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## “His own was ampler:” Dickinson and Whitman’s Sunset Poetry

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Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman both admired the “splendor of ended day” (LOG 414) appearing as “A Slash of Blue! A sweep of Gray!” (F233) and were inspired to make sunsets frequent subjects of their poetry. The coincidence that these dissimilar poets wrote about sunsets presents an opportunity for exploration and comparison. Dickinson and Whitman both wrote about sunsets, but they conceptualized them differently. This conceptualization does not refer to the actual display in the sky, for both poets described striking colors and light. Rather, the way each poet portrays sunsets is what distinguishes sunset poetry as being Dickinsonian or Whitmanian. Dickinson tries to capture the sunset in her poetry: she imitates the sun’s performance. Obvious tension is prevalent in her poems, as her speakers struggle to control the fleeting event while simultaneously honoring it. Whitman is not so easily frustrated by finales, and he celebrates the closure the setting sun ends the day with. In his characteristic style, he sings the emotions the experience provokes within him and delights in the cyclical nature of time. Even as they deemed the same phenomenon extraordinary, Dickinson and Whitman saw something different in their own sunsets.

Emily Dickinson wrote 406 poems featuring the word “sun,” 182 poems featuring the word “sky,” and 60 poems featuring the word “sunset” (Emily Dickinson Archive). Less than 40 of her poems chronicle sunsets with a focus on their progression and imagery, as the term “sunset poetry” implies (Forcina Appendix A). Sunsets, reminding Dickinson of fleeting time and inevitable endings, were a natural occurrence she strove to emulate in her poems, “each of her sunset poems was a ‘sketch’ or ‘study from nature’...local character and color without sacrificing the imaginative quality that separated an effective composition from a mere servile imitation” (St. Armand 268). In poems such as “Sunset that screens, reveals –” (F1644) Dickinson depicts the “local character and color” (St. Armand 208) of “Amethyst” (Dickinson 3) sunsets while still using her imagination: “Sunset that screens, reveals – /Enhancing what we see/ By menaces of Amethyst/And Moats of Mystery” (Dickinson 1-4). This nuanced sunset, which “screens” and “reveals,” emphasizes the progression of a sunset that casts light and shadow over “what

we see” (Dickinson 2). The rhyme of “see” and “Mystery” suggests the elusive quality of sunsets and connects the opposite concepts of visibility and invisibility. Dickinson recognizes aspects of the sunset that she saw, but never fully grasped.

Like Dickinson, the speakers of her poems occasionally experience tension as they try to simulate the sunset or to understand it, but they ultimately revere sunsets, which simply exist:

The sunset, then, is a curious amalgam of triumph and defeat, an experience that robs as much as it bestows. One cannot *tell* it, one can only reproduce its features as faithfully and as humbly as possible, hoping that the effect, character, or likeness of the hidden spirit will be evoked by corresponding poem or painting. (St. Armand 272)

Dickinson’s efforts to portray her beloved sunsets are ultimately humble recreations. “I send Two Sunsets” (F557) witnesses her endeavor to recreate sunsets; as an admirer of sunsets, she imitates them, yet feels strained in her competition with nature. The speaker’s joking tone is somewhat contradicted as the poem exposes their desire to manufacture sunsets. Personification allows the speaker to view “Day” as their enemy: “Day and I – in competition ran –/I finished Two – and several Stars – / While He – was making One” (Dickinson 2-4). The idea of the speaker “send[ing] Two Sunsets” and “finish[ing]” them is nonsensical, despite the speaker’s triumphant voice and their assertive “I” statements: “I finished Two –” (Dickinson 3). It is impossible to experience “Two Sunsets” simultaneously since there is only one sun. The excess of the speaker’s creation, the “Two” sunsets and “several Stars,” acknowledges the impossibility of the speaker delivering an actual sunset.

The speaker of “I send Two Sunsets” is not narrow minded as they can admit the excellence of nature: “His own was ampler” (Dickinson 5). According to the Emily Dickinson Lexicon, the poet would have understood “ampler” to mean “large; broad; plentiful; full; bountiful; spacious; extensive; great; vast” (Emily Dickinson Lexicon). Sunsets that encompass the sky are “ampler” than the speaker’s: they cannot be contained. The speaker acknowledges this but defends their sunsets by attesting that they are “more convenient/ To Carry in the Hand –” (Dickinson 7-8). This could be interpreted as the speaker’s assumed victory over Day:

The poet decides to create her own sunsets nevertheless. Such a decision obliges her to question whether the pure imitation of nature's sunset will be of any use. As a result, the speaker resorts to more pragmatic aspects of creating sunsets to the effect that she considers her own sunsets "more convenient" because they can be grasped. (Fraunholz 478)

Fraunholz recognizes the “humorous treatment” (Fraunholz 478) of the poem overall, but she interprets the speaker’s conclusion to be a “pragmatic” one due to the “convenience” of their sunsets. However, the tone of “I send Two Sunsets” is not necessarily pragmatic and is rather playful. The speaker’s rationalization of their sunsets’ superiority falls flat as the poem abruptly ends with a dash. The “convenient” quality of their sunsets lacks explanation and compels readers to wonder why anyone needs a sunset they can hold in their hand. The speaker’s tone, “as I/ Was saying to a Friend —” (Dickinson 5-6) is conversational and enables an interpretation of their self-deprecating humor. The speaker jokes that their sunsets are “more convenient” but does not make an outright statement that their sunsets are better than nature’s.

