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A Remembrance of the Belle: Emily Dickinson on Stage

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Abstract of the Thesis

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In September 2009, I served as the Production Dramaturg for the New York premiere production of *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance*. During my research process, I learned that the true persona Emily Dickinson does fit into one particular stereotype. In this thesis I provide, I examine three different theatrical interpretations of the character of Emily Dickinson: *Allison's House* by Susan Glaspell, *The Belle of Amherst* by William Luce, and *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance* by Chris Cragin. Though each of these texts are quite different in structure, they each depict woman who is strong and loving; she is not afraid of the world, but rather it is her choice to exclude herself from it. These plays provide audience members the opportunity to get to know the famous poet on a more personal level, and their perceptions about her cannot help but be changed by the end of the performance.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of her first edition of poems in 1890, Emily Dickinson has been a grand enigma in American culture. Those who are introduced to her poetry—be it in high school, college, or simply everyday life—may be first greeted with the “myth” of who Emily Dickinson actually was: a spinster shut-in who was so agoraphobic she hid herself away from the world outside of her family home. In fact, it was most likely in their years of high school English classes when many students learned about a prolific poet who never emerged from her home, who was frightened by the people around her, and who never published a poem until after her death. As students grew older though, these Emily Dickinson stereotypes may have grown loftier and more fantastic; in college, professors quite possibly presented their pupils with the idea of Emily as a rebellious atheist who rejected the Christian conservative world around her. Perhaps even, people learned and were more apt to believe that Emily was a lesbian who, because of the rigid Christian decorum of her rural New England town, rejected society in an effort to mask her homosexual tendencies. During Emily’s lifetime, her friends and neighbors in Amherst, Massachusetts did not know the true persona of this woman. To them, Emily, whom they deemed “The Myth of Amherst,” was an entertaining source of ghost stories and urban legends. Even her family did not fully understand the genius who was sleeping in the next room. Today, scholars, historians, professors, students, and readers still speculate on this mystery that began well-over two hundred years ago.

Born in Amherst on December 10, 1830, Emily lived all but fifteen years of her life in the same brick house on Main Street. She was the middle child of Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson, with an older brother, Austin, and a younger sister, Lavinia.

During her lifetime, she maintained lively correspondences with several close friends and family members, but by 1860, with her eyesight failing and her devotion to the Congregational Church waning, Emily slowly retreated into the world of her house. She hardly left her home and was often seen wandering through it wearing an infamous white dress. She passed away due to a condition which affects the kidneys, also known as Bright's Disease, on May 15 1886, having never married nor published a single poem in her name (Wetzsteon v-vi).

After her sister Emily's death, in May 1886, Lavinia "Vinnie" Dickinson was left to complete a customary funeral ritual in the nineteenth century: she was to go through her sister's remaining belongings and destroy any correspondence Emily may have received or produced. By burning Emily's letters, Lavinia would be ensuring that her sister's reputation, as well as that her correspondents, was protected. What she found instead forever changed American literature. Inside her sister's bureau drawers, Lavinia discovered 1,775 poems¹ written by Emily, hidden away and never published. When Lavinia discovered these poems after her sister's death, she could not abandon them. Instead of completing her unenviable task and burning all of these poems, Lavinia chose to defy her sister and social customs. She enlisted the help of Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd to edit and eventually publish these poems (Garner). Even though she knew the least about poetry—in comparison with her brother and sister—Vinnie still recognized greatness in its earliest form. Without Lavinia's persistence, Emily's contribution to American literature would be entirely lost.

¹ Emily's poems were discovered in "fascicles": hand-sewn booklets which contained six or seven poems. Emily was also notorious for writing poems on scraps of paper or the backs of envelopes (Garner).

Well over one hundred years after Emily Dickinson's death, Americans are still left questioning and exploring who this woman truly was, but the question is not left for American Literature scholars alone. Hundreds of biographies about her life—both fiction and non-fiction—have been published, and composers have even used her poetry to write new music. Additionally, since 1930, playwrights have used the medium of theatre in an attempt to characterize and illustrate the true persona of Emily Dickinson.

In 2003, my sophomore year at Baylor University, I had the opportunity to perform in the premiere staged reading of *An Amethyst Remembrance*, a play, by then-MFA Directing student Chris Cragin, based on the life of Emily Dickinson. This play was my first true introduction to Emily Dickinson. At this point in my life, I knew virtually nothing about Emily Dickinson. Well, not exactly nothing. I knew the assumptions of her that my high school English teachers introduced to me: she was a great American poet, who never left her house and who published only a handful of her poems during her lifetime. In fact, I learned the definition of “agoraphobic” when I heard someone use the word in reference to Emily Dickinson. As I read Cragin's play, I was honestly struck by her interpretation of the poet. Instead of a shy, cloistered individual, Cragin depicted a strong, enlightened woman, a person who could almost be classified as a rebel. Perhaps the thing I found most interesting about this character was that she did not fit any description of Emily Dickinson I had known previously.

Six years later, I was once again working on Cragin's play, now entitled *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance*—a title of which I highly approve—and my function was now that of Production Dramaturg for the New York premiere of her play, produced by Firebone Theatre Company. Where my curiosity for Emily Dickinson began at Baylor

University, I was now given the opportunity to find out exactly who this elusive woman was. As opposed to my preconceived notions of a woman crippled by shyness, I discovered through the production process a highly spiritual and intelligent woman who would not conform to societal conventions, a woman whose seclusion was a result of choice rather than of fear.

In this particular dramatization, Chris Cragin explores the essence of Emily's character, as well as her poetry, through her relationships with her family, friends, and mentors. However, Cragin was not the first playwright to do so; almost seventy years before Firebone Theatre Company's production, Susan Glaspell won a Pulitzer Prize for her play, *Alison's House*, and forty years after that, Julie Harris picked up the Best Actress Tony Award for her portrayal of Emily in William Luce's 1976 one-woman play, *The Belle of Amherst*. Though each play is entirely different in its structure and presentation of Emily, they each share a crucial similarity: none of these works characterizes Emily as frightened or weak.

Emily Dickinson rumors and stereotypes will probably never disappear; however, using certain works of dramatic literature, audiences can better comprehend exactly who this elusive poet was. Susan Glaspell, William Luce, and Chris Cragin all present three uniquely different interpretations of Emily Dickinson. Through their use of characters, poetry, and history, *Alison's House*, *The Belle of Amherst*, and *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance* succeed in educating their audiences, helping them demystify Emily Dickinson and understand that she is a profoundly complex individual. Once audience members are exposed to these works, they cannot help but come to appreciate the persona of Emily Dickinson, and if they had any preconceived notions about her, they will most

certainly have their perceptions of the infamous poet drastically changed—and all for the better.

ALISON'S HOUSE

The Absent Heroine

Almost eighty years before the New York premiere of *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance*, playwright Susan Glaspell produced the first major work in dramatic literature based on the life of Emily Dickinson with her play *Alison's House*. Though many of Glaspell's works have only recently reemerged after years of obscurity, her contribution to American theatre is immense. In 1915, she, along with her husband and fellow playwright George Cram Cook, founded the Provincetown Players in Massachusetts, a non-commercial theatre group dedicated to creating new American drama: a group which subsequently launched the career of renowned American playwright, Eugene O'Neill. In the period of approximately fifteen years Glaspell wrote numerous plays for the Provincetown Players that revolutionized how women were portrayed on the American stage (Goldfarb 426). In the preface to her biography on the playwright, *Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times*, author Linda Ben-Zvi describes Susan Glaspell as:

...a pioneer. Glaspell pioneered a new type of modern drama, extending the possibilities of what could be seen and discussed on the stage and what forms could be used. Finding few native models from which to draw, she created her own. She also pioneered in her depiction of the lives and struggles of women. Her writing is constantly marked by the presence of strong female characters whose consciousness of themselves and their world shapes the works. (xii)

This particular pioneering attitude is evident throughout Glaspell's career as a playwright. Not only was she the first major playwright first use Emily Dickinson as her subject, she also led the way for all American woman playwrights, including Chris Cragin. She opened doors and illustrated how women could be strong both behind the scenes and on stage. The heroines she created did not fit the traditional early twentieth century image of

a woman; instead, Glaspell's women were always independent, sometimes rebellious, and more often than not they did not conform to societal graces. Alison Stanhope—Susan Glaspell incarnation of Emily Dickinson—is certainly no exception.

