

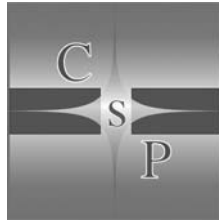
# A Wounded Deer



A Wounded Deer  
The Effects of Incest on the Life and Poetry  
of Emily Dickinson

By

Wendy K. Perriman



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A Wounded Deer: The Effects of Incest on the Life and Poetry of Emily Dickinson, by Wendy K.  
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for

**E. Sue Blume**

and all who strive to repair the damage



To fill a Gap  
Insert the Thing that caused it–  
Block it up  
With Other–and ’twill yawn the more–  
You cannot solder an Abyss  
With Air–

*(Emily Dickinson)*



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## PREFACE

It is possible to interpret the works of Emily Dickinson as the veiled testimony of an incest survivor. Of a potential 37 incest survivor aftereffects on an internationally recognized checklist designed by E. Sue Blume (a New York licensed clinical social worker) Dickinson displays a staggering 33 characteristics.<sup>1</sup> This fact is so arresting that it warrants further investigation. What evidence is there for sexual abuse in Dickinson's life? How is the theme of violation and its effects manifested in her writing? How did the poet herself deal with these issues? And how does this knowledge help explain some of the apparent contradictions in her biography and in her art? As there have only been two prior articles suggesting that the poet was probably exposed to childhood sexual abuse, this is the first comprehensive examination of Dickinson and incest.

Incest is defined by *Webster's Dictionary* as "sexual intercourse between persons so closely related that they are forbidden by law to marry," and as such, is the term used in this study to describe the severest form of violation. It is important to remember that lesser forms of inappropriate contact with older, more powerful people, can also have a traumatic effect on a youngster, and for this reason Blume's book *Secret Survivors* defines incest as any sexual act that breaks "an ongoing bond of trust between a child and a caretaker"(2). But from my own fifteen-year experience of working in high-risk schools (and unfortunately encountering many abused teens), the most damaged youngsters appear to be those molested by their father or step-father, when their assaults finally escalate to sexual penetration.<sup>2</sup> So the term 'incest' often implies some form of rape. And while we can never be certain to what extent Emily

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<sup>1</sup> E. Sue Blume, *Secret Survivors: Uncovering Incest and Its Aftereffects in Women* (New York: Ballantine, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> I worked in the British secondary school system between 1979-1994, teaching English, Drama and Dance in five different schools, across a wide age, ability, and socio-economic range. During that time my colleagues and I encountered a large number of youngsters who had been sexually abused, often in their own homes by close family members. Educators were quickly trained to spot certain indicators, especially those of us who worked in the arts, where an abusive home situation was occasionally revealed through dramatic role-play, or within a disturbing poem. After fifteen years of responding to the whole range of children's creative writing, experience has enabled me to identify (with some degree of accuracy) the individual at risk.

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Dickinson may have been sexually violated, if indeed at all, she does display enough startling symptoms to arouse suspicion.

In a 1991 essay for *The Journal of Psychohistory*, Norbert Hirschhorn (a public health physician) “felt compelled to explore” his hunch that incest issues “may also have touched Emily Dickinson,” as they had his own life (252).<sup>3</sup> His psychoanalytical piece, “A Bandaged Secret: Emily Dickinson and Incest,” successfully bridges the gap between Freudian psychology and modern incest theory, showing how the Dickinsons display many of the same traits commonly found in known incest families, and forging a comparison with other documented situations in nineteenth-century America. He suggests that Emily Dickinson’s behavior was consistent with that of other survivors and that some kind of healing occurred, although he does not explain how this process might have happened. Hirschhorn then examines why Dickinson became alienated from society, deciding that the popular literary “notion of a ‘wise, rational choice’ of reclusion is not credible” (264), and he explains that if his diagnosis is correct then dozens of poems can be read as testimony to the poet’s incest experience. Hirschhorn hopes that his hypothesis might stimulate new research, and concludes that (as with all personal traumas) this story needs to be told. But he does not provide any insight into how to interpret Dickinson’s poetry in this new light.

Then in 1998 Mary Jo Dondlinger’s “‘One Need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted’: Emily Dickinson’s Haunted Space” appeared in the compilation *Creating Safe Space*,<sup>4</sup> edited by Tomoko Kuribayashi and Julie Tharp. Dondlinger claims “Emily Dickinson was a survivor of sexual abuse, specifically incest, and like many sexually victimized women, used writing as a means of reconstructing a sense of safety” (101). Her examination focuses on a reading of six “Wife” poems, but it is a short literary study rather than an in-depth clinical analysis.

*A Wounded Deer* utilizes the latest developments in trauma theory (exploring not only Emily Dickinson’s peculiar writing and lifestyle, but also the self-healing process she went through) to offer the new insight into her craft that was missing from the two earlier incest articles. Although there is always the danger of a single mode of inspection being labeled reductionist or simplistic, I hope to demonstrate that rather than closing down avenues of inquiry, issues of childhood sexual abuse open up fresh paths of investigation that demonstrate an even greater appreciation of the complex Dickinson enigma.

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<sup>3</sup> Norbert Hirschhorn, “A Bandaged Secret: Emily Dickinson and Incest.” *The Journal of Psychohistory* (18:3, 1991): 251-281.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Jo Dondlinger, “‘One Need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted’: Emily Dickinson’s Haunted Space.” *Creating Safe Space: Violence and Women’s Writing*. Ed. Tomoko Kuribayashi and Julie Tharp (New York: SUNY Press, 1998): 101-116.

As an interesting aside, Karen Jacobsen McLennan compiled a collection of material for her book *Nature's Ban: Women's Incest Literature* that included four poems by Emily Dickinson.<sup>5</sup> McLennan does not state that Dickinson was herself a victim, but rather that she “personifies and symbolizes the incest legacy of entrapment through images that emphasize ambiguity, isolation, fear, idealization, and nightmare” (155). She does, however, offer Dickinson as a writer who uses “classical modes and symbols” to “obscure what might otherwise be understood as personal or autobiographical” to “escape criticism about incest as a literary subject” (6).

