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The mail of anguish: the humor of emily dickinson

Marian Hoffman Myers

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THE MAIL OF ANGUISH: THE HUMOR OF EMILY DICKINSON

BY

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A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND
IN CANDIDACY
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

JUNE 1969
APPROVAL SHEET

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Because Emily Dickinson's intellectual humor gleamed through the more permeating emotional intensity of many of her poems, I undertook to discover the persistence of this facet of her poetic art and its relation to the humorists of her time and place. The research has been rewarding.

I wish to extend my deep appreciation to those faculty members who have assisted me in my study at the University of Richmond, both in inspiration and guidance, and to the Librarians at the University of Richmond Library and the Virginia State Library.

I especially wish to thank my husband and my son, John G. Myers and John G. Myers, Jr., for their encouragement, their understanding, and their cooperation, without which this Thesis could not have been possible.
CHAPTER I - SOURCES

In the proliferation of twentieth century scholarly criticism of the poetry of the nineteenth century private poet, Emily Dickinson, suggestions of an appreciation of her comic spirit as a subtle and intricate facet of her poetry are just beginning to appear. The reasons for the century-late realization stem from two sources: from problems of publication and from incongruities of biography. Emily Dickinson herself caused the first difficulty: with the exception of seven poems which she grudgingly allowed anonymous publication during her lifetime (1830-1886), her first slender volume of poetry appeared posthumously in 1890. The first edition of her total work of 1775 poems was published a hundred years after her earliest known literary effort, as the product of the scholarly work of Thomas H. Johnson and his associates. For the first time in 1955 her work could be read as a whole. This date began an enlarged understanding and assessment of Emily Dickinson, the poet.

The second problem grew from the fact that while the biographical facts of her life are extensively documented, the events give only a slight key to her poetry. Also, there are immense gaps in the biographers' knowledge as well as inexplicable paradoxes in her experience and character. The following four ambiguities exemplify the difficulty. In spite of the fact that Emily Dickinson lived in her family home in Amherst under the same roof with her unmarried sister Lavinia for the
entire course of her life, "Vinnie" was as astounded as everyone else at the vastness and range of Emily's poetic production. Secondly, negating the "intimate" friendships which most effected her life as an artist is the fact that she almost never came into physical contact with these friends. Thirdly, although she could not accept the tenets of Calvinist belief, she lived by a moral code which would have been acceptable to her Puritan ancestors. And finally, from the microcosm of her daily living, she dealt with the macrocosm of life.

This thesis is an attempt to illuminate the pervasive element of intellectual humor which runs through much of her poetry, deepening and broadening its scope into universal meaning as she searched for means to transcend the dichotomy between physical and spiritual being. By the use of humorous techniques in her creative artistry, she found a tool to use in her search for humanistic answers to the overpowering abstract problems of love and death, life and immortality. As mask, as crutch, as shield, her ironic sense of the incongruous, the whimsical, and the fantastic, was vital to her psychological ability to live and to face the unanswerable questions of Everyman.

To understand the anacronism that is Emily Dickinson, it is necessary to understand something of the place and time that nourished her, the background which filled her soul with irony. By the time that Emily Dickinson was born in 1830, towns in New England larger and more progressive than Amherst might have physically, economically, and intellectually expanded beyond provincialism. However, the several hundred families of Amherst in the Connecticut River Valley continued to function almost as independent economic units. They owned their own homes and land and grew enough produce and stock to live self-sufficiently. In order to preserve the orthodox traditions of Puritanism which were being discarded by other
older and larger institutions, Emily Dickinson's grandfather had helped to establish the Amherst Academy and Amherst College. The cultural concerns of the college, while growing on the base of seventeenth century Puritanism, stimulated intellectual activity in the provincial community, the life of which centered around the college. By 1850 there were townspeople interested in enlightened progress, as evidenced by the town's support of a bookstore, a printing press, and a newspaper.

Although the traditional aspects of Congregational belief and morality were taught to the new generation, and although revelation in the individual's search for God through evangelical experience was expected by the elders, there were some Amherst youngsters who rebelled against the stern standards of the Calvinist religious doctrine. Among these dissenters were the three young Dickinisons and a friend who would later marry Emily's brother Austin. The four young people formed "a little coterie which considered itself avant garde, despising the literal, the commonplace, and the conventional."² Their social activities were pleasant:

Published and unpublished reminiscences make clear that the level of taste in Amherst during the mid-century was remarkably high, and the gatherings - the riding and sledding and other outdoor parties - gay and hearty . . . Emily Dickinson vigorously participated in the frolics which the young people arranged, and the parents provided the means to carry through - even into the small hours.³

Born into her cultured and privileged Amherst family at the time when the thrust of the Calvinist ethic was beginning to wane, Emily Dickinson

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3 Johnson, p. 4.
was ironically aware of the generation gap between her parents and herself. Her father, Edward Dickinson, was a prosperous lawyer of Amherst, a civic-minded man who was a pillar of his church, the sponsor of diversified projects which brought progress to Amherst, treasurer of Amherst College, a member of the Massachusetts legislature and a member of the United States Congress for one term. He was a dominating, though not an unduly repressive personality, with a high sense of duty and integrity. Emily's father was, no doubt, the most influential person in her life, as proven by her whimsical, if satiric, comments about him in many of her letters. In order to discover who she was, she had to observe her family from a perspective of objectivity and distance, surrounding their personalities with a minimum of sentiment. For example in her April, 1862, letter to Samuel Higginson, responding to his inquiry about herself and her family, she wrote:

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.

In the course of her conversation with Higginson on their first meeting eight years later in 1870, she told him:

My father only reads on Sunday. He reads lonely and rigorous books.

I never knew how to tell time by the clock till I was fifteen. My father thought he had taught me, but I did not understand and I was afraid to say I did not and afraid to ask anyone else lest he should know. (Letters, unnumbered, p. 475)

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4 Anderson, p. 290.
5 Ibid., p. 10.
7 Johnson, p. 31.
After his death in 1874, she wrote of her father in a letter to Higginson:

His Heart was pure and terrible and I think no other like it exists. I am glad there is Immortality - but would have tested it myself before entrusting him. (Letters, 418)

Later she wrote, "Home is so far from Home since my Father died." (Letters, 441) Perhaps the most revealing of all her relationships to her father is the extant half sheet of stationery addressed to, "Dear Father," and signed, "Emily," with the blank paper between, indicating her feeling about the impossibility of further communication with him.

Her lack of mental response to her mother, who lived submerged in domestic activities, is clearly shown in her words both in letters and in conversations quoted by Thomas Wentworth Higginson:

My Mother does not care for Thought. (Letters, 261)

I never had a mother. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled. (Letters, unnumbered, p. 475)

I always ran Home to Awe when a child, if anything befell me. He was an awful Mother, but I liked him better than none.

What further distance could a daughter create?

Emily had close family ties with her sister and brother. Lavinia and she always pursued the same daily activities of the unmarried New England spinster - living at home, caring for house and garden, exchanging neighborly calls and thoughtful attentions from kitchen and garden with family friends. In maturity, Emily withdrew from outside social contacts but maintained selected friends and acquaintances through correspondence. During Emily's adult lifetime, Lavinia shielded her from contacts with the world, and after her death arranged the publication of Emily's poetry.

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8 Ibid., p. 33.
Though close to her sister, Lavinia was astounded at the quantity and scope of the poems left largely in carefully sewn packets in bureau drawers. She, of course, knew, as did everyone else that Emily wrote poetry, but that she could have produced anything like the vast number of poems found surpassed anyone's belief.

Austin, who moved next door to the Dickinson family after his marriage to Sue, understood his sister Emily better than anyone in the family. He saw through her self dramatizations she adopted to stage her public appearances. Although they were intimate while growing up and always remained close, the intimacy with Sue cooled after she married Austin, probably because Sue did not always see eye to eye with the poet about some of her poems.

In her close family circle Emily Dickinson's young days were spent in normal healthy, adolescent activity. In her teens she was considered a "local wit" and was a popular member of her social group. Her earliest surviving letters from 1842 show her as a person motivated to be both amusing and original. During her attendance at Amherst Academy, she helped edit a humorous column for the school magazine, *Forest Leaves*. During her one year (1847) at Mt. Holyoke Seminary, her forte was in telling amusing anecdotes, in burlesquing popular sermons of the day, and in writing witty letters and poems in imitation of the prevalent genres of American humor with which she came in contact. Both her prose and her poetry from her adolescent years show her cleverness, ingenuity, and wit. However, during this Mt. Holyoke year a difficulty arose for Emily in that she could not bring herself to accept the revelation experience of religious acceptance

10 Anderson, pp. 3-5.
which her friends found comfort in and which was expected by the Mt. Holyoke elders. Early in her life Emily began to hide her personal feelings with her humorous mask. In a Valentine poem of 1852, an irreverence not expected of young people of that time and place came from her pen:

Put down the apple, Adam,
And come away with me;
So shall thou have a pippin,
From off my father's tree.11

In a later letter to her literary mentor, Higginson, she wrote of her family:

They are religious – except me – and address an Eclipse every morning – whom they call their Father. (Letters 261)

She had the feeling that those of her acquaintance who blindly accepted the current externally experienced faith had an easier road to living than she, who early understood that this could not be for her, that her belief had to be something from within and not dishonestly superficial. She could neither pretend nor conform.

The great irony of Emily Dickinson's literary recognition was in her selection of the aid she sought from a preceptor or master. Had she happened to ask aid from some of the greater writers of her time who were eager to assist young writers and who might have had the imagination to see the Emily Dickinson poetry as being worthy of publication – such as Emerson or Howells, who posthumously touted her poetry – the history of her literary publication would have been different, and critics in 1969 would not still be battling for the clearest understanding of her poems. However, the family friends, Samuel Bowles and Josiah Holland, were successful editors who knew the taste of their reading public; Thomas Wentworth

11 Richard Chase, Emily Dickinson (New York, 1951), p. 27.
Higginson was a pedestrian publicist and critic. None of the three possessed a critical appreciation of such unorthodox poetry as Emily Dickinson created. Had she not been interested by Higginson through his magazine's publication of "letter to a Young Contributor," the world perhaps could have had the experience of her poetry during her lifetime and given her the recognition she felt she deserved.

When she first wrote to him requesting his aid and advice, she seemed to write in an ironic rather than a timid questioning manner because she realized "that she already had a fully formed aesthetic mode that gave life and originality to her thought." In his comment within his "Letter" he had said:

Draw near him [the editor] therefore with soft approaches and mild persuasions as his time has some value, if yours has not.

She responded:

Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive? The Mind is so near itself - it cannot see, distinctly - and I have none to ask - Should you think it breathed - and had you the leisure to tell me, I should feel quick gratitude. If I make the mistake - that you dared tell me - would give me the sincerer honor toward you - (Letters, 26C)

She deliberately included in this first letter four poems which conformed to none of his rules. Throughout her relations with Higginson she asked for his advice and took none of it. She knew what she was, what her poetry did, and finally resolutely put aside the idea of fame during her lifetime, convinced that recognition would eventually come.

In Higginson, at least, she had someone with whom she could converse in her literary language. She had found a sparring partner, a foil. She realized that although he was an outsider, he was a kindly man who was

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12 Anderson, p. 21.
interested in writers but confused by her originality and her unique way of living and of expressing herself.\textsuperscript{14} She did not misunderstand him but avoided insulting him directly by veiled response to his advice, which she never took. She realized his conventional taste and that his knowledge of craftsmanship was only useful to her as a sounding board because she knew he was incapable of recognizing her innovations as art.\textsuperscript{15} Having been refused publication in his Springfield Republican several times between 1858 and 1862 by Samuel Bowles and having received Higginson's suggestion of her need to wait to publish, indicating that she should write poetry that was more like poetry people were accustomed to, she must have determined to hide her wounded psyche by foregoing most worldly activities in order to concentrate on developing her intuitive art for the sake of later fame.\textsuperscript{16} Or perhaps she simply could not stand the drain of meeting people.

