Dear Emwebbers:

This coming April 15, 2012, will mark the 150th anniversary of Emily Dickinson’s first letter to her mentor Thomas W. Higginson. In honor of their correspondence, we invite you to submit answers to the following questions:

What specifically are Emily Dickinson’s greatest contributions to the English Language?

In terms of language features, why is Dickinson’s verse alive and what makes her poetry breathe?

Please email your answers and your full name to [cynthia\_hallen@byu.edu](mailto:cynthia_hallen@byu.edu), and we will compile them into a celebratory tribute to be posted on the EDL website under the Resources tab.

Have a Dickinson Day!

Cynthia L. Hallen and Alison Mercer

Monday, 30 January 2012, 11:48 a.m.

15 April 1862-2012, Dickinson and Higginson

Celebratory responses for the anniversary of Emily Dickinson's correspondence with Thomas Higginson.

1. 30 Jan 2012, 12:43 p.m. MST

Dear Cynthia,

What a cool idea.

As I write this, A photocopy of Emily Dickinson's letter and the envelope she addressed to T.W. Higginson, which was given to me by Tevis Kimball, director of the Jones Library Special Collections in Amherst, is today and every day, a kind of talisman. As researchers know, the envelope is addressed simply: T.W. Higginson/Worcester. Mass. (She placed a period after Higginson; a period after Worcester; and a dash(!) after Mass) I have it framed, on the wall above my computer, along with one of the bookmarks given out by Harvard College Library depicting Dickinson's herbarium booklet.

I should probably wait to do research on your question, but I decided instead on a more personal note.

"What specifically are Emily Dickinson’s greatest contributions to the English Language?"

The poet broke through barriers built by reasonable people, with accustomed phrases constructed, often, in creative ways, that were meant to educate, inform, or entertain. Her "greatest contribution"

came when she responded to what she inherited, linguistically, by corralling her incompatible - insane(?) and possibly terrifying - thoughts and emotions and tamed them by writing poems. Domesticating her words only enough for someone (like me, for example) to read a poem and recognize one's (my) own unruly nature.

I think I have also answered, for me, what "makes her poetry breathe."

I really look forward to reading your "celebratory tribute." I think the date may, indeed, be ED's metaphysical birthday.

Sincerely,

Lois Kackley

**2.** Monday, January 30, 2012 1:04:45 PM  
**Subject:** Re: 150 years of Dickinson & Higginson

To try and pin down the essence of 'aliveness' and breath in Dickinson's poetry as a function of its longevity is notably a futile enterprise. And yet, in the spirit of Emily Dickinson's life-long pursuit of a challenge to the English language, we feel compelled to confront the futility of such a gargantuan enterprise in a manner analogous to our pursuit of the question of creative genius.  These two questions, of course, are most often linked as we attempt to explain to ourselves just how genius and its longevity come to be expressed in, in this case, lyric poetry. Obviously the question would call for a lengthy response, citing many examples from the poems themselves.  I cannot undertake that here, but it may suffice to say that when Dickinson sequestered herself, almost exclusively at night, in order to write unobserved and uninterrupted, she was internalizing her world, not fleeing it.  Odd phraseology alone cannot define poetic genius, nor can the "much" that has been made of Dickinson's unconventional punctuation, *inter alia*, help us to understand how genius in language is manifested.  And yet, despite the urge toward a non-structural approach to the poetry, I would say that a certain architectonics, identifiable for the sake of this brief argument in her alabaster chambers, is a key element in what makes any poetic body stand the tests of time and gravity.