In her very first play, *Trifles*, Susan Glaspell offers a unique perspective on the solitary life of one woman, and she carries this convention through to her Pulitzer Prize winning piece, *Alison's House*. *Trifles*, a one act play written in 1916, is perhaps the most well-known and most frequently anthologized play of her repertoire. In this short piece, Susan Glaspell uses two women, a sheriff's wife, Mrs. Peters, and a farmer's wife, Mrs. Hale, to put together the clues surrounding the murder of their neighbor, Minnie Wright's, husband. While both of their husbands are unsuccessfully searching for a motive as to why Mrs. Wright killed her husband, the wives use the "trifles" throughout Mrs. Wright's house—her quilting, her preserves, her ability to keep a clean kitchen—to deduce that Mrs. Wright slew her husband because he strangled her most prized possession, a canary (Jacobus 956-961). Even though Mrs. Wright never appears on stage, her character and the act she commits resonate throughout the audience and leave a strong and haunting impression. Moreover, everything the audience learns about Minnie comes secondhand from the reactions of Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters.

Fifteen years after penning her first play, Susan Glaspell revisits this very same convention in her full length Pulitzer Prize winning work, *Alison's House*. In this instance, the elusive poet Alison Stanhope is the driving force of the show. All of the action of the play is centered on Alison; however, the play takes place eighteen after Alison's death, and the audience—and some of the characters for that matter—do not get the opportunity to meet her. Even still the American public is enamored with Alison

Stanhope eighteen years after her death because during her lifetime, she was a reclusive woman who wrote beautiful, innovative poetry. Much like Emily Dickinson, the entire world wants to know who this woman was and why she did not share her poetry during her lifetime.

Alison's House begins with the impending sale of the Stanhope family home. Agatha Stanhope, Alison's sister, has grown too old and weak to care for her family's property, and her brother, John Stanhope, has decided to move Agatha into his home. Before the sale, Alison's family—including her outcast niece, Elsa—has returned to the home one final time. What they discover during this last encounter forever changes their family and the image of Alison Stanhope.

Much like Mrs. Wright, Alison's home—and more specifically her room—contains everything about her; in fact, Agatha, Alison's sister, has left Alison's room in the exact same condition it was in when she died. As a result, Alison's room becomes a sort of shrine, which honors her memory. When Eben and Elsa, Alison's nephew and niece, revisit her room once last time before the house is sold, they both experience a rush of memories of their beloved aunt: “She is sitting here with her papers—with her thoughts, and the words for her thoughts. She is wearing a white dress. The full skirt spreads out from the chair. The sleeves too are full, and her small hands hover over what she has. Her eyes—Heavens! Have I forgotten them?...she writes me a little poem....She gives me candy, and stands at the door...” (Glaspell 124-125). In *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance*, Cragin uses Emily's bedroom as a sanctuary for the poet: a place where she can escape the outside world. In *Alison's House*, in the midst of the turmoil that ensues, Alison's room is also a kind of safe haven; however, in this case, it is a sanctuary

for her family. Before the play begins, the family, and Elsa and Eben in particular, succumb to the chaos of their lives, and they begin to forget exactly who their aunt was and why they loved her. By keeping her sister's room in its pristine condition, Agatha provides her family with a place to reconnect with the spirit of the woman they all loved. As a result, Alison's physical room actually becomes a driving force in determining the outcome of the play.

From Massachusetts to Iowa

The inspiration behind *Alison's House* is not entirely clear. Some sources claim that Glaspell approached members of the Dickinson estate to request their permission to write a play based on Emily's life, and her request was denied. In her review for a 1999 New York production of *Alison's House*, J. Ellen Gainor of Cornell University claims:

[Susan] Glaspell based her drama on the family of American poet Emily Dickinson...although Glaspell wanted to write a biographical drama, the Dickinson estate refused permission to use the family name or any of Emily's verse. Rather than abandon the project, Glaspell chose to create the fictional Alison Stanhope whose relatives, like the Dickinsons, had to grapple with the poet's legacy. (425)

Unfortunately for Gainor, this statement is debatable. Other scholars, such as Linda Ben-Zvi in her biography of Susan Glaspell, argue that Glaspell wished to disassociate her play from Emily Dickinson's life. As a result, *Alison's House* tells the story of the family of elusive poet Alison Stanhope, not Emily Dickinson. Reportedly, Susan Glaspell told the *New York Times*, ““The play [*Alison's House*] was in no way founded on the life of Dickinson. It grew out of a feeling for her work and character,”” (qtd. in Ben-Zvi 335). Glaspell moved the setting of Emily Dickinson's story from Amherst, Massachusetts to a rural town in Iowa—Glaspell's home state—in an attempt to excuse herself from the

need to be historically accurate. By crafting her story to be that of Alison Stanhope, she probably hoped to give herself an incredible amount of freedom; from there, she could depict Emily, Vinnie, and Austin in whatever manner she chose. Ultimately though, the parallels between the Stanhope and Dickinson families are quite overt, and the comparisons between the two are unavoidable. Unfortunately for Glaspell, audiences saw through her attempt to separate Emily Dickinson from Alison Stanhope's story because the family dynamics and poet biographies remained incredibly similar. Just like Emily Dickinson, Alison was the middle sibling between an older brother and younger sister; both she and her younger sister never married and lived out their days in their childhood home. After Alison and Emily's deaths, their sisters—Agatha and Vinnie, respectively—discovered the vast collection of poetry hidden away, waiting to be discovered. As a result, each woman became a celebrity posthumously, and the entire literary world tried to solve the mystery behind her seclusion. Because of the obvious similarities between these two women, Glaspell was greatly criticized, and audience members could not help but see Alison Stanhope as Emily Dickinson. In his 1930 review of the play's New York City premiere, renowned critic Brooks Atkinson advised his readers, "For Alison of *Alison's House*...read Emily Dickinson. Although Susan Glaspell's new drama is a free improvisation², the great shadow of a mystic poet that hovers unseen through this spacious house is that of the New England spinster" (35). Regrettably, the reviews—and the Great Depression—took their toll on *Alison's House*, and the production closed after a mere twenty-five performances. Nonetheless, Glaspell

² Using the term "free improvisation," Brooks Atkinson is referring to Susan Glaspell's liberties with character, time, and place. She freely amended history, but ultimately, her play refers back to Emily Dickinson.

ultimately triumphed when her play was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in May 1931 (Ben-Zvi 341).

Despite reviewers' dismay at Glaspell's choice to avoid using Emily Dickinson's name, her decision ultimately was essential. Because she possibly feared backlash from the Dickinson family, the playwright needed to change names due to the fact that she diverges from history in her use of dramatic action. While protecting her sister's most precious poems, Agatha Stanhope sets fire to the family house in an attempt to destroy—thus hiding—Alison's secrets. Once she fails in doing so, she gives Alison's manuscript to Elsa for safe-keeping, and a moment later, Agatha dies. Because of this twist in the Stanhope's story, it now becomes incredibly necessary for Glaspell to move the location of the Dickinson's story, as well as change the names of the characters. For any living member of the Dickinson family at that time, the image of Lavinia Dickinson as a feeble, half-crazy, pyromaniac may be quite difficult to comprehend.

