

# **The Poems of Emily Dickinson Study Guide**

**The Poems of Emily Dickinson by Emily Dickinson**

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# 1850 - 1859

## 1850 - 1859 Summary

The first of Emily Dickinson's poems, and the only one written in the year of 1850, is a cry for a single man to choose for himself a lover. As many poets do Emily begins this poem with by summoning a muse, a higher power to help her write her poem and achieve her goal. Throughout this poem Emily points out examples of couples found in the universe to prove to the reader of her poem that being part of a couple is normal. These couples include the moon and sun, the bird and flower, as well as earth and heaven. Emily attempts to convince the man that being single is not natural. She encourages the man to pick the love of his choice then treat her royally.

In Poem 12 Emily talks about loss. Her losses include the loss of a piece of money, the loss of a bird, the loss of a star and the loss of a friend. Emily notes that although the money was not worth much, she still misses it. Although there are other birds and stars, these can not replace the ones she has lost. The lost friend, however, Emily seems to view with a different emotion. She seems to be angry this friend has left. In fact, she hopes that he finds no comfort where he is until he chooses to repent.

In Poem 64 Emily seems to be writing of a lost love or friend. In the lines of her poem she speaks to her heart, telling that organ to forget the warmth of the friendship. She commands her heart to forget this friend quickly before she remembers him. In Poem 78 writes about the way in which humans often spend more time concerned with relatives or friends who are dead than those who are still alive.

Emily writes about the subject of success in Poem 112. Emily indicates that it is those who never succeed who think success is "sweet". In this same way, victory is often not recognized by those who are victorious. Emily notes that even the sounds of triumph are often agonizing to those who die for their cause. Similarly, in Poem 69, Emily talks about having something just within reach without having the ability to grasp hold of it. Both these poems talk about the volatile nature of success.

Poem 103 makes a comment on the violent nature of the human race. Emily says that as her friends fight, she herself feels drawn into the battle. She wishes she could do away with all of humanity and begin her time in eternity.

## 1850 - 1859 Analysis

One of the first things one notices about Emily's poetry is her use of symbolism from nature. For example, in her first poem Emily's list of couples include the bee and the flower. In Poem 32 Emily writes that she will put a piece of jewelry decoration on at the prompting of nature "decorating" itself during the fall of the year. In addition, in Poem 60 Emily again uses this device of symbolism borrowed from nature. She writes her poem based on the idea that she was a rose while another person was mistletoe.



Emily also uses a great deal of imagery from the Christian Bible in her poetry. For instance, in her first poem Emily notes that the one who will not serve the sovereign will hang from a tree. This idea may refer to Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Jesus Christ to the Romans, an action that led to Jesus' crucifixion. Judas hanged himself soon after he betrayed Jesus.

Death is another theme seen often in Emily's poetry. In Poem 119, for instance, the tone of the poem gives the idea that Emily would be happy to learn she were dying. Even in her listing of couples in Poem 1 Emily includes an image of death in the idea of the worm wooing the mortal. Poem 40 seems to be a poem about Emily's own coming death. Although this poem is written early in her career, Emily already seems obsessed with preparing for this necessary step in life. In Poem 117 Emily pens a hope that her heavenly Father will take her into heaven despite her sins. Another example of Emily's obsession with death occurs in Poem 103 where Emily talks about her desire to kill all of battling humanity and live in eternity.

Eternity and heaven are two topics that also often occur in Emily's poetry. In Poem 4, for instance, a truer land where the doubts, fears and discords of here, assumedly Earth, are gone. In Poem 19 Emily asks the question of a disappeared daisy if it is with God. More than likely the disappearing daisy represents the death of a friend or acquaintance. Of this flower Emily asks the ageless question concerning what comes after death.



# 1860 and 1861

## 1860 and 1861 Summary

In Poem 157 Emily writes of her king, a king that does not speak. It is only at night in her dreams that Emily sees things that are hidden to her during the day. In the morning after she has had such dreams Emily wakes feeling victorious. If she has not seen these hidden things in her dreams, she notes that the following day the birds will not sing. Emily also notes that on these days she forgets to pray that the Father's will be done, and she is drawn in the way of her will. Emily equates this lack of prayer as being almost as bad as lying under oath in court.

In Poem 139 Emily writes about the mansions that have been prepared in heaven for God's children. These mansions, she writes, hold promise of being warm and keeping out hurts of the world. Emily indicates that if some people knew such dwellings were waiting for them, they would go there, by death, as soon as possible.

In Poem 179 Emily notes that the unlearned call flowers simply flowers while the learned people classify these same flowers into groups. However, they are the same flowers. Emily moves on to insist that those who read Revelations but don't understand the text should not be criticized by those who have studied Biblical texts. Emily considers Moses, one of the heroes of the Old Testament of the Christian Bible who was denied entrance into Canaan, the Promised Land. She writes that if her readers were to find themselves in Moses' shoes, they would consider scholastic learning useless. The greatest reward, she says, is to be allowed at the end of life at the right hand of Christ. Poem 215 addresses the promise Christ has made that after life is over the human will understand the reason for their troubles on earth. Emily also notes that once she has reached this point, the things that were so painful on earth will no longer be hurtful.

In Poem 225 Emily seems to be writing about the transition from being a single woman to being married and becoming a wife. She indicates it is safer to be a wife. She compares the girlish life she left behind to earth from the point of view of someone in heaven. Emily goes on to write her former life was one of pain while her current is of comfort. In a quick turn, she stops herself from making comparisons and decides to be content where she is.

Poem 232 discusses the Biblical tale of Peter's denial of Christ. Emily relates this tale to a personal experience where a friend symbolically denies her. According to the poem Peter was warming himself at a temple fire when a girl asked him if she was with Christ. Peter denies this "accusation" and as he makes his denial Christ looks at him. In the conclusion of her poem Emily rhetorically asks the man who denied her if she can do worse to him.



Paradise is the topic of Poem 241. Emily asks what this paradise is and who lives there. She wonders what the people do in paradise, if they know where Emily is, and that one day she will join them in paradise. Emily asks if those in Eden wear "new shoes" and if they are ever scolded for being homesick or cross. The final stanza of the poem asks if God really does exist and if He will save her. Emily ends with concern that the other ransomed will laugh at her, but she is hopeful that paradise won't be as lonely as New England.

Poem 249 is another poem that explores the topic of what happens to people when they die. Emily begins by Quoting from the Bible a description of the way to gain entrance into heaven. The phrases Emily uses to describe the way in which one enters into heaven come from the book of Matthew found in the New Testament of the Christian Bible. In the second stanza of the poem Emily talks about the cost associated with going to heaven. Here she uses banking terminology in her description. In the final stanza Emily notes that the good men receive their reward in heaven while those who have been bad go to jail. Emily shows her uncertainty of what actually happens to the bad people by tacking the phrase "I guess" onto the end of her poem.

Poem 261 is a poem of loss. In this poem Emily writes of a jewel that she has. She goes to sleep, and action that puts the jewel out of her mind, believing that the jewel will be there when she wakes. When she does wake, however, the gem is gone and Emily is left with only its memory. In a different tone, Poem 260 is one of Emily's more whimsical poems. In it she quips about the mundane nature of being famous. She states she'd rather be a nobody. In Poem 204 Emily describes a sunrise and sunset in Amherst. She describes the sunrise as ribbons unfolding as squirrels run to tell the news. She describes the sunset as a purple stile, or steps, with yellow colored children climbing over it.

