Images of Hope for Immortality Pervading the Patterns of Doubt in Emily Dickinson's Death Poetry

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IMAGES OF HOPE FOR IMMORTALITY PERVADING THE
PATTERNS OF DOUBT IN EMILY DICKINSON'S
DEATH POETRY

by
Nicholas Desmond

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
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VITA

The author, Nicholas Robert Desmond, is the son of Frank George and Shirley (Myers) Desmond. He was born 17 October 1958 in Melrose Park, Illinois.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIFE</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF POEMS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DARK CROWDS OF DOUBT</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE DELICATE BALANCE BETWEEN HOPE AND DOUBT</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REMEMBRANCES OF DEATH</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAITH AS THE BASIS OF HOPE</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTES</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF POEMS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poem</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1728 Is Immortality a bane</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1724 How dare the robins sing</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1021 Far from Love</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1599 Though the great Waters sleep</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1574 No ladder needs the bird but skies</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1718 Drowning is not so pitiful</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>241 I like a look of Agony</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>465 I heard a Fly Buzz</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1064 To help our Bleaker Parts</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193 I shall know why</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>547 I've seen a Dying Eye</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>463 I live with Him</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1149 I noticed People disappeared</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>856 There is a finished feeling</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>816 A Death blow is a Life blow</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>712 Because I could not stop for Death</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76 Exultation is the going</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1052 I never saw a Moor</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1433 How brittle are the Piers</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Emily Dickinson is a poet of doubts. She is also a poet of hopes. She was a searching person and her searching is reflected in her poetry. Much of Dickinson's poetry deals with death: either the moment of death or concerning the possibility of what comes after death.\(^1\) That is Emily Dickinson's pursuit—to find out what comes after death, if anything at all. For Dickinson, the knowledge of her own immortality is essential to her very life. "Death became for Emily the supreme touchstone for life."\(^2\) Without immortality, life itself is useless. "To her, then, the essence of poetry was a living breath," and her life became a struggle to know if immortality were possible.\(^3\) And so, much of Dickinson's poetry incorporates this struggle to verify her own immortality.\(^4\)

As Dickinson tries to articulate her struggle through poetry, she tends toward ambiguity in her verse.\(^5\) She sees more in her images than most critics are willing to admit is there, and much more than the average reader cares to consider in poetry. Those who do not fault Dickinson for lacking the "proper" accidentals of poetry (rhyme, regular meter, etc.) almost inevitably charge her with "obscurity."\(^6\) "There is always a margin of ambiguity in our final estimate of even her most extraordinary work, and though the
margin may seem to diminish or disappear in a given reading of a favorite poem, one feels no certainty that it will not reappear more obviously in the next reading. "7 Dickinson defies the simpler approaches to understanding poetry because she is not dealing with the simpler human emotions. Dickinson is struggling with questions of immortality in many of her poems, and that she is able to express that struggle so well, albeit so ambiguously, is remarkable. To achieve just the right effect in her poems, Dickinson painstakingly chose the words that the critics call "ambiguous." Oftentimes, she would change individual words in her manuscripts as many as ten or twelve times. 8 Even though Dickinson masters the art of "le mot just," most readers are disturbed by her ambiguity. This is because Dickinson has no more of an answer to her questions than anyone else does. 9

Dickinson does not struggle with the question of immortality on a grand scale. She questions her own immortality and, therefore, the issue is very personal to her. 10 Dickinson would be glad to seek an immortal way of life--if she could only be sure it existed. She struggles with this question between herself and her God. Like the Renaissance mind, Dickinson conceives an unceasing conflict between her bestial and her angelic nature. 11 But Dickinson is not a religious poet; she uses "the symbols of religion as a means of extending the significance of inner, personal feeling and conflict." 12 The issue of immortality is too close to her
heart to be treated in any other way, and so Dickinson looks to others who also treat the soul on a very personal level to guide her, to prove to her (if possible) that she is immortal. She goes to Emerson and Thoreau to show her her own immortality. They, in turn, tell her that all of nature echoes the immortality of the person, but she, in looking at nature, finds that it echoes only its own immortality. Thus, Dickinson is left alone again to search for that last reassurance to her immortality.

What keeps Dickinson searching is inherent to all people. Everyone feels the need to be immortal in some way. (It's found in Plato, Aquinas, Shakespeare, and all religions.) But Dickinson is not considering what immortality is; she is demanding it for herself. She acutely feels the need for her life to mean something. Even her puritanical religion cannot offer her the reassurance that her life will mean something when it is finished. Excepting "a few flip-pant references, the poetry seems to manifest a sincere and abiding faith in God." That faith only belongs to Dickinson, though; it is not part of her religious upbringing. Dickinson holds onto her personal faith as the only possibility she has for finding immortality, but she knows that she must go beyond the religion she has been taught if she is to believe that immortality is offered to her.

For the most part, Dickinson cannot believe in her own immortality, but she always hopes for it. She does not
understand her own consummate quest for something when she cannot find any hopeful symbols leading to it. Dickinson easily sees the pain in life. She also watches people groping towards an after-life--an after-life she is not sure exists. But if this eternity does exist, will the life after be better than the life now?

1728

Is Immortality a bane
That men are so oppressed? 15

In this poem, Dickinson confronts her worst possible fears of what immortality is. Basically, she is asking if that which she seeks is detrimental for man. The quest for immortality lives on tyranny, trampling down, and weighing heavily on man's mind. Does this mean that immortality is itself contained in these actions? If she were to ask only the first line, then we could say that immortality is the cause of death, but only a death here on earth. In consideration with the second line, though, this "bane" becomes a deadly poison in itself that "oppresses" or tyrannizes men.16 It harries and harasses them so that all their life is spent seeking this "Immortality." The underlying paradox of her question becomes "seeking life brings death." What Dickinson needs to know and what she tries to find in nature, religion, or through others is whether or not death leads to new life.17 She wants to believe it does.

Through much of her poetry, Dickinson is not yet ready
to accept the possibility of immortality. When she looks to nature, she finds death for herself. When she looks to her religion for reassurance, she finds a stern, merciless God toying with His creation. In the human soul, she finds a life of pain and sorrow; she is confronted with hurt, broken dreams, and seldom a sign of joy or anticipation that the pain will soon end. Through all of these poems, however, remains the search for that something better, for a forgiving God, for a "cycle of life." Her ideas of God appear to fluctuate, but this search in itself shows that Dickinson has not given up, that she, like all people, needs to do more than exist. Her death poetry is her search for that something more. The death poetry is seldom uplifting, but it always contains the exploration of Dickinson's search for immortality. In examining her death poetry, particular attention must be paid to the hopes for immortality that Dickinson is exploring.

Much of Dickinson's search seems to end in doubts which cannot be synthesized with any hopes she might have for immortality. Her death poetry looks at the pain and alienation of death, forsaking any unproven hopes that others might offer for the immortality of a person. In the poems questioning immortality, Dickinson concentrates on what she sees as man's dissociation with nature which everywhere contains symbols of continuity. She cannot understand the inconsistency between nature and her own
life, between what God is supposed to be and what He appears to be, and between the pain she feels and the joy immortality is supposed to offer her. Like any person doubting her own immortality, she involves herself in a frantic search for symbols of immortality, but her doubts always reverse them into signs of a harsh, painful world that not nature, religion, or her fellow man change.

Although Dickinson tends to doubt her own immortality, through much of her death poetry there is a strange blend of doubts and hopes. Usually, her doubts win out at the end of the poem, but always in these poems the reader detects signs of a mature hope for immortality that has survived the tests of her doubts, even if it cannot conquer them. In her blacker poems, Dickinson usually begins with some hope that has already been overcome and proven false by her doubts. In these poems, the mixture of doubt and hope is peculiar because the doubts appear to overcome the hopes, but the hopes survive until the end of the poems and are never quite destroyed by doubts. In the darker poems, Dickinson is testing both her hopes and her doubts to see which will survive. Dickinson survives because her hopes do--she still has a reason to live. However, the greatness of her death poetry comes through the survival of her doubts also--she can never be absolutely sure of immortality.
As Dickinson looks at death and nature's reaction to it, she finds that nature is indifferent to man's death. The world continues, but the dead person is no longer a part of the world. Nothing seems to change. The surprise that comes to Dickinson with nature's continuation regardless of the coming of death overwhelms her.

Dickinson probably looks to nature because the American romantic poets of her day were finding their hopes fulfilled by the natural world. Dickinson, on the other hand, comes seeking reassurance for her own immortality through searching the natural world, and she cannot find it. Instead of immortality, she finds death. Of course, she sees the continuing processes of nature, but there is no continuation for those who die. Life goes on, and the individual does not even create a stop in the natural process.

1724

How dare the robins sing,
When men and women hear
Who since they went to their account
Have settled with the year!—
Paid all that life had earned
In one consummate bill,
And now, what life or death can do
Is immaterial.
Insulting is the sun
To him whose mortal light
Beguiled of immortality
Bequeaths to him the night.
Extinct be every hum
In deference to him
Whose garden wrestles with the dew,
At daybreak overcome.

In "How dare the robins sing," the robins present a contrast to the people who have died. Robins are birds of spring, offering joyful songs and promises of happiness to children. But those who have died can no longer be concerned with promises; they must exist in accomplishments (past ones, of course). The accountant image opposes the youthful songs of the robins. Death demands an accounting of one's life's work; it will not accept promises, nor does it offer hope. The robin's song torments the ears of those who realize that, for them, hope is nonexistent. Dickinson fits into this category, not because she is dead or close to death when writing this poem, but because, in the realization of her own death, she must also realize the consequences of it. One of those consequences, as the robins point out, is a lack of empathy or sympathy by the natural world. The great emotional thrust in this poem is embodied in the word "dare." How could the robins have the courage, the audacity, the fearlessness to continue their merry little song when people are dead--people who will never be seen again?
The sun is also an opposing image to any hopes the questioner may have for immortality. "Insulting," like "dare," conveys that some fearlessness is involved on nature's part. The sun shines brightly, offering new days filled with hope—for those people still alive. However, the sun degrades those people who have died by the mere offer of a new day in which they cannot participate. While the light image has an obvious Christian parallel, Dickinson turns the hope this image usually offers into a cause for despairing. After all, the person who died has "bequeathed" or willed his existence to death with the usual Christian hope of gaining immortality: that is why he can face death without fear. But Dickinson tells the reader that immortality is misleading. There is, in a sense, "no refund" on the bill he has paid. The powers of life and death are "immaterial" or inconsequential because they can never affect the dead person.

