

## Trauma and Terror in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

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“My darling, you’ll be the only Dickinson they talk about in 200 years,” Death (portrayed by rapper Wiz Khalifa), prophesizes during a carriage ride with the show’s titular character, the enigmatic poet, portrayed by actress Hailee Steinfeld, Emily Dickinson (“Because I could not stop”). Considering this is a line written for an Apple TV+ series dedicated to the poet, Death’s bold assumption proves to be correct. Emily Dickinson’s poetry continues to enchant casual readers and serious scholars alike, inspiring the hit television series that has furthered the public’s interest in both Dickinson’s fascinating life and captivating poetry. Despite the show’s anachronisms, many scholars agree that the show, *Dickinson*, is a positive representation of the poet. Dickinson scholar Johanna Winant comments that the show’s “version of Dickinson is pretty close to [her] Emily Dickinson: the one [she knows] not through her biography but through her poetry” (Winant). Likewise, scholar Cristanne Miller echoes high approval for the show: “Dickinson was witty, brilliant, well-educated and irreverent. This, together with the fact that she wrote some of the greatest poetry in the English language, make her a natural protagonist for a TV series” (Hausler). Further, Emily Dickinson scholar Martha Nell Smith posits that Dickinson and other similar works have enhanced interest in the poet. In an interview, Smith was asked “Between [*Dickinson*], *Wild Nights* and *A Quiet Passion*, why do you think there’s suddenly a renewed interest in Emily?” to which Smith answers: “I think that’s because of very careful scholarship ... And many have been unearthing that Dickinson was bold and committed to her art. I think other artists are waking up to that” (Handler). Evidently, these

projects have caused a resurgence in interest in the poet's life, particularly, her private life and relationships. However, as apparent in the writing of this essay, these projects also inspire inquiry into aspects of her life that have been previously overlooked, such as the relationship between Emily Dickinson's trauma and how it translates to her poetry. Through elements of trauma theory, biographical details, and theories of the poet's life, we can better identify representations of trauma in Dickinson's poetry and how she used poetry itself as a coping mechanism.

Securing a concrete definition of trauma is difficult, as it differs depending on the theorist. Freedman cites Cathy Caruth's definition as "an experience so 'overwhelming,' 'sudden,' and 'catastrophic' as to penetrate the 'membrane' of the psyche" (4). Further, the extension of Caruth's definition clarifies "that one's response to trauma is often 'belated' (in Freudian terms), manifesting in the 'delayed, uncontrolled, repetitive appearance' of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (4). Meanwhile, Herman defines trauma as "'an affliction of the powerless,' and experience in which 'the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force'" (4). Additionally, she states that "traumatic symptoms are often disconnected from their source and take on a life of their own (a state she labels 'intrusion')" (4). Richard Crownshaw's definition is as follows: "that which defies witnessing, cognition, conscious recall and representation – generating the belated or deferred and disruptive experience of the event not felt at the time of witnessing" (167). These varying definitions communicate the intricacies of trauma and how it manifests in individuals.

These definitions also work closely with another preoccupation of trauma theory, namely, how trauma is witnessed. Despite the fluidity of trauma definitions, critics stress the necessity of "traumatic witnessing," defined as "the speaking, writing, or otherwise conscious

acknowledgment of a traumatic event—in order to overcome it” (Freedman 5). This entails efforts to “endure and prevail” to cope with the traumatic event through “[facing] one’s ‘buried truths,’ ‘[piecing] together’ an individual history, and [voicing] a ‘fully recognized narrative’” (Freedman 5). Possibly the most important piece of advice comes from Herman, who writes that “‘the only way’ a survivor can take ‘control of her recovery’ is to witness” (Freedman 5). Ultimately, the goal of witnessing is to “[empower] shattered subjects not only to survive but also to thrive” (Freedman 7). These ideas of witnessing trauma apply to my assertion that Dickinson’s poetry existed as a coping mechanism for both the potential and biographically legible traumas she endured. Despite not explicitly writing about her trauma as some writers do through personal narratives, Dickinson’s poetry sneakily divulges details of her life artistically.

