality as a woman's self-possession, or the result of a refusal to allow society the prerogative of selecting her.

2. Wolff. "Because I could not stop for Death-" turns its attention to the structure of narrative as an ordering force. Whereas the other poem had pitched itself against the proto-narrative form of the traditional Congregational funeral, this poem might best be read against a purely literary model, the novel of seduction.

The seduction novel was perhaps the first fictional form to find its way into the American tradition. Following the example of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe*, published in England in 1747-48 and widely read in American until at least the mid-nineteenth century, American novels of seduction like *Charlotte Temple* (1791) or *The Coquette* (1797) were strenuous, Puritanical moral tracts. The plot is begun when a young woman is persuaded rashly to leave home and am away with her lover; the crucial difficulty is introduced when she responds to his sexual advances without being legally married to him; the most strenuous tension inheres in the heroine's moral anxiety, her realization that she has lost her virginity to a man she cannot in conscience wed; and it is resolved when she undergoes a heartrending repentance and consigns herself to the service of the Lord.

American seduction novels employed this model with great consistency (echoes of it can be found even in *The Scarlet Letter*). Indeed, the reader's primary satisfaction in reading the formulaic versions was in having the anticipated resolution re-enacted. When the bride-of-Christ tradition is fused with the narrative of seduction as it is here-God's emissary, "Death," becoming the suitor to carry the runaway heroine to some undefined lovers' rendezvous-the perverse elements of the Christian tradition are laid bare: the prurience of God's role as the bridegroom awaiting His bride; the macabre unnaturalness of any courtship that must be conducted by means of the grave; the sadism of an omnipotent Being Who claims to woo us as a lover, but Who nonetheless sends "Death" to carry us away whether we are willing to come or not.

Strangest of all, such a fusion *seems* to allow the narrative of seduction to have a "happy ending." The maiden need not repent her elopement; instead, she can submit to the ghostly lover's advances with pleasure, anticipating the glorious ascension into Heaven where God in His magnificence is ready to receive her. In fact, of course, a "happy ending" of this sort is abhorrent; the frankly passionate sexuality that infuses the novel of seduction with power is entirely inappropriate to any relationship between God and mortal woman; and the notion of embracing "Death" with pleasure can be little more than a Gothic horror. Thus the stroke of fusing two narrative forms is the first step toward displaying the inherent ghoulishness of God's styling Himself as a bride-groom. The conclusive steps are taken by Dickinson's pacing of the poem's narrative so that ultimate victory goes not to God, but to the poet; and this triumph is achieved by a masterful refusal to bring the poem to any climax at all.

The poem opens with the echoing cadences of "I Could not stop" and "He kindly stopped." Although the difference in meaning is clear--I could not be troubled to stop what I was doing, so he kindly stopped his carriage to accommodate me--the mirror-image diction establishes a tone of balance. This suspension of dominant will or force is sustained by the following stanzas. Thus the parataxis that might drive percussively toward death ("We passed ... We passed ... We passed") is neutralized by Dickinson's use of several methods to shift movement away from both speaker and death before any conclusion can be reached.

As early as the third stanza, activity is imputed to others (the "Children strove"), and this shift prepares the reader for the shift in the locus of movement that takes place at mid-poem: "Or rather--He passed Us-." After this point, no further motion is reported. The cessation is not equated with death or with any other momentous turning point; rather, it seems a shift of attention as much as anything. Perhaps the speaker is still traveling; "We paused" in stanza five implies as much. The reader cannot know. In "I heard a Fly buzz--when I died-" (#465) metonymy and synecdoche were used to exemplify the palpable disintegration of consciousness; here, however, metonymy is introduced so unobtrusively that its potential for rendering such disruption is explicitly foresworn. It must have been the speaker who was "Gazing," although this action is imputed to the 'Grain' one might even say that the speaker's life is "Setting," although this declivity is quite plausibly assigned to the "Sun."

Still, by the time the capacity to "pass" has been transferred to the Sun, and "The *Dews* drew quivering and chill-," readers may have grown so accustomed to a diffusion of agency that they draw no inference at all. Does the exchange of activity express the speaker's bodily death? It is impossible to tell--impossible, perhaps, because the real subject of the poem is not "Death," but "Immortality." What holds the poem so remarkably taut is the steady, unruffled tone in which the speaker issues her astonishing narrative. When, in the last stanza, she shifts into the present tense, she does not thereby brandish victory and trumpet the change with a clarion claim. If anything, the unobtrusive alteration establishes a closer intimacy between reader and speaker, both now regarding an event that happened "Centuries" ago.

Still, the aesthetic bravura of this easy finale in the present is a victory, the poet's victory over time and mortality. By this point a ruminative reader must realize that "He kindly stopped for me-" has a meaning that may not have been altogether apparent upon first reading. Although "Death" has carried the speaker away, he has won no victory, for Death has been arrested by the artist the ticking of God's Design has been stilled. At the conclusion of the poem, movement has altogether stopped. Yet *nothing is ended*.

