

Dickinson honors nature’s capacity for both transcendent sublimity and horrible cruelty⁶¹ and accepts its darkness as well as its brilliant illuminations:

Through fissures in
Volcanic cloud
The yellow lightning shone –
The trees held up
Their mangled limbs
Like animals in pain –

(P 691, no. 1694)

Dickinson accepted nature’s darkness as well as its joys.

The full range of emotion and experience is Dickinson’s poetic terrain, which means she had to accept nature and life in its entirety, had to grapple with and accept death, the darkest and most threatening aspect of the cycle of birth, life, death, and dissolution. Because Dickinson recognized that death was as much a part of nature as life and its joys, she thought a great deal about the emotions that the certainty of death produced in her. Indeed, many of Dickinson’s best poems are interested in the problem of death, a problem she could never quite solve until she faced it herself.

“A Riddle, at the last”: death and immortality

To fully understand Emily Dickinson’s attitude toward life one must grapple, as Dickinson herself did, with the problem of death. Death was *the* problem for Dickinson, a riddle she could never solve but which she always explored, even before the deaths of loved ones during the last decade of her life. Because Dickinson’s poetry is dedicated to recording the subtle emotions of the moment, her attitude toward death is not consistent from poem to poem. At times, her poems seem to embrace the possibility, even probability, of immortality and an afterlife. Other poems are more depressed and despairing, while still others suggest the poet’s resigned acceptance of uncertainty. The poems record the changes in Dickinson’s fluctuating emotions. However, there is a persistent thread of mystery, silence, and uncertainty that always surrounds death in her writing. While her culture attempted to make death familiar and even comfortable, Dickinson undercut sentimental Victorian ideas about death and the afterlife by emphasizing the inherent inscrutability of death. Her project is not necessarily to clarify death but to explore its silence, mystery, and unknowability as well as to record the range of emotions that the frightening mystery of death awakens in the human heart.

The importance of mortality to Dickinson's work is evident in the sheer number of poems and letters that are preoccupied with the subject. The subject index of Johnson's reading edition of Dickinson's poems lists almost 150 poems under the headings of "dead" and "death." Of course, there are also poems listed under "immortality," "resurrection," and "eternity" that likewise discuss death. The word "death" is mentioned in Dickinson's poetry 141 times, following only "day" (232 times), "sun" (170 times), "life" (156 times), and "heaven" (143 times) as the most repeated noun in her poetry.⁶² Indeed, some form of the verb *die* appears in more than ninety poems.⁶³ Death is also an important subject in Dickinson's letters, especially during the last decade of her life when she writes more letters than poems.⁶⁴ Surrounded by the deaths of loved ones, "[n]ot only her own bereavements, but those of others, prompted nearly half of the letters [about 300 letters] now available from Dickinson's last decade" alone.⁶⁵

From her father's sudden death in June 1874, hardly a year was to pass in which Emily Dickinson escaped loss. In the summer of 1875, her mother suffered a paralyzing stroke, and thenceforth required constant care. In 1878 Samuel Bowles died, and in 1879 Charles Wadsworth. Both men had stimulated Dickinson's intellect and thus enabled her art . . . In 1881 came the death of Dr Holland . . . and in 1882 the demise of Mrs Dickinson . . . The unkindest cut of all came in 1883, when Gilbert, aged eight, died suddenly of typhoid fever. Judge Otis Lord, the romantic love of Emily Dickinson's final years, died in March 1884, and in that June she suffered the first full attack of her own fatal disease. In addition to these losses at the marrow of her life, others she had revered as literary friends and models had also died: Mrs Higginson in 1877, George Eliot in 1880, Emerson in 1882, Helen Hunt Jackson in 1885.⁶⁶

These losses notwithstanding, Dickinson's interest in death is not confined to the last decade of her life. On the contrary, in 1852 at the age of twenty-one Dickinson wrote to Jane Humphrey, "I think of the grave very often" (*L* 197, no. 88). Some of her very earliest poems written in 1852–3, though extremely conventional and sentimental, are nonetheless interested in death, resurrection, and eternity (e.g., *P* 5–7, nos. 4 and 5), subjects that repeatedly reappear in Dickinson's poetry and prose for the remainder of her life.

