

Emily Dickinson, the Tyrant, and the Daemon:
A Critique of Societal Oppression, and the Significance of Artistic Truth

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INTRODUCTION

Known during her time as the eccentric reclusive “Myth” of Amherst, Massachusetts, who would have imagined two centuries later, from stage left, that Emily Dickinson would be given her own monologue and begin a play with a glass of wine at hand (Davis2)? While 1920 and 1930 literary critics, such as Harold Mono, declared Emily Dickinson “a half-idiotic school-girl... [who was] intellectually blind, partially dead, and most dumb to the art of poetry” (Howe vii), literary criticism since the 1970s has greatly reconstructed the poet as a self-aware “genius” (Rich 160). Her first poem, as documented by Thomas H. Johnson, dates the beginning of her poetic journey at the age of 20. For the following 35 years, the solitary poet would craft nearly 1,800 poems—if not more—within her second-story corner bedroom, which she referred to as “freedom” (Rich 158). From a small 18-inch square desk in her floral-printed room, Dickinson would compose her “Immortality” carefully within letters, the folds of envelopes, and at times, on scraps of chocolate wrappers.

Her mastery of language reveals the capacity of her ability to profoundly capture the extremities of existence in poetic form. It is through this approach that critics, such as Harold Bloom, Susan Howe, Albert J. Gelpi, Adrienne Rich, and Sabine Sielke attempt to understand Dickinson as a female artist who devoted herself to obtain “[a] selfhood endlessly aspiring to freedom” from the oppressive forces that inhibited her creative potential (Bloom 19). As an iconoclastic woman who was keenly aware of herself and her surroundings, her intense and intimate relationship with language and art allowed her to recognize the limitations of the patriarchal society she lived in, its gender expectations, and the dogma of institutionalized

religion. At the age of fifteen, Dickinson, as Gelpi writes, “saw her life determined by an appalling choice between a calling of faith to membership in the church and a commitment to the world for whatever it was worth” (Gelpi 30). Her devotion committed itself to the immediacy of experience, which religion could not provide. Although Dickinson did not entirely reject the idea of God, the promise and practice of Christianity meant to her an existence of self-annihilation. Choosing to live in an unorthodox manner, Dickinson rejected all aspirations for religious salvation, and chose to traverse through her psyche through poetic meditation.

This thesis argues that art, for Dickinson, was an alternative system of salvation which her society could not provide her. Unwilling to surrender herself to the mold of her society, the institutional practice of Christianity and gender expectations, Dickinson chose to take ownership of her life through art, which allowed her to develop a personal language to combat the oppressive forces of the world around her. As a conscious “revolutionist of the word” Dickinson embarked on a path of self-discovery that enabled her to conduct a life in self-imposed exile as a means to emancipate herself from the constraints of conventional living (Howe xi). As Gelpi explains,

the normal man can follow the general trend without injury.... but the man who takes to the backstreets and alleys because he cannot endure the broad highway will be the first to discover the psychic elements that are waiting to play their part.
(Gelpi 83)

Because Dickinson refused to struggle or integrate herself into her society, she enabled herself to fiercely explore her imagination and question the tyranny of institutionalized Christianity, patriarchy, and gender expectations. The commitment she would make to art was not for the sake

of an elusive promise of redemption and transcendence of the ‘earthly,’ but rather a temporal goal which sought to uncover the full potential of her humanity as intensely as possible no matter the consequence. As a woman who harnessed and manifested an unnameable gift of language that defied and challenged the people and concepts of her time, Dickinson’s work depicts the struggle between succumbing to the expectations of society and the will to live by the dictates of her imagination.

I developed this thesis in three chapters. The first chapter offers a brief biographical overview of Dickinson’s adolescence to contextualize the environment and the influences that would ultimately give shape to her character and poetic foundations. I began the chapter by introducing Dickinson’s family members—specifically, her paternal lineage and mother. Within her paternal ancestry, its legacy of highly intuitive, erudite, and passionate men, without a doubt instilled into Dickinson a standard to excel in whatever she dedicated herself to. Given the history of her grandfather’s financial ordeals, which invariably devastated his reputation and his family’s well-being, the poet’s father would do what was within his power to prevent such disasters to plague his own family. This, by degree, prompted the poet’s father to run his household with order, which Dickinson found herself at odds with. While her father advocated for female education and encouraged Dickinson to excel in her studies, he did not believe a woman’s place was in public practice. In a letter, she addresses this inadequacy of her life to her brother, Austin, “I wish I could see your world and its little kingdoms” (J 70). Austin, who was, for extended periods of time, away from home due to schooling and teaching, represented a life she could only fantasize for herself. Along with her mother’s lack of interest in things unrelated to domestic affairs, Dickinson, at a young age, had already shown signs of displacement and

diverted from the conventional values her mother upheld. Though Dickinson performed many domestic duties, such as baking, gardening, and upkeeping the majority of her household's letter correspondence, her interests and her mother's were drastically different.

To further investigate Dickinson's complex inner life as a young woman, academic, and daughter, I also explore in Chapter 1 the poet's adolescent letter correspondence. Through close contextual readings of Dickinson's correspondence with her childhood friend, Abiah Palmer Strong, I surmise that Dickinson uses her epistolary persona as a means to playfully explore and develop her poetic voice. As a young woman, Dickinson desperately sought a way to express the inner turmoil that began to take form as her opposing thoughts and beliefs developed. It is through letters addressed to the selected audience of her closest of friends that she chooses to make this particular aspect of herself known. This aspect of Dickinson's concerns; however, was not well received by her schoolmates, which ultimately led to the end of the majority of her friendships. Despite the numerous endings of companionship, the concerns and questions Dickinson possessed could not be left unanswered. Although Dickinson's Puritan educational upbringing fueled the opposition against her contrasting thoughts and concerns, her Puritan education also equipped the young, impressionable poet with the necessary skill sets to actively challenge, investigate, and debunk the forces that oppressed her. It created the psychological foundation for Dickinson and allowed her to more intimately dissect her complex psyche. Seeing as others could not comprehend her, as a means to fully explore her contrasting beliefs and thoughts, Dickinson then turned to poetry.

The second chapter dedicates itself to understanding the pressures that prompted Dickinson's retreat from society and the adoption of her unconventional and iconoclastic

lifestyle. To discredit claims that diagnose Dickinson as having been afflicted by a psychological disorder, I engage with literary criticism from Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Adrienne Rich, and Susan Howe, who define Dickinson as a tactician who strategically positioned herself to most efficiently cultivate her poetic verse. To further this conjecture, I also present within this chapter the constructs of gender, patriarchy, and religion which threatened Dickinson's artistry. As implored by Adrienne Rich in her essay "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson," a deeper analysis of patriarchal society and its pervasive nature reveals a collective struggle of women's inability to live and define themselves through and by their own terms. In a world that only allowed women to experience their lives within the confines of limitation, Dickinson sought to disengage herself to the language of her society that refused her a proper platform to give herself a distinct and self-determined voice of her own. Rather than viewing the poet as the eccentric recluse she has often been anthologized as, I argue that her retreat from society and her commitment to poetry is not a symptom from psychological disorder, but a response to the disorder within the culture she was born into.

Because self-authorship and self-exploration reside in the core of Dickinson's concerns, her areas of focus largely pertain to gender discourse—specifically, Dickinson's perception of marriage, and Christian orthodoxy. I argue that the adhering to these aspects of Amherst's socio-cultural conventions would have jeopardized her ability to formulate an independent and authentic identity. While gender expectations, such as wifehood, meant to Dickinson the process by which women surrendered their identities and submitted to masculine authority, Christian orthodoxy is seen as an inhibitor of psychic development. God, in Dickinson's perception, posed as a tyrannical figure of oppression while institutionalized religion failed to provide her the

methodology to express her unconventional aspirations. As a result, Dickinson chooses to adopt her iconoclastic lifestyle and turns to poetry to intensely explore the extremities of her psyche. As argued by Vendler in her reading of Dickinson's poem "It's easy to invent a Life—" (J 724, F 747), God was unsympathetic to the human experience and operated as a scientist rather than a doting creator. Vendler further supports her claim by suggesting Dickinson's commitment to poetry is a means to surpass the constructs instituted by her society, and discover a world order beyond the learned principles she inherited from her upbringing.

In the last chapter, I attempt a close contextual analysis of Dickinson's most enigmatic poem, "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—" (J 1398). I begin by first establishing the importance for an individual to realize and actualize individual truth in which I engage Ralph Waldo Emerson's theories on Nature, Self-Reliance, and language. Identified as stemming from Emersonian philosophy, Harold Bloom and Christanne Miller both attest to their similarities. The realization of human potentiality through language meant for Dickinson, acknowledging what Rich refers to as, a "split" female. This concept, if realized, means that a woman is aware of her independent, creative self but must make a choice: to live in accordance to the conventions of her society, or by the dictates of her own nature. Because Dickinson refused to give into the conventions of her time, she sought an alternative salvation to satisfy and devote herself to: her poetic verse. As a woman who felt her creative energy as "Vesuvius at home," Dickinson's decision to depart from conventionality was inevitable (Rich 169).

Within this chapter I also explore Dickinson's relationship to her poetic daemon. For Dickinson, the daemon is not a supernatural being who possesses and controls the body of another being, but rather a metaphor that expresses the relationship between one's imaginative

energy and their humanity. In order to conceptualize the concept of the daemon, I utilize Walter Burkert's criticism on Greek culture and their use and semantic shift of the word. As defined by Burkert, the daemon does not explain a supernatural entity, but rather a "mode of activity" (Burkert 180). I further contextualize the daemon by employing Carl Jung and Harold Bloom who also attest to the significance of the poetic daemon within an artist's creative agenda. Through poetry, Dickinson embraces the duality of skepticism and belovedness by embracing her Other, the "daemon" and her humanity. As C.G. Jung describes, the daemon's:

creative urge is often so imperious that it battens on [an artist's] humanity and yokes everything to service the work, even at the cost of health and ordinary human happiness. The unborn work in the psyche of the artist is a force of nature that achieves its end either with tyrannical might or with the subtle cunning of nature herself, quite regardless of personal fate of the man who is its vehicle (Jung 75).

Dickinson, who was excruciatingly in tune with her daemon, was unable to ignore its presence and chose to explore its powerful, liberating, yet frightening terrain in solitary poetic meditation. By crafting a personal language Dickinson created an artistic realm for herself that offered her the freedom to critically question, bend, and play with language. As Bloom suggests, Dickinson's works "[have] no design upon us, no dark allegory we are summoned to search for" (Bloom 201). It offers no implications of answering the reader and leaves us to witness her 'pure' and unadulterated poetic power. Her personal language was never structured to enlighten an audience, but rather serves to answer to her and her daemon.

Dickinson's enigmatic poem, "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—" (J 1398), I argue, is a poem that depicts her relationship to her poetic daemon, which is to say, her insatiable creative energy. While many have interpreted the poem as describing a romantic relationship or Dickinson's failed attempt at harnessing independent power, I theorize that Dickinson, within this poem, recognizes and chooses to embrace her artistic power. The "Master/Owner" figure, therefore, does not represent a male figure, but rather is the embodiment of her own independent creative energy. By accepting its companionship, Dickinson assumes an identity where her creative potential and imagination becomes the catalyst for her actions.

