

134 QUOTATIONS



Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

Emily Dickinson is the greatest American poet according to most academics, critics, and other poets. Yet no poet is more religious. Victorian rather than Postmodern, Dickinson is politically incorrect yet a literary deity. Small, shy, dainty and childlike in virgin white, she radiated such intensity that the first time she met her editor, a veteran of the Civil War, she frightened him. Even her letters are intense. Her style dramatizes experiences—often with creatures in her garden—that are sometimes Existentialist, but more often ecstatic in affirming faith and immortality. She modulates rhythms with dashes that increase implications through ambiguity and convey a gaspy almost breathless intensity of sensation, perception and awe. She feels like a butterfly, like a queen, like the lover of God. Her short verses are so compressed into gems they are enigmatic while at the same time the vision they convey is expansive and cosmic, by way of the dashes and of capitalizations that often make her poems archetypal, allegorical and transcendental all at once. Dickinson epitomizes holistic vision, giving her words a sacramental quality.

ORDER OF TOPICS: home, solitude, renunciation, living, toil, society, fame, Civil War, Nature, love, ecstasy, compensation, pain, poetry, truth, psyche, individuation, holistic vision, Existential doubt, faith, God, from letters, old age, death, last words, immortality:

HOME

Where thou art, that is home.

My friends are my estate.

Eden is that old-fashioned House / We dwell in every day.

SOLITUDE

Forgive me if I am frightened. I never see strangers and hardly know what to say.

I don't know anything more about affairs in the world, than if I was in a trance.

The Soul selects her own Society — / Then — shuts the Door.

They might not need me — Yet they might / I'll let my Heart be just in sight — / A smile as small as mine might be / Precisely their necessity.

Saying nothing...sometimes says the most.

The Soul should always stand ajar.

RENUNCIATION

Renunciation — is a piercing Virtue. [as in Henry James and Edith Wharton]

LIVING

To live is so startling it leaves little time for anything else.

To be alive — is Power — / Existence — in itself — / Without a further function — / Omnipotence — Enough.

Find ecstasy in Life; / The mere sense of living is joy enough.

That it will never come again / Is what makes life so sweet.

Forever — is composed of Nows.

TOIL

Luck is not chance, it's toil, fortune's expensive smile is earned.

SOCIETY

Fortune befriends the bold.

It is better to be the hammer than the anvil.

No Life can pompless pass away — / The lowliest career / To the same Pageant wends its way.

Behavior is what a man does, not what he thinks, feels, or believes.

Success is counted sweetest by those who ne'er succeed.

FAME

Fame is a fickle food upon a shifting plate.

I'm Nobody! Who are you? / Are you — Nobody — Too?

Celebrity is the chastisement of merit and the punishment of talent.

I do not like the man who squanders life for fame; give me the man who living makes a name.

CIVIL WAR

A Sickness of this World it most occasions / When Best Men die.

It feels a shame to be Alive — / When Men so brave...are dead.

NATURE

Nature is Heaven.

Since I am of the Druid.

Beauty is not cause. It is.

Nature is what we know — / Yet have no art to say.

The pretty people in the Woods / Receive me cordially.

How strange that nature does not knock, and yet does not intrude!

I hope you love birds too. It is economical. It saves going to heaven.

The Butterfly upon the Sky... / Is just as high as you and I, / And higher, I believe.

Butterflies... / Have a system of aesthetics — / Far superior to mine.

Dogs are better than human beings because they know but do not tell.

To make a prairie takes a clover and one bee, / One clover, and a bee, / And revery. / The revery alone will do, / If bees are few.

A something in a summer's noon — / A depth — an Azure — a perfume — / Transcending ecstasy.

A solemn thing within the Soul / To feel itself get ripe.

LOVE

I never saw a Moor.

Wild Nights — Wild Nights! / Were I with thee / Wild Nights should be / Our luxury!

Morning without you is a dwindling dawn.

Love is anterior to Life — / Posterior to Death — / Initial of Creation, and the exponent of Breath.

Unable are the Loved to die / For Love is Immortality, / Nay, it is Deity.

