

Emily Dickinson and the Daisy

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It was not until 1955 that Thomas H. Johnson published his three-volume edition of Emily Dickinson's complete poems — 1775 in all.⁽¹⁾ Seventeen years earlier, George Whicher made an extensive study of nature images in Dickinson's poems. According to him, "Even such common trees as the birch, the oak, and the chestnut [were] not on Emily Dickinson's list."⁽²⁾ Among the flowers on her "list," Whicher noted that the rose was the flower the poet wrote of the most often (in 17 poems), followed by the daisy (in 15).⁽³⁾ Whicher did not, however, have available for his study all of the poems written by Dickinson. When the complete collection of her poetry came out in 1955, edited by Johnson, some of Whicher's findings obviously needed revising. For example, of the trees that Whicher did not find on "Dickinson's list," we now know that "the Oak tree" appears in poem #41 and "the Chestnut" in poem #1371.⁽⁴⁾ (Dickinson capitalizes the "Oak" and "Chestnut," following rather casually the earlier orthographic style that capitalized all nouns.) As for the flowers, the rose and the daisy are the two flowers at the top of Dickinson's list in Johnson's edition,

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as they were in Whicher's study. According to my count, in Johnson's edition of 1775 poems, the rose appears in 43 poems (17 in Whicher's study) and the daisy in 25 poems (15 in Whicher's study). In three of these poems (#46, #93, and #339), the rose and the daisy are both mentioned.

What significance do the rose and the daisy have in Dickinson's poetry—to have been selected more often than any other flower by the poet? And what special artistic qualities do these poems possess? These questions led me to take a new look at the poems in question. The result is the present paper, which focuses primarily on the use of the daisy in her poems, with a brief comparative discussion of the rose.

At the outset let it be said that the subject of my study is still very much unresolved. Therefore, I have decided to quote extensively from Dickinson's verse, so that others may get a better feel for her relationship to the flower.

True, the rose, of all the flowers, may have been the most familiar in Dickinson's life as we are told that "Dickinson's garden was replete with roses of various types and shades,"⁽⁵⁾ and therefore she may have selected this flower most often for her poems. However, the daisy, though less frequently mentioned than the rose, seems to have some specific significance to the poet, something which we don't find in her use of the rose. On this point, Johnson goes so far as to state that Dickinson "selected the rose more often than any other flower to write about, but no poem on the subject is memorable."⁽⁶⁾

Whicher notes that "no single formula can be given for Emily Dickinson's treatment of nature,"⁽⁷⁾ and this study too finds that there is no easily discernible pattern in her use of the two flowers. However, with respect to 20 or so of the 43 poems in which the rose

appears, we can describe several ways in which the poet uses this flower. The rose is used most often (in at least 9 poems) as a summer flower, usually representing the season, as shown in the first stanza of Poem #5:

I have a Bird in spring
Which for myself doth sing—
The spring decoys.
And as the summer nears—
And as the Rose appears,
Robin is gone.

Or, in the opening stanza of Poem #956:

What shall I do when the Summer troubles—
What, when the Rose is ripe—
What when the Eggs fly off in Music
From the Maple Keep?

And on occasion, the rose is placed in the context of changing seasons, as in Poem #32, quoted in full:

When Roses cease to bloom, Sir,
And Violets are done—
When Bumblebees in solemn flight
Have passed beyond the Sun—
The hand that paused to gather
Upon this Summer's day

Will idle lie—in Auburn—
Then take my flowers—pray!

Or, in Poem #12, the deepening of autumn is shown by the absence of the rose:

The morns are meeker than they were—
The nuts are getting brown—
The berry's cheek is plumper—
The Rose is out of town.

The Maple wears a gayer scarf—
The field a scarlet gown—
Lest I should be old fashioned
I'll put a trinket on.

In half a dozen poems the rose is associated with the idea of status or hierarchy, as in Poem #34:

Garlands for Queens, may be—
Laurels—for rare degree
Of soul or sword,
Ah—but remembering me—
Ah—but remembering thee—
Nature in chivalry—
Nature in charity—
Nature in equity—
The Rose ordained!