CHAPTER 1

DICKINSON : ADOLESCENCE, EDUCATION & LETTERS

As Alfred Habegger writes, “chronology is vital” when attempting to comprehend Emily Dickinson and her poetry (Habegger xiv). Although the facts of a poet’s personal life cannot provide every truth in understanding their works, it can provide insight into understanding their fundamental developments. As a descendant from a paternal lineage of “savvy, tough, resolute, heaven-obsessed, independent, [and] unusual” family members of judges, generals, governors, and ministers, Dickinson’s forefathers would embody and pass down characteristics that, as Habegger phrases it, would become Dickinson’s inheritance (Habegger 4-5). Though coming from a distinguished line of powerful and erudite men, Dickinson was not only “disqualified by her sex from entering public life but [was] actively instructed not to define herself in terms of the collective struggles of her time” (Habegger 5). What Habegger suggests is that Dickinson found herself imagining a life apart from the conventional roles her society offered; however, because women were not allowed to hold public positions in society, Dickinson had no other option but to find an outlet within the limitations of the private sphere of her home, family, and friends.

To further understand Dickinson, it is essential to further dive into her immediate paternal lineage. Encouraged to pursue education to “[expand] the mind’s powers, and [store] it with knowledge” (Habegger 14), the poet’s father, Edward Dickinson, attended Yale with the “resolute will to be great” and found solace and purpose in his education (Habegger 8). After completing his time at Yale, he would then engage himself in several occupations and find tremendous success. The poet’s father served in the military, became a lawyer and treasurer for Amherst College, ran for public office as a Massachusetts state representative and senator, was a

member of the governor's cabinet, and served as a U.S. Congressman. The poet's grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, also possessed public aspirations and is described as "being both a man of means and a man of thought" who served tenaciously as a community leader, advocated passionately to promote higher education, and was devout in Calvinist orthodoxy (Habegger 7). Samuel Fowler Dickinson also co-founded Amherst College; however, despite his many contributions to Amherst and its educational developments, due to his financially unstable lifestyle and frenetic tendency to overreach beyond his natural limits, he faced countless financial ordeals. At the whims of his father's financial inconsistencies, Edward Dickinson found himself in and out of Yale as a student due to his inability to pay tuition. Although Samuel Fowler Dickinson was a public servant who aspired to elevate the small town of Amherst through education, his irresponsible lifestyle cost him his reputation, which the poet's father would carry as he began to establish himself in Amherst. Determined to not repeat his father's mistakes, Edward Dickinson saw the importance of "silence, honorable self-control, firm-jawed leadership, and the necessity of preserving family dignity" as paramount when raising his own family (Habegger 21). While courting the poet's mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson, Edward expresses these values in a letter:

Let us prepare for a life of rational happiness. I do not expect or wish for a life of pleasure. May we be happy and useful and successful and each be an ornament in society and gain the respect and confidence of all whom we may be connected.
(Gelpi 7)

Along with his deep concern for his family's physical and financial well-being, Edward Dickinson's precedence to perform dutifully as a father, husband, and public figure are essential to his character. Described by the poet as "the straightest engine" that "never played", Edward

Dickinson conducted his household through discipline and order. In a letter Dickinson addressed to her mentor, Thomas Higginson, she recalls an afternoon she spent with her father before he had passed: “I preferred to be with him, and invented an absence for mother.... He seemed peculiarly pleased, as I oftenest stay with myself; and he remarked, as the afternoon withdrew, he “would like it to not end.”” (L 267). Later on she remarks, “His heart was pure and terrible, and I think no other like it exists” (L267). Despite her father’s austere personality, Dickinson regarded her father with the utmost respect and found a particular peace and enjoyment in his company.

Rational happiness, as Edward Dickinson refers to, does not only pertain to positive public reception, and physical and financial wellness, but also applies itself towards education. Desiring that his children receive the best possible upbringing, Edward Dickinson made no distinction between the importance of education for his son and two daughters. He was impartial towards gender in regards to their schooling, and expected his young son, Austin, and his two daughters, Emily and Vinnie, to all excel in their studies. Edward Dickinson’s attitude towards his children’s education is not unique and was shared amongst Amherst’s upper-class families. For those who could afford schooling for their children, regardless of their gender, education was equally enriching and beneficial to spiritual and intellectual growth. Having had a father who held such resolute faith in education and female potentiality, it is easy to observe how greatly the poet’s father influenced Dickinson and her need to also “[expand] the mind’s powers, and [store] it with knowledge” (Habegger 14).

In a sermon focusing on education for women administered by Daniel A. Clark entitled “To the Females of the First Parish in Amherst, Massachusetts,” he implores women to invest in their education:

Every wise woman, then, will enlarge her mind; will read, and think, and reason. She will be especially ambitious to grow in the knowledge of God; will become acquainted with her own being, and with being in general; that she may be happy, and the more useful. Sisters, mothers, there lies a world around you, and within your reach, which is to say your duty to explore. It rests with you to determine whether you will carry with you to the grave a contracted mind, or a mind large as the regions of space. (Jones 289)

Although women during this time were not necessarily viewed as intellectually inferior to men based on the premise of their sex, gaining a public position or contributing to academia outside of the Church was virtually unthinkable. Puritan education gave women a sense of value, but was organized so that women could only emancipate themselves through religious docility and were expected to remain active in the confines of their private and domestic spheres. Much like Clark, another minister who spoke in Amherst, William Buell Sprague, warns women that though they must educate themselves, their limits should not exceed their assigned roles:

When a woman takes up the weapons of theological warfare, the native loveliness of the female is instantly eclipsed. The modest and retiring virtues, which are the chief ornament of your sex, always retreat from the din and clashing of religious combatants. (Jones 291)

Sprague also encourages that women only read theological texts, such as the Bible and sermons. Works of fiction, such as novels and poetry, were viewed as unvirtuous for the female youths. Edward Dickinson also shared this distrust and warned his children to be wary of books that would “joggle the mind” (Jones 291). Despite his opinion on these genres of literature, Edward Dickinson did allow the young poet to engage with several works of fiction, which included Shakespeare, the Bronte Sisters, and Elizabeth Barret Browning.

Advocacy for women's education in Amherst had been established well before Dickinson's birth. The poet's mother, also named Emily, having been born into a respected, wealthy, and successful family, was provided with an extraordinary education for a woman of her time. Unlike the poet, who had a deep and abiding interest in the sciences (specifically botany), Emily Norcross Dickinson attended academic lectures largely due to the rising popularity it was gaining in the public eye. Education was fashionable, and she followed suit. Habegger describes Emily Norcross as a "very local person... [who] was tightly bound to family and friends, familiar routines, [and] a limited palette of country sights and sounds" (Habegger 37). Identified by the poet's father as a "person in whom so many of the female virtues are conspicuous", Emily Norcross was a respectable woman who adhered to her domestic roles as a woman, a wife, and a mother (Leiter 279). Unlike the poet's father, who frequently was absent from the home because of his public responsibilities, Emily Norcross Dickinson spent most of her days at home, and only on occasions would leave to visit relatives. Though occupying most of her time at home, Emily Norcross was a socialite and attended community events, was an active church member, and offered her culinary skills where it was needed. As with Dickinson, Emily Norcross was also exceptional at gardening and a passionate housekeeper.

Described by Dickinson's grandmother, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, the poet's mother was known to be "always timorous, [and] always anxious" (Leiter 279). Emily Norcross suffered from episodes of depression, and was advised by her husband to not exhaust herself too severely. This contributed to her children being wary of upsetting their mother, and often leaving her alone. Dickinson writes to her friend, "Mother has been an invalid since we came home,... lies upon the lounge or sits in her easy chair, I don't know what her sickness is, for I am but a simple

child, and frightened” (Leiter 280). It is very apparent in reading the poet’s accounts that Dickinson felt estranged from her mother and that the two were very different. Writing to her mentor, Higginson, Dickinson confides to him, “My Mother does not care for thought.... Could you tell me what home is. I never had a mother. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled” (Leiter 280). Finding no support or encouragement in her literary endeavors from her mother, Dickinson found herself being reprimanded more often than praised as a consequence for her rebellious nature: “Mother told me when I was a Boy that I must ‘turn over a new Leaf’ - I call that the Foliage of Admonition” (Leiter 280). Despite their differences, two traits that are shared between these two women is their love for the home and their dedication to family. Much like Dickinson, the most telling characteristics of her mother are found in her writings - specifically in her notes and outlines of sermons. As if strategically mapping out lesson plans, Emily Norcross jotted notes as to how and what she would teach her children the importance of spiritual labor, which ironically Dickinson would come to reject. Emily Norcross Dickinson jots down in the margins of a sermon: “Life is short and uncertain.... You must teach them... that the carnal mind is enmity against God and they possess the carnal mind” (Habegger 35). Among the Dickinsons, Emily Norcross was the first to convert. Although her children, Austin and Vinnie, would also join the Congregational church in Amherst, it would not be until another 20 years afterwards that her husband would follow suit. Dickinson; however, never converted and refused to attend services altogether. On one account, as narrated by her sister, Vinnie, the poet’s father was “more than unusually determined that Emily should go to church, [while Emily] was especially determined that she would not”. The event concluded with

Emily disappearing only to be “found after the service—locked in a cellar bulkhead and “calmly rocking in a chair” (Gelpi 13).

Though Dickinson found enmity with her parents’ ideals and her Puritan upbringing, Rowena Revis Jones asserts that Dickinson’s “toughness of mind and spirit..., [s]elf-respect, stubborn doubts, and hard-fought positions” are all characteristics that were heavily influenced and formulated by her experiences and education (Jones 285). As Jones identifies, Dickinson’s Puritan education contributes to her insights and manner of expression in three ways. Firstly, it taught the poet, at a young age, that the cultivation of the mind was of extreme importance. Secondly, because Puritan education recognized women’s capabilities of intellect, Dickinson was provided the educational opportunities to establish within herself a sense of self-worth. Lastly, Puritan ideals taught her that the union between an individual’s mind and their religious beliefs was essential in creating a sense of being (Jones 285). Although Dickinson would not become a devout Christian, she would learn, through her education, that loyalty and commitment to her strongest convictions demanded the entirety of her mind and soul.

Known now as a beacon and “cornerstone for the reconstruction of the female tradition of American women’s poetry,” when reading Dickinson’s early letters, the young poet seems to have been a radically different person during her adolescent years (Sielke 167). In her letters addressed to a childhood friend, Miss Abiah Palmer Strong, which the poet referred to as “A”, young Dickinson was “chatty and reliable [with a] voice [that] is never disembodied, [and] never drifts” (Charyn 28). Her use of language during this stage of her life was fairly direct and rarely traded in abstractions. The first documented letter indicates the two girls began corresponding in 1845 when Dickinson was fourteen and continued until 1853. Primarily focusing on topics such

as academia, beauty, marriage, religion, and music, the young poet was hardly atypical of a girl her age. Unlike the “Loaded Gun” we so often envision and associate Dickinson with, learning the ways of the domestic sphere as an “embryo of future usefulness” occupied Dickinson’s concerns during this portion of her life (L 11). In regards to courtship, wifedom, and motherhood, the young poet fancifully indulges her imagination. In one letter, Dickinson writes to A:

I am growing handsome very fast indeed! I expect I shall be the belle of Amherst when I reach my 17th 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. (L 7)

In this passage, Dickinson deploys a sort of cheekiness that suggests playfully she is already critical and aware of her cultural inheritance. Here, Dickinson comments on the patriarchal ideals of youthfulness, beauty, marriageability, and humorously dramatizes the anticipation of her suitors’ responses. Dickinson is highly conversational in her letters, and seeks to entertain her reader with subtlety, wit, and humor. As we know, Dickinson never married in her lifetime. In light of this fact, it is ironic for Dickinson to entertain such ideas as a young girl. Dickinson also apologizes for her forwardness to A: “Modesty, you know, forbids me to mention whether my personal appearance has altered. I leave that for others to judge” (L 14). It is as though she is actively trying to remind herself to practice domesticated restraint, but cannot and addresses it with boldness and humor. Notions such as having a swarm of suitors or regarding herself as beautiful makes Dickinson incredibly human, familiar, and accessible because of her deference to conventional attitudes towards gender. There is a particular confidence that Dickinson exudes

in her correspondence with A—especially when discussing her intellectual prowess. Crowning herself in self-praise and utmost confidence, she writes to A: “You may then be Plato and I will be Socrates, provided you won’t be wiser than I am” (5). As if playfully challenging A, Dickinson engages her friend in amicable competition.