Poem 236 tells about Emily's Sunday routine. While others in her village go to church she stays at home and communes with God in nature. Instead of the bells and ornamentation of a large church Emily's music is that of a bird. She hears a sermon from God Himself, and even notes that He never preaches a long time. Emily believes that this time with God in nature is more beneficial to her because she is experiencing heaven day by day instead of waiting for it after life is through.

## 1860 and 1861 Analysis

As has been noted, Emily's poems often show a preoccupation with death. Following this theme, death is a major theme in many of the poems in this section. In Poem 181 Emily refers to the "Ecstasy of death" which she has heard makes a deer injured by a hunter jump higher than other deer. Through her use of nature and every day events, Emily shares some of her own personality with her readers. For instance, in Poem 151 Emily writes a humorous epitaph for a mouse who has been killed by a cat.

Poem 139 makes reference to mansions that the Lord has prepared for his children. According to the Christian Bible those people who have professed their faith in Christ



will live in mansions in heaven built by the Lord. The only way to reach these mansions, however, is by death. In Poem 215 Emily writes of the promise Christ has made to explain to humans the reason for their suffering once they are with him in heaven. Emily seems to be writing this poem as a way to remind her of this promise and comfort herself during some trial she is facing.

Poem 179 is one example of Emily's use of religious imagery in her poetry. Her main intent in the poem appears to be to downplay the emphasis some people put on scholastic knowledge. She points out that the greatest goal in life may not be to be able to classify flowers or understand Revelations flawlessly, but to be accepted by Christ. Eden, the garden where God created and placed the first couple to live, is a Biblical place mentioned often in Emily poetry. Both poems 134 and 269 contain references to the Garden of Eden.

In Poem 241 much information can be gleaned about the writer of the poem. For instance, Emily lives in Amherst, New England. She is lonesome. She believes in God, but struggles with doubts. The "new shoes" she mentions may refer to some desire for a new personality or body to replace the one she feels is odd or shameful. At the end of the poem, there is a bit of a humorous lift which gives away Emily's sense of humor. Poem 260 is another tribute to Emily's sense of humor. In this poem she makes a jab at the "horror" of being well-known. She tells her audience she'd rather not be well-known.

Poem 264 is interesting because it is not clear who Emily is speaking about. From one viewpoint she could be speaking of the marriage-like relationship between Christians and God. From another view she could be talking about an earthly marriage. Poem 269 is another unusual poem because it seems to be written about earthly, sexual passion, a topic Emily does not usually write about. Also, Emily uses nautical imagery to describe the images in this poem.



# 1862

## 1862 Summary

In Poem 275 Emily professes allegiance to a friend by telling this friend that she would harass God until God let the friend into heaven. Poem 314 presents a beautiful picture of the idea of hope. In this poem Emily portrays hope as a bird that never stops singing. This hope is sweetest when the times of life are tough. Only a severe storm can drown out the sound of this bird's tune. The bird of hope can be found anywhere. Best of all, this hope never requires payment for its services. Poem 316 turns the idea of hope on its head. Emily writes about becoming lost after once being found, or saved. She indicates she believes she is now banished from heaven. She concludes the Savior has turned his face away from her.

In Poem 305 Emily contemplates what might happen if she were to kill herself. She believes by doing this she would free herself from the pains of life. The dangers of life, she says would become powerless to hurt her. These problems of life would be as meaningless to her as things that happened the day before. In Poem 329 Emily writes about gathering the courage to do something one is afraid to do. She encourages that even if the nerve is not there, to go ahead and try. She suggests holding a steady posture, and also taking deep breaths.

In Poem 367 Emily writes of how she tends her garden in honor of some absent person. The garden includes geraniums, daisies, cactus, carnations and hyacinths. She writes of her wonder that such small flowers can hold so much beautiful odor. In the conclusion of the poem Emily seems to be portraying herself as one of these flowers, a daisy, waiting for her lord to return.

Poem 357 brings forth the image of a person being able to examine their life manually as one might examine an inanimate object. Emily speaks of holding her life in her hands and examining it in the mirror. She turns herself round and round judging her features. After her contemplation is over, she decides even she might learn to like to live in heaven just as she likes her earthly home.

Emily writes about the color of the grave in Poem 424. In the first stanza, Emily writes about the green of the grave in the summer. She states the only way to tell this grave from the rest of the ground is the stone marker. In the third stanza Emily indicates the color of the grave in winter is white. The only way to find the grave in the winter is to wait until the sun has melted away the snow. Then the seeker must look for the rise in the ground formed by the grave. The color of the inside of the grave is more unspecified. Emily indicates it is neither white nor green, but does not hazard a guess at what color it might be.

In Poem 437 Emily writes about displacement and her desire to run away from God's watchful eye. She opens her poem by stating that she doesn't feel at home on earth.





She then assumes she will not feel at home in heaven either. In the next stanza Emily gives her reasons for knowing she won't like heaven. She writes that there it is Sunday, a day associated with ritual and properness, all the time and that recess, or times for relaxation, never comes. In the third stanza she voices her lack of comfort with the idea that God watches over us all the time. She wishes his watchful eye would take a break. In the final stanza she contemplates trying to run away from God but knows she cannot escape Judgment Day.

In Poem 387 Emily pledges her obedience to some distant acquaintance. She begins her poem by writing about the way the moon directs the rhythm of the sea. The sea is always obedient to the power of the moon and never oversteps its bounds. In the final stanza of the poem Emily compares herself to the sea in the way in which she promises to be obedient to the far away acquaintance.

Poem 459 is a poem about love. In response to a lover's question of why she loves him Emily answers that the wind does not require an answer from the grass when the wind passes by. The lightning also does not ask the human eye why it closes when the lightning lights up the sky. In conclusion Emily indicates that it is the sunrise that compels her to love him.

Fear is the subject dealt with in Poem 345. Emily first declares she is more afraid of the doorkeeper in her father's house than she is of death. Emily next states she is not afraid of life either. She points out that it is hard to be afraid of something that encompasses oneself as life does. Finally, Emily states she is afraid of the resurrection no more than the east is afraid of the morning time. Meanwhile, Poem 440 tells of returning home after being away for several years. Emily expresses dread at the idea of knocking on the door for fear that someone she does not know will answer and want to know why she is there. In the conclusion of the poem Emily runs from the house silently, like a thief, so no one will know she has been there.

In some poems Emily gives the reader a sense of her low self esteem. Poem 473 is one of the poems where she gives a clear sense of how unworthy and unnoticed she felt she was. She is shamed by noise and states she "could not bear to live - aloud." Not only does Emily convey she is quiet and keeps to herself but at the conclusion of the poem she indicates that she believes she could die and no one would even notice.

Poem 479 is one of Emily's more well-known poems about death. In this poem she states the obvious, death is never too busy to take a life, and all must eventually die. After death time will no longer be of importance, neither will our jobs, hobbies or other activities. The two ride in a carriage past a school, a field and the setting sun. As the air is growing cool, they pass a burial spot. In the final stanza Emily notes how short the time has seemed since she realized the carriage was taking her toward eternity and heaven. In Poem 485 Emily again addresses the subject of death. This time she writes about a mouse killed by a cat. She notes how the cat plays with the mouse, almost letting it go, before finally killing it.