Or in Poem #442:

God made a little Gentian —
It tried — to be a Rose —
And failed — and all the Summer laughed —
But just before the Snows

There rose a Purple Creature —
That ravished all the Hill —
And Summer hid her Forehead —
And Mockery — was still —

The Frosts were her condition —
The Tyrian would not come
Until the North — invoke it —
Creator — Shall I — bloom?

In this poem, the gentian is trying unsuccessfully to be a rose. Could it be a suggestion that the gentian, a wild flower, ought not aspire to be the rose, usually thought to be a garden flower carefully cultivated?

In several other poems the rose appears in varying relationships with the bee, as in Poem #620:

It makes no difference abroad —
The Seasons — fit — the same —
The Mornings blossom into Noons —
And split their Pods of Flame —

Wild flowers — kindle in the Woods —
 The Brooks slam — all the Day —
 No Black bird bates his Banjo —
 For passing Calvary —

Auto da Fe — and Judgment —
 Are nothing to the Bee —
 His separation from His Rose —
 To Him — sums Misery —

Or in Poem #1339:

A Bee his burnished Carriage
 Drove boldly to a Rose —
 Combinedly alighting —
 Himself — his Carriage was —
 The Rose received his visit
 With frank tranquillity
 Withholding not a Crescent
 To his Cupidity —
 Their Moment consummated —
 Remained for him — to flee —
 Remained for her — of rapture
 But the humility.

For the rest of the poems (or about a half of 43 poems) it seems to be no pattern to the way the rose is used.

Let us now turn to the poems in which the daisy appears. As was the case with the rose poems, in a few poems the daisy is used as a

flower of a particular season, that of summer, as in Poem #337:

I know a place where Summer strives
With such a practised Frost —
She — each year — leads her Daisies back —
Recording briefly — “Lost” —

But when the South Wind stirs the Pools
And struggles in the lanes —
Her Heart misgives Her, for Her Vow —
And she pours soft Refrains

Into the lap of Adamant —
And spices — and the Dew —
That stiffens quietly to Quartz —
Upon her Amber Shoe —

In Poem #995 “Daisies” are mentioned in the context of changing seasons:

This was in the White of the Year —
That — was in the Green —
Drifts were as difficult then to think
As Daisies now to be seen —

Looking back is best that is left
Or if it be — before —
Retrospection is Prospect’s half,
Sometimes, almost more.

And in Poem #22, the "Daisy" is mentioned together with some other flowers, for which the "nooks" are to be saved until their blooming season arrives, when "The swamps are pink with June."

All these my banners be.
I sow my pageantry
In May —
It rises train by train —
Then sleeps in state again —
My chancel — all the plain
Today.

To lose — if one can find again —
To miss — if one shall meet —
The Burglar cannot rob — then —
The Broker cannot cheat.
So build the hillocks gaily
Thou little spade of mine
Leaving nooks for Daisy
And for Columbine —
You and I the secret
Of the Crocus know —
Let us chant it softly —
"There is no more snow!"

To him who keeps an Orchis' heart —
The swamps are pink with June.

From some of her letters it is known that Dickinson used the daisy for herself, and this fact may help us understand some of the poems in which this flower is used. Two such letters are worth quoting. The first one is presumed to be written about 1861, to an unknown recipient.⁽⁸⁾ To begin, let me present a note by Thomas H. Johnson, Dickinson's editor: "Words which ED crossed out are here enclosed in brackets; alternative readings are in parentheses." In the following excerpts, my insertions are identified by < >.

Master.

If you saw a bullet hit a Bird — and he told you he was'nt
< sic > shot — you might weep at his courtesy, but you would
certainly doubt his word.

One drop more from the gash that stains your Daisy's
bosom — then would you *believe*? Thomas' faith in Anatomy,
was stronger than his faith in faith. God made me — [Sir]
Master — I did'nt < sic > be — myself. I dont know how it
was done. He built the heart in me — Bye and bye it outgrew
me — and like the little mother — with the big child — I got
tired holding him. I heard of a thing called "Redemption" —
which rested men and women. You remember I asked you
for it — you gave me something else. I forgot the Redemption.
.. I am older — tonight, Master — but the love is the same
—

.

