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Emily Dickinson's character as revealed by her poetry

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL
Thesis
EMILY DICKINSON’S CHARACTER
AS REVEALED BY HER POETRY
by
Marjorie Ruth Viets
(A.B. Connecticut College for Women, 1930)
Submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the de-
gree of Master of Arts
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Chapter I: Emily Dickinson's present popularity

A. Secondary reasons

1. Recent publications
   a. Appearance of "Further Poems"
   b. Biographies

2. Centenary celebration of her birth

B. Primary reasons for her significance

1. Minor reasons
   a. Psychological self-revelations
   b. Attitude towards God somewhat modern
   c. Combination of subjective and objective attitudes toward Nature
   d. Frank expression of love

2. Major reasons
   a. Simple expression of profound human truths
      (1) Economy of words and ideas
      (2) Economy of emotion
   b. Possession of the "anonymous mind"
      (1) Inheritance from father
      (2) Natural development after renunciation
   c. Ability to see life in its entirety
      (1) Balanced relationships of Nature and human nature
      (2) Balanced relationships of elements of man's nature
   d. Tremendous poetic energy
      (1) Due to virginity
      (2) Due to painful frustration
Chapter II: Facts of Emily Dickinson's life

A. Early life

1. Childhood
   a. Born in Amherst, Massachusetts, in 1830
   b. Daughter of Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson
   c. Inheritance of odd, powerful Dickinson characteristics
   d. Physical appearance

2. Girlhood
   a. Characteristics—romantic, imaginative, enthusiastic, worshipful
   b. Brief, unhappy education at Mt. Holyoke
   c. Friendship with Leonard Humphrey

3. Womanhood
   a. Probable love affair with George Gould
   b. Renunciation of her lover
   c. Emptiness of daily life
   d. Intensity of inner life
   e. Liberation through appreciation of Nature
   f. Hostile environment
      (1) In village
      (2) At home
   g. Escape through contemplation of God
   h. Sustenance through
      (1) Letters from George Gould
      (2) Reading
      (3) Admiration of the Brownings
   i. Despair verging on madness
   j. Deliverance through poetry
      (1) Not well received by Higginson
      (2) Inadequate outlet
   k. Friendship with women
1. Effect of war

(1) Shattering
(2) Challenging to a faith equal to it

m. Growth of introversion and introspection

(1) Emphasis on problems of evil
(2) Solution of problem of God's duplicity
(3) Growth in knowledge of God
(4) Learning the meaning of prayer

Chapter III: Emily Dickinson's character

A. Poet--ageless, cosmic

1. Contrast with women poets of definite periods

2. Contrast with Whitman
   a. More refined
   b. More exact

3. Greatest woman poet of America

B. Highly cultured woman

1. Communed with her own psyche

2. Communed with the Infinite

3. Read good books avidly

4. Was educated by Nature
   a. As sensuous as Keats, but not mythological in interpretation
   b. More restrained than Shelley
   c. Sympathetic with little things, like Burns
   d. As Pantheistic as Wordsworth and Emerson
   e. Interpreted Nature in her many manifestations at all seasons

C. Emily, the lover

1. Uncertainty of identity of the man she loved
   a. Possibly Dr. Wadsworth
b. Probably not Major Hunt

c. Almost certainly George Gould

2. Possible reasons for not marrying lover
   a. Edward forbade marriage
   b. Gould's personality less powerful than Edward Dickinson's
   c. Emily may have magnified her lover's feeling
      (1) Little known of courtship
      (2) Emily dramatized everything, including love

3. Her life the epitome of woman love
   a. Centralization through emotion
   b. Unquestioning acceptance of its reality
   c. Sincerity of feeling absolute
   d. Recognition of significance of marriage
   e. Acknowledgment of lover's superiority until renunciation
   f. Ecstasy equal to religious ecstasy
   g. Monogamy of highest sort

4. Her creed—simplest service
CHAPTER I: Emily Dickinson's Present Popularity

Within the past year, two significant biographies of Emily Dickinson and many magazine articles concerning her life and work have appeared. Librarians report that these books and articles, as well as her "Complete Poems" and her recently published "Further Poems", are in constant demand by a widely varied reading public. Two facts are partially responsible for the renewed interest in one of the finest poets that America has produced: "Further Poems" was not revealed until 1929; the centennial of Miss Dickinson's birth was celebrated in 1930. However, these two facts are insufficient to account wholly for the increase of popularity of the famous New England spinster and the esteem in which she is held.

There must be something vital and compelling to command the attention of a public that no longer reads her American contemporaries much except in connection with high school and college assignments. Miss Dickinson's revelations of self and her undisguised doubting of God's constant attention to the wants of man have little in common with Longfellow's and Whittier's simple objective pictures and moralizing platitudes. It is a far cry from

"Of course I prayed—
And did God care?
He cared as much as
On the air
A bird had stamped
And cried, "Give me" "

to

"I know not where his islands lift
Their fronded palms in air;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care."
Obviously a people who could be spiritually heartened by the latter sentiment could hardly appreciate the former. Emily Dickinson had as much in common with the skepticism of the present-day reader as Whittier had with the undimmed faith of the majority of conventional American thinkers of 1875. On the other hand, we admit that underneath her temporary rebellion at God's lack of attention to her needs and her frequent mocking and doubting, there was a fundamentally strong and abiding trust in an omnipotent Jehovah to set her apart from the thorough-going "modern" who has no such trust in a divine power. She was at once the Puritan of her own time and the free thinker of our day.

Similarly, though she did not attempt to identify herself with the whole realm of Nature, as Whitman did, or with the various parts of it in rapid succession, as many of our women poets do now, she stated her relationship to it in a more intimate and personal way than her contemporaries did. The subjective reaction is quite likely to be as important as the objective picture. In so doing, she links herself with the twentieth century poet.

"I dreaded that first robin so,
But he is mastered now,
And I'm accustomed to him grown—
He hurts a little, though."

She compared herself with the gentian,

"God made a little gentian;
It tried to be a rose
And failed, and all the summer laughed
But just before the snows
There came a purple creature
That ravished all the hill—
Creator shall I bloom?"
She spoke of the slant of light of winter afternoon that hurts us.

She went on to diagnose her emotions in "Love." With the exception of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in "Sonnets From the Portuguese", women were not analyzing their moods in verse in the 1800's, whereas the inner lives of women poets now are open books wherein men may read strange matters. Elizabeth Barrett had a double justification in baring her love that Emily lacked. At the time that the English woman wrote these particular poems, her genius had been recognized; and had she not publicly accepted Robert Browning?

But Emily's poetry would not win us if it were merely the record of the emotions of a young woman in Amherst who had renounced life and love and had asked God some questions that He had apparently not cared to answer. As a recluse in white, cherishing a deep passion for her remote lover, obeying her austere father against her will but not her affection, and caring more for her garden than for her neighbors, she is an engaging study in the repressed nineteenth century spinster. But the emancipated woman of 1930 would hardly pause to consider such a study in introspection if Emily were not something more. Hamlet as a pathological case in madness or near-madness means far less than Hamlet, the poet, soldier, scholar, the sensitive man of all time facing a practical problem difficult for him to solve. Emily as a neurotic puzzle to be noted in a psychiatrist's records is less important than Emily, a woman who loved with intensity, found in Nature the perfect beauties that most of us do not spend time to contemplate, and saw in mystic flashes the meaning of Time and Eternity.

If she were simply an anachronism, epitomizing the ideas of
twentieth century America, her poems would be arresting; but critics would not hail her contribution as permanently significant. That which can be defined only as the exact expression of life in a given place at a given time is bound to be ephemeral. If a poem be the expression of life itself, it will be incorporated in the literature of the world a thousand years hence. It may be too high praise to say that Emily Dickinson's name "will ring loudly on the heavenly fame" when the roll of the world's great poets is called, but it is probable that it will be there. She reduced universal truths to their simplest terms, putting them before us succinctly and clearly in a few brief stanzas. In no way is she more surely the daughter of New England than in her economy of words. She says that she fears a man of scanty speech—

"But he who waiteth
While the rest
Expend their inmost pound,
Of this man I am wary—
I fear that He is Grand."

There is no parsimony in the message that she sent to the world, only strict frugality. She "deals her words" as sparingly as she shared her personality. Thoughts and moods are condensed to epigrammatic length. Only a few friends and relatives knew her intimately, but those few were conscious of the power of an extraordinary woman. Martha Dickinson Bianchi says that she herself has given utterance to only one clever remark in her life. In her childhood she was comparing her gifts of Fortune with those of her playmates. She brought the discussion of relative merits to a triumphant conclusion by saying, "Well, anyway, your aunts are only common ant-hill aunts. You haven't an Aunt Emily." The children were
silenced, for children, Madame Bianchi declares, recognized the superiority of the genius. Aside from her own comparatively small family, and a few acquaintances of her girlhood, Emily had barely more than a score of friends. Madame Bianchi assures us that her aunt was not a snob; the housewifely concerns of women who had little to talk about save the exchanging of recipes and similar details of domestic routine meant little to one whose mind was focused on human destiny and Divine deliverance.

