EMILY AND THE CHILD: AN EXAMINATION
OF THE CHILD IMAGE IN THE WORK
OF EMILY DICKINSON

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

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The primary sources for this study are Dickinson's poems and letters. The purpose is to examine child imagery in Dickinson's work, and the investigation is based on the chronological age of children in the images.

Dickinson's small child exists in mystical communion with nature and deity. Inevitably the child is wrenched from this divine state by one of three estranging forces: adult society, death, or love. After the estrangement the state of childhood may be regained only after death, at which time the soul enters immortality as a small child.

The study moreover contends that one aspect of Dickinson's seclusion was an endeavor to remain a child.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The poetry of Emily Dickinson has great significance in a study of imagery. Although that significance seemed apparent to critics almost from the moment the first volume of her poems was posthumously published in 1890, very little has been written on Dickinson's imagery. Amy Lowell, herself a prominent imagist of the early 1900's, referred to Dickinson as a "precursor of imagism." John Q. Anderson notes that the "poems, particularly those written at the height of her most productive years, reveal . . . her increasing mastery of imagery as a vehicle for thought." It has always been obvious that Dickinson's poetry lies within the imagist tradition. However, interest in her bizarre life has so dominated critical studies that to date, eighty-three years after the first publication of her work by Thomas W. Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd, no definitive work on imagery in Dickinson's poetry has appeared. Biographical studies, on the other hand—especially concerning her seclusion and the identification of the great love, or loves, in her life—are voluminous. The only published work concerning Dickinson's use of imagery is

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one by Ruth Flanders McNaughton, entitled *The Imagery of Emily Dickinson*. Since it was a master's thesis not intended for publication, the work is incomplete, as the author herself admits. It explores the imagery in those poems which deal with the themes of nature, love, life, death, and immortality. While it contains many valid observations, it is a very general work and superficial, at best. A work comparable to that which Caroline Spurgeon has compiled on the imagery of Shakespeare has yet to be written concerning the imagery of Dickinson.

That the child was an important element in Dickinson's poetry was apparent even to her earliest critics, who frequently commented on the childlike quality of her work. No attempt was made to group the child poems, however, until the publication of *Bolts of Melody* in 1945. A section of that book entitled "Once a Child" includes several poems relative in various ways to children. Some of the poems included contain peripheral child images, such as "Mama never forgets her birds"; in others, such as "This dirty little heart," the child image is central to the poem. Still others included are poems the editors felt especially appealing to children, such as "Good to hide and hear 'em hunt!" or "The parasol is the umbrella's daughter."

The importance of a study of childhood in Dickinson's poetry, then, has been firmly established from her earliest publications. The form that such a study should take, however, has not always been clear. The most popular view
through years of criticism has been that the child was a "mask" which the poet applied at will. Richard B. Sewell speculates that "if she never entirely abandoned a child-like pose, it was not out of sentimental love for children but at once a point of belief as to the nature of perception and a literary device." Critics who hold the theory that the child in Dickinson's poetry is a literary device portray the poet as an artist fully aware of the device as well as the manner in which it is employed. Clark Griffith, in *The Long Shadow*, concurs that the child guise is a "mask" but is more explicit as to how it is used. "Beneath deceptively charming surfaces . . . [the] child poems have a way of broadening suddenly into malice and sly mockery. Out of their winsomeness, invective is likely to emerge, and not infrequently a touch of pure blasphemy. Of the various sides to Emily Dickinson's writing, none does more than the child poems to reveal the sardonic twists in her imagination or the deep and devious undertones of which she was capable."  

One of Dickinson's biographers, Richard Chase, interprets her propensity toward childhood quite differently. Rather than a literary device, he sees it as a way of life which the poet had deliberately chosen and which consequently

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manifested itself in her poetry. He postulates that "all poets, certainly all nineteenth-century poets, remain children, and desire to do so, in a way which is not true of non-poets. Nor is it surprising when we remember the Victorian cult of 'little women,' in which Emily Dickinson to some extent lived and thought. For all her great personal integrity, for all her fine and mature femininity, she always paid some obeisance to little womanhood. Her coy and oddly childish poems of nature and female friendship are products of a time when one of the careers open to women was perpetual childhood."\(^4\)

William R. Sherwood, although he recognizes the child image as a guise, senses that it is a reflection of the poet's psychological state when he observes, "there is another aspect of Emily Dickinson, one less appealing to those who take her seriously but one which is nonetheless characteristic--that of the poet as child. . . . As a deliberate disguise, a mask, 'Emily' is used simultaneously for propitiating and manipulating various aspects of the external world; but the fears which produced this figure are very real ones, and one can speculate that the very tensions and frustrations these fears aroused reinforced the intensity of Emily Dickinson's poetic drive."\(^5\)


John Cody, in a recently published psychography of Emily Dickinson, explodes Chase's assessment of her "fine and mature femininity" when he interprets the poet as psychologically unable to mature beyond childhood. He sees her poetry as an expression of this psychological state. Cody explains what he believes are contributing factors to her state of mind and concludes, "She seems not to have been able to imagine herself in the role of an adult. She knew what childhood was and she could anticipate senescence and 'immortality' with some hope that with a little assistance she could adjust to these states. But she dreaded adulthood as other mortals dread death."6

The child in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, then, has been approached from two divergent points of view: as the literary device of a mature artist aware of its use or as the unconscious expression of the psychological state of a rather disturbed woman. It is the purpose and scope of this study to explore a third avenue of inquiry—to group the poems and letters containing child imagery in order to determine whether a pattern is discernible within the images themselves. Such a study has not heretofore been undertaken; prior to this time the child images have not been grouped as such. Indeed, serious problems are inherent in such

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an attempt. One involves definition and classification of the images themselves; a second concerns the degree to which the images should be interpreted as an expression of the poet's philosophy about childhood.

McNaughton realized the difficulty of defining imagery. "The vital importance of imagery to poetry is generally conceded without argument. On the other hand, a completely satisfactory definition of the term is difficult to formulate." Imagery is generally believed to be that which conjures a definite "picture" in the mind of the reader. It is virtually impossible to be more specific than that very general definition without raising objections and citing exceptions. The authors of *A Handbook to Literature* also recognize the problem. They give a very general definition of an image as "a literal and concrete representation of a sensory experience or of an object that can be known by one or more of the senses." However, they proceed to point out that images may be divided into two general types, "a 'tied' image being one so employed that its meaning and associational value is the same or nearly the same for all readers; and a 'free' image being one not so fixed by context that its possible meanings or associational values are limited; it is,

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7 Ruth Flanders McNaughton, *The Imagery of Emily Dickinson* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Studies, 1949), p. 5.

therefore, capable of having various meanings or values for various people."\(^9\) Because "free" images are by definition subjective and therefore open to debate, they have not been included in the scope of this study. Only those poems which contain unmistakable child images have been incorporated.

A classification of the child images presents an equally challenging problem. Indeed, Henry W. Wells in his *Introduction to Emily Dickinson* discourages such an endeavor. "The strangely pervasive character of the child image in her poetry discourages exhaustive illustration. Anyone surveying her work from this point of view readily amasses notes far too numerous to itemize or even to tabulate."\(^10\) Wells has a valid point; the child images are numerous and difficult to classify. A chronological study of the images yields no discernible pattern; the nature of the images seems not to have changed substantially throughout Dickinson's years of writing. Neither will a subject or thematic classification prove satisfactory, for Dickinson's themes very often overlap. A nature poem may also be a death poem, and it may also be about children. Dickinson's subjects and themes defy simple classification. If, however, one approaches the child images from the point of view of the chronological age of the child in the image, a fascinating pattern emerges. From that perspective, the images take on a clearly discernible motif.

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\(^9\) Thrall and Hibbard, p. 232.

\(^{10}\) Henry W. Wells, *Introduction to Emily Dickinson* (Chicago: Hendricks House, 1947), p. 64.
emerging as a portrayal of childhood which places Dickinson squarely in the romantic tradition of Wordsworth and Blake.

With the approach to the images clearly in mind, one has then to consider the inevitable question: to what extent should the pattern of the images be considered a statement of the poet's own philosophy? Three criteria determine the answer. In the first place, it is well known that Dickinson's poetry is intensely personal. Because the poems were not intended for publication, they may be considered as totally reflective of the poet's feeling. Perhaps more than any other poet, one must consider the life of Dickinson in relation to her work. Moreover, a study of the child images in the poet's extant letters, themselves often as poetic as the poetry, reveals that they parallel and reinforce the pattern discernible in the poems. Finally, a study of the reaction of those who knew Dickinson and a review of certain characteristics of her life are valuable in assessing the degree to which the child images may be interpreted as an expression of the poet's philosophy of childhood. The first two criteria are generally recognized and accepted. The last represents a critical factor in establishing the child image pattern as a life philosophy.

The available accounts of actual meetings with Dickinson are uncannily alike in their description of the poet's childlike demeanor. The most notable of these accounts is one by Thomas W. Higginson, Dickinson's literary mentor and the first editor of her works, who wrote his wife the following impression
after his first meeting with the poet in 1870: "A step
like a pattering child's in entry & in glided a little plain
woman with two smooth bands of reddish hair & a face . . .
with no good feature--in a very plain & exquisitely clean
white piqué & a blue net worsted shawl. She came to me with
two day lilies, which she put in a sort of childlike way into
my hand & said, 'These are my introduction' in a soft frightened
breathless childlike voice--& added under her breath, Forgive
me if I am frightened; I never see strangers & hardly know
what to say--."¹¹ Higginson, though he had corresponded with
Dickinson for some eight years, was obviously surprised by
her childlike quality--sufficiently so that he used the term
three times in the description. Moreover, she did not seem
childlike to him in just one respect; rather, her whole
being seemed a child--she "pattered" as a child does; her
manner of presenting the flowers was childlike; and finally,
her voice was that of a child. A similar feeling is expressed
by Clara Bellinger Green, who as a young girl had been invited
with her sister to the Dickinson home to sing. "In the li-
brary, dimly lighted from the hall, a tiny figure in white
darted to greet us, grasped our hands, and told us of her
pleasure in hearing us sing. . . . As she stood before us in
the vague light of the library we were chiefly aware of a

¹¹Jay Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson
pair of great, dark eyes set in a small, pale, delicately chiseled face, and a little body, quaint, simple as a child and wholly unaffected."¹²

Except for a small circle of close friends, few people outside the immediate family were granted the privilege of an actual meeting with Dickinson. However, it was well known among residents of Amherst that she enjoyed the companionship of small children, although usually at a distance. She made her presence known to her small friends, however, by frequently rewarding them with cookies or other delicacies. In 1881, soon after her arrival in Amherst, Mabel Loomis Todd wrote her parents the following account of Dickinson: "No one who calls upon her mother & sister ever see her, but she allows little children once in a great while, & 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."¹³

The special relationship she felt with children is underscored by Dickinson's own admission. In 1880 she was asked to contribute some of her poetry to a charity for children. Her decision not to publish her work had long since been made; in fact, she had denied her work to such close associates as Helen Hunt Jackson, who literally begged

¹²Leyda, II, 273.
¹³Ibid., 357.
her to share her genius with the world. However, Dickinson made an exception to her long-standing policy in the case of the children's charity. She agreed to release three poems and explained her decision in a letter to Higginson: "The one who asked me for the lines, I had never seen--He spoke of 'a Charity'--I refused but did not inquire--He again earnestly urged, on the ground that in that way I might 'aid unfortunate Children'--The name of 'Child' was a snare to me and I hesitated..." It is not without significance that, although she refused to allow close associates such as Mrs. Jackson to publish her work, she released three poems for that purpose to a total stranger because he came in the name of a child.

The importance of Dickinson's concept of childhood to her life is further manifested by an examination of the friendships in which she shared. Her relationships with Susan Gilbert (Dickinson), Mrs. J. G. Holland, and her cousins, Louise and Frances Norcross, are characterized by a childlike quality. A poem included in an 1858 letter to Susan Gilbert, who later became Dickinson's sister-in-law, contains the following sentiment:

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Today is far from Childhood--
But up and down the hills
I held her hand the tighter--
Which shortened all the miles--

Dickinson seems to be saying that even though actual childhood has passed, the state of childhood may be attained through her friendship with Sue, whose hand, clasped in Emily's, shortens the distance between adulthood and childhood in such a way that the two friends again experience the state of childhood.

Throughout her lifetime Dickinson maintained a close, rather special friendship with Dr. and Mrs. J. G. Holland. On at least two occasions she refers to Mrs. Holland in childlike terms. In 1873, for example, she wrote Mrs. Holland, "I miss your childlike Voice--" (Letters, #399, c. 1873, II, 514). After Dr. Holland's death in 1881 she wrote his widow, "Poor 'Little Child Wife'!" (Letters, #738, c. 1881, III, 718). Exactly what was meant by these two references may not be known, but the fact that she used the child allusions at all bears witness to the possibility that she recognized in Mrs. Holland certain childlike qualities which made their friendship that of one child to another. Whatever the qualities, the friendship was an important and highly valued one to Dickinson; she trusted Mrs. Holland and spoke freely to her as a child might to another child.

In almost every letter Dickinson wrote to her Norcross cousins, she addressed them in terms such as "little children" or "my little girls." David Higgins writes, "Emily Dickinson affected childishness in some of her letters to the Norcrosses: reading them, one is embarrassed for Emily and for the cousins who apparently responded in kind."\(^{16}\)

Moreover, within her own family circle, Emily maintained childlike relationships. "The fact that her family circle remained unbroken until her father's death in 1874 made it possible for Emily to protract her childhood relation to her parents almost to the end of her own life."\(^{17}\) This fact undoubtedly helped her maintain her childlike relationship with her sister Vinnie, which she expresses in an 1859 letter to Dr. and Mrs. Holland: "You know we're children still . . ." (Letters, #207, c. 1859, II, 354). It is interesting to note that it was impossible for that relationship to be maintained with Austin, even though he lived next door after his marriage to Susan Gilbert. Evidence of this is in Austin's visit to the Dickinson household while Sue was away in 1875. Of the visit, Emily wrote, "Austin's family went to Geneva, and Austin lived with us four weeks. It seemed peculiar--pathetic--and Antediluvian. We missed him while he


was with us and missed him when he was gone" (Letters, #432, c. 1875, II, 537). Apparently Austin's responsibilities as the head of a household had separated him from the circle of children and forced the relationship to change. Indeed, the change was felt by Emily, and she found it "peculiar--pathetic--and Antediluvian."

It would be a mistake to describe all of Dickinson's friendships and relations as those of child to child, but at least those which were among her most meaningful she herself chose to describe in those terms.

John Cody, who has written the most convincing psychological interpretation of Dickinson to date, readily observes the importance of the child within the poet. "That her intellectual and esthetic gifts were fiercely unsubservient must not . . . be allowed to obscure the fact that in practical life she exhibited helplessness, vulnerability, and infantile dependence. Studying her behavior and her explicitly expressed attitudes, one is led to conclude that all her life there smoldered in Emily Dickinson's soul the muffled but voracious clamoring of an abandoned child."18

Based on this evidence, it would appear that a study of the child image in Dickinson's poetry must necessarily include the importance of the child concept to the poet's life. In the case of Emily Dickinson, as with no other poet, one may

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18Cody, pp. 46-47. Italics are Cody's.
paraphrase Yeats and question, "Who can tell the poem from the poet?" The study represented by this thesis seeks to establish a concept of childhood through the study of the child image in the poetry, as well as child allusions in the letters, and reveal Dickinson's philosophy of childhood as an ideal state which the poet strove in vain to attain in her adult life.

An examination of Dickinson's correspondence reveals a profound change in her concept of childhood around 1858. In her letters of the early 1850's she exhibited a rather ambivalent attitude concerning her own maturation. In her early twenties, contemplating the passing from childhood to adulthood, she vacillated between the two extremes. In 1850 she wrote, "I dream of being a grandame, and banding my silver hairs, and I seem to be quite submissive to the thought of growing old . . ." (Letters, #39, c. 1850, I, 103-04). But in the same letter she cries out, "I love so to be a child." Two years later she wrote, "--ar'nt there days in one's life when to be old dont seem a thing so sad--I do feel gray and grim, this morning, and I feel it would be a comfort to have a piping voice, and broken back, and scare little children" (Letters, #73, c. 1852, I, 175). In 1853 she expressed to Austin her desire for perpetual childhood. "I wish we were children now--I wish we were always children, how to grow up I dont know" (Letters, #115, c. 1853, I, 241).
During these years Dickinson in effect was seeking to force herself into the mold of the adult world, as she conceived it. Her letters confirm that she consciously sought, in this period of her life, to enter adulthood. The endeavor, however, was futile. The tone of the adult Emily rings hollow and possesses an air of meaninglessness and frustration bordering on depression. For example, in 1854 she wrote, "I rise, because the sun shines, and sleep has done with me, and I brush my hair, and dress me, and wonder who I am and who has made me so, and then I wash the dishes, and anon, wash them again, and then 'tis afternoon, and Ladies call, and evening, and some members of another sex come in to spend the hour, and then that day is done. And, prithee, what is Life?" (Letters, #172, c. 1854, I, 304). At the age of twenty-four, then, with her young adulthood in full flower, at a time when most people her age look forward to promising futures, Dickinson appears disconsolate and thoroughly dissatisfied with the meaninglessness of the adult world.

In the same year, after what appears to be a series of disappointments in her trusted friend Susan, she wrote: "You need not fear to leave me lest I should be alone, for I often part with things I fancy I have loved . . . thus my heart bleeds so frequently that I shant mind the hemorrhage, and I only add an agony to several previous ones, and at the end of day remark—a bubble burst! Such incidents would grieve me when I was but a child, and perhaps I could have
wept when little feet hard by mine stood still in the coffin, but eyes grow dry sometimes, and hearts get crisp and cinder, and had as lief burn" (Letters, #173, c. 1854, I, 305-06).

At the time of this writing Dickinson had lost several close childhood friends to adulthood. Because she remained child-like while they matured, the friendships died when she could not allow them to grow. Dickinson did not understand the estrangement. She apparently perceived adulthood as a time of emotional callousness, and she attempted to portray herself as "adult"—immune to emotional pain. Dickinson actually loved and felt deeply; "such incidents" as the break with Sue grieved her not merely when she was "but a child," but throughout her lifetime. This letter to Sue marks the last time she attempts to express adult callousness. It was written near the time at which Dickinson ceased the vacillation between childhood and adulthood, scornfully turned on the adult world, and took up residence in a world she considered more purely spiritual—more loving, trusting, wondering—the world of the child.

During the same period in which Emily vacillated between childhood and adulthood, she was also in the process of developing her attitude toward children. Her references to children in the early 1850's are primarily to the students of Austin and Susan, and they reveal the poet's animosity toward the students. Her remarks to Austin specify clearly where her sympathies lay: "we should enjoy the terrors of
50 little boys and any specimens of discipline in your way would be a rare treat for us" (Letters, #48, c. 1851, I, 123). Her remarks to Susan in the same year are very similar: "I fancy you very often descending to the schoolroom with a plump Binomial Theorem struggling in your hand which you must dissect and exhibit to your incomprehending ones--I hope you whip them Susie--for my sake--whip them hard whenever they dont behave just as you want to have them" (Letters, #56, c. 1851, I, 144). In view of Emily's intense affection and loyalty for both Austin and Susan, her attitude toward school children is perhaps understandable. However, it was an anathema to her philosophy of the child expressed in later years. Several later poems contain images of school children and the schoolroom. These poems will be examined in Chapter IV of this thesis; they reveal without exception that her sympathies lay with the children, and moreover that she regarded the school as a repressive and oppressive interference in the life of a child.

Dickinson's attitude and philosophy toward children underwent profound change; significantly, this change occurred at approximately the same time she began increasingly to withdraw into seclusion. In an 1858 letter one finds her earliest expression of the small child as an ideal. "I meet some octogenarians--but men and women seldom, and at longer intervals--'little children,' of whom is the 'Kingdom of Heaven.' How tiny some will have to grow, to gain admission there!" (Letters, #190, c. 1858, II, 336).
Although Dickinson's attitude toward childhood was in a state of flux prior to 1858, in that year she apparently solidified her feelings and beliefs concerning childhood. In the letter recounted above she describes the small child as an ideal; after 1858 she never mentions children in the flippant "adult" manner which is characteristic of her in the early 1850's. Instead, she sees childhood as a state of perfection, in which the child is in mystical communion with nature and a Supreme Being. Moreover, it is a state of innocence, honesty, and simple trust. Dickinson saw the adult world as devoid of these qualities—a world of sham and hypocrisy which forcibly wrenches the child from his natural state of perfection. After the estrangement has occurred, the "child" can attain the mystical sense of oneness with the universe only after death, at which time the soul enters the afterlife as a small child. It is the province of this study to establish the philosophy briefly outlined above through a close examination of the poems which contain child images as well as the letters which contain images of and references to children. Moreover, this thesis seeks to establish that one important aspect of Dickinson's seclusion is the attempt to remain a child. Clark Griffith observes that "there is the retreat backward into childhood, which is the crucial fact about Emily Dickinson's seclusion." His use of the phrase

Griffith, p. 283.
"retreat backward" denotes a regression or escape, which may well be true, if Cody is to be believed. Whatever the case, the "retreat" led the poet to an idealization of childhood; to her it seemed not a regression but a higher, more sublime state. Douglas Duncan advises the student of Dickinson, "We are bound to accept that her withdrawal from society was not an evasion of reality but a search for it ..."20 Childhood for Dickinson may well have seemed the essence of reality—reality at its simplest and purest level. At any rate, the appearance of the child in the poems and letters involves much more than a mere pose by a rather bizarre personality; it represents in fact a spiritual quest through which the poet attempted to understand the mysteries of life and death. She desperately endeavored in seclusion to maintain the "confiding" relationship with nature and divinity which she feels a small child naturally possesses.

