Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#754 (c.1863)

My life had stood – a Loaded Gun
In Corners – till a Day
The Owner passed – identified –
And carried Me away –

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods –
And now We hunt the Poe –
And every time I speak for Him –
The Mountains straight reply –

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow –
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through –

And when at Night – Our good Day done –
I guard My Master's head –
'Tis better than the Eider –Duck's
Deep Pillow – to have shared –

To foe of His – I'm deadly foe –
None stir the second time –
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye –
Or an emphatic Thumb –

Though I than He – may longer live
He longer must – than I –
For I have but the power to kill,
Without – the power to die –

ANALYSIS

"In this an allegory, and if so of what? Is it a cry from some psychic deep where good and evil are not to be separated? In any case, it is a poem whose reverberations are infinite, as in great music; and we can only guess with what agony it was written down. This power to say the unsayable—to hint of the unknowable—is the power of the seer, in this woman equipped with an ironic intelligence and great courage of spirit."

Louise Bogan
"A Mystical Poet"
Emily Dickinson: Three Views
(Amherst 1960)

"There is one poem which is the real 'onlie begetter' of my thoughts here about Dickinson; a poem I have mused over, repeated to myself, taken into myself over many years. I think it is a poem about possession by the daemon, about the dangers and risks of such possession if you are a woman, about the knowledge that power in a woman can seem destructive, and that you cannot live without the daemon once it has possessed you. The archetype of the daemon as masculine is beginning to change, but it has been real for women up until now. But this woman poet also perceives herself as a lethal weapon….

Here the poet sees herself as split, not between anything so simple as 'masculine' and 'feminine' identify but between the hunter, admittedly masculine, but also a human person, an active, willing being, and the gun--an object, condemned to remain inactive until the hunter--the owner--takes possession of it. The gun contains an energy capable of rousing echoes in the mountains, and lighting up the valleys; it is also deadly, 'Vesuvian'; it is also its owner's defender against the 'foe.' It is the gun, furthermore, who speaks for him. If there is a female consciousness in this poem, it is buried deeper than the images: it exists in the ambivalence toward power, which is extreme. Active willing and creation in women are forms of aggression, and aggression is both 'the power to kill' and punishable by death. The union of gun with hunter embodies the danger of identifying and taking hold of her forces, not least that in so doing she risks defining herself--and being defined--as aggressive, is unwomanly ('and now we hunt the Doe'), and as potentially lethal. That which she experiences in herself as energy and potency could also be experienced as pure destruction. The final stanza, with its precarious balance of phrasing, seems a desperate attempt to resolve the ambivalence; but, I think, it is no resolution, only a further extension of ambivalence….

The poet experiences herself as loaded gun, imperious energy; yet without the Owner, the possessor, she is merely lethal. Should that possession abandon her--but the thought is unthinkable: 'He longer must than I.' The pronoun is masculine; the antecedent is what Keats called 'The Genius of Poetry.' I do not pretend to have--I don't even wish to have--explained this poem, accounted for its every image; it will reverberate with new tones long after my words about it have ceased to matter. But I think that for us, at this time, it is a central poem in understanding Emily Dickinson, and ourselves, and the condition of the woman artist, particularly in the nineteenth century. It seems likely that the nineteenth-century woman poet, especially, felt the medium of poetry as dangerous, in ways that the woman novelist did not feel the medium of fiction to be. In writing even such a novel of elemental sexuality and anger as *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë could at least theoretically separate herself from her characters; they were, after all, fictitious beings. Moreover, the novel is or can be a construct, planned and organized to deal with human experiences on one level at a time. Poetry is too much rooted in the unconscious; it presses too close against the barriers of repression; and the nineteenth-century woman had much to repress."

