That portion sounds just like Dickens and could have been written by him, but the last paragraph could not have:

> The land around was rich in barley. Great corn stacks stood in the yards, for the rich burners had not found their way hither. The homesteads were those of rich farmers who paid not rent, or had the rare advantage of a lease and could afford to keep their corn 'til prices had risen. The coach would be sure to overtake some of these rich farmers on their way to their outlying fields or to the market town, sitting heavily, stately, on their well-groomed horses or weighing down one side of an olive green gig. They probably, these farmers, thought of the coach with contempt as an accommodation for people who have not their own gigs or who, wanting to travel to London and such distant places, belong to the trading and less solid part of the nation. The passenger on the box could see that this was the district of protuberant optimists, sure that old England was the best of all possible countries, and that if there were any facts which had not fallen under their own observation, they were facts not worth thinking about. This was a district of clean little market towns, and by God, these farmers were proud of it.

That is pure George Eliot, because she cannot help getting inside the minds of the farmers who are incidental to the main characters. Just as an aside we get a brilliant thumbnail sketch of what these self-satisfied upper-middle-class farmers think of the outside world. Everything has to be analyzed, and it makes for profound and delightful reading.

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Emily Dickinson

(1830–1886)

When we examine Emily Dickinson's unique contribution to American literature, the best way to begin is to realize what she was not. To illustrate my meaning, let me give you the names of the most famous American poets during her lifetime, which was in the middle of the nineteenth century, and let me mention one or two of their most famous works.

The authors and their works that were most popular during her lifetime: William Cullen Bryant, "Thanatopsis"; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Concord Hymn"; Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "The Courtship of Miles Standish"; John Greenleaf Whittier, "Snowbound"; Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Old Ironsides"; Walt Whitman, "Oh Captain! My Captain!" Now, consider the poetry of Emily Dickinson—you can understand immediately how different she was as a poet from what was demanded of poets during her lifetime. What were the crucial hallmarks of nineteenth-century poets? Above all the poets were male. Emily Dickinson was a female poet in an age dominated by men. Second, popular poems depended on a powerful title. Many poets of the day spent almost as much time thinking about the title for a poem as they did working on the poem itself, because this

helped sales and helped readers grasp the poem's meaning. Emily Dickinson did not give titles to her poems; the first line is usually used as the title. Her poems are simply numbered from what we believe was the earliest poem to the latest poem, and we refer to them in numerical order. Third, readers in Emily Dickinson's time wanted long poems. The average length of published poetry written during her lifetime was 110 lines, almost epic in length. The average length of an Emily Dickinson poem? Fourteen lines. This may explain why she is so wildly popular today in America: any poet who specializes in poetry as short as fourteen lines is going to be embraced by our rapid-paced society. Fourth, in Emily Dickinson's era poets were regarded so highly that their poems were expected to be elevated in tone and almost biblical in cadence. Emily Dickinson's poems rely on simple, hymnlike rhythms. Finally, readers wanted their poets to be prophets and teachers, turning out what we call didactic poetry. Fortunately for us Emily Dickinson was not trying to teach us at all. Most of her poems express a beautiful feeling or experience:

> I'll tell you how the Sun rose—
> A Ribbon at a time—
> The Steeples swam in Amethyst—
> The news, like Squirrels, ran—

Her poems are gorgeous in their evocation of nature and its beauties. Teaching was not her aim. To truly show you how different her poetry was, let me offer a contrast. The two most recognized lines of poetry written by an American poet during her lifetime are the following:

> By the shores of Gitche Gumee,
> By the shining Big-Sea-Water

Longfellow's "Song of Hiawatha," of course. These lines certainly don't sound like anything Emily Dickinson would ever write. She undermined all the expectations of what poetry should have been. Her vision was unique.

