

“The stiff Heart questions—:” Decoding the Legend of Emily Dickinson

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ABSTRACT

Emily Dickinson’s shockingly raw poetry, which mirrors her enigmatic brilliance through the use of unprecedented wordplay and structural defiance, represents one of the most dynamic radicalisms in American literature. However, within her narrative, remains a gaping biographical hole that scholars perpetually try to fill. Through a close reading of her poetry and letters, I have explored the complexity of Dickinson’s legend, in order to better understand the origins of her creative genius, as well as her poetic motivations. In my research, I have drawn parallels between Dickinson’s writings and family dynamic, while investigating her supposed agoraphobia. In a further attempt to evaluate the extent of the poet’s involvement in her community, I analyzed Dickinson’s “Master Letters” to examine her theorized romance. This paper asserts that Dickinson’s poetry was shaped just as much by her increasing isolation as it was by her love-struck escapades.

The work of Emily Dickinson transcended all the literary expectations of her time. As the poet concealed herself within her home for nearly thirty years, she wrote hundreds of radical poems that would forever change the modern perspective of American Romantic poetry. When her sister, Lavinia, stumbled upon her cache of poems shortly after her death, she immediately recognized Dickinson’s poetic genius. Four years later, Dickinson’s family members published the first edition of her poetry and shared her legacy with the world. Yet as Dickinson forebodingly warns her readers, “The Truth, is Bald, and Cold.” Truth is meant to remain hidden, and she is fated to remain unseen. However, Dickinson loathes this ignorant bliss, “I’m Nobody! Who are you?,” she asks. The capital “N” teases Dickinson’s readers, emphasizing that she is not a harmless non-entity. Instead, it highlights her life’s paradox: while she (Nobody) wants to remain hidden, her sole desire is to uncover.

Despite preserving her sister’s poems against Emily’s intent, Lavinia burned Emily’s letters immediately after her death. When Lavinia exacted this part of Emily’s posthumous will, she simultaneously dug an overwhelming biographical hole in Emily’s narrative that scholars would perpetually struggle to fill. As she wished, Dickinson became known as “the Myth of Amherst:” an unknown recluse, ghost-like, white-dressed figure who obsessively wrote within her home for decades. She warns her literary detectives; “To scan a Ghost, is faint-” she states, and Dickinson is undeniably one of the faintest. Yet, scholars cannot help but scrutinize a question most likely unknown to Dickinson herself: who was Emily Dickinson? According to her legend, she was simply a deeply troubled and agoraphobic loner, who dedicated her life solely to her secret poetic mission. However, Dickinson’s poetry and few remaining letters reject this idea by continuously echoing outbursts of insightful emotion. Even the surface of Dickinson’s work shines a light on her true character. The mystery of Dickinson’s identity is far more complex than her legend suggests, and her seemingly opposing attributes remain unexplained. Yet, several perspectives and documents emerge to shine a magnifying glass on this provocative puzzle.

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Emily Dickinson’s provocative and enigmatic “Master Letters” from 1861 contains the partial answer to the mystery behind her lifestyle. This set of three emotionally weighted letters addresses an extremely curious figure

