

THE INFLUENCE OF LAVINIA AND SUSAN DICKINSON
ON EMILY DICKINSON

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study is to seek out, examine, and analyze the relationship that Emily Dickinson shared with her sister, Lavinia, and with her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson. All of her letters and poems have been carefully considered, as well as the letters and diaries of friends and relatives who might shed light on the three women.

The primary sources used in this study are Emily Dickinson's poems and letters, and the personal accounts of people who knew the Dickinson family: Millicent Todd Bingham, Mabel Loomis Todd, and Martha Dickinson Bianchi. Also of great help were recent works of David Higgins, John Cody, and John Evangelist Walsh.

The thesis is divided into six chapters, each centering upon Susan or Lavinia and their relationship with Emily. Chapter One traces Emily's attachment to her sister from childhood to death. It includes poems and notes written to or about Vinnie, referring to her cats, her frequent visits away from home, and her role as protector. Chapter Two

begins with Emily's early acceptance of Susan Gilbert, who eventually married Austin Dickinson. Emily's desire to remain on good terms with Sue can be seen in the poems sent to Sue that reveal dependency. The start of Emily's disillusionment is evident in the poems that contain financial and power imagery. Chapter Three continues with this disillusionment, as it develops into the conflict between Sue and Emily, unresolved at the time of Emily's death. Chapter Four outlines the reasons for rivalry between Lavinia and Sue, and its effect on Emily. The jealousy Vinnie felt toward her sister-in-law is evident in the poems of this chapter, as well as Emily's efforts to keep peace in the family.

Chapter Five looks into the disturbed period in Emily's life. It shows her gradual withdrawal from society. Like the typical psychotic, Emily chose one person to trust, Sue, from whom she sought solace and shelter. This chapter contains an analysis of poems sent to Sue that show Emily's mental imbalance. Often Sue was too busy with her own life to suit Emily. As a result Emily felt rejected, and she turned from her sister-in-law, thus adding to the conflict between them.

Chapter Six develops naturally from Emily's mental distress. At this time she questioned the established religious concepts of Amherst, and she developed her own views

on life, death, and God. She shared these ideas, through her poems, with Sue. Emily chose Sue over Vinnie as a sounding board for her beliefs because she knew that Vinnie was too deeply entrenched in conventional religion to listen to new thoughts.

Even though Vinnie's part in her sister's life was not as significant as Sue's, many poems were written about Vinnie's garden, animals, and frequent absences from home. It can be seen that Emily was disturbed by her sister's petty, explosive nature and by the friction between Sue and Vinnie. But it is clear, also, that Emily cared very deeply for Sue in their early life together. It was this devotion that caused her to be greatly disillusioned by Sue's rejection of her during the years of her disturbance, and later.

It is hoped that this thesis will help to free from obscurity the meaning of many of Emily Dickinson's poems and to show the important role Lavinia and Susan Dickinson played in their writing. Perhaps without these two women, Emily might have lacked some of the inspiration for her poems, thereby decreasing the passion and emotion of her poetry and, in turn, its impact upon the world.

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ON EMILY DICKINSON

THESIS

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INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1886, a queer little woman was laid to rest in the town cemetery of Amherst, Massachusetts. The thoughts passing through the minds of the onlookers and mourners must have been varied. One of the Irish pallbearers whom Emily Dickinson had personally selected shortly before her death might have thought that she would have liked being buried on a beautiful, bright spring day.¹ As Susan Gilbert Dickinson, Emily's sister-in-law, followed the casket through the house and across the fields to the cemetery, she might have recalled the lines from one of Emily's letters to her: "Perhaps this is the point at which our paths diverge . . . and up the distant hill I journey on."² Mabel Loomis Todd, no doubt at Lavinia's side, probably found it very difficult to keep her thoughts from straying from the funeral itself to the funeral wake at which she was refused her request to view Emily's body. As she followed the funeral procession, Lavinia, Emily's maiden sister, must have been filled with anger. Yet, on this day and for her sister's sake, she tried to control the fury of

¹John Evangelist Walsh, The Hidden Life of Emily Dickinson (New York, c. 1971), p. 38.

²Emily Dickinson, The Letters of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1958), I, 306.

her tongue by avoiding thoughts of the two parties that Sue gave during the last days of Emily's life. She must have wondered, as she walked past the flower gardens her sister had loved, if Sue were really aware of the seriousness of Emily's condition when she planned the two social events. Even if Sue had not known of the impending death, she surely must have realized that something was wrong when Austin adamantly refused to attend either event, choosing to remain at his sister's bedside.³ The others in attendance, the neighbors and curiosity-seekers, must have exchanged glances over the strange funeral ceremony that Emily had planned for herself. Little did they know that they were witness to the last wish of one of America's greatest poets. Finally, upon reaching the cemetery hill, Emily Dickinson was laid to rest in a flower-covered casket next to her mother and father.

Within a few days after the burial, Lavinia began the sad task of sorting and burning Emily's things according to instructions in the will. Surely with a heavy heart, Lavinia entered her sister's room. She dutifully burned without reading (for that would have been sacrilege) all of Emily's correspondence that was easily found. A short time later, while cleaning out some drawers, she discovered a locked box. She pried it open and discovered sixty packets, containing approximately seven hundred poems. Trembling

³John Cody, After Great Pain, The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1971), p. 445.

with excitement, she now realized that her sister's genius should not pass unnoticed: her poetry must be published.

But how could it be done? Whom could she turn to? Lavinia guessed, partly because of Emily's reluctance to share her poetry with her, that she herself was not the most competent person to sift through the packets. Finally, she was forced to make a choice between Mabel Loomis Todd and Susan Dickinson. Even though Vinnie must have been inclined to choose Mabel, she knew that Sue was the better choice. Vinnie realized that Sue might have been her sister's own choice in the matter because Emily trusted Sue's opinion enough to share her poems with her over the years. Yet the years of feuding between Sue and Vinnie must have weighed heavily in her mind. She surely must have wished that someone other than Sue could be chosen. Reluctantly, but with her sister in mind, she offered the poems to Sue.

Therefore, a few weeks after Emily's death, Vinnie asked for Sue's help in readying the poems for publication. Contrary to the expected reaction, Sue did not jump at the honor. She was busy with her own family and with her social obligations. However, perhaps as a result of Austin's urging, she agreed to help.

Susan Dickinson was not the only one reluctant to publish Emily's poems; the few poems she considered the

best were turned down by various publishers. After two years of searching, she decided to print the poems privately.

Lavinia, however, did not remain idle during this time. She realized that Emily's friends were growing old, and she wanted to have the poems published before they were all dead. She also realized that her own health might not last for many more years. She was insistent that the poems be published in her own lifetime. Out of patience with Sue, Vinnie turned to Mabel Todd for help. Mabel, like Sue, was not overly eager. At this time in her life, she was caught up in her own column for Harper's. She insisted that she could not deal with Emily's unusual verse, but Vinnie was adamant. Mabel finally gave in.

By the fall of 1888, Mabel was working steadily on the poems, with the additional help of Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Mabel's choice could not have been wiser, because Emily herself had turned to him for advice with her writing. By November, 1890, her first volume reached the public. The reaction was so favorable that a second volume was begun.

But before long success was replaced by controversy. Sue had submitted to the New York Independent personal copies of some poems sent to her by Emily. Two of them were accepted for publication. When Vinnie heard this, she became enraged. She was insulted to think that Sue, who was reluctant to help her with the editing, had tried to

publish some poems without permission. Vinnie, convinced that she was legally the guardian of all of Emily's works, brought suit. Sue, whose lawyers sided with Vinnie, withdrew the poems from the paper. Vinnie, still furious, mutilated one of the packets of poems written near the time of Sue's marriage by inking out lines that referred to Sue.⁴

Mabel seemed to escape Vinnie's ire, at least for the time being. She was busy addressing clubs and women's gatherings on the subject of Emily and her poetry. She was also working on the next volume.

Yet their happy relationship did not last for long. Vinnie felt that Mabel was spending too much time lecturing and not enough time editing, and she was further miffed by Austin's suggestion that Mabel receive all the royalties from the latest volume. (Higginson was no longer working on the poems.) Vinnie felt that Emily's mind was her property, and not Mabel's. Even though she reasoned that all the royalties should be hers, she reluctantly agreed to give one-half of them to Mabel.

A few months later, in 1893, Mabel's relationship with Vinnie disintegrated in a court battle over the disposition of a large plot of land given to the Todds by Austin. The Todds had subsequently built their home on the land.

⁴Walsh, p. 46.

However, Austin died before the deed of transference was recorded. Vinnie, seizing the opportunity to vent her growing dislike for Mabel, brought issue in court. She testified that she was not aware of the paper she had signed with Austin. After a long trial, Vinnie had won the land but lost a friend.⁵

Furthermore, Vinnie did not fare well with the manuscripts. Mabel had many of the Dickinson poems and letters, which she kept locked in a chest for thirty years, at which time she entrusted them to her daughter. Vinnie's portion of the poems were not published until 1914 because she hid them in her home and died without telling anyone of their hiding place. (Sometime after her death, Sue and her daughter searched the house until they were found.) Therefore, upon her death in 1899, many of Emily's poems were still unpublished.⁶

Emily would have been horrified to know of the notoriety connected with her name after her death. Certainly she would have winced to know that her name had been drawn through the courts. She would have disapproved of Vinnie's petty actions toward Sue and Mabel. Emily might have also been disillusioned that her poetry was the source of such

⁵Walsh, pp. 48-9.

⁶Ibid., pp. 51-2.

great turmoil, conflict, and bitterness among the people she loved.

Even though much of Emily's verse was locked in Mabel's trunk for thirty years, some other poems eventually became known through the efforts of Martha Dickinson Bianchi, Sue's daughter, who also possessed some of Emily's unpublished poems. Madame Bianchi published The Single Hound in 1914; and with the help of Alfred Leete Hampson, Further Poems in 1929 and Unpublished Poems in 1935. In 1924, Madame Bianchi's biography, The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson, was published. In 1932 her last work of biographical import, Emily Dickinson Face to Face, became available to the public.

Mabel's daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham, eventually opened her mother's chest and offered Emily's poetry to the world. In 1945 she published Ancestor's Brocades; and in collaboration with Madame Bianchi, Bolts of Melody, which contained over six hundred poems, two-thirds of which had been hidden from the public for thirty years by Mabel Todd. As a result, almost sixty years after her death, all of Emily's verse became a part of American literature.

Other prominent researchers struggled to date Emily's poems. T. H. Johnson, perhaps the leading authority on Emily Dickinson, edited her poems and letters in two three-volume works. He also wrote Emily Dickinson, An Interpretive

Biography, which appeared in 1955. In 1964, with the aid of a computer, S. P. Rosenbaum published A Concordance to the Poems of Emily Dickinson.

Among the most recent biographical works is John Evangelist Walsh's The Hidden Life of Emily Dickinson. Having talked with the people of Amherst and having visited her home, Walsh has added a fresh approach to her life. He claims that many of Emily's ideas were originally found in Aurora Leigh, Ik Marvel, and Jane Eyre. He believes that she was coming out of her reclusive shell at the time of her death. He discovered that the Harvard experts who had examined her letters and poems had not correctly set the date of composition of much of Emily's work because the poems had been recopied at a later date and then placed in the packets.

Another work of merit is John Cody's After Great Pain. Dr. Cody believes that Emily Dickinson's behavior cannot be stamped into a mold of normality. He feels that she suffered from mental illness for a period of at least ten years. He lays the responsibility for Emily's reclusive nature and for her failure to publish upon her mother, rather than her father, who is usually blamed. Many of her poems, he claims, were based on sexual fantasies.

It is difficult to ascertain how Emily's creative genius developed in the simplicity of her homelife. Emily

Dickinson was born on December 10, 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts, to Edward Dickinson and his wife, Emily Norcross Dickinson. She was the middle child in a family of three children. Her younger sister, Lavinia, was born February 28, 1833, and her older brother was born on April 16, 1829. At the time of Emily's birth, her mother was preoccupied with the death of her own mother, the death of her sister-in-law's baby, and the impending remarriage of her father.⁷ She did not have time to dote on the infant Emily. Lavinia was a sickly child who required much of her mother's time. As a result, Emily was sent to her Aunt Lavinia's home in Monson, where she received the kind of affection she had never obtained from her mother. Surely Emily's lack of affection from her mother as a child accounts for her craving for love and acceptance as an adult.

As Emily grew older, she made several visits to Boston, Cambridge, and Worcester between the years of 1844 and 1851. In 1847 she graduated from Amherst Academy and went the following year to Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary in South Hadley. Here she came in contact with Mary Lyon, headmistress of the school, who often tried to convert Emily. Yet every attempt failed.

During her youth Emily had few close friends besides Lavinia. Three of her early companions--Sophia Holland,

⁷Cody, p. 49.

Benjamin Newton, and Leonard Humphrey--died early, leaving only Abiah Root and Susan Gilbert. Abiah, however, moved away and lost contact with Emily through the passage of time. Sue often was absent from Amherst, and she once even left for a year to teach school in Maryland. Perhaps Emily's closest companion was her sister.

Emily travelled occasionally during her youth. In 1854, the entire family visited Washington and Philadelphia. (Edward, her father, was at this time a member of the legislature.) In 1856, Austin married Emily's girlhood friend, Sue Gilbert, and moved into their Italian villa next door. Five years later the first of their three children, Ned, was born.

Emily and Lavinia remained at home, neither of them ever marrying. Their closeness grew with years of constant contact and love. Even though the parents were still alive, Emily looked to Vinnie for protection and love. Vinnie, not her mother or father, took Emily to Boston for eye treatments in 1864 and 1865.

During the decade of the 1860's, Emily suffered from a recurring psychosis. She turned to Sue for aid, but she eventually withdrew into herself. In 1874, Edward Dickinson died while in Boston. The following year Mrs. Dickinson suffered a stroke and remained paralyzed until her death in 1882.

The last few years of Emily's life were saddened by the death of her mother, as well as of many of her friends, including Samuel Bowles, Josiah Holland, Charles Wadsworth, and Otis P. Lord. (The last two have been linked romantically with Emily by her biographers.) In November, 1885, Emily became seriously ill, occasionally lapsing into unconsciousness. On May 15, 1886, she died.

The purpose of this study is to seek out, examine, and analyze the relationship that Emily shared with her sister, Lavinia, and with her sister-in-law, Sue. All of her letters and poems have been carefully examined for clues. Even though Vinnie's part in her sister's life was the most difficult to establish, it is obvious that Emily wrote many poems about Vinnie's garden and animals, as well as about her absences from the home. As can be seen in her poems and letters, Emily was puzzled by Vinnie's acceptance of religion, and by her petty, explosive nature. Emily's dependence upon Vinnie is also evident throughout her works.

Upon examining Sue's role in Emily's life, the reader can see that Emily wrote about their early friendship, as well as her growing dependence on Sue and her eventual conflict with her. During the years of psychosis, it is evident through her poems that Emily turned to Sue and poured out her thoughts on her mental state and her doubts on eternity and religion. The continual feuding between Sue and Vinnie is also evident in her work.

It is hoped that this paper will help to free from obscurity the meaning of many of Emily's poems and to show the importance Vinnie and Sue played in Emily's writing. Perhaps without these two women, Emily might have lacked some of the inspiration for her poems, thereby decreasing the passion and emotion of her poetry and, in turn, its impact upon the world.

CHAPTER I

A LIFETIME OF SISTERLY LOVE

Often during childhood, Lavinia and Emily were alone together. Their father was often in Boston working with the legislature, and Austin was in school pursuing his education. Emily, Lavinia, and Mrs. Dickinson were at home alone. Yet Mrs. Dickinson was not an ordinary mother interested in her children. She was usually too preoccupied with her own mental and health problems to be of much guidance to the sisters. As a result, each sister became the other's parent; as they grew older, Vinnie especially replaced Mrs. Dickinson as Emily's mother. Emily now had someone to turn to with her childhood problems, someone who came to her aid when she needed it, someone who never questioned her motives or actions, and someone who protected her without question. However, Emily did not turn to Vinnie in the hope of finding a confidante to share her most hidden thoughts. What she did hope to find--she succeeded in this effort--was a fortress against the world. Vinnie became Emily's closest friend in spite of their personality differences.

The two Dickinson girls possessed strong but individual personalities. Emily was more retiring and less attractive.

Lavinia, known for her spirit of high adventure and her fun-loving, gregarious nature, was a popular partner at Amherst social affairs where she was celebrated for her ability to mime.¹ In her youth Lavinia liked to travel and to visit friends and relatives.² Emily did not like to leave Amherst and her family for any great lengths of time. Austin Dickinson, the girls' brother, believed Emily's reclusive nature was the result of her self-conscious reaction to her plainness.³ While both girls were proud of their flower gardens and their housekeeping abilities, Emily appeared to excel in these endeavors. As noted by Joseph Lyman, Lavinia's "half-committed" suitor, "Vinnie is sometimes afraid of soiling her little fat hands."⁴

Vinnie's frivolity was in deep contrast with Emily's ideas. Despite Emily's observation that Lavinia was as "spectacular as Disraeli and sincere as Gladstone," she was not a true participant in life, but only an onlooker.⁵

¹Polly Longworth, Emily Dickinson: Her Letter to the World (New York, 1965), p. 66.

²Emily Dickinson, The Letters of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1958), I, 34.

³Millicent Todd Bingham, Ancestor's Brocades: The Literary Debut of Emily Dickinson (New York and London, c. 1945), p. 235.

⁴Joseph Lyman, The Lyman Letters: New Light on Emily Dickinson and Her Family, ed. Richard Benson Sewall (Amherst, Massachusetts, c. 1965), p. 14.

⁵Jay Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson (New Haven, Connecticut, c. 1960), II, 354.

She seemed content while Emily was not. After reading excerpts from Lavinia's diary, the reader is aware of her interest in the visible but not in the hidden meaning of existence. Her three main interests were her cats, her friends, and her sister. Her thoughts on most matters were only superficial and fleeting. For example, Lavinia thought of birds as a part of the landscape with no other purpose for existence. Emily believed birds to be the symbol of the renewing creativity of nature. Emily thought often and deeply on the true meaning of religion and God, while Lavinia, as noted in her diary, was more interested in the dress of the congregation.⁶ The following is an excerpt from Lavinia's diary in 1851: "Abby is dead. Frances Emerson & Tutor Holland called. Walked with Susan Gilbert. Expected Tyler, was disappointed. Felt very Sad."⁷ Her thoughts and lack of deep grief over the death of a friend support Joseph Lyman's opinion that she was "a proud, wilful, selfish, girl. . . . She viewed everybody and every plan only as it might affect her happiness."⁸

Lavinia's lack of emotion contrasted sharply with Emily's concern and great dismay at the death of a friend. Upon hearing from Lavinia a description of Otis Lord's

⁶Leyda, II, 99-100.

⁷Ibid., I, 197.

