One Way to Teach Emily Dickinson’s ‘Ample make this bed’

Ample make this bed
Make this bed with awe.
In it wait till judgment break
Excellent and fair.

Be its pillow straight
Be its mattress round;
Let no Sunrise’ yellow noise
Interrupt this ground.

From the Top

So, class, let’s begin this course by going through Emily Dickinson’s “Ample make this bed” pretty much word by word and let’s try to hear what Emily is saying to us. It’s very short and shouldn’t take long, and it will give you an idea of the kind of thinking we do in this class and maybe introduce you to a few poetic terms.

But before we begin, let me point out that her poems had no titles, so editors have chosen to identify them by their first lines. Let’s get started:

“Ample.” What does that mean? Anyone? “Enough?” Yes, but also more than enough. Webster says “fully sufficient or more than adequate,” “plentiful, enough,” “of sufficient or abundant measure,” “liberal, copious,” or “large, spacious, roomy.”

“Make this bed.” In this context, what are two possible meanings for “make”? That’s right, Jethro. You can make a bed with a hammer, nails, saw and carpenter’s level. But in the morning when your mom says, “Don’t forget to make your bed before you leave,” you don’t need those tools. She means for you to “fit it with sheets and blanket” or straighten it, bring it back to order, make it neat. So let’s keep both those definitions in mind as we proceed.

“[T]his bed” tells us Emily’s not talking about just any bed, only about the one in this poem. This is the one that should be made “ample,” or should that be “amply”? We know, by the way, Emily didn’t mind occasionally ignoring the rules of grammar in the interest of saying something exactly the way she wanted to say it.

Can “bed” have more than one meaning? Ruthie? Yes. Not just the kind we sleep in, but, like, a bed of roses, and it can also be the bottom of a lake or river. Webster says it can be “the marital relationship” or any resting place.

So that’s the first line, but wait. Something’s missing. What or who is the subject? You. Right: “You create or make ready this resting place or marital relationship or bottom of a river or lake.” That’s called the imperative mood. It’s a command. She’s not suggesting or “just saying.” She’s insisting: Do it!

But how? Here’s the second line: “Make this bed with awe.” First, notice the repetition. Any freshman-composition teacher worth her salt would line through “Make this bed” in line 2 and write “rep” or “unfortunate echo” in the margins, so you’d have a tidier “Ample make this bed with awe.” So why the repetition? Is she pleading? Is it a chant? A prayer? Certainly it’s not the implied monotony of Frost’s “And miles to go before I sleep / And miles to go before I sleep.” Is it?

In any case, this bed must be made with “awe.” Chedra, could you look up “awe” on your handheld, cellular-powered, pocket-sized, Internet-connected, telephonic device, please? Thanks. “An
overwhelming feeling of reverence, admiration, fear . . . produced by that which is grand, sublime, extremely powerful”; “power to inspire fear or reverence”; “fear or dread.” Well, that seems to rule out the mom-telling-you-to-make-your-bed scenario. You don’t feel like that in the presence of your bed, do you, Ichiro?

In six words, “Ample make this bed . . . with awe,” Dickinson has seemed, on the one hand, to demand that the reader do a very concrete, quotidian thing that carpenters do occasionally and that some people do daily, but, due to her first and last word, she has also placed us in the presence of an unnamed something greater than ourselves. Of course, we wouldn’t have noticed that had we not looked up the “ample” and “awe.”

So what bed must we make more than adequate, plentiful enough with a combination of reverence, admiration and dread? Anyone? No one? Well, we haven’t finished reading the poem yet. Keep thinking while we do.

Judgment Day

“In it wait till judgment break.” Maybe it’s the one we’ll die in. What word seems out of place or, I don’t know, poetic in this line? “Break.” How can that be the predicate for “judgment”? The line contains an implied metaphor, an invitation to a metaphor if you will. By that I mean she has led the reader to picture something that she, Emily, never actually drew.

