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“Wild Nights”
Death and Humor in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson’s unique style of poetic composition is marked by ambiguity and open-endedness, leading to the genesis of a privileged space wherein reader and writer are able to meet as co-creators of meaning. As a poet, Dickinson addresses many themes in ways that are subject to countless layers of interpretation. This essay focuses particularly on the theme of death, a prevalent topic in nineteenth-century America, due to confluence of cultural and historical events, among them the American Civil War. As a result of her particular style of being in, and of reflecting upon the world, Dickinson addresses death in unexpected ways. Through the use of humor under a more or less obvious form of reductio ad absurdum, Dickinson successfully and articulately pokes fun at prevailing customs and ideas surrounding death and dying. Examples can be seen in poems such as “Because I could not stop for Death,” “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” or “I like a look of Agony.”

In effect, Dickinson’s insight into human nature is visible in her capacity to incarnate the feelings and experiences of the speakers in her poems. Likewise, this capacity for observation is also reflected in the poet’s use of pretense, present as it is in the elaborate expressions that Dickinson employs throughout her work. This essay explores the forms used by Dickinson to achieve comic effect, namely, the exchange of language between different contexts. Through the dissociation between the verbal form and its so-called natural environment, Dickinson actively subverts ingrained concepts while creating absurdly comic situations. In that sense, her humor is the result of a culturally contingent wordplay, aimed at experimenting with and gaining power over the uncontrollable force of death, in a time obsessed with the great and final unknown ending of all life. Through the use of historical, cultural and literary sources, as well as of writings by and about Emily Dickinson, this essay brings to light the manifold ways which Dickinson uses to create humorous situations in her poetic work on the theme of death.
# Table of Contents

Primary Sources and Abbreviations  ................................................................. i

Significant Dates in Emily Dickinson’s Life, Work, and Publication  ................... ii

Introduction ........................................................................................................... 1

“Because I see – New Englandly”: Emily Dickinson In (and Out) of Context ...... 4
  The Cult of True Womanhood: American Women in Victorian Times ............ 4
  Dwelling in Possibility: The Atypical Circumstances of Emily Dickinson’s Life .... 7

“A fairer House than Prose”: Emily Dickinson and the Art of Poetic Composition ........................................................................................................... 13
  “A word made Flesh”: Language, Punctuation and Style in Emily Dickinson’s Craft ........................................................................................................... 16

“Death is the supple Suitor”: Death as a Theme in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson ........................................................................................................... 23
  *Ars Moriendi*: The Art of Dying ........................................................................ 23
  “Endow the Living – with the Tears”: Death as (Performed) Grief in Victorian America ............................................................................................... 30
  “The Color of the Grave is Green”: Death and the Dying in the American Civil War ............................................................................................... 35
  “He kindly stopped for me”: Emily Dickinson’s Death Poems ....................... 40

“A little Madness in the Spring”: Humor According to Emily Dickinson .......... 42
  “A throe opon the features”: Death, Dickinson Style .................................... 45
  “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,”: Death as a Penalty in the American Civil War .... 48
  “Because I could not stop for Death”: Emily’s Date with Death .................... 58
  “I like a look of Agony,”: When Death and Truth Meet at Last ..................... 63
  “A Wife – at Daybreak – I shall be”: Dickinson’s Wild Nights with Death ....... 67

Conclusion ............................................................................................................. 72

Appendix A ............................................................................................................. 74

Appendix B ............................................................................................................. 76

Appendix C ............................................................................................................. 77

Appendix D ............................................................................................................. 78

Appendix E ............................................................................................................. 79

Appendix F ............................................................................................................. 80

Appendix G ............................................................................................................. 82
Primary Sources and Abbreviations

L  The letters of Emily Dickinson used in this essay are taken from the 1958 edition of her letters, by Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, which was published by The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. The letters will be referred to according to their number, i.e., L1, etc.

F  The poems of Emily Dickinson cited in this essay are taken from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, edited by R.W. Franklin, and published by the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press in three volumes, in 1998. The poems’ manuscripts and transcripts, as well as the historical information contained in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition* can also be accessed online at the Emily Dickinson Archive: https://www.edickinson.org/. In this essay, the poems will be numbered according to Franklin’s *Variorum Edition*, and will be marked as F1, etc., according to the dates that Franklin attributed to the poems. Franklin’s cataloguing of Dickinson’s poetry turns “to the manuscripts, accepting them as their own standard” (1: 27). Aware of his inevitable involvement as an editor, Franklin nevertheless wished to perform his work in “fidelity to what Dickinson wrote,” while seeking “to intrude minimally” in the poet’s extant opus (1: 27). As to Franklin’s editorial work in terms of the dating of the poems, the citation will follow the MLA style guidelines for the in-text citation of a multivolume work. Franklin will thus be indicated as the author, inasmuch as Dickinson herself, with the exception of some of her letters, was not in the habit of dating her manuscripts.

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1 This edition of the complete poems of Emily Dickinson is the result of the direct transcription and dating of Emily Dickinson’s original manuscripts, undertaken by R.W. Franklin. This edition was chosen for this essay, precisely due to its fidelity to the original texts.

2 Further indications may be found under in https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_in_text_citations_the_basics.html, under “Citing multivolume works.”
## Significant Dates in Emily Dickinson’s Life, Work, and Publication

1830  
December 10. Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts. She was the second child of Emily (née Norcross), and Edward Dickinson, who were also parents to William Austin and Lavinia Dickinson, the older and younger of her siblings, respectively.

1835  
Emily Dickinson began her education at Amherst Female Seminary.

1840  
Both Emily and Lavinia Dickinson began their studies at Amherst Academy.

1847  
Emily Dickinson continued her education at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary.

1850  
One of Emily Dickinson’s poems was published in The Amherst College Indicator, a valentine titled “Magnum Bonum.”

1852  
Another poem, “Sic transit gloria mundi” (F2) was published, this time in the Springfield Republican. The title, however, was changed to “A Valentine” (Richards xx).

1855  
Emily and Lavinia visited their father in Washington. Mr. Dickinson had been elected to the US House of Representatives in 1852.

In November of that year, the family moved back to the Dickinson ancestral home, the Homestead, located on the town’s

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3 This section is largely based on the Chronology included in pp. xix-xxii of Emily Dickinson in Context, edited by Eliza Richards. Direct quotes of this or other sources will be indicated throughout. The reason behind choosing this chronology above all others is the fact that it includes the summary of Dickinson’s life and works published in a more succinct manner than in other similar works.
Main Street. The move took place after a period of almost fifteen years living in a house on North Pleasant Street.

1856 William Austin, familiarly known as Austin, married Emily’s close friend Susan Gilbert. The couple moved to the Evergreens, a home that Edward Dickinson had built for them, fairly close to the Homestead.

1858 Emily Dickinson entered her most productive period as a poet. This would last until 1868. It is also in 1858 that she began “recording poems in hand-sewn booklets later known as fascicles.” Emily Dickinson would continue with this practice well into 1864. Later, “in 1865, and from 1871 until 1875,” she would gather more poems, this time under the form of “loose anthologies called sets” (Richards xx). The so called “Master Letters” were also thought to have been written at this point. In the entry to this date, Richards also mentions that one of Emily Dickinson’s poems, “‘Nobody knows this Little Rose’” (F11) “appeared in the Springfield Republican as ‘To Mrs. - -, with a Rose’” (xx).

1861 The American Civil War began on April 12, with the Battle of Fort Sumter. The last confrontation of the Civil War would take place on May 12, 1865, with the Battle of Palmito Ranch. Nevertheless, the official end of the Civil War would occur on June 2, 1865, with “the surrender of the Army of the Trans-Mississippi” (“Civil War Timeline” n.p.). “‘I taste a liquor never brewed’” (F207) was “published in the Republican under the title ‘The May-Wine’” (Richards xxi).

1862 Another of Emily Dickinson’s poems, “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers” (F124) was “published in the Republican as ‘The Sleeping’” (Richards xxi).
After reading one of his essays on the *Atlantic Monthly*, Emily Dickinson began her correspondence with Thomas Wentworth Higginson.

Frazar Stearns, the son of the Amherst College President William Augustus Stearns, was killed while serving in the War. The entire town gathers for the final farewell (L255).

1864-5

An increasingly serious eye ailment led Emily Dickinson to search for treatment in the town of Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she lodged for a considerable time. She returned to Amherst in 1865 and experienced an improvement in her state. In 1864, several of her poems were published, albeit under different titles. “‘Flowers – Well – if anybody’” (F95) was “published by *Drum Beat, Springfield Republican*, and *Boston Post*, under the title ‘Flowers’; ‘These are the days when Birds come home’” (F122) “published by *Drum Beat*, a Brooklyn paper raising funds for the Union cause, under the title ‘October.’ ‘Some keep the Sabbath Going to Church’” (F236) was “published in the *Round Table* under the title ‘My Sabbath.’ ‘Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple’” (F321) was “published by *Drum Beat* and the *Springfield Republican* under the title ‘Sunset.’ ‘Success is counted sweetest’” (F112) was “published in the *Brooklyn Daily Union*” (Richards xxi).

1866

“A narrow fellow in the grass’” (F1096) was “published in the *Republican* as ‘The Snake’” (Richardson xxi). The editorial changes did not please the poet.

1870, 1873

Thomas Wentworth Higginson visited Emily Dickinson in Amherst.

1874

“While in Boston on June 16, 1874, Edward Dickinson [suffered]

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4 In some sources, however, his name is spelled Frazer.
a stroke and [died] suddenly” (Martin, 1: xlv).

1875
Mid-June: Emily Norcross Dickinson suffered a stroke and became paralyzed, thus depending on external assistance for all her needs (See also L440).

1878
After a visit from fellow poet and Amherst countrywoman Helen Hunt Jackson, Emily Dickinson agreed to publish her poem “Success is counted sweetest” (F112), in the anthology A Masque of Poets. Due to the anonymous nature of the publication, this poem was “attributed to Emerson” (Richards xxii).
It was also “around this time [that she began] writing to Judge Otis P. Lord, [in what appears to have been the start of a romantic] relationship that [lasted] to his death” (Richards xxii).

1882
Death of Emily Norcross Dickinson.

1883
Emily Dickinson’s youngest nephew, Gib, with whom she had a special connection, died “at age eight” (Richards xxii).

1884
“Judge Lord [died]” (Richards xxii). Three months after his death, Emily Dickinson “fainted and did not recover consciousness until evening” (Ackman 227). After this incident, and well into 1885, her health kept declining. By all accounts, “fainting in the kitchen was the beginning of the end” (Ackman 228).

1886
After a prolonged illness, Emily Dickinson “[died] on May 15; her final letter [to her Norcross cousins read] simply: ‘Little Cousins, Called back. Emily’ (L1046). Funeral [took] place on May 19 in the Homestead library. Higginson [attended and read] Emily Brontë’s ‘No coward soul is mine.’ Susan Dickinson [wrote] an obituary that [appeared] in the Republican” (Richards xxii). Lavinia discovered her sister’s poems and engaged the
assistance of Mabel Loomis Todd in order to prepare them for publication.

1886-1951

On the death of Emily Dickinson, Mabel Loomis Todd became the editor of her work. The ensuing years, particularly the ones that immediately followed the death of Austin Dickinson, which took place in 1895 (Martin, 1: xlvi), witnessed a series of bitter legal disputes over a plot of land that Austin had intended to leave to Mabel Loomis Todd. In effect, this judicial battle brought to public light the true nature of their adulterous relationship and caused lasting consequences for the legacy of Emily Dickinson.

As the first editor of her work, Mabel Loomis Todd also disputed ownership over Emily Dickinson’s poems and biography with Austin’s widow, Susan Gilbert Dickinson. This dispute was continued by both women’s daughters and resulted, among other things, in the fragmented publication of the extant poems written by Dickinson. Furthermore, it influenced the biographical depiction of Emily Dickinson herself as well as of the people in her intimate circle, with biographers eventually taking sides and accentuating certain real or exaggerated aspects over others. An example of such a positioning is patent in one of the most preeminent biographies of the poet, written by Richard Sewall. This book was based on a series of interviews given by Mabel Loomis Todd’s daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham, that offer the most nefarious depiction of Susan Gilbert Dickinson. Editorial and authorial choices on which view to uphold continue to influence contemporary perspectives on Emily Dickinson and her work. For a detailed recount of these events, see chapters 11 to 17 of Lyndall Gordon’s Lives Like Loaded Guns: Emily Dickinson and Her Family’s Feuds.

For a detailed account of the editorial history of Emily Dickinson’s work, please see The Editing of Emily Dickinson: A Reconsideration, by R.W. Franklin.
1951
All known poems of Emily Dickinson, in all their known versions, are published together in one volume, for the first time, in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson.

1958
All known letters of Emily Dickinson are published together in a single volume, for the first time, in *The Complete Letters of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward.

1988
Creation of the Emily Dickinson International Society, “in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to promote, perpetuate, and enhance the study and appreciation of Emily Dickinson” (Franz n.p.).

2007
Brigham Young University launches the *Emily Dickinson Lexicon*, an online database aimed at providing “a reference tool for examining the lexical intricacies of Dickinson’s poems, to supply definitions for translating the poems from English to other languages, and to provide information from Webster’s 1844 dictionary that Dickinson herself may have drawn upon” (“Significance of the Emily Dickinson Lexicon Project” n.p.).

2013
Creation of the *Emily Dickinson Archive*, an online database offering scans of the poet’s manuscripts along with their transcripts and historical notes based on *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, edited by R. W. Franklin, and published in three volumes, in 1998 (“Emily Dickinson, From Fascicle to Open Access” n.p.). Notes on the Johnson edition of Dickinson’s poems are also included in the database.

2016
The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press publishes *Emily Dickinson’s Poems as She Preserved Them*, edited by Cristanne Miller. This edition presents the poems as they were arranged by
Dickinson, be it as fascicles or as loose works stored without particular order (“Emily Dickinson, From Fascicle to Open Access” n.p.).

Full or partial, historical or romanticized biographies of Emily Dickinson, along with cinematic, musical and theatrical productions, as well as articles and critical books on her person and work are performed, produced and published. This serves to demonstrate the degree of interest that Emily Dickinson, both as an artist and as an individual, still receives to this day. An example is a recent biography written by Martha Ackman, *These Fevered Days: The Pivotal Moments in the Making of Emily Dickinson*, published in March of this year. In terms of mainstream media, the television series *Dickinson*, released in 2019 by Apple TV Plus, and starring Hailee Steinfeld as Emily Dickinson is the most recent reconsideration of the person and work of the poet.
Introduction

In a letter to her cousin Perez Cowan, dated October 1869, Emily Dickinson writes, “Dying is a wild Night and a new Road” (L332). This makes for an unconventional statement in the highly conservative society that she inhabited. In effect, the Victorian era, in England, as well as throughout the anglophone world, was marked by a particular mindset that regulated all aspects of life, from cradle to grave. In the case of Emily Dickinson’s life and poetry, it is important to understand, from a historical and culturally contingent perspective, the forms whereby her existence and her literary production were influenced by her immediate environment, and aligned, or not, with its demands. Through the study of gender roles in nineteenth century America, the impact of the Civil War on the daily life of the burgeoning United States, as well as of prevalent cultural practices, it is possible to grasp the meaning behind her words. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that any view or form of engagement with this very same work and the author herself is mostly personal and depends largely on the collaboration between reader and author as far as the creation of meaning is concerned, in this case the reader writing these pages, and Emily Dickinson, the author who left her work for posterity. According to Louise Rosenblatt, “there is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work [inasmuch as] the reading of any work of literature is, of necessity, an individual and unique occurrence involving the mind and emotions of some particular reader” (Rosenblatt, Literature as Exploration 32). This makes all the more sense in the case of Emily Dickinson’s poetry, as the lack of reliable biographical or personal literary sources that could assist in making her intentions clearer, allows for a greater participation of the reader in the creation of meaning. Nevertheless, this does not mean a “disregard for the more usual criteria of evaluation, predicated on some kind of consensus” (Rosenblatt, The Reader, the Text, The Poem 160), which in the case of this essay are of a historical and literary nature.

As someone often written about and yet not known, Emily Dickinson still appears as a mystery in many ways, no less due to the biased form in which the transmission of her life and work took place during the early stages of the publication of her poems. For that reason, instead of tracing a detailed biographical note on the poet, this essay will establish the connection between her personal and artistic path, and the currents of transformation that were brewing in the American society of her time, namely those of Transcendentalism. In effect, Emerson’s reflections on the nature of the poet, as well as on the desired characteristics of the self-reliant individual may have influenced Emily Dickinson’s literary and personal choices (Miller, Reading in Time 29-31). The widespread presence of his works
during that period, of which Dickinson possessed a volume, along with his visit to Amherst
during her lifetime suggest that she was familiar with Emerson’s work and ideology (Ackman
102-5; Sewall 115). Herself a well-educated woman, Dickinson certainly possessed the
necessary personal attributes that allowed her to pursue her literary inclinations, something
that was also facilitated by her socio-economic standing. Additionally, Dickinson’s great
talent and her capacity to create and recreate language and meaning, which she perfected
until her last moment, opened a new path in poetic form and language that is often, albeit not
necessarily accurately, aligned with an incipient form of Modernism (Miller, *Reading in Time*
22).

All in all, Emily Dickinson’s capacity to engage with the world around her on her
own terms allowed her to shape her life and work in an unconventional and truly innovative
manner. So much so that, when advised to adopt a more orthodox form of poetic composition
by Thomas Higginson, Dickinson refused to do so by stating that she “never consciously
touch[ed] a paint mixed by another person” (L271). In that sense, Dickinson’s independent
spirit stands out in a time when women were expected to disappear into the roles assigned to
them by society. Conversely, the atypical choice of poetic themes as well as the controversial
nature of the ideas expressed in some of her poems, among which there is an almost
obsessive reference to death, make for a break with widespread social expectations toward
Dickinson as a woman and a writer (Wolff 170-5). The following pages will further develop
these ideas and notions, while demonstrating that this obsession, which may take apparently
morbid overtones, can at times, be quite witty and comical. In other moments, however, the
manner in which Dickinson engages with the subject of death, particularly in a century
obsessed with it, and in a time marked by an unprecedented incidence of death on American
soil (Shi and Tindall, 1: 574), is typical of a trained observer of the world and the people
around her. An instance of Dickinson’s great insight into human nature and human
experience is her depiction of the inner thoughts and motions of someone condemned to
death, in her poem “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” (F340), comparable in many ways to the
description of Peyton Farquhar’s last moments offered by Ambrose Bierce in his short story
“An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.” The similarities between Bierce’s narrative, which
was published after Dickinson’s death, and her poem, are incredible, so much so when
considering that Bierce was an active participant in the American Civil War, while Dickinson
is likely to have merely read about and heard accounts of the War from other people.
Moreover, Dickinson’s poem was only published in 1896, thus completely excluding any
type of mutual influence on the part of both authors.
This, and other instances, demonstrate not only Dickinson’s intellectual dexterity, but also the depth and richness that she possessed as a human being. Emily Dickinson thus stands out as a poet for the world, a reflection of her time, as well as of the broader human experience that transcends any and all limits of time and space. In that sense, she appears as an author capable of looking beyond immediacy, choosing to address poignant issues that affect all people of all times with humor while lending life, shape and spirit to personal and collective experience in her written words. It is this unique capacity of studying people and events from different perspectives which allows Emily Dickinson to see death, the great unknown night, as something new and untrodden, wild and unexpected; in short, as a great adventure into an unknown world full of possibilities.
“Because I see – New Englandly”: Emily Dickinson In (and Out) of Context

The lack of reliable biographical sources on Emily Dickinson makes it necessary to find other equally valid forms of reaching an understanding of her person and work, while considering that any such attempts are intrinsically limited and for that reason, necessarily partial and inaccurate. In effect, as with any other human being, it is impossible to grasp the complexity and depth of an individual looking from the outside, whatever perspective one chooses to use to reach that goal. In the case of Emily Dickinson, that task becomes all the more daunting, as her only remaining personal papers are her letters and poems. Previous attempts, more or less successful as they might have been, at tracing a solid biographical recount of the poet’s existence have been influenced by struggles between rivals intent on asserting domination over Emily Dickinson’s person and legacy, and therefore cannot be taken at face value. As far as the purpose of this essay is concerned, it was deemed fit to include a series of notes on the circumstances surrounding the lives of the women who inhabited Victorian America. In this manner it is possible to perceive Dickinson’s degree of conformity to the requirements that the society of her time would have in relation to her as an individual of the feminine gender. Moreover, it is possible to understand which other factors, namely social status, education, and personal inclinations, played a part in her choice of becoming a poet and living on her own terms.