## 2. Anderson, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise* (traditional New Critical approach):

At first reading, the orthodox reassurance against the fear of death appears to be invoked, though with the novelty of a suitor replacing the traditional angel, by emphasizing his compassionate mission in taking her out of the woes of this world into the bliss of the next. 'Death,' usually rude, sudden, and impersonal, has been transformed into a kindly and leisurely gentleman. Although she was aware this is a last ride, since his 'Carriage' can only be a hearse, its terror is subdued by the 'Civility' of the driver who is merely serving the end of 'Immortality.' The loneliness of the journey, with Death on the driver's seat and her body laid out in the coach behind, is dispelled by the presence of her immortal part that rides with her as a co-passenger, this slight personification being justified by the separable concept of the soul. Too occupied with life herself to stop, like all busy mortals, Death 'kindly stopped' for her. But this figure of a gentleman taking a lady for a carriage ride is carefully underplayed and then dropped after two stanzas.

The balanced parallelism of the first stanza is slightly quickened by the alliterating 'labor' and 'leisure' of the second, which encompass vividly all that must be renounced in order to ride toward eternity.' So the deliberate slow-paced action that lies suspended behind the poem is charged with a forward movement by the sound-pattern, taking on a kind of inevitability in the insistent reiteration of the following stanza:

We passed the School, where Children strove

At Recess- in the Ring-

We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain

We passed the Setting Sun

Here her intensely conscious leave-taking of the world is rendered with fine economy, and instead of the sentimental grief of parting there is an objectively presented scene. The seemingly disparate parts of this are fused into a vivid re-enactment of the mortal experience. It includes the three stages of youth, maturity, and age, the cycle of day from morning to evening, and even a suggestion of seasonal progression from the year's upspring through ripening to decline. The labor and leisure of life are made concrete in the joyous activity of children contrasted with the passivity of nature and again, by the optical illusion of the sun's setting, in the image of motion that has come to rest. Also the whole range of the earthly life is symbolized, first human nature, then animate, and finally inanimate nature.

But, absorbed 'in the Ring' of childhood's games, the players at life do not even stop to look up at the passing carriage of death. And the indifference of nature is given a kind of cold vitality by transferring the stare in the dead traveler's eyes to the 'Gazing Grain.' This simple maneuver in grammar creates an involute paradox, giving the fixity of death to the living corn while the corpse itself passes by on its journey to immortality. Then with the westering sun, traditional symbol of the soul's passing, comes the obliterating darkness of eternity.

Finally, the sequence follows the natural route of a funeral train, past the schoolhouse in the village, then the outlying fields, and on to the remote burying ground. In the concluding stanzas the movement of the poem slows almost to a stop, 'We paused' contrasting with the successive sights 'We passed' in the earlier stages of the journey, For when the carriage arrives at the threshold of the house of death it has reached the spatial limits of mortality. To say that it 'passed the Setting Sun' is to take it out of bounds, beyond human time, so she quickly corrects herself by saying instead that the sun "passed us," as surely it does all who are buried. . . . The tomb's horror is absorbed by the emphasis on merely pausing there .... The idea of achieving immortality by a ride in the carriage of death is confronted by the concrete fact of physical disintegration as she pauses before a "Swelling in the Ground." . . . "Surmised" . . . is all the warranty one needs for reading this journey as one that has taken place entirely in her mind.

## 765 "My Life had stood--a Loaded Gun"

1. Shullenberger:

The poem's lucid and self-contained simplicity of story and the cleverness of the euphemistic metaphors ("I speak for Not," "do I smile," "Vesuvian face") suggest the cordiality of gunfire from the gun's point of view. In this poem, the search for meaning takes shape around the question of identifying the gun and the "Owner":

<i>Owner</i>	<i>Gun</i>
God	human self
soul or mind	body
body	soul or mind
husband	wife
male	female
reason	passion
purpose	power
spirit	language

The idea that God uses human beings as instruments for his inscrutable and often violent intentions seems a properly heretical Dickinson premise, but it founders on the paradox of the concluding stanza, where the owner is declared to be mortal, and the gun, although deathless, is also lifeless on the owner's disappearance, The

body-soul duality seems to speak to the symbiotic necessity of each for the other but founders on the same paradox. In effect, the poem traps us in our quest for meaning, exposing to us a need for intelligibility to which the poem itself may be indifferent.

## 2. Christanne Miller

For Miller, "My Life had stood" is an adolescent fantasy about coming of age that breaks down before what should be its happy conclusion--powerful adulthood--revealing the flaw in its initial fiction but perhaps also the extreme limitation the speaker feels in her life choices. The poem may also be a terrible fantasy of adult womanhood--that condition which allows notice of the privileges of childhood but few of the privileges of male adulthood in their place.

