

**“Emily Dickinson’s original approach to poetry results in startling and thought provoking moments in her work.” Give your response to the poetry of Emily Dickinson in the light of this statement. Support your points with suitable reference to the poems on your course.**

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### **Sample Answer One, (Allison Barry)**

I think Emily Dickinson can be described as an idiosyncratic poet. Her work is perhaps the most instantly recognizable of all poetry. It cannot be denied that these startling and thought provoking moments elicited by her work are perhaps the essence of her reputation and image as one of the greatest, but also one of the most eccentric poets of all time.

The reader gains great insight into her imagination through the medium of her poetry. She conveys moments of utter elation in poems such as “I taste a liquor never brewed” and “I could bring you jewels - had I a mind to”, to profound experiences of utter despair and depression in poems such as “I felt a funeral in My Brain” and “There’s a Certain Slant of

Light". What distinguishes her the most for me is her gift for figurative language, imagery, metaphors and similes. She had the ability to immerse herself in English literature and produce beautiful, shocking and startling material through the medium of aesthetic language.

Her "flood subject" was immortality and she often wrote about death. For me, the most thought provoking and startling evocation of immortality and death, is her poem **"I felt a Funeral in my Brain"**. Dickinson's poems on the *Hereafter* are probably among her best known. She was clearly deeply interested in the process of dying, and returned to it again and again in her writing. In this poem, the poet seems to have died sometime in the past and is now looking back or reliving the experience. **"I felt a Funeral in my Brain and Mourners to and fro, Kept treading-treading - till it seemed that Sense was breaking through"**. The poem parallels an actual funeral service. Imagining oneself at ~~their~~ one's own funeral is indeed a chilling thought. It is filled with remarkable imagery, punctuation, grammar and rhythm. The idea is simple, vivid and original. She is imagining her own death.

What chills me the most about this poem is this paradigm of the conscious mind in the coffin. That **"beating-beating"** sensation taking place in her mind **"till I thought my mind was going numb"** is terrifying. She is certainly not a "conventional" poet and it is her insights and interpretations that startle / OR astonish? and provoke rather unsettling thoughts and images amongst the readers / OR *with the reader*. The only functioning sense is her hearing. The corpse is in a coffin and the body has died. The mention of soul suggests an afterlife. Most of us would imagine an afterlife as being a place of peace and happiness, if we live a good, fulfilled life. However, in her original approach to poetry, Dickinson defies this traditional and conventional paradigm. She conveys the after life as a space, a vacuum almost, where she is

**"wrecked, solitary, here"**. The language and idea behind this line struck me and is something I have dwelled on with regard to her poetry. The use of "here" is effective in conveying the startling / OR alarming? immediacy and reality of her experience, "wrecked" and "solitary" expose a disturbing sense of isolation.

Death is not something many of us tend to dwell on. It is a topic we try to avoid. Our faith and hope safeguards the idea of a good and promising after life. Dickinson depreciates this sense of security we all have with regard to death and dying. This depreciation is fundamental in her originality and is what ultimately startles / OR surprises? me the most and enables me to ~~really~~ ruminate in the depths of matters concerning death and the hereafter.

**"There's a certain Slant of Light"** for me, was more thought provoking in relation to life after death. Dickinson had doubts about her faith. She was conflicted. This poem explores a state of mind in which the comfort of hope is absent. In its place there is despair associated with a certain kind of winter light falling on a landscape. Dickinson sees this light, coming from heaven, as an affliction, affecting the inner landscape of her soul, the cause of **"internal difference"**. There is a tone of oppression and melancholy throughout. She does not dwell on the afterlife. She focuses on our earthly existence and immortality. Being a young student I rarely ruminate on matters concerning my death or the termination ~~cease~~ of my existence. The significant fact that I will one day cease to exist has not yet registered with me. Reading the poem however, most certainly caused a shift in dynamics and the development of a rather unsettling internal difference or change within. **"Heavenly Hurt it gives us- We can find no scar, But internal difference, Where the Meanings are."** For me this "Heavenly Hurt" is the

hurt of knowing that I must die. Such knowledge is wounding and rather startling / OR shocking? Knowing that life must end is a profound part of our being. There is no physical scar or evidence of this "hurt", but instead "internal differences" which lie deep inside, in which we are aware of life's harsh reality. This realization and knowledge, for me, is *both* / OR *in parallel*, unexpected and unsettling - emotions elicited by Dickinson's originality.

Another aspect of Dickinson's style of writing in this poem, which I found quite remarkable, is her use of personification and pathetic fallacy. She incorporates nature and landscape into this poem to aid the development of her interpretation and the paradigm of the brutal realization of immortality. When moments come that make us aware of our immortality, the landscape listens. By personifying the Earth, Dickinson unites the human and our earthly home. **"When it comes the landscape listens- Shadows- hold their breath"**. With this line I can mentally conjure a weird, though wonderful image of the coherence of human emotion and suffering with nature. This exemplifies Dickinson's original approach to poetry which cause startling and thought provoking moments amongst us.