Dickinson’s imitation of sunsets serves as her homage to them, but also witnesses the tension she views them with. In her article “The Poetics of Emily Dickinson”, Eleanor Wilner defines Dickinson’s imitative poems as “mimesis:”

...the conception of poetry as mimesis. Just as the intense emotional experience was a heavenly sign, so the aspects of nature particularly extraordinary or intense events-lightning, auroras, volcanoes, noon, snows, sunsets and sunrises-were emblematic of enormous forces and supernal mysteries. Thus to reproduce nature was in fact to perpetuate inspiration. (Wilner 133)

Fittingly, Wilner utilizes “I send Two Sunsets” as the immediate example of mimesis. Wilner feels that the speaker’s “convenient” sunsets are “the condensation of a vast nature that then becomes accessible, significant, portable, scaled to the human grasp” (Wilner 133). Wilner believes that the poem, itself, allows a “vast nature” to become “accessible” on paper, where it may be contained. Recall that “vast” was one of the definitions supplied by the Emily Dickinson Lexicon for the speaker’s word, “ampler”, as they confess “His own was ampler” (Dickinson 5). Dickinson attempts to “condense a vast nature” in her poetry, but she competes against the natural world, which prevails as the “ampler,” or “vaster,” source of sunsets.

Using Wilner’s idea of mimesis, it is obvious that both Dickinson and Whitman wanted to imitate sunsets in their sunset poetry. In Whitman’s “A Prairie Sunset” (LOG 446) sunsets are portrayed as they would be in nature: they are vivid, resplendent, and sublime. This poem is reminiscent of Emily Dickinson’s rich imagery, for example, Whitman describes: “Shot gold, maroon and violet, dazzling silver, emerald, fawn/... colors till now unknown” (Whitman 1, 3). In his characteristic style, Whitman features a long first line which lists all the colors he observes. Like Dickinson, he focuses on the sunset’s colors because he wants to mimic and include them. Whitman, however, differs from Dickinson because he does not supply the colors with meaning or action: rather, he lists them as simple findings. Even when he

expresses these are “colors till now unknown” (Whitman 3), their “Mystery” (Dickinson 1644), as Dickinson might have described these colors, is not stressed in Whitman’s poetry. He is not as interested in the inquiry of sunsets as he is in their observance:

Color always delighted him, particularly the colors of the sky both day and night. He does not celebrate wet, cloudy, colorless days, but gorgeous sunrises and sunsets and the delicate colors of clear or filmy days... he paid special attention to "sky views and effects" ... he could see strange shows “in light and shade – enough to make a colorist go delirious,” which implies a suspicious sympathy with the colorist. He had an eye for pictorial effect. (Foerster 752)

The “delirious” feeling sunsets that evoked in Whitman is apparent in “A Prairie Sunset” (LOG 446). The speaker, assumedly Whitman himself, is overwhelmed by the sunset’s expansiveness: “earth’s whole amplitude and Nature’s multiform power” (Whitman 2) have “no limit, confine” (Whitman 4). The powerful “I,” which typically distinguishes his poetry as being Whitmanian, is noticeably absent from this poem. Rather, “A Prairie Sunset” is an authentic celebration of the “ample” sunset in and of itself, and the poem aims to achieve the “pictorial effect” (Foerster 752).

Dickinson’s mimesis suggests more than a desire to “perpetuate inspiration” (Wilner 133) because of the frequent involvement of speakers in her sunset poetry. Rather than ‘telling’ the appearance of the sunset like Whitman does in “A Prairie Sunset” (LOG 446), Dickinson’s speakers often have something to ‘show’ about them, especially in relation to themselves. In her poem, “The Sun went down – no Man looked on” (F1109) the speaker’s experience with the sunset is intimate: “The Sun went down – no Man looked on –/ The Earth and I, alone,/ Were present at the Majesty –/ He triumphed, and went on –” (Dickinson 1-4). This speaker, “alone” with the “Earth,” seems inferior when compared to the “Majesty” and “triumph” of the sunset. This solitary speaker describes how the sun “went on,” and as the sunset ends, so does the poem’s line, with a dash. Dickinson’s formal choice mimics the progression of sunset but also renders the speaker powerless against the setting sun. Closure, then, is forced upon an unwilling speaker. Some of Dickinson’s speakers are more willing to imitate the sunset: “If this is ‘fading’/Oh let me immediately ‘fade!’ /If this is ‘dying’/Bury – me, in such a shroud of red!” (F119, Dickinson 1-4). This speaker’s tone portrays the sunset more positively than the speaker of F1109; exclamation points and the interjection “Oh” (Dickinson 2) praise the sunset. The speaker desires to impersonate the movements and colors of the sunset, even if it means “dying” (Dickinson 2).

