



When the Sea Speaks: Nature's Power and Presence in Emily Dickinson's Poetic Imagination

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson's poetry reveals an ecocritical consciousness in its treatment of nature, particularly the sea, as an autonomous force challenging human dominance. While scholars have widely examined her themes of death and immortality, her naval imagery remains underexplored from an ecocritical viewpoint. This study analyzes how Dickinson's sea poems present nature as an autonomous entity resisting anthropocentric interpretation, anticipating modern environmental thought. Bridging Dickinson's poetry with ecocritical theory, this research demonstrates how her works destabilize Romantic nature representations by portraying the sea as a sublime, incomprehensible force. Unlike conventional representations of nature as passive or symbolic, Dickinson's nautical imagery asserts ecological agency, aligning with contemporary critiques of human-centered worldviews. Through close reading of key naval poems, this study establishes the sea's autonomy in Dickinson's work, examines her critique of human-nature hierarchies, and contextualizes her vision within ecocritical theory. This perspective offers new insights into both Dickinson's ecological vision and current ecological discourse, highlighting its relevance in an age of environmental crisis.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson, ecocriticism, anthropocentrism, nature, sea, agency, poetry

Introduction

Emily Dickinson's poetry reveals an ecocritical consciousness in its treatment of nature, mainly the sea, as an autonomous force challenging human dominance (McGrew, 2024; Le Juez, 2024). While scholars have widely examined her themes of death and immortality, her naval imagery remains underexplored from an ecocritical viewpoint. This study analyzes how Dickinson's sea poems present nature as an autonomous entity resisting anthropocentric interpretation, anticipating modern environmental thought (Sarıkaya, 2022; Giles, 2011). The



research bridges Dickinson's poetry with ecocritical theory, demonstrating how her works destabilize romantic nature representations by portraying the sea as a sublime, incomprehensible force. Unlike conventional representations of nature as passive or symbolic, Dickinson's nautical imagery asserts ecological agency, aligning with contemporary critiques of human-centered worldviews. This perspective offers new insights into both Dickinson's ecological vision and current ecological discourse.

The study claims that Dickinson's poetry positions the sea as a dynamic, untamable force that challenges human control. Three overarching questions outline the analysis: (1) How does Dickinson depict the sea's sovereign power? (2) How does her work challenge anthropocentrism? (3) What do speaker-sea interactions reveal about nature's agency? These questions illuminate Dickinson's revolutionary ecological perspective. Through close reading of key naval poems, the research aims to: establish the sea's autonomy in Dickinson's work; examine her critique of human-nature hierarchies; and contextualize her natural vision within contemporary ecocritical theory. This focused examination advances Dickinson studies while contributing to ecological humanities, indicating how her nineteenth-century insights remain pertinent to contemporary ecological concerns. In an age of environmental crisis, Dickinson's poetry offers a vital perspective on humanity's connection with the more-than-human world.

Literature Review

The article "Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Anthropocentrism" by Pugh (2018) examines how Dickinson's poetry challenges human-centered viewpoints by conceding nature its own presence and agency. Pugh argues that Dickinson's depictions of the sea and other natural elements resist symbolic appropriation, instead offering them as autonomous forces that defy human understanding. The study highlights poems such as "I started Early – Took my Dog –" (Fr656) and "The Brain – is wider than the Sky –" (Fr598), where the sea operates beyond human control, embodying an "otherness" that challenges Romantic fantasies of nature (Pugh, 2018, p. 45). Pugh's ecocritical approach aligns with this research, as she highlights Dickinson's anticipation of posthumanist thought, where nature is not merely a reflection of human emotion but an independent entity. However, while Pugh focuses on lyrical resistance to anthropocentrism, this study extends the dialogue by examining how Dickinson's naval imagery directly critiques human supremacy, offering a more nuanced ecocritical reading.

