APPENDIX

“ Nature” is what we see –

“Nature” is what we see –

The hill – the afternoon --

Squirrel – Eclipse – the bumble bee –

Nay – nature is Heaven –

Nature is what we hear –

The bobolink – the sea –

Thunder – the cricket –

Nay – nature is harmony –

Nature is what we know –

Yet have no art to say –

So important our wisdom is

To her simplicity

“ A bird came down the walk”

A bird came down the walk:

He did not know I saw;

He bit an angle-worm in halves

And ate the fellow, raw.

And then he drank a dew

From a convenient grass,

And then hopped sidewise to the wall

To let a beetle pass.

He glanced with rapid eyes

That hurried all abroad,--

They looked like frightened beads, I thought;

He stirred his velvet head

Like one in danger; cautious,

I offered him a crumb,

And he unrolled his feathers

And rowed him softer home

Than oars divide the ocean,

Too silver for a seam,

Or butterflies, off banks of noon,

Leap, splashless, as they swim.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson

American poet

in full Emily Elizabeth Dickinson

born Dec. 10, 1830, Amherst, Mass., U.S.

died May 15, 1886, Amherst

Main

American lyric poet who lived in seclusion and commanded a singular brilliance of style and

integrity of vision. With Walt Whitman, Dickinson is widely considered to be one of the two

leading 19th-century American poets.

Only 10 of Emily Dickinson’s nearly 1,800 poems are known to have been published in her

lifetime. Devoted to private pursuits, she sent hundreds of poems to friends and correspondents while apparently keeping the greater number to herself. She habitually worked in verse forms suggestive of hymns and ballads, with lines of three or four stresses.

Her unusual off-rhymes have been seen as both experimental and influenced by the 18thcentury

hymnist Isaac Watts. She freely ignored the usual rules of versification and even of grammar, and in the intellectual content of her work she likewise proved exceptionally bold

and original. Her verse is distinguished by its epigrammatic compression, haunting personal

voice, enigmatic brilliance, and lack of high polish.

Early years

The second of three children, Dickinson grew up in moderate privilege and with strong local

and religious attachments. For her first nine years she resided in a mansion built by her paternal grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, who had helped found Amherst College but

then went bankrupt shortly before her birth. Her father, Edward Dickinson, was a forceful

and prosperous Whig lawyer who served as treasurer of the college and was elected to one
term in Congress. Her mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson, from the leading family in nearby
Monson, was an introverted wife and hardworking housekeeper; her letters seem equally
inexpressive and quirky. Both parents were loving but austere, and Emily became closely
attached to her brother, Austin, and sister, Lavinia. Never marrying, the two sisters remained
at home, and when their brother married, he and his wife established their own household
next door. The highly distinct and even eccentric personalities developed by the three siblings
seem to have mandated strict limits to their intimacy. “If we had come up for the first time
from two wells,” Emily once said of Lavinia, “her astonishment would not be greater at some
things I say.” Only after the poet’s death did Lavinia and Austin realize how dedicated she
was to her art.

As a girl, Emily was seen as frail by her parents and others and was often kept home from

school. She attended the coeducational Amherst Academy, where she was recognized by
teachers and students alike for her prodigious abilities in composition. She also excelled in
other subjects emphasized by the school, most notably Latin and the sciences. A class in
botany inspired her to assemble an herbarium containing a large number of pressed plants
identified by their Latin names. She was fond of her teachers, but when she left home to attend Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (now Mount Holyoke College) in nearby South Hadley, she found the school's institutional tone uncongenial. Mount Holyoke's strict rules
and invasive religious practices, along with her own homesickness and growing rebelliousness, help explain why she did not return for a second year.

