

## STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE POEM “I DWELL IN POSSIBILITY” BY EMILY DICKINSON

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**Abstract:** *This paper presents the stylistic analysis of the American poet Emily Dickinson's poem “I dwell in Possibility” at various levels of analysis: phonological, graphological, grammatical, lexical and semantic. The analysis shows how the style used complements its theme and contributes to the overall meaning and effect of the poem. Our stylistic analysis has also helped to uncover deeper insights of the poem and shows that style and content are equally important for understanding the complete essence of a literary work.*

**Keywords:** *Emily Dickinson, experimentation, linguistics, poetry, style, stylistic analysis*

### 1. Introduction

Stylistic analysis, a field closely associated with linguistics, has emerged as a valuable tool in contemporary literary studies. It has its roots in the early 20th century formalist school of literary criticism that emerged in Russia (Jeffries and McIntyre 2010: 1). It acts as a link between literary criticism and linguistics and is important for interpreting and teaching literary works (Widdowson 2013: 3). Widdowson (ibid.) defines stylistics as a reading strategy for literature, where the study of literary texts is undertaken from a linguistic perspective. Stylistics makes use of a close-reading strategy to analyse the formal features and linguistic techniques of a text and to show how substantial they are in interpreting the meaning of the text (Wales 2011: 400).

Hence stylistic analysis is an objective and systematic method of interpreting a text by analysing the linguistic elements it contains. Usually, when we read a literary work, our focus will be on what meaning is conveyed by it. In stylistic analysis, the focus is shifted to how the meaning is conveyed by using language in the text. A style that is most apt and suitable should complement and embellish the content of the work. The analysis of the distinct style and language of a work helps one to read between the lines and get to the deeper layers of meaning, which would otherwise not be possible. In line with this, Carter (2014: 5) states that stylistic analysis is relevant for teaching literature, as it helps to foster “interpretative skills and to encourage reading between the lines”.

Many literary writers carefully craft their ideas in a style that goes hand in hand with the content of their work. Emily Dickinson is one such poet, who is known for her unique style and unconventional linguistic experimentation. Her experimental tenor is reflected in the lines of one of her last poems, where she says “Experiment

escorts us last” (Dickinson 1999a). She radically manipulated the conventions of form, sound, meter, and syntax in her poetry (Steger 1977, Miller 2007). Most of her poems make use of experimental techniques - like symbolism, juxtaposition, unusual punctuations, paradox, metaphors, and metonymy (Hagenbüchle 1993). Her terse poetic language is rich with multiple connotative possibilities (Thackrey 1954). She is considered as “one of the most powerful and innovative formalists in American literary canon” (Dickinson 1996). She crafts the form of her poems in such a way that, together with their content, it enhances and shapes the meaning of her poems (Dickinson 1996: 3). In other words, both the style and content are equally important in conveying her poems’ full meaning and intent.

Dickinson’s poem “I dwell in Possibility” (given in annex A) is one such poem that employs stylistic elements that complement the subject matter. The poem itself is an example of meta-poetry and with the help of the extended metaphor of the house, Dickinson juxtaposes the concept of poetry and prose. While the house of poetry stands for freedom and liberation, the house of prose denotes constraints and limitation (Wohlpert 2001: 64). This dichotomy at the level of subject matter (prose versus poetry) is also supplemented by using contrasting stylistic elements in the poem. By writing a poem about poetry itself, she argues about the potential and freedom available in poetry and establishes that it is superior to any other form of writing. This poem has been interpreted by readers as her defense of poetry as well as a “boastful celebration of her unorthodox form, grammar, and syntax” (Schoerke 2016: 495).

## 2. Research objectives

The way in which the poem “I dwell in Possibility” is crafted stylistically complements and enhances its theme and content. Most existing analyses of this poem either focus on thematic interpretations or examine only certain stylistic features in isolation. Specifically, no previous analysis has utilized a comprehensive multilevel linguistic framework, encompassing phonology, graphology, grammar, lexis, and semantics, to explore the nuanced stylistic elements and how the elements at these levels interact to convey meaning. Furthermore, previous studies on this poem have not given in-depth attention to subtle stylistic elements, such as the significance of capitalization, full stops, dashes, sound patterns and visual structure, which this study aims to address comprehensively. The study thus gives an integrated stylistic analysis that not only illuminates the linguistic intricacies of Dickinson’s poem, but also demonstrates the inseparability of style and content. Keeping this in mind, the objective of this paper is to:

- i) analyse the nuanced stylistic elements used by Dickinson in this poem and discuss their significance
- ii) show that the peculiar style used by Dickinson complements and contributes to the content of her poem
- iii) show that stylistic analysis helps to discern the deeper meaning of a literary text.

