

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#520 (c.1862)

I started Early – Took my Dog –
And visited the Sea –
The Mermaids in the Basement
Came out to look at me –

And Figures – in the Upper Floor
Extended Hempen Hands –
Presuming Me to be a Mouse –
Aground – upon the Sands –

But no Man moved Me – till the Tide
Went past my simple Shoe –
And past my Apron – and my Belt
And past my Bodice – too –

And made as He would eat me up –
As wholly as a Dew
Upon a Dandelion's Sleeve –
And then – I started – too –

And He – He followed – close behind –
I felt His Silver Heel
Upon my Ankle – Then my Shoes
Would overflow with Pearl –

Until We met the Solid Town –
No One He seemed to know –
And bowing – with a Mighty look –
At me – The Sea withdrew --

ANALYSIS

“The problem of judging [Emily Dickinson’s] better poems is much of the time a subtle one. Her meter, at its worst—that is, most of the time—is a kind of stiff sing-song; her diction, at its worst, is a kind of poetic nursery jargon; and there is a remarkable continuity of manner, of a kind nearly indescribable, between her worst and her best poems. [“I like to see it lap the Miles”] will illustrate the defects in perfection.... The poem is abominable; and the quality of silly playfulness which renders it abominable is diffused more or less perceptibly throughout most of her work, and this diffusion is facilitated by the limited range of her metrical schemes.

The difficulty is this: that even in her most nearly perfect poems, even in those poems in which the defects do not intrude momentarily in a crudely obvious form, one is likely to feel a fine trace of her countrified eccentricity; there is nearly always a margin of ambiguity in our final estimate of even her most extraordinary work, and though the margin may appear to diminish or disappear in a given reading of a favorite poem, one feels no certainty that it will not reappear more obviously with the next reading. Her best poems, quite unlike the best poems of Ben Jonson, of George Herbert, or of Thomas Hardy, can never be isolated certainly and defensibly from her defects; yet she is a poetic genius of the highest order, and this

ambiguity in one's feeling about her is profoundly disturbing. ['I started Early -- Took my Dog'] is a fairly obvious illustration....

The mannerisms are nearly as marked as in the first poem, but whereas the first poem was purely descriptive, this poem is allegorical and contains beneath the more or less mannered surface an ominously serious theme, so that the manner appears in a new light and is somewhat altered in effect. The sea is here the traditional symbol of death; that is, of all the forces and qualities in nature and in human nature which tend toward the dissolution of human character and consciousness. The playful protagonist, the simple village maiden, though she speaks again in the first person, is dramatized, as if seen from without, and her playfulness is somewhat restrained and formalized. Does this formalization, this dramatization, combined with a major symbolism, suffice effectually to transmute in this poem the quality discerned in the first poem, or does that quality linger as a fine defect? The poem is a poem of power; it may even be a great poem; but this is not to answer the question. I have never been able to answer the question."

Yvor Winters
"Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Judgment"
In Defense of Reason, 3rd ed.
(Alan Swallow 1947) 283-99

"The poem by Emily Dickinson 'I started early, took my dog' has been rather misinterpreted, in my opinion. Mr. Yvor Winters...regards this poem as a poem about death. 'The sea is here the traditional symbol of death,' he states; 'that is, of all the forces and qualities in nature and in human nature which tend toward the dissolution of human character and consciousness.' Mr. George F. Whicher, on the other hand, in his biography *This Was A Poet*, describes this poem in the chapter entitled 'American Humor' as written 'in a spirit of pure fantasy.' While in certain of Emily Dickinson's later poems the sea may symbolize death ('Fortitude incarnate / Here is laid away / In the swift partitions / Of the awful sea'), in this early poem the sea can hardly be so understood. Nor is this poem pure fantasy, or humorous in any sense. Rather I suggest it is a study in fear, fear of love, of which the sea is here the symbol, as it is in a number of early poems ('My river,' 'Wild nights').

The narrator describes an early visit to the sea, the word 'early' having the double sense of early in life and early in the morning, before the awakening of her family: the adventure is a vicarious escape from her repressive environment, her 'solid town,' as she calls it in the last stanza, thus contrasting its safe solidity with the terrifying fluidity of the sea. She goes not only early but alone, with only her dog to guide her 'simple shoe,' apparently expecting to return from what is merely to be a 'visit'—thus a note of apprehension even in the seemingly carefree opening lines.

