

Notes on Wild Nights - Wild Nights by Emily Dickinson:

“Wild Nights—Wild Nights!” contains no narrative plot to report; there is no story to tell. The poem is sustained exclamation, an extended expression of agitated yearning for reunion with a lover. In the first stanza, a storm seems to be raging, the seas in ferment from the winds. Were the speaker with her lover, there would be stormy nights of their own making, born of passionate indulgence and privilege (“Our luxury”).

In the second stanza, the persona remarks that the winds cannot avail against “a Heart in port”—that is, a lover can transcend life’s buffetings, given the stability provided by love. As a parallel to this thought, no longer does a lover require compass or chart on troubled seas, since in finding love, the voyage is done, the “port” reached.

In the third stanza, where Emily Dickinson typically employs ellipsis (word omission), she compresses her articulation sharply. Consequently, readers must fill in the missing thought, which seems to be that love’s formulative power makes everything like “rowing in Eden,” or into a paradise where life’s swells are leveled. The allusion to Eden turns menacing, however, reminding the persona of the tossing sea of the present night and propelling anew an anguished longing for the anchorage of her lover’s presence on this night of storm.

“Wild Nights—Wild Nights!” may come as a surprise to readers who have thought of Emily Dickinson as the Amherst recluse, purposely rejecting life, including thoughts of romance, for the “higher calling” of art. Moreover, the poem proves decidedly up-to-date in its erotic celebration of love by way of imagery easily understood by a generation exposed to Freud. Even at the time it was published, Dickinson’s friend and editor, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, expressed anxiety lest unscrupulous minds should read into the poetry more than the sexually innocent Dickinson had intended. Yet the fact is that “Wild Nights—Wild Nights!” is but one of many poems Dickinson composed on the subject of love, several of them equally explicit.