At home as well as at school and church, the religious faith that ruled the poet's early years
was evangelical Calvinism, a faith centred on the belief that humans are born totally depraved
and can be saved only if they undergo a life-altering conversion in which they accept the vicarious sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Questioning this tradition soon after leaving Mount Holyoke, Dickinson was to be the only member of her family who did not experience conversion or join Amherst's First Congregational Church. Yet she seems to have retained a

belief in the soul's immortality or at least to have transmuted it into a Romantic quest for the transcendent and absolute. One reason her mature religious views elude specification is that she took no interest in creedal or doctrinal definition. In this she was influenced by both the Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the mid-century tendencies of liberal Protestant orthodoxy. These influences pushed her toward a more symbolic understanding of religious truth and helped shape her vocation as poet.

Development as a poet

Although Dickinson had begun composing verse by her late teens, few of her early poems are extant. Among them are two of the burlesque "Valentines"—the exuberantly inventive expressions of affection and esteem she sent to friends of her youth. Two other poems dating from the first half of the 1850s draw a contrast between the world as it is and a more peaceful alternative, variously eternity or a serene imaginative order. All her known juvenilia were sent to friends and engage in a striking play of visionary fancies, a direction in which she was encouraged by the popular, sentimental book of essays Reveries of a Bachelor: Or a Book of

the Heart by Ik. Marvel (the pseudonym of Donald Grant Mitchell). Dickinson's acts of fancy
and reverie, however, were more intricately social than those of Marvel's bachelor, uniting
the pleasures of solitary mental play, performance for an audience, and intimate communion
with another. It may be because her writing began with a strong social impetus that her later
solitude did not lead to a meaningless hermeticism.

Until Dickinson was in her mid-20s, her writing mostly took the form of letters, and a surprising number of those that she wrote from age 11 onward have been preserved. Sent to
her brother, Austin, or to friends of her own sex, especially Abiah Root, Jane Humphrey, and
Susan Gilbert (who would marry Austin), these generous communications overflow with humour, anecdote, invention, and sombre reflection. In general, Dickinson seems to have
given and demanded more from her correspondents than she received. On occasion she
interpreted her correspondents' laxity in replying as evidence of neglect or even betrayal.

Indeed, the loss of friends, whether through death or cooling interest, became a basic pattern

for Dickinson. Much of her writing, both poetic and epistolary, seems premised on a feeling
of abandonment and a matching effort to deny, overcome, or reflect on a sense of solitude.
Dickinson's closest friendships usually had a literary flavour. She was introduced to the poetry of Ralph Waldo Emerson by one of her father's law students, Benjamin F. Newton,
and to that of Elizabeth Barrett Browning by Susan Gilbert and Henry Vaughan Emmons, a
gifted college student. Two of Barrett Browning's works, A Vision of Poets, describing the
pantheon of poets, and Aurora Leigh, on the development of a female poet, seem to have
played a formative role for Dickinson, validating the idea of female greatness and stimulating
her ambition. Though she also corresponded with Josiah G. Holland, a popular writer of the
time, he counted for less with her than his appealing wife, Elizabeth, a lifelong friend and the
recipient of many affectionate letters.
In 1855 Dickinson traveled to Washington, D.C., with her sister and father, who was then

ending his term as U.S. representative. On the return trip the sisters made an extended stay in
Philadelphia, where it is thought the poet heard the preaching of Charles Wadsworth, a fascinating Presbyterian minister whose pulpit oratory suggested (as a colleague put it) “years
of conflict and agony.” Seventy years later, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, the poet’s niece, claimed that Emily had fallen in love with Wadsworth, who was married, and then grandly
renounced him. The story is too highly coloured for its details to be credited; certainly, there
is no evidence the minister returned the poet’s love. Yet it is true that a correspondence arose
between the two and that Wadsworth visited her in Amherst about 1860 and again in 1880.
After his death in 1882, Dickinson remembered him as “my Philadelphia,” “my dearest earthly friend,” and “my Shepherd from ‘Little Girl’hood.”
Always fastidious, Dickinson began to restrict her social activity in her early 20s, staying home from communal functions and cultivating intense epistolary relationships with a reduced number of correspondents. In 1855, leaving the large and much-loved house (since
razed) in which she had lived for 15 years, the 25-year-old woman and her family moved

