



## Assignment B: Elements of Structure and Texture in Poetry

Your group has been assigned a Dickinson poem.

You are to explain it, using the following guidelines.

After completing the assignment, you will be asked to share the group's conclusions with the entire class.

Poems used in the assignment:

- *I'm Nobody, Who Are You ;*
- *The Soul Selects Its Own Society;*
- *I Dreaded That First Robin So;*
- *I Could Not Stop for Death;*
- *A Cemetery;*
- *Papa Above ;*
- *I Like to See It Lap the Miles;*
- *A Fly Buzzed When I Died;*
- *I Saw a Fellow in the Grass;*
- *I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed;* and
- *Letter to the World*

### Elements of Structure:

#### Structure:

What element(s) bind the parts of the poem together?

Note: Dickinson poems often have concentric levels of structural binding.

Possibilities to consider:

- Her poems are interior, private monologues, but are crafted as conversations addressed to some outside other, often using the syntax of direct address;
- Juxtaposition of two opposing elements (ex: large/small; this world/an another world; life/death):
- Many of her poems are also bound together by a central image that wraps around the poem — sustained metaphor, sustained personification;
- Metaphysical conceit — A sustained metaphor or simile that binds concrete and abstract references together to produce an intellectually shocking effect, and
- Progression toward an inductive clinch.

## Elements of Texture:

### Diction:

Emily Dickinson's word choice — diction — has been referred to as neutral, direct, gnomic, abrupt, simple.

- Do you agree with this assessment?
- How would you describe her diction?

#### Possible responses:

- simple;
- ordinary;
- everyday language;
- individual;
- many concrete words,
- not subjective;
- playful use of words, contributing to the ambiguity of the poem

### Syntax:

Emily Dickinson's syntax is inverted and elliptical.

- Explain these terms.
- Scan your assigned poem for specific examples.

#### Possible responses:

- Many of her lines do not follow traditional sentence patterns — for instance, they reverse (invert) subject and verb, thus placing strong emphasis on the verb.
- Many of her lines are fragmented (broken" syntax), leaving out the connecting words found in traditional sentences, building with a series of "abrupt" phrases.

### Rhythm:

Emily Dickinson controls rhythm through broken syntax, use of grammatical irregularities and eccentric capitalization and punctuation.

- She uses dashes of varying length to signal pauses; her long dashes signal dramatic pauses, "caesuras", that become suspended moments.
- She uses irregular capitalization to achieve special emphasis and to personify.

Scan your poem for specific examples of Dickinson's use of rhythm. Be prepared to explain your analysis.

**Rhyme:**

Emily Dickinson uses various kinds of inexact rhyme, i.e. combinations of sounds that are similar but do not directly rhyme. The terms off rhyme and slant rhyme are often used to describe these patterns.

Scan your assigned poem for example of these non-traditional rhyming combinations.

Be prepared to explain the nature of the modification(s). (Ex: do the vowels match, while consonants depart in sound - or vice versa?)

**Images:**

Underline key images in your assigned poem.

Make two columns on a sheet of paper. In one column, list concrete images (things of this world, Nature images); in the other, list abstract ones (hope, death soul, beauty, etc.)

Create a brief written analysis of the poem's statement and specific ways Emily Dickinson uses images to build that statement.

**Tone:**

The tonal quality of a poem emerges from the integration of the above elements.

Which of these following words describe the prevailing tone of your poem?

- assonant (vowels harmonious)
- dissonant (consonants discordant; use of off-rhyme, unharmonious);
- ironic (often achieved through inverted syntax, juxtaposition of images);
- ebullient, exhilarated, solemn
- other

### Identifying Theme:

The first edition (1890) of Emily Dickinson's poems grouped her themes into the following categories: Life, Love, Nature, Time and Eternity.

- In which category does your assigned poem belong?
- Do you think your poem belongs in a category other than those listed? Why?
- Could your poem be placed in more than one category?
- What evidence could you use to justify listing your poem in more than one category or in a category that's not listed?

Construct a sentence summarizing the primary theme of your poem's statement.

- What main aspect(s) in the poem's craftsmanship shaped your conclusion?
  - Was it the structural design of the poem?
  - The textural elements such as diction, rhythm, or images?
  - The tone?
  - All of the above?

Be prepared to explain/defend your analytical process.