While *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance* was in rehearsals, everyone on the production team knew that historical accuracy could be a concern for many of the play's reviewers. With scholars and poets, who have devoted their lives to studying Dickinson, living in New York City, the director, playwright, and dramaturg anticipated that some audience members would not appreciate Cragin's divergence from history. Luckily for Cragin, Susan Glaspell served as a pioneer on this front as well. Working once again as an innovator, she deemed that compelling dramatic action was more important than staying true to history; as a result, Cragin was able to escape a certain amount of backlash, thanks to Susan Glaspell.

Ultimately though, Susan Glaspell's journey into discovering who Emily Dickinson was mirrors that of her audience. At the time *Alison's House* was written, "despite the centennial [anniversary of the Emily's birth], the poet was not sufficiently known to the general public...and critics—strange as it may seem today—knew almost nothing about Emily Dickinson..." (Ben-Zvi 335). Glaspell once again led the way in her efforts to characterize and give strength to a literary figure yet unknown to her general audience.

"She Lays Her Beams in Music"

Much like the absent heroine, the poetry in Susan Glaspell's illustration of the Dickinson family is also noticeably absent. Of course this omission could very well be due to the copyright issues Glaspell supposedly faced with the Dickinson family. Nonetheless, the lack of poetry in her play is incredibly telling. As with many of her plays, Glaspell leaves out key telling details in order for her audience to infer who exactly her characters are. In the same sense, the audience of *Alison's House* is left to their own devices to decide what Alison's poetry was and why it was significant. When the family reads the poems Agatha hid from them, Stanhope becomes more desperate than ever to protect Alison. He firmly states to his children, "I promise you my sister's intimate papers are not going into your vulgar world" (Glaspell 145). By contrasting Alison's poems with the "vulgar world," Stanhope affirms what he considers to be the purity of his sister's work. It could be safe to assume that Alison's family very much regarded her hidden poems as sacred texts, blessed with the divine touch of her genius. Much like the holy image of a deity or saint, Alison's poems are too precious to be viewed or heard by

anyone who would not treasure them to their fullest extent. The same is true in *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance*; the poet shares her poems with the people who would best understand their meaning. As a result, in *Alison's House*, because they did not know Alison and were not a part of her family, the audience is not granted the privilege of seeing or even hearing her poetry. Glaspell simply leaves her audience to surmise on their own the beauty and love contained within Alison's work.

One of the only poems Glaspell incorporates in her text is "The House" by Ralph Waldo Emerson:

"There is no architect
Can build as the muse can
She is skilful to select
Materials for her plan;

Slowly and warily to choose
Rafters of immortal pine,
Or cedar incorruptible
Worthy her design...

She lays her beams in music,
In music every one,
To the cadence of the whirling world
Which dances round the sun.

That so they shall not be displaced
By lapses or by wars,
But for the love of happy souls
Outlive the newest stars." (qtd. in Glaspell 98-99)

Glaspell was more than likely able to use this poem because she did not have to contend with copyright issues when using Emerson's work. However, more than that, Emerson's poem ends up being a crucial element in the development of Alison's character. At first, Stanhope recites this poem Knowles³ in order to parallel the greatness of Alison's poems

³ Knowles is the reporter from Chicago, who is a big fan of Alison's. At first he is a great nuisance to the family because he wants to interview the family and publish a story on Alison, which would coincide with

with the physical structure of the family home. However, Knowles, at the end of the play, turns the poem around on Stanhope. By reminding Stanhope that “the love of happy souls/outlive the newest stars” (151), Knowles encourages the elder gentleman to publish Alison’s last manuscript. Rather than allow the great love that Alison exhibits through these last poems to remain hidden, “The House” gives Stanhope a push to acknowledge his sister’s true desires and to share them with her audience.

Aunt Alison

Out of all of the characters, Ted is by far the character who most closely resembles Glaspell’s contemporary audience. Having been extremely young when Alison died, Eben is desperate to learn more about his elusive aunt. Throughout the play, he asks incredibly pesky questions: “What kind of pen did Alison use, and where is the pen?” (Glaspell 27). “Was Alison a virgin?” (37). At first, these questions succeed in doing nothing more than infuriating his family. While he most certainly is using his knowledge about Alison to get a better grade in one of his university classes, his curiosity is also genuine, and his family’s refusal to speak of Alison is aggravating for both the audience and Ted. In using Ted, Susan Glaspell successfully personifies the frustration of the general public to know more about Emily Dickinson. He is—along with the reporter, Knowles—also a crucial plot device for the family to actually concede small amounts of information. Without his insistence, the family had absolutely no pressure to explore the true character of Alison; they could have simply shut up the home and

the sale of the house. Eventually, he earns their trust and even falls in love with Mr. Stanhope’s secretary, Ann.

forsaken Alison's last manuscript. The discomfort Ted brings to his family ultimately propels the action of the story, and as he learns more about his aunt, so does the audience.

Elsa though is without a doubt the most complex character in the entire play. On one hand, she represents her absent aunt, Alison, because in their respective lifetimes, they each experience an all-consuming, heart-breaking love. On the other hand, Elsa also functions as the antithesis to her aunt. Whereas Alison chose to sacrifice her own heart's desire out of her devotion to her family, Elsa chooses love. When Maravene Loeschke was preparing for her role as Emily in William Luce's play, *The Belle of Amherst*, she did what anyone close enough should do when presented with the task of staging Emily Dickinson's story: she took a tour of the Dickinson Homestead in Amherst, Massachusetts. In addition to her tour of Emily's home, she had the privilege of speaking with Mrs. Hampson, the woman who inherited Austin and Susan Dickinson's home, the Evergreens. During their conversation, Loeschke reveals that Mrs. Hampson's "real agenda was for [her] to understand that it was Emily's niece, Martha, who was the real writer, and that Martha's was the real story to be told" (Loeschke 125). Martha Dickinson Bianchi, daughter of Edward Dickinson, was incredibly instrumental in ensuring that her aunt's work would be published; due to family disputes between Lavinia Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd, further editions of Emily's poetry were nearly forgotten, but Dickinson Bianchi worked to publish further editions of Emily's poetry. In 1929, two years before the premiere of *Alison's House*, Martha Dickinson Bianchi published a new collection of poems entitled, *Further Poems of Emily Dickinson: Withheld by her Sister Lavinia* (Ben-Zvi 331). No doubt this recent edition of

Emily's work had a profound effect on Susan Glaspell as she developed the characters as well as the stories of Alison and Elsa Stanhope.

The entire action of the play involves Alison Stanhope, and she is by far the driving force of the play. However, because we never see Alison, the story then belongs to Elsa; in a sense, Elsa is the physically embodiment of her aunt. In fact, Brooks Atkinson, in his 1930 review of *Alison's House*, refers to Elsa as "the true custodian for Alison's genius" (35). Over the course of her life, each woman fell in love with a married man during a time period when the consequences of divorces were quite intolerable on women. As opposed to leaving Iowa and being with the man whom she loved, Alison retreats into her poetry. Her decision ultimately was motivated by her devotion to her family. Stanhope reveals to his children, "...I asked her to stay....He had come for her....But he was married. He had children. They parted. But—they were one. I know that now" (Glaspell 140-141). Rather than give into temptation and leave her family, she chooses seclusion and expresses her love through poetry. Elsa on the other hand chooses love because she did not possess her aunt's gift, and she could not express her heart's desires through writing. In the end, Elsa is given her aunt's manuscript because she is the person best to understand Alison's plight, as well as treasure her aunt's most intimate poems. Elsa exclaims at the thought of Stanhope destroying his sister's final manuscript, "I feel Alison wrote those poems for me" (Glaspell 153). Because Alison died with her great love having gone unrequited, her poems encourage her niece to not make the same mistake. When Elsa ran away with her married lover years before the play began, she disgraced her family, and as a result, she was shunned by the people she held most dear.

