

The Belle of Amherst Study Guide

The Belle of Amherst by William Luce

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Plot Summary

The Belle of Amherst is a whimsical one-woman show based on the life of Emily Dickinson. Told in two acts, this play gives a voice to one of America's most enigmatic and eccentric poets. Drawing largely from Emily's poetry and letters, The Belle of Amherst is a breathing autobiography of a true nonconformist. For years, scholars have theorized that Emily Dickinson had some form of mental illness. This play gives Emily the chance to answer those scholars in person. Using a stream of conscious flow of poetry and musings, Emily Dickinson is brought to life before the very eyes of her audience.

Emily Dickinson, a child-like fifty-three-year-old woman, welcomes the audience to her home with her special recipe for black cake. She asks the audience's forgiveness for any fear on her part and launches into the recipe for her cake. Right away, Emily identifies herself as a poet. She also reveals that the entire town thinks of her as "Squire Edward's half-cracked daughter." Emily confides that it is all an act.

According to Emily, her running from the neighbors, sending odd little notes, and surprising would-be sightseers, is simply a way for her to enjoy her "menagerie," which is what she calls the villagers. Now that she has set the record straight about her own quirky behavior, Emily moves on to discussing more important matters. Emily is a poet. She explains that she has published seven poems anonymously, so she prefers to introduce herself as a poet. Emily talks of her family and her childhood. She seamlessly moves in and out of her past and present as she brings her family and the people who have influenced her to life.

In Emily's discussions of her past, the audience learns that Emily hasn't always been so shy and retiring. She paints a picture of a normal childhood and a bit of rebellion in her teen aged years. She talks of her brother Austin, who she feels is the one person who knows her through and through. She talks of her younger sister Lavinia and how Lavinia looks after her as though she were a small child. She talks about her father with a mixture of respect, love, resentment, and hope. She speaks of her mother in a more reserved fashion, never giving anything away except that she cared for her mother during her mother's illness and the shock of her mother's death.

Emily speaks of her goal to be published under her own name and how crushed she was at Professor Higginson's critique of her poetry. After Mr. Higginson's heartbreaking remarks, Emily admits that she still writes poetry, just not as much as she used to. She feels that the people who should be listening to her poetry, like Mr. Higginson, are deaf to artistry. Her failed publishing career or her failed romantic entanglements do not daunt Emily. Instead, she chooses to share her world with the audience and invites them to come back and visit and let her know how they like the cake recipe.



Act 1, Section 1

Act 1, Section 1 Summary

Emily, a delicate and sometimes child-like woman, enters with a teapot and introduces herself to the audience. She picks up a plate of cake slices and offers it to the audience by way of introduction. It is black cake, made from her own special recipe. She asks the audience's forgiveness for any fright on her part, as she is not used to strangers. She says that she is fifty-three. She welcomes the audience to Amherst, and says her full name is Emily Elizabeth Dickinson.

Emily explains that her middle name came from her father's sister Elisabeth Currier. Elisabeth, or Aunt Libbie, is a formidable woman. Emily describes her as "the only male relative on the female side." Emily then explains that she no longer uses her middle name since she is a poet. She says that she has had several poems published anonymously and prefers to introduce herself as a poet. She says that in Amherst, she is known as the "half-cracked" daughter of Squire Edward Dickinson.

Emily says that she hasn't left the house for years, and the neighbors are stumped. She looks out the window and points out Henrietta Sweetser. Henrietta, according to Emily, is very intimidating, and is right now strolling around outside the house trying to catch a glimpse of Emily. Emily goes on to explain that she wears white all the time simply to baffle her neighbors. She mimics their gossip about her and Lavinia being spinsters. Emily wonders that anyone would want to surround themselves with that type of company. Emily goes on to say that the neighbors are constantly at the door bringing gifts as a way to get a look at her. She encourages the neighbors' curiosity by running through the house. Sometimes, she surprises them by answering the door herself.

Emily remembers the cake she is offering to the audience. She says that she does all of the baking at home and offers the recipe. She lists the ingredients, and explains that the cake will need to bake for several hours. Emily mischievously admits that she sometimes bakes cakes for the neighbors and leaves obscure little notes with them. She says that neighbors compare the notes to try and decide who received the strangest one. The notes have become collector's items around the village.

Emily says that there is a woman in Amherst imitating her and her antics. For Emily, the residents of Amherst provide endless amusement. She admits to doing it all on purpose. She constantly dresses in white, runs around the house, and leaves odd little notes deliberately. She enjoys confounding them. Emily says that her brother Austin knows that she is pretending. She says that he knows her better than anyone else. She worries that the stories about her may be causing him distress.

Emily says that words are her entire life. She treats words like they are their own entities. For Emily, some words are so wonderful that she must tip her hat to them. When writing a poem, she always hesitates over which words to use. As a poet, she



must always choose the best words. She moves on to discussing poetry. Emily can tell a poem when she has a physical reaction to it. She describes her friend Helen Jackson as being a scholar of words. Helen, however "has the facts, but not the phosphorescence. Emily is struck by the word phosphorescence and writes it down. For Emily, it is the light with in, the phosphorescence, which gives poetry its genius. Emily tells the members of the audience that each of them is a poem-a rare creation. She herself is a poem as well. She says that just because she is a poem doesn't mean she shouldn't write poetry.

Emily begins discussing her childhood. People find it hard to believe that she had a normal childhood. She can't blame them for it, because she encourages the assumption. Emily drifts into the past and becomes her fifteen-year-old self. She is arguing with Austin, because he has received eleven Valentines, and she hasn't received any. She fantasizes about how popular she will be at seventeen. At seventeen she imagines she will be crowned the Belle of Amherst. The scene shifts, and she is now meeting with Mr. James Francis Billings.

Emily tries to flirt with him. He asks about her sister Lavinia. Mr. Billings leaves and Emily remarks that he has found a pretty girl dressed in yellow. She comes back to her present self and discusses the house and the grounds. For Emily, the house and her garden are her entire world. Emily has everything she needs in that home in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Emily begins to wax poetic about nature and how it is the highest form of art. She speaks about summer. She describes the orchard, and the way the blue jays steal water from the hose and how joyful the scene is. She again flashes back to a younger self. This time, it is June and the circus is passing the house. She spends the entire evening watching them pass by her window.

Emily is now gathering her books and talking excitedly about the new school year. She will get to see her friends again. She remarks about all of the girls named Emily and how the teachers can never keep them straight. Emily balances a book on her head and practices her curtsies. She says that she and the other girls formed a Shakespeare Society. At their first meeting, they were supposed to read the Tempest.

Emily, the teenager, is sitting with her classmates as she realizes what her teacher is saying. Mr. Crowell, the teacher says that he wants to mark out the parts of the work that he considers questionable. Emily balks at this. She questions the logic in crossing out passages that they have already read. In her mind, the damage has been done. Besides, she says, how does one edit Shakespeare? She vehemently disagrees with Mr. Crowell and does not want any marks on her book. Emily opens the book and decides to read the questionable parts first. She reads aloud and openly challenges Mr. Crowell's dictate.

Emily is distracted by the sound of the clock. The mood of the play changes as she listens to the sound of church bells in the distance. A funeral is occurring. The funeral is for Jenny Hitchcock's mother. In Emily's mind, Jennie is now an orphan. She discusses



death. Emily can't imagine not living on earth. She is not afraid of death, as she has seen it since her childhood. She recites a poem about death and sympathizes with Jennie again.

Emily goes on to talk about how the clock stopped that afternoon and it made her feel like it was Judgment Day. Emily didn't learn how to use a clock to tell time, until she was fifteen. She didn't understand when her father tried to teach her, and she was afraid to say anything. She goes on to say that her father, though he loved them dearly, was very austere and hardly ever smiled.

Emily describes how difficult it was to take pictures of her father. The photographer would tell him to smile, and he would say that he is smiling. Her father was the only member of the family allowed to use the word damn. Of course, he only ever said it when he absolutely meant it. It was forbidden for anyone but her father to say it. Emily discusses the other things her father would forbid them to do. Her sister Lavinia used to primp in front of mirrors and run to the windows when boys passed. Her father would tell her to stop it and put on a shawl. Lavinia would go off to her room to pout.

