25 After a few nights in the hospital and two difficult months my wife's ribs have mended. And I did make it to the top of Mount Tripyramid that day, despite the storm that splattered the rocks and sent us scurrying for rain gear. For I was not alone: my wife was there, and two of my brothers, and two young friends who hauled me, bloody and bowed, to the summit.

But this is not a story of triumph over adversity. The man chased by tigers does not win in the end, at least not Hollywood fashion. In Christian theology we fall so that we can rise again later. That's a good story, too, but not the one I'm telling today. I would rather, at least for now, find victory in the falling itself, in learning how to live fully, consciously in the presence of mystery. When we learn to fall we learn to accept the vulnerability that is our human endowment, the cost of walking upright on the earth.

In the northern part of our town there's a stream that comes down out of the mountains, and at one place that we call the Pothole it makes a pool of emerald clear water ten feet deep. Every summer from my boyhood until quite recently I would climb the rocks high above that pool and fling my body into the air. A summer was not complete without the thrill of that rushing descent, the slap of the water, the shock of its icy embrace. I have a photograph, taken two years ago, of what would prove to be my last such jump. In the foreground, seen from the back, my wife stands waist deep in water, shading her eyes with one hand, watching. She has never approved of this ritual, something most grown men leave behind with their teenage years, but there I am, half way down, pale against the dark rocks that I rush past. You can see my wet footprints on the rock over my head that I've just left. My eyes are focused downward on the water rushing toward my feet, and I am happy, terrified, alive.

We are all—all of us—falling. We are all, now, this moment, in the midst of that descent, fallen from heights that may now seem only a dimly remembered dream, falling toward a depth we can only imagine, glimpsed beneath the water's surface shimmer. And so let us pray that if we are falling from grace, dear God let us also fall *with* grace, *to* grace. If we are falling toward pain and weakness, let us also fall toward sweetness and strength. If we are falling toward death, let us also fall toward life.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

1. Have you ever been faced with a debilitating illness or injury? If so, what did you find most frustrating in that experience? What most illuminating?
2. What does he mean by "When we learn to fall we learn to accept the vulnerability that is our human endowment, the cost of walking upright on the earth"? Do you agree? Explain.

MAKING AN ARGUMENT

1. Both Philip Simmons's "Learning to Fall" and Camus's "The Myth of Sisyphus" on page 1273 seem to be saying that "life is not a problem to be solved." Write an essay that compares and contrasts the way that these two pieces address this theme. Cite the text of both essays for support.

CASE STUDY IN CONTEXTUAL CRITICISM

The Poetry of Emily Dickinson

By presenting some insights into the life of Emily Dickinson, a rich sampling of her work, and representative critical commentary, this Case Study provides you with contextual material sufficient for a self-contained research unit.

HER LIFE (1830–1886)

Emily Dickinson was born to a well-to-do, well-known family in Amherst, Massachusetts. Her grandfather was one of the founders of Amherst College, and her father was a state senator, U.S. congressman, and the lawyer and treasurer of Amherst College. At home, her father created and dominated a highly conservative, religious atmosphere in which he read morning prayers and scripture to both family and servants. Dickinson attended Amherst Academy, but after a subsequent unhappy year at the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (which would become Mount Holyoke College), she returned home and gradually removed herself from outside responsibilities. She traveled rarely and led an almost solitary existence.

In order to protect her from books that might "joggle" her mind, her father forbade the reading of novels—a prohibition that did not stop her from reading and admiring novelists like the Brontë sisters or George Eliot. She read the Bible, classical myths, and Shakespeare—and often made allusions to them in her poems. And she read and admired the poetry of Keats, Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Tennyson, and the work of American contemporaries like Hawthorne, Emerson, and Thoreau.

Although it was reported that she dressed only in white, and was known throughout Amherst as an eccentric recluse, she had ongoing relationships with a number of people who provided her with feedback about her poetry. Most notable among these contacts were her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, with whom she had a close friendship, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly,* whom she considered her mentor. And there were other men in her life: Benjamin Newton, who worked for her father and with whom she

discussed books; Samuel Bowles, a newspaper editor and friend of the family; Charles Wadsworth, a Presbyterian minister; and widower and longtime friend Judge Otis Lord. But though Dickinson wrote powerful poems about the passion and disappointments of love, there is no evidence to indicate with whom she might have been in love—or evidence that she had ever been physically intimate with any man. What little we know of her exterior life, however, her remarkably insightful poems tell us a great deal about her rich, reflective interior life.

Her Work

Dickinson published very few of the nearly two thousand exquisitely crafted and startlingly original poems she composed during her lifetime, and she made her sister and brother promise to destroy her remaining work after her death. Her sister, Lavinia, did destroy her letters, but (fortunately) could not bring herself to destroy the poems—many of which were sewn into booklets or tied in bundles and hidden in bureau drawers. After numerous revisions in wording, punctuation, rhyme, and structure were made to Dickinson's poetry to "conform" her work to nineteenth-century sensibilities, nine volumes of her work were published in the 1890s—and in subsequent editions during the first half of the twentieth century. Not until Thomas H. Johnson published his three-volume edition of her work in 1955, however, did Dickinson's verses become available as she originally composed them.

Dickinson's stature continued to grow throughout the twentieth century, and today, along with Walt Whitman, she is considered one of the two great poetic geniuses of the nineteenth century and a cofounder of modern American poetry. But while Dickinson and Whitman both wrote unconventional poetry, and their work is filled with brilliant originality, their poems are quite different. Whitman's poetry is expansive and public; the verse lines are long—and his themes are large and broadly focused. Dickinson's poems are tightly compressed and inward with a focus on intensely felt moments.