The Cult of True Womanhood: American Women in Victorian Times

Victorian gender ideology had a strong presence in the United States of America, albeit with specific nuances derived from the particularities of the American environment. Following a strict patriarchal mentality which originated in a deep-seated religious ideology, women were perceived in every aspect as inferior to and dependent on men, for as Saint Paul once stated, wives must submit, in everything, to their husbands, in the same way that the Church submitted herself to Christ (The Holy Bible, Eph. 5. 22-4). Moreover, as the active cause of the downfall of man and, by extension, of the human race in the person and actions of Eve, any woman was regarded with suspicion and deemed in need of control. These power dynamics gradually crystalized in cultural and social practices which have influenced, among other customs, those of the outwardly prudish Victorian era. For that reason, there emerged a series of theories concerning acceptable behavior, educational and health practices, attitudes, and many other aspects of everyday life, which became strictly regulated on the basis of gender. For instance, it was widely accepted and defended that the world was to be divided
into two great spheres of influence, whereby women would assume the role of keepers of the house and family, taking on exclusively domestic functions. Men, on the other hand, would occupy mainly worldly functions, oriented largely toward their role as providers. The responsibility of the woman, then, was to take care of the family, with all that it entailed in terms of physical and mental work, while providing an oasis where her husband could find the much-needed respite after an extenuating day of work (Cott 67, 72-74).

This division of categories, furthermore, accentuated the maternal dimension of womanhood, inasmuch as women became identified with their wombs to such an extent that this organ was perceived as a regulator of any and all female activities. In effect, according to contemporaneous medical doctors, “woman [was] the product and prisoner of her reproductive system” (Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg 335). Women were thus led to believe that, as inherently weak beings, they must focus all their energies on motherhood, rather than disperse them through education, an effort which doctors believed hampered the development of their reproductive organs and consequently led to the frustration of their divinely ordained mission as mothers (Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg 338-41). Conversely, any disease or malaise experienced by women was attributed to disturbances in their reproductive organs, which led to the creation of the term hysteria as an all-encompassing medical condition that included exclusively female afflictions (Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg 335-6). This reduction of the female role to motherhood entailed a series of other behavioral requirements, which together came to define the so-called perfect woman. In America, the cultivation of the attributes of this idealized feminine incarnation took on the form of the cult of true womanhood, which, in all fairness, made for an unattainable ideal that added a great amount of tension to the already demanding life of women in the Victorian era.

The cult of true womanhood rested on four main pillars, “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity [which together shaped and encompassed the roles of] mother, daughter, wife – woman.” These virtues were so pervasive in social ideology and experience that a woman who was devoid of them, regardless of how accomplished she was, was dubbed as transgressive by the society of her time, and must consequently be othered by her peers, male and female alike (Walter 152). Believing herself to have been created by God for the most sacred mission of motherhood, the Victorian American woman must be an incarnation of religious values, which she would uphold and go on to transmit to her children. Religious education and observance were, therefore, encouraged and promoted through books, church attendance and other institutions, such as “women’s seminaries aimed at aiding women to be religious as well as accomplished” (Walter 153). Purity was also an essential
feminine attribute, which in practice meant the abstinence from sexual activities of any kind under the imminent peril of falling from grace and becoming a social outcast, attracting all sorts of misfortunes such as madness and death, or even the descent into the world of prostitution, as many instructive tales of the time illustrated (Walter 154-7). It was thus imperative that women “preserve [their] purity until marriage.” This, however, was a contradiction on its own, for the same marriage which “was necessary for [a woman’s] happiness” also entailed the loss of her purity (Walter 158). But in this, as in many other circumstances, women were expected to gently accept the judgement of their betters, as “submission was perhaps the most feminine virtue expected of women” (Walter 158). In that sense, women were to obliterate themselves into the obscurity of everyday life with its chain of domestic affairs, while aspiring to an eternal reward for the scrupulous fulfilment of their divinely ordained obligations. Working for the possession of the divine virtues which would counterweigh the fall of Eve, they would strive to turn their home into a blessed space, a true antechamber of paradise, in true adherence to the ideal of domesticity. The home was then to be the operation theater for women, who in their roles as wives, mothers, and nurses, would perform the required chores to make everyday life run smoothly (Walter 163-4). Conversely, the education of women was centered on the care and embellishment of the home, as well as toward typically feminine hobbies such as needlework, flower arrangements and even playing musical instruments, was oriented to the creation of this idyllic atmosphere that would maintain men in the house, thus avoiding the temptation they might feel of going “elsewhere in search of a good time” (Walter 163-5). All in all, and following the ethereal ideals of the time, the true Victorian woman was to be the angel in the house, a supernatural being in charge of the spiritual elevation of those around her, while bearing the too material burden of running the engine of the house and securing its proper functioning, the key tone being that of abnegation. Ethereal ideals, however, are not easily maintained by material creatures, and the disincarnated “perfection of True Womanhood [was no exception, for it] carried in itself the seeds of its own destruction” (Walter 174).

In effect, there were other, perhaps more hidden, aspects to the over-idealized woman of Victorian America and the supposed bliss of the married state. Dependent on her male counterparts in all aspects, she had no power over herself or her estate, to the extent that, by marriage, any possessions, be they in terms of estate or cash, became her husband’s property, as did the woman herself, inasmuch as “a married woman had no legal existence apart from her husband’s” (Cott 5). In that sense, according to Cott, “the traditional marriage contract resembled an indenture between master and servant,” as, although both parties had rights and
obligations, the wife’s situation was all the more precarious because she lost all pecuniary
and social agency (22). This was mainly due to the inherent dimension of woman’s role in
society, which was deeply connected to her body, allowing her “no escape” from the
obligations that it entailed and which were perceived quite often as onerous, for they implied
complete “selflessness” and continuous disposition to service (Cott 74, 71). The sole
exception to the rule were “single [women] over eighteen, or widowed,” as they were the
only females entitled to hold ownership over their “own labor power and property” (Cott 21).
Likewise, the extreme idealization of the married state as well as of the characteristics that
should adorn the ideal partner, or the overly-romanticized notion of true love made it nearly
impossible for some individuals to enter into such an alliance as they had no intentions of
“compromising [their] moral standards” (Berend 936, 938). This would frequently lead to
other forms of social service, namely through acts of charity and dedication to religious
endeavors (Cott 132, 159), which could be embraced by women of all states. Nevertheless, in
the case of spinsters, the inherently feminine capacity for maternal love and self-abnegation
“was viable outside [marriage] and might be directed to missions other than marriage and
family” (Berend 940). The growing trend for the “spiritualization of love [which included the
concept] of ‘moral motherhood’” thus invested the choice for an unmarried existence with
purpose and meaning, opening the path for new forms of service and charitable enterprises
directed at or based upon the foundations of faith and religious philanthropy (Berend 940,
943). Moreover, this also opened the door for women to pursue higher levels of education
under the guise of self-improvement as well as an increase of the quality of the services
offered to the community, while fulfilling their vocation as spinsters (Berend 943).

Dwelling in Possibility: The Atypical Circumstances of Emily Dickinson’s Life

Many are the forms whereby Emily Dickinson’s existence deviated from the female ideal of
her time, some of which granted her an aura of eccentricity and even a mythical element
which still persist to this day. Born to a wealthy family, Emily was nevertheless trained in
“the gentle science of homemaking,” perceived by her contemporaries as the corollary of
female education (Walter 166). According to Sewall, Mrs. Dickinson herself made it a point
to teach her daughters all about housekeeping (Sewall 86-7), not only due to it being
considered an essential part of female chores, but also due to the well-known “American
vicissitudes of wealth [which often led to abrupt changes in social status, to the extent that,
overnight,] the servant girl might become the mistress, or vice versa” (Cott 124). This made it
necessary for women to be able to run their household on their own, in both favorable and
more adverse circumstances, should life prove more or less fortunate in pecuniary terms. Changing fortunes was something that Americans, in general, were familiar with, and that the Dickincsons had also experienced. Edward Dickinson’s father, Samuel Dickinson, had known relative success in his early years as a lawyer and businessman, which allowed him to gather “a small fortune by local standards” (Wolff 16). Due to his considerable economic gains, he was able to build “the first brick house in Amherst,” the Homestead, by 1813 (Wolff 14). However, after experiencing prosperity, his fortune changed in later years, as the foundation of the local Amherst College gradually plunged him into financial ruin and led to the loss of the Homestead, which Edward Dickinson made a point of recovering for the family (Wolff 20-21, 25, Ackmann 7). It is then safe to say that Emily Dickinson’s knowledge of her family’s history as well as her austere upbringing, something that was common in the Puritan environment where she lived, contributed to the shaping of her personal habits. One of these customs was that of writing her poems on repurposed scraps of paper, as Dickinson would often reuse envelopes, paper bags and chocolate wrappings, among other random fragments of paper, as a canvas for her poetry (Gordon 364).

Another aspect of social life that was common at the time was that of receiving and performing social calls. According to Ackmann, it was not uncommon for Dickinson or for her contemporaries to spend their spare time from domestic chores “paying calls on the local citizenry or they on [them],” which was quite unpleasant for the poet (61). In all truth, Dickinson resented the time that these activities “snatched from her writing” (Ackmann 61), something that caused profound irritation and discomfort to the point that she did her best to avoid such activities. Moreover, Dickinson shows her awareness of the rather shallow dimension of social interactions in a letter to her friend Jane Humphrey, dated January 23, 1850. When addressing the bustling gatherings that she attends, she states, “I would gladly exchange them all for an evening with the friends I love – but it may not be” (L30). The time taken from her favorite activity, along with the lack of meaningful interactions could have added to the reasons for Dickinson’s progressive isolation, although this is still a highly debated question in terms of the actual degree of seclusion that she lived in as well as of the true reasons behind her choice. From the deterioration of her mother’s health and her growing dependency on others, which had a great impact on Dickinson’s social life, to the poet’s personal health issues or the premature death of her nephew Gib, many factors have been brought forward as possible explanations for Dickinson’s private existence. All these events notwithstanding, it is quite possible that, as Adrienne Rich suggested, Dickinson simply chose her poetry over all other pursuits and preferred to invest all her time and energy in the
perfecting of her artistic work (n.p.). Whatever the explanation, it is undeniable that this, among other aspects of her life, was the subject of an exaggeration by her early biographers and editors, namely Mabel Loomis Todd who, along with Dickinson’s poems, promoted “the image of a shy creature, reclusive, eccentric, asexual, whose ‘friend’ she had been” (Gordon 261). In reality, Mabel had “never met [Dickinson] face to face,” and most of her personal remarks about the author were far from true (Gordon 261, 306-7). At this point, it is interesting to note that regardless of the reasons behind her chosen lifestyle, Dickinson possessed the necessary means and the family support to dedicate her life to her artistic pursuits.

Born to an affluent family, and as a single woman, she was legally apt to inherit and hold ownership of her possessions and the fruit of her work (Cott 21). According to Lyndall Gordon, Edward Dickinson “had died intestate, in a country where there is no law of primogeniture,” which in practice meant that the three Dickinson siblings stood to inherit his estate in equal parts “as co-heirs” (224). Moreover, Austin Dickinson also “paid for [his sisters’] considerable bills (almost as much as those of The Evergreens) and took care of their finances as their father had done” (Gordon 200). In terms of the daily administration of her own household, Dickinson counted on the assistance of her sister Lavinia, who had also remained unmarried. Therefore, as far as temporal cares were concerned, Emily Dickinson was in full ownership of the two main endowments that, according to Virginia Woolf, any woman must possess in order to be able to dedicate herself to her work as a writer, that is, she had enough “money and a room of her own” (3). If she did not need to marry in order to secure her subsistence, Emily Dickinson was also free of the burden of having to work in order to survive (Gordon 98, Ackmann 15). Likewise, as it was not necessary for her to live off her writing career, Dickinson was also free of any pressure to publish her work and, in so doing, of adapting her style to contemporaneous literary trends. In this manner, Dickinson succeeded in establishing “a place all her own in the artistic world [...] while producing] many works that did not conform to print standards” (Smith, Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson 60-1). In effect, according to Cristanne Miller, “not publishing was [an active] choice,” which Dickinson stood by throughout her life (Reading in Time 174). She was then effectively released from the “Auction / of the Mind of Man” that she perceived to be the business of publication (F788), thus asserting her freedom and independence from external pressures exerted on her work as a poet.

Economically independent and self-sufficient, Emily Dickinson was set on the right path to live her vocation as a spinster. Nevertheless, she would not be the typical single
woman who had chosen a greater spiritual love over the impossibility of living the idealized temporal relationship within the married state (Berend 936). In effect, she lacked the faith that characterized the ideal woman of her time and that, in theory, should have guided her every decision, as she was unable to fully accept Christianity as it was lived and transmitted during her lifetime. In Dickinson’s letters, particularly in a letter to her friend Abiah Root, dated January 31, 1846, Emily Dickinson expresses her inner struggle as someone who feels that “I shall never be happy without I love Christ” (L10). Throughout this letter, the need to convert appears at par with an unspoken desire of following the example of those around her who did convert to Christianity. Nevertheless, it is impossible to judge how deeply she felt this inability to conform to the mainstream ideology, at least until her time at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary where, despite the best efforts of the Headmistress, Mary Lyon, she was consistently among the group of the “no-hopers” (Gordon 43). To Dickinson, the core of the matter resided in the intellectual submission that the acceptance of religion entailed, as, according to Lyndall Gordon, “what [she] rejects is not religion, but coercion,” thus manifesting an alert intellect which resisted any form of pressure or manipulation (46). This was, nevertheless, a major point of deviation from the feminine ideals of the time, and meant a stigma in the microcosmic society of Mt. Holyoke College as, to some of her colleagues, “Dickinson seemed unregenerate, even wicked” (Gordon 46).

Despite her resistance to conforming to her peers in terms of religion, Emily Dickinson certainly excelled in her academic endeavors. If her father, Edward Dickinson, reportedly believed that “a woman’s place was in the home,” his actions seemingly contradicted his beliefs, as Mr. Dickinson always sought the best available intellectual education for his daughters. Emily, in effect, studied consecutively at Amherst Female Seminary, Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, which she did at par with taking piano lessons and religious studies (Gordon 37-42). According to Wolff, Amherst had been open for both male and female students, “with the exception of a few years,” and despite the preference for “an orthodox religious education [...] the range of secular learning” was considerable and had been made available from the beginnings of the institution (17). A detailed recount of the curriculum available at the school can be found on a chronicle published in 1929, and it includes a wide variety of subjects, such as

reading, grammar, declamation, rhetoric and composition [...], ancient and modern geography [...], sacred geography, general history, history of the United States [...], intellectual and written arithmetic [...], algebra [...]

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conversations on natural philosophy, conversations on chymistry (old spelling), moral philosophy [...], practical mathematics, – comprehending navigation, surveying, mensuration, and astronomical calculations [...].

(Tuckerman 64)

All of this followed the most popular manuals of the time, among them “Johnson’s Dictionary, [which was] in vogue as late as 1840, although a few years earlier Walker’s or Webster’s octavo edition was recommended for the use of the pupils” (Tuckerman 65). Moreover, the study of classical languages, such as Greek and Latin was also available to students (Tuckerman 65). Both at Amherst as well as later, at Mount Holyoke, Dickinson was an outstanding student (Gordon 41-2). At Mount Holyoke, Dickinson was expected to combine her academic work with domestic chores and religious devotions. There, the curriculum was quite complex, and Dickinson prepared herself well for the entrance exams, which she passed brilliantly as “her scores placed her into the first class” (Ackmann 35-6). Dickinson’s studies at Mount Holyoke included “ancient history and rhetoric [as well as] science courses: algebra, Euclid [geometry], physiology, chemistry and astronomy” (Gordon 42). Additionally, Dickinson was quite well-read, as she “knew every verse of the Bible” (Wolff 71) and some of her favorite authors included Shakespeare, Elizabeth and Robert Browning, George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Bronté, John Milton, John Keats, John Ruskin, and Sir Thomas Browne (Sewall 620-1, L261). Dickinson, moreover, had access to her father’s library, which contained books on a great variety of subjects, as can be seen by his acquisition of “Dr. Williams [...] treatise Recent Advances in Ophtalmic Science” (Gordon 127). Mr. Dickinson is also said to have “always supplied [his daughter] with most of the books she wanted” (Gordon 42), despite his rumored reluctance concerning female education. Dickinson was also exposed to the latest news and literary trends through the newspapers and magazines to which her father subscribed, namely “The Atlantic Monthly, Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, and Scribner’s Monthly along with The Springfield Republican and two other newspapers – all of which published at least occasional current fiction, poetry, or literary criticism” (Miller, Emily Dickinson 155). In addition, Dickinson’s immediate circle of friends had cultivated the habit of buying “books on a regular basis and [exchanging] them with one another” (Miller, Emily Dickinson 155).

A well-educated woman with a mind of her own, Emily Dickinson was thus a rara avis at a time when “assertiveness [and self-sufficiency were perceived as] characteristics of a male life [that were therefore] ‘monstrous’ in women precisely because ‘unfeminine’”
An example of Dickinson’s affirmation of herself was her choice of poetic themes, which coincidentally broke away from the norm. Instead of writing about piety, family life or any other typically feminine subject, Dickinson chose to question fixed truths while addressing controversial subjects such as faith, or the lack thereof, death and the existence of eternal life, as well as experimenting with form and meaning in an unprecedented and certainly unexpected way for a female writer. At a time when women authors “were expected to exercise their emotions, but not their intelligence,” Dickinson’s openly speculative, experimental and “systematic” methods were sure to create controversy and be rejected by the mainstream publishing industry (Wolff 175). In that sense, her desire for originality, following the Emersonian principles of remaining faithful to oneself and obeying one’s innermost voice, was successfully materialized in her life and writings (18, 19).
“A fairer House than Prose”: Emily Dickinson and the Art of Poetic Composition

One of Emily Dickinson’s most outstanding poems about poetry, “I dwell in Possibility” (F466), which Franklin classifies as “about late 1862, [and is included] in Fascicle 22” (1: 483), addresses the richness and openness of poetic creative writing, and in so doing, it not only praises it for its beauty, but it also uses a series of techniques that the author developed over the years. It would be interesting, at this point, to read the poem here, in order to understand the layers of meaning that will be discussed:

I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –
More numerous for Windows –
Superior – for Doors –

Of Chambers as the Cedars –
Impregnable of eye –
And for an everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky –

Of Visitors – the fairest –
For Occupation – This –
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise –

Among the techniques employed by Dickinson in her poetry is the use of metaphor to create an almost dreamy imagery that, nevertheless, remains open to the participation of the reader in what refers to the creation of meaning. Moreover, the author’s use of fragmented sentences, of dashes in lieu of other punctuation marks, or even the capitalization of words that, in all logic, should not have been singled out in this manner, are further methods used by Dickinson in her craft. Thus, she successfully creates an unexpected and puzzling initial impact in the reader’s mind that demands a reply, inasmuch as the logic of the laws of grammar and semantics are irretrievably broken. This not only allows for, but it also provokes the co-participation of the reader in the creation of meaning, while generating an
open line of dialogue which cannot, by the openness of its nature, be subjected to definitive closures. In that sense, “the materiality of [Dickinson’s] words provides one kind of context where, frequently, other contexts are lacking [at the same time that it constitutes] a way to create meaning that is more full and ample than conventional poetics generally affords” (Juhasz 430). For Dickinson, then, poetry is the home of infinite possibility and, ultimately, a vehicle of and to eternity, as with its help, and through its means, her “narrow Hands / [can] gather Paradise” (ll. 11-2). This is what this poem comes to signify: poetry, in itself, is not only full of possibilities, it is possibility itself, with all the amplitude, height and depth that it entails. Such a statement, moreover, has an almost Pauline connotation, inasmuch as poetry takes on the dimensions of the all-encompassing divinity in whom St. Paul declares that “we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17. 28). Poetry then becomes, in Dickinson’s words, an infinite reality, unlimited in its nature, open to not only all possibilities, but also to the entire universe, for its limits are the “Gambrels of the Sky” (l. 8).

