



Emily Dickinson

Nature is what we see—

"Nature" is what we see—
The Hill—the Afternoon—
Squirrel—Eclipse—the Bumble bee—
Nay—Nature is Heaven—
Nature is what we hear—
The Bobolink—the Sea—
Thunder—the Cricket—
Nay—Nature is Harmony—
Nature is what we know—
Yet have no art to say—
So impotent Our Wisdom is
To her Simplicity.

Analysis (ai): The poem progresses through sensory definitions of nature—sight, sound, and an unattainable intellectual grasp—before concluding with human limitation. It mirrors Dickinson’s recurrent focus on epistemological boundaries but is more direct than her allegorical treatments of death or immortality.

- **Definition Through Accumulation:** Listing natural phenomena (Hill, Squirrel, Bobolink) reflects her habit of microscopically examining objects. Unlike her poems fixating on single entities (like “A narrow Fellow in the Grass”), this aggregates images to imply nature’s totality, yet undermines itself with “Nay” interruptions.
- **Formal Compression:** Hymn meter (common in her era) is pared down to near-telegraphic lines. Dashes and abrupt capitalization fracture syntax, amplifying tension between observation and comprehension—a signature technique, but here it serves a manifesto-like argument.
- **Theological Undertone:** “Nature is Heaven” and “Harmony” briefly conflate the earthly with divine, diverging from her frequent skepticism toward religious consolation. Unlike “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church,” this implies nature as a sufficient revelation, yet retreats into human inadequacy.
- **Archaic Diction:** “Nay” and “impotent” lend a polemical urgency, distancing the poem from Whitman’s exuberant catalogs or Emerson’s transcendental axioms. Its antique phrasing contrasts with Dickinson’s often colloquial tone, stressing the gravity of the argument.
- **Romantic Critique:** The final stanza’s humility (“So impotent Our Wisdom”) counters Wordsworthian confidence in nature as teacher. It aligns with her era’s post-Romantic disillusionment but sharpens it into a gnomic admission of defeat.
- **Underdiscussed Tension:** The poem’s insistence on nature’s simplicity clashes with its own fragmented form. This meta-conflict—using complex artifice to declare art’s futility—echoes her broader oeuvre’s self-aware paradoxes but is rarely noted here.

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- A poem of great beauty

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- To write of the simplicity of nature is to write a simple verse
So much truth in these simple lines

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Von Powell - The simple word 'Nature' encompasses so many mind pictures, sounds, emotions and feelings. Emily Dickinson, I believe listened with her eyes closed and her heart open to capture the wonderful feeling she has transferred to words.

~Von~

May 2003



Andrew Hide - Very truthfully and simply said, if only we all could see with your eyes.

Andrew

May 2003

