

Notes on My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun - by Emily Dickinson:

Emily Dickinson is considered to be both a difficult poet and one of the most popular American poets. "My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun" fits in the Dickinson tradition: it is not easy, and it's one of her more famous poems.

Scholars aren't sure exactly when it was written, since Dickinson's poems weren't widely published until after her death. Famous for being reclusive, Dickinson didn't wander far from her hometown of Amherst, Massachusetts, and eventually chose to stay at home by herself during her later years. During her lifetime, she produced 1775 poems, a monstrous body of work.

"My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun" is counted among Dickinson's greatest poems, and is certainly representative of her body of work. The poem's style, depth of thought, concise language, and simultaneous definition and ambiguity combine to make this poem a masterpiece. This is a scholar's poem, and you're brave to be taking it on, trust us. After you've chewed on it, let it sit for a while, we can guarantee that it will be well worth the effort.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

Emily Dickinson probably knows more about you than you do, and she's been dead for more than a century. Her uncanny insight into human nature is nothing short of amazing. Many people, no matter what their expertise, can find something of personal significance in her poetry.

How many times have you been angry? Well, Dickinson infuses that feeling into this poem. How many times have you been carried away by intense emotions? Dickinson translates the emotional experience into words. Reading Dickinson is truly a learning experience. You will learn something about the speaker in the poem, you will learn something about people in general, and you may even learn something about yourself by letting her poetry work on you.

Dickinson certainly has an eye for human nature. Like many great poets, she has the ability to express personal feelings that nearly every reader can identify with on some level. A Dickinson poem is both universal and personal at the same time. Approach it with patience and an open mind, and Dickinson's poetry just might become your personal favorite before you know it.

This poem is about many things. You may have your own interpretation, but we're going to focus on the theme of anger that pours out of these 24 lines like lava out of a volcano's mouth. Indeed, there is some anger up in this poem. And we're not talking about simple frustration, but fiery, explosive rage that can take over even the most levelheaded person. Wrath can make us feel powerful, invincible even.

However, as Emily Dickinson explores in the poem, it can be an uneasy arrangement. Anger can carry us away whether we'd like it to or not. While it can be strangely rewarding to get angry, giving you a sort of high, this process can also be highly destructive. Feelings of invincibility may be a cover for something deeper and darker than anger – something that is harder to express. Intense. That's Dickinson.

Lines 1-4

My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –
In Corners – till a Day
The Owner passed – identified –

And carried Me away –

We're going to take these lines slowly. Among major poets, Dickinson is about as far away from easy-to-read prose as you can get.

You know that handy stuff known as syntax – putting words in an order that allows you to understand what's being said? Dickinson is known for turning syntax on its head (through a technique called parataxis).

The poem begins "My Life had stood." We know right away that there's a person out there – a speaker – who is directly involved. (Since she says "my," we know she possesses something.)

What does she possess? A Life.

What had this life done? It had stood.

(We know this seems incredibly tedious, but it will pay off in the end because we'll know who or what is doing things.)

A note on the capitalization: really academic people who have studied Dickinson their entire lives haven't agreed on what her use of capitalization means. It means something, but it's hard to say what it signifies beyond the literal meaning of the word.

In the case of "Life," it's personified (an abstract concept that's treated like a person); it's more than the "life" you'd mean in "get a life!" It might encompass far more, it might be metaphorical. Continuing on to the second half of line 1, we get the famous Dickinson dash, a likely place for her to try to shake you while she messes with the syntax.

"My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –" What does that mean? Let's put together some likely candidates.

"My Life had stood like/as a Loaded Gun;" "My Life had stood next to a Loaded Gun;" "My Life had stood in front of a Loaded Gun."

To help us figure out which one to choose, we'll look to the second line: "In Corners – till a Day." That line is modifying where and for how long the speaker's life stood.

Let's start with the simplest one: "My Life had stood – [like] a Loaded Gun – "

We have the speaker's life, which stood in the corners like a loaded gun, until one day, when

"The Owner passed – identified – / And carried Me away –."

The use of "The Owner" adds another player to the mix.

We imagine the speaker's life lurking in some shadowy corner, along a sidewalk somewhere, when "The Owner" walked by, identified the speaker's life or was identified by the speaker's life – it's ambiguous – and then carried her away.

Initially, we had a separation between the speaker and her "Life" – she referred to it like it was outside herself.

Now, the speaker and her "Life" seemed to have collapsed into one: "Me." See that?

Her Life had stood in the corners, till the Owner passed by, but now she is being carried away.

So, we make the assumption that the speaker and her life are being carried away.

