

Cornell Notes:

Essay Title	Metaphors of Mental Illness: How Emily Dickinson and Vincent Van Gogh Understood and Expressed Their Personal Battles Within
Essay Author	Samantha Moss at Taylor University
What is depression?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Recent discovery● Still carries stigma● 17 million adults reported it in 2017● Characteristics:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Sadness○ Loss of interest○ Slowed mobility○ "Preoccupation with worthlessness"○ Suicidal● Put off as laziness for a long time
ED and depression	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Many artists, musicians, and authors suffer from depression● Van Gogh and Dickinson
ED's life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Always was solitary<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Letter: "What makes a few of us so different from others?"● Some friends died at an early age
ED's Poems and Depression	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Did not write for other people<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Failed romance may have fueled the writing○ Terror about her iritis● Wrote to think about things for herself● Wrote as an outlet for her illness
Illnesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Iritis<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Eye swelling○ Her "Terror" of blindness● SAD disorder<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Seasonal Affective Disorder○ Poems written: Summer accounted for three times fall

	<p>and winter combined</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term depression • Bipolar <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Manic/Depressive ◦ 10 times as many poems produced in manic stages • Agoraphobia
Poems for essay (by Johnson #)	<p>#311</p> <p>#1133</p> <p>#258</p> <p>#348</p> <p>#280</p> <p>#510</p>

Student
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Emily Dickinson and Mental Illness

Poetry, art, music, and writing: any of these creative mediums can be an outlet for the creator's feelings. It can give a voice to what they are experiencing. And when the poet is experiencing something serious, such as depression or other mental illness, this can be their only voice. Sometimes reading their works is the only way to realize how trapped inside their minds they were.

Emily Dickinson was born on December 10, 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts. Throughout her childhood, she remained very reclusive. Strangely, she was often absent from school for long periods. This may have actually been because she had epilepsy. Epilepsy is a severe condition where certain events can cause devastating seizures. This was most likely just one of the mental conditions Dickinson grew up with. This also probably contributed to her solitude and reclusiveness as a youth. Even Dickinson's childhood was marked with death. While she was at Amherst Academy, her second cousin and very close friend, Sophia Holland died of typhus. When Emily was 20, her friend and former principal Leonard Humphrey died for unknown reasons. Dickinson may have been secretly in love with him, so this death was also very painful for her. In a letter to her friend Abiah Root, she writes "The tears come, and I cannot brush them away; I would not if I could, for they are the only tribute I can pay the departed Humphrey."

These and other losses shook her to her core. Many of her poems, especially the later ones, focus on Death and Eternity. These things amazed her and were some of the things she thought about the most. Not much changed as Emily grew up. In 1855, she left Massachusetts to go to Washington, DC, to visit her father. The shocking thing is that at twenty-five years old, this was her first time traveling outside her home state. The even more shocking thing is that it would be her last. Slowly, Emily withdrew into her town, her house, and her tiny room, and she gradually became more and more anxious, more paranoid, more depressed, and more manic.

This period is when Dickinson started frantically writing. Starting from 1858 and 1859, poems seemed to have become her obsession. This coincided with the beginning of the Civil War, and a massive uptick in her reclusiveness. This is also when her iritis, an eye disease that half-blinded her, began. She did not like leaving her town, or speaking with strangers. No one knows what exactly caused this, but something made her existing agoraphobia, which is the fear of any event than could cause embarrassment or panic, much worse. In addition to this, Dickinson most likely had a few serious disorders. The first of these was likely persistent depressive disorder, a mild but long-lasting form of depression. This was reinforced by her seasonal affective disorder, which is where different phases of the year create different conditions. Lower sunlight amounts create adverse mood effects. In the winter, depression is

cripplingly severe. The spring must have been amazing for her. This may have been why so many of her poems focused on the beauty of nature. The light of the warm seasons saved her from the darkness of winter. Cycles were a big part of her mental rhythm, as she also had bipolar. Bipolar is a mental illness in which there are cycles of mood swings, ranging from depressive lows to manic highs. These cycles presumably coincided with winter and summer. There is firm evidence to support this. There were periods when Dickinson produced almost ten times as many poems than in depressive phases in the winter months.