There is a further difference. As opposed to the famous poets of her era, who were widely published and renowned, Emily Dickinson was unknown. Only seven of her poems were ever published during her lifetime; she was reviewed in print once. The reviewer simply said, "These poems are obviously the work of an oversensitive, coy, ill-disciplined, well-bred, hysterical spinster." Imagine how depressing it would be to be a poet with the genius of Emily Dickinson and to read this and only this about your poetry.

What sort of existence served as the environment for Emily Dickinson's poetic vision? Emily Dickinson lived one of the most unremarkable lives, in terms of important events, of any literary figure we know of. To us her life seems dull on the surface, but there were fathomless depths underneath.

She was the middle of three children; she had an older brother, Austin, and a younger sister, Lavinia. She was born in 1830 in the small but intellectually vigorous town of Amherst, Massachusetts, where she spent almost her entire life. The only time she ever left was to travel to Boston as an adult for a serious eye problem. Her lawyer father, Edward Dickinson, was one of Massachusetts's most distinguished men; for a time he was a member of the House of Representatives in Washington. We know little about her

mother, but Emily Dickinson did make this reference in a letter to a friend: "My mother does not care for thought." We have only glimpses of a loving but rather shadowy and ineffectual maternal figure. We do have a sense that Emily Dickinson was close to both her parents, and although her father was an authoritarian Victorian paterfamilias so typical of the mid-1800s, when he died, she offered one of the most beautiful statements one could make about someone beloved who has passed away. At his death she wrote a friend, "I am glad that there is immortality, but I would have rather tested it myself before entrusting someone so precious as my father to it." Although quite a bit of biographical material is available on Dickinson, her poetry always speaks so brilliantly about the states of her immortal soul that familial influences seem beside the point.

Emily Dickinson had an excellent education for a woman of that era. She attended Amherst Academy for what we would consider her high school years, then continued her schooling at the recently formed Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. She did not stay even a full year and withdrew partly due to ill health and partly due to her father's desire to have her at home while Austin was away at law school. It is ironic: if you receive literature from Mount Holyoke today, you would swear that Emily Dickinson must have been born on campus, lived her entire life on campus, and is probably buried underneath the library. I have never seen a college that got more out of one alumna than Mount Holyoke does today with Emily Dickinson.

When Emily Dickinson was in her twenties and thirties, a religious zeal spread through New England, and everyone seemed to become caught up in the fervor—everyone

except Emily Dickinson. She was by no means irreligious; she simply could not deny her doubts regarding the evangelical doctrine. She could not, would not, compromise her religious integrity by being swept along with numerous enthusiasts, whatever the pressure of teachers, family, and friends. By the time she was thirty she had ceased attending church: "Some keep the Sabbath by going to church—I keep it staying at home . . ."

Her sister, Lavinia, like Emily, never did marry, but her brother, Austin, did. He married the sisters' friend Susan Gilbert, and the couple moved next door to the Dickinson home. Emily became extremely close to her sister-in-law; Susan had a kindred love of poetry, and Emily frequently turned to her for her opinion and guidance. Susan was a prominent yet ultimately disappointing part of Emily's life, as we shall see. Susan was temperamental and high-handed, and her friendship with Emily would not survive, for several possible reasons. Certainly one strong cause was a scandal that enveloped the Dickinson family and titillated Amherst.

Some time after Susan and Austin Dickinson married, a young couple, David and Mabel Loomis, moved to town. Loomis had been hired as a teacher at Amherst Academy; Mabel was determined to make her mark as a sparkling socialite in Amherst. Both couples had much in common, and they became close friends, socializing frequently. But at some point Austin and Mabel became far more than friends—Austin Dickinson began a passionate, thirteen-year love affair with Mabel Loomis. Eventually the affair became common knowledge in Amherst; the lovers' relationship continued, and the marriages continued as well. You can imagine that when Susan found out that her husband was having an

affair with Mabel Loomis, her already prickly nature found an outlet in bitterness toward Austin's accommodating sisters. The path between the two Dickinson households, worn so well by Emily and Susan, became overgrown with weeds.