Emily says that their father was so proper and demanding that she would be floored anytime he was lenient or understanding. When he found out that Emily was writing poetry till the early hours of the morning, he at first was very upset, because he expected everyone in the house to rise early. Emily explains that she still rises as early as everyone else. After asking to hear some of her poetry, her father cancels the rule for Emily. Emily was allowed to stay up late and sleep later in the mornings. Emily says that her father would always yield when she least expected it.

Emily describes the night that the northern lights of the aurora borealis lit up the Amherst sky. Everyone in the village thought there was a fire at first. The streets soon became lined with spectator watching the lights. It was her father who noticed the lights first. Once he realized what was happening, he ran to the church and began ringing the bells so that everyone could come out and see it.

Act 1, Section 1 Analysis

The first part of Act 1 acclimates the audience to Emily and her home. Emily addresses the audience directly as though she were having them over for tea. This is the audience's introduction to Emily's personality. She is open in a child-like way. Even though the audience sees a fifty-three year old Emily, Emily's age changes with her attitudes and remembrances.

The audience also indirectly meets Emily's family. Although no other characters ever appear on stage, the audience is introduced to Lavinia, Austin, and Emily's father. Emily converses with these people as though they are right there in front of her. Her imagination is contagious. The audience easily falls in to the conversations and come back with her when she leaves the past for the present.



What is most interesting about this first section is the picture Emily paints of herself. She paints herself as shy and retiring, but also mischievous, brave, and sometimes a little spiteful. When she introduces herself, she feels she must present the audience with something other than herself. She offers them cake, and not just any cake. She offers them her special recipe black cake. She even goes so far as to give them the recipe for the cake in slow steady directions. She asks the audience to forgive her if she seems afraid, because she is very shy. Once she starts talking about herself though, she forgets about shyness. She tells stories of her own daring. She talks about blatantly disregarding her teacher and reading the objectionable parts of Shakespeare out loud. She admits to encouraging the curiosity of her neighbors for her own amusement. Emily's insistence upon leaving random notes for her neighbors and startling them at the door shows that she is not so shy as she would have the audience believe.

Emily's personality is an intricate and delicate web of memories and her perception of herself and the things outside herself. The first half of the second act provides the audience with a view of her personality and all of the contradictions within it. Emily says that she believes in truth. She just thinks the truth is always slanted. This explanation describes her life. Since her life is being told through her poems and letters in the play, the truth is slanted. Since Emily is also telling the story, the truth is even more slanted. Since Emily tends to slip back and forth through time, the entire tale is tinted with the air of a fairy tale. This is the mood that is set for the entire play.



Act 1, Section 2

Act 1, Section 2 Summary

Emily reminisces about the first time she parted from her father in 1847. She was sixteen and after graduating from Amherst Academy and entered Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Emily describes Mary Lyon, the woman who ran the school at that time. For Emily, Mary Lyon was a dragon of a lady, who had three classifications for her students. One group of students was classified as "professed Christians." The second group was classified as a group with hope. The final category, to which Emily belonged, was called the group without hope. Emily remembers when Mary Lyon tried to convert the group without hope.

All of the impenitent girls were invited to a meeting room. They were told to bring a Bible. There, Miss Lyon converted everyone but Emily. Emily explains that she desires to be good, and she does want to please her parents, but she has not yet been persuaded to become a Christian. She apologizes profusely to Miss Lyon, but she is simply not attracted to a life of duty. Emily describes the Bible as an arid book that is also wise and a bit merry. This of course offends Miss Lyon, but Emily can't back down. Emily does not return to Mount Holyoke the next year. She believes that she wore out her welcome with Miss Lyon.

Emily goes on to say that her father wanted her home anyway, so she was happy to not return to Mount Holyoke. Her father said he wanted her home for her health, but Emily believes her father was just lonely. Her brother Austin was about to leave for school, and she felt her father couldn't stand to have more than one child away at a time.

Austin and his father seemed to have a strange relationship. When they were together, they would do nothing but fight. When they were separated however, the two became devoted friends. Emily believes her father respected Austin above any other living person. No one, however, missed Austin as much as Emily. She describes how she would watch his coach pull away as he left. For her it became a superstition. She has to watch for Austin to turn around and see her through the stagecoach window. She believed that if he didn't see her as he left, she would never see him again. So no matter what the weather was like, Emily was outside watching her brother ride off in the coach.

Emily says that Austin finished law school and came home just before her twenty-fifth birthday. He never left Amherst again after that. Their father built Austin a house next door to keep him there. Austin marries Susan Gilbert and takes his father up on the house. Emily admits through her sarcasm that their father's gift was a selfish one, designed to keep Austin close to home.

Emily describes the path between the two houses as being just wide enough for two lovers. She says that she and Sue, her brother's wife, used the path more than anyone



else. Emily loves Sue, because Sue understands her need to write. She doesn't think that Sue understood her love though. Emily has always been very intense in her relationships and it tends to overwhelm people. Emily believes her business is to love, so she is often puzzled by people's reactions to her love. She feels that loving the way she does is dangerous and unnatural. She says that the path is now overgrown from disuse.

Emily moves on to religion. She reminisces about her family's morning prayers. She says that she always got a chill when her father would say "I say unto you." She doesn't understand why religion is so grim. The only types of sermons she enjoys are those that deal with disbelief. She says that she decided to stop attending church when she turned thirty. She had witnessed baptisms, church admissions, and a Lord's Supper along with a sermon that had been wheezed out by the reverend Leland. From then on, her family went to church while Emily stayed home. Emily never feels like she is alone when her family is at church, because she feels that God is always with her and watching her soul.

Emily asks the audience how they spend their evenings. She and Lavinia spend their evenings reading the *Springfield Republican*. Emily reads the news out loud while her sister sews. Lavinia is very partial to stories about tragic and unexpected accidents. She always asks Emily for the particulars. Lavinia wants to know all of the details of the death, the age of the person who has died, and whether or not they left a family behind. As Emily is telling Lavinia the story of a woman who died in a train accident, she realizes that Lavinia is sleeping. Moving on to the discussion of trains, Emily remembers the day of the Railroad Decision in 1852. Her father had fault for the railroad to come through Amherst, and was very pleased when it happened.

Its fall in New England, and Emily feels that Amherst is an Eden. Her sister Lavinia believes that autumn is "one long chore." Emily doesn't understand such an outlook, because she sees it as beautiful. While Vinnie is out picking apples for cider, Emily is having a time with Vinnie's cat, Buffy. While pushing Buffy off the chair, she tells the audience how Vinnie loves cats. Vinnie feels that cats are just a little lower than angels. Each of Vinnie's cats drinks from a china saucer.

Emily moves on to discussing Vinnie. Even though Vinnie is younger, she takes care of Emily in a motherly way. Emily believes their relationship to be strange. Vinnie loves and cares for Emily, but she does not understand Emily and is constantly surprised by what Emily says. Emily says her father was the same way. She says that her mother was different. Emily's mother never cared about thought, and never listened to anything Emily said. According to what Emily tells the audience, the family lived together in harmony. When she begins to recite her poem however, Emily explains that she quietly kept to herself and was afraid to live her life aloud.

Emily changes the topic. She is excited about an article in *The Atlantic Monthly*. According to the article, Thomas Wentworth Higginson is inviting young writers to submit their writings. Emily and Sue are now going through Emily's poems. Emily wants to submit only her best work. Sue worries that Emily's father will disapprove. Emily tells



her that once the published poems bring honor to their family, her father will approve soon enough. Emily spends time working on the letter while Sue goes through Emily's poems. The letter Emily sends must attract Mr. Higginson's attention as much as her poetry. She decides to sign her letter E. Dickinson. She goes through more of her poems, dismissing them as too giddy or having to do with birds. She decides to send "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers." Once she has decided on the poems, she removes all of the other poems. Emily doesn't want anyone to know that the famous E. Dickinson writes more than one draft of her letters.

Emily admits that Professor Higginson did answer her letter. She wasn't expecting him to edit her work the way he did, but he did ask to see more of her work. Emily explains that she sent him more work over the years. She treated him as her teacher, or her Preceptor, as she called him. After eight years, she is rewarded by a visit from Mr. Higginson. She holds his letter in her hands as she imagines that the two of them will truly get some real work done. At last, Professor Higginson is coming to Amherst, and finally, Emily will be famous!