In her correspondence with A, Dickinson speaks highly of her love for botany and gardening—specifically, she makes it a point to inform A about how “finely” her plants look. As seen in her poetry and her letters, flowers are of great importance throughout the poet’s life. In her poem “As Children bid the Guest “Good Night”” (J 133), which Thomas Johnson dates to have been written in 1859, Dickinson expresses the joy and pleasure she experiences when nurturing her flowers:

As Children bid the Guest “Good Night”
And then reluctant turn—
My flowers raise their pretty lips—
Then put their nightgowns on.

As children caper when they wake
Merry that it is Morn—
My flowers from a hundred cribs
Will peep, and prance again.

(J 133)

Analogized as sleeping children who rise happily in the morning, Dickinson adopts a maternal role and tenderly watches over her young, her flowers. The illustration Dickinson paints in this simple, two quatrain poem depicts the life cycle of a flower through the changing of the seasons. The imagery of the flowers dressing themselves in “nightgowns” indicates the arrival of autumn,

in which the flowers will prepare for their winter sleep. Transitioning to spring in the second stanza, Dickinson highly anticipates when her flowers will emerge and “prance again”. Greatly differing from the poems that she would write during the latter half of her poetic career, her earliest poems primarily took on simple forms and thematically focused on equally simpler topics.

In January 1850, when the poet was 19 years old, her correspondence with Miss A. P. Strong began to drastically change. Not only does her conversational exuberance begin to fade, but her letters also become progressively shorter and begin to have more violent shifts. She begins to tackle more abstract concepts in her letters and poetry, which usually pertained to her conflicted relationship with Christian orthodoxy. In her early poems, such as, “I think just how my shape will rise -” (J 237), Dickinson demonstrates a stage of indebtedness to God and the practices associated with her Christian beliefs:

I think just how my shape will rise—
When I shall be “forgiven”—
Till Hair—and Eyes—and timid Head—
Are out of sight—in Heaven—

I think just how my lips will weigh—
With shapeless —quivering —prayer—
That you—so late—“Consider” me—
The “Sparrow” of your Care—
(J 237)

We get a sense that Dickinson’s religious reverence is sincere and anticipates to be recognized, molded, and transformed by her savior. By putting the words “forgiven”, “sight”, “Consider” and

“Sparrow” in quotations and italics, Dickinson is differentiating their weight of significance in comparison to their surrounding words. She imagines her ascension to heaven—or as older Dickinson would perceive it—an erasure of identity. Forgiven for what, Dickinson would later inquire. The young poet confides with A:

The folks have all gone away; they thought they left me alone.... Three here instead of one, wouldn't it scare them? A curious trio, part earthly and part spiritual two of us, the other, all heaven, and no earth. God is sitting here, looking into my very soul to see if I think right thoughts. Yet I am not afraid. (L 34-35).

In this passage, the trio Dickinson refers to is alluding to the Holy Trinity; however, instead of God, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, it would appear Dickinson's trio is composed of a far more blasphemous collective that exists in separation from God. In this letter, Dickinson indicates that she and A's paths are beginning to diverge due to their differences in their religious beliefs.

Dickinson, rather hotly, retorts: “Success, however, even in making a fool of myself, isn't to be despised; so I shall persist in writing, and you may be laughing at me.... I certainly wouldn't be at the fag-end but for civility to you. This self-sacrificing spirit will be the ruin of me!” (L35).

Although the members of Dickinson's trinity are not explicitly listed, she secures the act of writing as essential. Dickinson becomes increasingly ambivalent about her sacrilegious thoughts and struggles to absolve herself of the conflict she has in her relationship with God. She even goes so far to confess to A:

I have lately come to the conclusion that I am Eve, alias Mrs. Adam. You know there is no account of her death in the Bible, and why am not I Eve? If you find any statements which you think likely to prove the truth of the case, I wish you would send them to me without delay. (L 17)

Linking herself to the woman who began sin and mortal suffering, Dickinson recognizes her faith in her religious upbringing is deteriorating. She asks A to help her disbelief, which suggests her drifting from Christianity was not intentional. Just as Eve became curious about the world outside of Paradise and ate of the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, Dickinson's cravings for truth also resulted in the shunning of Christianity. As Sabine Sielke conjectures:

Dickinson aligns herself with Eve's disobedience, her doubt towards orthodoxy, and her desire for knowledge. Not only is Eve a figure of fairly mysterious, motherless origin, she is also, as Dickinson points out, deprived of death. Such absences themselves, however, are fundamental to Dickinson's poetic enterprise, since they point towards "something" beyond "literal life. (Sielke 70)

This notion of being at variance with her Christian faith would remain with her as she transitioned into adulthood. Whereas Calvinist values viewed "a woman who has fallen into spiritual lethargy at home" [as being] suddenly torn away from familiarity" (Howe 42), young Dickinson finds herself caught in a web of contradictions that she desperately tries to reason through. Dickinson expresses this struggle in a poem:

I took my Power in my Hand—
And went against the World—
'Twas not so much as David—had—
But I—was twice as bold—

I aimed my Pebble—but Myself
Was all the one that fell—
Was it Goliath—was too large—
Or was myself—too small?
(FH 220, J 540)

In this poem, Dickinson expresses her desire for ownership and authority to conduct and live as she chooses, for self-authorship. Claiming to have surpassed David, Dickinson seeks fortitude in her own strength rather than depending on God's and casts her first stone but is unable to surpass her Goliath. Dickinson's "Goliath" remains ambiguous, but one might assume she is referring to the social constructs that limited her potential. "Was it Goliath—was too large— / Or was myself—too small?" (J 540), she contemplates. Though she can defeat David, she cannot rid herself of the Goliath in her life, which poses an imminent threat to her livelihood. She deliberately does not seek help from God because what she desires is the cultivation of a self-made, independent, and liberating identity apart from Christian orthodoxy. As Gelpi writes,

The first act of consciousness, therefore, is awareness of one's self in a separate but encompassing framework; and the condition of living, if one is to "live" deliberately," adjusts and readjusts itself, seeking in multiplicity the unity [to] which one returns perhaps only in death. (Gelpi 5)

This freeing and pleasurable first act of consciousness is one Dickinson feels she is unable to fully obtain. Although she may wield the power of language, she is unable to topple her adversaries. By submitting to God, she is surrendering her ability to not only possess anything but also is sacrificing her ability to name things. Just as God had molded the universe and decorated earth with his creation, Dickinson desires to take control over her world but is denied that power. Dickinson even goes as far as ascribing to herself sinful and rebellious qualities:

Perhaps you have exchanged the fleeting pressures of time for a crown of immortality. Perhaps the shining company above has turned their golden harps to the song of one more redeemed sinner. I hope that at sometime the heavenly gates will be opened to receive me and the angels will consent to call me sinister. (Gelpi 31)

Dickinson consents to her condemnation. She does not seek redemption and makes no indication she desires to repent for her rejection of Christianity, but dreams of the day the heavens will cast judgment and deem her unworthy. She takes pleasure in portraying herself in controversial ways and basks in the danger and euphoria of possibility. Towards the end of Dickinson and A's correspondence, it is clear that Dickinson thinks herself altered: "The shore is safer, A, but I love to buffet the sea - I can count the bitter wrecks here in these pleasant waters, and hear the murmuring winds, but oh, I love the danger!" (L 45). It is with this attitude that we see Dickinson tackle her pursuit of identity and engross herself in indulging in unconventional living. Despite her unpopular reception from her society, her unorthodox methodology is exactly what fueled her motivation to explore herself and her world through intense and profound linguistic examination.

CHAPTER 2

THE MAKING OF AN ICONOCLAST: GENDER, PATRIARCHY & RELIGION

When first arriving at Amherst in 1881, Mabel Loomis Todd wrote to her parents about a “character” who lived amongst the people as an oddity. In her account, Todd writes:

I must tell you about the character of Amherst. It is a lady whom the people call the Myth.... She has not seen the outside of her house for fifteen years, except once to see a new church, when she crept out at night, & viewed it by moonlight. No one who calls upon her mother & sister have seen her.... She dresses wholly in white, & her mind is said to be wonderful. She writes finely, but no one ever sees her... (Leiter 17-18)

Much like Todd, intense speculation upon Dickinson’s iconoclastic lifestyle is an area of interest amongst literary critics. Many have proposed that Dickinson may have suffered from extreme psychological disorder—or, as Higginson describes it, a “partially cracked” mind (Rich 160).

While conditions, such as agoraphobia, schizotypal personality disorder, or bipolar disorder have been theorized to have afflicted Dickinson, D.J. Moores does not diagnose Dickinson with a disorder, but rather, comments that her “unusual psychology enabled her to see states of being both negative, positive, perhaps everything in between, in unique, and insightful ways” (Moores, ch.1). Through his exploration of ecstatic poetic tradition, Moores demonstrates that unlike those who are closed off from certain parts of the mind; poets such as Wordsworth, Whitman, and Dickinson can convert pain and suffering into “a stimulus to extraordinary creativity and insight” (Moores, ch.1). Ecstatic poetic tradition, believed to have originated from Sufi mysticism, focuses on poetry that distinctly expresses the innate longing for a connection to the poet's sense of self and essence. Unlike certain ideas that became dominant after the Age of

Enlightenment, which advocated for the prioritization of logic and cognition over human experience, ecstatic language argues that the “immense psychological value of the Romantic encounter with the retrieval of the unconscious “other” is tantamount to reason. By doing so, an intense and deep understanding of the self can be derived. Therefore, because Dickinson experienced her humanity through an unconventional mind, the art she produced—especially that of grief, “exults in the power of the self to lift itself beyond suffering.... [and] leaves her with a mastery of its excess, as she can traverse through... it on solid footing” (Moore, ch. 1). Moore identifies Dickinson as a highly ecstatic being who, by her trade of linguistic prowess, was able to penetrate her psyche and achieve an exceptional understanding of the self. Through intense poetic meditation, she was able to not only encounter the self intimately, but can conceptualize the essence of her being and express it through language. The excess of self-knowledge she possessed gave her the ability to explore the most painful and darkest parts of her mind, and remain exceptionally perceptive and coherent.

Although it is convincing to perceive Dickinson’s self-imposed exile as a result of psychological disorder, when understanding the framework of oppression that worked against her, it is by degrees unjust to assume mental illness to be the catalyst of her isolation. Dickinson’s circumstances were, as Martha Nell Smith writes, “privileged by class but disenfranchised by gender”. While her class allotted her the necessary means to remain “comfortably single” and provided ample time for her to write, her gender jeopardized her status as a member of society, limited her influence within it, and made it virtually impossible to gain literary authority in a sphere that was dominated by men (Smith 14). Having no reputation or popularity within the literary sphere, Dickinson found herself belittled, scantily read, and

misunderstood. A century later, critics would remain in this vicinity of thought and would call her work “no more than [the] jottings” of a naive girl who failed to produce “musings of a full grown, fully educated woman” (Howe iii).

