INTRODUCTION

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

Emily Dickinson is universally esteemed by critics and other poets. Whitman, Eliot, Williams and even Frost--the most popular with the public--have some detractors, Dickinson virtually none. Famous for having published only a few poems in her lifetime, she is most often compared to Shakespeare, Donne and Blake. Dickinson and Whitman--opposites in so many ways--became by far the most influential American poets from the 19th century. Yvor Winters concludes: "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."

SUBJECTS

Dickinson is a Christian existentialist who vacillates between absolute faith and grave doubts: "Sweet Skepticism of the Heart -- / That knows -- and does not know" (#1413). Her poetry is fixated on just a few ideas--God, Nature, Love, Ecstasy, Death, Immortality, Heaven, Eternity--as evident in the subject index of her 1,775 *Complete Poems* (1955), edited by Thomas H. Johnson. His index is not a concordance, it does not record how often key words are used and it omits some important subjects, including *wilderness* and especially *Calvary*, evoking Christ, suffering and transformation--spiritual death and rebirth.

She refers to her own "Crucifixion" (#295) and calls herself "The Queen of Calvary" (#348). In 1862 the married clergyman Charles Wadsworth, thought by some to have been the love of her life--the one she addressed as "Master"--moved far away to a church named Calvary. From then until her death 26 years later she refused to wear colors, dressing only in white--her "white election," she called it. Her Calvary motif conveys the theme of spiritual renunciation also prominent in the fiction of her contemporaries Henry James and Edith Wharton: "Renunciation is a piercing Virtue" (#745). Secular critics who minimize her Christianity should note that Johnson cites 18 poems about Jesus Christ, 20 about Immortality, 29 about God, 11 about Faith, 6 about Angels, 37 about Heaven and just one about Hell. Only 5 are about loneliness. Johnson also cites 70 poems about Life and almost 150 about Death and the Dead, plus 21 more about the Grave.

STYLE

Her revolutionary style is so unique it can be recognized at a glance: brevity, extreme compression, frequent unconventional capitalization and abundant use of dashes that fragment sentences and isolate words and phrases, increasing their connotations and multiplying implications. She "Distills amazing sense / From ordinary Meanings" (#448)—"distills," intending to intoxicate and even to induce a vicarious ecstasy. Her dashes contribute to a breathless tone, cerebral drama and great intensity. By gnomic

compression she produced the rare gems reprinted in anthologies. At the same time, it must be acknowledged, in many of her 1,775 poems meanings are so indefinite, cryptic and generalized they dissipate into vagueness, sometimes even disintegrating the poems. Most common readers of her entire collection would be bewildered by many--perhaps most--of her poems, while to literature teachers they are an inexhaustible source of challenges to explication and of opportunities for projection.

When she capitalizes abstractions and concrete nouns, they become personifications and symbols--such as Death and the Door--turning poems into little allegories that link to others in the collection. “Tis this expands the least event / And swells the scantest deed” (#1665). Her archetypal symbolism is a powerful shorthand: “Within my Garden, rides a Bird / Upon a single Wheel” (#500): the Garden is the heart, the bird embodies the Sky and transcendent consciousness, and the Wheel is round and whole and rolling through Eternity, her monadic symbol of the divine Cosmos moved and directed by the forces of God--comparable in meaning to the Tibetan prayer wheel. Often she makes it impossible to determine the antecedents of pronouns so as to increase the possible implications. For example, “He” may refer to a loved one, to Christ, to God, to her own masculine side, etc. As we consider possibilities, the poem enlarges: “So infinite our intercourse / So intimate, indeed” (#1721).

Many of her poems render extreme states of consciousness with exquisite precision and sensitivity, such as “There’s a certain Slant of light” (#258) and “After great pain, a formal feeling comes” (#341). Her poems are extremely diverse as expressions of sensibility, including wit, riddle, humor and precise renderings of animals infused with her feelings about them, expressions of her at-one-ment with Nature--even “A narrow Fellow in the Grass” (#986). Her greatest poem according to consensus, “Because I could not stop for Death” (#712), implies an afterlife. However, Postmodern readers have identified in particular with her poems expressing religious doubt and an Existential confrontation with nothingness, including “I heard a Fly buzz when I died” (#465)—in which the speaker, being dead, is *proof* of an afterlife--and “The Tunnel is not lighted” (#1652). Her thinking in absolutes and ambiguities is similar to Melville.