To these few, she gave herself with protestations of affection that are saved from extreme sentimentality only by their sincerity and the sharp intellectual sallies that accompanied them. Though she had so definitely given up personal desires and hopes that she had virtually accomplished life and death, she had need of spending the treasures of her heart and mind on those nearest her. Enough of the need of loving and being loved remained to cause her to write ardently to Colonel Higginson and to ask the Bowles family to name one of their children for her. In these relationships, her eagerness to spend herself roused misunderstanding in the first case and embarrassment in the second.

Her hoarding of her mind and soul is seen in her attitude towards her father. She gave him obedience by remaining at home; she gave him a love as loyal and devoted as Cordelia's, with neither a spoken word nor a demonstrative sign; she escaped him mentally and spiritually altogether. Her captivity was the measure of her freedom. A spendthrift world can learn a lesson from Emily's purposeful conservation of words, ideas, and emotion.

We admire Emily, the economist, but it is Emily, the possessor of the anonymous mind, as Miss Taggard calls it, that interests us primarily. She wrote as one who had died and then returned to this
world might be expected to write; yet at the same time, she was most vitally alive in her immediate environment. The Amherst recluse is paradoxical from every point of view— withholding herself proudly from the many to lavish herself unreservedly on the few; remaining close to her father in body but flying far away from him in her mind; doubting God, trusting Him; writing with the impassioned fervor of one in the throes of an all-powerful emotion, and yet with the dispassionate analysis of a logical and reflective intellect, sufficiently remote to have gained enough perspective for the proper evaluation of its object.

In order to understand this peculiar quality of mind, one needs only to look into Emily Dickinson's life.

She inherited certain qualities from her father; an imperturbable aloofness in regard to her neighbors' judgment; a proud independence of spirit; and a certain legal attitude of mind, that made analysis of experience easy. She owed her love of beauty to him, too. A lawyer who could ring a churchbell to bring his neighbors out into the streets to see a beautiful sunset had an important gift to bestow on his daughter. Although Emily cared for her mother in her last illness, it is apparent that there was no deep bond between these two; neither is there any evidence that the daughter inherited anything from the maternal parent. Madame Bianchi says that she remembers her grandmother as "a lady, such a lady." There is evidence that Miss Norcross, later Mrs. Edward Dickinson, was a refined, patient woman, managing her household well and abiding by her husband's decisions; she was the typical good wife of the period, with no exceptional talents or abilities to bequeath to her daughter. Emily wrote, "I never had a mother." Lavinia seems to have inherited some characteristics from both sides of the household, but Emily was all Dickinson unless one is to interpret her refusal to run away with—
her lover as evidence of Norcross timidity. Through her girlhood, we see Edward, jealous and watchful, conditioning Emily's mind against marriage.

Cut off from the outer world, partly by her father's circumscribing her activities and partly by her own volition after her separation from her lover, Emily focused her attention on love, which was past; the delights of her garden, which were present; the transition from this existence to another, which was future; and the life of the spirit and of God, which are Eternal. "The great powers come resembling miracles; when the body is caught in a trap, it will invent an untrappable identity for itself and name it spirit, and the spirit's freedom will become the body's power." 1

Frequently, when reading "Collected Poems," one feels as though Niagara Falls had been forced to turn a toy mill-wheel. A great social enthusiasm coupled with Emily Dickinson's energy of spirit would have made another Jane Addams. Had she turned religious fanatic, she would have rivalled Mary Baker Eddy. One wonders that Niagara did not destroy the mill-wheel. Two years before her death, the poet did suffer a severe nervous breakdown, more truly named "A revenge of the nerves" by her doctor.

For a period of ten years after her love affair, Emily went calmly about the business of cultivating her garden. Far more important was her cultivation of that garden of which even her father knew nothing.

"On the bleakness of my lot,
Bloom I strove to raise."

She succeeded in producing a great number of sturdy, homely growths and some exotic ones.

Her greatness does not lie primarily in her during attitude towards religion, in her subjectivity, or in her unreserved frankness in ad-

1 "The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson", by Genevieve Taggard.
mitting an unfulfilled love. The latter two characteristics lose
their force when one considers that she was not writing for the public.
At least, she told Lavinia to burn her poems; however, it is probable
that she did not quite mean what she said. If she did mean it, why
did she send four poems to Mr. Higginson for editorial criticism; why
did she write in one of those poems that she had a message for the
world, and why did she tell her sister that she could never get her
work done in time? The literal-minded Lavinia must have misunder-
stood her sister, who could say one thing and mean another.

But to return to the real reason for Emily Dickinson's greatness:
It lies in her ability to see life as it is, in its beauty and its
ugliness, its weakness and its strength, its grief and its joy. If
any American can be said to see life steadily and see it whole, it
is she. She never denied any experience nor any phase of existence.
She did not try to read the riddle of the Universe in Nature alone,
regardless of human beings as Thoreau did. Therefore she did not
make his mistake of viewing the relationship between outer Nature
and human nature disproportionately, with undue emphasis on the
former. For this reason, it was she rather than he who left the
indelible imprint of natural scenes upon the inner eye. With all
his laborious detail and his striving for the interpretation of life
through a study of the habits of beavers and wood-chucks, it is her
pictures of dawn and daffodils, of winter skies and the stately
march of the seasons, that stay with us rather than his. One can
see her forest because there are not too many trees to obstruct the
vision.

With the same sense of balance, she laid equal stress on the
elements of man's nature. Browning is the only other poet who has
seen so clearly that sense helps soul as much as soul helps sense.
Whitman sang gloriously of the perfection of the body; Tennyson sang nobly of war between soul and sense, the spirit ultimately conquering. But the two wisest poets knew that in the perfect man the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual elements work together in harmony.

At the present time, many eminent novelists and some poets are trying to reduce all life to terms of sex. In Emily's time, Walt Whitman was the only one who was doing that, and even he was doing it with a difference. In 1850, women, particularly unmarried ones, were not mentioning love except in abstract and ethereal symbols. Emily, saner than most of the women writers of yesterday and today, deserves to rank with our best psychologists, paying to sex the tribute that is due it and no more.

The present theory of remarkable achievement, artistic or military, is that the artist or leader is compensating through his work or his conquests for some deficiency in his emotional life. We might have had no Shakespearean dramas or sonnets if William had been wholly satisfied with his life with Anne. There would have been no Waterloo if Napoleon had been a hero in his own household. There is no doubt that Emily Dickinson would not have written so powerfully as she did write—perhaps not at all—if she had married her lover and lived a happy life with him, bearing and rearing his children and assisting him to minister to the needs of his flock. Miss Taggard says that much of the vigor of Emily's writing is due to "the pressure of virginity." When Madame Bianchi is asked if it is likely that Emily would have been happier if she had married, she answers, "I do not know, but it is certain that the poetry that she wrote could never have been written by a married woman." There is no disparagement of the state of marriage suggested in this remark. Madame Bianchi
is merely stating that the energy that found an outlet in verse in those feverish moments in the late evening after Emily had left the living-room would have found release in an emotional rather than an intellectual way.

If sublimating the greater part of one's physical and emotional self in the creation of poetry is neurotic, then Emily belongs in that category. But she made no pretense that such sublimation is an adequate substitution for the normal joys that she had missed. Herein she was more sensible than those pseudo-scientists who, never having tried it, maintain that it is; she agrees rather with Dr. Dorsey, who insists that sublimation is both dangerous and unsatisfactory beyond a certain point.

"To fill a gap--
Insert the thing that caused it.
Block it up
With other and 'twill yarn
The more,
You cannot solder an abyss
With air."

She was aware of the toll of sleepless nights and restless days; she knew without the aid of a physician that the nerves were taking revenge, threatening to destroy her sanity. She was aware that the cellar of the brain may hold something that will pursue us—a picturesque simile for the subconscious. Her moral code permitted no laxity; therefore there was nothing to do but to live as best she could with her flowers, a few companionships, and the surreptitious relief of her pen. By telling the truth about her feeling, she escaped alike the condemnation and condescension of the psychologist. Without denying or ignoring the fundamental laws of love, she nearly
effected a complete escape into the spiritual world by analyzing the mind scientifically, pondering the nature of God, Time, and Eternity. She interchanged physical symbols until the mystic union of God, self, and lover was complete.

"A wife at daybreak I shall be,
Sunrise, hast thou a flag for me?
At midnight I am yet a maid--
How short it takes to make it bride,
Then, Midnight, I have passed from thee
Unto the East and Victory.

Midnight, "Good night"
I hear them call.
The angels bustle in the hall,
Softly my future climbs the stair,
I fumble at my childhood's prayer--
So soon to be a child no more!
Eternity, I'm coming, Sir,--
Master, I've seen that face before."

Thus she stole the thunder of the Freudians by a candid acceptance of the importance of love in all its aspects. But she transcended them by sustaining life through "the anonymous mind." Sunrise surely must have a flag for one so courageous!

Emily Dickinson early learned a lesson that the followers of all those modern cults that deny pain and suffering and evil would do well to learn. She wrote

"I like a look of agony
Because I know it's true;
Men do not sham convulsion,
Nor simulate a throe.

1 "Poems" London, 1886.
The eyes glaze once, and that is death—
Impossible to feign
The beads upon the forehead
By homely anguish strung."

She realized that the measure of any emotion is determined by the extent of its opposite. To argue away the sorrow would be to annihilate the joy. One "pays sharp pittances of years for each beloved hour." There is nothing Schopenhauerian in the statement; it is merely a self-evident fact. She went beyond Browning, who said,

"Be your joys three parts pain,
Strive and hold cheap the strain."

