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“THAT DARK PARADE”: EMILY DICKINSON AND THE VICTORIAN "CULT OF DEATH”

by

CAROL M. DEGRASSE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English
Department of Literature and Languages

Ann C. Beebe, Ph.D., Committee Chair

College of Arts and Sciences

The University of Texas at Tyler
May 2017

The University of Texas at Tyler
Tyler, Texas

This is to certify that the Master's Thesis/Doctoral Dissertation of

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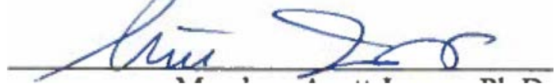

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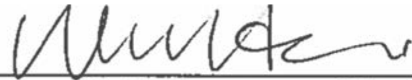

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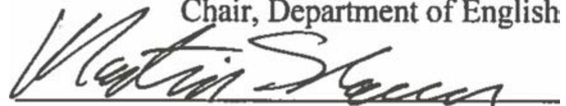

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Dedication

To my beloved son Andrew, whose undying love and support still comfort me each and every day.

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Abstract

“THAT DARK PARADE”: EMILY DICKINSON AND

THE VICTORIAN "CULT OF DEATH”

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The elegiac poems of Emily Dickinson provide what is perhaps the clearest depiction of the conflicting emotions inherent to the death-conscious nineteenth century. In one such poem, Dickinson’s oxymoronic phrase, “Dark Parade,” encapsulates the spirit of a social movement that was born of a desire to comfort the grief-stricken and to beautify the horrific. Throughout Dickinson’s corpus of elegiac poetry, the speaker echoes these sentiments and crafts an insightful portrait, juxtaposing the stark horror of death with the ethereal beauty of ceremony. As Dickinson’s elegies are traced over time, the poems develop as microcosmic representations of a grieving nation, as the speaker resacralizes the corruption of the death scene in the domestic realm. Particularly through her death-bed narratives, the poet exemplifies the paradox that was the 1800s-death

scene, the “Dark Parade.” Carefully placed together, the two simple words create an image—couched within the ostentatious display of ritual and deeply embedded in the disconsolate setting of mourning. In doing so, Dickinson’s speaker captures the essence of the nineteenth-century Victorian “cult of death.”

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Introduction

Emily Dickinson's c. 1863 poem "There's been a Death, in the Opposite House" (Fr547A) provides what is perhaps the clearest depiction of the conflicting emotions inherent to the death-conscious nineteenth century. The poem's speaker juxtaposes two words, "Dark Parade," using them to define the inner turmoil produced when a grief-stricken nation disguises the stark horror of death with the ethereal beauty of ceremony. Noah Webster's 1844 *American Dictionary of the English Language*[1] defines the word *dark* as "Gloomy; disheartening" and the word *parade* as a "Pompous procession." Carefully placed together, the two simple words create an oxymoronic image couched within the ostentatious display of ritual and deeply embedded in a disconsolate setting. In doing so, Dickinson's speaker captures the essence of the Victorian "cult of death"[2].

The Victorian "cult of death" began in 1862 with a single death-bed scene. Although this social circumstance had encompassed many elements of social significance in centuries past, this death-centered phenomenon originated on a wide scale with Queen Victoria as she sat at the death-bed of her husband, Prince Albert. As the beloved Prince

[1] Webster's 1844 dictionary, along with an 1828 edition of the same title, was included in the Dickinson family library. Currently, it is included in the Dickinson Family Library collection in the Houghton Library at Harvard University. The shelfmark number used to identify the text is EDR 113. The text is inscribed by Edward Dickinson and is believed to have been referred to by Emily Dickinson as her "lexicon."

[2] The Victorian "cult of death" was also called the Victorian "Cult of the Dead" or the Victorian "Cult of Memory."

Consort lay dying, the grieving monarch carefully crafted an exquisite scene to make her husband's final moments peaceful, meaningful, and memorable. A grieving nation followed Queen Victoria's example, and as the English nation was plunged into a state of mourning, the social dictates of an elaborate mourning process—the "beautification" of death[3]—reached a cult-like status (Zlomke xii). Soon thereafter, the tradition of the "Good Death"—the *ars moriendi* or "art of death"—of the ancient Greek civilization was reborn (*Republic* 6). This social singularity reached across the Atlantic to a nation that was in the beginning stages of a Civil War—a war that would rock the foundation of society and cause the death-bed scene to be recreated countless times across the countryside.

Figure 1. Prince Albert's Death-bed Scene
Queen Victoria and children at the death-bed of Prince Albert

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[3] The "beautification of death" is derived from *the ars moriendi*, or Good Death tradition. See Drew Gilpin Faust's "The Civil War Soldier and the Art of Dying" (2001) and *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death* (2008), *by* Mark S. Schantz.

Within this historical backdrop, American elegiac writing reflected the paradox of the social death scene in the early-to-mid nineteenth century. Written works of this genre echo common themes of conflicting emotions that are associated with the loss of a loved one and include consolation and grief, despair and detachment, and sorrow and joy. As such, American writers attempted to fashion an uplifting atmosphere in the constant face of death through the "new gospel of consolation"—a genre that includes both sentimental novels and poetry, or "mortuary verse" according to Barton Levi St. Armand in *Emily Dickinson and her Culture: The Soul's Society* (46, 61). Moreover, Ann Douglas, author of *The Feminization of American Culture*, explains that such writings comprised a national effort to console the American public through "obituary poems and memoirs, mourners' manuals, prayer guide-books, hymns, and books about heaven." Douglas further asserts that these writings "inflated the importance of dying and the dead. . . sponsored elaborate methods of burial and commemoration, . . . [and] . . . a sentimentalized afterlife" (201-02). It is through such an emotionally charged and romanticized environment that Emily Dickinson joined the effort to console the American people through her elegiac poetry. Mingling solace with raw honesty, Dickinson portrays the nineteenth-century death-bed[4] as a paradox consisting of horror "so appalling – it exhilirates – " and comfort that "sets the Fright at liberty" (Fr341A[5]). In

[4]This paper examines a cross-section of this subgenre of Dickinson's oeuvre. A more exhaustive review of Dickinson's death-bed poems and those which depict the Victorian "cult of death" conventions will be examined by this writer as this work continues.

[5] For purposes of this paper, all references to Dickinson's poems will use the numbering system established by Ralph W. Franklin. Quotations from all poems will be taken from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson I-III: Variorum Edition* (1998), edited by Franklin and with emendations adopted in accordance with that text.

doing so, Dickinson addresses the 1800s-death scene in a way that is solely American and uniquely Dickinson.

This "American way of death," described by Gary Laderman in *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death*, *1799–1883*, was firmly established prior to the beginning of the Civil War. As antebellum America embraced the Victorian-influenced death culture, New Englanders beautified the process of death and even the corpse itself. Later, with the advent of the Civil War, the presence of death became an overwhelming element in the daily lives of the American people. As the nation's young men lay dying on the battlefield in ever-increasing numbers—often horrifically and without friends or family to comfort them—Americans sought ways to sanctify or "beautify" the death process and corpse through tradition and ceremony. Similarly, as death invaded the home itself due to accident, disease, or childbirth, women sought a way to negate—or at least offset—the desecration of domestic sanctity caused by death. To this end, survivors of the deceased used rituals as a way to cope with loss and to "resacralize"[6] the home environment (Wexler 98).

Because most early-to-mid nineteenth-century deaths occurred at home in one's own bed, women held the primary responsibility for tending to the needs of the dying in the final moments of life, according to Bernadette Loeffel-Atkins in *Widow's Weeds and Weeping Veils: Mourning Rituals in 19th Century America*. Partly due to the feminized nature of nineteenth-century conventions of death, the American elegy often addressed the nation's grief-stricken public at the foundation of its existence—the domestic sphere.

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[6] For a thorough understanding of resacralization social theory, see Chapter 1 of Philip Wexler's *Social Theory in Education Primer*, Peter Lang Publishing, 2009.

Through a combination of the spiritual and the material, the combined paradoxes of bodily deterioration and supernatural renewal and of prolonged suffering and eternal peace became a common theme in domestic death-bed scenes (St. Armand 57). Consolation literature, such as Sigourney's *Letters to Mothers* and Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* show death as a formidable, unavoidable adversary that must be faced with beauty, grace, and stoic determination by the women who tended to dying loved ones.

In "Death Became Them: The Defeminization of the American Death Culture, 1609-1899," Briony D. Zlomke illuminates the importance of the female presence in the American 1800s death culture:

> On February 22, 1800, thirteen women clad in white dresses, black beaver hats, and black cloaks with white scarves, helped lead a funeral commemoration procession for George Washington in Hallowell, Maine. Escorting this somber parade to memorialize the fallen president of the New Republic, these women held a place of esteemed honor. . . .The participation of these women in this parade was consistent with decades of women's active and visible involvement within American colonial death culture. This culture would expand in the New Republic to include taking care of the dying, controlling the economics of death, and ritualizing mourning, funeral, and burial practices. For most of the nineteenth century, women defined and controlled American death and mourning culture as a distinctly gendered enterprise." (viii)

Obligated to create an idyllic setting for the dying and a comforting ambiance for the survivors, these women—impromptu undertakers— faithfully followed the prescriptive funerary conventions from bedside to grave. As nineteenth-century women writers claimed the juxtaposition of death and beauty for their own, poems, letters, and other writings adopted a domestic Gothic element. These death-related Gothic elements invited themes of pain, grief, and suffering, centered in a domestic realm that had previously provided a spiritual and emotional haven for its inhabitants. Consequently, death-themed

literature became domesticated, romanticized, and feminized—a reflection of the nation's desire to bring sanctity and peace back into the lives of the American people.

Within this historically romanticized and feminized paradox of nineteenth-century death-related conventions, Emily Dickinson left behind a number of poems describing the process leading up to and including the moment of death—poems referred to collectively as her "death-bed poems." This subgenre of Dickinson's corpus centers on the speaker's first-person account of a witnessed death-bed scene. In the poems, the speaker uses phrases, allusions, and historical references that directly correspond to funerary and mourning traditions commonly observed in the Victorian "cult of death." As such, Dickinson's elegiac speaker accurately—and starkly—depicts the surreal combination of horror and fascination that defined the nineteenth-century death-bed scene. Critic Paul Ferlazzo points out that Dickinson's speaker uses the poems as a platform to show the bereaved "how they can cope with the death of loved ones by being overwhelmed with death rituals, such as funerals" (89). Clark Griffith agrees in his article "Dickinson's Connection of Death to Time," stating that survivors—those left behind by the deceased in Dickinson's poems—"seek to reorder their lives through some tightly disciplined movement, some bare and yet ceremonious act" (54). Yet, nearly everyone who lived in early-to-mid nineteenth-century America had the same difficulty reconciling the solemnity of death with ceremonial rituals as did the survivors in Dickinson's death-bed poems. To this end, Dickinson's death-bed speaker provides a characteristically American identity to represent the nineteenth-century women who not only lovingly cared for the dying, but who also stoically carried out the gruesome, yet necessary, funerary tasks de rigueur that were expected of death-bed attendants.

Because Dickinson's death-bed poems offers such an accurate reflection of the cultural and historical aspects of the death-bed setting, this paper will examine Dickinson's letters, personal experiences with death, and acknowledgements of consolation literature that support the poet's knowledge of and contribution to the elegiac form as it specifically relates to her death-bed poetry. This writer contends that, to fully comprehend Dickinson's poetic perspective, one must consider the historical, regional, and biographical context that influenced her.

While some critics have claimed that Dickinson's death-bed poems present the speaker as a simple observer at a death-bed scene, this paper redefines and resituates Dickinson's death-bed speaker as more than a mere witness and instead positions her as an attendant to a death-bed scene. Furthermore, this writer's position contradicts prior critical assessments suggesting that Dickinson's death-related poems indicate an unnatural preoccupation with death. The poet displayed no more of a morbid curiosity about death in her writings than did other writers of her era. The poems, letters, and death-bed scenes in the works of Lydia Sigourney, Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Harriet Beecher Stowe reflect the same first-person accounts of comfort, death, and grief as does Dickinson. Finally, this writer maintains that Dickinson's speaker, situated as a death-bed attendant, offers unique insight on nineteenth-century society, on the dysfunctional nature of the American death-bed setting, and on the symbolism of Dickinson's death-bed poems themselves.

Chapter 1

"Yesterday is History": The Victorian "Cult of Death"

As an integral component of the Victorian "cult of death," the Good Death developed as an important element of the American nineteenth-century death culture. The conventions of the Good Death, or the "art of dying," stipulate that the dying had a responsibility to impart memorable words of wisdom when expressing his or her final farewells to those who would be left behind to mourn ("Civil War" 6). Last words were seen by onlookers as a testimony of love from passing loved ones. To ensure that the dying would be coherent enough to speak wisely, narcotic pain-relievers were typically withheld—even in cases of extreme suffering (Loeffel-Atkins 11). The dictates of the Good Death demanded that the dying remain calm, courageous, even stoic in the face of death. Displays of fear during the final moments were, to onlookers, sure signs that the dying loved one was spiritually unprepared to meet eternity. To many, such a display indicated that the soul of the dying was doomed to spend eternity alone and in Hell. As such, the fabled Good Death—earnestly desired by all—did not deviate from established social expectations. Instead, the Good Death embraced the essential elements of Victorian social conventions, thereby creating a utopian death-bed setting.

1.1 The Good Death

The Good Death became a symbol of hope and beauty that persisted even in the

face of horror. Responding to public sentiment, literature and art exemplified the spirit of the Good Death through highly romanticized death-bed scenes that evoked strong emotional responses from its readers. Consequently, in an effort to appeal to the sensibilities of a death-conscious American readership, popular nineteenth-century literature employed heart-wrenching death-bed scenes of likeable characters such as Nell Trent in Charles Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), Little Eva in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), and Beth March in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868). It is noteworthy that each of these seminal texts held a place in the Dickinson family library[7] and that Dickinson refers to each one of the works in her letters and poems. Jack L. Capps, author of *Emily Dickinson's Reading 1836-1886*, states that "like nearly everyone else. . .[Dickinson] read Mrs. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" (155) and that

> Of all the Victorian novelists. . .Charles Dickens was clearly the family favorite, and Emily knew his novels just as well or perhaps better than did the rest of her family. Allusions to *David Copperfield*, *Dombev and Son*, and *The Old Curiosity Shop* appear over a number of years (117).

Dickinson makes specific mention of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and of Dickens in an April 1853 letter to her brother Austin, informing him that "Father . . . gave me quite a trimming about "Uncle Tom" and "Charles Dickens" and these "modern Literati" who he says are *nothing*, compared to past generations, who flourished when *he was a boy*" (Leyda 268; vol. 1, emphasis in original). The poet also makes what is perhaps an oblique

[7] Alcott's Little Women (2 vols.) is currently held in the Houghton Library at Harvard University (shelfmark number EDR 29). The other two texts, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (twenty-fifth thousand edition) and Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop, and Other Tales*, are held in other Dickinson-related archive collections.

reference to Alcott's *Little Women* in a poem that she included in a c. 1880[8] letter written to Sally Jenkins[9]:

"Little Women – ": Which shall it be, Geranium or Juleps?

> The Butterfly upon the Sky
> That does'nt know it's Name
> And has'nt any tax to pay
> And has'nt any Home
> Is just as high as you and I,
> And higher, I believe,
> So soar away and never sigh
> And that's the way to grieve –

(Leyda 326; vol. 2)

Other than Dickinson's obvious titular reference to Alcott's *Little Women*, her mention of "Geranium or Juleps" can also be connected to the sentimental novel. One of the novel's main characters, Jo March, takes a beautiful cake—a "blancmange"—to an ailing friend. The cake is surrounded by "a garland of green leaves and the scarlet flowers of Amy's pet geranium." Given that the poem refers to both a "Butterfly" and "[grief]," the word *julep* is likely either a reference to the word's original denotation—"rose water" or to the practice of disguising the taste of bitter medicine in a "liquid sweetened with syrup or sugar" (OED). Dickinson offers her counsel on "the way to grieve" to the letter's recipient, telling her to "soar away and never sigh." The advice reflects the dual nature of the Victorian "cult of death" in that survivors attempt to cover grief through beauty and escape. Literary representations—such as those referenced by Dickinson—transformed the Good Death from a cultural tradition into a "spectacle in terms of fictional

[8] Leyda dates the letter as mid-July 1880, while Thomas Johnson dates the letter "about August 1881."

[9] Daughter of Jonathan Jenkins, minister of Amherst's First Church and friend of Dickinson.

sentimentality" that began to acquire a deeper, religious form of symbolism (Masur 13).

