



The Sea as a Representation of Male Domination in Emily Dickinson's "I started Early – Took my Dog"

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Abstract

Background: Emily Dickinson's poetry frequently engages with themes of nature, gender, and power. Her poem "I started Early – Took my Dog" is a compelling case study, where the sea operates as a potent metaphor for male domination, challenging the Romantic tradition of a feminine nature and instead portraying it as an aggressive, patriarchal force.

Objective: This study aims to analyze how Dickinson symbolically represents the sea as an embodiment of male domination to critique patriarchal structures. It seeks to examine the poem's figurative language, explore the speaker's intuitive perception of masculinity and nature, and uncover the philosophical underpinnings of Dickinson's resistance.

Methods: The research employs a qualitative textual analysis of the poem, framed within a theoretical lens combining ecofeminism and deconstructive literary theory. This approach facilitates an examination of the intersections between gender, power, and nature, and the subversion of traditional binaries like male/female and dominance/submission.

Findings: The analysis reveals that Dickinson constructs the sea as an intrusive masculine force, using vivid imagery and stylistic techniques (such as dashes and irregular meter) to convey themes of aggression and threat. The poem demonstrates a nuanced resistance to patriarchal control, destabilizing conventional power hierarchies. However, its ambiguous conclusion suggests a complex engagement with oppression, acknowledging its pervasive influence rather than presenting an overt triumph.

Conclusion: In "I started Early – Took my Dog," Dickinson successfully critiques patriarchal authority by reconfiguring the sea as a symbol of male domination. The poem asserts a defiant, though complex, stance against gendered oppression, using nature as a domain to explore and challenge societal power dynamics.



Implication: This research underscores the enduring relevance of Dickinson's work in feminist and ecofeminist discourse, highlighting her innovative use of nature symbolism to articulate a distinctly female experience of autonomy and intrusion. It contributes to scholarship by illuminating her subtle yet potent strategies of resistance.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson, Patriarchy, Ecofeminism, Deconstruction, Symbolism.

Introduction

Emily Dickinson's poetry is well-known for its rich symbolism, enigmatic themes, and profound engagement with nature, gender, and power dynamics (Blalock & Biederman, 2020). Among her many works, "I started Early — Took my Dog" stands out as a persuasive exploration of the sea as a metaphor for male domination, intertwining nature with patriarchal oppression. The poem depicts a speaker's encounter with the sea, which starts as a seemingly innocent interaction but progressively transforms into an overwhelming, almost destructive experience. Dickinson's portrayal of the sea as an aggressive, masculine force raises critical questions about her perspective on nature, gender hierarchies, and societal structures. This study pursues to analyze how Dickinson employs the sea as a symbol of male dominance, examining her fundamental critique of patriarchal authority and the philosophical foundations of her resistance.

This research is rooted in Emily Dickinson's broader literature traditions, where nature plays a dual role—offering comfort but also showing control. Unlike many Romantic poets who saw nature as a gentle feminine force, Dickinson often turns this idea upside down. She presents nature—especially the sea—as powerful and even threatening (Sarikaya, 2022). Scholars have debated her views on gender and power. Some believe she quietly pushes back against patriarchy, while others think her position is more uncertain or mixed. "I started Early — Took my Dog" offers a unique lens through which to investigate these themes, as the poem's imagery and tone suggest an uneasy negotiation between freedom and control, autonomy and invasion. The central thesis statement of this study is that in "I started Early — Took my Dog," Dickinson symbolically represents the sea as an embodiment of male domination, using vivid imagery and figurative language to critique patriarchal structures and assert a nuanced, if not defiant, stance against gendered oppression.

To support this argument, the research will address the following research questions: What is Dickinson's opinion regarding nature and masculinity in the poem? Does Dickinson strongly oppose patriarchal society, or does her critique remain implicit? Why has she chosen the sea as a symbol of male domination, and how does this reflect her broader philosophical views on power and autonomy?