⁸Lyman, p. 51.

death, Emily wrote to Mrs. J. G. Holland that his death was "a lisp from the irrevocable" (Letters, III, 816; 1884). She wrote to Susan Gilbert, "Those that are worthy of Life are of Miracle, for Life is Miracle, and Death as harmless as a Bee, except to those who run--." ⁹ She also wrote to Susan that "could the Dying confide Death, there would be no Dead--" (Letters, II, 445; 1865). Joseph Lyman, who lived with the family for one school term and corresponded with Emily for fifteen years, felt that she was a morbid and unnatural person. ¹⁰

Despite the personality differences of the sisters, their relationship was always close. However, Emily's ideas were often in conflict with those of her father, who ruled his family with harshness and severity. His contemptuous view of humanity clashed sharply with Emily's sympathetic understanding of mankind. ¹¹ Lavinia once jokingly referred to Emily's ideas as "hot air" and to her father's views as "Plain english [sic]" or "sound common sense." ¹²

⁹Leyda, II, 92.

¹⁰Lyman, p. 65.

¹¹Bingham, Ancestor's Brocades, p. 233.

¹²William R. Sherwood, Circumference and Circumstance: Stages in the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson (New York and London, 1968), p. 238, n. 12.

Both girls were aware of the combustible situation in their home. Once while Lavinia was away, Emily wrote to her that "It is pretty much all sobriety, and we do not have much poetry, father having made up his mind that it is pretty much all real life [prose]. Father's real life and mine sometimes come into collision, but as yet, escape unhurt!"¹³

Even though Lavinia developed the harshest qualities of her father and wasted her wit on neighborhood gossip and feuds, Emily depended upon her for protection from her father's rages and from the outside world.¹⁴ Lavinia was looked upon as the guardian of Emily's sensitive genius.¹⁵ Evidence of Emily's dependence on her sister is easily found in her letters. In 1851, while writing to Austin, she remarked that "one sustains the other--Vinnie and I console and comfort father and mother--I encourage Vinnie, Vinnie in turn cheers me--" (Letters, I, 141; 1851). During Lavinia's visit to the Norcross cousins in 1860, Emily wrote of their bedroom at home as "a mighty room--her [Lavinia's] sweet weight on my heart a weight."¹⁶ Once,

¹³Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁴David Higgins, Portrait of Emily Dickinson (New Brunswick, New Jersey, c. 1967), p. 29.

¹⁵Lyman, p. 3.

¹⁶Rebecca Patterson, The Riddle of Emily Dickinson (Boston, 1951), p. 152.

while Vinnie was ill, she noted that "when the head aches next to you it becomes important."¹⁷ The following excerpt from a letter written in 1863 to Louise and Frances Norcross further establishes Lavinia's protective image: "The nights turned hot, when Vinnie had gone, and I must keep no window raised for fear of prowling 'booger,' and I must shut my door for fear front door slide open on me at the 'dead of night.'"¹⁸ When writing to Mrs. Holland she added, "Vinnie leaves me Monday--Spare me your remembrance while I buffet Life and Time without--."¹⁹

The closeness between the two girls increased in later years. In 1883, Emily referred to Vinnie as her dearest earthly friend, and in her poems hinted the importance of her sister. She added, "the greatest confidences of Life are first disclosed by their departure" (Letters, III, 764; 1883). Perhaps Emily had already made plans for the disposal of her letters and poetry after her death. She therefore realized Lavinia's importance in this duty. Shortly before her own death, Lavinia noted that her sister had been offered marriage several times, but that Emily always said, "I have never seen anyone that I cared for as much as you Vinnie."²⁰ Perhaps another indication of Emily's reluctance to marry can be seen in a letter she

¹⁷Ibid., p. 12. ¹⁸Leyda, II, 79. ¹⁹Ibid., II, 166.

²⁰Ibid., II, 471.

wrote to Mrs. Holland: "an appeal from Vinnie, and I will sit in Love's Back Seat, and let the Horses walk."²¹

Emily's sisterly affection did not extend to Vinnie's cats, which she detested. The animals were always around, sometimes numbering a dozen. Despite her dislike for the cats, Emily must have found them interesting because they became the subject of some of her poems.

Throughout the seven cat poems, the animal is pictured as a dark being, similar to Death. The image of the cat as a death figure is reinforced through Emily's view that birds were the renewing quality of nature, the hope of an afterlife or heaven (Letters, I, 34; 1846). Therefore the death of a bird is like the murder of a saint. Looking upon the cat and bird in this manner, the struggle between Life and Death, or Heaven and Hell, becomes apparent. Both of these ideas are of much concern to Emily, a part of her religious misgivings. The struggle between the cat and bird symbolizes the body's fight for life while caught in the throes of Death, who alone decides the outcome. The cat, with its lack of affection or strong attachment, can end the game at will. So it is with Death, who also chooses his victim at random and destroys life at will.

²¹Theodora Van Wagenen Ward, Emily Dickinson's Letters to Dr. and Mrs. Josiah Gilbert Holland (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1951), p. 138.

Three poems stress the savage, dark nature of the cat and contain thoughts similar to those expressed in some of Emily's letters. Poem #507 is a visual description of the cat's movements when it sights a bird: it flattens its body against the ground, crawls, and finally runs noiselessly and mysteriously as if gliding above the ground. The gliding movement continues until the cat approaches the bird, "Her Jaws stir--twitching--hungry--/Her Teeth can hardly stand--."²² The use of broken short phrases probably intensifies the breathless suspense created for the onlooker. Emily, watching from her bedroom window, is powerless to intercede. She would not be able to stop the cat in time. The poem also contains reference to the immortality of the cat. The same idea is expressed in a letter from Emily to Mrs. Holland. She remarked that Vinnie was upset by the death of one of her cats. Emily, by referring to the cat as "immortal," eased Vinnie's grief.²³ By calling the cat in the poem "Pussy of the Sand," Emily illustrates the cat's similarity to the Sphinx, a mysterious silent object of the Near East that, like Death, is ageless. The use of a Near Eastern object in the poem stresses the exotic origin of the cat and links the poem with thoughts

²²Emily Dickinson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1955), II, 389.

²³Leyda, II, 114.

found in a letter to Frances and Louise Norcross. In the letter Vinnie's sleeping cat is termed "a Sicilian symptom;" dreaming of an "East India Wharf, sage and saucy" (Letters, III, 691; 1881).

The struggle between Life and Death is not limited to the struggle between cats and birds, but also includes mice. Because Lavinia owned at least a dozen cats, Emily was able to observe frequently the behavior of the cat and its prey. She once wrote to the Norcross girls that one of Vinnie's cats was an "ideal cat, has always a huge rat in its mouth, just going out of sight--though going out of sight--it has a peculiar charm."²⁴ Poem #762 details the cat's method of killing mice, the teasing half-hope for life that it extends. The hope diminishes quickly into a death by degrees:

The whole of it came not at once--
 'Twas Murder by degrees
 A Thrust--and then for Life a chance--
 The Bliss to cauterize--
 The Cat reprieves the Mouse
 She eases from her teeth
 Just long enough for Hope to tease--
 Then mashes it to death--
 (Poems, II, #762, 580; 1863)

The linking of the mouse with bliss or the hope for life ties this poem to #507 (see p. 20). Even though she accepts

²⁴Millicent Todd Bingham, Emily Dickinson's Home (New York, 1955), p. 326.

the fact that life must end with death, Emily rejects the sadistic, slow death in favor of a swift end.

Emily's dislike for cats was great. She once sent a cat's tail to Ellen Dick.²⁵ Emily wrote Poem #1102 after expressing in a letter her desire to find assassins for the cats. The entire poem is a description of a dead bird with its closed bill and lifeless limbs:

His Bill is clasped--his Eye forsook--
 His Feathers wilted low--
 The Claws that clung, like Lifeless Gloves
 Indifferent hanging now--
 The Joy that in his Happy Throat
 Was waiting to be poured
 Gored through and through with Death, to be
 Assassin of a Bird--
 Resembles to my outraged mind
 The firing in Heaven,
 On Angels, squandering for you
 Their Miracles of Tune--

(Poems, II, #1102, 775; 1866)

The term "assassin" applies to the cat, and emphasizes the fact that the death of the bird is similar to the murder of an important aspect of life. The fifth and sixth lines elaborate upon the life-death struggle and stress the untimely nature of death, which often comes too early, long before beauty or genius has been given to the world.

Two other poems contain references to cats. In Poem #61 a mouse is "o'er powered by the Cat," and Emily pleads with God to reserve a place in Heaven for the hapless creature (Poems, I, #61, 45; 1859). In Poem #1185 Emily contrasts

²⁵Leyda, II, 482.

the attitude of a dog with that of a cat. Perhaps the dog is Carlo, Emily's pet, or Gilbert's pet. Gilbert might be the "little Boy." In the first stanza Emily affectionately records the movements of the dog and its happiness:

A little Dog that wags his tail
 And knows no other joy
 Of such a little Dog am I
 Reminded by a boy

The Cat that in the Corner dwells
 Her martial Day forgot
 The Mouse but a Tradition now
 Of her desireless Lot.

(Poems, II, #1185, 827; 1871)

The scene shifts suddenly to a cat in the second stanza. The shift of scene creates a feeling of darkness and evil that contrasts sharply with the happy-go-lucky attitude of the dog.

The sinister nature of the cat is further indicated in a letter to Frances and Louise Norcross in which Emily mentioned the addition of a "pilgrim kitten" to the group. The black kitten appeared to be a "lineal descendant of the beautiful hearse-horse," a harbinger of Death (Letters, III, 677; 1880).

Although the sisters held opposing views on cats, they shared a love for growing things. Each was interested in flowers and gardening, each had her own garden. It can be assumed that some poems written by Emily refer to either or both of their gardens. In a letter to Marie Whitney, Emily mentioned her garden as a comforting thing during

Lavinia's absence when the spring flowers were about to bloom: "There are scarlet carnations, with a witching suggestion, and hyacinths covered with promises which I know they will keep" (Letters, III, 862; 1885).

The flower image is continued in Poem #339, set in spring when the flowers are starting to bloom. Beginning "I tend my flowers for thee--/Bright Absentee!" it suggests Emily's work in her garden while Vinnie is away. The picture of the garden is both visual and fragrant:

Carnations--tip their spice--
 And Bees--pick up--
 A Hyacinth--I hid--
 Puts out a Ruffled Head--
 And odors fall
 From flasks--so--small--
 You marvel how they held--
 (Poems, I, #339, 270-1; 1862)

The passage of time within the poem is likened to the visual changes of the flowers that have "tinted and spotted," or bloomed and then lost their petals. Even so some flowers, like the cactus, are still in bloom. Emily compares herself with the flowers and Lavinia with the sunlight. Like the flower that will not bloom but chooses to remain within its calyx, Emily decides to remain within the shelter of her home until Vinnie returns. In the last stanza Emily thinks of herself as an unblooming or dying bud that will return to life only with the return of sunlight--Lavinia. She feels that the flowers' blooming is useless:

Yet--thou--not--there--
 I had as lief they bore
 No Crimson--more--

Emily has no reason to live while her sister is away.

While Emily was caring for her sister's garden, she wrote to Lavinia, "I wept for the little Plants but rejoiced for you" (Letters, II, 435; 1864). These words resemble a line in Poem #339: "Thy flower--be gay--Her Lord--away." "Flower" refers again to the plants and to Emily who strives to be happy despite her sister's absence. In the letter Emily also expresses her desire for Lavinia to remain at home: "Had I loved them as well as I did, I could have begged you to stay with them, but they are Foreigners, now." "Foreigners" refers to the flowers that lose all familiarity during Vinnie's absence.

The second stanza of Poem #541 contains phraseology similar to the letter:

Some such Spice--express and pass--
 Subject to Your Plucking--
 As the stars--You knew last Night--
 Foreigners--This Morning--
 (Poems, II, #541, 415-16; 1862)

Emily describes the scent of a freshly picked flower that fills the air with fragrance. Once the aroma has been dispersed, the scent quickly fades into nonrecognition. The movement of the stars causes an effect similar to the flower's fragrance. As the stars disappear with the passage of night into day and as their positions change

with the rotation of the earth, they seem altered and even unrecognizable. Emily feels that all familiar things, such as the night sky and the freshly picked flowers, have changed. Only the flowers still growing in the garden remain unchanged. As she wrote in the previously mentioned letter to Vinnie, "I hope they [the flowers] will be alive, for Home would be strange except them, now the World is dead."

Many poems, other than those dealing with flowers and gardens, reflect the closeness between the two sisters. Poem #39 reveals Emily's dependent nature at an early age. Again, Lavinia is on a visit. Emily compares her departure with a bird leaving its nest:

It did not surprise me--
So I said--or thought--
She will stir her pinions
And the nest forgot,

Traverse broader forests--
Build in gayer boughs,
Breathe in Ear more modern
God's old fashioned vows--

This was but a Birdling--
What and if it be
One within my bosom
Had departed me?

This was but a story--
What and if indeed
There were just such coffin
In the heart instead?
(Poems, I, #39, 33; 1858)

Note that the word "pinions" can be not only wings, but also shackles. Perhaps by choosing this word, Emily suggests subtly the feeling she has toward her own strict upbringing

and homelife. Emily believes that if Vinnie, in her travels to gay, new places, has forgotten her at home, she will be able to understand. Yet, she realizes how different her attitude would be if Vinnie had really left home forever. The poem ends with Emily's feeling that if Vinnie left home permanently, there would be a death in Emily's heart.

Poem #494 concerns a letter from Emily to Vinnie. It is actually an apostrophe to the letter, to tell Lavinia of the pages of thoughts that were impossible to write. She explains the tiredness that has affected her fingers. The labor put into the writing of the letter is compared to the annoying tugging of a child on Lavinia's dress:

Tell Her--it wasn't a practised writer--
 You guessed--
 From the way the sentence--toiled--
 You could hear the Boddice--tug--behind you--
 As if it held but the might of a child!
 (Poems, I, #494, 376; 1862)

At one point, Emily decides not to tell some news to her sister as it might cause pain--probably about family or friends. The letter is an all-day project: "Tell her-- Day--finished before we--finished."

Emily and Lavinia's relationship is evident throughout Emily's correspondence. While Vinnie was in Boston visiting Mrs. Loring Norcross in 1859, Emily wrote a letter to Mrs. Joseph Haver expressing her loneliness: "I miss the geranium" (Letters, III, 346; 1859). One line from the letter, "I shall miss the clustering frocks at the door, bye and

bye when summer comes, unless myself in a new frock am too," is reminiscent of Poem #37. After thinking of happy moments in the first two stanzas, in the third stanza Emily looks beyond the present to the future when Vinnie will be gone again:

What we touch the hems of
 On a summer's day--
 What is only walking
 Just a bridge away

That which sings so--speaks so--
 When there's no one here--
 Will the frock I wept in
 Answer me to wear?

(Poems, I, #37, 32-3; 1858)

She thinks of the tear stains on her dress after Vinnie's departure, and of the dress's continued wear. The closeness between the two girls can be seen in the choice of the word "touch." It suggests tenderness and delicacy.

The letter to Mrs. Haver concludes with Poem #87, a four-line poem that expresses Emily's final awareness and acceptance of her sister's absence:

A darting fear--a pomp--a tear--
 A waking on a morn
 To find that what one waked for,
 Inhales the different dawn.

(Poems, I, #87, 71; 1859)

The close relationship is further established by the third line. It emphasizes Lavinia's importance in Emily's life.

Poem #584 contains an allusion to childhood that resembles closely the childlike clothing image found in Poem #37 and in the letter to Mrs. Haver: "As constant as

the Childish frock--/I hung upon the Peg, at night" (Poems, II, #584, 447; 1862). The poem describes the gradual alleviation of anguish and loneliness with the passage of time and stresses Emily's upset upon Vinnie's departure. Like a child, she reacts with fear and panic. The continual feeling of loneliness is emphasized by the frock image. Her loneliness eases only while she is asleep, and it returns with the daytime hours during which she wears the dress.

Upon the death of Mr. Lord, Emily wrote to Mrs. J. G. Holland, revealing her eagerness to learn from Lavinia the facts of his death. She states that Vinnie's account "omitted nothing." The letter concludes with a short four-line poem, #1607:

Within that little Hive
Such Hints of Honey lay
As made Reality a Dream
And Dreams, Reality--
(Poems, III, #1607, 1106; 1884)

The "hive" represents Vinnie's mind and indicates her ability to remember the most minute details. The word also refers to the orderly work of bees within the hive. In contrast, "honey" suggests the mad frenzy that attracts some animals to the honey despite the awaiting bee stings. The use of the word reveals Emily's eagerness to hear the story even though it will cause pain and grief. The last two lines of the poem refer to Vinnie's storytelling ability and her

tendency to embellish a story to the point that it becomes difficult to distinguish truth from fantasy.

Poem #611 might have been written during a night while Lavinia was sleeping. The first stanza sounds like a description of Vinnie as Emily sees her in the dark. She seems able to distinguish her sister's silhouette easily because great love illuminates her sister's image. Her love is like a prism giving off true, sincere feelings. By choosing the color violet, the deepest and purest color of the spectrum as well as the religious color of agony and penance, Emily links the depth of her feeling with the unhappiness experienced during life. She believes that she understands Vinnie better because of the years they have been together.

I see thee better--in the Dark--
 I do not need a Light--
 The Love of Thee--a Prism be--
 Excelling Violet--

I see thee better for the Years
 That hunch themselves between--
 The Miner's Lamp--sufficient be--
 To nullify the Mine--

(Poems, II, #611, 470; 1862)

She compares their life to a forgotten mine, and Vinnie to "the miner's lamp," something that has brightened the surrounding darkness. The use of mines is also found in a letter written to Sue. She calls herself the "lone student of the Mines" who "adores alloyless things" (Letters, III, 830; 1884).

Even in later life, Emily found comfort with Vinnie.
Poem #1473 reveals the silent communication between the two
women:

We talked with each other about each other
Though neither of us spoke--
We were listening to the seconds' Races
And the Hoofs of the Clock--
Pausing in Front of our Palsied Faces
Time compassion took--
Arks of Reprieve he offered to us--
Ararats--we took--

(Poems, III, #1473, 1019; 1879)

In older life, the women must have thought often on the
rapid passing of years. Emily suggests that this thought
might have preoccupied their minds on nights when they sat
together in silence in the living room of their home. Even
time seemed to pity them, for he offered them more years of
life.

In her thoughts of death, Emily sometimes included
Vinnie, as shown in Poem #1037:

Here, where the Daisies fit my Head
'Tis easiest to lie
And every Grass that plays outside
Is sorry, some, for me.

Where I am not afraid to go
I may confide my Flower--
Who was not Enemy of Me
Will gentle be, to Her.

Nor separate, Herself and Me
By Distances become--
A single Bloom we constitute
Departed, or at Home--

(Poems, II, #1037, 735; 1865)

Emily accepts her death by envisioning herself in the grave. The "Her" referred to in the second stanza is Vinnie. Emily is calling upon her friends, especially Sue, to be kind to Vinnie for her sake. The last stanza recalls to Sue the closeness she feels for Vinnie. Emily will continue to live through her love for Vinnie. The two of them will be together through their love for each other.