Emily is both excited and nervous. She has been so afraid that she won't have the talent, now she feels she will be famous. She runs to Sue and tells her that Professor Higginson is coming to visit.

Act 1, Section 2 Analysis

This section shows the audience Emily's instability. Emily is now seamlessly moving back and forth through her past and present. Her conversation is more fragmented with poetry and forgetfulness. She has placed all her hopes for fame and publication upon the shoulders of a man she has never met.

Even Emily's discussions of her family become fragmented. She says that she never returned to Mount Holyoke, because she wore out her welcome. Then she says that her father wanted her home and that he was lonely for his children. Suddenly, she moves on to her brother Austin and her superstitious ritual for seeing him off to school. Then she is back to talking about her father's selfishness in keeping Austin in Amherst after law school.

This section also shows Emily's spiritualist views versus those of her religion. Emily finds spirituality in small things, like sunshine and bees. Her love of the feelings invoked by words seems to contradict the strictness of her society's upbringing. Emily always feels that God is with her, she simply does not see God the way her society does.

It is also interesting that this section provides an understanding of Emily's family. Emily's father is proper and domineering. Her mother cares little for thought and rarely bothers to listen to what Emily says. While Emily adores Austin, he does not understand why she acts so eccentric, and her sister Vinnie simply doesn't understand Emily at all. While her sister-in-law Sue loves her and understands Emily's need to write, she is also afraid of Emily's intensity. Of course, this is all according to Emily. Emily's truth is always

slanted, and this section of the first act shows how easily she slips in and out of her own imagination.



Act 2, Section 1

Act 2, Section 1 Summary

The scene immediately picks up where Act 1 left off. Emily is eagerly awaiting Professor Higginson's arrival. She excitedly finished sewing together a book of her poems while instructing the servant to be on the look out. She begins to practice meeting him. She tries asking him about his wife and complimenting his humor and wit. She is very nervous and excited about his visit. She hears his coach and grabs her shawl. She tries to decide which poems to take downstairs, and in the end takes the whole box of them.

Emily welcomes Professor Higginson in and asks why he took so long to visit. She doesn't try to make conversation, because her mind is only on publication. She asks what he would like to do with her work as she hands him all the ones she has sent him over the years. She then begins to go through many more and offers those to him as well. She explains that she has many poems, probably enough for several volumes. She asks him to please choose which poems would be best for publication. She waits for his reaction.

Emily doesn't believe what she is hearing from Professor Higginson. He calls her meter spasmodic and uncontrolled. She tries to defend her work calling it experimental. She says that surely a publisher would recognize what she is doing. She is crushed and begins to realize that he does not think she is good enough. She comes back to the audience and explains that she still sends him poems, just not as many. She feels that his replies are polite enough to suggest that her work sits in a dusty drawer somewhere in his office. She tells the audience that Mr. Higginson crushed another poet in the same way. That poet was Walt Whitman.

Emily wonders aloud to the audience if anyone will ever read her poetry. She derides herself for thinking that she would ever be famous. She moves on to a recent visit by Helen Jackson. Helen is the woman Emily described earlier as "facts, not phosphorescence." Helen wants to publish Emily's work. Emily is doubtful because of her age. She tells Helen that she is at peace with not being published, and that her "meridian has passed."

Emily's business is to make poetry, not to publish it. She believes that she was selfish in wanting to be famous. Helen believes that Emily's current attitude is selfish. Emily doesn't know which path to take. She changes the subject.

Emily confides to the audience that she has had a few famous moments. Her rye and Indian bread did win second place at the Cattle Show, and her heliotropes won an honorable mention. Emily changes the subject back to her sister Vinnie. Contrary to town gossip, Vinnie did not give up being married to take care of Emily. Vinnie had received a proposal from Mr. Joseph Lyman before he fell in love with Laura Baker, the



pretty girl in the yellow dress. Vinnie never speaks about marriage, but Emily sees Vinnie's regret.

Emily, on the other hand, does not regret being single. She accepts her life for what she made of it. She believes that she would have happily let Vinnie marry even though Vinnie would not do the same for her. Time shifts again and Emily is in the garden when a man comes to take her away. He has secretly loved Emily and is waiting for her in the library. Emily can hear Vinnie screaming all the way outside. Vinnie is terrified that Emily will leave with him. Emily tries to explain that she didn't know the man was coming and that she had no prior plan to run away with him.

Emily wants to think about it. She is trying to reason with Lavinia, who won't stop screaming. Emily says that she loves Vinnie and their parents, and she doesn't want to hurt anyone, but she must figure this out for herself. Vinnie runs screaming to Sue and Austin's house next door to get help. Emily sends the man away. She apologizes that she cannot reveal his name, because he was married at the time. She says that Vinnie apologized for the things she said, but that Vinnie did the same thing last year. Judge Otis P. Lord proposed to Emily and Vinnie became hysterical, because the judge was eighteen years older than Emily.

Emily doesn't understand Vinnie's self-righteousness. After all, Vinnie doesn't object to Austin having an affair. Vinnie even carries letters between Austin and Professor Todd's wife as though she were their Cupid. Even though Vinnie disapproved of Emily and the judge, Emily had more problems with the judge's niece Abby Farley. After the judge died, Abby called Emily "a little hussy with loose morals." She also said that Emily was insane. Emily was seeing the judge while his wife was still alive. Emily thinks Abby knows about the prior relationship.

Is the audience shocked? Emily knows that she is plain and small, but she has beautiful chestnut hair and twinkling eyes. Emily says that though she is plain, she has had more than one suitor. All of her suitors have been older than her, and all of them were married. Out of all of her suitors, only one was her true love.

Emily is now twenty-four. She and Vinnie are visiting their father in Washington. Their father is a congressman. They attend the Presbyterian service and meet Mr. Charles Wadsworth, a minister. Emily falls in love with him at first sight. When she returns to Amherst, she is still unable to let go of her feeling for him. She begins to write him. She starts out hesitant and only speaks to him of spiritual things. Emily tells the audience how exquisite it is to love someone in the "fleshless" way she loves him.

Emily then admits that she only spoke with him twice in her life. The two times were twenty years apart. The last time they spoke was three years prior. Emily becomes her fifty-year-old self, struggling with emotion as she greets her visitor. She wants to know why he didn't tell her he was coming to visit. She is surprised to find that it has been twenty years since they last spoke. Emily reminds him that she will wait for him even though she has waited a long time already. She says she will love him until death. She kneels and begs him to open his life to her. Charles Wadsworth will not be coming to



Amherst again. Emily says goodbye to him. She laments to the audience that the "heart wants what it wants, or else it doesn't care." Emily tells the audience that Charles Wadsworth died last year.

Emily still writes poetry. She doesn't write as much as she used to, because there are so few people to listen to it. The people that should listen to it, like Mr. Higginson, are deaf in Emily's opinion. Even so, she still writes when nature inspires her. She watches the birds and the fields and must translate the beauty of it into poetry.

Act 2, Section 1 Analysis

This section provides more depth to Emily's world. As Emily talks of her meeting with Mr. Higginson, she is extremely agitated and expectant. She put all of her hopes in this one meeting and how it would lead to her publication and her eventual fame. Her shock at Mr. Higginson's opinion is tangible. She babbles explanations to him as though he were blind not to see her gift.

Emily's disappointment sets a tone for the rest of Act 2. In the first act, Emily discusses pleasant things. She is exuberant and expectant. The audience sees the vivacious Emily Dickinson. When Act 2 begins with her disappointment at the hands of Mr. Higginson, Emily's tone and the tone of the play becomes darker. The disappointment of failed publication becomes a discussion of her spinsterhood.

The audience sees Emily's resentment of Vinnie. Emily explains that Vinnie did not refuse marriage to take care of her. Emily could have let Vinnie go without worry. Vinnie, on the other hand, would never have let Emily marry. Emily thinks that Vinnie enjoys being a martyr and that Emily's existence justifies that martyrdom. Emily has had two chances to marry. Vinnie panicked when the first man came to ask Emily to run away with him. Emily had to send him away, because Vinnie refused to stop her hysterical screaming. When Judge Otis P. Lord asked Emily to marry him, Lavinia once again became hysterical and refused to allow Emily to marry him.

