



## EMILY DICKINSON

**Born:** Amherst, Massachusetts  
December 10, 1830

**Died:** Amherst, Massachusetts  
May 15, 1886

*Dickinson's poems, in marked contrast to writings in the sentimental, domestic style of her time, offer original ways of seeing the everyday through verse formulations that are distinctive, lyrical, and timeless.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, on December 10, 1830, the elder daughter of lawyer Edward Dickinson and Emily Norcross Dickinson. Dickinson was the second of three children, a year younger than her brother, William, and three years older than her sister, Lavinia. She was born in a large house built by her grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson; except for absences of about a year for her schooling and seven months in Boston, she lived in it all of her life and died there at precisely 6:00 P.M. on May 15, 1886.

It is paradoxical that a woman who led such a circumscribed and apparently uneventful life managed to acquire the rich perceptions that enabled her to write 1,775 poems unlike any others in the English language. Every one is recognizably her own, and many are masterpieces. The circumstances of her life, therefore, hold a special fascination for readers of her verse.

Dickinson's sharp perceptions and brilliant inner life arise primarily from her background. Her paternal grandfather, whom she never knew, remained an unseen presence in her family. A Trinitarian deacon educated at Dartmouth College, he became moderately prosperous through his legal practice, investments, and a number of appointive

and elective government positions; he was also a visionary. His religious zeal led him to use his entire fortune to found two Trinitarian educational institutions: Amherst Academy (1814) and Amherst College (1821). It was he who built "the homestead" in 1813, the great brick house that defined the daily life of his poet granddaughter.

Having spent thousands of dollars in the cause of education, he had become insolvent by early 1833. On May 22, 1833, he was even forced to sell the homestead. He moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, where he did church-related work, then Hudson, Ohio, where he died of pneumonia on April 22, 1838.

His son Edward, the poet's father, succeeded where the elder Dickinson had failed. Edward continued in his father's position as trustee of the Amherst institutions. By the end of his term in 1873, Amherst College had assets of more than a million dollars. By March, 1855, he had repurchased the house his father had built and lost. Educated at Yale University, he managed to combine religious zeal with practical business ability. His daughter would remember his long absences—as representative to the Massachusetts state legislature, as chief financial officer of Amherst College, as land speculator with holdings in northern New England—but she clearly loved him in a way she never did her mother.

Edward was an undemonstrative man; he had struggled through Yale University with only the barest financial support of a father who ironically had directed all of his resources to the support of

Amherst College. The elder Dickinson believed, in characteristic Puritan spirit, that he owed the most support to the greatest number, even though this meant stinting a member of his own family.

Edward was, consequently, a man who had needed to stifle external emotions so many times that he had trouble expressing them at all. Many of the courtship letters he wrote to Emily Norcross Dickinson (the poet's mother) survive, but even during the emotionally charged period before marriage Dickinson found it possible to describe, entirely impersonally, what he considered the characteristics of an ideal wife. Edward also had found it disconcerting that he had to sacrifice an independent career, in effect, to redeem his father's good name. Despite his withdrawn nature and his long absences from home, he remained a primary figure in his daughter's life and poetry.

Dickinson did not have the same close relationship with her mother. Emily Norcross was not intellectual by nature—she barely understood much of her daughter's poetry—and was at least as undemonstrative as Edward. Many stories about the strange relationship of withdrawn mother and poet daughter are embellishments of the apparently cruel comments the younger Emily made in letters. Others follow from stories told by the relatively small number of persons admitted to the Dickinson circle. Most likely, the antagonism between mother and daughter arose from their different temperaments: the mother lonely and nonliterary, the daughter keenly intellectual and entrusted by her father with many of the household responsibilities that properly should have been her mother's.

Still, it would be wrong to assume that Dickinson's relations with her mother were filled with petty arguments. After her father's sudden death in 1874, during his first term in the Massachusetts House of Representatives, Dickinson and her mother grew closer. She nursed her mother faithfully, from 1875 to 1882, through the paralysis which ultimately took her life.

Dickinson's early relations with her only brother were competitive. In many ways they were alike; both were intellectual and ambitious. Though Dickinson's education was excellent for a woman of the mid-nineteenth century—coeducational training at Amherst Academy, from 1840 to 1845, and slightly more than a year at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, in 1847 and 1848—it is likely that

she envied her brother's ability to circulate in the larger world. They were always friendly rivals.

Dickinson's sister had a personality much like that of her mother, though there is no indication of antagonism between Emily and Lavinia. Indeed, were it not for her sister's efforts after Dickinson's death it is likely that a first collection of her poems would never have appeared. With Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd, Lavinia sorted out the nearly eighteen hundred poems, some of which were written on billheads, envelopes, and odd scraps of paper. They deciphered Dickinson's cramped handwriting and "corrected" and standardized her punctuation.

Variations of this first edition, which first appeared in 1890, four years after the poet's death from kidney disease, remained substantially the only printed texts of Dickinson's verse until Thomas H. Johnson numbered and restored their original readings in his 1955 major edition. Dickinson had only eleven poems published during her lifetime.

The poet's surviving family members share some of the responsibility for creating the image of "the white nun of Amherst." This epithet refers to her habit of dressing exclusively in white after 1861. That she did this out of despair from some impossible love, either for young Ben Newton (her father's law clerk) or for Charles Wadsworth, a married Philadelphia minister with a family, is unlikely.

