

# ONLY SO MUCH IS CERTAIN:

## Selective Rhyme in Dickinson

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Emily Dickinson was born into comfortable upper-middle-class, mid-nineteenth-century American life, and although she never shattered any of its social, religious, or gender norms, the way she lived and wrote rattled the windows and doors of her apparently placid domestic environment. As Robin Fraser points out, the topics of her poems are conventional – faith, death, beauty, truth – and their form appears even more so. But in subtle, and radical, ways she unsettles conventional pieties by disrupting literary expectations. She published almost nothing during her lifetime, but subsequent generations recognized the work of a great poet.

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**E**mily Dickinson does not have a traditional Christian view of god and religion, nor does she hold the concept of providence with the same conviction that one often associates with Christianity, the predominant faith in her time. She refuses to adhere to normative sentiments about the church and its dogma; however, that is not to say she does not contemplate the mysteries of the universe. She readily shows deference towards faith that,

notably, does not feign certainty. In her poetry, Dickinson pays close attention to a major concern of human consciousness: that is, what persists in spite of the constant change that takes place in the earthly realm. While this is considered to be some type of divinity, it is not, for Dickinson, a strictly Christian one. The human almost invariably begs for oneness with this consistency and expresses this desire through the language of the soul. In doing so, they reveal their desire for death. As individuals who are incapable of absolute knowledge, death is the only place free of fragmentation. Dickinson's poetry explores both the presence of this pervading spirit and the possibility of unification with it in death. Her selective use of rhymes and slant rhymes help provide her well-constructed verse with a feeling of trepidation in conjunction with this desire for death. Dickinson pairs the uncertainty of her faith with poetically formal full rhymes. These are presented in a structure akin to hymn-style verse, creating a palpable irony. Correspondingly, Dickinson frames our experience with the certainty of death in an unfulfilling structure of slant, or near, rhymes. This aspect of form cleverly and closely coincides with the human feeling of

dissatisfaction as a fragmented individual on earth. Dickinson demonstrates intent through her ability to aptly apply these techniques in her poetry. The effect of pairing form and content is a bleak sort of irony that is, at times, painfully similar to the human experience.

In poem 320 ("There's a certain slant of light"), Dickinson displays her ability to pull off a pleasing and complete rhyme scheme: lines two and four of each respective stanza rhyme. This technique gives the reader a satisfying feeling because each line is resolved rhythmically with this fit rhyme. Not all of Dickinson's work displays this comfortable character in its form, but this poem exhibits it without fault. The irony lies in the contrast between this form and the subject matter. Though poem 320 resolves itself poetically by adhering to its rhyme scheme, the poem contains an unbearable amount of uncertainty, allowing Dickinson to explore the overbearing presence of this "something" which is always in our periphery. The poem describes this "imperial affliction / Sent us of the Air" (11-12) as being like the "Heft of Cathedral Tunes" (3-4) and giving one "heavenly hurt" (5). These descriptions pair this ungraspable entity with a concept, or, at least, an awareness of divinity.

The form of the poem points to the human ability to have transcendental moments; however, the uncertainty of the poem's content mirrors our inability to make sense of these moments. Here, no validation is attainable for the speaker, or for any living person. One cannot experience oneness with god, and therefore meaning, and continue to live and comprehend the experience. The language used in poem 320 is itself poetically fitting and it is very ordinary for this sort of form to accompany content related to divinity. Dickinson exemplifies a sense of her personal tone by pairing this hymn-like style with an insatiable and gloomy tone. The question of spiritual allegiance is framed in a complete way, but, for all of her transcendent experiences, the human falls short of receiving certainty in life.

The self is continually seeking the ungraspable something alluded to in poem 320. Poem 340 ("I felt a Funeral, in my Brain") provides a good example of this self-exploration by means of poetry. The whole of the poem is grounded in its speaker's consciousness. Rather than approaching the subject generally, it is focused to an individual perspective. This poem's rhyme scheme is

similar to poem 320's; that is, lines two and four of each stanza are rhymed, save for the last. The scheme is consistent throughout as the speaker's thoughts begin and progress, first through her brain, then her mind, and finally her soul. The speaker's contemplation seems to centre on a quest for "Sense" in the same manner as poem 320 (4). Like the speaker of poem 320, the speaker in poem 340 is overtaken by human limitations; the speaker is "Wrecked, solitary, here" (16), which the reader takes to mean in a body, or, more generally, on the earth. "Then a Plank in Reason broke" (17), and, in the final two and four pairing of the poem, the regular rhyme scheme is broken by the word "then." This word is isolated by a dash on either side of it (20). This choice changes the, poem's flow and aesthetics, and alters our understanding of the speaker's experience. Were the first dash deleted and the second exchanged for a period, the speaker may be telling us that she "finished knowing [then]." This reading concludes dejectedly and even implies defeat. However, just as readily, the speaker could be reaching some kind of epiphany at that lingering "then." Perhaps she has found sense or comprehended her new "World" (l. 19). We do not know

where the speaker's mind goes after she has concluded the poem. This individual human perception of the proverbial "it," which pervades the scene in poem 320, leaves the hymnal style and gives us an inkling of human doubt. This doubt reminds us that we do not *know* whether death, like the speaker's thoughts, resolves and brings wholeness or if it is simply destructive. It is unclear what Dickinson's speaker means, and the poem does not quench our powerful desire to see a resolution.