Early American feminists felt the need to protect girls from sexual exploitation with the 1885 petition to raise the legal age of consent to sixteen (it was ten or twelve in most states, with the exception of Delaware where the age of consent was seven).<sup>6</sup> But current statistics show that taking advantage of youngsters is a much wider problem than has ever been publicly recognized. FBI profiler, John Douglas, reports how the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse claimed there were approximately “350,000 reported cases of sexual abuse of children in the United States in 1995, about ninety per cent of which were perpetrated by someone the children knew—usually a family member.”<sup>7</sup>

Sociology professor Diana Russell, concludes her study on *Sexual Exploitation: Rape, Child Sexual Abuse, and Workplace Harassment* with the observation that “over one-quarter of the population of female children have experienced sexual abuse before the age of 14, and well over one-third have had such an experience by the age of 18 years” (194).<sup>8</sup> Clinical psychologist Michele Elliott’s book, *Female Sexual Abuse of Children*, also highlights how a very large number of victims “were girls sexually abused by their fathers” (5)<sup>9</sup> which the Harvard psychiatrist Judith Herman, in *Father-Daughter Incest*, interprets as “a common and predictable abuse of patriarchal power” (219).<sup>10</sup> And psychiatric social worker Florence Rush’s *The Best-Kept Secret: Sexual Abuse of Children* explains how this issue “has an extensive history going back

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<sup>5</sup> Karen Jacobsen McLennan, *Nature's Ban: Women's Incest Literature* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996): The four poems are Franklin 39, 477, 425 and 353.

<sup>6</sup> Melissa Doak; *et al.* “How Did Gender and Class Shape the Age of Consent Campaign Within the Social Purity Movement, 1886-1914?” (Binghamton: SUNY, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> John Douglas and Mark Olshaker, *Journey Into Darkness* (Worldwide: Pocket, 1997): 123.

<sup>8</sup> Diana E. H. Russell, *Sexual Exploitation: Rape, Child Sexual Abuse, and Workplace Harassment* (California, London and New Delhi: Sage, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> Michele Elliott, *Female Sexual Abuse of Children* (New York and London: Guilford, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Judith Lewis Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest* (Cambridge, Harvard UP, 2000).

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to biblical times and has been—and still is—condoned in our society” (cover).<sup>11</sup> The silence that surrounded incest for hundreds of years is finally being broken.

It is understandable that some Dickinson scholars may have a psychological resistance toward accepting the suggestions made in this book. As T. Walter Herbert explains in *Sexual Violence and American Manhood* a “law-abiding man hearing a victim’s testimony is all too likely to route it into the fantasy zone and find it hard to believe that such a thing actually took place”(200).<sup>12</sup> Further, Dickinson is such a personal icon that many female readers create an intimate bond with “My Emily” (Susan Howe), and this individual relationship is sacrosanct. To admit the possibility that a poet one so closely identifies with may have been violated is somehow to experience an unwanted violation of self, which can create a strong, protective reaction. And like most academics I resist the notion of closure when dealing with a poet of this complexity. I agree with critics like Marta Werner, whose *Emily Dickinson’s Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing* warns against the “impossibility and danger of imagining a plot or stable theoretical framework into which we may ‘insert’ a reading of her work” (35).<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, I argue that the theme of sexual abuse is one of the many areas of inquiry that Dickinson explores, and that even as a Puritan nineteenth-century spinster she may have had some first-hand experience to draw upon.

I am also sensitive to the fact that the Dickinsons are unable to defend themselves against unpleasant suggestions, and it is not the intention of this book to bring disrepute on any members of the family. But in order to further understand the motivation behind the poet’s dynamic legacy of verse it is necessary to accept that these personalities were real flesh-and-blood people (with all the intelligence, beauty, suffering and deficits that make all of us human). And if sexual abuse is as widespread as many clinicians believe, then the Dickinson children *could* realistically have been exposed to this trauma. But “My Emily” is not a victim—she triumphs as a role model for bravery, resilience, subversion and genius.

## Methodology

Because this is a new approach to Dickinson scholarship it requires a fresh methodology. In *Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in*

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<sup>11</sup> Florence Rush, *The Best-Kept Secret: Sexual Abuse of Children* (Worldwide: McGraw-Hill, 1981).

<sup>12</sup> Herbert, Walter T. *Sexual Violence and American Manhood* (Massachusetts and London: Harvard UP, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Marta L. Werner, *Emily Dickinson’s Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1995).

*American Women's Fiction*, Deborah Horvitz places trauma theory in a feminist literary context;<sup>14</sup> I follow a similar path, adding pertinent insights from the discipline of clinical psychology.<sup>15</sup> Employing the Incest Survivors' Aftereffects Checklist (to identify behavior consistent with an incest history), and then using the definition of the aftermath of incest as a complex post-traumatic stress disorder, this study examines the three-stage recovery model described in Judith Herman's book *Trauma and Recovery*, against details about Dickinson from extant poems, letters and biographical information.<sup>16</sup> It concludes that the poet achieved two of the three stages of recovery, but was unable to heal completely.

Blume's checklist is validated by a variety of sources, including prominent clinicians, psychologists, psychiatrists, researchers, and scientists working in the field of childhood sexual abuse. The list is further verified by the published testimonies of several incest survivors, whose first-hand accounts of their erratic behavior are highly consistent with biographical details of Emily Dickinson's peculiarities. These stories are examined to gain an insight into similar traumatic family situations. Although each of the accounts describes an individual's unique experiences, these women shared common feelings towards their childhood plights, and responded with almost identical patterns of behavior.<sup>17</sup> For example, every survivor agrees with Louise Armstrong's

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<sup>14</sup> Deborah M. Horvitz, *Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women's Fiction* (New York: SUNY Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> In *Creating Sanctuary: Toward the Evolution of Sane Societies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), Sandra Bloom explains how trauma theory "serves as an anchor for the integration of various psychological theories, techniques, and points of view," and is a "possible 'unified field theory' of human behavior" (17).