It is possible, as has been suggested, that Wadsworth's acceptance of a pastorate in San Francisco was an attempt to avoid temptation, but contemporary critics generally argue against the image of a Dickinson desolate because of a lost love. Johnson assigns most of Dickinson's bridal poems to the 1860's, based on this unhappy romance, but one can easily question the Johnson chronology. If correct, it would mean that Dickinson composed two-thirds of her entire output of verse in eight years and an astonishing number (681) in the years from 1862 to 1864.

Dickinson family members recalled, destroyed, and sometimes severely edited much of the poet's personal correspondence. "The belle" or "queen recluse" personae they created by default were infinitely preferable at the close of the nineteenth century to the rebellious, unconventional, but thwarted genius that she actually was. Dickinson had close relationships with several men her own

age, particularly with Samuel Bowles, editor of the Springfield, Massachusetts, *Daily Republican*. Newton, a clerk in her father's law office, was a friendly critic of her verse. It is difficult, and mostly unnecessary, to speculate about whether these were romantic attachments.

Contrary to the widely accepted myth, Dickinson's literary friendships actually broadened during the last ten years of her life. Higginson reintroduced her to a girlhood acquaintance, Helen Hunt Jackson, an acclaimed writer and crusader for the rights of American Indians (Jackson's 1884 novel *Ramona* is her work most familiar to modern readers).

Another area of Dickinson's life obscured in the nineteenth and early twentieth century accounts is the poet's views on religion, and this directly affects the interpretation of many of her poems. Dickinson was raised in the conservative Trinitarian tradition of Jonathan Edwards. This contrasts her background with that of the liberal Unitarians, whose most famous minister was, at the time, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Dickinson remained, however, the only member of her family never to undergo a conversion experience. This was something of a disgrace given the heady zeal of Amherst, but Dickinson never compromised, though it meant being anathematized while in attendance at Mount Holyoke.

Some of her poems suggest science and empiricism as alternatives to unexamined belief; many others portray the particulars of church services against the need for reason. It is an indication of their tolerance that Dickinson's family never pressed her in these matters. Indeed, Dickinson's father provided his daughter with the kind of training that encouraged such inquiry. She was well read, particularly in the physical sciences, and she had ready access to her father's and the Amherst College libraries. The men of the family had read many of the same works as Dickinson, but such readings had merely strengthened their religious convictions. Dickinson always maintained her belief in a supreme deity, but she doubted that human institutions provided a necessary link.

Except for the vision problem that plagued her periodically as early as 1862, Dickinson's life was free of any medical incident until the uremic poisoning which ultimately took her life, swiftly and without pain, on May 15, 1886. Dickinson sought treatment for her severely blurred vision in Boston

in 1864. Her stay there of seven months was the only period, aside from her year at Mount Holyoke, that she remained away from home, and her letters emphasize her desire to return home. The vision problem seems to have abated of its own accord in Dickinson's later years, though it appears in her handwriting throughout the 1860's.

The Dickinson that remains, once one disregards myth and apocrypha, is an immensely gifted woman born a century and a quarter too soon. Rebellious in matters of family and religion, she nevertheless remained dutiful to those who needed her. Far from being an active feminist (for this was nearly impossible during the Civil War period in conservative Amherst), she accepted the enclosed life of a well-born but unmarried New England woman. Had she lived more extensively in the larger world, her verse would probably not have resembled the legacy she left.

#### ANALYSIS

Critics of Dickinson's verse generally note that the poems incorporate one or more of the following themes: death, love, religion, nature, eternity. This observation, of itself, does not take into account the amazing thematic combinations she managed or the extraordinary variety of poetic voices she employed. These range from the almost embarrassing cuteness of poems such as 61 ("Papa above!") or 288 ("I'm Nobody! Who are you?") to the skepticism of 338 ("I know that He exists.") and the passion, with intended or accidental double meaning, of 249 ("Wild Nights—Wild Nights!").

Some of her poems are high serious meditations, such as 258 ("There's a certain Slant of light"); others amount to waspish commentary, such as 401 ("What Soft—Cherubic Creatures—"). That she could see herself as a nobody, a seething volcano, a mouse, or a loaded gun all within the compass of several hundred poems is an indication of the variety of unconventional metaphor she used.

Even more astonishing is the fact that her style undergoes no linear development. Many of the early poems are as excellent as the later ones; bathetic and coy elements also appear throughout the collection. Absence of end-line punctuation creates enjambments that run for full stanzas, while dashes often create a hiatus at mid-line or end.

Early critics ascribed these eccentricities to

Dickinson's inability or unwillingness to punctuate (a characteristic her correspondence shares). Others see Dickinson's unconventional style as a flouting of convention, particularly as most nineteenth century verse written by women was conservative in both form and theme. Still others, noting the lyric configuration of the dashes, compare her poems to the lyric measures of nursery rhymes or to the hymnal melodies then sung in Trinitarian churches. These interpretations do not necessarily exclude one another. What is important is that the irregular rhythms these dashes create almost always improve the poetry.

