

## Bookshelf - Professor Paul Crumbley on Emily Dickinson

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*Emily Dickinson foreshadowed today's environmental movement*

### English prof edits two journals on Dickinson, the anti-celebrity and environmentalist

*"We lose – because we win –"*

This first line of one of the shortest poems Emily Dickinson ever wrote electrified Paul Crumbley when he first encountered it in his early days as a young teacher at a private school in Seattle.

Today, he easily recites the rest of the verse: *"Gamblers – recollecting which – / Toss their dice again!"*

Until that moment years ago, he thought of Dickinson – when he did think of her – as the eccentric recluse as history unkindly portrays her. But a fellow teacher, Crumbley remembers, insisted that Emily Dickinson was "very misunderstood, that she's considered a kind of self-effacing, reticent, unmarried spinster." He said, 'That's the wrong way to look at her.'

"So I began looking at her."

What he found, he says now, was the opposite of the languishing "maid of Amherst" from Massachusetts.

"'We lose – because we win –.' That's central to Dickinson," Crumbley says. "It's a refusal of complacency in any form."

Dickinson "is a poet who takes nothing at face value," he said. "And she insists that every act we take, every move we make, be the product of self-examination on some level, so that what you do is truly you doing it."

Crumbley is an expert on another poet with the same perspective. Indeed, May Swenson was heavily influenced by Dickinson. He's now writing a book about this Logan native and acclaimed American poet. "The main thing for me is the Swenson book," he says. "I feel like it's not something I can rush. It has to be done carefully, and it's so close to home. I want it to be the 'book', if any book can, to trigger further scholarship" on Swenson

Crumbley's attention, however, was on Dickinson during a sabbatical in fall semester 2017. Crumbley spent the months completing the unusual assignment of guest-editing two of the best-known academic journals featuring new research on Dickinson.

The journals are focused on Dickinson's perception of two very contemporary concerns: environment and celebrity.

The latest issue of *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, published by Johns Hopkins University Press, is titled "Dickinson and Celebrity."

In addition, "Dickinson's Environments" is the title of a special edition of *ESQ: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture*, published by Washington State University.

In her deliberate pursuit of life, said Crumbley, Dickinson assiduously avoided fame of any kind. She never sought publication during her lifetime, though ten of her poems were published without her permission while she was alive. Even her family was unaware she had composed nearly 1800 poems at her upstairs desk. Not marrying was a deliberate action as well, said Crumbley. Despite history's easy assumptions, she wasn't hysterical or motivated by love gone wrong.

Dickinson created her poetry in a wallpapered, Victorian bedroom overlooking a sleepy neighborhood, but her art crisscrosses the world in subject, setting and sight. Dickinson's poetry, adds Crumbley, "is cosmic in scope."

The poet, though not a hermit, cherished her seclusion because, in part, she had seen the consequences of

celebrity in the lives of such writers as the Brontë sisters and poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

"She didn't want her life disrupted," Crumbley said. "One of the dangers of fame is if you produce something that wins the approbation of the public, then there's a lot of pressure to repeat it."

What's more, he adds, "she didn't want to make her family's home the pilgrimage point for curiosity seekers," said Crumbley.

(Inescapably, however, the family's home in Amherst, which is named the Homestead, is now a museum. May Swenson herself toured the dignified brick home, writing about it in a poem.)

So how did this quiet soul gain a reputation that, according to some scholars, said Crumbley, "rivals Shakespeare in terms of being one of the great masters of the English language"?

Dickinson's poetry was published after her death and immediately became "wildly popular," he said. That limelight lasted only for about a decade, however. She wasn't rediscovered until the 1930s or so. Interestingly, the first complete collection of all her poetry didn't appear until 1955.

The 1930s had introduced the New Criticism movement, which guided the way Crumbley himself learned to interpret poems.

"It's a way of viewing literature without connection to historical context," he explains. "Poetry was supposed to function with a kind of crystalline perfection, so that each part contributed to an essential, highly polished gem-like structure."

During the 1890s, Dickinson was frequently cast as a morbidly shy, eccentric recluse known for poems that "were scandalous in their implication," said Crumbley. "She played right into the notion of a mad woman in the attic. That colored a lot of the early response." The New Critics of the 1930s drew attention to her linguistic artistry but did not alter the public view of her private life.

Indeed, it's only been since the 1980s and '90s that scholars have begun to see how much she was, indeed, "of" the world, Crumbley says. "In the last 20 years a lot of scholarship has explored the way in which her poems were a direct response to the world."

That is, in part, why she's become a darling of a new movement in environmental studies called ecocriticism, which Crumbley describes as literature "that discusses the ways in which human beings engage with the ecological systems that surround us."

Dickinson was an active botanist, says Crumbley, and understood much of the world through nature. "She understood the world through plants," he said. "She could find her way to the far reaches of the universe through the particulars of botany."

The poet herself described that internal journey this way: "My flowers are near and foreign, and I have but to cross the floor to stand in the Spice Isles."

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