These marital setbacks don't seem to disappoint Emily. She says that she has had only one love. It is in this description that audience begins to see the first stirrings of Emily's break from reality. She is ecstatic in her description of her love for him. She has built a fantasy in which she and he share a love beyond the physical realm. She later admits that she has only ever spoken with him twice in twenty years. The second time was when he told her goodbye. Then, she is suddenly reciting a poem about his death. Her mind slips again, and she is talking about birds and fields and how she discusses these things with her dog. She remembers a particular Christmas and changes course to discuss how Vinnie's cats get along with the hens. Vinnie's hens remind Emily of how afraid of snakes Vinnie used to be and how Emily and Austin used to frighten Vinnie with them as children. That reminiscence inspires a poem about green snakes. She suddenly says that her father loved animals. The change of subject to her father transitions the play and the audience into the darker moments of the play.



Act 2, Section 2

Act 2, Section 2 Summary

Emily says that her father loved animals and kept beautiful horses. She remembers once when during a snowstorm, her father went out in his slippers to feed some scared and hungry birds. He hid himself as he fed them, he didn't want the birds to be embarrassed. Emily believes the descendents of those same birds are the ones who live in her garden.

Emily's recollection takes over. The day her father died, she spent the entire afternoon with him. She then sent him on a walk with Austin. She woke him the next morning and put him on the train, it was the last time she saw him. As the family is eating supper on the fifteenth of June, Austin arrives with a letter in his hand. One look at his face told Emily that everything would be changed, and that her father was ill. As Vinnie prepares to go to him, they receive word that he has died.

In Emily's mind, her father lives in a new house. He doesn't have any gardens, so she brings his grave the best of their flowers. She says that the family could stop crying over his death if only they knew that he was aware of how they tend his grave. She recalls Austin kissing their father on the forehead at the funeral. She becomes overcome and needs a moment to pull herself together. The descendants of the birds saved by Emily's father are content and unaware that their savior is gone. Emily dreams of her father every night, and spends her days wandering where he is. Even though she believes in immortality, Emily wishes she could have tested it before her father.

Emily begins to reminisce about her father coming home for lunch. Suddenly she is preparing the house for his arrival. She tells Vinnie to hide the mop and bucket and her mother to take the handkerchief from her head. She has her mother check the thermometer while she sees to the fire and shoos Buffy from her father's chair. Suddenly he is at the door, and she calmly greets him. She claims that they have had a peaceful morning. She tells him the temperature, tells him he is wearing the spectacles he is looking for, gives him his paper, and tells him they are having corned beef and cabbage for dinner.

Emily comes back to the audience. She says that the house was in a state of pandemonium when her father was alive, though he never knew it. It is very quiet with just her and Vinnie living there. Emily worries about Vinnie. Without their father there, Lavinia treats Emily like a child. Emily says that the night of July fourth, there was a fire in Amherst and Vinnie tried to convince Emily that it was simply fireworks. She says that even though it was chaos was reigning in Main Street, Vinnie refused to acknowledge the fire, and their mother slept through the entire thing.

Emily changes the subject to her mother. A year after Emily's father died, her mother had a stroke and lost the ability to walk. Emily says that she was stunned when her



mother did die. Emily says that her mother wasn't close to them when they were children. They became close when Lavinia and Emily cared for their mother after her stroke. Their mother became their child then. She tells the audience to hold on to their parents with all tenderness because, when they are gone, "the world will seem a strange and lonely place."

Tired of serious subjects, Emily wishes she were a blade of grass. That way she would never have to worry about the problems that come with living. She wonders aloud why people are so afraid to let go of their body, and why they are so sad when someone they love does let go.

After reciting a poem about her body's machinery, Emily changes the subject to recent letters. She says that she has heard from Helen. Helen is now living in Santa Monica, California. Emily goes on to say that Abby Bliss and her husband have just founded the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut. She moves on to the letter she has received from Samuel Bowles and his wife Mary. Mr. and Mrs. Bowles have enclosed stereopticon pictures of their travels through Europe. Emily looks at the pictures through a viewer, and remarks that she doesn't see what's so exciting about the Mona Lisa painting. As she continues looking through the viewer, she says "Everyone is somewhere, but Emily. Emily is here. Always here." She continues that Vinnie told her about a little boy, who ran away from Amherst. The little boy plans to go to Vermont or Asia. Emily thinks this is just wonderful and tells Vinnie she would also like to run away. Emily thinks she frightened Vinnie by saying that.

Emily says that she wonders at what she is and how she became that way. Even though she believes her existence has stopped, she at least has her niece and two nephews to inspire her. Ned and Martha are the two oldest. The youngest is Gilbert, who was born when Ned was fourteen. She says that when Gilbert was six, he and a friend gave an animal show on the front lawn. He planned to give half the admission to the college and the other half to the cat. She says that when Sue tried to teach him, "There's No Place Like Home," Gilbert immediately said that there is such a place, his Aunt Emily's house. She then says that Gilbert died of typhoid in October. She says that his last delirious cry was for them to open the door to those who were waiting for him. Emily and the rest of the family would love to know who was waiting for him.

Emily pours herself a cup of tea and speaks randomly of winter, March, hay and horses, and how spring, though delayed, has finally come. She rambles on speaking of the lawn and strange odors and the sound of the river in the tree. She says, "Spring is a happiness so beautiful, so unique, so unexpected, that I don't know what to do with my heart." She asks the audience what they would advise she do with it.

Emily says that eight weeks ago, she was making her black cake when everything went dark. She woke to find Austin, Vinnie and a Dr. Bigelow standing around her bed. She says it was the first time she had ever fainted and lain unconscious in her life. She asks herself what flower Austin put on Gilbert's grave. She says it was lilies of the valley and that damson-hawthorn was planted on her parents' graves. When her time comes,



Emily would like buttercups. She wants to be carried on a small white coffin from the house, through the garden and the barn and over the meadows to the burial ground.

When Vinnie tells her not to speak that way, she tells Vinnie not to be afraid, "it's only the Fourth of July." Emily says that one of her earliest friends sent her a letter the week before he died. In the letter, he said that he would go to Amherst if he lives, and he most definitely will go to Amherst if he dies. She calls death democratic and life short. She wonders if there is another life after this one. She admits to not knowing whether or not she has ever dreamed or if she is even dreaming right now.

Emily notices the time and exclaims that she promised to help Vinnie peel apples. She compliments the audience on how easy their visit has been, since they rarely have guests at the Homestead anymore. Before she goes to help Vinnie, though, she wants to share one last thing with the audience. She recites the following poem:

"This is my letter to the World That never wrote to Me - The simple news that Nature told - With tender Majesty Her Message is committed To hands I cannot see - For love of Her-Sweet-countrymen - Judge tenderly - of Me."

Emily reminds the audience that when they make her cake, they must tell her if they like it. She promises to give her gingerbread recipe to them the next time they visit. She puts down her box of poems, remarks that gingerbread is a word to lift one's hat to, and exits calling to Vinnie.

Act 2, Section 2 Analysis

The first half of Act 2 begins with the growing distance between Emily and reality. She drifts in and out of time more frequently. Her monologue is broken up with more poetry than in the first act. By the second half of the act, her fantasy world begins to crowd in. She is still lucid, but her conversation is darker. Her thoughts are on death and loneliness.

Emily begins the second half of the second act by discussing her father. She begins with his love of animals, and how he saved some birds from starving to death. She ends up discussing his death. She notes that the descendants of the birds he saved so long ago play at his grave completely unaware of his role in their lives. The loss of her father creates a void in Emily's home and her life. As Emily discusses her father's death she slips into the past. She is suddenly preparing the house for her father's coming home to lunch. Her need to please him and have everything perfect is evident. Emily never wants her father to think that their home is anything but peaceful. Now that he is dead, there is only Emily and Vinnie. The house is always peaceful now.

