

*Abstract of my PhD Dissertation at Penn State University*

*Emily Dickinson's Wonderland: The Uses of Fantasy in Her Poetry*

That Emily Dickinson makes extensive use of fantasy is something that critics have noted ever since her first book of poems was published posthumously in 1890. Though not as pervasive as her favorite device, metaphor, it deserves attention because, like metaphor, Dickinson uses it consciously, seriously, and precisely, as yet another way to deal with "Circumference," as a paradoxical way to measure and define truth. Fantasy, with its freedom from realistic constraints, its relationship to game and riddle, and its powerful natural ability to evoke a sense of mystery, is often the ideal means of communication for her. The worlds out of sight—whether within the mind, within nature, or within the locked universe of the dead—are Dickinson's primary poetic themes, even her obsessions. Fantasy provides a way by which a poet can explore these ungraspable worlds, while still acknowledging that they *are* ungraspable except through the imagination. It captures mysteries without destroying their mysteriousness, without reducing them to rational terms and limited, logical explanations.

The dissertation begins with a definition of literary fantasy: its distinguishing characteristics are that it be, first, impossible and, second, developed by the writer and accepted by the reader as real within its given context. Chapter two traces the foundations of Dickinson's mature use of fantasy, covering the influences of the Bible, Emerson, and Shakespeare, as well as lighter contributions made by Ik Marvel and the widely popular American tall tales of the time. This chapter also considers Dickinson's own theories about poetry, nature, and perception, pointing out how those theories sanction and support the use of fantasy as something more than a toy, as, in fact, a means to explore and articulate the mystery that Dickinson saw to be all around us. Chapter three examines Dickinson's fantasies about words, showing how her imaginative extravagances relate to her belief in words' "spectral," quasi-divine powers. Chapters four, five, and six have as their respective subjects the self, the natural world, and death—these are the aspects of existence whose mysteries tantalized and troubled Dickinson the most. In each chapter the emphases are the same: to explain the particular techniques by which Dickinson creates and sustains the fantastic elements in her poems, and to relate the use of fantasy to her general imaginative quest after truth and the limits of knowledge.

Though Dickinson wrote no treatise on fantasy, she understood as deeply as anyone ever did the complicated and profound uses to which it could be put, an understanding which is manifested in a number of the poems, among them some of her best.