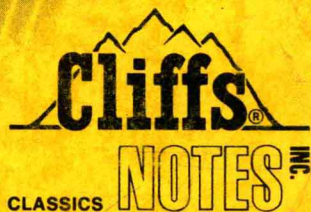


**CLIFFS NOTES on**

**\$2.50**

# **EMILY DICKINSON: SELECTED POEMS**



**Cliffs**<sup>®</sup>  
**NOTES** INC.

YOUR KEY TO THE CLASSICS

# EMILY DICKINSON: SELECTED POEMS

## NOTES

*including*

*Life and Background*

*Introduction*

*The Texts of Dickinson's Poems  
and Letters*

*Dickinson's Ideas*

*Dickinson's Poetic Methods*

*The Poems*

*Nature: Scene and Meaning*

*Poetry, Art, and Imagination*

*Friendship, Love, and Society*

*Suffering and Growth*

*Death, Immortality, and Religion*

*Brief Comments on Forty Additional Poems*

*Questions for Review and Writing*

*Selected Bibliography*

*Index of First Lines*

*by*

*Mordecai Marcus, Ph.D.*

*Department of English*

*University of Nebraska*

*editor*

*Gary Carey, M.A.*

*University of Colorado*

*consulting editor*

*James L. Roberts, Ph.D.*

*Department of English*

*University of Nebraska*



LINCOLN, NEBRASKA 68501

ISBN 0-8220-0432-1

© Copyright 1982

by

**C. K. Hillegass**

All Rights Reserved

Printed in U S A

# CONTENTS

<b>LIFE AND BACKGROUND . . . . .</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION . . . . .</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>THE TEXTS OF DICKINSON'S POEMS AND LETTERS . . .</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>DICKINSON'S IDEAS . . . . .</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>DICKINSON'S POETIC METHODS . . . . .</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>THE POEMS</b>	
Nature: Scene and Meaning . . . . .	20
Poetry, Art, and Imagination . . . . .	36
Friendship, Love, and Society . . . . .	47
Suffering and Growth . . . . .	66
Death, Immortality, and Religion . . . . .	80
<b>BRIEF COMMENTS ON FORTY ADDITIONAL POEMS . .</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW . . . . .</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>INDEX OF FIRST LINES . . . . .</b>	<b>98</b>



# EMILY DICKINSON NOTES

## LIFE OF THE AUTHOR

Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, on December 10, 1830, and died there some fifty-five years later on May 15, 1886. With the exception of a few visits to Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., and some nine months at school at South Hadley, Massachusetts, she spent her whole life in Amherst, most of it in the large meadow-surrounded house called the Dickinson Homestead, across the street from a cemetery. From 1840 to 1855, she lived with her family in a house on North Pleasant Street, after which they returned to the Homestead. She never married, and she lived in comfortable dependence on her well-to-do father and his estate, though she did more than her share of household chores while creating a large body of poems and letters.

Amherst, a farm-based community, grew in her lifetime from about 2,700 to about 4,200 inhabitants. It was the seat of Amherst College, a citadel of Protestant orthodoxy, and later of Massachusetts Agricultural and Mechanical College (now University of Massachusetts). Though somewhat isolated, Amherst had a good private academy, a rich but mixed cultural tradition of reading the Bible, Shakespeare, and the classics; and, as the nineteenth century progressed, contemporary American authors and a large amount of popular and sentimental literature became current there. Social life was confined largely to church affairs, college receptions, agricultural shows, and such private socializing as walking, carriage riding, and discussing books. Newspapers and magazines from Springfield and Boston brought current literature and opinion, serious and ephemeral, to the more literate. The Dickinson clan were old Yankee stock, tolerant of such religious dissidence as Unitarianism and Roman Catholicism, but deeply rooted in the orthodox Protestant tradition as it lived on in their own Congregational church (and the Presbyterian church), still actively Calvinistic and requiring public profession of faith for membership. Waves of religious enthusiasm and conversion swept

through Amherst, especially during Emily Dickinson's early years, and gathered up her friends and members of her family, but never her.