It is also possible to infer, from the reading of this poem, that Dickinson perceives poetry as an act of continuous observation, whereby one is constantly in a state of awareness to one’s surroundings, and open to all fair “Visitors” (l. 9) that may appear, that is, to all stimuli that may become the vehicles of poetic inspiration. Fairness, however, seems to be in the eye of the beholder insofar as, in her poetic work, Dickinson combines a clear appreciation for nature and beauty with a darker source of inspiration, which this essay will discuss, as one of the prevalent themes in her poetry is death. In that sense, it can be argued that, even in a phenomenon that instinctively causes some degree of repulse, “there’s [also] a certain slant of light” (F320, l. 1). Interesting enough, the exact poem that is supposed to encompass Dickinson’s thoughts on poetry, is left open-ended by the poet herself as it lacks a definitive punctuation mark, ending in a dash that simply hangs in space. Eternity then remains the scope and territory of poetry, an open house existing in an unlimited time, waiting for its visitor-reader to enter into it and receive or enjoy the fragments of Dickinson’s collected Paradise.

Emily Dickinson also offers an enlightening description of the artistic craft and function of the poet in a later poem titled “The Poets light but Lamps” (F930), which Franklin dates as “early 1865” (2: 855). For Emily Dickinson, then,

The Poets light but Lamps –
Themselves – go out –
The Wicks they stimulate
If vital Light

Inhere as do the Suns –
Each Age as a Lens
Disseminating their
Circumference –

The poet disappears behind her work, which itself becomes the bearer of light. It is as if the poem becomes the vehicle of the inner light that inspired the poet and will go on to create a response in the reader, or readers, that will come in contact with it. The interesting nuance, however, is that “if [this] light [is] Vital” (l. 4), it will itself shine through as the sun which illuminated it, almost as if it were a satellite reflecting the light of the sun, much like the moon when seen from the earth. In that sense, poets light eternal lights or, to put it in another way, their light shines through the readers of “Each Age, [whose function] as a Lens / [serves the purpose of] Disseminating their / Circumference” (ll. 6-8). Dickinson’s use of the term circumference, which she capitalizes in this poem in order to draw the reader’s attention to its weight in her reasoning, has its origin, according to Robert Weisbuch, in Emerson’s essay “Circles,” from 1841 (Weisbuch 52). In this essay, Emerson starts his argument with a quote which he mistakenly attributes to St. Augustine, that reads “the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere, and its circumference nowhere” (Emerson n.p.). This quote, which according to Michael Keefer, originally belonged “to the legendary Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus,” converts the sphere, which was “a traditional image of perfect intelligibility [... into] an intelligible form.” (303). This paradox was “heightened by Alain de Lille later in the [the twelfth century],” and came to signify the “indeterminate but somehow constant relationship between divine immanence (the ubiquitous centre) and transcendence (the unlocatable circumference), or between the insignificant created individual that is the centre point, and the unconceivable immensity of the divine whole” (Keefer 303). Nevertheless, de Lille’s own reflection on the subject seems to suggest elsewhere that “the attributes of the center and circumference [may be] exchanged,” in such a way that “the centre becomes a metonymy for the circumference, and the circumference a metonymy for the centre” (Keefer 304). Once the functions become interchangeable and inter-significant, both entities share in the same transcendence and immanence, whereby the one and the other are merged, and the immanent is also transcendent, meaning that the so-called “insignificant created individual” becomes not only a participant of “the unconceivable immensity of the
divine whole,” but he or she becomes that “divine whole” (Keefer 303). Applied to Dickinson’s views on the poet, it can thus be inferred that the reader not only participates in the meaning created by the poets, as the lens that reflects the poets’ light, but the reader also becomes that light, that is, that message, that meaning, that essence that the poet, in this case Dickinson, wishes to transmit through the metaphorical “scenelessness [whereby she] creates an expandable circumference of meaning” (Weisbuch 53). Poetry and the poet are thus identified with each other and come to incarnate, in Dickinson’s optic, a transcendental source of meaning that surpasses the boundaries of time, space and individual intentionality.

“A word made Flesh”: Language, Punctuation and Style in Emily Dickinson’s Craft

Emily Dickinson was always exceptionally careful in her choice of words, as well as in the form whereby these words were conveyed, or incarnated, into her manuscripts. Among the many aforementioned devices used by the author are the use of dashes, capitalization, metaphor and fragmentation of sentences. Moreover, the poet also made wide use of devices such as ambiguity, experimentation with form, grammar and rhythm. These forms of expression and presentation, however, were rooted in an earlier tradition, which Dickinson adapted to her own inclinations and ideas. This extraordinary capacity “to find all forms flexible to her thought or design” will be discussed in the following paragraphs (Miller, Reading in Time 59).

During the nineteenth century, “American aesthetics [revealed a decisive penchant toward the] return to ‘Beauty’ or ‘sound,’ that is, the lyrical aspect of the lyrical poem,” which was perceived as being “fully compatible [...] with the] didactic and philosophical argument” (Miller, Reading in Time 27). In a word, aesthetics did not exclude profound thinking, something that Dickinson found to be essential in her poetic craft (Miller, Reading in Time 31). As an accomplished pianist who had studied music and singing from a young age, Dickinson is likely to have developed a particular sensitivity to rhythm as well as to the musicality of words to the extent that, in Miller’s opinion, “Dickinson’s composition began with the rhythm of a stanza in her head” (Reading in Time 52-3, 74). This would gradually and almost naturally evolve into “a beginning stanza [which] set a pattern” for the rest of the poem without limiting her freedom, as “stanzas gave force and shape to thought through their anticipated rhythmic and syntactic closure – even when altered, or forestalled by enjambment” (Miller, Reading in Time 74). This musicality, as well as her familiarity with and “use of hymn meter (often called the common meter) for all but a few metrically experimental poems is widely attributed to her reading, and singing” of Reverend Isaac
Watts’s book titled *Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs*. This book, which was reportedly “as familiar to New Englanders as the Bible itself,” was available to Dickinson in her father’s library (Miller, *Emily Dickinson* 141). The inspiration for the use of the dash in Dickinson’s poems is attributed to her familiarity with this book, more specifically with the “Preface” written by Samuel Worcester, where the author states that “the dash is intended to denote an expressive suspension [for] in order to [achieve] good expression, a distinct and judicious observance of the pauses, is absolutely necessary” (5). The dash, moreover, was a common resource in letter writing at the time, and that is visible also in the use that Dickinson makes of it in her own correspondence, particularly starting from L29, dated January 1850, where dashes are widely used to replace almost all other signs of punctuation. This turns into a veritable habit in Dickinson’s epistolary style, to the extent that, when read out loud, or even when compared side by side, her letters and poems appear to be one and the same, with a mere variation in terms of form, for the former take on the shape of prose, while the latter take on the form of hymns. Nevertheless, the transcription of these dashes, particularly in the poems, is in itself problematic as, according to Martha Nell Smith, they are not uniform, but are rather directed “up or down,” offering a further layer of meaning that is all but lost in their translation from the original manuscripts into printed form (*Rowing in Eden* 19-20).

Another resource which Dickinson made wide use of is compression, which Cristanne Miller defines as “whatever creates density or compactness of meaning in language” (*Emily Dickinson* 24). According to Miller, this compression “takes a number of forms,” which serve different purposes, and are aimed at “[allowing] for protective ambiguity, [conveying] a sense of the speaker’s withheld power, and [implying] a profundity beyond the obvious import of its message” (*Emily Dickinson* 26-7). Compression, in this sense, is a vehicle for open-endedness, making way for the reader to effectively become co-creator of meaning, while abstaining from conditioning and somehow limiting his or her possible conclusions or experiences of the written artifact. This compression or fragmentation is not an innovation per se, but something that Dickinson herself would have been familiar with, once more, due to the hymnic culture that she lived in. In the preface to a book containing several of Rev. Watts’s hymns, *Church Psalmody*, which coincidentally was also available in Edward Dickinson’s library, editors Mason and Green also address the advantages of compression, despite not using this specific term to refer to this stylistic device (Miller, *Reading in Time* 60). According to Mason and Greene, then,

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6 For further clarification on the issue of the continuity between poems and letters, please refer to p. 72 of Robert Weisbuch’s book *Emily Dickinson’s Poetry*. 
Every line should be full of meaning. At every syllable, the mind should feel that it is making progress, taking some new view, or receiving some additional or deeper impression. [...] An unmeaning line or word, thrown in to make out the rhyme or measure is like a dead limb on a living body – a cumbrous deformity, better amputated than retained. (original emphasis, v)

Hence the condensed and often-times ambiguous language used by Dickinson in her poetic work, which is potentiated by her experimentation with grammar and punctuation. At this point, it is interesting to reflect on Dickinson’s use of the hymn and ballad forms in her work. According to Miller, these modes of poetic expression are not, in themselves, suitable for “an interrogation of philosophical questions,” however certain features such as “their easy rhythms, pungent and idiomatic address, and loose narrative structures seem to enable Dickinson’s densely metaphorical and epistemological turns” (Reading in Time 51).

Following her experimental inclinations, Dickinson then used these apparently modest forms to create and transmit her musings, or if not hers, those of the many selves which as an artist, she incarnated and through whose eyes she contemplated and experienced the many worlds of her imagination.

Ambiguity and experimentation with grammar are interconnected instances in Emily Dickinson’s poetic technique. It is widely known that she enjoyed using words in unexpected ways, and an example is her use of transitive verbs as intransitive verbs which, according to Miller, “will always create syntactic and semantic ambiguity [to such an extent that] the reader will attempt to find a direct object where there is none” (Emily Dickinson 70-1). As an example of this stylistic change of verbal categories offered by Miller is Emily Dickinson’s poem “Four Trees – opon a solitary Acre” (F778), which Franklin dates as “late 1863 [and is contained] in Fascicle 37” (2: 733):

Four Trees – opon a solitary Acre –
Without Design
Or Order, or Apparent Action –
Maintain –

7 For a detailed study of grammar in Dickinson’s poetry, please refer to chapters 2 and 4 of Emily Dickinson: A Poet’s Grammar, by Cristanne Miller.
8 Note that the spelling used by Dickinson would be commonly accepted as correct in nineteenth-century America although departing from modern usage.
Following Miller’s reasoning in this matter, the verb “Maintain,” at the end of the first stanza, appears to be requesting a direct object, or at least suggesting to the reader that something is missing. In that sense, the co-creation of meaning between the author and the reader appears as the only reply to an apparently incomplete sentence. Condensation, which in this instance takes the form of an abrupt cut of the sentence’s natural sequence, thus appears as a form of creating an impact and almost demanding a response from a reader who will necessarily engage with this atypical semantical structure. Likewise, the capitalization of words practiced by Dickinson in her poems contradicts amply practiced linguistic conventions, as in “the earlier British and American [written English, there was the] habit of capitalizing nouns” (Miller, Emily Dickinson 58). In her written work, however, Dickinson took to capitalizing other categories of words, namely verbs, adverbs, or pronouns, among others, thus giving “her words a symbolic referentiality [... as well as] added weight in the line” (Miller, Emily Dickinson 58). In this manner, the poet could create a further layer of meaning, simply by drawing the reader’s attention to words that might have easily been ignored at a first glance. The symbolic function of words is therefore reinforced as, from this perspective, “a capitalized noun [can] represent its class” and it may also embody its metaphorical connotation (Miller, Emily Dickinson 59). In this case, Miller offers the example of the symbolic significance contained in the first verse of Dickinson’s poem “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun” (F764). The “Gun,” which appears capitalized in this verse, “is metaphorical” as it captures both the “repression or containment [as well as the] potential explosively destructive power” which that gun, but also all guns in general, can yield in the hands of their users (Miller, Emily Dickinson 59). In general, however, the use of capitalization contributes to the open-endedness of Dickinson’s poems as, according to Miller, she “seems to invite the reader to make as much of them as he or she will” (Emily Dickinson 59).

A further feature that contributes to the open-endedness of Dickinson’s poetry is the fact that she left a number of poems, either in the form of drafts or of fair copies, which “contain one or more variants of a word or line without indicating which choice the poet preferred” (Miller, Emily Dickinson 46). These variants, as they are called, may have been

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9 For an example of the capitalization of words in earlier printed works in English, see figs. 1a and 1b, in Appendix A.
10 The first verse of this poem is also its title. It is interesting to note that Dickinson herself never gave titles to her poems, nor did she include any chronological note to her work. The only form whereby Dickinson sought to give some type of order to her manuscripts was through the sewing of selected poems in booklets which were later called fascicles. Any other form of cataloguing, either by theme or date, has been tentatively undertaken by the successive editors of Emily Dickinson’s work.
composed by Dickinson for her correspondents, the words being altered to suit the tone of the letter she was sending. Alternately, the author herself may have enjoyed these many possibilities and could not decide on a definitive version of her work (Miller, *Emily Dickinson* 46-7). Nevertheless, these extant versions of Dickinson’s poems may also be perceived as stages in the evolution of her writerly work, whereby the reader is given to observe the evolution of Dickinson’s craft. An example of these variant versions that have reached the modern reader is the poem “The Drop, that wrestles in the Sea,” which Franklin catalogues as 255A and 255B. Version 255A is described as having been sent to Samuel Bowles, one of Dickinson’s correspondents, in 1861 (Franklin 1: 275), and it reads:

The Drop, that wrestles in the Sea –
Forgets her own locality –
As I – toward Thee –

She knows herself an incense small –
Yet *small* – she sighs – if *all* is *all* –
How *larger* – be?

The Ocean – smiles – at her Conceit –
But *She*, forgetting Amphitrite –
Pleads – “*Me*”? (original emphasis)

Version 255B which Franklin dates as “late 1861”, survived along with twenty other poems, as a part of fascicle 11 (1: 275). It differs slightly from version 255A, with minor changes in terms of form, as the words are positioned differently throughout the stanzas, and the italics on stanzas two and three are eliminated. The single most significant change corresponds to the replacement of “incense” for “Offering,” along with the capitalization of the latter word,

The Drop, that wrestles in the Sea –
Forgets her own locality
As I, in Thee –

She knows herself an Offering small –
yet small, she sighs, if all, is all,
How larger – be?

The Ocean, smiles at her conceit –
But she, forgetting Amphitrite –
Pleads “Me”?

The changes in capitalization, aligned to convey the sense of greatness of the small offering are patent in the capitalization of the word, thus bringing to light the meaning and importance the importance of the drop of water to the actual immensity and strength of the entire Ocean. The drop that loses herself to give form to the greater mass of water, sacrificing its own identity identifies with the speaker who herself also disappears into the immensity of a greater being or purpose, a capitalized “Thee” who seems to be of a superior nature. In effect, the fact that in version 255A, the offering was incense, seems to point to the transcendental dimension of this mystical entity. It is in the second verse of Psalm 141 that the believer prays to God: “Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice” (original emphasis). In ancient Israel, and in fact, from the time that the covenant was celebrated between God and the Jewish people, the tradition of the afternoon “flower offering [involving] wheat or barley flower accompanied by wine and frankincense” was widely known among the people, and is referred to in Psalm 141 (Altein n.p.). By performing a sacrifice in the Temple, the devout also believed that the “matter and vitality of this world was [elevated] to a higher plane,” actually reaching the throne of God (Altein n.p.). Hence the heartfelt prayer accompanying the sacrifice would rise with the incense and evening sacrifice, and thus become even greater than the believers or their offerings, to the extent that it would actually participate and allow the believers to participate in the transcendence of the worshiped divinity. Back to the poem, through the parallelism between the speaker’s smallness and the immensity of the Sea, which himself takes on a divine dimension, the drop of water, presenting herself as an offering, asks to be recognized in her sacrificial component, as an important part that same immensity. Demanding to be granted equality with the divine power, or with the entire Ocean, the drop of water, or the human voice that prays to an unseen divinity both forgets and surpasses that distance, which is indicated by her “forgetting Amphitrite,” the Greek “goddess-queen of the sea, wife of Poseidon” (“Amphitrite” n.p.). It is almost as if the speaker is claiming to be even more important than the wife of Poseidon herself, demanding her contribution to be seen and acknowledged, for in the same measure that “Forever – is composed of Nows” (F690), so the
Ocean, in all its immensity, is composed by small and apparently insignificant droplets of water. Changing a word, then, as well as capitalizing it or italicizing it, may serve to clarify meaning, or create a new layer of comprehension. In this choice of not choosing, Emily Dickinson opens new doors, gives rise to new possibilities, thus engaging the reader in a continuous exploration of the new horizons that hide behind or within her words, or in the lack thereof.
“Death is the supple Suitor”: Death as a Theme in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson’s most prolific years as a writer, in terms of the quantity of poems produced, coincided roughly with one of the most destructive periods in the history of the United States of America, that is, the Civil War. Between 1861 and 1865, Emily Dickinson reportedly wrote 937 of the extant 1789 poems which constitute her entire opus (Franklin 3: 1533-4), a fact that may also be connected to an eye illness which could have potentially left her blind. According to Ackmann, the concern over “her eyes and the possible end of her creative production” likely compelled the poet to channel her energies into her poetic work in a more intense manner than ever before (141-2, 145). Several seemed to be the factors that aligned to impulse Dickinson’s creativity, in a moment of personal and collective uncertainty which called for a response, or a search, or simply the need to be faithful to oneself and one’s aspirations. Coincidentally, this was a period dominated by the idea and the presence of death in an unprecedented scale, for if the ominous presence of the end of life and the paraphernalia related to it was potentiated by the technological and economic changes originated by the Industrial Revolution of the preceding century (Lightfoot 83, 244), it was likewise palpable in the overwhelming numbers of fallen, both military and civilian, caused by the Civil War (Faust xi-xii). The confluence of this tragic event, which continues to affect the existence of American citizens to this day, and the Victorian culture of death as it was lived and manifested in nineteenth-century America, created a particular socio-cultural atmosphere which certainly influenced Emily Dickinson’s treatment of the theme of death. For that reason, it is interesting to address these instances in a more detailed manner before delving into Dickinson’s poems.

Ars Moriendi: The Art of Dying

Speaking of the omnipresence of the symbols and references to death in Victorian America makes it necessary to search for their origins in earlier history. The notion of death as an important milestone in the life of Christian believers can be traced to the origin of the religion, inasmuch as it was through Christ’s death and resurrection that the world and every single creature in it was saved, and creation was restituted to its original harmony. In a more personal way, death was perceived as the moment of truth, wherein the immortal soul would meet its maker, and “the dead [would] stand before [the throne of] God [...] and be] judged [...] according to their works” (Rev. 20.12). Those deemed worthy, the ones who, according
to the book of Revelation “do his [God’s] commandments [...] may enter in through the gates into the city,” that city being “the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God” (22.17, 21.10). Hence the marked tension toward eternal life, the true life, which would follow this world’s affliction, and which made death, and the preparation for it so crucial in the path of the believer. This tension toward eternity is generally indicated through the words that mark the ending of the book of Revelation, which are often left in their Aramaic original, Maranatha,11 which means “Come, Lord Jesus” (22.20), wherein the writer calls for the second coming of Jesus and the establishment of his kingdom in the new world that will be created in a future eschatological time.

This future encounter, however, was to be preceded by a more personal meeting and judgment, at the time of individual death, a moment, moreover, from which there was no turning back, and where there were no further possibilities to make amends. Hence the importance of personal and lifelong preparation for such a decisive moment as that of death, for this lifetime was considered to be all the time that the believer had at their disposition to prepare for it. The configuration with Christ in life, through the following of his commandments, and the imitation of his attitudes, became a constant from early Christianity onwards, as can be perceived by the words of the apostle Paul,

The Spirit itself beareth witness with our Spirit, that we are children of God: And if Children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be That we suffer with him, that we may also be glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. (original emphasis, Rom. 8.16-18)

Conforming with Christ in life, more specifically through the participation in his sufferings, would then signify being accepted as a child of God, and having the certainty of being with him in his kingdom for all eternity. From this perspective, then, life was not so much about this world, but about the way whereby individual existence in it would be a preparation for a final, perpetual, reward that would last forever.