### 3. Methodology

The stylistic analysis is done at the five major levels of language, as suggested by Paul Simpson (2014: 5). The five levels of language at which the poem is analysed include:

- i) the phonological level, where we study the sounds employed in a literary work, including aspects like pronunciation, rhyme scheme, consonance, alliteration, assonance, and other devices.
- ii) the graphological level: we shall look into the patterns of written language, including aspects like capitalization, spelling, structure, and punctuation in a work.
- iii) the grammatical level: we shall look into how words combine to form phrases and sentences and how they function in a sequence.
- iv) the lexical level: we shall analyse the vocabulary, particularly the words chosen in the poem.
- v) the semantic level: we shall pay attention to the meaning of words, phrases and sentences, to the literary and figurative language employed.

### 4. Results

The results of our stylistic analysis of Emily Dickinson's poem "I dwell in Possibility" are given in what follows.

#### 4.1 The lexical level

The lexical level of analysis focuses on the choice and usage of words in a text. The majority of the open-class words in the poem are nouns, which are listed in Table 1.

Nouns	
Possibility (L1)	Eye (L6)
House (L2)	Roof (L7)
Prose (L2)	Gambrels (L8)
Windows (L4)	Sky (L8)
Door (L4)	Visitors (L9)
Chambers (L5)	Occupation (L10)
Cedars (L5)	Hands (L11)
	Paradise (L12)

**Table 1.** A list of nouns used in the poem

Some of these nouns can be divided into concrete nouns related to a house and as abstract nouns.

Concrete nouns related to a house	Abstract nouns
Window (L4) Door (L4) Roof (L7) Chambers (L5) Gambrels (L8)	Possibility (L1) Prose (L2) Occupation (L10)

**Table 2.** Classification of nouns into concrete nouns related to a house and abstract nouns

In Table 2, it can be noted that there are several concrete nouns used in the poem which refer to physical objects that are parts of a house. The poem conveys the features of abstract concepts (given in table 2) such as prose, poetry (referred to as “possibility”), and the poet’s occupation, by connecting them to the more tangible elements, like the parts of a house (given in table 2). For instance, the poet describes poetry as a house with more windows and doors, along with an everlasting roof, than the house of prose. By referencing the concrete parts of a house, such as “doors” and “windows”, the poet illustrates the abstract features of poetry, emphasizing its openness, freedom, experimentation and interpretive possibilities, in contrast to prose, which is more confined, structured, and less open to interpretation. Thus, through the extended metaphor of two distinct houses with different features, the poet tries to juxtapose the features of these two genres of writing. The nouns used can also be classified in a different way, as in Table 3.

Nouns related to house	Nouns related to nature and the divine
Windows (L4) Door (L4) Chambers (L5) Roof (L7) Gambrels (L8)	Cedars (L5) Sky (L8) Paradise (L12)

**Table 3.** Alternative classification of nouns

In Table 3, we see that the nouns used are mostly related to parts of a house and this creates a homely atmosphere. It suggests that for Dickinson, poetry is akin to her own home, a place that gives her shelter, solace, and freedom. It is a place of security and refuge for her (Herd 2022). Further, the vocabulary chosen also suggests that poetry is closely tied with nature and connected to the divine. The poet’s house of poetry is made of cedars. Cedar was considered to be sacred, strong, and durable and was used to make ancient temples and palaces. It is believed that even Solomon’s temple and palace were made of cedar and there are many references to the tree in the holy bible (1 Kings 4:33, King James Version; Isaiah 60:13; Leviticus 14:4). By bringing in the image of the cedar, the poet-qualifies poetry as having a superior quality and divine essence. Also, the unlimited potential and immortality of poetry are highlighted by linking it to words related to the vast nature, with its huge trees and endless sky. By linking poetry to nature, she means that “poetry arises from nature and creates freedom and liberation” (Wohlpert 2001: 64). Poetry gives the poet the agency to move beyond her finite, limited space to the realm of infinite imagination and possibilities, which is suggested by the words “sky” and “paradise”- poetry gave her the wings to touch the sky and experience the bliss of paradise.