QUEENLY VICTORIANS

In Dickinson’s inner world, feeling like a Queen is a metaphor of spiritual elevation and power. She considers this feeling universal: “No Life can pompless pass away-- / The lowliest career / To the same Pageant wends its way / As that exalted here” (#1626). American male writers were too democratic to feel royal even in metaphor. Twain satirized aristocratic pretensions as unAmerican. In contrast, royal metaphors were popular with American women during the matriarchal Victorian age, evidence of their elevated cultural status that contradicts Feminist propaganda of the late 20th century. Margaret Fuller concludes *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) with a poem expressing an aristocratic sensibility: “Ask for the castle's King and Queen; / Though rabble rout may rush between.”

TRADITIONS

Dickinson wrote in the Puritan allegorical tradition of Anne Bradstreet, whose psychological wholeness likewise is expressed by thinking in the heart--the harmonious integration of the two hemispheres of the brain--a characteristic evident more often in women than in male writers: “The heart is the Capitol of the Mind” (#1354). Her Puritan inheritance also included the metrics of the hymn, a deeply introspective nature, a strong moral sense and a lifelong preoccupation with salvation. She retains the dualism of Bradstreet’s “The Flesh and the Spirit” (1678) in her lines “When Flesh and Spirit sunder” (#1420) and “The Spirit turns away / Just laying off for evidence / An overcoat of Clay” (#976). The Spirit likewise is dual: “Of Consciousness, her awful Mate / The Soul cannot be rid” (#894). Her mating metaphor implies that she is both masculine and feminine, transcending Victorian gender roles in the tradition of Margaret Fuller, preceding Virginia Woolf and the Modernists of the 20th century. At the same time, her metaphor genders the soul as female, consistent with the typology of Victorianism, as in Hawthorne.

Her collected poems are a spiritual autobiography unified by ongoing themes, recurrent figures and branching metaphors in the Metaphysical tradition of Donne and Edward Taylor. Her tendency to aphorism and her vision of Nature as symbolic of the soul show the influence of Emerson, in particular his essays on “Circles” and “Compensation,” as in her early poem #125: “For each ecstatic instant / We must an anguish

pay / In keen and quivering ratio / To the ecstasy." Among contemporaries she admired Elizabeth Barrett Browning and: "Oh what an afternoon for Heaven, / When 'Bronte' entered there!" (#148). Her religious existentialism precedes that of T. S. Eliot and her poetic innovations make her a bridge to Stephen Crane, Wallace Stevens, e. e. cummings, and Hart Crane.

BIOGRAPHY

Emily Dickinson lived in one house--the largest in Amherst--all her life, and died there. "Eden is that old-fashioned House / We dwell in every day" (#1657). At Mount Holyoke Female Seminary and Amherst Academy, she was known as one of the two "wits of the school" and wrote comic articles for the school magazine, one of them composed of burlesque sermons. She was unable to conform to the religious beliefs prevailing there and in her own home, as her father Edward Dickinson--lawyer, treasurer of Amherst College--was a strict Calvinist. She stopped attending church. She could not believe in an angry God who "scalps your naked Soul": "The Maker's cordial visage, / However good to see, / Is shunned, we must admit it, / Like an adversity" (#1718). Like Emerson and Whitman before her, she turned Calvinism upsidedown, seeing Nature not as fallen but as divine: "Nature is Heaven" (#668). However, "God cannot be found" (#1551) and her poetry records her search for divinity: "Oh Jesus in the Air -- / I know not which thy chamber is / I'm knocking everywhere" (#502). More than even Thoreau, she turned inward--to an idealized Nature.

RECLUSE

She withdrew from society and rarely descended from her room even to see guests who came knocking. Sometimes she would allow little children into her house to give them candy or cookies, but she usually avoided them, tying her treats to a long string and lowering them to the children out of her bedroom. By the age of 32 she rarely went outdoors. Always dressed in white, according to the legend, she was occasionally glimpsed by passersby like a spirit wafting through her garden. So little is known about her, biographers have focused on identifying the men in her life. Most have seen disappointment in love as probably the main cause of her withdrawal rather than spiritual alienation and a need for creative solitude comparable to Thoreau's.