Adrienne Rich
"Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson"
Reprinted in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silences*
(Norton 1979)

"I should like to offer two conventional paraphrases of the poem, which I shall then suggest are inadequate. In the first, picked up by God, the speaker becomes His marksman: the mountains resound with the echoes of her shots; those bursts of gunfire are as 'cordial' as the eruption of a volcano; with the threat of more gunfire, she guards him at night, imagining her power to be total. Alternatively, if 'Owner' is a term that suggests a deity, 'Master' may suggest a lover (a theory prompted by the 'Master' letters). In this reading, the speaker receives identity when she is carried off by the earthly lover whom she thereafter guards with murderous and possessive fury, anxious to protect him from his enemies and preferring, it seems, to watch over his bed than to share it with him' preferring, that is, violence to sexuality. But the problem with the poem is that it makes sense neither as religious allegory—the speaker's service to God does not involve the killing of the unrighteous—nor as the depiction of an erotic relationship. For either paraphrase, once it confronts the last stanza, faces its own inadequacy.

While the last stanza plays with the connections between life and death in a joke of comparative terms, those terms fail to make sense when applied literally to human beings (how could they have the power to kill without the power to die?) and make such obvious sense when applied to the inanimate gun (it goes without saying, and therefore it is unnecessary to say, that guns can kill but not die) that something further seems intended. The seepage of additional meaning, resonances of more complicated intention, infect the experience of the whole poem so that on the first reading we reject a superficial interpretation—the poem depicts neither the relationship between a man and his gun—nor one between a woman and her God or between a woman and her lover. Meaning bearing down on us and, at the same time, eluding us casts doubt on our ability to identify what we are reading, and this mystification is partly a consequence of the way in which the conceit draws attention to its own transparency.

In stanza one, for example, it is unclear whether we are to imagine the speaker as gun or as person, and the revealing taint of human presence continues in stanza two, where the echoes returned by the mountain might as easily be those of a voice as of a gun. Likewise in the third stanza, the speaker's smile, however provisional, conceivably takes place on a human countenance—the Vesuvian face that admits, albeit reluctantly, of pleasure. In the next stanza, the implicit alternatives of sexuality and death are clearly human alternatives. In the next, the human parts of the body are so fused with, and completed by, the parts of the gun, that our attention is drawn to the speaker's thumb rather than to the hammer it cocks.

The fusion of gun and person, force and identity, possessor and possessed defines the central problematic features of the poem as well as the central problematic dilemmas of its speaker. The central trope—life as a loaded gun belonging to someone else that, when claimed, goes off—once it is figured, still leaves many questions unanswered, the most crucial of which is: What imaginable relationship can be explained by such violence? I shall begin to address these questions by suggesting that 'identity' in the poem is conceived of as violence, just as life is apparently conceived of as rage. The poem is thus the speaker's acknowledgment that coming to life involves accepting the power and the inescapable burden of doing violence wherever one is and to whomever one encounters. But that interpretation, if it is a true one, is also terrifying, for violence turned upon the world can be returned by it. It is to guard herself against this return that the speaker imagines herself immortal. For the most foolproof protection from violence against the self is the denial of death.

Although my interpretation may sound extreme, it is prompted by the enigmatic last stanza, which makes a shambles out of any conventional interpretation of what precedes it. In the stanza, the focus shifts to the speaker's scrutiny of her own fury, and suggests, as we might have suspected, that this was the real subject after all. The speaker-gun is viewed as the agent of death and not (as the person for whom it stands would be) the object of it. Or, in other terms: fury grown larger than life disassociates itself in terror from the one who feels it and fantasizes its own immortality. The problem with the poem, then, is not that it is devoid of meaning but rather that it is overwhelmed by it (a problem exactly opposite to the one we witnessed in the definitional poems, though related to it, because both are prompted by the same retreat from both partiality and ending). Its phenomena surpass, seem larger than, their explanations. This fact suggests that any explanation of it will be inadequate, and it therefore draws our attention away from explanation and toward something else."

