

Emily Dickinson; Her Life and Portraits⁽¹⁾

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Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, in 1830. In those days, Amherst was a small farming village of some four or five hundred families. Like all settlements in the Connecticut River Valley, it had a cultural tradition dating from its seventeenth century Puritan beginnings. The establishment of Amherst College in 1821 owed in large part to the selfless devotion of Samuel Fowler Dickinson, Emily's grandfather, himself sixth in the line of descent from Valley settlers, and the first of three generations of Dickinsons who were pre-eminent in town and college affairs. He died before Emily was eight; thus he remained for her a somewhat legendary figure.

Edward Dickinson, Emily's father, succeeded his father in business and law. In May 1828, he married Emily Norcross, the third of nine children of Joel and Betsey Norcross of nearby Monson. The letters which they exchanged during their courtship show the degree to which sensitive young people of such background at that time were concerned with their spiritual welfare. The daily morning devotions, church attendance twice on Sunday with all members of the family present, frequent reading of the Bible—all were woven into the texture of the lives of the Dickinsons as they were in those

(1) This biography is largely based on *Emily Dickinson; An Interpretive Biography* by Thomas H. Johnson.

of the most Valley families during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The fact that Edward Dickinson postponed joining the church until 1850, when he was forty-seven years old, is not a measure of his indifference; on the contrary it confesses the acuteness by which he judged his unworthiness. His wife entered into church membership three years after their marriage. Of their three children the eldest, Emily's brother William Austin Dickinson, joined the church six months before his marriage in 1856. The youngest, Lavinia Norcross Dickinson, joined in her eighteenth year. Emily alone among the five never could bring herself to make a formal confession of faith, and her inability to do so gave her for many years a distressing sense of inadequacy.

The person that Emily Dickinson became and the poetry that she wrote can be understood only within the context of the Valley traditions which she inherited and the dynasty into which she was born.

Emily's childhood and girlhood were active and social. She had an education more extensive than usual for young women of that period; two years at Amherst Academy, and one at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary.

At Mount Holyoke, if girls had already experienced conversion, they were off to a good start. Today it is routine that all students undergo a physical examination at the beginning of the academic year. It was routine that all students entering the Seminary be examined on the state of their spiritual health. The concern was not so much that unconverted persons would be hazards to others; for their own welfare the impenitent must be brought at the earliest possible moment to an awareness of their peril and wakened to a desire for conversion. Thus, early in October a

census was taken to discover in which of three categories students might fall. They were either professing Christians, or "had hope," or were "without hope." In late December, after a series of prayer meetings and a final vigorous appeal delivered by Miss Lyon, who had established the institution ten years before, the third group had been reduced to twenty-five. No compulsion was used, in the sense of required attendance at meetings, but the atmosphere was tense, and the feeling of guilt on the part of those "without hope" must have been oppressive. One such meeting Emily Dickinson attended. A final session in February, after winter vacation, called to render the coup de gr^âce, she did not attend.

Just before vacation she wrote her school friend Abiah Root, saying nothing about the state of her spiritual welfare, but expressing sentiments about the institution. "I love the Seminary & all the teachers are bound strongly to my heart by ties of affection." But the subterranean emotion comes to the surface after her return in February. "I have neglected," she wrote Abiah, "the one thing needful when all were obtaining it, and I may never, never again pass through such a season as was granted us last winter." Her confidence continues:

Abiah, you may be surprised to hear me speak as I do, knowing that I express no interest in the all-important subject, but I am not happy, and I regret that last term, when that golden opportunity was mine, that I did not give up and become a Christian. It is not now too late, so my friends tell me, so my offended conscience whispers, but it is hard for me to give up the world... I am one of the lingering bad ones, and so do I slink away, and pause and ponder and pause, and do

work without knowing why, not surely, for this brief world,
and more sure it is not for heaven...

She lived throughout her life in her father's house in Amherst, with her parents (until their death in her middle years) and younger sister Lavinia. Her brother William Austin Dickinson and his wife Susan Gilbert Dickinson lived next door.

