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The Relation of Love and Death in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson

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THE RELATION OF LOVE AND DEATH IN THE POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON

By

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THE RELATION OF LOVE AND DEATH
IN THE POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON

The purpose of this study is to examine the possible causes of the attitudes toward love and death in the person and the poetry of Emily Dickinson, the psychological and metaphysical interaction of these experiences in her poetry, and the way in which this interaction concretizes, individualizes, and tensions her lyrics.

In the mind and art of Emily Dickinson there is a peculiar ambivalence toward all significant experience. This ambivalence is especially evident in her handling of love and death. She presents them as simultaneously desirable and fearful, fulfilling and destructive. She dramatizes them in an existential frame in which they reveal the contradictory elements that she considers the essence of the human condition. Close reading of her canon shows that the poet's fundamental ambivalence toward love and death contributes to the psychological, metaphysical, and dramatic quality of her better poems.

Chapter II considers the possible historical, biographical, psychological, and theological sources of Emily Dickinson's polar approach to love and death. It relates her inclusive and ambivalent attitudes toward these encounters to her cultural matrix, personal experience, psychic bent, and religious position. It demonstrates the effects upon her creative handling of the love-death theme of the poet's belief that expectation exceeds reality, that satisfaction destroys desire, and that the physical is valuable primarily as a symbol of the spiritual. It establishes the relation between the poet's reluctance to accept the limitations of finite knowledge, love, and duration to her dual presentation of love and death as ultimate transcendence and/or annihilation. It traces her aesthetic suspension between the poles of desire and fear to her fundamental uncertainty about the nature of God and so of man's position in relation to him and to all reality. It shows that while wanting to believe in a loving deity, Emily Dickinson was not sure that he might not be an indifferent or a malignant creator. Finally, it examines the effect of this scepticism upon her poetic treatment of love and death and especially demonstrates why, as a result, the expectation of love and death becomes the most desirable human posture.

Chapter III explores poetry in which love operates at one of three levels: 1) metaphorical:reference; 2) dramatizing conditioner; and 3) essential subject. It examines the typical use of love at these three levels. It particularly analyzes the situations, attitudes, imagery, and language patterns in poems whose central experience is love. Setting up ten categories in which love functions as the core of the poetic experience, it examines love as: 1) painful deprivation; 2) fearful threat; 3) rejection; 4) renunciation; 5) separation; 6) erotic encounter; 7) transforming grace; and 8) divine union. It also considers categories which present the nature of love or trace its effects. It organizes poems according to whether they present love as a fulfilling or destructive experience. It reveals a movement in Emily Dickinson's concept of love and in her handling of it as a poetic motif.

Chapter IV explores poetry in which death operates at the same three levels as love does in Chapter III. It parallels Chapter III in its organization and approach to death in this poet's canon. It recognizes six categories in the poems which explore: 1) awareness of death as a threatening or destructive force; 2) death as a cause of anxiety about immortality; 3) someone else's death or burial; 4) graves and existence in them; 5) death's nature; and 6) anticipation or realization of death as joyous fulfillment or transforming grace. It recognizes a movement in the death poems similar to the one evident in the love poems.

Chapter V examines poems in which love and death are essential to the imaginative experience. It analyzes these poems in which the close psychic and metaphysical links Emily Dickinson establishes between love and death in her lyrics are most explicitly apparent. It recognizes five categories in which both experiences are essential to the poem's meaning: 1) one experience analyzed and evaluated in terms of the other; 2) elegies composed in response to deaths that deeply touched the poet; 3) imagined projection of the death of the beloved; 4) death personified as an attractive but sinister caller; and 5) love presented as a promise of immortality and immortality presented as a promise of the fulfillment of love denied in life.

Chapter VI briefly summarizes the personal, psychic, philosophical, and artistic reasons that probably led Emily Dickinson to relate love and death so closely in her poetry. It concludes that erotic and eschatological encounters most efficiently dramatized her concept of man's position as a finite being who seeks to escape his existential condition. It also concludes that although relating love and death has archetypal and literary precedents, the ambivalence in these poems contributes to the originality of the more successful ones. Finally, it concludes that the multiple relationships that Emily Dickinson establishes linking love and death in her poetry contribute to its tension, drama, complexity, and modernity.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

At the center of Emily Dickinson's poetry lies a tension that is peculiarly her own. So essential is this tension to her work that it has caught the attention of numerous critics. As early as 1930, Allen Tate spoke of "the clash of powerful opposites in her poetry" as her claim to literary identity and greatness.¹ In 1960 Charles Anderson echoed this observation when he said that "she created her poems out of the tensions that arise from the clash of . . . powerful opposites."² Some critics characterize this pull as primarily a semantic technique: a matter of verbal contrast or a quality of imagery similar to the metaphysical mode. Margaret Schlauch notes words "juxtaposed out of different connotative spheres."³ George F. Whicher claims that Emily Dickinson uses paradox for the dramatic interplay of thought and sensation.⁴ Virginia Birdsall asserts that this poet's imagery often represents "the duality of experience."⁵ Richard Chase states:

¹Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), p. 12.

²Emily Dickinson: Stairway of Surprise (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 220.

³The Gift of Tongues (New York: Modern Age Books, 1942), pp. 246-247.

⁴This Was a Poet (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), p. 291.

⁵"Emily Dickinson's Intruder in the Soul," AL, XXXVII (March, 1965), 60.

The most intelligible mode of relationships or tensions within the poetry of Emily Dickinson is the relationship of the rococo to the sublime. There is hardly a poem in the whole canon which does not in some way exhibit both orders of experience.⁶

Other critics, stressing further the dependence of the artist's aesthetic patterns on her psychic ones, discuss the functional opposition in the tone of her lyrics. Robert Spiller says that in her poetry "the sublime and the trivial jostle each other and evoke her mingled reverence and satire."⁷

The consistency with which major critics--and minor ones as well--have specified contrast, antithesis, irony, and paradox as the core of Emily Dickinson's style testifies to the definitive function of these qualities in her psychic as well as her artistic temperament. If, as Jackson Pollock maintains, technique is a way of making a statement, then ambivalence is the angle of vision from which most typically and significantly Emily Dickinson viewed the human condition and turned her vision into art. Tension is more than a stylistic phenomenon in this poet to whom "form was inherently part of the idea."⁸ While agreeing that "Miss Dickinson adapted method to attitude and developed what might appropriately be termed an ironical aesthetic,"⁹ and that "her ambiguity by no means reflects a vague or befuddled mind; [that] it is rather the result of literary choices, acts of artifice as deliberate

⁶ Emily Dickinson (New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1951), p. 236.

⁷ Literary History of the United States, ed. by Robert Spiller, Willard Throp, Thomas H. Johnson, and Henry Seidel Canby (3 vols.; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), II, 912.

⁸ Thomas H. Johnson, Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 151.

⁹ Clark Griffith, The Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry

as Poe's"¹⁰ this study seeks to account for the tension at its most basic level, within the poet's psychological ambivalence, especially in regard to love and death as crucial human experience. This dissertation will, therefore, examine the relation of love and death in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, with particular emphasis on the tension created, by their being played against each other and by the resulting ambivalent attitudes of the speaker toward them, and also demonstrate how these postures probably reflect the poet's own psychic pattern.

In Emily Dickinson's reaction to the most profound human experience, desire and fear operate together. Her response is not the simple one of either/or, but the more complex one of simultaneous attraction and repulsion. She "did not picture the world in terms of simple dichotomies."¹¹ What Freud calls the normal and deep-seated "ambivalence of feeling," i.e., many instincts being "manifested almost from the first in pairs of opposites,"¹² Emily Dickinson displays to an unusual degree. As a result of her psychic disposition all the major events of life are the source of terror for her as she hangs emotionally suspended between equally strong drives. The complexity of the poet's view of man's position and the contradictory nature of her impulses trap the

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 57.

¹⁰ Joseph Moldenhausser, "Emily Dickinson's Ambiguity: Notes on Technique," Emerson Society Quarterly, No. 44 (Fall, 1966), 37.

¹¹ Thomas W. Ford, Heaven Beguiles the Tired: Death in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1966), p. 67

¹² In On Creativity and the Unconscious, Harper Torchbooks (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1958) Freud discusses what he terms this remarkable psyche phenomenon and shows linguistic parallels in the language of ancient Egypt, "Antithetical Sense of 'Primal Words,'" and archetypal parallels in

speaker in terror, the terror that arises from the ambivalence that

we feel at times in the presence of powerful forces and great dangers--we wish both to escape them and to be possessed by them. Everyone has some impulse to plunge off the cliff as well as to step back.¹³

What is only the occasional experience of most men is the typical, almost constant, intense condition of Emily Dickinson's speakers. This double attitude toward reality accounts for the antithesis of pleasure and pain, ecstasy and dread, faith and doubt constituting what Anderson calls a "running strategy in her poetry."¹⁴

A woman who maintains that "To know the worst, leaves no dread more--/
To scan a Ghost, is faint--But grappling, conquers it--" (281) must confront love and death.¹⁵ Since Emily Dickinson's way of grappling with reality is to explore it artistically, these two areas attract her as the ultimates of human experience. Considering Freud's opposing Eros as the great unifying force to Thanatos, the great destructive one, readers should not be surprised that a poet who thinks both eschatologically and ironically should relate love and death. The screws that wrung the essential oils of her art were the screws of anguish, the severe suffering she experienced as she faced the cosmic

ancient myths, "Analysis of the Three Caskets."

¹³ Thomas Macklin, "An Analysis of the Experience in Lyric Poetry," CE, IX (March, 1948), 320.

¹⁴ "Emily Dickinson," American Literary Masters, ed. by Charles Anderson (2 vols.; Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1965), I, 979.

¹⁵ Emily Dickinson, The Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (3 vols.; Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955), I, 200. All further quotations of her poems will be from this edition; only the number of the poem will be given in the body after the quotation.

questions involved in love and death. Her ruthless honesty in decisively asking ultimate questions caused her the pain that she relieved by objectifying it, defined by exploring it, and disciplined by transforming it into art.

Besides sharing a common source, love and death call forth similar attitudes in the speaker. The voice sees these experiences as polar. Her posture toward them is: 1) psychological; 2) transcendentalist; 3) platonic; 4) existential; and 5) tragic. Her final response is ambivalent.

So sensitive was Emily Dickinson to a polar approach to reality that one critic claims that "she was in love with extremes."¹⁶ Her presenting one experience in terms of its opposite suggests the limitation of the human condition as well as its polarity. She presents love not simply as the positive pole and death as the negative one, but instead treats them each as sources of creative and destructive powers. Love and death delight and frighten simultaneously. Desire and fear, consequently, complicate the speaker's attitude.

1) Psychological.--From within her own mind, the speaker explores love and death as levels of human consciousness. Such an approach searches the nuances of bridal and burial event chiefly to trace their effect upon the inner world, the changes they bring about within the speaker's inner self. Regardless of the immediacy of the external detail in these poems, such an approach of psychic reconnaissance is basically introspective. The stress is not upon the external, physical happening but upon the internal, responding self operating in Coleridge's world of secondary imagination. The stance is highly self-conscious and concerned to analyze with clinical precision--that

¹⁶ Glauco Cambon, "Violence and Abstraction in Emily Dickinson," SR, LXVIII (Summer, 1960), 460.

creates the deceptive illusion of objectivity--the inner effect and not the outer event.

2) Transcendentalist.--Closely connected to this absorption with psychological response instead of with event is the speaker's transcendentalist or Calvinistic concern with the significance of love or death rather than with the experience per se. If "no poet ever wrote with tighter grip on the realities of inner existence,"¹⁷ no poet was ever more aware that "the Outer--from the Inner/Derives it's Magnitude" (451). In a manner reminiscent of Edwards or Emerson, the speaker searches love and death for their symbolic meaning. The emphasis again is not on the outward event except as it conveys religious or moral experience. In such a mental climate, the physical world becomes an analogy for the spiritual and the speaker obsessively tries to identify the links between the two realms. Because of this interiorization of experience, this search for the reality behind the appearance, the physical facts of love and death are of importance only as they suggest corresponding spiritual aspects. As a result, the speaker's approach to both experiences contains a strange mixture of precise physical details of sensation and an attitude of superiority to the body. When the psychological and spiritual aspects of love and death consume the voice's attention, the physical facets fade almost into non-being.

3) Platonic.--The platonic motion of Emily Dickinson's mind also contributes to the minor importance of the physical. This poet's attitude toward the body and her creative use of it in her work are the converse of her

¹⁷Louis L. Martz, "In Being's Centre," UTQ, XXVII (July, 1957), 565.

contemporary, Walt Whitman's. With his quasi-rhapsodic and mystic praise of the physical, Whitman is much less precise about concrete sense details, whereas Emily Dickinson with her accurate rendering of sensation is really not at all concerned about the body. The sensual vehicle she employs merely intensifies, by contrast, the basically bodiless approach. The speaker's experience with either love or death is typically psychological, transcendentalist, or platonic; the mind or soul's reacting to the bridal or burial event, not the body's, fascinates the voice. Emily Dickinson's "sense of the evanescence and worthlessness of the flesh"¹⁸ prompts a speaker to cherish "our poor Ideal--/Till in purer dress--/We behold her--glorified/. . . Transfigured--mended--" (428). The frequency of white robe imagery, with its spiritualizing implications, testifies to this poet's idealism, which a contemporary who knew her well termed platonic.¹⁹

4) Existential.--Eclectic as her vision of the human condition is, Emily Dickinson can be called existential as well as platonic. Because of her experiential approach to being, she is now frequently recognized as an existentialist isolated in an age of transcendentalism.²⁰ Distrusting absolutes, she relies upon only the experience of the individual. The only truth that convinces her resides, not in formalized abstractions, but in concretions subject

¹⁸Chase, p. 181.

¹⁹Richard B. Sewall, The Lyman Letters: New Light on Emily Dickinson and Her Family (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1965), p. 35.

²⁰N.B. Charles R. Anderson, "The Conscious Self in Emily Dickinson's Poetry," AL, XXXI (November, 1959), 303; Griffith, pp. 261-262; Thomas H. Johnson, ed., The Letters of Emily Dickinson (3 vols.; Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958), I, xii-xiii.

to pragmatic testing. Abstractions about life she considers as inferior to personal experience, as "Liquor in the Jug" to "Liquor at the Lip" (1101). Although her desire for certainty refuses settled systems and relies instead upon her own inner awareness as the only means of achieving cosmic answers, Emily Dickinson recognizes the limitations of the self in an alien, threatening world. Thrown back upon herself, she sees man as a being ruled by uncertainty, loneliness, and time. Emily Dickinson's sensitivity to man's isolation, ignorance, and evanescence is so pervasive that critics parallel her metaphysical position to the darker romantics of her day and the darker philosophers of today. Paul McCarthy claims that she "went further than Melville in admitting the facts of man's inability to know and his frightening isolation."²¹ John Pickard says that "in much the same manner as modern philosophers like Tillich she viewed man as an estranged, beleaguered creature."²² Emily Dickinson's existential concept of man's precarious and anguished position as a dependent being radically affects her treatment of love and death. The voice's ambivalence as she encounters love and death involves the poet's terror in response to the flux she fears is the essence of life--a life she, therefore, terms brittle and porcelain. While critics recognize the decisive nature of this poet's concern with flux, they differ in their description of it; one claims that a "concept central to her thinking . . . is the imprisonment of man's mind in time"²³; but another says that "her neurotic obsession

²¹"An Approach to Emily Dickinson's Poetry," Emerson Society Quarterly, No. 44 (Fall, 1966), 26.

²²Emily Dickinson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1967), p. 37.

³⁷Charles R. Anderson, "Trap of Time in Emily Dickinson's Poetry," ELH,

with temporality . . . is the chief obsession of her poetry."²⁴ In a world of change, the speaker envisions both love and death as evidence of man's final extinction.

5) Tragic.--Denied cosmic certainty, subject to inevitable flux, and suffering spiritual isolation, Emily Dickinson's view of man is as tragic as it is existential. Threatened from without by a universe--and possibly a god--either indifferent or malignant, she sees potential destruction in all facets of life.²⁵ Her letters and her poetry betray her excessive fear of psychic destruction. Poem 201 dramatizes her realization of how far man will go to preserve life, spiritual as well as physical. Her fear of extinction of psychic integrity, and so of unique selfhood, is painfully realized in Poem 937. Her dread of any threat to her integrity makes both love and death dark forces destructive of individuality. Emily Dickinson's reaction to nature further demonstrates the terror she felt in the presence of any force that might overpower her. The danger lying just below the appealing surface of nature made it a source of mystery, destruction, and dread. The good the romantics saw in nature was always overshadowed in this poet's mind by its hostility. The

XXVI (September, 1959), 402.

²⁴Griffith, p. 280.

²⁵This position challenges Leta Perry Di Salvo's in The Arrested Syllable: A Study of the Death Poetry of Emily Dickinson, unpublished dissertation (Denver: University of Denver Press, 1965). She flatly states: "It is difficult to find any expression of fear in the Dickinson poems." p. 5. Later she limits this generalization, however, by saying: "Actual death is never feared. . . . What is feared is psychic death." p. 78.

anxiety of the speaker approaching nature, love, and death in Emily Dickinson's lyrics reflects the poet's own tragic view of the human predicament.²⁶

Ambivalence throughout characterizes the speaker's posture toward love and death. These are experiences that simultaneously delight and frighten. The voice finds them mysteries containing both the promise of fulfillment and the threat of annihilation. Because Emily Dickinson's tragic awareness is never total and her existential sense of anguish is never unqualified, she recognizes the limitations of the existing self but never accepts them.²⁷ If she could have accepted final uncertainty and impermanence, Emily Dickinson's suffering would have been diminished and her poetry would have been proportionately less tensioned. Her position appears more complex. Experientially she had to admit the reality of what Johnson calls

her agonizing sense of ironic contrasts . . . of the human predicament in which man is mocked, destroyed, and beckoned to some incomprehensible repose; of the limits of reason, order, and justice in human as well as divine relationships.²⁸

Spiritually and emotionally, however, she never appears to have accepted what

²⁶ Johnson asserts that "tragic vision gives her poetry its high rank." Letters, I, xii; Ford speaks of the "atmosphere of tragedy" in "her serious poetry." p. 103; and Griffith describes her as a "tragic poet, endowed with tragic insights and a great tragic sensibility." p. 6.

²⁷ Despite the scholarship and insights evident in Anderson's Emily Dickinson, his use of accepted rather than recognized seems inexact when he states that "she accepted the mortal lot as inescapable, trapped in time and wavering perpetually between doubt and belief in another life beyond." p. 222. Roy Harvey Pearce also asserts: "The point is that she accepts the predicament fully and utterly; that she exhibits in her poems no hope, no desire, of breaking out of it." "Emily Dickinson" in The Continuity of American Poetry (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 176-177.

²⁸ Johnson, ed., Letters, I, xii.

she intellectually recognized. Part of her religious rebellion seems to have been against not the imperfections of sinful man but against the natural limitations of his humanity. Like Emerson she believed "the soul refuses limits."²⁹ Emily Dickinson's recognition of the finite in man and his desire for the infinite makes her vision of all experience double and consequently her approach to love and death, the ultimate human experiences, peculiarly ambivalent.

Thematic relationships also link love and death in Emily Dickinson's poetry. Both are consistent concerns in her entire canon. As early as the valentine which Johnson places as her first poem in his definitive, critical edition, this poet connects love and death.

The worm doth woo the mortal, death claims a living bride,
Night unto day is married, morn unto eventide;

Although the voice in Poem 887 says that "we outgrow love," it and death permeate these lyrics. That many of Emily Dickinson's finest love and death poems appeared during the years of her multi-faceted crisis does not mean that these experiences nibbled at her soul only then, but rather that their number is proportionately higher at that period because her total creative output was at its peak in the early 1860's. Although her artistic use of them varied in tone and emphasis, the cosmic implications of love and death gnawed at her incessantly. The emphasis shifts; the earlier poems--especially the weaker ones--are more apt to be tinged with sentimentality and coyness, the later ones marked more by abstraction and detachment. A close study of poems with related

²⁹F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 182.

themes reveals patterns of thought. Even before the lyrics were chronologically arranged, many critics detected a movement in the love poems which they variously described as "a series of steps in a pilgrimage from earthly love to devotion to Omnipotence"³⁰; and as "an obvious change from the early sentimental love lyrics to a growing awareness of a powerful male influence"³¹; or as sublimated love, becoming "a cross, a crown, a heavenly bride, a divine title without the sign, and a promise of immortality."³² Whicher and Van der Vat give rather detailed steps in the generally agreed upon progression from sentimentality to spirituality in the love theme.³³

Except for a few critics, such as Louise Bogan, who consider this poet's interest in death as only an early addiction to graveyardism from which she moved away in her mature poetry, most Dickinson scholars regard death as one of her most persistent themes.³⁴ The only major movement critics discern in Emily Dickinson's death poetry falls into two areas: 1) a shift from greater confidence in immortality to greater skepticism and "apparent hopelessness of solving the 'riddle' in this life"³⁵; and 2) the emergence of time as "a

³⁰ Donald F. Connor, "The Significance of Emily Dickinson," CE, III (April, 1942), 630-631.

³¹ Pickard, p. 22.

³² Ruth Flanders McNaughton, The Imagery of Emily Dickinson, University of Nebraska Studies, New Series, No. 4 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1949), p. 61.

³³ Whicher, p. 273; D. G. Van der Vat, "Emily Dickinson (1830-1881)," ES, XXI (December, 1939), 257.

³⁴ "A Mystical Poet," in Emily Dickinson, ed. by Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 141.

³⁵ Ford, p. 70.

spatial quality" as the belief in immortality becomes less certain.³⁶ Interestingly, the movement in the love poems seems to be from intense, personal pain to serene, religious acceptance, while the movement in the death poems is inversely from religious confidence to tortured doubt.

In Emily Dickinson's poetry love and death have another and deeper relationship. They both represent crucial experiences that transcend man's limitations. They are ritual events of mystic meaning that illumine man and bring him nearer to the Infinite he craves. Since they confer the grace of vision, a sudden insight that plunges the recipient into the mystery of being, they are akin to moments of spiritual and artistic intuition for which "the Soul should always stand ajar" (1055). In Emily Dickinson's hierarchy of experience, love and death rank high as sources of religious illumination and sacramental status. In a world devoid of traditional values, this poet created a private and dramatic scheme to give possible meaning to her existence. Her "idea of status may be regarded as the doctrine of justification translated into a private language of romance."³⁷ Within this sacramental construct, the bridal and burial events possess the dignity and significance of sacraments.

Thematically Emily Dickinson's poems about love and death concretize her typical ambivalence in the face of these most powerful human experiences. As sources of both wholeness and destruction, love and death elicit no final or exclusive response from the speaker. Ecstasy and despair, desire and fear operate simultaneously. Because of the poet's and speaker's basic posture

³⁶ Frederick J. Hoffman, The Mortal No: Death and the Modern Imagination (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 4.

³⁷ Chase, p. 146.

toward these experiences, Eros and Thanatos sometimes fuse in Emily Dickinson's work making it difficult not only to say whether the specific poem creates an experience of fulfillment or destruction, but also to discern clearly whether the experience involves love or death. The critical problems resulting from this fusion of the erotic and the macabre become apparent in the widely differing interpretations of "Wild Nights--Wild Nights" (249). The majority of readings acknowledge its center as "sexual Passion"³⁸ and its expression as a "compact of Freudian figures."³⁹ Others, however, question this erotic analysis, claiming that despair "is its central point"⁴⁰ or even that the artifact is an "apparent death wish: a personification and apostrophe to Death."⁴¹

This study affirms that although her handling of love and death is highly individual, Emily Dickinson's poems that explore these experiences are part of a long Western tradition in which love and death interact, and part of the mainstream of American literature. The love-death duality has been a part of the European literary heritage from the time of the romance. The romantic mentality has consistently exalted a love that can find no consummation in this world. To the romantic--medieval, Renaissance, or nineteenth century--love at its highest demands obstacles that intensify it and also frustrate it and, therefore, glorifies death as the only avenue to passion's satisfaction, a

³⁸ Anderson, ed., "Emily Dickinson," American Literary Masters, I, 978.

³⁹ Henry Wells, Introduction to Emily Dickinson (Chicago: Packard and Company, 1947), p. 253.

⁴⁰ Paul Faris, "Eroticism in Emily Dickinson's 'Wild Nights,'" NEQ, XL (June, 1967), 269.

⁴¹ James T. Connelley, "Dickinson's 'Wild Nights,'" Explicator, XXV (January, 1967), #44.

satisfaction delayed until and sanctified by the grave.⁴² The literary tradition that assigns "infinite value to anything, including love, once it is lost, is instinctive, and is therefore so native to the human mind as to be pre-myth."⁴³ Louis Martz puts Emily Dickinson in another literary history when he aligns her

with other poets of the meditative genre—not only with Herbert and Vaughan, whom we know that she read and admired, but also with Hopkins, Donne, Yeats, Edward Taylor, and other poets of this . . . kind.⁴⁴

Other critics besides Martz have insisted on her resemblance--temperamental and aesthetic--to the Metaphysicals. Whether her likeness to these seventeenth century poets is a spiritual or a technical one, her sensitivity to the skull beneath the skin establishes her in the line of metaphysical poets and so in the mainstream of Western literature.

Emily Dickinson's poetry of love and death is also in the mainstream of American literature. Besides her kinship, in this regard, with Jonathan Edwards and Edward Taylor, this poet's work unites her with the major nineteenth century American romantics. In his vision of cyclic evolution, Whitman constantly links love and death. To a cosmic religious poet like Whitman, "death, like birth, is a ritualistic act."⁴⁵ He also presents sex as a mystically

⁴² Denis de Rougemont in Love in the Western World, Doubleday Anchor Books (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1957) traces the development of this aspect of the romantic sensibility and shows its influence upon literature. Leslie A. Fieldler in Love and Death in the American Novel refers to the effect of this romantic disposition upon fiction when he speaks of the bed as "the place of deflowering as well as dying," p. 265 and of "the extraordinary doctrine of sanctified posthumous adultery which informs both Julie and Werther." p. 87.

⁴³ Di Salvo, p. 58.

⁴⁴ Martz, p. 565.

⁴⁵ James E. Miller, "Four Cosmic Poets," UKCR, XXIII (June, 1957), 312.

meaningful act. The relation of Emily Dickinson's love-death poetry to the work of the other romantics resides, not so much in the likeness of the experiences explored, but in the basic attitudes toward human experience implied. Like Emerson and Thoreau, this woman presents reality as symbolic. Love and death interest her as metaphors of spiritual significance. Like Hawthorne--and especially like Melville--Emily Dickinson sees reality as threatening and so her work represents "a gradual movement toward pessimism" in American literature.⁴⁶ Melville's "seekers after extinction . . . sought out death in the hope that with death, either the answers would come, or else a total obliviousness to the questions."⁴⁷ At the same time that they woo death, figures like Ahab fear it. As a cosmic poet, Emily Dickinson's ambivalence toward love and death strongly resembles that of Melville's protagonists.

This analysis of Emily Dickinson's treatment of the duality of Eros and Thanatos demonstrates her kinship with major twentieth century American poets. What Hyatt H. Waggoner says of her work in general especially applies to this poet's poems of love and death.

There are very few American poets either before or after her whose work is not suggested somewhat in hers, whose images she did not try out, whose insights she did not recapitulate, criticize, or anticipate. She not only bridged the gap between Edward Taylor and Emerson, she bridged the one between Emerson and Frost--and even, more rarely but distinctly enough--between Emerson and Eliot and Stevens.⁴⁸

Depending upon their own point of concentration, critics have noted particular

46 Herbert R. Coursen, Jr., "Nature's Center," CE, XXIV (March, 1963), 467.

47 Griffith, p. 144.

48 "Emily Dickinson: The Transcendent Self," Criticism, VII (Fall, 1965), 326.

links binding Emily Dickinson and other American writers. Randall Stewart connects her with Henry James because of their common "emphasis upon the necessity of suffering."⁴⁹ In her division of twentieth century poetry into two main streams, Bernice Slote describes the New Puritanism as "that tradition of rigorously honed intellectualism in which the old worship of the soul has been replaced by the worship of the mind."⁵⁰ The complexity of love and death's interaction in Emily Dickinson's poetry makes apparent her position as a forerunner of the Eliot tradition and her relationship to Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and Robert Lowell.

Far from contributing to any myth of artistic eccentricity, Emily Dickinson's handling of this subject matter clearly reveals her place in the mainstream of American literature. Although she belongs to both the American and Western literary tradition, Emily Dickinson's monistic philosophic bent combined with her dualistic psychological and artistic bent makes her work unique in both traditions.⁵¹ This play of opposites at the deepest level of the poet's being contributes to the peculiar tension in her poems as doubt and affirmation, pulling against each other, create the individualized tonal pattern.

No one critical approach is adequate to an investigation of the many

⁴⁹ American Literature and Christian Dogma (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958), p. 106.

⁵⁰ in Start with the Sun, ed. by James E. Miller, Jr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), p. 3.

⁵¹ In Poem 976, e.g., Emily Dickinson uses the traditional convention of a body-soul debate, but her casual treatment of "an overcoat of clay" reverses the expected attitude and thus contributes toward the individuality of the experience.

ways in which this poet links love and death. If the artifact is acknowledged as the sum of the artist's total self--his historical inheritance, his own temperament, his personal experience, his metaphysical outlook, his spiritual questings--and also as an art object in itself worthy of existence separated from the poet, then the relevancy of a basically two forked instrument is obvious. Since the poet's own uniqueness is the glass through which he perceives and reacts to the self and the non-self, this study first examines the possible reasons why Emily Dickinson relates love and death as she does. Within the person of the poet and her milieu lie the causes of her sensitivity to and attitudes toward these experiences. The emphasis here is upon the artist, not upon the artifact; however, it is understood that this interest in the forces that shaped the poet is valid in such a study only as an aid in approaching the poetry more perceptively.⁵² The formative areas considered are: 1) historical; 2) biographical; 3) psychological; 4) and theological.⁵³ These factors qualified the attitudes, consciously and subconsciously, held by the poet toward love and death.

After the probable causes of Emily Dickinson's postures toward love and death and her reasons for relating them have been probed, their effects upon her poetry will be investigated. Exactly how the artist's awareness of the duality of these experiences individualizes and textures her work is the primary subject of this dissertation. Once the likely sources of Emily

⁵²Without the aid of biographical reference, poems such as 1027, 1028, and 1094--written to accompany a gift of fruit or flowers--could easily be misread.

⁵³Chapter II analyzes these factors in detail and shows how they colored Emily Dickinson's reactions toward the erotic and macabre aspects of life.

Dickinson's abiding interest in these themes is established, especially in regard to the postures toward them they precipitated, the precise use the poet makes of these motifs can better be analyzed. For it is the assumption of this study that the personality of the artist, the integrated whole of the poet's temperament, attitudes, and experiences, is reflected in the poem. This intimate relation between the artist and his creation is of particular significance in regard to poetry, where the matter and form of the work may be said to arise within the soul of the poet.⁵⁴ The poet's interpretation of reality conditions the concepts and images he uses and the contextual relations he builds between them.

This study limits its textual analysis of Emily Dickinson's poems to three types: 1) those in which love is the central experience; 2) those in which death is the central experience; and 3) those in which both love and death are essential to the experience.⁵⁵ Consequently, while recognizing their place in her canon, this study excludes extended analysis of poems in which love or death functions only as a conditioning tone to render a more complex interpretation of another experience. It also eliminates other poems in which erotic references or macabre objects are used to make the image strikingly concrete and unique. Only those poems are included in which love and/or death serve as a well wrought structure of meaning for the entire

⁵⁴ John Duffy, C.S.S.R., A Philosophy of Poetry Based on Thomistic Principles (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1945), p. 145.

⁵⁵ Chapter III deals with love poetry per se; Chapter IV deals with death poetry per se; and Chapter V deals with poetry in which love and death interact.

poem.⁵⁶

Part of the method of this study involves arranging poems within these three large groups according to the aspect of love or death explored and comparing them to discover basic patterns. These patterns may depend upon the similarity of the experiences or of the postures maintained toward them. This thematic grouping reveals not only structural and psychological designs, but it also makes "clear that she was pioneering a new direction in intellectual tone and poetic idiom."⁵⁷

A close and independent reading of the works themselves constitutes the major critical approach of this study. Structural analysis is, therefore, the backbone of most of this examination. In seeking to define the relationship of the love-death themes as Emily Dickinson employs them, this investigation must look closely at the basic attitudes toward love and death displayed in the poems. To identify the attitudes voiced in a particular poem means necessarily to identify the tone, for tone may well constitute "the most important part of meaning."⁵⁸ Identifying the tonal nuances of any poem requires the analysis of the interrelation of words and of the tensions they set off. It is in the tensions which the poet creates, tensions structured out of cadence, syntax, connotation, and other elements of poetry, which William Van O'Connor so ably discusses, that the typically complex attitude of the speaker

⁵⁶ At this second and third level of incorporation, Emily Dickinson typically introduces far more references to death than to love.

⁵⁷ Anderson, "Emily Dickinson," American Literary Masters, I, p. 967.

⁵⁸ Laurence Perrine, "The Importance of Tone in the Interpretation of Literature," CE, XXIV (February, 1963), 389.

toward the poles of love and death can be pin pointed, even in a loose manner.⁵⁹ This analysis of tension proceeds on the assumption that the poem is more than its rational content and that its "total intention may be very different from its paraphraseable, or purely logical, content."⁶⁰ The presence of antithetical responses qualifying each other in the same poem makes such close analysis of structure essential to any adequate interpretation of the relation of these experiences in this poet's work. In relation to both experiences this double vision is important, for it is one of the factors that, in the most successful poems of love and death, prevents a sentimental handling.

Finally, it is hoped that this close scrutinizing of the agent, the poetic object, and the relationship between them, in regard to these two themes will lead to a fuller understanding of the nature and source of the poet's fundamental ambivalence toward all reality, the relations of her stance toward love and death and other crucial experiences, and the resulting psychic and formal tensions that individualize the poems.

The very nature of this study presents certain problems. Centered in the poetic object, they include the extensiveness and unevenness of Emily Dickinson's work as well as the compressed and paradoxical nature of her style. Centered in the body of existing Dickinson criticism, they involve the unre-sisted danger of reading from her life into her poetry or of the use of Freudian insights by those who are not trained in psychoanalysis as well as the

⁵⁹"Tension and Structure," SR, LI (Autumn, 1943), 555-573.

⁶⁰Yvor Winters, Primitivism and Decadence (New York: Arrow Editions, 1937), p. 3.

contradictory opinions of respected critics. Centered in the writer, they involve the above critical hazards as well as a strong personal empathy for this woman and liking for her work.

The scope and unevenness of Emily Dickinson's canon necessitates limiting the analysis to those poems most significant, either in themselves or in relation to this investigation's purpose. Even though some critics claim that most of her love poetry was confined to the years of crisis, the poem's utilization of love, not the period of its composition, makes it relevant here.⁶¹

A more intrinsic problem in selecting and grouping love poems involves deciding the object of the love. In many lyrics the love could be read as directed either to a friend, to a lover, or to God--or even to more than one of these at the same time. The "marriage poems" demonstrate how difficult it is to distinguish between divine and human love in these poems. The themes of love and friendship also frequently overlap.⁶²

The nature of Emily Dickinson's work presents other obstacles to objective analysis. Her poetic style--compressed, elliptical, enigmatic, understated, ironic--challenges any simple interpretation. Her use of: intuitive jumps rather than a strictly rational sequence; unusual grammatical forms and punctuation; a private symbolism made up of an esoteric vocabulary; playful wit in the most serious situations; and ambivalent attitudes within the same poem make a totally objective reading difficult.

Because Emily Dickinson, "like many poets, was consistent in her

⁶¹Pickard, p. 26.

⁶²Poems 253 and 317, e.g., could be addressed to a friend or to a lover.

concerns but inconsistent in her attitudes," no single, final stance toward love and death appears in her poems.⁶³ The speaker's posture toward these experiences varies from poem to poem. The form of the work itself and the poet's sense of the dramatic basically decided the attitude in any lyric. Consequently, it is critically dangerous to assume that the stance in any poem solely reflects the poet's own intellectual and emotional response. As a conscious artist, she imaginatively projected herself into either macabre or erotic situations, and the emotion expressed was the one that would best delineate that particular segment of reality; it was not necessarily the poet's personal response in the situation. The personal element came to play in the fact that this poet could project herself into such situations involving the interplay of love and death, and furthermore, that she did, so readily and characteristically. Because her poems are "inter-dependent, a body of work, no one of them attempting to present 'the whole Truth,'" no one poem equals Emily Dickinson's response to love and death.⁶⁴ The nature of the relationship she created between Eros and Thanatos in her poems can be discovered only by considering the entire range of her canon, before studying a selective number of her poems in detail.

To an unusual degree articles and books dealing with Emily Dickinson have followed a vicious circle. They frequently—noticeably in the earliest period of Dickinson criticism—concentrated in a sensational and romantic fashion upon her life. By reading into the poetry from the supposed facts of

⁶³Richard Wilbur, "Sumptuous Destitution," in Emily Dickinson, ed. by Richard B. Sewall, p. 128.

⁶⁴Waggoner, 318.

her life and then supporting their reading of her life by the experiences in her poetry, they created a myth and kept attention away from the poetry itself. Emily Dickinson's love poetry has occasioned much of this type of unscholarly, undisciplined interpretation.

The guesses as to her secret have ranged from the over silly (that she was a Lesbian) to the over psychological (that she was in love with her father), with an assortment of other claims that this or that man was the cause of her retirement and renunciation of the world.⁶⁵

The dangers inherent in applying an excessively Freudian interpretation to the poet's life parallels the one exposed in a single-minded psychoanalytic interpretation of specific poems.⁶⁶

A thorough knowledge of the poet's biography, historical situation, and intellectual milieu is a prerequisite for this kind of thematic study; yet this background never warrants reading into the poetry what is not there. A poem, like any artistic object, has a right to independent existence. Meaning is contained within the poem's own structure; all related information, such as biographical details, should be used only as an aid in interpreting. What is extrinsic to the poem should not determine its meaning. The recognition of this hazard to true scholarship creates another danger, i.e., a hesitancy about tracing any connections between the agent and the poetic object, so that justified and significant links are not observed and meaningful general

⁶⁵ Charles Carroll Hollis, "Last Words on Our Greatest Woman Poet," America, March 11, 1961, p. 763.

⁶⁶ Poem 1712, e.g., objectifies the poet's—or the speaker's—fear of human existence, rather than a specifically erotic experience. It has, however, been misread in an exclusively sexual frame of reference. In such a frame, pit is distorted into a totally erotic, rather than a more inclusive psychological, image.

observations and conclusions are not made.

Disagreement among eminent critics also suggests some of the dangers involved in interpreting this poet's life and work. Whether neurotic or creative impulses motivated Emily Dickinson's secluded life, whether affirmation or denial marked her response to life, whether faith or despair characterized her spiritual state, whether she believed in or doubted immortality, whether her personal relation with a specific man or a more impersonal problem occasioned her years of crisis are all disputed questions.⁶⁷

The debate over whether an actual man motivated her spate of love poems --and who he might be--illustrates the difficulties these opposed interpretations cause. Johnson, Whicher, Chase, Gelpi, and Sherwood consider Dr. Wadsworth the probable object, conscious or subconscious, of this woman's love and the inspiration for most of her love poetry.⁶⁸ Higgins and Miller claim, and Lindberg implies, that Samuel Bowles was the disturbing male influence in the decisive years of crisis.⁶⁹ Anderson, on the other hand, strongly doubts that

⁶⁷ In seeking the probable causes of Emily Dickinson's attitudes toward love and death, Chapter II analyzes these debated questions in detail.

⁶⁸ Johnson, Emily Dickinson, pp. 82-83, 99-100; Whicher, pp. 99-112; Chase, p. 151; Albert Gelpi, The Mind of the Poet (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 21-25; William Robert Sherwood, Circumference and Circumstance: Stages in the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), pp. 71-86.

⁶⁹ David Higgins, Portrait of Emily Dickinson (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1967), pp. 81-84; Ruth Miller, The Poetry of Emily Dickinson (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), pp. 111-119; Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, The Voice of the Poet (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 53-54.

any identifiable lover existed.⁷⁰ Pickard says that Wadsworth "could have been the force behind her poetic explosion, the figure who provided the spiritual and emotional affinity for which she had been starving."⁷¹ Later he wisely adds:

The complexities of anyone's emotional life are difficult to unravel, and with an elusive, many-faceted personality like Emily Dickinson the hidden areas may never be fully illuminated. Whether Wadsworth or Bowles or some still unknown person was her imagined or actual lover is less important than the fact that her passionate response to this figure occasioned some of the finest lyrics in the entire range of American poetry.⁷²

Regardless of their opinion about the reality and/or identity of Emily Dickinson's lover or the intrinsic value of her love poetry, most critics agree that the poems themselves, not the mystery man, should be the object of scholarly study.

The writer's own prejudice toward this poet could be a final critical danger. Since, however, this study's method is analytic and descriptive rather than evaluative, Emily Dickinson's fascination as a person of rare intellectual and emotional honesty who ruthlessly analyzed her experiences as a woman and asked the supreme questions about human existence, and her equal fascination as a poet who is uniquely personal, yet universal and philosophic, and who wrote a poetry of ideas with womanly intensity yet stoical restraint, should not interfere with objective criticism.

As any bibliography of Emily Dickinson will mutely testify, the last

⁷⁰ Emily Dickinson, pp. 167-168. Theodora Ward speaks of a totally unknown man "who came into her life for only a short time." The Capsule of the Mind (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 153.

⁷¹ Pickard, p. 25.

⁷² Ibid., p. 29.

decade has produced a vast amount of research on this poet. Since the so-called middle period of Dickinson scholarship, the critical direction begun by Allen Tate, William Penn Warren, Ivor Winters, and Richard Blackmur has been generally followed. Charles Whicher's biography, an interpretative and an informed account of the poet's life and creative technique, furthered this trend. Richard Chase's and Thomas Johnson's interpretative biographies, David Higgins' and William Sherwood's studies, Jay Leyda's documentation of the poet's life, Jack Capp's study of her reading patterns, the Lyman Letters, and Thomas Johnson's definitive edition of her letters give needed insight into the personal and historical background from which the artist and her art developed. Given Thomas Johnson's definitive edition of Emily Dickinson's poems in 1955 and S. P. Rosenbaum's concordance to the poems in 1964, critics such as Charles Anderson, Clark Griffith, Albert Gelpi, Theodora Ward, David Porter, Thomas Ford, and Brita Lindberg-Seyersted have undertaken extended exegeses, thematic studies, linguistic analyses, and penetrating explications of her major poems. Ralph Franklin's treatment of the special problems involved in editing this poet and Klaus Lubbers' history of trends in Dickinson criticism add other dimensions to contemporary studies. Dissertations by Leta Di Salvo, Sister Anselmo, Norman Gregor, Lee Copple, John E. Todd, Thomas Arp, John Wheatcroft, Rowena Jones, Emma Julia Phillips, Robert Gene Flick, Bernard Frank, and Francis Molson give in-depth interpretations of certain aspects of Emily Dickinson's thought and poetry that are relevant to this investigation. All of these studies have in various ways contributed to this dissertation.

CHAPTER II

POSSIBLE CAUSES OF EMILY DICKINSON'S INTEREST IN AND ATTITUDES TOWARD LOVE AND DEATH

The poetic artifact is intimately related to all the facets of the poet's personality.

Whether or not the subject matter of a poem deals with circumstances of time and place, it is the poet himself who speaks through it. He not only shows . . . his conscious attitudes, but inevitably reveals something of his unconscious mind, but on a personal level and on the deeper one that touches his relation to those underlying psychological patterns common to all men.¹

The poet's natural disposition, cultural inheritance, historical position, religious aspirations, and philosophical convictions color all that he creates. His own individual experience qualifies—negatively or positively—the artist's vision of reality. Each experience of his life conditions in some degree the poet's profound self-awareness and modifies the inner substratum of thought and feeling from which he writes. Circumstances and temperament produce attitudes in the artist which make him particularly sensitive to certain patterns in life. As Thomas Hardy observes, an artist looks at life as if it were a carpet and follows the design or color that appeals to his sense of the human condition. He is historically and temperamentally conditioned to respond most readily and most completely to certain aspects of reality.

The connection of the poem to the poet parallels the connection of the

¹Theodora Ward, "Ourself Behind Ourself," HLB, X (Winter, 1956), 6.

poet to his environment. The entire complex of his milieu affects his creative activity. Allowing, therefore, for interaction between "the private imagination of the poet and the collective imagination of the tradition she inherited,"² nineteenth century New England--a peculiar time and place in the American experience--speaks through Emily Dickinson's poetry. For as one critic says, "intellectually she was a woman of her times,"³ or as she herself so succinctly says in Poem 285, she saw "New Englandly." With these causal relations in mind and the knowledge that "no one was more conscious than she herself that the consequences of having lived at a certain time and in a certain place and in a certain way may be all but absolutely decisive,"⁴ this chapter examines the possible roots of Emily Dickinson's interest in and attitudes toward love and death.

If a poem can be considered the result of tensions, the reciprocal action of subject matter and the poet's personality, then the meaning of love and death for this poet is also contained, at least implicitly, in the identical forces which produced their appeal. For the presence of Eros and Thanatos is universally felt, but their significance varies with the artist according to his own psychic disposition and historical position. To Emily Dickinson love and death were compelling facts and their importance, the light and shadow they cast upon all other experiences, in fact upon all existence, can be traced to intellectual and emotional patterns in the poet herself and in her era. Her own psychological, metaphysical, and spiritual bent and the external factors

²J. S. Wheatcroft, "Emily Dickinson's White Robes," Criticism, V (Spring, 1963), 136.

³Waggoner, 298.

⁴Chase, p. 8.

that modified them are the subject of this chapter both as the sources of this poet's consciousness of love and death and as the forces which predisposed her to certain attitudes toward these experiences.

Historical

Emily Dickinson's historical position was a potent factor in shaping her as a person and a poet. If Allen Tate is correct in his assessment of cultural impact upon the artist, Emily Dickinson lived in just the right time and place, "the perfect literary situation,"⁵ a time of radical change. She lived in one of the most markedly transitional periods in American history. The strong rivers of Calvinism were flowing into the unlikely streams of Unitarianism and Transcendentalism. The older order was disintegrating from within, and Emily Dickinson found herself precariously located historically, when all the authoritative philosophic certainties and moral disciplines were weakened. A homogeneous culture was no longer possible, for the intellectual atmosphere comprised "a watered-down version of two cultural phenomena: New England Puritanism and Romanticism."⁶ Growing industry and big business, along with the new science, were affecting American values. The materialism which the Transcendentalists abhorred was changing the nation into an acquisitive society. The Civil War epitomized the shattering changes through which this poet lived and to which she responded. Existence could never again be as simple and dogmatic as it had been--at least, not for those sensitive to their surroundings. These divergent intellectual, economic, and political forces complicated man's vision of reality.

⁵Tate, p. 19.

⁶Chase, p. 44.

Of all the changes that made this period a time of crisis, the breakdown of Puritanism created the most profound tensions. For the mid-nineteenth century was a time of great spiritual upheaval, "a crucial turning in the history of religious-poetic sensibility,"⁷ with outmoded systems behind and uncertainties ahead. In 1841 Emerson said of his era "'Our torment is Unbelief.'"⁸ For those who wanted some faith but to whom Calvinism was no longer acceptable, Unitarianism or Transcendentalism offered some modus vivendi for reaching out to God. The dogmatic liberalism and vague idealism of either system left many mid-century New Englanders in inner conflict and spiritual anguish.

Unitarianism might be said to have effected a theology of man, Transcendentalism, with equal justice, might be said to have refined this to a theology of the ego. In both views there was less and less of God invoked, and less and less of man involved. The area of religious control had, indeed, been reduced; but so had the area of religious experience.⁹

To generations used to the orthodoxy and authority of Calvinism, these offspring of Puritanism were often essentially unsatisfactory. Traditional Christianity seemed to have died and left a vast religious and social void. Not only did God seem amorphous now, but by reducing the awesomeness of man's relation to him, man was reduced in his own eyes. Man's spiritual stature grew in mediocrity and lost, consequently, significance and drama.

Transcendentalism.--Emily Dickinson's vision of reality contains traces

⁷ Griffith, p. 271.

⁸ Matthiessen, p. 181.

⁹ Henry Fairbanks, "Theocracy to Transcendentalism in America," Emerson Society Quarterly, No. 44 (Fall, 1966), 56.

of various doctrines that permeated her age. Basically her philosophic position is eclectic.¹⁰ At both the rational and the sub-rational level, she accepted and rejected elements of the intellectual life around her. The Calvinistic tendencies in her mind and emotions were tinged with diametrically opposed romantic ideas and feelings.¹¹ The Puritan tradition rested upon the authority of Scripture and established truth, God's incomprehensible sovereignty, the natural depravity and dependence of man, his need of grace, and the ascetic nature of his quest. Romantic sensibility, on the other hand, posited the individual's personal experience and realization of himself as the only authority, man's innate goodness, the reliability of his emotions, his self-sufficient ability to perfect himself, and the intuitive nature of his quest. The whole complex of Jonathan Edwards' ideas about the human condition might be summed up in his statement: "the conversion of a sinner being not owing to man's self-determination, but to God's determination."¹² Emerson's antithetical position might also be summed up in his statement: "its [the human mind's] highest attribute is its self existence. It looks to no higher source. It admits of no essence prior to itself."¹³

¹⁰Critics generally agree that Emily Dickinson's philosophic tenets are unsystematic and often contradictory. N.B., e.g., Whicher, p. 162; Chase, p. 187; Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 285; Ford, p. 188; and Griffith, p. 261.

¹¹The poet's indebtedness to her Calvinistic background is analyzed from p. 125 to p. 143 of this chapter.

¹²Freedom of the Will, ed. by Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 436.

¹³The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. by Stephen E. Whicher, Robert E. Spiller, and Wallace E. Williams (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), II, 84.

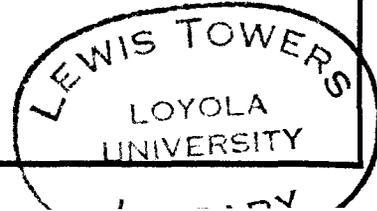
As a way of reacting against the eighteenth century's coldly logical or mathematical world view or the Calvinist's darkly determined one, Transcendentalism would appeal to this young poet. She first met this offspring of German and English romanticism at a decisive period in her spiritual development. At the very time that she could find in herself no affirmation of Calvinism, Ben Newton gave her a copy of the 1847 edition of Emerson's poems. Her sense of spiritual inadequacy and isolation found a temporary relief. Emerson had lectured in Amherst the year before in 1849, and he returned for other lectures in 1855, 1857, 1865, and 1879. Although there is no evidence that she heard any of these talks, during these years especially, Emersonian ideas were one current in her intellectual environment. Besides apparently reading everything he published, Emily Dickinson frequently referred to Emerson in her writing, directly in her letters, less directly in her poetry.

What Emerson meant to her is apparent not so much in the number of her references to him, despite his position in this respect right after the Bible and Shakespeare, as in the nature of them. . . . For the most part, she didn't need to quote him; he had been too thoroughly digested for that.¹⁴

In 1874 she sent Mrs. Higginson a copy of Emerson's Representative Man, calling it "a little Granite Book you can lean upon."¹⁵ That she admired Emerson and Thoreau and that they and other Transcendentalists--like Theodore Parker and William Ellery Channing--helped to shape her attitudes is evident in her own words. After reading Parker, Emily Dickinson said: "I heard that he was

¹⁴ Waggoner, 305.

¹⁵ Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 569.



'poison.' Then I like poison very well."¹⁶

Whether Emily Dickinson took Emerson as "an antidote to the stultifying effects that latter-day Calvinism had on her imagination,"¹⁷ or whether the relationship of these two poets to each other and to Parker and Thoreau was due to the fact that they "all were responding to the spirit of the time,"¹⁸ some basic philosophic assumptions bind together the work of the two poets. With the Concord philosopher, the Amherst poet believed in the infinitude of the private soul. Because of its sovereignty, the soul is totally self-sufficient. Because its self-sufficiency is based upon its own experience, abstraction gives way to sensation.

Experiment escorts us last--/ His pungent company
Will not allow an Axiom/ An opportunity. (1770)

Relying upon its own intuitions, the individual can stand unaided.¹⁹

By intuition, Mightiest Things
Assert themselves--and not by terms-- (420)

¹⁶ Ibid., II, 358. Johnson thinks this reference is to The Two Christmas Celebrations (1859), a volume that does not survive. Letters, II, 359. Galpi further comments that Emily Dickinson's endorsement of this book is revealing. "Parker moved his narrative from the humble simplicity of Jesus' birth through his preaching of individual piety and good will to the corruption of Jesus' example into Christianity, with all its paraphernalia of redemption, resurrection, miracles, heaven, and hell. The 'poison' which he asked the reader to swallow was the notion that the example of Christ's life for his followers was an individuality which 'broke away from the old established doctrines and forms' for 'the best and most religious men were those who had least faith in what was preached and practiced as the authorized religion of the land.'" pp. 52-53.

¹⁷ Capps, p. 127.

¹⁸ Whicher, p. 199.

¹⁹ This claim that Emily Dickinson relied upon intuition disagrees with DiSalvo who says ". . . she was psychologically incapable of doing anything with intuition but suspect it." p. 138. It is true that Emily Dickinson wanted to know and to know with certainty, but her method, like the Transcendentalists, was intuitive.

The Mind lives on the Heart
Like any Parasite (1355)

This type of individualism rejects all authority except personal experience; while depending upon sensation, the experience is either of an intuitive or an introspective nature, either cosmic or psychic. "Revelation is supplanted by intuition, and man himself becomes the source of moral law."²⁰

Emily Dickinson's arrival at truth in this sibylline fashion is not so much irrational as super-rational. She was interested not so much in a truth for its own sake—she was not a philosopher or a moralist—as in a direct vision of the truth.²¹

Because individual experience is the matrix of all values in such a philosophy, the inner life, not the outer world of fact and matter, is the focus of attention. Among the echoes that fly from soul to soul, "the most prolonged echo" of Emersonian thought in Emily Dickinson appears in this double consciousness: the poet's and the speaker's simultaneous response to sense perception and to its super-sensory implications.²² A metaphorical concept of reality is part of this poet's dual inheritance, for both the Calvinist and the Transcendentalist keenly responded to sensory experience while at the same time seeing it as a vehicle of spiritual meaning. Emily Dickinson's awareness of religious meaning in physical phenomena is related to Emerson's "concern with the all-pervading spiritual power which inhabits and transfigures the physical world."²³

²⁰ Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 233.

²¹ James Reeves, "Introduction to Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson" in Emily Dickinson, ed. by Richard Sewall, p. 118.

²² Frank Davidson, "This Consciousness: Emerson and Dickinson," Emerson Society Quarterly, No. 44 (Fall, 1966), 5.

²³ Donald E. Thackrey, Emily Dickinson's Approach to Poetry, University of Nebraska Series, n.s., No. 4 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1949), p. 33.

Behind this spiritualizing of the material lies Emerson's platonism, which one critic believes "was the dominant influence upon his philosophy. . . . though the taste of the time required him to disguise it in the cloak of German idealism and Oriental mysticism."²⁴ Emily Dickinson's hierarchy of soul over mind, and mind over body resembles neo-platonism. While she uses the senses, they function like the traditional platonic ladder to lead man from sense to spirit, from body to soul, from earth to heaven. Emerson's theory of compensation, in its practical rather than its metaphysical handling of evil, is also similar to Emily Dickinson's idea about the necessity of hunger to appreciate bread, loneliness to value love, and defeat to understand victory.

To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need. (67)

Water, is taught by thirst.
Land--by the Oceans passed. (135)

Although "of all the American authors whom she read, Emily Dickinson can be most closely associated with Ralph Waldo Emerson,"²⁵ in whom she "found dynamic expression of her deepest feelings about the importance of the inner life,"²⁶ Emily Dickinson can never rightly be called a Transcendentalist. Despite the influence of and likeness between this poet and the Transcendentalists, she breaks with them in three essential and related respects: 1) their optimism; 2) their concept of nature; and 3) their view of time.

In Emerson's world view there is no real evil; in Emily Dickinson's evil is a dark, threatening force. It comes in various forms--usually not

²⁴Floyd Stovall, ed., Eight American Authors (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1956), pp. 66-67.

²⁵Capps, p. 113.

²⁶Pickard, p. 19.

ethical but metaphysical or psychic—and haunts man. The very limitation man suffers is one radical form of evil. The possibility of certainty for which he hungers in Emily Dickinson's constructs—and hungers more painfully than for food or love—makes this vision of the human condition fundamentally different from Emerson's. Emily Dickinson's concept of man's desire for knowledge, for love, and for immortality marks her philosophically as an existentialist rather than a transcendentalist.²⁷ Emerson's position is really a monistic one; he sees an essential unity or harmony in reality. What, in his thought, at first appears to be bi-polar is not; all opposites are reconciled in the divine essence, the Over Soul. In Emily Dickinson's vision there is no such harmony; the tension of unreconciled opposites permeates her thinking.²⁸ "The disposition of Emily Dickinson's mind is between the poles of the now and the hoped for, between actuality and ideality."²⁹

Emily Dickinson's view of nature deviates from the transcendentalist's. To the romantic sensibility, nature is organic, evolutionary, and symbolic. It either reflects or participates in the divine spirit. The thin line between God and nature in the transcendental mode is often negligible, if not illusory. This woman, on the other hand, never confuses God and nature.³⁰ To her, nature

²⁷ N.B. Chapter I, pp. 7-8.

²⁸ This conclusion challenges Thackrey's position: "Likewise, they [Emerson and Dickinson] have in common a sense of the unified of the apparent diversity of the universe." p. 5.

²⁹ David T. Porter, The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 24.

³⁰ This interpretation contradicts Ruth McNaughton's which claims that Emily Dickinson's attitude toward nature was a "sort of implied pantheistic doctrine, often identifying nature with Heaven or God." p. 33. Rather than identifying God and nature, Emily Dickinson typically sees similarities between

is a dual reality; it is a source of beauty and terror. It is creative and destructive. These two modes of being make her view of nature include delightful, fragile objects and terrible, unleashed powers. She is distressingly alive to this second aspect of the physical world. Nature, therefore, is a constant and ritualized reminder of change. To this poet, "as far as one can perceive it, the essence of nature beheld in relation to human life, is impermanence, anxiety, and disintegration."³¹ To Emily Dickinson nature was distinct from God, but through it God might carry out his will. Since to her nature was the tangible expression of God's plan that man should die, it was constant in its destructive process and its cyclic change. Emily Dickinson poignantly sensed the anguish and desolation in all existence, and nature became the concrete symbol of mortality's potency and sway.

Emily Dickinson's view of time, which is related to her philosophic assumptions about nature, also opposes the transcendentalist's. Since the processes of nature did not represent to her an evolution, but rather an incessant and dramatic evidence of instability and destruction, time likewise became a sign of impermanence and chaos. To the romantic temper, time is part of a glorious upward sweep that carries man to new perfection, a kind of bridge to eternity. As Emerson said, "the soul filled with Reason, hath omnipresence; Space and Time disappear before its all-dissolving intuitions;"³² and "we are not children of time: . . . we hear with calm assent the primeval strains in which age chaunts [sic] to age the immortality of the soul."³³ In such a

them, and, therefore, assumes parallel ambivalent attitudes toward both.

³¹ Chase, p. 166.

³² Early Lectures, p. 184.

³³ Ibid., p. 188.

system, man transcends the limits of time and matter. To Emily Dickinson, on the contrary, man is trapped in time.³⁴ Change is one of the prime limitations of man, working at cross purposes with his desire for infinitude. This poet's views on time, like her views on nature, put her in the darkest shadow of the romantic tradition—precisely the shadow Transcendentalism lacked.³⁵

Although Emily Dickinson rejected the facile optimism of this romantic philosophy, American Transcendentalism helped her to define facets of her own thinking. Initially Emerson reinforced her own tendencies toward aspiring idealism and mitigated the confusion she felt in refusing Calvinism.

The end effect, however, was almost the reverse: Emily Dickinson could not fully endorse the ideas of either Puritanism or Transcendentalism, and since she found both unsatisfying, each served to highlight the other.³⁶

Finding no adequate answer to man's place in the universe, Emily Dickinson moved toward a philosophic position sometimes called Stoic or Gnostic, but more correctly termed existential. Since she was no systematic philosopher, even this tag may be misleading. Being so highly eclectic, the unresolved and opposed notions in her thinking may make her writing appear either more transcendental or more tragic than it actually is. With Tate's frame of reference in mind, Matthiessen observed that to Emerson life was an ecstasy, an

³⁴This position, maintained by Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 176; Ford, p. 125; and Griffith, p. 100 and p. 163, contradicts Gelpi's: "With the great Romantic poets she celebrated the mysterious and vital process of growth in which self realized itself in cosmic unity. Time was preferable to eternity." p. 82; and Miller's: "Nature is the visible sign of regeneration. . . . There is no lamentation at loss; there is everywhere a welcome of transiency, for it is the very attribute which affirms permanence." p. 154.

³⁵Griffith, p. 109.

³⁶Ford, p. 53.

almost unbelievable miracle; to Melville life was a tragedy, an almost unbearable agony; to Emily Dickinson it was simultaneously both.³⁷

In this poet's confrontation with cosmic questions there is both existential Angst and intense rapture. "Life is Miracle, and Death as harmless as a Bee, except to those who run—" she said to Sue in 1864.³⁸ Emily Dickinson did not run, and she found life viewed in the perspective of death has new values—metaphysical as well as personal. Looking at reality existentially from the vantage point of mortality sharpened the poet's perceptions and heightened her emotions.

Death sets a Thing significant
The eye had hurried by (360)

Emily Dickinson's existential leanings prodded her interest in love and death and affected her handling of these experiences. She presents death as a "great light upon our Minds" (1100), dispelling misty responses and revealing the pain and splendor of man's lot. She presents love conditioned by change and ultimately death. Viewed in the perspective of renunciation or death, the lover also has new meaning for the speaker. As he becomes more remote, the lover is more desired. The poet's sensitivity to the pervasiveness of change, to the temporal conditioning of all reality, qualifies the speaker's postures toward love and death. Emily Dickinson's projection of love and death as experiences in her more successful poems, rather than as abstraction in her weaker lyrics, comes from her existential philosophy and her concrete artistry.

Despite her rejection of basic tenets of Emersonian thought and her

³⁷Matthiessen, p. 408.

³⁸Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 434.

espousal of fundamental assumptions resembling Kierkegaard's, Emily Dickinson's contact with American Transcendentalism affected her interest in and treatment of the love-death theme. This New England philosophy was idealistic and emphasized the spiritual over the material. Emily Dickinson's treatment of love and death could be termed the poetic objectification of this emphasis. The platonic impulses in transcendentalism regarded the outer life as the symbol of the inner, the vital center of awareness. In her poetry this double consciousness operates constantly; the vivid external elements of the experience are presented for their metaphorical value, as vehicles of psychological and spiritual significance. In her better poems of love and death, Emily Dickinson uses these specific physical details to discipline the psychic exploration. Transcendentalism supported the validity of individual sense impressions, the particular quality of each person's inner nature, and the final sanction of individual intuition. Transcendentalism, full of misty abstractions and ethical aspirations, luxuriated in vague cloudiness. A parallel to these tendencies appears in this poet's bodiless treatment of Eros--the lover is either absent or dead--and her indefinite presentation of immortality. Her use of broad words in her less successful dramatizations of these experiences also manifests these same qualities. The naked soul's ability to meet pain and sorrow Emily Dickinson imaginatively tests in the solitary experience of renunciation, separation, or death. The intuitive awareness and spiritual haziness of this idealistic philosophy are evident in Emily Dickinson's abiding sense of wonder and awe in the face of reality--especially as she tries to penetrate the mysterious, timeless quality of love and death. This poet's historical inheritance was the source of both pain and joy. "Her peculiar burden was to be a

Romantic poet with a Calvinist's sense of things."³⁹ Consequently, her love-death poetry has a complexity, a richness, and a tension which it might well have lacked had she lived at some other time in some other place.

In Poem 1551, Emily Dickinson contrasts—with images of violence which suggest severe pain—the certainty of pre-Emersonian faith with the present "abdication of Belief."⁴⁰ The spiritual tensions of her time made religious commitment a highly personal matter. Mere social habit was incapable of sustaining spiritual significance and psychic stability; instead, they now "required the agony of doubt and the trial of deliberate expression in wilfully objective form."⁴¹ Both the religious ferment and spiritual sterility of her milieu colored Emily Dickinson's attitudes toward love and death. Her response to the inadequacy of spiritual signs—the orthodox Calvinism of her forefathers or the transcendentalism or unitarianism of her own time—strengthened her tendency to look to her own experience for religious meaning and to write what Anderson calls a type of religious poetry, i.e., poetry which passionately questions the meaning of existence.⁴² The intense inner pressure she felt to discover the truth about the human predicament led her to explore love and death in her poetry to an unusual degree. Her historical position provided one

³⁹ Gelpi, p. 91.

⁴⁰ The nature of Emily Dickinson's own religious stance is handled later in this chapter as the fourth major factor influencing her interest in and postures toward love and death. Here the emphasis is upon forces of change in the culture surrounding her.

⁴¹ R. P. Blackmur, "Emily Dickinson: Notes on Prejudice and Fact," Southern Review, III (Autumn, 1937), 330.

⁴² Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 283.

of the few perfect literary situations that Tate describes, for she had to assimilate the abstract elements of the fading world order and imaginatively produce through immediate experience the meaning missing in her own.

Transitional Period.--Besides coinciding with a period of religious transition in the nation, Emily Dickinson's most fruitfully creative years saw other major changes in the temper of American life. So great were these movements that Spiller calls the years from 1855 to 1870 a time of crisis.

Three fundamental issues reached the breaking point in those years: the conflict between the agrarian ideal of Jefferson and the industrial ideal of Hamilton, the conflict between the plantation gentility of the South and the commercial gentility of the North, and the conflict between a culturally mature East and a raw and expanding West.⁴³

These changes in the intellectual climate corresponded to vast alterations in the external pattern of American life. New economic, social, and political currents transformed the surface of life in New England just as the central religious and cosmic questions were changing its inner life. Emily Dickinson "lived in the midst of the Age of Enterprise, the Rise of Finance Capitalism, the budding of what Charles Beard later called the Second American Revolution."⁴⁴ Merideth and Berenson maintain that Emily Dickinson responded to her society much as the other romantics did and that her social awareness was strong enough to be not unlike Emerson's.⁴⁵ The tensions operating at all

⁴³ Robert E. Spiller, The Cycle of American Literature (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), p. 111.

⁴⁴ Robert Dean Merideth, "Emily Dickinson and the Acquisitive Society," NEQ, XXXVII (December, 1964), 437.

⁴⁵ Ibid., "In over 150 of her poems, or about ten percent of them, Dickinson appropriates the language of economics to criticize by the implication of diction and imagery the values of her society." 438; "Certainly in her poetry we find ample evidence that Emily hated sham, hypocrisy, and self-important

levels of American life culminated in the Civil War. Although Emily Dickinson wrote few poems directly related to the national conflict, she could not have been insulated against it. As a reader of the Springfield Republican, Harpers, Scribners, and the Atlantic, she could not have been any more unaware of the deadly nature of war than she was of the destructive nature of industrialism. "Contrary to critical opinion she was not protected from the effects of the war."⁴⁶

The many kinds of change that undermined the stability of the society into which Emily Dickinson was born had their effect upon this sensitive woman. She reacted to the uncertainty that surrounded her. One of her responses to the pressuring restlessness of her era was an awareness of change and death which led her to sense that "the patterns of ruin and disintegration are the archetypes of form."⁴⁷ Another and opposite response was to examine love and death to discover in them the meaning of existence and to look to both experiences for a fulfillment that would transcend change.

New England Provincialism.--The place of her birth as well as the period was decisive in shaping Emily Dickinson. With seven generations of Dickinsons preceding her in New England, the special quality of Massachusetts Valley life

materialism as much as she hated and rejected literal, blind religion." Adrienne Berenson, "Emily Dickinson's Social Attitudes: A Dissenting View," WHR, VI (Autumn, 1952), 353.

⁴⁶DiSalvo, p. 34. Ford agrees: "Considering the intensity of her interest in death even in peace time, it can be safely assumed that the war heightened her awareness of death still further." p. 97. Chase and Johnson disagree: "The war was an annoyance, a reality only when it was mirrored to her in casualty lists." Johnson, ed., Letters, I, xx.

⁴⁷Chase, p. 175.

marked her as its own. "The primary fact about her is that her mind was formed in what would now be called the New England hinterland during the three expansive decades before the Civil War."⁴⁸ That life in this hinterland was severe and rigid and unadorned many critics have noted. They have described Amherst as: "a self-contained remnant of orthodox Calvinism,"⁴⁹ "a very circumscribed world,"⁵⁰ a "traditionally stiffened society,"⁵¹ "a world of esthetic and creative apathy,"⁵² and a "parochial, theocratic society."⁵³ A severe moralism constituted the quintessence of Emily Dickinson's regional heritage. The people of Amherst cherished duty, self-discipline, and evangelical devoutness. They feared the destructive, liberalizing influences that came into their valley from the East. They preserved their provincialism as a moral and theological protection. Cultural isolation resulted in a "heavy uniformity of manner, sensibility, and opinion."⁵⁴ The people of Amherst met life with emotional restraint, lonely Stoicism, and ethical determination. They believed in training the mind and the will; Amherst College and the Puritan pulpit symbolized their community values. Consequently, provincialism, isolation, moralism, loneliness, and repression were essential elements in the soil which nurtured Emily Dickinson as a person and a poet.

⁴⁸Whicher, p. 153.

⁴⁹Pickard, p. 7.

⁵⁰Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 5.

⁵¹Louise Bogan, "A Mystical Poet," in Emily Dickinson, ed. by Richard Sewall, p. 140.

⁵²Morton David Zabel, "Christina Rosetti and Emily Dickinson," Poetry, XXXVII (January, 1931), 214.

⁵³Reeves, p. 118.

⁵⁴Chase, p. 18.

The loneliness of the Calvinistic tradition fed Emily Dickinson's sense of loss. In Poem 959 she expresses her haunting feeling of deprivation. Her intense sensitivity to loss conditioned her attitudes to love and death and caused her to link them in her poems. Her New England heritage also contributed to the extreme emotional restraint of her best poems. The compressed and regional language she uses to explore love and death clearly relate to her frugal, provincial background. The motif of physical denial and spiritual fulfillment in the love poems has obvious Puritanical roots. The radical emphasis on the spiritual significance of mortality and indifference to its bodily consequences in the death poems shares the same source. If "at its most complete development the New England temperament achieved an almost perfect doubleness," Emily Dickinson's ambivalence in approaching love and death has obvious connections with the Valley Tradition which fed her spirit.⁵⁵

Sentimentalism.—The cult of sentiment was a part of Emily Dickinson's inheritance and a potent factor conditioning her interest in brides and burials. Because of the religious and emotional character of her temperament, the ethical idealism of the period appealed to the young poet. She may well have inherited this idealism from her paternal grandfather, Squire Fowler, who lost everything because of his lavish devotion to education, or even from her own father who spent his life building colleges, railroads, and laws and who fought against slavery while in Congress and against drink in his own town, and who, in a letter to his future wife, could speak of their life together as one of Christian devotion and "rational happiness."

⁵⁵Whicher, p. 161.

In her education Emily Dickinson came into "contact" with the current of evangelistic humanitarian piety, and in valentines, gift books, and sheet music with vulgarized popularized sentimentality—two of the most influential forces of her generation.⁵⁶ She instinctively—despite the contrary reserved side of her nature—responded to the excesses of sentimental moralism. She knew sentimental valentines well enough to parody them with incisive wit. In a letter to her school friend Abiah Root, she called a popular song by Oliver Ditson, "Are We Almost There?" a beautiful piece of poetry.⁵⁷ In a similar vein ten years later, she quoted at length in a letter to Mary Warner a current poem by John Pierpont on death.⁵⁸ In the conventional gift book of her period, Emily Dickinson was exposed to the mawkish descriptions of deathbed scenes satirized by Mark Twain in Emmeline Grangerford and sticky lyrics on the order of Lowell's "After the Burial." Even in the revival songs of the era, such as Village Hymns edited by Nettleton, this sensitive young woman was exposed to songs about death such as "I Could Not Live Away."⁵⁹

The popular novels of Emily Dickinson's era ooze sentimentality. The home becomes a shrine in which husband and wife worship an ideal of love so far removed from reality that it becomes inhumane and distorted. The dependence of women and their obligation to submit to male dominance are preached as woman's destiny. The highest ideal held up to women in this kind of domestic fiction is the self-denial of a long-suffering Griselda. In this picture of

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 41.

⁵⁷ Letters (Johnson, ed.), I, 34.

⁵⁸ Ibid., II, 325-326.

⁵⁹ DiSalvo, p. 21.

family life, self-immolation replaces affection, and repression replaces sex. "The lack of restraint to be found in all these sentimental novels is nowhere so apparent as in the refinements of torture undergone by the willing victims of self-sacrifice."⁶⁰

Related to this unhealthy imbalance of emotions in love, the repression of the natural and the exploitation of the unnatural, the novel of sentiment was important to Emily Dickinson's development because of its indulgence of melancholia and its delight in genteel decay. Death was so prominent in this fiction that the characters became obsessed with the spectacle of mortality and regarded the "world as a sepulchral vestibule to eternity. Its sentimental heroines had a partiality for mortuary matters. They were forever watching beside deathbeds, sewing shrouds, and contemplating coffins."⁶¹ Deathbed scenes were popular because of their religious, sentimental, and dramatic appeal. So great was this appeal that one moral novel of Emily Dickinson's time, Resignation, "averaged at least one demise in every ten pages."⁶²

Melancholy and sentimentality saturated the books of two popular Americans whom Emily Dickinson read with delight. The sacredness of love and benevolence were part of Mrs. Maria Child's idealistic appeal. The sacredness of love and death, weirdly mingled, contributed to the morbid attraction of Ik Marvel's books. With Ben Newton, Emily Dickinson discussed Mrs. Child's radical religious and utopian idealism. Through her, the impressionable poet met Bohme, Swedenborg, and Woolman. Mrs. Child's writing drips inspiration. As Emily

⁶⁰ Herbert Ross Brown, The Sentimental Novel in America 1789-1860 (New York: Pageant Books, Inc., 1959), p. 297.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 126.

