

“Without” in Emily Dickinson’s Poems

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Reading Emily Dickinson’s poetry, we often come across the word “without.” Actually, she employs the word “without” in 125 poems out of 1775 poems. In many cases the word plays an important role. Examining the characteristics of how Dickinson employs the word “without” in her poems helps us understand some of her significant views and thoughts.

Distance

When Dickinson realizes the world into which she cannot enter, she often employs “without.” In Dickinson’s view, what people see is outside of nature, and they are never allowed to look into the inside. Therefore, the mystery of the world fascinates her, which leads her to use the word.

Poem 610 (“From Cocoon forth a butterfly”) describes the flight of a butterfly. The second stanza depicts the butterfly which goes everywhere :

Without Design—that I could trace

Except to stray abroad

On Miscellaneous Enterprise

The Clovers—understood—(ll.5-8)

As Dickinson cannot understand the butterfly’s “Design” or fluttery role in nature, she says the butterfly is “Without Design.” However, Dickinson thinks that the butterfly must have “Design” or a plan in nature. She restates in the expression, “Miscellaneous Enterprise.” “The Clovers,” which live in the same world as the butterfly, “understood” the butterfly’s “Miscellaneous Enterprise.” The “Enterprise” is not simple enough for Dickinson to understand it, so she feels excluded from “the mystery of creation.”¹ Her fourth stanza implicitly suggests that the but-

terfly's flight is meaningful for her, saying "To Nowhere—seemed to go/In purposeless Circumference." Although it seems difficult to define what "Circumference" is for Dickinson, it could be the realm which she wants to reach as a poet. The butterfly is described as "This Audience of Idleness" in the fifth stanza. "Idleness" does not refer to doing nothing, but it denotes "enjoying nature"² and freedom. Poem 979 ("His Feet are shod with Gauze—") associates a bee's idleness with composing poetry. As a poet Dickinson seems to hope to share the butterfly's experience. The desire urges her to understand the butterfly's "Design," and its role in the outside, natural world.

"Without design" in poem 778, which depicts the relationship between four trees and the things around them, also has similar usage as in poem 610. The first stanza includes "Without" :

Four Trees—opon a solitary Acre—
 Without Design
 Or Order, or Apparent Action—
 Maintain— (ll.1-4)

The expression "Do reign," which is displayed as the variant of "Maintain," indicates the governing power of the four trees. Gary Lee Stonum explains the differences between "Do reign" and "Maintain" as follows: "The variant, in other words, attributes to the trees a monarchical domination over the scene, albeit one that is still without design or order. 'Maintain,' on the other hand, suggests a different notion of control and coherence."³ The second and third stanzas explain how four trees contact "The Sun," "The Wind," "God," "The Acre," "Shadow," "Squirrel" and "Boy." The poem ends with the phrase that "What Deed" and "What Plan" the four trees have for "the General Nature" is "Unknown." The vague relationships between objects, that is, the disorder in nature is manifested by vague syntax. "Four Trees" stand with "Design/Order, or Apparent Action—." Here, Dickinson is expressing her feelings that the human beings cannot grasp the

great and varied designs of the natural world.

Although Shira Wolosky insists that there is not “Design” or “Order” in this poem,⁴ other critics do find them. Ruth Miller states that the trees “act out their roles in the natural world without self-consciousness, without intention.”⁵ Joanne Feit Diehl Juhasz notes that “Dickinson sustains the possibility that there may be a design that governs over against her provisional denial.” The second and third stanzas “elaborate this issue of motive or purpose beyond sheer physical presence.”⁶ Furthermore, Jane Donahue Eberwein comments that the poem “presents the mystery of trees set by God in solitude to fill out his design...”⁷

In the last stanza of poem 162 (“Some Rainbow—coming from the Fair!”), Dickinson praises nature’s glory when she writes :

Without Commander—countless—still—
The Regiments of Wood and Hill
In bright detachment stand!
Behold! Whose multitudes are these?
The Children of Whose Turbaned seas—
Or what Circassian Land! (ll.19-24)

In this poem, the participant wonders, in awe of the natural world but without being able to answer the questions that are posed. Many questions are asked, using the exclamation mark five times and the question mark twice. Although the poem expresses “Without Commander!,” Dickinson realizes that there must be a strict “Commander” behind nature similar to a military image. Observing nature controlled by strict order, Dickinson cannot but feel some existence which owns and controls nature, although she cannot identify it. Silence deepens “an unbridgeable chasm between the observed and the observer,”⁸ as Dickinson pours out her inability to fully comprehend the natural world outside her human existence.