After decades of intensive creativity and increasing reclusiveness, Emily Dickinson contracted Bright's disease (a kidney malfunction) during the last year of her life and died in 1886 at the age of fifty-five. Perhaps the most fascinating part of Emily Dickinson's life actually occurred immediately following her death. Once she had passed away, within a week of her death, her sister, Lavinia, went into Emily Dickinson's room and found a locked sewing box, where Lavinia knew her sister had kept the poems that she had written during her life. When the box was opened, Lavinia was shocked to discover over a thousand poems, tied neatly into little booklets or written on scraps of paper, on the backs of recipes, wherever paper could harvest the brilliant rhythms of her mind—1,775 poems!

Lavinia desperately wanted the poems published, in a complete edition if possible, but she did not have the wherewithal nor the talent to know how to edit these poems, all of which were in Emily's idiosyncratic handwriting, or how to go about getting them published. But she knew of someone who did—Austin's wife, Susan.

As Lavinia feared, Susan wanted no part in bringing Emily's poems to public attention. Lavinia, desperate to publish the poems, turned to Mabel Loomis. Mabel, because she loved poetry and had esteemed Emily highly, agreed. In 1890 a small volume of the poems was published. It became immediately popular as readers in increasing numbers discovered Emily Dickinson's unique voice.

Not until the 1950s were all her known poems published, due to the animosity that developed between Lavinia and Mabel Loomis. Both became increasingly eccentric and litigious as they aged, each of them determined that the complete works of Emily would not be published by the other. Not until the third generation was it finally understood that Emily Dickinson's works were far too important to be suppressed because of a family bitterness that had gone on for sixty years.

I think we should find it all the more remarkable that Emily Dickinson was able to write almost eighteen hundred poems when we realize she was deprived of three of the most important stabilizing elements of a poet's life, elements that allow most poets to feel they are worthy of writing poetry. First, during Emily Dickinson's lifetime, the certitude of an orthodox religious faith gave one's life a stability that encouraged poetry of great conviction. Emily Dickinson, however, never had a conventional religious faith to sustain her. Secondly, most of the established male poets married; they had spouses and children who supported them emotionally. Emily Dickinson never married; she never had a sustained love relationship. She had suitors, but her belief in her own poetic gift was matched by a conviction that marriage and children would distract her from the drive to create. And third, most of the remarkable poets of the age—Emerson, Longfellow, Whittier, Holmes, Whitman—gained a wide audience, eager to read what they would write. But look at Emily, essentially unpublished, unrecognized.

So what *did* she have? She had her uncompromising sense of herself as a poet, a sense that led her to sequester herself more and more. She never ventured from her father's

house or her beloved garden. She dressed all in white. She hid from curiosity seekers who came to the door: "The soul selects her own Society . . ." The result was her reputation, enduring to this day, as a depressed and highly eccentric New England spinster.

A niece of hers said to her one day, "You realize, Aunt Emily, that people do talk about you. They feel sorry for you, that you spend so much time in your room alone. It must be terrible to be so deprived." What Emily Dickinson answered is significant. She smiled at her niece, then pantomimed herself at her bedroom door. She pretended she held a key, and in pantomime she locked her bedroom door from the inside. "Just one turn of the wrist, Mattie, and then freedom." In other words, she did not lock herself in her room writing poems because she would have preferred mingling with people but was too shy and felt she had nothing to offer. On the contrary, she had made a deliberate, conscious decision to withdraw from life because she knew her genius lay in images and beautiful words. Life was too precious for her. She knew what her gift was, and she decided she would spend it the way she enjoyed most—by herself in her room, with a dictionary, creating some of the most brilliant and original poems ever written. She wrote the purest poems we have because she never wrote with the intention of publishing. She wrote with the intention of pleasing her most important audience, herself.