Little is known of Emily Dickinson's earliest years. She spent four years at a primary school and then attended Amherst Academy from 1840 to 1847, somewhat irregularly because of poor health. She wrote imaginatively for school publications but none of these writings survive. Her intense letters to friends and classmates show a variety of tones, especially in her reluctance to embrace Christ and join the church and in her anticipations and fears about the prospect of a married life. The world, as she understood the idea, was more dear to her than the renunciations which conversion seemed to require, and quite possibly she sensed something false or soft-minded in the professions of others. In a period of rigorous living conditions, without the benefits of modern medicine, life spans were shorter than ours, and Dickinson suffered the early deaths of many acquaintances and dear friends. She witnessed several deaths, doubtlessly impressed and shocked by the Puritan doctrine that looked for signs of election and salvation in the demeanor of the dying and especially in their willingness to die.

During this period, she was fond of, or attached to, two older men, Leonard Humphrey (1824-50), the young principal of Amherst Academy, and Benjamin Franklin Newton (1821-53), a law student in her father's office. Newton, a Unitarian and something of an Emersonian, discussed literature, ideas, and religion with her, and praised her early poetic efforts. After he left her father's office and moved to Worcester, he married and soon died of tuberculosis. Dickinson evidently felt a warm, sisterly affection for him, and on learning of his death, she worried about the state and future of his soul. It was a kind of worry which she would continue to experience throughout the rest of her life about the many people whom she cared for. Romantic inclinations towards Humphrey and Newton seem extremely unlikely for Dickinson, but these men are probably related to the descriptions of several losses in her early poems. In the fall of 1847, Dickinson began the first of a two-year program at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in South Hadley, where she did not yield to continued pressures to give up the secular world for Christ and join the church. A good student and fond of her classmates and teachers, she suffered homesickness and poor health, and she did not return for the second year.

Her immediate family were probably the most important people in Dickinson's life. Her father, Edward Dickinson (1803-74), a graduate of Yale law college, was a successful lawyer and Amherst's chief citizen by virtue of his imposing personality, his connection with Amherst College (its treasurer), his two terms in the state legislature, his one term in the United States Congress, and his leadership in civic endeavors. A man of unbending demeanor and rectitude, he appears to have had a softer side that he struggled to conceal. It came out in incidents of pleasure in nature, kindness to people, and the embarrassed desire for more intimacy with his children than he ever allowed himself. He joined the church at the age of fifty. Dickinson expressed her distress over his death in many poems and letters. In some sense, she may have lived in his shadow, but she went her own way and saw him with a critical as well as with a tender eye. He probably appears in some of her poems about deprivation and about explosive behavior. It is unlikely that he made any explicit attempts to keep either of his daughters from marrying, although he probably did communicate a sense of his need for their presence and support.

A clear picture of Dickinson's mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson (1804-82), is difficult to formulate. She seems to have been dignified, conventional, reasonably intelligent, and probably subservient to her husband. She suffered periods of poor health, probably of emotional origin, and her health was shattered by her husband's death. Dickinson and her sister, Lavinia, cared for her as an invalid for the last four years of her life, during which Dickinson's affection for her greatly increased. Dickinson's declaration to T. W. Higginson, her chief literary correspondent, that she "never had a mother" is poetically exaggerated.

Dickinson's sister and brother, Lavinia (1833-99) and William Austin, known always as Austin, (1829-95), were close to her all her life. Lavinia was a vivacious, pretty, and clever girl, but not particularly intellectual, although she had a reputation for having a sharp tongue. She seems to have rejected several offers of marriage, possibly in order to remain Dickinson's lifelong companion. Fiercely protective of her elder sister, she probably tried to shield the ever more reclusive Dickinson, and she may have understood Dickinson's need to have time and privacy for her poems. More imaginative and intellectual than his father, Austin had an artistic side and was interested in new ideas. After finishing law school and marrying, he succumbed to his father's pressures for him not to leave Amherst for



Chicago, became his father's law partner, and settled for life in a house across the street from the Dickinson home. Partly because of Dickinson's influence, he married Susan Gilbert, who had long been a close friend of Dickinson's. The marriage was unhappy, and its increasing tensions were probably visible to those in the house across the street.