These things are [reverent] holy, Sir, I touch them [rever-
ently] hallowed, but persons who pray — dare remark [our]
"Father"! You say I do not tell you all — Daisy confessed —
and denied not.

Vesuvius dont talk — Etna — dont — [Thy] one of them — said a syllable — a thousand years ago, and Pompeii heard it, and hid forever — She could'nt < sic > look the world in the face, afterward — I suppose — Bashfull < sic > Pompeii! "Tell you of the want" — you know what a leech is, dont you — and [remember that] Daisy's arm is small — and you have felt the horizon hav'nt < sic > you — and did the sea — never come so close as to make you dance?

I dont know what you can do for it — thank you — Master — but if I had the Beard on my cheek — like you — had Daisy's petals — and you cared so for me — what would become of you? Could'nt < sic > Carlo, and you and I walk in the meadows an hour — and nobody care but the Bobolink — and *his* — a *silver* scruple? I used to think when I died — I could see you — so I died as fast as I could — but the "Corporation" are going Heaven too so [Eternity] wont be sequestered — now [at all] — Say I may wait for you — say I need go with no stranger to the < sic > to me — untried [country] fold — I waited a long time — Master — but I can wait more — wait till my hazel hair is dappled — and you carry the cane — then I can look at my watch — and if the Day is too far declined — we can take the chances [of] for Heaven — What would you do with me if I came "in white?" Have you the little chest to put the Alive — in?

I want to see you more — Sir — than all I wish for in this world — and the wish — altered a little — will be my only one — for the skies.

Could you come to New England — [this summer — could] would you come to Amherst — Would you like to come —

Master?

[Would it do harm — yet we both fear God —] . . . Would Daisy disappoint you — no — she would'nt < sic > — Sir — it were comfort forever — just to look in your face, while you looked in mine — then I could play in the woods till Dark — till you take me where Sundown cannot find us — and the true keep coming — till the town is full. [Will you tell me if you will?]

I did'nt < sic > think to tell you, you did'nt < sic > come to me "in white," nor ever told me why,

No Rose, yet felt myself a'bloom,

No Bird — yet rode in Ether.

The second letter was written perhaps early in 1862 to an unknown recipient:

Oh, did I offend it — [Did'nt < sic > it want me to tell it the truth] Daisy — Daisy — offend it — who bends her smaller life to his (it's) meeker (lower) every day — who only asks — a task — [who] something to do for love of it — some little way she cannot guess to make that master glad —

A love so big it scares her, rushing among her small heart — pushing aside the blood and leaving her faint (all) and white in the gust's arm —

Daisy — who never flinched thro' that awful parting, but held her life so tight he should not see the wound — who would have sheltered him in her childish bosom (Heart) — only it was'nt < sic > big eno' for a Guest so large — *this* Daisy — grieve her Lord — and yet it (she) often blundered

— Perhaps she grieved (grazed) his taste — perhaps her odd
 — Backwoodsman [life] ways [troubled] teased his finer nature (sense). Daisy [fea] < sic > knows all that — but must she go unpardoned — teach her, preceptor grace — teach her majesty — Slow (Dull) at patrician things — Even the wren upon her nest learns (knows) more than Daisy dares —

Low at the knee that bore her once unto [royal] wordless rest [now] Daisy [stoops a] kneels a culprit — tell her her [offence] fault — Master — if it is [not so] small eno' to cancel with her life, [Daisy] she is satisfied — but punish [do not] dont banish her — shut her in prison, Sir — only pledge that you will forgive — sometime — before the grave, and Daisy will not mind — She will awake in [his] your likeness.

....