<sup>16</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> Knowledge of twentieth-century incest illuminates our understanding of the probable effects of this trauma in a nineteenth-century context. Survivors tell their own stories:

a. Louise Armstrong, *Kiss Daddy Goodnight: A Speak-out On Incest* (New York: Pocket, 1978): Armstrong describes how her father, who returned home when she was 11, began forcing her to have oral sex. After his death, she realized that *talking* about incest seemed to be a greater taboo than the act itself, so she decided to write a book inviting other survivors to speak out against the silence.

b. Katherine Brady, *Father's Days: A True Story of Incest* (New York: Seaview, 1979): Brady told her story so that other victims would not feel as isolated and ashamed as she had in childhood. For ten years, Brady acted the role of the perfect Midwestern teenager, while at the same time she was involved in a sexual relationship with her x-marine, prison-guard father. On the nights her mother worked late, 'Katy' was groomed to become her father's lover. She eventually escaped his house and married, but the relationship failed because of her illicit past.

c. Charlotte Vale Allen, *Daddy's Girl* (New York: Berkley, 1980): Allen was brought up in Toronto. After her father's death she started seeking answers and explanations about her past. Her father told her that incest was something that all daddies did with their little

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earliest revelations of nightmares, compulsive behavior, depression, guilt, shame, repetitive victimization, sexual problems, relationship crises, and the burden of secrecy. These testimonies span almost two decades (from 1978 to 1996) and they are not only highly consistent with each other, but they also parallel earlier known accounts of child abuse, most notably that of Anne Sexton in post-Second World War America,<sup>18</sup> and Virginia Woolf in post-First World War England.<sup>19</sup> And if the same type of incident caused a similar reaction in all of these women, as I conclude it did, then it is logical to assume that the nineteenth-century incest victim would have experienced, processed, and exhibited her trauma along comparable lines, as Sigmund Freud's initial work demonstrated.

As early as 1860 Ambroise Auguste Tardieu, "the most eminent representative of French legal medicine," had written one of the first clinical articles on incest, "A Medico-legal Study of Cruelty and Brutal Treatment

girls, and whenever she complied she noticed there were far less arguments in the home. Although her father constantly tried to have full intercourse, Allen managed to remain (technically) a virgin, but her marriage failed. She finally healed, and adopted an entirely new identity.

d. Melody Platt, *Breaking the Silence: A Personal Story of Incest and Recovery* (USA: Rainbow, 1992): Platt is a native of Alabama who endured sexual abuse throughout her childhood. During sixth grade she developed a peptic ulcer, cause by the stress of her forbidden relationship with her father. Mr. Platt appeared to be a Christian member of the community, yet during a nine-month period he raped his daughter at least seventy-two times. Melody's ordeal ended when she finally told her mother, and her father was arrested. Since that time Platt has distanced herself from people, and she wrote her book as part of the recovery process.

e. Helen Bonner, *The Laid Daughter: A True Story* (Texas: Kairos Center, 1995): Dr. Bonner went into therapy to deal with life-long problems extending back more than fifty years. During the recovery process she had to come to terms with the memory of being raped as a baby. The sexual abuse seems to have inexplicably ended when she was around seven years old.

f. Sue William Silverman, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You* (Athens and London: U. of Georgia P., 1996): Silverman's father was a Chief Counsel to the Secretary of the Interior (1933-1953), a prominent politician and banker. But he subjected his daughter to systematic sexual abuse from the age of four onwards. Victimized by other men, Silverman ended up with a sexual addiction and an eating disorder, before finally seeking the help she needed.

<sup>18</sup> Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991).

<sup>19</sup> Diana L. Swanson, "Safe Space or Danger Zone?: Incest and the Paradox of Writing in Woolf's Life." *Creating Safe Space*, Ed. Kuribayashi and Tharp: Woolf describes her abusive experiences in "Reminiscences," "22 Hyde Park Gate," and "A Sketch of the Past."

Inflicted on Children,” that identified the nature of sexual abuse, the long-term effects on the child, and the fact of denial.<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson’s book *The Assault on Truth: Freud’s Suppression of the Seduction Theory* examines how, although Sigmund Freud knew from such distinguished sources about the realities of incest in the nineteenth century, he was pressured into silence. For not only had Freud studied “hysteria” as a medical student in Paris with Jean-Martin Charcot, where he would have been exposed to the numerous victims of premature sexual experience in the hospitals and morgues, but he also had many of the French texts relating to child abuse in his personal library. Masson concludes that at “some time during 1895 or 1896, Freud had become convinced that the person most often guilty of the sexual abuse of young children (primarily girls) was the father” (92).

Initially Freud’s *seduction theory* recognized the significance of early childhood sexual abuse as the trigger of life-long trauma. His basic conclusions were: that everyone is shaped by juvenile experiences; neuroses are rooted in childhood; and that psychoanalysis can help repair the damage. But by 1897, in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess, overwhelmed by the amount of violation he was uncovering, Freud was forced to conclude “it was hardly credible that perverted acts against children were so general.”<sup>21</sup> So he revised his theory into the *seduction fantasy*, switching emphasis from the child-as-incest-victim to the child-as-perpetrator-of-her-own-incest-fantasies. To clinicians and the general public, sexual seduction was seen as merely an imaginary desire in the mind of the child. And until the 1980s few psychiatrists questioned this assumption.<sup>22</sup>

But today this has become a controversial thesis. In *Remembering Trauma*, Richard McNally (a psychology professor at Harvard University) states that “Masson erroneously believed that Freud’s patients had *told* him they had been molested by their *fathers*,” when in fact it was his own belief “that all hysteria

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<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *The Assault on Truth: Freud’s Suppression of the Seduction Theory* (USA and Canada: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984):

a. Twenty years later “Tardieu laments the fact that in the intervening years his article had not awakened the indignation and interest he expected.” He quotes the official figures for child rape between 1858 and 1869 as 9,125: “in the vast majority of cases . . . the victims are between the ages of four and twelve” (22-23).

b. Masson himself “met with irrational antagonism and ostracism” when this book was published (191).

<sup>21</sup> Alice Miller, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society’s Betrayal of the Child*. Trans. Hildegarde and Hunter Hannum (New York: Vantage, 1990): 114.

<sup>22</sup> In 1988 renowned psychotherapist Alice Miller officially broke away from the International Psychoanalytical Association arguing that Freud’s revision of the *seduction theory* was wrong. She has subsequently replaced this error with her own *trauma theory* which claims that incest is fact, not fiction, and that it is highly damaging.