⁶² Ibid., p. 343.

Dickinson read this "liberated feminist," she responded to the "grandeur" of lines like:

If this book convinces one doubting individual that there really is such a thing as constant, disinterested love, which misfortune cannot intimidate, or time diminish. If it teach one mistaken votary of ambition that marriage formed from conscientious motives make human life like a serene sky . . . If it reveal to one thoughtless wife some portion of the celestial beauty there is in a perfect union of duty and inclination;—If it prevent one young heart from becoming selfish and world-worn; If it make one of the frivolous, or the profligate, believe in a holy affection, that purifies those who indulge it, blesses them on earth, and fits them to be angels in heaven—then it has not been written in vain.⁶³

Religion and wedded love are nearly connected.⁶⁴

. . . the eager, unsatisfied aspiration of the human soul,⁶⁵

. . . the Practical has striven to suffocate the Ideal within me, but it is immortal, and cannot die.⁶⁶

The increase of beautiful burial grounds, like Mount Auburn and Greenwood, is a good sign. Blessed be all agencies that bring our thoughts into pleasant companionship with those who have "ended their pilgrimage and begun their life." Banished forever be the sable garments, the funeral pall, the dismal, unshaded ground.⁶⁷

The Battery is growing charming again, now that Nature has laid aside her pearls, and put on her emeralds.⁶⁸

It was evidently the spontaneous gust of human love and sympathy.⁶⁹

The cure for all ills and wrongs, the cares, the sorrows, and the crimes of humanity, all lie in that one word, LOVE. It is the divine vitality that everywhere produces and restores life.⁷⁰

⁶³Mrs. Lydia Maria Child, Letters from New York (New York: Charles S. Francis and Company, 1843), p. x.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. xi.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 3.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 5.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 39.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 109.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 183.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 184.

Love thou a holy life--let thy utterance be that of a free,
meek spirit! Thus, and not by ecclesiastical machinery, wilt thou
help to prepare the world for a wiser faith and a purer worship
. . . . A wise mind never despises a light that flows from a feel-
ing heart.⁷¹

That such an idealized exploitation of emotion would fascinate the young poet seems apparent from the extravagant tone of both her early poetry and her letters. Chase, however, limits Mrs. Child's influence--if any--to "a tendency, in weaker moments, to rather vague forms of spiritual aspiration and ethical abstraction."⁷² In her handling of the love-death theme, Emily Dickinson did have her weaker moments, and her susceptibility to the sentimentality of her time is then obvious.

Donald Grant Mitchell (Ik Marvel) fittingly subtitled his Reveries of a Bachelor "A Book of the Heart." Since this book came out only in 1850, Emily Dickinson's words to Sue in early October 1851 show how greatly this kind of sentimentality attracted her: "Do you know that charming man is dreaming again and will wake pretty soon--so the papers say, with another Reverie--more beautiful than the first."⁷³ A number of his themes naturally appealed to Emily Dickinson. He pictures the life of the imagination, dreaming, as superior to reality; he creates romanticized women, pure, sweet, fragile; he idealizes the power of love; he presents love that cannot be fulfilled because of duty, principle, or death; and he colors all love melodramatically with morbidity. A sense of loss and death marks his work; the tone is an unhealthy, macabre one. The following excerpts from the Reveries suggest why Ik Marvel

⁷¹Ibid., p. 229.

⁷²Chase, p. 73.

⁷³Letters (Johnson, ed.), I, 144.

stirred

the imagination of a poet who was to speak of the superiority of the heart over the head, of the transport of religious joy, of the anatomy of death, of achieving immortality through love, of the "volcano" of passion in the human breast, of the fire and ash of human feeling. ⁷⁴

Are not these forces . . . as living as anything human can be living? What if they have no material type--no objective form? All that is crude--a mere reduction of ideality to sense--a transformation of the spiritual to the earthly,--a levelling of soul to matter. ⁷⁵

Kind hands--none but hers--will smooth the hair upon your brow as the chill grows damp, and heavy on it; and her fingers--none but hers--will lie in yours as the wasted flesh stiffens, and hardens for the ground. ⁷⁶

. . . the worms are busy with all her fairness. ⁷⁷

Ah, what a gap in the world is made by the death of those we love! It is no longer whole, but a poor half-world, that swings uneasy on its axis, and makes you dizzy with the clatter of its wreck. ⁷⁸

I was content to slip quietly through the little town, with only a tear or two, as I recalled the dead ones, and mused upon the emptiness of life. ⁷⁹

Love only, unlocks the door upon that Futurity, where the isles of the blessed lie like stars. Affection is the stepping stone to God. The heart is the only measure of infinitude. The mind tires of greatness; the heart--never. ⁸⁰

Oh, the glory, the freedom, the passion of a letter! It is worth all the lip-talk in the world. . . . heart talk blazing on the paper. ⁸¹

Mitchell's aversion to the physical, his unhealthy idealization of love, his sick absorption in the maggoty aspects of death, and his electric thrill in

⁷⁴Chase, p. 47.

⁷⁵Donald Grant Mitchell (Ik Marvel), Reveries of a Bachelor (a new ed.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1863), p. 53.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 35.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 33.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 211.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 163.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 236.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 52.

uniting women and worms indicate a mind as ill as it was obsessed. With good reason Chase makes Mitchell's writing a darker, more dangerous influence than Mrs. Maria Child's upon the young poet. Chase's evaluation of this man is incisive:

Mitchell was a heady dose, more so than the pious unction of his manner would indicate. For beneath the gaiety and idealism and melancholy sentiment there lay powerful forces. . . . an erotic pleasure in the idea of death, a hatred of sexuality.⁸²

From the tone of Emily Dickinson's poems dealing with the Eros-Thanatos theme, Ik Marvel's sentimentality and idealism seem to have affected her far more than his perverse coupling of erotic and charnel house elements. Considering the pervasiveness of sentimentality in the popular culture of her time, Emily Dickinson's angle of interest in love and death and her attitudes—especially in the stronger poems—are quite free of graveyardism, melodramatic exploitation, and gratuitous emotion. The religious nature of love, friendship, and death is the central feature of nineteenth century sentimentality which was native to this poet's psychic bent, and a source of her abiding awareness of love and death.

Emily Dickinson's early letters, especially those dealing with love and death, show how susceptible she was to overly emotional postures and expressions. The extravagance of emotion demanded of friends at this period make some of her letters embarrassing reading today.

"So sweet and still, and thee, oh Susie, what need I more,
to make my heaven whole? ⁸³

Her pose of a coy innocent or a little woman in letters is another evidence of

⁸² Chase, p. 50.

⁸³ Letters (Johnson, ed.), I, 201.

how far popular sentimentality affected her.

Despite the sharpness of her mind, with its ironic and satiric propensities, the emotional postures and language of sentiment were not foreign to her either and a failure to expurgate them weakens many of her early poems. Poem 32, for example, illustrates a sentimental joining of love and death; the cemetery is introduced rather superficially to make a melodramatic plea to the lover. The very title of Poem 78, "A poor, torn heart--a tattered heart," inspired by Little Nell's weeping grandfather,⁸⁴ suggests the saccharine lyrics Emily Dickinson might have written had other forces in herself and her culture not saved her from emotional self-indulgence in her art. In the early poems structured around a love-death motif, the general lack of emotional and intellectual depth may also be due to the fact that the poet was not yet woman or artist enough to handle these experiences adequately.

Romanticism.--Besides the cult of sentiment which impinged upon Emily Dickinson in the popular music and books of her own country,⁸⁵ strains of a less vulgarized romanticism came to her in the English poets and novelists she cherished. Besides reading Lowell whose "Sweet Despair in the Slipper Hymn" attracted her and Longfellow whose "The Rainy Day" she frequently quoted,⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Johnson, Emily Dickinson, pp. 207-208, reveals that Emily Dickinson stitched two pictures cut from her father's copy of The Old Curiosity Shop to her copy of this poem.

⁸⁵ Emily Dickinson's immersion in the culture of her era is evident in her reading most books within the first year of their publication. In a letter of May 1848 she mentions her vacation reading: Longfellow's Evangeline, Tennyson's The Princess, Marcella Bute Smedley's novel, The Maiden Aunt, Thomas Moore's prose romance, The Epicurean, and Martin Tupper's novels, The Twins and The Heart. Letters (Johnson, ed.), I, 67-68.

⁸⁶ Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 649.

Emily Dickinson read and quoted from Young's Night Thoughts, Thomson's Seasons, Byron's poetry, Dickens' novels, and everything of George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and the Brontes. In her bedroom, where she did her writing, hung pictures of Thomas Carlyle, George Eliot, and Mrs. Browning. With the English women writers Emily Dickinson felt a kinship of spirit. Margaret Willy observes this likeness in general terms.

In certain features of her environment and upbringing striking parallels may be seen between this American poet and the Bronte sisters; and, in temperament and attitude to experience, especially between her and her Bronte namesake, Emily.⁸⁷

Richard Chase notes more specific common areas, some of which are particularly concerned with Emily Dickinson's attitudes toward love.

Mrs. Browning and George Eliot were concerned with the status of feminine intellectuals as well as with that of working women. The Brontes dealt with the problem even more radically than Mrs. Browning or George Eliot, understanding the lot of women not only from the social point of view of feminism but from the point of view of their deepest biological and spiritual characteristics as those were threatened by the overbearing force of men like Rochester and Heathcliff or the inscrutable power of the universe which seemed to find special instrumentality both for enslaving or destroying women.⁸⁸

In the poems of Emily Bronte, Emily Dickinson found many shared themes. The British poet saw nature as a destructive force, regarded crucial experience as a means of spiritual development, envisioned death as the final and most significant experience, and sought through intuition meanings beyond the purely physical or rational. In Emily Bronte, she found echoes of her own lyrics; as the speaker dies he says to his beloved:

⁸⁷"The Poetry of Emily Dickinson," English Association Essays and Studies, n.s., X, 91.

⁸⁸Chase, p. 143.

We part below to meet on high⁸⁹
Where blissful ages never die.

In George Eliot's work, Emily Dickinson discovered her own idea of the majesty of love supported by renunciation and of the necessity of pain for inner understanding.

Half truth must hidden lie/ If unlit by Sorrows eye⁹⁰
I by sorrow wrought in thee/ Willing pain of ministry.

In Mrs. Browning's Sonnets and Aurora Leigh, Emily Dickinson encountered similar praise of renunciation and of the totality and eternity of love, ideas about the relation of love to death and immortality, and use of royal and jewel imagery. In Sonnet XV, the American poet must have seen likenesses to her own Poem 322, "There came a Day at Summer's full." The speaker in the British poem of parting says to the beloved:

For we look two ways, and cannot shine⁹¹
With the same sunlight on our brow and hair.

Just as other lineaments of nineteenth century romanticism appear in a variety of ways in her poetry, romantic interest in and attitudes toward love and death affected her handling of these experiences. Her exposure to the sentimental and romantic in American writers of her time and her admiration for the idealism and romanticism of English women writers of the period reinforced her own emotional sensibility. Temperamentally one part of Emily Dickinson's complex personality was intuitive, idealistic, emotional; therefore, "her

⁸⁹ Emily Bronte, The Complete Poems of Emily Jane Bronte, ed. by C. W. Hatfield (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), p. 60.

⁹⁰ George Eliot, Poems (New York: Worthington Co., 1887), p. 257.

⁹¹ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Complete Poetical Works (Cambridge ed.; New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1900), p. 217.

romantic tendencies were only intensified by and not derived from the Romantic Movement."⁹² Recognizing the problems involved in tracing direct cultural influences, one can still wonder whether this poet would have had the same romantic tendencies to be intensified had she not lived in a romantic as well as a Calvinistic era. If "the romantic quest for ultima Thule explains a great deal about Emily Dickinson's fascination with things half seen and half hidden,"⁹³ surely her incorporating love and death in her poems exactly as she did owes much to the strong romantic currents of thought and feeling in mid-nineteenth century America.

Emily Dickinson was predisposed by her historical position to be emotionally and intellectually concerned about the metaphysical problems inherent in change and mortality. She lived in a transitional age whose restless insecurity sensitized her to respond to the macabre aspects of existence. Conflicting intellectual forces gave her milieu its feeling of uprootedness. This mental mood stimulated a reconnoitering mind like hers to find the significance behind love and death. Her acute sense of spiritual uncertainty made Emily Dickinson confront "circumferential" experiences to discover their meaning. She showed the influence of sensibility in developing a non-rational, intuitive approach to death and an idealized, non-physical approach to love. She accentuated the romantic concept of the awesomeness and unfathomableness of both experiences by dwelling on their inner meaning, supernaturalizing character, and intimate relation to the portentous forces of nature. The cleavage she felt was produced by the decadence of a unified strong culture. She

⁹²Capps, p. 28.

⁹³Gelpi, p. 126.

reacted to the unsettling disintegration and romantic tendencies that surrounded her; "the substance of her intellectual life was a complex of imaginatively possessed ideas, most of which arose from her historical relation to New England Calvinism and the Romanticism and Transcendentalism of the nineteenth century."⁹⁴ With Calvinism dying and transcendentalism unacceptable, Emily Dickinson's painful awareness of man's limitations and his desire to transcend them drove her to search through her art for the relation between love and death and God. Her profound sense of upheaval and inner stress was historically conditioned by romanticism and transcendentalism. She, therefore, employed an imaginative, intuitive frame. Her treatment of Eros and Thanatos was correspondingly idealized and spiritualized; it envisioned love and death in their "circumference," i.e., in their existential relation to other experience. The contradictory currents of thought and feeling in the New England of her time made Emily Dickinson's approach to these experiences ambivalent, psychological, and dramatic.

Biographical

Personal experience is the second factor considered as a modifier of the poet's attitudes toward love and death. After discussing the influence of the existing cultural patterns upon the individual's beliefs and attitudes, Robert Kastenbaum makes the following observation, pertinent to any understanding of Emily Dickinson's psyche, "on every level of functioning--from the biochemical to the psychological--organisms tend to achieve a synthesis of outer

⁹⁴Chase, p. 181.

and inner forces."⁹⁵ Emily Dickinson was an exceptionally strong individual; yet she was affected by the ideas, people, and events which touched her life. Had she not been as interiorly directed and resilient, she never would have been able to pursue her own mode of life, obey her own artistic inclination, seek her own metaphysical answers, nor preserve her own psychic stability. On the other hand, had she not been as perceptive and responsive to the people and happenings around her, she would not have been as sensitive a woman nor as complex an artist.

The fascination of her character is enhanced by paradoxes that continually baffle the observer. She had an extraordinary capacity for love and friendship, yet she shunned society. She was so absorbed in the spiritual world as to seem too ethereal for daily life, yet she could be as earthy as the bread, cakes and puddings she made, and could turn instantly from preoccupation with infinity to a playful and pithy humor. Full of tender sympathy for anyone she knew who was wronged, she could be merciless in her characterization and was highly intolerant of stupidity. . . . Her fear of contact with strangers was matched by the boldness of her thought, and her physical frailty by a vigor of spirit she could scarcely control.⁹⁶

To isolate in a personality as complex as Emily Dickinson the personal experiences which drew her attention to and colored her attitudes toward love and death is a highly artificial procedure. Often the same person or event conditioned her awareness of both experiences. Not only may their influence overlap, but certain factors in her history may also have had as strong subconscious results. Recognizing these cautions, this study divides Emily Dickinson's biographical material into two main sections: 1) matter pertinent to

⁹⁵"Time and Death in Adolescence," in The Meaning of Death, ed. Herman Feifel (New York: McGraw Hill, 1959), p. 112.

⁹⁶Ward, pp. 96-97.

her concept of love; and 2) matter pertinent to her concept of death.

In the early 1860s Emily Dickinson's affective life came to a crisis; in fact, her whole life—emotional, artistic, spiritual—reached a decisive stage. Whatever the cause of her agonizing passage into maturity, these were years of searing pain, inner growth, and definitive change. The external events of this period merely hint vaguely at the internal drama Emily Dickinson was suffering. In 1860 Charles Wadsworth visited her; in 1862 he accepted a call to Calvary Church in San Francisco; also in 1862 Samuel Bowles left for Europe and Emily Dickinson began corresponding with Thomas Wentworth Higginson. At this time Emily Dickinson's identity as a woman and as a poet was taking definite shape, assuming new dimensions. The depth and complexity of her inner struggle are indicated by many documented, external facts: this was the time of her greatest poetic output, of her decision not to attend Congregational services with her family, of her beginning to wear white, of her initial withdrawal from active part in Amherst life, of her dedication to the life of the spirit.

The curve of this woman's emotional development during these years is best discerned in the handwriting, correspondence, and poetry of the period. The quality of her penmanship, the tone of the letters, and the style and themes of the lyrics reveal much about the poet's threatening but fruitful encounter with psychic and cosmic pain. The "volcanic commotion . . . in her emotional life,"⁹⁷ as "she wrestled with personal and philosophic problems,"⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 53.

⁹⁸ John Q. Anderson, "Emily Dickinson's Butterflies and Tigers," Emerson Society Quarterly, No. 47 (Summer, 1967), 43.

is evident in the characteristically cryptic poems of 1859-1865.

It is not surprising that in 1861 Emily Dickinson's handwriting showed great agitation. She wrote voluminously on many subjects and in many moods, living perhaps, on several levels or in different compartments of her psychic house, while the foundations began to shake underneath.⁹⁹

The momentous changes within the poet resulted in parallel changes in her poetry. Many of the poems concretize pain in a sharply personal manner; Poems 686-690 speak of suffering that time cannot remedy, the paralysis of pain, and the nature of a God who allows such agony. There is in the poetry a new depth, emotional and intellectual. There is also a detachment and inclusiveness; while remaining intense, her letters and poems have philosophic overtones. In July 1862, Emily Dickinson wrote to Higginson "My Business is Circumference."¹⁰⁰ In another letter, this time to Dr. and Mrs. Holland, she wrote "My business is to love."¹⁰¹ These two short sentences suggest the new combination of the personal and the transcendence of the personal in her writing. Speaking of this growth one critic says:

The characteristic all-embracing tenderness is still there, together with the wit and intellectual darting and daring. But the later letters [roughly from 1859 onward] are the expression of a nature that has been shattered, and has come into itself after a healing process that has left it transformed.¹⁰²

Speaking of the new character of the poetry after 1862, another critic says that "the struggle is still intense, but the pain and passion have given way to a concentration of the whole being on the effort of affirmation."¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Ward, Capsule, p. 53.

¹⁰⁰ Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 412.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 413.

¹⁰² Louise Bogan, "The Poet Dickinson," Poetry, XLVIII (June, 1936), 164.

¹⁰³ Ward, Capsule, p. 66.

Many experiences contributed to Emily Dickinson's affective life. Each relationship qualified, abstractly and emotionally, her response to love. Her friends--both men and women--were powerful forces in the life of this sensitive woman. And although each person whom she loved had a strong influence upon her, "it cannot be said too emphatically or too often that Emily Dickinson's understanding of the human heart is not to be explained in terms of any one person."¹⁰⁴ Her posture toward love and death involves a complex of experiences, each with its own subtle nuances.

Love.--As the first and most formative factor in her emotional life, Emily Dickinson's home definitely colored her awareness of love. Part of her handling of love is rooted in the nature of the love she saw and felt in her own home. Although the Lyman Letters have lightened the oppressively somber hues ordinarily used to describe the atmosphere of this home, there still remains ample evidence of austere emotional restraint in the family.¹⁰⁵ The Dickinsons were not a demonstrative group. Any show of affection was suspect and embarrassing. Emily Dickinson grew up in a home dominated by her father who was dignified, restrained, and aloof. Her relationship with her father was one of the most decisive in her whole life and affected her later relationships with other men. Her relationship with her mother--in her formative years especially--was also vital to her emotional development. Emily Dickinson's

¹⁰⁴ Sewall, ed., Emily Dickinson, p. 5.

¹⁰⁵ Austin speaks of this restraint in his letters; N.B. Jay Leyda, ed., The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson (2 vols.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), I, 291 and 315. Galpi relates Austin's words as he stooped to kiss his father in the coffin: "There, father, I never dared do that while you were living." p. 18.

inability to identify with her mother, her feeling of never having had a mother's love, certainly modified her feminine responses. The love Emily Dickinson sensed between her parents, although not effusive, was respectful and devoted.

Throughout her life Emily Dickinson shared a strong bond with both her brother and her sister. With Lavinia it was loving, with Austin it was intellectual as well. Emily Dickinson recognized the unspoken love that linked Edward Dickinson to his only son. In her family circle, she experienced love—a love that was possibly more intense in proportion to its being unexpressed. The devotion that pulled all the members of the family together was disciplined and quiet, but almost compulsive. So great was this woman's attachment to her family that her love for them was mixed with both awe and anxiety.

Each member of Emily Dickinson's family, calling forth an individual emotional response, contributed to the cluster of experiences that conditioned her affective life. Edward Dickinson's place in his daughter's life was as dominant as his presence in their home; and his presence was felt whether he was in Amherst or Boston, whether he was living or dead. To her he was a patriarchal figure of authority and security. As lawyer and community leader he was stately and remote. "His life was so well-ordered and disciplined that he concealed from all but those who knew him most intimately the sensitive and fiery nature that lay within."¹⁰⁶ His daughter, however, seemed to sense his hidden nature and to respond to his love for her. Despite Edward Dickinson's

¹⁰⁶Theodora Ward, ed., "Introduction," in Emily Dickinson's Letters to Dr. and Mrs. Josiah Gilbert Holland (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), p. 17.

grave reserve and his daughter's shy reticence, a bond of mutual understanding and dependence linked their lives. Emily Dickinson's own sensitivity, intensity, and strength responded to these same virtues in her father. She held him in tender awe.¹⁰⁷ Her words about the afternoon they spent together the day before he died suggest the poet's profound respect for her father. "His Heart was pure and terrible and I think no other like it exists."¹⁰⁸ In the same letter she alludes to the painful self-consciousness she and her father experienced and suggests why they repressed affectionate gestures when she says that "his pleasure [in her companionship] almost embarrassed me." Their reciprocal respect for each other's privacy and fear of emotional display gave this father-daughter relationship a dignity and discipline that shielded each of them from the powerful feelings inherent in their attachment. "Emily Dickinson's femininity made her incapable of assuming the granite facade that concealed her father's emotions"¹⁰⁹; instead she used detachment and wit as a defense against a less idealized relation. Her letters to Austin are filled with ironic and gently satiric descriptions of their father which suggest that "she did not wish her father to be relaxed, simple, witty, negligé, affectionate, or demonstrative."¹¹⁰

Despite the tie that bound this inflexible New Englander to his daughter, Emily Dickinson's letters show a significant alternation of feeling

¹⁰⁷ While agreeing that her devotion to her father was unusually intense, most critics do not regard Edward Dickinson as an unfeeling tyrant nor Emily Dickinson as a neurotically dependent woman. N.B. Chase, p. 144; Whicher, pp. 27-28; Johnson, Emily Dickinson, pp. 24-28.

¹⁰⁸ Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 528.

¹⁰⁹ Capps, p. 15.

¹¹⁰ Chase, p. 91.

toward her father. In their pulsation "between the attraction and repulsion she felt" toward her father,¹¹¹ these letters indicate a possible early source of the ambivalence she later showed toward men. At the same time that she contributed to her father's being the axis of Dickinson life, her intense individualism resented this dominance. The possessive, authoritarian nature of her father's devotion could well be a primary source of Emily Dickinson's fear in adulthood of any masculine love as a threat to her psychic integrity. The poet's conscious or subconscious apprehension of the male as an aggressor, silent yet powerful in his attack upon the female, seems to be connected with her childhood relation with her father. Edward Dickinson's very aloofness, coupled with his daughter's love for him that was permitted no overt outlet, made her relationship one of potent and contradictory drives. Needing the security of his love and home, Emily Dickinson simultaneously resented masculine dominance and in many ways throughout her life dramatically rejected various men's attempts to enforce their will--whether in artistic, social, or personal contexts.

Emily Dickinson's relation to her father conditioned her attitude toward all men and contributed to the posture of the speaker toward the lover in her poems. Affection thrived best under the seal of silence, repression, and renunciation. If, as one critic believes, Emily Dickinson, because of her father, was psychologically a spinster at twenty-three, the consistent impossibility of love's being consummated in her lyrics has a personal as well as a

¹¹¹Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 26.

platonically base.¹¹² Her tendency to concentrate upon the inner effects of love and her hesitancy to explore any outer manifestations of passion may also be related to her father's rigid disapproval of any emotional demonstration as vulgar and uncontrolled. The idealization of spiritual relationships rather than physical ones in her love poetry, as well as her apparent need to expand imaginatively and to idealize relationships with older men in her personal life, seem rooted in her relation with her father. As the first and most powerful male figure in her life, Edward Dickinson had a profound influence upon Emily Dickinson's whole affective life and indirectly upon the kind of love poetry she wrote.

Just as her father's presence decisively colored her early experience of love, so her mother's absence affected her emotional life. Emily Dickinson's response to the father-figure was in proportion to her lack of a "strong, positive experience of the mother-child relationship when she was young."¹¹³ Emily Norcross Dickinson was a simple, gentle, submissive woman who was never bothered by ideas. Unimaginative, her world was narrowly circumscribed. Jay Leyda notes a passage Emily Dickinson marked in her second copy of Aurora Leigh and questions whether she marked it because it described Mrs. Dickinson:

She had lived, we'll say,
A harmless life, she called a virtuous life,
A quiet life, which was not life at all
(But that, she had not lived enough to know.)¹¹⁴

¹¹² Herbert E. Childs, "Emily Dickinson, Spinster," WHR, III (October, 1949), 303-309.

¹¹³ Ward, Capsule, p. 94.

¹¹⁴ Leyda, II, 338.

Until her mother was an invalid and dependent upon her, Emily Dickinson felt no vital relationship with this woman. If the development of human sexuality is related to the child's experience of love, then this poet's concept of woman's place in a love relationship must have been partially shaped by her mother's complete dependence upon her husband. Her mother's colorless passivity in living almost wholly in Edward Dickinson's shadow may have contributed to the poet's fear of male dominance. The nature of her parent's union may well have retarded Emily Dickinson's sexual development and so her maturity as a woman who could fearlessly accept her own sexuality and be frankly attracted by male sexuality. The lack of physical passion and even tenderness in her love poems may reflect the marriage the poet saw in her own home.

Through her brother and sister Emily Dickinson vicariously extended her affective life. Bound intimately to Vinnie and Austin, the poet shared their emotional peaks and disappointments. Vinnie often spoke in her letters of her loneliness. In the 1850's she seemed to want to marry and the tone of some of her remarks suggests an envy of her friends who did; for example, "I am tired of receiving wedding cards, they come from somewhere, everyday."¹¹⁵ The Lyman Letters testify to Vinnie's attachment to Joseph Lyman and her frustration when he married Laura Baker. Emily Dickinson watched Vinnie and Austin suffer disappointments in their romantic hopes, Vinnie outside of marriage and Austin in marriage. Since Emily Dickinson had hoped for such happiness in her brother's marriage to her closest friend in 1856, the growing estrangement between

¹¹⁵ Emily Dickinson's Home: Letters of Edward Dickinson and His Family, ed. by Millicent Todd Bingham (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1955), p. 249.

Sue and Austin so soon after their moving in next door probably made their love a tragedy to her. The double sadness she felt in the emotional life of two people so dear to her may have colored Emily Dickinson's attitude toward the possibility of love's fulfillment in this life. Suffering with Vinnie and Austin may have intensified her belief that expectation always exceeds reality. In her sister and brother's experience of love may be found a source of the poet's emphasis upon the suffering and renunciation love demands. The ambivalence of the poetic speaker, who both fears and desires love, may also be related to the poet's ability to suffer vicariously.

Besides the love she knew within her family circle, the quality of Emily Dickinson's emotional life was also affected by the love she felt for her friends. As a warm, loving woman, Emily Dickinson was capable of intense friendship. Affectionate by nature and emotional by calling, Emily Dickinson maintained a number of close and individualized relationships. Constance Rourke comments: "Rather more than most complicated personalities, Emily Dickinson was a different being to different people; and each relationship . . . was filled with extraordinary singleness and intensity."¹¹⁶ Her friends--both in adolescence and maturity--filled a great need in her life. They were the object of her extravagant, idealized devotion and, after her retirement, a multifaceted window opening upon the world beyond her home.

Emily Dickinson's friendships reveal her extraordinary capacity for intense relationships, her strategies to live without being destroyed by this capacity, and her pain when the strategies failed. Knowing her potential for

¹¹⁶"Emily Dickinson's Own Story," New Republic, April 20, 1932, p. 279.

passionate reaction to sensory experience as well as to people, Emily Dickinson always desired love yet feared the demands it made upon her. Because of her hypersensitivity, all relationships of any depth--and she seemed incapable of any other--drained her of psychic energy. The intensity of her love also made demands upon the understanding, the emotional equilibrium, and the totality of the other person's commitment. After a short visit with the poet, Higginson wrote his wife in 1870 "I was never with anyone who drained my nerve power so much. Without touching her, she drew from me."¹¹⁷ Because few people were willing to respond with the same weight of emotion, Emily Dickinson found pain an ingredient in many relationships.

Realizing that her friends were her "estate," Emily Dickinson found three devices necessary to hoard them and still protect herself.¹¹⁸ She limited the circle of those closest to her; she limited her contacts with them; and she limited their knowledge of her inner life. "Her love for individual men and women was highly selective and confined to those whom she found able to share or enhance her own vital experience of sense and thought."¹¹⁹ Johnson thus describes those whom she admitted to her circle of friends:

By nature Emily gravitated to those who were vibrant, witty, perceptive. She was especially attracted by persons for whom she felt an awe because their intricate natures, affinitive to hers, made them seem unfathomable.¹²⁰

After her period of crisis, Emily Dickinson limited her direct encounters with those who would most sap her psychic energy. The excitement she felt in

¹¹⁷ Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 476.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., II, 338.

¹¹⁹ Ward, ed., Emily Dickinson's Letters, p. 21.

¹²⁰ Emily Dickinson, p. 48.

merely anticipating a visit with a friend agitated her nerves so that she resorted to letters rather than to personal meetings. Letters, while satisfying her desire for contact with those she loved and negating her fear of the strain involved, also "enabled her to control the time and place of her relationships"¹²¹ and what she wanted to reveal about herself. In letters she could assume cryptic masks, similar to the dramatic masks she used in her few direct encounters with those outside her home, and so prevent standing naked emotionally. Referring to the occasional cruelties which have been noticed in her correspondence, Griffith describes them as defense tactics,

. . . ways in which this unusually responsive person was able to suppress the responses that could disappoint and hurt her--indeed, that threatened to destroy her utterly--if she expressed them without restraint.¹²²

Each of Emily Dickinson's closest friendships developed some aspect of her affective life. Her love for Susan Gilbert Dickinson was intense, rewarding, and painful. To Sue she revealed much of herself; she sent more poems to her than to anyone else. Sue's failure to make Austin happy, her social aspirations, and her inability to respond to the intensity of Emily Dickinson's love led to a gradual break in their relationship. The disappointment and hurt that Emily Dickinson suffered in the 1870's were proportionate to her hope and ardor in the 1850s when she wrote, "Oh Susie, I would nestle close to your warm heart, and never heard the wind blow, or the storm beat, again."¹²³ Yet even before she realized that this friendship could never be the perfect one she romantically imagined, Emily Dickinson's letters to Sue

¹²¹ Johnson, ed., Letters, I, xix.

¹²² Griffith, p. 158.

¹²³ Letters (Johnson, ed.), I, 177.

show her fear and anxiety. The sorrow Emily Dickinson suffered in this relationship may have reinforced her tendency to regard actuality as inferior to expectation and to associate renunciation and pain with love.

In her relation to her Norcross cousins, Emily Dickinson continued her immature postures. Her letters to them have some of the same sentimentality revealed in her girlhood correspondence with Abiah Root, Emily Fowler, and Jane Humphrey. In her attitude to these cousins, Emily Dickinson indulged exaggerated emotional patterns, protesting her loneliness and fear of losing those she loved. Although she felt an older sister's sincere love for them, with the Norcross cousins Emily Dickinson also maintained the cult of friendship in all its sweetness. The effects on her early love poetry are obvious.

Her relation with Mrs. Josiah Holland, on the other hand called forth a more mature response and a more open revelation of her inner self. For thirty years, Emily Dickinson shared an intimacy with this friend that was relatively free of fear, posturing, and excess. Although Dr. Holland's "intelligence was not great and his taste was sentimental and stodgily conventional,"¹²⁴ in the Holland's home Emily Dickinson saw an example of open affection that appealed to her. In this friendship, Emily Dickinson shared a stable and joyous love.

In one other friend, Emily Dickinson could see a woman who was not dominated in marriage. Helen Hunt Jackson was witty and tender, cosmopolitan and romantic. Her life had fullness and freedom and zest that the poet could associate with one type of man-woman relationship. The confidence of this friend in the quality of Emily Dickinson's poetry and her support in the last

¹²⁴ Chase, p. 273.

years made this friendship a positive force in her affective life.

Besides her friendships with women, Emily Dickinson's relation to various men—in her formative years and in her maturity—affected her emotional life and her attitudes toward love. Young men who worked in her father's law office and students and instructors from the college took her riding, loaned her books, and escorted her to parties. Her association with Elbridge Bowdoin, George Gould, Henry Emmons, Leonard Humphrey, and Joseph Lyman seems easy-going and natural. Besides talking about literature and philosophy, the young crowd of Amherst exchanged flowers and valentines. Emily Dickinson joined in the conversations and flirtations. Even though "she formed a number of idealistically amorous attitudes toward a number of young men,"¹²⁵ there is no evidence, however, of any love affair.¹²⁶ With Ben Newton her relationship was more intense, though hardly erotic. He stirred her mentally and spiritually, for he seems to have been the first to acknowledge her artistic gifts, share her inner experiences, and recognize her womanly stature. As a Unitarian and a radical, as a follower of Emerson, Newton had an especially strong impact on the young poet.

Emily Dickinson's relation with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, respected humanitarian, resigned Unitarian minister, and Boston patrician,¹²⁷ filled a

¹²⁵Chase, p. 33.

¹²⁶This contradicts the claim made by Genevieve Taggard in The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), pp. 153-159. Anderson, however, agrees: Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 292.

¹²⁷"Instead of turning his back on an America still provincial in its spiritual attainments . . . he worked for more libraries, universities, and art galleries as a prerequisite for the growth of a truly 'Athenian Culture' in which American art and letters might flourish." Klaus Lubbers, Emily Dickinson: The Critical Revolution (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968), p. 6.

similar intellectual need. She first wrote to him in 1862; the fact that she initiated the correspondence asserts her realization of her lack of intellectual companionship and artistic approval. Although she asked his advice and assumed a learner's pose, she coyly ignored all her mentor's recommendations. He wanted her to regularize her rhythm and use customary rhyme, to publish her poems, to attend women's meetings--to conform to his idea of the modern woman poet. Her individuality as an artist, as well as a woman, made any real efforts to fulfill his vision of the ideal poetess impossible. Higginson could have over her only the power she would permit; he could see her only as far as she would allow. It was always the "humble pupil" who prescribed the rules for their relationship--she evaded questions, wrote cryptic letters, and put on masks--and left Higginson bewildered. That this shy woman could so agilely set the tone of her association with a recognized literary figure, social reformer, and Unitarian minister suggests the depth of her fear of male dominance and her skill in warding it off. At the same time that she refused to sacrifice any of her individuality to this man, she gave their friendship considerable complexity and meaning. Emily Dickinson's position in this friendship parallels her tendency in her love poems to surround a person or a relationship with mystery and to confer on them imaginative meaning.

Emily Dickinson's friendship with Samuel Bowles appears to have answered more varied and deeper needs than her friendship with her Boston teacher. Except for two visits, Higginson was an abstraction, an ethereal symbol of gentility who responded to the poet's letters and to the mysterious, fascinating person who eluded him in them. Samuel Bowles was intelligent, independent, witty, original, and successful; he was a real human being who

came into her home informally and into her life also. Because he was the most intensely alive person she knew, Emily Dickinson found his company stimulating. Their mutual admiration was tender and unaffected. That Bowles seems, on the evidence of their correspondence, to have known the cause of the poet's crisis makes his relationship with her unique and significant. To him she also sent many of her love poems and Bowles seems to have objected to this highly emotional dimension's entering their relationship. So important was this man in Emily Dickinson's life that some critics feel that he might even have been "the force behind her poetic explosion, the figure that provided the spiritual and emotional affinity for which she had been starving."¹²⁸ Others are more cautious in their estimate of the relationship of this energetic, warm, sensitive man with his best friend's sister.

The place that Samuel Bowles filled in the life of Emily Dickinson cannot be clearly defined, though the high value he held for her is plainly seen in all she wrote to him and about him. The nature of their relation remains as elusive as her friendship with Higginson was categorical.¹²⁹

Whatever the nuances of their friendship, Emily Dickinson responded to Bowles with an authentic and intense emotion that involved more of her womanhood than any other man had previously touched.

The man who stirred Emily Dickinson most deeply at this time probably never suspected the nature of her love for him. When she heard Dr. Charles Wadsworth preach at the Arch St. Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Emily

¹²⁸Pickard, p. 125. Some other critics cite the parallel imagery in the poet's known letters to Bowles, her love poetry, and the "Master Letters" to support this thesis. N.B. Miller, pp. 111-119 and Higgins, pp. 81-84.

¹²⁹Ward, Capsule, p. 150.

Dickinson was at a crucial point. Personally, artistically, and spiritually she felt her inner emptiness, her lack of purposeful direction. After hearing Wadsworth, she began writing to him. He met her only twice in Amherst. Just as the tone of their correspondence is essentially religious, so the essence of their relationship was basically spiritual.¹³⁰ Emily Dickinson read all of Dr. Wadsworth's published sermons and found in them affinities with her own spirit. She looked to him for spiritual reassurance, especially in her doubts about immortality. He was her "beloved Clergyman," "closest earthly friend," and "Shepherd from 'Little Girl'hood."¹³¹ In her mind and heart, he assumed heroic proportions; he became a "'Man of Sorrow,'" a "Dusk Gem, born of troubled Waters."¹³² As a man of Calvary, "so noble . . . so fathomless--so gentle,"¹³³ Wadsworth became an idealized figure whom she could love passionately from a distance.

Against the monotony and flatness of Emily Dickinson's provincial life, Wadsworth stood forth with a brilliant and dramatic force. In contrast to the provincial business men, lawyers, students and professors, in contrast to the undistinguished and colorlessly spiritual wives and daughters among whom she lived, Wadsworth had for her a quality of greatness which made it possible to think of him as an almost mythical being. . . . In the dark secrets of his life there was the romantic suggestion of a demonic inner mystery, such as Emily and Charlotte Bronte attribute to Heathcliff and Rochester.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Few critics today would accept Martha D. Bianchi's sentimental, exaggerated account of this relationship in The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924). "To turn a relationship such as that of Dr. Wadsworth and Emily Dickinson into a love affair is not only misleading, it is false." Millicent Todd Bingham, Emily Dickinson's Home, p. 372. "Emily's long friendship with him [Wadsworth] was the spiritual intimacy, in Calvinist rather than Roman Catholic terms, of penitent and unseen confessor." Higgins, p. 208.

¹³¹ Letters (Johnson, ed.), III, 737.

¹³² Ibid., III, 744-745.

¹³³ Ibid., III, 737.

¹³⁴ Chase, p. 75.

An ideal image, he was not only a spiritual companion, but also, as the "Master Letters" and poems suggest, a chastely imagined lover whom she could both desire and renounce. Because of her longing for love and the power of her imagination, this spiritual counselor and the cherished lover became identified and merged into one symbolic figure of mythical stature. In Emily Dickinson's mind Wadsworth, cut off from the affairs of daily life (when he died, the poet had to write to his friends to try to discover the flesh and blood man behind the image she had created), was the ideal object of love; he was older, he was distant, he was abstract, he was mysterious. Her love for him also seemed ideal to Emily Dickinson; it was bodiless, it was impossible of fulfillment; it involved pain, it left her independent. Emily Dickinson's response to "her Philadelphia" was complex and ambivalent; it is doubtful that she would have had it otherwise.

To her it was a basic necessity that he continue in all ways to be exactly the image of him she had created. For her he must be both immediate and afar, acutely desired yet renounced.¹³⁵

To her imagination he could be intimately present; in actuality he was—and had to be—distant. The ambivalence Emily Dickinson showed at this depth of her emotional life is significant. That her love for Wadsworth both enlarged her affective life and dramatized its polarity cannot be doubted. That her response was not in proportion to the actual facts of their relationship does not mean that she did not experience a wide gamut of emotion, from rapture to despair. The meagerness of external events in no way lessened this woman's rich inner involvement. In her commitment to Wadsworth, Emily Dickinson found

¹³⁵Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 54.

a rarefied experience of love which qualified her whole emotional life.

Emily Dickinson's love for Judge Otis Lord, "her lovely Salem," was both similar to and different from her love for Dr. Wadsworth. Like the minister, this lawyer was older, professionally eminent, and impressively majestic. He was another man of her father's generation to whom Emily Dickinson could turn; he had, in fact, been a lifetime friend of Edward Dickinson; like her father and "her beloved Clergyman," he was an intense man who restrained his passions. He was intelligent, dignified, and sympathetic. He, too, entered deeply into Emily Dickinson's life at a time of strain; she was still dreaming of her dead father nightly and in her conscious hours trying to adjust to his absence and to answer the haunting theological problems his death renewed.

Unlike her relationship with Dr. Wadsworth this last love of her life was personal, reciprocal, and erotic--at least in its verbal expression. After the death of his wife, the judge's loneliness helped to bring to bloom a mutual love between him and his dead friend's daughter. Lord was no disembodied ideal to whom Emily Dickinson wrote, safe in the knowledge that she would probably never see him again. He visited the Mansion frequently. He and she wrote regularly, too, and their correspondence has a tenderness, playfulness, and passion missing in her earlier letters to the other two men who had come closest to her, Bowles and Wadsworth.

I confess that I love him--I rejoice that I love him--I thank the maker of Heaven and Earth--that gave him me to love--the exultation floods me.¹³⁶

Oh, my too beloved, save me from the idolatry which would crush us both--¹³⁷

¹³⁶Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 614-615.

¹³⁷Ibid., II, 616.

It is strange that I miss you at night so much when I was never with you--but the punctual love invokes you soon as my eyes are shut--and I wake warm with the want sleep had almost filled.¹³⁸

Judge Lord was no ethereal projection of Emily Dickinson's desire but a flesh and blood man who loved her and wanted to marry her. Whether her devotion to her invalid mother and her fondness for home, the unfavorable reaction of Judge Lord's niece, her long years of independence, her preference for the spiritual to the physical, and her fear that reality could never equal expectation prevented their marriage is not clear. From her letters to him "after four years of accepted love, freely expressed, it is clear that complete intimacy, either in marriage or without, was to be denied, yet the possibility of it was fully acknowledged between them."¹³⁹ Her letters indicate that she felt some sorrow that she could not fulfill her lover's hopes; but whatever the emotional cost to either of them, she did not marry. The spiritual-psychological roots of this denial of the sexual force in the relationship and the pain of renunciation also seem apparent from a letter to him in 1878.

Dont [sic] you know you are happiest while I withhold and not confer--dont you know that "No" is the wildest word we consign to Language?

The "Stile" is God's--My Sweet One--for your great sake--not mine--I will not let you cross--but it is all your's, and when it is right I will lift the Bars, and lay you in Moss--You showed me the word.

I hope it has not different guise when my fingers make it. It is Anguish I long conceal from you to let you leave me, hungry, but you ask the divine Crust and that would doom the Bread.¹⁴⁰

Emily Dickinson's love for Judge Lord was the last and most passionate of her

¹³⁸ Ibid., III, 663.

¹³⁹ Ward, Capsule, p. 102.

¹⁴⁰ Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 617.

life. This friendship touched her most deeply as a woman; it was the most fully human and made the most complete demands upon her emotionally. This love, unlike the earlier ones, which to such an amazing extent burned most intensely within her inner being, drew her to an answering center outside of her psyche. Knowing the intensity of her own emotions and feeling the strength of her sexual response, Emily Dickinson possibly feared to give full expression to this love. Although they could only guess at its significance, her brother and sister accepted this unconventional autumnal romance. As her sister lay in her coffin, Vinnie put two heliotropes by Emily Dickinson's hand "to take to Judge Lord."¹⁴¹ In death Emily Dickinson was no longer subject to the ambivalence she had experienced in her love for even Judge Lord.

In her relations with her various masters, different sides of Emily Dickinson's complex personality responded, and responded in varying degrees. With Humphrey and Newton and Higginson, her friendship was literary and intellectual. With Wadsworth, it was religious and idealized. With Bowles, it was literary, intellectual, and companionable. With Lord, it was erotic and personal. Her commitment to each love was ardent in its own way. Her developing experience of love resulted in emotional exaltation, anguish, and growth.

These relationships have much in common that affected her poetry. They all exhibit a typical tension and ambivalence. They are suspended between the poles of intimacy and remoteness. As a woman Emily Dickinson was pulled between desire for love and an inhibiting fear of its demands--psychological and

¹⁴¹Leyda, II, 475.

physical. In each case the man was older, a figure she could deify.¹⁴² She conferred symbolic significance and a sense of awe on each friendship. She felt a compelling necessity to renounce the ordinary satisfaction of any of these loves, while at the same time imaginatively indulging in their mystery and splendor. Possibly this near compulsion to renunciation explains why "in all but her last love, she seems inevitably, almost by design, to have chosen men who were related, married, dying or dead to immortalize and love. A forbidden love makes the luxury more precious."¹⁴³ All of these deeper relationships with men, therefore, involved pain and joy. In all but the last, the lover was out of reach and bodiless and the love was unanswered in kind and impossible. The elusive quality of these loves is not surprising in a woman who found gifts "more precious" because "more disembodied."¹⁴⁴ Paradoxically, just below the surface, there is a suggestion of passion; in the intensity of the spiritual aspects there is a hint of explosive sexual drives--consciously or subconsciously--barely kept in control.¹⁴⁵

As a result of these experiences, certain attitudes toward men developed in Emily Dickinson's psyche and poetry. In her youth, she exhibited a healthy interest in young men. Allowing for her poses--personal and literary--

¹⁴²"Emily Dickinson appears to have been conscious of her aptitude for idolatry in a love relation." Lindberg, p. 52; N.B. Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 560.

¹⁴³Norman Gregor, The Luxury of Doubt: A Study of the Relationship Between Imagery and Theme in Emily Dickinson's Poetry (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of New Mexico, 1955), p. 152.

¹⁴⁴Letters (Johnson, ed.), III, 761.

¹⁴⁵For clearer evidence of this eroticism, see Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 615 and 617 and Poems 190, 249, 512, and 520.

a letter Emily Dickinson wrote when she was only fifteen reveals a normal if coquettish young woman.

I am growing handsome very fast indeed! I expect I shall be the belle of Amherst when I reach my seventeenth year. I don't doubt that I shall have perfect crowds of admirers at that age. Then how I shall delight to make them await my bidding, and with what delight shall I witness their suspense while I make my final decision.¹⁴⁶

In her adolescent letters she often made witty references to her friends' beaux, saying that one "will make a devoted husband," but that she finds another's actions "rather suspicious," adding "these Music teachers are always such high souled beings."¹⁴⁷ Emily Dickinson's early social life seems quite free and

healthy. A letter she wrote in 1850, telling of arriving home at 2 A.M. from a party, contradicts the repressive picture often given of her home and

family.¹⁴⁸ The letters of her late teens and early twenties show positive, common-sense attitudes toward marriage and suggest her desire, at this time, to marry. One letter, however, written to Sue in 1852, suggests to Gelpi a more contradictory young woman because of:

. . . the dilemma that determined her response to experience at all levels. For a few moments and in her own words she is caught

¹⁴⁶ Letters (Johnson, ed.), I, 13. This same passage might be used by Griffith to substantiate his claim that the poet was jealous, not of man's physical attributes, but of his power, poise, and superiority. Long Shadow, p. 288. However, his further claim in an earlier article that she pathologically dreaded all things masculine seems, in the light of this dissertation, too exclusive and extreme. Her "aversion toward masculine grossness and toward the personal debasement which it threatens" is only one side of the coin. "Emily Dickinson's Love Poetry," UKCR, XXVII (Winter, 1960), 99. While admitting the poet's fear of masculine dominance and physical contact, the present study asserts that she also desired them. Her posture, therefore, would not be one of unmitigated dread, but a more complex one of desire/dread. This qualification of Griffith's basic thesis does not deny his many valuable insights and their importance to this study.

¹⁴⁷ Letters (Johnson, ed.), I, 17-18.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., I, 83.

hesitating between the desire to be ravished and the fear of being violated, between the need for integration with something else and the assertion of self-contained individuality, between the need for union with or subservience to the not-me and the insistence upon the separate identity of the ego.¹⁴⁹

For whatever unknown historical-psychological reasons, Emily Dickinson did not marry and her later attitude toward men grew more ambivalent. Strong, vibrant men attracted her. At the same time that she wished to be their "pupil," to be instructed and comforted by them, she rejected any real domination by them. The psychoanalytic axiom that "the individual's attitude in sexual matters is the prototype of his attitude toward the rest of life"¹⁵⁰ seems especially relevant in reference to Emily Dickinson, whose response to the significant in human experience was always polar. To this woman masculinity connoted: repulsion-attraction, threat-fulfillment, pain-joy. Accounting for the negative side of this image, Griffith cites the failure of the men who meant most to her--her father, brother, Higginson, Bowles, and God--to meet her needs.¹⁵¹

He describes her picture of man thus:

The image of man, which experience confirmed in her mind, was the image of a figure at once strong and dangerous: strong because he mastered, and dangerous because he used this mastery in order to reject and injure. Accordingly, her total view of masculinity had to be compounded of awe and bitterness, of reverence and fear, all struggling together in one uneasy emotional amalgam.¹⁵²

As proof of his thesis, Griffith offers "her childish primness and dislike of exposure," "her white dress and protective screen," and "her retreat itself"

¹⁴⁹ pp. 2-3.

¹⁵⁰ Karen Herney, "The Denial of the Vagina," in Psychoanalysis and Female Sexuality, ed. by Dr. Hendrik M. Ruitenbeck (New Haven, Conn.: College and University Press, 1966), p. 75.

¹⁵¹ "Emily Dickinson's Love Poetry," 97-98.

¹⁵² Griffith, Long Shadow, p. 169.

as evidence of her "attempt to deny the fact of her sexuality" and her need for a "symbolic barrier against any wicked attacks" or "necessity for physical contacts."¹⁵³ While admitting an erotic element in these actions, so rigidly limiting the motivation of a highly sensitive and complex woman solely to the sexual seems an error.

The same ambivalence toward love that made Emily Dickinson personally fear physical contacts yet need to express emotions marks her love poetry. To a woman who preferred letters because they were the spiritual essence of the writer without the burden of the body, "the mind alone without corporeal friend,"¹⁵⁴ an ideal experience of love was bodiless. Just as her friendships had an imaginative, symbolic quality that removed them from the realities of life and surrounded them with misty significance, so her love poetry typically suppresses the physical and glorifies the spiritual. A cerebral, desexualized experience of love may have held less threat for the speaker in her bridal poetry than a more inclusively erotic one. Themes of separation and renunciation predominate in the love poetry of this woman who could refer to the absence of a loved one as "the supper of the heart."¹⁵⁵ A related motif centered around love's fulfillment, deterred in time, but celebrated in a desexualized state beyond the grave. The bridal poems confer a pseudo-religious significance upon love, making it the source of grace and relating it to other crucial experiences. The close connection between Emily Dickinson's personal experience of love and her artistic transformation of it is suggested by the nature of the

¹⁵³Ibid., p. 167.

¹⁵⁴Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 460.

¹⁵⁵Ibid., II, 452.

major themes and dominant attitudes in her love poetry. The correlation between the poet's emotional life and the creative use she made of it illumines both the woman and her poetry.

The emotional exaltation and anguish that love brought Emily Dickinson definitely seems to have been a spur to her art. Many critics attribute the spate of poems she produced during the years of crisis to her inner turmoil, and her inner turmoil to the nature of her experience of love. While not denying a causal relationship between the love and the pain that she suffered and the poetry that resulted, it seems not only possible but highly probable that her crisis involved more of her total personality and experience than many critics acknowledge. That profound spiritual and artistic tensions came to a decisive--and anguished--head at the same time as the affective seems obvious from her letters and lyrics. If Emily Dickinson's pain had a theological and aesthetic as well as a romantic aspect, the radical changes in the pattern of her life and art after this period would be more understandable and the romantic legend of a frustrated love affair would be more discredited. The complexity of Emily Dickinson's emotional life and its rich creative results negate any sentimentally simple explanation of her almost simultaneous decision to initiate her correspondence with Higginson, to withdraw from the more ordinary mode of Amherst life, to no longer attend church services, to wear white, and to devote herself to her writing. In her perceptive analysis of the pattern of Emily Dickinson's inner life, Theodora Ward claims that the disturbance was not the result of any one set of circumstances, but the effect on a sensitive personality of "slowly accumulated pressures, both within and without, working against inherent forces for growth and

fulfillment."¹⁵⁶

While not discounting the affective elements in her anguish, it would seem more accurate to say that as a human being terribly troubled by cosmic questions, Emily Dickinson's crisis was fundamentally a religious one. She needed to know that God exists and that he is a God of love.¹⁵⁷ Her deepest anguish, far from being a matter of thwarted human love, arose from the nature of the human condition and her insistent need to cope with it.¹⁵⁸ At another level, her crisis was an artistic one. She needed to know how to channel her energies so that her poetic impulses could be realized--if possible--recognized.

The pain Emily Dickinson suffered from these multiple causes had two major effects upon her creativity. Suffering not only let loose a torrent of poetry, but it also matured her as a person and as a poet. Anguish enlarged her vision and increased her capacity to love. Her outlook and her emotions

¹⁵⁶ Capsule, p. vii.

¹⁵⁷ The parallel between her concept of God, the ultimate masculine-father figure, her picture of her own father, and her image of men connects the spiritual and romantic in the poet at a deep psychological level. The corresponding parallel in her ambivalent response to these figures is also significant.

¹⁵⁸ Griffith clearly agrees with this interpretation of the poet's crisis. "Emily Dickinson's problem was not a frustrated personal relationship, but a metaphysical quandary. . . . her struggle was not against temptations of the flesh, but against a religious skepticism, of the severest and most gripping kind." Long Shadow, pp. 77-78. Anderson implies agreement when, after discussing the sequence of events in this woman's life from 1854 to 1859, he says that "a search for religious truth . . . was the mainspring of her life as of her art." Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 57. Miller, in what seems a gratuitous manner, makes Bowles' supposed rejection of the poet's love a cause of her spiritual quest; N.B. pp. 111-113. This critic flatly claims: "Emily Dickinson came to terms with her suffering by abandoning her faith in her Master and restoring her faith in God." p. 186. With two modifications Sherwood makes a similar causal relation; the Master is Dr. Wadsworth whom God removes to California as punishment for her substituting a creature for her creator.

changed during the first half of the 1860s. "Whereas in her school days and early twenties, her response to affective moods had been diffuse and sweeping, they now began to focus in a narrow, sharper beam."¹⁵⁹ Because for this artist "poetry issued from pain, from the suffering involved in personal relationships or in beholding the naked threat of the cosmos to human existence,"¹⁶⁰ love, like death, was an impetus to a more tough-minded art. Agony lessened the incidence of sentimentality and heightened the philosophic implications of her art. Under the aegis of intense and prolonged suffering, Emily Dickinson reached the zenith of her creative powers. Her inner struggle demanded a high price from her nervous system, but it also paid her rich dividends as a woman and as a poet.

Following this period of decision, Emily Dickinson gradually withdrew from the more conventional forms of social life in Amherst. Realizing that one choice excludes others, she consolidated her spiritual and creative forces. Because she needed time and privacy to read and write, Emily Dickinson left her father's home less and less frequently. Within the family circle, she was involved and active. She did much of the preserving and baking—no one else could make the bread her father liked best. Later she shared for many years the care of her invalid mother. She did not simply go to her room and shut out her family and friends; she was aware of and responded on many levels to their individual needs.

Neither did Emily Dickinson isolate herself from the world beyond the

¹⁵⁹ Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 57.

¹⁶⁰ Chase, p. 191.

Homestead.¹⁶¹ Physical seclusion is not necessarily equal to psychic or emotional withdrawal. Her notes tell of her interest in and kindness to acquaintances and neighbors. She sent flowers, breads, jellies, and letters of congratulation or sympathy to a variety of people. She was well aware of the happenings in Amherst and the world beyond the Valley. Her reading insured her knowledge of world events. Probably no other woman in the town was as well informed as this "recluse" who regularly read newspapers like the Springfield Republican and the New York Times, periodicals such as Century, Scribner's, Harpers, and the Atlantic, and a wide range of current writers as diverse as Benjamin Disraeli, Bret Harte, Henry James, and John Ruskin. As an omnivorous reader, Emily Dickinson could refer ironically to Darwin's theories,¹⁶² mention forest fires in Wisconsin,¹⁶³ speak cryptically of Gordon's trying to relieve the British garrison at Khartoum,¹⁶⁴ and describe as a haunting story a British novel, Called Back, published just two years before.¹⁶⁵ Not only did this woman's reading keep her in touch with world happenings and intellectual currents of her time, but it also gave her "the vicarious experiences and perspective that made possible the perceptive observations and penetrating analyses characteristic of her poetry."¹⁶⁶

Emily Dickinson's retirement was not a cowardly escape from reality; she faced the agonizing metaphysical questions that haunted her, without the ordinary distractions of social intercourse. Her choice of a secluded life

¹⁶¹This statement differs from Chase's claim--at least in its implications--that she became "an almost complete stranger to the world outside her father's house." p. 6.

¹⁶²Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 485.

¹⁶³Ibid., II, 491.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., III, 833.

¹⁶⁵Ibid., III, 856.

¹⁶⁶Capps, p. 145.

demanded unusual courage and strength. She made this choice to turn her attention more exclusively beyond the limits of time, to explore cosmic problems and psychic reality through her art.¹⁶⁷ Emily Dickinson's seclusion was not a rejection of life either; it did not dry her up intellectually or emotionally. Neither did her turning away from the meetings and teas of Amherst narrow her awareness of the human condition or of herself as a human being. "From her vantage point of withdrawal it was possible to see more sharply than those who were involved in the conventions of the day."¹⁶⁸ By filtering out petty problems and village gossip, her retirement intensified her sensitivity and expanded her awareness. Her seclusion involved a sense of values, of emphasis, of interest: the internal world took precedence over the external. By refusing to conform to the ordinary mode of life for a New England spinster, this woman achieved a fullness of life that she probably could not otherwise have had. The richness and intensity of her existence was in proportion to its selectivity. The woman who said to Higginson in 1870 "I find ecstasy in living--the mere sense of living is joy enough"¹⁶⁹ is the same one who in 1864 spoke of the necessity of the soul's selecting "her own society" and then closing "the Valves of her attention--/Like Stone--" (303). The fact that Emily Dickinson limited the area of her experience and that she brought such a

¹⁶⁷ In his 1862 "Letter to a Young Contributor," Higginson had advised: "a wise man must have strength to call in his resources before middle life, prune off divergent activities, and concentrate himself on the main work." Atlantic Essays (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1871), p. 87.

¹⁶⁸ Charles R. Anderson, "From a Window in Amherst: Emily Dickinson Looks at the American Scene," NEQ, XXXI (June, 1958), 147.

¹⁶⁹ Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 474.

capacity for deep response to each experience resulted in a life of rare intensity and fulness.¹⁷⁰ Ecstasy was not foreign to this poet; but as Poem 1640 indicates, it was an inner vitality, a spiritual joy that was realized in the center of her being. When Robert Spiller says that "never was there a person to whom so little happened who suffered and rejoiced with such intensity," and adds in the next sentence that "she knew love and death as few have known them and survived,"¹⁷¹ he suggests a strong connection between Emily Dickinson's retirement and her artistic concentration upon love and death. The poet's secluded life encouraged her to look beyond temporalities. Grappling with cosmic questions, she put love and death in an existential frame that links them metaphysically. Analyzing with searing honesty her own emotional processes, she approaches love and death in her poetry from a psychological angle. The introspection and intensity her seclusion heightened are apparent in the poetry it allowed her to create, "a body of poetry devoted to the main concerns of consciousness" in which "fulfillment, dissolution, and transcendence inextricably entwined."¹⁷²

Because the motivation and nature of Emily Dickinson's withdrawal have such a direct bearing on her emotional life, and so on her creative handling of

¹⁷⁰ Ruth McNaughton sees Emily Dickinson's frequent use of the image of intoxication as evidence of her intense response to life. N.B. p. 56. Without disputing McNaughton's major claim, it should be noted that Rosenbaum offers only partial support for her minor premise. Intoxicate in its various forms has only four listings, drink ten, drinking one, drinker two, drunk three, drunkard two, drunken eight, liquor five, liquors two, and inebriate three. S. P. Rosenbaum, A Concordance to the Poems of Emily Dickinson (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1964).

¹⁷¹ The Cycle of American Literature (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), p. 165.

¹⁷² Gelpi, p. 109.

love, it is important that her seclusion is recognized, not as a neurotic flight from reality but as "a way of intensifying her perceptions"--of intensifying her whole being.¹⁷³ Since some critics have so distorted the causes and results of her retreat, it is especially necessary in a study such as the present to point out that her withdrawal did not essentially indicate a negative response. It was not a rejection of love and life. The very vitality of her emotional life, not its sterility, required some limitation. Those who find her economy of life unhealthy usually: 1) stress the privation, inwardness, and unhappiness of her life; 2) highlight her eccentricities--wearing only white, refusing to address envelopes in her own hand, even listening to piano music from the next room; and 3) attribute these peculiarities and her whole mode of life solely to a frustration in love.¹⁷⁴ If Emily Dickinson's life were as warped and introverted as some critics still maintain, the attitudes toward love displayed in her poetry would have a different tone.

Many critics take a more moderate stand regarding Emily Dickinson's seclusion. They recognize both the painful renunciation involved and the necessity of this renunciation to her full development as a woman and an artist.

¹⁷³ Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 156.

¹⁷⁴ Examples of unfavorable judgments upon Emily Dickinson's life pattern refer to it as: "a depressing jail of despair," Gregor, p. ; a "retreat backwards into childhood," Griffith, Long Shadow, p. 283; "intense neuroticism," Henry H. Wells, Introduction to Emily Dickinson (Chicago: Packard Company, 1947), p. 34; and "the neuroticism of too stringent self-suppression," Katherine Bregy, "Emily Dickinson: A New England Anchoress," Catholic World, CXX (December, 1924), 347. As recently as 1964 Robert Goffin said that the poet was "burning with an unrequited love amid the disappointments of her solitude." "Emily Dickinson," The New Hungarian Quarterly, V (Autumn, 1964), 183; and Rebecca Patterson in 1967 claimed that Sue Dickinson was the object of the poet's passion. "Emily Dickinson's Debt to Gunderode," The Midwest Quarterly, VIII (July, 1967), 341.

Allen Tate's statement that "when she went up stairs and closed the door, she mastered life by rejecting it" must be coupled with his other statement that "her life was one of the richest and deepest ever lived on this continent" to grasp the asceticism and joy involved in Emily Dickinson's seclusion.¹⁷⁵ If this duality of deprivation and fullness was the major mark of her affective life, it may also be the impetus behind her love poetry that stresses the necessity of renunciation, the inevitability of separation, and the benefits of suffering.

The third and largest group of critics--among whom are such respected Dickinson scholars as Anderson, Gelpi, Sewell, Ward, and Whicher--consider Emily Dickinson's mode of life a positive value, a sign of psychological integrity and inner strength.¹⁷⁶ Although the position of these critics is not radically different from that of the second group, there is in their statement a greater emphasis upon the normalcy, the maturity, and the happiness of the poet's choice and her day-to-day living of it. These critics give as her

¹⁷⁵ Emily Dickinson, ed. by Richard Sewell, p. 20. These critics refer to her life of retirement as one "of light and a surrender," Chase, p. 261; "adopted out of necessity, for her nature . . . combined tenseness with exultation," Letters (Johnson, ed.), I, viii; and as "a necessary condition for creativity." Griffith, Long Shadow, p. 9.

¹⁷⁶ These critics refer to her seclusion as "a way of living, not a renunciation of life," Ward, Emily Dickinson's Letters, p. 4; a "retreat from moral obscurantism and tyranny . . . one means at her disposal of preserving her personal identity and of expressing the genius with which she was endowed," Zabel, 214; "the condition and the discipline in which Emily could attain the freest and fullest possible state of being," Willy, 93; "Mr. Tate, I believe, is profoundly wrong. She never rejected life," Myron Oshshorn, "In Search of Emily Dickinson," New Mexico Quarterly, XXIII (Spring, 1953), 101; and "seclusion . . . was true economy to Emily Dickinson." Higgins, p. 160.

prime motive in restricting her social activities her need for time; in a household where she did her full share of work, Emily Dickinson needed time--time to think, time to write, time to be herself--and "the Puritan strain in her revolted at the dissipation of her gift of life."¹⁷⁷ They also stress that she found greater appeal and joy in the inner life than she did in the external; "largely she withdrew simply because there were things which interested her more."¹⁷⁸ One critic goes so far as to say that, far from a denial of love and life, the need Emily Dickinson experienced for union "extended beyond passion and possibility to a craving for universal love, for all life and all being."¹⁷⁹

Obviously the experience of and attitudes toward love possible in the seclusion described by this last group of critics are different from those of the second group, very different from those of the first. Living at a rare intensity few people could sustain, grappling with metaphysical questions, feeling the limitations of time, and imagining a perfect love that combined her sexual and religious longings, Emily Dickinson projected an idealized love in her poetry--a love doomed to frustration in this life but possible of fulfillment in a quasi-mystical nuptial that transcends and literally escapes the human condition in a heavenly union.

Just as the poet's whole affective life--her experiences of love from little-girlhood through adulthood, her friendships with men and women, her relationships with her family--conditioned her treatment of love in her poetry,

¹⁷⁷ Whicher, p. 138; Millicent Todd Bingham, Emily Dickinson's Home, p. 119.

¹⁷⁸ Berenson, 356.

¹⁷⁹ Galpi, p. 111.

so her encounters with death in her life affected her treatment of it in her art. Emily Dickinson's personal experiences intensified her natural inclination to dwell imaginatively upon death, the dramatic moment of dying and the philosophical and theological implications of mortality.

Her reading drew the poet's attention to death. "Books of the day, especially popular fiction and religious writings dwelt on death as persistently as books a century later would dwell on sex."¹⁸⁰ Discussing popular cultural patterns in the 1840's, an authority on American studies states: "The death-bed scene grew to be a staple of fiction and drama. Death provided the theme for many a poem, the suggestion for many a song. It offered the subject for many a picture."¹⁸¹ He offers, as "emblematic of the interest in death in art and letters," a poem published in 1844 in The Cypress Wreath.¹⁸² The first stanza reads:

Thou art gone to the grave, but we will not deplore thee,
Though sorrows and darkness encompass the tomb;
Thy Saviour has pass'd through its portal before thee,
And the lamp of his love is thy guide through the gloom!

In "Books for the Lady Reader, 1820-1860," Ola Elizabeth Winslow lists four titles from the 1849 The Book of Pearls: "The Early Dead," "Love in Sadness," "The Country Graveyard," and "The Maiden's Vow."¹⁸³ Ruth Miller, asserting a more specific connection between Emily Dickinson and the popular interest in

¹⁸⁰Higgins, p. 55.

¹⁸¹Carl Bode, ed., American Life in the 1840s (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p. 207.

¹⁸²Ibid.

¹⁸³Romanticism in America, ed. by George Boas (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1940), p. 99.

death, claims that Thomas Bridgeman's Inscriptions on the Grave Stones in the Grave Yards of Northampton, and the other towns in the Valley of the Connecticut, since it "seems the most well read of any [books in her father's library]" nourished "her interest in mortuary subject matter."¹⁸⁴ DiSalvo implies a similar link between the poet's awareness of death and her literary-religious milieu. After establishing that the most popular revival songs, such as "I Could Not Live Away," in Village Hymns edited by Nettleson and published in 1824, are about death, he adds that "these songs were not sung in church, but at home, and Emily Dickinson's copy of Nettleson was so popular she was continually lending it out."¹⁸⁵ While Samuel Bowles and Dr. Holland edited the Springfield Republican, it reviewed and reissued classics like Jeremy Taylor's Holy Living and Holy Dying.¹⁸⁶ In her 1862 letter to Higginson, Emily Dickinson gave Sir Thomas Browne as one of her favorite authors. Because of its concern with problems of belief and life after death, his Religio Medici interested her. The poet's concept of circumference echoes his in many ways. Whether this similarity is a matter of unconscious borrowing or simply proof of the likeness of their thinking, Sir Thomas Browne's writing riveted this woman's gaze firmly on eternity. Sue owned a copy of Theodore Parker's Prayers which her sister-in-law probably read. Dr. Wadsworth's sermons, which she called "a sorrowful Treasure" after his death, she read and reread in pamphlet and book form.¹⁸⁷ The eschatological nature of Dr. Wadsworth's thought is evident

¹⁸⁴ Miller, p. 399.

¹⁸⁵ DiSalvo, p. 21.

¹⁸⁶ Judith Banzer, "'Compound Manner': Emily Dickinson and the Metaphysical Poets," AL, XXXII (January, 1961), 425.

¹⁸⁷ Letters (Johnson, ed.), III, 738.

in his annual Thanksgiving sermon in which he spoke of death, calling it not a destruction, not even a decay but a harvest.¹⁸⁸ Her reading of the Bible, especially of her favorite Book of Revelations, also fixed her mind on eternity. The impact of this book, with its account of the heavens opening, is evident in her frequent quotations from it in her letters. As the sensational novels of Ik Marvel fed her romantic interest in love and death and the emotional writings of Mrs. Child her idealistic, so this variety of religious reading and popular music whetted Emily Dickinson's interest in the metaphysical aspects of mortality.

The Puritan concern with the moment of death also aroused Emily Dickinson's religious and psychological interest in mortality. To the Calvinist, the instant of dying was crucial. "Death, for the Puritan, was in a sense the apex of life, the culminating point of a career, the most important and solemn of all occasions; for shortly one would discover whether he was to be saved as member of the elect or be rejected and left out of God's love."¹⁸⁹ The Calvinist believed that the dying person gave some sign of salvation or damnation. The person's willingness or unwillingness to die, his fear or confidence, were supposedly evidence of his spiritual state. To people accustomed to a metaphorical approach to reality, the words and gestures of a dying person assumed great significance. Although the poet did not formally accept the faith of her parents, Calvinistic traits were a part of her unconscious. In

¹⁸⁸ Religion in Politics: A Sermon Preached in the Arch Street Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia (Philadelphia: William S. Martien, 1853).

¹⁸⁹ Ford, p. 46.

her letters, she often asked for the details of a friend's death.¹⁹⁰ When Ben Newton died, she wrote his pastor, Mr. Edward Hale ". . . I often have hoped to know if his last hours were cheerful, and if he was willing to die. . . . You may think my desire strange, Sir, but the Dead was dear to me, and I would love to know that he sleeps peacefully."¹⁹¹ In 1883 in a letter to Charles Clark, she says of his brother's death that she hoped he was able to talk in his closing moments, for "One accent of courage as he took his flight would assist your Heart."¹⁹² From those experiencing "the secret of Death," she looks also for another sign, some assurance of immortality. Emily Dickinson's poems contain this same double interest in the moment of death and its significance. In Poem 1633, the speaker asks the dying person:

What answer wrest from thee
Before thou dost exude away
In the recallless sea?

A number of her poems, capturing with clinical precision the instant of death, may have their source in the poet's abiding concern with the psychological and religious implications of dying. Emily Dickinson's concern with the symbolic importance of dying accounts for the angle of experience explored and the attitudes toward death presented in many of her death poems.

Besides these literary and religious reminders of human mortality, death in mid-nineteenth century New England was commonplace. The New England

¹⁹⁰ In view of her religious heritage, this interest does not seem unhealthy. Conrad Aiken's judgment, therefore, seems unwarranted and untrue: "Ultimately, the obsession [with death] became morbid, and her eagerness for details, after the death of a friend--the hungry desire to know how she died--became almost vulture-like." "Emily Dickinson," Dial, LXXVI (April, 1924), 308.

¹⁹¹ Letters (Johnson, ed.), I, 282.

¹⁹² Ibid., III, 778.

winters were severe and held a constant threat of disease. The statistics of the Mutual Life Insurance Company of New York for the period from 1843 to 1898 record an average of one death a week from tuberculosis among the 3,000 people living in Amherst.¹⁹³ Summers held their own special dangers, too. Writing to Abiah Root in 1846, Emily Dickinson mentioned that "there were over 100 deaths in Boston last week, a great many of them owing to the heat."¹⁹⁴ This poet was made extra sensitive to death by its frequency and suddenness among her friends. Entries in Vinnie's diary, like her sister's letters, are sprinkled with references to death: "Poor Abby is dead"¹⁹⁵; "Maria Norcross is dead"¹⁹⁶; "Aunt Eliza is dead."¹⁹⁷ Her parents' anxiety over their daughter's poor health encouraged Emily Dickinson's consciousness of death's power and presence. "The prevalence of heavy colds, often developing into illness fatal to her contemporaries, kept the family in a state of constant apprehension."¹⁹⁸ Because of what her family considered her delicate health, Emily Dickinson was kept out of school for whole terms. Not only the suddenness, power, and frequency of death, but its nearness drew her attention to it. Sickness and death were not hidden remotely behind a screen in the hospital. They were realities that people in nineteenth century New England lived with and cared for in their own homes, with their own hands. Neighbors and relatives assisted each other in nursing the sick and preparing the dead for burial. Death demanded more than sympathy from those near the dying. Since Emily Dickinson's

¹⁹³ DiSalvo, p. 18.

¹⁹⁵ Leyda, I, 197.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., I, 206.

¹⁹⁴ Letters (Johnson, ed.), I, 38.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., I, 199.

¹⁹⁸ Bingham, p. 179.

room overlooked the cemetery, the reality of death and the drama of a funeral procession early entered her consciousness. A letter she wrote when she was only sixteen tells of her reflections upon mortality as she sat by the north window when "the funeral train entered the open gate of the church yard, following the remains of Judge Dickinson's wife to her long home."¹⁹⁹ Because of her proximity to the Amherst cemetery, every funeral forcefully called Emily Dickinson to the puzzle of mortality.

