

A VOICE OF SILENCE: ON PUNCTUATION IN THE POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON

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Though many consider Emily Dickinson an essential poet of nineteenth-century America, her eccentric approach to art and life fashioned her a literary anomaly, a fact noted by both contemporaries and scholars. In the article “Emily Dickinson and Schizotypy,” Steven Winhusen discusses letters sent by Mabel Loomis Todd in 1881 about Dickinson, where she describes the poet as “the Myth” (81). Todd claimed Dickinson had only left her house once in the prior fifteen years to view a church by moonlight, wore nothing but white, and allowed none but the rare child to see her. This account details Dickinson’s most well-known eccentricity: reclusiveness.

She operated at a level of complexity similar to her poetry, with Thomas H. Johnson suggesting that she both “accepted her destiny as an artist who in her lifetime would remain unknown” as well as someone who “came to think of herself as a public name” (vii-viii). The complexities she dealt with in her personal life may explain why her poetry became so intricately interwoven within itself, as noted by Dr. John F. McDermott in “Emily Dickinson Revisited: A Study of Periodicity in Her Work.” He discusses the “polarity of mood” in her works as well as other signs and symptoms indicating Dickinson likely dealt with some sort of affective disorder, which may have led to these complex thoughts and emotions that informed her work (McDermott 688).

In the introduction to *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Thomas H. Johnson refers to an article written in 1891, five years after Dickinson’s passing,

about the correspondences between Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, her friend and later editor. Higginson described the peculiarities of her writing, stating that her poems offered “a problem never yet solved” and referred to them as “remarkable, yet so elusive of criticism” (Johnson vi). Johnson goes on to argue that Higginson viewed Dickinson’s poetry with the eye of a critic equipped to handle traditional mid-nineteenth century poetry and was therefore unequipped to deal with her “unorthodox” writings (vi). Dickinson, in her letters to Higginson, even references his descriptions of her writing, replying: “You think me “uncontrolled.” I have to tribunal” (Bianchi 241). However, even critics as recently as 2011, such as Brenda Wineapple, have referred to Dickinson’s use of language as something that “had never before been seen” and claimed that her poetry is “original, difficult, theatrical, perceptive, witty, and always a step or two above the rest” (132). Margarita Ardanaz also claims that Dickinson’s poetry is “experimental in the original sense: it experiments with the limits of genre” (256).

Dickinson’s eccentric use of punctuation also sets her poetry apart from that of her peers. Most of her poems that follow ‘grammatically correct’ punctuation were actually heavily edited by someone besides the poet. Glancing through *The Complete Works of Emily Dickinson*, an easily-discerned pattern appears: earlier poems, published and edited under the discretion of Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd, fit the grammatical and aesthetic palettes of readers at the time, while those published later on tend to retain Dickinson’s signature punctuation. While it seems she arbitrarily scatters her punctuation without purpose, its placement actually plays a vital role in shaping Dickinson’s messages. Her punctuation -- specifically her use of dashes -- can both deliver and obscure a theme, can both lead and trick a reader. Her punctuation’s ability to create physical and audible silence makes for one of the most engaging parts of her writing. I argue that this silence defines Dickinson’s poetic voice, as ironic as that may be. When viewing her punctuation, this angle sheds new light on how she wrote and thought about her poetry, also illuminating Dickinson herself.

Critics theorize a more personal reason beyond the poetic sense that explains Dickinson’s peculiar use of dashes. In his article on the poem “Good to Hide, and Hear ‘Em Hunt!,” David Rutledge discusses the “power of the poet’s voice,” which, in Dickinson’s case, ironically links to silence (139). He reads the poem as the poet playing games with her readers. He describes the “power of the poet” as her ability to “outfox even the most dogged reader, until she chooses to relinquish the riddle” (139). According to Rutledge, the poet ultimately finds herself in doubt as to whether or not “there will be a reader good enough to successfully seek her out” and believes that she has hidden too well for anyone to truly find her (140). He claims that this poem is a metaphor for a game of hide and seek between Dickinson and her readers, in which she is directing them towards certain truths while simultaneously hiding and hoping to be found.

Though Rutledge claims that Dickinson leads this dance of direction and misdirection through wordplay, she also uses punctuation to achieve the same effect. She conducts the poem with dashes, in an almost orchestral sense, using them to lead not only the words, but also the reader. The words become her sheet music, with her conducting them in original and unexpected ways. The written words by themselves say one thing, but the dashes that Dickinson adds give the poems their substance and signature style. The readers, in turn, become her players, drawn along to read the sheet music in a certain way, whether or not that is the rhythm they originally recognized.

The dashes' ability to create silence within the poem, forcing the reader to stop and take a break wherever one occurs, Johnson refers to as a "musical device" (x). The pause they create mimics the same effect as a comma, coaxing the reader into pausing, though on a slightly different scale. Given that a comma in a poem plays the same role as a quarter rest in music, indicating a single beat of silence, then a dash in Dickinson's poetry represents a half rest, lending itself to two beats instead of one. This extra beat of silence affects the theme of the poem and how it communicates to the reader, changing their interpretation.

In some cases, such as the poem "Morns like this – we parted –,” the dashes and resulting silence reinforce the subject matter.

Morns like this – we parted –
Noons like these – she rose –
Fluttering first – then firmer
To her fair repose.

Never did she lisp it –
It was not for me –
She – was mute from transport –
I – from agony –

Till – the evening nearing
One the curtains drew –
Quick! A Sharper rustling!
And this linnet flew!