Though Dickinson's fascination with death might seem an abnormal obsession to contemporary readers in a culture that pushes death to the margins of consciousness, such interest was in fact quite commonplace in nineteenth-century Victorian America. Dickinson's desire to know the particulars of her friends' passings (for example when she wrote to Charles Clark asking him to

tell her of his brother James’ final days (*L* 778, no. 826)) reflects the culture’s obsession with deathbed behavior. According to Janet Buell, this interest in deathbed scenes descended from Puritan ideas that “there was no more telling sign of election than a serene deathbed acceptance which served as inspiration and consolation to those left behind”; in fact, in Dickinson’s day, Buell points out, “clergymen kept [detailed] records of their parishioners’ conduct on leaving this life.”⁶⁷ Appropriate deathbed behavior, or *ars moriendi*, was a common topic of conversation as well as an important part of sentimental fiction.⁶⁸

Nineteenth-century America’s “widespread fascination with death and immortality [was] exemplified by the massive popularity of mourning manuals, the growth of the rural cemetery movement, and the near-meteoric rise of such sanitizing rituals as embalming.”⁶⁹ Newspapers, periodicals, and sentimental narratives were also filled with constructions of the afterlife as a domestic space that mimicked this life’s familial arrangements. According to Maria Farland, “In the popular fictions of Dickinson’s era, friends and family would be reunited in snug, heavenly homes complete with elaborate interior decorations and detailed housekeeping regimes”; death was merely “a mild transition whose gentleness provided evidence of God’s kindness.”⁷⁰ Often, death was depicted as a gentle angel, or a lover, conducting the faithful to a blissful new home.⁷¹ Dickinson’s interest in death, then, is not macabre but in alignment with her culture. However, Dickinson’s depictions of death are much more complicated and stark than conventional representations; she reverses cultural ideas in order to convey her own more complex attitudes toward death and the afterlife.

Emily Dickinson’s early letters seem to embrace the sentimental ideas of the afterlife as a reunion of loved ones. For example, in an 1855 letter to Mrs Holland, Dickinson writes: “Thank God there is a world, and that the friends we love dwell forever and ever in a house above. I fear I grow incongruous, but to meet my friends does delight me so that I quite forget time and sense and so forth” (*L* 319, no. 179). However, the sentences preceding these suggest that this exclamation comes from Dickinson’s fear that “there is not a world” (319). The possibility that heaven as well as the world may be a mere “dream” complicates Dickinson’s seemingly sure insistence on an eternal reunion with friends. In 1856, Dickinson (again to Mrs Holland) expresses her wishes for a heaven:

My only sketch, profile, of Heaven is a large, blue sky, bluer and larger than the *biggest* I have seen in June, and in it are my friends – all of them – every one of them – those who are with me now, and those who were “parted” as we walked, and “snatched up to Heaven.”

(*L* 329, no. 185)

Since Dickinson's emotional investment in this life was so intense, it is not surprising that in this letter she hopes for a future world that is a potential extension of what she already has and loves – friends, family, and nature. However, her skepticism surfaces again in the letter when Dickinson tells Mrs Holland, “[I]f God had been here this summer, and seen the things that I have seen – I guess that He would think His Paradise superfluous. Don't tell Him, for the world, though, for after all He's said about it, I should like to see what He *was* building for us, with no hammer, and no stone, and no journeyman either.” The playful, mocking tone again registers her disbelief in the heaven that God has promised, the paradise “not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (II Corinthians 5:1). In an 1858 letter to the Hollands, Dickinson's uncertainty about death creates, but does not answer, questions:

Good-night! I can't stay any longer in a world of death. Austin is ill of fever. I buried my garden last week – our man, Dick, lost a little girl through the scarlet fever. I thought perhaps that *you* were dead, and not knowing the sexton's address, interrogate the daisies. Ah! dainty – dainty Death! Ah! democratic Death! Grasping the proudest zinnia from my purple garden, – then deep to his bosom calling the serf's child!

