

## **Notes on I dwell in Possibility by Emily Dickinson:**

Imagine you're a white lady in 19th-century Massachusetts (that may be easier for some more than others). Now imagine you're the kind of lady who doesn't fit in. You're not totally down with the super Puritanical values and all that fussy society stuff. Yeah, maybe a husband and kids would be nice, but you want a little more out of life. You want to write poetry—and not just any poetry. You want to write poetry that breaks rules, that challenges the narrow-minded society around you...

Congrats, you just stepped into the shoes of Emily Dickinson. Hope you didn't get a blister.

Okay, we had fun with that, but really nobody has any idea exactly why Emily decided to become a recluse-poet for a big slice of her life. All we know for sure is that she did in fact spend almost all of her time cloistered away in her home in Amherst, Massachusetts, penning lines that would outlast her.

Yep, we also know for sure that she wrote 1775 of the greatest American poems ever. We're not yanking your chain here. Quietly and all by her lonesome, Emily put together a massive body of work that revolutionized poetry and spoke with a distinctly American voice. Lucky for us, her sister Lavinia found the piles of poems after Emily died in 1886 and went on a crusade to get them published. The first book, *Poems*, was published in 1890.

It's easy to see how "I dwell in Possibility" sprouted from Emily Dickinson's brain. It's a poem about the power of poetry, and it mashes up images of a house and nature to get its point across. Which makes a lot of sense coming from a lady who hung out at her country house writing poems all day, right?

More than anything, this poem has Emily written all over it because it deals with the way poetry can get us in touch with infinite universe around us. Ambitious? Yes. Does it pull it off? You be the judge. We have a feeling Emily is still reciting this one in that great big whatever it is out there.

### **WHY SHOULD I CARE?**

Be honest: have you ever felt like you live your life in a cage? Every day you wake up, go to school, do your extracurricular, go to work, and then you repeat the same thing over and over again. It's enough to make you go nuts. Don't worry, though; you're not alone. Plenty of people feel trapped by their lives—even people whose lives seem beyond cool from the outside.

"I dwell in Possibility" is a poem that shows us how any life-cage can be broken. No, it doesn't require Hulk-like strength. All you have to do is read a poem. Sure, that might sound a little Reading Rainbow cheesy, but it's the truth.

Yup, this is a poem that reminds of us of poetry's power to expand minds and make us think about the great big universe around us. Don't believe us? Read the poem. Dare yourself to dig... and dig deep. Then dare yourself to dwell in possibility.

The speaker tells us that she lives in a house with lots of doors and windows, which just so happens to be a way prettier house than "Prose." So we assume this house is a metaphor for poetry.

The speaker goes on to describe her poetry-house with lots of nature imagery. It's got trees for rooms, the sky for a roof—cool stuff like that. She ends by telling us how awesome the visitors to the house (readers of her poetry) are. Then she tells us that writing poems—or the life of the mind—is the best way she knows to reach for the divine.

Lines 1-2

I dwell in Possibility –

A fairer House than Prose –

So the speaker lives in Possibility, huh? Must be kind of hard for the mailman to find her. It seems like these first two lines are basically getting at how much more awesome poetry is than prose. Them's fightin' words.

The speaker doesn't use the word poetry specifically, but she does say that wherever she lives is better than "Prose."

Therefore, we can assume that the speaker is substituting the word "Possibility" for "poetry." Could she be implying that poetry is better than prose because poetry has more possibilities?

Because it opens up the mind more?

Because it's not as concrete? Yeah, probably.

The speaker is also slipping a metaphor in here on us by saying that possibility (a.k.a. poetry) is a "House."

She doesn't dig into this metaphor quite yet, but we have a feeling it's going to come up again.

Also, notice the wordplay with the word "fairer." This can mean either "more beautiful" or "more just." How do you think either meaning might apply here?

We also couldn't help but see that these first two lines have a pretty steady rhythmic form. Line

1 is in iambic tetrameter and Line 2 is in iambic trimeter. Check out "Form and Meter" for more on these vocabs.

This isn't the only poem where Emily uses this form, so we wonder if she'll keep going with it.

Lines 3-4

More numerous of Windows –

Superior – for Doors –

Ah, the house metaphor continues. We'll now officially dub this an extended metaphor because it keeps going and going and... well, you get the idea.

The speaker continues her argument from the first two lines about how poetry is better than prose because it's more open.

Here, that openness is represented by a house with tons of windows and doors. Whoa, are those metaphors within metaphors?  
Looks that way.

And let's not miss the rhyme games the speaker is playing here. "Windows" in Line 3 rhymes with "Prose" in Line 2.

Then we have an internal rhyme in Line 4 with "Superior" and "for," and the line ends with a slant rhyme, "Doors."

This is far from a typical rhyme scheme; in fact, it seems a little willy-nilly, if we may say so. Of course, this is a poem about the limitless power of poetry, so maybe it wouldn't make sense to tame it with a steady rhyme scheme.

We also notice that for some unknown reason, Emily decides to separate "for Doors" with a dash in line 4. What's up with that?

Why would she choose to emphasize the doors more than the windows in line 3? Maybe it's because doors are a bigger symbol of openness, because we actually walk through them to go other places.

We can also go through windows, but normally we only do that when we don't want our parents to know we sneaked out of the house.