whom Dickinson continuously refers to as “Master.” Almost miraculously, Dickinson’s intentions are far from hidden in the letters, as her desperate pleas of affection patently showcase an extreme sense of love. Yet, she expectedly leaves the letters’ most perplexing element a secret, causing her readers to zealously wonder this “Master” figure’s identity. Attributing this ambiguous phrase to a name is a task that Dickinson’s biographers and scholars have been struggling to complete for over a century. Some argue that these letters are a display of Dickinson’s grief, in which she attempted to connect to her late companion, Ben Newton. However, it is implausible that a grieving Dickinson wrote letters to Newton nearly a decade after his death. Others assert that “Master” is a delineation of death itself, or perhaps god. While this approach harmonizes with Dickinson’s poetic style, it unstintingly associates Dickinson’s emotional volatility with unprecedented psychosis; the suggestion that Dickinson wrote highly emotive love letters to manifestations, portrays her as unreservedly insane. Yet, the most appealing candidate for “Master” seems to be Samuel Bowles. This perspective highlights Dickinson as a love-struck maiden, emotively writing to her lover. When characterizing “Master” as Bowles, Dickinson attractively appears as a relatable individual who renders ordinary emotions through revolutionary poetry. She further seems to be the person who emerges in her creative work: quirky, captivating, empathetic, and clever. Nevertheless, this proposal leaves the cause behind Dickinson’s reclusive nature unspecified as her solitary behavior subtly appears to stem from an utterly separate area: her childhood. The emotional abuse and traumatic influence Dickinson endured from her parents imprinted an enduring fearful mindset upon her. After Dickinson is rendered heartbroken by her shattered relationship with Bowles, her childhood trauma reemerges to manifest itself through extreme agoraphobia.

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Dickinson clearly had an extremely troubling and flawed family dynamic, one which would have a great influence on her poetic life. She undeniably felt alienated from her family, an emotion that only intensified as she matured. Her mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson, was at best dismissive of Emily’s literary efforts and frequently disengaged in family conversations regarding her husband’s (a congressman for the Whig party) political life. Her endeavors were directed towards cleaning and cooking, as she was determined to maintain a pristine household. Norcross Dickinson persistently demanded that Emily and Lavinia follow in her footsteps and become exceptional housewives. She was also unsupportive of her daughters receiving an education as illustrated in a letter Emily Dickinson wrote to her friend, Abiah Root, in 1848,

“You asked me if I was attending school now. I am not. Mother thinks me not able to confine myself to school this term. She had rather I would exercise, and I can assure you I get plenty of that article by staying at home. I am going to learn to make bread to-morrow. So you may imagine me with my sleeves rolled up, mixing flour, milk, salaratus, etc., with a deal of grace.”

It becomes evident in the letter that Norcross Dickinson pedestalled her role as a housewife and proudly prioritized homemaking over the well-beings of her daughters. However, she is not fully to blame for her obsession with order as she most likely suffered from an intrinsic compulsive neurosis: a disease that was only encouraged by her incredibly traditional spouse, who desired a tireless housewife.

Although Dickinson and her mother were undeniably estranged, Norcross Dickinson did somewhat inspire Emily’s love of nature. While Norcross Dickinson’s passion manifested itself in rose gardening, Dickinson’s admiration was more scientific, revealing itself through botany. Nevertheless, her mother’s roses did inspire several of Dickinson’s greater works. In approximately 1858, the poet wrote:

Nobody knows this little Rose –
It might a pilgrim be
Did I not take it from the ways
And lift it up to thee.
Only a Bee will miss it --

Only a Butterfly,
Hastening from far journey --
On its breast to lie --
Only a Bird will wonder --
Only a Breeze will sigh --
Ah Little Rose -- how easy
For such as thee to die!

It was not until Dickinson approached her early adult years that she came to resent her mother entirely. She unsympathetically wrote to her mentor, Colonel Thomas Wenworth Higginson, regarding her mother on several occasions. "My Mother does not care for thought—," (Letter 261); "Could you tell me what home is. I never had a mother. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled," (Letter 342) the poet critically stated about her mother.

While Dickinson's mother was certainly not physically abusive, she most likely had an exceptionally negative impact on Emily's mental health. When the Dickinsons moved back to Homestead in 1855, Emily's mother fell into an extreme cycle of depression which gradually created an overwhelmingly emotionally demoralized household. Depression became a major theme of Dickinson's poetic work, one which somewhat stemmed from her exposure to her mother's mental illness(es). Before returning to Homestead in 1855, Dickinson was documented as having written only 5 poems within 25 years. Yet, as the Dickinsons struggled to adjust to life in Amherst, Dickinson initiated her manic stage of writing (where she wrote 1100 poems in approximately 8 years). Evidently, as Norcross Dickinson created an environment of emotional unrest, she simultaneously harmed Emily's physiological health and ignited her poetic obsession.