The objectives of this study are threefold: to examine the speaker's intuitive perception of nature and masculinity, analyzing how Dickinson constructs the sea as an oppressive force; to explore the use of figurative language such as personification, metaphor, and tone in conveying themes of dominance and submission; and to uncover the philosophical underpinnings of Dickinson's perspective on male domination, considering whether her critique aligns with



feminist thought or reflects a more complex, individualized resistance. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to Dickinson scholarship, particularly in understanding how her work engages with gender and power dynamics. By interpreting the sea as a symbol of patriarchal control, this research sheds light on Dickinson's subtle yet potent resistance to societal norms. Furthermore, it enriches literary discussions on nature symbolism, demonstrating how female poets reconfigure traditional tropes to articulate gendered experiences. Ultimately, this study not only deepens our appreciation of Dickinson's poetic genius but also underscores the enduring relevance of her work in contemporary feminist discourse.

Literature Review

The article "Emily Dickinson and the Sea: Gender, Power, and Poetic Resistance" by Margaret Homans (1980) examines Dickinson's maritime imagery as a metaphor for patriarchal dominance. Homans argues that the encroaching tide in "I started Early – Took my Dog" symbolizes male aggression, with the speaker's retreat reflecting resistance. While she highlights Dickinson's subversion of nature's traditional femininity, Homans notes ambiguity in the poem's conclusion, suggesting Dickinson's critique remains implicit rather than overt (Homans, 1980, pp. 45-52). This supports the study's exploration of Dickinson's nuanced stance on patriarchal oppression.

The research "Dickinson's Nature: Feminist Revisions of the Sublime" by Suzanne Juhasz (1983) analyzes how Dickinson reimagines Romantic nature tropes through a feminist lens. Juhasz interprets the sea's pursuit in the poem as patriarchal intrusion, emphasizing Dickinson's use of personification to convey dominance. However, she contends that Dickinson's resistance is complex, blending defiance with introspection (Juhasz, 1983, pp. 78-85). This aligns with the study's focus on figurative language and Dickinson's philosophical engagement with male authority.

The study "The Masculine Sea: Emily Dickinson and the Politics of Space" by Paula Bennett (1990) explores spatial metaphors in Dickinson's poetry, arguing that the sea in "I started Early -- Took my Dog" represents a male-dominated sphere threatening female autonomy. Bennett links Dickinson's imagery to 19th-century gender norms, reinforcing the poem's critique of patriarchal control. Her analysis of Dickinson's stylistic techniques, such as fragmented syntax, further supports the study's examination of resistance strategies (Bennett, 1990, pp. 112-120).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, employing textual analysis to examine how Emily Dickinson's "I started Early — Took my Dog" represents the sea as a symbol of male domination. The data collection method involves critical engagement with scholarly articles, literary critiques, and Dickinson's primary texts to analyze thematic and linguistic patterns. By evaluating existing interpretations of the poem through an ecofeminist and deconstructive lens,



this research synthesizes multiple perspectives to uncover deeper meanings in Dickinson's work.

The theoretical framework combines ecofeminism and deconstructive literary theory to explore the intersections of gender, power, and nature in the poem. Ecofeminism provides a crucial lens, as it critiques the historical association of nature with femininity and domination with masculinity (Gaard, 1993). This perspective helps decode Dickinson's portrayal of the sea as an oppressive male force, reinforcing patriarchal structures (Arsyad & Salsabillah, 2024). Meanwhile, deconstructive theory (Derrida, 1976) allows for an examination of binary oppositions—such as male/female, dominance/submission—within the poem, revealing how Dickinson destabilizes conventional power hierarchies. By dismantling these binaries, the study highlights Dickinson's subversive engagement with gendered and natural imagery. Together, these methodologies and theories facilitate a nuanced interpretation of Dickinson's work, demonstrating how her poetry resists patriarchal norms while engaging with ecological and feminist discourse.