In speaking of her loss of happiness, she said,

"Earth would have been too much, I see,
And heaven not enough for me;
I should have had the joy
Without the fear to justify—
So, Savior, crucify.

Defeat whets victory, they say;
The reefs in old Gethsemane
Endear the shore beyond.
'Tis hagglers banquets best define;
'Tis thirsting vitalizes wine—
Faith faints to understand."

One is reminded by these lines of "The Last Ride Together."

It is true that she derived a martyr-like joy from her grief. There was in her a touch of that Puritanical delight in misery that made Jonathan Edwards zealous in presenting God as a monster dangling naked human souls on pitch-forks over the hottest fires of

1 "Count the Cost.
2 "Climb to Heaven."
Hell. That she would have exchanged her barren state for a more fruitful one is certain, but that she would have exchanged it for the mild kind of happiness that her neighbors knew is unthinkable. Better her few moments of ecstasy with succeeding years of anguish and loneliness than their long years of uninspired pleasantness and peace.

"I deem that I with but a crumb

Am sovereign of them all."

And again

"The banquet of abstemiousness

Surpasses that of wine."

Emily was a psychologist as well as a philosopher. She knew that one hungers disproportionately for the thing which she does not possess. Food is all-important to the starving man, blankets to the cold. She knew equally well that satisfying hunger of any kind to the point of complete satiety takes away a certain precious element of yearning. The joys of life look most glorious at a little distance.

"Tis opposites entice,

Deformed men ponder grace,

Bright fires, the blanketless--

The lost, Day's face.

The blind esteem it be

Enough estate to see;

The captive strangles now

For deeming beggars play.

To lack enamour Thee,

Thou' the Divinity

Be only

Me."
The name Emily Dickinson has come to be synonymous with mysterious romance, yet the facts of her life are as bleak and unadorned as a black-and-white etching of a New England landscape in December.

She was born in Amherst, Massachusetts in 1830, the daughter of that correct pattern of austere fathers, Edward Dickinson, and quiet, practical Emily Norcross of Monson. The Dickinson family had lived in western Massachusetts for seven generations before the appearance of Emily. At least one member in each generation had been influential in the affairs of the town, and both generous and prosperous in his own. The leading members of the family had had much to do with shaping the political and intellectual ideas of Amherst.

"The Dickinsons had always been a little odd, even before they became the ruling class. They often emerged with red hair and the Celtic temper—the Yorkshire Celts had long ago seen to that. How their nature was to do just as they pleased; to speak outright, to care for no convention if it hindered them, and to carry themselves well in their own eyes." This paragraph explains a good deal of Emily.

Samuel, Emily's grandfather, was so public-spirited that in his efforts to raise large sums of money and find the best teachers for Amherst College his own law-practice suffered. Edward came home from Yale to rebuild a successful practice, while his father, full of zeal for work and high dreams of unselfish service, went west. The fire of Samuel's spirit was passed on to Emily, in whose nature it was to burn in a very different way.

Edward might easily have been mistaken for an old English squire as he walked the streets of his native town. His neighbors respected but did not understand this silent, inflexible man,
dressed in black broadcloth, and carrying a gold-topped cane in his hand. His grand-daughter, Madame Bianchi, looks very much like his portrait; piercing dark eyes, a broad forehead, a large, firm mouth, and an even firmer chin are the characteristic features of both. There is in her manner a dignity and an implication that there would be no gainsaying her opinion, that she must have inherited directly from him. When Madame Bianchi told the publishers that Emily's hay was "a hay" and not "the hay" devoured by horses, "a hay" remained in the printed version.

Emily's niece and biographer gives us this picture of her aunt; a small woman, with quantities of rich auburn hair and the white, translucent skin that belongs with it, large, expressive eyes, a nose not straight enough to be classic, and a long upper lip that gave her an ascetic expression.

As a child, Emily was fearful to disclose to her father that she could not tell time after he had given her a single brief lesson, yet she frequently dared to flout him in such little ways as hiding when he ordered her to church. The child was truly mother of the woman; this was the little girl who would later remain at home according to her father's will but escape him through her verse. Hers were not the actions of duplicity but of paradox.

As a young girl, Emily worshipped everything and everybody as only an enthusiastic young girl can worship. She studied the polite branches of learning that were considered becoming for a young woman to know, and looked forward to the day when she would be the belle of the town. She enjoyed long walks in the wood, where she met angels instead of goblins, but she had a good time at parties, too. One of her father's students hid romances in the tree-box beside the door, for it never would have done for Edward to have
discovered his daughter reading anything but the Bible.

At first he forbade her to go to Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, but in 1846 he gave his grudging and dubious permission, fearful lest his daughter learn enough of the world to make her want to live in it. However, he kept her visiting in Boston so long that she was too late to enter the seminary when she returned; thus her formal education was delayed for a year. Although Miss Mary Lyon seemed to be a female Edward Dickinson, she did not over-awe the frail young student from Amherst, who passed her entrance examinations successfully. Much as Emily had longed to escape from home, she found herself homesick for it and for her father. He had made her more dependent on him than she had realized in the security of her own four walls. Emily's sojourn at Mount Holyoke proved to be unhappy for another reason. Emily, in spite of her keen religious sense, was not a professing Christian. Teachers and students alike prayed with and toiled over those without the pale, in an endeavor to coerce them into joining the Christian Church. Whether or not the recalcitrant Emily openly defied Miss Lyon when the edict against the merry celebration of Christmas was issued is uncertain. In the Spring, Emily went home, sick and miserable, a wretched testimony to the sins formerly committed in the name of education and religion.

Emily became the pupil of young Leonard Humphrey, a serious-minded but truly inspired teacher, who may or may not have been in love with her. It is certain that there was a real friendship between them, and a debt of gratitude on the girl's side for the mental stimulation that the scholarly Humphrey aroused. It seems that this ardent friendship must have prepared Emily for the love affair that came later. Leonard Humphrey died in 1850, but his
unquenchable thirst for life and knowledge lived on in his pupil. The death of this friend prepared her, too, for the renunciation of life that she was to make. She had opened two of the doors marked "escape". The one that opened on a further education led down a narrow corridor to Mary Lyon's autocratic piety; the other led through a bright room of friendship to the vault of Death beyond. Emily, a baffled prodigal, was willing to go back to the house of her father. How soon would she be tempted to open another door?

George Gould, a tall young man from the Academy at Monson had come to Amherst on foot the fall after Humphrey had been graduated. He had been admitted to important societies and made editor of the literary magazine of the college; most important of all, he had become a friend of these other two. George was preparing himself for the Congregational ministry. How could he support Emily on a salary of a few hundred dollars a year? Edward, knowing that he could not do so without privation for both of the young people, forbade Emily to see her lover again.

There is a legend slightly supported by fact to the effect that Emily met her lover late on a June evening after his graduation. With promises of undying love, she renounced him, saying that she would always dress in white and never go beyond her own gate as long as she lived. Except for a few brief excursions, she kept her word.

How can one pity so proud a soul any more than one could offer sympathy to Prometheus?

The reader might ask why Emily, having chosen to remain with her father, baking his bread and sitting with him quietly in the long winter evenings, did not return to the simple pleasures of her
youth or interest herself in community projects, thus giving her tense nerves an opportunity for relaxation. There were no Poetry of Motion meetings now; those stolen evenings of dancing, when parents were elsewhere. If there had been, it is unlikely that Emily would have gone to them. Leonard Humphrey, her beloved early teacher, he who had first quickened her intellectual life, was dead. George Gould had been sent away. Lemonade is a mild drink when one has tasted wine. After experiencing a great love, there is no going back to the childish pastimes that were enough before. Emily tells us that she has put away her dolls.

"How odd the girl's life looks."

"Denial is the only fact
Received by the denied,
Whose will, a blank intelligence
The day the Heaven died--
And all the Earth strove common round
Without delight or aim."

"At leisure is the soul
That gets a staggering blow;
The width of Life
Before it spreads
Without a thing to do."

A lesser nature might have returned to the toys of girlhood. The woman had reached full maturity, yet the person who had brought her to a sense of womanhood had been renounced. Life is so constituted that it can not remain in a single state for long; there must be progression or retrogression. Emily recognized the laws of change, but what could she do?
"From blank to blank," she must "push mechanic feet." One seemed as impossible as the other. She was not socially minded; if she had been, there would have been little opportunity for exercising her gifts in Amherst, where practically every family was self-sufficient. Madame Bianchi assures us that Emily's withdrawal from the society as it did exist does not prove her a true recluse. Life in a country town, even a college town, in 1850 had nothing to offer in music, or art, and little in literature. Madame Bianchi is sure that if Emily had lived in Boston or even in Hartford in 1830, she would have enjoyed concerts and lectures and companionship with souls akin to her own. Her books were not wholly satisfying, for Edward was a strict and jealous censor. She could contemplate the meaning of life itself in the light of her own experience. Edward could not blue-pencil her thoughts if he did not know about them. In between time, she "had to plate the residue of woe with monotony."

"There may be miles on miles of nought
Of action."