Thematically Emily Dickinson's poetry reflects her personal awareness of death's power, presence, and speed. Many times in her art death becomes a type of thief who steals life and robs the speaker of those most dear.²⁰⁰ Poems similar to 532 dramatize the proximity of death. Without an empirical knowledge of death, the poet could not present the experience of Poems 241, 389, 485, 1073, 1078, and 1100. The wide variety of approaches to mortality utilized in her poetry grows out of the poet's own acquaintance with it—real or imaginary—and reflects her ambivalence to it.

Many other aspects of Emily Dickinson's personal experience intensified her natural inclination to dwell imaginatively upon death. Her haunting awareness of mortality stemmed, in part at least, from her sharp and early personal encounter with it. When only thirteen, she visited the dying Sophia Holland whom she evidently greatly admired. The death of this fifteen year old friend left a permanent and painful mark upon the impressionable adolescent's memory and imagination. Two years later she wrote to Abiah Root:

¹⁹⁹ Letters (Johnson, ed.), I, 31.

²⁰⁰ N.B. Poems 971, 1136.

At length the doctor said that she must die & allowed me to look at her a moment through the open door. I took off my shoes and stole softly into 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, and 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 no one the cause of my grief, though it was gnawing at my very heart strings.²⁰¹

That this experience was psychologically wounding to so intense a young girl, who brooded in silence for over two years, seems highly probable.

The early and sudden death of Leonard Humphry in 1850 again forced Emily Dickinson's attention on the mystery of human mortality. After an illness of only ten hours, he died of congestion of the brain. The death at only twenty-seven of Humphrey, one of her favorite tutors at Amherst Academy, made the young woman try to answer the riddle that would more and more haunt her. Referring to Humphrey's death in a letter to Abiah Root--who apparently shared her taste for florid melancholy and stylized expression of it--Emily Dickinson says, ". . . some of my friends are gone, and some of my friends are sleeping --sleeping the churchyard sleep."²⁰² Chase comments that "these are not the words of someone personally overwhelmed with grief" but of someone "trying to master the idea of grief and loss."²⁰³

Because in life Ben Newton had called forth a more personal and profound response from the poet-to-be, her reaction to his death was less conventional than it had been to Sophia Holland's or Leonard Humphrey's. Writing to

²⁰¹ Letters (Johnson, ed.), I, 32.

²⁰² Ibid., I, 102.

²⁰³ Chase, p. 43.

the Reverend Edward Everett Hale in January, 1854, Emily Dickinson apologizes for inquiring about Newton's death by saying that "the Dead was dear to me," a "gentle, yet grave Preceptor."²⁰⁴ The urgency in her words, "Please Sir, to tell me if . . . you think him at Home, I should love so much to know certainly, that he was today in Heaven"²⁰⁵ testifies to her sense of loss and to her concern about immortality, "a life again, nobler, and much more blessed--"²⁰⁶

Emily Dickinson's reaction to deaths in her teens and twenties shows a discernible movement from adolescent curiosity and sentimental cliches to personal involvement and religious questioning. Parallel to this growth, however, a consistent romanticizing of home and friends made Emily Dickinson fear losing her loved ones in death. Various letters afford plausible explanations of this fearful possessiveness.

When I think of the friends I love, and the little while we may dwell here, and then "we go away," I have a yearning feeling, a desire eager and anxious lest any be stolen away, so that I cannot behold them.²⁰⁷

. . . I think of the grave very often and how much it has got of mine, and whether I can ever stop it from carrying off what I love . . .²⁰⁸

Perhaps Death--gave me an awe for friends--striking sharp and early, for I held them since--in a brittle love--of more alarm, than peace.²⁰⁹

On the other hand, when the dead were not dear to her, Emily Dickinson seemed quite capable of confronting death objectively--almost flippantly. Writing to Austin in 1851, she declared:

²⁰⁴ Letters (Johnson, ed.), I, 282.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., I, 283.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., I, 282.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., I, 103.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., I, 197-98.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., II, 423.

Vinnie tells me she has detailed the news--she reserved the deaths for me, thinking I might fall short of my usual letter somewhere. In accordance with her wishes, I acquaint you with the decease of your aged friend--Dea Kingsbury. He had no disease that we know of, but gradually went out. Maratha Kingman has been very sick, and is not yet out of danger. Jane Grant is slowly improving, tho' very feeble yet.²¹⁰

A few weeks later she again wrote her brother, in a matter-of-fact way mixing details about "brown bread for tea" and news of recent engagements with:

It cannot be--yet it is so--Jennie Grant was buried yesterday --Maratha Kingman died at four o'clock [sic] this morning--one and another, and another--how we pass away!²¹¹

The impress of both changing and constant attitudes toward mortality is evident in the death poetry Emily Dickinson wrote. The matrix of stances arising from her early acquaintance with death is especially apparent in her treatment of love-death motifs.

In the 1870's and 1880's the deaths of many of those dearest to her painfully renewed Emily Dickinson's need to discover the truth about immortality. From her father's death in 1874 to Helen Hunt Jackson's in 1885, Emily Dickinson again and again asked the same question:

Lives he in any other world/ My faith cannot reply
Before it was imperative/ 'Twas all distinct to me (1557).

The extent to which Emily Dickinson suffered from her uncertainty during this period of loss, she herself suggests in a letter to her Norcross cousins in August, 1884.

. . . I grew very sick and gave the others much alarm, but am now staying. The doctor calls it "revenge of the nerves"; but who but Death had wronged them?²¹²

²¹⁰ Ibid., I, 138.

²¹¹ Ibid., I, 153,

²¹² Ibid., III, 826-827.

And in the autumn of the same year she confided in Mrs. Samuel Mack:

The Dyings have been too deep for me, and before I could raise my
Heart from one, another has come--²¹³

Possibly the most searing pain in this decade concerned her father's death in June, 1874. The fact that Edward Dickinson, after collapsing in the state legislature, died alone in his Boston hotel room, made his death more tragic to his family. The day before he died, Edward Dickinson and his daughter had spent a quiet Sunday afternoon together in Amherst. Either in actuality or in memory, those hours were uniquely meaningful to both of them. In a letter to Higginson in July, Emily Dickinson said "I preferred to be with him, and invented an absence for Mother."²¹⁴ For his part, Edward Dickinson "seemed peculiarly pleased"; in fact, "his pleasure almost embarrassed" his daughter.²¹⁵ Referring to her account of that last afternoon, a sensitive critic terms it a dramatic climax, drawing "together with a subtlety and poignancy of nuance that is worthy of Henry James the agonizing complex of emotions which bound together these two so alike yet so at odds."²¹⁶

In the years after her father's death, Emily Dickinson's letters show that she was haunted by his memory, that in death he assumed even more heroic proportions in her mind, and that she wavered between hope and doubt that he was enjoying an immortal existence. Dreaming about him at night and wondering during the day about his state--and so indirectly about the mysterious state imposed upon all by death--Emily Dickinson suffered personal grief and religious uncertainty. The loneliness and bereavement she suffered are evident in

²¹³ Ibid., III, 843.

²¹⁴ Ibid., II, 528.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Gelpi, p. 19.

many of her letters.

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 hasn't 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.²¹⁷

Mother is asleep in the library—Vinnie—in the Dining Room—
Father—in the Masked Bed—in the Marl House.

How soft his Prison is—
How sweet those sullen Bars—
No Despot—but the King of Down
Invented that Repose!²¹⁸

When I think of my Father's lonely Life and his lonelier Death,
there is this redress—

Take all away—
The only thing worth larceny
Is left—the Immortality—²¹⁹

I dream about father every night, always a different dream, and forget what I am doing daytimes, wondering where he is. Without any body, I keep thinking, What kind can that be?²²⁰

Since my Father's dying, everything sacred enlarged so—²²¹

. . . the last April that Father lived, lived I mean below . . .²²²

Edward Dickinson's death intensified and channeled his daughter's preoccupation with mortality. Because his death touched her so personally and deeply, her references to it are tender and urgent. Because it forced her to try once more to solve death's riddles, her references also are detached and abstract. Because her father's sudden death left such a shattering void, it took Emily Dickinson three years to find the words for "Lay this Laurel on the One" (1393).

²¹⁷ Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 526.

²¹⁹ Ibid., II, 551.

²²¹ Ibid., II, 583.

²¹⁸ Ibid., II, 537.

²²⁰ Ibid., II, 559.

²²² Ibid., II, 662.

Emily Dickinson's allusions in letters to her father's death reveal psychic regions common to her life and art. The references parallel various aspects of her death poetry. There is a consistency about: 1) the questions asked; 2) the attitudes adopted; and 3) the imagery used. Survival of individual consciousness and psychic integrity after death and communication between the living and the dead perplex her. The paradox of gain through loss and insight through deprivation is implicit. Loneliness, awe, and uncertainty create ambivalence. Death as a cunning thief, the grave as a cold home, and immortality as a regal estate function as illuminating metaphors.

1878 marked the first in a series of deaths of men whom Emily Dickinson loved as an adult. Without trying to define Samuel Bowles' precise role in the poet's life, one can see plainly that his death disturbed her deeply. The loss of this devoted and trusted friend of many years caused her anguish of mind and heart, for it brought again to full consciousness the questions that haunted her after her father's death. In letters and poems of the period she probed the mystery of death. As late as 1880 she wrote to Maria Whitney, who also loved and still mourned Bowles, about this search:

Could that sweet Darkness where they dwell
Be once disclosed to us
The clamor for their loveliness
Would burst the Loneliness—²²³

Dr. Josiah Holland's death three years later did not touch the poet as intimately as Samuel Bowles' had. Her sense of personal loss centered chiefly in her concern for his widow, Mary Holland "who in these years seems to have been her staunchest comforter and most steady correspondent."²²⁴ Her letters

²²³ Ibid., III, 662.

²²⁴ Johnson, ed., Letters, III, 654.

to Mrs. Holland are filled more with sympathetic support than with metaphysical questions about the survival of individual consciousness. In fact, the religious conviction that Dr. Holland had had in life seemed to Emily Dickinson a surety of his immortality: "The lost one was on such child-like terms with the Father in Heaven. He has passed from confiding to comprehending--perhaps but a step."²²⁵

In 1882 Emerson, Dr. Wadsworth, and Mrs. Dickinson died. Even though her relation with Wadsworth had been confined mainly to letters and her image of him idealized, his death in early April left an emptiness in her life that even her love for Judge Lord could not fill. Writing to Lord she confided:

Today is April's last--it has been an April of meaning to me. . . . My Philadelphia [Charles Wadsworth] has passed from Earth, and the Ralph Waldo Emerson--whose name my Father's Law Student taught me, has touched the secret Spring. Which Earth are we in?²²⁶

In other letters she also referred to Dr. Wadsworth's death:

My closest earthly friend died in April.²²⁷

He was my Shepherd from "Little Girl"hood and I cannot conjecture a world without him, so noble was he always--so fathomless--so gentle.²²⁸

Although Dr. Wadsworth's death did not seem to cause the same ache of uncertainty about eternal life that others had--perhaps his own faith was too firm for Emily Dickinson to doubt his achieving the heaven in which he had believed all his life--she still wrote to the Congregational pastor in Springfield, Washington Gladden, to ask: "Is Immortality true?"²²⁹ For the poet

²²⁵ Letters (Johnson, ed.), III, 713.

²²⁶ Ibid., III, 727.

²²⁷ Ibid., III, 737.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid., III, 731.

Dr. Wadsworth's and Emerson's death were peculiarly significant; "death had struck down within a single month the men who symbolized and supported the two sides of her divided spirit."²³⁰

Had Mrs. Dickinson died earlier, her daughter might not have experienced the loss she confided to James Clark.

Her dying feels to me like many kinds of Cold--at times electric, at times a trackless waste, Love has never trod²³¹

Paradoxically, it was not until the roles of mother and daughter were switched that Emily Dickinson discovered the woman behind the timid face. In a letter to Mrs. Holland a month after her mother's death, she described the change that occurred during the years of her mother's illness and complete dependency.

We were never intimate Mother and Children while she was our Mother --but Mines in the same Ground meet by tunneling and when she became our Child, the Affection came--²³²

A letter to the Norcross cousins suggests another reason for Emily Dickinson's pain at her mother's death.

She was scarcely the aunt you knew. The great mission of pain had been ratified--cultivated to tenderness by persistent sorrow, so that a larger mother died than had she died before.²³³

Later in the same letter, the description of her mother's death and burial exhibits many of the poet's typical concerns, attitudes, and images.

There was no earthly parting. She slipped from our fingers like a flake gathered by the wind, and is now part of the drift called "the infinite."

We don't know where she is, though so many tell us.

....

Mother was very beautiful when she died. Seraphs are solemn artists. The illumination that comes but once paused upon her

²³⁰ Gelpi, p. 62.

²³¹ Letters (Johnson, ed.), III, 752.

²³² Ibid., III, 754-755.

²³³ Ibid., III, 750.

features, and it seemed like hiding a picture to lay her in the grave; but the grass that received my father will suffice his guest, the one he asked at the altar to visit him all his life.

I cannot tell how Eternity seems. It sweeps around me like a sea.²³⁴

Except for her allusion to being "Plundered of her dear face,"²³⁵ all of Emily Dickinson's descriptions of her mother's death possess the serenity and tenderness suggested in her analogy of her departing to a sparrow's soaring unexpectedly in answer to a call.²³⁶ But death still tantalized her need to understand its mysteries. Her losses in 1882 accentuated this tortuous desire to pierce through the shadows surrounding mortality. Late in the year she confessed that "Sorrow, benighted with Fathoms, cannot find its Mind,"²³⁷ because "Blow has followed blow, till the wondering terror of the Mind clutches what is left, helpless of an accent."²³⁸

For the next two years the blows were unusually cruel. In early October, 1883, her beloved nephew Gilbert suddenly caught typhoid fever and as suddenly died. No adult death seems to have shocked or pained Emily Dickinson as deeply as this eight-year-old's. Besides the brevity of his illness and the intensity of her love for him, the death of this charming little boy sharply renewed her questions about human mortality. The poet's letters to Sue during the child's illness and after his death reveal how shattering--emotionally and spiritually--this experience was to his aunt. The poetic ardor of these letters,²³⁹ and the questions interspersed in her account of his

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid., III, 746.

²³⁸ Ibid., III, 754.

²³⁵ Ibid., III, 748.

²³⁷ Ibid., III, 749.

²³⁹ Ibid., III, 799, 801, and 803.

death indicate Emily Dickinson's many-faceted response to this loss.

"Open the Door, open the Door, they are waiting for me," was Gilbert's sweet command in delirium. Who were waiting for him, all we possess we would give to know--Anguish at last opened it, and he ran to the little Grave at his Grandparent's feet-- All this and more, though is there more? More than Love and Death? Then tell me its name!²⁴⁰

Critics agree that Gilbert's death left a void which Emily Dickinson was never able to fill.²⁴¹ Only three years before her own death, Emily Dickinson had found no final answer to mortality that would be both philosophically convincing and emotionally satisfying.

Judge Otis Lord's death in 1884, after only two weeks of illness, took from the poet her dear Salem, the man to whom she had given the most warmly human expression of her love. Realizing that Judge Lord had neither feared extinction nor prized redemption,²⁴² Emily Dickinson seemed to be unconcerned about his spiritual or psychic state. Her reaction to his death was that of a woman who loved ardently--almost to the point of the idolatry she had once mentioned to him--and so suffered keenly the pain of parting. Writing to Maria Whitney, whom she knew would understand such a demanding love, she said:

I fear we shall care very little for the technical resurrection, when to behold the one face that to us comprised it is too much for us, and I dare not think of the voraciousness of that only gaze and its only return.²⁴³

Poems, which Johnson dates as early as 1861, contain similar clusters of

²⁴⁰Ibid., III, 803.

²⁴¹"With his departure went a certain inner light." Johnson, ed., Letters, III, 654; "Life for her was now stripped of its creative relationships." Ward, Capsule, p. 106; "Emily Dickinson never recovered completely from her shock at Gilbert's death." Higgins, p. 227.

²⁴²Letters (Johnson, ed.), III, 861.

²⁴³Ibid., III, 862.

emotions and imagery.²⁴⁴ In these lyrics the voice elects the imperfect present in preference to an uncertain future, earth to heaven, her mortal lover to God. Love and death interact dramatically in these poems for eternity means reunion with the lover whose "Face/ would put out Jesus'--" (640). The interplay of this woman's imaginative and affective life and her creative is particularly significant in this area.

The last death to touch Emily Dickinson deeply was Helen Hunt Jackson's. The death of this writer in 1885 grieved the poet for she "had given Emily Dickinson, as no other person ever did, a conviction that her poems were of the first importance."²⁴⁵ Although Emily Dickinson did not accept her friend's offer to be her literary executor, this final gesture of artistic recognition had special importance for the poet in the depressed autumn of 1884.

The accumulated suffering of these many deaths--and her own unanswered questions about the inner meaning of mortality--left its mark on the poet's mind and body. In the last years of her life, Emily Dickinson suffered from what the doctor called "Nervous prostration" but what she termed instead "The crisis of the sorrow of many years."²⁴⁶ Her writing was confined almost wholly to elegies and letters where death's presence is often felt and eternity is almost tangible. Her repeated encounters with death brought her face to face with the mystery of immortality and strengthened her innate desire to escape human

²⁴⁴N.B. Poems: 263, 418, 464, 495, 636, 640, 695, 765, 1012, 1162, and 1260.

²⁴⁵Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 179.

²⁴⁶Letters (Johnson, ed.), III, 802.

limitations and to explore infinity. If her last two written words, "Called Back,"²⁴⁷ indicate her insight into death just before she went into a coma in May 1885, the poet's steady gaze upon mortality--besides being a powerful spur to her creativity--finally gave her some hope of immortality.

Psychological

A third factor that qualified Emily Dickinson's interest in and attitudes toward love and death was her psychic make up. If she had not had exactly the psychological disposition which she did, the reciprocal action of her personal experience and her cultural context might have formed a different person. Emily Dickinson's mind set was complex; some elements in it were in radical tension with others. Intensely conscious of her individuality, she suffered from a severe sense of isolation. Keenly responsive to sensory impressions, she was primarily interested in their significance. Haunted by the horror of evanescence, she found anticipation more delightful than reality and renunciation more satisfying than possession. Prizing the inner life of the mind, she feared memory's power to destroy the sensitive person.

The inwardness of Emily Dickinson's mind was one of its most salient characteristics. In fact, one commentator claims that "the chief trait in Emily Dickinson's character was the habit of introspection."²⁴⁸ She called

²⁴⁷ Ibid., III, 906.

²⁴⁸ Rev. Edward C. Burkhardt, The Imagery of Emily Dickinson's Poetry on Death, unpublished thesis (Detroit: University of Detroit, 1944), p. 20. Most critics consider this psychological bias a positive quality. Morton D. Zabel claims that "Her first strength is a searing introspection." "Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson," Poetry, XXXVII (January, 1931), 216.

this self-awareness:

That polar privacy
A soul admitted to itself--Finite Infinity (1695).

This reflectiveness was not, however, a sick self-absorption. Emily Dickinson was not indulgently narcissistic. She was fascinated by mental states, by the nuances of consciousness, by the inner drama of the subconscious, by man's attempts to escape from his memory--"That wily--subterranean Inn" (1406).²⁵⁰

The Puritanism that was virtually a part of her blood made her gaze turn in to observe the workings of the soul.²⁵¹ She directed all her mental energy to the probing of inner significance. To this woman two sets of facts comprised reality: the external happening and its internal meaning. Since it engaged man's central activity, the inner was to her always the more vital and meaningful aspect. Since her vision was metaphorical, the external was of value also as an emblem of the internal. Because the true meaning of any experience could be determined only in relation to death, mortality became the principle of illumination whereby the inner values that lie hidden beneath the surface of things could be intuitively established. Death, therefore, was linked in her mind with all consciousness as well as with love. Another psychological root

²⁴⁹ N.B. Poems: 642, 822, 894, 1242, 1323, and 1406. Rosenbaum has 24 listings for consciousness, 61 for mind, and 8 for minds.

²⁵⁰ Griffith notes the similarity between Emily Dickinson's images to the cellar or underground corridors and "Freud's topography of the unconscious." Long Shadow, p. 199.

²⁵¹ From the introspection of the early Calvinists to the self-awareness of nineteenth century New Englanders there had been a shift from an essentially religious to a psychological mode; soul, therefore, to Emily Dickinson was virtually synonymous with consciousness or mind.

of her interest in grasping the meaning of love and death was the poet's belief that comprehension of an object was the only way to possess. For her to explore these experiences was, therefore, a psychological necessity that had subtle and pervasive artistic results.

This double vision, with its emphasis on the psychic, permeates Emily Dickinson's handling of love and death. In her poetry she approaches both experiences as psychological states. Often this slant makes the poetry not so much an exploration of love or death per se, as of the voice's consciousness of them, her attempt to comprehend them or analysis of her response to them. It also suggests why the physical--whether erotic or macabre--is so noticeably played down in her art.

The psychological and spiritual aspects of love and death are so important in this poet's work that the speaker appears to be unaware that fully human experience involves the body. Her ethereal, idealized concept of love produced a poetry virtually devoid of sexual elements at the conscious level. The frame of reference is bodiless; no human face appears, no bodily consummation is possible. In an age which glorified home and family, a love poetry lacking any domestic elements is quite unique--and best accounted for by the poet's emphasis on the inner meaning of events. Although the strength of this inward bent ignores whole areas of human love, it also helped to save Emily Dickinson's better love poetry--and her better death poetry as well--from some of the abuses so common among her contemporaries.²⁵² Since much of her love

²⁵²The sentimental celebration of home could be found in various aspects of the culture of the time. It was found in music, most tellingly in the songs of Stephen Foster; in art, most often in the popular lithographs sold

poetry deals with separation and renunciation, the poet's own words, "Absence disembodies--so does Death" (860), provide a key to her psyche.

Another shaping element in Emily Dickinson's psychic life was her sensitive, yet persistent, reaction to the pattern of loneliness and loss which she sensed was the basic fabric of life. All of her adult life, this woman suffered from a lack of genuine companionship. A recent critic categorizes Emily Dickinson's "social situation: isolation versus need for communion."²⁵³ In a letter years before, Higginson, commenting to the poet about the loneliness of her life, recognized one fundamental cause: ". . . it isolates one anywhere to think beyond a certain point or have such luminous flashes as come to you."²⁵⁴ The exaggerated ardor of her love for her sister-in-law testifies to her desire for a friend who would meet her emotional and intellectual needs.²⁵⁵ Disappointments and bereavements--as well as her chosen mode of life--contributed to her exquisite sense of the inevitability of solitude. Her letters openly confess the extent of her loneliness.

Not to see what we love, is very terrible--²⁵⁶

by Currier & Ives and their competitors; in poetry most often in the ballads by the tender female poets. And in prose it fostered a whole school of fiction, as embodied in the so-called domestic novel." Bode, p. 55.

²⁵³ Lindberg, p. 18.

²⁵⁴ Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 461.

²⁵⁵ That Sue Dickinson failed to answer her sister-in-law's needs is only too apparent in the many letters and poems in which Emily Dickinson refers to their relationship in postures and terms which betray her painful disappointment. In Poem 156, for example, she speaks of Sue's sting and in Poem 446 of her No.

²⁵⁶ Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 406.

Nothing has happened but loneliness, perhaps too daily to relate.²⁵⁷

Teach me to miss you less--because the fear to miss you more--
Haunts us--all the time.²⁵⁸

Although during the years of crisis the anguish of loneliness is especially noticeable in her letters and poems, her sense of being alone was a constant psychic ingredient. It entered her poetry in a variety of ways. At times her view of loneliness is paradoxical: "It might be lonelier/ Without the Loneliness--" (405). At other times she simply states: "And I am all alone--" (840). Sometimes she speaks fearfully of the destructive power of solitude: "The Loneliness One dare not sound--" (777). In some poems she presents solitude as a painful but rewarding element of a life that is spiritually or artistically mature: "The Soul's Superior instants' Occur to Her--alone--" (306) and "Each--it's [sic] difficult Ideal/ Must achieve--Itself--" (750).²⁵⁹

Emily Dickinson's abiding sense of loneliness was related to her personal and cosmic sense of loss: "A loss of something ever felt I" (959). Interwoven in her every friendship was a piercing feeling of "insecurity, for she associated it with fear of loss. One may be deprived of friends by indifference or estrangement--or most incessantly by death."²⁶⁰ In this woman's mind and in her poetry also loss haunted every phase of human relations. As early as 1858 she said in a letter to a friend:

²⁵⁷ Ibid., II, 427.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., II, 437.

²⁵⁹ Other poems which reflect her abiding sense of loneliness are: 215, 262, 387, 413, 503, 590, 767, 822, 1068, 1116, 1179, 1370, and 1493.

²⁶⁰ Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 85.

I am sorry you came, because you went away. Hereafter, I will pick no Rose, lest it fade or prick me.²⁶¹

And as late as 1882 in another letter she expressed a similar apprehension:

All we secure of Beauty is it's [sic] evanescence.²⁶²

This persistent sense of flux and deprivation touched Emily Dickinson emotionally and philosophically. Her consciousness of the incompleteness and temporariness of life fixed her attention on the painful limits of man for whom "Bread is that Diviner thing/ Disclosed to be denied" (1240). Although she never used the classical terms ubi sunt nor the existential angst, the anguished awareness of human temporality that they imply was a shaping force in this woman's attitudes toward love and death and her poetic treatment of them.

Closely related to Emily Dickinson's sensitivity to loneliness and loss as part of the human condition was her severe sense of alienation.²⁶³ This feeling of isolation went beyond her awareness of her talent and individuality or her election of a way of life most did not understand. Her psychic alienation had metaphysical roots. Because "the Heavens were stiched" she experienced an existential state of aloneness: "and I alone/ A Speck upon a Ball--" (378).

²⁶¹ Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 334.

²⁶² Ibid., III, 747.

²⁶³ Although two recent unpublished studies, Emily Dickinson: Mystic and Sceptic by Robert Gene Flick (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1967) and Mysticism in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson by Emma Julia Phillips (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1967), and one revised published one, The Poetry of Emily Dickinson by Ruth Miller, claim that the poet enjoyed a mystic's sense of unity with all reality, this study maintains that although she understood and desired transcendence, she experienced the existential's sense of cosmic isolation. This interpretation is more in accord with the traditional position: Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 202; Chase, pp. 23, 167; Gelpi, 70; and Jay Martin, "The Apocalypse of the Mind," in Harvests of Change (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), p. 285.

In a weaker poem of cosmic isolation she says "I never felt at Home--Below--"
(413). She describes the causes and results of this awareness in another lyric:

There is another Loneliness
That many die without--
Not want of friends occasions it
Or circumstance of Lot

But nature, sometimes, sometimes thought
And whoso it befalls
Is richer than could be revealed
By mortal numeral-- (1116)

Nature's power to suggest to the poet her alienation is evident in Poem 1068. Late summer reminds the speaker of transitoriness; therefore, for her "Enlarging Loneliness." This loneliness is not merely temperamental, it is philosophic. Facing the mystery of the universe, the speaker's awareness is extended and her sense of alienation intensified. The poet's self-awareness also contributes to her sense of cosmic isolation. In Poem 822 the persona, linking her psychic awareness to her awareness of death, says: "Adventure most unto it-self/ The Soul condemned to be--." The processes of both nature and the psyche reinforced this poet's metaphysical alienation that was deeply rooted in her religious uncertainty. If she had not so often felt cut off from God, the universe might not have seemed so alien. Besides "having telescoped the religious history of a century, Edwards to Emerson, into a decade,"²⁶⁴ Emily Dickinson also was painfully aware of what Paul Tillich calls man's consciousness of "the eternal to which we belong and from which we are estranged by

²⁶⁴Waggoner, 302-303.

the bondage of time."²⁶⁵ The alienation she suffered as a result of her religious position was much more devastating than the loneliness she experienced as an unusually talented and sensitive woman. The insights she gained from this sense of isolation and their effect on her love and death poetry are proportionately greater.

Another psychological factor that conditioned Emily Dickinson's treatment of love and death was her fear that she might lose her mind. Realizing her emotional intensity, psychic sensitivity, and capacity for suffering, she dreaded the possibility of insanity. Confronting the human condition honestly, she felt that the thread separating sanity from madness was too thin and that madness could suddenly break through. As early as Poem 280, the voice could describe her mental state as "a Plank in Reason, broke,/ And I dropped down, and down--." Poems like 670, 777, and 1225 present the danger, horror, and terror that threaten the mind that asks the ultimate questions. Many of the poems written during the years of crisis deal with the "larger--Darkness/ Those Evenings of the Brain--" (419) which could lead to despair or madness, spiritual or psychic destruction. In Poem 937 the speaker concretizes the results of mental and emotional strain saying "I felt a Cleaving in my Mind-- / As if my Brain had split--." Recognizing the shattering power of extreme anguish, the personas of Poems 410 and 859 even doubt their identity: "That person that I was--/ And this One--do not feel the same--" and "A Doubt if it be Us/ Assists the staggering mind." That Emily Dickinson's suffering--

²⁶⁵"The Eternal Now," in The Meaning of Death, ed. by Herman Feifel (New York: McGraw Hill, 1959), p. 31.

whether termed psychological or spiritual--was profound and prolonged, that the outcome of her pain was decisive, and that she grew as a result of her inner anguish seem unquestionable.²⁶⁶ The probable effects of her dread of madness upon her attitudes--especially the negative ones--toward love and death are subtle but pervasive. The poet's fear that she might lose her reason seems closely related to the persona's fear that she might lose her psychic integrity through either of these experiences. Reciprocally, just as madness seemed to have some unconscious attraction for this poet that made her trace its nuances, so what the speaker felt were the dangers of love and death seemed to have an unconscious attraction for her.

In Emily Dickinson's mind set another polarity operated that radically conditioned her attitudes toward Eros and Thanatos. What she found most appealing she felt that she should not reach out fully to grasp. The experience that she most desired she felt should be kept at arm's length. The basic reason for the pull she felt between attraction and renunciation was not ascetical but psychological; it was the belief that anticipation is better than reality, that imagination is superior to actuality, that the desired is better than the possessed.²⁶⁷ Repeatedly this woman prized most what was lost or what was

²⁶⁶ A few commentators, however, make extravagant and unsupported claims about the dangers issuing from these psychic pressures and the fears they engendered. For instance, Pickard maintains that: "The emotional strain had so ravaged her nervous system that she suffered a physical breakdown in 1864," p. 24; and Myron Ochshorn states that "she contemplated suicide." 100.

²⁶⁷ Richard Sewall appears to be more sensitive than most critics to this motif in Emily Dickinson's work: ". . . not only are objects of her desire distant; they are also very often moving away, their sweetness increasing in proportion to their remoteness." *Emily Dickinson*, p. 133; and "Frequent also is the thought of what she here calls 'kindly thirst,' the sense of what she

impossible to obtain. Possibly she derived this value system from Emerson's "Circles," which exalts the possible over the actual. This theme runs through her letters:

A secure delight suffers in enchantment--²⁶⁸

That Possession fairest lies that is least possest.²⁶⁹

. . . the finest wish is the futile one.²⁷⁰

Remoteness is the founder of sweetness;²⁷¹

Charlotte Bronte said "Life is so constructed that the event does not, cannot, match the expectation."²⁷²

Judge Lord was with us a few days since--and told me the Joy we most revere--we profane in taking.²⁷³

Emblem is immeasurable--that is why it is better than Fulfillment, which can be drained--²⁷⁴

Success is dust, but an aim forever touched with dew.²⁷⁵

Consummation is the hurry of fools (exhilaration of fools),
But Expectation the Elixir of the Gods--²⁷⁶

For Emily Dickinson the most perfect understanding and appreciation of any experience was possible only with distance from it; the distance could be maintained by time, space, renunciation, or impossibility.²⁷⁷ Within this frame

calls in another place 'sumptuous destitution.' It is the reiterated theme of anticipation as a kind of experience superior to realization." Lyman Letters, p. 77.

²⁶⁸ Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 480.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., II, 486.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., II, 500.

²⁷¹ Ibid., II, 504.

²⁷² Ibid., II, 543.

²⁷³ Ibid., II, 566.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., III, 773.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., III, 822.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., III, 922.

²⁷⁷ This poet's frequent metaphorical use of foreign names and exotic terms for joy may be considered the linguistic correlative of her esteem for

of values, fulfillment could never match anticipation; or if it somehow did, its joy would be so great that it would destroy the person. The psychological ambivalence of such a position tensions many of Emily Dickinson's poems.

Heaven--is what I cannot reach! (239)

'Tis Beggars--Banquets best define-- (313)

The fairer--for the farness--
And for the foreignhood. (719)

A charm invests a face
Imperfectly beheld-- (421)

Spices fly
In the Receipt--It was the Distance--
Was Savory-- (439)

Satisfaction--is the Agent
Of Satiety--
Want--a quiet Commissary
For Infinity. (1036)

Rehearsal to Ourselves
Of a Withdrawn Delight--
Affords a bliss like Murder--
Omnipotent--Acute-- (379)

For Heaven is a different thing,
Conjectured, and waked sudden in--
And might extinguish me! (172)

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

Typically in these poems the voice knows a double fear: either reality will be less than she imagined and, therefore, it will disappoint her, or it will be equal to or surpass her anticipation of it and, therefore, will destroy her.

the distant in preference to the immediate.

In either case, there is a fear that keeps the persona from plunging into the most crucial experiences, or if she does, she does so with an unusual degree of ambivalence. The connection between these psychic patterns and the poet's handling of love and death is obvious in many lyrics in which the distant-- person or satisfaction--is more appreciated than the immediate and the impossible relationship is more desired than the possible.

Emily Dickinson's instinctive need to dramatize was another psychological trait that effected her artistic use of love and death. By temperament she was an extremist who found in expressive personal gestures an emotional outlet. She seemed unconsciously to recognize the psychic value of dramatizing her conflicts. She even spoke of human consciousness as the "Only Theatre recorded/ Owner cannot shut--" (741). Her election of white,²⁷⁸ her little girl posturing and other poses in her letters,²⁷⁹ her cryptic speech habits, her carrying a white lily the first time she met Higginson, her sending a single flower with a gnomic greeting to a friend, her addressing a blank sheet of paper to her dead father and signing it "Emily,"²⁸⁰ and her poetry were all symbolic

²⁷⁸While agreeing on its dramatic qualities, critics disagree on the precise symbolism of white for the poet: "For her, whiteness signified the Absolute, the final transcendence of time, change, and nature." Chase, p. 180; the color white "contained as many ambiguities for her as it had for Melville in his explication of 'the whiteness of the whale.'" Waggoner, p. 298; and "she wore white, as did the Greeks in mourning." Sister Mary James Power, In The Name of the Bee (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1944), p. 12.

²⁷⁹"Reading through her letters, especially her early ones, one cannot help observing in them a fair amount of posing, another method for achieving detachment and disguise." Lindberg, p. 27. As late as 1874 this same tendency is apparent in her signing a letter "Vinnie's Sister." Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 529.

²⁸⁰"This incident--sincere as doubtless her action basically was--serves to illustrate a certain element of self-dramatization to be detected also in her work." Willy, p. 101.

gestures that externalized her intense inner life. These ritualizations proclaimed likewise her sense of the mystery and the meaning of life and protected her against the dullness that resulted from the loss of religious belief in Amherst. Calvinism had been a religion of inner drama acted out in heroic dimensions. Generations of Puritan blood exhibited itself in a "certain self-conscious, deeply felt necessity to contribute to her own myth—a readiness to assume her part with appropriate flourishes and fitting decor."²⁸¹ Her flair for the dramatic was thus a quasi-protest against the colorless monotony of provincial life in New England. With her imagination, Emily Dickinson was able to project herself into highly dramatic—at times melodramatic—situations. When she was a young woman she created the following scene in a letter to a friend:

The other day I tried to think how I should look with my eyes shut, and a little white gown on, and a snowdrop on my breast; and I fancied I heard the neighbors stealing in so softly to look down in my face—so fast asleep—so still—Oh Jennie, will you and I really become like this?²⁸²

As a person and as a poet, Emily Dickinson appears to have posed much of the time, dramatizing her individuality, investing ordinary actions with dramatic proportions, and regarding "life under the rubric of its most sacred and dramatic occasions."²⁸³ Both love and death held the dramatic richness this poet desired. A life-time of expectant waiting for death, as one would await the knock on the door announcing the return of a lover, gave her existence drama and pitch and her creative intellect strong stimulus.

²⁸¹Chase, p. 7.

²⁸²Letters (Johnson, ed.), I, 197.

²⁸³Chase, p. 76.

In Emily Dickinson a need to dramatize and a discriminating sensitivity to the way in which the dramatic possibilities of love and death could be artistically utilized intensified her interest in both experiences. These twin themes were psychologically rooted in the dramatic bent of her temperament--personal and creative. Because of this propensity, she often presents love and death as ritualized experiences of mythic significance. In her better poems this emblematic quality enriches; in her weaker ones it becomes gratuitous. The poet's sense of the dramatic contributes to the concreteness of lyrics in which death enters as an ambivalent suitor. It also contributes to the sentimentality of many love poems in which the voice postures as a little girl.²⁸⁴ In many of her more successful lyrics, Emily Dickinson's astringent wit keeps the dramatic from slipping into the melodramatic in her handling of love and death.

The final psychological factor conditioning Emily Dickinson's attitudes toward these crucial experiences was her double vision. She felt that only by antithesis could truth be revealed. The contradictions of human existence were dynamic mysteries that challenged her mind, for to her they held the embryos of truth hidden within them. That these paradoxes haunted her is evident in the mental processes apparent in her integral use of antithesis, irony, and paradox in her poetry.

²⁸⁴ Chase associates this posture with the rococo tradition, which he terms "feminine and affectedly 'infantine.'" p. 229. He indicates the implications of such a convention for Emily Dickinson's love-death poetry when he adds that "it eschews the grand passion of love for fear of spoiling the delightful playfulness of the game and dispelling the illusion of naïveté and childish innocence." p. 229.

The Poverty that was not Wealth--
Cannot be Indigence (771)

The Zeroes--taught us--Phosphorus--
We learned to like the Fire
By Playing Glaciers--when a Boy--
And Tinder--guessed--by power
Of Opposite-- (689)

Best Gains--must have the Losses' Test-- (684)

Forever--is composed of Nows-- (624)

He was weak, and I was strong--then-- (190)

I rose--because He sank-- (616)

Delight--becomes pictorial--
When viewed through Pain-- (572)

'Twas a Divine Insanity--
The Danger to be Sane (593)

A quiet--Earthquake Style-- (601)

Cunning Reds of Morning
Make the Blind--leap-- (728)

I see thee better--in the Dark-- (611)

The Brain--is wider than the Sky-- (632)

Obviously, the mind in which these lines originated was a complex one. Emily Dickinson's attitude toward reality was correspondingly complex; as a result she lived in a suspension that was both painful and fruitful. In poems separated by at least a decade, she suggests consequences of this ambivalence:

Staking our entire Possession
On a Hair's result--
Then--Seesawing--cooly--on it--
Trying if it split-- (971)

In insecurity to lie
Is Joy's insuring quality. (1434)

In analyzing this duality at the root of her consciousness, Whicher

relates it to her response to death. "Things look different when seen in prospect and retrospect. Life is not precious save as mortality makes it so."²⁸⁵ Emily Dickinson's handling of death is typically complex. In many of her poems the voice's posture is one of certainty about eternal life. This confidence came from the poet's emotional, intuitive, mystical assurance of immortality. But she also had a skeptical side and her confidence was vitiated, at times, by agonizing intellectual doubts. When she had the greatest personal need to believe in immortality, her privately structured certainty could not be depended upon for genuine support. As a result, her art is tensioned by two different, opposed approaches to death. The attitudes of a hopeful, believing Christian qualify those of a skeptic whose mind is seared by doubt. Observing a parallel effect of the poet's double vision, Thackrey says: "both idealist and realist, Emily not only dreamed of the mystical meaning of death, discovering in him a benign divinity; she scrutinized a corporeal death, finding it terrifying and infernal."²⁸⁶ Her approach to love was equally ambivalent. Just as doubt qualified her faith as she confronted death, so fear and renunciation qualified joy and desire as she faced love. Unconscious fear of psychic annihilation and suspicion of physical union opposed conscious desire for transcendence in love. Part of the ambivalence in Emily Dickinson's love poetry arises from her Puritan's idealism interacting with her artist's response to the concrete. The negative and positive poles of her psyche were held in a state of almost continual tension and perfect balance. The effects of this psychological suspension upon her art are evident in her construction of a

²⁸⁵This Was a Poet, p. 303.

²⁸⁶Thackrey, p. 100.

love-death poetry of inclusion—one that is vastly enriched by the tension of irony and paradox.

Theological

Although Emily Dickinson's peculiar handling of the love-death motif had historical, biographical, and psychological sources as well, probably the most decisive was the theological. For this woman the most gnawing uncertainties—and ones integrally related to both these experiences—were religious ones. Is love, indifference, or vengeance God's chief mark? Is traditional faith possible in a scientific age? Is immortality a fiction of man's imagination? Is human suffering the will of an Old Testament God? Can man find God in institutional religion? How can the individual have a meaningful encounter with God? Emily Dickinson's constant religious hunger and spiritual quest were linked to these crucial theological questions. Although she spent her life existentially trying to solve these pivotal uncertainties and to experience divinity, the decade following her year at Mt. Holyoke seems a particular time of religious strain. Without the help of church or sacrament or minister, she explored the unknown regions of her own soul, searching for evidence of the nature of God. This inward quest was cosmic in scope and ultimately decisive in the poet's life and art.

Part of Emily Dickinson's spiritual difficulties lay in herself and part in institutional religion in America in her life time. In an age when revivals were popular, church construction spiralled, printed sermons and religious tracts were a literary form as well as a means of instruction, and popular religious art and music were a part of mass culture, the church was a part of American life for the majority, but doubt was growing among the

intellectual minority. As Emerson observed in his 1841 "Lecture on the Times," "Our torment is Unbelief."²⁸⁷ Higher Criticism, scientific advancement, and Yankee materialism undermined the darker theology, evangelical literalism, and rigid moralism of the major denominations so strongly that Bronson Alcott described "the whole scientific culture of the age" as "not only un-Christian, but anti-Christian."²⁸⁸ Emily Dickinson did not seek any compromise with the scientific materialism of the mid-nineteenth century, but she did find the sin-conscious, hell-fire theology of her heritage unacceptable. Her own spiritual refinement, intellectual honesty, and strong individuality set her in conflict with the image of God present in the Calvinism that was still alive in the Valley. Her own religious hunger and spiritual intensity turned her away from the Calvinism that was already dead but remaining as a mere skeleton in New England; its pietistic moralism could not nourish the profoundly spiritual nature of this woman for whom God and her relationship to him were the transcendent facts of existence.

Although a few critics have called Emily Dickinson a non-believer,²⁸⁹ her religious struggle did not so much involve doubts about the existence of God, whom she said "cannot discontinue himself,"²⁹⁰ but about his nature and the ability of conventional religion to reveal it. As she found institutional

²⁸⁷ Quoted in Mattheissen, p. 181.

²⁸⁸ Quoted by Carl Bode in The Anatomy of American Popular Culture, p. 183.

²⁸⁹ ". . . on the whole an unbeliever . . .," Chase, p. 163.

²⁹⁰ Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 610.

Christianity less and less meaningful, her poems suggest how painful and lonely was her approach to God. For someone less religious, the inability to reach the supreme being in the church would have been less critical. Numerous of her early poems, which have been interpreted as evidence of the poet's longing for lost love, may also be read as a sign of her agonized desire for lost faith. The sense of absence in these poems may well be the result of the deprivation of orthodox belief--belief which she had not questioned as a child--rather than of the loss of a lover.²⁹¹ Later poems, however, provide less disputable landmarks in this woman's spiritual journey. One poem directly voices adult nostalgia for a child's simple, untroubled faith which "Never had a Doubt--" (637). Some poems reveal a realization of the emptiness of life without faith:

To lose one's faith--surpass
The loss of an Estate--
Because Estates can be
Replenished--faith cannot--

Inherited with Life--
Belief--but once--can be--
Annihilate a single clause--
And Being's--Beggary-- (377)

Because the poet now thought of God as "Presence . . . denied" (437), she felt desolate and questioned if there "dwells one other Creature/ of Heavenly Love --forgot--" (532). In other poems she graphically presents the apparent futility of her attempts to discover the reality of God and to experience his presence:

At least--to pray--is left--is left--
Oh Jesus--in the Air--

²⁹¹N.B. Poems: 121, 135, 167, 178, 203, 245, and 247.

I know not which thy chamber is--
I'm knocking--everywhere--

Thou settest Earthquake in the South--
And Maelstrom, in the Sea--
Say, Jesus Christ of Nazareth--
Hast Thou no Arm for Me? (502)

Infinitude--Had'st Thou no Face
That I might look on Thee? (564)

Although Emily Dickinson feared that she had lost her faith when she could not accept Calvinism, her faith perfectly matched Tillich's description of it as a state of ultimate concern. For her the doubt she found a "scalding anguish" (193) was essential. Before a deeper, more interiorized spirituality could be reached, she had first to suffer skepticism.

When one attempts to raise an edifice of spiritual consciousness, the rubble of lost meaning must first be cleared from the mind. Such a clearing process requires disinterested inquiry and skepticism. It requires that one refuse to clutter the spaces of the mind with furniture designed primarily for comfort.²⁹²

For Emily Dickinson, however, the gradual realization of her psychological and theological estrangement from her Puritan heritage was not a coolly disinterested but a painfully purifying process. It involved existential anxiety and doubt and led to a state of theological shock--the essence of her crisis--that resulted in an eclectic faith tensioned with skepticism. For this woman there apparently never could be the orthodox certitude she desired. Nowhere is Emily Dickinson's polarity more apparent than in her skeptical intellect's rejecting the absolute answers that her religious nature craved.²⁹³ As late

²⁹²Flick, p. 34.

²⁹³Other critics have agreed on the severe religious tension Emily Dickinson experienced as "alternating doubt and belief held her mind unresolved

as 1877 she wrote to Samuel Bowles of:

. . . that Religion
That doubts--as fervently as it believes.²⁹⁴

And the following year she wrote:

How brittle are the Piers
On which our Faith doth tread-- (1433).

Years before Emily Dickinson came to this existential position,²⁹⁵ she began her religious quest. Brought up in strict Calvinism, she accepted Puritan doctrine and practice for ". . . childhood is earth's confiding time."²⁹⁶ Her home, church, and school provided Emily Dickinson's early concept of divinity. The Supreme Being that Amherst believed in was the one that the poet met as a child and, since there was no other church than the Congregational in town during her formative years, this was the fearful God of predestination. As a college town dedicated to Christian living, Amherst was conscious of its godly mission. It sent missionaries to far countries. It sponsored revivals,

to the very end." Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 285. N.B.: Griffith, Long Shadow, pp. 79-80; Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 239; Flick, p. 16; and Burkhardt, p. 7. A few critics maintain that she never experienced mature doubts or that she experienced an overwhelming conversion that resolved them in ecstatic confidence: "in later years when her faith was firmly realized," Capps, p. 29; her faith "as simple and strong as that of a child," Gilbert P. Voigt, "The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson," CE, III (November, 1941), 193; "After 1862, she . . . was pledged to God; her loyalties, and her assumptions fixed," Sherwood, p. 179; and ". . . finally consecration of herself to God." Miller, p. 134.

²⁹⁴Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 574.

²⁹⁵The poet seemed well aware of the ambivalence of her belief and its relation to her complexity as a person. After George Eliot's death, Emily Dickinson called her "Now, my George Eliot" and added: "The gift of belief which her greatness denied her, I trust she receives in the childhood of the kingdom of heaven." Letters (Johnson, ed.), III, 700.

²⁹⁶Ibid.

like the "Harvest of 1850," to bring the unconverted to God. It aroused the wicked to the dangers of alcohol. With badges and banners, the Cold Water Army of North Amherst marched through town in 1850 and then listened to addresses by two ministers and the respected Edward Dickinson.²⁹⁷ As she shared less and less in this community of belief, Emily Dickinson increasingly felt her spiritual isolation. Not only did her differing vision of God cut her off from her friends and neighbors; it also, she felt, cut her off from God. During the winter of the nineteenth century's Great Awakening, her letters say again and again in varying guises "I am alone--all alone."²⁹⁸

In the Dickinson home religion was a powerful force. Family prayer and Bible reading were daily practices just as church attendance was a weekly one. Because of their shyness, Emily Dickinson's family did not, however, talk of their religious experience; each one's encounter with his creator was a private, unshared meeting. At the same time, in such an atmosphere one's relation with God had a social significance. The search for faith was solitary; but once a person experienced the inner conversion that was recognized as a sign of faith, he joined the church. The proof of faith was still private, but one's commitment to the church implied social responsibility that elicited social approbation. From the time of Emily Dickinson's infancy, her mother was a church member. During the great revival of 1850, her father, her sister, and her friend, Sue Gilbert, made their profession of faith as members of the First Church of Christ. Edward Dickinson's long delay in joining the

²⁹⁷Leyda, I, 179.

²⁹⁸N.B.: Gelpi, p. 12; Capps, p. 28; and Higgins, p. 47.

church seemed to have roots similar to his daughter's final refusal to join it. His delay was not a sign of his lack of religious sensitivity and concern, but instead of his hesitancy to make a covenant with God until his doubts were dissolved.²⁹⁹ The dramatic surrender of himself to God symbolized by the written pledge her father carried hidden in his wallet until his death indicates the intensity of the spiritual fire that burned unseen in the poet's home. After Austin joined the church in 1856, Emily Dickinson realized again how far she had moved from the God her heritage offered to her.

In the church she also encountered the Puritan God whom she found less and less attractive or believable. The sermons she heard and the ministers she knew were her two most direct contacts with institutional Calvinism. Generally she found the weekly sermon boring, trite, and narrow.³⁰⁰ Even Lavinia, whose nature was obviously less literary than her sister's, frequently criticized the sermons in her diary.

JUNE 1, SABBATH. A Mr Holt preached in morning, Mr. Ober in afternoon, both dry & stale, did not attend evening meeting.³⁰¹

In a letter to Sue Gilbert in April, 1853, Austin makes an even more damning comment upon the quality of sermons.

I^{ve} been to church all day, as usual--in the forenoon to the Baptist in the afternoon to the Congregational--& listened to very dull preaching in both--I was amazed this afternoon in looking through the pew in which I sat . . . & see every person but one--nodding . . . I tried as hard as I could to find something in the sermon--but I could^{nt} & gave it up--³⁰²

²⁹⁹Letters (Johnson, ed.), I, 83.

³⁰⁰Her avid reading of Dr. Wadsworth's sermons in printed form was a notable exception to her aversion for the kind of sermon available in Amherst.

³⁰¹Leyda, I, 200.

³⁰²Ibid., I, 269.

Emily Dickinson's objections to local preaching went deeper than matters of rhetoric; the god presented was to her an unreal and distorted one. As dogmas about the Trinity, Original Sin, and predestination became less convincing to her growing skepticism, weekly sermons became more oppressive and repulsive. Although a recent critic's statement that "Meeting was, for her, an experience to be avoided if possible, endured if not, its ritual petty and fatiguing, its ministers bombastic, presumptuous, or dull,"³⁰³ seems excessive, there is support in the poet's own words in a letter as late as 1859. "Mr. S. preached in our church last Sabbath upon 'predestination,' but I do not respect 'doctrines,' and did not listen to him."³⁰⁴ In a later poem on the same topic, the diction and tone are particularly acid.

He preached upon "Breadth" till it argued him narrow--
The Broad are too broad to define
And of "Truth" until it proclaimed him a liar--
The Truth never flaunted a Sign-- (1207)

Despite the fact that Emily Dickinson equated "counterfeit presence" with some ministers, she had profound respect for those others whom she believed were truly religious. From these men she hoped to gain spiritual insights. The reverence in which she held Dr. Wadsworth partially stemmed from her conviction that he possessed the pearl of great price she longed for and partially from the spiritual discussions that constituted their correspondence. In a much lesser fashion, she looked to her distant relative, the Reverend Perez D. Cowan, and her friend and neighbor, the Reverend Jonathan Jenkins, for some pastoral guidance. Although Emily Dickinson could not accept institutional

³⁰³ Sherwood, p. 12.

³⁰⁴ Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 346.

religion, she did respond to the religious spirit in certain men within the institution.

Some of Emily Dickinson's most unorthodox theological ideas apparently came from her reading of the Bible. In school and church she came in contact with Calvinistic interpretations of Scripture, but her own private reading of the Bible seemed more formative. At first she must have read Scripture conventionally; later her critical and artistic faculties modified her reaction to the Bible as theological or historical truth. "Her attitude toward Scripture, its teachings and stories, was puzzled, irreverent, and half-trusting by turns, as was her attitude toward the Christian dogmas."³⁰⁵ The God of the Bible troubled her. In the Old Testament she discovered a deity she could not fully accept; in the New Testament she found a man she could admire—but not accept as divine. For her Christ—especially in his suffering—was the symbol of human greatness. Her rejection of the Old Testament God for his lack of love and of the New Testament Jesus for his lack of awesomeness and mystery typifies her theological ambivalence. Although the poet's reading of Matthew for hope paralleled her reading of John as "an exploration of the subject of faith,"³⁰⁶ the Book of Revelations seemed to have satisfied most fully her spiritual needs and to have fulfilled her concept of God. Its solemnity and symbolism corresponded to her use of awe for the infinitude of God whose nature escapes human definition and, therefore, human naming. Emily Dickinson's reading of the Bible as an often inspiring but humanly limited myth—in her

³⁰⁵Lindberg, p. 85.

³⁰⁶Capps, p. 51.

"soberer moments" she called it "Romance" (597)--contributed to her picture of God and further separated her from Puritan orthodoxy.³⁰⁷ During her year at Mt. Holyoke Seminary, the God of Calvinism came into sharper focus in Emily Dickinson's spiritual eye. This year was so significant in her spiritual development that some critics consider it decisive.³⁰⁸ Although many of the young woman's religious conflicts became especially strong then, it seems that, rather than being a climax to, this year was the beginning of her mature spiritual struggle. The aims of Mt. Holyoke and the character of Mary Lyons, the head mistress, fostered an unusually introspective religious atmosphere.

The very existence of a school of higher learning for women was at the time a bold experiment, justified only by its dedication to the interests of piety. Although the curriculum of the institution even at its beginning might fairly be called liberal, the heart if not the mind of the college lay in its religious revivalism.³⁰⁹

As Mary Lyons conducted her own brand of Puritan revival, the anxiety within Emily Dickinson grew. She would have liked to be able to conform, to detect within her own soul signs of grace, and to join her classmates in their declaration of faith. Although she watched others "flocking to the ark of safety,"³¹⁰ she could not profess belief in theological tenets that violated her concept of God nor in a conversion that she did not actually experience. She may have

³⁰⁷ See Gelpi, p. 48 and Flick, p. 200 for similar views concerning the poet's reading of the Bible as metaphor.

³⁰⁸ "From the religious point of view the year was a crucial one for Emily Dickinson." Ford, p. 47; "The evidence indicates that this was the crisis of the poet's religious life." Chase, p. 55. Flick puts Emily Dickinson's religious crisis "in the years immediately following her brief but disturbing psychological experience at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary." p. 35.

³⁰⁹ Henry W. Wells, The American Way of Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), p. 69.

³¹⁰ Letters (Johnson, ed.), I, 60.

refused to become a church member at this time because she also: 1) resented the psychic pressures used by the teacher; 2) distrusted the emotionalism under which the declarations were made; and 3) believed that man's most sacred relations should not be so public. Whatever Emily Dickinson's reasons were, "the withholding of the solicited response to this essential aspect of her native culture put her under a severe emotional strain"³¹¹ and added to her sense of alienation from the God she sought. This experience undoubtedly added to the poet's questioning the nature of the God who seemed simultaneously to invite and to reject her and, therefore, to her moving further away from orthodoxy.

Since the Edwardian God was the only one Emily Dickinson could find in the institutions of her culture, her religious quest had to turn inward if it was not to be destroyed by despair. Consequently, the young woman turned away from dogmatic to experimental Christianity. Because her faith was experiential rather than institutional, the poet spent over a decade trying to encounter God and to define her relation to him. During this period the seeds of doubt and faith--about the goodness, not the reality, of the godhead--developed in the rich soil of the poet's mind and soul, preparing for the final metaphysical shock that would leave her theologically suspended between the positive and negative poles of her being in a balance

That tips so frequent, now,
It takes me all the while to poise--
And then--it does'nt [sic] stay-- (576).

The 1850s were years of searching and suffering for Emily Dickinson as she tried to resolve her metaphysical quandaries. Driven by her nature to

³¹¹Phillips, p. 179.

discover definitive answers to her questions, she faced the inscrutability of the Infinite. Although she found the instruments available to her as a finite being painfully incapable of achieving the absolute certainty she craved,³¹² she did not give up the search. The cosmic questions that she grappled with during these years appear thematically later in her poetry. The nature of God, human suffering, and personal immortality filled her mind during this decade. These were the three pivotal questions to which she found only partial or, more typically, ambivalent answers.

In Emily Dickinson's mind the nature of God was the first uncertainty; it was the basic one and served as a hinge for the other two. If God was a loving father, then evil could be accepted and immortality could be both possible and desirable. If God, on the other hand, was an indifferent creator, then man was in a precarious state. Finally, if God was a malicious tyrant, then suffering would be man's fate in time and eternity. Because she never doubted the reality of God, the possibility of his being aloof or cruel was an uncertainty that haunted her. When she wrote:

I know that He exists.
Somewhere---in Silence---
He has hid his rare life
From our gross eyes (338)

the key words Somewhere, Silence, and hid suggest how inadequate she felt her knowledge of God was. The imperfection of her knowledge was partly the result of her confrontation with the shallow and distorted conceptualizations of the Puritan deity. Doubting the "reality of the preposterous monster proposed to

³¹²That she wanted in the realm of theology the kind of certainty possible in the realm of science is apparent in Poem 185.

her by conventional religion,"³¹³ she had not yet filled in the features of the creator she could recognize. That he must exist she knew, but she oscillated between the Old Testament God of vengeance whom she had been taught to believe in and the New Testament God of love whom she existentially knew. As a consequence, the tone of her poems treating the divine vary from the skeptical to the confident, from the bitter to the hopeful.³¹⁴

In her desperate questioning, Emily Dickinson contemplated the existence of a distant, indifferent, or malicious God. A number of her poems present a voice who doubts the goodness and justice of a creator who: 1) smugly builds mansions but shuts out children in a storm (127); 2) withholds himself from those who seek him (564); 3) jealously snatches from man what could give him pleasure (1260); 4) withholds his help until man has perished from its lack (1270); 5) is ruthless and cruel in his dealings with man (1439); 6) uses duplicity towards his creatures (1461); and 7) approves of death. Two behavior patterns of the godhead that Emily Dickinson records in her poetry seem to account for her presenting an impassible and arbitrary deity. God's apparent unfeeling treatment of Old Testament figures and those now seeking him in prayer is a motif in her religious poetry. To this woman the Biblical story

³¹³Wells, Introduction, p. 154.

³¹⁴Despite Chase's many fine insights into the poet's religious position, his comment on page 179, that the "wry satire" in her poems about God "is not directed against God so much as against conventional ideas of God," seems a bit simplistic. If the poet had been able to free herself totally from the fear that hostility might be God's attitude toward man, her faith would have been less qualified by skepticism and her attitude toward God less polarized. Another critic's claim that Emily Dickinson's poetry "definitely repudiates the too anthropomorphic God of the Puritan tradition" also minimizes the ambivalence of the poet's religious position. Phillips, p. 136.

of Moses and Abraham seemed a riddle of injustice and cruelty. She was simultaneously fearful and scornful of a god who would treat his chosen servants so badly. The tone and analogy she employs to explain her reasons for thinking Moses wronged by God carry a severe judgment. After saying that Stephen and Paul "were only put to death," she adds:

While God's adroiter will
On Moses--seemed to fasten
With tantalizing Play
As Boy--should deal with lesser Boy--
To prove ability. (597)

In this poem and the later one in which she describes God's treatment of Abraham, the poet finds most fault in divine motivation. The picture of God in this second poem is equally harsh and unfeeling. In Poem 597 he is an immature bully; in Poem 1317 he is a petty tyrant who is "Flattered by Obeisance." In neither situation is there evidence of a loving god; in fact, he suffers from the worst kind of anthropomorphism by using his power arbitrarily and cruelly.

Emily Dickinson's failure to find God in prayer seemed to contribute to her fear that he might not be after all a God of love. Her sense of being rejected (248) or ignored (376) reinforced her suspicion that the Puritan concept of divinity might be true. In a number of poems, the voice tells how futile prayer has become because God is too aloof from man to listen.

I prayed, at first, a little Girl,
Because they told me-- (576)

But I, grown shrewder--scan the Skies
With a suspicious Air--
As Children--swindled for the first
All Swindlers--be--infer-- (476)

In the poems dealing directly with prayer, the speaker's attitude can be as calmly disillusioned as it is in Poem 476 or as indignantly resentful as it is

in Poem 376, which opens with a cynical rhetorical question and terrible simile.

Of Course—I prayed—
And did God Care?
He cared as much as on the Air
A Bird—had stamped her foot—
And cried "Give Me"—

Emily Dickinson's fear that infinitude may be "a disappointing God" (1751) is present in many forms in her poems and letters. In one poem she uses a biblical metaphor inversely. The figures that one expects to reveal God's love here deny its reality.

Was God so economical?
His Table's spread too high for Us—
Unless We dine on tiptoe—
Crumbs—fit such little mouths—
Cherries—suit Robins—
The Eagle's Golden Breakfast strangles—Them—
God keep His Oath to Sparrows—
Who of little Love—know how to starve— (690)

The implications of the last two lines were especially frightening to one who looked to God for love. In a poem and a letter separated by about twenty years, Emily Dickinson pitted the connotations of friend against God's treatment of those whom traditional religion claims are his friends to dramatize divinity's lack of love. Contrasting the expected "Hand of Friend" with the proffered "Claw of Dragon," the speaker implicitly condemns the way the "Heavenly Father" leads his children "Far from Love" (1021). Writing to her aunt in 1884, the poet said:

It is very wrong that you were ill, and whom shall I accuse?
The enemy, "eternal, invisible, and full of glory"—but He declares
himself a friend!³¹⁵

³¹⁵ Letters (Johnson, ed.), III, 851.

In another letter two years earlier, she questioned her friend Mrs. Holland:
Is God's Love Adversary?³¹⁶

After Dr. Holland's death a few years previous, she had written to this same friend a letter that suggests how far her concept of God was from the qualities of friendship:

I shall never forget the Doctor's prayer, my first morning with you--so simple, so believing. That God must be a friend--that was a different God--and I almost felt warmer myself, in the midst of a tie so sunshiny.³¹⁷

Although the joyful, playful tone of this letter lessens the sting of the accusation, these words seem to fit the darker notion Emily Dickinson had of God's nature. Another letter reveals her disdain for, but apprehension of, the Calvinistic deity. After wittily referring to elements of Puritan belief, the poet closed with:

Orpheus' Sermon captivated--
It did not condemn--³¹⁸

Since Emily Dickinson could not theologically accept a God of Wrath or indifference, although she could still fear the possibility of one, it would seem that Christ should have satisfied her requirements for deity. Her references, however, to Jesus in letters and poems do not indicate that she accepted his divinity. Possibly her religious sensibility slanted too much toward the non-physical to admit divinity in flesh and too much toward the inscrutable to admit a person as infinite being.³¹⁹ A god of unapproachable light was

³¹⁶ Ibid., III, 755.

³¹⁷ Ibid., III, 713.

³¹⁸ Ibid., III, 732.

³¹⁹ This statement disagrees with Johnson's that "the person of God was a reality to her." Emily Dickinson, p. 243. However, he later qualifies this claim: "Her vision of Christ was almost entirely limited to his fellowship and humanity." p. 245.

more acceptable than one with recognizable humanity. Although she revered Christ as the representative man, she never seemed to find in him the qualities she desired in the supreme being.³²⁰ Whether her difficulties with the Incarnation were theological or psychological, this poet was not a Trinitarian; consequently, Christology added few pieces to her mosaic of divinity.³²¹

As Emily Dickinson tried to penetrate the mystery of God, she discovered that theologically-philosophically she could grasp him only in abstract terms while artistically she could better present him in concrete ones. If Flick is correct in saying that "Emily Dickinson regarded the term 'God' as too ambiguous and anthropomorphic to be meaningful,"³²² her preference for abstractions is more understandable. The words Infinitude, Vastness, or Power would probably approximate her rather nebulous--and often ambivalent--concept of the divine nature. Other critics who have analyzed this poet's religious position have come to similar conclusions.

Basically she conceived of God as infinitude, creative activity, motion, light, incomprehensible immensity. His boundless sufficiency awed her but never made her cringe.³²³

Godhead in Emily Dickinson's poetry is more often referred to in metaphorical terms such as Immortality, Eternity, the Infinite,

³²⁰ Her poetic references to Christ are usually incidental in poems dealing with love, suffering, or death. In these poems Christ's example is introduced to support the speaker's position. N.B. Poems: 85, 153, 158, 193, 203, 225, 317, 394, 432, 456, 502, 648 and 833. The experience of Poems 497, 502, 964, and 1207 is religious and Christ's presence in them is more essential poetically and orthodox theologically.

³²¹ If belief in the divinity of Christ is required of one calling himself a Christian, Emily Dickinson probably could not qualify as one in the orthodox sense of the term.

³²² Flick, p. 13.

³²³ Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 245.

Love, Beauty, Truth, the Silence, Heaven, or Paradise, than as
God . . . ³²⁴

It would probably come as close as is possible for the imperfect medium of language, to say that Emily Dickinson understood God to be the center and matrix of being . . . ³²⁵

Emily Dickinson found her God incomprehensible as a Person; He was faceless, indeterminate--and hence menacing. Exposure threatened the integrity and identity of the individual by opening him to obliteration by the Absolute, to engulfment by anonymous Being. ³²⁶

In her poetry the counterpoint of opposites is apparent. The sublime concepts she formulated of God mixed with her fearful ones as she called God: Burglar (49), Banker (49), Papa (61), King (103), Saviour (217), Swindler (476), Great Spirit (476), Curious Friend (564), thrifty Deity (724), Jehovah (982), Awful Father of Love (1204), and Mastiff (1317).

The ambivalence Emily Dickinson felt toward the supreme being, in whose reality she never lost faith, strongly colored her attitudes toward love and death. Just as she both desired and feared authentic encounters with God, encounters which promised a way to transcendence of her human limitations and also threatened her identity as an individual, so she simultaneously desired and feared the promise of fulfillment and the possibility of destruction in love and death.

These ambivalent elements in Emily Dickinson's vision of God had a direct effect on all her other theological convictions and religious attitudes. They particularly molded her position on human suffering and personal immortality. Rejecting the traditional dogma of Original Sin and the Calvinistic tenet of natural depravity, evil raised many questions for Emily Dickinson.

³²⁴Phillips, p. 36.

³²⁵Flick, p. 219.

³²⁶Gelpi, p. 123.

If God is a loving father, then he cannot be the source of human suffering. If, on the other hand, he is indifferent or ill-willed, he may easily be. If man does not sin in the orthodox sense, then his pain cannot be explained as purification or justified as penance. If, finally, there is no way to account for the anguish of the human condition, man could seem to be condemned to life in an unjust universe.

Emily Dickinson recognized the reality of human pain. Experientially and philosophically she realized how much suffering is a part of man's lot. Pondering the dilemma of an all-loving, all-powerful God who permits man to suffer and die, this woman searched for a solution equal to her own uncertainty and her own anguish. Being neither a Calvinist nor a Transcendentalist in her confrontation with man's pain, her adjustment to suffering was neither theological nor philosophical. Even though she treats the crucifixion as an example for all men, she seemed to regard it not as a redemptive act but as a paradigm of man's need to suffer.³²⁷ The emphasis is not upon God's involvement in suffering but upon pain's part in man's full spiritual development. Although her rationale for the necessity and good of suffering resembles Emerson's idea of compensation, it is basically psychological rather than metaphysical. Because she believed that man gained only through loss, suffering to Emily Dickinson was essential for human maturity. Because of her conviction about the inherent value of opposites, she saw a direct ratio between privation and psychic growth. She did not believe that a merciful God or beneficent nature compensated man for each loss, but that only through pain could man properly

³²⁷Flick, p. 254. N.B. Poems: 553, 567, and 571.

value the happiness he had had and be ready to respond more fully to it in the future.

Who never lost, are unprepared
A Coronet to find! (73)

Best Gains—must have the Losses' Test—
To constitute them—Gains— (684)

Joy to have merited the Pain—
To merit the Release— (788)

Despite her use in these poems of words with religious overtones, the poet's focus is primarily psychological; it can be called spiritual only in the broadest sense of the word. In other poems and letters, the persona recognizes a related value of psychic tension for those "Ordained to suffering" (405).

There is a strength in proving that it can be borne
Although it tear—
What are the sinews of such cordage for
Except to bear
The ship might be of satin had it not to fight— (1113)

Trial as a Stimulus far exceeds Wine though it would hardly
be prohibited as a Beverage.³²⁸

For Emily Dickinson suffering was more than "the discipline of hindrance"³²⁹ honored in New England. It was also a necessary way to gain insights, to develop values, and to achieve full human growth. Because of her belief that pain was both essential and salutary, this poet could write:

A nearness to Tremendousness—
An agony procures— (963)

This emphasis on the positive value of suffering links Emily Dickinson with

³²⁸ Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 532.

³²⁹ Bingham, ed., Emily Dickinson's Home, p. 42.

Hawthorne and James, accounts for her prizing renunciation, and affects—in a radical manner—her handling of love and death.

Emily Dickinson's life and art testify to the value she ascribed to renunciation. Although she "possessed the Christian's capacity for self-discipline,"³³⁰ her motivation for this "piercing Virtue" (745) was psychological rather than ascetic. Two of her basic beliefs led her to prize renunciation: 1) expectation excels fulfillment; and 2) loss means gain. These psychic patterns are evident in paradoxical statements such as:

The Banquet of Abstemiousness
Defaces that of wine— (1430).

. . . the Joy we most revere—we profane in taking.³³¹

Many of her poems proclaim that because loss heightens appreciation it is really a gain.³³²

. . . finer is a going
Than a remaining Face— (1422).

I see thee clearer for the Grave
That took thy face between (1666).

So deeply was renunciation embedded in her mind set that Whicher calls it "the most striking theme of her poetry."³³³ The value she attributed to self-chosen deprivation did not lessen its pain for her. The violence of her

³³⁰ Rollo Walter Brown, "A Sublimated Puritan," in Lonely Americans (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1929), p. 249.

³³¹ Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 566.

³³² N.B. Poems: 313, 662, 1382, 1497, and 1764.

³³³ George F. Whicher, Emily Dickinson: A Bibliography (Amherst, Mass.: The Jones Library, Inc., 1930), p. 13.

definition of renunciation as

The putting out of Eyes—
Just Sunrise— (745)

and the sensuous richness of the language she uses here and in other poems to describe it suggest the coupling of severe physical desire and its frustration that she experienced in keeping what she most wanted at a tantalizing distance. This psychic posture is directly related to the many poems in which the lover or his presence are renounced or the consummation of love is postponed until eternity. The motif of renunciation unites love and death in this woman's mind and art and supports her polarity of response to them in both.

In her existential attempts to discover the nature of divinity, Emily Dickinson confronted not only human suffering but also man's mortality. Her vision of God was crucial to her repeated efforts to find conclusive evidence for personal immortality. "The relationship between death and religion became for her, in fact, a circular one. Doubts concerning traditionally held religious beliefs focused her attention on death. Intense awareness of death prompted religious concern."³³⁴ A poem, which Johnson places as late as 1882, can be read as Emily Dickinson's realization of the relation between one's concept of God and confidence in immortality.

Those—dying then
Knew where they went—
They went to God's Right Hand—
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found— (1551).

All of her life she found reason simultaneously to hope in and to despair of individual consciousness after death. She did not so much vacillate between

³³⁴Ford, p. 20.

confidence and doubt as she did remain in almost perfect suspension between them. This ambivalence left her neither fully convinced of nor totally despairing of immortality.³³⁵ Her desire for communication with the dead in time

³³⁵ A number of critics hold substantially the same position: "Almost any aspect of doubt and belief can be found in her writings on immortality; she desired personal immortality and asserted that the soul never changed; yet, she . . . feared that eternity would be cosmic annihilation." Pickard, p. 111; "Of immortality as a future state she was never sure . . ." Ward, Capsule, p. 112; "Emily Dickinson did not want to be skeptical of immortality. She desperately wanted to believe that there was something after death." Ford, p. 150; "Over and over in her last years . . . Dickinson had said that the evidence available to her . . . was insufficient to support any definite religious belief in the subject [Immortality] at all, so that all she had to go on was her 'uncertain certainty,' her 'guess' or 'surmise,' and her willed commitment to the Possible." Waggoner, 334; "To the end of her life Emily wavered between hope and doubt about an attainable paradise the other side of death." Higgins, p. 183; ". . . Emily Dickinson subjected her intuition of immortality to a spirit of scepticism." Phillips, p. 214; "She seemed to realize that in the final analysis even religion is uncertain about the afterlife." Flick, p. 85; ". . . Emily Dickinson's estimate of death [and so of immortality] is shaped by whichever of two points of view she adopts in her poetry." Griffith, Long Shadow, p. 137; "Biographers have claimed that passing years and the deaths of friends forced a serene acceptance of immortality, but . . . much of the time she would have been satisfied with the stoicism that she admired in Judge Lord, which neither feared extinction nor prized redemption." Gelpi, p. 51. Other critics tend to weigh the scales more heavily in favor of her confidence in immortality: ". . . she discovered some ground . . . for a personal conception of such ideas as Heaven and Immortality." Wilbur, p. 128; "Her sincere and abiding faith in the immortality of the soul, seldom clouded by doubts . . . becomes an ever-recurrent theme of affirmation denying the finality of death." McNaughton, p. 55. Some other commentators maintain that Emily Dickinson had no doubts about personal immortality. Many of these are the same writers who also claim that her concept of God was untroubled by any dark notions: "To the end of her life her belief that . . . death was only the interval between life and immortality sustained her through all her moments of doubt and despair." Ida Fasel, "Emily Dickinson's Walden," Iowa English Yearbook, No. 7 (Fall, 1962), 26; "The dominant note in her poems on time and eternity is one of unswerving faith in the soul's immortality." Connors, 632; "The third article of Emily Dickinson's creed is her deep and abiding faith in the immortality of the soul." Gilbert P. Voigt, "The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson," CE, III (November, 1941), 196; and "To the doctrine of immortality, she paid the full homage of her understanding." Power, p. 28.

and for reunion with them in eternity sometimes seemed an assurance of immortality; at other times it seemed merely another terrible sign that man's desires are at cross purposes with his natural limitations. At times her desire for transcendence and its impossibility of fulfillment in this life seemed proof of another; at other times her aspirations served only to remind her that man may be fated to the anguish of being an over-reacher. Richard Wilbur's claim that one's sense of time's being "subject to the moods of the soul seemed to her proof of the soul's eternity"³³⁶ can be questioned in the light of Charles Anderson's study of the existential consequences of time for this woman.³³⁷ Isolated excerpts from either her letters or poems can be especially misleading in trying to ascertain Emily Dickinson's attitudes toward what she called the possibility of the "extension of Consciousness after Death."³³⁸ Frequently she uses the term immortality as a metaphorical vehicle. She sometimes uses it as an analogy for "the attaining of insight"³³⁹—in this life or in eternity. At other times, quite aside from any existence after death, she equates immortality "with the ultimate condition of completed personality."³⁴⁰ Besides this figurative use of immortality, there is also her antithetical treatment of it. The confidence in her words after her father's death:

I am glad there is Immortality—³⁴¹

³³⁶ in Emily Dickinson, ed. by Richard Sewall, p. 135.