Because her poems are so short, Emily Dickinson is the only author whose individual works I can actually offer in their entirety. The first poem is quite often included in high school, and even junior high school, English literature anthologies. It concerns the most important invention of

Emily Dickinson's lifetime—the train. She lived from 1830 until 1886; in that time the "iron horse" brought radical changes to rural Massachusetts. In fact, Emily's father had fought energetically to have the train come through Amherst. Emily was fascinated by the monstrous power of this new industrial marvel. In this, one of her most accessible poems, she played upon the image of the train as a horse:

> I like to see it lap the miles,
> And lick the valleys up,
> And stop to feed itself at tanks;
> And then, prodigious, step
>
> Around a pile of mountains,
> And, supercilious, peer
> In shanties by the sides of roads;
> And then a quarry pare
>
> To fit its ribs, and crawl between,
> Complaining all the while
> In horrid, hooting stanza;
> Then chase itself down hill
>
> And neigh like Boanerges;
> Then, punctual as a star,
> Stop—docile and omnipotent—
> At its own stable door.

A superficial reading of this poem might give the impression that, well, here's Emily Dickinson, delighting in how novel, how "animal," the train is. But this is not what she

intended at all. First of all, this poem is not a positive view of a train. How do we know she wasn't favorably impressed with the train? In this poem, what does this train actually do? How many passengers were on the train? None. How much cargo was it carrying? Cargo isn't mentioned at all. Where is the train going? It starts in one place, it makes a vast circle, and it ends up right where it began. It is a train that has no purpose. Does it actually do anything? Yes; it blows its own horn and makes a great deal of noise, even though it is perfectly worthless and useless.

Emily Dickinson sent this poem to a friend in a letter. The friend wrote back saying she had really enjoyed the poem about this silly train that doesn't really do anything but makes a lot of noise and brings attention to itself. Emily's caustic reply: "I'm so glad that you reminded me that this is a poem about a train, because given that it doesn't do anything, it just makes a lot of noise about who it is, I always tend to forget if I wrote this about a train or a man."

So we have this clever poem, satirizing the train. Why would she be against trains? The train represented material progress. Its invention showed great ingenuity, but Emily as a poet was not interested in material reality. Material advancement had nothing to do with spiritual reality or aesthetic reality, and so to her the train wasn't worth much. But what is the most intriguing element of this poem is this: when the train was first invented, what so amazed people was that just one car did the work—the engine. No matter how long the train was, all the other cars did absolutely nothing, but because they were coupled to the engine, when it moved, it pulled the others along. Emily Dickinson decided to see if she could write a poem whose structure was the same as a

train's: the first "car" would do the work, and all the others would be coupled to it. But poems aren't made of cars, they are made out of clauses and phrases and sentences and words, so she cleverly has one main clause at the beginning of the poem: "I like to see it lap the miles." That's the "engine," and the rest of the poem just tags along. Just as a train is linked together by huge iron couplers that have all the cars linked one to one, her poem uses the most common coupler in our language—*and*. Her poem is one main clause, "I like to see it lap the miles," and everything else is pulled along behind.

The next poem needs a little explanation. Although it is not about cooking at all, I want you to keep in mind that Emily Dickinson loved to bake. What she disliked was the cookbooks she had to use. In the mid-1800s most cookbooks were written by men; what bothered her about these cookbooks was how stupid men must have thought women were. Just as in today's cookbooks, at the beginning of the recipe was a list of ingredients: a half a cup of flour, a quarter teaspoon of salt, a teaspoon of vanilla, two teaspoons of sugar, etc. But then the directions for the recipe would read something like this: "Take the half a cup of flour and add the two teaspoons of sugar. When you've added the half a cup of flour and the two teaspoons of sugar, then put in the teaspoon of vanilla. Once the half a cup of flour and the teaspoon of vanilla and the quarter teaspoon of salt are added, then whip in three eggs . . ." In other words, men thought women were so mentally weak that when they wrote recipe books for them, they wouldn't trust that the women would go back to where the recipe ingredients were listed in the proper amounts; they kept repeating the amounts ad nau-

seam. Emily Dickinson kept this repetition in mind in one of her more famous poems about the imagination:

> To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,—
> One clover, and a bee,
> And revery.
> The revery alone will do
> If bees are few.

