"I DWELL IN POSSIBILITY": AN INTERPRETATION OF THE INNER VOICE AND VISION OF EMILY DICKINSON

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PREFACE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

That Emily Dickinson was essentially a poet of the inner life is a long-established fact that continues to fascinate readers and critics. She herself acclaimed the process of turning within: "the Outer--from the Inner / Derives its Magnitude."[1] The inner life is the realm in which her self-discovery was carried out; she turned inward to select, sort, focus, examine, and explore herself thoroughly so that a poetry vibrant with the heights and depths of consciousness would result. Rarely has her poetry been viewed in terms other than the private and the inner. Any divergence from this conventional interpretation is considered a revolutionary change in terms of Dickinson criticism. But even such interpretations are not free from recourse to some aspect of her interiority. Moreover, the life of Dickinson is not easy to analyze or epitomize, for it is at once contradictory, ebulliant, elusive, esoteric, epigrammatic, wayward, brilliant, and witty. Her refocusing of attention from the outer to the inner receives various names: self-examination, meditation, self-analysis, the journey within, spiritual autobiography, and psychosynthesis. Her interchangeable use of such terms as "soul," "mind," "spirit," "self," and "consciousness" is not

a sign of her confusion, but a reflection of "the transitional period in which she was writing, when the concerns of theology, philosophy, and psychology with the interior life of man were merging in a larger synthesis for many western thinkers."[2] From the pinnacle of her private world, she was able to explore the external world within the space of her mind and vivify everything there with an ethereal touch. Biographers, critics, and anthologists have approached her life from a variety of angles and have often explained her inner growth by means of sentimental fictions, ranging from alcoholism to incest, that only add to the already existing mystery surrounding her life.

To delve authoritatively into only those critics who deal with the inwardness of Emily Dickinson's life from the entire canon of Dickinson criticism is a difficult task, and no one study can claim the status of an absolute reading of it. However, criticism of Dickinson's inner life falls into three categories. Critics like Charles K. Trueblood, Henry W. Wells, Sergio Baldi, Elizabeth Jennings, Ernest Sandeen, Glanco Cambon, Denis Donoghue, and Louis L. Martz touch upon her inner life but do not adequately show the relationship between her life and the themes and techniques of her poetry.[3] A few later critics, Clark Griffith and John Cody, for example, in their full-length studies of Emily Dickinson's journey within, become entangled into a psycho-sexual analysis of her life.[4] In between are some of

the recent feminist critics who establish Dickinson as the poet of the mind and show how her language reveals her mental experiences.[5] Most of these studies, while exploring the innermost recesses of Dickinson's life, show the relationship of her life to some particular aspects of her poetry; nevertheless, none of them clarifies how Dickinson's imaginative and intuitive mind not only led her to an inner vision and urged her to hear her own voice, but also enabled her to dramatize this voice and vision in her poetry, and to become the creator of verses that delineate the fluxes and refluxes of her thoughts and feelings with gem-like precision, in a startlingly "Dickinsonian" manner.

The first category of criticism on Emily Dickinson's inner life consists of articles or parts of books. These critics who speak about the relationship between Dickinson's psyche and certain elements of her poetry do not adequately substantiate their statements, probably because of the limited scope of their essays. One of the earliest articles that refers to Dickinson's inner life is by Charles K. Trueblood, who considers her poetry as the image "not of random thoughts or idle observations, but of fundamental wish, central to mental being" (p. 293). Tracing the beginning of Dickinson's retreat within to her relationship with her father, Trueblood concludes that Dickinson withdrew not into the morbid recesses of the spirit but into its "bright observatories" (p. 307). According to Henry W.

Wells, inner life meant more to Dickinson than outer life, and her mind was often torn and numbed by pain, and the void in her heart was caused by a loveless life and an unloving God: "Political, social, and economic institutions are of value to her at the most in supplying metaphors to enrich the expression of her intensely personal existence. Her Civil War was fought wholly within" (p. 75). Sergio Baldi argues that Dickinson's interiorization or "instress" of reality of feeling and sensation affects her poetic language. In a state of spiritual solitude, Dickinson recognized love and death as the two vital moments that conditioned her innermost thoughts and feelings. (pp.438-449). Elizabeth Jennings' essay notes the richness of Dickinson's inwardness, which is generously displayed in her poems that are notable for their naked and fearless presentation of painfully personal experiences. But the author seems to be more interested in taking issue with some of the critical remarks made by Blackmur, Tate, and Reeves (pp. 78-87). Ernest Sandeen probes into the subliminal self of Dickinson through an analysis of her "Summer" poems, but he does not go beyond making categorical statements about Dickinson's life: "Whatever 'distance' she achieves through her almost clinical examination of her own responses, the examination is itself focussed upon the world of her inner life. Her creative energy is directed inward, is centripetal in its effect. . . . The illumination that

flashes from her best lines does not come from an explosion but from an implosion" (p. 495). Glanco Cambon speaks about Dıckınson´s spatial imagınation wıth which she internalızed the exıstential boundaries of experıence ın her poetry wıth the unequalled sophistıcatıon of her style: "In poem after poem the release Emıly attaıns by wıthdrawing from the outer world and communıng wıth herself is conceıved as the blossomıng of a butterfly from the cocoon of inwardness" (p. 41). Denıs Donoghue believes that most of the characteristıcs of Dıckınson´s poetry are based on the assumptıon that the poet´s soul ıs the center of the ınner unıverse. The two aspects of Dıckınson´s intuitıve lıfe--the craving to know and her belief ın the ımagination--enabled her to bind herself with cordialıty and tact to the external world: "Emıly Dıckınson withdrew ınto her room and attracted into ıt whatever of life her unwrıtten poem needed. Lıfe is drawn ınto her room and sometımes entertained there and often trapped there" (p. 101). Placıng Dıckınson within the medıtatıve tradıtıon, Louıs L. Martz states that, ın her poems, Emily Dıckınson recovered "stability after some dısastrous, shatterıng experıence; the process is one of reconstructıng the very self" (p. 92). But hıs essay deals more wıth a crıtıcal analysıs of the effectıveness of her poems ın theır present form.

In this context, the importance of the full-length studies of Albert J. Gelpi and William R. Sherwood on Emily Dickinson's mind and art[6] cannot be ignored. Going beyond biography and textual analysis to "fully and richly" understand Dickinson as a poet, in addition to suggesting "how central and radial a figure she is in the sweep of American imagination" (p. vii), Gelpi draws parallels between her work and that of nineteenth-century writers such as Edwards and Emerson and twentieth-century writers such as James, Eliot, Jeffers, Frost, and Robert Lowell, and tries to define Dickinson's attitudes toward the questions of existence. Gelpi analyses her responses to her personal and cultural situations and establishes her as a transitional figure between Christian orthodoxy and transcendentalism in her existential search for faith. His references to Dickinson's life are minimal. He sees her mind as exemplifying "a quest through an interior waste land, trackless and guideless, without even the name of the missing treasure" (p. 70). But unfortunately, Gelpi relies too heavily on analogies drawn from Emerson and Thoreau, even though he admits of Emily Dickinson's individuality. Also, he quotes the poems only in snippets and does not explicate them well enough to sustain his arguments. After all, a full comprehension of the conflicts and individuality of Dickinson's mind demands a thorough reading of the poems.

Treating Dickinson's poetry as "a form of autobiography," Sherwood examines the development of the poet from her earliest years through her most productive period in the 1860s and into the latter years of her creativity. He distinguishes four major periods in Dickinson's life: a period of questioning, before 1862, in which she sought and failed to find evidence of God and immortality; a period of resentment and defiance (of God) in which she set up her own god in the person of Wadsworth; a period of despair; and a period of religious conversion in which she discovered all her wrongs righted by a just God. Sherwood revives the Wadsworth myth and argues that Higginson played a pivotal role in shaping her aesthetic theory. But the major weakness of his argument is his insistence on the importance of Puritanism in Emily Dickinson's life and his relegating of transcendentalism to an insignificant role:

> Emily Dickinson's transcendentalism (or the watered-down version of it that lies behind her early poems about the intimations of nature) was a passing fancy, but Puritanism became a conviction and her commitment to it . . . was absolute. . . . In the long run, transcendentalism could never have satisfied her: It was too messy, and too

> democratic, that is to say too presumptuous. (pp. 231-233)

His reordering of the poems "to defend Emily Dickinson's integrity--and hence her sanity--and to show that her sensibility was a coherent and consistent one" (p. 138), while provocative and possible, is as arbitrary as Johnson's ordering of the poems. Moreover, Sherwood's sequencing of her life into stages on the assumption of making future studies congruous, and showing that when read as a whole and in the proper order, her poetry reveals a development of mind that is both logical and humanly possible, does not take sufficient account of hundreds of poems that do not fit into his thesis.

The second category of criticism about Dickinson's process of turning inward begins as psychological study but unfortunately ends up with psychoanalytical analysis of the poet's life. At least two authors show the extent to which such a psychoanalytical-biographical approach can lead to a distortion of the life of a creative artist in a seemingly "convincing" manner. In his The Long Shadow: The Tragic Poetry of Emily Dickinson, Clark Griffith concerns himself with the life of Dickinson so far as it can be determined from her poetry. Whether the life of Dickinson can be determined from her poetry or her poetry can be determined from her life is a point of debate, yet Griffith, from an analysis of some sixty-three or so of her poems, tries to

compartmentalize her as a tragic poet. While his analysis of the poems is brilliant and enlightening, his method appears to be misdirected, for he seems to be more interested in the poet's psychological aberrations than in trying to comprehend her inner life. Griffith extrapolates, in detail, Dickinson's so-called neurosis and relates it to her life and her poetry. Many critics before and after Griffith have talked about Dickinson's abnormalities and terrifying visions in a number of poems. But unlike others, Griffith considers the abnormal and the terrifying as central to her life and thought and finds fear to be the "dominant emotion" in her poetry. The problem with Griffith's approach is that he makes a few poems speak for the entire corpus of Dickinson's poetry and shuns poems dealing with the pleasant aspects of life, such as joy, ecstasy, hope, and beauty. Also, his criticism becomes rather far fetched when he traces her agony to problems of menstruation and tries to read phallic connotations in some of her "innocent" poems.

The eminent psychiatrist John Cody, in his <u>After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson</u> offers a controversial reinterpretation of Emily Dickinson's inner life. With evidence from a study of her poems, he seems to testify to the earlier theories on the mental breakdown of Dickinson. Like Griffith, Cody dwells on one "dominant" emotion in her poetry: pain. But unlike Griffith, Cody

makes use of letters and published and unpublished biographical papers to develop his arguments. Stating that the primary focus of his study is not Dickinson's poetic achievement and that nowhere does he attempt literary criticism, Cody establishes a new context for approaching a personality whose interior monologues "guard against full disclosure" (p. 73). He wants us to read her poems as profound accounts of intense states of mental suffering. His approach, mainly psychoanalytic, traces her trouble to a pre-oedipal stage. The premises of Cody's arguments include the traumatic deficiencies of Dickinson's unsuccessful relationship with her mother. Deprivation of maternal love early in childhood resulted in Dickinson's search for mother surrogates and strong identification with the male members of her family. Her brother Austin's marriage to Sue shattered her completely and caused a psychotic breakdown of numb suffering and intermittent nervous collapse. Her recovery from this state of psychosis was followed by a love affair "rooted in fantasy, displacement, and projection" (p. 84), and the outpouring of the poetry of the sixties. During the last phase of her life, when she began to live in the reclusiveness and helpless dependency of her father's house, her eccentricities of manner and dress became more and more marked, proclaiming to the world that she had chosen to return to the simplicities of childhood.

Cody's method demands that he understand not only the inner life of Emily Dickinson, but the interiority of the reticent members of her family as well. Even though Cody uses copious biographical data about the various members of the family, one is not sure how he could have had access to their inner lives. Criticizing Cody's "blatant disregard for the poetry of poems," and "the vitality and the enormous variety of Emily Dickinson's art," Griffith condemns his treatment of the Dickinsons as if they were playthings: "They allowed themselves to be picked up, speculated about, explored from within, classified psychoanalytically--and, while never misrepresented . . . turned into the subjects of a text for the psychologically sophisticated."[7] Also, as a methodology, the Freudian-biographical approach is restrictive and does not account for the role of social forces and human interaction in personality formation. Cody's reductive methodology eliminates the cultural facts of Dickinson's life, which have to be taken into account if the contours of her subliminal self are truly to be represented: "Cody's conceptual framework is inadequate to the task of rendering an 'inner life,' as perhaps the metaphor of an inner life is inadequate to the rich interrelation of inner and outer in human fact."[8]

While Freudian-biographical approaches such as Griffith's and Cody's may produce interesting readings of the poems, they are less helpful in understanding the poet's

inner life, for they are conjectural and speculative. As Richard B. Sewall in his review of The Long Shadow points out, Emily Dickinson is pre-Freudian and imposing psychoanalysis arbitrarily and exclusively to read her poems is inappropriate, for "what went on in her subconsciousness is dangerously speculative. Under such handling, the poem is apt to become a mere symptom and the poet a patient."[9]

Recently, the feminist critics have widened the frontiers of Dickinson criticism by giving a fresh impetus to the relationship between her life and her poetry. The feminists seek to explore the crucial missing link in the life and poetry of Emily Dickinson: "a center that will finally arrest the freeplay of interference about the poet's reclusive existence and her large aggregation of brief poems."[10] Penetrating into the core of Dickinson, they attempt a "reexploration" of her life and mind and establish her as a lyric philosopher: even though she does not attempt a systematic explanation of the macrocosm, she delves deeply enough into the microcosm of the mind and the soul to be called a philosopher. Hers was "not the revelation of the saints but the revelation of the moment."[11] While most feminist critics show a revival of interest in seeing the connection between the life and poetry of Dickinson, the leader of the movement, Suzanne Juhasz, seems to be interested in Dickinson's "innerness." But even before Juhasz, the pioneering study in the field seems to be The

Capsule of the Mind, by T.V.W. Ward, coeditor of the Harvard editions of the Letters.[12]

As Ward claims in her Preface, The Capsule "does not claim to be an analysis of the mind of Emily Dickinson or a consistent account of all that was emotionally significant in her life" (p. v). Exploring a few crucial periods and relationships in the poet's life, Ward bases her thesis on the theory that Dickinson took to poetry because of a psychological crisis: "She preserved her sanity by the transformation into art of all phases of her inner experience during the time of crisis" (p. vii). But Ward's approach of examining only the poems written in the first person does not solve the mystery of Dickinson; instead, the approach comes dangerously close to psychoanalyzing the poet. Claiming that Emily Dickinson achieved not a poetry of escape but a poetry of compromise, Ward is trapped into treating her as an unusual poet struggling with a disordered soul.

Making a strong case for a feminist reading of Dickinson's poetry, Suzanne Juhasz denigrates the works of Whicher, Cody, and Porter for considering the mind as a masculine construct. Juhasz analyses in detail poems that describe the space and levels of Dickinson's mental life, which she describes as the "Undiscovered Continent." She argues that Dickinson's "life informed her work, made her work possible and probable," that "Dickinson's most

important life was primarily interior but nonetheless real," and that her book is "a biography of that mental life" (p. 177). Dickinson, Juhasz believes, negotiated with the "intensest" and "extremest" of mental experiences: pain, delight, and "eternity." According to Juhasz, Emily Dickinson's choice of solitude is a personal experience which she universalizes by making it a strategy "for her and for women in our own time" (p. 1).

Unfortunately, Juhasz too falls into the pitfall of other feminist critics who overreach themselves by presenting their views with a feminist bias, by abruptly excluding the existing body of scholarship, and by making their appeal limited and their interpretations of poems narrow. If the critics she mentions regard the mind as a male construct, she regards it as a feminine one. A mind is, after all, a mind; it is neither masculine nor feminine. Also, from the hoard of about 1800 poems Juhasz has culled out only 104 poems to chart Emily Dickinson's mental life. Her disregard of chronology makes the organization of the book factitious, for it seems to form a progressive movement of experiences of pain to delight and to "eternity," factitious. While interesting perspectives such as Juhasz' may make a substantial contribution to the ever-widening horizon of Dickinson criticism, enabling us to see Dickinson in a new and revealing light, we should recall that the issue of gender should not be an impediment to literary

perception and appreciation and that Dickinson's poetry is an exploration of the human condition rather than that of a particular sex.

The discussion to this point is not an attempt to underestimate the importance of the scholarship that has gone into these important works. Instead, it is an effort to suggest that these works are not the last studies needed on Dickinson's inner life. The critics discussed posit biographical and interpretive theses with the aid of selective quotations from accommodating poems and letters. Their arguments "come finally to rest on the periphery of the enigma, having dealt with segments of circumference rather than its center, suspecting yet not declaring what might be there."[13] Most of them work on the premise that Dickinson's poetry is an inner record of a suffering, battling spirit. This premise seems suspect; for, if it is possible to read "pain" as the dominant mode in her poetry, it is also possible to see "pleasure" as the dominant metaphor. The infinite variety of her poems allows the two to coexist. Her many poems on pain are balanced by an equal number of poems on pleasure. As Karl Keller points out,

> her little madnesses are more attractive than they are pathetic, more drawing than melodramatic, more scenic than serious. She was not determined to go "after great pain." Like everything else she

> wrote about, it came and went. What is wonderful to witness is her stoicism amid all the transience of things in her life.[14]

Of course, in the process of development of her inner life, Dickinson was beset with one or the other of the three anxieties that threaten the full realization of an individual self: fate and death, emptiness and meaninglessness, and guilt and condemnation.

But these anxieties in her were "existential" rather than "pathological," for she faced these anxieties by exhibiting what philosophers such as Paul Tillich would call the courage of individualism and the courage of participation in interdependence,[15] and she won the battle by transforming into art the different phases of her inner turmoils. For this reason, she made sure that if at any time she fell upon the thorns of life, no one should see her bleed:

> Mirth is the Mail of Anguish--
> In which it Cautious Arm,
> Lest anybody spy the blood
> And "You're hurt" exclaim! (165)

Since the labyrinthine intricacies of her poems allow for any number of interpretations, a reading of her poems merely as lyrical outbursts of the extremes of pain or pleasure

excludes a vast majority of her poems that do not belong to these categories, for pain and pleasure are not the only final matters that were important enough to provoke her into writing poems. After all, her poetry includes life and death, time and eternity, the infinite and the finite, the concrete and the abstract, the cosmic and the comic, hope and fear, God and Nature, love and hate, agony and ecstasy, the sublime and the trivial, and myriad other puzzlements of mankind. By scrutinizing her emotions in all their contrariness, Wendy Martin maintains, Dickinson seems to have deliberately avoided any particular system of categories that would prestructure or limit her perceptions (pp. 79-81). I believe that a safer and surer approach than those advocated by the partial, psychosexual, and feminist approaches to comprehend the relationship between her inner life and her poetry would be to consider the "Flood Subjects"--cardinal subjects to which she returned again and again and which absorbed her heart and soul--as the subject matter of her poetry.

The major cause that drove Dickinson into an inner life was a religious crisis she confronted in her early life. Disillusioned with and unable to accept Christianity because of what she regarded as its duplicity, Dickinson questioned its dogma and ended up with a dialectical attitude towards it. In the absence of a firm faith, she turned within to explore her own self. The outer

manifestation of this retreat into interiority was her withdrawal from society, and the inner manifestation was her creativity. Having renounced the external world, Dickinson led a richly endowed inner life of thoughts and feelings. By creating and safeguarding her privacy, she became a "loner," given to listening to her own voices. Her imaginative and intuitive mind not only necessarily compelled her to hear her own inner voice, but also urged her to be creative for sheer self-survival. Her experiences led her to a profound inner vision that is true to her own enigmatic and charismatic inner life, in which thought is inextricably fused with feeling. Dickinson dramatized her inner voice and vision in poetry that resounds in the heights and depths of consciousness, and hence this poetry may be looked upon, not merely as biographical revelations but also as a "spiritual autobiography" of her inner life. Compiling a natural history of the self by plumbing its subterranean secrets and fashioning both her world and herself through the sensuous impressions and precarious experiences which were the raw materials of her poetry, she became the creator of verses that defy the computations of critics. Using poetry as a means to explore her inner self, she gave the most nebulous and subjective states of her mind a concrete and visible form in her poetry.

The present study endeavours to investigate how Dickinson's inner voice and vision dramatized the landscape

of her inscrutable mind and settled the subject matter of her poetry. The major themes of her poetry--nature, death, and immortality--were those that touched her self intimately and intuitively. However, in treating those themes, she revealed the same ambivalence that she had toward religion and thus the dominant mode of her poetry on these subjects was one of a dialectic of doubt rather than an affirmation of faith, one of negation rather than of acceptance. In this study, I intend to examine how Dickinson, in her formative years, suffered from a spiritual crisis which led her to turn within to explore her own self; how the outer manifestation of her self- exploration was her withdrawal from society and the inner manifestation was the creativity that culminated in poetry about nature, death, and immortality; and how her inherent questioning mind enabled her to use "implicatures"[16] such as direct expressions of negation, irony and naivete, and rhetorical questioning to create a predominant negation in the treatment of each one of these subjects.

CHAPTER I

"THE ALL IMPORTANT SUBJECT"

Ever since the revival of interest in the poetry of Emily Dickinson in the thirties, the outer facts of her life have given rise to varied proclamations, and at one time or another she began to be acclaimed as "a feminine Blake," "an epigrammatic Walt Whitman," "a New England mystic," "the Amherst Nun," "the Belle of Amherst," "a symbolist of the Symbolists," "the articulate inarticulate," and "Emily the Elusive." Perhaps, in the annals of American literary history, no other poet's life has undergone such extensive inquiry as hers. Nevertheless, apart from the speculative and controversial interpretations of a few exceptional circumstances that surround her life--her supposed disappointments in love, her intense relationship with her father, and her utter solitude--the external story of her life is very nearly a blank. Renouncing the external world, she turned to the inner one of her soul. Brought up in an atmosphere of transcendental idealism and nurtured by Puritan sobriety and reliance on individual conscience, Dickinson deemed "selfhood" as the way of her life. Not belonging or indebted to any movement, she became a world unto herself. She shut herself into the shell of her own

imaginative existence and spun out gossamer fantasies of poetry from her own spiritual cocoon. Poetry therefore became for her a tool for exploring her own self. Poetry was not only a mode of communication in her "Sentimental Journey," but also a necessity for her spiritual survival and self-discovery--a virtual "Pilgrim's Progress" towards her own ideal psyche, and "the inviolability of Selfhood was the substance and refrain of almost everything she wrote."[1] Her poetry therefore is to be looked upon not as mere biographical effusion but as a spiritual autobiography of her inner life.

Dickinson's inner life should not, however, be confused with her reclusiveness during the last twenty years of her life, marked by a total withdrawal from society, her wearing a "bridal dress," shunning visitors, startling guests through a voice from the dimness of the hall, and "responding to occasions for congratulation or condolence by neighbourly gifts of flowers and dainties accompanied by little notes pencilled in an odd hand and phrased in orphic idiom."[2] But Emily Dickinson's interior life stands for the kind of marvelous process of self-discovery by which she turned inward to fathom herself thoroughly and then to write poetry vibrant with the heights and depths of consciousness. That there have been certain notions as to what the characteristics of an interior life are is apparent from the teachings and writings of the period. The best description

of an introspective life is summarized in J. L. Dudley's sermon delivered at Milwaukee on February 5, 1871:

> This interior life is not the easiest to conceive of. It is by no means the easiest to speak of, and by no means at all the easiest to entertain in our hearing . . . the interior life is sensitively shrinking from display. It is greatly reserved. It dreads self-exhibition, exposure, out-of-door contact and raw, unaccustomed inspection by others. It is not demonstrative, never sounds its own trumpet, never runs up its own flag, thinks more than it talks, counting not the propensity to reveal itself in the eye of men more than the instinct to hide itself in the shadow of the Almighty. This life is modest; thinking no evil, shrinking from notoriety, spiritually chaste, exalted, still as gratitude, mighty as love.[3]

The description aptly sketches the way Dickinson lived. In much the same way, the causes of Dickinson's seclusion have been variously expounded. In her own times, she remained a myth to the people of Amherst, and "dozens of reasons" were ferreted out to account for her secluded life. Some of the common theories that account for her reclusiveness include a thwarted love affair, a strategy to conserve her time and energy to write poetry, a device to dramatize her

drab existence, a protection against overstimulation, a social protest, a regulatory factor in her personal relationships, a reaction to repression at school, and a spite against her father. More recent views attempt to explain aspects of her life. Thus, her "bridal white" myth is, according to Kathryn Whitford, due to "the rigors of the 19th century housekeeping and laundry,"[4] and according to St. Aramand, "her spotless white gown was . . . a tangible symbol of her patent guiltlessness in causing a Fall."[5] Critics tried to support one or the other of these conjectures with shrewd but inconclusive references from her poems and letters, so that it would fit into their particular theory. But fortunately, Dickinson's retreat into interiority, unlike her withdrawal from society, has not given rise to such speculative and complex theories. Critics of Dickinson's inner life see the influence of Puritanism, which regarded women as having a world within, as the major cause of her inwardness and acclaim that her inner life is an outcome of her withdrawal. However, I believe that in addition to Puritanism, there are other reasons for her retreat into her own psyche and that she was drawn into her seclusion by a relentless inward necessity. Of course, inner life need not always end up in seclusion. The Dickinsons were all people who led essentially inner lives. After his first meeting with Dickinson, T. W. Higginson expressed his reaction in a letter to his wife:

"If you have read Mrs. Stoddard's novels you could understand a house where each member runs his or her own selves."[6] With the exception of Emily, no one else seems to have withdrawn into seclusion even though oftentimes her father indicated such tendencies: "If anyone tried to probe his feelings, if conversation verged on what was called 'the intimate,' he withdrew into himself."[7] Probably Dickinson's withdrawal from society and her white dress are the outward manifestations of her inner life, as she herself proclaims:

> Mine--by the Right of the White Election!
> Mine--by the Royal Seal!
> Mine--by the Sign in the Scarlet prison--
> Bars--cannot conceal! (528)

In the words of J. L. Dudley, "He who never knows solitude will never reach true greatness. Man must be alone sometimes, or die. In retreats of mental loneliness and heart isolation, our sensibilities flood up into the purest light, and catch the radiance that gilds the prospect of heaven" (Leyda II, 174). Dickinson, whose withdrawal was becoming more and more intensive during the late sixties and early seventies, could not help noticing such prevailing ideas about spiritual experiences, and hence her introspective life, ironically enough, is in keeping with the religious teachings of her times, even though she was driven into that life because of a personal religious trial.