Like the speaker of “If this is ‘fading’” (F119), the speaker of Whitman’s “Song at Sunset” (LOG 414) welcomes endings, if they are as magnificent as the sunset. The speaker, assumedly Whitman, appreciates the

“endless finales” (Whitman 54) of the sunsets which end each day, every day, while Dickinson usually focuses on the temporary quality of a single sunset. Whitman achieves closure as he writes about sunsets, because he understands this fleeting phenomenon ushers in a new day, and that the sun will ultimately set again:

Illustrious every one!  
Illustrious what we name space, sphere of unnumber'd spirits,  
Illustrious the mystery of motion in all beings, even the tiniest insect,  
Illustrious the attribute of speech, the senses, the body,  
Illustrious the passing light – illustrious the pale reflection on the new  
moon in the western sky,  
Illustrious whatever I see or hear or touch, to the last. (Whitman 9-14)

Whitman utilizes anaphora by beginning each line in this stanza with “illustrious,” which the OED defines as “Lighted up, having lustre or brilliancy; luminous, shining, bright, lustrous” (OED). The word itself, “illustrious,” attracts attention as it is repeated, and illuminates the exclamations made by Whitman, whether they relate to the sunset or to the broader experience of living. The effect of anaphora in this stanza is that it encourages a cyclical reading; while reading the poem, one recalls the previous line began with “illustrious” and their attention is redirected to that line; thus, the poem’s form parallels with its content. The word “illustrious” begins and ends each line, just as the “illustrious” sun begins and ends each day. Whitman mimics the sunset’s progression and the cyclical nature of time in the poem’s form.

Whitman emulates the sunset differently than Dickinson: he does not compete with it or try to control it, but rather shares in it. An interesting overlap between “Song at Sunset” and Dickinson’s “The Sun went down – no Man looked on” (F1109) is that both use versions of the word “triumphant” to describe the sunset. According to the Emily Dickinson Lexicon, “triumphant” has many meanings, like “victory; conquest” or “celebration; pomp” (Emily Dickinson Lexicon). Dickinson’s “triumphant” aligns with the first definition. She employs this word to explain the sunset leaving the speaker alone: “He triumphed – and went on” (Dickinson 4) which depicts a pessimistic kind of triumph, in which the speaker is defeated and is no longer involved. Whitman’s “triumphant” aligns with the second definition; Whitman celebrates the triumph of the sunset and will “corroborate forever the triumph of things” (Whitman 8). He seemingly disregards that this sunset is a finite experience.

In Whitman’s approach, a sunset is an ending which fades into a beginning. He does not feel pressured to immortalize sunsets in his poetry, for they are already immortal: “I sing the endless finales of things,/I say Nature continues, glory continues,/O setting sun! though the time has come,/I still warble under you, if none else does, unmitigated adoration” (Whitman 54-55, 59-60). A finale is an ending, yet Whitman describes this finale as being

“endless.” As the poem itself reaches an end, Whitman reminds his subject which is the sunset, “you,” that his “adoration” is “unmitigated.” Whitman sounds nearly intoxicated as he explains the infinite magnitude of his “adoration” for sunsets. He celebrates what he finds extraordinary about the ordinary occurrence of a sunset, and this is what compels him to write: “[Whitman] thereby invests everything with primitive, natural emotion, but he also enlivens by the sheer power of his verse.” (Davidson 6). “Song at Sunset” does not simply honor the setting sun, but “enlivens” it with the human experience.

Whitman enlivens and imitates the sunset further still in “Song at Sunset,” as he presents sunsets as a source of self-awareness and of universality. He sings about the many places where sunsets occur. He lists the many locations he has witnessed sunsets in his life: “prairies... whatever streets I have roam’d/Or cities or silent woods, or even amid the sights of war” (Whitman 46-51). This catalog is reminiscent of the scope of the sunset in “A Prairie Sunset” (LOG 446) which unifies “North, South, all” (Whitman 4). Whitman perceives sunsets as being accessible to all individuals in all places, classifying them as spiritual and inclusive phenomena. Whitman believed that natural experiences like sunsets, and spirituality, are intertwined:

The earthly and the divine, the sensuous and the mystical, are never far from each other in his verse. His images flow rapidly from the minutiae of plant or animal life through parts of the human body to sweeping vistas of different times and places, often with affirmations of God’s harmonious universe. (Reynolds 235)