Dickinson neither titled nor dated her poems, and this is one problem that Johnson faced when preparing the 1955 major edition. The result is that he assigned the poems numbers, arranging them in what appeared a likely chronological order. Sometimes he arrived at relatively secure dating, as when a poem appears in dated letters, on dated billheads, or on postmarked envelopes. Unfortunately, this precludes neither prior nor subsequent composition. Furthermore, because the poems show no radical shifts in style, the task of firm dating remains even more daunting.

A related curiosity of Dickinson's poems is their nearly complete exclusion of reference to external specifics. Number 61 ("Papa above!") might appear to imply her father's death, yet the Johnson chronology posits 1859 as its year of composition. Because Dickinson's father died in 1874, accepting the Johnson dating means having to limit application of the first line to the poet's divine father alone. The poem becomes merely a coy parody of The Lord's Prayer rather than a simultaneous hope that the poet's own father might remember his little mouse.

The complete run of Dickinson's poems is so marked by genius that one tends to forget the occasional lapses of obviously unsuccessful works. These seem to occur most often when she reaches beyond the microcosm of her immediate world. A good example of this is poem 196 ("We don't cry—Tim and I,"). Dickinson here attempts to parallel the pathetic condition of the poet's persona and that of Tiny Tim, the patient crippled child of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843). Unfortunately, the effect is so cloying and sentimental that the poem descends to the bathetic, almost becoming parody.

Similarly, poem 127 ("Houses'—so the wise Men tell me—"), though it begins with a biblical simplicity akin to that of William Blake's child songs, strains to such an extent to evoke sympathy that the verse becomes flaccid. What began as the Lord's promise of a mansion for his children quickly descends to sentimentality for its own sake: "Mansions cannot let the tears in,/ Mansions must exclude the storm!"

The mid-nineteenth century figures of Dickens's Tiny Tim and Little Nell thus continue to afflict Dickinson's verse at irregular intervals. In all fairness, so much maudlin sentiment pervaded the popular poetry of the time that it is a wonder Dickinson's style remained as distinct and uniformly superior as it did. Her poetry is generally on its weakest ground when her dry wit or high serious reflection aims merely to imitate popular trends of the day.

Amherst, in Dickinson's time, was an enlightened, relatively well-educated community, surrounded even in the nineteenth century by institutions of learning, many of them associated in one way or another with the Trinitarian or Unitarian churches. From Dickinson's perspective, however, its people were all too comfortable in religious outlooks she rejected.

Infant death was a common fact of life in the nineteenth century United States. Regular influenza epidemics claimed the lives of adults as well as children every winter. Tuberculosis, then called consumption, claimed still more, and all those deaths appeared listed on the front page of the Springfield *Daily Republican*, the newspaper Dickinson read every day. The room in which Dickinson wrote overlooked the Protestant cemetery. At one period, the funerals of Amherst friends and acquaintances became so common that Dickinson felt she had to move her writing desk to the center of the room to spare herself. In short, Dickinson and her contemporaries lived with death in a way most present-day Americans can hardly comprehend.

Added to this is the fact that Dickinson steadfastly resisted the doctrine of "election," the view that some people were marked from birth for salvation, while others were damned. Proof of such justification lay in what Trinitarians called a "conversion experience." This generally took the form of some personal religious insight experienced at a

critical stage in life. Dickinson's grandfather, father, and brother had all undergone such an experience during or just after their college years. Even at Mount Holyoke, however, Dickinson was among "the unredeemed." She was one of only three students so categorized. To be included among "the saved" she needed only to profess some religious experience, yet she refused to make this claim merely for social acceptance.

By her late teenage years she had abandoned church attendance; for a New England woman raised in the tradition of nineteenth century Trinitarianism, this was anathema. It is little wonder, then, that particulars of the Congregationalist funeral service appear as they do in poem 280 ("I felt a Funeral, in my Brain"). Their droning monotony first causes the narrator's mind to go numb. Feet scrape the wooden floors of the frame church until the narrator feels "That Sense was breaking through—" The coffin seems to "creak across my Soul," and she is "Wrecked, solitary." Finally, "a Plank in Reason, broke," and the narrator "Finished knowing—then—" Literally, the poet describes her own death, a familiar starting point for many of her poems.

The particulars of the service are equally familiar, but her alterations are striking and reflect her nonconformist views. To the congregation, she is "wrecked" and "solitary." Reason breaks, and sense breaks through. She plunges downward into nothingness and finishes knowing, because at death she has certainty. There is no mention here of Heaven or Hell. The "World" she hits "at every plunge" is that of her inner self.

Dickinson here reverses the "plank of faith" metaphor familiar to most New England Protestants in the nineteenth century. This plank, firmly grounded on each side, bridges an abyss. One negotiates it while holding firmly to the Bible. One who looks to either side must surely plunge into the depths. Dickinson's family, as did most others of their station, owned William Holmes and John W. Barber's *Religious Allegories* (1848), which presents the metaphor accompanied by a woodcut showing one of the faithful attempting to cross the gap. Dickinson's plank is Reason, not Faith, however, and Sense does not break, it breaks through.

To modern readers such nonconformity may not seem particularly striking, but one must imagine the effect it had on Dickinson's family and

churchgoing acquaintances. This poem, then, synthesizes the death and religion one finds so often separately treated in Dickinson's verse; more important, it gives some impression of the extent to which the poet felt obliged to argue her convictions. She did not take her theological position merely for the sensation it (no doubt) created, and her religious views were certainly more heterodox than many critics indicate.

