

---

## From the Writer

---

For this paper, my professor asked the class to write an essay centered on an Emily Dickinson poem that “pulls you in different directions.” My approach for this essay, and I have my professor to thank for this, was to write it in several steps. The paper started with a simple assignment: choose a poem which can be read in more than one way, or which seems to have more than one meaning, and write a page or two about it. With the poem itself analyzed, it then became a matter of linking this analysis to Dickinson’s works as a whole—using her hundreds of poems, her personal letters, and her manuscripts to build a larger argument incorporating the original poem.

I chose “The Angle of a Landscape—” because of the way Dickinson’s own perspective changes drastically in one instant within the poem, when she awakens and mistakes a bough of apples outside her bedroom window for an angled landscape. It struck me that Dickinson was commenting on how the entire scale and nature of an object depends entirely on one’s viewpoint, and how, in a larger sense, this might relate to poetry itself as well as Dickinson’s dedication to poetry as an art form. The most difficult part of this assignment for me was to avoid creating an argument that was too broad or vague. I had developed an idea—that poetry, for Dickinson, combines her need for both the changing and unchanging elements in her life. In order to make the most concrete argument possible, I searched through her poems, letters, and manuscripts to find textual proof to back up each of my claims along the way. In the end, I believe it was the multi-layered approach I took, as well as my professor’s guidance and encouragement, which enabled me to create such a strong final product.

— Michele Buonanduci

---

MICHELE BUONANDUCI

*Prize Essay Winner*

## **"THESE—NEVER STIR AT ALL—": THE STATIC AND DYNAMIC IN DICKINSON**

---

"The Angle of a Landscape—" (#578) brings together two of the most prominent themes in Emily Dickinson's poetry—the variability of nature in the outside world, and the constancy of her own domestic surroundings. These take their form in the steadfast landmarks and changing seasons, viewed daily from Dickinson's own bedroom window. Dickinson often fluctuates in her poetic works between a desire for confinement and an affinity for the boundless natural world. This particular poem, which encapsulates these two converse and seemingly irreconcilable extremes, implies that Dickinson may have found a way to rectify her indecision through her own self-expression. The nature of poetry itself and Dickinson's own poetic form enable her to combine the static and the dynamic, without choosing between the two.

Upon waking, Dickinson's "open eye" is "Accost[ed]" by "The Angle of a Landscape—," which, presumably when she rights herself, turns out to be "just a Bough of Apples— / Held slanting, in the Sky—." What is implied in this scenario is the importance of perspective and its effect on how one views both the nature of an object (or a person, or a place, or an idea), and its scale. Just by a "slant" of her head, which can also be taken as a "slant" in thought, what initially appeared to be a vast landscape is reduced to something else entirely—something much smaller in scale and closer in distance—a branch of apples, quite nearly within reach.

Dickinson plays with similar themes of perspective and scale, as well as passing time and constancy, throughout the poem. As time goes on, she views the landscape change. One day, the tree outside her window

has “Emerald Bough[s],” and then, upon waking, she finds these to be replaced by the “Diamonds” of snow. It seems both natural and fluid, the way “The Seasons—shift—[her] Picture—,” like a slideshow or a reel of film, and yet markedly, some things remain unaffected by the continuous cycle of nature—landmarks such as “The Chimney—and the Hill—” “never stir at all—.” All of this, meanwhile—the turning of the seasons (the passing of time) and the vast landscape (the outside world) she sees—fit, it seems, “Between [her] Curtain and the Wall,” what she calls “an ample Crack.” Thus, the expansive scale of the passing seasons and the landscape she describes, fill, to her eyes, the mere inches between where her curtain ends and her wall begins.