Emily doesn't go into as much detail about her mother's death. Emily's mother had a stroke a year after Emily's father died. Since her mother could no longer walk, Emily and Lavinia became her nursemaids. It was a surprise to Emily when her mother died. Even though she had cared for her mother as she would a small child, Emily was stunned to



her very core at her mother's death. Emily suspected that her mother was afraid of dying, while Emily was simply intrigued by the idea of death.

Emily also expresses more resentment of Lavinia. Since the death of their father, Lavinia has treated Emily like a child who needs to be calmed at all times. Emily tells the story of a fire that broke out in Amherst and how Vinnie kept trying to convince Emily that it was the fourth of July celebration and not a fire.

How much of this is only in Emily's head? Emily says that the people ran excitedly up and down Main street shouting. Lavinia insisted it was fireworks and Emily's mother slept through the whole thing. This story begs the question of who is the more reliable witness. Even though Vinnie never speaks in the play, she is still the more practical of the two characters. The fact that Emily has never verified the fire with anyone else, lends further doubt to her version of events.

This passage is significant, because it brings doubt to everything Emily has said in the play. The audience has followed Emily through her journeys back and forth in time. Can the audience trust her as a narrator though? This one passage casts a veil of skepticism over the entire play or, at least over Emily's recollection of the events. From this point, Emily slips further into fantasy. Her only lucid moments come when she discusses the death of her nephew and when she realizes that the audience is still there.

The entire second half of the second act is a balancing act of fantasy and reality for Emily and the audience.



Characters

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson

Emily Dickinson is a delicate fifty-three year old woman when the play opens. She is described as sensitive and quaint but with inner strength. Her manner is described as childlike, whimsical, and deeply poignant. She has auburn hair and appears younger than her age. She is dressed in white and remains so throughout the play. Emily's personality is best described as eccentric. She asks the audience to forgive her if she seems frightened as she rarely sees strangers and hardly knows what she says. She admits that she wanders back and forth through time and is easily confused.

Emily is a poet, and is described by the neighbors as "Squire Edward Dickinson's half-cracked daughter." She admits that she has not left the house in several years. She has contempt for the gossip of her neighbors. Her neighbors believe she dresses in "bridal white," because she has been disappointed in love and that her younger sister Lavinia has stayed unmarried just to take care of her.

As much as she despises their gossip, Emily thrives on their curiosity. She admits to running up the stairs two at a time when a neighbor comes to the door. Sometimes, she will answer the door just to surprise them and watch them stammer out an excuse for ringing the bell. Other times, she will send them obscure little passages just to see their confusion. She gleefully reports that her little notes have become collector's items throughout the town.

How much of Emily's narrative can be trusted, however? When Emily tells her story, she admits that she tells the truth, but that the truth is slanted. Everything the audience sees and hears is from Emily's slanted version of truth. Her explanations of her life and relationships ring with a truth that only poetry can provide. Poetry, however, is merely a substitute for fact. Since Emily defines herself as a poet, the facts of her life are less important than her truth. Emily's own admonishment is that one should "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant."

Emily describes herself as shy. If this is so, how does one explain her outbursts during the Shakespeare reading, or her refusal to back down to Miss Lyon's attempts at conversion? Emily is at odds with her life. She is happy to be home, but unhappy with the people who surround her in Amherst. She loves Amherst and considers it an Eden, but shuns the society of the city. For Emily, the villagers of Amherst are her "menagerie." They exist to provide amusement for her. While at the same time, the villagers are entertained by her "half-cracked" antics. Emily never feels lost in the world she had built, even though that world may confuse and astound her audience.

Emily is a poet. The entire play is a conversation she is having with an unknown audience. The conversation is a love affair with words on her part. Emily's poetry can be described as rich but sparse. She relies on words to be sacred entities unto themselves.



She can only choose the best words for her work, the words that she chooses must have phosphorescence. She shies away from being called a genius. Emily doesn't know what genius is and doesn't think anyone does. She is simply a poet. It is her life's work to make poetry.

Emily's love of poetry translates into her love of life. She loves everyone in her audience as a "rare creation." Her love of nature transforms itself into spontaneous bits of poetry. She seems unable to control the outbursts of poetry, and quite content with that lack of control. It is this very lack of control that makes her unreliable as the storyteller. She knows her life, but how much of it is true and how much of it is slanted for poetical effect?

Emily's family is a large part of who she is. Even though Emily is the only person who ever appears on stage, her family members are present throughout her narrative. Interestingly, it is difficult to gain a real understanding of Emily's feelings for her family. She alternates between loving them unconditionally and making jokes at their expense. In some instances, she shows resentment towards them while at the same time submitting to their will with devoted loyalty.

Emily's relationship with her father is one of the stronger relationships in the play. She describes her father as austere and very proper. She says that she knew he loved them, but he was always so stern. She admits to surprise when he relaxed the rules for them. She explains that as a child, she would stay up late to write poetry. Everyone in her family was expected to rise by a certain hour, and she simply did without the sleep. One night, her father discovers that she is up late. She explains to him that she likes to stay up until the house is quiet, as it is the best time to write. She tells him that she will continue to rise at her regular time if that is what concerns him. He, surprisingly, asks to hear some of her poems. After listening to two of her pieces, he cancels the rules for her. Emily is now allowed to stay up late writing, and rise later in the day than the rest of the family. This small act of kindness on her father's part completely disarmed Emily. Emily describes a balancing act when it comes to her father. She spends her days in a frantic hurry making sure that everything is just right for him. When he arrives home, she is the picture of calm. She will not allow him to think that life in their home is anything but peaceful. Her father relented on the rules for her, because she read her poetry to him, but Emily says that her father never understood her.

Lavinia, Emily's younger sister, provides an interesting conflict in Emily's familial relationships. Even though Lavinia is the younger sister, she acts as Emily's nursemaid and mother figure. Emily resents the gossip of the village that says Lavinia refused to marry, because she couldn't leave Emily. Emily claims that Lavinia did receive a proposal, but that the gentleman changed his mind after meeting a pretty girl in yellow. She says that it is Lavinia who has the fanatical attachment, not Emily. Emily claims that she had the chance to marry at least twice, but that Vinnie refused to let Emily go. She tells a story of a man coming to the homestead to take her away, and how Vinnie began screaming hysterically and did not stop, until Emily sent the man away. Emily says that she would have been very happy for her sister to marry. She simply does not believe



her sister could do without her. Emily chafes under her relationship with Vinnie. She loves Vinnie, but she does not understand her any more than Vinnie understands Emily.

According to Emily, Austin is the only member of her family who truly knows her. He always believed her reclusive eccentricities were an act, and constantly told her to stop pretending. Even though Emily believes her father was selfish in keeping Austin in Amherst, she was happy when Austin and his wife Sue moved in next door. Emily lives vicariously through Austin and Sue. She views their children as her inspiration, and adores Sue with a baffling intensity. Emily says that even though Sue does not understand her or her regard, she does understand Emily's need to write, and for that she loves Sue unconditionally. Even though there has been historical debate about Emily's sexuality, Emily dismisses it by saying that when she loves-whether it be a man or a woman- she loves intensely and can scarcely understand the love herself. She admits that it frightens her and the people she loves by how attached she can become to the object of her affection.

Emily has few mentions of her mother. She says that her mother, like her father, never understood her. Her mother was not one for deep thought and therefore, rarely listened to anything Emily said. Emily does however qualify her relationship with her mother. A year after Emily's father died, her mother had a stroke and became bedridden. The roles between Emily and her mother became reversed. The affection Emily missed from her mother during her childhood bloomed when Emily began to care for her mother. Her mother's death shocked Emily to her very soul.

Emily's relationship with her family is never contentious, but there is resentment in her statements about them. Lavinia seems to be the biggest object of resentment for Emily, mainly because Lavinia is so practical where Emily is dreamy. Emily resents Lavinia treating her like a child. She tells the story of a fire in Amherst that lit up the skies and brought everyone out into Main Street. Lavinia tries to convince Emily that there is no fire. It is just the Fourth of July celebration that is lighting up the sky.