The same mentality is shared by even her most intimate literary companion, Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Their correspondence began on April 15, 1862, when the 31-year-old poet wrote to him:

Are you too deeply occupied to say if my verse is alive? The mind is so near itself it cannot see distinctly, and I have none to ask.... I enclosed my name, asking you, if you please, to tell me what is true. (L 253)

Along with her letter, Dickinson included four of her poems: “We play at Paste,” “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—,” “The nearest dream recedes unrealized,” and “I’ll tell you how the Sun rose.” Higginson, having already established himself as a “social activist, revolutionary Abolitionist, and influential writer”, acquired literary rank through a series of essays, which he wrote and published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Though Dickinson was an avid reader of the *Atlantic Monthly* and had encountered Higginson’s works before, it was not until after reading his essay “Letter to the Young Contributor”, which “offered witty, practical advice to young writers, pointedly including women, and spoke of the glory of language and the power and mystery of the individual word” that Dickinson felt compelled to seek his literary counsel (Leiter 319). In response to her letter, Higginson offered his literary critique and wrote back to inquire more about the mysterious poet. He attests to the rarity of her mind, and as if bewitched, writes to her, “you only enshroud yourself in this fiery mist & I cannot reach you, but only rejoice in the rare sparkles of light” (Leiter 322). Higginson recognized within the poet as possessing a remarkable gift of language, but found her “enigmatic” and impossible to comprehend. He

described her verse as a “spasmodic gait”, disapproved of her “uncontrolled style,” and was “never haunted by the doubts that tormented and inspired her, but instead devoted his life to fighting for what he knew was just” (Leiter 321). Judging by the surgical manner in which he critiqued her poems, his “rigidly time-bounded sense of poetic form [of] insistence on exact rhyme, standard punctuation, correct grammar, and titles” would hinder his appreciation of her poetry, and lead him to view her as a fascinating yet unfathomable “partially cracked” mind.

Rather than viewing Dickinson’s work as a product of disorder of the mind, I would argue her work is a response to the disorder within the society that she insufferably was born into. Her unconventional lifestyle catered to her mastery of unconventional language, and thus made her incomprehensible to the readership in her time. In contrast to Moores, critics, such as Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Adrienne Rich, and Susan Howe, paint a radically different portrait of the poet, and argue Dickinson’s retreat as a carefully evaluated and tactical move in her “poetic mission” (Smith 13). Dickinson, an “American woman alone and home and choosing” strategically her position, possessed an unyielding “Promethean ambition” that necessitated intense and solitary meditation. As Rich writes, “I have come to imagine [Dickinson] as somehow too strong for her environment, a figure of powerful will, not at all frail or breathless, someone whose personal dimensions would be felt in a household” (Rich 160). In a society that praised female intellectual growth, but disapproved of its voicing in public practice—with the exception within the church, Dickinson’s desire for unadulterated poetic expression would undeniably be squandered had she chosen a conventional life. Far from a madwoman in the attic, Dickinson’s self-imposed exile was a transition of lifestyles, a tactical move to identify, investigate, inquire, and converse with her “genius” without the interference of unnecessary

outside influences. Although it was not entirely uncommon for women during this time to occupy the majority of their leisure within their households, home, for Dickinson, was undoubtedly her most sacred and beloved of all places. Dickinson's love for her home is indisputable. "Duty is black and brown—home is bright and shining" (L 78) she writes to her brother, Austin, and blissfully continues to express her deep love and refuge within her safe haven:

Home is a holy thing,—nothing of doubt or distrust can enter it's blessed portals. I feel it more and more as the great world goes on, and one and another forsake in whom you place your trust, here seems indeed to be a bit of Eden which not the sin of any can utterly destroy,—smaller it is indeed, and it may be less fair, but fairer it is and brighter than all the world beside" (L 75)

As a girl, she regarded her home warmly and would hold onto that sentiment until the day she passed. In agreement with Wolf, Rich, and Howe, both of the poet's siblings, Austin and Vinnie Dickinson viewed their sister's "retreat from society" as not as extreme as many have made it out to be, but "[was] a happening... [that was] perfectly natural" (Leiter 18). Susan Gilbert, wife of Austin Dickinson and dearest friend of the poet, also attests to this view, and writes in her obituary of Dickinson:

Not disappointed with the world, not an invalid until within the past two years, not from any lack of sympathy, not because she was insufficient for any mental work or social career—her endowment being so exceptional - but the "mesh of her soul," as Browning had called the body, was too rare, and the sacred quiet of her own home proved the fit atmosphere of her worth and work. (Leiter 18)

The "mesh of her soul," as Gilbert mentions, desired liberation and the freedom to explore the depths of her artistry in the most concentrated and intimate way: by herself and for herself.

Rather than cocooning herself in the comfort of conventional living, Dickinson consciously chose to withdraw from society as a means to explore the “Undiscovered Continent” (J 832). As Dickinson famously writes:

Soto! Explore thyself!
Therein thyself shalt find
The “Undiscovered Continent”—
No Settler had the Mind.
(J 832)

Just as Hernando de Soto once ventured into Central and South America, Dickinson sought to dive into the uncharted terrain of her psyche and poetic craft. Fully aware of her opposition to social conventionality, and religiosity, Dickinson’s “basic motive... was comprehension: to know and to feel as intensely as possible” (Gelpi 98). “Explore thyself!” she boldly writes as if challenging Soto, and implores him to seek further. “There thyself shalt find / The “Undiscovered Continent,”” the place where the self can freely roam and live in its most raw and intimate form. For Dickinson, this territory of self-discovery was not easily identified or found, but through intense intimacy with the self, it can be brought into view.

She repeatedly calls into question the constraints of gender stereotypes, as well as the limitations it imposes on the female subject’s ability to cultivate an authentic identity and explore one’s creativity:

I'm "wife"—I've finished that—
That other state—
I'm Czar—I'm "Woman" now—
It's safer so—

How odd the Girl's life looks

Behind this soft Eclipse—
I think that Earth feels so
To folks in Heaven—now—

This being comfort—then
That other kind—was pain—
But why compare?
I'm "Wife"! Stop there!
(FH 39, J 199)

In this poem, “I’m “Wife”—I’ve finished that” the narrator discards the conventionality of wifhood and resides in “The other state” where she can reign as “Czar” and as a “Woman”. Dickinson intentionally weaves together the words “wife” and “Czar” to illustrate the contrasting power dynamics and the implications their opposition suggests. Whereas many women during Dickinson’s time would have perceived marriage and wifhood as virtuous and securing their social status, financial wellbeing, and purpose, Dickinson perceives it as the exact opposite. As suggested by the poem, wifhood means for a female a life of subjugation and submission to male authority and to the expectations of the society she operates within. Martha Nell Smith argues that Dickinson’s perception of marriage is the process in which a wife must be “curtailed to meet the approval of her husband,” and compares the image of a woman in her wedding veil to “the dead [who are] shrouded in winding sheets” (Smith 35). Rather than a harmonious union, Smith suggests that Dickinson views marriage not as “a happy, public celebrated affair, but a secret... crucifixion” (Smith 36). It is the process that denies the female from obtaining an autonomous sense of self, limits her reach to only marital perimeters, and afflicts the female with a form of death far worse than death itself. Because women were “full of thought and feeling and

fancy, but poor, lonely, and unhappy”, they would become burdened with a “private pain” that was discouraged to be given expression, which would become the catalyst of her demise (Smith 37).

In a letter Dickinson wrote to Susan Gilbert prior to her marriage to the poet’s brother, she expresses her apprehensive stance about marriage:

How dull our lives must seem to the bride, and the plighted maiden, whose days are fed with gold, and who gathers pearls every evening; but to the wife, Susie, sometimes the wife forgotten, our lives perhaps seem dearer than all others in the world; you have seen flowers at morning satisfied with the dew, and these same sweet flowers at noon with their heads bowed in anguish before the mighty sun; think you these thirsty blossoms will now need nought but—dew? No, they will cry for sunlight, and pine for the burning noon, tho’ it scorches them, scathes them; they have got through with peace—they know that the map of noon, is mightier than morning and their life henceforth with him. (Gelpi 1-2)

While speculating that those to be wed find the unwedded “dull,” she mentions the luxuries they receive. Although the bride is “fed with gold” and “gathers pearls every evening,” Dickinson foreshadows the bride’s fate by her illustration of the wife. Unlike the bride who is adorned with gifts, the wife becomes “forgotten.” Dickinson then describes the wife as longingly looking towards Dickinson and Gilbert, the unwedded women, as “dearer than all others in the world”. The word “forgotten” is especially significant, and is deployed by Dickinson with heavy intention. Similar to Smith’s conjectures about the consequences of 19th-century wifhood, Dickinson fears that marriage will render her life meaningless and “cry for sunlight, and pine for the burning noon.” Unlike the brides who accept gold and pearls, Dickinson desires direct contact with raw and intense feeling. She uses nature in this passage as a metaphorical bridge to

express her own being, and implores to Gilbert that just as the sunlight and burning noon “scorches” and “scathes” the body, nothing is “mightier” than the ability to live purely as one’s self. As illustrated by the “sweet flowers at noon,” who, “with their heads bowed in anguish,” Dickinson implores to Gilbert that surrendering to the eclipse of a husband’s shadow would render women unsatisfied and incessantly yearning. The “plighted maiden” who is blinded by measuring her happiness by societal standards, gold, and pearls, will ultimately meet ruin and self-destruction because she is bound to the laws and expectations of marriage and is denied the ability to cultivate an authentic identity apart from her husband. She will lose her connection with the world for what it is—and in consequence, will lose touch with her own nature.

In contrast to “wife”, which suggests inferiority, submission, and subservience, “Czar” wields capitalization to signify power and authority, and is the ascription Dickinson chooses to associate “Women” with. She is deliberately connecting the two and suggesting the poem’s female narrator has come to a radical understanding of her identity and willfully rules sovereign. To further illustrate the significance of the word “Woman”, Dickinson uses the image of a “soft Eclipse” to define the status of a “Girl” in comparison to the dominating Woman Czar. Though “eclipse” creates an image of overshadowing a subject, the word “soft” is so delicately chosen and placed. Rather than using a harsher adjective to describe the eclipse, Dickinson chooses to soften its impact, which lacks the dominating nature of a total eclipse. It is not life-threatening or all-consuming; rather, Dickinson’s eclipse seems to be describing a non-violent submission. There is no ominous or imminent threat that swallows the female whole. Instead, it veils her.

Dickinson’s eclipse is blurring the image of the female and does not convey an act of erasure, but describes an act of layering an identity falsely. Similar to Smith’s contrasting image

of a wedding veil concealing a bride's face and a "winding sheet" covering the dead, a "soft Eclipse" envelopes female identity into perpetual girlhood. The female is not defeated. Rather, she is simply unable to reveal or nurture her true self. This speaks to the experiences Dickinson faced in her own life. Dickinson's identity was not devoured by the patriarchal religious frameworks and conventions of her society; rather, it was pushed into hiding. No matter the pressures against her, she ultimately chose to detach herself from her society and remove the constant framing and influences that could jeopardize her liberty in creating a self holistically of her own will and choosing. Rather than surrendering to the "soft Eclipse" of girlhood, she chooses to reign as her own female Czar over the small kingdom within her room, using language as her decree. In a class of women whose profession was that of "perpetual childhood" and seen within the shadows of their husbands, what is being attested in Dickinson's poem is the struggle for women to attain autonomy within the confines of heterosexual marriage (Szalay 63). The imposition of marriage retracts the ability for expression and unless accompanied by a male counterpart, the female identity remains without status, powerless, and vulnerable.

