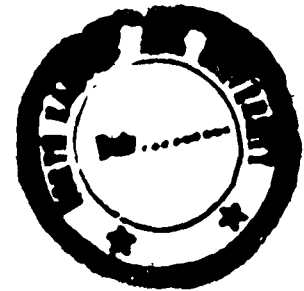


**EMILY DICKINSON AS  
A REBEL POET**

*BONTI BORA*



*DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF REQUIREMENT  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
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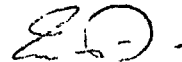
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C E R T I F I C A T E

This is to Certify that the dissertation

"Emily Dickinson as a Rebel Poet" Submitted by Bonti Bora in partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Philosophy to the Department of English, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong is a record of bonafide research work carried out by her Under my supervision and guidance. The results embodied in the dissertation have not been submitted to any other University or Institute for the award of any degree or diploma.

Date :  
11.2.92.



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C O N T E N T S

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## A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T

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But for my husband and family, who consistently encouraged me and extended their, co-operation, I would never have been able to put these pages together.

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Date : *31.1.92*

*B Bona*  
( BONTI RORA )

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Emily Dickinson ( 1830-86 ) is a major American poet of the nineteenth century. Her emergence as a first rate poet owes a great deal to the publication of the T.H. Johnsons' Varorium Edition of her poems in 1955 as it has made available to the public as well as critics the entire body of her poetry for critical and scholarly appraisal since then. Twentieth century critics have acclaimed her with epithets like a "Poet restored" and a "discovery of the twentieth century critics". Even as late as the first half of the twentieth century, critics in America and abroad, made little progress towards establishing authentic critical interpretation of her poems and her biography. It was, partly her cloistered life which shunned all social contacts and human relation (beyond her home) and partly due to the inconspicuous nature of her poetry, that her poems missed the limelight and the praise they deserved.

Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, December 10, 1830. Her life was uneventful, except for a circumstance which has caused much speculations among her critics. She led a childhood, thrilling and joyful, so common to all children. At seventeen, Emily Dickinson entered South Hadley Female seminary, rebelled at the extremities of its puritanism ; and her gradual dislike for it culminated in her leaving the place and a return home. According to her first biographer, she was " a social creature in the highest sense " from her eighteenth to her twenty -third year, after which there was a gradual receding away from the worldly scene. Several wild speculations of her critics and biographers claim that Emily Dickinsons' frustrated love affairs contributed to her withdrawal from the mainstream of life. The mysterious events which caused her to keep herself immured was variously detailed and disputed.

Josephine Pollitt<sup>1</sup> identified the man who prompted the love poems and her proud withdrawal from the world as Edward Hunt, the husband of Emily Dickinson's close friend, Helen Hunt Jackson.

Genevieve Taggard in her book " The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson ",<sup>2</sup> discovered a secret lover in George Gould of Amherst College. But the romance was shattered by Emily Dickinson's harshly possessive father, maintains the author.

Even a critical biography like Geogre Frisbie Whicher's<sup>3</sup>, does not say much except that it cuts down all obscurities of speculations. Whicher gives a detailed account of Emily Dickinson's meeting with Reverend Charles Wadsworth, her admiration for his preaching, and her growing infatuation with the man.

Till very recently what obsessed critics of Emily Dickinson was her private life because it was shrouded in mystery. It became so important for critics to discover a bond between the events of her life and her poems, that the poems for most part of the time were shoved to the background. Recently, the scene has changed with the changing attitudes of the critics.

Charles R Anderson being seemingly aware of the true character and importance of the poems of Emily Dickinson has remarked :

"The serious attention it deserves is the real task that remains. To study it intensively, to stare a hole in the page until these apparently cryptic notations yield their full meanings--this is the great challenge to the modern readers ".<sup>4</sup>

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1. Josephine Pollitt : **Emily Dickinson : The Human Background of her Poetry**, New York : Copper Square Publishers, 1970.
  2. Genevieve Taggard : **The life and Mind of Emily Dickinson** : New York, Alfred A. Knof, 1934.
  3. George Frishbie Whicher : **This was a poet : A critical Biography of Emily Dickinson**. New York : Scribner, 1938.
  4. Charles R. Anderson, "Preface", **Emily Dickinson's Poetry : A stairway of surprise**, (Garden City : Doubleday and Co : Anchor Books, 1969) P-XIV.

Keeping this 'Challenge' in mind, the attempt in this study is aimed at portraying Emily Dickinson as a rebel poet. With this in view, efforts have been made to study her poems 'intensively' and 'stare a hole in the page'. The obvious discernible characteristic of her poems is that they are a rich treasury of symbols and themes, employed to tell more about the poet, her ideas and her nature, than any biography could do.

We cannot overlook the fact that, like all other poets, Emily Dickinson's work too changed at times, and got conditioned by the events of her life. Infact there are a number of things in her poetry which becomes intelligible only when put against the background of her life. Yet her poems form the most important source of first hand information about the poet, because her poems were for Emily Dickinson a means of probing and analyzing the existence she was to lead. The poems reflected her approach to reality.

To establish Emily Dickinson as a rebel poet, the vital factor will be to discover the sources. This necessitates a minute and elaborate study of her handling of her themes, to specify the point that the themes she used were traditional no doubt but her handling of them was unique. So unique was her use of symbols and metaphors, and her language, that it led Higginson to remark quite at the initial stage of her poetic carrer.

"Her verses are like poetry pulled up by roots with rain, dew and earth clinging, giving a freshness and fragnance not otherwise conveyed".<sup>5</sup>

Though her themes of religion, God, immortality, death, nature and love are as universal as the treatment Puritan and New Englandly ; it was precisely due to her personal treatment of the same which accounts for her uniqueness, the qualities of "freshness and fragrance" that Higginson claimed to have discovered.

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5. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Preface", **Poems by Emily Dickinson** (Boston : Robert Brothers, 1890)

Emily Dickinson remained a critic of the Puritan God and dogma throughout her life. She rebelled against the atrocities of the Puritan faith as early as the age of seventeen when she left Holyoke Seminary School because she could not respond to the call of God.

Nevertheless, she was a deeply religious person, and the crisis she faced because of her scepticism flowered into phrases like ' "faith is doubt". If the Christian theology did not suffice her, Emily Dickinson evolved for herself a personal religion and God. Within this self-styled religious framework, Emily Dickinson talked about death and Immortality, love and nature, God and religion. She had to pay heavily for it, because during her life time, her poems did not see the light of day. It was only after four decades following Emily Dickinson's death that her poems were taken seriously, read and appreciated. The attitude expressed in most of Emily Dickinson's poetry is closer to what we choose to call modern than to the general conception of what people thought in the eighteen - nineties. So the flippancy of many of her religious poems, her curious mixture of sneering wit with sentiment, and her epigrammatic brevity, were not the accepted poetical norms of her times.

The first chapter of this dissertation titled "Emily Dickinson and her themes" - is a study of her various themes like - God and love, death and immortality, Nature, religion. It is an attempt at focussing on the unique fashion of her thematic handling and development, by enumerating several of her poems.

The second chapter deals with the subject - " Emily Dickinson and her contemporaries ". This section of the study is devoted to a study of the three contemporary poets - Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson. The Study has been more restricted to Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman because the latter has been considered the spokesman of his age, with him started a new cult in poetry. Critics now claim that it was with

the advent of Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, and Herman Melville, that the roots of modernism took grip in the American soil. So a detailed comparative study of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman is inevitable, because what accounted for Emily Dickinson's rebellious spirit was the modern aspect of her poetry which baffled critics and readers of her time.

The third chapter - " Emily Dickinson's stylistic Strategies ", is an attempt at analysing Emily Dickinson's artistic distinctions in the field of language, metre, symbols and metaphors, and grammar.

The following is the format of the present dissertation -

- (1) Introduction.
- (2) Chapter I : The Themes of Emily Dickinson.
- (3) Chapter II : Emily Dickinson and her Contemporaries.
- (4) Chapter III : Emily Dickinson's Stylistic Strategies.
- (5) Conclusion.

C H A P T E R - I

The Themes of Emily Dickinson

The main effort at establishing Emily Dickinson as a rebel poet, begins with a detailed study of her concurrent themes, focussing upon the novelty of her treatment of them not only from the conventional point of view but also from those of her contemporaries.

Looking back just two centuries from the birth of Emily Dickinson the old New England Church provides enough evidence of the Puritan's sense of grace and beauty expressed in simple forms. There were limits imposed on literary compositions too ; the style of the artist, his approach to his materials and his medium, which must be useful to society, the aim being to set forth the glory of God and not to indulge in the artists' imagination. Though a poet, Anne Bradstreet wanted to make it clear to her children that :

" I have not studied in this you read to show my skill, but to declare the truth, not to set forth myself but the glory of God ".<sup>1</sup>

Deep into the nineteenth century the old ideas and opinions clung to the new nation.

Whitman observes in the opening of his 1855 Preface to the Leaves of Grass that " the slough still sticks to opinion and manners and literature while the life which served its requirements has passed into the new life of the new forms. "

The conventional poet of Whitman's day took the easy way out of stating again the old conceptions from abroad and affirming anew the outworn

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1. The works of Anne Bradstreet, ed. Jeannine Hensley (Cambridge, Massachusetts ; Harvard University Press, 1967) p. 240.

affirmations of the past. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's " A Psalm of Life " disturbed nobody's comfortable beliefs. Walt Whitman could have remained snug and safe by strictly adhering to the sentimental verses like " O Captain, My Captain, " Which proved so popular during that time. But his choice was deliberate. Like Emily Dickinson he chose to look deeply into his own nature, to make profound discoveries of the self and spirit there.

For Emily Dickinson too, poetry is less a form of self expression than a probing and questioning of her inner life, her soul. Infact her grand theme is - " Life as it is involved in her life ..... Her empire is, in the poems, one over which she has total dominion - her soul. " <sup>2</sup>

Emily Dickinson, descendant of a Puritan New Englander, was born too late to live by the laws of Puritanism. In spite of her great reverence for orthodox religion and morality, Emily Dickinson could not conform to the doctrinal aspect of Puritanism. She could neither reject outright nor finally accept the religious dogmas, all along she struggled with her faith. The reading of the Bible inspired her with her various structures and thematic images of many of her poems. Her principal themes are therefore death, immortality, love and nature.

Emily Dickinson's poems strongly suggest her pre-occupation with the subject of death, almost to the point of obsession. Her experience of death came as early as thirteen when she lost one of her dear friends. Perhaps the greatest influence on her response to death was the death of her preceptor Benjamin Franklin Newton. She talks of him as a friend who taught her immortality. For her " a friend without a corporeal frame means immortality ".

By the closing years of her life Emily Dickinson had witnessed the death of her close and dear ones, her father's death in 1874, followed

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2. **The Continuity of American Poetry** by Roy Harvey Pearce. Princeton : New Jersey University Press, 1961. "American Renaissance" p. 82.

by the death of Samuel Bowles in 1878. Four years later Rev. Charles Wadsworth's and her mother's death which followed in quick succession, led her to write to her cousin in the year nineteen eighty three.

" The Crisis of the sorrow of so many years is that it tires me."<sup>3</sup>  
She was close enough to death to talk about it freely. Her reflections on the subject of death is not wholly philosophical, for death is not merely an abstract idea for her. An enumeration of her various death poems brings to light the fact that Emily Dickinson has treated the subject of death along various lines. She has personified death as a gentleman and lover. She has also presented the state of death as the passing of the discarnate mind from one world to another - from actual consciousness to the consciousness of the dead.

Above all, through the theme of death Emily Dickinson has raised problematic questions such as of the afterworld and life after death.

In the poem, "Because I Could Not Stop For Death", death is humanized and made to behave like a gentleman-lover. On the descriptive level the poem is an excellent example of a metaphysical conceit describing in a single image a bridal journey, which is in fact the funeral procession.

In its obvious interpretation the poem is simply the courting of a lady by a kind gentleman who is finally taken away in a coach to a

" ..... House that seemed / A swelling of the ground/.  
The roof was scarcely visible ..... " <sup>4</sup>

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3. **The Letters of Emily Dickinson**, 3 Vols. ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward. (Cambridge : Harvard University Press , 1958)  
In subsequent chapters, Emily Dickinson's letters will be referred to by the volume number to be followed by the page number.