Although Toni Morrison’s “The Site of Memory” primarily focuses on trauma in relation to slave narratives, pieces of her wisdom regarding the effects of trauma on writers can also be applied to a writer like Dickinson. Morrison discusses that for her specifically, in writing trauma the most important attribute is having “no mention of [the writer’s] interior life” (91). Despite this tidbit being catered towards fiction and/or personal narratives, it heavily applies to Dickinson’s poetry. Her poetry does not explicitly divulge details of her interior life, however, the historicization of her life points to her poetry being deeply personal, which reinforces her poetry as symptomatic of the traumas she had experienced, often including topics such as death and dying, fear, and anxiety. One example of this lies in her poem “’Tis not that Dying hurts us so —,” where she expresses: “’Tis not that Dying hurts us so -- / ‘Tis Living – hurts us more – / But Dying – is a different way – A Kind behind the Door” (l. 1-4). In these few lines the poet acknowledges life being more painful than death, which is a concealed sort of pain. From this example, Dickinson’s fascination with death is made clear, as she states that life is more painful

than death, a conclusion of which had to have been drawn from the hurt she had experienced in her own life. Poems such as this have led scholars to question what exactly made life so painful for Emily Dickinson, and consequently, they have looked to what little documents remain that could provide possible answers.

One of the most compelling pieces of evidence in Emily Dickinson's potential trauma comes from a letter she wrote to Thomas Wentworth Higginson on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1862. Dickinson writes: "I had a terror — since September — I could tell to none — and so I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground — because I am afraid" (Dickinson 172). The unknown details of Dickinson's "terror" has fascinated scholars, such as Dr. Isabel Legarda who hypothesizes that Dickinson's trauma may have been sexual assault. Legarda notes that as a physician herself, she believes that in conjunction with the grief that plagued Dickinson, trauma is a plausible explanation for the "myriad questions her life and work have generated." After consulting various poems, letters, and biographies, Legarda "felt compelled to consider that [Dickinson] might have endured sexual assault and been silenced not only in her own time but also by generations of scholars afterward who could not or would not recognize such a possibility." Legarda refers to several Dickinson poems that implicate trauma; heightened evidence is contained in "Rearrange a 'Wife's' affection," which Legarda considered to be "the most telling and disturbing" (Legarda). In my own analysis, this poem replicates an un-sexing of sort, the first stanza exclaiming: "Rearrange a 'Wife's' affection! / When they dislocate my Brain! Amputate my freckled Bosom! / Make me bearded like a man!" (704). These lines act as a relinquishing of her female body in favor of being more masculine, presumably, to be safe from the violence she has experienced as a woman. The last stanza chillingly refers to an unknown secret to be carried to the grave with the poet: "Big my Secret but it's *bandaged* -- / It will never get away / Till the

Day its Weary Keeper / Leads it through the Grave to thee.” (705). A secret being bandaged implies that it is also a wound in need of repair, but also that it is hidden from view.

Additionally, the continuation of it being bandaged until being led through the grave implies it will never fully heal. These heavy lines bear the weight of Dickinson’s trauma, implying it as so secretive, she could never fully recover from it while alive.

This mysterious terror may have contributed to Dickinson’s incredibly prolific writing streak. In 1858, Dickinson wrote 52 poems, while in 1862, she wrote 366 poems; this dramatic increase in her creative output gives way to the assumption that of the many influences on her writing, the unbeknownst “terror” she experienced in September of 1861 was a driving force (Legarda). In thinking about Emily Dickinson’s relationship to trauma, the scholarship on trauma in literature further explains the link between the event (i.e., Dickinson’s mysterious “terror”) and the poet’s creative surge. While Eden Wales Freedman points out the many variations in definitions of trauma, she cites Anne Whitehead’s definition of trauma as “both a seismic event (e.g., a railway accident) and the symptomatic responses to that event (a shattered psyche)” (4). Whitehead’s definition of trauma exemplifies how Dickinson’s “terror” acts as the event and her symptomatic response could be viewed as both her writing, and the contents of her writing, i.e., death, dying, and notably for this argument, the implications of assault.