Say, is he everywhere? Where shall I hide my things? Who is alive? The woods are dead. Is Mrs. H. alive? Annie and Katie – are they below, or received to nowhere? (L 341, no. 195)

Here, Dickinson's depiction of death undercuts sentimental notions of death's gentleness with darker and more threatening images of death's mystery. While she calls death “dainty” and draws on biblical and religious images of heaven as a gentle calling to Christ's bosom, she also emphasizes the physical grave in her remarks on “the sexton's address” and the daisies that spring from graves “below.”

The silence of the grave provides no answers for Dickinson's questions as she struggles to make a connection between the cycles of nature and the deaths of those around her. Her worries are never completely soothed by her culture's expressions of hope: “That *Bareheaded life* – under the grass – worries one like a Wasp” (L 364, no. 220). Ultimately, she fears that to die is to be “received to nowhere” rather than to ascend to a fatherly embrace. Thus, in a much later letter expressing her deep grief at Judge Lord's death, even as Dickinson recounts his seemingly peaceful, sentimental passing, she quickly follows with an expression of uncertainty: “Dear Mr. Lord has left us – After a brief unconsciousness, a Sleep that ended with a smile, so his Nieces tell us, he hastened away, ‘seen,’ we trust, ‘of Angels’ – ‘Who knows that secret deep’ – ‘Alas, not I –’” (L 816, no. 890). Even as Dickinson employs sentimental images to represent death,

she undercuts them with questions and uncertainties. Dickinson is haunted by the unknowability of death’s “secret deep.”

Some of Dickinson’s most famous and most powerful poems turn on the connections they make with reversals of sentimental notions of death and immortality. While sentimental fictions were designed to cover death’s fearful darkness with soft language and familiar images that render death less frightening, Dickinson’s poems often strip death of such reassuring language, highlighting instead its mystery and uncertainty. Dickinson’s extremely famous poem “Because I could not stop for Death” draws on the sentimental idea of death as a gentle lover escorting his love to a new and blissful home.⁷²

Because I could not stop for Death
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He passed Us –
The Dews drew quivering and chill –
For only Gossamer, my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – ’tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses’ Heads
Were toward Eternity – (P 350, no. 712)

The motif of death as a courtly lover is highlighted in the poem’s first three stanzas. Death here is “kindly” and offers the narrator a smooth journey to the afterlife. The journey is slow, not frighteningly hasty or bumpy, and death is full of chivalric “Civility.” The journey includes familiar scenes as the carriage

glides past the school and fields. However, the fourth stanza brings an abrupt turn to the poem. In the first three stanzas, the spatial coordinates of the poem are clear and consistent. The carriage journeys straight away from the home and town, eventually passing “the Setting Sun.” However, when the narrator suddenly adds, “Or rather – He passed Us –,” the journey’s progress suddenly becomes confusing. This abrupt turn in the poem flags a movement away from the sentimental idea of death as an easy spiritual journey. Instead of moving smoothly past the setting sun to the heavens, the journey ends rather abruptly and the scene becomes threatening. The poem has quickly moved from the positive image of “the Fields of Gazing Grain” to the darker image of the “Dews . . . quivering and chill” that threaten a vulnerable body clad with “*only* Gossamer” and “*only* Tulle.” The journey ends not with the arrival at a heavenly home, but in the buried and suffocating home “in the Ground” – the physical grave. The carriage that seemed so comfortable in the first half of the poem is not a chariot that transports a soul to an afterlife but a hearse transporting a body to the cemetery. “Eternity” seems nothing more than “Centuries” of physical decay in the earth that feel shorter than “the Day” when the narrator first noticed she was on her way to death. This poem’s last stanza also suggests that true eternity lies in the single day in which we recognize death and thus capitalize on the present moment, which is itself infinite.⁷³

“Death is a supple Suitor” takes an even darker view of the sentimental death-as-lover motif.