Dickinson's poetry is complex yet wonderfully simple. Her vivid, penetrating language offers and suggests complex thought and emotion—intensifying, clarifying, and re-creating experience. Her images, her timing, her sounds and structures, and her indirections are inner-life magical.

The Poems

If you are unfamiliar with her unique style, her poetry may provide some difficulty—at least initially. The word combinations in her lines sometimes leave spaces you are expected to fill, and her language anticipates your interpretation. The poems require active engagement—an engagement that will fill in the gaps. Read each poem several times—and out loud. Listen carefully, and give yourself time to sense the images; immerse yourself in them, feel them before you try to figure them out. Once they are felt—"where the meanings are"—you'll be well on your way to understanding them.

Success is counted sweetest [c. 1859]

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

To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of Victory

As he defeated—dying—
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear!

Faith is a fine invention [c. 1861]

"Faith" is a fine invention
For gentlemen who *see*—
But *microscopes* are prudent
In an Emergency.

There's a certain Slant of light [c. 1861]

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

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

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

When it comes, the Landscape listens—
Shadows—hold their breath—
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death—

I like a look of Agony [c. 1861]

I like a look of Agony,
Because I know it's true—
Men do not sham Convulsion,
Nor simulate, a Throe—

The Eyes glaze once—and that is Death—
Impossible to feign

The Beads upon the forehead
By homely Anguish strung.

Wild Nights—Wild Nights! [c. 1861]

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

Futile—the Winds—
To a heart in port—
Done with the Compass—
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden—
Ah! the Sea!
Might I but moor—Tonight—
In Thee!

The Brain—is wider than the Sky— [c. 1862]

The Brain—is wider than the sky—
For—put them side by side—
The one the other will contain
With ease—and You—beside—

The Brain is deeper than the sea—
For—hold them—Blue to Blue—
The one the other will absorb—
As Sponges—buckets—do—

The Brain is just the weight of God—
For—Heft them—Pound for Pound—
And they will differ—if they do—
As syllable from Sound—

Much Madness is divinest Sense— [c. 1862]

Much Madness is divinest Sense—
To a discerning Eye—
Much Sense—the starkest Madness—
'Tis the Majority
In this, as All, prevail—
Assent—and you are sane—
Demur—you're straightway dangerous—
And handled with a Chain—

I've seen a Dying Eye [c. 186?]

I've seen a Dying Eye
Run round and round a room—
In search of Something—as it seemed—
Then Cloudier become—
And then—obscure with Fog—
And then—be soldered down
Without disclosing what it be
'Twere blessed to have seen—

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died— [c. 186?]

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air—
Between the Heaves of Storm—

The Eyes around—had wrung them dry—
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset—when the King
Be witnessed—in the Room—

I willed my Keepsakes—Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable—and then it was
There interposed a Fly—

With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—
Between the light—and me—
And then the Windows failed—and then
I could not see to see—

After great pain, a formal feeling comes— [c. 186?]

After great pain, a formal feeling comes—
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs—
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round—
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought—
A Wooden way
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone—

This is the Hour of Lead—
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow—
First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting go—

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church— [c. 1862]

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

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice—
I just wear my Wings—
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little Sexton—sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman—
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last—
I'm going, all along.

This World is not Conclusion [C. 1862]

This World is not Conclusion.
A Sequel stands beyond—
Invisible, as Music—
But positive, as Sound—
It beckons, and it baffles—
Philosophy—don't know—
And through a Riddle, at the last—
Sagacity, must go—
To guess it, puzzles scholars—
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
And Crucifixion, shown—
Faith slips—and laughs, and rallies—
Blushes, if any see—
Plucks at a twig of Evidence—
And asks a Vane, the way—
Much Gesture, from the pulpit—
Strong Hallelujahs roll—
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
That nibbles at the soul—

There is a Pain—so utter— [c. 1862]

There is a pain—so utter—
It swallows substance up—
Then covers the Abyss with Trance—
So memory can step
Around—across—upon it—
As one within a Swoon—
Goes safely—where an open eye—
Would drop Him—Bone by Bone.

Because I could not stop for Death— [c. 1863]

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

We slowly drove—He knew no haste,
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility—

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—in the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—

Or rather—He passed Us—
the Dew drew quivering and chill—
For only Gossamer, my Gown—
My Tippet[°] —only Tulle[°] —

We paused before a House that seemed
A swelling of the Ground—
The Roof was scarcely visible—
The Cornice—in the Ground—

Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity—

[16] **Tippet** shawl **Tulle** silk netting

The Bustle in a House [c. 1866]

The Bustle in a House
The Morning after Death
Is solemnest of industries
Enacted upon Earth—

The Sweeping up the Heart
And putting love away
We shall not want to use again
Until Eternity.

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant— [c. 1868]

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our Infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanations kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind— 5

MAKING CONNECTIONS

1. What similarities in structure, rhythm, and word choice do you notice among Dickinson's poems?
2. The poems above are arranged chronologically. Do you see any evidence that Dickinson's work has evolved over time? Are there noticeable changes or developments in ideas or styles? Explain.
3. To what extent does your reading and understanding of earlier poems in the sequence help you read and understand some of the later ones?

Success Is Counted Sweetest

1. Do you agree with the title? Explain.
2. To what extent does your own experience influence your response?

Faith Is a Fine Invention

1. What does the speaker mean "For gentleman who *see*"?
2. In what way do microscopes represent a different way of seeing?

