Emily Dickinson: SOCIAL NORMS AND EMOTIONS

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson was one of the most popular poets from her time period, when women didn’t have the same liberations as other men did. Dickinson had isolated herself from society and rarely talked with relatives. However, Dickinson wrote many poems that have allowed scholars today a peek inside of Emily Dickinson’s thoughts. Did Emily Dickinson isolate herself because she refused to follow social norms when it came to emotions? This essay examines the use of literary devices in Dickinson’s poems to answer the question researched. The poems included in this research are, “Last Night she Lived,” “Because I could not stop for Death,” “There’s been a Death, in the Opposite House,” “After Great Pain, a Formal feeling comes,” “‘Hope’ is the thing with Feathers,” “I never hear the word ‘Escape’,” “To fight aloud is very brave,” and “The Soul has Bandaged Moments.” Through Dickinson’s use of a casual tone, descriptive imagery, dashes, passionate diction, and personification she tries to understand the complexity of emotions.

Keywords: social norms, emotions
Did Emily Dickinson isolate herself because she refused to follow social norms when it came to emotions?

Emily Dickinson never really published her poems while she was alive, when she did publish poems it was under anonymous. She had isolated herself from others and instead of conforming and living in the society around her; there is disagreement among scholars on whether it was deliberate so she could focus on her work or if it was due to a medical reason. She also wrote about her own society carefully and frugally as her relationship to the world around her was hugely reticent. Emily Dickinson tries to understand emotions through her writing which is revealed through her use of a casual tone, descriptive imagery, dashes, passionate diction, and personification proving that through isolation Dickinson became her own person and refused to follow social norms when it came to emotions.

In the poems, “Last Night She Lived,” and “After a Great Pain a Formal Feeling Comes,” Emily Dickinson uses a casual tone to showcase what she thought about emotions. In the poem, “Last Night she lived,” everyone but the narrator was feeling the same emotions of mourning. The narrator’s casual tone is set from the very beginning, “The last night she lived it was Common Night except the Dying,” she described the night as any other day and added the dying part as an afterthought because to the speaker the woman dying wasn’t important enough to be at the forefront of her mind. While everyone else was surrounding the dying woman being sad, she was just off to the side blaming her for leaving them to deal with the pain on their own. The narrator didn’t really care that the woman was dying only that those left behind have to deal with everything while the woman just got to leave, “That Others could exist While She must finish quite.” When someone dies it’s the social norm to feel sadness for the dead however, Dickinson
only cared about those left behind. Dickinson also casually talked about how the dying woman’s room would soon belong to someone else, “and rooms where those to be alive were.”

According to Pollak (2004), president of the Emily Dickinson International Society, Dickinson once wrote a letter to Higginson saying, “Perhaps Death-gave me awe for friends, striking sharp and early.” From early on Dickinson had already experienced death and instead of fearing death she was just in awe of how quickly and soon it strikes. From experience, Dickinson has in a way ‘been there don’t that’ and death just lost its layer of fear. She’s already been acquainted with death so it’s lost its spark. Dickinson talks casually about death as she would about an old friend. Also in the poem, “After Great Pain a Formal Feeling Comes,” there is no ‘real’ emotion being expressed which showcased that Dickinson used her poems to try to comprehend emotions. Dickinson just casually talks about suffering from mourning and then the suffering is all over, emotions go back to normal just like that. The speaker is moving mechanically without knowing how to feel, as if she’s unsure of how she’s expected to feel so she just uses a casual tone. Social norms told her to feel a certain way when the speaker felt differently and thus created confusion on how to feel. At the end when Dickinson says, “First-Chill-then Stupor-then the letting go-,” as if it’s something someone can do easily. Just think it and it happens almost as if Dickinson doesn’t really understand how emotions really work. The speaker just didn’t want to linger on any emotion related to death because all that’d do is give death all the power. According to Engle (2002), an English professor, Dickinson had realized that she can’t recognize Death’s power over her. Death happens and she refused to think about it any longer than necessary by using a casual
tone. Society expected people to live in misery and fear death until their last breath. What’s the point of staying in misery any longer than she has to instead of just living in the moment?