Even though Dickinson often wrote about death and is most famous for her eccentricity with regard to this matter, her poetry was also filled with the insightful happiness of a woman who had loved deeply and who relished the beauty of nature.

Unlike the absence of hope in "There's a certain Slant of light" we see a dramatic contrast in **"Hope is the thing with feathers"**. Despite the conflicting thoughts about death and afterlife, she manages to make an abstract concept concrete. The directness and confidence of the title makes her definition vivid and immediate. She objectifies hope, puts it before us similar to an

innate object. She makes hope real. Although Hope may seem slight and insignificant it is, in fact, something immensely powerful and comforting.

She describes hope as a bird that **"perches in the soul"**. There, it sings wordlessly and without pause. Dickinson celebrates hope as an ever present quality within us, one that goes beyond logic, reason and their limitations. Her use of universal symbolisms is very effective in developing and examining hope and how far it can carry a person. The feathers suggest the comforting nature of hope, the continuous song of the bird represents it's eternal nature.

**"And sore must be the storm- That could abash the little Bird"..**

She conveys the comfort that hope gives us in times of distress and uncertainty.

I really find this poem inspiring and tranquilizing. Being young, life progresses through peaks and troughs, ups and downs. This was a consolatory reminder to me that hope is a free gift. It exists for all of us. All we must do is not clip the wings of hope and let it fly and sing freely. It's song can be heard over the **"strangest Sea-"** and in the **"chillest land"** and in the worst storms. It is a song that never ends as long as we do not let it.

I think her approach to this poem is extremely original. Her use of metaphors and language is remarkable. She has the power to inspire people, to make them question things and to provide strange but significant perspectives to different aspects of life. This poem provokes positive thoughts with the reader, thoughts of joy and impressions of a certain "lust" for life, similar to that in the poem "I taste a liquor never brewed". This is a poem where Dickinson whimsically describes the exhilarating effect of nature. She uses the metaphor of drunkenness or intoxication to express how the beauty of nature and life elates her. This poem is a rarity of

Dickenson's work in that it celebrates the joy of excess, a reckless, indulgent joy captured in the word "Debauchee".

Her audacity of choosing a drunkard as the central image is also effective in conveying the wonderful sensations and exhilaration summer and nature invoke in her.

"Inebriate of Air- am I - And Debauchee of Dew". Nature, she declares, is a "liquor" stronger than any alcohol in its effects on her. She is happy to call herself a "Debauchee" or "little Tippler" as she revels in the "endless summer days". I find this poem in itself exhilarating.

Dickenson's attachment and love of nature is remarkable and most certainly conveyed throughout. The images are vivid and rich, like a painting, done with skill, precision and passion. My mind races as I try to envisage the "inns of Molten Blue", the rich colours, the delightful and blissful images of dizzy happiness and content. This, to me is unique, original and a one-of-a-kind poem. It inspires me to be imaginative and to explore my conscious mind which contains no boundaries. The images she describes metaphorically are breathtaking.

This inspiration is evoked by the final most striking aspect cohering with Dickenson's original approach to poetry; style of writing. There is a certain trend in each of her poems. That is of punctuation and grammar. Dickenson most often punctuated her poems with dashes, rather than the more expected array of periods, commas, and other punctuation marks. She also capitalized interior words. I think this is a rather intriguing element of her poetry and although it has been criticised and changed to please the population, I admire the way she defied the stereotypical traditions of formal grammar and punctuation. Apart from this, I think it is extremely effective in emphasizing the most important elements in her poetry. It reinforces the point she's making. I think without this distinctive style, Dickenson wouldn't be as original,

appealing or thought provoking as a poet. This distinguishes her from many other poets and is an interesting phenomenon in her work.

In conclusion, I think the statement that "Dickenson's original approach to poetry results in startling and thought provoking moments" is the absolute essence of good poetry. Poetry is meant to inspire, to relate, to provoke thoughts, to provide perspective and to invoke emotions. Dickenson most certainly achieves this throughout her vast array of poems. I cannot deny that: "I felt a Funeral in my Brain", "There's a Certain slant of light", "I taste a liquor never Brewed" and "Hope is the thing with Feathers" invoke powerful emotions in me, as a reader, provoke various thoughts and provide startling moments. Dickenson, in my opinion, is one of the most original and unique poets of all time.