The letters quoted above quite obviously express the writer's love for her "Master." Her feeling is intense, yet she is trying very hard to be patient, waiting for him, and in the second letter, she begs him to "forgive." For our present discussion, the important point is that the poet identifies herself with the flower and calls herself "Daisy." In addition, the two lines of verse at the end of the first letter are worthy of note. Here the writer, Daisy, acknowledges that she is "No Rose" and suggests that she is not the kind of flower. Then, what is the nature or character of the rose in the poet's mind, the nature or character that distinguishes this flower from the daisy with which the poet identifies herself?

If we are to look for some clue in Dickinson's poems, Poem #442, which has been quoted in full earlier, may be of some value. In that poem, "a little Gentian" "tried" "to be a Rose" "And failed." As I

have suggested, the rose which is usually grown in a garden, often tended by a gardener, may be considered a flower with more rank or of a higher status than a gentian, a humble wild flower. In Poem #620, also quoted earlier, the rose seems to be distinguished from "Wild flowers." Moreover, to "the Bee" in this poem, "His separation from His Rose" "sums Misery," the "Misery" compared to which "Auto da Fe—and Judgment—/ Are nothing." If the loss of or separation from the rose causes the misery more profound than "Auto da Fe" or "Judgment," what kind of relationship is suggested between the bee and "His Rose"? These two events would surely evoke the most profound awe from orthodox Christians. In still another poem, #1339, quoted above, "A Bee" "Drove boldly to a Rose." "The Rose received his visit / With frank tranquillity / Withholding not a Crescent / To his Cupidity—" These two "rose" poems seem to suggest relationships that are not religious or spiritual, but quite passionate and even carnal. Whether or not Dickinson had these associations in mind when she wrote she was "No Rose" in her letter, or, whether or not these poems have any relationship to her statement in the letter in question, suffice it to say that in the letter where she calls herself Daisy, she dissociates herself from the rose.

In Poem #921, we find the poet "I" identifying herself with the Daisy, but beyond that, its significance in this poem is ambiguous.

If it had no pencil
Would it try mine—
Worn—now—and *dull*—sweet,
Writing much to thee.
If it had no word,
Would it make the Daisy,

Most as big as I was,
When it plucked me?

In five poems, the Daisy – sometimes described as “low” or “meek” — is clearly contrasted, or juxtaposed, with something great, majestic, or even divine.

Poem #124 contrasts “Immortal Alps” with “A Myriad Daisy”
“Meek at [the Alps] everlasting feet.”

In lands I never saw — they say
Immortal Alps look down —
Whose Bonnets touch the firmament —
Whose Sandals touch the town —

Meek at whose everlasting feet
A Myriad Daisy play —
Which, sire, are you and which am I
Upon an August day?

In this contrast the poet evidently sees her relationship to “you,” someone to whom the poet salutes with “Sir” (reminiscent of Dickinson’s letters discussed above). The poet’s identification with the “meek” Daisy is suggested in the rhetorical question she poses: “Which, Sir, are you and which am I . . .?” Poem#481 presents a similar contrast: between the Daisy and, this time, the “Himmaleh.”

The Himmaleh was known to stoop
Unto the Daisy low —
Transported with Compassion

That such a Doll should grow
Where Tent by Tent — Her Universe
Hung out its Flags of Snow —

The sentiment expressed in each of these two poems differs, however. The poet in #481 attributes "Compassion" to "The Himmaleh" which "was known to stoop" "Upon the Daisy low." In the first poem, the Alps merely "look down," while the "meek" daisies "play" at their feet, suggesting a distance, or perhaps even a detachment, on the part of "Immortal Alps." In the second poem, on the other hand, "The Himmaleh" *stoops* "Upon the Daisy low," regarding it as a "Doll" (betraying affection perhaps tinged with sentimentality). These two poems juxtapose the daisy, the flower "meek" and "low," with the Alps and the Himmaleh, both of immense stature, but suggest different kinds of sentiment in their relationship, perhaps suggesting an ambivalence in her feelings for the "Master" of her letters.

In Poem #102, a four-line piece, the contrast is between the daisy and "Great Caesar," a historical figure rather than a huge mountain, as in #124 and #481.