Here, Dickinson's punctuation may initially appear arbitrary. The dashes do not correspond to the places where there should be end stops or commas, but are instead deliberately littered throughout the poem. Along with creating an audible silence, they also create a physical and spatial fragmentation. They create white space on the page, forcefully separating the words and phrases from each other and making each word and phrase fragment stand, helping the reader pick out which words are important to grasp the theme of the poem and leaving them hanging on to those words.

“Morns like this – we parted –” describes parting with a loved one; however, it is not just the speaker that ends up parted. The dashes throughout the poem create physical distance between the lines, notably so in the first stanza, where the speaker discusses parting with the unknown ‘she’ of the poem. Three lines in this stanza have internal separation, where a part of the phrase making up the line is physically separated from the rest. Other stanzas in the poem also employ this internal separation, but not quite as often. The first two lines of the stanza separate the subject and action, “we parted” and “she rose,” from the descriptors, “Morns like this” and “Noons like these.” The third line creates a distance between two actions, “Fluttering first” and “then firmer,” which, instead of measuring time like in the first two lines, echoes a shift in time itself created by the pause that the dash allows.

Dashes also shift and accentuate the last two lines of the second stanza. While, in the first stanza, the subject and action were separated from their descriptors, these lines have the subjects, “She” and “I,” separated from both the action, “was mute,” as well as the descriptors, “from transport” and “from agony.” Because this stanza is more static than the last, not following a line of events as in the first stanza, but rather showcasing the results or causes of those events, the dashes no longer serve to represent the time that is passing. Instead, they become a tool of the words around them. They animate the silence and agony, giving pause in the middle of the lines to accentuate those feelings in a way that could not be achieved if the poem flowed with regular punctuation. The pauses create a deeper sense of emotion, as though the physical lines represent the pauses of a person trying to speak through their agony—the breaking apart of the lines represents the breaking apart of a heart.

Dickinson also creates silence in this poem by placing dashes at the ends of lines, not just between the phrases. The reader hangs on to the end of each line with a dash, forcefully kept from tumbling over onto the next line. This slows down the entire poem and creates a stark difference between the lines that end in a dash and those with no end stop, particularly when it seems there *should* be an end stop, such as the lines “Fluttering first – then firmer/To her fair repose.”

However, punctuation does not always enhance the meaning of a poem—sometimes it can obscure or even change the meaning, as in the poem “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers –”:

‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers –
That perches in the soul –
And sings the tune without the words –
And never stops – at all –

And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard –
And sore must be the storm –

That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm –

I've heard it in the chilliest land –
And on the strangest Sea –
Yet, never, in Extremity,
It asked a crumb – of Me.

Upon first reading, this poem sounds joyful and optimistic. It describes hope as a bird always singing within our souls, never abandoning us even in the most dire of circumstances and never asking for anything in return. While it would be lovely if that remained the case, the poem's silence tells another story. Being forced to linger at the end of nearly every line and sometimes within the lines themselves, the silence slows the poem to a crawl. The slowness, silence, and physical distancing of the lines creates a melancholy feel to an otherwise upbeat and optimistic poem. This, combined with the lines "And sore must be the storm –/That could abash the little Bird/That kept so many warm –" makes the poem more like a eulogy for the hope that the speaker has lost rather than praising the hope that they currently have. The sensations created by the silence reinforce this interpretation, rather than the poem by itself, which would read completely differently had it followed conventional grammar.

The white space and silence in the poems above are emblematic of Dickinson's poetry, having become one of the most well-known traits in her writing. When readers encounter her poems with regularized punctuation, they recognize them as exceptions in her work which inspire an entirely different feeling. Removing or normalizing the punctuation so that the reader must no longer stop in the middle of lines, her poetry then adopts a whole new rhythm, such as in the poem "If I can stop one Heart from breaking."

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.

With the lack of punctuation, specifically end stops, the words and lines seem to rush and pour over each other desperately. Capitalization upholds the only remaining emphasis. Phrases no longer stand out because of being pulled apart, and silence no longer intensifies the emotions. Unlike in "'Hope' is the thing with feathers –," no outside interference hinders the meaning of the words as they stand; therefore, this poem is straightforward and easier to read than others.

Dashes in Dickinson's poetry operate by physically fragmenting phrases and words. Ardanaz claims that the dashes have "a function of separation of the units of meaning inside the poem...in an attempt to detach the value of its particular meaning" (259). I do not think that this is entirely the case. Though in some instances, separation detaches meaning as well as detaches certain phrases, such as in the poem "'Hope' is the thing with feathers –," this is not the rule in all of Dickinson's poetry. Where it may seem like the dashes in "Morns like this – we parted –" behaves similarly, also detaching semantic meaning from what has been physically detached, they are in fact doing the opposite.

It can be difficult to figure out what Dickinson is trying to accomplish with her punctuation. However, if Rutledge's interpretation of "Good to Hide, and Hear 'Em Hunt!" is correct, then we can assume that Dickinson makes her poems intentionally difficult as a sort of game, a puzzle to be put together by someone who can truly hear her beyond her tricks and illusions. She is not only the conductor of her words, but also of her readers. She waves her baton to make music out of her words and to make the readers dance exactly as she pleases. It also gives new meaning to the silence between the words. The silence obscures and enhances the music, but also obscures and distances Dickinson from her own work, a bid to keep herself from being found, or maybe to keep herself from gaining too much hope that she may one day be truly found. Perhaps her silence is not simply a device to enhance her poetry, but rather a consequence of her own forced silence as a poet.

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