CHAPTER III

Emily Dickinson's Stylistic Strategies

Emily Dickinson's poetic sensibility, even during her early and impressionable years of her poetic career, exhibits a new awareness of form and meaning. Her poetic sensibility does not conform to the cult of sentiment of her day to create a parallel literature of sentiment. Contrary to it, she harnesses it to the creation of a poetry of non-sentiment.

Emily Dickinson's initial attempt to establish herself as a poet, failed simply because Higginson could not classify the four poems she sent him for his approval. In 1891 Higginson wrote an article describing this early correspondence.

"The impression of a wholly new and original poetic genius: was as distinct on my mind at the first reading of these four poems as it is now after thirty years of further knowledge, and with it came the problem never yet solved, what place ought to be assigned in literature to what is so remarkable, yet so elusive of criticism".

The article "Experiments in poetry : Emily Dickinson and Sidney Lanier",1 traces the influence of contemporary events in America upon poetry. It further states that by the year 1870, America underwent the tumu-

-ltoes phase of the shattering war between the North and South, simultaneously with the advent of new science and new industrialism. The result was that all the poets sensed the moral problems posed by the new science. The article points out to Lanier's "Psalm of West", as celebrating the national spectacle. It rounds up by picking up on Emily Dickinson and Lanier among the few poets who "had begun to recognize the power of fresh realistic material communicated by blunt, experimental methods ....... This conflict between the new realism and the old conservatism, encouraged experiment by a few poets such as Dickinson and Lanier - experiments with new attitude and techniques which were still contained within the straining Old patterns". 2

To say that Emily Dickinson experimented with new techniques would be too far fetched an opinion for a person who admits, "I don't know anything more about affairs in the world, than if I was in a trance". She was capable of shutting out all distractions from her life and living a cloistered life with her 'Bees' and 'Bobolinks'. Emily Dickinson seemed blissfully unaware of the world around her. Whether the war made any impact on her remains an uncertainty, for nowhere in her poems she mentions it. Her grand theme is, life as it is involved in her life, and she declines to take the other option -her soul. Only because she knew her own world so well, would she venture to meditate other worlds.

What Emily Dickinson felt and thought took

2. Ibid P. 899.
shape in a spontaneous array of images, words, and symbols. Hers was not a conscious effort to establish a new form and technique in the field of poetry. The force behind her new stylistic strategies lay within her and not outside her. John Lynen's remark that "She stands apart, as indifferent to the literary movements of her day as to its great event," strongly substantiate this point.

Emily Dickinson wrote in her extraordinary diction, her imagery is tremendous in implication, her swift condensations win the most reluctant. The paradox that forms the pivotal point in her life is her deeply religious nature, refuting the doctrinal aspect of Christianity. It is the mythopoeic imagination of Emily Dickinson which creates for her religion "of a heightened consciousness based, not on the arguments, but on suggestive images which she calls "the Emblem". The metaphor symbols, images, that she employs to convey that experience are emblems in her poetry ...."  

Her Use of metaphor is the most revelatory aspect of her genius, and so her letters and poems defy literalness in interpretation. In the words of Dennis Donoghue,  

"with Emily Dickinson's poem in view, it is only a minor extravagance to say that nearly everything is sensibility".  

3. Lynen, p.126.  
An analysis of a few of her symbols in her poems will bear out this statement. The imagery that contained for Emily Dickinson a special symbolic meaning is that of royalty, particularly the image of 'king'. In the poem "I have a king who does not speak" (J. 103), 'king' is made out to be a lover. His silence evokes certain reaction in the mind of the narrator. The king is also the narrator's source of inspiration, a guide to the poet's genius. Since the silent king cannot inspire the poet through words, the poet awaits the night, when the latter may confront with dreams of inspiration.

"......Half glad when it is night, and sleep,
If, haply thro' a dream, to peep
In parlors, shut by day.
And if I do - when morning comes -
It is as if a hundred drums
Did round my pillow roll,
And shouts fill all my childish sky,.
and bells keep saying "victory"
From steeple in my soul;"
And if I don't - the little bird
within the orchard, is not heard,
And I omit to pray
"Father, thy will be done" today
For my will goes the other way,
And it were perjury;"

(J. 103)

The symbolic narration in the poem is far from the conventional mode. The 'parlor' image is attributed with different meanings in different poems. In the above
quoted poem 'parlor' is the source of inspiration for the poet. During the day the 'parlor' is too noisy to allow the mind access to inspiration, and so the suitable time is the night when sleep comes with dreamy enchantment.