## 1862 Analysis

It is interesting to note the various odd phrases and odd combinations that Emily comes up with in her poetry. Sometimes the combinations are even nonsensical. For instance in Poem 395 she speaks of the pain of death as being a pain from behind the door. Although there is not medical description of a pain from behind the door, the reader gets the sense that she means an unexpected pain, from nowhere. In Poem 347 she talks about being mangled by all the pianos in the woods. One must consider that she talks about the pain that the first robin, and it follows the song of the first robin, brings. It goes to reason the idea of a music making instrument whether a bird or piano, would have the same power to hurt or cause pain.

In Poem 390 Emily deals again with the idea of death. Only this time she looks at it from the viewpoint of Jesus' words when He told His disciples there were some people who would never die. She also includes that statement that Jesus came to overcome death. In her poem she takes literally the idea that Jesus saved Christians from everlasting death by providing an opportunity for repentance from sins. Emily uses this idea in her poem that some people will literally never die, and death no longer exists.

Poem 185 addresses, as a couple of other poems do, the idea of Emily becoming a wife. She contemplates this change from being a child, a maid to becoming a wife. These images of marriage may actually be Emily's way of talking about salvation, or even death. For instance, during the poem Emily references that she is coming to eternity, and has passed to the east, to victory. She calls her intended "savior." Note that in the Bible death is often referred to as victory. It is also said that when Christ returns, He will come from the east. Emily's reference to her beloved as savior may actually refer to Christ and not an earthly person at all. Finally, Emily may be taking inspiration from Christ's references to the body of believers, Emily included, as the bride of Christ. Since it is well known that Emily never married, this poetry about marriage may actually be Emily's way of talking about her relationship with Christ.

Poem 479 presents a personification of death. Death is pictured as a carriage driver who stops and picks Emily up for a ride to eternity. Emily and Death are joined in the carriage by companion Immortality. The passing of the school and the growing fields indicates that life goes on even after one has died. The setting sun indicates the ending of the day, also associated with the ending of life. The body becomes cold with the closing of the day. The carriage passes a graveyard with a "house" that is a swelling of the ground. They do not stop at this burial plot, however, but move on toward eternity.



# 1863

## 1863 Summary

In Poem 632 Emily makes the point that it is worse to lose one's faith than to lose a large amount of land or money. Land and money can be replaced, Emily writes, but once faith is gone it is lost for good. Once a belief is lost, it can never be recaptured. This loss of faith turns the being into something of a beggar.

Poem 547 is a poem that addresses the reality of death. In it Emily writes of her knowledge that there has been a death in the house across the street from hers. She notes the numb look of the house and the bustle of visiting neighbors. The doctor has left and the minister has come to take charge of the situation. A funeral director has also arrived and Emily knows there will soon be a funeral procession. After all, she writes, this is how it always happens in small towns.

In Poem 552 Emily writes about a pleasant weakness in life that is closer to occurring than pain. She indicates this weakness comes after pain, when the soul of a person has suffered all the pain it can handle. In the second stanza Emily describes this weakness as a fog that envelopes and dims consciousness. The third stanza switches focus to the surgeon, who does not feel pain but instead inflicts it on others. If he learns his patient has stopped feeling pain, the surgeon's response is that the person is no longer alive.

In Poem 623 Emily defines the act of prayer. She states that it is through prayer that men are able to communicate with God. God is referred to as the One whose presence is denied to men. Prayers are described in the poem as words flung to God ears. Although Emily does not indicate for sure if God hears the prayers or not, she indicates this is the correct manner in which prayer is accomplished.

Proof of existence is the theme of Poem 605. Emily states that she believes she is alive. She first reasons she is alive because she holds blooming Morning Glory in her hands. Next, when she holds a mirror before her mouth, it fogs up. This was a common way for physicians of this time period to determine if a person was breathing or not. Emily knows she is alive because she is not laid out in a parlor with people looking over her dead body and asking questions about her death. Emily also states she knows she is alive because she does not own a "house." What she may actually be referring to here is a tomb or coffin instead of a house. Note that this "house" is marked with Emily's name indicating that she writes of a tombstone. Finally Emily states it is good to be alive. She states her life is infinite indicating she is referring both to her natural birth and life, and her rebirth through belief in Christ.

Doom is the subject of Poem 710. In this poem Emily describes doom as a house without a door from which the ladder that allows one to gain entrance and exit is thrown away. She indicates the only changes to the life lived in this house of doom is the dreams of what goes on outside this house. In somewhat the same manner despair is



the topic of Poem 714. Emily writes that no one can determine the scope or direction of despair. It is just as a man who walks down a road without knowing its length does not know how far he has progressed. This is just as accurate as allowing a man who has experienced pain only once to estimate the severity of his discomfort. Man's only comfort is despair is his ignorance of his situation, she concludes.

Poem 687 talks about denial. In the first stanza Emily asks for only one thing. She offers her being or her life for it. However, the giver sneers at her request. Instead of respecting her wishes, he denies her request without even looking in her direction. In Poem 598 Emily writes about the scope of the human brain. In her first analogy she states the brain can encompass more than the sky because it can comprehend the secrets of the sky along with other information. In the next stanza Emily states the brain has the ability to think more deeply than the sea is deep. The brain, she writes, has the ability to absorb all knowledge that can be contained in the sea. Finally, she states that the brain is the same weight as God. Here she may refer to the importance of the brain as compared to the importance of God instead of the physical weight of the brain versus God. Emily states these two items are no different from each other than syllables, which form parts of word, differ from sound.

In poem 490 Emily makes a statement about the nature of rest. While the sun and nature rest at night, some men rest at night also. During the day while the sun shines and nature does its work, there are some people who rest during this time also.

In Poem 746 Emily uses the imagery of a stormy sea and tossed ship to describe life. The ocean has no pity on the ship or its crew. As the ship capsizes, all members of the crew fall below the waves where they are doomed to death. Poem 749 is a poem about finding home and comfort any place a loved one is located. Emily states comfort or pain, shame or pride, work or pleasure, imprisoned or free is all the same to her as long as her love is there. Any place this loved one is not found contains pain and misery for Emily. Even the praises of the heavenly angels would not lift her spirits in these sad conditions.

Poem 755 is a statement of undying devotion to a mysterious "sir." Emily states her affection will alter only when the hills change, and falter only when the sun does so. She also promises never to tire or become overfilled with the relationship with this obviously adored male friend.

The moon is the subject of Poem 735. Emily first notes the moon's changing appearance, first a sliver, then a few nights later, a full orb. Emily describes this moon in friendly terms which paint a picture of the moon being arrayed in silver, beryl and amber, materials used often in jewelry. In the final stanza Emily portrays the moon as being the owner or possessor of the universe with the remainder of the stars, firmament and universe being only garments and decorations for the moon.

Poem 737 depicts Emily's search for peace. She writes she often felt peace was at hand, almost as some see hallucinations of land or water where there is none. Emily states this unfounded feeling, like the belief there is land when there isn't, causes her to



struggle less for this peace she desires. She wonders how many times she will feel she is close to peace before the real peace actually arrives.

In Poem 781 Emily talks about remorse. Emily presents remorse as a relentless remembering of behaviors that are in the past. These behaviors are generally ones that the person remembering them regrets and wishes they could redo. In conclusion Emily states this remorse is equal to hell on earth. In Poem 789 Emily writes about the unchanging nature of death. While dynasties can be put back together and citadels can be disbanded there is no way to correct or alter the state of death.