Elsa is finally able to find redemption when she receives her aunt's final manuscript. In a sense, Alison offers her niece her blessing to be with the man she loves.

For Susan Glaspell and Chris Cragin, Emily's great love is the crux of both of their plays. In a sense, because she should not have fallen in love with a married man, Alison's decision to enter into seclusion becomes a sacrifice. Rather than hurt her family by entering into an inappropriate relationship, she sequestered herself through poetry. She resisted temptation. Elsa realizes the magnitude of her aunt's sacrifice when she states that parting from her love "was death for [Alison]. But she made it—life eternal" (Glaspell 141). Because she could not be with the man she loved, Alison immortalizes the love they shared through her poems.

"A Legacy of Love"

Even though Emily Dickinson and Alison Stanhope do not share the same name or hometown, an audience member can still learn a great deal about Emily Dickinson through Susan Glaspell's impressionistic portrait of the poet. Most people assume that Emily Dickinson led an incredibly sad and lonely life, due to the fact that she was never married. However, through Elsa, Eben, and Ted's memories, an audience can easily see how Alison—and Emily—were anything but lonely. With the love of her nieces and nephews, Alison's life was full to the brim of love and laughter. Between delivering sweet baked goods and candy to her little ones, Alison was also a pillar strength for her family; always someone to run to when Aunt Agatha was acting cross, Alison provided a place of refuge and laughter for Eben, Elsa, and Ted. Her words of wisdom sustained her loved ones and aided them during times of doubt or despair

Though Glaspell's play may be more difficult than some others to decipher, her reflections on Emily Dickinson ultimately come across loud and clear. As opposed to the rumors of a weak and crazy poet, Susan Glaspell saw Emily Dickinson as someone who possessed great wisdom. The Emily that Glaspell introduces to her 1930 audience is a woman who was full of love—love of a family, as well as passionate, intense love. As a result, Glaspell's pioneering spirit once again shined. In the same way that she reinvented the way plays were being written and produced, and in the same way she paved the way for future female playwrights, Glaspell's exhibits her pioneering spirit in her refusal to accept a stereotype. Glaspell's Pulitzer Prize was more than deserved because she attempted to explore and create a new image of an artist, and her innovation translated nearly eighty years later when Chris Cragin attempted to do the exact same thing. Though her initial reviews criticized her work, and she of course did not eradicate Emily Dickinson stereotypes, Susan Glaspell certainly earned her recognition for her attempt to do so.

THE BELLE OF AMHERST

“This is My Introduction”

Forty-six years after the premiere production of *Alison’s House*, Emily Dickinson once again returned to the New York stage, this time in William Luce’s one woman show, *The Belle of Amherst*. William Luce’s text is by far a more literal interpretation of Emily’s life than *Alison’s House* or *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance*; it is also by far the most ironic of the three plays. When Mabel Loomis Todd—the woman who would eventually fall in love with Emily’s brother, Austin, as well as revise Emily’s poems for publication with Thomas Wentworth Higginson—first moved to Amherst, she wrote home to her parents:

I must tell you about the *character* of Amherst. It is a lady whom all the people call the *Myth*. She is a sister of Mr. Dickinson, [and] seems to be the climax of all the family oddity. She has not been outside of her house in fifteen years, except once to see a new church, when she crept out at night, [and] viewed it by moonlight. No one who calls upon her mother [and] sister ever sees her, but she allows little children once in a great while, [and] one at a time, to come in, when she gives them cake or candy, or some nicety, for she is very fond of little ones. But more often she lets down the sweetmeat by a string, out of a window, to them. She dresses wholly in white, [and] her mind is said to be perfectly wonderful. She writes finely, but no one ever *sees* her. Her sister...invited me to come [and] sing to her mother sometime....People tell me the *myth* will hear every note—she will be near, but unseen.... (qtd. in Wetzsteon xv)

Todd’s account of her visit to the Dickinson household is not dissimilar to other reports given by the residents of Amherst. Emily was known to hide upstairs as her family entertained guests, and when she first met with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, their meeting took place in a darkened room (Pollak 15). Even when she delivered her delicious gingerbread to neighborhood children, she passed her treats down in a basket from her bedroom window (Garner). Emily Dickinson was a woman who spent the majority of her life hiding behind closed doors, obscuring her appearance to anyone who

was fortunate enough to be close to it; William Luce, on the other hand, gives his Emily no place to hide. In *The Belle of Amherst*, Emily does not have any barriers or walls to shield her from her audience. She is out in the open, alone, and above all, not frightened in the least.

The Belle of Amherst begins in the year 1883 when Emily is fifty-three years old. Emily greets her audience by offering her guests a piece of cake: “This is my introduction. Black cake. My own special recipe” (Luce, *Belle* 2). From this point on, Emily begins to narrate the story of her life, frequently jumping back and forth in time. She illustrates the most important events of her life and ends the play foreshadowing her death that will come three years into her future. *The Belle of Amherst* provides its audience with an excellent history lesson and covers every major event in the life of Emily Dickinson; the play also gives an entertaining and historically accurate glimpse for any audience member who is curious to learn more about the poet. More than that though, William Luce also provides significant insight into the kind of person he supposes—based on the factual events of her life—Emily Dickinson was.

The Emily Committee

William Luce is a playwright known for creating one-person plays. He began his one person repertoire with *The Belle of Amherst*, and from there, he composed works based on the lives of Charlotte Brontë, Zelda Fitzgerald, Lillian Hellman, Isak Dinesen, and John Barrymore. In his essay, “The Solo Performer,” Luce explains, “...I particularly am in awe of the magical intimacy created with an audience by one virtuoso actor....To hold a stage alone is the consummate test of a performer....It is pure theater

for a single voice to command, hold listeners, fire fancy, summon tears.” That being said, Luce is able to fully realize this intimacy he so admires with his work on *The Belle of Amherst*. Unlike *Alison’s House*, Emily in *The Belle of Amherst* is the opposite of absent. In this story, Emily invites her audience into her home; she serves baked goods, tells stories, and shares with the audience her deepest desires. At the end of the performance, an audience can surely feel as though they were able to get to know this woman who eluded her friends and neighbors throughout her entire lifetime.

In the preface to *The Belle of Amherst*, William Luce gives credit to “The Emily Committee,” which included director Charles Nelson Reilly and lead actress Julie Harris. In particular, he praises Harris because her “familiarity with Emily resulted from years of dedicated research into her life and works” (xv). With her performance in *The Belle of Amherst*, Julie Harris asserted herself as a preeminent Emily Dickinson-phile; after her work on this production, she could quite possibly be deemed an expert. Along with her Tony Award for Best Actress in a Play in 1976, Harris recorded albums of Emily Dickinson’s poetry, narrated the documentary film *Emily Dickinson: A Certain Slant of Light*, and starred in the television adaptation of *The Belle of Amherst*; like Susan Glaspell, Harris also served as a pioneer by being one of the first actresses to star in a one woman show. Her work garnered attention for strong actresses and paved the way for subsequent one-woman shows. In the years before the premiere of *The Belle of Amherst*, Julie Harris no doubt spent years living with Emily Dickinson’s poetry, and her hard work has served to enthrall audiences for over thirty years. Without her contribution to the production, along with immense acting talent, *The Belle of Amherst* may not have had the success it did. Elizabeth Davis, who portrayed Emily in *Emily: An Amethyst*

Remembrance, certainly would have used Harris as a role model in her attempt to also create a strong and lasting impression of Emily Dickinson. In addition, Luce's Emily Committee "all seemed joined together in love in [the] enterprise of simple beauty" (xv). In his preface, Luce makes it quite clear that *The Belle of Amherst* came together through collaboration, and it mostly certainly was a labor of love amongst all of the participants.