I believe that Emily Dickinson's move into her own psyche is due to the most important shaping force during her formative years, her religious skepticism; for it is possible to trace a chronological evolution of how her religious questionings culminated in an inner life and thus in her creativity. The retreat into interiority because of a religious conflict is not a new concept nor is it peculiar to Dickinson. She has a precedent in Anne Bradstreet, whose poetry reverberates with the two tensions "between religious doubt and simple faith," and "between love of the material for its own sake, and love of the spiritual."[8] Though they were unknown to each other, Dickinson's contemporary, Gerald Manley Hopkins, had to withdraw into a poetic silence for seven years because of his reception into the Catholic Church. He gave up writing poetry for a while because it clashed with his faith, whereas conversely Dickinson plunged into a poetic career in order to escape her spiritual intransigence. In both cases, the decision involved relinquishing many social ties and making a "partial" break with the family. In Dickinson the process of her move within worked as follows: religious crisis, the major cause of the tensions in her mind, resulted in a growing sense of isolation and negativity, which in turn necessitated a search for self-identity. The search for identity required that she turn inward. Of course, her journey within was not the result of her disturbed state of mind alone. She

believed the discovery of one's self to be the finest adventure one can embark upon. The outer manifestation of her inner life was her withdrawal from society and its inner manifestation was her creativity. Therefore, in this chapter, I trace how religion played a vital role in driving Dickinson toward a skepticism which ultimately resulted in her negation of dogma.

The core of Dickinson's inner life lies in the ambivalent attitude she reveals toward a joyless, Calvinistic religiosity. The spiritual upheavals that swept over Amherst during her schooldays were marked by the conversion of people who, induced by prayers and exhortations, renounced their desire with a "conviction of deep guilt, a period of despair and struggle, surrender of will, [and] the sudden benediction of peace" (Bingham, p. 91). During her youth, frequent religious revivals swept over New England, and between 1845 and 1866 Amherst college experienced at least ten revivals. She protested against forces which, in the form of religious revivals, dared her to submit herself publicly to God. She felt that "belief could be intense without demanding stilted words."[9] Her religious questionings did not result from any agnostic attitude on her part, but from her exceptionally independent spirit, which refused to blindly accept philosophical and religious discussions that contain many references to concepts that the purely logical mind questions--God,

angels, salvation, divine purpose, redemption, eternity, love of humanity, sacrifice, and sin. She was, however, conscious of the limitations of the human mind, which is sustained by assurances, amid complex problems, of the realities of life. She was exasperated by the emotional extremes reached during the revival meetings when people declared aloud their secret sins. As Bingham notes, "no matter how eloquent the preacher, the mere ability to be vocal about things that lie deepest" and a public display of intimacy with the Almighty were "distasteful to her" (p. 150). So voluble a faith, for her, is in reality equal to a denial of faith. As Higgins states, "in the Dickinson home, religion was an inward matter. Open confession did not suit so reticent a family" (p. 47). Her disillusionment with the laity was confirmed by the "ministers as well as deacons whose Sunday piety did not carry over into weekday behaviour" (Bingham, p. 150). George Gould's entry in his notebook in September 1877 about Edward Dickinson's conversion is worth mentioning here:

> While Hon E.D. of Amherst was converted--who had been long under conviction--His pastor said to him in his study--'You want to come to Christ as a lawyer--but you must come to him as a poor sinner --get down on your knees & let me pray for you & then pray for yourself. (Leyda I, 178)

"It was not easy for the Dickinsons to get down on their knees and pray before others," Richard B. Sewall says, "or to be demonstrative even before God. . . . The doctrine of the 'poor sinner' was congenial to neither father nor daughter."[10] According to Richard Chase, "the unbending individualism of Edward Dickinson, his feeling that to join with others in public expressions of emotion is vulgar, intolerable, and unworthy of a self-sufficient New Englander, was strongly ingrained in Emily Dickinson's temperament."[11] Being a Dickinson, she "will not in the same breath, say good Lord and good devil, and then attempt to cheat both" (Leyda, I, 320). As a result, "Faith" for her became "Doubt," and those who talked of hallowed things aloud only embarrassed her dog (L 271) and were no better than hypocrites. Torn between orthodoxy and an attempt to escape from it, "she was never able to find a solution with religion of her heritage, nor was she content on the other hand to rest in the unbelief of the materialist. The tension between faith and doubt remained constant from an early age down to her death."[12]

Setting aside traditional religion and struggling to find the center to which her life should properly converge, Dickinson asserted her belief in the freedom of the individual, the significance of self-reliance, and the countervailing nature of self-denial, and revitalized her personal experiences in the religion of her poetry. Thus,

her retreat into an inner life was neither sudden nor desultory, but the outcome of her own self's dictates over a period of time. In her resistance to conformity, she exhibited remarkable inner strength in the face of the surging emotional tide around her. She took the power in her hand and, as it were, defied the world. That she began to regard poetry as sacred is true from Bingham's recollection of Richard Sewall's comment that she "wrote her poems in much the same spirit that her devout contemporaries prayed." Sewall thought "it was a daily ritual with her, sustaining and refreshing, a very organic part of her religiously oriented life . . . a communion with her soul and her Maker in the very best Puritan tradition" (Bingham, p. 40).

Dickinson's poetic career seems to have begun in the 1850s. Except for a few early Valentine notes, she probably did not write any significant poetry before 1858. Nor did she suddenly launch into a poetic career due to some divine inspiration. It was probably more a matter of deliberate choice. The most important factor leading to this decision was the unresolved speculations of her own mind in religious matters, which had a modulating effect on her poetic bent of mind. This can be established from her letters rather than from her poetry because, by the time she began to write any serious poetry, she had already found a solution to her religious conflict in accepting her lost condition and was

more or less settled in becoming skeptical about her views on religion. As Sewall says, Dickinson's early letters "with their introversions and their increasingly critical animadversions on people and things, [are] exercises in the discovery of herself and her world" (II, 374-75).

From a chronological reading of her letters, it is possible to deduce that the resistance to conformity was her primary concern in her youth. In spite of girlhood trivialities and gossip, religion seems to be the main subject in most of her twenty-two letters to her childhood friend Abiah Root. Yet, surprisingly, she does not even broach the subject to her brother Austin, with whom she had many a shared moment then and thereafter. She resented public profession of faith. Even when she discussed her emotional disturbance with Abiah Root, she was not the one to open the subject, but responded only to Abiah's "confidences about her own uncertainties."[13] Her early letters to Abiah Root and to others suggest how she began with a desire to believe dogmas but ended up by rejecting them, and how she successfully resolved her religious conflict by entering into the world of her own self. Paul J. Ferlazzo points out that Dickinson's letters from 1848 to 1854 "reflect her struggles against the forces which challenged her to give herself openly to Christ" and that they "move from hopeful consideration of church membership, through rebellion and fear of its outcome, to a resigned

determination to stand apart from her community."[14] But my point is that Dickinson's religious crisis began as early as 1845 and lasted until early 1851, by which time all the other family members, with the exception of her brother Austin, had already become professed church members.

The religious crisis must have begun very early for Dickinson. In a letter to Abiah Root, written on January 10, 1845, when she was only fifteen years old, she refers to a disturbed state of mind: "The New Year's day was unusually gloomy to me, I know not why, and perhaps for that reason a host of unpleasant reflections forced themselves upon me which I found not easy to throw off" (L 9). The cause of gloominess is not explicitly stated and might have been anything, but a clue that it is ostensibly religious lies in her subsequent letters to Abiah. As a girl of sixteen, she considered Christianity an essential part of a happy life even though she felt that she would not be able to practice it: "There is an aching void in my heart which I am convinced the world never can fill" (L 10). This letter, which is devoted entirely to religion, centers upon a revival that swept through Amherst in the previous winter; those who attended the revival meetings in disbelief "were melted at once" and made "Christ their portion" (L 10). The letter contains a mixture of doubts expressed in the religious language of hope. Responding to Abiah's unsettled state of mind, Dickinson replied that she too had similar

feelings and was almost prevailed upon to become a Christian. For a while she thought that she was enjoying peace and happiness and that she could never again be thoughtless and worldly. But she was disillusioned right away: "I soon forgot my morning prayer or else it was irksome to me. One by one my old habits returned and I cared less for religion than ever" (L 10). She could only hope that someday she might become a professed Christian: "I am far from being thoughtless upon the subject of religion. I continually hear Christ saying to me Daughter give me thine heart. . . . I hope at sometime the heavenly gates will be opened to receive me and The angels will consent to call me sister" (L 10). Even though she constantly put off becoming a Christian because of evil voices lisping in her ear, she believed that there was enough time. Yet she felt that in refusing the free offers of mercy she was living in sin daily. However, she did not attend the revival meeting or resist the calls of Christ, not because she disliked Christianity, but because she was aware of her limitations. Excitable as she was, she was afraid to trust herself because she might once again be led into deception. As Sewall states, "she was afraid of being too much moved and, her imagination overstimulated, lured into a commitment she knew from experience she could not live up to" (II, 382). On the other hand, she hoped that someday she would be able

to "yield to the claims of He who is greater than" her. Her mind was torn between faith and doubt:

> I feel that life is short and time fleeting--and that I ought now to make my peace with my maker--I hope the golden opportunity is not far hence when my heart will willingly yield itself to Christ, and that my sins will be all blotted out of the book of remembrance. (L 10)

Even though she expressed a hope that she would in the future accept Christianity, this was not to be, as her subsequent letters to Abiah show. "At this point," according to Burbick, her rebellion "walks a tightrope between self-analysis and self-incrimination."[15]

In the letter written to Abiah Root on 28 March 1846, she once again speaks about her oscillating mind filled with many solemn thoughts which crowd upon her with an overpowering force. By that time Abiah had already decided upon acceptance of faith, and Emily expresses a wish that she could find the peace that is now Abiah's. Dickinson was quite aware of her shortcomings. She recalled her "pleasant feelings" of "perfect happiness" while she was "an heir of heaven" and communed "alone with the great God" (L 11). She was determined that she would devote her entire life to God's service. But the "winning words" of evil enticed her to the pleasures of the world, and "in an unguarded moment"

she began to listen "to her syren voice" and began gradually to lose her interest in heavenly things: "Prayer in which I had taken such delight became a task & the small circle who met for prayer missed me from their number" (L 11). Her friends and others tried to reason with her, but she felt that she "had rambled too far to return" and that her "heart has been growing harder & more distant from the truth," and she lamented her "folly" (L 11). Despite the emotional turbulence, she expresses some hope that she might still hear God's voice and "be with the lambs upon the right hand of God" (L 11), which she later declares as "amputated" (1551).

> I know that I ought now to give myself away to God & spend the springtime of life in his service for it seems to me a mockery to spend life's summer & autumn in the service of Mammon & when the world no longer charms us . . . Surely it is a fearful thing to live & a very fearful thing to die & give up our account to the supreme ruler for all our sinful deeds & thoughts upon this probationary term of existence. (L 11)

Such had been the thoughts that were "gnawing" at her "very heart strings" (L 11). In the postscript to the letter she admonishes Abiah not to allow anyone to see the letter. Being a Dickinson, she feels uncomfortable that she has

openly discussed a sensitive subject even if it be with a good friend of hers. That she did not open the topic again to Abiah for a while tends to confirm this view.

Her letter to Abiah written on June 26, 1846, does not mention the subject. But she momentarily returns to the subject in her letter of September 8. Although the letter is devoted primarily to recollections of her Boston trip, she returns before closing to the "all important subject" which they have often discussed: "But I feel that I have not yet made my peace with God. I am still a s[tran]ger--to the delightful emotions which fill your heart" (L 13). Yet she finds it impossible to overcome wordly considerations: "I have perfect confidence in God & his promises & yet I know not why, I feel that the world holds a predominant place in my affections. I do not feel that I could give up all for Christ, were I called to die" (L 13). However, that her self-assurance is waning is obvious in this letter, for she implores Abiah to pray for her so that she can "enter into the kingdom," where "in the shining courts above" (L 13) there may be room left for her. The letter is significant for an additional reason. Recalling her visits to the Chinese Museum, she writes that she was attracted by the Chinese opium eaters: "There is something peculiarly interesting to me in their self <u>denial</u>" (L 13), a hint at the direction at her later mental development toward self awareness. As Sewall says, "With Abiah safely in the fold

and Emily out, the tone of the letters" changed and "the differences between the friends widened" for they were no longer facing the same dilemma (II, 382).

From now on there is a change of tone in Dickinson's letters to Abiah. She seems resigned to the "impossibility" of her situation. In a letter written probably in late autumn, she admits God's benevolence but in the same vein feels that she may not be able to give up wordly interests: "I returned home about the middle of September in very good health and spirits, for which it seems to me I cannot be sufficiently grateful to the Giver of all mercies. . . . I could hardly give myself up to 'Nature's sweet restorer'" (L 14). At least more than a year elapsed since she mentioned the topic once again to Abiah, even though she had written two letters to her in 1847.

Dickinson's entry into the Mount Holyoke Convent in South Hadley, Massachusetts, where the students had to profess openly and in detail about their beliefs and unbeliefs--subjects Emily Dickinson regarded private--does not seem to have resolved her spiritual conflict. Indeed, her year at the Seminary, according to Chase, "was the occasion of her single religious crisis" (p. 51). As Edward Hitchcock, the President of Amherst College, pointed out, "The end and aim of all [the] efforts" of Mary Lyon, the founder and headmistress of the school was "to make the seminary a nursery to the church. She diligently prayed and

sought that all the genius and learning, talent and tact there gathered might be baptized into the spirit of the gospel."[16] Critics such as Gelpi and Weisbuch see Emily Dickinson's life at Mount Holyoke as a "rebellion" against authoritarian religion, whereas John Cody considers her as a "relentless and merciless" victim of "humiliations, threats, indignation, seductive persuasion, and histrionics."[17] As Joan Burbick mentions, her rebellion is due to a "separation from a network of love" (p. 65). Dickinson had no difficulties in coping with the new surroundings and her studies; although the heavily charged religious atmosphere oppressed her, she exhibited her usual independence of spirit. One of her contemporaries, Clara Newman Turner, recollecting her personal acquaintance with Dickinson, refers to one incident that happened during Dickinson's Mount Holyoke year:

> To illustrate the independence and honesty of her convictions,-- Miss Lyon, during a time of religious interest in the school, asked all those who wanted to be Christians to rise. The wording of the request was not such as Emily could honestly accede to and she remained seated--the only one who did not rise. In relating the incident to me, she said, "They thought it queer I

> didn't rise"--adding with a twinkle in her eye, "I thought a lie would be queerer." (Leyda I, 136)

However, her stay at Mount Holyoke, according to Higgins, "with its daily emphasis on the relationship between man and God, established in Emily her lifelong habit of searching for the Creator who nearly always eluded her" (pp. 45-46). This habit begins to show in her letters to Abiah, written in the beginning of 1848. She talks about it in a postscript to her letter written on January 17, 1848: "There is a great deal of religious interest here and many are flocking to the ark of safety. I have not yet given up the claims of Christ, but trust I am not entirely thoughtless on so important & serious a subject" (L 20). The letters to Abiah written during 1848, do not, however, show her to be inclined one way or another. She is apparently resigned to the fact that she cannot conform to orthodox religion even though her mind is still tormented and the question of faith remains a thorn in her flesh. She chides herself for neglecting the "one thing needful" and regrets that she did not become a Christian when she was offered the option in school (L 23). Her friends and conscience tell her that it is not too late even then, but she finds it hard "to give up the world." She concludes the letter by pleading to Abiah to keep their discussions confidential: "Keep them sacred,

for I never lisped them to any save yourself and Abby" (L 23).

Dickinson's career at the Mount Holyoke Convent came to an end due to her ill health and so did her indecision about religion. There do not seem to exist many letters written in 1849 to either support or disprove this view, but one written in May 1850 reflects her conscious choice and her anxiety about her own inadequacies. The topic, however, remains current in her correspondence to Abiah in the beginning of 1850:

> God is sitting here, looking into my very soul to see if I think right tho'ts. Yet I am not afraid, for I try to be right and good, and he knows every one of my struggles. He looks very gloriously, and everything bright seems dull beside him, and I dont care to look directly at him for fear I shall die. (L 31)

Referring to her refusal to go for a ride with a young friend, she says that she resisted the temptation only with great difficulty, but compares the experience to the temptation of Christ: "I had read of Christ's temptations, and how they were like our own, only he didn't sin; I wondered if one was like mine, and whether it made him angry--I couldn't make up my mind; do you think he ever did?" (L 36). By now, she has decided to reject the church,

her questioning attitude becoming more and more prominent: ". . . they talk of 'Jesus of Nazareth,' will you tell me if it be he?" (L 36). She compares herself to Abby Wood, who is very much changed since her conversion:

> I am one of the lingering bad ones, and so do I slink away, and pause, and ponder, and ponder, and pause, and do work without knowing why--not surely for this brief world, and more sure it is not for Heaven--and I ask what this message means that they ask for so very eagerly, you know of this depth, and fulnes, will you try to tell me about it? (L 36)

Her next letter to Abiah, written in late 1850, reflects a growing sense of awareness of her hopeless state. Praising Abiah's wisdom in "nipping in the bud fancies" which she had allowed to blossom, she says, "The shore is safer, Abiah, 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! You are learning control and firmness. Christ Jesus will love you more. I'm afraid he don't love me any!" (L 39)

After silence on the subject for approximately two years, Dickinson returns to it once again in a letter written to Abiah in late 1851. Just before concluding the letter she broaches the topic of eternity:

> If the life which is to come is better than dwelling here, and angels are there and our friends are glorified and are singing there and praising there need we fear to go--when spirits beyond wait for us--I was meaning to see you more and talk about such things with you--I want to know your views and your eternal feelings--how things beyond are to you. (L 50)

"The direction seems clear," says Sewall, "even if the goal remained indeterminate in her mind" (II, 388).

Dickinson's attitude towards the religious question seems to have changed considerably after 1850. Her father became a member of the Congregational church on August 11, 1850 and her sister Lavinia on November 3. Her only consolation was her brother Austin, who did not join the church then. However, she found it difficult to reconcile herself to seeing her father, whose religious position seemed more or less settled, display his faith openly by becoming a member of the church. Probably, that is the one incident that sealed her fate. From this point on, she had begun to accept her religious disillusionment, and her writings began to show an ambivalent and questioning attitude towards things sacred which later culminated in her poetry. As a result, her letters to Abiah Root change in tone whenever she refers to her faith. In 1852, she wrote

two letters to Abiah in which their hitherto common subject has been pushed to oblique references relating to "faith" (L 69), and "resurrection" (L 91). In her letter of late July, 1854, she does not even mention the topic. Thus, a chronological reading of Dickinson's letters to Abiah Root reveals that her approach to religion began with an uncertain ebb and flow of the unresolved speculations of her own mind. She sincerely attempted to overcome these speculations with a sense of righteousness and determination by following the inner light of conscience, and became a skeptic.

For some reason, Dickinson did not confide the "all important subject" that had been haunting her to her immediate family members, who shared many of her innermost thoughts. That she had discussed the subject with her childhood friend Abby Wood is clear from her letter to Abiah Root written on May 16, 1848: "I had quite a long talk with Abby while at home and I doubt not she will soon cast her burden on Christ. She is sober, and keenly sensitive on the subject, and she says she only desires to be good" (L 23). Even though Emily Dickinson and Abby seemed to have corresponded with each other, the letters are missing.

The only other person who enjoyed the privilege of sharing her mental agony was Jane Humphrey, a preceptress and a teacher, but not before January 23, 1850:

> Somehow or other I incline to other things--and Satan covers them up with flowers, and I reach out to pick them. The path of duty looks very ugly indeed--and the place where I want to go more amiable--a great deal--it is so much easier to do wrong than right--so much pleasanter to be evil than good, I dont wonder that good angels weep--and bad ones sing songs. (L 30)

She resents the religious fervor which seems to pose a threat "if not to her integrity, at least to her privacy, and perhaps to her growing sense of vocation" (Sewall I, 391). She admits that her "hopelessness" has evoked the attention of others: "I am alredy set down as one of those brands almost consumed--and my hard-heartedness gets me many prayers" (L 30). Three months later, confessing that the lure of the world had been too precious for her, Dickinson wrote to Jane Humphrey about the decision of Vinnie, Abby Wood, and other friends who had found a solution to their religious dilemma; she felt that she was standing alone in rebellion and was growing very careless. Entreating Jane to pray for her so that God's hand may be held to her and she "may be led away," she expresses wonder and doubt at what her friends have found: "I cant tell you <u>what</u> they have found, but <u>they</u> think it is something precious. I wonder if it <u>is</u>?" (L 35). Toward the conclusion of the letter she

says, "Something else has helped me forget that, a something surer, and higher, and I sometimes laugh in my sleeve" (L 35). Even though Dickinson does not explicitly state what that something is she seems to assert "her belief in this world (as opposed to the otherwordly concern of the Revival), her belief in human nature (the 'Columnar Self'), and her joy in the prospect of a poetic vision--a vision of a world that she as poet could create" (Sewall II, 396).

Dickinson's continued proclamations about her religious conflict should not, however, lead us to believe that she became irreligious and therefore abandoned the church totally. As Hyatt H. Waggoner points out, "while no other options were open to her but the choice of belief or unbelief, until she learned the existence of other possibilities through her reading, she chose unbelief as more honest."[18] She continued to attend church but was gradually withdrawing from it, especially after the conversion of her father and sister. The text of her letters changed to attending or not attending the church and often questioned religious doctrines.

On the 6th of July 1851, she wrote to Austin that she just returned "from Church very hot, and faded, having witnessed a couple of Baptisms, three admissions to church, a Supper of the Lord" (L 46). But her visits to the church were becoming more sporadic, and she invented some pretext or other to avoid going to church. She wrote to Abiah that

she always remained home on stormy Sundays and did not have "those opportunities for hoarding up great truths" which she "would have otherwise" (L 69). She pleaded with Sue not to attend church:

> The bells are ringing, Susie . . . and the people who love God, are expecting to go to meeting; dont you go Susie, not to their meeting, but come with me this morning to the church within our hearts, where the bells are always ringing . . . They will all go but me, to the usual meetinghouse, to hear the usual sermon; the inclemency of the storm so kindly detaining me. (L 77)

In a sacrilegiously humorous letter to Sue she writes that she recited "Oh Darling Sue" as the Pastor said "Our Heavenly Father": "When he read the 100th Psalm, I kept saying your precious letter all over to myself . . . I made up words and kept singing how I loved you, and you had gone, while all the rest of the choir were singing Hellelujahs" (L 88). On June 5, 1853, in an ironical tone, she writes to Austin about not attending on a Sunday the afternoon session of a sermon by Rev. Martin Leland: "I listened to him this forenoon in a state of mind very near frenzy, and feared the effect too much to go out this afternoon. The morning exercises were perfectly ridiculous, and we spent the

intermission in mimicking the Preacher . . ." (L 125). In January 1854, she writes to Sue, who was then in Manchester, that she got out of the church during the "exercises" and "several roared around, and, sought to devour" her, but she "fell an easy prey to Miss Lovina Dickinson," and she was immensely happy to find herself home: "How I did wish for you--how for my own dear Vinnie--how, far Goliah, or Samson, to pull the whole church down . . ." (L 154). By mid 1854, she was more or less settled upon a cloistered existence. Politely declining Abiah's invitation to visit her, Emily writes, "I thank you Abiah, but I dont go from home, unless emergency leads me by the hand, and then I do it obstinately, and draw back if I can" (L 166). In January 1855, she did not attend church because she was sick (L 177). In April 1856, she writes to John L. Graves, "It is Sunday--now--John--and all have gone to church . . . and I have come out in the new grass to listen to the anthems" (L 184). But she had not completely given up attending church, probably attending in 1858 (L 194) and even in 1859. In a letter written to Mrs. Joseph Haven she says, "Mr S. preached in our church last Sabbath upon 'predestination,' but I do not respect 'doctrines,' and did not listen to him, so I can neither praise, nor blame" (L 200). Her absence from the church became prominent as her faith began to wane, and she could declare with conviction to Judge Otis P. Lord,

"while others go to Church, I go to mine, for are not you my Church" (L 790).

