

18 TRANSCENDENTAL CHARACTERISTICS

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

See also "Model of Metaphors."

1. QUEST INTO THE WILDERNESS (psychological individuation toward wholeness or search for salvation): "Exultation is the going / Of an inland soul to sea, / Past the houses -- past the headlands -- / Into deep Eternity" (#76). Her archetypal symbolism here is identical to that in *Moby-Dick*. "Wild nights -- Wild nights!" (#249) may have been inspired by *Wuthering Heights*. She expresses a Jungian concept of individuation in "Each Life Converges to some Centre -- / Expressed -- or still -- / Exists in every Human Nature / A Goal" (#680). She is Emersonian in her lines "Growth of Man -- like Growth of Nature -- / Gravitates within... / Each -- its difficult Ideal / Must achieve -- Itself" (#750). As Thoreau exhorts us to do in the climax of *Walden*, Dickinson too proclaims "...Explore thyself! / Therein thyself shalt find / The 'Undiscovered Continent'" (#832). And finally, like Melville, she was on a spiritual quest all her life: "Not knowing when the Dawn will come, / I open every Door" (#1619).

2. SENSE OF NEED TO SAVE ONE'S SOUL, PSYCHE OR SELF, rather than rely on a "Papa above!" (#61); "So instead of going to Heaven, at last -- / I'm going, all along" (#324). However, the virginal Dickinson here feels no need to save herself. The opposite of Hawthorne in this respect, there is almost no recognition of evil in her poems, except perhaps for Death in the existential ones, because most of them express a pure transcendence. Though at times her head has doubts, she feels immortal, she feels absolutely deserving of immortality and she anticipates a Heaven in an afterlife while also experiencing earth (mainly her garden) as a heaven in this life. "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (#280) dramatizes the death of a nonbeliever as a plunge into levels of Hell as in Dante.

3. CHRIST-EVOKING FIGURE AS EXEMPLAR: "Christ will explain each separate anguish / In the fair schoolroom of the sky" (#193); "If Jesus was sincere -- / I need no further Argue" (#432); "As well as Jesus?" (#456); "Oh Jesus -- in the Air -- / I know not which thy chamber is -- / I'm knocking everywhere" (#502); "I argue thee / That love is life -- / And life hath Immortality -- / This -- dost thou doubt -- Sweet -- / Then have I / Nothing to show / But Calvary" (#549). At the end of "My Faith is larger than the Hills" (#766) she chides herself for limiting her faith in Christ.

4. SPIRITUAL GUIDES: Christ the exemplar; various male tutors, ministers and love interests; and all the animals in her poems are guides, especially the butterfly: "Butterflies from St. Domingo / Cruising round the purple line -- / Have a system of aesthetics -- / Far superior to mine" (#137); "God is a distant -- stately Lover -- / Woos, as He states us -- by His Son --" (#357); "The Butterfly upon the Sky, / Is just as high as you and I, / And higher, I believe" (#1521).

5. SOLITUDE & SOUL-RELIANCE: "The Soul selects her own Society -- / Then -- shuts the Door -- / To her divine Majority -- / Present no more --" (#303); "The Soul that hath a Guest / Doth seldom go abroad -- / Diviner Crowd at Home -- / Obliterates the need" (#674); "Through the solitary prowess / Of a Silent Life" (#750); "...that profounder site / That polar privacy / A soul admitted to itself -- / Finite Infinity" (#1695).

6. CONFRONTATION WITH ULTIMATE TRUTH, OFTEN IN THE FORM OF A WILD ANIMAL: Her existential confrontations with Death and Nothingness as "ultimate truth" express occasional religious doubt: "Looking at Death, is Dying" (#281); "I suppose it will interrupt me some / Till I get accustomed -- but then the Tomb / Like other new things -- shows largest -- then -- / And smaller, by Habit" (#426); "The tunnel is not lighted / Existence with a wall / Is better we consider / Than not exist at all" (#1652). "I heard a Fly buzz when I died" (#465) dramatizes doubt but affirms an afterlife with a voice from beyond the grave, as does "Because I could not stop for Death -- / He kindly stopped for me" (#712).

Dickinson's faith is revived not by a "confrontation," but by empathy, by spiritual identification with Nature--becoming the animals she observes, just as Ishmael by the end of *Moby-Dick* has become a whale-man. A very large majority of the animals in her poetry can fly, evoking transcendence in the Sky. Johnson cites 22 poems about birds, as well as poems about specific varieties: Blue Bird, Blue Jay, Bobolink, Crow, Hummingbird, Lark, Oriole, Owl, Robin (10 poems), Woodpecker and Wren. There are also 19 poems about bees, one or two each about Bat, Beetle, Cricket, Firefly and Fly. She includes Insects, Rat, Snake (3 poems) and Spider (5 poems). The most significant animal, the Butterfly is the subject of 11 poems.