Critics who analyze Dickinson's work must storm the verbal fortress of commentary written by her family and friends who, with all good intentions of making Dickinson the stereotype of a nineteenth century spinster who happened to write poetry, came close to neutralizing the double meanings of many of her best poems.

Higginson, whose advice Dickinson regularly sought on literary matters, is particularly blameworthy in this regard. During her lifetime, he repeatedly urged her not to publish, largely on the practical grounds that her verse was unsalable, though wider circulation of her poems would undoubtedly have brought her into correspondence with important writers of the day. One could also argue that this might have changed her style, made her less violently expressive, or rendered a life in Amherst impossible, but these are moot arguments.

Even after her death, Higginson was intent on perpetuating the Dickinson image he had helped to create. Typical is his famous disclaimer inevitably attached to commentaries on poem 249 ("Wild Nights—Wild Nights!"). The poem turns on the image of a storm; lovers can cast away both compass and chart and row in the safe harbor of their love. Higginson's scruples concerned the erotic implication of the poem's final lines: "Might I but moor—Tonight—/ In Thee!" Higginson feared to publish the poem, "lest the malignant read into it more than that virgin recluse ever dreamed of putting there."

One wonders, however, whether Higginson even noticed the much more perverse implications of a stormy Eden whose fallen lovers dispose of the compass and chart which would have kept them on the prescribed course—presumably, apart. Though one could argue that the erotic image of the moored lovers was unintended, it is much more difficult to reject the lovers' obvious abandonment of their set course. The reckless emotion of their

love justifies the erotic implication of the final lines.

Comparable eroticism, in this case consummation of love, appears in poem 190 (“He was weak, and I was strong—then—”). Here the lovers alternate in conditions of strength and weakness. When the narrator becomes weak, her lover leads her “Home.” The night is quiet, the lover says nothing. When “Day knocked” they had to part, neither the stronger: “He strove—and I strove—too—/ We didn’t do it—tho’!” This final line refers to the lovers’ refusal to part, but it also can imply their decision not to abandon the traditional rules of courtship. This naughtiness is an important element of Dickinson’s verse. To deny it merely to create the image of a sainted recluse plays false with the facts and cripples the impact of her poetry.

Men much more than women were important to Dickinson the poet. She relied upon the literary judgments of Newton, a clerk in her father’s office, and editors and Higginson, and she appears never to have questioned their separately expressed views that she should not attempt to circulate her poems more widely. They, no doubt as much as she, were affected by the stereotypes of domestic verse, the only kind considered suitable for a nineteenth century woman to publish.

If one examines the poems Dickinson did place during her lifetime, it becomes obvious that they suit requirements of prevailing taste. Were they the sole criterion by which to judge her as poet, she would have been considerably less important than critics agree she is. Of the 1,775 poems in Johnson’s edition, only eleven appeared in Dickinson’s lifetime, and six of those eleven were printed in the *Springfield Daily Republican*. Those six are poem 3 (“Sic transit gloria mundi,” which appeared bearing a title “A Valentine”), poem 35 (“Nobody knows this little Rose”), and more substantive verse such as poem 214 (“I taste a liquor never brewed—,” which was given the title “The May-Wine”), poem 216 (“Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—, called “The Sleeping”), poem 228 (“Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple,” titled “Sunset”), and poem 986 (“A narrow Fellow in the Grass,” which appeared as “The Snake”).

This small list allows one to see how editors consistently attempted to render Dickinson’s verse immediately intelligible, both by means of clarifying titles and standardizing punctuation. Though

one could consider none of these poems inferior, they nevertheless fit within the parameters of what passed as “women’s verse” in a way other of her works did not. It is easy to see how they are consonant with works published by Dickinson’s female contemporaries: Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1857), and George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1872). By the time Eliot had published *Middlemarch*, Dickinson had written but not published—and had little hope of publishing—more than twelve hundred poems.

### “POEM 160 (JUST LOST, WHEN I WAS SAVED!)”

**First published:** 1891 (as “Called Back”)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In this poem is one of Dickinson’s anticipatory views of eternity.*

Dickinson wrote this poem between 1860 and 1862, if one accepts the Johnson chronology. Her sister included it among the small selection of poems published after the poet’s death. It appears that the title “Called Back” was appended based on a note the poet had written to her cousins on the day before her death. Perhaps she was inspired by the sudden conviction she was recovering that affects many terminally ill people, or (equally likely) she did not want her cousins to worry. In any event, she wrote, “Little cousins,—Called Back. Emily.”

Dickinson’s poems often focus on a proleptic view of the death experience; that is, they anticipate death yet present a living narrator to interpret the nearly experienced event. Not surprisingly, they are usually devoid of any overt Christian imagery; yet, there does appear, in this instance, the image of the “Reporter” who has stood before the apocalyptic “Seal.” The narrator’s wish to remain next time, to see “the things . . . By Ear unheard,/ Unscrutinized by Eye—” corresponds to Saint Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 2.9. The speaker, however, is far more like Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner* or Herman Melville’s *Ishmael*,

the narrator of *Moby Dick* (1851). All three have looked upon death and lived.