back to the dwelling associated with her first decade: the Dickinson mansion on Main Street
in Amherst. Her home for the rest of her life, this large brick house, still standing, has become a favourite destination for her admirers. She found the return profoundly disturbing,
and when her mother became incapacitated by a mysterious illness that lasted from 1855 to
1859, both daughters were compelled to give more of themselves to domestic pursuits. Various events outside the home—a bitter Norcross family lawsuit, the financial collapse of
the local railroad that had been promoted by the poet's father, and a powerful religious revival that renewed the pressure to "convert"—made the years 1857 and 1858 deeply troubling for Dickinson and promoted her further withdrawal.

Mature career

In summer 1858, at the height of this period of obscure tension, Dickinson began assembling
her manuscript-books. She made clean copies of her poems on fine quality stationery and
then sewed small bundles of these sheets together at the fold. Over the next seven years she
created 40 such booklets and several unsewn sheaves, and altogether they contained about

800 poems. No doubt she intended to arrange her work in a convenient form, perhaps for her
own use in sending poems to friends. Perhaps the assemblage was meant to remain private,
like her earlier herbarium. Or perhaps, as implied in a poem of 1863, This is my letter to the
world, she anticipated posthumous publication. Because she left no instructions regarding the
disposition of her manuscript-books, her ultimate purpose in assembling them can only be
conjectured.

Dickinson sent more poems to her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, a cultivated reader,
than to any other known correspondent. Repeatedly professing eternal allegiance, these
poems often imply that there was a certain distance between the two—that the sister-in-law
was felt to be haughty, remote, or even incomprehensible. Yet Susan admired the poetry's wit
and verve and offered the kind of personally attentive audience Dickinson craved. On one
occasion, Susan's dissatisfaction with a poem, Safe in their alabaster chambers, resulted in

the drafting of alternative stanzas. Susan was an active hostess, and her home was the venue
at which Dickinson met a few friends, most importantly Samuel Bowles, publisher and editor
of the influential Springfield Republican. Gregarious, captivating, and unusually liberal on
the question of women's careers, Bowles had a high regard for Dickinson's poems,
publishing (without her consent) seven of them during her lifetime—more than appeared in
any other outlet. From 1859 to 1862 she sent him some of her most intense and confidential
communications, including the daring poem Title divine is mine, whose speaker proclaims
that she is now a "Wife," but of a highly unconventional type.

In those years Dickinson experienced a painful and obscure personal crisis, partly of a romantic nature. The abject and pleading drafts of her second and third letters to the unidentified person she called "Master" are probably related to her many poems about a loved but distant person, usually male. There has been much speculation about the identity of
this individual. One of the first candidates was George Henry Gould, the recipient in 1850 of
a prose Valentine from Dickinson. Some have contended that Master was a woman, possibly

Kate Scott Anthon or Susan Dickinson. Richard Sewall's 1974 biography makes the case for
Samuel Bowles. All such claims have rested on a partial examination of surviving documents
and collateral evidence. Since it is now believed that the earliest draft to Master predates her
friendship with Bowles, he cannot have been the person. On balance, Charles Wadsworth and
possibly Gould remain the most likely candidates. Whoever the person was, Master's failure
to return Dickinson's affection—together with Susan's absorption in her first childbirth and
Bowles's growing invalidism—contributed to a piercing and ultimate sense of distress. In a
letter, Dickinson described her lonely suffering as a "terror—since September—[that] I could
tell to none." Instead of succumbing to anguish, however, she came to view it as the sign of a
special vocation, and it became the basis of an unprecedented creativity. A poem that seems
to register this life-restoring act of resistance begins "The zeroes taught us phosphorus,"
meaning that it is in absolute cold and nothingness that true brilliance originates.
Though Dickinson wrote little about the American Civil War, which was then raging, her