A few poems and letters contain Emily's thoughts on blood ties with the family. In a letter to Mrs. Haver she writes: "I would like more sisters, that the taking out of one, might not leave such stillness. Vinnie has been all, so long, I feel the oddest fright at parting with her for an hour, lest a storm arise and I go unsheltered" (Letters, II, 346; 1859). In a letter to Sue she states, "No Words ripple like Sister's--Their Silver genealogy is very sweet to trace--" (Letters, III, 830; 1884). Poem #587 considers the genealogy of the sisters. Even though the poem deals with their blood relationship, it also emphasizes their closeness:

Empty my Heart, of Thee--
 Its single Artery--
 Begin, and leave Thee out--
 Simply Extinction's Date--

Erase the Root--no Tree--
 Thee--then--no me--
 The Heavens stripped--
 Eternity's vast pocket, picked--
 (Poems, II, #587, 449; 1862)

The second stanza illustrates the intermingling of the two sisters so that without one, the other could not exist. Just as the root is necessary for the tree's existence, Vinnie is necessary for Emily's existence. She is both a source of life as well as an anchor to the world.

Poem #1087 is similar to Poem #587 in that it, too, refers to relatives. It is a description of Emily's loneliness while her kinsman is visiting somewhere close by:

We miss a Kinsman more
When warranted to see
Than when withheld of Oceans
From possibility

A Furlong than a League
Inflicts a pricklier pain,
Till We, who smiled at Pyrrhenees--
Of Parishes, complain.

(Poems, III, #1087, 768; 1866)

She feels that the smaller the distance between the two, the greater her unhappiness.

Even though Emily was dependent upon Vinnie and shared many interests with her, she could never accept Vinnie's religious concepts. The contrast between organized religion in Amherst and Emily's views was one of the major points of difference between the two girls. The revival spirit began in 1850 in Amherst when it was voted at a town meeting "to put a stop to traffic in intoxicating drinks because they were thought to hinder conversion."²⁶ Smoking was also

²⁶Bingham, Emily Dickinson's Home, p. 92.

considered a heinous crime because it was considered a precursor of worse habits. In order to be converted, a person had to complete four phases: "Conviction of deep guilt, a period of despair and struggle, surrender of will, the sudden benediction of peace."²⁷

Emily Dickinson was troubled by the dogma that demanded of converts both fear and remorse. She could not reconcile Puritan fearfulness with her own experiences of God's mercy. She wrote to Abiah Root after the conversion of Abby Woods, "I am one of the lingering bad ones, and so do I slink away, and pause and ponder, and ponder and pause."²⁸ Despite Vinnie's desire for Emily to join the church, Emily remained "alone in rebellion" (Letters, I, 94; 1850). She wrote to Jane Humphrey that "Abby, Mary, Jane, and fartherest of all my Vinnie have been seeking and they all believe that they have found, I can't tell you what they have found, but they think it is something precious--I wonder if it is?" (Letters, I, 150; 1851). In a letter to Austin she wrote, "Vinnie thinks the ancient martyrs very trifling indeed and would welcome the stake in preference to the sunrise."²⁹

Poem #295 clearly illustrates Emily's misgivings about the religious attitudes of Amherst. In the first few lines

²⁷Ibid., p. 91.

²⁸Ibid., p. 93.

²⁹Leyda, I, 228.

she speaks out against the blind faith of many people who would die willingly for their religious faith:

Unto like Story--Trouble has enticed me--
 How Kinsmen fell--
 Brothers and Sister--who preferred the Glory--
 And their young will
 Bent to the Scaffold, or in Dungeons--chanted--
 Till God's full time--
 When they let go the ignominy--smiling--
 And Shame went still--

She employs the words "Brothers and Sister." They include all Christians as well as the members of her family. Emily cannot understand the blind religious acceptance of people who, like Vinnie do not question their beliefs. She believes that she will grow bold at the time of her death:

Feet, small as mine--have marched in Revolution
 Firm to the Drum--
 Hands--not so stout--hoisted them--in witness
 When Speech went numb--
 Let me not shame their sublime deportments--
 (Poems, I, #295, 214; 1861)

Note the use of "revolution." It calls to mind Emily's letter of religious rebellion written to Jane Humphrey (see p. 34). The portion of the stanza quoted above summarizes Emily's views on blind faith. She decides that she must struggle against unquestioning acceptance of religious doctrine and dogma.

As does Poem #295, Poem #725 stresses her disbelief in the Puritanical God of suffering:

Where Thou art--that--is Home--
 Cashmere--or Calvary--the same--
 Degree--or Shame--

I scarce esteem Location's Name--
 So I may Come--
 (Poems, II, #275, 554; 1863)

The use of "Calvary" suggests hardship and suffering that are accepted by most of the people of Amherst as necessary parts of conversion. Emily rejects this idea by stating that neither easy living ("Cashmere") or extreme difficulties ("Calvary") matter to her. The poem is tied to her thoughts of her sister or brother. She feels that if Gabriel, a representative of God, praises her, she would still feel despair if the person to whom the poem is addressed does not receive equal praise.

In a letter to the Hollands, Emily states, "Sisters are brittle things--one is a dainty sum!" (Letters, II, 354; 1859). Emily may refer to Vinnie in a similar manner in Poem #401:

What Soft--Cherubic Creatures--
 These Gentlewomen are--
 One would as soon assault a Plush--
 Or violate a Star--

Such Dimity Convictions--
 A Horror so refined
 Of freckled Human Nature--
 Of Deity--ashamed--

It's such a common--Glory--
 A Fisherman's--Degree--
 Redemption--Brittle Lady--
 Be so--ashamed of Thee--
 (Poems, I, #401, 314; 1862)

The poem stresses the strict, unforgiving nature of Vinnie's religious beliefs. It is ironic that the strong, bigoted

convictions about human weaknesses that were accepted by Lavinia and most of the people of Amherst stemmed from the simple loving teachings of Christ. Emily appears to chide her sister, as well as the others, for her "holier than thou" attitude.

Poem #215 contains child-associated images that establish at an early age Emily's views of God. The first stanza is filled with earthly images familiar to the surrounding area of Amherst--farmers and their chores:

What is--"Paradise"--
 Who live there--
 Are they "Farmers"--
 Do they "hoe"--
 Do they know that this is "Amherst"--
 And that I--am coming--too--

Do they wear "new shoes"--in "Eden"--
 Is it always pleasant--there--
 Won't they scold us--when we're hungry--
 Or tell God--how cross we are--

(Poems, I, #215, 150; 1860)

The word "Farmers" associates the Lord's workers, the angels, with the workers of the field. Like the farmers, the angels are concerned with a crop--the gathering or harvesting of the faithful. The question about wearing new shoes may indicate the materialistic attitude of many people. The entire poem consists of childlike questions and is an appeal for some type of guarantee that Paradise does exist. Emily's desire for assurance indicates her will to believe in its existence. She adopts the same heavenly tone in a letter to Harriette Austin Dickinson:

"Vinnie, who has been Soldier and Angel too since our Parents died, and only carries a 'drawn Sword' in behalf of Eden--the 'Cherubim' her criterion."³⁰

Poem #324 reflects Emily's resentment toward the harsh Calvinistic God of her father. While others pay tribute to God going to church, Emily stays at home:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church--
I keep it, staying at Home--
With a Bobolink for a Chorister--
And an Orchard, for a Dome--

The entire poem is set in nature, which was the renewing aspect of life--a hope for an after-life of some sort. Therefore, even though she could not accept the beliefs of organized religion, she could accept the existence of God in nature. The song of a bird is her choir and an orchard her church. Despite the unconventional method of prayer and meeting that she uses, Emily feels that Heaven is in nature:

God preaches, a noted Clergyman--
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last--
I'm going, all along.
(Poems, I, #324, 254; 1864)

A few poems contain brief reference to Vinnie.

Poem #606 is a description of a summer day as seen from Emily's window. Included in the scene is reference to "One gossiped in the Lane" (Poems, II, #606, 465; 1862).

³⁰Leyda, II, 403.

Because Vinnie was known for her gossipy nature and her involvement in neighborhood feuding, it can be assumed that Emily is describing her sister. Poem #987 contains further reference to a gossiping woman. It is a comparison of the movement of leaves with the chattering of women:

The Leaves like Women, interchange
 Exclusive Confidence--
 Somewhat of Nods and Somewhat
 Portentous inference.
 (Poems, II, #987, 714; 1865)

Poem #486 refers to Emily's position in her family. In it, Emily refers to herself as "the slightest in the House" (Poems, #486, 370; 1862). She describes her room as having a lamp, a book, and a geranium. The flower might be associated with Vinnie, in view of Emily's previous reference to Vinnie's geranium (see p. 27). Emily misjudged her importance. She was her sister's chief concern. Throughout the years Vinnie's life centered upon Emily as she strove to create an atmosphere filled with loyalty, love, and protection.

CHAPTER II

THE ADDITION OF A NEW SISTER

Another great influence on Emily was her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson. Even though she came from a poor family, Sue's girlhood personality charmed both Lavinia and Emily.¹ Because of her quiet disposition, she was known at the Utica Boarding School as "non-demonstrative Sue."² Her story-telling abilities were equal to those of Lavinia, as were her wit and intelligence.³ She became Emily's confidante at an early age and was referred to by Emily as a sister long before she married Austin.⁴ In letters to Austin Emily wrote that Sue "is a dear child to us all and we see her everyday." She continued, "Sue was at our house most all the time and she always makes us happy" (Letters, I, 254; 1853). There are constant references to visits from Sue in Emily's letters to Austin. She often chided

¹Millicent Todd Bingham, Ancestor's Brocades, The Literary Debut of Emily Dickinson (New York and London, 1945), p. 219.

²Rebecca Patterson, The Riddle of Emily Dickinson (Boston, 1951), p. 48.

³Ibid., p. 20.

⁴Emily Dickinson, The Letters of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1958), I, 51.

him for not writing to Sue. She once wrote to Sue that perhaps "a wicked snowstorm" had stopped the mail and had kept her from receiving a long-awaited letter (Letters, I, 168; 1852).

The extreme sentimentality popular at the time was present in Emily's letters to Sue. Exhibiting her affection for Sue, Emily referred to her as her "absent Lover" (Letters, I, 215; 1852). In another letter parodying a hymn, she wrote, "precious treasure thou art mine" (Letters, I, 208; 1852). The following is an example of the sentimental vein present in many letters: "I shall think of you at sunset, and at sunrise, again; and at noon, and forenoon, and always, and evermore--, till this heart stops beating and is still" (Letters, I, 208; 1852). This excessive feeling is also expressed in many of Emily's poems written to Sue and to others, regardless of sex.

The two girls were drawn together by their love for poetry. Emily said to Sue that they were "the only poets, and everyone else is prose."⁵ While there is little evidence that Emily confided in Lavinia about her writing, many of her poems were familiar to Sue, who often discussed them with Emily. In later years Emily often sent a cake or something else to Sue along with a short poem. Emily's

⁵William R. Sherwood, Circumference and Circumstance: Stages in the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson (New York and London, 1968), p. 6.

family, especially her father, was very fond of Sue. Edward Dickinson often relied upon Sue to be the family's hostess at socials.

Emily's early poems show few signs of conflict with Sue. In two such poems Sue is pictured as a bird. Poem #5 was sent to Sue, who was visiting in Geneva, New York. The first two stanzas of the poem compare Sue's return with the springtime leaving of the robin:

I have a Bird in spring
Which for myself doth sing--
The spring decoys.
And as the summer nears--
And as the Rose appears,
Robin is gone.

Yet do I not repine
Knowing that Bird of mine
Though flown--
Learneeth beyond the sea
Melody new for me
And will return.⁶

Emily states that she is not sad when the bird leaves for the summer. She knows that the bird (and hence Sue) will return to teach her new things. Despite the suggestion of discord in the fourth stanza ("Each little doubt and fear,/ Each little discord here/Removed"), the problem is probably only minor and caused by the distance between the two girls.

Poem #92 contains a similar comparison between a friend, perhaps Sue, and a bird:

⁶Emily Dickinson, The Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1955), II, 489.

My friend must be a Bird--
 Because it flies!
 Mortal, my friend must be--
 Because it dies!
 Barbs has it, like a Bee!
 Ah, curious friend!
 Thou puzzlest me!
 (Poems, I, #92, 73; 1859)

The poem indicates Emily's bewilderment at her friend's ability to cause pain. She may be puzzled by Sue's actions. Emily is aware that friendship is fragile and that it can die or fade. However, there seems to be no serious breach in the relationship because she still considers the other person to be her friend.

Emily was always excited to receive a letter from Sue. After such an event she wrote to Sue, "They are cleaning house today, Susie, and I've made a flying retreat to my own little chamber, where with affection and, you, I will spend this very precious hour."⁷

Poem #636 may be a description of the way in which Emily read Sue's letters:

The Way I read a Letter's--this--
 'Tis first--I lock the Door--
 And push it with my fingers--next--
 For transport it be sure--

And then I go the furthest off
 To counteract a knock--
 Then draw my little Letter forth
 And slowly pick the lock--

Then--glancing narrow, at the Wall--
 And narrow at the floor

⁷Jay Levda. *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*

For firm Conviction of a Mouse
Not exorcised before--

Peruse how infinite I am
To no one that You--know--
And sigh for lack of Heaven--but not
The Heaven God bestow--
(Poems, II, #636, 489; 1862)

Emily wishes to be lost in the privacy of her room and her thoughts. She does not want to be disturbed by someone's knocking. The description of opening the letter as if picking a lock reveals the great care she takes with letters. She does not want to destroy any of the writer's efforts. She wishes very much to be with the writer. If she were, she would be in "seventh heaven."

Both girls loved literature and often exchanged books. Poem #669 deals with this interest and emphasizes the closeness of their relationship:

No Romance sold unto
Could so enthrall a Man
As the perusal of
His Individual One--
'Tis Fiction's--to dilute to Plausibility
Our Novel--when 'tis small enough
To Credit--'Tis'nt true!
(Poems, II, #669, 516; 1863)

No novel or fantasy could be so captivating as their own story of friendship. The use of "our" shows the closeness of their relationship. "Credit" is a foreshadowing of the financial image apparent in many of Emily's later poems that express disillusionment and dependence on Sue.

However, with time their friendship became strained. In Emily's desire to remain on friendly terms, she often pleaded for them to return to their childhood days in spirit. In 1853, Emily expressed her desire for the two of them to "ramble away as children."⁸ Continuing with this thought, she also expressed her desire for them to forget "these many years, and these sorrowing cares, and each become a child again" (Letters, I, 211; 1852).

Poem #586 is a reminiscence of childhood and of the past. It was sent to Sue in the hope that she would remember happier days. It deals with childhood promises as well as with the girls' growth into womanhood:

We talked as Girls do--
 Fond, and late--
 We speculated fair, on every subject, but the Grave--
 Of our's, none affair--

We handled Destinies, as cool--
 As we--Disposers--be--
 And God, a Quiet Party
 To our Authority

But fondest, dwelt upon Ourselves
 As we eventual--be--
 When Girls to Women, softly raised
 We--occupy--Degree--

We parted with a contract
 To cherish, and to write
 But Heaven made both, impossible
 Before another night.

(Poems, II, #586, 448; 1862)

Emily felt that a return to childhood and its simplicity was the only way to stabilize and solidify their relationship.

⁸Patterson, p. 82.

In the first two stanzas the girls discuss many different topics, but they exclude death. Like most young people, they are not concerned with death because it is remote and distant and not under their control. The two girls may have been spending the night together and talking about many different things as do most girls at a slumber party. The closeness of their relationship is seen in their willingness to share all secrets with each other. The use of the word "ourself" instead of "ourselves" suggests that their relationship is so close that their personalities and lives have merged into one. It also indicates Emily's dependence upon Sue's happiness and desires as the source for her own joy. The failure of friendship found in the last stanza stresses the weakening relationship that came with maturity. The poem, beginning with a note of fidelity, ends with a rejection of childhood sentiments.

Reminiscences of childhood are included in a letter to Sue, and in Poem #14. In 1854, Emily wrote to Sue that she feared that their friendship might not last forever. She wrote that "perhaps this is the point at which our paths diverge--then pass on singing Sue, and up the distant hill I journey on" (Letters, I, 306; 1854). Similar thoughts are expressed in Poem #14:

One Sister have I in our house,
 And one, a hedge away.
 There's only one recorded,
 But both belong to me.

One came the road that I came--
 And wore my last year's gown--
 The other, as a bird her nest,
 Builided our hearts among.

She did not sing as we did--
 It was a different tune--
 Herself to her a music
 As Bumble bee of June.

Today is far from Childhood--
 But up and down the hills
 I held her hand the tighter--
 Which shortened all the miles--

And still her hum
 The years among,
 Deceives the Butterfly;
 Still in her Eye
 The Violets lie
 Mouldered this many May.

I split the dew--
 But took the morn--
 I chose this single star
 From out the wide night's numbers--
 Sue--forevermore!

(Poems, I, #14, 17-8; 1858)

The first sister referred to is, of course, Vinnie and the other Sue, who lived next door after her marriage to Austin. The next two stanzas emphasize the differences between her upbringing and that of Sue. Perhaps Emily feels that their different attitudes stem from their different backgrounds. The fourth stanza indicates that they are no longer children but still remain close to each other. Even though Emily realizes that "today is far from childhood," she still needs the closeness of their relationship. The line, "I held her hand the tighter" hints at Emily'd dependence on Sue. The note of dependency found in this poem is an important image

in many of Emily's later poems. By comparing Sue to a star, Emily emphasizes the constant shining aspect of Sue, who attracts others by her wit.

Even though the poem and the letter are very similar, there is one marked difference between the two. Emily concludes the poem with "Sue--forevermore," while she concludes the letter with the diverging paths that they must follow. Obviously between the time that the letter was written and the time that the poem was written, some event, perhaps Austin's marriage to Sue, solidified their relationship, at least temporarily.

Emily's letter to Sue in 1855 contains one of the first concrete references to any serious conflict between the two friends. In reference to their friendship she wrote, "If it is finished, tell me, and I will raise the lid on my box of Phantoms, and lay one more love in" (Letters, I, 315; 1855). The box to which she refers is perhaps the little chest in which Emily kept her letters from her closest friends.

The box theme is carried through in Poem #169 written five years later. The poem describes an ebony box which has been unused for many years, perhaps the "box of Phantoms" referred to in 1855. The box may contain letters from dead friends:

In Ebon Box, when years have flown
 To reverently peer,
 Wiping away the velvet dust
 Summers have sprinkled there!

To hold a letter to the light--
 Grown Tawny now, with time--
 To con the faded syllables
 That quickened us like Wine!