It is impossible not to sense the enlightened, humanistic tone of the poem's first two lines: "Just lost, when I was saved!/ Just felt the world go by!" The third line, which repeats the initial word of the first two and adds "girt," implies that meeting "Eternity" is akin to a struggle or a hero's encounter with an opponent. Eternity is predatory, and the paratactic arrangement of lines 1-3 emphasizes its insistent claim on the speaker. Even so, the "breath" of line 4 allows her to overcome its influence and to "feel," so that she can "tell" what she has seen. Poetry, whose words one feels as much as hears, thus provides the strength for the poet to return. The desire to be a "pale Reporter"—that is, to be a poet interpreting universal experience in an insightful way—is too great for her to succumb to death, at least this time.

Nevertheless, Hercules' cry of *Plus ultra* (still further), shouted when he had erected Gibraltar and Ceuta at the edge of the world, has meaning for the poet, too. She desires to take language further than it has ever been, even though she faces the likelihood of destruction, or a poem without transcendent meaning. The death and rebirth which the poem describe thus resemble a fixed part of a mythic hero's experience, even as they correspond to the humanist insight of a poet who has gone beyond merely dabbling in verse and become a true poet.

**"POEM 187 (HOW MANY TIMES  
THESE LOW FEET  
STAGGERED—)"**

**First published:** 1890 (as "Requiescat"; also called "Troubled about many things")

**Type of work:** Poem

*This work's burdened, domestic tone is characteristic of many Dickinson poems which have domestic settings.*

Though this poem was written during the same period as poem 160, the appearance of the housewife figure in poem 187 required an altogether more plodding, heavy tone. Dickinson achieves

this through alternating dactyls and trochees. The woman's "—low feet staggered" so many times that "Only the soldered mouth can tell—." Sealed coffin and mute corpse challenge anyone who desires to understand the hardship under which she labored to "Try" to "stir the awful rivet" and "lift the hasps of steel!" The corpse's forehead is "cool" because in death it is free of labor. Dickinson repeatedly shifts the housewife's burden to the reader through the imperatives "Try" (used twice) and "Lift." Ironically, the domestic burden of the housewife's duties becomes the weight of the coffin and the dead weight of handling the corpse itself: "the listless hair" and the "adamantine fingers," stiffened in death. Their steel-like unyieldingness can no longer wear a tin thimble.

Predatory flies, a death and disease symbol which regularly appears in Dickinson's poems, batter and speckle the woman's once-clean chamber window. Both they and the sun are "Brave"; both sun and ceiling cobweb are "Fearless." Even so, despite this oppressive imagery, the housewife has finally become "Indolent," lain in a field of daisies. The poem thus resolves itself in a single line through the double implication of "indolent": lazy, but also free from suffering. There is no contradiction at all in the two views of death Dickinson takes in her poetry. Seen from the aspect of the poet or of a woman whom household burdens do not confine, death becomes an awe-filled adventure contemplated with heroic anticipation. The moment the perspective becomes that of a housewife or a woman bound by domestic duties, death becomes a blessed release from labor.

**"POEM 214 (I TASTE A LIQUOR  
NEVER BREWED—)"**

**First published:** 1861 (as "The May-Wine")

**Type of work:** Poem

*This poem describes the intoxicating feeling that poetry inspires.*

For the ancient Greeks, Dionysus, the god of the wine grape, was also the deity associated with dramatic poetry. Writing verse, and reading it, removed one from ordinary sense experience. Dick-

inson, though never invoking the god's name, makes all she can of the association between intoxication and ecstasy in poem 214. The rhythm of a reel (a whirling dance) supports this imagery. Significantly, this poem privileges the reading of verse to the writing of it. The speaker "tastes" the never-brewed liquor, which is held in pearl tankards, the mother-of-pearl covered verse anthologies of Dickinson's time. The "Frankfurt Berries," the hops used to produce fine beer, could never yield as rich a brew as can the well-distilled language of great poetry.

Those who consume the insubstantial metaphors of verse become drunk, debauched on air and dew; they reel through summers that never end from inns under eternally blue skies. The speaker is unrepentant for her drunkenness. She will stop consuming verse only when the "Landlords" of nature turn "the drunken Bee" from gathering pollen from flowers or when butterflies no longer gather their "drains"—in other words, when nature no longer furnishes precedents for the speaker's behavior. When she dies, the seraphim, highest order among the angels, will toss their halos, their "snowy Hats," in greeting, the saints come to their windows to see her, the "little Tippler" from the world of humans—as well as from the wine-grape district of Spain, which she calls "Manzanilla."

This poem furnishes a good example of how early editors often diminished the strength of Dickinson's verse through alterations they believed would make the poetry more consonant with prevailing taste. After Dickinson's death, Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd changed the last lines from "To see the little Tippler/ From Manzanilla come!" to "To see the little Tippler/ Leaning against the sun." Their change rendered even more vapid the innocuous 1861 alteration made by the Springfield *Daily Republican*: "Come staggering toward the sun."

