

EMILY DICKINSONS SONNETS

Among the authors who influenced Emily Dickinson are several: Keats, Shakespeare, Emily Brontë, Emerson and Barrett Browning, all of whom were prolific writers of sonnets. (1) Yet Dickinson wrote only a handful of poems that would be considered sonnets. Even then, she would take the sonnet form and make it her own.

Defining a sonnet by its most basic attribute, fourteen lines, I found twelve that fit form in both R. W. Franklin's Reading Edition F# (2) and in his manuscript books FM# (3) along with the year assigned by Franklin to each poem based on Dickinson's evolving handwriting. The twelve were all composed between 1860 and 1864, during Dickinson's most productive period. In other words, her sonnets were composed within the time of her most intense work.

I searched these twelve poems further for other classical attributes of the sonnet: syllable count per line; a discernible rhyme scheme; a dominant iambic rhythm; and typically, the turn (*volta*), from one theme in development to the next; whether approximating the Petrarchan form, after the sestet, or the Shakespearian form, at the closing couplet.

Dickinson scarcely followed any of these classic sonnet attributes. Nevertheless, considering the poems as sonnets helps to reveal her poetic maneuvers and her movement of thought even as she subverted the form.

The twelve in the Franklin numbering are 167, 195, 237, 239, 258, 262, 371, 432, 477, 751, 832, 888. I have chosen five to analyze as examples.

F167. 1860. *FM 143-4*.

I'm the little "Heart's Ease"!
I don't care for pouting skies!
If the Butterfly delay
Can I, therefore, stay away?

If the Coward Bumble Bee
In his chimney corner stay,
I, must resoluter be!
Who'll apologize for me?

Dear - Old fashioned, little flower!
Eden is old fashioned, too!
Birds are antiquated fellows!
Heaven does not change her blue.
Nor will I, the little Heart's Ease -
Ever be induced to do!

[Nearly all of Dickinson's sonnet lines are seven syllables long beginning with a trochaic foot. F167 includes an irregular Petrarchan rhyme scheme: a/a b/b a/b a/a c/d c/d a/d (along with a classic turn at line 9), as if to say, "I'll make the sonnet form

my own,” which indeed she did. There is a sweetness to this poem absent in later sonnets.]

F195. 1861. *FM 831*.

Victory comes late –
And is held low to freezing lips –
Too rapt with frost
To take it –
How sweet it would have tasted –
Just a Drop –
Was God so economical?
His Table’s spread too high for Us –
Unless We dine on Tiptoe –
Crumbs – fit such little mouths –
Cherries – suit Robins –
The Eagle’s Golden Breakfast strangles – Them –
God keep his Oath to Sparrows –
Who of little Love – know how to starve.

[One year only came between “...little ‘Heart’s Ease!’” and this *cri de coeur*, a sparrow starved of love. It is the time of the second “Master Letter.” The sonnet has no classic feature except for the heartbreak turn at line 8 (“His Table’s spread too high for Us”). The poem with irregular line breaks and no stanzas anticipates the modern rush of a sonnet (see Terrance Hayes’s *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*); I believe the poet still understood this as a sonnet.]

F237. 1861. *FM 151*.

What shall I do – it whimpers so –
This little Hound within the Heart –
All day and night – with bark and start –
And yet – it will not go?

Would you untie it – were you me –
Would it stop whining, if to Thee
I sent it – even now?

It should not tease you – by your chair –
Or on the mat – or if it dare –
To climb your dizzy knee –

Or sometimes – at your side to run –
When you were willing –
May it come –
Tell Carlo – He’ll tell me!

[Carlo was Edward Dickinson’s gift to Emily in 1849, “my shaggy ally,” as she described the large Newfoundland dog to T. Wentworth Higginson. In the late 1840s, Dickinson had worrying respiratory symptoms: was it tuberculosis? Long walks in

pure fresh air was one prescribed treatment; hence, Carlo as companion. (4). The “Hound within the heart” is offered as a gift (we can speculate to whom). The first six lines begin with a proper rhyme scheme, then breaking up at line seven, suggesting distress, which may constitute a turn. “When” at line 12 can be considered a turn leading into the final line (“Tell Carlo”) to fill out the sonnet, which, I suggest, constitutes yet another turn. Three turns! Why not? Dickinson was in control.]

F432. 1862. FM 324.

