

Formative Influences in Emily Dickinson's Poetic Imagination

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), one of the most original voices in American poetry, developed a distinct poetic imagination shaped by a variety of cultural, intellectual, and personal influences. Her work, marked by spiritual intensity, psychological depth, and linguistic innovation, reflects the confluence of Puritan heritage, Romantic idealism, Transcendentalist philosophy, and her own profound introspection. This research paper seeks to examine the formative influences that shaped Dickinson's poetic vision and contributed to her unconventional yet deeply insightful portrayal of life, death, nature, and immortality.

The study explores how Dickinson's Puritan background instilled in her a sense of moral questioning and spiritual struggle, themes that recur throughout her poetry in paradoxical meditations on faith and doubt. Equally significant is the influence of Transcendentalism, particularly the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, which encouraged her inward exploration and belief in the divinity of the individual soul. Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Keats, and the Brontë sisters also played a vital role in nurturing her emotional sensitivity and her fascination with nature as a living presence. Moreover, her extensive reading, intellectual curiosity, and engagement with contemporary science, philosophy, and theology expanded the boundaries of her thought, giving her poetry a universal resonance.

The paper also considers how personal experiences—her isolation, emotional attachments, and encounters with loss—acted as catalysts for creative expression, turning private pain into profound art. Ultimately, Dickinson's poetic imagination emerges as a synthesis of inherited traditions and individual genius. Her ability to transform ordinary emotions into metaphysical insight demonstrates how external influences were internalized and reinterpreted through her unique sensibility. Thus, this study argues that the formative influences on Dickinson's poetry not only shaped her creative process but also positioned her as a revolutionary figure who redefined the boundaries of American poetic expression.

Keywords : Metaphysical, Romantic, Self Reliance, Victorian, culture, philosophy.

Assessing Emily Dickinson's contribution to American Literature Allen Tate notes that it is essential to bear in mind the tradition in and against which a great poet writes:

Poetry does not dispense with tradition; it probes the deficiencies of a tradition. But it must have a tradition to probe.¹

Tate's observation that the cultural milieu against which a poet evaluates his or her experience cannot be easily dismissed is particularly relevant to the study of Emily Dickinson. Although Dickinson's deliberate seclusion gives the impression of a poet detached from her social and cultural surroundings, her relationship to the age she lived in remains deeply significant. To understand her poetry fully, one must examine the multiple influences that shaped her literary sensibility – her response to the intellectual currents of her time, her interaction with prevailing poetic attitudes and themes, and her conception of creative art. Each of these aspects contributes to the formation of her unique poetic identity. Indeed, the wide range of critical interpretations of her poems often reflects these very dimensions of influence.

Placed against the literary and cultural backdrop of mid-nineteenth-century America, Dickinson occupies a distinctive position in the history of American literature. Her mind and art were profoundly affected by the moral and social climate of the 1850s – a period marked by religious revivalism, intellectual ferment, and the rise of individualistic thought. The strict domestic discipline of her family life, coupled with the serious and morally committed nature of her community, compelled her not only to internalize the dominant traditions of her time but also to question and transcend them.

Thus, Dickinson's poetry emerges as a creative response to the spiritual and intellectual conflicts of her era. While she may appear to stand apart from contemporary movements in religion, literature, and art, her work is in fact rooted in the very tensions those movements generated. Her poems reveal a dialectical engagement with her cultural milieu – a dialogue between conformity and rebellion, belief and skepticism. It is within this dynamic context that the formative influences on Emily Dickinson's poetic imagination must be understood.

The hypothesis of the present study may be articulated in light of T. S. Eliot's seminal essay "*Tradition and the Individual Talent*." Emily Dickinson's poetry, though distinctively original, emerges from a deep engagement with the dominant American intellectual and spiritual traditions of her time – notably the enduring legacy of Calvinist Puritanism and the emerging ideals of Transcendentalism. Yet, Dickinson's genius lies in her ability to transform these inherited influences through her individual creative sensibility. She transmuted personal experiences and profound emotions into compressed, vivid images, striking metaphors, and paradoxical expressions. In this sense, she may rightly be considered a precursor to the modern Imagist movement in English and American poetry, where precision of language and intensity of emotion converge to evoke universal meaning.

These cultural and philosophical backgrounds also illuminate the foundations of Dickinson's tragic vision – a central aspect of her poetic mode. Her poetry consistently reflects the dialectical structure of the universe, engaging with the tension between faith and doubt, joy and sorrow, life and death. The interplay of these opposites defines the thematic core of her work, revealing her intellectual depth and emotional

acuity. Understanding the formative background of her thought, therefore, becomes essential to appreciating the complexity of her poetic design.

Critics such as George Frisbie Whicher, Thomas H. Johnson, Douglas Duncan, Henry W. Wells, and Jean McClure Mudge have traced the dual strands of provincial and national traditions that shaped Dickinson's literary personality. Richard B. Sewall identifies her Puritan heritage and Calvinistic moral outlook as crucial formative influences, while Clark Griffith emphasizes the psychological undercurrents and the "inversion" of Emersonian Transcendental principles in her work. Similarly, Charles R. Anderson, Richard Chase, David Porter, and Robert Weisbuch acknowledge the influence of her environment but focus on her deeply individual, introspective temperament – one that was extraordinarily receptive to intellectual and emotional stimuli.

