

## 50 CRITICS DISCUSS

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

“The strange *Poems of Emily Dickinson* we think will form something like an intrinsic experience with the understanding reader of them....She never intended or allowed anything more from her pen to be printed in her lifetime; but it was evident that she wished her poetry finally to meet the eyes of that world which she had herself always shrunk from. She could not have made such poetry without knowing its rarity, its singular worth; and no doubt it was a radiant happiness in the twilight of her hidden, silent life.

The editors have discharged their delicate duty toward it with unimpeachable discretion, and Colonel Higginson has said so many apt things of her work in his introduction, that one who cannot differ with him must be vexed a little to be left so little to say. He speaks of her ‘curious indifference to all conventional rules of verse,’ but he adds that ‘when a thought takes one’s breath away, a lesson on grammar seems an impertinence.’ He notes ‘the quality suggestive of the poetry of William Blake’ in her, but he leaves us the chance to say that it is a Blake who had read Emerson who had read Blake. The fantasy is as often Blakian as the philosophy is Emersonian; but after feeling this again and again. One is ready to declare that the utterance of this most singular and authentic spirit would have been the same if there has never been an Emerson or a Blake in the world. She sometimes suggests Heine as much as either of these; all three in fact are spiritually present in some of the pieces; yet it is hardly probably that she had read Heine, or if she had, would have abhorred him.

[“I taste a liquor never brewed”] is something that seems compact of both Emerson and Black, with a touch of Heine too...But we believe it is only seeming; we believe these things are...wholly her own.... [The] love poems are of the same piercingly introspective cast as those differently named. The same force of imagination is in them; in them, as in the rest, touch often becomes clutch. In them love walks on heights he seldom treads, and it is the heart of full womanhood that speaks in the words of this nun-like New England life. Few of the poems in the book are long, but none of the short, quick impulses of intense feeling or poignant thought can be called fragments. They are each a compassed whole, a sharply finished point, and there is evidence, circumstantial and direct, that the author spared no pains in the perfect expression of her ideals....

Occasionally, the outside of the poem, so to speak, is left so rough, so rude, that the art seems to have faltered. But there is apparent to reflection the face that the artist meant just this harsh exterior to remain, and that no grace of smoothness could have imparted her intention as it does. It is the soul of an abrupt, exalted New England woman that speaks in such brokenness. The range of all the poems is of the loftiest; and sometimes there is a kind of swelling lift, as almost boastful rise of feeling, which is really the spring of faith in them. There is a noble tenderness, too, in some of the pieces; a quaintness that does not discord with the highest solemnity....The companionship of human nature with inanimate nature is very close in certain of the poems; and we have never known the invisible and intangible ties binding all creation in one, so nearly touched as in them.

If nothing else had come out of life but this strange poetry we should feel that in the work of Emily Dickinson America, or New England rather, had made a distinctive addition to the literature of the world, and could not be left out of any record of it; and the interesting and important thing is that this poetry is as characteristic of our life as our business enterprise, our political turmoil, our demagogism, our millionairism...‘There never was an artistic period. There never was an art-loving nation.’ But there were moments of and there were persons to whom art was dear, and Emily Dickinson was one of these persons, one of these moments in a national life, and she could as well happen in Amherst, Massachusetts as in Athens, [Greece].”

William Dean Howells  
Editor’s Study  
*Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* LXXXII

(January 1891) 318-21

“The English critic who said of Miss Emily Dickinson that she might have become a fifth-rate poet ‘if she had only mastered the rudiments of grammar and gone into metrical training for about fifteen years,’—the rather candid English critics who said this somewhat overstated his case.’ He had, however, a fairly good case. If Miss Emily Dickinson had undergone the austere curriculum indicated, she would, I am sure, have become an admirable lyric poet of the second magnitude. In the first volume of her poetical chaos is a little poem which needs only slight revision in the initial stanza in order to make it worthy of ranking with some of the odd swallow flights in Heine’s lyrical *intermezzo*. I have ventured to desecrate this stanza by tossing a rhyme into it, as the other stanzas happened to rhyme, and here print the lyric, hoping the reader will not accuse me of overvaluing it: ‘I taste a liquor never brewed / In vats upon the Rhine; / No tankard ever held a draught / Of alcohol like mine....’

Certainly those inns of molten blue, and that disreputable honey-gatherer who got himself turned out-of-doors at the sign of the Foxglove, are very taking matters. I know of more important things that interest me less. There are three or four bits in this kind in Miss Dickinson’s book; but for the most part the ideas totter and toddle, not having learned to walk. In spite of this, several of the quatrains are curiously touching, they have such a pathetic air of yearning to be poems.

It is plain that Miss Dickinson possessed an extremely unconventional and grotesque fancy. She was deeply tinged in the mysticism of Blake, and strongly influenced by the mannerism of Emerson. The very way she tied her bonnet-strings, preparatory to one of her nunlike walks in the claustral garden, must have been Emersonian. She had much fancy of a queer sort, but only, as it appears to me, intermittent flashes of imagination. I fail to detect in her work any of that profound thought which her editor professes to discover in it. The phenomenal insight, I am inclined to believe, exists only in his partiality; for whenever a woman poet is in question Mr. Higginson always puts on his rose-colored spectacles. This is being chivalrous; but the invariable result is not clear vision.

That Miss Dickinson’s whimsical memoranda have a certain something which, for want of a more precise name, we term *quality* is not to be denied except by the unconvertible heathen who are not worth conversion. But the incoherence and formlessness of her—I don’t know how to designate them—versicles are fatal....An eccentric, dreamy, half-educated recluse in an out-of-the-way New England village (or anywhere else) cannot with impunity set at defiance the laws of gravitation and grammar....If Miss Dickinson’s *disjecta membra* are poems, then Shakespeare’s prolonged imposition should be exposed without further loss of time, and Lord Tennyson ought to be advised of the error of his ways before it is too late. But I do not hold the situation to be so desperate. Miss Dickinson’s versicles have a queerness and a quaintness that have stirred a momentary curiosity in emotional bosoms. Oblivion lingers in the immediate neighborhood.”

Thomas Bailey Aldrich  
“*In Re Emily Dickinson*”  
*The Atlantic Monthly* LXIX  
(January 1892) 143-44

“This...is Emily Dickinson’s opinion of the traditional and anthropomorphic ‘God,’ who was still, in her day, a portentous Victorian gentleman. Her real reverence, the reverence that made her a mystic poet of the finest sort, was reserved for Nature, which seemed to her a more manifest and more beautiful evidence of Divine Will than creeds and churches. This she saw, observed, loved, with a burning simplicity and passion which nevertheless did not exclude her very agile sense of humor. Her Nature poems, however, are not the most secretly revelatory or dramatically compulsive of her poems, nor, on the whole, the best. They are often of extraordinary delicacy--nearly always given us, with deft brevity, the exact in terms of the quaint. But, also, they are often superficial, a mere affectionate playing with the smaller things that give her delight; and to see her at her best and most characteristic and most profound, one must turn to the remarkable range of metaphysical speculation and ironic introspection which is displayed in those sections of her posthumous books which her editors have captioned Life, and Time and Eternity.

In the former sections are the greater number of her set 'meditations' on the nature of things. For some critics they will always appear too bare, bleak, and fragmentary. They have no trappings, only here and there a shred of purple. It is as if Miss Dickinson, who in one of her letters uttered her contempt for the 'obtrusive body,' had wanted to make them, as nearly as possible, disembodied thought. The thought is there, at all events, hard, bright, and clear; and her symbols, her metaphors, of which she could be prodigal, have an analogous clarity and translucency. What is also there is a downright homeliness which is a perpetual surprise and delight. Emerson's gnomic style she tunes up to the epigrammatic--the epigrammatic she often carries to the point of the cryptic; she becomes what one might call an epigrammatic symbolist....

Death, and the problem of life after death, obsessed her. She seems to have thought of it constantly--she died all her life, she probed death daily....Ultimately, the obsession became morbid, and her eagerness for details, after the death of a friend--the hungry desire to know *how* she died--became almost vulture-like. But the preoccupation, with its horrible uncertainties--its doubts about immortality, its hatred of the flesh, and its many reversals of both positions--gave us her sharpest work. The theme was inexhaustible for her. If her poetry seldom became 'lyrical,' seldom departed from the colorless sobriety of its bare iambs and toneless assonance, it did so most of all when the subject was death. Death profoundly and cruelly invited her. It was most of all when she tried 'to touch the smile,' and dipped her 'fingers in the frost,' that she took full possession of her genius.

Her genius was, it remains to say, as erratic as it was brilliant. Her disregard for accepted forms or for regularities was incorrigible. Grammar, rhyme, meter--anything went by the board if it stood in the way of thought or freedom of utterance. Sometimes this arrogance was justified; sometimes not. She did not care in the least for variety of effect--of her six hundred-odd poems practically all are in octosyllabic quatrains or couplets, sometimes with rhyme, sometimes with assonance, sometimes with neither. Everywhere, when one first comes to these poems, one seems to see nothing but a colorless dry monotony. How deceptive a monotony, concealing what reserves of depth and splendor; what subtleties of mood and tone! Once adjust oneself to the spinsterly angularity of the mode, its lack of eloquence or rhetorical speed, its naive and often prosaic directness, one discovers felicities of thought and phrase on every page. The magic is terse and sure.

And ultimately one simply sighs at Miss Dickinson's singular perversity, her lapses and tyrannies, and accepts them as an inevitable part of the strange and original genius she was. The lapses and tyrannies become a positive charm--one even suspects they were deliberate. They satisfied her--therefore they satisfy us. This marks, of course, our complete surrender to her highly individual gift, and to the singular sharp beauty, present everywhere, of her personality. The two things cannot be separated; and together, one must suppose, they suffice to put her among the finest poets in the language."

Conrad Aiken  
"Emily Dickinson"  
*Dial* LXXVI (April 1924) 301-08

"Emily Dickinson was not only a lyric poet; she was in a profound sense a comic poet in the American tradition. She possessed the sense of scale and caught this within her small compass. A little tippler, she leaned against the sun. The grave for her was a living place whose elements grew large in stone. Purple mountains moved for her; a train, clouds, a pathway through a valley became huge and animate. Much of her poetry is in the ascending movement, full of morning imagery, of supernal mornings: seraphim tossing their snowy hats on high might be taken as her symbol. Her poetry is also comic in the Yankee strain, with its resilience and sudden unprepared ironical lines. Her use of an unstressed irony in a soft blank climax is the old formula frown almost fixed, yet fresh because it was used with a new depth.

And she could double ironically upon herself as well as upon the Deity. In the end--or at least in the composite, for the end is hardly known--she contrived to see a changing universe within that acceptant view which is comic in its profoundest sense, which is part reconciliation, part knowledge of eternal disparity. If she did not achieve the foundation of a divine comedy she was at least aware of its elements; its outlines are scattered through the numberless brief notations of her poems....Like Poe and Hawthorne and Henry James, though with a simpler intensity than theirs, Emily Dickinson trenched upon those shaded subtleties toward which the American imagination long had turned....Even her glances toward an exterior

world at their finest are subjective. Her poetry was indwelling in a final sense; she used that deeply interior speech which is soliloquy, even though it was in brief song.

She never lost a slight air of struggle; this appeared persistently in her sudden flights to new verbal and tonal keys, in her careless assonances which still seemed half intentional, in the sudden muting of her rhymes....her poems concentrate upon a swift turn of inner drama...Her language is bold, humorously and defiantly experimental...yet often she achieved only a hasty anarchy in meaning and expression, and created hardly more than a roughly carven shell....She seemed to emerge afresh as from a chrysalis in each lyric or even in each brief stanza; and the air was one which had been evident before in the sequence of American expression. Emerson had it...in everything he wrote. Whitman had it, and was aware of the quality: it was that of improvisation.

Her poetry has an abounding fresh intensity, a touch of conquering zeal, a true entrance into new provinces of verbal music; but incompleteness touches her lyricism. Often--indeed most often--her poems are only poetic flashes, notes, fragments of poetry rather than a final poetry."

Constance Rourke  
*American Humor*  
(Doubleday/Anchor 1931) 209-12

"Our perspective on the post-Civil War Period has been widened by the posthumous poetry of Emily Dickinson, as supreme in her self-contained medium as Whitman in his, and, in a sense, his complement. In this poetess, who published only a few poems during her lifetime, burned silently a flame like the white light of the sun, and as bold in its relation to the universe. Scholars and dilettantes still argue the facts of her outward life, which she passed in Amherst, Massachusetts. Whether frustrated by an unhappy love affair, whether, indeed, frustrated at all, she lived a life of inner concentration, in which developed discriminating shades of feeling--whimsical, tragic, ironical, gay, meditative, wry, mocking, wistful.

Overtone of her loneliness, of her friction with her father, of her New England background penetrate her poetry, but are dissolved in the crystal of her condensed quatrains. Slowly she wrote these fragile lyrics, each surcharged with the momentary mood...One may relate Emily Dickinson's integrity of mind to the passion for actuality pervading America, expressed now not in the bawling of pioneers but in the gossamer strength of a woman's soul. Bare truth suffices for her, this incandescent part and parcel of God, as she might have been called by Emerson--whose essays were among her treasured books. In the literary scales, perhaps, one Emily Dickinson outweighs a library of frontier literature."

Stanley T. Williams  
*American Literature*  
(Lippincott 1933) 131-33

"Mr. Aldrich's tinkered stanza follows...*Idiotic meddler!* [italics added] What has he dared to do to one of the most delicious lines in the English language! Mr. Aldrich takes one line of Emily's and then writes three nondescript of his own, in the interest of 'swallow flights' and 'lyrical intermezzos.'

'From tankards scooped in pearl' enjoins our attention, after being so vandalized. Quite apart from the sounds received and carried on by it, it runs the voice from the *a*'s in 'tankards' to the *o*'s in 'scooped' and then produces the word 'pearl,' on which to let them culminate; the *nk* and the *r* in 'tankard' catching all the other consonants as the ripple of tone-colour runs down the line. If anyone needs the pale device of rhyme after such interplay of sound, culminating in 'Yield such an alcohol,' he is tone-deaf and deserves to be so. But he should be told that, while he was hearing nothing, the stanza as a whole has been giving off the variations on the sound of *I*, firmly placed in the middle of the first line, at the end of the second, near the beginning of the third to culminate in 'yield' and the *l*'s of 'alcohol.'"

Genevieve Taggard  
*The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson*  
(Knopf 1934) 267-70

"Her meter, at its worst--that is, most of the time--is a kind of stiff sing-song; her diction, at its worst, is a kind of poetic nursery jargon; and there is a remarkable continuity of manner...between her worst and her

best poems.... 'I like to see it lap the miles...' The poem is abominable; and the quality of silly playfulness which renders it abominable is diffused more or less perceptibly throughout most of her work, and this diffusion is facilitated by the limited range of her metrical schemes....The difficulty is this: that even in her most nearly perfect poems, even in those poems in which the defects do not intrude momentarily in a crudely obvious form, one is likely to feel a fine trace of her countrified eccentricity; there is nearly always a margin of ambiguity in our final estimate of even her most extraordinary work...yet she is a poetic genius of the highest order....

Her poetic subject matter might be subdivided roughly as follows: natural description; the definition of moral experience, including the definition of difficulties of comprehension; and the mystical experience, or the definition of the experience of 'immortality,' to use a favorite word, or of beatitude. The second subdivision includes a great deal, and her best work falls within it...Her descriptive poems contain here and there brilliant strokes, but she had the hard and uncompromising approach to experience of the early New England Calvinists; lacking all subtlety, she displays the heavy hand of one unaccustomed to fragile objects; her efforts at lightness are distressing. Occasionally, instead of endeavoring to treat the small subject in terms appropriate to it, she endeavors to treat it in terms appropriate to her own temperament, and we have what appears a deliberate excursion into obscurity, the subject being inadequate to the rhetoric, as in the last stanza of the poem beginning, 'At half-past three a single bird'...The stanza probably means, roughly, that bird and song alike have disappeared, but the word 'circumference,' a resonant and impressive one, is pure nonsense....

