

RESEARCH ARTICLE



EMILY DICKINSON'S CONVERSATIONAL TONE: A PRECURSOR TO MODERN POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Even today, Dickinson's poetry is powerfully original; rejecting nineteenth-century poets that required heavily rhymed and metered lines, her poems convey the process of thinking itself—thought in motion—anticipating early twentieth century, "stream of consciousness." (Martin, xxix)

Emily Dickinson's conversational tone in her poems can be considered as a precursor for modern poetry. Her poetry is known for its unconventional themes, and for its unusual form and syntax, which gives an expression to unresolved tensions of thoughts and feelings in her poems. She is perceived as avant-garde poet: startling lines, abrupt phrases, and abstract images are the remarkable features of her poetry. Her experimental poems, delve deeper into spiritual and intellectual realms to uncover the unseen emotions in a unique way. And, this uniqueness has inspired the next generation poets. She writes simple verses in colloquial language, on genuine human themes of love, death, success, soul, heaven, pain, and about the faith etc. And the readers appreciate her poems, for its common themes, depicted in uncommon style that reflects in her poetry.

Keywords: Experimental style, Conversational Tone, Intellectuality, Creativity

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INTRODUCTION

Dickinson poetry is vividly rich in intellectual imagination that challenges other great poets. For example; she thinks differently from Ralph Waldo Emerson about the meaning of the word, "Word." It is mentioned in *Approaching Emily Dickinson: Critical Currents and Cross Currents Since 1960*: "Emerson blithely proclaims in Nature that words are "Signs of natural facts"; but for Emily Dickinson it was not so." Dickinson's poetic lines have rational appeal:

A word is dead when it is said,
Some say.

I say it just begins to live
That day- (White, 162)

The interpretation of her poems, in the light of unflinching realism and psychological profundity, provides an invaluable insight of her world view in her poems. In her poems, she expresses the concerns of life, in simple lines but in arresting style, that reveals her usage of concise phrases in her lyrical poetry. She exposes her inner world in the poems. This revelation can be considered as an initiation of 'Stream of Consciousness' technique of modern poetry. A Stream of Consciousness is explained as "A technique which

seeks to record the flow of impressions passing through a character's mind." (Childs 224) In fact, Sharon Leiter describes the poet's psychological depth in *A Critical Companion To Emily Dickinson* and also about her inner world view:

It is not that she shared us that her inner world of subjectivity (and ours by analogy) was rich and complex (we knew that), but that she showed us those odd and intense states of inner experience could be given voice and form. (Leiter vi)

The inner world view gives the subject, the identity as 'I', and the poets write with 'I' for personal expression. Dickinson begins the poems with startling lines; similarly, T. S. Eliot representative poet of twentieth century also begins his poem, "Let us go then, you and I / When the evening is spread out against the sky" ("Prufrock" 1-2). Now, read Dickinson's poem to draw analogy of pre-modernity in her poetry. For example her poem "I'm nobody! Who are you?" is in conversational tone with subjective 'I' and with the close reading of the poem, it is clear, the second person is unknown. Secondly, both poems begin abruptly and this incoherence is one of the features of modern poetry. Another, similarity is in using 'I' and 'You' pronoun in poems. Moreover, using capital letters and irregular punctuation marks, in between her poetic lines, clearly indicates her departure from grammar rules, one of the features of modern poetry. The poem "I'm nobody! Who are you?" counter arguments on the perception of the identity demonstrates her rational thoughts in the poem: Poems are quoted from Martha Dickinson Bianchi's *The Poetry of Emily Dickinson* the collection of poems:

I'M nobody! Who are you?

Are you nobody, too?

Then there's a pair of us—don't tell!

They'd banish us, you know. (Dickinson, 21)

Here, in the poem, she defines identity in terms of nobody and it seems in the poem; she responds to somebody and this somebody is paradoxical in nature. In the poem, the argument about somebody and nobody appears to be simple, but to capture the real

meaning in the essence of the being in the world, that's challenges the interpretation. Dickinson poems expose a different kind of confidence in her optimism like in the poem, "Hope is the thing with feathers", and this hope is for the soul and like the fly of the birds, it's limitless.