1.2 The Good Death—A Symbol of the Afterlife

Drew Gilpin Faust states in *This Republic of Suffering* that during the nineteenth century, the tradition of the Good Death was deeply ingrained into most cultures around the world. Even before the late 1400s, the *ars moriendi* tradition had provided the guidelines for the dying as well as for those who cared for them. The Good Death, in effect, became a "general [system] of belief held across the nation about life's meaning and life's appropriate end." The moment of death itself, then became one that must be "witnessed, scrutinized, interpreted, [and] narrated" (7-9). Due to the way death so blatantly disregarded the highly anticipated Good Death, questions arose concerning how, when, and where one should die, adding a distorted significance to death. Eventually, the seemingly utopian conventions of the Good Death, and the naturally oppressive atmosphere of death itself combined to form a sociocultural paradox that quickly evolved into the Victorian-era "cult of death."

During the Civil War, the Good Death—the desire for a proper end—transfixed members of the clergy who addressed those on the battlefield. A religious tract given to Confederate soldiers claimed that

> Death fixes our state. Here [on earth] everything is changing and unsettled. Beyond the grave our condition is unchangeable. . . .What you are when you die, the same will you reappear in the great day of eternity. The features of character with which you leave the world will be seen in you when you rise from the dead. ("Civil War" 10).

As the tract explains, the Good Death traditions held that the way in which one died not only characterized the life one had lived, it also foretold what type of afterlife one would

have. Eventually, heavy Protestant influences in mid-1800s literature recast the good-death model as the "good Christian death"—a concept that would be used weekly in pulpits across New England as yet another type of evangelical tool (Laderman 23). Over time, the religious implications of the "Evangelical 'Good Death'" replaced the aesthetics of the *ars moriendi* (Jalland 8).

1.3 Conventions of the Victorian "Cult of Death"

Even before the start of the Civil War, death took on a heightened degree of symbolic ritual that developed from a combination of fear and fixation toward the corpse. And, just as mourning had developed into a fashionable art in Europe, the shadow of death enveloped the United States, thereby fostering the transformation of grieving into a similar "artistic [expression]" (Loeffel-Atkins 5). Later, as the desire of the American people to beautify the specter of death intensified during the Civil War, the mourning customs and death-related superstitions of the Victorian "cult of death" became more firmly ingrained in the New England social atmosphere. Pat Jalland, in *Death in the Victorian Family*, states that these mortuary rituals facilitated the process of grieving, providing emotional assistance "within a coherent framework which reduced the terrifying aspects of death and also rallied the support of family and friends" (12). Over time, the sentimentalism of the New England death culture nurtured the accumulation of Victorian mourning and funereal traditions. As a result, the Victorian "cult of death' spawned more than one hundred individual conventions. These funereal conventions include customs that relate to the corpse, the home, the mourners, and the death-bed attendants. The social conventions of the Victorian "cult of death" comprise a wide range

of death-related traditions. Some of the most commonly noted traditions include those that are contained within Dickinson's death-related poetry[10] [11]:

- Formal written announcements of death/ funeral invitations—Dickinson's "News that He ceased Human Nature" (from Fr688A)
- Black crape hung in visible locations outside the home—referenced by Dickinson through a personified death that "Dresses each House in Crape" (Fr556A)
- Colored ribbon used to decorate various funeral-related items—black for an adult and white for a child—Dickinson's "darker Ribbon - for a Day - " (Fr315A)
- Mourning attire, known as "widow's weeds"—described as the "Crape I bore – " in Dickinson's "The Birds reported from the South" (Fr780A)
- Keeping personal mementos of the loved one in a box or locket, such as described in Dickinson's poem "In Ebon Box when years have flown" (Fr1180A)
- Blinds drawn and shutters closed, giving it "the numb look" in Dickinson's "There's been a Death, in the Opposite House" (Fr547A)
- Mirrors covered with black material or turned toward wall—suggested by the dulled reflection of the "Skater's Brook" in Dickinson's "'Twas warm - at first - like Us - " (Fr614)
- Clocks stopped at the time of death (sometimes restarted after burial)—noted by Dickinson in "A clock stopped - " (Fr259A).
- Flowers brought in to mask the odor of decomposition for the "timid Throng - " (Fr556A) that visited to pay their respects to the dead
- Corpse removed from house feet first—referenced as Dickinson's speaker recalls that death "Carries one - out of it [the house] - to God - " (Fr556A)
- An all-night vigil after death is assumed to prevent loved ones from being buried alive—"to stay - when all have wandered - " in Dickinson's "Promise this - When you be dying" (Fr762A)
- A domestic death-bed setting created in the Good Death tradition as is suggested in Dickinson's "Dying Room" (Fr1740),

These death-related customs cultivated a strong sense of sentimentalism in the American people, prompting merchants to turn the art of mourning into a profitable

[10] For a thorough explication of the customs of the "cult of death" prevalent during the nineteenth century, see Gary Laderman's *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799–1883*, Alan C. Swedlund's *A Cultural History of Illness, Death, and Loss in New England, 1840-1916*, and Caroline E. Janney's "Mourning during the Civil War."

[11] For the sake of brevity, only those conventions are listed that are referred to by Dickinson, specifically or by allusion, in the death-bed poems examined in this paper. A more complete examination of her entire corpus of death-bed poems will be analyzed in an expanded version of this research.

enterprise through the marketing and selling of keepsakes, mourning attire, postmortem photographs, and other funeral necessities (Loeffel-Atkins 5). To survivors of the deceased, keepsakes and other funerary items, such as "consolation tracts and mourner's handbooks" and "rural cemetery plots and markers," were an important way of remembering the dead. However, these remembrances also created an economic structure of their own—a structure that Luciano refers to as an "economy of grief" (67) and that Laderman calls "cultural currency" (73).

In addition, these death-related items became the topic of popular consolatory literature. St. Armand describes the effect that the period's societal economics had on literature: "Wedding rings, Bibles, locks of hair, and other mementos of the dying weigh down the mortuary verses of the time as well as the sentimental novels that sprang from the same love religion" (61). Dickinson captures the poignancy inherent to the keepsake tradition in her c.1860 poem "In Ebon Box when years have flown" (Fr180A). The poem's speaker references a precious "Ebon Box" that holds mementos of a departed loved one:

> In Ebon Box, when years have flown
> To reverently peer -
> Wiping away the velvet dust
> Summers have sprinkled there!
>
> To hold a letter to the light -
> Grown Tawny - now - with time -
> To con the faded syllables
> That quickened us like Wine!
>
> Perhaps a Flower's shrivelled cheek
> Among it's stores to find -
> Plucked far away, some morning -
> By gallant - mouldering hand!

A curl, perhaps, from foreheads
Our constancy forgot -
Perhaps, an antique trinket -
In vanished fashions set!

And then to lay them quiet back -
And go about it's care -
As if the little Ebon Box
Were none of our affair!

(Fr180A)

At the outset of the poem, the speaker indicates that the death occurred in years past, as she states that "years have flown" and that she must wipe away the "velvet dust /[that] Summers have sprinkled there!" (1-4). The reverent manner with which the speaker handles the box and the fact that both words—"Ebon Box"—are capitalized give the reader an indication of the importance the box holds for the speaker. Suggesting again the length of time that has elapsed since her loved one died, the speaker states that the "letter" has "Grown Tawny - now - with time - " and that the writing has turned to "faded syllables" (5-7). In line 8, the speaker implies that the deceased might have been a lover, since the letters exchanged between the speaker and her loved one "quickened [them] like Wine!" The word *quickened* denotes something that is "made living or lively; animated, revived, stimulated" and *wine* suggests a form of intoxication (OED). That the letters would stimulate and intoxicate both parties imply a relationship beyond one between friends or family members.

In the third stanza, the speaker describes a flower that she chooses from "Among [the] stores" in the keepsake box. Again, the speaker alludes to a lost love, as the word *gallant* (12) is suggestive of one that is "markedly polite and attentive to the female sex" (OED). Her use of the words *perhaps* in line 9 and *mouldering* in line 12 add a Gothic element to the poem, suggesting that the speaker wistfully imagines that the once-gallant

hand—now lying in decay—placed the flower in the box. Evoking the notion of mourning jewelry, the speaker remarks that a "curl, perhaps, from foreheads / Our constancy forgot - " lies in the treasured "Ebon Box" as well (13-14). The speaker's mention that the container is an "Ebon Box" (i.e. made of ebony) is noteworthy in itself, but especially so in connection with the "curl." According to Glennys Howarth and Oliver Leaman, editors of the *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying*,

> The Victorian period also witnessed a proliferation of mourning jewellery, which during the eighteenth century had largely taken the form of *memento mori* [translated as *remember death* and part of the *ars moriendi* tradition] fashion and was sometimes made from skulls, bones, and teeth of the deceased. In the nineteenth century, jet and ebony were the preferred materials for the manufacture of mourning jewellery, which took the form of brooches depicting upturned flowers or urn, lockets containing a lock of hair of the deceased, miniatures with portraits of the loved one, rings and so on. (191)

The speaker illuminates the reference to mourning jewelry as she states that it is "Perhaps, an antique trinket - / In vanished fashions set!" in lines 13-16. Finally, the speaker presents a clear view of the emotional detachment emphasized in the Victorian "cult of death" in the last stanza as she describes putting her keepsakes away. The speaker again stresses the emotional attachment to the box and implies that the "Ebon Box" is more than a mere trinket box. Instead, the keepsake box represents a lost loved one, and as such, it is difficult to lay the keepsakes "quiet back - " and continue to care for the "Ebon Box / [as if it] Were none of our affair!" (17-20). Although the Victorian "cult of death" encouraged the grief-stricken to detach themselves from the morose nature of death, the poem's speaker intimates that, at least for her, it is impossible to ignore the significance of the keepsakes held in the box.

Just as the “Ebon Box” proved to be of great import to Dickinson’s speaker, the mementos, consolation literature, and other working practices of the Victorian “cult of death” procured a significant role in elegiac writing. And as the American elegy continued to evolve, writers incorporated elements that echoed the rituals and emotional struggles inherent to the nineteenth-century death scene. These elements formed the core of the nation’s elegiac poetry and addressed the American people’s desire to reconcile the gulf between comfort and grief and between life and death, resulting in an elegiac form that was distinctly American.

1.4 The American Elegy and the Death-Bed

According to Max Cavitch in *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from The Puritans to Whitman*, it is through the historical context of Victorian funereal traditions that the American elegy developed, reflecting “broadly upon relations between the living and the dead. . . often avoiding the personalism and occasionalism of traditional elegy.”[12] Over time, a distinctly American form of “obliquely elegiac” poetry developed—a form of elegy epitomized by the corpus of Dickinson’s death-bed poetry (Cavitch 110). Since American death-bed behavior demanded that the dying “give up one’s soul ‘gladlye and wilfully’ [sic]: . . . [and] pattern one’s dying on that of Christ” (*Republic* 6), American elegiac poetry evolved as a sort of bridge that connected the Good Death tradition with conventional, Puritan-esque religious beliefs. These beliefs, depicted so eloquently in the period’s elegies, were intended to serve as an emotional barrier against the constancy of

[12] For an excellent commentary on the historical development of the elegy, see *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (2007), by Max Cavitch.

grief and death. Yet, the barrier proved futile compared to the relentless onslaught of misery experienced by so many in the American nineteenth century.

Death—due to war, disease, accident, and childbirth—presented itself as an ever-present adversary of the American people during the 1800s (Loeffel-Atkins 5). A twenty-one-year-old Dickinson describes a year in which she lost several friends to death, declaring to her brother that "one and another, and another—how we pass away!" (Leyda 222; vol. 1). The nineteenth-century brought very few, if any, safety regulations for industry or public transportation and even fewer advancements in the medical field (Coffee 19). Sadly, Americans living in the 1800s were "reconciled to death at any age; that was the will of their Puritan God" (16). Life expectancy rates were low. For example, females in Massachusetts in the year 1849 could expect to live to be between 36.3 and 38.3 years, while the lifespan of their male counterparts was somewhat lower. Moreover, mortality rates for children were shockingly high, with "one fifth and one third of all children" dying before the tenth birthday (Laderman 24). In addition, social conventions associated with death served as constant reminders that death was near. The tolling of the memorial church bells, traditional mourning attire, funeral processions, even "[b]roadsides"—the equivalent to modern-day billboards commemorating the death of a local resident—all served as constant reminders of human mortality (22-23). In addition, public burial grounds and garden cemeteries created another seemingly omnipresent reminder of man's humanity, as they often held a central location in the community and were filled with symbolic figures of death (23). Moreover, weekly sermons carried out the theme of death as a sort of "evangelical device," delivered with the intent to persuade those that had strayed into sin to consider the fate of immortal souls (23). In her

sociocultural overview titled *At Home: The American Family 1750-1870,* Elizabeth Donaghy Garrett shares an excellent historical account of the frequency of death as it occurred in the American nineteenth century**:**

> Statistics document an ever-increasing life expectancy for Americans between 1750 and 1870, yet there were few families that did not frequently renew acquaintance with the grim reaper. The pall of death was omnipresent; at home, next door, intoned from the pulpit in the roll of the week's dead, heard from one's bed as the bells tolled the count, indicating whether it was man, or woman, or child who had last been taken. And totalitarian death was no snob. Accidents, epidemics, malnutrition, and primitive medical practices claimed rich and poor, young and old. (240)

As a result of death's constant presence, the American people—especially in the Northern states—cultivated "morbid obsessions" with death that soon developed into a cultural and social movement as the nineteenth century progressed. Although societal mores exhibited a wide array of expressions, three main components characterized obsessive attitudes: "a refusal to allow the dead to disappear from the living community, a fixation on the body of the deceased, and a demand that the integrity of the corpse be perpetuated in the grave as well as in collective memory" (Laderman 73). The center of this national obsession was the death-bed, which became a major component of the daily lives of most nineteenth-century Americans. The advent of the Civil War brought with it an even greater death toll, causing the nation to address grief and suffering on a national level.

1.5 Dickinson as National Elegist

As the Civil War developed, American elegists formed their verse around a variety of themes—victory, regret, suffering, and reconciliation. The consistent use of

these themes demonstrates the national sense of melancholy that had enveloped the nation (Manheim 278). Dickinson addresses this nationwide despondency in a late-July 1862 letter to Dr. and Mrs. Holland, in which the poet speaks about "her business:"

> Cardinals would'nt do it—Cockneys would'nt do it, but I cant [sic] stop to strut—in a world where bells toll. I hear through visitor in town that 'Mrs. H. is not strong.' The little peacock in me tells me not to inquire again. Then I remember my tiny friend, how brief she is, how dear she is, and the peacock quite dies. Away. . . . Perhaps you laugh at me! Perhaps the whole United States are laughing at me too! I cant stop for that! My business is love.
>
> I found a Bird, this morning, down, down—on a little bush at the foot of the garden; and wherefore I sing, I said, since nobody *hears?*
>
> One sob in the throat, one flutter of bosom—'*My* business is to *sing,'* and away she rose! (Leyda 65; vol. 2, emphasis in original)

At the outset of the letter, Dickinson refers to the "Cardinals" and the "Cockneys."[13] Since both birds attract the attention of others—the cardinal by its bright-red plumage and the rooster by its crowing—the line suggests that Dickinson believes that she should, and will, call attention to her talents. However, her statement that she "cant stop to strut" strongly implies that she has more important "business" to tend to "in a world where bells toll." During this time, as the Civil War raged in the United States, the incessantly tolling bells would have signified that yet another death has occurred in the community, as dictated by the mourning conventions of the Victorian "cult of death" (Garrett 240). That Dickinson's "business is love" insinuates that, in light of the severity of the national situation, the poet must abandon all selfish motives and instead concentrate on her

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[13] By Dickinson's use of the word *cockneys,* it is assumed by this writer that the poet's intention was to represent the rooster. The word *cockney* was used during Dickinson's lifetime to mean a "small or misshapen [egg] occasionally laid by fowls, still popularly called in some parts 'cocks' eggs'" (OED).

concern for the nation's dying and their survivors. Dickinson mentions that when she hears that "Mrs. H" is not well—the attention-seeking "little peacock" in her tries to ignore the fact. However, she remembers that life is fleeting—"brief"—and suppresses her self-interest. Dickinson's concern that the "whole United States are laughing at me too!" bolsters this argument, as the poet makes obvious her interest in the nation's reaction to her poetry.

In her definitive article, "A Poet's Business: Love and Mourning in the Deathbed Poems of Emily Dickinson," Nancy Mayer rightly maintains "that there is a body of Dickinson poems—informed, like the letter quoted above [to Dr. and Mrs. Holland], by the contemplation of mortality and mourning—that reveal a love for human beings and human life that is both particular and universal, and occasionally communal." Mayer goes on to state that Dickinson creates a "dissection of mourning" in her elegies that are, in essence, "love songs from Dickinson" and "small narratives that end with the altered lives of the living" (45). Over time, Dickinson's elegiac style develops from one of consolation to a straightforward account of a death-bed scene. As she shifts her focus to the death-bed, she transforms herself from traditional elegist to national representative of America's women who bore the emotional toll of death's burden.