I smile when you suggest that I delay "to publish" - that being foreign to my thought as Firmament to Fin . . . If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her - if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the case. (Letters, 265)

By the time in her life when her friend and popular author, Helen Hunt Jackson, appreciated her genius, urged her to publish, and through an anonymous publication of a poem created a friendship by mail with Thomas Niles, who offered to publish her poetry, life's complications overwhelmed her and the time was too late. In March 1883 her great friend Judge Lord had suffered a stroke, her beloved eight year old nephew died in October, she had a nervous breakdown in June 1884, Judge Lord died in March 1885, and Emily herself died on May 15, 1886. Among Samuel Bowles' possessions was found this poem:

\textsuperscript{14} Anderson, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 21.
\textsuperscript{16} Miller, p. 3.
Victory comes late
And is held low to freezing lips
Too rapt with frost
To mind it!
How sweet it would have tasted.
Just a drop!
Was God so economical?
His table's spread too high
Except we dine on tiptoe!
Crumps fit such little mouths -
Cherries - suit Robins -
The Eagle's golden breakfast - dazzles them!
God keep his vow to "Sparrows"
Who of little love - know - how to starve!

The poet's prophetic cynicism was written in 1863 and draws a pattern for the subsequent course of her thought and the strength of her "sparrow-like" place in life. It also contains her ironic comment on the ways of God.

To return to the early portion of her experience, Emily Dickinson had little formal education, consisting of about the level of a completed high school education. She did not attend school after her eighteenth year. She had learned that her six years of school instruction intended to provide for three things: "the body's survival in the present, the mind's continued development in the future; and the soul's life in the hereafter." There was great religious emphasis, and Emily's lack of conversion was of great concern. How could she be elected "to the great society" without a formal and public statement of faith? Since she could not publicly accept religion, she felt that she did not belong to a group with a hope of salvation; therefore, after one year at Mt. Holyoke, her

18 Anderson, p. 28.
father felt that her health indicated that she should remain at home.

In spite of the weakness of her formal instruction, the books and periodicals of her home gave her opportunity for reading and breadth of comprehension. The library found in the Dickinson home has been preserved intact and catalogued. It has been and is being studied, with notations being made of the well read, partly read and uncut pages of these volumes. Because of the availability of reading material, Emily felt that she was a student all of her life. In her letter to Higginson, she said in response to his inquiry regarding her education:

I went to school, but in your manner and phrase had no education. You inquire my books. For poets, I have Keats and Mr. and Mrs. Browning. For prose, Mr. Ruskin, Sir Thomas Browne, and the Revelations. 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. (Letters, 261)

She slants her information so as to be devious rather than direct, and she does not include the whole story. For example, she does not mention her knowledge of the Bible; Shakespeare; the metaphysicals, Herbert, Vaughan, and Donne; Emerson, Thoreau, George Eliot, and the Brontes, all of whom she mentions in other letters.

Because of her failure to believe the standard formal "blood and thunder" of Calvinist theology which had been shaped to orthodox Puritan philosophy, and because she did not participate in the revivals, evangelism, and emotionalism, as part of the public demonstration of the religious mass hysteria and frenzy, she found need of a search for her individual belief. Of course, the King James Version of the Bible was the first book owned by New England families, and she was thoroughly familiar with many portions of both Old and New Testaments. The humorous but tense use she made of
her source materials illustrates the synthesis of ideas through her own being. Her familiarity with the Bible allowed her humorous twisting of Bible stories. In a letter she revealed a lifelong inquisitive interest in the Bible which was never concluded to her satisfaction.

The Fiction of Santa Claus always reminds me of the reply to my early question of "Who made the Bible?" - "Holy Men moved by the Holy Ghost," and though I have now ceased my investigations, the Solution is insufficient.19

While she did not disapprove of the Bible, she did feel critical of its contemporary explicators who interpreted a God of wrath rather than of love. In her poems she "poked the scriptures to make them come alive."20

The Bible is an antique Volume -
Written by faded Men
At the suggestion of Holy Spectres -
Subjects - Bethlehem -
Eden - the ancient Homestead -
Satan - the Brigadier -
Judas - the Great Defaulter -
David - the Troubadour -
Sin - a distinguished Precipice
Others must resist -
Boys that "believe" are very lonesome -
Other Boys are "lost" -
Had but the Tale a warbling Teller -
All the Boys would come -
Orpheus' Sermon captivated -
It did not condemn - (1545)

As she blends the Bible with mythology, she ironically compares the tones of each, to the detriment of the Bible as she knew it.

Stating in a letter that the Bible dealt with the center and that she dealt with circumference, she inverted Biblical stories for emphasis or wide-ranging effect or for the purpose of barbed humor. She reorganized and interpreted as if she were planning a complete new version of the

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20 Anderson, p. 18.
Bible, reworking the climactic dramas of many of the old heroes and villains to suit what she considered to be contemporary needs: she rewrote stories of Abraham, Moses, Belshazzar, Jacob, and others. Her verse satires on the Bible were a way of reinterpreting through the poet's eyes and words an objective approach of detachment, but they were not necessarily a part of her religious belief. For example her search for reality converts the Abraham-Isaac story:

Abraham to kill him
Was distinctly told
Isaac was an Urchin -
Abraham was old.

Not a hesitation
Abraham complied -
Flattered by Obeisance
Tyranny demurred -

Isaac - to his children
Lived to tell the tale -
Moral - with a Mastiff
Manners may prevail. (1317)

What she intends by her designation of "Mastiff" seems totally sacrilegious as a revelation of her feeling for the Creator. Or perhaps she considered the whole story simply a Mother Goose tale and intended no serious imputation. Another example of her witty reduction of a Bible story to human size follows:

Elijah's Wagon knew no thrill
Was innocent of Wheel
Elijah's horses as unique
As was his vehicle -

Elijah's journey to portray
Expire with him the skill
Who justified Elijah
In fact inscrutable. (1657)

Ibid., p. 19.
In her paralleling of home with Eden, she expresses joy in the isolation of the traditional Paradise, adding the ironic psychological comment that one never appreciates what one has until he no longer has it; for example, we never appreciate life while we live; and that we cannot go home again.

![Verse](https://example.com/verse.png)

She cynically points out as her psychological interpretation of the Adamic story:

![Verse](https://example.com/verse.png)

Emily Dickinson's attitude both to the Bible and to God was informally familiar, and her close search for truth and faith continued throughout her life through her reading and her synthesis of what she read:

Through her reading Emily Dickinson gained the vicarious experience and perspective that made possible the perceptive observations and penetrating analysis characteristic of her poetry. Her fondness for books and reading developed long before she sequestered herself in the homestead, and the reading interests that she manifested in her adolescent and young life were not inhibited by the seclusion of later years . . . Her reading reveals that she was related to her literary peers by no accident of mystical experience but by her own extensive knowledge of their lives and works.23

Doubtless, books formed an important part of her life. By nourishing

22 Capps, p. 145.

23 Ibid., p. 11.
her imagination and her memory, her reading broadened what could have been a too narrowed life of the recluse. She felt that her life was full.

In response to Higginson's first letter, which asked about her companions, she had responded:

You ask of my companions. Hills, sir, and the sundown and a dog as large as myself that my father bought me. They are better than human beings because they know but do not tell; and the noise in the pool at noon excels my piano. (Letters, 261)

It is surmised that Emily Dickinson had varied reasons to isolate herself physically from the world. Some feel that her love for the Reverend Samuel Wadsworth of Philadelphia, a happily married minister, was one of the reasons. Also, having had her poetry rejected for publication by both Bowles and Higginson, she, convinced of her own ability, felt that only by isolating herself from the world could she find time and power to concentrate on the development and expression of her poetry. Whatever the causes, basically she had need for time to focus her views and correlate them through her artistic perception. At about the age of twenty-five when her impetus for writing poetry exploded, overflowing her life from within, she had little time for social contact with fellow human beings. By 1869 she wrote to Higginson, "I do not cross my Father's ground to any House or Town." Her withdrawal and limitation was first to the village, then to the home and garden; then she avoided the calls of even intimate friends. Occasionally, she would listen to conversations from the shadowy halls, but her intensely desired seclusion was for the purpose of introspection so that she might concentrate on her inner sense of values. She needed


25 Ibid., p. 296.
to objectify the emotion she was overwhelmed with to express the truth for
which she searched. She exaggerated her desire for solitude to the extent
of having Lavinia address her letters so that her handwriting would not
be touched or seen by the world. She made only rare appearances to greet
visitors, always dramatically dressed in white and carrying a flower or
flowers. Sometimes, as when Mabel Loomis Todd played the piano, she would
listen from upstairs or from the hall and send notes or gifts of flowers in
appreciation. Although she did not see friends, but limited herself to
family, children, and the domestic servants, she did correspond with various
members of the family and with friends. Withdrawn from village life,
secluding her poetic self even from her family, through her letters she
found a medium for defining and creating the detachment necessary for
artistic perspective, detached from sentimentality. Keenly aware of a
writer's alienation from society, which created this perspective, she found
amusement in watching the human comedy around her and recording some of its
foibles and superficialities. 26

The Show is not the Show
But They that go
Menagerie 'to me
My Neighbor be - (1206)

Emily Dickinson inherited one difficult character trait from her father:
an unbending attachment to truth that prevented her professing something
she did not honestly believe. Therefore, she had to define what she did
believe:

26 Ibid., p. 11.
27 Capps, p. 29.
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 Nation —
Choose One —
Then — close the Valves of her attention —
Like Stone. (308)

Having made her decision to concentrate on poetry within her room, she spent her life outside of her necessary domestic duties, focusing on life's problems, convinced of her artistic purpose and the value of her concentration toward gleaning an objective perspective from her agonized emotional turmoil. By shutting the door to the world, she had freed herself to meet the challenge of her life. "She knew the sacrifice she was making, knew why, and was willing to gamble for the sake of a victory — immortality."

Dare you see a Soul at the White Heat?
Then crouch within the door —
Red is the Fire's common tint —
But when the vivid ore
Had vanished Flame conditions
It quivers from the Forge
Without a color, but the light
If unannointed Blaze
Least Village has its Blacksmith
Whose Anvil's even ring
Stands symbol for the finer Forge
That soundless tugs — within —
Refining these impatient Ores
With Hammer, and with Blaze
Until the Designated Light
Repudiate the Forge. (365)

To feel the truths of the universe, she sought unhampered by external superficialities, to condense her emotion objectively, and to translate what she learned through concentrated thought, demanded the whole of her

Miller, p. 3.
being in solitude for contemplation. She expressed her state of mind as being in condition to receive visionary thoughts through the sacrifice of externals to the loneliness which was vital to her creativity.

The Soul that hath a Guest
Doth seldom go abroad -
Diviner Crowd at Home
Obliterate the need -

And courtesy forbid
A Host's departure when
Upon Himself be visiting
The Emperor of Men - (674)

In contrast to the crowd she received at home, the people abroad, she stated that she found, "mistook the outside for the in, and talked of sacred things aloud and embarrassed my dog." She reversed the normal perspective by being critical of people who did not treat her reclusiveness as the natural way of living. In contrasting the politeness of visiting stars with the implied rudeness and boorishness of human visitors, she explains:

My best Acquaintances are those
With whom I spoke no Word -
The stars that stated come to Town
Esteemed Me never rude
Although their Celestial Call
I failed to make reply -
My constant - reverential Face
Sufficient Courtesy. (932)

She furthers comments friskily on the subject of identity:

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you - Nobody - too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! they'd banish us - you know!

How dreary - to be - Somebody!
How public - like a Frog -
To tell your name - the livelong June -
To an admiring Bog! (288)

If this comic spirit were a matter of sour grapes, Emily Dickinson used

her anguished feelings from the emptiness of her disappointment as did the mythological Phoenix for recreation from the ashes.