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CHAPTER II
INFANCY

It might be expected that a study of Dickinson's child imagery would yield very few images of infants, inasmuch as her exposure to babies was almost nonexistent. The infants closest to her were the children of her brother. However, Austin and Susan's first child, Edward "Ned" Dickinson, was born in 1861, at a time when her seclusion had more or less been accomplished; she rarely ventured outdoors at that time. It might be safely supposed, then, that her exposure even to her brother's babies was very limited. There is a paucity of references to infants in her letters; for the most part they consist of congratulatory notes to close friends who had become new parents, and they reveal the poet's sense of awe for infants. For example, when a child was born to T. W. Higginson and his second wife in 1881, Dickinson wrote, "I know but little of Little Ones, but love them very softly--They seem to me like a Plush Nation or a Race of Down--."¹ They seem, in other words, not quite of this world. Her description has a breathtaking quality--the image she draws

is not one of flesh-and-blood, miniature human beings, but instead it has an undefined ethereal quality. When Ned was born, Dickinson wrote her sister-in-law, "Is it true, dear Sue? Are there two?" (Letters, #232, c. 1861, II, 373). Birth seems difficult for the poet to comprehend; the tone of the excerpt is one of incredulity and a sense of wide-eyed wonder at the event.

In spite of her lack of experience with babies, Dickinson had a very definite impression of the state of infancy as ideal. Her feeling that infancy is life's most desirable state is expressed in an undated prose fragment, in which she professes, "I should think a faded spirit must be the most dreadful treasure that one could possess, as a spirit in bud must be the sweetest--" (Letters, Prose Fragment #83, c. 1880's, III, 924). Dickinson does not fully explain why she describes infancy, the "spirit in bud," as the "sweetest" state; there is, however, some evidence that she believed in pre-existence. For example, another undated prose fragment states, "Death being the first form of Life which we have had the power to Contemplate, our entrance here being . . . an Exclusion from comprehension, it is . . . amazing that the fascination of our predicament does not entice us more" (Letters, Prose Fragment #70, n. d., III, 922-23).

In subsequent chapters it will be seen that Dickinson describes childhood on occasion as "earth's confiding time," and that she pictures death in one instance as the voyage from "confiding" to "comprehending." With that information,
the above fragment takes on new significance. Dickinson seems indeed to believe in the pre-existence of the soul, in which state it "comprehends" the mysteries of existence. That comprehension is denied the soul in its mortal form. The same thought is expressed in a poem written in 1879:

We knew not that we were to live--
Nor when--we are to die--
Our ignorance--our Cuirass is--
We wear Mortality
As lightly as an Option Gown
Till asked to take it off--
By his intrusion, God is known--
It is the same with Life--

Pre-existence is definitely indicated in the poem; it indicates that before "we lived," "we knew," and that life is an "intrusion" in the ongoing process of the soul's existence.

The image of infancy arises in connection with the idea of pre-existence in the poem which follows. Written in 1858, it was entitled "The Tulip" when it was first published in 1896, and it involves a comparison between a tulip and an infant.

She slept beneath a tree--
Remembered but by me.
I touched her Cradle mute--
She recognized the foot--
Put on her carmine suit
And see!
(Poems, #25, c. 1858, I, 25)

In interpreting this poem, one must bear in mind that a

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tulip has a very short blooming period, or "life span."
In early spring its first green shoots appear. Shortly after, it blooms; within a fairly brief amount of time, it returns to its dormant state (of sleep), as a bulb. The bulb, here analogous to the soul, exists unseen until it senses the "signal" to assume a tangible form. The last two lines of the poem express a sense of wonder at the process. That the poet compares the tulip to an infant is especially significant; the tulip's first green shoots appear in its "cradle" in much the same sense that the soul's earliest human form appears in the nursery cradle.

The divinity of infancy might be assumed because of the infant's temporal proximity to the state of "comprehension." Moreover, that assumption is explicitly stated in 1877, in a poem in which the soul is compared to an infant:

Shame is the shawl of Pink
In which we wrap the Soul
To keep it from infesting Eyes--
The elemental Veil
Which helpless Nature drops
When pushed upon a scene
Repugnant to her probity--
Shame is the tint divine.
(Poems, #1412, c. 1877, III, 980)

Shame is portrayed in the first three lines as the protective covering--the pink shawl--which enfolds the infant, soul. The force which swaddles the child seems contradictory in that it is "we" in line two and "helpless Nature" in line five. Since in the last line shame ("the shawl of Pink" or the "elemental Veil") is called "divine," it is assumed that
the covering has divine origins, and that "we" and "helpless Nature" are merely intermediaries who perform the physical act of enfolding the "Soul" with the divine covering. The fact that the human soul is here analogous to an infant attests to the divinity of the infant in the image. The infant is not readily accessible; it must be protected from intruders. Its protection, the "elemental Veil," has interesting connotations. It calls to mind the Biblical descriptions of the temple, in which the "Holy of Holies," the innermost part of the temple, was separated from the adjoining chamber by a "veil." Only the High Priest was permitted to advance beyond the veil—and only on certain days could he enter. The "Holy of Holies" was so sacred that it could not be observed by "infesting eyes"; the veil prevented that. The infant soul in the image, protected by the "elemental Veil," is the holiest of human states.

The divinity of infancy also appears in a poem written in 1861 to commemorate the birth of a son to Samuel Bowles, a longtime friend of the Dickinson family.

Teach Him--when He makes the names--
Such an one--to say--
On his babbling--Berry--lips--
As should sound--to me--
Wore my Ear--as near his nest--
As my thought--today--
As should sound--
"Forbid us not"--
Some like "Emily."

(Poems, #227, c. 1861, I, 162-163)

On the surface, the poem is a request that the Bowles baby
be taught to say "Emily." To paraphrase, the poet asks that the infant be taught to say her name so that, were she able to be near the baby when he spoke, she could hear him say, in baby fashion, something that sounds like "Emily." In line eight the allusion to divinity comes, and it may be construed as an entreaty. It obviously alludes to New Testament passages such as Matthew 19:14, "But Jesus said, 'Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven." In her use of the allusion, Dickinson seems to identify herself with the infant ("forbid us not") in an attempt to gain access to deity, an access which is assured "little children" in New Testament promises. With her name on the infant's lips, it is hoped that her access to divinity cannot be denied.

Perhaps because of her lack of experience with babies, the corpus of Dickinson's work does not contain many images of infancy; however, the images are significant in that they portray the infant as an awesome representation of the divine. Dickinson "felt the mystery and awe of [life's] beginning. . . ."\(^3\) Infancy represents for her the soul's transition from its pre-life "comprehension" to its childhood's "confiding"; as such, it is a holy state which the poet regards with awe.

CHAPTER III

EARLY CHILDHOOD: EARTH'S CONFIDING TIME

Images of small children in Dickinson's work occur for the most part in conjunction with nature imagery, and the image is constructed in such a way that the two entities appear to commune with each other. Such communion has a mystical or divine nature, and much of the child imagery therefore appears in a merging of three separate images: the child, nature, and deity. The small child image defies strict categorization. For example, the "confiding" relationship the child and nature enjoy has traces of both pantheism and Christianity. However, the communion also conjures fears for the child; nature has awesome, terrible dimensions of the sort that the British romanticists—primarily Blake and Wordsworth—describe.

The child images which are inextricably fused with nature imagery seek to convey the spiritual quality which lies beyond the physical aspects of the child. Many of these images appear in metaphors in which nature is personified, and this personification takes one of two forms. In some of the images, certain aspects of nature, especially flowers, assume childlike qualities and are described in those terms. The second form the personification takes is
more profound. Again, various aspects of nature are compared to children, but there is also a hovering, protective figure in the image which is deity. The child seems surrounded by a spiritual aura, and the image is one of the child in a mystical oneness with nature. Dickinson comes close to defining this relationship in an 1879 letter in which she says, "Nature is our eldest mother, she will do no harm. Let the phantom love that enrolls the sparrow shield you softer than a child."¹ It is, therefore, very significant that many of Dickinson's "nature" poems contain the small child image. The images range from relatively superficial comparisons of certain aspects of nature—chiefly flowers—to the small child to more profound attempts to plumb the depth of the relationship between the child and nature.

It is not at all uncommon for Dickinson to compare flowers to small children. Such a comparison is made in the following light poem:

As Children bid the Guest "Good Night"
And then reluctant turn--
My flowers raise their pretty lips--
Then put their nightgowns on.

As children caper when they wake
Merry that it is Morn-- (no stanza break)

My flowers from a hundred cribs
Will peep, and prance again.2

The poet sees the specter of children in the faces of her flowers. The image produces gossamer children who bob and dance, fairy-like, in the wind. The result is to convey a spiritual rather than a realistic image of the child.

In the following poem, titled "My Rose" when first published in 1891, Dickinson again views the flower in comparison to a child:

Pigmy seraphs—gone astray—
Velvet people from Vevay—
Belles from some lost summer day—
Bees exclusive Coterie—

Paris could not lay the fold
Belted down with Emerald—
Venice could not show a Cheek
Of a tint so lustrous meek—
Never such an Ambuscade
As of briar and leaf displayed
For my little damask maid—

I had rather wear her grace
Than an Earl's distinguished face—
I had rather dwell like her
Than be "Duke of Exeter"—
Royalty enough for me
To subdue the Bumblebee.

(Poems, #138, c. 1859, I, 98)

Again the image is spectral; the rose is a seraph-child, and the awe with which the description is given is evident.

In another poem, written in 1861, a flower is compared to a small girl:

A Mien to move a Queen--
Half Child--Half Heroine--
An Orleans in the Eye
That puts it's manner by
For humbler Company
When none are near
Even a Tear--
It's frequent Visitor--

A Bonnet like a Duke--
And yet a Wren's Peruke
Were not so shy
Of Goer by--
And Hands--so slight--
They would elate a Sprite
With Merriment--

A Voice that Alters--Low
And on the Ear can go
Like Let of Snow--
Or shift supreme
As tone of Realm
On Subjects Diadem--

Too small--to fear--
Too distant--to endear--
And so Men Compromise--
And just--revere--

(Poems, #283, c. 1861, I, 202-03)

The poem is constructed around the personification of a flower; moreover, that personification assumes a dual nature. The flower is childlike, on the one hand, and both regal and heroic on the other. Although the flower is not identified, a lily fits the description. It does have a "bonnet like a Duke," and at the same time, it is a demure flower. The leaves ("Hands--so slight--") are narrow. In the third stanza auditory imagery conveys the dual nature of the lily; it is alternately beautifully silent and thunderously majestic. The effect of the image is to convey the lily's impression on the observer; it can be quietly perceived as a demure
flower, or it can inspire regal awe. In Chapter VI of this thesis Dickinson's fusion of the image of royalty with the child image will be examined; at this point it is significant to note that Dickinson often sees the small child as a spiritually regal being. The auditory image of the "voice" of the lily compared to the silence of a snowfall automatically conjures the visual image of the color white, which in turn creates the impression that the flower described is the Easter lily. Of all the flowers, the white lily is generally the most revered, both because of its short life and because of its religious implications. More divinity surrounds this image than the ones cited previously. Two factors create this illusion: one is the religious connotation inherent in the white ("Easter") lily; the other is the use of the word "revere" in the last line. The poem is a masterful fusion of three images: the lily, a child, and royalty.

The poems cited above were all written in 1859 or 1861, approximately the time at which Dickinson's philosophy of childhood began to form. Although the poems are not of great depth, they should not be passed over too lightly. Flowers were no mean things to Dickinson; they were, in fact, revered by her. She frequently accompanied notes with flowers, as a means of expressing sympathy or appreciation. Around 1886, she wrote, "If we love Flowers, are we not 'born again' every Day, without the distractions of Nicodemus? Not to outgrow Genesis, is a sweet monition" (Letters, #1037, c. 1886, III, 899). Dickinson sensed a spiritual reality
about flowers and recalled more than once the haunting affinity with flowers she felt as a child. For example, when Mabel Loomis Todd sent her a painting of Indian pipes in 1882, she received the following reply: "That without suspecting it you should send me the preferred flower of life, seems almost supernatural, and the sweet glee that I felt at meeting it, I could confide to none. I still cherish the clutch with which I bore it from the ground when a wondering Child, an unearthly booty, and maturity only enhances mystery, never decreases it" (Letters, #769, c. 1882, III, 740).

Emily's love for flowers was well known by the children in the neighborhood. When her nephew Gilbert wished to present a flower to his teacher, he depended on his Aunt Emily to provide the plant, and she responded with delight. Neighborhood children sometimes stole glimpses of her tending her flowers, and on occasion Emily invited them to join her as she worked. One of those children, MacGregor Jenkins, recounts the following experience: "As I passed the corner of the house, Miss Emily called me. She was standing on a rug spread for her on the grass, busy with the potted plants which were all about her. ... She talked to me of her flowers, of those she loved best, of her fear lest the bad weather harm them; then, cutting a few choice buds, she bade me take them, with her love, to my mother. ..." 3 She

found it easy to talk to children about flowers, for she sensed a kinship between the two. Jenkins also reports that Dickinson frequently included flowers in baskets of treats she lowered to children from her window—and often the children would send the basket back up, empty but for a flower they had picked "by way of tribute." Flowers provided a means of communication between the poet and the children. Clara Newman Turner, one of the neighborhood children, recalls, "Her little nephew [Ned], boy-like, had a way of leaving anything superfluous to his immediate needs at Grandma's. After one of these little 'Sins of Omission,' over came his high-top rubber boots, standing erect and spotless on a silver tray, their tops running over with Emily's flowers." The flowers conveyed the message. The spiritual aspect she perceived within small children she also saw in flowers; therefore she assumed an understanding—a communion—in their relationship, and the fact that she compared flowers to children has profound significance.

The most significant of the metaphors in which various aspects of nature are compared to children are those which include a protective figure—a "phantom love"—who assumes divine characteristics.

5Leyda, II, 481.
Whose are the little beds, I asked
Which in the valleys lie?
Some shook their heads, and others smiled--
And no one made reply.

Perhaps they did not hear, I said,
I will inquire again--
Whose are the beds--the tiny beds
So thick upon the plain?

'Tis Daisy, in the shortest--
A little further on--
Nearest the door--to wake the 1st--
Little Leontodon.

'Tis Iris, Sir, and Aster--
Anemone, and Bell--
Bartsia, in the blanket red--
And chubby Daffodil.

Meanwhile, at many cradles
Her busy foot she plied--
Humming the quaintest lullaby
That ever rocked a child.

Hush! Epigea wakens!
The Crocus stirs her lids--
Rhodora's cheek is crimson,
She's dreaming of the woods!

Then turning from them reverent--
Their bedtime 'tis, she said--
The Bumble bees will wake them
When April woods are red.

(Poems, #142, c. 1859, I, 101)

The poem, written in 1859, is obviously not one of Dickinson's best. It is maudlin in its sentimentality, but it is significant to this study because of the presence of a "phantom love" who "reverently" sees to the needs of her children. The cherubic quality of the "children" is again present--the child image conveys a spiritual quality rather than a physical one.
Four years after she wrote "Whose are the little beds, I asked," Dickinson completed the following poem. The hovering presence in this poem is identical in nature to the one described in the previous one.

Nature--the Gentlest Mother is,
Impatient of no Child--
The feeblest--or the waywardest--
Her Admonition mild--

In Forest--and the Hill--
By Traveller--be heard--
Restraining Rampant Squirrel--
Or too impetuous Bird--

How fair Her Conversation--
A Summer Afternoon--
Her Household--Her Assembly--
And when the Sun go down--

Her Voice among the Aisles
Incite the timid prayer
Of the minutest Cricket--
The most unworthy Flower--

When all the Children sleep--
She turns as long away
As will suffice to light Her lamps--
Then bending from the Sky--

With infinite Affection--
And infiniter Care--
Her Golden finger on Her lip--
Wills Silence--Everywhere--

(Poems, #790, c. 1863, II, 596-97)

When first published in 1891, the poem was unfortunately entitled "Mother Nature"--unfortunately, because the popular connotation of "Mother Nature" is much more superficial than that which the poem seeks to convey. The "Mother Nature" of the poem is supernatural, yet personal. She has power to cause the stars to twinkle and to will earthly
silence, yet she also attends to the motherly responsibilities of patience, admonition, and restraint toward her "children." Qualities of deity are ascribed to her; her voice "Incite[s] . . . prayer," and in the end of the poem, she is seen as encompassing all of creation. The use of the metaphor comparing squirrels, birds, crickets, flowers—indeed all of nature—to children is significant, for these "children" are attuned to the voice of the supernatural hovering over them and walking among them.

In the poem beginning "Three times—we parted—Breath—and I," the increasing life strength of the persona is contrasted to the decreasing turbulence of the wind and waves. The presence of "Mother Nature" is implied in the following lines, in which the winds are likened to children: "The Waves grew sleepy—Breath—did not--/The Winds—like Children—lulled—" (Poems, #598, c. 1862, II, 459).