## 1863 Analysis

Like the other sections of poems, death and dying are topics that Emily addresses often in her writing during the year of 1863. In Poem 528 Emily makes a comparison between the pain felt in living and the pain felt in dying. She concludes that there is more pain in living while death offers a different type of pain. Poem 637 is a poem that addresses another topic that appears often in Emily's poetry. This theme is that of arriving too late to thank or show affection to a loved one. In each of Emily's poems that follow this theme Emily generally finds her friend has died before Emily has had a chance to show her affection.

Another interesting comparison that Emily makes is in her description of God in Poem 615. In this poem she describes God as a distant, stately lover who woos mankind through His son. Emily seems to be writing Poem 706 to someone, either a friend or an acquaintance, of whom she thinks very highly. She does not think she could live with this person because she feels this type of life is unattainable for her. Emily states she also could not watch this person die. One statement that gives the reader a clue how highly Emily thinks of this person is indicated in the phrase where she states the person's face would put out even the light from Jesus' face. The subject of the poem was also obviously a church worker as Emily states that in heaven they would be judged because the object of her admiration "served Heaven" while Emily did not. Emily states she would go to hell for this person if they were there, and would consider herself in hell if she were away from this person. Emily indicates their meetings must be made at a distance, a situation which she finds to be hopeless.

One important aspect of poetry that has not yet been discussed is the rhythm and rhyming scheme of Emily's poetry. Her poetry is quite different from other poems written during this time period as Emily did not stick to strict rhyming schemes or meters. She instead used what is referred to as a slant rhyme or incomplete rhyme. Consider, for instance, Poem 750; lines 2, 4, and 6 end with the rhyming words of die, by and supply. Line 8, however, ends with the non-rhyming word immortality. Lines 1, 3, 5 and 7 do not rhyme at all. Emily splits her poem into two stanzas, each including four lines. Each line has an even pattern of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. The lines alternate with the first line containing four feet, or four sets of unstressed and stressed syllables, the second containing three feet, and so on.



Another unique feature of Emily's poetry is her liberal use of dashes instead of more traditional punctuation. In Poem 750, for instance, each line with the exception of the sixth line ends in a dash. There is also a dash included in the middle of the first and second lines. A dash in writing generally indicates an unfinished thought or an interrupted thought. In Emily's writing, however, these dashes especially those used at the end of a line or poem may indicate that she has not completed her thought process, as a period might imply. These poems are instead snatches of her thoughts, jotted down, which draw no firm conclusions.

A final note about Emily's writing style is her use of capital letters. It is generally acceptable to capitalize the first word in a sentence as well as proper names. In poetry the first word of a line is also capitalized even if it is not at the beginning of a sentence. Emily, however, will capitalize random words within her poetry. For example, she capitalizes the phrase "Nature's Act," "Water," "Great Water," "West," and "Immortality". It is uncertain if these words indicate a deity, the referrals to which could also be capitalized as some people capitalize the pronoun Him when referring to Jesus Christ. However, Emily may have had some other reason for capitalizing these particular words and phrases. For instance she may have wanted to give these words special emphasis or show they were more significant to the poem.



# 1864

## 1864 Summary

In Poem 861 Emily explores the idea that pains grown less with time. Instead of agreeing with this idea Emily states that these sufferings only cause the emotions to become harder or tougher with time. She writes that time does not cure troubles, but only determines if pain is real or not. If pain goes away with time, Emily states, it was never a problem at all.

Poem 881 is about the sadness one feels when they have not told a deceased loved one how much they cared for that person. Emily writes in stanza one that she intended to find this person but unfortunately death found the person first. In stanza two Emily recounts how she had intended to tell this loved one how much she wanted to be with them, but death had already been to this person first. Now Emily finds rest only in wandering and constant movement. To really rest would be a privilege to both memory and to Emily. Death is also the topic of Poem 860. The lady in the poem gives no announcement she is about to die. Although the summer was warm, the lady's body was cold, Emily writes. She also notes the woman has no sensation of how cold she was.

In Poem 796 Emily describes a coming storm. She writes the grass first starts blowing in the wind. As the wind increases, it begins to blow leaves from trees and dust from the roads. As the humans hurry for cover, thunder and lightening begin. Animals also heed the warning that a storm is on the way and head for their homes. Finally, the rains come. Emily notes that despite the threat of the storm, her father's house is not damaged. Only a tree in the yard is split.

Poem 804 describes the grave as being a bed where the sleeper will wait for Judgment Day. In Poem 825 Emily writes about the way in which God accepts His children. Although Emily tells Jesus she does not know Him, He tells her who He is and from where he comes. Although Emily believes she cannot get to Him, He tells her He can carry her in His arms. He will clean her spots and her smallness will be esteemed. In conclusion, He asks her to dwell in His house. In Poem 800 Emily writes that even though she has not physically seen heaven, she knows it exists. She states that she knows heaven exists in the same way that although she has never seen the sea, she knows it exists.

## 1864 Analysis

Poem 819 describes longing for an absent love. Emily describes her time with this person as being like time at a luxurious banquet. She writes just being near and gazing at her love satisfies Emily's desires much like food would satisfy a hungry person. One interesting poem to note in this section is Poem 796. Note the way in which Emily uses





her wording to create the growing threat and danger of the coming thunderstorm. She includes the effects of the weather on the plants, earth, animals and people in her town. The poem creates an all encompassing description of a coming storm. Also notice her use of the oxymoron "hurried slow" in line 10 of the second version of the poem. Emily uses these oxymorons, or conflicting descriptions, in her poems.





# 1865

## 1865 Summary

In Poem 951 Emily writes about the nature of love. She states that those who are loved are unable to die because the emotion of love is immortal. The act of being loved turns people into gods. In the same way she states in her poem that those who love also cannot die. Love changes the reality of death by turning those who love into godlike creatures. Divinity also comes into play in Poem 972. Emily states that God is not interested in what things people have done while on earth, but the things they might have done had they been more godlike.

In Poem 1032 Emily describes the life of the children of God. She writes that these people will often feel far from the affection of their heavenly Father. They will often feel more pain than comfort. They will often feel led by enemies instead of friends on their way to heaven, or their native land.

In Poem 1101 Emily writes about the personality of Mother Nature and her family of plants and flowers. She states that Mother Nature is not to blame for smiling at the antics of her fanciful children. In Poem 1100 Emily changes gears and writes about the death of a loved one. She first notes the night of the death was common for everyone not associated with the death. The family noticed things about the loved one they'd never noted before. Emily writes about a feeling of jealousy that this loved one is so close to infinity while those associated are required to stay behind on earth.

In Poem 1108, death is once again the topic. Here Emily speaks of the movement in a house the day after someone has died. Instead of the packing up of physical things, Emily refers to the packing up of love, as if this emotion were something that could be collected into a box and stored away.

## 1865 Analysis

Poem 943 is another poem about loss. Unlike the envisioning of the absent one in Poem 819, this poem deals with the pain felt when one realizes something is gone and cannot be gotten back.

The beginning and ending of life is discussed in Poem 966. In this poem Emily discusses the idea that some people are more alive after they die than when they were alive. It is unclear whether Emily is referring to life on earth versus the after life in heaven or if she is referring to this life after death as consisting of the memories the people leave behind. Of course this death could also refer to point in time when a person comes to the belief in Christ. It is at this point that Christians believe a new person is symbolically born and the old person, the sinful person, dies. Either way, she makes the point that some people start to live only when they die.