The alabaster chambers are tombs but also language constructs, cathedrals of words from a pen that seems anything but grand in its imaginings, rather circumspect in anything resembling a "pronouncement." Dickinson's poem, among her most treasured, is in the truest sense a construction of words, a metaphor for life couched in terms of death, enclosure and resurrection.  "Safe," she starts with, and that keynote sustains her imaginary throughout.  The dead lie in wait of the resurrection, their meekness (Biblical promise) belied by their endurance, and it is that endurance that transfers metaphorically to the enterprise of making the poem itself.  Just as later Robert Frost would epitomize the process of constructing a poem in his *Silken Tent*, Dickinson memorializes poetry and her brand of poetry in particular in a manner that employs sepulchral images so as to emphasize the life strain that is our only recourse in the confrontation with death.  The religious institutions of her time could not answer for her the question of death-in-life so she politely turned away from them.  And that very act of turning away was an act of turning toward something more sustaining and ultimately sustainable: the poetry itself.  So, the soundlessness of the poem's last imagine furnishes a hint to the poet's idea of 'aliveness' (rather than the grander and more abstract "life"): it does not lie in the pronouncements of kings and prelates that are finally minuscule and prone to melting and evaporation.  If her poetry is alive and therefore breathes, it is because it does not "surrender" but rather learns and teaches the hard lesson of endurance.

Robert L. Mazzola

Denver, Colorado

[robercind@comcast.net](mailto:robercind@comcast.net)

3. 30 Jan 2012, 1:56 p.m.

Hallo,

I am Dutch, so it is difficult for me to read/understand Emily, but with a translation in Dutch and a dictionary I come in the right direction. I have read many poems in my life (I am 69), but she is number one. Her mind is a goldmine!

I am glad to have met Emily and I will read her till my death,---- death, one of the things she wrote about in a manner that is full of consolation.

In one phrase: for me she is the best the American mind had given to the world,----- and that is not an exaggeration.

Thanks Emily!

Huub Niessen

4. 31 Jan 2012, 4:12 pm.

William Earl Polm

Question 1:  She wrote *intuitively*, trying various wordings until the just write words and phrases occurred to her.

And, she saw the numinous in her everyday environs. Everyday objects and scenes, metaphors with which she could approach an understanding of life's mysteries.

Question 2: She helped pave the way to free verse, that is starting to move away from strict adherence to formal meter.

And also, importantly, she was a role model. As a single lady, nearly a recluse really, with nothing beyond her intelligence, talent and persistence, she demonstrated by her life that such a person could write poetry that lives still today and influences many, and that such a person could wind up ultimately considered widely as one of America's finest poets.  In other words, if she can do it, very possibly so can you and I.

5. 31 Jan 2012, 7:49 a.m.

Sent from my iPad

She distilled doubts and compressed meanings into word pictures of raindrop-like perfection, for example: "to comprehend a nectar requires sorest need;" "across a barn or through a rut a traveling flake of snow debates if it will go."

The list goes on...

We will never know exactly what she meant, but her verse leaves ample room for readers to substitute their own interpretations into her unfinished equations. This is why her verse "breathes. "

Monroe Thomas Clewis

Kunming, China

[mtc265@yahoo.com](mailto:mtc265@yahoo.com)

6. 2 February 2012, 9:04 p.m.

Dear Dr. Cynthia Hallen:

It’s really a very happy thing to get your e-mail. I think it’s necessary to tell you my understanding of Emily Dickinson which can be taken as the answer to your questions.

I have been interested in Emily Dickinson for more than 10 years. To the best of my knowledge, I think the greatest contributions made by Emily Dickinson to the English language lie in her originality, creativity, or in some way, her riddle-like verse both as a poet, and as a poetess of the 19th century American literature. Studies of Emily Dickinson have been in an enduring hot state not only in America and Europe, but also in other non-English-speaking countries. Taking China as an example, since the first introduction of Emily Dickinson in the late 1970s, studies of her have lasted all the time. There are a certain number of academic papers, dissertations, theses completed and issued almost every year. As for me, I’m a doctoral candidate preparing for my dissertation now. I chose Emily Dickinson as my research focus just because I have been fascinated by her works which seem simple and childlike but with profound implication that can be interpreted from many perspectives. The reason that Dickinson has been refreshed and enlivened ever since she has been discovered and recognized is maybe scholars can always find convincing evidences in her works which can keep the studies with the pace of the development of world literature. Her works, including her verse and letters, or verse-letters, can cause curiosity, eagerness, and a strong motivation to understand, to study which, in fact, have taken people so much effort and energy through all these years, while have offered people a lot of enjoyment and benefit as well. Emily Dickinson is a combination of tradition and innovation just because her sensibility and sensitivity, her talents, her wide reading and persistent and hard work. You can perceive the continuity and transcendence in her works, especially her daring, pioneering and leading cognition in creation, her brand new picturesque poetry, which can be taken as the greatest contributions and it is that which make her verse alive and breathe.