Emily Dickinson was a product of the New England tradition of moral Calvinism; her dissatisfaction with her tradition led to her questioning most of its theology and discarding much of it, and led to her reinterpreting some of it, one would gather, in the direction of a more nearly Catholic Christianity. Her acceptance of Christian moral concepts was unimpaired, and the moral tone of her character remained immitigably Calvinistic in its hard and direct simplicity. As a result of this Calvinistic temper, she lacked the lightness and grace which might have enabled her to master minor themes; she sometimes stepped without hesitation into obscurantism, both verbal and metaphysical...Her best work is on themes more generalized and inclusive.

Emily Dickinson differed from every other major New England writer of the nineteenth century, and from every major American writer of the century save Melville, of those affected by New England, in this: that her New England heritage, though it made her life a moral drama, did not leave her life in moral confusion. It impoverished her in one respect, however: of all great poets, she is the most lacking in taste; there are innumerable beautiful lines and passages wasted in the desert of her crudities; her defects, more than those of any other great poet that I have read, are constantly on the brink, or pushing beyond the brink, of her best poems. This stylistic character is the natural product of the New England which produced the barren little meeting houses; of the New England founded by the harsh and intrepid pioneers, who in order to attain salvation trampled brutally through a world which they were too proud and too impatient to understand. In this respect, she differs from Melville, whose taste was rich and cultivated. But except by Melville, she is surpassed by no writer that this country has produced; *she is one of the greatest lyric poets of all time.*" [italics added]

Yvor Winters  
*In Defense of Reason*  
(Alan Swallow 1937-47) 283-84, 298-99

"What she actually represents is the last surprising bloom--the November witch-hazel blossom--of New England's flowering time....She was a child of the Golden Day and never lost the impress of the period. Three of its strongest currents came to a confluence in her poetry: The Puritan tradition in which she was nurtured; the Yankee or, more broadly, American humor that was just coming out of the ground; and the spiritual unrest, typified by Emerson, which everywhere was melting the frost of custom....Each was implicit in her surroundings and was absorbed from the atmosphere of her time. Blended, they gave her a style that was both original and native."

George F. Whicher  
*This Was a Poet*  
(New York 1939)

“The Dickinsons lived in the principal house in Amherst....Emerson, Phillips, Beecher and Curtis had stayed in this house next door...Emily usually ‘elfed it’ when visitors came. She was always in the act of disappearing...While sometimes, in the evening, she flitted across the garden, she never left the place by day or night. To have caught a fleeting glimpse of her was something to boast of...There were nurse-maids who thought she was a witch. They frightened the children by uttering her name, as if there were something malign in Miss Dickinson’s queerness...She was rapt in a private world of sensation and thoughts. It was even observed that her handwriting went through three distinct phases and that towards the end the letters never touched. Each character, separately formed, stood quite alone....

She liked the common hymn-metres, and the metres of nursery-jingles, which had been deeply ingrained in her mind as a child, and she seemed to take a rebellious joy in violating all their rules, fulfilling the traditional patterns while she also broke them. She was always experimenting with her rhymes and her rhythms, sometimes adding extra syllables to break up their monotony, sometimes deliberately twisting a rhyme, as Emerson did, for the sake of harshness, to escape the mellifluous effect of conventional poems. Many of her pieces were like parodies of hymns, whose gentle glow in her mind had become heat-lightning. For Emily Dickinson’s light was quick. It was sudden, sharp and evanescent; and this light was the dry light that is closest to fire....The turns of fancy that marked these poems were sharp and unpredictable, and yet they were singularly natural,--nothing was forced.

Miss Dickinson lived in a world of paradox, while her eye was microscopic, her imagination dwelt with mysteries and grandeurs...To juxtapose the great and the small, in unexpected ways, had been one of her prime amusements as the wit of her circle...These poems were fairylike in their shimmer and lightness, they moved like bees upon a raft of air; and yet one felt behind them an energy of mind and spirit that only the rarest poets ever possessed...Such were the games of solitaire that Miss Dickinson played in the silent room, as lonely as Jane Eyre...She felt that she knew love because she had lost it; and certainly for all she missed she made up in intensity. Where others merely glowed, she was incandescent.”

Van Wyck Brooks  
*New England: Summer 1865-1915*  
(Dutton 1940 ) 316-19, 326, 328

“Emily Dickinson’s poems, because they have such tension, are much more authentically in the metaphysical tradition than Emerson’s are. Not, however, that many of his values were not hers also--especially where they concerned the integrity of the mind and the sufficiency of inner resources. Moreover, her ideals of language, indeed her very tricks of phrase, seem [at times] indistinguishable from those of his...She does not have any of his range as a social critic, but her best poems display an excruciated awareness of the matching of good against evil, which was foreign to Emerson’s temperament. Their compressed form resulted from her need to resolve conflicts, and her conceits, unlike many of his, do not dissipate in every direction, since they are subordinated to a central issue....

And though Emily Dickinson’s comprehension of Shakespeare’s treatment of good and evil was undoubtedly as keen as Melville’s, her own drama, however intense, remained personal and lyric. Melville’s greater horizon of experience, the vigorous thrust of his mind, and the strength of his passion carried him, as similar attributes had carried Blake, into wider and more dangerous waters.”

F. O. Matthiessen  
*American Renaissance*  
(Oxford 1941) 115, 434

“Before her death, she had composed well over 1000 brief lyrics, her ‘letter to the world,’ records of the life about her, of tiny ecstasies set in motion by mutations of the seasons or by home and garden incidents, of candid insights into her own states of consciousness, and of speculations on the timeless mysteries of love and death. Her mind was charged with paradox, as though her vision, like the eyes of birds, was focused in opposite directions on the two worlds of material and immaterial values. She could express feelings of deepest poignancy in terms of wit. Like Emerson, her preference for the intrinsic and the essential led her often to a gnomic concision of phrase, but her artistry in the modulation of simple meters

and the delicate management of imperfect rhymes was greater than his. Her daringly precise metaphors made her seem to Amy Lowell a precursor of the Imagist school.”

James D. Hart

*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5th edition  
(Oxford 1941-83)

“We shall never learn where she got the rich quality of her mind. The moral image that we have of Miss Dickinson stands out in every poem; it is that of a dominating spinster whose very sweetness must have been formidable. Yet her poetry constantly moves within an absolute order of truths that overwhelmed her simply because to her they were unalterably fixed. It is dangerous to assume that her ‘life,’ which to the biographers means the thwarted love affair she is supposed to have had, gave to her poetry a decisive direction....

The general symbol of Nature, for her, is Death, and her weapon against Death is the entire powerful dumb-show of the puritan theology led by Redemption and Immortality. Morally speaking, the problem for James and Miss Dickinson is similar. But her advantages were greater than his. The advantages lay in the availability to her of the puritan ideas on the theological plane....The values are purified by the triumphant withdrawal from Nature, by their power to recover from Nature. The poet attains to a mastery over experience by facing its utmost implications. There is a clash of powerful opposites, and in all great poetry--for Emily Dickinson is a great poet--it issues in a tension between abstraction and sensation...

We are shown our roots in Nature by examining our differences with Nature; we are renewed by Nature without being delivered into her hands. When it is possible for a poet to do this for us with the greatest imaginative comprehension, a possibility that the poet cannot himself create, we have the perfect literary situation. Only a few times in the history of English poetry has this situation come about, notably, the period between about 1580 and the Restoration. There was a similar age in New England from which emerged two talents of the first order--Hawthorne and Emily Dickinson. There is an epoch between James and Miss Dickinson. But between her and Hawthorne there exists a difference of intellectual quality. She lacks almost radically the power to seize upon and understand abstractions for their own sake; she does not separate them from the sensuous illuminations that she is so marvelously adept at...

Like Donne, she *perceives abstraction and thinks sensation*....Neither the feeling nor the style of Miss Dickinson belongs to the seventeenth century; yet between her and Donne there are remarkable ties. Their religious ideas, their abstractions, are momentarily toppling from the rational plane to the level of perception....In Miss Dickinson, as in Donne, we may detect a singularly morbid concern, not for religious truth, but for personal revelation....Miss Dickinson and John Donne would have this in common: their sense of the natural world is not blunted by a too rigid system of ideas; yet the ideas, the abstractions, their education or their intellectual heritage, are not so weak as to let their immersion in nature, or their purely personal quality, to get out of control....

Hawthorne was a master of ideas, within a limited range; this narrowness confined him to his own kind of life, his own society, and out of it grew his typical forms of experience, his steady, almost obsessed vision of man; it explains his depth and intensity. Yet he is always conscious of the abstract, doctrinal aspect of his mind, and when his vision of action and emotion is weak, his work becomes didactic. Now Miss Dickinson’s poetry often runs into quasi-homiletic forms, but it is never didactic. Her very ignorance, her lack of formal intellectual training, preserved her from the risk that imperiled Hawthorne. She cannot reason at all. She can only *see*. It is impossible to imagine what she might have done with drama or fiction; for, not approaching the puritan temper and through it the puritan myth, through human action, she is able to grasp the terms of the myth directly and by a feat that amounts almost to anthropomorphism, to give them a luminous tension, a kind of drama, among themselves....

Like Miss Dickinson, Shakespeare is without opinions; his peculiar merit is also deeply involved in his failure to think about anything; his meaning is not in the content of his expression; it is in the tension of the dramatic relations of his characters. This kind of poetry is at the opposite of intellectualism. (Miss Dickinson is obscure and difficult, but that is not intellectualism.) To T. W. Higginson, the editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, who tried to advise her, she wrote that she had no education. In any sense that Higginson

could understand, it was quite true. His kind of education was the conscious cultivation of abstractions. She did not reason about the world she saw; she merely saw it. The 'ideas' implicit in the world within her rose up, concentrated in her immediate perception....

Miss Dickinson was a deep mind writing from a deep culture, and when she came to poetry, she came infallibly. Infallibly, at her best; for no poet has ever been perfect, nor is Miss Dickinson. Her precision of statement is due to the directness with which the abstract framework of her thought acts upon its unorganized material. The two elements of her style, considered as point of view, are immortality, or the idea of permanence, and the physical process of death or decay. Her diction has two corresponding features: words of Latin or Greek origin and, sharply opposed to these, the concrete Saxon element. It is this verbal conflict that gives to her verse its high tension; it is not a device deliberately seized upon, but a feeling for language that sensed out the two fundamental components of English and their metaphysical relation: the Latin for ideas and the Saxon for perceptions--the peculiar virtue of English as a poetic language....

She has Hawthorne's intellectual toughness, a hard, definite sense of the physical world. The highest flights to God, the most extravagant metaphors of the strange and the remote, come back to a point of casuistry, to a moral dilemma of the experienced world. There is, in spite of the homiletic vein of utterance, no abstract speculation, nor is there a message to society; she speaks wholly to the individual experience. She offers to the unimaginative no riot of vicarious sensation; she has no useful maxims for men of action. Up to this point her resemblance to Emerson is slight: poetry is a sufficient form of utterance, and her devotion to it is pure. But in Emily Dickinson the puritan world is no longer self-contained; it is no longer complete; her sensibility exceeds its dimensions. She has trimmed down its supernatural proportions; it has become a morality; instead of the tragedy of the spirit there is a commentary upon it. Her poetry is a magnificent personal confession, blasphemous and, in its self-revelation, its honesty, almost obscene. It comes out of an intellectual life towards which it feels no moral responsibility. Cotton Mather would have burnt her for a witch."

Allen Tate  
*On the Limits of Poetry*  
(Swallow 1948)

"In Emily Dickinson's poetry, taking it by and large, there is but one major theme, one symbolic act, one incandescent center of meaning. Expressed in the most general terms, this theme is the achievement of status through crucial experiences. The kinds of status our poet imagines are variously indicated by such favorite words as 'queen,' 'royal,' 'wife,' 'woman,' 'poet,' 'immortal,' and 'empress.' The kinds of experience which confer status are love, marriage, death, poetic expression, and immediate intuitive experiences which have the redemptive power of grace. We have here the basis of a fairly complex and various poetry. Yet we must observe that the view of life which our poet has taken for her central theme is based even more severely than it at first seems on a series of sharp and definitive exclusions. Each 'estate' involves its own renunciation, except for one: immortality. And each of the crucial experiences which confer the different kinds of status is a type and emblem of one of them: coming of death."

Richard Chase  
*Emily Dickinson*  
(New York 1951) 121-22

"Emily Dickinson often represents nature as a pageant of a symbolic pantomime. The motions of nature in summer, for example, make her think of 'priests' adjusting symbols or of 'the far theatricals of day.' Yet it would be a mistake to say that she makes nature into a mere bodiless drama, shadowing forth divine things. Nature does not symbolize God. It is true that in the sun or the lightning one may see a mode of His action, as in darkness one may see a simulacrum of His leisure or as in the ocean one may sense His width and depth. But on the whole one does not see God in nature. So far as one can perceive it, the essence of nature, beheld in relation to human life, is impermanence, anxiety, and disintegration. The essence of God is His absolute changeless repose. So striking to Emily Dickinson is this difference that she does not easily imagine any natural phenomenon to be symbolic of Deity. Except for His very general quality of repose God remains inscrutable.



But Nature is aggressively a fact—so consequential and inclusive a fact that it symbolizes itself. Its ‘theatricality’ is the ritual of its destructive encroachment upon human life. Thus Nature is both symbol and reality. This paradox, together with the irreparable estrangement between man and Nature, renders Nature unintelligible in its final essence, though there is no doubt about its function in relation to man....Nature is both reality and symbol, both house and ghost. The ‘simplicity’ of Nature consists not in its essence but in its function, which is to act as the condition of man’s death. We cannot know Nature by getting close to it, because the closer we get to Nature the closer we get to unconsciousness and death.

The transcendental doctrine of correspondences doubtless made an impression on Emily Dickinson’s thinking, and it may have given her some warrant (beyond her inherited Puritanism) for talking about the symbolic and typifying function of Nature. But she differed from Emerson in never doubting the estrangement of man from the cosmos. ‘Correspondence’ was hardly the word for the sense of bereavement, alienation, and dread which man feels when he confronts Nature. She could not believe in what Emerson called ‘that wonderful congruity which subsists between man and the world,’ though in fairness one must add that Emerson did not always believe in it either.

In her view of Nature Emily Dickinson is more easily compared with such a writer as Jonathan Edwards than with Emerson or the Romantic poets. In speaking of Edwards, Perry Miller has said that he ‘went into nature and experience, not in search of the possible, but of the given, of that which cannot be controverted, of that to which reason has access only through perception and pain....’ If she had formulated her view of Nature, Emily Dickinson would have written something a good deal like this. She was not much given to speculative thought. But there is obviously considerable philosophic activity in her verse. And this is some warrant for saying that when she reflects upon Nature, she does so in the manner of Edwards and that at those moments in her poetry when ‘reflects’ is too complicated a word to describe what is going on, her imagination works with what T. S. Eliot would call the ‘emotional equivalent’ of Edwards’s theological naturalism.”

Richard Chase  
*Emily Dickinson*  
(William Sloane 1951)66-72

“Here is a child of New England Puritanism sternly reared in a strict household, shut off from much of life, increasingly retiring. But here also is a playful humorist, a passionate rebel, daring in her feeling, thinking, and expression....Beginning in the 1920’s many critics have praised her, along with Whitman, for pioneering in modern poetry. The uses Miss Dickinson made of imperfect rhyme or eye-rhyme, the liberties she took with grammar and rhythm, and, in particular, her habit of packing her lines with cryptic meanings have endeared her to present-day readers. Too, her vivid imagination and her playful spirit made her as fond of poetic conceits as John Donne, idol of the moderns, had been in the seventeenth-century. The resemblance to Donne was almost certainly not the result of imitation: like the best modern poets, Miss Dickinson evolved a way of her own with words....Emerson...she knew in person and as an author, and [there are] stylistic resemblances between the verse of the Transcendentalist leader and that of Miss Dickinson.”