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patients harbored repressed memories of early sexual abuse.”<sup>23</sup> Freud “relentlessly tried to foist this interpretation on his patients,” thereby becoming the first clinician accused of “attempting to implant false memories of sexual abuse in his patients” (163-165).

In *Father-Daughter Incest* Herman reveals how society has historically suppressed the truth about incest. While the ‘pro-incest lobby’ (certain sex researchers, some clinicians, and the publishers of many men’s sex magazines) argued “that sexual contacts with adults are at worst harmless to children, and at best may be good for them” (23), African American women began writing about the damage such experiences cause: Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969); Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970); and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982). With the Women’s Liberation Movement survivors told their stories in public for the first time—Alice Miller ‘officially’ broke the silence in Europe in the 1980s; Louise Armstrong’s *Kiss Daddy Goodnight* (1978) became the first widely read testimony on incest published in America. Numerous international researchers have contributed to scholarship and/or helped raise public awareness: Ellen Bass and Laura Davis; Sandra Bloom; E. Sue Blume; Sandra Butler; John N. Briere; Susan Brownmiller; Christine Courtois; Michele Elliott; Beverly Engel; David Finkelhor; Jennifer Freyd; Susan Forward and Craig Buck; Judith Lewis Herman; Bessel van der Kolk; Florence Rush; Diana Russell; Suzanne M. Sgroi; Lenore Terr; and many others. It seemed that the twentieth century was finally able to accept that the incest taboo was grounded in fact.

But Herman’s “Afterword 2000” to *Father-Daughter Incest* explains how in the 1990s the False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMFS) emerged, co-headed by Pamela and Peter Freyd (whose daughter claimed to have been molested by her father), and Ralph Underwager (a man who was forced to resign from the board in 1993 after making embarrassing comments endorsing child-sex in the Dutch publication *Paidika: The Journal of Pedophilia*). Since then the political backlash has focused on making psychotherapists the source of the “false complaints,” despite the fact that the FMSF “could not demonstrate that the complaints were false,” nor provide statistics for exactly how “many of the accusing sons and daughters had ever seen a therapist at all” (234-238). Herman acknowledges that between 2 and 7 percent of complaints may actually be fabricated, but she also points out how youngsters are sometimes bullied into retracting true allegations, which means pedophiles often win against children in the legal system and in the press. Members of the public are now split between two opposing camps: those who believe that incest is still a widespread problem in society today, and those who believe it happens so rarely that current

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<sup>23</sup> Richard J. McNally, *Remembering Trauma* (Massachusetts and London: Harvard UP, 2003).

publicity comes from a conspiracy perpetuated by “irrational females bent on the destruction of upstanding citizens” (237). McNally’s book, *Remembering Trauma*, is currently the best attempt to record both sides of the debate, but it was quickly appropriated by FMSF advisor Frederick C. Crews as an endorsement of his position. In a 2004 *New York Review of Books* (“The Trauma Trap”) Crews suggests that the important questions McNally raises about the validity of recovered memory, repression, and dissociation are answered sufficiently enough to debunk “reckless traumatology” and the “conviction that fathers are naturally prone to incestuous rape”(5).<sup>24</sup> Crews’ sympathies lie with the “suffering of privately shattered families,” rather than with genuine abuse victims. To the survivors themselves, it seems that the accusation of False Memory has become the latest weapon in the patriarchal armory to promote a return to silence.<sup>25</sup>

Issues surrounding memory and amnesia have also split the medical community. Herman explains how psychologist Elizabeth Loftus (a member of the FMSF advisory board) has managed to convince many court juries that there is no evidence of amnesia following traumatic events, even though it is recognized as a clinical symptom in the *DSM-IV-TR*, the official position of the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, and the American Medical Association. Yet although many workers in the field of posttraumatic stress *are* convinced that amnesia exists, the question remains to what degree memories recovered after a period of amnesia are dependable. Herman claims there is no scientific evidence to prove that recovered memories are less reliable than any other memories. Rather, she suggests that “the FMSF appeals to people who long to return to a better time, when fathers ruled and daughters were obedient,” but she concludes that too many survivors “have disclosed their secrets. It is too late now to go back to silence” (238-242). McNally, however, challenges the validity of traumatic amnesia, claiming that rather than developing skills to forget disturbing material, thought-suppression

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<sup>24</sup> Frederick C. Crews, “The Trauma Trap.” *The New York Review of Books* 51:4 (March 2004).

<sup>25</sup> McNally records another side of the controversy too. In 1999 members of the United States Congress “unanimously voted to condemn a scientific article published in one of psychology’s most prestigious journals” (Rind, Tromovitch and Bauserman, 1998), because it concluded that “students who had been sexually abused were nearly as well-adjusted as their counterparts who had not been abused,” and showed “more resilien[ce] than anyone expected.” Nelson et al. (2002), and MacMillan et al. (2001), provided evidence from a collective 8,000 adults to demonstrate that sexual abuse increased the risk of “psychiatric disorders in men as well as women.” McNally concludes that “we still do not know for sure which variables predict vulnerability and which predict resilience among children exposed to these adverse experiences” (22-26).

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and directed-forgetting experiments suggest that sexually abused children actually “exhibit an impaired ability to forget disturbing material” (157). But he does point out that Freud often used the terms *repression* and *suppression* interchangeably, so “repression could be either a conscious or an unconscious process” (169), implying that patients who are currently diagnosed as suffering from amnesia may have consciously chosen to forget their unpleasant pasts.<sup>26</sup> He adds that the recovered memory debate focuses on whether people can *repress* and later remember their early trauma, and whether such memories are reliable. McNally concludes that anyone who has experienced trauma will have some recollection of the event (even if they consciously choose not to think about it for a number of years), and that it seems unlikely that an adult survivor with no memory of abuse will suddenly discover unrecalled abuse in her childhood.

Yet even though the political ‘backlash’ has been successful in convincing many laypersons that recovered memories are unreliable (mainly because of their belief in the potential for therapeutic manipulation) such a claim is irrelevant in Emily Dickinson’s case because she never visited a therapist, so could not have had her own childhood recollections distorted. Her memories were entirely her own, even if she did not always grasp their full meanings. And if she did have periods of time where she dissociated or consciously (publicly) suppressed knowledge of an incest history, this would have been the normal, conditioned reaction of a nineteenth-century woman in patriarchal society.