4. **The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson**, ed by Thomas H. Johnson London : Faber and Faber ; 3 Queen Square, - 1970. All references to Emily Dickinson's poems are from this edition indicated as 'J' followed by the number of the poem quoted.

At a deeper level of meaning the poem presents an unified vision of the themes of death. The narrator of the poem, obviously the dead woman, describes her journey in all its picturesque details - the school and the children playing, the fields, and also the setting sun as she sees passing by in her journey towards eternity.

Allen Tate's remark on the poem that - " The terror of death is objectified through this figure of the genteel driver ....., " <sup>5</sup> is questionable. The narrator's voice does not at any point seem to reveal terror or agony. Infact the word 'kindly' suggests how great a favour has been bestowed upon the narrator. The opening lines impart a sense of premonition, as if the narrator had been informed about the visitor - Death.

There is no regret nor any sense of doubt. Before the journey had actually started the narrator was busy with her life's tasks, but now she declares -

" I had put away / My labour and my  
Leisure too, / For His civility " (J. 103)

The third and the fourth lines of the poem state the number of passengers in the coach and identifies them.

" The carriage held but just ourselves -  
and Immortality . "

The travellers are the narrator, the coachman (Death) and Immortality. Emily Dickinson is very particular about such terms as Eternity and Immortality. She clearly distinguishes the three terms - Eternity, Immortality and the self :

" Behind me - dips Eternity -  
Before me - Immortality  
Myself - the term between ;" (J. 721)

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5. **Emily Dickinson : A Collection of Critical Essays** ed. Richard B. Sewall. Englewood Cliffs : Prentice Hall, Inc, 1963.  
"Emily Dickinson (1932), Allen Tate".

Both Richard Chase and Charles R. Anderson are of the opinion that "Immortality" in the poem is the end of the journey.

According to the Christian theology the soul is the immortal essence in the human personality. Surprisingly enough, Emily Dickinson's ideas about death are well contained within the theological framework of Christianity, in spite of her non-conformist attitude. In this light "Immortality" can best be explained as the immortal soul.

Allen Tate's remark about Emily Dickinson's 'Terror of death does not hold good, because 'terror' finds no place in her attitude towards death. Hers is not the attitude of an escapist ; hers is but a stoic acceptance of death. Emily Dickinson is keenly aware of a sense of division, a feeling of bisection (as the poet calls it ) in the mind which leads her to accept the fact that a part of one's self is certainly mortal. She describes Immortality as the divided part of the body -

"Mind without corporeal frame".

The two separate entities - the mortal body and the immortal soul pass through death to reach the state of eternity. As we read the poem we find that the first part of the poem relates to the visual experiences of the mortal self, ending in the imaginative sensations of the immortal self. Slowly and leisurely the journey proceeds.

However, in the succeeding stanzas the movement becomes fast and the quickness is evolved by the alliteration of the word "passed".

"The coach passed the school, where children strove  
. . . . Passed the fields of gazing grain .. ..  
. . . . Passed the setting sun". (J. 103)

The images of child, grain and sun are significantly used to represent, respectively the three progressive stages of life: the beginning, the prime and the end. The "setting sun" symbolizes the completeness of life and obviously means the end of life. It is at this juncture when the narrator passes the "Setting sun" the shift in the narrator's consciousness from one

world to another starts. Her sense perception now gives way to imagination. The ordinary consciousness changes into mythopoeic consciousness. Her imagination is at its best when she describes the grave in terms of a swelling of the ground and the line " the cornice in the ground " makes the visual impact clear and lasting. By the end of the poem we find that the narrator's consciousness is placed out of time. It has been 'centuries' since the day the narrator travelled towards Eternity but her consciousness has failed to keep account of the worldly calendar. Time has stopped for her and the consciousness feels that the time between her burial and the picking up of her memory is "shorter than the Day".

In the poem " I heard a fly buzz when I died, " ( J. 465 )

The theme of death reaches a different dimension. Emily Dickinson's scepticism about life after death enters the poem in the form of a fly. The fly becomes the dominant factor against which the speaker is struggling.

The poem is a familiar death-bed scene. The narrator is reminiscing about a past experience. The buzzing of the fly stands in contrast to the " stillness in the room " filled with the bereaved ones. As the voice speaks from the present she can only recall that

" I could not see to see ".

The whole experience is a mental reconstruction of the past event of death. The 'fly' has religious overtones. The narrator had

" signed away / what portion of me be /  
assignable ....." ( J.465 )

It means that the worn out body and tired brain have accepted death, Just " then it was / there interposed a fly ". ( J.465 )

The fly in its general meaning stands for dirt, evil and mischief. In the poem it signifies the decaying and dying situation. Keeping in mind the scepticism of Emily Dickinson, the 'Blue Fly' can be best explained as the evil spirit

coming at the moment of death to take possession of the unblessed soul of the narrator. The fear of damnation lingered in the mind of Emily Dickinson as she could not respond to the call of the Puritan faith and God. The religious crisis is apparent here. It is the theme of death which leads to the question of an after world.

The general concept of immortality as imperishability was rooted in all thinking in primitive society. But it is impossible to pinpoint the stage of mental development at which survival after death began to be doubted. Plato's dualism of body and soul, which collapses at death to launch the soul on its journey to eternity. The question that must have constantly posed itself before Emily Dickinson was whether the soul would retain its finite identity after physical death or merge with the infinite being.

The security of immortality promised by the orthodox belief is for her a tame prospect in which paradise is a "House of Supposition" and "Heaven quite insecure" (J. 696).

"The first fact of Emily Dickinson's experience then, was that whatever the Bible may mean by Paradise or Eden, the world of lost innocence and happiness symbolized by the unfallen Adam and Eve, it is something that is given in experience. It is attainable, the poet has attained it ..... " 6

Emily Dickinson is highly sceptical about the accepted dogmatic formula regarding the intricate problem of immortality - as a future life of eternal union with God or eternal damnation. Even as a girl Emily Dickinson felt the inadequacy of her faith to provide " a God so strong as that / To hold my life for me ". (J.576).

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6. Northrop Frye - **Fables of Identity : Studies in Poetic mythology** (New York : Harcourt, brace and World, INC 1963) P.211.  
In subsequent chapters any reference to this book will be cited as Frye to be followed by the page number.

She even claims that "The fact that Earth is Heaven / Whether Heaven is heaven or not " (J.1408). She refuses to accept the notion of life as a valley of misery and unhappiness, the only means of escape from which is heaven. At times Emily Dickinson adopts a childlike notion of Heaven. In a letter to Mrs Holland, written late summer in the year eighteen fifty six she writes :

"My only sketch, profile, of Heaven is a large, blue sky, bluer and larger than the biggest I have seen in June . . . . .  
. . . . . "She also writes in the same letter,

"If roses had not faded, and frosts had never come, and one had not fallen here and there whom I could not waken, there were no need of other Heaven than the one below - and if God had been here this summer, and seen the things that I have seen - I guess that He would think his paradise superfluous ".

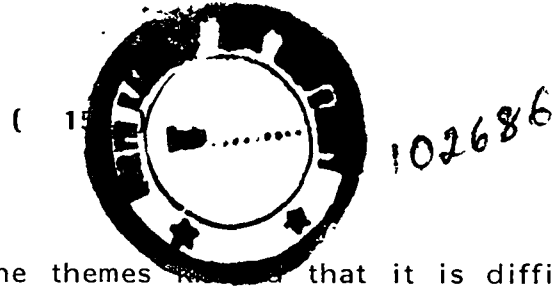
Life purified of the temporal, experiencing supreme joy, and self-fulfillment, amounts to Immortality here and now.

To Emily Dickinson, death is an adventure of the consciousness. her conception of death as an aspect of reality is not dogmatic and nor is immortality.

Immortality is an abstract truth for her based on her direct experience of death.

Emily Dickinson's theme of Death and Immortality are intimately associated with her concept of God and religion. Though the idea of a heaven of eternal happiness did not impress her, Emily Dickinson at times regrets her non-conformist attitude. So poetry became for her the only means of association between her soul and God - whom she conceives of as Absolute Reality. Emily Dickinson is however very sceptical about the Puritan God and faith.

The themes of Death and love are interrelated in Emily



Dickinson's poetry.

So closely are the themes intertwined that it is difficult to exactly pin point the lines of demarcation between each theme, as each one is involved in another. The themes are positioned like the strings of a lyre, one cannot be touched without disturbing the others.

As to the themes of love and death, it can be seen that in Emily Dickinson, love becomes an emblem absorbing the cycle of life, death and resurrection and immortality. This is how the finest of Emily Dickinson's love poems have their roots in her religious consciousness.

"Circumsference thou Bride of Awe/Possessing thou shalt be / possessed by every hallowed knight

That dare to covet thee ". (J.1620)

It can be recalled here that 'Awe' is Emily Dickinson's personal term for God. The relationship between the 'circumference' and 'Awe' has been equated to the bride and the bridegroom. The 'circumference' is possessed by a greater consciousness - God to whom the poet responds like a virgin. God courts her soul, takes it to heaven - this is the union with her lover, possible only after the mortal existence on the earth has ceased. Though she abandoned and abdicated the Puritan god, yet she could not altogether remain uncompromisingly hostile to the concept of Trinity in Christian theology or the 'Celestial Host' as she calls them. Christianity and Puritanism offered her valuable ingredients - a mixture of ideas and emotions that constitute her poetry ; specially the notion that the soul remains immortal even after death and attains oneness with the person of God in Trinity. But expressing this idea in her poems, Emily Dickinson rejects the theological principles and her conception of Immortality is centred in the lovers themselves.

"These Fleshless Lovers met -  
A Heaven in a gaze -  
A Heaven of Heavens - the privilege  
of one another's Eyes". ( J. 625)

The Paradise or Heaven is the place of unification for the lovers separated on earth by the severity of moral and Social laws. Certain other poems deal with the possibility of a knowledge of immortality which would enable the lovers to meet in the post-mortal life.

Emily Dickinson's love experience recognises God as lover, a - "Dim companion" of her soul - and also establishes union with Him in Eternity. The other fact is that, in the union with God the lover brings about a Conversion in her which is both emotional and physical.

In the poem " He touched me, so I live to know", ( J.506) Christ the lover touches the narrator, and the latter groping upon the lover's breast finds " it was a boundless place ....."(1.4)

The experience of the narrator is not merely the physical touch but also the realisation of the expansiveness of the lover in contrast to the puniness of the narrator. Just as the stream flows towards the sea to submerge its identity in its ( sea ) limitless expanse, so does the narrator lose her identity in the person of the lover, and this experience has changed her profoundly :

"And now I am different from before,  
As if I breathed superior air -  
Or brushed a Royal Gown -  
My feet, too, that had wandered so -  
My Gypsy face - transfigured now -  
To tenderer: Renown " - ( J. 506 )

In the poem " I am alive - I guess - ", the narrator has already " stepped into immortality". The speaker is immensely

happy for being not merely alive but

"Alive - Twofold  
The Birth I had  
and this - besides, in - Thee ;" (J.470 1.27,28 )

she has now become one with God and has attained immortality.

Emily Dickinson's uncompromising attitude towards the Puritan God and theology was reflected as early as her school days, when she could not bring herself to answer the call of God. At the age of seventeen Emily Dickinson declared herself "standing alone in rebellion, and growing very careless ". The struggle for faith continued throughout her life. In spite of being sceptical about an after life, Emily Dickinson was very often plagued by the idea of a damned soul. But her faith was in the integrity of her own mind and so her individual triumphed over all other things. She remained a critic of the Puritan God throughout her life, though she would have been nothing, she feels, without God.

There is a sense of regret expressed in several of her poems :

"Those-dying then,  
Knew - where they went -  
They went to God's Right Hand -  
That Hand is amputated now  
And God cannot be found ". ( J. 1551 )

God is to her an ' Absolute Reality ' and while dealing with this ' Absolute Reality ', she very often wears the mask of a child. Her mood is generally surcharged with a mixture of wit, humour, irony together with a kind of childlike innocence. This is discernible in her parody of the Lord's Prayer :

"Papa above ; / regard a mouse  
O'erpowered by the cat ;  
Reserve with in thy kingdom

A 'Mansion' for the Rat ;"  
Snug in seraphic cupboards  
To nibble all the day,  
While unsuspecting cycles  
Wheel solemnly away ; " (J.61)

The poem " I never lost as much but twice" is Emily Dickinson's charge against Providence for stealing away from the already impoverished.