# 1866 - 1871

## 1866 - 1871 Summary

In Poem 1121 Emily writes about nature in one of its less regal moments. In this poem Emily describes a dark winter day. The wind is moaning, the sky dark and low, but there is not snow. Emily concludes by stating this is a day when nature is caught without its crown.

Emily talks about the feeling of exhilaration in Poem 1157. She writes that this feeling of exhilaration raises people above their normal conditions and makes them feel as if they are somewhere better than their average circumstances. Even after this feeling of exhilaration is gone, life still feels better, she writes.

The wind is the topic of Poem 1160. In the first stanza Emily describes the duties of the wind as including directing ships at sea and marking the beginning of March. In the second stanza Emily writes about the joys of the wind. These joys include entertaining forests and coming or going at will. The third stanza introduces the relatives of the wind. These include birds and asteroids. In the final stanza Emily admits even she is not aware of the limitations of the wind.

Poem 1192 makes an interesting comment about the nature of God. She states that God does not act without reason, nor does he create people without reason. Emily indicates it is the assumptions of humans that cause us to believe God has acted rashly or without reason. In Poem 1259 Emily writes about the age old emotions of sadness and joy. Although these two emotions are usually found together, they are not generally of equal standing. Even if people try, she writes, they cannot get away from these two basic emotional sensations.

In Poem 1197 Emily writes about the spectacular abilities of humans. She states, however, that until people are asked to rise, they don't really know how high they can go. Emily concludes this bravery would be normal if people weren't afraid to rise above themselves.

## 1866 - 1871 Analysis

Poems 1104 and 1147 each address the common theme of nature. In Poem 1104 Emily presents a verbal picture of a sunset, and the ending of a day. The setting sun is visualized as workmen seeming closed the day. The twilight is given the characteristic of a stranger. Poem 1147, on the other hand, talks about the beauty and freedom of the morning. Emily again personifies her subjects. For instance the sun and fences are both said to have "ran."

Death is the topic of Poem 1221. Not only does Emily personify death, she also depersonifies the person who dies. While death is portrayed as a prompt visitor, the



dead person is presented as a house with pale furniture, body parts, arranged carefully. Emily supposes that if love, another personified emotion, had arrived first, the death would not have occurred.



# 1872-1875

## 1872-1875 Summary

Deeds are the topic of Poem 1294. In this poem Emily states deeds begin as thoughts, and then are carried out through the will. At this point these thoughts will either turn into actions, or they will die. If they die, only God knows these thoughts even existed. Likewise in Poem 1251 Emily encourages her readers to consider time with kindness. She insinuates that when the end of time sneaks up on each human, they will find time did his best.

The changing beliefs from childhood to adulthood about God and Jesus are discussed in Poem 1280. In the first two stanzas of the poem Emily talks about the beliefs held by children about God and Jesus. Children generally believe what they have been told by others, Emily deduces. In the following two stanzas Emily writes about the adult view of the Father and the Son. She believes if the pair had been presented to these adults in a more positive fashion, people would be better friends with the Father and the Son. As it is, she concludes, adults reject the idea of the Father and the Son until they are ashamed to take possession of the miracle that the Father and the Son represent.

Emily summarizes the Bible story of Abraham and Isaac in Poem 1332. Abraham is told to kill the child Isaac. Abraham is quick to comply. This quick action flatters the tyrant who asked Abraham to kill the boy and Isaac is spared. In the conclusion Emily states that the moral of this story is that "with a Mastiff" proper manners will triumph over tyrannical orders.

In Poem 1381 Emily makes the statement that one person really is an entity into himself. She writes that the heart is the capitol of, or ruler of, the mind. The heart and the mind together make up a single continent, or land, which is each individual human.

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# 1876-1880

## 1876-1880 Summary

In Poem 1407 Emily writes about comparisons. While a saucer holds only a little in the eyes of a human, it holds a feast in the eyes of a squirrel. To a squirrel a tree is a dining room. The squirrel has no silverware as humans do; they eat only with their lips and mouths. If humans could be found guilty of their obsession with minute details they would find the small animals, like the squirrel, are happier and more satisfied than most humans are. In Poem 1395 Emily describes a butterfly. Emily notes that even though the butterfly's wings are beautifully decorated, the butterfly still often closes its wings as if its decorations were not complete.

In Poem 1425 Emily writes about the affect her actions might have on other people. She states she hangs around just in case others need her, in case her smile might brighten their day. Hope is the topic of Poem 1424. Emily states that hope is always working but never runs out. Although there is little known of hope, it tends to make more beautiful all that humans have. Likewise, memory is the topic of Poem 1451. This poem states that those who have once been part of someone's memory never lose their place in the memory bank. In Poem 1429 Emily notes the possible effects of her hidden feelings on her friends and family. She states that disclosing these feelings would devastate those she loves even though it would give her relief. In Poem 1470 Emily writes about death. She states that death is a suitor who always gets the one it courts. Although death is quiet at first, it is later loud and obvious. After death gets what it wants, it bears this person away to the unknown.

In Poem 1475 Emily writes about the guilt a person who disenchant even one human heart should feel. These hearts, she writes, are innocent and trusting until someone tells them that things are not as they appear. In Poem 1495 Emily compares and contrasts opinion and truth. She writes that opinion is goes away quickly, truth will exist longer than the sun. Emily insists that if a person is not able to have both opinion and truth, they should attempt first to have truth.

## 1876-1880 Analysis

One poem of special interest in this section is Poem 1507. This poem about fame is almost autobiographical. As the poem indicates the person who earns fame has often passed away by the time this fame is gained. Also notice Emily continues to write about some general common themes. Death, for instance, is one of the themes that continues to be seen. Poems that address the theme of death include Poems 1470 and 1409. God is the topic of Poems 1481, 1538 and 1500.



# Summary 1881-1886

## Summary 1881-1886 Summary

In Poem 1546 Emily writes about how little the human knows about the direction their life might take. Although humans often make decisions lightly, they may never realize how large of an impact these decisions may have on their lives. Poem 1566 also deals with the similar topic of the human's desire to know and control the future.

The Bible is the topic of Poem 1577. She states this ancient book is written by "faded" or dead men. The topics include the Bethlehem, Eden, Satan and sin. Emily believes that if the story were told in a more pleasant way instead of condemning, there would be more believers. Emily also addresses the idea of faith in God in Poem 1581. In this poem she insinuates that people who died in times past knew they were destined for the right hand of God. She indicates this knowledge is no longer as secure now as it was in the past.

In Poem 1589 Emily writes of the desire to die in order to earn the look of respect and love she desire from an unnamed person who is always critical of her. Poem 1659 addresses the idea of loss from the viewpoint of a child with a butterfly. In this poem the child attempts to hold onto the insect so tightly that he loses it.

Emily writes of the winter state of the trees in Poem 1604. She compares this leafless tree to an unclothed person who doesn't want guests. Poem 1605 speaks of the freedom and joy of birds. The bird does not need a ladder to reach great heights. It also does not need a conductor in order for it to sing. The things needed to achieve happiness are few, just as Jesus' invitation to come to Him causes the angels to fly.