Dickinson ties up this image of death's absoluteness in the last four lines of the poem. Every "hum," every noise, every song is now "extinct;" they will never exist again for the dead person out of respect for him. The respect is paid to him because he tried to "wrestle" or struggle for his life, for a "dew" which passes away as soon as the sun touches it. Thus, the "daybreak," the sign of hope, of starting life anew, is "overcome," defeated. This struggle of hope that is overcome is worthy of
respect, if not for the outcome, at least for the struggle.

"How dare the robins sing" proclaims a grievous sort of death. In it, all hope from the natural world seems to have been abolished. Death has won. Through demands and trickery, it has vanquished all signs of immortality. Yet, the robins continue to sing, and the sun continues to shine almost as an effrontery to the person who seeks his own immortality through these images. While Dickinson rails against the deceit, the audacity, the impudence of nature as it portrays death (while not concerning herself with the dead person at all), in the midst of all the insults, is the one hint of deference to the person. A person who wrestles with the question of why the world continues may not be granted any greater chance for immortality, but his life becomes a "garden" swelling forth with hope that death must try and overcome. In the final analysis, the hope for immortality, not death, gains the "deference" of silence.

Because of this continuing, though tenuous hope for immortality, Dickinson continues her somewhat frantic search of trying to know she has the immortality she craves so badly. Thus, she turns to her religious beliefs, seeking support from them.

Dickinson's religious upbringing was somewhat Calvinistic. Because of this, a forgiving and merciful God is not in her religious understanding. Dickinson sees a God who is just, whose foreknowledge leads to predestination,
and who is not easy on the sinner (and we are all sinners according to Christian theology). The God she envisions is one who offers life eternal only to those worthy of receiving it—the "Elect." Thus, if Dickinson could be sure she were one of the "Elect," her faith would support her, but she cannot be sure—no one can. Rather than offering hope for life eternal, Dickinson's religion offers her nothing but uncertainty, with no chance of coming closer to God than He has preordained. In moments of doubt, her religion does not support her hopes for life; it supports her doubts, her sins, and the idea of a "just God." "She could neither embrace nor abandon the prickly matter of religious faith," however.  

If Dickinson has learned of nothing other than a God who manipulates the world He has determined like a puppeteer manipulates marionettes in a show, how can she come to Him and ask for life? Her religion demands that she give herself entirely unto God, but it will not guarantee her salvation. Throughout her life, Dickinson could never claim a conversion experience because her church offered no answer, no clear hope for salvation. "The God who emerges from these poems is a God who does not answer, an unrevealed God whom one cannot confidently approach through Nature or through doctrine." At least, this is the God her church in Amherst offered her.
Far from Love the Heavenly Father
Leads the Chosen Child,
Oftener through Realm of Briar
Than the Meadow mild.
Oftener by the Claw of Dragon
Than the Hand of Friend
Guides the Little One predestined
To the Native Land.

In "Far from Love," Dickinson couples her observations of religious faith with images from nature. The "Heavenly Father" or ever-loving God leads the "Chosen Child" (one whom He elects) away from "Love" or safety. In one sense, God is leading His children or chosen ones into heaven (the "Native Land"), but in order to take them there, He leads them through the briars rather than meadows and takes hold of them with a claw rather than a friendly hand. Dickinson is not just paraphrasing the old maxim "the way to heaven is hard and steep." She notices what appears to be a predetermined plan by God to lead people into painful situations, to scratch and choke their faith, if He can.

Dickinson builds on this idea in a variety of ways. What the Father leads the child away from is more than just tenderness or affection. "Love" can also be sympathy and fellow feeling. The chosen child will have to make his faith journey alone, and he must also put aside any feelings
of love for those who are not chosen. In this poem, Dickinson could be relating the changes in her own relationships because as time progressed, she still did not profess a conversion experience.

The harshness of being called to solitary faith life is heightened by the image of the "Heavenly Father." He "leads" the chosen one to heaven, but "leading" can be more than just directing or acting as pilot. The chosen one is passive in this journey; he follows where he is led. "Leading" also connotes a "governing" or even a "prescribing" of what to do. Being chosen may mean the end to one's free will.

Where the Father leads the child to; echoes of this governing interpretation of "leads." The child is led into a "Realm," a region or sphere whose authority, whose command, whose dominion is "Briar" or thickets. A person cannot get through thickets unscathed, nor can he hide in them and not catch himself up. In other words, the Father will not let a person be comforted on his faith journey. Dickinson is saying the faith journey is one that is filled with pain; the chosen one is governed rather than helped along the way; he is taken by a "Claw" that digs into the skin with tenacity and clutches the person rather than a "Hand" that reaches out with love like that of a friend's. Because he is "predestined" in the poem, the reader is left with the feeling that the child is forced to go--possibly against his will.

It seems that "Far from Love" is purposely meant to
portray the frightening side of being led by God; it portrays the roughness of life. This pain that is deliberately given to the chosen is vividly explored in a few short images. Through all this pain there is a hope. The child does not despair about the "Native Land" because it is his home or birthplace. Dickinson knows that through all the hurt, the child is at least in touch with God. The word "Guides" balances off the negative connotations of "leads" by adding the sense of a model or pattern to follow. It offers a path rather than pushing the child down the path he must go. The ending of "Far from Love" would have the reader remember that, despite the pain, the Father's hand never once left the child's while the beginning of the poem makes the reader question if even this is desirable.

1599

Though the great Waters sleep,
That they are still the Deep,
We cannot doubt--
No vacillating God
Ignited this Abode
To put it out--14

In "Though the great Waters sleep," Dickinson looks again at nature as it brings God to her mind. But neither God nor nature offers her any warmth or joy. Instead, they bring cold realities of death to her mind. The waters do not bring to mind the life they contain, but rather the unknown depths that lie below the surface. Similarly, the thought
of God does not connote His creative energies, but, instead, His hidden power.\textsuperscript{15}

One of the great key words in this poem is "Though." Dickinson is looking at a peaceful sea--at a calm perhaps. Even as she sees the calm "sleep" of the ocean, she looks beneath the surface as if to say, "There it is! Can't you see the hidden turmoil!?" The "great Waters" could mean the ocean or life to Dickinson. "Sleep" for the ocean is when the surface is placid, but "sleep" for a person connotes either the unconscious sleeping at night or death itself, which can also be placid. However, Dickinson does not look at the calm meaning in either application of the metaphor; rather, she draws the reader's attention to the "Deep," the unknown aspects of the sea, or the body which is buried "Deep" in the ground and the unknown aspects of death.\textsuperscript{16}

With that one word, "Though," Dickinson ignores the obvious physical signs of peace and picks up instead, on the underlying turmoil, the unknown that is behind the physical world. Rather than looking at and enjoying the physical world, she looks beyond the physical scene and reinforces her own doubts.\textsuperscript{17}

The next key phrase acts as a separation between the parts of the poem. "We cannot doubt" affirms Dickinson's certainty about the turmoil she has seen. Just as we cannot doubt that the calm waters still retain the hidden depths, neither can we doubt Dickinson's next statement. Turning to
religion, Dickinson comes up with the picture of the God she has been taught; a God who makes decisions and then sticks to them. This God does not "vacillate" or waver; He is certain of His actions. And His actions consist in creating life, not ending it. But underlying this creation is the unknown force of God. For Dickinson, God only creates life so He can manipulate it.

As Dickinson looks at her own possible death, she gets no consolation from her religion. The God she has been taught wants only to manipulate her life. The need for immortality, which is so important to every person, is not fulfilled by her religious beliefs. Her religion leaves her feeling more doubts about immortality than nature does.

The American romantics sought life in nature and found their evidence for immortality in the natural world. In one sense, Dickinson uses "Though the great Waters sleep" just as Emerson suggests, but to a far different end. Dickinson looks at the serenity of the sea and thinks of all the unknown dangers that lie beneath the surface; she thinks of God creating and realizes that there is only death after life—all initiated by God. As Dickinson seeks her immortality, her religion does not support her, or does it? For having acknowledged that God ignited her life, she must question whether or not He did so only to take it from her and offer nothing in its place. Dickinson is never so strong in her religious beliefs as to let them alone destroy her.
Dickinson turns to natural images, then, in "Though the great Waters sleep" to "supply a principle of unity," the "oneness" that Emerson taught.\(^{18}\)

Nature seldom offers Dickinson any hope for immortality. Usually, it acts as a detrimental force to Dickinson's hopes. Sometimes, it gives her a real-life situation with which to test her hopes, but they seldom survive that test. At other times, nature definitely becomes a sign of immortality because of its cycles, but nature does not offer Dickinson the same cycles of life that it has for itself. Thus, she despairs all the more because it would seem that immortality is offered to all but herself. However, nature can, and does at times, become an impetus for Dickinson to realize her own immortality by offering situations which do not scorn her mortal condition, such as "No ladder needs the bird but skies." The natural scene, becomes for Dickinson an imitation of the immortal world, and, by this physical representation, Dickinson feels secure in her own hopes.

\[1574\]

No ladder needs the bird but skies
To situate its wings,
Nor any leader's grim baton
Arraigns it as it sings.
The implements of bliss are few--
As Jesus says of Him,
"Come unto me" the moiety
That wafts the cherubim.\(^{19}\)
"No ladder needs the bird but skies" is one such poem where the natural scene becomes a representation of Dickinson's own hopes for immortality. In one sense, the meaning of the poem refutes Dickinson's very search for proof of her own immortality. After all, the bird does not need something physical like a ladder to realize its true place in the universe. Likewise, the words of Jesus become a "moiety" or an indefinite share or part that propels or "warts" the "cherbim" (representing all immortals) to their proper place next to His side. In this sense, the symbol is saying to Dickinson (and the reader) that immortality need not be searched for, for each creation will find its proper place within God's plan.