The loss of her loved ones forces an exclamation from her which is as much a accusation as a plea :

"..... twice have I stood a beggar  
before the door of God ;  
Angel - twice descending  
Reimbursed my store -  
Burglar ; Banker - Father ;  
I am poor once more ; " (J. 49)

Behind this playful and sporting attitude towards this 'Absolute Reality', there is a clear-cut manifestation of sincere and abiding faith as she (Emily Dickinson) remarks in 1848 :

" I have not yet given up to the claims of Christ, but trust I am not entirely thoughtless on so important a subject ."

The Biblical myth about Jacob who wrestles with an angel all night and defeats it, and in the morning discovers that it was God ; fascinated her and she frequently refers to it in her poems and letters. The poem " Two Swimmers wrestled on the spar " - (J.201) is a reference to this Biblical Myth -

"Two Swimmers wrestled on the spar -  
Until the morning sun -  
When one - turned smiling to the land -  
Oh God ; the other one :  
  
The stray ships - passing  
Spied a face -

Upon the water borne -  
With eyes in death - still begging raised -  
And hands - beseeching - thrown ; " (J.201)

Here the wrestlers (Jacob and the Angel) are introduced as swimmers and the sea is introduced in the background where the swimmers wrestled until morning.

Since Emily Dickinson's intention is to convey her personal feelings through the poem ; she quite conveniently changes the Biblical myth into a poetic one.

Emily Dickinson identifies herself with Jacob who wrestles with faith. In the poem God is victorious and He does not bless Jacob. This is exactly the situation in which the poet visualises herself. Literally, the poem is a reflection on the final destiny of a person who defies God. Through it Emily Dickinson projects her own position as a non-believer. God refusing to bless Jacob, projects her fear that her prayers may be un-blessed and therefore unanswered.

Surprisingly enough, for Emily Dickinson God and love are synonymous. He has been projected in several poems as the lover figure, the 'Awe' whose bride is the poet ; (J. 1620) as the superior Man who touches her and she is transformed in mind and matter ; (J. 506). She also calls Him "My Dim Companion", (J.275). The poet employs various symbols, images and metaphors to concretize her relationship with God or the greater consciousness - like that of the sea to the moon, bride to the bridegroom, daisy to the sun.

Through her unique technique of presenting the theme of God and religion, Emily Dickinson succeeds in making it clear that her God and religion is not just a ritual or a sacrament. God must be for her an experience of the consciousness. She must feel a total sense of belonging to God - what God is for her and she for Him. She expects to feel His presence with her whole body, mind, and soul.

This is what she indicates when she announces "The Bible deals with the centre and her business is circumference". 'Centre' for her is the doctrinal aspect of religion and she feels alien to it. It is Emily Dickinson's mythopoeic imagination that creates for her the world of circumference - it is the metaphor through which she describes the activity of the consciousness. In this innermost part of her consciousness she finds her God and Heaven. Through the experience of her circumference she reaches Paradise.

Perhaps the most recurrent theme in Emily Dickinson, next to the theme of Death and Immortality, is Nature. Nature was the most popular subject picked up by the poets of the 1860's. It continued from Blake and Wordsworth in England to Emerson in America. The theme was exhaustively explored.

To Wordsworth Nature was an expression of the Divine will, a 'guide, friend and philosopher'; a cure of the evils of civilization, and also a means of glimpsing immortality. In America, Emerson was the poet perhaps the closest to Wordsworth. They all philosophised about Nature. Emily Dickinson's treatment of Nature is different and unique. Her's is a fresh approach, she never idealizes nature nor evolves a philosophy around it. Her treatment of Nature is so varied that a single definition is inadequate to describe her attitude towards Nature.

In most of her minor poems, she like Wordsworth, declares the existence of a mystical bond between Nature and man.

"Several of Nature's People/ I know, and they know me/  
I feel for them a transport of cordiality "(J.986)

Unlike her Puritan heritage, she does not see Nature as a stern preceptor. At times her attitude towards Nature is humorous and friendly. It is in sheer delight and mirth she writes :

" In the name of the Bee / And of the Butterfly/And of the Breeze, Amen ; " (J. 18)

Yet in certain other poems Emily Dickinson's friendly and close association with nature is reversed. She becomes unsure as to the identity of Nature :

"Nature and God-I neither know  
Yet both so well knew me  
They startled, like Executors  
Of My identity " ( J. 835),

Most of her nature poems are an excellent appreciation and minute description of Nature in all her subtleties and moods. For her Nature is that part of creation belonging to a higher order and so : "Nature is what we know/yet have no art to say / so important our wisdom is / To her simplicity " (J. 668),

Emily Dickinson's Nature poems expressing a certain mood of nature, and her reactions to it, can be termed as reflective poems of her early stage of writing. The poem "These are the days when Birds come back" (J. 130), describes beautifully the transition period between winter and spring. The sky is described as 'fraud' as it resumes the " Old sophistries of June "

" a blue and a gold mistake." (J. 130)

The 'fraud' cheats the birds as well as the poet and a few birds fly' to take a backward look". As the air alters "softly/Hurries a timid leaf". The whole process of renewal of nature is sacred to the poet and she appeals to Nature to " Permit a child to join" in this 'communion'. The poet wishes to appreciate the beauty of every object of Nature visually and physically, therefore she pleads :

"Thy sacred emblems to partake  
Thy consecrated bread to take  
And thine immortal wine ;" (J. 130)

The same mood is persistent in several other poems like "Further in summer than the Birds ", (J. 1068) " There is a morn by men unseen " (J. 24)

Towards the end of her poetic career, Emily Dickinson's Nature poems seem to contain less of such concrete images, like the Bobolinks, Bee, Bird, Sky and Sea. Her concern is now with mystical ideas and so the images and symbols used are abstract.

"Bring me the sunset in a cup" is an excellent example of this abstraction. Here, the poet like an inspired person questions :

"How far the morning leaps - Tell me what time the weaver sleeps who spun the breaths of blue;" (J.128) She even asks for the sunset to be brought in a cup. She feels at this stage a direct communion with Nature. Such moments of exhilaration, and ecstasy leads her to proclaim : "And Awe - was all we could feel ;".

It is as if Emily Dickinson has been visited by Shelly's "awful, unseen presence", the spirit of the "Intellectual Beauty", when she is inspired and talks like an Oracle.

"A little Madness in the spring  
Is wholesome even for the king" (J. 1333)

This 'madness' in ecstasy, she finds is tiring, and expresses itself in the beauties of nature. In such ecstatic state of mind even the awful and terrifying moods of nature create an emotional turmoil which is at once intense and vivid. The experience recorded in the poem " I started early took my Dog", (J.520) is one such terrifying experience.

On its literal level the poem is a record of the poets walk by the sea shore with her dog. She is in a most relaxed state of mind. As she stands "Aground upon the sands" the sea advance towards her. The sea is personified here first as a 'Tide' then as

'He'. Gradually

"the tide/went past my simple shoe -  
And past my Apron - And My Belt  
And past my Boddice - too -".

With this experience the narrator in the poem is moved emotionally and physically. Soon the narrator faces a kind of agonising terror as the sea "made as He would eat me up . . . /And then I started - too -". She is terrorised by the expanse of the sea against the backdrop of which she is just a puny, helpless, fragile creature - " as a Dew/upon a Dandelions sleeve". 'He' follows her as if trying to court her but she escapes 'His' grip and succeeds in resisting 'His' advances. The line "I felt his silver heel" reveal her appreciation of the beauty of the sea even in its terrifying aspect. In the last stanza the sea is seen withdrawing in degrees :

"And bowing - with a Mighty look -  
At me - The sea withdrew -"

Emily Dickinson's whole conception of nature owes its allegiance to the bees and bobolinks and roses of her garden. Similarly the tiny incidents in her exclusively private world, formed the basis of the drama of life she constructed in her poems, like - Death and Immortality, ecstasy and suffering, love and separation. What was outside her 'circumference' was outside her orbit. Her only form of communication with the outside world is her poetry.

"This is my letter to the world", (J.441) is what she says of her poems. Her poems mirror her feelings and reflect a rebellious mind and a unique personality at work.

Critics claim that the educated Americans of Walt Whitman's time found him repugnant because the poet deviated from the 'genteel tradition' of his time by writing unabashedly about sex and the 'body electric', - such ideas which were taboo during that

period. Emily Dickinson too may have been unacceptable but decidedly to a lesser degree than Whitman ; had her poems been published during her life time. Emily Dickinson defied tradition only in her choice of themes and style. She never wrote about the conventional God or religion. Nor did she stick to the traditional metre and rhyme scheme, or poetic language of her time. Whereas the erotic and amorous nature of Whitman's writing debased the very decency of contemporary life. The poet outrageously claims :

"As the hugging and loving bed-fellows sleeps at my  
side through  
the night, and withdraws at the peep of the day with  
stealthy tread, .... " (Song of Myself)

It was precisely because Emily Dickinson's thought and techniques ran ahead of her time that she failed to reach the limelight, as well as acceptance and recognition when she was alive. The fame she earned posthumously and the delight with which she is read to-day, is proof enough of her modernity. Critics have failed to fully appreciate so mysterious a poet and assign to her a specific place in the literary genre. That she is simultaneously called a metaphysical poet, mystical poet, religious poet, transcendental poet, establishes the enigmatic range of her imagination. Recognising the novelty of the treatment of her themes, modern critics have made claims of discovering her and of restoring her.

The fact that Emily Dickinson had kept her poems hidden fully convinced that they would never see the light of the day ; makes her poems all the more precious.

The utmost secrecy with which she confined her poems, is a distinct clarification of the point that she wrote not to impress her critics, nor to baffle her readers with her wit. For her, writing poetry was the only means of communication between her inner soul and

the outside world, and what she wrote was the ultimate truth as she perceived it.

To quote Richard Wilbur -

" The poems of Emily Dickinson are a continual appeal to experience, motivated by an arrogant passion for the truth, 'Truth is so rare a thing', she once said, 'it is delightful to tell it'.<sup>8</sup>

In the process, when she found the Christian religion and God falling short of her need to establish the truth she conceived, Emily Dickinson did not hesitate even to replace Christianity with her own personal religion.

"The result is a home-made religion to suit her : the old terms are made to mean their opposites ; the rituals are stolen and deritualized ; the sacred is desecrated ; the forms are reformed . . . . . The allusion functions as camp ; the naivete is revolutionary .....

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8. "Symptomatic Destitution" - Richard Wilbur, from : **Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays**, ed. by Richard B. Sewall. New York Prentice-Hall INC, 1963 .

9. "The Sweet Wolf Within ; Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman" P. 292 in **The only Kangaroo among the Beauty, Emily Dickinson and America** (Baltimore and London : John Hopkins University. Press, 1979)

In subsequent chapters reference to this book will be cited as Keller to be followed by the page number.

C H A P T E R - II

Emily Dickinson and her contemporaries

"Emily Dickinson", in the words of Jhon F. Lynen, "is a baffling poet because she seems to bear little or no relation to the historical period within which she worked. She stands apart, as indifferent to the literary movements of her day as to its great events".<sup>1</sup>

But another critic H.H. Waggoner has something quite different to say about her. He writes : "There are a very few American poets either before or after her ; whose work is not suggested somewhere in hers, whose images she did not try out, whose insights she did not recapitulate, criticise, or anticipate".<sup>2</sup>

How relevant these opinions are, can only be ascertained when Emily Dickinson is placed along with her contemporary American poets, specifically Walt Whitman ; a comparison which will be studied in some detail.

Emily Dickinson's interest in contemporary American poets was superficial at best. With the exception of perhaps Emerson, no other contemporary poet of America impressed her,

"We do not have much poetry (here at home)"<sup>3</sup>, she complained to her brother in 1851.

When T.H. Higginson, then the editor of 'The Atlantic', had asked Emily Dickinson if she had read this new andacious poet,

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1. John F. Lynen, "The Uses of the Present : The Historian's the Critic's, and Emily Dickinson's **College English** 28 (Nov'1966) : 126-36
  2. H.H. Waggoner, "Emily Dickinson : the Transcendental Self" : **American poets : From the Puritans to the Present**. New York, Boston : Houghton (1968) p. 213
  3. Letters, P. 161

her reply was in the form of a letter where she wrote,- "you speak of . Mr. Whitman - I never read his Book - but was told he was disgraceful ".<sup>4</sup>

In fact, for the entire New York literary scene of which Whitman was a part, Emily Dickinson cared very little. Nonetheless the two were contemporaries. Their poetry belonged to the same cultural period. It was a phase when poetry became a curative for society, when established doctrines were abandoned, when the question of individual integrity became a serious matter, when one was besieged by the idea of impermanence. Hence it is not illogical to imagine that she shares some rather definite intellectual characteristics with Walt Whitman. They both preferred to present themselves as spiritual adventurers. To them, writing was an art which performed the sacred task of exposing an unique personality.