This story shows the audience two interesting things. Emily resents Lavinia trying to soothe her as though she were a small child. She says that she knows the difference between a fire and celebration. More interestingly, one has to wonder which event is true. Since Emily's mother slept through the commotion, and since Emily never left the house to verify that it was a fire, the audience never really knows whether Lavinia or Emily was right. Since Emily is telling the story, the audience might side with her by default. It is the way she tells her story, however, that clouds the entire event with doubt.

Lavinia Dickinson

Lavinia, or Vinnie, as she is sometimes called, is the younger sister of Emily. Emily describes Vinnie as clumsy but, also practical. Vinnie loves cats above all other creatures and will begrudge her pets nothing. When Emily complains about the cats killing birds, Vinnie tells her to blame the creator and not the cats.



Vinnie is the perfect contrast to Emily as a character. Vinnie assumes the practical responsibilities of the home. She knows where everything is, she considers fall to be "one long chore," and can't conceive of it as an Eden the way Emily does. Vinnie treats Emily as her child, even though she is younger than Emily. Vinnie describes Emily's reclusive antics as simply "a happen." She puts no stock in the idea that Emily is incapable of leaving the house. She is simply happy to have Emily there. According to Emily, Vinnie never refused a marriage proposal on Emily's account. In Emily's view, Vinnie would be lost without Emily to care for. She believes that Vinnie enjoys being a martyr. If Emily were to marry, then there is no longer any justification for Vinnie's martyrdom.

Vinnie's infinite practicality seems to amuse Emily. For Emily the entire world is a poem that has yet to be written. She does not understand Vinnie's pragmatic view that the autumn is for picking apples and working hard chores. Emily says that even though they love each other dearly, there has never been any real understanding between the two of them. Emily also considers Vinnie to be a hypocrite. Vinnie did not want Emily to run away with the man who came to the house, because he was married. Vinnie, however, knows that their brother Austin is cheating on Sue and has no issue with it. She even delivers notes between Austin and his mistress, acting as though she were Cupid to a great romance.

What of Vinnie? Vinnie's character is only defined through Emily's perceptions of her. The audience never hears whether there is any resentment of Emily on Vinnie's part. The audience never discovers whether Vinnie was disappointed in the marriage proposal that fell through. The audience never even learns what type of relationship Vinnie has with the other members of the family. Vinnie seems to exist for only Emily. Again, this says more about Emily's perceptions than it does about Vinnie's character.

Edward Dickinson

Edward is the patriarch of the Dickinson family. Emily describes him as proper and austere. He is demanding and controlling, but he is also sentimental in his own way. Emily explains that when her father taught her to tell time, she didn't understand, but she pretended she did, because she was afraid of disappointing him. She says that he was so inflexible that any leniency on his part would completely disarm everyone in the family. When he allowed her to stay up late to write and sleep later in the mornings, she was charmed by such a small favor from him.

Edward is a study in contrasts. According to Emily he is a stern and proper man but he appreciates life and beauty. She describes the night that the aurora borealis lit up the New England sky. That night everyone was roused by the bells of the church, and came out to see the sky. Emily says that it was her father who saw the beauty and rang the bells to alert everyone to the northern lights. Of course, since it is Emily telling the story, one can never be sure of Edward's actual motives for ringing the church bells that evening. She admits that everyone, including her, thought that it was a large fire at first.



It is possible that rather than wanting to share the beauty of the sky, Edward simply wanted to warn the village of the fire.

Emily balances the austerity of her father with her own view of his sentimentality. When Austin returned home from school, Edward bought the house next door. He wanted Austin to move in to the house and always be near the family. This controlling attitude is balanced by a story Emily tells about her father's love of animals. During his last winter, there were several snowstorms and the birds sat by the kitchen door. Edward was worried that the birds would starve so he went out in his slippers and brought them some grain from the barn. He hid from the sight of the birds while he fed them so that the birds wouldn't be embarrassed by his presence. The descendants of those birds are still singing in the homestead and frolicking over the grave of their unknown benefactor.

Austin Dickinson

Austin is Emily's brother. Emily says that Austin knows her in a way that no one else in her family does. The two of them are so different from everyone else in the family that they are dependant upon each other. She worries that Austin is disturbed by the stories of her antics around town.

Austin is the only one besides Emily's father to receive a complete education. After a year of Mount Holyoke, Emily returned home and did not leave. She says that she wore out her welcome with Miss Lyon but she also admits that it made it easier for Austin to go away to school, as their father did not like for more than one child to be gone at once. Austin and his father had an argumentative yet, respectful relationship. When the two of them were together, they would argue. When they were apart, they were devoted to each other and extolled each other's virtues. When Austin finished law school he received an offer from a law firm in Chicago. Austin was prepared to leave when his father offered to build him a house next door. Austin stayed and married Sue.

Austin is also a set of contrasts. He obviously admires family above all with his devotion to his sister and his father, but he is having an affair. He cannot be with his father without discord, but loves him dearly and respects him above all others. At his father's funeral, Austin kissed him tenderly on the forehead and said that it was the one thing he was never allowed to do while his father lived. The audience will never know if Austin ever resented his father's controlling ways.

Susan Gilbert Dickinson

Sue is Austin's wife. Emily does not give away very much about Sue. She says that she loves Sue, because Sue understands her need to write. Sue is the one who helps Emily choose the poems to submit for publication. When Emily learns that Mr. Higginson will be coming to visit, Sue is the first person she tells. When Emily considered running away with the married man, Sue was the person Vinnie brought back to convince Emily to stay.



Sue is presented as a constant for Emily. She mothered the children that became Emily's inspiration. She may not understand Emily, or Emily's motivations, but she understands Emily's need to express herself and encourages her poetry. Emily never says whether or not Sue knows about Austin's affair. The audience is left to wonder if Sue harbors resentment or is content with her life as it is.

Emily Norcross Dickinson

Emily Norcross Dickinson is Emily's mother. Emily is very spare in her descriptions of her mother. She describes her mother as uninterested in the things Emily says. Emily says that because her mother was never one for deep thought, her mother usually ignored what Emily had to say. Emily's mother was always somewhat sickly, and after suffering a stroke, became bedridden.

Emily and Lavinia took over their mother's care, and she became like a child to them. Since their mother showed very little affection to the children when they were young, the reversal in roles allowed them to become closer. Emily says that her mother's death stunned her soul. Even though she was bedridden, Emily never expected her to die.

Mary Lyon

Mary Lyon was the headmistress of Mount Holyoke. Emily describes her as a dragon of a lady. While Emily speaks of Miss Lyon as a noble woman whom she liked, she still considered her a dragon. Miss Lyon is a stern and devout woman intent upon converting her students to Christianity. She divides her students into three categories, professed Christians, students with hope, and students without hope. Emily was in the last category.

While Emily refused to be converted and even offended Miss Lyon by calling the Bible a merry and arid book, she refuses to laugh at her. Emily believes that Mary Lyon was possessed of a pure heart.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson

Higginson was a literary critic with whom Emily corresponded. Emily saw him as her mentor and wanted more than anything to have him recognize her talent. In the play, Emily sends her poems to him and eagerly awaits his response. When she finally meets him in person, he crushes her by calling her rhyme scheme spasmodic and her meter uncontrolled. Emily is at a loss and is devastated. She tries to cheer herself by reminding the audience that Mr. Higginson also crushed Walt Whitman in the same way.

Before Emily meets Higginson, she is caught up in a fantasy that he will make her famous. After he devastates her, she calls him deaf to true poetry. While Thomas Wentworth Higginson is an esteemed historical figure, he is no more than a bit character in the play about Emily's life.



Henrietta Sweetser

Henrietta is not so much a character as a symbol. She represents the villagers of Amherst. Emily mimics Henrietta's gossip and feels that Henrietta is a representative of what the whole town believes about Emily. Emily admonishes the audience not to believe anything that Henrietta has to say.

Charles Wadsworth

Charles is a Presbyterian minister. Emily saw him for the first time in Philadelphia at a church service. She instantly fell in love with him. She began writing him when she returned home and tried to only discuss spiritual things. Though Emily claims to have loved him truly, she admits that she only ever met him twice, and those times were twenty years apart. Charles represents all of Emily's unrequited loves.