In the three poems discussed above, Dickinson does not simply deny the words following “without,” although she employs the negative expression “without.” The

words following “without” are implicitly affirmed. Dickinson describes nature as she observes it, which made her write “Without Design,” “Without Design Or Order, or Apparent Action,” and “without Commander.” She expects her readers to find out what she really means, and also wants them to develop their own insights into her simple expressions. The three poems imply the existence of God in the phrases including “without.”

When Dickinson cannot express her feelings in words, she employs the phrase “Without the words.” In poem 314 (“Hope” is the thing with feathers—”) is used to express the world which the speaker cannot understand. The poem defines “Hope” skillfully, comparing it to a bird throughout the poem. The bird “perches in the soul—/And sings the tune without the words—/And never stops—at all—.” The bird continues to give messages to the speaker without asking for reward. The messages deeply appeal to Dickinson’s soul, but she cannot adequately express them in words. The poem expresses the abstract concept “Hope” in concrete words, yet there are limitations, which made Dickinson write “without the words.” Miller E. Budick states that “The most important truths of the universe may be too large to be contained within the paradigms of human language.” Hope is the world which the speaker cannot grasp from a human position.

“Without a syllable” in poem 798 is similar to “Without the words” in poem 314. The poem ends with a phrase using “without.”

We pass—and she—abides—
 We conjugate Her skill.
 While She—creates and federates
 Without a syllable—

Although nature does not tell what she does, “we,” who are keenly aware of her greatness, utilize her skill. The last phrase, “Without a syllable,” intensely makes the readers recognize the gap between nature and human beings.

Let us proceed to study phrases including “without” which convey the feeling

of envy towards nature. Poem 1095 depicts the sun contrasted with the earth :

When I have seen the Sun emerge
From His amazing House—
And leave a Day at every Door
A Deed, in every place—

Without the incident of Fame
Or accident of Noise—
The Earth has seemed to me a Drum,
Pursued of little Boys

The poem presents several contrastive points between the sun and the earth. The first stanza emphasizes the fairness of the sun, saying that the sun shines equally “at every Door” and “in every place.” On the other hand, people are absorbed in fickle fame on the earth. In other words, the poem declares that fame does not judge people fairly. Secondly, the quiet and magnificent sun is contrasted with people on the earth who are busy and make a fuss about trifles.

Looking at a bird which flies freely in the sky, Dickinson says a bird “crossed a thousand Trees/Before a Fence without a Fare” in poem 1663. The poem reflects the world of human beings in which each person lives surrounded with restrictions.

Similar expression “Without offence of Toll” appears in poem 1286 (“There is no Frigate like a Book”). Reading books allows people to travel the world of imagination “Without offence of Toll— ;” the narrator is free from restriction in society. “Without offence of Toll” literally refers to being poor. Even if “we” are poor, “we” feel rich as if “we” were kings or queens as the expression, “the Char-iot” indicates.

Heaven is other worlds outside her. Poem 194 compares the difference between marriage in heaven and that on the earth :

Title divine— is mine!

The Wife — without the Sign!
 Acute Degree — conferred on me —
 Empress of Calvary!
 Royal — all but the Crown!
 Betrothed — without the swoon
 God sends us Women —
 When you — hold — Garnet to Garnet —
 Gold — to Gold —
 Born — Bridalled — Shrouded —
 In a Day —
 “My Husband” — women say —
 Stroking the Melody —
 Is *this* — the way?

The persona is now a wife in heaven, which is very different from being a wife on the earth. The phrase “without the Sign” manifests Dickinson’s scorn for marriage as a social form. Marriage in heaven does not have “swoon,” that is, “the sexual swoon of earthly nuptials.”¹⁰ According to Suzanne Juhasz, “...swoon can be read as symbolic, or symptomatic, of the ordinary woman’s response to a man, a husband, to marriage.”¹¹ “Without the Sign” and “without the swoon” express Dickinson’s conviction that marriage in heaven is a spiritual one, and she feels that the status of such a marriage is a noble one. At the same time, she criticizes women who think marriage alone secures and defines their status in human society.

Dickinson feels that death is also an important other world phenomenon outside human existence. Seeing “a Dying Eye,” a narrator wants to share the experience of death, but the eye is “Soldered down/Without disclosing what” the dying eye searches for in poem 547 (“I’ve seen a Dying Eye”). The world of death is a place where “we” are never allowed to enter, while “we” are alive.