By situating her speaker as a representative for the nation's death-bed attendants, Dickinson signifies—personifies—the aura of discord and inner turmoil put upon these women out of necessity. Dickinson addresses her desire to aid the nation's grief-stricken in a December 1862, letter to cousins Frances and Louise Norcross:

> Sorrow seems to me more general than it did, and not the estate of a few persons, since the war began; and if the anguish of others helped one with one's own, now would be many medicines. . . I noticed that Robert Browning had made another poem, and was astonished—till I

> remembered that I, myself, in my smaller way, sang off charnel steps. Every day life feels mightier, and what we have the power to be, more stupendous" (Leyda 72; vol. 2).

The poet's statement that she also "sang" suggests a connection to her letter written six months earlier, stating that "*My* business is to *sing*" (Leyda 65; vol. 2). Moreover, Dickinson's remark that "Robert Browning had made another poem, and was astonished," followed by her remembrance that she, too "sang off charnel [burial ground] steps"—creates a symbolic connection to her role as a national elegist. In situating the letter in relation to Dickinson's poetic timeline, biographer Alfred Habegger makes an interesting observation about date of the letter in *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson*. Originally estimated to have been written in 1864 by editor Thomas H. Johnson, the letter was later traced to December 1862 by Leyda. Habegger states that "Getting the date right is crucial: it shows that, on the eve of her most productive year, 1863, the poet made the connection between the war and her growing powers" (400). Leyda bases his dating of the letter on an article, published in the *Springfield Republican* and dated December 20, 1862, which states that "A new edition of Robert Browning's poetica works is announced in London; also a new long poem from him, titled "Christmas Eve and Easter Day" (*Springfield*). It is noteworthy, in this writer's estimation, that a poem titled "A Soldier's Death," by N.A.W.P., of Winchendon, Massachusetts lies adjacent to the article itself. The unidentified poem[14] epitomizes the type of American death-bed elegy that Dickinson creates as she "sang off charnel steps." The poem encapsulates the nineteenth-century death-bed scenario and the conventions of

[14] As of this date, this writer has been unable to determine the identity of the poem's author other than what is stated in the cited edition of the *Springfield Republican*.

the Good Death, ending with a bittersweet combination of death and joy. Perhaps it was this poem, printed next to the announcement of Browning's new poetry, that caused Dickinson to recall that she too "sang off charnel steps." Or, perhaps it was the recollection of Browning's 1842 work, "The Pied Piper of Hamelin," that prompted her to think of herself as a national poet. Regardless, Dickinson—internally if not overtly—situated her death-bed speaker, her "supposed person," as a "Representative of the Verse."

The death of United States President Abraham Lincoln on April 15, 1865, propelled the entire nation into a state of mourning as intense as the one that the nation of England had experienced following the death of Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert. The Civil War and death of President Lincoln combined in a tragic way, materializing as "a cement to the whole People, subtler, more underlying, than any thing in the written Constitution"[15] (Luciano 215). Under the oppressive shadow of death—now both personal and national—the death-bed became the foundation of American elegy as a symbol that embodied the nation's grief and hope.

Following Lincoln's untimely death by assassination, his eulogists emphasized what Luciano calls the slain President's *representativeness*. In doing so, Luciano cites Emerson's definition of a "representative individual" as he states that

> the representative individual, for Ralph Waldo Emerson, was 'who is what he is from nature, and who never reminds us of others,' yet who somehow 'must be related to us, and our lives receive from him some promise of explanation.' In effect, the representative individual reminds us not of others but of *ourselves*—the fuller, better selves that circumstance

[15]Quoted by Luciano from Walt Whitman's "Death of President Lincoln," included in *Memoranda during the War and Death of President Lincoln,* edited by Roy P. Basler, Greenwood, 1972.

> may circumscribe but to which democracy promises at least the possibility of unfolding. (216)

In the context of a nationwide representativeness, Faith Barrett claims that Dickinson did not situate herself in a national sense (Manheim 277). However, a letter written as a response to T. W. Higginson in the summer of 1862 indicates that—at least to some degree—Dickinson *did* see herself as a "representative individual," even before Lincoln's death. Dickinson states in part: "Perhaps you smile at me—I could not stop for that—My Business is Circumference. . . . When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person" (Leyda 64; vol. 2[16]). The word *circumference* (OED), denotes the act of encircling or encompassing and, especially when taken into context with the phase *representative of the verse*, implies that Dickinson sees her speaker—"a supposed person"—as a national poet.

It is through the voice of her speaker that Dickinson focuses her efforts on addressing the nation's grief-stricken and thereby easing the "anguish of others" (Leyda 72; vol. 2). To this end, she directs her attention to those who deal most intimately with the corpse—the death-bed attendants. In doing so, Dickinson's death-bed speaker resacralizes death, returning a semblance of beauty and sanctity to a people beleaguered with sorrow.

1.6 Dickinson's Resacralization of Death

As death continued to invade the space of the local community, the American

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[16] Letters are quoted from Jay Leyda's *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson, Vol. One and Two* (1960).

people struggled to re-consecrate the civic atmosphere. Desiring to exorcise the death-ridden atmosphere, mourning Americans romanticized and spiritualized death with increasing frequency. When the corpse began to be viewed as a potential source of disease, a movement toward "garden cemeteries" developed in the 1830s in larger cities such as New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. This "garden cemetery" movement exploited the American public's long-standing desire to maintain a pastoral setting and to inject "pious, moral instruction" into the death process by constructing a peaceful, calming burial scene (Laderman 9). Since no professional funeral industry[17] existed prior to the late nineteenth century, friends, neighbors, and family members bore the brunt of disposing of their loved one's remains. Although "undertakers, liverymen, and cabinetmakers" were available to transport the corpse from the home to the cemetery, the deceased and his or her survivors played the primary roles in all funereal rituals.

As death permeated every facet of the social climate of nineteenth-century America and became more deeply entrenched in the nation's culture, the corpse itself began to take on a symbolic quality that was almost sacred. According to Laderman,

> The majority of Protestant Americans who died in the North during the antebellum period were treated to funeral services that fell somewhere between the elaborate ceremonies, national honor, and religious deification accorded Washington's absent body and the lack of ceremony, irreverence, and ultimate obliteration visited on the suicide's body. . . . After the pronouncement of death and before disposition of the body, the corpse had a sacred quality greatly determined by its liminality. . . .Indeed, the feelings of horror and danger provoked by the lifeless corpse, combined with the sense of obligation and fidelity to the deceased,

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[17] For a thorough history on the development of the professionalized funeral industry, see Chapter 13, "The "Business of Death in the Late Nineteenth Century" (pp. 164-175) in Gary Laderman's *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799—1883*.

> contributed to the religious meanings that survivors linked to the physical presence of the dead. (27)

Laderman claims that the corpse itself was treated as a "liminal, sacred object" that must be "ushered out of living society in a socially acceptable, religiously sanctioned manner" (27). As the corpse became endowed with Christian symbolism, the gradual "deschristianization" of religious philosophy began to slowly recast the context of death and the corpse (10). The ideology of death and the corpse as sacred entities conflicted with the newly emerging concept that both epitomized corruption. This conflict created an even stronger desire within the community to resacralize death—especially as it related to the domestic sphere. To this end, American poets sought to re-consecrate the death scene through their unique style of elegiac writing. Dickinson also re-contextualized the death-bed scene, but without the broad consolatory discourse of most of her contemporaries. Instead, Dickinson's treatment of the death-bed scene addresses death in an idiosyncratic form. Speaking to the survivor's need for consolation and hope, the poet offers solace while refusing to shield her readers from the glaring atrocities committed by a personified Death, yet resacralizes the scene through a turn of events. The speaker in Dickinson's "The Birds reported from the South – " (FR780A, c. 1863) re-sanctifies death by interjecting beauty and wisdom into a chance meeting in which two strangers share conflicting emotions of comfort and grief:

> The Birds reported from the South -
> A News express to Me -
> A spicy Charge, My little Posts -
> But I am deaf - Today -
>
> The Flowers - appealed – a timid Throng -
> I reinforced the Door -
> Go blossom to the Bees - I said -
> And trouble Me - no More -

The Summer Grace, for notice strove -
Remote - Her best Array -
The Heart - to stimulate the Eye
Refused too utterly -

At length, a Mourner, like Myself,
She drew away austere -
Her frosts to ponder - then it was
I recollected Her -

She suffered Me, for I had mourned -
I offered Her no word -
My Witness - was the Crape I bore -
Her - Witness - was Her Dead -

Thenceforward - We – together dwelt -
She - never questioned Me -
Nor I - Herself -
Our Contract
A Wiser Sympathy

(Fr780A)

The diction used by the speaker in the poem's opening quatrain first intimates that the "News" of a death comes from "the South" but that she does not want to hear it as she is "deaf – Today" (1). That she refuses to listen to the "News" presents a clear reference to the division between the North and South caused by the Civil War. However, the speaker uses wordplay that suggests a two-fold context that incorporates themes of the Civil War conflict with the conventions of the Victorian "cult of death." The speaker's use of the words *south*, *charge*, and *posts* lend a Civil-War context through the specific geographic notation—"the South"—and the two words *charge* and *post*—both capitalized for emphasis—that carry military connotations. Moreover, the words *birds*, *news*, *express*, *charge*, and *posts* imply allusions to the Victorian "cult of death" tradition of announcing that a death has occurred. According to Victorian-era traditions, birds are often the harbinger of bad news, especially in relation to death (Lutwak 109). The words

news, *express*, *charge*, and *posts* can also be related to nineteenth-century mourning customs where living survivors place "funeral announcements" in local newspapers and express *post* or *post-riders* travel "*express* with letters, dispatches, etc., esp. along a fixed route" to deliver the *charge*—or "source of trouble or inconvenience" (OED, emphasis added).

In the second and third quatrains, the speaker alludes again to paradoxical nature of Victorian "cult of death" sensibilities. The speaker addresses the emotional barrier of denial created by the human mind in its effort to process the news that a loved one has died, asserting in lines 6–8 that she has "reinforced the Door" and asked the "Bees" to leave and "trouble Me - no More - ." However, the words *flowers*, *door*, *blossom*, and *bees* also carry meanings that connect them to Victorian-era death traditions. Flowers and fragrant tree blossoms were used as an aesthetically pleasing method to hide the odor of decomposition and were fashioned into wreaths as a means of informing the community that a death had occurred (Loeffel-Atkins 6). And in literature, "Bees" have served as a longstanding symbol of the soul (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 79). The diction of the poem places the speaker as part of the "timid Throng" that is present at the home of the deceased and for which the "Flowers" have been placed (5). The poem's third stanza expands on the scene, as the speaker combines the concept of nature personified—"Summer Grace"—who strives against grief and mourning using her natural beauty—"Her best Array" (9-10). Yet the speaker's "Heart," too grief-stricken to enjoy nature's respite, "Refused too utterly" to "stimulate the Eye" (11-12).

The final three stanzas of the poem present a metaphoric representation of reconciliation and strength through the speaker's efforts to resacralize the event. Another

"Mourner"—likely from "the South"—retreats in the distance to "ponder" the "frosts"[18] that now serve as the source of her grief (13-15). The speaker declares that she "recollected Her" (16); however, the context of the poem implies that the speaker recognizes *herself* in the stranger. The speaker continues to describe an ethereal, yet sublime bond that is shared between the two women. The fact that the other mourner "suffered" the speaker, or merely tolerated her (OED), strongly suggests that the "Mourner" was from the South. Still, the two women reach a common understanding through their shared loss. The two women do not speak. Silent, symbolic "[Witnesses]" of death—the traditional mourning "Crape" worn by the speaker and the noticeable grief of the stranger—are the only means of communication between the two mourners (19-20). Finally, the speaker transforms the oppression of death and grief into the beauty of inner strength and wisdom, as the two mourners cement their unspoken emotional bond—their "Contract / A Wiser Sympathy" (24-25).

Through the shared grief of mourners, Dickinson's speaker reshapes the disconsolate nature of grief, resacralizing death through beauty and tradition. Through the reconciliation of opposing forces, she recasts the sweeping melancholy that enveloped her grief-stricken nation. And as a "Representative of the Verse," Dickinson's poetic speaker articulates what the entire nation experiences. As Dickinson's own death experiences melded with her heartfelt desire to comfort the grieving, the poet's call to sing "off charnel steps" turned its attention to the death-bed—the epicenter of the nineteenth-century death scene.

[18] See Patrick J. Keane's "Frost as Death in Dickinson's Poems" in *Social Issues in Literature: Death and Dying in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson*, Greenhaven P, 2013, pp. 103-11.

Chapter 2

"Looking at Death, is Dying": Dickinson and the Death-Bed Setting

Dickinson's poems that refer to death and dying are among her best-known works and comprise a subsection of her oeuvre containing more than six-hundred poems. As such, the death-related themes of many of Dickinson's poems and letters lead some literary critics to claim that the poet held a lifelong obsession with death. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* the word *obsession*, defined in a psychological context, denotes a "recurrent, intrusive, inappropriate thought, impulse, or image causing significant distress or disturbance to social or occupational functioning." While Dickinson certainly wrote about death and dying in her poems and letters, there exists no significant evidence that the subject caused the poet "distress or disturbance to [her] social or occupational functioning." Yet, the myth persists that Dickinson was obsessively captivated by the subject of death.

One such claim comes from John Cody's "Dickinson's Obsession with Death" in which Cody notes that Dickinson's "letters are filled with inappropriate references to and questions about the last days of someone who had died." However, Cody subsequently asserts that the Puritan culture and "romanticism in her day dwelled upon death. And death from fatal diseases, rarely seen in the twenty-first century, was a daily occurrence in her small community"—an assertion that suggests the entire New England culture "dwelled upon death," couching Dickinson's so-called "obsession" in a social, rather than in a psychological framework (34). Cody's psychological evaluation of the poet

continues to pose that Dickinson's purported fixation on death and dying resulted from "mental disturbances in her youth" (34).

2.1 Dickinson and Death

That death played a key role in the poet's written works is not surprising, especially given the extensive degree to which Dickinson had personal interaction with death. In a historical context, Dickinson, like most other New Englanders, was surrounded by death, even as a young girl. For example, Habegger explains that the Dickinson family moved to a home on West Street in the spring of 1840 to escape the crowded conditions of the Homestead[19]. The second-story windows of the family's new home overlooked what is now called West Cemetery and what later became Dickinson's final resting place. The cemetery is described by a local minister as "treeless, 'forbidding,' and 'repulsive" (Habegger 129). The family remained in the home for fifteen years (129-30). In addition, the death of the young poet's friend and cousin, Sophia Holland, on April 29, 1844 is cited as "a shattering experience" for Dickinson, who was thirteen years old at the time of Sophia's passing (Leiter 7). Dickinson describes the effect her young friend's demise had on her in a March 28, 1846 letter to former classmate Abiah Root:

> I have never lost but one friend near my age & with whom my thoughts & her own were the same. It was before you came to Amherst. My friend was Sophia Holland. She was too lovely for earth & she was

[19] After financial difficulties forced Samuel Fowler Dickinson (father of Edward, Emily Dickinson's father) to sell the family estate, the property was acquired by General David Mack, Jr. in late 1833. Shortly afterward, Edward Dickinson purchased one half of the home from Mack. The Dickinson family occupied the eastern half of the home until 1840, when they moved into the West Street home. The family purchased the entirety of the Homestead in 1856, where Emily Dickinson lived until her death in 1886.

> transplanted from earth to heaven. . . .At length the doctor said she must die & allowed me to look at her a moment through the open door. I took off my shoes and stole softly to the sick room.
>
> There she lay mild & beautiful as in health & her pale features lit up with an unearthly—smile. I looked as long as friends would permit & when they told me I must look no longer, I let them lead me away. I shed no tear, for my heart was too full to weep, but after she was laid in her coffin & I felt I could not call her back again, I gave way to a fixed melancholy.
>
> I told not one the cause of my grief, though it was gnawing at my very heart strings. I was not well & I went to Boston & stayed a month & my health improved to that my spirits were better. I trust that she is now in heaven & though I shall never forget her, yet I shall meet her in heaven. (Leyda 85; vol. 1)

Dickinson's letter exemplifies the same emotional upheaval that had become hallmarks of the Victorian "cult of death" and the Good Death tradition. Dickinson first describes Sophia's dying in ethereal terms that resonate with the conventions of the Puritan-esque Good Death, stating that her young cousin was "transplanted from earth to heaven." She illustrates the sight of Sophia's lifeless body in much the same way—"mile & beautiful as in health" and with an "unearthly—smile" on her face. In addition, Dickinson shows her reverence for the corpse, removing her shoes and quietly tip-toeing to Sophia's side. Yet, the scene, expressed in terms of such happiness and beauty, left the young poet in a state of "fixed melancholy" that was "gnawing at [her] very heart strings." It is this combination of otherworldly beauty and unshakeable despondency that characterize the Victorian "cult of death" and became both a persistent presence in Dickinson's life and a significant influence in her work.

