

Reconfiguring Emily Dickinson

What happens if we take an idea made famous and first posited by Aristotle: ***The whole is greater than the sum of its part.*** Or more accurately as it is found in Aristotle:



*“To return to the difficulty which has been stated with respect both to definitions and to numbers, what is the cause of their unity? In the case of all things which have several parts and in which the totality is not, as it were, a mere heap, **but the whole is something beside the parts**, there is a cause; for even in bodies contact is the cause of unity in some cases, and in others viscosity or some other such quality.”*

There is a “cause in the unity” as suggested by Aristotle that cause might have something to do with quality. At least that is the way I choose to look at it with poetry and other great literature. The writer, in an attempt to express the quality of an experience, makes an arrangement of elements, in most cases the basic unit of these elements is words. The arrangement we can refer to as structure. The quality transmitted to the reader is dependent upon the final arrangement of the words. The final draft or published choice of the writer.

By closely examining that arrangement, and even by reconfiguring the arrangement, is it possible to change the “quality” attained by the whole? Here’s the idea: if we were to reconfigure the wording of a piece of literature, what would be the effect on the quality exchange that takes place for the reader? Can a quality be altered, improved, or decimated by that reconfiguration?

If we maintain the parts, but alter the arrangement or structure, do we achieve the same result?

In systems this is known as the concept of emergence: which occurs when an entity is observed to have properties its parts do not have on their own. These properties or behaviors emerge only when the parts interact in a wider whole. For example, smooth forward motion emerges when a bicycle and its rider interoperate, but neither part can produce the behavior on their own.

So...

What happens if we reconfigure Emily Dickinson? Let's attempt a small exercise and then answer some questions about the results.

Here's a rather well-known poem (479)

*Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.*

*We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility –*

*We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –*

*Or rather – He passed Us –
The Dews drew quivering and Chill –
For only Gossamer, my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –*

*We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –*

*Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity –*

Specifically, let's look at the famous first two lines. (Please note that this exercise can be extended out to other poets and writers):

**Because I could not stop for Death--
He kindly stopped for me--**

The couplet chosen consists of twelve individual units/words. These have been arranged by Dickinson (including punctuation) to create a particular quality (effectiveness of meaning) that a reader absorbs as a result of this arrangement. It should be noted that that quality may vary from person to person.

Variation 1

***I could not stop for Death
Because he kindly stopped for me***

Variation 2

***Death kindly stopped for me
Because I could not stop for he (him)***

Variation 3

*Kindly, Death stopped for me--
Because, for he (him), I could not stop--*

Variation 4

*Kindly Death-- for me stopped
Because for he (him)-- I could not stop*

Variation 5

*I could not stop for Death--
He kindly stopped for me because--*

Variation 6

*I could not kindly stop for death--
Because he stopped for me--*

Variation 7

*I, kindly, could not stop for Death
He--stopped for me because--*

Variation 8

*Stopped for me--He--kindly for death
Because I could not stop*

Variation 9

*For he--Death-- stopped kindly for me
Because I could not stop*

The variations could, of course, continue as we reconfigure the arrangements of the twelve units/words. We can further vary through punctuation choice as well as capitalization, and perhaps, even extending beyond a couplet, but I think the point is made.

Is there an equal or more effective arrangement of the twelve units than the one finalized by Emily Dickinson? The argument with justification is yours to make.

The point of such practice is to allow the writer/reader to

- Appreciate the power of a writer's choice of unit and structure for that unit (the arrangement of the parts to make a whole)
- Gain an understanding of the plasticity of language and the writer's craft
- Force attention to the idea of revision and how revision can create quality
- Reconsider the idea of meaning dictating form and what is gained or lost for the writer when variations are tried

Here are some Dickinson excerpts to practice. Try to create at least five reconfigurations of each one. Next, consider what is gained or lost in each variation when compared to the original. I've included a link to the original poem where the couplet occurs. Try reading your variations in place of the original and see how they affect the poems in its entirety. Is the effect positive, an improvement? Or does the variation create or open the door for a much different reading of the poem. Finally, consider how such close attention to the detail in your own writing, particularly your most important parts of that writing--claim statements, conclusions, direct statements can impact and improve your writing.

1. "Hope" is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul - [\(314\)](#)
2. I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro [\(340\)](#)
3. Wild nights - Wild nights!
Were I with thee
Wild nights should be
Our luxury! [\(269\)](#)
4. Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies [\(1263\)](#)
5. I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know! [\(260\)](#)

This exercise can of course be done with other poets as well as with prose writers.

Consider a craftsman like Norman Maclean (*A River Runs Through It*), Virginia Woolf (*A Room of One's Own*), F. Scott Fitzgerald (*The Great Gatsby*).

For each...

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 - Try reading your variations in place of the original and see how they affect the poems in its entirety. Is the effect positive, an improvement? Or does the variation create or open the door for a much different reading of the poem.
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Here's a sampling from [Virginia Woolf](#) (from the first lines of her opening paragraphs):

1. But, you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction--what, has that got to do with a room of one's own?
2. Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please--it is not a matter of any importance) sitting on the banks of a river a week or two ago in fine October weather, lost in thought.
3. But however small it was, it had, nevertheless, the mysterious property of its kind--put back into the mind, it became at once very exciting, and important; and as it darted and sank, and flashed hither and thither, set up such a wash and tumult of ideas that it was impossible to sit still.
4. What idea it had been that had sent me so audaciously trespassing I could not now remember.

And here [Maclean](#):

1. He told us about Christ's disciples being fishermen, and we were left to assume, as my brother and I did, that all first-class fishermen on the Sea of Galilee were fly fishermen and that John, the favorite, was a dry-fly fisherman.
2. After my brother and I became good fishermen, we realized that our father was not a great fly caster, but he was accurate and stylish and wore a glove on his casting hand.
3. As for my father, I never knew whether he believed God was a mathematician but he certainly believed God could count and that only by picking up God's rhythms were we able to regain power and beauty.
4. My father was very sure about certain matters pertaining to the universe. To him, all good things—trout as well as eternal salvation—come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy.
5. When you are in your teens—maybe throughout your life—being three years older than your brother often makes you feel he is a boy.

And [Fitzgerald](#):

1. In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.
2. The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality when it appears in a normal person, and so it came about that in college I was unjustly accused of being a politician, because I was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men.
3. No--Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men.
4. And so with the sunshine and the great bursts of leaves growing on the trees, just as things grow in fast movies, I had that familiar conviction that life was beginning over again with the summer.