Relating her particular experience to the general universal experience, she expresses her individual spirit submerged in the overall spirit of the Universe, which, in turn, offers her the freedom to act as an individual. Yet, through her transcendental expression, her cynicism negates her optimism. She, unlike John Donne, chooses as objective correlative something less filled with vitality than an island: a stone. She admires and even envies its happy isolation, its passivity, its harmony with the universe which fuses its identity into the whole:

How happy is the little Stone
That rambles in the Road alone,
And doesn't care about Careers
And Exigencies never fears -
Whose Coat of elemental Brown
A passing Universe put on.
And independent as the Sun
Associates or glows alone
Fulfilling absolute Decree
In casual simplicity. (1510)

As did other cultured Amherst families, the Dickinsons subscribed to The Springfield Republican, a weekly four page newspaper in the 1840's, which later became a larger daily paper. The paper proudly spoke for the community. It published accounts of the progress of Amherst, agricultural, industrial, and historical, along with local, national, and foreign news. Its influence was almost as great as that of the Bible. Through Emily Dickinson's familiarity with the best known provincial newspaper in the United States, she learned from family friend Samuel Bowles, the editor, a clean-cut, laconic style. Samuel Bowles supervised every aspect of its publication and was tireless in his war on verbosity. His favorite advice was to put all of importance in the first sentence. Editorials were

30 George F. Whicher, This Was a Poet (New York, 1938), p. 170.
telescoped into paragraphs, paragraphs into two lines. He had no use for phrases that "did not make a hole in the target." His paper was renowned for its pithy, condensed sentences that "snapped like a whip and sometimes cut like a knife."\footnote{Ibid.}

Bowles loved the native vernacular, and printed the typical humorous stories written in the hearty American idiom. Of course, this local fare only increased the entertainment provided for the readers by reprinting the poems, stories, and articles by such recognized authors as Irving, Bryant, Poe, Longfellow, Holmes, Hawthorne, Whittier, and Mrs. Stowe.\footnote{Ibid., p. 171.}

Douglas Herrold's "Mrs. Caudle's Curtain Lectures" were reprinted as fast as copies of 	extit{Punch} arrived from England. Reprinting often from the humorous \textit{New York Spirit of the Times}, Bowles familiarized his readers with the type of frontier humor of the South and the Southwest as well as the Down-East characterization of the Yankee. In the early 1840's there were typical specimens of Southern humor from \textit{The East Alabemian}, edited by Johnson J. Hooper, who wrote the popular "Adventures of Simon Suggs;" chapters from William T. Thompson's "Major Jones's Courtship," and the perpetually reiterated tale of Cousin Sally Dillard.\footnote{Ibid.} From New England sources were reprinted Saba Smith's "Major Jack Downing" letters or imitators of burlesque interviews with ballerina Fanny Elsasser by "Jonathan Slick;" jocose realistic sketches of odd characters and local customs, such as "Josiah Baker. His Turkies and his Sweetheart," or "A Military Muster Down East," from \textit{The Yankee Blade} of Gardiner, Maine.
This native humor of both North and South "depended in part on a somewhat exaggerated but realistic observation of characters and their activities, in part on fantastic incident of the tall story variety, and in part on verbal extravagance and surprise." As early as 1840, parodies on sermons were popular when "Dowe's Patent Sermons" began to appear in *The New York Sunday Mirror*.

Other comic writing and emphasis grew through dramatic comedy, such as Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787), in which the Yankee character became popular along with the dramatic monologues at intermission which presented Down East natives who were considered to be quaint in their vernacular, their actions, and their ideas. Almanacs, jest books, dramas, newspapers, travel books, had made American readers cognizant of native interests, and fiction writers revealed low characters with comic amusement, through having them relate funny, exaggerated stories, or through having the anecdotes told about them.

By 1850 America had determined most of the things it was going to laugh about, and after that time authors varied and enhanced themes already popular. Characteristics of established Yankee humor were the use of local dialect, the emphasis on local background and individualized characters, with varying narrative techniques: letters written by the character depicted, verses by provincial poets, narratives bursting with dialogue, and dramatic prose monologues. Through her reading of *Scribner's* and *The

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34 Ibid., p. 172.
Atlantic Monthly, as well as The Springfield Republican, Emily Dickinson knew what amused America and made her laugh.

She was feeling in her way the electric vigor of a new nation in its young lustihood, conscious of uncommitted energies and unearmarked resources; life was an ecstasy that only an untrammelled imagination could fittingly interpret. All over America the sap was rising, stimulating a quick, rank foliation or popular humor that was soon to fall and merge with the soil, but stimulating, too, the fine flowering of a poet's response.38

38 Whicher, p. 188.
CHAPTER II - ELEMENTS OF HUMOR

Emily Dickinson had absorbed and synthesized into her being the essence of American humor. In her particular way, she felt the dynamic vigor of the adolescent nation, brimming with electric vitality and unlimited resources, human and material. Her comic concern is not typical of the humorists of her time and place because of the universality of her perspective and interests which lift her beyond nineteenth century American matters. Nor is her poetic art on a comparable plane, since her mental capers ranged broadly, limited only by her soaring imagination. However, her comic spirit stems from the same sense of freedom and individuality as that of the native American humorists, as do the literary devices and ideas she employs which are organic to their genre. Laughing at what they feared and whistling to keep up their courage, the American humorists and Emily Dickinson shared the following literary approaches as they revealed facets of American character and thought: detailed realism; underlying tones of naturalism with its violence and unconcern; imaginative and brilliantly original and perceptive metaphors; and extravagant language, both of hyperbole and deflation.

Emily Dickinson's humorous craftsmanship controls her poetry in four major ways: through her use of a conversational poetic style, which creates brief and sometimes epigrammatic monologues; through her bantering, irreverent tone and attitude; through her occasional use of the
narrative technique; and through her use of language which creates humor by exaggeration or understatement, by word play of incongruous contrast, juxtaposition, paradox, and an occasional pun. Because of her extensive use of irony as a humorous device, separate chapters will deal with this approach.

The quality of Emily Dickinson's humor cannot be considered as "native" or "national" American humor in the following sense:

Humour is national when it is impregnated with the convictions, customs, and associations of a nation. . . National American humour must be all this transferred into shapes which produce laughter. The humour of a people is their institutions, laws, customs, manners, habits, characters, convictions, - their scenery, whether of the sea, the city, or the hills expressed in the language of the ludicrous.\(^{39}\)

Her concerns are supra-national and usually more generalized and universalized in material and attitude than in the treatment by the native American humorists, even though she stated that she saw things "New Englandly."

Her purpose differed from that of the humorists as they wrote to entertain a contemporary audience, whereas she primarily wrote to illuminate her own thinking, to locate "the Single Hound, her own Identity."

More than one hundred and fifty of her 1775 poems speak with the conversationalist's word, "I," which technique is direct from the oral tradition of the American humorists' style. Being speaker as well as actor in her own poems creates the dramatic tension and intimacy of shared confidences.

She conveys to the reader with whom she speaks not only the energy and vitality of her words but a sense of the common human experience, urgent and immediate.\(^{40}\)

\(^{39}\) H.W., "Slick, Downing, Crockett, Etc.," The London and Westminster Review, XXXII (December, 1838), 138-139, quoted in Blair, p. 3.

The Only News I know
Is Bulletins All Day
From Immortality.

The Only Shows I see -
Tomorrow and Today -
Perchance Eternity -

The Only One I meet
Is God - the Only Street -
Existence - This Traversed
If Other News there be -
Or Admirable Show -
I'll tell it you (827)

Her words are spontaneous, natural with the casualness of conversation, and
flowing as though immediately spoken. Although the subject matter differs,
her approach is that of The Farmer's Almanac in the sharing and promising to
share matters of community interest among neighbors.

Emily Dickinson enjoys parodying the raconteur's verbosity in his
biographical and environmental survey of his characters. She might have
been inspired by such a work as Seba Smith's portrait of Jack's Grandfather
in his "Jack Downing Letters and Other Dockyments":

As I said afore, my grandfather, old Mr. Zebedee Downing, was
the first settler in Downingville ... As it is the fashion, in
writing the lives of great folks, to go back and tell something
about their posterity, I spose I ought to give some account of my
good old grandfather, for he was a true patriot, and as strong a re-
publican as ever uncle Joshua was. He was born somewhere in the
old bay State away back of Boston, and when the revolutionary war
come on, he went a sogering ... 41

She makes barbed fun of the New Englander's love of his ancestry by her
treatment:

Death is the only Secret -
Death, the only One
You cannot find out all about
In his "native town."

Nobody knew "his Father" -
Never was a Boy -
Hadn't any playmates,
Or "Early History." (153)

41 Blair, p. 203.
Since a good conversationalist knows that self-centeredness, especially self pity, bores the listener, Emily Dickinson objectifies and tempers the depths of her serious matters with her attitude of spoken gayety. She tells of her internal emotional pain but with a wry smile which sees her tottering on the edge of self-pity but prevents her falling into the pit. She observes herself in this uncomfortable, hesitant attitude, and laughs at herself:

42

I can wade Grief -  
Whole pools of it -  
I'm used to that -  
But the least push of Joy  
Breaks up my feet -  
And I topple drunken -  
Let no Pebble - smile -  
'Twas the New Liquor -  
That was all! (252)

And again she deflates herself with objective whimsy:

I was a Phebe - nothing more  
A Phebe - nothing less -  
The little note that others dropt  
I fitted into place.  
I dwelt too low that any seek -  
Too shy, that any blame -  
A Phebe makes a little print  
Upon the Floors of Fame. (1009)

In similar reasoning, William Tappan Thompson has Major Jones laugh at himself in his shy love for Miss Mary. Too modest to ask THE question, he suspends himself overnight in a meal bag as a "Christmas" gift which Miss Mary has promised to keep forever.

43

Not only does Emily Dickinson converse with the reader, but she carries on a dialogue with God. Her bantering and irreverent tone of intimacy does not belie her faith, yet it is totally foreign to the

42 MacLeish, p. 24.
43 Blair, pp. 326-330.
Puritan ethic. While covering her feeling of awe with her playfulness, here she borders on the impertinent:

Papa, above!  
Regard a Mouse  
O'erpowered by the Cat!  
Reserve within thy kingdom  
A "Mansion" for the Rat!

Snug in seraphic Cupboards  
To nibble all the day,  
While unsuspecting Cycles  
Wheel solemnly away! (61)

Although she is at times on intimate, gossipy, social terms with God, Emily Dickinson never hesitates to point out what she feels to be an injustice:

"Heavenly Father " - take to thee  
The supreme iniquity  
Fashioned by thy candid Hand  
In a moment contraband -  
Though to trust us - seems to us  
More respectful - "We are dust." (1461)

Later in his Letters from Earth, Mark Twain makes a similar reprimand of the Creator. Sometimes she laughs, as with a child's innocent air, at her father's Puritan God of fire and brimstone; by so doing she brings Him close to New England:

Of God we ask one favor,  
That we may be forgiven -  
For what, he is presumed to know -  
The crime from us is hidden -  
Immured the whole of Life  
Within a magic Prison  
We reprimand the Happiness  
That too competes with Heaven. (1601)

Occasionally, she becomes even more cynical, as in this poem in which she adopts the impersonal third person's point of view as she relates her anecdote to her listener:
I never lost as much but twice,
And that was in the sod;
Twice have I stood a beggar
Before the door of God!

Angels, twice descending,
Reimbursed my store.
Burglar, banker, father,
I am poor once more. (49)

Her medley of name-calling is made even more explicit in her synchronization within Longfellow's poem, "The Courtship of Miles Standish," of the relationship between God and His Son:

God is a distant, stately Lover —
Woos, as He states us — by His Son
Verily a vicarious Courtship —
"Miles" and "Priscill" were such an One.

But — lest the Soul — like fair "Priscilla"
Choose the Envoy — and spur the Groom —
Vouches with hyperbolic archness
"Miles" and "John Alden" were Synonyme. (357)

Several elements in the narrative style of the American humorists effected Emily Dickinson's technique. She uses exaggerated, yet realistic, observation of character and scene as she tells a fantastic incident; and the event has a wide-ranging meaning beyond the facts themselves. T. B. Thorpe uses similar craftsmanship in "The Big Bear of Arkansas," as does George W. Harris in Sut Lovingood's story of "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting." The stories also have a similar feeling of the inevitable denouement as does Emily Dickinson's "Because I Could Not Stop for Death.

Just as Jim Dogett feels that the bear was the unhuntable bear which was not killed by the hunter but which died because his time had come, and as Sut Lovingood feels that Mrs. Yardley was not killed either by her love for diamond quilts or by the run-away horse but by her heart which stopped beating, so Emily Dickinson feels that the journey to eternity was inevitable in her poem. In "Because I Could Not Stop for Death,"
there is also a suggestion of the character of the Yankee Peddler such as Thomas Chandler Haliburton's "Sam Slick," who can always outwit anybody by using his Yankee ingenuity "by a knowledge of soft sawder and human natur." In the guise of the dapper, chivalric, and romantic gentleman, Death personified is a magnificent hoax.

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 desire too,
For his Civility -

Emily also uses the incongruous elements of life in the activity of the playing children and of the "Gazing Grain," incongruity being one phase of the American humorists' art.

We passed the School, where children strove
At recess - in the ring -
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain
We passed the Setting Sun -

With the sense of the humorists' understatement, she expresses her feeling of shock and surprise by contrasting the timelessness of Eternity with her first recognition of the journey's destination:

Since then - 'tis Centuries - and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses Heads
Were toward Eternity. (712)

The suggestiveness shrieks beyond what the quiet words say in the ambiguous tale.