11 According to the Precept Austin website for Bible study, Maranatha “is transliterated into English from two Aramaic words which are rendered either as ‘Marana and tha,’ which is translated as a prayer ‘Our Lord, come’ (מָרַנָא תָא) or alternatively as ‘Maran and atha’ (מָרַן אֲתָא) which is translated as a declarative statement ‘Our Lord comes’ or ‘Our Lord has come.’” (“Maranatha – Our Lord Come” n.p.).
The promises awaiting the believer after a holy death, however, did not remove the fear of this decisive, yet unknown, moment. According to Stannard, “during the late Middle Ages, [the fear of death] appears to have reached a peak of intensity, [quite possibly, but not exclusively, due] to the devastating plagues that wracked western Europe during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries” (15). It was during this time that traditions such as “the danse macabre and Ars Moriendi [...] developed and flourished” (Stannard 15). A notable change was registered in the representation of death, particularly in terms of tomb sculptures, which

turned toward literal representations of the deceased in advanced stages of decomposition; life-size images of the naked dead were sculpted, with great care taken to depict such details as the abdomen stitches of the embalmers and the decayed vermin-infested flesh of the corpse. (Stannard 15)

The subject of the disintegrating corpse thus became an obsession, being widely represented in painting as well as in sculpture, for “it was invariably the physical quality of death and dying” which seemed to preoccupy individuals thus far focused on the spiritual dimension of death (Stannard 19). The representation of death in such a macabre manner was, according to Huizinga, a gradual process which culminated in the “conception of death in art and literature [under] a spectral and fantastic shape [adding] a new and vivid shudder to the great primitive horror of death” (129). Central to this concept of death was what Huizinga calls “the death-dance,” the danse macabre mentioned by Stannard, which has its source in the “motif of the three dead and three living men, which is found in French literature from the thirteenth century onward” (Huizinga 129-30). These characters’ unexpected meeting culminates with the “three hideous dead men [telling the living] of their past grandeur and [warning] them of their own near end” (Huizinga 130). The warning of the unavoidable future of death and the decomposition that it entailed soon became a popular theme, appearing in sculptures and frescoes all over Europe. These artistic representations, which in time came to include both men and women, were placed in cathedrals, churches or cemeteries, thus becoming accessible to a great number of people, and serving as a memento mori, a reminder “of the frailty and the vanity of earthly things, [beginning with life itself, while preaching] social equality as the Middle Ages understood it [with] Death levelling the various ranks and professions” (Huizinga 130-1).
Associated with this pictorial representation of the final earthly reality of human life, there was a literary current aimed at confronting the living with the later moments of their existence on this planet, as well as with what awaited them immediately after this event. Two major works, the *Ars Moriendi*\(^{12}\) and the *Quatuor Hominum Novissima*,\(^{13}\) which translated to English means *The Art of Dying* and *The Last Four Things*, “that is, the four last experiences awaiting man, of which death was the first, [... both] comprised a description of the agony of death” which encompassed traditional Christian doctrine regarding death and the fate of the immortal human soul (Huizinga 132). The *danse macabre* was itself the subject of woodcuts and prints, as well as of “dramatic representations,” which made the horror of death more alive for its audience and readers. According to Huizinga, “the first edition of the *Danse Macabré* [was published in] 1485 [by] Parisian printer Guyot Marchant,”\(^{14}\) who chose to illustrate this book of the visitation of death to men of all ranks with images that were based on one of the most famous representations of death-dances in France, that is, the 1424 mural “of the cloister of the churchyard of the Innocents at Paris” (Huizinga 130). In these illustrations, as well as in the general depictions of the putrefying corpse, “the indefatigable dancer is the living man himself in his future shape, a frightful double of his person” (Huizinga 131). However, by the end of the century, this dancing “figure [...] of a corpse with hollow and fleshless body, becomes a skeleton,” and it is through this exchange that “Death in person [replaces] the individual dean man” (Huizingia 131).\(^{15}\)

The common theme of death in the Christian world made it so that these realities were known in the English speaking world as well, at least until the formal separation from Rome headed by king Henry VIII, which in turn led to the creation of the Anglican Church. Nevertheless, some of these doctrines were incorporated into Anglican piety, albeit with the required adaptations. Such was the case of the aforementioned *Ars Moriendi*, which, in time, “was reinterpreted by the Anglican cleric Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667) to fit the tenets of the Church of England” (Lightfoot 67). Taylor’s adaptation, published as “*The Rule and Exercise of Holy Dying*, [which] was written in 1651 and reprinted several times [...] instructs readers

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\(^{12}\) For further information on the *Ars Moriendi*, and to browse through the book, please refer to [www.loc.gov/item/49038880/](http://www.loc.gov/item/49038880/).

\(^{13}\) For further information on the last four things of the Christian soul, please refer to the Catechism of the Catholic Church: [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p123a12.htm](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p123a12.htm).

\(^{14}\) Guyot’s *La Danse Macabre* can be accessed in its entirety in: [http://www.dodedans.com/Eparis-1485.htm](http://www.dodedans.com/Eparis-1485.htm). By clicking on the pictures, the reader is granted access to more detailed information about each character, as well as on different editions of the book, and translations into English. However, some parts are not translated in this website, therefore, for a more detailed translation, please refer to: [https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/cook-and-strakhov-dance-of-death-la-danse-macabre](https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/cook-and-strakhov-dance-of-death-la-danse-macabre).

\(^{15}\) For an overview of the evolution of the depiction of death in funereal art, please see the Appendices at the end of this work. For an image from this book, please see fig. 2, in Appendix B.
on how to prepare for [death and] also prepares survivors for the death of a loved one” (Lightfoot 67). Alongside the Anglican reformation, however, other currents of thought and belief, sought to perfect the Christian doctrines and their manifestations in everyday existence. One of these reformist groups was that of the so called Puritans, “who were deeply dissatisfied with what they considered to be the incomplete break with Rome that the Anglican Church of the sixteenth century had effected” (Stannard 32). Living in a world marked by misery, poverty, and the proliferation of disease and death, where faith and the belief in a divinely ordained creation were the only security that they felt, the one thing that Puritans looked forward to, “indeed, their deep-rooted expectation – was [...] Christ’s imminent second Coming” (Stannard 39). In effect, the certainty that “the millennium was at hand [...] infused [them] with the dynamic spirit of reform” which moved them to search not only for the collective salvation of England, but also to lock “themselves in their homes and [search] agonizingly for the signs of their individual deliverance” (Stannard 40).

Convinced of the intrinsic depravity of human history and of the human heart, and persuaded of the proximity and the power of the forces of evil, Puritans additionally believed that no one, with the exception of “a select and predetermined few” chosen by God’s mercy, was worthy of eternal salvation (Stannard 36-41). It was in the quest for any hint of this predestined salvation that the Puritans initiated “a journey of harrowing and tearful introspection [wherein] they searched [...] among the numberless indications of depravity [within their consciences, for] some signs, at least, that they might be among the chosen few” (original emphasis, Stannard 41). Thus, feeling isolated from their contemporaries and experiencing the turmoil of this ceaseless introspection, the Puritans decided to search for a refuge, a new world where “the holiest remnant of God’s people” could await for the coming of their Lord freely following his precepts (Stannard 40). Among the early settlers who arrived at North American shores in search of this earthly City of God was Nathaniel Dickinson, a direct ancestor of Emily Dickinson who crossed the Atlantic Ocean in 1630, as a part of “the Great Migration led by John Winthrop” (Sewall 17).

For the Puritans, according to Stannard, death was in itself an ambiguous concept, as it was “both punishment and reward,” for at the same time that it could open the gates of eternal life to the believer, it was also a punishment for sin (77). This perspective was based on the words of St. Paul, when he said that it was due to the fault if Adam that “sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned” (Rom. 5.12). Punishment notwithstanding, the gift of God’s grace, offered freely through Christ’s sacrifice, granted the base sinner the gift of reigning with his divine Savior “through
righteousness unto eternal life” (Rom. 5.21). Death then became “one of the devout Puritan’s more important preoccupations,” to the extent that it became an obligation to meditate upon death on a daily basis and live as if one were dying every day. That much is emphasized in the words of Cotton Mather, who dedicated a sermon to the importance of the daily death of the devout Christian by stating, among other things, that to die daily “is to have Daily, and Serious, and Solemn Thoughts on the Judgment which is to come After Death,” and think of and examine oneself on how one will appear in that judgment, that is, as someone who has followed and kept God’s word and his commandments, or as someone worthy of the eternal punishment of hell (original emphasis, 25-6). The terrifying notion of this impending doom, along with the existential anguish caused by the uncertainty of salvation, caused a great deal of terror among the Puritans, and created a rather bleak individual opinion as well as a negative perception of the world in general (Stannard 40-3, 72 ff.). This, along with their geographical isolation, contributed to a rigidification of the customs and worldviews among the Puritans of New England which, as time went by, came to contrast with the progressive openness of their English counterparts to the doctrines of the Church of England, namely those concerning death (Stannard 87-8, 96-7). Nevertheless, this was an unsustainable state of affairs and, through a process of “change [that] remains a matter of conjecture,” the Puritan society of New England experienced a gradual transformation in its core beliefs as well as in the forms whereby they were lived out in a daily context (Stannard 93). According to Stannard, as a result of this evolution, New England’s Puritan culture is said to have suffered its downfall in the 1740s (163).

An interesting feature of this early Puritan society, which is noteworthy for the manifestation of the culture of death in early Anglo-American society, is that of the customs related to death and burial. Despite believing in the resurrection of the body, Puritan Christians also held the notion that, after the separation of the soul from the body at the time of death, the body which was left behind was “an horror to all that behold it; a most loathsome and abhorred spectacle [insofar as] those that loved it most, cannot now find in their hearts to looke on’t” (Bolton 82). To aggravate matters even further, Puritan belief in the fact that funeral rites of any kind, due to their inherently “superstitious” nature, “are [in] no way beneficial to the dead, and have proved many ways hurtful to the living” made it so that, upon someone’s death, that person should be “immediately interred, without any ceremony” (“The Directory for the Publick Worship of God” n.p.). In their desire to purge the reformed religion from any traces of Catholicism, early Puritans also believed it necessary to destroy all religious imagery, in an iconoclastic movement that extended to “tombs and grave
markers adorned with religious imagery” (Stannard 106-7). Despite legislation being issued by the Queen of England, in 1560, to forbid such forms of disrespect against the dead, in practice, the most fervent members of the reform movement did not conform to these rulings (Stannard 107). This resulted in almost a complete wipe out of “pre-Restoration headstones [in] England,” the remaining few consisting of “almost uniformly small, simple blocks of stone” (Stannard 108). This extremist position concerning all things related to death and funereal rites extended also to the Puritans who emigrated to New England, at least until the late seventeenth century, when a “increasing numbers of Puritan funerals were conducted with an air of elaborate and formal ritual” (Stannard 111).

From the washing and dressing of the body for the funeral rituals, to the gifting of gloves as a sign of invitation to the ceremony, latter-day Puritans also carried out religious ceremonies in the place of worship, and buried their dead in good quality coffins (Stannard 112-3). Likewise, the dead body would be carried to its final resting place on a hearse pulled by horses, being both the hearse and the coffin clad in black cloth. After the interment, the funeral party would then meet at the “church or home of the deceased, where they feasted and were frequently given funeral rings to mark their attendance” (Stannard 113). These rings, “fashioned of gold,” were given not only in memory of the deceased, but also had the function of memento mori, as they were “inlaid with delicately carved black enamel death’s-heads, skeletons, coffins, and other reminders of the frailty of life” (Stannard 113). Coincidentally, these were signs and symbols of death which prevailed and were adopted in a larger scale in the nineteenth century. Death had, then, become an extravagant and costly affair, in great contrast to the way in which the first Puritan inhabitants of the New World had desired. This newly found ritualization also extended to the cemetery, inasmuch as, from the 1650s, “carefully carved stones [used] to indicate the sites of burial” begin to make their appearance (Stannard 116). As a reminder of the deceased, but also as a reminder of the ultimate fate of every human being, these stones were adorned with symbolic images referring to death, such as “death’s-heads, scythes, hourglasses, picks and shovels” (Stannard 117). This “imagery of the tombstone was reflected also on the printed page [namely in the] broadside verse [which celebrated] the virtuous and religious nature of the deceased” and, along with the funeral sermon, also became a part of the funeral rituals among the Puritans of New England (Stannard 117).\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{16}\) For a representation of Puritan mourning rings, please see fig. 3, in Appendix C.

\(^{17}\) For a representation of a headstone containing Puritan symbology of death, please see fig. 4, in Appendix D.
As time went by, and mentalities and mores changed, views on death also evolved, to the point that, from the eighteenth century onward, death became romanticized, and was increasingly perceived as a moment of reunion with departed loved ones (Stannard 151, 160-1, 163). This changing attitude toward death was reflected in the tombstones, which started gradually to depict this “metamorphosis away from death’s head image to the beginnings of abstract design and the more romantic and optimistic angel’s head motif” (Stannard 158). The progression in the relationship with and perception of death continued into the nineteenth century, with the creation of an American culture of death which, albeit largely based on the influences of old England, had many nuances that made it unique to the American context.

“Endow the Living – with the Tears”: Death as (Performed) Grief in Victorian America

In a similar way to what had occurred in the past, death was a constant presence in nineteenth-century America, mostly due to the confluence of different factors such as wars, illnesses, and poor medical care. In effect, the latter may be justified by the lack of knowledge on the origins of infectious diseases, which in turn led to the inability to effectively combat them (Lightfoot 150). In such a state of affairs, diseases spread amply, and often were transmitted by the doctors themselves, due to a lack of hygiene that could have otherwise prevented the death of many. For that reason, hospitals were seen as dangerous places, to the point that “in 1800 [they] were only established by charities as places where the less fortunate went to die” (Lightfoot 151). Therefore, the care for the sick took place in the home, generally perceived as the appropriate place for it, inasmuch as it was in the familiar environment of their house that “people were born and […] people died” (Lightfoot 151). According to Linkman, then, in the nineteenth century, Americans

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18 For a representation of a late eighteenth-century headstone from New England, please see fig. 5, in Appendix E.
19 Due to the length of this essay, as well as the central topic that it addresses, it is impossible to offer greater detail on the what was a highly meticulous and complex series of customs, rituals and objects related to death and the treatment of the dying and the deceased in nineteenth-century America. For further information, please refer to D. Tulla Lightfoot’s book The Culture and Art of Death in 19th Century America. Another interesting source about the customs surrounding death and dying in America, from its foundation to present times, is the book Disconnected from Death: The Evolution of Funerary Customs & The Unmasking of Death in America, by Amy Slaughter and Troy Taylor.
believed that a ‘good death’ should take place in a Christian home, where the
dying person, lucid, conscious and surrounded by loving relatives, could take
meaningful last farewells from family members, resigned to God’s will and
[was] comforted by the assurance that they would meet again in heaven. (15)

Caring for the dying was both a duty and a privilege, something that the living looked
forward to in order to have something to remember their departed loved ones by. Being
absent from the deathbed of friends or family was often greatly regretted, and portraits or
photographs of the departed, along with detailed narratives of their last moments, often filled
the void originated from said absence, while alleviating any sentiment of guilt derived from it
(Lightfoot 151).

Expressions of grief were quite public and encompassed a series of customs which
involved elaborate mourning rituals for both men and women, that included a panoply of
objects, garments, and forms of keeping the memory of the departed alive. The Industrial
Revolution of the previous century, along with all the scientific breakthroughs it occasioned
truly and effectively changed all aspects of everyday life, among which were those related to
death. This allowed for the serialized production of commodities associated to death and
mourning, which became accessible to a greater number of people, as “entrepreneurs realized
that money could be made from grieving loved ones and figured out ingenious ways to
capitalize on this,” creating a veritable mourning industry. Likewise, the need to maintain a
connection with the departed led to the emergence of spiritual currents that promised an
instant form of speaking to the dead, giving rise to the proliferation of séances, the genesis of
pseudo-religious doctrines, as well as the advent of death and spirit photographs. Popular
perception regarding the places of interment also changed, and both cemeteries and funereal
art began to reflect shifting tastes. All in all, in the nineteenth century, death was everywhere,
and its increasing presence was greatly owed to the inventions that revolutionized
manufacturing techniques, marketing campaigns, and religious and cultural perceptions.

Attire was one of the areas where the scientific changes were most visibly reflected.
If, in the past, black clothes were used mainly by the wealthy, particularly the members of
royalty, to demonstrate grief and observe mourning, in the nineteenth century, with the
invention of synthetic dyes, black cloth became available to the masses. Therefore, together
with the great availability of fabric which derived from the mechanization of weaving, black
fabric became cheaper and more easily attainable, which meant that sections of the
population which received a lower income could also purchase it and make costumes to
observe mourning (Lightfoot 69, 83-4). As a result of this, mourning fashion, with its different types of fabric directed to the different stages of mourning, became widespread, particularly among the feminine public, due to the publication of magazines addressed to women, which contained specific pages that offered images and cuttings of the latest fashions. Victorian fashion, moreover, was quite fleeting, and the patterns and styles were constantly changing, which then, as now, led to the need of making new dresses each time someone died. Likewise, the ingrained belief that using the same mourning clothes to grieve for different people was bad luck reinforced the consumerist desire of a world increasingly moved by the need to feed the economic machinery of a rising capitalist society (Lightfoot 112). A cycle of consumerism was skillfully promoted by well-orchestrated marketing campaigns divulged in magazines, newspapers, and the recently printed etiquette manuals, which in the Victorian age began to proliferate. Coincidentally, these publications not only mentioned the customs surrounding mourning and the products that were to be used, such as the appropriate types of fabric, jewelry, or cards to print death notices or other related content, but they also indicated the stores or warehouses where they could be acquired (Lightfoot 83, 91-5). Death became so commercialized that, by the mid-nineteenth century, “larger warehouses specializing in mourning goods appeared in major cities in Europe and America,” which sold all the required products “for a socially correct funeral including the hearse, horses, and the necessary fabric to make mourning clothes and accessories” (Lightfoot 93). Nevertheless, death and its observance also caused inequalities and strain among the lower classes, giving rise to “trade organizations [where the poor] could rent mourning clothing” (Lightfoot 93). According to Lightfoot, these rigid prescriptions surrounding death were eased “by the 1880s [as a] response to the high cost of mourning clothes,” among other social and medical reasons (95).

As far as mourning was concerned, there was a series of other accessories and mementoes that were considered essential to nineteenth-century Americans, such as memorial jewelry. The particularity of these jewels was that they included a fragment of the deceased’s hair, or were made exclusively from that hair, something that came into fashion due to the example of Queen Victoria, who not only inserted her living loved ones’ hair into her jewelry, but also had jewelry made from her deceased husband’s hair (Lightfoot 142). The bereaved would take “locks of their deceased loved ones’ hair to their local jewelers [and choose] a design and pattern, and left the hair to be woven and mounted into a sentimental
The intricacy of hairwork made it necessary for jewelers to hire external workers to produce this type of costume jewelry, giving rise to companies solely dedicated to the handling and production of hair jewelry. This type of subcontracting, however, soon prompted other concerns, as the hair of the deceased was frequently replaced by that of another person, owing either to the original hair’s lack of conditions to be made into jewelry or simply to a mix up in the manufacturer’s line of production. The mistakes emanating from the process were so serious that, at times, the hair contained in “the returned piece might even be of a different color than the original hair” (Lightfoot 143). Fearing that the hair in their memorial jewelry did not belong to their loved ones, mourners, particularly women, started to create their own pieces of hair jewelry, something that was encouraged by the magazines of the time which additionally offered step by step instructions on the process (Lightfoot 143-5). In effect, the manufacturing of hair jewelry “became a popular pastime [...] for women in antebellum America,” as, according to the female magazines of the time, it not only added a personal touch to the items, but was also considered “elegant,” not to mention that it saved on the “price [required for the] purchase of professional hair jewelry” (Lightfoot 146). With time, this fashion also faded, firstly due to the dissemination of scientific ideas which led people to look on the hair cropped from a dead body “as being unhealthy” and a potential source of disease. Later on, the lowering prices of hair jewelry, combined with the mass production of other types of jewelry, and the advent of photography as a form of remembering the dead, gradually contributed to pushing this type of memorial jewelry into oblivion (Lightfoot 146-7).

Portraying the dead as a means of keeping their memory alive for posterity was done mostly by the well to do members of society. In the earlier stages of this art form, painters would be ordered to depict the departed, “either right before or right after they passed,” while giving them a resemblance of life and including signs and symbols related to death in their works, so as to distinguish these paintings from those of living models (Lightfoot 44). As the century progressed, scientific innovations gave rise to the ancestor of the photograph, the daguerreotype, which arrived in America in 1839. Making a daguerreotype was a fairly easy process to learn, at the same time that the equipment used for its production was accessible both in terms of use as well as of price. In an America that was still suffering from the effects of the financial crisis of 1837, the conjunction of these factors contributed to the popularization of the new technology, which, in time, came to be simplified and perfected

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20 For examples of hair jewelry, please see figs. 6, 7 and 8 in Appendix F.
21 For the reproduction of one such painting, please see fig. 9, in Appendix G.
Despite not being cheap per se, daguerreotypes were more affordable than paintings, and this allowed for more modest people to be able to afford portraits of their loved ones, especially of those who were deceased, as a means of keeping a souvenir for posterity. The photographers who took these daguerreotypes treated the bodies of the deceased with great care, dressing and positioning them as if they were in their sleep, generally portraying them “at home, surrounded by family members and symbols” (Lightfoot 153). These images “were treasured and preserved in albums or displayed on the walls of parlors or bedrooms,” aiming at keeping the memory of the departed alive while bringing “comfort to the bereaved” (Lightfoot 153).