Lines 5-8

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods –
And now We hunt the Doe –
And every time I speak for Him –
The Mountains straight reply –

From here on, this poem is easier to understand, especially since we've sorted out the particulars of who's doing what.

To make things even easier, we're going to choose one of the possible interpretations of this poem.

In our interpretation "The Owner" is the speaker's anger. (It isn't the only way of interpreting "The Owner," though it is probably the most popular one.)

In line 5, the speaker and her anger (who carried her away in the first stanza) are roaming in the woods – a decidedly cryptic line – and hunting the Doe.

The use of "Sovereign" could be invoking its meaning as "supreme" – they are all-powerful together. It could also mean "independent," in the sense that they are not dependent on anyone. In any case, "sovereign" generally alludes to a place of power.

This also continues the analogy of the speaker's life as a loaded gun. When someone harbors a lot of rage, they can be as dangerous as a loaded gun – ready to blow.

Here, she hunts the doe, an image of stalking and violence.

Line 7 and 8 together describe how the speaker "speaks" for her anger, which is a way of saying she expresses it.

The mountains reply could refer to an echo. Expressing anger that is like a loaded gun would certainly cause an echo.

We should say that our references to the anger interpretation are just that – one interpretation among many.

Lines 9-12

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow –
It is as a Vesuvian face

Had let its pleasure through –

This stanza describes the speaker smiling.

One way to paraphrase this is, "And if I smile, it's like an uptight hot-head had actually loosened up a bit."

The smile is cordial, and shines upon the Valley, but it's like a "Vesuvian face" had smiled. ("Vesuvian" references Mount Vesuvius, a volcano in Italy. Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 A.D. and buried the city of Pompeii and many of its inhabitants. Not a pretty picture. To say someone is Vesuvian is to say that they're prone to explosive anger.)

So, the speaker smiling is like a Vesuvian face. In other words, we have the image of a person with anger-management problems, who cools down a bit and "let its pleasure through."

Lines 13-16

And when at Night – Our good Day done –
I guard My Master's Head –
'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's
Deep Pillow – to have shared –

This stanza is very interesting and is rather like a riddle. It also reveals something about the nature of anger.

At night, when the speaker is in bed, she guards her "Master's Head."

If we look at the first stanza again, "The Owner" mirrors this reference to "Master," so we can assume that "Master" could also be a reference to her anger.

This would be significant, then, because anger can often take over a person, as if it were his master.

In the third line, you are probably wondering (as we were) what the heck an "Eider-Duck's Deep Pillow" is.

Well, for the most part, an Eider duck is a duck just like any other, but it is known for plucking its own feathers to make its nest (its "Deep Pillow"). This makes sense because many pillows back in the day were filled with feathers, hence the nest/pillow comparison, and because of the self-destructive nature of the Eider duck.

Self-destructive ducks? – this is crazy, you say. Well, Dickinson might be saying something about the nature of protecting one's anger as an inherently self-destructive act. How many times has expressing rage gotten you into trouble?

Lines 17-20

To foe of His – I'm deadly foe –
None stir the second time –
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye –
Or an emphatic Thumb –

This stanza refers to how the speaker defends her "Master" and "Owner."

She is a deadly foe of any of his enemies, no one messes with either of them a second time. We immediately think back to the gun metaphor with this image. A "deadly" foe is certainly one with a loaded gun, and no one stirs a second time if they're shot dead.

The third line of the stanza's reference to a "Yellow Eye" could refer to something like giving someone the "evil eye," generally a sign of aggression, intimidation, or cursing.

The "Yellow Eye" could also refer to the muzzle flash of a gun.

The last line is similar. Thumbing your nose at someone was an old sign of aggression, and giving someone an "emphatic Thumb" is something similar (and certainly not a thumbs-up). Just like the "Yellow Eye," it could also refer to the thumb used to cock a gun.

Lines 21-24

Though I than He – may longer live
He longer must – than I –
For I have but the power to kill,
Without – the power to die –

These four lines make up a tricky stanza, so let's pull it apart.

Paraphrased, it reads, "Though I might live longer than him, he must live longer than me, because with him I have the power to kill, and without him, the power to die."

If we treat the "he/him" as anger or rage, then the stanza makes sense.

Though the speaker might outlive her anger, her anger also gives her power – the "power to kill."

These lines also imply invincibility, because without her anger, she is left with the power to die.

This suggests that she is somehow immortal when equipped with her anger.

On a less extreme level, anger can make us feel powerful and courageous, ready to lash out in our own defense. Without anger, there is a danger of becoming shy, of losing your nerve, of not standing up for yourself.

Another interpretation is that the power to die is a quality of living things; thus, since she "is" a gun, this is a continuation of the extended gun metaphor.