Sharon Cameron
"'A Loaded Gun': The Dialectic of Rage"
Lyric Time
(Johns Hopkins U 1979)

"Despite the narrative manner, it is no more peopled than the rest of Dickinson's poems, which almost never have more than two figures: the speaker and another, often an anonymous male figure suggestive of a lover or of God or of both. So here: I and 'My Master,' the 'Owner' of my life. Biographers have tried to sift the evidence to identify the 'man' in the central drama of the poetry. Three draft-'letters' from the late 1850s and early 1860s, confessing in overwrought language her passionate love for the 'Master' and her pain at his rejection, might seem to corroborate the factual basis for the relationship examined in this poem, probably written in 1863. However, as I have argued elsewhere, the fact that biographers have been led to different candidates, with the fragmentary evidence pointing in several directions inconclusively, has deepened my conviction that 'he' is not a real human being whom Dickinson knew and loved and lost or renounced, but a psychological presence or factor in her inner life. Nor does the identification of 'him' with Jesus or with God satisfactorily explain many of the poems, including the poem under discussion here. I have come, therefore, to see 'him' as an image symbolic of certain aspects of her own personality, qualities and needs and potentialities which have been identified culturally and psychologically with the masculine, and which she consequently perceived and experienced as masculine.

Carl Jung called this 'masculine' aspect of the woman's psyche her 'animus,' corresponding to the postulation of an 'anima' as the 'feminine' aspect of the man's psyche. The anima or animus, first felt as the disturbing presence of the 'other' in one's self, thus holds the key to fulfillment and can enable the man or the woman to suffer through the initial crisis of alienation and conflict to assimilate the 'other' into an integrated identity. In the struggle toward wholeness the animus and the anima come to mediate the whole

range of experience for the woman and the man: her and his connection with nature and sexuality on the one hand and with spirit on the other. No wonder that the animus and the anima appear in dreams, myths, fantasies, and works of art as figures at once human and divine, as lover and god. Such a presence is Emily Dickinson's Master and Owner in the poem.

However, for women in a society like ours which enforces the subjection of women in certain assigned roles, the process of growth and integration becomes especially fraught with painful risks and traps and ambivalences. Nevertheless, here, as in many poems, Dickinson sees the chance for fulfillment in her relationship to the animus figure, indeed in her identification with him. Till he came, her life had known only inertia, standing neglected in tight places, caught at the right angles of walls: not just a corner, the first lines of the poem tell us, but corners, as though wherever she stood was thereby a constricted place. But all the time she knew that she was something other and more. Paradoxically, she attained her prerogatives through submission to the internalized masculine principle. In the words of the poem, the release of her power depended on her being 'carried away'--rapt, 'raped'--by her Owner and Master. Moreover, by further turns of the paradox, a surrender of womanhood transformed her into a phallic weapon, and in return his recognition and adoption 'identified' her.

Now we can begin to see why the serious fantasy of this poem makes her animus a hunter and woodsman. With instinctive rightness Dickinson's imagination grasps her situation in terms of the major myth of the American experience. The pioneer on the frontier is the version of the universal hero myth indigenous to our specific historical circumstances, and it remains today, even in our industrial society, the mythic mainstay of American individualism. The pioneer claims his manhood by measuring himself against the unfathomed, unfathomable immensity of his elemental world, whose 'otherness' he experiences at times as the inhuman, at times as the feminine, at times as the divine--most often as all three at once. His link with landscape, therefore, is a passage into the unknown in his own psyche, the mystery of his unconscious. For the man the anima is the essential point of connection with woman and with deity.

But all too easily, sometimes all too unwittingly, connection--which should move to union--can gradually fall into competition, then contention and conflict. The man who reaches out to Nature to engage his basic physical and spiritual needs finds himself reaching out with the hands of the predator to possess and subdue, to make Nature serve his own ends. From the point of view of Nature, then, or of woman or of the values of the feminine principle the pioneer myth can assume a devastating and tragic significance, as our history has repeatedly demonstrated. Forsaking the institutional structures of patriarchal culture, the woodsman goes out alone, or almost alone, to test whether his mind and will are capable of outwitting the lures and wiles of Nature, her dark children and wild creatures. If he can vanquish her--Mother Nature, Virgin Land--then he can assume or resume his place in society…