Her artistry in personifying natural forces such as death or the sea is that of Joel Chandler Harris whose Uncle Remus Stories dramatize ideological and political conflict in the humanized characters of "Erer Fox"

44 Blair, p. 229.
and "Brer Rabbit." Another adventure story with humorous elements of personification combine with overtones of mystery and fear in the persona of an innocent view of an eventful experience:

I started Early - Took my Dog -
And visited the Sea -
The Mermaids in the Basement
Came out to look at me.

And Frigates - in the Upper Floor
Extended Hempen Hands -
Presuming Me to be a Mouse -
Aground - upon the Sands -

But no Man moved Me - till the Tide
Went past my simple shoe -
And past my Apron - and my Belt
And past my Boddice - too -

And made as He would eat me up -
As wholly as a Dew
Upon a Dandelion's Sleeve -
And then - I started - too -

And He - He followed - close behind -
I felt His Silver Heel
Upon my Ankle - Then my Shoes
Would overflow with Pearl -

Until We met the Solid Town -
No one He seemed to know -
And bowing - with a Mighty look -
At me - The Sea withdrew. (520)

With a dramatic cast of characters, she succinctly visualizes in fearful glee the dangers and excitement of mermaids; of ships with extended rope hands thinking her a mouse in trouble; and of the vicious, foreboding, threatening Sea himself, lonely and terrible, menacing, attacking, and pursuing until stopped by the reality and comfort offered by the social community of men to which she returns.

Again Emily Dickinson dramatizes with a humorous bravado the horror and unreality of unknown dangers for humanity in a world filled with every sort of observing eyes:
I know some Lonely Houses off the Road
A Robber'd like the look of -
Wooden barred,
And Windows hanging low
Inviting to -
A Portico,
Where two could creep -
One - hand the Tools -
The other peep -
To make sure All's Asleep -
Old fashioned eyes -
Not easy to surprise!

How orderly the Kitchen'd look, by night,
With just a Clock -
But they could gag the Tick -
And Mice won't bark -
And so the Walls - don't tell -
None - will

A pair of Spectacles ajar just stir -
An Almanac's aware -
Was it the Mat - winked,
Or a Nervous Star?
The Moon - slides down the stairs
To see - who's there!

Day - rattles - too -
Stealth's - slow -
The Sun has got as far
As the third Sycamore
Screams Chanticleer "Who's there?"

And Echoes - Trains away,
Sneer - "where!"
While the old Couple, just astir
Fancy the Sunrise - left the door ajar (289)

The whimsical fear lies not in what happened, but in the fact that nothing happened in such a fear-laden mood of mysterious events enveloping a tense and lonely night. The fright-surprise technique is similar to Edgar Allen Poe's usage in "The Telltale Heart."

In an observant child's narrative, Emily Dickinson criticizes the material progress of mankind, which takes him nowhere with enormous speed - and for no discernible reason.
I Like to see it lap the Miles - 
And lick the Valleys up - 
And stop to feed itself at Tanks - 
And then prodigious stop

Around a Pile of Mountains - 
And supercilious peer 
In shanties - by the sides of Roads 
And then a Quarry pare

To fit it's [sides] 
And crawl between 
Complaining all the while 
In horrid - hooting stanza - 
Then chase itself down Hill

Then neigh like Boerengers - 
Then prompter than a Star 
Stop - docile and omnipotent 
At it's own stable door - (585)

Every known element of speed is included here in the taut words and breathless pace of the categorizing story-teller. The rush has elements of the hunt in Thorpe's "The Big Bear from Arkansas," or in G. W. Harris' preacher's haste in "Parson John Bullen's Lizards." Emily Dickinson satirically presents the breathlessness as total futility, commenting humorously on the realism of the "Iron horse" and its accomplishment as a speeding, neighing horse.

In the tradition of Poor Richard's Almanac, Emily Dickinson makes epigrammatic sense which cuts to the core of her meaning. In the comic process of upsetting grammar and syntax, she simplifies problems and then expands them into infinity. In a laconic New England style of speech, she develops an elliptical style by pruning away every possible word to reach the skeletal language. This technique completely involves the reader in the words and images of the poetry so that he can interpret the fundamental idea out of the ambiguity she intentionally prepares. For example, she states:

"Following nineteenth century custom, Emily Dickinson writes the possessive "its" with an apostrophe. Throughout this paper her practice will be transcribed without further notation."
We knew not that we were to live
Nor when - we are to die -
Our ignorance - our cuirass is -
We wear Mortality
As lightly as an Option Gown
Till asked to take it off -
By his intrusion, God is known-
It is the same with Life - (1462)

The suggestive and paradoxical use of the word "intrusion" is her sceptical comment. And again she writes:

Best Things dwell out of Sight
The Pearl - the Just - Our Thought

(The incongruous cataloguing of the three substantives above creates a comic thrust.)

Most shun the Public Air
Legitimate, and Rare -

The Capsule of the Wind -
The Capsule of the Mind
Exhibit here, as doth a Burr -
Germ's Germ be where? (998)

In each of these brief statements Emily Dickinson is saying that the quest to discover the secret of life's vitality is hidden to the vision and reason of men. Ironically, the fact can only be known by its covering; the ultimate reality is encased and hidden by the image of clothing in the first poem and by the burr in the second.

The reader is surprised, amused, and sometimes startled by her connotative word choice as she juxtaposes Anglo-Saxon and Latin-derived vocabulary for expanded meaning or mixes words from different jargons for humorous comprehensions. She uses trivia to illuminate ideas of contrasting moral or spiritual significance, at times. She approached words with the eagerness of an explorer. Language spelled the excitement of adventure, the fresh wonder of seeing the dark side of the moon.
She used words as if she were the first to do so, with a joy and an awe largely lost to English poetry since the Renaissance. She created words with the artist's palette of color, boldly maneuvering her vocabulary, collapsing the syntax, springing the rhythm, slanting the rhyme. She twisted words into new contexts with a resulting wealth of suggestiveness and revitalization of language in the process.45

Using her 1847 enlarged edition of Webster's Unabridged American Dictionary of the English Language, she also made parallel use of words of different etymology and connotative spheres, but she also absorbed her vocabulary-in-action from her reading. Her uniqueness in word usage and her humor can be understood from the following quatrain in which she pairs off the simple word with the scholarly, as she contrasts the older Calvinist theology with a new type of religion suggested through science. Her irony is clear through her use of word ancestry:

"Faith" is a fine invention
When Gentlemen can see
But microscopes are prudent
In an Emergency. (185)

Lining up the nouns from the four lines will focus on her intent: invention - microscope - prudent - emergency. The words involving science are derived from classical languages. The older theological words such as faith are Anglo-Saxon in origin. The implication is that the Calvinist faith of the New England theocracy was "invented" by New England pioneers and therefore was a mechanical invention. The "faith" is adhered to by "Gentlemen" - both words being of Latin derivation - not just by human beings, but "Gentlemen." This suggests people of an upper social class with a superficial refinement and an acquired, rather than an inherited, point of view. Therefore, she is suggesting a deterioration of religion

45 Anderson, p. 3.
46 Ibid., p. 34.
to a social function. "Prudent" modifies "microscope," suggesting the Benjamin Franklin sort of common-sense wisdom, but also suggesting the medieval religious meaning, to be "endowed with the capacity of perceiving divine truth." The irony of the lines lies in the suggestion that science offers a way to see the truth of the Divine Being. The emergency is, no doubt, the complexity which needs to be resolved in the disintegrating spiritual matters of the nineteenth century.  

In the following classic she set the abstract against the concrete:

He ate and drank the precious Words -  
His Spirit grew robust -  
He knew no more that he was poor,  
Nor that his frame was Dust -  

He danced along the dingy Days  
And this Bequest of Wings  
Was but a Book - What Liberty  
A loosened spirit brings. (1587)

"Precious" is juxtaposed against "poor," and "spirit" against "dust." By her use of poignant contrast, a man who physically imbibes words as revelation of divine doctrine becomes strong and is raised above daily problems of poverty and the limitations of life. In heady words, this man's thoughts dance above his ordinary life - the "bequest" lifts man above his problems and does not praise immortality but freedom to live. From such use of etymology, she gives philosophical and spiritual significance through her choice of understated symbolic trivia. As did other American humorists, she used words and expressed thoughts which are "part terror, part vision, part insight and observation."  

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48 Blake and Wells, p. 4.
CHAPTER III - IRONY AS HUMOR

Although Emily Dickinson occupies a wide range on the continuum of humor, from barely perceptible whimsy to surprise and shock, she uses the three kinds of irony more frequently than other devices of the comic spirit. In this sense Emily Dickinson uses irony in attitude as a comic mask, in situation by exaggeration or deflation, and in structure by her verbal usage. As a humorous technique, her irony silhouettes the difference between the way things are and the way they ought to be. In this critical sense the use of irony expresses a feeling of superiority as one laughs with a deflating force at a wrong in order not to cry. Irony woven into the fabric of a work often allows the comic to come close to the tragic. Thereby, she uses irony as a barbed force of the comic spirit, as an illuminating, generating, and stoically optimistic literary device. She achieves her ironic perspective by her use of paradox, sarcasm, caricature, satire, and incongruity through the two major manifestations of the comic technique: form and language.

In her interpretation of a changing world through her intense and fresh poetic flashes of vision, no choice of literary framework for her poetry could have punctuated Emily Dickinson's poetic purpose with as great irony and incongruity as her choice of the Common Hymn form to carry the weight of her shrinking and doubting religious sensibility. By making it bear the burden of new and complicated ideas instead of the simplicities of
faith, she turned the framework into an instrument of surprise. Transforming the hymn form from the expression of ritual in the reiteration of an accepted belief, she creates below the depths of the reader's consciousness a vehicle from which to judge the spiritual adventures of a doubting soul. The copy of Watts' *Hymns* in her father's household taught her how hymn meters should be. She focused through the simple form a content of complex thought and change of the fundamental pattern, which she twisted into an erratic, jerky, confusing expansiveness. She clearly expressed her chaotic state of mind, as did Whitman and Hopkins in their creation of new poetic modes.\(^{49}\) She avoided monotony by transfiguring the basic patterns in countless ways, crowding stressed monosyllables together, juxtaposing meaning accents with metric accents, using harmonizing devices to unify the content and the form. She used bold experimentation and radical innovation by

playing every conceivable change on the basic tunes, breaking and reshaping foot, line, and stanza, substituting silences for sounds until she could escape from her self-imposed strait-jacket, creating a counterpoint on Watts. To traditional exact rhyming, she added assonance, consonance, identical and suspended rhyme, slant and internal alliteration, deliberate devices to make of her patterns something quite different from a hymn. She experimented with initial reiteration, parallelism, the mingling of prose rhythms with poetic meters and intricate patterns of vowel and consonant tones.\(^{50}\)

Although her original intent was changed and "improved" later by those who tried to edit her poetry, destroying her plan in the process, she meant her lines as she wrote them with each variance from a standard pattern intentional. Hymnologists did not ask such questions as she irreverently asked:

\(^{49}\) Anderson, pp. 24-25.

Father, I bring thee - not Myself -
That were the little load -
I bring thee the departed Heart
I had not strength to hold -

The Heart I cherished in my own
Till mine - too heavy grew -
Yet - strangest - heavier - since it went -
Is it too large for you? (217)

Added to the undercurrent of irony in her basic use of the hymn form, she also uses qualities of the medieval ballad and the long buried folk wisdom of the Mother Goose stanzas as well, with strong, colloquial idioms, roughened meters and slant rhymes, with swift concise climaxes. She mixes sarcasm with piety in the sort of comic device that approaches the tragic.

Familiarity and deflation is revealed:

Lightly stepped a yellow star
To its lofty place
Loosed the Moon her silver hat
From her lustral Face
All of Evening softly lit
As an Astral Hall
Father I observed to Heaven
You are punctual. (1672)

The sibilants and liquids of the first few lines culminate in Victorian euphemism in the words "lustral" and "astral." She upsets the whole patter in an incongruous shift of word and rhythm. By the changed pace of the conversational bump of "punctual," she reverses the meaning of the poem. It is not the heavens which rotate, but the earth. By using the pre-Copernican world with the earth centrally located, Emily Dickinson points satisfyingly at man's ignorant attitude toward the cosmos.