Let’s return to the literal world for a moment and imagine Emily lying in her bed. There was a window to her left and straight ahead (I’ve been in that room). What might she see as she waits, as she delays her getting up? Daybreak. The sun rises and a new day breaks. And this new day is Judgment Day. Therefore, the bed must be made ample and with awe.

For many Christians, the phrase “Judgment Day” does not make the heart leap up with joyful anticipation. Especially for those of us who are wicked, it is threatening, portentous, ominous, the day when there is no longer anywhere to hide, when we are subjected to a Divine and final CAT scan, and all our filthy little secrets are read back to us by the Creator of the Universe or one of his divine clerks, and our sentence is revealed.

But in this poem, it sounds more like a beautiful spring day. It will break “excellent and fair.” Something excellent is “remarkably good, possessing outstanding quality.” And fair? Please (Buffy, look up “fair.”). Who doesn’t want her judgment to be fair?

“Irving, you want your judgment to be fair, don’t you?”
“Yes.”
“Seriously?”
“Yes.”
“Think about it. Absolutely fair. Exactly what you deserve.”
“Hmm. Maybe not.”
“When you turn in an essay, do you want the teacher to be fair in assessing its value? Buffy, did you find ‘fair’?”
“Yeah, but there’s like 50 different definitions. Do you want me to read’em all?”
“I guess not. Just give us a sampling and see if that helps.”
“‘Free from bias, dishonesty or injustice. Proper under the rules. Moderately large.’ Whoa! It gives ‘ample’ as one of the synonyms!”
“Sweet. Please continue.”
“Neither excellent nor poor. Moderately or tolerably good. Likely, promising. Fair, sunny, cloudless, not stormy. Free from blemish or imperfection. Seemingly good or sincere, but not really so.”

“That’s enough! Yes, what is it, Irving?”

“I decided that when you grade my essays, I prefer grace over justice.”

“Nicely put.”

Soooo. Someone paraphrase what we have so far.

“You create or make ready this resting place or marital relationship or bottom of a river or lake and do it in a way that is fully sufficient for the purpose and plentiful, so that it is spacious and roomy, and you accomplish this with a mingling of fear, reverence and dread. Then you wait there until outstanding, remarkably good judgment that is neither excellent nor poor, just moderately good, but ample, proper under the rules and, actually, only seemingly good or sincere, but not really so, breaks.”

Exactly. Emily’s diction is really heavy. Her language is compressed. It is dense, like uranium. She is saying more than can be said with that handful of words that my high-school teachers read with such strict obedience to the rules of meter. I’ve heard, but do not believe, that her diction was so heavy that she actually wore, while writing, one of those Velcro back supports used by people who move pianos or refrigerators for a living.

But anyway, together we have managed to “lift” her first stanza.

Before we go to the second one, does this thing rhyme? “[B]ed/awe/break/fair.” Anyone see a rhyme there? No one?

Emily’s poems typically do rhyme, and many of them rhyme in the abcb pattern. If that’s the case in this poem, “awe” rhymes with “fair.” And, trust me, it does. That’s called “slant rhyme,” also called half rhyme, near rhyme, oblique rhyme, or imperfect rhyme. These are all names for using either assonance (repetition of vowel sounds: shed/bell) or consonance (repetition of consonant sounds: head/round) to rhyme, but this one – “awe” and “fair” -- is a bit of a stretch.

Okay, those of you who are still here, get up and move around, do a jumping jack or two, maybe do some deep breathing.

And Now, the Second Stanza

The second stanza begins in 5, 4, 3, 2 . . .

Look at the odd wording of those first two lines: “Be its mattress straight / Be its pillow round.” Your mom would’ve never said it this way. It’s still the imperative mood, but it’s elevated, exalted. Emily could have said “Make the mattress straight” or “Be sure the mattress is straight.” Instead, the syntax has a priestly air, a hieratic or hortatory tone, i.e., as if the lines are a formal exhortation.