Dickinson also uses descriptive imagery in the poems, “Because I could not stop for Death,” and “There’s been a Death, in the Opposite House,” to figure out why people fear death and stop living their lives because of it. In the poem, “Because I could not stop for Death,” Dickinson uses imagery to connect the idea of death to these happy scenes, “where Children strove to Recess…passed the Setting Sun.” The narrator is described as a person who doesn’t fear death which is shown through the use of imagery to make a casual happy scene. She would patiently live her life without fear of the unknown until it was time for her to die. The narrator wasn’t going to stop living just because others fear death, “Because I could not stop for Death—He kindly stopped for me—,” she even describes Death as kind. Dickinson didn’t let the social norms dictate how she should think about Death, she made up her own standards. It’s as if she is trying to understand why one would fear Death when in the poem she only associates him with joyful scenes. Dickinson didn’t care about how she’s supposed to feel all because social norms commanded it. Spencer (2007), a literature professor, explained the poem in that the speaker doesn’t’ want to speculate on the where she might just end up, she’ll just patiently wait for the day death comes. The narrator just wants to take her life into her own hands and just live one day at a time shown through her unwillingness to stop for Death in the poem. Dickinson uses imagery to try to understand why some fear death whereas she portrays the speaker as someone calm and collected when thinking about death. In the poem Dickinson only described death as a patient man. The speaker wasn’t going to stop living out of fear for death and the unknown. In the poem, “There’s been a Death, in the Opposite House,” Dickinson uses imagery to describe a situation where she didn’t understand the emotions going on and tried to conceive why people
conform to society and act as expected of them. Dickinson portrays the speaker in the poem as a sort of recluse, “The Neighbors rustle in and out-/The Doctor-drives away-.” The speaker is describe as an outsider from the death going on across the street. All the speaker does is describe the event without any emotion almost in a detached way. Dickinson tries to convey why people care so much about Death when Dickinson could care less. In her life, Dickinson had even gone as far as isolating herself because she didn’t want to conform. According to Engle (2002), an English professor, that in the true way of a warrior she looks her own death in the eye and thereby not only escapes its hold over her, but also achieves the perspective essential to living one’s life fully and in the moment. Dickinson expresses her own ideology into her writing. Her thoughts about emotions are shown through the imagery used in poems. It gives readers a peek into Dickinson’s mind since she was a recluse when she was alive. She also wants to show through the imagery she uses that life shouldn’t be put on hold for death. Sometimes it’s best to live in the present and not think about the future.

In the poems, “‘Hope’ is the thing with Feathers,” and “The Soul has Bandaged moments,” Dickinson uses dashes to express her confusion on why people have hope. In, “‘Hope’ is the thing with Feathers,” Dickinson is comparing hope to a bird, a fickle animal that could fly away at any moment. Dickinson uses dashes after each individual thought as if she has to pause to recollect herself. It affected the meaning of poem in that she wasn’t sure what hope really was. She describes hope as the thing that doesn’t want to stop being believed in, “sings the tune…and never stops-at all.” She compares hope to an annoying bird that doesn’t want to give up. Dickinson uses the dashes to add a pause and emphasis each individual action or adjective she uses in the poem. Not only does she not understand why hope keeps on going but why others keep it going and uses the dashes to try to convey her thoughts also. In the last line, “It asked a
crumb-of me,” she’s surprised that hope was asking to be believed in even if Dickinson didn’t even know how. Here she used the dash to emphasize a tone of surprise that an emotion that many others strongly believed in also wanted to be believed in. By using the dash it showed that Dickinson had paused because she was about to unveil a surprising fact that occurred. According to Campbell (2015), the vice chair of a college English department, Dickinson use of dashes were used as a parenthetical device for emphasis on certain ideas. She wanted the point she was making about hope to be noted. The dashes add an emphasis on each pause of her thoughts. Dickinson wants the readers to take their time to understand her ideology. In the poem, “The Soul has Bandaged Moments,” Dickinson also uses dashes to take a beat; she wants what’s being said to skin in. In the poem, “The soul has moments of escape-/ When bursting all the doors-,” Dickinson tries to paint every individual thing to make sure the readers take a pause and think about it before continuing to read. When Dickinson goes on in the rest of the poem she emphasizes with the dashes that life can be ugly even with hope involved, “With shackles on the plumed feet/ And staples, in the song.” Also that there’s no real use in being hopeful, “The Horror welcomes her, again.” She expresses that the soul just ended up going back to the pain and misery it tried to escape from. Dickinson uses the dashes to think about the emotions the soul is going through, trying to understand why to keep hope if it’s not helping the soul. According to Melanie (2009), an English professor, Dickinson used dashes in some of her poems to keep a note of uncertainty or undecidability. By using the dashes Dickinson to try and grasp why people like the soul maintain hope if it’s all for naught. She’s uncertain on the why keep trying just fail over and over. It’s also almost as if she can’t decide whether to admire the soul for at least trying or to call it foolish for believing in something that won’t help it escape.
Dickinson also uses passionate diction in the poems, “To fight aloud is very brave,” and “I never hear the word ‘Escape’,” trying to comprehend why other people believe in an emotion if in the end it doesn’t do one any good. In the poem, “To fight aloud is very brave,” Dickinson writes about how the unsung heroes are the braver ones, “To fight aloud, is very brave-/ But gallanter, I know.” By using passionate diction she writes about how sometimes people’s priorities are wrong and don’t know what’s the right thing to believe in. She writes as if she really wants to know why people don’t see things the same way she does. People don’t think about the internal battles that are more important. People fight everyday but only the battles seen are appreciated; to Dickinson the internal battle are more important as shown in the first line of the poem. Dickinson tries to fathom why people’s emotions are focused on something already praised enough whereas she feels differently about the situation. According to Melanie (2009), an English professor, her [Dickinson] seclusion may have contributed to the obscurity of her poetry. One danger of living alone, in one’s own consciousness, is that the person may start to create private meanings. After having barely any interaction Dickinson wanted someone or something to hear her because by nature humans are social beings. So she vented her thoughts onto paper in place of talking to an actual person. Since Dickinson couldn’t really talk to anyone else and she had so much to say, she conveyed her ideas passionately through her poetry. Sometime people in general need to just put their ideas down and leave it in the open. In the poem, “I never hear the word ‘Escape’,” Dickinson also uses passionate diction to describe the useless of having hope. When a person is in a dire situation society has taught people to have hope to keep going. However, instead of believing what society dictated one should do/believe in Dickinson didn’t care and did her own thing. In the first stanza Dickinson starts with using passionate diction to describe a sort of situation where the word ‘Escape’ brings so many
emotions with it. However, then Dickinson writes about what’s the point of hope if with it one won’t accomplish anything, “I tug childish at my bars/ Only to fail again!” She tries to understand why one should have hope and to keep on trying if only to fail over and over. Dickinson used such passionate diction to share her thoughts and to imagine how it would feel to have hope. She was quick to talk about how hope didn’t help and only brought about the feel of failure. Melanie (2009), an English professor, once wrote that Dickinson felt with her whole heart, thought with intensity, and imagined with ardor and shared herself in her poetry and letters. Not even Dickinson’s family knew the extent of her writing. Whenever Dickinson believed in something it was with her whole heart and she didn’t do anything halfway. She conveyed her dreams and passions through her works also released her thoughts out with pen and paper.