awareness of its multiplied tragedies seems to have empowered her poetic drive. As she confided to her cousins in Boston, apropos of wartime bereavements, “Every day life feels mightier, and what we have the power to be, more stupendous.” In the hundreds of poems Dickinson composed during the war, a movement can be discerned from the expression of immediate pain or exultation to the celebration of achievement and self-command. Building on her earlier quest for human intimacy and obsession with heaven, she explored the tragic ironies of human desire, such as fulfillment denied, the frustrated search for the absolute within the mundane, and the terrors of internal dissolution. She also articulated a profound sense of female subjectivity, expressing what it means to be subordinate, secondary, or not in control. Yet as the war proceeded, she also wrote with growing frequency about self-reliance, imperviousness, personal triumph, and hard-won liberty. The perfect transcendence she had formerly associated with heaven was now attached to a vision of supreme artistry.

In April 1862, about the time Wadsworth left the East Coast for a pastorate in San Francisco,
Dickinson sought the critical advice of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, whose witty article of
advice to writers, A Letter to a Young Contributor, had just appeared in The Atlantic Monthly. Higginson was known as a writer of delicate nature essays and a crusader for women's rights. Enclosing four poems, Dickinson asked for his opinion of her verse—whether or not it was "alive." The ensuing correspondence lasted for years, with the poet
sending her "preceptor," as she called him, many more samples of her work. In addition to
seeking an informed critique from a professional but not unsympathetic man of letters, she
was reaching out at a time of accentuated loneliness. "You were not aware that you saved my
Life," she confided years later.
Dickinson's last trips from Amherst were in 1864 and 1865, when she shared her cousins
Louisa and Frances Norcross's boardinghouse in Cambridge and underwent a course of
treatment with the leading Boston ophthalmologist. She described her symptoms as an aching

in her eyes and a painful sensitivity to light. Of the two posthumous diagnoses, exotropia (a kind of strabismus, the inability of one eye to align with the other) and anterior uveitis (inflammation of the uvea, a part of the iris), the latter seems more likely. In 1869 Higginson invited the poet to Boston to attend a literary salon. The terms she used in declining his invitation—“I do not cross my Father’s ground to any House or town”—make clear her refusal by that time to leave home and also reveal her sense of paternal order. When Higginson visited her the next year, he recorded his vivid first impression of her “plain” features, “exquisitely” neat attire, “childlike” manner, and loquacious and exhausting brilliance. He was “glad not to live near her.”

In her last 15 years Dickinson averaged 35 poems a year and conducted her social life mainly through her chiselled and often sibylline written messages. Her father’s sudden death in 1874 caused a profound and persisting emotional upheaval yet eventually led to a greater openness, self-possession, and serenity. She repaired an 11-year breach with Samuel Bowles and made friends with Maria Whitney, a teacher of modern languages at Smith College, and Helen Hunt Jackson, poet and author of the novel Ramona (1884). Dickinson resumed contact with

Wadsworth, and from about age 50 she conducted a passionate romance with Otis Phillips
Lord, an elderly judge on the supreme court of Massachusetts. The letters she apparently sent
Lord reveal her at her most playful, alternately teasing and confiding. In declining an erotic
advance or his proposal of marriage, she asked, “Dont you know you are happiest while I
withhold and not confer—dont you know that ‘No’ is the wildest word we consign to Language?”
After Dickinson’s aging mother was incapacitated by a stroke and a broken hip, caring for her
at home made large demands on the poet’s time and patience. After her mother died in 1882,
Dickinson summed up the relationship in a confidential letter to her Norcross cousins: “We
were never intimate Mother and Children while she was our Mother—but…when she became
our Child, the Affection came.” The deaths of Dickinson’s friends in her last years—Bowles
in 1878, Wadsworth in 1882, Lord in 1884, and Jackson in 1885—left her feeling terminally

alone. But the single most shattering death, occurring in 1883, was that of her eight-year-old
nephew next door, the gifted and charming Gilbert Dickinson. Her health broken by this culminating tragedy, she ceased seeing almost everyone, apparently including her sister-inlaw.