³³⁷"Trap of Time ." ³³⁸Letters (Johnson, ed.), III, 667.

³³⁹Griffith, Long Shadow, p. 258; Chase speaks of "her insistence that immortality is a form of knowledge" as a "strikingly Gnostic strain" in her work. pp. 183-184.

³⁴⁰Porter, p. 18. ³⁴¹Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 528.

or after her mother's death:

. . . this was mother's week, Easter in November.
Father rose in June.³⁴²

must be balanced against the uncertainty in other letters and poems:

Of subjects that resist
Redoubtablest is this
Where go we--
Go we anywhere
Creation after this? (1417)

That it will never come again
Is what makes life so sweet.
Believing what we don't believe
Does not exhilarate. (1741)

The House of Supposition--
The Glimmering Frontier that
Skirts the Acres of Perhaps--
To me--shows--insecure-- (696)

Realizing that "if human death has no meaning, then the whole of life is nothing but emptiness,"³⁴³ Emily Dickinson wanted to believe in personal immortality, she tried to think of death this way (1558), but she could never discover the overwhelming evidence she craved.

Emily Dickinson's Janus-like conception of divinity accounts for the essential duality of her approach to immortality and, consequently, for its imprint in her poems of love and death. Her ambivalence toward immortality resulted in poems dreading the annihilation of death and others anticipating the ecstasy of individual consciousness after death. Because of this same ambivalence, she created poems in which lovers renounce joy here and look forward

³⁴² Ibid., III, 851.

³⁴³ Ladislaus Boros, S.J., The Mystery of Death, trans. by Gregory Bainbridge, O.S.B. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), p. viii.

instead to consummation in eternity and others in which they prefer the enjoyment of love here lest there be no eternity.

Rejecting so much of her Calvinistic inheritance, Emily Dickinson's religious position was highly heterodox; in fact, some of its elements might as easily be called literary-mythic as theological. Certain assumptions, however, which have metaphysical and/or theological implications, are evident in her lyrics. Three of these assumptions—which ironically seem to have roots in the Calvinism she threw off—are relevant to her artistic treatment of love and death: 1) the symbolic nature of reality³⁴⁴; 2) the superiority of illumination to reason in grasping reality; and 3) the inherent superiority of the soul to the body.

Despite the inquiring and skeptical nature of her mind, Emily Dickinson did not have much confidence in the ability of human reason to reach ultimate truth. To her the rational process was too limited to discover the final answers. Only knowledge that flashed suddenly across the consciousness like lightning was capable of coming near to the mystery at the core of being."³⁴⁵ In these moments of brilliant illumination and semi-ecstasy, the individual seemed to escape the boundaries of time and space and to plunge into the unfathomable. The poet's existential skepticism kept these intense influxes from becoming mystical in the orthodox sense of the word³⁴⁶—"absolute at-

³⁴⁴See pages 110-111.

³⁴⁵N.B. Poems: 420, 974, 1419, 1468, and 1581.

³⁴⁶There is wide critical divergence concerning this point. All major critics acknowledge the poet's experience of supra-logical flashes and gratuitous insights that exceed the ordinary. Whether they consider them spiritual

homeness in the universe through the experience of identification with the creator of it"³⁴⁷---but they were the moments in which she felt most fully alive and existence was most meaningful. They were moments of private revelation and spiritual joy. Like grace, they caused an inner change; they expanded consciousness in a spiritual manner. She termed these flashes "The Soul's Superior instants" (306); they occurred seldom but when they came, they served as "Mortal Abolition" (306) for they allowed consciousness to be free of the limits of the human condition. They also functioned "as stimulants" (393) to rescue the soul from "Despair---/Or Stupor" (393). They were short-lived, related to infinitude, and longed for:

A Grant of the Divine---
That Certain as it Comes---
Withdraws---and leaves the dazzled Soul

or literary, mystical or not, depends upon their definition and qualification of these terms and their reading of certain poems. Generally speaking, the following writers do not regard Emily Dickinson as a mystic: "Her attitude is not mystical." Blackmur, 328; "Emily Dickinson was no mystic yearning for union with God . . ." Anderson, "Emily Dickinson," American Literary Masters, I, 979; "Though neither nun nor mystic . . ." Spiller, Literary History, II, 908; and ". . . she was surely not a mystic in any closely defined sense of the word." Chase, p. 184. Other critics believe that although she had mystical tendencies, vision, or partial experience, she was not a mystic: ". . . she had the ability to conceive and to write about the range of mystical experiences." Flick, p. 27; and "Her mystical tendencies are the sequel to her break with orthodoxy." Wells, Introduction, p. 158. The last group of critics claim that Emily Dickinson was a mystic: ". . . the reverence that made her a mystic poet of the finest sort . . ." Aiken, 306; ". . . in the religious sense of the term--a Christian mystic," Voigt, 194; "Emily Dickinson, at least part of the time, discovered, as a result of mystical experience, a sense of complete and lasting fulfillment of her nature as a human being and as a poet." Thackrey, p. 44; and ". . . in some sense of the word a lover and a mystic . . ." Gelpi, p. 76. For a more complete survey of arguments for and against Emily Dickinson as a mystic writer see Chapter I of Phillips' dissertation. For a perceptive analysis of Emily Dickinson as a mystic poet see Louise Bogan's essay.

³⁴⁷Phillips, p. 73.

In her unfurnished Rooms-- (393).

Emily Dickinson structured a number of her poems around these experiences of heightened awareness. In some poems she employs the traditional imagery of the soul or consciousness as host and the divine intuition as guest to concretize the conditions necessary to prepare for these moments of revelation.

The Soul that hath a Guest
Doth seldom go abroad--
Diviner Crowd at Home--
Obliterate the need-- (674).

The Soul should always stand ajar
That if the Heaven inquire
He will not be obliged to wait
Or shy of troubling Her (1055).

In other poems, Emily Dickinson describes the quality of the intuitive flash; it is not merely rational, it is a multi-leveled revelation that can be violently experienced but not verbalized (420). Once the thunderbolt is gone, the consciousness recalls the vision gained in its blinding but revealing light (974). The moment of ecstatic awareness changes the psyche; it is now dissatisfied with its more ordinary, pedestrian mode of operating. So crucial were these experiences of private revelation to Emily Dickinson as a person and a poet that many critics have analyzed and tried to define them.³⁴⁸

Only certain occasions are associated in Emily Dickinson's poetry with this influx of divine energy--somewhat analogous to grace in the Edwardian

³⁴⁸ Considering them a type of non-orthodox salvation, Chase calls them "the few forcibly revelatory experiences," p. 123; associating them with the poet's symbolic use of circumference and awe, Johnson calls such an intuition ". . . a lightning flash that illuminates the stupendousness of the most ordinary crises of living," Emily Dickinson, p. 135; Gelpi speaks of them as "climatic capsule moments," p. 83; and Ward describes them as "moments of sudden revelation of a spiritual nature." Theodora Ward, "The Finest Secret: Emotional Currents in the Life of Emily Dickinson," Harvard Library Bulletin, XV (Winter, 1960), 83.

and to inspiration in the Emersonian tradition. She strictly limited these incandescent intuitive experiences. They excluded all but: 1) stirring creative enlightenments; 2) quasi-mystical visitations; 3) love and marriage; and 4) death and immortality. With the exception of immortality, every crucial experience required ascetic renunciation. Each experience of significance was related to the others and emblematic of the most characteristic one—death. These estates were characteristically narrow in their limitations, but deep in their spiritual connotations and intense in their emotional perception. Because of their joyful promise and devastating force, these crucial experiences elicited both hope and fear.³⁴⁹ These experiences were so alike in affording vision into the realities of the spirit that she called love and poetry "coeval" (1247). In this mythical structure death was the principle of true value insights and the source of all consciousness. As a consequence of these relationships, in her assumptions about intuitive experience Emily Dickinson connected love and death metaphysically.

Emily Dickinson's ideas about the relation of the soul to the body also conditioned her treatment of love and death. She was obsessed neither with the horrors of human corruptions nor with the pleasures of human passion. In fact, her poetry almost totally ignores these aspects of both experiences. In her poetic exploration of love and death, she gave little attention to the body per se. Apparently the flesh interested her so little because the spirit

³⁴⁹Emily Dickinson's choice of lightning as her typical image for this powerful revelatory experience is significant in its ambivalence. It suggests light, might, suddenness, destruction.

interested her so radically.

In this poet there was no medieval conflict between the soul and the body. In her Calvinistic heritage there was a suspicion of the body and its demands. As a young woman Emily Dickinson was well enough aware of this tenet of Puritanism to use its terminology, with some playfulness yet some seriousness, in a letter; "Colds make one very carnal and the spirit is always afraid of them."³⁵⁰ In her reading of Emerson, she did not find any moral war between the spirit and the flesh, but instead such emphasis upon the non-physical as "the principle of life"³⁵¹ that "no accurate adjustment between the spirit and the body" seemed possible.³⁵² In her writings Emily Dickinson speaks of the human body and soul as "Profound--precarious Property--" (1090). She treats their relationship as either essential or casual. After using musical metaphors, equating the body with a violin and the spirit with its music, to demonstrate the necessary union of the physical with the non-physical in man, she adds a further analogy:

The Spirit lurks within the Flesh
Like Tides within the Sea
That makes the Water live, estranged
What would the Either be? (1576)

Her poems in which the mind is isolated from the body and self-existent are, however, more frequent and more typical of her concept of the relation of spirit and flesh. Often she employs house, clothing, and bird imagery to show how casual this relation is. After the separation of death, the soul becomes

³⁵⁰ Letters (Johnson, ed.), I, 89.

³⁵¹ Emerson, p. 183.

³⁵² Ibid., p. 263.

"Costumeless Consciousness" (1453). In another poem the spirit triumphs over death and proves its superiority to dust by turning away and:

Just laying off for evidence
An Overcoat of Clay (976).

Later, but with the same casual tone, the speaker refers to the body as "corporeal clothes—" (1399). In a similar fashion the house in Poem 948 functions both literally and metaphorically.

Psychologically and theologically, if not artistically, Emily Dickinson was an adherent of idealism. This trait was noted by Herbert Child when he termed her a Platonist and further defined his predication by commenting that "her Platonism was essentially an ontological monism; a tendency to stress idea, spirit, rather than matter."³⁵³ Because of this monism, in Emily Dickinson's mind there was a hierarchy of spirit over matter that was pervasive if not always enunciated. In her free use of theological terms, soul, spirit, and consciousness are usually interchangeable and signify the essence of individuality that implies self-awareness, spirituality, and immortality. Consequently, in her writings the soul is generally superior to the body, gives meaning to the body, and is freer released from the body. The spirit's priority in her mind seemed to rest upon its inherent nobility, its essential independence of matter, and its claim to possible immortality.

Spirit cannot be moved by Flesh--It must be moved by spirit--³⁵⁴

A Being--impotent to end--
When once it had begun-- (565)

³⁵³"Emily Dickinson and Sir Thomas Browne," AL, XXII (January, 1951), 461.

³⁵⁴Letters (Johnson, ed.), III, 918.

No Rock can torture me--
My Soul--at Liberty--
Behind this mortal Bone
There knits a bolder One-- (384)

Glad to know you were better--better physically, but who cares for a body whose tenant is ill at ease? Give me the aching body, and the spirit glad and serene, for if the gem shines on, forget the mouldering casket.³⁵⁵

Griffith notes the poet's tendency to personify the soul as feminine and to present her as "the best, noblest, and purest part of the total self" and indifferent "to any except the most rarefied and other-worldly of human pursuits."³⁵⁶ Because of this dedication to the highest human aspirations, the soul gives significance to the physical in this poet's view of reality. The power of the spirit to direct and give purpose to the flesh is clearly stated in Poem 1576. The spirit's basic freedom from the physical³⁵⁷ and its ability to act unfettered in the body in this life or totally released from it in death is apparent in one of her later poems:

With Pinions of Disdain
The Soul can farther fly
Than any feather specified
in Ornithology--
It wafts this sordid Flesh
Beyond it's dull--control
And during it's electric gale--
The body is a soul-- (1431).

³⁵⁵ Ibid., I, 140.

³⁵⁶ Long Shadow, p. 210.

³⁵⁷ This statement agrees with Anderson's observation about "Her unique theory of the mind's entrapment in time as the essence of the mortal condition, rather than the conventional one of the spirit imprisoned in the body." "Trap of Time," 420, but disagrees with Flick's assessment of her position: "Though spirit may be dependent on body, it nevertheless continues to seek release," p. 213 and "The spirit emerges through flesh only to be fettered by flesh." p. 214.

Emily Dickinson's idealism conditioned her handling of the body in the experience of love or death. In neither situation does she highlight the physical except as it becomes a sign of the spiritual. The emphasis in both Eros and Thanatos is upon the psychic, not the carnal. Consequently the love poetry is strangely fleshless and the death poetry devoid of morbidity despite its use of physical details.

From her year at Mt. Holyoke until the early 1860's, Emily Dickinson's religious quest led her gradually to an existential crisis, a philosophic and theological shock that changed her life interiorly and exteriorly.³⁵⁸ Severe feelings of spiritual inadequacy, failure, and alienation and unsettled questions about the nature of God preceded the crisis; some type of existential belief resulted from it. After her years of questioning and search and this period of extreme crisis, she was able to fashion a loose metaphysical structure that included faith and doubt in a precarious balance. Although she never finally resolved her religious conflicts, after 1862 she was able to maintain this balance with more philosophic detachment and less involved anguish and, consequently, to achieve a maturity that deepened her personal and artistic life.

As Emily Dickinson moved further away from orthodoxy, as she found she had to reject church membership, and as she struggled with the darkest theological possibilities, anxiety and fear filled her unconscious. Her dread that

³⁵⁸ Most critics agree that internal evidence, such as "the increase in emotional resonance . . . as well as the nature of the images and themes of the poems" points to "a major crisis in Miss Dickinson's life." Owen Thomas, "Father and Daughter: Edward and Emily Dickinson," AL, XL (January, 1969), 518.

a sinister God--the one who hid himself from her--ruled over a hostile universe spilled over into her conscious mind. Like Pascal and Melville, this woman was haunted by uncertainties about God. Like Heidegger or Unamuno, she anguished over the metaphysical implications of death. Like existentialists of any period, she felt a sense of cosmic loss that pushed her to cross "the mysterious boundary which runs through things, persons and events" and to live "in a constant expectation of infinite encounter and ineffable security."³⁵⁹ Her sense of having once escaped the limits of her mortal condition and her consequent sense of restlessness and loss appear in a poem which can be read existentially:

The lonesome for they know not What--
The Eastern Exiles--be-- (262).

The alienation and isolation she suffered in her spiritual quest she suggested years later when she wrote:

--we cannot believe for each other. I suppose there are depths
in every Consciousness, from which we cannot rescue ourselves--
to which none can go with us--³⁶⁰

The completeness of her examination of all dogma left her little comfortable support. The absolute honesty of her scrutiny is found in her own words:

The appalling trust [that God cannot discontinue himself] is at
times all that remains--³⁶¹

The severe crisis that nearly shattered Emily Dickinson resembles many points in Boros' description of existential shock:

. . . the shock with which we realize the uncertainty and mysterious-
ness of existence.³⁶²

³⁵⁹ Boros, p. 18.

³⁶⁰ Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 612.

³⁶¹ Ibid., III, 916.

³⁶² Boros, p. 16.

. . . our own existence is seen to be both bound up with impermanence and yet forever breaking out of its provisional limitations . . .³⁶³

Our shock when we discover that our existence is such a questionable thing, our sudden insecurity in the world to which we are so accustomed, awaken in us secret anxieties . . .³⁶⁴

. . . a mysterious feeling of not belonging.³⁶⁵

. . . sense of wonder at the significance of being and the insignificance of existence.³⁶⁶

. . . the being we grasp in our philosophical wonder is divided in two; his figure is made up of contradictory elements. The two poles we find in him maintain a reciprocal and opposed tension and yet are inseparable.³⁶⁷

The existential shock that Emily Dickinson experienced was the climax of many years of spiritual searching. It involved her whole being. It was agonizingly difficult, personally decisive, and artistically fruitful. From it emerged a new woman committed to an intense inner life and dedicated to art as a way of exploring and defining the dynamic data of consciousness.

The effects of this crisis upon Emily Dickinson's love and death poetry are tremendous. Her attitudes toward God and her existential position set her attitudes toward all else: nature, sex, death. The natural polarity of her mind was confirmed. Her tortured postures in poems decreased and her detached stances increased. "The lyrical, despairing outbursts of the bereaved bride come abruptly to an end."³⁶⁸ Her poetic treatment of love and death reflect the new found serenity of her own life.

³⁶³ Ibid., p. 17.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 19.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 20.

³⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 22.

³⁶⁸ Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 240.

CHAPTER III

POEMS INCORPORATING LOVE

In Emily Dickinson's canon love is a major theme. That a woman would write about love is not noteworthy. That a nineteenth century woman, living in a provincial society oozing with romanticism, would write about love is even less noteworthy. That a sensitive artist in any culture would elect love as a motif is not surprising. That an intense, religiously oriented, existentially aware poet would select it is even less surprising. Although this particular poet's choosing to explore love is not surprising, it is significant for:

The poetic object is selected by a free choice from all objects in the world, and this object, deliberately selected and carefully worked up by the adult poet, becomes his microcosm. With a serious poet each minor poem may be the symbol of a major decision. It is as ranging and comprehensive an action as the mind ever tried!¹

That this isolated spinster produced "the most intensely moving love poems ever written by an American poet,"² is also psychologically and artistically significant. For, much as her milieu focused Emily Dickinson's attention on love and conditioned her responses to it, her creative use of it is individual. Her mythic manner of relating the stages of a woman's life to the stages of love is unique. Conferring a quasi-religious quality on love gives it a

¹John Crowe Ranson, The World's Body (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), p. 272.

²George Frisbie Whicher, Poetry and Civilization, ed. by Harriet Fox Whicher (New York: Russell and Russell, 1955), p. 63.

dimension in her love poetry that is rare. Her tensioned presentation of love as a desirable yet threatening experience provides an unusually psychological complexity in her poems of this genre. Pitting a human lover against a divine creates metaphysical overtones in poems usually devoid of them. Her insistence upon renunciation gives her love lyrics a tragic grandeur. Relating love to immortality gives these love poems cosmic implications. Her astringent wit and ironic vision produces a complexity of tone often lacking in love lyrics. Emotional intensity, coupled with bashful reserve, separates her poems from others of this genre. Her antiseptic idealism creates a strangely unearthly aura for poems of earthly love. Stressing the psychic reaction to love, rather than the lover, makes these poems peculiarly introspective love lyrics. Part of the originality and effectiveness of Emily Dickinson's love poetry obviously lies in her particular concepts of this experience and part in her unique poetic techniques.³

³These modes of structuring are discussed in relation to individual poems analyzed in this and the next two chapters. For studies concentrating on aspects of this poet's particular style see: Lindberg, The Voice of the Poet; McNaughton, The Imagery of Emily Dickinson; Porter, Chap. VI, The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry; Johnson, Chap. IV, Emily Dickinson; Moldenhauer, "Emily Dickinson's Ambiguity"; Cambon, "Violence and Abstraction in Emily Dickinson"; Gay Wilson Allen, "Emily Dickinson's Versification," in American Prosody (New York: American Book Company, 1935); James Davidson, "Emily Dickinson and Isaac Watts," Boston Public Library Quarterly, VI (July, 1954), 141-149; Martha Winburn England, "Emily Dickinson and Isaac Watts: Puritan Hymnodists," Bulletin of the New York Public Library, LXIX (February, 1965), 83-116; William Howard, "Emily Dickinson's Poetic Vocabulary," PMLA, LXXII (March, 1957), 225-248; Carroll D. Laverty, "Structural Patterns in Emily Dickinson's Poetry," Emerson Society Quarterly, No. 44 (Fall, 1966), 12-17; Grace B. Sherrer, "A Study of Unusual Verb Constructions in the Poems of Emily Dickinson," AL, VII (March, 1935), 37-46; Suzanne M. Wilson, "Structural Patterns in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson," AL, XXXV (March, 1963), 53-59; Mary Cynthia DeJong, Structure in the Poetry of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1968); Bernard Frank, The Wiles of Words: Ambiguity in Emily Dickinson's Poetry (unpublished Ph.D.

Except for biographical interest, whether Emily Dickinson's love poetry is the fruit of an actual or an imagined experience is irrelevant.⁴ According to her own words, the poet is able to distill "amazing sense/ From ordinary Meanings--" (448). When a critic says that her poems are autobiographical only "in the special sense of being true to her imagined experience,"⁵ his meaning is the same as the poet's when she wrote to Higginson: "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse--it does not mean--me--but a supposed person."⁶ The fact that these lyrics probably do not record any actual relationship with an individual man does not in any way detract from their emotional impact or their artistic value.

Besides being individual and imaginative, Emily Dickinson's use of love in her poetry is also functional. She introduces this experience in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes. Her consciousness of love enters her poems at different levels: 1) incidental reference; 2) dramatic background;

dissertation, University of Pittsburg, 1965); John Emerson Todd, Emily Dickinson's Use of the Persona (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1965); Edith Perry Wylder, The Voice of the Poet (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of New Mexico, 1967).

⁴This study, therefore, makes no effort to relate these poems directly to any incidents in the poet's life and instead supports judgments such as the following: ". . . one is justified in taking both lover and beloved as poetic figures," Anderson, "Emily Dickinson," American Literary Masters, I, 978; and ". . . image of a man in the poet's mind," Lee B. Copple, Three Related Themes of Hunger and Thirst, Homelessness, and Obscurity as Symbols of Privation, Renunciation and Compensation in the Poems of Emily Dickinson (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1954), p. 11.

⁵John Crowe Ranson, "Emily Dickinson: A Poet Restored," Perspectives USA, No. 15 (Spring, 1956), 15.

⁶Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 412.

and 3) essential experience.

Unlike her use of death at the metaphorical level, Emily Dickinson rarely incorporates love to illustrate a point by an imaginative and provocative analogy. While she frequently utilizes macabre references to particularize, define, and differentiate, she hardly ever uses erotic figures for the same purposes. Possibly she was unable to employ precise, realistic, or kinesthetic details relative to love as supporting or illuminating metaphors because of the vagueness of her conceptualization of this experience. In proportion to her incidental references to charnel house details, those to the marriage bed are significantly sparse and generalized. Her many sharp, concrete references to the tomb stand in contrast to her few, idealized ones to the lover.

One of the poet's exceptional uses of love at the incidental level is contained in Poem 300, which explores possible meanings of morning.⁷ In this short poem, Emily Dickinson uses references to lovers three times to illustrate varying views of the same phenomena. Actually, in this poem the voice does not use erotic or nuptial allusions as metaphors but as provocative examples. Listings rather than comparisons reveal the speaker's mental processes. At the same time that these examples advance the poem by an imaginative rather than a rational sequence, they suggest widely different reactions to morning--and possibly to any new experience for which morning functions as an inclusive sign. To the practical farmer dawn means work; to the high mountain peaks, the lovely first light of the sun; to the ill or dying, respite from the

⁷N.B. Poems: 64, 65, 424, 631, 661, 703, 1495, 1580, 1594, 1620, 1641, 1711, 1756. The incidental references in these poems include: lover, wed, ravish, suitors, bride, marry, dower, and betroth.

night's depressing darkness; and to those of faith, an exciting act of God. All of these people or things represent different responses to dawn or the unknown. The speaker seems to set the masculine and the feminine reactions in opposition to each other. To the lover day "means Just Risk," but to the beloved or bride it means "Just revelation" or "an Apocalypse." This male-female contrast, the use of the limiting just, and the mixture of religious allusions with erotic ones seem to imply the contradictory and ironic nature of reality. Whether the apocalypse and revelation mean new knowledge for the woman, or knowledge of her by the man, or both simultaneously adds to the poetic suggestion of the antithesis at the center of human life.

Besides this incidental use of amative references, Emily Dickinson incorporates love to qualify or to dramatize other themes. At this second level of creative assimilation, love enters the structure in a more dominant role to perform more essential functions. When she introduces love to dramatize or to condition another subject, it contributes to a dynamic rather than a static background. The presence of love provides imaginative and philosophic tension in some of her poems. Because her most typical use of love at this second level is to give an erotic background to a spiritual experience, it creates a sensuous dimension that helps to concretize what otherwise might have remained nebulous. The poet's use of nuptial tropes as a vehicle for religious experience is not particularly original. The Song of Songs, the poetry of St. John of the Cross and John Donne, and the mystical writings of St. Catherine of Siena are examples of the imaginative use of bridal conventions to convey the soul's experience of the divine. Not her choice of these traditional nuptial figures but what she does with them in these poems constitutes

Emily Dickinson's inventiveness. While her use of erotic terms and nuptial imagery to carry an essentially spiritual experience has certain common features in a number of poems, the total effect can be as different as the wittily irreverent lyric, opening with "God is a distant--stately Lover--" (357) from the sublimely ecstatic one, beginning with "Given in Marriage unto Thee" (817). There is also an essential difference between poems of this group and those of another which they resemble; in this group the experience is spiritual, the terms erotic; in the other group the experience is erotic, the terms religious.⁸

Two lyrics that represent Emily Dickinson's use of bridal tropes as the supporting imagery to convey and dramatize a spiritual experience are Poems 461 and 473. Both lyrics open with a strong declaration. Following this initial statement, a question indicates the speaker's attitude toward the expected coming of the divine. Both poems mix nuptial and religious figures. Each lyric contrasts the speaker's state before the overwhelming advent of grace and her transformation afterwards. The spiritual change is crucial in both experiences. The movement in each is toward the climax of the concluding lines. As the speaker moves from anticipation to immediate encounter with God, the last two lines of both poems ring with exaltant joy.

In "A Wife--at Daybreak I shall be--" (461), the speaker's first words carry her attitude of confident jubilation. Excitement and awe fill her as she anticipates the divine presence which will change her from child to bride, from maid to wife. She realizes that while the transformation is primarily interior, it effects a change of status, not social but spiritual. She

⁸See pp. 234-241 for poems of this other category.

celebrates the nearness of her passage from a midnight stage in her life to the fullness of sunrise. Sunrise suggests light, warmth, newness, growth, and beauty. By equating her anticipated condition with East and Victory, she reinforces the connotations of sunrise and adds the suggestion of triumph over whatever forces previously held her in the dark of Midnight, particularly the gloom of human mortality which could discourage spiritual aspiration. Nuptial and religious allusions mix in the second stanza. The angels who "bustle in the Hall" suggest the essentially religious nature of her longing and expectation. These spirits indicate preparation for the divine encounter. His approach is serene and majestic. In contrast to the bustle, the efforts of lower creatures, he softly "climbs the Stair." The impersonal and abstract Future, which the voice first uses to indicate the proximity of God, gives way toward the poem's ecstatic close to the more individualized yet respectful Sir and finally to the climactic Savior. The voice's surprise that the face she sees as she encounters God is the face she has so long searched for and desired as she attempted to discover God suggests that she prepared herself for this revelation. Now that God has approached her, she realizes that he is more familiar than she had dared to hope.⁹

In "I am ashamed--I hide--" (473), the speaker's initial attitude is opposed to that of the voice in Poem 461. She is uncertain and confused. Sensing her unworthiness, she dreads the moment of grace. Rather than joyfully

⁹This reading differs from others in that it considers this radical encounter a possibility in time rather than reserving it for eternity. While accepting the alternate interpretation, this one seems equally valid. N.B.: Anderson, "The Trap of Time," 419; Sherwood, p. 150; Flick, p. 308; and McNaughton, p. 62.

anticipating the divine encounter, she hides—psychologically if not physically—from God. She contrasts her poverty, her lack of spiritual beauty, her Dowarless state with what she would like to offer to the bridegroom. Realizing the distance between what she would like to be and what she is, she questions her right to be a bride. In her mind there is no uncertainty about the fact that she is soon to be a bride, only about her worthiness to be. Her humble posture does not make her doubt her election to this new spiritual state. Again the recurring references to her soul's desire to prepare itself emphasize the spiritual nature of the anticipated experience. In stanzas two and three, the voice's concern about beautifying her spirit is conveyed in the most concrete figures. She mentally casts off her former dull dress, her "Gown of Dun,"¹⁰ and, instead, selects raiment "of Pompadour." She talks of jewels, clothes, and hair styles—all that a woman might think of to adorn herself for marriage. Then she dreams of inner qualities to match this external beauty: a spirit quaint, white, quick, and gay. With these virtues she would feel less unworthy of her divine bridegroom. As if her consideration of her lack of merit and her desire for beauty to delight her spouse had been a prayer, her sense of humility becomes her claim to the communion promised. The paradox of the second from the last line, "Meek--let it be--too proud--for Pride," is her reason for no longer hiding, no longer being ashamed. The speaker's attitude has come full circle. Mixing religious and nuptial terms, she ends with

¹⁰"a dark color; of a color of brown and black." Noah Webster, An American Dictionary of the English Language (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publisher, 1849), 332.

a triumphant confidence similar to the close of Poem 461. Joyfully she proclaims her inner change and her change of status, her double sacrament:

"Baptized--this Day--A Bride--"¹¹

In both poems the rapid pace catches the dramatic intensity of the speaker's movement from one spiritual state to another. The juxtaposition of nuptial terms and religious ones puts the sublime significance and the ecstatic sensory quality of the experience in a functional tension. Because of the nature of the soul's relation with God and the erotic richness of the tropes used to individualize it, poems of this group demonstrate the creative value of the polarity in the poet's approach to reality. The interaction of the ethereal and the concrete elements in these poems and their consequent theological, psychological, and artistic enrichment reveal Emily Dickinson's effective use of bridal imagery as a vehicle for profound religious experience.¹²

At the third level of creative assimilation love is immediately met as the essential experience of the poem. Emily Dickinson undoubtedly uses this mode of artistic assimilation most frequently because love itself fascinated her emotionally and philosophically and provided an artistically rich theme.¹³ Along with death, love supplied a dramatic and crucial human experience which simultaneously attracted and frightened the poet.

¹¹Others who have analyzed this poem also read it as an experience in time: ". . . the immediacy, the now, is emphasized." Flick, p. 311.

¹²Other poems not already mentioned that represent this second level are: 1297, 1314, 1495, and 1555.

¹³Rosenbaum lists 101 uses of love, 7 of love's, 13 of loved, and 16 of forms of lover.

The existential situation in these poems has certain common features. In almost all of them, time plays a crucial role. The metaphysical implications of time color the experience and determine which aspects of it are explored. Distance also effects the situation. The lover is too far away to have any sharply human traits; he remains as disembodied as their relationship is rarefied. The situation is structured by so ethereally sacred and passionately human elements that:

It is not always possible to tell in a given context whether she is delineating both sacred and profane love like Titian, embodying a spiritual essence in a sensual metaphor . . . or climbing the ladder from initial to celestial love with Plato.¹⁴

The angle of vision is always psychological; the psychic reaction of the speaker is the primary focus through which the reader enters the experience.

In her response to love, the posture of the speaker also has many common traits. The poet, who wrote about "the delicious throe/ Of transport thrilled with Fear—" (1413), created speakers whose view of reality, including love, is composed of antithetical elements. Sometimes the tone is pleading and submissive, other times confident and commanding. Except in the earlier or sentimental poems, the typical mental state of the voice is ambivalent. Desire and fear, exultation and pain tension her posture. Consequently, her stance is sometimes ironic, often paradoxical, usually complex. Wanting love as a fulfillment but dreading it as a threat, the voice typically idealizes love as a semi-mystical encounter while preferring to renounce its actual enjoyment. Despite her own renunciation, the lover's rejection of her,

¹⁴Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 167.

or their physical separation, unshakable constancy marks the speaker's attitude toward her lover.

Besides a similarity of situations and attitudes in the love poetry, common clusters of imagery bind these lyrics of Emily Dickinson. Typically she employs religious, royal, jewel, and commercial figures to define this experience. Although Jung says that "religious symbols have a distinctly 'revelatory' character" because "they are usually spontaneous products of unconscious psychic activity,"¹⁵ since these figures so nearly approximate this poet's notion of love, her election of religious imagery may have been quite conscious. Tropes from Christian ritual provide an idealized dimension for love. The lovers become a congregation, their meeting a communion service, and their love a baptism.¹⁶ Transferring spiritual imagery to a human love reinforces the poet's sublime and non-physical vision of it and gives it the force of a religious commitment. Besides conferring this other-worldly splendor upon love, these figures also afford imaginative potential, which the poet effectively exploits; for instance, references to Eden suggest prelapsarian bliss as well as ecstatic immortality. Two recent critics comment upon this feature of Emily Dickinson's love poetry.

Of the terminology of the Christian institution there are innumerable examples, most of them used metaphorically and especially in love poems: apostasy, baptize, blaspheme, consecrate, covenant, elect, grace, heresy, incense, judgment, litany,

¹⁵ Carl G. Jung, "The Soul and Death," in Feidel, p. 8.

¹⁶ In one of her letters to Judge Lord, the poet used the same type of imagery to consecrate their love. "While others go to Church, I go to mine, for are not you my Church, and have we not a Hymn that no one knows but us?" Letters (Johnson, ed.), III, 753.

matins, ordain, save, sermon, and vesper making up a random sample list.¹⁷

As aware of the resemblance of Amor to Caritas as the medieval courtly lover, she chooses to serve the religion of love and raises secular love to a holy state through investing it with religious imagery. . . . In this respect she is more of a medieval poet than a metaphysical one . . .¹⁸

In her love poetry, Emily Dickinson uses royal imagery for the same reasons that she uses religious figures. These tropes from the secular realm also suggest the solemn dignity of love and its power to raise the individual to a higher level. In many poems, speaking of an experience that transforms her, the voice selects regal figures to dramatize "the desolate woman sacramentally restored, the empty vessel newly replete with redemptive effulgence."¹⁹ She speaks of her lover as a prince (616), of a queenly status conferred on her,²⁰ of the title she now enjoys (1072), and of possessing "the Crown/ That was witness for the Grace--" (356).²¹ These allusions to royalty indicate the honor, elevation, and dedication the poet associates with love. They also contribute some tension to the experience by highlighting the earthly and the heavenly elements that characterize it.

Most typically, Emily Dickinson employs jewel figures to assert the worth of the beloved or his royal treatment of her. The voice refers to her lover as "my Gem" (270), "one pearl" (270), and "the Amethyst" (160). The masculine figure who pelts her with rubies (466) may be a human or divine lover; her calling him "the Emperor" may suggest his kingly nature and regal

¹⁷Lindberg, p. 86.

¹⁸Sherwood, p. 90.

¹⁹Chase, p. 163.

²⁰N.B. Poems: 373 and 493.

²¹N.B. Poems: 195, 231, 232, 336, 356, 508, and 1737.

control of her life rather than an absolute status. In some poems the person loved but lost in death is compared to a precious stone, a jewel once held in the voice's fingers (245) and (299). In other lyrics the speaker declares that she would give diamonds, rubies, and topaz to gain even the small attention of a smile from the man she loves (223). She also claims that she would willingly give diamonds, gold, and rubies to pay the messenger who would carry her words, "I am true!" (400) to her absent beloved. In Poem 493 the voice equals their relationship to a pearl and gratefully acknowledges the man's gift to her. In all the love poems utilizing gem tropes, these figures illuminate the extravagance of the speaker's position, support her exalted view of her lover and their relationship, and reinforce the exotic and idealized quality of their love.

Occasionally Emily Dickinson uses commercial imagery and house references in her love poetry.²² In Poem 638, the lover brings fire to give light and warmth to the speaker's home. Poem 580 is a good example of terms borrowed from the realm of commerce. To illumine love the speaker uses: pay, contract, ratified, wealth, purchaser, merchant, buy, risk, gain, debt, and insolvent. Poem 621, which tells of a rejection of the voice by a masculine figure, uses commercial terms. The "Mighty Merchant," who refuses the one thing the voice asked and for which she willingly "offered Being," may be a human or divine object of her love. Her use of monetary allusions in this situation effectively contributes to the reader's understanding of the coldness of the rejector

²²Allusions to banking and housing are more frequent in the poet's death lyrics.

and the anguish of the rejected, who is so impersonally treated. In a compressed, later poem, the speaker employs monetary terms for a quite different purpose; in Poem 1248 she briefly explores the inner nature of love by an analogy with investments.

Another major metaphor that Emily Dickinson utilizes in her love poetry is related to her simultaneous exultation of the lover to mythic-religious proportions and her belief "that the strongest of childhood emotions was the sense of deprivation."²³ A group of her love poems demeans the speaker to a little girl's posture, her daisy position, and elevates the beloved to a superior stance, his master posture. These complimentary figures create a love poetry in which the lovers are oddly unequal, the voice pleads for her master's slightest attention and is annoyingly grateful that he in any way stoops to her (481). In these poems the voice is shy (106) and meek (124); her beloved is great and majestic (102). She equates him with the sun (106), an "Immortal Alp" (124), and Himmaleh (481). From her lowly daisy position, she refers to him as her Lord (339). She admits choosing a lover who does not choose her (85); yet she begs him to condescend to receive her (102). The poet's choice of these metaphors results in a poetry of adulation and idolatry rather than of reciprocal and mature love. At its worst, it encourages the sentimentality of a "Broken hearted statement" (85) of unrequited love.

In some of her most startling love poems, Emily Dickinson introduces water and food to illuminate and concretize the speaker's desire for love.²⁴

²³Chase, p. 308.

²⁴Because of the openness of the symbolism in these poems, they can also be read as imaginative statements of any severe human need. This need may

Using basic necessities in this way supports the poet's belief in the absolute human need for love and the speaker's desperate situation. These analogies, implying as they do severe physical pain and even a life-death struggle, contribute to the dramatic quality of these love lyrics. The extreme deprivation of hunger and thirst gives an immediacy and urgency to the experience of love in these structures that is quite different from its ethereal, bodiless nature in others. Analogies to hunger and thirst operate primarily in love poems of privation in which the voice speaks of thirsting in the desert (209), of thirst that blisters (296), of "lips long parched" (131), of being "hungry all the Years" (579), and of "a finer Famine" (872).

Physical desire is also a strong element of metaphors from nature which Emily Dickinson introduces in her love poetry. Tigers, leopards, snakes, bees, flowers, seas, and sun function in these poems as discreet figures for more overtly erotic desire. These figures also suggest the more dominant male role and the submissive female one in love. Through these analogies, ravishment and abandonment enter the usually spiritualized vision of love in this woman's work. They permit a natural release and unrestrained enjoyment of sexual pleasure in a frame of reference deceptively innocent of human passion. Whether erotic overtones came from the poet's conscious or unconscious is artistically irrelevant; the implications are in the poetry and contribute to the quality of the imaginative experience. Sometimes the speaker describes the helpless or struggling flower (91), its being subdued (38), the flower that butterflies desire (380), and the bee's "sweet assault" (1224). Other times

be interpreted as spiritual or artistic as well as emotional.

she equates herself to a drop of water and her lover to the sea in which she is absorbed (284), or herself to a lesser river that "runs to thee," the larger river, (162) and is docile to it (212), or herself to the sea and her lover to the moon who controls her with "amber Hands" (429). In a Poem such as 520, the sea is an ambivalent aggressor who may represent love or death.²⁵ All these figures imply male force and dominance. The metaphors from the natural realm significantly expand Emily Dickinson's treatment of love and reveal her awareness of its physical power.

When love is the essential experience of Emily Dickinson's poetry, the lyrics fall into a number of larger groupings. These groupings are dependent upon the aspect of love projected, the attitudes of the poet toward it, the attitudes of the speaker toward it, the tensions that result, and the controlling tone of the poem. Because of the complexity of this experience and the polarity of the poet's conception of it, some of these groupings exhibit a basically negative quality, others a positive one. A movement appears in the shift from negative to positive, from fear to anticipation, from earthly to heavenly love; however, the line of movement is never a completely straight rise; it always shows the ambivalence at the center of the poet's being. Ten major divisions of Emily Dickinson's love poetry²⁶ are evident in poems that

²⁵ The sea as a metaphor for death is more typical in her canon than as a metaphor for love. Poems such as 249 and 368 are, however, other examples of the erotic connotations of water in this poet's sensibility.

²⁶ Other critics have grouped Emily Dickinson's love poetry; their divisions are fewer and less exclusive than these ten categories. N.B.: Gregor, p. 105; Griffith, Long Shadow, p. 151; Pickard, p. 87; and Ward, Capsule, p. 73.

explore: 1) lack of love; 2) love as a threatening or destructive force; 3) rejection by the lover; 4) renunciation by the speaker; 5) separation of the lovers; 6) protestation of constancy in love; 7) the nature of the relationship created by love; 8) love as an erotic experience; 9) love as a fulfillment or transforming grace; and 10) human love in relation to divine.

The first category of love poems centers around the speaker's sense of deprivation.²⁷ She suffers acutely from a lack of love. Her craving for love is so extreme that she typically uses physical hunger and thirst to convey her emotional one.²⁸ Because the desire for fulfillment through absolute dedication to a beloved is a peculiarly feminine need, the speaker usually seems to be a woman.²⁹ Only in love's service can this speaker spend herself. Transcendence is possible for her only through love. Consequently, love is as essential for her psychic vitality as food and drink are for her physical life. In a letter, the poet makes a direct simile that parallels many of the metaphors and symbols in these poems of deprivation:

Affection is like bread, unnoticed till we starve, and then we dream of it, and sing of it, and paint it . . .³⁰

Yet, because the voice demands so much from love, her craving must always go unsatisfied and she must suffer from the terrible burning sensation of thirst

²⁷See Copple for an extensive study of this motif in this poet's canon.

²⁸See pp. 173-174 for Emily Dickinson's reason for this choice of imagery.

²⁹Even when the craving is not human, when the voice as an outsider observing the plight of a starving tiger or leopard, the viewpoint is usually feminine.

³⁰Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 499.

and the gnawing pain of hunger. Copple suggests that this final negative note persists because the poet's "sense of need was more powerful than her imagination of fulfillment."³¹ A further and related reason seems to be her ambivalence toward reality which led her to say:

Longing, it may be, is the only gift no other gift supplies.³²

In this situation, the voice often shows opposed attitudes toward food and drink. She longs for them but at the same time fears them and holds them at a distance; therefore, she dare not eat, though she starve (791). While she mentally reaches for the cup, she pushes it away lest it be insufficient to slake her thirst (904) or so rich that it act like poison upon her parched throat and she "perish--of Delight" (405). Thus suspended between acute hunger and thirst and their dubious satisfaction, she does not know "which, Desire, or Grant--/Be wholly beautiful--" (801).

In poems of this type,³³ dramatizing deprivation of love in terms of severe physical hunger and thirst, the voice speaks often of the crumb³⁴ that would have sustained her and the drop that would have tasted sweet (690). The pitifully small request betrays the speaker's inferior position and suggests the extremity of her need. Irony contributes to the voice's condition when she refers to her little food as sumptuous (773). The terrible emptiness of the voice sometimes takes on Dickensian tones. Hungry, the voice stands outside

³¹Copple, p. 42.

³²Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 499.

³³N.B. Poems: 119, 272, 566, 579, 690, 773, 791, 801, 815, 872, and 904.

³⁴N.B. Poems: 579, 690, 791, 815, and 872.

looking in on a feast. When she does enter, she trembles before touching "the Curious Wine." When she eats, her body's reaction tells how accustomed to famine it is: "The Plenty hurt me--'twas so new--/Myself felt ill--and odd--" (579). Sometimes in her desire for love, the speaker feels she would become an Epicure if she could just once gaze upon the beloved; his presence in her mind, "the Consciousness of Thee," is the crumb which sustains her. The implied contrast between the painful hunger, which a crumb could hardly assuage, and the sensuous enjoyment and satisfaction, which epicure connotes, suggests the voice's sharp awareness of her emotional state. The voice in these lyrics typically plays the negative overtones of beggar, poverty, deprived, hungry, starve, famine, and freezing lips against the positive ones of bread, wine, dine, riches, banquet, plenty, and sumptuousness. In some poems, the momentary taste of love, which the speaker had earlier experienced, only heightens her present state of deprivation.

Of Emily Dickinson's poems utilizing famine and thirst as figures for lack of love, one of the strongest is "It would have starved a Gnat--" (612). This lyric depends upon a sustained and revealing comparison.³⁵ Opening with an arresting verb and hyperbole, the speaker sets up a comparison between herself and a gnat that captures her extreme anguish of spirit. She insists that an insect would have starved on the little that sustained her existence. Using the past tense helps to give the speaker a controlling distance from the agony

³⁵ Gregor reads this poem instead as a literal equation of the speaker and the insect. By creating absurd images, this literal rather than metaphorical reading does destroy much of the poem's power. Gregor envisions a leech bloodsucking the gnat while a claw and dragon also attack it. pp. 94-95. This misreading leads Gregor to criticize parts of the lyric, which actually contribute to its effectiveness, as ludicrous and grotesque.

she recalls in such vivid terms. The horror of her pain never escapes the discipline of the grammatic structure. After making her initial statement, the speaker qualifies it with the adversative yet, which here has a double significance. As a human being, "a living Child," her needs— affective and psychological as well as physical— were greater than any lesser creature's. Despite her lack of sustenance, she had to go on being "a living Child." This early allusion to a life-death tension gives urgency to her situation and prepares for the concluding stanzas.

In the second stanza, the voice further dramatizes the ravishes of hunger. The simile that relates "Food's necessity" to an immovable claw suggests the enormity of her pangs. Her need of food was insistent, gripping, painful, destructive, and overpowering. The claw of hunger was inflexible. Two other hyperboles convey her helplessness to remove it. She compares her efforts to coaxing a leech to move or making a dragon move. Neither rational nor physical power could lessen the terrible hold of hunger on her being.

Stanzas three and four continue the comparison of the speaker to a gnat. She observes two areas in which this minute insect was superior to her. It had the power to fly and so to seek food to preserve its life and the opposed power to destroy its life. These negative stanzas reveal the speaker's helplessness to cope with her deprivation and the torture she suffered as a result. She was immobile and trapped by her humanity. Because she lacked this escape, she refers to the gnat's "privilege to fly." Because she envied the insect its freedom to destroy itself, she considers him "mightier." To have been able to gad her being out "Upon the Window Pane," she ironically considers an art, which consciousness denies the human being but allows the

directionless gnat. The final line, with its isolated again, reinforces the horrible effects of the speaker's lack of love³⁶ which turned her from a life to a death-oriented existence. While her deprivation reduced her to a level below the gnat, her higher awareness intensified her consciousness of pain and its existential overtones.

In the love poems of deprivation in which Emily Dickinson does not use hunger and thirst as metaphors, the posture of the voice is typically less tensioned. She pleads for love. She is submissive. She asks for the attention of a respected, superior being. Although the begging may be urgent, the voice is aware that she can live without wealth in a way that she cannot exist without food. In these lyrics, the poet selects gem, real estate, geographic, and religious figures to carry the speaker's deprivation. The voice sometimes contrasts the wealth of the beloved with her poverty in lacking him (299) and, relying on the connotative richness of India, says "I'm sure 'tis India--all Day--/To those who look on You." More startlingly sometimes, she compares her present lack to the violence of having her eyes put out and confesses that now full sight would be so great that it would kill her (327). At other times, her attitude is more ambivalent. She wants the void filled, yet she fears--and this could be read erotically--that his presence could not be contained in her "little Room" (405). In some poems, the momentary taste of love which the speaker once experienced only heightens her sense of deprivation.³⁷

³⁶Ward interprets this poem biographically as evidence of the poet's hunger for "a missing element--something deeply felt but unknown. . . . what she needed was a way to alleviate the spiritual loneliness of carrying a burden she did not understand." Capsule, p. 12.

³⁷Poems 472 and 559 employ allusions to heaven and paradise, while

The second group of love poems explores the threatening and destructive elements in the experience.³⁸ The poet presents love as a force capable of crushing the individual.³⁹ In some of Emily Dickinson's poems, it becomes so powerful and so fraught with suppressed psychic violence that the identity of the speaker is in danger. Although Spiller seems to attribute her poetic association of violence and love to repression in the poet's life,⁴⁰ the essence of love itself seems to offer a better clue. To a woman so sensitive to her selfhood, love, which she might well define in the following words, would naturally be at least partially threatening in her poetry:

The nature of love is to be a surrender of one's very being, a removing of oneself out of the centre of one's affirmation of existence, a transferring into the other's being of the centre of gravity of one's existence.⁴¹

In other lyrics, the situation is more complex and the response more tensioned. The intensity of the experience of love attracts and frightens the speaker who seems the archetype of "the duality of man's attitude toward sex."⁴² Freud's law of ambivalence of feeling also operates in the voice's desire for ecstatic

Poem 771 uses famine to portray the speaker's sense of loss after being once near to love and/or death. Poem 296 uses banquet, wine, and thirst to describe the voice's state after her taste of love one year before.

³⁸N.B. Poems: 91, 313, 315, 443, 520, 561, 601, 644, 925, 928, 986, 1224, 1500, and 1670.

³⁹Although Griffith's statement that "fear is the dominant emotion of Emily Dickinson's poetry" is too inclusive, fear is an important posture in her work and often one of the elements in the speaker's polarity. Long Shadow, p. 273.

⁴⁰Spiller, Cycle, p. 165.

⁴¹Boros, p. 69.

⁴²Roy P. Basler, Sex, Symbolism, and Psychology in Literature (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1948), p. 15.

union and her dread of male power.⁴³ As a feminine voice, she also often embodies woman's primitive dread of sexuality. The collective fear is evident in the speaker's apprehension of female helplessness and passivity and male aggression and dominance.⁴⁴ At other times, the speaker's dread seems to reflect the poet's idea that all attachments are conditioned by time and change, and, therefore, they all involve pain. Time conditions the experience in almost all of Emily Dickinson's poems, but in her love poems its role is particularly crucial. The woman who wrote:

I am sorry you came, because you went away.
Hereafter, I will pick no Rose, lest it fade or prick me.⁴⁵

creates situations in which time colors the love relationship and affects the speaker's attitudes. What Griffith says about her sense of time in relation to love also applies to her poetic treatment of Eros:

. . . Emily Dickinson's view of love was conditioned by her horror of evanescence. She had to see that human attachments, like all other experiences, will be fleeting and transitory. No sooner are they founded than the attachments become vulnerable to the inroads

⁴³One critic sees an early example of this sexual polarity in Emily Dickinson's 1852 letter to Sue Gilbert. N.B. Letters (Johnson, ed.), I, 209-210 and Gelpi, pp. 1-3.

⁴⁴In spite of Griffith's many fine insights in this area, his claim that patterns in Emily Dickinson's life and work reveal her "pathological horror of everything masculine" is extravagant. "Emily Dickinson's Love Poetry," 97. Freud speaks of "the general female tendency to ward off sexuality," "The Taboo of Virginity," p. 197. Many contemporary psychologists also maintain that a certain fear of sex is natural in woman because of: 1) her unconscious, collective memory of male violence; 2) her conscious submission to man in carnal union; and 3) her awareness of possible pregnancy. Especially in a period when custom, culture, and law asserted masculine supremacy, feminine fear of masculine aggression seems quite understandable. In all areas of male-female relations, the woman was subservient in this poet's day.

⁴⁵Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 334.

of change and time.⁴⁶

Precariousness and evanescence make the situation in these love lyrics potentially disastrous and, consequently, agonizing. In other poems, because the worst pain follows the greatest pleasure, love threatens the speaker for yet another reason.

Emily Dickinson evokes a sense of female vulnerability in a variety of ways. Connotations contribute to the tone and create some of the feeling of danger: desire, struggling, blushing, stung, blow, torn, robbed, bisect, maimed, struck, scalps, assault, surrendering, defeat, consume, hissing, vannish, victorious, and slew.⁴⁷ The unpleasant s sound so prominent in these words also adds to the feeling of uneasiness in these lyrics. The violence of these words reinforces the shattering quality of the experience. In some poems, the poet suggests the danger to the speaker by insisting upon the persistence of the male figure. In Poem 520, the poet details the steps in his relentless pursuit and repeats he.⁴⁸ In other lyrics, the vague sense of dread comes

⁴⁶"Emily Dickinson's Love Poetry," 95. His claim, however, that "her tragedy was the neurosis which forced her to see only a decaying skull beneath every human relationship," seems both an extravagant and unjustified application of the poetry to the poet's personal life. Long Shadow, p. 183.

⁴⁷N.B. Poems: 91, 315, 520, 601, 925, 928, and 1224.

⁴⁸Interpretations of this poem vary widely. Yvor Winters considers the sea "the traditional symbol of death." "Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Judgment," in Maule's Curse (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1938), p. 151. George Whicher and Laurence Perrine read the poem as a delightful fantasy. This Was a Poet, p. 185 and "Dickinson's 'I Started Early--Took My Dog,'" The Explicator, X (February, 1952), #28. Other critics equate the sea with an erotic encounter--or fear of one. Griffith, Long Shadow, pp. 21-22; Kate Flores, "Dickinson's 'I Started Early--Took My Dog,'" The Explicator, IX (May, 1959), #47; and Eric W. Carlson, "Dickinson's 'I Started Early--Took My Dog,'" The Explicator, XX (May, 1962), #72.

from the speaker's reaction. In Poem 986, she experiences "a tighter breathing/ And Zero at the Bone." In Poems 520, the implications of the speaker's words are more subtle: "But no Man moved Me--till the Tide." The mysterious he of Poems 315⁴⁹ and 925⁵⁰ also contributes to the feeling of danger. His attractiveness only heightens his destructiveness and adds to the precariousness of the female situation. Near the end of the second poem, the voice declares that "Most--I love the Cause that Slew Me."

The imagery Emily Dickinson employs in poems presenting love as a threatening experience falls into two main groups: religious and natural.⁵¹ She introduces Calvary,⁵² crucifixion (313), and cross (561) to give a spiritual dimension to the pain endured by the speaker. By relating the pain of human love to the pain of divine love, these allusions enrich the experience. In Poem 644, the voice refers to the "two Legacies" she received from her beloved: love and pain. The poet sometimes introduces metaphorical references to a hurricane (928), a volcano (601), an earthquake (601), the sea (520), and snakes⁵³ to suggest the destructive force of erotic love.⁵⁴ In a number of

⁴⁹One critic considers the he to be death, Frank, p. 24; another, nature, God, or a human violator, Griffith, Long Shadow, p. 172; another, definitely a divine lover, Flick, p. 305; and still another, "an old-fashioned hell-fire preacher." Anderson, "From a Window in Amherst," 157.

⁵⁰Gregor believes the he is "The beloved." p. 107.

⁵¹In poems using religious imagery, the painfulness of love is stressed in those using natural figures, the destructiveness.

⁵²N.B. Poems: 313 and 561.

⁵³N.B. Poems: 986, 1500, and 1670.

poems, the bee functions as a sexual image, but only in a few of them is his role threatening.⁵⁵ In poems such as 315 and 925, the violent assault may be erotic, macabre, or divine. By comparing the speaker to a drop of dew and the aggressive male to the sea ready to absorb her, the poet heightens the sense of impending danger in Poem 520.

Of the poems that present love as a threatening experience, "In Winter in my Room" (1670) is one of the least disguised and most powerful.⁵⁶ Its unified phallic symbolism, psychological implications, visual, tactile, and kinesthetic appeal, rapidity of movement, and dramatic tension give it urgency and force. It makes effective use of contrasts at various levels. With the structure of a miniature four act play, the poem has a rising action that reaches a climax in the third stanza and a falling one in stanza four that contributes to the psychic complexity of the experience.

The first stanza sets the stage psychologically and physically. The voice's recalling the meeting gives her distance that helps to control her emotional involvement and the poem's intensity. The fact that the speaker's

⁵⁴These metaphors may also be interpreted as references to the overwhelming and threatening power of death.

⁵⁵In Poem 1224, his attack is feared, but in the majority of erotic poems using the bee-flower cluster, the ecstasy of the encounter is stressed. Poems of this tenor belong to the eighth grouping, treated on pp. 227-234 of this chapter.

⁵⁶Of the critics who have commented on this poem all agree that the snake represents male sexuality. Griffith, Long Shadow, pp. 180-183; Gregor, pp. 170-174; and Pickard, pp. 84-85. Griffith and Gregor believe that the reptile may also represent death. Griffith's further contention that this poem shows that Emily Dickinson was "haunted by sex fantasies" seems unwarranted and unscholarly. p. 179.

encounter with the worm took place in her own room in winter is significant.⁵⁷ Part of her early security comes from being safe and warm and in familiar surroundings. Her unconcern in stanza one contrasts effectively with her terror in the last two stanzas. Her early lack of fear, which is manifested only at an unconscious level, makes the later confrontation and fear more surprising--to the voice if not to the reader. The action of stanza one is initiated by the woman; she comes upon the worm, she is the aggressor who subdues and secures him. The but of line four, presume of line five, and secured of line seven reveal her unvoiced, unrecognized fear of the worm. Her rationale for binding him was his presuming and her not being fully at ease with him; presume may here be read as his tendency to assume the masculine role of dominance. Her unconscious motivation may also have included her desire to keep him as an innocent pet because he attracted her.

Once she had secured him, the speaker gave no more thought to the worm until their roles were reversed and her fear became conscious. In stanza two, the worm mysteriously changes into a snake, whose beauty, power, and movement fascinate and terrify the speaker. The change in the worm, like the whole experience of the poem, transpires only in the voice's mind.⁵⁸ Once her imagination and unconscious began their surrealistic drama, the worm took on more and more male characteristics. He assumed the superior position; he was

⁵⁷Pickard believes that the season indicates the "frozen dead state" of the voice's emotions. p. 84.

⁵⁸Griffith's claim that the change can be interpreted only "as the miracle of tumescence" seems to reduce the psychological nature of the experience.

confident; he surveyed the situation; and he had power to awaken both an emotional and a physical response in the voice. As she noticed his splendid "mottles rare" excitingly "ringed with power,"⁵⁹ her blood crept. With rising emotion, she realized the vital change in this male figure--really a change in her psychic and physical response which she projects upon the phallic symbol. He attracted and frightened her; he fascinated and repelled her.

In stanza three the polarity of the speaker's reaction to sexual love is apparent. As she encountered the snake, she shrank from him yet said how fair he was. Her unconscious physical reaction countered her rational one. Her terming her remark "Propitiation's claw" indicated her fear and need for protection. Claw suggests animal defense, physical violence. The speaker's fear indicated her awareness of his knowledge and control of the situation. The snake's hissing connotes an unpleasant, threatening, attacking posture. The erotic movement connotes a pleasing, attractive, inviting posture. These ambivalent modes of the snake are the speaker's transference to her own polarity toward a sexual encounter.

After this shattering meeting, the voice ran from the male force. As she flew, she watched "lest he pursue" but also in terrified fascination. In a fashion similar to the voice's reaction to the tide's approach in Poem 520, the speaker runs from town to town. Although her escape is psychological rather than physical, the verbs flew, pursue, and run make the inner terror and mental flight graphic. The speaker's final comment brings the psychic drama

⁵⁹ Pickard interprets this as "the coiled, deadly rhythm of a snake about to strike, which parallels rising sexual desire." p. 85.

to a close: "This was a dream," an imaginatively free expression, artistically controlled, of the voice's response to erotic love. This reaction reveals how threatening such an encounter might be and typifies the pole of Emily Dickinson's sensibility that could imagine love as a destructive experience.⁶⁰

Experiences of rejection constitute the third category of Emily Dickinson's love poetry. The woman who wrote to her cousin: "Odd, that I, who say 'no' so much, cannot bear it from others. Odd, that I who run from so many, cannot brook that one turn from me,"⁶¹ created many poems around the theme of rejection. In these lyrics, the speaker suffers the pain of being spurned or forgotten by a friend or lover.⁶² Unlike the poems of the two previous categories, the situation in these lyrics does not seem as crucial. There is an obvious lack of violence in the action; the person simply turns away, drifts away, or forgets.⁶³ The voice's rejection by the man she loves is varied. He may never have responded to her love (85), he may be offended and distant (235), he may simply turn away (256), he may have grown tired of her (425), he may have grown indifferent (704), he may gradually forget her (203), he may

⁶⁰ Although the number of poems that represent this approach to love are fewer than the number in some other groupings, they are significant for they clearly reveal this facet of Emily Dickinson's response to Eros.

⁶¹ Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 386.

⁶² Poems 85, 192, 203, 235, 238, 256, 267, 425, 438, 444, 462, 492, 523, 643, 704, 840, 881, 1098, 1210, 1559, and 1560 center around a lover's rejection. Poems 156, 538, 727, 874, and 1219 center around a friend's forgetting. While Poem 621 could refer to a human lover, its bitter tone separates it from the others and seems to make the Merchant the God who denies her any assurance of love.

⁶³ The exceptions to this generalization are: 1) the verbs kill and stab of Poem 238; 2) the tone of Poem 621; and 3) the final imagery and impression of Poem 874.

fail her (881), he may shut her out of his life (523), he may frown, rebuke, and spurn her (492), he may tell her to leave (1210), or he may sneeringly refuse her request for love (621). The friend's betrayal of the voice is also varied. She may forget (727), grow distant and remote (1219), sting her (156), exclude her from her life (538), or banish her (874).

The feminine speaker's response to neglect and rejection is typically submissive and forgiving. She speaks of seeking "his royal feet" (235). In the majority of lyrics, she is resigned; she accepts her position without blaming her lover or friend for their failure. Besides pardoning them herself, she asks God to forgive the offending parties: "Forgive Them--Even as Myself--/ Or else--forgive not me--" (538). Despite the difference between her devotion and the other person's lack of it, in almost all these poems the rejected voice protests her loyalty and love: "Precious to Me--She still shall be--/ Though She forget the name I bear--" (727). Sometimes she asks for pity (492). At other times, she too coyly threatens her indifferent lover (704) or reproaches him for his neglect (256). In other poems, she ponders the difficult art of forgetting (433). In a few poems, her attitude becomes resentful and bitter (874). The sentimentality that mars some of the lyrics in this group is particularly destructive in Poem 192.

Emily Dickinson employs a number of linguistic techniques to realize these experiences of rejection. The devices she selects contribute to the differing nuances of these poems and to their artistic success or failure. In some of the earlier ones she sets up a parallel between the voice's situation and attitudes and Christ's. Poem 85 compares her dishonor with Christ's in not being chosen by those whom he had chosen to love. In Poem 203, comparing

Peter's denial of Christ with her lover's denial of her, the voice asks if her response could be any different: "Jesus merely 'looked' at Peter--/ Could I do aught else--to Thee?" (203). Her question reveals that she is incapable of any verbal accusation; the love in her eyes is itself a far more subtle though silent reproach. Emily Dickinson often uses a rhetorical question in these poems to emphasize the speaker's posture.⁶⁴ These questions sometimes help to contrast the speaker's attitudes with her lover's. At other times, the voice directly states her awareness of the contrast: "He forgot--and I remembered--" (203), "Sweet--You forgot--but I remembered" (523), and "Kill your Balm--and it's Odors bless you--" (238). In Poem 425, the poet merely juxtaposes day and night, while she structures the two stanzas of Poem 1210 as parallel forms but opposed positions. The adversatives in these lyrics also work toward the implied or stated contrasts: but,⁶⁵ though,⁶⁶ and if.⁶⁷ In some of the poems, the dialogue--stated or implied--advances the argumentative sequence and gives immediacy to the psychic action: "You love me--you are sure" (156). The voice's frequently addressing the other person also contributes to the dramatic tension and the intimacy of the action.⁶⁸ In some of the poems, the poet exploits various meanings of certain words: court carries both royal and

⁶⁴N.B. Poems: 192, 203, 425, 433, 462, and 643.

⁶⁵N.B. Poems: 85, 433, 462, 523, 538, 621, 704, 840, and 881.

⁶⁶N.B. Poems: 538, 727, 840, and 1098.

⁶⁷N.B. Poems: 523, 840, and 881.

⁶⁸The vocatives range from the informal and personal to the formal and impersonal: You, Heart, Sweet, Dollie, Thee, Sir, Master, Lord, Signor, and Sovereign.

judicial denotations (325); dull suggests both less intelligent and less sensitive (433); and maddest connotes least rational, most exotic, and most unrestrained (238). The imagery Emily Dickinson employs in these poems of rejection includes: religious,⁶⁹ royal,⁷⁰ house,⁷¹ mathematical,⁷² commercial,⁷³ and geographical.⁷⁴ By making an arresting comparison, intellectually rather than sensually perceived, the references to logarithm (433), guineas (523), sun (523), farthing (523), fractions (643), merchant (621), and number (727) help to control the emotional quality in these experiences of rejection. When the poet speaks of "the Heart that goes in, and closes the Door" (1098), the personification functions organically to render the experience more concrete; but when she gratuitously personifies "Poor little Heart" (192), the poem becomes mechanical and melodramatic. In a number of these lyrics, the poet symbolically refers to a face turning⁷⁵ or a door shutting.⁷⁶

Poem 1219, "Now I know I lost her," is a good example of the more successful lyrics in this group.⁷⁷ It centers around the speaker's recognition that the other has drifted away, that what once may have been a mutually strong attachment is now one-sided, and that her emotional expenditure has elicited only a subtle rejection. By the choice of imagery, the reflective tone

⁶⁹ N.B. Poems: 85, 203, 256, and 538.

⁷⁰ N.B. Poems: 235 and 704.

⁷¹ N.B. Poems: 156, 874, and 1098.

⁷² N.B. Poems: 433, 643, and 727.

⁷³ N.B. Poems: 523 and 621.

⁷⁴ N.B. Poems: 881 and 1219.

⁷⁵ N.B. Poems: 256, 840, and 880.

⁷⁶ N.B. Poems: 874 and 1098.

⁷⁷ Considering the general quality of this poem, it surprisingly has not been explicated.

created, and the levels of contrast employed, Emily Dickinson controls the explosive emotional quality of this experience and creates a low-keyed, but intense poem.

The first stanza opens strongly with a trochee. The voice's direct statement of loss contains a time contrast: now, knew, and lost represent two different temporal sequences. Now suggests immediacy, while knew allots the recognition to a past time and lost indicates a completed past action. The speaker then proceeds to explain her loss. She first defines by negation. The loved person has not moved away physically; her distance does not involve spatial factors. Instead, the loss is greater, less reparable for the voice. The but of line three introduces her awareness that the distance separating her from the other is psychic. She qualifies her assertion of loss by telling the evidence that convinced her of it. The emotional distance of the other becomes graphic when the voice says that ". . . Remoteness travelled/ On her Face and Tongue." The vagueness she sensed in their relationship becomes concrete in this personification. Face suggests tell-tale expressions which the other was unable to hide; these can be interpreted as signs of indifference, boredom, or even annoyance. Tongue suggests the verbal equivalent of these facial revelations; the words and expressions which betray the other person's attitudes can be interpreted as slight but revealing verbal gestures of ennui and inattention.

Stanza two intensifies the speaker's awareness of her loss. Just as she had contrasted time in the opening, here she contrasts space. Her use of alien and adjoining, linked by the adversative though, reveals her realization of how far she is separated from the other. Being situated next to the other,

in the close physical proximity the voice needed to notice minute facial reactions, could not overcome the subtle, inner differences that made them foreigners to each other. All the implications of "Foreign Race" make the voice's simile apt to convey the psychic factors dividing her and her beloved friend. The spatial references in this stanza give the experience a concreteness that helps to illuminate it. Traversed can refer to action prior to and/or simultaneous with the disillusioning meeting the speaker recalls in the poem. It may be interpreted as an allusion to the experiences which the other has had--which the speaker does not share--which have drawn her away. Or the verb may be read as the distancing of the other during the encounter which made the voice aware of the change in their relationship. In either reading, "Latitudeless Space" implies psychic realms into which the speaker has no entry, her sense of their enormous expanse, and, therefore, her growing realization of distance from the other.

In stanza three, the speaker gains new insights into her altered relationship. Advancing earlier temporal and spatial contrasts, she continues to see in opposites. Psychologically this mode of vision is very fitting to the voice's mental and emotional state. Though she intellectually recognized "Love's transmigration," at the unconscious level, she continued to put her past relation against her present one and, consequently, to see reality in opposed terms. Externally reality remained the same, but internally all was changed. Externally there was no action, all the motion was within. The voice sets in tension the, to her, physically static universe and the inexplicably altered inner world. Her use of but here suggests her inability to comprehend: 1) how there could be such a drastic inner change without any

apparent outer cause; and 2) how nature could be so indifferent to her altered condition. Somehow also indicates her failure to grasp the reasons which brought about the change. Its evidence was apparent; she recognized it in line one; but as she continued to reflect and the poem advanced, she could not discover reasons.

In the last stanza, the imagery changes and the speaker comes to a conclusion about her rejection. The previous allusion to nature's indifference to the speaker's loss is further advanced when the voice says that "Nature took the Day/ I had paid so much for--." Since to this poet nature meant change, the voice's use of nature here could be read as synonymous with time which absorbs into itself the day for which she had paid so much. In this stanza, the poet's use of paid, penury, and restitution emphasizes the psychic investment the voice had made in the relationship. Her election of idolatry also suggests what the voice had given of herself to the other and her final recognition that she had given too much, that the love was out of proportion to its object and, consequently, mistaken in hoping for a commensurate return. The last five lines powerfully sum up the voice's awareness of her own emotional poverty and suggest that she had gained some insight into the causes for the change, causes significantly within herself rather than the other. A resolution, however grim, is also implicit in these lines for the speaker is convinced that trying to revive the original relationship would only add to her penury. Such a poem of psychic awareness and inner change is far from the typical treatment of rejection by women poets of Emily Dickinson's day who seemed sentimentally obsessed with the melodramatically deserted bride.

Poems centering around the theme of renunciation constitute a

significant group of Emily Dickinson's love lyrics.⁷⁸ The mind set of the woman who wrote to a man she deeply loved:

Dont you know you are happiest while I withhold and not confer
--dont you know that "no" is the wildest word we consign to Language?⁷⁹

is poetically evident in her frequent equation of love and renunciation. From her Puritan background, this poet associates the sacrifice of sexual satisfaction with a kind of religious fulfillment that transforms passion into a spiritualized love.⁸⁰ She also insists, in the best romantic tradition, that unfulfilled love burns most ardently, that since satisfaction is static it destroys desire, and, therefore, that the more intense the passion, "the more it recoils from being assuaged."⁸¹ Another reason renunciation is so persistent a motif in her love poems is Emily Dickinson's belief that anticipation excels the event, that reality may be disappointingly less than expectation, and that aspiration is purer than fulfillment: "The Banquet of Abstemiousness / Defaces that of Wine--" (1430). Renunciation had another appeal for Emily Dickinson; in her mind joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, seemed interwoven in a peculiarly Dostoevskian manner. If "for each extatic moment/ We must an

⁷⁸ N.B. Poems: 260, 293, 313, 322, 349, 366, 379, 388, 458, 640, 745, 863, 965, 1022, 1181, 1282, 1430, and 1736. Poems 293 and 379 can also be read as expressions of separation or loss. Whicher calls renunciation "the most striking theme of her poetry." Emily Dickinson: A Bibliography (Amherst, Mass.: The Jones Library, Inc., 1930), p. 13.

⁷⁹ Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 617.

⁸⁰ Despite this connection of the sexual and the spiritual in Emily Dickinson's mind, Gregor's claim that these poems reveal a masochism that "becomes both a sexual-spiritual excitation and a ritual of purification" seems extravagant. p. 280.

⁸¹ de Rougemont, p. 142.

anguish pay" (125), intense happiness is fraught with pain, and, therefore, to be avoided. These poems also reflect the poet's greater interest in love itself than in the person loved.

Although in her poems of renunciation, Emily Dickinson creates many different situations, three seem most typical: 1) a presentation of the dramatic moment of decision and/or parting⁸²; 2) an analysis of the nature of renunciation⁸³; and 3) a reflection on the reasons for renunciation or the pain following it.⁸⁴ In Poem 260, the speaker gently encourages her beloved to be brave and strong enough to renounce their carnal longings. With an archness radically different from the attitude in all the other lyrics in this category, in Poem 1282 the speaker commands the other to recognize and accept her commitment "to Heaven divine," symbolized by her dressing in white to meet him (388). Sometimes the voice rationalizes why, despite her pain, denial is better than fulfillment (313). At other times, she recalls their last day together and the pain of parting (322). After the decision has been made, the voice sometimes envisions the emptiness of the future because of it (458). Rather sentimentally, the voice sometimes day dreams about what their life together might have been (366). Reflecting upon the nature of self-denial, the speaker emphasizes its spiritual qualities (745). In another poem, she stresses that the interior act of the will separates her from her beloved as a physical obstacle never could (863). Sometimes the voice even glories in the shared pain

⁸²N.B. Poems: 260, 322, 388, 458, 640, and 1282.

⁸³N.B. Poems: 379, 745, 863, 965, and 1430.