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51 Ibid., p. 25.
52 Ibid., p. 28.
Her use of irony is enlarged by her manner of objectifying Romantic sentimentality into aphoristic essence through her own senses and sensitivity. Her perspective of the world which she gained paradoxically by giving up the world, plus her masking humor, helped her objectify emotional expression into ironic depths and richness of insight. As an individual struggling to bring the universe of clay and of spirit into a unified whole, she dramatizes the tensions of an ambivalent religious point of view in simple terms. By showing the reader her emotions through examples rather than through explanation, she removes the Romantic passion from her poetry and is an objective viewer of the passing scene.

The patterns elaborated by the Romantic poets were too ornate for her, and by the middle of the century, they had lost the impulse that had given them validity. . . She and Whitman and Hopkins were the three great experimenters of the age, searching for new forms, or mutations of old ones, in order to discover the meanings of their visions. Unknown to each other, they were kindred spirits only in the radicalism of their experiments. By their technique they fused their form and meaning.\(^5\)

One of her simpler poems indicates clearly the absence of sentimentality:

\begin{quote}
New feet within my garden go -
New fingers stir the sod -
A Troubadour upon the Elm
Betrays the solitude -

New children play upon the green -
New Weary sleep below -
And still the pensive Spring returns -
And still the punctual snow! (88)
\end{quote}

The timeless perspective toward the new dead with the emphasis on the unceasing and dependable swing of the seasons shows the shift from an emotional and personal wailing about the loss of the one who has died.

In the following poem, the irony is in Emily Dickinson's basic imagery of a religious body of crickets who are praying, as humorous and imaginative creation as the pen of any American literary comedian could have devised.

\(^5\) Ibid., pp. 23-24.
An objective awareness of time's passage, and surprise and sadness that
the summer time of Nature's fulfillment, is quickly passing is regretted:

Further in Summer than the Birds
Pathetic from the Grass
A Minor Nation celebrates
It's unobstrusive Mass

... Antiquest felt at Noon
When August burning low
Arise this spectral Canticle
Repose to typify.

Remit as yet no Grace
No Furrow on the Glow
Yet a Druidic Difference
Enhances Nature now. (1068)

Through this solemn religious ceremony of communion, the crickets' saying
high mass to their mother earth marks the waning summer in its peak month
of August and encourages lonely and somber thoughts. One word in each
stanza ties the theme together: pathetic - pensive - spectral - enhances.
Because of the use of the word "antiquest" and the suggested antiquity of
"Druidic Difference," summer's fullness brings no contentment but an
uneasy backward glance into the past.56

Simple joy in anticipating the approaching spring is ironically
changed by line three of the following poem, "But God be with the Clown."
If readers think into the thoughts of a clown, who is a funny fellow laugh-
ing to hide his grief at the harshness of life, they are stung by the
juxtaposition of kinetic and frenetic joy at the promise of spring versus
a deeper sense of ironic despair when they realize that spring is merely

54 Johnson, p. 184.
56 Ibid., p. 186.
an experiment which fails in permanence.

A little madness in the Spring
Is wholesome even for the King —
But God be with the Clown —
Who ponders this tremendous scene —
This whole Experiment of Green —
As if it were his own! (1333)

Winter also has the power to sting the reader ironically by the light on a winter's afternoon which arouses a mysterious feeling of shadow, darkness, and depression:

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 — (258)

The colloquial use of the New England word "heft" to mean the weight of the darkness and coldness of winter brings a vividness beyond the meaning of physical leadenness. It suggests the deepening chill and quiet of air preceding a snowstorm. The ambiguity of the "heft of Cathedral Tunes" implies that to souls of strong orthodox faith, the oppressiveness would be missing. However, the person of non-conforming faith, which the poet professes to be by implication, is deeply pained and afflicted by his own lack. The language itself carries the weight of gloom: oppresses, hurt, scar, despair, and affliction. Through the artistry of these words in combination, the impermanence of winter gloom ironically becomes permanent.
The brilliant imagery and suggestiveness of the pathetic fallacy, which, in the landscape personification, is listening while the shadows hold their breath, is surpassed only by the measurement of distance on the "look of Death." The mysterious light, instead of brightening, darkens. When this dull light is present, it is an imperial infliction from the heavens and must be endured— even by the landscape, which it depresses. The emotional expression within the poem is objectified through the imagery; however, responsive passion in the reader may be as deeply aroused by Emily Dickinson's objectivity as by a Romantic poet's "I faint, I bleed, I die."

The ironic mask which was plumbed from the depths of her being, Emily Dickinson needed to hide her awareness that her quest to relate her physical and spiritual worlds was frustrating, if not hopeless. She needed to hide the dramatic tension she felt as she sought a truth in which she could believe. She knew that this truth would have to be more adequate than the dying force of the New England Calvinism. She needed to hide her frantic reaching for something which proved to be beyond her reach. As she struggled to understand the secrets of existence through the common experience of man, she used her comic sense to cover her cosmic pain by deflating infinite matters:

The Missing All, prevented Me
From missing minor Things.
If nothing larger than a World's
Departure from a Hinge
Or Sun's extinction, be observed
'Twas not so large that I
Could lift my Forehead from my word
For Curiosity. (985)

By humorous deflation, which cut the universe down more to her size, she used the device of the early American humorists who created the Davy Crockett legends. Crockett telescoped the cosmos into manageable proportions through  

57 Ibid., p. 189.
unjamming the frozen sun, thereby allowing the earth to regain its motion, and walked home with a piece of sunrise in his pocket. A mere American continent was not so massively frightening to Crockett after such a reduction of the universe.

Emily Dickinson was cynically conscious of the reason for her choice of a humorous perspective in her artistry. Her aesthetic theory evolved throughout the course of her poetic life. Realizing at about age twenty that she enjoyed an original sense of humor and a gift for expressing her ideas in a new type of poetic form, she intuitively adopted a comic mask both to hide and to explain her inmost self. In a poem written about 1860, at the beginning of her most anguished—and most productive—period of writing, she stated that she would gloss over her struggling spirit, teeming with fears, doubt, and a feeling of rejection as a poet. She masks her despair, as did Edgar Allen Poe through Senora Psyche Zenobia in his essay, "How to Write a Blackwood Article." Poe illustrated his understanding of the nature of a writer's suffering through the social disrespect that was the fate of the author in America. Emily Dickinson wrote:

A Wounded Deer - leaps highest -
I've heard the Hunter tell -
'Tis but the Extasy of death
And then the Brake is still -

The Smitten Rock that gushes!
The trampled Steel that springs!
A cheek is always redder
Just where the Hectic stings!

Mirth is the Mail of Anguish -
In which it Cautious Arm
Lest anybody spy the blood
And "you're hurt" exclaim! (165)

She felt herself to be the Wounded Deer, the Smitten Rock, the trampled Steel, the stung Cheek. She was hurt first by her own inability to solve
her problem of religious belief, and then by the threefold rejection of her poetry by her friends, editors Samuel Bowles, Josiah Holland, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who could easily have published her poetry had they thought it worthy. Aware that she could not expose the depths of her personal problem, she determined both by conscious logic and subconscious intuition to explore her problem in the best way she knew, through writing her verses. Her encompassing subject was to be truth, reality; she knew, as do modern students of psychology, that she had to approach her problem from varying angles. When she came to one impasse, she had to try another road of approach. But throughout her struggle, she felt that she had to protect her inmost self and personal insight. Therefore, in about 1868, she established poetically a second directional marker, a slanted revolt against established patterns:

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 explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind. (1129)

The circuitous approach through the narration of the frontier teller of tall tales is comparable. For example, the heroic proportions and achievements of a Paul Bunyan are inflated by the astounding size and feats of the animals and insects surrounding him, with which he successfully deals. The brittleness of the pervasive "T's" punctuate the thought with staccato sound while the hissing "S's" ironically magnify the enormity of the problem. Typical of Emily Dickinson's developing style is the abrupt effect emphasized by the poetic shorthand with its fractured grammar, its abbreviated
syntax, its hieroglyphic compression of thought. She states that Truth is too superbly surprising and dazzling for man to understand directly. He may only know the paths that lead to Truth and grow gradually accustomed to the physical guides, the indicators, which point the way toward a logical growth of understanding. Feeling that Truth could not be directly sought via the straight line as the shortest distance between two points, she feels that the brilliant impact of the epiphany can only be tackled by diffusion. She suggests that man is dazzled en route into a relative blindness - or into knowing truth. Emily Dickinson draws no final conclusions. So, by her cover-up with the comic mask and by indirection, she will approach the problems of the human condition.

As a clarification of the purpose of her life, she developed a poetic credo which pinpointed her limitation. Believing that she was a poet and would create in her finite way something that would live, she wrote in about 1864:

The Poets light but Lamps -
Themselves - go out -
The Wicks they stimulate -
If vital Light

Inhere as do the Suns -
Each Age a Lens
Disseminating their
Circumference - (883)

In contrast to the generated and infinite light of the sun which is self-sustaining, the light of an artificial lamp lit by a match at the hands of the poet must be "stimulated with a living light, which will continue with a living light of immortality of its own." In the last three lines of the poem, the key word is "disseminating", which contains "both the idea of scattering abroad and the seminal nature of the poems as seeds."\(^{58}\) The

\(^{58}\)Anderson, p. 58.
Lens is the magnifying glass through which succeeding ages of men may distort or enlarge their meanings. If the poet lights a living light, he is ironically content to cease to exist physically as long as light to pierce the dark of the universe has been created through his words.

In about 1863 Emily Dickinson further points out exactly how she hopes to accomplish this silhouetting of abstract belief through concrete illustration. She hopes to sift from ordinary things surrounding the essence of understanding that central core, in spite of her limited experience:

Essential Oils are wrung -  
The Atter from the Rose  
Is not expressed by Suns - alone -  
It is the gift of Screws -  
The General Rose decay -  
While this - in Lady's Drawer  
Make Summer, when the Lady lie  
In spiceless Sepulchre. (675)

She also feels the irony of her summer-making lines' lying eternally hidden in her bureau drawers. She feels that if, through her own screws of concrete illustration and symbol, she could wring the essence of things from the whole, she could preserve the eternal warmth, light, and harmony of summer fulfillment in her poems - IF they should ever be removed from those bureau drawers and published.

In a further imaginative treatment of fame as immortality in timelessness, she writes:

A Word dropped careless on a Page  
May stimulate an eye  
When folded in perpetual seam  
The Wrinkled Maker lie

Infection in the sentence breeds -  
We may inhale Dispair  
At distance of Centuries  
From the Malaria. (1261)

Feeling that all words may be immortal, however, does not convince her that
the author of the word, either by intuition or reason can solve the riddle of existence. She seems to be consistent in her concerns but inconsistent in her attitude toward the concerns.

Emily Dickinson satirized both human foibles and local types of characters, as did Mark Twain the "The Celebrated Jumping Frog," or Bret Harte in "The Luck of Roaring Camp." With a swift and clean stroke she drew her caricatures in concentrated form, reversing the slow development used by the anecdotists in their realistic sketches of town or country characters. The hypocrisy of ministers was a "favorite dislike" of Sut Lovingood who noted that ministers hugged only the pretty girls; Simon Suggs pointed up materialistic preachers by planning to become a preacher, planning to build a church, and then absconding with the collection plate. Emily Dickinson writes:

He preached upon "Breadth"
Till it argued him narrow -
The Broad are too broad to define
And of "Truth" until it proclaimed him a Liar
And Truth never flaunted a Sign -

Simplicity fled from his counterfeit presence
As Gold the Pyrites would shun -
What confusion would cover the innocent Jesus
To meet so enabled a Man! (1207)

The superficial didacticism of this minister is punctured by the presence of reality, truth, and religion. Anything which seemed pretentious or insincere received the barbed point of Emily Dickinson's wit.

The banal and vacuous members of her own sex, she ridicules with a sweet insincerity in words which sound like praises on the face of them:

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60 George F. Whicher, This Was a Poet (New York, 1938), p. 186.
Superficially, her comment on the angelic, chaste, refined lady-like characteristics of the gentlewomen is belied by the pairing of opposites in the overall structure, coiled so that it can spring open with shock value. The "Cherubic Creatures" are so soft as to be nothing as is the softness of plush; they have such "Dimity Convictions"; they are so horrified at the motley nature of human beings. They are so aristocratic, they believe, that Emily Dickinson thinks they would look down on even Christ's background. She has originated a probing and punishing comment on her sex. The "horror so refined" can be duplicated in "Widow Bedott's Monologues" and in "Mrs. Partington," who, with keen sensibility and thoughtfulness, orders warm water in which to drown unwanted kittens to prevent their being uncomfortably chilled in the process.