The poet died in 1886, when she was 55 years old. The immediate cause of death was a
stroke. The attending physician attributed this to Bright's disease, but a modern posthumous
diagnosis points to severe primary hypertension as the underlying condition.

Assessment

Dickinson's exact wishes regarding the publication of her poetry are in dispute. When Lavinia found the manuscript-books, she decided the poems should be made public and asked
Susan to prepare an edition. Susan failed to move the project forward, however, and after two
years Lavinia turned the manuscript-books over to Mabel Loomis Todd, a local family friend,
who energetically transcribed and selected the poems and also enlisted the aid of Thomas
Wentworth Higginson in editing. A complicating circumstance was that Todd was conducting

an affair with Susan's husband, Austin. When Poems by Emily Dickinson appeared in 1890,
it drew widespread interest and a warm welcome from the eminent American novelist and
critic William Dean Howells, who saw the verse as a signal expression of a distinctively American sensibility. But Susan, who was well aware of her husband's ongoing affair with
Todd, was outraged at what she perceived as Lavinia's betrayal and Todd's effrontery. The
enmity between Susan and Todd, and later between their daughters, Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Millicent Todd Bingham (each of whom edited selections of Dickinson's work),
had a pernicious effect on the presentation of Emily Dickinson's work. Her poetic manuscripts are divided between two primary collections: the poems in Bingham's possession went to Amherst College Library, and those in Bianchi's hands to Harvard University's Houghton Library. The acrimonious relationship between the two families has
affected scholarly interpretation of Dickinson's work into the 21st century.
In editing Dickinson's poems in the 1890s, Todd and Higginson invented titles and regularized diction, grammar, metre, and rhyme. The first scholarly editions of Dickinson's
poems and letters, by Thomas H. Johnson, did not appear until the 1950s. A much improved

edition of the complete poems was brought out in 1998 by R.W. Franklin. A reliable edition
of the letters is not yet available.

In spite of her "modernism," Dickinson’s verse drew little interest from the first generation of
“High Modernists.” Hart Crane and Allen Tate were among the first leading writers to register her greatness, followed in the 1950s by Elizabeth Bishop and others. The New Critics
also played an important role in establishing her place in the modern canon. From the beginning, however, Dickinson has strongly appealed to many ordinary or unschooled readers. Her unmistakable voice, private yet forthright—"I’m Nobody! Who are you? / Are
you—Nobody—too?"—establishes an immediate connection. Readers respond, too, to the
impression her poems convey of a haunting private life, one marked by extremes of deprivation and refined ecstasies. At the same time, her rich abundance—her great range of
feeling, her supple expressiveness—testifies to an intrinsic poetic genius. Widely translated
into Japanese, Italian, French, German, and many other languages, Dickinson has begun to
strike readers as the one American lyric poet who belongs in the pantheon with Sappho,

Catullus, Sa□dī, the Shakespeare of the sonnets, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Arthur Rimbaud.

Editions

The standard edition of the poems is the three-volume variorum edition, The Poems of Emily

Dickinson: Variorum Edition (1998), edited by R.W. Franklin. He also edited a two-volume

work, The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson (1981), which provides facsimiles of the poems in their original groupings. The Letters of Emily Dickinson, in three volumes edited

by Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (1958), was reissued in one volume in 1986, and

it is still the standard source for the poet's letters. Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson (1998), edited by Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith, is a selection of the poet's correspondence with her sister-in-law. Facsimiles of the letters to "Master" and Otis Phillips Lord are presented in The Master Letters of Emily Dickinson (1986), edited by R.W. Franklin, and Emily Dickinson's Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing (1995), edited by Marta L. Werner. Emily Dickinson's Reception in the 1890s: A Documentary History (1989), edited by Willis J. Buckingham, reprints all known reviews from the first decade of publication.