This heightened sensitivity endowed Dickinson with remarkable linguistic precision, wit, and mastery of phrase-making. Her poetry, therefore, becomes not merely a reflection of her time but an artistic synthesis of inherited tradition and personal insight. The study of these formative influences is indispensable, for they lie at the core of the historical, cultural, and psychological tensions that animate Emily Dickinson's unique poetic imagination.

The cultural and literary milieu of nineteenth-century America provided the essential impetus for emerging writers to chart their own distinctive paths in the realm of creative expression. It was an era marked by transformation, experimentation, and the spirit of intellectual adventure. The period witnessed profound progress and change in nearly every sphere of life, generating an atmosphere conducive to artistic innovation and individual

assertion. Transition, indeed, became the defining characteristic of the age.

New England, long rooted in the traditions of eighteenth-century Europe, began to acquire a distinctly American identity. One of the most significant transformations occurred in the sphere of religion. The rigid theocracy and moral austerity of orthodox Puritanism gradually loosened its grip on the collective consciousness of the people. This decline of traditional Puritan dominance opened space for fresh philosophical, scientific, and spiritual inquiry.

The nineteenth century thus marked a pivotal moment in American cultural history – an age animated by a new sense of confidence, achievement, and self-realization. Intellectual currents such as Transcendentalism encouraged freedom of thought and emphasized the divinity of individual experience, while advances in science and philosophy expanded the horizons of human understanding. The result was a vibrant and dynamic cultural landscape, one that inspired writers and thinkers to explore new forms of expression and redefine the relationship between art, faith, and human existence. As Jay Margin remarks:

America now directed its course towards a more opulent and materialistic future. The rise of wealth as a result of intensive business activity opened up new vistas of education, literature, science, invention, the fine arts, social reform...²

The period projects a markedly variegated quality in which scholars, poets and intellectuals interacted with their contemporaries to assess and estimate the thoughts of their age. In fact, the emerging thoughts and ideas from the debates and discourses of the intellectual giants of America were being absorbed in the culture itself.

It is in this age of transition, when theocratic society was being replaced by a culture characterized by social norms, that Dickinson wrote her poetry. She represents the farthest point of the nineteenth century American poetry particularly with regard to the adventure of the spirit. With a terrible intensity and meaningful simplicity she has expressed the most aspiring experiences of the Puritan soul. She lived for fifty-six years in the quiet Amherst society, her tranquil life full of adventures in eternity. There is little to record outwardly in her life. To her austere lawyer-father, Edward Dickinson, she was bound by inviolable ties of duty and affection. In the narrow yet superior society of the New England village her character took on its distinctive traits of devotion, self-reliance and ceaseless scrutiny or her own mind.

The beginning of some strange celestial apprenticeship is early initiated by her in a letter written at the age of twenty-three, I do not go from home. About 1861-62, she was definitely committed to her retirement from the world. But she was not simply an ascetic divorced from life. Her renunciation of life was reinforced by human love and anguish. She loved the suffering of human life because it was worthy of one who loved truth. Being a sensitive person love, frustration and death affected her greatly. She had seen the deaths of some near and dear ones; as regards love, it is said, she loved but somehow love's labours were lost. For one or the other reason and being a child of nature she absorbed the beauties of nature to certain extent but she was aware of the dualism between man and nature. She lived on in her garden, in her chamber, more and more not as a lover of nature but as a denizen of a metaphysical domain of her own. This metaphysical and mystic world she suffered until her death in 1886.

Her introspection, her latter-day transcendentalism, belong to her long story of gradual liberation from the old Puritan orthodoxy. She lived a cloistered, fugitive life, ignorant of the subversive events of the America of her day, such as the Civil War and the growth of science. According to a review of Shira Wolosky's full-length study on Dickinson, her delineation of war themes forms a significant aspect of her poetry. Wolosky deals at length with the war imagery that occurs in her poems and establishes that the Civil War affected her poetic consciousness profoundly. She could not grasp the full enormity of war and she has not written poems like Walt Whitman on Abraham Lincoln or other political events. Yet she knew the grief that resulted from war. She cannot be regarded as a war poet, although she was aware of the agonies of war.

Amherst village, the home of Dickinson and the locale of her artistic pursuits, was extremely fortunate in possessing the means of enlarging the scope of its educational interests. The majority of the community was deeply conscious of the need for a center of intellectual pursuits. The founding of Amherst College, provided the population of the village with a forum or a mouth-piece for intellectual deliberations. It also became a stronghold of the orthodox faith to serve as an effective speaker against the propagation of Unitarianism. As Whitcher remarks:

The infant institution, founded in 1821 for the classical education of indigent and pious young men, was tacitly designed to become a stronghold of orthodoxy against Unitarian heresies of Harvard.⁴

While the institution emphasized morality and spirituality, it also channelized the youthful minds into intellectual pursuits and was sensitively receptive to the new ideas that were deeply

related to man's existence. The emergence of Transcendentalism as a secular answer to spiritual quests, widened the mental scope of the people and encouraged further explorations in the field of metaphysics. Emerson, Thoreau and Lowell spearheaded the literary and spiritual movement which led America to new creative frontiers. Transcendentalism with its deep emphasis on man and the divinity of nature infused the people with hope and enthusiasm. Emerson and Whitman were the most vociferous spokesmen of the oneness of man with nature, which was the divine and spiritual symbol for God.