HOPE is the thing with feathers

That perches in the soul,

And sings the tune without the words,

And never stops at all, (Dickinson, 24)

The paradoxical optimism is evident in the poem, "Success is counted sweetest, By those who ne'er succeed." (Dickinson 7) The poetic lines have optimism, but with the elements of irony, that suggests only failures can celebrate the real success. But, her novelty of thought and her personal expression appeals to the reason, entwined in her poetic lines. In her poetry, we find effortless use of common words, for creative expression in her poems for instance, "Pain has an element of blank; It cannot recollect, When it began, or if there were, A day when it was not." (Dickinson 17) It's her novelty to perceive the pain differently, to say, the pain resides in feelings not in memories, is appreciable. Again, different perception of pain in poem, "I FELT a funeral in my brain", explores her rich ideas in experimental style; to think in new ways about the common feelings with the deeper meanings in her poems. For instance, in the poem, "have funeral in the brain", here, she uses 'brain' in literary sense in place of mind, in the same way, she experiments with the word 'funeral' applies it within the body, a rare imagination: resembles avant-garde style. Avant-garde is defined as "By violating the accepted conventions and properties...they set out to create ever new artistic forms and styles and to introduce hitherto neglected, and sometimes forbidden, subject matter." (Abrams 227) On similar grounds, the reading of the following lines in her poems, one can find elements of avant-garde style, as she treats the subject of "pain" in new ways that affects the sensibilities of the readers.

I FELT a funeral in my brain,

And mourners, to and fro,

Kept treading, treading, till it seemed

That sense was breaking through. (Dickinson 234)
Her poems are simple, short, bold, and causal in expression but often ambiguous in form and content, similar to Metaphysical poetry. The twentieth century poets were the followers of metaphysical poets, in this context, Dickinson is considered to be the precursor for modern poetry. She uses riddle in her poems that adds richness to her poetry. One of the poems is "Is Heaven a physician? They say that He can heal; But medicine posthumous, Is unavailable." (Dickinson, 32) Her poem surrounds with an aura of enigma, appears to be simple, but compels the readers to ponder over the riddle. It's common to believe in Heaven, but using physician as a metaphor to God, is her creativity. Her poetry has an intellectual insight that depicts in irregular rhyme, however, her thoughts presides the style. For instance in the poem, "WE never know how high we are." This poem echoes the same aphorism of truth and dictum of Socrates, Shakespeare, Alexander Pope, and Ralph Waldo Emerson but she slightly differs, for her being truthful to self leads to success.

WE never know how high we are
Till we are called to rise;
And then, if we are true to plan,
Our statures touch the skies.

(Dickinson 58)

Her bold but eloquent lines give rhetorical shocks to the readers, like in poem "I TOOK my power in my hand, And went against the world;" (39). Here, she suggests to live an independent life like a pebble. Another example of optimism, herein, she encourages to enjoy the endless joy, in taking risks, even at the possibilities of endless loss. "Tis so much joy! 'T is so much joy! If I should fail, what poverty!" (9) Her spiritual imagination with vividness is perceptible in her poem, "BECAUSE I could not stop for Death." Generally, the 'death' word frightens the imagination, but these poetic lines describe the death as a courteous friend, glad to receive her. She philosophically states in the first line that, it is not up to us when to die but one has to accept it as a joyful ride. Dickinson's lyrics are unusual in form and syntax and the twentieth century poetry, displays the same characteristics of informal style of writing poetry.

BECAUSE I could not stop for Death,
He kindly stopped for me;
The carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality. (Dickinson 190)

Emily Dickinson experiments with her themes, deals with wide array of numerous emotions with ease, whilst expresses them in confessional style through a stream of consciousness technique in her poetry. She unveils her inner world in conversational tone, though in concrete words in lyrical style; this style indicates the advent of modern poetry.

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