Alfred Habegger

THE POETRY OF DICKINSON

Type of work: Poetry

Author: Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

First published: Poems, 1890; Poems: Second Series, 1891; Poems: Third Series, 1896; The Single Hound, 1914; Further Poems, 1929; Unpublished Poems, 1936; Bolts of Melody: New Poems, 1945; The Poems of Emily Dickinson (edited by Thomas H. Johnson), 1955; The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson (edited by Thomas H. Johnson), 1960.

Few of America's great poets waited so long to achieve recognition as did Emily Dickinson. Though she wrote over 1,775 poems, during her lifetime only seven were published, and those anonymously. When she died, few beyond her circle of family and friends had heard of her, yet nearly seventy years after her death she was critically acclaimed as one of the leading poets of her time. Along with Walt Whitman, Dickinson is credited with bringing American poetry into the twentieth century, for her highly unusual style and her passion for expressing the truth helped to free nineteenth century verse from its limitations of image, meter, and rhyme.

To neighbors in her hometown of Amherst, Massachusetts, Dickinson was an eccentric figure, the spinster who always dressed in white and who, after her early thirties, never ventured beyond the family home or garden. She rarely received a visitor, and when she did,
she would hide upstairs and sometimes send down a note or poem to her guest. Some biographers suggest that the reports of her reclusive life-style may be somewhat exaggerated,
but it is nonetheless clear that Dickinson preferred to socialize through letters and to confide
her deepest thoughts in her poems. One of Dickinson's long-time correspondents was Thomas
Wentworth Higginson, poetry critic for The Atlantic Monthly, to whom she initially sent a few poems along with the earnest question whether he found the poems alive. His answer that
there was life in the poetry she claimed had saved her life; yet Higginson, a conventional
critic with traditional tastes, was generally lukewarm in his praise. He found her poems strange and unpolished, and his reservations may have contributed to her reluctance to have
them published.
After Dickinson's death her sister discovered hundreds of poems in Emily's room, many hand-sewn into small booklike packets. Lavinia Dickinson persuaded Higginson and a family

friend, Mabel Loomis Todd, to published the poems, which they did in 1890, 1891, and 1896.

It is clear, however, that Dickinson's editors had no conception of the value of her work, for they freely made changes to it, smoothing out rhymes and meter, fixing punctuation, and revising diction—in short, making the poems more conventional. Her books sold widely but met with little critical success. Friends and relatives brought out more editions over the years, but each persisted in the practice of "correcting" her work. It was not until the 1950s, after her estate was given to Harvard University, that through the painstaking scholarship of Thomas H. Johnson, a more authentic version finally reached the public. Though some controversy still exists about the dates of composition and Dickinson's final editing choices on some poems, Johnson's edition The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson (1960), along with its system for numbering the poems, is generally accepted as the standard.

Approaching Dickinson's work, what she called her "letter to the World," one should bear in mind the words of the critic Allen Tate: "All pity for Miss Dickinson's 'starved life' is

misdirected. Her life was one of the richest and deepest ever lived on this continent." The
evidence for this richness and depth, of course, is her poems. Though she often wrote about
small and common things, her reach was always broad and high, always bringing her to confront, with searching honesty, the larger universal themes: nature, love, death and immortality, and God. What looked unpolished to her contemporaries— the sometimes awkward phrasing, the skewed rhymes, the short staccato bursts set off by dashes rather than
the more grammatically polite comma—reveal a passionate thinker, a mind that would not
rest, that was continually seeking answers, and for whom poems were not a polite parlor
game but rather a lifeline. She searched for truth and knew that the nature of truth made it
impossible to nail it down once and for all; one had to nail it down a hundred times. This is
why it is difficult to summarize "Dickinson's themes," such as her view of death, because for
Dickinson, trying to understand death, or love, or God, was a continuous quest. If something
was understood, why would she need to write about it again and again?

