

1-1-2006

# Isolated but not Oblivious: A Re-evaluation of Emily Dickinson's Relationship to the Civil War

Peggy Henderson Murphy

Follow this and additional works at: <http://mds.marshall.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Henderson Murphy, Peggy, "Isolated but not Oblivious: A Re-evaluation of Emily Dickinson's Relationship to the Civil War" (2006).  
*Theses, Dissertations and Capstones*. Paper 636.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Marshall Digital Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations and Capstones by an authorized administrator of Marshall Digital Scholar. For more information, please contact [zhangj@marshall.edu](mailto:zhangj@marshall.edu).

Isolated but not Oblivious:  
A Re-evaluation of Emily Dickinson's  
Relationship to the Civil War

Thesis submitted to  
the Faculty of the Graduate College of  
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of  
the requirement for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
in English

By

Peggy Henderson Murphy

Dr. Katharine Rodier, Ph.D., Committee Chair  
Dr. Mary Moore, Ph.D.  
Dr. Christopher Green, Ph.D.

Marshall University  
May 2006

## Abstract

Isolated but Not Oblivious:  
A Re-evaluation of Emily Dickinson's Relationship to the  
Civil War

By  
Peggy Henderson Murphy

Emily Dickinson's physical isolation and her disinterest in publishing have led scholars to conclude that Dickinson had no interest in the outside world. Although Dickinson's poems do contain war imagery, scholars have argued that these images are used by Dickinson to deal with her own inner struggles and are not directly related to the Civil War. However, Karen Dandurand's discovery of poems published by Dickinson in a Civil War fund-raising magazine compels us to reconsider Dickinson's supposed disinterest. It is evident by Dickinson's letters and her poems that the war energizes and inspires her by providing questions about life, death, and the responsibility of God. The Civil War was not some abstract idea nor was it merely a metaphor to be used to express her inner demons. The Civil War affected Dickinson in a profound way; therefore, she used her poetry to explore the horrific effects of war.

## Introduction

When I was in high school, I was taught that Emily Dickinson was a slightly unbalanced recluse who always wore white, rarely left her room, and mostly wrote about death. As I was not interested in "death" poetry, I ignored Emily Dickinson. Later, when I taught high school English, the only 19<sup>th</sup> century woman included in the Literature textbook was Dickinson and the poem included was "The Snake." Therefore, I began to wonder: Why Emily Dickinson? But I continued to ignore her because, in a way, I was angry with her for being part of a canon that ignored so many other deserving women.

In the spring of 2005 I was still asking the question— Why Dickinson? — when I decided to take a graduate seminar focused on Dickinson and Whitman. I did not take the course to answer my question. I had a long ingrained prejudice against Dickinson, but the course fit into my schedule and Dr. Katharine Rodier was teaching it. Other graduate students encouraged me to take a course with Dr. Rodier and since she is known to be a Dickinson enthusiast I decided there might be more to the poet than I had previously been taught.

Our assignment for the course was to write a seminar length paper on a topic relating to either Dickinson or Whitman. I chose Dickinson and the Civil War because I have an interest in the history of that time period. As I began gathering materials

for my paper I came across an article written by Karen Dandurand. In that article Dandurand writes about her discovery of three Dickinson poems published in a Civil War fund-raising magazine. This discovery presented the possibility that Dickinson had agreed to the publishing in order to support the Union soldiers; therefore, revising traditional definitions of her simply as a self-centered poet. Further, I realized that if Dickinson had agreed to publish for political or social reasons then her poetry might also contain political and social commentary that had previously been overlooked. Therefore, Dickinson had not been recognized for the full extent of her importance to American history and to women's literature. At that point Dickinson became relevant and it became essential that I answer the question: Why Emily Dickinson? In order to establish that Dickinson was indeed interested in the political and social issues of her day I considered two forms of evidence. First, I considered the publishing history that Dandurand presents in her dissertation. Second, I examined the letters Dickinson wrote during the Civil War for war references.

In the first section of my thesis I consider a great deal of Dandurand's research in order to establish that Dickinson did indeed agree to publish in *The Drum Beat* and that she did not agree to publish for any other reason. I owe an immense amount of gratitude to Karen Dandurand for her work. It has inspired me to re-evaluate Dickinson and to see her as a relevant figure in modern literature. However, I use Dandurand's research for a

different purpose from hers. Her purpose is to identify why Dickinson did not publish. I focus on the importance of Dickinson's decision to publish and how that affects the way her poetry should be read. Dandurand's research brings together several sources to draw a complete picture of Dickinson's publishing history. Through her research it becomes evident that Dickinson approved of the publishing of her poems in *The Drum Beat*. For Dandurand, establishing Dickinson's publishing choices helps her to support her thesis, which is that most scholars have misunderstood Dickinson's reasons for not publishing. I build on Dandurand's research to support my own thesis that her discovery of the poems published in a Civil War fund-raising magazine and her assertion that those poems are the only poems that Dickinson agreed to publish should radically change the way Dickinson is defined.

In my second section, I continue to support my assertion that Dickinson should be seen as a political and social poet by analyzing the references to the Civil War that appear in Dickinson's letters of 1861 through 1865. Here, I rely on *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*; collected and edited by Thomas Johnson. I also include poems in this section that I feel cannot be separated from a discussion of Dickinson letters; either because Dickinson sent the poem as a letter or because the poem was closely related to the subject of a considered letter.

In the last section I consider five of Dickinson's war poem. Again I rely on Thomas Johnson who collected and edited *The*

*Poems of Emily Dickinson* in 1955. I also looked to newer scholars such as David Cody, Betsy Erkkila, Tyler Hoffman, Leigh-Anne Marcellin Urbanowicz, and Shira Wolosky who in the early 1990s began writing and publishing articles exploring Dickinson's war imagery. However, most of these scholars stand on the precipice of acknowledging Dickinson's status as a political and social poet and refuse to jump. They concede that Dickinson uses war imagery, but they offer varying explanations as to why Dickinson used those images. Some scholars go as far as to say that she was indeed deeply affected by the war, but in the last section I try to illustrate that Dickinson does not just express her feelings about the Civil War, but that she offers commentary on war. It is a tiny step forward that takes scholars into a radically different way of defining Dickinson and making her relevant to a modern audience.

Also, I want to offer a special thanks to Dr. Rodier who is not only responsible for my Dickinson conversion, but has also patiently and compassionately guided me through this process. I have often felt overwhelmed by her expectations, but she has pushed me to be better and to create a piece that I am proud of: Thank You. Lastly, thank you to my writing group for all your ideas, comments, and especially for your encouragement.

## Table Of Contents

Abstract	ii
Introduction	iii
Section One: The Exception to Her Rule	1
Section Two: The Letters: 1862-1865	20
Section Three: War Poems of 1863	42
Conclusion	48
Bibliography	50
Appendix 1: Emily Dickinson 1830-1886 By Mary Elwell Storrs	53
Appendix 2: "Sunset" and "Flowers"	54
Appendix 3: "October"	55

## Section 1

### The Exception to Her Rule

In 1891, Thomas Wentworth Higginson published an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* describing Emily Dickinson and her poetry; he used words such as "peculiar," "curious," "shy," "enigmatic," and "strange." When relating his first meeting with Dickinson he described her as childlike, "I heard an extremely faint and pattering footstep...in glided almost noiselessly, a plain, shy little person...She had a quaint nun-like look... whose prescribed garb was white pique" (Higginson 272). The picture that Higginson created of the odd, frightened recluse who glided about in white resided within the American consciousness and developed into a mythology that would stay with the public for decades. Included in this mythology is the belief that Dickinson's self-imposed physical isolation was due to her disinterest in the outside world. In 1958, Thomas Johnson stated in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, "the fact is she did not live in history and held no view of it past or current" (xiv). However, this statement becomes problematic when we consider that over half of Dickinson's poems were written during the years between 1861 and 1865 and that many of those poems contain war imagery. This fact alone suggests that Dickinson was compelled to write by the

significant and deeply troubling events occurring throughout the nation.

In recent years, scholars have begun to identify war imagery in Dickinson's poems, but they argue that Dickinson uses these images to deal with her inner struggles and are not directly related to the Civil War. Even Shira Wolosky, a scholar at the forefront of identifying Dickinson as a war poet, does not go far enough. Wolosky claims that Dickinson's use of war imagery is only a means to express her "deeply conflicted relationship to her cultural world, in religious, historical as well as personal sense of self" ("Public" 123). Instead of recognizing that Dickinson uses martial imagery and war references to comment on the Civil War, Wolosky falls back on the mythology of Dickinson as a self-centered poet. However, Karen Dandurand's discovery of poems published by Dickinson in a Civil War fund-raising magazine "obliges us to reconsider...Dickinson's supposed indifference" to the War and toward society ("New" 18). Of the over 1,800 poems written by Dickinson only ten<sup>1</sup> are known to have been published during her life time; by contributing three poems in support of the Union soldiers, Dickinson shows that she is indeed concerned with their plight.