They both appeared to have held that a poem, when created out of a certain special, living experience, gains authenticity. The individual consciousness gains priority over all, in the works of both Whitman and Emily Dickinson. They seemed to have felt that the poets effort is successful when it is capable of causing an upheaval in society. So their inclination is markedly towards antigenres resulting in the fragmentary quality and the sense of incompleteness of Emily Dickinson's poetry, and the defiance of all metrical canons in Whitman's.

Even in the face of such general affinities it would be inappropriate to call Emily Dickinson "a feminine Walt Whitman", as some readers did in the 1890's . Emily Dickinson chose to be a "recluse" and Whitman claimed to be a spokesman - poet for all America.

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4. Letters, p. 404 (April, 26, 1862)

The "Eardic Symbols", like a majority of Whitman's early poems, places him in the presumptuous role of a self-appointed spokesman. His definition of ideas like - the Self, God, America - are matched to satisfy his own personal needs. He has even dared to make such prophetic statements like -

" America is isolated yet embodying all, what is it finally except myself ?"

Whitman is not just Whitman the poet, but America personified, he and the nation becomes one. He created an ideal out of his own personal desires and then named it "America". In the preface to the **Leaves of Grass**, 1855, he writes -

"The (Poet's) spirit responds to his country's spirit ...  
..... he incarnates its geography and natural life ....  
to him enter the essences of the real things and  
past and present events - of enormous diversity ...."<sup>5</sup>

So the poet is not merely a myth - maker, he is also a prophet, a man with a very sacred and serious mission in life. According to Whitman the poet or other artists alone can give "the ultimate verification to facts, to science, and to common lives endowing them with glows and glories and final illustriousness which belongs to every real thing, and to real things only ..... .. without this ultimate verification reality would seem to be incomplete and science, democracy and life itself, finally in vain".<sup>6</sup> It is a summing up of Whitman's growing sense of the power of poetry and thus of the poet.

Emily Dickinson was never the self appointed Messaiah

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5. **Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose by Walt Whitman**, ed. John Kouwenhoven. New York : Random House : The Modern Library ( 1950)

"Preface 1855 - Leaves of grass", p. 442.

6. Ibid.

that Whitman was. In fact she was very much a 'private poet', deliberately detached from the literary scene of her time. Emily Dickinson's poetic experiences were imaginatively created around certain symbols derived out of her life and readings. For her poetry was not so much a means of self expression as it was means of probing and analyzing the existence she was to lead. The 'Centre' and 'Circumference' form the major components of her literary symbols, the understanding of which is necessary to interpret her poems. She remarks that the Bible is the 'Centre' and 'Mybusiness is Circumference'.

The Bible prescribe for man a world where there is a promise of an Eden after death where man will live eternally. Emily Dickinson could not come to terms with such an idea of a life in paradise after death. For her, both religion and God must be a part of her in the presence of which she must be at peace and find joy.

Since her encounter with the 'Centre' makes her feel alien, she creates through her imaginative consciousness the world of her 'circumference'. Under this new religious consciousness Emily Dickinson completely identifies herself with nature. Nature now becomes for her the paradise. In this Paradise of her imagination the inhabitants -

"..... dance and game, / And gambol  
...../ Employ their holiday". (J. 24)

The people of the "Mystic Green" (J.24) are able to make their moments of bliss eternal.

Surrounding the 'Circumference' of human consciousness, says Emily Dickinson is a still greater consciousness which she describes as 'Awe'. 'Awe' is her personal name for 'God', and her relationship with 'Awe' is like bride to the bridegroom, or sea to the moon.

For Emily Dickinson poetry became an essence for the redemption of life, for she had abandoned belief in the conventional church, God, and the Bible. So the only means of establishing the relation of her soul to her God, whom she conceived as 'Absolute Reality', was poetry.

She was doubtful about the idea of eternal happiness in Heaven after death. For her the boundaries of her Paradise are Within her own mind. So the important fact about her religious experience is the vision of earth as Heaven, and the second important fact is that the vision is not permanent, -

" I've known a Heaven, like a Tent  
To wrap its shining Yards -  
Pluck up its stakes, and disappear  
Without the sound of Boards ". (J. 243)

Such a vision comes and goes unpredictably.

Man's terror of death is deeply rooted in his sense of sin. People differ invariably in their speculation about the consequence of death. For some the only consequence of death is total annihilation, a thought most dismal and terrifying. For others death is the merging of the soul with the Ultimate soul or Reality. For the rest immortality is the natural sequel to death. But common to all is the wish to maintain a healthy spiritual life until the time of departing from this world arrives.

But the new generation of this scientific and mechanical world remains sceptical about death's sequel, for they no longer believe as their fore-bearers believed about death and its consequences. Walt Whitman foresaw and prophesized the coming of such a time. He himself was sceptical about life after death, very much like Emily Dickinson. To quote Jung, " One has to be close to death

to acquire the necessary freedom to talk about it ".<sup>7</sup>

This was exactly ~~was~~ the position of Emily Dickinson. her concern with death was partly gained by experience and partly by reflection. Emily Dickinson is obviously much more daring than Whitman, in her approach to death. Her obsession with death turned at times to morbidity and it took more than interest on her part to make her eager for details after the death of a friend. But her concern for death was not philosophical. It was purely poetical. The poem "Because I Could not Stop for Death ", is an example of a metaphysical conceit. The single image of the bridal journey is used to describe the funeral procession which is viewed as a journey to eternity. And again,

"Behind Me - dips Eternity -  
Before Me - Immortality -  
Myself - the term between ". (J.721)

So eternity is the end of the journey and immortality is, according to Emily Dickinson " Mind without corporeal frame". One part of the self is mortal and the other part immortal. But both the parts must go through death to achieve rebirth into an eternal state of consciousness.

In the Bible death is seen as means of separating man from God, due to man's sinful ways. Emily Dickinson takes a positive view of this idea by trying to glorify life. She treats death in a personal manner but with certain reservations about an after life. Even in the face of anguish and sorrow Emily Dickinson's preference is for an earthly existence and in many of her poems she weighs the earth against Heaven.

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7. C.D. Jung : **Memories, Dreams, Reflection**, (New York : The Fontana Library, 1972)

In contrast to Emily Dickinson's scepticism, Walt Whitman holds a strong and solid affirmation that death is a phase of transition - a natural transition to re-birth. The thought of death was clearly the chief threat his vision had to overcome. So a major theme of Walt Whitman's poetry between 1855 to 1858 is the poet's victory over death. In 'Song of Myself' he presents himself not as an immortal soul temporarily inhabiting a mortal body and struggling to live in a world of diversions :

" I have heard what the talkers, were talking,  
the talk of the begging and the end  
But I do not talk of the begging or the end  
There was never anymore inception than there  
is now.

Nor any more youth or age than there is now  
And will never be any perfection than there is now".

('Song of Myself')

But Whitman understands death as a cosmic process, as a continual loss through death and consequent gain of death - in - life. To quote John Snyder, .

" One of this poem's ('Song of Myself') major thrust, along with so many others in **Leaves of Grass**, is that if death is the end of life, both its goal and annihilation, than life would seem to be absurd and empty .... In 'Song of Myself' grass is a constant sign of life and death collapsed into the process ..... And Whitman's tacit argument when he establishes this symbolic parity is that life and death are one because they both are, because they both have being. Death's being fills the void of life's being"<sup>8</sup> In section 6 , of 'Song

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8. John Snyder : **The Dear Love of Man : Tragic and Lyric Communion, Walt Whitman.** (Clear Lake City, University of Houston 1975) pp. 46 - 47

of Myself'; Whitman's search for the identity of the grass is evident following the questioning of the child -

" A child said what is the grass ?  
. . . . . I do not  
Know what it is anymore than he ". ( 90 -91 )

Whitman goes through a series of speculations about the possible meaning of grass -

" I guess it must be the flag of my disposition,  
Out of hopeful green staff woven.  
Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord  
A scented gift . . . . . designedly dropped ...".

Ultimately what appears vital to Whitman is not the identity of the grass but to identify it with the meaning of life. He finally settles on an answer with the assertion that grass symbolizes the totality of living and dead men -

"Growing among black folks as among white,  
Kanuck, Yuckahoe, Congressmen, Cuff, I give  
them the same, I receive them the same.  
And now it seems to me the beautiful circuit  
hair of graves". (Song of Myself', 1. 99-101)

The following lines are a triumphant assertion of the poet, of his understanding of life as a continual loss through death and a consequent gain of death in life.

" They are alive and well somewhere;  
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,  
And even if there was it led forward life,  
and does not wait  
at the end to arrest it,  
And ceased the moment life appeared.  
( 'Song of Myself', 11.116-119)

" Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" from the 'Sea Drift' section of Whitman's poems, presents the mother sea as the grave as well as the womb. The poem notes Whitman's early realization of death as a boy.

At the Surface level the poem describes the separation of two mocking - birds. After the disappearance of the she-mocking -bird, all summer along the he - mocking - bird sings a song of unsatisfied love. The boy poet moved by the song translates this song, and at its completion the boy is -

" . . . . . Ecstatic with his bare feet the waves / with his hair the atmosphere dallying . The love in the heart long past, now loose, now at last tumultuously bursting ".<sup>9</sup>

The boy-poet grasps the meaning of this experience which is the knowledge of his 'tongue's use' and the conviction that it will never cease uttering a thousand other songs "clearer, louder and more sorrowful" ( 1. 163)

The boy's experience of one song has opened a promising, gateway for the entrance of a 'thousand songs'. The philosophy of this experience is that, a single experience has unlocked innumerable doors making it possible for further new-experiences.

" O give me the clew ; (it lurks in the night somewhere  
here )

O if I am to have so much, let me have  
more ; "<sup>10</sup>

The sea whispers to him in answer the "strong and delicious word - death". The sea represents the wisdom of death. The presentation of the sea as a gently rocking cradle - endlessly rocking provide with the theme of death and re-birth. 'Cradle' itself is highly suggestive of birth and life. The implied cycle is, - cradle-death-birth.

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9. 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking'

10. 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking'

The message of the sea for the boy is "Death, death, death, death, death," ( 1. 173) while the bird teaches him love. The word 'death' is "the word final Superior to all ", the 'clew' the boy-poet searches for . This 'clew' awakens in the boy a 'thousand responses'. Once he unearthes the meaning of life which is "death", the boy-poet is never the same innocent lad - "never again leave me to be the peaceful boy I was before".

He has now become the poet the "Uniter of here and after ". Walt Whitman finds in death the ultimate truth of life, the key to life and re-birth.

Emily Dickinson's theme of death is interrelated to the theme of love, and these themes are again intimately associated with her concept of god. In fact it can rightly be mentioned here, that the finest of Emily Dickinson's love poems have their root in her religious consciousness. True relationship of the poet's consciousness to a "Greater consciousness" with whom the union is possible only in paradise, is a major point of her conception of love -

"These Fleshless lovers met -  
A Heaven in a gaze -  
A Heaven of Heavens - the privilege  
of one another's eyes - ". (J. 625)

Whitman too, establishes a link between love and death.

In the 'Calamus' section, the poem "Scented Herbage of my Breast". stands as an explicit proclamation of this relationship between love and death. "Death is beautiful . . . . . (What indeed is finally beautiful except death and love ?)" (1. 17).

Since love is the truth of life, the heart of the poem is a genuinely tragic recognition that to live is to love, and to love is to lose. Love is the beginning of life and also its end. This acknowledgement lifts the poet to a kind of exaltation and death becomes

beautiful to him. Walt Whitman's love is so strong that it must find some means of release. Since life denies this fulfilment, death is the only way open to it.

"The high soul of lovers welcomes death most" (1.24) since to love is to lose. The final secret of life is reserved for the lovers that the 'real reality' of life is love and death. The poem implies that man is born for defeat because the need of the heart is not met by life. So the only course open to him is to stoically meet his fate.