In all of the above poems, Dickinson conceptualizes of the various worlds out-

side of human experience and struggles in her life with how she might come to terms with them. While she knows she can not enter the pre-designed natural paths of the butterfly, nor participate in the arrangement nature makes of trees or the process of death while humans are alive, her poetic expressions show how very much aware she is of these inaccessible places and her almost mystic fascination with the worlds they represented outside of human existence. This fascination stayed with her throughout her life.

Sympathy

Now, we want to examine Dickinson’s concept of “without” as it expresses her sympathy for various aspects of the natural world.

Poem 534 (“How many Flowers fail in wood—”) describes flowers which “fail in Wood—/Or perish from the Hill—/Without the privilege to know/That they are Beautiful—,” although their beauty greatly influences other living things. That is to say, the poem deplores flowers which die without knowing their own worth or a guarantee of knowing that they will be loved by other forms of life. The flowers may reflect Dickinson herself who anticipates dying without her talent as a poet ever being acknowledged.

Dickinson also finds herself in “My Season’s furthest Flower—... Because I found Her Kinsmanless—/A Grace without a Friend” in poem 1030 (“My Season’s furthest Flower—”). Dickinson, who hopes her poems will be appreciated after her death, confesses in poem 930 that “The Poets light but Lamps—,” meaning that they continue to compose poems without being influenced by others. “I tenderer commend” the flower, all the more “I” am lonely, writes Dickinson, expressing her sense of isolation as are beautiful flowers which bloom unnoticed.

Nature shows us not only her bright sides, but also her dark sides. One gloomy winter day is described as “Nature, like Us is sometimes caught/Without her Diadem” in poem 1121 (“The Sky is low—the Clouds are mean.”). Nature has her

bad mood just as human beings do, the narrator finds. This poem is included in Dickinson's letter to Mrs. J.G. Holland probably written sometime in November of 1866. The poem is inserted after the lines : "Today is very homely and awkward as the homely are who have not mental beauty." Consequently, the poem is used to draw an analogy between nature and human beings.

When Dickinson expresses nature's humbleness and solitude by using "without," she senses that nature is close to her. The phrases including "without" show Dickinson's pride, solace and belief in the value of her life, however lonely or potentially unnoticed.

Death

Dickinson's usage of "without" in her poems on death shows the close and significant relationship between life and death.

Poem 764 ("My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—"), one of her most inscrutable poems, deals with "a Loaded Gun," which is identified as a narrator. It is just a lifeless thing, but when the owner identifies it, it displays its ability. In other words, it is the owner who controls the gun. The gun and the owner are presented as if they were lovers. Here is the last stanza :

Though I than He—may longer live
 He longer must—than I—
 For I have but the power to kill,
 Without—the power to die— (ll.21-24)

The last line, "Without the power to die—" startles the readers, because people die when they lose power. The last line presents a tragic fact ; while the gun is not identified by the owner or after the owner died, the narrator is just a lifeless thing. Therefore, "Without—the power to die—" means 'without life.'

Poem 1023 ("Too scanty 'twas to die for you,") compares the living to the dying as follows :

The Dying, is a trifle, past,
 But living, this include
 The dying multifold — without
 The Respite to be dead — (ll.5-8)

While Dickinson mentions the greatness of death in her poems, she also stresses that life is more valuable than death. The above poem is one which expresses this view. The last phrase, “without/The Respite to be dead” emphasizes “multifold.” The poem proclaims that “we” are alive, recognizing death in many ways. Inder Nath Kher has pointed out that “The experience of dying — ‘The dying multifold — without The Respite to be dead’ — enhances our perception of love”.¹²

Dickinson’s challenging idea of life and death is found in poem 1027 :

To die — without the Dying
 And live — without the Life
 This is the hardest Miracle
 Propounded to Belief.

The phrase “To die — without the Dying” negates the generally accepted idea of death, and the phrase “live — without the Life” negates the generally accepted idea of life. Inder Nath Kher interprets the first line as follows : “...the suggestion here is, as it seems to me, that one can die without really physically dying, meaning that one can experience death in the spiritual sense...”¹³. Katharina Earnest proposes the following view : the poem 1027 “reflects consequences of religious dogma in a very complex and veiled manner... The argumentation implies the belief in man’s immortal soul. Immortality as primarily the absence of death leads the speaker to deduce that living is the absence of life. ...Religious belief forces man to conceive of an existence in which the terms ‘living’ and ‘dying’ do not apply. The detachment displayed in lines three and four stresses the nonappearance of man in religious dogma ; the speaker’s criticism of religious belief is revealed by the unbridgeable gap between her [Dickinson’s] conception of man’s life and

the idea proposed by doctrine.”¹⁴ The speaker embraces his/her disbelief in traditional religious belief, having in mind the inseparable relationship between life and death. He/she seems to find out more value in living in this world rather than the world after death.

