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Emily Dickinson's Civil War Poetry

Most of our students have been reading Dickinson's poetry since middle school. They have studied her life; compared her verse to Whitman's and other contemporaries; explored nature, God, and death in the poems; and probably even tried to write an imitative poem. Still, in my experience, they feel exhausted, confused, and bored. As a former high school teacher, I looked forward to teaching Dickinson, but at the same time, I dreaded having to answer the same questions about her reclusive nature and sexuality instead of exploring the poems, and I felt like our discussions always took similar routes from previous semesters. What I discovered, once I started teaching Dickinson on the college level, is that all of my lessons and objectives existed in a vacuum. With most high school textbooks still heavily influenced by New Criticism, we spent most of our critical energies on metaphor, irony, ambiguity, and form without paying attention to the America that surrounded each poem. How can we insert a little life into this poetry that is so important to American letters, but yet resisted by college students?

This brief article will explore the conversation surrounding Dickinson poems written between 1861-1865 in the first section and closely analyze a few of those "war" poems in the second section in hopes to present another point of entry for teachers of American literature. An understanding of the relationship between the historical or external and the internal can change the way students read and interpret Dickinson's poetry. An explication of the following poems "Our journey had advanced (453)" and "My Portion is Defeat—today—(704)" will provide evidence that first, Dickinson did engage with a real, external conflict; and secondly and simultaneously, the use of the soldier's voice allows the poet to grapple, struggle, and resist the religious ideologies of

*Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice*  
Volume 2, Issue 1 Winter 2008

her community and her household: Puritanism. These explications should also prove that any discussion of the war in Dickinson's poetry should not ignore her broad treatment of religion, nature, beauty, self, etc. My hope is that reading her poems with an understanding of the time and culture surrounding the poems will elucidate how we interpret and teach her work.

I.

Teachers should not ignore the fact that Dickinson's most prolific time as a writer occurred during 1861-1865. According to R.W. Franklin's exhaustive research, 864 of her 1789 poems were composed during the four years between 1861 and 1865."<sup>1</sup> In 1965 Thomas W. Ford wrote the first scholarly approach to Dickinson's involvement with the war, an article appropriately called "Emily Dickinson and the Civil War." Ford asserts she wrote four poems directly influenced by the war: "They dropped like Flakes (545)," "It don't sound so terrible—quite as it did (384)," "It feels a shame to be Alive (524)," and "When I was small, a woman died (518)."<sup>2</sup> Since that article, many scholars have broached this topic discussing the many aspects of those very prolific years (1861-1865) as they coincided with America's great conflict. Although it is widely known that Dickinson spent most of her life secluded to her Amherst home—information that many critics use to discount claims that she actually wrote about the war—it is this home that grounded much of her involvement with politics, especially those issues concerning slavery and secession.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix #2 "Distribution by Year" on page 1533 in Volume 3 of Franklin's *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> All numbers refer to RW Franklin's *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum edition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

*Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice*  
Volume 2, Issue 1 Winter 2008

Her father Edward strongly opposed the Abolitionists' move to abolish slavery by means of war. For him, as it was for many Northerners, the union was more sacred than the immediate freedom of the slaves.<sup>3</sup> Actively involved in the Constitutional Union Party, Edward found a life in politics and social thought. It is also widely known that Emily's brother paid \$300 and excused himself from any fighting.<sup>4</sup> Although it is clear that Dickinson wanted no immediate involvement with the war (she once refused to knit socks for soldiers), she did not close herself off entirely from the brutalities and realities of war. In a December 31, 1861 letter to her cousin Louise Norcrosse, she writes about one of Amherst's own: "Frazier Stearnes is just leaving Annapolis . . . I hope that ruddy face won't be brought home frozen . . . Poor little widow's boy, riding to-night in the mad wind, back to the village burying-ground where he never dreamed of sleeping! Ah! The dreamless sleep!"<sup>5</sup> Dickinson's obsession with death collided with a national incident. Moreover, she did publish three poems in the Union magazine *Drum Beat* that helped the war effort. One of her first considered war poems, "Success is Counted Sweetest (67)," was published in 1864 in the *Brooklyn Daily Union*. We should, then, ask our students to use this information to explore how the Civil War may have affected Dickinson's poetry. Are there, in fact, Civil War poems hidden in her expansive collection? Or, were her poems about death and God incidentally published during the great national conflict.