At the beginning, the speaker's life is in stasis. At first, like most nineteenth-century girls, she waits to be "carried ... away--" to her life; she waits for an 'Owner,' a "Master" to serve and guard ... To return to that state would be to exist indefinitely in a state between life and death that allows consciousness but prevents action or choice. Having imagined herself as a gun, the speaker now appears to be trapped in that fiction.

She is a gun; her smile is volcanic. Her aim and shot are so deadly that none of her victims rise "the second time," the unidiomatic definite article suggesting the second coming and the beginning of eternal life. The speaker imagines that she can kill beyond God's power of redemption,

The paradoxical power and powerlessness of the poem's speaker proceeds necessarily from the poem's opening metaphor: a gun cannot fire itself A woman/gun or poet/gun, by analogy, cannot stimulate own activity or fulfill the purpose of her creation. This inability seen as natural or normal in a woman's life as with a gun, she is to be directed and stimulated by an "Owner." Unlike a gun, the woman is also supposed to be creative, not destructive, and perceptive, not explosive.

She aims with her "Yellow Eye," pulls her own trigger, and chooses to guard rather than share his bed. In these ways she is less his instrument than she is the independent expression of his enmity and power. Nonetheless, her independence is limited. The gun's target remains "foe of His," and its sole named target is "the Doe"--the only distinctly female creature of the poem. As Gelpi (traditional criticism) writes, in killing the Doe the speaker kills the feminine aspect of herself, sacrificing a natural female role in order to take on the male roles of independent speech and power.

The paratactic "ands" linking hunting with and guarding ("And now ... And now. . . suggest that all speaker's actions with her Master are repeated variations on one: she destroys herself in being "carried ... away" with and by ownership, or in using his power. Paradoxically, she must destroy nature, figured as feminine in the Western canon

In the last stanza, the repetition of the comparative "longer" suggests the speaker's concern with longevity even before we learn that--as inhuman gun--she cannot die. Parallel uses of "longer" and "the power to' stress "must" in the first grouping and "Without" in the second, and singly, these words reveal the speaker's desperate frustration: though she "may longer live," he "must" outlive her.

The repetition "foe ... deadly foe" emphasizes the speaker's lack of control in her killing: when he hates, she kills .... The power of killing, then, is secondary to the power of dying, and power is at the heart of this poem for its writer as well as for its speaker.

## 3. Cynthia Griffin Wolff

Once a reader has accepted the premise that death is the speaker and God is the Master, certain other elements of the poem become clear. In the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, 'death' was figured as an angel with a special assignment (see If Samuel, 14:15-17, for example), in America, this mythic creature took visible shape

as the Angel of Death that appeared on so many New England headstones. Of course the angel in question had always existed and had always been capable of performing his eventual task; however, until God decided to use him, his singular role had not been "identified," and he had to wait like "a Loaded Gun /In Comers.' Once chosen for his mission, he became the 'Angel of Death' and could begin the relentless process of annihilation that all men and women must submit to.

Thus as soon as the "Gun" has been "carried ... away," Dickinson's usual syntactic pattern for the drive toward death is introduced into the poem: "And carried ... And now ... And now ... And every time." It is not difficult to understand that the activity described in stanzas two through five is the process of hunting and killing; therefore, the challenge of the poem rests in untangling its mingled tonalities and allusions. The 'Sovreign Woods-' names a king's hunting preserve; in the case of God, of course, these comprise the entire world, a Woods that suffers the force of His blood lust countless times each day.

There is an unsettling sexual timbre in the poem that recalls the effete elegance of Elizabethan songs and madrigals where shooting the 'Doe' was a synonym for seduction; the violence of this trope angrily captures the lascivious obscenity of a Christian tradition that accepts all the notions implicit in a bride-of-Christ fable. And although they look backward in time to the late sixteenth century, when English Puritanism began, these stanzas also communicate a pungent sense of nineteenth-century American culture. The hunt takes place in a "Valley 'that "glows'; and "Mountains ... reply" by echoing the gun's retort. Such a configuration mimics the geography of that Trinitarian bastion, Amherst itself, a town set among hills and mountains like a handful of pebbles at the bottom of a shallow bowl.

Fittingly, the poem recalls an American song tradition, too, the rollicking, crudely bragging backwoods ballad, here evoked by the speaker's relish in his work and by his bald satisfaction in a good job of killing. All of these taken together suggest that the final inheritance of the great New England Puritan tradition is not a set of gentle pieties, but the persistent presence of a God motivated principally by phallic rage. And God's countenance, should we attain Heaven and glimpse it, will be a "Vesuvian face" that radiates deadly light like the blast of His agent's gun.