**"POEM 216 (SAFE IN THEIR  
ALABASTER CHAMBERS—)"**

**First published:** 1862 (as "The Sleeping")

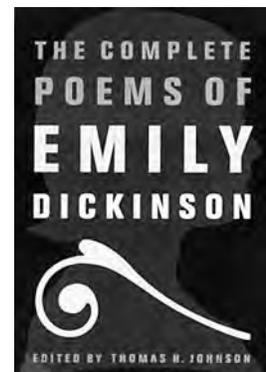
**Type of work:** Poem

*This poem, written in several sections, describes the justified dead awaiting resurrection.*

Dickinson wrote several versions of this poem, sending them quite literally across the backyard hedge for the opinion of her sister-in-law. Unable to make a final decision, she sent two versions to Higginson, who printed the completely different final stanza of the second version together with the two stanzas of the first version, thereby creating a single poem one-third longer than Dickinson had intended.

There are curious implications in this poem that critics often overlook. Read straightforwardly, it states that the meek sleep safely in their satin-raftered, stone-roofed graves and confidently await their resurrection to ratify the salvation they already know is theirs. Breezes laugh in the castle above them; bees buzz "in a stolid Ear," and birds sing ignorantly in cadence. The poem concludes with a lament on the wisdom lost with the dead. In the second stanza of the 1861 version, the ages wheel by, crowns drop, and doges (Italian dukes) lose their power silently.

The cynical implication of the 1859 version's second stanza is that the breeze laughs at them as they wait, the bee gossips about them in the unyielding ear of creation, and the birds sing their meaningless songs in rhythm even as no resurrection occurs. In the 1861 version, years pass through the firmament, crowns drop, and power passes; it all happens silently, but the justified merely wait, safe in the comfort of their ignorance.



**“POEM 258 (THERE’S A CERTAIN SLANT OF LIGHT)”**

**First published:** 1890

**Type of work:** Poem

*The afternoon winter light is compared here with the despair one encounters in a search for transcendent meaning.*

This poem begins by noting the oppressive sound of church bells heard in the bleak atmosphere of a winter afternoon. They give “Heavenly Hurt,” though they leave no external scar. Within six lines, Dickinson synthesizes a description of depression in terms of three senses: hearing, sight, and feeling.

This depression is, however, more than ordinary sadness. It comes from Heaven, and it bears the biblical “Seal Despair.” It hurts the entire landscape, its nonhuman as well as its human constituents, which listens, holds its breath for some revelation, yet perceives only the look of death. Significantly, the poet nowhere implies that no meaning exists; indeed, in other poems she is certain that a divine being exists and that there is a plan. Even so, the implications of what she writes are almost as devastating, for the apocalyptic seal of revelation holds fast, yielding no enlightenment to those below but the weak afternoon sun of a New England winter.

Read straightforwardly, the only means to combat this despair is, logically, faith, but in Dickinson’s landscape one senses only its external sign: the weighty tunes of a cathedral carillon. The “internal difference,” the scars of discouragement and despair remain within all, though visible to none.

**“POEM 303 (THE SOUL SELECTS HER OWN SOCIETY —)”**

**First published:** 1890 (as “Exclusion”)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poem explicitly notes that individuals choose the particulars of their own environments but also implies renunciation of traditional beliefs.*

Critics note that poem 303 was written in 1862, the year Dickinson made her decision to withdraw from the larger world. The poem, read in this simple way, simply states the need to live by one’s own choice. This reading, perfectly acceptable in itself, overlooks several important phrases which have larger implications.

The first of these curious choices of language is “divine Majority,” in line 3. “The Soul” of line 1, not merely “a soul” or a person, shuts her door not only to people at large but also to the majority, even those who bear the stamp of divine sanction. Read this way, the poem also indicates the poet’s decision not to join the society of the Elect, this even though “an emperor be kneeling” on her doormat. The conduit of grace, an analogy favored in the sermons of Jonathan Edwards, becomes “the Valves” of the soul’s discrimination.

Though she remains “unmoved,” the soul is neither nihilistic nor solipsistic. Even as the capitalized letter implies zero, the soul chooses “One” then becomes deaf to all entreaties “Like Stone.” To insist that this necessarily indicates preference for a Unitarian rather than a Trinitarian view carries the interpretation to a theological level that the poem’s language will not sustain. Nevertheless, selectivity in all matters, including religion, is something the poet clearly favors.

On a complementary level, one notices the carefully crafted description of the woman not at home to any callers, except one or at most a few. Read this way, which merely supplements the other possible alternatives, the poem states the preference to live in a way unlike that of most nineteenth century women, spurning the conventions of social obligation and what society expects, even though an emperor might attempt to persuade her to join the larger group.

**“POEM 328 (A BIRD CAME DOWN THE WALK —)”**

**First published:** 1891

**Type of work:** Poem

*Unexpected cruelty, distrust, ingratitude, and fear are described, all within an apparently placid, idyllic setting.*

This is the finest example of Dickinson's nature verse, for it perfectly juxtaposes elements of superficial gentility against the inner barbarity that characterizes the workings of the world. The narrator chances to see a bird walking along a pathway, but just as the scene appears perfect, the bird seizes upon a worm, bites it in two, and devours it. The bird drinks some dew on nearby grass (note the alternate for a drinking "glass"), then graciously steps aside, right to a wall, to allow a beetle to pass. The bird, like one fearful of being caught in an unacceptable action, glances around quickly with darting eyes.