Death is the supple Suitor
 That wins at last –
 It is a stealthy Wooing
 Conducted first
 By pallid innuendoes
 And dim approach
 But brave at last with Bugles
 And a bisected Coach
 It bears away in triumph
 To Troth unknown
 And Kindred as responsive
 As Porcelain.

(P 614, no. 1445)

This poem’s vision of the afterlife is not one of reunion at the warm and happy domestic hearth that the culture usually propounded. Death as suitor is not a positive and gentle image here, but a “stealthy” and even violating danger. There is no happy reunion with friends and family. Here we have only the coldness and stillness of the corpse and the mausoleum.

Again and again, Dickinson's poems undercut sentimental ideas of death. Instead of recording a comforting and inspiring deathbed scene in which the dying individual experiences a religious revelation and a peaceful conclusion to mortal life, Dickinson imagines dying as anticlimactic in "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –."

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –
The Stillness in the Room
Was Like the Stillness in the Air –
Between the Heaves of Storm –

The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset – when the King
Be witnessed – in the Room –

I willed away my Keepsakes – Signed Away
What portion of me be
Assignable – and then it was
There interposed a Fly –

With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –
Between the light – and me –
And then the Windows failed – and then
I could not see to see –

(P 223–4, no. 465)

In this poem, the speaker, now a corpse, and the friends gathered round are trying to enact a sentimental deathbed scene. The faces of loved ones brace for the final moments, possessions and keepsakes are willed away, the last words are spoken, and the arrival of "the King" who will lead the dying to heaven is anticipated. But instead of being gently led by Christ, a common fly interposes, undercutting the solemnity of the scene: the speaker sees a fly, and then the light suddenly fails and death takes over. Dickinson highlights the isolation of death and cuts the speaker off from the group gathered round by using dashes to cut off and isolate the "me" of the poem in the last stanza. There is no gentle passage into death, only an abrupt, awkward, and isolating end that seems as "uncertain" and "stumbling" as the flight of the fly.

For Dickinson, death is not the known, mappable terrain of Victorian narratives but an ultimately impenetrable region: "Dust is the only Secret – / Death, the only One / You cannot find out all about" (P 72, no. 153). The silence of the grave prohibits any certainty about life after death. In "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," the speaking corpse is silenced before it can give any hints about life after death:

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
 And Mourners to and fro
 Kept treading – treading – till it seemed
 That Sense was breaking through –

And when they all were seated,
 A Service, like a Drum –
 Kept beating – beating – till I thought
 My Mind was going numb –

And then I heard them lift a Box
 And creak across my Soul
 With those same Boots of Lead, again,
 Then Space – began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
 And Being, but an Ear,
 And I, and Silence, some strange Race
 Wrecked, solitary, here –

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
 And I dropped down, and down –
 And hit a World, at every plunge,
 And Finished knowing – then –

(*P* 128–9, no. 280)

At death, “Being” may become an “Ear,” but it has no voice to tell what it hears. Death may result in hyper-self-consciousness, but nothing can be communicated. Death is a place of “I, and Silence”; the speaker “drop[s] down, and down” into death and “Finishe[s] knowing – then –.” The poem feels unfinished because the truth of what death is cannot be communicated. Death is unknowable except to the dead, who are of course silent and probably not sentient in Dickinson’s view.⁷⁴

The silence and mystery of the grave are constants in Dickinson’s writings even when she tries to hope that there is an afterlife or some kind of reunion of loved ones. “This World is not Conclusion” (*P* 243, no. 501) while claiming at its beginning that there is another world beyond this one, focuses more on the mystery of death than the certainty of afterlife:

This World is not Conclusion.
 A Species stands beyond –
 Invisible, as Music –
 But positive, as Sound –
 It beckons, and it baffles –

Philosophy – don’t know –
 And through a Riddle, at the last –
 Sagacity, must go –
 To guess it, puzzles scholars –
 To gain it, Men have borne
 Contempt of Generations
 And Crucifixion, shown –
 Faith slips – and laughs, and rallies –
 Blushes, if any see –
 Plucks at a twig of Evidence –
 And asks a Vane, the way –
 Much Gesture, from the Pulpit –
 Strong Hallelujahs roll –
 Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
 That nibbles at the soul –

Like “Music,” immortality “baffles” the poet because no language clarifies its meaning. Death is a “Riddle” that “puzzles scholars” but which “at the last” everyone must pass through in order to reach “Sagacity.” Death is, as Dickinson calls it in another poem, a “bland uncertainty” (*P* 674, no. 1646). The best one can do is imagine the afterlife because death is “Further than Guess can gallop / Further than Riddle ride” (*P* 445, no. 949). Dickinson cleverly uses a pun to say that trying to understand death is as vain as asking “a Vane, the way.” All the thundering pronouncements from the pulpit cannot nullify the grave’s silence or erase the gnawing uncertainty about death and eternity.

In discussing her father’s death in a letter to Higginson (1874), Dickinson writes, “I am glad there is Immortality – but would have tested it myself – before entrusting him” (*L* 528, no. 418). Dickinson’s desire to locate her father in “Immortality” is complicated by its uncertainty and mystery. In her letter to Susan after Gilbert’s death (*L* 799, no. 868), Dickinson grounds much of her consolation in Gilbert’s earthly life, while representing his death as an initiation into a secret: “The Vision of Immortal Life has been fulfilled – How simply at last the Fathom comes! . . . Gilbert rejoiced in Secrets – His Life was panting with them . . . Now my ascended Playmate must instruct *me*. Show us, prattling Preceptor, but the way to thee!” Dickinson employs sentimental ideas about death to console her friend by describing Gilbert’s death as an ascension to the heavens, but she also emphasizes the mystery, “the Fathom” of death that Gilbert has now discovered. The rest of her letter focuses on his earthly life and then once again returns to the essential mystery of death in its enclosed poem: “Pass to thy Rendezvous of Light, / Painless except for us – / Who slowly ford the Mystery / Which thou hast leaped across.” Dickinson registers her

uncertainty about an afterlife even more vividly in her description of Gilbert's last moments to Mrs Holland: "he ran to the little Grave at his Grandparent's feet – All this and more, though *is* there more? More than Love and Death? Then tell me it's name!" (L 803, no. 873). The silence of the grave resists any elucidation of its secret.

Ultimately, Dickinson is not committed to sanitizing death, though she does, at times, employ sentimental conventions in order to console others. On the contrary, her project is one of recording. Embracing life in all its variations, even its most painful, Dickinson explores death as one of life's most poignant experiences. Her ability to describe the pain, as well as anger, one feels after the death of a loved one draws on her own intense feelings of grief:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
 The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
 The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
 And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
 Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –
 A Wooden way
 Regardless grown,
 A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead –
 Remembered, if outlived,
 As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
 First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –

(P 162, no. 341)

Dickinson describes the way a loved one's death leaves an individual empty, cold, almost dead themselves, moving mechanically through the world without any real sense of the life that moves around them. The death of a loved one creates an emptiness in the mourner that is not only a miniature death of the self, but also a preview of the mourner's own death. The heavy stupor that is one of the stages of grief may be outlived, but it is always remembered as a pall cast on one's own life.

Recording momentary feelings allows Dickinson to capture not just the intense pain, but the anger and guilt that accompany grief:

How dare the robins sing,
 When men and women hear
 Who since they went to their account
 Have settled with the year! –

Paid all that life had earned
In one consummate bill,
And now, what life or death can do
Is immaterial. (P 700, no. 1724)

The robin’s song is an insult to the dead’s memory, and the guilt of continuing to live and enjoy the robin’s song when the dead cannot oppresses the mourner. Dickinson explores the complex emotions involved in mourning, while also imagining death from the perspective of the dying person.