"No ladder needs the bird but skies" is Dickinson's hope for finding her own natural place in creation (or nature). The hopes are tested true, the images tested in the natural world and found viable. A bird needs only open space to habitate or "situate its wings." It sings naturally, and as it sings, "no leader's (ruler, despot) grim (dark, fierce, unyielding or repellent) baton (symbol of office) arraigns (accuses) it as it sings." A bird is not stopped from doing what is natural to it, and neither shall we be accused of doing or seeking an unnatural place in nature. Dickinson says we are not given much to work with to complete our happiness ("The implements of bliss are few"), but it is enough, no matter how indefinite it may be: look at the
"moiety" that Jesus uses to draw the immortals to Himself. Only a "Come unto me" is needed to propel the soul into union with God.

There are three tests to Dickinson's hope in "No ladder needs the bird but skies." The first is "any leader's grim baton/ Araigns it as it sings." This dreary phrase tests Dickinson's first statement that each creation finds its natural place. If a creature were suspect of using the wrong method to try and reach its "natural place," then the place it reached would be suspect also of not being "natural." The second test involves "The implements of bliss." The bird has only one way to achieve its position, one way to be happy. True bliss is the kind that will never go away, that can never be taken away. Dickinson realizes that she cannot achieve this "true bliss" in just any way that comes to mind. She has only a few tools to work with. One of these tools is the third test. The cherubim find their happiness (as do all the immortals for a Christian) in Jesus. They answer His call unquestioningly. Dickinson, in becoming one of the immortals, must also be propelled by Jesus' call. The test, then is a test of Dickinson's faith in her own hopes. This is the hardest test for Dickinson to pass at any point in her life.

If Dickinson can pass these tests, she can learn to accept the place offered her by nature; she can "situate her wings" among the immortals. However, no matter how sure she
is in any one poem, she still doubts herself at times, but she is also able to overcome these doubts at times and accept the promises of Death.

1718
Drowning is not so pitiful
As the attempt to rise.
Three times, 'tis said, a sinking man Comes up to face the skies,
And then declines forever
To that abhorred abode,
Where hope and he part company—
For he is grasped of God.
The Maker's cordial visage,
However good to see,
Is shunned, we must admit it,
Like an adversity. 21

Dickinson looks specifically to man and his relationship with God in "Drowning is not so pitiful." In this poem, she has one man trying desperately to survive. 22 Dickinson gives no hint as to whether or not as the drowning man rises he is seeking help from anyone in particular. One obvious interpretation is that if no one is nearby, his cries for help can only reach up to heaven. Of course, Dickinson does not even have the man cry for help explicitly in the poem; the ending makes the reader assume the man wants life over death. ("cordial visage").

One of the ways the darker images overshadow the joy of seeing the face of God is that at death, the man is
"grasped" or taken or even "clawed" by God. Now, this could mean that God wants to cling tightly to the man, but from the man's point of view, God will not let him go. The entire poem is a struggle against death. In one sense, it is a struggle for Dickinson to maintain her hope because she has been taught from her religion (and most Christian religions) that at death, she has no more hope for immortality--she either is with God or not. Death is that "abhorred abode" or despised dwelling place that leaves no hope; it is not wanted by anybody. The rising to "face the skies" is that man's hope for life, even though he knows he is drowning. That the man rises three times is significant, not only because that is the common adage about drowning, but the number "three" has biblical and trinitarian significances that are too diverse (and some too absurd) to consider as possible connotations used by Dickinson. However, we should note at least that "three" can represent a complete regeneration or a symbol of the trinity and unity of God.

The man's "decline" is another overshadowing of the joyful images in "Drowning is not so pitiful." Dickinson uses both "decline" and "drowning" equivocally in this poem. A "decline" is more than a descent to the "abhorred abode;" it can also be a weakening of the man's spirit and it can be an unwillingness by the man to be "grasped of God." After trying for three times to "face the skies," it can even be the man's rejection of hope. "Drowning" does more than
merely set the image for Dickinson. A drowning can be part of a murder. More likely, the drowning represents the man "drowning" with life in some way: he could be toiling in vain; his joy and willingness to live could be sinking; or he could be foundering in trying to deal with the problems of life.

In "Though the great Waters sleep" Dickinson cannot accept the symbols of hope which her religion tries to give to her; in "Drowning is not so pitiful" she presents man rejecting his only possibility for hope. The "Maker's cordial visage" is a very real symbol of the fulfillment that religion offers, but rather than accepting the presence of God, the man "shuns" it or turns away in order to keep his own life. Dickinson is not offering this man a possibility for hope; she is offering its fulfillment. Yet, the man, like all human beings, would rather not see God if it means death. The darker images overshadow, but do not overpower the images of hope in this poem. What makes the hope in this poem ambiguous is that we are left to wonder what Dickinson means by the word "pitiful." Is it "lamentable" that the man drowns, or is it "disgraceful" that he cannot accept a better existence? Dickinson could easily mean both.

Since Dickinson cannot find the unconditional support for her own immortality that she needs in either nature or her religious beliefs, she re-directs her search. Like many before her, Dickinson seeks to find in the interactions of
people, a proof for her own immortality, a reason to live. However, Dickinson's own doubts are her greatest enemy. For as she looks at people, Dickinson sees beneath the exterior signs, pain and doubts, just as she does with nature. When she describes death on a human level, the pain Dickinson describes cannot be brushed away because it is real. Unlike natural and religious metaphors, Dickinson cannot be said in this framework to be "coloring" her fears of death. At no time is a person so unsure of his own immortality as he is at the point of death, and at no time does a person need assurance more than when he reaches that point. Dickinson looks at that moment of death, places herself in the situation, and strains to find the hints of immortality she hopes lie in death.

241

I like a look of Agony,
Because I know it's true--
Men do not sham Convulsion,
Nor simulate, a Throe--
The Eyes glaze once--and that is Death--
Impossible to feign
The Beads upon the Forehead
By homely Anguish strung. 26

"I like a look of Agony" is one of Dickinson's blackest poems dealing with human existence. The poem seems to say that the only thing real in life is pain. Dickinson is, above all else, looking for truth and she finds it in "Agony"
or pain. Of all things, the pain in life is real. Men do not feign convulsions or spasms; they would rather not recognize their existence. People, on the whole, are repulsed and even frightened by the sight of a person in a convulsion. Likewise, the glazing of the eyes that occurs at death cannot be feigned. With death comes a certain amount of anguish, extreme suffering that no one wants to go through.

This suffering at death is what Dickinson notices most. "The Beads upon the Forehead" is more than sweat from a dying fever. The sweat, for Dickinson, comes from the deep inner tension of the person wondering if he will be saved, if he will be immortal. Those "Beads," that sweat of death, is impossible to affect for it only appears at death, when the need to be sure of one's own immortality is strongest. Note that the "Beads" are by "homely Anguish strung." The "Beads" can be a sign of rosary beads strung together by pain and love interwoven. In the Christian context, they offer hope of salvation. For Dickinson, they offer only pain. The "Beads" are not an ugly sign of this anguish in life; rather, the anguish is "homely" or unadorned. That plainness about a person's suffering at death makes it all the more frightening, all the more frightening if nowhere can be seen a sign for believing in immortality.

"I like a look of Agony" does not offer much hope except that Dickinson can at least be sure of truth in something, even if it is pain. However, the metaphors Dickinson
uses in "I like a look of Agony" offer much hope for immor­tality, even if they do remain unfulfilled at the end of the poem. Dickinson uses the Biblical image of the marking of the "Elect" to say that she does believe in immortality; she is hoping for it for herself: immortality is not beyond her reach. Of course, nowhere in the poem does Dickinson see that special mark upon her own forehead--that is the reason for her doubts. After all, the "Eyes glaze once" and she has but one chance to know if she is among the "Elect." She has only the one chance to know if her suffering means a better life to come or to know if when her eyes glaze that she will know nothing more after that. All of Dickinson's darkest poetry reflects her inability to be sure of her own immor­tality, but her very search for immortality through her death poetry reflects the underlying hope within her that she wants to live forever in God's bosom.

Dickinson's poems of uncertainty, the poems where she questions her doubts as well as her faith, do not offer her any resolution to search for proof of her own immortality, but they prepare her for something much more. They prepare her to accept more readily the underlying hopes for immor­tality in all of her death poems, albeit hesitatingly. Her darker poems tend to question and destroy the immature hopes that Dickinson feels most people live off. These poems, a mixture between doubt and hope, tend to question Dickinson's own doubts by offering her tested hopes, hopes that can sur-
vive the doubt—even though they cannot conquer it. Because these hopes survive a test of doubts, Dickinson uses them to support her when the need to prove her own immortality becomes acute or even when she looks upward after seeing something hopeful which she previously would have scorned.
THE DELICATE BALANCE BETWEEN HOPE AND DOUBT

When Dickinson looks at nature, testing both her doubts and her hopes, she is not looking to it for proof of her immortality. Rather, Dickinson already has the hope for immortality, and nature, once again, deters these hopes. In these poems, Dickinson uses nature to test her hopes—to see if nature can destroy what it does not support.

465

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—¹

In "I heard a Fly buzz," nature interposes at the moment of death.² Dickinson is asking, "What does it feel like to die?"³ Dickinson has laid the scene for her own
death before the reader; she shows us how she has prepared
everything. The poem considers "the sensations of the dying
person, the physical experiences as the soul leaves the
body." Then, just as everything is set, a fly comes buzzing
in and takes her mind away from her preparations. The fly
comes between her and her scenic conception of death, and she
dies, then, with something as insignificant as a fly standing
in the way of her view of immortality.

"I heard a Fly buzz" uses the interference of nature as
a reminder that nature does not die. However, the poem does
offer a hopeful view of death on Dickinson's part. It com-
bines in a delicate balance, Dickinson's hopes for what death
could be and the realities of what she sees that death really
is. The opposing images are juxtaposed so that they work to-
gether to bring reality to her fantasies and hope to her
reality.