The phrases including “without” in the three poems discussed above reflect Dickinson’s view that there is always death behind life. In her view, to acutely perceive death requires people to be sensitively aware of life. The more people are aware of death, the more they will strive to live a sensitive, valuable, and meaningful life.

Necessity

Although to employ “without” to express necessity is a common usage in Dickinson’s poems, it is worth studying the usage to find out what Dickinson considers to be important. She is strongly aware of what is indispensable in the world of nature.

A speaker establishes his/her own way of seeing things “against all the orthodoxies,”¹⁵ which is called “New Englandly” in poem 286 (“The Robin’s my Criterion for Tune—”). He/she says “Without the Snow’s Tableau/Winter, were lie—to me—.” The poem proclaims that every person, even the Queen, sees things provincially like him/her. The speaker has a strong belief and pride in his/her way of seeing things ; he/she has his/her own definition of winter.

Poem 464 begins with a phrase which intensely emphasizes the significance of the word, “this” :

Without this—there is nought—
All other Riches be
As is the Twitter of a Bird—
Heard opposite the Sea—(ll.1-4)

As a speaker does not mention what “this” refers to, “this” cannot be defined.

“This” may be “the Whole” or “the Gold.” What he/she seeks for is only one thing, and nothing but the thing can satisfy him/her.

Poem 1128 (“There are the nights that Beetles love—”) describes a beetle’s up and down movement comically, using such military terms as “Drives,” “Bomb,” and “alarm.” The narrator exercises caution towards the beetle and is enchanted by it at the same time, which is shown by the fact that “terror” is substituted by “transport” and “merriment” is substituted by “jeopady.” The beetle stimulates the narrator’s imagination. The poem ends saying “the Summer evening” will be “Too dear” “Without discreet alarm—.” That is to say, summer won’t be really summer without the presence of the beetle.

The second stanza of poem 1777 (“To lose thee—sweeter than to gain”) states :

The Caspian has it’s realms of sand,
It’s other realm of sea.
Without the sterile requisite,
No Caspian could be. (ll.5-8)

The Caspian is divided into two parts : the realms of sand and those of sea. The former corresponds to the “sterile” area, but it also has an important role as well as the latter. The poem articulately indicates Dickinson’s view of looking at two opposite elements at the same time ; there is a dark aspect behind a bright one. The readers are forced to be aware that everything is procedually related in the world of nature.

“Without” in the four poems discussed above, reveals what Dickinson thinks is important to nature’s processes, reflecting her unique fascination with the natural world even outside of her human existence.

The inner world

We referred to the cases in which the phrases including “without” indicate the world beyond reality. There are other aspects to Dickinson’s use of the term.

Spiritual union in heaven is a theme in poem 325 (“There came a day—at Summer’s full—”). The lovers prepare their lives in heaven, hoping for their marriage there. In the world of the lovers, the concept of time is described as “all the time had leaked, without external sound,” which suggests the parting of the lovers. The phrase means the time flies quickly as water leaking into a ship. The phrase “without external sound” not only refers to sound, but also refers to time ; the passage of time is quick between the lovers, neglecting the passage of time in the external world.

Poem 450 (“The Inner—from the Outer—”) asserts one of Dickinson’s most creative principles. Here is the third stanza :

The Inner—paints the Outer—
The Brush without the Hand—
It’s Picture publishes—precise—
As is the inner Brand— (ll.9-12)

Inwardness naturally comes out, which is to compose poetry. The phrase, “The Brush without the Hand,” stresses the direct relationship between the outer and the inner worlds. Imagination makes a person draw a picture. It also refers to the process in which invisible things are turned into actual existence.

The sunset spiritually influences the speaker in poem 1104 (“The Crickets sang”). After describing the change of nature at sunset concretely, the last stanza reads :

A Vastness, as a Neighbor, came—
A Wisdom, without Face or Name—
A Peace, as Hemispheres at Home—
And so, the Night became— (ll.9-12)

“A Vastness,” “A Wisdom,” or “A Peace” from the world beyond this world overwhelms the speaker. The speaker cannot specify it, as the phrase “without Face, or Name” indicates.