There's a Certain Slant of Light

1. What is the setting for this poem? Why does the speaker call it a "Slant of light" rather than a "light"?
2. What does she mean by "None may teach it"? To what extent can this apply to the subjects of her other poems as well?

I Like a Look of Agony

1. Do you find it startling that the speaker likes "a look of Agony"? Explain.
2. To what extent is this a poem about other "looks" the speaker has seen?

Wild Nights—Wild Nights!

1. How can we reconcile this poem with Dickinson's reclusive life?
2. What is the central metaphor of the poem? To what extent does it work?

The Brain—Is Wider Than the Sky—

1. How could the brain be "wider than the sky"?
2. To what extent does this poem represent Dickinson's life and writing?

Much Madness Is Divinest Sense—

1. What do you think the speaker means by "Much Madness"? By "Much Sense"?
2. Who is the "Majority" that prevail? Do you think they should? Explain.

I've Seen a Dying Eye

1. In what way is this poem more about those looking on than it is about the dying person?
2. In what way is the eye running around the room—and why?

I Heard a Fly Buzz—When I Died—

1. Who is the speaker in the poem?
2. Why do you think the poet chose a "fly" and not something more exotic?

After Great Pain, a Formal Feeling Comes—

1. What kind of "great pain" does the speaker make reference to?
2. To what extent is your response affected by your own experience? How do the images convey the meaning?

Some Keep the Sabbath Going to Church—

1. Describe how the speaker keeps the Sabbath.
2. What does the speaker mean by "instead of getting to Heaven . . . / I'm going, all along"?

This World Is Not Conclusion

1. What is the "Tooth / That nibbles at the soul"?
2. Compare this poem to "Faith Is a Fine Invention."

There Is a Pain—So Utter—

1. Why do you think the speaker seems unable to finish the first line?
2. Compare this poem with "The Bustle in a House" or "After Great Pain, a Formal Feeling Comes."

Because I Could Not Stop for Death—

1. To what extent is the title and first line of this poem ironic?
2. What concrete images in the poem signify death?

The Bustle in a House

1. Why do you think there is such a bustle in the house? Have you ever experienced one like it? Explain.
2. Compare this poem to "There Is a Pain—So Utter—" or "After Great Pain, a Formal Feeling Comes."

Tell All the Truth but Tell It Slant—

1. How does this poem compare with the popular saying "Honesty is the best policy"? Do you think it's right when telling the truth to "tell it slant"? Explain.
2. Consider the words and images in this brief poem. Do you think they convey the message of the poem effectively? How so?

MAKING AN ARGUMENT

1. The sixteen Dickinson poems in this Case Study are connected to the theme of this section—Faith and Doubt—but what other, more specific thematic connections can you find between and among her poems? Identify a consistent theme in her work, and write an essay that supports your view. Cite the text of the poems for support.
2. Both Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman were innovative geniuses who transcended the poetic conventions of their age—but their work is very different. Write an essay that compares and contrasts the style, structure, and content of Dickinson's poems with Whitman's poems in this anthology:

"When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" (p. 85), "There Was a Child Went Forth" (p. 518), and "Song of Myself 6" (p. 1213).

3. Given the unusual nature of her images and metaphors, Dickinson's work is often compared with that of John Donne. Write an essay that compares her poetry and her metaphors with those in Donne's poem "Death, Be Not Proud" (p. 1205).

Emily Dickinson—In Her Own Words

To Susan Gilbert (Dickinson)

late April 1852

So sweet and still, and Thee, Oh Susie, what need I more, to make my heaven whole?

Sweet Hour, blessed Hour, to carry me to you, and to bring you back to me, long enough to snatch one kiss, and whisper Good bye, again.

I have thought of it all day, Susie, and I fear of but little else, and when I was gone to meeting it filled my mind so full, I could not find a *chink* to put the worthy pastor; when he said "Our Heavenly Father," I said "Oh Darling Sue"; when he read the 100th Psalm, I kept saying your precious letter all over to myself, and Susie, when they sang—it would have made you laugh to hear one little voice, piping to the departed. I made up words and kept singing how I loved you, and you had gone, while all the rest of the choir were singing Hallelujahs. I presume nobody heard me, because I sang *so small,* but it was a kind of a comfort to think I might put them out, singing of you. I a'nt there this afternoon, tho', because I am here, writing a little letter to my dear Sue, and I am very happy. I think of ten weeks—Dear One, and I think of love, and you, and my heart grows full and warm, and my breath stands still. The sun does'nt shine at all, but I can feel a sunshine stealing into my soul and making it all summer, and every thorn, a *rose.* And I pray that such summer's sun shine on my Absent One, and cause her bird to sing!

You have been happy, Susie, and now are sad—and the whole world seems lone; but it wont be so always, "some days *must* be dark and dreary"! You wont cry any more, will you, Susie, for my father will be your father, and my home will be your home, and where you go, I will go, and we will lie side by side in the kirkyard.

I have parents on earth, dear Susie, but your's are in the skies, and I have an earthly fireside, but you have one above, and you have a "Father in Heaven," where I have *none*—and *sister* in heaven, and I know they love you dearly, and think of you every day.

Oh I wish I had half so many dear friends as you in heaven—I could'nt spare them now—but to know they had got there safely, and should suffer nevermore—Dear Susie! . . .

Emilie—

To T. W. Higginson

25 April 1862

Mr Higginson,

Your kindness claimed earlier gratitude—but I was ill—and write today, from my pillow.

