

## EMILY DICKINSON ON HER OWN TERMS

Few American poets, wrote biographer Jay Leyda, have been the "subject of so much distorting gossip" as has Emily Dickinson. The myths that came to enshroud the 19th-century poet—depicting her variously as hermit-recluse, village eccentric, or victim of unrequited love—have often had the effect of trivializing both her life and work. Here, Betsy Erkkila argues that behind Dickinson's unorthodox behavior and her strikingly original poetry was a shrewd strategy for survival, a means by which she gained at least partial freedom from the close restrictions of Puritan New England society.



*by Betsy Erkkila*

"Emily was my patron saint," said William Carlos Williams in a 1962 interview. More recently, another prominent American poet, Adrienne Rich, described Dickinson as "the genius of the 19th-century female mind in America." Rich went on to praise Dickinson for inventing "a language more varied, more compressed, more dense with implications, more complex of syntax, than any American poetic language to date."

Despite the accolades of the poets and the probing of biographers, Emily Dickinson remains obscured by many of the same myths and legends that grew up around her while she was alive. Dickinson herself did little to help future investigators separate fact from fiction. Having asked that her personal papers be destroyed after her death, she left only a few traces to mark the path of her external life.

Born in 1830 in rural Amherst, Massachusetts, she spent her entire life in the household of her parents, Emily and Edward Dickinson. Her father, a successful lawyer, was active in local affairs and served in the state legislature and the U.S. House of Representatives. Her older brother, Austin, also a lawyer in

*Emily Dickinson  
(1830–1886) in a daguerreo-  
type taken while she was a  
student at Mount Holyoke.*



Amherst, was her lifelong intellectual companion, sharing her interest in literature and music. Lavinia, the youngest of the three children, shared with her sister the curious distinction of never leaving home.\* It was Lavinia who once described the roles of the various members of the Dickinson family. Emily, she wrote, “had to think—she was the only one of us who had that to do; . . . Father believed; and mother loved; and Austin had Amherst; and I had the family to keep track of.”

As a child, Dickinson attended the First Church of Christ, the local Congregational church, but she, alone among her family, never underwent the experience of conversion—the necessary prelude to full membership in this Calvinist sect. By the late 1850s, she had stopped attending church altogether.

Dickinson’s formal schooling was similarly truncated. At age 10, she was enrolled in the “English Course” at Amherst

\*The family had two houses, the imposing “Homestead” on Main Street and an equally capacious house on Prince Street, where they lived from 1840 to 1855.

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Academy, where for seven years she studied language, literature, politics, natural science, morals, and society. She was also a student for one year, 1847–48, at nearby Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, which had been founded in 1837 as the nation's first college of higher education for women.

"I went to school," Dickinson later wrote, "but . . . had no education." Her real education took place in the family library, where in addition to the Bible and Shakespeare, to which she often returned, she read and admired the work of Sir Thomas Browne, John Keats, Robert Browning, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and John Ruskin. She felt a particular affinity for contemporary women writers, including the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Helen Hunt Jackson. Dickinson hung portraits of Eliot and Browning in her upstairs bedroom and acknowledged Browning, Charlotte Brontë, and Jackson as the inspirations for several of her poems.



The Dickinson household was not merely the site of her education; it became, increasingly, the center and circumference of her world. Aside from a trip to Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., in 1854, Dickinson rarely left the town of Amherst. After 1868, she was never seen off the Homestead premises. Besides helping with chores around the house, she spent most of her time reading, "thinking," and writing. Dickinson's mother considered her a "mystery and a constant surprise," and her father was equally baffled by his daughter's peculiar behavior. No one in the family had any idea how much she was writing.

Between 1858 and 1862, it was later discovered, she wrote like a person possessed, often producing a poem a day. It was also during this period that her life was transformed into the myth of Amherst. Withdrawing more and more, keeping to her room, sometimes even refusing to see visitors who called, she began to dress only in white—a sartorial habit that added to her reputation as an eccentric.

The main elements of the myth were described in a private journal by Mabel Loomis Todd, the wife of an Amherst profes-

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sor, who carried on a secret 13-year love affair with the poet's brother, Austin, and who was instrumental in editing and publishing the first volume of Dickinson's *Poems* in 1890.