---

<sup>1</sup> This number will fluctuate between seven and ten depending on when the reference being considered was published. Dandurand discovered three poems in the early 1980's that were until then unknown to have been published during the poet's lifetime. Dandurand published an article in 1982 discussing the first of the poems she discovered, which appeared in *American Literature*. After the discovery of the next two poems, two years later Dandurand published a second article in *American Literature* discussing the importance of those two poems. Therefore, any reference published before 1982 would include only seven poems. During that period the number given depends on how familiar the scholar was with Dandurand's work. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* 1999 edition edited by Franklin also agrees with the number ten.

In her dissertation *Why Dickinson Did Not Publish*, Karen Dandurand brings numerous sources together to create a history of the publishing of Dickinson's poems during her life time. By considering the circumstances that led to the publishing of each of the poems, Dandurand concludes that the only publication Dickinson agreed to was in *The Drum Beat*. I present Dandurand's research in combination with the conclusions I have drawn from considering her research in order to establish a historical basis for re-examining Dickinson's letters and her poetry for references that may reveal attitudes toward the War, which have until now been overlooked. Again, Dandurand's purpose in assembling the historical documents is to identify the reasons Dickinson chose not to publish. I utilize her research and focus on the one instance when, according to Dandurand, Dickinson acquiesced and agreed to publish. My purpose for doing so is to create a rationale for looking at Dickinson in a new light.

Although we cannot know for sure if Dickinson willingly offered the poems to *The Drum Beat*<sup>2</sup>, there is ample evidence to support the assertion that she did so; beginning with the improbability that the publisher, Reverend Richard Salter Storrs, printed Dickinson's poems without her permission. The Reverend Storrs was the editor of the *Independent* and had a "long-standing reputation for editorial integrity" (Dandurand, Why 24). When

---

<sup>2</sup>In 1864, the wartime fund-raising magazine *The Drum Beat* published three of Dickinson's poems: "Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple" titled "Sunset," "Flowers—Well—if anybody" titled "Flowers," and "These are the days when Birds come Back" titled "October." If Dickinson chose to offer these poems for publication in *The Drum Beat* then they "must be seen as her contribution to the Union Cause" (Dandurand 18).

soliciting for literary contributions for the magazine he did so by personal request. A letter written by Oliver Wendell Holmes and printed in *The Drum Beat* on February 25th provides evidence of Storrs's custom of solicitation. Holmes's letter apologizes for being unable to send "original communications." Storrs published the letter with "original" italicized, indicating that the word had appeared in the request to Holmes. Storrs also publishes the letter with a note from the editor stating that the letter was written "in answer to a request for an article from his pen" (3). In addition, Storrs being the president of the Long Island Historical Society included many documents from the Sanitation Fair in the society's collection, including form letters sent by other departments requesting contributions, but none from him are among the papers he collected (Dandurand, *Why* 23). Given the fact that Storrs had a keen interest in preserving the documents associated with the fair, it seems likely that had any existed he would have included them. This supports the assertion that Storrs obtained all of the material published in *The Drum Beat* through personal requests.

Also, Storrs and his wife, Mary, developed an intimate relationship with Austin and Susan Dickinson beginning in 1862. Mrs. Storrs became acquainted with Samuels Bowles while they were taking a water cure in Northampton. Bowles having become very fond of the Storrses introduced them to Austin and Susan. After the introduction, the Storrses stayed at the Evergreens, the home of Austin and Sue Dickinson, when they visited Amherst, which

they did at least once a year when they returned for the annual graduation (18-19). During the early 1860s, Emily Dickinson spent a great deal of time at the Evergreens; therefore, it is possible that during these visits Dickinson became acquainted with the Storrses, and began a correspondence with Mary Elwell Storrs who often helped her husband in his pastoral and editing duties. Although none of their letters survive, Mary's poem, which appeared in the *Springfield Republican* on May 22, 1891, "Emily Dickinson: 1830-1886" indicates that she had a personal relationship with Dickinson.<sup>3</sup> It is possible that it was upon her suggestion that Storrs requested the poems that were published in *The Drum Beat*. Further, the acknowledgment written by Storrs in *The Drum Beat* claims that all of the "correspondents... voluntarily supplied the editor with the communications with which his columns have been largely filled" (Dandurand, "New" 23).

After considering Storrs's publishing reputation, his personal relationship with the Dickinsons and the acknowledgments that appear in *The Drum Beat*, it seems that Storrs did not publish Dickinson's poems without her consent. Therefore, Dickinson agreed to do something for the Union soldiers which she did not do for any other reason—publish. The publishing history of the remaining poems bolsters the assertion that the only printing approved by Dickinson was that done in *The Drum Beat*.

The first Dickinson poem known to have been published is "Sic transit Gloria mundi" which was published as "Valentine" on

---

<sup>3</sup> Included in the Appendix is a copy of this poem.

February 1852 in the *Springfield Daily Republican*. "This poem is prefaced with an editorial note inviting the author to send poems directly to the *Republican*" (Dandurand, *Why* 206). Obviously, this poem was obtained through a second party because the publisher acknowledges in the preface that the poem was not sent to the *Republican* and it seems as if the publisher did not know to whom the poem belonged.

The second Dickinson poem published is "Nobody knows this little rose" published with the title "To Mrs. -----, with a rose." It was also published in the *Springfield Daily Republican*, on August 2, 1858. In July of that year Dickinson wrote to Mrs. Haven— the wife of Joseph Haven who was a professor at Amherst College from 1851-1858— in that letter she enclosed a rosebud and the poem "Nobody Knows this little rose" (206). When the poem appeared, a comment was included that indicated that the poem had come to the *Republican* "surreptitiously." Samuel Bowles was the editor of the *Republican* during this time but his friendship with the Dickinson had just begun. Johnson comments that the letters written between the families that summer "were friendly but not intimate" (*Letters* 335). As Dandurand points out, Emily Dickinson's first letter to Bowles and his wife was sent early that summer. These facts indicate that "Nobody Knows this little rose" was probably the first Dickinson poem Bowles saw. It also indicates that he decided quickly after reading the poem for the first time to print the poem, indicating the unlikelihood of him obtaining the poet's permission. Bowles was

connected to the Havens and very likely "surreptitiously" obtained the poem from Mrs. Haven's and printed it without Dickinson's knowledge (Dandurand, *Why* 93-99).

Samuel Bowles was responsible for the publishing of two more Dickinson poems: "I taste a liquor never brewed," titled "The May-Wine," was published in the *Springfield Daily Republican* on May 4, 1861 and reprinted in the *Springfield Weekly Republican* on May 11, 1861. "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" titled "The Sleeping" was published in the *Springfield Daily Republican* on March 1, 1862 and reprinted in the *Springfield Weekly Republican* March 8, 1862. There is little doubt that Dickinson sent these poems to Bowles and that he as the editor of the *Republican* promoted their publication. It was Dickinson's custom to enclose poems in letters to her friends especially when they were experiencing illness or grief such was the case with Bowles who had often been ill. Dandurand asserts that Dickinson sent the poems as a sort of "get well" card (118). The few letters sent to Bowles during the time period preceding the printing of the poems support this assertion. In the letters, Dickinson often mentions her concern for Bowles's health. However, in the letters that Dickinson sends to Bowles she does not mention a wish to have her poems published. If Dickinson sent her poems to Bowles as an editor and not as a friend, she would have at least hinted at her desire to have them published. She does however, express her disapproval that he published her poems and she expresses her wish that he not publish others.

Dandurand identifies three letters written successively in early 1862 that seem to express Dickinson's desire to be an unpublished poet.<sup>4</sup> In the first, Dickinson writes, "Forgive the Gills that ask, for Air-if it harm-to breath." The "Gills" that Dickinson refers to are her poems. She makes it clear that she does not wish those "gills" to breath air. Fish who breathe air die and Dickinson believes that her poems will be harmed by the exposure. We know that "Gills" refers to her poetry because she uses a similar reference several other times. For example, in a later letter to Bowles she mentions a soldier coming by and asking for a "nosegay" then she comments, "I suppose he thought we kept an aquarium." The nosegay is another oblique reference to her poetry, and in this case someone has requested poetry from her probably to publish, but she refuses. Dickinson includes the aquarium remark to remind Bowles of her previous statement that she did not wish to publish (125).

In another letter sent to Bowles, Dickinson encloses a poem that identifies her as a poet without published works. The poem includes three pairs "The wife without the Sign/ Royal all but the Crown/ Betrothed-without the swoon." In each case, Dickinson presents a title-Wife, Royal, Betrothed-but each is missing the outward manifestation of their position. Dickinson is a poet, she sees herself as a poet, but she does not believe that she must publish in order to hold that title.