⁸⁴N.B. Poems: 293, 313, 349, 366, 1153, 1181, and 1736.

of their mutual sacrifice (1736). At other times, she almost bitterly traces a possible effect of long self-denial and rejects what once she desired but no longer needs or craves (1282). In Poem 1430, the voice presents a value of renunciation which keeps the desired object "Within reach, yet ungrasped." With psychological insight, the speaker in another situation analyzes why she experiences both bliss and anguish in remembering the "Withdrawn Delight" (379). Reliving vividly the misery of her renunciation, the speaker in Poem 293 voices an ironic prayer for help against despair. In some poems, the speaker explains her renunciation by saying that the beloved was too far above her (366), that he would outshine Christ (313), or that the excess of joy would have destroyed her (313). In her sacrifice, the voice manifests a variety of attitudes and emotions. Sometimes she is peacefully resigned;⁸⁵ other times she is keenly aware of her loneliness and pain.⁸⁶ Determination is an important psychic factor in some of these experiences.⁸⁷ Sometimes the voice is triumphant⁸⁸ and/or hopeful of reunion in eternity.⁸⁹ This apocalyptic posture is opposed to the nostalgic, little girl one in Poem 366.

Emily Dickinson uses her customary techniques in these love poems of renunciation. Her placing the action in the past or present is purposeful. She often employs time present in her efforts to define the nature of self-

⁸⁵ N.B. Poems: 322, 349, and 1181.

⁸⁶ N.B. Poems: 293, 313, 379, and 458.

⁸⁷ N.B. Poems: 260, 388, and 458.

⁸⁸ N.B. Poems: 388, 1181, 1282, and 1736.

⁸⁹ N.B. Poems: 332 and 366.

chosen sexual sacrifice. When she is creating the crucial moment, Emily Dickinson uses either the present tense for immediacy or the past tense for a controlling distance. She effectively employs past temporal sequences in the reflective lyrics which concentrate on the speaker's rationale for denial or her misery following it. The presence of the beloved and direct addresses to him add to the tension and immediacy of the dramatic moment. The voice's calling the other Sweet in Poem 260 implies a different kind of relation from the one in Poem 366 where she addresses him as Sir. Speaking to the beloved in imperatives also suggests the quality of their relationship; read (260), say (366), and take (388). Emily Dickinson uses contrast structurally in a number of these poems. Sometimes she sets the speaker's notion of what might have been or what she hopes will be in eternity against what is.⁹⁰ In other poems, the poet contrasts the ambivalence in the speaker's experience.⁹¹ Sometimes she sets the appeal of what is withheld against the commonness of the possessed.⁹² In Poem 260, the voice compares her and her lover's posture with the courage and hope of martyrs. In another situation, the speaker implicitly contrasts her first sharply physical pain after renunciation with the later, duller misery of semi-despair (293). The voice twice compares her renounced lover with Christ.⁹³ In two poems, the poet relates the danger of despair to severe

⁹⁰N.B. Poems: 313, 322, and 366.

⁹¹N.B. Poems: 379, 458, and 1181.

⁹²N.B. Poems: 313, 1282, and 1430.

⁹³N.B. Poems: 313 and 640.

self-sacrifice.⁹⁴ The voice's mental process, following a rational, cause and effect pattern, contributes to the reflective tone maintained in many of these

poems.⁹⁵ In one of them, Emily Dickinson opens with a question that clearly indicates the speaker's attitude: "Art Thou the thing I wanted?" (1282).

In another, the poet concludes with a question that reveals the voice's posture: "What Comfort was it Wisdom—was—/The Spoiler of Our House?" (965).⁹⁶

The imagery Emily Dickinson uses also colors the quality of the experience and indicates the voice's posture. The poet apparently elects the cluster of figures to illumine the value of renunciation or to concretize its painfulness. Metaphors of vision function both ways. The speaker alludes to her beloved's saturating her sight (640). She equates the misery of renunciation with "The putting out of Eyes—/ Just Sunrise" (745) and the emptiness following it to "Eyes that looked on Wastes" (458). Violent images define the agony of self-denial. Martyrdom by fire or drowning is a vehicle for the voluntary suppression of sexual love (260). References to wound, dirk, died, murder, torn sinews, and stapled breath vividly suggest the physical and emotional suffering of the voice.⁹⁷ Allusions to food and drink reveal the longing of the voice for the renounced lover.⁹⁸ Religious imagery conveys both the pain and

⁹⁴ N.B. Poems: 393 and 640.

⁹⁵ N.B. Poems: 313, 640, 745, 1022, and 1181.

⁹⁶ If Wisdom refers to the lovers' decision, this poem is a reaction to loss through renunciation; if, on the other hand, it refers to God, then it is a reaction to loss through death.

⁹⁷ N.B. Poems: 293, 379, and 1438.

⁹⁸ N.B. Poems: 313, 1282, and 1430.

value of the sacrifice and gives it a spiritual significance.⁹⁹ As they suffer "Calvaries of Love," the renouncing lovers become sealed churches and each other's crucifix (322).¹⁰⁰

"I cannot live with You—" (640) exemplifies many typical features of Emily Dickinson's love poems of renunciation. With dramatic intensity, controlled by a syllogistic sequence, the voice tells her beloved why their love is so hopeless. Stanza by stanza, she explores--and he apparently listens without effecting her thought process--the impossible possibilities that face them. One by one, she rejects the alternatives open to them. As she reasons why she can neither live, die, nor rise with her beloved, she reveals the intensity of her love which is paradoxically the obstacle to its fulfillment in time or eternity.¹⁰¹ The rational tone and syllogistic structure discipline the explosive emotional quality of the experience.

In the first three stanzas; the voice presents her reasons for renouncing a life together. Her ironic reason she states in the opening lines: living with the man she loves "would be Life." Life here implies a fullness of being that she feels is excluded from the human condition.¹⁰² Referring to

⁹⁹N.B. Poems: 260, 313, 322, 458, 640, 745, 1282, and 1736.

¹⁰⁰"Her identification of religious duty with renunciation is fulfilled in the numerous poems of the lovers' martyrdom on Calvary." Gelpi, p. 22.

¹⁰¹One critic believes the obstacle to satisfaction is the ambivalent posture of the voice "transfixed on the threshold of fulfillment," Gregor, p. 126.

¹⁰²One critic comments that the poet's use of Life here implies that the speaker is "already dead, though alive." Eunice Glenn, "Emily Dickinson's Poetry: A Revaluation," Sewanee Review, LI (Autumn, 1943), 584.

Life as "over there--/ Behind the Shelf," implies that the joy she would experience in love's fulfillment is denied her in this life by the Sexton who controls the keys. Shelf can be read as metaphor for the obstacles separating the speaker from the fullness of being she senses might have been hers, if the Sexton so willed. In this context, Sexton can be interpreted as the Puritan God who does not permit his creatures such joy in this world. Keys suggest the divine will which restricts the speaker, making her life the equivalent of delicate porcelain not to be used, locked instead in the cupboard lest it crack.

The next two stanzas touchingly tell why the voice cannot die with her lover. As she thinks of dying together, this situation becomes as impossible in her mind as living together had been. Again the major obstacle is the intensity of their love. She feels that "One must wait/ To shut the Other's Gaze down." Apparently their love is so strong that no one else could rightly do this office. She realizes that her lover could never bring himself to close her eyes. Consequently, he must die first. But if he did, she could not wait to render him this loving service. Like Juliet seeing Romeo dead, she would have to claim "Death's privilege." She rhetorically asks if she could "Stand by" without claiming her "Right of Frost." The objectivity in the poet's election of freeze balances the speaker's involved tenderness. The voice's love of life is also set against her eagerness to die if he should.

In the next six stanzas, the speaker rejects the possibility of life with her beloved in eternity. This is no poem of hopeful reunion after death. The main reason the speaker advances for not being able to rise with the other is that her love for him is so great that his face "would put out Jesus'." If

he were not there, heaven would be plain and foreign to her eyes homesick for him. Realizing that in life he totally absorbed her, she feels that such a love might exclude her from heaven. Because of the quasi-idolatrous nature of her love, which kept her from serving God, she refers to the "sordid excellence" of heaven. Her lover, outshining God, makes the divine seem inferior. Implicitly contrasting the joy of heaven with the joy she knew in her human love, she finds the possible divine rapture sordid. Because her love for her beloved is an end in itself and impossible of rewarding fulfillment, heaven, which she envisions as a reward for loving God, seems sordid. In this sense, heaven could be considered a kind of divine bribery. Next she considers the implications of his being lost and her being saved. In this hypothetical situation, heaven would be empty and she would be lost. Then she contemplates the reverse. If he were saved and she were not, the essence of hell for her would be his absence.

After she has exhausted the possibilities of living, dying, or rising with her beloved, the voice comes to a conclusion introduced by so. The logical apparatus of her thought sequence makes her final renunciation seem inevitable and possibly the terrible judgment of a hostile God. The ironic implications of just in the conclusion expose the voice's awareness of the agony involved in her sacrifice. Asserting her paradoxical conclusion, she remains separated from her lover by an act of will. She equates the "Door ajar" with the ocean, which has power to divide and to connect bodies far apart. She seems to affirm the possibility of a kind of psychic-spiritual meeting. Prayer and despair appear to operate in two ways. First, they may be predications of door. If they are like a door ajar, the possibility of the

voice's communicating with the beloved is small. Second, they may be read as indications of the voice's final, tensioned posture after making her renunciation. Prayer would then be a symbol of hope and her defense against despair, the "White Sustenance," which suggests spiritual death as much as the earlier metaphor, "Right of Frost," suggests physical death. Without him, neither life nor death is possible, yet the voice thinks that she must renounce him.

The fifth group of Emily Dickinson's love poems explores aspects of separation.¹⁰³ So much is temporality involved in all relations in this poet's mind that she calls man's awareness of it "Being's Malady." The majority of the lyrics of separation focus on the absence of the beloved and the feminine voice's yearning for his presence. A minority center around the barrier that separates the lovers and the speaker's yearning for the possibility of the other's presence.¹⁰⁴ In the first group, the essence of the separation is physical; in the second, moral. Whether the absent lover will or will not return, of course, further divides poems in the first group. Some of the lyrics concentrate primarily on the nature of separation and others, on its effects. Spatial and temporal factors are essential considerations in these experiences. Time and place in these poems are particularly relative to the beloved's presence or absence: "I scarce esteem Location's Name---/ So I may come--"

¹⁰³ N.B. Poems: 33, 47, 232, 240, 247, 253, 296, 339, 348, 398, 415, 422, 474, 485, 494, 504, 511, 570, 603, 725, 781, 786, 808, 825, 834, 877, 939, 968, 1013, 1032, 1042, 1141, 1155, 1233, 1290, 1507, 1612, 1632, 1664, and 1739. The large number of poems in this category may be partially accounted for by the fact that romantic lovers do not need "one another's" presence but one another's absence." de Rougemont, p. 31.

¹⁰⁴ N.B. Poems: 415, 474, and 485.

(725).

These lyrics explore many nuances of separation. Sometimes the voice dreams of her lover as she tends her garden (339). Frequently she reflects on the nature of time in relation to her beloved's absence¹⁰⁵: "To wait an Hour --is long/ If Love be just beyond--" (781). Other times she projects her loneliness in spatial terms¹⁰⁶: ". . . Distance is/ Until thyself, Beloved" (1155). In some poems, the voice emphasizes the distance separating her from her lover: "He--is more than a firmament--from Me--" (240). In others, she anticipates his joy in seeing her after years of being away (968). Sometimes the voice envies the ordinary things near to the man who is far from her.¹⁰⁷ Occasionally she makes hyperbolic statements of what she would give to see him (247). In her bereaved state, the voice dreads the first signs of spring whose brightness and joy are so different from her emotional posture (348). Sometimes the voice reflects on the moral obstacle, the "Single Hair," that separates the lovers (398). At other times, she considers "Jehovah's Watch" at fault (415). She compares the former positive effects of love with the present negative ones in his absence (232). She also reflects upon the psychological essence of parting (1739). She rationalizes that the time of his absence is a means to growth so that she may be "Fitter to see Him" (968). More typically, however, she views their separation negatively; she debates mentally with her lover that she has suffered more than he (296), maintains

¹⁰⁵N.B. Poems: 415, 474, and 485.

¹⁰⁶N.B. Poems: 511, 781, 825, 834, and 1141.

¹⁰⁷N.B. Poems: 240, 1155, and 1664.

that adjusting to the absence of the other is more painful than to his death (485), tells about her futile efforts to fill the void he left (786), thinks sadly on the lines of his face which are growing dim in her memory (253), and says that because he is gone she breathes in her own grave (1632).

The attitude of the speaker to the separation contributes to the quality of her experience. Staggered by her loss, she sometimes feels feeble (232). As she thinks of him, she can become wistful and tender (570), or jealous (498), or resigned (1013). Knowing how destructive his absence can be to her emotionally, she sometimes asks "Severer Service" of herself (786) and lives with a "Rigor unrelieved" (1022). If she believes that he will return (968) or that she will find him (1664), she becomes visionary and/or joyful. In some of the earlier poems of this class, the tone is so light or so emotionally detached and linguistically clever, that any deep involvement by the voice seems questionable.¹⁰⁸ In other poems, the rational tone controls, rather than denies, the reality of the speaker's experience and her emotional posture toward it.

These poems of separation exhibit a number of Emily Dickinson's poetic techniques. The vast majority gain immediacy by using the present tense¹⁰⁹ and a first person point of view.¹¹⁰ Imperatives often contribute to the drama

¹⁰⁸N.B. Poems: 33, 47, 232, 240, 247, and 339. These lyrics appear to be verbal exercises rather than significant emotional experiences.

¹⁰⁹Of all these lyrics only six are basically in time past: 232, 348, 474, 603, 786, and 1022.

¹¹⁰Only four of these poems do not use a first person approach: 232, 422, 781, and 1612.

and urgency of the situation: haste (47); stop, say, and sign (247); confess (253); spell (296); choose (422); tell (494); and give (1632). Rhetorical questions, such as "What would I give to see his face?" (247), reveal the voice's position.¹¹¹

The poet's choice of vocatives also suggests the speaker's relation to the absent other: Sir (296), Bright Absentee (339), Master (415), Ishmael (504), Sweet (1013), Goliath (1290), and Beloved (1155). Paradox plays an important role in some of these poems: 1) the burden of emptiness without him (834); 2) the idea of gain through loss¹¹²; and 3) the ability of a short time to be equal to a century or even eternity.¹¹³

Metonymy is evident in the speaker's making the face represent the whole person.¹¹⁴ Personification is particularly evident in this group of love lyrics.¹¹⁵ Love's arraying the voice (968), eyes' fondling the speaker (485), and morning's staring (570) are fitting and/or precise and, therefore, strengthen the poetic experience. A letter's guessing, pitying, or getting sleepy (495), however, resemble the pathetic fallacy and add to the essentially sentimental posture of the speaker. In some of these poems, Emily Dickinson employs a type of catalogue: listing flowers near the speaker¹¹⁶ or items near the absent lover.¹¹⁷ A rational tone

¹¹¹ N.B. Poems: 296, 348, 495, 504, and 808.

¹¹² N.B. Poems: 968 and 1022.

¹¹³ N.B. Poems: 781, 825, and 1141.

¹¹⁴ N.B. Poems: 253, 474, 504, 968, and 1141.

¹¹⁵ N.B. Poems: 47, 240, 253, 339, 348, 485, 494, 495, 570, 786, 968, 1042, and 1290.

¹¹⁶ N.B. Poems: 247 and 339.

¹¹⁷ N.B. Poems: 498 and 570.

and/or conditional sequence heightens the reflective quality and controlled emotion in a number of these lyrics: so,¹¹⁸ but,¹¹⁹ yet,¹²⁰ and though¹²¹ support the analytic process and its conditional elements. In some of these poems the poet simulates the mental shifts involved in a developing logical or argumentative sequence (296). She relates the painfulness of the experience to the danger of despair.¹²² Typically, she uses contrasts as essential structural forces. Opposition is the basic building device in some poems (725). In Poem 296, the speaker compares her position with her lover's. In Poem 834, she contrasts time before with time after her lover's coming. In Poem 33, she sets recollecting against forgetting. In Poem 1013, she contrasts the ease of dying with him with the pain of living without him. In the majority of these poems, there is also the subtle tension of the implied contrast of the "dilemma of isolation and the necessity of human love."¹²³

The imagery of these lyrics suggests the speaker's view of isolation. She compares life with the beloved to: spring (232), home (725), and dawn (1739). She equals his absence to: a sudden eclipse (415), lost eye sight (474), an "awful Vacuum" (786), "dying multifold" (1013), "a newer wilderness"

¹¹⁸N.B. Poems: 240, 296, 348, 415, 808, 896, 1632, and 1664.

¹¹⁹N.B. Poems: 240, 253, 296, 348, 398, 415, 474, 494, 504, 511, 877, 939, 1013, 1022, 1141, 1233, 1290, and 1664.

¹²⁰N.B. Poems: 339, 498, and 1022.

¹²¹N.B. Poems: 240 and 348.

¹²²N.B. Poems: 725 and 1612.

¹²³Porter, p. 24.

(1233), and night (1739). Allusions to nature are particularly frequent in this group of poems.¹²⁴ She equates its darker, negative features to love's frustration and its brighter, positive ones to its promise. Religious figures usually suggest the value of their love and the pain of separation.¹²⁵ Royal imagery often indicates the position of the beloved: King (232), Lord (339), and Sovereign (247). Commercial metaphors suggest both the emotional involvement of the speaker and the suffering of separation.¹²⁶ Allusions to travel generally indicate the distance dividing the lovers.¹²⁷ References to food and drink suggest the speaker's longing for the distant lover.¹²⁸ Medical images indicate the painfulness of separation.¹²⁹ Violent images also suggest the physical and psychic agony of separation: stapled feet (474), eyes wrenched away (485), and slashing clouds cutting off her vision (504).

"If you were coming in the Fall," (511) is a simply constructed, powerfully understated, representatively poignant poem of separation. It clearly reveals how relative time is to the separated speaker. Each time the voice addresses her distant lover, realizing more profoundly how far he is from her, she employs temporal and conditional references. The first four stanzas, all beginning with if, lead up to the climax which reveals that these introductory

¹²⁴ N.B. Poems: 47, 232, 240, 247, 296, 339, 348, 398, 415, 422, 474, 498, 504, 511, 570, 786, 808, 825, 1042, 1155, 1233, 1664, and 1739.

¹²⁵ N.B. Poems: 296, 348, 415, 485, 725, 968, and 1612.

¹²⁶ N.B. Poems: 247, 1616, and 1664.

¹²⁷ N.B. Poems: 808 and 825.

¹²⁸ N.B. Poems: 296 and 339.

¹²⁹ N.B. Poems: 786 and 877.

qualifiers are more than conditional. In the light of the last stanza, they seem markers of a contrary-to-fact supposition. The allusion to ever greater time spans, the speaker's indifference to them if at the end he will return, and the repeated ifs build up to a dramatic, but low-keyed, climax in the final stanza.

In the opening stanza, the speaker says in a matter-of-fact way that her lover's return in fall would make the months until then unimportant to her. Her use of brush and spurn, her condescending "half a smile," and her equating summer with a fly indicate her attitude toward such a short wait. His return would rob time of its regular value; to wait a few months for him would be nothing.

The second stanza extends the time to a year, continues the mental process begun, and introduces new domestic imagery. If she could see him in a year, the time would still be brief to the speaker. It would be more meaningful though, for she declares that she would "wind the months in balls" and put each in a separate drawer "for fear the numbers fuse--." This household metaphor suggests a slight shift in the voice's attitude toward time. Winding wool is a deliberate action. It suggests a rational sorting out and conscious saving of what might otherwise be tangled or lost. Since time to the speaker is meaningful only in relation to her beloved's return, she seems to be saying that she would store events in distinct psychic slots lest in the period of waiting everything blur in her mind. She may also be implying that she would save the memory of events during this time for his coming so that they might then share them.

The subjunctive sequence and the mental and emotional posture it

represents continue in stanza three. Irony and hyperbole reinforce the voice's attitude toward time and her absent lover. Her juxtaposing only with centuries indicates how totally meaningless time would be to her if she could only be sure that at some point in it he would return. Even in her eagerness to see him, centuries would be nothing. She claims that she would keep count of them, subtracting each one as she neared the point at which they would be reunited. She would continue counting, mindless of all but his return, until her fingers dropped. Her reference to an island in the South Pacific suggests her reason for no longer keeping track of the centuries. Exhaustion would be an obvious one, but not meaningful in context. Instead, the only reason she would stop would be his return.¹³⁰ Their joyful reunion, suggested by the heart-shaped, exotic island, would make any future counting meaningless. Present fulfillment would negate any sense of time future.

In stanza four, another uncertainty makes his absence painful. Just as she would be willing to wait any length of time for his return, if she could be certain of his coming, so she would be willing to wait until eternity, if she could be certain of immortality. If she could be positive that he and she would survive in another life, she would toss present time aside as one would a rind, subject as it is to decay. The contrast between time and eternity in her mind is conditional; the condition and her uncertainty about it add drama to her position and tension to the poem.

The last stanza sums up her uncertainty in a concrete figure. She can

¹³⁰This interpretation differs from the only other reading presently available. Gregor, pp. 118-120.

no longer brush the fly aside as she earlier did. Without eternity, time would assume a new and menacing power. Without immortality, she could not continue to wait serenely indifferent to time. She is caught in a middle state between faith and despair—a state the bee represents. Although she elsewhere introduces him as a vehicle for death or sexual union, the bee here is an image of her doubts and their persistent, disturbing attacks. The macabre and erotic overtones may also operate in this lyric, for the primary reason the voice is concerned about time and eternity is her longing for reunion with her beloved. The introduction of the bee, therefore, may subtly imply that time, death, and love mingle in the speaker's unconscious.

The movement from these first five categories of love poems to the other five is essentially one of degree. In the last five groupings, the experience is a more positive one, there is more possibility of fulfillment, and the voice's attitudes reflect this shift from longing to realization—even if it is a highly spiritualized one, the man loved seems more symbolic than real, and consummation can be expected only in a vague realm after death.

In the sixth category of love poems, the speaker proclaims the depth and constancy of her love.¹³¹ These declarations are generally personal and intense, often exclamatory, and typically deceptively self-regarding. Tracing the voice's emotional posture, they focus more on her than on the beloved. Some of the earlier lyrics, especially the Master-daisy poems,¹³² are devoid

¹³¹N.B. Poems: 31, 102, 106, 124, 186, 200, 223, 246, 268, 270, 275, 303, 317, 400, 438, 456, 464, 480, 481, 549, 587, 729, 740, 775, 961, 966, 1005, 1189, 1237, 1357, 1398, 1496, 1555, 1737, and 1754.

¹³²N.B. Poems: 102, 106, 124, and 481.

of mature emotion; while others, presenting a more adult experience, are stronger artistically. Because of her idealization of the man and her correspondingly awed love, the speaker often declares her happiness in merely sitting at the feet of the beloved, who remains majestically aloof.¹³³ Because of her love, the speaker voices a secular prayer that she might give joy to the man she loves (31) and be forever at his side (246). Poem 246 also effectively expresses her sense of shared identity: "Two lives--One Being--now--." Sometimes the voice asks for a way adequately to reveal her love: "My Message-- must be told--" (400). In trying to reveal her love, the speaker admits that she is as powerless to tell her reasons for loving as the grass is to say why the wind moves it (480). Sometimes the voice wishes her beloved were in various painful situations so that she might prove her love through service to him (961). In Poem 740, the voice thanks her lover for what he has given to her and asks to be worthy of him. In a number of other poems, the speaker also proclaims the depth of her love.¹³⁴ When she states that her beloved "constituted Time," the voice economically suggests how great her love was; she implies that to her he was reality, the supreme fact of her existence, and the only meaningful measure of time (765). At other times she simply says "I have no Life but this--" (1398) or "My Heart ran so to thee" (1237). Sometimes she rationalizes that he is of such value to her that it is better to lose him than to gain any one else's love (1754). In some poems, the voice tells what the beloved means to her although she realizes that to others he is

¹³³ N.B. Poems: 102, 106, and 124.

¹³⁴ N.B. Poems: 303, 456, 765, 966, 1398, 1555, 1737, and 1754.

nothing.¹³⁵ Because of the nature of the experience they present, these last two poems have more objectivity and serenity than most of the others in this grouping. Along with Poem 480, they also posit an existential recognition of a reality that cannot be rationally explained. Many of these lyrics are declarations of the voice's constancy.¹³⁶ Sometimes she speaks as if she was challenging her lover's unspoken accusation: "Me, change! Me, alter!" (268), "Doubt Me! My Dim Companion!" (275), "Alter! When the Hills do--" (729), and "Rearrange a 'Wife's' affection!" (1737). These defiant protestations of fidelity have an emotional urgency that colors the experience. Whether the voice asserts the subjective worth of the man she elects, confesses the depth of her devotion, or declares her constancy, these poems share an essentially positive approach to love. The voice's posture, therefore, is often joyful or grateful. She humbly refers to herself as shy (106), meek (124), timid (275), least (400), and low (481). Mindful of his superior nature, she is content to be "the smaller of the two" (246). As an archetype of the wise, older man, he is virtually a deity so far above her that she finds his knee a dizzy height (186). In the declarations of fidelity, the speaker's stance is determined, dedicated, and sometimes defiant. In the weaker poems, her posture is too coy and sentimental (186) or too pleading and coquettish (223).

Emily Dickinson uses many linguistic devices to structure these poems of constancy. The vast majority use the first person point of view¹³⁷ and the

¹³⁵ N.B. Poems: 1189 and 1555.

¹³⁶ N.B. Poems: 268, 270, 275, 317, 438, 464, 587, 729, 775, 1005, and 1737.

¹³⁷ Only Poems 102, 303, 481, and 1357 utilize a third person point of view.

present tense¹³⁸ to create a sense of involvement and immediacy. Rhetorical questions frequently allow the speaker to voice an intensely emotional declaration of her constancy.¹³⁹ Sometimes the rhetorical question instead closes the poem.¹⁴⁰ In at least one case, the entire poem is a sustained rhetorical question (186). Hyperbole is an important feature in these poems.¹⁴¹ Often the speaker makes extravagant claims saying she will be faithful until "Deity conclude" (400) or the sun questions "His Glory" (729). In many of these structures, the other person's presence is felt even though he does not engage in a dialogue. The voice addresses him as "Great Caesar" (102), Marauder (106), Sir¹⁴² "My Dim Companion" (275), Caviler (275), Heart (317), and Sweet.¹⁴³ These vocatives suggest the voice's attitude toward the beloved as well as his dramatic presence.¹⁴⁴ Imperatives also indicate the speaker's posture toward the other as well as contribute to the situation's tension: condescend (102), answer, say, look (400), prove (456), and forfeit (775). Argumentative sequences dramatize the voice's one-sided debate with the beloved.¹⁴⁵ In spite

¹³⁸ Only Poems 200, 481, 765, and 1237 employ time past.

¹³⁹ N.B. Poems: 438, 456, 480, and 775. ¹⁴⁰ N.B. Poems: 124 and 223.

¹⁴¹ N.B. Poems: 268, 400, 549, 729, 1005, 1398, 1737, and 1754.

¹⁴² N.B. Poems: 106, 223, and 729. ¹⁴³ N.B. Poems: 549, 961, and 966.

¹⁴⁴ In only a few poems is the beloved absent and, therefore, referred to in a third person form: 246, 400, 1189, and 1555. These lyrics are typically more reflective.

¹⁴⁵ N.B. Poems: 275, 549, and 775.

of the speaker's obvious emotional involvement, her use of syllogistic steps to prove her fidelity makes the final conclusion seem reasonable.¹⁴⁶ Conditionals and adversatives also support the rational quality of these poems: if,¹⁴⁷ but,¹⁴⁸ and yet (740). Metonymy operates in the imaginative equation of the total person with his face.¹⁴⁹ In many of these lyrics, personification concretizes the emotion.¹⁵⁰ Characteristically, contrast is a vital structural element. The poet sets the voice's lowly position against her beloved's lofty one.¹⁵¹ The voice compares her constancy with others' (438). She sets his possible action and her response in opposition: "Bind me—I still can sing—" (1005). She contrasts her love of him with the indifference or scorn of others who do not see him as she does.¹⁵² She compares losing him with gaining all others (1754). Twice the voice forcefully compares her love with Christ's.¹⁵³ Once she sets her lover's power against Christ's (464). In the earlier poems in this group, Emily Dickinson employs exclamations often to convey intensity.¹⁵⁴ To prove her love to the other, the speaker also presents hypothetical

¹⁴⁶N.B. Poems: 480, 587, and 961.

¹⁴⁷N.B. Poems: 246, 400, 729, 775, and 966.

¹⁴⁸N.B. Poems: 775, 961, 1237, 1398, 1754, and 1357 version II.

¹⁴⁹N.B. Poems: 1189 and 1237.

¹⁵⁰N.B. Poems: 200, 246, 480, 729, 1237, and 1737.

¹⁵¹N.B. Poems: 102, 106, 124, 156, and 481.

¹⁵²N.B. Poems: 1189 and 1555. ¹⁵³N.B. Poems: 317 and 456.

¹⁵⁴In Poem 102 there are two exclamations in four lines; in 268, three in six lines; and in 275, two in the opening line.

situations more frequently than in the previous groupings.¹⁵⁵ The opening line of many of these poems is exceptionally arresting. The poet uses three main devices to achieve these strong and dramatic first lines: 1) placing an action verb in the initial spot;¹⁵⁶ 2) setting opposites in tension;¹⁵⁷ and 3) using fresh imagery.¹⁵⁸ Most of Emily Dickinson's allusions in this category are religious,¹⁵⁹ royal,¹⁶⁰ commercial,¹⁶¹ legal,¹⁶² and mathematical.¹⁶³ The high incidence of figures from the world of finance, law, and mathematics is significant for their presence helps to balance the emotional quality of the experience and contributes to the poem's tension. The poet employs many references to nature,¹⁶⁴ some to music,¹⁶⁵ gems,¹⁶⁶ and food.¹⁶⁷ The shift to a more positive approach to love probably accounts for the fact that in only two poems is the imagery violent.¹⁶⁸

¹⁵⁵ N.B. Poems: 268, 587, 729, and 961.

¹⁵⁶ N.B. Poems: 275, 438, 587, 729, and 1737.

¹⁵⁷ N.B. Poems: 966, 1005, and 1754.

¹⁵⁸ N.B. Poems: 765 and 1237.

¹⁵⁹ N.B. Poems: 317, 765, 775, 1237, and 1555.

¹⁶⁰ N.B. Poems: 270, 303, and 1398.

¹⁶¹ N.B. Poems: 223, 270, 400, 1189, 1237, and 1357.

¹⁶² N.B. Poems: 275, 775, and 1357. ¹⁶³ N.B. Poems: 275, 587, and 1189.

¹⁶⁴ N.B. Poems: 31, 102, 106, 124, 186, 275, 481, 587, 966, 1189, 1555, and 1754.

¹⁶⁵ N.B. Poems: 31 and 1005.

¹⁶⁶ N.B. Poems: 270 and 400.

¹⁶⁷ N.B. Poems: 246 and 1555.

¹⁶⁸ N.B. Poems: 275 and 1005.

Among the poems declaring the speaker's constancy, "Empty my Heart, of Thee--" (587) is one of the best. It also contains a number of features common to the more successful lyrics in this category. It is simultaneously argumentative and reflective. Although he never makes the poem a dialogue, the presence of the other is felt. The speaker is always conscious of him and directs her attention, words, and emotion toward him. The logical development of the three stanzas prepares for their individual conclusions and builds up to the arresting image in the last two lines which is the final conclusion. The syllogistic tone helps also to control the speaker's intensity. This poem is condensed and pithy. The analogies, which are the core of the poetic experience, are apt and expandable. The poem's compression and imagery require the reader to enter intellectually as well as emotionally into the experience. The active, concrete verbs and the chosen imagery allow the fourteen lines to carry an impressive weight of meaning. The punctuation reinforces the rhythms of speech which catch the mind as it moves in a rational, yet emotionally tense, pattern. The retardation and speeding up of lines and the omission of all but the essential words match the speaker's mental process. Diction, imagery, and rhythm make the feminine voice's declaration of her total dependence upon her beloved and the meaninglessness, in fact, the impossibility, of life without him a satisfying and dramatic experience in this poem.

The initial line strikingly sets the mood of the poem. Beginning with a trochee in an action verb makes a strong opening which functionally indicates the voice's posture. The dominance of the verb suggests her dedication and determination. Her addressing the other so early in the poem reveals that this is not a solitary experience. Although the reader has no way of knowing what

prompts so impassioned a protestation of love, the vehemence of the opening and the argumentative quality of the entire poem suggest that the voice feels an urgent need to convince the other of her constancy. Since the speaker apparently never feels the slightest hesitancy about her love, the challenge she is answering seems to lie outside of her, in the thee of the first line. In this line heart functions at two levels: 1) the physical of the biological metaphor and 2) the symbolic one representing her affective commitment. Modified by single, the artery metaphor is peculiarly effective. Because the voice thus limits the source of blood to her body to just one tube, the analogy becomes more telling; her whole life depends solely and totally upon him. Once this relationship is established, her reasoning in lines three and four is perfectly consistent. Opening the third line with begin and demanding a pause after it place emphasis on the verb. The compression of lines three and four supports their meaning. Paring the lines to their core words demonstrates formally the implications of simply: without him no life is possible for the speaker.

In the second stanza, the voice makes a new analogy to show how utterly dependent she is upon her beloved. She compares her immersion in him to the billows that make up the sea. By again deleting any linking verbs, the poet forces the reader to supply the syntactical links to work out the metaphor. Establishing the fact that many billows are one Baltic prepares the reader for the next hypothesis. Addressing the beloved, the speaker commences another line with a concrete verb. Subtract seems to be a conditional subjunctive rather than an imperative form. By adding "in play" as a qualifying phrase, the speaker implies that in reality he could not withdraw from her life, but

that if he could, then she would be destroyed. The only run on line in the lyric follows the conditional clause and indicates the speaker's mounting excitement. As the voice considers her condition if the other could withdraw, she responds with emotion but in the mathematical language begun by subtract. Although the syntax is reversed and a verb connects the pronouns, the last line of this stanza matches the thought pattern of the second.

The third stanza advances the speaker's arguments. Syllogistically, she sets up the premise of the relation of the root to the tree. Beginning the stanza with the action verb erase and omitting connectives add force to the line and suggest the speaker's emotional state. The conclusion follows with logical inevitability. Just as the tree depends upon its roots, so she depends on him. In the second line, by deleting the verb but including the connectives, the poet emphasizes the reasonableness of the voice's conclusion. The last two lines advance the earlier conclusions to their ultimate one. The final result would be more terrible than the previous ones. If he could withdraw from her, all her dreams would be destroyed. The graphic figures carry a result that is more painful to the voice than mere physical death. The heavens and eternity represent her spiritual aspirations which, without him, are impossible.¹⁶⁹ Just as the poet rhymed the final word in the opening line of each stanza for emphasis, so she slantly rhymes the last two lines to draw attention to the concluding imagery which concretizes the speaker's hypothetical condition without the beloved. The negative aspects of stripped and

¹⁶⁹ Although Flick maintains that the "last two lines make it fairly certain that the lover is identified with God, for her loss means the loss of heaven too," this reading seems at least equally acceptable. p. 315.

Picked contribute to the effectiveness of the final metaphors and to the forcefulness of the voice's assertion of constancy in this poem.

Poems rooted in the nature of love make up the seventh category.¹⁷⁰

Although these are love poems, there is a definite attempt to stand back and observe the experience objectively, to analyze it critically, and to define it unemotionally. Whether these qualities betray a lack of emotional involvement in the poet's life is irrelevant; their presence in the poetry is not. Because of their reflective nature, these poems are less dramatic and tense, contain fewer imperatives and exclamations, exhibit less awareness of the beloved, and address themselves less frequently to him than poems in some other categories. Their theoretical approach affects the diction, imagery, and rhythm of these lyrics as well as the speaker's psychic and affective posture in them. In this grouping three subgroups are evident: 1) the speaker calmly and objectively reflects on the nature of love¹⁷¹; 2) the speaker more personally considers the nature of her own relationship¹⁷²; and 3) the speaker talks to the other in a less detached way about their love.¹⁷³

In trying to analyze and define love, Emily Dickinson reveals many of its complex facets. She presents love as a sudden, unexpected, and joyous

¹⁷⁰ N.B. Poems: 180, 208, 273, 453, 568, 580, 638, 673, 738, 751, 754, 756, 909, 914, 917, 1248, 1438, 1725, 1729, and 1765. The he of Poems 208 and 751 could easily be a divine as well as a human lover. Ruth Miller claims that in Poem 208 the dedication is to poetry, not to a beloved.

¹⁷¹ N.B. Poems: 208, 453, 568, 909, 917, 1248, 1438, 1725, and 1729.

¹⁷² N.B. Poems: 273, 284, 580, 638, 751, 754, and 756.

¹⁷³ N.B. Poems: 180, 738, and 914.

experience.¹⁷⁴ She traces external signs of love's presence (208) and the minute incidents which give it reality (1248). At other times, she presents it as the great experience of life (1725), so great that it eludes rational explanation (568) or precise analysis (909). In some lyrics, the poet praises love as overwhelming, human fulfillment¹⁷⁵ or exalts its glorious power to transcend human limitations.¹⁷⁶ In others, she emphasizes the risk (580), the service,¹⁷⁷ the surrender,¹⁷⁸ and/or the paradoxes involved in love. The poet also isolates two other aspects of love: 1) the speaker's desire to please (738) or to be worthy of (751) the beloved. To discover the nature of love, the voice observes herself and others from various perspectives. As she tries intellectually to scrutinize the experience, her posture is typically objective. Wonder and humility are her dominant attitudes. As she reflects upon the complexities of love, she feels a sense of awe. As she considers her own love, she experiences delight and gratitude. The privilege and responsibility of being loved render her imperial (273).

To explore the nature of love, Emily Dickinson utilizes a variety of verbal patterns and techniques. Because of the personal nature of the experience, all but three of these poems are in the first person.¹⁷⁹ Because of their reflective quality, more are in the past temporal sequence than is

¹⁷⁴ N.B. Poems: 180 and 638.

¹⁷⁵ N.B. Poems: 754 and 756.

¹⁷⁶ N.B. Poems: 909 and 638.

¹⁷⁷ N.B. Poems: 273 and 914.

¹⁷⁸ N.B. Poems: 273, 909, and 1729.

¹⁷⁹ N.B. Poems: 917, 1248, and 1438.

typical.¹⁸⁰ The exclamations used convey a sense of awe and wonder rather than emotional tension.¹⁸¹ The other is also less often present¹⁸²; consequently, vocatives¹⁸³ and imperatives¹⁸⁴ are rarer while third person references to the beloved are more frequent.¹⁸⁵ Rational sequences support the analytic tone: so (751), because (914), and for (754). Conditionals and adversatives perform a like function.¹⁸⁶ Personifications typically concretize what might otherwise remain vague: a flower puzzles (180), speech staggers (208), and a house fans and rocks itself (638). Rhetorical questions help to reveal the speaker's posture.¹⁸⁷ Contrasts operate in a number of ways in these lyrics; the voice sets her unworthiness against his merit (751), lists opposites to discover what will please him (738), looks at the antithetical elements in love (1438), and contrasts abstract theory with experiential understanding (568). Three devices seem especially operative in this category of love poems: 1) the poet relates love to eternity¹⁸⁸; 2) elects one controlling

¹⁸⁰ N.B. Poems: 208, 568, 580, 638, 756, and 1725.

¹⁸¹ N.B. Poems: 180, 568, 1725, 1729.

¹⁸² N.B. Poems: 180, 738, and 914.

¹⁸³ The only one occurs in Poem 453 and is addressed, not to the beloved, but to love.

¹⁸⁴ These appear in Poems 738 and 1438; tell, say, and behold.

¹⁸⁵ N.B. Poems: 273, 580, 638, 751, and 909.

¹⁸⁶ N.B. Poems: 180, 284, 738, and 1438 for if; 754 for though; and 453, 568, 580, 673, and 909 for but.

¹⁸⁷ N.B. Poems: 180, 284, 453, and 738.

¹⁸⁸ N.B. Poems: 208, 453, 638, and 917.

analogy to explore the experience¹⁸⁹; and 3) uses abstractions often.¹⁹⁰ The poet's desire to define love probably accounts for the frequency of words like bliss (453), wisdom (568), life (580), and boon (1438). Emily Dickinson draws most of her imagery from her usual sources: nature,¹⁹¹ religion,¹⁹² monarchy,¹⁹³ law,¹⁹⁴ and commerce.¹⁹⁵ The natural figures often suggest the wonder and vitality of love; the religious, its sacredness; the royal, its nobility; the legal, its binding power; and the financial, its risks and rewards. In this category, the poet also uses literary (568), political (909), and hunting¹⁹⁶ allusions. The high incidence of domestic¹⁹⁷ and geographic¹⁹⁸ figures seems significant and functional. The poet appears to elect domestic references to carry experiential and geographic to carry theoretical knowledge. The familiarity of buckle (273), hearth (638) and bowls (756) suggests the personally realized. On the other hand, the unfamiliar ring of Chimborazo (453), Isles of Spice (580), and Vesuvian (754) suggests the distant, unknown, and exotic.

¹⁸⁹N.B. Poems: 180, 284, 580, 754, 909, and 1729.

¹⁹⁰N.B. Poems: 738, 751, 754, 756, 909, 917, 1248, 1438, and 1725.

¹⁹¹N.B. Poems: 180, 208, 273, 638, 738, 754, 756, 909, and 914.

¹⁹²N.B. Poems: 180, 568, 673, 751, 756, 1438, and 1725.

¹⁹³N.B. Poems: 273 and 738. ¹⁹⁴N.B. Poems: 273 and 580.

¹⁹⁵N.B. Poems: 580, 756, 1248, and 1725.

¹⁹⁶N.B. Poems: 754, 1438, and 1729.

¹⁹⁷N.B. Poems: 180, 208, 273, 638, and 756.

¹⁹⁸N.B. Poems: 180, 453, 580, 754, 756, and 914.

Among the poems whose core is the nature of love, "I gave myself to Him" (580) is one of the better.¹⁹⁹ It examines the risks and rewards involved in love. It reflects upon love as a complex experience, which can be fulfilling and disappointing. Although recognizing that reality may be less than expectation, it insists that unless a person takes this chance and opens herself to its possibilities, some precious potential in her will remain unrealized. Erotic overtones tension the dignity of love which the poem posits. Financial and legal imagery play against the poem's personal tone and emotional quality. Conversational directness and connotative richness operate together. The concept of love presented and its mode of presentation interact to convey a complex experience.

Emotion in the first stanza is finely controlled. With the detachment of commercial and legal terms and the distance of past tense, the speaker tells of her commitment to the other. The verbs gave and took concretize the inner and suggest the outer exchange she associates with the commitment. With disarming directness, the voice says "I gave myself to Him." Since she gave herself to the beloved, the speaker's use of pay is unexpected. The only thing she expected or wanted in return was him. Pay here can represent three levels of their exchange: physical, emotional, and spiritual. The importance of this exchange to the voice is evident in her electing contract and modifying it with solemn. The relation of the phrase "of a Life" to contract is twofold.

¹⁹⁹ Although some critics read this poem solely as an experience of divine love, there does not seem to be any internal reason for not reading it as an experience of human love. N.B.: Miller, p. 81; Sherwood, p. 163; and Flick, p. 313. Internally the implications of the lover's lack of omniscience and externally the similarity of the imagery of cargoes and spice isles to figures in Poem 368 seem to require a human lover.

The phrase suggests that the contract involved the giving of her life to the other and that it was the great commitment of the speaker's life. The method of ratification also indicates the voice's concept of love's nature. The unqualified gift of themselves to each other humanizes the cold overtones of contract and ratified. The voice evidently sees love as both an inner and an outer relationship, as a spiritual and a physical union.

The second stanza moves from past to present tense, from declarative to subjunctive forms. The directness of the speaker's initial statement in stanza one prepares for her honesty in this one. She faces the possibility that her gift of herself might be less than the other expected. Continuing the commercial references begun with pay, she uses wealth, poorer, purchaser, and own²⁰⁰ to concretize the beloved's possible response. These terms suggest the voice's ability to stand emotionally outside of the situation and scrutinize it objectively. Since the speaker's own emotional involvement is evident in stanza one, these terms indicate the maturity of her love which can afford to be so understated. The run on lines in this stanza build up the emotional impact of the understatement. The connotations of purchaser imply that the lover gave to the speaker just as she did to him. Calling him great would negate any suspicion of miserly calculation on his part. That reality could be different from what he anticipated would also seem to negate the possibility that the lover is omniscient and, therefore, divine--in fact, his lack of foreknowledge would seem an adequate argument against the existing interpretations of this lyric as a poem of divine love.

²⁰⁰Own is here a substantive used in the archaic sense of that which belongs to one as property.

The opening line of stanza three completes the thought pattern begun in stanza two. Depreciate carries the financial figures begun when the voice wonders if the intimacy of daily living together might not lessen the love experience. Vision suggests the lover's possibly unrealistic concept of the speaker or of love and so another reason for her wondering whether disappointment might not follow a life lived in conjugal closeness. After facing the possibility that the ordinariness of life together might destroy romantic idealizations, in the next three lines the speaker clearly demonstrates her approval of taking the chance. But introduces her reason for preferring testing reality to holding back from it in fear. As she speaks of the merchant buying, the commercial figures take on exotic and erotic coloring. Until love is experienced, it is merely a fable, exciting but unreal. In context, "Isles of Spice" and "subtle Cargoes" assume strong sexual overtones.

After making her original statement about her dedication to the other, speculating about its disappointing possibilities, and establishing her reasons for risking them, in the last stanza the speaker comes to an erotic conclusion disguised in commercial imagery. The fact that the risk love involves is mutual reassures her. Mutual here could mean not only that both parties face the same danger but that they share it. Her careful qualifications, as she further reflects that for some love has been a mutual gain, indicates how inclusive the speaker's posture is. Echoing the allusions of stanza one, the imagery of stanza four brings the poetic experience to an artistically and psychologically satisfying close. The last two lines: "Sweet Debt of Life-- Each Night to owe---/ Insolvent---Every Noon---" bring the voice's view of love, the commercial imagery, and the erotic implications into a final relationship.

In the conclusion, sweet, debt, owe, and insolvent tension the voice's attitude toward love and sexual union. She finds them fulfilling and destroying, delightful and draining. The exchange of love is a debt which she owes, pays, and claims. That she can be insolvent yet each night pay parallels her paradoxical view. The contrast of night and noon, the juxtaposition of sweet and debt, and the tension between erotic implications and commercial language aptly convey the poem's complex view of love.

The next category of poems focuses upon the erotic aspects of love.²⁰¹ Although the sexual nature of love is more evident here than in any of the other groups, it is still usually disguised if not always restrained. Possibly puritan idealism kept more overtly erotic desires in the poet's unconscious.²⁰² Another reason may lie in the poet's sensibility, which led her to write: "Of our deepest delights, there is a solemn shyness."²⁰³ Certainly the literary temper of her day would have discouraged any more open artistic celebration of sexual love. Whatever the cultural and psychic causes of the poet's

²⁰¹N.B. Poems: 76, 138, 162, 206, 211, 212, 213, 249, 284, 368, 380, 429, 682, 869, 896, 1224, 1339, and 1734. The sea in Poem 76 may represent death and immortality as well as love. Ward restricts it to eternity. Capsule, p. 43. James Reeves, however, considers the sea as "some overwhelming force, or great destructive power—death possibly, or love, or perhaps both." p. 125.

²⁰²Any such observation is conditional and hypothetical for: "Granted that images which spring to the poet's mind spontaneously may be significant of personal experience even though consciously elaborated imagery may not be, we are not in a position to draw the distinction between 'conscious' and 'unconscious' creative activity." Lillian H. Horstein, "Analysis of Imagery: A Critique of Literary Method," PMLA, LVII (September, 1942), 641.

²⁰³Letters (Johnson, ed.), III, 926.

indirection and however innocent her imagery may appear, the erotic nature of these poems is too evident to be denied.²⁰⁴ Submerged sexual metaphors and ambivalent fear of ravishment and delight in carnal union characterize this group of poems. The erotic nature of the attitudes and the tone of these poems distinguish this category from the other nine which are so often marked by a fearful or spiritualized approach to the physical aspects of love. The focus of these lyrics as well as their peculiar imagery, strong trochee line beginnings, and run on lines or breaks within emphasize the naturalness, excitement, pleasure, and power of sexual love.

The experience in these poems seems to fall into three major divisions. The speaker equates "Their Moment consummated" (1339) with exultation (76), felicity (206), Eden (211), ecstasy (249), and rapture (1339). She also speaks of their relationship in terms of her wanting to be absorbed into him.²⁰⁵ At other times, she more subtly presents her view of woman's inferior position: the man assaults, takes, and leaves while the woman is passive, submits, and remains.²⁰⁶ The voice's concept of the difference between the masculine and feminine role in human sexuality is apparent in her diction. She refers to woman as: pleading (162), bashful (211), docile (429), least (212), obedient (429), worshipping (869), and vanquished (1224). She pictures the woman as "withholding not a Crescent" (1339), but the man as taking "his felicity" (206).

²⁰⁴Pickard even claims that "few American poets before or since had been so concerned with describing the effects of love and passion." p. 87. [Italics mine]

²⁰⁵N.B. Poems: 162, 212, and 284.

²⁰⁶N.B. Poems: 206, 211, and 213.

She visualizes the male's being lost in Balms (211), hallowing the female (213), but rejecting her once she submits (213). She refers to the man as a traitor (896) who is victorious (1224) in his cupidity (1339). At times, the voice presents the physical attraction of the lovers (138). At other times, because she is not used to such intoxication, the feminine speaker asks the other to approach her gently and slowly (211). The posture of the woman in these poems ranges from unrestrained excitement and erotic release to defensive resentment of man's sexual assault. Ravishment and rape seem uncomfortably near to each other. The poetic success of these poems also varies widely. Artistically effective poems such as 76, 213, and 249 stand in sharp contrast to such a poetically weak one as 1734.

The emotional intensity of these experiences apparently determines the poetic devices which Emily Dickinson uses. First person point of view²⁰⁷ and time present²⁰⁸ intensify the situation. Besides adding poignancy, talking to the other makes the lover's power over the speaker felt.²⁰⁹ The voice, however, generally addresses her vocatives, not to the other, but to love.²¹⁰ Imperatives,²¹¹ adversatives,²¹² and argumentative sequences are rare;

²⁰⁷ Only Poems 206, 211, 213, 896, and 1339 are in the third person.

²⁰⁸ Only Poem 1339 is in past time.

²⁰⁹ N.B. Poems: 249, 368, and 869.

²¹⁰ N.B. Poems: 162, 211, and 1734; 429 is an exception.

²¹¹ N.B. Poems: 162 and 211.

²¹² N.B. Poems: 206, 249, 284, and 682 for but; 284 and 429 for yet; and 368 for though.

personifications²¹³ and rhetorical questions,²¹⁴ average; and exclamations,²¹⁵ rapid run on lines,²¹⁶ and omissions of connectives and verbs,²¹⁷ high. The emotional build-up in these lyrics is related to the presence or absence of these structural and imaginative techniques. The poet makes special use of strong trochees to open lines,²¹⁸ italics to emphasize words,²¹⁹ and breaks to isolate key words.²²⁰ A patterned parallelism tends both to underscore and to control the emotion in a number of these poems.²²¹ Certain clusters of imagery are peculiar to these poems: flower-bee,²²² river-sea,²²³ and boat-port.²²⁴ Although none of these sets of analogies is original, in the better poems Emily Dickinson freshly explores their possibilities. In the flower-bee figures, she exploits the association of heat, liquor, and mid-day. She uses the river-sea figures to suggest a shared identity. The boat-port set offers

²¹³N.B. Poems: 284, 380, and 429. ²¹⁴N.B. Poems: 76, 162, and 213.

²¹⁵N.B. Poems: 162, 206, 211, and 249.

²¹⁶N.B. Poems: 76, 213, 682, 896, and 1224.

²¹⁷N.B. Poems: 162 and 212.

²¹⁸N.B. Poems: 76, 138, 211, 213, 249, and 368.

²¹⁹N.B. Poems: 162, 213, 284, and 368.

²²⁰N.B. Poems: 162 say, 211 enters, 212 thee, and 249 tonight.

²²¹N.B. Poems: 138, 249, 368, 869, and 1339.

²²²N. B. Poems: 138, 206, 211, 213, 380, 682, 869, 896, 1224, 1339, and 1734.

²²³N.B. Poems: 162, 212, and 284.

²²⁴N.B. Poems: 249 and 368.

her particularly erotic possibilities. She employs religious figures here to suggest the joyful results of union: Paradise (213), hallow (213), Eden,²²⁵ and grace (896). She introduces royal allusions to indicate the male's position: sovereign (380), Earl (213), and duke (138). One of this poet's rare references to mythology is here in Poem 284. She uses allusions to warfare to carry her concept of male dominance in carnal union: ambuscade (138), subdue (138), moat of pearl (213), defeat (380), surrender (380), bravest (380), assault (1224), chivalry (1224), victorious (1224), and vanquish (1224). She uses references to transportation as vehicles for the male's approach,²²⁶ the voice's relation to him,²²⁷ and her delight in love's satisfaction (76).

"Wild Nights--Wild Nights!" (249) is one of the most successful of Emily Dickinson's erotic poems.²²⁸ Its intensity and brevity, its stress on the non-rational drive toward sexual pleasure, and its sense of vitality and excitement make its celebration of earthly passion artistically satisfying. The poet's fine formal control, the speaker's now unfulfillable desire for

²²⁵ N.B. Poems: 211 and 249.

²²⁶ N.B. Poems: 1224 and 1339.

²²⁷ N.B. Poems: 249 and 368.

²²⁸ Most critics agree basically about the erotic nature of this poem: Whicher, This Was a Poet, p. 274; Wells, Introduction to Emily Dickinson, p. 253; Johnson, Emily Dickinson, pp. 98-99; Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, pp. 169-170; Lindberg, p. 77; and Suzanne M. Wilson, 353. "Emily Dickinson and Twentieth Century Poetry of Sensibility," AL, XXXVI (November, 1964), 349-358. Some critics, however, disagree. Faris, for instance, considers despair "its central point." 269. James T. Connelley considers the sea a macabre force and reads the poem as "an apparent death wish." "Dickinson's 'Wild Nights,'" Explicator, XXV (January, 1967), #44. Miller predictably claims that the poem expresses a longing for Jesus. p. 91. Thomas Arp reads the poem as "an expression of spiritual unrest and desire." p. 145. Dramatic Poses in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1962).

sexual ecstasy, and the reader's necessary intellectual and imaginative response to the erotic symbolism refine the sensual quality of the poetic experience. Transformed by art, the poem's delight in human passion is both intense and restrained, erotically spontaneous and intellectually disciplined. While the sexual impulses and desires threaten to erupt at any moment, they are kept within the confines of a tightly organized form. The resulting tension between the primitive abandonment desired and the restraint imposed by form is an essential factor in the lyric's effectiveness.

The strong opening line demonstrates this pull between the speaker's turbulent eroticism and the poem's formal channeling of it. The connotations of wild suggest naturalness and lawlessness, tempestuous emotion and turbulent excitement, and freedom from restraint and lack of rational control. The patterned repetitions, on the other hand, put the voice's overpowering impulses under the restraint of art. The many w sounds, the rapid run on lines, and the two exclamations suggest the voice's aroused state. Time present and first person point of view add to the urgency of the speaker's words. Her election of luxury carries forward the implications of wild and modifies some of their overtones. Luxury here connotes opulence, emotional and sexual, not financial. Abundance and voluptuousness would mark their shared delights, just as they do the feminine voice's fantasy of them. The etymological relation of luxury and lust contributes to the connotative richness here. The voice's reference to the absent lover and her use of a subjunctive, contrary-to-fact structure makes her desire more poignant. The insistent reality of her drives plays against the fantasy of their fulfillment.

The second stanza opens arrestingly with futile isolated from the rest

of the line. As if by association of thought, the speaker chooses futile. Her conscious mind recognizes that the winds of passion are powerless to disquiet the person already enjoying sexual satisfaction; her unconscious seems to posit the futility of her desires in the given situation as well as the torment she suffers from her unfulfilled physical drives. There is an implied contrast between the person buffeted by violent desires, who must exercise rational restraints, compass and chart, to move safely out of the storm, and the person resting tranquil after sexual release. Although the second line seems to reverse the male-female position, the serenity suggested by a "Heart in port" partially explains the poet's choice. Repetition of done and the patterning of the two lines it begins allow form to control the speaker's exultant expectation of release from erotic strain and from unwanted restraints.

The third stanza begins with a graphic action verb²²⁹ which continues: 1) the imagery of stanza two; 2) the reversal of sexual postures; and 3) the anticipation of explosive erotic pleasure. Eden suggests the speaker's final vision of perfect pleasure and peace in the beloved's ecstatic embrace and protective presence. The voice's crying "Ah, the Sea!" operates in two ways. The sea ambivalently represents the turbulence of passion and the joy of its satisfaction. The cry, therefore, carries the voice's frustrated and excruciating desire to be united with the other and her anticipated delight in their union. The isolation of tonight focuses attention upon the immediacy of the voice's desire. It may also function with might to reveal her belief that

²²⁹ Although rowing may be read as a verbal, it here seems to be part of an understood subjunctive phrase expressing desire.

one night would satisfy her or, as Anderson observes, that "Since the fall, man is limited to only an instant in Eden."²³⁰ At one level, rowing and moor may be equivalents of strenuous fore-play and satiety. At another, they may represent the voice's psychic and physical excitement and her emotional security and sexual fulfillment with him.

Although the number of poems making up the ninth category is rather small, this cluster constitutes an important division of Emily Dickinson's love poems.²³¹ The positive pole of her view is readily evident here for these lyrics present love as an experience capable of changing the person and lifting her to a new position.²³² The transformation is, therefore, both internal and social. Since love here has a spiritual significance, it is often synonymous with grace.²³³ Since love confers rank, it frequently is equated with a type of royal elevation symbolized by a crown²³⁴ or a diadem.²³⁵ Since love initiates a girl into a woman's role, it typically is linked to nuptial experience.²³⁶ In these poems, Emily Dickinson exploits the ceremonial nature

²³⁰"Emily Dickinson," American Literary Masters, I, 1004.

²³¹N.B. Poems: 195, 199, 343, 356, 387, 466, 493, 506, 508, 732, and 1072.

²³²This position resembles Chase's reading of the marriage poetry: pp. 147, 157-158. It differs basically from Griffith's interpretation of the marriage poetry: Long Shadow, p. 177.

²³³N.B. Poems: 343, 356, 387, 506, 508, and 1072.

²³⁴N.B. Poems: 195, 336, 356, 508, and 1072.

²³⁵N.B. Poems: 356, 466, and 508.

²³⁶N.B. Poems: 199, 493, 508, 732, and 1072.

of baptism, coronation, or wedding to portray her idealization of love's power to redeem, to raise, and to transform. Allusions to religious, royal, and nuptial ritual intermingle to convey the poet's vision of love as a fulfilling and ennobling change. Because of her lofty concept of the dignity conferred by love, she typically presents it as a sacramental experience. The idealization of this view probably accounts for the frequency--especially in the earlier poems--of vagueness²³⁷ and abstraction.²³⁸ It also partially explains the emphasis upon the transforming effects of love rather than upon the beloved who, even in the marriage poems, remains shadowy and distant. In these lyrics celebrating the emotional awakening and new life effected by love, the poet tends to relate this transformation in time to a final elevation in eternity.²³⁹

The essential experience of these love poems is one of significant and radical change. The transformation Emily Dickinson envisions as a result of love in these lyrics parallels an assertion she made in 1878 that "Love makes us 'heavenly' without our trying in the least. 'Tis easier than a Saviour."²⁴⁰ Besides presenting love's effects in terms of grace, royalty, or marriage, these poems also equate the inner change with a trance (195); a soft eclipse

²³⁷ See Poems 195, 199, and 343 for an unspecified use of this and that.

²³⁸ Examples abound: glory, necessity (195); state, comfort, pain (199); reward, being, eternity (343); heresy, faith (387); modesty, doubt, gratitude (393); renown (506); choice, rank, will (508); requirement, amplitude, awe (732); title and swoon (1072).

²³⁹ N.B. Poems: 195, 336, 343, and 1072.

²⁴⁰ Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 601.

(199); a "Reward for Being," a premium, or a bliss (343). As the voice realizes and tries to describe the alteration she feels within, she says that love clothes her in majesty (356), that it makes her a queen (493), or that she is transfigured by it (506). In other lyrics, she refers to her ring (1072) or new name²⁴¹ as signs of the emotional, spiritual, and social change love produces. Sometimes she speaks of putting away her dolls (508) or other playthings (732) as evidence of her womanly rank. In all these poems, the voice ascribes her new dignity to an action outside of herself which she describes as being "Called to my Full--" (508) or even ravished (506). She is the passive receiver; the masculine figure or love is the active force that transforms her and brings her life to maturity.

The speaker's attitude toward the inner transformation she experiences is quite consistent in all these poems. She feels modesty and gratitude (493) that she has been chosen (356). She speaks of being permitted and of grace being conferred (1072). She is humble toward the male figure whom she terms a Master (336) or an emperor (466). She refers to him as boundless (506) and his stooping down to her (195) as munificence (493). She considers the woman's role as one of rising to the man's requirement (732). Exultation and awe reinforce her position of humble gratitude. She feels elevated because of the psychic and social change love has caused: "And now, I'm different from before, / As if I breathed superior air--" (506).

Emily Dickinson employs many of her usual verbal patterns to present the effects of love. The majority of lyrics in this category have the

²⁴¹N.B. Poems: 493 and 508.

immediacy of present time²⁴² and first person.²⁴³ Contrast is an essential structural element in many of these poems for the voice typically sets her former state unfavorably against her present one²⁴⁴ or she contrasts other conditions with her own.²⁴⁵ She hyperbolically claims that realms are "just Dross" (343) in relation to her wealth, which she equates with owning "the ample sea" (466). To convey her sense of exaltation, the speaker refers to her crown that death can not touch (195) and her diadem that is so large it fits a dome (466). She compares her new beauty with the setting sun's (356). Rhetorical questions function in two poems²⁴⁶ and exclamations in six.²⁴⁷ Vocatives are restricted to Poem 336; personifications,²⁴⁸ adversatives,²⁴⁹ conditionals,²⁵⁰ and imperatives²⁵¹ are relatively few. Repetition of mine as the initial word in seven out of nine lines in Poem 528 effectively conveys the voice's stance. Just as the ellipses in three lines of the first stanza of Poem 343 suggest the voice's emotional intensity, so the retarding pauses

²⁴²Only Poems 356 and 732 are wholly in a past form.

²⁴³Only Poems 387 and 372 are in third person.

²⁴⁴N.B. Poems: 199, 356, 506, 508, and 732.

²⁴⁵N.B. Poems: 343 and 466. ²⁴⁶N.B. Poems: 197 and 1072.

²⁴⁷N.B. Poems: 195, 199, 336, 493, 528, and 1072.

²⁴⁸N.B. Poems: 195 and 732.

²⁴⁹N.B. Poems: 195, 199, 356, 387, and 1072 for but; 356 for yet; and 387 for though.

²⁵⁰N.B. Poems: 493, 506 and 732 for if.

²⁵¹N.B. Poems: 195 for get and 199 for stop.

in the opening line of Poem 493 indicate her reflective posture: "The World--stands--solemn--to me--." Powerful trochees strengthen the opening of many lines which are essentially iambic: haunt (195); lift (506); crowned (508); mine (528); title, empress, born, royal, and stroking (1072).

Because of the poet's concept of love's power to elevate, religious and royal imagery abound in this group of poems. Allusions to coronations supply vehicles for the immense dignity love confers.²⁵² Tropes involving gems perform a similar function.²⁵³ Religious allusions--especially to grace and conversion--suggest the type of change Emily Dickinson envisions as a result of love.²⁵⁴ Imaginative references to nature are relatively sparse.²⁵⁵ Legal allusions²⁵⁶ are present in only two poems and political,²⁵⁷ in three.

One of the most effective and representative poems in this category is "I'm ceded--I've stopped being their's--" (508).²⁵⁸ In it Emily Dickinson employs royal, religious, and nuptial tropes to convey the voice's exultant

²⁵²N.B. Poems: 195, 199, 336, 343, 356, 466, 493, 506, 508, and 1072.

²⁵³N.B. Poems: 343, 356, 466, 493, and 1072.

²⁵⁴N.B. Poems: 195, 199, 336, 343, 356, 387, 493, 506, and 1072.

²⁵⁵N.B. Poems: 195, 199, 356, and 506.

²⁵⁶N.B. Poems: 508 for ceded and 528 for charter.

²⁵⁷N.B. Poems: 199 for czar; 343 for election, ballot, and votes; and 528 for election and veto.

²⁵⁸See the following for similar readings: Chase, pp. 156-158; Ward, Capsule, pp. 57-58; Pickard, p. 87; Lindberg, pp. 174-175; Anderson, "Emily Dickinson," American Literary Masters, I, 1005; Flick, p. 60; and Cambon, 451-453. Sherwood's reading is basically different; he denies any erotic implications and regards the experience as wholly spiritual. pp. 147-148.

—almost defiant—consciousness of the change love has caused in her. Aware of her new status of emotional and spiritual maturity, the voice contrasts girlhood with womanhood. She now finds her former interests and attitudes inferior. Her earlier occupations and rank she feels are appropriate to a maiden but unsatisfactory for a wife. As she looks back upon her dependence, she proclaims her new freedom to choose and to stand erect as evidence of her changed position. Self-awareness and the ability to accept or reject the grace offered seem essential qualifications of her superior rank. Because of love her life has been brought to a fullness which she recognizes and welcomes. She consciously and joyously opens herself to this transformation.

In the first stanza, the voice proclaims her independence of the past. She compares her baptism with her marriage. Both sacraments involve grace, a change of name, a new relationship, and a radical transformation. As the speaker stands on the threshold of adulthood and wedlock, she turns away from reminders of her girlhood: her maiden name and her dolls are symbolic of her virginal state. The voice's use of ceded is significant for it suggests a legal transfer with full property rights. She insists that she no longer belongs to her family, she is not their's [sic]. Her passivity in having water dropped upon her face in baptism is different from her present state of full consciousness and willing acceptance. The lack of end punctuation in lines two and three suggests her emotional intensity. Her sense of superiority excites her and informs her attitude toward her girlhood and family.

The contrast-comparison of the rite of baptism and marriage continues in the second stanza. The adversative but indicates the difference the voice sees in the two rituals. The consciousness and choice that were lacking in

the first sacrament are present now. There is, therefore, an interaction between the grace given and the person receiving it. No longer passive and unaware, she responds as an adult with self-awareness and an act of will. These mature qualities in her reaction to love's gift make her joyous. Because she feels that she is being brought to the fullness of being, that "Existence's whole Arc" is being filled, she exults in her womanly response. Three things in this stanza indicate the speaker's regard for her initiation into womanhood: 1) her calling her new name supremest; 2) her comparison of her new condition to Diana's; and 3) her reference to her diadem.

The final stanza advances the contrast-comparison, the imagery, and the attitudes of the first two stanzas. Still using baptism as the basic trope, Emily Dickinson mingles coronation and nuptial figures to present the voice's exuberant joy in the transformation love has caused in her. The speaker explicitly says that in comparison with her new state, her second rank, the first was inadequate. Her lack of awareness and choice in baptism made her a "half unconscious Queen." The voice does not deny the efficacy of grace itself in the earlier sacrament, but finds the experience of grace recognized and responded to a more fully human one. Her description of herself as crowing on her father's breast may indicate the quality of her awareness of the great gift she then received. As a half unconscious queen, the level of her response may rightly be compared with an animal's. Or crowing may suggest her cries as the water dropped on her forehead. Crowing can, therefore, indicate the speaker's lack of awareness or positive cooperation in the earlier rite in contrast with her consciousness and choice now. As an adult, initiated into love, her reaction is joyous, aware, and active. Love has transformed her and

this second baptism becomes the vehicle for the voice to celebrate this change.

The final category of love poems had divine love as its core. Two fundamental approaches to celestial love seem evident here: the first stresses the relation of the beloved and God in the mind of the speaker and so results in a kind of divine triangle and the other stresses the speaker's ecstatic union with the divine. In the first group, the voice either prefers the human lover to the divine and, consequently life in time to any possible happiness in eternity,²⁵⁹ or she symbolically elects God in preference to any earthly man.²⁶⁰ In the second group, the human and the divine merge and the voice experiences the ineffable as a person, a guest who lives in her soul or a bridegroom who both ravishes and sanctifies her.²⁶¹

The experience of these poems, therefore, reflects Emily Dickinson's ambivalent attitude toward God. They indicate that she envisioned some type of competition between divine and human love that necessitates a choice between the two²⁶² or their fusion.²⁶³ They also reveal the poet's personal experience

²⁵⁹N.B. Poems: 464 and 765. See Poems 577 (stanza seven), 640 (stanzas six to nine), and 1260 (stanza six) for a similar posture in poems whose essential experience puts them in other categories.

²⁶⁰N.B. Poems: 320 and 1269. Poem 1555, which appears earlier in this chapter as a proclamation of depth in love, can also be read as belonging to this last category.

²⁶¹N.B. Poems: 674, 817, 1495, and 1496. See footnote 263 for other poems which can be included in this category.

²⁶²This view of God as a jealous competitor may be considered evidence of the distortion of Edwardian theology in Emily Dickinson's time.

²⁶³This ambiguous mingling of the human and divine lover in this poet's work can be viewed biographically or artistically. Flick claims that the difficulty in separating the image of God from the image of the lover lies in the fact that "God often is the lover, especially in the poems after 1861." p.

of God²⁶⁴ or her ability to imagine and to celebrate an epithalamium union with the divine.²⁶⁵

In these poems of heavenly love, there is usually some distance between the speaker and the experience. A high percentage--four out of seven--are in the past tense and/or third person. Even Poem 320, which uses a present mood, refers to a previous time; the insight of the present is founded upon the earlier experience. Possibly the very nature of the voice's encounter with God results in a dignified, calm, grateful posture. As she attempts to define mystic union, the speaker realizes that much eludes her. In Poem 1721, she confesses that she does not know whether God was her host or her guest and that their intercourse, which was both infinite and intimate, cannot be analyzed. Realizing that her values previous to her experiential knowledge of the divine and sense of union with him were those of a fool (320), she is grateful for the wisdom (1269), the rapture (1495) and the promise of immortality (817) that have come to her because of her heavenly love. When she speaks of God's enamored mind pursuing her (1496), his omnipresence is like the eye of a lover following his bride. In these lyrics, the voice is less

302. This mingling of the two images can be considered an aesthetic weakness or it may be seen as "a double frame of reference and hence a means of attaining a larger significance." Miller, p. 117. It certainly permits overlapping in categories such as this study uses and explains why poems such as 461, 473, 506, 508, 587, and 1072, which are in other areas in this chapter, can also be read as experiences of divine love and so as part of this last area.

²⁶⁴ Whether these lyrics have an experiential or imaginative source is, of course, aesthetically irrelevant.

²⁶⁵ This view of God as a loving intimate may represent the positive pole of the poet's religious tradition.

self-regarding than usual. Although the experience itself fascinates her in its meaning, power, and elusiveness, she is essentially directed to the other.

The functional combination of peaceful detachment and intense emotion in these poems is evident in a number of formal details. In the two most ecstatic in the group, Poems 817 and 1495, tightly wrought form controls the speaker's joy. The rhythms are simultaneously rapturous and restrained. The repetition of so as the opening word in two lines of Poem 1721 and bride in the same position in Poem 817 and numerous run on lines suggest the emotional posture of the voice, while the could qualification in Poem 464, the use of arbitrate and ratified in the rhetorical question in Poem 1269, the retarding of lines to explain,²⁶⁶ the high incidence of abstractions,²⁶⁷ the frequency of factual statements as openings,²⁶⁸ the lack of vocatives, exclamations, and imagery all contribute to the serenity of the poems. The simple declarative forms rather than the typical and more complex relationships created by adversatives and conditionals also contribute to the sense of calm in these poems. With restraint, the voice presents the divine action in her soul, which she equates with "ravished Holiness" (1495). Instead of using imagery to convey her experience of the divine, the speaker relies on a type of symbolism or allegory in these poems. Playing with paste (320) or working for chaff (1269) represents this trend. Contrast²⁶⁹ and personification²⁷⁰

²⁶⁶ N.B. Poems: 320 and 464.

²⁶⁷ N.B. Poems: 464, 674, 817, 1495, 1496, and 1721.

²⁶⁸ N.B. Poems: 320, 674, 765, 817, 1495, 1496, and 1721.

²⁶⁹ N.B. Poems: 320, 464, 674, 765, 817, and 1269.

²⁷⁰ N.B. Poems: 674, 1269, and 1495.

contribute to the speaker's rational-imaginative process as she tries to capture in words her experience of God.

Although a number of fine poems could be selected to represent a mystical encounter with the divine, since four of them are explicated in other parts of this chapter,²⁷¹ one that presents tension between divine and human love, "You constituted Time—" (765), is elected as representative, if not totally typical, of this last category of Emily Dickinson's love poems. The eight lines of this compressed poem effectively condense a complex experience of love. The speaker finds God a jealous and determined lover and her response to him a paradoxical idolatry.

The speaker's detachment from the experience is qualified by certain elements of the poem that suggest her emotional position. The matter-of-fact opening, the predominance of Latinate nouns and verbs,²⁷² the past temporal sequence, the many abstractions,²⁷³ the analytic process indicated by therefore, and the voice's apparent adjustment suggest the serenity possible only in retrospect. On the other hand, opening with the personal you, using run on lines, telescoping the experience so economically, setting time and eternity and the divine and human lovers in opposition to each other, subjectively equating time with her human lover, and closing with "slow idolatry" suggest

²⁷¹N.B. Poems: 461, pp. 165-166; 473, pp. 166-168; 508, pp. 238-241; and 587, pp. 217-220.

²⁷²Time and deemed are the only words other than pronouns and relatives and the single adjective slow with O.E. roots.

²⁷³N.N. time, eternity, revelation, deity, absolute, relative, and idolatry.

tense, personal involvement.

When the speaker says that "You constituted Time," she implies three things about her relationship. To her the first love was so great that he became reality, the supreme fact of her existence, and the only meaningful measure of time. In the next two lines, she implies that he also constituted eternity for to her heaven would be a revelation, not of God, but of her human lover. This switch in theological roles prepares for the final irony of the poem. Since to her man had taken God's place, when God takes this man's place in her life, her adjusting to the change involves a paradoxical irony. Therefore in the last line of the first stanza indicates that to the voice God's reaction to her initial idolatry was not arbitrary but logical and inevitable.