Objects/Places

The Dickinson Household (The Homestead)

Called the Homestead by Emily, the Dickinson household is where all of the action of the play takes place. Emily's entire world is the house and the gardens. Emily's descriptions of the house are at times full of excitement and chaos and at other times quiet and lonely. She says that when her father died the house seemed empty with just her and Lavinia. The house is Emily's anchor. It is the thing that keeps her grounded in reality as she moves in and out of her past recollections.

The Evergreens (Austin and Sue's Home)

Edward built the Evergreens next door to the Homestead. He built it to keep Austin in Amherst. There, Austin and Sue made a home and raised a family.

The Path Between the Evergreens and the Homestead

Emily describes a little path between the two homes. She says that it was just wide enough for two lovers, but that she and Sue were the ones who most often used it. She uses the path as a metaphor for her relationship with Sue. She says that she loved Sue dearly, but that Sue didn't understand her love. Emily believes that the way she loves is dangerous and that bliss is unnatural. Therefore, when the path becomes overgrown from disuse, she simply says "it's best to abandon paths when you find they lead nowhere." This is a fitting description for her love of Sue.

Emily's Box of Poems

Emily keeps all of her completed poems in a box. She goes through the box to show her father her poetry, and he allows her to stay up late and sleep longer in the mornings. Sue goes through the box to help her find poems suitable for submission to Mr. Higginson. In the final scene of the play, Emily pulls a poem from the box to read especially to the audience.

Black Cake

When the play opens, Emily is offering the audience her recipe for black cake. The recipe is fairly involved and takes several hours to complete. The cake is her way of welcoming the audience into her home.



Themes

Fantasy vs. Reality

The most prominent theme in this play is that of fantasy versus reality. Emily's is the only voice the audience hears throughout the play. Emily, however, is not very reliable as a teller of history. She recounts stories of her past and tales of her family, but each is slanted from her own perception.

Several times throughout the play, the audience is left to wonder whether Emily is relating fact or her translation of it. She openly admits to giving the villagers false impressions of herself for her own amusement. There is nothing to suggest that she isn't doing the same to the audience. She describes herself as shy and retiring, but tells stories of her own daring. She says that she, the shy and guarded Emily, read every objectionable part of Shakespeare aloud to her classmates simply to defy her teacher. She runs to hide from her neighbors, but then says that she audaciously rejected Miss Lyon's attempts at conversion.

There are more telling moments of Emily's lapses into fantasy. The entire premise of the play is that Emily meanders through time and is a different age at any given moment. These lapses become more seamless as the play progresses. In the first act, she provides a setting for her flashbacks. She says, for instance, that she used to send Valentines, before she becomes the teenage girl complaining about not receiving any. She talks about the admirers she expects to have before she becomes a young girl attempting to flirt with Mr. Billings. Throughout the first act, she sets up each flashback with a small introduction. By the second act however, there are no clues about when a flashback will occur. Her prose as does her poetry becomes more random and less clear.

Specific events also cloud the validity of Emily's perceptions. The night of the aurora borealis, Emily claims that her father saw the lights and rang the bells so that the entire town would enjoy the beauty of the moment. This is an ambiguous statement on her part. She and everyone else in the village assumed that it was fire lighting up the sky. So, there is no reason to believe that her father rang the bell for any other reason than to warn the township. The audience sees this again when Emily relates the story of a fire on the Fourth of July.

Emily resents Lavinia for saying that the fire was just the Fourth of July celebration. Emily says that she knows a fire when she sees one and that Lavinia was only trying to soothe her as she would a child. The audience, however, can never be sure which story is accurate. Emily's mother slept through the commotion, the neighbors were outside watching as they would either event, and Emily never confirmed with any other neighbor what actually happened. This particular incident calls into question most of what Emily perceives as reality.



As the play comes closer to its end, Emily's lapses into fantasy become more overwhelming. After she describes the death of her nephew Gilbert, Emily ruminates on the seasons. This part of her monologue becomes muddled and confused with sounds and smells from her memory. It becomes a mass of tangled memory that the audience is left to decipher.

Life, Art and Poetry

Emily views all of life with love. She believes each person to be a rare and beautiful poem. She sees nature and art as things to be translated to poetry. She says that it is her business to create poetry, and all of her poetry is inspired by life. For Emily, life becomes art and art is poetry. There is no separation between the three entities.

Emily has such an ecstatic joy in life that it comes as no surprise that she views it all as poetry in progress. It is also no surprise that her jubilation pushes her to translate all she sees into poetry. She views her brother's children as her life's inspirations and autumn as an Eden in Amherst. For Emily, there is only beauty. Even death inspires wonder in her. She ruminates about the extension of consciousness and the gift of immortality that all human beings will have. Emily loves life with such childlike intensity that there is no room for anything but poetry. She paints life as a whimsical happening that she alone seems capable of enjoying.

Familial Loyalty and Resentment

Emily speaks of her family with love and loyalty, but there is also an underlying resentment in her tone. Emily describes her father as an austere, but loving man. She goes out of her way to balance all of his proprieties with acts of sentimentality. Not once does she ever explain away his controlling personality. She sarcastically calls her father unselfish for keeping Austin home. It is the only time she truly insults anything her father has done.

Emily's love and resentment of Lavinia is more obvious. Emily says that though they love each other unconditionally, she and Lavinia simply don't understand each other. Lavinia is Emily's younger sister, but she cares for Emily as though Emily were a child. Emily shows her resentment for Lavinia in small ways. Emily believes that Lavinia uses her as an excuse for martyrdom. Emily accuses the township of baseless gossip regarding Lavinia's spinsterhood. Emily accuses Lavinia of being afraid of losing her. She says that she never kept Vinnie from marrying. It was the other way around. Emily's resentment of Lavinia is defined in one particular moment. Emily believes there was a large fire in Amherst that brought everyone out of his or her homes and into Main Street. Lavinia told her that it was just the Fourth of July celebration as a means of soothing her like a small child. This chafed Emily so much that when Vinnie tells her not to speak of death, Emily simply says, "Don't be afraid, dear Vinnie, it's only the Fourth of July." The simple phrase sums up all of the resentment Emily has for Vinnie's place in her life.



The Artist as an Enigma

Historically, very little is known about Emily Dickinson's private life. The play is based on her poetry and letters, so the events are ambiguous in relation to reality. The character of Emily Dickinson plays with this concept. Since she is weaving the tale with all of the power of her poetry, where does reality end and exaggeration begin? The historical Emily Dickinson was an enigma to those around her and though many speculated about her eccentric behavior, only she knew the truth.

The character Emily Dickinson is still an enigma. Though she is openly confiding to the audience, how much of what she says is actually credible? Her lapses into the past, and into poetry leave the audience wondering if they truly know anything about Emily. Is she the "half-cracked" daughter of Squire Dickinson, or is she a sane and reasonable person playing with the minds of those around her? These questions are never answered. Emily tells her story, but gives nothing away. In the end, the audience is left wondering if they have even scratched the surface of Emily's life.

Artistic Thought versus Rational Behavior

Emily is a poet. She makes that very clear from her opening statements. She claims that her eccentric behavior is all an act for her own amusement at the expense of the village. Is she being honest though? Emily lives and breathes poetry choosing only the best words for poems and only the most natural beauty for her inspiration. In her mind, there is no separation between art and life. In this context, she is a playful child weaving art out of life.

Rationally, the audience must accept that Emily is unstable. Her meanderings through time and language are beautiful, even poignant, but also unbalanced. She moves seamlessly through time during the course of the play with only the house to keep her anchored. There is nothing rational about a grown woman sprinting up the stairs to both avoid and gain her neighbors' attention. When she slips into a tangled mass of words that evoke feeling but little understanding, is she still rational, or, is in the midst of a delusion?

The audience is left to decide whether Emily is an eccentric artist putting on an act for her personal amusement, or whether she is indeed "half-cracked."



Style

Points of View

Since the play is a one-woman show, everything is told from Emily's perspective. The audience never learns anything from any other viewpoint. It is Emily's story, and she tells it whimsically. Since Emily slips in and out of the past and, because her feelings and thoughts come through in sudden bursts of poetry, one can never be sure whether or not to trust her version of events. She is an unreliable narrator. She admits that though she believes in the truth, all truth is told on a slant.