This, then, leads one to shift his or her own perspective on what the poem itself is saying. The poem, which emphasizes the importance of perspective, must itself be looked at from more than one “angle.” It is one thing to look at it through Dickinson’s own eyes—looking out through her window onto a branch, or a landscape, or the changing seasons. However, this viewpoint can make a distinctive turn, looking instead *in* on the bedroom in which Dickinson literally passed her life away. It may well be noticed that among the landmarks that “never stir at all—,” her own “Curtain” and “Wall” may very well be included. For as time and seasons pass, it is still in her same bed that she “wake[s]” to mark these changes, and through the same window that they appear to her eyes.

Dickinson wrote to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a lifelong correspondent: “I do not cross my Father’s ground to any House or town” (Johnson 461). When asked whether she ever felt a “want of employment,” being confined so, she replied, “I never thought of conceiving that I could ever have the slightest approach to such a want in all future time,” adding, “I feel that I have not expressed myself strongly enough” (474). Within this context, it seems an understatement to say that Dickinson was content to pass her life away within the walls of her childhood home. Indeed, there is certainly something to be said for the value of security such unchanging familiarity provides her, and this can be read through the lines of her poetry. In “The Wind begun to rock the Grass” (#796), Dickinson writes of a gathering storm. The “livid Claw” of lightning and the rains which “wrecked the Sky,” violent forces of nature, in the final lines “overlooked [her] Father’s House.” Thus, her father’s house is safe from the chaotic

forces of the outside world. The house is untouched by the unpredictability of nature, which can be read as life beyond her father's grounds, of which it seems she holds some intangible fear.

Dickinson struggles with this seeming need for physical confinement in poem #456, "A Prison gets to be a friend—." She writes of a "Kinsmanship" which develops between the prison and its inmate. Further, the one held captive comes to "look with gratitude" towards it, and to regard as "sweet" those features which "Day and Night— / Are present to us—as Our Own—." Again, its familiarity, its certainty, its predictability—these are the things which make a prison a source of comfort to Dickinson. Her "Prison," which we can assume is her house, has all of these features. However, while in this instance it is a prison in which Dickinson dwells, a mere ten poems later it is within "Possibility" (#466). It seems that she wavers between a desire for the unchanging (her lifelong home) and the dynamic (nature and the outside world), unable to choose between the two.

For Dickinson, nothing breaches this gap better than poetry, which combines both the changing and the unchanging—elements which diametrically oppose one another yet seem to be simultaneously necessary in her mind (and occur very nearly next to one another in her poetry, separated by mere sheets of paper). In the most literal sense, words are unchanging. Once written, they are permanent. Dickinson's poems, recorded in her tediously copied fascicle sheets, were sure to remain unchanged unless edited by her own hand. Yet at the same time, there is nothing as dynamic and mutable as language, which can be read in countless ways and is capable of expressing the enormity of both time and space. There is no limit to poetry in this sense, even while it can be physically contained within several folded sheets of paper. Poem #278 expresses this very sentiment. Dickinson writes that while some claim that "A word is dead, when it is said," she herself insists that "it just begins to live / That day." Again, this reflects the static versus the dynamic nature of poetry.

Dickinson wrote her first letter to T. W. Higginson in 1862, asking him to tell her "if [her] Verse is alive" (403). For Dickinson, the life and limitless nature of poetry was its ultimate appeal. In poem #1491, she states simply, "To see the Summer Sky / Is Poetry, though never in a Book it lie— / True Poems flee—." Two things are emphasized here. First, the scale of the poem is expansive. The entirety of the summer sky is impos-

sible to contain even within our range of vision. Yet here it is expressed within a mere three lines. Second, it states that poems are never motionless—they are unpredictable and dynamic. “True Poems flee—,” and cannot truly be tied down, even to the page.