The usage of phallic and graphic sexual imagery stands as evidence of Dickinson’s potential familiarity with sexual violence. One specific example of this is found in a poem from ca. 1862, “It would never be Common – more – I said –” in which the poet employs a goblin to communicate what might be a sexual encounter. One of the stanzas of the lengthy poem informs readers: “When – suddenly – my Riches shrank – / A Goblin – drank my Dew – / My Palaces – dropped tenantless – / Myself was beggared – too –” (206). The imagery accompanying a

mythical creature like a goblin, drinking a mysterious dew, points to the encounter as nonconsensual, as the goblin figure is performing an act that leaves her unfamiliar in her own body. Considering her body as the palace she writes about, it being rendered tenantless highlights the separation of herself as a result of an assault. Further, referring to herself as being “beggared” implies her as begging, homeless, wishing to have a comfortable home in the body that was once hers.

Considering the goblin was a motif featured in multiple Dickinson poems, other scholars also contend Dickinson’s goblin works as a reference to a sexual assault. As explained by Wardrop:

The goblin performs the roles of father/Father/lover/Master/lawyer/Death/surgeon/editor/critic/rapist. Most especially, the goblin’s roles link integrally the work of critic and rapist. The goblin terrifies the victim as reader, gauging her responses in gothic terms, even as he threatens to violate her. Dickinson compounds the horror of a horrible act by casting a monster as the major performer. (84)

The goblin’s repeated appearance in her poetry gives way to the assumption that the creature is one that continues to haunt the poet. While referencing “It would never be Common – more – I said –” Wardrop points out both the stanza depicting the goblin drinking the dew and the following stanza, which reads:

I clutched at sounds –  
 I groped at shapes –  
 I touched the tops of Films  
 I felt the Wilderness roll back

Along my Golden lines – (206)

Wardrop describes the goblin's consumption and "the issue of ownership" as the established theme in the goblin's appearance. She further explicates: "Here the victim has owned and loses her voice as the invader appropriates her house her body her text."

Further, drawing specifically from the line "I clutched at sounds" she describes it as "the victim's numbing of the experience of rape. Exemplary for its incisive notation of the victim's response" (87). Through this we see how Dickinson's use of the goblin in this poem exhibits a clear exchange, the goblin taking something from the poet, and the attempts to grasp at anything around them in response—sounds, shapes, and films.

Considering Wardrop's assertion that those lines are explicitly about the victim's response, it works in tandem with trauma theory's treatment of trauma responses, like Herman's explanation that following a trauma, victims "may remember everything in detail but without emotion" such as Dickinson's portrayal of numbness (Freedman 4).

Wardrop's assessment of the poem greatly supports my own, specifically, the goblin as a symbol of sexual violence. While the goblin is featured in many of her poems, Dickinson creatively employs other creatures to depict scenes of sexual violence.

Much like Dickinson's goblin, her poem "In Winter in my Room" uses another surprising creature; this time, however, it is a worm. The poet writes: "In Winter in my Room / I came upon a Worm -- / Pink, lank and warm --" (682). A pink, warm, lanky worm in the intimacy of a bedroom evokes overtly phallic imagery. This type of phallic imagery is continued into the second stanza through the worm's transformation into a serpent. The second stanza describes the worm's metamorphosis:

A Trifle afterward

A thing occurred  
 I'd not believe it if I heard  
 But state with creeping blood –  
 A snake with mottles rare  
 Surveyed my chamber floor  
 In feature as the worm before  
 But ringed with power –