---

<sup>4</sup> Letters 249, 250 and 251

Johnson comments on the third letter: "it certainly is an attempt to make her position clear, a position which the proceeding letter makes ambiguous" (*Letters* 395). Johnson does not comment on what he believes Dickinson's position is, but as we have seen her purpose was to convince Bowles that she did not wish him to publish her poems. She re-emphasizes this point in the third letter by writing, "If you doubted my Snow—for a moment—you never will again . . . I fixed it in the Verse—for you to read—when your thought wavers, for such a foot as mine—" Dandurand points out that Dickinson is alluding to her status as an unpublished poet when she refers to her feet. We know this because in a letter to Higginson she characterizes her condition as "My Barefoot-Rank" (*Why* 128). Therefore, the poem that she encloses with this letter has the purpose of reminding Bowles, lest he should forget, that she prefers her status as an unpublished poet. Bowles obviously got the point because after receiving these letters he no longer published poems sent directly to him from Dickinson. However, it seems that he did not believe Dickinson's request applied to poems published elsewhere. Bowles had already shown a great deal of interest in publishing Dickinson's poems, but had not done so after Dickinson made it clear that she did not want her poems published. However, when three appeared in *The Drum Beat* Bowles may have recognized them as Dickinson's and seized the opportunity to again publish her poems.

Shortly after Dickinson's poems appeared in *The Drum Beat*, two were republished in the *Republican*. "Sunset" was published in the *Springfield Daily Republican* on March 30, 1864 (just one month after its first publishing) and in the *Springfield Weekly Republican* three days later on April 2<sup>nd</sup>. "Flowers" was republished in the *Springfield Daily Republican* on March 9, 1864 (one week after appearing in *The Drum Beat*), and in the *Springfield Weekly Republican* three days later on March 12<sup>th</sup> (3,4). "Flowers" was subsequently republished in the *Boston Post* on March 16, 1864. The nearness of the publishing dates and textual characteristics that appear in all of the printings but not in the fascicles or known autograph copies strongly suggest that the later publishings were directly related to the original publishing in *The Drum Beat* and were not sent for consideration by Dickinson.<sup>5</sup> Bowles was still editor of the *Republican* during this time and could have recognized the poems in *The Drum Beat* as Dickinson's and re-printed them, as was the custom of the day. It is also possible that Bowles had nothing to do with the re-prints. The expanding *Republican* editorial staff re-printed several poems written by other authors that appeared in *The Drum Beat*.

The next two poems known to have been published are "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church" published in the *Round Table* on March 12<sup>th</sup> 1864 and "Success is counted sweetest" published in the *Brooklyn Daily Union* April 27<sup>th</sup> 1864. The publication of these

---

<sup>5</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the textual evidence see Dandurand's *Why Dickinson Did Not Publish*.

two poems seems to be connected to Gordon Ford, the husband of Emily Fowler Ford who was a childhood friend of Dickinson's. Fowler Ford undoubtedly had in her possession poems sent to her by Dickinson during their correspondence. However, after Ford's marriage in 1853 her frequent correspondence with Dickinson came to an end. Emily Ford's husband, Gordon, Henry Sweetser (a cousin of Dickinson's), and Charles Sweetser (a former Amherst resident), were involved in the publishing of both newspapers (25-32). "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church" is presumed to have been in the possession of Gordon Ford due to a statement made by Emily Ford that "the first [Dickinson] poem I ever read was the robin chorister... which she gave my husband long ago" (Johnson, *Poems* 255). Also, unlike that of the publisher of *The Drum Beat*, Ford and Sweetser's publishing reputations are suspect. The *Round Table* in particular was accused of printing material without permission. On April 6<sup>th</sup> 1864 the *Springfield Daily Republican* reported, "The *Round Table* in New York is making copious extracts . . . without acknowledgment of any kind"

The last poem known to have been published during Dickinson's lifetime is "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" titled "The Snake." It appeared in the *Springfield Daily Republican* on February 14, 1866 and was reprinted in the *Springfield Weekly Republican* on February 17, 1866. Dickinson's long time friend Helen Hunt Jackson was responsible for the publishing of this poem in the *Republican's* "No Name Series." But who was responsible for the publishing in this case is unimportant

because Dickinson in uncharacteristic fashion is quite clear in a letter she sends to Thomas Wentworth Higginson on May 17, 1866, that she is rather annoyed with the publishing of her poem "Lest you should meet my Snake and suppose I deceive it was robbed of me—defeated too of the third line by the punctuation. The third and fourth were one—I told you I did not print—I feared you might think me ostensible."

Another reason Dickinson's publishing in *The Drum Beat* is such an extraordinary event is because Dickinson's friends and literary mentors requested, cajoled, and begged her to publish; yet, she refused. If Dickinson had not published because people were not interested in her poetry then the *The Drum Beat* publication would be insignificant, but this is not the case. The fact that publishers reprinted her poems shows that they were indeed interested and that they did not view them as, the mythology would have us believe, as objectionable or inaccessible. Her letters unquestionably provide evidence that several of the people in Dickinson's life who she respected encouraged her to publish. As discussed earlier, Samuel Bowles was very interested in publishing Dickinson's work and probably would have continued to if she had not begged him to stop. Also, Thomas Wentworth Higginson must have encouraged her to publish for in a letter Dickinson wrote in June of 1862 she answers his suggestion to publish by saying, "I smile when you suggest that I delay "to publish"—that being foreign to my thoughts." Dickinson is obviously commenting here that publishing is "foreign" to her

thoughts because every indication in her letters to Higginson is that she wishes him to comment on her poetry. She never requests that he afford her an opportunity to publish.

Also persistently encouraging Dickinson to publish was her friend Helen Hunt Jackson. Dickinson began a correspondence with Jackson in the late 1860s. As Johnson points out, "Helen Jackson by this time was acclaimed the leading woman poet in America and had become a most successful writer of stories. She . . . believed Dickinson to be an authentic poet" (*Letters* 431). Dickinson had an enormous amount of respect for Jackson. Jackson's opinions on poems were asked for and given; yet, even Jackson's suggestions that Dickinson publish were ignored. After many such appeals followed by refusals from Dickinson an exasperated Jackson, in 1875 writes, "When you are what men call dead, you will be sorry you were so stingy" (L444a). Dickinson's reluctance never abated for in a letter she received in 1882 Thomas Niles expresses his wish that she would consent to publish (L749b). Therefore, one cannot deny that by agreeing to publish in a Union fund-raising publication, while continuing through out her life to refuse other requests, that Dickinson "acquiesced to an appeal for aid to the sick and wounded soldiers" (Dandurand, "New" 27). If Dickinson were truly disinterested in the soldier's plight, she would have maintained her preference not to publish.

## Section 2

The Letters: 1862-1865

As previously noted, Emily Dickinson's physical isolation and her disinterest in publishing have led scholars to believe that she had no interest in the outside world. However, Dickinson's letters do not support the mythology of the disinterested and isolated poet. By the end of 1861, with the deaths brought by war of several Amherst boys, Dickinson's letters express an overwhelming sense of personal loss, but by 1865 her grief has expanded beyond the personal to include an understanding of the general grief the nation was suffering. The small portion of her letters that survive reveal that Dickinson is not only aware of the Civil War, but that those events are profoundly affecting how she views war and its horrific consequences. The Civil War references that exist in Dickinson's letters identify her as a poet who is interested in political and social issues.

It is important when we consider Dickinson's letters to remember that only a small portion of her correspondence survives. It was the common practice of the day to destroy a person's correspondence after their death. *In The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*, Jay Leyda lists dozens of people whom Dickinson corresponds with, but whose letters are lost. An example from the 1862 to 1865 letters is that of Mrs. Elizabeth

Holland<sup>6</sup>. Only three letters to Mrs. Holland survive from this time period; yet, her letters suggest that their correspondence was frequent. A letter sent to Mrs. Holland in November of 1865 contains the everyday relating of events and news of common friends that would accompany the letters of one regularly communicated with. Probably the most important correspondence destroyed were those sent to her favorite aunt, Lavinia Norcross. Louise and Fanny Norcross, Dickinson's cousins with whom she religiously corresponded, are most likely to have destroyed their mother's letters. Their letters from Dickinson were offered to Mabel Loomis Todd for publication in 1894, but they transcribed parts of the letters and Todd never saw the originals (Sewall 750). One can only imagine what Dickinson might have said in the sections that her friends and family chose to withhold.