The poem begins with the harshness of reality. The
reader enters the death scene at the same time reality (in
the form of the fly) does. As the reader meets the persona,
she is "stalled between worlds." The "Fly" represents na-
ture in its lowest form. It is the most common, the most
bothersome, and the least welcome of any guest in a house at
any time, let alone in the midst of a death scene. As if it
were not bad enough that the fly had to disrupt her, it also
had to come in "buzzing" so that everyone would know that it
is there. The fly image opposes the picture of peace within
the room caused by her impending death. The room, so still, is like the quiet "Between the Heaves of Storm." For Dickinson, like most people, the ideal is to have one's passing noticed—to be the center of attention. In any kind of pain (sickness as well as death), people have the greater need to be the center of attention than when they are healthy. The fly takes the attention away from her. It seems to be saying that the world goes on, whether she dies or not.

The second stanza concentrates on Dickinson's own death; her own preparations to be received into heaven by the Savior. Dickinson continues her pretty picture-setting in the third stanza, giving away all her earthly possessions, and along comes the fly to interpose, to spoil her moment of grandeur. The fly buzzes, placing itself between her and the "light," from the window which traditionally symbolizes life eternal or following the ways of God. Dickinson dies, her "windows failing;" indicating that she no longer is able to allow that symbolic light to enter into her life. Thus, Dickinson dies not in the arms of the "King" as she had hoped, but she dies alone, separated from her "King" by something as insignificant as a "Fly."

Besides the fly acting as an opposing image to her hope, Dickinson's own view of life and the possibility of an afterlife in the first stanza does not offer much hope for her future life. By comparing the "Stillness" in the room at her death to the quiet in the center of a storm, I think Dickin-
son is also commenting on what life has been for her. In one sense, she sees the pain of life, and anticipates that pain will come after she dies. Her time of death is her one rest from pain; she awaits it as someone in the midst of a storm awaits the short time of rest allotted by the storm's center, yet he still fears the back of the storm which is often worse than the beginning.

Dickinson offers the reader some other hopes in this poem which overshadow the untimely interruption of the fly diverting all the attention to himself and the fear of the upcoming storm imagery. The anticipation of the "storming" ("Onset") of the "King" to save Dickinson contrasts with the fear caused by the storm imagery. The Fly, which seems like a cruel joke of nature, interposes itself between Dickinson and the window. But his "Buzz" is "uncertain" and "stumbling," as if, perhaps, it cannot interfere in the beauty of Dickinson's death. "I heard a Fly buzz" does not end with a glorious death scene as Dickinson would have liked, and nature certainly is unwilling to offer her any assistance. However, the condemnation by nature is not so strong in this poem as it has been in other poems, and the opportunities for Dickinson (and the reader) to hope increase.

The hopes Dickinson expresses in "I heard a Fly buzz" are vaguely presented and very much unarticulated. Her hope is present, off-setting the doubt, but neither are capable of conquering the other and finally winning Dickinson over.
Throughout her life, she vacillates between both extremes, accepting each as her emotions allow.

One of the hopes in "I heard a Fly buzz" concerns Dickinson's basic religious belief as a Christian in the coming of Christ as a Savior at death. Dickinson does not present this image as something to believe in; rather, it is part of her ideal picture of what her death scene should look like. Because of the harshness of her religious upbringing, at least in the outward forms, Dickinson has a hard time accepting religious hopes as anything other than what she is "supposed" to believe in. Dickinson lacks proof from the physical world to support the hopes of faith that come from her private life, and the harshness in the religion she was brought up in has a profound effect upon her ability to hope for immortality. Her hopes are unproven; her doubts come from her experience. When Dickinson feels strong enough to entertain religious hopes for immortality while still realizing her doubts, the images she uses do not oppose each other as sharply as they do in her nature images. Her doubts are reproached by her simple hopes, as a mother would reproach her child. The reader must be careful in poems where doubts and hopes are juxtaposed that he is not being taken in by a platitude.  

1064

To help our Bleaker Parts
Salubrious Hours are given
"To help our Bleaker Parts" seems like one of those platitudes. Outwardly, it is more like a home-spun philo-
than a poem which combines doubts and hopes in Dickinson's search for security in her own immortality, but it is
integral to Dickinson's search as she looks to her religion to bolster her hopes for immortality.\textsuperscript{15} The hope it gives is
more than just a platitude from her mother's knee. In "To help our Bleaker Parts," Dickinson looks at the world, looks
at her pain, and she sees signs of hope--signs that offer her a reason for hope. Granted, it is hope tested by pain, but,
more importantly, it is pain that comes to hope.

Dickinson uses "To help our Bleaker Parts" to show how the pain in life is soothed by the hope of comfort in the after-life. Our "Bleaker" or weaker parts need aid in over-
coming their bend toward the darker desires and despair. Without this aid, we would dwell on our darker aspects and lose sight of the possibility of immortality. Of course,
this aid may not be easily noticed--it may not "fit for Earth," but it is given to us anyway.

Dickinson concentrates on our being given or offered this aid. The "Salubrious Hours" are wholesome, healthy times for the soul which come when we need them most. They act as interlopers in our bad times. They give comfort when it is needed. As we remember these times, the happy moments
of our lives, we attain the strength we need to overcome the hardships in other times, the times of despair, the times of doubts. The strength they offer, even the times themselves, may be unrecognizable immediately to the grief-stricken eye, but because they do offer us strength, they prepare our hearts to hope, to seek something more in the final analysis, and to be able to accept that something more. That is how they "Drill silently for Heaven." They encourage us when the times are rough; they give us practice in overcoming our difficulties. Thus, gently, unnoticed, they aid us in attaining "Heaven" or life eternal.

Even though the hope expressed in "To help our Bleaker Parts" seems untested, Dickinson pulls her hope in this poem out of human experience. The hope she has is real because she has felt the effect of "Salubrious Hours." These good times are her cause for hope. Because she has previously known the grace of good times, Dickinson hopes that possibly even more grace has been given to her, which, while she may not notice it now, will someday call her soul into realizing her own possibility for immortality. In a sense, Dickinson's religious beliefs offer hope in the face of a harsher reality.

193

I shall know why—when Time is over—
And I have ceased to wonder why—
Christ will explain each separate anguish
In the fair schoolroom of the sky—
He will tell me what "Peter" promised--
And I--for wonder at his woe--
I shall forget the drop of Anguish
That scalds me now--that scalds me now! 16

That harsher reality becomes the prominent image in "I shall know why." At first, the poem unfolds with a surety about the after-life that is uncharacteristic of Dickinson. However, one clue that gives a clear indication that this is truly a Dickinson poem is the bitingly sarcastic second line that leaves the reader feeling that help can only come too late. In spite of her sarcasm, Dickinson presents a beneficial image of immortality--one that is both comforting and satisfying. Christ himself will explain the reasoning behind personal suffering in "fair (meaning both just and beautiful) schoolroom of the sky." Christ will explain everything in detail, and Dickinson will forget her present pain. 17

In some ways, it seems as though Dickinson wants to attack in the last line of the poem her own belief that she will grow to understand. She can rationalize her own pain to the point of calling it a "drop of Anguish" in comparison to Peter's anguish after he denied Christ three times even though he promised he never would, but she cannot rationalize away the hurt that the pain causes. A comparison with the pain others have felt is no longer helpful when her own pain is "scalding" her at the present moment. She cannot wait to understand why hers is only a drop of anguish; she needs
relief from the seething effect it has on her.\textsuperscript{18}

Of course, Dickinson realizes that she will never be able to understand her present pain. Part of her hope lies in the fact that she seems willing to wait to understand. Dickinson is making the first step in a response of faith in "I shall know why." Dickinson has a definite conviction of faith throughout the poem that compensates for her own feelings of hurt. Dickinson in "I shall know why" is looking forward to relief from her present troubles; relief she is sure she is going to attain. She is willing to wait until the end of time to hear Christ explain the reasoning behind life's sufferings—even though she would rather learn the reason now. The real relief from anguish comes when Dickinson realizes how little she has suffered compared to Peter after he denied Christ three times. Dickinson could never really accept Christ fully. Her anguish is one of doubt; Peter's is one of betrayal. When Dickinson can understand what that kind of anguish is like, then she can rest. Death holds that understanding for her. Thus, in spite of her doubts, Dickinson uses her hopes for immortality to bring meaning to those doubts.

Dickinson is also able to find hope in her human situations, no matter how grave they may seem. As she looks at death, Dickinson closely examines the person she is describing—she tries to find in him a sign of immortality. (This is Dickinson reading her own heart through poetic images.)
In the midst of the pain which she sees, Dickinson can also see the glimmerings of hope—hope which springs from the "look of Agony" she sees. Dickinson reads the pain and hope at once within the person.

547

I've seen a dying Eye
Run round and round a Room—
In search of something—as it seemed—
Then Cloudier become—
And then—obscured with Fog—
And then—be soldered down
Without disclosing what it be
'Twere blessed to have seen—

Dickinson uses "I've seen a dying Eye" to read her own heart and its make-up of fears and hope. Like the "Eye" in the poem, her search for immortality is frantic, running "round and round a Room." She does not have much time (or so her heart says) to guarantee her own immortality, and so the search becomes much more hurried. The "Eye" is her image of that frantic search. It is dying; it does not have time to waste. It must know of its own immortality if its life will continue (in a spiritual sense). As the "Eye" finally dies, "obscured with Fog," Dickinson feels blessed to have had the chance to see it make its search, although it does not disclose what it sees.

In some ways, "I've seen a dying Eye" presents a pretty
bleak picture for any kind of hope in immortality. First, the "Eye" dies without ever disclosing what it sees. As the "Eye" searches, it becomes "Cloudier" and less clear; it is not sure what it sees. Then, in this "Fog," the "Eye" is "soldered down" or sealed shut, never to search anymore. The reader is assured through the shutting of the "Eye" that the search is over--forcibly over, as a matter of fact. However, he is not assured that the "Eye" has completed its search, or that it found what it was searching for. This lack of information about the success of the "Eye's" search is discomforting when it is coupled with the forced ending of the search. That is the basic darkness of the poem.