Great Caesar! Condescend
The Daisy, to receive,
Gathered by Cato's Daughter,
With your majestic leave!

The poet identifies herself with "Cato's daughter," Portia, who picks "the Daisy" and offers it to Great Caesar, asking him to "condescend" to receive it. Aside from our main concern with Dickinson's use of the daisy, this four-line poem (#102) interests us because it seems to

suggest — even though fragmentarily — an insight into the poet's attitude toward the historical figures. Marcus Porcius Cato (95-46 BC), whom the poet presumably refers to, strove to preserve the republic against potential tyrants, Caesar in particular. Cato's attempt at obstructing Caesar's agrarian legislation proved unsuccessful and in the end he committed suicide. It is not certain how well Dickinson was acquainted with these historical facts. But in this poem she plays with these ancient rivals and paints a vignette — perhaps a creation of her imagination — again with a tinge of sentimentality. ⁽⁹⁾

In Poem #85, a highly suggestive poem with religious overtones, the poet as "a Daisy" speaks to her "Sovereign" in an impassioned voice.

"They have not chosen me," he said,
 "But I have chosen them!"
 Brave — Broken hearted statement —
 Uttered in Bethlehem!

I could not have told it,
 But since *Jesus dared* —
 Sovereign! Know a Daisy
 Thy dishonor shared!

Poem #106 opens with the line, "The Daisy follows soft the Sun
 —."

The Daisy follows soft the Sun —
 And when his golden walk is done —
 Sits shyly at his feet —
 He — walking — finds the flower there —

Because, Sir, love is sweet!

We are the Flower — Thou the Sun!

Forgive us, if as days decline —

We nearer steal to Thee!

Enamored of the parting West —

The peace — the flight — the Amethyst —

Night's possibility!

The relationship of the daisy with the Sun as expressed in this poem seems to be that of love, its intense tone reminding us of that found in the letters quoted earlier. At the same time, however, the daisy's faithful following of the sun can be interpreted within the context of Christian faith: the daisy signifying a devout believer in God. This piece, then, may not simply be a poem of intense love for a human lover, but also one reflecting a deep and intense love for and faith in God.

In addition to the poems discussed above, in which the daisy is seen as "low" or "meek," in the presence of something larger or more powerful, a few other poems emphasize the daisy as being humble, sometimes, even submissive, as in Poem #339:

I tend my flowers for thee —

Bright Absentee!

My Euchsia's Coral Seams

Rip — while the Sower — dreams —

Geraniums — tint — and spot —

Low Daisies — dot —

My Cactus — splits her Beard
To show her throat —

Carnations — tip their spice —
And Bees — pick up —
A Hyacinth — I hid —
Puts out a Ruffled Head —
And odors fall
From flasks — so small —
You marvel how they held —

Globe Roses — break their satin flake —
Upon my Garden floor —
Yet — thou — not there —
I had as lief they bore
No Crimson — more —

Thy flower — be gay —
Her Lord — away!
It ill becometh me —
I'll dwell in Calyx — Gray —
How modestly — alway —
Thy Daisy —
Draped for thee!

As noted by some critics,⁽¹⁰⁾ this poem expresses the speaker's intense feeling for her absent lover. Yet, the intensity of the sexual desire and frustration caused by his absence seems somewhat muted by the submissiveness and modesty that the daisy suggests.

In Poem #137 the "Daisies" are shown blooming "upon the hillside," suggesting that they are humble flowers growing in the wild, rather than in the more cultivated surroundings of the garden.

Flowers — Well — if anybody
Can the ecstasy define —
Half a transport — half a trouble —
With which flowers humble men:
Anybody find the fountain
From which floods so contra flow —
I will give him all the Daisies
Which upon the hillside blow.

Too much pathos in their faces
For a simple breast like mine —
Butterflies from St. Domingo
Cruising round the purple line —
Have a system aesthetics —
Far superior to mine.