I’m a teacher in Central-south University, Changsha, Hunan, China. Li Ling is my full name. Wish we can keep in touch and promote Dickinson study, which must be our common aim.

Best wishes!

Li Ling

7. 13 February 2012, 5:30 p.m.

Dickinson's verse is alive because under the words there are unconventional thoughts of an intelligent mind; her verse is alive because over the thoughts there arises a web of words sparkling with etymology, category-"mistakes," sonic reverberations, and dense implication.    
  
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8. 24 Feb 2012, 1:18 p.m.

Jane Eberwein

You’ve raised the right questions, Cynthia – essentially the ones Emily Dickinson posed to Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Even though Higginson’s response of inquiring about his correspondent’s personal story anticipated reactions of later readers, most of whom have become curious about details of Dickinson’s biography, ultimately it is the poems themselves that remain “alive,” and they do so because of what she accomplished with words.

To me, the distinctive power of Dickinson’s language comes from its explosive qualities of energy and distillation. Higginson should have gotten a keen sense of that combination from reading the “Grand go the Years” stanza of “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers –” (the version she sent him of Fr124 with that self-introductory letter). Those last two lines are dizzying in the force of their withholding: “Soundless as Dots, / On a Disc of Snow.” After the cosmic sweep of the stanza’s opening lines comes the awesome silence of those “Dots” that refer simultaneously both to galaxies spinning forever in space beyond our Milky Way and specks of soot on ordinary snow like what I see from my window this morning. Alliteration intensifies this effect, of course, in that those seemingly inconspicuous “Dots” link up with “Diadems” and “Doges” that convey a sense of earthly power while anticipating “Disc” that ties into the poet’s great theme of “Circumference.”

Among Dickinson’s greatest poetic gifts is her brilliance in planting opening and closing lines in the reader’s remembrance:

“Because I could not stop for Death –” (Fr479)

“Split the Lark – and you’ll find the Music –” (Fr905)

“The fascinating chill that Music leaves” (Fr1511)

“’Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch,” (Fr425)

“I wish I were a Hay –” (Fr379)

“This is the Gnat that mangles men –” (Fr1347)

“Could it be Madness – this?” (Fr423)

Her phrases are equally memorable: “Cobweb attitudes” (Fr160), “Quartz contentment” (Fr372), “harrowing Iodine” (Fr285), “Arguments of Pearl” (Fr604), “Amethyst remembrance” (Fr261), and “Aptitude for Bird” (Fr1088) among many others. My favorites are her oxymoronic phrases like “sumptuous Destitution” (Fr1404) and “imperial affliction” (Fr320) that generate explosive energy from the clash of seemingly unrelated intellectual and emotional categories.

Jane Donahue Eberwein

9. 2/29/2012 12:16 p.m.

I love how Dickinson validated the use of long words. Orwell was right in advising against a long word where a short word will do, but sometimes there's simply no substitute for Emily's "effulgencies," "evanescence," "ecstatic," or "emolument."

Robert Heaton

10. 7 April 2012, 3:08 a.m.

Pat Malouf:

Emily Dickinson's poetry holds up a looking glass in which I see the many and varied shades of human experience. Emily Dickinson truly knew and understood the loves, longings, fears, joys, doubts, and losses of us all.

Through Emily Dickinson's masterful use of dictionary meanings, literary devices, and punctuation, we may discover a world in a word and a universe in a phrase. The multiple layers of meaning and truth in her poetry inspires us to toil for her "treasure", and to always believe that there is one more precious "nugget" to be found.