Thank you for the surgery—it was not so painful as I supposed. I bring you others—as you ask—though they might not differ—

While my thought is undressed—I can make the distinction, but when I put them in the Gown—they look alike, and numb.

You asked how old I was? I made no verse—but one or two—until this winter—Sir—

I had a terror—since September—I could tell to none—and so I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground—because I am afraid—You inquire my Books—For Poets—I have Keats—and Mr and Mrs Browning. For Prose—Mr Ruskin—Sir Thomas Browne—and the Revelations. I went to school—but in your manner of the phrase—had no education. When a little Girl, I had a friend, who taught me Immortality—but venturing too near, himself—he never returned—Soon after, my Tutor, died—and for several years, my Lexicon—was my only companion—Then I found one more—but he was not contented I be his scholar—so he left the Land.

You ask of my Companions Hills—Sir—and the Sundown—and a Dog—large as myself, that my Father bought me—They are better than Beings—because they know—but do not tell—and the noise in the Pool, at Noon—excels my Piano. I have a Brother and Sister—My Mother does not care for thought—and Father, too busy with his Briefs—to notice what we do—He buys me many Books—but begs me not to read them—because he fears they joggle the Mind. They are religious—except me—and address an Eclipse, every morning—whom they call their "Father." But I fear my story fatigues you—I would like to learn—Could you tell me how to grow—or is it unconveyed—like Melody—or Witchcraft?

You speak of Mr Whitman—I never read his Book—but was told that he was disgraceful—

I read Miss Prescott's "Circumstance," but it followed me, in the Dark—so I avoided her—

Two Editors of Journals came to my Father's House, this winter—and asked me for my Mind—and when I asked them "Why," they said I was penurious—and they would use it for the World—

I could not weigh myself—Myself—

My size felt small—to me—I read your Chapters in the Atlantic—and experienced honor for you—I was sure you would not reject a confiding question—

Is this—Sir—what you asked me to tell you?

Your friend,
E—Dickinson

In Others' Words

Thomas Wentworth Higginson [1823-1911]

On Meeting Dickinson for the First Time [187

A large county lawyer's house, brown brick, with great trees & a garden—I sent up my card. A parlor dark & cool & stiffish, a few books & engravings & an open piano. . . .

A step like a pattering child's in entry & in glided a little plain woman with two smooth bands of reddish hair & a face a little like Belle Dove's; not plainer—with no good feature—in a very plain & exquisitely clean white pique & a blue net worsted shawl. She came to me with two day lilies which she put in a sort of childlike way into my hand & said "These are my introduction" in a soft frightened breathless childlike voice—& added under her breath Forgive me if I am frightened; I never see strangers & hardly know what I say—but she talked soon & thenceforward continuously—& deferentially—sometimes stopping to ask me to talk instead of her—but readily recommencing . . . thoroughly ingenuous & simple . . . & saying many things which you would have thought foolish & I wise—& some things you wd. hv. liked. I add a few over the page. . . .

"Women talk; men are silent; that is why I dread women."

"My father only reads on Sunday—he reads *lonely* & *rigorous* books."

"If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way."

"How do most people live without any thoughts. There are many people in the world (you must have noticed them in the street) How do they live. How do they get strength to put on their clothes in the morning"

"When I lost the use of my Eyes it was a comfort to think there were so few real *books* that I could easily find some one to read me all of them"

"Truth is such a *rare* thing it is delightful to tell it."

"I find ecstasy in living—the mere sense of living is joy enough"

I asked if she never felt want of employment, never going off the place & never seeing any visitor "I never thought of conceiving that I could ever have the slightest approach to such a want in all future time" (& added) "I feel that I have not expressed myself strongly enough."

From a letter to his wife, August 16, 1870

Mabel Loomis Todd [1856–1932]

The Character of Amherst [1881]

I must tell you about the *character* of Amherst. It is a lady whom the people call the *Myth.* She is a sister of Mr. Dickinson, & seems to be the climax of all the family oddity. She has not been outside of her own house in fifteen years, except once to see a new church, when she crept out at night, & viewed it by moonlight. No one who calls upon her mother & sister ever see her, but she allows little children once in a great while, & one at a time, to come in, when she gives them cake or candy, or some nicety, for she is very fond of little ones. But more often she lets down the sweetmeat by a string, out of a window, to them. She dresses wholly in white, & her mind is said to be perfectly wonderful. She writes finely, but no one *ever* sees her. Her sister, who was at Mrs. Dickinson's party, invited me to come & sing to her mother sometime. . . . People tell me the *myth* will hear every note—she will be near, but unseen. . . . Isn't that like a book? So interesting.

From a letter to her parents, November 6, 1881

Richard Wilbur [b. 1921]

On Dickinson's Sense of Privation

What did Emily Dickinson do, as a poet, with her sense of privation? One thing she quite often did was to pose as the laureate and attorney of the empty-handed, and question God about the economy of His creation. Why, she asked, is a fatherly God sparing of His presence? Why is there never a sign that prayers are heard? Why does Nature tell us no comforting news of its Maker? Why do some receive a whole loaf while others must starve on a crumb? Where is the benevolence in shipwreck and earthquake? By asking such questions as these, she turned complaint into critique, and used her own sufferings as experiential evidence about the nature of the deity. The God who emerges from these poems is a God who does not answer, an unrevealed God whom one cannot confidently approach through Nature or through doctrine.