Dickinson's "daisy" poems emphasize this flower's being "low," "meek," and modest, in contrast to something large, powerful, or majestic. And in one of her letters, the daisy is contrasted to the rose. Her characterization of the daisy reminds us of the "daisy" poems by William Wordsworth. There is no question that Dickinson "knew something about Wordsworth's poetry," as Johnson puts it,⁽¹¹⁾ although it is uncertain whether or not she knew or read any of these poems. In the first, "To the Daisy," Wordsworth associates the daisy with summer: "Whole summer-fields are thine by right." (line 13). Also,

just as Dickinson compares the daisy with the rose, so does Wordsworth:

Proud be the rose, with rains and dews.

Her head impearling,

Thou liv'st with less ambitious aim,

Yet hast not gone without thy fame;

Thou art indeed by many a claim

The poet's darling (lines 27-32)

In the second poem entitled "To the Same Flower," the poet speaks to the daisy:

Daisy! again I talk to thee,

For thou art worthy,

Thou unassuming common-place

Of nature, with that homely face,

And yet with something of a grace,

Which love makes for thee! (lines 3-8)

And the last stanza of this poem reads:

Bright *Flower*! For by that name at last,

When all my reveries are past,

I call thee, and to that cleave fast,

Sweet silent creature!

That breath'st with me in sun and air,

Did thou, as thou art wont, repair

My heart with gladness, and a share

Of thy meek nature!

(lines 41-48)

The third, and the shortest, of the three poems is also entitled "To the Daisy." Let me quote the last stanza:

Thou wander'st the wide world about,
Unchecked by pride or scrupulous doubt,
With friends to greet thee, or without,
 Yet pleased and willing;
Meek, yielding to the occasion's call,
And all things suffering from all,
Thy function apostolical
 In peace fulfilling.

(lines 17-24)

Whatever relevance these "daisy" poems by Wordsworth may or may not have had to Dickinson, it is interesting to note that Wordsworth's daisy shares certain qualities which Dickinson attributes to this flower: "unassuming common-place /Of nature"; "meek"; "less ambitious" than the rose; "meek, yielding to the occasion's call."

The daisy appears in another eight of Dickinson's poems (nearly one third of her "daisy" poems), all of which have something to do with the subject of death, or vanishment and separation, with the suggestion of death. That so many of the "daisy" poems are associated with the theme of death should not surprise us, because, as Johnson and other critics have noted, death "is a theme to which in one degree or another she devoted some five hundred of her poems."⁽¹²⁾ Is it just coincidental that one-third of her poems and one-third of her daisy poems both deal with death? Additionally, this association of the daisy with death reminds us of the English expression, "under the

daisies.”

Poem #28 is about “a Daisy [that has] vanished,” and ends with the line: “Are ye then with God?”

So has a Daisy vanished
From the fields today —
So tiptoed many a slipper
To Paradise away —

Oozed so in crimson bubbles
Day's departing tide —
Blooming — tripping — flowing —
Are ye then with God?

Poems #29 and #54 are specifically about death, but in neither of these poems does the daisy play a central role.

29

If those I loved were lost
The Crier's voice would tell me —
If those I loved were found
The bells of Ghent would ring —

Did those I loved repose
The Daisy would impel me.
Philip — when bewildered
Bore his riddle in!

54

If I should die,
And you should live —
And time should gurgle on —
And morn should beam —
And noon should burn —
As it has usual done —
If Birds should build as early
And Bees as bustling go —
One might depart at option
From enterprise below!
'Tis sweet to know that stocks will stand
When we with Daisies lie —
That Commerce will continue —
And Trades as briskly fly —
It makes the parting tranquil
And keeps the soul serene —
The gentlemen so sprightly
Conduct the pleasing scene!

Quoting the lines, "'Tis sweet to know that stocks will stand / When we with Daisies lie —," Johnson singles out this poem (#54), among Dickinson's "earliest poems concerning death and moments of dying [which] are sentimentally funereal," as one which "is rescued from complete bathos by the kind of whimsy for which too often, one fears, she had been commended." (13)

In Poem #72, the poet seems to suggest that the girl or woman who "cannot speak" despite her "Glowing" "Bonnet," "Cheek," and

"Kirtle," had better "Vanish unrecorded" "as the Daisy / From the Summer hill." It seems that the poet is most interested in the way the girl (and the daisy by association) will be missed by "tearful rill," "loving sunrise," and by "feet unnumbered" once she is gone.