Throughout her correspondence, most of the surviving letters are concerned with the commonplace concerns of life. There are often words of condolences following the news that a mutual friend or a family member of a friend has died. Also

---

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Holland was the wife of Dr. Josiah Holland. Although he retained the title of Doctor, Holland found that he was not suited for the profession and began to write. According to Richard Sewall, upon meeting Samuel Bowles in 1849 he was hired "on the spot" to write for the *Springfield Republican* (596). However, it was not through this connection that the Dickinson's became friends with the Hollands, but through Edward Dickinson's involvement with Amherst College. In 1851 Amherst awarded Dr. Holland an honorary degree and during their visit the Hollands stayed with the Dickinsons. At this time Mrs. Holland invited Emily and Vinnie to come for a visit in Springfield. The girls actually visited with the Hollands twice cementing a friendship and correspondence that would continue for thirty-three years. Dickinson sent many poems to the Hollands during those years and Josiah Holland has been named as a possible source for the poems published in the *Springfield Republican*. However, Sewall points out that the Hollands seem not to be aware of Dickinson's skill as a poet. Later as the publisher of Scribner's, Holland does not publish Dickinson's poems and the Hollands granddaughter writes "their taste was too limited by conventional forms of their time to enable them to see the full worth of her poetry." She also writes that "Dr. Holland is quoted as having said that Emily's verse was too ethereal for publication" (Sewall 608). Therefore, it seems unlikely that it was Josiah Holland who suggested that Dickinson's poems be published.

often written about are sicknesses endured and once in while even the weather takes precedence; especially when it affects Dickinson's beloved flowers. Another constant theme in Dickinson's letters is her never-ending pleadings that her friends and cousins come and visit. Ironically, also included are several letters that contain apologies when friends do visit and she is unable to see them.

The most notable event in the correspondence during the early 1860s is the letter sent to Thomas Wentworth Higginson on April 15<sup>th</sup> 1862 where she asks him to comment on her poetry, "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive? . . . Should you think it breathed—and had you leisure to tell me, I should feel quick gratitude" (L260). Her correspondence with Higginson would be one of the most important of her life and would last until her death.

Although the first letter sent to Higginson is a notable event, it is the letters to Samuel Bowles and to Fanny and Louise Norcross that dominate the surviving letters written between 1862 and 1865. From those years, sixty-nine letters appear in the collection (this includes poems sent as letters). Edward Dwight, Mary Bowles, Master, her nephew Ned Dickinson and Eudocia Flynt each have one letter from Dickinson included in the collection. Mrs. Holland has three letters included; Sue and Lavinia Dickinson receive several letters during the seven months that Emily Dickinson is in Cambridge for eye treatments, but the remaining letters are those sent to Samuel Bowles and the

Norcross cousins. It is in these letters that Dickinson addresses her feeling toward the loss she is experiencing and communicates her knowledge of the Civil War. In *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* Thomas H. Johnson writes in his preface that "she was undergoing an emotional disturbance of such magnitude that she feared for her reason." I argue that her "emotional disturbance" was a direct result of the Civil War.

Dickinson alludes to the Civil War eight times in her letters between December of 1861 and 1865. The first letter written on December 31, 1861 is to her cousins Fanny and Louis Norcross. In 1862, Dickinson writes four letters that refer to the War. The first in March is also sent to her cousins. Three others are sent to Bowles. In February of 1863, she writes a letter to Higginson upon learning that he has gone to war. Another letter to her Norcross cousins appears sometime in late 1864 and the last letter written by Dickinson referring to the Civil War is a letter sent to her sister Lavinia in May 1865.

In December 1861, Dickinson's letter to Louise Norcross expresses her shock and grief following the news that her neighbor, "Mrs. Adams had news of the death of her boy today, from a wound at Annapolis" (L245). Apparently another of Mrs. Adams's sons had died a few months earlier "from fever in the camps and Mrs. Adams herself had not risen from bed since then." Dickinson expresses her sorrow for Mrs. Adams's loss with the imagery of a "poor little widow's boy, riding tonight in the mad wind, back to the village burying-ground where he never dreamed

of sleeping! Ah! The dreamless sleep." In the same letter, she asks "Christ to be merciful!" to Frazer Stearns, a friend of her brothers who is "just leaving Annapolis... I hope that ruddy face won't be brought home frozen." Her apprehension proves to be justified for three months later another letter to her Norcross cousins tells of Frazer Stearns's death.

In the letter to her cousins, Dickinson writes of Stearns, "his big heart shot away by a 'minie ball.'...We will try and comfort broken-hearted Ella. . . Austin is stunned completely" (L255). Frazer was the son of President Stearns of Amherst who was a family friend of the Dickinsons.<sup>7</sup> Although Frazer was a particular friend of Emily Dickinson's brother, Austin, he certainly was well known by her. The letter written to her cousins clearly articulates how deeply she was affected by Frazer's death.

Just as he fell, in his soldier's cap, with his sword at his side, Frazer rode through Amherst. Classmates to the right of him, and classmates to the left of him, to guard his narrow face! He fell by the side of Professor Clark, his superior officer—lived ten minutes in a soldier's arms. Ask twice for water—murmured just, "My God!" and passed! Sanderson, his classmate, made a box of boards in the night, put the brave boy in it, covered with a blanket, rowed six miles to reach the boat, -- so poor Frazer came. They

---

<sup>7</sup> ED spelled Stearns first name: Frazer. Johnson spelled it Frazar as does Sewall. I prefer Dickinson's spelling and therefore use it except when using a direct quotation.

tell me that Colonel Clark cried like a child when he missed his pet, and could hardly resume his post. They loved each other very much. Nobody here could look on Frazer—not even his father. The doctors would not allow it.

The bed on which he came was enclosed in a large casket shut entirely, and covered from head to foot with sweetest flowers. He went to sleep from the village church. Crowds came to tell him goodnight, choirs sang to him, pastors told how brave he was—early-soldiers heart. And the family bowed their heads, as the reeds the wind shakes. (L255)

The great care that Dickinson took to recount the events that surrounded the death and burial of Frazer Stearns show how affected she was by his death.

Within this letter, she erects a hero whom everyone loves. The loyalty shown by the friend who makes his coffin and rows six miles so that he can be taken home, the Colonel who could “hardly resume his post” from the grief he felt, and the crowds of people who came “to tell him goodnight” are perfectly constructed to form a picture of a young man who was admired by his peers, his superiors, and his community. The image invoked by Dickinson’s words is of a large processional moving through Amherst as if the coffin carried “from the village church” contained one of great importance. For Dickinson it obviously was, for her large images

are enriched by the small details she takes pains to include. In her description of Frazer she puts "his sword at his side" and calls him "a brave boy." A strikingly affectionate detail is her description of his box being "covered with a blanket." A blanket provides comfort and warmth, which is identified with a nurturing or loving act. In the last paragraph of the letter, she tells her cousins "you must come next summer and we will mind ourselves of this young crusader—too brave that he could fear to die." The use of the term "crusader" elevates Frazer because it indicates that he made a choice to go to war for the purpose of fighting for a cause that he believed in. The term crusader is also most often associated with a religious or moral cause. This would promote Frazer's death as significant and place him above the masses that were dying everyday. She again describes him as "brave" and puts him in the category of young men who believe their cause too just to consider death. It is this idea, which germinates in her letters that will grow into a poem about Frazer Stearns and other young men like him. It therefore can be said that "the death of a close acquaintance gave her an intimate realization of war" and directly inspires her to write at least two poems (Ford 202).

The first poem, which Ford identifies as being inspired by the death of Stearns, was written in 1862 the same year as his death. In this poem Dickinson describes the methods she used to deal with her friends death.

It don't sound so terrible—quite—as it did—

I run it over—"Dead", Brain, "Dead."  
 Put it in Latin—left of my school—  
 Seems it don't shriek so - under rule.

Turn it, a little—full in the face  
 A Trouble looks bitterest—  
 Shift it—just—  
 Say "When Tomorrow comes this way—  
 I shall have waded down one Day."

I suppose it will interrupt me some  
 Till I get accustomed—but then the Tomb  
 Like other new Things—show largest—then—  
 And smaller, by Habit—

It's shrewder then  
 Put the Thought in advance—a Year—  
 How like "a fit"—then—  
 Murder—wear! (J426)

First, she tries to "put it in Latin" explaining "it don't shriek so—under rule." Following a study of the grammatical patterns used by Dickinson Lois Cuddy concludes that Dickinson often employed the grammatical rules of Latin in her poetry. She did so because the fusion of Latin and English gave her the freedom to maintain her poetic structure while using words in unexpected

ways. By applying the Latin syntax she could reverse the order of words, use a noun as an adverb or leave out words, as she liked. For example, in this poem she uses "it don't." According to English grammar rules the verb should be doesn't, but according to the rules of Latin either is correct (Cuddy 75). Dickinson's grief over Frazer's death "don't shriek so under rule" because the limited rules of English grammar liberate her means of expression.

Dickinson could also mean that she thought of the words associated with Frazer's death in Latin. The use of Latin would make expression more formal and therefore less emotional. Latin is particularly formal because it is an ancient "dead" language associated with antiquity. Dickinson was familiar with Latin from her days at Amherst Academy where she used *Andrews and Stoddard's A Grammar of Latin Language; for the Use in Schools and Colleges*. This certainly would not have provided her with a lively Latin experience. It is more likely that Dickinson's experience with the language would have consisted of rote memorization and grammar drills. Again, this rote association with Latin would make the language less emotional and more academic.