The Living Verse

Susan Glaspell, William Luce, and Chris Cragin each take a very different approach in presenting Emily's poetry. For Susan Glaspell, the poetry is nearly non-existent; William Luce's use of poetry is far more similar to that of Chris Cragin. Both playwrights explore why and how Emily's poems were created. In *Belle of Amherst*, Luce is incredibly crafty at blending Emily's poetry with her natural dialogue. By the end of the play, her dialogue and her poetry become interlocked. In a sense, Luce illustrates how these words were *living* inside Emily, waiting to be verbalized or recorded. As the play progresses, Emily's words even become increasingly lyrical, sounding almost "sing-song." At times, it could be more than difficult for an audience member to discern when Emily is speaking in prose or poetry because as the play goes on, the two types of language begin to blend together. In the 1976 *New York Times* review of *The Belle of Amherst*, Mel Gussow describes "the character leap[ing] into verse when the emotion carries her there....At times the poetry merges with character and performance" (48). In another *New York Times* review, Walter Kerr remarks, "In the first half, I wished [Julie Harris] wouldn't so plainly let me know where a fragment of a letter or memoirs was ending and a poem beginning; in the second, all was seamless, and I admired her totally" (61). William Luce seems to have designed his play to work so that

Emily's poetry and natural speech become interchangeable and indistinguishable. In this sense, the poetry in *The Belle of Amherst* functions in the same manner as songs in a musical; when Emily becomes so overwhelmed with emotion, she has to speak in verse in order to express herself. For instance, when Emily learns that she will finally have the opportunity to meet Thomas Wentworth Higginson, she is overcome with excitement. She begins by first speaking in prose, but when her excitement gets the best of her, she slips into poetry:

I—I've been so afraid. It's like being terrified of midnight when I was a child.
But now...

It's time to smooth the Hair—
And get the Dimples ready—
And wonder we could care
For that old—faded Midnight—
That frightened—but an Hour!

He's coming to Amherst at last! (Luce, *Belle* 42)

Though Cragin heavily relies on her poetry in *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance*, Emily's poetry is by far the most natural in *The Belle of Amherst*. Cragin makes it a point to change the mood, tone, and pace of the scene when Emily is speaking in poetry; for Luce, Emily's poetry fits in seamlessly with her dialogue and the scene. She speaks poetry as though it were a part of her natural speech patterns and word choice, thus illustrating how more often than Emily cannot separate herself from her poetry. Also, Cragin purposefully chooses not to include two of Emily's most famous poems: "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" and "Because I could not stop for Death," two out of thirty plays which are included in *The Belle of Amherst*. Both Cragin and William Luce want their audiences to understand when and why she might have composed particular poems. However, because Luce's play spans a greater time period than Cragin's, he has more

freedom in including works that were composed in the latter half of Emily's life. Because of that, Luce is able to present a broad spectrum of Emily as an artist; he illustrates how her craft grows from her days as a teenage until her eventual death in 1886.

“Alone But Not Lonely”

In the preface to *The Belle of Amherst*, William Luce explains his decision to tell Emily's story in the format of a one-woman show: “I consider the one-person play to be uniquely suited to the telling of Emily's story. She was seclusive, an individualist of the highest order. To interpolate other actors and actresses seemed unnecessary to me. I decided that Emily alone should tell her story, sharing with the audience the inner drama of a poet's consciousness in an intimate, one-to-one relationship” (xiv). Before the play even begins, William Luce indicates that the “characters” of the play will include people such as Emily, Austin, Lavinia, Susan, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Mary Lyon, Abby Wood, and many others. With this list provided by William Luce, a reader cannot help but assume the actress performing *The Belle of Amherst* will be physically embodying this litany of characters. Instead, Luce surprises his readers. The actress in this play portrays only one character, and that is Emily. These other “characters” appear only in Emily's imagination, or at least out of the view of the audience. She will have conversations with these people and sometimes mimic her friends and family, but the actress playing Emily will never physically transform into anyone other than Emily Dickinson. Always the conversations between Emily and whoever else is “on stage” will

showcase Emily's dialogue, but not the other person. For instance, when Emily's father catches her writing well past her bedtime, their conversation happens as such:

“But Father—I thought you were asleep.

No, I didn't notice the time.

Two o'clock? Is that late?

But this is the only time the house is quiet, Father” (Luce, *Belle* 22).

By crafting these one-sided conversations, Luce showcases how Emily maintains interactions with her family and friends, but how at the same time she also is certainly not a part of their world. She exists in an entirely different plane altogether. Emily is very much *in* the world of Amherst, but she certainly is not *of* it. The same can be said for the Emily in *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance*; in the opening scene of the play, Emily is sequestered in her bedroom, reading *Jane Eyre* while her family prepares for Easter breakfast. She may physically be in the same house as her family, but she certainly is not a part of their world. Both Cragin and Luce personify this idea in different ways; Cragin's Emily is separated from her family by a door while Luce's Emily does not come into physical contact with another living human being.

In his introduction to the 1951 edition of *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Thomas H. Johnson writes, “There are certain significant dates in American literary history during the nineteenth century....[One] is surely April 15, 1862 when Thomas Wentworth Higginson received a letter from Emily Dickinson enclosing four poems” (v). In truth, this day is significant for American literary scholars, but above all, it is a significant date for the Emily of *The Belle of Amherst*. Unlike Susan Glaspell and Chris Cragin's depictions of the poet, Luce's Emily had an earnest desire to be

recognized. At the end of Act One, when she learns that Thomas Wentworth Higginson is going to pay her a visit, Emily shouts to her friends, family, and of course the audience, “It seems *I’m going to be famous!*” (Luce, *Belle* 43). Unfortunately for Emily, when she finally has the opportunity to meet Higginson, she is crushed when he is critical of her poetry; she expected him to help her publish her works, but instead, he informs her that her work is “spasmodic...uncontrolled” and her rhyming is bad (48). Higginson’s criticism is perhaps the ultimate force behind this Emily’s retreat into seclusion. Before his visit, she maintained high hopes that he would be excited about her “experimental” (48) poetry, but his fear of the unknown pushes Emily away. Though Emily keeps sending poems to Higginson, she is still guarded in their relationship, which causes her to become more guarded with everyone around her.

At the beginning of her journey, Emily writes to her dear friend, Abiah saying, “I expect I shall be the Belle of Amherst when I reach my seventeenth year. I don’t doubt that I shall have perfect crowds of admirers at that age,” (Luce, *Belle* 12). Ironically, Emily does not become “the Belle of Amherst”; instead, her nickname is distorted into “the Myth of Amherst”—as evidenced by Mabel Loomis Todd’s letter. However, in her own world, Emily continually remains a belle. She is polite and witty—in her own way, of course—both qualities expected of a 19th century belle; she of course never lacks admirers. In her own little world, Emily is quite content with her status. However, William Luce uses the title of his play ironically in that Emily does in fact one day become the Belle of her hometown; unfortunately, this day does not occur in Emily’s lifetime. Though the Emily we see through Luce’s eyes is pleased with her reputation as the odd member of the Dickinson family, many years after her death, her home will

become a landmark in Amherst, Massachusetts, and she will be one of, if not the most, esteemed residents the town ever had.