In the poem "The day came slow - till Five O' clock", parlor is used to mean daylight: "A guest in this stupendous place - The parlor - of the day." (St.iv,1. 1,3,4.) presents a literal usage.

Parlor gains a sinister colour in the poem "The grave my little cottage is" (J. 1743). Here 'parlor' is a place for receiving the dead ones.

Another important word in Emily Dickinson's poems is "victory". In the poem "Delayed till she had ceased to know", stresses the meaning of lifes triumph over death.

".... who knows but this surrendered face were undefeated still?  
Oh if there may departing be  
Any forgot by victory  
In her imperial round -  
Show them this meek appareled thing  
That could not stop to be a king -  
Doubtful if it be crowned;"

(J.58. St.II., 1.1,5,6, and St.III)

The poem "Triumph may be of several kinds" - (J. 455) enumerates 'Triumph' in varied stages, as when "Death is overcome by Faith", 'Triumph of Truth' in the 'Mind'; and 'Triumph' over 'Temptation'.

"Triumph - may be of several kinds -
There's triumph in the Room
When the Old Imperator - Death -
By Faith - be overcome -

There's Triumph of the finer Mind
When Truth - affronted long -
Advance unmoved - to Her Supreme -
Her God - Her only Throng -

A Triumph - when Temptation's Bride
Be slowly handed back -
One Eye upon the Heaven renounced -
And One - upon the Rack -

Severer triumph - by Himself
Experienced - who pass
Acquitted - from that Naked Bar -
Jehovah's countenance - ".

In a few other poems (J.42,67,690) Emily Dickinson uses the word 'Victory' in its most common place meaning.

Emily Dickinson's symbols are founded on a wide and reversible elasticity of meaning. Any attempt to confine the meanings to a single subject ruling out probability of other subjects would amount to inconsistency.
The following poem illustrates the point -
"I met a king this afternoon;
He had not on a crown indeed,
A little palm leaf hat was all,
And he was barefoot, I'm afraid;

But sure I am he Ermine wore,
Beneath this faded jacket's blue -
And sure I am, the crest he bore
Within the jacket's pocket too;"
For 'twas too stately for an earl -
A Marquis would not go so grand;
'Twas possibly a Czar petite -
Pope or something of that kind;

If I must tell, you, of a horse
My freckled Monarch held the rein -
Doubtless an estimable Beast,
But not at all disposed to run;

And such a wagon; While I live
Dare I presume to see
Another such a vehicle
As then transported me;
Two other ragged Princes
His royal state partook;
Doubtless the first excursion
These sovereigns ever took;
I question if the Royal Coach
She explains the 'Barefoot Estate' as Emily Dickinson "conception of the unique quality of her poetry".\textsuperscript{7}

According to Miller the poem is "a dramatic rendering of the nature of her verse. How sure she is of the unique quality of her poetry. How indifferent to the gait of the horse, but not the wagon . . . one can enjoy her private assessment of editors, those ragged princes of their first excursion into such poetry as hers."\textsuperscript{8}

Theodora Ward reads 'king' as the symbol for a living person who "held God like potentialities."\textsuperscript{9}

But the outer analogue of Sts. iv.v and vi, and the mock-serious vein of the entire poem, makes it difficult to attribute to the king symbol 'God like potentialities'.

James Reeves comments: "The king is usually her lost lover, husband, master, the queen is herself".\textsuperscript{10} This reflection is based on very narrow and exclusive grounds.

The two poems illustrated that Emily Dickinson's use of the 'king' symbolism is much more varied than what James Reeves states.

Another fully exploited symbol of Emily Dickinson is the flower - bee imagery. In her first valentine

\textsuperscript{7}Ruth Miller, \textit{The Poetry of Emily Dickinson} (Middletown: Western University Press, 1968, Pg.104)
\textsuperscript{8}Ibid (Pg. 106)
\textsuperscript{9}Theodora Ward - \textit{The Capsule of the Mind : Chapters in the Life of Emily Dickinson} (Cambridge, Mass : Harvard University Press - 1961. Pg.50)
\textsuperscript{10}James Reeves, "Emily Dickinson". \textit{Commitment to Poetry} (London : Heinemann, 1969 P.198).
Round which the Footmen wait  
Has the significance, on high,  
Of his Barefoot Estate. (J.166)