As we have seen, in this poem Emily Dickinson accedes to the 'rape,' because she longs for the inversion of sexual roles which, from the male point of view, allows a hunter or a soldier to call his phallic weapon by a girl's name and speak of it, even to it, as a woman. Already by the second stanza 'I' and 'he' have become 'We': 'And now We roam in Sovereign Woods-- / And now We hunt the Doe--," the rhythm and repetition underscoring the momentous change of identity. However, since roaming "in Sovreign Woods--," or, as the variant has it, roaming 'the -- Sovereign Woods --' is a contest of survival, it issues in bloodshed. 'To foe of His – I'm deadly foe,' she boasts later, and here their first venture involves hunting the doe. It is important that the female of the deer is specified, for Dickinson's identification of herself with the archetype of the hero in the figure of the woodsman seems to her to necessitate a sacrifice of her womanhood, explicitly the range of personality and experience as sexual and maternal woman. In just a few lines she has converted her 'rape' by the man into a hunting-down of Mother Nature's creatures by manly comrades--Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook in *The Last of the Mohicans*, Natty Bumppo and Hurry Harry in *The Deerslayer*….

In the psychological context of this archetypal struggle Emily Dickinson joins in the killing of the doe without a murmur of pity or regret; she wants the independence of will and the power of mind which her allegiance with the woodsman makes possible. Specifically, engagement with the animus unlocks her artistic creativity; through his inspiration and mastery she becomes a poet. The variant for 'power' in the last line is 'art,' and the irresistible force of the rifle's muzzle-flash and of the bullet are rendered

metaphorically in terms of the artist's physiognomy: his blazing countenance ('Vesuvian face'), his vision ('Yellow Eye'), his shaping hand ('emphatic Thumb'), his responsive heart ('cordial light'). So it is that when the hunter fires the rifle, 'I speak for Him --'. Without his initiating pressure on the trigger, there would be no incandescence; but without her as seer and craftsman there would be no art. From their conjunction issues the poem's voice, reverberant enough to make silent nature echo with her words.

In Hebrew the word 'prophet' means to 'speak for.' The prophet translates the wordless meanings of the god into human language. Whitman defined the prophetic function of the poet in precisely these terms: 'it means one whose mind bubbles up and pours forth as a fountain from inner, divine spontaneities revealing God.... The great matter is to reveal and outpour the God-like suggestions pressing for birth in the soul.' Just as in the male poetic tradition such divine inspiration is characteristically experienced as mediated through the anima and imaged as the poet's muse, so in this poem the animus figure functions as Dickinson's masculine muse. Where Whitman experiences inspiration as the gushing flux of the Great Mother, Dickinson experiences it as the Olympian fire: the gun-blast and Vesuvius. In several poems Dickinson depicts herself as a smoldering volcano, the god's fire flaring in the bosom of the female landscape. In her first conversation with the critic Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Dickinson remarked: 'If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. Is there any other way.'

But why is the creative faculty also destructive, Eros inseparable from Thanatos? To begin with, for a woman like Dickinson, choosing to be an artist could seem to require denying essential aspects of herself and relinquishing experience as lover, wife, and mother. From other poems we know Dickinson's painfully, sometimes excruciatingly divided attitude toward her womanhood, but here under the spell of the animus muse she does not waver in the sacrifice. Having spilled the doe's blood during the day's hunt, she stations herself for the night ('Our good Day done --') as stiff, soldierly guard at 'My Master's Head,' scorning to enter the Master's bed and sink softly into 'the Eider-Duck's/ Deep Pillow.' Her rejection of the conventional sexual and domestic role expected of women is further underscored by the fact that the variant for 'Deep' is 'low' ('the Eider-Duck's / Low Pillow') and by the fact that the eider-duck is known not merely for the quality of her down but for lining her nest by plucking the feathers from her own breast. No such 'female masochism' for this doeslayer; she is 'foe' to 'foe of His,' the rhyme with 'doe' effecting the grim inversion.