James E. Miller, Jr.  
*The Literature of the United States II*, 3rd edition  
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 177-78

“One notices how many of her poems seem less concerned with a total conception than with expressing a series of staccato inspirations occurring to her in the form of individual words....Emily Dickinson herself gives us ample warrant for studying her poems a word at a time. Her constant practice of compiling a thesaurus of word choices for a single line, while constituting grave editorial difficulty, is at least an indication that each word was a veritable dynamo of implication and associations....Her poems indicate that she regarded words as organic--separate little entities with a being, growth, and immortality of their own....Connotations and symbolic extensions of meaning become inseparable from the word, so that its pronouncement will forever stimulate an entire ‘circumference’ of meaning.”

Donald E. Thackrey  
*Emily Dickinson's Approach to Poetry*  
(U Nebraska 1954)

“Her religious traditions held that man is a dependent creature whose intuitions are untrustworthy, that he is not perfectible in this life or by his own effort, that he is not the source of moral law, and that revelation is to be sought though it cannot be guaranteed. These portions of the traditional [Calvinist, as opposed to Unitarian] orthodoxy--and they constitute a major part of it--she clung to even in her moments of severest doubt. Her philosophic utterances thus have a durable consistency which they would lack had she expressed herself in terms of [the] Romantic idealism [which was integral to Unitarian doctrine]....

Although writers of free verse acknowledge a debt to Emily Dickinson, she wrote in fact almost nothing which today would be called *vers libre*, that is, cadenced verse, as distinguished from that which is metrical or rhymed. Her first attempt to do so in 1862, ‘Victory comes late,’ seems to have been her last, for it evidently convinced her that such a form was not the medium which best transmitted her mood and ideas.... To her contemporaries, and to most critics at the time her poems were first published, her seemingly unpatterned verses appeared to be the work of an original but undisciplined artist. Actually she was creating a new medium of expression.

Basically all her poems employ meters derived from English hymnology. They are usually iambic or trochaic, but occasionally dactylic. They were the metric forms familiar to her from childhood as the measures in which Watt's hymns were composed....Her great contribution to English prosody was that she perceived how to gain new effects by exploring the possibilities within traditional metric patterns. She then took the final step toward that flexibility within patterns which she sought. She began merging in one poem the various meters themselves so that the forms, which intrinsically carry their own retardment or acceleration, could be made to supply the continuum for the mood and ideas of the language. Thus iambs shift to trochees, trochees to dactyls, and on occasion all three are merged.

At the same time she put into practice her evident belief that verse which limits itself to exact rhyme is denied the possible enrichment that other kinds can bring. Her pioneering is here too in the new order erected on old foundations. She felt no more bound to one kind of rhyme than she did to one meter. She should have realized that she was charting a lonely voyage, and in some degree she did, but her independent nature gave her self-assurance. Her way of poetry was to prove far lonelier than she expected, for it denied her in her own lifetime all public recognition. The metric innovations might have been tolerated, but in her day no critic of English verse would have been willing to accept her rhymes. Milton had proved that English verse could be great with no rhyme at all. No one in 1860, reader or critic, was ready to let it be supple and varied.”

Thomas H. Johnson  
*Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography*  
(Cambridge 1955)

“Her poetry is like her life, strange and different, sometimes affectedly whimsical, but at its best it has a quality all its own. This poetry is Emily Dickinson's ‘letter to the world,’ which, she said, never wrote to her. It is not the verse of a lonely, self-pitying recluse, absorbed in private grief. ‘To live is so startling,’ she wrote, ‘it leaves but little room for other occupations.’ A walk in her garden, a sunset, the death of a friend, a theological riddle, a rushing locomotive--all went into the alembic of her revelry and thought. The resultant distillate was unlike any other. In looking at Nature, her microscopic eye catches new images: a snake becomes ‘a whip-lash unbraiding in the sun,’ and the jay is ‘a prompt executive bird.’

But Nature is not her chief concern: ‘I thought that nature was enough / Till human nature came.’ Though she saw little of people, she saw through them readily. She was sharp on a pompous churchman who ‘preached upon breadth till it argued him narrow,’ and on the ‘dreary somebodies,’ who, froglike, ‘told their name the livelong day / To an admiring bog.’ She took her stand against trade, pillars of society, and public officials, and for the dignity of the unregimented individual: ‘I took my power in my hand / And went against the world.’ Most of her poetry, however, is devoted to her own mind and thoughts, although she warned against her subjectivity's being taken too literally. ‘When I state myself, as the representative of the verse, it does not mean me, but a supposed person.’

Her poetry is full of startling figures of speech, familiar words in unfamiliar uses, learned expressions (Noah Webster's *Dictionary* was one of her favorite books), sudden shifts of tone, metrical irregularities,

deliberately imperfect rhymes, and grammatical difficulties. She was quite literally ahead of her time, and she has exerted a considerable influence on American poets of the present century, who have been attracted by her technical restraint, her bold imagery, her experimentation with words and concern for ideas, her cryptic brevity, and her revolt against sentimentality and poetic diction. Her fame has continually increased, and the little New England spinster, confined in her lifetime to a single house and garden, is now recognized as one of the world's few great women poets."

Lillian H. Hornstein, G. D. Percy, Sterling A. Brown, Leon Edel, Horst Frenz, William L. Halstead,  
Robert B. Heilman, Calvin S. Brown, William M. Gibson, S. F. Johnson, Napoleon J. Tremblay  
*The Reader's Companion to World Literature*  
(New American Library Mentor/Dryden Press 1956)

"The Dickinson practice was to punctuate by dashes, as if the reader would know what the dashes meant--both grammatically and dramatically--by giving the verses voice. Within her practice, and to her own ear, she was no doubt consistent. To find out what that consistency was, and to articulate it for other readers and other voices, requires more of a system than ever bothered her...The Dickinson practice cannot be systematized; there is not enough *there*; but with enough intimacy with the poems we can see what sort of system might have emerged...In English poetry it seldom presents itself with such multiplicity of irritation--so much freedom in rearrangement--with such spontaneity left to the reader...Consider how Emily Dickinson's poems, all short, have none of the self-modulating advantages of length or any of the certainties of complex overt structure. One exaggerates, but it sometimes seems as if in her work a cat came at us speaking English, our own language, but without the pressure of all the other structures we are accustomed to attend....

Emily Dickinson withdrew from the world in all the ways she could manage, and was connected with the world by the *pangs* of the experience she could not abide and yet could not let go. She could not perfect her withdrawal, and she found herself in successive stages of the inability to return...She found herself a shut-in...The willfulness of her syntax led to irregularities rather than to new orders...One thinks in her of enthusiastic transcendence and of lyric solipsism."

R. P. Blackmur  
"Emily Dickinson's Notation"  
*The Kenyon Review* 18 (Spring 1956)

"By the instinct of the artist she had found her own way, in the 1860's, toward forms of expression which only became naturalized in the iconoclastic 1920's. Her style was simple yet passionate, and marked by economy and concentration. Like the later generation she discovered that the sharp, intense image is the poet's best instrument. She anticipated the modern enlargement of melody by assonance, dissonance, and 'off-rhyme'; she discovered, as our contemporaries did, the utility of the ellipsis of thought and the verbal ambiguity. Her ideas were witty, rebellious, and original, yet she confined her materials to the world of her small village, her domestic circle, her garden, and a few good books. She possessed the most acute awareness of sensory experience and psychological actualities, and she expressed radical discoveries in these areas with frankness and force. Confronted with the question of how, in her narrow life, she came by these instruments and this knowledge, one can only conclude that it was by sheer genius. She remains incomparable because her originality sets her apart from all others, but her poems shed the unmistakable light of greatness."

Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, eds.  
*The American Tradition in Literature*, 3rd edition I  
(Norton 1956-67) 177-78

"The visible setting of these poems was the New England countryside, the village, the garden, the household that she knew so well, a scene, the only scene she knew, that she invested with magic, so that the familiar objects became portents and symbols...She domesticated the universe and read her own experience into the motions of nature...Miss Dickinson lived in a world of paradox, for, while her eye was microscopic, her imagination dwelt with mysteries and grandeurs. To juxtapose the great and the small, in unexpected ways, had been one of her prime amusements as the wit of her circle...The poems were fairylike in their shimmer and lightness, they moved like bees upon a raft of air; and yet one felt behind

them an energy of mind and spirit that only the rarest poets have possessed. Where others merely glowed, she was incandescent....Emily Dickinson died in 1886 at Amherst in the red-brick house where she was born....She had left word to have her poems burned.”

Van Wyck Brooks and Otto L. Bettmann  
*Our Literary Heritage: A Pictorial History of the Writer in America*  
(Dutton 1956) 173

“Emily stands, among New Englanders, between Emerson and Hawthorne,--of whom she wrote that he ‘entices-appalls.’ Her rearing was in Trinitarian Congregationalism--often in New England villages referred to as--in contrast to Unitarian heresy--the Orthodox Church. Unlike the rest of her family (some of whom capitulated early, some later), Emily never ‘joined the church,’ never would fix the content of her belief; but she knew what her neighbors and her pastor believed, and--like Emerson in his attacks on Harvard College--had the personal comfort and poetic license of cherishing favorite skepticisms...She lacks Hawthorne’s sense of sin, and isolation for privacy is hardly an evil to her; the analogy to Hawthorne lies rather in her obsession with death and futurity,--still more the sense of mystery...Her deepest poems are metaphysical or tragic; her mode of vision is symbolist--thinking in analogies. Emerson...may have flexed her mind, encouraged her speculations and her questionings of orthodoxy; but her mythology remains--what Hawthorne’s was and Emerson’s never--Biblical and Trinitarian. She is a rebel--but not, like Emerson, a schismatic...”

God was her lover. The God whom she revered was not the Son...but God the Father, the Lover at once infinitely attractive and infinitely awesome, one partly revealed by the Son and His nature, but only partly revealed; finally, the unattainable God. ‘He who loves God must not expect to be loved in return.’ All of Emily’s lovers were unattainable: either members of her family or women or married men; and they were doubtless loved, in her way, precisely because they were unattainable.”

Austin Warren  
“Emily Dickinson”  
*The Sewanee Review* (Autumn 1957)

“Blackmur makes a perfunctory admission of Emily’s greatness, but most of his essay is concerned to deny it. He concedes that she had ‘an aptitude for language’...but objects that she was naive and unprofessional....Blackmur is of the school of Eliot and Auden, both of whom have expressed themselves as opposed to the idea of inspiration in poetry. He prefers poetry which is demonstrably a wrought and contrived work of art....The life she constructed for herself within, yet apart from, that society was lived in the world of her poetry; and that world was built, like the world of the classical renaissance, on a hierarchical order, in which flowers, insects, birds, animals, inanimate nature, humanity and divinity had their appointed places. It does not matter whether the pattern of her royal hierarchy derives from the *Bible*, from Shakespeare, or from myth and legend. It is perfectly valid within its context. The King is usually her lost lover, husband, master; the Queen is herself...”

Emily could not rationalize in the masculine way. We are not aware of intellectual deficiency in her poems, as we are aware of poetic deficiency in Elizabeth Barrett’s. The latter, educated in a strenuously male discipline, tried to reason like a man. Emily reasoned, or argued, in riddles and paradoxes....Her wit has been compared to the metaphysical style of Donne; it may also be compared with the gnomic style of Blake. It occurs in her letters and was, according to witnesses, a feature of her conversation....Emily’s arrival at the truth in this sibylline fashion is not so much irrational as super-rational. She is interested, not so much in a truth for its own sake--she was not a philosopher or a moralist--as in a direct vision of the truth. One might rationalize the vision or intuition after it had occurred, but that was not her business as a poet. In seeking to understand her poems, which are often highly cryptic, we require intuition rather than reason....

As for the irregularity of Emily’s rhymes and rhythms, it is difficult to find any consistent explanation, or any principle in which they can be said to occur deliberately. Emily composed by instinct--which is not to say automatically. She used the basic rhythms of the hymns she had heard from childhood, adapting them to the need of the moment. Her instinct told her that mechanical regularity makes for monotony. Her rhythms, considered as personal variations on a rigid pattern, are to be justified, or found wanting,

according to the shapes and sounds of particular poems. To my ear her rhythmic sense is seldom absolutely deficient, often inspired. There is more variety than the formal appearance of the poems would suggest, and a study of the rhythmic variations in any half-dozen of her best poems would reveal considerable subtlety.

Attempts have been made to show that her use of assonance instead of full rhyme is always deliberate artistry. It would be truer to say that, on the whole though not invariably, full rhyme accompanies her moods of confidence, and assonance her moods of uncertainty. But the exceptions are significant. All we can say is that she felt no particular compulsion to find exact rhymes, and that probably assonance also helped her to get away from the mechanical jingle of hymn-forms....We have to do with a poet of almost total originality, and it is very rarely that originality and formal perfection go together. There is about all original poets--Skelton, Donne, Blake, Hardy, Hopkins--a certain home-made roughness of form which, according to temperament, some will regard as a blessing, and some as a blemish. Ben Jonson regarded Donne's metrical irregularity as a blemish and on the whole posterity has disagreed with Jonson."

James Reeves  
Introduction  
*Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson*  
(Macmillan 1959)

"We find that the progress of the mystic toward illumination, and of the poet toward the full depth and richness of his insight, are much alike. Both work from the world of reality toward the realm of Essence; from the microcosm to the macrocosm....They see the world in a grain of sand and Heaven in a wild flower; and now and again they bring eternity into focus, as it were, in a phrase of the utmost clarity. In the work of Emily Dickinson such moments of still and halted perception are many. The slant of light on a winter day, the still brilliance of a summer noon, the sound of the wind before the rain--she speaks of these, and we share the shock of insight, the slight dislocation of serial events, the sudden shift from the Manifold into the One.

One of the dominant facts concerning Emily Dickinson is her spirit of religious unorthodoxy. Her deeply religious feeling ran outside the bounds of dogma; this individualism was, in fact, an inheritance from her Calvinist forbears, but it was out of place when contrasted to the Evangelicalism to which, in her time, so many Protestants had succumbed. She early set herself against the guilt and gloom inherent in this revivalism. She avoided the constrictions which a narrow insistence on religious rule and law would put upon her. She had read Emerson with delight, but, as Yvor Winters has remarked, it is a mistake to think of her as a Transcendentalist in dimity. Here again she worked through to a standpoint and an interpretation of her own; her attitude toward pain and suffering, toward the shocking facts of existence, was far more realistic than Emerson's. As we examine her chief spiritual preoccupations, we see how closely she relates to the English Romantic poets who, a generation or so before her, fought a difficult and unpopular battle against the eighteenth century's cold logic and mechanical point of view....

Scholars have busied themselves with the record; we know what color she names most frequently (purple) and what books she read (Shakespeare and the *Bible* well in the lead). We ourselves can discover, in the index to the three volumes, that her favorite subject was not death, as was long supposed; for life, love, and the soul are also recurring subjects. But the greatest interest lies in her progress as a writer, and as a person. We see the young poet moving away, by gradual degrees, from her early slight addiction to graveyardism, to an Emersonian belief in the largeness and harmony of nature. Step by step, she advances into the terror and anguish of her destiny; she is frightened, but she holds fast and describes her fright. She is driven to the verge of insanity, but manages to remain, in some fashion, the observer and recorder of her extremity. Nature is no longer a friend, but often an inimical presence. Nature is a haunted house. And--a truth even more terrible--the inmost self can be haunted.

At the highest summit of her art, she resembles no one....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. The stuff of Emily Dickinson's imagination is of this world; there is nothing macabre about her material (in the manner of Poe) and there is very little of the labored or artificial about her means....And her lyrical notation is so precise, so fine and moves so closely in union with her mind, that she is continually

striking out aphorisms, as is usual in mystical writing from Plotinus to Blake. And as her life goes on, everything becomes whittled down, evanescent. Her handwriting becomes a kind of fluid print; her poems become notations; all seems to be on the point of disappearing. And suddenly all disappears. 'She was a visionary,' says Richard Chase, 'to whom truth came with exclusive finality [and] like her Puritan forbears she was severe, downright, uncompromising, visionary, factual, sardonic'."