As ironically as Mark Twain's "Blue Jay," who did not understand that the hole he was trying to fill with acorns was a chimney to a house, so Emily Dickinson searched for the answers to the problems of life through a concentrated study of death. She might have agreed with Twain who later said:

I think we never become really and genuinely our entire and honest selves until we are dead - and not then until we have been dead years and years. People ought to start dead, and then they would be honest so much earlier. 61

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Her observation of death, even to the habit of personal observation beside
death beds paralleled Twain's satire of Emmaline Grangerford in Huckle-
berry Finn:

She warn't particular; she could write about anything you choose
to give her to write about just so it was sadful. Every time a man
died or a woman died or a child died, she would be on hand with her
"tribute" before he was cold . . . the undertaker never got in ahead
of Emmeline but once, and then she hung fire on a rhyme for the dead
person's name, which was Whistler.62

However, Twain could hardly have known of the habits or interests of Emily
Dickinson, the private poet; therefore, the similarity of names is simply
a literary coincidence.

Emily Dickinson's study of the physical aspect of death convinced
her of the hopelessness of finding a key to the secrets of life through
the physical experience of death. In her usual objective approach, she
put herself in the place of the dying person, with her ironic last line
pointing up the sameness of life and death - as far as the revelation of
mysteries is concerned: "I could not see to see." Her view was as naturalis-
tic and realistic as Sut Lovingood's when he was helping to prepare Mrs.
Yardley for burial. Emily Dickinson wrote:

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 -
The 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 - then it was
There interposed a Fly-

(continued)

62 Mark Twain, Huckleberry Finn (Boston, 1958), p. 88.
With Blue - uncertain stumbling Buzz
Between the light - and me -
And then the Windows failed - and then
I could not see to see. (465)

The quiet preparation for the coming of a king explodes in the coming of a fly. Listening for sounds about or from eternity, she finds only the common insect, which all men know. Her search for rational answers continues. Her loss of orthodox belief influenced much of her poetry through her thought that man is in a precarious position in an unfriendly universe. The violence and cruelty which underlie the humor of such Southwest frontier humorists as A. B. Longstreet in the fights of his Georgia Scenes is suggested in the following fearfully ironic poem:

I know that He exists
Somewhere - in Silence -
He has hid his rare life
From our gross eyes.

'Tis an instant's play
'Tis a fond Ambush -
Just to make Bliss
Earn her own surprise!

But - should the play
Prove piercing earnest -
Should the glee - glaze -
In death's - stiff - stare -

Would not the fun
Look too expensive!
Would not the jest -
Have crawled too far! (338)

She begins this poem about the remoteness of God with confidence that he is playing a game of hide and seek with her. At first, she feels that He is well-hidden just to force her really to search. Then, she is shocked by the possibility that she may never discover him. If this is true, and He is not extant for her, then the game is unfair, and her concentrated

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This poem is an ironic expression of her doubt, which leads to bottomless fear and hopeless loss of direction. She further writes of this doubt and sense of loss as a vicious and painful torment:

Wonder - is not precisely Knowing
And not precisely Knowing not -
A beautiful but bleak condition -
He has not lived who has not felt it

Suspense - is his maturer Sister -
Whether Adult Delight is Pain
Or of itself a new misgiving -
This is the Gnat that mangles men. (133)

Sometimes she imputes her difficulty to the wrong approach. She satirizes God's response to prayer and taunts Him with being a distant and unconcerned Creator:

Of course - I prayed -
And did God Care?
He cared as much as on the Air
A Bird - had stamped her foot
And cried, "Give me " - (376)

Here she deflate the power of prayer by using scientific terminology:

Prayer is the little implement
Through which Men reach
Where Presence - is denied them
They fling their Speech
By means of it - in God's ear -
If then He hear -
This sums the Apparatus
Comprised in Prayer - (427)

At times she carries on her friendly conversation with God as Clarence Day was to do much later, reminding Him of His unfulfilled promises and shortcomings. Her conclusions are querulous and inconclusive: Why is God so sparing of his presence? Why have we no signs that our prayers are heard? Why does Nature tell us no comforting news of its Maker? Why do some men receive a full loaf and others a crumb? Where is benevolence in disaster? In answer, there emerges a God who does not answer her, an

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65 Johnson, p. 240.
unrevealed God who cannot be approached confidently either through Nature or a doctrine.

Her remaining feeling was a fear, which overrode her sometimes comforting relation to her Creator. She wrote this amusing, yet terrifying piece in the innocent attitude of a child — until the last line:

I never felt at Home — Below
And in the Handsome Skies
I shall not feel at Home — I know —
I don't like Paradise

Because it's Sunday — all the time —
And Recess — never comes —
And Eden'll be so lonesome
Bright Wednesday afternoons.

If God could make a visit —
Or ever took a Nap —
So not to see us — but they say
Himself a Telescope

Perennial beholds us —
Myself would run away
From Him — and Holy Ghost — and All —
But there's the "Judgment Day"! (413)

She could never escape from the doubts inspired by the Puritan anthropomorphic concept. She brought God to the level of her place and activity, and finally reached one inescapable conclusion, that she should not know during her lifetime. Like Twain, she realized that if she had "started dead," she might have known.

To Emily Dickinson the anthropomorphic concept of God accepted in terms of a concrete heaven and hell of the evangelical sermons of her time did not seem inspiring enough to encompass her feelings. The Bible of the George W. Harris preacher, Parson John Bullen, presented as "a tex powfly mixed wif brimstone, an trim'd wif blue flames," did not arouse her emotions. Nor did the optimistic pantheism in the Transcendentalist

belief. Her respect for an Infinite Creator could not be contained in the petals of a buttercup. Because she felt the lost of the traditional faith of her time, she covered the chasm with a gay irreverence to formal religion and a search for an individual faith. She expresses a whimsical attitude of going to church through staying at home with Nature:

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. (324)

In the personification of birds as choir and sexton, she satirizes the church which she felt needed revitalizing. Therefore, she does not feel that her gay irreverence in sacrilegious. 68

Unique metaphors, such as Emily Dickinson used, were the typical creations of the American humorists. Therefore, in this respect as in others, she is cut from the same imaginative cloth as the native American humorists. In the following poem the comic imagery masks the anguished longing within Emily Dickinson in the vivid personification of a Faith, who slips, blushes, asks questions of a weather vane; and in the formal presentation of religion as a narcotic which cannot dull the pain of the mouselike doubts that nibble at the soul:

This World is not Conclusion
A Species stands beyond -
Invisible, as Music -
But positive, as Sound -

(Continued)

67 Anderson, p. 17.
68 Ibid., p. 18.
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. (501)

The inconsistency and variety of her ideas about death impart conflict, tension, and drama to her writing. She fuses concrete ideas with abstractions and sensations with thought in her handling of death, which subject is in the texture of some six hundred poems. She believes:

Death is a terror to be feared and shunned. It is a hideous, inequitable mistake, a trick played on trusting humanity by a sportive, insensate deity. It is a welcome relief from mortal ills. It is the blessed means to eternal happiness. But which of the attitudes is most valid, what assumptions about it are really true, she never decides.69

One persistent thought that binds together her poems about death is that death snaps the lines of communication with people we have known and loved and creates doubt that such communication can ever be reestablished.

Her deep apprehension with regard to immortality is clothed with her comic spirit. The knowledge of immortality is a continuing quest. At times she doubts the possibility of such a philosophy as immortality and feels that death is the end of life. Even from the depths of the despair she shows, she deliberately uses her comic hyperbole for distortion that blends pain and poignancy with mockery. The exaggerations of this poem are as immense as those of the fictional near-river god of the early South-

69 Johnson, p. 203.
70 Ibid., p. 204.
west frontier, Mike Fink, who purported to be half man and half alligator as he roared through superhuman feats.

Under the Light, yet under
Under the Grass and the Dirt,
Under the Beetle's Cellar
Under the Clover's Root,

Further than Arm could stretch
Were it Giant long,
Further than Sunshine could
Were the Day Year long,

Over the Light, yet over,
Over the Arc of the Bird -
Over the Comet's chimney -
Over the Cubit's Head,

Further than Guess can gallop
Further than Riddle ride -
Oh for a Disc to the Distance
Between Ourselves and the Dead! (949)

Emily Dickinson's concerns with immortality are defined by space and time—limitless space and infinite time. In the following poem she identifies herself with time outside of the realm of time itself—pure objectivity unhampered by the movement of time or of space:

Funny - to be a Century -
And see the People - going by -
I - should die of the Oddity -
But then - I'm not so staid - as He -

He keeps His Secrets safely - very
Were He to tell - extremely sorry
This Bashful Globe of Our's would be
So dainty of Publicity - (345)

From first identifying herself as a Century, she watches the passing comedy of life. Then contrasting herself with the personified Century's qualities of stability, power, unconcern, she objectively feels that the Century's hiding the future from humankind is necessary. She draws a striking image of man's need for ignorance of his future as the "Bashful Globe" too dainty and shy to wish publicity.
Emily Dickinson stoically chose to ridicule the chaotic disunity she saw in the human comedy. Being unable to find the Unifying force of the truth she sought, she illuminated the problems she dealt with through a wry irony in her poetic attitude, through the situations she selected, and through the structure of her poetry itself.
CHAPTER IV - IMAGERY AS HUMOR

Although Emily Dickinson is not in the mainstream of the American humorists, her imagery and figurative language stems from as unique an imagination and as poignant an originality as did the comic, creative force of G. W. Harris or Mark Twain. In the incongruity of realistic detail garbed in whimsical fancy, she, as objectively as they, amusingly depicts the sights and sounds of observable natural phenomena. Her acrobatics in metaphor are as organic a technique of her literary art as that of any Literary Comedian or Local Colorist, with the added dimensions of subtlety and universality.

She sees specific and concrete household tools, activities, and objects in existential perspective as she interprets and suggests universal expansive meanings beyond the brooms and beds, the flowers and flies. For the recluse whose life was involved in the compass of domestic activities in her house and garden, her use of imagery and symbol gleaned from her observation and activity in her daily life was a natural way for her to select meaningful feminine objective correlatives for her abstract thoughts. She angles her concepts into pointed irony by using the image of home-making:
Ample make this Bed
Make this Bed with Awe
In it wait till Judgment break
Excellent and Fair -

Be it's Mattress straight
Be it's Pillow round
Let no Sunrise's Yellow noise
Interrupt this Ground. (829)

As a body waits in the tomb for judgment day, she satirically suggests a comfortable, healthy sleep in a darkened room, undisturbed by the daytime noises of life, instead of commenting on the obvious physical decay. Her use of the word "noise" to indicate the yellow light of the sun is the technique of the Symbolist who mixes the sense perception to clarify meaning.

In the following poem, rather than emphasizing the frightening gap of loss felt by the bereaved who remain on earth and must face the problems of death and immortality, she portrays mankind continuing his daily work, thereby sublimating his human anguish and obliquely subduing his psychological suffering and fear:

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. (1078)

The picture of sweeping the pieces of broken heart into a dustpan and of folding up an emotion nearly into a package and placing it in a bureau drawer may also be intended to imply Emily Dickinson's ironic despair in having thus to put away her poetry for the future because of the lack of a publisher.

Ordinary wifely chores continue in various activities as her imagination
conjures incongruous whimsy into the sunset:

She sweeps with many-colored Brooms -
And Leaves the Shreds behind -
Oh, Housewife in the Evening West -
Come back and dust the Pond!

You dropped a Purple Ravelling in -
You dropped an Amber thread -
And now you've littered all the East
With duds of Emerald!

And still, she plies her spotted Brooms,
And still the Aprons fly,
Till Brooms fade softly into stars -
And then I come away - (219)

In spite of the succinctness, the humor of the concrete pictures serves
to broaden the perspective into an abstract and symbolic expansiveness.