Further, the lexical chain relating to the uniqueness of the house of poetry is *fairer* (Line 2), *numerous* (L3), *superior* (L4), *everlasting* (L7), *sky* (L8), *spreading* (L11) and *gather paradise* (L12). These words, in turn, suggest the multiple interpretations, perspectives and potentials of poetry, when compared to the more limited, less digressive, and restricted prose. To highlight this, the poet has deliberately used the word “possibility” instead of *poetry* to show its unrestricted

and endless potential. For her, prose is associated with restrictiveness, while poetry is the realm of “possibility” (Raab 1998: 290).

Moreover, the lexical chain related to the readers of poetry is limited to *visitors* (L9) and *fairest* (L9). The “visitors” of the house are used as a metaphor for readers of poetry. By addressing them as the “fairest”, she means that the genuine readers of poetry are those who judge poetry fairly without prejudices. Also, the only word that is repeated in the poem is the word “fair” in its comparative and superlative forms. It is used in the comparative degree, ‘fairer’, to support the poet’s stand that poetry is better than prose, and in the superlative degree, “fairest”, to suggest that it is superior to any other form of writing.

We can also see that some words in the poem are used in peculiar ways: for example, the word ‘possibility’ is used instead of poetry, ‘visitors’ is used instead of readers, ‘windows’ and ‘doors’ are used to denote the possibilities and limitlessness of poetry and “cedars” is used to show how poetry is connected to nature and the divine. As mentioned before, the dichotomy in the subject matter of the poem is accompanied by various techniques, which supplement and add to the contrastive effect. An example of this at the lexical level are the words used in opposition, that is, pairing two words with contrasting connotations. Phrases like “everlasting roof”, “impregnable of eye” and “spreading wide my narrow hands” combine contrasting ideas and enhance the effect of dichotomy prevalent in the poem’s subject matter. For instance, in the phrase “everlasting roof”, ‘everlasting’ conveys a sense of being endless or unlimited, while the noun ‘roof’ suggests something closed or limited. Another way to look into the contrast in this phrase is that ‘everlasting’ means something eternal or unchanging, while **‘roof’** represents a physical, often temporary structure that can wear down or decay over time. Similarly, in the phrase “impregnable of eye”, the contrast lies in ‘impregnable’, which suggests something that **cannot be easily seen, penetrated, or understood**, juxtaposed with ‘eye’, typically associated with vision and exposure. Lastly, in the phrase “spreading wide my narrow hands”, ‘spreading wide’ represents an attempt at expansion and growth, while, in contrast, ‘narrow hands’ highlights physical limitations, smallness, or constraints.

Thus, lexical analysis shows how the words and phrases chosen emphasise the superiority of poetry, the dichotomy present in the subject matter, the multiple possible interpretations of poetry, its connection to nature and its divine quality. It makes the features of poetry more solid by comparing it with the concrete parts of a house. It also reveals how Dickinson’s vocation as a poet helped her assert her agency and empowered her to explore beyond her limitations.

#### 4.2. The grammatical level

The poem doesn’t have a proper grammatical structure and doesn’t follow the conventional rules of syntax. The sentences are broken and connected to each other by dashes. The unconventional syntax reflects the poetic license and freedom available in poetry. It highlights how poetry is not restricted by rules. Unlike in prose, this freedom in poetry allows one to break the conventions and restrictions of writing. This power of poetry is itself what enables the poet to break the restraints of

life and explore beyond her limits as pointed out in the poem. And this is the reason why poetry is her favourite genre of writing. The analysis at the grammatical level shows that Dickinson has chosen an unconventional style that complies with the theme of the poem - her advocacy of experimental poetry.

#### 4.3. The graphological level

On the graphological level, Dickinson's poem presents various deviations, including irregular and uncommon capitalisations and punctuations. The first letter of every line in the poem is capitalized. Apart from this, the first letter of many words like "Possibility", "Prose", "House", "Doors" and "Cedars" are capitalised. This is done in order to foreground them and bring the attention of the readers to these words which carry the crux of the poem. "Eye" is the only noun in the poem which does not begin with a capital letter. In this way, this word is least emphasised, as the poet believes that eyes are the least important in the context of poetry. Poetry to her is not something that is understood with the help of sight, but through imagination and the greater faculties of the mind. Not everyone who has eyes can see and enjoy the beauty of poetry. Only those with purity of the mind and with poetic sensibility will get the true experience of poetry, which is beyond mere words on a paper.