Dickinson's relationship with her sister-in-law is very revealing and is relevant to these Notes. It was in the early 1850s that Susan Gilbert, (later Dickinson) (1830-1913), an orphan, came to live with relatives in Amherst and became Dickinson's dearest friend. They shared books, ideas, and friends. After a stormy courtship, Susan married Austin in 1856. A woman of attractiveness, intelligence, powerful social demeanor, and a stinging tongue, Susan became the social leader of Amherst. Her relationship with Dickinson remained highly ambivalent, Dickinson suffering from Susan's sarcasm mixed with her tenderness and also from Susan's pressures to make her submit to conventional religion. Dickinson wrote warm and revealing letters and poems to Susan but seems to have become quite disillusioned with her, though her fondness for Austin and Susan's three children and her sympathy for her brother kept her bonds with Susan partly whole. The death of Gilbert Dickinson (1875-83), Austin and Susan's youngest child, was a terrible blow to Dickinson.

During the 1850s, Dickinson made the most of her few travels outside Amherst, visiting Boston, Washington, and Philadelphia, but she was becoming more reclusive; she stopped attending church services (she had been a keen observer and often sarcastic commentator on sermons), and she spent much of her time writing poems. Towards the end of the decade, Dickinson seemed to be approaching several emotional crises. In her early twenties, she had experienced some normal social attentions from young men, but probably none of them constituted what one could call courtship. In 1858, 1861, and 1862 (these dates are approximate), she wrote draft copies of three fervent letters to someone whom she addressed as "Master," while calling herself "Daisy." The letters are anguished descriptions of a guilty, rejected, and subservient love. Quite possibly, these letters were never sent. They are the strongest available evidence that a desperate and impossible love was the chief source of her crises, although there is no proof of it.

Among the many candidates advanced as Dickinson's secret love, two men have been singled out as being most likely: the

Reverend Charles Wadsworth (1814-82) of Philadelphia and San Francisco, and Samuel Bowles (1826-78), editor of the *Springfield Republican* and a lifelong friend of the Edward and Austin Dickinson families. Charles Wadsworth was a successful orthodox preacher — sober but imaginative, rigorous yet tender. Dickinson probably heard him preach in Philadelphia in 1855. He visited her in Amherst and of his correspondence with Dickinson, only a short letter from him to her survives, revealing a pastoral concern for an unspecified distress. After his death, Dickinson wrote of him in various endearing terms, calling him her "dearest earthly friend." Happily married and the father of several children, Wadsworth must have been completely unaware of any romantic attachment which Dickinson may have felt for him. The fact that Wadsworth's San Francisco church was called Calvary and that many of Dickinson's love poems employ religious allusions have suggested but do not prove that she was romantically infatuated with Wadsworth.

Samuel Bowles is a more likely candidate for the person addressed in Dickinson's so-called Master letters. An extremely handsome and worldly man, Bowles numbered many women among his friends, much to his wife's pain. A frequent visitor at the Dickinsons, he may have tempted Emily to plead with him for recognition of her poetic ability, a recognition which he was quite unable to give. Emily Dickinson's letters to him bear significant similarities to the Master letters, and she sent him many poems, including "Title divine—is mine!" (1072); this one was accompanied with a note, which may imply that in her imagination he was her husband. Various details of the lives and travels of both Wadsworth and Bowles fit selectively into Dickinson's comments on separations and losses which she suffered, but others do not. Possibly Dickinson worshipped in her imagination a composite of these two men or a version of someone else who cannot be identified. Her emotional crises of the early 1860s may also stem from her fear about the condition of her eyes (which, in turn, may have been of emotional origin), fears for her sanity in connection with these difficulties and with family instabilities, or a combination of love-desperation with all of these frustrations. She may also have been desperate because no one could recognize her poetic gifts. Her increasing reclusiveness and her continually wearing white dresses may be chiefly related to the idea that in spirit she was married to someone; this may suggest that in addition to all these conflicts, there was a need for time and privacy for her writing

and an increasing conviction that she derived more satisfaction from living in the world of her poems than in ordinary society. In any case, her poetic productivity from 1861 to about 1866 continued at an astonishing rate. The figure of an unattainable lover looms large in her poems, but it is probably a mistake to think that a frustrated love was the chief cause of her becoming a poet. Nevertheless, one must grant that her writing served as an emotional catharsis and as a healing therapy for her, which contributes to its appeal.