If we agree that there are poems directly influenced or explicitly about the war, then a useful discussion should revolve around what kind of war Dickinson constructed

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<sup>3</sup> See Millicent Todd Bingham's *Emily Dickinson's Home: The Early Years As Revealed in Family Correspondence and Reminiscences*. New York: Dover Publications, 1967. 333.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the Dickinson family's engagement with politics, namely the Civil War, see the Richard Sewell's *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (1974) and a more student friendly biography by Connie Ann Kirk (2004): *Emily Dickinson: A Biography*.

<sup>5</sup> Mabel Loomis Todd. *Letters of Emily Dickinson*. (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1894) 386.

through her poetry. Because she rarely mentioned particular battles, events, or people in her poetry, it seems easy to dismiss any involvement with the war; however, many critics discuss her appropriation of the war to discuss her own inner demons and struggles. Although not the first critic to discover Dickinson's "war poems," Shira Wolosky has written the seminal (and only exhausted) work on these poems. Her basic argument posits that war is a metaphor for Dickinson's most intimate struggles:

Far from remaining detached from the civil conflagration, Dickinson internalized it. The plight of soldiers was one with which she could identify. Both she and they seemed trapped in a situation beyond their control . . . In short, both she and they lived in a world altogether unpredictable and terrifying, in which life hung by a thread.<sup>6</sup>

A question critics ask is whether these war poems are nothing more than an occasion for the exercise of her poetic powers, or does she truly involve herself with the American conflict. Wolosky is clear, and I agree, that the war became a venue to attach her own doubts and fears about herself, the world, God, and her connection with both. Instead of separating the private and the public world of Dickinson, these "war" poems, essentially, show a poet who saw the war as not merely a canvas to paint her sufferings; it became a collision between her private life and her public world.

During the war years, the majority of her poems deal explicitly with death, and many of those are lyrical intimations. And still, many of those images are of battles, wounds, soldiers, mourners, etc. Critics like Thomas Ford, Daniel Aaron, and Tyler Hoffman agree that the Civil War had a profound influence upon Dickinson, and seem to

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<sup>6</sup> Wolosky, Shira, *Emily Dickinson: The Voice of War* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1984) 38-39.



*Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice*  
Volume 2, Issue 1 Winter 2008

The form of the poem is more traditional than most of her short lyrics. Using short measure: a strong iambic base, rhyming (or slant rhyme in Dickinson's case) lines two and four with trimetric lines except for a four-beat substitution in line three, Dickinson creates a solid marching rhythm. With strict adherence to this form, she forces the images to march at her control, much like a soldier in battle. The rhyming quatrains help us analyze the poem as a whole. In the second stanza, "led" is paired with "dead" as the participants are pulled or coerced on this particular journey, one linked ultimately with death. The last stanza uses a rhyming pair that connotes more ambiguous reading than the previous pair. Here, "route" is paired with "Gate." The slant rhyme attaches the means with an end. With death behind the travelers, a gate marks their path ahead, and instead of death, one can read the "white flags" as life eternal guarded by God. However, the pair can also be read to portray a journey that has only one end—death. The rhythm allows the reader to march along with the participants, and ultimately involve themselves within the salvation / sacrifice of the last stanza.

Continuing the military motif, Dickinson uses words like "advanced," "pace," "retreat," "white flag," and "Route" to place the ideas and images of war in the reader's mind. Why? Is the Civil War the primary focus of this poem? Who is the speaker? Is it Dickinson speaking for all who travel on life's road, or is it a soldier speaking for a whole regiment during battle? The first stanza introduces the journey and the primary conflict. Troubling aspects of the stanza are present in lines three and four. First, readers are introduced to the "Fork in Being's Road." The focus here is on "odd." Why is this fork abnormal or unexpected? Eternity, placed in the fourth line and separated by dashes, seems to be the object of the stanza. And "by Term" could refer to a scheduled pattern,

*Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice*  
Volume 2, Issue 1 Winter 2008

an inevitable and orderly end to the journey. So, “oddly” within the advance of the travelers, Eternity (with its easy connotation of death) presents itself as a fork or choice (one they make or one predestined by God) to the participants of the journey.