Just as the other senses become acute when a man loses his sight, so the inner life is intensified when one cuts himself off from society. Those few objects that are left to compose one's surroundings gain in significance until the blossoming of a single flower or the chirping of the first robin is portentous. To the modern busy person with a book full of engagements for every hour in the day, the simple act of dressing for breakfast does not require any particular celebration; but to Emily the business of putting her dimples on and her ribbons in place was ceremony enough to constitute a poem. One marvels that her crumbs of daily experience were sufficient to keep her alive.
"I tie my hat, I crease my shawl,
Life's little duties do precisely,
As the very least
Were infinite to me."

Further, when one deliberately puts an end to major emotional experiences at the same time that she shuts the door on society, one of three things will happen; her emotional powers will atrophy if they are weak; they will turn and overwhelm the possessor if they are strong; or they will flow into intellectual channels, swelled the mental stream. In Emily's case, the first could not happen; the other two did.

Financial worries were non-existent for Emily; household responsibilities were slight. Edward provided; Lavinia, with the help of Maggie, managed very well.

Only those who are done with the bustle of life, the ambitions, the petty rivalries, have the time or the attention to look on the rising of the sun as a miracle. Only such can see "a worm measuring its length on a leaf" far down the orchard in the illumination of a fire. The Wordsworths could be deeply stirred by a drop of dew glistening on a blade of grass; William could make an adventure of beholding a thousand daffodils dancing in the breeze. These two had found the same liberation from the world that Emily found.

It is doubtful if one who has lived a cosmopolitan or metropolitan life could fully understand how foreign an environment a small New England town was for a genius of Emily's type. Nowhere in the world is the non-conformist looked on with more distrust and disapproval than in a rural New England community. Anyone who shows individuality in dress, manner, or speech is considered queer. Emily knew that only a slight deviation from provincial conduct was enough to cause one "to be handled straightway with a chain." Even to this
day, the small town Yankee continues to measure, with his coarse
thumb and finger, "those things that take the eye and have the price."
He may pay tribute to the spiritual and mental values, especially
on Sunday, but he is much more comfortable dealing with the physical
ones. The Puritanical standard-bearer of 1850 talked of Divine love
and worshipped on the Sabbath, but he was estimating worth in a far
more tangible way on Monday morning. Very likely the women of
Amherst pities Mrs. Edward Dickinson because she had a peculiar
daughter, whose only real ability was baking bread. Madame Bianchi
states that her mother, the Sister Sue of Emily’s letters, was the
one person in the community who spoke the same language, with the
exception, of course, of the neighborhood children. However, Miss
Taggard suggests that Sue did not quite understand. Her sister-in-
law, in the fervor of a new and intimate friendship, thought that
she did but found out later that she did not. That intense inner
fire that makes the poet passionate in love makes him equally fervent
in friendship. As Carlyle says, Burns in the warmth of his own
friendliness, took to his bosom friends who were vastly inferior to
him without realizing their inferiority. Emily, on the other hand,
"selected her own divine majority, then shut the door." Yet it is
apparent that she rushed into those few relationships that she did
wish to cultivate with as much ardor as Burns evinced in his less
discriminating choices.

The Puritanical forefathers of the New England hamlets pro-
fessed to know a great deal about divine love, but they were sus-
picious of human love. The religious zeal that led to the conden-
sation of Hester Prynne on the scaffold was not extinct in Amherst in
1850. A man might kiss his wife on Sunday without calling down the
wrath of the gods and his neighbors, though there is no record that
Edward Dickinson ever did that. A man who could write the following
message to his fiancee just before the wedding ceremony would not be likely to become uxorious: "Let us prepare for a life of rational happiness. I do not expect or wish for a life of pleasure. May we be happy and useful and successful and each be an ornament in society and gain the respect and confidence of all with whom we may be connected." What bride would care to "pick the lock of a letter like that?"

Lavinia and Emily could not remember having been kissed by their father; neither could they recall his laughing at anything. Love and laughter had no part in the life of a mature man, who was determined to be successful and useful. Joy was always fugitive in the Dickinson household. Is it any wonder that at least one child in these surroundings was storing up emotions for an unknown someone who would claim them later? Virtue and happiness, at least an exuberant young person's sort of happiness, have never been compatible to the Puritan. The most innocent physical pleasure savored of sensuality. Her lover's kiss was something to take to Heaven "to teach the angels avarice."

The time for the writing of her verse had not come; that for falling in love had passed. In the interim, she could tend her flowers, write to her friends, minister to her father's wants, and watch Time and Eternity go by. There was enough of these last two to make it possible for her to record the minute details of living and to feel the daily presence of a God that busier folk had opportunity to meet only for a little while on Sunday.

And were there not "letters from Vevay" and a score of other places in America and Europe, cities from afar visited by her lover? It is possible that Deacon Luke Sweetser, the merchant, and Maggie, the servant of the Dickinson home, were accomplices to her crimes of correspondence with George Gould, who was travelling abroad for his health. Mr. John Gough, an Englishman, was Mr. Gould's com-
From notes of his, it is evident that he was drawn to the young minister-to-be by a powerful but not sentimental emotional quality in the letter. Would this not be exactly the sort of man to whom the emotionally intense, starved Emily would be drawn? Both of the men were disgusted by sights of drunkenness and revelry in continental cities. But the lofty beauty of the Alps restored their sense of rightness in an otherwise debauched land. Emily's lover spent one summer, perhaps two, in Switzerland. From here he wrote to her, we know. Then he went to Italy at about the time that Emily was becoming acquainted with the poetry of the Brownings and their idyllic life together. How pitiful that her lover should be in the land of the perfect lovers, while she was learning to live with father and her letters and a deep hopelessness. Her attitude toward the Brownings was worshipful, so worshipful that she wanted the Bowles to name their fourth child Robert, (they did not) and she felt a personal loss when Mrs. Browning died. It was hard for her to understand how the husband could go on writing poetry; then she realized that she was doing much the same sort of thing.

It is significant to note that at this time Emily entertained the idea of madness. The broken life has three alternatives; a choice of some way of mending itself, madness, or Death. Carlyle says of Burns: "Three gates of deliverance, it seems to us, were open for Burns: clear poetical activity; madness or death." He goes on to show how "the milder third gate was opened for him." Emily chose the former, but she knew well enough of the existence of the other two. The heart asks pleasures first; then anodynes for pain—and finally Death. She would have been shocked at the thought of taking her own life, although there were times enough when she would not have been sorry if God had taken it. In 1862, she wrote of the possibility of going mad. It would not have been in the least strange
if she had lost her reason. She had ceased to hear from her lover regularly; the Civil War, with its torture to sensitive souls, had been begun; young Amherst men had gone to the front, and some of them—her brother's best friend among them—had been killed. As relief from misery, Emily was beginning to write poetry. In the Spring, she put four poems in an envelope and sent them to Mr. Higginson for approval. In the fall, she received word that George Gould was to be married.

Mr. Higginson, the editor of the Atlantic Monthly, was a genial, scholarly man, who liked reform and general humanitarian endeavors. It was no novelty for him, who knew all the important literary men of his day well and counted many of them among his own friends, to receive manuscripts of various sorts from ambitious young ladies. At the same time that he was receiving these manuscripts, he was writing voluminous essays, poems, and lectures of his own and making jottings about the literary celebrities with whom he was coming in contact constantly. How could a man of his sort, agreeable and cultured though he was, know of the terrors of undertaking to send four little poems for his criticism? It meant little to him to send the author one negative note and then another. He could not make much sense of the badly rhymed and unconventional verses and advised her not to think of publishing for a while, yet did give her one small crumb of encouragement. Thus Emily, whose life had been a series of rebuffs, had to meet another at a time when her very sanity seemed to depend on meeting with encouragement. A crumb had saved her before; it was enough to do as much now. One wonders what would have happened if this little men had ever sat down to a banquet—a real banquet—of any sort, the complete satisfying meal of which she could only dream. Could she have borne an adequate joy after so much frustration, on meager rations of
happiness at best? She doubted her own strength to endure fulfillment; she was never put to the test. Would the banquet have proved so hearty as to have overloaded a precariously balanced mind or would it have restored her to complete sanity? Conjectures are useless.

Whether she was trying to find in Mr. Higginson a somewhat impersonal friend to take the place of those that she had lost, is uncertain. Even those who have renounced life are still human. To him, she remained queer and unpoegetic according to the rules of poetry by which he measured material submitted to his magazine. Only the poetry itself was left. Far into the night she wrote until her nerves were shattered and her eyesight almost gone.

Of course there were her women friends; but to a woman who has deified the male until God, father, and lover are almost synonymous, a woman friend must be accepted on a lower emotional and possibly intellectual plane. There were Vinnie, Sue, and the Norcross sisters for relatives; Helen Hunt Jackson, Mrs. Bowles, and Mrs. Holland for friends. Her letters to and from these women show a larger dependence on them for understanding than Emily herself might have realized.

In time of war, every thoughtful person's attitude toward the whole of life is changed. Every human belief is challenged; ideas of good and evil; faith in a loving, personal God; a certainty of the importance of the individual soul; a sense of proportion; an abiding trust that the Good and Beautiful will ultimately prevail. It is an acid test for anyone to pass; many poets have found it impossible to do so. In the World War, Toves and Kipling were so deeply affected by the tottering of their idea world that both have been incapable of any remarkable achievement in the past ten or twelve years. Even so sturdy a realist as Wasefield turned to
romance. If such strong men could go to pieces, it is to be ex-
pected that a sheltered woman would have a painful time in recon-
structing those few values that had seemed certain. No wonder that
Emily wrote that everything changes, even love. The sun himself
may lose his way in a universe that has suddenly gone mad; if it
does, her faith must show it the path. The stern, unyielding
Puritan in her stood her in good stead in a time of Chaos. Re-
adjustment, of course; loss of fundamental values, never.