Figure 2. West Cemetery, Burial Site of Emily Dickinson and Family
As a young girl, Dickinson's bedroom overlooked the same cemetery, where she would be buried following her death in 1886.
Photo credit: Amherst College Archives and Special Collections

April of 1851 marked the beginning of what has been called the "year of deaths" among the youth of Amherst, noted by biographer and Dickinson scholar Richard B. Sewall in *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (435). It was during this year, Dickinson's twenty-first, that some of Dickinson's closest friends died. Sewall makes note of some of the deaths in his text:

> Abby Haskell died in April, age nineteen. In October, John Spencer, Amherst '48 principal of Amherst Academy 1848-49, who had once climbed Mt. Holyoke with Emily and Vinnie, died of consumption. Jennie Grout died on October 27 and "merry Martha Kingman" died on the thirtieth, both about Emily's age. (435)

On the day that Martha Kingman died, Dickinson wrote to her brother Austin, declaring "It *cannot* be—yet it is so—Jennie Grout was buried yesterday—Martha Kingman died at four o,clock [sic] this morning—one and another, and another—how we pass away! (Leyda 222; vol. 1). Two years later, the March 24, 1853 death of mentor Benjamin F. Newton, who died of tuberculosis, appears to have given Dickinson cause to contemplate

her own mortality, evidenced by a note to her brother: “Oh Austin, Newton is dead. The first of my own friends. Pace” (Leyda 267; vol. 1). During the years prior to the Civil War, tuberculosis presented the largest threat to New England residents. Habegger cites a total of twenty-one deaths from the disease among the “people in Dickinson’s world” (640).

While it is evident that death surrounded the poet throughout her life, Sewall suggests that it was perhaps her brother’s reaction to death that made the biggest impression on her. Sewall notes three distinct occurrences in which Austin’s reactions to death had a noticeable impact on Dickinson: “the death of his friend Frazer Stearns . . . in 1862; the death of his father in 1874; [and] his beloved son Gilbert’s death, at the age of eight, in 1883.” Dickinson remarks on Austin’s state in a March 1862 letter to Samuel Bowles:

> Austin is chilled—by Frazer’s murder—He says—his Brain keeps saying over “Frazer is killed”—“Frazer is killed,” just as Father told it—to him. Two or three words of lead—that dropped so deep, they keep weighing—Tell Austin—how to get over them! (Leyda 49; vol. 2)

Dickinson later writes the Norcross cousins, informing them that “Austin is stunned completely” (Leyda 50; vol. 2). Moreover, following the death of Austin and Susan Dickinson’s son Gilbert—affectionately known as Gib—Dickinson’s sister Lavinia (Vinnie) wrote that “little Gilbert has disappeared and Emily and I have had hard work to keep Austin from following – .” Similarly, following the death of the Dickinson family patriarch, Edward Dickinson, a friend wrote that Austin was “apparently the most shocked, stunned by the loss of his father” (Sewall 124). Although Dickinson herself did not exhibit the same degree of devastation upon the death of her father as did her brother, Edward’s death did stir up memories of the disturbing effects of a funeral that Dickinson

had attended years earlier, of which she spoke in a June 1877 letter: "Since my Father's dying, everything sacred enlarged so – it was dim to own – When a few years old – I was taken to a Funeral which I now know was of peculiar distress" (Habegger 174).

As Linda Wagner-Martin remarks in *Emily Dickinson: A Literary Life*, the 1870s brought with them another series of deaths. Although the new wave of deaths[20] certainly took a toll on Dickinson, it was the deaths of her father on June 16, 1874, and of Samuel Bowles on January 16, 1878, that affected her the most. Dickinson describes her reaction to her father's death to Louise and Frances Norcross in a letter dated about July 1874:

> You might not remember me, dears. I cannot recall myself. I thought I was strongly built, but this stronger has undermined me. . .Father does not live with us now – he lives in a new house. Though it was built in an hour it is better than this. He has'nt any garden because he moved after gardens were made, so we take him the best flowers, and if we only knew he knew, perhaps we could stop crying. . . I cannot write any more, dears. Though it is many nights, my mind never comes home. (Leyda 227; vol. 2)

Wagner-Martin illuminates the devastating effects of her father's death on Dickinson, stating that "She did not attend it [her father's funeral]. She did not speak with any of the mourners who came to pay respects. Instead, she remained in her room upstairs, leaving the door ajar so she could hear what was being said downstairs and, with her windows open, outside." (144). According to Wagner-Martin, the death of Samuel Bowles had a similar effect on the poet, causing her once again to feel a painful blow to the well-being of herself as well as her entire family (151).

Not only had death personal affected Dickinson in her close-knit community of

[20] The deaths included those of cousin and classmate Eliza Coleman Dudley in 1871, relative of Margaret "Maggie" Maher, seventeen-year-old Margaret Kelly and friend and correspondent Joseph B. Lyman both in 1872, and T. W. Higginson's wife, Mary, and Judge Otis Lord's wife, Elizabeth, both in 1877 (Sewall xxv-xxvi).

Amherst, death and dying had also pervaded the entire social structure of the time—a time when physicians could do little to protect patients from disease, a time before antibiotics, surgical anesthesia, or antiseptics, and a time when typhoid, cholera, and tuberculosis were daily threats. In her biography of Dickinson, Cynthia Griffin Wolf states that

> Few in Emily Dickinson's world could put death out of mind, for it was too daily and too near. . . . Indeed, far from being ignored, the fact of dissolution was insistently reiterated, for unless each individual could achieve a comprehensive acceptance of death, he or she could never embrace faith ardently enough to gain Heaven. From her earliest childhood days, dating at the latest from her experiences at the Norcross farm when she was two years old, Emily Dickinson had been acquainted with the slow process of extinction. Just as early, however, she had begun to become familiar with her culture's complex and stylized ways of delineating it. (69).

As Wolf indicates, Dickinson, acquainted with death from an early age, was expected by those in her small world to accept death as a pathway to a Calvinist Heaven—a Heaven that she was not sure existed[21]. However, she certainly maintained an awareness of the way New England society embraced death as a means of coping with grief and loss. Her awareness—if not her acceptance—crept into the lines of her elegiac poems and personal correspondence. To this end, Dickinson's poetry adopted the conventions of the Victorian "cult of death," incorporating as its center the death-bed—a conflicted symbol of grace, death, beauty, and grief.

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[21] See *Religion Around Emily Dickinson* by W. Clark. Gilpin for a detailed discussion of religious influences on Dickinson and her reaction to them.

2.2 Dickinson and the Death-Bed Setting

In the American 1800s, the death-bed setting became the focal point for the paradox of death and light that permeated American culture through the Good Death tradition during and after the Civil War. As Wolf states, Dickinson not only understood the death-saturated climate that enveloped the nineteenth-century sociocultural scene, she also developed a way to communicate the surreal atmosphere of the death-bed setting to her readers. In "The Art of Peace," Barton Levi St. Armand eloquently expresses Dickinson's ability to depict the combination of darkness and light that surrounded the 1800s-death culture:

> Dickinson's unique "black light" stood for the dark night of the soul that followed the detonation of sunset or preceded the rosy flush of dawn. Night was necessarily black, yet because it could harbor hope and faith as well as doubt and despair, it became either the sum of all colors or the complete negation of them. (163)

Nancy Mayer provides a similar analysis, stating that "Dickinson enacts a disjointed mimesis that requires her to try on different roles within the human community of the dying, the dead, and those who mourn" (46). Perhaps the reason Dickinson understood the fragmented nature of grief so intimately and could adopt a variety of roles related to the fact that she too had suffered grief and heartache due to death.

Furthermore, Dickinson was no stranger to the death-bed scene or to the conventions of the Good Death within the context of the Victorian "cult of death." Ferlazzo states that "Dickinson considered it a necessity and an honor to be present at the bedside of a loved one about to die." In fact, the critic maintains that in Dickinson's poem "The World – feels dusty / When we stop to Die," the speaker "expresses her wish to be the one chosen to bring comfort during the final moments of life." Ferlazzo further

suggests that a “positive value of witnessing death” exists and that it has “a value for the living that is rational and more accessible to the reader. It is a lesson in courage that frees us from the fear of death and prepares us for the moment when we ourselves shall die” (92). The idea of a “positive value,” combined with the definitive negativity connected with death embodies the dark/light dichotomy that existed in the 1800s death-bed setting.

In *Emily Dickinson and her Culture: The Soul’s Society*, St. Armand affirms that Dickinson’s Calvinist upbringing had taught her that death-bed behavior was viewed as “one of the barometers by which one could measure the rise or fall of the individual soul.” In other words, if one showed acceptance and “Christian composure” when faced with impending death, it could be assumed that the dying was one of God’s elect and could enter Heaven. An excellent example of this belief appears in an excerpt from an April 23, 1848 letter between a physician’s wife and her sister, concerning the impending death of the former’s mother-in-law: “I think the slender thread will soon be broken that keeps her from the sainted dead. She is perfectly resigned. She waits God’s appointed time with great patience. How easy is the death bed of the righteous” (Coffin 47). However, if the dying showed rejection and agitation as death became imminent, it would be assumed by those present that he or she was destined for eternal damnation (Laderman 52-53).

2.3 Dickinson’s Morbid Obsession

In addition, Laderman states that onlookers could learn about the process of death by observing the dying during the last moments of life. Those present at the death-bed often wondered to what degree the dying suffered and whether he or she had “[resigned]

himself to divine Providence" (28). Similarly, Dickinson had many of the same questions, due largely to her Calvinist indoctrination. As a result, many of Dickinson's letters contain questions about life's final moments and whether the deceased had been "willing to die." For example, in a January 13, 1854, letter to the Rev. Edward Everett Hale, Dickinson writes concerning the 1853 death of her close friend, Benjamin Newton, stating that "I often have hoped to know if his last hours were cheerful, and if he was willing to die...I would love to know that he sleeps peacefully...Please Sir, to tell me if he was willing to die, and if you think him at Home" (Leyda 294; vol. 1). In another letter, written in early May 1862, Dickinson asks her cousin, Louise Norcross, to reveal the details surrounding the death of Louise's Aunt Myra:

> When you leave your little children, Loo, you must tell us all you know about dear Myra's going, so sudden, and shocking to us all, we are only bewildered and cannot believe the telegrams. I want so much to see you, and ask you what it means, and why this young life's sacrifice should come so soon, and not far off. I wake in the morning saying 'Myra, no more Myra in this world' . . . Was Myra willing to leave us all? I want so much to know if it was very hard, husband and babies and big life and sweet home by the sea. I should think she would rather have stayed . . . I wish 'twas plainer, Loo, the anguish in this world. I wish one could be sure the suffering had a loving side." (Leyda 58; vol. 2)

Dickinson makes an oblique reference to the Good Death through her implication that Myra fought against death—that she "would rather have stayed." This suggestion is amplified by the poet's wistful expression of doubt as to whether a heavenly afterlife—"a loving side"—exists. Dickinson illustrates the profound feelings of loss that could be masked, but not eliminated, through the stoic demeanor expected of grieving survivors as she writes that she "[wakes] in the morning saying 'Myra, no more Myra in this world.'"

As Dickinson continues to understand death through the Good Death construct, she makes a similar request of Thomas Niles in the middle of August 1985, asking for details concerning the "*last days and thoughts*" of Helen Hunt Jackson (Leyda 455; vol. 2, emphasis in original). In an August 19, 1885 letter addressed to Mrs. Jackson's widower, William S. Jackson, she implores him to tell her of his wife's passing, saying that "when Sorrow will allow" she would like to see if he would share with her "a very little of her Life's close" (456; vol. 2). When a response was not forthcoming, her curiosity further intensified, prompting her to repeat her request for information to Forrest F. Emerson, a member of the clergy. In the letter, Dickinson states that it was her sister, Lavinia, who longed to hear the details of Jackson's death and asks if he would appeal to a mutual friend, stating that "Vinnie hoped, too, to speak with you of Helen of Colorado [Jackson], whom she understood you to have a friend, a friend also of hers. Should she know any circumstances of her life's close, would she perhaps lend it to you, that you might lend it to me?" (458; vol. 2). Another letter, dated October 20, 1881, Dickinson questions Mrs. J. G. Holland about the late Dr. Holland's death-bed behavior: "I am yearning to know if he knew he was fleeing—if he spoke to you. Dare I ask if suffered? Some one will tell me a very little, when they have the strength" (356; vol. 2). And yet another letter, dated June 6, 1882, reveals that Dickinson wrote to Charles Clark about the death of his brother, James, asking for similar information:

> I had, dear friend, the deep hope that I might see your Brother before he passed from Life, or rather Life we know, and can scarcely express the pang I feel at it's last denial. . . I never had met your brother but once—An unforgotten once—To have seen him but once more, would have been almost like an interview with my "Heavenly Father" whom he loved and knew. . . I am eager to know all you may tell me of those final Days—We asked for him every Morning, in Heart, but feared to disturb you by

> inquiry aloud—I hope you are not too far exhausted from your “loved employ”—. (Leyda 400; vol. 2).

Like other letters penned by Dickinson, the letter to Clark contains elements of the Good Death, as the poet questions the deceased’s willingness to die and asks for details concerning his “final Days.” A part of the Good Death tradition was the belief that those who were close to death existed in a limbo between the earthly and the ethereal. Death-bed witnesses often reported that the dying frequently spoke of their transitional state while on their death-beds[22]. Dickinson conjures a semblance of this belief as she asserts that seeing James again would be “like an interview with my ‘Heavenly Father’” Moreover, in a clear reference to the inherent duality of the loving sense of obligation and duty to the deceased, the poet refers to Clark’s caring for his dying brother as his “loved employ.” As she struggled to grasp the personal implications of death through the experiences of others, she reveals through her letters her perception of the connection between death and the social conventions of her time.

Still, Dickinson held a deeper understanding of human death than what she had acquired vicariously through her questioning. The poet, on several occasions, had personally experienced the death-bed scene. On March 28, 1846, Dickinson describes one such encounter to Abiah Root concerning Sophia Holland’s death on April 29, 1844. Dickinson writes:

> I visited her often in sickness and watched over her bed… [and] it seemed to me that I should die too if I could not be permitted to watch over her or even to look at her face. At length the doctor said she must die and allowed me to look at her a moment through the open door. I took off my shoes and stole softly to the sick room” (Leyda 85; vol. 1).

[22] See Mary Riso’s *The Narrative of the Good Death: The Evangelical Deathbed in Victorian England* for a thorough accounting of religious themes tied to the Victorian death-bed.

Dickinson's yearning to view Sophia in death—referred to as the "Morbid Desire" or the "female gaze"—was a common desire for nineteenth-century Americans, and cited predominantly in women. In fact, the emotional connection to the corpse during Dickinson's lifetime was so strong that "Some women wanted to enter the tomb on a regular basis, others would open the coffin and gaze upon the decaying remains of their husband, child, parent, or sibling" (Loeffel-Atkins 12).

2.4 Dickinson Witnesses Death

Dickinson's friend Sophia was a part of "the five"—a close-knit circle of friends—with which the poet shared a common bond. Sophia had been fifteen-years old—Dickinson only thirteen—when the young girl died of typhus. Dickinson watched over Sophia's death-bed, and saw her as she lay unconscious shortly before her death. Dickinson remarks on the unearthly beauty of Sophia as she lies in her casket: "There she lay mild [and] beautiful as in health and her pale features lit up with an unearthly—smile. I looked as long as friends would permit and when they told me I must look no longer I let them lead me away" (Leyda 85; vol. 1). Sharon Leiter states in *Critical Companion to Emily Dickinson: A Literary Reference to Her Life and Work* that critics are divided over "whether her absorption [of the concept of death] was 'normal,' given the Victorian death-bed scenes, or morbidly excessive." Regardless, the poet's parents were concerned enough about her emotional state to have her visit "Aunt Lavinia" for a month (7).

Dickinson demonstrates her immersion into the death-culture of her day following

the death of her own mother on November 17, 1882[23]. Dickinson writes to Mrs. J.G. Holland and describes in detail her mother's death-bed scene:

> [*Mother*] had a few weeks since a violent cold, though so had we all, but our's recovered apparently, her's seemed more reluctant—but her trusted Physician was with her, who returned her to us so many times when she thought to go, and he felt no alarm—After her cough ceased she suffered much from neuralgic pain, which as nearly as we can know, committed the last wrong—She seemed entirely better the last Day of her Life and took Lemonade—Beef Tea and Custard with a pretty ravenousness that delighted us—. (Leyda 382; vol.2)

In the letter, Dickinson remarks first on her mother's illness, then on what appeared to be an improvement on her condition[24]. In another letter to Mrs. Holland, Dickinson explains that "After a restless Night, complaining of great weariness, she was lifted earlier than usual from her Bed to her Chair, when a few quick breaths and a "Don't leave me, Vinnie" and her sweet being closed" (Leyda 383; vol. 2). Dickinson's mention of both her mother's improved condition on the "last Day of her Life" and her last words reveal how, even as late as 1882, the Good Death tradition remained deeply embedded in the New England social culture.

2.5 The Good Death in Dickinson's Poetry

Clearly, the personally witnessed death-bed scenes and unresolved questions

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[23]Discrepancies in the dates used in Leyda's text and those listed in Habbegger's biography are unaccounted for at the this writing. Although the letter is quoted from Leyda's text, the date is possibly more accurate in Habegger's biography. Leyda notes the date as November 13, 1882.