"Emily is called in Amherst 'the myth,'" Todd wrote in 1882. "She has not been out of the house for fifteen years. . . . She writes the strangest poems, and very remarkable ones. She is in many respects a genius. She wears always white, & has her hair arranged as was the fashion fifteen years ago when she went into retirement."

Lavinia described Emily's retirement as "only a happen," and Austin said she withdrew because she found society "thin and unsatisfying in the face of the Great realities of Life." Perhaps the best explanation was offered by Dickinson herself, in a poem composed sometime around 1862:

The Soul selects her own Society—  
Then—shuts the Door—  
To her divine Majority—  
Present no more—

Renunciation of society, these lines suggest, was Dickinson's form of artistic self-preservation, her way of practicing what Adrienne Rich labeled "necessary economies."

Even during Dickinson's lifetime, however, rumors began to develop that the cause of her seclusion and the source of her poems was a failed romance. The rumor was given more substance when in *The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson* (1924), Martha Dickinson Bianchi, Dickinson's niece, claimed that Dickinson fell hopelessly in love with the Reverend Charles Wadsworth during her trip to Philadelphia in 1854. The romance assumed yet another dimension when in *Emily Dickinson's Home* (1955), Millicent Todd Bingham published the rough drafts of three love letters addressed by Dickinson to an unidentified "Master." Presenting herself under the name of Daisy to an all-powerful Master, Dickinson confesses in anguished and densely metaphoric language "a love so big it scares her, rushing among her small heart—pushing aside the blood and leaving her faint and white in the gust's arm."

Although there is no evidence that these letters were ever mailed, or indeed that the Master was any more than a figure of Dickinson's imagination, studies of Dickinson have tended to center on the Master as the key to the riddle of her life and art. Not surprisingly, much scholarly ink has flowed in defense of various figures, male and female, who might best qualify for the role of Master.

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“Wadsworth as muse made her a poet,” wrote Thomas Johnson in his 1955 biography. Another biographer, Richard Sewall, proposed Samuel Bowles, a Springfield, Massachusetts, newspaper editor who began visiting Dickinson in 1858. More recent critics, many of them feminists, have noted the trivializing effect of the Master myth: Masking the element of self-conscious choice in her life, it reduces her work to the scratchings of a sufferer of unrequited love.

The identity of the Master, whether real or figurative, is, in fact, less important than the role that Dickinson makes him play in her life and art. At about the same time that she wrote her Master letters, she composed a series of bridal poems in which she enacts a fantasy marriage with a powerful male figure. While Dickinson makes use of the language of love and redemption, the male figure in these poems acts as a poetic muse, the inspiration for and projection of her own creative power. Their marriage thus becomes a sign of her artistic dedication:

I'm ceded—I've stopped being Theirs—  
 The name They dropped upon my face  
 With water, in the country church  
 Is finished using, now,

Baptized, before, without the choice,  
 But this time, consciously, of Grace—  
 Unto supremest name—  
 Called to my Full—the Crescent dropped—  
 Existence's whole Arc, filled up,  
 With one small Diadem.

My second Rank—too small the first—  
 Crowned—Crowing—on my Father's breast—  
 A half unconscious Queen—  
 But this time—Adequate—Erect,  
 With Will to choose, or to reject,  
 And I choose, just a Crown—

The poem is a good example of the ambiguity of Dickinson's use of language and metaphor—the interchangeability of terms within her work. Drawing upon biblical language and religious ritual, the poem suggests an earthly or heavenly marriage, not to man or God but to her poetic muse. Through this marriage, Dickinson—“Adequate—Erect”—assumes sovereignty over herself.

In their determination to read Dickinson's life in terms of a traditional romantic plot, biographers have missed the unique

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pattern of her life—her struggle to create a female life not yet imagined by the culture in which she lived. Dickinson was not the innocent, lovelorn, and emotionally fragile girl sentimentalized by the Dickinson myth and popularized by William Luce's 1976 play, *The Belle of Amherst*. Her decision to shut the door on Amherst society in the late '50s transformed her house into a kind of magical realm in which she was free to engage her poetic genius. Her seclusion was not the result of a failed love affair but rather a part of a more general pattern of renunciation through which she, in her quest for self-sovereignty, carried on an argument with the Puritan fathers, attacking with wit and irony their cheerless Calvinist doctrine, their stern patriarchal God, and their rigid notions of "true womanhood."