To one who 'never saw the sea,' something of its strangeness, its essentially mythical, inaccessible and hostile quality is conveyed in the lines 'The mermaids in the basement / Came out to look at me.' Mermaids, those legendary creatures who live in the sea, come not to greet their visitor but to 'look at' her, an inimical gesture to one who wished never to be looked at, or even seen. (One recalls the protest: 'Creation seemed a mighty crack / To make me visible.') The limp extended hands of the sixth line are a typical Dickinsonian self-projection, as is the mouse aground upon the sands: a self-portrait of timidity. And there is undoubtedly a wistful contrast here between the legless semi-animal mermaids who are so at home in the sea and the human visitor drawn toward the sea but able only to stand transfixed upon its shores.

The phrase 'But no man moved me' at the beginning of the third stanza may be read quite literally, I think, the word 'moved' having both an emotional and a purely physical connotation: the poet cannot be moved from the spot where she stands immobilized with dread and longing; whereupon the sea advances toward her, rising past her feet to her knees, her waist and finally her breast, and threatening at last to overwhelm her completely by engulfing her head. Thus the poet's fear of the sea is based upon the very excessiveness of its power to undo her. It is at this point, when her whole being seems endangered, that she succeeds, by the strength of her intellect, her will, in turning to go. For the sea which she had so blithely set out to visit she now seeks to flee; and it is in abject terror—conveyed with great power in the repetition of

the word 'he' in the fifth stanza—that she finds it in close pursuit, treading her ankle with its 'silver heel'—the sensation is of spine-chilling horror.

The phrase 'no man he seemed to know' would appear to refer merely to the desperation of the sea's pursuit; but the poet too in her blind terror of the sea can know no man. This obliviousness, in their mutual concern with each other, of sea and poet, ends with their arrival back to her rigid home environment which, restraintful as it is of the wildest seas, seas which in fact range within the poet herself, she now finds to be a sanctuary. And as she retreats there, proud of the sea's 'mighty look' of amazement at her power—a look which she must surely return—it seems clear that she will never venture forth again."

Kate Flores

"Dickinson's 'I Started Early -- Took my Dog'"
The Explicator IX (May 1951) Item 47

"Both Yvor Winters and Kate Flores...load Emily Dickinson's 'I Started Early, Took My Dog' with a weight of meaning, symbolism, and emotion which this wholly delightful bit of poetic fancy simply will not bear. Yvor Winters regards the poem as being about death, of which the sea is the symbol. Kate Flores regards it as 'a study in fear, fear of love, of which the sea...is the symbol.'

But the imagery and the whole tone of the poem are playful and marked with characteristic Dickinsonian whimsy: the sea is divided into basement and upper story, the mermaids peer out in curiosity, the friendly frigates extend their ropes like 'hempen hands' for the little 'mouse' to run up. I simply cannot find 'a note of apprehension' in the opening stanza, a 'hostile quality' in the curiosity of the mermaids, 'abject terror' in the repetition of the word 'he' in the fifth stanza, or 'spine-chilling horror' in the imaginative metaphor of the sea's 'silver heel' upon the poet's ankle (especially when followed by the fanciful and beautiful image of her shoes overflowing with 'pearl'). Nor anything at all about love or death.

The poet is describing a morning walk to the sea—real or imaginary. She captures the wonder and freshness of it and indulges in poetic fancy. The fear in the poem is mock-fear. When the sea makes as if it would gobble Emily up 'as wholly as a dew upon a dandelion's sleeve,' she feigns terror. But the delicacy of the figure tells us that we must not take this seriously, that she is only acting out a little play. The play is concluded in the last stanza with the mock-solemnity of the sea's formal bow and withdrawal. This is Ruskin's 'fallacy of the willful fancy,' not 'pathetic fallacy'."

Laurence Perrine

"Dickinson's 'I Started Early -- Took my Dog'"
The Explicator X (February 1952) Item 28

"Two earlier interpretations have left unresolved the question of the basic meaning of this poem. One view [Perrine's] maintains that by means of metaphor, playful whimsy, and mock-fear, but not symbolism, the poem simply presents the wonder and freshness of a morning walk to the sea; it has nothing to do with love and death. The other reading [Flores'] sees the poem as a study of fear, the fear of love, the whole episode dramatizing a vicarious escape from the repressive environment of the 'solid town.' When the sea threatens to engulf her, the speaker is terrified, but by her strength of will and intellect, she succeeds in returning to the safety of her rigid home environment.