Glowing is her Bonnet,
Glowing is her Cheek,
Glowing is her Kirtle,
Yet she cannot speak.

Better as the Daisy
From the Summer hill
Vanish unrecorded
Save by tearful rill—

Save by loving sunrise
Looking for her face.
Save by feet unnumbered
Pausing at the place.

Poem #96 is concerned with the dead "Master" and the return of spring.

Sexton! My Master's sleeping here.
Pray lead me to his bed!
I came to build the Bird's nest
And sow the Early seed—

That when the snow creeps slowly

From off his chamber door —
Daisies point the way there —
And the Troubadour.

The poet, at the gate of her "Master's" graveyard, asks the sexton to lead her to "his bed." She comes there "to build the Bird's nest" and to "sow the Early seed," so that in time "Daisies point the way there —" and "the Troubadour" (which may be interpreted to be a song-bird) may come to the nest. In this poem, the daisies whose seeds are sown while snow is still on the ground are given a double role. On a literal level, the poem simply says that the poet came to sow the seeds of daisies so that in spring or summer the flowers will bloom and "point the way" to the grave of her master — whoever he may be. On a metaphorical level, daisies may symbolize the spiritual communion between the dead and the living, pointing the way to the place where the master sleeps eternally.

Poem #187 seems to be a rather humorous treatment of someone dead: "Indolent Housewife" lying "in Daisies."

How many times these low feet staggered —
Only the soldered mouth can tell —
Try — can you stir the awful rivet —
Try — can you lift the hasps of steel!

Stroke the cool forehead — hot so often —
Lift — if you care — the listless hair —
Handle the adamantine fingers
Never a thimble — more — shall wear —

Buzz the dull flies — on the chamber window —
 Brave — shines the sun through the freckled pane —
 Fearless — the cobweb swings from the ceiling —
 Indolent Housewife — in Daisies — lain!

Among Dickinson's early poems on death, this poem is considered by one critic "weightier and more original," noted for "a kind of tender irony."⁽¹⁴⁾ In a light-hearted tone, the poet observes the body of a deceased housewife. Her activities in life are brought to memory by various parts of her body, now stiffened in death.

In Poem #1037 the poet imagines her own death, laid to rest "Here, where the Daisies fit my Head."

Here, where the Daisies fit my Head
 'Tis easiest to lie
 And every Grass that plays outside
 Is sorry, some, for me.

Where I am not afraid to go
 I may confide my Flower —
 Who was not Enemy of Me
 Will gentle be, to Her.

Nor separate, Herself and Me
 By Distances become —
 A single Bloom we constitute
 Departed, or at Home —

In this poem the poet sees herself and the daisy “become” “A single Bloom” “Departed, or at Home,” suggesting that both in life and death, she and the flower are one.

Poem #411 talks about a “Grave” that apparently stands in the field.

The Color of the Grave is Green —
The Outer Grave — I mean —
You would not know it from the Field —
Except it own a Stone —

To help the fond — to find it —
Too infinite asleep
To stop and tell them where it is —
But just a Daisy — deep —

The Color of the Grave is white —
The Outer Grave — I mean —
You would not know it from the Drifts —
In Winter — till the Sun —

Has furrowed out the Aisles —
Then higher than the Land
The little Dwelling Houses rise
Where each — has left a friend —

The Color of the Grave within —
The duplicate — I mean —
Not all the Snows could make it white —
Not all the Summers — Green —

You've seen the Color — maybe —
Upon a Bonnet bound —
When that you met it with before —
The Ferret — cannot find —

In this poem “a Daisy” appears suddenly in the second stanza, and in this context, the Daisy is possibly meant to help locate the grave for those unfamiliar with the grave site. Viewed in this light, this “Daisy” may remind us of the “Daisies” in Poem #96 — connecting as they do the living with the dead.