In the following excerpt, the "children" of the poem are the sun's setting rays; their activities are similarly supervised by a divine being.

```
... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
But how he set—I know not--
There seemed a purple stile
That little Yellow boys and girls
Were climbing all the while--
Till when they reached the other side,
A Dominie in Gray--
Put gently up the evening Bars--
And led the flock away--
(Poems, #318, c. 1862, I, 242)
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The image which the sunset conjures is that of a purple fence (outlines on the horizon) which fairy-like, yellow children
(the sun's rays) scamper over. The supernatural is very evident in the image; "A Dominie in Gray" gathers the gossamer children and leads them away. This figure is virtually the same as the "phantom love" mentioned in letter #609 and evident in the previous poems. The point to be made here is that Dickinson assumes a gentle, loving control by a supernatural power over all of nature.

The seasons in the following poem are likened to children. Like the children in the previous images, they are watched over by a divine protector.

The Mountain sat upon the Plain
In his tremendous Chair—
His observation omnifold,
His inquest, everywhere—

The Seasons played around his knees
Like Children round a sire—
Grandfather of the Days is He
Of Dawn, the Ancestor—

(Poems, #975, c. 1864, II, 705)

The mountain has divine characteristics in that he is omniscient and eternal. He oversees the childlike seasons and remains constant. He is ever present and all-knowing. Like the "Dominie in Gray" and "Nature—the gentlest Mother," he is Deity.

Although the metaphor in the following 1859 poem is confused, the presence of a divine "Commander" is suggested in the last three lines:

Some Rainbow—coming from the Fair!
Some Vision of the World Cashmere—
I confidently see!
Or else a Peacock's purple Train (no stanza break)
Feather by feather—on the plain
Fritters itself away!

The dreamy Butterflies bestir!
Lethargic pools resume the whirr
Of last year's sundered tune!
From some old Fortress on the sun
Baronial Bees—march—one by one—
In murmuring platoon!

The Robins stand as thick today
As flakes of snow stood yesterday—
On fence—and Roof—and Twig!
The Orchis binds her feather on
For her old lover—Don the Sun!
Revisiting the Bog!

Without Commander! Countless! Still!
The Regiments of Wood and Hill
In bright detachment stand!
Behold! Whose Multitudes are these?
The children of whose turbaned seas—
Or what Circassian Land?

(Poems, #64, c. 1859, I, 49)

The bees, robins, orchis appear throughout most of the poem as militia waiting for orders. That image, however, softens when the persona questions from what exotic land these "children" have come. They no longer seem rigid soldiers but mysterious children, perhaps "playing soldier." The questions raised in the last three lines are metaphysical ones. The question, "Whose Multitudes are these?" implies the existence of an unseen presence who both commands and oversees his "children."

The preceding images all contain metaphors comparing nature to the child. Interestingly enough, Dickinson's work contains surprisingly few metaphors in which the child is compared to an aspect of nature. An implication which
may therefore be drawn is that Dickinson, in giving nature animation, ascribed to it the characteristics she saw in the life of a child--more a spiritual than a physical reality--a mystical quality. For Dickinson, the child best personifies the spiritual qualities she sees in all of nature.

The relationship between the child and nature, however, involves much more than a similarity of spiritual characteristics between the two. It is a metaphysical relationship which Dickinson tried on occasion to define. In an 1881 letter she wrote, "childhood is earth's confiding time . . ." ([Letters, #710, c. 1881, III, 700] and thereby implied a communication--a communion--between nature and the child. In 1877 she similarly wrote, "Day is tired, and lays her antediluvian cheek to the Hill like a child. Nature confides now--" ([Letters, #503, c. 1877, II, 583]). In that same year she professed, "I was always attached to Mud, because of what it typifies--also, perhaps, a Child's tie to primeval Pies" ([Letters, #492, c. 1877, II, 576]). The philosophy which emerges is one which envisions the child and nature in a confiding relationship; the child is able to commune with deity in nature.

The child in Dickinson's images is, for the most part, an integral part of nature itself. In conveying this idea, Dickinson portrays the child and nature in a sympathetic relationship. Dickinson's child is the child of nature rather than the child of woman. The following image is an example of that concept:
New feet within my garden go--
New fingers stir the sod--
A Troubadour upon the Elm
Betray the solitude.

New children play upon the green--
New Weary sleep below--
And still the pensive Spring returns--
And still the punctual snow!

(Poems, #99, c. 1859, I, 77)

The appearance of children in the spring is as predictable
as the fresh songs of birds in that season. To Dickinson
the small child is nature's child.

In "A Tongue--to tell Him I am true!" written in 1862,
the persona begs for a messenger to go to her lover to assure
him of her fidelity. The messenger requested is a child,
and the request is made in such a way that nature seems the
mother of the child: "Had Nature--in Her monstrous House/
A single Ragged Child--" (Poems, #400, c. 1862, I, 313).
The persona asks permission from nature for a child to be
her intercessor.

The relationship between the child and nature is much
more, however, than that the child is part of nature.
Dickinson viewed nature as sympathetic to the child.

When I have seen the Sun emerge
From His amazing House--
And leave a Day at every Door
A Deed, in every place--

Without the incident of Fame
Or accident of Noise--
The Earth has seemed to me a Drum,
Pursued of little Boys
(Poems, #888, c. 1864, II, 655-56)

The same idea—that the earth enjoys and responds to children--
may be found in still another image:
Glass was the street—in tinsel Peril
Tree and Traveller stood—
Filled was the Air with merry venture
Hearty with Boys the Road—

*(Poems, #1498, c. 1880, III, 1034)*

Of the last two poems cited, the former was purportedly written in 1864, while the latter has been dated 1880.

Dickinson’s concept of the relationship between the child and nature, then, seems to have remained intact throughout that period of time. The child enjoys nature, and nature responds sympathetically. Indeed, there is a communion between the two, as witnessed by the image in the following excerpt:

The Moon is distant from the Sea—
And yet, with Amber Hands—
She leads Him, docile as a Boy—
Along appointed Sands—

*(Poems, #429, c. 1862, I, 332)*

The image is that of a young boy, walking along the beach in communion with the forces of nature and in obedience to its command.

The closest Dickinson comes to defining the relationship between nature and the child is in a fragment written about 1868:

The Merchant of the Picturesque
A Counter has and sales
But is within or negative
Precisely as the calls—
To Children he is small in price
And large in courtesy
It suits him better than a check
Their artless currency—
Of Counterfeits he is so shy
Do one advance so near
As to behold his ample flight—
*(Poems, #1131, c. 1868, II, 793)*
Very simply, children are not counterfeit; they are genuine and sincere. That quality gives them access to nature—access which is denied those who lack the quality, namely adults. The high premium Dickinson placed on genuineness is obvious throughout the corpus of her letters and poems. Children—especially small children—are not deceitful; they do not veil their feelings. Perhaps that quality more than any other led to Dickinson's idealization of childhood.

But there were also other qualities about children which were equally important in the development of her philosophy. For example, children do not merely observe their surroundings; they experience them—they are indeed a part of them. In the preceding fragment, the "Merchant of the Picturesque," which may be defined as nature, allows children admission but denies it to "counterfeits" (adults). The same image—of nature as a show which may be experienced by children but only observed by adults—is contained in this poem:

Dew—is the Freshet in the Grass—
'Tis many a tiny Mill
Turns unperceived beneath our feet
And Artisan lies still—

We spy the Forests and the Hills
The Tents to Nature's Show
Mistake the Outside for the in
And mention what we saw.

Could Commentators on the Sign
Of Nature's Caravan
Obtain "Admission" as a Child
Some Wednesday Afternoon.
(Poems, #1097, c. 1866, II, 771)
The last stanza reflects a heartfelt plea by the poet—if it were only possible for nature's spectators to enter its confines, as one enters a carnival or a circus, and thereby experience it as a child does. The implication is clear—such is not possible; therefore, only the child can know the fullness of nature; others only see its exterior realities. This poem is perhaps the most compact expression of the relationship Dickinson feels exists between the child and nature.

The nearness of children to nature is spiritual, or mystical. In poem #496, for example, Dickinson compares the spiritual nearness of a dead loved one to the nearness of "Children, to the Rainbow's scarf—/Or Sunset's Yellow play" (Poems, #496, c. 1862, II, 380). In 1883 she wrote, "I think the early spiritual influences about a child are more hallowing than we know" (Letters, #324, c. 1883, III, 777). One may safely infer, since "childhood is earth's confiding time," that those "early spiritual influences" emanate from nature.

The spiritual nature of the relationship between the child and nature is often denoted by use of religious imagery. Perhaps the clearest example of the fusion of child, nature, and deity is found in the following poem:

These are the days when Birds come back—
A very few—a Bird or two—
To take a backward look.
These are the days when skies resume
The old--old sophistries of June--
A blue and gold mistake.

Oh fraud that cannot cheat the Bee--
Almost thy plausibility
Induces my belief.

Till ranks of seeds their witness bear--
And softly thro' the altered air
Hurries a timid leaf.

Oh Sacrament of summer days,
Oh Last Communion in the Haze--
Permit a child to join.

Thy sacred emblems to partake--
Thy consecrated bread to take
And thine immortal wine!

(Poems, #130, c. 1859, I, 92-93)

The religious imagery renders the experience with nature a sacred one. In stanza five the poet asks the privilege of joining--of participating in, rather than merely observing--the autumnal rites. The "joining" is requested as a child, rather than as an adult, in keeping with Dickinson's concept of the child on the same spiritual plane with nature and therefore entitled and able to be a part of it.

The fusion of the deity, nature, and the child is also found in the following two poems. Both were supposedly written in 1862, three years after "These are the days when Birds come back--.

The Black Berry--wears a Thorn in his side--
But no Man heard Him cry--
He offers His Berry, just the same
To Partridge--and to Boy--

He sometimes holds upon the Fence--
Or struggles to a Tree--
Or clasps a Rock, with both His Hands--
But not for Sympathy--
We--tell a Hurt--to cool it--
This Mourner--to the Sky
A little further reaches--instead--
Brave Black Berry--
(Poems, #554, c. 1862, II, 423-24)

The description of the blackberry immediately calls to mind the image of the suffering Christ. The picture thus serves as a fusion of deity in nature. The partakers of this mystical union are the partridge and a boy, two extensions of nature who appear in the poem as equals. The blackberry does not seem to favor the bird over the boy, even though the popular conception might be that the bird is more a part of nature. In the mind of the poet, the two are equally entitled to experience nature.

Fifteen years after the previous poem was written, Dickinson expressed a similar sentiment to Sally Jenkins, a neighborhood child and sister of MacGregor Jenkins. "Will the sweet child who sent me the butterflies, herself a member of the same ethereal nation, accept a rustic kiss, flavored . . . with clover?" (Letters, #496, c. 1877, II, 578). The image portrays the child as having equal status in nature with the butterfly, just as the boy in the previous poem had equal status in nature with the partridge.

In the following poem, the religious connotation of "Tabernacles" in the last stanza deifies the hemlock:

I think the Hemlock likes to stand
Upon a Marge of Snow--
It suits his own Austerity--
And satisfies an awe
That men, must slake in Wilderness--
And in the Desert--cloy--
An instinct for the Hoar, the Bald--
Lapland's--necessity--

The Hemlock's nature thrives--on cold--
The Gnash of Northern winds
Is sweetest nutriment--to him--
His best Norwegian Wines--

To satin Races--he is nought--
But Children on the Don,
Beneath his Tabernacles, play,
And Dnieper Wrestlers, run

(Poems, #525, c. 1862, II, 403)

The setting for the poem is in the northeast part of Europe. The poet specifically mentions Lapland, a northern Scandinavian country, and the Don and Dnepr rivers, both located in the northwest part of Russia. The effect of placing the hemlock in that area is to intensify the "austerity" of the tree--it is located in an icy, exotic land. The hemlock is an awesome figure for desert men, who are separated from it. The "satin Races," on the other hand, ignore it. The term "satin Races" has interesting connotations. Satin is a glossy, ornamental type of cloth. It is not worn for comfort or warmth but for display. "Satin Races," then, would refer to those who have no genuine substance but who stress appearance--hypocrites, perhaps. In contrast to these are the children, who recognize and delight in the hemlock's deity. They play--not in the shade of the tree--but in its "Tabernacles." They are not awed, nor are they unaware; they are participators in the hemlock's domain. Again, there is the unmistakable image of the deity, nature, and the child as united in a mystical
oneness of understanding. When her nephew Ned visited Lake Placid in 1885, Dickinson wrote him, "Your intimacy with the Mountains I heartily endorse. . . . Deity will guide you--I do not mean Jehovah--" (Letters, #1000, c. 1885, III, 880). Deity--not the god of organized religion--but the god of nature--makes possible the communion between the child and nature.

The poems or excerpts which have been examined thus far in this chapter have several common characteristics. The most obvious is that all of the child images are fused with nature images. This fusion takes one of two forms. Certain aspects of nature--flowers, seasons, birds, animals, the sun, the sea--are compared to young children. In these metaphorical poems, the poet describes an animate nature. The type of animation she sees is the type most readily observed in the life of a child--an intangible quality, a wholesome innocence, and most importantly, a communion with the divine force which is thinly veiled by nature. The second form the nature-child fusion takes is that, instead of comparing the child to aspects of nature, the child appears an extension of nature, able to participate in it and to partake of it in a perfectly natural and innocent manner. Implied in these images is the idea that the child, in the state of innocence, possesses a oneness with nature and deity which is denied to those who do not live in the state of innocence--namely adults, who are variously described as "satin Races," "commentators," or "counterfeits."
The child in this state of innocence is invariably the small child.

The poems and excerpts cited thus far are similar in their portrayal of the small child as part of a divine whole. Yet they were written, according to the dates assigned by Johnson, in widely varying years. The earliest assigned date is 1858, the year in which Dickinson's philosophy of childhood began to take a definite form, as reported in Chapter I, and also the year in which she began more and more to live in seclusion. The latest assigned date is 1880, only six years before her death. This aspect of her philosophy concerning childhood, one may therefore infer, was developed around 1858 and in fact did not change substantially throughout her life.

Dickinson, intrigued by the child in the state of innocence, sought in several poems to define the feeling of such a child and to recapture that feeling for herself. Perfect communion with nature and deity renders the world of childhood one of unabashed joy. The following poem is interesting for the use of the child image to convey the feeling of joyousness in a state of perfection:

I have a King, who does not speak--
So--wondering--thro' the hours meek
I trudge the day away--
Half glad when it is night, and sleep,
If, haply, thro' a dream, to peep
In parlors, shut by day.

And if I do--when morning comes--
It is as if a hundred drums (no stanza break)
Did round my pillow roll,
And shouts fill all my Childish sky,
And Bells keep saying 'Victory'
From steeples in my soul!

And if I dont--the little Bird
Within the Orchard, is not heard,
And I omit to pray
'Father, thy will be done' today
For my will goes the other way,
And it were perjury!

(Poems, #103, c. 1859, I, 78-79)

The poem begins with a feeling of estrangement. If that
estrangement may be overcome--vicariously, through dreams--
the poet's joy is akin to that of a child--unabashed and
complete. If reconciliation cannot be effected, the poet's
"sky" is not "childish"; instead, she cannot commune with
nature or deity. The poem is primarily important because of
the exultation it associates with the word "childish."
Moreover, if the persona feels "childish," it is a spiritual
experience, as witnessed by the lines, "Bells keep saying
'Victory'/From steeples in my Soul!"

The child's world is an ideal world; it is magical and
mystical. The unaffected joy of the child is described in
this excerpt:

"If it would last"
I asked the East,
When that Bent Stripe
Struck up my childish
Firmament--
And I, for glee,
Took Rainbows, as the common way,
And empty Skies
The Eccentricity--

(Poems, #257, c. 1861, I, 184)
Childhood joy is thus described in terms of the splendors of nature. The child's affinity with nature is thereby underscored.

In a poem beginning "My first well Day--since many ill--" the transition from summer to fall is described with the use of the child image to convey a feeling of great joy and optimism. In the opening stanzas, the persona recounts a recent, serious illness. The duration of the illness has coincided with that of summer, and the persona's first venture outside is a tour through summer's end.

```
The Summer deepened, while we strove--
She put some flowers away--
And Redder cheeked Ones--in theirstead--
A fond--illusive way--