Louise Bogan  
"A Mystical Poet"

*Emily Dickinson: Three Views* (Amherst 1960)  
Richard Wilbur, Louise Bogan, Archibald MacLeish

"As a woman she was well aware that deprivation in life might be one of the pressures that produced art....But as a poet she knew that words were the only medium of her art, like colors to the painter and notes to the composer....From the *Bible* she learned among other things, the mode of juxtaposing elemental concrete things with equally fundamental ideas and feelings--grass, stone, heart, majesty, despair. But this method of achieving universality is given novelty by reducing the *Bible's* expansive narrative to startlingly compact lyrics....Her debt to Shakespeare was just as pervasive and even less visible. Poetic language in mid-nineteenth-century America had been reduced to a relatively flat and nerveless state, but he furnished her with clues for its resurrection. The major writers of the preceding generation had not only finished their careers but had brought the older way to a dead end. For a poet to come of age at such a time, as she did, may have been a handicap in that it deprived her of a living tradition within which or against which to work....

Dickinson is actually cited as a forerunner of modern poetic usage, but the other devices were part of her practice as well. Substitution of simple concrete terms for the abstract ones actually intended was her strategy for achieving vivid immediacy, and the opposite for giving transcendent value to the homely. Juxtaposition of words out of different connotative spheres she employed for ironic contrast, as with the legal and the amorous, and abrupt changes from one level of discourse to another for rhetorical shock, as from the serious to the comic, from eloquence to bald statement. Close kin to these are her rearrangements of word order to secure emphasis and surprise, deliberately rather than through ineptness, often merely by exaggerating a familiar colloquial usage...No child of the region ever exploited the laconic temperament so successfully in poetry. In striking contrast with the practice of her contemporaries is the brevity of her own forms, which she celebrated in an aphorism: 'Capacity to Terminate / Is a Specific Grace --' This gift she developed into a highly elliptical style, pruning away all excess in her passion to get down to the clean bones of language....

Her effect of reality is achieved not by an accent on pleasure or pain but by her dramatic use of their interaction. As an artist she took full advantage of contrast as a mode of definition, making the pleasure-pain antithesis a running strategy in her poetry....She simply separates the lesser pains that will heal from the greater pains that will not and chooses the latter as her special concern, noting with precision their qualities and above all their effects. If she had emphasized their causes, as from a loss of love or fame or religious faith, there would be more justification for biological inquiry....A number of her poems, though not usually the best, seem to relate this extreme suffering to loss in love....The pain that Dickinson explores in her major poems is of a sort the victim never fully recovered from. 'Split Lives—never "get well",' she commented in a letter....

The prerequisite for mastery, as in all Dickinson's best poetry, was to abandon the cumulative and logical for the tight symbolic structure that was her forte. Closely connected with this was the narrowing of her concern to one emotion at a time....Her best poetry is not concerned with the causes but with the qualities of pain, an emphasis that removes it effectively from the category of the sentimental....Her own approach at times seems almost clinical, but this is simply the mode she adopted to gain the proper distance between her personal emotions and her art. It separates her sharply from the subjective lyricism of an older tradition and reveals her kinship with the twentieth century. The qualities she sought to fix with greatest precision are its intensity, its duration, and the change it brings about. In several minor poems she used time as a measure of degree in defining the extremity of pain that was her real concern....

It is true that in her later years she indulged her penchant for aphorism in a number of verses that tend to run off into sheer intellectualism, even as some of her earliest efforts had been pure expressions of personal sentiment. Her best poems, however, present their themes in the full context of intellect and feeling, concerned not with exploiting either as such but with rendering the experiences that fuse them both.... 'Like Donne, she perceives abstraction and thinks sensation'....She was probably the only Anglo-American poet of her century who achieved a fusion of sensibility and thought, attaining 'a mastery over experience by facing its utmost implications.'

Her search for meaning within the self, as well as in the non-self outside, led to a search for rediscovery of the maker of these selves. A poem written in mid-career, of small intrinsic worth, has considerable interest as a statement of her progressive concern with nature, man, and God. At first she thought that 'nature' was a sufficient subject for her poetry, she says, until 'Human nature' came in and absorbed the other 'As Firmament as Flame'; then, when she had just begun her exploration of that, 'There added the Divine.' All of her major themes are listed here in order: the outer world and the inner; the other world and, by implication at least, the paradise of art as the nearest she could come to attaining the 'Divine.'

As a schoolgirl she had explained her inability to make peace with God because 'the world holds a predominant place in my affections.' Her withdrawal from society after maturity merely changed the terms of her loyalty, first to external nature then to the interior world of the self. As a poet she concluded that this last was the only reality she could know. It was also, she discovered, her best instrument for perceiving the processes of time and for conceiving the stasis of eternity, so that the reader today sees the ultimate purpose of all her explorations as religious in the profoundest sense of that term. And she would have rejoiced in the confirmation of her world view by modern thinkers, as in the recent definition of religion by an eminent scientist as 'a search for the relation between human desire and purpose on the one hand and cosmic change and indifference on the other.'

In contrast with the orthodoxy of her own day this approach could only seem heretical, however, which explains her tendency to discountenance herself as a religious person, as in her terse self-portrait late in life, 'I am but a Pagan'...Her pained sense of estrangement from the religion of her fathers lingered to the end, but so did the integrity that gave her courage to go her own way, to continue her search for heaven through poetry rather than through a theology she could not accept. This debate frames her perfect image for the earthly paradise where she wrestled with her angel. The mind and heart, the consciousness, the self, the soul—whatever word one wishes—this was the 'Magic Prison' she always explored in her poetry. 'Immured the whole of Life' within its walls she accepted the mortal lot as inescapable, trapped in time and wavering perpetually between doubt and belief in another life beyond. There she dedicated herself to creating the one thing of absolute value that, in her view, the human being is capable of. It goes under the rather inadequate name of religion, or art, the vision that comes with man's utmost reach towards truth and beauty. Its essence is longing, with ecstasy at one end and pain at the other, the leap of the heart and the despair of the mind."

Charles R. Anderson  
"Words," *Emily Dickinson's Poetry*  
(Holt 1960)

"At some point Emily Dickinson sent her whole Calvinist vocabulary into exile, telling it not to come back until it would subserve her own sense of things....She inherited a great and overbearing vocabulary which, had she used it submissively, would have forced her to express an established theology and psychology. But she would not let that vocabulary write her poems for her. There lies the real difference between a poet like Emily Dickinson and a fine versifier like Isaac Watts. To be sure, Emily Dickinson also wrote in the metres of hymnody, and paraphrased the *Bible*, and made her poems turn on great words like Immortality and Salvation and Election. But in her poems those great words are not merely being themselves; they have been adopted, for expressive purposes; they have been taken personally, and therefore redefined....

That her taste for truth involved a regard for objective fact need not be argued: we have her poem on the snake, and that on the hummingbird, and they are small masterpieces of exact description. She liked accuracy; she liked solid and homely detail; and even in her most exalted poems we are surprised and

reassured by buckets, shawls, or buzzing flies. But her chief truthfulness lay in her insistence on discovering the facts of her inner experience. She was a Linnaeus to the phenomena of her own consciousness, describing and distinguishing the states and motions of her soul....[She discovered] that the aspect of the world is in no way constant, that the power of external things depends on our state of mind, that the soul selects its own society and may, if granted strength to do so, select a superior order and scope of consciousness which will render it finally invulnerable. She learned these things by witnessing her own courageous spirit. Another result of Emily Dickinson's introspection was that she discovered some grounds, in the nature of her soul and its affections, for a personal conception of such ideas as Heaven and Immortality, and so managed a precarious convergence between her inner experience and her religious inheritance....

I think that for her there were three major privations: she was deprived of an orthodox and steady religious faith; she was deprived of love; she was deprived of literary recognition....She became an unsteady congregation of one....The truth is, I think, that Emily Dickinson knew she was good, and began her career with a normal appetite for recognition. I think that she late came, with some reason, to despair of being understood or properly valued, and so directed against her hopes of fame what was by then a well-developed disposition to renounce. That she wrote a good number of poems about fame supports my view: the subjects to which a poet returns are those which vex him....

Emily Dickinson elected the economy of desire, and called her privation good, rendering it positive by renunciation. And so she came to live in a huge world of delectable distances. Far-off words like 'Brazil' or 'Circassian' appear continually in her poems as symbols of things distanced by loss or renunciation, yet infinitely prized and yearned for....It seems to me that she generally saw Heaven as a kind of remote bank, in which, she hoped, her untouched felicities were drawing interest....Her residual Calvinism was criticized and fortified by her study of her own soul in action, and from the phenomena of her soul she was capable of making the boldest inferences. That the sense of time is subject to the moods of the soul seemed to her a proof of the soul's eternity. Her intensity of grief for the dead, and her feeling of their continued presence, seemed to her arguments for the reunion of souls in Heaven. And when she found in herself infinite desires, 'immortal longings,' it seemed to her possible that such desires might somewhere be infinitely answered....

Poetry must have been the chief source of her sense of blessedness. The poetic impulses which visited her seemed 'bulletins from Immortality,' and by their means she converted all her losses into gains, and all the pains of her life to that clarity and repose which were to her the qualities of Heaven. So superior did she feel, as a poet, to earthly circumstance, and so strong was her faith in words, that she more than once presumed to view this life from the vantage of the grave. In a manner of speaking, she was dead. And yet her poetry, with its articulate faithfulness to inner and outer truth, its insistence on maximum consciousness, is not an avoidance of life but an eccentric mastery of it."

Richard Wilbur  
"Sumptuous Destitution"  
*Emily Dickinson: Three Views*  
(Amherst 1960)

"The purity and integrity of her best work makes it, in all its uniqueness, the fullest and most direct expression of that egocentrism basic to the mid-nineteenth-century American style....She gives no indication of trying to achieve Emerson's intended transcendental sacramentalism and thus of losing herself in her world....The matter of a coherent world-view is hardly material to the comprehension and appreciation of her poems. When the poems are arranged in classes and categories, the resulting structure of ideas is so general that it makes little or no sense unless referred back to the poems. This is not true of Poe, Emerson, and Whitman, whatever may be said against their aspirations toward a 'philosophy.' They felt drawn toward a philosophy as they came sharply up against the limitations which their poetic egocentrism set for them, and they strove increasingly to build 'systems.' Not so Emily Dickinson. Such generalizations as can be derived from her poems concern the egocentric predicament upon which they are postulated....Emily Dickinson's situation, temperament, and genius made that style peculiarly and directly her own. As a poet she was strong enough to need nothing else....



Writing poems, she writes herself. She claims to do nothing more and dares do nothing less. She must know as much of the world as she can, yet in the end know it only as it serves to shape her knowledge of herself. Her words are exact: She is hounded by her own identity. The most apt analogy is Melville's Ishmael, insisting that he is writing his novel after the fact, urging our assent to his utter freedom to adduce material from whatever quarter he wishes and to write from various points of view and in various forms, just so he may understand what has happened to him, just so he may create himself, or at least the possibility of himself. The great conglomeration of Emily Dickinson's poetry is indeed a kind of *Moby-Dick*. Her poetry has its own kind of proliferation and plenitude, and likewise its own kind of incompleteness; for the very lack of 'system' in the poetry, the open-endedness of its conception of the creating self, is such that there is, properly speaking, no end and no beginning--simply life being made as it is being lived through....

Above all, it is *her* world, framed by variations on the hymn stanza and seeming-casual rhymes, held together by a variety of subtle internal echoings and parallels, modulated (as the Johnson text now lets us see) by an improvised kind of punctuation (mostly dashes)--all of which lets us sense a quality of vital annotation, as though the moment had to be put down now, the only time it would ever exist for her whose moment it was. She is the Puritan diarist who no longer has to believe that her acutely sensed private experiences are valuable and explicable only as types of something larger than they--something given from above, from outside herself. Which is to say, she is the extreme American Protestant self which, when it comes fully alive in its greatest poems, is in effect able to set its institutional and religious commitments aside and be radically and unflinchingly itself, radically and unflinchingly free. In that freedom there is at once loss, denial, pain, release, certainty, and victory....

In Emily Dickinson's poems, the fall into existence is expressed with an integrity and purity--a final honesty--which makes them almost unbearably objective....For her, death is a *fact* as it could not be for Poe, Emerson and Whitman, for whom it was at most a *state*. They were perhaps too anxious to *express* themselves and so did not always slow down sufficiently to try to *understand* themselves....Her grand theme, then, is Life as it is involved in her life. She declines to take the other option for the egocentric poet: her life as it might be involved in Life. The 'I' with which so many of her poems begin, since it is so completely her own, since it is of such a power to make its world flow into and out from it, makes her the most imperious of American poets. Her empire is, in the poems, one over which she has total dominion--her soul....The continuity between her personal history and her poems was great, of course--at times too great, as it resulted in poems which objectify nothing but her purely private sense of herself....

If Emerson's characteristic failures result from his striving so much to universalize the self that it gets lost in the striving, then Emily Dickinson's characteristic failures result from her striving so much to be herself that she can no longer conceive of other selves....Without the willfully 'artistic' purpose of Poe, without the willfully 'metaphysical' and 'religious' purpose of Emerson and Whitman, without their hope that by committing themselves to a conception of the self in one or another of its manifestations they might save society--Emily Dickinson was able completely and entirely to save herself, thereby to exhibit many of the infinite forms of such salvation for all who might care to look....Dickinson held close to and thereby most richly developed the egocentric style which is basic in nineteenth-century poetry. This was her triumph."

Roy Harvey Pearce  
*The Continuity of American Poetry*  
(Princeton 1961) 174-5, 179-84, 186

"Her use of words as sounds is simple--as simple as the hymnbook from which she borrowed it. Her organization of words as meanings, though sometimes a little difficult, a little too colloquial or not quite colloquial enough, appears to be decipherable in the usual way of prose. Her images are so familiar as to be barely visible or so strangely abstracted as to be almost transparent. And her reader, her first-time reader, often ends, not with a handful of poems, but with a handful of aphorisms such as: good comes from evil, having is taught by having not, suffering enriches. It is only by a second reading--or by another reader--that the aphorisms can be turned back into poems and discovered to mean something very different. And this rereading involves, of course, a reconsideration of those means to meaning--an opening of eyes and ears....

Few poets, Blake among them, have used words as sounds in as primitive a way while using the same words as meanings in a way so far from primitive. And not even Blake pushed his organization of words as meanings as far toward the unsavable as Emily sometimes did in these simple-sounding little tunes....No, I know no poems in which the double structure of words as sounds and words as meanings--that curious relationship of the logically unrelated--will be found, on right reading, to be more *comprehensive* than it is in the poems of Emily Dickinson. But the same thing is not true of the coupling of Emily's images, either in metaphor or out of it. Here it takes more than a second reading or even a third to demonstrate that there are images at work at all....The difficulty, I think, has a double cause.

First, the 'objects' of Emily's images are often not objects at all but abstractions used as though they were objects--abstractions presented for the eye to see and the ear to hear and the hand to touch. Second, the objects, when they are objects, are often 'transparent' in the manner of the visible member of that coupling we call as symbol....[Her] more characteristic image lets the light through either by pushing the natural object back until it seems to become an abstraction, or by drawing the abstraction forward until it has the look or feel of an object...or by doing both together in a coupling of the two. And it is here, of course, that the difficulty resolves itself. For the moment it becomes apparent that Emily is using objects and abstractions in this inverted and inverting fashion, it becomes apparent that images *are* in constant play and that their coupling is a coupling back and forth, not only between incongruities, but between worlds--the visible and the invisible....

Not only has the poem a *voice* (not all poems do) but it has a particular voice—Emily's voice. And it is by reason of that particularity that these universalizations of Emily's are changed to 'things'...The poet of the private world is not observer only but *actor* in the scene that he observes. And the voice that speaks in his poems is the voice of himself as actor--as sufferer of those sufferings, delighter in those delights--as well as his voice as poet....Anyone who will read Emily's poems straight through in their chronological order in Thomas H. Johnson's magnificent Harvard edition will feel, I think, as I do, that without her extraordinary mastery of tone her achievement would have been impossible....But what then is this tone?... For one thing, and most obviously, it is a wholly spontaneous tone. There is no sense that a subject has been chosen--that a theme is about to be developed....