I argue thee / That love is life — / And life hath Immortality.

ECSTASY

I taste a liquor never brewed.

Inebriate of Air — am I / And Debauchee of Dew.

Take all away from me, but leave me Ecstasy.

COMPENSATION

For each ecstatic instant / We must an anguish pay / In keen and quivering ratio / To the ecstasy. [echo of Emerson]

PAIN

I like a look of Agony, / Because I know it's true.

People need hard times and oppression to develop psychic muscles.
After great pain, a formal feeling comes — / The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs.

I should have had the Joy / Without the Fear — to justify — / The Palm — without the Calvary.

Parting is all we know of heaven, / And all we need of hell.

A wounded deer leaps the highest.

What Exultation in the Woe.

POETRY

This is my letter to the World — / That never wrote to Me.

So infinite our intercourse / So intimate, indeed.

If I can stop one Heart from breaking / I shall not live in vain.

Nature is a Haunted House — but Art — a House that tries to be haunted.

This was a Poet — It is That / Distills amazing sense / From ordinary Meanings.

Tis this expands the least event / And swells the scantest deed.

But who am I, / To tell the pretty secret / Of the Butterfly.

A word is dead / When it is said, / Some say. I say it just begins to live that day.

He ate and drank the precious Words — / His Spirit grew robust — / He knew no more that he was poor, /
Nor that his frame was Dust.

There is no Frigate like a Book / To take us Lands away / Nor any Coursers like a Page / Of prancing
Poetry.

If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry.

If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry.

TRUTH

Truth is so rare that it is delightful to tell it.

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant.

The truth I do not dare to know / I muffle with a jest.

Much madness is divinest Sense.

PSYCHE

The heart is the Capitol of the Mind — / The Mind is a single State — / The Heart and the Mind together
make / A single Continent.

Of consciousness, her awful Mate / The Soul cannot be rid.

Grant me, Oh Lord, a sunny mind — / Thy will to bear!

The Brain — is wider than the Sky.
Heaven is so far of the Mind.

INDIVIDUATION

The Sunrise kissed my Chrysalis.

My Cocoon tightens... / I'm feeling for the Air.

From Cocoon forth a Butterfly — As Lady from her Door.

Growth of Man — like Growth of Nature — Gravitates within... / Each — its difficult Ideal / Must achieve
— Itself.

Exultation is the going / Of an inland soul to sea, / Past the houses — past the headlands — / Into deep
Eternity — [compare *Moby-Dick*]

Explore thyself! / Therein thyself shalt find / The “Undiscovered Continent.” [compare *Walden*]

Each Life Converges to some Centre.

HOLISTIC VISION

Within my Garden, rides a Bird / Upon a single Wheel.

Slow tramp the Centuries, / And the Cycles wheel!

I turned my Being round and round.

EXISTENTIAL DOUBT

God cannot be found.

The Tunnel is not lighted.

“Heaven” — is what I cannot reach!

Sweet Skepticism of the Heart — / That knows — and does not know.

I heard a Fly buzz — when I died.

O Jesus — in the Air — / I know not which they chamber is — / I'm knocking everywhere.

The abdication of Belief / Makes the Behavior small.

FAITH

Faith is Doubt—

“Faith” is a fine invention / When Gentlemen can see — But Microscopes are prudent / In an Emergency.

Dwell in possibility.

Not knowing when the Dawn will come, / I open every Door.

“Hope” is the thing with feathers — / That perches in the soul — / And sings the tunes without the words
— and never stops at all.

There’s Triumph in the Room / When that Old Emperor — Death — / By Faith — be overcome.

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church — / I keep it, staying at Home — / With a Bobolink for a
Chorister — / And an Orchard, for a Dome.

So instead of going to Heaven, at last — / I’m going, all along.

GOD

You are sure there’s such a person / As “a Father” — in the sky.

They say that God is everywhere, and yet we always think of Him as somewhat of a recluse.

The Maker’s cordial visage, / However good to see, / Is shunned, we must admit it, / Like an adversity.