Emerson's striking criticism of the conventional religion and his theory of "Self-Reliance" opened up new vistas of spiritual and aesthetic inquiry. Emerson wrote in his essay "Self-Reliance,"

As man's prayers are a disease of the will so are their creeds a disease of their intellect.⁵

Emerson's emphasis on the self, on the individual self, had a tremendous impact on those who searched for new values for firmer conviction of their faith. Dickinson was exposed directly and indirectly to the theory of Transcendentalism and selected ideas which confirmed to her personal mode of belief. The theory of self-denial, compensation, stoicism, and the realization of the ideal potentials of man and nature were the essential ingredients of the Transcendental theory. Dickinson was strongly attracted towards the concept of individualism and also favoured self-denial because it offered psychological fulfillment for her. Once her intellectual and emotional growth is related to the mental climate of her day, and the extraordinary materialistic progress in all directions, her position in the imaginative world becomes clear. Poised precariously between the shifting

values of the past and present, Dickinson sought to evolve her own individual faith. The subtle shades of family up-bringing, her typical New England character, and above all, her intensely introspective temperament led to the formation of a poetic mode which was far removed from the prevalent literary practice.

Combined with the cultural background influences which formed her outlook on life, was her exposure to the past and contemporary literature. Her literary readings form an interesting assortment of poetry, prose and novel ranging from the Bible to the Metaphysicals, the Romantics and the Victorians. She also imbibed from Emerson, the subtle art of phrase-making. Whicher's assessment of the literary influences on Dickinson in the light of her readings becomes very pertinent to the understanding of her poetry. He observes,

Edward Dickinson's library contained.. sets of such historians as Hume, Macaulay, Motley, Bancroft and Prescott; the works of American Statesmen, Hamilton, Jefferson, Webster, John Adams; the British essayists-including Carlyle, Sydney Smith, Wilson and Jeffrey many books on the American Revolution and ponderous tomes of travel like Kane's Arctic Voyages and Stephan's Yucator... and Knight's Shakespeare in eight volumes, Addison's works and Washington Irving's Cowper, Byron and numberless small leather-bound editions of the early (i.e. seventeenth and eighteenth century) English poets. (Whicher, 27)

Besides the writers listed above, she evidenced a keen interest in the contemporary literature also. Dickinson and her brother surreptitiously bought and read Longfellow's *Evangeline*, Tennyson's *The Princess*, Thomas Moore's *The Epicurean*, and Tupper's *The Twins*

and the Heart. However, there was scarcity of books on modern literature. In a letter written in 1862¹⁰, she mentioned only Keats and Browning as poets, for prose Ruskin and Thomas Browne. Further, because of her extremely reticent nature and her aloofness from the literary scene she could not avail herself of any distinct literary tradition. As R.B. Sewall states,

She had no coterie, no publisher to keep her in touch with the literary world, not even a literary neighbour, she could count on for day by day support But she imbibed unconsciously from the writings of the English Metaphysicals, Romantics and Victorians is an undeniable fact.

Emily Dickinson's poetic imagination was shaped by a remarkable synthesis of limited yet profound literary influences. Although she lived in relative seclusion and had minimal access to the vibrant literary circles of her time, her intellectual curiosity and voracious reading allowed her to internalize the essence of diverse traditions. Her exposure to writers such as Longfellow, Tennyson, Moore, and Tupper, as well as to the profound philosophical prose of Ruskin and Thomas Browne, reveals her deep engagement with both classical and contemporary literature. The Romantic lyricism of Keats, the psychological intensity of Browning, and the moral earnestness of the Victorians all left an indelible mark on her poetic sensibility.

Despite her isolation, Dickinson's imagination was not stifled by geographical or social boundaries. Rather, it flourished in solitude, drawing nourishment from the English Metaphysicals, Romantics, and Victorians, whose ideas she absorbed unconsciously and transformed into her own distinctive voice. Her

lack of a literary coterie or external validation did not hinder her creative growth; instead, it heightened her self-reliance and sharpened her introspection. As R. B. Sewall rightly observes, she had "no publisher to keep her in touch with the literary world," yet she achieved an originality that transcended imitation.

Ultimately, Dickinson's poetry stands as testimony to the power of an independent and inwardly rich imagination. Her genius lay in transforming inherited literary impulses into a personal and timeless art, one that bridges the spiritual, the intellectual, and the emotional. The formative influences on her work were not merely sources of inspiration but catalysts that helped her redefine poetic expression itself, making Emily Dickinson an enduring figure in the continuum of world literature.

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