Few poets and they among the most valued--Donne comes again to mind--have written more *dramatically* than Emily Dickinson, more in the live locutions of dramatic speech, words born living on the tongue, written as though spoken. Few have committed themselves as actors more livingly to the scene. It is almost impossible to begin one of her successful poems without finishing it. The punctuation may bewilder you. The density of the thing said may defeat your understanding. But you will read on nevertheless because you will not be able to stop reading."

Archibald MacLeish  
"The Private World: Poems of Emily Dickinson"  
*Poetry and Experience*  
(Houghton 1961)

"The facts of her existence are straightforward, but reveal none of the sources of the knowledge of ecstasy and despair that infuses her poetry....The poems are uniformly short, consisting usually of four-line stanzas with very weak rhymes, but no factual description can convey their power. Her diction is taken from the homespun traditions of New England and its Calvinist backgrounds and, probably because of her lack of professional acquaintances, it retains its rude, tough shape. It has been said, with too much frequency, that the 'awkwardness of her poetry became a metaphor of life itself.' Nevertheless, the fact is that the power and flashes of illumination, the curious exactness of her best poems indicate a poetic genius of first rank...

Her poetry deals in a terse, aphoristic style with that central problem of romantic art: the relationship between the natural and the spiritual orders of being--in terms of her verse, between the concrete New England world and the divine prototype. This tension is manifest in most of her poems and relates her directly to that tradition of American letters, stated by Emerson and simultaneously revealed by Dickinson and Walt Whitman, which finds current voice in Robert Frost. The modernity of Miss Dickinson's expression is seen in her love of word and image. On the surface such poets seem to be simply realists

examining the world, lovers of nature's objects, though not naturalists; but finally the meaning of their poetry is in the spiritual truth it reveals through the natural fact.

Miss Dickinson's poetry is not divorced from the tradition of Calvinism despite her personal rejection of its tenets, and in this respect her resemblance to Hawthorne is obvious. Their common literary and philosophical ancestor was Jonathan Edwards, who saw that the purpose of existence is to strive for the kind of freedom gained only through work and agony, and that this freedom is an individual achievement and comes through the self. Thus, in her poetic vision of individual realization and her poetic expression of the nature-spirit dualism, Miss Dickinson was true to her heritage. Isolated physically...she forged significance and triumph from private anguish and recorded it with exceptional poetic skill."

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

"When she describes a hummingbird as 'A route of evanescence': 'Her conscientious Voice will soar unmoved / Above ostensible Vicissitude,' she is using what medieval poets called 'aureate diction,' big soft bumbling abstract words that absorb images into categories and ideas. She does not--like, for example, D. H. Lawrence--try to get inside the bird's skin and identify herself with it; she identifies the bird with the human consciousness in herself. Many of her poems start out by making some kind of definition of an abstract noun....

She has for the most part no punctuation, except a point represented in the Johnson edition by a dash, which, as the editor points out, is really a rhythmical beat, and is of little use in unraveling the syntax. She also shows a curious preference for an indirect subjunctive form of expression that appears in such phrases as 'Beauty be not caused,' and she has what seems a most unreasonable dislike of adding the *s* to the third person singular of verbs. The effect of such sidelong grammar is twofold: It increases the sense of epigrammatic wit, and it makes her poetry sound oracular, as though the explicit statements of which her poetry is so largely made up were coming to us shrouded in mystery. As she says, 'Tell all the Truth but tell it slant -- / Success in Circuit lies.' The result is not invariably success: sometimes we may agree with enthusiasm...At other times we can only say... 'I don't see at what you're driving, mystic lady'...

Her beat punctuation and offbeat syntax go with an abrupt and colloquial diction. The tang of her local speech comes out in such spellings as 'February' and 'bouquet,' in such locutions as 'it don't' and 'it is him,' and in such words as 'heft' for 'weight'....When she meets an inadequacy in the English language she simply walks through it, as a child might do....A similar teasing of the conventional reader's ear comes out in her slanting rhymes, which often have the effect of disappointing or letting down one's sense of an expected sound. At the same time even a conventional reader can see that her commonplace stanza forms could hardly achieve any variety of nuance without some irregularities. This is particularly true of the sinewy rhythm that syncopates against her rigid hymnbook meters and keeps them so far out of reach of monotony or doggerel....

In sophisticated poetry close attention is paid to the sounds of words: vowels and consonants are carefully balanced for assonance and variety, and we feel, when such poetry is successful, that we have the inevitably right words in their inevitably right order. In popular poetry there is a clearly marked rhythm and the words chosen to fill it up give approximately the intended meaning, but there is no sense of any *mot juste* or uniquely appropriate word. In the ballad, for example, we may have a great number of verbal variants of the same poem. Here again Emily Dickinson's practice is the popular, not the sophisticated one. For a great many of her poems she has provided alternative words, phrases, even whole lines, as though the rhythm, like a figured bass in music, allowed the editor or reader to establish his own text....

What we find in Emily Dickinson's poetry, then, is a diffused vitality in rhythm and the free play of a lively and exhilarating mind, crackling with wit and sharp perception. These were clearly the qualities that she herself knew were there and especially prized....As a poet, she is popular in the sense of being able, like Burns or Kipling or the early Wordsworth, to introduce poetry to readers who have had no previous experience of it. She has on the other hand, a withdrawn energy that makes her almost esoteric, certainly

often difficult. In any case she seems, after her early valentines, to have reached her mature style almost in a single bound....

The most cursory glance at Emily Dickinson will reveal that she is a deeply religious poet, preoccupied, to the verge of obsession, with the themes of death and of immortality....Like Huckleberry Finn, whom she resembles in more ways than one, Emily Dickinson had a great respect for orthodox religion and morality, did not question the sincerity of those who practiced it, and even turned to it for help. But she never felt that the path of social conformity and assent to doctrine was her path. Her resistance gave her no feeling of superiority: even her school girl letters are full of a wistful regret that she could not feel what her friends all asserted that they felt....She did not want to repudiate her faith but to struggle with it....When she compares the *Bible* unfavorably with Orpheus, whose sermon captivated and did not condemn; when she speaks of Cupid as an authentic deity and asks if God is Love's adversary, she is saying that there is another kind of religious experience that counterbalances, but does not necessarily contradict, the legal and doctrinal Christianity which she had been taught....

This other kind of religious experience is a state of heightened consciousness often called 'Transport' and associated with the word 'Circumference,' when the poet feels directly in communion with nature and in a state of 'identity'--another frequent term--with it. Nature is then surrounded by the circumference of human consciousness, and such a world is Paradise, the Biblical Eden, a nature with a human shape and meaning, a garden for man. 'Home is the definition of God,' and home is what is inside the circumference of one's being. In this state the mind feels immortal...It also enters into a condition of unity or oneness which is partly what the word identity means....The human circumference is surrounded by a greater consciousness, to which the poet is related as a bride...

In her background there were two powerful antimystical tendencies at work. One was the rationalism of her generation; the other was the Puritanism in which she had been reared, with its insistence that the divine will was inscrutable, that it made sense only to itself, not to man, and that no human experience could transcend the limits of fallen humanity. For Emily Dickinson, therefore, the identity between the experience or circumference she had had and the postmortal eternity taught in the *Bible* remained a matter of 'inference.' It could be held by faith or hope but not by direct knowledge. This 'inference' became the central issue in her struggle with her faith....She never seemed to accept the Platonic view that the soul is immortal by nature. If the first fact of her experience is a vision of earth as heaven, the second fact is that this vision is 'evanescent,' comes and goes unpredictably, and, so far as experience itself goes, ceases entirely at death. It is significant, therefore, that Emily Dickinson should so often symbolize her vision as a temporary and abnormal state of drunkenness....

Where the mind is a center and nature the circumference, there is no place for any divinity: that has vanished somewhere beyond the sky or beyond life. This is the state of 'Those Evenings of the Brain,' in which the body, so far from being a circumference incorporating its experience, is a 'magic prison,' sealed against all intimations of immortality....Like Blake, with whom she has been compared ever since Higginson's prefaces to the 1890 volume, Emily Dickinson shows us two contrary states of the human soul, a vision of innocence and a vision of 'experience,' or ordinary life....But she has nothing of Blake's social vision, and the state that he associates with child labor, Negro slavery, prostitution, and war she associates only with loneliness. Her two states are often associated with summer and winter, or, less frequently, with day and night...Emily Dickinson is an impressionist in the sense that she tends to organize her visual experience by color rather than outline, and purple, the color of mourning and of triumph [and of aristocracy and royalty, as in Hawthorne], is the central symbol for her of the junction between life and death."

Northrop Frye, ed.  
*Major Writers of America II*  
(Harcourt 1962) 7-15

"The responses to Emily Dickinson's poems have been nearly as various as her values....With the poetic renaissance of the second decade of this century and with the publication of a selection of her poems in 1924 by Conrad Aiken, who regarded her as 'among the finest poets of the language,' she became a poet of the modern fashion, a precursor, who along with Whitman had first broken through the stalemate in the

Victorianism of Longfellow and Tennyson. Perhaps without direct influence on writers of the modern school, she was still prized by them, certainly for her intensity of thought and image and for her homely idiom, but also for what seemed the oddity of her life and manner...As Henry W. Wells has remarked, 'In the instance of Emily Dickinson the careful reader discovers a far greater versatility than appears at first glance. Within a sphere outwardly limited and strangely unShakespearean, her work remains in breadth fascinatingly comparable to Shakespeare's'...

The music of the poet's lines parallels the handling of her imagery in exquisite modulations of a basic simplicity. Thomas H. Johnson has examined most fully how she used the meter of her church hymnal, most frequently following the common meter of eight and six syllables, but often setting up patterns of long meter (8,8,8,8), short meter (6,6,8,6), common particular meter (8,8,6,8,8,6), and so on. Yet just as she made her individual interpretations and denials of the doctrines of her church, so she did not hesitate to bend the hymn meters to her own idiom. From hymnology and from Emerson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning she again received the hint for practicing inexact rhyme; but until the twentieth century no poet as fully exploited the effects of inexact rhyme as she did. To use 'After great pain a formal feeling comes' again as a point of reference, of the six rhymes only three are conceivably exact, the three others (comes, Tombs; round, Ought; Lead, outlived) showing the oblique quality that enhances her poetry.

A third aspect of the poet's distinction is her rhetorical ability to set in a phrase--sometimes abstract, sometimes metaphorical--her mood and belief. Poem after poem opens with lines that catch the memory... Yet few of her lines, wherever they are in her poems, stand alone. As she linked image with image, sound with sound, and image with sound, so she enriched abstract statements by the whole pattern of the poem. 'My business is circumference,' she wrote to Higginson in July, 1862--'circumference,' as Johnson defines it, being 'a projection of her imagination into all relationships of man, nature, and spirit'."

William M. Gibson & George Arms, eds.  
*Twelve American Writers*  
(Macmillan 1962) 611-12

"Then there is her ubiquitous and eccentric form of punctuation--the dash. The Harvard edition was the first to attempt a typographical approximation of the curious Dickinson pointing, and it has been a matter of concern to almost all post-1955 commentators. The attempt was necessarily an approximation, for the manuscripts show how varied her use of the dash was--long, short, high, low, slanting up, slanting down. There was sufficient uniformity in the manuscripts, nevertheless, to warrant the attempt. After recovering from the initial shock, many students of her work agree that it was justified and there should be no retreat. Mr. Warren's suggestion that in future editions all punctuation except periods be omitted would, if adopted, do violence to what now seems to be a clear and indisputable fact of the Dickinson idiom.

Rightly or wrongly, this is the way she envisaged her poems. She could not have used the dashes so often, throughout so much of her career, unless she meant them. Had she published her poems and listened to her editors, she would most probably have modified her procedure, at least to some extent; but this is what we have from her hand, and there seems less point in changing it than in leaving it as she wrote it. The technique is true to her idiom, to the way she thought--tentatively, a little breathlessly. It is also true to her amateurism, a constant reminder that she was not a publishing poet and that she indulged her amateur's idiosyncrasy to the full...

[John Crowe] Ransom predicted that only one out of seventeen of her poems would 'become a common public property.' As the literature on Emily Dickinson's poetry mounts, it is clear that readers are pressing far beyond the few dozen favorites of the past and making many more poems their own. She is a 'popular poet,' and her popularity is not to be measured by the traditional anthology pieces. T. S. Eliot has reminded us that a knowledge of the whole of a poet's work alters our view of every single part. What Winters called 'the desert of her crudities' is yielding many riches. Again: how can Blackmur say that 'she married herself,' that she was all 'withdrawal' and no 'return,' in the face of her brilliantly objective and concrete nature poetry and her many psychological, philosophic, and semantic analyses, so perceptive of purely external fact as to be all but academic and clinical? Having led, quite consciously, a metaphorical life, Emily Dickinson is often the cause of metaphor in her commentators. I would gently warn against it.

So our discussion goes, and should go, as more and more truth emerges from the press of dialectic and taste. It all points to one large conclusion: that we still are not quite sure of her. We ask and ask. The image of almost every other major lyric poet is by comparison fixed and certain...There are hundreds of her poems still left to explicate...We have not yet taken seriously Mr. Tate's advice of thirty years ago: 'All pity for Miss Dickinson's "starved life" is misdirected. Her life was one of the richest and deepest ever lived on this continent.' My own prediction is that Emily Dickinson will grow stronger with the years as we continue to outdistance the sentimentalities that still cling to her. Her eccentricities will fall into perspective. We will become increasingly aware of the toughness and sinew of her poetry, its range and versatility, its challenge to our understanding. We will test our knowledge of humanity against hers and find that we can learn on almost every front. Far from the little figure of frustrations and renunciations and regrets, we will come to see her as a poet of great strength, courage, and singleness of purpose."

Richard B. Sewall, ed.  
*Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*  
(Prentice-Hall, Twentieth Century Views 1963) 3-4, 7-8

"For the sake of such conciseness, monosyllabic and disyllabic words predominate, frequently those of the homespun New England life, of which she was so inseparable a part; broom and bonnet; rut, stile, and overcoat. One fancies a cause and effect between her ever more emphatic solitude, with its consequent silences, and her laconic diction in verse; nothing, *nothing* could be communicated save the kernel of the thought--no rind, no glossy surface. Therefore, like other American writers deprived of the smoothing, standardized influence of the 'circle' or of the stings of critical friends, she preserved the stiff, rude edges of her thought; she developed a technique indisputably her own, however much it has puzzled other writers, such as Higginson, or even the determined semi-scientific modern student of poetry.

She omitted conjunctions; used half- and quarter-rhymes; played with the subjunctive mood or with legal phrases; dispensed with agreements of nouns and verbs; cut and clipped her sentences. Thus she was often cryptic—"half-idiotic," says one impatient, obtuse critic--and she was always on the wing...Such fleetness she attained by her intense, rapid methods of composition; she strove to capture the telegraphic thought. Moreover, in her half-rhymes, her irregularities of speech and rhythm, her spasmodic quality, she mirrored the incongruities and frustrations of human experience; the awkwardness in her poetry became a metaphor of life itself....

So Emily Dickinson's dualism, repudiating such a monism as animates the poetry of Whitman, permeated her life. She is intensely curious, on the one hand, concerning God, and on the other, concerning the daily newspaper (her character of recluse has been exaggerated). The dualism is evident, too, in her poetry....From one point of view, Emily Dickinson is a realist, examining, as she says, each splinter in the groove of the brain; a witty piquant preceptress on all the common life around her, and also on its divine origins. She writes of the bee, the bobolink, the spider, the bat, the storm, noon, the sunset, or the preacher with his preposterous sermon on 'breadth.' In this role of commentator on things visible and invisible she aphorizes on God, human life, death, and also on mermaids and angleworms. In her poetry the sublime and the trivial jostle each other and evoke from her mingled reverence and satire...

To adopt her own metaphor, she does little sums of spiritual arithmetic; and her epigrammatic conclusions, sometimes somber or even Freudian as in her dream of the worm... In brief, the real meaning of Emily Dickinson's poetry must reside in its inner record of an elevated human spirit suffering, battling, growing toward a victorious purgation....She is more than a pretty aphorist; she is an interpreter of universal experience....On this plane of being she attains a kind of peace which, ever-simplifying, we may say atoned for her loss of earthly love. In the end she acquired a vivid sense of God...Emily Dickinson's experimentation, in debt to Emerson, and in love with the image, the word, and learning, anticipates the metaphysical strain in the verse of today. Taken together, their originality heralded afar off new themes, new forms; their verse (and Whitman's) formed the pronaos [the open vestibule of a classical Greek temple] of modern poetry."