This passion to understand accounts for the sheer volume of Dickinson's work, as well as its occasional unevenness. Generally it is some uncontrollable feeling, such as the pain of loss, or a mind-numbing despair, or even an ecstatic joy, that tornadolike sets Dickinson's poetic faculties into motion. Often her subject is so volatile that it cannot even be named, a fact reflected in her work by a frequent use of the pronoun "it." Within those poems attempting to define the "it," the argument often proceeds like a riddle, developed with a confusion of imagery. It is as though she gathers words like the flying debris at the outer edge of a storm—mixing her metaphors and throwing words together in unlikely pairs—to give her restless subject at least some shape; or, she mixes words just as various pigments are added to a base of paint, and shaken, to reach an appropriate, exact color. The evidence of Dickinson's various drafts and revisions confirms that word choices that seemed careless to her first critics were actually quite carefully made. The brevity of Dickinson's poems makes them appear simple, but reading them actually requires careful attention, often to what is not said.

One of Dickinson's strategies is to make an unstated shift in perspective; she will frequently

investigate her subject by turning all around it, considering it from differing attitudes and points of view. This approach is manifest in the poems as a sometimes unresolvable tension
of opposites, an imbalance, a seeming resolution and then dissolution, a dance between what
can and cannot be faced or named. The destination of this process, so turbulently awakened,
is always to penetrate to the center of this storm, a place of mastery and calm, where meaning
can be distilled. Her passion for meaning is what made this reclusive spinster such a literary
revolutionary: Dickinson had to bend language and form in order to get at the truth. "Tell all
the Truth," she admonished, "but tell it slant."
Dickinson's truth is primarily an inner one. She was one of the first American poets to carefully map the interior landscape of feeling, exploring the terrain of the subconscious before it was "discovered" decades later by Freud. Even in those poems that are descriptions
of external reality, such as her nature poems, the inner life still carries the greater force. Her
well-known "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" (#986) culminates most powerfully when it shifts its focus from the snake, the object observed, to the observer, who with "a tighter breathing" is feeling "Zero at the Bone." "There's a certain Slant of light" (#258), a

description of a winter afternoon, projects the poet's despair onto the landscape; in this Dickinson is a forerunner of the twentieth century Imagists, creating imagery that is not ornamental but intrinsic. In poems like "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (#280) Dickinson openly explores the mind, detailing the disturbing loss of reason, when feeling has overtaken
sense.

Dickinson's love poems reveal a passion that belies the quiet facts of her biography. They
support the speculation that if Dickinson withdrew from society it was not because she was
indifferent to it; rather, it was because she felt her attachments to friends and lovers so deeply. There has been much speculation about the identity of the man for whom Dickinson's
unrequited love occasioned an outpouring of poems during her "flood years" of the early 1860's. Many believe it was Charles Wadsworth, a married preacher from Philadelphia who
left for California in 1862. Of course knowing whom Dickinson wrote about is ultimately much less significant than the poetry he inspired, poems ranging from the exuberant "Wild
Nights—Wild Nights!" (#249) to the despairing "I cannot live with you" (#640).

The subject which holds by far the greatest fascination for Dickinson is death, about which

she wrote over five hundred poems. Sometimes she considers it from the point of view of the
bereaved survivors, as in "The last Night that She lived" (#1100) and "There's been a Death,
in the Opposite House" (#389). Other times she looks at it from the point of view of the person dying, as in "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" (#465) and "Because I could not stop
for Death" (#712). The latter poem's personification of Death as a gentleman caller demonstrates her typically atypical approach. Hers is not so much a morbid fascination as it is
an intense and fearless curiosity. At times she sees death as a horrifying cessation, but at
others it is a blissful release envied by the living. Death is for Dickinson the ultimate punctuation mark, which, appearing at the end of life's sentence, gives it all its meaning. It is
a gateway through which one passes to a perhaps even greater type of existence. It is also a
mystery about which one can never be completely convinced, which is perhaps why she keeps probing. This restless questioning also characterizes her religious poetry, which vacillates between faith in God and doubt, as when the initial conviction in "I know that He
exists" (#338) unravels during the stanzas that follow.