As I see it, the poem is less a study of fear and abject terror as such than a dramatization of the frightening realization that toying with love may arouse a tide of emotion too powerful to control, or at least threateningly high for the timid or inexperienced, or for the individual who, however desirous of self-fulfillment, fears the loss of self-identity and retreats behind the protective seawall of social habit and custom. Even such a restatement of the basic idea over-simplifies, for within the narrative the ambivalent attitude toward the sea lasts to the very end: from the curiosity and the playful interest in the possibility of romantic love, in the first two stanzas, through the nearly full tide of emotion and the consequent fear of being overwhelmed by a devouring love, to the lingering pleasure and desire suggested by 'his silver heel' and 'pearl' and 'bowing...with a mighty look.'

That 'mighty look' is unforgettable and, along with the mermaids and hempen hands, suggests a power greater than that of romantic love, despite the whimsical personification of the tide as a polite gentleman.

Ordinary prudence ('took my dog') is no safeguard against the subtle enticements and the tidal flow that slowly enfolds man in its embrace until his very individuality is threatened with extinction. Similar in its mystic appeal is the haunting call of the thrush music in the 'pillared dark' of Robert Frost's 'Come In.' In Frost's poem the counterforce of ideal purpose is sufficient to offset the mystic call, whereas here the speaker is saved by her sudden realization that the sea is no friendly lover: despite the lingering pleasure of its touch ('I felt his silver heel'), Nature is a stranger to civilized human values ('the solid town').

In another poem, 'The Waters Chased Him As He Fleed' (#1749), the sea again personifies death, physical death only, but the conscious irony is too flat and stark to parallel the emotive symbolic overtones of 'I Started Early.' 'The Masthead' in *Moby-Dick* offers a better parallel: despite its softly undulating waves and its 'magnanimity,' the sea drowns and destroys indifferently. In mystic surrender to Nature, Melville and Dickinson seem to say, lies the most insidious threat—the loss of self-identity. On this level of meaning, Dickinson's poem implies a power in Nature greater than and different from the power of romantic love. What seems, at first, alluringly romantic turns out to be a matter of life or death."

Eric W. Carlson
"Dickinson's 'I Started Early--Took my Dog'"
The Explicator XX (May 1962) Item 72

"My favorite among Dickinson's multiple unexpected changes in verb tense occurs in the deceptively innocent 'I started Early — Took my Dog -- / And visited the Sea --' (#520). Here the speaker presents herself as walking quietly by the sea, seeing its landscape, in childish metaphors, until stanza 3.... [There the] sudden introduction of the conditional 'Would,' however, gives the speaker away, This auxiliary changes the mood of the verb and of the poem: what seemed a single action in the past now seems to be either a hypothetical or a customary, repeated action. The speaker's tale becomes a sexual fantasy--repeated either in her imagining of what it would be like to walk by what she sees as a masculine and therefore dangerous sea, or in her imagination as she in fact walks by the sea, or in her metaphorical representation of real dealings with the world of men.

The speaker teases the reader, and perhaps herself, just as much as she does the sea/Man. She pretends to be entirely innocent in her motives for going to the sea (walking the dog) and then repeatedly lets it touch her to the point of mutual arousal before she runs away to the 'Solid Town.' The last lines of the poem give the sea dignity in his lovely but otherwise undignified chase and underline the sexual content of the poem: 'Until we met the Solid Town -- / No One He seemed to know -- / And bowing -- with a Mighty look -- / At me -- The Sea Withdrew --' As with Dickinson's mixture of past and present tenses in other poems, her combination of differing verb tense and mood in this narrative, remove it from any simple, temporal context. The poet does not let us place her speaker easily, and the speaker is allowed her coy retreat to apparent innocence and safety.

Dickinson's gravitation toward the simple (habitual) present and toward the uninflected verb may suggest her overriding concern to escape the historicity of time, to make herself in some way timeless and thus safe from the forces of death and loss she feels...strongly... It seems to me, however, that these verb forms (and Dickinson's poems) point more toward a concern with ongoing process, revelation, continuous perception, and change than toward the lyric suspension exemplified by the dancers on Keats's Grecian urn or the predictable return of Wordsworth's 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey.' The teasing disappearance of Dickinson's verbs from any single time or person repeats itself in her experiments with other parts of speech, and in the narratives of her poems generally."

