



Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries

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Seamus Heaney, Denis Donoghue, William Pritchard, Marilyn Butler, Harold Bloom, and many others have praised Helen Vendler as one of the most attentive readers of poetry. Here, Vendler turns her illuminating skills as a critic to 150 selected poems of Emily Dickinson. As she did in "The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets," she serves as an incomparable guide, considering both stylistic and imaginative features of the poems.

In selecting these poems for commentary Vendler chooses to exhibit many aspects of Dickinson's work as a poet, from her first-person poems to the poems of grand abstraction, from her ecstatic verses to her unparalleled depictions of emotional numbness, from her comic anecdotes to her painful poems of aftermath. Included here are many expected favorites as well as more complex and less often anthologized poems. Taken together, Vendler's selection reveals Emily Dickinson's development as a poet, her astonishing range, and her revelation of what Wordsworth called the history and science of feeling.

In accompanying commentaries Vendler offers a deeper acquaintance with Dickinson the writer, the inventive conceiver and linguistic shaper of her perennial themes. All of Dickinson's preoccupations death, religion, love, the natural world, the nature of thought are explored here in detail, but Vendler always takes care to emphasize the poet's startling imagination and the ingenuity of her linguistic invention. Whether exploring less familiar poems or favorites we thought we knew, Vendler reveals Dickinson as a master of a revolutionary verse-language of immediacy and power. Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries will be an indispensable reference work for students of Dickinson and readers of lyric poetry. "

Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries Details

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From Reader Review Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries for online ebook

Karen says

In this beautifully arranged collection of Dickinson's poetry, Helen Vendler, offers us a glimpse in the mind of fruitful artist. Emily Dickinson winds her way through the portals we live in and brings to light what we live that may just be out reach within our hearts. While the commentaries are helpful, in a way it serves the reader better to grasp the message of her poetry through the lens of the individual life. A collection to be savored in small bites, pondered and revisited.

Jan van Leent says

Excellent commentaries on the selected poems by Emily Dickinson.

Recommended.

One additional remark on Helen Vendler's commentary on Emily Dickinson's poem "My life closed twice before its close":

Emily Dickinson had been raised in a Calvinist family. Probably she had been influenced by Calvin's predestination doctrine stating that God's grace had already been determined before her birth and will never change because God in his almightiness has settled it for once and always. With the predestination doctrine in mind, the life of Emily would close twice: once at her natural death on earth and once at the end of time, when a third event - the end of time - may include a new parting between God's elect and the others. Before the end of time one may never be certain to be among God's elect ... or among the others in damnation.

With Calvin's predestination doctrine in mind, an additional meaning can be given to this poem.

Bookdragon Sean says

Dickenson is my idea of the perfect poet. She is a religious sceptic, but she is not dismissive of a possible truth in religion. Her poetry dances between opposing ideas and it doesn't suggest truth in either of them; thus, it is open to interpretation and debate. It can be read in different ways and through this it is profound, powerful and utterly beautiful. I love her unique style, and this book helped me to see other themes within her work. The commentaries are short and superb. My only complaint is that the author didn't do one for each and every one of Dickenson's poems. There's a lot in here, but more would have been even better!

I'm so glad I chose to write one of my university essays on her!

Mohit says

It took me almost a year to finish this book, meanwhile I kept reading other fictions and poetry works also. I have apparently been living with Emily Dickinson since quite some time and have laid my hands on almost everything that associates itself with Emily Dickinson. This book was referred to me by one of my very good friends and I am glad I paid heed to his advise. People who have read Dickinson, know that she takes you on a journey of multitude of emotions where nothing counts as important as the voice of your own heart. But, this particular book gives you a technical insight of her poems and helps you to understand them in a better manner. Writer refrains from using any poetic jargon even when it comes to allusions, Christian allegories and old English archaic. The moment you finish these 150 poems, you feel like a life worth living.