The body of her poems is the best window into her suffering. A good, and frightening, one to look at is F347, "I dreaded that first Robin, so." Dickinson does not see spring for its beauty anymore, as she did in her earlier poems. Everything blooming in spring is new. Everything old was dead. She is afraid the joys of spring and summer would "pierce me with a fashion/ So foreign to my own-" She contrasts her Leaving the comfortable mourning is painful. This poem shows how far gone she was, even in 1862. A poem written around the same time is F340, "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain." This piece of writing expresses a fear of going insane. She compares whatever is going on to a funeral in her brain. Whether the funeral is meant to be her funeral, or someone else's, or the death of her sanity, we don't know. The metaphors she uses for depression in this poem are a numbing, beating, drum, heaviness, and darkness. At the end, "And then a Plank in Reason, broke, And I dropped down, and down - And hit a World, at every plunge, And Finished knowing - then -" She is picturing what would happen if the weak remnants of Reason finally snapped. The poem abruptly cuts off at the end, instead of giving you the expected rhyme. This gives you a sense of a sudden cut-off. It gives you the feeling that the poem wasn't finished. That adds to the scene of the poem. Weight is a prevailing device used to convey depression in her poems. Take the seemingly innocent F291, "It sifts from Leaden Sieves." At first glance, this is a pretty poem about snow. To some people, it's just about snow making "an even Face/ Of Mountain and of Plain." It describes how everything is blank fields of white. But some people, if they look deeper, can see the possible messages about depression. First of all, the opening lines convey a sense of heaviness with their mention of lead. And snow covers everything. The whole vibrant world is turned into a monotonous, grey, landscape. Monotony. This features in F340 as well, as the ever-beating, paralyzing, drum.

Is there a God? People worldwide have wondered, speculated, and fought over this question. Emily Dickinson's family was Calvinist and attended Amherst First Congregational Church regularly. Dickinson and her family were living in a time when traditional American religious beliefs clashed with modern scientific discoveries, such as Darwin's theory of evolution. Dickinson was clearly caught up between these two sides. At first, she seemed to accept the beliefs of the church. For example, in L142, from 1853, she writes "We had such a splendid sermon from that Prof Park-I never heard anything like it..." Religious hymns often use hymn/common meter, which features in most of her poems. Dickinson clearly felt like nature was a better thing to worship than God, however. Read F236. She doesn't not believe in God, she just seems to think it's better to hold "mass" in nature than mass in a church. If you read from this poem, in 1861, to F581, written in 1863, you see that much has changed in her mind. God is no longer a kind god who resides in every little thing in nature, who makes the world heaven. God has abandoned her. If there really is someone there, she should be rescued from

her horrible state. Or at least to remove her from life, to numb her in the “Atom’s Tomb. Better dead than living here abandoned in mental darkness. No one came for her. Later, her poems became practically irreverent, such as F1577. She seems to be making fun of the church in a joking way, but many other of her poems are no joke.

In F581, Dickinson mentions she wishes she had been left in the numbness of non-existence. This spark was set deep into her brain, waiting for events to ignite it. And as the Civil War ended, the descent steadily began. By 1867, she rarely left the Homestead, let alone Amherst. Except for close friends, most people were told to speak from behind a door or curtain. Then, in 1874, her life was turned upside down. Edward Dickinson, her father, died. Dickinson was too scared to attend the funeral. Soon after, Emily Norcross Dickinson had a paralyzing stroke. After this, poem writing decreased and letter writing increased. It makes sense. The younger Emily was stuck in the house caring for her a lot. But her mother was slowly getting better, and she began a romance with Judge Otis Phillips Lord. Maybe things could get better. Soon, however, they got worse. Her mother’s health declined and succumbed to illness in November 1882. And then, the biggest tragedy of her life. About a year later, in the fall of 1883, the beloved darling of the entire family, Gilbert “Gib” Dickinson, died of typhoid. When Emily saw his little coffin, she vomited and fainted on the spot. From then on, she was bedridden and numb. I wonder if she even really cared when Judge Otis died. Each of these strokes tolled the bells and beat the drums inside her brain until the spark caught and lit the fire. She was definitely world-weary at this point. Just look at her poems. From F1683: “Why should we hurry - Why indeed / When every way we fly / We are molested equally / By immortality.” What’s the point of trying? Our lives only last an hour, after all. And her last known poem, F1685. “Of glory not a beam is left / But her Eternal House - / The Asterix is for the dead, / The Living, for the Stars - “ It is over. As she said in one of her first poems, she says in her last. Except there is no more humor in it. “Sic Transit Gloria Mundi.” Thus passes the glory of the world.