From her earliest childhood Emily Dickinson felt a respect for her father akin to awe. Before she was twenty she had come to realize that he was one of the shaping forces of her nature and probably the greatest. Over the years his name is repeatedly drawn into the body of her letters.

Born in 1803, Edward Dickinson was reared on the ideals of the eighteenth century, and transmit them to the nineteenth. For him happiness was to be pursued by devotion under God to family and commonwealth, (He was a State Senator.), not by declared intent but by resolved action. He was a man of rectitude whose reason governed his passions, and for whom moderation in all things was the rule of life. For example, he would leave the table when Emily happened to show her too much gift for wit. In her girlhood, she made resistance to her father at times, smashing dishes or cups. She was pulsating between the attraction and repulsion she felt.

Her mother was demure, submissive, domestic, and deeply religious. In addition to that, she was invalid. Writing T.W. Higginson in 1862, Emily sketches; "... My Mother does not care for thought-
..."

After a trip to Washington and Philadelphia in 1855, she settled into a quiet pattern of life, never leaving Amherst except for two

(2) Van Wyck Brooks, *New England: Indian summer*, p.370

trips (for eye care) to Boston, seeing fewer people outside her close family circle and old friends, and drawing gradually into seclusion.

New England had-and has-many maiden ladies like her, and many widows who are like maiden ladies.⁽³⁾ There are many who have loved unsuccessfully or insultably-whom fear or pride have kept from the married state; many who have loved “above them,” could love in no other way, and who prefer singleness to some democratic union. The father who prefers his daughters not to marry, who needs them at home with him, is matched by the daughter so filial as to prefer the tried arrangement. There is nothing monstrous—or even necessarily thwarted or blighted—about such women. They have their friends and their duties; they can nurture their own sensibilities and spiritualities-grow sharper in consciousness for their economy.

Throughout her life people were of the utmost importance to her, but direct contacts exhausted her emotionally to such an extent that she shrank from all but the most intimate. This is not to say that she withdrew from the outside world. On the contrary, she associated steadily with the friends of her selection through the medium of letters. Her correspondence was voluminous.

About Emily’s lovers, I would like to choose her brother Austin’s saying like Austin Warren.⁽⁴⁾ What was his judgment of the “lovers”? Asked, after Emily’s death, the direct question, “Did she fall in love

(3) Austin Warren, “Emily Dickinson” *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays* edited by Richard B. Sewall, p.111

(4) Austin Warren, “*Emily Dickinson*”, p.110

In former days, Rev. Charles Wadsworth was believed to be the person who caused Emily’s reclusion. Emily was said to begin a secluded life because of her disappointed love.

with the Rev. Mr. Wadsworth?" he thought not. He said that "at different times" Emily "had been devoted to several men." He even went so far as to maintain that she had been several times in love, in her own way. But he denied that because of her devotion to any one man she forsook all others. Emily "reached out eagerly, fervently even, toward anybody who lighted the spark..." Then, Mr. Warren says, "It seems archetypally true of Emily to say that God was her Lover."

She died, after a two-year illness, on May 15, 1886. Except for seven anonymous verses, her poems were unpublished during her lifetime. They were found after her death, and editions of sections of them have appeared over the years since then.

The followings are her portraits by several persons.

At first, by her own: "I had no portrait, now, but am small, like the Wren, and my Hair is bold, like the Chestnut Bur, and my eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves."

T.W. Higginson met her and remarked on precisely the features she had identified: her slender form, quick and light when in motion; her reddish chestnut hair; and her brown eyes, which caught and held the light. He added that she was a "plain, shy little person, the face without a single good feature." He says that she began to talk and thenceforward continued almost constantly, and without a trace of affectation: "she seemed to speak absolutely for her own relief, and wholly without watching its effect on her hearer."

Her cousin John L. Graves, who was a frequent visitor at the Dickinson house before his graduation from Amherst in 1855, comes as close as any to revealing her effect on people. When his daughters later asked for some description of her, some clue to her

personality, he merely replied: "She was different. Emily Dick had more charm than anyone I ever knew."