David says

Though sometimes Professor Vendler's readings can feel a little reductive (but is it even possible to try and "analyze" Dickinson into prose without reducing her scope and depth?), she makes an effort to balance general insight, considerations of meter and form, and also biographical and comparative notes to make this selection feel as truly definitive an introduction to Dickinson as one could desire.

Those reading her for the first time will have a very erudite and trustworthy guide to help bring out some of the more literal substance, shades, angles, contours of the shapes of thought sometimes contained within the beautiful tapestry (or perhaps mist?) of verse, but longtime Dickinson adorers will definitely be shown insights and readings they might not have considered before. The selection is ample enough that one doesn't feel like one is being robbed of any of Dickinson's truly great poems, though of course there are always going to be a few favorites that weren't included.

A lovely and fitting dust jacket to boot. This is a must-have book for anyone's poetry collection.

Rich Kelley says

For my money Helen Vendler explains poems better than any other critic. She writes sensibly without any critical jargon. She seems to get inside the poet's head so you see the poem for the first time. I've enjoyed her explanations of Shakespeare's sonnets and Wallace Stevens and now she has just published this beautifully produced Belknap book of commentaries on 150 of Emily Dickinson poems and it's just as good as I hoped it would be. If there continue to be poems by ED you're puzzled by--and how can there not be--you'll treasure this.

Naomi Williams says

I read this book like a devotional: a poem or two plus attendant commentary, every day, for months. It was the perfect way to start a day. Tea plus Emily Dickinson plus a thoughtful scholar's commentary.

I felt like Vendler kind of taught me how to read Dickinson over the course of the book. At first I simply read the poem then went straight to the commentary & ingested it. But eventually I was pausing over each

poem for several minutes thinking about it, trying to figure something out about it & my reaction to it, before going to the commentary. In part I was doing this because I found myself disagreeing with Vendler now & then and wanted the mental space to have my own thoughts. And I wondered how Vendler would react to my own readings & reactions to her -- there's something a bit dogmatic about her "take" on things. I found most interesting Vendler's comments on the histories of the poems -- their publication history or, even more interesting, the composition history -- where Dickinson changed words or lines over time. I found that window into Dickinson's thinking & artistic evolution fascinating.

I would love to read more in this vein: poem + commentary.

EL Core says

I would give this 4.5 stars, if I could.

This is a collection of commentaries on 150 of Emily Dickinson's poems. I spent almost nine months reading it. I planned to read a poem a day, but I wasn't able to do it every day. I started on January 1, 2018, and I finished today, September 23rd.

Each poem is analyzed in extraordinary detail. I have been reading Dickinson for three decades, and I learned quite a lot. What I learned more than anything else, perhaps, is to very carefully watch Emily's diction and meter; more especially, the rhyme scheme and which words she chooses to rhyme, and any changes in rhyme scheme or meter: these often tie together, or break apart, the significant ideas in the poem.

I fault the book in one or two little respects (they may be different aspects of the same issue.) First, I think the author reads too many of her own ideas into Emily's poems, though I suppose that might be true of any reader of any writer. Second, I think this is exemplified by some "stretches" in her analysis. I will mention some.

For poem 1332, "Abraham to kill him", Vendler thinks Emily's use of a mastiff as a metaphor for God involves "a sub-surface pun" because "dog" is "God" spelled backwards. I think that's a silly stretch.

For poem 1581, "Those - dying then", Vendler thinks it may be significant to the poem that the words "illuminate" and "illusory" resemble one another: too much of a stretch, I think.

But such are insignificant blots in an otherwise excellent book. Highly recommended to fans of Emily's poetry.

John Pappas says

In a form familiar to readers of such explicatory texts as Paglia's *Break Blow Burn*, Helen Vendler presents 150 Emily Dickinson poems with short, tight, analytical essays on each. Unravelling the uniqueness and complexity of Dickinson's earlier works and exploring the intricacies of the more anthologized poems, Vendler makes a case for Dickinson as a supreme and sometimes shocking iconoclast rivaled at times among her poetic contemporaries by Whitman but in her society, rivaled by none. Vendler provides much needed social and religious context to illuminate this poet often thought of as elliptical, abstract or difficult. The

result is no less than a master class in poetry, technique and the culture of Dickinson's Amherst. Brilliant.