Dickinson's ambivalence towards authority applied to the expectations of marriage, as well as religion. In her poem "A solemn thing—it was—I said—" (J271), Dickinson imagines a life that "beckons her but does not yet belong to her" (Leiter 46):

A solemn thing—it was—I said—
A woman—white—to be—
And wear—if God should count me fit—
Her blameless mystery—

A hallowed thing—to drop a life
Into the Purple well—

To plummetless—that it return—
Eternity—until—

I pondered how the bliss would look—
And would it feel big—
When I could take it in my hand—
As hovering—seen—through fog—

And then the size of this “small” life—
The Sages—call it small—
Swelled—like Horizons—in my vest—
And I sneered—softly—“small”!

(J 271)

Dickinson’s most iconic choice of attire: the white dress, is known to have been worn by the poet after the mid-1800s. Although it cannot be assumed this poem references it directly, I conjecture that it can offer insight. While Habegger concludes Dickinson’s white dress was a choice of practical means, literary critic, Susan M. Gilbert, argues that it was a conscious decision that “transformed her life into art”. Gilbert further explains:

[Dickinson] used her ‘small’ life itself as an instrument of her great art: even the most ordinary material of her life... became a sort of encoded gestures meant n]both to supply imagery for, and to supplement encoded statements of her verse” (Leiter 47).

Gilbert’s claim suggests that Dickinson’s white dress is a visual embodiment of her iconoclastic lifestyle and commitment to her poetic craft. For Dickinson, “A woman—white—to be / And wear—” identified a woman who, in front of God, willingly chooses to dress herself in ”blameless mystery”. Seeing as Dickinson had refused to attend service or join the

Congregational church, it is likely that white, which typically assumes religious undertones, is not associated with God. Rather, it is an extension of her creative potential. Looking for a more direct and sensual way of living, in stanza two, Dickinson imagines herself jumping into the “plummetless purple well,” which is to say, her poet craft, and highly anticipates the rewarding euphoria of “bliss”. By dropping her worldly life in the depths of her poetic craft, she can experience “mystic illuminations of her vocation; of the “Horizons” that swell within her” (Leiter 48). By the concluding stanza, Dickinson points out the inability for the “Sages” to comprehend her great mission, and can only make a judgment with jaded eyes. ”The Truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind— ” (J 1263), Dickinson implores much later in life, as if finally obtaining what she could only imagine grasping during her early years of solitude.

As Cynthia Griffin Wolff explicates, “the drift away from God was generational, [and was] the phenomenon of an increasingly secular America” (Wolff 451). Regardless of the pressures she faced, Dickinson’s religious skepticism with her Christian faith served as a springboard in the pursuit of exploring her subjectivity. Seeing as several cultural and religious trends, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson’s transcendentalism, Darwin’s theory of evolution, the theological rethinking of Higher Criticism, as well as the devastation marked by the American Civil War, falling out of faith was not entirely uncommon. Dickinson, who kept herself updated with current events, found herself, too, shifting her convictions away from Christian orthodoxy. When attending Mount Holyoke as a young girl, Dickinson refused to profess her faith publicly. Gelpi describes: “When Miss Lyon asked those lost girls who at least desired to become Christians to stand up, Emily Dickinson was the only one to remain seated, [and commented in a letter], “They thought it queer I didn’t rise - I thought a lie would be queerer”” (Gelpi 32).

Because her beliefs did not reside in Christian orthodoxy, Dickinson found it unreasonable to say otherwise. As described in Chapter 1, Dickinson never became a full-fledged member of the church, and eventually stopped attending services altogether. By being unable to adhere to a religious calling, Dickinson recollects the gravity of the pain she endured as she lost many of her closest companions:

I am selfish too, because I am feeling lonely; some of my friends are gone, and some of my friends are sleeping - sleeping in the churchyard sleep—the hour of evening is sad—it was once my study hour - my master has gone to rest (L 43).

Because this passage is said in lamentation, what Dickinson calls the “churchyard sleep” is not desired. It suggests a slumber that has caused her friends to abandon her and fall into a stagnant stupor. Induced by the practices and beliefs of religion, this slumber stunts the growth of the mind and one’s subjectivity. For Dickinson, religion limits identity and provides a facade that is unnatural to human nature. Dickinson’s poetry and letters identify God as a masculine authority. Just as patriarchal culture, during her time, devalued and othered women who, by independent choice, wished to live apart from conventionality, it is not unlikely that Dickinson perceived God similarly. God was—above all else—sovereign, and demanded a person to surrender all wants and desires to serve and worship Him. Because religion and culture found themselves entangled, patriarchal ideals became justified through the manipulation of scripture. As a patriarchal authority who would threaten her livelihood and aspirations for poetic expression, it is by no radical inclination that Dickinson rejects Christian orthodoxy.

Quite often Dickinson dramatizes her perception of religion with irony:

Perhaps you have exchanged the fleeting pressures of time for a crown of immortality. Perhaps the shining company above has turned their golden harps to

the song of one more redeemed sinner. I hope that at some time the heavenly gates will be opened to receive me and the angels will consent to call me sinister.
(Gelpi 31)

In this passage, Dickinson makes the distinction between her salvation and another's. Unlike the other person who is met by the "shining company" with rejoicing and music, Dickinson arrives at the gate of Heaven and is called "sinister." While most would anticipate their acceptance into Heaven, Dickinson finds it humorous to be unwelcomed. Rather than the "crown of immortality," she chooses to relish in the "fleeting pressures of time." She satirizes the practices and convictions of believers to point out the foolishness of it all. Dickinson writes in a poem:

I think, they call it "God"—
Renowned to ease Extremity—
When Formula, had failed—
(FH 293, J89)

Here she demonstrates that religion only offers illusionary escape. Karl Marx states, "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opiate of the masses" (McKinnon). It is within this vein of thought that Marx and Dickinson share similar beliefs that servitude to the Lord inhibits human potential, and therefore is undesirable. It is vital to understand that what Marx and Dickinson critique is not religion itself, but the institutionalization of it. Because man manipulates religion in accordance with socio-cultural values, religion, therefore, cannot truly save or provide an individual with absolute truth. What institutionalized religion offers man are boundaries, limitations, and disguises suffering with illusory happiness. As Bloom eloquently puts it, "[Dickinson] shares Emerson's rejection: "Other world! there is no other world. Here or nowhere is the whole fact"

(Bloom 208). This attachment to the immediate rather than the Heavenly led to a majority of her relations to perish prematurely despite her efforts to maintain them. Nonetheless, Dickinson perseveres through her loneliness and trades in her companionship to friends for a relationship with “the Master”, which is to say, her imagination and its transcription into poetry.

Although Dickinson stopped attending service, she did not reject the idea of God. She entertained and held fast onto her discernment of His characteristics and continued scrupulously to challenge Him. In Vendler’s commentary to Dickinson’s poem, “It’s easy to invent a Life—” (J 724, F 747), Dickinson characterizes God as “unserious... [and as one who] enjoys being a spontaneous artist”, which she mocks (Vendler 314). Within this poem, God, as Vendler describes, heedlessly gambols in His works, and is disinterested in caring for the sole creation made to be in His image: man. The religious idea of God’s Providence is also questioned by Dickinson, to which Vendler writes:

Providence of Dickinson’s narcissistic God does not protect lives, but cruelly sports with them.... while affirming God’s omnipotence and providential care, accepted His absolute capacity to allow evil and catastrophe. And, by showing God-the-artist’s careless “Spontaneity” in action, she defines, through opposition, her own idea of the artist as precise, intent, and motivated by a love for those “Patterns” created by imagination that are preserved, not jettisoned, after they have taken shape. (Vendler 315)

In agreement with Vendler, Gelpi also argues that Dickinson’s God was not the all-loving, just, and merciful Father as so many prescribed Him to be. For Dickinson,

God [was] 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. (Gelpi 123)

For Dickinson, God was intangible, distant, and unyielding. Perhaps even self-serving, capricious, and cruel. Rather than a savior, God was a tyrant.

Dickinson's honest commitment to her truth became the pillar of her noncompliance to religion. God was cruel and treated Man unfairly yet still demanded worship and praise. Religious instruction throughout Dickinson's life taught that one should submit to His will, and relinquish all earthly desires. It squandered her possibility for freedom and expression. Because her thoughts were seen as wild and blasphemous, there could be no room for God to rule her world. She would be left dry, unfed, and dissatisfied—which is to say, to live as if one was already asleep. Gelpi recapitulates the poet's thoughts:

Is there an objective correspondence between the beholder and the beheld? Do I know myself only in connection with, even in submission to, something beyond the self? Or must I make my own meaning in a murky universe?... [W]hen I beheld Nature, is there an inherent correlation between the phenomenon and its significance, between the concrete thing and its universal relevance, between physics and metaphysics? (Gelpi 153)

Gelpi further conjectures, “the cultivation of consciousness was [Dickinson's] religion” (Gelpi 108). Oddly enough, while disapproving of God, Dickinson accepts the story of Jesus Christ. While having no connection to her God who plagued the earth in fanciful experiments, Dickinson identifies with Jesus Christ's human suffering. She writes to Higginson, “To be human is more than to be divine, for when Christ was divine he was uncontended till he had been human” (L 274). Because Dickinson could not experience God, she could not lay her life before

Him; rather, she committed to the imagination and the freedom poetry allowed her. As Gelpi expresses, “the individual’s experience is a religious experience, like Christ’s pain and bliss; religion and consciousness are one and the same” (Gelpi 108). In this light, Dickinson replaces Christianity with the belief in the things immediate, the Body, and the Brain. As Vendler states:

God, through Nature, utters Sounds, but human language alone is voiced in Syllables. The Poet exists to reframe in intelligible Syllables the unintelligible Sounds ascribable to God. They boast—that Syllables are better than Sounds, and therefore the Brain is superior to God—presumes a Divinity who is exceeded in power by Humanity. Dickinson’s sacrilegious worship of the Syllable ... [c]ompels us to inquire into what—if not religion—is worthy of reverence. (Vendler 18)

What Vendler is suggesting in this passage is Dickinson’s belief that through language, one can understand reality—a world order beyond religious principles, which is to say the Real. As Lacanian Psychoanalysis describes, the Real is the absolute truth of reality that supersedes the confines of social order that humans create for themselves. As a means to conceive of a world order beyond the constructs of her society, Dickinson uses language to create and discover a way she could thrive outside the limitations and inadequacies of her culture. Though Dickinson does not address this directly, she makes motions to appraise intimate self-cultivation as her truth, and even states, “the few short moments in which I loved my Savior I would not now exchange for a thousand worlds like this” (Gelpi 31). The phrase suggests Dickinson has found a world far greater than that of the world that worships God. Dickinson identified the inadequacy of religion and social order, and purposely orchestrated a life where she could express and explore herself in an environment absent of excessive scrutiny of the world and its false pretenses. Her only faith,

as Bloom beautifully writes, is “in poetry and herself” (Bloom 211). Religion only but “hunts for Poetry’s freedom, while Poetry roams Divinity’s sovereign source” (Howe 55).