In other words, if you wish to build a prairie there are two ways of doing it. Either you get a clover and a bee and you sit down for a hundred years, and after a while all the clovers and the bees get together and eventually you have a prairie. But if you want a shortcut to a prairie, you do what Emily Dickinson did. You go up to your bedroom, you lock the door, and you envision a prairie that never was, and through revery—through imagination—you create a prairie. So we have a concise poem about imagination; it's a recipe, really, to make a prairie.

The next poem we will explore is one of her most famous:

> Success is counted sweetest
> By those who ne'er succeed.
> To comprehend the nectar
> Requires sorest need.
>
> Not one of all the purple host
> Who took the flag today
> Can tell the definition,
> So clear, of victory.

> As he, defeated, dying,
> On whose forbidden ear
> The distant strains of triumph
> Break, agonized and clear.

Initially it seems Emily Dickinson is saying, "If you want to understand success, there are two ways. Either you understand it because you have become successful, or you are not successful at all. And because you lack success you sense instinctively what you lack, and so you understand success because you never achieved it. Then she brings in the soldier. The soldier who truly understands success—victory—is the one who is dying, who has been defeated; he hears the victor's trumpet and he recognizes that success is beyond his grasp.

But I don't think that is what she is saying; I think she is making a much more remarkable point. She is stating that the *only* way to know the definition of anything is not to have it. The only way to really understand, to appreciate, something is to be utterly deprived of it, and in your deprivation and your longing for it, you will understand it. When you achieve success, you then tend to take it for granted. Only when you don't achieve it and you long for it do you know what it is. Of course Emily Dickinson lived her entire life this way. This is one reason she locked the door to the bedroom, so she wouldn't be tempted to experience the messy business of "life" firsthand because then it can't be imagined any longer.

When I speak on Emily Dickinson in high schools, I give this example to illustrate her point: Suppose it's time for the senior prom, and in a class you have a young man who is the

high school hero. He's on the football team, he's handsome, he's a brilliant student—everything he does is perfect. He is attractive in all ways. When it's time for him to go to the prom, he has a choice between two girls as his prom date. He may select either the perky, adorable, popular cheerleader, or he may choose the unfortunate girl who always sits in the back of the class, the one who is extremely unattractive, who has never been asked out. Whom *does* he take to the prom? If this is a realistic situation, we may assume he takes the perky cheerleader. The question I pose is this: Who knows what it is like to go to the prom with the high school hero—the perky cheerleader, or the poor girl who is not asked out at all? If you are Emily Dickinson, your answer is, the only female who understands what it is like to go to the prom with the hero of the high school is the unattractive girl, home on that night crying her eyes out because she didn't go.

Then why doesn't the perky cheerleader understand what it is like to go to the prom with the high school hero? She actually goes, so of course she should know, correct? *No!* She hasn't a clue, because when she indeed goes out with the high school hero, what does she discover? He has bad breath, worse morals, and cares about nothing but himself. . . . Unfortunately she went to the prom with the hero and discovered there is nothing heroic at all about him. But that poor unattractive girl crying in her bedroom is thinking about what it must be like to be that cheerleader and go out with this absolute paragon, a young man who is perfect in every way. And because she can imagine what such a date would be like, because she doesn't have to go out with him and discover that he is a pig, she knows exactly what it is like

to go out with the campus hero. In her imagination he—and the prom—will always be perfect. Emily Dickinson teaches us that if you really want to understand something, nothing is purer or "truer" than our imaginations.