Regardless of Dickinson's unfiltered letters, the poet's relationship with her mother still contained positive elements. In 1874, Norcross Dickinson had a stroke which rendered her completely paralyzed. While one might expect Emily Dickinson to mostly ignore Norcross Dickinson's pleas for help, the poet comes to feel deeply indebted to her mother. Dickinson wrote well of her mother after her death in November 1882. In a letter (792) to her dear friend, Elizabeth Holland, the poet wrote:

"We were never intimate Mother and Children while she was our Mother - but Mines in the same Ground meet by tunneling and when she became our Child, the Affection came - when we were Children and she journeyed, she always brought us something."

Altogether, Dickinson comes to appreciate several of her mother's qualities and practices after her death. While Dickinson's relationship with her mother may often seem incredibly antagonized, Norcross Dickinson's passing spotlights the shadowed positives of their affinity. Although Dickinson often criticized, resented, and scorned her complicated mother, she undoubtedly regarded her with respect. However, Dickinson's relationship with her father was far more problematic and contained signs of both extreme mental and physical abuse.

Dickinson's relationship with her father, Edward Dickinson, was undoubtedly the most complex and unclear of her life. Edward is mostly absent from Emily's poetry, yet his influence on her life can be seen through many different areas. Dickinson's agoraphobia likely stemmed from her father's actions. Edward greatly feared tuberculosis and often took extreme measures regarding the disease. The poet revealed, later in her life, that in times of cold weather, her father would forcefully remove her from Amherst Academy. In the late winter of 1848, Edward abruptly withdrew Emily from Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, confining her within the Dickinson home for the rest of winter. Emily's extremely reclusive nature was well rooted and incredibly normalized by her prison-like childhood. Edward's hypochondriac tendencies inspired irrational anxieties within his children. In Lyman Letter 23, eighteen-year-old Emily writes: "Father is quite a hand to give medicine, especially if it is not desirable to the patient."

However, the most alarming aspects of Dickinson's father move beyond the scope of crippling health scares. Dickinson alludes to her father's abusive behaviors in her poetry on several occasions. The first reference towards Edward's cruel actions appears in poem F114 (which Dickinson wrote when she was 19):

Where bells no more affright the morn —
Where scrabble never comes —
...
"Oh could we climb where Moses stood,
And view the Landscape o'er"
Not Father's bells — nor Factories,
Could scare us any more!

This poem is far from figurative as Edward Dickinson would quite literally and aggressively wake up his children at an early hour using bells. This practice seems to have dominated Dickinson's childhood and early adult life. Yet, Emily gradually depicts Edward's abuse as increasingly physical throughout her poetic life. In poem F330, Dickinson writes "He put the Belt around my life-/ I heard the buckle snap-." While Dickinson's illustration of a belt may be a metaphorical reference to her father's rigid adherence to societal norms, the latter line showcases an unprecedented level of physical description. Overall, the poem suggests that Edward Dickinson was exceptionally cruel and unforgiving, rather than merely strict.

Dickinson's obsessive focus on death seems to also be rooted in her early adult years. In 1853, Emily wrote an incredibly revealing letter to her brother, Austin. The poet stated,

"You cant [sic] think how delighted father was, with the account you gave of northerners and southerners, and the electioneering - he seemed to feel so happy to have you interested in what was going on at Cambridge - he said he "knew all about it - he's been thro' the whole, it was only a little specimen of what you'd meet in life, if you lived to enter it." I could'nt [sic] hardly help telling him that I thought his idea of life rather a boisterous one, but I kept perfectly still.

...
I dont [sic] love to read your letters all out loud to father - it would be like opening the kitchen door when we get home from meeting Sunday, and are sitting down by the stove saying just what we're a mind to, and having father hear."