The thought of war naturally fixed her mind on the mystery of
death, a phenomenon which is a part of the life of the soul—a
stepping-stone to Immortality. And death brings escape. One would
choose abundant Life; missing that, one feels that death is a
desirable alternative.

"You are not so fair, Midnight--
I chose Day,
But please take a little girl
He turned away!" I

Emily's probing the inner self without benefit of anesthesia
is doubtless one reason for her popularity at the present time. In
a period when other poets were turning their attention to the
brotherhood of man, she was concentrating on those impulses and
reactions of the self that are not noised abroad, but that produce
mightier conflict than national war. Hers was the psychological
approach in a sociological age. Emily was an aristocrat without
presumption when America was becoming almost violently democratic.
Whitman might enjoy the company of dock hands and find a common bond
of humanity with the woman of the streets; but Emily was Emily
Dickinson, the withdrawn, related to her fellowmen in suffering and
joy but fastidiously apart from them in the confines of her own
imagination and intellect. She was proud of her isolation, just as she was proud of her suffering. She had no desire to be considered one of the majority.

"'Tis the majority
In this, as all, prevails.
Assent, and you are sane;
Demur—you're straightway dangerous
And handled with a chain."

Here is the perfect introvert: a queer in the fastness of her own soul, but a queer, incompetent little woman in the eyes of society; a dramatic and superior creature by herself, unwilling to address an envelope because something that she had held would be touched by vulgar, alien hands, but a timid wren who looked on the meeting with a person of importance whom she herself had summoned from another city as too formidable a situation to be met. Seldom does the ego climb to such heights as these, or the body that is its fragile shell fall into such pits of terror at the conduct of ordinary affairs. Here is something compounded of genius and a sanity bordering on insanity which justifies Shakespeare in saying that the poet, the lover and the lunatic are one. Certainly Emily was all three.

Introspection had filled her days ever since George Gould had gone away. Unlike many of the contemporary younger poets who deliver experience raw to their readers, she was questioning the Eternal, making and revising mental notes, arriving at conclusions until the time came to write. What other writer has ever served so strange an apprenticeship? In the physical world, all her days were alike; there was no growth in domesticity or objectivity. In what Miss Taggard calls the poet's vacuum, her "anonymous mind" grew.

How was she to rebuild a world, a God, a universe that had been tumbled down, not demolished by war within herself and war without in
the nation? She recognized evil, though she could not solve its problem. She posed as the sinner. Could this New England virgin who wrote of the bliss of drunkenness and murder have thought of herself as a possible Magdalene? High as she held the sanctity of marriage and the ecstasy of spiritual love, it is probable that she did if one is to judge from some of her erotic verses. She was too wise to consider sex and sin as synonymous, yet there was enough of the Puritan in her to give her a delicious thrill of depravity in the thought. God would forgive her; that was His prerogative.

God was all-powerful, but was He all-wise to put innocent, helpless human beings in the world and let them suffer the "smart misery" that was her lot? Better nothingness—"the atom's tomb"—than that. Was He just? Not so far as Moses was concerned. Only a brutal big boy would let a lesser boy take a peek into paradise and then withhold it from him. Having found no satisfying answer to the riddle of injustice, she turned again to that of sin. Each of the writers of her period was dealing with it in his own way; solving nothing. If God were responsible, as He obviously was, for both good and evil, then He must be forgiven for His duplicity. But one must not forget that staunch faith that could show the sun the way. Back of God, the forces of creation must be ultimately right. Tennyson says, in the "Morte d'Arthur", that it seems as though some lesser god had shaped the world until the high God should come to shape it. George Bernard Shaw believes that God himself is evolving toward a perfection not yet reached. Are not all three of these thinkers saying the same thing in different words? This theory of evil is obviously inconsistent with that of omnipotence, sometimes held by Emily. Most theories are, if closely examined. How could Emily reconcile a God that bullied Moses with the tender Father that would some celestial day lift her over a stile of pearl?
How does anyone reconcile anything in an inexplicable and paradoxical universe? Emily built and rebuilt her theology daily.

Some strictly orthodox Christians have been shocked by Emily's practice of treating God familiarly. God was her friend, His world was her house; and Eternity was then and always. What is irreverent about feeling the omnipresence of the Divine? There is nothing shocking in saying that God keeps house next door, and 'his furniture is love.'

"The blunder is to estimate—
'Eternity is then',
We say, as if a station.
Meanwhile he is so near
He joins me in my ramble;
Divides abode with me;
No friend have I that so persists
As this Eternity."

She shows us that there is a great deal of difference between praying in a conventional way and letting one's whole being become illuminated with sacred light. Then she tried the former, she sometimes failed, but then it was that real religion uplifted her and she was ashamed of her former feeble attempt. She tells us whimsically that she doubts if she will feel at home in Paradise because God never takes a nap or makes a visit.

"And Eden'll be so lonesome
Bright Wednesday afternoons"
because it is Sunday all the time. She says more seriously,

"Eden is that old-fashioned House
We dwell in every day,
Without our ecting our abode
Until we drive away."

1 "Complete Poems" p. 361
Chapter 3. Emily Dickinson's Character

Of all the women poets that America has produced, Emily Dickinson is the only one who belongs to all time in the sense that her ideas are ageless, cosmic. Anne Bradstreet is as colonial as Amy Lowell is modern. Edna St. Vincent Millay's wit and Elinor Wylie's subtleties pronounce them both twentieth century sophisticates. If we were not told that Emily Dickinson was a Puritan—and she was less a one than her niece and some of her critics have implied—we should guess that only now and then from anything that she herself said. Her independence of thought was too vigorous to permit her to be labeled as a representative of any particular group; her faith was too comprehensive to be brought within the confines of any specific creed. Perhaps of all the epithets that have been applied to her, an "epigrammatic Walt Whitman" is the most fitting, in that she concisely expresses the meaning of the elemental forces of the universe in their relationship to each other and to her, the individual person. On the other hand, she has a delicacy and refinement, a power to spiritualize and sublimate the physical, that Whitman lacked. Thus her possession of finer sensibilities and her ability to compress within a few lines what it took him pages to say entitle her to a place above his in our admiration and esteem.

Emily Dickinson is unquestionably the greatest woman poet that America has produced; few of the men poets deserve to rank with her. But she is more than that; she is possibly the most truly cultured American woman, if we are to accept John Cowper Powys' definition of that scarcely definable word. If he had taken her as an example from the various angles at which he looks at the subject, he could not have found anyone who approximated the ideal more exactly, according to his own definition.
He shows the abysmal gap that often exists between education and culture—the difference between the accumulation of a number of facts and theories more or less dependent on the dominant attitudes of a particular period for their accepted interpretation, and the absorbing of wisdom until it becomes a part of one's self through contemplative and emotional processes. In speaking of the relationship between philosophy and culture, he says, "It is clear that there must be a will to philosophize at the very start. This implies a desire to focus such imaginative reason as we possess upon the mystery of life.****The more culture a man has, the more sullenly does he abide by his own taste. Since the conscious development of our awareness of existence is the very essence of culture, it is necessary to acquire the habit of falling back in our thoughts on the basic situation. Thus in our lonely communion with the cause of our being, there will be no place for optimism or for pessimism. Our personality will simply strip itself bare and will commune with this ultimate power in a concentrated dialogue." Powys goes on to show how the psyche passes from its conversation with the Infinite to a conversation with itself.

Emily Dickinson found no time "to traffic with a berry woman" nor to discuss trivial matters with gossipy neighbors. Lavinia, her devoted, practical sister, attended to such ordinary matters. Emily was too busy becoming acquainted with the cause of her being and that being itself, stripped bare, to be troubled with the small complexities of everyday existence. She was developing that sense of awareness that is the first requisite of culture, simply because it was natural for her to do so. She did not have a great deal of formal education, though she attended Mt. Holyoke Seminary for a time.

However, one cannot possibly arrive at a conclusion concerning
the meaning of Emily's life without taking into consideration the part that books played in it and her own certainty of their importance.

"There is no frigate like a book
To take us lands away,
Nor any coursers like a page
Of preening poetry.
This traverse may the poorest take
Without oppress of toll;
How frugal is the chariot
That bears a human soul?"

In another poem she says,

"Unto my books so good to turn
For ends of tired days."

She spoke of a man who was poor and lonely, but who had the joyous companionship of books. His whole self was transformed from poverty to wealth by what he read.

"He danced along the dingy days,
And this bequest of wings
Was but a book. What liberty
A loosened spirit brings."

"A precious, mouldering pleasure 'tis
To meet an antique book,
In just the dress his century wore."

Emily was at home in any century. Sappho and Beatrice were friends of hers, but not in the intimate sense that Charlotte Bronte, Currer Bell, was. There was a strong bond between her, secluded in her Amherst home, and the Bronte sisters, intense and lonely in their remote home on Haworth Moor.

1 "Complete Poems" p. 53
2 "Complete Poems" p. 14
"Oh, what an afternoon for heaven
When Bronte entered there!"