Moreover, compounding the woman's alternatives, which exact part of herself no matter how she chooses, stands the essential paradox of art: that the artist kills experience into art, for temporal experience can only escape death by dying into the 'immortality' of artistic form…. Both the poet's relation to her muse and the living death of the artwork lead into the runic riddle of the last quatrain. It is actually a double riddle, each two lines long connected by the conjunction 'for' and by the rhyme: 'Though I than He -- may longer live / He longer must -- than I-- / For I have but the power to kill, / Without -- the power to die --' In the first rune, why is it that she may live longer than he but he must live longer than she? The poet lives on past the moment in which she is a vessel or instrument in the hands of the creative animus for two reasons--first, because her temporal life resumes when she is returned to one of life's corners, a waiting but loaded gun again, but also because on another level she surpasses momentary possession by the animus in the poem she has created under his inspiration. At the same time, he must transcend her temporal life and even its artifacts because, as the archetypal source of inspiration, the animus is, relative to the individual, transpersonal and so in a sense 'immortal.'

The second rune extends the paradox of the poet's mortality and survival. The lines begin to unravel and reveal themselves if we read the phrase 'Without -- the power to die' not as 'lacking the power to die' but rather as 'except for the power to die,' 'unless I had the power to die.' The lines would then read: unless she were mortal, if she did not have the power to die, she would have only the power to kill. And when we straighten out the grammatical construction of a condition-contrary-to-fact to conform with fact, we come closer to the meaning: with mortality, if she does have the power to die--as indeed she does--she would not have only the power to kill.

What else or what more would she then have? There are two clues. First, the variant of 'art' for 'power' in the last line links 'the power to die,' mortality, all the more closely with 'the power to kill,' the artistic process. In addition, the causal conjunction 'for' relates the capacity for death in the second rune back to

the capacity for life in the first rune. Thus, for her the power to die is resolved in the artist's power to kill, whereby she dies into the hypostasized work of art. The animus muse enables her to fix the dying moment, but it is only her human capabilities, working in time with language, which are able to translate that fixed moment into the words on the page. The artistic act is, therefore, not just destructive but in the end self-creative. In a mysterious way the craftsmanship of the doomed artist rescues her exalted moments from oblivion and extends destiny beyond 'dying' and 'killing.'

Now we can grasp the two runes together. The poet's living and dying permit her to be an artist; impelled by the animus, she is empowered to kill experience and slay herself into art. Having suffered mortality, she 'dies into life,' as Keats's phrase in 'Hyperion' has it; virgin as the Grecian urn and the passionate figures on it, her poetic self outlasts temporal process and those climactic instants of animus possession, even though in the process of experience she knows him as a free spirit independent of her and transcendent of her poems. In different ways, therefore, each survives the other: she mortal in her person but timeless in her poems, he transpersonal as an archetype but dependent on her transitory experience of him to manifest himself. The interdependence through which she 'speaks for' him as his human voice makes both for her dependence and limitations and also for her triumph over dependence and limitation.

Nevertheless, 'My life had stood -- a Loaded Gun --' leaves no doubt that a woman in a patriarchal society achieves that triumph through a blood sacrifice. The poem presents the alternatives unsparingly: be the hunter or the doe. She can refuse to be a victim by casting her lot with the hunter, but thereby she claims herself as victim. By the rules of the hunter's game, there seems no escape for the woman in the woods. Emily Dickinson's sense of conflict within herself and about herself could lead her to such a desperate and ghastly fantasy as the following lines from poem 1737: 'Rearrange a "Wife's" affection! / When they dislocate my Brain! / Amputate my freckled Bosom! / Make me bearded like a man!'

The violent, exclamatory self-mutilation indicates how far we have come from the pieties of Mrs. Sigourney and her sisters. Fortunately for Dickinson the alternatives did not always seem so categorical. Some of her most energetic and ecstatic poems--those supreme moments which redeemed the travail and anguish--celebrate her experience of her womanhood. The vigor of these dense lyrics matches in depth and conviction Whitman's sprawling, public celebration of his manhood. At such times she saw her identity not as a denial of her feminine nature in the name of the animus but as an assimilation of the animus into an integrated self."