Thus, a sequential reading of Emily Dickinson's early letters reveals that religious faith was her chief concern in her youth. She seems to have begun with a conflict between faith and doubt, but having few choices and guided by her highly independent spirit, she accepted unbelief as her way of life. Her growing sense of isolation and fear made her choice difficult, but once she had made up her mind, she made no secret of it. Consequently, her subsequent letters and poems voice an ambivalent attitude towards important religious questions such as God's benevolence, immortality, heaven, sin, etc., and she finds herself drawn back again and again into a problem she believed she had resolved. However, vestiges of this ambivalence began to show even as she was undergoing the spiritual conflict.

In early December 1852, she writes to Sue about her mental state: "'God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform, he plants his foot upon the sea, and rides upon the storm,' and if it be his will that I become a <u>bear</u> and bite my fellow men, it will be for the highest good of this fallen and perishing world" (L 97). The interesting part of the letter is that she signed it <u>Judah</u>, and though the association is purely speculative, from the context it is implicit that she considers herself as one who has gone

astray and betrayed faith.[19] The letter she wrote to Sue sometime in September 1854 alludes to some misunderstanding between them and also refers to her own indifference to religious matters: "Sue--I have lived by this. It is the lingering emblem of the Heaven I once dreamed, and though if this is taken, I shall remain alone, and though in that last day, the Jesus Christ you love, remark he does not know me--there is a darker spirit will not disown it's child" (L 173).

Commenting on a sermon on death and judgment, she expresses her mixed feelings to the Hollands in a sardonic tone:

> The minister today, not our own minister, preached about death and judgment, and what would become of those, meaning Austin and me, who behaved improperly--and somehow the sermon scared me, and father and Vinnie looked very solemn as if the whole was true, and I would not for worlds have them know that it troubled me . . . He preached such an awful sermon though, that I didn't much think I should ever see you again until the Judgment Day, and then you would not speak to me according to his story. The subject of perdition seemed to please him, somehow. It seems very solemn to me. (L 175)

Referring to Mr. Dwight's "precious" sermons on "unbelief" and "Esau," she informs Sue that "Sermons on unbelief ever did attract" her (L 176). To John L. Graves she writes in late April 1856 that resurrection "is no schoolboy's theme" (L 184). She believes that "Jerusalem must be like Sue's Drawing Room" (L 189). She begins to realize that "the Charms of the Heaven in the bush are superceded . . . by the Heaven in the hand occasionally" (L 193). On September 26, she mentions to Sue, who was then visiting Geneva, "What a privilege it is to be so insignificant! Thought of intimating that the 'Atonement,' wasn't needed for such atomies!" (L 194). In early August 1859, she confirmed her beliefs to Mrs. Elizabeth Holland:

> And I'm half tempted to take my seat in that Paradise of which the good man writes, and begin forever and ever <u>now</u>, so wondrous does it seem . . . and if God had been here in my garden this summer, and had seen some of the things that I have seen--I guess he would think his paradise superfluous . . . Pardon my sanity Mrs. Holland, in a world <u>insane</u>, and love me if you will, for I had rather <u>be</u> loved than to be called a king in earth or a lord in Heaven. (Leyda I, 371)

In 1861, she wrote to Samuel Bowles that she "did not learn to pray" (L 242). Referring to her family members as being

religious, in her second letter to T. W. Higginson she says, "They are religious--except me--and address an Eclipse, every morning--whom they call their ´Father´" (L 261). She calls herself "the only Kangaroo among the Beauty" in her fourth letter to him (L 268). She believes that the "loveliest sermon" she ever heard was the one on "the disappointment of Jesus in Judas" (L 385). Reacting to the evangelical meetings that resulted in a series of religious conversions in Amherst during the last week of April 1873, Emily Dickinson writes to the Norcross cousins: "I suppose to intimidate [is] antichrist; at least it would have that effect on me. It reminds me of Don Quixote demanding the surrender of the wind-mill, and of Sir Stephen Toplift, and of Sir Alexander Cockburn" (L 389). In October of the same year, she once again wrote to the Norcross cousins, "Let Emily sing for you because she cannot pray" (L 421). In 1877, she wrote to Higginson that "to be human is more than to be divine, for when Christ was divine, he was uncontented till he had been human" (L 519). Towards the end of 1882, she mentioned Santa Claus to Mrs. Holland: "The Fiction of ´Santa Claus´ always reminds me of the reply to my early question of ´Who made the Bible´ . . . and though I have now ceased my investigations, the Solution is insuffient" (L 794). In 1885, she proclaims herself a "Pagan" to Helen Hunt Jackson (L 976). In her penultimate letter, written to the sick Higginson, she questions the existence of God:

"Deity--Does He live now? / My friend--does he breathe?" (L 1045).

With equal emphasis and competence, Dickinson expresses a similar conflict between doubt and belief in her poems. As a result, if she is seen at times as reverential and philosophic in her attitude toward God, she at times is also occasionally blasphemously irreverent. In a poem written in 1862, she refers to her troubled state of mind and her irresolution:

> I prayed, at first, a little Girl,
> Because they told me to--
> But stopped, when qualified to guess
> How prayer would feel--to--me-- (P 576)

At first, she says, that with a "childish honesty" she gazed fixedly wherever "God looked around." Soon she is baffled by "The mingled side / Of his Divinity" (P 576). She feels that she could not make up her mind:

> And often since, in Danger,
> I count the force 'twould be
> To have a God so strong as that
> To hold my life for me
>
> Till I could take the Balance
> That tips so frequent, now
> It takes me all the while to poise--

And then--it doesn´t stay-- (P 576)

She who addresses God as "Heavenly Father--take to thee" (1461) and a "distant, stately lover" (357), also regards him as "Burglar! Banker--Father!" (49), a "Swindler"(476), "a vacillating God" (1599), "a jealous God" (1719), a "disappointing God" (1751), and a callous one (376). Concerning God´s "duplicity" (1461), she believes that God is so economical that "His Tables spread too high for Us" (690).

Similarly, she who questions, "Why--do they shut Me out of Heaven?" (248) and "Is Heaven then a Prison?" (947), also believes that Heaven is the "House of Supposition" and the "Acres of Perhaps" (696), a "Codicil of Doubt" (1012) and not a place of reality. It is also a symbol of deprivation (1205) and is "the uncertain certainty" (1411). She feels that she would never be comfortable in Heaven:

I never felt at Home--Below--
And in the Handsome Skies
I shall not feel at Home--I know--
I don´t like Paradise--

She accounts for her dislike in the next stanza:

Because it´s Sunday--all the time--
And Recess--never comes--
And Eden´ll be lonesome

Bright Wednesday Afternoons-- (413)

She dislikes the perpetual sabbath in heaven since the expectancy of a recess is not there. In such a state of complacency, heaven would be a very lonely place during even the middle of the week when life is expected to be busy. In the next two stanzas she expresses a desire to escape from the "despotism" of God, who keeps a close vigil on humanity, but she realizes the impossibility of her situation:

> If God could make a visit--
> Or ever took a Nap--
> So not to see us--but they say
> Himself--a Telescope
>
> Pernnial beholds us--
> Myself would run away
> From Him--and Holy Ghost--and All--
> But there's the "Judgment Day"! (413)

The last line reveals her conflict between faith and doubt. Even though she wishes to escape religious concepts that deal with God's Trinity, the knowledge of Judgment Day reminds her of God's tyranny. These are only a few of the many references to God, heaven, and immortality in her poems. The fact that most of them are dominated by her "doubt" rather than "belief" indicates the major tendency of her mind.

The preceding discussion is not informed by a critical strategy to evaluate Dickinson's poetry as isolated effusions of a highly distinctive metaphysical thinker. Yet it outlines the religious conflict in her life as evidenced in her letters. Dickinson's early letters, especially to her childhood friend Abiah Root, reveal that there is a gradual evolution in her religious thinking. She appears to have started with a sincere effort to adhere to religious doctrines, but finding them inadequate and unconvincing, her mind became divided between faith and doubt. Not left with many choices, she accepted unbelief as the way of her life. Hence the tone of her letters changed from musings of a tormented soul to the expressions of disbelief and negation like those which later pervaded her poetry.

CHAPTER II

THE JOURNEY WITHIN

Dickinson's questioning mind led her to approach religious questions with skepticism which in turn led her to develop a dialectical attitude toward life in general. In one of her poems, she refers to the nature of her skepticism: "Sweet Skepticism of the Heart-- / That knows--and does not know-- / . . . Invites and then retards the Truth."[1] Torn between the conflicts of faith and hope, disillusioned by the ambivalence of her family members who became members of the church one after the other, and afraid of being led into self-deception, Dickinson, setting aside traditional religion and struggling to find the center to which her life should properly converge, realized the need to create a private religion through poetic imagination. Acceptance of conformity or assent to doctrine, she believed, would be violating the dictates of her conscience. Her mind was haunted by resounding affirmations of faith along with harrowing doubt, distrust of the Deity, fear of personal salvation, and resentment and annoyance at the suffering of humanity. Such an ambivalent and inconsistent state of mind is the essence of her spiritual dilemma, which is clearly revealed in her challenges against the concepts

of an orthodox God, heaven, and salvation. The more she confronted these issues the more negative her mind became toward them, which later culminated into her central poetic mode. As a result, in many of her poems there is a movement from certainty to doubt, from statements of affirmation to an eroding, undermining, or questioning of the same statement. In this chapter, I will discuss the origins of Dickinson's skepticism which led her to a life of negation: her negation of the external world by withdrawing into her father's house; her negation of the various aspects of her life in her poetry in which she found implicatures appropriate devices to communicate her thoughts.

Dickinson's negative mental state, neither idiosyncratic nor desultory, was reached after much self-probing. She had been well grounded in the sanctity of the human mind at the time when she began to delve into religious questions. This fact can directly be related to the influence of her educational background, which not only emphasized the significance of mental faculties but also challenged the unquestioning acceptance of religious doctrines. Some of the attitudes that were widely prevalent would testify to this fact. Jane Hathcock wrote to Austin in 1850 about the Ipswich Seminary: "But more especially, our parents did send us to this Seminary to enjoy ourselves. We were sent here to improve our immortal minds, to strengthen & make better the part <u>that never dies.</u>"[2]

Similarly, Justice Otis P. Lord's memorial address on Asahel Huntington exhalts the marvel of the human mind: "The mysteries of mind are more subtle than those of physics and much more readily elude pursuit and investigation; and he that becomes master of the human mind and human passions has achieved a greater triumph than he who has discovered a planet."[3]

In keeping with these attitudes towards the exaltation of the mind, the academic centers of the period included in the curriculum textbooks that dealt directly with the improvement of the mind. The catalogue of the South Hadley Female Seminary included Isaac Watts' Improvement of the Mind, and the curriculum included T. C. Upham's Elements of Mental Philosophy. Both books are concerned with a thorough analysis of the various faculties of the mind and their functions in the development of the personality of the individual. By the time Emily Dickinson began to question dogma, her mind had already received ideas about the greatness of the mental faculties from her study of these books and, when she encountered the opportunity to use what she had learned, she seized it. Of course no one can deny the indomitable influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "the dean of American thought-divers,"[4] on Dickinson's mental development. But her reading of Emerson did not begin until January 1850, when Ben Newton sent her a copy of Emerson's Poems. Emily Dickinson's religious questioning and her

initial search for the self must have begun much earlier, and her negativity must have been unconsciously shaped by her reading.

Proclamations of the influence of the Bible, Shakespeare, and Emerson on Dickinson's poetry do not account for some of her early reading that gave a sense of direction to her life. One often ignored book is T. C. Upham's Elements of Mental Philosophy. Jack Capps lists the book among the textbooks used at the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary during 1847-48.[5] Sewall notes that the Elements was included in the curriculum of the Seminary but dismisses it by saying that it is difficult to ascertain if Emily Dickinson ever studied the book at all.[6] On October 9, 1851, Lavinia Dickinson records in her Diary that Tutor Dickinson "borrowed Upham's Phylosophy" (Leyda I, 216). That remark indicates that the book should have been in active use in the Dickinson household. Had it been an insignificant incident, Lavinia would not have bothered to record it. Being a voracious reader who scanned the large number of books in her father's library, Dickinson would not have ignored a book that was closely relevant to her life. Moreover, the book seems to have been very popular in the academic institutions of the time, and many scholars and teachers regarded the book as giving a full view of the operations of the mind. Many scholars regarded a thorough reading of the book as the best aid for a student studying

in an institution "or in the lonely efforts of self-culture" (no pagination). Teachers felt that the students who studied the book were deeply fascinated by it. As publishers Harper & Brothers wrote in 1840,

> the teachers in our various seminaries all agree that a system of education, without some knowledge of mental philosophy, cannot be considered complete. On the contrary, they seem to regard the knowledge of the human mind as in some respects more important than any other form of knowledge. (p. 471)

The book had great appeal to younger minds not only because of the uniformly simple style, but also because it catered to their needs in mental training.

Trained in a rigorous educational philosophy that emphasized repeated readings and memorization of vast quantities of detail, a fact that accounts in some measure for her extensive vocabulary and unusual metaphors, Dickinson probably did not escape the impact of an influential book such as Upham's. Just as her internalization of the Bible became the chief source of the imagery and metaphor in her poetry and her reading of Isaac Watts' Hymns influenced the hymnal quality of her verses, the study of Upham must have formed the basis of her wholesome mental life. I do not mean to assert that

Dickinson read each of Upham's ideas and shaped her life accordingly, nor do I argue that she chose some of Upham's ideas and left out the rest. What I do assert is that a thorough reading of Upham enabled her to assimilate the various principles involved into a mental framework.

However, Upham, who is not a full-fledged philosopher, does not provide an exclusive philosophy of his own. His book is eclectic in that it is an amalgamation of most of the leading thought on mental philosophy and is a complete and systematic overview of the powers and operations of the mind that would greatly assist the student in a pursuit of self-knowledge and self-culture. The object of the book is the search for truth in its simplest and most impressive of forms, and it embraces all the departments of the mind.

A brief look at a few of the ideas expressed by Upham on the faculty of reasoning is appropriate here. In the section on the internal sources of knowledge, Upham considers reason as an effective "source" of the intellect that enables us "to develope [sic] in the mind new elements of thought, and to cast light on the darkened places in the field of truth" (p. 275). Dickinson, whose task was to seek truth, probably did not miss such tenets as these. Upham believed that reason sustains and illuminates the secret truths of nature: "It reveals to the inquisitive and delighted mind a multitude of fruitful and comprehensive views, which could not otherwise be obtained; and invests

men, and nature, and events with a new character" (p. 341). Probably, such an awareness of the power of reasoning prevented Dickinson from accepting dogma without questioning the basis of authority.

Another book which possibly shaped the questioning mind of Emily Dickinson during her girlhood was Isaac Watts' Improvement of the Mind.[7] According to the Eleventh Annual Catalogue of Mount Holyoke Female Seminary 1847-48, it was one of the books required at the school, and she probably read it. The proper reading of Improvement of the Mind required that students read the text at least thrice and retain in memory the most important aspects of it. Reading the book at an impressionable age, Dickinson might have absorbed into her thinking Watts' suggestions to store the mind with the most useful knowledge.

The Improvement, in two parts, is a collation of "remarks and directions for the improvement of the mind in useful knowledge" (Preface, p. 1). The first part deals with the ways in which knowledge can be communicated to others. The book was designed

> to unfold and invigorate the faculties; to store the mind with the most useful knowledge . . . to subject every power, thought and pursuit, to the empire of reason; . . . in short, to prepare the mortal and immortal part of our nature, for the

> greatest possible usefulness and enjoyment both here and hereafter. (p. iii)

In one of the longest chapters of the book, "Enlarging the Capacity of the Mind," Watts speaks about the "great and sacred advantages to be derived from . . . [the] enlargement of the mind" (p. 124), which, in turn, would lead one into "exalted apprehensions" of God's grandeur. Dickinson, who was disillusioned with the religious tenets of her times, and tried to see God's glory by an enhancement of her mind, might have gotten her cue from Watts. Exalting the mind's capacity to receive new ideas, Watts states that

> those who confine themselves within the circle of their own hereditary ideas and opinions, and who never give themselves leave so much as to examine or believe any thing beside the dictates of their own family . . . or party, are justly charged with a narrowness of soul. (p. 125)

Dickinson avoided this charge by becoming a non-conformist. Watts believes that next to religion, the teaching of the improvement of the mind is the most vital part of a child's education (II, 64). Watts also regards "a knowledge of ourselves" as the basic step in human prudence. Dickinson's turning toward an exploration of her own self as a necessary step after religious disillusion is certainly an indication

of a movement in this direction. Watts' book sets forth categorical aphorisms such as these:

> It is the design of logic to give this improvement of the mind and to teach us the right use of reason in the acquirement and communication of all useful knowledge. (p. 3)

> Accustom yourself to clear and distinct ideas in everything you think of. Be not satisfied with obscure and confused conceptions of things, especially where clearer may be obtained. (p. 132)

> Use all diligence to acquire and treasure up a large store of ideas and notions; take every opportunity to add something to your memory. (p. 133)

An awareness of these capacities of the mind to question, analyze, and solve difficult issues probably contributed considerably to Dickinson's interrogative mind.

Some of the doctrines of Christianity, according to Watts, are questionable and "embarrass the minds of honest and enquiring readers" (p. 9). In a later section he states that it is "a culpable partiality" to "examine some doubtful or pretended vision or revelation without the use of reason" (p. 154). Dickinson's questioning of dogma that resulted in

an ambivalent attitude toward them seems to be an implementation of Watts' tenets. Watts hopes that some of the inadequately explained doctrines in the Bible can be resolved in some way:

> Why may not a sincere searcher of truth in the present age, by labour, diligence, study, and prayer, with the best use of his reasoning power, find out the proper solutions of those knots and perplexities, which have hitherto been unsolved and which have afforded matter for angry quarrelling? (p. 9)

Dickinson's constant "companionship" with the Bible must be an attempt at this task. Watts suggests what can be done on such occasions. In the chapter entitled "Of Determining a Question," he states what one must do while searching for truth of doubtful or incomplete nature: "Keep up a just indifference to either side of the question, if you would be led honestly into the truth; for a desire or inclination leaning to either side, biases the judgment strangely" (p. 158). Dickinson's ambivalence is probably a reflection of this statement of Watts. Watts believes that even the most mysterious and sublime doctrines of the revelations are not to be accepted blindly without sufficient reason in their support, nor should one defend them until he has convincing proofs that they are revealed, "though perhaps we may never

in this world attain to such clear and distinct ideas of them as we desire" (p. 161). He implies that when dealing with an important question a person should not be content with partial examination; instead, he should turn his "thoughts on all sides, to gather in all the light [he] can towards the solution of it," and should "take time, and use all the helps that are to be obtained, before" making a final decision (p. 158). Dickinson did use her own lifetime in attempting to resolve the religious question but left it unresolved by presenting both sides. Dickinson's indefinitive attitude toward the most important religious issues like God, resurrection, and eternity, which ultimately culminated in a negation of these questions, probably had its origins from her reading of the Improvement, which emphasized the use of reason in accepting dogma.

Therefore, Dickinson, disillusioned by the mediocrity, passivity, and spiritual surrender represented by Christianity, and nurtured perhaps by a reading that emphasized the immortality of the mind and the use of mental faculties such as reason and intelligence in forming judgments on religious questions, developed a negative attitude toward them which resulted in the negation of the meaning of existence. Dickinson decided to turn inward so that she could escape from the conflict between faith and unfaith. But she was also aware that conflict is the

technique of self-discovery and a means of realizing the grandeur of the soul, and therefore she kept the religious conflict alive in her mind. The outward manifestation of this negative attitude toward life is her negation of an outer life and a preference for a cloistered existence in her father's house, for home is one of the "favorite symbols of the mind."[8] Even though she longs for home during her school days, it takes on special significance when she was undergoing her religious crisis. In her letter to Austin written in February 17, 1848, she says, "Home was always dear to me & dearer still, the friends around it, but never did it seem so dear as now" (L 22). Given the context, it is not a mere outburst of homesickness but a cry of helplessness. She writes to Austin in October 1851, about the attraction home holds for her. The letter not only throws light on how from an attitude of "home, sweet home" it becomes a holy thing, but also states the reason why home is important for her, especially at a moment of crisis:

> 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 <u>any</u> can utterly destroy--smaller it

> is indeed, and it may be less fair, but fairer it is and <u>brighter</u> than all the world beside. (L 59)

She finds home a secure and protective place from where she can carry out her pursuit of her poetic career. The sense of security and coziness of home allows her to declare in late October 1870, to Parez Cowen, "Home is the definition of God" (L 355). She feels that "The Soul that hath a Guest" in the form of the self "Doth seldom go abroad" because "Diviner Crowd at Home-- / Obliterate the need--" (674), thus establishing the "Soul's distinct connection" with home.

Dickinson's seclusion provided her with an opportunity to "meditate" about her own nature, to concentrate on her reading, to get closer to nature, and to think about life. Courageously she isolated herself from the human relationships around her so that she could, in effect, construct herself as an individual from what she found in herself during her separation and isolation. Of course, people who lead a secluded life run the risk of isolating themselves from everything and of missing the significant interchange and socialization that is certainly important to self and social development. But Dickinson escaped the risk, for she exhibited what philosophers like Paul Tillich would call the courage of participation,[9] which enabled her to participate with other beings, primarily through the

letters and poems. When a person retreats within and shuts the door behind, he deliberately breaks the line of communication with the outside world, and often relapses into a state of hopeless apathy. In such a condition it is imperative that he establish a connection from the depth of his retreat, and the one possibility is to encourage creativity. In creativity, the person finds an outlet for his fears and anxieties. Dickinson's life thus necessarily leads to a consideration of her poetry, for it was through her poetry that she achieved a stay from all the confusions and stultifications of her life.

As spiritual intransigencies resulted in decades of isolation and loneliness, she became creative and wrote poetry that was at once private and unmistakably original. Threatened by the existential anxieties of fate and death during the process of her self-exploration, Dickinson patiently and stoically attempted to comprehend the true meaning of existence, and her poems became the dramatic representations of the encounter of the self with the total reality of human experience. Dickinson realized that the vocation of writing poetry brings about a transformation within that cannot be annulled by any external force. Defining this affective power of poetry, Dickinson says, "If a poem makes me feel too cold to be warmed by any fire, I know it is poetry. If it seems to take the top of my head off, that, too is poetry" (L 342a). The poet's art provides

insights into the meaning of life. Poets, according to Dickinson, posses vital insights into the problems of existence:

> The Poets light but lamps--
> Themselves--go out--
> The Wicks they stimulate--
> If vital light
>
> Inhere as do the suns--
> Each Age of Lens
> Disseminating their--
> Circumference (883)

The poet's vision of reality enriches his awareness of self and the world around him. By becoming a poet, Dickinson dwelt in "Possibility" (657), which afforded her ample opportunities for observing life around her. Turning to poetry for solace and sustenance, she defines her activity as follows:

> For Occupation--This--
> The spreading wider my narrow Hands
> To gather Paradise-- (657)

She believed that by remaining within the self she would be able to probe deeper into the furthest expanse of existence. Even though her poems may be grouped on the basis of a

variety of thematic concerns, the vast themes that touched her intimately and intuitively were nature, death, and immortality--themes she regarded as her "Flood Subjects."[10] These three subjects constituted for her the totality of existence--nature representing life, death the end of it, and immortality the afterlife--and almost all her poems touch upon one or more aspects of these themes. These were the subjects that absorbed her heart and soul, that were immediately relevant in her search for the self, and that were the cardinal forces that affected her inner life.