Lastly, I will show you a well painted portrait. Joseph Bardwell Lyman⁽⁵⁾, lawyer, journalist, author, distantly related to the Dickinson family, composed a pen-portrait of Emily in handwriting.

Emily

"Things are not what they seem"

Night in Midsummer

A library dimly lighted, three mignonettes on a little stand. Enter a spirit clad in white,⁽⁶⁾ figure so draped as to be misty, face moist, translucent alabaster, forehead firmer as of statuary marble. Eyes once bright hazel now melted & fused so as to be two dreamy, wondering wells of expression, eyes that see no forms but glance swiftly to the core of all things-hands small, firm, deft but utterly emancipated from all claspings of perishable things, very firm strong little hands absolutely under control of the brain, types of quite rugged health, mouth made for nothing & used for nothing but uttering choice speech, rare thoughts, glittering, starry misty figures, winged words.

Her use of the word "ample"

The word "ample" is not so popular. In the Bible we can not find it. Neither in the poems of Dylan Thomas. There is one in *The Island of Statues* by W.B. Yeats. William Wordsworth is exceptional for making many poems using the word "ample".

(5) Richard B. Sewall, *The Lyman Letters (New Light on Emily Dickinson and Her Family)*, p.69.

(6) Emily appears dressed in white, a habit of the years from 1861 on.

Of all the 1775 poems composed by Emily, we find the word “ample” employed in 20.⁽⁷⁾ Ampler; 5 times. Amplest; once. Amply; twice. Emily often uses capital “A” in place of a small letter. And I found in the authology that 14 poems are selected out of her 26 “ample” poems. (In that book⁽⁸⁾ of Dr. T. Johnson he selected 575 from 1775.) Then does the word “ample” have a special meaning in her poetry?

The meanings of this word explained in Webster’s dictionary⁽⁹⁾ are the following;

1. marked by extensive or more than adequate size, volume, space, or room 2. a: marked by more than adequate measure in strength, force, scope, effectiveness, or influence b: marked by more than adequate measure in number or amount 3. a: marked by generous plenty or by abundance: more than adequate: not scant or niggard b: COPIOUS, VOLUMINOUS, FULL 4: satisfying wants or desires more than adequately 5: BUXOM, PORTLY

It is derived from Latin via Middle French. Allen Tate says in his essay about Emily Dickinson.⁽¹⁰⁾

Her diction has two corresponding features: words of Latin or Greek origin and, sharply opposed to these, the concrete Saxon element. It is this verbal conflict that gives her verse its high tension; it is not a device deliberately seized upon, but a

(7) S.P. Rosenbaum ed., *A Concordance to the Poems of Emily Dickinson*. If you count the alternatives, ample is used 23 times.

(8) Johnson ed., *Final Harvest*.

(9) Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, 1967. Emily used to use Webster’s American Dictionary of the English Language in the enlarged edition of 1847.

(10) Allen Tate, “Emily Dickinson”, Richard B. Sewall ed., *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p.26.

feeling for language that senses out the two fundamental components of English and their metaphysical relation: the Latin for ideas and the Saxon for perceptions—the peculiar virtue of English as a poetic language.

So it can be said that Emily Dickinson expressed the abstract idea rather than the concrete perception by the word “ample”. According to Dr. T. Johnson’s saying, that is the world of the unseen and unheard rather than the world of nature and the world of friendship.

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

Unmoved-she notes the Chariots-pausing-
At her low Gate—
Unmoved-an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat —

I’ve known her—from an ample notion—
Choose One—
Then—close the Valves of her attention—
Like Stone—

This is one of her well-known poems. The following excerpt of Dr. T. Johnson will well explain this poem.⁽¹⁾

The strait path to her seclusion she deliberately chose, the better to enable her to participate in the common experiences

(1) Johnson, *Emily Dickinson; An Interpretive Biography*, p.248.

of all mankind. She had elected to do so in 1862, when her creativeness was at flood and she sensed that her fulfillment as artist required time to spend with the hosts that visited her. "The Soul selects her own Society," she said, "Then-shuts the door." She has in mind a way of life, and she will remain unmoved even though chariots pause at her low gate or an emperor kneels upon her mat, presumably to beg her to alter her convictions or to offer inducements for accepting other close associations. She tolerated no interference from routine distractions. The poem is universalized, but at the personal level it states her intent to live by her convictions.