Albert Gelpi
"Emily Dickinson and the Deerslayer: The Dilemma of the Woman Poet in America"
Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets

"No poem written by a woman poet more perfectly captures the nature, the difficulties, and the risks involved in this task of self-redefinition and self-empowerment than the poem that stands at the center of this book, Emily Dickinson's brilliant and enigmatic 'My Life had stood -- a Loaded Gun'…. Composed during the period when Dickinson had reached the height of her poetic prowess, 'My Life had stood' represents the poet's most extreme attempt to characterize the Vesuvian nature of the power or art which she believed was hers. Speaking through the voice of a gun, Dickinson presents herself in this poem as everything 'woman' is not: cruel not pleasant, hard not soft, emphatic not weak, one who kills not one who nurtures. Just as significant, she is proud of it, so proud that the temptation is to echo Robert Lowell's notorious description of Sylvia Plath, and say that in 'My Life had stood,' Emily Dickinson is 'hardly a person at all, or a woman, certainly not another 'poetess'….

Like the persona in Plath's Ariel poems, in 'My Life had stood,' Dickinson's speaker has deliberately shed the self-protective layers of conventional femininity, symbolized in the poem by the doe and the deep pillow of the 'masochistic' eider duck. In the process the poet uncovers the true self within, in all its hardness and rage, in its desire for revenge and aggressive, even masculine, sexuality (for this is, after all, one interpretation of the gun in the poem). The picture of Dickinson that emerges, like the picture of Plath that emerges from the 'big strip tease' of 'Lady Lazarus'…and other Ariel poems, is not an attractive one. But, again like Plath, Dickinson is prepared to embrace it nevertheless--together with all other aspects of

her unacceptable self. Indeed, embracing the true or unacceptable self appears to be the poem's *raison d'etre*, just as it is the *raison d'etre* of Plath's last poems.

In writing 'My Life had stood,' Dickinson clearly transgresses limits no woman, indeed no human being, could lightly afford to break. And to judge by the poem's final riddling stanza, a conundrum that critics have yet to solve satisfactorily, she knew this better than anyone. As Adrienne Rich has observed, Dickinson's underlying ambivalence toward the powers her speaker claims to exercise through her art (the powers to 'hunt,' 'speak,' 'smile,' 'guard,' and 'kill') appears to be extreme. Of this ambivalence and its effect on women poets, Rich has written most poignantly, perhaps, because of her own position as poet. For Rich there is no easy way to resolve the conflict entangling Dickinson in the poem. 'If there is a female consciousness in this poem,' she writes, 'it is buried deeper than the images: it exists in the ambivalence toward power, which is extreme. Active willing and creation in women are forms of aggression, and aggression is both "the power to kill" and punishable by death. The union of gun with hunter embodies the danger of identifying and taking hold of her forces, not least that in so doing she risks defining herself--and being defined--as aggressive, as unwomanly ("and now We hunt the Doe"), and as potentially lethal'….

Yet despite these dangers and despite her recognition of the apparent dehumanization her persona courts, in 'My Life had stood' Emily Dickinson does take precisely the risks that Rich describes. In the poem's terms, she is murderous. She is a gun. Her rage is part of her being. Indeed, insofar as it permits her to explode and hence to speak, rage defines her, unwomanly and inhuman though it is. Whatever constraints existed in her daily life (the breathless and excessive femininity so well described by her preceptor, Thomas Wentworth Higginson), inwardly it would seem Emily Dickinson was not to be denied. In her art she was master of herself, whatever that self was, however aggressive, unwomanly, or even inhuman society might judge it to be.

Given Dickinson's time and upbringing, it would, of course, have been unlikely that she, any more than we today, would have been comfortable with the high degree of anger and alienation which she exhibits in this extraordinary poem. But the anger and the alienation are there and, whether we are comfortable or not, like Dickinson we must deal with them. If, as Adrienne Rich asserts, 'My Life had stood -- a Loaded Gun' is a 'central poem in understanding Emily Dickinson, and ourselves, and the condition of the woman artist, particularly in the nineteenth century,' it is so precisely because Dickinson was prepared to grapple in it with so many unacceptable feelings within herself. Whatever else 'My Life had stood' may be about, it is about the woman as artist, the woman who must deny her femininity, even perhaps her humanity, if she is to achieve the fullness of her self and the fullness of her power in her verse."