[24]According to A.D. Macleod in "Lightening up before Death" (2009), "A lightening, or clearing, of the mental state in the hours or days before death, particularly in those delirious, is occasionally noted by those caring for the dying."

concerning death impacted Dickinson in such a way that their impressions found their way into her poems. In “A brief but patient illness” (Fr22A, c. 1858), Dickinson’s speaker describes a sudden loss for which the survivors of the deceased have only “An hour to prepare - ” (1-2).

> A brief, but patient illness -
> An hour to prepare -
> And one below, this morning
> Is where the angels are -
> It was a short procession -
> The Bobolink was there -
> An aged Bee addressed us -
> And then we knelt in prayer -
> We trust that she was willing -
> We ask that we may be -
> Summer - Sister - Seraph!
> Let us go with thee!

In lines 3 and 4, the speaker affirms her hope that the departed loved one now resides “where the angels are - .” The fact that the illness was both “brief” and “patient” indicate the attendant’s hope for a smooth transition from life to death, following the Good Death tradition. She mentions that it was a “short procession,” which suggests that the deceased had few family members or close friends. The speaker underscores the sparseness of the funeral attendance, as she mentions only the “Bobolink”—a possible “funerary vocalist” (EDL)—and the “aged Bee.” The speaker’s use of the phrase “aged Bee” suggests a biblical allusion that refers to the sting of death—“O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” (*King James Version*, 1 Corinthians 15:55). Contextualized through such a religious framework, the “aged Bee” can be said to represent a preacher who reminds the funeral party that death’s sting is removed for those who accept death willingly. That those in attendance “knelt in prayer” *after* the “aged Bee addressed [them]” implies that, faced with the finality—the sting—of death, the funeral party

prayed for the soul of the deceased (7-8). The speaker also indicates that the unnamed "she" died alone, seeing that the speaker notes that "We" can only "*trust* that she was willing" (9, emphasis added). Consequently, the phrase "We trust that she was willing" makes a clear reference to the Good Death, since a willingness to die represents the onlookers' hope for an eternity in heaven for the soul of the departed. Finally, the speaker's account of the funeral assembly's prayer – "We ask that we may be – / Summer - Sister - Seraph! / Let us go with thee!" – reflects the conflicting emotions caused by the paradox inherent to the Victorian "cult of death" (10-12). To this end, the funeral attendants first implore God to provide warmth and light, companionship, and angelic protection to the deceased. However, the prayer concludes with a declaration of overwhelming grief, as the assembly notes their longing to follow the departed to the grave.

In Dickinson's "Promise this - When you be dying" (Fr762A, c. 1863), the speaker affirms her desire to attend the death of a loved one:

> Promise This - When You be Dying -
> Some shall summon Me -
> Mine belong Your latest Sighing -
> Mine - to Belt Your Eye -
>
> Not with Coins - though they be Minted
> From An Emperor's Hand -
>
> Be my lips - the only Buckle
> Your low Eyes - demand -
>
> Mine to stay - when all have wandered -
> To devise once more
> If the Life be too surrendered -
> Life of Mine - restore -
>
> Poured like this - My Whole Libation -
> Just that You should see

Bliss of Death - Life's Bliss extol thro'
Imitating You -

Mine - to guard Your Narrow Precinct -
To seduce the Sun
Longest on Your South, to linger,
Largest Dews of Morn

To demand, in Your low favor -
Lest the Jealous Grass
Greener lean - Or fonder cluster
Round some other face -

Mine to supplicate Madonna -
If Madonna be
Could behold so far a Creature -
Christ - omitted - Me –

Just to follow Your dear feature -
Ne'er so far behind -
For My Heaven -
Had I not been
Most enough - denied?

(Fr762A)

In the first quatrain, the speaker asks an unnamed loved one to promise that she be summoned to his or her bedside in the event of death. The speaker amplifies her assertion, stating that she wants to be present at the moment of death—at "Your latest Sighing - " (3). More importantly, the speaker expresses the desire to "Belt Your Eye - / Not with Coins" (4-5)—a clear reference to the Victorian "cult of death" tradition where death-bed attendants were responsible for securing the eyelids of the corpse prior to the onset of rigor mortis. The speaker continues, in the second quatrain, by expressing her deep affection for the deceased, stating that her love for the departed is so strong, she imagines her "lips [as] the only Buckle" necessary to secure the eyelids in death. In reality, the typical method of preventing the eyes from opening after death was to place coins on the eyelids before rigor made it difficult. This tradition is rooted in superstition,

as it was believed that a corpse whose eyes were left open waited for another to follow in death. Consequently, the tradition of placing coins on the eyes began as an intention to "remove the reflection of death upon the living," and by doing so, prevent the corpse from effecting the spread of death to the living (Quigley 28). Later, the coins served a dual purpose when they began to be used to hold the eyelids closed.

The speaker makes another reference to nineteenth-century mourning traditions in the third stanza by referencing the all-night vigil for the dead, another Victorian "cult of death" tradition born of necessity, yet also rooted in superstition. So that the grieving family could get some much-needed relief from their grief, an attendant—typically a neighbor or other member of the community—would sit beside the coffin or casket, remaining awake throughout the night. This obligatory duty eventually became known as a *wake*. In part, the vigil was necessary to ensure that insects, rodents, or household pets did not disturb the corpse. It was also necessary since, during the nineteenth century, most Americans had an overwhelming fear of being buried alive. Part of this fear stemmed from the fact that medical technology had not yet advanced enough to tell with certainty the difference between coma and death. As a result, friends, neighbors, or extended family members would stay beside the corpse throughout the night to ensure that the deceased was truly dead. The poem's speaker imagines herself keeping the wake for a loved one that has died, affirming that it will be hers to "stay – when all have wandered" (9). Moreover, the speaker refers to the desire to confirm that death has truly occurred in saying "To devise once more / If the Life be too surrendered - / Life of Mine - restore - " (10-12).

The poem's fourth stanza echoes the sentiments of the Good Death tradition in which the survivors praise the deceased and pledge to uphold his or her legacy. Comparing herself to a drink that has been "Poured [out] like this.../ Just that You should see / [the] Bliss of Death," the speaker emphasizes that she strove to facilitate a Good Death for the deceased (13-14). She vows to allow "Life's Bliss" to live through by "Imitating" her departed loved one. In the fifth stanza, the speaker alludes to the dictates of the Victorian "cult of death" that call for an elaborate burial to commemorate the life of the deceased while offering survivors a sense of peace and closure (Laderman 9). First, the speaker evokes an image of her earnest desire "to guard" the final resting place—the "Narrow Precinct"—of the deceased (17). As part of her pledge, she states that she will persuade the "Sun" to linger on the grave of her departed loved one (18). In praise of the dead, the speaker implies that a personified nature—"the Jealous Grass" might "cluster / Round some other face - " if she does not plead with the dew to bestow the "Largest Dews of Morn" on her loved one's grave (19-24).

The speaker expresses feelings of doubt and of being abandoned by God, as she questions whether "Madonna be" (26). She implies that Divinity, in the form of "Madonna," plucked her beloved from among the living, adding that "Christ" forgot to take her as well (27-28). Furthermore, the speaker suggests that she would count it her "Heaven" to "follow Your dear feature - " into death (29-31). She closes by alluding to the great pain caused by death and questioning the compassion of God, who "denied" her the presence of the departed (32-33).

Through the poem's speaker, Dickinson expresses the same thoughts, even desires, concerning death that were held by most other Americans of her era—to be

present when a loved one passes from this world to the next and to continue the legacy of the deceased. These thoughts and desires do not—as some critics suppose—provide evidence of an obsession with death. Instead, the speaker's words simply reflect the cultural dynamic encountered by nineteenth-century Americans who, constantly affected by death and dying, contemplated what lies beyond the grave. As death invaded the religious and personal lives of nineteenth-century Americans, it became difficult—if not impossible—for those intimately affected by death to escape its shadow. Creating a means of dealing with grief and loss, survivors began to view death as an escape from suffering and an opportunity for an eternal, joyous reunion. Yet, for women in the early-to-mid 1800s, death remained an unwelcome intruder into the domestic realm. In their attempts to protect the sanctity of the home's atmosphere, women turned the event of death into a surreal scene—one that could not only help them to deal with the harsh realities of death, but also to continue to fulfill their roles as the "angel of the house" (Masur 40). As such, Dickinson's death-bed speaker introduces a Gothic element into the domestic scene and, in doing so, exemplifies the conflicted nature of the Victorian "cult of death."

Chapter 3

"The Bustle in A House:" Dickinson's Domestic Gothic

The home had long been the epicenter of family life in the American nineteenth century; however, when the home no longer served as the center of domestic production, it became a sacred space that needed to be preserved. Amy G. Richter, author of *At Home in Nineteenth-Century America: A Documentary History*, explains that "few institutions were as central to nineteenth-century American culture. Beginning in the 1820s, the home emerged as a sentimental and celebrated space apart from the public world of commerce and politics, competition and corruption" (1-2). Furthermore, as men's work moved farther away from the home, the domestic setting became primarily associated with women, whose job it was to maintain the home's serenity. Consequently, the woman's role in the home began to be viewed as an "extension of women's inherent nature and a form of feminine love and nurturance" (Richter 11).

3.1 Dickinson's Home—A "Holy Thing"

To this end, the home itself represented a haven from the harshness of the outside world and the specter of death. Yet, due to the high rate of accidents in the industrialized workplace, the advent of the Civil War, and the incidence of untreatable illness, the oppressive weight of death soon placed a heavy burden on the home. Because death now intruded into the domestic realm—a formerly sacred space—it corrupted the safety and

serenity that had once reigned supreme. Michael Lake contextualizes the domestic death scene in his descriptive "Overview of 'The Bustle in a House'":

> Today dying is often hidden from us, obscured behind the façade of high-tech "life-support" systems in alien clinical environments. And death is disguised, cosmetically "sanitized," and made unreal in corporate "funeral parlors." But in Dickinson's day, death was "up close and personal," an entirely domestic affair. The dying often remained in their own quarters at the time and the socially required Puritan ethic of self-control, grieving survivors in Dickinson's social circle often had nowhere to "hide" emotionally from their inward torment. But according to thanatologists, the psychologists who study the phenomena of death and dying, denial is usually the first of many stages in the grieving process in most cultures anyway. It is logical, then, that retreat into the everyday details of domestic life would be, especially for women of that era, the safest place to hide from the pain of losing a loved one. (1)

To combat this morbid intruder, women recreated the death-bed scene by posing it as a consecrated setting—so tightly tied to religious belief and tradition that it became its own form of sacrament.

Like most other women in the 1800s, Dickinson thought of home as a sacred space, as she indicates in this October 15, 1851, letter to her brother Austin:

> Home is a holy thing—nothing of doubt or distrust can enter it's blessed portals. . . . here seems to be a bit of Eden which not the sin of *any* can utterly destroy—smaller it is indeed, and it may be less fair, but fairer it is and *brighter* than all the world beside (Leyda 222; vol. 2, emphasis in original).

Dickinson's use of the phrase "holy thing" in reference to her home demonstrates the degree to which the home was held sacrosanct, especially by the women of the 1800s. She invokes a series of terms that hold long-standing religious connotations that underscore the sacred aura of the domestic realm. Indeed, she casts her home as a consecrated domain whose "blessed portals" repel doubt and whose Edenic purity cannot

be tainted by sin. Because the home represents a sanctified place to Dickinson, it shines "fairer...and *brighter*" than much grander and more aesthetically pleasing homes.

Dickinson's home held quite an emotional attachment for the young girl. In response to an invitation to visit, Dickinson responds to girlhood friend Abiah Root by stating that she does not leave home, "unless emergency leads me by the hand" and later says "don't [sic] expect me" (Leyda 310; vol. 1). In a similar letter written in the spring of 1852 to friend Jane Humphrey, Dickinson writes:

> I'm afraid I'm growing *selfish* in my dear home, but I do love it so, and when some pleasant friend invites me to pass a week with her, I look at my father and mother and Vinnie, and all my friends, and I say no - no, cant [sic] leave them, what if they die when I'm gone. (Leyda 244; vol. 1, emphasis in original)

That Dickinson displays such a reluctance in leaving her home out of fear that her loved ones will die reveals the poet's early associations of the home with death and loss. Later, this association would exhibit itself in her elegiac poetry. Cristanne Miller maintains that Dickinson's invocation of Gothic elements into her domestic narratives is not only intended, but is also theatrical in nature (157). Yet, given the degree to which death permeated the home environment in Dickinson's lifetime, it seems natural that the poet would situate her elegy—and especially her death-bed poetry—in the domestic realm.

3.2 Dickinson's Gothic in the Domestic Realm

Accordingly, Dickinson frames the domestic narrative in several of her death-bed poems using Gothic elements. For example, in "I've seen a Dying Eye" (Fr648), Dickinson's speaker employs visual imagery to create an eerie impression as she describes a "Dying Eye" as it runs "round and round a Room / In search of Something":

I've seen a Dying Eye
Run round and round a Room -
In search of Something - as it seemed -
Then Cloudier become -
And then - obscure with Fog -
And then - be soldered down
Without disclosing what it be
'Twere blessed to have seen –
(Fr648)

Set in the room of a dying person, symbolized by the "Dying Eye," the poem's speaker describes a Gothic setting using words such as "Cloudier," "obscure," and "Fog" (4-5). Through the assertion that the personified "Dying Eye" is "In search of Something" and the aural imagery created by the repetition within the phrase "Run round and round a Room," the speaker suggests a never-ending, ghostly search for escape or eternal rest. In addition, the visual image of the unseeing eye—"soldered down"—and the implied heavenly vision that the eye is "blessed to have seen" combine to form a dual representation of sightlessness and sight.

Similarly, Dickinson's "The Bustle in a House" (Fr1108, c. 1865), situates the Gothic death-bed setting in the domestic realm. According to Lake in his overview of the poem, Dickinson's speaker depicts the psychological denial of grief-stricken survivors through the women's "[b]ustle" or household activity. Examined through this lens, the poem's speaker uses the domestic activity as a signifier for the women's "retreat into the everyday details of domestic life" in an effort to assuage their grief (1). Ferlazzo agrees, stating in his examination of Dickinson's poetry, that "Dickinson observes [through her poems] how humans try to divert their suffering and loss through ritual and ceremony" (93). The domestic funerary activities performed by these women were likely carried out resolutely, as a way of masking the pain of losing a loved one; nevertheless, these

household duties were also a necessary part of the funerary preparations. Thus, the contrast between duties performed purposefully to alleviate grief and those executed out of simple household necessity frames the domestic activity as a dyadic representation of the 1800s-death scene. The speaker begins by depicting a burst of domestic activity following a death:

> The Bustle in a House
> The Morning after Death
> Is solemnest of industries
> Enacted opon Earth -
>
> The Sweeping up the Heart
> And Putting Love away
> We shall not want to use again
> Until Eternity -
>
> (Fr1108)

In a juxtaposition of Gothic elements and domestic expressions, each of the words *bustle*, *house*, *morning,* and *industries* in the opening stanza of the poem, carry with them connotations that, set apart from their putative denotations, relate to both the domestic duties of those who are left behind as well as to the demise of the physical body itself. For example, the word *bustle* typically signifies a "Noisy activity and movement; excitement, noise, fuss, commotion" (OED). In the context of Victorian-era funereal traditions, the word *bustle* is representative of the obligation of death-bed attendants to perform all household responsibilities necessary to continue the function of the home. This domestic assistance enabled family and friends to grieve according to nineteenth-century mourning customs (Swedlund 91). Furthermore, the word *bustle* conveys aural images of the sounds heard by onlookers as the body surrenders to death in one last flurry of life. Dickinson uses the word *bustle* in the same figurative context in "That short -

potential stir" (Fr1363, c. 1875), a definition poem that identifies "That Bustle"—or last breath—as a "potential stir / That each can make but once - / ... the eclat[25] of Death - " (1-5). The nonliteral implications of the word are significant in relation to nineteenth-century funerary conventions, as tradition dictated that death-bed attendants physically ensure that death has truly occurred before preparing the body for viewing and burial. In the absence of a physician, death-bed attendants verified the physical characteristics of death—often using common household items such as a mirror or piece of glass to detect even the faintest sign of life.

Part of the household "Bustle" expected of death-bed attendants included the seemingly gruesome tasks of cleaning, dressing, and preserving the body, as well as sitting with the corpse through the night so that the grieving family could get some much-needed rest (Swedlund 91-92). Yet, it remained imperative for death-bed attendants to maintain a certain degree of detachment to the corpse—what Lake refers to as "grief delayed" and "simple psychological denial." In addition, the poem's speaker refers to the sacred, ceremonial tone of mourning, confirming that death and mourning are the "solemnest of industries / Enacted opon Earth –" (Lake 2).