Cristanne Miller
Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar
(Harvard 1987)

"James Reeves, in his introduction to his selection of Emily Dickinson's poetry, says of this 'extraordinary and tantalizing poem' (as he describes it): 'It is evident that here the sea represents some overwhelming force, of great destructive power.... What begins in a playful vein concludes as a pursuit to the death. It is only when she reaches the solid familiarity of home, the reassurance of the town she knows so well, that the pursuit ends.'

I am not sure about the appropriateness of the term 'playful' as applied to the beginning of the poem. The lightness of the opening (light rather than playful) is an integral and calculated part of the serious purpose of the whole, and introduces several essential properties of the poem. Perhaps we can interpret the 'Mermaids in the Basement' as the deluding phantoms or sirens of the deep, luring to destruction; and the 'Frigates in the Upper Floor' as the great masters, a Dante, a Shakespeare, who have plumbed and mastered the depths of human experience and can safely ride the deep, extending 'Hempen Hands' to the small isolated figure caught up in the destructive elements. Even the dog, which enters the poem only to disappear from it immediately, has its significance--the significance is perhaps in the disappearance itself, the breakdown, when the situation begins to get serious, of the substitute companionship ('no Man moved Me') demanded of the dog in the absence of the real human companionships and support that the town might provide.

'The solid familiarity of home, the reassurance of the town she knows so well'--yes, but of course the poet's real relationships with the 'Solid Town' were more complex than that; it is not a mere homesick child who is heading for the town after receiving a bad fright which any sympathetic adult can help to dispel, though the poem does seem to be cast in that familiar mould. The 'Dog,' the 'Mermaids,' the 'Frigates,' the 'Mouse,' the 'Apron,' 'Belt' and 'Bodice,' the 'Silver Heel,' the 'Shoes' overflowing with 'Pearl,' the bad fright and the race for home--all these seem to form a familiar age-old pattern, though given a new content and depth of meaning. If the relics of childhood are still present though transcended in the poem, that only adds to the poem's profound insight, expressing an abiding reality of the human consciousness.... [T]he picture presented in the poem, of the poet alone with her dog outside the town's limits, pursued by the rising tide of consciousness or (to change the metaphor to that of another of her poems) by 'That awful stranger Consciousness,' the presence whom she is trying to exorcise or master through the return to the town."

Kenneth Stocks

Emily Dickinson and the Modern Consciousness: A Poet of Our Time
(St. Martin's Press 1988)

"Poem 520 -- concerns itself, on the one hand, with the play of power between the female narrator and the Sea who is figured as male and, on the other, with the private internal world of the narrator, the workings of whose mind remain fundamentally inaccessible to the reader. 'I started Early -- took my Dog' begins as conventionally as any narrative could but moves quickly into the bizarre, private world of the narrator....

The apparent simplicity and conventionality of the beginning of the poem belies the complexities and obscurities of the universe into which we are suddenly thrust. The sense of cozy domesticity, created in the opening line of the poem by the description of the narrator taking her Dog for a walk and potentially maintained by the comparison of the Sea to a House, is undermined by the fact that it is Mermaids who live in the House's Basement, and that the Sea transforms into a Man later in the poem, a transformation which is not elucidated or clarified. Similarly, the Dog which originally appears to symbolize normality, ordinariness, and domesticity disappears out of the poem after the first line and is not seen again. Thus, even these apparent indicators of normality and ordinariness betray the reader and force her to question the framework in which the poem occurs.

In the second stanza, the Frigates are personified and fantasize the narrator as a 'Mouse -- / Aground,' implying that she should somehow be living in the Sea-House in the first place. The surreal spatial dislocations in the poem are playful and teasing, and the whimsicality and strangeness of the poem deny us a framework with which to read it. We find ourselves in a poetic universe where the poem seems to move from one metaphor to another without ever illuminating the connections between them.

The welcoming, 'extend[ing]' hands of the Frigate are not entirely friendly and contain a slight sense of threat, as 'Hempen' implies the possibility of trapping, tying, and strangling. This threat is made explicit as the Sea turns into a Man who follows the narrator, which serves to sexualize the image. The sense of increasing encroachment conveyed in the repetitions of 'and' in the third stanza, and of personal threat contained in the repetition of 'my' in the same stanza, reach their climax in 'And made as He would eat me up.' The threat here is that the narrator will be incorporated into the Sea and swallowed up just as 'a Dew'

might be. The relative size and impact of a drop of dew in relation to the ocean also serves to indicate the narrator's sense of her own powerlessness and fear of ravishment.

