

A Little Bit About Emily Dickinson — Prairie U-U Society, March 26, 2000

Musical Prelude—Doleta; Welcome—Nancy; Chalice Lighting—to honor Emily, Warren

Prairie Choir: To Make a Prairie

Joys and Sorrows

Childrens' Poem: "I'm Nobody," Lisa Glueck and Doleta Chapru

A Little Bit About Emily Dickinson:

1. On the face of it, not much happened in the life of Emily Dickinson. She was born in 1830 in Amherst, Mass., the middle child of three: her older brother Austin was born in 1829, and her sister Lavinia was born in 1833. Emily lived in Amherst for her entire life, taking fewer than a dozen extended trips away from home. She was well educated, but her lawyer father thought that women could not and should not pursue careers. She had some boyfriends, but never married. She had a small social circle, and had a few correspondents who were more or less intellectual. She started writing systematically in her 20s, but she published only about a dozen poems in her lifetime. As she grew older, she increasingly became a recluse. Her family and friends knew she wrote poetry and respected her wit and intelligence. But after her death in ~~1865~~ 1886 her sister Vinnie was astonished to find a locked box with 1,775 poems. Her family and friends tried to get them published, and the first slim selection was published in 1890. Disputes in the family delayed further publication, and the complete works were only published in 1955. Today she is recognized as one of America's greatest poets, perhaps the greatest. Much of the poetry isn't all that accessible—it's rather cryptic and can require some effort to decipher.

I read a biography in preparing this program and expected it to be dull. But it is in fact exciting (Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *Emily Dickinson*, PS1541 Z5 W58 986) — Not for the reason some of you might suspect, sex, but for essentially religious reasons. Emily Dickinson comes across to me as a kind of existentialist heroine.

So let me elaborate.

2. The Dickinson clan might be able to trace its lineage as far back as the Norman Conquest.

[Doleta Dickinson Chapru on the Dickinsons]

Emily's grandfather was a lawyer in Amherst who was instrumental in founding Amherst College. He was overly ambitious and eventually became bankrupt and had to leave Amherst. Emily's father was another lawyer and more stable and successful. Her father comes across as a very cold and emotionless man, and her mother as a somewhat dependent and ineffectual character. But Emily and her siblings had a very strong and lifelasting sibling solidarity.

[No time for Emily on her father, Wolff, p33, or fun and games in childhood, p. 105]

Amherst College was founded largely as a place to train Trinitarian ministers in reaction to the Unitarianism of Harvard and Boston. Emily's education was heavily religious. The religion placed some emphasis on the argument from design for the existence and benevolence of God, so she got a pretty good science education, and it shows up in some of her nature poetry. The religion included revivalist sessions. Every adult was expected to become "converted," to publically admit being a sinner and publically submit to God. It wasn't a step taken lightly; her father didn't convert until she was 20, and her brother until she was 26. But the pressures were

strong. In 1847 she was a student at Mt. Holyoke, and on the evening of October 2, there was a session in which the students were classified, she wrote, as those who had "professed faith, those who have a hope, and those who have not...I cannot tell you how solemn it was, as one after another class arose. I saw more than one weep as her name was put down no hope." (P. 100) But Emily didn't convert. She respected and sometimes envied those who did, but she rebelled. She wrote to friends,

"I have dared to do strange things—bold things, and have asked no advice from any—I have builded beautiful temples, yet do not think I am wrong." (P. 103)

She certainly believed in God. One of her most frequently anthologized poems is

Poem A. "I Never Saw a Moor...." *Linda S.* *the existence of*

But that's atypical. Her rebellion consisted not in disbelief in God but in disbelief that God is good and that one ought to submit to him. One of the central myths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is that of Abraham and Isaac, where God commands Abraham to kill Isaac and saves ~~him~~ *Isaac* only at the last second. About this Emily wrote

"Not a hesitation—
Abraham complied—
Flattered by obeisance
Tyranny demurred—
Isaac—to his children
Lived to tell the tale—
Moral—with a Mastiff
Manners may prevail." (P. 157....should I repeat?)

Poem B. "The Drop, that wrestles in the Sea" (see text distributed) *Mary Mullin's*
(Before having this read, a couple of notes of explanation: the poem refers to the religious hope of union with God, the "Thee" in the third line. Amphitrite was the wife of Poseidon, carried off and raped by him. She became the Goddess, the Queen, of the sea.)

Susan will sing a song that expresses her rebellion in a humorous vein. It's also pretty clear that she is rebelling against patriarchy.