CHAPTER THREE
EMBRACING THE DAEMON:
NAVIGATING “MY LIFE HAD STOOD—A LOADED GUN—”

Susan Howe describes Dickinson's poetry as having “possessed the chameleon-capacity to change color in mid-stanza by the manipulation of a word, even one letter” (Howe 93). As is her poetry, her mind is of the same nature. For two centuries, literary critics have attempted to extrapolate a sense of Dickinson’s mind and have acquired far more questions than answers. In particular, a mystery that has captivated critics surrounds the events following her death. Anticipating her death, Dickinson had given her sister, Lavinia, instructions to burn the poet's letters she had received and collected over the years from her various correspondents. When Dickinson passed, upon destroying the letters, Lavinia came upon a bureau drawer containing her sister’s life’s work of well over a thousand poems. Dickinson's practice and dedication to poetry remained unknown to her family until the discovery of her poems, and having had no instruction as to what to do with them, Lavinia brought them to Mabel Loomis Todd, which led to the publication of Dickinson’s work. Because the poet chose to withhold instructions to destroy her poems, but did leave instructions to discard the bulk of her letters, questions are undoubtedly raised concerning the poet’s intentions.

In a time where publications were the main avenue as a means to gain exposure and recognition for one’s work, Dickinson rejected publication for the majority of her poems except a scant few during her lifetime—all of which were submitted anonymously. Though the poet was encouraged to publish and reminded of her “social obligation to make her work known to the public” by Helen Fiske Hunt, a prominent female writer during Dickinson’s time, for whatever

reason, the poet chose to remain relatively hidden (Leiter 369). With friends such as Samuel Bowels, who worked as an editor for *The Republican*, and individuals, such as Thomas Niles, editor of Roberts Brothers in Boston, requesting manuscripts of her verse, had Dickinson wished to publish, it was within her reach to do so. Of the few poems she did publish in her lifetime, Dickinson writes to Thomas Higginson in frustration about the alterations to a version of her poem, "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" (J 986), which she entitled "The Snake," that was submitted to the Springfield Weekly Republican. Vehemently, Dickinson writes: "Lest you meet my Snake and suppose I deceive it was robbed of me—defeated too of the third line by the punctuation. The third and fourth were one—I had told you I did not print" (Smith 11). Smith further infers that because "editorial interference dissuaded her from conventional publication," the poet gave up the endeavor altogether (Smith 11).

Whatever the reason, the reason as to why Dickinson did not publish her work remains a mystery. However, because she did not publish them on her own accord during her lifetime and left no request to do so after death, it is unknown if publishing Dickinson's poetry is imposing on her work and creative vision. Dickinson's thoughts about publication are expressed in several of her poems. One, in particular, describes the act of publishing as "the Auction / Of the Mind of Man—" (J 709). By using an "Auction" to describe publication, it is understood that the significance of the poet's mind and works are diminished for the sake of exchange value. By rejecting publication, Dickinson is also rejecting the commodification of her art. Rather than "reduc[ing] Human Spirit" to the "Disgrace of Price" (J 709), Dickinson abstained from publication and devoted her efforts as a poetic catalyst for herself. She did not write to cater to anyone or any price, but rather, wrote to explore realms of her own psyche. As Habbeggar

suggests, “[Dickinson] wasn’t driven by a quest of recognition. Rather, her writing was the expression of a hard existential fight [of her unconventional gift of language] that could not be shirked” (Habegger 404). He further conjectures that Dickinson’s “self-approval” outweighed any and all outside praise. In a poem Dickinson comments on the idea of fame, and mocks it:

Fame is a bee
It has a song—
It has a sting—
Ah, too, it has a wing.
(J 1763)

For Dickinson, wealth, the vanity of fame, and public validation from others were flighty aspirations and could not entice her to surrender to publication.

Whether or not Dickinson feared public response and disapproval, what Adrienne Rich conveys in her essay, “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson” establishes a strikingly different narrative that prioritizes self-confirmation rather than public acceptance. Rich illustrates Dickinson’s struggles, and conjectures, “It is an extremely painful and dangerous way to live—split between a publicly acceptable persona, and a part of yourself that you perceive as the essential, the creative and powerful self, yet also as possibly unacceptable, perhaps even monstrous” (Rich 175). This act of “splitting” Rich is referring to is the struggle of a female subject whose most basic need is individuality, but must subdue her creative self and adopt an acceptable public persona as a means to successfully operate within her society. Dickinson, at a very young age, recognized that she suffered from a “split” identity, and showcases deep concern for self-definition outside of her orthodox upbringing. As seen with Dickinson’s own life, to be a woman during this time and to possess the desire for an identity apart from conventional

standards could not be afforded unless she were to surrender herself to the extremities of isolation, ostracization, and being othered. Embarking on a life moved by individual creative drive defied every aspect of what was perceived to be a woman's ideal life. When weighing these options in comparison to the security and stability of conventional living, the lure of societal acceptance undoubtedly proved to be more favorable to the majority of women. To reduce the creative self is an act of human camouflaging that may help one to live peacefully and beneficially, but at the expense of hiding her independent, creative energy—or tossing it to the wayside. In contrast, Dickinson, from a “fractured sense of being eternally on intellectual borders,” created her unconventional poetic form (Howe 21). As a 19th-century woman who resided in a “community [where] expression [was] characterized by specific and often [placed] rigid constraints upon articulation and personal individuality” (Dobson 41), Dickinson found it necessary to initiate herself into the elusive and shifting nature of language to explore the fullness of her humanity and poetic potential.

Forgoing one's true nature, according to Ralph Waldo Emerson, is the root of human failure and unnecessarily hinders the cultivation and expression of an authentic self. Rather than procuring original thought, man recites dogma, scriptures, and the words of predecessors without considering what the truth of the individual is. As Emerson analogizes, unlike the blade of grass which exists unabashedly as itself, man cowers and chooses to live bound to the constraints of inherited thoughts. Emerson implores that individuals should rely on instinct and independent truth in opposition to the institutions of the masses (Bloom 157). Because man thinks through conformity, he, therefore, cannot and does not think for himself. As a woman, a highly sophisticated thinker, and a revolutionary writer, Dickinson finds commonality within the

fundamental belief of Emersonian philosophy that emphasizes the need for an individual to obtain authentic self-consciousness and individual truth. Harold Bloom, in his book *The Daemon Knows*, also connects Dickinson and Emerson and states, “Dickinson, whom I regard as a heretic from the Emersonian religion,... exalts whim over trust and faith” (Bloom 15). What Bloom implicates is that Emerson and Dickinson invest their conviction in the immediacy of experience to acquire a profound sense of being over the inherited dogmas of inherited concepts.

Dickinson’s admiration of Emerson is expressed to her dearest friend and sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert. She writes to her in a letter that Emerson seemed to be “as if he had come from where dreams are born” (Miller 149). Emerson was said to have stayed at the Dickinsons’ Evergreen estate while giving lectures in Amherst, but despite Dickinson’s great fascination for his work, no evidence indicates Dickinson met the well-known philosopher, poet, and essayist. Prioritizing personal exploration of the self, Dickinson and Emerson are both concerned in the discovery of truth through raw, direct, and immediate experience. Relying on the senses rather than the systems followed by the masses, such as organized religion, gender expectations, conventionality, and science, individual freedom and the journey to original thought is paramount. Concentrated on autonomy and individualism, Dickinson’s “recalcitrant selfhood,” as Wolosky argues, is highly recollective to the writings of Emerson (Wolosky 134). Having read Emerson’s *Essays, Second Series* (1844), which included his essays, “The Poet,” and “Nature,” and received a “beautiful copy” of his 1847 *Poems*, Dickinson’s regard for Emerson was of high respect. As Miller conjectures, the poet was so enamored with Emerson’s concepts that the poet quotes and paraphrases Emerson in her letters and poems, which Miller identifies in “I taste a liquor never brewed” (J 214), and “It sifts from Leaden Sieves” (J 311).

Miller also further links the two poets together and expresses in her book, *A Poet's Grammar*, that their connection is not only in their agreements with certain philosophies about nature and human potentiality, but in their beliefs in and about language. Fundamentally driven by the Puritan belief that words are an extension of God, language, to Emerson, is the “ideal system of meaning” (Miller 149). In theory, because words are “signs of natural facts,” according to Emerson, through the meditation in nature, language enables consciousness, and is, therefore, the perfect medium to translate and interpret all truths (Miller 149). Like Emerson, Dickinson believed in the emancipatory power of language, but also recognized the fallacy of conformity and institutionalization. The most obvious separation between the two is in their conception of God. While Emerson remains in praise of God as the Almighty and Majestic Creator, Dickinson reveres God as an authority figure who jeopardizes her livelihood and abuses His power over his subjects. Ambivalent concerning the powers that she refuses to submit to, she severed ties from “compensatory philosophy . . . , idealism and theology [and] insisted on the separation between self and other as fundamental for subject formation” (Sielke 189). Because God, society, science, and philosophy did not and could not fully attest to Dickinson’s sense of truth, she made it her mission to discover a medium that could supply her the highest form of liberation possible and satisfy her. For the female poet, language—specifically, her language—became her truth, dogma, and personal methodology.

As a pioneer of her own life, Dickinson's purpose, as Sielke suggests, was to explore the extremities of the human psyche through language and “leap over the chasm of the unknown” (Sielke 189). Dickinson prioritized the discovery of the self by opposing “the other within” (Sielke 189). As described by Rich’s concept of the “split” female, what Dickinson is battling is

the persona that is expected by culture, and the creative force that desperately wishes to give itself a voice and dominion. What is most feared and kept in silence, Dickinson chose to embrace and give language. She writes in a letter to her aunt, “My birds fly far off, nobody knows where they go, but you see I know they are coming back, and other people don’t, that makes the difference” (L 194). Dickinson uses the image of the bird to signify the freedom in which her words are able to take to the skies. Unlike Dickinson, who could only write words onto paper, words are able to exceed the natural boundaries of the earthly. As demonstrated in this passage, Dickinson’s language owes no explanation to anyone but herself. Her “birds”—which is to say her poetic and expressive language—is cast out onto paper, and in her own dialect. This phrase can also attest to Dickinson’s confidence in her language, and she understands that her work is likely incomprehensible to others. However, Dickinson’s intentions with her poetry were never to communicate to others directly, but to intensely communicate with and to herself. The poet never intended to become a heroine for anyone or herself, and did not commit herself to work for any public cause or to become an agent of public change. She was not trying to write into existence the voice for women of her time, but was solely dedicated to her craft to navigate the complexity of her psyche. By doing so, she rejects referential motivations and is prompted purely for and by the self. The act of living in unity with one’s nature and strictly serving the purpose of one’s nature is where true power and identity dwell.

When writing to her friend, Abiah, Dickinson describes herself similar to Eve concerning her disobedience, disbelief in orthodoxy, and her hunger for knowledge beyond her conventional and orthodox upbringing (Sielke 170). Much like Eve, Dickinson takes fate into her own hands and combats the repercussions of taking what could not be hers. “Power, entirety, self-union,

self-sufficiency,” once acquired, can never be substituted (Bloom 164). Describing her insatiable creative drive, Dickinson writes in a poem:

You cannot put a Fire out—
A Thing that can ignite
Can go, itself, without a Fan—
Upon the slowest Night—

You cannot fold a Flood—
And put it in a Drawer—
Because the Winds would find it out—
And tell your Cedar Floor—
(J 530)

Within this poem, “Fire” indicates the existence of an unstoppable energy that cannot be extinguished. Independently, it fuels itself without the need for another stimulus and burns perpetually—no matter the conditions that surround it. Similarly to the Flood, this energy also cannot be contained. Even having stowed away her poems and letters in chests and drawers, it appears in this short poem that Dickinson, too, was aware of her genius and knew the power of her words could never be lessened no matter her circumstances. Constantly interrogating and engaging with “the other within” remained to be Dickinson’s methodology, and did so by embracing her nature—or as Rich calls it, her daemon.