In this poem the Soul emerges as a kind of royal princess. Her use of the word "ample" suggests Shakespeare's use.

King Lear I i 82 "This ample third of our faire Kingdome."

Henry V I ii 226 "There wee'l sit, Ruling in large and ample Emperie."

Yes, she was very much devoted to Shakespeare. T.W. Higginson made the following note on his visit to her on 17 August 1870.⁽¹²⁾ "After long disuse of her eyes she read Shakespeare and thought why is any other book needed?"

There is another poem which expresses the royalty.

'Tis little I—could care for Pearls—
Who own the ample sea—
Or Brooches—when the Emperor—
With Rubies—pelteth me—
Or Gold—who am the Prince of Mines—

(12) Sewall, ed., *The Lyman Letters*, p.75.

Or Diamonds-when have I
A Diadem to fit a Dome—
Continual upon me—

Richard Wilbur says, "This is one of her gleeful poems." Here she sings about her friends. She says in her letter to Samuel Bowls, "God is not so wary as we, else he would give us no friends, lest we forget him!"

It is interesting that in the poem which begins with "The gentian has a parched Corolla—", she put down the alternatives to the word "abundant". They are the following; fervent, loyal, gracious, ample. "Ample" was the most suitable word for her to express her royalty. Baudelaire also uses once in his poem; "sa robe exagérée, en sa royale Ampleur. "(Les fleurs du mal)

But that is all I can say about the royal image of "Ample". I have exemplified her awareness of traditional use of the word. We had better get along with her own use of this word.

I send Two Sunsets—
Day and I—in competition ran—
I finished Two-and several Stars—
While He-was making One—

His own was ampler-but as I
Was saying to a friend—
Mine—is the more convenient
To Carry in the Hand—

This is one of her poems dedicated to her friends with the gifts of flowers. Here she complains of the brevity of the floral life compared with the ampleness of a day's course in her realm.

God gave a Loaf to every Bird—
But just a Crumb—to Me—
I dare not eat it—tho'I starve—
My poignant luxury—

To own it—touch it—
Prove the feat—that made the Pellet mine—
Too happy—for my Sparrow's chance—
For Ampler Coveting—

It might be Famine—all around—
I could not miss an Ear—
Such Plenty smiles upon my Board—
My Garner show so fair—

I wonder how the Rich—may feel—
An Indiaman—An Earl—
I deem that I—with but a Crumb—
Am Sovereign of them all—

She thinks a Crumb is enough for her, and she is too happy for "Ampler Coveting". That is to say, she boasts of the ampleness of her board with but a crumb in her poetical realm.

Her life in this world was of course, not as ample as that in her realm.

I had no time to Hate—
Because
The Grave would hinder Me—
And Life was not so
Ample I

Could finish—Enmity—
Nor had I time to Love—
But since
Some Industry must be—
The little Toil of Love—
I thought
Be large enough for Me—

When this poem was published in 1890 by Mabel Loomis Todd, wife of an Amherst professor, with T.W. Higginson, lines are arranged as two quatrains.

I had no time to hate, because
The Grave would hinder me,
And Life was not so ample I
Could finish enmity.

The rhymes are exact and the iambic metres are regular. This poem is perfect in versification. The former poem may be less beautiful technically, nevertheless it is more earnest in feeling. And there is a certain emphasis on the word "ample". She cherished the word "ample".

'Twould ease—a Butterfly—
Elate—a Bee—
Thou'rt neither—
Neither—thy capacity—

But, Blossom, were I,
I would rather be
Thy moment

Than a Bee's Eternity—

Content of fading

Is enough for me—

Fade I unto Divinity—

And Dying—Lifetime—

Ample as the Eye—

Her least attention raise on me—

In this case, she intended herself to arrange the final six lines as a quatrain. That may have been sent to Sue:

Content of fading is enough for me

Fade I unto Divinity—

And Dying—Lifetime—ample as the eye

Her least attention raise on me.