In contrast to the narrator's sense of helplessness, the Sea's power and competence is conveyed throughout the poem. The transitional movement from the world of sexual excitement to the solid world of respectability, imaged by the contrast between the liquid richness of the Sea and the solidity of the Town, is perfectly managed by the Sea and conveyed the narrative by the social nicety of the phrase 'No one He seemed to know -- .' His power is conveyed again by the idea of control and choice that is implicit in the fact that his withdrawal at the end of the poem is presented not only as voluntary but also as temporary. In turn, the narrator's sense of the Sea's control over her is conveyed through the meaningfulness and intimacy of the 'Mighty look --' which he directs at her.

What is also evident, however, is the narrator's excitement. It is conveyed as early as the opening line of the poem, as it is she who originally chooses to visit the Sea. In this sense, the action of the poem is 'started' by the narrator ('I started Early -- Took my Dog --'), and her excitement is also present in the later repetition 'And then -- I started -- too.' The repetitions of 'He' in the fifth stanza, the intimacy of the Silver Heel upon the 'Ankle,' the liquidity and richness of 'Pearl,' and the strong staccato rhythms of the poem in general, all function together to convey the narrator's sexual excitement.

Indeed, the sense of the narrator's fantasy pervades the poem. The poem is filled with whimsy and pretence and functions as a world of make-believe. Even the Sea appears to possess the capacity to play; 'And made as He would eat me up --.' The poem works so subjectively and in such a freely associative manner that the reader eventually gives up her expectations of a rational framework and accepts the strange transitions from concept to concept and from metaphor to metaphor. The central tenet of free association is, however, its private nature. Many of the connections in this poem remain unexplained or seem meaningful only in the narrator's private symbolic world. The movement from Dog to Mermaid to Mouse to personified Dandelion remains whimsical and private.

Since the meanings of the poem are elucidated mainly by reference to the narrator's private symbolic world, they may be said to remain closed to us. The phrase 'Took my Dog' exemplifies this point. Usually, the notion of taking one's dog implies normalcy, domesticity, and companionship, but all of these factors are absent by the middle of the first stanza. The narrator's experience is characterized by the notable absence of notions such as normalcy or domesticity and remains strange, unexplained, and at times frightening. Indeed, her experience is dependent upon a sense of isolation and lack of companionship, so that the Dog not only fails to protect her but disappears inexplicably after the opening line. Thus, in spite of the intimacy present in the possessive pronoun 'My,' the connection between the narrator and her dog is never explained.

An attempt to work out the narrator's relationship with the Sea is equally complex. The Sea is imaged first as a House or a building which is inhabited, and then as a Man. It is easy to explain the threatening, engulfing, overwhelming effect that the Sea has on the narrator as it follows her, but all of this tends to contradict the idea of shelter, domesticity and immobility usually implied by the image of a building. In a discussion of Dickinson's symbols, Weisbuch comments that the Sea tends to be 'the place of risk,' while home is 'almost always a place of safety and rest' (53). In fact, Weisbuch is actually commenting, at this point in his discussion, on the difficulty of attributing precise meanings to Dickinson's symbols, but it is interesting to note that even the kind of wide-ranging opposition that he suggests here is contradicted in this poem. The poem continually subverts and undermines the associations and connotations that it creates.

The poem's irrational world never does provide its own containing framework. The lack of control is manifested in the overflowing tide, the absence of clarifying or containing connectives, and in the lack of a clear framework inside which one can read this poem. The only kind of framework that can exist is one that may be arbitrarily imposed -- by the poem's ending, for example. This poem ends without telling the end of the story: the sense that there will be another confrontation with the Sea is strong. Thus, Dickinson refuses to bind her meanings or to circumscribe her universe. 'I started Early -- Took my Dog' takes for its subject matter the irrationality of free association, the private nature of the internal symbolic universe, and it explores both of these in the context of an unexplained confrontation with male power. The evasiveness

manifested by the narrator inside the poem finds its formal concomitant in the relative inaccessibility of the poem itself. The difficulties inside the poem appear to reflect the difficulties outside the poem, the difficulties for a woman writer of being received in the public external world.” [Women novelists were much more popular and accepted than male novelists in the 19th century.]

Lynn Shakinovsky

“No Frame of Reference: The Absence of Context in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry”
The Emily Dickinson Journal III.2 (1996)

Michael Hollister (2014)