In addition to unconventional capitalisation, the poem also makes use of dashes and caesura as important stylistic devices. The dashes act as a link between the fragmented sentences used by Dickinson in the poem. They bring about a retarder effect and slow down the tempo of reading the poem. Through this means, the readers are reminded that, unlike prose, poetry should be read and understood at a slower pace in order to be able to appreciate its full beauty. The dashes or caesura also deliberately force the readers to pause in various places to reflect upon what is being said. Dickinson's use of punctuation and dashes creates gaps and multiple sentence possibilities, allowing readers to give various interpretations to the text (Schoerke 2016: 495). These pauses give the readers the freedom to read between the lines and fill in the gaps with their own imagination and sensibility. Dickinson's style is such that, instead of passively enjoying her poem, readers are actively called upon to co-create its meaning (Hagenbüchle 1993: 25).

Another notable feature of the poem is the absence of one of the most common punctuation marks in writing – the full stop. Nowhere in the poem can we see the presence of a full stop and, by extension, a dead end. This in turn implies that the poet can write poetry tirelessly. For her, writing poetry is like a cathartic release of her emotions and feelings through pen and paper. Poetry flows naturally and endlessly from her heart and this is reflected in the technique of enjambment in the poem, where thoughts flow effortlessly from one line to the next, without a break. This shows that Dickinson shares a deep connection with her vocation: poetry lives through her and she lives through poetry. The lack of full stops also signifies this endless, immortal, eternal nature of poetry. It also points to the readers' endless imagination, allowing umpteen interpretations, which is a characteristic of poetry. The last line of the poem is also about how poetry helps the poet to expand, to imagine and grow endlessly beyond her limits: "The spreading wide my narrow Hands/ To gather Paradise –"



(Dickinson 1999b). We find that the poem ends with a dash instead of a full stop to once again suggest the unlimited potential and capability of poetry to take the poet to heights even beyond paradise.

In addition, one can also see a sort of graphological parallelism at the level of the structure in the poem. The poem is organised into three quatrains. The broken sentences look like bricks that are cemented together by the dashes. Overall, it roughly forms a box-like structure that is visually parallel to the rooms of a building or a house. The dashes can also be seen as windows (of interpretation). So the extended metaphor of the house is also reflected in the structure of the poem. Another noteworthy aspect is that the penultimate line of the poem, “The spreading wide my narrow Hands” is lengthier compared to other lines. This expansion is in parallel to the content of this line. The idea of the poet-who spreads wide her narrow hands, i.e. expands herself, is visually represented by stretching the line beyond the length of other lines in the poem. Thus, the graphological features of the poem also support and supplement its content.

#### 4.4. The phonological level

The dichotomous effect created at the level of subject matter while using words in opposition is also extended to the phonological level, by employing opposing sounds, and seemingly alternating meter. There is a repetition of the consonant sounds [s] and [r] throughout the poem. The [s] sound helps to create a sweeping rhythm, while, on the contrary, the [r] sound creates a sense of harshness, thus adding to the contrasting effect. By predominantly employing the iambic foot, which alternates stressed and unstressed syllables, the dichotomy at sound level is further sharpened, thus contributing to the overall contrasting effect of the poem. The meter seems to alternate between iambic tetrameter and trimeter, as can be seen in the beginning lines of the poem.

I dwell | in Pos- | sibi- | lity –  
A fair- | er House | than Prose –

But the meter employed is irregular, as the poet does not always stick to the iambic foot. For example, in the following lines, she deviates and uses the pyrrhic foot as the second foot:

The Gamb | rels of | the Sky –

By employing such deviation, Dickinson shows the ‘possibilities’ available in poetry and reinforces the idea that poetry is not restricted by rules. Different kinds of rhymes are also employed in the poem, such as end rhymes, as in ‘eye’ and ‘sky’ (stanza 2), and internal rhymes, as in ‘house’ and ‘prose’ (line 2). Another type of rhyme employed is the slant rhyme, which uses words that have similar, but not identical sounds. An example of this is ‘prose’ and ‘doors’ (stanza 1). A similar connection can be made between the two genres - of poetry and prose - which this poem primarily deals with: they are similar to a large extent, but also distinct and unique modes of expression.

