Emily Dickinson: Master of Literary Form

Emily Dickinson is known for her unusual poetic line and her use of unorthodox grammar. The majority of Emily Dickinson's poems are composed in short stanzas, along with some longer poems, with a rhyme scheme that can be considered slant or off-rhymes. Dickinson is able to manipulate poetic devices throughout her poetry to create double meanings, and she condenses her poetry in order to help the reader understand what her poems mean. Many of Dickinson's poems are missing key words or specific punctuation to help keep the reader involved in what they are reading. She uses literary proprieties such as parataxis, which is when she changes topic unexpectedly in the middle of the sentence. Dickinson uses repetition and capitalization to emphasize specific words that she wants the reader to pay attention to. The last literary propriety that Dickinson manipulates to slow her poetry down or to help eliminate specific words is her use of the dash. Dickinson is able to create many interpretations of what she is trying to vocalize through her poetry by the manipulation of grammar.

The unusual manor of language Dickinson uses in her poems gives the reader the ability to unravel what the poem means. Dickinson chooses every word carefully, and made her decisions based on the specific definitions behind each word. Since Dickinson omits certain key words in her poems, she must pay attention to the words that she uses in order for readers to understand what she is writing about without using the actual word. While Dickinson wrote her poetry, or even letters, she tended to write multiple drafts because she would constantly change word choices and even phrases (Miller 5). Dickinson’s language usage comes in many forms and they also relate to each other. She compresses her words within her poetry in order for one word to have many meanings, and so that she is able to write about multiple themes (24). "The
Hallmark of Dickinson's poetic style is her conciseness, that is, her knack for cramming as much meaning as possible into the space of a few words” (Guthrie 112). Another way condensed language benefits Dickinson is that she is able to display her strength of choosing a specific word for her poems. Dickinson knew that all language was meant to be symbolic for something (113). She spends time trying to figure out what word has the correct definition in order to illustrate her thoughts; displaying her strength in language. The last way that her condensed writing technique pulls her pieces together is that it exemplifies the unlimited amount of knowledge that Dickinson had (Miller 27).

Emily Dickinson also uses parataxis throughout her poetry. She places sentences, phrases, or clauses together without the use of a conjunctive word (Miller 30). Dickinson uses parataxis to help move her poems along while writing smaller stanzas. It enables the poem to move faster between metaphors or other literary conjunctions (31). In her poem, "My Reward for Being, was This" (163), Dickinson writes in the first stanza, "A Scepter — penniless—.” She unexpectedly changes her attention from a powerful ruler who has a staff to a person who has no money. The beginning of "My Reward for Being, was This" discussing rewards that a powerful ruler receives and swiftly changes to getting no rewards and to being impoverished. The quick shift makes the juxtaposition more jarring. According to Cristanne Miller, parataxis is used to connect two topics together instead of trying to rephrase words together in order to make them transition into each other. When Dickinson uses the grammatical function of parataxis she is able to add more of a dramatic voice to the poem, helping her get a reaction from the reader (31-32). Dickinson uses parataxis to create anticipation for the sublime, while also creating a sense of uncertainty for the reader.
During the nineteenth-century repetition was highly praised in poetry because of how it affected the meter, and how it could change words and sound. Cristanne Miller discusses that it would have been extremely unusual and unconventional if she did not use repetition in her poetry. Dickinson uses "thematic verbal repetition, syntactic and structural repetition" (75). Dickinson’s use of repetition does not make her standout amongst other poets the way her grammatical manipulation does. Throughout her work, Dickinson tends to repeat specific pronouns in order to connect different pieces together based on repeating words and themes. Dickinson used letters and syllable repetition throughout her poetry to help create a sense of rhythm. She would also repeat specific words throughout her entire body of work. For example, the word “sun” was used 170 times, and “sea” was used around 122 times throughout her collections (Guthrie 77).

Capitalization is another way that Dickinson is able to manipulate grammar in order to convey her meaning. Dickinson capitalizes words throughout her poems in a nontraditional manor. In most of her works, nouns tend be capitalized throughout her stanzas. Miller strongly suggests that Dickinson used capitalization in her poetry to inspire erratic thoughts (58). When Dickinson capitalizes a word she is drawing attention to that specific word and in doing so gives the word a symbolic meaning. "Thus this metrical identity heightens the impression that these are intended as two stages of one being" (Wilner 24). Once she capitalizes a word it becomes more important than it would have if she had left it in lowercase. By capitalizing specific words or phrases, Dickinson is able to draw the readers attention to a certain part of the poem, and therefore emphasizes where she wants the reader to find meaning. (Miller 58). In the poem "Like Some Old fashioned Miracle" (142), Dickinson capitalizes eight words in the first stanza alone, not including the first word in each sentence.
Like Some Old fashioned Miracle
When Summertime is done—
Seems Summer's Recollection
And the Affairs of June (142)

Dickinson uses the capitalization to help show the significance a word has, and to help define the ambiguous meanings of her poems.

Dickinson’s powerful manipulation of grammatical rules creates equivocation and double meaning when she uses the dash throughout her work. Dickinson's poems can be recognized by many people all over the world because of her famous usage of the dash as punctuation throughout her 1,775 poems (52). Dickinson uses the dash for several reasons throughout her poetry. The dash replaces the traditional accepted formats of punctuation. The dash is used as a verbal sign that can divide and connect, that can rush forward and yet stops as well (Wilner 26). Dickinson tends to use the dash to replace commas or other punctuation factors that are nonessential. Dickinson also uses the dash to help illustrate the connotation of separating a word from other words, or she uses the dash to help surround specific words to manipulate the way they interact with the reader. "The regular recurrence of stresses and sounds in poetry seems to have a calming effect on the poet" (Miller 12). When Dickinson uses the dash to seclude specific words, it draws attention to the word as well as creating a hook to capture reader’s attentions in order to get them to slow down, or stop to contemplate the word or phrase (51-53). Dickinson uses the dash to emphasize certain points in her poems as well as "making thematic words more distinct" (52). Dickinson was able to use the dash in a unique way that no other poet of her time did. This characteristic makes her writing standout and easy to recognize.
Dickinson manipulated nineteenth-century literary proprieties to create her unique style of the poetic line and stanza. She shortens her stanzas by condensing her ideas and words in order to create an ambiguous meaning. Parataxis gives her the opportunity to make a fast change within a line to control the speed, flow, and movement of the poem. Both repetition and capitalization help Dickinson signify what part of the poem she wants the reader to pay specific attention to. These literary properties help the reader understand what Dickinson is trying to communicate. Her unusual grammar catches the essence of the complicated themes she chose to write about. Dickinson’s use of poetic rhyme and structure was not conventional until the late nineteenth-century (miller). Dickinson’s characteristic use of the dash molds her poetic line and stanza by controlling how the reader reads and thinks. This demonstrates that it’s not just the words that give the poem meaning, but the manner and style in which the reader receives the words.

Works Cited