Dickinson also wrote poems about her craft, among them #675, "Essential Oils":

Essential Oils—are wrung—

The Attar from the Rose

Be not expressed by Suns—alone—

It is the gift of Screws—

The General Rose—decay

But this—in Lady's Drawer

Make Summer—When the Lady lie

In Ceaseless Rosemary—

"Essential Oils" is about poetry, but more specifically, it represents the mastery of a particular
question important not only to Dickinson but, in varying degrees, to all poets: the choice between the life of the common man, with its sphere of social relationships, and the life of the
poet, with its demanding solitude. In "Essential Oils" the choice is distilled, and embodied, in
the metaphor of the rose. There is the rose that blooms in a day, whose fragrance is drawn out
of it by the attentions of the sun. and the rose that is taken from the garden, so that its essence
may be concentrated into an enduring perfume. There is no doubt in the poem about which
rose Dickinson prefers. She has passed that stage of the argument, has reached the still center

of meaning, and so sustains throughout the conviction that begins the poem.

"Essential Oils," the volatile essence that imparts the characteristic odor of a plant, represents
that very nature of a thing, which is incapable of removal without destroying the thing itself
or its character. Poems, the volatile essence of the poet, become of life-and-death importance;
without them the poet ceases to be herself. This necessity justifies the process by which they
are gotten: They "are wrung," a verb that implies physical and emotional pressure, the process of suffering and pain. This is the poet's secret: Art "is the gift of Screws." As a metaphor for the poetic process, "screws" is an image of remarkable compression. It suggests
not only the flower press but also the pain of the medieval torture device, and as a reference
to the tools of the carpenter, it implies discipline and craftsmanship as well. The image also
suggests, in its spiral shape narrowing to a point, an emblem for the poet's mind turning around a subject until it reaches its center, until meaning is screwed down. This process is
compared to that other one which draws the odor from a bloom, the expressions of "Suns,"

which for Dickinson is a metaphor for the masculine principle, hence symbolizing the warm
attentions of suitors; thus the essence of the rose becomes an image for a woman's sexual
potential. A woman can express her being through a union with a man; but the poet—"alone"—realizes her identity through the creative process.

"The General Rose" is the common rose, different from the rose of the poet. "General" carries
the connotation of military ranking, an ironic reference to the command a wife exerts over her
household and the social superiority she may enjoy. In outward form, the first line of this stanza is very similar to the opening line of the first stanza: A modified noun is separated by a
dash from its verb. Whereas "Essential" seems to justify and balance the pain in "wrung,"
however, in this line the emotional scales are tipped, and there is nothing in the "General
Rose" to redeem it from "decay," the most negatively charged word in the poem. "But this"
redirects the argument to the strength of the poet, her attar, the poems and fascicles she keeps
in her bureau drawer. "Lady's drawer" as an image of limited space also suggests the artistic

isolation and confinement that are necessary to preserving the poet's essence. The scents of
poems "Make Summer"—summer for Dickinson being an emblem of fruition, when the potential of nature is realized. This fact masters death for the poet so that it can be described
with a gentle euphemism, "When the Lady lie/ In Ceaseless Rosemary." Rosemary has long
been associated with the power of memory and was often used to scent coffins. The poet
lying in "Ceaseless Rosemary" will not be forgotten after her death; the line is a prophetic
description of Dickinson's belated but nonetheless powerful impact on American letters.