Stanley T. Williams  
*Literary History of the United States*, 3rd edition  
(Macmillan 1963) 910-13, 916

“A disproportionate amount of interest in Emily Dickinson’s personal life has led to a number of speculative (and often incorrect) biographical studies. She never married. Yet because her poetry reveals a passionate statement of love, many critics have felt challenged to solve the ‘riddle’ of her love life. According to one author, Emily Dickinson’s sweetheart was George Gould, a student at Amherst and subsequently a preacher of some renown...Another theory is that Emily Dickinson was in love with Edward Hunt, the husband of Helen Fiske, afterward Helen Hunt Jackson...A more likely theory is that she found in the Reverend Charles Wadsworth the kind of intellectual and spiritual guide she seemed always to need...And finally, late in life, substantial evidence indicates that she was ‘very much in love’ with Judge Otis Lord...Whatever one makes of the ‘love affairs’ is perhaps incidental, as long as the biographical theorizing does not obscure the fact that such attachments may well have been more imaginative than actual.

Emily Dickinson did not marry; she did not leave her father’s home; she became a bride, not in fact, but in her poetry. All we know for certain is that something happened in Emily Dickinson in her late twenties and early thirties. From 1850 to 1861 (according to the Belknap edition numbering) she wrote about 300 poems. In 1862, she wrote 366 poems; in 1863, 141; and in 1864, 174—more than one-third of the 1775 poems were written during three years. This astonishing productivity may have coincided with her love for someone; it may have been caused by persistent religious questionings; it may have been the natural growth of the poet; or it may have been a combination of all of these reasons of none of them....

She published, and then reluctantly, only seven poems during her lifetime. The remaining ones, bound in packets, were found by her sister, Lavinia, after Emily’s death....Emily Dickinson never prepared her poems for publication, and her editors were faced with a bewildering number of textual problems. Because of this, and in deference to the current literary taste, nearly all of Dickinson’s early editors (with the exception of Mrs. Bingham) introduced changes in punctuation, rhyme, stanzaic arrangement, etc. It was not until 1955 that Emily Dickinson became a ‘poet restored.’ In that year, Thomas H. Johnson edited *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, three volumes ‘including variant readings critically compared with all known manuscripts....In 1960 Johnson edited a one-volume edition, intended as a reading text, based on the variorum three-volume edition. In the 1960 volume, Johnson presents but one form of each poem, attempting to establish the final version as nearly as possible....What must remain the definitive edition of the known poems of Emily Dickinson....

The early reviews of William Dean Howells and Thomas Bailey Aldrich following the publication of the 1890 volumes symbolically foreshadow the tone of subsequent criticism. Howells wrote that Dickinson’s poetry was ‘a distinctive addition to the literature of the world’; Aldrich, dismayed by her undisciplined form, asserted that ‘oblivion lingers in the immediate neighborhood.’ Her defenders have sometimes been overgenerous in their praise; her attackers have treated her with scorn. Part of the reason for such opposing viewpoints is biographical, for many critics equated her isolation with the ‘primitive’ qualities in her poetry; others felt that her ‘crudely wrought...colorless...lifeless’ poetry would have benefited by less seclusion, by broadened literary contacts.

Textual confusion has also contributed to the critical furor. Unable to determine the sequence of her poems or any clear chronology, critical estimations were, by reason of their incompleteness, severely limited....In making the selections for this book I have tried to provide those poems that represent Emily Dickinson’s major themes—love, death, nature, faith, immortality.”

Thomas M. Davis, ed.

Introduction

*14 by Emily Dickinson with Selected Criticism*

(Scott, Foresman 1964)

“Emily Dickinson is a tragic case of the poet who was never allowed to emerge. The years of the Civil War were for Miss Dickinson especially productive, but she never, so far as I know, refers to the war in her poetry, and there are very few references to it in her letters: she comments on the deaths of the sons of her friends, alludes to the arrest of Jefferson Davis and, in writing to Thomas Wentworth Higginson...she scared him....Emily Dickinson has become an American classic (though one that I cannot help thinking is a little overrated)...”

Edmund Wilson  
*Patriotic Gore*  
(Oxford 1966) 488-89

“In the whole span of the New England tradition, from Bradford and Winthrop and Edwards to Emerson and Dickinson and later to Eliot and Frost, individual experience finally focused and rested upon the pivotal moments of revelation and insight—the moments of divine manifestation and human vision. This union—however insecure—in which the individual lost himself in totality is the sole end of that Augustinian strain of piety which Perry Miller saw as the bright heart of Puritanism....[Dickinson] came after the fatal cleavage that split the Puritan mind between 1740 and 1840, and in her, for the last time, the dislocated elements came together to struggle for articulation...In Emily Dickinson the opposing tendencies that divided the New England mind met at cross-purposes, and after her the tendencies were to diverge again. One line of development would lead to T. S. Eliot....Robert Frost exemplifies in many respects another line of development that proceeded from Emily Dickinson....

Her peculiar burden was to be a Romantic poet with a Calvinist's sense of things; to know transitory ecstasy in a world tragically fallen and doomed. Her poems display a range and variety of emotional experience which far surpass that of Edwards, Emerson, Thoreau, or Whitman, but the work of all these men has a wholeness, a consistency, and finally a repose which hers lacks. She could be possessed only by the experience of the immediate moment, and so her art expressed itself in short lyrics each of which incarnated a moment. As a result her poetry emerged not in a consistent and overmastering design but in an intricate pattern of individual and contrasting fragments....

Emily Dickinson hoped that she had discarded the Calvinist God for another Deity who was friend instead of foe, but she found that her relation to Him was in many respects unchanged. He remained the unknown Jove-Jehovah, hurling lightning bolts and leaving a stricken 'little girl' to make what she could of the experience....Faced with the increasing difficulty of coming to terms with personal experience within the safety of received religion, Emily Dickinson like many modern poets affirmed her supreme (and religious) dedication to comprehending her experience through the intense concentration of artistic expression....

Nurtured in the conservative Connecticut Valley, she not only came to distrust its theology but was personally incapable of logical, not to say theological, thought. System and argument, like the austere New England winter, were too hard and frigid for her, but now, at the crucial period of thaw, she came upon the warm, swelling, swirling notions of the Romantic poet-prophets....For most of the Romantics, however transcendental, Nature served as intermediary between self and Deity, as the meeting place of the new 'religion'....Nature was precious because it was the material medium through which God or the Life Spirit touched man and through which man touch Him or It....Dickinson saw things as 'trembling Emblems' and felt the movements of an unseen Weaver [allusion to the "weaver god" in *Moby-Dick*]....

Emerson spoke in Amherst in 1855 on 'A Plea for the Scholar,' in 1857 on 'The Beautiful in Rural Life,' in 1879 on 'Superlative or Mental Temperance,' and led off a course of lectures in 1865 with 'Social Aims.' That he met with small crowds and little enthusiasm, even as late as his lecture of 1879 (by which time he was something of a national monument), indicates the extent to which Emily's interest outran that of her Amherst neighbors. Although there is no evidence that she attended any of these lectures, she must have listened from a distance...As Emily Dickinson realized—along with Hawthorne and Melville—[Emerson] had had to close his mind and heart to much of the complex reality in order to achieve [his] serenity....She had absorbed, as early as 1850, the essential features of Transcendentalism—the optimism, the emphasis on experimentation and originality, the sense of social purpose, the metaphysical and mystical speculations, the pulse of rhythm and imagery...Nevertheless, her unshakable conception of reality and awareness of the human condition were derived not so much from Emerson as from the 'old-fashioned' Puritans....[She exhibits] all the major elements of the Puritan 'vision': the initial harmony of the universe; man's violation of that harmony and his consequent alienation; the possibility of reunion and its fulfillment in visionary instants; the bankruptcy of life without vision....



Under the stress of emotional crisis she composed more than five hundred poems in 1862 and 1863.... At its most sublime intensity, the momentary incandescence consumed the categories of human Understanding and held all in its illumination. In Emerson's words, with the movements of Reason, 'there is the incoming or the receding of God: that is all we can affirm; and we can show neither how nor why.' In Dickinson's image the manifestation was 'a Blossom of the Brain,' 'the Spirit fructified.' The cessation of such epiphanies would be 'the Funeral of God,' for each of these sublime moments was indeed 'a cordial interview / With God'—not, she told her nephew Ned, the unseen Jehovah in epaulettes but another Eleusinian Deity who revealed Himself in an overpowering efflux of life....Light, she said, enabled Light; for God to show Himself, we must be able to see....

The assumption underlying her moments of exultation was not so much that earth as earth was superior to heaven but that earth was heaven, that indeed as Emerson and Thoreau had said, 'the "Supernatural," was only the Natural, disclosed'....Even when Emily Dickinson tried to conjure up a conception of heaven as it was or would be, she could imagine only the natural order extended through time and space....On the other hand the peerless moments revealed earth as Eden before the Fall—Nature perfected to Paradise. If heaven is Arcadia, Eden is heaven....Natural ecstasy corresponded to God's grace, and even the impermanence of ecstasy was transformed into the renunciation which was a sign of justification and election. The only commandment was to 'Consider the Lilies' each ordained day, for Nature was the sacrament unto sanctification and spring the miracle of redemption and resurrection. The process of 'sacramental' experience constituted, in Thoreauvian terms, the 'natural Sabbath' of heaven at home."

Albert Gelpi  
"Seeing New Englandly: From Edwards to Emerson to Dickinson"  
*Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet*  
(Harvard 1966)

"The distinctive qualities of her art: its bold disregard of conventional shapeliness, the surprise of its novel verbal strategies, its seizure of the significant image, its disconcerting integrity in psychological disclosures, its firm control of powerful emotion. Like filings in a magnetic field, those early poems which assert her genius define the emotional contours of the central theme of aspiration....

In her finest poems the emotional experience reaches an intensity that necessarily reveals at the same time the stylistic control which prevents those feelings from lapsing into intemperance. Her success in confining the centrifugal pressures of emotions within an aesthetic framework represents perhaps her highest achievement as an artist. That achievement of control which would not stifle the intensity she intended to express undoubtedly posed her most challenging problem....The principal method by which she resolved this problem of control is her absolute distillation of expression, which provides not only a formal control but so closely circumscribes emotions that they cannot trail off into self-indulgence. This ability of extreme condensation attests also to her powers of psychological insight, for with the greatest economy of terms she could reach directly to the core of a particular feeling. This habit of elliptical expression, however, sometimes fragments her compositions....

In the years from 1850 to 1862 she succeeded in refining genuine and effective expressions of feeling from a clutter of commonplace ideas and syntaxes. Perhaps the principal reason for her early success is that she addressed herself again and again to a single theme. The repeated application not only deepened her psychological insight, but allowed her opportunities to pursue a variety of attitudes and to refine her expression. That refinement is evidenced in a wide range of elements, but most obviously perhaps in her imagery and in her prosodic variations on the hymn patterns that provided her metrical base. The development of irony she was able to maintain effectively through the speaker's vigorously secular attitude and through meaningful manipulations of sound correspondences.

But ultimately the totality of her art in the early years is greater than the sum of the individual elements that go into its makeup. Her expressive skills combined to effect a concision, a specific gravity, as it were, not often encountered in English poetry. Her elliptical expression is all the more remarkable for embodying the complexity which it does. That complexity and the intensity of the feeling with which she informs her best works from this period are, in turn, the more remarkable for being under firm control."

David Porter  
"The Early Achievement"  
*The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry*  
(Harvard 1966)

"To Emerson's way of thinking, the profile of a sphere implies a center....Emily Dickinson made it her business as a poet to scan the profile of the sphere, but the harder she scanned it, the less she thought she knew what it signified. Perhaps the profile of the sphere, when fully understood, would turn out to be a 'purposeless circumference,' an emblem not of birth but of death. Perhaps at the center there was only an emptiness and a silence. Perhaps man could not bear what was signified. More remote from the mystical tradition than Emerson, she devoted herself to attempting to define what Emerson had said was intrinsically undefinable...."

Like Pain and Bradstreet and Taylor before her, she seldom lost sight of the grave....But of course it is not necessary to go back to the Puritan poets of the seventeenth century, of whom she so often and so sharply reminds us, to find an analogue for her sensibility. The Puritan mind was still intact in Amherst... She herself in the end chose to wear only white, a color that contained as many ambiguities for her as it had for Melville in his explication of 'The Whiteness of the Whale'...Intellectually, she was a woman of her time with an extremely intelligent and well-stocked mind. Alice James's *Diary* provides a closer analogue to her literary situation than Anne Bradstreet's *Tenth Muse*....

She saw all things freshly, as though for the first, and the last, time. The 'genius' of Dickinson's poetry, that which gives it both uniqueness and its value, rests finally on an unhabitual way of perceiving, an angle of vision that found both formal and thematic expression....As late as 1862, more than a dozen years after she had discovered Emerson and other outlets in the New Thought for her religious emotions, Amherst's way of defining the issues of faith and unfaith was still assumed in her statement to T. W. Higginson about her family: 'They are religious--except me.'

Almost certainly she had already read 'Intellect' in *Essays First Series*, in which Emerson had spoken directly to her condition....The poet's rejection of orthodoxy was now complete, but the language in which she conveys her rejection is drawn from the *Bible* and the church. Religious options have multiplied in the Dickinson family and she has chosen Transcendentalism as the faith associated in her mind with the 'immortal colors.' From now on the *Bible* will continue to be her favorite reading and the chief source of her language and images...[but with] her father's faith rejected, she has found a wider God and a new way of asserting the claim of life against death....

Emily Dickinson could be said to have had two fathers and to have been deeply attached to both of them, though they pulled her in opposite directions. Emerson was as powerful an influence on her as he was on Whitman, and the evidence of her debt to him is just as clear....As the Johnson indexes show, the *Bible* was her chief literary resource, Shakespeare next, then Emerson--this on the basis of a simple (and incomplete) numerical count of her allusions. The first two would have been the same for most writers of her period--Melville, for instance--but Emerson was in a different category. His impact on her, counterpointed against that of Edward Dickinson, was what, more than anything else, gave her work its special quality....Emerson was her rock, in the shelter of which she had built her own church with its congregation of one. Implicitly she was declaring that the resources she leaned on were not two but three: To the consolations offered by Nature and the *Bible* she now added Emerson....From Emerson, Dickinson got not only a religious alternative to late Calvinism but a conception of the proper role of the poet....And there is no need to try to guess *where* she found the word, the image, and the conception in his works. She found them all in the essay 'Circles'...

Dickinson's conception of poetry is clearly enough expressed in a good many poems that offer no difficulties of interpretation--'This was a Poet,' 'I found the words to every thought,' 'To pile like Thunder to its close,' and 'I dwell in Possibility,' for example. The view is familiar, and she never qualifies or complicates it: The artist's concern is with the ineffable, and his poems are revelations of truth, the kind of truth only the imagination can glimpse....One might think of Dickinson's poems as a record of a continuous dialogue between parts of herself, aspects of her mind, segments of her complex heritage; except that there

are not just the two speakers required by dialogue but always a third, a watcher and listener, amused or dismayed, aware of the limitations of what can be conveyed by words, superior to all dialogue. This ultimate self watches the self writing in the diary or engaging in poetic debate. This self is absolute.

The majority of her poems may be classified as relating to one of three subjects on which she was always debating within herself. She debated with her father on the subject of the validity of his faith, she debated with Emerson on the validity of *his*, and she debated with both of them, her *two* fathers as it were, on the question of whether there could be any valid faith at all, as they both thought....Some of her finest poems on this subject date from as late as the early 1870's. Meanwhile the debate with Emerson had begun in the early 1860's, at a time when personal crises made her feel that pain and limitation ought to be given a central place in any description of experience, not ignored or mentioned only as an afterthought in what she came to feel was Emerson's way in his early essays. Sometimes, in these years, she drew upon late Emerson to rebut the Emerson who had freed her from her father's faith, as in 'I had not minded -- Walls,' which takes note of 'limitations' in images drawn from 'Fate' in *The Conduct of Life*. By 1875 she had made all the criticisms of Emerson's early doctrines she was ever to make....