Though Emily had her favorite books, she was more truly educated by Nature in a Wordsworthian sense. There are so many different approaches to an appreciation of Nature that it is difficult to define any one of them; moreover, a real love of Nature is so closely bound up with one's religion and his fundamental philosophy of life that it is impossible to discuss it as a separate quality of any human being. Emily Dickinson did not have Keats' sensuous appreciation—or, rather, not the same sort of sensuous appreciation, inasmuch as ethereal beauty appealed more to him than to her, and the exact, delicate motions and colors of butterflies and blossoms made a more definite impression on her than on him. Nor had she his mythological apprehension of Nature, implying that a particular Genius or soul exists in each tree or plant; yet she invested every natural creature with a highly important life of its own. Toads and men, earls and midges and gnats have the same privileges of life and death, light and darkness. Why then, she asks in various ways, should men feel his supremacy over the lesser things of earth? Since she knew well that iron bars do not make a cage nor stonewalls a prison, she had no need to write of wild west winds and sky-larks that have the joy of soaring unrestrained, as Shelley wrote of them. Not that the significance of Shelley's incomparable poems should be minimized! She was free in her own soul, self-liberated. In the warm sympathy that she felt for the least of God's creatures, robins and orioles, spiders and bees, she was like Robert Burns. She felt that they have as undeniable a right to life and happiness as she. There is only one animal with which she felt no kinship—a snake.
"A narrow fellow in the grass
Occasionally rides.

Several of nature's people
I know, and they know me;
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality;

But never met this fellow,
Attended or alone,
Without a tighter breathing,
And zero at the bone." 1

She was pantheistic in the way that Wordsworth was and Emerson, too, although the latter was very different in his expression of the One-in-all or All-in-one.

To her, an inner force "rolls through all things." God was close to her, a part of her, in the air that she breathed, the "wind like a bugle" that quivers through the grass, "the skies that can't keep their secret," the daffodils and the gentians. She mentioned over thirty flowers common to any New England spot, some wild and some cultivated; her favorite, or at the least the one that she spoke of most frequently and with the rarest imagery, is the daffodil.

"If you would like to borrow
Until the daffodil
Upties her yellow bonnet
Beneath the village door—"

Where can anyone find most delicate imagery than this picture of butterflies and flowers?

"Where ships of purple gently toss
On seas of daffodil,
Fantastic sailors mingle,
And then the wharf is still." 2
And here are her beloved bees:

"Pigmy seraphs gone astray,
Velvet people from Vevey,
Belles from some lost summer day,
Bees' exclusive coterie." 1

Both robins and orioles are among her favored birds:

"The robin is the one
That speechless from her nest
Submits that home and certainty
And sanctity are best." 2

Here she allowed herself to do a bit of direct moralizing. Although a principle frequently underlies her nature poems, she seldom permitted it to become so obvious as in the foregoing poem.

Nearly all of her verses are in miniature. She wrote of the small, gentle birds, not ravens and eagles. Similarly she sang of orchards, brooks, gardens, and country roads rather than of rivers, mountains, and the ocean. The fact that she did not live many miles from the Green and White Mountains or from the Atlantic Ocean had little effect on her. Perhaps she never saw any of them. She was content with the path under the trees to Sister Sue's, her own tiny garden, and the fields just beyond her own door-yard. Sugar Loaf and Mount Holyoke and the rich open meadows of the placid Connecticut River were grandeur and magnificence enough for her.

There is no intimation that she had any desire to visit a Gibraltar or the Grand Canyon.

She wrote of every hour of the day and night. In many of her poems, she implied that she lay awake all night with grief, assuaged somewhat by bird-song and the beauty of the night and of the dawn.

"When night is almost done
And sunrise grows so near

1 "Complete Poems" p. 82
2 "Complete Poems" p. 78
That we can touch the spaces,
It's time to smooth the hair
And get the dimples ready,
And wonder we could care
For that old faded midnight
That frightened but an hour.

It must have been a long hour, for she tells us of the single bird that propounds a single term of melody to a silent sky at half-past three, and of his singing at half-past four and half-past seven. As she lay awake, she pondered whimsically on the coming of daybreak when pain permitted her to be whimsical. She tells us of mid-day heat and of "two butterflies that went out at noon and waltzed above a stream." There is less of setting suns and of twilight in her work than there is of dawn and sunshine. This whole poem of sunrise and sunset is typical of her exquisite use of imagery.

"I'll tell you how the sun rose--
A ribbon at a time,
The steeple swam in amethyst,
The news like squirrels ran.
The hills untied their bonnets,
The bobolinks begun.
Then I said softly to myself,
'That must have been the sun.'

But how he set, I know not.
There seemed a purple stile
Which little yellow boys and girls
Were climbing all the while

Till they reached the other side,

1 "Complete Poems" p. 12
2 "Complete Poems" p. 121
A dominie in gray
Put gently up the evening bars,
And led the flock away."

There is one remarkable description of the sunset, of the old mountains dripping with color, the fire ebbing like billows, and the small dusk crawling on the village till the houses blot. In conclusion, she says that such visions have baffled artists through the ages. Her portrait of every feature of the moon with the firmament for her bonnet, the universe for her shoe, stars for the trinkets on her belt, and the heavens for her blue diaphant dress is highly imaginative.

It is hard to say of which season Emily Dickinson wrote best. Spring was her favorite, although she admitted that the coming of the first robin and the daffodils and the grass were almost too much for a Queen of Calvary to bear.

1 "A light exists in spring
Not present on the year
At any other period."

Her picture of Indian summer is rarely beautiful:

"These are the days when skies put on
The old, old sophistries of June--
A blue and gold mistake."

Winter depressed her, as it does many poetic natures, yet it has a bleakness that is interesting, though to her ignoble:

"The sky is low, the clouds are mean,
A travelling flake of snow
Across a barn or through a rut
Debates if it will go.

A narrow wind complains all day

How some one treated him; 2

1 "Complete Poems" p. 127
2 "Complete Poems" p. 124
Nature, like us, is sometimes caught
Without her diadem."

Here is further evidence of the feeling of depression:

"There's a certain slant of light
On winter afternoons
That oppresses, like the weight
Of cathedral tunes.

When it comes, the landscape listens,
Shadows hold their breath;
When it goes, 'tis like the distance
On the look of death." 1

To the mystic, Nature is God; to the poet, Nature with "her diadem" is the embodiment of beauty; to a suffering, sensitive mortal, it is a restorer and comforter. Being triune, Emily turned to the heavens and the earth for a stronger sustenance than that one she called "Despair."

"My nosegays are for captives;
Dim, long-expectant eyes,
Fingers denied the plucking,
Patient till paradise.

To such, if they should whisper
Of morning and the moor,
They bear no other errand,
And I, no other prayer." 2

To a few mortals is given the power to appreciate Nature in her daily renewal. "The glory and the dream" of a new day is no more commonplace than an eclipse of the sun would be to the majority of us. Custom can never stifle their marveling at the dawn; the miracle is no less wondrous in that it is repeated daily. Emily and William

1 "Complete Poems" p. 125
2 "Complete Poems" p. 74
Blake and Wordsworth belong to the chosen few with this gift of constant appreciation and wonderment. The other two accepted the miracle. Wordsworth, man-fashion, tried to define it; Emily, child-and-woman-fashion, asked questions about it that she knew could not be answered.

"Oh, some scholar. Oh, some sailor!
Oh, some wise man from the skies!
Please to tell a little pilgrim
Where the place called morning lies!"

Emily was never at a loss for apt similies, but she was at her best in the use of figurative language when describing natural phenomena.

"The day came slow, till five o'clock,
Then sprang before the hills
Like hindered rubies, or the light
A sudden musket spills."

Apparently unconsciously, she used symbols of love in writing of the elements of the universe. Thus the sun just touches the morning, making her happy in the belief that he has come to stay. Then he departs, leaving her "to feel feebly for her crown." She could not forget for a moment that she, too, had lost her diadem.

She missed no single sign of the approach of Spring. Every "purple finger on the slope" and vermillion imprint on the lawn was recorded in her Book of Days.

Emily may have promised to dress in white and she may have called herself a little wren, but she liked color. Crimson, vermilion, gold, sapphire, purple—these are the royal hues which she noted over and over again.

The oriole, with his Midas touch, is only a little less of a favorite than the robin, though he is a "Jesuit of orchards."
admirer took a mild vicarious glory in his misdemeanors which she

dramatized until he appeared in a role that might better have

belonged to a bird of prey. The Amherst nun belonged to the legion

of good people who have their sly, proud moments of worshipping the
daringly evil. In the vegetable world, the mushroom is an Iscariot.

Was she thinking of herself when she wrote of the small, independ-

te inconspicuous stone

"That rambles in the road alone

And doesn't care about careers."

Sometimes she was whimsical in the extravagance of her figurative

language.

"Bring me the sunset in a cup,

Reckon the morning’s flagons up,

And say how many dew.

Write me how many notes there be

In the new robin’s ecstasy

Among astonished boughs."

And in another poem,

"She sweeps with many-colored brooms

And leaves the shreds behind;

Oh, housewife in the evening west,

Come back and dust the pond!"