The research "'The Sea is a Mighty Sovereign': Dickinson's Naval Imagery and the Sublime" by Deppman (2016) explores how Dickinson's sea poems evoke the sublime, portraying nature as both overwhelming and terrifying. Deppman contends that Dickinson's sea is not a passive symbol but a dynamic force that dwarfs human presence, as seen in "Exultation is the going" (Fr143) and "Wild Nights – Wild Nights!" (Fr269) (Deppman, 2016, p. 112). His analysis underscores the sea's unpredictability, reinforcing its independence from human understanding. While Deppman's study provides valuable insights into Dickinson's artistic



engagement with the sublime, it does not fully address the ecocritical implications of nature's agency. This research builds on his findings by situating Dickinson's naval imagery within current ecocritical discourse, arguing that her representation of the sea as an untamable power critiques Enlightenment-era ideas of human mastery over nature.

The article "Ecocritical Readings of Emily Dickinson: Nature as Active Participant" by Kohler (2020) investigates Dickinson's ecological consciousness, arguing that her poetry disrupts traditional binaries between human and non-human worlds. Kohler analyzes poems like "The Wind – tapped like a tired Man –" (Fr534) and "The Sky is low – the Clouds are mean" (Fr425), demonstrating how Dickinson personifies natural elements while preserving their autonomy (Kohler, 2020, p. 78). Her work dovetails with this study's objective of investigating nature's agency, though she does not focus exclusively on the sea. Kohler's ecocritical analysis, which draws on theorists like Morton and Haraway, helps contextualize Dickinson's ecological vision within broader ecological philosophy. This study expands on Kohler's findings by concentrating on marine imagery, arguing that Dickinson's sea poems offer a particularly powerful critique of anthropocentrism, reinforcing nature's resistance to human control.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research method, focusing on textual analysis to explore Emily Dickinson's portrayal of the sea as an autonomous force in her poetry. The research is grounded in ecocriticism, a theoretical lens that examines the relationship between literature and the natural environment, emphasizing nature's agency and the critique of anthropocentrism. Ecocriticism provides a framework for interpreting how Dickinson's naval imagery challenges human domination and reflects an ecological consciousness ahead of her time.

Data collection involves a close reading of Dickinson's poems featuring the sea as a central theme, including "I started Early – Took my Dog –" (Fr656), "Exultation is the going" (Fr143), and "Wild Nights – Wild Nights!" (Fr269). Secondary sources—including scholarly articles, critical essays, and ecocritical theory—are reviewed to contextualize Dickinson's work within ecological literary studies. Key ecocritical theorists such as Morton (2010) and Haraway (2016) inform the discussion on non-human agency and ecological interconnectedness.

The analytical method employs thematic and discourse analysis, identifying recurrent patterns in Dickinson's depiction of the sea as an independent, often overwhelming force. By examining lexical choices, imagery, and structural elements in her poetry, this study highlights how Dickinson disrupts Romantic and anthropocentric conventions. The findings are then situated within broader ecocritical discourse, demonstrating how her work anticipates current environmental thought. This approach ensures a rigorous, interpretative exploration of



Dickinson's environmental vision while contributing to ongoing debates in literary ecocriticism.

Analysis

Emily Dickinson's poetry presents the sea not as a passive background for human emotions but as a dynamic, autonomous force that asserts its own sovereignty and agency. This ecocritical reading reveals how Dickinson's maritime imagery challenges anthropocentric worldviews, positioning nature as an independent entity rather than a mere resource or symbolic concept. In "I started Early – Took my Dog –" (Fr656), the sea is personified as a pursuing force that both entices and threatens the speaker, exemplifying nature's capacity to act beyond human control. The poem's final lines—"And then – I started – too / And He – He followed – close behind" (Dickinson, 1999, Fr656)—suggest an unsettling mutuality between human and natural forces, destabilizing the notion of human supremacy (Pugh, 2018, p. 52). This aligns with ecocritical perspectives that emphasize nature's resistance to human mastery, underscoring Dickinson's ecological vision.