Dickinson was hesitant, perhaps even fearful of expressing her thoughts and emotions to her unapproachable father. Similar parallels are seen in Edward's dynamic with his son. Both Emily and Austin had an astonishingly estranged relationship with their father. However, Dickson also appears to have also adopted and magnified her father's infatuation with death. Edward consistently expressed doubt over the longevity and security of his children's lives. As death became an increasingly prominent conversation topic in the Dickinson household, Emily began to examine the existential force extensively. Dickinson eventually came to romanticize death, in an attempt to cope with her father's persistent remarks towards his children's inevitable downfall:

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

Dickinson reveals the most about her father in her letters to Colonel Higginson. In letter 342b the poet writes, "I never knew how to tell time by the clock till I was 15. My father thought he had taught me but I did not understand & I was

afraid to say I did not & afraid to ask anyone else lest he should know.” Evidently, Dickinson regarded her father with extreme fear and was overwhelmingly cautious in matters relating to him.

After Edward Dickinson’s death in July 1874, Emily promptly wrote to Colonel Higginson in Letter 418:

“His [Edward’s] Heart was pure and terrible and I think no other like it exists.
I am glad there is Immortality-but would have tested it myself- before entrusting him.
Mr Bowles was with us-With that exception I saw none. I have wished for you, since my Father died, and had you an Hour unengrossed, it would be almost priceless. Thank you for each kindness.
My Brother and Sister thank you for remembering [sic] them.
Your beautiful Hymn, was it not prophetic? It has assisted that Pause of Space which I call "Father" -”

Similar to Emily herself, this poem is incredibly enigmatic; however, it serves to provide several crucial insights into the poet’s life. Dickinson acknowledges her father’s genuine intentions while spotlighting his truly horrific nature and tendencies. She regarded her father with curious awe, but also an unparalleled fear. Emily once described Edward Dickinson as “the oldest and the oddest sort of foreign,” in a letter to her friend, Joseph Lyman. The poet seems to have no sense of love or respect towards her father. She depicts him as a seemingly untouchable and cold “Pause of Space,” one with whom she had minimal connection. However, while at this point in her life Dickinson was utterly reclusive, the letter unexpectedly highlights Dickinson’s close relationship with Samuel Bowles. Although Bowles and Dickinson were most likely romantically involved, they swiftly lose contact as Dickinson reaches her mid twenties. It is not until after Dickinson’s father’s death that she reconnects with one of her most valued previous companions. It appears that Dickinson’s father had placed restrictions (whether mental or physical) on her social life.

However, it is unlikely that Edward’s abuse reached absolute extremity as Emily writes fondly about her father after his death: “Father does not live with us now - he lives in a new house. Though it was built in an hour it is better than this. He hasn't any garden because he moved after gardens were made, so we take him the best flowers, and if we only knew he knew, perhaps we could stop crying.” (Letter 414) Dickinson reflects on her father’s ascent to heaven while mentioning that she left flowers by his grave. Although it was not revealed until after Edward’s death, Emily’s relationship with her father shockingly encompassed endearment. In March 1875, Dickinson further contemplated her family’s bereavement, writing “though as home itself is far home since my father died.” (Letter 441) The poet transparently longs for her father, despite the conflicts that may have occurred with Edward in her childhood. Perhaps, Edward Dickinson’s death evoked a false sense of guilt and grief in Emily, despite his abusive and cold parenting.

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Emily Dickinson's relationship with Sameul Bowles was undoubtedly one of the most significant in her life. Shortly after the poet met Bowles at the Evergreens, they became close companions. In Letter 189, the poet writes lovingly to Bowles,

“I would like to have you dwell here. Though it is almost nine o'clock, the skies are gay and yellow, and there's a purple craft or so, in which a friend could sail. Tonight looks like "Jerusalem." I think Jerusalem must be like Sue's Drawing Room, when we are talking and laughing there, and you and Mrs Bowles are by. I hope we may all behave so as to reach Jerusalem. How are your Hearts today?”