But there was another way in which Emily Dickinson dealt with her sentiment of lack—another emotional strategy which was both more frequent and more fruitful. I refer to her repeated assertion of the paradox that privation is more plentiful than plenty; that to renounce is to possess the more; that "The Banquet of abstemiousness/Defaces that of wine." We all know how the poet illustrated this ascetic paradox in her behavior—how in her latter years she chose to live in relative retirement, keeping the world, even in its dearest aspects, at a physical remove. She would write her friends, telling them how she missed them, then flee upstairs when they came to see her; afterward, she might send a note of apology, offering the odd explanation that "We shun because we prize." Any reader of Dickinson biographies can furnish other examples, dramatic or homely, of this prizing and shunning, this yearning and renouncing: in my own mind's eye is a picture of Emily Dickinson watching a gay circus caravan from the distance of her chamber window.

From "Sumptuous Destitution" in *Emily Dickinson: Three Views* by Richard Wilbur, Louise Bogan, and Archibald MacLeish

Sandra M. Gilbert [b. 1936] and Susan Gubar [b. 1944]

On Dickinson's White Dress [1979]

Today a dress that the Amherst Historical Society assures us is *the* white dress Dickinson wore—or at least one of her "Uniforms of Snow"—hangs in a dry cleaner's plastic bag in the closet of the Dickinson homestead. Perfectly preserved, beautifully flounced and tucked, it is larger than most readers would have expected this self-consciously small poet's dress to be, and thus reminds visiting scholars of the enduring enigma of Dickinson's central metaphor, even while it draws gasps from more practiced visitors, who reflect with awe upon the difficulties of maintaining such a costume. But what exactly did the literal and figurative whiteness of this costume represent? What rewards did it offer that would cause an intelligent woman to overlook those practical difficulties? Comparing Dickinson's obsession with whiteness to Melville's, William R. Sherwood suggests that "it reflected in her case the Christian mystery and not a Christian enigma . . . a decision to announce . . . the assumption of a worldly death that paradoxically involved regeneration." This, he adds, her gown—"a typically slant demonstration of truth"—should have revealed "to anyone with the wit to catch on."

We might reasonably wonder, however, if Dickinson herself consciously intended her wardrobe to convey any one message. The range of associations her white poems imply suggests, on the contrary, that for her, as for Melville, white is the ultimate symbol of enigma, paradox, and irony, "not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors." Melville's question [in *Moby-Dick*] might, therefore, also be hers: "is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink?" And his concluding speculation might be hers too, his remark "that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of [Nature's] hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects . . . with its own blank tinge." For white, in Dickinson's poetry, frequently represents both the energy (the white heat) of Romantic creativity, and the loneliness (the polar cold) of the renunciation or tribulation Romantic creativity may demand, both the white radiance of eternity—or Revelation—and the white terror of a shroud.

From *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*

Critical Commentary on Her Poetry

Helen McNeil

Dickinson's Method

from Emily Dickinson [1986]

Many Victorian poems describe unexamined abstractions, as if society agreed about what constituted sorrow or love. These could be personified, and their attributes could be listed and elaborated metaphorically. Dickinson takes on a frightening abstraction and evolves its attributes from experience, not tradition. In poetry and philosophy, the subject—the experiencing person—may wonder about the existence of other minds. Dickinson wrote many poems on this problem. In "Pain—has an Element of Blank," she contemplates the possibility that there may be circumstances in which the perceiving consciousness also does not exist, erased by its own emotion. "The Soul has Bandaged moments—" she begins another poem; the abstract soul is a bandaged body, in a metaphor which denies dualism. Time is also represented physically, bound up by pain. As Dickinson concludes at the end of "The Soul has Bandaged moments—," such recognitions "are not brayed of Tongue—" in the public discourse of her society, or, for that matter, our society either.

Dickinson wrote about feeling, but out of feeling she constructed a theory of knowledge—not *beyond* feeling, or free from it, or in any way separate, but using it as a kind of knowing. In effect—though not in conventional terms—she is an epistemological poet, a poet who advances a theory of knowledge. Dickinson made this concern explicit. After the forms of the verb "to be," "know" is the most frequently used verb in Dickinson's poetry, appearing 230 times, more even than any noun except "day."

Dickinson's constant pressure towards knowing means that she can treat even the most tormented situations with great calm. She can begin by writing "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," or "Pain—has an Element of Blank—" or "I felt my life with both my hands—" and then proceed to delineate that state with a commanding accuracy. In a manner more resembling the Metaphysical poets than her Victorian contemporaries, male or female, she uses emotionally heightened states as occasions for clarity.

American poetry characteristically embodies acts of process: the Dickinsonian "process" is passionate investigation. Her investigative process often implies narrative by taking speaker and reader through a sequence of rapidly changing images, even when all the action is interior. These investigations structure Dickinson's poetry; I suspect that the flexibility of her investigative movement is the major reason why Dickinson generally was contented with common meter. She may even have even enjoyed the way her condensed discoveries press against the limits of a small form.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff [b. 1935]

On the Many Voices in Dickinson's Poetry [1986]

There were many "Voices." This fact has sometimes puzzled Dickinson's readers. One poem may be delivered in a child's Voice; another in the Voice of a young woman scrutinizing nature and the society in which she makes her place. Sometimes the Voice is that of a woman self-confidently addressing her lover in a language of passion and sexual desire. At still other times, the Voice of the verse seems so precariously balanced at the edge of hysteria that even its calmest observations grate like the shriek of dementia. There is the Voice of the housewife and the Voice that has recourse to the occasionally agonizing, occasionally regal language of the conversion experience of latter-day New England Puritanism. In some poems the Voice is distinctive principally because it speaks in the aftermath of wounding and can comprehend extremities of pain. Moreover, these Voices are not always entirely distinct from one another: the child's Voice that opens a poem may yield to the Voice of a young woman speaking the idiom of ardent love; in a different poem, the speaker may fall into a mood of almost religious contemplation in an attempt to analyze or define such abstract entities as loneliness or madness or eternity; the diction of the housewife may be conflated with the sovereign language of the New Jerusalem; and taken together, they may render some aspect of the wordsmith's labor. No manageable set of discrete categories suffices to capture the diversity of discourse, and any attempt to simplify Dickinson's methods does violence to the verse.