The unnamed “thing” occurring, in conjunction with the snake imagery, point to a sexual encounter. Snakes are notoriously phallic imagery, and in this example, it is in her bedroom, an inherently intimate space. The snake being described as “ringed with power” also implies it as phallic, and noticeably erect in comparison to the flaccid worm. While it could be read as a consensual sexual encounter, the usage of “But state with creeping blood” mark it as chilling and unwelcome. These interpretations of this selection of Dickinson’s poetry, in connection with the idea of Dickinson’s writing as a trauma response and an interior view of her possible trauma, are an example of one of the many implications of sexual trauma in Dickinson’s life and poetry.

While Dickinson’s implications of sexual abuse discussed above do not mention or highlight any specific suspect that could have abused the poet, other circulating theories do. Namely, these discussions point to Dickinson’s turbulent relationship with her family. Some scholars contend that her relationships to those in her family are a source of trauma, as well. Specifically, Mary Jo Dondlinger’s piece, “‘One Need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted’: Emily Dickinson’s Haunted Space” proposes Dickinson was a victim of incest. Dondlinger highlights evidence of incest in the Dickinson home between Emily and her father. In particular,



she examines Dickinson's "wife" poems and the evidence of her father's controlling nature. Ultimately, Dondlinger contends that the series of "wife" poems, such as "Rearrange a 'Wife's' affection," mentioned earlier in this essay, may be in reference to Dickinson being the "wife" to her father, if she were being sexually abused, or based on her taking on domestic duties while her mother was ill. Dickinson herself notes her father's role as the patriarch of the family, in a letter to her brother Austin saying: "What father says, he means" (Dondlinger 106). Dickinson's father is described by Dondlinger as being "the person in control and was not to be defied or refuted" (106). She also highlights other factors that contribute to Dickinson's "high risk for sexual victimization" (102). Considering the constituency of the family structures that encourage sexual abuse, Dondlinger explains each factor and how they align with the Dickinson family structure. The main factors are: "marital conflict or disruption, absence or inability of the mother, and the ordinal position of siblings." All factors listed apply to the Dickinson family (102). There is evidence of the marriage between Dickinson's father, Edward, and Dickinson's mother, also named Emily, being disrupted due to Edward being frequently away on business trips. The marital separation works in tandem with the absence of the mother piece, as well, because the Dickinson matriarch was frequently ill, often bedridden and withdrawn from her family. Her mother's weakness implies an inability to protect her daughter from dangers, a lack of child supervision, and an ineptitude to fulfill domestic duties. In turn, Emily cared for her mother and took on domestic responsibilities, which, consequently led to a resentment towards her mother's ill health. Dickinson famously, and hyperbolically, wrote in one letter that she "never had a mother" (102-103). Lastly, Dickinson was the oldest daughter and the oldest daughter in families has the highest likelihood of sexual abuse, especially in the case of father-daughter incest (103).

Collectively, her father's tyrannical rule, coupled with the instability in the Dickinson home, contribute to the possibility of an incestuous, sexual abuse for the unfortunate poet.

Comfortingly, Dondlinger also attests that Dickinson's writing was therapeutic for her, and essentially, an act of witnessing. Dondlinger cites one of her letters in which she wrote to Higginson "I felt a palsy, here—the Verses just relieve" (101). Like other scholars, Dondlinger believes the poet used writing as "a means of reconstructing a sense of safety" (101). Dickinson accomplished this by the description of space in her poems, often using either the home or the grave, or non-physical human characteristics, such as the mind, heart, or soul "in an attempt to construct safe spaces internally." (Dondlinger 111). This assertion is valid, considering Dickinson's negative representation of the home in her poems, such as the haunted house in "One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted." As a whole, Dickinson's construction of safe spaces function as a way to "cope with a sense of threat, quite probably from within her own home, by recreating a sense of home or safety elsewhere" (Dondlinger 111). This explanation thoroughly examines how and why Dickinson used poetry to cope with the trauma in her home life.