In the second stanza Emily holds a letter to the light in the hopes of reading the faded print. The reference to wine and its effect suggests the sentimentality of her letters as well as the feeling of great warmth and intoxication she receives from them. The next two stanzas describe the content of the box: a dried flower, a curl of hair, and other old trinkets. In the last stanza, Emily puts back the box and its contents:

And then to lay them quiet back--
 And go about it's care--
 As if the little Ebon Box
 Were none of our affair!
 (Poems, I, #169, 124; 1860)

Poem #631 contains more references to Sue's marriage to Austin. It was sent to "Sue, 'the Brain,'" at the time of her wedding. The first stanza describes the establishment of their friendship as children:

Ourselves were wed one summer--dear--
 Your Vision--was in June--
 And when Your little Lifetime failed,
 I wearied--too--of mine--

The third line refers to their leaving childhood and its happiness for adulthood. Emily left behind her childhood only because Sue had grown up. The second stanza deals

with Emily's bewilderment after Sue's maturity and her desertion through marriage:

And overtaken in the Dark--
 Where You had put me down--
 By Some one carrying a Light--
 I--too--received the Sign.

Emily felt alone and abandoned after Sue had grown up and found Austin. The third and fourth stanzas relate the different paths their lives will take in adulthood. It is Emily's prediction of the future:

'Tis true--Our Futures different lay
 Your Cottage--faced the sun--
 While Oceans and the North must be--
 On every side of mine

'Tis true, Your Garden led the Bloom,
 For mine--in Frosts--was sown--
 And yet, one Summer, we were Queens--
 But You--were crowned in June--
 (Poems, II, #631, 485-6; 1862)

Sue's home and life would be happier than her own, because Emily felt that her future would be isolated and lonely. Even Sue's garden would be hardier than Emily's. Emily might also be comparing herself and Sue to gardens that are attractive and warm. Sue "led the bloom" because she was much more attractive and outgoing than was Emily. "Frost" suggests the coldness and loneliness of Emily's home life. The poem concludes with the memory of their childhood closeness as contrasted to the future which Emily envisions. Despite the fact that there was no real break in their relationship at this time, it was known that Emily was

upset by Sue's marriage because she felt that Sue would be taken away from her. Later in life, Emily would be saddened by Sue's conduct and by the knowledge that the marriage was not a happy one.

Throughout the years Emily's desire to remain on good terms with Sue alternated between success and failure. Emily was deeply upset by the marital problems Sue and Austin experienced. Sue spread rumors about Emily, even claiming that she had seen her in the arms of a man. Sue helped to start and to circulate rumors about Emily's heartbroken attachment to a nebulous clergyman.⁹ Sue became very involved in the social life of Amherst, and she lost interest in Emily's desire for truth.¹⁰ Sue, while believing in Emily's literary greatness, was jealous of her and she often passed her poems on to others for their opinions. Despite the tension, Sue's niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, felt that the two women often tried to get together during the day to confer by themselves because they liked to share each other's happiness and disappointments. According to her niece, Sue's test of a lesser friend was to let that person read Emily's poems and then watch for a reaction. Despite Mrs. Bianchi's rationalization, Sue did pass poems, regardless of her intention, on

⁹David Higgins, Portrait of Emily Dickinson (New Brunswick, c. 1967), p. 202.

¹⁰Bingham, p. 219.

to others without Emily's permission. She betrayed Emily's trust.

As a result of Emily's desire to remain on good terms with her sister-in-law, the love Emily felt for Sue gradually changed to a feeling of desperation and dependence. She tried desperately to hold on to Sue. Three images emerge from the letters and poems that reveal Emily's desperate clinging to Sue: a financial image, a religious, mystical one, and a power struggle. Throughout these poems and letters Emily chooses words like "owe," "pay," "shrine," "idolator," "queen," and "forfeit." The struggle for domination, superiority, and power is also evident. Sue owns Emily on an emotional level. Emily is tied to her both by Sue's marriage to her brother and by their early friendship. In her attempt to remain on close terms with Sue, Emily feels it necessary to sacrifice or "sell" her individuality in order to receive Sue's good graces. "Own" is used to create an image of dominance, not necessarily financial, but certainly emotional.

Along with the financial image, Sue's mystical power over Emily is evident. In a letter written in 1868, she termed herself "Susan's Idolator" who keeps "a Shrine for Susan" (Letters, II, 458; 1868). This idea is similar to the thought expressed in Poem #1219. The poem deals with idolatry and the loss of Susan:

Now I knew I lost her--
 Now that she was gone--
 But Remoteness travelled
 On her Face and Tongue.

Alien, though adjoining
 As a Foreign Race--
 Traversed she though pausing
 Latitudeless place.

Elements Unaltered--
 Universe the same
 But Love's transmigration--
 Somehow this had come--

Henceforth to remember
 Nature took the Day
 I had paid so much for--
 His is Penury
 Not who toils for Freedom
 Or for Family
 But the Restitution
 Of Idolatry.
 (Poems, III, #1219, 849-50; 1872)

The first two stanzas show Emily's belief that she has lost Sue, even though she still lives close by. Emily realizes that her previous image of Sue has been destroyed and that it is useless to try to regain it. The use of "penury" and "paid" again stresses the financial image and the power struggle between the two women.

Poem #869 was sent to Sue, and it contained more examples of the religious way in which Emily regarded Sue:

Because the Bee may blameless hum
 For Thee a Bee do I become
 List even unto Me.
 Because the Flowers unafraid
 May lift a look on thine, a Maid
 Always a Flower would be.

Nor Robins, Robins need not hide
 When Thou upon their Crypts intrude
 So Wings bestow on Me
 Or Petals, or a Dower of Buzz
 That Bee to ride, or Flower of Furze
 I that way worship Thee.
 (Poems, III, #869, 647; 1864)

The entire poem is set in nature, and Emily compares herself to a bee and a bird. As seen by the use of "blameless" in the first stanza, Emily feels that she is like the bee that cannot prevent its sting because it is an involuntary reaction. It is as if she were the cause of some trouble in the past. The maid in the second stanza is Emily. The use of "unafraid" reemphasizes the strain in their relationship. The last four lines of the poem include all three nature images from the previous stanzas--bird, flower, and bee. Emily concludes that the only way she can show her affection is by becoming unnoticed by Sue. Despite the obvious strain in their relationship, Emily still cares for Sue. By choosing "worship," Emily adds a religious tone to the poem. The religious image ties in with the mystical one present in many other poems.

Poem #456 also contains a religious image. It was sent to Sue as a plea for proof of her feelings toward Emily. Undoubtedly Emily was very insecure and unsure of herself:

So well that I can live without--
 I love thee--then How well is that?
 As well as Jesus?

Prove it me
 That He--loved Men--
 As--I--love thee--
 (Poems, I, #456, 352; 1862)

In the first line Emily is saying that her love for Sue is so great that she can live without its return from others. Emily restates the sincerity and depth of her love for Sue by comparing it to Christ's love for mankind. In this comparison, Emily must feel able to accept the fact that pain, suffering, and even denial will be the rewards for her devotion.

Some poems sent to Sue contain references to financial images used to portray emotional dependence. Poem #69 was written shortly after Austin and Sue were married. It may reveal Emily's attitude toward Sue. She is willing to set aside her own problems in order to help Sue with hers:

Low at my problem bending,
 Another problem comes--
 Larger than mine--Serener--
 Involving statelier sums--

I check my busy pencil,
 My ciphers file away.
 Wherefore my baffled fingers
 Thine perplexity?

(Poems, I, #69, 55; 1859)

Perhaps there is some early breach in the marriage. Emily creates a mathematical image in the second stanza through the use of "ciphers" and "pencil." Emily sets aside her own problems in order to be of some help to Sue. Emily's placement of Sue above her own life and its problems eventually leads to emotional dependence on Sue.

Poem #1028 contains another financial image:

'Twas my one Glory--
 Let it be
 Remembered
 I was owned of Thee--
 (Poems, II, #1028, 732; 1865)

Emily seems to be happy that she "belongs" to Sue. Judging from the poem, there is no evidence that Emily resents Sue at this time. Perhaps this relationship satisfied her need for stability at a critical time in life.

There is also a relationship between Emily's loneliness and Sue's domination over her. Because of her lonely life, Emily felt the need to cling desperately to her friend despite the personal affronts. Sue, knowing Emily's desire to remain on friendly terms, was often able to manipulate their friendship to suit her own desires.

The financial image and the power image appeared in Emily's notes to Sue. In 1868, she wrote "that my sweet Sister remind me to thank her for herself is valuablest" (Letters, II, 459; 1868). In 1878, she sent another note to thank Sue. She commented upon Sue's grievances by saying, "Susan breaks many commandments, but One she obeys-- 'Whatsoever ye do, do it unto the Glory'--Susan will be saved" (Letters, I, 304; 1878). In the same note she reminded Sue to "cherish Power--dear--Remember that stands in the Bible between the Kingdom and the Glory, because it is wilder than either of them." In 1882, Emily replied to

Sue's gift of flowers with the following: "I send My Own, two Answers--Not one of them so spotless, nor so strong as her's--Sinew and Snow in one" (Letters, III, 755; 1882).

The power that Sue held over Emily is emphasized by a letter written to Sue that begins "To miss you, Sue, is Power. The stimulus of Loss makes most Possession mean." The letter concludes with a verse:

Of so divine a Loss
We enter but the Gain,
Indemnity for Loneliness
That such a Bliss has been.
(Poems, III, #1179, 822; 1871)

The words "gain," "loss," "indemnity," and "enter" emphasize the financial image. "Enter" suggests the use of a record book in which all acts of happiness are kept.

In a letter written to Sue in 1878, Emily acknowledged her debt to Sue by saying, "where we owe but a little, we pay" (Letters, II, 603-4; 1878). Again emphasizing her almost reverent feeling for Sue, she added, "Adulation is inexpensive except to him who accepts it. It has cost him Himself." The letter indicates the great psychological dependence that Emily had developed. Despite her awareness of the situation, she seemed unable to overcome Sue's strength. As evidence that her attempts to liberate herself of any dependence on Sue were fruitless, she wrote, "I can defeat the rest, but you defeat me, Susan--" (Letters, II, 632; 1878).

In 1877, Emily sent a poem to Sue that described the closeness of their relationship at that time and indicated the financial image and the power struggle:

To Own a Susan of my own
 Is of itself a Bliss--
 Whatever Realm I forfeit, Lord,
 Continue me in this!
 (Poems, III, #1401, 972; 1877)

The use of "own" and "forfeit" stresses the monetary image of previous poems. "Own" also connotes possession and domination: it stresses the desire for power and control on Emily's part. If their relationship was one of complete love and affection, Emily would have chosen "cherish," "love," and "know."

The power struggle is also found in Poem #210. The poem is the description of the efforts of two swimmers to survive a night in the water:

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 waters borne--
 With eyes in death--still begging raised--
 And hands--beseeching--thrown!

(Poems, I, #201, 143;

The first stanza describes their struggle throughout the night to remain afloat until morning, when one swam to shore. The use of the word "wrestled" indicates a struggle between the two swimmers in their attempts to save

themselves, not one another. The individual efforts are a far cry from the "ourself" found in Poem #586 (see p. 45).

Poem #537 contains Emily's thoughts on drowning, and it also presents ideas similar to those found in one of Emily's letters to Sue: "I would have drowned twice to save you sinking, dear, If I could only have covered your Eyes so you would'nt have seen the Water" (Letters, II, 441; 1865). In the poem Emily hopes that she will be able to prove to Sue her desire to drown in Sue's place. The poem describes the progression of the rising water as it moves from her feet to her mouth. The poem ends with Emily drowning while looking for Sue:

Me prove it now--Whoever doubt
 Me stop to prove it--now--
 Make haste--the Scruple! Death be scant
 For Opportunity--

The River reaches to my feet--
 As yet--My Heart be dry--
 Oh Lover--Life could not convince--
 Might Death--enable Thee--

The River reaches to my Breast--
 Still--still--My Hands above
 Proclaim with their remaining Might--
 Dost recognize the Love?

The River reaches to my Mouth--
 Remember--when the Sea
 Swept by my searching eyes--the last--
 Themselves were quick--with Thee!
 (Poems, II, #537, 413; 1862)

The two poems and the letter deal with drowning and saving. In all three Emily's eyes are open, and only one of the two survives, presumably Sue. In the letter Emily

wishes to close Sue's opened eyes. Even though in the earlier poem, #201, Emily is not willing to drown for Sue, she has changed her mind in Poem #537 and in the letter, because she now would accept death in order that Sue might be saved. This change of heart emphasizes Emily's growing desperation and dependence on Sue. In the earlier poem she realizes their conflict, as well as the fact that only one of them can prevail. Emily seemed determined to struggle for herself. However, with time, Emily's independence slackens. She still realizes that only one of them can dominate, but now feels that her willingness to "save" Sue, or to surrender to her, is actually a sign of her love and devotion. Poem #537 and the letter illustrate Emily's willingness to submit to Sue's control in order to continue their friendship and to keep peace in the family.

From time to time Emily fought Sue's domination. Three poems sent to Sue and referring to Caesar indicate her effort. The first accompanied some flowers from Emily's garden:

Great Caesar! Condescend
 Thy Daisy, to receive,
 Gathered by Cato's Daughter,
 With your majestic leave!
 (Poems, I, #102, 78; 1859)

Emily refers to Sue as Caesar and shows her respect and affection by comparing Sue to the great ruler. In this poem there is no mention of Brutus, an omission which may

show that, at this time, there was no serious breach between the two women. However, the two references found in Letters #430 and #448 suggest a reversal of roles and betrayal on Sue's part. In these letters Emily has become Caesar, the dominant figure. The first reference, "Egypt--thou knew'st--" (Letters, II, 533; 1874) and the second, "For Brutus, as you know, was Caesar's Angel--" (Letters, II, 546; 1875) hint at the master-servant relationship between the two women. Both references reveal a desire for power and domination. "Egypt" refers to the treason committed by Anthony for Cleopatra. The use of Brutus suggests betrayal by a trusted friend.

Emily's poems that reveal reliance on Sue are not the only poems expressing this idea. Emily also wrote about her need for Vinnie. The dependence expressed in the poems dealing with Vinnie is of a different sort (see pp. 26-31). It grows from the sisterly love and the closeness and understanding in their relationship that developed throughout the years. It stems from Emily's loneliness during Vinnie's absence. There is no real conflict present in these poems. However, the poems revealing Emily's relationship with Sue show much conflict. Their relationship is based on the fear of loneliness and the fear of Sue's petty retaliations, as well as Emily's desperate desire to have peace in the family. The poems sent to Sue emphasize Emily's struggle

to overcome Sue's strange hold on her. Therefore, the dependency found in both sets of poems stems from entirely different sources.

CHAPTER III

SIGNS OF CONFLICT

The suggestions of personal conflict in Emily's poems may stem from many different sources. As Sue was often away, the trouble might have been caused by distance. Emily often wrote to Sue pleading for an answer to her last letter. More often than not, the conflict between Sue and Vinnie was the cause of Emily's consternation. This topic will be discussed more fully later on. For now let it suffice to say that in 1873, Lavinia found out that Sue had spread rumors about Emily's private affairs with a minister, probably Wadsworth, whom Lavinia swore she had never met.¹ Despite Madame Bianchi's insistence that Lavinia ran to Sue's house next door in 1854 claiming that "that man" had come to take Emily away, there is no real proof that the event ever took place.² The year given by Madame Bianchi is most assuredly incorrect because the Austin Dickinson home was not built until 1856, two years later.³

¹David Higgins, Portrait of Emily Dickinson (New Brunswick, New Jersey, c. 1967), p. 202.

²Genevieve Taggard, The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson (New York, c. 1930), p. 122.

³Ibid.

Various Amherst citizens were unhappy with Sue. One faculty wife wrote to her son abroad in 1876, "I should be sorry for any who were at the mercy of Mrs. A [Sue]." The same woman later wrote, "Jim Cooper says Mrs. Austin Dickinson is the most deceitful person he ever knew in his life--." Mrs. Todd wrote, "It was Mrs. Dickinson's way to have some 'fuss' on hand most of the time."⁴ Mrs. Todd may be a prejudiced source, but it is obvious that she was not alone in her opinion of Sue. Even though the proof against Sue's character is slim, it is interesting to note that there is little printed evidence to refute the idea.

Even the death of Sue's son, Gilbert, did not soften her enemies. Mrs. Jamison wrote that some people felt that Mrs. Dickinson "would probably make a parade of her grief."⁵ Mrs. Todd indirectly revealed Sue's home life by writing that Austin idolized Gil, who was "the only thing in his house that truly loved him, or in which he took any pleasure."⁶

As can be seen, a number of people, for whatever reasons, felt antipathy toward Sue. Emily tried desperately to overlook Sue's faults, until she faced Sue's attempt to publish some of her poems. After two poems that Sue gave

⁴Jay Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson, II (New Haven, Connecticut, 1960), pp. 261, 405.

⁵Ibid., p. 405.

⁶Ibid., p. 411.

to The Springfield Republican to be published had been altered by the paper to suit conventions of rhyme and imagery,⁷ Emily may have felt that her work had been compromised.

Another circumstance that affected Emily's relationship with Sue was the doing of Mrs. Todd, according to whose diary of 1872, Sue told her not to allow Mr. Todd to visit the Dickinson girls "because they have not, either of them, any idea of morality."⁸ Judging from Mrs. Todd's strong dislike for Sue, the entire episode might have been of her own creation. However, Mrs. Todd surely repeated it, however false, to Lavinia, who, seizing the opportunity to injure Sue's image, passed it on to Emily. Whether Emily believed of Sue's treachery is not known. However, Emily did turn against Sue, and she was not on friendly terms with her for more than a year before her death.

Emily wrote four poems dealing with the strip of land separating the two Dickinson households which had been given to Austin by his father as a wedding present. Their new home, a type of Italian villa, was built nearly adjoining his father's home. The strip of land dividing the two homesteads was covered by gardens and a hedge. Supposedly a path had been worn through the hedge by the frequent

⁷Higgins, p. 162.

⁸Ibid., p. 375.

visiting of the two families. Edward Dickinson often crossed to drink a second cup of tea with Sue before he left for his law office.⁹

The earliest poem was written around 1866, the last in 1873. All of them were sent to Sue. As they were written later in Emily's life, it might be supposed that they were written when the small pathway had fallen into disuse.

The first Poem, #808, might deal with the visitors to Sue's house that Emily could see arrive from her back window:

So set it's Sun in Thee
What Day be dark to me--
What Distance, far
So I the Ships may see
That touch--now seldomly--
Thy Shore?¹⁰

The poem establishes the feeling that Emily obtains from the closeness of Sue's household. Emily, despite her reclusive nature, remained in contact with the world through the comings and goings of Sue's friends.

Poem #1183 was sent to Sue in 1871, perhaps when their problems were becoming serious. The first stanza describes the narrow strip of land between the two houses:

Step lightly on this narrow spot--
The broadest Land that grows

⁹Polly Longworth, Emily Dickinson, Her Letters to the World (New York, c. 1965), p. 86.

¹⁰Emily Dickinson, The Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1955), II, 610.

