



Positive as Sound: Emily Dickinson's Rhyme

Judy Jo Small

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The strange rhymes of Emily Dickinson's verse have offended some readers, attracted others, and proved a stumbling block for critics. In the first thorough analysis of the poet's rhyming practices, Judy Jo Small goes beyond simple classification and enumeration to reveal the aesthetic and semantic value of Dickinson's rhymes and show how they help shape the meaning of her lyrics.

Considering Dickinson's rhyming technique in light of its historical context, Small argues that the poet's radical innovations were both an outgrowth of nineteenth-century aesthetics ideas about the music of poetry and a reaction against conventional constraints—not the least of which was the image of the female poet as a songbird pouring forth her soul's joys and sorrows in lyrical melody. Unlike other scholars, Small attaches special importance to Dickinson's own musical background. Revealing Dickinson's auditory imagination as a primary source of her poetic power, Small shows that sound is an important subject in the verse and that the phonetic texture contributes to the meaning.

By looking closely at individual poems, Small demonstrates that Dickinson's deviations from "normal" rhyme schemes play a significant part in her artistic design: her modulations and dislocations of rhyme serve to structure the poems and contribute to their dynamic shifts of mood and meaning. Analyzing Dickinson's more daring experiments, Small shows how the poet achieved uncanny effects with fluctuating partial rhymes in some poems and with homonymic puns in others. It is in the interplay between the musical and the written aspects of Dickinson's language, Small contends, that her poetry comes alive. Small takes particular note of the use of rhyme at the ends of poems, illustrating Dickinson's brilliant effects in closing some poems decisively and in leaving others tantalizingly open-ended.

Teaching us how to listen to Dickinson's poems and not simply to scrutinize them on paper, *Positive as Sound* is an innovative, lucidly written book that contributes not only to Dickinson scholarship but also to the general study of poetics.

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