To conclude, there is no single pattern to the use of the daisy in Dickinson's poetry. What we find, instead, are a variety of ways in which she uses this flower. Clearly, Dickinson views the daisy as being humble, low, meek, and modest, the qualities traditionally attributed to it. However, the daisy is never actually *described* as a natural object in her poems. Moreover, none of the poems in which the daisy appears deals with the flower itself as the subject. Even poem #106, which begins with “The Daisy follows soft the Sun,” is not so much about the daisy as about the relationship between it and the sun, about what that relationship stands for. The same thing can be said about the poems in which the rose appears, where none of the 43 poems deals with the flower as the subject.

In this respect, Dickinson's “daisy” poems differ significantly from Wordsworth's three poems addressed to the daisy. In those poems, Wordsworth expresses his tenderness and affection for the flower — for what it is and what it means to him.

Furthermore, more than half of the “daisy” poems belong to

Dickinson's "early" period (1850-1860), according to Johnson's dating of her complete poems, and these "early" poems are generally considered to be of minor significance and of less artistic value. That may explain why only a handful of her "daisy" poems have been selected for critical studies over the decades. If a few daisy poems have gained critical acclaim, it is not so much due to the presence of that flower for its own sake, but because of the subject (such as death or love) of the poem in question, the way the subject is handled, or the originality of the poet's point of view.

Finally, the very fact that there is no clearly discernible pattern in the use of a particular flower, be it the daisy or the rose, in Dickinson's poetry may ultimately point to a fundamental characteristic of her literary art — what James Reeves calls "her idiosyncratic sensibility" ⁽¹⁵⁾ — that is to say, she is free, innovative, and hence unpredictable, sometimes even "whimsical," in nearly all facets of her poetic genius.

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Notes:

- (1) Thomas H. Johnson, ed. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, "Including variant readings critically compared with all known manuscripts," 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1955). The text of the 3-vol. edition, with the variant readings omitted, was published in a single volume in 1960: Thomas H. Johnson, ed. *The Complete Poems of*

Emily Dickinson (Boston: Little, Brown & Co.).

- (2) George F. Whicher, *This Was a Poet: A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), 257-258.
- (3) Whicher, 258.
- (4) Dickinson's poems are identified according to the numbering in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* edited by Johnson.
- (5) Elizabeth A. Petrino, *Emily Dickinson and Her Contemporaries: Women's Verse in America, 1820-1885* (Hanover, NH.: UP of New England, 1998), 153. The remark attributed to Martha Dickinson Bianchi, in an unfinished manuscript from the 1930s.
- (6) Thomas H. Johnson, *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1955), 200.
- (7) Whicher, 259.
- (8) Two letters quoted here are included in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1958). In this edition all the letters are numbered and dates given. The first letter quoted is #233, dated "about 1861," and the second, #248, is dated "early 1862?" However, the dating of Letter #248 is disputed and an earlier date of "early 1861" is suggested in *The Master Letters of Emily Dickinson*, edited by R. W. Franklin (Amherst, Mass.: Amherst College P, 1986), 5-10.
- (9) Petrino suggests that Emily Dickinson sent this lyric to Austin, her brother, about 1859, characterizing him as "Caesar" and herself as a "Daisy." (Petrino, 156)
- (10) See Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *Emily Dickinson* (Reading, Mass.: Perseus Books, 1988), 382, and Petrino, 159-160.
- (11) Johnson, *Emily Dickinson*, 196.
- (12) Robert E. Spiller *et al.*, *Literary History of the United States*, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1974), 910. See also Johnson, *Emily Dickinson*, 203.
- (13) Johnson, *Emily Dickinson*, 208.
- (14) *Literary History of the United States*, 910.

- (15) This comes from James Reeves' brief article entitled "Dickinson, Emily (Elizabeth)" in *American Literature to 1900*, ed. James Vinson (London: The Macmillan Press, 1980), 102.

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