Is not so ample as the Heart
 These Emerald Seams enclose--
 (Poems, III, #1183, 826; 1871)

Emily employs contrasting words like "narrow" and "broadest" to illustrate the paradoxical size of the land. Even though its distance appears not to be great, it is actually insurmountable. Emily is not able to traverse the distance because of her reclusive nature or because of the tension between the two houses. As the poem was written at about the time of Sue's alleged statements about Emily and Vinnie, the latter supposition might be true.

Poem #1074 carries a similar thought:

Count not that far that can be had,
 Though sunset lie between--
 Nor that adjacent, that beside
 Is further than the sun.
 (Poems, II, #1074, 760; 1866)

Emily deals with the relative distance between two objects. The close object is not necessarily accessible, nor is the far one forbidden. The third line is a direct reference to Austin's home. Even though the two houses are close to each other, their inhabitants have distant viewpoints.

The last two stanzas of Poem #1400 were sent to Sue in a note in 1877:

But Susan is a Stranger yet--
 The Ones who cite her most
 Have never scaled her Haunted House
 Nor compromised her Ghost--

To pity those who know her not
 Is helped by the regret
 That those who know her know her less
 The nearer her they get--

These lines may reveal the undecipherable aspects of Sue's personality. Emily feels that despite their years together, she still does not know Sue. The "ghost" is Sue's soul or innermost thoughts. Emily believes that those who are acquainted with Sue and those who are not are almost equal in their understanding of Sue. These lines were altered somewhat when Emily added them to Poem #1400, which begins with a description of the well in her backyard:

What mystery pervades a well!
That water lives so far--
A neighbor from another world
Residing in a jar

Whose limit none have ever seen,
But just his lid of glass--
Like looking every time you please
In an abyss's face!

Water and its dwelling place in the well are personified by Emily, who is mystified by the depth and the reflection of the water. The "jar" is the well itself encased in the earth. The "lid of glass" is the top layer of water that carries the reflection. The third stanza contains Emily's amazement at the grass, unafraid at the closeness of such an eerie, depthless object:

The grass does not appear afraid,
I often wonder he
Can stand so close and look so bold
At what is awe to me.
(Poems, III, #1400, 970-1; 1877)

However, this stanza can be interpreted differently in the light of the note sent to Sue. Even though the poem

appears to be a comment on the wonders and mysteries of the well, it may well be a comment on Sue. Perhaps because the last two stanzas were originally directed to Sue, Emily might still be referring to her. (Emily also sent the final version of the poem to Sue.) Perhaps Emily thought of Austin as the grass. If so, Emily cannot understand how he can exist so close to Sue whom she cannot understand and whom she considers to be so awesome.

Poem #1285 was written around the time that Mrs. Todd told her diary of Sue's statement on the Dickinson girls' morality. It might well refer to Emily's passing Sue's house, in a sense, when she walked by it in her room looking out her window, or when she walked by it in her garden. It expresses both Emily's awareness of the tension in their relationship as well as her opinion that the breach is of Sue's doing. It is rare for Emily to blame Sue:

I know Suspense--it steps so terse
 And turns so weak away--
 Besides--Suspense is neighborly
 When I am riding by--

Is always at the Window
 Though lately I descry
 And mention to my Horses
 The need is not of me--
 (Poems, III, #1285, 893; 1873)

There are many poems or notes sent to Sue that express awareness of Sue's deceit and cruelty. There is a change in tone apparent in these poems as opposed to the tone of the dependence poems, where Emily tried desperately to

cling to Sue and to accept her at all costs. The conflict poems and notes express no such desire. Even though they appear throughout Emily's lifetime, the most emphatic ones occur later when the schism is deepest.

As stated before, Emily's efforts to remain on friendly terms with Sue were not always successful. The early conflict poems surely must have been written during a time of alienation when Emily, objectively and without emotion, could view Sue as she really was. Perhaps in this way Emily felt that she could free herself from Sue by learning and accepting the truth about her character.

Poem #428 was sent to Sue in 1862, perhaps as an attempt to reconcile herself with Sue's weaknesses. It reveals Emily's early tendency to discard or shun people who had some flaw in their personality or character:

Taking up the fair Idea,
 Just to cast her down
 When a fracture--we discover--
 Or a splintered Crown--
 Makes the Heavens portable--
 And the Gods--a lie--
 Doubtless "Adam"--scowled at Eden--
 For his perjury!

Cherishing--our poor Ideal--
 Till in purer dress--
 We behold her--glorified--
 Comforts--search--like this--
 Till the broken creatures--
 We adored--for whole--
 Stains--all washed--
 Transfigured--mended--
 Meet us--with a smile--

(Poems, I, #428, 331-2; 1862)

The poem recounts the shattering of Emily's idolized image of Sue. She is unable to adjust to the tarnished ideal. After time has passed and the shattered image has reasserted itself, she is able to re-form part of her previous opinion. The use of "crown," "transfigured," "Heavens," and "Gods" reiterates the previously discussed images of power and royalty. However, as Emily once wrote, "A spell cannot be tattered and mended like a coat";¹¹ hence she cannot really accept Sue's imperfections. The use of "stains," "mended," "broken" reveal her deeper thoughts. Sue is no longer flawless. No matter how much Emily tries to forget, there still remain defects or weaknesses below the surface.

Poem #1071 details Emily's ideas on perception, applicable to Sue:

Perception of an object costs
 Precise the Object's loss--
 Perception in itself a Gain
 Replying to it's Price--

The Object Absolute--is nought--
 Perception sets it fair
 And then upbraids a Perfectness
 That situates so far--

(Poems, II, #1071, 757; 1866)

Emily seems fully aware that by perceiving clearly she may lose the worth of an object or of a person. Because the poem was sent to Sue, it may be assumed that Sue is the object being scrutinized and analyzed. Emily weighs the

¹¹Emily Dickinson, The Letters of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1958), III, 673.

worth of perception against the result of her scrutiny, the loss of respect and love that she feels for Sue. Yet in her continual drive for truth, Emily feels no loss is too great. Despite the appearance of perfection, careful study will reveal minor flaws. What effect does scrutiny have on Emily? Is she able to accept flaws in others? The key is found in the second stanza in the word "upbraid" or reproach. Emily, by using this word, reveals her inability to accept imperfection in someone she admires. As a result, she becomes reproachful and disenchanted.

Emily sent several unfriendly poems to Sue, perhaps in an attempt to analyze Sue's motives and thereby free herself from Sue's control. The poems are much less clouded by emotion than are previous analytical attempts.

Poem #810 may be critical of Sue:

Her Grace is all she has--
 And that, so least displays--
 One Art to recognize, must be,
 Another Art, to praise--
 (Poems, II, #810, 611; 1864)

The first two lines describe Sue's only endearing quality as grace, which she fails to display often. In other words, Sue rarely shows her good side to Emily, who concludes by stating that it takes a special effort to find this enduring quality and another effort to praise it. The use of "art" suggests a long, searching process that must be highly developed in order to recognize Sue's best, and perhaps only, outstanding quality.

Poem #989 was sent to Sue perhaps after she had failed to thank Emily:

Gratitude--is not the mention
Of a Tenderness,
But it's still appreciation
Out of Plumb of Speech.

When the Sea return no Answer
By the Line and Lead
Proves it there's no Sea, or rather
A remoter Bed?

(Poems, II, #989, 715-6; 1865)

Emily clarifies the meaning of gratitude by saying that it is not achieved by mere thanks. Gratitude does not necessarily have to be expressed verbally to be felt. The second stanza compares this feeling with measuring the sea's depth. Just because the depth of the sea cannot be measured by line and weights does not mean that the bottom is not there.

Poem #1453 seems to describe Sue:

A Counterfeit--A Plated Person--
I would not be--
Whatever strata of Iniquity
My Nature underlie--
Truth is good Health--and Safety, and the Sky.
How meagre, what an Exile--is a Lie,
And Vocal--when we die--

(Poems, III, #1453, 1006; 1879)

Emily emphasizes her views on truth. She feels that a person who lies to himself is the victim of fakery. She contrasts truth with lies by equating good health with truth, and death with lies. Perhaps she is warning Sue to give up her gossipy ways. As the poem was also written about the same time as Mrs. Todd's accusation, perhaps

Emily was prompted to write it because of Sue's lying about Vinnie and her. The impact of Mrs. Todd's statement must have been extreme.

Poem #1539, sent to Sue in 1882, contains a sharp comment on Sue in a parody of a child's prayer:

Now I lay thee down to Sleep--
 I pray the Lord thy Dust to keep--
 And if thou live before thou wake--
 I pray the Lord thy Soul to make--
 (Poems, III, 1539, 1060; 1882)

Emily obviously still cared for Sue, at least to some degree, for she entrusts her to God. The third line is paradoxical. It is perhaps a plea to Sue or a warning to give up her superficial ways and to become a sincere person again. By using a child's prayer, Emily has recalled two things to Sue: their happy childhood days together, and Gil's death. Emily undoubtedly is trying to change Sue by an appeal to the sentiment of her memories. In the last line Emily asks God, upon Sue's desire to return to the caring world, to make a soul or integrity for her. This line emphasizes that Sue has no worthwhile quality at present. The poem resembles some of Emily's dependence poems in that it shows some degree of affection for Sue and a desire to help her. However, unlike the dependence poems, Emily may be completely aware of Sue's faults and does not try to amend them through her own efforts, but through God's. Probably she feels that it would almost take a miracle to help Sue.

Poem #1486 continues with Emily's analysis. The first three lines were sent to Sue in a note:

Her spirit rose to such a height
 Her countenance it did inflate
 Like one that fed on awe.
 More prudent to assault the dawn
 Than merit the ethereal scorn
 That effervesced from her.
 (Poems, III, #1486, 1027; 1880)

Sue became so inflated by her own conceit and self-importance that she appeared awesome to others. The use of "ethereal" along with "scorn" creates a paradoxical image. Sue's self-image is combined with the image that Emily sees.

Perhaps Poem #479 is another comment on Sue:

She dealt her pretty words like Blades--
 How glittering they shone--
 And every One unbarred a Nerve
 Or wanted with a Bone--

She never deemed--she hurt--
 That--is not Steel's Affair--
 A vulgar grimace in the Flesh--
 How ill the Creatures bear--

To ache is human--not polite--
 The Film upon the eye
 Mortality's old Custom--
 Just locking up--to Die.
 (Poems, I, #479, 367-8; 1862)

The first stanza might describe Sue's deviousness. She says that Sue never consciously realizes her sarcasm or the cruelty she inflicts. The third stanza describes Emily's attempt to hide her unhappiness. The last line suggests that through her behavior Sue is killing any deep feeling Emily might have for her.

A short poem written in 1880 illustrates the tension between the two women. Emily worried about Sue's gossipy nature and her love of meaningless chatter. She knew that Sue only cared for appearances and busied herself with this scintillation.¹² Emily, in her constant drive for Truth, was worried about Sue's superficial attitude. The four lines are very explicit:

Opinion is a flitting thing,
But Truth, outlasts the Sun--
If then we cannot own them both--
Possess the oldest one--
(Poems, III, #1455, 1007; 1880)

Emily calls upon Sue to realize the shortlived nature of opinion because opinion changes with the slightest action. She asks Sue to re-evaluate her attitudes and strive for truth, an absolute, nonchanging commodity. Despite the absence of money, the use of "own" creates a financial image.

There are three versions of Poem #1366. The first was written in 1876, the second in 1878, and the last in 1880. The second version was most likely sent to Sue. The first version might have been sent to Austin who, according to Vinnie, was upset by Sue's extravagances:

Brother of Ingots--Ah Peru--
Empty the Hearts that purchased you--
(Poems, III, #1366, 944; 1876)

¹²Higgins, p. 219.

The use of "ingots" emphasizes the financial wealth that Austin had accrued. "Ophir" is a Biblical land rich in gold. Emily may be saying that Sue's heart or love for Austin was shallow.

Version B was probably sent to Sue with the following note: "Sue--to be lovely as you is a touching contest, though like the Siege of Eden impracticable--Eden never capitulates." This version illustrates Sue's devious nature:

Sister of Ophir--
 Ah, Peru
 Subtle the Sun
 That purchase you--
 (Poems, III, #1366, 944; 1878)

With time, Emily's relationship with Sue deteriorated. The joy she had received from her new sister was often replaced by disillusionment. Emily could not understand why Sue drew away from her to become part of the social scene of Amherst. In an attempt to comprehend, Emily analyzed Sue's personality and her behavior. The effort revealed few answers; it created only problems, thereby deepening the schism in their relationship.

CHAPTER IV

RIVALRY

Despite their grievances, Sue and Lavinia were the most influential women in Emily Dickinson's life. In one, she found solace and an emotional outlet for her work; in the other, security, protection, and home so that she could write in peace. Lavinia, like Emily, was quick-witted and known for her sense of humor. Each sister was proud of the other, Emily of Lavinia's beauty and Lavinia of Emily's genius. Both dressed oddly in later life and clung to their home. They were often critical of their neighbors and of strangers.

Nevertheless, their differences were also many. Lavinia was not shy like Emily, and she was known for her sharp tongue. She had a penchant for dramatics which she used freely to amuse her family and friends. Lavinia was the practical sister who ran the house, but she was known throughout the neighborhood as a bitter, cynical, gossipy woman, while Emily was known for her kindness.

Sue, too, resembled Emily in several ways. She possessed the same quick wit and sense of humor. She was interested in writing and writers, as witnessed by the many books and notes on literary topics sent between the two

women. Emily valued Sue's critical opinion greatly. They also shared a love for Austin.

Yet Sue and Emily were very different in other ways, which became more obvious with time. Sue became interested in social prestige, while Emily was concerned with the search for Truth. Sue busied herself with Amherst gossip, and as her time became more and more occupied with her family and social obligations, she saw Emily less. However, despite the conflict in later years, Emily still clung to her at times. This may be explained in part by their strong childhood bond, and in part by Sue's consideration when Emily was so desperately in need during the years of her mental distress.

The occasional rivalry between Sue and Emily had no counterpart in the relationship between Emily and Lavinia. No trace of competing can be found in any of her letters. The two sisters seemed to be fairly well-suited to each other, and loyal too. Lavinia guarded Emily closely; the slightest disturbance would send Lavinia into an angry rage. For example, once when Sue had not answered Emily's last letter, Lavinia wrote to Sue a scathing letter saying, "Emilie very unhappy and me vexed for not writing to her."¹

¹John Cody, After Great Pain, The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1971), p. 461.

She would not leave the matter to Emily, who maintained that Sue must have had a good reason for not writing.

The lack of rivalry between Emily and Vinnie was more than made up for in Vinnie's relationship with Sue. Even though Sue was welcomed by most of the Dickinson family (Emily called her "sister"), Lavinia was at first more cautious. But in 1853, she relented temporarily and wrote to Austin, "I confess I did wrong to suspect her [Sue], but some times I feel rather depressed & then I see everything through cloudy spectacles."² However, Vinnie's attempts at friendship did not last long. She soon became Sue's enemy and their continual feuding lasted throughout life.

What was the cause of the rivalry that separated the two most important women in Emily's life? A great part was played by jealousy. In the beginning, there may have been the mutual suspicion of two beautiful women. Later Vinnie may have resented the fact that Sue became the official hostess for Edward Dickinson, a position that Lavinia, no doubt, felt rightfully belonged to her. And as spinsterhood drew near, Lavinia could reflect that Sue was happily married, and furthermore the unchallenged first lady of Amherst. She was perhaps hurt that Emily had turned to Sue, not to her, during the time of her mental

²Jay Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson (New Haven, Connecticut, 1960), I, 273.

distress. And although she was proud to be the sister of the brilliant Emily, she was no doubt sorry that she was not a part of the creative excitement, as was Sue.

But not all the trouble between Sue and Vinnie was the result of Vinnie's jealousy. Sue was no angel either. Perhaps unknowingly she antagonized Vinnie by "mistreating" Emily and by spreading rumors about the two sisters. Lavinia was rightfully enraged when she learned through Mabel Todd that Sue had shared some of Emily's poems with others. Sue knew the effect this would have on Lavinia, and she may have taken delight in upsetting her.

As the years passed, Lavinia's protectiveness became as glaring as her jealousy. She could not stand for anyone to be critical of Emily. The thought that Sue could criticize, even though constructively, some of Emily's poems enraged her. Lavinia was furious over Sue's mistreatment of Emily's feelings. She valued Emily's privacy above all things.³ As a result, Lavinia may have erupted when she learned that Sue had published one of Emily's poems without her permission. No doubt Vinnie's verbal confrontations with Sue were heard and talked about throughout the neighborhood.

It can be imagined that Lavinia had few friends in later life. (Sue, too, may have had few friends, but many

³Cody, p. 448.

people were tied to her because of her social position.) The few which Vinnie had were often chosen because they had fallen out with Sue. Such is the case of Mabel Loomis Todd who, in 1881, came to Amherst as a young bride. At first the attractive Mabel was accepted into Amherst's society by Sue, who made her a frequent guest at her home. However, it appears that perhaps Sue was not the only Dickinson interested in Mabel. There were rumors that Austin had fallen in love with Mabel and that he had told her of his unhappy home-life.⁴ Sue, who might have also been jealous of Mabel's beauty and youth, confronted Mabel with her knowledge of "the affair." As a result, Sue ostracized Mabel from the social gatherings of Amherst.⁵

At about the same time, Lavinia began to show an interest in Mabel, perhaps partly because Sue disliked her, and invited her into the Dickinson household on several occasions to play the piano for Emily. Even though Emily refused to see Mabel, she sent her flowers, poems, and notes expressing her appreciation and friendship.

Throughout the years, Lavinia had been tearing away at Sue's relationship with Emily. Yet finally she needed Mabel Todd's help to destroy their friendship. When Mabel

⁴John Evangelist Walsh, The Hidden Life of Emily Dickinson (New York, c. 1971), p. 32.

⁵Ibid., p. 33.

told Lavinia that Sue had warned her to keep her husband away from the Dickinson girls, Lavinia was able to complete her work. Emily severed relations forever with Sue, and when Emily died, Lavinia accused Sue of shortening her life several years by her subtle cruelties.

What was the effect of the tension between Lavinia and Sue on Emily? She was too sensitive a person to ignore a problem which must have been very conspicuous to the entire family. Was she able to accept the hatred and verbal warfare between the two women she loved most? How did the "cold war" influence her poetry? Surely, she wrote emotionally about the impact their fighting had on her.