Before we go to the next stanza, we just want to point out that we've totally shifted away from rhythmic pattern of the first two lines. Just go to "Form and Meter" for the whole rundown.

Lines 5-6  
Of Chambers as the Cedars –  
Impregnable of eye –

These two lines get the award for most cryptic in the poem. Line 5 continues the house metaphor by talking about the "Chambers," or rooms of the house. The line makes our head hurt a little bit when it uses a simile to compare the "Chambers" to "Cedars," which are a type of tree.

How is a room like a tree?

Well, this is a house of openness, so maybe the rooms are like trees because they grow.

Or it could be that the poem is using "the Cedars" to represent a forest. The spaces between trees in a forest are kind of like rooms in a house, but they're a lot more open, right? (This house is starting to sound kind of drafty; we wouldn't want that heating bill.)

We also wonder why the speaker compares the rooms to specifically to cedar trees. When Emily's at the helm, it's usually safe to look for Biblical interpretations. Cedar trees are talked about in nothing but glowing terms in the Bible. The Hebrews couldn't get enough of them. Lots of important palaces and temples were built out of cedar. In fact, one of King

Solomon's most important buildings was called "the house of the forest of Lebanon." (Kings 7:2).

"House of the forest"? Oh snap, isn't our speaker comparing the rooms of her poetry house to a forest right now?

It could be that she specifically talks about cedars here to allude to all these holy buildings from the Bible. Maybe she's saying that poetry is made of things that are just as holy as anything you'll find in the Good Book.

Okay. So far so good.

But line 6 is a bit of a head scratcher at first, too. "Impregnable of eye"? What is that supposed to mean?

Well, "impregnable" describes something that is incapable of being taken by assault, like an impregnable fortress or something like that.

So if this place is "Impregnable of eye," then it seems like the speaker is saying that nobody can see into her poetry house, no matter how hard they try.

Here's the question, though...

Up until now the speaker has been telling all about how open her poetry house is. So why is she now making it sound like it's closed off?

Could it be that she's saying that the naked eye isn't enough to see into it? Instead, maybe the only way to enter is through the imagination or the mind.

Lines 7-8

And for an everlasting Roof  
The Gambrels of the Sky –

The speaker continues to blend her extended house metaphor with nature by comparing the roof with the sky. We're back to some clear-cut symbols of openness again.

This house doesn't have a normal roof; this roof is "everlasting." The word "everlasting" could imply that the roof/sky goes on forever in terms space or time.

How about this word "Gambrels"? We'll admit it: we had to look that one up, too. It turns out a gambrel is the sloped style of roof that we usually see on barns.

It's interesting how we went from Biblical temple with "the Cedars" to a barn roof. Could Emily D be trying to make a connection there?

This poetry house seems to know no boundaries—even when it comes to class.

These two lines are really starting to make us think about a central paradox in this poem:

If the speaker is ultimately trying to describe how much more open poetry is than prose, then why did she bother with a house metaphor to begin with? Couldn't she have just said that

"poetry is the sky" and gotten to the point a lot quicker? Most houses have walls and roofs—they're contained structures. So why is a house a useful metaphor for openness?

Wait a sec... Maybe what the speaker is trying to tell us isn't quite that simple. Maybe she wants us to feel the built-in contradiction in the idea of a house that encompasses everything.

Isn't that what a poem is: a little block of words on a page that can open the mind to the universe? This is officially getting deep.

Lines 9-10

Of Visitors – the fairest –  
For Occupation – This –

The speaker moves on from describing her poetry house but keeps the metaphor going by mentioning "Visitors," which we're going to go ahead and assume refers to the readers of the poetry.

Notice that she describes the readers as "the fairest," in the same way that she described her house as "fairer" in line 2.

So not only is the house the fairest of them all, but so are the readers who come to check it out. Hey, isn't that us? Aw, shucks.

She must really mean it, too, because she separates "the fairest" with dashes.

We figure the "Occupation" that the speaker is talking about in line 9 is being a poet. Sure, it doesn't pay much—especially not in Dickinson's case—but it does occupy the time.

In case we were confused about this, the speaker separates the word "This" with dashes, emphasizing the fact that she's referring to the whole poem up until now as her job.

Living in an eternal poetry-house—sounds like a sweet job to us.

Almost to the end here, but we'd be selling you short if we didn't point out the assonance-consonance combo going on in these two lines.

Check out all the short "i's," "s's," and "t's" in "Visitors," "fairest," and "This."

Lines 11-12

The spreading wide my narrow Hands  
To gather Paradise –

The speaker ends the poem with a similar image to that whole eternal roof/sky thing in lines 7-8. Though she has "narrow Hands," she spreads them to try and grasp something huge and indefinable. So again we have a bit of a paradox.

Something small and contained is trying wrap around something that is ultimately uncontainable. How can we puny humans "gather Paradise"?

It seems like in the mind of the speaker Paradise is something eternal; it's the great unknown, the great beyond, Heaven, the Universe etc. It's impossible to hold that in your hands.

Of course, the speaker doesn't actually say that she succeeds in gathering Paradise. She just tells us that's what she's trying to do.

So even though writing poetry helps her expand her mind and her readers' minds, she still never quite reaches the thing for which she's reaching.

Hey, that's life right? And it seems like the speaker isn't too sad about it. It's the quest for knowledge and insight that keeps her going.