Poem 1675 is another poem about the nature of God and religion. In this poem Emily writes that all humans ask from God is to be forgiven. She states that although humans generally don't know from what they need forgiveness, they live their lives locked in the prison of this guilt. She concludes that humans rebuke the happiness they could have on earth in their effort to wait for the happiness that awaits them in heaven.

## Summary 1881-1886 Analysis

While Poem 1566 addresses the idea that human's want to know and control their futures, it also includes a very interesting illustration from the Bible. Adam and Eve were the first couple created by God to live in the Garden of Eden. While still in the garden Eve was tempted by Satan, who came to her in the form of a snake, to eat a piece of fruit from a forbidden tree. Satan convinces the couple to eat the fruit when he tells them the fruit will allow them to know all things. This example fits very well in the context of Emily's poem since the couple did what they were dared in order to have knowledge of all things. This knowledge of all things caused the couple to hide in fear from God.



# Undated

## Undated Summary

Poem 1694 speaks of the outward signs of affection. These signs include speech and silence. There is another sign which the apostles have said to behold yet none has ever seen. In Poem 1700 Emily writes about glory. She speaks of glory as a single moment that allows an otherwise unknown person to have some recognition. As soon as this moment is realized, however, it is gone and the person slips back into obscurity.

In Poem 1727 Emily writes about the nature of love. She states that in her opinion, there are few people in the world who actually love at all. Poem 1716 recalls a time when Emily felt as if she were forgotten by a friend. Emily states she was surprised she was worthy enough to be forgotten by this friend. Emily also writes that apparently her faithfulness became a burden or shame to this friend, who forgot her.

Suicide is the topic of Poem 1726. Emily indicates she believes all should have the right to die. However, she indicates that when one tries to exercise this right, they will be examined by people trying to determine why they chose to die. In Poem 1729 Emily turns her writing to the subject of people who do brave, honorable things. Emily states that it is more wonderful to do these honorable things when one is not accustomed to doing them. She indicates that by not doing these wonderful things, one misses the chance to feel the pleasure of doing these wonderful things.

In Poem 1774 Emily writes a poem in which she describes a person with a hard face. She states this face is empty of both love and grace. However, she also states this face is successful. Her description indicates that if this face were put together with a stone, they would be good friends from the first meeting. Poem 1752 describes the nature of God. In this poem she indicates that she knows God is a jealous God. She states this God cannot stand to see His children interacting with each other, but not with him.

The relationship between an umbrella and a parasol is the topic of Poem 1765. Emily explains that although the parasol and umbrella are similar, their uses are drastically different. The parasol is generally associated with a fan and is used mainly for decoration. The umbrella, however, has a serious use in keeping rain off its user. This fact this fixture is well honored and often borrowed indicates its usefulness.

In Poem 1788 Emily writes about fame. She compares this station in life to a bee. She states that while fame can be pleasant, it can also be painful. Fame can also fly away, like a bee. Poem 1789 is written about the beautiful, unique noise the birds make early spring mornings. Emily states this noise makes her think of loved ones that have passed away and now seem more dear than ever. She indicates the memories the birds resurrect almost make her wish their song would stop. Hearing these familiar and memory evoking noises can break the heart more quickly than a sword, she concludes.





In Poem 1784 Emily combines a variety of different ideas. First, she writes of the grave being a dwelling place like a cottage. It is here that she prepares for a person, a loved one assumedly, from whom she is separated. These two are separated, she writes, until they are reunited in the afterlife.

## Undated Analysis

Poem 1788 is an excellent example of the use of metaphor in a poem. In the opening line of this poem, Emily states "Fame is a bee". She takes the idea of fame and compares it to a bee. It is easily understood by the reader that the song of the bee represents the pleasure of fame, while the sting of the bee represents the way fame can be painful and hurtful. The wing of the bee represents the fleeting nature of the fame, it can be gone before one realizes it.



# Characters

## Emily Dickinson appears in Various Poems

Although she is also the author, Emily appears as a character in many of her own poems. Through these references to herself in her writing as well as the tone of her writing in general, readers of her work can get a good idea of what type of person she was. Emily was a very serious person, a loner, but also a person who considered deeply the effect of her actions on other people. It also seemed important to Emily that her life have some sort of meaning. One poem that shows Emily's desire for her life to mean something is Poem 982. In this poem Emily writes that if she can help just one person, she will consider her life a success. It is also obvious through Emily's writing that she spends much time in a garden observing nature. For this reason her poems are often full of references to flowers, animals and sunrises. Much of her imagery contains references related to nature.

Emily also appears to be very preoccupied with the idea of death. She has obviously been close to a person who has died and has observed this process carefully. In Poem 1108 Emily records the actions going on in a house nearby where someone has recently died. It is apparent from her poem that Emily has carefully watched the actions from a distance and knows well what the comings and goings mean. Although most of her poems are serious or even border on what might be considered morbid, it can also be seen that Emily had a sense of humor. For example, in Poem 260, Emily makes fun of the idea of popular.

Although Emily had few close friends and acquaintances it appears through her writing that she had at least one man for whom she felt great affection. Many poems, such as Poem 706, record a longing for a missing loved one. This love seems much deeper than that for a friend or a relative; it is portrayed as if Emily were in love with this person. She gives her audience a clue that this man might be involved in some sort of church work or ministry when she mentions that he, "served Heaven, you know, / Or sought to;". Emily, however, never gives the name of her secret love.

## God appears in Various Poems

God is a character in many of Emily's poems. It appears she was torn concerning her idea of God and His role in the human's life. In Poem 1668 Emily portrays God as a character pleased with his creation. In Poem 546 Emily charts her changing beliefs in God. She recalls the blind belief of her childhood when she prayed because others told her to. As she began to have some opinion of her own, however, she stopped praying. At the conclusion of her poem Emily seems to be trying to find some balance between the belief in an all powerful God and the realities of the world.



In Poem 795 Emily refers to God as truth's twin. According to Emily both truth and God and God will exist forever. In Poem 803 Emily relates God to nature. Even though Emily claims she knows neither nature nor God, Emily feels they both know her well. In other poems God is portrayed as a judge, a creator and as one who takes away. Emily is particularly perturbed at God for taking away her loved ones as is seen in Poem 245.

## **Jesus appears in Poems 87, 377**

Jesus is another character who appears often in Emily's writings. According to the Christian Bible, Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus was born on earth as a man, grew up and although He was sinless, He was crucified for the sins of the world. According to the Bible, this sacrifice allows all who believe in Him to have eternal life. In Poem 87 Emily writes about Jesus' statement that He chose the people of the earth to be His children even before they came to believe in Him. In Poem 377 Emily is searching for this person of Jesus in the storms of life. Although Emily searches everywhere and tries to find Jesus through prayer, she feels she is unable to connect with Him.

## **Jacob appears in Poem 145**

Jacob is a Biblical character who allegedly wrested all night with an angel of God until the angel agreed to give Jacob a blessing. The only downfall was that the angel touched Jacob's leg during the contest and caused him to be lame the rest of his life.

## **Sue appears in Poem 5**

Sue is a character in Poem 5 who is like a sister to Emily. According to the poem Sue lives next door to Emily. Although this sister did not wear her hand-me-down clothes as her blood sister did, Sue is just as close as this blood sister. Emily's friendship with Sue has made the years easier and life more beautiful.

