

Notes on A narrow Fellow in the Grass by Emily Dickinson:

So it turns out that, for a long time, people got Emily Dickinson all wrong—or mostly wrong. Teachers and students had this image of Dickinson as this Civil-War era, virginal, mousey woman that never left her house or wanted to publish a poem. But the more you look into her letters, her poetry, and newer biographies, the more you see how she was a sarcastic, witty woman who had major crushes on dudes (and dudettes). She was a total drama queen and could have been a famous poet had she not been so dedicated to her family and turned off by the world outside of her neighborhood.

Emily wrote letters non-stop, and most of them were to Susan Dickinson (her sister-in-law). It was pretty typical of the time for women and men to write very personal poetry and share it with people close to them. Emily wrote 1789 poems and poem fragments this way. Unlike most poets we read today, she wasn't sending off drafts to magazines and trying to make a living out of it. Some poems did get published though.

One of these was "A narrow Fellow in the Grass," published by Sue Dickinson without Emily's knowledge. Sue submitted one of Emily's private poems with some edits and a title ("The Snake") to the Springfield Daily Republican. One of those edits was moving the question mark in the third line. Dickinson may have been secretly happy to get something published, but she certainly wasn't happy about having people mess with her punctuation. She even wrote a letter to this guy she had a crush on, just so he would know that she didn't mean to put the question mark at the end of the third line. Here's part of the letter: "Lest you meet my Snake [the published version of "A narrow Fellow in the Grass"] and suppose I deceive it was robbed of me —defeated too of the third line by the punctuation. The third and fourth were one."

So, clearly, Dickinson was not just scribbling in her diary. She had artistic vision behind her poems, and was rightly cheesed off when somebody came around to mess with that. And what a vision it was. With "A narrow Fellow in the Grass," Dickinson has crafted a poem that has more layers than a toddler going out into a snowstorm. Every element of the poem calls for our attention. The dashes, the question mark, the capitalization, and the strange wording are all important, because they mix together to make our encounter with "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" both intriguing, and as startling as almost stepping on a snake.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

Ever had a chill run down your spine? We bet you have. Was it a person that had such a creepy effect on you, or did you just forget your jacket on a windy day? If it's the former, person-related experience, boy do we have a poem for you. Emily Dickinson's poetry is often seen as private, personal, and difficult for people to relate to. But, spend a little time with her work and we bet that, like us, you'll start to make all kinds of personal connections.

Take this poem, "A narrow Fellow in the Grass," for example. A speaker comes across a snake in the grass (literally). No big whoop, right? Well, for most of us, it isn't. But Dickinson has a gift of exploding the moment, of really examining how a daily occurrence like this might be meaningful, even vital, to human experience.

Think about it: have you even met something in the world—human or animal—that had an immediate, chilling effect on you? What was it about that encounter that affected you so? What cues gave you that threat response, put your hairs up on end? This poem really explores that

moment of cold realization when you realize that things may not be as warm and fuzzy as you had supposed.

Sure, it's not a particularly pleasant sensation, but it's a one that nearly all of us can relate to at some point in our lives. It's also an odd, kind of extra-sensory experience when we just feel that something is off, rather than know it explicitly. Dickinson's really tapped into that primal experience here, but in an elegant and distilled way. So, put your regular senses on hold and dive into this poem. It's sure to be a sensation you won't soon forget!

The speaker recalls walking through some grass and scaring a snake away. The speaker describes this in vivid and strange ways, and develops it into an extended metaphor. The snake reminds the speaker of meeting certain people that take his breath away.

Lines 1-2

A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides -

Okay! Off we go. Let's see...well, your guess is as good as ours as to who this fellow is. We get just a few details about him: he's narrow, he's in the grass, and occasionally he takes rides. Hmm! Well, since he's narrow and riding "in the Grass," we'll assume that were talking about a snake. Hey! Look at us. Riddle #1: solved.

But let's not get too settled on that whole snake thing, because it's shaping up to be a weird poem.

For example, this snake is called a "Fellow" who "rides." Rides what? Do they make little bikes for snakes? He's being treated more like a human than an animal so far. That, folks, is called personification. We wonder if this treatment will hold up through the rest of the poem...

Lines 3-4

You may have met him? Did you not
His notice instant is -

The speaker is asking us directly if we have met the snake. It's like he (or she) wants to verify their experience by checking with us first.

"Did you not" just seems to be hanging out there after the question mark.

You'd think the question mark would come at the end of the line: "You may have met him. Did you not?" But it turns out that when the poem was first published, Dickinson's sister-in-law or the publisher took it upon themselves to put the question mark at the end (See "In a Nutshell" for that story and hurry back!).