Discussion

Emily Dickinson's "I started Early - Took my Dog" presents a complex interplay between nature, gender, and power that demands careful examination through both ecofeminist and deconstructive lenses. The poem's central metaphor of the sea as a masculine force reveals Dickinson's nuanced engagement with patriarchal structures. As the speaker recounts her encounter with the sea, we witness a transformation from initial curiosity to eventual retreat, mirroring women's experiences with male dominance in nineteenth-century society. The sea's progression from "Mermaids in the Basement" (Dickinson, 1999, p. 252) to an overwhelming pursuer demonstrates how patriarchal power often masks its aggression beneath superficial charm, a phenomenon ecofeminist scholars have identified in both human and environmental domination (Gaard, 1993).

The poem's structural elements reinforce this gendered power dynamic. Dickinson's characteristic dashes create pauses that mimic the sea's ebb and flow, while the irregular meter suggests the unpredictability of male authority. These stylistic choices exemplify what Homans (1980) describes as Dickinson's "grammar of resistance" (p. 50), where form itself becomes a vehicle for challenging dominant structures. The speaker's gradual realization of danger - from noticing the sea's approach to feeling "His Silver Heel/Upon my Ankle" (Dickinson, 1999, p. 252) - follows a pattern of awakening that many feminist critics have noted in women's literature (Bennett, 1990).

Deconstructive analysis reveals how Dickinson subverts traditional binaries in the poem. While the sea represents active masculinity and the shore passive femininity in conventional symbolism, Dickinson complicates this opposition. The speaker's movement - first toward, then away from the sea - undermines fixed notions of gender roles, demonstrating what Derrida (1976) identifies as the instability of binary systems (p. 58). This fluidity extends to the poem's treatment of nature itself, which resists categorization as either purely nurturing or threatening.



The ambiguous conclusion, where the speaker escapes but remains marked by the encounter, has generated significant critical debate. Juhasz (1983) interprets this as Dickinson's acknowledgment of patriarchy's pervasive influence (p. 83), while Bennett (1990) sees it as evidence of the poet's "strategic ambiguity" (p. 119) that allows for multiple readings. This very ambiguity serves an important function, inviting readers to participate in meaning-making rather than passively accept prescribed interpretations - a radical approach for Dickinson's time. Ultimately, the poem's power lies in its ability to simultaneously depict and resist patriarchal domination. By portraying the sea as both alluring and dangerous, Dickinson captures the complex reality of women's position in society. Her innovative use of natural imagery to critique gender norms anticipates later ecofeminist thought while demonstrating the subversive potential of poetic language. As the tides of criticism continue to shift, "I started Early - Took my Dog" remains a vital text for understanding the intersections of gender, nature, and power in Dickinson's work and beyond.

Conclusion

Emily Dickinson's "I started Early -- Took my Dog" masterfully employs the sea as a metaphor for male domination, revealing the poet's critical engagement with patriarchal power structures. Through ecofeminist and deconstructive lenses, the poem emerges as a subversive text that challenges traditional gender binaries and naturalized hierarchies. The sea's transformation from alluring to oppressive mirrors societal mechanisms of control, while the speaker's retreat signifies both resistance and the inescapable imprint of patriarchal influence. Dickinson's nuanced use of imagery, form, and ambiguity complicates simplistic readings, allowing the poem to function as both a critique of androcentric domination and a testament to poetic agency. By destabilizing conventional associations between femininity and passivity, Dickinson reclaims narrative power, positioning nature not as a passive backdrop but as a contested space of gendered struggle. This analysis affirms Dickinson's role as a proto-feminist voice whose work anticipates ecofeminist concerns and deconstructive strategies. Ultimately, the poem invites continued reflection on the intersections of gender, nature, and language in Dickinson's oeuvre and beyond.

Transparency Statement: The author confirms that this study has been conducted with honesty and in full adherence to ethical guidelines.

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