Her best woman friend other than her unmarried younger sister Lavinia was Susan Gilbert, the wife of her brother Austin, whose family lived next door. During her lifetime she enclosed nearly 300 poems with notes to Susan. But she seemed to need an older man to act as her "preceptor" or "tutor," to use her terms. One was a lawyer acquaintance of her father she met before she began writing poetry. He awakened her literary tastes, introduced her to the works of Emerson, expanded her horizon and "taught me Immortality." Later came the married Reverend Wadsworth, until he moved away. Another was a newspaper editor who published one of her early poems. The last was a judge who was a friend of the family--another older man beyond her reach: "He carries a circumference / In which I have no part" (#1663). Some think she fell in love with this one or that one, others think that her relationships with men were completely intellectual and that the men were unaware of her feelings. Still, they must have sensed by what high standards they were being judged: "God is a distant -- stately Lover" (#357).

EDITOR HIGGINSON

She began writing poems in the later 1850s and in 1858 she began to gather them in packets. By 1862 she was writing a poem every day, most of them included in letters to her friends for their opinions. Needing another preceptor, she turned to an influential editor and critic at the *Atlantic Monthly*, Thomas Higginson, a former Unitarian clergyman who later organized and led a black regiment in the Civil War. He had invited any "new genius" among his readers to approach him. Dickinson sent him a letter enclosing four poems, asking if he thought her poetry was "alive" and "breathed." She had no interest in publication, only his critical opinion. Her odd poems broke so many rules he did not pass them on to his Editor. He wrote her a sympathetic letter in response and they began a long correspondence.

At intervals she sent Higginson poems, signing her notes "your gnome" and "your scholar." She asked him to be her "preceptor" and he offered her a number of suggestions, but she never changed anything--not a single dash--to please him. He realized that she did not want specific criticisms and had no intention of

changing her poems to conform to conventional standards. Her poems puzzled him, but he sensed her genius: “You enshroud yourself in this fiery mist and I cannot reach you, but only rejoice in the rare sparkles of light.” They had never met.

Finally in 1870, when she was 40, he visited her out in Amherst. He waited in the parlor. After awhile, he heard a faint rustle in the hallway. Then a shy little feminine creature appeared gliding into the room like an apparition, pale and childlike, dressed all in white and carrying two white lilies. Gracefully prim, her dark hair pulled back smoothly tight, she handed him the lilies, saying in a soft breathless voice, “These are my introduction.” Then she bent slightly forward and whispered through full rosy lips, “Forgive me if I am frightened. I never see strangers and hardly know what to say.” She made a few enigmatic remarks and seemed to Higginson remote and strange. He felt disturbed by a tension in the air and said later that he had never met anyone before who drained and unnerved him as much as Emily Dickinson.

CIVIL WAR

Throughout her life she could have said what she did at 16: “I don’t know anything more about affairs in the world, than if I was in a trance.” She is accused by some critics of being so withdrawn she did not even notice the Civil War, which happened during her period of greatest productivity--from 1861 to 1865. Yet in circa 1862 she wrote, “It feels a shame to be Alive -- / When Men so brave...are dead” (#444). The sacrifices of men in the war--Calvarys by the thousands--may have contributed to her burst of creativity, which subsided after the assassination of President Lincoln: “A Sickness of this World it most occasions / When Best Men die” (#1044).

DEATH

Dickinson had no feminist need for empowerment: “To be alive -- is Power -- / Existence -- in itself -- / Without a further function -- / Omnipotence – Enough” (#677). Without a career, she had time to live with a sublime intensity: “To live is so startling it leaves little time for anything else.” At the age of only 53 she had a nervous collapse. She left instructions that upon her death, all her letters be burned, but she did not mention her poems in the bottom drawer of her bedroom bureau--hundreds of lyrics bound in packets. According to one account her last words were “I must go in, the fog is rising.” According to another she whispered, “Oh is that all, is it?” Quietly then, she died.

Michael Hollister (2014)

CRITICAL RECEPTION

“The two editors, Mrs. [Mabel Loomis] Todd and [Thomas Wentworth] Higginson, produced *Poems by Emily Dickinson* in 1890....A second and a third selection appeared in 1891 and 1896, respectively.... Martha Dickinson Bianchi, and Mrs. Todd’s daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham...produced a series of editions of both poems and letters between 1914 and 1950....

When Mrs. Todd’s volumes appeared, there were, despite her editorial efforts, some hostile reviews and some complaints about the poet’s lack of ‘technique,’ by which was meant smooth rhymes and meters. The complaints came mainly from such minor poets as Andrew Lang in England and Thomas Bailey Aldrich in America, who naturally ascribed the greatest importance and difficulty to the only poetic quality they themselves had. Against this, we may set the fact that the first volume alone went through sixteen editions in eight years, and was constantly reprinted thereafter.