However, the dominant mode in which Dickinson treated these subjects was negation. Just as her religious questioning resulted in negating dogma and in accepting unbelief as the legitimate state of her mind, she repeatedly used negation as the distinctive feature of her poetry[11] and often conveyed her ideas obliquely, with slantness, as she probably would have said. As a result, her treatment of the flood subjects as sources to comprehend the meaning of existence was tempered by her paradoxical and inconsistent state of mind. But what makes her poetry fascinating is her vacillation, her courage not to settle for easy solutions, and her ability to accept and to live with uncertainties. She realized that the primary task of the poet is to tell the true nature of experience and that what gives life to poetry is the amount of truth that has been infused into it. She also realized that in her case it would be impossible to

utter truth whole and entire in all sincerity because of the uncertain state of her mind. She believed that such truth should be unveiled only by slow degrees and with an utmost tact and caution and in a circuitous style; thus she proclaimed her artistic credo:

> Tell all the Truth but tell it slant--
> Success in Circuit lies
> Too bright for our infirm Delight--
> The Truth's superb surprise
> As lightning to the children eased
> With explanation kind
> The Truth must dazzle gradually
> Or every man be blind-- (1129)

The poet should, according to her, modulate and moderate the quantum of what he wishes to impart to suit the receptivity of his audience. She believed that by indirection and slantness she would be able to make palatable certain truths which would otherwise appear outrageous. The dominant strategies she employed to achieve this indirection were implicatures such as expressions of negation, irony and naivete, and rhetorical questioning

Implicatures, subtle and sophisticated modes of communication, include a number of written conventions--rhetorical question, irony, ambiguity, ellipsis, use of archaic and dialect form, bizarre

punctuation marks, literal negation, and others--used to communicate meaning indirectly. Dickinson found these implicatures convenient strategies to express her negative treatment of nature, death, and immortality. Since the rest of this study is based on Dickinson's use of implicature as a device to express her subject matter, especially her flood subjects, a brief discussion of implicature is appropriate here.

According to Marilyn M. Cooper, H. Paul Grice describes implicatures as communicative acts in which what the writer means "departs radically from the conventional meaning"[12] of words. Even though such "indirect communicative acts" are common in conversation, they hold good in any kind of communication. Assuming that a successful conversation is a cooperative endeavor which has a an underlying purpose, Grice proposes certain maxims related to quantity, quality, relation, and mannner, the deliberate violations of which produce implications.[13]

A. Quantity: "1. Make your contribution as informative as is required" (Grice, p. 45). When a writer or speaker does not provide the required information, he implicates his meaning. For instance, when Dickinson talks about her dislike for heaven in "I never felt at Home--Below" (413) she says

Because it's Sunday--all the time--

And Recess--never comes--
And Eden'll be so lonesome
Bright Wednesday Afternoons.

the reader expects Dickinson to say why "Wednesday Afternoons" would be "Bright." Unless the reader knows that Amherst Academy had a half day off on Wednesdays each week probably as teacher's compensation, he may not be able to make the connection. Thus by failing to provide the required information Dickinson implicates.

"2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is necessary" (Grice, p. 45). Some kinds of negation violate this maxim because to say something did not happen is to say something more than is required. For instance, "It was not Death, for I stood up" (510) is introduced by a series of negatives: "It was not Death . . . It was not Night . . . It was not Frost," all disclaiming knowledge of the central event of the poem. By using such negative expressions, Dickinson is stating more than is required and thus flouts Grice's second quantity maxim. A speaker should avoid overstatement of any kind, for it impedes communication. Overstatement involves irrelevant details and thus flouts the maxim of relation.

B. Quality: "1. Do not say what you believe to be false" (Grice, p. 46). Speakers believe their assertions, expect answers to their questions, and do things they

promise to do. The rhetorical question violates this maxim because the questioner does not seek to evoke an actual reply from the hearer. Irony also violates this maxim because it allows the writer to mean something different from what he says literally. For instance, "God is a distant--stately Lover--" (357) is an ironical treatment of the Trinity:

> God is a distant--stately Lover--
> Woos, as He states us--by His Son--
> Verily, A Vicarious Courtship--
> "Miles", "Priscilla", were such as One--

The suggestion that God might be conceived as a sensual earthly lover is incongruous. Despite a detailed and homely description of cosmic and spiritual things, the idea that God is a three-personed trinity carries an ironic impact. Similarly, when the speaker rhetorically asks "Is Immortality a bane / That men are so oppressed?" (1728), she expresses her doubtful state of mind rather than expecting any reply from the reader.

2. "Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence" (Grice, p. 46). There should be adequate reasons for any act, and speakers assert things they have reason to believe are true; they ask questions to which they do not know the answers and believe their hearers can answer.

C. Relation: "Be relevant" (Grice, p. 46). Is the statement relevant? Speakers should make sure that the information they convey is appropriate and relevant. Changing the subject of conversation, for instance, violates the maxim of relation. Also, interrogative and negative forms on certain occasions flout this maxim.

D. Manner "1. Avoid obscurity of expression. 2. Avoid ambiguity. 3. Be brief. 4. Be orderly" (Grice, p. 46). Information that is obscure, ambiguous, or disorganized might be insufficient or irrelevant; inconsistent acts also belie the speaker's belief. When the speaker or writer violates one of these maxims, he does so to say something indirectly, and Grice calls this strategy an implicature. Quite often the syntax in Dickinson's poetry is ambiguous. For instance, in the following quatrain,

> That such have died enable Us
> The tranquiller to die--
> That Such have lived,
> Certificate for Immortality (1030)

"Certificate" could either be a noun or a verb appearing in a kind of subjunctive or past participle, the equivalent of "certified." In another poem she treats the theme of death in abstract and elliptical language:

Some we see no more, Tenements of Wonder
Occupy to us though perhaps to them
Simpler are the Days than the Supposition
Their removing Manners
Leave us to presume

That oblique Belief which we call Conjecture
Grapples with a Theme stubborn as Sublime
Able as the Dust to equip it's feature
Adequate as Drums
To enlist the Tomb. (1221)

Even though the poem seems to be about the inescapability of death and an afterlife which can only be a conjecture, the poem is obscure because of abnormal syntax, vague grammatical references, and ambiguous imagery. The sparseness of the punctuation marks (only a comma and a period in the whole poem) adds to the obscurity of structure and meaning. The final stanza of "My Life had stood--a loaded Gun," baffles critics with its obscurantism:

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-- (754)

Her copious use of the dash (as substitutes for commas, periods, and semicolons) enables her to convey the

paradoxical quality of her mind and writing and create a fragmentary effect of an intentional inconclusiveness of her observations.

Grice also emphasizes that an implicature occurs only when speakers or writers violate these maxims intentionally and overtly (so that they draw the attention of the hearer or reader), and thus implicatures communicate meaning indirectly. Dickinson preferred to express herself through suggestions, implications, connotations, manipulations of syntax, understatements, and overstatements rather than explicitly or literally. Grice states that implicatures can also arise when no maxims are clearly violated such as when a speaker conveys meaning beyond that carried by the conventional meaning of what he says. Dickinson's attempts to tell truth with a slant, which involves her considering how much she should reveal and how much she should withhold in the act between perceiving and seeing, is obviously an implicature of this type. In the following chapters I shall confine my discussion to how, in keeping with her dialectic of doubt, she used implicatures such as expressions of negation, irony and naivete, and rhetorical questioning to create negation in the treatment of her flood subjects.

The above discussion posits that the roots of Dickinson's creativity lay in the religious crisis that she confronted early in life. Not left with many choices and unable to find definitive answers to her religious

questions, unable to turn to the other members of her family for solace, disillusioned by their "conversion," and unable to accept religion in its "duplicity," she developed a negative attitude toward life in general. She was aware that in setting down her ideas in words she was revealing herself to herself, thus fulfilling the age-old injunction, "Know thyself." The outer manifestation of her negativity was her gradual but certain withdrawal from society, which enabled her to explore herself and understand the meaning of existence thoroughly from her cloistered life in her father's house. The inner manifestation of her self-awareness was the infinite possibility of her creativity, which enabled her to write poetry that not only touched upon the innermost recesses of the self, but also traversed myriad other puzzlements of mankind. However, the major themes of her poetry--nature, death, and immortality--became the foci to which her attempts to comprehend the meaning of existence converged. She viewed these subjects with the same dialectic of doubt and faith with which she questioned religion and found implications as appropriate devices to express her mental state.

CHAPTER III

FLOOD SUBJECTS I: NATURE

Dickinson's persistent concern with the task of self-discovery determined the subject matter of her poetry. Her search for self-identity required that Dickinson isolate herself completely from society and get closer to nature and commune with it so that she could think and understand the meaning of life. She probably thought, like Melville, that the soul attains to its maturity only as it learns in "stillness and seclusion . . . to think untraditionally and independently, receiving all nature's sweet and savage impressions fresh from her own virgin, voluntary, and confiding breast."[1] Nature is so pervaded with human life that there is something of humanity in all and every particular. Just as Thoreau attempted to seek reality in nature, Dickinson attempted to seek the truth of life in nature. Consequently, nature became "an allegorical projection of her internal drama as her poems present a spectrum"[2] of her reactions to it. Nevertheless, inspired as she was by nature, Dickinson realized that in her experience nature was not the panacea for her problems and that by itself it would be an inadequate source of her

creativity: "I thought that nature was enough / Till human nature came."[3] She could neither see nor create any vision of harmony from the phenomena of nature. Indeed, nature presented itself to her as a bundle of contradictions: good and bad, tender and merciless, life-giving and death-dealing. Realizing that nature could not be relied upon as the only source of her comprehension of life, she decided to probe other aspects of human experience such as the significance of death and intimations of immortality. Thus nature, death, and immortality became the major themes of her poetry.

However, just as her religious skepticism resulted in her negating dogma and in accepting unbelief as the legitimate state of her mind, she repeatedly used negation as the distinctive feature of her poetry. Since reason has the capacity to disturb and produce a negative reaction in the individual, she tends to articulate everything from the point of views ranging from passive doubt to the most cynical despair. Dickinson attempted "to ´Tell all the Truth´ by means of ´circuit´ above all to various forms of <u>negation</u>."[4] Thus her treatment of the major themes of her poetry, despite occasional affirmations of faith, was generally dominated by the dialectic of doubt and distrust. Appropriately, Dickinson found indirect methods such as implications convenient strategies to convey her uncertain mental state and her desire to be uncommitted and

inconspicuous. Therefore, this chapter and the following two chapters highlight how Dickinson, through implicatures such as expressions of negation, irony and naivete, and rhetorical question, negates nature, death, and immortality as potential solutions of the mystery of life.

Nature

Deprived of a firm faith in religion and threatened by the existential anxieties of guilt and condemnation, Dickinson, in an endeavor to search for her self, turned toward nature for consolation. Apart from her Puritan heritage, which enabled her to regard nature as a teacher fraught with lessons sent by God for man's profit and instruction, her reading of Emerson, Upham's Mental Philosophy[5], Isaac Watts' Improvement of the Mind[6] and her botany textbook, Familiar Lectures on Botany[7] by Almira H. Lincoln (Phelps) was mainly responsible for her turning to nature for solace and compensation for her religious doubt. The basic tenets of these writers emphasize the relationship between the human mind and nature and the mystery of God behind creation. Dickinson, who was undergoing a spiritual crisis and was questioning the doctrines of orthodox religion during her formative years, might have been considerably influenced by her reading in her decision to turn to nature for comfort. For the rest of her life, she was engaged in a continual struggle to attain a

clear-sighted and uncompromising perspective of the world around her, a perspective crucial to her religious quest. She employed the various natural objects as images and metaphors that capture the living representation of the self, for she believed that the "Growth of Man--like Growth of Nature-- / Gravitates within" (750). Yet no single theory can be propounded to fathom Dickinson's treatment of nature, for she was not concerned with the construction of a fixed and consistent philosophy but with an essentially poetic, creative approach to it: "she found the external world so variously and intricately related to the inner world from which she drew her poetry that she could not avoid including it" (Sewall II, 351). She observed the natural phenomena around her with keen eyes and recorded in her poems her most intimate and personal reactions to them.

However, nature did not provide her with the kind of answers she was seeking. If at times its beauty and liveliness provided her with delight, there were many occasions when it haunted her with its mystery. As a result, her attitude towards nature became ambivalent, as it was with her religious questioning. The more she attempted to probe nature to comprehend its meaning, the more intrigued she became by its mystery and its indifference; ultimately she realized the essential alienation between man and nature. She refers to the intriguing and alienating aspect of nature in a short lyric probably written in 1875.

Questioning whether nature was "apocalypse" or "experiment," she concludes that to presume nature was ordained for man is clownish:

> A little Madness in the Spring
> Is wholesome even for the King
> But God be with the Clown--
> Who ponders this tremendous scene--
> This whole Experiment of Green--
> As if it were his own! (1333)

Even as she affirms the exuberance that one feels with the regeneration of nature in spring, she warns that it would be ridiculous to believe man can understand nature. "The experimental quality in nature," Paul Ferlazzo maintains, "makes all conclusions about it hypothetical and tentative, and subject to examination."[8] Man is an insignificant speck in the enormous spectacle of nature and his limited power does not entitle him to claim the entire scene as his. He must admit his alienation from the complex phenomena of nature, whose significance he cannot totally understand. As a result, Dickinson's dominant attitude towards nature was negative; denying its benign aspects, she did allude to the inscrutability and inaccessibility of nature through questioning nature's supposed benevolence and by using implicatures such as rhetorical question, irony, and direct negation. Thus this section attempts to explore Dickinson's

use of implicatures such as direct expressions of negation, irony and naivete, and rhetorical questioning to undercut nature's benevolence and to bring out the estrangement between man and nature. However, she does not always use a single implicature in a poem and there is much overlapping.

Implicatures occur when a writer means something beyond what he says and thus aims at drawing the reader's attention to the point he is making. The use of negation is an instance of implicature because it is an instance of an intentional violation of Grice's second quantity maxim: to say something is not, is to say something more than necessary and results in overstatement. Thus, in many poems, Dickinson negates nature's benevolence by directly stating that nature's meanings are not determinate and are not enjoyable. Nature, to which she turned for reassurance, despite its occasional pliability, evaded her with its fleeting beauty, and her troubled soul did not, most of the time, see benevolence in nature. Even though gifted with an acute power of observation and an intensely sensitive mind, Dickinson realized that she could not enter the innermost sanctuary of nature. As a result she exhibited her innate dual attitude towards nature. On many occasions, even as she was impressed by the beauty of nature, she found something elusive and baffling about it and began to look at it as an enigmatic and inscrutable force, the ways and vagaries of which were disturbing to mankind. In keeping

with her dual attitude, the normal pattern that she follows is by beginning a poem with a reference to the external beauty of nature and then gradually countervailing her statements by bringing to surface the mystery of nature. In "The Tint I cannot take--is best" (627), for instance, she refers to the "graspless manner" of nature, mocking the effort to know what cannot be known. She begins the poem by alluding to the eyes that perceive the splendor of color--"the impalpable Array"--surpassing the legendary pomp and grandeur of Cleopatra and filling the heart with a spell of nature's glory. But the spell is only brief, and toward the end of the poem the eyes are deceived:

> Their Graspless manner--mock us--
> Until the Cheated Eye
> Shuts arrogantly--in the Grave
> Another was--to see-- (627)

By directly stating that nature seems to mock mankind and the eyes feel "cheated," Dickinson implies that the loveliness of nature brings only brief moments of ecstasy and in no way constitutes a thorough knowledge of nature's mysteries. Nature seems to her as delighting in ambiguity, as intentionally elusive, as a mistress of tricks and deceptions, whose sport lies in tantalizing the individual and in frustrating his thirst for knowledge.

Regarding nature as being indifferent towards humanity, she believes that the alienation between man and nature is irreconcilable. In "What mystery pervades a well!" (1400), she directly negates nature by stating how the well, as a phenomenon of nature, appeals to her as an enigmatic force with its strange and frightening depths:

> What mystery pervades a well!
> That water lives so far--
> A neighbor from another world
> Residing in a jar
>
> Whose limit none have ever seen,
> But just his lid of glass--
> Like looking every time you please
> In an abyss's face! (1400)

The words "far," "neighbor from another world," and "abyss" whose "limit none have ever seen," even as they seem to portray the awesome aspect of nature, imply a certain distance and inaccessibility of nature to man. Nature is not indifferent toward other aspects of nature (a fact that she contradicts in another poem) because the grass that grows around the well or the sedge that "stands next the sea" does not seem to be afraid of the dark aspect of nature. But that is not so with man because nature somehow

rebuffs man and he is not going to be completely privy to its secrets:

> But nature is a stranger yet
> The ones that cite her most
> Have never passed her haunted house
> Nor simplified her ghost.
>
> To pity those that know her not
> Is helped by the regret
> That those who know her, know her less
> The nearer her they get. (1400)

The explicit assertion that "nature is a stranger" precludes any possibility of familiarity between man and nature. She has already regarded nature as "a haunted house" in one of her letters,[9] and the mystery of its ghost cannot be understood by mankind. She expresses a suspicion that nature is in essence profoundly alien to man and is fascinatingly unknowable. The "haunted house" and the "ghost," if stretched a little further, bring out the remoteness and incomprehensibility of nature for ordinary human understanding. The more man attempts to know about nature the less he learns about it, for there is so much more to know that it becomes impossible to know nature entirely.

In another poem, she negates nature by bringing out its incomprehensibility by comparing the external beauty of nature to the outer fringe of a tent which nature has installed for itself and which man can only possibily see, experience, and enjoy, though he is denied admittance into its secrets. Dickinson regards it an error to claim a knowledge of nature's secrets by viewing its exterior:

> We spy the Forests and the Hills
> The Tents to Nature's Show
> Mistake the Outside for the in
> And mention what we saw (1097)

Nature is an alien, baffling force that defies full comprehension. Those who pretend to talk about it simply mislead others, for they merely betray a lack of perception. She concedes that there is a certain veiled and hooded opaqueness about nature that she can never hope to penetrate. Nature not only seems inaccessible but also entices her with its tricks. Dickinson argues that "Nature affects to be sedate" (1170) at times and "grand" on other occasions, but human observation ends there, as nature's practices resemble those of a necromancer. The parody lies in personifying nature and letting it express its significance in the "flamboyant 'juggling' act of tossing and spinning the planets."[10] The reference to the juggler and the practices of necromancy brings out not only nature's

mystery but also refers to its lures and deceptions which are beyond the comprehension of ordinary mankind. Just as the juggler tricks his spectators with his manipulations, nature deceives humanity with its external charm.

In all these poems, Dickinson directly denies the benevolence of nature by alluding to its mystery and its inaccessibility to ordinary human understanding. The normal pattern that she follows in these poems is opening the poem with a reference to some beautiful aspect of nature and subsequently denying it by bringing up some mysterious aspect of it. There are other occasions when she employs implicatures such as literal negation, irony, and rhetorical questioning to denounce nature. Even on such occasions, she follows the same pattern of expressing nature's loveliness followed by expressions of negations.

One of the dominant modes that Dickinson found congenial to express herself was the skillful and deliberate use of literal negation (by using negative words like "no," "not," "never," etc., or prefixes un-, in- etc.), a device in keeping with her negative attitude toward the world that enabled her to evaluate negative things. When Dickinson defines nature as a great teacher and as a source of beauty and moral wisdom, her use of the negative allows her to be overinformative about how the various ways in which nature can be experienced suggest not only its totality but also its mystery:

"Nature" is what we see--
The Hill--the Afternoon--
Squirrel--Eclipse--the Bumble bee--
Nay--Nature is Heaven--
Nature is what we hear--
The Bobolink--the Sea--
Thunder--the Cricket--
Nay--Nature is Harmony--
Nature is what we know--
Yet have no art to say--
So impotent Our Wisdom is
To her Simplicity. (668)

Her inherent dialectic prevails upon her and does not allow her to define nature from a single perspective. The reiterated "Nay" in lines four and eight as direct statements of negation cautions against accepting a single idea about nature as the whole truth and also brings out her own indecisiveness in accepting a single formula about nature. By saying what nature is not, Dickinson tries to establish what nature is, and thus resorts to overstatement to make her point. The unresolved tension persists when she precisely states that nature's ostensible simplicity or artlessness is deceptive and conceals a complexity which we have neither the discerning wisdom nor the competence of art to describe.

Describing the slithering glide and strange beauty of the snake, she mentions that though she had felt an ecstasy of cordiality towards various creatures of nature, she negates such a relationship between her and the snake for it inspires sheer dread and causes a chillier apprehension:

> But never met this Fellow
> Attended, or alone
> Without a tighter breathing
> And Zero at the Bone-- (986)

As a prototype of the Great Adversary of mankind, the infernal serpent probably causes the painful feeling of fear in confronting cold, live evil. Instead of being a representative of the cordiality of nature, the snake renders the inhuman and utterly alien aspect of nature. Again the use of the negative word "never" indicates that she always met the snake with a sense of terror and thus the obliqueness becomes an implicature. By denying the possibility of a cordial relationship between man and at least one aspect of nature, the snake, Dickinson seems to portray nature as being an antagonistic and malicious force.

In "As imperceptibly as Grief" (1540), Dickinson employs negation of a less direct kind in her description of one of nature's mysteries, the end of summer:

> As imperceptibly as Grief

The Summer lapsed away--
Too imperceptible at last
To seem like Perfidy--
A Quietness distilled
As Twilight long begun
Or Nature spending with herself
Sequestered Afternoon--
The Dusk drew earlier in--
The Morning foreign shone--
A courteous, yet harrowing Grace,
As Guest, that would be gone--
And thus, without a Wing
Or service of a Keel
Our Summer made her light escape
Into the Beautiful. (1540)

Dickinson undercuts nature by implicitly stating her sense of loss and estrangement by comparing the departure of summer to a polite guest who has overstayed and has become impatient and is determined to leave, no matter how much he is entreated to stay. She achieves this by, among other things, comparisons of a basically negative sense--"As imperceptibly as," "Too imperceptible," "to seem like,--" and by denying the existence of certain things by the use of the word "without." Such "tendency to negation in the poet's language," says Seyersted, may be related to "her

attitudes toward truth and the possibility to reach it" (p. 230). The flight "without a Wing" and a "Keel" suggests the mysterious flight of the season.

Apart from negating nature by referring to its mystery by using negative expressions, Dickinson uses irony to undercut its benevolence. Ironical utterances result in implicatures because they flout Grice's first quality maxim, which deals with the correlation between what the writer says and what he means. As a device of "dissembling," irony serves for Dickinson as an effective strategy to distinguish between what she asserts and what she means; an "ironic tone of voice" is an appropriate tactic "to an energetic assertion of negativity."[11] The term irony is overused and made very complex by modern criticism, and therefore I want to limit its use to a carefully proscribed area. I have treated it in the sense of either the irony of saying one thing and meaning another or of implying one tone or feeling with another really intended. Dickinson's use of irony lies in using either an ambiguous image or description which invites one sort of interpretation but then turns to resist it vigorously. The technique adds richness and intensity to a given context and incites wariness in the reader:

A Light exists in Spring
Not present on the Year
At any other period--

When March is scarcely here

A Color stands abroad
On Solitary Fields
That Science cannot overtake
But Human Nature feels.

It waits upon the Lawn,
It shows the furthest Tree
Upon the furthest Slope you know
It almost speaks to you.

Then as Horizons step
Or Noons report away
Without the Formula of sound
It passes and we stay--

A quality of loss
Affecting our Content
As Trade had suddenly encroached
Upon a Sacrament. (812)

Dickinson begins the poem with a careful description of the loveliness of nature but soon it is undercut by her ironic comments. The first three stanzas assert that nature has something profound to reveal to mankind, as if she believes that all natural phenomena are intensely meaningful. In the presence of the spring light the speaker appears to be on

the verge of experiencing a mystical communion with nature, expecting to derive peace of the heart and joy of understanding from it. But just when the promise of communication between man and nature seems established, the light, almost unnoticed and inexplicably, recedes. The manner in which it recedes bespeaks of nature's rebuff of the helplessness of man. The speaker is rendered doubly destitute, since nature's lessons are both withheld from her and withheld in a manner which suggests nature's contempt toward human beings. Dickinson ironically compares the destitute feeling caused by nature to commercial intrusions into the sanctities of religion and indirectly expresses her disapproval of both. The sentient being that nature was expected to be emerges to neglect and torment rather than to benefit or sustain. She can no longer feel at home in the presence of nature.

In a similar way, she employs irony to express the dread that nature holds for her.

> When Night is almost done--
> And sunrise grows so near--
> That we can touch the Spaces--
> It's time to smooth the Hair--
>
> And get the Dimples ready--
> And wonder we could care
> For that old--faded Midnight--

That frightened--but an Hour-- (347)

For the unwary, the poem appeals in a straightforward manner: night and its terrors have gone, and the time of renewed hope and cheerfulness is come with the advent of day. But ironically, the person has to prepare herself laboriously before she can really become ready to welcome day. There is something mechanical about the adjusting of the hair and something strained and stiff in the arrangement of the dimples. Both gestures undercut the speaker's optimism by indicating that one has to conceal real fears beneath a made up, sham state of mind. The irony continues when the reader realizes that if day ends night, then day must, perforce, prepare for a new night all over again and thus there is no end to night's terror. As a result, the poem ends with a reference to the "old-faded Midnight," now curiously revived, and the frightening hour, from which escape seems impossible. Thus irony serves as a convenient device for Dickinson to assert one thing but at the same time provides a number of reasons for negating the assertion. What appears as a reasonably straightforward statement--the easy movement from dark to light, from fear to peace--becomes circuitous as the poem returns to the very states which it apppeared to have negated. The ironic references to the perpetual fear of night evinces the dread

that nature holds for mankind despite assurances of the peace and calm during the day.