Like the majority of people, the poet felt the autumnal sadness

when "the dusk draws earlier in." The passing of summer was like

that of a beloved friend. Her funeral prayer for the lamented

season is this:

"In the name of the bee

And of the butterfly

And of the breeze, amen!"

1 "Complete Poems" p. 100

2 "Complete Poems" p. 101
She had her own way of putting off her shoes before the burning bush:

"The red upon the hill
Taketh away my will;
If anybody sneer,
Take care, for God is here,
That's all."

Could Miss Millay have had these lines in mind when she wrote "God's world?"

Emily Dickinson felt that she was nearer God when she was out in the orchard with her bees and her butterflies than when she was in church. Therefore she spent Sunday morning at home with the children of the family while parents and brother and sisters worshipped conventionally within doors. Madame Bianchi tells us that her aunt would talk so charmingly of and with the out-door creatures that it seemed no time at all until the other members of the family returned.

"God preaches--a noted clergymen--
And the sermon is never long;
So instead of getting to heaven at last,
I'm going all along." 1

Emily felt a close fellowship between herself and "the pretty people in the woods who received her cordially." She was guilty of what Ruskin called the pathetic fallacy of investing nature with one's own emotional mood. That surprising egotism that made her too conscious of her own worth to put her writing on an envelope is evident in these lines:

"The brooks laugh louder when I come,
The breezes madder play."

In much the same way, she wrote,

1 "Complete Poems" p. 111
"No blossom stayed away
In gentle deference to me,
The Queen of Calvary."

Miss Dickinson rarely philosophized about the metaphysical principles underlying the habits of the universe. She gave the picture in simile or metaphor, frequently appending a line or two about her own feeling. Sometimes, however, she mentioned the laws of regularity and order, speaking of the clock of the seasons:

"——that pathetic pendulum
Keeps esoteric time."

Again she wrote in definition,

"Presentiment is that long shadow
on the lawn
Indicative that suns go down;
The notice to the startled grass
That darkness is about to pass." ¹

Emily had a charming way of describing the humming bird's tasting of spicy blossoms in her garden. When he had gone, she almost doubted that he had ridden his "dizzy whed" among her flowers.

Her duller eye was referred

"To just vibrating blossoms—
An exquisite reply."

It is in her delicacy of description, her lightness of touch, that she excelled in a manner peculiarly her own. Like the humming bird's movements, her strokes were quick, true, and graceful.

Compared with her, Keats seems abundant and rich, almost florid; Wordsworth, cumbersome; and Blake, baffling.

It seems to have been a habit of hers to send a verse with a flower to a favored friend.

In not attempting to decipher the laws of Nature, she came very

¹ "Complete Poems" p 118
close to the heart of it.

"But Nature is a stranger yet;
The ones that cite her most
Have never passed her haunted house
Nor simplified her ghost."

Although Emily herself showed a scientific power in making some of her analyses, she felt only scorn for the scientist who neglects beauty in his natural experiments. She is life Whitman, who left the room where the learned astronomer was lecturing to go out under the stars.

"It's so unkind of science
To go and interfere.
I pull a flower from the woods—
A monster with a glass
Computes the stamens in a breath,
And has her in a class." 1

It is not strange that the rigor of a New England winter was too severe for one who loved the Spring. She stood in awe before the hoary hemlock, but she could not say of herself as she did of it,

"The hemlock's nature thrives on cold."

Great as Emily's love for Nature was, her love of a man was greater. Madame Bischani and two or three of her critics believe him to have been Dr. Charles Wadsworth, a young Philadelphia clergyman, already married and the father of two children when Emily first heard him preach. Miss Pollitt introduces Major Hunt, the husband of the novelist Helen Fiske Hunt, later Mrs. Jackson, as the probable lover. Miss Taggard is positive that the object of Emily's intense and unchanging emotion was neither of these men but Mr. Gould, an Amherst graduate and friend of Austin Dickinson.

She has some facts but hardly enough to substantiate her statements.

1. "Complete poems" p. 89
Although his identity is important, it is of far less significance than the fact that the poet loved with all the fervor of a deep, passionate nature. She is great as a poet and mystic, but she is even greater as the epitome of woman-love.

Why so spirited and strong-souled a girl as Emily did not marry her lover is hard to understand. Her refusal to run away with a man who had a moral obligation to his family, is comprehensible. But so long as we question whether or not Dr. Wadsworth was her lover, our bewilderment remains. It is doubtful whether Emily would have permitted herself to become well-acquainted with anyone who had even a slight attraction for her, to say nothing of an overwhelming one, when he was already the husband of someone else. On the other hand, if she permitted the affair to develop at all, could she, with her clarity of thought, fairness of judgment, and tremendous love, have stopped short of the consummation of that love? Madame Biondi says that her moral precepts, her Puritanical background prevented her from doing just that. It is easier to believe that she fell deeply in love after just a comparatively brief acquaintance and that her unusually sensitive heart fixed a few hours as the central ones for all Eternity.

If we believe that George Gould was her lover, it is difficult but not impossible to find a sufficiently strong reason to account for the fact that she said good-bye to him on that quiet afternoon when

"Each bound the other's crucifix;
We gave no other bond."

Could a father's stern authority, his selfish jealousy, have held her any more than they held Elizabeth Barrett when she loved Robert Browning?

The reason for the renunciation remains a partial enigma. But
there is no doubting the love.

"Alter? When the hills do.
Falter? When the sun
Question if his glory
Be the perfect one."

"Doubt me, my dim companion!
Why, God would be content
With but a fraction of the love
Poured thee without a stint."

One of the first questions that a modern reader asks is, "How could a young woman with Emily's intensity of emotion, keen mental insight, and fearlessness of spirit, remain with her father when an importunate lover whom she loved madly, begged her to go away with him? The answer is three-fold. Edward, with the selfishness characteristic of the nineteenth century father, determined that she should remain at home to be his companion. He had no wish to break her spirit, only to bend it to his own desires. Here was mettle more attractive than could be found in his wife, or in his other daughter. His son Austin was easily won. He made her believe that marriage demanded more than a delicate, sensitive girl of her sort could give. This emphasis of his served to bind her to him at the same time that it caused her to invest marriage itself with a kind of romantic glamour that it might not otherwise have held. It was inevitable that her father's attitude should bring about this reaction or distinct aversion. If Emily had had a more scientific background of knowledge, she might never have been influenced in the way that she was.

Secondly, the woman of 1850 unquestioningly accepted the domination of a male, father or husband. Marriage meant the exchange of

1 "Complete Poems" p. 145
the former for the latter. Like other women of her time, Emily accepted her father's dictum as final. When one considers how constantly her strong-minded parent strove to cement the natural bonds between them and how much she loved, admired, respected, and even feared him, one realizes that only a superman could have taken her away from him. It seems fairly likely that George Gould, an intellectual and upright young minister, was the lover. He was endowed with the same fine sensibilities and sensitiveness of nature that she was, but there is nothing to indicate that he was a superman. George Gould lacked the austerity and vigor that marked Edward Dickinson strongly. This lack might have been the reason for his failure to win Emily, who was the essence of feminism. She could love such a man deeply, but could she submit her will to his in the way that she had submitted to her father? A man like Robert Browning might have been able to effect the victory, but not George Gould. One might answer that Charlotte Bronte, under similar conditions, went so far as to marry an inferior man, but the elder Bronte never exercised a spell that was both loving and tyrannical. Moreover, Charlotte was inferior to Emily.

The third reason is that little is known of the courtship. Though there is no doubting the strength of Emily's love nor that the feeling was reciprocal, it is quite probable that she magnified the affair, since she heightened every love and friendship of her life to the highest possible degree. One might not go so far as Arnold Bennett does in saying that nine-tenths of love resides in one's self and the other tenth in the beloved object, but it is possible that Emily read into her lover's attitude something of her own dramatic ecstasy. Without minimizing his devotion to her, it is safe to say that his fervor has not been understated. At least he recovered
sufficiently to enjoy a trip abroad and to marry twelve years after Emily refused him. Her story has lost nothing in the poetic telling.

Like many outwardly quiet people, Emily used dramatic language in depicting the vehemence of inner experience, especially that of shipwreck and war. Over and over again, her life is a gallant little boat going down beneath the gale, and her soul is a battle ground on which fearful conflicts are fought. Her unfulfilled love took on the tragic dignity of a tremendously dramatic spectacle enacted at Calvary.

"Each bound the other's crucifix."

Emily Dickinson's life shows how closely centralized a woman's whole being is. The pivot is love. Physical tasks and mental attitudes derive their significance from the depth of her affection. That any part of one's life can be unaffected by the central emotion is impossible.

"Empty my heart of thee--
Its single artery,
Begin to leave thee out--
Simply extinction's date.

Subtract thyself in play,
And not enough of me
Is left to put away--
'Myself' meant thee." 1

Home is not the place where one's body dwells, but the place where one's beloved is. How little Edward reckoned with the power of love when he thought that he could keep Emily "at home" in Amherst all her life.

"Where thou art--that is Home,
Cashmere or Calvary--the same."

1 "Further Poems" p. 146
Emily accepted the reality of love with the same unquestioning simplicity that she accepted the realities of pain and death. Like them, it defies complete explanation, nor did she seek it.

"Why do I love thee, Sir?"