With an almost syllogistic progression, the voice accounts for God's intervention. As the Absolute, he removed the Relative. When she says that her reaction to her loss was a slow adjustment, the adjective operates on two levels. Besides indicating the long period of time needed, it suggests an unwillingness on her part to make the adjustment. Since God forced her to put him in the place of her cherished human lover, who had assumed a God-like role in her life, any love she might now give God could be termed idolatry. The voice may also be implying that the change was not due to direct action on God's part but to a change in her as she recognized the difference between relative and absolute love. If slow and adjust are interpreted as indicating a gradual development of value response on the part of the voice, this second reading is also consistent with the last two lines. Idolatry would then be more startling than paradoxical. It could suggest the nature of her love, which is so great, that it could be hyperbolically termed idolatry. Because

of the radical difference in final attitude toward God contained in these two readings of the second stanza, one tentatively excludes the other. If, however, an ambivalent closing is artistically accepted, the very openness of the last stanza to such divergent interpretations enriches this poem just as its rational and passionate, abstract and personal factors tension the experience.

In Emily Dickinson's love poetry, critics discover various patterns. To some the thread is primarily biographical and so they trace a "development from aggrieved woman to disembodied intelligence."²⁷⁴ Most critics, however, who discern a development in these poems, concern themselves with an aesthetic one involving content and/or form. Thematically they see a progression from earthly to celestial love,²⁷⁵ and formally, a progression from sentimentality to "poems of immediate, sometimes violent intensity."²⁷⁶ Although the poems in this chapter are arranged topically rather than chronologically, they give general support to the argument that Emily Dickinson's love poetry exhibits this dual movement. Moreover, they suggest another development, one of shifting emphasis rather than of definitive steps, from a negative and fearful to a more positive and joyous approach to love. While acknowledging this general

²⁷⁴Whicher, This Was a Poet, p. 272. A few other critics make similar claims. McNaughton says: "Emily Dickinson's love became sublimated from an earthly to a spiritual one." p. 61. Copple believes that her poetry reflects "a normal, progressive adjustment to this need for love." p. 53.

²⁷⁵See the following for similar assertions: Pickard, p. 22; Wilbur, in Emily Dickinson, ed. by Richard Sewall, p. 134; Van der Vat, 257; and Connors, 630-631.

²⁷⁶Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 53.

movement, the polarity in these poems must be recognized as an essential part of their expression of love.

Critics generally agree that Emily Dickinson's love poetry, taken as a whole, is not the best in her canon. Although most admit that a few of her love lyrics are excellent, the majority find many weaknesses in this group and believe that the poet is "rarely at her best on the subject of love" and that "compared to any other area of her work, the love poetry as a whole seems thin and brittle."²⁷⁷ Some claim that Emily Dickinson's love poetry relies too much on literary inspiration and conventions to be convincingly authentic aesthetic experiences.²⁷⁸ They find the intrinsic value of the amorous lyrics marred by sentimentality, abstraction, or melodrama. They criticize their lack of originality,²⁷⁹ concreteness, and humanity. In the mid-forties, Bernard De Voto anticipated these criticisms in his own poetic one when he said that these love poems are: "light without heat . . . flame without fire . . . splendor without substance."²⁸⁰ The major faults ascribed to this poet's love

²⁷⁷ Griffith, "Emily Dickinson's Love Poetry," 93. Anderson's judgment is similarly adverse: "In spite of some freshness of phrasing, and an occasional haunting image, these poems tend to fritter themselves away in a series of images." Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 169.

²⁷⁸ "They are . . . experiences of the idea of love rather than of the experience of it, products of fancy rather than imagination." Sherwood, p. 86. "One suspects that most of them failed because their inspiration was literary." Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 169.

²⁷⁹ Griffith asserts that the "love poems are clogged with 'cliches' and stock responses." "Emily Dickinson's Love Poetry," 94.

²⁸⁰ "Emily Dickinson," Harper's Magazine, CXC (June, 1945), 605. Although it might be argued that this statement has more wit than profundity, it does succinctly sum up many others' adverse reactions to this area of Emily Dickinson's work.

poetry lie in its tendency to become pure emblem rather than realized experience, to be self-regarding rather than turned to the other, and to escape artistic control.²⁸¹ In view of the excellence of some of the poems explicated in this chapter and acknowledging the peculiar unevenness of Emily Dickinson's canon, regardless of the experience of the poems, some of these negative observations on her love poems seem too exclusive to be valid. The lack of depth or technique in some of the love poems should not prevent critics from looking more objectively at others.

In spite of these general criticisms of this area of Emily Dickinson's canon, some critics claim that these are "at once the most delicate and the most intense lyrics in American literature and some of the most beautiful in any language."²⁸² The value in this area of the poet's canon, however, seems more accurately assessed by the major critics who find her reflective poems of love more effective than her rhapsodic ones, her poems of spiritual love more convincing than those of human love,²⁸³ and her poems of deprivation, renunciation, and separation superior to those of fulfillment. Among the poems presented in this chapter, especially those selected for extended study, are some of the highest artistic value in this poet's canon. They are intense yet

²⁸¹ "They lack the artistic control necessary to raise them beyond the biographical and the personal." Pickard, p. 87. Although this judgment applies to the sentimental love poems, it does not take into account the successful ones.

²⁸² Edwin Mosely, "The Gambit of Emily Dickinson," University of Kansas City Review, XVI (Autumn, 1949), 18. McNaughton also claims that the poet's love lyrics are "some of her greatest." 58.

²⁸³ Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 190.

controlled, highly tensioned, and original in their approach to love. They also exhibit the wide range of postures Emily Dickinson conceives as possible reactions to love and the essential ambivalence at the heart of her creative response to love. In this ambivalence lies much of the originality, tension, and control that individualizes her better poems of love.

CHAPTER IV

POEMS INCORPORATING DEATH

Because of the imprint of Emily Dickinson's whole mind set upon her work, the poems of love are closely related to the poems of death in her canon. The sensibility that responded to all of life with a peculiar curiosity, freshness, intensity, honesty, and polarity was as fascinated with the mystery of death as it was with the complexity of love. The creative imagination that could escape the limits of its own experience of Eros could also peer into the grave and beyond. The psyche that could simultaneously see love as desirable and threatening could also envision death in this same ambivalent fashion. The theological uncertainty that made absolute faith or disbelief equally impossible for this woman also made love and death sources of both hope and apprehension. Like God and love, death could neither be totally accepted nor totally rejected. The poet who could present the experience of love from so many diverse and often opposed angles could likewise present mortality from various points on a spectrum wide enough to include antithetical positions. The artist who created lyrics with psychological and symbolic dimensions in the area of love also approached death as an existential phenomenon whose physical realities were of value only as they revealed the psychic and spiritual significance of the experience.

Similar qualities of Emily Dickinson's mind as a person and her resources as an artist are evident in her poems of love and her poems of death.

The philosophic interest in both areas of human experience, the ambivalent attitudes taken toward them, the emotional stances assumed toward them, the synthesizing imagination that so often relates them, and the techniques used to create satisfying aesthetic experiences whose core is Eros or Thanatos link these two large areas of Emily Dickinson's poetry. The successful macabre lyrics are as psychological, intense, ambivalent, compressed, and tensioned as the successful erotic ones. Poems from both areas tend to explore the inner meaning of experience, to dramatize its contradictory impulses, to see it in relation to time, to locate it in an existential frame, and to concretize it with immediacy yet to analyze it with necessary distance.

In Emily Dickinson's poetry mortality is central. As early as Poems 1 and 3 death enters the lyric experience; and as late as Poem 1684 it persists in haunting the speaker. Because of the precariousness of the poet's balance between faith and doubt, death fascinated and frightened her. Because of her sensitivity to the transitoriness of the human condition, she felt death's presence all around her. As she tried personally and artistically to penetrate this primordial mystery, Emily Dickinson's responses reveal both the attraction and the terror death held for her. The gamut of attitudes toward mortality contained in her letters and poems is extremely inclusive. At times the poet seems obsessed with the implications of the "Granite Lip" (182), "soldered mouth" (187), "Mortised Ear" (592), and "mouldering hand" (169) of the dead. At other times, she speaks of death as a "thoughtful grace" (141), a "Gentle Miracle" (499), a "privilege" (536), a "Good News" (947), "A Miracle for All!" (1626), "the White Exploit" (922), and "a wild Night and a new Road."¹

¹Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 463.

Both quantitatively and qualitatively, death's presence in Emily Dickinson's poetry is significant and unique. Over one-fourth of her canon deals directly or indirectly with mortality. But even more characteristic than the weight it carries in this poet's work is the polarity that marks its presence. Evidence of this ambivalence exists at many levels. Emily Dickinson is able to treat death realistically and idealistically. Concrete imagery, objective clinical details, and emotional distance, which rescue her better poems from the prevailing sentimental orgies of death poetry in her day, also tend to strip death of its spiritual overtones and, therefore, to reduce it to the merely physical.² At the same time, Emily Dickinson is capable of ignoring the biological and presenting death as transcendence. Then symbolic, subjective significance displaces corporeal concerns, the time-space relationship inverts as it helps to define the experience,³ and a cosmic view replaces a microscopic one. She can also conceive of death as the source of man's awareness of his individual consciousness and as a means to transcend or to destroy it. She relates death to life in time and to its possibility in eternity. She presents death experientially and abstractly as an index of human values. And finally, within the imaginative construct, she presents death as fulfillment and as destruction.

This final ambivalence is crucial in Emily Dickinson's death poems.

²So strong is this approach in some of Emily Dickinson's macabre poems that one critic claims that the poet transferred "death as event to death as a mechanistic function." DiSalvo, p. 139.

³See Frederick Hoffman, "Mortality and Modern Literature," in The Meaning of Death for further insights into time-space consciousness as evidence of a negative or a positive view of immortality.

Promising both completion and annihilation, mortality is simultaneously desirable and threatening. As a positive encounter, it rounds out man's selfhood, completes his spiritual cycle, and brings him to the fullness of being, for in death "the soul achieves the consummation of its own personal self-affirmation."⁴ As an act of inner self-realization and transcendence of the limitations of the human condition, death is a joyful experience and eternity an attractive reality.

Emily Dickinson's awareness of death as fulfillment is evident in the poems which stress the dignity, insight, freedom, joy, status, or immortality it confers. In these lyrics focusing on the non-physical aspects of human mortality, the tone and vision, which carry the conviction of death as transcendence, depend especially on rhythm, diction, and imagery. Many of these lyrics have the majestic sweep of "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers--" (216) and "Behind Me--dips Eternity--" (721). The poet equates death with extasy (165), privilege (583), worthiness (799), and a journey already taken by Christ (698). Besides these positive identifications, the poet claims that death is "but our rapt attention/To immortality" (7) and the grave "but a Relay/Supposed to be a terminus" (1652). In a similar manner, she asserts that mortality is a trifle (57). She speaks of a soul's escaping "the House unseen" (948) and taking "her fair aerial gait" (1691). Besides giving the soul new freedom, death is the source of new values: "Death sets a thing significant/The Eye had hurried by" (360).⁵ She repeatedly calls heaven a home.⁶ In keeping with

⁴Karl Rahner, On the Theology of Death (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), p. 30.

⁵N.B. Poems: 386, 906, and 1100.

⁶N.B. Poems: 7, 104, 335, 1024, and 1573.

this image, she refers to death as the "Porter at my father's Lodge" (608) and those not yet dead as exiles (499). She describes existence after death as: a "truer Land" (5), "better Latitudes" (335), and a "Paradise of Light" (1145). When she designates immortality as "that Great Water in the West" (726) and "Costumeless Consciousness" (1454), the imagery aptly suggests man's thirst for eternal life and its non-physical quality. Her use of cocoon-butterfly figures in Poem 1099 utilizes ancient Christian symbols for the resurrection and implies both the naturalness and the miracle of man's change from a mortal to an immortal state.

In spite of her presenting death as only the "Drift of Eastern Gray" (721) or a cordial mystery (1626) and immortality as the "only thing worth larceny" (1365), Emily Dickinson's death poems also present mortality as a fearful and destructive experience. As a negative encounter, it sets absolute silence and insurmountable distance between the living and the dead, it leaves the body cold, rigid, and motionless, it destroys individual consciousness, and therefore, annihilates the person. As the irrevocable, final step in man's existence, death is a solitary act that reduces man to his ultimate limitations as a finite being. In this existential perspective, death is a terrifying experience.⁷

⁷ Even to the believer in immortality, death is terrifying. The explanation of this terror includes the following theological, philosophical, or psychological ones. "In death the soul is ontologically exposed to real and effective annihilation." Boros, p. 74. "This breaking up of his existence is in the deepest sense a painful process." Boros, pp. 135-136. ". . . death as the end of the biological life is simultaneously and in a way which affects the whole man, an irruption from without, a destruction, the intervention of the Fates, an external event that turns up unexpectedly, so that a man's own death, from within, through the act of the person, is at the same time an event of the most radical spoliation of man, activity and passivity at once." Rahner,

Emily Dickinson's awareness of death as destructive is evident in poems which stress the condition of the body in death, the isolation of the grave, and the anxiety arising from doubt about immortality.⁸ In these lyrics focusing on the biological aspects of immortality, the abyss separating the living and the dead, and the possibility that there is no life after death, the tone, which carries a psychic if not a physical shudder, again depends on the connotative value of the diction and the vividness of the imagery, as well as on judiciously placed qualifications.

Because she believed that "the meaning of existence is consummated in its end,"⁹ Emily Dickinson never presents death as merely meaningless cessation. Concern with mortality as the end of a biological process is, however, as crucial in these poems as is anxiety about it as the beginning of a new life. Diction and imagery convey the utter passivity of the corpse as it lies

p. 31. ". . . death is a threat to the intact Ego and as such must be handled by all humans no matter what their religious conviction . . ." Irving E. Alexander and Arthur M. Alderstein, "Death and Religion," in The Meaning of Death, p. 281. "The more a man is conscious of himself as an individual rather than a member of a group, the greater is his fear of death." Ignace Lepp, Death and Its Mysteries (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), p. 35. "For the ordinary man, the thought of death inspires a fear concomitant with his sensitivity and imaginative capacity." Lepp, p. 41. In the light of these various explanations of man's fear of mortality, this poet's sense of her own condition as a being toward death, her feeling for her own individuality, and her heightened sensitivity and imagination make the ambivalence of her creative response to death more understandable.

⁸ Howard's study of Emily Dickinson's poetic vocabulary supports the implications of this observation: "She talks about death more often in terms of eye, face, hand, and foot than she does in terms of soul and spirit." p. 246. "There seems to be little doubt that Emily Dickinson wrote more about death as a physical phenomenon than as a mystic experience." p. 247.

⁹ Carl G. Jung, "The Soul and Death," in The Meaning of Death, p. 8.

indifferent, chilled, and motionless. The poet most frequently equates death with frost, cold, and freezing. Just as she functionally employs tropes of hunger and thirst to carry a lack of love, so she employs these figures as vehicles for the absence of life. She speaks of the fingers growing "too cold/ To ache" (519), of a brooch frozen on the body (665), and of the entombed freezing as easily in summer as in winter (592). Frequently she emphasizes the hard rigidity of a corpse. Sometimes she refers to "adamantine fingers" (187), says "The Forehead copied stone." (519), or compares the dead to a "Tier of Wall" (592). Other times the description is more direct: "Too cold is this/ To warm with Sun--/Too stiff to bended be" (1135). The passivity of the dead is carried by allusions to its "listless hair" (187), "fastened Lips" (1527), and nailed down eyes (561). The unresponsiveness of the dead is evident in its "stiff stare" (338), its indifference to chancicleer's song (592), and its "metallic peace" (1230). To convey further the negative side of mortality, the poet calls death a murder (426), an assassin (1624), and a thief (1296), presents him as a hostile (705) attacker (1136), and notes his "metallic grin" (286). The frequency of allusions to the lips' of the dead being clasped by death's fingers (56), silenced by moss (449), or bound by awful rivets and hasps of steel (187) concretizes the impossibility of any communication between the living and the dead. References to distance as well as to silence indicate how inexorably the dead are "Set separate" (529). That death could mean utter extinction is implied in the poet's reference to being molested by doubts (1646) and in her calling eternity a "House of Supposition" and "Acres of Perhaps" (696). In these poems, however, diction and imagery do not carry the full weight of the anxiety caused by uncertainty about immortality. Often the

poet effectively presents an experience as if it were one of hopeful expectation of immortality and then subtly undermines the confidence by a word or two which radically changes the entire poem. After creating a positive picture of life after death and encouraging the addressee to trust, the poet, for instance, closes Poem 350 with: "Eternity is ample/And quick enough, if true." Conditionals such as this one, especially placed in the decisive final position, dramatically, economically, and deftly yet forcefully suggest the terrible doubt which sees death as possibly the annihilation of individual consciousness.

These lyrics presenting the fearful and destructive elements of human mortality reveal one set of responses to death in Emily Dickinson's poetry. Possibly the bitter denunciation of a perturbless God who not only permits death (724) but approves of it (1624) most openly and fully reveals the horror mortality is in some of this poet's aesthetic experiences and suggests some probable theological roots for its dominant and ambivalent role in her canon.

Death in Emily Dickinson's poetry can be classified in the same manner that love is, i.e., according to the basic ends the poet introduces it to achieve. As an incidental reference, mortality enters the structure as the minor term in an analogy. This juxtaposition of terms illustrates, defines, and differentiates. At the metaphorical level, macabre figures are intended to illuminate and define through exact, concrete imagery. The poet uses death also as a conditioner or dramatizer of other themes. At this second level, she may use death as a backdrop to qualify an abstract theme so that a fuller experience results. But this poet's haunting awareness of the grave is most typically and frequently realized at a third level where mortality itself is the essential matter of the poem. When mortality is her major subject, the

poet's ideas about it, antithetical as they are, are most apparent.

Emily Dickinson incorporates death most frequently at the metaphorical level to illustrate a point by an imaginative and provocative analogy.¹⁰ Typically the poet uses these references to explore abstractions such as doubt, pain, despair, consciousness, fear, silence, solitude, and suspense. In a lighter vein, she employs allusions to death to describe the activities of coons, bees, and spiders. The attitude of the speaker ranges from the witty and playful, or sentimental and coy, to the objective and philosophic. Amplification by analogy complements the colloquial tone and subjunctive sequence of these introspective monologues. Related to this reflective yet dramatic quality is the use of imaginative references to death to enrich the tone by intensifying the emotional nuances and to enrich the whole poetic experience by enlarging the realm of significance and paradox. Because of the absence of logical links, exact meaning is not usually anchored in a rational process. The poet introduces accurate, realistic, kinesthetic, and paradoxical details to indicate the relatedness of apparently dissimilar elements whose manner of correspondence can best be recognized intuitively. Although this poet also utilizes references to mortality to dissect and advance thought in process, the analogies still have a psychological rather than a strictly logical base. Consciousness fascinated Emily Dickinson and she often employs death imagery

¹⁰ N.B. Poems: 1, 3, 14, 165, 167, 169, 241, 310, 358, 376, 384, 399, 455, 479, 510, 517, 561, 608, 629, 660, 705, 777, 786, 799, 822, 883, 893, 899, 945, 1031, 1046, 1138, 1193, 1209, 1216, 1296, 1310, 1422, 1522, 1695, and 1712. The incidental references in these poems include: worm, mortal, memento mori, ashes, moulder, die, dying, death, slew, felled, marble, tomb, mortality, entomb, sepulchre, grave, urn, funeral, carrara, shroud, bier, and hearse.

to delineate and objectify its various qualities. This use is not only artistically sound as an effective objective referent, but as one critic notes it is also psychologically sound:

The many different uses which Dickinson made of death as metaphor or symbol, not only correspond in a general way to constructs recognized as valid in classical psycho-analysis, but also can be found to correspond in more specific instances to specialized psychic state.¹¹

Use of macabre allusions is part of the effectiveness of "It was not Death, for I stood up," (510), a rather long, but tightly organized experiential definition.¹² In this poetic frame, death enters twice; the first time to function negatively and the second time positively. Death's presence helps to create a sensibly exact and dramatic delineation of the experience, whose precise name is effectively withheld until the last word of the last line.

The first two stanzas define by exclusion. The voice realizes her mental and emotional state is not a consequence of death; she contrasts her ability to stand with the fixed rigidity of the dead. In the next two lines, the speaker establishes herself in time as well as in space. Here the appeal is not kinesthetic, but auditory; she knows that it is not night for, as she indirectly and figuratively reflects, the bells signalling noon are ringing.

The second stanza continues the pattern of definition by negation begun in the first. Through a physically compelling appeal to the sense of

¹¹Di Salvo, p. 77.

¹²Three of the four major, published readings of this poem generally support this interpretation: Ward, Capsule, p. 59; Griffith, Long Shadow, pp. 188-192; and Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, pp. 211-215. Arp, however, maintains that the experience is not of despair but that it could be of death. He further claims that because the voice does not know "whether it was or was not death," the reader cannot be certain either. p. 101.

touch, the voice proves to herself that she is not held by frost's powerful chill. Tension exists between the two forces of nature chosen in the second stanza--fire and frost. Her "Marble feet" assure the voice that fire is not responsible for her psychological and physical condition. In these two opening stanzas, the poet presents the speaker as strangely detached from any ordinary mode of existence, yet at the same time keenly aware of disturbing and contradictory sensations.

After examining and denying four possible causes of the voice's posture, the third stanza loosely links them by asserting that her partially paralyzed condition resembles them all. That her mental, emotional, and physical state could simultaneously be compared to Death, Night, Frost, and Fire is psychologically valid and significantly paradoxical. The similarity is strangely and rather generally recognized through the sense of taste--the sense to which this poet often ascribes impressions received only through other sense mediums. In this stanza, mortality again individualizes the experience; the voice associates her present posture with the figures she has seen "Set orderly, for Burial." It is almost as if the speaker's existence were divided into two antithetical segments; the body giving the appearance of being lifeless, yet at the same time receiving intense sense impression, while the mind perceives, analyzes, and attempts to interpret these contradictory facts. The poem's questioning and reflective progression constitutes its intellectual tone which compliments its appeal to each of the senses. Stood invokes a kinesthetic response, crawl a tactile one, ticked an auditory one, and stares a visual one.

Throughout the poem the voice is poignantly conscious of a paralyzing, enervating, frightening, "Stopless-cool" atmosphere that is reciprocally the

cause and effect of the experience. The last three stanzas objectify this emotional and psychic state through imagery that implicitly contrasts spatial imprisonment and vast freedom and dramatically prepares for identification of the lyric's topic--despair.

"This Consciousness that is aware" (822) relates the individual's psychic knowledge of herself to her haunting awareness of mortality.¹³ The workings of the mind intrigued this poet and she, consequently, devoted numerous poems to analyzing and interpreting the elements involved in the voice's realization of her own consciousness.

The speaker mentions three things of which consciousness is sensible: Neighbors, the Sun, and Death. She reflects that the part of man's mind that is cognizant of external and physical realities, gathered under the symbols of these human and material contacts, will also be aware of the spiritual, mysterious, and future experience implied in death. The three-fold arrangement contrasts the tangible and known present with the non-physical and unknowable future condition of human existence. In the first stanza, mortality functions to define the complex and dominant nature of consciousness, to give stress to the form, and to dramatize the isolation of consciousness which "itself alone" will meet death.

The second stanza, which is extremely compressed, is syntactically related to the first and third lines of the preceding stanza. The nouns and verbs are rich in their implications, both in their initial selection by the

¹³For further insights into this poem see: Chase, p. 127; Johnson, Emily Dickinson, pp. 250-251; Pickard, p. 94; Phillips, p. 157; and Sherwood, p. 171.

poet and in their juxtaposition within the poem. Denotatively traversing prevents this lyric's being a static reflection; and "traversing the interval" implies a line with the present at one end and death at the other. The voice's attitude is caught in both traversing and interval--life is dynamic, it is a connecting means, it is short in relation to eternity. The tone is confident and expectant. Consciousness, which is alert to present experience and recognizes it as one of the infinite number of points making up this line, also relates it to the "most profound experiment Appointed unto Men." The poet's concept of the crucial and supreme nature of death is evident in these adverbial and adjectival choices. Experiment carries the idea that the outcome is unknown and uncertain, while Appointed suggests the notion of a divine and inexorable decree. These two opening stanzas are outstanding examples of the poet's eminently skillful use of provocative implication and structural incorporation of references to death.

The last two stanzas, which are devoid of macabre analogies, objectify the sufficiency of the soul, i.e., of consciousness, to reveal the individuality of the voice to herself. Identity is an interior awareness, private and secret. None can be admitted to its inner adventure and the soul is, therefore, condemned in its most decisive moments to absolute aloneness. The correlations the speaker makes between the solitary nature of consciousness and death light up and define her attitudes toward both.

Emily Dickinson's sensitivity to death and her artistic skill unite in the macabre analogies she uses so characteristically. The metaphorical relations she establishes are not fantastic; on the contrary, they respond to the inner architectural needs of the particular poem. By fashioning her

linguistic objects around correlatives of such a startling nature, this poet typically rejected the sentimentality of her milieu. By exploiting fresh and radical analogies, she usually avoided the generalizations and moralizing attitudes of her era. Rather than describe from a third person point of view the subtle and complex reactions of the individual in a tensioned situation, Emily Dickinson chooses death imagery to illuminate and convey mental and emotional gestures directly.

Besides an incidental use of macabre references, Emily Dickinson incorporates her sensitivity to mortality to qualify or to dramatize other themes.¹⁴ At this second level of creative assimilation, death enters the structure in a more dominant role to perform more essential functions than it did at the metaphorical level. When she introduces her awareness of the grave to dramatize or condition another subject, it contributes to a dynamic, rather than a static, background. Death's nearness and the voice's implicit attitudes toward it give these poems a peculiar sense of dramatic immediacy. Death's presence also highlights the complexity of life and provides imaginative and philosophic unity in many poems at this second level.

As a dramatizer or conditioner of other motifs, death performs a number of functions. In some of the earlier, weaker poems, mortality supplies the melodramatic background for the speaker's sentimental posture.¹⁵ In a poem such as 67, death dramatizes the abstraction that deprivation heightens desire.

¹⁴ N.B. Poems: 32, 56, 67, 141, 158, 234, 280, 295, 301, 338, 341, 414, 449, 470, 539, 583, 598, 639, 678, 690, 692, 762, 836, 906, 990, 1015, 1033, 1046, 1049, 1082, 1149, 1188, 1194, 1212, 1227, 1261, 1624, 1625, 1654, 1698, and 1718.

¹⁵ N.B. Poems: 32 and 56.

Death is frequently a part of these lyrics because the poet considers its presence necessary to grasp ultimate truths; in Poem 583, death provides the perspective against which life itself is newly valued. An abstract dialogue about the relation of truth to beauty becomes more effective when the debate is in the first person, the scene is the grave, and the talk continues "Until the Moss had reached our lips--/And covered up--our names--" (449). Personifying passion (1033) or beauty (1654) against the backdrop of death tends to make some of these poems resemble morality plays in cameo. Sometimes death acts as one member of a direct and sustained comparison to illuminate an abstraction such as defeat (639), suspense (705), or pain (1049). Death can also provide an existential frame for the voice's challenge to God's justice. Poems 141, 234, 301, 338, and 1551 are bitter examples of mortality's supplying the background for the speaker's spiritual anguish.

Death at this level often becomes a functional, unifying symbol for psychic experience. So effectively does Emily Dickinson have the voice imagine her own death or burial as a sustained and dramatic metaphor that some of these poems are mistakenly read at the literal level, whereas they are actually tightly organized and symbolic presentations of the speaker's psychic state as she battles against fear, disorientation, or despair.¹⁶ In these situations, dying and burial are the means by which the poet explores the mind and soul, the intense inner drama, of the voice undergoing severe psychic-spiritual crisis. The poet exploits this method for an individualized, psychological,

¹⁶ Anderson offers the seriousness of the poem as the distinguishing mark that indicates the death or burial are intended as metaphoric rather than literal experience. Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 210.

and dramatic rendering of grievous interior tension due to fear, loss, or doubt. Threats to the emotional, mental, or spiritual stability of the speaker, to her survival as a person enduring unbearable strain, are fittingly concretized in these metaphoric dramas of death and burial.

Equating a tortured mental state with death and burial, Emily Dickinson formalizes the appalling experience of impending psychic-spiritual disaster in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (280).¹⁷ To an unusual degree auditory and kinesthetic sensations convey the voice's desperate emotional state. The first line sets the stage for a drama enacted wholly in the voice's consciousness, a consciousness that is significantly and painfully aware only of signs of impending death and is otherwise cut off for reality. Repetition of treading--treading functions to give an agonizing sense of pressure upon the brain, just as the drum's beating--beating does in the second stanza. The first four stanzas appeal to the sense of hearing to an extraordinary degree to carry the voice's growing feeling of approaching, solitary disaster. The rush of

¹⁷This interpretation agrees with Anderson's which reads the poem metaphorically and identifies its subject as "the extremity of pain, the kind producing a state of trance." Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 208; with Ward's, Capsule, pp. 54-55; with Griffith's which regards the experience as "the break-up of rational powers, with the onset and triumph of lunacy," Long Shadow, p. 247; with Lindberg's, pp. 209-210; and with Sherwood's, p. 107. It differs from Johnson's apparent reading when he states the poem's intent lies in "evoking the characteristic mood of New England funerals and their appalling effect upon a person both sensitive, and acutely allergic, to them." Emily Dickinson, p. 212; from Chase's literal one, p. 246; from DiSalvo's which considers the theme a "statement about a headache," p. 134; and from Monteiro's which equates the experience with "the intuitive knowledge of eternity gained through an intimation of death." p. 660. George Monteiro, "Traditional Ideas in Dickinson's 'I Felt a Funeral in My Brain,'" Modern Language Notes, LXXV (December, 1960), 656-663. It partially differs from Arp's which claims that the mental stress can be only vaguely identified. pp. 94-96.

oppressive sounds and the repetition of strong verbs suggest annihilation's imperative advances upon the senses. These advances threaten to break through and leave the mind numb, for the beating is a maddening type which is capable of driving out all rational responses.¹⁸ The continual and menacing beating of the second stanza rises to a pitch of rare emotional intensity.

The next lines are marked by a lower auditory and emotional tone. The sound of the lifted box is heavy and close to the earth. Although its import is carried to the speaker's tortured consciousness, creak is also a grounded sound. Boots of Lead produce a full and resounding thud.¹⁹ The stanza ends with another imaginative auditory reference: the synesthesia of "Space--began to toll." Usually one thinks of space whirling as a person loses consciousness, but since the sense through which this unique experience is explored is basically hearing, or movement related to hearing, the sensation is again auditory and the person suffering psychic death and burial is "but an Ear." Finally the beating which gathered such wild momentum and the heavy creaking are supplanted by absolute silence which symbolizes the voice's isolation and paralyzing fear. The poet's artistic experience is manifested in these stanzas by the different impressions of terror she is able to produce, all of them

¹⁸ Sense breaking through has a "twofold meaning here, of the mind giving way and of the sensations threatening to quicken again from their comfortable state of numbness . . ." Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 209.

¹⁹ Anderson comments that the use of same and again "implies that the experience was re-enacted over and over yet simultaneously, with the lead of the coffin grotesquely transferred to the boot-soles of the attendants. This same duality of consciousness continues as the procession leaves the church and the funeral knell sounds, announcing the death of the body of agony and at the same time killing the listening spirit." Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 209.

dependent upon hearing or hearing transferred into movement.

The last stanza abandons auditory impressions and instead utilizes the sensation of falling, so often experienced in the first moments of sleep, to convey the voice's last seconds of consciousness. The verbs broke, dropped, and plunged concretize this agonized mental state. The poem appropriately seems to end without an ending; it is as if, all consciousness gone, the voice stops speaking in the middle of a line. Dramatic immediacy and psychic truth make this unusual closing effective.

When death is the essential poetic experience, certain common features mark the existential situation. The sudden, mysterious, experiential, and solitary qualities of death are highlighted. Nature's indifference to human mortality is also emphasized. The metaphysical implications of time qualify the experience. A sense of distance contributes to the speaker's alienation while a sense of unlimited space characterizes her vision of eternity. Sharp physical details concretize the experience of dying, while the experience of immortality remains ethereally vague. The angle of vision is always psychological; the psychic reaction of the voice is the primary focus through which the reader enters the experience. Presenting consciousness at a tensioned peak, the poet creates situations that are intense and dramatic, theologically and philosophically significant, and artistically complex and compressed.

In her response to death, the posture of the speaker also reveals many common traits. Sometimes her tone is exultant and confident, other times grim and frightened. The voice's view of reality, and so of death as its ultimate test of meaning, is a grid of opposites. Except in the earlier or sentimental poems, the typical mental state of the speaker is ambivalent. Hope and doubt,

desire and fear tension her response. Consequently, her stance is sometimes ironic, often paradoxical, usually polar. Wanting immortality as a possible fulfillment, but dreading death as a probable final destruction, the voice typically idealizes death as a spiritual encounter while graphically presenting it as physical and psychic annihilation.

Besides a similarity of situation and attitude in the death poetry, common clusters of imagery bind these lyrics of Emily Dickinson. Characteristically, she employs religious, royal, jewel, natural, mathematical, commercial, legal, building, and clothing figures to define the experience. The aspect of death the poet wishes to explore in a given structure seems to determine her choice of imagery.

Religious tropes and biblical parallels generally emphasize the mystery, dignity, and status involved in death. Referring to the vestments of a dead flower as "silver fleece" gives to even its death a spiritual dimension (75). Connecting "Nicodemus' Mystery" with spring's renewal suggests that human re-birth, though more mysterious, is as certain as nature's (140). Allusions to "Litanies of Lead," "Crucifixal Clef," and "Key of Calvary" relate the sorrow of human loss through death to Christ's redemptive pain (364). The connotations of Eden (215), saints (431), witnessed (465), crucifixion (501), grace (575), and Miracle²⁰ lift death above the biological plane, reinforce its elevating effects, and relate it to the mystery of immortality.

Royal imagery performs a similar function in Emily Dickinson's death

²⁰N.B. Poems: 468, 499, 721, 984, 1017, and 1624.

poems. Crowns²¹ are signs of the status death implies. References to courtiers (53); mitred, footman, ermine, purple, escutscheon, rank (98); and retinue (171) suggest the pomp and eminence involved in dying. The connotative richness of earl (665), monarchy (721), domain (943), dominion (959), and majesties (1691) likewise indicates the position and privilege immortality promises. These tropes from the secular realm, like those from the religious, are functional vehicles for the solemn, regal transformation that the voice associates with death and immortality.

In Emily Dickinson's poetry, gem analogies carry both positive and negative attitudes toward mortality. In some constructions, pearl (758) or diamond (665) vaguely suggest the new dignity of the dead and, consequently, the spiritually elevating nature of death. Most frequently, however, references to precious stones are vehicles for the physical change effected by death. This transformation is evident in the corpse's weight, coldness, and rigidity. Adamant carries these negative connotations in Poems 87, 519, and 948, agate in Poem 1135, and granite in Poems 182 and 261. Occasionally the poet uses costly stones to illumine some aspect of the grave. Although "Carrara Guide post" (795) and "Emerald Seams" (1183) are primarily descriptive, these figures carry negative implications. Unlike the positive function performed by jewel tropes in the love poetry, in the death poetry references to precious stones are usually introduced to suggest the fearful aspects of mortality.

Nature in Emily Dickinson's death poetry is rather complex. Nuances of light on the landscape, slight shifts in the color of flowers, or the minor

²¹N.B. Poems: 58, 79, 98, 144, and 608.

changes in a cricket's tone become symbols of change and, therefore, of mortality. The intuitive knowledge of the transitoriness of all existence, which this close observation of nature prompts, is an "imperial affliction" (258) and a "presentiment" (764) that prevents man's being content with his mortal condition. The cycles of nature constantly suggest the impermanence of all creation and also afford some hope of renewal for man as well as for butterfly and bird. Dawn, noon, and twilight can be signs of heaven, reminders of Paradise, (575) and a cocoon can be a "clue divine," a hope for man's immortality (1099). The poet also uses traditional metaphors from nature to describe death and immortality. Generally she equates land with life or immortality²² and water with death and/or eternity.²³ The vastness of the sky can also be an image for the unlimited space the poet associates with timelessness (721). Water in a desert serves as a figure for a heaven that is as desirable as it might be illusionary (121). Metaphors from nature carry both confident and fearful overtones in these poems. Dying is compared to a bird's flight (45) or a reed's bending lightly to the water (1100), the transitional state of death to a chrysalis (970), and the body in the grave to a seed in the earth ready for an everlasting spring (804). On the other hand, the obscuring of the eyes of the dying is compared to a fog (547), the glassy stare of the dead to a "Skater's Brook" (519), and the dead body to frost. Poem 409 illustrates this dual use of images from nature. The first two lines contain two similes whose implications are antithetical. Dropping like Flakes

²²N.B. Poems: 5, 48, 1558.

²³N.B. Poems: 43, 48, 160, 726, 695, 1136, 1234, 1558, and 1633.

associates naturalness, ease, and beauty with death. Dropping like Stars associates cosmic disorder, grotesqueness, and violence with death.

In Emily Dickinson's death poems, mathematical, commercial, and legal allusions usually deal with the nature of death. These images most frequently present the fearful side of mortality. Calling his hat and jacket, floating in the pond where he drowned, the sum of a boy's history economically and powerfully captures the tragedy of his early death (923). Using thrifty (724) and banker (49) in reference to God's part in human mortality helps to reveal the speaker's cynical attitude toward both death and the deity who dispassionately takes away life. In Poem 1270, the poet exploits the monetary implications of exchequer, negotiation, and owe to reject an immortal state whose terms are unacceptable to the speaker. In Poem 1724, Emily Dickinson employs the cold and impersonal connotations of account, settled, earned, paid, and bill to illumine death's power to take away meaning and joy. Just as the financial allusions create an apparently detached posture at the same time that they utilize unpleasant connotations, so legal references like annuls (922) and warrant present death as a threatening experience. Warrant, for instance, not only suggests death's power to force the soul, against its will, to a state it fears but also hints that a judgment will ensue. Occasionally the poet uses these sets of images to define the value of the dead to the living or to illumine positive aspects of death. Ratio (88) and Circumference (943) help to indicate the worth of the dead to the voice. Circumference often suggests the splendor eternity casts upon man's temporal existence. In Poem 1194, commuted suggests that the sentence of death is lifted and that paradoxically the speaker lives spiritually although she has died physically.

Emily Dickinson uses imagery involving clothing most frequently to describe the changes death effects in the person and imagery involving buildings to describe the grave. References to clothing are vehicles for two radically different transformations the poet associates with mortality: the corpse and the glorified body. When the dead person is described as wearing a "vest of snow," the trope effectively suggests two facts: rigor mortis encloses the body and snow covers the grave (58). In a similar way, the buried are referred to as wearing "the Sod Gown" (665). Terming the hair of the dead "Unnumbered Satin" reveals the speaker's love for the deceased as well as her sense of her loss of personhood in death (758). A less intrinsic relation between the body and the soul is implied in the voice's calling the body an "Overcoat of Clay" (976) or "corporeal clothes" (1399). These clothing figures often indicate the speaker's concept of the importance of either the spirit or the flesh to the wholeness of the person. Equating death with a glorious transformation, the voice speaks of immortality as "Everlasting Robes" (171), "Creatures clad in Miracle" (984), and "Costumeless Consciousness" (1454). Sometimes the poet equates the body with a house in which the soul dwells temporarily (948). Frequently she presents the grave—or coffin—as a room (449), an apartment (1701), a house (470), a home (335), a cottage (1743), chambers (216), or an inn (115).

Although Emily Dickinson's death poems contain diametrically different situations, attitudes, and emotions, fundamentally she treats mortality from one of three points of view, all imaginatively wide yet limited to a home-centered, existential, and psychic approach. She regards death as an objective bystander who can observe clinical details of inner significance, or she sees death as an essentially destructive encounter, or she reflects upon the riddle

of death as the most mysterious, powerful, and decisive event of man's existence.

When death is the essential experience of Emily Dickinson's poetry, the lyrics fall into a number of larger groupings. These groupings are dependent upon the aspect of mortality projected, the attitudes of the poet toward it, the attitudes of the voice toward it, the resulting tensions, and the controlling tone of the poem. Because of the complexity of this experience and the polarity of the poet's conception of it, some of these divisions exhibit a basically negative quality, others a positive one. A movement appears in the shift from the sceptical to the affirmative,²⁴ from fear to anticipation, from the phenomena of death to its meaning, from the biological to the transcendent, from the concrete to the abstract; the line of movement, however, is never a completely straight one; it always reflects the ambivalence at the center of the poet's being. Six major divisions in Emily Dickinson's death poetry²⁵ are evident in the poems that explore: 1) awareness of death as a threatening or destructive force; 2) death as a cause of anxiety about immortality; 3) someone else's death or burial; 4) graves and existence in them; 5) death's nature; and 6) anticipation or realization of death as joyous fulfillment or transforming grace.

²⁴Ford, however, believes that the later death poetry is "more pessimistic" in its emphasis on the inscrutability of death. p. 70.

²⁵Other critics have grouped Emily Dickinson's death poetry. Their divisions are fewer and less exclusive than these six categories and those of Chapter V. N.B. Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 203; Ford, p. 73. In their analyses of her death poems, Griffith notes three large divisions; Whicher, Chase, and McNaughton, four.

In the first group of poems, Emily Dickinson presents death as an essentially threatening and destructive force.²⁶ Its might, nearness, suddenness, and finality make it a frightening and devastating reality that overshadows all of life. Because of its imminence and irrevocability, death haunts the voice in these lyrics. She sees death's presence all around her, senses its ultimate control over her as a finite being, and fears its power to destroy her as an individual. Her concept of herself as a person is existentially connected with her consciousness of mortality: "This Me--that walks and works-- must die/ Some fair or stormy Day" (1588). She, therefore, refers to death and man's awareness of his being born to die as an "Omen in the Bone" (532) and an "over Horror . . . The soul stares after" (281). The poems that project this sense of death as destruction have three types of experience as their core: 1) a sensitive response to changes in nature that operate as symbols for the transitoriness of all creation and so make the speaker more painfully aware of human mortality²⁷; 2) a more generalized intuition of death's presence and power²⁸; and 3) the realization of death as a triumphant thief who robs life of meaning or a conquering foe who produces sudden and irrevocable annihilation.²⁹

²⁶N.B. Poems: 18, 28, 35, 50, 75, 130, 182, 258, 286, 314, 390, 391, 520, 586, 749, 762, 764, 784, 812, 882, 935, 1033, 1063, 1068, 1080, 1102, 1115, 1127, 1136, 1202, 1205, 1260, 1328, 1342, 1422, 1549, 1624, 1682, 1716, and 1749.

²⁷N.B. Poems: 18, 28, 35, 75, 130, 258, 391, 520, 764, 812, 1063, 1068, 1080, 1115, 1127, 1202, 1422, 1624, and 1682.

²⁸N.B. Poems: 50, 182, 286, 314, and 784.

²⁹N.B. Poems: 390, 586, 749, 762, 882, 935, 1033, 1102, 1136, 1205, 1260, 1328, 1342, 1549, 1716, and 1749.

Certain types of experience most often carry the voice's awareness of and fundamentally negative concept of death. Sometimes the beauty of a spring or summer day but more often the brilliance of Indian summer provide evidence for the speaker's belief that the seasonal cycles are manifestations of mortality.³⁰ Although her response to nature was as ambivalent as her response to any other significant reality,³¹ this poet so keenly felt the presence of death in nature that to her its dominant side was hostility, impermanence, and ruination. Regarding nature as the only free agent in the universe and as the most powerful agent of God's will to bring about human death, the disintegrative processes of nature assume an impressive and functional role in her work. Poems, consequently, which apparently have nature as their subject often merely use it as a vehicle for a subtle but poignant awareness of death; or as one critic observes, "the natural images exist only that they may contribute to the definition of a moral experience."³² In many of these poems, however, nature does not provide a springboard for the voice's intuition of her condition as a creature surrounded by and moving toward death.³³ Instead, she experiences a wholly interior, extra-rational, peculiarly painful sense of death

³⁰ See Chase, pp. 170-175; Anderson, American Literary Masters, I, 975-976; McCarthy, 27; and Ernest Sandeen, "Delight Deterred By Retrospect: Emily Dickinson's Late-Summer Poems," NEQ, XL (December, 1967), 483-500.

³¹ The rebirth of nature, for instance, also provides evidence for a belief in immortality. N.B. Poems: 65, 66, 74, 140, 392, 575, 797, 844, and 1099.

³² Roy Harvey Pearce, "Emily Dickinson," The Continuity of American Poetry (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 179.

³³ N.B. Poems such as 679, 726, and 946, however, center around the voice's intuition of life's continuing in a transcendent state.

similar to Heidegger's or Sartre's or Unanumo's awareness of human mortality. In these poems, man's place in the universe, rather than any observable changes in it, points to death's power and presence. Because Emily Dickinson saw human life as so precarious and the individual as so threatened by mortality, in many of these lyrics she personifies death as a destructive aggressor. The ruthless indifference of death to human values appalls and terrifies and, therefore, intensifies the extremely negative picture of death this poet presents.

In all poems in this category, Emily Dickinson presents death as a fearful and destructive encounter. The threat can be psychic or physical. The experiences that reveal this totally negative aspect of death range from a lovely summer's end which reminds the speaker that "Conclusion is the Course of All" (1682) to the ugliness of a bird "Gored through and through with Death" (1102). Some of the Indian summer situations enlarge human loneliness (1068), others are more directly prophetic and arouse doubts (1115), all remind the voice of her own death (1422). In some of these poems, the speaker sees twilight as a kind of murder of day (1127) or the wind's going down as a type of dying (75). Sometimes the voice envisions the frost as a killer-lover (391) or the sea as an evil yet attractive destroyer (520). The beauty of a spring day can make the speaker apprehensive lest there not be another year (1080), or the passing of a light that exists only in spring can remind her of the transitoriness of all creation (812). Often the speaker's awareness of death is related to a delicate play of light in such a way that the light functions as both cause of and symbol for the intuition of immortality. The consciousness of the voice, which makes her aware of death, also makes her dying

more painful than a rose's (35) and more frequent than a tree's (314).³⁴ In some constructions, the sense of death is so obsessive that the personified grave actually haunts the speaker so that, even after she has escaped its nightmare pursuit, a "Spade/ Remained in Memory" (784). Sometimes, she dreads death as a foe in battle (1549). Often it is not an awareness of death, but death itself, that terrifies the speaker who experiences it as frost (1136) or vermin (1716) against whom she struggles uselessly. Other times she watches him in the guise of a sinister and devouring sea destroying life (1749). Sometimes she personifies triumphant death and defeated passion in their unequal struggle (1033). The absolute destruction and irrevocability of death concerns the speaker in poems such as 390, 586, 749, and 1342. The power of death to take away those without whom life is demeaned or meaningless is highlighted in Poems 935, 882, and 1328. In a few lyrics, God, not death, is the marauder (1205), who takes away those whom the voice loves (1260). Whatever particularizes the experience of death in these poems, there is an obvious pattern of potential destruction or realized annihilation that links them all.

The voice's posture in these poems also has common traits. In the experiences of intuitions of mortality, the speaker's attitude is typically reverential and resigned. Her objective observation and reflective response in the better poems of this type do not prevent her from being disturbed by what nature's changes imply about man's lot. In almost all of the poems in this category, the speaker reveals a sense of loss that is personal as well as cosmic. She, therefore, sometimes questions the departed: "Are ye then with

³⁴The sentimentality of the first poem and the irony of the second make these, however, significantly different aesthetic experiences.

God?" (28), or God, "Why give if Thou must take away/ The Loved?" (882). Sometimes her response to death is wistful (35), cheerful (75), serene (1549), stunned (1342), terrified (286), angry (1136), outraged (1102), or bitter (1716).

Many of Emily Dickinson's characteristic poetic patterns are evident in these poems, while others are significantly absent. Although the number of poems in the first person is still greater than those in third person by about a 3:2 ratio, the many in third person suggest that the poet consciously uses this approach to achieve an essentially objective description of either nature³⁵ or death.³⁶ This distance helps to control the speaker's fear or revulsion. With detachment, the voice can build into the description itself her horror of death. The weakness of earlier poems such as 18, 28, and 35, in which the personal reaction to death is added on after the description of the occurrence in nature, suggests one reason for the poet's utilizing a third person approach. An aesthetically integrated experience using a first person point of view is, of course, achieved in poems of such obvious value as 258, 520, and 812. Because of its dramatic possibilities, present tense marks most of these poems.³⁷ Rapid declarative constructions, run on lines, and liquid sounds reinforce the intuitive base of many of these experiences and contribute to the mixture of anxiety and serenity in the voice's stance. This sense of

³⁵ N.B. Poems: 75, 391, 764, 1063, 1068, 1127, 1422, 1624, and 1682.

³⁶ N.B. Poems: 762, 882, 1033, 1328, 1716, 1749.

³⁷ All poems but 520, 586, 784, 1033, and 1749 are essentially in present time.

profound fear carefully controlled by form seems an essential factor in the better poems in this category. The lack of exclamations in all but the earliest poems also contributes to their feeling of restraint.³⁸ It is as if the poet realizes the horror of death is too terrible to be encountered without discipline. Because of the intuitive and emotional quality of these experiences, adversatives and other signs of rational progression of thought are relatively rare.³⁹ The poet uses the conditional if to suggest the polar elements contained in the speaker's immediate response.⁴⁰ Because of the solitary nature of the voice's encounter with death, there are few vocatives⁴¹, imperatives⁴², or rhetorical questions.⁴³ Personification, on the other hand, is an effective and vital element of many of these lyrics.⁴⁴ Comparisons are the skeletal base of many of these experiences; death is presented in religious⁴⁵, erotic⁴⁶, and scientific (1063) terms. The poet's sensitivity to

³⁸The few exclamatory forms are in Poems 18, 35, 130, and 138.

³⁹But is the single exception; it operates in a number of poems: 18, 57, 258, 391, 520, 586, 812, 1115, 1202, 1205, 1342, 1422, and 1549. The other scattered adversatives are: yet 1136 and except 935 and 1205.

⁴⁰N.B. Poems: 182, 762, 935, 1080, 1202, 1260, 1549, and 1716.

⁴¹N.B. Poems: 18, 35, 130, 882, and 1260.

⁴²N.B. Poems: 182, 1033, 1063, 1136, and 1716.

⁴³N.B. Poems: 28, 882, and 1080.

⁴⁴N.B. Poems: 28, 35, 50, 258, 286, 314, 391, 520, 764, 784, 812, 1033, 1068, 1115, 1127, 1136, 1202, 1205, 1624, and 1749.

⁴⁵N.B. Poems: 18, 28, 130, 1068, and 1115.

⁴⁶N.B. Poems: 391 and 520.

sound helps to create a dominant mood of serene awe or anxious hostility. In poems emphasizing a calmer observation of and/or resignation to death, o and a vowels and liquid consonants predominate.⁴⁷ In those presenting terror or anxiety in the face of death, explosives and harsh s sounds predominate.⁴⁸ Repetition⁴⁹ and anaphora⁵⁰ intensify the voice's attitude toward death. Beginning three stanzas of Poem 520 with and, for instance, heightens the mood of the poem by seeming to pile one impression upon another in mounting tension. The use of past within three lines of the same poem achieves a similar effect of rising fear. The slow pacing of poems which contain retarding lines supports the impression of the voice's gradually gaining insight into the horror of death. The isolation of key words in a line such as "Death--unto itself--exception--" (749) formally contributes to its impact by visually reinforcing the line's meaning. Beginning four out of eight lines of Poem 1033 with strong action verbs adds to the sense of conflict in the debate of death and passion.⁵¹

Emily Dickinson dips into her usual clusters of imagery to present death as a threatening and destructive force. The incidence of use is,

⁴⁷N.B. Poems: 18, 35, 258, 764, 812, and 1068.

⁴⁸N.B. Poems: 268, 749, 762, 1127, 1202, 1328, 1342, 1422, and 1624.

⁴⁹N.B. Poems: 28 so; 520 past; 1080 when; and 1646 why.

⁵⁰N.B. Poems: 18 the, we, and; 35 only; 50 nor; 75 her; 130 oh, why; 286 that; 391 and; 812 it; 1102 his; 1136 we; 1202 of; and 1422 beginning and forever.

⁵¹Trochee line beginnings are noticeable in Poems: 258, 390, 391, 749, 1033, 1068, and 1716.

however, quite different in this category. Because so many of the poems employ seasonal change as a symbolic paradigm, there are less incidental references to nature than usual. When the poet equates death with an insect (1716), a snake (1136), a cat (762), frost (1624), or the sea (1749), she exploits their sinister implications.⁵² Because of the frightening nature of the encounter, religious imagery is also rather infrequent in this category. The religious allusions are most operative in the poems describing changes in nature.⁵³ They tend to surround the speaker's intuition of death with an awe that is quasi-spiritual and to imbue death—whether of a flower or a season—with a cosmic dimension. The religious figures, therefore, mitigate the horror of death. Since royal imagery usually suggests status in this poet's work, it is also noticeably absent in these poems.⁵⁴ Gem figures are correspondingly rare. When the poet does use them, she exploits their fearful connotations. Coldness, hardness, and rigidity are suggested by marl (391) and granite.⁵⁵ Within the context of Poem 520, even pearl and silver carry frightening notes. Household references tend to lessen the fearfulness of the experience: weave, loom (18); couch (75); and pillow (784). Clothing figures perform both positive and negative functions. In the poems using nature as a symbol, cravat (182), millinery and shawl (1682) lighten the tone; while in the poems dealing

⁵² Snake and water imagery is also evident in the poems presenting love as a destructive experience.

⁵³ N.B. Poems: 18, 28, 75, 130, 258, 286, 778, 812, 1068, 1102, 1115, 1260, 1422, and 1682.

⁵⁴ The exceptions are: imperial (258), seal (258), and dynasties (749).

⁵⁵ N.B. Poems: 182 and 286.

more directly with death, clothing figures add to its oppressiveness: "The claws that clung, like lifeless Gloves" (1102) and "Dress each House in Crape and Icicle" (390). Commercial and legal allusions generally expose some sinister aspect of death. A lease of years (75) and a contract that death can dissolve over night (586) reveal how little control man has over his temporal existence. Confiscated gods (1260) and a defaulting face (1328) likewise suggest death's power to take away those cherished by the living. Commutated and refund, however, imply that death's power is not final. Violent imagery is, of course, prevalent and functional in poems presenting death as a fearful or annihilating experience: sears, scalps (314); assassin, cauterize, mashes (762); gored (1102); massacre, sabres (1127); shot (1202); marauding (1205); war, battle, foe (1549); beheads, assassin (1624); and menacing (1716).

One of the most successful of all of Emily Dickinson's poems is also one of the best examples of this category: "There's a certain Slant of light" (258).⁵⁶ It powerfully concretizes the profound macabre impression nature

⁵⁶ Many critics agree that the poem's core is an intuition of death due to an intense awareness of nature. N.B. Chase, p. 173; Thackeray, p. 79; Lindberg, p. 195; and Laurence Perrine, "Dickinson's 'There's a Certain Slant of Light,'" Explicator, XI (May, 1953), #50. Some other critics relate the experience to death but disagree that an awareness of mortality is the theme. DiSalvo claims that "this is a poem about time, and about time alone." p. 170. Ivor Winters says that "the inexplicable fact of change" is the poem's core. In Defense of Reason (Denver: University of Denver Press, 1947), p. 293. Anderson, in American Literary Masters, I, 980, asserts that despair is the theme and Gregor concurs. pp. 28-29. Sherwood sees alienation from God as the poem's motif. p. 97. Although Griffith maintains that the voice is reminded of "her own ultimate extinction," he claims that the poem speaks primarily of being maimed by a malignant God. Long Shadow, p. 27. Without specifying a theme, Johnson sees in the poem a "dread of winter" and an attempt "to catch the fleeting moment of anxiety which, having passed, leaves the beholder changed." Emily Dickinson, p. 189.

made upon this poet. In this poem, she employs a nuance of nature as the adequate symbol within which to explore the implied theme of mortality. "Combining her greatest power with her finest execution,"⁵⁷ Emily Dickinson creates an experience in which the voice responds with peculiar foreboding to the slightest variation of light and shadow which she intuitively feels is an intimation of mortality. Although the voice tries to analyze it, this profoundly interiorized impression transcends explicitly rational explanation. The inversions, retarding pauses, and isolated words functionally parallel the speaker's psychic difficulties as she attempts to define this experience in terms of the pain and insight and awe it entails.

The setting is in harmony with and symbolic of the speaker's emotional and mental state. The opening lines immediately present a winter afternoon when the somber light of the descending sun casts a lonely, brilliant, but oppressive light across the gray snow. There are no exclamations; the structure is completely declarative. The form is as restrained, solemn, and majestic as the psychic experience. The voice's statements imply that she visualizes nature as a mystical sign of the deeper mysteries and meanings of life and that she sensitively responds to nature's mood.

The fact that there is "a certain Slant of light" is important. According to its directness or angle, light has different values. Not all slants would have the same effect; it required just this particular slant to produce this heaviness of spirit which the voice associates with listening to "Cathedral Tunes." This analogy, which relates an auditory and a visual

⁵⁷Winters, p. 283.

impression, suggests that the emotional power of the light is similar to the depressive and hauntingly beautiful effect of music played in a minor key.

The second stanza defines the type of suffering this intuition brings to the sensitive beholder. The pain is wholly interior and spiritual. The inverse word order puts added emphasis on Heavenly Hurt, stressing that the essence of the experience is the inner wounding of the spirit. The nature of the suffering excludes the possibility of any visible signs; yet noting that the voice "can find no scar" gives the lyric richer tension by setting up opposition between the psychic and the physical. The pain is also termed Heavenly because it is the awe felt in a rare moment of intuitive realization. Because the voice is more aware of inner and vital mysteries, she is changed in mind and soul "Where the Meanings, are." The punctuation of this last line retards it so that it parallels the speaker's slowly gaining further insights into the initial experience.

The third stanza claims that no one can teach what this transforming suffering does. This type of truth cannot be perceived abstractly but must be individually and experientially realized. The first line of this stanza may have a second meaning, i.e., that no one can alter or refuse this experience. Both readings are simultaneously possible. The same awful sense of personal and cosmic loneliness and loss that characterizes the first stanza is present in the second line of the third. Besides introducing the royal imagery, Seal carries many implications. It suggests the final, irrevocable, sublime, and crucial nature of this wintry experience of human mortality. Because the quality of this intuition is so far beyond the ordinary mode of knowledge, it is defined as "An imperial affliction Sent us of the Air." The voice chooses

imperial because of its connotative richness. The person who is capable of responding as the speaker has the privilege and the pain of an awareness beyond the ordinary. She is lifted but the elevation demands its own price. She also notes that the intuition is "Sent us of the Air" because its efficient cause is above and because it depends upon the atmosphere for its material cause.

The last stanza is divided temporally and tonally into two complementary sections. The opening adverbial tells that at the precise moment when this intimation of death, for which the light is the objective correlative, comes, everything is hushed and expectant; therefore, "the landscape listens" and "Shadows—hold their breath." After this dramatic climax has been experienced and the illuminating moment of heightened awareness is over, the voice feels detached from the everyday things of life. She has been lifted out of the material world, but by means of it, to a different plane of being. Now that the exalted moment is passed, it seems as far removed and unattainable as the "Distance/ On the look of Death." The poet's choice of Death as the final and climactic word of this poem reinforces it as the implied theme and aptly closes the structure as it began with a visual image of vast significance.

Thackeray comments:

The feeling of softened, lengthened distance as seen at dusk, the poignancy in the departure of something precious, the resigned awareness of death—not felt with the acute sensations of before but contemplated dispassionately—all are included in this solemn final image.⁵⁸

The voice's gestures are conveyed in the poem's cadence with its

⁵⁸ Emily Dickinson's Approach to Poetry, p. 79.

balanced hesitations and breaks and its contrasting rapidity, in the hushed tone due to the l sounds, in the declarative sequence, in the stress suggested by the s, and in the quiet and reflective setting. The voice's serenity and confidence are never weakened by the intensity of the pain; her experience of these semi-mystical insights gives her an intellectual and emotional breadth that prohibits any narrowly personal feelings in the face of cosmic mortality.

The second category of poems that explore negative aspects of death comprises those Emily Dickinson structures around doubts about personal immortality. In these poems she questions the possibility⁵⁹ or the desirability⁶⁰ of human existence after death. Although her "doubting heart" (5) was directly related to her religious position, the poet's concern about the survival of consciousness is not so much theological as it is personal. In an early letter, she reveals the reason for her interest in immortality as well as for her frequent election of earth over heaven.

If roses had not faded, and frosts had never come, and one had not fallen here and there whom I could not waken, there were no need of other Heaven than the one here below.⁶¹

A much later letter shows a similar mind set.

Forgive me if I come too much--the time to live is frugal--

⁵⁹N.B. Poems: 10, 29, 48, 63, 121, 127, 350, 370, 432, 489, 501, 769, 1017, 1228, 1274, 1323, 1411, 1417, 1497, 1499, 1503, 1557, and 1646. Although their number seems less significant, there are, of course, poems which proclaim a belief in immortality: 726, 827, 1145, 1454, 1492, and 1525. This study excludes some poems from this category because their little girl posture, coyness, and generally light handling seem to deny the serious doubt or pain of those included. N.B. Poems: 79, 101, and 215.

⁶⁰N.B. Poems: 351, 374, 418, 696, 1012, 1162, 1270, 1408, and 1741.

⁶¹Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 329.

and good as is a better earth, it will not quite be this.⁶²

In these poems, the speaker's desire to believe is as evident as her agony in not being able to confess a sustaining confidence in transcendence. The pull between faith and skepticism in these experiences gives them a high degree of tension and complexity. They also exhibit--in varying degrees--the dramatic intensity and psychological slant that mark the poet's better lyrics. The nature of the experience presented, however, seems to have led Emily Dickinson to exclude from these poems most of her usual tropes and to rely instead upon an unusually heavy Latinate diction and subjunctive sequence. These stylistic features contribute to the questioning, painful posture of the voice and to the skeptical, troubled tone of the poems.

The situations in these poems have a definite pattern. The speaker's need to believe is as evident as her honesty in doubting. She tries to affirm but she continues to question. She asks: "Do People moulder equally,/ They bury, in the Grave?" (432) and "Where go we/ Go we anywhere/ Creation after this?" (1417). Her attempts to assert a faith in heaven or its value involve rational scrutiny and emotional distress. She admits that the wheel of her life is in the dark (10) or that, like Noah, she is afloat upon a troubled sea searching for land that she may never find (48). She continues to long for the security of heaven (127). She is willing to pluck "at a twig of evidence" (501), as she tries to find reasons for belief (1228). She thinks of the joys of heaven and then undermines her confidence with a telling qualification such as the last words of Poems 121 and 350, ". . . if true." The voice's brave

⁶²Ibid., II, 579.

declaration of faith is similarly vitiated by her appending "If Jesus was sincere" (432). Sometimes the speaker wonders if heaven may be only a projection of human desires (370). At other times, the very fact that heaven promises so much arouses the voice's suspicions (769). She recognizes the difficulties faith experiences as it tries to assuage doubts about immortality (501) and admits that "Too much of Proof affronts Belief" (1228). Yet because her "Beliefs are Bandaged" (1328), she suffers, she moves back and forth between hope and despair, she cannot answer whether those she loves live "in any other world" (1557), and she realizes that she clings "to nowhere" (1503). Finally she concludes--almost cynically--that "Of Paradise' existence/ All we know/ Is the uncertain certainty" (1411) and that "The bravest die/ As ignorant of their resumption/ As you and I" (1497). Even when she prefers life on earth to life in heaven, she does so because of her fears that paradise may either not be or be less than what she anticipates. Existence in time is certain--if limited--while existence in eternity is uncertain. The joys of life are tangible, while those of heaven are nebulous. Sometimes the voice imagines herself in heaven only to find it inferior to her "Old Home" (351). Other times she defends her choice of now and her skepticism of a future life (1012). Finally she argues that earth is superior to heaven, because even if it does exist, it is only "An Ablative estate" (1741). The speaker clearly voices these fears about eternity in a number of poems: "'Twas best imperfect--as it was--/ I'm finite--I cant see" (1557); "Which is best? Heaven--/ Or only Heaven to come/ With that old Codicil of Doubt?" (1012); "The Fact that Earth is Heaven--/ Whether Heaven is Heaven or not" (1408); and "The House of Supposition--/ The Glimmering Frontier that/ Skirts the Acres of Perhaps/ To Me--

shows insecure" (696). It is the uncertainty about immortality that "nibbles at the soul" (501), molests the speaker (1646), and threatens to annihilate her afresh each time she confronts death (1323). She refers to man's uncertainty about eternity as a problem flung back to the living by the dead (10), a "troubled question" (48), a "riddle, at the last" (501), a subject that resists plumbing (1417), and "Old Nicodemus' Phantom" (1274).

The voice's stance reflects her essential ambivalence toward immortality. Her posture is questioning, doubtful, and insecure. She can be wistful (127) or ironic (1499). Pulled between faith and doubt (501), she is suspicious and skeptical (1274). She tries to be detached and rational as she examines the evidence for belief (29). She can also be argumentative (696). She finds her doubts have power to "scare us like a spectre" (1497). She sometimes objectively accepts the impossibility of attaining certainty (1411) but at other times is deeply disturbed (1323), bitter (1499), or despairing (1503). Within the voice there is always tension between her felt need for the conviction faith might bring and her intellectual honesty which recognizes that "Believing what we don't believe/ Does not exhilarate" (1741).

To create these experiences of tortured doubt about immortality that death occasions, Emily Dickinson employs many of her typical linguistic techniques and avoids others. She uses a first person point of view to convey the personal and experiential nature of either faith or doubt.⁶³ To carry the immediacy of the speaker's dilemma, she uses present time.⁶⁴ Because of the

⁶³All but four poems are in first person: 501, 769, 1017, and 1662.

⁶⁴All but three poems are in time present: 351, 374, and 1662.

introspective quality of the experience, rhetorical questions are prominent. Five poems⁶⁵ open with queries as provocative as: "The Bone that has no Marrow, / What Ultimate for that?" (1274). Rhetorical questions function within six lyrics⁶⁶ and close two.⁶⁷ As she confronts—or is confronted by—the Miracle of "To die—without the Dying/ And live—without the Life" (1017), paradox efficiently conveys the voice's dilemma in a number of poems.⁶⁸ While Emily Dickinson uses exclamations in the earlier poems⁶⁹ to suggest the speaker's disturbed emotional state, she avoids them in all but one of the later lyrics (1274). Because of the solitary quality of the experience, vocatives and imperatives are conspicuously few.⁷⁰ Even in Poem 351, the voice, standing apart from herself, addresses her "Take courage, Friend," to her doubting psyche. Personification contributes an imaginative appeal to these essentially cerebral-emotional experiences. Faith slips, laughs, rallies, and blushes (501); the mind tills the abyss of belief (1323); and facts look around (1497). Contrast and comparison operate at many levels in these poems. Sometimes the contrast is an effective verbal one: all posited against nothing (1503) and busy juxtaposed against tomb (10). Frequently the voice thinks in sets of opposites: life versus death (1017), heaven versus earth⁷¹, and her concept

⁶⁵N.B. Poems: 432, 1012, 1270, 1274, and 1646.

⁶⁶N.B. Poems: 63, 489, 1012, 1228, 1270, and 1274.

⁶⁷N.B. Poems: 487 and 1417.

⁶⁸N.B. Poems: 432, 769, 1017, 1408, 1411, 1503, and 1741.

⁶⁹N.B. Poems: 10, 29, 48, 63, 127, and 351.

⁷⁰Poems 48, 350, and 351 employ both vocatives and imperatives.

⁷¹N.B. Poems: 351, 374, 418, 696, 1012, 1162, 1228, 1408, and 1741.

of paradise versus traditional ones (1270). Sometimes she contrasts ordinary reason with the mind set she thinks needed for belief (769) or her certainty before with her lack of it now (1557). The polarity of faith and doubt within the speaker often creates tension.⁷² In one extremely bitter poem, the voice implicitly contrasts the weakness of those who too easily accept immortality with her own ironically crumbling state as she is strong enough to refuse what could be such a comforting belief (1499). The poet uses comparisons here to define the speaker's condition in time as a primer (418) or certain wealth (696) and heaven as a mansion (127), a site (370), or a town (374). At a more original level, she equates the dead with a marrowless bone (1274), doubt with a tooth nibbling at the soul (501), and difficulties in accepting immortality with a mole's problems in accepting the sky (1228). Subjunctives⁷³, conditionals⁷⁴, adversatives⁷⁵, shifts in thought⁷⁶, retarding of lines⁷⁷,

⁷²N.B. Poems: 350, 370, 501, and 1662.

⁷³N.B. Poems: 29, 63, 350, 351, 432, 1408, and 1741 for if clauses. Besides using subjunctive for these conditional states, the poet also uses it for contrary to fact and potential conditions. N.B. Poems: 48, 351, 370, 374, 418, and 1012.

⁷⁴N.B. Poems: 121, 696, and 1228 for if and 1408 for whether.

⁷⁵N.B. Poems: 350, 351, 489, 501, 769, 1162, 1228, 1270, 1274, and 1411 for but; 10, 48, and 418 for yet; and 374 for almost.

⁷⁶N.B. Poems: 350, 370, 501, and 1162 as examples of rational sequences that shift so radically that the poem ends with a position exactly opposite to the one that opens it.

⁷⁷N.B. Poems: 370, 374, 418, 489, and 1017.

abstractions⁷⁸, and Latinates⁷⁹ support the cerebral aspects of the speaker's doubt. The rational, quasi-syllogistic progression of many of these poems helps to discipline the voice's disturbed emotional state. So in Poem 350 and because in 1162 contribute to the voice's detachment as she analyzes her difficulties in accepting "the hardest Miracle/ Propounded to Belief" (1017). Run on lines, on the other hand, suggest the speaker's distressed intensity as she tries to resolve her uncertainty.⁸⁰ In some situations, the poet skilfully uses both retarding and accelerating to reveal the voice's mental and emotional changes. More often than is her custom, Emily Dickinson employs italics to emphasize a key word.⁸¹ Other times she isolates⁸² a word or phrase in a line

⁷⁸Examples abound: peace (63); fancy (121); capacity, idea, desire (350); spirit, time (351); sagacity, contempt, faith (501); values (696); doubt (1012); infinity (1162); belief (1228); obligations (1274); terror, madness, consciousness (1323); certainty (1411); constancy, curiosity (1417); recognition, conjecture, resumption (1497); eternity, identity (1499); and inference (1646).

⁷⁹Although in these poems there are many Latinate forms that passed through French, examples abound of words directly from Latin: Columba (48); conviction (351); adequate (370); supposition, insecure (696); codicil (1012); location, affidavit, missionary (1228); negotiation, posthumous (1270); ultimate (1274); commensurate (1323); vicinity (1411); constancy (1417); protrude, portentous, recognition (1497); cohere (1499); and imperative (1557).

⁸⁰N.B. Poems: 10, 29, 48, 63, 121, 1012, 1162, 1228, 1323, 1408, 1411, 1417, 1497, and 1741.

⁸¹N.B. Poems: 10 land; 63 them, developed; and 127 I.

⁸²N.B. Poems: 351, 696, and 769.

or uses alliteration⁸³, patterned repetition⁸⁴, or anaphora⁸⁵ for the same purpose. The peculiar punctuation of "Life--just--or Death--" (769) functionally retards the reading, sets life and death in greater tension, and conveys the dichotomy in the speaker's attitude. Biblical echoes add tension to a number of these poems of doubt.⁸⁶ Poem 48 depends heavily upon biblical material and Poem 1012 upon a folk proverb. Imagery is significantly sparse in these lyrics. The cerebral nature of the experience presented does not apparently lend itself to highly imaginative tropes. Among the few allusions used, legal⁸⁷, commercial⁸⁸, medical⁸⁹ and geographic⁹⁰ analogies most often illumine or define. The absence of the poet's usual religious, royal, and gem imagery is, of course, in keeping with the negative nature of this set of poems in which the speaker finds immortality bewilderingly inscrutable and her faith painfully uncertain.

A good example of the play between the desire to believe and skepticism

⁸³ Frequently the repeated consonants are explosives or frictives which reinforce the anxiety of the speaker.

⁸⁴ N.B. Poems: 48 once; 63 if; 351 I; 769 one; 1270 is, but; 1499 how; 1646 why; and 1741 that.

⁸⁵ N.B. Poems: 10 some; 121 as; 127 mansions; 350 his; 489 we; 501 to; 698 their, the; 1162 the; 1270 I; and 1497 the.

⁸⁶ N.B. Poems: 29, 127, 432, 1270, and 1274.

⁸⁷ N.B. Poems: 1012, 1228, and 1408.

⁸⁸ N.B. Poems: 696, 1270, and 1741.

⁸⁹ N.B. Poems: 501, 1270, 1323, and 1499.

⁹⁰ N.B. Poems: 350, 489, 696, and 1162.

in this category is "As Watchers hang upon the East" (121).⁹¹ The poet sets up three analogies of sensuous richness to suggest the fundamental nature of man's craving for transcendence. Within two of the similes, however, is hidden the controlling doubt that is not fully revealed until the poem's last two words. Although the tension between belief and doubt is rather well disguised behind the apparently unqualified and positive statements about the satisfactions of heaven, diction subtly suggests that the attractive promises of heaven are not to be trusted fully. An objective, descriptive approach allows the speaker to be ironic in her presentation of the bliss of heaven and the delusion of those who believe in it. It also allows her to remain ultimately uncommitted to a totally negative or positive stance. Diction, imagery, irony, and the final conditional create a tone that is essentially doubtful of the reality of immortality.