Dickinson found in nature, despite apparent transparency and pliability, a certain impenetrable opaqueness and equivocal quality. The ways and vagaries of nature were often disturbing to her and she perceived it as an enigmatic and inscrutable power which was beyond her reach: "Great Nature's Face / Passed infinite by Me--" (978). She had the power to look into the darker aspects of nature, probably because they paralleled the dark inner landscape of her own mind. Sometimes, nature, reflecting her darker moods, was indifferent. Dickinson found irony a convenient device to express such an experience. Thus, even as she says "Nature and God--I neither knew / Yet Both so well Knew me" (835), she undercuts this awareness by stating that both frightened her like "Executors." According to T. H. Johnson, "nature appears as a separate entity made privy to the Creator's secrets which are not revealed to any man."[12] Both God and nature appear to baffle her because of their mysteriousness and apathy, which she explains in another poem. In "Apparently with no surprise" (1624), she seems to describe a natural phenomenon in which the frost quite unintentionally disrupts the life cycle of the flower by destroying it. But she compares the process to a criminal act in which the frost is the "blonde Assassin," the flower the innocent victim, and the sun the silent

witness. The lawless execution demands justice, at least in human terms. Instead, it is met with the inscrutable indifference of nature. Dickinson reiterates the callousness of one aspect of nature over another, pointing out the sun's indifference toward the frost's action. Dickinson's bitter irony is condensed in the last line, where the treacherous action of the frost, as well as the sun's indifference towards its action, has God's complicity:

> The Sun proceeds unmoved
> To measure off another Day
> For an Approving God. (1624)

The lines may echo Dickinson's realization that man, exposed to the callousness of nature, is a helpless creature in the presence of an indifferent God whose arbitrary ways (which constantly baffle human understanding) are as unacceptable as the fallacy of a perfect communion with nature.

A common ironical device that Dickinson exploited in many of her poems is naivete. By assuming a pose of innocence and simplicity and by making naive and seemingly obstuse statements, Dickinson achieves ironical effects. Even though there are certain occasions when she used irony to bring out the essential alienation between man and nature, naivete enabled her to see nature as a child would see it--as it actually is, unconditioned by prejudices or false qualifications. The child role enabled her to

confront the world through the wide eyes and scared voice of a demure, lonely girl. As Eberwein states, "it was a mask that apparently struck the poet as a safe refuge from responsibility and as representing a status that allowed free articulation of fears."[13] In a much anthologized poem, "I taste a liquor never brewed--" (214), she uses an ironic naivete by assuming the pose of an innocent girl enjoying the ecstasy of mystic communion with nature. Dickinson uses the sustained metaphor of inebriation to express a delirious state of happiness that can be experienced from the beauty of nature and a longing for the reward of security and religious ecstasy which the union with nature can offer. She boldly proclaims nature as a source of diversion for her vexatious self, and thus the poem represents the intoxicated unity of nature and self. But the use of the alcoholic imagery is ironical, for it implies that the beatific communion with nature is deceptive and short lived. The drunkard regains his senses after the effect of intoxication; so does the speaker in the poem when she realizes that nature is alien to her self and cannot be comprehended fully. As Agnieszka Salska points out, the poet expresses a longing to absorb nature's beauty, but "only succeeds in becoming nature's clown--'the little Tippler / Leaning against the Sun'. . .a comic figure very much like the village drunkard leaning against the lamp-post."[14] Thus the poem, though superficially seeming

to suggest a longing for a mystic communion with nature, undercuts it by establishing the alienation between man and nature. Yet the mask of the innocent young girl gives her the latitude for speaking openly and with candor.

In a tantalizing poem, "I started Early--Took my Dog--" (520), she assumes the role of a naive girl and refers to a similar sense of alienation between man and nature evoked by another natural phenomenon, the sea. Dickinson uses the sea to representing some overwhelming force with great potential for annihilation. The poem opens with a lovely and seemingly innocuous situation in which Dickinson assumes the pose of an innocent young girl who undertakes a lonely walk to the sea. The apparent hospitality with which the girl is received by the sands, the mermaids, and the sunken frigates all add to the rapport that the natural phenomenon promises to bring, but the promise is never fulfilled. The sea suddenly seems to turn hostile, and the tides seem gradually to engulf her, and nature reveals itself as a menacing force. The girl, terrified by this threatening gesture, with great strength of will, turns back and flees in abject fear until she reaches the world of human beings. Many contradictory interpretations revolve around the image of the sea, which has been treated as a symbol of love, death or sexuality, and "the effectiveness of the symbol, whether the force challenged was love, death, or some other power, lies

largely in its resistance to any close-ended interpretation" (Salaski, p. 82). That the sea is somewhat inaccessible and indifferent is ironically conveyed by the image of the mermaids gathered not to greet her but simply to gaze at her, a gesture that lacks cordiality and is hostile. Also, the personification of the sea as an amibivalent "he" (a reversal of the traditional feminine role assigned to the sea) ironically represents the harassing gesture of the sea. As the male sea pursues her, he displays an insistent and brazen quality which reinforces his role as a seducer of a maiden. Thus, Dickinson's use of naivete enables her to present a seemingly innocent situation in which nature turns into a hostile force, wantonly disregards human interest, and widens the estrangement between man and nature.

Another common device of implicature that Dickinson employs to deny the benevolence of nature is the rhetorical question. Like irony, rhetorical questioning also violates Grice's first quality maxim, for the questioner does not want an answer, whether the answer is known to him or not. Rhetorical questions give the opportunity for Dickinson to be persuasive since the questions for which the answers are known would make a much deeper impression on the reader than a direct statement. Sometimes, she follows her usual pattern of describing the external beauty of nature and then reverses with a sudden question. Thus, even as she proclaims that her relationship with nature is frolicsome,

intimate, and cordial in "The Bee is not afraid of me" (111), the questioning couplet "Wherefore mine eye thy silver mists, / Wherefore, Oh Summer Day?" negates such an intimacy. Speaking about nature's benevolence toward other aspects of nature in "Twice had Summer her fair Verdure" (846), she directly questions its courtesy towards man: "Nature, Had'st thou not a Berry / For thy wandering Bird?" Even as she is fascinated by nature's neglected oddities, she feels a sense of discomfort at nature's enigma. She sincerely endeavors to describe these objects in minute detail but usually ends up with a note of skepticism about nature's being a benevolent force or a source of pleasure. Thus, the bat appeals to her as an "inscrutable . . . Philosopher" (1575). But the dark color and nocturnal habits of the bat make her question where it is from or what covert powers it possesses:

> Deputed from what Firmament--
> Of what Astute Abode--
> Empowered with what Malignity
> Auspiciously withheld-- (1575)

Dickinson does not expect an answer for her question nor does she herself attempt to answer the question. Instead, she states that the creator of such a creature deserves all praise for his benevolence, and there is no way of understanding His idiosyncrasies. The rhetorical question

implies that nature's ways are enigmatic, and her use of the words "inscrutable," "firmament," and "malignity" (to describe the bat) with their association of mystery and evil, certainly does not subscribe to the beneficence of nature. On the other hand, the questions serve to present nature as being deliberately treacherous and unpredictable. Referring to the sinister aspect of nature, Dickinson in a paradoxical statement says that nature, in a whimsical mood, has given her an anguish caused by joy. She is so desperate that she tries to escape the feeling. She questions why the song of the bird in summer should cause a staggering pain to her otherwise "ravished spirit." She believes that an answer to such an inquiry can be obtained only after death:

> Why Birds, a Summer morning
> Before the Quick of Day
> Should stab my ravished spirit
> With Dirks of Melody (1420)

Sometimes, the happiness of a flower causes her to question if happiness itself is a misery:

> So gay a Flower
> Bereaves the Mind
> As if it were a Woe--
> Is Beauty an Affliction--then?
> Tradition ought to know-- (1456)

Having questioned how a beautiful object of nature can be a source of pain, she does not wait for an answer. The brevity of the flowers reminds her of the transitoriness of life, and thus beauty itself becomes a source of pain to her. But she sardonically comments that probably the preachers who attempt to offer "traditional" answers to vital religious questions may have the answer for her question too. What she surmises is that nature is only a teasing, cryptic, and callous force that causes a paranoia in man.

She combines both the rhetorical question and naivete in "Will there really be a 'Morning'?" (101) to expose the inscrutability of nature. The questions are so gentle that they hardly look like an attack at all:

> Will there really be a "Morning"?
> Is there such a thing as "Day"?
> Could I see it from the mountains
> If I were as tall as they?
>
> Has it feet like Water lilies?
> Has it feathers like a Bird?
> Is it brought from famous countries
> Of which I have never heard?
>
> Oh some Scholar! Oh some Sailor!
> Oh some Wise Man from the skies!

Please to tell a little Pilgrim
Where the place called "Morning" lies! (101)

The pretentious questions of an innocent girl as she tries to understand nature are so innocuous that they scarcely appear as an attack against nature. But Dickinson's ironic exposure of the inabilities of the scholar, the sailor, or some wise man to answer her simple questions is so subtly framed that one can hardly miss the sly smirk behind the humorous pose. Thus, rhetorical questioning enables Dickinson to express persuasively the fact that nature's ways are ultimately strange to mankind and kindle a sense of alienation and an instinctive melancholy. Nature appears to be a sentient being capable of conferring moments of ecstasy. But such moments are only evanescent and transitory, for they tantalize and lull the poet into feelings of false security. They disappear so suddenly that she sees nature only as being enigmatic and antagonistic, thus reinforcing the irreconcilable cleavage between man and nature.

Hence, the dominant mode in which Dickinson responded to nature was one of negation. Even though occasionally she admitted that nature is capable of conferring moments of ecstasy, most of the time she found it as a disturbing and mysterious source that increased the estrangement between man and nature. As she attempted to probe the meaning of

nature, Dickinson realized that nature was not an amicable force that would solve the problems of her selfhood nor would be a viable substitute for religion. On the contrary, she found the insidiousness and indifference of nature toward humanity incomprehensible:

> As Nature did not care--
> And piled her Blossoms on--
> And further to parade a Joy
> Her Victim stared upon-- (364)

Therefore, she denied nature's benevolence by alluding it to its mystery, indifference, and alienation from man through negative expressions and through implicatures such as irony, naivete, and rhetorical questioning, which resulted from the conviction that in a world of manifold uncertainties, the only viable language would be one of careful inconclusiveness.

CHAPTER IV

FLOOD SUBJECTS II: DEATH

Dickinson wrote more than six hundred poems on the theme of death, conceived from every possible angle ranging from the physical to the emotional and psychological aspects of it. As Millicent Todd Bingham stated, "from the time when Emily Dickinson first began to write poetry until her last fading pencil marks on tattered bits of paper, the mystery of death absorbed her."[1] No one can read her poems and letters without discovering her intense fascination for death scenes, graveyards, and mourning. Her self discovery involved a perceptive and passionate probing into the meaning of existence. For a person in pursuit of the self, according to Socrates and Plato, nothing is more immediate than the problem of death, for "the bodily senses, desires, and feelings hinder the soul's search for knowledge of true existence."[2] Dickinson posed questions about the order of nature, the meaning of loss and pain and death, the reality of an afterlife, and the justice of God's authority; but her experience did not provide her with definitive answers. Neither the luxury of hope nor the lesser security of despair was granted to her inquisitive mind. What she did map out in her poetry is psychological realities, not

philosophical absolutes. Nature, to which she turned for comfort and sustenance, proved itself, through its mystery and alienation toward man, as an inadequate source of knowledge. In one of her poems, Dickinson stated that nature could not provide her with the kind of knowledge she was seeking and that hence she had to turn to death:

> No Drug for Consciousness--can be--
> Alternative to die
> Is Nature's only Pharmacy
> For Being's Malady--[3]

Caught between the agony of life and the tormenting fear of death, Dickinson probably realized that there is no way one can stop death, but to free oneself from its pangs one should experience it in the depths of one's heart. With a painful awareness she stated, "The Things that never can come back are several-- / Childhood--some forms of Hope--the Dead" (1515). Considering death as an integral part of creation that enhanced the significance of life, Dickinson gained in self-perception and thus learned the art of living. Man appeared to her as a paltry and helpless creature against the uncontrollable force called death. The questioning about the meanings of life and what lay beyond prompted her fascination for death. Jane Donahue Eberwein sees Dickinson as a quester who, "finding death as a barrier, tried to speculate in any way she could to discover

whether she could trust Christian promises of eternal and intensified life."[4] The number of deaths she encountered during her lifetime would have easily shattered another personality physically and emotionally. Because of her stoicism, she did not allow these heart-rending experiences to overcome her; instead, with typical fortitude, she transformed those experiences into lovely poems with a melancholic strain and thus kept her self in tact. Writing poetry about death "became for her an act of courage," and "with her great creative spirit she transformed human frailty, fear, and anxiety about death into the highest levels of art."[5] Death thus became the most dominant theme of her poetry.

Her attitude toward death, like her attitude toward religion and nature, was ambivalent. Sometimes, she regarded death as a welcome relief from the trials and tribulations of the world and as a blessed means to everlasting happiness. On other occasions, she contemplated death as a terrifying force and sportive trick played on trusting humanity by a callous God. Yet, she did not affirm which of her attitudes was more valid. The one thought that binds together her poems on death is the "knowledge that death snaps the lines of communication with those we have known and loved, and creates the uncertainty in the minds of all mortals whether that communication can ever be re-established."[6] She looked at death from every possible

angle and expressed her views about it depending upon her moods, but most of the time, with an ironic and sardonic perception of death's inevitability.

However, just as her questioning mind led her to deny nature as a source of comfort and assurance, it led her to a similar attitude of negating death as the potential discloser of ultimate meanings of life. The reasons for her negative attitude can be accounted for: the Calvinistic and the "nineteenth-century sentimental-romantic" (Ferlazzo, p. 41) background in which she was nurtured; her confrontation with the deaths of her dear ones such as Sophia Holland, her fifteen-year-old girlhood friend, Leonard Humphrey, her master, Ben Newton, her preceptor in her early life; her witnessing of the deaths of her father, mother, Reverend Charles Wadsworth, Justice Lord, and Samuel Bowles in her later life; and the cemetery which was adjacent to the Dickinson household on Pleasant Street from where she could see every funeral procession.[7] Just as she found questioning and implication appropriate strategies to convey her slant views on nature, she found the same strategies useful to express her negative ideas about death, though each poem does not explicitly contain each one of these techniques individually. Her nebulousness is such that in a single poem it is possible to see a combination of techniques operating at the same time. Death presented itself to her as a closed door, but she attempted to unlock

its mysteries to discover whether she could find the promise of an eternal life. Thus it is possible to see death treated in her poems as a potential source of release from the trials and tribulations of the world. But predominantly the mystery of death haunted her as a force of deprivation, an irreversible and crushing burden of finitude, and a source of extinction of hope and divine grace. By referring to these aspects of death in her poetry, Dickinson negated the meaning of death. Therefore, in this chapter I discuss how Dickinson employed implicatures such as expressions of negation, irony, and ambiguity to bring out the negative aspects of death.

One of the dominant modes in which Dickinson perceived death was negation. She recorded her negative attitude toward death by referring to her painful impressions of death in her early letters to her friend Abiah Root: "I have just seen a funeral procession go by of a negro baby, so if my ideas are rather dark you need not marvel."[8] When she saw the dead body of her girlhood friend Sophia Holland, she felt her grief unbearable:

> There she lay mild & beautiful as in health & her pale features lit up with an--unearthly smile . . . I shed no tear, for my heart was too full to weep, but after she was laid in her coffin & I

> felt I could not call her back again I gave way to fixed melancholy (L 11).

Later in February 1863, she wrote to Colonel Higginson: "Perhaps Death--gave me awe for friends--striking sharp and early, for I held them since--in a brittle love--of more alarm, than peace" (L 280). In 1884, she wrote, "the Dyings have been too deep for me, and before I could raise my Heart from one, another has come" (L 843). In her poems she described death as "the White Exploit" (922) which annuls the power of communication. She mentioned how death does not spare anyone:

> Death is the Common Right
> Of Toads and Men--
> Of Earl and Midge
> The privilege (583)

She suggested that "We wear Mortality / As lightly as an option Gown" (1462). It is the "spacious Arm . . . / That none can understand" (1625) and "the Riddle / One will walk today" (50). Death's "Democratic fingers" do not make a distinction of color, creed, or rank:

> Color--Caste--Denomination
> These--are Time's Affair--
> Death's diviner Classifying
> Does not know they are-- (970)

The dominant impression that registered in her mind was the severing of all human relationships between the living and the dead, between the visible world and the mighty bourn from which no traveller returns. Painfully aware of the absolute helplessness of human life which is circumscribed and limited by death, Dickinson negates the significance of death as a possible discloser of ultimate truths of life by confronting its mystery, deformity, and bewildering aspects.

Dickinson negates the idea of death explicitly by using negative expressions such as "not," "no," "never," etc., and with the use of suffixes such as "-less." Deprived of any firm faith, she directed her attention toward death as the potential discloser of the final mysteries. She thought that death could be the "source of her true identity"[9] without which human life would be bereft of any significant meaning. But she realized that death is nothing more than a force of deprivation, a source of extinction of hope and grace, and that it does not provide any meaning into the mystery of life.

Though it is difficult to find any consistency in her ideas about death, the beauty of her poems on the subject lies in their varied and unexpected turn of thought running into contraries. Sometimes, even as she perceives death objectively and without sentimentality, she refers to its enigmatic nature by using negative expressions. "A Clock stopped," for example, is a detached but picturesque

representation of the death of a person in terms of a striking conceit of the sudden failure of a "Mantel" clock. But the poem negates death by bringing out the irreversibility of life and mystery of death and represents Dickinson's sardonic comment on death, which religion fails to explain adequately:

> A Clock stopped--
> Not the Mantel's--
> Geneva's farthest skill
> Can't put the puppet bowing--
> That just now dangled still-- (287)

She begins the poem with a conceit of a clock but immediately states that it is not the mantel clock that has stopped. Except for the reference to the doctors who attempt to revive the dying person, she sustains the imagery of the clock skillfully throughout the poem. The dying person is referred to in terms of the various parts of the clock--pendulum, dial, trinket, and puppet. The clock has just stopped--the person is just dead--and the motion of neither can be renewed. The poem brings out the suddenness of the cessation of life and time ("Degreeless Noon"). The skillful watchmakers of Geneva cannot set the clock right again, for it is the heartbeat of the dying that has stopped. The use of the negative twice in the first stanza ("not," "can't") brings out that which lies beyond death is

unknown. The hunched "Figures" with their expression of awe and pain graphically represent the suffering, the pain, and the ugly convulusions that accompany death.

Even the doctors could not restore the life that is closed for ever ("It will not [italics mine] stir for Doctors--"). "The Pendulum," the vitality and movement of life, is now "of snow," an apt image that suggests the chillness and the immobility of death. The "Shopman" may try to restore the clock to life but with no avail ("This Shopman importunes it-- / While cool--concernless No--" [italics mine]). The use of negation violates Grice's second quantity maxim and thus results in implicature. When Dickinson refers to the inability of the doctors to restore the dead to life she implies that life is irreversible and hence death's mystery can never be made known to the living. If the doctor, the shopman, and the watchmaker can be identified with God, Dickinson, in a blasphemously ironic tone, seems to suggest that "the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, but he cannot repeat the performance with the same trinket."[10] The helplessness of the doctors and the shopman also seem to be veiled allusions to the inabilty of the priests and other such dignitaries to explain the mystery of death. What is real about death is that one sees only a corpse and not any glimpse of immortality or the dignity of death.

The living cannot reach the dead and the corpse which is unresponsive to attempts at revival with an accentuated "no" makes the mystery of death incomprehensible. Thus the poem, as it objectively describes death in terms of a conceit, denies death as a potential discloser of ultimate mysteries because what lies beyond death is incomprehensible and the dead could never be brought back to life to tell its mystery.

In addition to using words such as "not" and words ending with "-less," Dickinson employs other expressions such as "without" to express negation. She negates the idea of death not only by alluding to the irreversibility of life but also by referring to the inability of the dead to disclose to the living any visions of their dying moments. "I've seen a Dying Eye" (547), for instance, is an accurate representation of the actual process of dying, from a few minutes preceding death to the actual moment of dying. But at the same time the poem denies the possibility of any glory attached to death. Even if there is one, there is no way of knowing it because the dead pass away without disclosing what it is:

> I've seen a Dying Eye
> Run round and round a Room--
> In search of Something--as it seemed--
> Then Cloudier become--

And then--obscure with Fog--
And then--be soldered down
Without disclosing what it be
'Twere blessed to have seen-- (547)

In an earlier poem, Dickinson refers to her ability to recognize the dying looks because they are "Impossible to feign" (241). However, in this poem, the eyes of the dying person roam all around the room intent upon seeing a blessed vision or some sign of grace. The phrase "as it seemed" introduces the difference between appearance and reality, a device that often has negative connotations, for the speaker herself does not seem to believe that the dying eye could have any glorious illumination. The negative word "without" means "lack of something," and in this poem it implies death's deprivation. As Alan Helms points out, even "the final dash implies a continuum in which death, an apparent ending, is realized as an unfamiliar and other-worldly beginning."[11] But no one knows what the dying person sees because at the time of death his vision becomes blurred and foggy and is obliterated once and for all and he expires without disclosing his experience. Even the speakers's eye wanders with the eyes of the dying to see what death brings--a complete and irreversible end of life or some new incarnation or perspective. But the dying registers only blankness and confusion, and both he and the speaker are

reminded that they are destitute of the power to see in the presence of the inexorable force called death. Death remains only opaque, cloudy, foggy, and soldered down tightly; it is inexorable. Thus, the poem may be read as Dickinson's awareness that no one knows whether the dying moment brings any vision of the "promised" immortality or not. What one is certain of is the reality of death and the vulnerability of mankind in its presence.

Sometimes, Dickinson negates death's sublimity by employing negative suffixes such as "-less" and prefixes such as "un-" so that she could express herself obtusely. In both symbolic and chivalric terms, Dickinson describes the denial of the hope of a heaven of restored human relations in "Death is the supple Suitor" (1445), in which death appears as a seducer who strikes trusting humanity.

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.

As a character, death appears as pliable, persistent, adaptable, would assume any guise and adopt any means to achieve his goal, and hence is "supple." The adjectives that describe the activities of death--"stealthy," "pallid," and "dim"--certainly carry negative connotations and imply that there is something terrifying, deceptive, cunning, crafty, and sinister behind the courtly and considerate exterior of this suitor. His wooing is "stealthy"--secret and furtive; his suggestions are "pallid"--subtle, soft, and silent; and his approach is "dim"--quiet and secret. The unknown destination to which death seems to bear her away ("Troth unknown" [italics mine]) suggests Dickinson's vehement denial of death as a potential discloser of ultimate mysteries of existence. There is not even the suggestion of attaining heaven or immortality. The kindred of death, the souls of the already dead, are described as "Porcelain" a word having negative connotations: cold, hard, and unfeeling. If Heaven is a place of perpetual bliss, certainly those who have attained heavens would not be associated with the coldness, indifference, and immobility of porcelain. The central irony of the poem lies in the fact that, in spite of the concrete personification of death and the explicit statement of his purpose, it ends with a

nebulous ambiguity in which the carriage and its occupants drop into a world beyond the poet's descriptive powers. Thus Dickinson seems to suggest that for man the hope of an afterlife is only a mirage. What is real is death, which employs all the tricks of its trade to fulfill its mission of annihilation.

In all these poems Dickinson employs negative expressions such as "not," "never," and "without," or suffixes such as "-less," or prefixes such as "un-" to express death's mystery and lack of any dignity or glory. In addition to negation to treat death, Dickinson, as she did in the case of the negation of nature, uses irony to denounce any significance of death. The ironically careful attempt to define precisely and concretely that which is ultimately beyond description is an impulse at the heart of Dickinson's assault on the important matters of human existence such as death, God, nature, time, and other related realms. In fact, she excels in using irony to denounce death. In a very early valentine she underlines her ironic mode. Since "mortality is fatal," she believes

> A coward will remain, Sir,
> Until the fight is done;
> But an <u>immortal hero</u>
> Will take his hat and run! (3)

Irony serves as an effective device to attain her purpose because, even as she is describing a seemingly innocuous situation surrounding death, it gives her the opportunity to undercut what she just said by implying a meaning beyond.