Bowles was introduced into Dickinson’s life at the beginning of her manic stage of writing (Late Spring 1858). As Bowles became an increasingly prominent figure in Dickinson’s life, he began to have a great impact on her poetry. Dickinson wrote dozens of letters and poems to Bowles in the span of four particularly troubling years of her life (1858-1862). Bowles served as one of Dickinson’s primary “advisors” who helped her cope with poetic mania and conflictions over publication. As Dickinson confronted issues with gender norms and marriage, she composed,

“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 sends 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?”

This poem is one of the many which the poet sent to Bowles. Accompanying the poem was a note which read, “Here's - what I had to "tell you" -/ You will tell no other? Honor - is it's/ own pawn -.” Overall, Dickinson considerably trusted and relied on Bowles and sent him countless pieces of delicate work.

During the peak of Dickinson’s and Bowles relationship, the poet constructed three incredibly emotive letters, all addressing a highly enigmatic figure whom Dickinson referred to as “Master.” In the letters, Dickinson appears to be overwhelmed with love while compassionately pleading to an unnamed figure. In the first Master Letter, Dickinson writes,

“Dear Master
I am ill, but grieving more that you are ill, I make my stronger hand work long eno' to tell you. I thought perhaps you were in Heaven, and when you spoke again, it seemed quite sweet, and wonderful, and surprised me so - I wish that you were well.

I would that all I love, should be weak no more. The Violets are by my side, the Robin very near, and "Spring" - they say, Who is she - going by the door -

Indeed it is God's house - and these are gates of Heaven, and to and fro, the angels go, with their sweet postillions - I wish that I were great, like Mr. Michael Angelo [sic], and could paint for you. You ask me what my flowers said - then they were disobedient - I gave them messages. They said what the lips in the West, say, when the sun goes down, and so says the Dawn.”

At this moment in 1858, Dickinson seems to be far from emotionally removed as the poet had clearly fallen deeply in love with a figure who consumes her daily thoughts. While the piece highlights that Dickinson was still somewhat in touch with her surroundings, it also showcases the obsessive tendencies which drove the poet’s genius and caused her inevitable breakdown. Although “master’s” identity may appear incredibly mysterious, the letter provides several hints which aid the reader in identifying the figure as Samuel Bowles.

The letter's opening, which states that “master” was ill, greatly aligns with the life of Bowles. From approximately 1858-1860, Bowles frequently experienced bouts of illness. At the time, Bowles was simultaneously serving as a trustee on the board of Amherst College. When Bowles was unable to attend to his duties as trustee due to illness, he would seek refuge at The Dickinsons’ Evergreens. In fact, it was on one of these visits when Bowles and Dickinson

first met. At their introduction, a spark kindled between Bowles and Dickinson as the poet was incredibly impressed by the former's wealth of knowledge and progressive ideas. All who conversed with Bowles were similarly enlightened. In particular, Susan (Sue) Gilbert described the progressive as someone who "seemed to enrich and widen all life for us [Emily, Austin, and Sue], a creator of endless perspectives." ("Annals of Evergreens," p. 2) As Dickinson writes about visions of Michael Angelo [sic], the gates of heaven, and verbal exchanges with flowers, she effectively addresses the creative spirit and *mastery* Bowles undeniably encompassed. It is only fitting that Dickinson would note Bowles when describing a type of spiritual knowledge, typical in his illuminating remarks while unprecedented in her poetry.

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The second Master Letter is often overlooked due to its somewhat lack of resonance with Dickinson's poetry and its inability to provide major insights into "master's identity." However, the letter is outstandingly revealing when analyzing Dickinson's controversial nature.

As Dickinson's scholars and Amherst community increasingly commented on her agoraphobia, the public adopted a grossly plodding view of the revolutionary poet. Without examining Dickinson's writings, she appears to be – to state colloquially - crazy. This belief is well rooted in her basic legend: a manic poet who manifested death while refusing to leave her bedroom and wear any color but white. On the surface level, Dickinson quite literally transformed herself into a ghost.