"Death or life I am indifferent - my soul  
declines to prefer " ( 1. 23)

The exaltation is the exaltation of passing beyond hope and illusion to a knowledge of what life and death finally are. Death is welcomed because it is the ultimate truth of life. Walt Whitman also wrote about sex, frequently and with a frank enthusiasm, which earned for him the reputation of being 'disgraceful' His writing in 1855 - " the procreant urge of the world . . . always sex, . . . always a breed of life", stuck as a nasty image practically in every body's mind. But to him the subject of sex was a form of literary realism and he wrote about it repeatedly.

"Through me forbidden voices,  
Voices of sexes and lust, voices  
Veiled and I remove the veil."

(Song of Myself)

It cannot be said that Emily Dickinson totally neglected the sexual aspect of a man/woman relationship. She wrote about desire with an almost equivalent interest as Whitman -

No man moved me - till the Tide  
Went past my Simple shoe -  
And past my Apron - and my Belt

And past my Boddice too -  
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And made as He would eat me up ". (J. 520)

But hers are not the kind of sexual poems that can be called revolutionary like Whitman's. Her sexual statements are subtle and are hence often overlooked and easily forgotten.

Since Emily Dickinson's "business is circumference", Her pre-occupation is the human consciousness. She remarks, that the Bible is the 'Centre' and her concern is the "Circumference". Her poetic outpourings are the brilliant pleasures she experienced in the process of disregarding the doctrines and discarding the conventionally accepted Christian God and dogma. But a deeply religious poet like Emily Dickinson was in constant search of a religion and God to fall back upon. So she evolved for herself a personal religion in the presence of which she feels perfectly at ease. Talking about her personal God with childlike simplicity she writes -

"God is indeed a Jealous God - " (J.1719) or calls Him "Papa above ;" (J. 16) It is again, her feeling of closeness to God which leads her to remark of Him as "Banker, Burglar, Father", (J. 49) or think of Him as her "Dim companion". (J. 275)

For Walt Whitman, God whether be a person or a divinity, or a life-force, expresses Himself in the spirit and passions of man.

"And I say to mankind, be not curious about God .....  
I see God each hour of twenty four .... In the faces  
of men and women. I see God and in my own face in the  
glass". ("Song of Myself"), section 48).

Walt Whitman's God is all encompassing. he expresses identification with God, with all men and women and with nature's variety.

"And I know that the hand of God is the

Promise of my own,  
And I know that the spirit of god is the  
brother of my own,  
And that all the men ever born are also my  
brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers,  
And that a Kelson of the creation is love,  
And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping  
in the fields,  
And brown ants in the little wells beneath  
them,  
And mossy scabs of worm fence, heap'd  
stones, elder, mullein and poke -weed"  
(Song of Myself'-section5)

Such a mystical experience leads Walt Whitman to a form of belief, it is a revelation that the self is inseparable from its Creator - God. Here Walt Whitman exhibits, as many critics believe, a marked affinity with the Hindu Vedantic thought. Malcolm Cowley in his "Introduction to Whitman's complete Verse and prose", (1948) suggests that 'Song of Myself' is better understood when considered in relation to the greater mystical philosophy of India as expounded in the **Bhagavad Gita** and the **Upanishads**.

Cowley is not alone in discovering this striking kinship between Whitman and the ancient Hindu scriptures in thought and experience. Quite a few American readers of **Leaves of Grass** over these one hundred years have recognized these correspondences. When Thoreau read it in 1855, he remarked that the book was "wonderfully like the Orientals", and Emerson found in it a mixture of the **Bhagavad Gita** and the **New York Herald**. There is no established evidence that Walt Whitman had any first hand knowledge of the Hindu Scriptures. The only direct evidence of his enthusiasm for India is perhaps his poem "Passage to India", but it reveals no precise knowledge about the country. Yet there exists a strong affinity between his thought and the Hindu Vadas. The 'Self' that is the Vedantic 'Atman' or the individual

soul is inseparable from its creator or the Vedantic "Brahma" - the supreme soul of creation. The soul or 'Atman', and the creator or 'Brahma' is one, each is a manifestation of the other. Considering the point that America showed considerable enthusiasm for Hindu philosophical ideas ; it is likely that Walt Whitman read the English translated version of the **Bhagavad Gita** which became available there by the time he wrote **Leaves of Grass**.

Any study of Emily Dickinson would remain incomplete without referring to Ralph Waldo Emerson, another contemporary poet and essayist. His contribution to the development of American literature make him an important figure in its history. Emerson had an astonishing effect upon his contemporaries. It was Emerson who was responsible for bringing Whitman "to a boil", after he read his (Emerson's) essays.

Emerson convinced both Whitman and Emily Dickinson that poetry had the power of transforming the habits of perception and thereby bringing in new light into the world. Emerson saw the poet as " an Emperor in his own right ". He further says : "The poet has a new thought, he has a whole new experience to unfold, he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. For the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet".<sup>11</sup>

While Whitman's idea of the poet is similar to that of Emerson's, as the preface of **Leaves of Grass**, ( 1855) proves ; Emily Dickinson never felt so seriously about the role of the poet. Perhaps that is why she preferred to stay away from the lime-light.

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11. "The poet", **Essays : Second Series, The complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson**, ed Edward Waldo Emerson, Centenary Edition (Boston : Houghton Mifflin, 1903 - 1904).

Emerson's essays about 'Love', 'Nature', 'Friendship', 'The Oversoul', 'Art', can be termed as a granary of intellectual ideas. Even Emily Dickinson, who declared to have no interest in her American male counterparts, could not escape the impression of Emerson's writing.

Nevertheless, Emily Dickinson's unique writing on various subjects of Death, Love, God, Nature and Immortality, proves that she was beyond being impressed, and that she cared little or nothing at all for the literary standard of her time, or of anybody else's views of these.

In his essay on "Love", Ralph Waldo Emerson talks explicitly about the all encompassing quality of love, and how central it is to life.

"Love is our highest word, and the synonym of God .... seizes on man . . . . and works a revolution in his mind and body ; unites him to his race, pledges life to the domestic and civil relations, carries him with new sympathy into nature, enhances the powers of the senses, opens the imagination, adds to his character heroic and sacred attributes, establishes marriage, and gives permanence to human society ..... ".

In contrast to this somewhat practical approach of Emerson, Emily Dickinson's attitude towards love is markedly idealistic, her lover is no ordinary man, but she is the "Bride of Awe". When lovers meet they are "fleshless". Love has its roots in her religious consciousness. So she misses out the poignancy and burning desire of the physical side of love in almost all her love poems. Even wherever sex is hinted at , it is done in a most decorous manner. It appears that Emily Dickinson has given love a spiritual magnitude and a religious overtone.

Emerson's affirmation about spiritual love is as strong as that of Emily Dickinson's as it finds expression in such beautiful lines as -

"One beautiful soul' becomes the door through which all true and pure souls' may be apprehended and cherished .... " <sup>12</sup>.

Just the same, Emerson was never squeamish about sex though he showed no undue interest in it, in the narrow sense. He recognized frankly the importance of the power to rouse passion. So he writes in one of his poems that love is futile minus its electrifying quality to drive one mad" with sweet desire."

Emily Dickinson's "Absolute Reality", and Emerson's "oversoul", are synonymous terms. These are personal names given by the poets to address God. Abandoning the Christian God and dogma, Emily Dickinson created her own homely God and religion to cater to her needs.

Emerson's 'Oversoul' is God, whom he sees incarnated in Man. Emerson's faith in God is explicitly expressed when he says " I and the Father are one", Nature too, appeared to Emerson as" a projection of God in the unconscious", an inferior incarnation of the Divine than that which have been achieved in man. Emily Dickinson's approach to Nature is refreshingly new, having the bees, winds, birds and bobolinks, within the circumference of her consciousness. In comparison to Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman's attitude towards Nature is never so personal. It is undeniable that he uses the sea, the mocking birds, the leaves and grass, and trees, as a means to express many of his personal ideas and experiences. Walt Whitman sees God manifested in Nature and man. So, for him there is a close affinity

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12. Edward Wagen Knecht, **Potrait of a Balanced Soul**. New York : Oxford University Press, 1974. ( P. 136).

between man, Nature and God. Whitman at best is a visionary, and sees beyond his world to what it might be. According to him nature mirrors the one single and ultimate truth of life, which is death.

Apparently, Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman complement each other, and appear rather co-operative in their artistic strategies of defiance of conventions.

While Emily Dickinson's revolt is that of 'inwardness' and self-imposed isolation from society, Whitman's defiance of it assumed a missionary zeal. His attempt was to create " an ideal out of his own personal desires and then advertise it as " America" for popular consumptions".<sup>14</sup>

In resisting the powerful current of an European tradition, American poetry began to make its own waves. Whitman was the chief Oarsman. He never looked back with longing at London he had never seen, or at the Europe he had never revered. Others followed him - some obviously, some secretly ; and a singular poet Emily Dickinson, wrote out of a situation so universal that it was beyond nationality. She was a child of Puritan New England, born too late to live by the inherited formula of Puritanism. In contrast to Whitman who inherited nothing and was free to welcome the new age, Emily Dickinson faced her age and background with the desperation of one who feared to lose anything because of her sensitive and non-conformist nature.

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14. Keller, P 292.

C H A P T E R - III

Emily Dickinson's Stylistic Strategies

Emily Dickinson's poetic sensibility, even during her early and impressionable years of her poetic career, exhibits a new awareness of form and meaning. Her poetic Sensibility does not conform to the cult of sentiment of her day to create a parallel literature of sentiment. Contrary to it, she harnesses it to the creation of a poetry of non-sentiment.

Emily Dickinson's initial attempt to establish herself as a poet, failed simply because Higginson could not classify the four poems she sent him for his approval.. In 1891 Higginson wrote an article describing this early correspondence.

"The impression of a wholly new and original poetic genius; was as distinct on my mind at the first reading of these four poems as it is now after thirty years of further knowledge, and with it came the problem never yet solved, what place ought to be assigned in literature to what is so remarkable, yet so elusive of criticism".

The article "Experiments in poetry : Emily Dickinson and Sidney Lanier",<sup>1</sup> traces the influence of contemporary events in America upon poetry. It further states that by the year 1870, America underwent the tumu-

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1. "Experiments In poetry" : Emily Dickinson and Sidney Lanier" in **Literary History of the United States.** ed. Robert E. Spiller Willard Thorp, Thomas H. Johnson, Henry Seidel Canly Richard M. Ludurg. (London: Collier MacMillan Limited, 1969)

-ltous phase of the shattering war between the North and South, simultaneously with the advent of new science and new industrialism. The result was that all the poets sensed the moral problems posed by the new science. The article points out to Lanier's "Psalm of West", as celebrating the national spectacle. It rounds up by picking up on Emily Dickinson and Lanier among the few poets who "had begun to recognize the power of fresh realistic material communicated by blunt, experimental methods ..... This conflict between the new realism and the old conservatism, encouraged experiment by a few poets such as Dickinson and Lanier - experiments with new attitude and techniques which were still contained within the straining Old patterns".<sup>2</sup>

To say that Emily Dickinson experimented with new techniques would be too far fetched an opinion for a person who admits, "I don't know anything more about affairs in the world, than if I was in a trance".

She was capable of shutting out all distractions from her life and living a cloistered life with her 'Bees' and 'Bobolinks'. Emily Dickinson seemed blissfully unaware of the world around her. Whether the war made any impact on her remains an uncertainty, for nowhere in her poems she mentions it. Her grand theme is, life as it is involved in her life, and she declines to take the other option -her soul. Only because she knew her own world so well, would she venture to meditate other worlds.

What Emily Dickinson felt and thought took

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2. Ibid P. 899.

shape in a spontaneous array of images, words, and symbols. Hers was not a conscious effort to establish a new form and technique in the field of poetry. The force behind her new stylistic strategies lay within her and not outside her. John Lynen's remark that "She stands apart, as indifferent to the literary movements of her day as to its great event,"<sup>3</sup> strongly substantiate this point.

Emily Dickinson wrote in her extraordinary diction, her imagery is tremendous in implication, her swift condensations win the most reluctant. The paradox that forms the pivotal point in her life is her deeply religious nature, refuting the doctrinal aspect of Christianity. It is the mythopoeic imagination of Emily Dickinson which creates for her religion "of a heightened consciousness based, not on the arguments, but on suggestive images which she calls "the Emblem". The metaphor symbols, images, that she employs to convey that experience are emblems in her poetry ....."<sup>4</sup>

Her Use of metaphor is the most revelatory aspect of her genius, and so her letters and poems defy literalness in interpretation. In the words of Dennis Donoghue,

"with Emily Dickinson's poem in view, it is only a minor extravagance to say that nearly everything is sensibility".<sup>5</sup>

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3. Lynen, p.126.