## Sample Answer Two (Shannon Greene)

Emily Dickinson certainly faces poetry with an incredibly original approach and presents the reader with many startling and thought provoking moments throughout her poetry. She presents the reader with her own unique viewpoint on array of subjects including: death, hope, love, faith, religion and nature. Her individual perspectives provoke many thoughts within me as a reader as she encourages us to question our own personal views on difficult questions like faith, the meaning of life, what happens after death, the fragile state of the human mind, the fragility and importance of hope and the intoxicating effects of nature. I thoroughly enjoyed this idiosyncratic poet who brought her own individual, modern approach to each of her poems. The poems I have studied and will be discussing in this essay are 'Hope is the thing with feathers', 'I heard a Fly buzz when I died', 'There's a certain Slant of light', 'I felt a Funeral in my brain', and 'I taste a Liquor never brewed'. I have learned from this selection of poetry that Dickinson was a versatile poet who achieved many startling moments while ultimately achieving her goal to "tell all the truth but tell it in slant."

Dickinson's positive and uplifting poems create many startling moments. We see many examples of this in her poems 'Hope is the thing with Feathers' and 'I Taste a Liquor never brewed'. The poet uses her unique and original approach to describe the strength of hope and the uplifting capabilities of nature. In 'Hope is the thing with Feathers' she tactfully uses a bird image to describe its uplifting quality. She not only describes this uplifting quality effectively but also describes its resilience by insisting that "it never stops at all" and that it is present "in the chilliest land" and "on the strangest Sea". Personally, I find the image of hope



being a bird to be a beautifully simplistic idea. I can visualise this 'bird' "that sings the tune without words – And never stops- at all" but also I believe that this metaphor shows Dickinson's originality at its peak. It shows how clever Dickinson was and her ability to create such thought-provoking moments by taking abstract ideas and making them realistic for her readers. She also achieves this in 'I taste a liquor never brewed'. In this poem Dickinson whimsically describes the exhilarating effect of nature. She describes feeling elated by images of intoxication. This is an exceptionally unique and startling image that shows off Dickinson's original approach and her ability to be a playful poet. The introductory line; "I taste a liquor never brewed" is a paradoxical statement that introduces the initial metaphor of intoxication. She playfully confesses drunkenness as she states "inebriate of Air – am I". This line in particular startled me as a reader as it is such an unusual remark to make, especially when you consider the Puritan world that she lived in. This shows her rebellious nature and proves her to be a remarkably original poet who achieved many startling and thought-provoking moments throughout her poetry.

It is evident from Dickinson's poetry that she had an obscure fascination with death. Many of her poems include startling death imagery. She explores this theme in two of the poems I have studied, 'I felt a Funeral' and 'I Heard a Fly Buzz'. 'I felt a Funeral' is one of Dickinson's poems of retrospective self-analysis, a demonstration of mental suffering that leads to a lack of consciousness that is cleverly portrayed through the use of death and funeral metaphors. Dickinson tactfully examines the theme of death while also creating an in-depth description of a clinical case of a mental breakdown. Initially, on a literal reading of the poem, it follows the progression of a New England funeral. We see all the typical ingredients of a funeral;

mourners walking "to and fro" and the monotonous funeral service that beats "like a drum". Upon my second reading of the poem, I realised this poem is about a mental breakdown. It is evident that the poet is experiencing some emotional turmoil or personal anguish in her life. Although some images are incredibly cryptic, it appears that the speaker is losing hope in life. Hope is no longer this resilient creature that we met in 'Hope is the thing with feathers' "that keeps so many warm", she is merely "wrecked, solitary, here". She also describes her state of mind as being "numb" and is clearly experiencing some morbid thoughts as we see her metaphorical "plank" breaking as she is "dropped down and down". Similar to this, we see another funeral image in the poem 'I heard a Fly buzz when I died'. This poem begins with a startling statement and unusual viewpoint of death as we are presented with this distorted image of a fly interposing a death-bed scene. Similar to 'I felt a Funeral' we are presented with the typical features of a funeral/death scenario. We see mourners crying through the perspective of the dying person, "their eyes around – had wrung dry-". The poet appeals to both auditory and visual senses as she claims that she sees the mourners in terms of both sight, "the Eyes" and sound, "Breaths". The monotonous description of mourners in this poem closely resembles the mourners who wore "Boots of Lead" in 'I felt a Funeral'. She also presents death as a ritual as she repeats the phrase "in the Room". We see death is a harsh reality to her as she explores the role of decomposition within her word choice of the word 'fly'. The fly is an organism closely related to death and decomposition and its role in this poem is to confuse and disgust the reader. I personally found this a clever tactic and unusual symbol that strengthened the poem. It cannot be denied that the theme of death weaves through both of these poems but in an original and creative way.