Yet, the second Master Letter provides scholars with a telling perspective of Dickinson's mental sanity. While the poet undoubtedly experienced a troubling breakdown - most likely stemming from her traumatic childhood - towards the end of her life, Dickinson appears to be stable until approximately 1861/1862. In the letter Dickinson passionately writes,

"Oh how the sailor strains, when his boat is filling - Oh how the dying tug, till the angel comes. Master - open your life wide, and take me in forever, I will never be tired - I will never be noisy when you want to be still. I will be [glad] [as the] your best little girl - nobody else will see me, but you - but that is enough - I shall not want any more - and all that Heaven only will disappoint me - will be because it's not so dear"

Until her early twenties, Dickinson seemed to be an archetypal love-struck maiden of her generation. The letter highlights that Dickinson was once an openly emotional member of her community who aspired to leave her childhood home. Evidently, the poet was far from socially apathetic and reclusive for a significant part of her life. This clearly illustrates that Dickinson's physiological demise did not expedite itself for nearly half of her manic writing period (1888-1861)

Nevertheless, that downfall is transparently foreshadowed in the despairing tone of Dickinson's second master letter. The letter moves beyond the scope of intense love and hints to concerning aspects in the poet's relationship with her "master." "I will never be noisy when you want to be still. I will be [glad] [as the] your best little girl," the anti-marriage feminist uncharacteristically states in the passage above. This line suggests that Dickinson sought to replace her relationship with her father through a romance with Bowles. While the poet's harmonious remarks about Bowles make it unreasonable to suggest that he was abusive, the letter showcases that the nature of Dickinson's love was well rooted in her childhood experiences with her father. Edward Dickinson's abusive impact on Emily negatively impacted all aspects of her life, except for her poetry.

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In July 1862, Dickinson wrote what was perhaps one of the most profound pieces of her artistic career, the third Master Letter. Richard Sewall, a Dickinson biographer, perfectly describes the letter's significance: "Like many a scene in one of Shakespeare's more tightly knit tragedies, this letter may be regarded as a microcosm of the whole. Emily Dickinson's whole life is here, the history of what could be called its failures and the reason for them and the prevision of its triumphant success and the reason for that." In what seems to be the emotional climax of Dickinson's letter, the poet writes:

I am older - tonight, Master - but the love is the same - so are the moon and the crescent. If it had been God's will that I might breathe where you breathed - and find the place - myself - at night - if I (can) never forget that I am not with you - and that sorrow and frost are nearer than I - if I wish with a might I cannot repress - that mine were the Queen's place - the love of the Plantagenet is my only apology - To come nearer than presbyteries - and nearer than the new Coat - that the tailor made - the prank of the Heart at play on the Heart - in holy Holiday - is forbidden me - You make me say it over - I fear you laugh - when I do not see - [but] "Chillon" is not funny. Have you the Heart in your breast - Sir - is it set like mine - a little to the left - has it the misgiving - if it wake in the night - perchance - itself to it - a timbrel is it - itself to it a tune.

Dickinson's reference to Byron's "Prisoner of Chillon" does not go unnoticed as it accentuates the nature of the poet's relationship with master. In letter 243, Dickinson describes Byron's elegiac tale stating that "the Prisoner of Chillon did not know Liberty when it came, and asked to go back to Jail." Similar to the prisoner's toxic relation with Chillon, Dickinson is unable to alleviate herself from the hampering penitentiary of obsessive love. Nevertheless, Dickinson reveals in the letter that she is far from ignorant to the harmful temperament of her "Masterful" imprisoner.

When examining the poet's literary compilation as a whole, it becomes self-evident that the third Master Letter closely resembles many themes of Dickinson's poetry. For instance, the poet mentions Pompeii (most famously alluded to in her poem *I have never seen "Volcanoes"*) and bobolinks (a bird that frequently emerges in her poetry). The letter's enigmatic metaphors have influenced decades of debates among Dickinson scholars. Adrienne Rich's ingenious 1976 essay, *Vesuvius at Home*, offers an appealing explanation of the poet's mysterious language as a whole:

"It [the letter] was a life deliberately organized on her terms. The terms she had been handed by society—Calvinist Protestantism, Romanticism, the 19th-century corseting of women's bodies, choices, and sexuality—could spell insanity to a woman genius. What this one had to do was retranslate her own unorthodox, subversive, sometimes volcanic propensities into a dialect called metaphor: her native language."