Once again in his preface to *The Belle of Amherst*, William Luce explains, "...It was my hope to depict the humanity and reasonableness of Emily Dickinson's life. I say reasonableness, because I believe that she consciously elected to be what she was—a voluntary exile from village provincialism, an original New England romance, concisely witty, heterodox in faith, alone but not lonely, 'with Will to choose, or to reject'" (xiii). "Alone but not lonely" is the very first image of the poet Chris Cragin presents in *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance*, and it is also quite possibly the best way to describe Luce's illustration of the famed poet. Luce's Emily is by far the most childlike, happy to play with her imaginary friends and content to re-enact conversations that happened decades before the start of the play. In a way, Emily's seclusion seems to be more of a result of life getting away from her as she lives in her head, rather than a conscious effort to become a hermit. However, as the play progresses, Emily's childlike demeanor begins to wither as the weight of disappointment overcomes her. In her article for *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, Maravene Loeschke states that "the [greatest] challenge to the actress [playing Emily] is the mixture of hope and pessimism that slowly envelopes the play from the visit of Higginson to the end" (128). As Emily's desires to be famous are instantly crushed, she then begins to see all of her hopes and dreams fade, and with these dreams, she also loses her father, then mother, and then her young nephew. With all of this loss and with the knowledge that she will not be famous—at least in her lifetime—Emily slowly creeps into her isolation. Ultimately, Emily's seclusion is slightly less

deliberate than the other plays; time seems to slip away from her, and before she knows it, her life has come to an end.

“I Shall Not Live in Vain”

For the price of a theatre ticket, William Luce offers his audience a very intimate glimpse into Emily Dickinson’s home. Though the play cannot substitute for a visit to the Dickinson Homestead in Amherst, Massachusetts, *The Belle of Amherst* does give its audience the brief opportunity to feel as though they are sitting in the salon of Emily Dickinson, drinking tea and eating black cake. In doing so, audience members from Seattle to Chicago to New York are given a peep into the New England world of an elusive and mysterious poet. From her penchant for baking to her extreme dislike of cats, William Luce presents not only a comprehensive biography of Emily Dickinson to his audience, but he skillfully creates a character who is warm, likeable, and genuine. She is funny and also quite aware of how people perceive her; however, she has no desire to change in order to meet the status quo, and she has no need impress anyone in Amherst.

Much like Susan Glaspell, William Luce also served as a pioneer. Before *The Belle of Amherst*, one woman shows were very uncommon, and Emily Dickinson did not garner nearly as much interest as she does today. Plays like *The Belle of Amherst* simply had not been done before. Because the play was both commercially and critically successful, nowadays it becomes difficult to imagine how new and innovative William Luce’s work was in 1976; however, much like Susan Glaspell, Luce paved the way for Chris Cragin and her work with *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance*. By making audiences more receptive to Emily Dickinson’s works, Cragin could follow up Luce’s

work thirty years later with a depiction of Emily that was unique but ultimately supportive of Luce's own conclusions.

Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance

Beginning at the End

In each one of these plays, the playwrights use unique conventions to tell Emily Dickinson's story. For Susan Glaspell, Emily's—or in this case Alison's—story is told through the observations of Alison's family; William Luce allows no other characters on stage and lets Emily speak for herself. Chris Cragin's work contrasts these two playwrights in that she depicts both Emily, as well as the members of her family. In addition, she also chooses to approach Emily's story backwards.

Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance begins in the year 1860, the year when Emily Dickinson ceased going to church and when she began her longest period of seclusion, and ends in 1848 when Emily returns home from Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. The very first scene of the play is set on Easter Sunday; Vinnie tries desperately to get Austin and Sue to coerce Emily out of her room. To no avail, Emily remains shut away in the library, only emerging once her family has left for church. Because this “alone but not lonely” image is the first the audience sees of Emily, one of the show's main dramatic questions then becomes why Emily has reached this point of solitude. As the events of the play unfold, Cragin pieces together this mystery as the reasons behind Emily's seclusion become clearer.

From the very beginning of her process, Chris Cragin was “compelled by the question of why [Emily] locked herself away from society” (Cragin, Interview). Like so many people who are introduced to Emily's poetry, Cragin was also aware of the stigma that surrounded Emily's character. She knew this famed poet was someone who spent the majority of her life shut away in her home, refusing the company of anyone outside of

her family. With this knowledge in hand, Cragin was most interested in discovering if Emily Dickinson was in fact agoraphobic or if there was a bit more craft behind her decision to excuse herself from Amherst society. In order to address this question, Cragin chooses to begin her story at the end of Emily's—or at least at the end of Emily's interactions with the outside world and the beginning of her isolation. Cragin says of her process, "I decided to begin with what we do know and work my way from there." The very interesting thing about *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance* is that "it moves backwards in time, yet with a forward moving structure" (Cragin, Interview). Though Emily's life is presented in reverse, the dramatic action serves to fully develop the characters, especially Emily.

Cragin was also incredibly unconvinced with the stereotypes regarding Emily Dickinson's character. "I wasn't satisfied with the idea of her as a gothic figure or a brooding artist," says Cragin of Emily; "instead, I loved the idea of a woman who bucked all social norms and defied expectations" (Cragin, Interview). As a result, Cragin chooses to break down the assumptions about Emily and begin her play with the image she so dislikes: the brooding artist. However, by the end of the play, in 1848 when Emily returns home after deciding to leave Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, Cragin has introduced her audience to a woman who is strong, self-assured, and ultimately very spiritual.

"I See Thee Best"

As an emerging playwright based in New York City, Chris Cragin is well on her way to establishing a solid career. Born in the Philippines and raised in China by

American missionaries, Cragin moved to the United States as a teenager and then began pursuing her passion for theatre. She studied acting at Oklahoma Baptist University, then moving on to directing at Baylor University. While at Baylor pursuing her Masters of Fine Arts in Directing, she discovered her true passion: playwriting. Cragin moved to New York City in 2005 to develop her career as a playwright, and shortly thereafter, she was accepted into the inaugural class of the Public Theatre Emerging Writers' Group.

Cragin's interest in Emily Dickinson began when she read Roger Lundin's biography on the poet, *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief*. Before the play even begins, through her playwright's note, Chris Cragin informs the reader of her intentions with her script:

This play is indeed an "Amethyst Remembrance" of Emily's life. I see through a glass darkly, silhouettes, images, soulful longings. Rather than burdening myself with the task of documenting the historical details of her life, I've chosen to capture the Emily I experience when I read her poetry. Though many of the details in the play are drawn from historical records, I've taken creative liberty in how those are presented. (Cragin, *Emily 2*)

With this note, Cragin attempts to rid herself of the backlash from critics who would be disappointed that her play is not historically accurate. When depicting a historical character, any playwright faces an incredibly difficult question: how historically accurate does this piece need to be? Can I sacrifice accuracy for the sake of dramatic action? Like Susan Glaspell before her, Cragin did just that. Granted, the play has come a long way since it was first drafted. In Emily Dickinson's real life, her father passed away in 1874 while her mother died in 1882, a mere four years before Emily's death. However, in the first draft of Cragin's play, Emily's mother died very early on in the poet's life. The original scenes depicting Mrs. Dickinson's funeral and Mr. Dickinson's subsequent mourning were thus complete fiction. While revising her script for the New York

production, Cragin had to make the decisions as to what scenes would be kept as they were and what would need to be changed. Cragin's originally intended to showcase how Mrs. Dickinson's death was a major reason behind Emily's choice to isolate herself from Amherst society. However, in the final draft of the script, Cragin eliminated Mrs. Dickinson's death and transformed her funeral scene into the point in time when she first was debilitated by a stroke. As a result, Cragin still managed to succeed in illustrating how Mrs. Dickinson's illness still had a profound effect on Emily's point of view as an artist, as well as her decision to enter into seclusion. Choosing to amend this point of the play was a scary moment for both the playwright and the dramaturg. This particular scene illustrated a crucial turning point in Emily's character development; however, with the persistence of the director, Steve Day, reworking this scene ended up being quite beneficial. In an interview, director Steve Day said of the revision, "With a few simple changes, we could maintain the arc of the story and achieve historical accuracy...the decision was a 'no-brainer.'" Nonetheless, even with this change, Cragin still chose to rework history when she depicted Sue and Austin's wedding taking place in Amherst, and above all, she exhibited tremendous liberty by crafting Emily and Newton's intimate relationship.