In one brief lyric, she contrasts man's natural ancient fear of
winter dark and cold with the warmth and cheeriness inside a snug home.
Her ironic point of view shifts from the actual physical scene to eternal
questions storming outside in contrast with a dull interior sense of
security and harmony:

Like Brooms of Steel
The Snow and Wind
Had swept the Winter Street
Where rode the Bird
The Silence tied
His ample plodding steed -
The Apple in the Cellar snug
Was all the one that played. (1252)

The humor lies in the incongruity of her imaginative interpretation of the
realistic background, the concrete realism of the observable world serving
as the frame work for her fancy. In similar manner of realistic frame with
imaginative interpretation, Southwestern humorist T. B. Thorpe creates his
comic world:

... a world in which potato hills grow so large that they
are mistaken for Indian mounds, in which a bear becomes
so hot that the steam which is escaping from him
spurts out of a bullet hole in his body, in which a bear walks over a fence, "looming up like a black mist, he seems so large." 71

Thorpe also used such vivid similes as this: "the bear walked through the fence like a falling tree would through a cobweb." The device is one commonly used by American humorists, with the imagery growing organically and naturally from the life the writer knew. For example, Sut Lovingood says:

Her skin was as white as the inside of a frogstool, and her cheeks and lips as rosy as a perch's gills in dogwood blossom time - and such a smile! why, when it struck you fair and square it felt just like a big horn of unrectified old Monangahaley, after you'd been sober for a month, attending a ten horse prayer meeting twice a day, and most of the nights.

or again:

The noise he made sounded like a two-horse mowing-machine, driven by chain lightning, cutting through a dry cane brake on a bit bet. 72

An undercurrent of the enjoyment of cruelty can be traced in American humorists from Longstreet's depiction of fighting, real or imaginary, in his Georgia Scenes through a continuing line of development into the "sick" humor or "black comedy" of today.

In viewing tragic emotion under a comic light, the humorists of our past have been able to transform violence and suffering into occasions of pleasure. 73

A macabre humor in the next poem illustrates the above truth. The poem questions the causes of some of nature's devastating effects which lie behind the glories, bounties, and beauties. The poem expresses fear of a natural force which moves like a cruel ghost and gives the kiss of death.

71 Blair, p. 94.
72 Ibid., p. 98.
73 Lynn, XIV.
This frost metaphor corresponds with the character of death Emily Dickinson created as a chivalric suitor of mortals:

A visitor in Marl -
Who influences Flowers -
Till they are orderly as Busts -
And Elegant - as Glass -

Who visits in the Night -
And just before the Sun -
Concludes his glistening interview -
Caresses - and is gone -

But whom his fingers touched -
And where his feet have run -
And whatsoever Mouth he kissed
Is as it had not been - (391)

To Emily Dickinson nature is evanescent, being sometimes a friend and sometimes a love-death image.

She expresses her individualistic whimsy as she animates water and grass with human characteristics:

What mystery pervades a well!
The water lives so far -
A neighbor from another world
Residing in a jar.

Whose limit none have ever seen,
But just his lid of gloss -
Just looking every time you please
In an abyss's face!

The grass does not appear afraid,
I often wonder he
Can stand so close and look so bold
At what is awe to me.

But nature is a stranger yet;
The ones that cite her must
Have never passed her haunted house,
Nor simplified her ghost. (1400)

With humorous incongruity she questions the miracle and mystery of the well in relation to the courage of the grass. In Emily Dickinson's use of imagery, she shows brilliantly perceptive comic choice of metaphors and

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Johnson, p. 92.
similes as did other American humorists as they selected from human foibles, animal characteristics, and natural phenomena, elements which they mixed into incongruous vividness.

In the cataloguing of unlike things, Emily Dickinson's imagination added fuel to the fires of the comic in her unexpected comparisons:

I'll tell you how the Sun rose -
A Ribbon at a time -
The Steeples swam in Amethyst -
The news, like Squirrels, ran -
The Hills untied their Bonnets -
The Bobolinks - begun -
Then I said softly to myself -
"That must have been the Sun!"
But how he set - I know not -
There seemed a purple stile
That little Yellow boys and girls
Were climbing all the while -
Till when they reached the other side,
A Dominie in Gray -
Put gently up the evening Bars -
And led the flock away. (318)

Here is an amusing, light-hearted gait, dealing with living. Dawn and sunset are characterized with images from human athletics: swimming, running, climbing. The light, bright colors of the amethyst dawn, enhanced by the implied colors of bonnets, fade with the dawn sound of bobolinks into the pastoral gray of evening. The fading sun-yellow of the children passes peacefully over the sunset bars. "Flock" suggests the sheep-counting before one falls into a dream-full sleep.

Personifying the forces of a storm and their effects, Emily Dickinson enjoys her fanciful creations. Although there is feverish excitement surrounding the turmoil, there is only a suggestion of the harm that might have been in the Breughel-like scene. "One cannot take too seriously thunder that gossips or lightning that seems to be doing a polka."\(^{76}\)

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\(^{75}\)Johnson, p. 108.

\(^{76}\)Ibid., p. 94.
The Wind begun to knead the Grass
As Women do a dough -
He flung a Hand full at the Plain -
A Hand full at the Sky -
The Leaves unhatched themselves from Trees -
And started all abroad -
The Dust did scoop itself like Hands -
And throw away the Road -
The Wagons quickened on the Street -
The Thunders gossiped low -
The Lightning showed a Yellow Head
And then a livid Toe -

The Birds put up the Bars to Nests -
The Cattle flung to Barns -
Then came one drop of Giant Rain -
And then as if the Hands
That held the Dews - had parted hold -
The Waters wrecked the Sky -
But overlooked my Father's House -
Just quartering a tree. (824)

She caricatures natural elements as she lists the storm's activities, particularly an element of fear among the animals: the wind kneading grass as do women dough and wildly flinging fists of dust; the leaves unhooking themselves and tearing on adventures; the dust picking itself up to whirl away the road; the birds putting up bars on their nests to protect their families; and the hand filled with waters dousing the world. Her use of the word "dew" is ludicrous when used to represent the torrents of the world's rain.

In a light mood Emily Dickinson creates a kind of framework of verisimilitude by reporting a discussion she had with her dog about a hummingbird's dizzying swirl through her garden. Not trusting her own eyes, she has her dog corroborate the visit by the circumstantial evidence of the "vibrating Blossoms." Her humor is contained in the contrast between the fact of realistic observations with the fiction of her reliance on her dog's sensibility.
Within my Garden rides a Bird
Upon a single Wheel -
Whose spokes a dizzy Music make
As 'twere a travelling Mill -

Till every spice is tasted
And then his Fairy Gig
Reels in remoter atmospheres -
And I rejoin my Dog.

And he and I perplex us
If positive 'twere we -
Or bore the Garden in the Brain
This Curiosity

But He, the Best Logician,
Refers my clumsy eye -
To just vibrating Blossoms
An exquisite Reply! (500)

In a second poem about the hummingbird, she whimsically counterpoints the realistic detail of the bird's flight with metaphors of sound, color, motion, and distance, with the comical result of the disheveled flowers having to readjust their stance. Her literary allusion to the flight's origin from the infinite distance of the sun contains a laughable charm:

A Route of Evanescence
With a revolving Wheel -
A Resonance of Emerald -
A Rush of Cochineal -
And every Blossom on the Bush
Adjusts its tumbled Head -
The mail from Tunis, probably,
An easy Morning's Ride - (1463)

In the pervasive nature imagery of her poetry, she exaggerates with the expansiveness of the Literary Comedians, such as one sees in Bill Nye's "Spring":

Spring is now here. It has been here before, but not so much so, perhaps, as it is this year. In spring the buds swell up and burst. The "violets" bloom once more, and the hired girl takes off

77 Doubtlessly, Dickinson had in mind the Shakespearean reference in The Tempest to the sun as mailman in Act II, 1, 246-248:
"She that is queen of Tunis; she that dwells
Ten leagues beyond man's life; she that from Naples
Can have no note, unless the sun were post -"
the double window and the storm door. The husband and father puts up the screen doors, so as to fool the annual fly when he tries to make his spring debut. The husband and father finds the screen doors and windows in the gloaming of the garret. He finds them by feeling them in the dark with his hands. He finds the rafters, also, with his head. When he comes down, he brings the screens and three new intellectual faculties sticking out on his brow like the button on a barn door. 78

Emily Dickinson's view of bees amuses the reader with her description of the champagne itself - not its bubbles - contained in the unspillable containers of the flowers:

Bees are Black, with Gilt Surcingle -  
Buccaneers of Buzz.  
Ride abroad in ostentation  
And subsist on Fuzz.

Fuzz ordained, not Fuzz contingent -  
Marrow's of the Hill.  
Jugs - a Universe's fracture  
Could not jar or spill. (1405)

From Seba Smith, James Russell Lowell, Charles Henry Smith and other humorists, she borrowed the literary technique of letter writing used by countless American humorists as an established comic tradition.

Bee! I'm expecting you!  
Was saying yesterday  
To somebody you know  
That you were due -  
The Frogs got Home last Week -  
Are settled, and at work -  
Birds, mostly back  
The Clover warm and thick -  

You'll get my Letter by  
The Seventeenth; Reply  
Or better, be with me - Yours, Fly. (1035)

The ambiguous use of frogs and flies as harbingers of spring undercuts some of the usual pleasant anticipation of spring in slightly hollow mirth.

She satirizes her feminine interest in fashion and the American ambition to "keep up with the Joneses" in her jest:

78Blair, pp. 107-108.
The morns are meeker than they were -
The nuts are getting brown -
The berry's cheek is plumper -
The Rose is out of town.

The Maple wears a gayer scarf -
The field a scarlet gown -
Lest I should be old-fashioned
I'll put a trinket on. (1215)

Here she employs the same type of anti-climax as Josh Billings when he says:

When I see people ov shallow understanding, extravagantly clothed,
i always feel sorry - for the clothes.79

In an apt, if incongruous, parallel, she characterizes and personifies
a Jay bird in legal terminology - with an additional weight of military
decorum:

A Prompt - executive bird is the Jay -
Bold as a Bailiff's Hymn -
Brittle and Brief in quality -
Warrant in every line -

Sitting a Bough like a Brigadier
Confident and straight -
Much is the mien of him in March
As a Magistrate. (1177)

One of her most comic conceits contrasts the realism of a snake's physical
crawling in the grass with overtones of the archetypal myth of man's
fall from Eden. The humor occurs in the contrasting revelatory appropriateness of the final two lines which state Emily Dickinson's meaning. In preparation for the tone of the climactic stanza, the first lines speak of a companionable being who shares the experience of living with mankind. Emily Dickinson does not name the fellow traveller since she feels that "You do not call a snake a snake because, trailing clouds of myth, the snake is loathsome."80 The restraint toward surprise and shock in the conclusion blends into the realistic description from the first lines. In the second

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79 Ibid., p. 120.
stanza the flashing instant when the "spotted shaft" is seen parting the
grass is dramatized as motion in the next stanza as "a whip lash unbraiding
in the sun." Philosophizing about the fellowship with some of "Nature's
People," she contrasts the tension aroused by "this Fellow." To return
to the first line, the Adamic myth begins with a suggestion of the devil
or evil as "the Narrow Fellow in the Grass," the subconscious realization
of the temptation to mankind. Innocence is suggested in the line, "Yet
when a Boy, and Barefoot." The reader must continue the channel of thought
himself through man's fall after the temptation by the snake, and man's
eternal reaction thereafter to the snake's presence while they live as fel-
low outcasts of the Garden of Eden.

A Narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides -
You may have met Him - did you not
His notice sudden is -

The Grass divides as with a Comb -
A spotted shaft is seen -
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on -

He likes a Boggy Acre
A floor too cool for Corn -
Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot -
I more than once at Noon
Have passed, I thought a Whip lash
Unbraiding in the Sun
When stopping to secure it
It wrinkled and was gone.

Several of Nature's People:
I know, and they know me -
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality -

But never met this Fellow
Attended, or alone
Without a tighter breathing
And zero at the Bone - (986)

Her poem corroborates Henry Shaw's character, Josh Billings, as he sceptically
remarks, "Snakes are innocent, but they hav got a bad reputashun, and all the innocence in the world won't cure a bad reputation." 81

Emily Dickinson's satiric cynicism gleams through the lyrics of the next two poems. In the matriarchal society of America, she eulogizes the archetypal, beneficent and transcendental earth mother. Beneath the superficial praise, a few words key her critical and sarcastic thought:

Nature - the Gentlest Mother is,
Impatient of no Child -
The feeblest - or the waywardest -
Her admonition mild -

(If "Nature" were as kind as she is omnipotent, she would have produced no "feeble" or "wayward" child.)

... When all the Children sleep -
She turns as long away
As will suffice to light Her lamps -
Then bending from the Sky -

With infinite Affection -
And infinite Care -
Her Golden finger on her lip
Wills Silence - Everywhere (790)

By her words, "Wills Silence - Everywhere," Emily Dickinson resents the will which contains the secrets of the universe as secrets. The humor lies in the contrast between the surface admiration and the underlying critical emotion.