Dickinson uses poetry as an outlet for her own personal questioning of faith and for religious contemplation. There are numerous references to religion that are usually closely followed by cynicism. The three poems that I have studied which I believe best exhibit this are 'There's a certain Slant of light', 'I heard a Fly buzz' and 'I taste a liquor never brewed'. 'There's a certain Slant of light' misled me as a reader as I assumed it would be a positive poem. It opens on what appears to be a positive note; "There's a certain Slant of light, Winter Afternoons-" but it is proceeded by a dark, negative image of something that oppresses "like the Heft of Cathedral Tunes". The use of the word "Cathedral" leads us to believe that her religion is the source for her feelings of oppression. This theory is substantiated by another religious reference "Heavenly Hurt". This example of alliteration is also a paradoxical statement representing the irony involved in her faith; faith being something she should feel comforted by but now instead feels anguish. She uses hymn-like language as she describes this wave of faith being "the Seal of Despair". She also tactfully portrays her faith as something incredibly far-fetched as she uses far-fetched imagery and personification such as, "Shadows – hold their breath" and "the Landscape listens". I found this poem strikingly original as it provoked many thoughts and questions within me as a reader. Similarly in 'I taste a liquor' we see Dickinson question faith and morality yet again. Although 'I taste a liquor' is a wittier approach than 'There's a certain Slant', she is still effectively exploring religious morality. She playfully references her father's negative views on alcohol, "Yield to such an alcohol" while also presenting the reader with unusual religious imagery. We see heavenly angels as being white and pure and perhaps judging someone impure as this "tippler" that she describes throughout the poem; "Til Seraphs swing their snowy hats". This clever use of sibilance portrays the sense of judgment she felt as someone within her church and perhaps even as a poet. We are also

presented with a spiritual image of the tippler "Leaning against the – Sun". This little rebellious creature is merely leaning on the outskirts of heaven merely on-looking the pure "Seraphs" and "Saints". Another aspect of religion, the after-life, is questioned within her poem 'I hear a Fly buzz'. The image of the fly creates not only an ominous nature but adds to its gruesome and cynical portrayal of death and the after-life. The fly not only represents the decay and decomposition involved in death but the cynicism that is sometimes involved in the belief in the after-life. We see that this fly "interposed" death in some way. My views on this is that the fly interrupts the possibility of the after-life's existence. We see the fly arriving when the "King" is expected. I personally believe that the king is a metaphorical representation of God, someone who the speaker never gets to meet. The fly manages to come "between the light" and the speaker, portraying the absence of a transition between life and the after-life. We see the "windows failing" proving that an ascension into heaven may not be achieved but this fact remains uncertain to the reader as it ends on a note of uncertainty, an ellipsis "I could not see to see-". Dickinson creates many startling moments in these three poems in particular. I definitely recognised these to be profound and thought-provoking as they made me question faith, morality and death.

The most original aspect of Dickinson's poetry is her original and unconventional approach to style, syntax, punctuation and grammar. It is evident from her poetry that she was a unique individual, but more importantly a unique poet, whose poetry still speaks to a modern audience. Her unusual writing style certainly created many startling and provocative moments for me as a reader. She rebelled against the traditional writing styles, grammar and punctuation. It was originally thought that this was out of carelessness but it is now recognised as serving a technical purpose within her poetry. She brought a remarkably original approach

to grammar while creating a unique style that has made her poems instantly recognisable. Dickinson once remarked "here's freedom" upon describing her independence as a recluse, this freedom is echoed in her poetry as she abandons the rules of punctuation and grammar to express her thoughts in an original way. One of Dickinson's main hallmark features is the use of the dash. The dash interrupts the flow of the sentence in order to create a pause, a moment of contemplation for example in her poem 'There's a certain Slant of light' she uses a dash after the line, 'Heavenly Hurt, it gives us- '. The dash in this instance makes the reader ponder what the speaker is attempting to express. The dash also creates a link between ideas and adds a sense of structure to her poems. The majority of her work also remains title less. The reason for this is unknown and many refer to her poems by their first line. Dickinson also capitalises words in the middle of sentences to emphasise key words that are relevant to the theme she is discussing. This makes her poetry a little easier to understand, otherwise her messages would remain highly cryptic. There is also an absence of full stops which adds to the melodic nature of her poems while also creating enjambment, 'The Stillness in the Room/Was like the Stillness in the Air-'. These unique features are combined with her effective use of more traditional poetry techniques like alliteration, imagery and personification. The majority of her poems also use traditionally religious stanza forms. By using a traditional hymn form, she maintains the structure of religious poetry while attempting to redefine it. This yet again adds to her unconventional and startling approach to poetry.

Personally, I think she is the most fascinating poet that I studied during the Leaving Certificate Course. It cannot be denied that the poetry of Dickinson was crafted from her strikingly

original approach that created many startling and thought provoking moments throughout. It is evident from many of her poems that she used writing as not only a form of self-expression but an escape route from her emotions. "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotion know what it means to want to escape from these."