To cheat Herself, it seemed she tried--
As if before a child
To fade--Tomorrow--Rainbows held
The Sepulchre, could hide
```

(Poems, #574, c. 1862, II, 438)

For the child, "tomorrows" hold promise of great joy. By producing brilliant ("Redder cheeked Ones") flowers, summer tries to convince herself that "rainbows," and not the grave, are in store for her. The child image conveys the idealism of the child--"rainbows" are the "common way."

The small child lives in a state of innocence, of joy, of oneness with nature and deity, of bliss.

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Bliss is the plaything of the child--
The secret of the man
The sacred stealth of Boy and Girl
Rebuke it if we can
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(Poems, #1553, c. 1882, III, 1070)
This short poem, written in 1882, describes childhood as a state of ecstasy. The use of the word "sacred" in line three again brings to mind the influence of the deity in the life of the child. Dickinson believed "that the innocents had unchallenged access to the deity. . . ."6 In the poems cited thus far, this belief has been ascertained through the use of spiritual or religious imagery. In other poems Dickinson is much more direct. In the one which follows, for example, she explicitly states her conviction that deity favors children.

It was given to me by the Gods--
When I was a little Girl--
They give us Presents most--you know--
When we are new--and small

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

(Poems, #454, c. 1862, I, 350)

The innocence of childhood, with all its accompanying attractions, is divinely disposed. Jack L. Capps recognizes the most probable source for Dickinson's concept of the child in communion with deity. In Emily Dickinson's Reading, he reports his observations concerning her references to the book of Matthew. "Considered as a group, her references to Matthew indicate that she looked to that book for the promise of mercy manifest in the love of children, birds, and flowers, and for confirmation of the paradox of ultimate triumph and reward for the least of beings."7 He goes on to say, "[her]
heart . . . held an undying love for children, a natural affection heightened by her awareness of the child's privilege of access in the Christian hierarchy. 'Suffer little children, and forbid them not . . . for of such is the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 19:14) was a passage especially meaningful for her."8 Indeed, she quoted that particular scripture on many occasions, one of which was in an 1870 letter to Higginson. "With the Kingdom of Heaven on his knee, could Mr. Emerson hesitate? 'Suffer little children'--" (Letters, #353, c. 1870, II, 482). Capps further observes that, "When she assumes the ingenuous role of a child or articulates the truth embodied in the natural beauty of a bird or flower, she gives her uninhibited appeal the sanction implicit in Christ's 'Suffer the little children' or 'Consider the lilies.' This was for her a natural and satisfying relationship with God, with truth, and with poetry, a relationship reinforced by Matthew's assurances of its validity."9 The deity who placed children uppermost in his realm was also the deity who said, "Consider the lilies." The book of Matthew, then, served to reinforce her ideas concerning the spiritual affinity of nature and the child.

The following image of Christ as a fellow child reveals the relationship Dickinson felt existed between the two:

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8Capps, p. 43.
9Ibid., p. 50.
The Savior must have been
A docile Gentleman--
To come so far so cold a Day
For little Fellowmen--

The Road to Bethlehem
Since He and I were Boys
Was leveled, but for that twould be
A rugged billion Miles--
(Poems, #1487, c. 1881, III, 1027)

Enclosed in a letter to Higginson, dated 1881, the poem was titled by Dickinson, "Christ's Birthday." Christ came to earth, the poem states, for "little Fellowmen." The use of the word "little" again underscores Dickinson's belief that the child holds the foremost place in the spiritual hierarchy.

Among the most poignant of Dickinson's poems are those in which the subject is a child. An examination of three such poems follows. Dickinson seems particularly partial to boys. She found the ideal of childhood in the boy. The following images portray the child as greatest of importance in the spiritual hierarchy.

He told a homely tale
And spotted it with tears--
Upon his infant face was set
The Cicatrice of years--

All crumpled was the cheek
No other kiss had known.
Than flake of snow, divided with
The Redbreast of the Barn--

If Mother--in the Grave--
Or Father--on the Sea--
Or Father in the Firmament--
Or Bretheren, had he--
If Commonwealth below, 
Or Commonwealth above 
Have missed a Barefoot Citizen-- 
I've ransomed it--alive-- 
(Poems, #763, c. 1863, II, 580-81)

Although the boy described is apparently an orphan, he has known the affection of nature. The religious overtones in the poem are apparent; the act of ransoming in the last line is a redeeming act in the theological sense.

The divinity Dickinson sensed in the child is more obvious in the poem which follows--by virtue of the use of religious imagery.

This dirty--little--Heart 
Is freely mine. 
I won it with a Bun-- 
A Freckled shrine--

But eligibly fair 
To him who sees 
The Visage of the Soul 
And not the knees. 
(Poems, #1311, c. 1874, III, 909)

The dirty, freckled boy in the image is in effect an altar on which the persona places her offering ("a Bun"). The boy, in this respect an intermediary, appears to have direct access to deity. His divine nature is implied by the persona, who sees past his dirty exterior to the "Visage of the Soul."

The spiritual aspect of the child is described through the image of royalty in the following poem:

I met a King this afternoon! 
He had not on a Crown indeed, 
A little Palmleaf Hat was all, 
And he was barefoot, I'm afraid!
This poem is much like the previous one; the dirty, ragged appearance of the boys is deceiving. Spiritually, they are regal. The estate of the small boys has the greatest significance in the Christian hierarchy.

The child in the state of innocence has an innate and intimate knowledge of deity and nature; he is at one with the two without the need for seeking to comprehend or define his status—without the mental tools to verbalize his feelings. The child in the state of innocence is himself divine. At the same time, however, the child is aware of the dangers
lurking behind a too-close communion with nature. Such an awareness has no place in a Christian or pantheistic framework but is distinctly romantic. The child's existence is comprised of both divine love and supernatural, awesome terror.

That the child recognizes extremes in nature, by inference as well as experience, is stated in the following poem:

The Zeroids—taught us—Phosphorus—
We learned to like the Fire
By playing Glaciers—when a Boy—
And Tinder—guessed—by power
Of Opposite—to balance Odd—
If White—a Red—must be!
Paralysis—our Primer—dumb—
Unto Vitality!
(Poems, #689, c. 1863, II, 532)

Glaciers, symbol for extreme cold, are perhaps also symbolic of nature's beauty. Fire, conversely, is extremely hot and fearful. If nature has extreme beauty, the child reasons, then it must also have extreme destructive powers. The icy experience of "playing Glaciers" causes the child to infer the existence of an intense heat. The child consequently lives with and readily recognizes the dual aspects of nature.

In Dickinson's concept of the child as an integral part of a mystical whole which also embodies nature and divinity, the child experiences both unabashed joy and unbounded, awesome fear. This aspect of her concept is reflected in poems ranging from a very light treatment of the subject to a more profound. For example, the following poem is very light—even merry—in tone, but it includes the idea that
small children have the capacity to be romantically terror-stricken by the simplest of creatures.

These are the Nights that Beetles love--
From Eminence remote
Drives ponderous perpendicular
His figure intimate
The terror of the Children
The merriment of men
Depositing his Thunder
He hoists abroad again--
A Bomb upon the Ceiling
Is an improving thing--
It keeps the nerves progressive
Conjecture flourishing--
Too dear the Summer evening
Without discreet alarm--
Supplied by Entomology
With it's remaining charm

(Poems, #1128, c. 1868, II, 791-92)

The beetle, while it brings a chuckle from adults who understand what it is and realize its harmlessness, inspires fear in the hearts of the children. Because the children are not familiar with the beetle, they are alarmed by it, but the underlying point is their ability to believe in the presence of an awesome terror—an ability denied to men, who can find a plausible explanation for every phenomenon.

A more profound—and more Wordsworthian—statement of the awesome fear which is one of childhood's most constant companions is contained within the following poem:

Through lane it lay—thro' bramble--
Through clearing and thro' wood--
Banditti often passed us
Upon the lonely road.

The wolf came peering curious--
The owl looked puzzled down--
The serpent's satin figure
Glid stealthily along--
The tempests touched our garments--
The lightning's poinards gleamed--
Fierce from the Crag above us
The hungry Vulture screamed--

The satyrs fingers beckoned--
The valley murmured "come"--
These were the mates--
This was the road
These children fluttered home.
(Poems, #9, c. 1858, I, 11-12)

In this poem nature takes on an entirely different aspect from that seen in the poems cited thus far. It is not the gentle, sympathetic, protective "phantom love," but a menacing, fearful reality. Even demonic characteristics may be discerned; the poem is replete with images of satyrs, serpents, vultures, wolves. The image is not destructive; the fear invoked has a romantic nature. The point is that the children in the image believe in the possibility of the dangers described. If the small child experiences divine ecstasy, he may envision its opposite extreme--supernatural fear--in much the same way that he infers the existence of fire from his experience with ice. Three years after the above poem was written, a similar image was included in a letter to Louise Norcross, in which Dickinson wrote about "the tangled road children walked . . . some of them to the end, and others but a little way, even as far as the fork in the road" (Letters, #234, c. 1861, II, 376). The "tangled road" is frightening. Some brave children walk to the end of the road; more timorous children, however, turn back at various points along the way. It is not difficult for one to imagine
Dickinson at her window, or out for a walk with Vinnie and Austin, observing a scene similar to the ones she describes. What is fascinating is her ability to project herself into the midst of those children—to feel and think as they do. Adulthood has not robbed her of the ability to recall vividly her own childhood experiences in such a way that she in effect experiences them anew. This perhaps says a great deal about the poet herself. She wrote to a childhood friend in 1850, "The shore is safer, Abiah, but I love to buffet the sea—I can count the bitter wrecks here in these pleasant waters, and hear the murmuring winds, but oh, I love the danger . . .

(letters, #39, c. 1850, I, 104).

The well known poem "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" expresses the fear which a child feels in the presence of nature. The child, while he has an affinity and intimate acquaintance with nature, realizes it contains cause for intense fear.

A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides--
You may have met Him--did you not
His notice sudden is--

The Grass divides as with a Comb--
A spotted shaft is seen--
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on--

He likes a Boggy Acre
A Floor too cool for Corn--
Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot--
I more than once at Noon
Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash
Unbraiding in the Sun
When stooping to secure it
It wrinkled, and was gone--
Several of Nature's People
I know, and they know me--
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality--

But never met this Fellow
Attended, or alone
Without a tighter breathing
And Zero at the Bone--
(Poems, #986, c. 1865, II, 711-12)

The poet describes her feeling concerning the snake—he strikes terror to the very marrow of the bone, both for the child and the adult.

Another "snake poem" indicates the child's terror-stricken flight from possible danger:

Sweet is the swamp with its secrets,
Until we meet a snake;
'Tis then we sigh for houses,
And our departure take
At that enthralling gallop
That only childhood knows.
A snake is summer's treason,
And guile is where it goes.
(Poems, #1740, n. d., III, 1170)

The swamp, with all its mysteries, is inviting—until a possible danger is realized. The child flees at an "enthralling gallop." The use of the word "enthralling" is interesting. It indicates that even as the child is fleeing, he loves the danger. Moreover, that "enthralling gallop" is one that "only childhood knows"; it is denied to adults.

The frantic terror of childhood is denoted again in the following poem:

I never hear the word "escape"
Without a quicker blood,
A sudden expectation,
A flying attitude!
I never hear of prisons broad
By soldiers battered down,
But I tug childish at my bars
Only to fail again!
(Poems, #77, c. 1859, I, 62)

The intense fear the poet seeks to express can best be explained in terms of a "childish" fear; the child's fear is most intense. In a letter to Higginson in 1862, Dickinson expressed her own fear in childlike terms when she wrote, "I had a terror--since September--I could tell to none--and so I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground--because I am afraid--" (Letters, #261, c. 1862, II, 404).

Pantheism, Christianity, and romanticism all are reflected in Dickinson's concept of the state of the small child. Communing with deity through nature is definitely a pantheistic tenet; Christianity, on the other hand, assures the importance of the child in the spiritual sense--indeed, the hovering presence of an unseen deity in many of the images is remarkably similar to the Christian concept of Christ as the "Good Shepherd." Finally, Dickinson reflects the British romantic writers in her awareness of the awesome terrors which lurk in nature.

It was with the small child that Dickinson felt a special affinity. In his biography of the poet, Johnson reports, "To small children she was always accessible, and to them she opened her heart and her cookie jar."10 He goes on to

report that, "the last fifteen years of her life . . . her outward activities, so far as they could be observed by neighbors, seemed confined to caring for her invalid mother, tending her flowers, and enjoying the association of small children."\(^{11}\) Dickinson identified readily with small children, perhaps because she equated her feelings about the spiritual qualities of nature with those she felt existed innately in the small child. MacGregor Jenkins relates an experience with nature which Dickinson provided for him. "I followed her and she pointed out a wonderful moth which had broken its chrysalis and was fluttering about among her flowers . . . To this day I never see a particularly gorgeous butterfly . . . that I do not feel a faint echo of the thrill for its beauty and mystery that Miss Emily tried to share with me that day."\(^{12}\) On another occasion, she conveyed this message to the Henry Hills children: "Please tell the Children the Acorns sell me Saucers still for the little Pies, but I have lent my only Wing to a lame Robin, so cannot freight them. Children's Hearts are large. I shall not need an Intercessor" (Letters, #417, c. 1874, II, 528). She needs no intercessor because she shares the child's affinity with nature and therefore is one of them. "In what she wrote for children, in prose and verse, the tone insists: we know and understand even if

\(^{11}\)Johnson, p. 258. Italics are mine.

\(^{12}\)Jenkins, p. 122.
they don't. Childhood bands its members together in conspiracy against the adult."¹³ Dickinson considered herself a child; she shared the child's sense of oneness with nature and deity. She also shared the child's belief in nature's terrors in such a way that "the effect of Miss Dickinson's kind of thinking is to make the world uniquely hazardous, a place given over to strange powers and to extraordinarily dangerous adversaries. All around the individual, there are intelligent and unfriendly forces that lurk and listen . . ."¹⁴ This view is typically childlike—and typically Dickinson.


Dickinson's idealization of the small child is intense; he is a divine being worthy of her emulation. She observes that in the normal processes of development, however, the small child gradually but inexorably grows away from the communion he enjoys with nature and divinity. That process of estrangement Dickinson deplores, and there is a large group of images which depict the small child as a victim of a combination of estranging forces, including his own curiosity, adult repressiveness, education, and religion. The tone of these images is alternately pathetic and bitter. Images which depict the child as the protagonist in the process of estrangement are full of pathos. The largest number of images in this category, however, concern forces outside the child himself—adult convention, education, religion, death. These images are marked by invective; adults appear virtually to wrench the child from the arms of deified nature and to force him to conform to standards which have been formulated for him. For example, the child must learn to behave; he must be educated; he must embrace religion. All these pressures to conform are anathema to Dickinson, and her sympathies clearly lie with the child. The most cruel form of
estrangement is death. Poems which deal with a child's reaction to death or the death of a child have a tone of cruel irony. There does appear to be one acceptable state of existence beyond childhood for Dickinson, and that is within a love relationship. There is consequently a small group of images which depict a girl passing from the sublime state of childhood into a "diviner" relationship with a loved one. The love relationship is the only instance in which the separation from childhood is treated sympathetically.

The following image, which is an analogy of the soul to a small boy, reflects the poet's feeling of empathic pain for the child who has been separated from the ecstasies to which he is entitled. For this child "rainbows" are not the "common way."

It is easy to work when the soul is at play--
But when the soul is in pain--
The hearing him put his playthings up
Makes work difficult--then--

In the composite image of the small child in the preceding chapter there is no feeling of pain. That child appears capable of only unbounded joy or "enthralling," awesome fear. That overall image is a marked contrast to this image of the pained child. Although the reason for the separation is not specified, the child in the above image is in the process of estrangement. He is shown putting aside his

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childhood joys, and his resultant pain is acutely felt by the poet—so acutely that she relates intense spiritual pain to that of the child in the process of estrangement.

The small child who enjoys a confiding relationship with nature and deity does not seek to understand himself or his surroundings. As his intellect develops, however, he begins to ask questions, and his own questioning sets in motion his ultimate estrangement from divine communion. When the child seeks explanation for natural phenomena, he ceases to experience nature and becomes an observer. In the following poem the child does not accept the natural progression of the day; instead, he demands to know where morning may be found:

> Will there really be a "Morning"?  
> Is there such a thing as "Day"?  
> Could I see it from the mountains  
> If I were as tall as they?  

> Has it feet like Water lilies?  
> Has it feathers like a Bird?  
> Is it brought from famous countries  
> Of which I have never heard?  

> Oh some Scholar! Oh some sailor!  
> Oh some Wise Man from the skies!  
> Please to tell a little Pilgrim  
> Where the place called "Morning" lies!  

(Poems, #101, c. 1859, I, 78)

Assuming the child guise, the persona questions as a child would, seeking concrete answers in childlike terms. The child, although described as a "little Pilgrim (italics mine), is beginning to pass through the state of innocence. The answers he seeks do not come; because he cannot understand
morning, he has lost communion with it. He observes, rather
than experiences, it. The child is in the process of es-
trangement.

The child's questioning embraces more than inquiries
about the forces which create nature; he also asks profound
questions concerning human existence—questions whose answers
also elude him.

Good night, because we must,
How intricate the dust!
I would go, to know!
Oh incognito!
Saucy, Saucy Seraph
To elude me so!
Father! they wont tell me,
Wont you tell them to?
(Poems, #114, c. 1859, I, 84)

The last two lines portray a questioning child who demands to
know secrets which lie beyond the grave. The insatiable
desire to know what cannot be known ultimately renders exist-
ence an enigma for the child and results in his estrangement
from childhood's "citadel."

Three years before the preceding poem was written,
Dickinson expressed to Dr. and Mrs. Holland a desire to
return to a state in which questions of life and death would
neither need to be asked nor answered. Her mother appeared
seriously ill at the time, and Dickinson wrote, "I dont know
what her sickness is, for I am but a simple child, and
frightened at myself. I often wish I was a grass, or a toddling
daisy, whom all these problems of the dust might not terrify-."  

The wish to be blissfully ignorant as a part of nature is significant, inasmuch as Dickinson sees the small child in that role. The process of estrangement is, therefore, regrettable because it presents troubling and unanswerable questions concerning the tenuousness of human life.

In a child's questioning he insists upon knowing the whole truth. That insistence often leads him to unpleasant discoveries.

Glee--The great storm is over--  
Four--have recovered the Land--  
Forty--gone down together--  
Into the boiling Sand--

Ring--for the Scant Salvation--  
Toll--for the bonnie Souls--  
Neighbor--and friend--and Bridegroom--  
Spinning upon the Shoals--

How they will tell the Story--  
When Winter shake the Door--  
Till the Children urge--  
But the Forty--  
Did they--come back no more?

Then a softness--suffuse the Story--  
And a silence--the Teller's eye--  
And the Children--no further question--  
And only the Sea--reply--

(Poems, #619, c. 1862, II, 476-77)

The fact that four survived the shipwreck is insufficient for the children; the enormous truth is that forty did not survive--and it is that truth which overwhels. The adult desire is

to relate only the pleasant aspect of the disaster—the survival of the four. It is the children who insist on the whole truth.

Children, then, are to some extent their own enemies in that their questioning is an important step in the process of estrangement. They insist on the whole truth, unpleasant as well as pleasant aspects. They question natural phenomena they formerly were content to experience and enjoy. The process of estrangement, then, is inevitable and painful; moreover, the child's passage through it is reluctant. In an 1877 letter to Higginson, Dickinson recalled, "When Flowers annually died and I was a child, I used to read Dr. Hitchcock's Book on the Flowers of North America. This comforted their absence—assuring me they lived" (Letters, #488, c. 1877, II, 573). Thus she realized that in her own childhood she had experienced estrangement from an aspect of nature she particularly loved. The sense of alienation was so acute that she sought assurance that the flowers—and thereby the relationship—would return. Her action may be construed as an attempt not to lose touch even for a season with an aspect of nature for which she felt special affinity, for fear that the communion might not be completely restored.

As the child reluctantly enters the process of estrangement, he is encouraged and abetted by the adult world, and he becomes increasingly disillusioned by adult deceptions. The
deceptions range from seemingly innocuous ones to those more serious. Even the apparently harmless ones, however, foster distrust and disillusionment in the child. Dickinson reminisced with her Norcross cousins in 1874, "Do you remember the 'sometimes' of childhood, which invariably never occurred?" (Letters, #406, c. 1874, II, 522). Inherent in her question is a criticism of adults who, when seeking to allay a child's request, respond, "Sometime." In the response is no actual intent to fulfill the request in the future; it is intended merely to quiet the child. However, the child interprets it as a promise and is disillusioned when the promise is not kept.

Many adult deceptions are not so subtle; some are outright lies. Even though they may be fabricated for the child's safety, they are nonetheless lies, and Dickinson reveals her contempt for this practice in a letter to Higginson which expresses sentiment reminiscent of a poem cited earlier, "Sweet is the swamp with its secrets." "When much in the Woods as a little Girl, I was told that the Snake would bite me, that I might pick a poisonous flower, or Goblins kidnap me, but I went along and met no one but Angels, who were far shyer of me, than I could be of them, so I haven't that confidence in fraud which many exercise" (Letters, #271, c. 1862, II, 415). In this context the adult world seemingly seeks to wrench the child from his natural communion with nature and deity by creating within him an irrational fear.
of nature. Such practice is obviously repugnant to Dickinson; she considers it "fraud," and she suggests in the following poem a more desirable method of making explanations to children:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant--
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind--

(Poems, #1129, c. 1868, II, 792)

The child's questions and fears may be allayed by a kind, honest explanation. The persona advocates that truth be related gradually but that deception not be practiced.

A critical tone is found in the following poem which contains the image of an adult seeking to pull the child from his natural state and make of him a social being:

A little Dog that wags his tail
And knows no other joy
Of such a little Dog am I
Reminded by a Boy

Who gambols all the living Day
Without an earthly cause
Because he is a little Boy
I honestly suppose--

The Cat that in the Corner dwells
Her martial Day forgot
The Mouse but a Tradition now
Of her desireless lot

Another class remind me
Who neither please nor play
But not to make a "bit of noise"
Beseech each little Boy--