Of the many theories surrounding Dickinson, some scholars subscribe to the belief that her mysterious trauma was related to her ill health, specifically, her eye and vision problems. Scholars have difficulty locating the starting point of Dickinson's eye issues, but some of her letters contain clues that point to it beginning early in 1861. One letter of hers written to Joseph Lyman around 1865 contains the phrase: "Some years ago I had a woe, the only one that ever made me tremble" (Guthrie 10). Guthrie connects this phrase to the similar phrasing of the infamous "terror since September" from April 1862, meaning, the terror occurred in 1861. Dickinson sought treatment for her eye issues in Boston in 1864, making the timeline of

Dickinson's vision problems as on and off for at least five years. While her exact eye problem will never be known, some have extracted evidence of it being exotropia, "a deviation of the cornea that prevents the sufferer from achieving perfectly binocular vision" (Guthrie 11).

Richard B. Sewall was the first to propose exotropia as Dickinson's ailment in 1974; in 1979 Sewall teamed up with an ophthalmologist, Martin Wand, to confirm Dickinson's deviating cornea. They used an early photo from her Mount Holyoke Female Seminary portrait to show that her right cornea "deviated as much as fifteen degrees from true" (Guthrie 11) (see fig. I). Running alongside this evidence, however, are other suggestions of what caused the poet's ocular issues.

Despite the legitimate, biographical and historical evidence that suggest Dickinson's eye problems were real, some scholars suggest that her symptoms were merely psychosomatic or metaphorical. Dr. John Cody proposed that Dickinson's eye pain stemmed from an "unconscious" fear of the sun because it "represented an unacknowledged, symbolically castrated male principle in herself that was the result of an incomplete, unrequited relationship with her mother." Countering this, feminist critics, such as Wendy Barker, argue that Dickinson's symptoms were borne from a resentment and resistance of male domination, "the sun becoming an image in her poems of an oppressive male energy capable of inflicting violence and destruction" (Guthrie 10-11). Similar to Legarda's proposition that Dickinson's "terror" was possibly from a sexual assault, Baron St. Armand contends that "Dickinson was traumatized by the loss of a male companion whom she came to symbolize, both in her poems and in the Master letters, with the image of the sun" (Guthrie 11). This collection of hypotheses ultimately gives way to how Emily Dickinson processed the trauma of her debilitating eye condition through her poetry.

As this essay has proposed thus far, Emily Dickinson's trauma contributed to her intense periods of creativity. Dickinson "regarded writing as a form of therapy, yet not because it granted her a means of escaping, imaginatively, from the tedium of her sickroom" rather, "her poems provided Dickinson with the intellectual tools she needed to come to grips with her situation" (Guthrie 8-9). In other words, Dickinson's poetry served as a coping mechanism for her. Specifically in her poems referencing her eye issues, she was able to healthily "mourn the visible world she had been forced to renounce" (Guthrie 9). In poems such as "Before I got my eye put out" written in 1862, the poet directly references her ocular issues and the vision she mourns. The opening stanza reads: "Before I got my eye put out / I liked as well to see – / As other Creatures, that have Eyes / and know no other way –" (Dickinson 155). This opening captures Dickinson reflecting on how her vision has taken her natural ability to see and further, how vision is a natural ability that goes unnoticed until it is obscured or otherwise altered. Dickinson reflects on the limitation of her vision and how much she would enjoy seeing clearly if she were given the opportunity. In stanzas two and three, she writes:

But were it told to me – Today –  
 That I might have the sky  
 For mine – I tell you that my Heart  
 Would split, for size of me –  
 The Meadows – mine –  
 The Mountains – mine –  
 All Forests – Stintless Stars –  
 As much of Noon as I could take  
 Between my finite eyes –

These stanzas encapsulate Dickinson's writing of her situation as a vehicle for processing what has happened to her. While other scholars have suggested the references to eyesight in her poetry are purely for the sake of poetics or symbolic of other ideas, this poem directly addresses her loss of vision as traumatic. Dickinson's reflection of how she misses her clear vision and how eyesight is essentially "finite" acts as her own processing of her vision loss as a form of trauma.