Mrs. Todd gave dozens of lectures on the poet, and could have given far more. It is inconceivable that the first volume of an unknown poet today could achieve such a success, unless fortified by pornography.... In the 1890’s she was a genuinely popular poet who found her own public in spite of what the highbrows said. When she reappeared in the 1920’s, her reputation was curiously reversed. Then the highbrows took her up, hailed her as a precursor of whatever happened to be fashionable at the time, such as Imagism or free verse or metaphysical poetry, and emphasized everything in her work that was unconventional, difficult, or quaint. Both conceptions have some truth in them....

Finally the bulk of the manuscripts came into the possession of Harvard. With Thomas H. Johnson's definitive edition of the poems (1955) and letters (1958), Emily Dickinson achieved publication on her own uncompromising terms....For the thousands of people, most of them women, who make verse out of a limited range of imaginative experience in life, love, Nature, and religion, who live without fame and without much knowledge of literature beyond their schoolbooks, Emily Dickinson is the literary spokesman. She is popular too in her conceptual use of language, for popular expression tends to the proverbial, and the unsophisticated poet is usually the one who tries to put prose statements into verse."

Northrop Frye, ed.
Major Writers of America II
(Harcourt 1962) 7-8

THE MYSTERY OF HER LOVE LIFE

"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 (see Genevieve Taggard, *The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson*). Another theory is that Emily Dickinson was in love with Edward Hunt, the husband of Helen Fiske, afterward Helen Hunt Jackson (see Josephine Pollitt, *Emily Dickinson: The Human Background of Her Poetry*). 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 (for a summary of this relationship, see Thomas H. Johnson, *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography*, Chapter IV). And finally, late in life, substantial evidence indicates that she was 'very much in love' with Judge Otis Lord (see Millicent Todd Bingham, *Emily Dickinson: A Revelation*).

PRODUCTIVITY

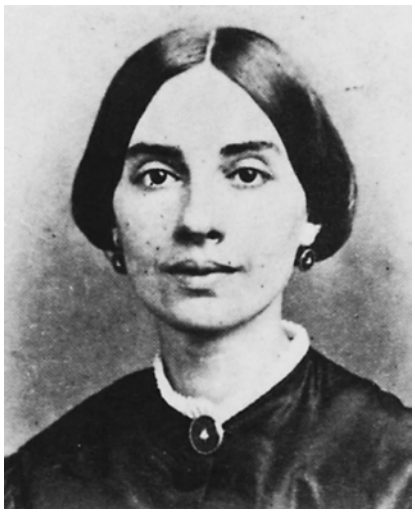
Whatever one makes of the 'love affairs' is perhaps incidental, as long as the biographical theorizing does not obscure the fact that such attachments may well have been more imaginative than actual. Emily Dickinson did not marry; she did not leave her father's home; she became a bride, not in fact, but in her poetry. All we know for certain is that something happened to 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 1,775 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 or none of them."

Thomas M. Davis
Introduction, *14 by Emily Dickinson*
(Scott, Foresman 1964) i

POEMS OF HOMAGE

Of the many poems written in homage to Emily Dickinson, 78 are collected in *Visiting Emily: Poems Inspired by the Life and Work of Emily Dickinson*, eds. Sheila Coghill & Thorn Tammaro (U Iowa 2000). Donald Hall considers "The Impossible Marriage" of Dickinson and Walt Whitman, Madeline DeFrees relates Dickinson to Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Robert Bly is reverential visiting her grave. Some poets have written of her house as a shrine. Bruce Meyer contributes "A Love Poem for Emily Dickinson" while Billy Collins is "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes." Additional humorous poems include "Amherst with Fries" by Philip Dacey, "The Deconstruction of Emily Dickinson" by Galway Kinnell, "Because I Could Not Dump" by Andrea Paterson and "Emily Dickinson Leaves a Message to the World, Now That Her Homestead in Amherst Has an Answering Machine" by X. J. Kennedy. Jayne Relaford Brown imagines the criticism Emily might receive if she were starting out today in "Emily Dickinson Attends a Writing Workshop" and Maxine Kumin imagines her "After the Poetry Reading": "If Emily Dickinson lived in the 1990s / and let herself have sex appeal."

Michael Hollister (2014)



Emily Dickinson 1865