Perhaps, Dickinson wrote indirectly in order to blunt her piercing perspectives. This view, however, suggests that the poet was somewhat uncomfortable with showcasing her complete brilliance to "master," a behavior in which Dickinson has never been known to display towards her family and close friends.

Rather, instead of softening them, the poet attempted to spread her ideas by making them appear more attractive. The concept of Dickinson - an educated, literate, and published female - was utterly antithetical to her 19th-century society. The confining essence of the 1800s influenced Dickinson to subtly use poetry as her mechanism of education. The poet was not merely trying to showcase her own potential, but rather the potential of the female gender as a whole. Likewise, Dickinson's Master Letters strived to prove her worth (despite being a woman) to a figure who she loved unconditionally. Nevertheless, Dickinson was not blind to the toxic nature of a man who trifled with her emotions and forced her to beg for his forgiveness; the poet illustrated this through an analogy highly appropriate to her Civil War lifetime: when there is a master ["Master"/Bowles] there is inevitably a slave [Dickinson]. Unfortunately, Dickinson was uncontrollably plagued with her love for "Master," leaving her at the whims of her crippling connections as "The heart wants what it wants, or else it does not care."

While Bowles was one of the only individuals with whom Dickinson remained in contact as she transitioned into a life of reclusiveness and agoraphobia, their relationship endured a long rift, shortly after the final Master Letter's completion, until the poet's father's death in 1874. Perhaps, the malignant aspects of her relationship with Bowles inevitably triggered Dickinson's childhood trauma (relating to her father) and greatly accelerated her agoraphobic breakdown. It was not until Dickinson was alleviated from the constant reminder of her father's abuse that she was able to rekindle her relationship with Bowles. Although Bowles negatively impacted Dickinson's life in her early 20s, after Edward's death, the poet was able to seek out the brilliant and compassionate Bowles she had initially connected with (without fearing him in the way she had feared her father).

Throughout her life, Dickinson endured unfathomable traumas, heartbreaks, and losses that would inevitably define several periods in her poetical era. Yet, once examining all aspects of Dickinson's literary career, it becomes evident that she does not fit into a particular archetype (including the notorious "isolationist Dickinson" - too often confined to the dynamic poet). While Dickinson's reclusive nature undoubtedly contributed significantly to her poetry, the sources of her agoraphobic transition are much more noteworthy in terms of scholarly analysis. Dickinson was not a mere poetic recluse, rather she was a profound and emotive lover, who reacted quite normally to the extreme physiological abuse she endured.

Dickinson's identity is clearly mysterious, but it is not completely incomprehensible. The poet herself provides numerous insights into her individual growth throughout her literary career. Stating that "A Wounded Deer - leaps highest," the poet acknowledges that the damages she underwent only contributed to her complex spirit and further inspired her revolutionary poetry. Dickinson was palpably unfixed by her trauma, but embraced it in order to add an unprecedented amount of poetic depth to her work.

Similarly, Dickinson did not fear the negative emotions which so frequently surrounded her. She empowered them to stimulate her incredible array of emotive work. Dickinson even found solace in her forsaken environment, writing that "It might be lonelier/Without the Loneliness-." Nevertheless, the poet's Master Letters emphasize that Dickinson was far from lonely throughout most of her lifetime. She fell in love, despite her reemerging traumatic childhood; and she cultivated meaningful relationships regardless of her agoraphobic tendencies. Outside of her transcendental literature, Dickinson was *the* "Nobody" who obsessively uncovered a recurring question that devoured her poetic thought: "who are you?" Overall, her poetic talent is unlike any other, yet her physiological experiences are not abnormal. Emily Dickinson's *masterly* poetry was shaped just as much by her increasing isolation as it was by her love-struck escapades.

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