I think she preferred the former style because the line “Ample as the Eye—” is more impressive in the former poem. It seems to me that her praying tone can be heard here. For Emily Immortality is one of her distinct subjects.

They leave us with the Infinite.

But He—is not a man—

His fingers are the size of fists—

His fists, the size of man—

And whom he foundeth, with his Arm

As Himmaleh, shall stand—

Gibraltar's Everlasting Shoe

Poised lightly on his Hand,

So trust him, Comrade-
You for you, and I, for you and me
Eternity is ample,
And quick enough, if true.

Here the Infinite is protean. So one may miss him easily enough, yet he is “ample”. In 1864 she could express her sense of Immortality with classic restraint;

Ample make this Bed-
Make this Bed with Awe—
In it wait till Judgment break
Excellent and Fair.

Be its Mattress straight—
Be its Pillow round—
Let no Sunrise' Yellow noise
Interrupt this Ground-

Emily Dickinson titled the poem, in her letter “Country Burial”. By the word “ample”, she well suggests slippery immortality. For her Immortality is the thing true but nevertheless incorporeal, the thing real but nevertheless immaterial.

A Coffin—is a small Domain,
Yet able to contain
A Citizen of Paradise
In its diminished Plane.

A Grave—is a restricted Breadth—
Yet ampler than the Sun—

And all the Seas He populates
And Lands He looks upon
To Him who on its small Repose
Bestows a single Friend—
Circumference without Relief—
Or Estimate—or End—

Here she speculates stately death and immortality. She uses the word “ample” to express a restricted space of a grave. This thrilling poem makes me think she does not only say a terror for death but a terror for life’s own self.

Immortal is an ample word
When what we need is by
But when it leaves us for a time
'Tis a necessity.
Of Heaven above the Firmest proof
We fundamental know
Except for its marauding Hand
It had been Heaven below.

Here “ample” means a sufficiency. But it also means a hollowness and an emptiness.

Water makes many Beds
For those averse to sleep—
Its awful chamber open stands—
Its Curtains blandly sweep—
Abhorrent is the Rest
In undulating Rooms

Whose Amplitude no end invades-
Whose Axis never comes.

Emily often uses “Bed” for “grave”, and sleeping for laying in the grave. So “Water” seems to symbolizes Immortality. If one may feel the word “Amplitude” is dreadful, Emily’s ironic sense does not make one stand there. I think “Amplitude” also means ample rescue, or splendor of Immortality in other words.

When the word “ample” is used to qualify Immortality, it inevitably means its awfulness and hollowness at once. Emily as a realist could not permit the existence of Immortality, and Emily as a woman who loves this world and people so earnestly could not deny it.

There still remains another example about her use of this word.

You love the Lord—you cannot see—
You write Him—every day—
A little note—when you awake—
And further in the Day.

An Ample Letter—How you miss—
And would delight to see—
But then His House—is but a Step—
And Mine’s—in Heaven-You see.

Here rhymes are not exact. (day—Day; see—see) That gives the poem a little bit commical tone. She said “An Ample Letter” half in jest and half in earnest.

The Moon was but a Chin of Gold
A Night or two ago—

And now she turns Her perfect Face
Upon the World below—
Her Forehead is of Amplest Blonde—
Her Cheek—a Beryl hewn—
Her Eye unto the Summer Dew
The likest I have known—

The moon is personified and has a faery tale-like beauty. She did not express any hollowness in this poem. She adores the moon with all her heart. She makes us imagine the benign but unapproachable moon only by the two words “Amplest Blonde”.

As you may judge from the above-quoted poems, the word “ample”, when used by the poetess, acquires a strange charm, sometimes sweet, sometimes awe-inspiring, but at any rate, powerful.

Because she enjoyed, an ample freedom as the sovereign of the spatially tiny, yet poetically immense domain of her own.

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