The growing belief in the presence and action of spirits resulted in the creation of another type of photographic technique which soon became fashionable, that is, spirit photography, whereby photographers claimed they were able to caption the spirits of the dead who stood close to the living. This innovative technique was developed by photographer William H. Mumler, who claimed to have “had a special relationship to spirits that other photographers lacked,” a decisive factor that allowed him to portray the souls of the deceased (Lightfoot 169). Mumler, whose early occupation was that of an engraver for a Boston jewelry company, began to dedicate himself to spirit photography in 1861, after a “blurred image” appeared in a photograph he took of himself (Lightfoot 171). This coincided with the time of the American Civil War, when soldiers were dying in the most unexpected and precarious conditions, and the need for the comforting belief in the afterlife was more necessary than ever. Prosecuted for fraud in New York in 1869, Mumler was acquitted of all accusations, in what was perceived as a public victory for the defenders of Spiritualism. Mumler, however, lost a great deal of money due to the high cost of the legal fees of the process, and his career never recovered from the blow. He then went on to destroy all the negatives of his work, thus turning his technique into an everlasting enigma that not even modern photographers can decipher through the examination of his extant photographs (Lightfoot 175). One of Mumler’s most famous customers was widow Mary Todd Lincoln who, in 1872, had her photograph taken in his Boston studio.

In the nineteenth century, cemeteries were also moved outside of their habitual location in the churchyard, and tombstones were replaced by more elaborate forms of art in commemoration of the deceased. The growth of the population in the United States, along

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22 For the reproduction of a postmortem photographs, please see figs. 10 and 11, in Appendix G.
23 Mary Todd Lincoln’s photograph, wherein the spirit of her deceased husband Abraham Lincoln also appears, can be seen in fig. 12, in Appendix G.
with disease outbreaks in cities such as New York or Boston contributed to both the lack of burial space in the churchyards as well as to an increasing fear of contagion from the great number of dead bodies that resulted from such occurrences. As a result, Boston authorities searched for a solution to this problem, and suggested the creation of a burial ground outside of the city limits, a project that came to fruition with the purchase of land for Mount Auburn cemetery in 1831 (Lightfoot 214, 217). This new cemetery soon “became the model for rural cemeteries in the country and around the world [inasmuch as it was not only] a burial ground, [but] it was also the first designed landscape open to the public in North America” (Lightfoot 218). Mount Auburn thus became a place to honor the dead and a place where the living could walk in nature and admire the “art and architecture” of the funereal monuments (Lightfoot 218). When their creators thought of the main features of rural cemeteries, art was definitely an essential aspect of these spaces, and there was a desire for “monuments [which were at a time] instructive and inspirational [with] inscriptions [that were meant] to give the living an awareness of history” (Lightfoot 219). As a result, American artists began to learn and practice the art of sculpture, creating different types of three-dimensional monuments that would represent the deceased and their families, while striving to “create a shared history for Americans” (Lightfoot 221). Noble intentions notwithstanding, the differences that separated the living were also present among the dead, and “cemeteries were laid out like cities, with neighborhoods for the wealthy and for the poor” (Lightfoot). All in all, these innovative resting places for the departed perpetuated the contexts inhabited by the living, calling into question the notion of death as the great equalizer in a century that converted this occasion into a full-blown industry.24

“The Color of the Grave is Green”: Death and the Dying in the American Civil War

According to Faust, the Civil War was an extremely destructive and complex event with long-lasting effects that transcend the spatial-temporal context wherein it occurred. For the purpose of this essay, focus will be placed on the effect that the events surrounding the Civil War had on the perception and the relationship of American citizens with death and dying, rather than on offering a detailed or chronological recount of events. In many ways, the Civil War “presaged the slaughter of World War I’s Western Front and the global carnage of the twentieth century” (Faust ix). Likewise, the impersonality and randomness of warfare along with its consequences caused the questioning of realities which, until that moment, had been

24 For images of monuments at Mount Auburn Cemetery, please see figs. 13 and 14, in Appendix H.
taken for granted among the general population. Death no longer followed the requirements of earlier times, when the *Ars Moriendi* governed the appropriate and acceptable way of dying, as the war turned a peaceful form of departing the world into an arbitrary and devastating event. In effect, from a natural phenomenon, death changed into a caused event requiring both “action and agents,” as soldiers were progressively desensitized into becoming authentic killing machines, more so as the war went on, and “duty and self-defense” gave way to the primeval “desire for retribution” (Faust 35). Moreover, religious beliefs and social customs were called into question, as a result of the amount of death caused, seen and survived by the soldiers who took part in the conflict, as many among them “tried to make sense of what they had wrought” (Faust 56). Conversely, the abundance of dead bodies and the contemplation of their decay elicited the surviving soldiers to scrutinize important social paradigms that had once appeared as cornerstones of society, namely those of race and social status. Death, indeed, in its visual and biological crudeness appeared as a silent leveler, much like it had been portrayed during the Middle Ages. Thus were the living reminded of the absurdity of man-made categories that became obsolete in the most decisive moments of individual and collective history. Being present to witness this destruction also created a deeper conflict in the minds of the surviving soldiers, who often asked themselves why they had outlived the war, as if trying to make sense of the senseless violence that they somehow helped to create but of which they were also victims (Faust 57, 60).

With the advent of war, and the death toll that it entailed, it was no longer possible for the majority of Americans to spend their last moments at home, in the company of their loved ones, which meant that both the living and the dead were deprived of the comfort of each other’s companies. The customs related to the *Ars Moriendi* as it had been lived so far were thus impossible to maintain, creating a more pressing need for any souvenir of the departed, such as letters from their fellow soldiers narrating a relative’s last moments, or an object belonging to that person, all while trying to find some comfort and discovering how that person had left this world. According to Faust, both “soldiers’ personal possessions” as well as “condolence letters reporting the details of soldiers’ deaths served as *memento mori* for kin working to understand wartime loss” (29). Letters, moreover, would serve as the basis for the Obituaries published on the occasion of the communication of the deceased’s departure, as a form of commemorating his life and sharing the memory of his last moments in the front while “assessing the likelihood of the deceased’s [eternal] salvation” (Faust 29-30). Nevertheless, these humane gestures
could not annul the killing that war required [...] nor could they erase [the painful] scenes of battlefield carnage that made soldiers question both the humanity of those slaughtered like animals and the humanity of those who had wreaked such devastation. (Faust 31)

The trauma of war, which was endured by the living and the dead was particularly visible in the number of corpses that resulted from active combat, which in turn caused issues for the living, as it was the immediate task of the winners of each battle to bury the dead soldiers that resulted from it (Faust 69).

In its early stages, it was not expected that the Civil War would last for a long time, which meant that those in charge of caring for the deceased had the necessary conditions and the resources to do so in a humane manner (Faust 3). In a predominantly Christian society, the body was associated with the notions of being “the repository of human identity, [inasmuch as] it represented the intrinsic selfhood and individuality of a particular human,” while holding a metaphysical dimension as a vessel of the human soul which, along with it, would rise again for eternal life (Faust 62). This made it even more necessary to care for the body of the deceased in the best possible way, which, at the beginning of the war, was accomplished through the creation of cemeteries for soldiers, as well as through “making coffins” and keeping “careful records of those interred” and maintaining the graves for as long as the armies staid in the same place (Faust 63). However, with the intensification of the conflict, and the exponentially growing number of dead, it became impossible to care for the deceased or even record all deaths and burial places in the same detailed manner, which meant that there was often an accumulation of bodies waiting for burial (Faust 63, 70 ff.). This also caused the need of hastening burial procedures, particularly for sanitary reasons, which in turn resulted in the creation of mass graves where “enemy dead were more likely to be buried” (Faust 71). Nevertheless, the hope of returning for the dead who had been swiftly laid to rest in these mass graves, gave way to the custom of leaving “personal items [...] with the bodies, preserving at least the possibility of later disinterment and identification” (Faust 72-3). A further difficulty raised by the great “haste and carelessness” which involved the process of burying such a great amount of individuals was that these graves were often “so shallow that bodies and skeletons often reappeared” due to the effect of the elements on the landscape, which posed further issues, as “hogs [and possibly other animals] rooted

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25 For an image of the deceased in the Battle of Gettysburg, please see fig. 15 in Appendix I.
26 For an image of a collective grave created after the Battle of Gettysburg, please see fig. 16 in Appendix I.
around the battlefields in search of human remains” (Faust 73). The anonymity of the mass graves, along with the indeterminacy in terms of the actual count and identity of those deceased in the war increased the suffering of their surviving relations, as they lacked bodies to grieve and bury, and were consequently unable to mourn their loved ones and experience the closure they needed to accept their loss (Faust 146-7).

The reality of war, in all its carnage and violence, became even more alive to those living during the time of the Civil War, as “for the first time civilians directly confronted the reality of battlefield death rendered by the new art of photography” (Faust xvi). Seeing these bodies opened a new conflict for people used to have their loved ones die in the peace of the home, inasmuch as it became possible to perceive “their destruction and deformation, [while] inevitably raising the question of how they related to the persons who had once inhabited them” (Faust xvii). Along with this never before seen decay, people also felt the anguish of not being with their loved ones at the moment of their death and feared for their eternal salvation. Thus, they increasingly turned to spiritualism, in the hope of receiving news from the afterworld regarding the situation of their loved ones. Spirit circles, as they were called, were quite popular even before the war, and were held in all types of places, including the White House, where “Mary Todd Lincoln [...] sponsored a number of séances [wherein she] sought regularly to communicate with her dead son Willie” (Faust 181). Along with séances, a new form of communicating with the dead, the “planchette, precursor of the Ouija board,” was widely marketed “during the 1860s, and especially in the years immediately following the war,” making mediumship available to the masses, to the extent that it ended up becoming “a parlor game” (Faust 182). Spiritualism, nevertheless, provided those who believed in it with the certainty and the security of a “reunion [with the departed] in the world beyond,” thus giving a sense of continuity and purpose to “the unfinished narratives of so many lives” which suffered untimely interruptions (Faust 185). If many found comfort in the messages from beyond the grave, others “were unable to console themselves with a vision of heaven that transcended war’s afflictions,” and began to question the definitive responses offered by faith (Faust 188). In that sense, the Civil War created a rift with a past of certainties, opening the door to doubt, questioning and reflection upon a reality that is not always as straightforward as one would like to think. It is then possible to state that the Civil War preceded the events of the first World War, not only in terms of the proportion of its destructive force or of the impersonal warfare that was taking place, but also in the creation of a clear sense of a before and after, inasmuch as, after the Civil War, neither America nor Americans would ever be the same.
Funerary customs were also affected by changing paradigms in the American wartime society, as the need to transport the remains of the deceased soldiers to their homes, which were often quite far from the battlefield where they perished, contributed to the development of a series of pre-existing scientific techniques (Lightfoot 241). Among these procedures used for the preservation of dead bodies was that of embalming, which was applied to the bodies after they had been located had positively identified, in order to transport them to their families in the best possible conditions (Faust 94-8). Alternatively, bodies could also be refrigerated in cases designed for the purpose, which, along with embalming and the eventual trips required to locate or recognize the body of the deceased, was available only to the well-off (Faust 98). In terms of death and mourning, then, both the customs of the time as well as important events contributed to configure Americans’ relationship with death and dying, distancing the process from the family home, and placing it into the hands of specialists who made a living from caring for the dead bodies and organizing their burials (Lightfoot 241-2). A single tragic event in the history of the United States illustrates both the pageantry as well as the technical and scientific procedures surrounding death that were becoming available in America.

On April 15, 1865, only a few weeks before the official end of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln was murdered, precipitating the nation into a collective state of mourning, inasmuch as “his death was the ultimate death – and became in many ways emblematic of all the losses of the war” (Faust 156). After paying tribute to the late President in Washington, it was decided that he would be taken by train to be buried in Springfield, Illinois, albeit making the necessary preparations to allow the greatest number of Americans to pay their last respects to their leader. Stopping in several places along the way, namely “Baltimore, Harrisburg, Philadelphia, New York, Albany, Buffalo, Cleveland, Columbus, Indianapolis, Chicago,” meant that the President’s body would be taken in solemn processions and exposed, in an open casket, for public homage (Faust 157). This demanded special measures to preserve the body during the time of Lincoln’s posthumous tour, specifically through the work of an embalmer and an undertaker, who had been hired specifically for the purpose (kmcgrathop n.p.). The entire nation participated in the funerereal ceremonies and tributes offered to their leader, both in person as well as through the descriptions offered by the press. Nevertheless, and perhaps with the intention of preserving Lincoln’s image, photos of his dead body were strictly forbidden. In effect, the pictures obtained by photographer Jeremiah Gurney, Jr., in New York, were confiscated by Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton who, having destroyed all plates and prints, saved one single
stereogram as a personal souvenir, which was discovered by accident upon his death. The photograph was finally made public due to its once again accidental discovery in 1952. Despite their best attempts, the people in charge of preserving Lincoln’s remains could not avoid the decay that was manifested in his appearance by the time he arrived at his final resting place, a decay that he shared with so many contemporaneous dead, particularly the soldiers whose lives had been lost on the battlefield. In that sense the President, despite all the resources which were available to him even after his death, came to embody and represent the cruel deaths of the war, while elevating the devastation of the recent years to a transcendent dimension, by “tying American purposes to those of God” (Faust 156).

Death as a collective experience had thus been present in American history since the foundation of the country, and in Dickinson’s lifetime it became even more so due to its prevalence in social and religious mores, as well as a result of the decisive event of the American Civil War. Finally, death literally vanquished it all, when the most powerful man in the land, who in theory should have also been the most guarded and protected individual in the nation, was unexpectedly murdered. America thus became a country at grips with death, in a world that, albeit for distinct reasons, seemed to be likewise obsessed with the inevitable conclusion of all human life.

“He kindly stopped for me”: Emily Dickinson’s Death Poems

Around April 1852, Emily Dickinson wrote a letter to her friend Jane Humphrey wherein she addressed the subject of death, detaining herself on the inability to actually conceive that one day, she could also become a dead body. While musing in the fancies of her imagination, Dickinson went on to state that “I think of the grave very often, and how much it has got of mine, and whether I can ever stop it from carrying off what I love; that makes me sometimes speak of it when I don’t intend” (L86). This was not at all a strange thing to think about as, according to what has previously been established, the presence of death both in numbers as well as of its weight in terms of cultural mores and religious observances, was quite prevalent in Emily Dickinson’s lifetime. What makes Dickinson’s choice of death as a poetic topic different is the form whereby she decided to approach it, as she broke away from the traditional sentimental molds of a rather Romantic nature, to actually address the physical dimension of death and question the widely accepted notion of an afterlife that should unquestionably await the deceased on the other side of this existence. Moreover, Dickinson’s

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27 For the image of Abraham Lincoln lying in state in New York, please see fig. 17 in Appendix I.
treatment of the issue of death reveals a deeply intuitive and insightful individual, capable of examining the world around her and drawing meaningful metaphysical conclusions. In other words, Dickinson’s personal study of reality went far beyond the limits of description, inasmuch as she processed the events that she witnessed or read about through active rationalization and reflection. Poetry and poetic expression thus became a form of making sense of a decisive external event such as death, that had deep internal repercussions which required to be worked upon and assimilated.

Living in a time when death had become more ubiquitous than ever before, and the customs surrounding dying and death were rigidly prescribed, it is not strange that Emily Dickinson chose to address funerary rituals, dying moments, or even perceptions of the afterlife in her work. In poems such as “I like a look of Agony” (F339), “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” (F340), or “Because I could not stop for Death” (F479), among many others, Dickinson not only describes funerary rituals or customs, but she also meditates on the actual meaning of this culture of death. According to Weisbuch, Dickinson actively questions the intentions behind demonstrations of grief which at times border on the farcical as “the attention paid the corpse is often [perceived as] an attempt to make up for the neglect for the living person who inhabited the body that is being revered (93). In other words, compassion and respect should be afforded to the living inasmuch as, for Dickinson, the dead can “no longer be helped by human affection” (Weisbuch 93). Nevertheless, the words and attitudes of the personae in Dickinson’s poems are subject to many layers of interpretation, which can be clarified through the use of Dickinson’s other writings, as well as in light of contemporaneous events, customs and literary works. At times, it appears as though the speaker in Dickinson’s poems is questioning the existence of eternal life, of God, or mocking funerary customs, while in others, the speaker takes a completely opposite position. However, the use of language and imagery may also suggest contrasting interpretations for a same poem, thus indicating that meaning, in Dickinson’s work, is never definitive or unilateral. For instance, Dickinson’s poem “Because I could not stop for Death” (F479), can be looked at from two distinct perspectives, as it may be interpreted either as a serious musing on death, or as poking fun at the entire experience of a deceased who joyfully follows the person Death into the grave, as a clueless observer that amuses herself in each small object or scene that she contemplates along her path. Therefore, before addressing the poems themselves, it is interesting to make a further parenthesis in order to explain and understand the use of humor in Dickinson’s poetic work.
“A little Madness in the Spring”: Humor According to Emily Dickinson

According to Rachel Trousdale, poets make use of humor with several goals, namely, “to establish their own poetic authority,” while calling into question a series of events and circumstances that they disagree with “and perhaps, most unusually to increase their readers’ sense of community and capacity for sympathy” (1). Humor, however, is not necessarily or even predominantly shallow, nor is it a synonym of frivolity. In effect, according to Wallace, “the lyric and the comic may derive from the same burst of intensity, focusing and releasing the same exuberance” (11). This is a conclusion that he draws from his study of Howard Nemerov’s theory of humor in poetry, wherein Nemerov states that “poems and jokes resemble one another,” regardless of their capacity to provoke laughter, inasmuch as the essence of both forms of literary expression resides in the “quality of decisiveness and finish, of absolute completion to which nothing need be added nor could be added: not laughter, but the silence with which we greet the thing absolutely done” (14). Appreciating this wordplay that gives rise to the comedic content of poetry, however, is easily attained by “reading [...] poems aloud [which in theory would allow the reader to] see that this tension is there” (Nemerov 15). This is something that Nemerov applies to Blake’s poems, but which is also true of Dickinson’s poetry, insofar as through her use of poetic devices such as “wit, satire, irony, parody, farce, burlesque, and play,” as a comic poet, she is successful in creating a form of language that, in all ways, achieves the literary equivalent to the effect of the visual performance of a stage comedian (Wallace 49, 31). Thus, through the recitation of Dickinson’s poems, as well as the reading aloud of her letters, the “noise, music, fractured syntax, metaphor, pun, and paradox” contained in her written word, come alive and reach the senses, opening the mind to new layers of meaning that otherwise would not be detected at a first glance (Wallace 31). In that sense, Dickinson’s use of humor reminds the reader of Shakespeare’s clown, whose apparently absurd words actually disguise a deep reflection upon and comprehension of reality that other, more logical and supposedly grounded characters, seem to lack.

Humor is, additionally, a widely used resource in poetic composition among American writers, particularly poets, for whom “comedy has been not only a device; it has been a characteristic way of looking at the world” (Wallace 5). In effect, despite the different use and tone that each American writer and poet has given to humor and comedy, according to Wallace,
comic poetry has [at a time], questioned atrophied beliefs, criticized an imperfect society, and exposed the pretensions and frailties of the self and others, while also providing laughter as a weapon against chaos and despair in a world that seems increasingly indifferent and absurd. (5)

More than a literary device, humor thus becomes “an attitude toward life, a way of responding to experience,” whereby the author’s fundamental motion “is to embrace [the world around him or herself, with all its virtues and flaws,] by disclaiming [or rejecting any given premise or idea], and to disclaim by embracing” (Wallace 49). Beneath this contradictory stance resides

a spirit of affirmation, exhilaration, and celebration, of high seriousness and hilarity, of conflicting attitudes that dance in harmonious balance until, wonderful and absurd, we feel more at home in the universe. (49)

In Emily Dickinson’s case, her use of humor is aimed at achieving a diametrically opposed effect to the immediate meaning of her words, inasmuch as she “uses the shy self-deprecation of the Yankee to ridicule and elevate herself” (Wallace 19). As an example, Wallace quotes Dickinson’s poem “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” (F260):

I’m Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – too?
Then there’s a pair of us!
Dont28 tell! They’ll advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!
How public – like a Frog –
To tell one’s name – the livelong June –
To an admiring Bog!