Close examination of Emily's poetry reveals that their hatred was not unnoticed by Emily. There are several poems, all except two of which were written in the last years of her life, that deal with the conflict between the two, Lavinia's volcanic nature, the healing that time brings, and the peace attempts made between the two households. Even though a few of the poems were written in the late 1860's most were written after 1874, the year that Edward Dickinson died. Until his death, Lavinia was known to have tried to control her animosity.⁶

A large part of the conflict may have been due to Lavinia's fiery disposition. As she grew older, Lavinia

⁶David Higgins, Portrait of Emily Dickinson (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1967), p. 200.

seemed to develop the undesirable attributes of her father. The entire neighborhood, not just the family, was probably aware of her combustible nature. She felt that the neighbors were interested in her comings and goings and that they spied on her every action.⁷ Once she wrote to Austin after some neighborhood disturbance,

I shall go first to Mrs. Luke & give her a piece of my mind, then Mrs Fay another piece & see what effect will come of it. Mrs Sweetster has interfered with my business long enough & now she'll get it, I tell you. I'll bring up all past grievances & set them in order before her & see what she'll say for herself. I hope to start by 11 oclock in the morning to deliver my feelings. I certainly shall.⁸

Because of her disposition, Emily termed Lavinia "Vesuvius at Home."⁹ She probably was referring directly to Vinnie in Poem #1705:

Volcanoes be in Sicily
And South America
I judge from my Geography
Volcanoes nearer here
A Lava step at any time
Am I inclined to climb
A Crater I may contemplate
Vesuvius at Home.¹⁰

Emily recognizes Vinnie's combustible nature and realizes

⁷Cody, pp. 461, 469.

⁸Millicent Todd Bingham, Ancestor's Brocades, The Literary Debut of Emily Dickinson (New York, 1945), p. 358.

⁹Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁰Emily Dickinson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1955), III, 1153.

how close Vinnie is to being a human volcano. The "Lava step" is the stairway in the Dickinson home. Emily says that she can witness the behavior of a volcano, its erratic eruptions, in her own house by watching Vinnie burst into a rage over minor incidents, maybe caused by small quarrels with Sue.

Emily wrote a few other poems dealing with volcanoes. The first, #175, was written in 1860 and it reveals her close observation of Lavinia's desire to control her temper:

I have never seen 'Volcanoes'--
 But, when Travellers tell
 How those old--phlegmatic mountains
 Usually so still--

Bear within--appalling Ordnance,
 Fire, and smoke, and gun,
 Taking Villages for breakfast,
 And appalling Men--

If the stillness is Volcanic
 In the human face
 When upon a pain Titanic
 Features keep their place--

If at length, the smouldering anguish
 Will not overcome--
 And the palpitating Vineyard
 In the dust, be thrown?

If some loving Antiquary,
 On Resumption Morn
 Will not cry with joy "Pompeii!"
 To the Hills return!

(Poems, I, #175, 128-9; 1860)

The first two stanzas contain a warning that volcanoes or people may appear to be calm on the outside when all along they are smouldering inside, waiting to erupt. Even under

great displeasure or pain, Vinnie tries to control herself, perhaps for her father's sake. However, she is not always successful, and she erupts with fury like a volcano that destroys a vineyard. The vineyard may represent the land, its gardens and hedge, that separates the two Dickinson households. Emily says that Vinnie's temper has often destroyed the good relationship between the two houses. Emily, the "loving Antiquary," is glad to see Lavinia's anger spent and the air of normality returned.

Poem #601 is another poem dealing with volcanoes. A variant of the poem is most easily related to Vinnie:

A still--Volcano--Life--
That flickered in the night--
When it was dark enough to show
Without endangering sight--

A quiet---Earthquake style--
Too smouldering to suspect
By natures this side Naples
The North cannot detect

The Solemn--Torrid--Symbol--
The lips that never lie--
Whose hissing Corals part--and shut--
And Cities--slip--
slide--
melt--

Therefore--we do life's labor--
Though life's Reward--be done--
With scrupulous exactness--
To hold our Senses--on--

(Poems, II, #601, 461; 1862)

The first stanza again emphasizes the quiet surface Emily sees in Lavinia as well as a side of her that is not usually visible. The third and fourth lines of the second stanza

reflect her awareness that some may not know of Vinnie's darker side until it is too late. The third stanza is a description of Vinnie. "The lips that never lie" reveal Emily's trust. She seems willing to believe anything that Lavinia tells her. The last two lines of this stanza reveal the destructive power of Vinnie, who can destroy false friends and hopes with her words. These lines also reveal Emily's willingness to accept her sister's words. Therefore it is easy to see why Emily would have believed Mrs. Todd's slanderous accusations of Sue. The last stanza is a suggestion of her views on duty. She seems to accept Vinnie's role as protector. The last line is reminiscent of the psychosis which Cody describes as evident during the time this poem was written. Perhaps Emily's willingness to accept her sister as a refuge from the outside world was the result of her years of mental distress. When she realized Sue was too busy to help her, Emily may have turned to Vinnie.

Poem #1748 reveals Vinnie's suspicious nature:

The reticent volcano keeps
 His never slumbering plan;
 Confided are his projects pink
 To no precarious man.

If nature will not tell the tale
 Jehovah told to her
 Can human nature not proceed
 Without a listener?

Admonished by her buckled lips
 Let every prater be

The only secret neighbors shun
Is Immortality.

(Poems, III, #1748, 1174-5; ?)

As the poem was probably written late in life, the first lines reflect upon Vinnie's antisocial attitude which she shared, to some extent, with Emily. The first stanza suggests Emily's efforts to discuss Vinnie's problems before she explodes. The second stanza discloses the reason for her anger. Someone, perhaps Sue, has told a secret. Even though Emily believes she is tolerant of human frailty, Vinnie is not. "Buckled lips" is a reflection on Vinnie's appearance, who in later life was said by her enemies to resemble an old hag. The use of "neighbors" may lend credence to the idea that Lavinia is upset by something that her neighbor, Sue, has said.

Several of Emily's poems reflect upon the power of words to inflict pain. As both Sue and Vinnie were known for their quick tongues, Emily may have been writing about the verbal assaults that she herself had witnessed. Poem #8 was sent to Sue around the year 1858, and it may be witness to the arguments between the girls or between Sue and Emily:

There is a word
Which bears a sword
Can pierce an armed man--
It hurls it's barbed syllables
And is mute again--
But where it fell
The saved will tell
On patriotic day,
Some epauletted Brother
Gave his breath away!
(Poems, I, #8, 11; c. 1858)

Emily emphasizes the penetrating power of well-chosen words and their ability to "twist in the wound." She is aware of Sue's ability to choose especially cutting words in order to get the most pain out of them (see p. 75).

Poem #118 may also be Emily's observation of Sue and Lavinia's rivalry, since they were always among Emily's childhood companions and they are the only two of her companions that did not seem to get along. In the poem Emily is puzzled and hurt by their actions:

My friend attacks my friend!
 Oh Battle picturesque!
 Then I turn Soldier too,
 And he turns Satirist!
 How martial is this place!
 Had I a mighty gun
 I think I'd shoot the human race
 And then to glory run!
 (Poems, I, #118, 86; 1859)

Emily admits that she, too, sometimes becomes a part of the argument, as well as does Austin, the "he" in the poem.

Yet she does not feel that Austin is aware of the seriousness of the situation, as seen in the use of "satirist."

Emily is strongly aware of the division these arguments cause in her family. The last three lines reveal her disgust and contempt for the pettiness of the two girls.

Poem #430, in its first two stanzas, may reveal Emily's efforts to accept the pettiness of Lavinia and Sue's rivalry and to ignore it as much as possible:

It would never be Common--more--I said--
 Difference--had begun--

Many a bitterness--had been--
 But that old sort--was done--

Or--if it sometime--showed as 'twill--
 Upon the Downiest--Morn--
 Such bliss--had I--for all the years--
 'Twould give an Easier--pain--

(Poems, I, #430, 333; 1862)

Emily seems to feel that all minor differences are over between the two girls, perhaps as a result of Vinnie's promise to Austin to try to love Sue. Obviously both girls are making a conscious effort to maintain peace. Emily surely hopes that even if some dissension does occur in the future, it will be minor.

The feeling of goodwill did not last for long. Poem #952 may contain Emily's later awareness of the combustible situation at home. Possibly, it is her plea to Vinnie and Sue to measure their words before they speak:

A Man may make a Remark--
 In itself--a quiet thing
 That may furnish the Fuse unto a Spark
 In dormant nature--lain--

Let us divide--with skill--
 Let us discourse--with care--
 Powder exists in Charcoal--
 Before it exists in Fire.

(Poems, II, #952, 691; 1864)

The first two lines hint that Austin, or perhaps Edward Dickinson, might have been the cause for the most recent flare-up between the two women.

Poems #309 and #1581 are interesting in that they reveal the neutrality that Emily strives to retain. Poem #309

was sent to Sue, perhaps in realization of Vinnie as the cause of tension:

For largest Woman's Heart I knew--
 'Tis little I can do--
 And yet the largest Woman's Heart
 Could hold an Arrow--too--
 And so, instructed by my own,
 I tenderer, turn Me to.
 (Poems, I, #309, 230; 1862)

Nevertheless, Emily must feel that it is her duty to stand by Vinnie, although reluctantly. She may have sent the poem to Sue in order to make clear to her her understanding of the situation.

Poem #1581 was first attached to the following note sent to Sue: "Tell the Susan who never forgets to be subtle, every Spark is numbered--." The note concludes with a verse:

The farthest Thunder that I heard
 Was nearer than the Sky--
 And rumbles still--
 Though torrid Noons
 Have lain their Missiles by--
 (Poems, III, #1581, 1090; 1881)

The poem is a warning to Sue about her verbal attacks on Vinnie. Emily is aware of Sue's guilt in this matter, just as she was aware of Vinnie's in Poem #309. The "thunder" Emily refers to is Vinnie's verbal attacks. Thunder also might refer to Vinnie's grumbling. Emily warns Sue that even though she may have forgotten the incident, Vinnie has not. Emily is aware of Vinnie's long memory for such events and her slowness to forgive. She is warning Sue to beware.

As time progressed, Emily was certainly aware that the friction between Sue and Vinnie would simply not disappear. The two women seemed to be drifting further and further apart. Eventually Emily resigned herself to the fact that her efforts would not heal the breach made by years, but that time might have some sort of healing effect on the situation.

Three poems which support this idea can be applied to the tense situation between Sue and Vinnie. The first stresses the element of time, plus the importance of the strong foundation of early friendship:

Long Years apart--can make no
Breach a second cannot fill--
The absence of the Witch does not
Invalidate the spell--

The embers of a Thousand Years
Uncovered by the Hand
That fondled them when they were Fire
Will gleam and understand--

(Poems, III, #1383, 953; 1876)

Emily seems to be calling to Vinnie to reconsider the childhood friendship she had with Sue (Vinnie was the first of the two Dickinson girls to become friends with Sue). Time cannot break friendships or bonds between two people. Even though long silences or dissensions occur, these people are still tied together by their early bonds.

Poem #1529 mentions early warfare between the two houses:

'Tis Seasons since the Dimpled War
 In which we each were Conqueror
 And each of us were slain
 And Centuries 'twill be and more
 Another Massacre before
 So modest and so vain--
 Without a Formula we fought
 Each was to each the Pink Redoubt--
 (Poems, III, #1529, 1054; 1881)

The "Dimpled War" is a reference to the mouth area. The poem illustrates woman's ability to insult another even while smiling sweetly. Obviously one of the two girls became carried away in her gossip about the other. Emily eventually became involved in the verbal onslaught, which hurt all three of the women. She hopes that a long time will pass before such a senseless battle takes place again. Emily realizes that there was no strategy behind the conflict. The lack of gain due to friction can be seen in the use of "Pink Redoubt." A "redoubt" is a stronghold used during warfare to hold provisions. In other words, Emily is saying that each used the same ammunition, the same words, but tried to turn them to her own advantage. However, because they shared the same stronghold, neither of them won. The battle was senseless.

Two poems probably give evidence that Emily tried on some occasions to be the peacemaker. Poem #905 is the first:

Between my Country--and the Others--
 There is a Sea--
 But Flowers--negotiate between us--
 As Ministry.
 (Poems, II, #905, 665; 1862)

The "Sea" between the two houses is a garden. After a verbal battle or confrontation with Vinnie, Emily sends flowers to Sue in the hope of softening her animosity and of reasserting her love.

Poem #1229's first stanza reveals Emily's reasoning to Vinnie as an attempt to calm her resentment:

Because He loves Her
 We will pry and see if she is fair
 What difference is on her Face
 From Features others wear.
 (Poems, III, #1229, 855; 1872)

Emily calls upon Vinnie to accept Sue because she is Austin's wife and for that reason alone worthy of her affection. Even though Sue is different from them, she still is a member of the family.

Both Lavinia and Sue were tied to each other by their love for Emily; yet this love was not enough to stop their quarrels. Lavinia was jealous of Sue and she seized any opportunity to destroy Emily's ties to her. Sue, too, antagonized Vinnie and indirectly, Emily. Caught in the middle, Emily sincerely wished that they would remain close and on friendly terms throughout their lives. The women's unwillingness to do so troubled Emily greatly and saddened her remaining years.

CHAPTER V

A PRECARIOUS STATE OF MIND

According to Dr. John Cody of the High Plains Comprehensive Community Mental Health Center in Hays, Kansas, Emily suffered from a psychosis following the marriage of her brother. He supports his theory by Emily's description of her psychological state in her letters and poems. She wrote to her cousins that she had "a snarl in the brain which don't unravel yet."¹ She wrote to Sue that her absence "insanes" her so.² Several of her poems appear to deal with the loss of reasoning ability. Her brain seems to break in two. Cody feels that many of her poems portray "the ego in collapse, crushed between irreconcilable opposing forces: on one side, prodigious inner needs, on the other, unyielding environmental facts."³

Psychosis, according to Cody, consists of the encroachment upon the consciousness of desires, memories, and fears from the unconscious life. The earliest signs of Emily's

¹Emily Dickinson, The Letters of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1958), II, 424.

²Ibid., I, 229; 1853.

³John Cody, After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Massachusetts, c. 1971), p. 294.

inner struggle are simple depression or sadness. Further indications of an impending psychotic episode may be minor gaps in reality that last only a few moments. Yet, as Cody states, every psychotic episode probably gives advance notice of its coming through experiences of estrangement and de-personalization. However, the problem can make itself known suddenly. Often the person realizes something is happening to him. As the problem becomes worse, he feels the world grows more and more hostile. After a psychotic event, as when a book the subject knew he put on the mantel turns up on the end table, he will often turn to someone he loves for comfort. Eventually anguish turns to terror. He feels the sympathetic loved one is only acting. Everyone, including God, has turned against him for some unknown reason. After the first psychotic breakdown, the person usually is swept by a feeling of peace and great indifference as he retreats into himself.⁴

Despite the contention of many researchers that Emily did not suffer any mental illness, it is interesting to fit her behavior into the symptoms just described. Poem #631, written shortly after Austin's marriage, reveals her sadness and depression (see pp. 49 and 50). The world began to seem strange to Emily during the early 1860's when she wrote to the Norcross cousins of her fear to stay alone during Vinnie's

⁴Cody, p. 313.

absence of a "prowling 'booger'" (Letters, II, 424, #281; 1863). In a letter to Vinnie she termed her flowers "foreigners" (see p. 25). She wrote to Austin, "I dont know why exactly, but things look blue, today, and I hardly know what to do, everything looks so strangely" (Letters, I, 255; 1853). Emily searched for someone to turn to during the decade of her illness. Lavinia and Austin were often away or too absorbed with their own lives. Her father too was absent much of the time, and her mother could offer no help. In desperation Emily turned to Sue, her childhood friend, in an effort to receive solace and comfort. No matter what the differences between the two women, Emily was willing to sacrifice all in return for the shelter she found with Sue. She sent at least six poems to Sue on the subject of her mental state.

Poem #305, sent to Sue, contains the horror and fear Emily must have felt after her first symptoms of mental distress:

The difference between Despair
And Fear--is like the One
Between the instant of a Wreck--
And when the Wreck has been--

The Mind is smooth--no Motion--
Contented as the Eye
Upon the Forehead of a Bust⁵--
That knows--it cannot see--

⁵Emily Dickinson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1955), I, 230-1.

The poem supports Dr. Cody's theory that Emily has recovered from a distress and is filled with a feeling of peace and indifference. The choice of words is significant. The use of "despair," "fear," and "wreck" in the first stanza reflects the inner torment Emily has experienced. The "wreck" is like the destruction of her perspective. The second stanza reflects Emily's attitude after the psychosis has passed. The use of "smooth," "eye," and "bust" reveal the condition of her mind. She experiences no mental activity, only peace. By comparing herself to a bust, she suggests her loss of contact with the world. She is like stone, indifferent to all others.

Written in 1862, Poem #310 is possibly Emily's reflection upon a psychotic moment:

Give little Anguish--
 Lives will fret--
 Give Avalanches--
 And they'll slant--
 Straighten--look cautious for their Breath--
 But make no syllable--like Death--
 Who only shows his Marble Disc--
 Sublimer sort--than Speech--

She seems to believe that her mental anxieties are only temporary and that they will disappear soon. Despite the despair she may have suffered, she thinks that her mind will be able to compensate for its problems. She does not feel that her problem is serious enough to cause death. Through this poem it is obvious that Emily tried to analyze her mental process.

The first stanza of Poem #303 was sent to Sue in 1864. Along with the rest of the poem, it might be an illustration of withdrawal:

The Soul selects her own Society--
Then--shuts the Door--
To her divine Majority--
Present no more--

Unmoved--she notes the Chariots--pausing--
At her low Gate--
Unmoved--an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat--

I've known her--from an ample nation--
Choose One--
Then--close the Valves of her attention--
Like Stone--

(Poems, I, #303, 225; 1862)

The process of withdrawal from society is clear in the first two lines. The use of "unmoved" and "stone" again suggests withdrawal. The selection of one person to turn to, in this case Sue, is in line with Cody's theory.

Poem #670 likens the mind to a house:

One need not be a Chamber--to be Haunted--
One need not be a House--
The Brain has Corridors--surpassing
Material Place--

Far safer, of a Midnight Meeting
External Ghost
Than it's interior Confronting--
That Cooler Host.

Far safer, through an Abbey gallop,
The Stones a'chase--
Than Unarmed, one's a'self encounter--
In lonesome Place--

Ourself behind ourself, concealed--
Should startle most--

Assassin hid in our Apartment
Be Horror's least.

The Body--borrows a Revolver--
He bolts the Door--
O'erlooking a superior spectre--
Or More--
(Poems, II, #670, 516-7; 1863)

Emily feels that minds are similar to buildings in that they both can be haunted or possessed. She thinks that the greatest danger or fear comes from within. Emily uses fearful situations to illustrate the impact of her inner torment. The mind can create far worse tortures than any haunted house could contain. She would rather meet a real ghost than face the inner terror. She would rather run through a churchyard and be chased by the dead than to meet the anguish created inside. In the last stanza Emily contemplates a form of suicide, the death of her being and brain. This is a far cry from her first reaction to her mental problems.

Poem #683 was also sent to Sue:

The Soul unto itself
Is an imperial friend--
Of the most agonizing Spy--
An Enemy--could send--

Secure against it's own--
No treason it can fear--
Itself--it's Sovereign--of itself
The Soul should stand in Awe--
(Poems, II, #683, 529; 1862)

Emily realizes the seriousness of her disorder. She knows that her mind can be a friend or a tormentor. The use of "spy" supports Cody's theory that the psychotic often feels

that the world is menacing to him. In the first line of the second stanza Emily reveals the inner struggle between her healthy mind and her illness. If her mind could overcome the anxieties it faces and be its own ruler through rational thought, then she would have accomplished an awesome task.