In "Dust is the only Secret--," for instance, in an ironically humorous vein, she says that "the best way to stay alive is not to get killed":[12]

> Dust is the only Secret--
> Death, the only One
> You cannot find out all about
> In his "native town."
>
> Nobody knew "his Father"--
> Never was a Boy--
> Hadn't any playmates,
> Or "Early history"--
>
> Industrious! Laconic!
> Punctual! Sedate!
> Bold as a Brigand!
> Stiller than a Fleet!
>
> Builds, like a Bird, too!
> Christ robs the Nest--
> Robin after Robin
> Smuggled to Rest! (153)

Even though the poem contains negative expressions to refer to the mystery of death, the dominant mode in the poem seems to be irony. As Ronald Wallace points out, Dickinson seems to be "gossiping behind death's back, getting away with it by means of a series of gentle ironies that result in death's ultimate comeuppance" (p. 39). The best way to escape death is to "run" away from him by distacting him with trivialities and playfulness. For Dickinson, death seems to be a combination of awe (because his mystery is unfathomable) and sympathy (because he is lonely without parents or playmates). The use of the negatives in the first two stanzas ("cannot," "nobody," "never," "hadn't") suggest that there is nothing profound about death, for there are no clues to understand his secrets. Even the seemingly admirable qualities ascribed to death in the third stanza--industry, terseness, punctuality, boldness, and stillness--carry ominous and sardonic overtones because of their implication of the callousness and insensitivity with which death strikes humanity. "Industrious" foreshadows the persistence and diligence of the supple suitor, "laconic" and "sedate" his quiet way; and "Bold as Brigand," his stealth. The syntax, the use of a series of abstract adjectives without any referent within the stanza, reinforces the amorphous, obscure, inscrutable nature of the figure depicted in the first two stanzas. Entertained by the speaker's playful jests, death is lulled into a sense of

false security and taken off guard in the final stanza where everyone seems to elude him through Jesus' grace. But there is nothing honorable in Jesus' action either, for in an ironically blasphemous tone she compares his action to robbing and smuggling (she referred to God as a "Burglar" once).

Torn by the dialectic of death as meaningless destruction on the one hand and a possible road to immortality on the other, sometimes Dickinson tries to comprehend death by a keen perception and acute description of actual dead bodies. But as she records her reactions to the spectacle of a corpse, she negates the "dignity" of death by ironically bringing out the gruesome details that surround a cadaver. In "How many times these low feet staggered--" (187), rendering lifelessness as against life, Dickinson describes, in a cold, detached manner, a dead housewife. She brings out the sensation of pain and pathos that a person feels as he sees a corpse:

> How many times these low feet staggered--
> Only the soldered mouth can tell--
> Try--can you stir the awful rivet--
> Try--can you lift the hasps of steel!
>
> Stroke the cool forehead--hot so often--
> Lift--if you care--the listless hair--
> Handle the adamantine fingers

Never a thimble--more--shall wear--

Buzz the dull flies--on the chamber window--
Brave--shines the sun through the freckled pane--
Fearless--the cobweb swings from the ceiling--
Indolent Housewife--in Daisies--lain! (187)

The poem begins with an innocuous situation. As a corpse lies immobilized and awaits burial, Dickinson's thoughts move back and forth temporally. The corpse, absolutely motionless, cannot break open the lid of the coffin and answer the question of how many times the soft feet of the housewife treaded the house. The phrases "soldered mouth," "awful rivet," and "hasps of steel," in their associations with cold insensate metal, not only suggest the impossibility of the revival of life but also a quality of gruesome horror that accompanies death to complement the "adamantine" fingers, cool forehead, and listless hair. The mechanical images describing the corpse bring out the "lifelessness" of death. Death, with nothing dignified or profound about it, appears only as cold and insensate.

There is a visual contrast between the absolute coolness, quietness, and inactivity inside the coffin and the active life that the deceased once led. Because the woman is now dead and gone, the fly buzzes in the room freely. Since the windows are not closed, the sun shines

through the pane. Even the cobwebs swing boldly from the ceiling. They are not household annoyances anymore, for she is no longer concerned about the cleanliness of the house. The housewife, while alive, was active, staggering, speaking, plying her fingers in sewing, and busy setting things in order, but now she is "indolent" and is lying on the daisies in the coffin. The irony in the poem is double-edged. Dickinson seems to say ironically that the lady finds comfort only in her death. But at the same time the poet sardonically implies that death has disrupted the order of the household activities and the family unit, the languidness of death brought out in the use of the word "indolent." Just as the lady will not be able to speak out about her past life (the number of times her low feet staggered in the house), she will not be able to tell about the moment of her death. Death does not seem to resolve its own mystery or enhance the knowledge of life. Ironically, it seems to indicate the meaninglessness of existence.

In order to overcome the angst of dying, it is imperative that a person confront creatively the question of his own death. Deathbed throes might bring only trivial deliverance from pain rather than any vision of glory or dignity. As St. Aramand says, "rather than opening the door to Hades or Paradise, 'The Spoiler' might simply conduct her toward oblivion that invalidated a faith as well as all reason."[13] A poem that graphically and ironically pictures

this aspect of death is "I heard a Fly buzz--when I died." Considered to be one of Dickinson's masterpieces for its precision and eloquence, the poem is an imaginative and ironical treatment of her own vision of the last moments of death and the sensations of experiencing it:

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 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-- (465)

The poem, as Will C. Jumper points out, is probably Dickinson's "strongest rejection of the transcendentalist idea of death as the 'liberating leap' into enlightenment and total fulfillment."[14] Brought up in the Calvinist tradition, Dickinson believed in watching for signals of salvation or damnation at the moment of death. In one of her letters to Mrs. Holland, she recalls the dying words of her little nephew, Gilbert: "'Open the Door, open the Door, they are waiting for me' was Gilbert's sweet command in delirium. Who were waiting for him, all we possess we would give to know" (L 873). In "Rendezvous of Light" (1564), Dickinson describes herself as attempting to ford the mystery the boy had leaped across. "I heard a Fly buzz" tells one simple truth: that one's death may be the most trivial event, surrounded with irrelevancies and leading to no immortality. But it tells the truth by indirection.

Even though the poem appears to be a close description of a New England deathbed scene, Dickinson undercuts the glorification of death by ironically referring to how the last moments of the dying are spent: there are no grand final words or gestures, no angelic welcomes, no visions of God's immortality. The expectancy of family and friends gathered round the death bed to witness "a burst of dying energy to bring on the grand act of passing"[15] of the soul is belied. The bereaved family wait in the room with anxious breath to witness the arrival of the "King"--death

or some divine revelation. But the silence in the room is broken by the buzzing sound of the fly, and its arrival is a dramatic disappointment for them. The fly is a symbol of the nebulous nature of death itself, intimating the end to mortality, its buzzing sound being an ominous drone foreboding the approach of death. Besides death, the king may stand for Jesus Christ or God, but it does not matter to Dickinson, for her task in the poem is to sardonically mock the role of these "dignitaries" in the process of life and death. Ironically, the image of the fly dominates the poem (it appears in three stanzas in the poem) and not the "King." As a carrion eater, the fly seems to "hint that stink and corruption are death's only legacies."[16] The crucial moment is robbed of its grandeur by the fly, which reminds her of the insects and worms awaiting the corpse.

The final moments are disappointing to the dying too. Death is supposed to be a release from the turmoils of life into something more meaningful. Ironically, the dying person does not have any glorious vision of immortality or any other heavenly gift. Instead, the last moments are spent in thoughts about bequeathing her worldly possessions and in contemplating a fly, and thus the fly calls to mind "man's final cadaverous condition and putrefication."[17] With the arrival of the fly, the light from the window fails, and her vision becomes defunct.

The arrival of the fly "With Blue--uncertain, stumbling Buzz" suggests a note of despair, too. It has prevented the dying from seeing not merely the physical light but also the radiant spiritual light of the hereafter. But the word "uncertain" casts a note of doubt whether she was really hearing the buzzing of the fly or some meaningless sound. The poem moves from a comically incongruous situation to a sense of horror in the awareness of the loss of sight and the reality of death, and "a perfect holy dying is spoiled by awkwardness, confusion, and doubt" (St. Aramand, p. 61). The closing of the poem with the image of the fly, however, suggests that at the time of death decay will be all and only the maggot will ultimately dominate the mind of the dying.

Dickinson's irony reaches its heights, when she presents death as a character. The ironic personification of death is a creative strategy that she adopted to comprehend the meaning of life. Whenever Dickinson personifies death, she ironically presents him as being polite and hospitable: "How cordial is the mystery! / The hospitable Pall" (1626). In "It's coming--the postponeless Creature" (390) death is endowed with powers of speech, and trespasses by opening the latch and door and entering boldly without the consent of the owner of the house. In this poem, death affects to be polite in seeking recognition: "You know Me--Sir"? Unconcerned about who the owner is, it

just carries him away "to God." The tone of the last phrase is certainly sardonic, for Dickinson makes no secret of her belief that such promises as going to God after death have no basis. In "The Frost of Death was on the Pane--" (1136), she ironically says that death may be an omnipotent power who can force his way through what he wants to do, but his maneuvers to do so relate him only to the loneliest animals like the snake.

In all these instances Dickinson undercuts the significance attached to death by ironically referring to its callousness and meaninglessness. But her irony is at its best when death appears as an urbane and persuasive but an evasive gentleman suitor. Dickinson excels in her ironical personification of death as a gentleman caller by exhibiting her unique ability to find the right images and symbols that would grip death at the moment of striking.

One of the most anthologized and explicated of her poems in which death appears as a gentle suitor presents her ambivalence to the concept of death. In this poem, in addition to irony, she employs naivete to denounce death. But the naivete consists in assuming, not the role of an innocent young child, but that of a coy and demure maiden who is invited probably for her first date. The innocence and curiosity of the maiden are revealed in how she enjoys the leisurely ride and how she is attracted to the external scenery while riding:

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-- (712)

In one sense, the poem suggests that the prospect of dying holds a definite appeal. The image of death as an ardent and pleasant lover, the excitement that accompanies the journey, and the relaxed and graceful nature of the journey all seem to support this meaning. But the tone of the poem "is tenderly ironic, the atmosphere tinged with sorrow for life and concern for the smallness of the human soul that must face inexorable death, solitary except for its immortality."[18] Dickinson describes an ironic journey where the stately formality of death is balanced against its always incredible intrusion into the fulness of life. Death appears as a tender, solicitous lover. His

characteristics--"kindness" and "civility," and the leisurely pace in which he takes the maiden--at face value bespeak a tact and consideration towards others. The silent presence of immortality as the third rider sanctifies the relationship between death and the lady by keeping a close vigil on them so that the journey would have a respectable ending.

But the whole journey attains an ironic reversal when they pause for a while at the country cemetery. The cemetery is not their destination; their destination is eternity. All along, the lady had not realized where her intimate suitor was taking her until they reached the cemetery. The description of the grave is frightening and sinister. At this juncture, the "lover-death" abandons her to face her destiny all by herself. The lowering of the coffin into the grave implied in the line "The Roof was scarcely visible," adds a chilling note. Then death's civility and politeness and the leisurely ride attain an ironical twist. Death appears as someone depraved and malevolent and all along his behavior had been hypocritical. Even in the leisurely ride we have a glimpse of "the arrogance of Death, his bland disregard for human wishes" (Griffith, p. 130). The flimsiness of the lady's dress--gown, tippet, and tulle--recapitulates the vulnerability and helpessness of mankind in the presence of death. Even immortality, who appeared to perform the role

of the "Guardian Angel," becomes party to the fraudulent wickedness perpetrated by death and vanishes from the scene. Dickinson's ironical representation of death as a courtly lover who proves to be in reality a deceptive abductor reflects her negative attitude toward death. Thus death becomes repellant because he betrays, the journey with him is inexorable, and he holds the human being in captivity. The personification of death as a polite but deceitful suitor enabled Dickinson to regard death not only as an untrustworthy guide to understand the meaning of life but also to question the belief in immortality itself.

Sometimes, Dickinson uses ironical naivete to denounce death. Normally she assumes the role of a young girl (or boy) whose simplistic nature enables her to make seemingly innocent remarks that actually imply a more serious meaning. The device serves for her as an effective strategy to say things with an obtuseness that the reader can interpret differently to see what she actually means. Thus in "There's been a Death, in the Opposite House" (389), she appears to make an objective presentation of death, viewed through the eyes of a young boy. The poem is a "vivid reconstruction of a child's memory of a death impersonally witnessed from the outside of the neighbor's house in which the death occurred" (Johnson, pp. 212-213). In another poem, she ironically remarks that

The Bustle in a House
The Morning after Death
Is solemnest of industries
Enacted upon Earth-- (1078)

In "There's been a Death," she says that she could easily recognize such a house because of its somber appearance. However, in the poem she does not describe the dead body of any individual. Instead, she talks about the way death is treated after its occurrence, pictures the bustle and movement caused by the dead, and uses mockery to reduce the awesomeness of death. She assumes the persona of an innocent young boy watching from his window the death of a neighbor and the activities that follow it. The poem seems to innocently describe the house's "numb look," the window opening "like a Pod," the arrival of the self-important minister, the children's speculations, the arrival of the undertaker, and finally the procession itself. But the poem implies more than that. Dickinson conveys the fact that behind the scurry of all these activities, there is an implication of death being busily deprived of dignity and significance. The visits of the neighbors, the doctor, the clergyman, and the undertaker have something of a mechanical and dispassionate element in the way they are carried out. Even the close relatives treat the dead with callousness and

a sense of horror and the once human being ironically becomes a non-human "it":

> Somebody flings a Mattress out--
> The Children hurry by--
> They wonder if it died--on that--

Dickinson's bitterest irony is directed against the priest who exploits the solemn occasion of death to his advantage by proclaiming vociferously about death and sinners, and the undertaker who makes his fortune unethically at the expense of other people's misfortunes:

> The Minister--goes stiffly in--
> As if the House were His--
> And He owned all the Mourners--now--
> And little Boys--besides--
>
> And then the Milliner--and the Man
> Of the Appalling Trade--
> To take the measure of the House-- (389)

The child persona provides Dickinson the opportunity to describe a neighbor's death in a seemingly objective manner, but at the same time to undercut the significance of death by implying the meaninglessness of the life lost and the callousness and indifference with which it is treated by those who are alive.

In another poem, assuming the role of a young girl, she expresses terror at venturing alone into the darkness of death. The poem is in a playful mode but mildly "exposes" God's betrayal at the moment of death and employs both naivete and rhetorical questioning. For a young girl darkness is akin to death. She raises the rhetorical question whether someone would bring her light so that she could see her way through the eternal darkness and coldness of death:

> Dying! Dying in the night!
> Won't somebody bring the light
> So I can see which way to go
> Into the everlasting snow? (158)

The girl pleads to Jesus to be her escort but feels betrayed by him. Dickinson's irony is implicit when she undermines God's omniscience by stating that probably Jesus does not know the house from which the call for help was coming (implying that Jesus has failed in his role as a Savior). The statement can be qualified by another remark of Dickinson's: "Of course--I prayed-- / And did God Care?" (376):

> And "Jesus"! Where is <u>Jesus</u> gone?
> They said that Jesus--always came--
> Perhaps he doesn't know the House--

This way, Jesus, Let him pass! (153)

The pronoun "they" appears intentional. Is Dickinson poking fun at the priests who speak about the Savior of humanity or is it an impersonal "they"? Ultimately, the girl is comforted not by Jesus but by "Dollie" (Dickinson's petname for her childhood friend Sue). As an innocent child would believe, she ends the poem with the note that death "won't hurt" her anymore because she has her friend as her companion. The child persona enables Dickinson to ironically denounce God for his failure to appear in the time of need and at the time of death and to state that what prevails for humanity is only terror of death.

In addition to using irony and naivete, Dickinson sometimes used a combination of irony and ambiguity to convey her negative attitude toward death. While irony violates Grice's first quality maxim, ambiguity flouts his second manner maxim--Do not be ambiguous. By being ambiguous, the writer intentionally gives more than one meaning and leaves uncertainty about the true significance of his statement. A number of Dickinson's poems employs this device, terminating in seeming contradictions, unanswered questions, and suspended judgments. Her ambiguity by no means reflects a vague or confused mind; it is rather the result of literary choices, acts of artifice, and a deliberate intention to utilize a device conveying

precisely her conflicting attitudes toward death. Thus "She lay as if at play" (369) is a poem that employs both irony and ambiguity to undermine the significance of death.

Dickinson was usually deeply affected by untimely deaths, especially those of her dear ones. For instance, when her handsome, healthy, and vivacious nephew Gilbert died on October 5, 1883, she wrote to her sister-in-law, Sue, a deeply moving elegiac letter of surpassing eloquence in which life, not death, was predominant:

> He knew no niggard moment--His Life was full of Boon--The Playthings of the Dervish were not so wild as his-- . . . I see him in the Star, and meet his sweet velocity in everything that flies--His Life was like the Bugle, which winds itself away, his Elegy an echo--his Requiem ecstasy-- . . . Without a speculation, our little Ajax spans the whole-- (L 868)

However, in "She lay as if at play," while describing the corpse of a young girl Dickinson does not ruminate upon innocence and youth, nor does she dwell on any sentimentalization of death. Nor is the poem a simple statement that death cuts short the innocence of childhood with an untimely strike or that immortality provides greater delight for the early dead:

She lay as if at play
Her life had leaped away--
Intending to return--
But not so soon-- (369)

The poem poses a number of ironic counter suggestions. The comparison of the child's death to her playfulness and vitality in the opening line becomes a macabre conceit throughout the poem: death becomes a game, a weird pastime of hide-and-seek between the girl's body and the life which had informed it. The vocabulary of the frolic pervades the poem: "at play," "leaped away," "merry Arms," "sport," "Trick," "dancing," and "for fun." Death has not made much of a difference in the physical aspects of the girl. The posture of her body gives an impression of her being at play, as if her life has leaped out of her body only temporarily and will return soon. Her arms appear half-dropped as if there is a temporary cessation of her sportive activity and as if she has forgotten to resume her play for an instant (recapitulating the puppets caught in the midst of their action in "A Clock stopped"). Her half-dropped arms and fixed gaze add to the physical ugliness that is part of death. We are constantly aware of the grotesque incongruity of the whole situation. The qualifying "as if" in each of the first three stanzas marks the disharmony between the fact of the motionless corpse and

the figure of the frolic. The phrase "Trick to start" indicates the suddenness, the bounce, and unexpectedness associated with playing. But this image of life could be appropriated to describe death, which takes her with the same suddenness and the same bounce, so that the trick does not really start life but ends it.

The game is over for the girl, and to visualize her death in terms of a child's play is to realize more intensely her total estrangement from the activities of living children. Ironically, she appears in death to amuse herself with childish pranks as she did when she was alive. The process of life, which she has forgotten for "an instant" to resume is a "trick," a piece of juggling, an artifice, a fragile deceit. Her subtlest trick, it seems, was to die when no one would have expected her to. The play motif thus becomes ambivalent: the dead girl remains at play and has paused in her game. The dramatic description of the "half dropt" arms and the eyes that are "ajar" qualifies the meaning of "sport" and "play."

> Her dancing Eyes--ajar--
> As if their Owner were
> Still sparkling through
> For fun--at you--

Why "for fun"? The mockery in the eyes of the dead ironically implies that the beholder too might end in the same way.

Dickinson's ambiguity is seen in the last stanza where an absolute view ("I am sure") replaces the provisional "as if"; the prospect of the child's immortality ("Morning") is reassuring to the living. Like a visitor at the child'd house, immortality stands in a welcoming gesture before her body, before her door-like eyes, to be precise. As the sunrise and visitor, immortality will shortly "force" or interrupt the body's rigid "sleep," rousing the soul to an endless day of "sport." But "force" can also mean "constraint" or "to compel." Morning will confirm the immobility of the body, dispelling the illusion that she lies "at play." Also, the image of morning at the door takes on an ironic resonance. Like the life which "leaped away," inadvertantly ending the game of existence, immortality resembles a merry companion, given to tricks and frivolity. The connotations of inescapability and playfulness associated with her mortal life are now transferred to her immortal existence which waits "devising" or plotting something deceitful, to force the child's sleep. The sleep of the child is paradoxically "light" and "deep." The balanced phrases preserve the ambiguity of the earlier images. "So deep" emphasizes the permanence of the girl's sleep, and "so light" stresses that her stillness is but a

"lull of sport," that her gleeful nature finds occasion for a trick even in extinction, and that immortality is another ground for her playfulnes. Asserting neither the finality nor the transience of death, the poem maneuvers the beholder's conflicting emotions of assurance and dismay against one another, as possibilities, within the inclusive image of the child's play. The image remains as ambiguous as death remains inscrutable to the speaker.

Therefore, a careful consideration of Dickinson's death poetry reveals that her attitude toward death is not one of hope or compromise but one of negation. Expressions of negation, irony, naivete, and ambiguity, with their negative connotations and implications, served for Dickinson as appropriate devices to communicate her negative feelings towards death. Occasionally in her letters she presents death as "the hinge of life" (L 281), "as harmless as a Bee, except to those who run" (L 294), and as "perhaps an intimate friend, not an enemy" (L 478); yet the dominant view in her poetry is that death is a mysterious force which does not lead humanity to any ultimate meaning of life and which is utterly lacking in dignity and glory. Thus Dickinson rejects death because of its deformity, disorder, ugliness, and complexity. She finds death as a meaningless aspect of life, for it does not provide her with any glimpse of immortality; rather it haunts her with a sense of the fragility and transitoriness of life. The employment of

expressions of negation. irony, naivete, and ambiguity are apt devices to imply more than she actually means and to effectively communicate her views in seeming contradictions and oblique statements about death.

CHAPTER V

FLOOD SUBJECTS III: IMMORTALITY

All of Dickinson's flood subjects can be precisely related to the central issue of immortality. That most of Dickinson's poems on immortality were written before she was thirty-five years old indicates that the subject was her prime concern during the peak of her spiritual crisis. "Immortality" and allied words appear in approximately 8 out of 100 poems written during 1862-1865, the word "immortality" appearing more frequently than the others.[1] As Evan Carton states, "the general principles of life and of personal identity are, for Dickinson, bound up in the poetic quest to establish a relation to the divine."[2] Her probe into death provided her with only the mystery of death and the vulnerability of mankind in its presence. Of course, thinking about death is essential to overcoming fears of annihilation. But much more than death Dickinson was drawn toward immortality, for a contemplation of death involved a perspective on what lay beyond. Appropriately, therefore, a dimension of Dickinson's search for the self is related to her concern with the question of immortality. She was so overawed by it that she was puzzled and could not get a

satisfactory answer to that "ample word."[3] Considering "Paradise is of the option," she regarded immortality as "the colossal substance" and "the Flood subject."[4]

A number of Dickinson's poems on the subject show a distrust of established institutions--not that she found theological doctrines totally unacceptable but that she found them inadequate. She was disillusioned with the promises made by orthodoxy on the vital questions of life--God, salvation, eternity, and sin. Her innate questioning--indeed, her skepticism--would not allow her to accept answers to these questions as certain, and thus doubt became a perennial constituent of her mind. No longer satisfied with the Puritan dogmas which were already collapsing when she was attaining maturity, Dickinson "gradually realized her need to construct a private religion through the poetic imagination in order to revitalize in her personal experience what had formerly been kept alive by automatic belief."[5] Her mind was torn between orthodoxy and an attempt to escape from it, but neither could she find a solution in religion nor was she content with the incertitude of the materialist. As a result, we find her mind a conglomeration of doubt and belief about heaven, eternity, and God, which she expressed in her poems with equal emphasis and competence.

Though some of Dickinson's poems reflect a firm belief in immortality, many of them do not always reveal such

faith; instead, they explicitly negate immortality by questioning God's benevolence, by expressing the inadequacy of Heaven, and by revealing doubts about resurrection. This negation seems to be common in her letters and poems. After the death of her father, for instance, she wrote to Colonel Higginson: "I am glad there is Immortality--but would have tested it myself--before entrusting him" (L 418). When Wadsworth died, she asked Charles Clark, one of his intimate friends: "Are you certain there is another life? When overwhelmed to know, I fear that few are sure" (L 827). She responded to the death of Samuel Bowles as follows: "That those have Immortality with whom we talked about it, makes it no more mighty--but perhaps more sudden" (L 553). After the death of Wadsworth and during the illness of Justice Lord, she wrote to Washington Gladden, "Is Immortality True?" (L 752a). In late 1882, she wrote to Justice Lord that prayer was "like writing a Note to the Sky--yearning and replyless--but Prayer has not an answer and yet how many pray!" (L 790). In June 1883, she wrote to her friend Maria Whitney, "You are like God. We pray to Him, and He answers 'No.' Then we pray to Him to rescind the 'no,' and He dont answer at all, yet 'Seek and ye shall find' is the boon of faith" (L830). Divested of the illusory blessings of immortality, she despairs, "Is Immortality a bane / That men are so oppressed?" (1728). Sometimes immortality presents itself as a source of terror and uncertainty:

Why should we hurry--why indeed?
When every way we fly
We are molested equally
By Immortality (1646)

The staggering impression left by these statements is that, even though she seems to have some vague belief in immortality, she rejects it because she is uncertain how to visualize it in human terms. As in the case of nature and death, she found implicatures such as expressions of negation, irony and naivete, and rhetorical questioning to be appropriate devices to express her negation of immortality. Since a full comprehension of immortality is compounded of a belief in God, Heaven, and salvation, Dickinson's negation of immortality can be studied in relation to how she negates these other concepts in her poems. Thus, in this chapter, I explore how Dickinson negates immortality through direct expressions of negation, irony, naivete, and rhetorical questioning.