28 Note that the spelling used by Dickinson would be commonly accepted as correct in nineteenth-century America although departing from modern usage.
According to Wallace, Dickinson uses her “Yankee voice of witty self-effacement and wry self-aggrandizing,” in this poem to indicate the exact opposite of the words that are used (20). The poet thus applies the metaphor of the frog and the apparently absurd request for the non-publicization of her and the reader’s anonymous state to actually “claim [...] that she is somebody [...] who doesn’t want to pursue trivial public approval, somebody strong and self-sufficient” (Wallace 19). The use of paradox gives way to an absurd situation, wherein the lack of obvious logic creates a comic situation, as the poet pokes fun at conceit, and does so through the use of an elaborate, albeit economic, argument. This, according to Nemerov, “illuminates a vital quality of wit, which takes the longest way round as the shortest way home, [and] whose beginnings and endings seem to be disposed upon a circle, not a straight line” (11). The capacity to retake an idea and ponder upon it, while using it in a new sense, follows suit with Dickinson’s personal statement that “My Business is Circumference,” inasmuch as it indicates the reflective capacity of someone who, while incarnating “a supposed person,” examines that speaker’s reality, whatever it may be, and literally sucks “all the marrow of [their imagined] life” through the use of poetry (Nemerov 11; L268; Thoreau 91).

According to Juhasz et al., “Emily Dickinson was a noted wit among her circle of friends and family,” nevertheless, her comical side was apparently forgotten by critics who chose to focus on her “profound scrutiny of life-and-death matters” (1). However, Emily Dickinson’s “clever [and] frequently downright funny” poetry is also “part of that profundity,” for it is through the “subversive and disruptive modes [of comedy that Dickinson offers] alternative perspectives on [her] culture” (Juhasz et al. 1). Moreover, through the use of linguistic and imagistic devices, Dickinson creates an intelligent humor that is not obvious, and requires the participation of the reader to decipher the underlying meaning to her words. In that sense, as in other instances, Dickinson’s poems remain open-ended, as she subverts the rules of humor and crosses the boundaries of the acceptable, while forging her own criteria and creating her own type of comic approach, and so remaining true to her own intuition as an artist (Miller, “The Humor of Excess” 136). The capacity of perceiving Dickinson as a comic poet truly “humanizes her, [while making her more] believable, palpable, and wise.” It additionally “expands her range, her significance, and her power, [for, after all.] Emily Dickinson the comedienne is [...] the same poet as Emily Dickinson the tragedienne” (Juhasz et al. 140). By acknowledging her multifaceted creative capacity, the reader and the critic are able to have a glimpse of a complex person of great talent, whose combined intellectual and human education allowed her to grasp and translate the richness of
human nature and human experience into the allegorical language of poetry. In effect, according to Allen Tate, there is a great misconception regarding Dickinson’s life and person, for “her life [was actually] one of the deepest, one of the richest ever lived on this continent [inasmuch as Emily Dickinson] is one of the few Americans who have realized themselves” (622).

When addressing the subject of death, Dickinson does so in an intelligent, yet disarming way, insofar as she proceeds to personify death, and in so doing, she uses this device “to tease out death’s existence, to confront its power” (Juhasz, “The Big Tease” 50). Through the approximation of the inscrutable mystery of death to the plane of everyday existence, to the extent that death becomes a person among us, an equal, it is then possible for Dickinson to eliminate or somehow erase, even if momentarily, the terror that he invokes in every human being, as the great, unpredictable and decisive unknown. In effect, according to Juhasz, it is “this essentially human gesture,” or configuration, that allows for “death’s mystery [to] become [less] overwhelming,” if not completely dismissed (“The Big Tease” 50). An example of this personification is Dickinson’s poem “Because I could not stop for death” (F 479), wherein Death is presented as a lover, opening a space for the dialectic “life and death struggle [wherein Dickinson’s] tease is on behalf of self-preservation,” something that due to the specific nature of death as an insurmountable phenomenon, she is ultimately unable to achieve (Juhasz, “The Big Tease” 48). A more detailed analysis of this poem, however, will be offered below. By changing rational paradigms, and questioning deep-seated cultural assumptions that border on the dogmatic, such as all that refers to death and dying, Dickinson makes light of a quite heavy affair, and in so doing dissipates, even if for a second, the fear surrounding death, through the use of humor. In that sense, humor, and the use of words and definitions in a humorous manner, become a tool to reinterpret and reinvent the world.

“A throe opon the features”: Death, Dickinson Style
According to what has already been established, death is a common theme in Emily Dickinson’s poetry, starting from the first extant poem included in her collected works, where she declares, in l. 21, that “the worm doth woo the mortal, death claims a living bride” (original emphasis, F1). The treatment of this subject, however, soon merits a humorous approach in the following poem, “Sic transit gloria mundi,” which includes a comic view on the transitory nature of human life, and pokes fun at the longstanding tradition of the memento mori. In his work, Franklin includes two variants, 2A and 2B, which he dates as
“about 1852,” the second one being a manuscript sent to William Howland who, according to the editor, “supplied the text for the Springfield Daily Republican” (1: 51-6). The following corresponds to version 2A, which is based on a copy of the poem made by Dickinson’s cousin Eudocia Converse (1:51), and reads:

Sic transit gloria mundi
“How doth the busy bee”
Dum vivamus vivamus
I stay mine enemy! –

Oh veni vidi vici!
Oh caput cap-a-pie!
And oh “memento mori”
When I am far from thee

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Mortality is fatal
Gentility is fine
Rascality, heroic
Insolvency, sublime

Our Fathers being weary
Laid down on Bunker Hill
And though full many a morn’g
Yet they are sleeping still

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A coward will remain, Sir.
Until the fight is done:
But an immortal hero
Will take his hat and run
The memory of my ashes
Will consolation be
Then farewell Tuscarora
And farewell Sir, to thee. (F2, ll. 1-12, 41-8, 52-6, 65-9)

This poem, read in its entirety, demonstrates Dickinson’s extensive education, as well as her familiarity with the predominant issues at the core of her cultural milieu. In effect, her capacity to turn things around, giving them different interpretations and poking fun at culturally ingrained concepts demonstrates her deep knowledge and understanding of these ideas. In the case of “Sic transit gloria mundi,” the theme of death and its reminders is poked fun at through a witty use of historical references, namely the memories of national heroes such as Peter Parley, Daniel Boone or Columbus (ll. 9-10, 37). Further illustrious mentions refer to Adam, Isaac Newton, the fallen at the Battle of Bunker Hill, or the Tuscarora War, which took place, respectively, during the American Revolution, and during the settlement of North Carolina, in the early 1700s (ll. 17, 29-32, 44-7; Horwitz n.p.; Shamlin n.p.). In a way, Dickinson traces a history of illustrious people whose memories are deemed worthy of being preserved for posterity, while mocking the concept of the memento mori and of the truth underneath the embellished and selective memories the living choose to keep for future generations. Such a notion seems to be indicated by the verses which mention that “an immortal hero / will take his hat and run” (ll. 55-6). Poems, like other forms of literature, originate in particular contexts and, in some ways, constitute a dialogue with or a response to external or internal stimuli. Such is also the case of Dickinson’s poetry which, although not strictly autobiographic, echoes the author’s musings upon personal or mediated experiences. In the case of the illustrious dead, whose memories are perceived as edifying mementos mori, the author seems to point to the fact that there is a difference between

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29 It is interesting to add, as a side not, that the translation of the Latin maxims included in the poem is not accurate at all. According to The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, “sic transit gloria mundi” is a Latin expression which “may ultimately derive from ‘O quam cito transit gloria mundi [Oh how quickly the glory of the world passes away]’ in the De Imitatione Christi of Thomas à Kempis.” This expression comes to signify “the transitoriness of earthly glory” (https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/sic-transit-gloria-mundi). As to the expression “dum vivimus vivamus,” the Merriam-Webster online Dictionary translates it as “while we live, let us live” (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dum%20vivimus%20vivamus), a sort of equivalent to another well-known expression, “Carpe Diem,” an invitation to enjoy life to the fullest. Apparently, Dickinson’s spelling of this expression, or its transcription by editors of her work, was not correct, as “vivamus” appears twice in the same verse (Franklin 1: 51).
memory and reality, inasmuch as the human mind is likely to be selective when it comes to what it chooses to remember once any given person, particularly one of importance, departs from this world. While pointing at this tendentious tendency, Dickinson pokes fun at the reasons behind the idealized remembrance of illustrious individuals, transferring the solemn *memento mori* tradition from the realm of the sentimental into that of the absurd. In that sense, “Sic transit gloria mundi” (F2) falls into the tradition of the comic valentine poems that coexisted with the romantic valentines in nineteenth-century America, and were intended as a parody of the romantic tropes present in valentine poems as well as in the literary amorous tradition in general (Pollack 61, 65). Dickinson’s comic valentines, however, were “remarkable for their exuberant and eclectic wit [as] she had the shrewdness to burlesque the literary forms and attitudes” that were available to her, without falling into the vulgar tones that characterized the satirical mockery of sentimental poetry of her time (Pollack 78, 65).

That much is visible throughout “Sic transit gloria mundi” (F2), wherein Dickinson makes “use [of] communal rhetoric to satirize pompous didacticism and romantic posturing,” while experimenting “in oblique parody” (Pollack 72). In so doing, she mocks the culturally contingent tendency to romanticize death and the dead. From her early poetic work, Dickinson then appears set on changing paradigms and taking unconventional approaches to the most conventional, and apparently untouchable of subjects, that is, the inevitability of death, and the quasi-sacred aura surrounding the dead.

“I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,”: Death as a Penalty in the American Civil War

Emily Dickinson’s capacity for humorous discourse does not exclude her ability to examine the reality of death in all its crudeness. An example of her skill to incarnate different characters and meditate upon their emotions in a deep manner is her poem “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” (F340), which Franklin dates as “about summer 1862 [and is included in] Fascicle 16” (1: 365),

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

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

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

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

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

Written in the early months of the Civil War, this poem has also different layers of meaning, which the current analysis does not expect to dissect, inasmuch as each reader will create their own meaning along with Dickinson, in a private dialogue of infinite possibilities. For the present reading, however, two main possible interpretations seem to rise from the analysis of the text. One the one hand, it seems to refer to the conscious deceased, who, although not a part of this world anymore, is still able to participate in what is going on around him or her through the sense of hearing. Being a silent witness to their own funeral service, the persona understands all that goes on around them, from the movement of the “Mourners [who] kept treading [...] to and fro,” to the drum-like rhythm of the funeral “Service [that was heard through the [reigning silence] when they all were seated” (ll. 2-3, 5-6). The most impacting and perhaps shocking description is that of the deceased feeling the “Box” being lifted and moved through the empty space, in a crescendo of “Silence” and confusion, wherein the persona is all “but [a powerless] Ear / [...] / Wrecked, solitary, here –” as time appears to have stopped in an interminable present characterized by the unknown state that the speaker experiences (ll. 9-16).
The climax is reached in the final stanza, when the deceased feels the disappearing of whatever support structure still existed underneath themselves in an inexplicable and abrupt manner that defies all “Reason,” noting that “I dropped down, and down - / And hit a World, at every plunge, / And Finished knowing – then –” (ll. 17-20). This would suggest actual the moment of the entombment, here compared to a descent into the underworld, as the moment par excellence when the “Being [who had been reduced to] an Ear,” ceases to receive familiar stimuli from the outside world, and enters the unknown space, where all known sounds cease to be discerned (l. 14). Death, full of never-before heard sounds, or of the absence thereof, literally becomes a “a wild Night and a new Road,” albeit a road that ends in an all too stationary destination (L332). Moreover, the fact that the ear remains operative, while all other senses appear to have been deactivated may also point to a common phenomenon in the nineteenth century. In fact, it was not strange for people in a state of coma or at least in a cataleptic state to be considered dead, and be buried alive, only to wake up in the tomb. Once people became aware of these tragical events, they devised a series of methods in order to save those who had been prematurely buried, the most popular being security coffins, which can still be found in the United States to this day, albeit under an updated version (Edwards n.p.). In the nineteenth century, one of the most popular forms of safety coffins consisted of a rope which tied a bell to the finger of the supposed deceased who, when awakening, would pull the rope and thus warn the living of their state, in order to be disinterred and brought back to the surface (Jarvis n.p.).

From another perspective, and taking into account the events of the time when this poem is thought to have been written, namely that of the American Civil War, it is possible to interpret it from the point of view of the man, soldier or civilian, who died by hanging. From the early settlement of what would become the United States, capital punishment by hanging was widely used among the population, in order to punish a series of crimes or other actions that, at the time, were perceived as serious trespasses. From “theft, rape and murder [... to] witchcraft, sodomy, and concealing a birth,” death by hanging was seen as a just sentence for those guilty of these actions (Weiser 1). At about the time of the American Revolution of 1755, popular groups of individuals decided to take justice into their own hands, due to a perceived “absence of formal criminal justice systems,” giving rise to vigilantism, a phenomenon that became known as “lynching mobs” (Weiser 1). At this point, it is interesting to note that, “after the revolution, the most common hangings of white men were

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30 For an image of a drawing of this type of security coffin, as well as of traces of its presence in an American cemetery, please see figs. 18, 19a and 19b, in Appendix J.
due to war-related crimes such as spying espionage, treason or desertion,” be this treason real or imagined, as “whites who sympathized with slaves were also often hanged” (Weiser 1). For black people, nevertheless, especially slaves, hanging was done at the discretion of their masters, “most often for the ‘official’ reason of revolt” (Weiser 1). Vigilante groups became prevalent all over the United States, with particular prevalence in the West as well as in the Southern states, largely in places where people felt that the hand of justice did not reach, or would not do so with the necessary speed. During the American Civil War, “soldiers were being hanged by the dozens, for crimes such as guerulla activity, espionage, treason, but most often for desertion” (Weiser 1). Public deaths by hanging, furthermore, “were performed with regular frequency, the most popular of which being the execution of the conspirators who were found guilty of killing Abraham Lincoln in 1865,” which, along with lynching, virtually became “public spectacles of death [that] took on a festival-type atmosphere, as families attended with picnic baskets in hand, vendors sold souvenirs, and photographers took multiple photographs of the event, many of which wound up on penny postcards,” something that went on until 1936, when the government put a stop to public executions of criminals (Weiser 1).

During the American Civil War, the executions of soldiers accused of treason were also present in the newspapers, and the descriptions of these events were thus able to reach a greater number of people, in all likelihood the Dickasons of Amherst included. An example is the graphic publication of the account of the hanging of a pair of Confederate soldiers, Williams and Peters, who were passing themselves as Union Soldiers in order to spy on the Union Army in Tennessee. The Harper’s Weekly newspaper offered a recount of their espionage tactics, their discovery and hanging, through the publication of a letter from “the surgeon of the 85th Indiana” (“The Execution of Williams and Peters” 419). The execution itself was narrated in detail:

Arrived at the place of execution they stepped upon the platform of the cart and took their respective places. [...] This over, the cart moved from under them, and they hung in the air. [...] The bodies were cut down at 30 minutes and encoffined in full dress. [...] Both men were buried in the same grave – companions in life, misfortune, and crime, companions in infamy, and now companions in the grave. [...] the prisoners did not want their punishment delayed; but, well-knowing the consequences of their acts

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31 For an image of the front page of this issue of the Harper’s Weekly newspaper, please see fig. 20 in Appendix K.
Williams’s and Peters’s deaths appear as examples of the fate of hundreds of soldiers who endured the same lot, and whose final moments were conveyed through the narratives of others in the media, through correspondence, or simply by word of mouth, thus shaping public opinion and the understanding of a war that escaped all rational justification. For the analysis of “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” (F340), it is worth noting two key moments in the hanging of these men, namely, the moment when “the cart moved from under them, and they hung in the air,” and the “30 minutes” that mediated between the hanging and their actual deaths (“The Execution of Williams and Peters” 419). These moments echo the “Plank in Reason [that] broke,” leading to the continuous fall of the speaker, who describes his dropping down as hitting “a World, at every plunge,” until there are no more worlds to hit, and the dropping is done, and they “Finished knowing – then –” (ll. 17-20). The moment of the decisive lack of knowledge, because it is the moment when the ear ceases to identify any familiar sound and thus stops functioning, is then the moment of death. Therefore, in the case of the executed individual, being hanged literally equates to falling into his demise.

The death sentence of a soldier, during the American Civil War, followed an extremely ritualized process which generally culminated in an execution “by firing-squad” (Katcher n.p.). After being court-marshaled and convicted, the soldier in question would then be allowed to “pray with a clergyman of his choice, [...] dressed in civilian clothing [...] so as to not disgrace the uniform, and [was] placed in a wagon with his coffin to go to the place of execution” (Katcher n.p.). The wagon would be “led by a corporal, [and accompanied by] a firing squad of eight men, marching with arms reversed, [...] with drummers beating the funeral march” (Katcher n.p.). Once arrived at the place of the execution, the man would lay the coffin close to his grave, which “had already been dug,” and sit “on the coffin while his sentence was read.” After being comforted by the priest, the convict had the chance to utter his final words, being later “blindfolded and [having] his hands [...] tied behind him.” It was thus that, kneeling “before the grave or in the coffin,” the convict awaited his death, which, after the firing, was confirmed by a surgeon (Katcher n.p.). In light of this ritualized process, certain excerpts of “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” (F340), when considered in the context of an execution, make more sense, particularly the references to the treading Mourners, in the first stanza, or the beating drums in the second stanza, which seemingly beat until the speaker loses conscience. The reference to the box that is lifted, in
the third stanza, and the creaking effect that this gesture has in the disturbed spirit of the speaker becomes all the more dramatic, inasmuch as it strengthens the sense of confusion and despair in the mind of one who already knows himself to be breathing his last. This sentiment is reinforced by the thumping of the “Boots of Lead” that make the very “Space [...] toll,” as if the heavy, rhythmical pace of the steps of those wearing them could cause the earth to quake (ll. 11-2). The loneliness, or even the utter isolation of the persona, whose senses begin to fail, and whose plunge into the absurd of the tragic situation that they are experiencing, appears to be frozen in a perpetual, and endlessly “wrecked” now that reflects the inner brokenness of the subject. This goes on until the final and decisive blow that causes death gradually precipitates the speaker into deep and unknown layers of (un)awareness only to culminate in the key moment wherein he ceases altogether to know, to perceive, and ultimately to be, that is, when the speaker finishes to exist entirely (ll. 17-20).

At this point, it is interesting to make a reference to a contemporaneous author of Emily Dickinson’s who was coincidentally a soldier in the American Civil War, and, years later, went on to write about the events that he had witnessed during his time in the military. Ambrose Gwyneth Bierce eagerly enlisted for service during the Civil War in 1861, at age eighteen, when he joined “the Ninth Indiana Volunteers, after Lincoln’s call for troops on April 15” (Duncan and Klooster 8). Bierce was remembered as a brave and enthusiastic soldier, always ready for action, which contributed to a speedy ascension in the military ranks as a result of his acts of valor and demonstrations of comradery and loyalty. In effect, Bierce was quickly promoted to “the rank of first lieutenant” on New Year’s Eve, 1862, due to his astounding performance in combat (Duncan and Klooster 9). Among his many functions in the army, Bierce also acted “as provost marshall overseeing two military executions,” and was later assigned to the function of “topographical engineer” (Duncan and Klooster 9). In his later years, Bierce himself recognized the importance of “his experience as a map maker” for the writing of his stories (Duncan and Klooster 11). Despite having been released “from active duty on January 25, 1865,” Bierce soon found himself working “as a Treasury Department agent [in] Alabama,” where he was tasked with fighting the “contraband property, mostly cotton, abandoned or hidden by Confederates” (Duncan and Klooster 11). As an active military during the time of the Civil War, Bierce “was the only major American writer who knew first-hand what the war had meant to” all the soldiers involved, a factor that gives an immense weight to his writings, “as both a historical record of one man’s remembered experience and as a literary account of what happened and why it mattered” (Duncan and Klooster 21).
Nevertheless, Bierce was not one to idealize the crude and cruel events in which he partook, as he clearly opted to debunk “the ‘good war’ myth,” by offering instead a faithful recount of all the horrors of the battlefield and of its tragic aftermath, as well as of the underlying absurdity of the deaths of so many young men who gave their lives “for causes they did not understand” (Duncan and Klooster 19, 20, 17). Dying to defend a culturally contingent ideal of masculinity that was founded on “courage, honor, duty, [...] men were recognized as men by going into uniform for the purpose of dying or killing other protectors” of the same values (Duncan and Klooster 17). As a writer of and about the Civil War, Bierce took on an unpopular standpoint, while not only debunking collective myths surrounding the Civil War, but also centering his narratives “at the edges” of the real warfare action (Duncan and Klooster 26). In effect, for Bierce, the real action of combat was in the center of the psyche, the mind, the psychological twists and turns of the protagonist, weighing his duty, usually, against his fear of dying. No one had written this kind of war story, one eschewing patriotism and glory to focus on terror and death. In Bierce’s war, men died, and that was that. All their thinking and fear could not stop fate. (Duncan and Klooster 27-8)

Therefore, in the words of Edmund Wilson, “Death may perhaps be said to be Ambrose Bierce’s only real character,” particularly in his short story “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” (622).