"His notice instant is" is also vague, mainly because of the twisted syntax. But this isn't just an exercise in Yoda-speak. This line is purposefully worded in such a way that you just can't be sure if he notices you instantly or if you notice him instantly.

This is a double whammy in a way: both meanings, at the same time, suggest that the snake and the person scare each other in one simultaneous moment.

Lines 5-6

The Grass divides as with a Comb -
A spotted Shaft is seen,

The speaker goes on to describe what it looks like when you almost step on a snake, and it slithers off.

In a really unique simile, the grass splits like hair being parted with a comb. Now that doesn't seem very threatening, does it?

For being startled by the snake, we think this simile reflects a mind that is more interested in the movement of the snake, than threatened by its appearance.

The snake, described here as a "spotted Shaft," appears and disappears in the blink of an eye.

Notice the use of passive voice here ("is seen"). It's not clear who is actually doing the seeing, really. Why doesn't the speaker just say that he (or she) saw the shaft? It's as though the poem wants to generalize this experience so that everyone can participate in it. How thoughtful!

Lines 7-8

And then it closes at your Feet
And opens further on –

Aha! It's not even the speaker's feet anymore. It's "your" (meaning ours, the readers') feet. This speaker is really trying to get us to consider the experience from our own point of view, not just his (or hers—we still haven't figured out just who's talking to us).

The grass ("it") closes as the snake moves past it, then opens further away to indicate that the snake is moving away from us. So, who's more afraid here?

The speaker (or us, as the poems draws us in), or the snake?

Rhythm note: By now, and particularly if you're reading out loud, you should notice a kind of regular rhythm to these stanzas. It's called a "ballad" meter, about which we say much, much more over in "Form and Meter."

Lines 9-10

He likes a Boggy Acre -
A Floor to cool for Corn -

Now we're going into Nature Channel mode.

The average snake (according to Emily Dickinson, anyway) really digs marshes, or bogs.

"Boggy" is the adjective form of bog, and a bog is a wet, grassy field that isn't too different from a wet sponge.

“Acre” is a unit of measurement for land. It's 4,840 square yards to be precise (as we push up our nerd glasses), but we don't think the speaker is being that specific. The point is that the snake likes to hang out in swampy places.

Guess what else? He also likes to hide in cool places, cooler even than the floor of a silo (one of those round towers you see next to barns that are used to store things like corn).

Thanks for this habitat update, speaker. It's great info and all, but what's the point? One answer to that question might come from the choice of "He likes."

Remember from line 1 how the snake is a "Fellow" who "rides"? Snakes may find suitable habitats that have plentiful prey, but to say that "He likes" these places is to again suggest that this snake has some human qualities, bordering on personification.

Lines 11-12

But when a Boy and Barefoot
I more than once at Noon

Now that you're about halfway through the poem, Dickinson throws us a major curve ball

We finally figure out who our speaker is. Shocker! It's a man, or least a male who can remember being a young boy. This is why we say, time and again, that you can't confuse the "poet" with the "speaker." Sure, lots of poets write from their own personal points of view, but, unless we're missing a major piece of her biography, Emily Dickinson was not one of them. Here, she adopts the point of view of a man, reflecting back on those carefree days of boyhood, when he would walk around without shoes on.

This is kind of typical boy behavior, but it's striking that Dickinson feels the need to frame it as such. Why couldn't a girl do this stuff, too?

These lines also set us up for a trip to memory-ville. Get ready for a recollection, folks. What else did this boy used to get up to? Well, "more than once," he would at noon... ah! The suspense is killing us.

Lines 13-14

Have passed I thought a Whip Lash
Unbraiding in the Sun

The speaker describes a state of confusion at first. At "Noon" (12) (and, remember, as a boy), the speaker passed what he "thought" to be a whip lash, or an actual whip itself. (By putting a space between "whip" and "lash," the speaker clarifies that it's not "whiplash"—an actual strike or movement of a whip—that he's talking about.)

So, what about this mistaken lash? Well, Dickinson gives us this great verb here: "Unbraiding." In other words, what the boy notices is that this "whip" looks like it has been out there so long that it's starting to come apart.

Okay, so that's the story that this boy is telling us, but we just have to stop for a second a) to admire Dickinson's word choice ("Unbraiding" = awesome creativity) and b) wonder a bit about what's behind that choice.

The image of a whip unbraiding is a kind of unraveling mess, a once-unified whole coming apart. In this moment, the speaker is describing a mistaken perception (we, the readers, know that this "Whip Lash" is really a snake). And that confusion is really nicely reflected, we think, in the image of a whip that is starting to come apart. An unraveling whip is a bit like the speaker's understanding of his surroundings, which is about to come apart with this mistaken identification.

