

Essay 2: A Common Element in Two Emily Dickinson Poems

“[Reading Dickinson] is really a question of the in(ter)determinacy of meaning, whether with respect to the relation *among* poems in a fascicle* or with respect to variants *in* poems. Meaning in Dickinson’s poems is thus understood as relational. Moreover, it is produced by relations that evolve and shift.”

-Sharon Cameron, *Choosing Not Choosing: Emily Dickinson’s Fascicles*, 159

*“fascicles” are the string-bound, handwritten booklets into which Dickinson bound her poems

You have a simple task for this assignment: find one element shared by two of Emily Dickinson’s poems and explain the meaning made available to us as readers once we consider these two poems together. This common element could be almost anything—a metaphor, an image, an idea, a rhyme, the shape of a stanza—but the more specific it is, the easier it will be for you to make an argument about its meaning. A single word used differently in two poems is of a wholly appropriate scale for this assignment.

One of the poems you choose must be among the ones on our class reading list; the other may be any other Dickinson poem (you are, of course, welcome to choose two of our class poems).

Requirements

Your essay should be between **three and four double-spaced pages long**. In Dickinson’s spirit, you should strive to say a lot in few words. The only reason that I’m requiring three or four as opposed to two or three pages is that quoting poetry normally takes up more space than quoting prose. You **do not need to cite any sources aside from the poems** you’re uniting, which you should cite by line number and refer to by opening line (in quotation marks, not italics). Finally: please remember to **include an original, specific title for your paper**—“Dickinson Paper” won’t do.

Deadline

Your paper is due on Canvas by 5pm on Friday, October 2nd.

A Note on Original Work

There is a lot of Dickinson analysis on the internet, some good, a lot of it bad. Don’t plagiarize it, or you will get a zero on this paper, which is worth 20% of your course grade.

Some Examples of Appropriate “Common Elements”

(Feel free to use these if you want, but I recommend that you read and reread as many Dickinson poems as you can until you find some element you really want to focus on):

- “Slant” in “There’s a certain slant of Light” and “Tell all then truth but tell it slant”
- The use of the fabric “tulle” in “The Tint I cannot take—is best—” and “Because I could not stop for Death—”
- The preservation of poetry figured as a flame in “The Poets light but Lamps—” and as perfume in “Essential Oils are wrung”
- The appearance of deathlessness at the end of “Because I could not stop for Death—” and “My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—” (this last one has a high degree of difficulty)