Published in 1890, “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” tells the story of the final moments of Peyton Farquhar, a plantation owner from Alabama, who is being executed for treason (Duncan and Klooster 344). While Farquhar is awaiting death, the narrator goes back to the actions that precipitated his conviction, namely what the Southern planter deemed a heroic proposal of assistance to the Confederate Army by provoking the destruction of Owl Creek bridge, and thus sabotaging the advancement of the Yankee Army (Bierce 129-30). Farquhar’s actions, however, do not stem from an organized plan of his own, but originate in response to an agent provocateur, a “Federal scout,” who had previously approached his home disguised as a Confederate soldier bringing news from the front (Bierce 130). Unaware of the enemy’s deception, Farquhar, who desired only to serve the Southern cause, accepted the challenge of burning the bridge, despite being well aware of the impending doom reserved to “any civilian caught interfering with the railroad, its bridges, tunnels or trains”
And caught Peyton Farquhar was, and convicted to die a traitor’s death by hanging from the very bridge he had so eagerly volunteered to destroy, in an absurd confluence of events that seems to reiterate the non-sense of the heroic ideals of masculinity surrounding the fratricidal war that was taking place. For Peyton Farquhar, nevertheless, the true combat had just begun in the exact moments preceding his hanging, which is where the incipient action finds him. Preparing for death, Farquhar appears in all his vulnerability as someone facing the ultimate destiny, death, and struggling to evade it through the fantasy of a miraculous escape, only to be confronted with the inevitability of his ending (Bierce 130-4).

For the analysis of “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” (F340), there are a few key moments in “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” that appear to reflect the perception of the former as an illustration of an execution by hanging, particularly taking into consideration that Bierce’s narrative was likely gathered from his personal experience as an overseer of, and possibly a participant in, such public actions of military discipline. While opening the consciousness of Peyton Farquhar to the reader, Bierce depicts the moments of internal anguish of an individual who literally falls to his death, as well as of the external ceremonial that surrounds his demise. The company of soldiers witnessing the execution is still, at one side of the bridge, “staring stonily, motionless,” while the five people, four officers and the convict, who stand in the center of the bridge, are the only ones who make any movement (Bierce 127-8). Death, in effect, is defined by Bierce as “a dignitary [who, according to] the code of military etiquette [must be received with] silence and fixity” (Bierce 128).

Notwithstanding the present moment wherein the world stands still, it is understood that the group must have marched to the place of the execution, as was customary in the military ritual of capital punishment. Hence the parallels with stanzas one and two of “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” (F340), wherein the mourners keep treading to and fro until it seems to the persona that “Sense is breaking through –” (ll. 2-4). When this movement stops, and all have taken their assigned places, the speaker hears the numbing beating of a drum that makes all the rest disappear underneath its overwhelming sound (ll. 5-8). In Bierce’s narrative, the drums marking the march of the convict to the place of his death are no longer heard, for their time, like that of the procession to the place of the execution, has already passed. In their stead, Farquhar is disturbed from his final thoughts by “a sound which he could neither ignore nor understand, a sharp, metallic percussion like the stroke of a blacksmith’s hammer upon the anvil” (Bierce 129). The sound that populates and reverberates through the thick silence of the frozen image of the figures that await for the conclusion of this somber ritual,
echoes in his brain in a maddening pattern that raises Farquhar’s anguish to the brink of madness, as “Space [itself] began to toll” (l. 12). According to Bierce’s brilliant description,

Its recurrence was regular, but as slow as the tolling of a death knell. He awaited each stroke with impatience and – he knew not why – apprehension. The intervals of silence grew progressively longer; the delays became maddening. With their greater infrequency the sounds increased in strength and sharpness. They hurt his ear like the thrust of a knife; he feared he would shriek. What he heard was the ticking of his watch. (129)

Being is thus reduced to the ear, and the extent of the individual’s brokenness grows to be evident, as he becomes isolated due to his particular circumstances, as a member of “some strange Race” who, unable to run, hide, or save himself, remains in the devastated now, “Wrecked, solitary, here – ” (ll. 11-16). For an anguished and terrified man, like Peyton Farquhar, or anyone consciously facing their last moments, the wait becomes maddening, and the seconds become endless, at the same time that the counting of time, which appears as a proof of there still being time to count, turns into a further desperate attempt to hold on to the life that is literally running away from him.

In Peyton Farquhar’s execution there is no mention of a casket. However, there is a report of the steps of the officers’ “Boots of Lead” on the bridge, while they make the final preparations for the execution (l. 11, Bierce 128). The officers succeed each other in standing on the opposite edge of the plank where Farquhar himself stands, prolonging his agony and the fear of his imminent fall, until finally, the only thing literally standing between him and certain death is a nameless sergeant (Bierce 128). Following the captain’s signal, the sergeant “stepped aside,” and “Peyton Farquhar fell straight downward through the bridge [...], lost his consciousness and was as one already dead” (Bierce 129-30). However, during the interval that mediated between his fall and his actual death, a different plank was moved, the one that the speaker in Dickinson’s poem refers to as a “Plank in Reason, [that] broke,” (l. 17), and Peyton Farquhar successively travels to different places, “and [hits] a World, at every plunge” (l. 19). In effect, the inner struggle for life does not cease with the act of hanging; rather it takes on a different and perhaps more dramatic turn as, in his mind, and through his thoughts, Farquhar miraculously escapes the noose and breaks free from the ropes that bind him, only to swim down the river, and walk back to his home. However, small hints point to the fact that this is merely a fancy, like his unlikely escape from the noose and the ropes that
tie him, as well as his miraculous evasion of the firing squad that shoots at him as he drifts down the river. Likewise, his inexplicable pain, or the strange aspect and coloration of a dreamlike, and at the same time terrifying landscape, which in one occasion borders on the “uncanny,” or the downright “malignant” seem to indicate that something is amiss (Bierce, 131-5). Finally, almost without knowing how he got there, Peyton Farquhar “stands at the gate of his own home,” and as he moves toward his wife, who in his vision has an almost angelic or preternatural demeanor,

he feels a stunning blow upon the back of his neck; a blinding white light blazes all about him with a sound like a shock of a cannon – then all is darkness and silence!

Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of Owl Creek bridge. (135)

The decisive blow that ends his dream of freedom, and irreversibly marks the victory of death over a struggling individual, makes for a full stop in Farquhar’s fall between the successive worlds of his imagination, and into the one unchangeable and undeniable reality of his death. It is, moreover, in this key moment that he finishes knowing (l. 20), as all turns into darkness, and Peyton Farquhar, along with all his ideals, hopes, and dreams, literally merges with and disappears into the great unknown mystery of inexistence.

While comparing the phenomena described in this poem with the reality of death, particularly in the context of the military executions which took place during the American Civil War, it is possible to notice Dickinson’s acute perception and capacity to reflect upon realities that, quite likely, she would only have heard or read about. A deep insight into human condition, along with her sharp intellect allowed for Dickinson to incarnate the experiences of different personae and transmit them through poetry in a realistic and convincing manner. In the case of “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” (F340), this reflection is quite detailed, serious, even somber in many ways, and demonstrates Dickinson’s command of her art and capacity to understand and examine, in detail, the psychological complexity of her persona’s dispositions and experiences, which in no way contradicts her capacity to make light of serious events. In effect, the capacity to experience and communicate extreme feelings of humor as well as of tragedy stems from the same source, for great feeling makes for great art, whatever the spectrum the artist chooses to move in.
“Because I could not stop for Death”: Emily’s Date with Death

Emily Dickinson’s poem “Because I could not stop for Death” (F479), which Franklin dates as “about late 1862” is, according to Smith, “perhaps [...] her most anthologized poem” (1: 492; “The Poet as Cartoonist” 92). In it, Dickinson addresses the highly ritualized funeral procession, which consisted of taking the body of the deceased to the cemetery, for its burial, by means of a horse-drawn hearse which was built for the effect.32 Riding with death, the persona thus seemingly goes for a casual drive with a familiar friend, into lands unknown, as the poem reads,

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 –

32 For an image of a nineteenth-century hearse and a funeral cortege, please see figs. 21a and 21b in Appendix L.
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 –

The first image presented by the poem is that of someone in motion, in activity, or at least occupied by their chores who, not being able to leave them and stop for Death, as if he were a real person requiring the speaker’s undivided attention, ultimately makes Death himself stop for them. Perhaps, it can even be argued that, not desiring to stop living, the speaker declares herself unable to “stop for Death” (l. 1). Then Death, as one ready to claim the speaker, stops for her, thus coercing his guest into an unexpected trip (l. 2). The persona then gets into the carriage only to discover that she and Death do not travel alone, but are accompanied by a third guest, Immortality. The matter of fact terminology used by Dickinson in this first stanza, along with the flowing rhythm of her words seem to indicate that, instead of a funeral procession, the reader is witnessing a meeting between intimate friends, or even perhaps an amorous encounter between a lady and her suitor.

At this point, and taking into consideration the analogy of the meeting between lovers, it is worth quoting another of Dickinson’s poems, which, according to Juhasz is the companion to “Because I could not stop for Death” (“The Big Tease” 52). “Death is the supple Suitor” (F1470), which Franklin dates as “about 1878” (3: 1287), deepens on the theme of the perception of Death as a lover,

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

Reading these poems side by side, it would seem as though “Death is the supple Suitor” fills in the information that is lacking between lines one and two of “Because I could not stop for Death” (F479), as the reason for Death’s sudden stop for the speaker is made clearer. After performing a “stealthy Wooing” (l. 3), Death then “wins at last” (l. 2). His wooing, nevertheless, is not of a romantic nature, but rather a physically consuming one, and quite literally so. Starting off “by pallid innuendoes / And [a] dim approach” (ll. 5-6), Death gradually gains terrain in the body of the speaker, much like an enamored individual gradually conquers the loved one. It is worth opening a parenthesis, however, for it is commonly understood that not all affections are returned nor that they increase with time, with the exception of the affection owed to the suitor in the aforementioned poems. In effect, according to Juhasz,

dead as lover represents male power in its most extreme form, perhaps because one cannot ever, finally, hold out against him. Death forces the issue of competition which for Dickinson is just beneath the surface of erotic interchange. With him, it’s a life and death struggle, literally, so that her tease is on behalf of self-preservation. (“The Big Tease” 48)

Death is thus the irresistible, because ultimately unavoidable suitor, whom the beloved literally cannot reject. Finally, after what appears to be a slow crescendo, Death triumphantly whisks away the speaker, carrying her in his “bisected Coach,” and heading to what the persona calls a “Troth unknown” (ll. 7-10). The double entendre of Death carrying the body to the grave, a place unknown to any living creature, in his hearse, and that of the beloved carrying his bride in the “wedding chariot” to her new and unknown life as wife and mother, underlies the meaning of the “bisected Coach”, to which the poem alludes (Mitra n.p.; l.8). It also seems to refer to the unknown fate that awaits the speaker, as the future, whatever it may be, is always uncertain, regardless of the promises that it theoretically holds.

A further instance where the bleakness of this future appears evident is in the final lines of the poem, where the speaker refers to the kinsmen that await her in this new region that she will inhabit. The “divulgeless” or unknown relatives or neighbors that await the persona are then compared to the “Clans of the Down,” which can be interpreted as both the
inhabitants of the subterranean regions of the dead, and as the most unknown people that exist, as a hint to the ill-reputed relations among whom the newlywed bride will live. As a historic note, it may be interesting to mention that the Clans of the Down cited in the poem can refer to the inhabitants of former County Down, in Northern Ireland, a region that received a great influx of Scottish migrants during the seventeenth century ("Down" n.p.). The population of County Down, moreover, had suffered greatly due to the 1315 landing of "Edward Bruce [who entered the place] to assert his claim to the throne of Ireland," leaving his supporters to suffer heavy penalties for assisting him in his struggle (Lewis n.p.), something that Emily Dickinson might have been familiar with from her history classes or her personal readings. Whatever may be the source of these ideas, the key notion to keep in mind is that the future that awaits the speaker is not a happy or propitious one, be it through this gloomy marriage or through death, perceived by Dickinson as the true ending of all things (Weisbuch 93).

Through the paradoxical use of language of “a Sentimental Love Religion, [which] represented the most popular level of [Victorian American] culture,” Dickinson worked with the widespread notion that “death, love, the afterlife, nature, and art were all bound in fealty to the great idea of romance, whether it was found in theology, history, fictions, or real life” (St. Armand 80). In using these signs and signifiers interchangeably to fabricate alternate layers of meaning, the poet was able to create a comic connotation for her writings, albeit not in a frivolous or obvious manner, but rather following the notion suggested by Henri Bergson, who states that

*A comic effect is always obtainable by transposing the natural expression of an idea into another key.*

The means of transposition are so many and varied, language affords so rich a continuity of themes and the comic here is capable of passing through so great a number of stages, from the most insipid buffoonery up to the loftiest forms of humour and irony [...]. (original emphasis, 140)

Besides irony and humor, Bergson also refers to degradation and exaggerations as forms of comic linguistic transposition (140-1). In Dickinson’s case, this transposition of language from a context wherein it makes sense, because it is its so-called natural environment, to a completely different level of meaning, is intended as a form of “appropriation [through] a process of personalization, internalization, exaggeration and inversion that can be seen in her
response to other aspects of her culture” (St. Armand 73). While appropriating the notions of matrimony and death, and mixing them into a romantic/ comic/ morbid procession that leads to a new home, which is ultimately the grave, Dickinson enters into a sort of intentional redactio ad absurdum, mocking both the institution of marriage and its consequences for the bride, as well as the possible result of death. According to St. Armand,

she could not stop with a sentimental punctuation that made the grave a period and the afterlife an apostrophe. Death became an ambiguous hyphen, and paradise, if it existed, could be depicted only by a passionate exclamation point. (73)

This exclamation point, however, may be real or figurative, inasmuch as, in the case of “Because I could not stop for Death” (F479), the cluelessness which surrounds the speaker’s encounter with the abode that awaits her at the end of the journey can be perceived as the equivalent of mocking the final destination, which she will inhabit for centuries, in the company of Death and Immortality (ll. 11-24).

There is in this poem, moreover, a gradual crescendo of absurdity, from the observation of the children playing and the fields of corn, indicative that, even after death, life goes on, and the living go on living, to the bridal dress or the destination of this trip. It is quite ironic that the companions of the bride/ corpse in her trip are Death and Immortality, for if Immortality joins the speaker in her final trip, and in the last stanza, it is indicated that it has been “Centuries” since the speaker “first surmised the Horses’ Heads / Were toward Eternity –” (ll. 21-4), and the interval between the trip and the present was spent in the grave, then the concepts of Eternity and Immortality are a sham, for the persona, in all her sentient and conscious self, has never left the same place. Hence, Dickinson pokes fun, in a circular and not very obvious manner, at the romanticizing of, as well as the religious or theological notions associated with death, insofar as she questions the dogmatic truths of heaven and paradise that were deeply ingrained in the society of her time. This comic absurdity is, at the same time, a grotesque one for, when examining the speaker’s dress in more detail, it is stated in stanza four that it is made of “Gossamer” (l. 15). Gossamer threads are obtained, according to Soth, from spider webs, and can be used to weave a type of silk
that is “as strong as steel, [and yet] as light as a feather” (n.p.), which explains the cold felt by the speaker in Dickinson’s poem, as it not only refers to the physical iciness of death, but also to the lightness of her attire that, along with “The Dews drew quivering and Chill –” (l. 14). However, the visualization of the speaker as someone wearing silk made from spider webs may take an even more sinister turn. In effect, this line may be interpreted as an euphemism for the state of the speaker as someone enclosed in a giant cocoon, like the prey that is first trapped by the spider in its web, only to be entangled in it and finally devoured as a meal. All in all, the disconcerting views that can emerge from this poem seem to point in the direction of a disturbing and uncomfortable bridal promenade that has, doubtless, a ghastly ending, be it in the decomposition of the grave, or in the annulment, or death in married life for the Victorian American woman. According to St. Armand, Death, then, “becomes not merely a porter or a herald or an esquire [...], but a sinister ‘Gentleman-usher’ who is also a best man, a groom or proxy who stands in for the true lover delayed in a remote paradise” (71). However, this analogy begs the interrogation of whether Dickinson is not calling the Romantic ideal of the supposed “true lover” into question, and by not referring to him, and insisting on the time that the speaker has spent in the geographically circumscribed space of the grave, is indicating that these ethereal ideals are nothing more than a false consolation. In the end, the real end, all is darkness and decomposition, and the individual stops being in the exact moment when their physical existence ceases, or so the poem seems to suggest. Likewise, in this conjunction of absurdity and disgrace, wherein the comic appears as a product of the transferences between Romantic and Monstrous, and the other way around, Dickinson the poet and the human being gains power over the inescapable Death, in its multifarious forms, precisely due to the nature of the language that she uses, and the form whereby she does so. Before deepening on the subject of transposition of language and meaning, it is worth opening a small parenthesis to consider Emily Dickinson’s use of exaggeration in her poem “I like a look of Agony” (F339).

“I like a look of Agony,”: When Death and Truth Meet at Last
According to Guthke, “the condition of the soul at the moment of death appears to be of extreme importance in determining its destination in the here-after,” hence the significance given by Christian traditions to an individual’s “last moments on earth” (36). In these decisive moments, it was recommended to cleanse one’s soul through the

33 For a visual representation of the process of creating silk from spider webs, please watch https://youtu.be/Fv1qq6ypiTk.
confession of sins, repentance, affirmation of faith, prayer, forgiveness for all, and, ideally, the ritual “commendo spiritum meum in manus tuas,” [that is, into your hands I commend my spirit] addressed to Christ or the Lord (who were thus the object of the last words) [thus guaranteeing] the passage of the soul into eternal bliss. (Guthke 36).

Dying well was vital in nineteenth-century America, so much so that it was a general perception that “how one died [...] epitomized a life already led and predicted the quality of life everlasting” (Faust 9). In order to die what was deemed a Good Death, people felt it was essential to accompany the dying in their last moments, not only for personal edification and comfort, but also to record their last moments in search of a hint of their eternal salvation, and consequently of the possibility of meeting them again in the afterlife. According to Faust, “the hors mori, the hour of death, had therefore to be witnessed, scrutinized, interpreted, narrated – not to mention carefully prepared for by any sinner who sought to be worthy of salvation” (9). Such great importance was given to this final moment and to the weight that it had for the eternal fate of the dying person, that

people believed final words to be the truth, both because they thought that a dying person could no longer have any earthly motivation to lie, and because those about to meet their maker would not want to expire bearing false witness. (Faust 10)

Therefore, the desire to die a Good and holy Death, aligned with the fear of eternal damnation should, at least in theory, serve as an impulse for the proper preparation for the dying moment.

This notion of truth as a critical part of the final moment of someone on this earth is also addressed by Emily Dickinson in her poem “I like a look of Agony” (F339), which Franklin dates as “about summer 1862 [and is contained] in Fascicle 16” (1: 365). The poem reads as follows:

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.

According to Weisbuch, “both agony and death eliminate façade,” hence the importance of this key moment, when all masks fall off, and the truth that remains possibly hidden inside the human heart comes to light (93). The need or strength to pretend, or dissimulate, dissolve in the presence of the ultimate moment of truth, and the person lies naked, in spirit, in front of his or her maker, as well as of their fellow men and women, in the need to comfort others, but particularly, in the need of reassuring themselves of the eternal reward that awaits them.