(Poems, #1185, c. 1871, III, 827-28)
The joy of childhood should be inviolate, and Dickinson's sympathies are clearly with the boy. Johnson theorizes that the poem was written with Ned, her ten-year-old nephew, in mind. Five years earlier, she had written these lines to Ned's mother, Susan Dickinson: "Ned is safe—Just 'serenaded' Hannah, and is running off with a Corn Leaf 'tail,' looking back for cheers, Grandma 'hoped' characteristically 'he would be a very good Boy.' 'Not very dood' he said, sweet defiant child! Obtuse ambition of Grandmamas!" (Letters, #320, c. 1866, II, 454). Dickinson's sense of humor is evident in both the poem and the letter, but her point is very clear. She sees the child as a natural being whom adult forces attempt to condition. The imagery surrounding the adult in the poem is fraught with unfavorable overtones. Dickinson's hearty dislike for cats is well known. The adult in the image is likened not just to a cat but to an old, worn out cat, rendering the image even more unfavorable. The boy, on the other hand, is a free spirit "without an earthly cause."

Not only could she observe adult repressiveness in the lives of children around her, but she could recall it in her own childhood.

They shut me up in Prose—
As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet—
Because they liked me "still"—
Still! Could themself have peeped--
And seen my Brain--go round--
They might as wise have lodged a Bird
For Treason--in the Pound--

(Poems, #613, c. 1862, II, 471-72)

Adult convention demands decorum of children. They must be "tamed" and forced to conform. The criticism is inherent in the image. The medium of poetry best suited Dickinson; indeed poetry may be construed as the persona's "natural" state. To "shut her up" in prose forces an estrangement from that natural state, as locking a child in the closet is inimical to his nature.

Further criticism of adults is leveled at those who deceive the child by shielding him from that which is unpleasant, such as death.

I noticed People disappeared
When but a little child--
Supposed they visited remote
Or settled Regions wild--
Now know I--They both visited
And settled Regions wild
But did because they died
A Fact withheld the little child--

(Poems, #1148, c. 1869, II, 805)

With maturity, then, the child learns the answers withheld from him earlier. The truth, which is less romantic than the child's imaginings, is denied the "little child"; such deception is typical of adults.

In Chapter I of this thesis excerpts from Emily's letters to Susan Gilbert (Dickinson) and Austin Dickinson, written in the early 1850's, were cited. Those excerpts will be
remembered as instructions to Austin and Susan, then both teachers, in disciplining their students. Dickinson's attitude toward children changed sharply; with that change in concept her attitude toward formalized education changed accordingly. The schoolroom assumed for her a repressive connotation, and that image is reflected in both poems and letters. For example, to Mrs. Holland she expressed her feeling that standardized spelling was totally unnecessary knowledge. "The Birds are very bold this Morning, and sing without a Crumb. . . . I used to spell the one by that name 'Fee Bee' when a Child, and have seen no need to improve! Should I spell all the things as they sounded to me, and say all the facts as I saw them, it would send consternation among more than the 'Fee Bees'!" (Letters, #820, c. 1883, III, 774). Whether spelled "phoebe" or "Fee Bee," the bird remains the same; Dickinson expresses her desire to place most importance on the basic realities or truths and to consider superficial and unimportant such trivialities as correct spelling. In fact, she delighted in circumventing such educational conformities as standardized rules of spelling and grammar. Northrop Frye notes this proclivity: "There is little in Emily Dickinson . . . of the feeling that a writer must come to terms with conventional language at all costs. When she meets an inadequacy in the English language
she simply walks through it, as a child might do."³ MacGregor Jenkins, reminiscing about the notes neighborhood children were wont to receive from Dickinson, observes: "The words are far apart . . . and she made free use of capital letters, a thing we noticed with delight, as it defied all the rules of the copy books with which we were familiar."⁴ Dickinson thus ridicules schoolroom conventions; her sympathies clearly support the child in resisting such intrusions into his natural, blissful state. In the early 1850's Dickinson exhorted Austin and Susan as teachers literally to whip their students into obedience and learning (see pp. 17-18). In the late 1850's, however, she appears to despise the repressive atmosphere of formal education. Her attitude toward the schoolroom underwent a complete reversal in the 1850's.

In certain poems cited in the previous chapter it was noted that the skies reflected the small child's innocence; they held rainbows—shouts filled them—evidence of divine guidance could be seen in the sun's movements across them. In the following poem, the sky appears to the questioning child not as a harbinger of divinity, but as an entity subject to scientific investigation. Education forms the basis for the child's questions.


It troubled me as once I was--
For I was once a Child--
Concluding how an Atom--fell--
And yet the Heavens--held--

The Heavens weighed the most--by far--
Yet Blue--and solid--stood--
Without a Bolt--that I could prove--
Would Giants--understand?

Life set me larger--problems--
Some I shall keep--to solve
Till Algebra is easier--
Or simpler proved--above--

Then--too--be comprehended--
What sorer--puzzled me--
Why Heaven did not break away--
And tumble--Blue--on me--

(Poems, #600, c. 1862, II, 460)

The skies which the child had accepted so naturally in the state of innocence are now subject to question. Because he cannot find answers, the child is perplexed. Education has alienated him from communion with an aspect of nature which in his former state he naturally possessed.

The following poem, in a similar vein, is an expression of outrage felt when, in the process of education, the child is encouraged to use sophisticated terms for his familiar cosmos. Education thus intrudes on the magical world of the child.

"Arcturus" is his other name--
I'd rather call him "Star."
It's very mean of Science
To go and interfere!

I slew a worm the other day--
A "Savan" passing by
Murmured "Resurgam"--"Centipede"!
"Oh Lord--how frail are we"! 
I pull a flower from the woods--
A monster with a glass
Computes the stamens in a breath--
And has her in a "class"!

Whereas I took the Butterfly
Aforetime in my hat--
He sits erect in "Cabinets"--
The Clover bells forgot.

What once was "heaven"
Is "Zenith" now--
Where I proposed to go
When Time's brief masquerade was done
Is mapped and charted too.

What if the poles sh'd frisk about
And stand upon their heads!
I hope I'm ready for "the worst"--
Whatever prank betides!

Perhaps the "Kingdom of Heaven's" changed--
I hope the "Children" there
Wont be "new fashioned" when I come--
And laugh at me--and stare--

I hope the Father in the skies
Will lift his little girl--
Old fashioned--naughty--everything--
Over the stile of "Pearl."

(Poems, #70, c. 1859, I, 55-56)

The last stanza bears remarkable resemblance to the last few lines of "I'll tell you how the sun rose," in which a "dominie in grey" leads the "flock" of children away. The two poems were probably written within one year of each other, and although the images are very similar, the perspectives of the poems are quite different. "I'll tell you how the sun rose" contains the image of a small child in perfect communion with deity and nature. "Arcturus," on the other hand, is written from the point of view of a child in the process of estrangement from this perfect communion. The child is reluctant--
even defiant—to suffer the separation, but she is powerless to halt the onslaught of education. The last stanza is a profound hope—even a plea—that she will regain her state of innocence after death, when deity will again guide her as a small child.

The schoolroom image, when used by Dickinson, gives a highly unfavorable impression. The following poem makes a plea for compassion which is not ordinarily found within the too-orderly confines of the schoolroom:

Did we disobey Him?
Just one time!
Charged us to forget Him—
But we couldn't learn!

Were Himself—such a Dunce—
What would we—do?
Love the dull lad—best—
Oh, wouldn't you?
(Poems, #267, c. 1861, I, 190)

The subject of the poem is probably the severing of a love relationship. The beloved, who assumes the form of a schoolmaster, orders that he be forgotten. That order is one which cannot be obeyed, and Dickinson pleads for mercy for the "student" who breaks the rules, the "dull lad" of the poem.

The schoolroom image is again used in a repressive sense in the following death poem:

I think the longest Hour of all
Is when the Cars have come—
And we are waiting for the Coach—
It seems as though the Time

Indignant—that the Joy was come—
Did block the Gilded Hands—
And would not let the Seconds by—
But slowest instant—ends—
The Pendulum begins to count--
Like little Scholars--loud--
The steps grow thicker--in the Hall--
The Heart begins to crowd--

Then I--my timid service done--
Tho' service 'twas, of Love--
Take up my little Violin--
And further North--remove.

(Poems, #635, c. 1862, II, 488)

The poem is presumably centered around the departure of a body for its burial. The second stanza is heavily ironic in its portrayal of time, an earthly reality, seeking to allay the departure. Biblical assurances of the joy in eternity are mocked; the clock tries desperately to stall the realization of that "joy." Time moves slowly toward the burial hour; when that hour is nigh, the sound of the pendulum is momentous. That Dickinson chose the recitation of "little Scholars" to compare to a clock's ticking toward the hour of burial indicates her feeling toward schoolroom recitation; the image is one of oppression and dread.

Nature reaches out to retrieve her educated and fading children in these lines:

The Hills in Purple syllables
The Day's Adventures tell
To little Groups of Continents
Just going Home from School.

(Poems, #1016, c. 1865, II, 728)

The children could not share the "day's adventures" with the hills, as they would like; they were "contained" within school. Again an unfavorable image of the estranging role of formal education emerges.
Not only are children merely "contained" in school; they are imprisoned. The following poem is perhaps the most openly critical of education in its role of wrenching the child from his natural state:

From all the Jails the Boys and Girls
Ecstatically leap--
Beloved only Afternoon
That Prison does'nt keep

They storm the Earth and stun the Air,
A Mob of solid Bliss--
Alas--that Frowns should lie in wait
For such a Foe as this--

(Poems, #1532, c. 1881, III, 1057)

The children in the image literally burst their bars to get back to the world where they naturally belong—nature. They "storm the earth" and "stun the air." In that world they may find ecstasy; however, in the last two lines they are confronted again with adult repressiveness—probably in the form of a disapproval of their unbounded enthusiasm. The child is continually thwarted in his attempt to remain in his natural state by adult institutions and adult sense of propriety; he is thereby forced to enter the hollow world of adulthood.

Three poems written in 1861 and 1862 fuse education and religion as estranging influences upon the child:

God permits industrious Angels--
Afternoons--to play--
I met one--forgot my Schoolmates--
All--for Him--straightway--

God calls home--the Angels--promptly--
At the Setting Sun--
I missed mine--how dreary--Marbles--
After playing Crown!

(Poems, #231, c. 1861, I, 168)
The image is an interesting one. On the one hand, God represses the angels and allows them only limited access to children; on the other hand, school similarly represses the child. The child and the angel, held fast by their respective "teachers," struggle in vain for greater access. That access is readily available to the small child who is untainted by restrictions. On another level of interpretation, perhaps in the process of estrangement the child gets only brief glimpses of the divine communion he formerly enjoyed. Those brief glimpses magnify the drab, mundane life for which the estranging forces are preparing him--a life consisting of "marbles," not "crowns."

God assumes the form of a schoolmaster in the following 1862 poem:

'Tis One by One--the Father counts--
And then a Tract between
Set Cypherless--to teach the Eye
The Value of its Ten--

Until the peevish Student
Acquire the Quick of Skill--
Then Numerals are dowered back--
Adorning all the Rule--

'Tis mostly Slate and Pencil--
And Darkness on the School
Distracts the Children's fingers--
Still the Eternal Rule

Regards least Cypherer alike
With Leader of the Band--
And every separate Urchin's Sum--
Is fashioned for his hand--

(Poems, #545, c. 1862, II, 418)
The schoolmaster repeats the recitation until his reluctant students can "dower back"—or reiterate—the lesson. The unwilling children are forced to remain within the confines of the schoolroom until they conform. The tone of the image is bitter and, in the last stanza, mocking.

Paradise is here depicted as one big schoolroom—dread and repressive:

I never felt at Home—Below—
And in the Handsome Skies
I shall not feel at Home—I know—
I don't like Paradise—

Because it's Sunday—all the time—
And Recess—never comes—
And Eden'll be so lonesome
Bright Wednesday Afternoons—

If God could make a visit—
Or ever took a Nap—
So not to see us—but they say
Himself—a Telescope

Perennial beholds us—
Myself would run away
From Him—and Holy Ghost—and All—
But there's the "Judgment Day"!
(Poems, #413, c. 1862, I, 321-22)

The effect of the images in the three preceding poems is to relate education and religion as similarly repressive pressures on the child. He reacts to them unfavorably; they are uncomfortable and unnatural. They divorce him from childhood.

Dickinson's most biting criticism of the forces which intrude into the child's perfect state is reserved for religion. The god of adult religion is not the same deity in communion with the child in innocence. This dichotomy can
be demonstrated by recalling her previously quoted advice to Ned on his visit to Lake Placid. "Your intimacy with the Mountains I heartily endorse. . . . Deity will guide you--I do not mean Jehovah--" (Letters, #1000, c. 1885, III, 880). The god in nature is the god of innocent childhood; Jehovah in this context is the god of adult religion. What Dickinson abhorred in religion was its portrayal of Jehovah, the god of vengeance. She relied heavily on her own intuition and the portions of the New Testament which picture the loving Christ for her theology. There was a profound dichotomy, she felt, between the deity and the interpretation of deity given by organized religion. In a letter to her nephew Gilbert in 1881 she states the difference between "human" and "divine" religion. "'All Liars shall have their part'--Jonathan Edwards--'And let him that is athirst come'--Jesus--" (Letters, #712, c. 1881, III, 701). The god of Calvinism, the dominant religious force of her day, was the god of judgment. Deity as she conceived it was compassion, embodied in Christ. Therefore, she could not accept most religious teachings, especially those regarding condemnation and damnation. "We . . . thought how hateful Jesus must be to get us into trouble when we had done nothing but Crucify him and that before we were born--." 

that "the doctrine of infant damnation she found revolting. . . . She never became reconciled to the God who punishes."6 The Calvinistic doctrine of predestination was also anathema to Dickinson.

Far from Love the Heavenly Father
Leads the Chosen Child,
Oftener through Realm of Briar
Than the Meadow mild.

Oftener by the Claw of Dragon
Than the Hand of Friend
Guides the Little One predestined
To the Native Land.

(Poems, #1021, c. 1865, II, 729)

The process of religious instruction, then, often removes the "chosen" child from the "meadow mild" to the "Realm of Briar," a less pleasant domain. It takes him from the world of love and harmony with nature to deliver him into the hands of a vengeful, exacting deity. The process produces a lamentable change in the child. The children in the following poem, for example, have been exposed to religious instruction, and they are frozen with fear as they seek—in the last three stanzas—the god of adult religion.

We dont cry—Tim and I,
We are far too grand—
But we bolt the door tight
To prevent a friend—

Then we hide our brave face
Deep in our hand—
Not to cry—Tim and I—
We are far too grand—

Nor to dream--he and me--
Do we condescend--
We just shut our brown eye
To see to the end--

Tim--see Cottages--
But, Oh, so high!
Then--we shake--Tim and I--
And lest I--cry--

Tim--reads a little Hymn--
And we both pray--
Please, Sir, I and Tim--
Always lost the way!

We must die--by and by--
Clergymen say--
Tim--shall--if I--do--
I--too--if he--

How shall we arrange it--
Tim--was--so--shy?
Take us simultaneous--Lord--
I--"Tim"--and Me!
(Poems, #196, c. 1860, I, 141)

The image of the fearful children (really only one child),
trying to reach God through hymn-reading and prayer, is
indeed a far cry from the images of children still in the
state of innocence, in communion with deity. Those children
are joyous; these are near tears, fearful, because of reli-
gious instruction. The type of fear these children experience,
moreover, is a destructive fear. It is not at all similar to
the fear the small child in communion with nature knows--an
exciting, "enthralling" fear.

Religious instruction gives rise to conscience, which
makes life miserable for the child with its endless accusa-
tions.
Who is it seeks my Pillow Nights--
With plain inspecting face--
"Did you" or "Did you not," to ask--
'Tis "Conscience"--Childhood's Nurse--

With Martial Hand she strokes the Hair
Upon my wincing Head--
"All" Rogues "shall have their part in" what--
The Phosphorus of God--
(Poems, #1598, c. 1884, III, 1100)

The Biblical allusion is to Revelations 21.8: "But the fearful, and unbelieving . . . and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death." This scripture is one which she associates with Jonathan Edwards (see p. 83), and which she considers inimical to Christ's teachings. Such dire warnings disturb the child's sleep and destroy the feeling of bliss which is his birthright. The nurse, conscience, does not comfort but intimidates the child. She is a marked contrast to the divine protector of childhood who appears in images of the child before estrangement.

Dickinson recorded her own sentiments when, as a child, she received religious instruction and encouragement to embrace Christianity. "When a Child and fleeing from Sacrament I could hear the clergyman saying, 'All who loved the Lord Jesus Christ--were asked to remain--' My flight kept time to the Words" (Letters, #412, c. 1874, II, 524-25). Christ, as represented by the clergyman, was so much to be feared that her immediate response was to escape.
Dickinson found the representation of religion similar to the legend of Santa Claus in that both are adult fabrications. The legend of Santa Claus, however, is not destructive. "The fiction of 'Santa Claus' always reminds me of the reply to my early question of 'Who made the Bible'--'Holy Men moved by the Holy Ghost,' and though I have now ceased my investigations, the Solution is insufficient--Santa Claus, though illustrates Revelation But a Book is only the Heart's Portrait--every Page a Pulse--" (Letters, #794, c. 1882, III, 756). Such religious deception was particularly resented by Dickinson. Only three years before her death, Dickinson reproved a friend in these terms: "You are like God. We pray to Him, and He answers 'No.' Then we pray to him to rescind the 'no,' and He don't answer at all, yet 'Seek and ye shall find' is the boon of faith" (Letters, #830, c. 1883, III, 780). Religion offers a false hope; faith dies when Biblical promises prove untrue.

I meant to have but modest needs--
Such as Content--and Heaven--
Within my income--these could lie
And Life and I--keep even--

But since the last--included both--
It would suffice my Prayer
But just for One--to stipulate--
And Grace would grant the Pair--

And so--upon this wise--I prayed--
Great Spirit--Give to me
A Heaven not so large as Your's,
But large enough--for me--

A Smile suffused Jehovah's face--
The Cherubim--withdrew-- (no stanza break)
Grave Saints stole out to look at me--
And showed their dimples--too--

I left the Place, with all my might--
I threw my Prayer away
The Quiet Ages picked it up--
And Judgment--twinkled--too--
That one so honest--be extant--
To take the Tale for true--
That "Whatsoever Ye shall ask--
Itself be given You"--

But I, grown shrewder--scan the Skies
With a suspicious Air--
As Children--swindled for the first
All Swindlers--be--infer--

(Poems, #476, c. 1862, I, 365-66)

Cynthia Chaliff interprets the poem as follows: "In her innocence as a child, Emily expected that life naturally would bring happiness. The religious precepts she learned reinforced her expectation. She believed that all her requests would be granted, and trustingly asked for them. She then encountered adult hypocrisy for the first time, and was subjected to the ridicule of the revered adults for having believed in them. The confusion produced in the child by its first experience of malicious teasing was quickly replaced by the conclusion that it must expect dishonesty and deceit from every quarter."\(^7\) Childlike trust, when applied to religion, is betrayed. Jehovah mocks one who does not recognize Biblical promises as deceptions. Such experience leads to bitter disillusionment with deity. The deity of innocence

may not be restored, and the god of religion, Jehovah, is a fraud. A great void exists, then, for the child in the process of estrangement.

I prayed, at first, a little Girl,
Because they told me to--
But stopped, when qualified to guess
How prayer would feel--to me--

If I believed God looked around,
Each time my Childish eye
Fixed full, and steady, on his own
In Childish honesty--

And told him what I'd like, today,
And parts of his far plan
That baffled me--
The mingled side
Of his Divinity--

And often since, in Danger,
I count the force 'twould be
To have a God so strong as that
To hold my life for me

Till I could take the Balance
That tips so frequent, now,
It takes me all the while to poise--
And then--it does'nt stay--

(Poems, #576, c. 1862, II, 440)

The god of religion is not operable in the child's life; this discovery leaves him adrift and unable to find a fixed point on which to anchor his life.

The child seeks knowledge of the mysteries of Jehovah, but it eludes him.

The nearest Dream recedes--unrealized--
The Heaven we chase,
Like the June Bee--before the School Boy,
Invites the Race--
Stoops--to an easy Clover--
Dips--evades--teases--deploy--
Then--to the Royal Clouds
Lifts his light Pinnace-- (no stanza break)
Heedless of the Boy--
Staring--bewildered--at the mocking sky--

Homesick for steadfast Honey--
Ah, the Bee flies not
That brews that rare variety!
(Poems, #319, c. 1862, I, 243-44)

The seeker, symbolized by the boy, yearns for knowledge of ultimate spiritual truth, symbolized by the bee; the last stanza indicates he does not find it because it deliberately evades him. The spiritual void, then, is unfilled, and in the following poem is seen the image of the child who acutely feels the pain of that void.

Why--do they shut Me out of Heaven?
Did I sing--too loud?
But--I can say a little "Minor"
Timid as a Bird!

Would'nt the Angels try me--
Just--once--more--
Just--see--if I troubled them--
But dont--shut the door!

Oh, if I--were the Gentleman
In the "White Robe"--
And they--were the little Hand--that knocked--
Could--I--forbid?
(Poems, #248, c. 1861, I, 179)

This is a significant reversal of the Biblical image of Christ knocking at the heart's door. The knocking child receives no answer and poignantly construes the silence not as the absence of a god, but as his own unacceptability.

Christian belief, as translated to children by adults, is destructively frightening.
Who were "the Father and the Son"
We pondered when a child,
And what had they to do with us
And when portentous told

With inference appalling
By Childhood fortified
We thought, at least they are no worse
Than they have been described.

Who are "the Father and the Son"
Did we demand Today
"The Father and the Son" himself
Would doubtless specify--

But had they the felicity
When we desired to know,
We better Friends had been, perhaps,
Than time ensue to be--

We start--to learn that we believe
But once--entirely--
Belief, it does not fit so well
When altered frequently--

We blush, that Heaven if we achieve--
Event ineffable--
We shall have shunned until ashamed
To own the Miracle--
(Poems, #1258, c. 1873, III, 872-73)

The child's religious quest earns him deceptions and half-truths. He learns to distrust religion, and the poet regrets that such distrust prevents his ever finding the answers to his questions. The "but once" in which belief is "entire" is in the early years--"earth's confiding time."

The Bible is particularly suspect to Dickinson. In certain Biblical stories she sees God as a capricious, unjust ruler.

Abraham to kill him
Was distinctly told--
Issac was an Urchin--
Abraham was old--
Not a hesitation--
Abraham complied--
Flattered by Obeisance
Tyranny demurred--

Isaac--to his children
Lived to tell the tale--
Moral--with a Mastiff
Manners may prevail.

(Poems, #1317, c. 1874, III, 911)

The child Isaac was important to Jehovah only as a sacrifice--he was, after all, an "Urchin." Dickinson interprets the story as an example of God's haughtiness and lack of concern for either the child Isaac or the old man Abraham. Only because he was flattered did God spare Isaac's life. Deplorably, in the poem Isaac lived to condition his own children in religious deceptions.

The story of David and Goliath is completely reversed in the following poem:

I took my Power in my Hand--
And went against the World--
'Twas not so much as David--had--
But I--was twice as bold--

I aimed my Pebble--but Myself
Was all the one that fell--
Was it Goliath--was too large--
Or was myself--too small?

(Poems, #540, c. 1862, II, 415)

David was very young when he faced Goliath, here symbolic of the world. The image is one of a lad seeking to overpower the forces of the world, but instead being "buckled under" by them. Again, hope engendered by a Biblical account proves false.
In 1882, when Ned was twenty-one years old, his aunt wrote the following famous lines, setting forth clearly her beliefs about Biblical teachings:

The Bible is an antique Volume--
Written by faded Men
At the suggestion of Holy Spectres--
Subjects--Bethlehem--
Eden--the ancient Homestead--
Satan--the Brigadier--
Judas--the Great Defaulter--
David--the Troubadour--
Sin--a distinguished Precipice
Others must resist--
Boys that "believe" are very lonesome--