Line one opens with the first of three similes. These comparisons equate man's desire for heaven with his elemental need for light, food, and water. The eagerness and dependence of those watching for daybreak are carried by hang. East suggests both the dawn of a new day and the beginning of immortal life. This first analogy makes use of a traditional symbol and contains no hint of deception. The second line begins another comparison. Parallel openings reinforce the complementary nature of these two analogies. Man's desire for eternal life is now compared to a beggar's joyful anticipation

⁹¹Ford's comments do not conflict with this interpretation although he does not seem to find the poem as ironic and skeptic. pp. 76-77. The fact that he took the title for his study of death in Emily Dickinson's poetry, Death Beguiles the Tired, from this poem would seem to indicate that he does not find the poem as cynical or even doubtful as this reading.

of a rich meal. Beggars indicates man's lack, his essential poverty, if this life is all that he can have. Ravel suggests the extravagant pleasure man has in looking forward to paradise. Feast implies the richness of eternal life in comparison with life in time. Fancy, however, hints that the heaven anticipated is as deceptive as it is desirable. Introducing lines one, two, and four with as reinforces the similarity of the three similes. Those who hope for heaven are now likened to thirsty people in a desert who imagine that they hear brooks babbling. An impossible distance, "too far," separates them from the delight of slaking their thirst. After setting up these analogies, the voice finishes her quasi-syllogism with a line whose implications are devastating for belief. In this same way, she implies "Heaven beguiles the tired." Beguiles suggests not only deceit but self-induced delusion on the part of those who desire heaven. By implying that they are not as critical in their weariness, tired may mitigate their intellectual guilt, but it does not change the realities of the situation.

The second stanza continues the comparisons. Moving from anticipation to satisfaction, the voice pictures those who long for dawn, food, or water almost reaching the point of full enjoyment. The sensuous expectations implied in East, feast, savory, and delight prepare for the opulent figure of the dawn opening the "lid of Amethyst." The beggar does not only eat; he becomes an honored guest. The thirsty do not just drink; they press flagons to their lips. The extravagance of their satisfaction in heaven contrasts with their earlier abject poverty and desperate need. After setting up the spectacle of an almost oriental heaven, rich in its pleasures, the voice undermines the probability of any such pleasures with her last two words, "if true."

The unreal and impossible features of the second and third similes prepare for the skeptical close. The connotations of beguiles and tired also anticipate this doubtful ending. Whether Emily Dickinson meant this poem to expose essentially false and superficial concepts some people allow themselves to form of heaven or whether she intended it to ridicule any hopes of heaven as types of delusion is impossible to say. The voice does not commit herself to a final position of total doubt and neither does the poet. The overall tone and effect of this poetic experience, however, certainly make it one of doubt laced through with irony.

The third category of macabre poems centers around the death scene⁹² and/or the corpse ready for burial.⁹³ Emily Dickinson's exploration of dying in these poems is both literal and metaphorical. She realistically describes the biological process: lips cracking with fever (132), muscles grappling with leads (948), consciousness being enveloped by mists (396), and eyes congealing like a skater's brook (519). She also graphically describes the corpse: a body turned "superfluous Cold" (132), a forehead coping stone (519), and eyes "soldered down" (547). She describes a funeral as a "Dark Parade" (389) whose bells make a "Lacerating Tune" (735). On the other hand, she also explores dying in figures whose serenity, delicacy, and beauty create a radically different experience. Presenting death as transcendence, these images equate dying with a bird's flying freely (27), with dew's quietly disappearing from a

⁹²N.B. Poems: 27, 30, 43, 93, 132, 146, 149, 150, 201, 287, 344, 389, 396, 409, 524, 547, 614, 619, 723, 795, 798, 804, 923, 948, 1062, 1100, 1102, 1272, 1703, and 1757.

⁹³N.B. Poems: 45, 187, 369, 519, 665, 735, 758, 1061, 1135, 1217, 1307, 1527, and 1752.

flower (149), or snowflakes' gently dropping (409), and a funeral to a dark bridal procession (649) and a "Journey of Down" (665). In this category, Emily Dickinson places the speaker in one of two positions to observe the moment of death: 1) she stands in the bedroom watching the death of a person to whom she is emotionally tied; or 2) she has an omniscient view of the death by drowning (201), suffocation (614), or suicide (1062) of someone to whom she is not attached. Although in both situations the voice is unusually objective in her description, there is an effective tension between objective observations and subjective reactions. If the dying person is a friend, the speaker responds to her individual death; if the dying person is not a friend, the speaker responds to death itself. In either situation, the voice's ability to stand back and observe precise details plays against her own emotional reaction to their meaning. Griffith comments: "It is when death is presented as a spectacle—or when the corpse is laid out before her—that Miss Dickinson's speaker is most openly appalled."⁹⁴ The tension in poems of this type also comes from an implicit or explicit contrast between the concern of the living and the indifference of the dead or of nature, and between the activity of the living and the passivity of the dead.

The experience in these poems is basically a description of someone else's death or burial, viewed as either a biological or a transcendent phenomenon. In different poems, however, the poet further highlights various aspects of dying. Looking back upon a death scene, the speaker often tries to capture the spirit in which the person died and the impression it made upon

⁹⁴ Long Shadow, p. 133.

her. With the distance of time, she says: "She died--this was the way she died" (150), "'Twas Crisis--All the length had passed" (48), or "So proud she was to die" (1272). Sometimes she tries to pinpoint the moment of death with a sigh (804) or the consent of the dying (1100). Sometimes emphasizing the pain and suffering that preceded death, she presents it as a relief.⁹⁵ Occasionally she concentrates upon the bodily struggle of the dying who fight against death (201). Other times minimizing the physical, she speaks of the "flesh--Surrendered--Cancelled" (524) and the soul's escaping the "House unseen" (948). Once she wonders about the circumstances of a boy's drowning (923). Another time she sings an ironic hymn of praise that four are saved although forty drown (619). In her description of a corpse, the voice focuses upon its coldness, rigidity, and indifference. As she prepares a body for burial, the voice tenderly touches and reflects upon the senses of the deceased (758) or pleads prayerfully for life to return to them (1527).

In spite of the voice's objectivity as she describes a death, corpse, or burial, her emotional response colors the experience. Occasionally she accepts death with serenity because of the suffering that it ends (396) or the immortality it promises (409). Often she feels sorrow. Her eyes brim (132) as she watches the pain of the dying. She feels anguish because human efforts are so often futile in preventing death (614), the dying seem so content to leave the living who cherish them (1272), or the living already miss the dying (758). As she watches the death of someone who belongs to her, the voice admits her need of comfort, diversion, and relief (1703). Frequently the

⁹⁵ N.B. Poems: 344 and 396. Although they share a motif, these poems are far apart aesthetically.

speaker's stance is one of controlled frustration⁹⁶, horror⁹⁷, or anger⁹⁸. These responses, which often mix with others in a given poem, are evident in the implications of diction, imagery, and mode. Sometimes the voice refers directly to her "outraged mind" (1102). Other times she alludes to her jealousy because of the peaceful indifference of the dead (1272) or their being "So nearly infinite" (1100). Because of the ease of their death (149) or the naturalness of their corpse (369), the voice occasionally finds it difficult to believe that the dead are truly gone. In her presentation of someone's death, the voice is occasionally sentimental⁹⁹ or melodramatic.¹⁰⁰

The verbal patterns Emily Dickinson chooses in these poems seem to be related functionally to the nature of the experience she is describing. While she uses first person point of view frequently for immediacy¹⁰¹, she also uses third person for controlling distance.¹⁰² While she uses past time more often to present a death scene with greater restraint¹⁰³, she uses present time more

⁹⁶N.B. Poems: 132, 287, 614, 804, 1527, and 1703.

⁹⁷N.B. Poems: 187, 201, 519, and 614.

⁹⁸N.B. Poems: 614, 619, 723, 923, and 1062.

⁹⁹N.B. Poems: 93, 146, and 344. ¹⁰⁰N.B. Poems: 614 and 1757.

¹⁰¹N.B. Poems: 27, 43, 45, 93, 132, 149, 150, 344, 369, 389, 519, 547, 723, 758, 795, 804, 923, 1061, 1100, 1102, 1217, 1272, 1527, 1703, and 1752.

¹⁰²N.B. Poems: 30, 146, 187, 201, 287, 396, 524, 614, 619, 665, 735, 798, 948, 1062, 1135, 1307, and 1757.

¹⁰³N.B. Poems: 27, 30, 43, 93, 149, 150, 201, 369, 409, 519, 524, 547, 614, 665, 723, 795, 798, 804, 923, 948, 1061, 1062, 1100, 1703, and 1757.

often to describe a corpse or funeral with greater intensity.¹⁰⁴ Imperatives operate most frequently to reveal the voice's posture as she regards the dead body of someone dear.¹⁰⁵ Especially in the earlier lyrics, the poet uses exclamations to reinforce the voice's emotional response.¹⁰⁶ Interjections appear in this category to suggest the speaker's disturbed reaction.¹⁰⁷ Conditionals¹⁰⁸, adversatives¹⁰⁹, and subjunctives¹¹⁰ also indicate the voice's attitudes. Although the voice is reflective as she recalls the death scene, she rarely uses rhetorical questions.¹¹¹ The irony of coupling idle with hand (45) or indolent with housewife (187) to describe a woman awaiting burial or asking "Of the Separated Parties/ Which be out of Sight?" (1061) to describe the void between the dead and the living conveys the complexity of the voice's stance. "Anguish stooped" (1272) is just one of many personifications¹¹² that

¹⁰⁴ N.B. Poems: 45, 132, 146, 187, 287, 389, 396, 619, 735, 758, 1102, 1135, 1217, 1307, 1527, and 1752.

¹⁰⁵ N.B. Poems: 187 try, stroke, lift, handle; 758 latch, smooth, ad-just; 1527 give, deck, lay, affiance; and 1752 inter.

¹⁰⁶ Poems 30 and 93 open with exclamations; Poems 27, 30, 43, 93, 149, 187, 201, 287, and 344 use exclamations within; and Poems 27, 30, 43, 93, 45, 146, 149, 187, 201, 344, and 1757 close with them.

¹⁰⁷ N.B. Poems: 132 alas; 723 ah; 201 Oh God; and 146, 614, 1307, 1527, and 1757 oh.

¹⁰⁸ N.B. Poems: 45, 132, 146, 369, 389, 649, 795, 804, 1062, and 1752 for if.

¹⁰⁹ N.B. Poems: 369, 396, 409, 614, 619, 649, 795, 804, 948, 1217, and 1703 but; 795 yet; 804 though; and 1100 except.

¹¹⁰ N.B. Poems: 45, 132, 389, 519, 614, 1062, and 1272.

¹¹¹ N.B. Poems: 30, 146, and 1061.

¹¹² N.B. Poems: 201, 287, 369, 389, 396, 409, 519, 524, 619, 723, 795, 948, 1102, and 1703.

concretize and define these experiences. Run on lines¹¹³ frequently add to the emotional buildup in these poems. Retarding lines also contribute to the quality of these experiences.¹¹⁴ The slowing down of the final lines contributes to the controlling emotion of horror or awe as the speaker presents death in two quite different poems: "With eyes in death--still begging raised--/ And hands--beseeching--thrown!" (201) and "Two Worlds--like Audiences--disperse--/ And leave the Soul--alone--" (524). Italics similarly emphasize the importance of certain words.¹¹⁵ By underscoring the dominance of some words, anaphora¹¹⁶ and other patterned repetitions¹¹⁷ illumine these situations. Alliteration, especially of unpleasant s sounds and explosives, also adds to the emotional impact of these poems.¹¹⁸ Many levels of contrast help to create these experiences of death. Sometimes the poet juxtaposes words like "unknown Renown" (1307), or opposes ideas of hot and cold¹¹⁹, factually objective first lines and the emotional intensity of the rest of the poem (150), the attitudes of the dying and the living¹²⁰, human ignorance of where the war dead are

¹¹³N.B. Poems: 146, 150, 547, 904, 948, 1217, 1272, 1527, and 1703.

¹¹⁴N.B. Poems: 187, 201, 344, 389, 396, 524, 614, 723, 795, and 1100.

¹¹⁵N.B. Poems: 30, 43, 93, 150, and 1703.

¹¹⁶N.B. Poems: 45, 146, 187, 287, 389, 396, 406, 519, 524, 547, 614, 619, 640, 795, 804, 948, 1061, 1062, 1100, 1102, 1135, 1317, and 1752.

¹¹⁷N.B. Poems: 30, 146, 149, 150, 344, 409, 649, 723, 758, 923, 1100, and 1272.

¹¹⁸N.B. Poems: 45, 150, 201, 396, 406, 547, 614, 619, 649, 665, 723, 798, 804, 948, and 1062.

¹¹⁹N.B. Poems: 132, 187, 1135, and 1703.

¹²⁰N.B. Poems: 27, 795, and 1272.

buried and God's ability to resurrect each fallen man (409), or even structures an entire poem around alternating inner and outer events (1703). Besides playing against the abstractions¹²¹ in these poems, graphic action verbs¹²² concretize and individualize these experiences.

Because of the generally negative delineation of death in this category, religious, royal, and jewel images are infrequent. The religious allusions generally assert a life beyond for the dying.¹²³ All the gem figures, except in Poem 665, suggest the stone-like nature of the deceased.¹²⁴ Images of violence contribute fearful elements to the experience of death.¹²⁵ Journey allusions imply that man is a pilgrim (132) and death, therefore, a passage to another life.¹²⁶ Clothing metaphors describe the buried as wearing a "sod gown" (665) and interred in "seamless grass" (409). A sustained metaphor that

¹²¹ Examples abound: gravity 45; arrogance 287; vitality 396; intuition 389; indifference 519; soul 524; anguish 614; salvation 619; endeavor, acquiescence 649; industriousness 795; privilege 948; dissent 1061; leisure 1100; fortitude (1217); jealousy 1272; and comfort 1703.

¹²² Examples abound: gurgles, shot 30; touch, kiss, sob, weep 45; crackling 132; wrestled 201; trudging, sigh, slipped, rocked 146; dropt 149; swings, buzz, staggered, stroke 187; bowing, dangling, hunched, quivered, nods 287; leaped, dancing, sparkling 369; rustle, flings 389; blanch 396; crept, dropped 514; leaning 524; solder 547; boiling, spinning, shake 619; caper, salute 649; tossed, slipped, spun, groped, tripped, dropped 723; pile 804; stretched 923; grappled, shook, shot 948; staggered, groped, dropped, caressed 1062; jostled, bent, struggled 1100; clasped, wilted, clung, gored 1102; bended 1135; knock 1703; sparkled 1752; tottered and grasped 1757.

¹²³ N.B. Poems: 132, 150, 344, 523, and 649.

¹²⁴ N.B. Poems: 519 Adamant; 795 Carrara; 948 Adamant; and 1135 agate.

¹²⁵ N.B. Poems: 187, 547, 735, 948, and 1102.

¹²⁶ N.B. Poems: 30, 43, 344, 649, and 665.

likens death to a clock that cannot be started again provides the skeleton for Poem 287. The majority of the imagery in this category relies upon direct or implied comparisons with nature. To describe the separation of spirit and body in death, the poet likens the soul to a kernel and the flesh to a husk. She compares signs of approaching death to natural occurrences. She likens the bodily chill of the dying to frost creeping upon a glass (519), his loss of sense perception to a fog (547), and his mental confusion to mists that "obliterate a Crag" (396). She compares a person's death to a bird's fleeing (45), a star's softly dropping (149), or a petal's suddenly dropping from a rose (409), and his burial to a seed's being carefully fitted in the ground (804).

"She lay as if at play" (369) exemplifies many characteristics of this group of poems; at the same time it is unusual for it describes the corpse of a just dead child—and does so without sentimentality. It formalizes the mystery of a young girl's death with immediacy, irony, and tenderness. The interplay of the sensual, intellectual, and emotional elements of this poem gives it a complexity that is not at first apparent. The surface simplicity of the diction, rhythm, and rhymes tends to hide the more complex attitudes of the voice which individualize this poem. The technical perfection of the lines and the poem's tonal nuances give it a beauty not readily associated with a corpse. The metric pattern and liquid vowels and consonants contribute to this beauty as well as to the delicacy of the play motif. The speaker's tender, reverential, yet light-hearted and ironic attitude also reinforces the motif at the same time that it tensions it and saves it from stock responses.

The first and second lines suggest three possible readings which are substantiated by the text. The dead girl lay in such a manner that it seems as

if: 1) she is dead but she died in the moment of play so some of life's vitality, some of the exuberant excitement of a child's game, is suggested by her corpse (this posture of activity is, of course, ironically opposed to the fact of her death); or 2) she were merely playing that she is dead as children playing "Statue" try to assume the stillness of death; or 3) her life had only playfully leaped away, teasingly almost, intending to return but somehow delayed. The basic meaning of the poem rests on the connotations of play; all three readings are possible and all are acceptable. And they all contribute to the poem's tension for they rest upon the three times repeated as if which effectively "announces the disharmony between the fact of the motionless corpse and the figure of frolic."¹²⁷

This child's body lacks most corpses' oppressive appearance of deadness. This aspect of a beautiful little girl's death simultaneously mitigates and heightens mortality's horror. A strong sense of life and delicate gaiety are, consequently, necessary ingredients of this experience. The gracefully light and happy tone is carried by the short lines, which also symbolize the brevity of her life, and by the poet's inclusion of leaped, play, fun, trick, merry, dancing, and morning. The poet introduces visual elements that also contain a sense of vitality quite opposed to mortality. The arms are not rigid, nor the eyes closed. This description is consonant with the lyric's mood. The little girl's state hints that just for an instant her body forgot "The Trick to start." Time enters here; while seeming partially to erase death's finality, it really suggests the decisiveness of the moment of death. The

¹²⁷Moldenhauer, 38.

fact that the child's eyes are open in an empty stare is another grotesque reminder of the reality of her death. The poet's use of this one detail to suggest opposed meanings is an example of the subtle tension operating throughout this poem.

The last stanza is less playful. Tenderness and skepticism exclude the game motif. The implications of devising and force and the parenthetical "I am sure" bring the irony of the earlier stanzas into focus. "So light--so deep--" must be read slowly to catch the voice's reverent sorrow that one so young and lovely must sleep, that the appearances are not the facts, that she is indeed dead, and that there may be no life for her to wake to in this deep sleep.

The next category of death poems reflects Emily Dickinson's sensitivity to graves and curiosity about existence in them. Although her preoccupation with cemeteries has some traits in common with romantic graveyard poetry, her lyrics generally are devoid of sentimental or maggotty overtones. Using traditional imagery, Emily Dickinson's poems that center around graves are original and successful in proportion to the understatement, irony, and tension that mark them. Most typically in this category, the poet places the speaker in a cemetery where headstones become the focus for her uncertainties about mortality.¹²⁸ Occasionally the voice, speaking from the grave, attempts to define her experience of death.¹²⁹ Because of the angle of death explored in

¹²⁸ N.B. Poems: 96, 115, 216, 408, 411, 457, 829, 876, 892, 897, 942, 943, 1147, 1159, 1183, 1396, 1443, 1674, and 1701.

¹²⁹ N.B. Poems: 51, 99, 496, and 1037.

these situations, the poet typically uses negatives to define the experience. By saying that the grave lacks warmth, vitality, companionship, and color, the poet presents an impression of death that can move from stasis, quiet, and peace to isolation, emptiness, and nothingness. Repose¹³⁰ usually suggests rest, but within the context of some of the poems it may also hint at a void that follows the destruction of personhood.

As the voice moves through a cemetery, she is often concerned that the buried are forgotten by the living¹³¹, ignored by and unable to respond to nature¹³², and possibly lost in a cosmic vacuum.¹³³ That the buried do not live in anyone's memory seems an extension of their death to the voice who laments that the headstone is more constant than the deceased's friends (1396) and that briars cover a grave (876). Sometimes she asks that the grave be kind to those she reposes there.¹³⁴ The request can be as general as "Ample make this Bed/ Make this Bed with Awe" (829) or as specific as "Blanket wealthier the Neighbor/ We so new bestow" (942). In one poem, she speaks to the Sexton about tending the grave of her Master in preparation for spring (96). Noticing the birds and flowers in a cemetery, the voice sometimes contrasts the activity outside the grave with its lack within.¹³⁵ Often the voice reflects upon the nature of life in the grave and asks: "What Inn is this . . .?" (115) or "Who occupies this House?" (892). Sometimes she thinks about the serenity and

¹³⁰ N.B. Poems: 942 and 943.

¹³¹ N.B. Poems: 876, 1147, and 1396.

¹³² N.B. Poems: 99 and 496.

¹³³ N.B. Poems: 216 and 1159.

¹³⁴ N.B. Poems: 829, 942, and 1183.

¹³⁵ N.B. Poems: 216 and 496.

security of those buried¹³⁶; other times, finding these qualities unhealthy omens, she notes that "A chilly Peace infests the Grass" (1443). Recalling that she used to wonder "What they did there--/ And why it was so still--" (51), the buried voice describes the grave as "stillier than the sundown" and "cooler than the dawn." Another time, she describes the atmosphere of the grave as "Gravity--and Expectation--and Fear--/ A tremor just, that All's not sure" (408). She also ironically contrasts a simple grave and "a stupendous Tomb" (1674), the symbolic colors of the outer and the inner grave (411), and the realities and anguish of entombment with the mind set which refuses to face death and lets it "Hum by--in Muffled Coaches" (457). In some poems, she reflects upon some of the paradoxical aspects of a grave: it exists in time, yet for it time is meaningless (1159); it is restricted in size, yet if it contains a friend, it is also "Circumference without Relief--/ Or Estimate--or End--" (943). She pictures the buried, those "Too infinite asleep" (411), as safe (216), untouched (216), and untumbled (216) and the grave as still (51), cool (51), strict (408), sweet (457), glad (457), gay (457), quiet (892), fortunate (898), and successful (898).

The posture of the speaker, who looks upon a grave and considers the condition of those the "Emerald Seams enclose" (1183), is essentially reflective. As she considers what being buried implies, her description can be as objectively declarative as "New feet within my garden go" (99) and her reaction as subjectively emotional as "And still the pensive Spring returns--/ And still the punctual snow" (99). The voice questions and wonders, she asks and

¹³⁶N.B. Poems: 216 and 1701.

exclaims. Her inquisitive probing can be as simple as the naïvete in "What curious rooms!" (115) or as complex as the irony in "Let no Sunrise' yellow noise/ Interrupt this Ground" (829). As she considers life in the grave, she is curious¹³⁷, tender¹³⁸, or sad.¹³⁹ Sometimes she is confident¹⁴⁰ enough to encourage another to "Trust the loving promise/ Underneath the mould" (51); other times, she is repulsed and fearful¹⁴¹ that a tomb merely proclaims "to the Gloom/ How dead we are" (1674). Sometimes contemplating the dead's freedom from time and space--in spite of their confinement in the grave--she is overcome with awe.¹⁴² Other times her response is tensioned by an ironic element.¹⁴³ The sight of a grave rarely elicits a wholly unqualified mental or emotional reaction from the speaker in these poems.

Most of Emily Dickinson's typical formal patterns appear in this category. Although the persona she selects is almost evenly divided between first and third person, the time sequence is not correspondingly split between present and past tense. The sense of immediacy in these poems depends in part upon their use of present time; only Poem 1159 is wholly in time past. To indicate the cerebral and emotional nature of the voice's exploration of a state beyond her empirical limits, the poet opens and closes lyrics with rhetorical

¹³⁷ N.B. Poems: 51, 115, 408, 876, and 892.

¹³⁸ N.B. Poems: 51, 876, 942, 1183, and 1489.

¹³⁹ N.B. Poems: 99, 1147, and 1396.

¹⁴⁰ N.B. Poems: 829, 943, and 1701.

¹⁴¹ N.B. Poems: 408 and 1443. ¹⁴² N.B. Poems: 216, 943, and 1159.

¹⁴³ N.B. Poems: 115, 408, 892, and 942.

questions¹⁴⁴, uses personification to an unusual extent¹⁴⁵, and relies heavily upon types of definition by negation.¹⁴⁶ Closing with a question suggests the speaker's final uncertainty. Personification adds concreteness to situations that could float in an undifferentiated vagueness. Breezes that laugh (216), a sun that furrows (411), and winds that recollect (1147) contribute the vitality the poet sets in opposition to death. A "pensive Spring" (99), "Weeds triumphant" (1147), and a "confiding stone" (1396) sharpen the voice's response to death. Definition by negation suggests both the speaker's inability to describe life in the grave realistically and the possibility that it is essentially a state of nothingness. Even the description of the external grave can reflect this negative approach: "It was a Grave, yet bore no Stone/ Enclosed 'twas not of Rail" (876). Lines like "No ruddy fires on the hearth--/ No brimming Tankards flow--" (115) and "No Chatter--here--no tea--" (408) convey the lack of warmth, sociability, and joy in the grave. Its lack of activity --and possibly meaning--is suggested by: "Here was no Notice--no Dissent/ No Universe--no Laws--" (1159). Adversatives¹⁴⁷, conditionals¹⁴⁸, subjunctives¹⁴⁹,

¹⁴⁴N.B. Poems: 115, 408, 892, and 942.

¹⁴⁵N.B. Poems: 51, 96, 99, 216, 408, 411, 457, 897, 1147, 1159, 1183, 1396, 1443, 1674, and 1701.

¹⁴⁶N.B. Poems: 115, 408, 411, 457, 1159, 1443, and 1701.

¹⁴⁷N.B. Poems: 408, 411, 892, 1159, 1443, and 1701 for but; 411 for except; and 876 and 943 for yet.

¹⁴⁸N.B. Poems: 876, and 897 for if.

¹⁴⁹N.B. Poems: 96, 829, and 892.

and logical links¹⁵⁰ support the rational aspects of the speaker's reflection and tension its emotional ones. Even the imperatives¹⁵¹ and vocatives¹⁵² carry the solitary quality of the experience. Only in Poem 51 is the command directed to a specific person; the others are all addressed to nature (942) or a generalized audience. Only in Poem 408 is the vocative directed to human beings; the others are to God (51), death (115), or nature (942). Especially in the earlier poems, exclamations¹⁵³ and interjections¹⁵⁴ indicate the speaker's emotional state. Rapidly moving lines are one of the devices the poet uses later to achieve a similar effect.¹⁵⁵ Harsh s sounds¹⁵⁶ suggest the voice's agitation while o sounds carry her serenity.¹⁵⁷ Patterned repetition¹⁵⁸, anaphora¹⁵⁹, and retarding lines¹⁶⁰ emphasize key ideas. In some situations, paradox¹⁶¹ functionally reveals the speaker's ambivalence.

¹⁵⁰ N.B. Poems: 51, 408 for so; 892 for since; and 1183 for for.

¹⁵¹ N.B. Poems: 51, 408, 829, 942, and 1183.

¹⁵² N.B. Poems: 51, 115, 408, and 942.

¹⁵³ N.B. Poems: 51, 96, 99, 115, and 216.

¹⁵⁴ N.B. Poems: 115, 216, 411, and 892.

¹⁵⁵ N.B. Poems: 876, 892, 942, 943, 1147, 1183, 1396, 1443, 1674, and 1701.

¹⁵⁶ N.B. Poems: 51, 96, 99, 216, 457, 892, 897, 942, 1147, 1159, 1183, 1396, and 1443.

¹⁵⁷ N.B. Poems: 216, 876, and 1147.

¹⁵⁸ N.B. Poems: 99, 411, 892, 943, and 1183.

¹⁵⁹ N.B. Poems: 51, 99, 115, 408, 411, 457, 829, and 892.

¹⁶⁰ N.B. Poems: 216, 408, 457, 897, 942, and 943.

¹⁶¹ N.B. Poems: 943 and 1183.

Contrast¹⁶² and comparison are structural forces in these poems. The poet often sets the vitality of motion and sound against their lack in the grave. Frequently she compares death to sleep¹⁶³ and a coffin to a bed.¹⁶⁴ Besides comparing graves to individual homes, she also links them with a village (51), a garden (99), a town (892), or a domain (943). She also equates the buried with citizens.¹⁶⁵ A series of comparisons provides the entire frame for Poem 496. To individualize the experience Emily Dickinson often elects common adjectives¹⁶⁶ and verbs¹⁶⁷ which are arrestingly unusual in context. Saying that a bird singing in a cemetery "Betrays the Solitude" (99) sets the verb and abstraction in a new relationship that is imaginatively rich and organically provocative. There are few religious¹⁶⁸ or royal¹⁶⁹ allusions operating in these poems. Various kinds of household references support the grave-home and coffin-bed metaphors. Clothing figures appear occasionally.¹⁷⁰ The poet sometimes introduces tropes from nature to suggest the significance and sacredness of the buried. She asks, for instance, that 'no Sunrise' yellow noise/

¹⁶²N.B. Poems: 51, 99, 115, 216, 411, 457, 892, 942, 943, 1147, and 1183.

¹⁶³N.B. Poems: 96, 99, 115, 216, 411, 829, and 942.

¹⁶⁴N.B. Poems: 96 and 829. ¹⁶⁵N.B. Poems: 892 and 943.

¹⁶⁶N.B. Poems: 408 "Coy Dead"; 492 "acclimated Creature"; 942 "Austere Snow"; 1396 "docile Crescent"; and 1443 "Chilly Peace."

¹⁶⁷N.B. Poems: 51 enfolds; 829 break, interrupt; 876 appease; 942 admonish; 943 bestow; 1443 astray, infects; and 1701 untumbled.

¹⁶⁸N.B. Poems: 496, 829, and 943. ¹⁶⁹N.B. Poems: 216 and 1396.

¹⁷⁰N.B. Poems: 457, 496, and 1183.

Interrupt this Ground" (829).

Although the apparent confidence of "A Coffin--is a small Domain" (943) is not typical of this category, this poem exhibits many of the formal qualities Emily Dickinson uses to explore this type of experience. Using the grave as a pin to tack down her reflections about the nature of existence after death, the poet concentrates upon its grandeur, which she attempts to illumine in two paradoxical statements. In its inclusiveness, however, the second paradox differs from the first. The first is totally objective; it considers only the condition of the interred. The second is subjective and regards the speaker's state. The similarity of the opening lines of stanzas one and two makes the difference between them more subtle and the relation of stanza three to stanza two less obvious. The parallel patterning of stanzas one and two, the breaks that isolate coffin and grave, the underlying contrast, the use of repose and bestows, the peculiar use of relief in conjunction with circumference, the retarding of the concluding lines, and the paradoxical view relate this poem technically--if not attitudinally--to others in this category. The implications of the concluding lines suggest a fear the voice feels in the absolute separation between her and the dead. This tension enriches the poem, mitigates one critic's censure¹⁷¹, and links it more closely to the complexity of some of the other poems in this category.

In the next group of poems, Emily Dickinson analyzes the nature of death. She attempts to stand back and define as objectively as possible what

¹⁷¹Sherwood calls this poem a "facile, too assured, almost flippant exploitation of paradise." p. 189. Johnson, on the other hand, speaks of the terror in this lyric. Emily Dickinson, p. 204.

she terms "the White Exploit" (922). As a biological phenomenon and a metaphysical fact, death's essential characteristics form a complex of meaning which so intrigues this poet that she examines mortality from numerous angles. As she looks at death philosophically, she identifies it as: mysterious¹⁷², solitary (1603), experiential (1770), decisive (615), complex¹⁷³, and awesome (1370).¹⁷⁴ Approaching death as a biological event which severs communication and isolates, the poet sees it as a violation of man's nature.¹⁷⁵ Approaching death as a part of human evolution, the poet analyzes it in a variety of images which convey its naturalness: rest¹⁷⁶, sleep¹⁷⁷, home (499), seed-blossom¹⁷⁸, journey¹⁷⁹, and flight.¹⁸⁰ Approaching death as transcendence, the poet envisions it as an event that lifts the voice above her natural existence by freeing her from the petty distinctions of time¹⁸¹ or the limitations of the physical¹⁸², by intensifying her appreciation of life¹⁸³, or by clarifying her

¹⁷²N.B. Poems: 52, 89, 153, 160, 382, 581, 600, 698, 900, 929, 1202, 1221, 1399, 1493, and 1603.

¹⁷³N.B. Poems: 71 and 976.

¹⁷⁴These characteristics resemble those in her description of death as a person in Poem 153: secretive, laconic, sedate, still.

¹⁷⁵N.B. Poems: 68, 194, 261, 417, 509, 529, 592, 778, 922, 949, 1402, and 1702.

¹⁷⁶N.B. Poems: 423, 714, and 1065.

¹⁷⁷N.B. Poems: 13 and 120.

¹⁷⁸N.B. Poems: 40, 1047, and 1572.

¹⁷⁹N.B. Poems: 4, 1234, and 1558.

¹⁸⁰N.B. Poems: 5 and 335.

¹⁸¹N.B. Poems: 970 and 1256.

¹⁸²N.B. Poems: 976, 1630, and 1691.

¹⁸³N.B. Poems: 57, 294, 574, 857, and 1665.

values.¹⁸⁴ Because of these contradictory aspects of death, which Emily Dickinson never resolves or synthesizes, she considers its essence ultimately illusive. Referring to her exploration of death, the poet, therefore, says "That oblique Belief which we call conjecture/ Grapples with a Theme stubborn as Sublime" (1221). The very inexplicability of mortality may account for the large number of poems which comprise this category.

As the poet attempts to define the essence of mortality, the voice's impression of it generally falls into one of four areas. She experiences death primarily as unsolvable riddle, natural change, unnatural phenomenon, or transcendent event. The situations in these poems, consequently, reveal a similar pattern. In some poems, the voice reflects on the unknown condition of those who occupy "Tenements of Wonder" (1221), the incomprehensibility in this life of death and cosmic order (600), or the uncertainty of the value of the gifts of death in comparison with those of life (382). She concludes that "Unproved is much we know--/ Unknown the worst we fear" (1202) and that dying is "The going from a world we know--/ To one a wonder still" (1603). Sometimes she personifies death to dramatize her questions about him (153) or regrets her being called back from death when she was so close to discovering its secrets (160). Often the voice laments that the dead are beyond the reach of natural things; neither affection (68), nor birds (194), nor music (261), nor sunlight (778) can wake them. Sometimes she equates the silence and isolation of death with spatial distances: "How many leagues of nowhere/ Lie between them now" (68) or "Further than Guess can gallop/ Further than Riddle ride" (922). She

¹⁸⁴N.B. Poems: 856, 906, 1086, and 1714.

grieves that the dead cannot answer the questions of the living (1402). She questions whether the dead, cut off from the living, are happy, conscious, or homesick (529). Defining mortality in metaphorical terms, the voice equates it with jumping across a threatening brook to pick a "Flower Hesperian" (1558), a shepherd's giving rest to his "tired Flocks" (1065), a seed's developing into a mature bloom (1047), exiles' returning home (499), or basking "Centuries away" (654). In one poem, she compares summer's holiday dress for death with man's traditionally sober garb (1572). Looking at pictures of the deceased, the speaker thinks of their delight now as "Beyond our faint conjecture—/ Our dizzy Estimate" (499). In a few poems, she regards death chiefly as a means of releasing the dead from the limitations of time and space. She imagines death's "Democratic fingers" freeing the deceased from any prejudices of color, caste, or denomination (970); she envisions the soul rising from the body as a balloon freely ascending (1630) and, therefore, "Beyond the hope of touch" (1691). Sometimes the voice considers death's positive effects upon the living. She asserts that recalling the existence of mortality makes one "venerate the simple days" (57), facing it fills the doomed "With different Delight" (294), and living in its presence "expands the least event" (1665). Death not only makes the speaker grateful for her "right to walk upon the Earth" (1665), but it also sharpens her sense of values. By its light, the voice is able to infer "Preciser what we are/ And the Eternal function" (856). She claims that an "Open Tomb" provides a "Compound Vision" that reorganizes her priorities (906). In another poem, "everlasting Light" helps the speaker to recognize and reject her temporal values as "Twigs we held by" (1086). The voice claims that death occasions these insights because "By a departing light/ We see

acuter quite" (1714).

The attitude of the voice toward death varies according to what aspect of it dominates her definition. Because she is approaching death analytically in these poems, the speaker tries to maintain an objective stance.¹⁸⁵ Her detachment and rationality here tend to exclude the more intense emotional position in some of the other categories of death poems. Seeking to understand and explain the essence of mortality, the voice elects a cerebral and controlled stance that allows her to be open to different possibilities. As a particular aspect of death fills her vision, the voice's response, of course, reflects this change. When she isolates its inscrutability, she is uncertain (52) and puzzled (600). As she questions (900) and wonders (1603), she sometimes is serene (153), other times troubled (529). When she regards death as an unnatural isolation, she is disturbed and sad.¹⁸⁶ The absolute indifference of the dead to nature seems simultaneously to fascinate and to appall her. When she regards death as a natural process, she is confident¹⁸⁷ and/or joyous.¹⁸⁸ Occasionally she is visionary and exultant.¹⁸⁹ Sometimes a sense of awe overcomes her as she contemplates the nature of death.¹⁹⁰

The personal and reflective nature of the experience in these poems

¹⁸⁵ N.B. Poems: 52, 71, 89, 382, 581, 714, 856, 970, 1047, 1202, 1256, 1399, 1558, 1603, 1665, and 1714.

¹⁸⁶ N.B. Poems: 194, 261, 509, 529, 778, 922, and 949.

¹⁸⁷ N.B. Poems: 4, 5, 40, 335, 423, 499, 698, 1065, 1234, and 1402.

¹⁸⁸ N.B. Poems: 4 and 499. ¹⁸⁹ N.B. Poems: 13, 76, and 160.

¹⁹⁰ N.B. Poems: 615, 1370, and 1691.

affects Emily Dickinson's style. She apparently uses language patterns to suggest either the emotional or the philosophical nature of the voice's search. First person¹⁹¹ and present tense¹⁹² reinforce the urgency of the speaker's exploration of death's nature. Exclamations¹⁹³, interjections¹⁹⁴, and italics¹⁹⁵ reveal her personal involvement. Occasionally imperatives¹⁹⁶ and vocatives¹⁹⁷ perform a similar function. A variety of techniques carry the rational nature of the voice's efforts to define the meaning of death. Subjunctives¹⁹⁸ indicate the uncertainty of her suppositions or the necessity of her negative approach. Some rhetorical questions reveal the voice's curiosity about death's meaning.¹⁹⁹ Others suggest the impossibility of her adequately comprehending or defining mortality: "Can I expound the skies?" (89); "Can

¹⁹¹The ratio of poems in first and third person is approximately 3:1.

¹⁹²Only three poems are totally in time past: 574, 600, and 615.

¹⁹³Exclamations open Poems 120, 160, and 261; operate within Poems 4, 13, 68, 120, 153, 160, 194, and 261; and close Poems 4, 13, 68, 89, 120, 153, 160, 194, 261, 294, 509, 949, and 1086.

¹⁹⁴N.B. Poems: 4 ho, eternity; 194 alas; 698 "Tender Pioneer"; and 120, 949, 1065, and 1086 oh.

¹⁹⁵N.B. Poems: 4, 13, 57, 120, 194.

¹⁹⁶N.B. Poems: 120 bury; 417 find; and 778 match.

¹⁹⁷N.B. Poems: 4 pilot; 120 "Fellow Men"; 417 you; 1065 death; and 1402 passenger.

¹⁹⁸N.B. Poems: 57, 261, 499, 509, 581, 592, 698, 778, 900, 949, 1202, 1493, and 1665.

¹⁹⁹N.B. Poems: 4, 417, 499, 900, and 929.

Blaze be shown in Cochineal--/ Or Noon--in Mazarin?" (581); and "Would Giants
--understand?" (600). In a few poems, they suggest the impressive (654) or
paradoxical²⁰⁰ aspects of death. Conditionals²⁰¹, adversatives²⁰², logical
links²⁰³, argumentative sequences²⁰⁴, negatives²⁰⁵, diction²⁰⁶, and retard-
ings²⁰⁷ contribute to the analytical tone of the poetic experience. Slowing
down lines functionally conveys both the speaker's mental process and her emo-
tional posture: "Maybe--that--would awaken--them!" (261). The frequency with
which the speaker describes by negation or admits "We do not know" (698) sug-
gests the difficulties inherent in her search. Paradox²⁰⁸ testifies to the

²⁰⁰N.B. Poems: 574, 929, and 1603.

²⁰¹N.B. Poems: 52 whether; 261 maybe; 1202, 1221, 1399 perhaps; and
120, 509, 529, 574, 900, 970, 1047, 1086, 1202, 1234, 1402, 1558, and 1665 if.

²⁰²N.B. Poems: 5, 499, 600, 949 yet; 698, 1221 though; and 335, 615,
1202, 1370, 1558, 1572, and 1603 but.

²⁰³N.B. Poems: 160 therefore; 261 since; 600 for; and 294 and 857
because.

²⁰⁴N.B. Poems: 261 and 1603.

²⁰⁵N.B. Poems: 89, 654, 778 nor; 27, 153, 1202 never; 5, 89, 153, 194,
423, 654, 698, 927, 1221, 1256, 1370 no; and 13, 40, 68, 153, 335, 382, 417,
698, 900, 906, 970, 1399, and 1770 not.

²⁰⁶N.B. Poems: 499 estimate, conjecture; 529 wonder, trouble; 600
puzzle, prove, problems, comprehended; 900 questions; 949 guess, riddle; 1202
unknown, unproved, secrets, analyze, infer; 1221 supposition, conjecture,
presume, belief; 1399 suppose; 1603 unknown, wonder; 1702 surmise; and 1770
experiment.

²⁰⁷N.B. Poems: 89, 261, 335, 382, 581, 600, 615, 654, 698, 900, and
970.

²⁰⁸N.B. Poems: 57, 89, 499, 922, 949, 1047, and 1234.

contradictions the voice recognizes as death's central meaning. Contrast²⁰⁹ also often reveals the speaker's paradoxical view of death. She speaks of being "Just lost, when I was saved" (160), of death as both extasy and anguish (71), and of the dead's being both under and over (949). To demonstrate how meager is human understanding of death, she contrasts death's knowledge and man's intuition (970) and the knowledge of the dead and the supposition of the living (1221). The voice frequently introduces comparisons²¹⁰ and personifications²¹¹ to project her concept of death. Comparing the silence of those long dead and those recently deceased (922) or the opening and the closing of being (1047) sharpens the aesthetic experience. Personifying centuries that tramp (160), death that rubs away distinctions (970), and the earth that tenderly puts the dead away in her "mysterious Drawers" (423) concretizes the poetic reflection. By emphasizing key words, patterns of repetition²¹² and anaphora²¹³ support the speaker's attitudes. In Poem 778, the voice's idea of death's dehumanizing effects is carried by her referring to the deceased as this and it, by the cumulative effect of the four parallel nor phrases in lines three to six, and by the formally controlled climax: "Match me the

²⁰⁹ N.B. Poems: 68, 71, 89, 153, 160, 509, 529, 698, 778, 900, 906, 949, 970, 1221, 1572, and 1702.

²¹⁰ N.B. Poems: 5, 382, 922, and 1047.

²¹¹ N.B. Poems: 68, 153, 160, 382, 423, 529, 574, 949, 970, 1065, 1202, 1221, 1402, 1558, 1691, and 1770.

²¹² N.B. Poems: 13, 40, 120, 153, 778, 857, 929, 1202, 1221, 1256, and 1630.

²¹³ N.B. Poems: 4, 13, 52, 71, 160, 194, 382, 509, 529, 574, 581, 592, 615, 778, 856, 900, 922, 944, 970, 1065, 1202, and 1370.

Silver Reticence--/ Match me the Solid Calm." Pleasant²¹⁴ and disturbing²¹⁵ sound sequences also reinforce the voice's posture as she probes death's meaning. Arresting juxtapositions and verbs startling within the context heighten the imaginative appeal and intellectual fiber of these poems.²¹⁶ By making connotations play against each other, the poet forces combinations such as the following to carry added meaning: "reluctant crumb" (335), "pitying snows" (335), "fictitious People" (499), "quaintest Distance" (778), and "Silver Reticence" (778). Within context many verbs in these poems are provocative; by establishing new relationships, they economically expand meaning. Defies, e.g., in Poems 581 and 929, not only concretizes death's ability to elude human understanding but also suggests a whole complex of attitudes and emotions.

The type of imagery Emily Dickinson chooses to define the nature of mortality varies according to which aspect of death she emphasizes in a given poem. When she presents death as a mysterious event, she usually selects analogies involving a journey. "Mystic mooring" (52), "skirting foreign shores" (160), and "that odd Fork in Being's Road" (615) suggest the unknown elements in death. Spatial figures suggest the separation death causes as well as its strangeness.²¹⁷ Allusions to birds and the sun usually point to the

²¹⁴N.B. Poems: 68, 76, 160, 615, 714, 922, 1399, 1493, 1603, and 1691.

²¹⁵N.B. Poems: 4, 13, 153, 160, 194, 261, 529, 654, 856, 900, 970, 976, 1202, 1221, and 1603.

²¹⁶N.B. Poems: 71 denominated; 89 expound; 120 presumes; 153 smuggled; 194 straggled; 261 laps; 335 persuade; 581 chalk; 592 vex, waste; 698 justify; 900 snatch; 1221 grapples; 1402 denote; 1493 burat; 1572 adjourns, frilled; 1630 defrauded; 1691 accomplished, inscribes; 1714 decks; and 1770 escorts.

²¹⁷N.B. Poems: 949, 1402, and 1702.

absolute removal of the dead from all vital activity, while similes and metaphors equating death with nature usually carry positive implications. In one situation, the poet introduces dawn to heighten the unnatural condition death imposes: "The quiet nonchalance of death--/ No Daybreak--can bestir" (194); while in another, she equates death to a chrysalis to express the natural and evolutionary process involved in dying (970). Commercial, legal (900), scientific (600), and mathematical²¹⁸ figures generally suggest the unknown or the isolating qualities of death; sometimes images from these four areas concretize the values death gives to the living.²¹⁹ The living cannot know the proportionate value of the gifts of death for the rates lie here (382) and the deceased cannot testify (417) for their power to communicate has been annulled (922). Generally domestic and clothing allusions support a more positive picture of death's nature.²²⁰ Religious references are rare²²¹, gem figures restricted to Poem 261, and royal imagery non-existent.

"What care the Dead, for Chanticleer" (592) exemplifies Emily Dickinson's notion of death as a violation of human nature. In it she characterizes death as isolation. Her definition, however, is not an abstract statement. By emphasizing the total unresponsiveness of the dead to a series of concrete natural events, she shares an existential truth. Specific incidents, therefore,

²¹⁸ N.B. Poems: 600 algebra and 1770 axion.

²¹⁹ N.B. Poems: 574, 857, 906, and 1086.

²²⁰ N.B. Poems: 423, 574, 976, 1086, 1399, and 1714.

dramatize the dehumanizing qualities of mortality and the poet's exploration of death's meaning becomes an aesthetic experience rather than a philosophic statement.

This poem makes effective use of antithesis to define the total separation of the dead from the vitality of life symbolized by various elements of nature. It could also be called one long rhetorical question which depicts the deceased's inability to experience the beauty of, or in any way respond to, Chanticleer, Day, Sunrise, Morning, or Summer. The lyric's structure sets the dead's insensibility in dramatic opposition to some of the most appealing objects in nature, objects associated with warmth, energy, hope, happiness.

Opening with strong interrogatives, the voice questions what effect nature can have upon the dead. The parallelism of the first two lines emphasizes the voice's emotional and mental position; she is distressed by the dehumanizing results of death. Her questions are a type of psychic relief for they allow her to formalize what has been held in a corner of her mind. The detail and depth of her responses reveal how profoundly she has reflected on the nature of death. The restraint, compassion, and tenderness of her reaction balance its irony, bitterness, and despair. The intellectual and emotional reactions of the speaker to death are in a tension that enriches the poem. Subjunctives, negatives, and diction reveal the despairing pain of the voice as she externalizes her reflections on the meaning of death.

After asking her first two questions, the speaker answers in analogies that reveal her concept of death's nature. Late and vex suggest both her sorrow and her attempt to control it. Vex is especially ironic; since the dead are beyond the touch of the sun's light or warmth, it can hardly annoy

them. To be awakened early in the morning can no longer be vexing; now it would be as miraculous and joyful as it is impossible. The run on lines suggest the speaker's stance as she answers with a second analogy. Setting the "Purple Ribaldry--of Morning" in opposition to the stone-like and frigidly insensible nature of the buried, she concludes that the dead are as capable as a cement wall would be of feeling the light and beauty of the brilliant sunrise.

The third and fourth stanzas, which parallel the tone, attitude, and structure of the first and second, ask the question, "What care the Dead for Summer?" Responding to her own query, the voice maintains in an apt and beautiful image that there is no power in the sun that can "waste the Snow before their Gate." Waste carries meaningful and ironic overtones, and Gate reinforces them. This figurative answer supports the voice's earlier conclusion that the dead are beyond all reach of man or nature. The speaker's attitude toward the inexorable remoteness of the dead is further illuminated when she speaks wistfully in a contrary to fact mode of the bird whose tune "Could thrill their Mortised Ear." The precise and sensual quality of this image exhibits with poignancy the voice's intellectual and emotional awareness of death's meaning.

The last two stanzas continue the same pattern. Interrogatives, implications, contrast, concrete imagery, irony, and emotional restraint function to define the exact quality of the speaker's perception of the isolation experienced both by the dead and by the living in relation to the dead. With tenderness and delicacy, yet intellectual toughness, these concluding stanzas present an experience of the dehumanizing effects of death that make this poem not so much an abstract definition but an experiential statement of the nature

of death.

In the last group of death poems, the encounter loses all of its sinister implications; it now is an experience of fulfilling happiness²²² and/or radical transformation.²²³ The change Emily Dickinson envisions as a result of death in these lyrics is both emotional and spiritual. Although this category parallels the second last one of the love poems²²⁴, it presents the social change immortality effects only as a metaphoric one. A crown or other royal trappings²²⁵ often symbolizes immortality's ability to lift man above his natural existence. Because of the difficulties inherent in imaginatively projecting herself beyond the grave, Emily Dickinson often contrasts the royal rank that death confers with the lowly estate of the living²²⁶, or likens the anticipated joys of eternity to temporally experienced ones²²⁷, or relies on a sustaining metaphor²²⁸ or abstractions (1040) to convey her vision of ecstatic personal immortality. Although these lyrics contain many valuable insights and visionary glimpses of death's power to raise and to transform, they never attempt to produce "a fully structured image of it."²²⁹ These poems attribute the new happiness enjoyed and dignity conferred to a force outside the

²²²N.B. Poems: 24, 76, 1040, and 1056.

²²³N.B. Poems: 7, 53, 98, 144, 171, 431, 515, 721, and 1626.

²²⁴N.B. Chapter III, pp. 234-241.

²²⁵N.B. Poems: 53, 98, 144, 171, and 721.

²²⁶N.B. Poems: 53, 98, 144, 171, 431, and 1626.

²²⁷N.B. Poems: 7, 24, 76, and 98.

²²⁸N.B. Poems: 24, 76, 98, and 1056.

²²⁹Chase, p. 215.

recipient. The dead are passive receivers but joyful reactors to the fullness of being eternity involves. Death is the active power that significantly alters their existence. One poem directly relates the new status of the "Modest Clay" to a spiritual cause: "Since that My Lord, 'the Lord of Lord' / Receives unblushingly!" (171).

These poems celebrate the essential change and ecstatic happiness to which death leads. The experience, of course, remains fundamentally hypothetical. Sometimes the voice shifts from a prophetic and potential position to one that is supposedly personally realized.²³⁰ Moving from the apocalyptic vision of "There is a morn by men unseen" to the immediate experience of "Here to light measure, move the feet / Which walk no more the village street" (24) involves nuances of time and distance that contribute to the complexity of even such an early poem. In a number of poems, the voice relies upon a sustained metaphor to body forth her vision. She likens her state to a May holiday enjoyed on a "mystic green" (24), to the pomp and dignity of a coronation (98), to an inland soul's first trip "Into deep eternity" (76), and to a zone of "perpetual Noon" (1056). These comparisons move from the concrete, to the semi-concrete, to the relatively abstract. Sometimes the voice sings of the regal condition of the dead: "Courtiers quaint, in kingdoms / Our departed are" (53). Other times she anticipates heaven in religious terms and joyfully exclaims: "Me—come! My dazzled face / In such a shining place!" (431), or more serenely contemplates the solemn significance of resurrection when "Circumference be full" (515). Once she imagines herself on the verge of

²³⁰ N.B. Poems: 7, 24, 98, and 721.

immortality and its divine status; but even as she tells of her experience, she remains in a middle state: "Behind Me--dips Eternity--/ Before Me--immortality" (721). Because she considers death "A Miracle for all!", she claims that "No life can pompless pass away" (1626).

Since to the speaker of these poems death is "but our Rapt attention/ To immortality" (7), her stance is typically joyous²³¹ and/or exultant.²³² Phrases such as "The lips at Hallelujah" (7), rhythms that move rapidly, and exclamations such as "Full royal is his Retinue!/ Full purple is his state!" (171), as well as the tone of the individual lyric reveal the voice's happily excited state. She is occasionally more philosophically detached (1040) and serene.²³³ As she considers the transforming power of death, she is characteristically humble²³⁴ and reverent.²³⁵ In only one poem is her posture sorrowful as she laments the deceased's dying unaware of the bliss and elevation death would open to her (58).

In these poems revealing the positive pole of her ambivalent approach to death, Emily Dickinson employs some of her usual linguistic devices and rejects others. Because she is attempting to create an aesthetic experience, rather than a philosophic definition, of death's power to bring man to full

²³¹N.B. Poems: 7, 24, 53, and 171.

²³²N.B. Poems: 53, 76, 171, 431, 515, 721, and 1626.

²³³N.B. Poems: 24, 431, and 1056.

²³⁴N.B. Poems: 53, 98, 144, 171, 431, and 515.

²³⁵N.B. Poems: 58, 144, 171, 431, and 515.

maturity, the poet generally uses first person²³⁶ and present tense.²³⁷ Exclamations²³⁸ intensify the speaker's emotional involvement in many structures. Run on lines²³⁹ reinforce the immediacy and excitement of these experiences. In a Poem such as 1056, run on lines play against its emotional control and contribute to its intense but disciplined climax. Because of the positive and attractive nature of the experience, subjunctives and adversatives are negligible.²⁴⁰ Because of the solitary and prophetic nature of the experience, vocatives, imperatives, and rhetorical questions are used rarely.²⁴¹ Italics and interjections are totally absent. Rational rather than imaginative elements qualify some poems. In a few, logical links²⁴² or restricting phrases²⁴³ restrain the voice's rhapsodic stance. Although abstractions are relatively few, they suggest the hypothetical base of these experiences of death as a fulfilling, elevating encounter. Only in Poem 1040, however, does Emily

²³⁶ Only Poems 1056 and 1626 are in third person.

²³⁷ No poem is totally in any time but present; Poems 144 and 431 mix tenses.

²³⁸ Poems 98, 171, and 431 open with them; Poems 98, 171, 431, and 1626 use them within; and Poems 24, 98, 171, and 1626 close with them.

²³⁹ N.B. Poems: 7, 76, 98, 144, 171, 431, 1056, and 1626.

²⁴⁰ Subjunctives operate in three poems: 24 should; 53 must; and 71 might. But is the only adversative used and even it functions in only four poems: 7, 144, 721, and 1040.

²⁴¹ The single vocative is in Poem 24; the only imperatives are in Poem 171; and rhetorical questions close three poems: 76, 144, and 515.

²⁴² N.B. Poems: 171 since and 721 then.

²⁴³ N.B. Poems: 515 "I suppose" and 721 "they say."

Dickinson completely abandon her efforts to create an experiential rather than a reflective lyric. Slowing down lines²⁴⁴ contributes to the speaker's sense of solemnity and incredibility. Retarding lines, especially final ones, graphically parallel the voice's wonder as she realizes the new plane of being open to her. Emily Dickinson exploits connotations to present death as the fullness of life. Some words suggest exuberant happiness: dance, revel, and sing (24). Others suggest a deeper joy: exultation (76), paradise (431), and absorbed (515). Some indicate rank: mitred, ermine (98), courtiers, saints (144), and kingdoms (721). Others carry more sublime implications: wondrous, mystic (24), circumference (515), miracle (721), and infinite (1040). To carry her vision of immortality she echoes St Paul as she negatively describes: "Never saw I such a wondrous scene" (24). She also uses contrast to present what eye has not seen, nor ear heard. She sets up tension between the natural and the mystic elements in her projection of eternity (24). She contrasts the "little maid" (53) and "simple You, and I" (98) with the status death confers. She sets the voice's sense of unworthiness in opposition to the dignity given by death (431). She opposes the limitations of temporal experience against the infinite relations possible in eternity (1040). She effectively uses personification to suggest the lowly state of the living: "timid bonnet" (144), "Modest Clay" (171), and "bashful feet" (431). She also uses verbs

²⁴⁴N.B. Poems: 7, 53, 431, 515, 721, 1040, and 1056.

that are startling in context²⁴⁵, arresting juxtapositions²⁴⁶, liquid vowels and consonants²⁴⁷, alliteration, patterned repetition²⁴⁸, and anaphora²⁴⁹ to create a spiritually and emotionally satisfying experience of death as a fulfilling and elevating encounter. By coupling fantastic and bells (24) and perpetual and noon (1056), the poet suggests that the new dawn to which she is called is beyond rational expectation or natural understanding. By joining mitred and afternoon (98) and divine and intoxication (76), she indicates the spiritual rank and unearthly joy mortality makes possible. The alliteration of d in stanzas one and two, the correspondence between the first lines of stanzas one and three, and the parallel within and between these lines add to the effectiveness of the voice's conviction that "'Tis Miracle before Me--then --/ 'Tis Miracle behind--between--/ A Crescent in the Sea--" (721).

In this category, Emily Dickinson relies heavily upon religious²⁵⁰ and royal²⁵¹ tropes to convey the transformation death affects. Equating death

²⁴⁵ N.B. Poems: 7 pours, extorted; 24 employ; 53 marshalled; 98 delays; 144 traced; 171 invests; 515 connect, efface, dissolve; 721 dips; and 1056 constructs and interrupt.

²⁴⁶ N.B. Poems: 7 "gayer sandals"; 24 "Seraphic May"; 53 "courtiers quaint"; 98 "meek escutscheons"; 171 "obsequious angels"; 431 "dazzled face"; 515 "restricted grave"; 721 "pauseless Monarchy," "Dateless Dynasty"; and 1626 "hospitable Pall."

²⁴⁷ N.B. Poems: 24, 53, 76, 98, 171, 431, 515, 721, and 1626.

²⁴⁸ N.B. Poems: 24, 53, 76, 144, 171, 431, 721, and 1056.

²⁴⁹ N.B. Poems: 7, 24, 53, 98, 144, 171, 515, 721, 1056, and 1626.

²⁵⁰ N.B. Poems: 7, 53, 98, 144, 171, 431, 721, and 1626.

²⁵¹ N.B. Poems: 7, 53, 98, 144, 171, and 721.

with sitting down with saints (144) or having one's brow invested with majesty (171) suggests the voice's idealization of mortality. Referring to the "dignified Attendants" (98) and "Obsequious Angels" (171) who serve the deceased reinforces the idea of death as an elevation. Metaphors drawn from nature most often present the happiness and perfection of immortality.²⁵² Other than figures from these three areas, no groups of imagery function in this category of death poems.

Although "No Crowd that has occurred" (515) or "Behind Me—dips Eternity—" (721) might be selected as aesthetically greater poems to represent this last group of death poems, "One dignity delays for all—" (98) better exemplifies the traits of this category. In this poem the voice clearly and grandly sings of status achieved through death. She regards death as a right which all men share; yet as she experiences it in her journey to coronation and the grave, she enjoys a rank that puts her above others. Even in this apparently simple celebration of the new plane of existence death raises one to enjoy, there is some irony and ambivalence. Dignity, mitred, purple, and crown suggest establishment in rank or grace. Mitred introduces the religious note and reinforces the idealistic notion that the day of death confers upon the soul what a bishop would bestow in confirmation or even ordination. De-lays paradoxically connotes death's willingness to wait since his leisure ultimately will triumph. The repetition of one at the beginning of the first two lines suggests that this is the great dignity, the only one that all men can claim. The strong trochee beginning of the majority of these lines and

²⁵²N.B. Poems: 24, 721, and 1056.

the three sets of anaphora emphasize the key words that the poet uses to set up her idea of death. Repeating None in this initial position draws attention to the irony that although this is such a dignity, such a privilege, some would avoid or evade it if they could.

The coach image of the second stanza conveys dramatic urgency and regal motion. Short, rapidly readable lines contribute to the sense of movement as the voice travels to eternity. Almost all of the words in this stanza have a double function; they refer to a stately funeral procession as well as to a coronation journey. The rich mode of travel is in harmony with the lyric's tonal grandeur; but tension exists in the irony just below the surface of the whole poem. The reader never forgets that the coach is both the symbolic one and the one actually carrying the corpse through town.

The third stanza continues the coach imagery of the former one but is poetically weaker. Three exclamations, fewer concrete objects, and too much reliance upon what and how detract from the lyric's power to individualize. The metaphorical reference to one hundred hats gives some motion and sensual immediacy to the situation.

The last stanza directly picks up the royal imagery of the first. Ermine and escutscheon define in precise terms the status conferred in eternity. Pomp continues the adulation of the throng and the reverence of the attendants presented in the middle stanza. The escutscheon that the voice presents is her right as a human being to die.²⁵³ She asserts that she can claim "the

²⁵³This disagrees with Anderson's identification of the escutcheon as a tombstone. Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 241. It agrees, however, with Erhardt H. Essig, "Dickinson's 'One Dignity Delays for All,'" Explicator, XXIII (October, 1964), #16.

rank to die!" as the dignity that awaits all men. Setting the lowliness of their temporal condition against this newly attained and supremely blissful state results in tension. Even in this poem where the posture of shimmering expectancy is dominant, irony and stress are structural elements; they do not deny, but enrich, the voice's presentation of death as a fulfilling and elevating encounter.

In Emily Dickinson's death poetry critics discover various patterns. To some the thread is primarily biographical and they trace a movement from a positive to a negative or a negative to a positive position, depending upon their interpretation of the poet's religious evolution. Most critics, however, who discern a development in these poems, concern themselves with an aesthetic one involving content and/or form. Thematically they see a movement from graveyard material, to death bed scenes, to the meaning of mortality and formally, a movement from sentimental treatment, concrete details, and hopeful attitudes to a more complex handling, calm abstractions, and less confident postures.²⁵⁴ In the earlier poems they discern more emotional urgency and emphasis on the physical; in the later, more serene detachment and emphasis on the meaning of death.²⁵⁵ Although the poems in this chapter are arranged topically rather than chronologically, they give some support to the argument that Emily Dickinson's death poetry exhibits this multiple movement. While acknowledging these changes in her poetry, the polarity in these poems must

²⁵⁴ N.B. Ford, pp. 69-70 and Lindberg, p. 96.

²⁵⁵ Miller's interpretation runs contrary to this one; she sees a movement from the abstract to the concrete and from troubled doubt to serene confidence in immortality. p. 196.

be recognized as an essential part of their expression of mortality. Moreover, this chapter suggests the proportion between the poems in which death is presented as a frightening and destroying force and those in which it is presented as an attractive and fulfilling experience.²⁵⁶

While critics agree that Emily Dickinson's death poetry contains some of her finest lyrics, they also recognize weaknesses in this area of her canon. They particularly criticize her earlier death poetry because of its frequent "sententious bathos"²⁵⁷, banality²⁵⁸, "sentimentality, and morbidity."²⁵⁹ While admitting that many of the earlier death poems lack the intellectual fiber, original insights, and emotional complexity of her later ones, Emily Dickinson's death poetry generally avoids the "emotional orgies"²⁶⁰ so common in her contemporaries' treatment of this theme.

Judging that Emily Dickinson's death lyrics are "her best and most characteristic poems"²⁶¹, critics, on the whole, praise their unique handling of classic figures of death²⁶², their avoidance of "hackneyed literary conventions"²⁶³, their range of approach²⁶⁴, and their insight into the nature of

²⁵⁶The ratio of negative to positive experiences of death in this chapter seems significantly higher than that of love in the previous chapter.

²⁵⁷Willy, p. 100. ²⁵⁸Sherwood, p. 69. ²⁵⁹Pickard, p. 102.

²⁶⁰Carl Bode, The Anatomy of American Popular Culture 1840-1861 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), p. 180.

²⁶¹Chase, p. 122. ²⁶²Ford, pp. 28-30.

²⁶³Anderson, American Literary Masters, I, 983.

²⁶⁴Pickard, p. 102.

mortality.²⁶⁵ Her best death poems are psychological, tensioned, and tragic. They use "kinaesthetic imagery"²⁶⁶, emphasize the human observer of the mystery of death rather than the mystery itself²⁶⁷, sound the reaches of death's frightening power²⁶⁸, and reveal a "markedly existential view."²⁶⁹

This study is in general agreement with these critical observations. The number of poems which present death as a fearful and destructive rather than an attractive and fulfilling experience confirms Emily Dickinson's dark view of reality. The other view, which is always in some tension with this one, accounts for the psychological and ambivalent character of the most effective poetic experiences of mortality. This polarity helps these lyrics to escape the maudlin and stereotyped sentiment that flaws the weaker ones. The poems analyzed in detail especially reveal the formal qualities which make this area of Emily Dickinson's canon such a successful combination of opposites playing against each other. In this ambivalence of her creative response to mortality lies much of the originality, tension, and control that individualize her better poems of death.

²⁶⁵Ibid., p. 101.

²⁶⁷Sherwood, p. 187.

²⁶⁹Ford, p. 13.

²⁶⁶Chase, p. 233.

²⁶⁸Pickard, p. 102.

CHAPTER V

POEMS INCORPORATING BOTH LOVE AND DEATH

Some of the most original and successful poems in Emily Dickinson's entire canon bring love and death into a peculiar philosophic and psychic relationship. Viewing love and death as crucial experiences with similar metaphysical and psychological consequences for the individual, it is not surprising that this poet links these two decisive encounters. Her concept of the essential connection between these two areas of human experience and of their existential roots is evident in a letter she wrote to Mrs. Holland in 1873.

Parting is one of the exactions of a Mortal Life. It is bleak--like Dying, but occurs more times.

To escape the former, some invite the last.¹

Speaking of her mother's death and funeral, in two later letters she again reveals how closely related bridal and burial events are in her mind.

The illumination that comes but once paused upon her features, and it seemed like hiding a picture to lay her in the grave; but the grass that received my father will suffice his guest, the one he asked at the altar to visit him all his life.²

Her dying feels to me like many kinds of cold--at times electric, at times benumbing--than a trackless waste, Love has never trod.³

Since the idea of either encounter simultaneously "invites--appalls" (673), it was capable of moving this woman emotionally and shaking her intellectually.

¹Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 514.

²Ibid., III, 750.

³Ibid., III, 752.

Looking to both love and death as means of fulfilling or destroying the individual, the poet links them psychologically and spiritually. Because of the threat and promise Emily Dickinson saw as the core of both of these encounters, they were intimately associated at both a conscious and an unconscious level. So closely, in fact, are love and death related in Emily Dickinson's view of reality that at times they seem to merge.⁴ Both demand the absolute surrender of the person and promise him the fullest realization of himself as a person. Both demand total self-encounter and promise total transcendence of self. The pain and ecstasy of the womb and the tomb involve the radical stripping down of the individual who is torn from himself in order to become more truly himself. Emily Dickinson's idealization of love and her concept of renunciation require a non-terrestrial consummation that also creates a special relationship between love and death. Sensitive to the psychological, philosophical, and spiritual interconnection between love and death, Emily Dickinson often formally relates these two encounters.

As early as Poem 1, Eros and Thanatos appear together: "The worm doth woo the mortal, death claims a living bride." Throughout her canon, love and death come together in varying degrees of interaction. They enter the poetic structure corporately at the same levels that they do individually. They function as metaphoric reference, dramatic background, or essential motif. Sometimes, therefore, they are used as supporting examples to illumine some other

⁴Poems 76, 249, 520, and 1670 can be read as experiences of either love or death. Water and royal imagery function in both areas; e.g., king in Poems 235 and 465, sea in Poems 162 and 76. The personification of death in Poems such as 279, 391, 712, 718, 1053, and 1445 also carries strong erotic overtones which suggest that to this poet love and death are possibly interchangeable aspects of one inclusive reality.

subject. In Poems such as 1150 and 1243, e.g., love and death are not philosophically or psychologically related. They are utilized for aesthetic reasons. Saying that "Love is one, not aggregate/ Nor is Dying double—" (1243) effectively supports the thesis that genuine suffering is, of necessity, solitary.

At a second level, death's presence intensifies the experience of love.⁵ In a Poem such as 196, awareness of time and, consequently, death, "We must die--by and by," adds a tender and tragic dimension to the relationship presented. In another lyric, death enters as a rival to the human lover, who is forced to surrender (718). A similar poem, lamenting that death had been more punctual than love, asserts that if love had preceded death, "Delight had aggrandized the Gate/ And blocked the coming in" (1230).⁶ In one poem honoring a friend's return from near death to this world, the poet describes her "half of Dust,/ And half of Day, the Bride" (830). Although the protestation of love in Poem 537 is remarkably similar to the declarations of many poems in Chapter III, the presence of encroaching death, that rises like a devouring river, creates a more dramatically tense situation.

The most representative and artistically satisfying poem in which death provides a dramatic backdrop for the experience of love is "Of all the Souls that stand create" (664).⁷ The speaker, standing imaginatively at the

⁵ N.B. Poems: 169, 196, 537, 664, 718, 830, 1059, and 1230.

⁶ Although this lyric resembles those whose core contrasts the power of love and death, the essential experience here is sorrow over the absence of love which made death possible: there is also, of course, the added implication that love is stronger than death.

⁷ Other readings generally support this one: Chase, pp. 159-160, 245; Anderson, American Literary Masters, I, 1006; Pickard, p. 91; Flick, p. 368; Wilbur, Emily Dickinson, ed., by Sewall, p. 134; and McCarthy, 27.

threshold of eternity, professes her timeless and sublime love. Grandeur and nobility characterize the situation. With complete freedom and majestic poise, the voice views "all the Souls that stand create" and declares her eternal and irrevocable selection of the one she loves. The voice's vision is transcendent and her feelings are magnificently beyond the threat of time or change.⁸ At the same time, her vision is objectively realistic and her final stance ironic.

Only in this superior state does she believe that true values are evident. The speaker claims final truth for the spirit only when the senses are no longer an intermediary. This resplendent revelation of the essence of all things takes away the Subterfuge which in time clouds man's vision. In this light, the lover contrasts that which is, i.e., values which still exist because they are spiritual and deep-rooted, with that which was, i.e., appearances of value whose insufficiency will be exposed in eternity's clear vistas. The visible separation of the three words which compose line six reinforces the idea that in this state of spiritual splendor there will be an absolute distinction between values. In this twelve-line love poem, immediate and perfect perception of reality is the major characteristic of eternity presented. Part of the tonal serenity of this lyric proceeds from the poet's concentration upon this non-sensible aspect of immortal joy to intensify the voice's delight in her choice of a lover.

"Shifted-like a Sand" implies that judgment will follow death; whether this judgment will be by God or by the individual herself, now that her values

⁸So controlled is the speaker's stance that Chase refers to her "stoical steadiness." p. 159.

are no longer dependent upon sense impressions, is not certain. Tension exists between the voice's sublime concept of eternity and her estimate of human life carried in "this brief Tragedy of Flesh." She implies that immortality is vastly superior in its essential felicity, spirituality, and duration. The figures of royalty refer to the depth and richness of some lives which will remain unrecognized until the hour of judgment, while the mists which will be carved away refer to deceptive coverings which have given some lives the semblance of worth. Coupling carving with mists makes this line more provocative. The poet's metaphorical handling of judgment conveys its necessity, justice, and grandeur.

To the speaker, the ultimate tribute to her lover lies in the fact that at this exalted and exalting moment, when truth stands forth in its full beauty, she still rejects all others and chooses him forever. Wit, realism, and a certain irony enter in the last lines when she substitutes Atom for soul as she triumphantly calls upon "all the lists of clay" gathered for judgment to behold the lover she prefers. That she can visualize her beloved reduced to clay gives this poem an inclusiveness not suggested in the speaker's confident joy nor in the lyric's magnificent tonal serenity. Projecting the lovers beyond the grave, the poet creates a love poem of rare spiritual beauty and intellectual appeal. Without using death as the dramatic background for this situation, the poet could not formalize this experience of love which so depends upon the voice's ability to project herself beyond the limits of temporal existence.

At the third level, love and death exhibit a more essential and profound relationship. One encounter is explored in the light of the other. The connection between these two experiences appears most clearly in the situations

where they almost fuse. Love becomes the promise of immortality; death becomes the promise of a union denied the lovers in life. Love and death meet in a mysterious and enticing personification. The sinister yet engaging figure Emily Dickinson projects reflects the existential and psychic connections she perceives in these two areas of human experience and her ambivalent creative response to them. Although the lover always remains indistinct and minor in Emily Dickinson's love poems, death as a lover ironically becomes more than a mere symbol. His complexity helps to make him a more fully developed figure. In keeping with the cluster of attitudes contained in a letter of 1865, "Wedlock is shyer than Death,"⁹ death's touch in these lyrics seems more real and acceptable than a mortal lover's.

Although the fundamental links Emily Dickinson establishes between womb and tomb may reflect archetypal patterns and Christian motifs, the artistic use she makes of them is often highly original. While the folklore and literature of all ages and cultures "deal with the mysterious relationship between death and love,"¹⁰ formally and thematically this poet projects many facets of this relationship that are uniquely her own. In these poems where love and death interact in a way essential to the whole aesthetic experience, five major divisions are evident. These lyrics: 1) explore one encounter in terms of the other; 2) lament the loss of the beloved¹¹; 3) imagine the lover's

⁹ Letters (Johnson, ed.), II, 445.

¹⁰ Lepp, p. 102.

¹¹ Because of the polite nature of so many of Emily Dickinson's elegies, this category limits itself to those poems inspired by the death of people clearly recognized as intimates of the poet: her parents, her nephew, and three men whom she loved.

death; 4) present death as an erotic visitor; and 5) consider love a promise of immortality and immortality a promise of postponed erotic fulfillment.

In the first group of poems in which love and death interact in a way essential to the poetic experience, Emily Dickinson analyzes and sometimes evaluates one experience in terms of the other.¹² Frequently as she tries to determine which is the more powerful force, she puts love and death in metaphysical and formal tension. Often she asserts that although love cannot prevent death, it does survive it and ultimately triumphs over it. There is a tendency, in the face of death, to blame the body for the limitations of love¹³ and to extol the spirit for love's strength.¹⁴ Another seminal idea of this poet appears in the poems that claim that the beloved is not only dearer but better seen in death.¹⁵ The fact that only one of the poems that philosophically pits love against death belongs to the poet's earlier period adds weight to the observation at the end of the last two chapters that Emily Dickinson's love and death poetry moves from more personal toward more theoretical concerns. The peculiar relationship the poet establishes between love and death in these poems also reflects her tendency to move from physical phenomenon to its spiritual and psychic meaning.