Paula Bennett
My Life a Loaded Gun: Dickinson, Plath, Rich, and Female Creativity

"In 'My Life had stood'…the speaker/Gun compares her smile to the aftermath of a volcanic eruption. Her smile is not like the volcano's fire or threat but like its completed act: when she smiles it is as if a volcano had erupted. The past perfect verb is more chilling than the present tense would be because it signals completion, even in the midst of a speculative ('as if') comparison; her smile has the cordiality of ash, of accomplished violence or death, not just of present fire. In the second instance, the speaker prefers guarding the master to having shared his pillow, that is, to having shared intimacy with him—primarily sexual, one would guess from the general structure of the poem. Again, the comparison contrasts action with effect rather than action with action… As a consequence, the speaker seems ironically and almost condescendingly distant from the world of life (here, of potential life-creation or love). Shared intimacy, in her view, would bring nothing better than aggressive self-reliance does. Both uses of the perfect tense in this poem distance the speaker from humanity, perhaps as any skewed analogy would. Yet by allying herself with catastrophic power rather than sexual intimacy, she may also be indicating that the former seems more possible or safer to her; even the power of volcanoes may be known. The change in tense alerts the reader to the peculiarity and the importance of the comparisons."

Christanne Miller
Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar
(Harvard 1987)

"Feminist critics have rescued this poem from obscurity and awarded it central status in the Dickinson canon but have missed its cultural dimensions. We have seen that a common stereotype in popular literature was the adventure feminist, the tough woman who could survive extreme physical peril and outbrave men in battle. We have seen that another image associated with women, the volcano, was commonly used in the literature of misery to represent the quiet but inwardly explosive woman who was denied a viable outlet for her energies. The first stereotype enacted fantasies of power; the second reflected the realities of repression and powerlessness.

In her poem Dickinson takes the wholly original step of fusing these contrary images. On the one hand, the 'I' of the poem is the ultimate adventure feminist, the omnipotent aggressor who does all the hunting and speaking for her man and always guards him from danger. On the other hand, she has a 'Vesuvian face' that signals the total repression of her aggressions in deference to him. Whether or not the man here referred to as 'Owner' and 'Master' is the intended recipient of Dickinson's pained 'Master' letters, the poem makes it clear that Dickinson is conjuring up an adventure-feminist fantasy and, simultaneously, suggesting the suspicion that this imagined power is an illusion.

A loaded gun is not useful until it is fired, just as the 'I' of the poem gains power only when carried off by her Master. The fantasies and frustrations the 'I' embodies, however, are secondary to the potency of the poem itself. The ingenious fusion of contradictory female stereotypes sets off a string of lively metaphorical associations that themselves constitute the aggressiveness of the woman writer. Her fusions of contradictory popular stereotypes are part of her overall effort to hide behind shifting masks, while always asserting her creative powers. Time and again in her poems, popular images lose political meaning but gain literariness because they are recombined and treated metaphorically.

This conscious stylistic manipulation of popular stereotypes is underscored by an accentuation of other experimental devices in women's literature--particularly ellipsis and shifts in perspective--that take on incredible energy when condensed into her abrupt potent images. If the other writers of the American Women's Renaissance occasionally contravened the official language patterns of their culture, Emily Dickinson did so with a vengeance. No 'Master' ever received such confusingly metaphorical, impossibly cryptic love letters as the three that she wrote.... Her experimental style represented an unremitting protest against the pretense that meaning could be summed up neatly or contained in an axiom."

David S. Reynolds
Beneath the American Renaissance
(Harvard 1989) 425-26

"The Dickinson poem that Rich so presciently invoked in 1965, 'My Life had stood -- a Loaded Gun' (poem 754), has since then attracted diverse interpretations, especially feminist interpretations. It has become the locus of discussion for feminist critics concerned about accounting in some way for the aggression of Dickinson's poetry, beginning with Rich herself. In her 1975 essay 'Vesuvius at Home,' Rich names 'My Life had stood -- a Loaded Gun --' as the 'onlie begetter' of her vision of Dickinson, the poem Rich had 'taken into myself over many years.' The language of Rich's critical essay suggestively echoes the issues of the poems Dickinson had already haunted and would later haunt for Rich.