"Because—"

The wind does not require the grass
To answer wherefore, when

He pass,

She cannot keep her place." 1

How Emily would have scorned the subterfuges, the insincerities and pretenses that make love more of a fascinating game than a reality. A shallow lover would have scorned her for her frank and unabashed avowals of her feeling! It must be recorded to his credit, whoever he was, that he appreciated the verities. Emily's declarations are as forthright and candid as a child's. If love is supposed to be a chessboard pastime in which a woman must study adroit moves, she never knew it. "The whole of me, forever," was not too much for her to offer.

Many of the new women clamoring for the right to preserve their individuality after marriage by living lives of their own and bringing their peculiar talents to fruition quite independently of their husbands would be strangers to Emily, who knew that the sum of one and one can equal more than two when two lives merge completely to form a new entity. Moreover, she gladly acknowledged the superiority of her lover up to the very moment of renunciation.

"Forever at his side to walk
The smaller of the two,
Brain of his brain,
Blood of his blood,
Two lives, one Being, now."

1 "Further Poems" p. 153
Again, she wrote,

"Dropped my fate, a timid pebble
In thy bolder sea,
Ask me, sweet, if I regret it--
Prove myself of thee."

But in the moment that fixed Eternity for her, it was the woman who was the stronger of the two.

"I rose because he sank,
I thought it would be
Opposite.
But when his power bent,
My Soul stood straight.

And so with thews of hymn
And sinew from within,
In ways I knew not that
I knew, till then--
I lifted him."

Perhaps if this had not been true, there would have been no ultimate separation.

The intensity of Emily's love is not more impressive than the suddenness and the finality of it. There is no gradual ripening of comradeship and affection to love. Love comes

"As lightning on
A landscape
Exhibits sheets of place
Not yet suspected but
For flash and bolt and suddenness."

It springs full-grown from the forehead of Jove. There was no questioning in timid, girlish fashion whether this was life's

1 "Further Poems" p. 93
supreme experience or not. Just as instinct reported the friend in the room with her to be Immortality, instinct told her that this was "the drought of life" for which she must pay "the market-price, precisely, an existence." There was no haggling over the cost. Sara Teasdale writes,

"For one white singing hour of peace,
Give all you have been or can be."

Emily wrote,

"They weighed me, dust by dust,
They balanced film by film,
Then handed me my being's worth—
A single dream of Heaven." 1

This was the climax of years of suppression in the Dickinson household. This was the dream for which the romantic young reader of "Jane Eyre" had been waiting.

"God would be content
With but a fraction of the love
Poured thee without a stint."

For one so strictly brought up, there was something little short of blasphemy in these lines:

"I love thee; then how well
Is that?
As well as Jesus?
Prove it me
That He loved men
As I love thee." 2

When she reached Heaven, her lover's face would put out Jesus. She defied the angels in Paradise to love their God as well as she loved the elected one.

If a modern young woman were to write so constantly of the
1 "Further Poems" p. 135
2 "Further Poems" p. 168
difference between her state of girlhood and that of womanhood, with emphasis on the fact that she is woman now, "wife without the sign," her statements might be construed to mean that she actually became her lover's wife.

"I gave myself to him,
And took himself for pay.
The solemn contract of a life
Was ratified this way." 1

But Emily accomplished all the rites of marriage in imagination, thus establishing them as fact. At least, no biographer has been bold enough to assume that the words "I'm wife now; I've finished that, that other-state," should be taken literally.

In speaking of the gifts with which she would dower him, she said,

"It cannot be my spirit,
For that was thine before;
I ceded all of dust I knew." 2

The thought of her lover was always uppermost in her consciousness, whether she was tending flowers for her bright absentee, wondering how many times a day he was thinking of her, or dwelling on a union with him beyond the grave.

"I live with him, I see his face,
I live with him, I hear his voice."

She found parallels in Nature for her merging with the beloved personality.

"My river runs to thee;
Blue sea, wilt welcome me?"

She was the flower on his breast, the little brook in his heart, the sea obedient to his moon, the careless fingers that let slip a gem until she had only the "amethyst remembrance" left.

1 "Complete Poems" p. 159
2 "Further Poems" p. 146
Her language in writing of love, as of other things, is highly figurative and dramatic. Love

"Deals one imperial thunderbolt
That scalps your naked soul."

A second affair in Emily's life would have been unthinkable. Hers was the strictly monogamous heart; to care for another would have been to destroy the perfection of the one love. The possibility of loving twice did not occur to her.

"One Life of so much consequence
That I for it would pay
My Soul's entire income
In ceaseless salary." 1

And in a similar poem,

"All forgot for recollecting
Just a paltry One."

In spite of the fact that Emily refused to let Mary Lyon lead her into the fold, many of her religious ideas were orthodox enough. She hoped that she would not disgrace her loved one when they both stood in

"The Heaven you know to understand,
That you be not ashamed
Of me, in Christ's bright audience
Upon the further hand." 2

In a longer poem she spoke of the union of the fleshless lovers after a long parting. She visualized the marriage of their two spirits; only Emily could do that.

"Was bridal e'er like this,
A paradise, the host,
And cherubim and seraphim
The most familiar guest."

1 "Further Poems" p. 148
2 "Further Poems" p. 170
Over and over again, she said that heaven would be any place where she could dwell with her beloved, whereas any place where he was not would be hell though her own name were recorded above. Heaven would be the place where she "might dwell timidly" with him.

"Of all the souls that stand create
I have elected one."

She did not hesitate to say that life had only one great meaning for her—Love. She put away all the activities that fill the lives of other people, to be alone with the great reality that she did know and the other of which she constantly dreamed, the thought of marriage. Both wild nights and calm days made her want to be with him. She was proud almost as a martyr is proud.

"But I would not exchange the bolt
For all the rest of life."

Her pain was sweeter to her than any pleasures unrelated to love could possibly be.

"To lose thee, sweeter than to gain
All other hearts I know.
'Tis true the drought is destitute,
But then I had the dew." 1

And similarly:

"Proud of my broken heart since
thou didst break it."

She wrote:

"I've got an arrow here;
Loving the hand that sent it,
I the dart revere." 2

One lesson that life taught her was this; that we pay dearly for our ecstasies.

"For each ecstatic instant 1. "Complete Poems" p. 169
We must an anguish pay

1. "Complete Poems" p. 171
In keen and quivering ratio
To the ecstasy."

She summarized her pain, her pride, and her love in these lines:

"Title divine is mine
The Wife without
The Sign.
Acute degree
Conferred on me--
Empress of Calvary." 1

It is not difficult to find Emily's creed. She stated it quite simply in this well-known little poem:

"If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again.
I shall not live in vain." 2

We trust that "the gentleman in the white robes has heard the little hand that knocked" and let Emily into the heaven for which she needed neither chart nor map.

1 "Complete Poems" p. 176
2 "Complete Poems" p. 6
Summary

Emily Dickinson, the greatest woman poet that America has produced, has been recognized for her true worth only within the past year or two. Part of the recognition has been due to the celebration of the centennial of her birth in 1930; part has been the result of increased interest since the publication of "Further Poems" in 1929. More significant than either of these reasons for her present popularity is the realization of present-day readers that her spirit and her attitude towards life mark her as distinctly modern. Her psychological self-revelations, her questioning of the God that was her neighbor, and her experience of an unfathomable love set her apart from the women of her own time and establish her as one of us. Her terse and vivid expression of human truths and her "ability to see life steadily and see it whole" place her among the immortals.

The story of her early life is not unlike that of many well-bred girls in small New England towns in the middle of the nineteenth century. She enjoyed contacts with other young people, out of-door life, and romantic books read surreptitiously lest her stern father discover her becoming acquainted with literature that was not Biblical.

With the death of her tutor, Leonard Humphrey, she gained a swift insight into grief. Both the friendship and the separation prepared her in a measure for her love for and her separation from her lover, who was probably George Gould, an Amherst student and later a Worcester clergyman. After she had renounced him in obedience to her father's desire to keep her at home, her emotional life became so intensified and her daily existence so simplified that her surcharged emotions overflowed into intellectual channels and found an ultimate outlet in poetry. The war challenged her religious faith; daily she rebuilt her belief in a religion whose upper structures tottered
but whose foundation was firm.

Emily Dickinson is the only American woman poet who belongs to all time rather than to any particular period. Whether one considers her as a cultured woman, an interpreter of Nature, or the epitome of woman love, she is truly great. She became acquainted with herself and with God. In her attitude towards Nature, she was as sensuous as Keats, as sympathetic as Burns, and as pantheistic as Wordsworth and Emerson.

All readers of Emily Dickinson's love poems have been curious as to the identity of the man who inspired them. Although some critics, including Madame Bianchi, have believed him to be the Philadelphia clergyman, Dr. Charles Wadsworth, and Miss Pollitt has stated that he must have been Major Hunt, it seems more probable that George Gould was her lover. We know that Edward Dickinson wished to keep his daughter at home; from the little that we can learn of Mr. Gould's personality, it is evident that he was less powerful than Emily's father was. Emily, in the fervor of her own emotion, may have dramatized the courtship. However, it is impossible to ascribe her failure to run away with her lover to any adequate motive. The fact remains that Emily loved deeply. Beyond that love, she had but one creed, and that was one of simplest service.

Emily Dickinson's message to the world has at last been read with reverence and understanding by twentieth century admirers who have learned to look beyond the eccentricities of her verse and personality to the heart and mind of a genius.
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