Chris Cragin shares a great deal in common with Susan Glaspell in that they each take very different tactics to excuse their historical liberties. While Glaspell changed names and locations and disclaimed the representation of Emily, Cragin included her playwright's note as well as a final poem to explain her interpretation of Emily Dickinson. In her final drafts of *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance*, right before the play went into performance, Cragin chose one of Emily's poems, which is heard in a voice-

over as Emily walks back into the Dickinson household where she will live out the rest of her days, to use as her epilogue:

I see thee better – in the dark
 I do not need a light-
 The Love of Thee – a Prism be-
 Excelling Violet-

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

And in the Grave – I see Thee best-
 Its little panels be
 A’ glow-All ruddy-with the light
 I held so high, for Thee

What need of Day-
 To Those whose Dark- hath so – surpassing Sun-
 It deem it be – Continually-
 At the Meridian. (qtq. in Cragin, *Emily* 96)

The “I” in this poem, in a sense, is Cragin’s own voice. She sees Dickinson most clearly when the poet’s appearance is veiled behind doors and through darkness. Using this poem at the end of the play, Cragin again not only explains her interpretation of Emily Dickinson, but in a way, she also instructs her audience on how to view Emily. Historically accurate facts and events are not necessarily the focus of Cragin’s play; instead, she invites her audience, using Dickinson’s poetry, to forget stereotypes and draw their own conclusion on her character.

“My Nosegays are for Captives”

When she began composing *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance*, another of Chris Cragin’s intentions was to explain *why* Emily wrote her poetry. As a result, the events of

Emily's life are her motivation to write a specific poem. After the prologue, the first poem Emily speaks is one she shares with Sue:

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

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

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

Today is far from Childhood --
 But up and down the hills
 I held her hand the tighter --
 Which shortened all the miles – (qtd. in Cragin 12)

This poem clearly illustrates Emily's relationship with her sister-in-law, Susan. Though Sue was not a biological member of the Dickinson family, once she came into their lives, the family accepted her as one of them, and Emily loved Sue as though she were own sister. Many scholars hypothesized that Emily was in fact a lesbian, due to her deep devotion and attachment to Susan; however, this issue became a moot point in *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance*. Choosing think of Emily and Sue in a homosexual relationship did not support Cragin's goals; instead, she used the above poem to illustrate that Sue and Emily's relationship was more of a sisterly bond than a sexual one. Moreover, much like in *The Belle of Amherst*, Cragin uses Emily's poetry much like a musical uses songs, only in this case, the poems function as a device to further the action of the play while at the same time developing the characters and their relationships with one another. Many

times throughout the play, poems are not spoken solely by Emily; according to Cragin, “Each character has *their* poem with her” (Cragin, Interview). Though the poems in *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance* are not as sacred as those in *Alison’s House*, Cragin’s Emily only shares her words with the people who are most important to her and with the person with whom each specific poem means the most. For instance, the aforementioned poem that Emily shares with Sue further develops relationship between these two characters; from the very beginning of her play, Cragin intends to show her audience that Sue and Emily share a special and deep relationship. Their bond goes beyond family and blood, and they truly treasure one another. Without having to provide any exposition that would slow down the action of the play, Cragin instead uses poetry to seamlessly develop her characters and their relationships with one another. As a result, the play shows how Emily developed her poetic gift through her interactions with friends and family.

“I Measure Every Grief I Meet”

One of Chris Cragin’s goals with *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance* was to show the major role death played in Emily’s life and her poetry. In the fifteen years that Emily did not reside in the Homestead on Main Street, she lived about a mile away on Pleasant Street, and in this particular house, Emily’s bedroom window overlooked the town’s cemetery—the same cemetery in which Emily would one day be buried (Garner). From a very young age, Emily was exposed to death, simply through her very own bedroom window. As a result, Emily’s connection with death is evident through her poetry, and Cragin sought to explore how Emily developed this connection through three important losses. In *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance*, Emily first recalls the death of her friend,

Sophia, who passed away when the girls were only eight years old. Towards the end of the play—which of course takes place during Emily’s early adulthood—Emily is greatly affected when her mother suffers a paralyzing stroke. However, in Chris Cragin’s opinion, the most important loss in Emily’s life occurs with the death of her preceptor⁴.

Throughout her lifetime, Emily was rumored to have several different suitors. According to Vivian Pollak, starting in 1878, Emily “did have one documented love affair that was significantly mutual and physical” with Otis Phillips Lord (49). However, before Lord came into Emily’s life, she shared a relationship with a man whom she deemed her preceptor: Benjamin Franklin Newton. In most Dickinson biographies, the mention of Newton is small, practically miniscule; some biographies devote no more than a paragraph to Emily’s friendship with him. Historians do know though that he was a law student whom Emily trusted with her poetry; in fact, according to Roger Lundin, “Newton was the first to recognize Dickinson’s remarkable verbal dexterity, and he encouraged her to dream of a poetic career,” (77). However, in 1843, he married another woman, moved to Worcester, and by 1853, he died of tuberculosis. While Emily’s interaction with Newton may be nothing more than a small blip on most historians’ radar, Cragin, on the other hand, saw a great deal of potential in this relationship. For her purposes, Cragin takes this minor historical figure and instead transforms him into a major part of Emily’s life.

An audience member first introduced to Cragin’s play will indubitably ask the question, “What exactly is an amethyst remembrance?” However, the proper question for this audience member to ask is: who is the amethyst remembrance? For Cragin’s Emily,

⁴ According to Roger Lundin, Emily thought of a preceptor as “one who had traveled before an unknown land and could, as a result, tutor her about all that he learned. She granted this title to only a few people in her lifetime” (77).

the amethyst remembrance is Benjamin Newton. As the play works backwards in time, from the very beginning, Cragin hints at the death of someone very near to Emily. The very first time the audience hears the name “Newton,” Vinnie is attempting to convince her sister, in the second scene of the play, to reconvene meetings of their Shakespeare Society. Much to Vinnie’s astonishment, Emily grants her permission; when Emily questions her sister’s reaction, Vinnie replies, “After Newton died, you said—” (Cragin, *Emily* 23). Emily promptly cuts her sister off before Vinnie can reveal who Newton is and how he died. Two years previous to this scene, in the next scene, Emily smashes a piece of china, losing her temper for one of the only times in her life. When confronted by Williamson her reason for doing so, Emily reveals that Newton died three years beforehand. Cragin then uses the following poem to transition into the final scene in Act One:

I held a Jewel in my fingers—
 And went to sleep—
 The day was warm, and winds were prosy—
 I said "Twill keep"—

I woke—and chid my honest fingers,
 The Gem was gone—
 And now, an Amethyst remembrance
 Is all I own— (qtq. in Cragin 46-47).

Cragin uses this particular poem to clearly illustrate Emily’s attitude towards Newton. She held onto him tenderly, expecting that he would also be in her life indefinitely. In fact, in the final scene of the play, when Newton asks Emily to marry him, she rejects his marriage proposal for the moment but hopes that one day she will be ready for marriage. Ultimately, Emily takes Newton for granted, and she loses her chance to be with him when he dies in 1853, which in this case is the end of Act One. As a result, in *Emily: An*

Amethyst Remembrance, Cragin chooses to let the death of Emily’s love—which occurred when she was twenty-three—propel the poet into solitude.