As in the cases of nature and death, she rejects immortality by using negative expressions such as "not" and "cannot" in addition to using words that carry negative connotations. The usual method that she employed on such occasions is to begin the poem with an initial affirmation of faith which is gradually undercut until the poem ends with an expression of skepticism. One of the poems in which

Dickinson uses negative expressions and explicitly states her disillusionment with the doctrines of organized religion about immortality is "This World is not Conclusion" (501). The poem begins with a feigned confidence of faith in the afterlife and "moves from a confident statement of faith and belief, through admissions of man's failure to know, to a confession of doubt."[6] The assertion of faith (reinforced by her rare use of the period at the end of the opening line) takes the form of a statement that life in this world is not an end itself, for there is a life beyond. But this life beyond is "invisible" like music and thus cannot be seen by the naked eye; Dickinson negates the afterlife by saying that it is nonexistent. Her assertion that it is "positive, as sound" also has negative implications, for sound can only be heard and can never be seen and thus its enduring existence is doubtful. Similarly, assertions about an afterlife can only be heard, not seen; the concept is thus only intangible and speculative. The prospects of this afterlife are attractive and inviting, but at the same time it "baffles" because it is enigmatic and beyond comprehension, thus remaining a puzzle to humanity:

> Philosophy--don't know--
> And though a Riddle,--at the last--
> Sagacity, must go--
> To guess it, puzzles scholars-- (501)

The martyrs who uphold a faith in an afterlife have undergone suffering and have been treated with contempt and mockery. In short, Dickinson deplores the inability of philosophers, scholars, and martyrs to resolve the mystery of immortality. Reverend preachers eloquently try to account for it by arguments; choirs cultivate it by singing Hallelujahs in a resonant voice in praise of the afterlife. But these are mere theatricality and noisiness upon the pulpit, contributing nothing to an understanding of the life beyond. She feels that her soul has fallen upon the thorns of unbelief and bleeds, and no anodyne ("Narcotics") will be able to relieve it of its pain and provide it with a faith. In addition to using negative words such as "not" and "don't," Dickinson employs words that carry negative connotations to undercut her belief in immortality: "invisible," "baffles," "puzzles," "blushes" (confuses), and "plucks" (fidgets). Thus the poem begins with a positive assertion of faith but gradually slips into a confessed uncertainty.

In addition to explicit use of negative expressions, Dickinson employs irony to undermine immortality. In fact, irony is the dominant mode with which she treats the subject of immortality, and it enables her to state her meaning implicitly so that she can avoid reprobation. Irony serves as a convenient device for her to hide behind while treating

a religious subject such as immortality in an incredulous manner.

A potent form of irony argues with the extreme and uncompromisingly logical voice of reason. In "Those--dying then" (1461), for instance, reason self-consciously affirms the need for belief in the act of viewing belief from the perspective of abdication:

> Those--dying then,
> Knew where they went--
> They went to God's Right Hand--
> That Hand is amputated now
> And cannot be found--
>
> The abdication of Belief
> Makes the Behavior small--
> Better an ignis fatuus
> Than no illume at all-- (1551)

Faith is viewed as a construct of those past imaginations that found security even in death because they "knew where they went." The irony in the first stanza rests on Dickinson's use of the Biblical metaphor of "God's Right Hand." With marked intellectual detachment from the spiritual and metaphoric quality of the religious language she uses to describe faith, she proceeds to describe the loss of faith with devastating logic: "That Hand is

amputated now / And God cannot be found--." Similarly, the abandonment of belief in the second stanza leads to an ironic reversal; the faith that is being abandoned is "ignis fatuus," a silly belief in God's beacon light. This light is silly because it seems to work even though it is only an imaginary construct, an "ignis fatuus" instead of real illumination. When it is better to substitute a false light than to search for a true one, the truth must be bleak indeed.

Failing to perceive the life beyond through traditional means and agencies, Dickinson proclaims her intellectual independence by discarding the religious doctrines about death and salvation and by upholding "the unresolved speculations of her own mind,"[7] which is filled with anxieties about the mysterious, inexplicable, and incomprehensible experience of immortality. The conflict between her belief in and her doubts about immortality is obvious in "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" (216), where she ironically negates the kinship between immortality and resurrection. The poem appeared in two versions and was published in the Springfield Republican during Dickinson's life time. The first stanza in both versions are somewhat alike, but she came to opposing conclusions in the two versions of the second stanza.

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers--

Untouched by Morning
And untouched by Noon--
Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection--
Rafter of satin
And Roof of stone.

Light laughs the breeze
In her Castle above them--
Babbles the Bee in stolid Ear,
Pipe the Sweet Birds in ignorant cadence--
Ah, what sagacity perished here!

Version of 1859

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers--
Untouched by Morning
And untouched by Noon--
Lie the meek members of the Resurrection--
Rafter of Satin--and Roof of stone!

Grand go the Years--in the Crescent--above them--
Worlds scoop their Arcs--
And Firmaments--row--
Diadems--drop--and Doges--surrender--
Soundless as dots--on a Disc of Snow-- (216)

Version of 1861

In the first stanza of both the versions, the dead lie in the cold graves, hoping for their resurrection even though

there seems to be no possibility of either the "morning" of resurrection or "noon" of immortality. She wrote to John L. Graves in April 1856: "It is a jolly thought to think that we can be Eternal--when air and earth are full of lives that are gone--and done--and a conceited thing indeed--this promised Resurrection" (L 184). Though the poem is about the relation between death and immortality, it does not dramatize the dignity of death, nor does it treat immortality as a sublime aspect of life. Resurrection was a subject that captivated her and gave her the "fascination with death and the mysteries thereafter including the always uncertain possibility of immortal life."[8] Apparently, the first stanza in both versions describes the dead in their tomb, but there is a definite insight into immortality. The dead lie peacefully in the cold and unfeeling "Alabaster Chambers." Enjoying the security of their "Rafter" of satin and the stony roof of the tomb, they are undisturbed and unaffected by the ravages of time. But they are also awaiting their resurrection--a rebirth, a resurgence, and a revival of new life in a future time. Dickinson has used time with full irony,, for what protects the dead insures that they will not live and she ironically implies that these "meek members" have sacrificed the warm and vital world of the living for a hope of immortality that remains uncertain during their lifetime and unfulfilled after their deaths. The negation is emphasized lexically by the poet's

referring to the vital sensations that are absent: untouched by light, untouched by heat of day. Another sign of negation is the satin lining of the coffin. As a symbol of an afterlife in its elegance, it is abruptly nullified, not only conceptually but audibly as the word "stone" climaxes each 'n' sound prior to it in its connotation of oppressive weight, crushing the promise of immortality.

The second stanza of the 1859 version describes a world vibrant with sensations and vitality which do not reach the alabaster coolness of death. Dickinson ironically implies that the dead seem to be wise in foregoing these joys of life and in lying in their tombs impervious to their surroundings, eagerly expecting to be resurrected. But the note of exclamation in the last line seems to sardonically suggest the meaninglessness of pretending to be wise by remaining impassive to the beauty and activity of mortal life. The meek members await their resurrection. But what happens in reality? The answer is implied in the second stanza of the 1861 version. Years or centuries seem to pass by and the planets and constellations move slowly in their orbits. The vastness of these cosmic changes dwarfs all other considerations and reveals the insignificance of the meek members of the resurrection still waiting for their glorification. In spite of cosmic changes all around, there is no indication of the dead being resurrected to immortality. The transient nature of power on earth and the

leveling influence of death are suggested by "Diadems--drop--and--Doges--surrender"; monarchs fall and leaders die meekly as "Soundless as dots--on Disc of Snow." The "safe" stasis of the imagery of the first stanza gives up its serene implications as it is contrasted with the sweeping movement and grandeur--Diadems, Doges--of the second stanza, which in turn diminishes finally into the cold disc at the end. Dickinson implies that man's role on earth is insignificant compared to "the great whirling cloud of solar systems" (Ferlazzo, p. 40), and his hope of a renewed and eternal life is thwarted by a cold, indifferent universe. In the deliberately flat ending, we discern a most subtle inanimation in the images of the "dot" and "Disc of Snow." Deprived of physical presence and certainly not furnished with eternity's disclosures, these images convey in their abruptness an absolutely final and abstract "no."

Dickinson's use of irony is at its best when she denounces God and heaven. Irony serves as a convenient tool for Dickinson to make her utterances implicitly. Her poems on God are saturated with her religious disillusionment. Even though her attitude toward God is sometimes transcendental and philosophic, by and large she exhibits a blasphemously irreverent tone while talking about Him, and often He is a target of severe rebuttal in her poetry. As a result, many of her poems "focus on the discrepancy between God'd alleged love, bounty, and omnipotence and her

experience of what seem to be His indifference, arbitrariness, and even malice."[9] During the early stages of her self-probing when the effects of apostasy were predominant in her mind, she regarded God as "Burglar! Banker--Father!" (49). The attitude seems to have remained constant throughout her life. Even as she appears to pray in "Papa above" (61), she regards Him as an unjust God. She sees Him not being responsive to personal petitions, but as being impersonal and apathetic in a staggering way in "My period had come for Prayer" (564). In "Far from love--the Heavenly Father" (1021), she cannot reconcile herself to the unforbearing attitude of the God who punishes. Even as she addresses Him as the "Sweet Deity," she reproaches Him as being "Adamant" and "a God of flint" (1076). In "Of God we ask one favour" (1601), she complains indignantly about an inimical and intolerant God. He presides as an "Auctioneer" at the time of death, who sells the "prices of Despair" (1612). Attributing a human vice to Him, in a more poignant poem, "God is indeed a jealous God" (1719), Dickinson seems to react like a gnostic in blaming Him as the author of all the miseries in this world. Towards the end of her poetic career, she finds divinity a "disappointing God" whom she will not "call again" (1751) because of His untrustworthiness.

Even though the prominent tone in her poems on God is one of skepticism and outrage, it probably does not mean

that Dickinson's attitude toward God was agnostic. He is a real force in her life and in her poetry, even though a steady, sure, and sustained contact with Him seems impossible. An impish sense of humour inherent in Dickinson's character permeates an ambivalent attitude toward God, which makes her consider Him in moods comprised of awe and cynicism, and thus her poems "record a struggle to come to terms with the unkown God by persistent confrontation, accusation, logical argument, questioning, and complaint" (Teichert, p. 22). In "I know that He exists" (338), Dickinson's belief in the existence of God seems clouded by a belief in His possible treacherous qualities; thus she appears to explore both God's existence and non-existence:

> I know that He exists.
> Somewhere--in Silence--
> He has hid his rare life
> From our gross eyes.
>
> 'Tis an instant's play.
> 'Tis a fond Ambush--
> Just to make Bliss
> Earn her own surprise!
>
> But--should the play

Prove piercing earnest--
Should the glee--glaze--
In Death's stiff--stare--

Would not the fun
Look too expensive!
Would not the jest--
Have crawled too far! (338)

The poem's basic irony lies in the first line's comfortable affirmation that God exists. The rest of the poem investigates this affirmation and raises a series of highly ironic doubts that point to "the horrible possibility that the invisible god may be a non-existent God."[10] He hides Himself somewhere, in silence, away from the coarse and sensuous human sight. Also, the poem creates an impression of God playing a game of hide-and-seek with His creatures. Dickinson hopes that God's hiding is only momentary and that His appearance might be sudden, spontaneous, and unexpected. He tantalizes her by concealing Himself behind a mystery. Our bliss and His discovery will have been earned by our seeking for Him; that is, our joy at His appearance will be greater than if we had known all the time where He was and were sure that we would find Him there. But Dickinson undercuts the assurance asserted in the first stanza by stating that the game of hide-and-seek is continued in earnest and ends up only in the grave. The tone of

endearment in "fond Ambush" (one of the old meanings for "fond"--foolish--should also be considered) and the child's hope of the "Bliss" earned by the surprise that will come at the game's end are remote from the comfortable religious assurance of the opening line. Only in the physical death of man can he see the spiritual life of God--for the glee derived at the sight of God is to be seen only in the fixed stare of death; and "if there is no salvation after death, she exclaims, a cruel joke indeed would have been played on us" (Ferlazzo, p. 33). The irony becomes complex in the third stanza, where the tone changes abruptly. In hide-and-seek there ought to be at least two players, and God is deceitful because He does not play by the rules of the game; instead, He appears as a merciless trickster who enjoys watching people's foolish anticipations. She feels that to sacrifice life to see such a God is too expensive a price to pay. The experience of earthly death in order to grasp heavenly life before God is too costly a fun. God's tormenting inaccessibility remains a challenge, an inscrutability which is finally repelling. The word "crawled" suggests both the cravenness of the joke and its crippling effects. Dickinson reacts to the possibilities of God's inadvertent cruelty with biting irony, implicitly answering her own questions as she asks them.

An ironic voice involves an energetic assertion of negativity. In many poems Dickinson uses a rational

analysis of religious language in order to demonstrate both the internal inconsistency of religious ideas and the logical absurdity of their application. "'Heavenly Father'--take to thee" (1461), in which Dickinson directly accuses the Deity, is a parody of the Lord's prayer:

> "Heavenly Father"--take to thee
> The supreme iniquity
> Fashioned by the candid Hand
> In a moment contraband--
> Though to trust us--seem to us
> More respectful--"We are Dust"--
> We apologize to thee
> For thine own Duplicity-- (1461)

Whenever Dickinson addresses God as "Father" she does so with heavy irony. While introducing herself to Higginson, for instance, she seems to speak like a gnostic, stating that all her family members were religious "except for me--and address an Eclipse, every morning--whom they call their 'Father'" (L 261). Under the thin veneer of irresponsibility and playfulness she accuses God of teaching man depravity and evil by serving Himself as a bad example. Mankind is weak and sinful. If they have sinned, is He not the author of the sin? If they are guilty, He is implicated in their guilt. The quotation marks are significant. The two quoted phrases constitute the prayer to God; the rest of

the text is a cynical aside that Dickinson does not want God to hear because of the blasphemy it contains. The quotation marks render the address heavy with irony and deprive God of paternal love and question the verse from Genesis: "Man, dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return." God proves Himself a harsh father: vengeful, untrusting, and uncommunicative. The act of humble praise is supposed to glorify the Lord because compared to Him we are "Dust." The traditional quoted language--"Heavenly Father . . . We are Dust"--contrasts harshly with the last couplet, which shows the only kind of praise that may be logically given to a God who made man sinful, yet in His own image. As if to frustrate man, God also gave him the capacity to recognize the contradiction implicit in his own insignificance. The irony lies in the fact that if man is mere dust, the idea that he is dignified with freedom and self-determination appears ludicrous. If man is not free he cannot be guilty; and if there is guilt, it must be God's. This rigorously logical treatment of the "I" and "Thou" relation of prayer inverts conventional usage, using words like "iniquity," "contraband," and "Duplicity" to refer not to the "I" who is praising, but to the "Thou" who is being praised. In so doing, Dickinson ironically calls into question God's morality and undermines the entire concept of prayer. The juxtaposition of "supreme" with "iniquity," "candid Hand" with "contraband," "trust" and "respectful" with "Duplicity"

leads to the ironical inversion of roles in which human beings rise to apologize to God for His double-dealing that foredooms them. Creation is seen as a ploy for praise, and the speaker sardonically apologizes to such a God not for her own smallness, but for His deceit.

Dickinson's use of irony is twofold. She employs irony as meaning something beyond what she actually says; and she chooses key terms in such a way that they become out of place in the context in which they appear. The inappropriateness is intentional and purposeful violation of decorum, for Dickinson uses the device to counteract an idea or concept which she appears to sanctify. Using irony, Dickinson asserts one thing but promptly negates the assertion by implying a number of good reasons against it. Point becomes counterpoint as the images undercut themselves to deny their own validity:

> Prayer is the little implement
> Through which Men reach
> Where Presence--is denied them.
> They fling their speech
>
> By means of it--in God's Ear--
> If then He hear--
> This sums the Apparatus
> Comprised in Prayer-- (437)

In the very first line, prayer is limited; it is neither worship nor communication. The definition of prayer seems appropriate enough until the full force of the phrase "little implement" is realized. If "little" diminishes prayer to something trivial and inefficacious, "implement," with its mechanical associations, denigrates it as something hard and metallic, business-like, and unspiritual. The strange attitude of those who pray, "flinging" their supplications to God--perhaps in anger, impatience, or even nonchalance--hints that prayer is nothing more than aimless, empty utterances of words. Also, it is important to note that there is no assurance that God will hear, let alone answer, that which has been flung at Him. Then why bother at all with this mechanical implement when God will not hear? The words "sums," "means," and "comprised" emphasize prayer as a kind of commercial venture. "Apparatus" completes the incongruity begun by "implement." To regard prayer as an implement and an apparatus is to place a sacred ritual in a mechanistic and thus doubtful light. Dickinson's use of language implies that prayer is a hopeless routine, a doubtful device, an enterprise that is futile, unheard, and devoid of any significance.

A device closely related to irony that Dickinson employs to negate immortality is, again, that of assuming the role of a child, which provides her the opportunity of raising disturbing questions and making outrageous

statements. In the persona of a vulnerable, deprived, powerless, and naive child, she asks humorously innocent questions, pretending to see "the figurative in terms of the literal, the spiritual in terms of the physical, and the exalted in terms of the common."[11] Sometimes she assumes the stance of the naive child in order to be impudent with impunity:

> Papa above!
> Regard the Mouse
> O'erpowered by the Cat!
> Reserve within thy kingdom
> A "Mansion" for the Rat!
>
> Snug in seraphic Cupboards
> To nibble all the day,
> While unsuspecting Cycles
> Wheel solemnly away! (61)

In a deceptively playful tone, she begins with irreverence and contemplates the iniquities inherent in creation, in this instance the predatory superiority of the cat over the mouse. Confronted with a mysterious and potentially threatening universe, she deprecatingly refers to herself as a diminutive mouse frightened by a devilish cat, in an effort to approach God "by reductio ad absurdum" and "a sinister smile."[12] By assuming a diminutive size and

picturing herself as already "O´erpowered" by some threatening aspect--life, pain, or God Himself--she pleads to God to sympathize with her and reserve for her a small place in heaven. The plea is seemingly sincere, but then the childish sincerity may also be counterfeit and may hint at her disapproval of a God who would allow the timid mouse to be bested by a more powerful adversary. The irony lies in the incongruity of the pompous elevation given of God to "Heavenly" Father at the same time that He is reduced to a human papa. The irony serves a dual function: it affirms conventional truths about God and immortality; it also brings God down to a manageable size. In presenting the child´s attempt to pray, Dickinson is crying out against an unjust God. Ironically turning herself into a mouse-child, Dickinson turns God into a domestic papa, rendering Him less distant and ominous by diminishing Him and His heaven to an acceptable size. There is a clash between the mighty and the weak marked precisely in the last stanza where the mouse´s "nibble" is juxtaposed to the immensity of "unsuspecting Cycles" that wheel solemnly away. Buried beneath the tone of the naif there is a kind of incipient rebellion against the Creator himself. By adopting the role of an innocent child, she is able to treat God and immortality in everyday human terms and give the abstract concepts the meaning they lack.

Dickinson often assumes an air of spontaneous incredulity and speaks like an eager and amiable sinner to a God she had inadvertently forgotten. The naivete enables her to stress the contrast between "myself"--"the little load"--and the "imperial Heart," which has been too heavy a burden for the frail speaker:

> Savior! I've no one else to tell--
> And so I trouble <u>thee</u>.
> I am the one forgot thee so--
> Dost thou remember me?
> Not, for myself, I came so far--
> That were the little load--
> I brought thee the imperial Heart
> I had not strength to hold--
> The Heart I carried in my own--
> Till mine too heavy grew--
> Yet--strangest--<u>heavier</u> since it went--
> Is it too large for <u>you</u>? (217)

The "imperial Heart" presumably has a realm, but the speaker is unable to solve the riddle of its location, and the italics emphasize her surprise as she leaps from thoughts of her own limited strength to doubts of God's capacity. The final rhetorical question is powerful precisely because of its unfeigned, unpremeditated quality and indicates God's inability to fulfill human needs.

Dickinson assumes naivete to undercut the glory of heaven. "Throughout Emily Dickinson's life," Eberwein says, "the idea of heaven continued to beguile and entice her--continued also to intimidate her at times" (p. 239). The distance between Heaven and earth was appalling to her, and the prospect of an afterlife posed itself as the epitome of unanswerable questions. One of the ways in which she negates the sublime aspect of heaven is by declaring a preference for earth even as she is describing the topography of Heaven. Some of her letters reveal this tendency explicitly. In one of her early letters she visualizes a Heaven on earth: "if God had been here this summer, and seen the things that I have seen--I guess that He would think His Paradise superfluous" (L 118). In 1873 she wrote to the Hollands: "Vinnie says you are most illustrious and dwell in Paradise. I have never believed the latter to be a superhuman site" (L 391). She wrote to Henry Mills in 1879: "I think Heaven will not be as good as earth, unless it bring with it that sweet power to remember, which is the Staple of Heaven--here" (L 623). In a letter to Justice Lord she calls Heaven "an imperfect place" (L 750). This world, "were it not riddled by partings," would be "too divine" (L 860). In one of her poems she declares, "Earth is Heaven-- / Whether Heaven is Heaven or not (1408). These are only a few instances of Dickinson's attempt to negate heaven by indicating a preference for earth. Even

when she attempts to describe heaven, she is able to do so only in earthly terms. The strategy becomes most appropriate for her naive stance because a child can visualize unknown things only in terms of what it knows.

Thus in "I went to Heaven" Dickinson assumes an ironic naivete and expresses her negation of heaven by describing it in earthly terms:

I went to Heaven--
'Twas a small Town--
Lit--with a Ruby--
Lathed--with Down--
Stiller--than the fields
At the full Dew--
Beautiful--as Pictures--
No Man Drew.
People--like the Moth--
Of Mechlin--frames--
Duties--of Gossamer--
And Eider--names
Almost--contented--
I--could be--
'Mong such unique
Society-- (374)

The poem describes heaven, but the final impression left by the poem is something less than the gloriously portrayed

Biblical heaven of angels and mansions. Heaven appears more as a place on earth because Dickinson presents it in terms of earthly attributes. While heaven is usually thought of as a dimensionless, timeless, and infinite experience, she describes it with restricted topography, conceiving of it only as a small town illuminated with a ruby. Yet the central irony of the poem is not found in the clash between the homely image of the town in juxtaposition to the "Ruby" heaven, but rather in the irony directed at what in the final analysis is a very unsubstantial heaven. She is trying to create a paradisiacal atmosphere in conceiving of Heaven in sensuous terms such as lit "with a Ruby" and "lathed--with Down." At the same time she brings out the serenity of the place by saying that it is a place "Stiller--than the fields" in the early mornings. When she says that it is more beautiful than the pictures drawn by any man, she vaguely admits of supernatural creation "without hands" and thus implies that the mystery of heaven is beyond human comprehension. The inhabitants of heaven are fleeting "like the Moth," delicate like "Mechlin," and are of ethereal "frames." Heavenly duties are "Gossamer" and are happily carried out. Dickinson understands "duties" in heaven in terms of perpetual pleasure, for they are light and pleasure-giving, in contrast to the earthly responsibilities that are weary and burdensome. But the adverb "Almost" is her final dismissal of a falsely

illuminated, superficially attractive, and thus substanceless heaven. The dropping of the "a" in "'Mong" such unique / Society" calls attention to the colloquial diction of the child. Her reference to the uniqueness of the society inheaven has negative connotations too. This society is so unique that perhaps it does not even exist.