In conjunction with theories relating to Dickinson's poor health that caused her to stay inside, the poet's public image is often tainted by her reputation as a recluse in her later years. The poet's seclusion is interpreted as both bizarre but also coolly mysterious, as expressed by Maryanne Garbowsky, who writes: "the life of Emily Dickinson reads like a fairy tale, with the air of a dream clinging to it — a young woman dressed in white confined to her father's home" (17). By the time Dickinson had begun her correspondence with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, she was almost entirely housebound. When he invited her to come to Boston, as "All ladies do," thus marketing it as being "a proper excursion for literary women" Dickinson declined. Her reasoning? She wrote to him: "Father objects because he is in the habit of me." Instead, Dickinson invited Higginson to her home in Amherst in June 1869, explaining: "I do not cross my Father's ground to any House or town" (Garbowsky 28-29). Dickinson's isolation fascinated Higginson, who planned his visit to learn more about the poet. Much like Higginson, Dickinson's puzzling sequestering continues to intrigue contemporary scholars who seek an answer to her isolation. The fairytale-like mystery surrounding the poet's seclusion has led to theories of whether another ailment afflicted her—agoraphobia.

Garbowsky's book ultimately argues that Dickinson's seclusion was "due to an agoraphobic syndrome that left her in fear of the outside world." Garbowsky traces how Dickinson "changed from a normal, outgoing person to someone afraid to leave the 'safe'

confines of her father's house" saying that "Turning to representative poems within the fascicles, we find the record of that life: the grip of fear, the pattern of flight, and the habit of denial" (22). This fearfulness is apparent in Thomas Wentworth Higginson's own encounters with the poet, who he said was "suffering from 'an excess of tension' created by 'an abnormal life'" (Garbowsky 28). The "excess of tension" would likely be classified as generalized anxiety disorder, by today's standards; however, her seclusion was not the root cause of it. Dickinson's "chronic apprehension was part of a larger emotional disorder that in fact created [her] abnormal life-style" (Grabowsky 28). Dickinson's debilitating anxiety and fear of leaving her father's house would, most likely, be diagnosed today as a severe agoraphobic syndrome.

Diagnosing and identifying agoraphobia (especially in the now-deceased poet) is incredibly tricky. Broadly speaking, agoraphobia is defined as "a marked fear of being alone, or being in public places from which escape might be difficult or help not available in cases of sudden incapacitation. Normal activities are increasingly constricted as fears or avoidance behavior dominate the individual's life" (Garbowsky 32). Further clarification notes that "at its most basic level the term can denote a patient's fear of leaving the house" but it also includes other types, specifically an agoraphobia with panic attacks and one without. The initial phase of agoraphobia begins with recurrent panic attacks, according to the *DSM III* (Garbowsky 34). While it is impossible to know the specifics of Dickinson's anxiety and panic, these symptoms alongside her reluctance to leave her home are reflected in her poetry.

Despite Dickinson's infamous reclusion, it is important to acknowledge that she did not lock herself away without contact to the outside world. Garbowsky stresses: "Although the poet was a recluse, she did not live in a vacuum. Withdrawn from the outside world, she participated in its activities through her family, her reading, and her correspondence" (21). Despite

Dickinson's reclusion, she was largely active in the world she created for herself in the Dickinson homestead and through her letters. While many details of her life are "as tightly closed upon herself as ever it was closed in the upstairs bedroom" her poetry offers us key insights into the mystery of her reclusive years (Griffith 274).