Alternatively, in poem 591, the structure contains no perfect rhymes until the final pairing of the last stanza. The course of the poem relays the last moments of earthly life for the speaker. Each stanza that explores this scene neglects to fulfill our expectations by giving us non-existent or off rhymes. In the final stanza, the speaker tells us about the "stumbling buzz" of a fly, which is "uncertain" and stands between "the light" and the speaker. This light is typically a metaphor for the afterlife and the looming answer to that question about death. When, in the final line, the speaker tells us that they "could not see to see" (16), the reader assumes the speaker has passed. If death completes us as individuals by

unifying us with our cause, a thing we are isolated from in life, then this line is satisfying. The speaker is unable to “see” physically and to “see” comprehensively what is in the beyond because they no longer possess their bodily form; they are a part of that light now. If readers are unsure about how to interpret this final line, they are at least given the sense of conclusion in the only full rhyme of the poem. It comforts the reader to know there is light, as there are complete rhymes, but there is still uncertainty from the viewpoint of the living.

Dickinson is not always able to find, or desirous of finding, this kind of resolution. In poem 448, the rhyme scheme falls apart almost immediately. The first stanza introduces the speaker soon after her death when she is placed in her tomb. Here, we hear that the speaker and her companion have died, respectively, for “beauty” and “truth” (1-3). This idyllic sentiment is paired with the line two and four rhyme scheme that is familiar to Dickinson’s work. However, the following communication between these two recently deceased speakers contains dissatisfying non-rhymes. It is plausible that Dickinson could have found a full rhyme to perpetuate this secure feeling in the twelve-line poem. For

example, the clunky “he said” (8) at the end of the second stanza, might have been rhymed “he sighed” to match the preceding “replied” (6). The fact that these words are not rhythmically fit displays a likely intention in Dickinson’s writing to enact such a feeling of discomfort. Though these two have passed on and are embarking on this journey toward completion, the moss inevitably “[covers] up - [their] names,” leaving their sacrifice unimportant in our earthly realm (12). We cannot feel the kinship with these speakers that they feel with each other for we do not understand their experience. The poem reflects this in its unsatisfying lack of rhyme.

Dickinson is quite capable of using familiar forms of poetry and establishing her personal doubt through syntactical choices and decisions in punctuation and rhyme, or lack thereof. Dickinson uses slant or near rhymes to cause discomfort just as easily as she succeeds in filling our poetic expectations with full rhymes. These off or non-rhymes often let us down or leave us feeling unfulfilled. That unsatisfying feeling which is a result of slant rhymes in poems such as 339 is also the human’s experience of life. As the living human seeks death as a means of wholeness,



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they can never be satisfied. Dickinson therefore refuses to satisfy our poetic desires when addressing what we can know of this wholeness, divinity, or truth. In poem 339, the subject matter is very much concerned with an earth-bound exploration of this pervading truth. The speaker tells us how agony and death are among the only interactions in earthly life that satisfy, or come close to satisfying, the expectations of wholeness. These are predominant examples of humankind's ability to access truth. Although the speaker here shows direct access to that presence and is more readily able to identify it as truth, the message remains rather morbid. It is only through these "convulsions" that we may access divinity in life (3); therefore, the unrhymed structure of this eight line poem pairs that human feeling of dissatisfaction and lack of formal conclusion, in form, to the grim idea that our satisfaction is only realized partially in pain, and fully in death.

The aura of a poem is inevitably affected by its structure. Dickinson twists the experience of poetry, which often attempts to unite language with the ideas they represent, by preaching uncertainty. When Dickinson describes the certainty of death, the experience,

she is also careful to pair it with a form that promotes the uncertainty of death, the afterlife. Likewise, she is able to imply a certainty of divinity in her form, yet still convey her uncertainty as to what this is in a poem's bleak content. Throughout her work, Dickinson experiments with form, and particularly with rhyme, as she uses full rhymes to give us false comfort while talking about the unknowable. She clearly demonstrates the lack of formal rhyme or the use of slant rhymes to convey the displeasure with what is knowable for the human. The reader experiences the tone of the poem as affected by its structure and this influences their understanding of the poem. For Dickinson, neither form nor content can be expected to deliver certainty alone. Consequently, she explores her own sense of uncertainty by selectively marrying form and content in an untraditional way.

Work Cited

Dickinson, Emily. "Selected Poems." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature: Beginnings to 1865*. 7th ed. New York: Norton & Company, 2008. 1205-15. Print.