I’m probably missing something, but the content of those lines seems clear enough: Be sure the different elements of the bed are as they should be.

And now we’ll take the final two lines together: “Let no sunrise’ yellow noise / Interrupt this ground.”

Why the apostrophe after the “sunrise”? It’s possessive: The “yellow noise” belongs to the sunrise. Anyone know what figure of speech “yellow noise” is? Yellow comes to you through the eye, noise through the ear, so noise can’t literally be yellow. The senses have inextricably mingled, and this is called synaesthesia, even though your spell-check would prefer synesthesia, or maybe it would prefer you just say “union of the senses.”

(The 19th-century poet John Keats was a big fan of synaesthesia and used it so often he would be the cover boy of Synaesthesia Monthly, if such a publication actually existed. F. Scott Fitzgerald, one
of Keats’s biggest fans, used it frequently and beautifully, especially in some of the more poetic passages of *Great Gatsby*.)

Okay, “noise” is the last word of the third line of the second stanza. What word occupies that space in the first stanza? “Break,” which also suggests sound – it’s almost onomatopoetic, but not quite. Judgment *breaks* and the yellow noise *interrupts*, adding to the poem’s coherence by intimating that the noise in stanza two is that of judgment day breaking in stanza one.

Notice how the imperative mood continues in these last two lines. But who is the audience this time? We, the reader, can make our bed ample and with awe (or at least try our best to do so) and we can wait in it. What we can do about “sunrise’ yellow noise” is trickier.

We cannot keep the sun, with its yellow light, from rising. Who can?

We *can* keep our eyes closed or wear special Wake-No-More eye covers, as if we were trying to get some sleep on a flight to Japan. Will that keep the sunrise from interrupting us?

Picture Emily on her little bed in her snug, tidy bedroom in Amherst when the sunrise breaks through her window. While you’re picturing that, let’s go to the final line.

The last two words are “this ground.” The last two words of line 1 are “this bed,” linking these two images just the way Emily linked “break” and “noise.” Unless there was some sort of transformation between the first and last lines, “this bed” is “this ground.”

Considering the poem as a whole and nothing but the poem as a whole – as if that were possible – what bed or ground is she talking about?

A somewhat literal guess: her death bed or, by extension, her burial plot. So, undertakers, gravediggers and other cemetery workers, prepare the body and the plot carefully as the deceased will wait here until Gabriel blows the Last Trumpet to wake the dead . . . but the narrator requests that Gabriel mute his horn.

A less literal and more encompassing guess: her entire life. If she makes her life enough, plentiful, sufficient for the purpose, and does this with a mix of reverence and dread, there will be no need to interrupt her rest with judgment’s great reveille.

But there is no “if,” no conditional in the poem. As close as we can come to the conditional is an implied “then” between “Be its pillow round” and “Let no sunrise’ yellow noise.”

Why don’t we just brainstorm for a moment: daybreak is implied in line 3; the day breaks in the east; east reminds Christians of Easter; Easter celebrates the resurrection of the body of Christ; but the sound of the sun (Son?) rising is nothing but a disruptive “noise” in this poem; therefore, the body continues to rest . . . or wait?

Given the poem’s imperative mood and lofty tone, which reading feels more at home with the poem?

What do I think? First figure out what *you* think, and we can talk about it later. Maybe Emily’s wish was to jump start our thinking apparatus, to invite us into an intelligent dialogue. Personally, I would distrust a teacher or mentor who told me what this poem means. To overdo an arboreal metaphor, almost all of Emily’s poems are the size of acorns, transformed, through careful readings, into mighty, sprawling, towering oaks. Why, then, try to shrink this thing back down to an acorn? Why bundle its extraordinary potential into the confines of a definitive theme?

So keep thinking about it. That’s what it’s for.

Class dismissed. Thanks for coming to high school today.
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