Reynolds’s articulation of Whitman’s philosophy echoes the verses of his sunset poetry. In both “A Prairie Sunset” and “Song at Sunset,” the natural phenomenon encompasses many individuals and places. All the while, Whitman “affirm[s] God’s harmonious universe” as the sunset inundates his own soul: “Wonderful to depart! /Wonderful to be here!” (Whitman 22-23). “Departing” and “being here” are interchangeable; Whitman affirms that both life and death are “wonderful” as the sunset implies them to be. The spiritual experience of viewing a sunset is both a universal and intimate event in Whitman’s point of view, whereas Dickinson’s sunset poetry is much more intimate, featuring only one speaker who typically views the sunset alone.

Though their sunset poetry differs, Dickinson and Whitman wrote with the same intention: to imitate, and even to immortalize, the sunset. Their platform to accomplish this intention was their poetry, which permitted them to portray sunsets as more than just an image, but as a meaningful phenomenon that an individual could interpret and have a relationship with. Both poets felt a responsibility to convey the dramatic display of sunset that accomplished what a photograph could not: “Emily Dickinson was never surfeited by the sunset; her own sensibility and perception had to serve as a

Daguerrean apparatus to capture the daily passion drama of the sun's decline and death" (St. Armand 246). Similarly, Whitman was compelled to 'photograph' the sunset from his own unique perspective: "Whitman's... words, 'literally photographed', reflect his faith in the power of photography to absorb experience and hold it fast... his poetic 'I' was a kind of roving camera eye aimed at the world around him" (Reynolds 282-283). The poets were photographers, except their expression of the sunset's imagery and progression lacked the immediate visual and instead relied on words that could produce that visual in the mind's eye. Poetic form, diction, and tone enable their sunset poetry to imitate the evocative experience of viewing a sunset.

Whether they are "fading" or "endless," a "competition" or "celebration," sunsets, as described by Dickinson and Whitman respectively, were inspiring subjects. Dickinson's sunset poetry, (not limited to the poems analyzed but also including the poems in Appendix A), defines the sunset as a momentary event that is indicative of time's brevity. Dickinson's speakers, though they strive to perfect the sunset's craft, tend to overcome tension and generally marvel at the sunset's beauty. Whitman's sunset poetry portrays sunsets that are expansive in their appearance and breadth; Whitman's unifying sunsets reach all parts of the world. The sunset is a spiritual experience for Whitman that he can be immersed by or that he can sing, as his celebratory voice often does. Dickinson and Whitman capture the imagery and progression of sunsets with the precision of photographers, but they also imbue sunsets with meaning in the ways only poets could.

## Appendix A

Dickinson's "Sunset Poetry"

Table created by Devyn Forcina

Note: "Sunset Poetry" refers here to poems that portray the imagery and progression of sunsets, not poems that simply include the word "sunset."

Edition	Number	Title
Franklin	119	If this is 'fading'
Franklin	140	Bring me the sunset in a cup -
Franklin	182	The Sun kept stooping - stooping - low!
Franklin	233	A Slash of Blue! A sweep of Gray!
Franklin	251	If He dissolve - then - there is nothing - more -
Franklin	265	It cant be Summer!
Franklin	297	This - is the land - the Sunset washes -
Franklin	318	She sweeps with many-colored Brooms
Franklin	427	Sunset at Night - is natural -

Franklin	468	Whole Gulfs - of Red, and Fleets - of Red
Franklin	495	The Day undressed - Herself
Franklin	557	I send Two Sunsets -
Franklin	589	They called me to the Window, for
Franklin	603	The Red - Blaze- is in the Morning -
Franklin	669	An ignorance a Sunset
Franklin	715	The sun kept setting - setting - still
Franklin	752	Ah, Teneriffe - Receding Mountain -
Franklin	787	Bloom upon the Mountain stated -
Franklin	875	The Color of a Queen, is this -
Franklin	1013	Superfluous were the Sun
Franklin	1045	We learn in the Retreating
Franklin	1085	Who is the East?

Franklin	1086	Nature rarer uses Yellow
Franklin	1095	When I have seen the Sun emerge
Franklin	1109	The Sun went down - no Man looked on -
Franklin	1116	The Sunset stopped on Cottages
Franklin	1203	On the World you colored
Franklin	1442	It was a quiet seeming Day -
Franklin	1599	A Sloop of Amber slips away
Franklin	1624	Pass to thy Rendezvous of Light
Franklin	1644	Sunset that screens, reveals -
Franklin	1656	The Sun in reining to the West
Franklin	1681	"Red Sea", indeed! Talk not to me
Franklin	1709	The Sun retired to a cloud
Franklin	1733	Of Yellow was the outer Sky

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