"When much in the Woods as a little Girl," Dickinson said in 1862, "I was told that the Snake would bite me, that I might pick a poisonous flower, or Goblins kidnap me, but I went along and met no one but Angels, who were far shyer of me, than I could be of them, so I havn't that confidence in fraud which many exercise." Dickinson's anecdote is a kind of allegory of her life and work, suggesting the self-reliant spirit in which she, like Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne in the forest, tested the wisdom of the Puritan Fathers. At age 15, she already had begun to conceive of herself as part of a female universe of blooming gardens and singing birds, continually threatened by a tyrannical, all-powerful masculine force. "I have heard some sweet little birds sing," she wrote her friend Abiah Root in 1845, "but I fear we shall have more cold weather and their little bills will be frozen up before their songs are finished. My plants look beautifully. Old King Frost has not had the pleasure of snatching any of them in his cold embrace as yet, and I hope will not." The same struggle between female fecundity and a potentially destructive male force is the subject of several of her poems:

Apparently with no surprise  
 To any happy Flower  
 The Frost beheads it at its play—  
 In accidental power—  
 The blonde Assassin passes on—  
 The Sun proceeds unmoved  
 To measure off another Day  
 For an Approving God.

Written only a few years before her death in 1886, the poem suggests the fear and awe that Dickinson continued to experience in the face of the "blonde Assassin" and the seemingly arbitrary

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and impersonal power of the Puritan God.

Between 1840 and 1862, there were no fewer than eight Calvinist religious revivals in Amherst. Although her mother and father, sister and brother, and most of her companions received the call to God, Dickinson resisted. "Christ is calling everyone here," she wrote her friend Jane Humphrey. "I am standing alone in rebellion, and growing very careless." Wavering between belief and doubt, Dickinson was, like the figure in Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning," reluctant to exchange the rich, changing variety of the world for the promise of permanent heavenly bliss: "It was then my greatest pleasure to commune alone with the great God," she wrote of her momentary experience of religious grace. "But the world allured me & in an unguarded moment I listened to her syren voice."

During her year at Mount Holyoke, Dickinson resisted the religious instruction of the founder, Mary Lyon; she was one of the few students found to be "without hope." "I regret that last term, when that golden opportunity was mine, that I did not give up and become a Christian," she wrote Abiah Root in 1848; "but it is hard for me to give up the world." Associating religious conversion with the act of giving herself up to an all-powerful God, Dickinson resisted the call of revival. Later, in her poems, she celebrated her refusal:

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—

Here, Dickinson reinvents the religion of the fathers in the image of her own and nature's "syren voice." As in many of her poems, her unorthodox use of the hymnal form of Isaac Watts's *Christian Psalms* to express unconventional views provides an occasion for subtle irony.

Dickinson's refusal to assume the passive role required of a proper Christian woman became part of her more general refusal to play a traditional female role. As a woman poet seeking to create a place for herself in a predominantly male literary tradition—represented in America by such figures as Emerson, Edgar Allan Poe, and Walt Whitman—Dickinson was split between her sense of herself as an independent artist and the demands of domesticity, piety, and submissiveness expected of "true womanhood."

Dickinson described in explicit and humorous detail this split between her writer self and her domestic self in an 1850 let-

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ter to Jane Humphrey: "So *many* wants—and me so *very* handy—and my time of so *little* account—and my writing so *very* needless—and really I came to the conclusion that I should be a villain unparalleled if I took but an inch of time for so unholy a purpose as writing a friendly letter."

Unable to be the Victorian Angel in the House, Dickinson associated her refusal with the satanic: "Somehow or other I incline to other things—and Satan covers them up with flowers, and I reach out to pick them. The path of duty looks very ugly indeed—and the place where I want to go more amiable—a great deal—it is so much easier to do wrong than right—so much pleasanter to be evil than good, I don't wonder that good angels weep—and bad ones sing songs."

