

The Belle of Amherst

By William Luce

Directed by Sean Graney



Synopsis

The Belle of Amherst is a one-woman show based on the poet Emily Dickinson. Throughout the play, Dickinson's poems, diary entries, and letters welcome us into her Massachusetts home, where she shares snippets of joy and creation amongst the heartache of an isolated and misunderstood life. She shares details of her childhood, introduces us to her loved ones, and discusses the delights and difficulties of being a writer. Overall, the play gives us a glimpse into the life of one of history's most fascinating and enigmatic poets.

Setting

As the title indicates, this show takes place in Amherst, Massachusetts. All of the action takes place in Emily's home, which she refers to as the "Homestead." The play's single setting is a reflection of Emily's reclusive life: nearly her entire world was her house and gardens. At some points, Emily describes the house as full of excitement and chaos, while at other times, it is quiet and lonely. She also tells stories about her neighbors and shares town gossip, revealing details of the social climate of mid-19th century New England.

Time

The play spans the years 1845 to 1886, sharing stories from Emily's teenage years to her death.

Characters

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886):

Emily is fifty-three years old when the play opens. Emily is a scrupulous poet, and is described by her neighbors as “Squire Dickinson’s half-cracked daughter.”

She asks the audience to forgive her if she seems frightened, as she rarely sees strangers and hardly knows what she says. She admits that she wanders back and forth through time and is easily confused.



Emily has contempt for the local gossip, and confides that she always wears bridal white to give her neighbors “something to talk about.” Though she has various suitors, she never marries.



Samantha C. Jones’s costume sketches for the 2017 Court Theatre production of *The Belle of Amherst*

Although no other characters appear onstage, central figures in Emily’s life include:

- **Lavinia Dickinson**, Emily’s younger sister. Emily frequently refers to her as “Vinnie,” and the sisters spend nearly all of their time together at home.

- **William Austin Dickinson**, Emily's older brother, called Austin. The two share a deep understanding of each other. Austin later marries **Susan Gilbert**, who Emily is very fond of, and the couple has three children: Ned, Martha, and Gilbert.
- **Emily Norcross Dickinson**, Emily's mother. Emily and her sister spend many years caring for their bedridden mother after she had a stroke.
- **Edward Dickinson**, Emily's father. Described by Emily as proper, demanding, and inflexible, Edward works as a lawyer, treasurer of Amherst College, and later as a congressman.
- **Thomas Higginson**, a professor and literary critic. In 1862, Emily sends Higginson four of her poems and a letter containing the famous line, "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is Alive?" Though he never publishes any of her poetry, and the two only meet once in person, they maintain correspondence until Emily's death.
- **Charles Wadsworth**, a Presbyterian minister whom Emily refers to as her "master" and is deeply enchanted by.

Important Poems

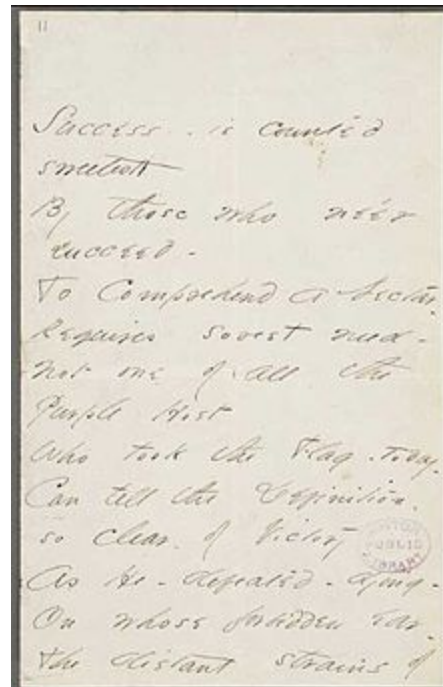
Note: Dickinson rarely titled her poems, so the pieces are often referred to by their first line and are numbered in an approximate chronological sequence (1 - 1789).

Success is counted sweetest (112)

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of victory

As he defeated—dying—
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear!



I'm Nobody! Who are you? (260)

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you—Nobody—too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! they'd advertise—you know!

How dreary—to be—Somebody!
How public—like a Frog—
To tell one's name—the livelong June—
To an admiring Bog!