Emily Dickinson's chief attempt to establish contact with the literary world and gain recognition for her poems began in 1862 when she wrote a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823-1911) and sent him the first of many packets of poems. Dickinson was responding to advice that Higginson had offered to young writers in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Higginson was a minister, editor, writer, soldier, and a champion of liberal causes. Emily Dickinson's correspondence with him, which continued almost until her death, is the most important part of her correspondence, and Higginson, who visited her in 1870 and 1873, has left the most detailed reports on her conversation that we have. Higginson recognized in Dickinson a sensitive, gifted, and imaginative person, but he could not see her work as poetry; he described it as beautiful thoughts and words, and he cautioned her against early publication, trying to steer her towards conventional form and expression, and trying to draw her into society. She pretended to accept all his criticism and to plead for a continued tutor-mentor relationship, but she seems to have recognized all his limitations and to have drawn sustenance from his personal, rather than from his literary support. Higginson probably appears in a number of Dickinson's poems about the relationship of artist and audience. After Dickinson's death, Higginson helped edit her poems, and their popular success greatly advanced his opinion of them.

During Emily Dickinson's lifetime, only seven of her poems appeared in print – all unsigned and all altered and damaged by editors. She had probably agreed to only a few of these publications. Five of these poems appeared in Bowles's *Springfield Republican*. One appeared in 1878 in the anonymous anthology *A Masque of Poets*, surely as a result of the persuasion of Dickinson's only other important literary friend, Helen Hunt Jackson (1830-85), who, as Helen Fiske, had been among Dickinson's childhood friends in Amherst. After the death of her first husband, Helen Hunt, later Jackson, became a suc-

cessful poet and novelist (famous for *Ramona*, 1884). In the 1870s, she wrote to and visited Dickinson, became convinced of her greatness as a poet, and tried to persuade her to publish. Her only success, however, was to persuade Dickinson to contribute "Success is counted sweetest" (67) to *A Masque of Poets*, but she told Dickinson that she was a great poet, and Dickinson's correspondence shows a warm affection for her.

The other important relationship of Emily Dickinson's later years was her reciprocated love for Judge Otis P. Lord (1812-84), a friend of her father's, who became Dickinson's close friend after he was widowed in 1877. Dickinson's letters to him are fervent with bashful love. He seems to have proposed, and she seems to have refused in the name of her persisting sense that fulfillment would have overwhelmed her. Lord's death in 1884 seems to have shocked Dickinson into a rapid physical decline. According to some writers, he appears in a few of her late poems.

After her withdrawal from the world in the early 1860s, Dickinson's life revolved around her correspondence, her poetry, and her household duties. She remained a faithful daughter and sister, and in her own terms, she was a faithful friend to many to whom she related chiefly through letters. Her later reclusiveness may have approached a certain pathological state, as evidenced by her turning friends away and sometimes conversing and listening to music through only slightly opened doors. But Dickinson constantly insisted that she did not suffer from her isolation and that she felt deeply fulfilled and in intimate contact with the world. Her correspondence with Higginson probably convinced her that her poems would find no significant or sympathetic audience during her lifetime, for though she protested to Higginson that she did not want publication, it is evident that she wanted to make her relatives proud of her work after she died, and her combination of pride and resignation probably stemmed from her awareness of her great gift and her frustration that so many people were as mystified by her poems as by her talk. Many of the poems give eloquent testimony that she longed for an audience. As luck would have it, her poems survived. But their struggle for adequate publication, understanding, and recognition almost parallels her inner life in its complexity.

## INTRODUCTION

Enormously popular since the early piecemeal publication of her poems, Emily Dickinson has enjoyed an ever-increasing critical reputation, and she is now widely regarded as one of America's best poets. These Notes focus on clarification of some eighty-five of her poems, chosen and emphasized largely according to the frequency of their appearance in eight standard anthologies, where the average number of her poems is fifty. These poems also seem to offer an excellent representation of her themes and power. In a final section to these Notes, additional poems are commented on briefly.

In face of the difficulty of many of her poems and the bafflingly diffuse and contradictory general impression made by her work and personality, Dickinson's popularity is a great tribute to her genius. Her poems are often difficult because of their unusual compression, unconventional grammar, their strange diction and strained figures of speech, and their often generalized symbolism and allegory. She took up baffling and varied attitudes towards a great many questions about life and death, and she expressed these in a great variety of tones. The speaker in these individual poems is often hard to identify. In many poems, she preferred to conceal the specific causes and nature of her deepest feelings, especially experiences of suffering, and her subjects flow so much into one another in language and conception that often it is difficult to tell if she is writing about people or God, nature or society, spirit or art. One often suspects that many such subjects are being treated simultaneously. Furthermore, her condensed style and monotonous rhythms make sustained reading of her work difficult. The flagging attention that results can contribute to misperception and hasty judgment. Nevertheless, since her poems are mutually illuminating, the reader may face the choice of trying to learn much from a generous selection or trying to concentrate on the essentials of a smaller number.