Yet there is a paradox here. This is, by no stretch of the imagination, a body of poetry that might be construed as a series of lyrics spoken by many different people. Disparate as these many Voices are, somehow they all appear to issue from the same "self". . . . It is the enigmatic "Emily Dickinson" readers suppose themselves to have found in this poetry, even in the extreme case when Dickinson's supposed speaker is male. One explanation for this sense of intrinsic unity in the midst of diversity is the persistence with which Dickinson addresses the same set of problems, using a remarkably durable repertoire of linguistic modes. Evocations of

injury and wounding—threats to the coherence of the self—appear in the earliest poems and continue until the end; ways of rendering face-to-face encounters change, but this preoccupation with "interview" is sustained by metaphors of "confrontation" that weave throughout. The summoning of one or another Voice in a given poem, then, is not an unselfconscious emotive reflection of Emily Dickinson's mood at the moment of creation. Rather, each different Voice is a calculated tactic, an attempt to touch her readers and engage them intimately with the poetry. Each Voice had its unique advantages; each its limitations. A poet self-conscious in her craft, she calculated this element as carefully as every other.

From *Emily Dickinson*

Allen Tate

On "Because I could not stop for Death"

from "Emily Dickinson," in Collected Essays [1959]

If the word "great" means anything in poetry, this poem is one of the greatest in the English language. The rhythm charges with movement the pattern of suspended action back of the poem. Every image is precise and, moreover, not merely beautiful, but fused with the central idea. Every image extends and intensifies every other. The third stanza especially shows Miss Dickinson's power to fuse, into a single order of perception, a heterogeneous series: the children, the grain, and the setting sun (time) have the same degree of credibility; the first subtly preparing for the last. The sharp *gazing* before *grain* instills into nature a cold vitality of which the qualitative richness has infinite depth. The content of death in the poem eludes explicit definition. He is a gentleman taking a lady out for a drive. But note the restraint that keeps the poet from carrying this so far that it becomes ludicrous and incredible; and note the subtly interfused erotic motive, which the idea of death has presented to most romantic poets, love being a symbol interchangeable with death. The terror of death is objectified through this figure of the genteel driver, who is made ironically to serve the end of Immortality. This is the heart of the poem: she has presented a typical Christian theme in its final irresolution, without making any final statements about it. There is no solution to the problem; there can be only a presentation of it in the full context of intellect and feeling. A construction of the human will, elaborated with all the abstracting powers of the mind, is put to the concrete test of experience: the idea of immortality is confronted with the fact of physical disintegration. We are not told what to think; we are told to look at the situation.

The framework of the poem is, in fact, the two abstractions, mortality and eternity, which are made to associate in equality with the images: she sees the ideas, and thinks the perceptions. She did, of course, nothing of the sort; but we must use the logical distinctions, even to the extent of paradox, if we are to form any notion of this rare quality of mind. She could not in the proper sense think at all, and unless we prefer the feeble poetry of moral ideas that flourished in New England in the eighties, we must conclude that her intellectual deficiency contributed at least negatively to her great distinction. Miss Dickinson is probably the only Anglo-American poet of her century whose work exhibits the perfect literary situation—in which is possible the fusion of sensibility and thought. Unlike her contemporaries, she never succumbed to her ideas, to easy solutions, to her private desires . . .

Neither the feeling nor the style of Miss Dickinson belongs to the seventeenth century; yet between her and Donne there are remarkable ties. Their religious ideas, their abstractions, are momently toppling from the rational plane to the level of perception. The ideas, in fact, are no longer the impersonal religious symbols created anew in the heat of emotion, that we find in poets like Herbert and Vaughan. They have become, for Donne, the terms of personality; they are mingled with the miscellany of sensation. In Miss Dickinson, as in Donne, we may detect a singularly morbid concern, not for religious truth, but for personal revelation. The modern word is self-exploitation. It is egoism grown irresponsible in religion and decadent in morals. In religion it is blasphemy; in society it means usually that culture is not self-contained and sufficient, that the spiritual community is breaking up. This is, along with some other features that do not concern us here, the perfect literary situation.

Paula Bennett [b. 1936]

On "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—" [1990]

Dickinson's rage against death, a rage that led her at times to hate both life and death, might have been alleviated, had she been able to gather hard evidence about an afterlife. But, of course, she could not. "The *Bareheaded life*—under the grass—," she wrote to Samuel Bowles in c. 1860, "worries one like a Wasp." If death was the gate to a better life in "the childhood of the kingdom of Heaven," as the sentimentalists—and Christ—claimed, then, perhaps, there was compensation and healing for life's woes. . . . But how do we know? What can we know? In "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died," Dickinson concludes that we do not know much. . . .