## **Adam and Eve appears in Poem 1**

In Poem 1 Emily writes about the couples of the world. One of these couples she includes is Adam and Eve. According to the Christian Bible Adam was the first man created by God. Adam lived alone in the Garden of Eden until God realized Adam was not happy alone. At this time God created Eve to be Adam's wife and friend. Eve was supposedly created by God using one of Adam's rib bones. Adam and Eve were the first recorded earthly man and wife.

## **Pontius Pilate appears in Poem 404**

Pontius Pilate is one of the governmental figures central in Jesus' crucifixion. He and King Herod planned together to have Jesus killed. However, Pilate's wife had a dream in



which she was warned not to allow her husband to have anything to do with Jesus' death. Although Pilate tried to reason with the crowd gathered at Passover and convince them to allow Jesus to be freed, they insisted He be crucified. At this decision Pilate took water and symbolically washed his hands of the guilt of Jesus' death. This is why Emily states in her poem that Pilate sowed the seeds of the crucifixion of Jesus.

## **Peter appears in Poem 232**

Peter was one of Jesus' twelve disciples, or close followers. Although Jesus had warned Peter he would deny he knew Jesus three times, Peter swore this would never happen. On the night before Jesus' crucifixion Peter did deny he knew Jesus three times just as Jesus had predicted. Jesus' only chastisement for Peter was to look at him, a look that wounded Peter to the heart.

## **Sir appears in Various Poems**

Several of Emily's poems are addressed to an unidentified "sir" to whom Emily appears to have been in love with. One of these references is found in Poem 8 where Emily asks this sir to take care of her flowers after her death. Emily probably uses the idea of the flowers to represent some prized possession, perhaps her poetry. In Poem 108 Emily compares herself and this mysterious sir to the Alps and a daisy, though she doesn't come to a conclusion who is which. Poem 755 is a promise of everlasting devotion to this un-named man. Emily writes that her love will be as steadfast as the hills and long lasting as the sun.

## **My Master appears in Poem 75**

Poem 75, like a few of Emily's other poems makes reference to "my master." It is uncertain who Emily considers her master to be. This man may be one in the same of the "sir" of her other poems. However, the master may also refer to God, Jesus or Emily's father.



## **Objects/Places**

### **My Garden appears in Poem 79**

This garden, assumedly close to Emily's house, is the setting of many of her poems.

### **Canaan appears in Poem 179**

Revelations is the last book in the Christian Bible. This book is considered one of the apocalyptic books because it tells of the last days of the earth.

### **Revelations appears in Poem 179**

Canaan is the land promised to the Israelites after they were lead by God from bondage in Egypt.

### **Pompeii appears in Poem 165**

Pompeii is a Roman city destroyed during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

### **Amherst appears in Poem 241**

Amherst, Massachusetts is Emily's hometown.

### **Four Divisions of the Earth appears in Poem 1152**

Emily may use this idea of the four division of the earth as a variation of the Biblical reference to the four corner of the earth. This idea refers to the world as a whole.

### **Azof appears in Poem 1160**

Azof, also spelled Azov, is a riverside town in Russia well-known for its shipping trade.

### **Ophir appears in Poem 1462**

Ophir is an area mentioned in the Bible. It is recorded that King Solomon often had expensive items imported from this wealthy area.



## **Gethsemane appears in Poem 1485**

The garden of Gethsemane is the area where Jesus prayed the night before he was crucified. It is also the spot where Jesus was arrested by the Roman soldiers.

## **Houses appears in Various Poems**

Emily often refers to graves as houses.

## **Heaven appears in Various Poems**

A location to which Emily often alludes is heaven. It is promised to Christians that if they profess a belief in Jesus Christ after they die they will go to heaven, a place of peace and beauty.



# Themes

## Death

One of the more prevailing themes in Emily's poetry is her preoccupation with death. It almost seems at times that she is trying to come to terms with the idea of death by writing down her feelings about the passing of loved ones. In Poem 181 for instance Emily writes about a deer killed by a hunter. She states that it is after this deer is shot by the hunter that it jumps higher than it ever has in its life. She attributes this to the "ecstasy of death." This wording makes it seem as if Emily considers death to be a pleasant experience.

In Poem 1108 Emily describes the activity that goes on in a home after a person has died. It is apparent from her description that Emily has paid close attention to the details of dealing with a death. One can almost see Emily sitting in her home, watching the house across the street as the details of death are taken care of and the funeral planned. Note that Emily knows who each visitor is and what their role is in the funeral preparation.

Poem 479 addresses the unrelenting nature of death. Emily depicts death as a person who will stop by and pick up everybody. The carriage, in which death and immortality ride, represents the funeral procession. The carriage and its occupants pass children playing and farming fields, representing that even when one person dies, the lives of other people still go on. One day, however, death will come for these people too.

## God

Another topic commonly addressed in Emily's poetry is that of God and religion. Her fluent use of Biblical stories and characters in her poetry shows that she knows the content of the Bible well. For instance, she includes Adam and Eve, the first couple created by God, in her list of couples in Poem 1. Also, Emily also writes about the night that Jacob wrestles with God in Poem 145. Although she knows the content of the Bible well, Emily seems to have difficulty accepting the idea of God. Most of her poetry seems to lead the reader to believe she is not really sure if God exists or not. She wonders why God did not allow people to be immortal, and why he came to conquer death when people still die. Only one poem, Poem 800, indicates that Emily has a steadfast knowledge of God and confidence in His existence. She states that even though she has not physically seen God nor seen heaven, she knows they exist, just as she knows the sea exists even though she's never seen it.

## Affect of Actions

Another aspect of Emily's personality that surfaces in her poetry is her cognizance of the way her life and her actions affect the lives of others. Her earlier poems show that



Emily first only considered her past actions, the ones she couldn't change. In Poem 781, for instance, Emily describes the remorse she feels about past mistakes as being like the pain of hell. Emily indicates there is no cure for the pain of remorse, not even God can take this pain away. In many other poems Emily points out past actions can often not be repaired, especially once a person has passed away.

In her later poems, however, Emily begins to show a more positive attitude toward the effect her actions may have on others. In Poem 982, for instance, Emily shares the idea that if her life has a positive effect on only one person, she will consider her life to be a success. In Poem 972 Emily writes that God will not judge people based on the things they have done, but what they might have done had they been more godlike. What Emily may mean in this poem might be that actions can not gain one entrance into heaven. God will judge only whether or not the person has been "diviner". This reference may indicate God is interested only in whether or not a person is a believer, and will not judge only based on their actions and words.

## Nature

One common theme in Emily's imagery consists of references to trees, flowers and animals. There was apparently a garden near Emily's home where she spent much of her time observing nature. In Poem 944, for example, Emily writes about a moth. In her conclusion Emily states the moth shows that nature is as fond of jewelry as a girl. Emily talks about the joy of nature in Poem 908. She writes she believes flowers and plants grow just for the purpose of bringing smiles to the faces of humans, even if they have little or no money.

In addition to her poems that are strictly about nature, Emily also incorporates references to nature in her other poems. For instance in Poem 314 Emily uses the idea of a bird to describe the nature of hope. Although she never calls this image a bird until the second stanza of the poem, her references to feathers, singing and perching in the first stanza lead the mind to picture hope as a bird.