The 'king' in the poem, and the usual image of a royal personage provides for the paradox in the poem, and helps in the identification of the idiosyncrasies of the royal being. The poem opens with the startling description of the king wearing a "Little Palm-leaf Hat" instead of a crown. He is 'barefoot' too. The third stanza highlights the difficulty in precisely identifying the royal state of the 'king'. A connection between the 'Barefoot Estate' of the poem and the 'Barefoot Rank' mentioned in her (Emily Dickinson's) letter to Higginson, is not improbable. In the third letter written to Higginson after she accepted her destiny as an artist who in her life time would remain unknown, she goes on to say -

"... If fame belonged to me, I could not not escape her-if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase -and the approbation of my Dog, would forsake me -then. My Barefoot -Rank is better . . . .". 6

Ruth Miller associates the imagery of 'Barefoot Estate' in the poem to the 'Barefoot Ranks' of the letter.

of 1850 the reference is there of -

"The bee doth court the flower, the flower
his suit receives
And they make merry wedding, whose guests
Are hundred leaves," (J. 1)

As a student of Botany Emily Dickinson took keen interest in the facts of science which she used later for the symbolic purpose of her art.

Emily Dickinson used the flower-bee symbolism on two levels: Poetry and Love.

On the level of poetry Emily Dickinson equates the Bee to a hummer-poet.

Like the nectar of the Hippocrene that inspired the muse so does the nectar of the flowers inspire the hummer-poet.

This association, of the humming of the Bees with poetry is also found in Keats and Emerson.

Keats in his 'Endymion' writes -

"Many and many a verse I hope to write
... and ere yet the bees
Hum about globes of clover and sweet peas
I must be near the middle of my story."

(Endymion Bk I, L.1.49,51 - 53)

Emerson also described the Humming Bees thus:

"Burly, dozing humble bee,
Where thou art is clime for me
--- --- --- ---
Zig zag steerer desert cheerer,
Let me chase thy waving line,
--- --- --- --- ---
Singing over shurbs and vines
Hot midsummer's petted crone,
Sweet to me thy drowsy tone
Tells of countless sunny hours,
Long days, and solid banks of flowers",
("The Humble - Bee", sts. I, IV)

On the level of love, the flower-bee symbolism
stands for earthly love. The imaginative texture of
Emily Dickinson's poems on love intermingles with the
scientific fact of pollination of flowers and the collection
of honey-dew by the bee, to colour its meaning and shape
its design.

"Come slowly - Eden!
Lips unused to Thee -
Bashful - sip thy Jessamines -
As the fainting Bee -
Reaching late his flower,
Round her chamber hums -
Counts his nectars -
Enter - and is lost in Balms ".

(J. 211)

That the 'Eden' image for Emily Dickinson had two levels
of meaning can be illustrated by an analysis of the follow­
ing poem -

"Paradise is that old mansion
Many owned before
Occupied by each an instant
Then reversed the Door -
Bliss is frugal of her leases
Adam taught her thrift
Bankrupt once through his excesses" - (J.1119)

In the former poem (J.211) 'Eden' most appropriately stands for the state of physical love. The latter poem (J.1119) projects the image of the garden of Eden. Physical love is here equated to the primal experience in the garden of Eden, mainly in its short duration and abrupt ending.

In the poem (J. 211) 'Bashful' suggests the moment of hesitancy and torment, felt just on the verge of total surrender to the bliss of love. The Bee 'counts' his nectars and 'enters' the flower "and is lost in Balms" - suggests the sensuously over-powering effect of "Jessamines". The same rapacious advance of the lover bee is found in "Did the Hareball loose her girdle" (J. 213).

The ecstasy of consummated love (as imagined by the poet) signified by 'Eden' is well expressed in the poem (J.249).

"Wild Nights - Wild Nights!
Were I with thee
Wild Nights, should be
   Our luxury!
Futile - the winds -
To a Heart in port
Done with the compass -
Done with the chart!

Rowing in Eden -
Ah, the sea!
Might I but Moor - Tonight
In Thee!

In its obvious meaning the poem is a longing for sensuous consummation of love instilled with the awareness of its brevity. When the heart finds its harbour of love, - 'port', the tumult of its wild passion cannot be subdued by the tumult of the winds outside the port.

The fact that Emily Dickinson took a keen interest in contemporary women writers especially the Bronte's, George Eliot and Elizabeth Browning, helps in establishing a connection of the Flower-Bee symbolism between Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Browning.