#### 4.5. The semantic level

At the semantic level, this metapoem contains figurative and metaphoric language. It makes use of several poetic techniques, such as figures of speech, including metaphor, visual imagery, paradox, simile, symbols and hyperbole. A paradox is a statement that may seem contradictory, but can be true. Usually, one feels safe and secure to live in a closed and protected house. The fact that the poet wants to live in a house with multiple openings and with the sky as roof seems to be paradoxical at first. But here, the house that is open to the sky metaphorically refers to the realm of poetry, which simultaneously provides a secure place and offers immense possibilities to the poet and hence it is depicted as a house with several openings (Herd 2022). Further, visual imagery is used to describe the house with its various parts, like doors, windows, chambers and roof. The structure of the poem itself gives an image of rooms or chambers. The imagery in the lines “The spreading wide my narrow Hands” signifies the poet’s growth, liberation and the process of exploring beyond her limitations through poetry.

The use of paradox can also be seen in phrases like “everlasting roof”, “impregnable of eye”, and when the poet talks about spreading wide her “narrow” hands to gather the immense “paradise”. The phrase “everlasting roof” is self-contradictory, as discussed earlier, but when interpreted metaphorically, it suggests the eternal and boundless nature of poetry. The phrase “impregnable of eye” is also paradoxical, because it seems illogical to say that eyes, which are typically used for vision, cannot see something, yet it seems true in the context of poetry, where the greater faculties of the mind are necessary for understanding it, rather than mere physical sight. Other symbols used in the poem are those of the various doors and windows, which signify limitless possibilities. “Windows” and “Doors” are metonyms for the creativity and freedom of expression that is offered by poetry, as against the more straightforward style of prose (Raab 1998: 290, Borovičková 2009: 17). Also, the hard cedar wood of the chambers symbolises the stability that poetry offers to the poet (Borovičková 2009: 17). Hyperbole is another figure of speech that is tactfully employed to talk about the limitless house of poetry, with its “everlasting” roof, “fairest” visitors (i.e. readers of poetry) and the unlimited potential of poetry to gather the immense “paradise”. Through these exaggerated and extravagant statements, Dickinson is once again bringing to the forefront her defence of the superiority of poetry over prose and other forms of writing. The figurative and metaphoric style found in this poem enhances the beauty of the poem and adds deeper layers of meaning, thus enriching the reader’s experience.

#### 5. Conclusion

In general, the linguistic and stylistic features of the poem “I dwell in Possibility” play a significant role in complementing and enhancing its meaning. Like traditional poems dealing with the topic of poetry, this poem does not simply explain the features of poetry directly. Instead, the poet explains the concept of poetry through the extended metaphor of a house and other linguistic devices. This style is similar to the conceits used by the metaphysical poets who make a



comparison between two unlikely objects (Eliot 1932: 268). In this poem, a set of random images related to a house (roof, windows, doors) are used to highlight the unlimited possibilities and freedom available in poetry. The structure of the poem is also visually parallel to the rooms of a house.

Dickinson's use of irregular meter, unconventional capitalization, punctuation and dashes represent her notion of 'possibilities' or freedom available in the form, style, and interpretation of poetry. The vocabulary chosen, imagery, metaphor, foregrounding and parallelism are in some way or other used to reinforce the subject matter of the poem. The juxtaposition of the concepts of prose and poetry is also aided by contrasting stylistic elements. The stylistic devices at various levels play a major role in establishing the poet's opinion that poetry is superior to prose; with their help, Dickinson gives credit to her vocation as a poet, which empowers her to explore and transcend her limitations. Further, as the results show, undertaking a stylistic analysis at different levels of language helps to understand the deeper meanings of the text and how they are conveyed through poet's stylistic choices.

Emily Dickinson, like other modern poets, breaks the traditional conventions and rules of poetry in order to express her unique views. Wendy Martin (2007: 33) says that "She abandoned standard meter and rhyme, threw conventional grammar out the window, and forced her readers to work to understand her meaning. The traditional structures of poetry were incapable of conveying the ideas she wanted to express". The deviant and unconventional style of the poem "I Dwell in Possibility" is crafted carefully by Dickinson in order to deal with her unusual metaphor and unorthodox notion of poetry. It suggests that her stylistic choices align with and reinforce the central message or purpose of the poem – that of defending experimental poetry.

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## Annex A

### The full text of "I dwell in Possibility –"

- 1 I dwell in Possibility –
- 2 A fairer House than Prose –
- 3 More numerous of Windows –
- 4 Superior – for Doors –
  
- 5 Of Chambers as the Cedars –
- 6 Impregnable of eye –
- 7 And for an everlasting Roof
- 8 The Gambrels of the Sky –
  
- 9 Of Visitors – the fairest –
- 10 For Occupation – This –
- 11 The spreading wide my narrow Hands –
- 12 To gather Paradise –