While not explicitly violent in the way of Dickinson's loaded gun, Rich's metaphor of incorporating, eating Dickinson's poem establishes, but only to transgress, the boundary between inside and outside. Invoking the dedication to the 'onlie begetter' of Shakespeare's sonnets identifies Dickinson's poem with a male literary tradition (although the overriding aim of Rich's essay is to link Dickinson to other women writers) and identifies Dickinson herself with a phallic power (the loaded gun's power) of inseminating Rich's thoughts. It is hardly necessary to add that Rich's language is intimately, evocatively complicit in these respects with the language of Dickinson's poem itself. What it means to be inside or outside another identity; what it means to 'take in' or possess; the very meaning of a boundary--are put into question by 'My Life had stood -- a Loaded Gun --'.

In this and other poems, Dickinson's often violent transactions with what is 'outside' her reflect a situation for women poets of the dominant Anglo-American tradition in which, according to Joanne Feit

Diehl, ‘the 'Other’ is particularly dangerous...because he recognizes no boundaries, extending his presence into and through herself, where the self’s physical processes, such as breath and pain, may assume a male identity.’ The male Other who occasions her speech may also commandeer her very bodily identity, leaving no refuge of interiority that is her own. Adrienne Rich’s reading of ‘My Life had stood’ internalizes Dickinson’s struggle with the problem of boundary and violence, rendering Dickinson both as the Other male ravisher and as an aspect of Rich’s own interior.”

Mary Loeffelholz
Dickinson and the Boundaries of Feminist Theory
(U Illinois 1991)

“The object status of a subject within a narrative is dramatically played out in Dickinson’s frequently discussed poem, ‘My Life had stood -- a Loaded Gun --’. In this poem the subject fears the permanence of the text as much as death, or rather, fears the overdetermination of her subjectivity by the text more than ‘the power to die’…. The term ‘identified’ elsewhere in Dickinson’s poetry and in her culture at large refers to the conversion experience that authorizes the Christian to view his or her life as typified by the narrative of Christ’s life. To be able to tell this story, like learning language, permits the individual to be a Christian to another Christian and to herself. Dickinson’s poem is told by the object it is about and thus gives expression to the object positions we all occupy within social-symbolic codes. The Christian narrative form in this poem is enacted as the object/instrument life of the gun. The master gives dramatic form to the prior narrative, or master story, which confers identity on the gun. The ‘Sovereign Woods’ designate the limits within which both the master and gun are free, an analogue for the freedom invented by, but limited to, the Christian narrative….

Given this reading of the poem, the ambiguity of the ending, ‘Though I than He -- may longer live / He longer must -- than I -- / For I have but the power to kill, / Without -- the power to die – ‘ (like ‘to see to see’) represents the difficulty and relative success Dickinson has in creating a text that will preserve a relationship of equality between herself and her reader, imaged in the exchange between the gun and the mountain within the poem. Dickinson is using a text to free herself from the restrictive and destructive freedom [?] of the Christian narrative frame. We, her readers, come upon her poem as a prior text, which we may read as our master story because it is prior. The danger of inventing a new relationship between writer and reader is suggested in the figures of the gun and the mountain. They are both images of potential violence, and their unchecked pleasure or power, if we take the allusion to the volcano Vesuvias literally, would ultimately be destructive of life. In other words, there is a danger in escaping one form of identity only to become mastered by another. In our desire for identity we bring the words we read, whether those of the Bible or Dickinson’s poem, to life. The words that liberate us in turn become the limits of identity. Dickinson’s works demonstrate that the only way to prevent oneself from being ‘framed’ by language is to keep writing one’s way out.”

Claudia Yukman
“Breaking the Eschatological Frame: Dickinson’s Narrative Acts”
Emily Dickinson Journal 1.1 (1992)

Michael Hollister (2014)