7. SPIRITUAL DEATH & REBIRTH IN SUBMISSION TO HIGHER POWER: "To fight aloud, is very brave -- / But *gallanter*, I know / Who charge within the bosom / The Cavalry of Woe" (#126); "I should have had the Joy / Without the Fear -- to justify -- / The Palm -- without the Calvary" (#213); "Step martial -- at my Crucifixion" (#295); "We -- who have the Souls -- / Die oftener -- Not so vitally" (#314); "Each bound the Other's Crucifix...through Calvaries of Love" (#322); "In gentle deference to me -- / The Queen of Calvary" (#348); "'Twas just this time, last year, I died" (#445); "I died for Beauty" (#449); "There's Triumph in the Room / When that Old Emperor -- Death -- / By Faith -- be overcome" (#455); "One Calvary.../ As many be / As persons" (#553); "A piercing Comfort it affords / In passing Calvary" (#561).

In Christian tradition the butterfly symbolizes the soul because of its transformation (spiritual death and rebirth), beauty, form, and elevation into the Sky, like Hawthorne's butterfly in "The Artist of the Beautiful." As Dickinson says, "The Butterfly upon the Sky, /Is just as high as you and I, / And higher, I believe" (#1521); "My Cocoon tightens... / I'm feeling for the Air" (#1099); "Then Sunrise kissed my Chrysalis" (#598); "From Cocoon forth a Butterfly / As Lady from her Door" (#354).

8. ATONEMENT WITH NATURE AND/OR GOD: "Since I am of the Druid" (#44); "I -- a Sparrow -- build there / Sweet of twigs and twine / My perennial nest" (#84); "The bee is not afraid of me. / I know the Butterfly. / The pretty people in the Woods / Receive me cordially" (#111); "Oh Sacrament of summer days" (#130); "With a Bobolink for a Chorister -- / And an Orchard, for a Dome" (#324); "The Branches on my Hand / Are full of Morning Glory" (#470); "A Solemn thing within the Soul / To feel itself get ripe" (#483); "An Abbey -- a Cocoon" (#517); "Several of Nature's People / I know, and they know me -- / I feel for them a transport / Of cordiality" (#986); "...Earth is Heaven" (#1408); "The foliage of the mind / A Tabernacle is for Birds / Of no corporeal kind" (#1634).

Her atonement is total as she accepts all animals, even appealing to "Papa above" on behalf of the Rat (#61). Contrary to the symbolism in the *Bible* and to the traditional iconology of Christianity expressed in Hawthorne, Dickinson recognizes the dangers of the Snake (#1740) yet is cordial to it as one of "Nature's People" (#986). And she admires the Spider (#605 & #1138) "as an Artist" (#1275).

9. RECONCILIATION OF OPPOSITES THAT INTEGRATES HEAD AND HEART, PURITAN & PASTORAL VALUES IN SYNTHESIS: "I climb the 'Hill of Science,' / I view the landscape o'er; / Such transcendental prospect, / I ne'er beheld before!" (#3); "I went to Heaven -- 'Twas a small Town" (#374); "Forever -- is composed of Nows -- 'Tis not a different time" (#624); "Renunciation is a piercing Virtue" (#745); "The heart is the Capitol of the Mind" (#1354); "Betrothed to Righteousness might be / An Ecstasy discreet" (#1641); "On my volcano grows the Grass" (#1677); "Vesuvius at Home" (#1705) .

10. CIRCULAR, CYCLICAL & SPIRAL IMAGERY: "Slow tramp the Centuries, / And the Cycles wheel!" (#160); "My little Circuit would have shamed / This new Circumference" (#313); "I turned my Being round and round" (#351); "The fine...unvarying Axis / That regulates the Wheel" (#451); "Within my Garden, rides a Bird / Upon a single Wheel" (#500); "When Cogs -- stop -- that's Circumference -- / The Ultimate -- of Wheels" (#633); "Each Life converges to some Centre" (#680); "The Depth upon my Soul was notched -- / As Floods -- on Whites of Wheels" (#788); "And now, among Circumference -- / Her steady Boat be seen" (#798); "A Route of Evanescence / With a revolving Wheel" (#1463); "Circumference thou Bride of Awe" (#1620); "He carries a circumference / In which I have no part" (#1663).