Conflict arises in the second stanza. The key word in this stanza is “reluctant.” By some force other than individual power, the travelers are “led” onward to their goal, whether that goal is the “Cities” or “Eternity” as alluded to in the previous stanza. Many of Dickinson’s letters and poems depict her resistance to the Calvinistic teaching of election and predestination, yet she plays with this theme often in her poetry. “Feet” here are disembodied—distinct from the soul or creative force. They are machines, which play heavily into military marches and the poet’s own spiritual struggles. “Sudden awe” could be referring to the “Cities” as the longing goal of the march, and of course, the “City” should connote Paradise or Heaven that is awarded to us once we pass through the “Forest of the Dead.” However, it could be read literally to keep them from death.

This image of the “Forest of the Dead” is the most telling of them all. Soldiers, in passing through fields and forests on their way to other cities or battle fields, came in contact with many of the dead. Bodies were strewn along paths and in forests before proper (or at times improper) burials were performed. Clearly, the realities of war were set into the minds of the soldiers and became a passage way for each fighter, whether on to victory on the battlefield or death. More importantly, this symbol of mortality forces any person or traveler to stop and take personal inventory. This phrase is also placed in the turn of the poem, forcing a decision to be made by the participant. Ultimately, according to the last stanza, the existence of such an image creates the feeling that maybe the decision has already been made.

*Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice*  
Volume 2, Issue 1 Winter 2008

Therefore, the last stanza is incredibly complex, and I propose can be read with two opposing meanings. Knowing Dickinson's resistance to Puritan thought, especially philosophies revolving around Calvin's idea of election, this stanza can be read with a tone of sudden melancholy. The sense that God is all around and the white flag of surrender is inevitable leaves the speaker with a sense of terror and hopelessness. If we interpret the "Forest of the Dead" as the realities of war and battle, then this sense of hopelessness is all too real for the speaker, which for this reading is the soldier. Then, the "Sealed Route" becomes an Edenic state of innocence, or it could represent the safety of home. Regardless, the soldier cannot return. He either dies in battle or the images of war scar him in such a way that the emotional retreat is impossible. Secondly, "God—at every Gate" leaves the speaker no hope for progression. When they enter "the Forest of the Dead," they inevitably give up everything, whether it is life or innocence. This is the fate of all who enter war, and if we believe that Dickinson internalizes the literal war, then this fear can also be attributed to the very quotidian journey of life. Death scares all who travel down life, because it forces you in steps that diminish innocence and leads only to surrender. The steps are willed by God: "Our pace took sudden awe--/ Our feet – reluctant – led." Ultimately, this becomes the "Fork in Being's Road." Do you choose emotional / spiritual death through the loss of innocence, or do you choose physical death, possibly through the realities of war.

The second reading, which, after reading biographies and letters, I hold with some skepticism, grants God with a more positive function in the poem. God aids in the soldier's surrender. With no other viable option, the "Forest of the Dead" forces the "fork" into a single path, essentially giving death to the travelers. However, death does

not have the last word as God stations Himself at every Gate. This reading seems to contradict what we know of Dickinson's theological frustrations; however, does it have to be that this God is one of aggression, playing the role of a blockade, rather than the joyful gatekeeper. I favor the first reading, but some students will tend to depict God as the *Shepherd* figure and not as the *Judge*. These frustrations and ambiguities take a softer approach in the more violent poem "My Portion is Defeat—today—"

**My Portion is Defeat—today—**

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 Bone and stain—  
And Men too straight to stoop again—,  
And Piles of solid Moan—  
And Chips of Blank—in Boyish Eyes—  
And scraps 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  
Contenteder—to die—

This poem, according to Franklin, was written in the latter half of 1863 but not published until 1929 in the *Saturday Review of Literature*.<sup>8</sup> Dickinson again uses a variation of the hymn measure—this time common particular—to demonstrate the order and ubiquity of death's place in life. The juxtaposition of an orderly religious meter and

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<sup>8</sup> Franklin, 672-673.

*Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice*  
Volume 2, Issue 1 Winter 2008

the fragmentation of war create a certain irony that is necessary to understand Dickinson's ambivalence towards God's sovereignty and war's utility.