The speaker's reference to the "House" as *a* "House" rather than as one particular "House" implies that the poem's subject is *any* household that has experienced such a loss, thereby underscoring the fact that death occurred at some point in most nineteenth-century homes (*Republic* 16). Furthermore, the use of the word *house* indicates a "building for human habitation, typically and historically one that is the ordinary place of

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[25] "Public display, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED).

residence of a family" (OED); yet, Dickinson often uses the word in a figurative sense to represent the "body; or residence of the soul" (EDL). In addition, the use of word *morning*, defined as "the early part of the day," suggests a play on the word *mourning*, which denotes "Grieving caused by the death of a person" (OED). And *industries*—"diligence or assiduity in the performance of a task" (OED)—not only implies the domestic duties expected of the attendants, but also alludes to the tasks of preparing the body for burial according to nineteenth-century mourning traditions.

In the poem's second quatrain, the speaker continues her domestic imagery and illuminates the Gothic setting through the aura of detachment that envelopes the death-bed attendants. The speaker's reference to "Sweeping up the Heart" illustrates the attendants' decisive—yet heart-wrenching—air of indifference to the dead. Similarly, the line "Putting Love away" alludes to the preparations that must be made for the viewing—or wake—and funeral that will soon take place. Yet, through her household imagery the speaker also suggests that this domestic setting has become corrupted and must be cleansed like the decrepit, moldy castles of the Gothic novel. The speaker alludes to the concept that "Love" itself has become desecrated and is not something that "We shall not want to use again / Until Eternity - " (7-8). In addition, the speaker's use of the phrase "The Sweeping up the Heart" suggests a play on the homemaker's task of sweeping the *hearth*, or the "area . . . in front of a fireplace" (OED). Just as a nineteenth-century housewife would sweep the hearth and dispose of the ashes, so does the speaker and her fellow death-bed attendants shield their hearts from the painful reminders of death by "Putting [the] Love away / [that they] shall not want to use again / Until Eternity - " (6-8). Through the speaker's depiction of the unsettling act of "Putting the Love away" in

the midst of the household's "Bustle," Dickinson's poem embodies the spirit of the Victorian "cult of death" and the influence it enacted on the nation in the domestic sphere.

3.3 Dickinson's Gothic Death-Bed

In like manner, Dickinson's death-bed speaker in her poem "How many times these low feet staggered - " (Fr238A, c. 1861), describes the characteristics of a housewife as she lay dying. Jane Donahue Eberwein claims the poem uses mechanical terminology to describe the defection of a woman from her domestic duties. Eberwein adds that, by using phrases such as the "soldered mouth," "cool forehead," and "adamantine fingers," the speaker describes the progression of death through a domestic lens as it affects the wearied physical self of a beloved housewife (213). Critic Robert J. Forman also reads the poem through a domestic lens and proposes that the poem is a metaphor for final rest from a life of domestic burdens (1). Yet the first-person diction of the poem indicates that the death-bed narrative is from the perspective of an attendant who cares for a much-loved housewife as she lay dying:

> How many times these low feet staggered -
> Only the soldered mouth can tell -
> Try - can you stir the awful rivet -
> Try - can you lift the hasps of steel!
>
> Stroke the cool forehead - hot so often -
> Lift - if you care - the listless hair -
> Handle the adamantine fingers
> Never a thimble - more - shall wear -
>
> Buzz the dull flies - on the chamber window
> Brave - shines the sun through the freckled pane -

Fearless - the cobweb swings from the ceiling -
Indolent Housewife - in Daisies - lain!
(Fr238A)

In the first quatrain, the speaker places herself in the presence of the deceased housewife through her use of the demonstrative adjective *these* which denotes "things or persons actually or ideally *present* or *near*" (OED, emphasis added). Through the anaphoric "Try" and imperatives "Stroke," "Lift," "Handle," "Buzz," and "Brave," she delineates the tasks expected of the death-bed attendant, who must secure the mouth and eyes, clean and position the body in the casket, keep the wake, and maintain a facade of bravery at the funeral. She vividly depicts the now-unyielding mouth as a frozen, "soldered" hinge, secured by an unmovable bolt in lines 2 through 4, referring to "the awful rivet" and "the hasps of steel." These lines provide an accurate depiction of the effects of death on the human body, since the first parts of the human body to be affected by rigor mortis in the death process are the "eyelids, neck, and jaw," according to Christine Quigley in *The Corpse: A History* (68). As part of the necessary duties in preparing the corpse for viewing and burial in the nineteenth century, the death-bed attendants must first, as Dickinson states, "stir the awful rivet –" then "lift the hasps of steel" (3-4), an act that required a forked stick to be wedged between chest and chin to keep the jaw tightly closed (Quigley 62). Prior to the development of the funeral industry in the late 1800s, death-bed attendants who prepared the corpse also sewed the lips shut to prevent the sudden opening of the mouth—a common postmortem phenomenon that proved shocking to both attendants and grief-stricken loved ones (63-64). Through the allusions to the effects of rigor mortis, the speaker suggests that the once-active body of

the housewife is now corrupted in the Gothic sense, as the body in death is now inanimate, cold, and fixed.

The death-bed speaker exhibits her fondness for the unnamed housewife in the second stanza as she describes “[stroking] the…forehead” that had been “hot so often” in illness and is now cooled in death. In line 6, the speaker expresses her dismay at seeing the hair that had once so beautifully framed the woman’s face, now arranged listlessly on the pillow. Through her reference to the “adamantine fingers,” the speaker indicates that she remained at the bedside of the woman long after she had succumbed to death, since the hands and fingers of the human body do not show the effects of rigor mortis until nearly six hours after death has occurred (Quigley 15).

In the third and final quatrain of the poem, the speaker describes the funereal scene and offers a paradoxical depiction of the “Indolent Housewife” as she lies in her casket for viewing. This depiction—a surreal mixture of beauty and horror—captures the mood of the Victorian “cult of death” and its effects on those who endured it. In her description of the final scene, the death-bed speaker applies Gothic imagery typically associated with an unkempt, untended home, using such descriptive terms as “the dull flies” and “the cobweb swings” and alluding to the inevitable—yet natural—physical decomposition process of the dead (9,11). The speaker suggests that her perception of the outside world has forever changed, as she now views it through an eternally “freckled pane” (10). In contrast, she quickly counters the dark tone by affirming that, although the symbolic windowpane has been soiled by death, the sun still shines (10). She also implies that her thoughts are now turning to practical matters, since the “freckled pane” and the “cobweb [that] swings from the ceiling” must be cleaned or hidden from view before

visitors arrive to pay their final respects to the deceased. Finally, this "Indolent Housewife" evokes Gothic images of a slain hero, as the weary, "low feet" of the housewife are now "in Daisies - lain" and can work no more.

3.4 Dickinson's Domestic Gothic in the "Opposite House"

Furthermore, Dickinson's speaker in her c.1863 poem, "There's been a Death, in the Opposite House" (Fr547A), presents "a Death" in a neighboring home in striking Gothic terms:

> There's been a Death, in the Opposite House,
> As lately as Today -
> I know it, by the numb look
> Such Houses have - alway -
>
> The Neighbors rustle in and out -
> The Doctor - drives away -
> A Window opens like a Pod -
> Abrupt - mechanically -
>
> Somebody flings a Mattrass out -
> The Children hurry by -
> They wonder if it died - on that -
> I used to - when a Boy -
>
> The Minister - goes stiffly in -
> As if the House were His -
> And He owned all the Mourners - now -
> And little Boys - besides.
>
> And then the Milliner - and the Man
> Of the Appalling Trade -
> To take the measure of the House -
>
> There'll be that Dark Parade -
>
> Of Tassels - and of Coaches - soon -
> It's easy as a Sign -

The Intuition of the News -
In just a Country Town –
(Fr547A)

In the first stanza, the speaker notes that the “House” has taken on a “numb look” (1). It is noteworthy that the speaker asserts that it is the “House,” rather than its occupants, that has the “numb look.” The use of the word *numb*—“emotionally deadened, unresponsive, or spent, as the result of grief, shock, fear” (OED)—in line 1 immediately cloaks the setting of the poem’s action in a sullen, Gothic tone. However, the household bustle created as the “Neighbors rustle in and out” and as the “The Doctor - drives away - ” establishes firmly that the action of the poem occurs in a domestic, familial setting. The word *pod* used in line 7 implies a “tomb; grave; casket; sepulcher” (EDL) and, used in conjunction with the home’s “Window,” immerses the poem’s domestic theme in the Gothic setting (7). The mental picture of the “Children” wondering if “it died - on that - ” as they hurry past a [discarded] “Mattrass” [sic] certainly creates a Gothic image (9-11). The pronoun reference to the deceased neighbor as an ambiguous “it” casts the corpse as a repulsive inanimate object. Moreover, the speaker’s depiction of the “Minister” as he “stiffly” enters the home evokes an impression of dread and gloom in the mind of the reader (13). In a similar fashion, the speaker poses the “Milliner - and the Man”—members of the “Appalling Trade -”—as ghastly workers for “Death” (17-18). These men were casket-makers—cabinetmakers by trade who arrived at the home to “take the measure of the House - ”—the corpse of the deceased (17-19). The poem’s speaker also describes the funeral march in Gothic terms, referring to the somber procession as “that Dark Parade” (20). Yet, in a perfect reflection of the duality that was the Victorian “cult of death,” she depicts the pompous air of the occasion, a ghastly parade decorated with

“Tassels - and ... Coaches” (21). Finally, Dickinson’s speaker reflects the public acclimation to death’s frequency in the community by suggesting that the ceremonial trappings that signal a resident’s death are such a common sight that the spectacle becomes “easy as a Sign - / The Intuition of the News - / In just a Country Town - ” (22-24).

Perhaps the most poignant of Dickinson’s death-bed poems is “’Tis Sunrise - little Maid - Hast Thou” (Fr832A, c. 1864)—a poem that displays domestic Gothic elements through the speaker’s personal address to a deceased “little Maid.” The speaker suggests that, in her opinion, the young girl is better off dead than she would be to live a long life of domestic drudgery:

‘Tis Sunrise - little Maid - Hast Thou
No Station in the Day?
'Twas not thy wont, to hinder so -
Retrieve thine industry -

‘Tis Noon - My little Maid -
Alas - and art thou sleeping yet?
The Lily - waiting to be Wed -
The Bee - Hast thou forgot?

My little Maid - 'Tis Night - Alas
That Night should be to thee
Instead of Morning - Had'st thou broached
Thy little Plan to Die -
Dissuade thee, if I c'd not, Sweet,
I might have aided - thee -
(Fr832A)

In the poem, the speaker repeats the phrase “little Maid” to emphasize her domestic role in the home, referring to the young girl’s domestic duties using benchmarks of scheduled tasks. For example, she begins at “Sunrise” by asking the dead girl if she does not have important household tasks waiting (1). Later at “Noon,” she asks the “little Maid” if she

is still “sleeping” and implies that, due to her early death, the young girl will miss being a bride and a mother (6). In the third stanza, the speaker once again addresses the young girl, telling her “’Tis Night” and implying that “Night”—or death—should be counted as “Morning” to the “little Maid” (10-11). The juxtaposition of the words *night* and *morning* in relation to death creates a play on words by suggesting that death should be counted as *morning* or a new beginning, rather than as cause for *mourning*, which would indicate her life’s close. This implication is further amplified by the speaker’s suggestion that if the “little Maid” had failed to die—“broached / Thy little Plan”—the speaker would have “aided” her in doing so (11-12, 14). The speaker insinuates further that the young girl committed suicide by calling it “Thy little Plan to Die - ” (12). Finally, the speaker hints that she would have, in fact, helped her to die rather than have her live as nineteenth century woman.

As Dickinson situates her death-bed speaker in the home and incorporates Gothic elements, she provides the reader with an accurate representation of the daily struggle of nineteenth-century women to maintain the home as a sacred space. In turn, the efforts to eradicate the home of corruption introduced by death into the domestic sphere capture the essence of the American early-to-mid 1800s domestic setting—a setting in which an entire nation struggled with grief and loss and used the romanticized death-bed scene to contend with the devastation of death.

Chapter 4

"That Dark Parade": Dickinson and The Victorian "Cult of Death"

In addition to situating herself as one of the death-bed attendants, Dickinson's speaker alludes to the social conventions maintained as elements de rigueur of the Victorian "cult of death." Due to the pervasiveness of death in nineteen-century America, death became incorporated "through a series of ritual and symbols, into the life of the community" (Laderman 26). Victorian funereal traditions—including those associated with the Good Death—allowed horrified, grief-stricken Americans to cope with death through its "beautification" (Zlomke xii). To express the unearthly combination of sorrow, duty, and tradition, Dickinson adopted these rituals and symbols for her own, thereby creating a voice for expression through her death-bed speaker.

4.1 Dickinson's Good Death—"To know just how He suffered"

Although Victorian "cult of death" traditions remain evident throughout Dickinson's death-bed corpus, it is perhaps her c. 1863 poem "To know just how He suffered would be dear" (F688A) that expresses these death-related conventions most clearly. The diction in the poem underscores the importance of the Good Death, particularly in the first two stanzas:

> To know just how He suffered - would be dear -
> To know if any Human eyes were near
> To whom He could entrust His wavering gaze -
> Until it settled broad – on Paradise -

To know if He was patient - part content -
Was Dying as He thought - or different -
Was it a pleasant Day to die -
And did the Sunshine face His way –

What was His furthest mind - of Home - or God -
Or What the Distant say -
At News that He ceased Human Nature
Such a Day -

And Wishes - Had He any -
Just His Sigh - accented -
Had been legible - to Me -
And was He Confident until
Ill fluttered out - in Everlasting Well -

And if He spoke - What name was Best -
What last
What one broke off with
At the Drowsiest -

Was he afraid - or tranquil -
Might He know
How Conscious Consciousness -could grow -
Till Love that was - and Love too best to be -
Meet - and the Junction be Eternity

(F688A)

In the opening stanza, the poem's speaker wonders whether the deceased had suffered and whether "He" had died alone (1-2). In the throes of the Civil War, the threat of dying alone without friends or family to lend comfort was a constant source of concern for American soldiers and their families[26]. Since the sentiment of the dying toward death reflected on the soul's disposition, the speaker ponders in the second stanza whether "He was patient - [or] part content"—a Calvinist measure of the condition of the soul (5). And, as part of the conventions of the Good Death, death-bed attendants were to provide

[26] For details on how the Good Death was enacted in connection to Civil War soldiers, please see Drew Gilpin Faust's "The Civil War Soldier and the Art of Dying."

the dying with as many comforts as possible—to create for them a “pleasant Day to die” (7). The speaker’s hope that “Sunshine” (8) faced the deceased alludes to her optimism that the death occurred in “a condition or atmosphere of happiness or prosperity” (OED).

The second and third stanzas reflect the importance of the final moments of life and how they reflected the state of a loved one’s eternal soul to onlookers. In lines 9-11, the poem’s speaker contemplates whether the final thoughts of the deceased were centered on “Home” or “God” or on how his loved ones will react to the “News.” The speaker suggests that she received only one “legible” piece of information concerning the death—that “He” sighed as the illness left his body and as he entered a state of “Everlasting Well” (14-17).

The final two stanzas provide the reader with a clear depiction of the importance of one’s last words in the Good Death tradition. Because the notion that the final words of a dying soul could either impart priceless wisdom or give attendants a glimpse—however fleeting—into the afterlife, attendants attached a distinctive significance to the last farewell. The speaker highlights this significance by wondering that “if He spoke - What name was [spoken] Best - / ...last” before death (18-21). The speaker creates another allusion to the Good Death in asking if he was “afraid – or tranquil,” since embracing death indicated an eternity in Heaven and fleeing death meant eternal damnation in Hell (22). For this reason, loved ones insisted on witnessing and analyzing the *hors mori*, or hour of death, of the dying (Faust 9). Reflecting that insistence, Dickinson’s speaker wants “To know” exactly how her loved one died.

4.2 Mourning Attire—Dickinson's "A darker Ribbon – for a Day"

In "To die - takes just a little while - " (Fr315A, c. 1862), Dickinson's speaker addresses the conventions of the Good Death and Victorian "cult of death" traditions. The poem begins and ends by casting death as a pleasant, albeit final escape from life's burdens:

> To die - takes just a little while -
> They say it does'nt hurt -
> It's only fainter - by degrees -
> And then - it's out of sight -
>
> A darker Ribbon - for a Day -
> A Crape opon the Hat -
> And then the pretty sunshine comes -
> And helps us to forget –
>
> The absent - mystic - creature -
> That but for love of us -
> Had gone to sleep – that soundest time -
> Without the weariness -
>
> (Fr315A)

The speaker evokes the Good Death as she alludes to a short, peaceful death for the poem's subject in the first stanza. This allusion to a quick, painless end echoes the hallmark of the Good Death tradition. The "darker Ribbon - for a Day - / A Crape opon the Hat - " in lines 5 and 6 refers to the strict Victorian-era code of etiquette expected of survivors during the mourning period. According to Margaret M. Coffin, "By the nineteenth century there were definite rules setting the length of mourning and the clothing to be worn during each period" (197). Some of these practices include[27]:

- Two and a half years of "first" or "deep, fresh, or full mourning" were customarily expected of widows.