This is my letter to the World (441)

This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me—
The simple News that Nature told—
With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see—
For love of Her—Sweet—countrymen—
Judge tenderly—of Me

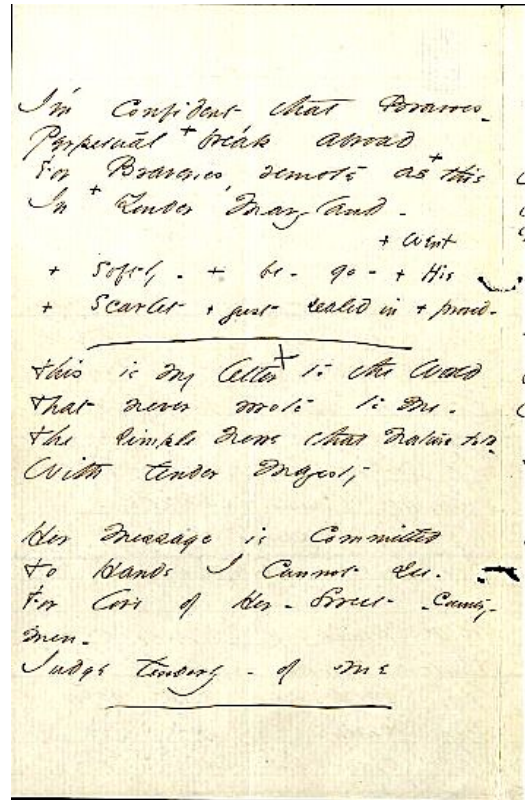
A word is dead (278)

A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.

I say it just
Begins to live
That day.

If I can stop one heart from breaking (919)

If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain
If I can ease one life the aching,



Or cool one pain,

Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee (1755)

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

Themes

Isolation

Since Emily Dickinson lived a very secluded life, this play naturally includes only one character: Emily. In her writings and throughout the play, Emily talks about the upsides and downsides of living a lonely life. In Emily's words, "I don't regret my aloneness. I accept the pattern of life as it came to me—or as I caused it to be." However, she hopes that heaven is less lonely than her life in New England was. People often perceive Emily Dickinson as closed-off and antisocial. In this show, however, she's open, witty, and entertaining.

Nature

To Emily, nature is "the highest art." She finds beauty and poetry in the earth's simplest features: the summer sky, chirping birds, even a garden snake. Nature imagery is present in the majority of her poems, often serving as a symbol for human emotions. In her words, "Animals have a natural, simple wisdom. Except chickens, of course."

Religion

Throughout the play, religion serves as a great comfort for Emily. Given her mostly solitary life, she finds joy in God's presence: "When the family went to church, I was never alone. God was sitting right there looking into my very soul."

In the following poem, Emily Dickinson relates the certainty of nature to the certainty of God. She believes that you can be sure something exists—or know what something looks like—even if you haven't seen it.

I never saw a Moor—
I never saw the sea—
Yet know I how the Heather looks,
And what a wave must be.

I never spoke with God
Nor visited in Heaven—
Yet certain am I of the spot
As if the Chart were given—

Death

After experiencing the deaths of many friends and family members, Emily spends a lot of time musing about the nature of death. Because she has seen death all around her, she isn't afraid of dying herself (in fact, she refers to death as "an old friend"). She ponders the questions: where do we go after we die? Is it possible to live again? What is it like to spend an eternity in heaven?

Discussion Questions

1. What did you know about Emily Dickinson before seeing this play? Did your expectations of her differ from what you saw onstage?
2. How reliable is Emily as a narrator? Can we trust everything she says? Why or why not?
3. Why do you think Emily did not seek publication more actively?
4. What does it feel like to read a Dickinson poem? What is your sense of her musicality, sound, and rhythm? Do you read these poems quickly or slowly? What do you think about the capitals or punctuation?
5. Pick one of Dickinson's poems. In your own words, what's she trying to say?
6. The best and easiest way for Emily to express herself is through her poetry. Why? What is your favorite way to express yourself?

More Resources

Emily Dickinson Museum: <https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/>

Emily Dickinson biography: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson>

Emily Dickinson poetry: <http://www.bartleby.com/113/>