Dickinson’s technical cause of death was Bright’s disease, but the doctor never had a chance to diagnose her. She wouldn’t let the doctor in the room. Bright’s was a hurried guess. According to a New York Times article, “A Suicide in Amherst?” by David Reynolds, reviewing a book that put forth this idea, she may have committed suicide. This article states that “She may have taken an overdose of a prescription drug containing strychnine.” Her last known letter, a brief note to her cousins, simply reads:

Little Cousins:
Called Back, Emily.

And on her grave, instead of reading “Died,” it reads “Called Back.” These circumstances seem suspicious. But was the famous poet’s death really by her own hand? We may never know. But depression is still an issue. It is still an issue that carries a stigma. Maybe we have progressed from Dickinson’s time, where it was put off as laziness, but we still need to be aware. We need to prevent suicide everywhere. And how many other great woman poets were kept private and were never discovered? It’s like Shakespeare’s sister. How much have we missed out on?

Poems Mentioned:

F347

I dreaded that first Robin, so,
But He is mastered, now,
I'm accustomed to Him grown,
He hurts a little, though—

I thought If I could only live
Till that first Shout got by—
Not all Pianos in the Woods
Had power to mangle me—

I dared not meet the Daffodils—
For fear their Yellow Gown
Would pierce me with a fashion
So foreign to my own—

I wished the Grass would hurry—
So when 'twas time to see—
He'd be too tall, the tallest one
Could stretch to look at me—

I could not bear the Bees should come,
I wished they'd stay away
In those dim countries where they go,
What word had they, for me?

They're here, though; not a creature failed—
No Blossom stayed away
In gentle deference to me—
The Queen of Calvary—

Each one salutes me, as he goes,
And I, my childish Plumes,
Lift, in bereaved acknowledgment
Of their unthinking Drums —

F340

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading - treading - till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through -

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum -
Kept beating - beating - till I thought
My mind was going numb -

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space - began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race,
Wrecked, solitary, here -

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down -
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing - then -

F291

It sifts from Leaden Sieves -
It powders all the Wood.
It fills with Alabaster Wool
The Wrinkles of the Road -

It makes an even Face
Of Mountain, and of Plain -
Unbroken Forehead from the East
Unto the East again -

It reaches to the Fence -
It wraps it Rail by Rail
Till it is lost in Fleeces -
It deals Celestial Vail

To Stump, and Sta ck - and Stem -
A Summer's empty Room -
Acres of Joints, where Harvests were,
Recordless, but for them -

It Ruffles Wrists of Posts
As Ankles of a Queen -
Then stills it's Artisans - like Ghosts -
Denying they have been -

F236

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church —
I keep it, staying at Home —
With a Bobolink for a Chorister —
And an Orchard, for a Dome —

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice —
I, just wear my Wings —
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little Sexton — sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman —
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last —
I'm going, all along.

F581

Of Course — I prayed —
And did God Care?
He cared as much as on the Air
A Bird — had stamped her foot —
And cried "Give Me" —
My Reason — Life —
I had not had — but for Yourself —
'Twere better Charity
To leave me in the Atom's Tomb —
Merry, and nought, and gay, and numb —
Than this smart Misery.

F1577

The Bible is an antique Volume
Written by faded men
At the suggestion of Holy Spectres
Subjects—Bethlehem
Eden—the ancient Homestead
Satan—the Brigadier
Judas—the Great Defaulter
David—the Troubadour
Sin—a distinguished Precipice
Others must resist
Boys that "believe" are very lonesome
Other Boys are "lost"
Had but the Tale a warbling Teller
All the Boys would come
Orpheus' Sermon captivated
It did not condemn