The poetry that reflects her reclusive nature functions therapeutically, "releasing her from a life that would otherwise have been impossible to live" (Garbowsky 22). Much like scholars who attribute Dickinson's terror to a possible assault or her eye ailment, Garbowsky contends that the terror could very well be "a reactivation and intensification of panic attacks" stemming from her agoraphobia (67). By 1869, Dickinson's last trip was to Boston in 1865, marking the four years as extremely reclusive (Garbowsky 29). Poems from this stage of her life are reflective of the anxiety terrorizing Dickinson, and consequential collapse of mental health. One poem from ca. 1865, "Crumbling is not an instant's Act" emphasizes the degeneration of her mental health. The first two stanzas capture the decline of one's sense of self:

Crumbling is not an instant's Act

A fundamental pause

Dilapidation's processes

Are organized Decays.

'Tis first a Cobweb on the Soul

A Cuticle of Dust

A Borer in the Axis

An Elemental Rust – (463)

In these lines, Dickinson captures the gradual process of mental health's decline, first beginning as a cobweb sprouting, then dust gathering, a borer clinging, and rust forming.

Considering Dickinson's seclusion beginning sometime after her trip to Boston in 1865, these stanzas embody Dickinson's awareness of the slow process of her inner self's deterioration. In another poem from her later years, ca. 1873, the short poem captures the powerlessness of one's circumstances: "In this short Life / That only lasts an hour / How much – how little – is / Within our power" (562). While it is unknown if she was specifically referring to anxiety, these brief lines provide insight to the powerlessness Dickinson has felt in her short life, potentially including her mental health's collapse, onset of panic attacks, and fear of the outside world. In particular, this relates to Herman's trauma definition centered around the "affliction of the powerless" and feelings of helplessness.

Through the many implications of trauma in Dickinson's life and subsequently, her poetry, she also captures the effect of trauma on her mental health and how her body aims to cope with it. The first stanza of one poem from ca. 1863 expresses: "One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted -- / One need not be a House – The Brain has Corridors – surpassing / Material Place – (333). In these four lines, the poet acknowledges the complexity of the brain, comparing it to a haunted house with many corridors. To cope with the labyrinthine, haunted brain, Dickinson writes about secluding oneself: "The Body – borrows a Revolver – / He bolts the Door – / O'erlooking a superior spectre – / Or More" (333). This poem functions as Dickinson's acknowledgement of how the brain bears the brunt of trauma and asks the challenging question of how a body should cope with it, and as evident in her case, isolation is the answer. As a whole, poems, such as this one, provide insight to Dickinson's mysterious, long period of isolation, and thus, inspire further inquiry into her life.



As one of America's most celebrated female poets, Emily Dickinson's fascinating poetry and mysterious life inspire an infinite amount of scholarly work. As explicated in this essay, her life was marked with a variety of traumas, some biographically sound and others merely theoretical. Together, the examination of Dickinson's trauma highlights how further interest in Emily Dickinson and trauma theory can work together. This essay proves that trauma theory can be used to identify representations of trauma in poetry just as well as it does in works of fiction. As scholarship on Dickinson continues to advance, in part due to shows like *Dickinson*, hopefully more scholars look to the topic of trauma. Through investigating the evidence of trauma in her life and represented in her poetry, we have further understanding of the enigmatic poetess of Amherst and can better honor her legacy with new questions, gratitude, and admiration. We may never know the truth of Dickinson's life; whether her "terror" was sexual assault, sexual abuse by her father, her eye condition, or a debilitating case of agoraphobia. At the very least, we do know that her poems soothed the poet's wounds regardless of their cause.

## Figures



Fig. I. Daguerreotype of Emily Dickinson that depicts her right cornea's deviation. "Emily Dickinson Daguerreotype." ca. 1847, Amherst College Archives & Special Collections. Accessed 11 December 2021, <https://www.amherst.edu/library/archives/holdings/edickinson/dickinsondag>.

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