[27] See Coffin's *Death in Early America: The History and Folklore of Customs and Superstitions of Early Medicine, Funerals, Burials, and Mourning* and Loeffel-Atkin's *Widow's Weeds and Weeping Veils: Mourning Rituals in 19th Century America*.

- In the first year, the widow wore a black wool dress—called "widow's weeds"—with collars and cuffs made from untrimmed crape. No other trim was considered acceptable.
- A simple crape bonnet could be worn with a long, black crape veil. Hats were not allowed until later in the mourning process.
- During the second year, known as "second mourning," lighter fabrics could be substituted for the heavy wool and the veil could be shortened.
- Other muted colors, such as gray or violet, could be worn after a year and a half.
- Other periods of mourning were "ordinary mourning and finally light or half mourning."
- A typical mourning period for a widower was about three months. If he remarried, his new spouse would mourn for the deceased wife.
- A woman who was mourning her parents or child wore the same clothing, but only mourned for one year.
- There were also time stipulations for mourning the loss of grandparents, siblings, and extended family members.
- Stringent restrictions were placed on accessories such as gloves, handkerchiefs, and even the degree of sheen allowed on fabric.
- Children under twelve wore white in summer and gray in winter, trimmed in black.
- The attendance of women at wedding, parties, and other festivities were highly restricted.

Figure 3. Traditional Nineteenth-Century Mourning Attire

The two women are wearing traditional nineteenth-century mourning dress, called "widow's weeds."

In the poem, the speaker suggests that the mourner is a male, since the “Crape” of line 6 is worn “opon the Hat.” Men in mourning often wore black crape “wrapped around the hat like a hatband with black streamers attached to it” (Loeffel-Atkins 26). In lines 7 and 8, the speaker alludes to the comfort given the mourner through the convention of ritual and routine—the “pretty sunshine [that] comes – / And helps us to forget.” The poem closes with a Good Death affirmation, likening death to a sweet sleep and the corpse to an “absent - mystic - creature” (9).

4.3 The Inevitability of Death—Dickinson’s “the postponeless Creature”

“It's Coming - the postponeless Creature - ” (Fr556A, c. 1863) is a poem of two quatrains in which Dickinson’s speaker combines themes of death’s inevitability with Victorian “cult of death” rituals:

> It's Coming - the postponeless Creature -
> It gains the Block – and now - it gains the Door -
> Chooses it's latch, from all the other fastenings -
> Enters - with a “You know me – Sir”?
>
> Simple Salute - and Certain Recognition -
> Bold - were it enemy - Brief - were it friend -
> Dresses each House in Crape, and Icicle -
> And Carries one - out of it - to God –
> (Fr556A)

In the poem, the speaker presents death as a relentless “Creature” that advances—first to the “Block” and then to the “Door”—until the final moment of capture (1-2). Death carefully selects its prey, entering the home of his chosen victim as it “Chooses it’s latch, from all the other fastenings - ” (3). A personified death suggests that the hunted is expecting death to call; death “Enters” and asks, “You know me - Sir?” (4). In the second quatrain, the speaker acknowledges the degree of ceremony customarily interwoven into

the nineteenth-century death scene. The victim, aware that he must soon die, appraises his deadly captor, offering a "Simple Salute" out of both respect and fear. He considers what his death might be like, according to the Good Death tradition—"Bold" if he were afraid to die and "Brief" if he accepted his fate willingly (6). Lastly, the speaker notes the observance of two mourning traditions in her closing lines. She mentions that death "Dresses each House in Crape, and Icicle," suggesting that the ceremony and tradition associated with death brings with it a chilling emptiness (7).

After the "postponeless Creature" has done his work, funeral decorum still presides. Nineteenth-century burial conventions dictated that the deceased always be carried out feet first—a tradition rooted in both religious ideology and superstitious belief. That the corpse is carried feet first allows the newly dead to present his or her spirit to God in a state of humility and respect. Older superstitions claim that carrying the corpse out feet first prevents the soul of the deceased from looking back into the house, thereby summoning another member of the family to follow in death. Dickinson's speaker alludes to this practice by stating that, after the formalities are over, the pallbearer "Carries one - out of it [the house] to God - " (8).

4.4 Victorian "Death-Bed" Conventions in Dickinson's "Dying Room"

An undated poem, Dickinson's "'Twas comfort in her Dying Room" (Fr1740) provides yet another exemplar of Victorian "cult of death" conventions. The speaker begins by stating that those caring for an unnamed woman took "comfort" in hearing "the living Clock" while tending to her as she lay dying:

> 'Twas comfort in her Dying Room
> To hear the living Clock

A short relief to have the wind
Walk boldly up and knock –
Diversion from the Dying Theme
To hear the children play
But wrong the more
That these could live
And this of our's must *die*
(Fr1740A)

In the poem, line 1 ends with the phrase "Dying Room," which is, according to nineteenth-century mourning customs, the room in which one spends his or her final moments on the death-bed, surrounded by friends and family. The speaker's syntax in the phrase "Dying Room" places an added significance to the setting of the death-bed scene through wordplay by suggesting that the room itself is dying. Just as Dickinson sought comfort in her presence during her cousin Sophia's last moments, the "living Clock" of the poem comforts the speaker in the "Dying Room" (1). Moreover, the "living Clock" in line 2 offers the reader a dual representation. In the tradition of Victorian-era-era funereal customs, all clocks in the home were stopped as the time of death was noted. Some were never started again, to serve as a constant reminder of the deceased and his or her final moments; however, most were wound once again following the burial ceremony (Loeffel- Atkins 6). In this context, the continued ticking or chiming of the "living Clock" is a comfort, as it indicates to the speaker that the loved one still lives. Contextualized in this way,, the phrase "living Clock" is used as a symbolic representation of the beating heart of the dying, which like the clock, indicates life through its continued beating.

In addition, the word *wind*, in line 3, which typically denotes "breeze; atmospheric current; air in motion," also holds figurative implications in a figurative sense, as in "spirit; breath; respiration; life" (EDL). The fact that it "[knocks]" is likely a

reference to the "death knock," also known as the "death rattle," commonplace in the nineteenth century that created a surreal death-bed scene for the onlookers. The "death knock," although disturbing, gave those in attendance some degree of comfort, as it indicated that death was very near and that the suffering of the dying loved one would soon end (Laderman 28). Moreover, the noun *wind* is also a play on the verb *wind* as used in the context of 'winding a clock,' and offers another reference to the symbolic duality of the still-ticking clock and the still-beating heart—both indicators that the moment of death had not yet arrived.

Dickinson makes a similar comparison in her c. 1861 poem "A Clock stopped" (Fr259A), in which the poem's speaker refers to the human heart as a "Clock." She states that the "Clock stopped" but that it is "Not the Mantel's [clock]" (1-2). The speaker further alludes to the suddenness of death as she claims that the deceased "just now dangled still" (5). In saying that the clockmaker—"Geneva's farthest skill"—cannot repair the "Clock," the speaker affirms that the "Clock" is indeed a human heart.

A Clock stopped -
Not the Mantel's -
Geneva's farthest skill
Cant put the puppet bowing -
That just now dangled still -

An awe came on the Trinket!
The Figures hunched - with pain -
Then quivered out of Decimals -
Into Degreeless noon -

It will not stir for Doctor's -
This Pendulum of snow -
The Shopman importunes it -
While cool - concernless No -

Nods from the Gilded pointers -
Nods from the Seconds slim -

Decades of Arrogance between
The Dial life –
And Him -

(Fr259A)

In the second quatrain, the speaker continues to describe the exact moment of death, describing the expression and movements of the dying in terms of a living "Clock." The "awe [that] came on the Trinket" reflects the spirit of the Good Death, in which loved ones watch over the death-bed in hopes of capturing a glimpse of the afterlife. "Figures hunched - with pain - " are likely representations of the death-bed attendants who so lovingly labor to ease the suffering of the dying. As the life on the death-bed comes to a close, the body "[quivers]," a reference to the body's physical movements as it releases its last breath. The speaker evokes the image of the heart/ clock once again in the third quatrain, combining the natural with the mechanical. She first affirms that the heart "will not stir for Doctor's - ," then reverts to the clock imagery by referring to it as "This Pendulum of snow - " and substituting the "Doctor's" care for that of "The Shopman" (9-11). Furthermore, by using the words *snow* in line 10 and *cool* in line 12, the speaker implies that the body has lain dead for a while and has now grown cold. She alludes to the fact that time continues for the living, as the "Gilded pointers" and the second hand both "[Nod]" with each passing moment in the fourth quatrain (14-18). Finally, the speaker notes the great distance—the "Decades of Arrogance" (16)—that immediately separates "The [Dial's] life – " from the realm of the living at the moment of death.

As Dickinson's poetic speaker incorporates the conventions of the Victorian "cult of death" into her elegiac form, she interposes a new dimension into traditional nineteenth-century sensibilities. Couched within the emotional darkness of grief and

mourning and the social confines of ritual and expectation, the poems add an odd mixture of beauty and horror to the specter of death. To this end, Dickinson uses her speaker to address the emotional turmoil experienced by those most intimately affected by death—the community of nineteenth-century death-bed attendants.

4.5 Dickinson's Death-Bed Poems

Many of Dickinson's poems, including "Because I could not stop for death" (Fr479), "I felt a funeral in my brain" (Fr340), and "I heard a fly buzz when I died" (Fr591), depict death through the eyes of the dying. However, there are also a number of poems that have to do with physical death as it is viewed through the eyes of onlookers—poems referred to collectively as her "death-bed poems." According to Nancy Mayer, Dickinson's poetic speakers "frequently speak from within a group of undifferentiated, probably female, mourners watching over the approaching death. . . .Dickinson, who can seem so estranged from others, seeks to become in these poems the representative voice for this community of isolates" (45).

Surprisingly, critical assessments of Dickinson's death-bed poems are extremely lacking. Paula Hendrickson, author of "Dickinson and the Process of Death," states that although numerous books and scholarly articles have been written about Dickinson's death-themed poetry, "virtually nothing has been published about her moment of death poems." She adds that, on a limited number of occasions, scholars have referred to the poet's "moment of death poems;" however, to date, a thorough study of the poet's death-bed poetry does not exist. "This is unfortunate," Hendrickson claims, "because the most fascinating of ED [Emily Dickinson]'s death poems involve the description of the very

moment of death." (33). Nonetheless, Hendrickson's 1999 assessment provides only a cursory analysis. And obvious connections between Dickinson's corpus of death-bed poems and the bizarre range of social conventions of the Victorian "cult of death" remain ignored. These connections establish Dickinson's death-bed speaker as more than an ordinary observer of death; instead, the speaker in the poems presents herself as one of the death-bed attendants. As such, this writer endeavors to evaluate several of Dickinson's poems for evidence of diction, symbolism, and metaphoric representations that exemplify the relationship between nineteenth-century death-bed attendants and the dysfunctional social setting of Victorian America—especially during and after the Civil War. In a close examination and historical analysis of Dickinson's death-bed poetry, the speaker's metaphoric representation of nineteenth-century funereal rites and traditions becomes apparent. As a result, a new understanding of Dickinson's "death-bed" poetry emerges, disclosing to the reader a first-hand glimpse into the dysfunctional relationship that existed between those who became essential participants in the death-bed setting of the American 1800s and the historical setting of the Victorian "cult of death."

Referring to the death-bed attendants, Ferlazzo appropriately states that "sometimes the viewer feels honored and obligated to be a witness. In other cases, witnessing death is shown to give one the courage to prepare for one's own death" (89). Dickinson's first-person speaker locates herself in the midst of the utopian nightmare that was the nineteenth-century death-bed scene in her c.1852 poem "'Tis so appalling it exhilarates" (Fr341A). True to the conflicted nature of the Victorian "cult of death," the speaker claims in the opening stanza that a witnessed death is both "appalling" and "[exhilarating]":

‘Tis so appalling – it exhilirates –
So over Horror, it half captivates –
The Soul stares after it, secure –
To know the worst, leaves no dread more –

To scan a Ghost, is faint –
But, grappling, conquers it –
How easy, Torment, now –
Suspense kept sawing so –

The Truth, is Bald - and Cold -
But that will hold -
If any are not sure -
We show them - prayer -
But we, who know,
Stop hoping, now –

Looking at Death, is Dying –
Just let go the Breath –
And not the pillow at your cheek
So slumbereth –

Others, can wrestle –
Your's, is done –
And so of Wo, bleak dreaded – come,
It sets the Fright at liberty –
And Terror's free –
Gay, Ghastly, Holiday!

(Fr341A)

In line 1, the speaker employs wordplay in her use of the word *appalling*. The word typically denotes something that is “dismaying, shocking” (OED); however, the speaker’s use of the word alludes to several other terms that are identified with death, such as *pall*—the pale, discolored skin of the dead— *pallbearers*, those who carry the body of the deceased to his or her final resting place, or *pall*, the typically black-fringed cloth laid over the casket (Coffin 104). Dickinson’s speaker further alludes to the burning questions typically asked by those who tended to the dying, through phrases such as “To know the worst, leaves no dread more” (4) in the first stanza and “Suspense kept sawing so” in the

second (8). Moreover, she depicts the obvious spiritual struggle that she observes between the "Soul" and the "Ghost" of the dying and notes that the onlookers are glad that the "Torment" of the newly deceased is ended and the "Suspense" of the witnesses quelled (7-8).

In the poem's third stanza, the speaker juxtaposes the stark reality of death against the reassurances of the Good Death conventions. The speaker's affirmation that the "Truth, is Bald – and Cold – / But that will hold – / If any are not sure" offers evidence of the nineteenth-century confidence that, in the face of death, the dying are compelled to tell the "Truth" (9-11). During the 1800s, it was believed that the dying no longer had reasons to lie and would not want to face his or her eternity—whatever it may be—while making false statements. In fact, preachers across the nation consistently repeated this notion to churchgoers, assuring them that "a death-bed's a [lie] detector of the heart" (*Republic* 10). In lines 12-14 of the poem, the speaker alludes to the death-bed confession, a much-desired aspect of the Good Death setting, as she states that "We show them – prayer –" / But we, who know / Stop hoping, now –." The speaker explains that after the dying is led to Christ through "prayer" by the onlookers, those in attendance "who know" that the deceased has a home in heaven can "Stop hoping, now."

In the final two stanzas, the speaker once again situates herself at the death-bed, as she claims to be "Looking at Death" (15). As the death-bed attendant watches the physical struggles caused by the impending death, she wishes that the dying would "Just let go the Breath" so that "Others, can wrestle" (16, 19). Furthermore, the speaker intimates that although "Wo" has come to the deceased, the "Fright"—or fear—of death is set "at liberty - / And Terror's free - " (22-25). This freedom from "Fright" and

"Terror" has a two-fold implication. Not only is the recently deceased free from the fear and horror of the physical death process, but the speaker and her fellow death-bed attendants are also relieved of their own "Fright" and "Terror," knowing that their loved one is now secure in Heaven. It is this strange combination of grief and relief that prompts the speaker to proclaim "Gay, Ghastly, Holiday!" (24).

4.6 Death-Bed Sentiment in Dickinson's "I've see a Dying Eye"

In another death-bed scene created by Dickinson's single-stanza poem "I've seen a Dying Eye" (Fr648, c. 1863), the speaker situates herself as a first-person witness to death as she recounts her observations:

> I've seen a Dying Eye
> Run round and round a Room -
> In search of Something - as it seemed -
> Then Cloudier become -
> And then - obscure with Fog -
> And then - be soldered down
> Without disclosing what it be
> 'Twere blessed to have seen –
> (Fr648)

In the poem, Dickinson's speaker suggests that one who lay dying—represented by the personified "Dying Eye"—is searching for "Something" (3). According to the conventions of the Good Death, Hendrickson rightly suggests that the personified eye searches for "that elusive, enigmatic object of death" or that it searches for "God or an escort to Paradise" (34-35). As the search continues, the speaker—a death-bed attendant—observes the "Dying Eye" for the signs of approaching death. Within the context of the "Good Death," those who tended to the dying closely observed the eyes for signs of terror and sure damnation or of acceptance and eternal bliss. Although the

“Dying Eye” appears to be “in search of Something,” it soon slows and halts its frantic search, as the eyes “Cloudier become - / And then - obscure with Fog - ” (3-4). These observances of the eye in death are consistent not only with those documented by nineteenth-century death-bed attendants and physicians, but also with currently accepted evidences of death. Christine Quigley, author of *The Corpse: A History*, states that in death, “the eyes...become dulled...then the eyes become covered with a cloudy film and flatten just enough to be noticed” (15). In addition, the speaker indicates that the eyes are “soldered down” (6). According to Victorian-era funerary customs, the eyes of the recently deceased must be held tightly closed, as the open eyes of a corpse were believed to signify that another death would quickly follow (Quigley 29). Finally, consistent with Dickinson’s own questions concerning death, the speaker suggests that she wondered what the dying was “blessed to have seen” as he or she experienced death (7-8).