During the course of history the female psyche has changed little in its response to trauma, and the Excursus at the end of this book gives examples of how English-speaking writers have examined incest throughout the centuries. It becomes increasingly apparent that women have always been damaged by rape and sexual abuse, although past societies have chosen to respond to the aftereffects in various ways: in biblical times such women were generally labeled lascivious, *fallen*, and evil; during the medieval period they were often thought to be possessed by demons or called witches; at the turn of the twentieth century damaged women were deemed *hysterical*, then later reclassified as *mentally disturbed*; and only in the past three decades have they finally been recognized as victims of *complex post-traumatic stress disorder*. But the aftereffects have remained remarkably consistent throughout recorded history, as Freud originally suspected. For rather than being the accepted psychological suggestion of an Oedipal fantasy in the child’s mind, incest has instead been a persistent and terrifying reality for a large number of youngsters. Therefore,

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<sup>26</sup> Blume contends that the repression / suppression argument is a moot point because clinicians now understand traumatic forgetting / traumatic amnesia as being the clinical phenomenon of *dissociation*.

because the Incest Survivors' Checklist is as legitimate a tool to employ in a nineteenth-century analysis as it is in the modern context, I am able to use it to examine how pertinent incest clusters show up in Dickinson's poems, letters, comments made by Dickinson's associates, and observations from biographers.

Traditional Dickinson scholarship was previously constrained by Thomas H. Johnson's controversial dating of the poems,<sup>27</sup> but many of the earlier problems have been resolved by R. W. Franklin's recent work.<sup>28</sup> I have chosen the later variant where multiple versions exist (except where indicated), unless the poem was intentionally rewritten in a different context for a specific recipient (as in the example Fr 1602, "Her Losses make our Gains ashamed," which was originally drafted in reference to George Eliot, but was later turned into a eulogy for William Hawley Dickinson when Susan Dickinson received the variant, "His Losses made our Gains ashamed").<sup>29</sup>

The poems perhaps offer the greatest clues as to how Dickinson dealt with the traumas of childhood. James R. Guthrie points out in *Emily Dickinson's Vision* that "in the prevailing postmodernist critical climate . . . we actually stand at greater risk of underestimating the degree of intimacy existing between an author's literary productions and the network of experiences, great and small, that shapes an individual life" (5).<sup>30</sup> For although Dickinson told Thomas Wentworth Higginson in July 1862 that "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person" (L268),<sup>31</sup> as Richard Sewall claims in *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, "it is hard to see how he could have missed the intense involvement here" (553).<sup>32</sup> Indeed, whenever Dickinson uses the "I" speaker, it seems to reflect a personal opinion, at some level. And in *My Life, a Loaded Gun*, Paula Bennett refers to Virginia Woolf's belief that "the lyric poet must be willing to put herself on the line and stand at the center of her verse. These are *her* feelings, *her* thoughts" (3).<sup>33</sup> Therefore it is reasonable to consider that Dickinson's work might offer a unique insight into the psychological and artistic development of a victim turned

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas H. Johnson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston, New York, Toronto and London: Little, Brown & Co., 1961).

<sup>28</sup> R. W. Franklin, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Massachusetts and London: Harvard UP, 1998).

<sup>29</sup> "Fr" signifies the number of the poem in Franklin's variorum edition.

<sup>30</sup> James R. Guthrie, *Emily Dickinson's Vision: Illness and Identity in Her Poetry* (Florida: U of Florida P, 1998).

<sup>31</sup> Thomas H. Johnson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Massachusetts and England: Belknap, 1986): "L" signifies the number of the letter in the Johnson edition.

<sup>32</sup> Richard B. Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (Third Edition). Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1997).

<sup>33</sup> Paula Bennett, *My Life, A Loaded Gun: Dickinson, Plath, Rich and Female Creativity* (Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1990).

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survivor. In *From Hearing to Healing: Working with the Aftermath of Child Sexual Abuse*, Anne Bannister (manager of the NSPCC Child Sexual Abuse Consultancy for ten years) explains the importance of this transition: “We have to realize why we use the expression ‘survivors.’ It is because they have lived through appalling experiences in which someone has sought to destroy their own inner integrity. They have survived these experiences, sometimes against all odds” (8-9).<sup>34</sup> Dickinson resisted the impulse of suicide; instead she created a new life for herself as a secluded poet.

Camille Paglia’s *Sexual Personae* points out how Dickinson’s poems “require patient detective work, for they are intricate with sophisticated puns.” The poet was also devoted to her Webster’s dictionary, and her “wordplay is Alexandrian bookwork” (638).<sup>35</sup> Extant variants of the poems demonstrate how she reworked vocabulary, making careful selections from various word options. For this reason it is crucial to consider all of the definitions presented in Dickinson’s own 1844 dictionary when explicating individual poems, as she did not always choose the most obvious one.<sup>36</sup> An example of this is Webster’s citation for “Soul”:

**SOUL, n.**

1. The spiritual, rational and immortal substance in man, which distinguishes him from brutes; that part of man which enables him to think and reason, and which renders him a subject of moral government. The immorality of the *soul* is a fundamental article of the Christian system.

Such is the nature of the human *soul* that it must have a God, an object of

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<sup>34</sup> Anne Bannister, *From Hearing to Healing: Working with the Aftermath of Child Sexual Abuse* (New York: Wiley, 1998).

<sup>35</sup> Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage, 1991).

<sup>36</sup> a. Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (Amherst, Massachusetts: 1844).

b. In *An Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia* (Ed. Jane Donahue Eberwein. Connecticut and London: Greenwood, 1998) Jean Carwile Masteller explains that Dickinson probably had access to the original 1828 dictionary as a student at Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke Female Seminary before “Webster published a revised and enlarged two-volume octavo edition of his unabridged 1828 dictionary in New Haven in 1841. In 1844, after Webster’s death, J.S. and C. Adams of Amherst, using their imprint, bound unsold sheets of the 1841 edition with a thirty-five-page ‘Supplement’ to the second volume.” Masteller adds that although “critics have speculated about which dictionary the poet used, the family dictionary (inscribed by Edward Dickinson in 1844 and now housed at Harvard’s Houghton Library) was the 1844 Amherst imprint of Webster’s unabridged 1841 edition” (5).

c. All definitions in this book come from the signed 1844 Amherst-edition family lexicon. They are identified by italics. See Appendix C.