Like many people in her period, Dickinson was fascinated by death-bed scenes. How, she asked various correspondents, did this or that person die? In particular, she wanted to know if their deaths revealed any information about the nature of the afterlife. In this poem, however, she imagines her own death-bed scene, and the answer she provides is grim, as grim (and, at the same time, as ironically mocking), as anything she ever wrote.

In the narrowing focus of death, the fly's insignificant buzz, magnified tenfold by the stillness in the room, is all that the speaker hears. This kind of distortion in scale is common. It is one of the "illusions" of perception. But here it is horrifying because it defeats every expectation we have. Death is supposed to be an experience of awe. It is the moment when the soul, departing the body, is taken up by God. Hence the watchers at the bedside wait for the moment when the "King" (whether God or death) "be witnessed" in the room. And hence the speaker assigns away everything but that which she expects God (her soul) or death (her body) to take.

What arrives instead, however, is neither God nor death but a fly, "[w]ith Blue—uncertain—stumbling Buzz," a fly, that is, no more secure, no more sure, than we are. Dickinson had associated flies with death once before in the exquisite lament, "How many times these low feet / staggered." In this poem, they buzz "on the / chamber window," and speckle it with dirt, reminding us that the housewife, who

once protected us from such intrusions, will protect us no longer. Their presence is threatening but only in a minor way, "dull" like themselves. They are a background noise we do not have to deal with yet.

In "I heard a Fly buzz," on the other hand, there is only one fly and its buzz is not only foregrounded. Before the poem is over, the buzz takes up the entire field of perception, coming between the speaker and the "light" (of day, of life, of knowledge). It is then that the "Windows" (the eyes that are the windows of the soul as well as, metonymically, the light that passes through the panes of glass) "fail" and the speaker is left in darkness—in death, in ignorance. She cannot "see" to "see" (understand).

Given that the only sure thing we know about "life after death" is that flies—in their adult form and more particularly, as maggots—devour us, the poem is at the very least a grim joke. In projecting her death-bed scene, Dickinson confronts her ignorance and gives back the only answer human knowledge can with any certainty give. While we may hope for an afterlife, no one, not even the dying, can prove it exists.

From *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet*

Poems About Emily Dickinson

Linda Pastan [*b. 1932*]

Emily Dickinson [1971]

We think of her hidden in a white dress
among the folded linens and sachets
of well-kept cupboards, or just out of sight
sending jellies and notes with no address
to all the wondering Amherst neighbors.
Eccentric as New England weather
the stiff wind of her mind, stinging or gentle,
blew two half-imagined lovers off.
Yet legend won't explain the shear sanity
of vision, the serious mischief
of language, the economy of pain.

Billy Collins [*b. 1941*]

Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes [1998]

First, her tippet made of tulle,
easily lifted off her shoulders and laid
on the back of a wooden chair.

And her bonnet,
the bow undone with a light forward pull.

Then the long white dress, a more
complicated matter with mother-of-pearl
buttons down the back,
so tiny and numerous that it takes forever
before my hands can part the fabric,
like a swimmer's dividing water,
and slip inside.

You will want to know
that she was standing
by an open window in an upstairs bedroom,
motionless, a little wide-eyed,
looking out at the orchard below,
the white dress puddled at her feet
on the wide-board, hardwood floor.

The complexity of women's undergarments
in nineteenth-century America
is not to be waved off,
and I proceeded like a polar explorer
through clips, clasps, and moorings,
catches, straps, and whalebone stays
sailing toward the iceberg of her nakedness.

Later, I wrote in a notebook
it was like riding a swan into the night,
but, of course, I cannot tell you everything—
the way she closed her eyes to the orchard,
how her hair tumbled free of its pins,
how there were sudden dashes
whenever we spoke.

What I can tell you is
it was terribly quiet in Amherst
that Sabbath afternoon,
nothing but a carriage passing the house,
a fly buzzing in a windowpane.

So I could plainly hear her inhale
when I undid the very top
hook-and-eye fastener of her corset

and I could hear her sigh when finally it was unloosed,
the way some readers sigh when they realize
that Hope has feathers,
that reason is a plank,
that life is a loaded gun
that looks right at you with a yellow eye.

A Student's Critical Essay

In the critical essay that follows, Sophie Drake writes about the effectiveness of an unusual poetic device—the dash—in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Her thesis is that while the dash does not convey much by itself, "placed strategically before and after" Dickinson's often unusual images, it provides an essential "clarifying pause." It is a critical essay because she supports her thesis by analyzing the texts of four of Dickinson's poems and cites the text of each poem to prove her point.

Sophie Drake
Prof. Madden
Eng 102
September 26, 200X

A Dash of Meaning

It is fortunate that Emily Dickinson's brother and sister did not destroy her poems after her death (as she had requested), or we would be without the work of a great American poet. When we consider the original condition of those poems, it is understandable that for their initial publication they were revised to fit the standards of the 1890's by removing dashes and correcting other forms of punctuation and structure. However, it is also fortunate that in the 1950's Thomas Johnson restored Emily Dickinson's poems to their original form (Madden 1288). Very important among these restorations is the restoration of the dashes. By themselves, the dashes convey very little. But placed strategically before and after Dickinson's unusual images, they convey a great deal. The meaning they convey is in the clarifying pause and personal response they prompt from the reader.

"There's a certain Slant of light" is a poem filled with dashes that encourage us to pause and digest unusual images by personalizing them. The first dash follows a capitalized (emphasized) "Winter Afternoons—"(2) and prompts us to recall our own experience of winter afternoons and the pale light of winter that seems only a "Slant" of light, but a slant of light that weighs on us like "the Heft/Of Cathedral Tunes—" (4). Each of the twelve dashes in this poem follows an image we are prompted to recall from our own experience, and the poem concludes with a haunting but familiar image of the dim light of a winter's day descending into night: "When it goes, 'tis like the Distance/on the look of Death—" (15–16).