Other Boys are "lost"--
Had but the Tale a warbling Teller
All the Boys would come--
Orpheus' Sermon captivated--
It did not condemn--

(Poems, #1545, c. 1882, III, 1065-66)

There is no happy choice for the boy; he may either be "lost" and miserable or "saved" and miserable. Exposure to Biblical doctrine moves the boy from a natural to an unnatural state. Particularly Dickinson protests the condemnation inherent in Biblical teaching, and she lodges her protest in mythological terms. To rescue Euridice from hell, Orpheus charmed the underworld; he did not chastise its inhabitants for being there. Her point is that the Bible could be more attractive and more readily believed if it were less harsh.

Jehovah takes on the characteristics of a petulant being in these lines:

God is indeed a jealous God--
He cannot bear to see
That we had rather not with Him
But with each other play.

(Poems, #1719, n. d., III, 1159)
The sentiment is based upon sound Biblical doctrine, and the inference is clear—the god of organized religion is petty and jealous. A deity who truly loves his children would not be so selfish as to begrudge them any joy. Jehovah's nature is not compatible with that of the child.

To Dickinson, the joy of childhood should be inviolate; nature is to be experienced and enjoyed—that is the child's natural estate. After the child is exposed to the god of vengeance and judgment, that relationship is destroyed. In the two poems which follow, the child's exposure to religion deprives him from enjoying the communion with nature he formerly possessed.

Over the fence--
Strawberries--grow--
Over the fence--
I could climb--if I tried, I know--
Berries are nice!

But--if I stained my Apron--
God would certainly scold!
Oh, dear,—I guess if He were a Boy--
He'd climb--if He could!
(Poems, #251, c. 1861, I, 180-81)

The girl apparently chooses not to go after the strawberries (the joys of nature) in deference to "the rules," and she is left with a feeling of resentment. In the subsequent poem, however, the persona chooses to defy "the rules" because God cannot be trusted to deal fairly, anyhow.

So I pull my Stockings off
Wading in the Water
For the Disobedience' Sake
Boy that lived for "Ought to"
Went to Heaven perhaps at Death
And perhaps he didn't
Moses wasn't fairly used--
Ananias wasn't--
(Poems, #1201, c. 1871, III, 835)

The persona, presumably a boy, decides that he will obey his own instincts rather than religious precepts. Even an obedient boy has no assurance he will go to "heaven" at death. Moreover, the Biblical examples of Moses and Ananias inspire skepticism concerning God's fairness. Moses was a faithful servant, yet he was denied entrance into the "Promised Land" because of one moment of weakness. Ananias similarly was struck dead because of one lie. Obviously, to Dickinson these Biblical figures received punishment disproportionate to their "crimes." The persona reasons that, since God cannot be trusted to deal fairly with people, he might as well do as he pleases without regard for what God might want. Therefore, he pulls his stockings off and wades, but his wading is more an act of defiance than of enjoyment. The concept of a wrathful god has destroyed the change for innocently experiencing nature in the same way a small child does.

That the church's religion is not the true religion is proclaimed in this poem:

Better--than Music! For I--who heard it--
I was used--to the Birds--before--
This--was different--'Twas Translation--
Of all tunes I knew--and more--

'Twas'nt contained--like other stanza--
No one could play it--the second time--
But the Composer--perfect Mozart--
Perish with him--that Keyless Rhyme!
So Children--told how Brooks in Eden--
Bubbled a better--Melody--
Quaintly infer--Eve's great surrender--
Urging the feet--that would--not--fly--

Children--matured--are wiser--mostly--
Eden--a legend--dimly told--
Eve--and the Anguish--Grandame's story--
But--I was telling a tune--I heard--

Not such a strain--the Church--baptizes--
When the last Saint--goes up the Aisles--
Not such a stanza splits the silence--
When the Redemption strikes her Bells--

Let me not spill--it's smallest cadence--
Humming--for promise--when alone--
Humming--until my faint Rehearsal--
Drop into tune--around the Throne--

(Poems, #503, c. 1862, II, 386)

The poet is attempting to relate a spiritual experience which in the last two stanzas she distinguishes from a religious experience. The intense experience Dickinson seeks to describe reminds her of the innocent child's initial state. He readily believes magical tales until maturity convinces him that such tales are merely legends. In turn, she muses about the child's gradual disillusionment--then calls herself back to her original subject in stanza four when she realizes that the child's disillusionment is not compatible with the experience she is seeking to relate.

A review of the images in the child's process of disillusionment reveals an attempt on the part of adults to condition the child--to "box him in," so to speak, within the confines of the walls built by adult society. These "walls" are built of deceptions, schooling, religion. The child's natural reaction to this conditioning is to escape it.
Contained in this short Life
Are magical extents
The soul returning soft at night
To steal securer thence
As Children strictest kept
Turn soonest to the sea
Whose nameless Fathoms slink away
Beside infinity
(Poems, #1165, c. 1870, II, 813)

His efforts to escape to nature's magical world, however, are constantly thwarted, and he finds himself, when the process of estrangement has been completed, with a deep sense of regret for a state which he cannot regain.

A loss of something ever felt I--
The first that I could recollect
Bereft I was--of what I knew not
Too young that any should suspect

A Mourner walked among the children
I notwithstanding went about
As one bemoaning a Dominion
Itself the only Prince cast out--

Elder, Today, a session wiser
And fainter, too, as Wiseness is--
I find myself still softly searching
For my Delinquent Palaces--

And a Suspicion, like a Finger
Touches my Forehead now and then
That I am looking oppositely
For the site of the Kingdom of Heaven--
(Poems, #959, c. 1864, II, 694-95)

The estranged child loses the splendor he possessed in the state of innocence. He seeks in vain to recapture his former status and begins the realization that he must look forward, not backward, in that goal. Indeed, in a subsequent chapter concerning the child images which relate to immortality, it will be observed that the state of innocence may be regained only in the life after death.
Perhaps the most definitive image of the child's progression from a blissful state to estrangement is contained in the following 1862 poem:

The Child's faith is new--
Whole--like His Principle--
Wide--like the Sunrise
On fresh Eyes--
Never had a Doubt--
Laughs--at a Scruple--
Believes all sham
But Paradise--

Credits the World--
Deems his Dominion
Broader of Sovereignties--
And Caesar--mean--
In the Comparison--
Baseless Emperor--
Ruler of Nought,
Yet swaying all--

Grown bye and bye
To hold mistaken
His pretty estimates
Of Prickly Things
He gains the skill
Sorrowful--as certain--
Men--to anticipate
Instead of Kings--
(Poems, #637, c. 1862, II, 489-90)

The image in stanza one depicts a dewy-eyed child in a state of innocence. In the third stanza, however, the image is of the estranged child who has experienced adult conditioning. The mood of the poem accordingly shifts from buoyancy to dejection.

Since "death was a theme of major importance at every stage of Emily Dickinson's creative development," it is not

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at all surprising to find a large number of child images in that context. Given Dickinson's ideas about the sacred nature of early childhood, one might expect her to take a rather bitter view concerning the death of children. That expectation is fulfilled. She views death as inimical to childhood; the two are at opposite ends of a spectrum and are not compatible. In many instances the child image is juxtaposed against death imagery, and the contrast is jarring. In other poems, Dickinson assumes an ironic tone in portraying death as democratic, in that he claims children as well as adults. The irony is especially bitter in poems containing the depiction of the child in death. Death is the most cruel of all the forces which estrange the child from his natural, blissful state. A note of pathos is added to her overall concept of the death of children in Dickinson's treatment of certain images regarding the effect of a child's death on the living.

In the following poem Dickinson dichotomizes death and afterlife. She attempts to personify death but fails in the outset; death cannot be personified because it was never a child. The two extreme realities of life cannot be compared.

Dust is the only Secret--
Death, the only One
You cannot find out all about
In his "native town."

Nobody knew "his Father"--
Never was a Boy--
Had'nt any playmates,
Or "Early history"--

(Poems, #153, c. 1860, I, 109)
Death and childhood are incompatible—death is the end of life; childhood is life's beginning. Because death is inimical to childhood, the attempt at personification fails, and Dickinson abandons the metaphor in a succeeding stanza to compare death to a bird, building "nests" wherein to lay the dead.

In the following poem summer, harvest, and boys fuse into one image which stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from death. Each opposing image acts to intensify the other. Because death is present in the midst of life, the harvest seems more joyous; conversely, because the harvest is so joyous, death seems more dread.

I'm sorry for the Dead--Today--
It's such congenial times
Old Neighbors have at fences--
It's time o'year for Hay.

And Brood--Sunburned Acquaintance
Discourse between the Toil--
And laugh, a homely species
That makes the Fences smile--

It seems so straight to lie away
From all the noise of Fields--
The Busy Carts--the fragrant Cocks
The Mower's Metre--Steals

A Trouble lest they're homesick--
Those Farmers--and their Wives--
Set separate from the Farming--
And all the Neighbor's lives--

A Wonder if the Sepulchre
Dont feel a lonesome way--
When Men--and Boys--and Carts--and June,
Go down the Fields to "Hay"--

(Poems, #529, c. 1862, II, 406)
The harvest is a celebration of nature; nature and man work in harmony, and the child ("boys") is an integral part of that harmony. The communion with nature which exists in the harvest—and which is the small child's natural and constant domain—is denied to the dead. The juxtaposition of the two opposites renders each experience more intense.

In the famous poem "Because I could not stop for Death" the child image is again juxtaposed against death imagery to note the irony of young life in the presence of death.

Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality.

We slowly drove—He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure, too,
For His Civility—

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—in the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—

(Poems, #712, c. 1863, II, 546)

In view of Dickinson's concept of childhood thus far established, the third stanza is highly significant. In that stanza is the image of the child at recess and the image of sunny fields of grain. The death hearse passes children and nature; it is described as "passing" nothing else. Moreover, the children are at recess—they are not "contained" or imprisoned in adult institutions. Rather, they are free to be at one with nature. The fact that nature and child
imagery are included in the same stanza perhaps indicates a psychological association on the part of the poet between the child and nature and calls to mind the vision of the child in communion with nature—a communion inimical to death.

The reality of death is avoided by the child and by nature. That idea is manifest in the analogy of the graveyard to a small community in the following excerpt:

It seems a curious Town—
Some Houses very old,
Some—newly raised this Afternoon,
Were I compelled to build

It should not be among
Inhabitants so still
But where the Birds assemble
And Boys were possible

(Poems, #892, c. 1864, II, 658)

The graveyard prohibits the presence of boys and birds; death seems unnatural, inimical to the communion of the child and nature.

The juxtaposition of child and death imagery in the following excerpt results in intense poignancy of the death experience:

T'was comfort in her Dying Room
To hear the living Clock
A short relief to have the wind
Walk boldly up and knock
Diversion from the Dying Theme
To hear the children play

(Poems, #1703, n. d., III, 1152)

The child image falls on the heels of nature imagery as if the two were inextricably fused. That image in the presence of the death image, serves to make death more dread.
In the following excerpt the children, fleeing death's presence, wonder about it with macabre interest.

There's been a Death, in the Opposite House,  
As lately as Today--  
I know it, by the numb look  
Such Houses have--alway--

The Neighbors rustle in and out--  
The Doctor--drives away--  
A Window opens like a Pod--  
Abrupt--mechanically--

Somebody flings a Mattress out--  
The Children hurry by--  
They wonder if it died--on that--  
I used to--when a Boy--

The Minister--goes stiffly in--  
As if the House were His--  
And He owned all the Mourners--now--  
And little Boys--besides--

... (Poems, #389, c. 1862, I, 306-07)

Death is foreboding, wondered about--and avoided by children. The minister, symbol of death, "owns" the boys; they nevertheless try to avoid him.

Death, the representation of life's end, is foreign to the child, who represents life's beginning. The child therefore views death with dread curiosity.

I often passed the village  
When going home from school--  
And wondered what they did there--  
And why it was so still--

... (Poems, #51, c. 1858, I, 39)

The idea that the child intuitively knows that death is his enemy and is therefore to be avoided is set forth in the following poem. This is perhaps Dickinson's clearest statement of the inimical relationship between the two.
We do not play on Graves--
Because there is'nt Room--
Besides--it is'nt even--it slants
And People come--

And put a Flower on it--
And hang their faces so--
We're fearing that their Hearts will drop--
And crush our pretty play--

And so we move as far
As Enemies--away--
Just looking round to see how far
It is--Occasionally--

(Poems, #467, c. 1862, I, 359-60)

One of life's grimmest realities, however, is that death knows no bounds and is heedless of age. It does "crush" childhood's "pretty play." Especially was this true in Dickinson's era, when child mortality rates were considerably higher than now. Since Dickinson viewed death as inimical to childhood, the ironic tone of images concerning the death of children comes as no surprise. The fusion of the two previously juxtaposed images produces a jarring effect. "I buried my garden last week--our man, Dick, lost a little girl through the scarlet fever. . . . Ah! democratic Death! Grasping the proudest zinnia from my purple garden,—then deep to his bosom calling the serf's child!" (Letters, #195, c. 1858, II, 341). The reference to death as "democratic" produces an irony, inasmuch as a favorable description is assigned to a dread inevitability. The two following poems produce a similar effect:

This quiet Dust was Gentlemen and Ladies
And Lads and Girls--
Was laughter and ability and Sighing
And Frocks and Curls.
This Passive Place a Summer's nimble mansion
Where Bloom and Bees
Exist an Oriental Circuit
Then cease, like these--

(Poems, #813, c. 1864, II, 614)

The "laughter and ability and Sighing" and the "Bloom and Bees" are obviously preferable states to that of the grave, even though it is described in favorable terms. Moreover, death is democratic; it claims children as well as adults.

Not any higher stands the Grave
For Heroes than for Men--
Not any nearer for the Child
Than numb Three Score and Ten--

This latest Leisure equal lulls
The Beggar and his Queen
Propitiate this Democrat
A Summer's Afternoon

(Poems, #1256, c. 1873, III, 871)

Written nine years after the previous poem, these stanzas are remarkably similar in tone. The grave is "leisure"; it "lulls"; it is democratic in that it claims all ages and stations--and yet it is to be appeased and stalled. The result of the fusing of dread and pleasant imagery is irony.

Most of the images of a dead child in Dickinson's poetry contain a more bitter irony than that seen thus far. Since childhood was so highly idealized, it seemed particularly unfair that the child be taken from his blissful state by death and that life's beginning also be its end.

There was a little figure plump
For every little knoll--
Busy needles, and spools of thread--
And trudging feet from school--
Playmates, and holidays, and nuts--
And visions vast and small--
Strange that the feet so precious charged
Should reach so small a goal!
(Poems, #146, c. 1859, I, 105)

There is special pathos and a feeling of injustice in the death of a small child; rather than enjoying childhood bliss, the child must lie quietly under the "little knoll." The first six lines of the excerpt contain the image of the joyous, small child who has not been completely estranged from his natural state. The grave is a mean goal for the innocent child. The tone of bitter regret in the last two lines is unmistakable.

Dickinson's correspondence and poems concerning the death of children maintain a dreadful, depressing tone accompanied by a sense of waste and injustice. She wrote to Mrs. Holland, for example, "[Susan] is still with the sister who put her child in an ice nest last Monday forenoon. The redoubtable God! I notice where Death has been introduced, he frequently calls, making it desirable to forestall his advances" (Letters, #311, c. 1865, II, 444).

The subject of the dying child or the child-in-death is treated so realistically by Dickinson that the image seems rather macabre. For example, in the following poem, Dickinson attempts to capture the feeling of a drowning boy:

How the Waters closed above Him
We shall never know--
How He stretched His Anguish to us
That--is covered too--
Spreads the Pond Her Base of Lilies
Bold above the Boy
Whose unclaimed Hat and Jacket
Sum the History--
(Poems, #923, c. 1864, II, 674)

While the "anguish" of the child is conveyed in the first stanza, the last stanza deals with the grim fact of the death. Death has unjustly snatched the boy from life.

The following description of a dead child is rather grotesque in that it views the child-in-death as a frozen child-in-life.

She lay as if at play
Her life had leaped away--
Intending to return--
But not so soon--

Her merry Arms, half dropt--
As if for lull of sport--
An instant had forgot
The Trick to start--

Her dancing Eyes--ajar--
As if their Owner were
Still sparkling through
For fun--at you--

Her Morning at the door--
Devising, I am sure--
To force her sleep--
So light--so deep--
(Poems, #369, c. 1862, I, 294)

In the poem "death becomes a pastime, a weird game of hide-and-seek between the child's body and the life which had informed it." The incongruity of the image reveals the bitterness with which the poet views the forces which permit

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death to stop short the child's play. The deep irony in the poem is very similar to that in the following poem:

'Tis Sunrise--Little Maid--Hast Thou
No Station in the Day?
'Twas not thy wont, to hinder so--
Retrieve thine industry--

'Tis Noon--My little Maid--
Alas--and art thou sleeping yet?
The Lily--waiting to be Wed--
The Bee--Hast thou forgot?

My little Maid--'Tis Night--Alas
That Night should be to thee
Instead of Morning--Had'st thou broached
Thy little Plan to Die--
Dissuade thee, if I c'd not, Sweet,
I might have aided--thee--

(Poems, #908, c. 1864, II, 667)

The poet assumes a mocking tone in the poem. In stanza two she tries to call the child back by reminding her of her natural state—in communion with nature. The lily, the bee await the child, but locked in the arms of death, she cannot comply. Death is the most cruel of the estranging forces.

Dickinson frequently assumes the identity of the dead in her poetry; the technique is particularly poignant when the dead one is a child, as is the case in the following poem:

I cried at Pity--not at Pain--
I heard a Woman say
"Poor Child"--and something in her voice
Convinced myself of me--

So long I fainted, to myself
It seemed the common way,
And Health, and Laughter, Curious things--
To look at, like a Toy--
To sometimes hear "Rich people" buy
And see the Parcel rolled--
And carried, we suppose--to Heaven,
For children, made of Gold--

But not to touch, or wish for,
Or think of, with a sigh--
And so and so--had been to us,
Had God willed differently.

I wish I knew that Woman's name--
So when she comes this way,
To hold my life, and hold my ears
For fear I hear her say

She's "sorry I am dead["]--again--
Just when the Grave and I--
Have sobbed ourselves almost to sleep,
Our only Lullaby--

(Poems, #588, c. 1862, II, 450)

The feeling of consciousness after death and the resultant anguish is emotionally overpowering. Very ironic is the disparity between the image of death as protector in this poem to images examined earlier which contain a protector for the child. Those earlier protectors were kind, loving, gentle, divine. Death is the macabre protector who merely observes the child in the cradle of ice sobbing himself to sleep. Death does not comfort the weeping child; he is a cruel protector. Ten years after this poem was written, Dickinson wrote, "Little Irish Maggie went to sleep this morning at six o'clock... Our Maggie is helping her mother put her in the cradle" (Letters, #375, c. 1872, II, 496). The grave is a cradle--but a cruel one; it is referred to variously as the "ice nest," the "quiet dust," the strange village where boys are not possible. In other
words, it sunders the world of the child; it is the macabre thief which steals the child from bliss.

... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...
The Shapes we buried, dwell about,
Familiar, in the Rooms--
Untarnished by the Sepulchre,
The Mouldering Playmate comes--

In just the Jacket that he wore--
Long buttoned in the Mold
Since we--old mornings, Children--played--
Divided--by a world--

The Grave yields back her Robberies--
The Years, our pilfered Things--
Bright Knots of Apparitions
Salute us, with their wings--

...(Poems, #607, c. 1862, II, 466)

Death is not only destructive of the child's blissful innocence; it also has a devastating effect upon those the child leaves behind.

They wont frown always--some sweet Day
When I forget to teaze--
They'll recollect how cold I looked
And how I just said "Please."

Then They will hasten to the Door
To call the little Girl
Who cannot thank Them for the Ice
That filled the lisping full.

...(Poems, #874, c. 1864, II, 649)

On the surface the poem seems a petulant child's mocking cry, "You'll be sorry when I'm dead." On a deeper level, however, the poem states that death is the most powerful and destructive of the estranging forces. Adults will regret their efforts to condition the child when death has removed him completely from their control.
Two poems employ the image of a dead child to convey an intensified preciousness of any reminder of a departed one.

I'll send the feather from my Hat!  
Who knows--but at the sight of that  
My Sovereign will relent?  
As trinket--worn by faded Child--  
Confronting eyes long--comforted--  
Blisters the Adamant!

(Poems, #687, c. 1861, II, 531)

Dickinson records a personal experience in this regard.  
Benjamin Newton, an early friend and tutor, had given her a copy of Emerson's Poems before his death. In the following poem she uses the image of the pastimes of dead children to convey the overpowering feeling of remorse felt at the sight of the gift of a beloved friend.

Death sets a Thing significant  
The Eye had hurried by  
Except a perished Creature  
Entreat us tenderly

To ponder little Workmanships  
In Crayon, or in Wool,  
With "This was last Her fingers did"--  
Industrious until--

The Thimble weighed too heavy--  
The stitches stopped--themselves--  
And then 'twas put among the Dust  
Upon the Closet shelves--

A Book I have--a friend gave--  
Whose Pencil--here and there--  
Had notched the place that pleased Him--  
At Rest--His fingers are--

Now--when I read--I read not--  
For interrupting Tears--  
Obliterate the Etchings  
Too Costly for Repairs.

(Poems, #360, c. 1862, I, 286-87)
In short, the death of a child seems an injustice to Dickinson; the grave "robs" the child from the confiding arms of nature. The child is cruelly frozen in the midst of play and laid away in an "ice" cradle which envelops him in dread and misery. All the images of dead children, taken together, yield such a composite picture. In contrast to images of small children reviewed previously, these are cruel, dread, and unnatural. Moreover, even adults view the death of a child with a special remorse. That the beginning of life also be its end is unjust.

On three occasions Dickinson uncharacteristically describes the death of a child as desirable, using as a basis for the description the assertion that age is not determined merely by the amount of time a person has lived. For example, when Higginson's infant daughter died in 1880, Dickinson consoled him with these words: "Most of our Moments are Moments of Preface--'Seven Weeks' is a long Life--if it is all lived--" (Letters, #641, c. 1880, III, 660). It must be assumed that these words constitute no more than a futile attempt at consolation and can therefore not be considered with any great degree of seriousness as constituting her feelings about the death of children--especially not in view of the preceding child-death imagery. Seven weeks cannot be considered a long life by any standard; it is difficult for anyone--even Dickinson--to justify the death of a tiny infant. She undoubtedly realized that her words provided hollow comfort.
In two other images found in poems dated 1865 and 1859, respectively, Dickinson sets forth the theory that experience, not years, constitutes age, and in that framework, death is not an estranger who steals the child from childhood. Instead, the child has already left childhood, and death comes for him as for other adults.

Not all die early, dying young--
Maturity of Fate
Is consummated equally
In Ages, or a Night--

A Hoary Boy, I've known to drop
Whole statured--by the side
Of Junior of Fourscore--'twas Act
Not Period--that died.
(Poems, #990, c. 1865, II, 716)

For the child whose earthly experience has not been pleasant, death indeed may be welcome.

Some, too fragile for winter winds
The thoughtful grave encloses--
Tenderly tucking them in from frost
Before their feet are cold.

Never the treasures in her nest
The cautious grave exposes,
Building where schoolboy dare not look,
And sportsman is not bold.

This covert have all the children
Early aged, and often cold,
Sparrows, unnoticed by the Father--