11. INNER LIGHT: “The Poets light but Lamps -- / Themselves -- go out” (#883); “’Tis Compound Vision -- / Light -- enabling Light” (#906); “But Light a newer Wilderness / My Wilderness has made” (#1233); “What Soul survive? / By her exacting light” (#1414); “Pass to thy Rendezvous of Light” (#1564). Dickinson did not experience the inner light of mystics such as Taylor, Woolman and Whitman. If she had, she would not have worried so much about Immortality. Her transcendentalism has a stronger intellectual component than that of the mystical Whitman, who was predominantly pastoral. Jonathan Edwards is the rare case of a mystic with an inner light who was also a great intellectual and scientist.

12. NUMINOUS EVOCATION OF SPIRIT: “A Grant of the Divine -- / That Certain as it Comes -- / Withdraws -- and leaves the dazzled Soul” (#393); “Then Sunrise kissed my Chrysalis” (#598); “The gleam of an heroic Act / Such strange illumination / The Possible’s slow fuse is lit / By the Imagination” (#1687). Many of her poems are numinous to the extent the reader is able to experience them in her transcendental mode. That usually starts with the intellect puzzling out meanings and then progresses by rereading until the poem sinks into the subconscious and reading it engages the whole psyche. Paradoxically, rereadings of Dickinson’s poems increase their spontaneity.

13. MYSTERY, INTENSITY, ECSTASY: “A something in a summer’s noon -- / A depth -- an Azure -- a perfume -- / Transcending ecstasy” (#122); “A transport one cannot contain / May yet a transport be -- / Though God forbid it lift the lid -- / Unto its Ecstasy!” (#184); “Inebriate of Air -- am I -- / And Debauchee of Dew” (#214); “An Unconcern so sovereign / To Universe, or me -- / Infects my simple spirit / With taints of Majesty” (#290); “A perfect -- paralyzing Bliss” (#756); “Her travels daily be / By routes of ecstasy” (#1513); “Take all away from me, but leave me Ecstasy” (#1640); “A single Dram of Heaven!” (#1725).

14. TRANSCENDENCE OF TIME & SPACE: “I walked -- as wings -- my body bore -- / The feet -- I former used -- / Unnecessary -- now to me -- / As boots -- would be -- to Birds” (430); “Time feels so vast that were it not / For an Eternity -- / I fear me this Circumference / Engross my Finitude” (#802); “I’m feeling for the Air -- / A dim capacity for Wings / Demeans the Dress I wear” (#1099); “Exhilaration is the Breeze / That lifts us from the Ground / And leaves us in another place” (#1118); “Perceiving thee is evidence / That we are of the sky” (#1643); “No friend have I that so persists / As this Eternity” (#1584).

15. SENSE OF PARADOX: “Is Bliss then, such Abyss” (#340); “Captivity is Consciousness -- / So’s Liberty” (#384); “A Death blow is a Life blow to Some” (#816); “Experience is the Angled Road / Preferred against the Mind / By -- Paradox” (#910); “What Exultation in the Woe” (#1642).

16. INEFFABILITY: “But who am I, / To tell the pretty secret / Of the Butterfly” (#173); “Nature is what we know -- / Yet have no art to say” (#668); “We blush, that Heaven if we achieve -- / Event ineffable -- / We shall have shunned until ashamed / To own the Miracle” (#1258).

17. HOLISTIC PERCEPTION: “For each ecstatic instant / We must an anguish pay / In keen and quivering ratio / To the ecstasy” (#125); “’For Beauty,’ I replied -- / ‘And I -- for Truth -- Themselves are One’” (#449); “The Negro never knew / I -- wooed it -- too -- / To gain, or be undone -- / Alike to Him -- One” (#452); “Called to my Full -- The Crescent dropped -- / Existence’s whole Arc, filled up” (#508); “Circumference be full” (#515); “You left Boundaries of Pain -- / Capacious as the Sea -- / Between Eternity and Time -- / Your Consciousness -- and Me” (#644); “I could not care -- to gain / A lesser than the Whole” (#655); “For two divided, briefly, / A cycle, it may be, / Till everlasting life unite / In strong society” (#1743).

18. HARMONIOUS VISION OF LIFE UNIQUE IN ITS TOTALITY, UNIVERSAL IN ITS ARCHETYPAL COMPONENTS: “No wedlock -- granted Me -- / I live with Him / I hear His Voice -- / I stand alive -- Today -- / To witness to the Certainty / Of Immortality” (#463); “Nature is Heaven...Nature is Harmony -- / Nature is what we know” (#668).

Michael Hollister (2014)