Poem #821 is another description of Emily's withdrawal from society:

Away from Home are some and I--
An Emigrant to be
In a Metropolis of Homes
Is easy, possibly--

The Habit of a Foreign Sky
We--difficult--acquire
As Children, who remain in Face
The more their Feet retire.

(Poems, II, #821, 621; 1864)

The first stanza is a description of Emily's mental state. She is alienated from society, as can be seen through the use of "emigrant." The third line suggests that Emily, at this time, feels completely alone, cut off from her own family and from Sue. The second stanza reflects upon the first symptoms of psychosis. The "foreign sky" is the mental distress which alienates her from her family. The use of "difficult" stresses Emily's desire to fight her mental problems. She says she has struggled to overcome them. The last two lines illustrate Emily's withdrawal, not just from the family, but into herself. The "feet" represent the scurrying, retreating activity of her mind.

Poem #937 was not sent to Sue, but it is closely related to Poem #992, which was. If Cody's assumptions are correct, it is probably a description of Emily's mental state that shows her awareness of the situation:

I felt a Cleaving in my Mind--
 As if my Brain had split--
 I tried to match it--Seam by Seam--
 But could not make them fit.

The thought behind, I strove to join
 Unto the thought before--
 But Sequence unravelled out of Sound
 Like Balls--upon a Floor.

(Poems, II, #937, 682; 1864)

Emily is aware that her mind is becoming uncontrollable. The "cleaving" or breaking apart of her mind illustrates the spilling of the unconscious into the conscious world of reality. Emily tries desperately to reorganize her mind and to keep it rational and coherent. She strives to keep her thoughts in natural order. However, as seen in the last two lines, her attempts fail. She uses the rolling of balls of yarn across the room to illustrate her frame of mind. Her desire to think in normal, sequential order fails. "Ravelled" is used to show the tangle made of logical thought in her brain. "Out of Sound" illustrates the internal silence that comes with psychosis. Sequence or rational thought is beyond recall by auditory methods.

Poem #992, which was sent to Sue, echoes the structure of #937:

The Dust behind I strove to join
 Unto the Disk before--
 But Sequence ravelled out of Sound
 Like Balls upon a Floor--
 (Poems, II, #992, 718; 1865)

Emily obviously is trying to share her illness with Sue. She feels the need to turn to her girlhood friend. The first two lines, though similar, are somewhat different from those in Poem #937. "Dust" may mean the logical thought that has been hidden for some time in her mind, or in the "cobweb of the Soul." The absence of a dash in the last line of this poem may be of some importance. Emily has come to accept her illness a little more readily. The use of a dash in the previous poem emphasized her fearful, panicky state at the time, whereas now she can deal with the problem a little better.

Poem #1142 might be Emily's concept of the mind. It was written after her early psychotic tendencies became manifest, and it may express indirectly her desire for an orderly mind:

The Props assist the House
 Until the House is built
 And then the Props withdraw
 And adequate, erect,
 The House support itself
 And cease to recollect
 The Auger and the Carpenter--
 Just such a retrospect
 Hath the perfected Life--
 A past of Plank and Nail
 And slowness--then the Scaffolds drop
 Affirming it a Soul.
 (Poems, II, #1142, 801; 1869)

The use of building tools stresses the orderly nature of the normal mind. However, because Emily's mind (or house) requires scaffolding for support, it is somewhat shaky. She is slow to accept the return of good mental health because she realizes it may be only temporary.

As Emily's mental state deteriorated she clung to Sue, perhaps as her last foothold in the sane world. She was willing to sacrifice all in order to find shelter in Sue. For approximately ten years, 1860-1870, Emily wavered on the brink of insanity. There is no way to measure Sue's aid in helping Emily overcome these severe mental disorders.

CHAPTER VI

TO DEATH AND BEYOND

Shortly after Austin's marriage to Sue, Emily's letters seem to change, partially as a result of her psychosis. As her mental state began to deteriorate, her letters lost their informal spontaneity and became stylized, with many references to the Bible and death. Two days before her birthday, Emily cut out an ad for tombstones. She wrote several letters to Mrs. Holland referring to "a reaper whose name is Death." She continued, "I found a verse like this, where friends should 'go no more out' and there were 'no tears' . . . and I wished as I sat down tonight that we were there--not here."¹ As early as 1852 Emily acknowledged her preoccupation with death in a letter to Jane Humphrey: "I think of the grave very often, and how much it has got of mine, and whether I can ever stop it from carrying off what I love; that makes me sometimes speak of it when I dont intend" (Letters, I, 197-8; 1852).

Much has been said about Emily's preoccupation with death. Many writers feel her withdrawal was based on her great fear of losing friends to death. As she once wrote

¹Emily Dickinson, The Letters of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1958), II, 323-4.

to Higginson, "Perhaps Death--gave me awe for friends--striking sharp and early, for I held them since--in a brittle love--of more alarm, than peace" (Letters, II, 423; 1863).

Emily was fully aware of the precarious nature of life. Her interest in death can be partially attributed to her mental instability. According to Cody, preoccupation with death is a symptom of some forms of psychosis. Yet psychosis need not be the only reason for her interest.

There were various factors that could have contributed to Emily Dickinson's interest in death. First of all, death was frequent in her experience, often striking her young friends. And then the literature of the time also was important, as can be seen in her sentimental letters. Some authors she read had a tendency to dissect and analyze every aspect of death. They emphasized the sentimental, the melodramatic, with heavy stress upon the subjective. Emily may have sent poems on death to Sue because she felt that Sue, like herself, was in part a romantic. Later on, she might have sent such poems to comfort and console Sue in the loss of friends and family.

Such factors as these caused Emily's deep interest in death. She was very curious about all the details. Once she eagerly awaited Vinnie's reconstruction of Mr. Holland's death. Emily wrote vividly and enthusiastically of the death of Frazar Stearns, how his sword and cap fell

when he died. She "enlightened" her Norcross cousins with details of his last words.

When Sue's sister Mary died in childbirth Emily wrote to Sue, "I have parents on earth . . . but your's are in the skies, and I have an earthly fireside, but you have one above, and you have a "father in Heaven where I have none-- and sister in heaven--" (Letters, I, 201-2; 1852). In 1854 she asked Sue, "did you ever think Susie, that there had been no grave here? To me, there are three, now. The longest one is Austin's--I must plant brave trees there . . . and Susie, for you and Vinnie I shall plant each a rose" (Letters, I, 285; 1854). She wrote from Washington, "And if you love me, come soon--this is not forever, you know, this mortal life of our's" (Letters, II, 317; 1855).

As seen in some of her poems, Emily's great desire was to be able to experience death without actually dying. One of the earliest poems on the subject was sent to Sue in 1859:

Exultation is the going
Of an inland soul to sea,
Past the houses--past the headlands--
Into deep Eternity--

Bred as we, among the mountains,
Can the sailor understand
The divine intoxication
Of the first league out from land?²

²Emily Dickinson, The Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1955), I, 61.

To the movements of the sea, Emily likens the passing of the soul, which seems to drift out past familiar landmarks into the deep sea of death. "Exultation" and "intoxication" indicate that Emily did not regard death as sinister but more as a happy release from this life. She feels that the soul will be wildly happy upon its death.

Poem #153, sent to Sue in 1860, illustrates the amount of thought Emily must have given to dying. It emphasizes death's variety:

Dust is the only Secret--
 Death--the only one--
 You cannot find out all about
 In his "native town

Nobody knew his Father--
 Never was a Boy--
 Had'nt any playmates,
 Or "Early history"--

Industrious--Laconic--
 Punctual--Sedate--
 Bold as a Brigand--
 Stiller than a Fleet--

Builds, like a Bird--too--
 Christ robs the nest--
 Robin after Robin
 Smuggled to rest--

(Poems, I, #153, 110; 1860)

There is no way to experience death by inquiry. The third stanza lists some of the qualities of Death: always punctual, sometimes sedate, sometimes bold. The fourth stanza contains a nature image that ties in with Christ's efforts. Death seems to gather the souls into its nest while Christ steals them from Death in order to give them eternal rest. There

is still another interpretation of the final stanza. Perhaps Emily feels that death is an end except for those who believe in Christ. These souls, saved by their belief in an after-life, are granted eternal peace. The poem expresses no fears on Emily's part. She almost seems to admire or to be fascinated by the perversity of Death.

Poem #79 expresses Emily's excitement at death ("Going to Heaven!/I don't know when--"). She realizes she is not dying yet and is very glad to still be alive. She appears to be exhilarated by death. She wants to have a place saved for her near Sophia and Benjamin Newton. She is also relieved to know that her departed friends believed in Heaven and that they are resting in Its peace. The last stanza states:

I'm glad I dont believe it
 For it w'd stop my breath--
 And I'd like to look a little more
 At such a curious Earth!
 I'm glad they did believe it
 Whom I have never found
 Since the mighty Autumn afternoon
 I left them in the ground.
 (Poems, I, #79, 64; 1859)

Yet she expresses fear that if she accepted the belief, she might be forced to give up her earthly life before she is ready. The last few lines indicate a search to find her lost friends, who died several years apart. The "Autumn afternoon" may well be the day upon which she finally accepted their deaths.

Three more poems were sent to Sue that express Emily's fascination with death. However, in these poems she has changed her views. Death has become final, there is no other life but this one.

The first of these poems, #1106, expresses Emily's realization that life is speeding by:

We do not know the time we lose--
The awful moment is
And takes it's fundamental place
Among the certainties--

A firm appearance still inflates
The card--the chance--the friend--
The spectre of solidities
Whose substances are sand--
(Poems, II, #1106, 778-9; 1867)

Mankind is oblivious to the fact that the living approach death rapidly. She feels that even though objects and people appear to be real, concrete, and tangible, they have only the appearance of reality. They are actually nothing in a world of nothingness.

Poem #1295 is also a pessimistic interpretation of dualism. Emily believes that life takes place on two levels, the actual and the supposed:

Two Lengths has every Day--
It's absolute extent
And Area superior--
By Hope or Horror lent--

Eternity will be
Velocity or Pause
At Fundamental Signals
From Fundamental Laws.

To die is not to go--
 On Doom's consummate Chart
 No Territory new is staked--
 Remain thou as thou art.
 (Poems, III, #1295, 898-9; 1874)

The second stanza develops a scientific approach to eternity or death. It will be governed scientifically within the laws of Nature, not religiously within the laws of God. The first two lines of the last stanza indicate Emily's feeling that there is no place for a departed soul to go. The soul is not placed on a chart, it is not cared for or looked after. There is no after-life or new place for the soul. She concludes that it is better to stay alive than to die.

Poem #1454, also sent to Sue, is similar:

Those not live yet
 Who doubt to live again--
 "Again" is of twice
 But this--is one--
 The Ship beneath the Draw
 Aground--is he?
 Death--so--the Hyphen of the Sea--
 Deep is the Schedule
 Of the Disk to be--
 Costumeless Consciousness--
 That is he--
 (Poems, III, #1454, 1006-7; 1879)

She seems to be directing the poem to those who are not religious believers of an afterlife. She feels that there is only one life. Death is a gap in living, a break in eternity. Almost like an electric current, once broken it ceases to function--so is Life. The use of "Costumeless Consciousness" creates an unusual effect. Living is

consciousness because it includes the awareness of actions, objects, and people. It includes all the trimming mankind adds to it. The putting on of a costume illustrates man's becoming more aware or sensitive. "Costumeless" illustrates life stripped of its awareness. Therefore, it is no longer life, it is nothing. Death is a void of nothingness.

Poems #79 and #153 express no real fear of death, whereas Poems #1295, 1106, and 1454 all are pessimistic. There may be some relationship between Emily's own experiences and her opposing viewpoints in the poems. Poem #76 and Poem #153 were written between 1859 and 1862, when Emily may have experienced no loss of friends by death. The closest deaths to these years were those of Benjamin Newton in 1853 and Sophia Holland several years before.³ As a result, the pain she had suffered from death was easing, and so was her pessimism. Even though Emily was still fascinated by death, she was not distraught. As she wrote in 1858, "I can't stay any longer in the world of death."⁴ Yet at about the same time she began to suffer periods of mental anxiety when she felt alien, strange, and alone. Her religious beliefs seemed to waver, and she assumed God had turned against her, as had the children in

³Thomas H. Johnson, Emily Dickinson, An Interpretive Biography (Cambridge, Massachusetts, c. 1955), pp. 235-7.

⁴Millicent Todd Bingham, Ancestor's Brocades, The Literary Debut of Emily Dickinson (New York, 1945), p. 407.

Heaven who "might point at me and stare." In 1865, in the middle of the ten years of anxiety, Sue's niece died. The pain the death caused Sue was very upsetting to Emily. In 1874, her own father died, followed within four years by Samuel Bowles. All three of these events shocked her fragile mind. She could seem to find no hope in Heaven or in God. Her religious beliefs were fractured, as can be seen in the poems of the time, #1295, #1106, and #1454. In all three poems she has given up her hope in an afterlife. She holds no hope for the dead.

Four poems sent to Sue reveal Emily's efforts to observe the exact moment when life leaves the body. Perhaps in a desire to gain some glimpse of the afterlife, or perhaps in an effort to become accustomed to such a frightening event, she used the death scene as a means to prepare for her own death.

Poem #71 is the first poem that was sent to Sue which reveals Emily's knowledge of death through her own observations. It was written in 1859, judging from its similarity to a letter written in 1846, but it may be a recollection of Sophia Holland's death in 1844. When Emily was thirteen years old, Sophia Holland died of "brain fever." Emily visited the sick child daily until her passing. The event was a shocking one for Emily, who did not reveal her thoughts

on the event to anyone for two years,⁵ at which time she wrote to Abiah Root, "There she lay mild & beautiful as in health & her pale features lit up with an unearthly--smile" (Letters, I, 32; 1846). Note the similarity between the letter and the poem:

A throe upon the features--
A hurry in the breath--
An extacy of parting
Denominated Death.

An anguish at the mention
Which when to patience grown,
I've known permission given
To rejoin it's own.

(Poems, I, #71, 57; 1859)

The first stanza is a description of the dying person's face: breathing becomes laborious, a spasm passes over the face, followed by a look of peace and happiness. The second stanza describes the effect on Emily. She is easily upset by the mention of Sophia's death but finally adjusts to it. With the passage of time, Emily is able to forget and thereby let Sophia's soul rest. The last two lines signify Emily's acceptance. She realizes that she cannot brood forever over Sophia's passing. The poem is Emily's attempt to share with Sue, who also was a friend of Sophia, the intense grief and sorrow she had experienced.

Poem #315, a description of death's process, was entitled "The Master" when sent to Sue in 1862. It is a combination of Death and religion:

⁵David Higgins, Portrait of Emily Dickinson (New Brunswick, New Jersey, c. 1967), p. 56.

He fumbles at your Soul
 As Players at the Keys
 Before they drop full Music on--
 He stuns you by degrees--
 Prepares your brittle Nature
 For the Etherial Blow
 By fainter Hammers--further heard--
 Then nearer--Then so slow
 Your Breath has time to straighten--
 Your Brain--to bubble Cool--
 Deals--One--imperial--Thunderbolt--
 That scalps your naked Soul--
 (Poems, I, #315, 238; 1862)

It is a vivid, frightening poem in which Death is likened to a piano player practicing before a recital. The player is trying to find new chords and new musical combinations. The image might have been a memory of the player in Emily's church or in her home. The player is like Death, who looks for different ways to take life away from man. It is also experimenting. The use of "brittle" emphasizes the fragility of life. Dying can occur by degrees, little by little. The description of its sudden striking, similar to a thunderbolt, also resembles the rapidity of death resulting from a stroke or heart attack.

Poem #816 may carry through with the blow of death concept in the previous poem, as well as with a religious tone:

A Death blow--is a Life blow--to Some--
 Who, till they died--
 Did not alive--become--
 Who had they lived
 Had died, but when
 They died, Vitality begun--
 (Poems, II, #816; 618; 1864)

The poem was sent to Sue near the time of her niece's death, perhaps in an attempt to comfort Sue. According to Cody, Emily was at the time suffering from psychosis. If so any disturbance to Sue, her shelter and comfort, would tend to upset Emily. The poem is a reassurance regarding an after-life. Believers "live" in Christ after their own physical death. The fourth line is puzzling: "Who had they lived/ Had died." She may be saying that if Sue's niece Susan Smith had lived longer, she might have lost her religious beliefs as Emily had. If so, there would have been no hope of an afterlife for her. So, in a way, it was fortunate that the infant died before she was old enough to question her religious beliefs.

Part of Poem #809 was also sent to Sue at the time of her niece's death:

Unable are the Loved--to die--
 For Love is immortality--
 Nay--it is Deity--
 (Poems, II, #809, 611; 1865)

The poem reveals Emily's belief that love is the connection between the dead and the living. It is the string that ties the two worlds together; it is eternal, like a god. Love is the hope for the dead, not Heaven.

Emily did not remain satisfied with analyzing the look of Death or the varied processes of Death. She carried her quizzical thoughts even to the grave. She often imagined how she herself would look in her grave. She shared her

thoughts with Sue by sending her three poems that describe dead women, perhaps Sue or Emily, in their graves. They may also have been descriptions of dead friends. Two of the poems, #58 and #154, might also be references to Sophia Holland. The third, granting some leeway in the date of its writing, might have been sent to Sue after her niece's death in 1865. If Cody's assertions and the timetable are correct, these morbid poems were all written during the years of psychosis when Emily must have felt that Sue would understand. She certainly sent them in the belief that her efforts would not be rebuffed. In a sense, Emily might have been trying to repay Sue for comfort and solace received during the years of mental distress. In return, Sue was allowed to share Emily's research into death. Therefore Sue's own passing, as a result of the poems, might be easier. Or Emily might have taken her questions to Sue in the hope of learning something from Sue's experiences with death.

The first poem, written in 1859, is typical of the questioning poems. She wishes to know what the dead girl experienced in the moment of passing. What did she see? "Who knows but this surrendered face?"

The second poem, #154, might be a mixture of Emily's seeing herself in the grave along with seeing the body of a dead friend. It is similar in tone to the poems about Emily which reveal her apparent insignificance in the family

Except to Heaven--she is nought.
 Except for Angels--lone.
 Except to some wide-wandering Bee,
 A flower superfluous blown.

Except for winds--provincial--
 Except for Butterflies
 Unnoticed as a single dew
 That on the Acre lies

The smallest Housewife in the grass,
 Yet take her from the lawn
 And somebody has lost the face
 That made Existence--Home--
 (Poems, I, #154, 111; 1860)

The last two lines indicate that Emily might not have known the girl. This is seen in the use of the word "somebody." Emily was known to have clipped obituaries and ads for tombstones from the paper, so the girl may have been someone she came across in an obituary. Whatever the source of inspiration, the last two lines point out Emily's belief that everyone needs to be needed and loved by at least one person.