- supreme affection. *J. Edwards*
2. The understanding; the intellectual principal.  
The eyes of our *souls* then only begin to see, when our bodily eyes are closing. *Law*.
  3. Vital principal.  
Thou sun, of this great world both eye and *soul*. *Milton*.
  4. Spirit; essence; chief part; as, charity, the *soul* of all the virtues.  
Emotion is the *soul* of eloquence. *E. Porter*.
  5. Life; animating principle or part; as, an able commander is the *soul* of an army.
  6. Internal power.  
There is some *soul* of goodness in things evil. *Shak*.
  7. A human being; a person. There was not a *soul* present. In Paris there are more Than seven hundred thousand *souls*. London, Westminster, Southwark and the suburbs, are said to contain twelve hundred thousand *souls*.
  8. Animal life.  
To deliver their *soul* from death, and to keep them alive in famine. Ps. xxxiii. vii.
  9. Active power.  
And heaven would fly before the driving *soul*. *Dryden*.
  10. Spirit; courage; fire; grandeur of mind.  
That he wants caution he must needs confess,  
But not a *soul* to give our arms success. *Young*.
  11. Generosity; nobleness of mind; *a colloquial use*.
  12. An intelligent being.  
Every *soul* in heav'n shall bend the knee. *Milton*.
  13. Heart; affection.  
The *soul* of Jonathan was knit with the *soul* of David. 1 Sam. xviii.
  14. In *Scripture*, appetite; as, the full *soul*; the hungry *soul*. Prov. xxvii. Job. xxxiii.
  15. A familiar compellation of a person, but often expressing some qualities of the mind; as, alas, poor *soul*; he was a good *soul*.

On some occasions Dickinson uses the “soul” to mean 7. *A human being*, yet on others the meaning shifts to 10. *Spirit; courage; fire; grandeur of mind*. As all of Webster’s definitions appear to be equally valid, it is quite conceivable that Dickinson often selected the more unusual interpretations to intentionally create ambiguity in her most sensitive poems. She may even have written hidden content, as the word-choices made are often highly consistent with the central incest theme hidden as subtext in many examples. And this could help explain why Dickinson’s verse appears problematic on first reading, yet her intent is somehow intuitively ‘felt’ or ‘understood.’ The 1844 dictionary has also been an important resource for analyzing the poet within her own historical context. Because we cannot be certain that Dickinson’s use of a word like “Soul” would match our own, it is necessary to consider all available options in her personal lexicon. Consequently, the citations for each highlighted word are recorded in Appendix C so the reader can evaluate the potential choices.

## The Effects of Incest on the Life and Poetry of Emily Dickinson

Cynthia Griffin Wolff's *Emily Dickinson* suggests that there "is no concrete evidence for an event or series of specific events that would 'explain' her remarkable poetry," and that it is insidious to suppose "that the poetry might be used to infer the events of the poet's life" because there are gaps in the biographical facts (140).<sup>37</sup> Yet Norbert Hirschhorn argues that: "Despite herself, Wolff is susceptible to the raw images in E[mily] D[ickinson]'s poetry," especially poems that highlight "domestic brutality" and "sexual molestation" (272). Indeed, the intensity and anger behind many of her powerful poems appears strong enough to suggest some type of traumatic event so shocking that the entire Dickinson family perhaps covered up the evidence. This might be why there *are* gaps in the biographical facts; the scholar's role is to try to interpret between these gaps in an effort to fully understand a particular strand of the poet's work, while acknowledging that there may be multiple events throughout Dickinson's biography that may have contributed towards her unconventional lifestyle. For perhaps the main difficulty in dealing with a writer of Dickinson's intellect is being able to compile her "letters to the world" into a coherent pattern so that they reveal some of what she (at that time) could not—even if readers are psychologically resistant to the information revealed.

Dickinson's verse is also problematic because of the multiple ways to read it; in over thirty-five years of writing she had the opportunity to pursue many simultaneous lines of thought and inquiry. Yet of the 1,775 extant poems, approximately five percent seem to be in some way directly concerned with incest issues, and these particular samples (mostly written in the 1860s) are the focus of this study. This is not to suggest that *every* Dickinson poem is about sexual abuse. Rather, that around one hundred of her lyrics can be examined in this context, even though the majority of her writing is undeniably concerned with many other diverse issues. It is my belief that some of the most complex poems are autobiographical, so it is not surprising to discover that the poems help explain her biography, and that at the same time knowledge of her family history helps explicate the poems. For both her life and poetry were enmeshed in a circular pattern—life experiences fuelling the poems and the poems therapeutically sustaining that life—with the trauma of sexual violation perhaps at the core.

Aside from the poems themselves, the other primary source that offers an insight into Dickinson's psychological development is her impressive collection of letters. These range from when she was eleven years old (18 April, 1842) until her death in 1886. Edward Dickinson, however, often seems to have invaded his family's privacy. As revealed in Emily's correspondence to brother Austin (18 March, 1853), Father "reads all the letters you write as soon as he

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<sup>37</sup> Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *Emily Dickinson* (New York: Knopf, 1986).

gets, at the post office, no matter to whom addressed. I presume when Sue [Susan Gilbert (Dickinson)] gets back, and has directed to her, he will take them and read them first” (L108). It is unclear whether Mr. Dickinson read *all* the letters, or just the ones from Austin, but perhaps because of this intrusion (and because Emily feared her father might intercept out-going mail too) her letters often lapse into a cryptic ‘stream-of-consciousness’ format, full of hints and allusions the intended recipient would presumably understand. This makes them difficult to analyze in context, because that context is frequently unstated, although Thomas H. Johnson’s *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1961) and R. W. Franklin’s *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1998) offer some valuable biographical clues. And many of the letters were also heavily censored by family members before publication. So although they occasionally clarify concrete facts and events, they are perhaps more useful as a key to the writer’s state of mind, and a map of her linguistic development. Dickinson’s letters also highlight how the poet often: adopted different poses; covered up events that might upset the recipient; found ways to outwit parental restrictions; battled with her own dark thoughts; responded to letters that are no longer extant; and frequently wrote the very things she felt the reader wished to hear.