Among the poems dated by Johnson in the years from 1879 on until her death in 1886, not one of them returns to the question of whether *any* sort of religious faith is possible for one both informed and honest with himself. 'Faith' in these last poems comes to be thought of as a 'venture' of the soul with no expectation of 'proof' from either a sacred book or the sign language of Nature. Whereas both her father and Emerson had thought that their very different faiths had rested on some sort of revelation, divine or natural, and would have agreed that without revelation there could *be* no faith, Dickinson came to believe that far from being required by anything we could 'know' about a reality outside ourselves, faith was simply a 'first necessity' of our being, resting on nothing but need. Redefining faith as commitment in the manner of later Existentialists was agonizingly difficult....

Her new 'proveless' faith did not cancel anything she knew. It left her as aware as ever of 'transport instability' (contra Emerson), of the impossibility of imagining 'costumeless consciousness' (contra her father and personal immortality), aware of what it meant to 'cling to nowhere' waiting for the 'Crash of nothing.' Yet it did have two effects. More often now she returns to Emersonian sentiments like those of 'A Route of Evanescence,' which dates from this period....

Higginson was incapable of corrupting her by drawing her out of her isolation into his own world of borrowed feelings and second-rate ideas....Dickinson at times would have liked to endure for a while the dreariness of being 'somebody,' but she found no way of reaching the 'admiring bog'--for even Higginson, though his mind was sufficiently boggy, was not *admiring*. Failure, then, partly endured, partly sought, condemned her to be what she was and make do with what she had....If one were forced to choose just one poet to illuminate the nature and quality of American poetry as a whole, to define its continuing preoccupations, its characteristic themes and images, its diction and its style--even to suggest the kinds of subjects and concerns typically *absent* in it--one ought to choose Dickinson.

There are very few important American poets either before or after her whose work is not suggested somewhere in hers, whose images she did not try out, whose insights she did not recapitulate, criticize, or anticipate. She not only bridged the gap between Edward Taylor and Emerson, she bridged the one between Emerson and Frost--and even, more rarely but distinctly enough--between Emerson and Eliot and Stevens. All this came as her special sensibility responded to her limited experience, and responded chiefly in terms of the *Bible*, Shakespeare, and Emerson. She would have been poorer without Shakespeare, but the *Bible* and Emerson, their conflict and their coherence, were what chiefly shaped her ideas, her language, her sensibility, and even her choice of verse forms.

The 'common meter' which is the basis for almost all her work she adopted from the hymns she was hearing in 'meeting' every Sunday. That the meter and stanzaic form of most of the older hymns was the same as that of the traditional folk ballads and the commonest nursery rhymes was a positive advantage from the Emersonian point of view that was hers by the time she reached poetic maturity....It was no accident that she turned to the form preferred by writers of hymns and ballads and nursery rhymes--a form debased in our time to being used in advertising jingles--and used it as freely as she felt the occasion

demanded. It was a children's form--and she thought of herself increasingly, after she was twenty, as a little girl--or sometimes as a little boy, a little tippler, or even a little gnome. It had the great advantage of not being a 'literary' form--though Wigglesworth had used it, and Bryant occasionally, and Emerson often. It suggested to her not literature but life--her own, for in it the most important things had been said....

She read constantly and penetratingly. Hawthorne, for instance, was probably second only to Emerson among those who shaped her imagination, important enough to her at any rate to prompt her once to think of herself as Hepzibah, that forlorn old maid; important enough to provide the source of 'I heard a Fly buzz -- when I died'...Over and over in her last years, we recall, Dickinson had said that the *evidence* available to her, lacking as she did any such mystical experience as Whitman had had, was insufficient to support any definite religious belief on the subject at all, so that all she had to go on was her 'uncertainty certainty,' her 'guess' or 'surmise,' and her willed commitment to the Possible."

Hyatt H. Waggoner

*American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present*  
(Houghton 1968) 181-89, 192, 200-08, 212-14, 219, 221

"Dickinson's bardic pronouncements are countered by her confessions of failure and suffering; her belief that each earthly moment contains a potential paradise is countered by her belief that this heaven is always lost as time runs on....Dickinson's poetic quester is heroic not because he succeeds in reaching his goal but because he is motivated to devote himself to this ungraspable goal. He is special only because he can intuit that which he, no more than another man, can rationally comprehend....The greatest diligence is to push forward the quest in spite of the strong suspicion that it is endless and fruitless....Dickinson's idea of beauty, her impossible quest, includes tragedy as an assumption and thus, on its own terms, becomes invincible to it....A far more pragmatic belief couples with this Sisyphus-like heroism to cheer the quester. Richard Wilbur names this belief, in Dickinson's own phrase, 'sumptuous destitution.' It is the law that 'once an object has been magnified by desire, it cannot be wholly possessed by appetite,' and further that 'food, or victory, or any other good thing is best comprehended by the eye of desire from the vantage of privation.' The idea runs through hundreds of poems....

No lover, no friend, no worldly ambition deserves dominion over the soul. A failure to recognize Dickinson's insistence on this point has created countless difficulties for interpreters of her poetry and her life. The chief victim, perhaps, has been this poem: 'The Soul selects her own Society --' [#303]....This is the poem invariably invoked when a biographer wishes to nominate a new candidate as Dickinson's secret lover, the 'One' chosen by Dickinson's feminine soul before she closes 'the valves of her attention.' But if we read the poem without the intention of pimping, we see that the second stanza rules out worldly suitors, emperors, and their chariots. The chosen 'one' is a 'what,' not a 'who,' unnamed because its only name is 'Mystery'...The soul must attend to itself and its furthest goal; everything in between is perjury. Less censoriously, Dickinson tells Higginson, 'To live is so startling, it leaves but little room for other occupations though Friends if possible are an event more fair.' More fair, perhaps, but less essential...

For Dickinson, the simple desire for a private life contains, by implication, the life-principle of a protean ego, free to identify with its moving thoughts as they move forward (not to) the mystery behind the veil.... Dickinson's persona forsakes the frog-like certainty of a public Somebody to become a voyaging epistemology....This very growth, borne of longing, will substitute for social relations as a source of present joy....Poetry was to be Dickinson's thread to heaven, not the heaven itself....Dickinson names this quest 'the White Exploit.' The 'White' is a symbol for the ego's pure devotion to the Ultimate....

In her maturity, Dickinson identified with her fictional quester by constantly wearing the white robes which symbolized both the nature and the unattainable object of the quester's faith. We should not be surprised by this direct transference of a poetic idea to Dickinson's life. Romantic poetics, with its avowal of sincerity, makes demands on the poet's life which an aesthetic stressing impersonal craftsmanship might find absurd....Her resultant failure to marry cease[s] to vex us once we comprehend the quest's renunciatory ethic. In fact, the real problem becomes Dickinson's three apparent lapses, including her two verifiable romances.

The first, with the Philadelphia clergyman Charles Wadsworth, is well characterized by Albert Gelpi as 'an affair that could not exist beyond the confines of her mind'; it was, in other words, an infatuation, carried on by Emily before she became Dickinson, the writer of poems. The second, an affair conducted by Dickinson when she was fifty with the elderly widower Judge Otis P. Lord, was very real, and as delightful as it was strangely tardy....Susan, Emily's sister-in-law, remarked to her mother...I went in there one day, and in the drawing room I found Emily reclining in the arms of a man.' We find an explanation even for this late lapse in the poems. Dickinson's romance is the result of a minor rebellion against her own principles, against sumptuous destitution and the ego's freedom as a 'Nobody'."

Robert Weisbuch  
*Emily Dickinson's Poetry*  
(U Chicago 1975)

"By today, of course, there has been a reversal of heights and a redistribution of crowns. Mrs. Browning is little read, while Emily Dickinson, who was unknown during her lifetime because virtually unpublished until the 1890s, has achieved what appears to be a permanently high place in American literature. She is regarded as a pivotal pre-Modern in the line that runs 'from Baudelaire to Surrealism': 'a member in good standing,' as R. P. Blackmur puts it, 'of the intellectual movement of modern poetry.'

The real hidden scandal of Emily Dickinson's life is not the romances upon which biographers try vainly to speculate, but her embarrassing ignorance of American literature. She knew Emerson's poetry well, and perhaps a little Thoreau and Hawthorne; but she pretended, at least, not to have read a line of Whitman, no Melville [On the contrary, see especially "Exultation is the going --" #76], no Holmes, no Poe, no Irving; and none of the colonial New England poets. Instead she read and reread every Anglo-American woman writer of her time...

Dickinson was no realist, no feminist, no reformer, no agitator, no daughter of the epic age.... It is primarily because of her boldly compressed metaphorical linkings between girlish intimacies and spiritual abstractions that we compliment Emily Dickinson on being a 'metaphysical'...Women's love poetry seems to me to be I-You poetry, not I-He poetry on the whole; the effect is verse letters directed by a woman to the specific man she loves, and not about him; women poets do not celebrate *his* eyes, *his* hair, *his* smile; they mostly write about Me....Emily Dickinson's 'dog as large as myself,' as she coyly wrote Thomas Higginson, 'that my father bought me'...With their rough shaggy coats, their deep, senseless voices, their stupid affection, and their dirty habits, surely dogs supplied the want for all that is precious in masculinity to literary spinsters."

Ellen Moers  
*Literary Women*  
(Doubleday/Anchor 1977) 86, 92-94, 255, 260

"A mind capable of describing psychological states more accurately than any poet except Shakespeare....More than any other poet, Emily Dickinson seemed to tell me that the intense inner event, the personal and psychological, was inseparable from the universal; that there was a range for psychological poetry beyond mere self-expression...Emily Dickinson's is the only poetry in English by a woman of that century which pierces so far beyond the ideology of the 'feminine' and the conventions of womanly feeling...Dickinson is *the* American poet whose work consisted in exploring states of psychic extremity."

Adrienne Rich  
"Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson"  
*Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*  
eds. Sandra M. Gilbert & Susan Gubar  
(Midland 1979)

"The eruption of (Dickinson's) imagination and poetry followed when she shifted her passion, with the energy of desperation, from (the) lost man onto his only possible substitute,--the Universe in its Divine aspect...Thereafter, the marriage that had been denied in the real world, went forward in the spiritual...Just as the Universe in its Divine aspect became the mirror-image of her 'husband,' so the whole religious

dilemma of New England, at that most critical moment in its history, became the mirror-image of her relationship to him, of her 'marriage' in fact."

poet Ted Hughes  
quoted by Adrienne Rich  
"Vesuvius at Home" (1979)

"The conflict in the poems, put simply, seems to be between forces of sexuality and forces of death; the convergence of sexuality and death, of avoiding the acknowledgment that the two join each other in time, and that the self comes to its end at their meeting. A third voice, intervening in the dialectic, which takes its passion from the knowledge of sexuality and its vengeance from the knowledge of death, is often one of rage. Rage is a way of preventing the convergence of sexuality and death, albeit momentarily and albeit in full and painful awareness that the two can be kept apart only conceptually and only one step removed from experience. This third voice (the one breaking into the established dialectic in order to complicate it) is a complex one, for its existence, its presence, effects the stopping of time by framing the dilemma in words that exempt themselves from the very process against which they rage and to which they must inevitably return. Thus, if we were to chart the three voices, the two dialectical ones would appear along the same linear plane, although distanced from each other. The third, disruptive, voice would place itself erratically above that linear progression, in defiance of it. Its position in relation to the two dialectical points against which it was lodging its protest would of course determine the specific nature of the poem.

Often protest in the poems I shall discuss takes the form of a speaker's recoil from the eminence of her own insights. When the refusal to know is an unconscious one, Dickinson loses control over her subject, and seems afflicted by the same paralyzing despair that prohibits coherence as her speakers are."

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

"The origin of this fatal view of herself is her failure to become converted to the evangelical Christianity that most of her friends were then embracing. She herself views it as a failure: in the sad discussions of religion of this period and earlier she never expresses a doubt that Christianity has a patent on goodness and that in not accepting Christ it is she who is in the wrong. In 1846 she had, from her report, experienced a temporary conversion."

Margaret Homans  
"Emily Dickinson and Poetic Identity"  
*Women Writers and Poetic Identity*  
(Princeton 1980)

"Like the Romantics, she writes quest poems, for they seek to complete the voyage, to prove the strength of the imagination against the stubbornness of life, the repression of an antithetical nature, and that 'hidden mystery,' the final territory of death. The form of the poems reflects their subject. She writes poems of 'radical inquiry,' riddles that tense the intelligence or alternatively achieve startling definitions which testify to the authority of her own consciousness. Such authority depends on power and it is power that lies at the center of Dickinson's relation to Emerson. It is from Emerson that she learns the terms of the struggle and what she needs to conquer—to write poems that win from nature the triumph of freedom for the imagination."

Joanne Feit Diehl  
"Emerson, Dickinson, and the Abyss"  
*Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination*  
(Princeton 1981)

"Whereas Whitman and Dickinson turned their backs on the ornate variety of Victorian verse forms and created individual prosodies, Melville set himself to school with traditional metrics...The verses of the retiring Emily Dickinson show more appetite for the grits and quiddities [essentials] of human psychology than do Whitman's paeans."

John Updike

“The first reviewers of Emily Dickinson’s work pronounced it ‘bad poetry...divorced from meaning, from music, from grammar, from rhyme: in brief, from articulate and intelligible speech.’ Thomas Higginson, having finally agreed to support the publication of *Poems*, did so with apologies. In his preface to the volume, he wrote, ‘After all, when a thought takes one’s breath away, a lesson in grammar seems an impertinence.’ Such impertinence had, however, been his. His thirty-year hesitation to recommend Dickinson’s work was based on objections to form and grammar he here urges others to overlook. Even decades after the emergence of Dickinson’s poems, Percy Lubbock reproached her for their ‘cryptic harshness, their bad rhymes and wild grammar.’ Harold Monro similarly complained: ‘Her style is clumsy, her language is poor; her technique is appalling and there is no excuse (except that very excuse of faulty technique) for the frequent elementary grammatical errors.’”

Shira Wolosky  
“A Syntax of Contention”  
*Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War*  
(Yale 1984)

“Her aim is not Thoreau’s conversion of Nature into her own mind; it is the minuteness, the exact shading, of an actual human cycle forever reenacting itself within a domestic setting. Everything in her life is in her poems--especially when she has to make it up...Least of all did she believe that the human soul was needed to complete the universe. Saturated in a theological tradition that still provided the language for everyday experience, she must have recognized herself (in addition to her other troubles) as a reluctant skeptic ahead of her time. She was the first modern writer to come out of New England....

Yet Dickinson somehow managed to live the dialectic of the old religion--the minutely observing self under God’s all-seeing eye. Every instant of life was morally of supreme importance. This made her incessantly expressive, a Puritan trait. But she never affirmed faith where there was only a longing for faith. Her view of life remained strenuous, problematic, a contest. Writing was a trial of strength. God, whatever else He was not, was still the greatest *weight* on her life. Death was the next stage of life but was such a break with everything known that it could just as easily be called Immortality as not. Thus she lived a more complex consciousness than most American writers knew anything of. The ‘eternities’ for Dickinson, as for Melville, are not to be doubted. But where Melville gave them extended physical properties--the sea, the ominous whiteness of the whale, limitlessness, landlessness, frightfulness--for Dickinson they are names for her mental states....

The contractedness of her ‘breathing,’ phrasing, the undisclosed territory between her capitalized nouns, between the dashes as her abrupt punctuation--all this seems to mock the anxious expressiveness of Victorian America. The abstractions with which she orients herself are homemade. Emerson sought ‘dry light and hard expressions.’ Thoreau could never resist epigrams, puns, scornful little pellets of Yankee wit. They were practicing ‘economy.’ Dickinson respected Emerson but must have laughed at so much conscious rhetoric. She wrote out of turbulence, feeling now like ‘nobody,’ now like a ‘queen’; she wrote as a person bargaining for her life, line after line, not as an ‘infinite’ soul....