However, Dickinson does not dwell upon the closing of the "Eye." Rather, she concentrates on the search, a frantic, dying search of a "Dying Eye."\(^{22}\) The "Eye" is trying to fulfill the need of the dying person to know of his own immortality, just as Dickinson tries to fulfill that same need in her life.\(^{23}\) The "Eye" is stopped without letting anyone know whether or not it found the answer. I think Dickinson feels blessed to know that she is involved in a common search, that others entertain doubts of their own immortality and are searching for something to prove to themselves that they are immortal. While other people cannot act as proof for Dickinson to believe in her own immortality, they, because of their own searches, become supports for Dickinson in her search for immortality.
463

I live with Him—I see His face—
I go no more away
For Visitor—or Sundown—
Death's single privacy

The Only One—forestalling Mine—
And that—by Right that He
Presents a Claim invisible—
No wedlock—granted Me—

I live with Him—I hear His Voice—
I stand alive—Today—
To witness to the Certainty
Of Immortality—

Taught Me—by Time—the lower Way—
Conviction—Every day—
That Life like This—is stopless—
Be Judgment—what it may—

In "I live with Him," Dickinson is living with hope about death. She is still very unsure as to what death brings her, but she also feels much more comfortable about her possible union with God. As Dickinson goes through this seemingly hopeful poem (from the title comes its hope), the reader notices the doubts beginning to intrude; he becomes less sure of what Dickinson's feelings were when she wrote this poem. Rather than hopes penetrating through the doubts, Dickinson presents a basic hope for immortality which her own doubts infiltrate until, at the end of the poem, the hopes and doubts are juxtaposed into one stance of uncertainty. Dickinson wants to be able to believe that
she can "live with Him," but her doubts and her own experi-
ence tell her that this may not be the case. She must try
to balance in this poem the hopes she wants to believe in
with the doubts she already has of her own immortality. The
doubts are not fighting her hopes, but she is trying to find
a hope that will help her overcome her doubts.

The darker images of "I live with Him" begin in the
second line of the poem--immediately after the first sign
of hope. "I go no more away" can be taken as meaning that
she does not want to go away, or that she cannot go away,
although she may want to. She cannot leave even if she
were to have a "Visitor" or a friend come by; she must
always stay with Death. "Death's single privacy" acknowledg-
es Death's right to that one particular "privacy" or secrecy
within Death's life-style so that he can rightfully demand
that Dickinson "go no more away." Death's right to do this
is the only thing preventing or "forestalling" Dickinson
from doing as she likes; Death "claims" her and she belongs
to him as such, without the assurance of knowing whether
or not she is immortal. "No wedlock--granted Me" is Dickin-
son's image for saying that she is not guaranteed immortality.
("Wedlock" connotes a union of lives and since one
never leaves the clutches of Death, to live in union with
him is to be immortal, in a sense.) Dickinson must follow
Death whenever he "claims" her which is why she can only
say that she is alive"--Today." Dickinson ends with a
neutral stance ("what it may") about judgement, but in the light of all the darker images, it does not seem to offer any hope at all for Dickinson.

Opposing all the darker images of Dickinson's emotions, is the hope she is striving to comprehend. The images of hope seem to be beyond Dickinson's understanding in "I live with Him," but the images are there as something Dickinson is reaching for, something she wants to attain, not scorn. "I live with Him--I see His face" is an image of hope. The relationship Dickinson presents is one of a union, for she is living with "Him;" he is close enough to her that she can "see His face." Dickinson wants a union, an immortal togetherness with Death as the word "wedlock" (which is not yet granted) suggests. To be with him, in a sense, offers her life in death, or immortality ("I stand alive"). And by a union with Death, Dickinson can "witness" or testify to the "Certainty/Of Immortality." She can, at last, be sure of her own immortality (notice: only after it is achieved). As each day goes on, Dickinson learns that "Life like this," her own life at the present moment, is endless; she is immortal as soon as she can "see His face," no matter how she is judged. Dickinson's casual treatment of judgment shows her desire for immortality; it shows that she is reaching for a hope that she can clutch and hang onto in spite of all adversities.

Emily Dickinson can also be very certain about her
own immortality at times. These poems of sureness are not that common, however. Throughout her life, Dickinson wanted to be able to accept death as leading to immortality without any hesitations on her part, but nowhere could she find absolute evidence that anyone's life will continue after death, let alone her life specifically continuing. In these poems where she accepts the possibility of immortality as being the most likely consequence of death, Dickinson has tested her hopes, and she finds that they cannot be undermined by doubt, no matter how hard she tries. These poems often seem sophomoric because they express simple hopes and philosophies that are more like platitudes than the searching questions we normally find in Dickinson. But these poems are not platitudes with air-tight arguments used by Dickinson to convince herself that she is offered immortality. These poems contain oft-tested hopes that survive Dickinson's grueling interrogation because she has no way to disprove them. Naturally, these are light-hearted moments for Dickinson, or she would still be trying to break her own hopes in the face of what she sees as a harsher reality. Dickinson never fully accepts these hopes as a certainty even though she can never disprove them in her experience.
REMEMBRANCES OF DEATH

1149

I noticed People disappeared
When but a little child--
Supposed they visited remote
Or settled Regions wild--
Now know I--They both visited
And settled Regions wild
But did because they died
A Fact withheld the little Child--

Along with the three previously-mentioned ways in which Dickinson considers immortality (nature, faith, and human relationships), her poems of certainty also involve another method of assuring Dickinson of immortality: she remembers past events that she has reflected on over the years. "I noticed People disappeared" is a poem recalling past phenomena; Dickinson only begins to understand these phenomena now. "People disappearing" are people who have died--they are the only ones who will disappear and not tell anybody. Dickinson uses the child image to present an attitude toward death that is innocent and easily frightened. Like any child, Dickinson can only imagine what happened to the people who died. Death is confronting Dickinson in a sense, but instead of having the child journey through the dangers of death himself, Dickinson
sets the child in a common situation for children—seeing others die. Because a child cannot understand what death is, he must imagine what happened to the people he used to speak to. It is fascinating, but also predictable that Dickinson has the child imagine that those people have gone to visit remote or settle "Regions wild." Dickinson is trying to present the idea that death is possibly painful, or in the words from "Far from Love," "a realm of briar," by using the intimations of the unknowing child.

Death, then, is for Dickinson as it is for everybody—unknown. By using the child as an image (because its feelings are unveiled by all the fears and inhibitions that adults learn), Dickinson shows the natural reaction of most people to the unknown, which is fear. "Regions wild" or "remote" reminds especially the American reader of the Great Plains which, during Dickinson's time were wild, remote, and savage. That is the same type of savagery that death presents to Dickinson. Of course, the worst part of death's wilderness is that it is only "supposed." Dickinson cannot be sure that death is like anything in particular. She imagines it to be painful because the only physical effect of death that she sees—people disappearing—is painful to her.

Even with all the allusions to the fearful unknown, Emily Dickinson does have sense of hope curtailing her fears. The reader first thinks that Dickinson is predomi-
nantly trying to tell him that she has come to some kind of understanding about death with the words "now know I," but this is not true. The hope in this poem lies not in Dickinson's growth of understanding, for if it did, the reader would find that she is merely accepting the idea that death is painful. Dickinson is not trying to eliminate the unknown aspects of death for herself, but she now knows what she could only suppose as a little child: the people who have disappeared have gone into those unknown regions and "settled" them. A very subtle hope lies in that one word "settled." The people who died "settled" those regions "wild," and, by settling, they secured and civilized those lands for all who come after them. Dickinson points out that as she grew older, she realized, as we all do, it was because those people died that they were able to settle those unknown regions. In a sense, Dickinson wants the reader to know that we are never absolutely sure of what death is like until we die; then, we settle our fears by going to those "Regions wild." Of course, once we settle there, they can no longer be "wild."

856

There is a finished feeling
Experienced at Graves--
A leisure of the Future--
A Wilderness of Size.
By Death's bold Exhibition
Preciser what we are
And the Eternal function
Enabled to infer. 3

"There is a finished feeling" expresses Dickinson's dubious hopes about what death will bring. It is a poem of great uncertainty about what death will bring.

Dickinson puts the experience of death itself off to someone else in "There is a finished feeling"—just as she does in most of her poems about death. 4 But the experience she describes is her own because it is the feeling she gets while visiting a grave. Graves have the ability to lead one to think about his own death and what it will be like to be dead. Graves, as a sign of death, not only offer a sense of the "end" or "finish" of someone's life, but they are also a sign of completion, a life that is finished by being fulfilled.

Dickinson experiences two distinct possibilities about what comes after death. Death brings a "leisure of the Future" and a "Wilderness of Size." The future after death is unoccupied time (or leisure time) as far as she knows. There will be no hurry to do things; there will be no "finished feeling." The "Size" or extent of death both in time and as a physical region, is unknown, uncharted as far as Dickinson knows. It is a "Wilderness" that must be settled as she says in "I noticed People disappear". The wilderness image presents an unknown that is frightening
and possibly savage. Death's unknown factors can also be painful and not leisurely.

The second stanza moves beyond the unknown aspects of death. It provides a purpose for this "finished feeling." A grave is "Death's bold Exhibitioner" because it is the most obvious and lasting sign of death. It is always there for anyone to see. It is also the sign of death that carries no hope for the continuance of life; the physical body is not going to move from its resting place. This exhibition or show by death can be considered "bold" when we think of the unknown aspects of death that parade into our thoughts whenever we see a grave. But these thoughts also help us move beyond our fears about death. We become "Preciser" or more accurate, more strictly defined. We have less of a chance to vary between fear and hope; death becomes more explicit to us. Because we are "Preciser," the "Eternal function" or logic behind the universe, the purpose for life, or even what might be the function of the dead person for the rest of eternity is more explicit and better defined due to that bold exhibition. We are "Enabled to infer" this function or, in another sense, we are given the power to understand what it is trying to say in ways that are normally hidden.