A more bitter caricature of man's belief in science rather than in religion is blatant in the following:

Split the lark and you'll find the music,
Bulb after bulb, in silver rolled,
Scantily dealt to the summer morning,
Saved for your ear when lutes be old.

(Continued)

81
Loose the flood, you shall find it patent,
Gush after gush, reserved for you;
Scarlet experiment! sceptic Thomas,
Now, do you doubt that your bird was true? (861)

In another mood, with the exhilarated hyperbole of a Mike Fink or a Davy Crockett, she reveals man drunk with the exuberance of living, using the sun as a heavenly lamppost:

... 

Inebriate of Air — am I
And Debauchee of Dew —
Reeling — through endless summer days —
From inns of Molten Blue —

When "Landlords" turn the drunken Bee
Out of the Foxglove's door —
When Butterflies — renounce their "drams"
I shall but drink the more!

Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats
And Saints to windows run —
To see the little Tippler
Leaning against the sun. (214)

The confounding sense of scale staggers one's acceptance unless he has been acclimated to men whose tall tales were limited only by the infinitude of their imaginations.

Both Emily Dickinson and the American humorists illuminate their concepts through their wildly imaginative imagery, using concrete objects familiar to them in their daily lives to accomplish succinct understanding in the reader's mind. They achieve ironic doubleness by welding dissimilar materials together. Out of this amusing incongruity the reader sees the human comedy and the divine comedy through the artists' eyes.
CHAPTER V - IRONY OF PUBLICATION

Emily Dickinson's art in her provincial hermitage developed from the same American literary milieu as that of the native American humorists. They possessed the same privilege of expansive freedom for individualized growth without the domination of a controlling American literary tradition. They saw the same naive rawness and idealism of character fused with the developing materialism into recognizably American qualities. They felt the fading Puritan influences, the Down East wiliness, the frontier initiative and braggadocio, and the sub-soil of human violence and aggression. They saw the same agricultural and industrial growth which became enmeshed in the chaos of civil and its aftermath. They saw the potential for American compassion and humanity and the lack of fulfillment; within this gap they observed and wrote about the frustrations of man. In this respect, humorists are humorists because they deal with complex human problems in chaotic relationships, which they hope to untangle through their amused detachment.

Emily Dickinson differed from the comic pattern of the American humorists in two ways: primarily, she used the comic technique in only a portion, but not in all of her poetry; and secondly, she dealt with universal and timeless problems of man rather than with topical or local matters. Because she struggled intensively in the throes to find solutions to her overwhelming problems of life and death, she adopted the
mask of irony to cover and protect her despair from the eyes of the world.

However, the greatest irony related to Emily Dickinson was perpetrated upon her work and her life by the tangled maize of well-meaning, but competitive, posthumous authors, editors, and publishers.

Critics, in large measure, have been so involved with other approaches toward Emily Dickinson's poetry - perhaps more urgent approaches - that the comic spirit permeating part of her work has been neglected. With the exception of an occasional chapter of a book, a rare article in a periodical, or an infrequent sentence identifying her irony, there has been no focus on her point of view of intellectual humor. In the mounting morass of Emily Dickinson criticism, mention of the comic side of the poet was late in arriving. Actually, the greatest irony toward the Emily Dickinson canon occurs in the critical treatment of the private poet who now stands on permanent public display.

She could not have had pre-vision of her literary future beyond expecting fame if it were due her, and yet in her lines, she accepts her anonymity with a prognostic irony toward what might happen:

Publication - is the Auction
Of the Mind of Man -
Poverty - be justifying
For so foul a thing

... ...

In the Parcel - Be the Merchant
Of the Heavenly Grace -
But reduce no Human Spirit
To disgrace of Price - (709)

No history of literary publication is more paradoxical.

The first great irony consisted of Mabel Loomis Todd's unwitting destruction of Emily Dickinson's preparation for publication. After
Emily Dickinson's death when Lavinia, failing to enlist Sue Dickinson's help in arranging the poems for presentation to the public, urged their family friend, Mabel Loomis Todd, to edit some of the poems. Mrs. Todd laboriously and painstakingly approached the task of making the work acceptable to the conventional editor, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and to the world.

Inside an ebon box lay thirty-nine threaded packets of fascicles (811 poems), four unthreaded fascicles (72 poems) and eight packets of loose manuscripts (240 poems) - a total of 1123 poems. Several hundred scraps of verse and worksheet drafts had also been carefully preserved. 83

With the noblest of intentions and dedication to her task, Mrs. Todd took the packets apart to select and edit the most appealing poems and the most conventional ones, thereby losing for the world Emily Dickinson's own dramatic plan of organization, intrinsic explanation, and some of her originality. From 1890 until today, the Emily Dickinson image has passed through a broad spectrum of handling and mis-handling. Even today with the best scholarly effort having reassembled the packets, much of the dramatic sequence cannot be repaired with certainty to present her personal intent. Even the Johnson variorum edition of 1955 has created new opportunity for diversified and conflicting critical interpretation as to the meaning and significance as well as the text of some of the poems.

From a panorama of the literary history, some measure of the confusion can be judged. "The Poems, First Series were published on November 12, 1890 - four years after Emily Dickinson's death - their popularity causing them to be reprinted twice by December 27, 1890. In 1891 three more editions were sold out, plus a De Luxe edition. By 1892 the poems were in their eleventh

Due to a complication of disagreements and death within the family, plus a lawsuit, the editor, Mrs. Todd, ceased her labors with the manuscripts; the publications stopped. In 1914 Sue Dickinson's daughter, Martha Gilbert Dickinson Bianchi, edited The Single Hound, which consisted only of the poems her mother had received over the hedge from her sister-in-law, the poet. This Bianchi publication included none of the variations which might have been previously published through Mrs. Todd's editing, not did it include the poems from the fascicles. "The public was confused; the partisans of the poet were baffled; the dissenters were delighted."

To unknot the confusion, emphasis then turned to biography in search of explanation. This investigation only deepened the problem, and the life of the poet was muddled with conflicting stories and inconclusive evidence. In 1824 Martha Dickinson Bianchi published The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson, purportedly proving "with the authoritative ring of a niece's testimony" a love story which accounted for Emily Dickinson's isolation because of her love and renunciation of a married minister of Philadelphia, Charles Wadsworth. In 1930 two new biographies suggested new inconclusive romances. Genevieve Taggart involved a principal of Amherst Academy, Leonard Humphrey, and an editor of the Amherst College monthly, George Gould. Josephine Pollitt suggested Helen Hunt Jackson's second husband, Lieutenant Hunt. Doubtlessly, Lavinia's destruction of a wealth of Dickinson material confirms the impossibility of factual proof. Then Mrs. Todd's daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham, urged her mother to publish an expanded collection of letters still unpublished (which erroneously seemed to reinforce the Wadsworth theory). These were published in 1931. In 1932

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84 Ibid., p. 12.
85 Ibid., p. 23.
86 Ibid., p. 24.
Mrs. Bianchi countered with further letters, interspersed with ruined versions of poems combined with personal reminiscences. Millicent Todd Bingham then attacked, exposing family feuds, her mother's unrewarded efforts, the unfair legal jurisdiction, and the Todd relation to the Emily Dickinson poetry. She completed this work in 1935, but she did not publish it until after the death of Mrs. Bianchi in 1945, under the title of Ancestors' Brocades: The Literary Debut of Emily Dickinson. Mrs. Bianchi had published another volume of Dickinson poems in 1935, Unpublished Poems of Emily Dickinson. In 1945 Mrs. Bingham published four hundred previously unpublished poems added to two hundred published ones under the title, Bolts of Melody: New Poems of Emily Dickinson. This was followed by her 1954 volume, Emily Dickinson: A Revelation, intended to undo the confusion about the life of the poet. Here were included letters indicating Emily Dickinson's love for her father's friend, Judge Otis P. Lord. She followed this with her 1955 publication, Emily Dickinson's Home.

Mrs. Bianchi had willed all Dickensoniana to Alfred Leet Hampson, who sold everything at Mrs. Bianchi's death to Gilbert Montague of Springfield, Massachusetts, who preserved all that he had and presented it to Harvard University. In the Houghton Library of Harvard

the very shawl she carried, her garnet brooch, her Bible, the pictures on her walls, her quaint old-fashioned piano, and her threaded booklets - all her cherished possessions - were brought to stand forever clean and safe and on permanent public view in a hushed sanctuary of memorabilia and manuscripts.

A wealth of material, including the Dickinson libraries, are also on public display in the Amherst Library repository.

Critics attempting to evaluate her significance have contradicted

87 Ibid., p. 38.
each other as they have categorized her in paradoxical terms: the last of
the Puritans, a social protestor, a psychological neurotic, a sceptic, a
metaphysical poet, an existentialist. Explications of her poetry belie
each other in the proliferation of studies of the tensions, elasticity,
and meaning of her poetry. Actually, the publication of the three-volume
Thomas H. Johnson text of her poems in their original variations and textual
inconclusiveness did clear the air and assure scholars of the following
facts:

This was indeed a great poet; but there remains a permanent dis­
agreement on what precisely was great, her ideas or her manner, her
suffering or her spirit, her torment or her wisdom. There has been
a continuing fragmentation of the text by her multiplex interpreters,
striving to establish her significance... to her times, to her
place, to her progenitors, to her hymnbook. Johnson’s further 1958 issuance of a three volume collection of her letters
and Jay Leyda’s 1960 publication of a two volume collection of relevant
materials from diaries and periodicals of her time does give literary
scholars the opportunity of studying the poetry in its comprehensive
context. However, the final word has not yet been written for this genera­
tion.

Perhaps Emily Dickinson would have felt that this inconclusiveness
simply paralleled her own ironic search for conclusions and was therefore
congruent to her own comic mask. She found compensation in the idea that
perhaps the seeking was better than the finding would have been, for she
herself had said that "Success is counted sweetest/ By those who ne'er
succeed," and that the dying soldier feels more deeply than anyone else the
victory which he cannot live to enjoy. She had further postulated:

Ibid., 38.
Undue Significance a starving man attaches
To Food -
Far off - He sighs - and therefore - Hopeless
And therefore - Good.

Partaken - it relieves - indeed -
But proves us
That Spices fly
In the Receipt - It was the Distance
Was Savory - (439)

She had also written with wry bitterness the following:

It might be lonelier
Without the Loneliness -
I'm so accustomed to my Fate -
Perhaps the Other - Peace

Would interrupt the Dark -
And crowd the little Room -
Too scant - by Cubits - to contain
The Sacrament - of Him -

... It might be easier
To Fail - with Land in Sight -
Than gain - My Blue Peninsula -
To perish - of Delight. (405)

Emily Dickinson was not a simple poet, nor a logical philosopher,
yet through her power of objective expression, she enables the reader
"to see through a glass darkly," as she sees the human comedy. She demands
creative reading of her comic spirit as she measures the mind of man with
God's creations and finally with God Himself:

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. (632)
She theorizes here that man's mind is a part of God as syllable is a part of sound, one facet of the transcendental belief. As an integral part of the Oversoul, man's brain receives truth and knowledge direct from the Oversoul or Creator or God through intuition which transcends reason.

Emily Dickinson herself never wrote the final words to her search for truth. Her interest was, of necessity, the exploration of differing paths to humanistic answers, never the Q. E. D. per se. Therefore, throughout all of her life she experimented and exposed her ideas with immediacy and newness. "She seemed to emerge afresh as from a chrysalis in each lyric or even in each brief stanza."

Had readers of her time been exposed to her poetry, they would have been more confused by her objectivity and infinitude than are modern readers who are more accustomed to such oblique and agonizing gyrations relative to the problems of the human condition. Therein lies the generating thrust of challenge of the Emily Dickinson canon to the modern critic.

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VITA

Born in Statesville, North Carolina, January 31, 1917, Marian Frances Hoffman moved to Danville, Virginia, at the age of five, where she attended Randolph Macon Institute (now Stratford College) and the Danville Public Schools. She graduated from George Washington High School in Danville in 1934 and attended Goucher College, Baltimore, Maryland, in the years 1934-1938, at which time she received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English.

Married on October 14, 1939, to John G. Myers of Richmond, she has spent the thirty years since that time in Richmond, with the exception of the years of World War II, 1941-46. One son, John G. Myers, Jr., was born on April 15, 1951.

Varying volunteer community activities occupied time outside of domestic activities. In 1964 she became interested in high school teaching, and taught English at Thomas Jefferson High School and John Marshall High School, 1964-1968. She is currently on an educational leave of absence.