Sometimes the dashes simply make us pause to understand a provocative opening statement: "I like a look of Agony, / Because I know it's true—" (1–2).

We understand that Dickinson is not referring to everything about the look of agony but only one thing, its authenticity. She then follows with a similar sentiment about the look of death, "Impossible to feign" (6). The dashes invite us to be part of a process of discovery. They seem to pause the poem for our response. It's almost as if we are having a conversation with the poet, a conversation that has us comparing our own internal responses to the world with hers, the dashes telling us when it's our turn. Helen McNeil supports the idea of this "internal" process when she says of Dickinson's poetry that "Her investigative process often [takes] speaker and reader through a sequence of rapidly changing images, even when all the action is interior" (1301).

In "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—" (1), the dashes surround the key phrase in the poem. There is nothing special about hearing a fly buzz but hearing a fly buzz at the moment of death, as the last event in our lives, is worthy of notice. It's the dashes before and after "when I died" that let us pause and digest the irony and meaning of the moment. There are fourteen other dashes in this poem that work in a similar way. Many things are being described in this monumental moment, the "Stillness in the Air—" (3), "The Eyes around—" (5). They are the kind of images we would expect to see at such a moment, and we are given time to digest them with help from the dashes. These predictable images put us back in the death scene, until suddenly "—and then it was / There interposed a fly—" (12). The preceding dash transitions us to the fly; the dash following gives us pause to imagine and reflect upon the usually unimportant fly now dominating the last vision of the speaker. As Paula Bennett describes it, the fly's buzz "is not only foregrounded. Before the poem is over, the buzz takes up the entire field of perception, coming between the speaker and the 'light' (of day, of life, of knowledge)" (1304). The dashes in the poem help us to experience that.

Allen Tate describes "Because I could not stop for Death—" as "one of the greatest [poems] in the English language." He says that "Every image intensifies every other," and he praises the poet's power "to fuse, into a single order of perception, a heterogeneous series: the children, the grain, and the setting sun (time)" (1302). The poem's twenty-two strategically placed dashes help us to experience this singular vision and intensity. The poem is a journey toward eternity, and the dashes connect each leg of the journey to the next and connect us (by giving us time to pause and reflect)

to each of those legs. Death is a coachman who (because "I could not stop") "kindly stopped for me—" (2). The dash lines (—) seem to extend the miles on our journey and what we see out the coach window as we encounter "the School" (9), "the Fields and Grazing Grain—" (11), "the Setting Sun—" (12) (as both distance and time pass) until we reach the grave, "A swelling of the Ground—" (18), and finally after centuries, the realization that "the Horses' Heads / Were toward Eternity—" (24). That last dash is as much a question mark—prompting our own thoughts on the matter of an afterlife.

It would be foolish to suggest that the dashes in Dickinson's poetry are as important as her words and the striking images that result from those words. What makes her a brilliant poet is her use of words. But the dashes matter. They prompt us to pause and to clarify our own thoughts on the image at hand and the subject of the poem at large. They put us in an interior dialogue with the speaker in the poem. They magnify and extend the poem's images—and our responses. They are a dash of meaning.

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Exploring the Literature of Faith and Doubt: Options for Making Connections, Building Arguments, and Using Researc

MAKING CONNECTIONS

1. Consider the ways your beliefs and values have affected your life. Do any of the stories, poems, plays, or essays in this section remind you of your own experiences or circumstances in your life? If so, choose one or more of these works and write a response essay that compares your experiences or circumstances with those in the literature.
2. Our own values, beliefs, and/or doubts affect the way we see the world and can strongly influence our response to the literature in this section. We may agree or disagree with what an author says or what characters say or do. So too, this literature may influence us and the formation of our values and beliefs. Write an essay about the ways in which one or more works in this section either provoked a moral judgment on your part or helped you learn something.

MAKING AN ARGUMENT

1. In his 1788 work *Critique of Practical Reason,* Immanuel Kant wrote: "Morality is not properly the doctrine of how we may make ourselves happy, but how we make ourselves worthy of happiness." Do you agree? Consider this quote, and write an essay about how an author or a character in one or more works in this section defines morality or his or her values.
2. In his poem "In Memoriam," Alfred Lord Tennyson expresses his view of faith and doubt in the following lines: "There lives more faith in honest doubt, / Believe me, than in half the creeds." Do you agree? Write about this quote as it affects the way a character or an author in one or more works in this section sees the world.
3. Choose a quote (or quotes) in the introduction to this section on Faith and Doubt (pp. 1149–1150) and pair it (or them) with one of the longer pieces in this section that either supports it or argues against it. For example, Yamaga Soko's comment about the unquestioning loyalty of the samurai warrior might be paired with Wilfred Owen's "*Dulce et Decorum Est,*" which might be seen as an argument against it. If you choose R. D. Laing's comment about alienation, you might choose Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" to support it. Write an essay that compares or contrasts a quote (or quotes) from the introduction with a story, poem, play, or essay that supports it or argues against it.

Using Research

Nathaniel Hawthorne's story "Young Goodman Brown," Wilfred Owen's poem "*Dulce et Decorum Est,*" and David Mamet's play *Oleanna* all have something important to say about faith and doubt. Each of these works, however, springs from