

Brenda Begitschke

Dr. Mercer

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Emily Dickinson's Poetry Reveals Power of Nature

A large number of Emily Dickinson's poems have a subject matter or theme centering on nature. One small part of Dickinson's nature poetry is her "nature is powerful" poetry. Through word choice and poetic form, Dickinson shows the reader the power nature has over living things and even itself in its intentional destruction of life and the reaction it causes in living things confronted with its power.

Dickinson reveals through her poetry that nature has power through its ability to destroy life at will. One of the methods Dickinson uses to reveal nature's brutality towards life is word choice. In poem 328, "A Bird came down the Walk," Dickinson uses word choice to show the gruesome consumption of a worm by a bird. She writes that the bird "bit an Angeworm in halves / And ate the fellow, raw" (3-4). The words "in halves" and "raw" make the reader cringe; Dickinson convinces the reader of the viciousness of nature towards a living thing. Dickinson also employs word choice in another poem, "The Wind began to rock the Grass" (824), to show nature's destruction of life. The wind "rocks" the grass with "threatening tunes" in the first two lines of the poem. It throws a "menace" at the earth and sky (3-4). Later, the waters "Wrecked the Sky" (18). The words Dickinson chooses to describe the winds and waters of a storm reveal its intimidating nature. It purposefully throws a "menace," or threat, to the earth. The storm is knowingly out to destroy life. Poem 1593, "There came a Wind like a Bugle," is another example of Dickinson's use of word choice to show nature's threats toward life. She describes

the wind as being a “Green Chill” that passes ominously upon the “Heat” (4-5). According to Webster’s New World Dictionary, to be “ominous” is to be “threatening,” “sinister,” or “menacing.” Dickinson combines this definition with the metaphor of a “Green Chill” to reveal the “chilling,” or fear-inducing nature of the cold wind as it suddenly threatens to eradicate the heat. The wind looks green as it moves through the green grass. Later, Dickinson refers to the wind as “the Doom” (7). Webster’s defines “doom” as “a judgment,” “sentence,” or “condemnation.” Using the words “ominous” and “doom” shows that nature purposefully chooses to terrorize and harm life. It acts almost like a god by “condemning” life to its wrath in the form of a storm. Dickinson carefully chooses her words to reveal that nature consciously threatens and destroys living things.

Another method Dickinson employs to show nature’s destruction of life is poetic form. In “The Wind begun to rock” and “There came a Wind” she uses her usual iambic tetrameter alternating with iambic trimeter rhythm for the majority of the lines. Using a typical, predictable poetic form contrasts sharply with the theme of the poems: the storm is menacing and unpredictable. The storms in “The Wind begun” and “There came a Wind” seem even more threatening and out-of-control when compared to the calm, easy flow of the poems’ forms. “A Bird came” also contains typical trimeter, tetrameter, or even seven-syllable lines. However, these lines are not in any predictable pattern. The unpredictable nature of lines with regular syllables parallels the theme of “A Bird came.” The bird is a typical and ordinary bird; however, its choice to eat a worm and allow a beetle to pass unharmed is unpredictable. When compared to Dickinson’s form, the theme of “A Bird came” comes forth: sometimes nature can be understood and expected, but many times its power is mysterious and unforeseen. Poetic form helps reveal the brutality of nature towards living things.

Nature's threat causes living things to show fear and chaos in Dickinson's poetry.

Dickinson again uses word choice to show the reader a truth about nature: the reactions of living things to nature reveal nature's power over them. Nature's power comes forth in "The Wind begun to rock" through the reactions of both animals and people to the threat of a storm. "The Birds put up the Bars to Nests / The Cattle fled to barns" (13-14) in fear of nature's power to harm them with a storm. The animals do not simply prepare for a storm; they put up barriers to prevent the battering of wind to their nests and run away quickly from the danger of the storm. People also show fear to the threats of the wind and water in "The Wind begun." The wagons of the people "quickened on the Streets" (9). Like the cows, the people move rapidly in response to the movements of a harsh wind. Poem 986, "A narrow Fellow in the Grass," also shows a human's fearful reaction to nature through its words. In the last two lines of the poem, the speaker gives his reaction to a snake in the grass: he feels "tighter breathing / And Zero at the Bone" (23-24). Knowing the danger the snake poses to him, the speaker's breathing becomes constricted. "Zero" denotes the freezing point of water on a Centigrade scale. The speaker feels a chill at the sight of something in nature that has the power to kill him. The fearful reaction of life shows how threatening nature is to animals and humans.

Dickinson also employs meter to reveal nature's threat to humans and even nature itself. Both "There came a Wind" and poem 1694, "The wind drew off," contain a change in the main meter to emphasize an important point. Dickinson writes "There came a Wind" with the usual iambic tetrameter alternating with iambic trimeter. However, lines 15 and 16 break up the metrical pattern. Instead of writing one tetrameter line, Dickinson splits it in half and creates two dimeter lines followed by the typical trimeter line. The two dimeter lines receive emphasis in the poem because they are visually the shortest lines. Similarly, Dickinson emphasizes line ten in

“The wind drew” by giving it a different syllable count than the other lines of the poem. The majority of the poem consists of two dimeter lines followed by a trimeter line. In line ten she combines two dimeter lines into one tetrameter line followed by a trimeter line.

The meaning of “The wind drew” changes because of Dickinson’s emphasis on line ten, just as the meaning of “There came a Wind” also changes due to line emphasis. The lines emphasized in “There came a Wind” are those told by the “flying tidings” of the bell: “How much can come / And much can go” (15-16). The bells warn of nature’s ability to both create life and destroy it; their reaction to nature reveals the power nature holds over them. Likewise, the line emphasized in “The wind drew” gives a truth about nature. The trees hold up “their mangled limbs” because “Nature falls upon herself” (7-8, 10). The trees hold up their limbs in defense of Nature’s power “upon herself.” Even nature reacts to the threat of its own power. Dickinson emphasized lines in both “The wind drew” and “There came a Wind” to show just how commanding nature is to animals, people, and even itself.

Emily Dickinson uses word choice and poetic form in several of her “nature is powerful” poems to help the reader understand the theme of her poems: Nature has power in both destroying life and in causing fear in living things. Animals, people, and even nature itself fall under the destructive force of nature.