4. Anantharaman - p.116.

5. Dennis Donoghue - "Emily Dickinson", **Six American Poets from Emily Dickinson to the Present: An Introduction** : ed. A Tate (Minnea Polis University of Ninnnesota Press, 1969) p.31.

An analysis of a few of her symbols in her poems will bear out this statement. The imagery that contained for Emily Dickinson a special symbolic meaning is that of royalty, particularly the image of 'king'. In the poem "I have a king who does not speak" (J. 103), 'king' is made out to be a lover. His silence evokes certain reaction in the mind of the narrator. The king is also the narrator's source of inspiration, a guide to the poet's genius. Since the silent king cannot inspire the poet through words, the poet awaits the night, when the latter may confront with dreams of inspiration.

".....Half glad when it is night, and sleep,  
If, haply thro' a dream, to peep  
In parlors, shut by day.  
And if I do - when morning comes -  
It is as if a hundred drums  
Did round my pillow roll,  
And shouts fill all my childish sky,.  
and bells keep saying "victory"  
From steeple in my soul;"  
And if I don't - the little bird  
within the orchard, is not heard,  
And I omit to pray  
"Father, thy will be done" today  
For my will goes the other way,  
And it were perjury;"

(J. 103)

The symbolic narration in the poem is far from the conventional mode. The 'parlor' image is attributed with different meanings in different poems. In the above

quoted poem 'parlor' is the source of inspiration for the poet. During the day the 'parlor' is too noisy to allow the mind access to inspiration, and so the suitable time is the night when sleep comes with dreamy enchantment.

In the poem "The day came slow - till Five O' clock", parlor is used to mean daylight : "A guest in this stupendous place - The parlor - of the day." (St.iv, l. 1,3,4.) presents a literal usage.

Parlor gains a sinister colour in the poem "The grave my little cottage is" (J. 1743). Here 'parlor' is a place for receiving the dead ones.

Another important word in Emily Dickinson's poems is "victory". In the poem "Delayed till she had ceased to know", stresses the meaning of lifes triumph over death.

".... who knows but this surrendered face  
were undefeated still?  
Oh if there may departing be  
Any forgot by victory  
In her imperial round -  
Show them this meek appareled thing  
That could not stop to be a king -  
Doubtful if it be crowned;"

(J.58. St.II., l.1,5,6, and St.III)

The poem "Triumph may be of several kinds" - (J. 455) enumerates 'Triumph' in varied stages, as when "Death is overcome by Faith", 'Triumph of Truth' in the 'Mind'; and 'Triumph' over 'Temptation'.

"Triumph - may be of several kinds -  
There's triumph in the Room  
When the Old Emperor - Death -  
By Faith - be overcome -

There's Triumph of the finer Mind  
When Truth - affronted long -  
Advance unmoved - to Her Supreme -  
Her God - Her only Throng -

A Triumph - when Temptation's Bride  
Be slowly handed back -  
One Eye upon the Heaven renounced -  
And One - upon the Rack -

Severer triumph - by Himself  
Experienced - who pass  
Acquitted - from that Naked Bar -  
Jehovah's countenance - ".

In a few other poems (J.42,67,690) Emily Dickinson uses the word 'Victory' in its most common place meaning.

Emily Dickinson's symbols are founded on a wide and reversible elasticity of meaning. Any attempt to confine the meanings to a single subject ruling out probability of other subjects would amount to inconsistency.

The following poem illustrates the point -

"I met a king this afternoon;  
He had not on a crown indeed,  
A little palm leaf Hat was all,  
And he was barefoot, I'm afraid;

But sure I am he Ermine wore,  
Beneath this faded Jacket's blue -  
And sure I am, the crest he bore  
Within the jacket's pocket too ;"  
For 'twas too stately for an earl -  
A Marquis would not go so grand;  
'Twas possibly a Czar petite -  
Pope or something of that kind;

If I must tell, you, of a Horse  
My freckled Monarch held the rein -  
Doubtless an estimable Beast,  
But not at all disposed to run ;

And such a wagon ; While I live  
Dare I presume to see  
Another such a vehicle  
As then transported me ;  
Two other ragged Princes  
His royal state partook ;  
Doubtless the first excursion  
These sovereigns ever took ;  
I question if the Royal Coach

She explains the 'Barefoot Estate' as Emily Dickinson "conception of the unique quality of her poetry".<sup>7</sup>

According to Miller the poem is "a dramatic rendering of the nature of her verse. How sure she is of the unique quality of her poetry. How indifferent to the gait of the horse, but not the wagon . . . one can enjoy her private assessment of editors, those ragged princes of their first excursion into such poetry as hers."<sup>8</sup>

Theodora Ward reads 'king' as the symbol for a living person who "held God like potentialities."<sup>9</sup>

But the outer analogue of Sts. iv.v and vi, and the mock-serious vein of the entire poem, makes it difficult to attribute to the king symbol 'God like potentialities'.

James Reeves comments : "The king is usually her lost lover, husband, master, the queen is herself".<sup>10</sup> This reflection is based on very narrow and exclusive grounds.

The two poems illustrated that Emily Dickinson's use of the 'king' symbolism is much more varied than what James Reeves states.

Another fully exploited symbol of Emily Dickinson is the flower - bee imagery. In her first valentine

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7. Ruth Miller, **The Poetry of Emily Dickinson** (Middletown: Western University Press, 1968, Pg.104)

8. Ibid (Pg. 106)

9. Theodora Ward - **The Capsule of the Mind : Chapters in the Life of Emily Dickinson** (Cambridge, Mass : Harvard University Press - 1961. Pg.50)

10. James Reeves, "Emily Dickinson". **Commitment to Poetry** (London : Heinemann, 1969 P.198).

Round which the Footmen wait  
Has the significance, on high,  
Of his Barefoot Estate ; (J.166)

The 'king' in the poem, and the usual image of a royal personage provides for the paradox in the poem, and helps in the identification of the idiosyncrasies of the royal being. The poem opens with the startling description of the king wearing a "Little Palm-leaf Hat" instead of a crown. He is 'barefoot' too. The third stanza highlights the difficulty in precisely identifying the royal state of the 'king'. A connection between the 'Barefoot Estate' of the poem and the 'Barefoot Rank' mentioned in her (Emily Dickinson's) letter to Higginson, is not improbable. In the third letter written to Higginson after she accepted her destiny as an artist who in her life time would remain unknown, she goes on to say -

" . . . . If fame belonged to me, I could not not escape her-if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase -and the approbation of my Dog, would forsake me -then. My Barefoot -Rank is better . . . . ". 6

RuthMiller associates the imagery of 'Barefoot Estate' in the poem to the 'Barefoot Ranks' of the letter.

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6. Letters to Higginson in June 1862.

of 1850 the reference is there of -

"The bee doth court the flower, the flower  
his suit receives

And they make merry wedding, whose guests  
Are hundred leaves," (J. 1)

As a student of Botany Emily Dickinson took keen interest in the facts of science which she used later for the symbolic purpose of her art.

Emily Dickinson used the flower-bee symbolism on two levels : Poetry and Love.

On the level of poetry Emily Dickinson equates the Bee to a hummer-poet.

Like the nectar of the Hippocrene that inspired the muse so does the nectar of the flowers inspire the hummer-poet.

This association, of the humming of the Bees with poetry is also found in Keats and Emerson.

Keats in his 'Endymion' writes -

"Many and many a verse I hope to write

. . . and ere yet the bees

Hum about globes of clover and sweet peas

I must be near the middle of my story."

(Endymion Bk I, L.l.49,51 - 53)

Emerson also described the Humming Bees thus:

"Burly, dozing humble bee,

Where thou art is clime for me

- - - - -

Zig zag steerer desert cheerer,

Let me chase thy waving line,

- - - - -

Singing over shurbs and vines  
Hot midsummer's petted crone,  
Sweet to me thy drowsy tone  
Tells of countless sunny hours,  
Long days, and solid banks of flowers",  
("The Humble - Bee", sts. I, IV)

On the level of love, the flower-bee symbolism stands for earthly love. The imaginative texture of Emily Dickinson's poems on love intermingles with the scientific fact of pollination of flowers and the collection of honey-dew by the bee, to colour its meaning and shape its design.

"Come slowly - Eden!  
Lips unused to Thee -  
Bashful - sip thy Jessamines -  
As the fainting Bee -  
Reaching late his flower,  
Round her chamber hums -  
Counts his nectars -  
Enters - and is lost in Balms ".

(J. 211)

That the 'Eden' image for Emily Dickinson had two levels of meaning can be illustrated by an analysis of the following poem -

"Paradise is that old mansion  
Many owned before  
Occupied by each an instant  
Then reversed the Door -  
Bliss is frugali of her leases

Adam taught her thrift

Bankrupt once through his excesses" - (J.1119)

In the former poem (J.211) 'Eden' most appropriately stands for the state of physical love. The latter poem (J.1119) projects the image of the garden of Eden. Physical love is here equated to the primal experience in the garden of Eden, mainly in its short duration and abrupt ending.

In the poem (J. 211) 'Bashful' suggests the moment of hesitancy and torment, felt just on the verge of total surrender to the bliss of love. The Bee 'counts' his nectars and 'enters' the flower "and is lost in Balms" - suggests the sensuously over-powering effect of "Jessamines". The same rapacious advance of the lover bee is found in "Did the Hareball loose her girdle" (J. 213).

The ecstasy of consummated love (as imagined by the poet) signified by 'Eden' is well expressed in the poem (J.249).

"Wild Nights - Wild Nights !

Were I with thee

Wild Nights, should be

Our luxury !

Futile - the winds -

To a Heart in port

Done with the compass -

Done with the chart !

Rowing in Eden -

Ah, the sea !

Might I but Moor - Tonight

In Thee ! "

In its obvious meaning the poem is a longing for sensuous consummation of love instilled with the awareness of its brevity. When the heart finds its harbour of love, - 'port', the tumult of its wild passion cannot be subdued by the tumult of the winds outside the port.

The fact that Emily Dickinson took a keen interest in contemporary women writers especially the Bronte's, George Eliot and Elizabeth Browning, helps in establishing a connection of the Flower-Bee symbolism between Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Browning.

In "A Dead Rose", Elizabeth Browning makes a distinct allusion to the amorous function of the bee:

"The bee that once did suck thee  
And build thy perfumed ambers up his hive,  
And swoon in thee for joy, till scarce alive,  
If passing now, - would blindly overlook  
thee'.

Marjory A. Bald's opinion that Emily Dickinson found in Elizabeth Browning a Poetic model and she turned to her instinctly,<sup>11</sup> does not seem totally irrelevant.

The word 'home' has become an archetypal symbol in Emily Dickinson's religious poetry. 'home' is used by her variantly to mean immortality, God and Heaven.

Her three poems, "The feet of People Walking

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11. Marjory A. Bald, *Women Poets of the 19th Century*.  
(New York Russell 1963 P.276)

Home", (J.7) "Tho' I Get Home - How Late - How Late--"  
(J.207) "I Years Had Been From Home", (J.609) show how  
the symbols of Home has been used in different situations.  
In the first poem, (J.7) Emily Dickinson's approach to  
immortality is markedly within the framework of Christianity-

"Death, but our rapt attention

To immortality. (J.7 St.II.L.17 - 8)

The 'Crocus' in st.I, line three, symbolizes  
resurrection. Crocus is an early spring flower that  
lie dead under bed of wintry snow, only to bloom again  
with the coming of spring. The third stanza -

"My figures fail to tell me

How far the village lies -

Whose peasants are the Angels -

Whose cantons dot the skies -" (J.7)

established the expanse of the 'village'- the Heaven  
- which is unfathomable by mortal beings. The poem conclude  
with the adoration of "that Dark", and the concept of  
resurrection being introduced again.