There are great silences within her poems that are not withholdings from the reader but contractions of feeling (‘a zero at the bone’) that tighten sense almost to inaudibility in the pell-mell rush of her thinking to herself...Her famous terseness and breathless brevity derive from her persistence in seeing the world now on one surface, now on another; folding and refolding an object in her hands....In Dickinson the present is entirely present. It makes a phenomenology of pure being....The reader is startled first by her immediacy, the hurtling directness of her attack. One is even more startled by her ability to present separate words as physical sensations. Her lexicon replenished itself from dictionaries, farmer’s almanacs, maps, and especially Shakespeare. He had such a large vocabulary....

Dickinson’s poetry must be taken, initially, as a young woman’s rebellion. There are obvious cries of frustration, a sexual kittenishness and bravado, from the round corner room (her first image of ‘circumference’) in the house on Main Street....Her being an anachronism was good for Emily Dickinson’s

poetry, if not for her rational happiness. The good New England writers left were the last leaves on the Puritan tree. Harriet Beecher Stowe was established as an eccentric; Sarah Orne Jewett was an exquisite but ultimately too fragile miniaturist.”

Alfred Kazin  
*An American Procession*  
(Random House/Vintage 1985) 163-72

“Of all poets writing in English in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I judge Emily Dickinson to present us with the most authentic cognitive difficulties. Vast and subtle intellect cannot in itself make a poet; the essential qualities are inventiveness, mastery of trope and craft, and that weird flair for intuiting significance through rhythm to which we can give no proper name. Dickinson has all these, as well as a mind so original and powerful that we scarcely have begun, even now, to catch up with her....Dickinson’s strangeness, partly masked, still causes us to wonder at her, as we ought to wonder at Shakespeare or Freud. Like them, she has no single, overwhelming precursor whose existence can lessen her wildness for us. Her agon [debate] was waged with the whole of tradition, but particularly with the Bible and with romanticism. As an agonist, she takes care to differ from any male model....The heraldic drama of her reclusiveness became the cost of her confirmation as a poet more original even than Whitman, indeed more original than any poet of her century after (and except) Wordsworth....

I cannot believe that even Dickinson would have written with so absolutely astonishing an audacity had Emerson not insisted that poets were as liberating gods....When Emerson lectured in Amherst in December 1857, and stayed next door with Dickinson’s brother and sister-in-law, he was characterized by the poet: ‘as if he had come from where dreams are born’....‘Experience’ and ‘Circles’ [are] two essays that I think Dickinson had internalized....In his essay, ‘Circles,’ Emerson had insisted: ‘There is no outside, no inclosing wall, no circumference to us.’ The same essay declares: ‘The only sin is limitation’....‘My Business is Circumference—’she famously wrote to Higginson...When she wrote, to another correspondent, that ‘The Bible dealt with the Centre, not with the Circumference--,’ she would have been aware that the terms were Emerson’s, and that Emerson also dealt only with the Central, in the hope of the Central Man who would come. Clearly, ‘Circumference’ is her trope for the Sublime, as consciousness and as achievement or performance. The spiritual choice was not to be post-Christian, as with Whitman or Emerson, but to become a sect of one, like Milton or Blake....Her own Sublime [is] that state of Circumference at once a divine discontent and a series of absolute moments that take dominion everywhere. Better perhaps than any other poet, she knows and indicates that what is worth representing is beyond depiction, what is worth saying cannot be said [ineffable].

Poem 1260, dated by Thomas Johnson as about 1873, but it must be later, if indeed the reference is to the dying either of Samuel Bowles (1878) or of Judge Otis Lord (1884), the two men Richard Sewall, Dickinson’s principal biographer, considers to have been her authentic loves, if not in an conventional way her lovers. The poem closes with a conditional vision of God refunding to us finally our ‘confiscated Gods.’ Reversing the traditional pattern, Dickinson required and achieved male Muses....Of Dickinson’s 1,775 poems and fragments, several hundred are authentic, strong works, with scores achieving absolute aesthetic dignity. To choose one above all the others must reveal more about the critic than he or she could hope or know. But I do not hesitate in my choice, poem 627, written probably in her very productive year, 1862.”

Harold Bloom, ed.  
*Emily Dickinson: Modern Critical Views*  
(Chelsea 1985) 1-6

“Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson are America’s nineteenth-century poetic geniuses; separately, they resisted the Anglophilia that had hobbled American verse in genteel forms. Whitman invented American free verse unrhymed and unmeasured; Dickinson invented a free form of England’s most common poem, the hymn. Except for a very few experiments, Dickinson wrote in hymn meters all her life, shaping her single form till it responded effortlessly to her intensity of perception and expression.

Dickinson, brought up in conventional Protestantism, never abandoned the metaphysical questions of her upbringing--questions of mortality, renunciation, perfection, existential meaning. But she emptied them



of specifically Christian import, though she continued to employ Christian symbols, especially those of damnation, salvation, crucifixion, and heaven. 'Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -- / I keep it, staying at Home --' she wrote. Her poetry is frequently blasphemous, as when she indicts God as the torturer who 'scalps your naked Soul.' She does not evade her Puritan and Emersonian inheritance of personal ethical responsibility, but she wrenches it powerfully to her own uses.

A second Dickinson, as powerful as the metaphysical one, is the observer of nature, watching a bird eat a worm raw or coming upon a snake and feeling 'Zero at the Bone'...The third, and greatest, Dickinson is the psychological analyst. Herself subject to extremes of anxiety and depression, she never flinched from interrogating her own mental states, taming them (at least to some degree) by her fine-drawn descriptions of the horrors she experienced...Though she concealed herself, in life, from others, she was nakedly exposed to herself. There are other Dickinsons--the love poet, the social satirist, the observer of people, the poet of aesthetic reflection--each of them a considerable talent....A search through Dickinson's *Complete Poems* never fails to turn up new poems of great value....

Dickinson's early poetry, when it is weak, displays hysteria, self-absorption, and a coy whimsicality. To watch her develop as a poet is to see the whimsicality relax, the hysteria become disciplined by intellectual analysis, and the self-absorption strengthen itself into meditation on the human lot. Her irony turns on herself as well as on the universe; her love of paradox deepens to an examination of the laws of necessity, creative and destructive at once....Dickinson's bold calligraphy and her composition by phrase--each marked off by a dash with space before and after--puts emphasis on each stamp or impress of the mind in its analysis of experience. Slant rhymes and an oblique form of expression ensure the oddness of surface in Dickinson's poems; the resonant forms of her language stand for her conviction of the baffling eccentricity of life and thought.

Though her poetry reflects her reading of many English poets (Shakespeare, Keats, Mrs. Browning) and of Emerson, she is the least imitative of American poets, turning the discursive certainties of writers and philosophers alike into her own preferred thematic form, the riddle. Enigma is her genre; and pain her topic; her anatomy of psychic skepticism remains one of the great documents of American nineteenth-century attitudes. The best measure of her success in verse is the way in which her poems make themselves remembered. Without any effort on our part to memorize them, we find we cannot forget her lines. Her fame has continued to grow. Her poems, once rewritten by others for public acceptability, are now known in their full power and self-assertion."

Martha Banta  
*The Harper American Literature II*  
(Harper & Row 1987) 186-88

"The same popular religious currents that influenced Emerson contributed in different ways to Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Melville's *Moby-Dick*, and some of Emily Dickinson's poetry...The new religious style was adaptable to any metaphysical vision and any genre. As Emerson had noted, preaching had suddenly become the most flexible of forms, available for either affirmative or skeptical use by American writers....Dickinson soars adventurously beyond doctrine by mixing the sacred and the secular, the Christian and the pagan. And she had been taught how to achieve this mixture by her popular religious culture....

By aligning herself with several of the most progressive religious stylists of the day, Emily Dickinson was launching a silent but major rebellion against the doctrinal tradition valued by her father.... Wadsworth's style was adventurous...with a tendency to the startling and paradoxical. Emily Dickinson once praised his 'inscrutable roguery' and seemed to copy his impish style in many poems...Similarly, she could be totally captivated by 'a splendid sermon' from Edwards A. Park, which left the congregation 'so still, the buzzing of a fly would have boomed out like a cannon. And when it was all over, and that wonderful man sat down, people stared at each other, and looked as wan and wild, as if they had seen a spirit, and wondered they had not died.' The combined imagery here of the fly, death, and religion seems to anticipate Dickinson's famous poem 'I heard a Fly buzz -- when I died.' [#465]...It is not theology or Christianity that counts but rather the existential impact of a momentous situation....

'Some keep the Sabbath going to Church' [#324]...may be regarded as a clever adaptation of the antebellum religious style: not only does it shift worship from the church to nature and sing praise to short sermons, but it actually converts God into an entertaining preacher trained in the new sermon style....[In] 'He preached upon "Breadth" till it argued him narrow--' [#1207]... Dickinson uses the tools of antebellum imaginative preaching--paradox, humor, startling metaphor, stress upon the human Jesus--to undermine preaching itself....Her tortured, elliptical poetry was far more than the anguished record of one trapped woman's private struggles. It can be profitably viewed as the highest product of a rich literary moment, roughly between 1855 and 1865, that I call the American Women's Renaissance...Emily Dickinson, as a student humorist at Amherst Academy, wrote a comic article in which she plagiarized from a series of burlesque sermons that had been appearing in New York newspapers since the early 1840s....

One of the most common errors of critics has been to focus closely on a handful of poems that seem to have gender-specific meaning. The fact is that Dickinson's poetry is most characteristic of her era's best women's writing in its extraordinary flexibility of tone, its refusal to rest comfortably in individual gender roles, its magnificent assertion of creativity through the fabrication of dense imagery, its gaps and indirections and its gender-specific quest for a gender-free reality....If the women authors of the literature of misery sought to establish an artistic middle ground between the effete Conventional and the openly feminist, so Emily Dickinson explicitly rejected both the 'Dimity Convictions' of traditionalists and the public methods of the women's rights advocates....Dickinson's irregular prosody, with its ubiquitous dashes and caesura, shows rhythm and structure being shattered by the pressure of vehement emotion brought under severe restraint, a stylistic feature common in the literature of misery...

We might be tempted to look for specific biographical sources for Dickinson's volcano imagery (such as the much discussed issue of her possibly homoerotic attraction to her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson), but more significant than such psychoanalytic guesswork is the realization that, whatever the personal motivations behind individual poems, Dickinson frequently discovered new poetic applications for the volcano, one of the most common images in American women's writing....Dickinson transforms one of her era's favorite subjects, the death of feeling after a crushing experience, into literary art by enlivening it with a metaphorical intensity and variety absent from the lesser literature....Witness the artistic treatment of all-annihilating pain in these famous lines: 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes' [#341]...These lines capture precisely the chilly impassivity that characterized the American literature of misery....Only Emily Dickinson succeeded consistently in gaining the artistic sophistication and the philosophical originality many women writers were seeking....

Nowhere in Dickinson's poetry do we find the direct, topical discussion of women's wrongs and women's rights that we find in works like *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Blithedale Romance*, *The Marble Faun*.... Hawthorne and Whitman are thematically subtle but linguistically straightforward in their treatment of women. Dickinson is even more subtle than they and, at the same time, linguistically more shifty, metaphorical, oblique. Moreover, the large majority of her poems have no apparent gender-specific meaning whatsoever....Those who focus narrowly on a few Dickinson poems that seem directly feminist or on particular personality quirks that make Dickinson appear to be a nineteenth-century madwoman do not truly account for her stature as a paradigmatic American woman writer. Her real representativeness lies in her incomparable flexibility, her ability to be by turns coy, fierce, domestic, romantic, profeminist, antifeminist, prudish, erotic...

Given Dickinson's literary aims, it is not surprising that she directly rejected women's rights and was notably inconsistent on women's issues. In the course of her close relationship with Thomas Wentworth Higginson she never showed interest in one of his favorite reforms, women's rights, and when the progressive popular novelist Elizabeth Stuart Phelps wrote her in 1872 asking for her aid in the women's cause, she burned Phelps's letter and mailed her a flat refusal....Although it is tempting to identify psychological reasons for Dickinson's experimental poetics (her apparent agoraphobia, say, or her homosocial bonding with strong women), it does a disservice to her complex makeup to place her in neat pigeonholes, such as nineteenth-century madwoman or secret man hater."

David S. Reynolds

*Beneath the American Renaissance*  
(Harvard 1989) 24, 32, 35-37, 339, 412, 414-17, 420, 423, 437

“In reading Dickinson’s poetry, it is best not to look for creeds or statements of belief. Though she reflects her community’s Protestant and Calvinistic frames of reference, religious terminology in her poetry does not indicate that she held orthodox religious beliefs. She is by turns satirical, skeptical, awed, reverent, speculative, outraged, tantalized, ironic, or God-like herself....

Like Walt Whitman, another rejecter of custom and received wisdom, Dickinson experimented radically with poetic style. Unlike Whitman, she condensed; where he was discursive and celebratory, she was taut, terse, suggestive, oblique....She rearranged word order, ignored rules of punctuation, evaded rhyme schemes even while suggesting them, and in general tried to ventilate and open up language to the point where it approximated her own sense of the layered complexity of matter, spirit, and consciousness.”

Peggy McIntosh & Ellen Louise Hart  
*The Heath Anthology of American Literature I*  
(D. C. Heath 1990) 2843-44

“Dickinson uses the dash to fragment language and to cause unrelated words to rush together; she qualifies conventional language with her own different strains; and she confounds editorial attempts to reduce her dashed off jottings to a ‘final’ version. Not only does she draw lines through her own drafts but also through the linguistic conventions of her society, and her challenges to God are euphemistic imprecations against conventional religion. Even the allusion to the Morse alphabet is not entirely irrelevant: through her unconventional use of punctuation, particularly the dash, Dickinson creates a poetry whose interpretation becomes a process of decoding the way each fragment signals meaning.

Dickinson’s transition from a dominant use of the exclamation mark to a preference for the dash accompanied her shift from ejaculatory poems, which seem outcries aimed with considerable dramatic effect at God or others, to poems where the energies exist more in the relationships between words and between the poet and her words. In this intensely prolific period, Dickinson’s excessive use of dashes has been interpreted variously as the result of great stress and intense emotion, as the indication of a mental breakdown, and as a mere idiosyncratic female habit. Though these speculations are all subject to debate, it is clear that in the early 1860s Dickinson conducted her most intense exploration of language and used punctuation to disrupt conventional linguistic relations, whether in an attempt to express inexpressible psychological states or purely to vivify language.”

Kamilla Denman  
“Emily Dickinson’s Volcanic Punctuation”  
*The Emily Dickinson Journal* (1993)

“She leaves out helping verbs and connecting words; she drops endings from verbs and nouns. It is not always clear what her pronouns refer to; sometimes a pronoun refers to a word which does not appear in the poem. At her best, she achieves breathtaking effects by compressing language. Her disregard for the rules of grammar and sentence structure are one reason twentieth century critics find her so appealing; her use of language anticipates the way modern poets use language. The downside of her language is that the compression may be so drastic that the poem is incomprehensible; it becomes a riddle or an intellectual puzzle....

Dickinson consistently uses the meters of English hymns. This is undoubtedly one reason why modern composers like Samuel Barber and Aaron Copland have set her poems to music and why the dancer Martha Graham choreographed them as a ballet....She uses the dash to emphasize, to indicate a missing word or words, or to replace a comma or period. She changes the function or part of speech of a word; adjectives and verbs may be used as nouns; for example, ‘We talk in *careless*--and in loss’; *careless* is an adjective used as a noun. She frequently uses *be* instead of *is* or *are*. She tends to capitalize nouns, for no apparent reason....She does use rhyme, but she uses forms of rhyme that were not generally accepted till late in the nineteenth century and are used by modern poets....Dickinson uses *identical rhyme* (sane, insane) sparingly. She also uses *eye rhyme* (though, through), *vowel rhymes* (see, buy), *imperfect rhymes* (time, thin), and *suspended rhyme* (thing, along).”

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