

# Emily Dickinson Through the Directorial View



# A Critical Review

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My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -

In Corners - till a Day

The Owner passed - identified -

And carried Me away

Her life had stood and is perpetually standing an enticing object of incessant focus and research. One of the most mythical poetic figures in American literature, Emily Dickinson and her work has always been inspiring interest not only in academic circles and for erudite purposes but also constitutes an indissociable part of the contemporary lore. The nature of her poetry and the feelings that it brings to the reader world have rendered her an emblematic poet whose influence is entirely reflected to the modern culture psyche. Enigmatic and reclusive persona throughout her lifetime, rebellious against the narrow mores and paradigms of her society, her volitional hermitage yet abounding in inner intensity and spiritual splendor are some of the characteristics that have woven the unrivaled mythos of the poetess. That mythos had contributed to the formation of a perception of Dickinson's as a figure of reverence and awe. The values of her poetry and life reflect highly, even from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, today's attitude to life circumstances, while her ardent readers and every person living in the world of today can empathize and identify with her.

There is a flower that Bees prefer—  
And Butterflies—desire—  
To gain the Purple Democrat  
The Humming Bird—aspire—

She portrays a "flower that bees" -i.e readers, literature enthusiasts etc, prefer because she never ceased to generate eerie feelings, curiosity and admiration. That provides an explicit elucidation of how and why Emily Dickinson, even centuries apart her artistic activity, has gained her position in the visual arts of theatre and filmography. The need to witness her life dramatized firstly emerged nearly half a century after her death. Early dramatic stage plays are traced around 1930's and 40's. Some of these are "*Alison's House*"(1930) by Suzan Glaspell, "*Brittle Heaven*"(1935) by Vincent York and Frederick Pohl and "*Eastward in Heaven*"(1949) by Dorothy Gardner. Notably though, when the terms Emily Dickinson and theatre play encounter, the most prominent drama which arises is "*The Belle of Amherst*"(1976) by William Luce. This iconic play was the first major and most popular of all its precedents for it contributed to a condensed, more explicit and orbicular view of Dickinson's persona. An one-woman show, "*The Belle of Amherst*" constitutes a remarkable and truly original attempt to portray and present the biography of the poet. The viewer finds himself/herself on a peaceful evening paying a visit to Dickinsons' home. Emily is there to greet her visitors and the scene is set.

*"Welcome to Amherst. My name is Emily Elizabeth Dickinson.  
Elizabeth is for my Aunt Elizabeth Dickinson Currier[...]  
But I don't use my middle name anymore, since I became  
a poet."*

The poet introduces herself and without a moment to spare the whimsical narration of her life begins. From the very first moments into the masterful play, the spectator is able to locate and acknowledge familiar words. The performance reveals that the script is written quite shrewdly because miscellaneous lyrics from her work, excerpts from her letters, musings, even the recipe of her favorite "black cake" are interwoven in a captivating flow of insightful, eloquent and natural speech, with modern patterns of speaking and surely, poetry. Emily from her second-storey room and, for the purposes of narration frequently transferring in a series of flashbacks in other places like the classroom of the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary recollects all of her well-treasured memories. Through her shared memories with the audience about her family and the relationship between them, the friends and the acquaintances, it is very well perceived that the initial structure of the play intends to exude a truthfulness, reasonableness and humanity of hers. Now in her fifty-three years she is recounting her life to her imaginary visitors and listeners and in a confession fashioned narration she gives the impression of a last, contemplative deep and innermost attempt to present it. Undoubtedly, the purpose of such a performance it is not to justify her life choices or to give an elucidation of it. On the contrary, it is more than discernible the playwright aims to consolidate a definite and transparent, even proud and void of any stereotypical mark, insight of Dickinson life for her audience to receive.

William Luce had stated that the amount of Dickinson's biographical notes and letters he had to go through for the scriptwriting was immense. The play is clearly based on that, but what is even more enchanted is the manner in which he treats the persona of the poet. Respectfully would be the fittest word. With respect in terms of her life choices, of her grandiose spirituality, deep clarity of mind and her self-awareness. The play and, thus the performance by unique Julie Harris pay a homage to the way she lived and write. She created poetry with vast clarity of her own self. This is the way also the play treats its protagonist. "*I am a poet*" she says. Dickinson had the mind capacity and did recognize herself as a poet, despite the frustration by the absence of general artistic acknowledgement that surrounded her life. She agonizes to find the perfect word for her writing;

*'PHOSPHORESCENCE. Now there's a word to lift your hat to... to find that phosphorescence, that light within, that's the genius behind poetry.'*

She does admit that she is the subject of small talks and she has been entitled as the local eccentric, character of her society. Humorous, witty, insightful and sometimes ironic like her writing is the response of hers to all above.

While the enchanting and engaging narration takes place, a rather intriguing point escapes the notice. The verisimilitude of the intact events of her life are on the question and an inexplicable paradox is introduced. The most reclusive person of American literature receives visitors and share unobstructedly with them her most deep and secret emotions and

thoughts. Really quickly, this question is recanted. The intimate conversation with the audience and their active participation is genuinely one of the most valuable assets complementing play's acceptance, popularity and success. Thus it goes without saying why "*The Belle of Amherst*" is the most popular theatrical play on Dickinson's life that contributed to an inspired general perception of her persona, and bestowed Julie Harris, an ardent enthusiast of Dickinson's poetry, a Tony Award and was considered to be the role of her career. The play accepted a lot of appraisal it has been stated that it constitutes the most representative portrayal of Dickinson's in the history of theatre art.