Dickinson also looks at Stearns's death as if it were a tangible object. She "turns it" and "shifts it" attempting to gain a different perspective on the situation. She is groping for understanding and cannot find it. There is also a sense that she is unable to deal with the reality. When she "turns it" and

looks at it "full in the face" she "shifts it" making it easier to deal with until she has become accustomed to it.

In another attempt to come to terms with her grief Dickinson speaks of wading through the day, but assures herself that this difficult time will get "smaller, by Habit-." She is hoping that as she becomes accustomed to the reality of Frazer's death that it will be easier to deal with what she calls a "murder." The use of the term "murder" at the end of this poem comes as a surprise to the reader. The term creates a sense of anger that is not present until that moment. The repetition of "dead" and the half thoughts in lines six and seven create a troubled and introspective mood, but at the last moment the poet attacks using "murder" instead of the less brutal- killed. The exclamation Dickinson makes at the end of this poem gives a glance at her true feelings about the war. She does not see the circumstances of Frazer's death as honorable, heroic, or valiant. She sees it as wanton slaughter or premeditated malice. Here Dickinson makes an exceptionally strong and personalized anti-war statement for a poet who is considered by many to be disinterested in the War.

The second poem, identified by Ford, also written in 1862, is not so obviously about Stearns, but considering the comment Dickinson made in her letter to her cousins that he was "too brave to fear that he could die" the poem seems to be at least inspired by Frazer's sacrifice.

He gave away his Life-

To Us—Gigantic Sum—  
 A trifle—in his own esteem—  
 But magnified—by fame—  
  
 Until it burst the Hearts  
 That fancied they could hold—  
 When swift it slipped its limit—  
 And on the Heavens—unrolled—  
  
 Tis Ours—to wince—and weep—  
 And wonder—and decay  
 By Blossoms gradual process—  
 He chose—Maturity—  
  
 And quickening—as we sowed—  
 Just obviated Bud—  
 And when We turned to note the Growth—  
 Broke—perfect—from the Pod— (J567)

The first line suggests that this poem is not about death in general, but about the death that occurred during the Civil War. The poet comments, "He gave away his life--/ To Us." The "To Us" indicates that this poem is about someone who gave his life for a cause that Dickinson considered herself to be affected by. The poem identifies the subject as having given his life, which was a "Gigantic Sum" but to him was only a "trifle." This line also

suggests Frazer as the subject because we know from her letters that Dickinson valued Frazer Stearns.

In those letters Dickinson constructs a young man who is generally well thought of and whose death is considered a great loss. However, as a young man he did not grasp his mortality, as most young people do not, and he went off to war without understanding his worth; therefore, he died as if his life were only a "trifle." The first two lines of this poem evoke the idea of a monetary transaction. "He gave away" what to him was worth so little, but to Dickinson was worth a "Gigantic Sum." Dickinson often uses this transaction motif in her war poetry to express what life is worth and how it is often undervalued.

Further evidence that this poem was inspired by Frazer's death is Dickinson's description of the "Just obviated Bud" that is "broke-perfect-from the Pod." She uses the plant imagery to symbolize the human lifecycle. Similar to flowers, young men, like Frazer, gradually bloom. There is only a moment when they are at their peak; from there they begin to "decay." Frazer died at that moment of "Maturity," which is true of thousands of the young men who died during the Civil War and in that way this poem can be applied generally. Dickinson may have been inspired to write this poem by Frazer's death, but she could not have been ignorant of its universal application to young men who have given their lives "To Us" meaning to society. She therefore expands the relevance of this poem from her private pain and gives it meaning in the public sphere.

Dickinson continues to have difficulty dealing with Frazer's death and writes another letter to her friend Samuel Bowles expressing her grief (L256). Also written in March of 1862, Dickinson's letter utilizes a device employed by her many other times in her writing. She uses the feelings of others to express her own. Although at times Bowles was one of the few people that Dickinson privileged with her feelings, on this occasion she uses Austin's grief as the means of describing her own inability to reconcile Frazer's death. Although the letter is written as if Austin is the one overcome with grief and shock, it is evident that Dickinson is actually speaking of herself for she says, "and sometimes-wakes at night, with a worry for you" (L256). This is a very intimate and personal comment that would not have been known by Dickinson regarding her brother.

Another indication that she is using Austin as a means to express her grief is that Dickinson includes a letter, which she asks Bowles to address and forward. Dickinson says that the request comes from Austin; however, it seems unlikely that Austin would have given Dickinson a letter to send to Bowles who would then forward it to its intended reader. This request also fits with Dickinson's custom of having others address letters for her. Dickinson had an "aversion to putting her handwriting on the outside of letters." She often asked her sister to address letters for her and when Lavinia was not available she would sometimes resort to clipping letters from the newspaper (Taggard 14). The request obviously comes from Dickinson, but she is

attempting to continue the ruse that it is Austin and not herself who is grief-stricken.

This is not to say the Austin was not grieved by Frazer's death. But Austin's character does not seem to fit with the dramatic nature of the expression "his brain keeps saying over 'Frazer is killed'—'Frazer is killed.'" Particularly by this time in Austin's life, he had adopted the stoic character of his father. When he did experience grief it seems from the comments of Mabel Loomis Todd that he tended more to the melancholy than the dramatic (Sewall 124-126). Conversely, it is very much in Emily Dickinson's character to express her feelings through verbal contrivances and veiled remarks.

Separating Dickinson's correspondence from her poetry is often difficult. Dickinson frequently enclosed poems in her letters and often sent poems as correspondence. Such was the case when Dickinson sent Samuel Bowles the poem beginning "Victory comes late" (L257).<sup>8</sup> In *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, Johnson places the letter-poem immediately after the letter sent to Bowles regarding Frazer Stearns's death. However, the correspondence was not dated. The handwriting indicates that poem was written during the same time period as the letter to Bowles, but it is the poem's theme that determines its chronological placement. Johnson notes, "It is possible that the poem is associated with the death of Frazar Stearns'" (*Letters* 400). Johnson's use of "associated" is key. Although this poem

---

<sup>8</sup> The poem sent to Samuel Bowles is an earlier version of the poem numbered 690 in *The Complete Poems*. There are several differences, but here I consider the poem as written in ED's correspondence.

was written during the same time period as the letters and other poems dealing with Stearns's death, this poem has a marked difference. The poem is written in more general terms. In "It don't sound so terrible—quite—as it did—" it is apparent that Dickinson is describing a personal loss and in "He gave away his life" the use of the singular masculine pronoun coupled with the use of symbols that represent youth being cut off or taken away prematurely certainly make us think of Frazer, but could represent other young soldiers who died too early. "Victory comes late" was written during the time Dickinson was in turmoil due to Frazer's death, but it is not about Frazer Stearns.

Dear Mr. Bowles.

Victory comes late,  
 And is held low to freezing lips  
 Too rapt with frost  
 To mind it!  
 How sweet it would have tasted!  
 Just a drop!  
 Was God so economical?  
 His table's spread to high  
 Except we dine on tiptoe!  
*Crumbs* fit such little mouths—  
*Cherries*—suit *Robins*—  
 The Eagle's golden breakfast—*dazzles them!*

God keep his vow to "Sparrows,"

Who of little love—know how to starve!

Emily.

Upon hearing of Frazer Stearns's death, Dickinson would also have heard about the battle where he died and a few days later she would have read the details of the battle published in *Harper's Weekly*. On April 5<sup>th</sup> 1862 *Harper's Weekly* published a detailed description of the maneuvers taken by Frazer's regiment the Twenty-first Massachusetts. Along with two brigades, six regiments and one battalion, Frazer's regiment spent the day advancing, retreating and flanking the enemy. Dickinson may have imagined Frazer's last moments as she read that the twenty-first Massachusetts was ordered to charge toward the enemies "intrenchment and, driving the rebels before them, had attempted to reverse the guns, when repulsed by a strong reinforcement of the enemy . . . drove them out." In the end, the Union army won the battle, but in the process seventy Union soldiers were killed and two hundred and fifty were wounded. Dickinson's reaction is clear "Victory comes [to] late." For those soldiers who died during the battle victory is worthless because they die before they can experience even the smallest satisfaction of having won the day.

Dickinson's poem quickly takes a turn toward the metaphysical when she asks, "Was God so economical?" Some Christians believe that one dies when God decides it is your

time. Dickinson is asking if it is God who has denied these men "a drop" or a "sweet...taste" of victory. She sees God as tantalizing humans with a well spread table that they cannot reach until after death. The promise of future "rewards and the scheme that assumes future bliss to assuage present misery came to seem inadequate" to Dickinson (Wolosky, *A Voice* 61). She sees God as willfully withholding his blessings from those who are suffering and questions why death is required to receive salvation from God. The "Golden Breakfast" promised as consolation for the death and suffering brought on by the Civil War is seen by Dickinson as useless; just as victory is useless to those who die in the battle. Although many of Dickinson's contemporaries believed that the war was justified and necessary in order to redeem the erring nation, Dickinson continues to question whether God's plan is just. For Dickinson, on going death and suffering is not worth future salvation.