Nevertheless, this poem, like many others by Dickinson, has many possible layers of interpretation, one being that related to the audience of loved ones, relatives and friends, who accompany the dying person in their final moments. The eagerness to be a part of this decisive time, of recording any words or gestures, or of discerning the traces of eternal salvation in these last instants, make for an almost obsessive and minute observation on behalf of the witnesses. The speaker, in this case, would seem to indicate an almost pathological desire to not miss an instant of what they are observing, especially this marked “look of Agony” that they so enjoy, because they know to be “true” (ll. 1-2). It is almost as if the speaker finds a morbid delectation in contemplating the agonizing expression in the face of the dying, something that they apparently know so well, possibly from other similar experiences, that they indicate that “Men do not sham Convulsion / Nor simulate, a Throe –” (ll. 3-4). Following the consignments of the Good Death, the speaker reaffirms that, possibly, the only thing that people are unable to feign is exactly the moment of death, when light and life disappear from their eyes, only to give way to the icy glance of death. Through the exaggerated fixation in this “look of Agony” (l. 1), the speaker, and Dickinson through him or her, poke fun at the ingrained custom of recording and witnessing someone’s last moments, through the focal point of the agonic look of a weak and feeble person who, for all effects, may even feel like some sort of sideshow freak, under the gaze of awkwardly pious observers to whose rules he or she must conform to until their last moment. Death thus becomes a spectacle, albeit under the guise of intimacy and piety, where the dying are denied peace and made to almost solemnly declare that they are as they should be, that is, they are saved and on their way to Paradise.
A companion to this poem, “The Look of thee, what is it like” (F1731), which Franklin classifies as having been “lost, [and surviving only as a transcription] by Susan Dickinson” (3: 1496), seemingly offers a deeper insight into the thoughts and feelings of one accompanying a dying person. The poem reads as follows:

The Look of thee, what is it like
Hast thou a hand or Foot
Or mansion of Identity
And what is thy Pursuit

Thy fellows are they realms or Themes
Hast thou Delight or Fear
Or Longing – and is that for us
Or values more severe –

Let change transfuse all other Traits
Enact all other Blame
But deign this least certificate
That thou shalt be the same –

In a crescendo of seemingly absurd musings and questions at the beginning of what appears to be an interior monologue, the speaker gradually moves toward their deepest inquiries. When contemplating the person that lies dying, one core issue seems to trouble the witness, and that is to ensure that, in this last moment, after a shared existence of more or less length, “thou shalt be the same – ” (l. 12). The need to comprehend or at least have a small inkling of the reality that the dying person is experiencing, of wondering whether that individual has “Delight or Fear,” or if he or she is longing for family and friends, or already dreaming of eternity in the exact moment that precedes it, all cross the mind of the beholder. Moreover, as one awaiting a similar fate, the speaker appears as one who knows that the final instant is also the great unknown moment that everyone crosses on their own (ll. 5-8). And yet the ultimate knowledge that the one veiling beside the dying person aims to is that of the authenticity of that person, which is the reason why the “look of Agony” is something decisive for ascertaining the reality of someone who, despite being known to the speaker, still remains somewhat of a mystery until their last moments, when all the truth inside them should be
supposedly revealed. Hence, death and dying can be the object of different types of scrutiny, a curious or an empathetic one, depending on the eyes of the beholder. The need to make sure that a loved one dies in a state of grace, and is welcomed into eternal life, where one can rejoin them, or simply the obsessive and almost sickly gaze of someone who observes a dying person, almost expecting to finally see their truth, appear as two sides of a same reality. The exaggeration of “I like a look of Agony” (F339), along with the more meditative approach of “The Look of thee, what is it like” (F1731), thus complement each other and, once more, demonstrate Dickinson’s capacity to both observe, incarnate and poke fun at culturally contingent ideas and ideals of death and dying. Moreover, their superlative content and possible interpretations reflect the age wherein they originated as one of excesses that extended into the most private and sacred moment of one’s death which, as personal as it might be, still constituted a virtual public attraction for those closest to the dying. After this digression, it is now time to return to Emily Dickinson’s “appropriation of the props of the Sentimental Love Religion” (St. Armand 73), and the interchangeable transposition that she undertakes between this rather romantic context and that of death.

“A Wife – at Daybreak – I shall be”: Dickinson’s Wild Nights with Death

The transposition of Romantic language into Death language, or into the context of the macabre and morbid, offers a scope to read other poems, which might be considered as belonging to a more erotic nature, in a rather different and darker manner. Therefore, the possibility of entertaining a more comic or absurd interpretation makes more sense, and adds a further layer of meaning to Dickinson’s intentions, accentuating the open-endedness of her writings as well as the ample space that the reader who approaches her poems enjoys as a co-creator of meaning. According to what has already been discussed, death and love, even erotic love, are represented in such ambiguous terms in Dickinson’s poetry that the possibilities for interpretation become so ample so as to turn this very ambiguity into the potential source of a simultaneously comic and tragic reading. A good example of this ample span of possibility is the poem “A Wife – at Daybreak – I shall be” (F185), which has survived in three different versions that Franklin successively dates “as 1861, 1862, 1863” (1: 218). The following transcription corresponds to the third variant, from 1863, which was included in “Fascicle 32” (1: 219):

A Wife – at Daybreak – I shall be –
Sunrise – Hast Thou a Flag for me?
At Midnight – I am yet a Maid –
How short it takes to make it Bride –
Then, Midnight – I have passed from Thee –
Unto the East – and Victory.

Midnight – Good night – I hear them Call –
The Angels bustle in the Hall –
Softly – my Future climbs the Stair –
I fumble at my Childhood’s prayer –
So soon to be a Child – no more –
Eternity – I’m coming – Sir –
Master – I’ve seen the Face – before –

Despite the obviously erotic connotation that the poem might have in terms of the analogy of the wedding night of the speaker, and the consummation of her marriage, there is, nevertheless, an underlying layer of meaning particularly suggested in the last verse of the first stanza, as well as in the second stanza. The reference to the “East – and Victory,” in l. 6, may be perceived as an allusion to the rising sun that is Christ, that originates in the popular “‘O’ Antiphons [which have been sung during the time of Advent, at least from] the eighth century” (“The ‘O Antiphons’ of Advent” n.p.). These Antiphons or verses precede a longer prayer, in this case the recitation of the Magnificat (Luke 1. 46-55), between December 17th and 23rd, in preparation for the celebration of Christmas.34 Moreover, they employ “ancient biblical imagery drawn from the messianic hopes of the Old Testament to proclaim the coming Christ as the fulfillment not only of Old Testament hopes, but present ones as well” (“The ‘O Antiphons’ of Advent” n.p.). The particular antiphon that refers to Christ as the rising sun is sung on the 21st of December (“The ‘O Antiphons’ of Advent” n.p.):

*O Oriens, splendor lucis aeternae, et sol justitiae: veni et illumina sedentes in tenebris, et umbra mortis.  
*O Dawn of the East, Brightness of the Light Eternal and Sun of Justice, come and enlighten them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. (original emphasis, Scalia n.p.)

34 Interestingly, the acronym of the initials of the first words of the antiphons reads Ero Cras, that is, I will be here tomorrow. https://dappledthings.org/8481/history-and-mystery-the-o-antiphons-in-a-favorite-hymn/
Notwithstanding the Protestant context wherein Dickinson lived, it is not unlikely that she was familiar with this tradition of perceiving or invoking Christ as the rising sun, or even of associating the East with positive religious connotations for, after all, Christ was associated for centuries with the cardinal point wherefrom the sun rises every morning.

Conversely, references to hearing “the Angels [that] bustle in the hall” while someone is calling for the speaker, the subtle and ambiguous allusion to the imminent fate of the speaker who is “soon to be a Child – no more – ,” and more specifically the cry of “Eternity – I’m coming – Sir –” (ll. 7-8, 11-2), all seem to indicate that the event taking place is quite another than it would appear at a first glance. Leaping to Eternity, then, implies that death has to take place first, and the Bridal procession, as well as the bridal nervousness and expectation thus seem to align with the bride of “Because I could not stop for Death –” (F479), whose bridal promenade is anything but that. A similar suggestion of marriage as the equivalent to death, or involving some type of Death-like presence, is offered in “Title divine, is mine” (F192), which according to Franklin survived in two variants, F192A from “about 1861 [which] was sent to Samuel Bowles,” and another, F192B, from “about 1865, [which was sent] to Susan Dickinson, signed ‘Emily’” (1: 228-9). Variant 192B reads,

Title divine, is mine.
The Wife without the Sign –
Acute Degree conferred on me –
Empress of Calvary –
Royal, all but the Crown –
Betrothed without the Swoon
God gives us Women –
When you hold Garnet to Garnet –
Gold – to Gold –
Born – Bridalled – Shrouded –
In a Day –
Tri Victory –
“My Husband” – Women say
Stroking the Melody –
Is this the way –
In the same day, three key events follow, as the speaker is “Born – Bridalled – Shrouded –” (l. 10), and the Romantic language is once again subverted into an association with Death, and the realm of the macabre. The bride, then, in the same way as the one in “Death is the supple Suitor” (F1470), sees herself won over by her lover, already married and at once shrouded, and thus born into a new and different life. Emily Dickinson, thus, seems to play with the notion of marriage as the social death of women, as well as of that of the death of the pure woman while she crosses the forbidden line of the erotic, allowed only through marriage but which, coincidentally, precipitates her into the realm of death to herself and to the world around her. This all happens with the use of language in a rather exaggerated manner, conveying at one time the absurdity of an altogether bleak situation, along with the extreme power of such strong forces as love and death. In that sense, according to Juhasz, “with death, as with love, poetry becomes the opportunity to have the feeling, a dangerous feeling, without taking the consequences or paying the price,” in what can be considered a controlled experiment wherein the poet, Dickinson, has all the metaphorical and dialectic power over life and death (“The Big Tease” 48).

Hence, taking into account what has already been said, and considering Dickinson’s own statement that “Dying is a wild Night and a new Road” (L332), it is possible to apply different perspectives, from a telescopic outlook whereby the reader chooses the standpoint of death, to poems that may be subjected to completely different interpretations. Through the subversion of linguistic and cultural symbols, and their transposition into different spheres of meaning, Dickinson creates alternative realities, offering a veritable shock of the senses and calling into question strict representations of reality. This is no less true for one of her poems, where erotic love seems to be the main theme, “Wild nights – Wild nights!” (F269), which Franklin dates as “about late 1861 [and is included] in Fascicle 11” (1: 288),

Wild nights – Wild nights!
Were I with thee
Wild nights should be
Our Luxury!

Futile – the winds –
To a Heart in port –
Done with the Compass –
Done with the Chart!
Rowing in Eden –
Ah – the Sea!
Might I but moor – tonight –
In thee!

Taking the thee to be Death, the supple suitor, the one that stops for the speaker and ushers her into his carriage, the companion of the great adventure that starts with dying, everything becomes an immense possibility, and in that very adventurous open-endedness lies all the excitement and joy of Paradise, not as a place, but as a state of continuous exploration. The new road that is being continually opened, treaded, explored, by the use of language in the most diverse and atypical ways, is in itself a “wild Night and a new Road” (L332). And it is this subversive inventiveness, with all the exaggeration, degradation, humor and irony that Bergson attributes to it (140-1) that effectively creates the comic moments in Dickinson’s poetry, for it is through the skillful use of metaphor that new worlds are brought to life and light in her verse.
Conclusion

Emily Dickinson is an atypical and innovative poet both for her choice of themes and due to her unusual style. In effect, while placing her poems in the socio-cultural, historical and literary contexts wherefrom they emerged, it is possible to perceive the many ways whereby Dickinson plays with words and their meanings in order to create comic situations when addressing the theme of death. To achieve said effect, Dickinson often applies romantic language to the context of the rituals and customs that surround the end of life. In so doing, she skillfully creates absurd situations that prompt humorous replies to a seemingly illogical reasoning. From that perspective, her choice of words contributes to the creation of an open-endedness that facilitates the cooperation of the reader as a co-creator of meaning along with Dickinson, the writer, in a shared process that is always subject to further exploration.

It is from this wide and open space created by Dickinson that the reader is able to perceive the many avenues of meaning present in poems that, more or less obviously, touch on the subject of death. From exaggeration, to degradation, to humor or irony, and even through the interchange of expressions and tropes, following in what would later be defined by Bergson as the forms of producing and giving rise to comic situations, Dickinson crafts her personally styled *reductiones ad absurdum*. In this manner, she plays and experiments with strong forces such as life, love and death, while creating the momentary illusion of exerting power over them through dexterous wordplay. In a time obsessed with death, and in a country deeply torn by a fratricidal conflict that generated unprecedented destruction and grief, Dickinson’s work was truly groundbreaking and subversive, not the least because she was a woman, and a woman poet at that. Without falling prey to an easy and frivolous provocation of laughter for laughter’s sake, Dickinson consistently weaves words and meanings together to poke fun at a rigid society that lives off appearances, and reduces death and dying to a series of formal observances, under the guise of benevolence and correctness. In effect, the unexpected and, at times, blatantly inappropriate effect of Dickinson’s wordcraft becomes even more poignant when confronted with detailed descriptions of said customs, as well as with their graphic representations.

While provoking a veritable shock of the senses, Dickinson, on her part, converts the greatly unknown and feared moment of death into a promenade, an adventure, a “wild Night and a new Road,” where fear gives way to expectation, through the materialization of her exceptional ideas, couched in the expressions that mirror her rich inner life. Dickinson’s genius thus shines through her work, while the poetic world that she created from the
isolation of her home resonates with each and every reader who is invited to take part in the vast allegorical horizon opened by her lyrical “letter to the World.”
Fig. 1a. Introduction to the book of Psalms of David, pp. iv-v. In this excerpt, it is possible to see how certain nouns were capitalized in order to draw the readers’ attention to specific aspects concerning the use and interpretation of the book’s content. Source: Watts, Isaac. *The Psalms of David, Imitated in the Language of the New Testament, and Apply’d to the Christian State and Worship*. 2nd ed. London, Printed for J. Clark, at the Bible and Crown in the Poultry; R. Ford, at the Angel in the Poultry; and R. Cruttenden, at the Bible and Three Crowns in Cheapside, 1719, archive.org/details/staaaimi00watt/page/n3/mode/2up. Accessed 17 Aug. 2020.
Fig. 1b. The Psalms in Dr. Watts’s adaptation, pp. 280-1. Specific nouns are capitalized throughout, in order to draw attention to the concepts that the author wishes to highlight, in this case ideas related to Christian virtue and piety. Source: Watts, Isaac. The Psalms of David, Imitated in the Language of the New Testament, and Apply’d to the Christian State and Worship. 2nd ed. London, Printed for J. Clark, at the Bible and Crown in the Poultry; R. Ford, at the Angel in the Poultry; and R. Cruttenden, at the Bible and Three Crowns in Cheapside, 1719, archive.org/details/staaaimi00watt/page/n3/mode/2up.
Appendix B

Fig. 2. Death visits the Abbot and the Bailiff.\textsuperscript{35} Source: 
Accessed 12 July 2020.

\textsuperscript{35} For an English translation of the original text, please see ll. 183-214 in https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/cook-and-strakhov-dance-of-death-la-danse-macabre.
Appendix C

Fig. 3. Puritan mourning rings, “Top, A simple gold band containing an etched death’s head with wings; bottom left, A gold band inlaid with black enamel and containing a skeleton design in gold on each side of the stone; bottom right, A gold and enamel band containing a coffin-shaped, transparent stone, through which can be seen a carved skeleton.” (original emphasis, Stannard 114-5).
Appendix D

Fig. 4. Tombstone of Mrs. Susanna Jayne, who died in 1776 and was buried in Old Burial Hill, in the town of Marblehead, MA. Despite its later date, this stone contains a great number of symbols related to death, such as the bones and the hourglass in the tympanum. The tablet is also full of meaningful images, namely a skeleton which represents death. The skeleton is wearing “a crown of laurels, indicative of victory. In its hands are celestial objects: the moon in one hand and the sun in the other. Behind Death is the scythe it uses to reap its harvest. Encircling Death is a snake, with its tail in its mouth, possibly indicating the neverending [sic] nature of eternity. In the upper two corners are winged cherubs, or angels of heaven. In the lower corners are bats of the underworld. The upper panel has an hourglass flanked by bones: Death moves in when time runs out.” Source of image and text: Old Burial Hill, Marblehead, www.oldburialhill.org/ministers/ministers_02a.html. Accessed 13 July 2020.
Appendix E

Appendix F


Fig. 7. Memorial brooch, containing the hair of sisters Ann Mary and Augusta Haven, both deceased in 1826. The brooch is made from “gold, enamel, hair, glass.” The colors symbolize both sisters, the “white for unmarried Augusta and black for Ann Mary [who died] two weeks after the birth of her second child.”
Fig. 8. Hair jewelry was also used for other purposes, such as crafting “family trees or token of friendship,” among other works of art. This is a “Bracelet, from the collection of Eden Daniel. Photo by Evi Numen. Courtesy of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia and the Mütter Museum.”

This type of painting was characterized by the use of symbols which alluded to death, such as “Greek columns, white flowers with missing petals, ships leaving the harbor, and dark clouds overhead.” Moreover, the deceased was generally depicted wearing “his [or her] very best clothes, a signal of burial attire” and the artist would use “a heavy pallet of red, white and black, all traditional colors of mourning.” In this specific portrait, the child holds his hat in his hand, as if saying goodbye, and the vines crawl up the porch column, signifying the survivors’ attachment to the deceased” (Lightfoot 44). This type of portrait would additionally “hang in a prominent place in the homes of the deceased individuals and be formally viewed by the family members on their birthdays or on the anniversaries of their deaths” (Lightfoot 45).

Fig. 11: “A Deceased Young Girl and her Dolls,” date and author not attributed. Source: “Post-Mortem Photography,” Tobedamit.Com, 1 Apr. 2016, tobedamit.com/2016/04/01/post-mortem-photography/. Accessed 20 July 2020. Photographers often decorated the dead with “flowers, favorite toys, religious objects, a cross or a Bible […] to keep the viewers’ minds from [...] images of decay and decomposition” (Lightfoot 153).
Appendix H


Appendix I


Fig. 17. Abraham Lincoln Lying in State, 1865, from a stereograph taken by Jeremiah Gurney, Jr. According to Lightfoot, the image features “Admiral Charles H. Davis (navy) and General Edward D. Townsend (army), [who are standing, respectively,] at the head and feet of the slain president. This image was taken by Gurney on April 24, 1865, in City Hall, New York City, which still stands” (157). Source of image: “Photo Gallery.” Rogerjnorton.Com, 1996, rogerjnorton.com/photos/assassination6.html. Accessed 20 July 2020.

It is interesting to note that, “even before the assassination of Lincoln, stereographs and photographs of famous corpses [criminals included], were mass-produced and sold” to an eager audience (Lightfoot 157).
Appendix J

Fig. 18: “Improved Burial-Case.” From a Patent Issued in 1868, where the inventor is declared to be Franz Vester, from Newark, New Jersey. Source: Brown & Michaels, PC, n.d., n.p., www.bpmlegal.com/wcoffin.html. Accessed 28 July 2020.


Fig. 19b: “Safety Coffin Bell Holder – Glenwood Cemetery.” A close-up of the headstone of Mary and C.F. Scholibo allows for a better view of the iron rod, where the bell that was tied to the rope in the deceased’s fingers would hang. Image source: Historic Houston, n.d., n.p., historichouston1836.com/buried-alive/. Accessed 28 July 2020.
Appendix K

Appendix L

Fig. 21a. President Lincoln’s Funeral Hearse, by the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. The original hearse was destroyed by a fire that struck the Lynch & Arnot Livery, of St. Louis Missouri, where the hearse had been built and where it had been returned to after the funeral. Source: “Our Nation’s ‘Icon of Freedom’: Abraham Lincoln Hearse.” 4th ed., Mar. 2017, pp. 1. 13, www.abrahamlincolnhearse.com/AbrahamLincolnHearse/index.html. Accessed 1 Aug. 2020.

Fig. 21b. Reenactment of Abraham Lincoln’s Funeral in the 150th Anniversary of the event, in Springfield, Illinois. In this image, the replica of the original hearse is passing in front of Lincoln’s Springfield home. Source: David Spencer/ The State Journal Register. The Visual Journal, 3 May 2015, visuals.sj-r.com/lincoln-funeral-reenactment-sunday-may-3-2015/. Accessed 1 Aug. 2020.
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