4.7 Dickinson and the Process of Death

Of Dickinson’s death-bed poems, perhaps one of most representative is “’Twas warm - at first - like Us - ” (Fr614, c. 1863). Critical readings of the poem expectedly include many interpretations that solely emphasize the physical aspects of death, the ostensible focus of the poem. For instance, Nancy Mayer suggests an imagined scene from the perspective of the dying, coupled with a representation of the speaker’s terror and resentment (52-53). Eberwein claims, cursorily and in passing, that the poem reflects the speaker’s frustration at the inability of the dead to communicate (212). And critic Paula Hendrickson proposes an afterlife reading, stating that the physical body is “seeking out some unknown object—God” (35). However, the diction and symbolic

representation used by the speaker infuses the poem with a much deeper meaning, one that underscores the detached nature of physical death while highlighting the practices of those who tended the dead according to the nineteenth-century “cult of death.”

The poem begins in the opening quatrain with a first-person view of a corporeal death through the eyes of the living:

> 'Twas warm - at first - like Us -
> Until there crept upon
> A Chill - like frost opon a Glass -
> Till all the scene - be gone.
>
> The Forehead copied stone -
> The Fingers grew too cold
> To ache - and like a Skater's Brook -
> The busy eyes - congealed
>
> It straightened - that was all -
> It crowded Cold to Cold -
> It multiplied indifference -
> As Pride were all it could -
>
> And even when with Cords -
> 'Twas lowered, like a Weight -
> It made no Signal, nor demurred,
> But dropped like Adamant
>
> (Fr614)

The first stanza supplies the sole reference to the first-person speaker through the inclusive pronoun *us*, which denotes “a couple or group identified to its members by a [form of the] word ‘we’” (OED). It is through the context of the inclusion implied by the pronoun that the speaker firmly establishes her presence within the community of “Us”—those tending to the deceased. Furthermore, the speaker indicates in line one that she watched while the poem’s subject passed from life to death, since at first the body was “warm - . . . - like Us -. ” She follows this statement with “Until there crept upon / A Chill,” which signifies the speaker’s customary duty to observe the body for tactile signs

of death as the end of life grows near. The simile compares this gradual "Chill" to a frost that obscures a windowpane—"like frost opon a Glass - / Till all the scene - be gone"—and suggests that the chilling a "frost" slowly gains control until the body succumbs to death, leaving those in attendance to confirm the passing. According to traditional funereal customs, those who tended to the dying in nineteenth-century New England relied on the appearance and cooling—the "Chill"—of the skin to determine that death was imminent[28]. Hendrickson claims that the "Chill" describes the "diminishing sense of feeling" of the "victim" and asserts that the poem is a "moment of death" poem written from the perspective of the dying (35). Yet, the speaker calls attention to the *coldness* of the "Chill" through her use of repetition and alliteration. In lines 6 and 10, the word *cold* is repeated three times. The alliterative emphasis generated by the repetitive *c* sound combines with the visual pattern formed by the repeated letters *co* in words *copied*, *cold*, *congealed*, *cold*, *could*, and *cords*, thereby creating a cryptic image of a corpse so cold that its attempts to communicate are repeatedly interrupted, as though it were stammering.

The second quatrain of the poem illustrates the state of the body immediately following death. Since many who lived in the nineteenth century feared being buried alive, it was of utmost importance for those who witnessed the presumed demise to ascertain that death had indeed occurred (Laderman 31). This fear is paralleled in the poem by the attendants' visual and tactile efforts to verify that death has transpired. As efforts are made to confirm the passing, the speaker emphasizes the intransigency of

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[28] The *Textbook of Palliative Nursing* (2005) states in Table 29.2 "Symptoms in the Normal Progression of Dying," that the skin appears "mottled" and the "patient feels cool to the touch" during the latter stages of death (569).

death as she examines the “Forehead” which now “copied stone” and clasps the “Fingers [which] grew too cold / To ache.” Using simile, the speaker equates a frozen, now-opaque “Skater’s Brook” to the once “busy eyes” of the departed which appear “congealed” as they stare vacantly (6-8). The speaker’s description of the frozen, unmoving eyes parallels the effects of the death process on the human eye, lending credence to the accuracy of Dickinson’s death-scene portrayals. According to Quigley, the eyes quickly dull and the pupils dilate; the eyes are obscured and take on a clouded appearance, flattening “just enough to be noticed” (15). This mirror-like surface implied by the image of the “Skater’s Brook” pairs with dulled reflection of the “busy eyes” and evokes the customary practice of covering all mirrors in the home where one has died—a death-related ritual with roots in Irish-Catholic tradition[29] (Quigley 17).

In the third quatrain, the speaker describes the state of the corpse and gives a sense of the psychological disengagement required of the death-bed attendants. The depiction of the corpse as the ambiguous “It” of line 9 is significant and accentuates the speaker’s desire to uphold an almost-clinical emotional distance from the body. The anaphoric use of *it* in lines 9-11 and line 15 calls the reader’s attention to the callous, impersonal character of the body after death. The word appears again in lines 1 and 14, albeit concealed with the contraction ‘*twas*—or *it was*. The poem’s speaker embedment of the word *it* in the past-tense verb *was* magnifies the corpse’s ambiguity and adds a dimension of weakness, as though “It” cannot stand alone without support. Further, in forming the contraction, the “It” loses its “I,” an effect that amplifies its obscurity and

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[29] For a narrative of Irish-Catholic influences on Dickinson, see Richard B. (Sewall’s *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (1994).

resulting inability to act on its own. The speaker states that "It"—the body—"multiplied indifference" (11). *Indifference* denotes an "Absence of feeling for or against;...Absence of care for or about a person or thing; want of zeal, interest, concern, or attention; unconcern, apathy" (OED). As the frozen visage of the corpse stares blankly, the deceased exudes an exaggerated air of arrogance and disinterest—perhaps because "Pride" and "indifference" "were all it could" show in death. In lines 9 and 10, another image of the corpse emerges as "It straightened - that was all - / It crowded Cold to Cold." The speaker's use of the words "straightened," "crowded," and "Cold" suggests the rigidity of the body and its positioning in the casket by the death-bed attendants. The lines echo the practice of placing the corpse—now grown cold—in "ice beneath and around the body," a nineteenth-century funereal custom used to preserve the natural state of the body as long as possible (Quigley 53). Finally, the poem describes the solemn duty of the death-bed attendants to set the jaw, fold the arms, and close the eyes, giving "It" the appearance of "Pride" and allowing the dead a final, symbolic triumph before interment (Quigley 53). Dickinson echoes the sentiment caused by the finality of death and the disconnected nature of the corpse in a letter referring to the death of a relative, stating that "my heart was too full to weep, but after she was laid in her coffin and I felt I could not call her back again I gave way to a fixed melancholy" (Leyda 85; vol. 1). This "fixed melancholy" appears in the poem as well through the speaker's detached presentation of death to the reader. Underscoring the finality of death, the death-bed speaker turns her attention to the rite of entombment and a final tribute to the deceased.

The fourth quatrain of "'Twas warm - at first - like Us -" (Fr614) exemplifies the irrevocability of death as it is related through the formality of burial conventions.

Lines 13 and 14 of the poem comprise a simile to illustrate the slow, solemn ritual of lowering the casket into the ground, witnessed by the speaker: “And even when with Cords – / 'Twas lowered, like a Weight.” The speaker reports that “It [the body] made no Signal, nor demurred, / But dropped like Adamant” (12). The word *adamant* offers a possible biblical reference to Adam, who fell from grace as a consequence of his own actions. In the same way, the body “dropped like Adamant”—fell, due to its own weight. As the body is lowered, it gives no indication of life nor does it protest or resist, thereby emphasizing the irrevocability of death. The words *weight* and *adamant* suggest the air of heaviness and solemnity that envelops the onlookers as the remains are given a proper burial (14, 16). This aura reflects Victorian-era burial rites that mandated a somber, yet memorable burial service performed as a consolatory act for survivors. The “beautification of death” remained an important part of the mourning process, particularly for those close to the departed (Laderman 85). Unlike other “cult of death” formalities that embraced elaborate displays to memorialize the deceased, nineteenth-century burial practices comprised a “distinctive North American pattern. . . with New England values honoring frugality and avoidance of vanity and ostentation” (Swedlund 185).

4.8 Dickinson and the Moment of Death

Another of Dickinson’s death-bed poems, “The last Night that She lived” (Fr1100, c. 1865), is a Civil War-era poem that relates the observations of the speaker—one of the attendants—who depicts the scene as a surreal event. As Mayer notes, “we know nothing of the dying woman’s identity, what or whom she is leaving behind, or

whether she has gone on to. . . heaven. The penultimate stanza is, in fact, the only one that focuses on the dying woman, and all we learn about her is that she seems, from the narrator's perspective, to have accomplished the act of dying with remarkable grace and ease" (47). Yet Dickinson's speaker centers her focus on the death-bed attendants through her diction and first-person perspective. Both are significant, as the speaker crafts her exquisite portrayal of the tumultuous relationship between death itself and those who cared for the dying. The first-person speaker positions herself in the presence of the body in the opening stanza through the inclusive pronoun *us*. Moreover, she situates death as an everyday occurrence, stating that it was a "Common Night / Except the Dying" (3-4):

> The last Night that She lived
> It was a Common Night
> Except the Dying – this to Us
> Made Nature different
>
> We noticed smallest things –
> Things overlooked before
> By this great light opon our minds
> Italicized - as 'twere.
>
> As We went out and in
> Between Her final Room
> And Rooms where Those to be alive
> Tomorrow, were, a Blame
>
> We waited while She passed –
> It was a narrow time –
> Too jostled were Our Souls to speak
> At length the notice came.
>
> She mentioned, and forgot - -
> Then lightly as a Reed
> Bent to the Water, struggled scarce –
> Consented, and was dead –
>
> And We - We placed the Hair –
> And drew the Head erect –

And then an awful leisure was
Belief to regulate –

(Fr1100)

The speaker explains that, although death had become a common occurrence, witnessing death had changed “Nature” (4)—“the whole natural world” (OED) for those who observed the death. In addition, as the speaker describes the meticulous attention paid to the characteristic changes of the physical body as it passes from life to death, she affirms that “we noticed smallest things – / Things overlooked before” (5-6). In other words, the death-bed attendants noticed the almost-imperceptible signs of approaching death. The import of the occasion brought with it a “great light” (7), an “Illumination or enlightenment” (OED) that “Italicized” or emphasized the event in the minds of those who observed the death scene.

In the third stanza, the speaker once again includes herself in the presence of the death-bed through the inclusiveness of the personal pronoun *we*, as those who tend to the ambiguous “She” move between rooms as they care for the dying woman. The speaker’s suggestion that “Those / to be alive / Tomorrow” (11-12) will remain alive accentuates the irreconcilable dichotomy of the attendants’ simultaneous relief and guilt—poignant aftereffects of managing death in the nineteenth century.

Likewise, lines 15 and 16 reflect an unnatural combination of sorrow and joy—the conflicted emotions inherent to the death-bed scene—as the speaker describes the sentiments of the death-bed witnesses after the passing is confirmed: “too jostled were Our Souls to speak / [when] At length the notice came.” The connotation of the word *narrow* expands the context of line 14, implying that the “narrow time” is not only short

but that it is also a difficult time to pass through and that the onlookers struggle emotionally to maintain their composure while continuing their funerary duties.

The poem continues in lines 17-20 as the speaker describes in detail the moment of death—a subject that held a particular fascination for Dickinson, just as it did for most Americans—especially during the Civil War. In the poem, the speaker crafts a simile to compare the dying woman's moment of death to a "Reed" that "Bent to the Water, [and] struggled scarce - / [then] Consented, and was dead" (18-20). This simile echoes that of an April 1862 letter from Dickinson to cousins Fanny and Louisa Norcross, in which the poet similarly describes the grieving family of Civil-War soldier Frazer Stearns[30], stating that the family members "bowed their heads, as the reed the wind shakes" (qutd. in *Republic* 205).

However, as the poem continues in the final stanza, the speaker states that the emotions of the witnesses are soon forgotten, usurped by their responsibility to the deceased in preparing the body for viewing according to Victorian-era burial customs. Yet, the speaker expresses a hesitancy—a reluctance—to participate in positioning the body after death, as her speech falters in telling the reader that "We – We placed the Hair - / And drew the Head erect - " (21-22). Alluding to the attendants' feelings of emptiness and abandonment that follow the flurry of activity, the speaker affirms that "then an awful / leisure was / Belief to regulate - " (23). Finally, the speaker and other death-bed

[30] Lieutenant Frazar A. Stearns, long-time friend of Dickinson's brother, Austin, and son of the fourth president of Amherst College, William Augustus Stearns, died March 14, 1862, in the Civil-War Battle of New Bern. Dickinson writes to Norcross: "Austin is chilled—by Frazer's murder—He says—his Brain keeps saying over 'Frazer is killed'—'Frazer is killed,' just as Father told it—to Him. Two or three words of lead—that dropped so deep." Dickinson was deeply affected by Stearns' death, resulting in a number of poems honoring the Civil-War dead.

attendants have nothing left to do, other than attempt to “regulate” or control their own “Belief”—an “awful leisure” no longer afforded to the dead (24).

These elegiac poems of Emily Dickinson provide what is perhaps the clearest depiction of the conflicting emotions inherent to the death-conscious nineteenth century. In one such poem, Dickinson’s oxymoronic phrase “Dark Parade” encapsulates the spirit of a social movement that was born out of a desire to comfort the grief-stricken and to beautify the horrific. Throughout Dickinson’s corpus of elegiac poetry, the speaker echoes these sentiments and crafts an insightful portrait, juxtaposing the stark horror of death with the ethereal beauty of ceremony. Particularly through her death-bed narratives, the poet exemplifies the contradiction that was the 1800s-death scene—the “Dark Parade.” Carefully placed together, the two simple words create an image—couched within the ostentatious display of ritual and deeply embedded in the disconsolate setting of mourning. Dickinson’s speaker captures the essence of the Victorian “cult of death,” yet, she presents death on her own terms. As Dickinson depicts the death-bed scene, she reveals the conflicting emotions of those who care for the dying and the resulting social turmoil of a nation obsessed with death and consumed by grief.

Conclusion

An examination of Dickinson's death-bed poems through a historical and cultural perspective yields a clear glimpse into Victorian-era funereal customs. These traditional funerary practices—historically referred to as the Victorian "cult of death"—embraced ceremony and tradition as a way of processing the emotional turmoil caused by death and grief. Dickinson's personal experiences with death and dying found their way into her elegiac poetry and became the substance of her speaker's graphic death-bed scenes, couched within the utopian conventions of the Good Death. As Dickinson uses imagery and allusion to recreate the death scene in pointed and gruesome detail, she effectively captures the impact of death on nineteenth-century America, modeling poetics after reality. Her idiosyncratic elegies offer consolation to the disconsolate, often through a disturbing blend of sorrow and comfort, and her poetic endeavors defy typical elegiac boundaries by extending them to domestic and national settings. As Dickinson becomes a representative of the death-bed scene, she delivers a narrative of the course of physical death and burial, viewed through the illuminating lens of the period in which she lived. Through her depictions of the death process, Dickinson's speaker describes the death-bed scene in chilling detail through the eyes of death-bed attendants. Read as a first-person account of the speaker, these poems reflect man's desire to understand the process of death within the context of nineteenth-century social mores. The speaker reveals the struggle to balance heart-wrenching grief with emotional detachment.as she situates herself as one of the death-bed attendants. As Dickinson's death-bed speaker delivers her

ghastly message, she embraces the aura of the death-saturated atmosphere of the American 1800s and in doing so, captures the essence of a paradox that gripped the nation—the Victorian "cult of death."

Dickinson, willing to address themes often avoided by others, examines the harsh realities of life and death in a pointed and honest way. Yet, the poet embeds these stark portrayals in moments of beauty, consolation, and compassion. It is this unique fusion of darkness and light that sets Dickinson's death-bed poems apart from other consolatory literature of her era. These death-bed poems that embrace the conventions of the Victorian "cult of death" are only one part of her "letter to the world"—her effort to address, console, and represent the women of the American 1800s who so lovingly cared for the dying and the dead. Even so, the poems offer the modern world a glimpse into the enigma that was the nineteenth-century death scene. The poems remain as a significant example of Dickinson's poetic legacy and of her endeavor to speak for those who had no voice, "Her - Sweet - countrymen -." As Dickinson's poems continue to give life to these unheard voices, it is the earnest desire of this writer that Dickinson's legacy—her "letter to the world"—will likewise continue to live on through the hearts, minds, and hands of those of us who choose to write back.

This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me -
The simple News that Nature told -
With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see -
For love of Her - Sweet - countrymen -
Judge tenderly - of Me

(Fr519A)

—Emily Elizabeth Dickinson (1830-1886)

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