## Summary

The first chapter of this work considers the clinical evidence that suggests Dickinson was an incest survivor. Current information indicates that she displayed at least 33 Aftereffects from the Incest Survivors’ Checklist, and Blume recommends that only after one experiences over 25 of these items should incest be suspected. Chapter Two exposes how the idealized myth of the Dickinson family (loving, sociable, Christian, and moral) was a carefully constructed façade: Mrs. Dickinson emerges as an increasingly fading presence who gradually withdrew from parental responsibilities; Mr. Dickinson was a domineering Victorian patriarch who never allowed his children to grow up; and the Dickinson siblings adhered to their father’s wishes even when he was dead. After many years of virtual ‘house arrest’ abuse victims can conceive of no other life style, which helps explain Dickinson’s withdrawal from society. This chapter also considers various family members in the role of the perpetrator: Edward Dickinson (father); Emily Norcross Dickinson (mother); and Austin Dickinson (brother), and the possibility that the offender was an unidentified adult with access to the Dickinson home. Emily’s younger sister (Lavinia) would also have been at risk (and possibly Austin too). The ‘Lothrop’ poems in the 1870s record Dickinson’s reactions to an infamous local scandal concerning child abuse reported in the *Springfield Daily Republican* newspaper. This resource not only contains a detailed account of the trial, but also provides an

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invaluable insight into nineteenth-century Amherst life. Chapter Two concludes by showing how Emily Dickinson disclosed the family secrets in “slant,” using her pen as a “Loaded Gun” to shatter the secrecy surrounding incest.

Judith Herman’s model of complex post-traumatic stress claims there are three stages to recovery, and Chapter Three discusses how Dickinson completed Stage One—the stabilization process. In the first period of healing the poet organized her flashbacks into more coherent memories in an effort to make some sense of them from a carefully constructed ‘safe space.’ Her quest to find the ‘right words’ to validate her experience may have stimulated her poetic genius, which ultimately differentiates Dickinson’s work from that of her peers. Chapter Four examines how Dickinson integrated her memories in the second stage of recovery. Here the survivor tells the story of her trauma. Dickinson overcame gaps in memory and the social taboo of *talking* about incest. She also considered the consequences of pleasure and blame on her Puritan soul. The poet eventually moved from fragmentation to wholeness. The fifth chapter concerns the third stage of recovery—the development of self. This final stage has four phases: the creation of a new identity; recreation of faith; telling the story as an inspiration to other victims; and reconnection with the outside world. Dickinson succeeded with the first three phases, but was unable to complete the final task.

When all the evidence is considered together it is possible to conclude that the poet was a classic incest survivor. Nevertheless, she left behind an amazing testimony of her attempts to heal as an inspiration to future writers; Emily Dickinson’s poetry is perhaps the finest demonstration in the English language of how “A *wounded* Deer—leaps highest—” (F181).

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## INTRODUCTION

What event in the life of Emily Dickinson wounded the poet so painfully that it reverberates throughout her work and seems to account for much of her literary power? Perhaps trauma theory can help unveil the mystery. Because her writing is enigmatic, and the biographical details sketchy, previous scholarship has centered on trying to clarify facts—but while the myths are unfortunately many, the certainties remain distressingly few.

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson (1830-1886) was born the second child of Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson. She had an older brother Austin (1829-1895) and a younger sister Lavinia, often referred to as Vinnie (1833-1899). Emily spent most of her life in Amherst, Massachusetts, where her father was a lawyer, and influential in local and state government. Mrs. Dickinson, who was from Monson, Massachusetts, met her husband in 1826 and two years later moved to Amherst to marry him; she appears to have mirrored the Victorian ideal of the “Angel in the House” by quietly accepting a traditional role in the female sphere.<sup>1</sup> The couple first rented a house with another occupant named Jemima Montague, eventually moving to Main Street to share Edward’s childhood home (the Homestead) with his parents and remaining siblings. Around the time of Lavinia’s birth the family suffered financial hardship, and the Dickinsons were forced to sell the house to General David Mack. The Macks wanted to occupy the west side but agreed to let Edward’s family rent the east side, recently vacated by Edward’s father when he left Amherst to start a new life elsewhere. In 1840 Edward purchased his own home (a house no longer extant on what is now North Pleasant Street), which is where the poet seems to have been happiest. Emily was educated at Amherst Academy and then attended Mount Holyoke Female Seminary for a year, but unlike her peers she did not become a wife, teacher, nurse, missionary, or governess. Neither did Vinnie. In 1855 Edward fulfilled his ambition to buy back the entire Homestead from General Mack, and, evidently with some reluctance on the part of the

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<sup>1</sup> Many critics share the views of Sharon Leder and Andrea Abbott in *The Language of Exclusion: The Poetry of Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti* (New York, Connecticut and London: Greenwood, 1987) that “Emily Dickinson’s mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson, appears to have been the ‘ideal’ Victorian woman: sickly, retiring, devoted to her housekeeping” (36).

women, the family returned to the ancestral seat. Austin was persuaded to live in the house next door, built for him after his wedding to Susan Gilbert in 1856. Mrs. Dickinson's health became increasingly precarious, eventually leading to bouts of prolonged illness, and during these periods the Dickinson girls were expected to run the household with the help of a small domestic staff.<sup>2</sup> In 1874, a year after her husband's death, Mrs. Dickinson suffered a stroke and was nursed for her remaining seven years by her daughters. Austin and Sue had three children, but their youngest son Gilbert (Gib) died in 1883. Following that tragedy, Emily's health declined and Austin found continuing solace in a love affair with a young professor's wife, Mabel Loomis Todd. The poet died on May 15, 1886; the official cause was Bright's Disease. She was survived by both siblings.