"There is a finished feeling" offers us an image that means a better understanding of death and immortality. Dickinson is not yet ready to say that she accepts an
offering of immortality, but she makes a giant leap in saying that through these experiences she can better understand the "Eternal function." Somehow, death has led her to an understanding of immortality in a very hopeful light.

816

A Death blow is a Life blow to Some
Who till they died, did not alive become--
Who had they lived, had died but when
They died, Vitality begun.5

Once she has accepted death, Dickinson can also describe the "vitality" of losing her fear about immortality. "A Death blow is a Life blow" is a hopeful poem on death, but it is filled with paradoxes.6 These are the same type of paradoxes one would expect to find in John's Gospel, such as a man is dead until he is born again; through belief in Jesus, a man cannot die, even if he "dies."7 To Dickinson, the death blow knocks some people into life; some people do not live until after they have died. Through these paradoxes, Dickinson is trying to tell the reader her observations on the different ways people (including herself) look at death and immortality.

Some people do not consider how they should live until they are near death or someone close to them dies. Their lives are a mere acting out of basic instincts. These people live for themselves. This poem may be Dickinson's blunt attempt to satirize such people. It could also be
her raging against what she feels to be the prevalent attitude of her time. In either case, the poem is definitely a pessimistic view of such people, despite the obvious allusion to life after death.

Perhaps even bleaker than the commentary on people who wait for a death blow to convert, is the remark that only "Some" people are affected by such an extreme measure. Of course, some people do not need to change because they have already begun to "live" in a spiritual sense, but there are some people who will never change. That only some people change heightens the attack on the insensitivity of those who do not change.

However, the most important aspect of this poem is the positive aspect it presents toward death. Even though it does so for only some people, the death blow still acts as a "Life blow." Because they died, they became alive; the end result of their life is positive. Dickinson focuses on the immortality that comes through death. Their life, up until the point of death, was useless, but after death, a real sense of living began in these people. Death, then, as a reality or as an occasion for thought is an impetus toward reflection on one's life, and it can offer the hope of vitality--new life. But this hope can only be given to someone who is ready to accept it.
Because I could not stop for Death--
He kindly stopped for me--
The Carriage held but just Ourselves--
And Immortality.

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

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

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

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

Since then--'tis Centuries--and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity--

Dickinson accepts death almost completely in "Because I could not stop for Death." She goes beyond her speculations and fears about death and lives with death in her hopes of immortality. The poem becomes for Dickinson an expression of hope in her real union with Death while still
maintaining her life (but not on earth). The poem is not just a fantasy or a dream of the coming of Death. Dickinson puts Death's coming into the background in this poem, and she concentrates on the events which occur after she and Death come together. Dickinson describes herself, Death, and the scenery they travel through. While lacking specifically religious images, Dickinson's hope in this poem is religious because it is personal to her; it is a relationship between herself and the immortal, which she calls "Death" in this poem. While organized religion never provided much support for Dickinson's need to feel immortal, the very nature of her need to be immortal forces her to hope for immortality in at least a quasi-religious atmosphere.

Dickinson describes Death as a gentleman caller in "Because I could not stop for Death." He does not grab her unwillingly; he courts her. Death treats Dickinson with all the respect due a lady love, including a chaperone ("Immortality") in the carriage to ride with them. The ride is slow and leisurely--a typical lovers' ride. Death is not a terrible thing to be afraid of; rather, he is a mannerly gentleman who escorts a woman into the after-life instead of dragging her there. Dickinson responds to this vision of Death in the same way as he presents himself. She has been waiting for a union with Death--a wedding. When Dickinson goes on the ride with Death, she is dressed in
"Gossamer" (a lacy fabric used in wedding gowns) with "Tulle" (a fine, thin netting or veil) for her "Tippet" or hat. She is dressed for a wedding, and Death comes to her with exactly that in mind. Her old fears from "I live with Him" about "No wedlock--granted Me" are laid aside as she and Death ride together forever.13

Because Death comes to her in the way that she had hoped for, Dickinson accepts his coming and rides along with him. She feels secure being with Death. As they travel in the carriage, Dickinson's description of what she sees shows her serenity throughout the world. They drive on "slowly," like lovers. When they are together, time has no influence upon them anymore. Dickinson puts away all her cares and worries--and even her pastimes--because she rests assured in Death's "Civility." Together they view the stages of Dickinson's life: looking at the images of her search for immortality.14 The children, striving at "Recess--in the Ring," are laboring even at playtime to make a circle--a symbol of immortality because it has no beginning and no end. "The Fields of Gazing Grain" are the productive years in life that are looking beyond or "Gazing" beyond what they are producing. "The Setting Sun" is the end of Dickinson's life, not yet over and still beautiful--a sight that, like every sunset, one hopes will last.15 And then, they stopped before her tomb to let the body off in a "House that seemed/A Swelling of the Ground."16
If "Because I could not stop for Death" were to end with the stanza where the carriage stops at Dickinson's tomb, the meaning of the poem would alter drastically. In a sense, then, Dickinson would be betrayed. She would have waited for Death, and he would have come only to escort her to her final resting place: "No wedlock--granted Me." But the poem continues, giving reinforcement and success to all the images of Dickinson striving in her life to find immortality. They leave that "House" in the second to last stanza and continue on with their travels: "Since then--'tis Centuries." And now Dickinson knows that the horses that pull her carriage are headed toward "Eternity;" she has a real union with Death, a union that "Immortality" looks after, making sure it survives.17

Dickinson accepts Death as her beau, and she feels secure with him, protected by "Immortality." She has her union with Death, the culmination of a life-long search for immortality.18 She also has a life that means something because it lasts; the end of her body does not signal the end of her life.19 This poem is not just a fantasy for Dickinson because she goes beyond meeting Death. Her hopes survive the test of possibly being left with the body back at the tomb. Dickinson, in this poem, accepts death for all that she hopes it will bring to her.20
FAITH AS THE BASIS OF HOPE

Even with such poems as "Because I could not stop for Death," Dickinson can never fully accept the possibility of immortality for herself. She is too much afraid that death will be as her religious upbringing describes it or that it will be a destructive force such as can easily be found in nature. Quite often, poems of despair and poems of hope appear to have been written in the exact same period of her life. Looking at her canon, one can see no particular movement either toward or away from hope. However, the poems very obviously point to a struggle within Dickinson to try to resolve this issue for herself.

76

Exultation is the going
Of an inland soul to sea,
Past the houses--past the headlands--
Into deep Eternity--

Bred, as we, among the mountains,
Can the sailor understand
The divine intoxication
Of the first league out from land? 1

When Dickinson can pass the test of believing in her own hopes, when she can accept the promises she believes Death (and "Immortality") offers her, then, and only then,
can she go beyond physical death, to living in hope; then she can live on the emotions of her hopes. Dickinson feels this secure very few times, for most often, her doubts supersede her hopes and cause her to dwell on those doubts instead. "Characteristically, she (Emily Dickinson) rejected the possibility that human beings could ever be certain of immortality."² "Exultation is the going" is a poem where Dickinson has this kind of hope, a mature hope that has been tested by the pain of life (although the early date of this poem naturally precludes the painful experiences in her life that come after 1859). This poem is Dickinson's chance to express emotionally the hope of immortality she feels so fully in "No ladder needs the bird but skies" and "Because I could not stop for Death." Dickinson describes the feeling of immortality as well as linking the poem to the pain she has previously experienced.³

Dickinson describes the emotion of the soul passing from death to life as "Exultation" or triumph. Realizing her own immortality certainly makes her jubilant, but it also makes her feel triumphant because, in a sense, she has "won" over her doubts, she feels her own immortality (for now). Nothing can stop this feeling of joy. Her soul is driven into "deep Eternity," and the only question Dickinson asks now is whether those who have not experienced pain can feel as she does.

Dickinson describes her pain, her entire life, as
being "bred among the mountains." The mountains, with their high, jagged peaks, become for Dickinson objects that stand in the way of a clear view of what her future will be like. Before she can know her future (in terms of immortality), Dickinson must first surmount her present problems, her "mountains." To live among the mountains means to live a struggling life, having struggles that offer no sign of hope or relief. Those who do not feel this struggle to hope, or those who can always retain their hopeful outlook, may be blessed in one sense, but they do not have the same emotional response as one who has struggled to realize his own immortality. The exultation comes not from just any soul passing from death to life; it comes when an "inland soul" passes into immortality. An "inland soul" is one which has surmounted the pains of life to reach the shore; it has overcome its own doubts in order to learn to accept its own immortality after death. In this poem, death is the shoreline, immortality is the sea, and the mountains represent a rigorous life. The "sailor" would be the person who can hope his entire life through. Dickinson is an "inland soul." She must reach the shoreline in order to accept her own immortality. Thus, Dickinson's life is a series of stages: she believes; she doubts her beliefs; she doubts her doubts; and the only thing to survive all this questioning unfailingly are her hopes.

As she goes out to "sea," Dickinson's soul passes
"houses" and "headlands." She passes by the places of rest ("houses") where she can feel safe and secure. She goes beyond the "headlands" or capes that jut out into the water, offering a safe place from which to view the sea and, yet, they would still allow her a way to walk back to the mainland without danger. Her soul is not taking the safe way to "Eternity"—her hopes keep her going beyond these safe boundaries without causing her worries. At most times, we would expect Dickinson to stay on the shoreline and look out: combining her hopes and her doubts. But in this poem, she is at last living in her hopes, and her acceptance of what she believes in moves her past the shore, past even the "headlands." Dickinson's soul moves into "deep Eternity." The image of the sea helps to visualize the picture of the great unknown it contains: the unknown amount of risk Dickinson is taking by relying on her hopes. The sea offers no sight of another shoreline, nor any clue of what lies beneath it, yet Dickinson takes the risk to go out upon the sea. By living in her hopes, by accepting her own immortality, Dickinson feels the "divine intoxication/ Of the first league out from land." She can enjoy the peace that death offers her because she has struggled in life, and not everyone can say that, not everyone can feel the happiness, the unbelievability of the peaceful feeling that comes with accepting one's own immortality.