The last poem, perhaps her most beautiful expression of this same theory, is this one:

I never saw a moor,
I never saw the sea;
Yet know I how the heather looks
And what a billow be.

I never spoke with God
Nor visited in heaven;
Yet certain am I of the spot
As if the checks were given.

Some of you, if you know this poem, may say, "Wait a minute, that's not how it was written in my book." And you're correct; usually it is written:

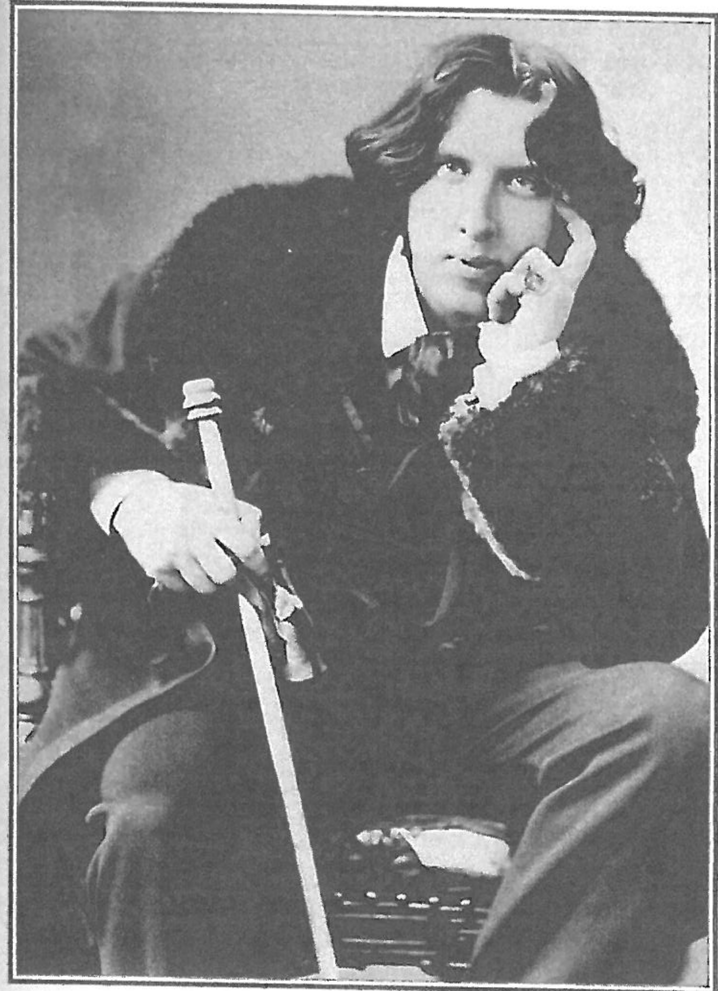
I never saw a moor,
I never saw the sea;
Yet know I how the heather looks
And what a *wave* must be.

Emily Dickinson never wrote "what a wave must be," she wrote, "what a *billow* be." *Billow* is the perfect word because its sound—so round, so forceful—sounds likes a wave. It is a very poetic word. Why then do many books print "what a wave must be"? Mabel Loomis, who edited Emily's first edi-

tion of poetry, thought that Emily was a good poet but that she had some good ideas too. When she saw *billow*, she thought, "Well, no, she doesn't mean *billow*, she means *wave*," so she changed it. Fortunately we have Emily's manuscript to prove what she wrote.

The last point I wish to make about Emily Dickinson is not just how prolific her genius was, but how brilliant she could be in so few words. Her poems are not only exquisite, they are brief. One other literary work, written at just about the midpoint of Emily Dickinson's life, has that same virtue of being short and memorable. In 1863 Abraham Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address. If any work of prose has the power of Emily Dickinson's poetry, it is the Gettysburg Address; it too uses a minimum of words to magnificent, memorable effect.

> A word is dead
> When it is said
> Some say—
> I say—
> It just begins
> To live
> That day



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Oscar Wilde

(1854–1900)