Emily Dickinson was an intelligent child who demanded intense relationships with school friends and family members. She lived a year from home at Mount Holyoke (1847-1848), when she attended the Female Seminary, but rarely traveled unless for health reasons. During her lifetime Dickinson secretly trained herself to become one of the seminal writers of the American canon, and yet she is known to have published only ten poems. As she gradually withdrew from society, first to the confines of her father's house and later it seems to the sanctuary of her own room, she managed to maintain at least one secret romantic attachment that failed to materialize in marriage, and had various types of relationship with several prominent men and women. Even as she became increasingly reclusive throughout her thirties she maintained a lively dialogue with the outside world by mail. Her correspondence with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who became her editor after her death, lasted for 23 years. And although he initially failed to recognize her talent, the poet once claimed that this important literary relationship had "saved my Life" (L330).

## **The Dickinson Enigma**

Marietta Messmer's article on "Dickinson's Critical Reception" in *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*, explains how early reviews of Dickinson's poetry comment on the "strangeness" of her poems, the "force of the writer's genius,"

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<sup>2</sup> Polly Longworth, "The 'Latitude of Home': Life in the Homestead and the Evergreens" in Jerome Liebling's *The Dickinsons of Amherst* (Hanover and London: UP of New England, 2001): "Recollections of an earlier, more stressful decade, when the family had shared the Homestead with Edward's parents and siblings, may have oppressed Mrs. Dickinson, for the move back in 1855 induced a severe depression that lasted two or three years and placed excessive burdens and constraints upon her daughters" (18).

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and “the originality of her imagery” (302).<sup>3</sup> As interest in her work grew Josephine Pollitt and Genevieve Taggard wrote biographies based on the letters and gossip of various family members. The first objective study was undertaken by George Whicher (1938). He established that Benjamin Newton and Charles Wadsworth were her intellectual advisors, rather than romantic love-interests, and identified Puritanism and Yankee humor as the two major elements defining Dickinson’s work. Conrad Aiken produced the first psychological study, and recognized Dickinson as an early pioneer of American modernism. During this period much of the criticism focused on the poet’s private life, intent on unveiling her elusive “Master.” Then in 1951 Rebecca Patterson dared to suggest that her love interests were female when she discussed Dickinson’s relationships with Susan Gilbert and Kate Scott Turner Anthon.

In 1955 Thomas H. Johnson wrote *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography*, and compiled the first collection of all extant poems (including variant readings). Three years later, he published *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* with Theodora Ward. He replicated Dickinson’s original spelling and punctuation, and provided a rough chronology for her work.<sup>4</sup> Johnson’s books led to a burst of scholarship in the 1960s, and allowed Charles Anderson to provide the best criticism of that time. Roland Hagenbuchle’s “Dickinson and Literary Theory” in *The Emily Dickinson Handbook* points out that for the most part Anderson is a patient and intelligent reader, although the elusive ending of “My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun” appears to have baffled him, causing him to conclude that the combination of form types “does not quite come off”(359).<sup>5</sup>

In 1960 Jay Leyda published one of the major Dickinson biographies. *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* is a compilation of events, observations and records related to the poet’s daily routine, but with limited comment and explication. Leyda concludes that Dickinson’s poems leave an “omitted center” that the “uninitiated” reader is left to reconstruct.<sup>6</sup> At this point biographical studies appear to have developed in two (often overlapping) directions: some scholars continued detailing the life and relationships of the poet, while others used psychology to attempt to discover the source of Dickinson’s creativity, and a reason for her agoraphobic behavior. And although recent scholarship has also branched off in many new directions, similar lines of inquiry are still pursued

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<sup>3</sup> Gudrun Grabher *et al.* *The Emily Dickinson Handbook* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Marietta Messmer, “Dickinson’s Critical Reception.” *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*: 312.

<sup>5</sup> Roland Hagenbuchle, “Dickinson and Literary Theory.” *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*.

<sup>6</sup> Jay Leyda, *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1960), 1:xxi.

today.<sup>7</sup> The two most persistent questions seem to be: Who was Emily Dickinson's secret lover? And why was her behavior so odd? After more than a hundred years of speculation there are, as yet, no widely accepted or definitive answers to either question. It is my belief that trauma theory can add some valuable insights into Dickinson's life choices.

Dickinson criticism in the 1970s was spearheaded by John Cody's Freudian psychobiography *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson* (1971), which examined Dickinson's mind during the crisis years of 1861 to 1863. But many readers took offense at this sexualized interpretation of Dickinson's life and works, with Susan Howe even going so far as to describe Cody's book as "the rape of a great poet."<sup>8</sup> Three years later Richard Sewall published *The Life of Emily Dickinson*. Sewall was the first to reveal the romantic relationship between Austin Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd. He also highlights evidence of the poet's Puritan heritage in the "pettiness, the hypocrisy, and the narrow moral view" found in many New England towns like Amherst, where hard work and industriousness were prized, thrift was a virtue, and the desire for simplicity resulted in a life of "denial and renunciation" because the overwhelming quest was for religious salvation: "No fewer than eight revivals swept Amherst, college and town, during her formative years" (20-24). At the same time a variety of critical perspectives appeared from feminist writers. Following the examples of scholars such as Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Vivian Pollak, Adrienne Rich, Elaine Showalter, and Cynthia Griffin Wolff, a substantial body of work dealt with Dickinson as a woman author. One of the most influential is Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), which examines Dickinson's subtle tactics in avoiding and undermining the limitations of patriarchy. They suggest that instead of playing the roles of 'little girl,' 'woman / wife' and 'queen,' Dickinson's verse actually exploits, tests, criticizes and subverts such clichés.<sup>9</sup>

During the last part of the twentieth century a plethora of academics have contributed to our understanding of Emily Dickinson: Paula Bennett, Christopher Benfey, Sharon Cameron, Jack Capps, Angela Conrad, Jane Donahue Eberwein, Lillian Faderman, Judith Farr, Maryanne Garbowsky, Gudrun Grabher, James R. Guthrie, Alfred Habegger, Suzanne Juhasz, Karl Keller, Mary Loeffelholz, Polly Longworth, Roger Lundin, Cristanne Miller,

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<sup>7</sup> At the recent American Literature Association Conference in San Francisco (May 27–30, 2004), one of the two panels organized by the Emily Dickinson International Society was called "Dickinson: New Psychoanalytic Approaches."

<sup>8</sup> Marietta Messmer, "Dickinson's Critical Reception." *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*, 312.

<sup>9</sup> Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979).