In "A Dead Rose", Elizabeth Browning makes a distinct allusion to the amorous function of the bee:

"The bee that once did suck thee
And build thy perfumed ambers up his hive,
And swoon in thee for joy, till scarce alive,
If passing now, - would blindly overlook thee'.

Marjory A. Bald's opinion that Emily Dickinson found in Elizabeth Browning a Poetic model and she turned to her instinctly, does not seem totally irrelevant.

The word 'home' has become an archetypal symbol in Emily Dickinson's religious poetry. 'home' is used by her variantly to mean immortality, God and Heaven.

Her three poems, "The feet of People Walking

In the first poem, (J.7) Emily Dickinson's approach to immortality is markedly within the framework of Christianity—

"Death, but our rapt attention
To immortality." (J.7 St.II.L.17 - 8)

The 'Crocus' in st.I, line three, symbolizes resurrection. Crocus is an early spring flower that lie dead under bed of wintry snow, only to bloom again with the coming of spring. The third stanza—

"My figures fail to tell me
How far the village lies—
Whose peasants are the Angels—
Whose cantons dot the skies—" (J.7)

established the expanse of the 'village'- the Heaven — which is unfathomable by mortal beings. The poem conclude with the adoration of "that Dark", and the concept of resurrection being introduced again.

In the poem 'Tho' I get home how late - How Late-, the narrator is imagining how "transporting that moment (J.207 st.I L.7) will be, a moment which is "brewed from decades of Agony!" (st. I. L-8, J.207) when she will reach 'home'. Her arrival will be delayed but the very fact that she will reach home will compensate for her belated arrival. The narrator in her consciousness, imagines the moment of 'Ecstasy' when in the "descending dumb and dark" (st.I L.5) night she will reach home and the inhabitants of the house will await her arrival expect-
antly. The remarkable point of the poem is that the poet is going forward on an endless journey which may take centuries but she is very optimistic about the journey.

The first two stanzas of the poem "I years Had been From Home", (J.609) Depicts the fear and doubt of the narrator. The narrator was away from home for a long period, and now when she is finally back she is doubtful of the welcome she will receive.

"I dared not enter, lest a Face I never saw before (J.609,st.I,L.3-4) Stare stolid into mine And ask my business there - "My business but a life I left Was such remaining there ?" (J.609 St.II)

With the third stanza ambiguity enters the poem in both tone and imagery.

The confident person is seen here leaning ".....upon the Awe/I lingered with before". (J.609 St.III, L.1-2) 'Awe' is Emily Dickinson's term for God. The third and fourth lines of the third stanza are made up of abstract images and complex symbols.

"The second line an ocean rolled And broke against my ear" (J.609)

The technique of paradox employed here is very evident. The 'second' - the smallest unit of time passed like a ocean "and broke against" the narrator's ear. Probably the narrator underwent some kind of fleeting experience which shook her deeply. So greatly was she
affected that it transformed her into a confident person again; and we see her in the fourth stanza laughing away her fears. Towards the closure of the poem the narrator had gathered enough mental strength to touch the "Latch ....with trembling care". But soon the mood changes into fear lest the door opens with calamity for the narrator. Finally darkness and fear over come her and the poem concludes with the narrator defeated and fleeing. The poem presents a religious theme but without the sentiment of sanctity, remorse, prayer or apology. In fact the narrator though terrorised is never seen engaged in remorse or prayer.

"The conventional notions of Emily Dickinson's day were that poetry should be close to prose in its grammar and syntax, and that its vocabulary should be more refined than that of ordinary speech...."

"But Emily Dickinson flouts both convention."\(^{12}\)

Emily Dickinson's primary concern was for the faithful portrayal of her inner feelings and concepts. She sacrificed grammar for it in her poems. Her adherence to grammatical rules in her poems, is hardly discernible. The following poem will illustrate the point.

" An anti quated trace
Is cherished of the crow
Because that Junior Foliage is
disrespectful now
To venerable Birds
Whose corporation coat
Would decorate oblivious
Remotest consulate". (J.1514)

Similarly, Emily Dickinson is indifferent to the rule that grass or hay has no singular form. To the horror of critics like Higginson she wrote:

"The Grass so little has to do
I wish I were a hay " (J.333, st.V L 3-4)

The most baffling and enchanting nature of Emily Dickinson's art is the ambiguity with which she coats her poems. Most certainly, her life as we experience it in much of her poetry, was strife-torn because of "the honest duplicity with which Emily Dickinson faced her puritan background". She named this duplicity "compound vision".