After her death, Emily Dickinson was heralded as a pillar of the transcendental and atheist community. Growing up in a Congregationalist community, Emily constantly felt the pressure to convert and develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. At Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, where Emily attended school in 1847, young women were placed into three different key groups: those who already had a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, those who had the hope of being converted, and those who had no hope of ever being saved. Mary Lyons, founder of Mount Holyoke, placed Emily into this last group of girls (Lundin 40-41). By 1860, Emily had completely stopped going to church altogether, choosing instead to sequester herself on Sunday mornings. Because of Emily Dickinson’s resistance to converting to Christianity, as well as refusal to attend church services and local revivals, many scholars and historians are willing to label her as a token atheist. However, her obstinacy can and probably has been misconstrued. According to Julie Harris during her narration in the film *Emily Dickinson: A Certain Slant of Light*, Emily simply “rejected dogmas and creeds.” Connie Ann Kirk states in her biography on the poet:

Many scholars read Dickinson’s poetry today and see a soul searching for faith. Some see one with a highly developed sense of spirituality that would not be bounded by organized religion. Still others see a person who refused to believe in an unseen god; one with a clear-eyed view of a scientist who would rather risk hell than be a hypocrite or pretend to believe in Bible stories. One fact about religion and Dickinson is clear to most of those who study her life or read her work—she pondered the concept of immortality and other spiritual questions. (Kirk 34)

Chris Cragin, who did not have a previous academic interest in Emily Dickinson, was intrigued by this question of spirituality in Dickinson’s poetry. After reading Roger

Lundin's biography of the poet, *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief*, Cragin became even more attracted to the idea of exploring Emily's spiritual nature.

Within his assessment of Emily, Roger Lundin insists that she was not without spirituality; instead, "Dickinson chose poetry as a surrogate for traditional religion....For her willing self, the world of infinite aesthetic possibilities and inward reveries seemed more enchanting than ordered world of orthodoxy..." (59). Chris Cragin took this concept and based her interpretation of Emily on Lundin's conclusions. However, Cragin went one step further and chose view Emily's poetry as her calling from God. In the case of *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance*, the playwright chooses to think of Emily as a nun; Emily's choice to never marry and to remain in her home becomes more of a monastic calling, than a retreat from society. In the second to last scene of the play, during one of Emily's Shakespeare Society meetings, Emily becomes incredibly frustrated with her friends and family members. In particular, during their reading of *Measure for Measure*, Austin and Vinnie mock Isabel's choice to enter the monastery; they, along with Sue, agree that Isabel will have a much better life if she accepts the Duke's marriage proposal. Emily is deplored by their conclusions, and she argues the benefits of a life in the convent. Finally, Sue catches on to Emily's frustration, and in a moment alone, she asks Emily, "You see a bit of yourself in Isabel don't you?" (Cragin, *Emily* 78). Emily then replies, "I just feel...I understand her....She looks around at the suffering in her world and she can't ignore it, just go on living as if it weren't there. She wants to ease it. To understand it. To enter it. So she takes a sacred vow. An escape from the mundane to the meaningful" (79).

Between Susan Glaspell, William Luce, and herself, Chris Cragin probably gives the clearest answer as to why Emily chooses the life she does. Before she began writing her play, Cragin asked the question, “Can art be a spiritual calling? Perhaps, this is what she was meant to do with her life” (Cragin, Interview). Though Emily rejects Newton’s marriage proposal, she does so knowing that she was destined to a higher purpose. She was not simply created to be a wife and mother, but she was meant to create great works of art, works which could only be created in solitude. Though Emily never attended church services, nor did she deem herself “saved,” the Emily in Chris Cragin’s play has the closest connection to God than anyone else in her life does. She has a clear focus on what God has called her to do, and her retreat from society is simply her calling. Her bedroom is her convent, and her poems are her sacred vow.

Enlightened Pain

Elizabeth Davis, who portrayed Emily for Firebone Theatre Company’s production of *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance*, was asked during a publicity interview to give her most likely reason by Emily Dickinson chose to be a shut-in. Her reply was as such:

Enlightened Pain — there was a piece of her brain that was alive that so many others had let deaden. Even though she endured recurring loss and suffering, she was able to channel it into her exquisite expression. Rejection and loss undoubtedly played a role in her seclusion, but they did not destroy her like it does to many. The poetry we see in the production leads us to believe that her understanding of a loving God helped her know that where she was going after death would wrong the rights. Her seclusion was a statement of “patience till Paradise.” (“Five Questions...”)

Ms. Davis clearly seems to be in agreement with Chris Cragin. The Emily that they—along with their audience—see is a woman who endured losses and heartache that would

cripple most people; however, their Emily is one who through the use of her poetry rises above these trials.

One of the most interesting things about *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance* is the sense of hope the audience has when exiting the theatre. Even though the outcome of Emily's life is made evident in the very first scene of the play, a spectator cannot help but smile when Emily gives Newton the hope that one day she will accept his marriage proposal. When she returns from Mount Holyoke, Emily joyously has her entire life before her; though the audience is aware that one day it will be filled with extreme sadness, one will inevitably feel uplifted at the end of Cragin's play. This feeling is certainly not a coincidence. Cragin intends to show her audience that Emily's is not a sad story. She did not die lonely and without purpose. The Emily in Cragin's play uses the gifts God gave her to their fullest extent, and as a result, her life is full and prosperous.

CONCLUSION

For the 1927 publication of her aunt's poems, in her introduction Martha Dickinson Bianchi states, "[Emily Dickinson] was of the part of life that is always youth, always magical....She lived with a God we do not believe in, and trusted in an immortality we do not deserve, in that confiding age when Duty ruled over Pleasure before the Puritan became hypocrite....Her awe of that unknown sacrament of love permeated all she wrote..." (v-vii). Dickinson Bianchi's musings seem to encapsulate and perfectly summarize the three distinct perspectives that Susan Glaspell, William Luce, and Chris Cragin have of her famous aunt. Though the playwrights' works do not agree on one single interpretation, when looked at together, they combine to create a holistic view of the famed poet. To them, she was childlike, yet strong and mature. She was rebellious, but at the same time, tender and spiritual. She possessed great love for her family, and she also experienced very passionate and intense love. In *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance*, the very first poem of Emily's the audience hears her speak speaks volumes about Emily's character which is reflected in all three plays:

How happy is the little Stone
That rambles in the Road alone,
And doesn't care about Careers
And Exigencies never fears --
Whose Coat of elemental Brown
A passing Universe put on,
And independent as the Sun
Associates or glows alone,
Fulfilling absolute Decree
In casual simplicity – (qtd. in Cragin 4-6).

These three plays illustrate that the playwrights' believed Emily Dickinson was a person who could appreciate the simplicity of the world around her. She had no need to conform to the traditional image of a woman. She was not a person who could be given a simple,

one-word adjective for a title; instead, she had a great many facets of which these three plays only begin to cover.

Ultimately, these three plays—*Alison's House*, *The Belle of Amherst*, and *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance*—are works of fiction. Though the playwrights each closely studied Emily Dickinson's poetry, letters, and biographies and because they all also drew their own conclusions about the true character of Dickinson, their assumptions could also be false. Because the playwrights' viewpoints are unique and personal, it is quite possible that an audience member could leave the performance of anyone of these three plays without knowing anything more about who Emily Dickinson truly was. However, what these plays succeed in doing is garnering their audience's interest in Emily Dickinson and forcing them to question anything they may have previously thought about the poet. If someone came into the production of any one of these three plays thinking that Emily was a stereotypical agoraphobic, at the end of the play, this audience member could not help but re-examine this viewpoint.

Alison's House, *The Belle of Amherst*, and *Emily: An Amethyst Remembrance* are certainly not the only plays which depict the life of Emily Dickinson. She has inspired countless others artists and will no doubt continue to do so well into the future because of the mystery that enshrouds her persona. No one will probably ever know what happened behind the closed doors of Emily Dickinson's bedroom, but the opportunity to take a peek into her world is enough to entice any audience member. With luck, through the crafting of more plays such as these, people will begin to develop a greater appreciation for Emily Dickinson; though we may never know for sure exactly why she made the choices she did, with hope she will at least finally be able to shed the superficial

stereotypes, and people will recognize her for the complex and beautiful individual she was.

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