"Cautious" describes both the demeanor of the bird and that of the observing narrator. Both feel threatened, the bird of the possible consequences of its savagery, the narrator because she is next on the bird's path. She "offered him a Crumb," not because she admires the bird but out of fear and expediency. The bird, sensing that it has escaped any potentially harmful consequences for what it has done, struts a bit as "he unrolled his feathers" and "rowed him softer home—." Ironically, its walk is too casual, softer than oars dividing a seamless ocean or butterflies leaping into noon's banks, all without a splash. Behind its soft, charming, and genteel facade, nature is menacing, and its hypocritical attempts to conceal its barbarism make it more frightening.

### "POEM 465 (I HEARD A FLY BUZZ—WHEN I DIED—)"

**First published:** 1896 (as "Dying")

**Type of work:** Poem

*This is the most famous of the Dickinson poems that look ahead to death, set at the instant that lies between life and death.*

This poem relies upon the poetic devices known technically as synesthesia (use of one sense to describe the workings of another) and paronomasia (wordplay). The predatory fly, functioning as in poem 187, waits to claim a corpse. The room is still, but this stillness resembles the interval between the heavings of a storm. Eyes had cried all they could; the patient, who is speaking, is beyond willing life,

though she has willed her "Keepsakes." The language is both theological and legal: "when the King/ Be witnessed—/ in the Room—." Then, hesitantly but unmistakably, the fly interposes itself between the dying speaker and the light. Its buzz is "Blue—uncertain stumbling." The windows fail, and the speaker cannot "see to see—."

Characteristically, there is no enlightenment at the moment of death, merely a failing of the human objects designed to admit light. Thus, human sight does not allow human understanding. Dickinson once wrote to Higginson, using her distinctive capitalizations, that, "The Ear is the last Face We hear after we see." Clearly, she identifies the "eye" with the "I." The King is present to witness the death, but it remains a legal transaction. Neither he nor the speaker have the will to alter things, beyond ensuring that the material objects willed fall to the wills of their new owners.

### "POEM 640 (I CANNOT LIVE WITH YOU—)"

**First published:** 1890 (as "In Vain")

**Type of work:** Poem

*This most famous of the love poems is often misread to argue for the poet's love relationship with Charles Wadsworth.*

This poem's coherence results from the opposition of tensions that arise from Dickinson's dual understanding of life. To live with the beloved is impossible, for "it would be life." Life is, on the other hand, something eternal, the key to which resides with the church sexton, who keeps the key to the Lord's tabernacle. The cups of human life, however, hold no sacramental wine; the housewife discards them when they break or crack and replaces them with newer ware.

The speaker cannot die with the beloved, for the gaze of "the Other" intrudes; it can be shut neither out nor down. This apparent rival that spies on any possible pact is the metaphysical divine other that has first rights in matters of death as well as life. Similarly, it is impossible for the speaker to "stand by/ And see you—freeze"; the single death of the beloved denies death to the devoted speaker.

Even a joint resurrection of the lovers is impossible; this would anger Jesus and obscure the face of the redeemer. To this dual understanding of life the poet thus adds the stages of the Christian experience: life, death, judgment, and resurrection. When the beloved looked upon the “homesick Eye,” grace would “Glow plain,” but it would be “foreign” to him who sought a higher grace. Furthermore, “They d judge Us,” saying that he sought to serve Heaven even though she could not.

The speaker could then no longer have her eyes on paradise; both would suffer damnation, but she would fall the lower, and they would still be apart. The effect would be the same even if the beloved were forgiven. The only alternative, “Despair,” becomes their connection; their only conversation is their joint prayer, which allows them to link the immanent and the transcendent

**“POEM 712 (BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH—)”**

**First published:** 1890

**Type of work:** Poem

*In the most famous of her eternity poems, Dickinson personifies death as a gentleman caller.*

Death appears personified in this poem as a courtly beau who gently insists that the speaker put aside both “labor” and “leisure.” He arrives in his carriage, having stopped for her because she could not have stopped for him, and he even submits to a chaperone, “Immortality,” for the length of their outing together.

This death holds no terrors. Their drive is slow, and they pass the familiar sights of the town: fields of grain which gaze at them, the local school and its playground. Even so, the speaker realizes that this is no ordinary outing with an ordinary gentleman caller when they pass the setting sun, “Or rather— He passed Us—.” She realizes that it has grown cold, that she wears only a gossamer gown and a tulle lace cap.

Death takes the speaker to her new home, “A Swelling of the Ground,” whose roof is “scarcely visible.” Though centuries have passed since the event, the entire episode, including the speaker’s

awareness of her death, seems less than a day in length. The poem fuses elements of the secular seduction motif, with elements of the medieval bride-of-Christ tradition, arguable through inclusion of details such as the tippet of a nun’s habit.

**“POEM 754 (MY LIFE HAD STOOD—A LOADED GUN—)”**

**First published:** 1929

**Type of work:** Poem

*The most famous of the paradox poems deals with the Christian and secular understandings of life and death.*

This poem is written as a riddle that challenges the reader to identify the speaker. On the literal level the speaker is a gun, loaded to do its owner’s bidding. Its “smile” is like a Vesuvian eruption, laying low its master’s enemies. None survive “On whom I lay a Yellow Eye—/ Or an emphatic Thumb—.” Though the master must live longer than the gun, the gun may also live longer than its master.