Song 1. "Why Do They Shut Me Out of Heaven?" (a little out of order)

With regard to prayer, she wrote

"Of Course—I prayed—
And did God care?
He cared as much as on the Air
A bird—had stamped her foot—"

And with regard to physical resurrection,

"I'm glad I don't believe it
For it would stop my breath—
And I'd like to look a little more
At such a curious Earth" (P. 262)

3. Lots of her poems are about death and about the very closely related topic of separation. One of the most frequently read is this one,

Poem C. "My Life Closed Twice Before Its Close" Kay F.

And the feeling of loneliness is nicely expressed in the next song.

Song 2: "The Sun Went Down"

(Ernst Bacon was an American composer who taught at the Eastman School of Music, among other places. His music is not well known, and my performance might well be the only one in Madison in years.)

4. Emily began systematic writing in her 20s: she kept drafts and revised them. She had confidence in her abilities, but she didn't brag about them. In 1853 she wrote her brother,

"I am *something* of a fox, but you are more of a hound."

And in a letter to her sister about a little spat with Austin, she wrote

"Bats think Foxes have no eyes—Ha Ha!!" And there is a poem,

"Good to hide, and hear 'em hunt!

Better, to be found,

If one care to, that is,

The Fox fits the Hound—

Good to know, and not tell,

Best to know and tell,

Can one find the rare Ear

Not too dull—" (Pp. 128f)

But the ears were indeed rare. Her father gave her no encouragement whatever. She didn't have much success in publishing her work. In 1862 she wrote some friends,

"I found a bird, this morning, down—down—on a little bush at the foot of the garden, and wherefore sing, I said, since nobody *hears*? One sob in the throat, one flutter of bosom—'My business is to *sing*'—and away she rose." (Pp. 249f)

[No time for Bluebird, "Before you thought of Spring," Pp. 527f]

She got a little help from correspondents. The most important of these was Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a Unitarian minister. He was a little too liberal for his first congregation and got fired. He led a Black regiment in the Civil War and wrote a book about it—it's a small world, and Pat Watkins had me read from it in one of her programs a month or two ago. Higginson was a feminist as well as an abolitionist, and Emily wrote him on the basis of some of his feminist essays. He didn't encourage her to publish her poetry. He thought the poems too difficult and didn't understand them all that well himself. But he listened to her and wrote back. I think they met just once, but they corresponded until she died—one of her last two letters was to him. You could call him a significant other, and it shows that significant others need not be in face-to-face relations.

5. But Emily made a commitment to being a poet—one can use the religious language, a “vocation,” “ein Beruf,” a calling to God. It was a rebellious commitment in the 19th century, since women were not expected to be poets.

And it was a commitment that excluded marriage. Emily had boy friends and men friends. Some of her correspondence includes some pretty passionate love letters. I think the following song is the setting of a love poem. It isn't always easy to tell, but when she wrote “My river runs to thee,” “thee” was in lower case, and she was careful about things like that.

Song 3. “My River Runs to Thee” *→ rather than religious*

6. Emily also had woman friends. Among the most important was her sister-in-law Susan, who read much of her work and responded to it. Austin, Emily's brother, fell in love with Mary Loomis Todd, a married woman, a faculty wife, in 1881, and that relationship continued for the rest of their lives. Emily didn't meet Mary Todd, but it was obviously a stressful situation. The children of Susan and Mary fought over Emily's poems, one reason for their late publication in full, but they also clearly recognized the value of the poems. *i.e., Susan hated Mary*

7. Emily wrote many nature poems. I'm delighted to sing the one about the prairie that Barb Park discovered. As you might expect, she was a bit ambivalent about nature: nature is often cruel,

“...As Nature did not care—
And piled her Blossoms on—
And further to parade a Joy
Her Victim stared upon—” (P. 285)

But let us have a more upbeat one to conclude the solos.

Song 4. “Nature, the Gentlest Lover”

⇒ Maybe the last line is not so upbeat, Nature “wills silence everywhere”

8. Discussion:

Do the poems express her personal situation? I doubt it. Quote p. 141.3, Emily as a follower of Emerson, “...verse...a supposed person...” (Looking for specific persons in the verses is like looking for the identities of specific persons in Shakespeare's sonnets....which doesn't stop people in either case.)

And was there physical sex? I doubt it....Emily and Samuel Bowles, Thomas Higginson, and especially Otis Philips Lord, which might even have led to marriage....

And with Susan? It's hard to believe.

Introduction of Guests and Visitors
Prairie Announcements

Concluding choir songs: “To Make a Prairie” (Reprise)
“Is There Such a Thing as Day”