Critics have traced the ambiguity in her poetry to this "compound vision", An analysis of Emily Dickinson can only reveal our inability to clarify the ambiguist in her. The position is deliberate enough in her and we can assume that she understood on some level the logic of the convention she helped to establish in American literature. While creating her ambiguity Emily Dickinson is not interested in the reader's multiple and divergent readings of her work so much as in her divergent and multiple reading of the universe and world.

13. Keller, P.125
Her interest is not in deliberately blurring and muddling her thoughts for the sake of abstraction or wit, so much as in putting down in black and white the blur and muddle in her mind. For her ambiguity "represents not a polarized imagination or conceptual antithesis but instead, the ability to synthesize and suspend." It is not just the simple antithesis or paradox, it took the rhetorical form in her writing in the oxymoron.

Oxymoron became as Karl Keller put in:

"a balanced contradiction opposed to resolution, a juxta position of contradictory terms of equal rank and emphasis." 14

The oxymoron as a linguistic feature of ambiguity in the work of Emily Dickinson evades logical conclusion and as such receives a reductive proportion. The result is the fragmentary equality of her poems as may be the illustrated by the following lines -

"A still volcano - life ---
A quiet - Earthquake style -
The solemn - Torrid - Symbol ---- " (J. 601)

For Emily Dickinson, who expostulated that "Faith is Doubt", the concept of ambiguity had its source in her religious dilemma. So God is simultaneously "Burglar! (and) Banker ". (J. 49)

14. Ibid. P. 129
15. Ibid. P. 129
Her repertoire reveals a mind who believed in telling the truth "but to tell it slant" -
"An Necromancy Sweet :" (J. 127)
"Delight despair at setting ....(J. 1299)
"Crisis is sweet" (J.1416)
"Safe despair it is that raves ...(J.1243)
"How ruthless are the gentle". (J.1439)
"Anecdotes of air in Dungeons
Here sometimes proved deadly sweet :" (J.119)
Emily Dickinson's interest in the inherent ambiguity of words themselves is a very modern aspect of her writing.
The word modern is a very elusive and relative term - it escapes final definition. Yet it is generally conceded that with the advent of Mark Twain, Herman Melville and Walt Whitman, American literature became modern.

Whitman wrote about America and Democracy. Whitman was himself a condition that he called "America". So he has been considered a national poet, the spokesman of his age.

Away from the limelight enjoyed by the celebrity Walt Whitman, stowed away in a small town was Emily Dickinson, an equally important poet of unique qualities. Walt Whitman appeared on the American literary scene in the role of Messiah.
Emily Dickinson struggled with her private self, with the baffling questions of her soul.
An analysis of both the poets will establish the fact that both Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson shared a close affinity in their use of stylistic strategies in their art, the former was acknowledged and appreciated because he declared he wrote for a nation; the latter unknown and neglected because she chose to be a private poet.

Walt Whitman's modernism is reflected in his way of thinking which certainly was different from his age, he thought ahead of his time. His *Leaves of Grass* is an exquisite display of free verse, reflecting in its flowing lines the theme of liberty basic to the book. The easily discernible factor in the *Leaves of Grass* is the bond between the freedom he discovered in himself and his country, expressed in free and easy poetic diction.

It has been a difficult job for critics to decide the particular niche to which Walt Whitman belong. To him has been simultaneously assigned the titles of poet of sex, poet of religion, poet of democracy, poet of mysticism. It is astonishing that Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* can be quoted to support any of these epithets. Whitman himself acknowledges this multiplicity when he remarks -

"Do I contradict myself?
Very well than I contradict myself
(I am large, I contain multitudes").

*(Song of Myself)*
Way back in 1891 Higginson had to face the same difficulty while classifying Emily Dickinson's poems, and he admits that even after the passage of thirty years, he was not in a better position to reach at a satisfying answer. Emily Dickinson still evades all criticism because she too is "large", and "contains multitudes". However there is a basic difference between the two poets. Though outwardly Whitman could easily embrace contradictions he was ruthless in his consistency with the self. The vision in Whitman that remained constant was of the inviolate self. The opening line of "Leaves of Grass" expresses it plainly -

"Ones' - self I sing, a simple separate person".

Emily Dickinson's life as we see reflected in much of her poetry was strife - torn, revolving round the contradiction between 'Faith' and 'Doubt'. So the ambiguity in her poems.

Through her unique style, Emily Dickinson turns away from the traditional concept of poetry because only by doing so, could she express fully the visions of a mind which did not "conform" - and stood "apart" from her generation.