Sometimes, Dickinson employs a combination of naivete and irony in an effort to negate immortality. In "I meant to have but modest needs--" (476), she portrays a demanding but double-dealing God. The child persona is typical: small, vulnerable, timid, and dependent. Her prayer is becomingly modest. She desires a small, private heaven:

> I meant to have but modest needs--
> Such as Content--and Heaven--
> Within my income--these could lie
> And Life and I--keep even--
>
> But since the last--included both--
> It would suffice my Prayer
> But just for One--to stipulate--
> And Grace would grant the Pair--
>
> And so--upon this wise--I prayed--
> Great Spirit--Give to me
> A Heaven not so large as Yours,
> But large enough--for me--

But in the rest of the poem we are not told what the fate of the prayer is. Dickinson does not explicitly state whether the request is granted. There is a bitter irony behind God's amusement at the child's honest belief in the efficacy of prayer. God violates His own promise of "Whatsoever ye shall ask-- / Itself be given You--." As Griffith points out, God's "barbarousness lies in His withholding compassion from the child, in His having corrupted the simple faith of the simple, trusting maid."[13] Nothing changes except the persona, who reacts cynically to her disappointment. Growing mature and "shrewder," she suspects Jehovah to be a "Swindler." She states that she threw away her prayer and left the place with all her might. The final references to the swindling ("As Children--swindled for the first / All Swindlers--be--infer") indicate that her plea for a small place in heaven has been rejected, and her loss of faith in God's responsiveness to prayer precludes her taking such a risk again.

In addition to negative expressions, irony, and naivete, another implicature that Dickinson adopts to negate immortality is rhetorical questioning. Just as she denounces God in many poems with direct expressions of negation, she keeps on raising questions about the sanctity and splendor of heaven. She expresses her view on heaven categorically in "Going to Heaven! / I don't know when" (79). Even though the first line ends in an exclamation, it

appears as a rhetorical question asked in response to another person's question. She states that she is not enamored of going there because it sounds "dim." She tells the person who is going first to reserve a small place for her there, "The smallest 'Robe' will fit me." She would prefer to stay on earth and enjoy life:

> 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!
> I'm glad they did believe it
> Whom I have never found
> Since the mighty Autumn afternoon
> I left them in the ground. (79)

In "Why--do they shut Me out of Heaven?" she condemns God's arbitrariness in selecting only a blessed few to enter Heaven and sarcastically questions His criteria in making the choice (248). In "We Pray--to Heaven" (489), she asks "Is Heaven a Place--a Sky--a Tree?" where "There's no Geography." In "Of Tolling Bell I ask the cause" (947) she questions "Is Heaven then a Prison?" In "Which is best? Heaven--," she admits that life itself is a Heaven and is better than an uncertain Heaven with a "Codicil of doubt:

> I cannot help esteem

The "Bird within the Hand"
Superior to the one
The "Bush" may yield me (1012)

She questions "Is Heaven a Physician?" or "an Exchequer?" (1270). When her nephew Gilbert died she exclaimed, "Immured in Heaven / What a Cell" (1594). Questioning and rejecting most of the traditional views about heaven, Dickinson in these poems made them the butt of her ironic humor.

In "Of course--I prayed" (376) she talks about God's indifference and questions the value of prayer as a form of appeal:

Of Course--I prayed--
And did God Care?
He cared as much as on the Air
A Bird--had stamped her foot--
And cried "Give Me"--
My Reason--Life--
I had not had--but for Yourself--
'Twere better Charity
To leave me in the Atom's Tomb--
Merry, and Nought, and gay, and numb--
Than this smart Misery. (376)

She regards prayer as an ineffectual "apparatus" if God is going to be indifferent to the pleas. Since her prayer has received no response, she dares to question His concern for humanity. Questioning if God cares to listen to the prayers of frail humanity, she answers her own questions by saying that He cares as much as He might for the demands of a bird. She feels that her prayer made little impression upon Him, just as a bird's angry stamping of its foot in mid air (an apt image of impotence) makes little impression on the air itself. In the absence of God's reply to the necessity of purpose, she says that it is better not to pray (because prayers cause despair when unheeded), and that it is better to be left as a "Nought" in the void of "the Atom's tomb" than to have been created by a callous God and left to face an emptiness. The God who creates also frustrates, thwarts, and destroys.

As is customary with her, Dickinson does not use each technique individually in her poems. In one of her poems, she uses a combination of naivete and rhetorical questioning and the two devices combined evoke a sense of irony. In "What is--'Paradise'" (215), the questions are asked with utmost innocence by a child persona who would willingly accept affirmative answers without the slightest hesitation:

> What is--"Paradise"--
> Who live there--

Are they "Farmers"--
Do they "hoe"--
Do they know that this is "Amherst"--
And that I--am coming--too--

Do they wear "new shoes"--in "Eden"--
Is it always pleasant--there--
Won't they scold us--when we're homesick--
Or tell God--how cross we are--

You are sure there's such a person
As "a Father"--in the sky--
So if I get lost--there--ever--
Or do what the Nurse calls "die"--
I shan't walk the "Jasper"--barefoot--
Ransomed folks--won't laugh at me--
Maybe--"Eden" a'n't so lonesome
As New England used to be! (215)

The proposition of a paradise is just a matter of childlike wonderment and curiosity. As Eberwein notes, "the child persona behind which she so often hid when making unsettling observations served her in good stead for assaulting hackneyed presentations of heaven as some sort of glorified earth still somehow subject to societal hierarchies and to mundane routine" (p. 234). The child wants to hear more about heaven, but she simultaneously expresses a dread of an

eternity of correction and alienation. Her questions themselves become her answers.

In fine, Dickinson's concern with death led her to thoughts of immortality, which she tried to understand through the symbols of God, heaven, and resurrection. In her spiritual pioneering, she realized that she could never accept religion as a convention but could only explore it as a way of life in her poetry. Since she did not attempt to develop any systematic philosophy in her poetry, she was content to remain in a state of unbelieving search rather than to accept a religion on the basis of authority or custom. She was assailed by doubts about these religious issues, and as a result her poems betray a sense of irresolution and a constant tension between alternating doubt and belief. The prominent mode in which she expressed her doubt was by negating the benevolence of God, the grandeur of heaven, and the uncertainty of salvation. Using implicatures such as negation, irony and naivete, and rhetorical questions, Dickinsontold what she considered as the truth about these subjects in an adroit and oblique manner.

CONCLUSION

In the preceding discussion, I have considered why and how skepticism led Dickinson to an inner life of creativity which culminated in her writing poetry about nature, death and immortality; how her questioning that led to the negation of religion also led her to negate the themes of her poetry; and how she found implicatures such as expressions of negation, irony and naivete, and rhetorical questions appropriate devices to express her negativity.

Dickinson suffered from a spiritual crisis in her formative years. A chronological reading of her early letters, especially to her childhood friend Abiah Root, reveals that there was a gradual evolution of her apostasy. She began with a desire to believe religious dogmas but the more she probed their meanings, the more disillusioned she became. She seems to have confronted a conflict between faith and doubt. Unable to find definitive answers to religious questions, unable to accept the apparent duplicity of religion, unable to turn to the other members of her family for solace, and not left with many choices, Dickinson negated dogma and accepted unbelief as the way of her life.

Dickinson's skepticism led her toward a series of negations: a negation of the external world which culminated in her seclusion and a negation of the various facets of life for which she found implicatures appropriate devices to communicate her thoughts. However, before she developed a negative attitude, she was well grounded on the sanctity of the human mind through her reading of Isaac Waats' Improvement of the Mind and T. C. Upham's Elements of Mental Philosophy, both dealing with an eclectic philosophy of the faculties of the mind. A reading of these books during her Mount Holyoke days, when she was undergoing religious upheaval, ripened her mind into a fit receptacle of ideas about the greatness of the mind and also subscribed to her questioning and negating attitude toward religion. Disillusioned by the mediocrity, passivity, and spiritual surrender represented by Christianity, and nurtured by a reading that emphasized the immortality of the mind and the use of reason and intelligence in forming judgments on religious questions, Dickinson could see only negation as a way of her life. The outward manifestation of this negation was her gradual withdrawal from society, which enabled her to explore herself and attempt to understand the meaning of existence from the cloistered environment of her father's house. The inner manifestation of her negation was her creativity, which enabled her to write poetry on various problems of life with the same dialectical attitude that she

used in evaluation of religion. She realized that her task as a poet was to tell the truth of life. She also realized that she could tell the truth only with a "slant" because of her negative mental state. She found that to tell truth obliquely she needed a method of verbal indirection which would allow her to say one thing while implying another. She realized that the appropriate devices for the purpose would be implicatures such as expressions of negation, irony and naivete, and rhetorical questioning. Even though she seems to have used other implicatures such as obscurity, ambiguity, involuted syntax, elliptical phrases and many others, the most appropriate implicatures to express her negativity towards her major themes--nature, death, and immortality--appear to be expressions of negation, irony and naivete, and rhetorical questions.

Dickinson achieved negation explicitly by the use of negative words such as "no," "not," "never," and "without" or suffixes such as "-less," or prefixes such as "un-" and "in," in addition to using words that carry negative connotations. The tendency toward negative expression can be related to her attitude toward truth and the possibility of reaching it. The use of negation fails to fulfill Grice's second quantity maxim because to say that something is not is to say something more than is required.

Irony enabled Dickinson to look with equal favor upon the contradictions and opposing possibilities around her.

In her poetry, Dickinson achieved ironic effects through ambiguous images or through the use of descriptions which invite one interpretation but turn out to resist it vigorously. The technique adds richness and density to the given context and at the same time provokes wariness on the part of the reader. Dickinson's voice seemed to perform an internal debate as her personality passed in and out of belief. Probably she realized that the only viable form of language, in a world of uncertainties, would have to be terse and stringent, and that irony had these characteristics.

In using naivete, Dickinson seemed to assume a persona of a child and revealed sardonic twists of her imagination and her most subtle undertones. Sometimes naivete provided her with the opportunity of rendering statements bordered on invective and blasphemy with an air of innocence and simplicity. In order to express her resentment, and at the same time be safe from reprisal, she found the submissiveness of a child a proper persona to adopt. To lie low in order to gain freedom of asserting herself and to speak openly with candor was the essence behind Dickinson's naivete.

Rhetorical questioning, frequently a form of negation, is used for effect rather than information and is more emphatic than direct statement. Dickinson used the device to command attention from her readers, sometimes to express

shades of her emotion, and sometimes as a transitional device to lead from one subject to another. In using rhetorical questions she did not look for an answer to her questions; instead she implied that the answers to her questions should be known.

Dickinson exploited these implicatures fully in order to express her negative ideas about nature, death, and immortality. She probed natural phenomena in search of solace for her spiritual crisis. As she probed deeper into the meaning of nature, she realized that nature was not an amicable force that may be easily worshipped as a substitute for religious faith. Except for the few occasions when nature presented itself as a source of liveliness and beauty, she discovered a certain impenetrable indifference and equivocal quality about it. Predominantly she negated nature by regarding it as a mysterious force, often treacherous and indifferent towards humanity. Hence, Dickinson's negation of nature was marked by an expression of deterministic doubt rather than romantic worship, and she recognized that at a deeper level nature was an adversary that withheld its meanings from humanity.

Dickinson's personal, impersonal, and personified treatment of death did not present death to her as a potential discloser of life's mysteries. Rather, death appeared to her as a trick played on trusting humanity by a callous God. Her questioning mind caused her to negate

meaning of death by treating it as reflecting the meaninglessness of life. Ever questioning and ever doubting, generally she depicted death in her poems with an ironic and sardonic perception of its inevitability.

Similarly, when she spoke of immortality, her poems reflected every aspect of doubt about religious subjects such as God, salvation, eternity, and Heaven. Even as she thought of God as "Papa above"[1] and "Heavenly Father" (1461), she cast aspersions on Him for his duplicity and treated Him as a burglar, swindler, marauder, and unfeeling merchant. When she visualized Heaven, she considered it in earthly terms and did not find anything ennobling in it. She thus remained in a state of unbelieving search rather than accept these religious symbols on the basis of authority. The tension between faith and doubt ultimately resulted in a predominant negation.

Even though there are many instances where Dickinson's attitude toward the subject matter of her poetry is truly ambivalent, this dissertation has endeavored to touch upon only the negation of Dickinson in such subjects as nature, death, and immortality. I conclude that Dickinson attempted to understand her own self through exploring nature, death, and immortality. She was like a vast cloud that kept on changing and forming in the most beautiful and unpremeditated patterns. Her poetry is marked by an element of surprise and the unexpected, for she always told the

truth with a slant and found implicatures appropriate devices to achieve her end. That she wrote her poems on odd scraps of paper and hid them deep in her dresser drawer, without any intention of publication, does not really indicate her diffidence as poet; probably, as a sensitive, personal poet, she realized that she was ahead of her times, and she was also, perhaps, aware that American literary taste was not prepared to accept her radical views and break new ground and create new possibilities for an intellectual woman poet; yet in her heart of hearts, she hoped for recognition, perhaps even posthumously. Hence her exhortation to her "Sweet--Countrymen" to "Judge tenderly--of me" (441). It is in this spirit of admiration, sympathy, and understanding that I have attempted to evaluate Dickinson and her poetry.

Notes

Introduction

[1]Poem number 451. Thomas H. Johnson, ed., The Poems of Emily Dickinson, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955). Poems are cited parenthetically by the number Johnson assigned to each.

[2]Charles R. Anderson, "The Conscious Self in Emily Dickinson's Poetry," American Literature 31 (1959), 303.

[3]Charles K. Trueblood, "Emily Dickinson," in American Criticism, ed., William A. Drake (N. Y.: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1926), 291-307; Henry W. Wells, The American Way of Poetry (N. Y.: Columbia University Press, 1943), pp. 66-77; Sergio Baldi, "The Poetry of Emily Dickinson (1956)," Sewanee Review 68 (1960), 438-449; Elizabeth Jennings, "Emily Dickinson and the Poetry of Inner Life," A Review of English Literature 3 (1962), 78-87; Ernest Sandeen, "Delighted Deterred by Retrospect: Emily Dickinson's Late Summer Poems," The New England Quarterly, 40 (1967), 483-500; Glanco Cambon, The Inclusive Flame: Studies in Modern American Poetry (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), pp. 27-49, 232-234; Denis Donoghue, "Emily Dickinson," in Connoisseurs of Chaos: Ideas of Order in

Modern American Poetry (N. Y.: The Macmillan Company, 1965), pp. 100-128; Louis L. Martz, The Poem of the Mind: Essays on Poetry, English and American (N. Y.: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 82-104

[4]Clark Griffith, The Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1965); John Cody, After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971).

[5]Suzanne Juhasz, Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women, A New Tradition (N. Y.: Harper and Row, 1976); Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979); Karl Keller, The Only Kangaroo Among the Beauty: Emily Dickinson and America (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979); Margaret Homans, Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Bronte, and Emily Dickinson (Princeton, N. J.:Princeton University Press, 1980); Joanne Feit Diehl, Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1981); Barbara Antonina Clarke Mossberg, Emily Dickinson: When a Writer Is a Daughter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); Suzanne Juhasz, The Undiscovered Continent: Emily Dickinson and the Space of the Mind (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).

[6]Albert J. Gelpi, Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965); William R. Sherwood, Circumference and Circumstance: Stages in the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson (N. Y.: Columbia University Press, 1968).

[7]Clark Griffith, "The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson," The Southern Review, 9 (1973), 470, 475.

[8]Nina Baym, Review of After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson by John Cody, Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 71 (1972), 290.

[9]Richard B. Sewall, Review of The Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry, by Clark Griffith in Modern Language Quarterly, 26 (1965), 351.

[10]David Porter, "Essay Review: Dickinson's Readers," The New England Quarterly, 57 (1984), 106.

[11]Wendy Martin, An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 83.

[12]Theodora Ward, The Capsule of the Mind: Chapters in the Life of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961).

[13]Jack L. Capps, Review of Dickinson: The Modern Idiom by David Porter, American Literature, 54 (1982). 299.

[14]Karl Keller, "Notes on Sleeping with Emily Dickinson," in Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson, Ed.

Suzanne Juhasz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 78.

[15]According to Tillich, the courage of individualism is the process by which human beings "tap their potential and develop themselves as fully as they can, which may sometimes require a separation or escape from their society, culture, and other people, This development is something that can only be done by the individual alone and requires the courage to be alone and to face who and what he or she is and try to develop one's self, and to be, despite threats of this development." The courage of participation, on the other hand, requires "the courage to be by participating in a society or various groups or institutions within it to be able to face and deal with the three anxieties." Jacques P. Thiroux, Philosophy: Theory and Practice (N. Y.: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985), pp. 126-27.

[16]I borrowed the term "implicatures" from H. Paul Grice's theory of implicatures. See H. Paul Grice's Logic and Conversation, William James Lectures, Harvard, 1967 and "Logic and Conversation" in P. Cole and J. L. Morgan, Eds. Syntax and Semantics (Vol. 3) Speech Acts (N. Y.: Academic Press, 1975), pp. 41-58, and "Further Notes on Logic and Conversation" in P. Cole, Ed. Syntax and Semantics (Vol. 9) Pragmatics (N. Y.: Academic Press, 1978), pp. 113-27.

Chapter I: "The All Important Subject"

[1]Martha Hale Shackford, "The Poetry of Emily Dickinson," in The Recognition of Emily Dickinson: Selected Criticism since 1890, Ed. Caesar R. Blake and Carlton F. Wells (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 80.

[2]George F. Whicher, This Was a Poet: A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957), pp. 135-36.

[3]Jay Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), II, 168.

[4]Kathryn Whitford, "Why Emily Dickinson Wore White," Dickinson Studies, 55 (1985), 12.

[5]Barton Levi St. Armand, Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 7.

[6]Letter number 342a. Thomas Johnson and Theodora Ward, Eds. The Letters of Emily Dickinson, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958). Hereafter, letters are identified by L and Johnson's number.

[7]Millicent Todd Bingham, Emily Dickinson's Home: Letters of Edward Dickinson and His Family (N. Y.: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1955), p. 6.

[8]Robert C. Wess, "Religious Tension in the Poetry of Anne Bradstreet," Christianity and Literature, 25 (1976), 32.

[9]David Higgins, Portrait of Emily Dickinson: The Poet and Her Prose (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1967), p. 59.

[10]Richard B. Sewall, The Life of Emily Dickinson, 2 vols. (N. Y.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974), I, 66.

[11]Richard Chase, Emily Dickinson (N. Y.: William Sloane, Ass. Inc., 1951), p. 57.

[12]Charles R. Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise (N. Y.: Holt, Rinehart and Wiston, 1960), p. 257.

[13]Note by Johnson to L 10.

[14]Paul J. Ferlazzo, Emily Dickinson (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), p. 29.

[15]Joan Burbick, "'One Unbroken Company': Religion and Emily Dickinson," The New England Quarterly, 53 (1980), 66.

[16]Edward Hitchcock, The Power of Christian Benevolence Illustrated in the Life and Labors of Mary Lyon (Northampton, Mass.: Hopkins and Bridgman, 1851), pp.210-11.

[17]John Cody, After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 18.

[18]Hyatt H. Waggoner, American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), p. 185.

[19] I think Dickinson referred to Judas Iscariot when she signed the letter Judah. Both the names were derived

from the Hebrew Yehudah and according to Concordances of the Bible, in the New Testament the name Judah is represented by its Hellenized form Judas.

Chapter II: The Journey Within

[1]Poem number 1413. See Johnson The Poems.

[2]See Bingham, Home, p. 50.

[3]See Leyda, The Years and Hours II, 178.

[4]James McIntosh, "Emerson's Unmoored Self," The Yale Review, 65 (1976), 232.

[5]Jack L. Capps, Emily Dickinson's Reading 1836-1886 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 191.

[6]See Sewall, The Life II, 352.

[7]Isaac Watts, Improvement of the Mind. Available in Early American Imprints, Evans Number 26440.

[8] Chase, p. 130.

9 Thiroux refers to Tillich's philosophy of the self in Philosophy: Theory and Practice, pp. 126-127.

[10]Frederick L. Morey lists eleven themes of Dickinson: death, deprivation, love, metapoetry, mind, mutability, nature, pain, philosophy, religion, and personal salvation. See Morey's article "Emily Dickinson as Modern," Dickinson Studies 58 (1986), 84. Dickinson refers immortality as "the Flood Subject" (L 319). Johnson classified nature, death, and immortality as the "Flood Subjects." Salamathullah Khan

included nature, divine love, death, and immortality as the "Flood Subjects." I have followed Johnson's classification because I believe that the overwhelming subjects with which Dickinson was concerned were nature, death, and immortality.

[11]Hiroko Uno in her "Expression by Negation in Dickinson's Poetry" in Dickinson Studies 47 (1983), 3-13 lists the total frequency of Dickinson's negations in her poetry as 2002, 1.99 percent of the total number of words used, 100,413, in her poetry.

[12]Marilyn M. Cooper, "Context as Vehicle: Implicatures in Writing," in What Writers Know: The Language, Process, and Structure of Written Discourse, Ed. Martin Nystrand (N. Y.: Academic Press, 1982), pp. 111-12.

[13]H. Paul Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in Syntax and Semantics (Vol. 3) Speech Acts, Ed. P. Cole and J. L. Morgan (N. Y.: Academic Press, 1975), pp. 41-58.

Chapter III: Flood Subjects I: Nature

[1]Herman Melville, Moby-Dick (N. Y.: Russell and Russell, 1963), pp.91-92.

[2]Joanne Feit Diehl, Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination (N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 165.

[3]Poem number 1286, Johnson, The Poems.

[4]Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, The Voice of the Poet: Aspects of Style in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson (Uppsala, Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri, 1968), p. 230.

[5]Thomas C. Upham, Elements of Mental Philosophy (N. Y.: Harper & Brothers, 1841), p. 60.

[6]Isaac Watts, Improvement of the Mind. Available in Early American Imprints, Evans Number 26440, p. 17.

[7]Quoted by Richard B. Sewall, The Life of Emily Dickinson, 2 vols. (N. Y.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974), p. 48.

[8]Ferlazzo, p. 99.

[9]Anderson, Stairway of Surprise, p. 106.

[10]Larry R. Olpin, "Hyperbole and Abstraction," Dickinson Studies, 50 (1984), 4.

[11]Carole Anne Taylor, "Kierkagaard and the Ironic Voices of Emily Dickinson," Journal of English and Germanic Philology 77 (1978), 575.

[12]Thomas H. Johnson, Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 184.

[13]Jane Donahue Eberwein, Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), p. 56.

[14]Agnieszka Salska, Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson: Poetry of the Central Consciousness (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), p. 48.

Chapter IV: Flood Subjects II: Death

[1]Mabel Loomis Todd and Millicent Todd Bingham, ed., Bolts Of Melody `(New York and London: Harper, 1945), p. 5.

[2]Church F. J. Plato: Phaedo (N. Y.: The Bobbs Merrill Company, 1951), p. 11.

[3]Poem number 786, Johnson, The Poems.

[4]Jane Donahue Eberwein, Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), p. 199.

[5]Ferlazzo, p. 42.

[6]Johnson, An Interpretive Biography p. 204.

[7]Sewall, The Life, I, 80.

[8]Letter number 9. See The Letters

[9]Inder Nath Kher, The Landscape of Absence: Emily Dickinson´s Poetry (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 211.

[10]Anderson, Stairway of Surprise, p. 237.

[11]Alan Helmes, "The Sense of Punctuation," The Yale Review, 69 (1980), 186.

[12]Ronald Wallace, God Be with the Clown: Humor in American Poetry (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984), p. 39.

[13]St. Armand, pp. 246, 249.

[14]Will C. Jumper, "Footnote to 'Dickinson's 'I Heard a Fly Buzz': One More Swat," Poet and Critic, 6, No. 2 (1971), 33.

[15]Caroline Hogue, "Dickinson's 'I Heard A Fly Buzz When I Died,'" The Explicator, 20 (1961), item 26.

[16]Clark Griffith, The Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 136.

[17]Gerard Friedrich, "Dickinson's 'I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died,'" The Explicator, 13 (1955), item 35.

[18]James Reeves, Commitment to Poetry (London: Heinemann, 1969), p. 205.

Chapter V: Flood Subjects III: Immortality

[1]For a consideration of Dickinson's vocabulary with differentiation among her usages of the words "immortality," "eternity," and "infinity," see Robert W. Peckham, "This Colossal Substance," Emily Dickinson Bulletin, 28 (1975), 112-23.

[2]Evan Carton, "Dickinson and the Divine: The Terror of Integration, the Terror of Detachment," Emerson Society Quarterly, 24 (1978), 242.

[3]Poem number 1205, Johnson, The Poems.

[4]Letter number 184. See The Letters

[5]Anderson, Stairway of Surprise, pp. 259-60.

[6]Paul McCarthy, "An Approach to Dickinson's Poetry," Emerson Society Quarterly, 44 (1966), 31.

[7]Ferlazzo, p. 32.

[8]Eberwein, p. 225.

[9]Marilyn C. Teichert, "The Divine Adversary: The Image of God in Three ED Poems," Emily Dickinson Studies, 46 (1983), 21.

[10]Martin S. Day, A Handbook of American Literature (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1975), p. 215.

[11]Ronald Wallace,p. 39.

[12]Paul Anderson, "Metaphysical Mirth of Emily Dickinson," Georgia Review, 20 (1966), 73.

[13]Griffith, The Long Shadow, p. 209.

Conclusion

[1]Poem number 61. Johnson, The Poems.

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