Dickinson uses personification to give life to an emotion and try to understand it which is used in the poems, “Because I could not stop for Death,” and “The Soul has Bandaged Moments.” In the poem, “Because I could not stop for Death,” Dickinson uses personification to compare Death to a nice gentlemen. When the poem says, “He kindly stopped for me-/The Carriage,” Dickinson gave life to Death and described him as someone kind who gives her a ride around town taking their time. She gives life to something inanimate to try to understand why people stop living their lives and instead live in fear of Death. Dickinson even describes Death as “kind” as if it was the first word that came to mind when she thought of Death. According to Evans (2009), a specialist of literary theory, Death is described as if he were a living thing yet he’s not described as a reaper or a sadistic figure like other literary works do. Social norms dictates that people should fear death. However, Dickinson expresses that she views death as a complete gentlemen by using personification. Dickinson tries to understand why people fear
death when she has personified him as the kindest person whom stopped kindly for her when she was too busy. In the poem, “The Soul has Bandaged Moments,” Dickinson personifies the soul as a prisoner who has hope. The ‘Soul’ is being personified as a tortured being perhaps a woman in love. In the poem, “With shackles on the plumed feet,” where she feels shackled and held down by love. Dickinson uses personification to illustrate the soul has something that has hope and that it’s only an illusion. All hope does is make one try again even if it’s impossible to escape only to fail again. Hope, instead of helping those who believe it only sets them up for failure again just like the soul in the poem. According to Hess (2004), a poetry writer, since the soul is seen as a woman, it is possible to think that either society are holding her back. Dickinson reflects her emotions and thoughts through poems and this poem is no different. In this specific poem it reflects what Dickinson thinks about hope and society. She had even isolated herself from society and in this poem she talked about society holding her back.

In conclusion, Dickinson tries to understand emotions through her poems and use of a casual tone, descriptive imagery, dashes, passionate diction, and personification. Dickinson didn’t follow social norms and instead isolated herself from society to be the individual she wanted to be without being oppressed.
Works Cited


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[https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/emily-dickinson](https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/emily-dickinson)