Dickinson's search for immortality leads her to doubt
the hopes she had been taught to believe in, to test the hopes she felt on her own, and to believe in hopes that survive, but may not conquer, her doubts. It leads her to accept, at times, the possibility of her own immortality as something real. Dickinson's search allows her to be able to live in the hope of that immortality she wants, even when she doubts its existence. Dickinson's search, Dickinson's struggle with the question of what lies beyond death was never concluded in either a negative or a positive sense at any time in her life. She believed very strongly in her own immortality at times, and, at other times, she doubted it very strongly. Yet, throughout her life, Dickinson searched for that evidence of immortality that would allow her to overcome her doubts. That search for proof is reflected in her death poetry and bonds it to the heart of every person who struggles with the question of their own immortality. Dickinson continued her search throughout her life because, even in times of despair, she had enough hope left to question why she hoped at all. The hope for immortality added meaning to Dickinson's life, and without that hope, her very existence would have been useless to her. If we analyze that hope, it boils down to faith. Faith stems for Dickinson from her belief that "the love of God may be taught not to seem like bears." Her religious upbringing taught Dickinson her own worthlessness and that faith is a gift from God given out of His majesty to those
whom He chooses. Dickinson's struggle throughout her life is to find images that verify and sustain her unPuritan belief.

Throughout her life, Dickinson had enough faith to believe in the possibility of immortality, no matter how slight that possibility seemed. As strange as this sounds, she also had enough faith to question herself and the beliefs she was raised on. Dickinson tested her faith many times during her life: sometimes she lost hope and sometimes her hopes increased, but always her faith remained--however shaken. As it grew, that faith could lead her to believe in immortality without always needing proof of it.

1052

I never saw a Moor--
I never saw the Sea--
Yet know I how the Heather looks
And what a Billow be.

I never spoke with God
Nor visited in Heaven--
Yet certain am I of the spot
As if the Checks were given--

"I never saw a Moor" is representative of this kind of faith. Dickinson has no physical proof to help her believe in the images presented here, but she believes anyway--in them and their effects. Dickinson applies this same analogy to God and heaven: that she has no proof for their existence does not matter--she believes in them both.
To some, this sounds like a simple kind of faith—the faith suggested by Christ—and perhaps it is. Perhaps, Dickinson relegates herself down to a simple profession of faith since she cannot overcome her doubts completely. I think Dickinson is being much more mature than this. Dickinson is looking at her doubts and calling them into question along with the hopes she cannot prove. Just as a philosopher studying metaphysics can ultimately doubt all existence, including his own, I think Dickinson realizes that her doubts could fall into the same pattern. This is not to deny the validity of the doubts, but merely to call into question the asking of proof for those things which may be unprovable. Merely to deny the existence of something because it lacks physical evidence does not eliminate its possible reality. Dickinson believes in the possible reality of immortality—that is all she can believe and conclude that she is immortal. She is "certain" of heaven because it exists inasmuch as God does, or a moor or anything else that Dickinson has no proof of—she has faith in it.

1433
How brittle are the Piers
On which our Faith doth tread—
No bridge below doth totter so—
Yet none hath such a Crowd.

It is as old as God—
Indeed—'twas built by him—
He sent his Son to test the Plank,
And he pronounced it firm. 9

As "How brittle are the Piers" shows, Dickinson can even call into question her faith. Especially for Dickinson, faith is a shaky, "brittle" holding onto of a belief that is unprovable. However, faith is the only thing to hold onto in times of real doubt. Faith is the last stronghold for Dickinson. "If she could not accept conventional religion, she still retained an unshakable trust in God's actual reality."10 Yet, despite its assailability from all sides, faith is the means most people use to withstand their doubts. The only way Dickinson could ever believe in her own immortality is through a simple act of faith. Faith is all she has left because nature, religion, and even other people have led her to doubt more often than hope.

Faith is only a "Pier" or "bridge," though, because it upholds the individual while he crosses from mortality to immortality. Despite its "totterings," it is a bridge many are willing to cross over on. The pier image is fascinating because it relates back to poem 76 ("Exultation is the Going"). Immortality is not reached until the soul has "gone out to sea." Thus, the pier is the last place the soul stands before it is on the sea. The last point between living in this world and living in the next world Dickinson calls "Faith."

The real hope and acceptance of faith in this poem
comes not because faith upholds the individual crossing over to immortality, nor that many others also use faith as a crossing-place, nor even that faith is as "old as God;" the real hope of this poem is that the "Plank" of faith was tested and pronounced "firm" enough to be a crossing into immortality. Dickinson is not so much expounding theology that can be found in John's Gospel (5.24) as much as she is trying to explain her own need for faith. Dickinson's last refuge is in a faith that cannot be beaten because it cannot be cross-examined with logical or physical arguments. Her problem is committing herself to such a faith.

Faith, then, is the basis of hope, and hope keeps Dickinson searching, struggling to find an answer to the pains of life, to its "mountains." "She viewed death from every possible angle, and left a record of her emotions and of her ideas about it in her poems."11 "In her personal life, as well as in her poetry, alternating doubt and belief held her mind unresolved to the very end."12 Sometimes, she can accept death and hope for immortality. At other times, the pain of life causes her to grope about, searching through all she knows for something to support that ever-dimming hope. Most times, Dickinson comes up empty-handed, or with an answer that questions her questions as well as her answers. And so, she keeps searching, through life, through her verse. "Emily locked away in a chest a
voice which cries to all of us of our common life and love and death and fear and wonder."13 "The real question she asked was not 'will I be crowned in Heaven' but 'by what strategy can I fill the needs of the inner life in a world in which neither God nor man appears to recognize, support, or sustain it,' or, to put the question more simply, 'how is the poet to live?'"14 Quite possibly, Dickinson's death poetry was never meant for eyes other than her own, but the personal struggle it portrays reflects our need in times of doubt to be sure of our own immortality far better than the poems that sing the praises of man's immortal nature without ever questioning it.
NOTES

Section I

1 Archibald MacLeish, "The Private World," in Critics On Emily Dickinson, ed. by Richard H. Rupp (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1964), p. 40. MacLeish labels death the "constant theme" in ED's poetry. (N.B.: "ED" is the standard abbreviation for "Emily Dickinson" and it will be used throughout the notes.)


5 Karl Keller, The Only Kangaroo Among the Beauty: Emily Dickinson and America (Baltimore, Md.: John Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 129. "Ambiguity in Hawthorne and Emily Dickinson represents ... the ability to synthesize and suspend. It is not a desperately divided state of mind or tormented perspective, not mere conflict, but balance without resolution, without coherence. It does not so much show a dual perspective or simple perception of inherent paradox as it shows a tentativeness."


8 Wells, p. 93. The importance of ED's choice of any particular word is carefully studied in this thesis. The study of individual words in a poet like Dickinson becomes crucial when economy of words is her major characteristic.
One can whole-heartedly agree with Wells, then, when he says, "It hardly becomes hyperbole to say that a single word in her poetry often contains more imaginative energy than an entire lyric by a respectable but less distinguished poet. She seeks to give the word a poetic luminence over and beyond its literal connotation as defined by the dictionary, or its prosaic meanings in familiar conversation."—p. 95.

9 Winters, p. 150.


13 Weisbuch, p. 70. See also note 1 in Section II.


15 Thomas H. Johnson, ed., Poems of Emily Dickinson, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), vol. 3, p. 1164. This poem is a fragment; no autograph copy is known according to Johnson. N.B.: All further references to ED's poems shall cite this work. The numbers given at the top of the page were assigned to the poems by Johnson for easy reference. This work shall henceforth be cited as "Poems" to distinguish it and Johnson's biography of ED. The biography shall be noted by author.

Keller, p. 125, calls ED's life "deliberately strifetorn" because of her doubting nature.

What ED calls her "rebellion against God" (Sherwood, p. 14) must be remembered as a rebellion against the God presented in her religious upbringing, not against a God of her own imagery that brings immortality to her.

Griffith, p. 81. Griffith attributes ED's lack of assurance to what she saw in life, namely "mutability."

Sister Mary Humiliata, pp. 59-60.

Griffith, p. 83, claims ED is looking to immortality for "a sense of stability."

Griffith, p. 146, explains the mixture in ED's view of death as almost being dependent upon her mood: "It is simply that, depending upon where she stood when she thought of death, she could see it as the greatest of human perils--or as a positive virtue." Her mood, of course, would seem dependent upon a variety of possible factors (i.e. biographical, religious, and psychological influences either common to all people or peculiar to ED). Griffith does not expound upon this subject.

Section II

Griffith, p. 231. Even though ED follows Emerson's assertion that "natural facts are symbols of spiritual facts," she has quite a different interpretation of nature's behavior than Emerson does.

Kher, p. 178, notes that ED finds "Death inevitably woven into the schema of creation."


Winters, pp. 164-5.
5 Ford, p. 18.

6 Keller, p. 95.


8 Wilbur, p. 50.


10 Thomas H. Johnson, Emily Dickinson: an Interpretive Biography (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 234. Johnson reads the coupling of these images as ED's revulsion against infant damnation, another Calvinist doctrine. As I point out throughout my interpretation, I see ED being deliberately vague in some of her phrasing, too vague to merely be attacking any one (or several) Calvinist doctrine. See also Winters as cited in note 4, this section for a view on ED's attack of the "moral Calvinism" she was taught.

11 Keller, p. 92. ED is incorporating the Puritan (and general Christian) theological viewpoint that a person must give himself over to God entirely as a means of protesting this very same doctrine. The reader notes that the "predestined" ones are the ones being led "through Realm of Briar." While this concept of self-sacrifice is in the Puritan theology, the doctrine of Special Providences (see Calvin's Institutes, Bk I, ch XVI) usually prevailed over spiritual mortification in the minds of most Puritans.

12 MacLeish, p. 42, refers specifically to poem #1601, but his comments upon ED's ability to confront God is still applicable in this situation: "Other poets have confronted God in anger but few have been able to manage it without rhetoric and posture."