Of course, if we wanted to go even deeper here, we could also extend this relationship to the reader of the poem, whose prior assumption of Dickinson-as-the-speaker (i.e., a "she") has been unraveled by the reveal in line 11 that the speaker is a "he."

Lines 15-16

When stooping to secure it
It wrinkled And was gone –

So, the speaker goes to pick up what he thinks is a whip then, poof! It's gone.

We think it's telling here that the speaker never says outright that he realized that the lash was actually a snake. "It" is used to describe, in our mind as readers, the snake, but in the actual syntax of the poem, it refers to the whip itself. It's like the whip suddenly became animated and slithered ("wrinkled") away. And giving an inanimate whip the ability to crawl away would be another example of personification. That's a recurring idea in this poem. Dickinson's choices seem to deliberately invest the snake, or the whip in this case, with human abilities and powers.

The line between the inanimate and animate (human) world seems to be purposefully blurred here.

See how much Dickinson can pack into these seemingly-simple little lines?

Lines 17-18

Several of Nature's People
I know and they know me

So, now we're back to the grown up speaker talking to his audience.

He's got friends, don't you know. Specifically, "Nature's People" are some folks he knows.

He also feels compelled to tell us that they know him, too. Why? Wouldn't it be enough to say,

"Those Nature People? Oh yeah, I know them"? It seems that it's not. He wants us to know that they know him, too.

Maybe this back and forth has something to do with who the speaker knows. "Nature People"? Does he mean hippies?

Probably not, since Dickinson wrote this long before the Grateful Dead showed up. More likely, this refers to the snake and the rest of the critters that live out in the natural world. We might call them animals.

Our speaker doesn't, though. Again, the line between people and animals is blurred. Not only are these animals "People," to the speaker, they're also capable of "knowing" him. This relationship is a two-way street, and the animals are able to "know" the speaker as we might know a person. Once again, we're hit with a helping heaping of personification.

Lines 19-20

I feel for them a transport
Of Cordiality

Some confusing terminology is going on here. Let's take it bit by bit.

"[T]ransport" is a weird word that would usually be used for the religious and spiritual highs of saints and holy people, but it also means to carry something from one place to another.

"Cordiality" is the pleasure that you feel either hosting a guest or being a guest.

So, in other words, the speaker feels either the ecstasy or the transfer (or both!) of hospitable feelings toward "Nature's People."

Put simply, he's a fan of animals. The way this idea is presented, though, shows us that such feelings are not that straightforward. He feels some deeper connection to them.

Lines 21-23

But never met this Fellow
Attended or alone
Without a tighter Breathing

We're back to that "Fellow," the snake.

The speaker, by himself or in company, is deeply affected when he comes across this snake, and not in a good way (unless you enjoy having shortness of breath).

Now, we should recognize that there is a school of thought that does, in fact, see this in a kind-of-positive light. In other words, some folks see this encounter with the snake as highly symbolic of sexual intercourse.

The snake might be indeed be a symbol of the male anatomy, we agree. If that is what Dickinson intended, then it's not that hard to see this tighter breathing as that feeling of a pounding heart and quick breathing that you feel when you meet a gorgeous stud or babe. Right?

That's the great thing about poetry, though, since it's open to interpretation, as all art is. Often, what we take from a poem says more about us than it does about the poem. So, if you want to

see this breathing as a sign of sexual excitement, more power to you! We even cover this available reading in "Themes: Sex."

Still, we do think there are other ways to look at these lines. The shortness of breath seems to be particularly negative in one sense, if you follow up with the next line...

Line 24
And Zero at the Bone.

This is one of the most famous lines in Dickinson's poetry, maybe in all poetry.

It's famous because, well, nobody really knows exactly what the Sam Hill it means.

We can guess that "zero," being nothing, represents a kind of emptiness, and to feel that "at the Bone," might suggest a deep disturbance.

This interpretation is supported by the "But" back in line 21. The speaker was telling us about how he really loved all the animals, but... then we get the final lines. In other words, "Animals are great and all, but this snake gives me the heebie-jeebies"—only it seems to be more profound than a passing chill. There seems to be something about this snake that shakes our speaker to the core.

What could it be? Well, that's a question that critics have wrestled with for decades. You know what? We're in the mood for some exercise! Check out the rest of this module—particularly "Themes" and "Symbols, Imagery, and Wordplay"—to see how we put this question in a headlock and try to get some answers.