Fortunately, common sense and expert guidance can offer new insights into this maze. Usually, biographical information is useful in interpreting a poet according to the degree of strangeness in the situations and states of mind which the poet portrays. It is true that Emily Dickinson's themes are universal, but her particular vantage points tend to be very personal; she rebuilt her world *inside* the products of her poetic imagination. This is why some knowledge of her

life and her cast of mind is essential for illuminating much of her work. Such knowledge, however, must always be used with caution and tact, for otherwise it can lead to quick judgments, simplifications, and distortions. Understanding of her work is helped even more by recognizing some of her fundamental *patterns* of subject matter and treatment, particularly her contrasting attitudes and the ways in which her subjects blend into one another. Such patterns may – and for the Dickinson expert must – include material from her life and letters, but this approach requires a continual awareness that, like her poems, her letters were written for specific effects on their readers (they were often drafted), and they are often even more vague than her poems on parallel subjects. The Dickinson devotee will eventually emerge with a multi-faceted and large-scale conception of her poetic personality. Fortunately, a smaller-scale and yet rich conception is possible for readers who immerse themselves in only fifty or a hundred of her poems. One of the joys of such reading, very particular to Emily Dickinson, is that the effort to keep such a conception flexible will bring added pleasure with fresh visits to her work.

Nothing, however, will help quite as much as careful reading of her own words, sentences, stanzas, and whole poems. Particular attention should be given to grasping the sense of her whole sentences, filling in missing elements, straightening out inverted word order, and expanding the sense of telescoped phrases and metaphors. Perhaps most important for understanding Emily Dickinson is the testing of one's conceptions of the tone or tones of individual poems and relating them to other poems and to one's own emotional ideas and feelings.

Scholarly aids are generously available but not equally reliable. Outdated and wrong-headed materials are sometimes recommended, but the wise beginning student should disregard these resources until he or she has a firmer foundation to build on. For a full understanding of Emily Dickinson, a reading of her complete poems and letters is essential. For a more than generous sample of her best poetry, *Final Harvest* is outstanding. The early biographies by Bianchi, Pollitt, and Taggard should be avoided. The biographies by Whicher, Chase, and particularly the biography by Johnson give accounts reliable up to a point. The biography of Sewall outdates all of these in its thoroughness and use of new materials, but it is

cumbersome in its bulk and organization. Excellent critical books and articles abound but are frequently one-sided. Often after one has immersed himself or herself in Emily Dickinson thoroughly, one's own intellectual and emotional responses and implications are as genuine and accurate as the scholars' evaluations.

## THE TEXTS OF DICKINSON'S POEMS AND LETTERS

After Emily Dickinson died, she left behind several drawersful of poems in various states of completion: fair copies, semi-final drafts, and rough drafts, all strangely punctuated and capitalized. Her handwriting is difficult, and many manuscripts list alternate choices for words, lines, and stanzas. In the 1890s, T. W. Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd began publishing some of her poems in *First Series* (1890), *Second Series* (1891), and, by Mrs. Todd alone, *Third Series* (1896); these volumes included 449 poems. In order to create popular public acceptance, they often corrected grammar, conventionalized punctuation, improved rhymes, omitted stanzas, and supplied titles. In succeeding decades, Martha Dickinson Bianchi and A. L. Hampson edited several more small volumes and then collected many of the remaining poems into *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 1937. They took fewer liberties with the texts, but they misread many words in the manuscripts. In 1945, Millicent Todd Bingham issued her completion of her mother, M. L. Todd's, editing of another 668 poems, under the title *Bolts of Melody*, a carefully edited but also repunctuated text. (To repunctuate Dickinson is often to re-interpret her poems.) In 1955, Thomas H. Johnson edited from all known manuscripts *The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Including Variant Readings*. This edition, known as the Johnson text, attempted to report the manuscripts with complete accuracy and arranged the poems according to their dates of composition, as estimated by Emily Dickinson's changing handwriting, which helped establish Dickinson's yearly rates of composition. This volume also supplied poem numbers which are now almost universally used with first lines to identify each poem. This edition contains 1775 poems and fragments. When faced with textual variants, Johnson chose words and lines listed first, but he reported all the others in footnotes. In 1960, Johnson