I read my sentence – steadily –
Reviewed it with my eyes,
To see that I made no mistake
In it’s extremist clause –
The Date, and manner, of the shame –
And then the Pious Form
That “God have mercy” on the Soul
The Jury voted Him –
I made my soul familiar – with her extremity –
That at the last, it should not be a novel Agony
But she, and Death, acquainted –
Meet tranquility, as friends –
Salute, and pass, without a Hint –
And there the Matter Ends.

[The subject matter, a death sentence after trial, overwhelms the classic form now in a solid bloc. Against Dickinson’s practice, fewer nouns are capitalized. Rhymes are gone except for “friends/Ends”. The turn is buried at line nine. If the sonnet had been broken up into stanzas, they would number 4-4-4-2 lines. The final two lines are dead-on iambic in Dickinson’s familiar 8/6 cadence.]

F751. 1863. FM 888.

Precious to Me - She still shall be –
Though She forget the name I bear –
The fashion of the Gown I wear –
The very Color of My Hair-

So like the Meadows – now -
I dared to show a Tress of Their’s
If haply – She might not despise
A Buttercup’s Array –

I know the Whole – obscures the Part –
The fraction – that appeased the Heart –
Till Number’s Empery –
Remembered – as the Milliner’s flower
When Summer’s Everlasting Dower –
Confronts the dazzled Bee –

[So many of Dickinson's poems can be, have been, multiply interpreted: either biographically or symbolically. Susan Kornfeld and Adam DeGraff, for example, explore this poem's metaphor of individual love overcome by the grandeur of nature: <https://www.poetryverse.com/emily-dickinson-poems/precious-to-me-she-still-shall-be/poem-analysis>. Iambics dominate in Dickinson's signature 8/6 rhythm, with the turn at line 9, moving from speculation to certainty, "The Number's empery" shows Dickinson's capacity for metaphor, here rule by natural history, a topic much studied by the poet.]

Observations

Rarely in the sonnets do we find lines with ten syllables, and in only three of those. Dickinson's dominant line count is in 8s and 6s her 'intrinsic' and instantly recognizable rhythm. Helen Vendler, in her analysis of F706, *I cannot live with You* – shows how Dickinson's shorter 6-4 syllabic count can be 'regularized' to iambic pentameter, and comments, "the extent to which she throughout her life avoided [pentameter] – the common coin of most English poets from Chaucer on — is in fact extraordinary." (5) Margaret Freeman (personal communication) notes that the eight-line poem, F1343 (*To flee from memory*), 1874, also in 6s and 4s, can as well be reduced to four iambic pentameter lines. However, as Vendler points out, a smooth iambic line would "ruin the emotional turmoil" of Dickinson's finest poems.

While the early sonnets begin with a 'proper' rhyme scheme, that soon breaks down. I suggest that Dickinson even when writing classically valued much more the unique and surprising word over any well-behaved regularity as in use of the turn.

Finally, consider the emotional content of these dozen fourteen-liners. Except for the despairing F195 (*Victory comes late* –), which is hardly a sonnet, the first group of 1861 poems, plus F371 dated 1862, are rather sweet but with one exception: F477 (*He fumbles at your Soul*) one of Dickinson's most agonizing poems. Later sonnets (F432, F832 and F888) are sober disquisitions on death.

In the end, the sonnet form, however subverted, was simply uncongenial to her explosive work. It could not contain her; no longer fit for purpose. Margaret H. Freeman has said it well: "Had Dickinson been ruled, had she organized, she wouldn't have been the poet she is. Her aesthetics are the aesthetics of crazy wisdom." (6) *Crazy wisdom* indeed.

References

1. Petrino, E. A. "Allusion, Echo, and Literary Influence in Emily Dickinson." *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 19, 2010.
- 2) *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Reading Edition. Franklin R.W., ed., (Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998).
- 3) *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* (2 volumes). Franklin R.W., ed. (Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981).

4) Hirschhorn, N. "Was It Tuberculosis? Another Glimpse of Emily Dickinson's Health." *New England Quarterly*, March 1999.

5) Dickinson. *Selected Poems and Commentaries*. Vendler H. (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2010).

6) Freeman MH. "Emily Dickinson's Poetic Art. A Cognitive Reading. Bloomsbury Academic (New York, London), 2023.

My analysis began a dozen years ago, and gained from Margaret H. Freeman's Myrifiield Institute for Cognition and the Arts, who made me see beyond my nose.

Norbert Hirschhorn
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