Dickinson's concern, however, is not so easily bestowed upon the living. In an August 1862 letter to Samuel Bowles, Dickinson mentions, "a soldier called—a morning ago, and asked for a nosegay, to take to Battle" (L272). Nosegays were a way of creating a message with flowers. Each flower had a specific sentiment attached to it so the combination of flowers formed a unique message. In this case the "nosegay" that Dickinson is talking about is a poem. Dandurand suggests that "a soldier" refers to an individual who requested a poem from Dickinson to be published on behalf of the soldiers. During the War there were

countless pamphlets and newspapers that were produced as fundraising endeavors. These papers characteristically include poetry and fictional stories. But Dickinson refuses the request and she reminds Bowles of her past admonishment that her poems are not meant "for Air" by sarcastically declaring, "I suppose he thought we kept an Aquarium." Her reaction to the "soldier's" request reveals an ambivalence she feels at this time towards soldiers who are unknown to her. She speaks passionately in her letters and in her poetry about soldiers she knows and in general about the death of soldiers, but when faced with an opportunity to support them she chooses not to comply. Her reticence may be due to the fact that she has just experienced the publishing of several of her poems by Bowles. She immediately communicated to Bowles that she did not wish to publish any more poems.

Acquiescing to a request for a poem in support of the soldiers at this time may appear to Bowles as indecisive and could realistically offend him. Bowles's opinion meant a great deal to Dickinson. She would not have wanted to offend him nor would she have wanted him to misunderstand her and continue to publish her poems.

The Dickinson family had an immense respect for Bowles and felt that as the publisher of the *Springfield Republican* he was closer to the news than most. Apparently on Bowles's frequent visits to Austin and Sue's home, the Evergreens, he would share with the family news of the War. Richard Sewall notes, "Not that they were uninformed... but Bowles more than any other visitor

brought the sense of this 'yeasty time' into their living rooms" (466). The Dickinsons, except Mrs. Dickinson, were very well read. They had subscriptions to several important periodicals which would have kept them abreast of local and national issues of the day. They regularly read *The Springfield Journal*, *The Hampshire and Franklin Express*, *The Amherst Record*, *Harper's New Monthly*, *Scribner's Monthly* and *The Atlantic Monthly* (Capps 128).<sup>9</sup> Edward Dickinson's service in Congress and in the Massachusetts legislature reflects his particular interest in politics. Austin, although never involving himself in national politics, was very involved in the politics of Amherst as was the family tradition. In her letters Dickinson makes two references to regular conversations with her family about the Civil War. In a November 1862 letter to Bowles, Dickinson laments, "failure in a Battle—was easier—" when you were with us. This letter was written to Bowles while he was on a trip to Europe and was away from the family for long period of time. Dickinson was obviously accustomed to discussing war news with Bowles and missed his valuable viewpoint. The Dickinsons were a political family with strong political views. Emily Dickinson's comment indicates that she not only participated in discussions about the Civil War, but that she also valued those discussions.<sup>10</sup>

In a letter written in 1865, Dickinson again indicates that it is her family's custom to discuss current events. This letter

---

<sup>9</sup> Although I reference Capps here Richard Sewall and Jay Leyda also mention this to be the case.

<sup>10</sup> For further evidence of ED's reading habits see Letters 109, 231, 234, 488, 502, 619, 621, 721, 714, 1018.

was written to her sister Lavinia while Dickinson was staying with Louise Norcross in Cambridge. She writes, "Loo wishes she knew Father's view of Jeff Davis' capture—thinks no one but He, can do it justice" (L308). She continues by mentioning "a Photograph of the Arrest" that Louise wishes to send to Austin. These two comments make it apparent that the family is accustomed to discussing such events with each other. Further, the comment about the picture is obviously made in a wickedly humorous vein showing how comfortable and common political exchanges were between the families.

A Further Civil War reference occurs in 1863 when Dickinson writes a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson upon discovering that he has gone to war (L280). This letter shows a shift that is beginning to occur within Dickinson. She is moving from the overwhelming grief she experienced early in 1862 due to Frazer's and other neighbor's deaths to confronting death. Dickinson describes her new means of attachment to friends: "I have held them since—[experiencing death] in a brittle love—of more alarm, than peace." Her tone in this letter at times takes on almost a flippant attitude: "I trust you may pass the limit of War." This is a Dickinson who has been deeply affected by her losses and is attempting to protect herself against further devastation. However, it is in vain for she is obviously concerned for Higginson's safety, " I should have liked to see you before you became improbable . . . Should there be other summers, would you perhaps come. It is interesting that she does not write as if

she assumes there will be other opportunities for her to meet with Higginson. Dickinson accepts the possibility of death without reservation. She ends the letter by asking him to "avoid death" because she "would bereave" but the tone of the letter certainly includes the recognition that Higginson could very well die.

By 1864, Dickinson had become "vividly aware that all must face death and must be influenced by its effects" (Ford 210). She writes to her cousins Louise and Frances Norcross that "sorrow seems more general than it did, and not the estate of a few person's, since the war began"(L298). This letter demonstrates that Dickinson not only feels the loss of her acquaintances, but also recognizes the human suffering and tragedy that is being experienced by the entire nation. The overwhelming grief she felt early in 1862 and we see her beginning to deal with in her letter to Higginson in 1863 has by 1864 become a controlled grief.

In an 1864 letter to her Norcross cousins, Dickinson writes that after reading *Dramatis Personae* she is astonished that Robert Browning has the ability to continue to write after the death of his wife until she "remembered that I, myself, in a smaller way, sang off charnel steps." She compares her productivity to Browning's realizing that after such trauma she too continued to write. In Dickinson's case, she wrote more in that year than in any other. In the same 1864, letter Dickinson writes, "every day life feels mightier, and what we have the power to be, more stupendous." There is hope in that comment,

but not just personal hope for she says, "what **we** have the power to be." It is an indication that she has come to terms with the turmoil that stimulated her flurry of writing. This is further evidenced by the fact that as the War came to an end her writing of poetry drops off dramatically. In 1862, Dickinson wrote approximately 330 poems. It took her two more years to equal that amount. By 1865, that number had fallen to approximately 85. This "clearly implies that death was a great stimulus to her writing [it therefore] lends strong support to the belief that the Civil War acted to rouse her creative energy" (Ford 201). It is evident that what Dickinson finds "the power to be" during the war years is a poet who explores how the onslaught of death caused by the Civil War can be understood.

## Section 3

### War Poems of 1862

Karen Dandurand's discovery of Dickinson poems published in a Civil War fund-raising magazine and her conclusion that Dickinson had agreed to the publishing led me to look for corroborating evidence of Dickinson's political/social interest in her letters. Finding evidence in Dickinson's letters that she was in fact interested in the issues of her day led me to examine her poetry for the expression of similar attitudes and concerns. The Civil War was the bloodiest time in American history. More Americans died during the Civil War than in all of the conflicts of the twentieth century combined. Every individual in the North and in the South was personally affected by the death and destruction brought on by the war. It is beyond reason to suppose that a sensitive poet who was the daughter of a politician, a friend to soldiers who had lost their lives, and a friend to soldiers still fighting could escape the onslaught of grief and devastation permeating the air. People must have felt as Dickinson did: "They drop like Flakes—/They Drop like Stars—/Like Petals from a rose—" (J409).

As Urbanowicz Marcellin points out, here Dickinson uses natural occurrences to represent the masses of soldiers who fell on the battlefield. Snowflakes drop to the ground and melt,

stars fall from the sky and burn out, and rose petals blow away in the wind. All are beautiful creations that disappear without a trace. Their fragile nature allows the powerful wind that sweeps across the landscape, just as the war sweeps across the country, to remove all traces of their existence.

When suddenly across the June

A wind with fingers—goes—

They perish in the Seamless Grass—

No eye could find the place—

But God can summon every face

On his Repealless—List

Dickinson then personifies the wind by giving it "fingers" creating the image of the powerful and destructive human mass that sweeps across the battlefield. Those who "perish" do so in the "Seamless Grass." The battlefield contains no fissures or spaces that would hide the bodies of the soldiers yet, "No eye could find the place—" were they died. The sheer number of soldiers dying creates a carpet of bodies that removes the individuality of each soldier making them invisible to the human eye. "But God can summon every face," he does not lose people or forget them. Unlike man who looks over the battlefield and no longer distinguishes individuals, God remembers "every face" and has recorded them "On his Repealless—List." Society may have

abandoned the fragile creations as expendable, but God remembers them all.