Another poem sent to Sue, #671, seems to mingle death with Emily's concept of eternity:

She dwelleth in the Ground--
 Where Daffodils--abide--
 Her Maker--Her Metropolis--
 The Universe--Her Maid--

To fetch Her Grace--and Hue--
 And fairness--and Renown--
 The Firmament's--To Pluck Her--
 And fetch Her Thee--be mine--
 (Poems, II, #671, 518; 1863)

The dead girl is with Nature, who is continually self-renewing.

The use of "dwelleth" in the present tense stresses the concept of life continuing through Nature.

When Emily's poems deal with an actual death of a loved one, they are not subject to supposition as the preceding three were. One such poem, #1597, was sent to Sue after Judge Lord's demise. After her own father's death, Emily became strongly attached to Judge Otis P. Lord, a family friend. Although eighteen years Emily's senior, Lord seemed to find in her a kindred spirit. There were rumors that during Emily's stay in Boston in 1864 and 1865 he saw her often.⁶ Emily found comfort in Lord, who, after the death of his wife, seemed to take solace in Emily. Emily wrote to Lord three letters of great emotion in which she termed herself "Daisy" and him "Master."⁷ After 1877, their relationship evolved into a type of engagement with marriage imminent, as can be seen in one of Emily's letters to Lord where she wrote, "Emily Jumbo, Sweetest name, but I know a sweeter--Emily Jumbo Lord."⁸ In 1884, Lord died unexpectedly. Reaching out to share her grief with someone, she turned, half-heartedly, to Sue, sending her the following restrained poem:

⁶John Evangelist Walsh, The Hidden Life of Emily Dickinson (New York, c. 1971), p. 189.

⁷Ibid., pp. 188-9.

⁸Ibid., p. 234.

'Tis not the swaying frame we miss,
 It is the steadfast Heart,
 That had it beat a thousand years,
 With Love alone had bent,
 It's fervor the electric Oar,
 That bore it through the Tomb,
 Ourselves, denied the privilege,
 Consolelessly presume--
 (Poems, III, #1597, 1100; 1884)

The reference to "steadfast Heart" may be a reflection upon the twenty years of their relationship. The lack of deep emotion in the poem mistakenly leads to the idea that Emily did not react, to any great degree, to his death. To understand Emily's feelings one must consider to whom the poem was sent. Perhaps Sue knew of Lord's relationship with Emily and disapproved of it. Yet, at the time of his death, Sue, remembering previous death poems, must have waited for some reaction from Emily. Sue knew that she would probably be called upon to comfort Emily, as Emily had tried to comfort Sue in the death of her niece and her sister. Emily, knowing of Sue's views on Lord, did not want to be ridiculed or scolded by her. (It is doubtful that she would react in this manner, but Emily's fear might have been a hangover of her psychosis.) Emily also might have feared that Sue would share her reaction with her friends and neighbors, as she had been known to do on previous occasions. Choosing to keep her grief to herself, she sent the above poem to Sue. Later, Emily wrote with great emotion of his death in Poem #1632 which begins, "So give me back to death."

Despite Emily's somewhat subdued sharing with Sue of Judge Lord's death, she expressed more freely her emotions at the time of the deaths of Charlotte Bronte and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Upon the death of Charlotte, Emily wrote, "Oh what an Afternoon for Heaven, when 'Bronte' entered there!" (Poems, I, #148, 106; 1859). Poem #312 was sent to Sue after the death of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, from whom many believe that Emily received inspiration and style:

Her--"last Poems"--
 Poets ended--
 Silver perished with her Tongue--
 Not on Record bubbled Other--
 Flute, or Woman, so divine--
 Not unto it's Summer--Morning
 Robin--uttered--half--the tune--
 Gushed too free for the adoring,
 From the Anglo-Florentine--
 Late--the Praise--
 'Tis dull--conferring
 On a Head too high to crown--
 Diadem--or Ducal Showing--
 Be it's Grave--sufficient Sign--
 Yet, if We--No Poet's Kinsman--
 Suffocate--with easy Wo--
 What and if Ourself a Bridegroom--
 Put Her down--in Italy?
 (Poems, I, #312, 235; 1862)

The poem is much more emotional than the one sent after Lord's death, because the two women shared the same feelings about Mrs. Browning. The last four lines illustrate their great emotion for the poet. Emily feels that they could die easily of sadness. She also realizes that if their feelings for a woman whom they had never met were so strong, the grief felt by Robert Browning must be even greater. "Ourselves"

is reminiscent of the same word used in Poem #586 (see p. 46), and it emphasizes the unity between the two.

Emily knew how much Sue loved her niece, who was named for Sue. When she died in 1865, Emily found another chance to share her views on death with a sympathetic person. Poem #991 is a comparison of the girl to rose petals. It too contains reference to an afterlife in Nature:

She sped as Petals from a Rose
Offended by the Wind--
A frail Aristocrat of Time
Indemnity to find--
Leaving on nature--a Default
As Cricket or as Bee--
But Andes in the Bosoms where
She had begun to lie--
(Poems, II, #991, 717; 1865)

The girl's death is the result of a weakness in Nature. However, her passing causes great grief to Sue and in turn to Emily even though her death is insignificant to Nature.

Even though the women were tied together by the deaths of friends and relatives, the greatest tragedy that they both shared was the death of Gilbert Dickinson, Sue's youngest child. Despite Emily's possible lack of interest in the child during his first two years (there is no mention of him in any of her letters at the time), Emily eventually became enthralled with the boy whom she referred to as "Austin's Baby." His baby charm enraptured both households. He became a link between Emily and Sue because both were so deeply attached to him. Emily was delighted by Gil, who would run

neighborhood errands for her. She often playfully encouraged him to chase Vinnie's cats. Emily made sure that there were cookies or sweets on hand for his visits.

Suddenly in October, 1883, Gil contracted typhoid fever and died a month later. The shock was great. Emily's life seemed shattered, and in a note to Sue she tried to console Sue and herself by writing, "Now my ascended Playmate must instruct me. Show us, prattling Preceptor, but the way to thee!" She continued, "I see him in the Star, and meet his sweet velocity in everything that flies--His Life was like a Bugle, which winds itself away, his Elegy an echo--his Requiem ecstasy--" (Letters, III, 799; 1883). In another attempt to give hope to Sue, she concluded the letter with Poem #1564:

Pass to thy Rendezvous of Light,
Painless except for us--
Who slowly ford the Mystery
Which thou hast leaped across!
(Poems, III, #1564, 1078; 1883)

Later, Emily sent to Sue three more poems about Gil. The first is Emily's reassurance that Gil will not be forgotten: "To be forgot by thee/Surpasses Memory" (Poems, III, #1560, 1073-4; 1883). The second poem is a tribute to Sue's ability to accept suffering: "Her Losses Made our Gains ashamed." The third poem, #1565, contains a reversal of the death idea:

Some Arrows slay but whom they strike--
 But this slew all but him--
 Who so appareled his Escape--
 Too trackless for a Tomb--
 (Poems, III, #1565, 1078; 1883)

All of the family died, in a sense, except Gil, who lived and mysteriously disappeared. He alone is alive somewhere. The hope of some sort of an afterlife is interesting when viewed in light of Emily's previous poems that dispute its existence. Previously Emily had suggested that nothing survived after death. Yet in this poem, Emily indicates the opposite. Emily knew that only by reversing her position would she be able to give solace to Sue. Even though she does not state specifically the idea of an afterlife, there is room for Sue to mold the suggestion present in the work into her own beliefs.

Emily's views on death, closely related to her views on religion, were based partially on romantic and transcendental philosophy. The transcendentalists felt that sense experiences were fundamental in reality. They asserted the importance of spiritualism over materialism. They rejected the view of an arbitrary God and substituted the perfectability of all. Transcendentalists believed that an object in this life was an imperfect reflection of a perfect object in another realm.⁹

⁹Johnson, p. 233.

Emily could not accept the church of her Fathers because of many of its concepts. She did not believe in infant damnation and a punishing God. Salvation for only a few was ridiculous to her. She could not accept the concept of predestination or original sin. Looking around the congregation of Amherst, she began to associate sin with hypocrisy.¹⁰

As a child she was often the lone dissenter in her family. At school she failed to be converted, even though she often came close to joining the church. It was difficult for Emily to discuss her indecision with members of her family. Lavinia was a church member, as were her mother and father. Once Emily locked herself in the cellar to prevent her father's forcing her to attend services. Despite Emily's closeness to her sister, she could not discuss her religious views with her because of Vinnie's strong convictions (see pp. 33-39).

Going outside her family for assistance, she turned to Sue. Sue was frequently away, visiting in Geneva. As a result, Emily was able to write to Sue and to express her views because Sue would read the questioning letters even if she disagreed with Emily's opinion. In February, 1852, while listening to church bells ringing, Emily pleaded with Sue to go to "the church within our hearts, where the bells are always ringing, and the preacher whose name is Love--

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 234-5.

shall intercede there for us!" (Letters, I, 181; 1852).

Later she wrote to Sue about her religious misgivings: "I shall remain alone, and though in that last day, the Jesus Christ you love, remark he does not know me--there is a darker spirit will not disown it's child" (Letters, I, 305-6; 1854).

As Emily's thoughts on religion, death, and God developed, her views emerged into a theory. In her quest for self-knowledge and understanding, all experiences became religious ones. She rejected the comfort she might receive from Christ and searched for her own key to eternity. Earth or Nature became Heaven for her. Death kept life from being perfect. By accepting Nature as God and Heaven, she pictured Him as a vastness of silence. Immortality and eternity became part of the wholeness of life, and they were contained in the greater mystery of the inner world of the soul.

Emily sent a number of her religious poems to Sue. Most of them deal with the religious ceremony itself, along with faith in God and salvation. The first poem, #322, based upon church service, was sent in 1861. It contains a combination of orthodoxy and Nature:

There came a Day at Summer's full,
Entirely for me--
I thought that such were for the Saints,
Where Resurrections--be--

The Sun, as common, went abroad,
The flowers, accustomed, blew,
As if no soul the solstice passed
That maketh all things new--

The time was scarce profaned, by speech--
 The symbol of a word
 Was needless, as at Sacrament,
 The Wardrobe--of our Lord--

Each was to each The Sealed Church,
 Permitted to commune this--time--
 Lest we too awkward show
 At Supper of the Lamb.

The Hours slid fast--as Hours will,
 Clutched tight, by greedy hands--
 So faces on two Decks, look back,
 Bound to opposing lands--

And so when all the time had leaked,
 Without external sound
 Each bound the Other's Crucifix--
 We gave no other Bond--

Sufficient troth, that we shall rise--
 Deposed--at length, the Grave--
 To that new Marriage,
 Justified--through Calvaries of Love--
 (Poems, I, #322, 249-50; 1862)

Emily begins the poem with a description of a peaceful day, and she uses religious imagery to illustrate the pain of parting with Sue. She likens the scene to the silence and sacredness of communion in the church service. She feels that the symbolism of church, its ceremony, is needless. Emily describes the love she feels for Sue, and she contrasts this love with Christ's. In the last line, Emily cannot accept a love or a God that requires pain and suffering, as did Jesus. She only requires love. What she has been denied in life, she hopes to find in death. Emily believes that their love will last beyond the grave and unite them forever.

Emily wrote to Sue of her early doubts in religion. Poem #160, which was sent to Sue during one of the periods of indecision, has at least two possible interpretations:

Just lost, when I was saved!
 Just felt the world go by!
 Just girt me for the onset with Eternity,
 Just breath blew back,
 And on the other side
 I heard recede the disappointed tide!

Therefore, as One returned, I feel,
 Odd secrets of the line to tell!
 Some Sailor, skirting foreign shores--
 Some pale Reporter, from the awful doors
 Before the Seal!

Next time, to stay!
 Next time, the things to see
 By Ear unheard,
 Unscrutinized by Eye--

Next time, to tarry,
 While the Ages steal--
 Slow tramp the Centuries,
 And the Cycles wheel!

(Poems, I, #160, 116-7; 1860)

The poem represents her effort to establish the meaning of death. Emily may feel that she was almost about to accept Christ's teachings and the idea of an after-life. However, she could not. The poem represents her effort to establish conclusively the meaning of death and her yearning to find out about the "other side." Perhaps, if Emily could have been sure of God's existence on the other side of life, then she might have been able to accept his Son's teachings. "Educated guesses" were not enough for Emily. On the other hand, Emily may be relating her own experience in which she

felt that she was dying, and at the last moment life was returned to her. In the second stanza, Emily believes that since she is one of the few who have been returned to life from Death's door, she should tell her story to others. Yet she is not satisfied with this small amount of knowledge about dying. She realizes, almost happily, that the next time Death comes, she will really die and she will then have an opportunity to learn all the secrets of Death.

In Poem #158, Emily imagines herself dying:

Dying! Dying in the night!
Wont somebody bring the light
So I can see which way to go
Into the everlasting snow?

And "Jesus"! Where is Jesus gone?
They said that Jesus--always came--
Perhaps he does'nt know the House--
This way, Jesus, Let him pass!

Somebody run to the great gate
And see if Dollie's coming! Wait!
I hear her feet upon the stair!
Death wont hurt--now Dollie's here!
(Poems, I, #158, 115; 1860)

"The everlasting snow" is a symbol for Heaven. Even though Emily calls for Christ's presence, she does not despair when he does not appear. Instead, she is quite satisfied that Sue (Dollie) is coming to be with her. The poem is important in that it reveals her great dependence on Sue as well as her lack of strong attachment to or belief in Christ.

Poem #317 contains Emily's views on conversion, and it is a confrontation with Christian principles. Emily, in

sending the poem to Sue, may have tried to relate to her the pressure Emily was receiving to join the church:

Just so--Jesus--raps--
 He does'nt weary--
 Last--at the Knocker--
 And first--at the Bell.
 Then--on divinest tiptoe--standing--
 Might He but spy the lady's soul--
 When He--retires--
 Chilled--or weary--
 It will be ample time for--me--
 Patient--upon the steps--until then--
 Heart! I am knocking--low at thee.
 (Poems, I, #317, 241;)

The first lines relate the efforts made to convert Emily and the different approaches presented to her. It is as if Jesus has come to her house. After knocking and ringing the bell without any response from within, He peeks into the house through the windows on the door and eventually leaves. The "Bell" and "knocker" are two ways of getting someone in the house's attention, in this case Emily. In that respect they may represent two different attempts to persuade Emily to join. Emily, despite the appeals, even from Christ Himself, sees no rush in accepting Christianity, because it is not the only religious concept "knocking" at her "Heart." She wishes to examine carefully her own theory of religion. The last line is Emily's way of preparing her soul to make way for her own religious thoughts.

Poem #313 was sent to Sue, perhaps with the hope that she would understand why Emily could not accept organized

religion. In the poem Emily realizes the plausibility and acceptability of some Christian precepts:

I should have been too glad, I see--
 Too lifted--for the scant degree
 Of Life's penurious Round--
 My little Circuit would have shamed
 This new Circumference--have blamed--
 The homelier time behind.

I should have been too saved--I see--
 Too rescued--Fear too dim to me
 That I could spell the Prayer
 I knew so perfect--yesterday--
 That Scalding One--Sabacthini--
 Recited fluent--here--

Earth would have been too much--I see--
 And Heaven--not enough for me--
 I should have had the Joy
 Without the Fear--to justify--
 The Palm--without the Calvary--
 So Savior--Crucify--

Defeat whets Victory--they say--
 The Reefs in Old Gethsemane
 Endear the Shore beyond--
 'Tis Beggars--Banquets best define--
 'Tis Thirsting--vitalizes Wine--
 Faith bleats to understand--

(Poems, I, #313, 236-7; 1862)

In the first stanza Emily realizes the greatness of Christ's teachings. She scolds herself for not being able to accept them willingly by saying, "I should have been too glad, I see--." She asks for more than what she finds in organized religion, and ironically she states that the granting of her wish was too much for an all-merciful God. In the second stanza, Emily reflects upon her childhood religious upbringing, when she knew from her own study and experience the meaning of Christ's call of despair from the cross.

Yet recitation is not a sign of faith and acceptance. The third stanza is a reiteration of arguments presented to her to make her a convert. The fourth stanza emphasizes her reasons for not accepting Christ. She cannot accept the fear, the denial and suffering demanded by Christ. Emily realizes that she is losing a great deal by denying Christ. Only through His loss will she be aware of His worthiness. Not being able to have faith in something she cannot understand, she must "suffer" life without Christ.

Even though Emily could not accept agony as a test of Christ's love, she was fascinated by those who could. Poems #792 and #984 were sent to Sue and contain Emily's thoughts on martyrs. In both poems the martyrs are always intent upon Christ. They never seem to waver in their faith. Poem #792 begins, "Through the strait pass of suffering--/The Martyrs--even--trod" (Poems, II, #792, 598; 1863). Poem #984 contains an emphasis on the steadfast faces of the suffering martyrs: "'Tis Anguish grander than Delight/'Tis Resurrection Pain--" (Poems, II, #984, 710; 1865). In both poems Emily does not seem aware that the martyrs or "chosen few" could ever doubt their beliefs in Christ's teachings. Perhaps this superficial view of the "chosen few" contributed to Emily's inability to accept Christ. She might have felt that in order to join the church, all doubts must be erased. Conversion became a sign

of the resolution of these doubts. If Emily had realized that all people, even martyrs and saints, as witnessed by Peter's denial of Christ, have religious reservations or fears throughout their lives, she might have been able to understand the church a little better. Eventually, Emily might have been able to join the church despite her reservations.

Two poems, sent to Sue later in life, reflect the change in Emily's views from the time when she first considered joining the church. Poem #1487 was written in 1880. It emphasizes the distance between Christ and her present ideas:

The Road to Bethlehem
 Since He and I were Boys
 Was leveled, but for that twould be
 A rugged billion Miles--
 (Poems, III, #1487, 1027; 1880)

Poem #1599 is a little puzzling in that Emily seems to be accepting the concept of God openly:

Though the great Waters sleep,
 That they are still the Deep,
 We cannot doubt--
 No vacillating God
 Ignited this Abode
 To put it out--
 (Poems, III, #1599, 1101; 1884)

However, the God Emily writes about is the God she has found in Nature. It is not the Christian concept of God. The poem was sent to Sue at the time of Samuel Bowles' death. Emily seems to try to reassure Sue that there is some sort of

order to the Universe, even if it is not a part of Christian philosophy.

Emily's interest in death and religion can be partially accounted for in Cody's theory of psychosis. Yet the source of her interest may lie only in insecurity and rejection. Surely, the numerous times that Death touched her life or the lives of her friends forced her to seek some sort of explanation through her own investigation. More and more Emily must have felt that the unmerciful religion of her family was not the answer to her questions. As a result, Emily Dickinson turned inward to satisfy her thoughts. She felt that the loss of Christian security was worth the small knowledge she had gained.

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