Dickinson's association of her writing with the songs of bad angels betrays the inescapable influence of the Puritan culture in which she was raised. Within Puritan New England, as Hawthorne suggests in his Custom House preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, art and the imagination had always been associated with the seductions of Satan. Although the culture could accommodate those art forms that were tightly bound by a moral and religious perspective, most of Dickinson's contemporaries still looked upon the unfettered imagination as seditious and satanic.

At a time when unprecedented numbers of female poets were entering the literary marketplace, writing poems that confirmed rather than challenged conventional views of womanhood, Dickinson once again stood alone in rebellion. No poet was more popular than Lydia Sigourney, who wrote poems voicing traditional sentiments about mothers, children, and home in a completely standardized form. In one of her more popular poems, "The Connecticut River," Sigourney describes the domestic economy of the female:

Her pastime when the daily task is o'er,  
With apron clean, to seek her neighbour's door,  
Partake the friendly feast, with social glow,  
Exchange the news, and make the stocking grow;  
Then hale and cheerful to her home repair,  
When Sol's slant ray renews her evening care,  
Press the full udder for her children's meal,  
Rock the tired babe—or wake the tuneful wheel.

Dickinson could no more reproduce such stock sentiments than she could the predictable rhymes in which they were packaged. Indeed, in many of her poems, she mocked the "Dimity Convictions" of the Angel in the House:



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What Soft—Cherubic Creatures—  
These Gentlewomen Are—  
One would as soon assault a Plush—  
Or violate a Star—

Such Dimity Convictions—  
A Horror so refined  
Of freckled Human Nature—  
Of Deity—ashamed—

What set Dickinson apart from the gentlewoman and the lady poet was her desire to use the power of the “word made flesh” to become herself a sort of god, creating an imaginary universe in which the values of America—political, moral, religious—were reversed and, in many cases, reinvented. She knew, if others did not, that in the eyes of her culture she was one of the bad angels. And had she been born at an earlier time, she, like the free-thinking Anne Hutchinson of Boston, might have been banished as a witch.

As Dickinson began during the 1850s to develop her poetic resources, she came to look upon marriage as a potential threat to her art. “You and I have been strangely silent upon this subject, Susie,” she wrote her future sister-in-law in 1853. “How dull our lives must seem to the bride, and the plighted maiden, whose days are fed with gold, and who gathers pearls every evening; but to the *wife*, Susie, sometimes the *wife forgotten*, our lives perhaps seem dearer than all others in the world; you have seen flowers at morning, *satisfied* with the dew, and those same sweet flowers at noon with their heads bowed in anguish before the mighty sun. . . . they know that the man of noon is *mightier* than the morning, and their life is henceforth to him. Oh, Susie, it is dangerous. . . . It does so rend me, Susie, the thought of it when it comes, that I tremble lest at sometime I, too, am yielded up.” Moving toward her own creative flowering, Dickinson feared yielding herself up to marriage and “the man of noon,” just as she feared giving herself up to the power of God.

Dickinson’s poems, only seven of which were published during her lifetime, became a counterworld in which she, rather than the “blonde Assassin” or the “man of noon,” was the sovereign power:

I reckon—when I count at all—  
First—Poets—Then the Sun—  
Then Summer—Then the Heaven of God—  
And then—the List is done—

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But, looking back—the First so seems  
 To Comprehend the Whole—  
 The Others look a needless Show—  
 So I write—Poets—All—

Their Summer—lasts a Solid Year—

The art of writing was Dickinson's means of entering a world of endless summer, releasing her from the world of time, change, and female powerlessness. Unlike Whitman and Emerson, whose moments of vision became the base of an affirmative ethics and poetics, Dickinson's moments of vision were transient and provisional. Her poems are characterized by radical shifts in subject and mood: She swings between moments of transport, when she is "Rowing in Eden" and "Reeling—thro endless summer days," and moments of loss, guilt, and despair, when she is the "Queen of Calvary."