For Dickinson, death is the most intense of moments, the moment of profound meaning between friends (“Parting is all we know of heaven, / And all we need of hell” (P 703, no. 1732)) but also a moment with the potential for self-discovery, a journey into a terrifying hyper-self-consciousness.

This Consciousness that is aware
Of Neighbors and the Sun
Will be the one aware of Death
And that itself alone

Is traversing the interval
Experience between
And most profound experiment
Appointed unto Men –

How adequate unto itself
Its properties shall be
Itself unto itself and none
Shall make discovery.

Adventure most unto itself
The Soul condemned to be –
Attended by a single Hound
Its own identity.

(P 399, no. 822)

Death is still the unknown, as always in Dickinson; here she imagines it as a journey into oneself, a journey of self-discovery that may possibly become a hunt in which one is hounded by one’s own identity. As always, however, death is the “most profound experiment / Appointed unto Men.”

Whether in moments of hope, despair, acceptance, or anger, Dickinson always registers the fundamental inscrutability of death. She explores and imagines death, not to uncover any certainty about death and immortality, but to grapple with its mystery and uncertainty. Dickinson was never able to solve death’s “riddle,” but ultimately, for Dickinson, the apparent finality of death is

what gives meaning to life. Anticipating Wallace Stevens' sentiment that "death is the mother of beauty," Dickinson makes clear that one's appreciation of life is affected by the ability to accept and remember the reality of death.⁷⁵

The Admirations – and Contempts – of time –
 Show justest – through an Open Tomb –
 The Dying – as it were a Height
 Reorganizes Estimate
 And what We saw not
 We distinguish clear –
 And mostly – see not
 What We saw before –

 'Tis compound Vision –
 Light – enabling Light –
 The Finite – furnished
 With the Infinite –
 Convex – and Concave Witness –
 Back – toward Time –
 And forward –
 Toward the God of Him – (P 428, no. 906)

The certainty of death gives a new perspective on life – a "compound Vision" that illuminates through contrast and encompasses presence and absence, past and future, "Convex" and "Concave." Such perspective reorganizes the "Estimate" of time and discovers eternity in the present moment. This brief life is the "single Dram of Heaven" that the soul is given (P 700, no. 1725); its briefness does not take away from its heavenliness, but intensifies it. Eternity for Dickinson is not an endless extension of literal days, or a physical place, but a perspective of time that creates a heightened appreciation of the infinite potential of the moment:

The Blunder is in estimate.
 Eternity is there
 We say, as of a Station –
 Meanwhile he is so near
 He joins me in my Ramble –
 Divides abode with me –
 No Friend have I that so persists
 As this Eternity

 (P 687–8, no. 1684)

Any linear measurement of time – to "estimate" – is a blunder. Eternity exists in the unfolding moment of the present, not as a location in a distant heaven.

“I find ecstasy in living,” Dickinson once said, “– the mere sense of living is joy enough” (*L* 474, no. 342a). The “ecstasy of living,” the “omnipotence” that Dickinson feels in being “alive,” is “enough” to make this existence profoundly worthwhile, even if there is no existence after death (*P* 335, no. 677).

Thus, for Dickinson, one’s legacy ultimately lies in the ability to live fully in the present and to bequeath a legacy of self to loved ones. Dickinson’s bequest is the poetry that records her own attempts to understand and appreciate each individual moment. In the effort to achieve “circumference,” her poems offer a wide range of sometimes contradictory perspectives that depend upon the moment in which she wrote. Sometimes the poems plunge into dangerous self-reflection or despair. Sometimes they embrace a moment of transcendence and ecstasy. Dickinson’s poems map the flux and changes of human experience. They are the legacy of a life lived with full consciousness and self-awareness.