In the previous poem Dickinson describes the soldiers deaths through the eyes of an observer, but in "Our journey had advanced—" (J615), as Urbanowicz Marcellin notes, Dickinson constructs a description of death told from the soldier's point of view. Dickinson's careful choice of words that generate in the reader war connections makes it apparent that the poem is specifically describing a soldier's final journey.

Our Journey had advanced—  
 Our feet were almost come  
 To that odd Fork in Being's Road—  
 Eternity—by Term—

Our pace took sudden awe—  
 Our feet—reluctant—led—  
 Before—were Cities—but Between—  
 The Forest of the Dead—

Retreat—was out of Hope—  
 Behind—a Sealed Route—  
 Eternity's White Flag—Before—  
 And God—at every Gate—

The first stanza brings the soldiers to the last "fork" on their road thorough life. They identify that "fork" as

"eternity" and in the second stanza they are "reluctant" to approach it. Their pace slows with reluctance, but they realize that retreat is impossible due to the "Sealed Route." Eternity has surrendered to them allowing their journey to continue forward, but God who guards "every Gate" has sealed all routes behind them.

Words such as "feet" and "pace" bring to mind a soldier's marching, while other war allusions such as "Retreat," "Sealed Route" and "White Flag" brings to mind defeat in war. However, "The lines that reveal that this martial imagery is more than a metaphor and that clearly distinguish the work as a war poem are: 'Before—were Cities—but Between—/ The Forest of the Dead—'" (Marcellin, "Emily" 109). "The Forest of the Dead" can only be the dead bodies that lie upon the road as the soldiers march from city to city. By using the imagery of a forest Dickinson communicates an overwhelming picture. Just as there are too many trees in a forest to count, there are too many bodies on the battlefield for an individual to visually perceive. Dickinson's image of the vast enumerable is historically accurate. In the spring of 1862 the Union and Confederate Armies faced off in a battle that would come to be known as Shiloh. Twenty-three thousand men lost their lives in that battle. To date Shiloh was the bloodiest day of the War but it would not hold that distinction for long. In September of 1862 the bloodiest battle in American military history was fought at Antietam where in twelve hours twenty-seven thousand men lost their lives. In was

within this bloody environment that Dickinson was writing in 1862.

David Cody identifies the Poem "The name-of it-is 'Autumn'" (J656) as being specifically inspired by the battle of Antietam. Dickinson places autumn in quotes, which indicates that she is using the term as more than a mere indication of the time of year. John Greenleaf Whittier described Antietam as the "Battle Autumn." Cody suggests that Dickinson is employing the same phonetic paronym.

The name of it is "Autumn"-  
 The hue-of it-is Blood-  
 An Artery-upon the Hill-  
 A Vein-along the road-

Great Globules-in the Alleys-  
 And oh, the Shower of Stain-  
 When Winds-upset the Basin-  
 And spill the Scarlet Rain-

It sprinkles Bonnets-far below-  
 It gathers ruddy Pools-  
 Then-eddies like a Rose-away-  
 Upon Vermilion Wheels-

Especially for a New Englander, autumn is associated with the bright color of red that paints the trees in the fall.

Dickinson uses this traditional image and naturally connects the red of autumn with the blood-soaked battlefield. The autumnal imagery is of streams that carry brightly colored leaves to basins where the leaves gather and eventually spill over into "ruddy" or intensely red "pools." But Dickinson's use of human anatomy elevates the poem above the common glorification of the New England autumn. The arteries and veins are, of course, responsible for carrying blood to and from the heart; therefore, Dickinson's autumnal streams are carrying blood to the "basin," but the "basin" is "upset" by the powerful and sometimes destructive wind. In "They drop like Flakes" Dickinson uses the wind to represent the powerful force that sweeps across the battlefield causing death and destruction. Here again it is the "Wind" that causes the spilling of blood. Dickinson imagines that overflow as "Scarlet Rain" emphasizing the amount of blood spilled. The image evoked is of a ground soaking rain that creates pools of blood. However, the blood "sprinkles Bonnets" image evokes a religious connection with the sacrificial blood that was sprinkled upon the altar by the Israelites as a sin offering.

Many of Dickinson's contemporaries believed "that the ongoing war was to be interpreted as a great purgative sacrifice or blood -offering demanded of an erring nation by an angry God" (Cody 26); therefore, the sprinkled blood could more specifically be understood as the blood that was sprinkled on doorposts by the Israelites during the plagues of Egypt so that they would be

spared the last plague, which brought about the death of the household's first-born. The blood "sprinkled" on "Bonnetts," indicates that the sin-atonement blood paid to God would purchase the salvation of not only the soldiers but would also include the women and children. After the price for the nation's sins is paid the pool of blood "Then— eddies like a Rose—away." Dickinson continues the whirlpool motion of an eddy, which can move in converse circles just as the petals of a rose swirl in the wind. After the wind sweeps through the rose petals disappear. In this case the blood disappears "Upon Vermilion Wheels—." In the mid 1800s through the Civil War one of the most popular styles of locomotive was the Vermilion Wheeled. If this poem is a description of the battle that took place at Antietam, as David Cody suggests, then Dickinson could have been imagining dead and wounded soldiers being removed from the battlefield by trains. This image is particularly strong because the wheels on the locomotives were vermilion or deep red. The wheels appeared as if they had become blood stained as they moved across the country and through the blood soaked fields.

Many of Dickinson's contemporaries believed that this shower of blood was necessary, but Dickinson was not convinced. In her poem "It feels a shame to be Alive" (L444) she questions whether the living are worthy of the price that is paid for the nation's rebirth.

It feels a shame to be Alive—  
When Men so brave—are dead—

One envies the Distinguished Dust—  
 Permitted—such a Head—

The Stone—that tells defending Whom  
 This Spartan put away  
 What little of Him we—Possessed  
 In Pawn for Liberty—

The Price is great—Sublimely paid—  
 Do we deserve—a Thing  
 That Lives—like Dollars—must be piled  
 Before we may obtain?

Are we that wait—sufficient worth—  
 That such Enormous Pearl  
 As Life—dissolves before Us—  
 In Battle's - horrid Bowl?

It may be—a Renown to live—  
 I think the Man who die—  
 Those unsustained—Saviors—  
 Present Divinity—

Dickinson's poem honors those who have died "in pawn for liberty" but she feels "shame" that she is still alive because the price for her "liberty" was so great. She elevates the men who have

died by envying the "Distinguished dust" that holds their resting heads and by describing them as Spartans. The term Spartan certainly refers to the ancient warriors of Sparta who were known to be disciplined and have great courage in battle, but it also contains the meaning of one who is willing to forgo comfort and luxury and one who is impervious to pain and danger. Dickinson offers tribute to the soldiers, but she did not approve of the trade because "we-possessed" so "little of Him." This line could simple be referring to time; that those who died had not been given enough time. But it also could be a comment on how little a part of their lives the war was. Society "possessed" them as if it owned them; yet, undoubtedly these men had families, friends, girlfriends, children, jobs, and homes, which were taken from them to pay for "Liberty."

The "price" paid was not only the death of the men who fought, but also the pain that was suffered by their families and friends. The imagery of the "piled" "dollars" represents the enormous price that had to be paid. The men who died were commodified, traded for the liberty of others. Further, the "piled" "dollars" bringing to mind the literal piles of bodies that were heaped on the battlefields. Although the poem describes the soldiers as "brave" and as "Spartans" it is not the individual soldier but life itself that concerns Dickinson. An "Enormous Pearl," would have a great deal of value and yet it is allowed to dissolve without protest. In the Bible, Jesus recounts the illustration of the pearl of high value. The

merchant in the illustration is willing to give up all he has for the pearl, which represents life. However, Dickinson presents a situation where not all life is valued. Life is given or "dissolved" in battle in order to preserve the lives of others. Dickinson questions the trade. "To Dickinson, the ultimate sorrow challenging theodicy was death" (Wolosky, A Voice 67). Therefore, as the poem suggests, the popular belief during her time that the spilling of blood was necessary to gain God's approval greatly disturbed her, but in the end she chooses to praise the dead by declaring that although those who live may gain "Renown," or fame, those who died "Those unsustained—Saviors—/Present Divinity—." This idea is contrary to typical Dickinson because for her life is divine and death is a concept she constantly grapples with; however, "in an attempt to make sense of the war [Dickinson] at times adopts the rhetoric and reasoning of her period" (71).

The question of whether the men who fight believe their deaths are worth victory for the living is addressed in "My Portion is Defeat—today—" (J 639). In this poem a single soldier describes the defeat he suffered.