A persona heard “A Crash without a Sound” in poem 1665 (“The farthest Thunder that I heard”). The phrase “without a Sound” clarifies that he/she hears the thunder not in reality but in his/her psyche. The thunder is described as something very important to the persona. Inder Nath Kher interprets it as “the poet’s creative power”¹⁶ and Rebecca Patterson explains it as “the lightning bolts of love.”¹⁷

Dickinson’s conceptualized use of sympathy for the worth of natural things, “death,” as an automatic concluder of life, certain aspects of nature (like the beetle) which is a “necessary” or indispensable component of summer, and her distinction between the inner and outer worlds of reality are all forms of creative expression which she uses to mark distinctions between what human beings can and cannot understand about the natural world. One of her lifelong concerns was to try to explain and draw distinctions between what existed with and “without” of human existence. Throughout her life, Dickinson tries to poetically express how her understanding of what was inside and what was outside her existence created as well as negated the meaning of reality.

Conclusion

Although Dickinson employs “without” in many ways, we have discussed some common characteristics.

In many cases, Dickinson presents her view which nobody can notice by using “without”, which is made possible by her acute sensibility. Therefore, “without” is imbued with her pride as a poet. She expresses existence behind nature, employing “without.” In this case, “without” does not mean negation, but affirmation. As the persona cannot explain the existence in words, he/she employs “without,” but he/she acknowledges that he/she notices it.

Dickinson grasps the world outside her in relation to herself, which makes her use “without” so often. Therefore, “without” conveys her various feelings of envy,

surprise, sorrow, courage, sympathy and loneliness.

“Without” is often employed to bring the readers of her poems into the world beyond this world, that is, the spiritual world. Excluding the reality by using “without” makes Dickinson create the imaginative world.

In Dickinson’s view, life is closely related to death. The idea is skillfully expressed by employing “without.” To be conscious of death strengthens the value of life, which is the message behind “without.”

Dickinson’s attitude of trying to see what is both invisible as well as absent creates her unique poetic world through employing “without.”

NOTES

All quotations from Emily Dickinson’s poems are from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 3 volumes, edited by R.W.Franklin (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England : The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998). The book includes more than one version of a poem when more than one version exists. Version A is used, except for poems 325 and 1286 for which version B is used.

1. Karl Keller, *The Only Kangaroo among the Beauty: Emily Dickinson and America*, Baltimore and London : the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979, p.114.
2. *Ibid.*, p.24
3. Gary Lee Stonum, *The Dickinson Sublime*, Wisconsin : The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990, p.16
4. Shira Wolosky, *Emily Dickinson : A Voice of War*, New Haven & London : Yale University Press, 1984, p.4.
5. Ruth Miller, *The Poetry of Emily Dickinson*, Middletown, Connecticut : Wesleyan University Press 1968, p.258.

6. Joanne Feit Diehl, “Ransom in a Voice,” *Feminist Critics read Emily Dickinson*, ed. Suzanne Juhasz, Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1963, p.165.
7. Jane Donahue Eberwein, *Dickinson : Strategies of Limitation*, Amherst : The University of Massachusetts Press, 1985, p.137.
8. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *Emily Dickinson*, New York : Alfred A. Knopf Inc. 1986, p.64.
9. Miller D. Budick, *Emily Dickinson and the Life of Language : A Study in Symbolic Poetics*, Baton Rouge : Louisiana State University Press, 1985, p.129.
10. Stonum, *op.cit.*, p.163.
11. Suzanne Juhasz, *The Undiscovered Continent : Emily Dickinson and the Space of the Mind*, Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1983, p.112.
12. Inder Nath Kher, *The Landscape of Absence : Emily Dickinson’s Poetry*, New Haven : Yale University Press, 1974, p.171.
13. *Ibid.*, p.214
14. Katharina Ernst, *Death in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson*, Heidelberg : Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1992, pp.180-181.
15. Suzanne Juhasz, Christanne Miller and Martha Nell Smith, *Comic Power in Emily Dickinson*, Austin : University of Texas Press, 1993, p.30
16. Kher, *op.cit.*, p.249.
17. Rebecca Patterson, *Emily Dickinson’s Imagery*, Amherst : The University of Massachusetts Press, 1979, p.192.