13 The poem is also a storehouse of Calvinist theology. Besides the stated doctrine of predestination, the poem contains hints of the doctrines of irresistible grace, the total sovereignty of God, the total depravity of man, and Special Providence. See Calvin's Institutes for elucidation of these doctrines. I refer specifically to: Bk III, ch XXI; Bk I, ch I; Bk II, ch III; and Bk I, ch XVI.
Poems, vol. 3, pp. 1101-2. Written about 1884 or 85. There are five fair copies of this poem, four of them sent to various people between these two years.


John B. Pickard, Emily Dickinson: an Introduction and Interpretation (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1967), p. 35. This poem is an example of what Pickard would call ED's "mystical inclinations." The imagery of this poem is meant specifically to go beyond the stated. This is ED seeking "the essential moral truths veiled behind material appearances."

Pickard, p. 35.


Wells, p. 69, states, "Emily was both priest and sinner, interrogating her own soul and reporting her own confessions." ED acts out both parts in this poem. As priest, she is telling the reader what is needed for immortality. As sinner, she is requesting physical verification for her hopes.


Wells, p. xiii. This poem is an example of ED's expansive nature as a poet. Wells states this quality thus: "her poetry, though still personal, became highly expressive of our common human experience."

Wells, p. 154.
Wells, p. 155, attributes the signs of pains as an agent of God: "Throughout all nature, she (ED) discovers God's 'marauding hand.'"

Wells, p. 38, labels ED's dealing with her experiences of pain and putting them into poetic form as a mind "capable of perceiving the particular and achieving the universal." No one should misinterpret this to read that ED is recounting experiences through her poetry. If we are to call ED a poet, we must recognize that experiences are impetui for her toward a synthesis of understanding, which is what the poems attempt to achieve. See note 3, section V for further elucidation on the development of ED's artistic practice. Such purely biographical misreadings are lacking in any artistic theory other than Skinnerian psychology.


Griffith, p. 141, says that part of ED's poetry is eliminating the pain in life; thus, through death, she "gains immunity." But, as can be seen from the poems discussed earlier, death has to include some kind of after-life as well as an immunity from pain, or ED does not want it. Griffith does not point to ED's need for immunity and immortality.

Weisbuch, pp. 97-98, picks up on the biblical allusions of the word "Agony" and emphasizes the edifying aspect of the crucifixion. Certainly, ED could easily be alluding to this biblical agony, and, if Weisbuch is correct, the poem is more hopeful than commonly thought. However, biblical allusions aside, I do not think ED sees pain as edifying in this poem. ED uses this poem to describe pain, and the effects of this pain belong to a future time not covered in this poem.

Kher, p. 200.

Johnson, p. 95. The painful experience of this poem does not have to be a death experience. As Johnson says, ED's main interest "is to make the reader experience an emotion." Yet, the suffering she recreates for the reader is not hers. The experience of pain is within a persona. Johnson places ED's position to the poem as "standing outside the anguish and by a kind of ironic indifference to deepen the inherent compassion."
Section III


2 Weisbuch, p. 94. By having "the mourner typologically leap into the grave," ED produces an intensity of pain on the part of the mourner.


5 Pickard, p. 102.

6 Kher, p. 206, sees this poem as saying that death means the total loss of perception. While his interpretation is sound, Kher tends to find less hope in this poem than I do.

7 Weisbuch, p. 100, holds that the poem presents an idea of dislocation, both sensory and metaphysical between two worlds. The emphasis, then, is on what is being lost rather than what is to come.

8 Weisbuch, p. 101, sees the fly as many things, but not as the interposition of reality. For one, the fly is a "dramatic disappointment" of the expected king. The fly also represents vitality as opposed to ED's paralysis. Lastly, ED did not like flies.

9 Griffith, p. 136. The fly represents two images here opposing the peace of the death scene. The first is that the fly is a sign of life and as long as the persona can see the fly, life is still there. The second image is that the fly brings to mind the body's eventual decay.
"The mourners are seen by the persona in synecdoche and metonymy."

Paul J. Ferlazzo, Emily Dickinson (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), p. 49, notes that the mourners are part of the preparation. They are there wondering if the persona will show any sign of Election.

Eugene Hollahan, "Dickinson's 'I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died,'" in Explicator, XIII (April, 1955), #35. Hollahan presents a seemingly preposterous theory allegorizing the fly as "Satan."

Wells, p. 50.


Sherwood, p. 221.


Sewall, vol. 2, pp. 689-91, considers this poem of anguish as coming out of "Emily's lifelong experience of the cross." ED read Thomas à Kempis' Imitation of Christ and marked it quite heavily. The Imitation provided "a daily regimen" for ED, and she learned many things from its pages. However, Sewall's understanding of what is contained in the Imitation is very much mistaken. He cannot have more than a "content-page acquaintance" with the book, or he would not have so limited what ED learned from it. The Imitation does consider God and immortality as well as Christ's suffering and the daily regimen.

Whicher, p. 112.


Griffith, pp. 235-38, makes an interesting, but purely conjectural analogy between ED and Emerson's imagery of the eye as a universal vision.
21 Kher, p. 77, notes the importance of seeing this "something."


23 Griffith, p. 235, notes that theme of this poem centers on the "limitation of human vision." When ED tries to perceive some sign of immortality like the Puritan mourners, (see note 10, this section) her vision is limited by her own doubts.


25 Johnson, p. 253, notes the imagery developed here for being with God: the marriage symbolism is characteristic of some of ED's other poems and can be traced back to the manner of the Song of Solomon in the Bible.

Section IV

1 Poems, vol. 2, p. 805. The poem is an unfinished worksheet copy about 1869.

2 Wells, p. 58.


4 Duncan, p. 62, notes an "academic quality" in the second stanza which contributes to this detachment.


6 Ford, p. 105, sees ED touting Puritan theology about both eternal life and predestination in this poem.

7 Johnson, p. 152. According to Johnson, ED drew from about thirty books in the Bible. John's Gospel ranks fourth
in the number of times ED alludes to a particular book. Matthew, Revelation, and Genesis are the most heavily alluded to books.


9 Sewall, vol. 2, pp. 571-3, calls this poem "the moment when eternity struck with full force and ... she saw her poetic mission unfolding before her." While the poem is definitely an accepting of eternity by Dickinson, the cessation of activity in stanza two does not seem to indicate the beginning of a poetic or any other type of mission.


11 Weisbuch, p. 114, thinks the poem shows ED "fraught with danger." She places "Immortality" in the carriage as a chaperone to be sure that she is not left with just death.

12 Ferlazzo, p. 55, considers Death as a gentlemanly caller, also concentrating on Death's civility towards the persona.

13 Thomas H. Johnson, "Because I Could not Stop for Death," in Critics on Emily Dickinson, pp. 75-6. N.B. Any other time this article is referred to, it will be noted as Johnson in Rupp.

14 Kher, p. 212, notes, quite interestingly, that this poem combines the experiences of death and immortality.

15 Charles R. Anderson (in Ferlazzo, p. 56) treats the third stanza in this way: "The seemingly desperate parts of this are fused into a vivid reenactment of the mortal experience. It includes the stages of youth, maturity, and age, the cycle of day from morning to evening, and even a suggestion of seasonal progression from the year's upspring through ripening to decline." Ferlazzo also suggests that the adjectives applied to the grain and sun are transferred from the death experience itself.
Weisbuch, p. 115, sees the grave as "an unnatural growth of natural dust."

Griffith, pp. 131-2, would lead us to believe that "Eternity" is a sufficiently ambiguous word to interpret the poem's ending as either hopeful or despairing. The fact that the body has already been left behind would seem to disengage the possibility that death is without immortality.


Ruth Miller, The Poetry of Emily Dickinson (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), pp. 193-94, sees this poem as the beginning of ED's commitment to poetry after her failure with Bowles. The poem does not seem to bear up this historical interpretation, though. Examining the stanzas, one finds no "shutting of the door" on man as Miller describes. Also, ED is a bride in this poem, but she is a bride of death, not Christ as Miller thinks. The two are not equivalent for ED.

Winters, p. 155, seems to think the poem "exquisite" in its failure of presenting death. At the same time, he says it is very successful in showing how to leave life. The poem, then, is primarily a "departure from life," I think Winters faults ED for not being spiritually awakened enough in this poem to anticipate immortality.

Section V


Pickard, p. 30, notes that ED "stressed that poetry grew directly out of her personal experiences and served as an outlet for frustrated emotions." This quote may shed some light upon all of ED's poems. Obviously, if I am in agreement with Pickard, it would naturally seem that this quote should have come much earlier in the text. However, the possibility for misreading this statement is great, and
the ensuing misinterpretations from a too-early presentation of Pickard's statement is sufficient justification for its present placement. ED's poetry is not a journal of her experiences as some critics seem to reduce her to. To read Pickard properly, we find that ED's poetry is an artistic synthesis of her experience of life, not of particular experiences.

4 Sherwood, p. 46.


6 Poems, vol. 2, p. 742. About 1865. Johnson notes the perplexity of the word "Checks" which is altered to "Chart" in the 1890 Poems and all other subsequent editions. However, "Checks" was a colloquial term in ED's day for railroad tickets in general. Several articles have also been published by other authors noting that "Checks" was also a colloquial term for gambling chips in card games. Hence, the phrase developed "cashing in one's checks" just as we say "cashing in one's chips" today. ED may or may not have been acquainted with gambling colloquialisms, but it seems more than likely that she would know about railroad tickets.

7 Griffith, p. 110.

8 Keller, p. 291. ED's metaphors "bring the hopeful down to earth." Thus, she has her heaven now in this poem.


10 Pickard, p. 36.

11 Johnson, p. 203.


13 Macliesh, p. 39.
14 Sherwood, p. 65.
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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Nicholas Robert Desmond has been read and approved by the following committee:

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The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated into the text and that the thesis is now given final approval by the Committee with reference to content and form.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

10/12/80
Date

Director’s Signature