The tone of peace and acceptance of this poem is constructed by the first stanza. In the very first line, Dickinson pays homage to her Puritan heritage. "Portion" as defined in the Oxford English Dictionary is "that which is allotted to a person by providence; lot, destiny, fate." This definition (as I assert the poem does as well) implies a lack of agency within the speaker. Like the previous poem, death is the soldier's lot on that given day. He didn't ask for it, he didn't want it, but he got it. So, the rest of the poem follows the soldier as he tries to find peace with this portion. The connotation of Puritan election and predestination is clear here. This soldier is not one of the chosen, one of the victors who are "somewhat prouder, over there-- / The Trumpets tell it to the Air—." He finds himself on the losing side: "Less Paeans—fewer Bells— / Drums don't follow Me—with tunes—." Hymns and victorious songs do not follow the loser. Images such as "Men too straight to stoop again" and "Stamped visible—in Stone" perpetuate this notion of agency (or lack thereof). Statues haunt the battlefield, moving where they are led, ultimately witnessing "Death's surprise." Do we choose death? Life? Or, are we led there?

Unlike the speaker in "Our journey had advanced," the soldier/speaker is dying, if not already dead. Already having passed through the "Forest of the Dead," the speaker talks about the difference between victory and defeat. Although there is no strict rhyme or meter, the rhythm of the monologue is iambic in base, mimicking patterns of ordinary speech. Stark images of death plague the entire poem, which contrasts peculiarly with the speaker's reflection on his own demise. The second stanza paints a picture of the

*Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice*  
Volume 2, Issue 1 Winter 2008

War (some have argued that this poem was written after Dickinson viewed one of Matthew Brady's photographs) with the gore of bones and blood, "piles of solid moan," and "boyish eyes." These images are the most vivid description of war in Dickinson's poetry.

The third stanza functions as an intimation on the battle's winners and losers. What is the difference between the one who has victory and the one who does not? According to the soldier, "the One / Who to have had it, would have been / Contenteder—to die—." Much like the soldier in "Our journey," the speaker realizes the cost of war. To die is to feel pain once and never again. To live is to relive the loss of innocence because of war's brutality.<sup>9</sup> This poem harkens another dramatic monologue with the same sentiment. Robert Burns' "To a Mouse" ends with the farmer addressing the mice that he accidentally killed:

Still thou art blest, compar'd wi' me!  
The Present only toucheth thee:  
But, och! I backward cast my e'e  
On prospects drear!  
An' forward, tho' I canna see,  
I guess an' fear!

For both of Dickinson's war poems and Burns' poem, after such a tragic event, the route to innocence is sealed and death is all around. For Dickinson's speaker, this is the past most sought after. The visuals of war are too great not to affect the soldier profoundly, so essentially, death and defeat are only "a paler luck than Victory." To win is still pale, still ghastly.

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<sup>9</sup> Teachers should consider comparing "My portion is Defeat—today" with "Success is Counted Sweetest" (112). Although "Success" was written a few years before the war began (1859), so not in the chronological scope of this paper, the themes are very similar. Dickinson highlights the agony of the defeated as they listen to the triumphs of the victors: "As he defeated—dying--/On whose forbidden ear / The distant strains of triumph /Burst agonized and clear!" It is important for students to explore her compassion and affinity for the defeated, unlike popular war poetry and its focus on the victor.

*Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice*  
Volume 2, Issue 1 Winter 2008

These explications conclude that Dickinson's war poetry is not the commemorative verse so commonly found in magazines of the time. Not only does she not specifically refer to the War's particulars, but the ideology itself does not match those poems that were written almost solely to perpetuate the Union war effort, like Whitman's "Beat Drum Beat," Melville's "Gettysburg," and Whittier's "Barbara Fritchie." One of the reasons why so many critics denounce her conscious effort to write "war poetry" is that her poems rely so much on reflection and the inner life as opposed to the politics and philosophies at large. However, these two are different from the thousands of poems she wrote in her lifetime. They are considered war poems because of heavy use of war imagery and appropriation of the soldier's voice. As the poems do not commemorate a single battle or event, they do commemorate a war attitude, one not heavily discussed in poems of the time.