In the same line, more one woman-shows were created to praise the life and artistry of the emblematic poet. "*Tea with Emily*" (2002) by Martha Furey which presents a fictional visit of two important figures of American literature in Dickinson's house, Henry David Thoreau's and Mark Twain's. Other plays having introduced to the audience are "*Emily Dickinson: The Soul's Society*" (1995), Laurette Willis and the "*Search for Emily*" (1989 by playwright Brian Marsh, where is another attempt to create a fictional scenario based on Emily's mystique. Alice, a playwright, seeks for Emily Dickinson and her genuine self by bringing the poet to encounter face to face her admirers. For once again, the play's theme touches on the exploration and revealing of Dickinson's real self.

Success is counted sweetest  
By those who ne'er succeed.  
To comprehend a nectar  
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple Host  
Who took the Flag today  
Can tell the definition  
So clear of victory

As he defeated – dying –  
On whose forbidden ear  
The distant strains of triumph  
Burst agonized and clear!

Recognition, acknowledgement, publication of her poetic work, success are concepts that during Dickinson's lifetime always alluded her. It is striking and remarkable how after those centuries the poet's success is moving with incessant pace and the profound resonance that it has to the popular culture is perpetually present. The "sweetest success" and the embrace of

Dickinson's poetry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century life that reaches everyone is reflected on the transfer of her life on a film. Filmography and cinema is one of the most representative sources and means that refer to the contemporary culture status. Creating a film to portray the life of the poet was highly anticipated and a credible proof of her popularity and admiration today.

When her passion receives a character and a resourceful, sensitive and meticulous director undertakes to bring her to life in front of the world's eyes, then it is when a masterful piece of filmography is born. "A Quite Passion" by Terence Davies is not another movie about Dickinson's life but the first feature film on her ever produced. The film follows Emily Dickinson from her early years as an adolescent to the last days of her life. Once again, what the director defined as one of the most focal points in the movie was the relationship between the members of the Dickinson family with the poet and vice versa. Through the charting process of poet's artistic and creative maturity, what defined Dickinson as a poet and a woman of exception and uniqueness are all examined under the director's scope. It could be implied that the spirit of the movie could be representative of her way of living, silent, secret and decelerated. Although not surprisingly, Davies managed to weave a tale of outward and inward activity but as the movie proceeds the inner world of Dickinson conquers the scene. The initial feeling of a comical satire on New England's strict doctrines transforms into a sincere tragedy of a life. The riveting rebellion against the religious and social conventions, the defiance and doubting of God, the volitional exile in her room, the anger to the world that never wrote to her with renown and the deterioration of health and eventually death are all the truth that the director wants the audience to know about her. In terms of directorial narrative, Davies concentrates all of his stylistic power on delicately creating portraits. Precise emphasis is given on the stillness and the centralization on the eyes. It is utterly gripping that the creator took into consideration the importance which the "Eye-I" has in Dickinson's poetry. "A Quite Passion" is an amalgamation of the two splendid forces of exceptional acting and delicate direction too. The protagonist Cynthia Nixon delivers a riveting performance as she incarnates Emily Dickinson. Nixon's Dickinson intention is to communicate clearly the anguish and the bitterness that the lack of renown induced her. It accentuates more on how the director views her position about her anonymity.

The director of this rare, inspired, thrilling movie aims to create a powerful and captivating narrative about Dickinson's real inner world. One more directorial attempt to externalize what that unique mind was created to think and accomplish. One more attempt to interpret that woman's unique material and nature, and give an insight and an opportunity to the viewer audience to comprehend the poet who they deeply cherish.

In the line of more academic narratives, Dickinson has been the subject-matter of numerous documentaries. One of the most noteworthy amongst them is "Voices and Visions" (1988). Precise analysis and commenting on her life and her poetry by significant people of literature, such as Antony Hecht, Adrienne Rich and Joyce Carol Oates is the central focus of this great documentary. During the illuminating presentation of facts based on her life and the length of her original poetic artistry, what really draws the attention is how all the eminent poets agree on relinquishing all the characterizations and stereotypes that Emily has been forced to bear. "The madwoman in the attic, the fey, ethereal person in white won't fit because she was a woman who looks deep and saw very clear". The essence of comprehending and embracing Dickinson's persona lies in her poetry and vice versa. She was a poet of spiritual and cognitive grandeur and it is imperative to be perceived as such.

A person of unparalleled spirit and intelligent capacity that has enchanted with her words

for over a century, Emily Dickinson is ubiquitous in the modern culture. The need of unfolding the enigmatic and mysterious life of hers and what urged her to stand as a distinct figure has been riveted in the arts of theatre and cinema and more and more directors will endlessly appear to state their own rendering of her enigmatic yet appealing persona. She may be categorical to what her soul selected to be her society but the modern culture has undoubtedly selected Emily Dickinson.

*Cover from E. Dickinson's collected page of herbarium. Retrieved from [http://www.slate.com/blogs/the\\_vault/2013/06/04/emily\\_dickinson\\_her\\_collection\\_of\\_botanical\\_specimens.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_vault/2013/06/04/emily_dickinson_her_collection_of_botanical_specimens.html)*

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