Critics have given this poem every variety of interpretation, almost none of them totally satisfactory. Most common (and least satisfying) is the argument that the poet is herself the loaded gun, waiting to be called by her master, the Lord, ready to fight her Lord’s battles, willing to make his enemies hers. Yet how can one reconcile this with the possibility of the gun’s outliving her master, except by admitting the possibility of a mortal deity?

Though Dickinson doubts and even despairs in some of her poems concerning matters of election and redemption, she never denies that a deity exists. In fact, poem 338 explicitly records her certainty that there is a divine presence. Similarly, it does no good to see this poem merely as an emblem of the poet’s personal, creative, or sexual frustration, as some critics have done.

Were one to have asked residents of Dickinson’s Amherst the solution to the final riddle stanza, however, it is likely that they would have answered that the master was Christ and the gun was death. Christ has authority over life and death as Son of the Father; even so, Christ died before death disap-

peared from the world of the living, and in this sense death outlived him.

Another interpretation embraces a more classical alternative. Myth traditionally pictures deities dealing out death with weapons: Zeus uses thunderbolts, Apollo and Artemis bows and arrows, Wotan a spear fashioned from the great ash tree which underpins creation. Seen in this way, death is both master and means. It uses whatever tool stands at the ready and creates opponents even as it destroys creation. The single consolation to universal creation, which will one day encounter death, is that neither death nor the tools it uses has eternal life.

### “POEM 986 (A NARROW FELLOW IN THE GRASS)”

**First published:** 1866 (as “The Snake”)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The archetypal snake in the grass is presented as a symbol of cunning.*

One of the best-known Dickinson nature poems, poem 986 is more remarkable for its execution and technique than its content. The narrator unexpectedly encounters a snake in tall marsh grass. Far from tempting the narrator, as the serpent tempted Eve, it induces fear, panting, and a sudden chill. The first eleven lines describe the snake in a personified, almost amiable way. He sometimes “rides” through the grass, parting it like a comb does hair. Yet, when plain sight threatens to betray its exact location, the grass “closes at your feet/ And opens further on—.”

The narrator of this poem is male, perhaps because boys rather than girls would be more likely to walk through marshes; however, the narrator’s sex also underscores the phallic implications of this symbol. If one prefers to see this sexual imagery, it is possible to cite the sexual association of such words and phrases as “Whip lash,” “tighter breathing,” and “Zero at the Bone.” In any event, reading the poem as a commentary on human cunning is entirely consistent with any further level of meaning. The narrator feels cordial toward “Several of Nature’s People” but has only fear for the snake. In this, as in many Dickinson’s poems, one must

beware of mixing biographical folklore with the poem and forcing the reading offered by structuralist critics that the poem is Dickinson’s confession of sexual fear.

Reading the poem’s first line aloud causes the tongue to flicker, like that of a snake; sibilants abound in increasing number as the lines describe the snake’s approach. These elements are certainly intentional. Poem 1670 (“In Winter in my Room”) presents a similar encounter, though with a worm-turned-snake. Relating the events as a dream sequence, this narrator flees whole towns from the creature before she dares set the experience down.

### “POEM 1624 (APPARENTLY WITH NO SURPRISE)”

**First published:** 1890

**Type of work:** Poem

*Nature is presented as the victim of the elements and an approving God.*

The situation described in this short poem is simple. Frost “beheads” a “happy Flower” even as it plays back and forth in a breeze. The flower is not surprised that it has died in this way, even if the frost’s power was “accidental.” The wordplay on axe, beheading, and accidental is clear. What is a surprise is that the real assassin is “blonde.” It is clearly the sun, which withheld its warmth and allowed the frost to do its dirty job. The sun “proceeds unmoved,” the oxymoron emphasizing that the sun simply observes the workings of nature from its high vantage point. It metes out a day, and God, higher still, approves it all as director of the conspiracy.

#### SUMMARY

One can fully appreciate Dickinson’s originality only by placing her verse against that of her poet contemporaries. She is certainly more mystical—and is a better poet—than Ralph Waldo Emerson or Henry David Thoreau. Her poetic works have greater substance than those of Edgar Allan Poe. She writes poems far richer in content than the school poets: James Russell Lowell, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The

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only American poet of her century with whom she is comparable is Walt Whitman.

In the nineteenth century, women generally wrote only domestic verse—material suitable for ladies' magazines—or wrote under male pseudonyms. Higginson's advice that Dickinson avoid publication makes most modern readers of Dickinson angry, as do the alterations made by Dickinson's early editors. One can be grateful that Dickinson's creative energy remained undiminished.

Robert J. Forman

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Emily Dickinson lived a life constrained in many respects. What liberating experiences of her life—including self-created ones—contributed materially to her poetry?
- How have editors of Dickinson's poetry both obscured and clarified what she actually wrote?
- Examine three or four Dickinson poems with a theme of love. What particular effects of imagery and tone distinguish these poems?
- Repeat the above process with respect to poems on the theme of death.
- What factors account for the inclusion of weakly sentimental poems in her canon? Would the publication history of her poems be one of these factors?
- Dickinson's favorite stanza is basically that of many familiar hymns of her time. What differences in rhythm and phrasing do you note between the hymns and her poems?
- Compare the different versions of "Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers." Is it possible to determine the direction her revisions took or in fact which versions are revisions?