My Portion is Defeat—today—  
 A paler luck than Victory—  
 Less Paeans—fewer Bells—  
 The Drums don't follow Me—with tunes—  
 Defeat—a somewhat slower—means—  
 More Arduous than Balls—

Tis populous with Bones and stain-  
And Men too straight to stoop again-  
And Piles of solid Moan-  
And Chips of Blank-in Boyish Eyes-  
And scrapes of Prayer-  
And Death's surprise,  
Stamped visible-in Stone-

There's somewhat prouder over there-  
The trumpets tell it to the Air-  
How different Victory  
To Him who has it-and the One  
Who to have had it, would have been  
Contender-to die-

The first stanza gives us the impression that the soldier feels that victory and defeat are closely related. He says that defeat is "paler luck" which implies that victory is pale as well. The horror that defined the Civil War could not be escaped. Families stood on opposite sides, homes and towns were destroyed, and millions died. Here, those who declare victory endure debilitating loss. The second stanza describes the horror that soldiers experienced after large battles. The field is piled with dead bodies and running with blood. Those who are not dead are moaning from the pain of their wounds and the terror of dying. The speaker mentions that many of the dead have "Boyish

Eyes" belonging to young men who have not even had the opportunity to live. The third stanza returns to the soldiers monologue "where he wonders if victory is worth dying for" (Marcellin, "Singing" 70). The soldier's words reveal the true futility of war. The victors are only "somewhat prouder" than the defeated and the soldier does not believe that a different outcome would have changed anything. The dead and the dying languishing on the battlefield would have looked just the same.

Leigh-Anne Urbanowicz Marcellin states, "in this poem Dickinson provides neither a clear pro-war nor an anti-war statement only ambiguity" (110). Although ambiguity is almost always present in Dickinson's poems, this poem makes a clear anti-war statement. Dickinson clearly communicates her belief that war does not bring satisfaction to anyone involved. As observed in the previous poem, Dickinson honored the men who died and she did recognize that many of the issues that brought this nation to war were important, but she could not accept the notion that death was necessary for redemption.

## Conclusion

The mythology of Emily Dickinson has come to define how many readers interpret her poetry. It has also encouraged them to believe that she was so completely isolated from the world that she had no interest in the events that surrounded her. But as the mythology has broken down so has the presumption of her disinterest in the world outside. Dickinson's poetry is by nature enigmatic. She said, "The Riddle we can guess / We speedily despise" (J1222). Therefore, to believe that if Dickinson felt strongly about a matter she would make that concern evident is to misunderstand the poet. Dickinson reveled in her ambiguity; however, her writings do provide evidence of the turmoil the Civil War created within her. The war seems to have energized and inspired Dickinson. It provided questions about life, death, and the responsibility of God that fired her imagination and her spirit. Perhaps these were questions she considered before the war, but her poetry does not bear this out "The poetry before 1861, in comparison with that which she wrote after 1861, is somewhat conventional and sentimental . . . there is not that intensity, sense of urgency, and strong overtones of anguish characteristic of the poems of the Civil War" (Ford 199).

Dickinson felt compelled to write about the events that engulfed a nation; she felt compelled to write about events that affected her neighbors; and she felt compelled to write about events that affected her personally. The Civil War was not some

abstract idea that seemed far away and unable to touch her. We can see from Dickinson's poetry that she spoke passionately about the soldiers and the battles as if she had experienced them first hand. With her sensitive nature and her vivid imagination she probably felt as if she had. Shira Wolosky commented that Dickinson "disapproved of reality" ("Public" 107). For Dickinson, it must have been hard to accept the war years as reality. Of course she disapproved of the stark reality that defined her most productive years, but she certainly was not oblivious to it.

Emily Dickinson

1830-1886

By Mary Elwell Storrs

April 1891

That face pathetic haunts my days of late;  
 All pale, yet crowned with flowers, she sighs and  
     Sings;  
 Defiant music clashes as it flows,  
 Clear notes and tangles fascinate the ear;  
 So sings the thrush against the rising storm,  
 The caged canary thrills and quivers so;  
 Ah, warbles sweet, her voice outsings ye all,  
 Thrilling and throbbing from a human heart.

Now calm and strong, audacious and severe,  
 Now glad and childlike, ringing wild and clear,  
 The loud winds blow, the swift grass rustles low:  
 Carousing bees, and butterflies, and song  
 Of birds, and waving flags and flowers, prolong  
 A vivid panorama of delight  
 Returning oft upon the inward sight!  
 Thus rimmed and decked, wise wisdom sets its truths,  
 Vying in choices with the Concord seer,  
 In epigrams, in hives sententiousness.  
 The chimes may falter, rhythmic waves pulse on.

And Life's supremest hours take form and move:--  
 Not heart-throes only, but the very scenes  
 Unfold and pass, as in a magic glass,  
 Nor Hawthorne's probings open deeper depths;  
 The sad strains, swan-like, die in ecstasy  
 Of love, of pain, of triumph over grief.

O soul, made white before the great white throne,  
 Past pain! Dost thou released shrink quivering still,  
 Laid open, bare, by earth's publicity!  
 Yet comfort thee! Thy great heart's sympathy,  
 Like shadowing pine, like morning's tearful dew,  
 Cheers the drear sands, soothes scorching pain to rest!

## SUNSET

Blazing in gold, and quenching in purple,  
 Leaping like leopards in the sky  
 Then at the feet of the old horizon  
 Laying her spotted face to die;  
 Stooping as low as the oriel window,  
 Touching the roof, and tinting the barn,  
 Kissing her bonnet to the meadow—  
 And the Juggler of the Day is gone!

As published in The Drum Beat February 29, 1864.

## FLOWERS

Flowers—well, if anybody  
 Can the ecstasy define,  
 Half a transport, half a trouble,  
 With which flowers humble men—  
 Anybody find the fountain,  
 From which floods so constra flows,  
 I will give him all the Daisies,  
 Which upon the hill-side blow!

Too much pathos in their faces,  
 For a simple breast like mine!  
 Butterflies from San Domingo,  
 Cruising round the purple line,  
 Have a system of esthetics  
 Far superior to mine!

As Published in The Drum Beat March 2, 1864.

## OCTOBER

These are the days when birds come back,  
A very few, a bird or two,  
To take a backward look.

These are the days when skies resume  
The old, old sophistries of June,—  
A blue and gold mistake.

Oh, fraud that cannot cheat the bee!  
Almost thy plausibility  
Induces my belief,

Till banks of seeds their witness bear,  
And softly, through the altered air,  
Hurries a timid leaf.

Oh, sacrament of summer days,  
Oh last communion in the haze,  
Permit a child to join!

Thy sacred emblems to partake,  
Thy consecrated bread to take,  
And thine immortal wine!

As published in The Drum Beat March 11, 1864.

## Works Cited

- Capps, Jack L. Emily Dickinson's Reading 1836-1886. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966.
- Cody, David. "Blood Basin: The Civil War in Emily Dickinson's 'The name-of it-is Autumn-.'" The Emily Dickinson Journal 8 (1999): 25-52.
- Cuddy, Lois. "The Latin Imprint on Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Theory and Practice." American Literature 50 (1978): 74-85.
- Dandurand, Karen. "New Dickinson Civil War Publications." American Literature 56 (1984): 18-27.
- . Why Dickinson Did Not Publish. Diss. University of Massachusetts. Amherst: 1984
- Dickinson, Emily. The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960.
- . Emily Dickinson Selected Letters. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002.
- Erkkila, Betsy. "Dickinson and the Art of Politics." A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson. Ed. Vivian Pollak. Oxford: University Press, 2004. 133-174.
- Farr, Judith. The Gardens of Emily Dickinson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Ford, Thomas. "Emily Dickinson and the Civil War." University Review of Kansas City 31 (1965): 199-203.
- Higginson, Thomas Wentworth. Carlye's Laugh and Other Surprises. Freeport: Books for Library Press, 1968.
- Hoffman, Tyler. "Emily Dickinson and the Art of War." Emily Dickinson Journal (1994): 1-18.
- Johnson, Thomas. Ed. The Poems of Emily Dickinson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955.
- Leyda, Jay. The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson. United States: Archon Books, 1970.
- Marcellin Urbanowicz, Leigh-Anne. "Emily Dickinson's Civil War Poetry." The Emily Dickinson Journal 5 (1996): 107-112.

- . "Singing Off the Charnel Steps: Soldiers and Mourners in Emily Dickinson's War Poetry." The Emily Dickinson Journal 9 (2000): 64-74.
- Sewall, Richard B. The Life of Emily Dickinson. 1974. Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 2003.
- Taggard, Genevieve. The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson. New York: Cooper Square Publisher, 1967.
- Wolosky, Shira. "Public and Private in Dickinson's War Poetry." A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson . Ed. Vivian Pollak. Oxford: University Press, 2004. 103-131.
- . Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.

## Works Consulted

- Dandurand, Karen. Dickinson Scholarship: An Annotated Bibliography 1969-1985. New York: Garland Publishing, 1988.
- Friedlander, Benjamin. Emily Dickinson and the Civil War. Diss. SUNY at Buffalo. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1999.
- MacKenzie, Cynthia. Ed. Concordance to the Letters of Emily Dickinson. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000.