In the poem 'Tho' I get home how late - How  
Late-, the narrator is imagining how "transporting that  
moment (J.207 st.I L.7) will be, a moment which is "brewed  
from decades of Agony!" (st. I. L-8, J.207) when she  
will reach 'home'. Her arrival will be delayed but the  
very fact that she will reach home will compensate for  
her belated arrival. The narrator in her consciousness,  
imagines the moment of 'Ecstasy' when in the "descending  
dumb and dark" (st.I L.5) night she will reach home and  
the inhabitants of the house will await her arrival expect-

antly. The remarkable point of the poem is that the poet is going forward on an endless journey which may take centuries but she is very optimistic about the journey.

The first two stanzas of the poem "I years Had been From Home", (J.609) Depicts the fear and doubt of the narrator. The narrator was away from home for a long period, and now when she is finally back she is doubtful of the welcome she will receive.

"I dared not enter, lest a Face  
I never saw before (J.609, st.I, L.3-4)  
Stare stolid into mine  
And ask my business there -  
"My business but a life I left  
Was such remaining there ?" (J.609 St.II)

With the third stanza ambiguity enters the poem in both tone and imagery.

The confident person is seen here leaning ".....upon the Awe/I lingered with before". (J.609 St.III, L.1-2) 'Awe' is Emily Dickinson's term for God. The third and fourth lines of the third stanza are made up of abstract images and complex symbols.

"The second line an ocean rolled  
And broke against my ear" (J.609)

The technique of paradox employed here is very evident. The 'second' - the smallest unit of time passed like a ocean "and broke against" the narrator's ear. Probably the narrator underwent some kind of fleeting experience which shook her deeply. So greatly was she

affected that it transformed her into a confident person again; and we see her in the fourth stanza laughing away her fears. Towards the closure of the poem the narrator had gathered enough mental strength to touch the "Latch ....with trembling care". But soon the mood changes into fear lest the door opens with calamity for the narrator. Finally darkness and fear over come her and the poem concludes with the narrator defeated and fleeing. The poem presents a religious theme but without the sentiment of sanctity, remorse, prayer or apology. In fact the narrator though terrorised is never seen engaged in remorse or prayer.

"The conventional notions of Emily Dickinson's day were that poetry should be close to prose in its grammar and syntax, and that its vocabulary should be more refined than that of ordinary speech....."

"But Emily Dickinson flouts both convention."<sup>12</sup>

Emily Dickinson's primary concern was for the faithful portrayal of her inner feelings and concepts. She sacrificed grammar for it in her poems. Her adherence to grammatical rules in her poems, is hardly discernible. The following poem will illustrate the point.

" An anti quated trace  
Is cherished of the crow  
Because that Junior Foliage is  
disrespectful now

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12. Fryes P 203

To venerable Birds  
Whose corporation coat  
Would decorate oblivious  
Remotest consulate". (J.1514)

Similarly, Emily Dickinson is indifferent to the rule that grass or hay has no singular form. To the horror of critics like Higginson she wrote :

"The Grass so little has to do  
I wish I were a hay " (J.333, st.V L 3-4)

The most baffling and enchanting nature of Emily Dickinson's art is the ambiguity with which she coats her poems. Most certainly, her life as we experience it in much of her poetry, was strife-torn because of "the honest duplicity with which Emily Dickinson faced her puritan background".<sup>12</sup> She named this duplicity "compound vision".

Critics have traced the ambiguity in her poetry to this "compound vision", An analysis of Emily Dickinson can only reveal our inability to clarify the ambiguity in her. The position is deliberate enough in her and we can assume that she understood on some level the logic of the convention she helped to establish in American literature. While creating her ambiguity Emily Dickinson is not interested in the reader's multiple and divergent readings of her work so much as in her divergent and multiple reading of the universe and world.

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13. Keller, P.125

Her interest is not in deliberately blurring and muddling her thoughts for the sake of abstraction or wit, so much as in putting down in black and white the blur and muddle in her mind. For her ambiguity "represents not a polarized imagination or conceptual antithesis but instead, the ability to synthesize and suspend."<sup>14</sup> It is not just the simple antithesis or paradox, it took the rhetorical form in her writing in the oxymoron.

Oxymoron became as Karl Keller put in :

" a balanced contradiction opposed to resolution, a juxta position of contradictory terms of equal rank and emphasis."<sup>15</sup>

The oxymoron as a linguistic feature of ambiguity in the work of Emily Dickinson evades logical conclusion and as such receives a reductive proportion. The result is the fragmentary equality of her poems as may be the illustrated by the following lines -

" A still volcano - life ---

A quiet - Earthquake style -

The solemn - Torrid - Symbol ---- " (J.601)

For Emily Dickinson, who expostulated that "Faith is Doubt", the concept of ambiguity had its source in her religious dilemma. So God is simultaneously "Burglar! (and) Banker ". (J. 49)

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14. Ibid. P. 129

15. Ibid. P. 129

Her repertoire reveals a mind who believed in telling the truth "but to tell it slant" -

"An Necromancy Sweet :" (J. 127)

"Delight despair at setting ....(J. 1299)

"Crisis is sweet" (J.1416)

"Safe despair it is that raves ...(J.1243)

"How ruthless are the gentle". (J.1439)

"Anecdotes of air in Dungeons

Here sometimes proved deadly sweet :" (J.119)

Emily Dickinson's interest in the inherent ambiguity of words themselves is a very modern aspect of her writing.

The word modern is a very elusive and relative term - it escapes final definition. Yet it is generally conceded that with the advent of Mark Twain, Herman Melville and Walt Whitman, American literature became modern.

Whitman wrote about America and Democracy. Whitman was himself a condition that he called "America". So he has been considered a national poet, the spokesman of his age.

Away from the limelight enjoyed by the celebrity Walt Whitman, stowed away in a small town was Emily Dickinson, an equally important poet of unique qualities. Walt Whitman appeared on the American literary scene in the role of Messiah.

Emily Dickinson struggled with her private self, with the baffling questions of her soul.

An analysis of both the poets will establish the fact that both Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson shared a close affinity in their use of stylistic strategies in their art, the former was acknowledged and appreciated because he declared he wrote for a nation; the latter unknown and neglected because she chose to be a private poet.

Walt Whitman's modernism is reflected in his way of thinking which certainly was different from his age, he thought ahead of his time. His **Leaves of Grass** is an exquisite display of free verse, reflecting in its flowing lines the theme of liberty basic to the book. The easily discernible factor in the **Leaves of Grass** is the bond between the freedom he discovered in himself and his country, expressed in free and easy poetic diction.

It has been a difficult job for critics to decide the particular niche to which Walt Whitman belong. To him has been simultaneously assigned the titles of - poet of sex, poet of religion, poet of democracy, poet of mysticism. It is astonishing that Walt Whitman's **Leaves of Grass** can be quoted to support any of these epithets. Whitman himself acknowledges this multiplicity when he remarks -

"Do I contradict myself ?

Very well than I contradict myself

(I am large, I contain multitudes".)

(Song of Myself)

Way back in 1891 Higginson had to face the same difficulty while classifying Emily Dickinson's poems, and he admits that even after the passage of thirty years, he was not in a better position to reach at a satisfying answer.

Emily Dickinson still evades all criticism because she too is "large", and "contains multitudes". However there is a basic difference between the two poets. Though outwardly Whitman could easily embrace contradictions he was ruthless in his consistency with the self. The vision in Whitman that remained constant was of the inviolate self. The opening line of "Leaves of Grass" expresses it plainly -

"Ones' - self I sing, a simple separate person".

Emily Dickinson's life as we see reflected in much of her poetry was strife - torn, revolving round the contradiction between 'Faith' and 'Doubt'. So the ambiguity in her poems.

Through her unique style, Emily Dickinson turns away from the traditional concept of poetry because only by doing so, could she express fully the visions of a mind which did not "conform" - and stood "apart" from her generation.

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C O N C L U S I O N

To arrive at a fairly accurate answer as to what shaped Emily Dickinson's attitude towards her themes of Love, Death Religion, God and Immortality ; it is necessary to study her poetic carrer against a wide perspective of her religious background and her times.

Emily Dickinson though born of a Puritan heritage, found the Christian theological framework insupportable. As early as the age of seventeen this realisation dawned upon her, and she admits standing alone in rebellion, unlike her friends who responded to the call of God. She was not willing to give up the world she loved, for any religion. The price she paid was heavy. She was forced to depart from the Holyoke Female Seminary. This was the starting point of her life - long individual struggle, her rebellion which she termed as "Faith is Doubt".

Emily Dickinson wrote in a letter in 1850 -

"The path of duty looks very ugly  
indeed - and the place where I want to  
go more amiable - a great deal - it is so  
much easier to do wrong than right - so  
much pleasanter to be evil than good, I don't  
wonder that good angels weep - and bad  
ones sing songs <sup>1</sup>.

Emily Dickinson's own life was a kind of deviation from the life of the young girls of her age. Even at the unripe age of thirteen Emily Dickinson looked upto Benjamin Newton as her preceptor who she claims, taught her 'Immortality'. Her father was perhaps the only man in her life to impart in her young mind a long lasting

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1. Letters P. 82

impression of security, strength and integrity. So she remarked at his death -

"his heart was pure and terrible, and I think no other like it exists ".

Gossip said that her father's possessiveness prevented both herself and her sister Lavinia from getting married and leaving the house. But there is doubt as to how far this fact is authentic.

Perhaps the most predominant factor among the Dickinsons was a strong closeness and family feeling. Strangely enough even such closeness could not bend Emily Dickinson's mind to follow her Family into church membership during the local awakenings that swept Amherst between eighteen forty to sixty two. In this connection her feelings are of regret -

"I am standing alone in rebellion and growing very careless ---- . I am one of the lingering bad ones."

In her late twenties she looked desperately for alternatives to the church -

"The charms of the Heaven in the bush are superseded, I fear, by the Heaven in the hand occasionally " <sup>2</sup>.

When girls of her age busied themselves with various social engagements, Emily Dickinson chose to live a cloistered life with in the boundary of her father's garden, with her bees, flowers and bobolinks. Her peculiar habit of sending notes with rhymed sentences, as condolence messages, and congratulatory remarks, made her appear eccentric. Her eccentricity reached its peak when at times she would

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2. In Millicent T. Bingham : **Emily Dickinson's Home : the Early Years as Revealed in Family correspondences and Reminiscence.** New York : Dover, 1967.

meet visitors not <sup>in</sup> person but through conversations carried on across the wall of the visiting room. Deliberately dressed in white, Emily Dickinson appeared to her close acquaintances like Higginson, "Way Ward", "insane", and a "Partially cracked poetess".<sup>3</sup>

Emily Dickinson very successfully resisted the religious and social context within which she lived. This rebelliousness is explicit when she writes in a letter in 1863 : "Let Emily sing for you because she cannot pray, to keep the dark away".

She obviously sees herself as the singing bad angel. Her "Singing" ranges from the baffling questions of her soul- her skepticism about the Puritan ideology, and her non-conformist attitude - to an inconsistent attempt at "Looking oppositely. For the site of the kingdom of Heaven".<sup>4</sup>

She persistently questions her own faith in faith -  
"Belief, it does not fit so well  
When altered frequently ". (J. 1258)

At the same time she is afraid of this doubt which may lead her to state as she pictures -

"Why - do they shut Me out of Heaven ?  
Did I sing - too loud ?" (J. 501)

Though Emily Dickinson mastered the Bible, (involuntarily) and it was the model for the structure and language, and even themes of her poems ; she doubted its ideological authenticity.

"Her dissatisfaction with the tradition, her questions of its theology, her discarding of ideas and manners expected of her - these are the moral adjustment of <sup>a</sup> rebel".<sup>5</sup>

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3. Jay Leda. **The years and Hours of Emily Dickinson**. New Haven : Yale University Press, 1990.
  4. Letter, pp 561, 420 - 21.
  5. Keller, p. 76.

Through her rebellion Emily Dickinson discovered her need for a religion of her own -

"Guess I and the Bible will move to some Old fashioned spot where we'll feel at Home", and there also existed in her a nostalgia for "God's old fashioned vows".

So the search for the means to satisfy her needs found expression in her rebellion. This search can also be called a religious search.