Rich asks herself, if not for religious or scientific dogma, “What in fact, did [Dickinson] allow to “put a Belt around her Life”—what did wholly occupy her mature years and possess her?” (Rich 171). In a letter Dickinson had written to her mentor, Thomas Higginson, the poet expresses her apprehension with her creative energy: “I had no monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself: and when I try to organize, my little life force explodes and leaves me bare and charred” (L 258). Although some would argue that this statement indicates Dickinson to have

depended on Higginson's literary guidance, I would argue that it demonstrates Dickinson's acknowledgment of her own power, but was unable to fully comprehend. What Dickinson expresses is not the anxiety about being unable to govern this violent aspect of herself, it is describing her struggle to create a space of mind she could inhabit with control and sovereignty. In conjecture, Rich suggests that such power within a woman of her time was destructive, and that if choosing to embrace it, it was at extreme cost and sacrifice. Fully aware her unorthodox verse would be unacceptable by conventional standards, Dickinson, a "woman who feels herself to be Vesuvius at home" was in need of a creative outlet that could harness her volcanic verse (Rich 169). Through poetry Dickinson examines and comprehends her relationship with her creative energy. This power that presses upon Dickinson's psyche as a frightening, dangerous, violent, yet liberating force, is, I would argue, her daemon.

The term daemon is not to be confused with the word demon. Walter Burkert, in his book *Greek Religion*, explains the origins of the daemon having come from the Greek word, *daimon*. *Theoi*, meaning, the gods, was an insufficient term to describe the totality of the divine, hence the word *daimon* was employed. The *daimon* served as a semi-divine messenger between mortals and the divine, and usually accompanied noble or heroic persons. Unlike the word demon, which describes a cursed and vile creature, the daemon neither assumes a bias for goodness or evil. As Walter Burkert explicates:

[the] *Diamon* is an occult power, a force that drives man forward where no agent can be named. The individual feels as it were that the tide is with him, he acts with the daimon... or else when everything turns against him, he stands against the daimon." (Burkert 180)

While the concept and presence of daimons were perceived as valuable for mortals in Ancient Greek mythology, it was not until the trial and execution of Socrates that the term shifted in semantics. Burkert reiterates that Socrates was driven into isolation by what could only be referred to as “a unique experience,” which began by an encounter with a peculiar voice that Socrates could not quite define as divine or evil. The voice often caused him to abruptly alter his actions and speech and intervened with his ability to maintain a normal civic life or participate in political activity. Rather than speaking of the divine and adhering to the norms of his society, Socrates invested his efforts in retelling his daemonic encounters to his peers, which caused fear for those who were unwilling to accept the unknown, concern within those who feared for his religiosity and sanity, and perhaps, intrigue for those who sought to learn more. Consequently, because it was found as unlawful to introduce unorthodox teachings, Socrates was accused of spreading false doctrine and atheism, found guilty, and executed (Burkert 315).

As described by Bloom, the daemon has also been perceived as a “pervasive spirit,” or specter (Bloom 153). However, an insightful depiction of the daemon is provided by Walter Burkert: “Daimon does not designate a specific class of divine beings, but a peculiar mode of activity” (Burkert 180). Unlike a poetic muse which is typically a person, place, character, or object, the daimon, does not have form, but exists as an intangible force in connection with its host, the poet. The relationship between the poet and the daemon is not to be understood as a parasitic bond in which the poet must acquiesce to the daemon’s demands, but rather, their bond is symbiotic, both beneficial and potentially harmful. As expressed by Burkert and Rich, the poet and the daemon must act together, or else the life of the poet will find constant affliction. Because the daemon is an aggressive force, it either “achieves its end... with tyrannical might or

with subtle cunning of nature”. Literary criticism, however, has adopted this term and repurposed it. Often compared to the concept of the muse, the daemon’s role within a poet’s experience is that which “yokes everything to the service of the work” of artistic creation. Because creation is the daemon’s only purpose and desire, it does not adhere to the poet’s culture and defies the poet’s understanding of hierarchy and of consciousness (Jung 75). It defies the categorization of good or evil, and is unable to be understood in a normative model of ascribing meaning or value.

Critics have made several claims concerning the identity of Dickinson’s daemonic counterpart. Harold Bloom dedicates his book, *The Daemon Knows* to identify daemons and argues that poets inherit their daemons. He suggests that “Dickinson found her daemon in Shakespeare”, and similarly assigns the same daemon to Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne (Bloom 192). By inheriting Shakespeare’s daemon, Dickinson learns a language and lyrical consciousness that thinks through “images, tropes, and poems” (Bloom 182). Unlike writers, such as Henry James, who understood the daemon as something of a ghostly and spiritual nature, Dickinson’s experience is entirely physical. Not in the sense that the daemon takes material form or shape, but that it achieves existence by direct contact with the poet’s mind and body. It is not by supernatural, but through preternatural nature that the daemon accompanies the poet’s everyday living.

Dickinson’s most elusive poem, “My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—” expresses this relationship:

My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—
In Corners—till a Day
The Owner passed—identified—
And carried Me away—

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods—

And now We hunt the Doe—
And every time I speak for Him—
The Mountains straight reply—

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow—
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through—

And when at Night—Our good Day done—
I guard My Master's Head—
'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's
Deep Pillow—to have shared—

To foe of His—I'm deadly foe—
None stir the second time—
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye—
Or an emphatic Thumb—

Though I than He—may longer live
He longer must—than I—
For I have but the power to kill,
Without—the power to die—
(J 754)

Several theories and arguments have been made about this specific poem, and though they may vary, the most basic narrative of the poem surrounds the “extended metaphor of an “alliance” between a masculine figure and the speaker, a “Master” and a “Loaded Gun”” (Leiter 145). What critics find themselves constantly investigating is the identity of these two figures, as well as the premise of their relationship. Arguments of the “Master”/“Owner” as a reference to a specific male or potential male love interest have also been used as a point of reference in understanding this poem. Dickinson’s use of the “Master” figure in her letter and poems are not entirely uncommon. Thomas Higginson is theorized as a possible candidate for the “Master”/“Owner”

figure, and has even been referred to as “Master” by Dickinson herself. In a letter she addresses to Higginson, she laments the impending death of her friend, Samuel Bowles, and calls Higginson Master: “When you have lost a friend, Master, you remember you could not begin again, because there is no world. I have thought of you often since the darkness, though we cannot assist another’s light” (L 267). Though this letter dates itself after the writing of the poem, Dickinson’s relationship with Higginson as student and mentor can be interpreted as similar to that of the “Loaded Gun” and “Owner”. Just as the Gun finds meaning and purpose by the possession of her Owner, it is argued that Dickinson found her poetic voice through Higginson’s mentorship. As Susan Howe argues, the poem, “in its most literal sense, can be read as her psyche’s startled response to her own boldness in hunting him down” (Howe 79). Because Dickinson’s correspondence with Higginson was lifelong, and because she had specifically chosen him, though he was “heroic yet obtuse... [and] incapable of comprehending her work,” the poet, arguably, may have sought his approval of her poetic verse (Bloom 191).

Other theories, such as Judith Far’s, argues the poem depicts a romantic relationship. Because Dickinson and Higginson were strictly intellectual companions, critics have looked towards the poet’s most alleged “dynamic, volatile, and fascinating male friend”, Samuel Bowles (Leiter 257). Richard B. Sewall suggests in his biography of the poet that her unrequited love for Bowles had never ceased. Although the letters she has received from Bowles were destroyed after her death, the 50 letters and 35 poems that survived indicate a far more cryptic language unlike that which she used with others. A year before his death, Dickinson sent him the poem “I have no Life but this—” (J 1398):

I have no Life but this—
To lead it here—
Nor any Death—but lest

Dispelled from there—

Nor tie to Earths to come—

Nor Action new—

Except through this event—

The Realm of you—

(J 1398)

In another version of the poem, the last line reads: “Except through this event—/The love of you”. If we compare the first stanzas of both poems, there are conceptual similarities, yet different consequences:

My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—

In Corners—till a Day

The Owner passed—identified—

And carried Me away—

(J 754)

I have no Life but this—

To lead it here—

Nor any Death—but lest

Dispelled from there—

(J 1398)

The speakers in both poems begin their narratives by presenting their “Life” as unlively and immobile. While the first speaker begins as an idle “Loaded Gun”, the second speaker does not indicate lethal potential. Rather, she is unarmed and desolate. While the first speaker has an opportunity for purpose and movement, the second speaker exists in a solitary “this” and carries whatever she must alone. Having nothing, neither Life nor Death, the speaker only has herself. After Bowles died in 1878, Dickinson wrote to his wife, Mary: with her deepest condolences. Reminiscing his best traits, Dickinson describes Bowles to be “Beyond earth’s trafficking frontier, for what he moved, he made ” (L 189). These concepts of moving and creation are

strikingly similar to the circumstance of “My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—”. Though the relationship between the two cannot be definitively classified as romantic, the connections that can be inferred between Bowles and the “Master” are compelling, but not complete.

In Christanne Miller’s reading of “My Life had Stood—a Loaded Gun”, the speaker of the poem engages herself from beginning to end in an “adolescent fantasy” where autonomy is never fully achieved (Miller 123). Entangled in the transition from adolescence into adulthood—specifically womanhood, Miller argues that the speaker experiences a paradoxical relationship with power and powerlessness in the fiction she creates for herself (Miller 123). As a loaded gun, she depends on her Owner to identify and pull her trigger. She only experiences power through instruction, never from independence. In this context, the speaker’s identity is only possible through her association with her male counterpart. Determining the status of women has been determined in the same manner. Miller argues that Dickinson remains within the same system of identification throughout the entire poem. The speaker begins and ends in an immobile stasis, and does not equip herself properly to formulate an identity if her “Owner” should vanish. If we interpret Miller’s reading of the poem as describing an economic relationship between the speaker and the “Master”, her survival and sanity is completely dependent on the wellbeing and command of her “Master.” Like most girls in the 19th-century, the speaker, too, remains in her “Corner” waiting for her life to begin and “carried away”.

Eloquently stated by Emerson, “Perception is not whimsical, but fatal.” (Emerson, *Self-Reliance* 123) Interpreting the attitude of the speaker drastically alters the reading of this poem. As Miller prescribes, the speaker indulges herself in naivety and fantasy. Trapped in the confines of her “Corners”, Miller’s speaker idly awaits the day she will be “carried... away”. But

what if we entertain the idea that the speaker strategically assumes her position “In Corners” with lethal intention? Envision instead a human being fully aware of her power who has positioned herself to observe and assess her surroundings intensely before learning to hunt and to kill. The speaker already acknowledges herself as a Loaded Gun before encountering her “Master”, and though she does not know how to use her power yet, she does not hesitate to learn when given the opportunity. This interpretation of the poem is most true to Dickinson’s poetic journey to self identify and befits the “woman who feels herself to be Vesuvius at home” (Rich 169).