The analytic nature of these lyrics is obvious in the experience that they create. Most typically the poet sets Eros and Thanatos in opposition to each other as she tries to locate them in a philosophic frame. Sometimes she

¹²N.B. Poems: 56, 573, 610, 611, 831, 833, 907, 917, 924, 1288, 1666, and 1731.

¹³N.B. Poems: 573 and 1731.

¹⁴N.B. Poems: 573 and 833.

¹⁵N.B. Poems: 611 and 1666.

seeks to establish the duration of love: "Till Death--is narrow Loving--" (907); "Love--is that later thing than Death--" (924); and "Love--is anterior to Life--/ Posterior--to Death--" (917). In these lyrics, love exceeds the limits of time. Even in Poem 56, the voice proclaims, not that death can destroy love, but that only death has the power to prevent her paying tribute to the beloved. In some poems, the voice laments that love is not strong enough to stop death or to call the dead back to life: "Maddest Heart that God created/ Cannot move a sod" (1288) and "Love can do all but raise the Dead" (1731). Two poems explore the Christian mystery of the relation of caritas and mortality. The speaker claims that "The Test of Love--is Death" (573) and that because of love "Christ--stooped until He touched the Grave--" (833). In two other lyrics, the voice exults in a love that is so great that it lights up the darkness of the grave and makes the beloved more clearly visible than he was in life.¹⁶ Two other poems dramatize effects of the death of loved ones upon the speaker's concept of and attitudes toward mortality. One lyric tenderly, yet with irony, asserts that the thought of the dead makes dying easier (610). The other claims that "Not for itself, the Dust is shy"; but because of what death's artillery has done to friends, it is a feared force (831).

The attitude of the voice in these situations is primarily objective. She tries to maintain the detachment necessary for critical examination. She distances herself to evaluate logically the relative power of love and death. Her stance sometimes involves ironic¹⁷ or paradoxical elements.¹⁸ While her

¹⁶ N.B. Poems: 611 and 1666.

¹⁷ N.B. Poems: 610 and 907.

¹⁸ N.B. Poems: 611, 833, 917, and 1666.

posture is basically rational, she does respond with controlled emotion. In Poem 610, tenderness tensions the speculative nature of the experience. The voice's sense of pain and frustration is apparent as she laments love's inability to bring back the "Longed for Dead" (1288).

The analytic and philosophic nature of this category apparently determines Emily Dickinson's poetic style. Third person, which she uses one out of two times, contributes to the intellectual detachment and emotional discipline in these lyrics. Logical links¹⁹, adversatives²⁰, conditionals²¹, and subjunctives²² support the rational tone. The careful reasoning implied by qualifications such as somewhat (610), perhaps (833), and even (1731) suggests a mental process that at times is almost syllogistic. The rhetorical questions²³ that close two poems effectively conclude the earlier declarations about the power and nobility of love. Retarding lines with hyphens²⁴, unusual word order²⁵, or a change in the rhythm or rhyme pattern (56) indicate the cautious deliberation of the speaker. Abstractions²⁶ suggest the theoretical nature of these analyses. Because of the reflective and solitary quality of the

¹⁹N.B. Poems: 56 because; 1288 and 1731 so.

²⁰N.B. Poems: 610 though; 831, 907, and 1731 but.

²¹N.B. Poems: 56, 573, and 1731 if.

²²N.B. Poems: 56, 573, 611, 831, and 1731.

²³N.B. Poems: 611 and 833. ²⁴N.B. Poems: 573, 610, 611, and 907.

²⁵N.B. Poems: 831 and 907.

²⁶N.B. Poems: 573 patience, infinity; 831 certainty; 833 dishonor; 907 finiteness, privilege, destitution, delight, resemblance; 924 interval, eternity; and 1288 nature and existence.

experience, exclamations, imperatives, and vocatives are infrequent. Because of the affirmative nature of the voice's declarations concerning love and death, liquid vowels and consonants are quite evident.²⁷ The tension that functions in these lyrics is apparent in the opening lines that immediately set love and death in opposition²⁸, in the matter-of-fact tone of many of the initial lines and the emotional responses that follow²⁹, and in the imaginative and emotional factors that play against the rational and speculative ones. Present time gives some immediacy to the speaker's reflections.³⁰ Hyperbole³¹ often carries the voice's emotional involvement and colors her seemingly logical assertion: "Miner's Lamp--sufficient be--/ To nullify the Mine--" (11). Personification³² often gives sensory vitality to a structure that could otherwise remain speculatively abstract. By referring to loss which procures destitution (907), the poet also exploits the antithetical overtones of procures and destitution to make the personification carry extra imaginative weight. Arresting juxtapositions³³ and verbs particularly startling in context³⁴ perform a similar

²⁷ N.B. Poems: 573, 611, 833, and 1731.

²⁸ N.B. Poems: 573, 907, 917, 924, and 1731.

²⁹ N.B. Poems: 56, 610, 611, 907, and 1288.

³⁰ Only Poem 56 is totally in a tense other than present.

³¹ N.B. Poems: 907, 1666, and 1703.

³² Only Poem 917 lacks any use of this figure. The effectiveness of the use, of course, varies and is not necessarily in proportion to the number. The number of personifications in Poem 924, e.g., does not save it from being what Frank calls "a vague and prosaic puzzle, nothing more." p. 74.

³³ N.B. Poems: 610 "tawdry Grace"; 907 "privilege of finiteness," "narrow Loving"; and 1288 "enchanted Pod," and "Maddest Heart."

³⁴ N.B. Poems: 56 claps; 610 bought, sets, ease; 611 nullify; 907 spent.

function. Much of the voice's vision of love's stability, e.g., is implied in her claiming that the "scantest Heart" (907) loves until death. The very technical verb annealed (833) economically indicates a whole cluster of attitudes toward love and furthers the poet's originality in handling well known biblical material to support her concept of death's relation to love.³⁵

There seems to be no pattern to the imagery in this category. Sometimes the voice compares her love to a prism, lamp, lantern, or sun to concretize its ability to give a light greater than death's darkness (611). In a similar poem, she equates the grave to a mirror that reflects her beloved more fully than life could reveal him (1666). Likening love to a giant (1731) or death to an advancing army (831) carries her concept of their relative power. The scarcity of imaginative analogies in these poems is probably due to their analytic and philosophic bent.

"Till Death--is narrow Loving--" (907) ironically yet tenderly makes a judgment on the depth of love. The criterion it proposes is fidelity's duration. The opening line, declaring that love that extends only until death is inadequate, upsets the reader's expectations. Associating "till death" with the most solemn pledge of fidelity, this bold opening challenges what is accepted and forces a reevaluation of the marriage vow. Till and narrow immediately set up mathematically measurable norms for a promise that eludes any such criterion. The speaker's stance is also suggested in the two hyperbolic

procures, abdicate; 1288 pasted, advertise; 1666 attests, illumine; and 1731 graze.

³⁵ Poems 573 and 833 use biblical examples to support the lofty concept of love and death the voice espouses.

statements that constitute the first stanza. Paralleling "narrow Loving," "scantest Heart" makes an extravagant claim for what is presented as the most ungenerous love. Coupling privilege, finiteness, and spent adds to the significance of the second half of the stanza. Finiteness, especially in Emily Dickinson's value system, is not usually considered a good; death, however, as an entrance to eternity is sometimes presented in her poetry as a privilege.³⁶ Here the poet seems to be exploiting the word ambivalently. The commercial or consumptive connotations of spent also create tension. A privilege is not ordinarily associated with these implications.

The second stanza continues to reverse expectations. Loss, procures, and destitution are linked in an arresting manner. The financial connotations of the three words somewhat conceal the implications of procures in relation to both loss and destitution. The poet uses these words to startle the reader so that he realizes the absolute requirement of love. Opening stanza two with but sets the norm of love here in opposition to the one so easily brushed aside in the first stanza. The voice recognizes as true only the love that is so total that the death of one makes the existence of the other so abject that it is only an imitation of life. Love does not stop at the death of the beloved; instead it brings about the death of the lover because of the beloved's death.

Stanza three opens with a temporal similar to the initial word of the poem. The hyphens isolating until emphasize this time rather than the till of the first meager norm dismissed so grandly in the first stanza. The fidelity

³⁶N.B. Poems: 515, 536, 583, 640, 1153, and 1597.

that the voice will accept--and this only as somewhat exhibiting love--demands that the death of the beloved so diminishes the lover that her existence without him only resembles life and "for His pursuit" she actively gives up life, "Delight of Nature," or at least its enjoyment. Abdicates, echoing the idea that privilege suggests in the opening stanza, helps to bring the experience to an artistically satisfying close at the same time that it makes the final qualifying somewhat more ironic and so adds to the speaker's idealization of love.

In this lyric, Emily Dickinson puts love and death in multiple tensions to advance her concept of love's absolute fidelity and power. The irony she exploits in this relationship helps her to present an idealization of love without sentimentality. Because of the links she establishes between love and death, these twelve lines carry added weight and become a more complex experience.

Elegies can bring love and death into an intense union.³⁷ This group of Emily Dickinson's poems is so large and varied that it accounts for an unusual segment of her canon.³⁸ Johnson says about the elegies that "At the

³⁷These lyrics are not elegies in the classical sense for they lack some of the formal requirements of the genre. On the other hand, they fulfill the thematic requirements more fully than the other categories of Chapter V or any of those of Chapter IV, which in the broadest sense of the term are also elegies. This study applies the term elegy only to serious reflections on mortality occasioned by the death of a particular person.

³⁸Besides poems written in response to an actual death, Emily Dickinson created many others which present the voice's reaction to the death of those most loved, e.g., 49, 482, 485, 542, 734, 882, 935, 991, 1078, 1083, 1153, 1260, and 1764.

end the songs are inspired by death, but the theme is the might of human love."³⁹ He and Anderson differ about the value of this group of poems.⁴⁰ Not only their aesthetic success but the apparent intention of the poet and her intimacy with the dead diversify these elegies.

Some poems were written primarily as courtesies to neighbors and distant relatives. One sympathetically declares "Love's stricken 'why' / Is all that love can speak" (1368). Some were composed to praise the dead; the Civil War lyrics represent this trend.⁴¹ Some were sent as supportative consolation to the bereaved whose loss the poet shared more personally.⁴² Emily Dickinson wrote to Mrs. Holland, a few months after the Doctor's death, this elegy for him: "How much of Source escapes with thee" (1517). To her cousin, after the death of his daughter, she said: "'And with what body do they come?'--/ Then they do come--Rejoice!" (1492). Even among the elegies whose purpose seems to be to console the deceased's family, a gamut of approaches appears. The poet never merely mouths pious platitudes in these laments. Two short elegies, e.g., written to Higginson after the death of his infant daughter, reveal how different these poems can be from each other. While far from offering effusive sympathy, "The Face in evanescence lain/ Is more distinct

³⁹ Emily Dickinson, p. 231.

⁴⁰ "The elegies that Emily Dickinson wrote as tributes to the memory of persons she had loved range in quality from the least to the finest of her creations." Emily Dickinson, p. 224. "Her best poems on death were not inspired by personal experiences." Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 227.

⁴¹ N.B. Poems: 409, 426, 444, and 596.

⁴² N.B. Poems: 164, 1489, 1492, and 1517.

than our's---" (1490) seems more consoling, though less original, than "A Dimple in the Tomb/ Makes that ferocious Room/ A Home---" (1489). Some resulted from a death that caused the poet severe sorrow and renewed her old uncertainties. After Helen Hunt Jackson's death, she wrote two elegiac quatrains; the first praises the dead friend and the second speaks of the poet's reaction; "Of Glory not a Beam is left" (1647) and "The immortality she gave/ We borrowed at her Grave" (1648). Some elegies were composed for people she deeply respected but had never met. The memorials to Elizabeth Barrett Browning⁴³ and Charlotte Bronte (148) testify to her belief that grief over the death of people who have not shared one's personal life reveals a spiritual bond: "A vital kinsmanship import/ Our Soul and their's [sic]--between" (645). Some laments were written for those closest to her; whether they had intimately entered her heart but rarely her home seems to have made little difference in her profound grief or her creative response. This study restricts itself to the memorials written for those whom she most loved⁴⁴: her father⁴⁵, her mother (1573), her nephew⁴⁶, Samuel Bowles (1616), Dr. Charles Wadsworth⁴⁷, and Judge Otis Lord.⁴⁸ The fact that Emily Dickinson used the same elegy for different people reveals

⁴³The attribution of these elegies to these specific people relies upon evidence in the letters introducing them and Johnson's notes concerning them.

⁴⁴N.B. Poems: 312, 363, and 593.

⁴⁵N.B. Poems: 1300, 1312, 1334, 1346, 1352, 1365, and 1393.

⁴⁶N.B. Poems: 1564, 1565, 1566, 1567, 1584, and 1594.

⁴⁷N.B. Poems: 1543 and 1576.

⁴⁸N.B. Poems: 1597, 1599, 1605, 1606, 1623, and 1638.

that these poems are more aesthetic than purely personal responses to death.

Because of their meditative quality and attention to the other, the focus of these poems is quite different from the majority of Emily Dickinson's. Since the dead so engage her mentally and emotionally, the speaker is less prone to look within. Even though she admits to feeling homeless (1573), consoleless (1599), or penniless [sic] (1623), she still is usually more concerned with the deceased or the meaning of his death than she is with herself or their relationship. From the standpoint of the deceased, death is presented as a positive movement or an escape⁴⁹; from the standpoint of the living, it is presented as a painful loss. Presenting death as a desirable experience, these elegies associate it with light or freedom.⁵⁰ Whether the poet concentrates primarily on the greatness of the dead or the mysterious glory of death, the approach is more philosophical than psychological. Confidence in personal immortality in these elegies rests upon two convictions--one deo-centric, the other homo-centric. Hope in the face of the death of loved ones arises from a belief that the nature of God and/or the nature of man requires it: "No vacillating God/ Ignited this Abode/ To put it out--" (1599); "Expense⁵¹ cannot be lost--" (1584); and "'Twas Christ's own personal Expense/ That bore him from the Tomb--" (1543). While honoring the dead and offering consolation to

⁴⁹N.B. Poems: 1565 and 1584 escape; and 1300 exody.

⁵⁰N.B. Poems: 1564 "Rendezvous of Light"; 1573 "bright east"; and 1584 "Tracts of Sheen." Besides being presented as moving toward areas of brilliance, the dead are sometimes equated to stars, e.g., Poems 1616 and 1638.

⁵¹In these constructions, expense performs a function similar to circumference in Emily Dickinson's poetry. It stands for the fullest spiritual development possible to man.

the living, these commemorative pieces reflect the voice's psychic and spiritual state as she contemplates mortality and immortality. In these poems, consequently, there is often tension between the voice's lofty concept of the dead or infinity and her personal sense of loss.

The experience in these elegies is essentially the voice's reaction to the death of one dearly loved. In varying degrees, she responds by: 1) praising the dead; 2) lamenting his death; 3) reassuring herself or others of his immortality; and 4) reflecting on death as transcendence. While in some poems there is a pronounced emphasis on one response, most elegies are a combination of these reactions. As she considers her father, the poet praises his vast heart (1312), his quiet courage and unselfish devotion to duty (1352), his continued influence after death (1300), and his nobility that was "Too intrinsic for Renoum" (1393). The tribute to her mother basically consists of her metaphoric vision of her in Paradise, "fathoming what she was," and realizing the effect of her death upon the bereaved (1573). In the poems occasioned by Gilbert's death, the voice's pain is the main tribute to the dead boy. In Poem 1579, she honors Judge Lord's "steadfast Heart"; in 1638, she likens his nobility to a star. Sometimes the greatest tribute to the dead consists in saying that his death "takes part of us" (1605), ironically slays "all but him" (1565), shuts the world to those who love him (1584), and makes "existence stray" (1573). Recognizing the paradoxical nature of death, she reflects that her father's grave is a soft prison and that "No Despot but the King of Down/ Invented this repose" (1334). In another poem occasioned by Edward Dickinson's death, his daughter assures herself through the persona: "Take all away--/ The only thing worth larceny/ Is left--Immortality--" (1365). After Gilbert's

death she wrote as consolation to his mother: "Repast to me/ That somewhere, there exists,/ Supremacy--" (1567) and "Expanse cannot be lost--" (1584). After Judge Lord's death she asserted: "Though the great Waters sleep,/ That they are still the Deep,/ We cannot doubt--" (1599). As she considers the possibility of immortality, the voice is sometimes less confident. She asks if Adversity or "Wild Prosperity" follows death (1576). She feels the need of sustenance that is "of the Spirit" (1623). In another poem, she states quite existentially that the individual determines his own future: "Obtaining but our own Extent/ In whatsoever Realm--" (1543). In another, she characterizes immortality as a bondage that ravishes (1594).

The voice's stance in these elegies depends greatly upon whether she is fundamentally considering her loss or the deceased's gain. Although loss is a painful factor in many elegies, the only time that the speaker seems to resent death is when she feels that it gave Edward Dickinson an undeserved blow (1312). Sometimes her distress seems quite acute; but at other times, she is relatively detached and serene. In a few lyrics she questions, but most of the time she makes reassuring or semi-ecstatic statements. Most typically, she feels reverence and awe for both the deceased and for the mystery inherent in his death and resulting glory.

Emily Dickinson uses various methods to reveal the speaker's adjustment to the death of a dearly loved person. The point of view she chooses is often an index to her focus and emphasis. She uses third person for restraining distance as often as she employs first person for immediacy. A second person point of view is important in this category and marks some of its most majestic

lyrics.⁵² Although tenses mix in some of these lyrics, present time carries most of them. Because of the voice's assurance, she rarely employs subjunctives, conditionals, negatives, retarding lines, harsh sounds, or rhetorical questions. Her tribute to the dead and/or vision of his immortal state is declarative. The solemnity of the occasion as well as the voice's depth response seem to demand severe emotional control.⁵³ Even the few exclamations used support the essentially intense but understated position of the speaker. Some of the most exultant poems open⁵⁴ or close⁵⁵ with exclamations that suggest the voice's feeling of triumph because she has adjusted to this death. The imperatives used in these elegies are generally in the same poems and perform a function similar to the exclamations. They suggest the voice's mastery of the emotional, mental, and spiritual problems inherent in the death of a beloved.⁵⁶ The vocatives⁵⁷ seem to suggest the tender and harmonious response of the speaker to the universe once she has gained some insight into death and mastery over her reaction to it. Adversatives⁵⁸, contrasts⁵⁹, comparisons⁶⁰,

⁵²N.B. Poems: 1365, 1393, 1564, and 1638.

⁵³The marked restraint, serenity, and confidence in these elegies that involved the poet most personally suggest that she had to achieve an emotional distance before she wrote them. The fact that some appeared quite some time after the death they commemorate supports this assumption.

⁵⁴N.B. Poems: 1594 and 1638.

⁵⁵N.B. Poems: 1393, 1564, and 1594.

⁵⁶N.B. Poems: 1365 take; 1393 lay, vail; 1573 remit; 1564 pass; and 1638 go.

⁵⁷N.B. Poems: 1393, 1573, and 1594.

⁵⁸N.B. Poems: 1334, 1352, 1543, 1565, 1567, 1576, 1584, 1606, 1623, but; 1346 yet; and 1564 except.

⁵⁹N.B. Poems: 1352, 1365, 1564, 1565, 1573, 1576, 1606, and 1623.

⁶⁰All these poems use a comparison, stated or implied.

paradoxes⁶¹, and abstractions⁶² help the poet project her tribute to the dead and their immortality. Often the adversatives set up opposition between the deceased's splendid state and the impoverished condition of the bereaved or between two elements in a paradox: "A Dungeon but a kinsman is/ Incarceration —Home" (1334). Comparisons of the imagined state of the dead to experientially known situations aid the poet in concretizing these experiences. She likens the dying to a bird's flying east (1573), troops' escaping (1584), or leaping over a stream (1564). Death itself she likens to repose (1334), a stream (1564), a blast (1312), or an arrow (1565). Death as movement is carried by a number of these comparisons as well as by individual verbs.⁶³ She equates the dead to a cedar felled by an extraordinary wind (1312), a confederate of duty, and a king who rules from a distance. She makes an analogy between the bereaved and a loyal realm (1300) and a crumbless, homeless robin (1606). Personifications⁶⁴, juxtapositions⁶⁵, unusual verbs in context⁶⁶, and some

⁶¹N.B. Poems: 1334, 1393, 1565, 1566, 1573, 1594, and 1606.

⁶²N.B. Poems: 1346 circumvention, declivity; 1352 simplicity, duty, fate; 1365 immortality; 1393 renown; 1564 mystery; 1566 punishment; 1567 supremacy, repulse; 1573 existence; 1576 prosperity, adversity; 1594 bondage; 1597 privilege; and 1616 immortality.

⁶³Poems: 1564 pass, ford, leaped; 1566 ran away; 1573 flies; 1616 went; and 1638 go.

⁶⁴N.B. Poems: 1334, 1346, 1352, 1393, 1543, 1573, 1576, 1599, and 1605.

⁶⁵N.B. Poems: 1334 "sullen bars"; 1566 "costly Hearts"; 1576 "Prognostic Push"; 1599 "vacillating God"; and 1616 "subtle Name."

⁶⁶N.B. Poems: 1300 relegates, befallen; 1334 invented; 1346 charge; 1393 chasten; 1565 appareled; 1567 impelled; 1573 remit, enticed, dissolves, strays; 1576 estranged, lurks; 1594 ravished, immured; 1599 ignited; and 1616 abdicated.

anaphoras⁶⁷ and patterned repetitions⁶⁸ add to the imaginative and sensory appeal of experiences that could otherwise remain too speculative. Referring to music "Arm and Arm with Touch" (1576), coupling sullen and bars (1334), describing eternity as ravishing (1594), repeating How as an initial word (1334), and repeating the drowsy sound d in "We deem we dream—/ And that dissolves the days" (1573) contribute to the sensory, emotional, and intellectual beauty of these poems.

The tropes in these poems rely heavily on metaphors from nature. Birds, trees, stars, tides, winds, and water supply one term for the analogies that body forth the speaker's tribute to the dead. Royal references function in two tributes to Mr. Dickinson. Because it suggests the spiritual freedom and election promised the Israelites in their journey, Exody earns its place as the only religious allusion in this category (1300). It economically implies that death is a parallel journey to another Promised Land. In two poems, food provides a stimulating vehicle for the spiritual nourishment the voice feels she needs to confront the death of those most dear and to believe in their immortality.⁶⁹

"Pass to thy Rendezvous of Light"⁷⁰ (1564) is a condensed elegy that illustrates in miniature many of the attitudes and techniques characteristic

⁶⁷N.B. Poems: 1334, 1352, 1566, 1606, and 1616.

⁶⁸N.B. Poems: 1312, 1564, 1573, and 1606.

⁶⁹N.B. Poems: 1567 repast and 1623 sustenance and dregs.

⁷⁰See the following for other comments: Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 226; Ford, pp. 170-171; Lindberg, p. 20; and Pearce, p. 185.

of this part of Emily Dickinson's canon. Its delicate beauty and understatement and its restrained yet intense passion fit its cameo tribute to the dead, expression of pain occasioned by this death, and reflection on the nature of death and infinity. The tension between the imagined splendor of the dead and the deprivation of the living and between the voice's intellectual and emotional response gives this quatrain an unusual weight of significance.

The first line sets the lyric's magnificent tone. The voice stands back and commands the deceased to pass, to move between life and death to eternity, to travel to his appointed state, "Thy Rendezvous of Light." This command, which is also a farewell and unorthodox prayer, foreshadows the opening of Poem 1638: "Go thy great way!" The poet loads this figure with meaning. The connotations of rendezvous make the encounter death occasions a pre-arranged meeting, secretive, purposeful, attractive, exciting. Light suggests both splendor and illumination, exactly the opposite of the dark state of the living who have not yet penetrated the mystery of death. The second line is functionally ambiguous. It can suggest that for the dead his going is marred only by his having to leave the living: "Painless except for us." His going, presented as a sublime and joyous movement for the dead, is also set in relation to the living for whom it is a source of pain. The pain is a double one. The voice feels the loss of the beloved dead and his death renews her dilemma over the unknowns involved in mortality. While her stance toward death is predominantly positive and hopeful in this poem, death still remains a mystery to the living.

Beginning lines one and two with p and three and four with w tends to tie these two sets of lines together and reinforces the implied contrast

between them. The trochee opening of lines one and two performs a similar function, while the emphasis on pass in the first line also contributes to the voice's emotional control and the idea of death as a passage, a movement. Lines three and four set the ease, rapidity, and vitality of the deceased's passage against the speaker's condition as she tries to comprehend death; she must "slowly ford" what he leaped. Ford applies to both the voice's efforts to understand the mystery and her living to maturity before dying, and, therefore, slowly making a crossing that her beloved nephew did so quickly. The final word, across, brings the movement of the initial pass to an artistic completion. The exclamation following it climaxes the voice's tribute to the dead boy who had so gracefully made the leap.⁷¹

In the next group of poems, Emily Dickinson brings love and death together in the mind of the voice who imagines her lover's death.⁷² The death scene of a beloved, of course, strongly appealed to the romantic writers and readers of the period. Whether this poet chose it because, as one critic claims, "the moment of her lovers' actual death . . . would be the only time in mortal life that the poet could express her love without censure"⁷³ or because "there adheres to the tenderest and closest of our affections a vestige of hostility which can excite an unconscious death-wish,"⁷⁴ the creative results

⁷¹Without making extravagant claims concerning the unconscious forces in the poet's choice of this verb, it does suggest Kierkegaard's idea of the irrational leap that existential faith requires. A parallel between the leap into faith and this leap across death enriches the poem.

⁷²N.B. Poems: 205, 236, 566, 616, 622, 648, 715, and 1633.

⁷³Sherwood, p. 104.

⁷⁴Freud, p. 233. In view of her ambivalence toward love, this observation may account for one unconscious motivation in her artistically linking

are the same. This category is the least successful of all those examined in this study. Although one critic deplors their "necophilic preoccupation" which "outdoes everybody except perhaps Poe,"⁷⁵ the major weakness of these poems seems to be formal rather than thematic. Relying upon ineffectual techniques, their emotion is gratuitous. Without artistic discipline, they are too often sentimental. They offer a startling and insightful contrast to the last category, with its severe formal economy and understated emotion. Despite their insignificant number and quality, these lyrics are included because they represent one way in which love and death relate in Emily Dickinson's poetry and expose the blatant potential sentimentality that formal restraint prevents in her better love-death poems.

In these situations, the voice thinks of her lover's death as either a past or a future occurrence. As a past event, she wonders about the details of his dying (622), laments that she was too late to save him (566), or consoles herself that she helped him to die confidently (616). Her unanswered questions about the circumstances of his death range from the kind of day it was and what name he last called to whether he was afraid or tranquil (622). The support the voice recalls bringing to the dying includes the symbolic but ambiguous water of Poem 566 and the specific spiritual reassurance of Poem 616. As the speaker projects herself into future hypothetical situations, she pictures herself giving her beloved physical, emotional, or spiritual succor.

love and death.

⁷⁵ Galpi, p. 112.

Often she insists on her right to render these services⁷⁶; "Just His Sigh--
Accented--/ Had been legible--to Me--" (622) and "Mine belong Your latest
Sighing--" (648). In one poem, the voice fears not being at the friend's bed-
side when his dying eyes hunt the room for her (205). In another, she asks
that her dying lover be told of what dissolation his death would bring her,
apparently hoping that this knowledge would stave off death (236). The
speaker's desire to attend her dying lover can involve a direct request to
him, "Promise This--When You be dying--/ Some shall summon Me--" (648), or a
kind of secular prayer, "Mine be the Ministry/ When thy Thirst comes--" (715).
Once as the voice imagines her beloved's last hour, she asks "Which question
shall I clutch--/ What answer wrest from thee" (1633). Because of her intimate
love, in these lyrics the speaker desires to minister to the dying and/or
learn from him something of the meaning of death.

Although sentimentality colors many of these lyrics, the voice's stance
also varies. Whether she is a helpless spectator or an active consolor
greatly determines her response. Sometimes she is relatively objective in her
description of the scene and her focus upon the other.⁷⁷ Her desire for in-
formation reveals two types of curiosity. Sometimes her interest is primarily
personal; she wants to know everything about the circumstances of the beloved's
death (622). Other times it escapes this limited range; it wants to penetrate
the meaning of death (1633). A kind of jealousy appears in her insistence upon
her rightful privilege of being the one to minister. Tenderness often mixes

⁷⁶N.B. Poems: 648, 715, and 1633.

⁷⁷N.B. Poems: 566, 622, 715, and 1633.

with her other emotions.⁷⁸ Anguish (205), despondency (236), horror (566), and courage (616) also mark the voice's response to the imagined death scene of her beloved.

The hypothetical yet dramatic nature of the experience presented in these poems is related to many of the language patterns evident in them. First person point of view adds urgency to these deathbed scenes.⁷⁹ Although many of the openings are declarative, subjunctives⁸⁰ carry the imaginative tone of the voice's projections. Adversatives⁸¹, conditionals⁸², paradoxes⁸³, and contrast⁸⁴ contribute a rational tone to some constructions and, consequently, somewhat restrain their effusiveness. Referring to herself as one "Who sped too slow" (566) or recalling that "I rose—because he sank—" (616) reveals the voice's rational or emotional evaluation of her services to the dying. Hyperboles⁸⁵, rhetorical questions⁸⁶, irritating s sounds⁸⁷, and retarding

⁷⁸N.B. Poems: 648, 715, and 1633.

⁷⁹Only Poem 236 totally lacks a first person reference.

⁸⁰These subjunctives include future conditionals, contrary-to-fact situations, and optatives.

⁸¹N.B. Poems: 566, 616, 715, but and 648 and 1633 though.

⁸²N.B. Poems: 205, 236, 616, 622, and 648 if.

⁸³N.B. Poems: 566 and 648.

⁸⁴N.B. Poems: 616, 622, 648, and 715.

⁸⁵N.B. Poems: 236 and 715.

⁸⁶N.B. Poems: 236, 622, 648, and 1633.

⁸⁷N.B. Poems: 205, 566, 622, 648, and 1633.

lines⁸⁸ also reveal the speaker's attitudes and emotions. Juxtapositions⁸⁹ and unusual verbs in context⁹⁰ add to the intellectual and imaginative appeal of these poems. In this category, Emily Dickinson sometimes uses personification⁹¹ and repetition⁹² effectively, but these techniques, along with italics, seem too often trite and mechanical; consequently, they illicit only a sentimental response. The non-organic and inappropriate use of pulse lisping or a little life leaking red (236) weakens the speaker's position as much as her calling herself "His little Spaniel." Because of the childish persona projected in these figures, the emotional response asked by the poem is as fraudulent as the emotion it presents. The cosmic and theological disorders implied in "Eclipse--at Midnight" and "Sunset--at Easter" also are inappropriate to such a limited speaker. The repetition in Poem 205, instead of creating a feeling of intense emotion, merely asks for an emotional response and sentimentalizes the voice's experience.⁹³ Because of its lack of

⁸⁸N.B. Poems: 205, 566, 616, 622, 648, and 715.

⁸⁹N.B. Poems: 205 "tardy name"; 622 "furthest mind," "Everlasting Well"; 648 "low favor," "Jealous Grass"; and 1633 "reportless Grave" and "recallless Sea."

⁹⁰N.B. Poems: 205 stab; 236 dissolve; 616 dropped, cheered, lifted, grew; 622 entrust, ceased, face; 648 belt, seduce; 715 stirred, stop; and 1633 own, clutch, and exude.

⁹¹N.B. Poems: 205, 236, 616, 622, and 648.

⁹²N.B. Poems: 205, 236, 648, 715, and 1633.

⁹³This assertion questions Lindberg's claim that in this poem "repetition of words and clauses . . . contributes effectively to the impression of the speaker's anguish at the prospect of her friend's death, at the same time as it suggests that friend's behavior in the delirium of fever." p. 210.

originality, her speaking of the "Heart that wanted me" also weakens this poem. In Poem 648, her unusual use of belt and buckle in reference to her closing the eyes of the dead with a kiss and seduce in reference to her convincing the sun to shine more warmly upon his grave gives the voice's posture complexity and prohibits her gratuitously exploiting the emotion involved in the situation. In Poem 648, instead of modifying features with a word that would have fresh sensory or imaginative appeal, the poet relies upon the trite dear for an artistically unmerited response. Her use of eligible in conjunction with sigh, on the other hand, earns the reader's closer attention. On the whole, the more successful poems in this cluster use form to illicit response, while the others appear to rely upon the situation itself or stock diction and imagery to call forth a gratuitous reaction.

The imagery in this category mainly involves analogies to thirst and to nature. Thirst symbolizes the agony of the dying in two poems.⁹⁴ The desire of the voice to minister to him has a biblical echo as she speaks of pouring out her "Whole Libation" for him (648). Dew and rain represent the succor the speaker brings. In Poem 566, using a tiger for the beloved allows the voice a certain distance, while likening herself to a spaniel in Poem 236 works inversely. The royal power and bearing of a tiger are far different from the whimpering of a puppy. The sea is equated with death or eternity (1633). Royal allusions, "my fainting Prince," operate in Poem 616; religious, "the Chariots wait," in 236; and household, "be my lips--the only Buckle," in 648.

Without being one of Emily Dickinson's greater poems, "The World--feels

⁹⁴N.B. Poems: 566 and 715.

"Dusty" (715) fortunately avoids many of the formal weaknesses that sentimentalize this category. Its three stanzas divide themselves into two sections. As generalized statements about the values and needs of the dying, the first two stanzas hold together. As a consideration of the future death of the beloved, the last stanza narrows the poem's focus.

The first stanza reflectively contrasts the former values of the dying and what is meaningful at the time of death. Dominated by w and s sounds, the first three lines begin the thirst analogy that operates through the rest of the poem. The initial line functions at three levels. The dustiness of the world suggests the dying's physical condition, his feeling hot and thirsty. It also suggests his now finding what he used to desire old, dingy, unrefreshing, unattractive. It may simultaneously refer to his indistinct vision which makes concrete things seem distant and covered with film. "Stop to die" indicates both time and a change from the ordinary business of life. The peculiar punctuation of then at the end of line three creates a functional ambiguity for it can be read with either line three or line four or with both. Dew suggests both coolness and dampness, the opposites of the heat and dryness associated with dust. It becomes a symbol, therefore, of the relief and/or refreshment the dying desire. Taste carries along the sensory appeal of dusty and dew. Honors, as externals that offer the dying no consolation or comfort, rightly are valueless in this frame of reference and, consequently, "taste dry."

The second stanza continues both the psychic rejection of the unimportant and the affirmation of the meaningful within the situation. Flags serve as an umbrella for all that is not personal to the dying. As symbols for an

abstraction, flags do not have the intimacy nor the power of what is personally experienced; as a result, they vex the dying. The hyperbole that follows makes such an extravagant claim for the value of a friend's loving attention at the bedside of the dying that it can be considered sentimental. In the absolute-ness of a death scene, however, the assertion that a friend's fanning the dying "Cools---like the Rain" may not be as effusive as it first seems. The consolation and comfort of this attention may, in this situation, equal the other term of the analogy.

After this assertion, the third stanza is not such an abrupt change. Whether "Mine be the Minstry/ When thy Thirst comes---" is read as an exultant, possessive claim or as a more humble, secular prayer, these lines switch the focus from a generalized reflection to a specific situation and person while still continuing the thirst trope. The dews the voice pictures herself giving to the beloved will be the ones desired in the first stanza. The two areas mentioned are vehicles for the richness of her ministry. As a fertile lowland between hills in northern Greece, Thessaly enjoys frequent and heavy dews. As a town in Sicily famous for its honey, Hybla balms convey a sensory satisfaction opposed to the dusty dryness of stanza one. Connotations of fertility and sterility, of course, also are present in the dry-dusty and dew-honey figures. Dews and Balms, therefore, symbolize the multiple consolation the voice desires and determines to bring to her beloved when he is dying.

In the next cluster of poems, the erotic and eschatological fuse in a figure indigenous to American letters.⁹⁵ Death as an attractive but sinister

⁹⁵ N.B. Poems: 279, 391, 635, 712, 850, 1053, and 1445.

visitor who courts the woman represents the ambivalence and originality of Emily Dickinson. This metaphor aptly bodies forth her psychologically complex response to both love and death. It accommodates her fear of physical consummation and her preference for a celestial union. By picturing death as a bridegroom, the poet sought to avoid the destructiveness she feared in both encounters. Yet the dark and mysterious figure she presents in these poems carries his own threat for the vulnerable feminine figure. In this one metaphor, therefore, Emily Dickinson combines the annihilation and the fulfillment that both love and death meant to her. Even the journey motif contains this double significance, for the carriage which the caller has waiting for the woman is a bridal and a burial coach and so it moves toward ecstatic transcendence and total destruction of the self. The mysterious visitor, whose coming the poet invests with such a weight of meaning, is a trope that runs through her poetry and which she uses also to concretize her belief in the revelatory nature of crucial experience. The positive aspects of this visitation by death as lover, therefore, parallel those in poems in which the caller symbolizes spiritual and artistic inspiration⁹⁶ or the transforming joy of an encounter with death or love.⁹⁷ The destructive aspects of this meeting likewise parallel those in poems in which the caller symbolizes the threatening force in love or death.⁹⁸

These experiences of death as lover who comes to court a woman have

⁹⁶N.B. Poems: 306, 674, 1055, and 1721.

⁹⁷N.B. Poems: 98, 171, 665, and 1339.

⁹⁸N.B. Poems: 390 and 1670.

certain common features. The personality of death remains a mixture of opposites never brought into a synthesizing definition. He is kind and civil (712), supple and stealthy (1445). He is laconically polite and aggressively powerful. He has a "quiet way" (1053), yet he threatens to ravish by force and carry the woman off in triumph (1445). This imaginative and tensioned handling of death peculiarly roots the abstract in concrete form, yet the precise nature of the figure is never pin pointed exclusively. His erotic intentions ironically cause death, but a death that leads to life--in most situations. Time is an important factor in these lyrics. The woman waits in excited anticipation, feeling that "Time/ Indignant--that the Joy was come--/ Did block the Gilded Hands" (635). Death seems to require this leisure that is really a readiness to die. When she is too busy with life to stop to die, then death must take the decisive step and stop for her (712). Because death is unaffected by time, he has almost infinite leisure, he can afford to wait, for in the end his wooing inevitably conquers. In the one construction in which frost operates as the lover-killer who visits the living flower, their relationship is associated with night. The seductive destroyer clandestinely caresses in the dark "And just before the Sun--/ Concludes his glistening interview" (391).⁹⁹ Many of these poems, either directly or indirectly, present eternity as timelessness; the centuries that have passed since seem "shorter" than the day of death (712) and "Sunrise stopped upon the place/ And fastened it in Dawn" (1053). Before the caller takes his bride on their journey toward

⁹⁹ Poem 391 is included in this chapter because it differs from those in which frost merely destroys. Here the personified male kisses and caresses as he kills, so the seductive and lethal sides of love and death mix in him.

eternity, some decisive and symbolic act is necessary to signify her desire to go with him. As a lover, death requires her to make a sign of commitment; only then will he take her gently. Sometimes she asks him to "Tie the Strings" to her life (279); other times she sings while she waits "My bonnet but to tie" (850). Sometimes she pledges her troth only with her eyes (1053). Always she must put aside all things and everyone for him; therefore, a rather elaborate and formal leave taking is part of these lyrics. The formality of both a wedding and funeral colors most of these experiences while the journey motif concretizes the majority.

Recognizing the erotic and eschatological motivation of this visitor, the voice's stance varies. Observing his stratagem from a third person point of view, this insidious aggressor fills her with horror. Experiencing him personally, she is generally objectively reflective as she remembers his coming or excitedly eager as she awaits it. In one instance, her eagerness turns to fear as anticipation becomes reality (635). In Poem 279, she is unusually assured as she confidently gives commands to her lord. In Poems 279 and 1053, her stance is also exultant as she looks forward to or recalls her journey.

Emily Dickinson's verbal habits in these poems of double encounter fit the experience. Third person¹⁰⁰ and past time¹⁰¹ give her the distance she desires to present with objective control the evil of this male personification. The understatement evident in verbs such as influences (391) and surmised (712) also add to the speaker's discipline as she describes death's advances or her realization of their consequences. Imperatives, vocatives, and exclamations

¹⁰⁰N.B. Poems: 391 and 1445.

¹⁰¹N.B. Poems: 712 and 1053.

operate only in the one lyric whose tone is less restrained (279). Direct, declarative opening lines and frequent o sounds reinforce the serenity that characterizes most of these experiences. To control the submerged explosiveness of these encounters, the poet limits trochees in initial positions and the repetition she often uses. She employs negatives¹⁰², adversatives¹⁰³, and paradoxes¹⁰⁴ to support the cerebral note in her description and to suggest the ultimate impossibility of pinning down this elusive figure. Personification¹⁰⁵, juxtaposition¹⁰⁶, and arresting verbal selection¹⁰⁷ contribute to the sensual, imaginative, and intellectual appeal of these experiences. Referring to time as indignant (635), coupling pallid and innuendoes (1445) or bisected and coach (1445), and saying that sunrise fastens eternity enriches meetings with the erotic-lethal stranger.

To carry out the trope of an erotic-macabre journey leading to eternity, the poet exploits diction, imagery, and rhythm. She concretizes the symbolic journey with references to horses (279), cars (635), a carriage (712), chariots (1053), and a coach (1445). Besides speaking of traveling slowly (712)

¹⁰²N.B. Poems: 279, never; 712, 850, and 1053 no; 391, 635, 712, and 1053 not.

¹⁰³N.B. Poems: 712 yet; 279, 391, 635, 850, 1053, and 1445 but.

¹⁰⁴N.B. Poems: 391, 712, and 1053.

¹⁰⁵N.B. Poems: 635, 712, and 1053.

¹⁰⁶N.B. Poems: 391 "Glistening interview"; 635 "timid service"; 712 "Grazing Grain"; 850 "best step"; 1053 "mortal noise," "Ether street"; and 1445 "Supple Suitor," "pallid innuendoes," and "bisected coach."

¹⁰⁷N.B. Poems: 391 influences, caresses, kissed; 635 crowd; 712 drew, strove, surmised; and 1053 stopped and fastened.

or moving "with swiftness, as of Chariots/ And distance, as of Wheels" (1053), the poet alters the rhythm to match the pace of the trip. The galloping speed of Poem 279, the smooth movement and pauses of Poem 712, and the rapid run on lines of parts of Poem 1053 carry the voice's concept of the trip. Metaphorically the poet presents the movement as being carried "Before this mortal noise" (1053) and seeing the world dropping away. The final destination appears as judgment (279), eternity¹⁰⁸, "the day" (850), Dawn (1053), and "Troth unknown" (1445).

"Because I could not stop for death" (712) is probably the most celebrated lyric Emily Dickinson wrote to body forth her ambivalent personification of this erotic-lethal visitor. A structural critic acclaims this poem because "it exemplifies better than anything else she wrote the special quality of her mind" and because "it is flawless to the last detail."¹⁰⁹ Form and matter are exquisitely integrated so that each supports and intensifies the other. The voice's gestures are delicately carried by the cadence, the contrasts, and the imagery.

The subjunctive of the first line is prohibitive and suggestive; it provokes a question about why she could not stop for death. One implication is that she was too busy living, too occupied with the affairs of time to be attentive to eternity. Or could may suggest that because of the proprieties governing the relations of a young lady and her gentleman friend she was restrained from taking the initiative. These overtones arising from the verb

¹⁰⁸ N.B. Poems: 712 and 1053.

¹⁰⁹ Allen Tate, Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas, pp. 13-14.

form are opposed and expose a complex posture toward death. Inclusion of both readings of the subjunctive contributes subtle shades of meaning and emotion to the experience.

Kindly indicates the speaker's primary attitude toward mortality; she finds him charming and chivalrous. Her approach is romantic; the mystery hidden in death is implied in the expectation and excitement she feels in her escort's company. The fact that she willingly put away her labor and her leisure for "His Civility" supports the first interpretation of could; the personality of death won her over as any lover would have to do. Her clothes, which are bridal rather than burial garments, also reinforce this reading; the fact that wedding robes were worn as burial ones during this period only heightens their symbolic value in this situation.

Awareness of time and skillful contrasts are basic elements of this poem's structure. The timelessness of death, which results in his complete lack of concern for trivialities, is carried by the slow assurance of his manner. This confidence is exhibited in his gentlemanly leisure—"He knew no haste." The ease and repose of death contrast with the striving of the children. Repetition of passed gives a kinesthetic sense of time's movement, of the carriage's advance, and of death as a transitional link between life and immortality. Johnson further notes that it conveys the speaker's feeling of being outside of time and change.¹¹⁰ Setting Sun also suggests time's passage. Throughout the lyric, feelings of freedom from the pressure of time are vital. The last stanza intensifies this aspect of death, or rather the timelessness

¹¹⁰ Emily Dickinson, p. 223.

of eternity which is composed of only a present tense. Contrasting the actual time since her death, "tis Centuries," with her subjective estimate of it as "shorter than the Day" defines her final posture toward mortality. The last two lines, in a concrete reference of beauty and depth, further amplify her emotional and mental attitude toward her journey and bring the poem back in time to the day that opened it. Consequently, this poem is a cyclic journey of recollection as well as a journey of a hearse to the grave. The poem's close, therefore, is psychic and dramatic rather than mystic.

Paradoxically emotional calmness and intellectual detachment are as much a part of the voice's reaction to death, as sensory accuracy and tensioned contrasts are part of the poem's essence. Arp accounts for the lyric's tone and the experience's tension by saying that "because the poem is a recollection of the event, the poet wishes to communicate not only the attitude of her speaker during the event, but also the present attitude."¹¹¹ Severe stylistic economy complements breadth of vision. This lyric exemplifies Emily Dickinson's use of a central, individualized, and unifying personification to concretize her complex notion of love and death's ambivalence in a tensioned and dramatic form, unique in American literature. Because of the technical perfection and imaginative richness of this poem it often has been selected for analysis, and many of these studies are outstandingly perceptive; therefore, this study endeavors to supplement, rather than duplicate, these critical investigations.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Thomas Roscoe Arp, Dramatic Poses in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Stanford University, 1962), p. 10.

¹¹² N.B. Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, pp. 241-46, 248-49; Arp,

The approach in the last group of poems linking erotic and eschatological experience in an essential manner is psychic and literary rather than theological. Presenting love as a promise of immortality and immortality as a promise of the fulfillment of love denied in life, Emily Dickinson creates a heaven that fits no religious system. Rather it reflects her own psychological and artistic needs. Just as she wore white as a personal symbol, so its presence in these poems is revealing. "By far the most interesting and most significant use Emily Dickinson makes of the white robes image is her exploitation of the figure to resolve the problem of death in terms of a consummation of love."¹¹³ In such a frame, the essence of eternity lies in its power to compensate for sexual renunciation in time. For the virginal figure who fears the embrace of a corporeal lover as a kind of destruction, the embrace of a disembodied spirit becomes highly desirable. This celestial marriage, devoid of all threats of sex and time, is a source of joyful anticipation to the feminine sensibility that sees in it a perfected spiritual love. For such a woman, heaven basically means the presence of the other. In 1885 the poet wrote to Maria Whitney:

I fear we shall care little for the technical resurrection,

pp. 2-22; Chase, pp. 249-251; DiSalvo, pp. 41-50; Ford, pp. 122-123; Glenn, 587-588; Goffin, 81; Griffith, Long Shadow, pp. 128-133; Gregor, pp. 190-196; Theodore C. Hoepfner, "Because I Could Not Stop for Death," AL, XXIX (March, 1957), 96; Ankey Larrabee, "Three Studies in Modern Poetry," Accent, III (Winter, 1943), 115-117; William R. Manierre, "Emily Dickinson: Visions and Revisions," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, V (Spring, 1963), 7-9; Tate, Reactionary Essays, pp. 13-16, 22-25; and John Stewart Wheatcroft, Emily Dickinson and Orthodox Tradition (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Rutgers University, 1960), p. 145.

¹¹³Wheatcroft, p. 141.

when to behold the one face that to us comprised it is too much for us, and I dare not think of the voraciousness of that only gaze and its only return.¹¹⁴

The paradise Emily Dickinson presents in this group of poems is marked, therefore, by the fleshless and timeless, the ecstatic and fulfilling, the pure and perfect joy it affords the united lovers. This ethereal yet personalized happiness justifies the love that promised its immortal consummation. Although the heaven the poet creates has few orthodox theological foundations, it does possess literary ones. It matches elements in the romantic tradition that asserts that death serves the cause of love, that "it removes all obstacles from love's path and makes eternal what otherwise would only be contingent."¹¹⁵ It also matches the end Freud implied as the only possible one for the impossible and unreal love of Tristan and Yseult.¹¹⁶

The last category has a twofold focus that is reciprocal. First, the poet presents love in time as a promise of existence in eternity.¹¹⁷ As Anderson observes, "probably the oldest motivation to a belief in immortality is the joining of love and death."¹¹⁸ Reverencing love as a semi-deity, it is not surprising that this poet felt that it must escape the limits of time and insure man life beyond his terrestrial condition. As "her confidence that love endures beyond the grave bulwarked her hopes for immortality,"¹¹⁹ so it

¹¹⁴Letters (Johnson, ed.), I, 862.

¹¹⁵Lepp, p. 102.

¹¹⁶Yvon Bres, "A Type of Romantic Love," in Sexuality and the Modern World: A Symposium, ed. by Bernard Gelligan et al. (West Nyack, N.Y.: Cross Currents, 1964), p. 211.

¹¹⁷N.B. Poems: 463, 491, 800, 809, 1030, and 1643.

¹¹⁸American Literary Masters, I, 981.

¹¹⁹Pickard, p. 112.

provides the theme of many of her poems. The voice in these lyrics makes many claims for love's power both to convince man of his immortal nature and to assure its actualization. She asserts that because of love she stands as a "witness to the Certainty/ Of Immortality—" (463). Having experienced the other, the voice declares that "Perceiving thee is evidence/ That we are of the sky/ Partaking thee a guaranty/ of immortality" (1643). She envisions love as "the Fellow of the Resurrection/ Scooping up the Dust and chanting 'Live!'" (491). She believes that lovers cannot die since "Love reforms Vitality/ Into Divinity" (809). Second, the poet presents eternity as a promise of celestial union.¹²⁰ These marriage-in-heaven poems allow an idealized love that escapes the day to day drudgery of human love and other limitations of earthly existence. The love they envision is purer and more spiritual than any possible on earth; the union they celebrate is more mystical than passionate, more ethereal than human. Yet the timeless consummation of love relinquished in time remains essentially the satisfaction of the human desire for transcending love.¹²¹ As the voice in these constructions anticipates the joy of union in eternity, she declares that "The Stimulus beyond the Grave/ His Countenance to see/ Supports me like imperial Drums" (1001). Implicitly contrasting her present deprivation with this longed for joy, she says that "Transporting must the moment be—/ Brewed from decades of Agony!" (207). Sometimes she grows so eager that she

¹²⁰ N.B. Poems: 207, 277, 528, 577, 625, 788, 933, 954, 984, 1001, 1078, 1231, 1383, and 1743.

¹²¹ Copple's claim, however, seems questionable: "It is evident that she expects a heaven which will have its physical as well as its spiritual resemblances to the things she wanted and missed on earth." p. 66 [Italics mine]

asks "What if I say I shall not wait!/ What if I burst the fleshly Gate---/ And pass escaped---to thee!" (277). So great is the voice's desire for his presence that she confesses "Forgive me, if to stroke thy frost/ Outvisions Paradise!" (577). Other times she grandly asserts her right to this celestial marriage: "Mine---by the Right of the White Election!/ Mine---by the Royal Seal!/ Mine---by the Sign in the Scarlet prison---" (528). She once describes this fervently desired joy as "A Heaven in a Gaze---/ A Heaven of Heavens---the Privilege/ Of one another's Eyes---" (625). In most situations, the speaker confidently feels that "Long Years apart---can make no/ Breach a second cannot fill---" (1383) and "For two divided, briefly,/ A cycle, it may be,/ Till everlasting life unite/ In strong society" (1743). Sometimes she impersonally imagines the fleshless lovers as "Creatures clad in Miracle" (984). Once with intense personal concern she asks "Oh God of Width, do not for us/ Curtail Eternity!" (1231).

The speaker's stance includes exultant eagerness and rational detachment. When she presents love as a preparation for and assurance of immortality, she is most often objective. Her position, of course, can be a tensioned mixture of rational discipline and emotional involvement. She can paradoxically observe that love is like both life and death; but her emotional reaction to the implications of her observation is as much a part of the experience as its more cerebral factors (491). Intellectual elements in many poems reveal the voice's objectivity.¹²² Generally the voice is confident, but occasionally she qualifies her position.¹²³ In a few lyrics, her present pain

¹²²N.B. Poems: 463, 491, 800, 809, 933, 954, and 1383.

¹²³N.B. Poems: 207, 577, and 954.

intensifies her expected joy in an eternal, heavenly embrace.¹²⁴ With the physical and temporal threats involved in earthly love negated by her vision of an idealized and timeless marriage, the voice is typically exultant and joyful.

To exploit the psychic possibilities, suspense of anticipation, and dramatic tension inherent in these situations, Emily Dickinson selects certain literary tools and avoids others. First person¹²⁵ carries the experiential nature of the voice's assurance of immortality and the private nature of her concept of the bliss it promises. Although two poems utilize the distance past tense¹²⁶ offers and some partially utilize the distance future tense provides, the majority of these poems use present time to heighten their intensity. Although the poet introduces subjunctives¹²⁷, adversatives¹²⁸, and conditionals¹²⁹ to create a rational tone, the voice's assurance of love's power and ultimate fulfillment makes these qualifiers less numerous in this category than in many others. The certainty of the speaker's vision also eliminates retarding lines and rhetorical questions as signs of thought in process. When she isolates words or phrases in this cluster, the poet's intention seems to be to emphasize key words¹³⁰ rather than to create an illusion of thought moving slowly

¹²⁴N.B. Poems: 207, 277, and 1231.

¹²⁵Only four poems reflect a third person perspective: 625, 809, 933, and 1383.

¹²⁶N.B. Poems: 625 and 933.

¹²⁷N.B. Poems: 207, 463, 577, 788, 933, 954, 1231, 1643, and 1743.

¹²⁸N.B. Poems: 1231 and 1643 but.

¹²⁹N.B. Poems: 207, so; 207, 577, 788 though; 612 except; and 277, 577, 933, and 954 if.

¹³⁰N.B. Poems: 207, 277, 463, 528, 577, 625, and 800.

to a difficult conclusion. Frequently, since time is such an important element in these experiences, the poet isolates temporal terms that she sets in opposition to each other. Because of the privacy of these experiences, imperatives¹³¹ and vocatives¹³² are relatively rare. Abstractions suggest the voice's desire to demonstrate in philosophical terms love as a cause of immortality or her difficulty in presenting marriage in heaven in concrete terms.¹³³ Diction¹³⁴, exclamations¹³⁵, hyperbole¹³⁶, paradox¹³⁷, compari-

¹³¹N.B. Poems: 277 see; 491 show, live; 577 think; and 588 prove.

¹³²N.B. Poems: 577 Lover; 788 "Hazel Witnesses"; and 1321 "God of Width."

¹³³N.B. Poems: 207 extasy, agony; 277 liberty; 463 privacy, right, claim, certainty, immortality, conviction, judgment; 491 division, love, life, death, resurrection; 528 vision; 577 death, life, grief, soul, paradise; 625 privilege, paradise; 788 joy, pain, release, paradise, time, eternity; 800 privilege, eternity, divinity, quality, paradise; 809 immortality, deity, vitality, love, divinity; 933 heaven, mystery; 954 conviction, disaster; 984 anguish, delight, resurrection, transport; 1001 stimulus; 1030 immortality; 1078 love, eternity; 1231 immortality; 1643 truth, immortality; and 1743 life, and society.

¹³⁴N.B. Poems: 463 certainty, conviction; 528 right, seal, sign, election; 954 conviction; 1001 stimulus; 1030 certificate; and 1643 evidence and guaranty.

¹³⁵Exclamations open Poems 277 and 528; operate within Poems 207, 277, 528, and 577; and close Poems 207, 277, 491, 528, 577, 954, and 1231.

¹³⁶N.B. Poems: 277, 577, 788, 809, and 1383.

¹³⁷N.B. Poems: 491, 577, 800, 984, and 1643.

sons¹³⁸, contrasts¹³⁹, rapid line movement¹⁴⁰, and repetition¹⁴¹ carry the voice's certainty and joy. Identifying love as a certificate (1030) or guaranty (1643) of immortality strengthens the voice's affirmation. The extravagance of claiming that "Love is Immortality/ Nay, it is Deity--" (800) rapturously conveys the speaker's belief. While defying logic, the voice's assertion that love makes humans immortal twice effectively proclaims its own truth (800). Frequently the voice contrasts time and eternity and her condition in each state to body forth her belief in the power of love to transcend death and her expectation of the celestial fulfillment of love. Opening the first three lines of the last stanza with "Love is" builds up to the magnificent affirmation of the last line (491). Opening six lines of a nine line poem with Mine contributes to the lyric's sonorous intensity. Run on lines and rapid rhythms build up the rising emotion in many poems, culminating in the last word of the last line. Often the poet terminates the lyric with a key word that climaxes her affirmation of love and death's relation: live (491), divinity (809), paradise (577), immortality¹⁴², and eternity.¹⁴³

¹³⁸N.B. Poems: 277, 491, 528, 577, 625, 788, 809, 984, 1001, 1078, and 1383.

¹³⁹N.B. Poems: 207, 277, 463, 491, 528, 577, 788, 800, 984, 1001, 1078, 1231, 1383, and 1743.

¹⁴⁰N.B. Poems: 491, 800, 933, 954, 984, 1078, 1231, 1383, and 1743.

¹⁴¹N.B. Poems: 207, 277, 463, 491, 528, 577, 625, 788, 809, 984, and 1030. Anaphora also operates in Poems: 277, 463, 491, 528, 577, 625, 788, 984, and 1078.

¹⁴²N.B. Poems: 1030 and 1643.

¹⁴³N.B. Poems: 788, 1078, and 1231.

Personification¹⁴⁴, juxtaposition¹⁴⁵, understatement¹⁴⁶, and verbs provocative in context¹⁴⁷ enrich the sensory, imaginative, and intellectual appeal of these poems. Presenting sunshine that pinches (577), embers that understand (1383), or truth that is fractured (954) concretizes and individualizes these poetic experiences. Exploiting connotations by joining chemical and conviction (954), resurrection and pain (984), and marble and tea (1743) sharpens the voice's posture and extends the poem's meaning. Speaking of transport brewed suggests the slowly cumulative and potentially explosive effect of pain turned to joy, of joy intensified by the pain that precedes it (207). Referring to love chanting confers a religious dimension by suggesting that resurrection is an act of worship to the creator as well as a fulfillment of the creature (491). Describing the severe adjustment following the death of a beloved in diminishing household figures, sweeping up the heart and putting love away until eternity, poignantly understates and effectively controls the tone while also suggesting by the very discipline employed what painful emotions are hidden

¹⁴⁴N.B. Poems: 207, 277, 463, 491, 577, 588, 788, 800, 933, 954, 984, 1078, 1231, and 1383.

¹⁴⁵N.B. Poems: 207 "long-cheated eyes"; 277 "Fleshly Gate"; 463 "single"; 525 "White Election," "Grave's Repeal," "Delirious Charter"; 625 "Fleshless Lover"; 788 "old fashioned Eyes," "Hazel Witnesses," "taleless days"; 800 "Paradise superlative"; 954 "Chemical conviction," "fractured Trust," "Finished Creatures"; 984 "Resurrection pain," "smitten Face"; 1001 "imperial Drams"; 1231 "general Earth," "Indifferent Seasons"; and 1743 "marble tea."

¹⁴⁶N.B. Poems: 800, 809, 1078, and 1643.

¹⁴⁷N.B. Poems: 207 brewed, beguiles; 277 burst, file; 463 witness; 491 lap, scooping, pare, chanting; 577 lock, coveting, outvisions; 625 set; 788 merited, compass, bought, remanded, notched; 800 reversed; 809 reforms; 933 procured, furnished; 954 enable; 1231 pay, consecrated, curtail; and 1383 invalidate and fondled.

behind the trope (1078).

The imagery in this cluster usually functions to support the speaker's claim to immortality or to illumine her concept of celestial union. Frequently she sets up a type of poetic syllogism, the kind whose first premise is telescoped, e.g., in "Chemical conviction" (954) or the effects of a witch's absence (1383), to carry her affirmations. When she declares her willingness to "burst the fleshly Gate" (277) or to "pay each Atom that I am" (1231), the figures concretize and individualize as well as illumine the extent of her desire to be united with the beloved in eternity. She uses religious, Calvary, (577), nuptial, "No Wedlock," (207), and political, veto, (528) tropes to body forth her painful deprivation. She uses allusions from these same areas, as well as royal and natural images, as vehicles for both the bliss she anticipates and her assurance of it. She speaks of being consecrated (1231) and confirmed (528) and of wearing a "Royal Seal" (528). Many figures in Poem 528 simultaneously suggest a sacrament, coronation, and wedding.

"'Twas a long Parting--but the time" (625) presents the reunion of lovers as a nuptial event in which God officiates and angels are guests.¹⁴⁸ The voice describes the scene and its significance from the perspective of time past and third person. This distancing of the speaker and the diction and rhythm of stanza one contribute to her objectivity as an observant bystander. After the first stanza, however, the switch to a more rapid rhythm, the change of focus from the "judgment Seat of God" to the ardent gaze of the lovers,

¹⁴⁸For partial readings of this poem see: Johnson, Emily Dickinson, pp. 100-102; Griffith, Long Shadow, p. 162; and Wheatcroft, p. 141.

the introduction of baptismal allusions in stanza three and marriage ones in stanza four, and the voice's awed inquiry "Was Bridal--e'er like This?" create a different tone and change the meaning of the experience.

The first stanza is declarative and restrained. The voice sets the stage for the drama. She notes the length of time from the death of the one to the death of the other and contrasts the "long Parting" with "the time/ For Interview." Her choice of interview rather than reunion or marriage adds to the impersonal tone of this stanza. Standing "before the Judgment Seat of God--" carries no hint of the joyful celebration of the following stanzas, no suggestion that the interview would be nuptial rather than judicial. By describing the interview as "The last--and second time," the voice ironically implies that this second meeting would be their last, for they would never again be separated.

The rational and restrained tone of this stanza changes as the voice for the first time names the figures "Fleshless Lovers." Objective detachment changes to rapturous description. The reunited lovers have eyes only for one another. Their mutual and ardent gaze becomes not only their heaven, but hyperbolically "A Heaven of Heavens." The repetition of lines two and three and the connotations of privilege support the growing intensity. Privilege suggests the lovers' complex of thought and feeling at this moment. It implies that after their long deprivation just being able to look upon each other constitutes the ultimate joy. It may also suggest that since they could not in life look upon one another with such love, they still fear this love is something they have no right to claim.

The intellectual and spiritual appeal of stanza three differs from the

emotional and visual appeal of stanza two. With a clothing image and a subtle biblical echo, the poet emphasizes the lovers' freedom and purity. They are beginning a new life beyond the limits of the human condition; therefore, "No Lifetime set--on them." Comparing their state to the innocence of the new born, but insisting that the lovers' condition is superior to it because it is a kind of eternal rebirth that has been won through temporal experience gives their union a spiritual significance that includes a mature complexity.¹⁴⁹ It may imply, too, that they look upon each other with ardent love but no lust because their years of renunciation have given their relationship sexual innocence and spiritual depth. The comparison also prepares for the sacramental experience of stanza four and so links baptism and matrimony as the transforming events of a woman's life.

While recalling the heavenly setting and the splendor of their rebirth, nuptial imagery overshadows judicial and baptismal ones in the last stanza. The voice's rhetorical question suggests both the magnificence of this wedding and its spiritual significance. With Paradise as Host and Cherubim and Seraphim as guests, a splendor surrounds this marriage that mirrors its inner beauty and meaning. Linking unobstructive and Guest, the poet suggests two things: 1) even angels are relatively unnoticed in this unique situation; and 2) the lovers are still so absorbed in each other that they have no eyes for the angels attending them.

The poems in this chapter, relating love and death in a way essential

¹⁴⁹ See Wheatcroft for further insights into Emily Dickinson's use of white robe imagery and the bridal and baptismal implications of appareled and new. p. 141.

to the experience they present, reveal many things about Emily Dickinson's attitudes toward and creative use of erotic and eschatological encounters. In these poems both experiences appear in relations that indicate how closely associated they were in the mind of the poet and how complex her personal and artistic response was to them. While the poet relates love and death in these poems in many insightful and psychologically and philosophically significant ways, the dichotomy in her own sensibility remains evident. While love and death interact at one level, ambivalent attitudes toward them interact at another. Considering them existential encounters which could fulfill and/or destroy the individual, she presents Eros and Thanatos in a variety of relations, exploits their attractive and fearful possibilities, and uses them as dramatic and crucial poetic motifs to body forth an ambivalent view of the human condition. At their worst, these lyrics are sentimental and melodramatic exercises or romantically naive statements. At their best, these existential poems are integrated and inclusive experiences of high artistic value.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The relation of love and death in Emily Dickinson's poetry is biographically insightful, artistically organic, poetically enriching, psychologically complex, dramatically ambivalent, spiritually significant, philosophically existential, and relevantly contemporary. The interaction of love and death in her poetry reveals that these experiences drew an unusually perceptive and tensioned response from Emily Dickinson as a human being, a woman, and a poet.

The presence of love and death in Emily Dickinson's canon is linked to and integrated with the other basic thematic and technical ingredients of her poetry. The emphasis in Chapters III, IV, and V is on structure for it is the assumption of this study that form is meaning and, therefore, that how the poet utilizes her sensibility in relating love and death reveals much about her creative process. Yvor Winters observes:

The originality of a poem lies not in the newness of the general theme . . . but in the quality of the personal intelligence, as that intelligence appears in the minutiae of style, in the defining limits of thought and feeling, brought to the subject by the poet who writes it.¹

Emily Dickinson's poetry is typically tensioned, compressed, psychological, and existential. These characteristics are peculiarly fitted to formalizing her concept of erotic and eschatological encounters. Structuring her lyrics

¹In Defense of Reason, p. 247.

around the clash of powerful opposites, her artistic method parallels her attitudes toward womb and tomb. These crucial experiences, therefore, provided the material for lyrics that are unusually tensioned. The counterpointing of opposites that constituted her vision of reality is apparent in the tension of these love-death poems. They are intensely emotional, yet philosophic; private yet universal; colloquial yet literary; sensuous yet abstract. They rarely posit any one view of love or death; they contain some pull, some qualification, some reservation. They play one set of associations, one kind of rhyme, one level of diction against another. They deal with universal experience, yet they filter it through the mind and emotion of the projected persona. They use an experiential and psychological frame to grapple with metaphysical enigmas. They employ rhetorical and syntactical patterns that are taut and vibrating. The poet's ambivalence toward love and death and her artistic expression of it demonstrate that form follows function, for in these intense yet cerebral poems there is no final repose, no relaxation, no synthesis. The relations Emily Dickinson establishes between love and death advance this complexity for "they form interlocking and reversible sequences."²

The two-sidedness of this poet's concept of love and death is also related to the compression of these lyrics. Her ambivalence does not fit a horizontal approach; she elected these crucial encounters and delved deeply into them with the utmost economy. This compression supports the urgency of her creative response which a longer form would weaken or destroy. Love and death aptly fitted this poet's concept of the areas of experience most

²Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 220.

congenial to poetic treatment; they demanded an intensity in response and economy in structure that give her poetry its electric atmosphere. Intuitive gaps, syntactical jumps, and logical rhyme accommodate the poet's double vision and give these poems an often epigrammatic note. Insightful juxtaposing, arresting verbal connotations, original images, and provocative understatement allow these poems to carry a weight out of proportion to their length. With severe verbal economy, these lyrics present an intense but complex experience of love and death.

The poet's interest in psychic states made love and death fertile themes to explore. Whether her conception of the bed and the grave as places of ecstasy and transcendence as well as of deflowering and dying was fully conscious in these poems Emily Dickinson generally presents love and death as projections of consciousness, but attitudes toward them as projections of both consciousness and the unconscious. Thinking of these experiences as times of heightened consciousness and regarding externals as symbolic of this intense awareness, the poet's approach to either is psychological. When she looks below the surface of man's polite control and civilized rationality, this poet makes a "junction of love and death at the instinctual level,"³ and presents unconscious and ambivalent responses to them. As Emily Dickinson exposes the deepest and extra-rational attitudes toward love and death in these poems, she sets up two opposed clusters of reactions that correspond to the psychic doubleness modern psychologists ascribe to man. She creates poetic experiences that reveal fear of love and death as destructive of freedom and individuality.

³Ibid., p. 220.

Each encounter is presented as potential annihilation of personal identity. Pitting the final surrender of either experience against the autonomy of the voice, her negative responses are related to the feared extinction of identity that is the motif of many of Emily Dickinson's poems directly concerned with consciousness. She also creates poems of counter attitudes. In these, love and death are envisioned as attractive experiences that fulfill man, that allow him to transcend his limited self, and that establish a unity with the other, divinity, and all reality. From this side of her double vision, the poet presents love and death as necessary for human completion. These poems reveal man's pull toward experience, his craving for fulfillment, and his desire for personal and cosmic unity. These encounters allow man to escape the limitations of the human condition against which he existentially struggles. The poet creates imagined experiences that reveal man's insatiable desire for love and/or death as means of destroying the barriers that keep him isolated within his own being and within temporal boundaries. Sensitive to the "esoteric belt" (1717) protecting man's sanity as he feels conflicting desires at the root of his being or recognizes the conflict between his aspirations and limitations, Emily Dickinson presents poems in which the response to love and death is so ambivalent that the speaker hangs in psychic suspension. The complexity of her handling of these crucial encounters enriches the poetic experience and expands its significance.

The relations Emily Dickinson establishes between love and death make her poetry strangely modern and existential. Her vision of the precariousness and limitation of human existence links love and death metaphysically. Confronting the multiple junctures of love and death with the tragic nature of man

the overreacher, who realizes the significance of his being but the insignificance of his existence, Emily Dickinson sets these encounters in an existential frame. For the man who finds his desires and limitations forever at cross-purposes, Emily Dickinson presents love and death as promises of allness and/or threats of nothingness. Admitting man's inability to reach certainty, his frightening alienation, and his being toward death, this poet creates lyrics in which the voice seeks knowledge, love, and life beyond man's natural condition. Trying to escape the limits of flesh and time, the voice regards love and death as essential factors in this seeking. Both experiences are presented as fundamental in man's religious search for ultimate meaning. Although she uses absurd only once in her whole canon, the anguish that marks Emily Dickinson's creative exploration of love and death puts them in an existential relationship that is polar yet inseparable. Antithesis, irony, paradox, and tension project this world view. Her poetic techniques parallel her double vision and consequently link love and death more closely. This poet's concept of love and death and projection of them reinforce the existential, ambivalent, and dramatic nature of her canon. The dissonance in her poetry, like that of much modern music, complements and carries an ambivalently complex view of reality. The way in which Emily Dickinson concretized her vision of the human condition in erotic and eschatological experiences demonstrates the essentially existential and modern nature of her art.

As a human being, a woman, and a poet, Emily Dickinson's response to love and death was highly emotional yet paradoxically intellectual. She confronted these encounters as a contingent being facing the mystery of existence. To her they had metaphysical and theological significance. As keys to

the nature of God, man, and nature, love and death engaged her whole person. If man is born only to be frustrated by his desire for transcendence, then the creator must be malignant, the universe hostile, and man alienated. If, on the other hand, through love and death man can escape his isolation, expand his consciousness, and fulfill himself, then the human condition--and God's responsibility for it and all creation--is less threatening but still surrounded by uncertainties. The philosophic and theological implications of love and death challenged Emily Dickinson as a sensitive and intelligent human being seeking adequate answers to her questions about what it means to be a finite being who seeks absolutes.

Emily Dickinson's interest in and response to the sexual and eschatological also involve her womanhood. In spite of the masculinely tough intellectual quality of her poetry, her attitudes in it toward love and death are peculiarly feminine.⁴ Despite her intellectual complexity and astringent wit, she approaches both experiences from a distinctly woman's point of view.⁵ To her love is an emotional necessity and a source of fear. Her poems exhibit this archetypical feminine desire for yet fear of masculine conquest. The ambivalence of the voice toward love and death is deeply involved in her femininity. The speaker's fear of death as a violation of her psychic integrity may be unconsciously related to her fear of sexual violation, just as her desire for union with the non-me in death may be subtly related to her womanly

⁴The mawkish "little girl" poems demonstrate this trait in its most artistically degenerate form.

⁵"Her absolute loyalty to mind, governed as she knew it by the heart, is her distinguishing trait as a poet." Anderson, American Literary Masters, I, 977.

need for completion through love. The tendency in her lyrics to spiritualize the body through love's relation to death is a decidedly non-masculine trait. Concern with the psychic state and spiritual significance of love and death rather than with the experience per se is also related to the feminine sensibility of this poet.

To Emily Dickinson the poet, love and death offered the most dramatic moment, the most meaningful encounter, and the most challenging experience to explore aesthetically. She exploited the drama and tension inherent in both events. Bridal and burial experience provided the psychologically and metaphysically richest areas of human life to formalize. They were a means of dramatizing her view of the human condition, of putting her sense of cosmic flux into specific human situations, and of concretizing the terrible ambivalence she found at the core of reality. She used these crucial encounters as material for a poetry of rare inclusiveness that plays opposed emotions and attitudes against each other.

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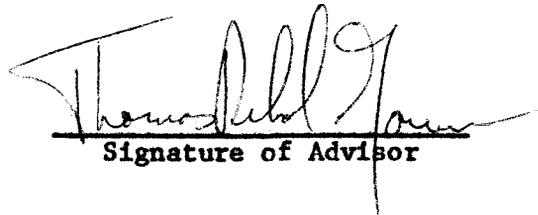
APPROVAL SHEET

The dissertation submitted by Sister Mary Louise Hall, O.P. has been read and approved by members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is, therefore, accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

6/18/70
Date


Signature of Advisor