The Bible she says in the 'Centre' and her concern is 'Circumference'. 'Circumference' is associated with a heightened consciousness, she often called 'Transport'. In this state she speaks like an Oracle -

"Tell me how far the morning leaps,  
Tell me what time the weaver sleeps,  
Who spun the breadths of blue ", (J. 128)

Through her mythopoetic imagination, Emily Dickinson succeeds in identifying Nature with Heaven -

"Heaven is what I cannot reach  
The Apple on the tree  
Provided it do hopeless hang  
That Heaven is to Me ;". (J. 239)

So the Biblical Paradise is within the circumference of one's given experience. Similarly the Biblical God is unacceptable to Emily Dickinson because He stood for her as a Providential God who sanctions all the unnecessary misery in life and the demythologizes Him in this manner -

"Himself - such a Dance". (J. 267)

Her personal God is "Awe", "Absolute Reality". She calls herself -

"Circumference thou Bride of Awe".

Behind this facade of serious attitude, Emily Dickinson very often wears the mask of a naughty child and calls God "Papa above", Sometimes she attackingly addresses Him as "Banker, Burglar", or intimately as " My Dim Companion".

This same mirth permeates her nature poems when she writes -

"In the name of the Bee  
and the Butterfly  
and the wind, Amen ;".

For the most part Emily Dickinson was happy with her simple appreciation of Nature. It is not strange that Emily Dickinson never philosophized Nature as was in vogue by the 1850's ; probably because the basis of her symbolic world - the projection of her rebellion - is not logical arguments but suggestive images. Her easy understanding of Nature is however, at times shrouded in mystery. Than Emily Dickinson admits -

" So impotent our wisdom is  
To her Simplicity". (J. 668)

It is again from the notion of 'Circumference' that Emily Dickinson's concepts of Death, Love and Immortality, gets expanded.

Emily Dickinson's obsession with the idea of death is well known. By being a witness to the death of several of her Friends and relatives, Emily Dickinson gathered some first hand experience of it. Her mythopoeic imagination coupled with her experience, enabled her to actually re-live the experience of the dead. Death, seen from such a close angle, lost its fearful side for the poet. Infact she welcomes death in "Because I could not stop for Death"- . She says death "Kindly" stopped for her; the word 'Kindly' suggests the favour bestowed upon the narrator by death. Emily Dickinson perhaps sees death as the ultimate truth of life ; therefore she is stoic about its

acceptance. Death for her, is also related with questions of an afterworld. but Emily Dickinson, akin to a mystic, believed in the here and now. The present engulf the past and future. Death is however seen by her as the gateway to immortality - it is the union of the soul with God. She sees this union as the union of two lovers. The image of God, the Divine Lover transporting the poet to Heaven is a frequently used metaphor. Only "fleshless lovers" can find Heaven in a gaze. So love and death appear synonymous terms, both having their roots in the religious soil -

"Unable are the loved to die  
For Love is Immortality,  
Nay, it is Deity -  
Unable they that love - to die  
For Love reforms vitality  
Into Divinity". (J. 809)

Where love is concerned, Emily Dickinson neglects the physical side of it. It is not that she never spoke about physical love, but wherever she did, it stood independent of love. The poem "I started Early - Took my Dog" (J. 520) recalls the poet's experience when the sea advancing towards her gradually passing her 'simple shoe' passed her 'Apron' and her 'Belt' and "Past (Her) Bodice too". She is terrified with the advances of the sea and she admits that -

"No Man moved Me - till the Tide .....  
And made, as He would eat me up - .....  
and then - I started too .....".

Emily Dickinson's love is seldom consummated, the moment of fulfillment evades into a torment, and ecstasy mingles with pain, as the following poem reveals.

" I cannot live with you -  
It would be life -  
And life is over there -

Behind the shelf.  
The sexton keeps the key to -  
Putting up  
Our Life - His Porcelain -  
Like a cup -  
Discarded of the Housewife .....  
I could not die - with you  
. . . . .  
Nor could I rise with you.  
. . . . .  
So we must meet apart -  
You there - I - here . . . . . " (J. 640)

Though Emily Dickinson operated with the theme, found within the traditional norms of society, her treatment of the same was uniquely her own.

Emily Dickinson's rebellion is not the kind Shelley championed. For that matter, Shelley and Whitman are similar because they both were concerned with society and man.

Shelley's endeavour was at creating a new and better world out of the old worn out system. Walt Whitman's rebellion too was somewhat of this nature. It encompassed the whole of America and the American society. Whitman called upon the Americans to wake up to a sense of American identity and destiny. In his preface to the **Leaves of Grass**, he declares that America of all nations on earth have the fullest poetical nature. Talking of the poet he says :

"his spirit responds to his country's spirit .....  
he incarnates its geography ..... ". The poet is not longer to him the poet with the sacred mission to set forth the glory of God. The poet is now to be a democratic hero, a representative of the people, their priest. Whitman's bold statement made in his 1855 preface perhaps shocked the reading public, because it was certainly different from what they had tasted so far. Whitman says -

"The poet is one complete lover whose very flesh shall be a great poem".

Against the prevailing impotence, Whitman offered America him self as mate :

"Submit to the most robust bard till he remedy your barrenness. Then you will not need to adopt the heirs of others ; you will have true heirs, begotten yourself, blonded upon your own blood".

While Emily Dickinson talked about the 'Centre' and 'circumference', Walt Whitman shocked the sense of descency of the Public by talking about the "Body Electric".

Emily Dickinson's rebellion was symbolic, Walt Whitman's social and personal.

Emily Dickinson's unique handling of her themes coupled with her innovative strategies, places her in the position of a poet of total originality. Higginson was stupefied at such a display of unique style and originality. He could not classify her poems for they formed a genre of its own. Her use of metaphoric language can rightly be called the most revelatory aspect of her genius, and so her letters and poems escape literal interpretation. The following poem illustrates the point.

"My Brain - begun to laugh  
I mumbled - like a fool -  
And tho' - tis years ago - that Day  
My brain keeps giggling - still ".

Emily Dickinson's employment of certain symbols, her use of syntax ; along with her peculiar rhyme scheme ; requires on the part of her readers the employment of their senses. She is indeed a sensous poet very much akin to the Romantics, specially Keats, whom she admits to have read.

Emily Dickinson's sensual utterance

"Bring Me the Sunset in a cup" is equivalent to Keats' longing for a "beaker ful of the warm south" <sup>6</sup>.

They both employ abstract images to express very concrete feelings.

Emily Dickinson's use of such images marks a gradual change in her from her early appreciation of nature to her dealing with the mystical ideas, using images, symbols and metaphors which are abstract

"The wind did'nt come from the Orchard - today -"  
(J. 316)

is an excellent example of such a poem written at the fag end of her career.

"The wind did'nt come from the Orchard - today -  
Further than that -  
Nor stop to play with the Hay -  
Nor joggle a Hat -  
He's a transitive fellow - very -  
Rely on that - - - - -  
- - - - -  
If He brings Odors of Clovers -  
And that is His business - not Ours -  
Then He has been with the Mowers -  
Whetting away the Hours -  
To sweet pauses of Hay -  
His way - of a June Day ..... "

To talk about Emily Dickinson's symbols used in her poems, it is necessary to pick up certain imagery which contain for the poet a special symbolic meaning. The imagery of Royalty, particularly the image of king is variedly employed by the poet to express different meanings. The 'King' in "I have a king who does not

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6. J. Keats - 'Ode to Nightingale'

speak" (J. 103) is depicted as a lover, and a source of inspiration, a guide to the poet's genius.

In "I met a King this afternoon" (J. 166) the description of the King with a "Palm leaf hat" instead of a crown, and "barefoot", certainly provides for the paradox between the King of the poem and the usual image of a King.

Critics have attributed to the King symbol the identity of a lover, husband, and also a God. But an analysis of the symbols prove the multitudeness of its meaning.

In yet another poem "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died"- (J. 465) the king is employed for religious connotations.

"For the last onset - when the king  
be witnessed - in the Room .....".

The 'King' indicates death who has come to take away "what portion of ( the narrator ) be Assignable ".

The 'King' can also be associated with Heaven, coming to claim the soul, as opposed to the "Blue Fly" who "interposed" in the room.

"Home" is another archetypal symbol in Emily Dickinson's religious poetry, used variantly to mean Heaven God, and immortality. In the Poem "Tho" I got home, how late - how late", the poet is going forward on an endless journey which may take centuries to arrive at her 'home' - which is definitely the end of life, a union with God after death. So the tone of the poem is optimistic. In contrast to this poem, the poem "I years Had been from Home". (J.609) depicts the fears and doubts of the narrator of being unwelcomed in her 'Home'.

Emily Dickinson's primary concern while writing poetry was the faithful portrayal of her inner feelings and concepts. This is

the answer to her non-adherence to conventional notions of writing poetry. She kept no rules of grammar nor took her language close to prose in refinement and syntax. She sacrificed grammar for her need -

" I took one Draught of life". (J. 1725) and coined new words wherever necessary - "And Debauchee of Dew" (J. 128)

or " Learned Waters" (J. 1210)

The enchanting and unique quality of Emily Dickinson's poems is the ambiguity with which she coats her poems. Critics have claimed the ambiguity in her poetry to her strife - torn life between faith and doubt. An analysis of the poet can only reveal our inability to clarify the ambiguiist in her. While creating her ambiguity Emily Dickinson is not interested in the reader's multiple and divergent readings of her work so much as in her divergent and multiple reading of the universe and the world. Her interest is not indeliberately blurring her thoughts for the sake of abstraction, so much as in putting down in black and white the blur and muddle in her mind. Emily Dickinson's marked ambivalent attitude towards fame and ublicity, is yet another aspect of her silent rebellion.

Critics like Millicent Bingham claim that Emily Dickinson was obsessed by the thought of fame.

This is of course - too far - fetched an opinion because Emily Dickinson herself admits that "If famed belonged to me I could not escape her ; if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chose ..... My barefoot rank is better". She wrote this to Higginson in June, eighteen sixty two.

In contrast, Walt Whitman was playing up to the gallery.

Even if there is regret on the part of Emily Dickinson at not being recognized, it is always subsumed by the inner urge to be herself. Her attitude was not deliberate but she was answering some

deep longing in herself to express what she always felt to be the truth. Perhaps the contemporary writer closest to Emily Dickinson, is Emily Bronte. She wrote within a different setting from that of the American scene. But Strangely enough both share the similar halo of mystery surrounding their lives. This is what Winifred Gerin has to say about Emily Bronte -

"Emily Bronte has been the subject of many books, even if few of them can be classed as biographies. The scarcity of direct evidence relating to her and the mystery that has been allowed to surround her life, while enhancing her appeal for writers, has tempted them to produce unauthenticated narratives and invent where they could not record " 7

For Emily Bronte, like Emily Dickinson "the landscape of her home at Haworth had the greatest effect in quickening her mind and in shaping her character " 8

At home the picture she (Emily Bronte) produced was of a busy housekeeper, baking and ironing. This is precisely what Emily Dickinson did in the Dickinsonian household .

But they both expressed in their art the passion for freedom. The paradox between " this outward contentment and an inner rebellion lies at the root of Emily Bronte's (And Emily Dickinson's) art as of (their lives) " 9

If **Wuthering Heights** places Emily Bronte outside the main current of Victorian fiction, her poems too, further establishes her as an artist different from the literary norms of her time. Through

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7. Winifred Gerin **Emily Bronte - A Biography** Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1971.

8. Ibid

9. "A critical and Biographical Profile of Emily Bronte" by Inga-Stina Ewbank in **The world's Great Classics - Wuthering Heights - Emily Bronte** . New York : Collier Ultratype, 1968.

her verses Emily Bronte (Like Emily Dickinson) intended to portray the unvarnished reality which she perceived in the world about her.

The stylistic device Emily Bronte developed in writing her poems was as baffling as a riddle. This same strategy is very predominant in Emily Dickinson which again makes her so fascinating.

Going back to **Wuthering Heights**, the world Emily Bronte presents here is a microcosm of the human situation. It contains within its pages a world of birth, death, hatred, love, nature and the seasons. Apart from this it bears no relation to the society outside. This is Emily Bronte's symbolic world, through which she expressed her silent rebellion - through the characters of the novel and through the feelings they conveyed.

Emily Dickinson too succeeded in creating such a vision of life through her poetry. In articulating the inner conflicts of her mind. She becomes the anticipatory voice of doubt - which is the hall mark of twentieth - century man. In daring to voice doubts, in questioning the sanctity of the sacred symbols erected by society, Emily Dickinson stood apart and " alone in rebellion" as she herself proclaimed.

Much of the relevance and interest in her poetry today rests on this unique position of Emily Dickinson as a poet who stood apart from her age - and could thus be considered a 'rebel' .

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