simplified the variorum edition into a single volume, reader's edition, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, recently reissued in a reduced-type paperback edition. The single volume edition occasionally departs from the textual choices of the variorum. In 1961, Johnson issued *Final Harvest*, a selection of 575 poems. Early printings of the one-volume edition and of *Final Harvest* contain a number of misprints. As for Dickinson's letters, a body of work which many critics believe to be as valuable as her poetry because of its imagery and ideas, two editions of selections from Emily Dickinson's letters appeared under M. L. Todd's editorship in 1894 and 1931. In 1958, T. H. Johnson gathered all known letters into the three-volume *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. A number of the best known early critical essays on Emily Dickinson, including those by Conrad Aiken, Allen Tate, and Yvor Winters, quote from the sometimes mangled pre-Johnson texts. Most contemporary anthologies employ the Johnson texts, but the earlier editions still reside on library shelves and two selections of Emily Dickinson's poems that remain in print, edited respectively by R. N. Linscott and J. M. Brinnin, use pre-Johnson texts either wholly or substantially, sometimes misleadingly for the reader.

## DICKINSON'S IDEAS

Emily Dickinson's major ideas are readily available to us in her poems and letters, but on first reading, they form complicated and often contradictory patterns. This is not surprising; her world was insular and small, and she was highly introspective. In addition, her work has its roots in the culture and society of her times, but though these can be explored extensively and many parallels can be established between her statements and various literary and religious documents, the poems create more mutual illumination than does Emily Dickinson's background itself. Orthodox Protestantism in its Calvinistic guise was the major underpinning of nineteenth-century Amherst society, though it was undergoing shocks and assaults. This New England faith, often called Puritanism, was based on the idea of man as being sinful and unregenerate and completely at the mercy of a loving but arbitrary God. Salvation was by predestined election (it lay entirely in the will of God), but acceptance of God's will, and



renunciation of the world for Christ, were paramount for proof of piety and peace of soul. Worldly success and religious faith were taken as signs of salvation but not as its causes. In Dickinson's time, this faith was wearing thin, and material success had long replaced deep piety as the real standard for recognizing the elect. This thinning out of faith helped create the ideas of New England Unitarianism and Transcendentalism. Unitarianism having watered down the emotional components of religion, the transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and others elevated man's spirituality, self-development, and union with the stream of nature to the level of the divine, without ever quite denying the Godhead. The Puritans had seen God's will everywhere in the signs of nature. In Emerson's footsteps, Whitman, Thoreau, and certainly Emily Dickinson tended to see man's spirit manifested or symbolized in nature, though Dickinson often saw only the human mind reading its feelings into nature. Dickinson was aware of and troubled by the admitted and surreptitious breakdown of faith in her time, and she was dubious of all measures to shore it up. She drew sustenance from new ideas, but sometimes found them shallow. She rejected old ideas, but found in them much emotional correspondence to her own set of mind.

For Dickinson, the crucial religious question was the survival of the soul after death. She rejected absolutely the idea of man's innate depravity; she favored the Emersonian partial reversal of Puritanism that conceived greatness of soul as the source of immortality. The God of the Bible was alternately real, mythical, and unlikely to her. She could neither accept nor reject His assurance of a life beyond death, and her doubts pushed her faintly in the direction of transcendental naturalism or towards mere terror of dissolution. She declares, alternately, faith and doubt with equal vehemence, surely as much because of her own struggles with the idea of and need for fulfillment as because of any intellectual battlement. Her sarcastic comments on the God of the Bible are not necessarily jocular. She was independent minded, but she did not shift her stance in her letters to suit her recipients, nor in her poems presumably, to suit her moods; she was interested primarily in her poetic momentum.

In some sense, Dickinson is almost always a religious poet—if her concerns with human perception, suffering, growth, and fulfillment as directed towards something permanent can be called religious concerns. These concerns are as important for her as are