Dickinson’s unresolved desire for both the familiarity of her unchanging home as well as the unpredictability and freedom found in the natural world finds an outlet in her poetry. These elements exist together in her poem “The Angle of a Landscape—.” In the final stanzas, she begins to describe the “shift[ing]” of the scenery outside her window and wakes to find unexpected changes in the seasons. In other words, the “Picture” begins to move and change before her more rapidly. Interestingly, it is then that the poem ends, with Dickinson’s final remark, “These—never stir at all—.” Dickinson’s punctuation is ambiguous here, as it is throughout most of her poetry; only dashes are used to separate groupings of words. It makes sense for this final statement to refer to the previous two lines, which mention the few motionless landmarks (and, by extension, her own bedroom window), the unchanging features in her life. However, if taken out of context, what could be inferred from its meaning is that *all* of the preceding words Dickinson has written, words that speak of passing time and changing landscapes, are in fact the objects that “never stir at all,” being fixed onto a page by her own hand. Notably, Dickinson wrote only one version for this poem, without any alternative readings. Again, she seems to be insisting on the constancy of her words even while their nuances are ever-changing and expanding.

On a more structural level, also, Dickinson’s poetry is able to resolve this “cleaving in [her] mind” (#867) that seems to pull her at once in two opposite directions. It is common for her stanzas to contain four lines, a regular pattern of beats, and ABCB rhyme schemes. However, Dickinson will often vary the pattern of beats in one stanza as well as use slant-rhyme rather than exact rhyme. In other words, while the general formula of her poetry remains consistent, she gives herself the ability to diverge from the regularity she sets for herself. Her poems are uniform yet fluctuate in their form. “The Angle of a Landscape—” of course is no exception. Composed of four-lined stanzas, each line contains three beats, with the exception of only two—line 3, which has four beats, and line 20, which can be read with either three or four. Interestingly, these lines are “Between my Curtain and

the Wall” and “These—never stir at all—.” Thus, it is the line that depicts her unchanging bedroom window as well as the line that declares its own constancy that, in fact, *vary* from the rest of the poem. Furthermore, none of the B lines in the poem’s ABCB rhyme scheme are exact rhymes except for two—lines 6 and 8—which end in “eye” and “Sky.” It is interesting, also, how this singular exact rhyme seems to link the two words, as if emphasizing how the expanse of the sky is within her sight and thus within her mind.

If, then, the elements of this poem emulate poetry itself in their static yet dynamic nature, the themes of perspective cannot be ignored. Just as the expansive landscape outside Dickinson’s window somehow fits, in her eyes, between the crack offered by her curtain and wall, so too does the expansive nature of poetry, with all of its limitless and uncontained possibility, fit into a few lines. The changing perspective offered by a tilt of her head that transforms a landscape into a branch of apples can be applied to poetry as well. The meaning of a poem depends entirely on the “angle” from which it is viewed, and a simple tilt of the head has the ability to open up infinitely many new possibilities for interpretations of the scale, substance, and very nature of the poem itself. Furthermore, the poem’s insistence on the importance of perspective correlates to Dickinson’s vacillation between imprisonment and freedom; a “slant” of the head, and what was once a “Prison” becomes instead a “friend” (#456).

Dickinson depicts in “The Angle of a Landscape—” what it is to be looking out on the world from her bedroom window, from which vantage point she enjoys the dynamic views of nature while herself being contained within the comfort and familiarity of four unchanging walls—a different experience entirely from the person who is outside looking in. Likewise, the art form of poetry allows Dickinson the best (in her own mind) of both worlds—a medium that has regularity in its structure and form, yet is infinitely mutable, and, in its “true[st]” sense, “flee[s]” from the page in a way that Dickinson herself would ultimately never be willing to “flee” from her father’s homestead (#1491).

## WORKS CITED

Franklin, R. W., ed. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005.

Franklin, R. W., ed. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*. Vol. 2. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998. 3 vols.

Johnson, Thomas H., ed. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958.

MICHELE BUONANDUCI was born and raised locally in southeastern Massachusetts. Currently she is a sophomore in the College of Arts and Sciences majoring in environmental science and hoping to minor in mathematics. This essay was written for Thomas Otten's EN220: American Gothic.