Lambs for whom time had not a fold.
(Poems, #141, c. 1859, I, 100)

The grave thus assumes dramatically different characteristics for the unhappy, neglected child. It is warm; it is a protector for those who have no earthly shelter. The child described, moreover, quite possibly has never known the
bliss of childhood; he has somehow been excluded from "earth's confiding."

The two preceding images are atypical of the majority of images of the child and death. Moreover, the children in the images are themselves atypical. These are not really children; experience has aged them beyond their years. Because their lives have been full of misery, neglect, and unchildlike experience, the grave provides a welcome escape. It is only in this context, however, that Dickinson describes the death of a child sympathetically.

The only favorable force which estranges the child from childhood is love. The love relationship transports the child from a sublime state to an even more sublime existence. There is no transition from childhood to a love relationship; the change, rather, is abrupt.

A Wife--at Daybreak I shall be--
Sunrise--Hast thou a Flag for me?
At Midnight, I am but a Maid,
How short it takes to make it Bride--
Then--Midnight, I have passed from thee
Unto the East, and Victory--

Midnight--Good Night! I hear them call,
The Angels bustle in the Hall--
Softly my Future climbs the Stair,
I fumble at my Childhood's prayer
So soon to be a Child no more--
Eternity, I'm coming--Sir,
Savior--I've seen the face--before!

(Poems, #461, c. 1862, I, 355)

This poem may be interpreted on several levels. The first stanza describes the approach of the persona's wedding day. The sun imagery which appears throughout the stanza compliments
the subject of marriage, inasmuch as the sun is usually a masculine figure in Dickinson's work. Line two may in that context be interpreted as the persona's wish to be a ray of the sun—or to enter into physical union with him. Midnight then becomes the state of maidenhood (the absence of a male), while sunrise (the male's appearance) seals the marriage.

In the second stanza the poet introduces death imagery and thereby clouds to some extent the poem's meaning. The last two lines indicate that sunrise will usher in, not a marriage in the temporal sense, but a marriage with eternity, which constitutes death. However, variants of this poem substitute the word "Master" for "Savior" in the last line. Since Dickinson's use of the word "Master" is generally believed to refer to a specific man, those variants diminish somewhat the death imagery and bring the poem back to the realm of physical marriage, even though mention of "Angels" and "Eternity" remains. "Eternity, I'm coming" could conceivably mean that with marriage the persona is taking one more step in the progression toward eternity. The angels are present only while the persona is still "a Maid." Those angels, who inhabit and share the child's domain, leave willingly as Future draws nigh. The child is not being wrenched from childhood; she is leaving it willingly, and it appears willing for her to go.

I'm ceded--I've stopped being Their's--
The name They dropped upon my face
With water, in the country church (no stanza break)
Is finished using, now,
And They can put it with my Dolls,
My childhood, and the string of spools,
I've finished threading--too--

Baptized, before, without the choice,
But this time, consciously, of Grace--
Unto supremest name--
Called to my Full--The Crescent dropped--
Existence's whole Arc, filled up,
With one small Diadem.

My second Rank--too small the first--
Crowned--Crowing--on my Father's breast--
A half unconscious Queen--
But this time--Adequate--Erect,
With Will to choose, or to reject,
And I choose, just a Crown--
(Poems, #508, c. 1862, II, 389-90)

Both childhood and marriage are sacred states. Because marriage is more sacred, childhood may be left willingly, deliberately, and abruptly. The abruptness of the shift from child to beloved woman is perhaps best shown in the following excerpt:

... You said it hurt you--most--
Mine--was an Acorn's Breast--
And could not know how fondness grew
In Shaggier Vest--
Perhaps--I could'nt--
But, had you looked in--
A Giant--eye to eye with you, had been--
No Acorn--then--

So--Twelve months ago--
We breathed--
Then dropped the Air--
Which bore it best?
Was this--the patientest--
Because it was a Child, you know--
And could not value--Air?

If to be "Elder"--mean most pain--
I'm old enough, today, I'm certain--then--
As old as thee--how soon? (no stanza break)
One--Birthday more--or Ten?
Let me--choose!
Ah, Sir, None!
(Poems, #296, c. 1861, I, 215-16)

This poem reveals the intense pain which often accompanies love. The persona seeks to convince her lover that she is capable of experiencing as much pain as he—that her love for him has transformed her from a simple child to a mature woman.

Love, then, instantly transforms the child to a woman, and the change, though painful, is desirable.

In the following excerpt the child actively seeks the love relationship:

Going to Him! Happy letter!
Tell Him--
Tell Him the page I did'nt write--
Tell Him—I only said the Syntax--
And left the Verb and the pronoun out--
Tell Him just how the fingers hurried--
Then—how they waded—slow—slow—
And then you wished you had eyes in your pages—
So you could see what moved them so—

Tell Him—it wasn't a Practiced Writer--
You guessed—from the way the sentence toiled--
You could hear the Boddice tug, behind you--
As if it held but the might of a child--
You almost pitied it—you—it worked so--
Tell Him—no—you may quibble there--
For it would split His Heart, to know it--
And then you and I, were silenter.

...(Poems, #494, c. 1862, I, 376)

Estrangement from childhood is desirable through a love relationship. Love necessitates the estrangement because it is a state too profound to be borne by a child. Dickinson describes it as "A love so big it scares her, rushing among her small heart—pushing aside the blood and leaving her
faint . . . and white in the gust's arm. Daisy--who never flinched thro' that awful parting, but held her life so tight he could not see the wound--who would have sheltered him in her childish bosom . . . only it was'nt big eno' for a Guest so large--" (Letters, #248, c. 1862, II, 391). The child's heart is not large enough for the enormity of love; the sudden growth in its capacity transforms the child to woman. "God made me-- . . . Master--I didn't be--myself. I don't know how it was done. He built the heart in me. Bye and bye it outgrew me--and like the little mother--with the big child--I got tired holding him" (Letters, #233, c. 1861, II, 373-74).

Frequently Dickinson employs images of royalty, wealth, and exotic lands to convey sublimity or sacredness. Such is the case in the following poem which may be interpreted to mean that, though childhood is sublime, love has greater sublimity.

Your Riches--taught me--Poverty.
Myself--a Millionaire
In little Wealths, as Girls could boast
Till broad as Buenos Ayre--

You drifted your Dominions--
A Different Peru--
And I esteemed All Poverty
For Life's Estate with you--

Of Mines, I little know--myself--
But just the names, of Gems--
The Colors of the Commonest--
And scarce of Diadems--

So much, that did I meet the Queen--
Her Glory I should know-- (no stanza break)
But this, must be a different Wealth--
To miss it--beggars so--

It's far--far Treasure to surmise--
And estimate the Pearl--
That slipped my simple fingers through--
While just a Girl at School.
(Poems, #299, c. 1862, I, 218-19)

In her childhood the girl was already a "millionaire"; the love relationship, however, would have made her even richer. The "richness" of love may be defined as a kind of divinity, and in the following poem Dickinson defines love as a "diviner" relationship than that experienced in childhood.

We learned the Whole of Love--
The Alphabet--the Words--
A Chapter--then the mighty Book--
Then--Revelation closed--

But in Each Other's eyes
An Ignorance beheld--
Diviner than the Childhood's
And each to each, a Child--

Attempted to expound
What Neither--understood--
Alas, that Wisdom is so large--
And Truth--so manifold!
(Poems, #568, c. 1862, II, 434)

The love relationship is a profound state--a second birth. The change has such profundity that its sudden appearance produces a numbing effect.

I am alive--I guess--
The Branches on my Hand
Are full of Morning Glory--
And at my finger's end--

The Carmine--tingles warm--
And if I hold a Glass
Across my Mouth--it blurs it--
Physician's--proof of Breath--
I am alive--because
I am not in a Room--
The Parlor--Commonly--it is--
So Visitors may come--

And lean--and view it sidewise--
And add "How cold--it grew"--
And "Was it conscious--when it stepped
In Immortality?"

I am alive--because
I do not own a House--
Entitled to myself--precise--
And fitting no one else--

And marked my Girlhood's name--
So Visitors may know
Which Door is mine--and not mistake--
And try another Key--

How good--to be alive!
How infinite--to be
Alive--two-fold--The Birth I had--
And this--besides, in--Thee!

(Poems, #470, c. 1862, I, 361-62)

Childhood for Dickinson is a divine state; love, however,
is so much more divine that the state of childhood is to the
state of love as a "Gown of Dun" is to "Fabrics of Cashmere."

I am ashamed--I hide--
What right have I--to be a Bride--
So late a Dowerless Girl--
Nowhere to hide my dazzled Face--
No one to teach me that new Grace--
Nor introduce--my Soul--

Me to adorn--How--tell--
Trinket--to make Me beautiful--
Fabrics of Cashmere--
Never a Gown of Dun--more--
Raiment instead--of Pompadour--
For Me--My soul--to wear--

Fingers--to frame my Round Hair
Oval--as Feudal Ladies wore--
Far Fashions--Fair--
Skill--to hold my Brow like an Earl--
Plead--like a Whippowil-- (no stanza break)
Prove--like a Pearl--
Then, for Character--

Fashion My Spirit quaint--white--
Quick--like a Liquor--
Gay--like Light--
Bring Me my best Pride--
No more ashamed--
No more to hide--
Meek--let it be--too proud--for Pride--
Baptized--this Day--A Bride--

(Poems, #473, c. 1862, I, 363)

In his biography of Dickinson, Richard Chase asserts, "Emily Dickinson divided the Ages of Woman into three... Childhood, though it is never entirely abandoned, outwardly ends (legally ends, one might almost say) when one finds the great love of one's life." Childhood, then, is the first age, followed by love as the second. The third age is immortality. Cody postulates in After Great Pain that Dickinson's own childhood was an unhappy one, marked by deprivation of love. Likewise, he believes her adult love relationships were marred by guilt, rooted in her unhappy childhood. The three stages of life Dickinson idealized were childhood, love, and immortality. The first two, Cody states, she had never realistically known. The last, of course, cannot be known.

In Dickinson's philosophy the child is divine; the love relationship ushers in a greater divinity, followed by immortality, the ultimate divine state. Any attempt to disrupt

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this progression in a life is looked upon by Dickinson with disdain and bitterness. The child images in this chapter support this view. Adults, schools, religion are criticized for their intrusion in the life of the child. The death images in this chapter have been on a purely physical level, and the image of the dead child has been accompanied by a sense of bitter injustice. For Dickinson, death and immortality were two separate realms. Death is dread and destructive of the child's sublime state. Her stern view does not apply to immortality, which will be discussed in Chapter VI. There is no allowance in Dickinson's concept for maturity; the child should pass suddenly from the divinity of childhood to the greater divinity of love. Love is the only estranging force Dickinson views with sympathy and acceptance.
CHAPTER V

THE ESTRANGED CHILD

Dickinson's writings contain relatively few images of or references to older children and adolescents. John Cody suggests that a possible explanation for this is that Dickinson herself actually never experienced any stage beyond childhood. "Her leavetaking of childhood was undergone reluctantly and was agonizingly protracted. In a sense she never did depart from it, never allowed herself to experience anything resembling a true adolescence, if one takes the term to mean the ordinary psychological developments and adjustments which usher in maturity." Consequently, her adolescent imagery has an air of superficiality.

The images in this chapter lack the sympathetic warmth which surrounds the image of the small child, but they also lack much of the bitterness of the images of the child in the estranging process. The children in these images, one may assume, are the children who have succumbed to the estranging process and who are subsequently adrift from the divine realm of childhood. Images of girls portray their superficial concern for appearance, their conversation, and

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their bereavement over the separation from childhood. Images of boys consistently convey a cruelty. They are, in a sense, at war with nature—belligerent and insensitive.

Although the following image analogizes nature to a girl, the perspective is quite different from small child images in which similar analogies are made. Those images record experience; this records observation:

A Moth the hue of this	
Haunts Candles in Brazil.  
Nature's Experience would make  
Our Reddest Second pale. 

Nature is fond, I sometimes think, 
Of Trinkets, as a Girl.²

As girls gild themselves with various "trinkets," so does nature. This superficial view of nature is a contrast to that presented in Chapter III, where nature is a more profound presence in the small child's experience. The portrayal of nature's trivialities elicits an image of the girl as estranged from the sense of nature's mystery, awe, and divinity.

A similar image is found in the following poem, possibly written in the same year as the preceding one:

Ribbons of the Year--
Multitude Brocade--
Worn to Nature's Party once

Then, as flung aside
As a faded Bead
Or a Wrinkled Pearl--
Who shall charge the Vanity
Of the Maker's Girl?
(Poems, #873, c. 1864, II, 649)

The tree in the above image seems fickle, in that it discards its beautiful attire (leaves) in much the same way that a vain girl discards a once-worn party dress. The image is slightly critical, in pointing out the vanity of the tree, the "Maker's Girl." Dickinson looked on the change of seasons with apprehension. That she analogizes one aspect of the transition from summer to fall to an adolescent girl indicates she perhaps looks upon adolescence also with apprehension.

In the following poem the girl describes herself as "dull" and looks forward to a time when she may attain a royal state. The imagery of royalty is used throughout Dickinson's work in connection with the small child, love, and immortality--Dickinson's three divine states. The persona, then, feels the lack of divinity in her estranged state and looks forward to the next divine state.

No matter--now--Sweet--
But when I'm Earl--
Wont you wish you'd spoken
To that dull Girl?

Trivial a Word--just--
Trivial--a Smile--
But wont you wish you'd spared one
When I'm Earl?

I shant need it--then--
Crests--will do--
Eagles on my Buckles--
On my Belt--too--
Ermine--my familiar Gown--
Say--Sweet--then
Wont you wish you'd smiled--just--
Me upon?
(From Poems, #704, c. 1863, II, 542)

This poem reveals what John Cody feels is Dickinson's basic problem with sex identification. She identified more readily with the male members of her family than the female, and she often refers to herself in masculine terms. In this poem she mixes the sex of the persona. It is presumed that the "Earl" of the poem is a later stage of the "dull Girl." The reference to "Earl" is most important, however, in signifying royalty. Royalty, in turn, indicates divinity. Presumably, the divine state she here refers to is love. However, it could conceivably refer to eternity. The girl in the image does not suddenly pass from childhood to love. Anticipating a more "regal" state, she is estranged--she is a "dull Girl."

The girls in the following image ponder their future in a manner very typical of adolescents:

We talked as Girls do--
Fond, and late--
We speculated fair, on every subject, but the Grave--
Of our's, none affair--

We handled Destinies, as cool--
As we--Disposers--be--
And God, a Quiet Party
To our Authority--

But fondest, dwelt upon Ourself
As we eventual--be--
When Girls to Women, softly raised
We--occupy--Degree--

We parted with a contract
To cherish, and to write (no stanza break)
But Heaven made both, impossible
Before another night.
(Poems, #586, c. 1862, II, 448)

Although the image of the girls is not unfavorable, it is rather superficial in comparison to images of small girls. Moreover, the nature of divinity is quite different from that in the small girl images. That divinity protects the child; God in the above poem is an enemy, lurking in the shadows—"Heaven" interrupts the girls' plans with death. Deity is not a divine protector, but an unwanted intruder.

An attitude atypical of the small child is exemplified by the girl in the following image; she approaches the coming of spring with dread.

I dreaded that first Robin, so,
But He is mastered, now,
I'm some accustomed to Him grown,
He hurts a little, though--

I thought if I could only live
Till that first Shout got by--
Not all Pianos in the Woods
Had power to mangle me--

I dared not meet the Daffodils--
For fear their Yellow Gown
Would pierce me with a fashion
So foreign to my own--

I wished the Grass would hurry--
So--when 'twas time to see--
He'd be too tall, the tallest one
Could stretch, to look at me--

I could not bear the Bees should come,
I wished they'd stay away
In those dim countries where they go,
What word had they, for me?

They're here, though; not a creature failed--
No Blossom stayed away (no stanza break)
In gentle deference to me--
The Queen of Calvary--

Each one salutes me, as he goes,
And I, my childish Plumes,
Lift, in bereaved acknowledgement
Of their unthinking Drums--
(Poems, #348, c. 1862, I, 278)

In a previously cited reference, the young child Emily eagerly sought assurance that spring would return. The girl in the above image is older, and she anticipates the coming of spring with dread. The cause for the estrangement from nature is not specified, but the statement of the poem is very similar to that expressed in "The Morning after Wo--" (Poems, #364, c. 1862, I, 289), in which Dickinson describes nature's refusal to modify its behavior to suit the depressed emotional state of the persona. The persona of "I dreaded that first Robin, so," has obviously undergone a woeful experience which has caused a breach between herself and nature. Nature reaches out to the girl ("Each one salutes me"), and she significantly responds by lifting her "childish Plumes" (italics are mine). The persona is no longer a child; she is estranged from communion with nature, and nature's salute, followed by her acknowledgment in the last stanza seems a kind of farewell.

The images of older boys reveal a cruelty not observed in any other child image. While estranged girls seem vain, superficial, and saddened, their male counterparts openly and spitefully attack nature.
To interrupt His Yellow Plan
The Sun does not allow
Caprices of the Atmosphere--
And even when the Snow

Heaves Balls of Specks, like Vicious Boy
Directly in His Eye--
Does not so much as turn His Head
Busy with Majesty--

(Poems, #591, c. 1862, II, 452)

The sun is the major figure of the poem—he is supreme and
undaunted, even under attack. His attacker, a snowstorm,
is compared to a boy—not playfully throwing, as a younger
child would—but viciously throwing snowballs at the sun.
There is a definite breach between the two, and the sun
completely ignores the insult. The sun, whose rays "little
boys and girls" appear to climb, has an entirely different
and less desirable relationship with the older boy.

Other images of older boys are similarly destructive.

An example is the following excerpt:

Struck, was I, nor yet by Lightning--
Lightning--lets away
Power to perceive His Process
With Vitality.

Maimed--was I--yet not by Venture--
Stone of stolid Boy--
Nor a Sportsman's Peradventure--
Who mine Enemy?

(Poems, #925, c. 1864, II, 675)

Among the types of injury described in the poem is that which
may be inflicted by a malicious boy's slingshot. The image
is quite unfavorable.
This heart that broke so long--
These feet that never flagged--
This faith that watched for star in vain,
Give gently to the dead--

Hound cannot overtake the Hare
That fluttered panting, here--
Nor any schoolboy rob the nest
Tenderness builded there.

(Poems, #145, c. 1859, I, 104)

The older boy is inimical to nature. Dickinson had a great love for birds, which renders the image even more unfavorable. A similar image of a boy, written fifteen years after the previous one, is contained in the following poem:

Not with a Club, the Heart is broken
Nor with a Stone--
A Whip so small you could not see it
I've known

To lash the Magic Creature
Till it fell
Yet that Whip's Name
Too noble then to tell.

Magnanimous as Bird
By Boy descried--
Singing unto the Stone
Of which it died--

Shame need not crouch
In such an Earth as Our's--
Shame--stand erect--
The Universe is your's

(Poems, #1304, c. 1874, III, 906-07)

The boy in innocence--the "dirty little heart" who lives attuned to nature--would never commit the act of deliberately killing a bird. The older boy, however, has become callous to the point that he feels no sense of shame at having stoned to death one of nature's harmless creatures.
The bitterest of all the images in this category is the following, in which God is likened to a taunting, haughty boy:

It always felt to me—a wrong
To that Old Moses—done—
To let him see—the Canaan—
Without the entering—

And tho' in soberer moments—
No Moses there can be
I'm satisfied—the Romance
In point of injury—

Surpasses sharper stated—
Of Stephen—or of Paul—
For these—were only put to death—
While God's adroiter will

On Moses—seemed to fasten
With tantalizing Play
As Boy—should deal with lesser Boy—
To prove ability

The fault—was doubtless Israel's—
Myself—had banned the Tribes—
And ushered Grand Old Moses
In Pentateuchal Robes

Upon the Broad Possession
'Twas little—He should see—
Old Man on Nebo! Late as this—
My justice bleeds—for Thee!

(Poems, #597, c. 1862, II, 458)

Jehovah, the god of organized religion, is the malicious boy, torturing Moses, his inferior, in order to prove his own supremacy (see p. 95). Dickinson found the Biblical account of God's dealings with Moses particularly revolting. Moses endured years of hardships and intolerable conditions in obedience to God's commands. Moses, however, made one "mistake," recounted in Numbers 20. At God's command, he had
led the Israelites into the desert of Zin, and water was desperately needed. God commanded Moses to gather all the Israelites together "and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes; and it shall give forth his water, and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock: so thou shalt give the congregation and their beasts drink" (Numbers 20:8). Rather than speak to the rock, Moses hit it with his rod. For this act of disobedience, God decreed that Moses could see, but not enter, the "Promised Land," and he remained true to his promise. In Deuteronomy 34:45, as the Israelites stood on the threshold of the "Promised Land," "the Lord said unto him, This is the land which I sware unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob. . . . I have caused thee to see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go over thither. So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord." The injustice was repugnant to Dickinson, and it is significant that the boy estranged from his natural state of oneness with nature and deity embodies the hateful characteristics she attributes to God.

The images of adolescents are scarce in Dickinson's work. The ten images which have been cited in this chapter portray the older child as a superficial, vain, sometimes sad, and often malicious being. As a group, the images are highly unfavorable. Estranged from his natural state, the child is superficial and, on occasion, cruel. There is no trace of the mystical aura which surrounds the small
child, nor is there any evidence of the guiding presence of divinity. The child portrayed in the images in this chapter is the estranged child.
CHAPTER VI

CHILDHOOD IN IMMORTALITY

The physical aspect of death has dire implications in Dickinson's philosophy of childhood. Death is described in extremely unfavorable—even bitter—terms. Death's companion, immortality, on the other hand, is viewed in an entirely different light. It is in immortality that childhood may be regained, and in child images in the context of immortality Dickinson invariably envisions the soul in immortality as a child. "It was one of her ideas... that in growing old one was in some sense growing a child again, since only thus could one be finally taken into the kingdom of heaven." Indeed, immortality provides a more perfect childhood than that possible on earth. The images of the child in immortality reveal the same mixture of philosophies seen in images of the small child of Chapter III in that elements of Christianity, romanticism, and pantheism may be discerned.

That the soul enters immortality as a child is explicitly stated in most poems in this category; that belief may be inferred from the following excerpt:

How sweet if I am not forgot
By Chums that passed away— (no stanza break)

Since Playmates at threescore and ten
Are such a scarcity—\(^2\)

Since the persona expresses the hope that she can again "play"
with "Chums that passed away," it is clear that she plans to
enter the afterlife as a child.

In contrast to previous images of death as an "ice
nest" or a cruel stranger is the following image of death
as the gateway to a pleasant experience in the afterlife.

The Months have ends—the Years—a knot—
No Power can untie
To stretch a little further
A Skein of Misery—

The Earth lays back these tired lives
In her mysterious Drawers—
Too tenderly, that any doubt
An ultimate Repose—

The manner of the Children—
Who weary of the Day—
Themself—the noisy Plaything
They cannot put away—

(Poems, #423, c. 1862, I, 328)

The "tired lives" that the persona names are analogized to
exhausted children, weary of their play but unable to leave
it of their own accord. The afterlife is the child's "ultimate
repose," and the tone of the image of the child in immortality
is very pleasant, in contrast to previous images of the
child in death.

Cody asserts in *After Great Pain* that Dickinson had
serious doubts about immortality. There is ample evidence,

\(^2\)Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed.
Thomas H. Johnson (1951; rpt. Cambridge: The Belknap Press,
1968), #1549, c. 1882, III, 1068-69. Hereafter cited as
*Poems.*