God is a distant — stately lover.

from LETTERS

God is sitting here, looking into my very soul to see if I think right tho’ts.... This self-sacrificing spirit will
be the ruin of me! (29 January 1850)

My only sketch, profile, of Heaven is a large, blue sky, bluer and larger than the biggest I have seen in
June, and in it are my friends — all of them — every one of them — those who are with me now, and those
who were “parted” as we walked, and “snatched up to Heaven”....

Pardon my sanity, Mrs. Holland, in a world insane, and love me if you will, for I had rather be loved than to
be called a king in earth, or a lord in Heaven. (August 1856?)

Mr. Higginson, Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive? The Mind is so near itself — it
cannot see distinctly — and I have none to ask. (15 April 1862)

Mr. Higginson, your kindness claimed earlier gratitude — but I was ill — and write today, from my pillow.
Thank you for the surgery — it was not so painful as I supposed. I bring you others — as you ask —
though they might not differ. For Poets — I have Keats — and Mr. and Mrs. Browning. For Prose — Mr.
Ruskin — Sir Thomas Browne — and the Revelations. I went to school — but in your manner of the
phrase — had no education. When I was a little Girl, I had a friend, who taught me Immortality — but
venturing too near, himself — he never returned — Soon after, my Tutor, died — and for several years, my
Lexicon — was my only companion — Then I found one more — but he was not contented I be his scholar
— so he left the Land....

My Mother does not care for thought — and Father, too busy with his Briefs — to notice what we do — He
buys me many Books — but begs me not to read them — because he fears they joggle the Mind. They are
religious — except me — and address an Eclipse, every morning — whom they call their “Father.” ...You
speak of Mr. Whitman — I never read his Book — but was told that he was disgraceful...
(25 April 1862)

I have had few pleasures so deep as your opinion [Higginson], and if I tried to thank you, my tears would
block my tongue....

You think my gait “spasmodic” — I am in danger — Sir — You think me “uncontrolled” — I have no
Tribunal. Would you have time to be the “friend” you should think I need? I have a little shape — it
would not crowd your Desk — nor make much Racket as the Mouse, that dents your Galleries — If I might

bring you what I do — not so frequent to trouble you — and ask you if I told it clear — 'twould be control, to me....

But, will you be my Preceptor, Mr. Higginson? (7 June 1862)

To T.W. Higginson, I had no portrait, now, but am small, like the Wren, and my Hair is bold, like the Chestnut Bur — and my eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves — Would this do just as well?...

I am happy to be your scholar, and will deserve the kindness, I cannot repay. If you truly consent, I recite now — Will you tell me my fault, frankly as to yourself, for I had rather wince, than die. (July 1862)

After you went [Mrs. J.G. Holland], a low wind warbled through the house like a spacious bird, making it high but lonely. When you had gone the love came. I supposed it would. The supper of the heart is when the guest has gone....

Friday I tasted life. It was a vast morsel. A circus passed the house — still I feel the red in my mind though the drums are out....

Vinnie is deeply afflicted in the death of her dappled cat, though I convince her it is immortal which assists her some. (May 1866)

...I have been very ill, Dear friend [Higginson], since November, bereft of Book and Thought, by the Doctor's reproof, but begin to roam in my Room now — I think of you with absent Affection, and the Wife and Child I never have seen, Legend and Love in one — (Spring 1886)

OLD AGE

Old age comes on suddenly, and not gradually as is thought.

DEATH

Drowning is not so pitiful / As the attempt to rise.

The Poets light but Lamps — / Themselves — go out.

Because I could not stop for Death — / He kindly stopped for me — / The Carriage held but just Ourselves — / And Immortality.

Dying is a wild night and a new road.

LAST WORDS

I must go in, the fog is rising.

Oh is that all, is it?

IMMORTALITY

I could not care — to gain / A lesser than the Whole.

I stand alive — Today — / To witness to the Certainty / Of Immortality.

The Spirit turns away / Just laying off for evidence / An Overcoat of Clay.

Christ will explain each separate anguish / In the fair schoolroom of the sky.

Pass to thy Rendezvous of Light.