# Style

## Point of View

When writing her poetry Emily most often uses the first person point of view. These first person point of view poems can be identified by Emily's use of the pronoun "I" in her text. The nature of Emily's poems makes this first person point of view the best choice for her work. These are ideas that come from her own introspection and observation of life and her surroundings. It is through these first person point of view poems that Emily shares her own personal thoughts and emotions with her readers. Poems written in the first person point of view include poems 138, 207, 313, 639, 1080, 1575 and 1716.

In some of Emily's poems the person or persons to whom the poems were directed is more important than the point of view from which they were written. In some of her poems Emily addresses her poetry to the reader. In one poem, for instance, Emily asks "Dare you see a Soul". This particular poem is addressed to the large, generic audience that might read the poem. In Poem 635, however, Emily addresses her poem to a single person. The "you" in this poem is a single specific person as opposed to a member of a large audience or a group of people in general. While several of Emily's poems are written to an unidentified "sir" or "master," it seems these poems are directed to a specific person who Emily admired greatly. There are other poems that seem to be directed toward a specific person, however, this person is never identified.

## Setting

The most common setting of Emily Dickinson's poems is the poet's own imagination. Those poems that deal with ideas or emotions often have no setting. Other poems, however, are set in a variety of places. One of the more often noted settings is Emily's garden. It is assumed this garden was near the house where Emily spent most of her time and wrote her poetry. The home where Emily lived with her family also appears occasionally as a setting in her poems. The ocean and sea are also often used as settings in Emily poems. Another setting that emerges often in Emily's poems is heaven. This heaven appears as both the heaven promised to believers in Christ as well as the physical location of the moon and the stars. Graveyards, cemeteries and houses where people have died are also often used as settings for Emily's poems. Finally, Emily often includes Biblical settings such as Gethsemane and Bethlehem in her poems.

## Language and Meaning

Because of her distinctive style the language of Emily Dickinson's poetry can seem baffling to first time readers. She often uses unusual combinations of items in her poems. In one poem, for instance, she writes about pianos in the woods. She also often refers to graves as houses. Finally Emily often refers to herself a wife. This is an



unusual reference since it is well known that Emily lived as a recluse and was never married.

Emily's poetic devices are also unique. Although her lines are iambic, meaning that they contain an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, she follows no set rhyming scheme. The meaning of some of her poetry is unmistakably clear while the meaning of other poems seems masked. In her imagery Emily borrows terminology from law, the Bible and nature as well as Greek mythology. Finally, Emily often uses personification in her poems. One of her more common techniques is to personify items found in nature such as flowers, animals, and the sun, moon, and stars. Ideas such as death and immortality are also given human characteristics in some poems.

## Structure

This book contains the entire collection of Emily Dickinson's poetry. There are 1,789 poems total. These poems are arranged in the book according to the year in which it is believed each poem was written. Presented in this arrangement, it is easy to see the years in which Emily was at her most creative and those in which her work began to decline in numbers. For instance, there is one poem each for the years of 1850, 1852, 1853, and 1854. In 1858 this number jumps to 43 poems. There are 82 poems written in 1859, 54 in 1860, 88 in 1861, and 227 in 1862. The year 1863 was apparently Emily's most creative year with 294 poems being created in that time span. Emily's third most creative year was 1865 when she wrote 229 poems. These years were separated by a relatively dry spell in 1863 when only 98 poems were written. After 1865 there Emily averaged less than forty poems each year. The collection of poetry ends with a section of undated poetry which includes a total of 112 poems.

By structuring the book in this fashion the editor allows the reader to see the ways in which Emily's poetry and her writing technique changed and developed through her years of writing. Since there are no section titles or topics assigned to any of the poems, the reader is allowed to read each poem with an unbiased mind and decide for themselves what each poem is about. The only negative aspect of this layout is the difficulty in discerning themes and similar ideas. Emily rarely writes a group of poems in the same year that all follow the same topic, she writes about various topics. She explores these same topics through out her writing career. It is necessary to study the poems carefully and often go back and reread some poems to determine the ways in which Emily's ideas of some of her topics have changed and matured. If the poems were grouped by topic, this endeavor might not be so difficult.



## Quotes

"Success is counted sweetest / By those who ne'er succeed. / To comprehend a nectar / Requires sorest need." Poem 112, Pg. 59, Lines 1-4

"To fight aloud is very brave, / But gallanter, I know, / Who charge within the bosom, / The cavalry of woe." Poem 138, Pg. 70, Lines 1-4

"There's a certain slant of light, / On winter afternoons, / That oppresses, like the weight / Of cathedral tunes." Poem 320, Pg. 142, Lines 1-4

"I like a look of agony, / Because I know it's true; / Men do not sham convulsion, / Nor simulate a throe." Poem 339, Pg. 152, Lines 1-4.

"The soul selects her own society, / Then shuts the door; / On her divine majority / Obtrude no more." Poem 409, Pg. 189, Lines 1-4

"The heart asks pleasure first, / And then, excuse from pain; / And then, those little anodynes / That deaden suffering;" Poem 588, Pg. 264, Lines 1-4

"Much madness is divinest sense / To a discerning eye; / Much sense the starkest madness." Poem 620, Pg. 278, Lines 1-3

"There is a flower that bees prefer, / And butterflies desire; / To gain the purple democrat / The humming-birds aspire." Poem 642, Pg. 287, Lines 1-4

"I cannot live with you, / It would be life , / And life is over there / Behind the shelf" Poem 706, Pg. 314, Lines 1-4

"Pain has an element of blank; / It cannot recollect / Where it began, or if there were / A day when it was not." Poem 760, Pg. 339, Lines 1-4

"I never saw a moor, / I never saw the sea; / Yet know I how the heather looks, / And what a wave must be." Poem 800, Pg. 355, Lines 1-4

"If I can stop one heart from breaking, / I shall not live in vain; / If I can ease one life the aching, / Or cool one pain, / Or help one fainting robin / Unto his nest again, / I shall not live in vain." Poem 982, Pg. 411

"The last night she lived, / It was a common night, / Except the dying; this to us / Made nature different." Poem 1100, Pg. 445, Lines 1-4.

"The bustle in a house / The morning after death / Is solemnest of industries / Enacted upon earth," Poem 1108, Pg. 448, Lines 1-4

"Look back on time with kindly eyes, / He doubtless did his best; / How softly sinks his trembling sun / In human nature's west!" Poem 1251, Pg. 490, Lines 1-4



## Topics for Discussion

Select one of Emily Dickinson's poems. Write an essay in which you analyze this poem. Include points such as imagery, rhythm, rhyming scheme, and figures of speech such as metaphor and symbolism.

Research Emily Dickinson's life. Identify the aspects of her life that influenced her poetry. Write an essay in which you describe these influences and identify at least one poem that may have been affected by each of these influences.

Compare and contrast Emily Dickinson's poetry with other poetry being written during the same time period. Consider poets such as Ralph Waldo Emerson or Oliver Wendell Holmes.

Describe Emily Dickinson's use of religious imagery in her poetry. What influences in Emily's life allowed her to be so familiar with the Bible?

Consider the mysterious man to whom Emily addresses some of her poetry. Do you believe this was a real man? If so, who do you believe this man was? Explain your answer.

Consider Emily's relationship with God as described in her poetry. Was she a believer or a non-believer? Explain your answer.

Taking into account the entire library of Emily's poetry, describe the ways in which her work changes through the years. Include aspects such as tone, language and meaning. Which of her poems do you like best, her early poems, her late poems, or those written in the middle of her career? Explain your answer.