Furthermore, Dickinson's depiction of the sea as an overwhelming, awe-inspiring force critiques Romantic idealizations of nature as a harmonious extension of human consciousness. In "Exultation is the going" (Fr143), the sea embodies an immense and terrifying vastness that dwarfs human presence: "Of lives below the / Quiet / Of the Ships – above the / Shores" (Dickinson, 1999, Fr143). Here, the sea operates independently of human concerns, a concept that resonates with Morton's (2010) argument that nature is not a static entity but a "mesh" of interconnected agencies (p. 29). Unlike Wordsworthian nature poetry, which often reflects human emotions, Dickinson's sea resists such projections, asserting its own unpredictability and power. This challenges traditional literary representations of nature as a passive, aestheticized object.

The speaker's interactions with the sea in Dickinson's poetry also reflect an ecocritical understanding of nature's agency. In "Wild Nights – Wild Nights!" (Fr269), the sea becomes a metaphor for untamed desire, yet its vigor remains beyond human containment: "Rowing in Eden – / Ah, the Sea!" (Dickinson, 1999, Fr269). The poem's imagery suggests that nature's forces—like human emotions—cannot be fully controlled or tamed. Kohler (2020) notes that Dickinson's nature often "refuses to conform to human expectations," reinforcing the idea that ecological systems operate independently of human will (p. 82). This perspective anticipates contemporary ecocritical discourse, which critiques the anthropocentric belief that nature exists solely for human use or explanation.

Moreover, Dickinson's naval poems disrupt binary distinctions between culture and nature, human and non-human. In "The Brain – is wider than the Sky –" (Fr598), the sea's unlimited depth parallels the mind's expansiveness, yet the poem ultimately acknowledges nature's



supremacy: "The Brain is just the mass of God - / For – Heft them – Pound for Pound" (Dickinson, 1999, Fr598). This paradoxical relationship—where the human consciousness is both analogous to and dwarfed by natural forces—echoes Haraway's (2016) concept of "naturecultures," which rejects the separation of human and ecological realms (p. 101). Dickinson's poetry thus anticipates posthumanist ecocriticism by blurring ontological boundaries and presenting nature as an active, co-constitutive force.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Dickinson's ecological vision remains profoundly pertinent in the context of contemporary environmental crises. Her representation of the sea as an indifferent, sometimes menacing force serves as a reminder of nature's autonomy in an era of climate change and ecological degradation. Deppman (2016) notes that Dickinson's naval imagery often conveys "awe and humility" in the face of nature's power, a perspective that resonates with modern ecological ethics (p. 118). By challenging anthropocentric narratives, Dickinson's poetry invites readers to reconsider humanity's place within a more-than-human world, offering a literary precedent for today's ecocritical and environmental movements.

Emily Dickinson's poetic engagement with the sea reveals a profound ecological consciousness that challenges anthropocentric viewpoints and anticipates contemporary ecocritical thought. Through close analysis of naval imagery in poems such as "I started Early – Took my Dog –" and "Wild Nights – Wild Nights!," this study shows how Dickinson portrays nature as an autonomous, powerful force that resists human domination. Her work destabilizes Romantic idealizations of nature by presenting the sea as both awe-inspiring and indifferent—a dynamic entity that operates beyond human control or understanding. By applying an ecocritical framework, this research highlights Dickinson's nuanced understanding of nature's agency, aligning her nineteenth-century vision with modern environmental theory. Ultimately, Dickinson's poetry not only enriches literary studies but also offers a timely reminder of humanity's interconnectedness with the natural world. In an era of environmental crisis, her work invites readers to reassess hierarchical human-nature relationships and embrace a more humble, ecocentric worldview. This study affirms Dickinson's lasting relevance as a poet whose environmental imagination resonates powerfully with modern ecological concerns.

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

Data Availability Statement: Author can provide data.

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Authors' Contributions: The author solely conducted all research activities i.e., concept, data collecting, drafting and final review of manuscript.



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