Whether it is the battlefield of the soldier, or the backyard of an Amherst home, the speaker reflects on the journey (spiritual, military, or other) in life as a pawn—a forced and tragic piece of a cosmic game. Thus, her fight with the Puritan God embarks. According to Perry Miller, "without some understanding of Puritanism . . . there is no understanding of America."<sup>10</sup> As much as the Civil War was a part of Emily Dickinson's life during the war era, her religious heritage ruled supreme over the Dickinson household, and ultimately over her art. Her family can be traced back to Nathaniel Dickinson who, led by John Winthrop, traveled from England during the Great Migration around 1630. Dickinson's poetry shows an immense knowledge of the Puritan tradition, according to biographer Richard Sewall: "She knew what the massive Puritan traits

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Richard Sewall's biography, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Ferrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1974) 19.

were, saw them in her family and in herself, respected them, but was critical of them throughout her life . . . her whole career may be regarded as a sustained, if muted, rebellion against this very inheritance.<sup>11</sup>” What the Civil War became was an amazing canvas, with its torture and battle, for Dickinson's personal struggles with her Puritan heritage. According to the speaker of the poems, this is a holy war.

“Our journey had advanced” and “My Portion is Defeat—Today—” help show that the Civil War is not just secondary to the personal battles of the speaker; the images and symbols of war create a complex landscape of fear, coercion, and death. Unlike many of the uplifting, patriotic commemorations of the late nineteenth century, Dickinson’s “war” poems address the realities of death. And, implicitly, she questions the role each person, especially the soldiers of this war, plays in the decisions of life and death. The speaker’s tragic feeling of life as a pawn is transferred onto the tragic life of a soldier. Puritan doctrine permeates these poems as Dickinson, through a soldier’s voice, resists the acknowledgment of a God who would not only allow such violence to occur among his people, but also in one who has a hand in choosing the victorious and the defeated.

Ultimately, my hope is that this approach to Dickinson poetry gives teachers a new entry point to Dickinson’s poetry, genre, and poetic form. Secondly, I am constantly encouraging my students to take an interdisciplinary approach to their studies and assignments. Exploring how writers engage with culture is an appropriate way to introduce students to cultural studies and research tactics in other disciplines. The following appendix should help teachers better prepare for discussion on Dickinson and the Civil War

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

**I.**

**A Brief Selection of Dickinson Civil War poems:**

**Published during the war:**

- “Success is Counted Sweetest” (112)
- “These are the days when Birds come back” (122)
- “Flowers—Well—if anybody” (95)
- “Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple” (321)

**Poems containing war imagery/allusions:**

- “A slash of Blue” (223)
- “They dropped like Flakes” (545)
- “It don’t sound so terrible—quite as it did” (384)
- “It feels a shame to be Alive” (524)
- “One Crucifixion is recorded—only” (670)
- “Inconceivably solemn!” (414)
- “The Battle fought between the Soul” (629)
- “When I was small, a Woman died” (518)
- “Our journey had advanced” (453)
- “To know just how He suffered—would be dear” (688)
- “My Portion is Defeat—today” (704)
- “The name—of it—is ‘Autumn’ (465)
- “Whole Gulfs—of Red, and Fleets—of Red” (468)
- “Victory comes late” (195)
- “He fought like those Who’ve nought to lose” (480)
- “Those—dying then” (1581)

II.

**Bibliography**

These are the articles and books I find most helpful while preparing for teaching how the Civil War plays an important role in teaching Dickinson's poetry. The above list of poems is a compilation of poems found in the following essays. However, there are many, many more articles concerning Emily Dickinson's treatment of the war and many other poems not already addressed in scholarship: consider asking students to find Dickinson poems that could be included in her war catalog.

Additionally, there are tremendously helpful websites to introduce students to cultural studies and Dickinson's war canon. The first is called "A Nosegay to Take into Battle: The Civil War Wounding of Emily Dickinson" hosted by the University of Virginia ([www.iath.virginia.edu/fdw/volume2/werner/index.html](http://www.iath.virginia.edu/fdw/volume2/werner/index.html)). This source provides cultural context, explications, a short bibliography, and sample discussion questions and writing prompts. I recommend students viewing this site before discussing the poetry in class. Secondly, a website called "Whitman, Dickinson, and the Elegy: Death, Dying and the Civil War, written by Susan Belasco (University of Nebraska) is another great introduction to genre and war: <http://www.classroomelectric.org/volume2/belasco/>.

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*Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice*  
Volume 2, Issue 1 Winter 2008

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