however, that it was not the existence of immortality, but the nature of that state which puzzled her. In 1884, for example, she wrote, "I thought the Churchyard Tarrytown, when I was a Child, but now I trust 'tis Trans." In an 1880 note of condolence on the death of an infant, she wrote, "It may have been she came to show you Immortality--Her startling little flight would imply she did. . . . I hope Heaven is warm--There are so many Barefoot ones--I hope it is near--the little Tourist was so small--" (Letters, #671, c. 1880, III, 678-79). Since Dickinson's words were intended to console a bereaved parent, they may not accurately reflect her true feelings; she may merely be offering the expected sentiments for such times. On the other hand, they may well reveal her private beliefs. She does not question the existence of immortality in her remarks, but she is unsure of how it should be described.

The following poem is similar in concept to the previous prose excerpt in that the nature, not the existence, of "Paradise" is questioned. Moreover, the questioning is done by a child contemplating the entrance to immortality.

What is--"Paradise"--
Who live there--
Are they "Farmers"--
Do they "hoe"--
Do they know that this is "Amherst"--
And that I--am coming--too--

Do they wear "new shoes"--in "Eden"--
Is it always pleasant--there--
Wont they scold us--when we're hungry--
Or tell God--how cross we are--

You are sure there's such a person
As "a Father"--in the sky--
So if I get lost--there--ever--
Or do what the Nurse calls "die"--
I shant walk the "Jasper"--barefoot--
Ransomed folks--wont laugh at me--
Maybe--"Eden" a'nt so lonesome
As New England used to be!

(Poems, #215, c. 1860, I, 150-51)

Although the answer to the question, "What is--Paradise" is never given, it finally appears a more desirable state than the child's present life. "Maybe--'Eden' a'nt so lonesome/As New England used to be!"

Eternity is portrayed as an "Empire" full of royal children in the following poem:

The Court is far away--
No Umpire--have I--
My Sovreign is offended--
To gain his grace--I'd die!

I'll seek his royal feet--
I'll say--Remember--King--
Thou shalt--thyself--one day--a Child--
Implore a larger--thing--

That Empire--is of Czars--
As small--they say--as I--
Grant me--that day--the royalty--
To intercede--for Thee--

(Poems, #235, c. 1861, I, 170)

In the portrayal of a heaven full of small "Czars" there is a fusion of royal and child imagery similar to that found in earlier images of the small child. For example, in describing a small boy, she begins, "I met a King this
afternoon!" (see pp. 54-55). Imagery of royalty signifies sublimity, which is first achieved in early childhood. An intermediate state of sublimity may be achieved by the female child in a love relationship. Finally, immortality is the soul's ultimate divine state; before it may be attained, the soul must take on the child's characteristics and qualities.

Thus far, immortality has been described by Dickinson as a pleasant place, full of souls in the state of childhood. It is "Paradise"; it is a "Kingdom." A third description is presented when it is likened to a school in the two following images. The tone of the images is not repressive, as are those which reveal the school as an estranging force. The recitation described here is "sublime" and quite different from the recitation of the "little Scholars" in poem #635 (see pp. 78-79).

I can't tell you--but you feel it--
Nor can you tell me--
Saints, with ravished slate and pencil
Solve our April Day!

Sweeter than a vanished frolic
From a vanished green!
Swifter than the hoofs of Horsemen
Round a Ledge of dream!

Modest, let us walk among it
With our faces vailed--
As they say polite Archangels
Do in meeting God!

Not for me--to prate about it!
Not for you--to say
To some fashionable Lady
"Charming April Day"!
Rather—Heaven's "Peter Parley"!
By which Children slow
To sublimer Recitation
Are prepared to go!
(Poems, #65, c. 1859, I, 50-51)

Nature, in the form of an April day, is a sublime lesson which prepares "Children" for the even greater and more sublime lessons they will learn in immortality. The relationship of the small child and nature, then, is a portent of the "diviner" state which may be attained in the childhood of immortality.

Although immortality contains "sublime recitations," it also offers recess, at which time "School Boys" may pursue their activities freely. Images of nature, the child, and immortality fuse in the following poem:

A feather from the Whippowil
That everlasting--sings!
Whose galleries--are Sunrise--
Whose Opera--the Springs--
Whose Emerald Nest the Ages spin
Of mellow--murmuring thread--
Whose Beryl Egg, what School Boys hunt
In "Recess"--Overhead!
(Poems, #161, c. 1860, I, 117)

The bird by description takes on elements of mystery and divinity. Although the feather itself is tangible and earthly, the substance behind the feather is eternal, boundless, mysterious, and divine. It "everlasting--sings"; its "Emerald Nest the Ages spin." A clearer statement of pantheism would be hard to find. The bird image fuses with the child image in the last two lines. The boy does not hunt the egg maliciously; instead, the egg becomes the symbol for mysteries
of existence—mysteries which are hidden "Overhead" and which may be pursued by "School Boys" in immortality. The final image is the uniting of the child with nature and divinity in the afterlife.

In still another concept of immortality, many poems and letters reflect a purely Christian concept of heaven. Bolstered by New Testament promises, Dickinson often seems sure of childhood in a heaven described by Christ. For example, Luke 18:16 commands, in Christ's own words, "Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God." Echoing that assurance, Dickinson wrote a bereaved mother, "'Come unto me.' Beloved Commandment. The Darling obeyed" (Letters, #595, c. 1879, II, 636). On a separate occasion in that same year, 1879, she wrote the grieved father of an infant daughter who had recently died, "'Come unto me' could not alarm those minute feet—how sweet to remember" (Letters, #620, c. 1879, II, 648). The injustice of infant death which is the hallmark of preceding poems on the subject is absent from these remarks. That absence may be attributed to the fact that the focus is not on the death itself but on the life after death. Moreover, Dickinson's purpose in the notes is to console bereaved parents. Her words echo New Testament promises that the child's existence in immortality is happy.

Trudging to Eden, looking backward,
I met Somebody's little Boy
Asked him his name—He lisped me "Trotwood"—
Lady, did He belong to thee?
Would it comfort—to know I met him--
And that He didn't look afraid?
I couldn't weep—for so many smiling
New Acquaintance—this Baby made—
(Poems, #1020, c. 1865, II, 729)

Jubilation greets the child crossing the threshold of
immortality. In the following poem he is greeted at heaven's
door with banners:

Taken from men—this morning—
Carried by men today—
Met by the Gods with banners—
Who marshalled her away—

One little maid—from playmates—
One little mind from school—
There must be guests in Eden—
All the rooms are full—

Far—as the East from Even—
Dim—as the border star—
Courtiers quaint, in Kingdoms
Our departed are
(Poems, #53, c. 1858, I, 40-41)

Stanza two is reminiscent of John 14:2: "In my Father's
house are many mansions... I go to prepare a place for
you." In the Christian heaven, then, the child is welcome,
he is well provided for, and he is a member of a royal court.

The same Biblical allusion to heaven's "mansions" is
contained in the following poem:

'Houses'—so the Wise Men tell me—
'Mansions'! Mansions must be warm!
Mansions cannot let the tears in,
Mansions must exclude the storm!

'Many Mansions', by 'his Father',
I don't know him; snugly built!
Could the Children find the way there—
Some, would even trudge tonight!
(Poems, #127, c. 1859, I, 90)
For the child, heaven is desirable—it is protective and sufficient for his needs. Indeed, for children like the "Beggar Lad" Christian immortality holds far more promise than any earthly situation.

The Beggar Lad--dies early--
It's Somewhat in the Cold--
And Somewhat in the Trudging feet--
And haply, in the World--

The Cruel--smiling--bowing World--
That took it's Cambric Way--
Nor heard the timid cry for "Bread"--
"Sweet Lady--Charity"--

Among Redeemed Children
If Trudging feet may stand--
The Barefoot time forgotten--so--
The Sleet--the bitter Wind--

The Childish Hands that teazed for Pence
Lifted adoring--then--
To Him whom never Ragged--Coat
Did supplicate in vain--

(Poems, #717, c. 1863, II, 550)

Though deprived on earth, the child may look forward to loving treatment from Christ in heaven because the New Testament promises it.

Dickinson's belief that the soul enters immortality as a child was reinforced—perhaps even shaped—by Christ's words recorded in Luke 18:17: "Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein." Following Edward Dickinson's death in 1874, a friend sent a Christmas wreath for his grave, which Emily acknowledged in this manner: "I am sure you must have remembered that Father had 'Become as Little Children,' or
you would never have dared send him a Christmas gift, for you know how he frowned upon Santa Claus—and all such prowling gentlemen—" (Letters, #425, c. 1874, II, 531).

Even in humorous images, Dickinson is consistent in her concept of the promise of the pleasures and delights in the Christian heaven.

Where bells no more affright the morn—
Where scrabble never comes—
Where very nimble Gentlemen
Are forced to keep their rooms—

Where tired Children placid sleep
Thro' Centuries of noon
This place is Bliss—this town is Heaven—
Please, Pater, pretty soon!

"Oh could we climb where Moses stood,
And view the Landscape o'er"
Not Father's bells—nor Factories,
Could scare us any more!

(Poems, #112, c. 1859, I, 82-83)

Johnson interprets the poem as a plea for early morning quiet so that the poet could sleep late, which undoubtedly it is. The view of heaven as filled with happy children is entirely consistent with Dickinson's concept of childhood in immortality.

When George Eliot died, Dickinson wrote the Norcross sisters, "The gift of belief, which her greatness denied her, I trust she receives in the childhood of the kingdom of heaven. As childhood is earth's confiding time, perhaps having no childhood, she lost her way to the early trust, and . . . [so?] later came" (Letters, #710, c. 1881, III, 700). The blissful, confiding state of childhood, then, may be attained in immortality. Similarly, after Dr. Holland's
death in 1881 she wrote his widow, "The lost one was on such childlike terms with the Father in Heaven. He has passed from confiding to comprehending--perhaps but a step" (Letters, #731, c. 1881, III, 713; italics are Dickinson's). To call Dr. Holland "childlike" was the highest accolade Dickinson could give him. Since he had maintained the child's "confiding" relationship with deity, he was well equipped to enter the life after death. In the state of early childhood, one may only be on "confiding" terms with nature and deity. In immortality, a "comprehending" state may be attained. That comprehension renders the immortal child not just an extension but an integral part of nature and deity.

Wilbur Merrill Frohock observes, "the Calvinist Protestantism in which her birth had implanted her, with its great emphasis upon the anthropomorphic Fatherhood of God, its insistence upon becoming as a little child in order to enter into the Kingdom and of suffering little children, its persistent placing of the faithful in a filial relationship to the Almighty, had given her ... an abundant stock of cliché to juggle."4 Dickinson's concept of childhood in immortality held for her promise of re-attaining a state she idealized and sought throughout her lifetime to attain. Frohock's observation might be interpreted to mean that the New

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Testament merely provided a vehicle for the expression of Dickinson's established views on the soul's childlike existence in the afterlife. One wonders to what extent Christian tenets of childhood in fact influenced Dickinson's concept. Perhaps, as Frohock suggests, the New Testament assurances of the importance of the child in the Christian hierarchy merely reinforced her ideas and gave her a vehicle for expressing them. On the other hand, perhaps the Christian beliefs about childhood planted within her the seed of a philosophy which she subsequently nurtured and enlarged. Whichever is the case, her concept of childhood in immortality encompasses more than the Christian view. Some of the images in that category have distinctly romantic characteristics. In 1862, for example, she wrote an account of a child's feelings, on the threshold of immortality.

Why make it doubt— it hurts it so--
So sick-- to guess--
So strong-- to know--
So brave-- upon it's little Bed
To tell the very last They said
Unto Itself-- and smile-- And shake--
For that dear-- distant-- dangerous-- Sake--
But-- the Instead-- the Pinching fear
That Something-- it did do-- or dare--
Offend the Vision-- and it flee--
And they no more remember me--
Nor ever turn to tell me why--
Oh, Master, This is Misery--
(Poems, #462, c. 1862, I, 356-57)

The "dear-- distant-- dangerous-- Sake" is a very similar image to that of the awesome forces from which the small child flees at an "enthralling gallop." Though dangerous,
they are desirable, and the child seeks union with them—a union which awaits the child in the above image on the opposite side of the threshold of immortality. The child looks into the abyss of immortality with a sense of awe and dread. Simultaneously, however, the child is afraid that the vision of immortality will disappear; it is fearful yet strangely compelling. In an 1870 letter to Higginson, Dickinson speaks of immortality as "The larger Haunted House it seems, of maturer Childhood—distant, an alarm—entered intimate at last as a neighbor's Cottage—" (Letters, #353, c. 1870, II, 480). The "Haunted House" is synonymous with childhood. What child has not known the rapturous terror of a haunted house? In spite of the danger he believes lurks within the house, a child will return again and again to the dread abode, stepping closer and closer to the entrance until finally "the boldest" takes the plunge into its darkness only to find it harmless. Again Dickinson fuses images of awesome fearfulness ("Haunted House") and great desirability ("intimate ... as a neighbor's Cottage") to describe immortality.

The dates of these two images, 1862 and 1870, respectively, indicate that a latent romanticism concerning immortality was lurking in the poet's mind at a time when most of her imagery in that regard was couched in distinctly Christian terms. After 1881, however, there seems to have been a profound shift in the poet's thinking about immortality in the direction of romanticism. Images concerning childhood
in immortality lose their Christian flavor and reveal a philosophy more in accord with the concept of immortality as the "larger Haunted House . . . of maturer Childhood." The shift is noticeable in all poems about immortality written after 1881. Approximately one hundred and thirty-nine poems are known to have been written in the last five years of the poet's life. Although a number of these poems concern the subject of immortality, none is couched in the Christian framework of earlier immortality poems. There are several possible explanations for this apparent shift. The most obvious is that the poet at this time was approaching the end of her own life. One would therefore expect that she sought to determine her genuine feelings about immortality—to steer away from clichés in order to determine the essence of her belief. In the second place, in the period of 1881-1886, not only was Dickinson's own health failing, but also she experienced the loss of many of her closest friends and relatives. The death which had the most profound impact on her was undoubtedly that of her nephew Gilbert at the age of eight years. All of the deaths, however, were very significant for her.

When the child image is found in the context of immortality in this period, an illusion of the immortal child's mystical union with nature and deity is conveyed.

Of Death I try to think like this--
The Well in which they lay us
Is but the Likeness of the Brook (no stanza break)
That menaced not to slay us,
But to invite by that Dismay
Which is the Zest of sweetness
To the same Flower Hesperian,
Decoying but to greet us—

I do remember when a Child
With bolder Playmates straying
To where a Brook that seemed a Sea
Withheld us by it's roaring
From just a Purple Flower beyond
Until constrained to clutch it
If Doom itself were the result,
The boldest leaped, and clutched it—

(Poems, #1558, c. 1882, III, 1072-73)

The dangers inherent in complete union with nature are intuited by the child. These awesome dangers constitute the "enthralling" fears the small child knows. Even in the presence of awesome terror, described in the poem above, the bold child nevertheless defies the danger. He achieves union with nature at the expense of losing his physical existence. The brook and the "Flower Hesperian" are mystical, compelling, fearful, and irresistibly beautiful. In the poem the brook symbolizes death; the flower is symbolic of immortality. The image of "Flower Hesperian" is surrounded by an aura of mysticism and indescribable beauty—and it is the bold child who rushes to his death in order to "clutch" it.

Gilbert Dickinson's death unleashed his aunt's vision of the mystical nature of immortality—a vision which prior to that time may be seen only in fleeting glimpses. Gilbert, a "bold" child, was especially loved by his aunt. Her natural partiality to boys was intensified by Gilbert's zest
for life—he was undoubtedly her favorite of all her child companions. In her first letter to Susan Dickinson after Gilbert's death, Dickinson gives full vent to her imaginative powers concerning the mystical state of immortality.

The vision of Immortal Life has been fulfilled—
How simply at the last the Fathom comes!
The passenger and not the Sea, we find surprises us—

Gilbert rejoiced in Secrets—
His Life was panting with them—With what menace of Light he cried "Dont tell, Aunt Emily"!
Now my ascended Playmate must instruct me. Show us, prattling Preceptor, but the way to thee!
He knew no niggard moment—His Life was full of Boon—The Playthings of the Dervish were not so wild as his—
No crescent was this Creature—He traveled from the Full—
Such soar, but never set—
I see him in the Star, and meet his sweet velocity in everything that flies—His Life was like the Bugle, which winds itself away, his Elegy an echo—his Requiem ecstasy—
Dawn and Meridian in one.
Wherefore would he wait, wronged only of Night, which he left for us—
Without a speculation, our little Ajax spans the whole—
Pass to thy Rendezvous of Light,
Pangless except for us—
Who slowly ford the Mystery
Which thou hast leaped across!

(Letters, #868, c. 1883, III, 799)

Gilbert was an ideal for his aunt. Her description of his life reveals that he was the type of child who "storms the Earth and stuns the Air." In life, one may assume, she considered him on "confiding" terms with nature—earlier references to the child have revealed that. In his death he becomes an aspect of the mystical whole that encompasses
all existence—he has passed from "confiding" to "comprehending."
In view of earlier Dickinson images concerning the dangers
which lurk for the child in too-close communion with nature,
it perhaps is significant to point out that Gilbert's death
was the result of typhoid, contracted while playing with
neighborhood children in mud. His situation ironically
parallels that of the bold child in the poem who defies the
dangers of the rushing stream to attain the purple flower.
The events surrounding his death can only have served to
reinforce Dickinson's mystical view of fusion with nature
in immortality. In Johnson's biography of the poet, he terms
the above letter to Sue, "the most moving letter that Emily
Dickinson wrote in all her many years of correspondence. . . .
A sense of vibrancy, rapid motion, and light predominate, and
the figures of speech tumble over each other: the boy is a
passenger panting, prattling, whirling like a dervish,
soaring; she sees him in the star, and meets his velocity in
all flying things; he is light, and dawn, and meridian, and
the swift-footed Ajax."5

In 1884, the year after Gilbert's death, the poet wrote
the Norcrosses, "The little boy we laid away never fluctuates,
and his dim society is companion still. But it is growing
damp and I must go in. Memory's fog is rising" (Letters,
#907, c. 1884, III, 827). Following those lines, she added
the following poem:

5 Thomas H. Johnson, Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive
The going from a world we know  
To one a wonder still  
Is like the child's adversity  
Whose vista is a hill,  
Behind the hill is sorcery  
And everything unknown,  
But will the secret compensate  
For climbing it alone?  
(Poems, #1603, c. 1884, III, 1103-04)

Again, she describes the "leap" of the "bold child." She wrote Sue in 1883, "Awe is the first hand that is held to us" (Letters, #671, c. 1883, III, 800). Images such as the above indicate that she believes it is also the last hand that is offered. In becoming an integral part of that awe, the child enters eternity—as he enters a haunted house—or jumps a brook—or braves a treacherous hill. The awe which the small child realizes in early childhood is the same awe that the child enters in immortality.

Dickinson describes Gilbert in immortality as mysteriously an integral part of nature. "I see him in the Star, and meet his sweet velocity in everything that flies...Dawn and Meridian in one" (Letters, #668, c. 1883, III, 799). In the following 1859 poem, written twenty-four years before Gilbert's death, Dickinson similarly describes a child's fusion in immortality with a universal whole, which fusion makes the child an integral part of nature.

She died at play,  
Gambolled away  
Her lease of spotted hours,  
Then sank as gaily as a Turk  
Upon a Couch of flowers.

Her ghost strolled softly o'er the hill  
Yesterday, and Today, (no stanza break)
Her vestments as the silver fleece--
Her countenance as spray
(Poems, #75, c. 1859, I, 61)

Although the imagery is not as highly developed as that surrounding Gilbert's state in immortality, it affords a glimpse of latent romanticism and mysticism which came to fruition after Gilbert's death. In the preceding image the child in immortality, like Gilbert, unites with nature--she is the clouds, the dew.

Nature, death, and the child are related also in the following reference from an 1884 letter to Mrs. Holland: "When it shall come my turn, I want a Buttercup--Doubtless the Grass will give me one, for does she not revere the Whims of her flitting Children?" (Letters, #901, c. 1884, III, 824). Nature--the grass--communicates with and responds to the child in immortality. Moreover, as the child in immortality, the poet envisions herself as able to experience nature in much the same way the small child does. A very revealing episode is related by Leyda in The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson: "When a relative of whom she was fond, was dying with consumption, she sent a box of trailing arbutus. He understood the message. As children they had gathered the fragrant wood flowers." The message is assumed to be the assurance of unity with the all-encompassing mystical whole in immortality. By reminding him of early childhood,

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Dickinson perhaps sought to prepare him for "maturer childhood." Nature conveyed the message.

With her concept of childhood in immortality, Dickinson's philosophy of childhood is complete. Early childhood is a mystical, divine state in which the child is on "confiding" terms with nature and divinity. Though blissful, the child also experiences awesome fear when he recognizes the powers, both supernatural and explainable, which reside in nature. A series of factors and experiences eventually lead the child to an estrangement from the confiding relationship with nature and deity. That state is regained and surpassed, however, when the soul enters immortality as a child. The immortal child becomes himself a mystical being and an integral part of the encompassing whole. Dickinson's pictorial representation of eternity varies and becomes less concrete over the years. Though Christian assurances of the child's importance in the heavenly hierarchy were attractive to Dickinson, in the final analysis, she abandoned the Christian for the mystical, romantic concept—a vision of immortality in which the child is perfectly united with nature and deity to make complete an all-encompassing whole.

Throughout most of Dickinson's adult life she sought to live on childlike terms, even though she must have realized, perhaps subconsciously, that she was attempting the impossible. In 1858 she wrote:
Today is far from Childhood--
But up and down the hills
I hold her hand the tighter--
Which shortened all the miles--

(Poems, #14, c. 1858, I, 18)

The hand technically is Sue's, but symbolically it is childhood. Dickinson believes that with effort, the state of childhood can be maintained. The following year she wrote: "I ask God on my knee to send you much prosperity, few winter days, and long suns. I have a childish hope to gather all I love together—and sit down beside, and smile" (Letters, #212, c. 1859, II, 358). Her wish essentially is that she may remain a child. In seclusion, to some extent, Dickinson indeed did just that. As her life drew to a close, however, she apparently abandoned the effort—or at least realized realistically its impossibility. In 1881 she wrote, "The Things that never can come back, are several--/Childhood--some forms of Hope--the Dead--" (Poems, #1515, c. 1881, III, 1045). In that same year she draws the image of a boy as the representative of a faded past.

A faded Boy—in sallow Clothes
Who drove a lonesome Cow
To pastures of Oblivion—
A statesman's Embryo—

The Boys that whistled are extinct—
The Cows that fed and thanked
Remanded to a Ballad's Barn
Or Clover's Retrospect—

(Poems, #1524, c. 1881, III, 1051)

And in an undated prose fragment which was probably written some time after 1881, she reminisces over a childhood forever
lost: "Two things I have lost with Childhood--the rapture of losing my shoe in the Mud and going Home barefoot, wading for Cardinal flowers and the mothers reproof which was . . . more for my sake than her weary own for she frowned with a smile (now Mother and Cardinal flower are parts of a closed world--) But that is all I have lost--memory drapes her Lips" (Letters, Prose Fragment #117, c. 1880's, III, 928-29). Perhaps near the end of her life she realized she was looking "oppositely/ For the site of the Kingdom of Heaven" (Poems, #959, c. 1864, II, 694-95). With that realization, she left her artificial, idealized childhood in anticipation of the ultimate state, in which she could join the mystical, divine whole as a child.
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