Emily's is the only voice throughout the play. No other character appears on stage even though Emily interacts with them. She is omniscient and completely fallible. Emily admits to playacting for the sake of confusing her neighbors. She says she enjoys the game and views the village as her menagerie. The villagers are only given voice through Emily's mimicry. Emily controls everything that the audience hears. The audience learns very little about the individuals of Emily's family, because everything is colored by Emily's perception of them.

Setting

The play is set in the Dickinson house in Amherst Massachusetts. The initial time period of the play is 1883. Time becomes unimportant as the play progresses however. Emily greets the audience at the age of 53, but she is many different ages throughout the play. At times she is a child happily reading her poetry to her father. Other times she is a mischievous teenager defying her teachers. She moves from a Mount Holyoke student rejecting conversion, to a thirty-year-old rejecting church altogether.

While most of the action of the play takes place in the Homestead, time shifts constantly as Emily weaves her story for the audience. Her mannerisms control the movement of the play and time shifts with her. There are only two times that the audience is to believe that Emily is outside of the house. When Emily is telling the story of her Shakespeare Society, the audience must imagine that she is in a classroom of sorts, even though she has only moved to the parlor of the house. The parlor is used again to represent Meeting Room B of Mount Holyoke. In the meeting room, Emily rejects Mary Lyon's attempts to convert her to Christianity.

Language

Language is probably the most important stylistic point of the play. The author, William Luce, describes the play as a "love affair with language." Throughout the play, Emily collects words that inspire her. She believes that as a poet, it is her responsibility to use only the best words for her work. The language of Emily's monologue is lyrical and poetic. The monologue is only broken by her poems.



The audience understands that Emily is playing with words and language as only a poet can. When a subject becomes troubling or ignites some strong feeling, Emily breaks into poetry as a means of translation. For Emily, all of her life is about translating the events and natural happenings around her into poetry.

Language plays another important role in the play. It is through her language that the audience is able to identify Emily's shifts through time. When she is remembering something far off, her tone becomes dreamy and ethereal. When she slips into a past happening, her tone changes to suit her age and emotional state. When she cannot bear to speak of something, she says it in poetry as a way of slanting the truth.

Emily uses language as a tongue-in-cheek means of asking forgiveness. She wants forgiveness for her love of nature and beauty and for loving those around her so intently. She wants forgiveness for childlike innocence and fear of midnight. Her life is her art, and she wants the audience to understand that she is not mad. She is simply bursting with joy. Emily does all of this through her language.

Emily's language reveals her mental state and her unreliability as a narrator. She offers everything as truth, but not as fact. She has no proof that there was a fire during the Fourth of July holiday, but refuses to believe Lavinia's explanation that it was simply the celebration. She does not know what the people of Amherst really say and think of her, but mimics their gossip and imagines their reactions as though she did. As her mental state moves more into a realm of fantasy, her words become jumbled. At times, she is not speaking in coherent sentences. She is only evoking images with sudden groupings of words.

Structure

The Belle of Amherst is a one-woman show in two acts. There are no scene breaks. There is just Emily telling her story to the audience. Act 2 is a continuation of Act 1. The structure shows the audience that everything happening on stage is happening the same day. In the span of a single day, Emily tells her life story and share perceptions of her family and neighbors. Though the play spans the life of a historical figure, history is unimportant.

The play itself is a compilation of Emily's poems, letters, and historical biographies. The author, William Luce, has created a fictional character from a historical one. Since so little is known about Emily besides what she wrote or what was written about her, the play is both a biography and a work of fiction.



Quotes

"Here in Amherst, I'm known as Squire Edward Dickinson's half-cracked daughter. Well I am! The neighbors can't figure me out. I don't cross my father's ground to any house or town. I haven't left the house for years." Act 1, p. 3

"Sometimes I bake one for a neighbor and I enclose a short note that is usually so obscure...no one can understand it! I hear my little notes are becoming collectors' items in the village. People compare them to see who has the strangest one." Act 1, p.5

"Words are my life. I look at words as if they were entities, sacred beings. There are words to which I lift my hat when I see them sitting on a page." Act 1, p. 7

"To find that phosphorescence, that light within, that's the genius behind poetry." Act 1, p. 9

"Decency? But what good is crossing them out going to do? I've already read them, and so has Abby. And Jennie. Haven't you girls? Anyway, how do we dare edit Shakespeare, Mr. Crowell?" Act 1 p. 17

"I never knew how to tell time by the clock till I was fifteen. Father thought he had taught me, but I didn't understand. And I was afraid to say I didn't and afraid to ask anyone else, lest he should know. Can you imagine never knowing what time it was? Thank goodness for twilight!" Act 1, p. 20

"But I have read the Bible Miss Lyon, Old and New Testaments. Well, I thought at first it was an arid book. But then I found it wise and a bit-merry." Act 1, p. 27

"I've always been intense about relationships. At times, my love overwhelms people. And it puzzles me. My business is to love. It's dangerous to love as I do. Bliss is so unnatural, don't you think?" Act 1, p. 30

"Vinnie's always falling off something. But she's practical. She knows where everything is in this house, from a lost quotation, to last year's muffler." Act 1, p. 35

"But - my meter is new - experimental. Not spasmodic! Bad rhymes? Oh, no. You don't understand what I'm trying to- if only I could explain...Uncontrolled? But, Mr. Higginson, when I try to organize, my little force explodes." Act 2, p. 48

"I understand that another poet met with the same disappointing reception from Mr. Higginson. But he didn't give up as I did. Here...he got his poems published somehow. And his book has gone through nine editions already. Mr. Higginson says his poems are absolutely scandalous! His name? - Walt Whitman." Act 2, p. 49

"Vinnie did not give up marriage to remain with me! Don't you listen to that Henny Sweetser. Vin never speaks of marriage anymore. But I think she lives much of the time in the State of Regret. My Country is Truth!" Act 2, p. 53



"Yes, I still write poetry, but not as much as I used to. There are so few listeners, and those who should be the best listeners - like Professor Higginson - are deaf. But even yet...when I see a tall pale snowstorm stalking through the fields and bowing at my window, I find I must translate my feeling into poetry." Act 2, p. 61

"Father doesn't live with us now. He lives in a new house. Though it was built in an hour, it is better than this. He hasn't any garden, because he moved after the gardens were made. So we take him the best flowers. And if we only knew he knew, perhaps we could stop crying. Though it is many nights, my mind never comes home." Act 2, p. 64

"I suspect Mother was afraid of dying. She always avoided talking about it. One night, Austin and I were talking about the extension of consciousness after death, and Mother told Vinnie afterward - she thought it was 'very improper.'" Act 2, p. 69

"Vinnie says a little boy ran away from Amherst a few days ago. When asked where he was going, he replied 'Vermont or Asia.' What a smart little boy. Told Vinnie I wanted to run away too. I think I frightened her." Act 2, p. 72

"Oh, I can hear Vinnie say, 'Don't talk like that, Emily.' But I say, 'Don't be afraid, dear Vinnie, it's only the Fourth of July.'" Act 2, p. 76

"I wonder if I ever dreamed - or if I'm dreaming now. I cannot tell how Eternity seems. It sweeps around me like a sea." Act 2, p. 76



Topics for Discussion

In his introduction, William Luce says that he believed Emily Dickinson consciously elected to be a recluse who was alone but not lonely. Does the character in the play really live up to Luce's understanding, or is Emily mentally unstable? Give examples from the play to back up the argument.

How reliable is Emily as a narrator? Does her own admissions of play-acting make her more or less believable in the stories she tells?

The play depicts two characters. There is the Emily Dickinson of history, and there is the Emily Dickinson as a character in the play. Discuss whether this play should be considered a biography, or a work of fiction. Use examples from the play to back up the discussion.

Even though she never speaks, is Lavinia a more reliable witness than Emily?

Emily Dickinson's poems appear throughout the play. Using examples of some of the poems, describe how they relate to Emily's mental state.

Choose two poems from the play. Provide an analysis of them in their context. In the analysis, provide information about the imagery and symbolism Emily Dickinson's poetry evokes.

Throughout the play, Emily comments on religion and her beliefs in regards to Christianity. Christianity aside, how do Emily's spiritual beliefs infuse both the play and her poetry?