She was, in fact, primarily a poet of the end of life, whose principal subject was death. At times she played even with death, as in "I Heard a Fly buzz—when I died—," where, characteristically, the homey (fly) jostles with the cosmic (death), giving the subject a humorous, albeit grotesque, dimension; or in her much anthologized "Because I could not stop for Death—," where she treats death as a lover who comes to court her. At other times, however, she was more solemn:

There's a certain Slant of light,  
 Winter afternoons—  
 That oppresses, like the Heft  
 Of Cathedral Tunes—

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us—  
 We can find no scar,  
 But internal difference,  
 Where the Meanings, are—

None may teach it—Any  
 'Tis the Seal Despair—  
 An imperial affliction  
 Sent us of the Air

Dickinson made riddle and paradox her means of expression—as exemplified by the "Heft" of cathedral tunes, the "Heavenly Hurt," and the "imperial affliction" in the above passage. The drama of her poems is created not by logical development

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and narrative line, but by verbal compression and the dynamic tension created by the splitting of syntax, image, line, and unit. Like the slant light in the above passage, Dickinson's slant style—her use of dashes and off-rhymes and her fracture of image and syntax—is an emblem of her fragmented way of being and seeing in a world split by the polarities of life and death, faith and doubt, masculine and feminine, being and nothingness.



In April 1862, the *Atlantic Monthly* published a piece entitled "Letter to a Young Contributor" by the well-known abolitionist minister and supporter of women's rights Thomas Higginson. Dickinson read the letter and, encouraged by his words on the art of writing and publication, wrote him for advice about her own creative work: "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive," she asked him in a letter written only a few weeks after his article had appeared. The letter was the first in a correspondence that lasted until Dickinson's death in 1886.

By writing to Higginson at the height of her artistic power, Dickinson was obviously seeking, in her circumspect way, a larger audience for her work. Although Higginson later helped Mabel Loomis Todd in the posthumous publication of Dickinson's poems, he was, during the poet's lifetime, a key figure in influencing her *not* to publish. Attuned to the lilting rhythms and conventional poetic taste of the day, Higginson was unable to appreciate Dickinson's linguistic and artistic innovation. Referring to her as his "half-cracked poetess," he apparently encouraged her to standardize her meter and regularize or eliminate entirely her rhyme. Dickinson said of his first letter to her: "I thanked you for your justice—but could not drop the Bells whose jingling cooled my Tramp." And then, she added: "You think my gait 'spasmodic'—I am in danger—Sir—You think me 'uncontrolled'—I have no Tribunal." Dickinson's words are at once coy and ironic, suggesting that her unorthodox metrics, like her unorthodox life, are endangered by the culture in which she lives.

It was the popular 19th-century American poet Helen Hunt Jackson, and not Higginson, who was the first to recognize Dickinson's unique poetic genius. While Higginson was still complaining about Dickinson's "spasmodic" and "uncontrolled" style, Jackson was unrelenting in her effort to get Dickinson published. "You are a great poet," she wrote Dickinson in 1876, "and it is a wrong to the day you live in, that you will not sing aloud." But Dickinson, who had already experi-

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enced what she called the "surgery" of Higginson's advice and the corrections of editors eager to straighten her slant style, had already determined not to publish.

"Perhaps you laugh at me!" Dickinson wrote her good friends Dr. and Mrs. Josiah Gilbert Holland in 1862 at the time of her most intense creative activity. "Perhaps the whole United States are laughing at me too! I can't stop for that! . . . I found a bird, this morning, down—down—on a little bush at the foot of the garden, and wherefore sing, I said, since nobody *hears*? One sob in the throat, one flutter of the bosom—'My business is to *sing*'—and away she rose!"

When Dickinson died of Bright's disease on May 15, 1886, no one, not even her family, had any idea of the extent of her poetic "business." Among Dickinson's belongings, her sister Lavinia found 1,775 poems, some in several drafts, some scribbled in fragments on scraps of papers, and some sewn neatly into fascicles of 18 to 20 poems each.

The fact that these poems remained unpublished is itself a sign of the plight of female genius in 19th-century America. But Dickinson's refusal to publish was also one final antinomian gesture, her last rebellious act in her argument with America. Dickinson's silence was not powerless but potent in its ability to protect the purity of a new female being and a new poetic idiom, both of which came to be appreciated in the next century. By choosing not to publish her poems, Dickinson freed herself from the potential violations of editorial or public taste. "'No,'" she said toward the close of her life, "is the wildest word we consign to Language."