Rather than identifying the “He”/”Master”/”Owner” as a man, Rich argues that Dickinson uses the term as a metaphor to describe her relationship with her daemon. As Rich reasons, because patriarchal culture assumes power with masculinity, Dickinson most likely assigns her daemon—which is to say, her creative and destructive power, a masculine identity to represent the daemon’s hierarchical power (Rich 166). The language between Dickinson and her daemon, though gendered, is not employed by Dickinson to kill femininity or praise masculinity. Her intentions go beyond gender ideology or conventionality. Rather, she uses gender to describe a power dynamic. Because Dickinson’s poetry thrives in her mastery of concealment and disguise, she cannot reduce herself as strictly feminine or masculine. She is something in between, both the “hunter, admittedly masculine, but also a human person, an active willing being, and the gun—an object” (Rich 174).

“My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—” is a poem about Dickinson embracing and identifying her daemonic self, and narrates a life understood by the binary oppositions of subject-object relationships: Owner/Gun, Hunter/Doe, Male/Female, Life/Death, etc. Within the

first stanza the speaker experiences the immobility of her life being made into motion. The “My” and “He” become “We”, signifying a melding of two souls, which in return, gives the speaker tremendous violent power. If the Master is understood as a man, the speaker’s power is seen as borrowed and unoriginal, but if the “Owner” is viewed as Dickinson’s daemonic self, her power is of her own creation. It is by positioning herself “In Corners” of her room, which Dickinson called “freedom”, that she gives voice to her creative power. For Dickinson, the significance of freedom is not measured by worldly means. Although she wrote prolifically within the vicinity of her home, she was irrevocably trapped within the laws and culture of her time. Rather than understanding freedom by which could be exerted within the context of her society, Dickinson’s freedom was that of the mind. To have the liberty to dictate without restraint or hindrance from others, the transcription of thought into language became Dickinson’s expression of freedom. The “Sovereign Woods”—the verse she can freely create, contradict, question, and kill—is her hunting ground, and the “Doe” she hunts down with her Dameon is anything she identifies as prey. Just as Dickinson must struggle to give voice to her daemon, the speaker must “speak for Him”. This “pitless [power] once you have put it on” that the speaker experiences through self-identification is claimed not by another person, or by man, but the speaker’s self (Howe 83). The speaker states, “I smile,” “I guard,” “I lay a Yellow Eye—or emphatic thumb,” “I’m deadly foe”. The speaker has always been conscious, but gains agency through her partnership with the daemon. To commit her loyalties to poetry as a proud and confident defender is “better than the Eider Duck’s/Deep Pillow—to have shared—”. In a world where marriage, religion, and social convention will devastate a woman’s independence, the deception of a comforting “Pillow” would never satiate her desire for power. She can, however, trust in herself and in her ability to

vanquish any opposing foe, for “None stir the second time” when she has her sights set upon them.

Though I than He—may longer live
He longer must—than I—
For I have but the power to kill,
Without—the power to die—
(J 754)

The last stanza of the poem, typically known as the most elusive stanza, reveals that Life and Death play a significant role in the speaker’s relationship with her daemon.

As Leiter summarizes, the speaker experiences a drastic shift in her perception of loyalty and power. Whereas in the first stanza the speaker celebrates her union with the “Owner”/“Master,” it is within the last stanza that she recognizes the “delusion of achieving self-realization through subservience” (Leiter 146). As Leiter further explains, though the gun “may longer live” the “Owner,” this results in the existence as a meaningless and purposeless object. This is the inescapable fate “of anyone who gives away their own will and attempts to gain power by becoming the instrumentality of another, whether that other is another person or a mastering ideology” (Leiter 146). Vendler offers a similar reading, but provides various vantage points to reconsider the relationship between the Speaker and her “Owner.” Firstly, the “Gun” can be interpreted as a prosthetic that belongs and is activated by the “Owner.” The “Gun” is utilized to speak and kill. By taking this stance, Vendler conjectures that the relationship between the “Gun” and the “Owner”/“Master” is favorable, and that the “Gun” delights in ownership for she has no “power to die” (Vendler 320).

Another reading Vendler offers, which I believe to be the most accurate interpretation, understands the “Master” as a male muse and the “Gun” as the poet. When identified by her male

muse as a poet, the Speaker—who is, arguably, Dickinson, herself—leaves the “Corners” of domesticity and begins a life adjoined to the “dominating Muse”. Through this relationship, Dickinson can experience the unlimited power of expression. By allowing herself to succumb to her male muse—which is to say, her overwhelming power of language—she is able to “speak so loudly that the Mountains [echo] in response... [and] could radiate power with her cratered Fire, “smil[ing]” while she awaits her next eruption” (Vendler 320-321). As the Muse directs her, she can kill those who threaten her will to create art. Having obtained the power to hunt the “Doe”, to navigate the “Sovereign Woods”, and kill her Master’s “foes”, she cannot fathom a life without him. In “perpetual conflict or embrace,” the poet acknowledges that once possessed, existence without the daemon is impossible (Bloom 196). Because she has identified her daemonic self as an integral part of her own being, to part from her “Master” would mean to live without expression or meaning.

CONCLUSION

POETIC REDEMPTION: ARTISTIC TRUTH

Artistic truth, as described by John Hospers in *Meaning and Truth in the Arts*, does not concern itself with the truth *about* things. Rather, it lies within the truth *to* things concerning one's human nature, their actions, and their fundamental qualities to experience the world they live in and the recreation of their worldview through art (Heyl 251). Because the creative process of art has often been described as a cognitive act that unleashes the unconscious of the artist's worldview, it is suggested that art is also a means for an artist to reach an acquisition of truth. Unlike rational truth which understands the world through irrefutable facts and empirical evidence, artistic truth is derived from subjective and personal interpretation. Amongst the several art forms that allow artists to explore, express, and experience, it is only through literature that the complexity of language is employed to assert what is true and what is false according to the artist. As expressed in a 1919 review by William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore emphasizes the importance of poetry's function and reiterates, "Poetry... is an assertion.... The poet must use anything at hand to assert [oneself]..." (Sielke 23-24). By implying that poetry is an assertion, Moore and Williams suggest that poetry is truth—specifically, the truth of the poet.

The significance of poetry for Dickinson is that it allows her to experience the process of self-discovery on her own terms. She is Master of herself, and decides for her poems where to begin, where to go, the form she will take on, the language she will speak, and whom she speaks to. Rather than an absorption of another's power—specifically, that of a masculine Owner—this thesis argues that Dickinson's daemon should be interpreted as an integral humanistic energy.

Unlike Rich who identifies Dickinson's daimonic power as masculine, I would argue the poet's daemon is not and cannot be reducible to gender. She necessitates transgression to evade alignment with any set pattern dictated by society and intentionally positions herself in extremity to playfully mock, challenge, and observe the borderline between reality and her imaginative creativity. When she chooses, she can disguise herself as a lethal weapon with a "Vesuvian face" (J 754) or be delicate and diligent as "a clover and one bee" (J 1755). However, while Dickinson recognizes that conformity cannot grant her the subjectivity she desires, she is also aware that non-conformity has its own limitations, but provides the best opportunity for her to create herself in her own image. Within poetry, she is not only able to freely discern and cultivate artistic truth, but is also able to live within it as intensely as possible. Rather than assigning herself to a life dictated by the confines of institutionalized religion, gender expectations, or the values of her patriarchal society, Dickinson finds an alternative salvation through poetry.

Dickinson possessed a unique and highly complex worldview that was entirely of her own creation and imagination. For example, Dickinson's interpretation of the ability of sight showcases not only the biological function of vision, but also the ability to observe, witness, and possess ownership. In her poem "Before I got my eye put out" (J 327), Dickinson composes her thoughts about sight:

Before I got my eye put out
I liked as well to see—
As other Creatures, that have Eyes
And know no other way—

But were it told to me—Today—
That I might have the sky
For mine—I tell you that my Heart
Would split, for size of me—

The Meadows—mine—
The Mountains—mine—
All Forests—Stintless Stars—
As much of Noon I could take
Between my finite eyes—

The Motions of the Dripping Birds—
The Morning's Amber Road—
For mine—to look at when I liked—
The News would strike me dead—

So safer—guess—with just my soul
Upon the Window pane—
Where other Creatures put their eyes—
Incautious—of the Sun—
(J 327)

In a society where women were only able to own property under their own name if their husbands were incapacitated, the very idea of an unmarried woman owning property was in itself a radical thought—especially, if she desired the mountains, meadows, forests, and stars. What she claims as hers in stanza three, she claims with authority and resolution. This jurisdiction of ownership over nature was entitled to God, and for Dickinson to claim His possessions as her own showcases her ambivalent and transgressive nature towards patriarchal authority, religion, and the constructs instituted by gender expectations.

By deploying the word “Creature,” Dickinson is differentiating herself from others. While the “Creatures” blind themselves by looking into the “Sun,” Dickinson chooses her position strategically and sees her world with clear eyes. However, just as Dickinson recognizes her exceptional ability to see and the power she can wield in verse, she also acknowledges the limits of poetry. As indicated by the poem's concluding stanza, the reality of her reign is not

granted to her in a literal sense. Rather, from the safety of a “Window pane” her soul executes ownership over the mountains, meadows, forests, and stars. Perhaps Dickinson is deploying the image of a “Window pane” as a visual metaphor for poetry. Much like the art of poetry which gives the poet’s imagination the power and liberty to roam, a window can frame the world and give the viewer the power to observe, witness, identify, rule, and through intense meditation, give meaning. As C.G. Jung expresses, the “significance of a true work of art resides in the fact that it has escaped from the limitation of the personal and has soared beyond” the confines of the poet’s life (Jung 71). What Jung implicates is that true art is created when the artist possesses the ability to allow their creativity to transcribe the world in a way that exceeds the artist’s own limitations. Dickinson, though choosing to isolate herself, grasped deeply the extremities of her existence and identified several inadequacies within her society’s patriarchal and Puritan culture. Dickinson, from the vantage point of her second-story corner room, was able to not only observe her world intensely and comprehend it in highly complex sophistication but was also able to cultivate meaning in a language she created for herself through her poetry.

Despite choosing a solitary life that left her balancing herself at the edge of extremities, what redeems the poet is the fact she willingly “*went out* to where she finds herself” (Vendler 277). By defying adherence to the conventions of her society in regards to the institutionalization of Christianity, gender expectations, and patriarchal culture, Dickinson created, through the medium of poetry, a language to combat, challenge, and interrogate the oppressive forces around her. As an active agent and catalyst to develop a methodology that could attest to her sense of truth, Dickinson was able to emancipate herself from the confines of her society. Her life could not find satisfaction by conventional means, and through her iconoclastic methods to cultivate

her artistic truth, she unabashedly declares, “This is my letter to the World / That never wrote to Me—” (J 441). As argued by Adrienne Rich and Sabine Sielke, Dickinson’s commitment to poetry was not for the sake of creating art, but was necessary for the cultivation of her most authentic sense of self. Dickinson writes “as a means of surpassing her historical disposition... [and] attempted to extend the limits of life and consciousness by transgressing the limits of poetic discourse” (Sielke 35). By examining Dickinson’s iconoclastic lifestyle and understanding the oppressive forces that infringed upon her creative self, and the power of her verse, this thesis addresses the process of self-proclaimed emancipation Dickinson acquired through the art of poetry. As is true in Dickinson’s poetic philosophy, Susan Howe beautifully concludes in her book “My Dickinson”, “Poetry is redemption” (Howe 138). Not towards any authority derived from her society, but for herself and her unrivaled poetic prowess.

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