Sylvain says

What's the point of an analysis of Dickinson's poems that makes me appreciate them less rather than more?

David Anthony Sam says

Emily Dickinson's poetry was unlike just about everything being written at the time by her more famous mostly male contemporaries. She distilled complexities of experience and emotion into language that truly told it slant. Her verse is like Shakespeare's sonnets which are at their most difficult because they contain deep and sometimes contradictory emotion.

Helen Vendler proves again to be a great companion for the reader, unpacking and guiding. The best way to read this selection is to read each poem, Vendler's commentary, and then reread that poem once or twice more. Windows open. I cannot say I always agree with Vendler's interpretations, but they are always illuminating.

Captain Sir Roddy, R.N. (Ret.) says

If you love Dickinson's poetry, or are interested in approaching her poetry, then this is a 'must have' volume. Dr. Vendler takes you on an intimate and in-depth tour of 150 poems by Emily Dickinson. Vendler invites you to view each poem as a window into the mind, soul, and heart of the 'Belle of Amherst' and oh what a marvelous experience it is. I learned so much about Dickinson, the poet and the person, as well as the technical and emotional merits of her substantial body of work. I come away from Vendler's amazing book about Emily's poetry realizing that she really is not only a great American poet, but one of the greatest poets of all time.

Kathryn says

This book was a challenge to get through. I love Emily Dickinson and while Vendler had some really interesting contextual insights, she also had a lot of random allusions to Wallace Stevens. And took a bunch of logical leaps about religious subjects especially I'm not sure were justified by the text. But I do feel like it is real accomplishment that I read the whole thing.

Ross says

This volume contains 150 of Emily Dickinson's poems. Eye-opening commentary from Helen Vendler guides us through Dickinson's anarchist expression of an expansive variety of ideas in areas ranging from natural science to gothic eroticism. Dickinson irreverently appropriates Christian imagery to describe aspects

of her own personal religion. Not a book to be read quickly or all at once, but one to savor slowly in wonderment.

James Murphy says

I think this might be important criticism. I think it's terrific. One has to admire Helen Vendler's scholarship in discussing what is probably the essential poems of Dickinson's oeuvre. In selecting 150 of them and discussing them in depth, she's provided a work that accumulatively has lots to say about what she wrote, how she wrote it, and the currents of her thought. Each poem is printed in what has come to be the accepted form as Dickinson probably intended it. Following each poem is Vendler's intelligent analysis. Knowing Dickinson's work thoroughly and seeming to understand her is Vendler's strength. She apparently had access to the drafts of the poems and so can sort of read her mind as she developed each of them, guessing her intent as she chose and changed words and phrases here and there. This familiarity with each poem and how Dickinson composed informs Vendler's perceptive glosses. The detail is impressive. Multiple connotations of words and phrases as Dickinson understood them and used them receive extensive investigation. Meaning, metaphor, social and religious and philosophic contexts are made clear. Each brief analysis is a microscope peering into the intricate world of each poem, pointing out life and form. No stone, as far as I can tell, is left unturned. Vendler's voluminous knowledge of modern poetry also means she can tell us how Dickinson influenced later poets, as her loss of religious belief impacted Wallace Stevens's, for instance, or how the meter of a particular line was adopted by Hart Crane. By the time the reader finishes the book, he'll know a little bit about how Dickinson thought and wrote these poems, too. In recent years I'd been reading Dickinson using the Reading Edition of her poems compiled by Ralph W Franklin in 1999. I suspect in the future I'll consider the poem selection and glosses provided by Vendler to be inclusive enough to satisfy my occasional craving to touch base with her.
