

DICKINSON

by William H. Roetzheim  
13518 Jamul Drive  
Jamul, CA 91935  
619.917.4917  
William@level4press.com

## DICKINSON

### Characters:

Emily Dickinson, the poet  
Austin Dickinson, her brother  
Edward Dickinson, her father  
Emily Norcross (Emma) Dickinson, her mother  
Judge Lord, her lover  
Lavinia (Vinnie) Dickinson, her sister  
Sue (Susie) Dickinson, her sister-in-law and Austin's wife  
The Playwright, the playwright of this play  
Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a middle-aged preacher

The play is written so that it may optionally be performed by four actors as follows:

Emily Dickinson  
The Playwright  
All other male parts  
All other female parts

### Setting:

The play takes place during one night in Emily Dickinson's bedroom in her father's Amherst, Massachusetts mansion. For Emily the time is the late 1800's, while for The Playwright the setting is the same but the time is the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The bedroom has an upstage door leading to a closet, and a window stage left and door stage right, both leading to nothingness. The bedroom is furnished with period appropriate bedroom furniture, including a twin bed, a writing desk stage left, a dresser with some books and a kerosene lamp atop it, a potted live ficus tree, and a large chest on the floor stage right. The books contain scraps of paper on which are written poems by Emily Dickinson. Emily Dickinson and The Playwright remain in the bedroom throughout the play. All other characters perform their lines from the ethereal nothingness of the world outside the bedroom, which may be represented by any available areas of the theatre.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

The Play begins with fog and blue light as strange, ghostly melodies play.

THE PLAYWRIGHT, a man in his early middle age, is asleep at the desk amidst scattered papers, many crumpled into balls. A leather satchel leans against the side of the desk.

The chest of drawers creaks open, and EMILY arises from the chest dressed all in white, stepping onto the stage. EMILY is a petite woman with brown hair, in her mid-thirties. She stares at the audience without seeing them, then slowly turns, sees THE PLAYWRIGHT, and screams. THE PLAYWRIGHT startles backward, falling over in his chair. He scrambles to his feet and sees EMILY. He screams. She points at him and screams. He points at her and screams. They continue alternating screaming at each other several times, but the volume ratchets down and they each slowly sink to the floor in exhaustion during the process. In the end they sit on the floor facing each other, making half-hearted efforts at screams, then giving up.

EMILY

Get out!

THE PLAYWRIGHT

It's all just a dream.

EMILY

Get out!

THE PLAYWRIGHT

It's not real. I'm having a nightmare, that's all. There's no such thing as ghosts.

EMILY

Get out of my room, Sir!

THE PLAYWRIGHT

[Covering his ears and closing his eyes] Na na na na na na.  
Just a dream...wake up soon... [sing-song] now I lay me down to  
sleep...pray the Lord my soul to keep...If I should die before  
I wake... [Leaps to his feet]

EMILY

You have no right to be in here, Sir!

THE PLAYWRIGHT

That's it, isn't it? I'm dead, aren't I. This is some  
kind of waypoint.

EMILY

[Leaping to her feet as well] You, Sir, are a villain, a  
doer of crimes, a scoundrel, a disturber of the public  
peace, and a state's prison filler!

THE PLAYWRIGHT

I was expecting some kind of tunnel.

EMILY

I call upon the destructive forces of fire, water, light,  
tempest, hungry wolves, lightning and thunder to destroy  
you!

THE PLAYWRIGHT

You don't look like any relative I remember. Are you my  
spirit guide?

EMILY

I'm Emily Dickinson, and this is my bedroom, and you are  
invading the chamber of a lady, and you are most unwelcome.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Thank God! Not dead, just dreaming.

EMILY

I assure you that this is no dream.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

You don't know what I know or else you'd know that I know that there's no way this can be anything but a dream.

EMILY

[quizzically] I don't know that you know...

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Don't you get it? I'm writing a play about you, but it's not going well. In fact, it's going horrible. So I fall asleep and dream you up out of nothing, just like...just like...just like the way your poems were discovered in that trunk [*pointing*] after you were dead.

EMILY

Dead? I'm not dead. At least, not in the sense that you mean. And this is most assuredly not a dream. Now leave!

THE PLAYWRIGHT

You leave.

EMILY

I can't. You must.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Why not? Oh, I get it. The whole agoraphobia thing. [*Taps his head*] Clever. My mind's got it all figured out. OK, I'll leave and you can stay. [*He opens the door and starts to step out, grabs the door jamb in a panic, pulls himself back in and slams the door, holding it shut with both hands and breathing hard.*]

EMILY

What's wrong with you?

THE PLAYWRIGHT

[*Pointing at doorway*] There's... It's... Only... There's nothing there.

EMILY

Of course there's nothing there. It's the middle of the night, who would you think would be in my hallway.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

No hallway.

EMILY

What do you mean no hallway?

THE PLAYWRIGHT

There's no hallway. No stairs, no walls, no building, no nothing. It's like looking over a cliff, but with no bottom.

EMILY

That's crazy. [*She walks to the door, puts her hand on the knob as if to open it, pauses, thinks better of it, then backs away*] I know you're wrong, but I believe you're right. I've felt it myself. [*Points at the window*] You'll just need to climb down the tree.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

[*Walks to the window*] I don't see a tree. [*Opens the window and sticks his head and much of his upper body out the window*] It's just like the door. There's nothing out here but emptiness. Nothing at all but... [*this last is cut-off as EMILY pushes against his butt, attempting to shove him out the window*]

[*Scrambling back inside and to the floor*] What did you do that for? You could have killed me!

EMILY

No, it's all a dream. You said so yourself.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

I didn't know you were such a bitch. Hey, that's helpful!  
[Scrambles and finds a pen and paper, begins to jot down  
some notes]

EMILY

You said you were writing a play?

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Yes, yes. Five plays actually. About the five poets at  
the turn of the century who did the most to influence  
poetry throughout the twentieth century.

EMILY

Oh, so you're from the future? And I'm one of the five?

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Yes, of course. You're the most important one of the five.

EMILY

Oh, I think I like that.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Wonderful.

EMILY

And the turn of the Century, so I'll be... [counting], why,  
I'll be seventy years old then. How old do I live to be?

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Uh...there's a little problem.

EMILY

You can tell me! Eighty? Do I live to be eighty?

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Fifty-five.

EMILY

Fifty-five what?

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Fifty-five years. You die when you're fifty-five years old.

EMILY

But you said, "Turn of the Century". I distinctly heard you say, "Turn of the Century."

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Well, you're kind of an odd bird. I included you because your poems weren't published until around the turn of the century.

EMILY

Just fifty-five?

THE PLAYWRIGHT

And of course, you were writing way ahead of your time so you really had to be included. Sort of like you were moved up a grade in school.

EMILY

Well I'm glad I died at the age of fifty-five. Sooner would have been even better. Did you know I began cutting out advertisements for tombstones when I was twenty-six?

THE PLAYWRIGHT

No, but that's good. [*begins writing notes again*]

EMILY

[*Curious, looking over his shoulder*] What have you got so far? Tell me!

THE PLAYWRIGHT

[From his notes] EMILY is a petite woman with brown hair, in her mid-thirties.

EMILY

That's it? And you call yourself a writer? No wonder you're having such a hard time. You're incompetent, that's all.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

[Writing and underlining] Bitch, no doubt about it.

EMILY

Let's see. Emily is small, like the Wren; and her hair is bold, like the Chestnut Bur; and her eyes...her eyes are like the sherry in the glass that the guest leaves.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Wow, you are good.

EMILY

So is that the problem that you're having with the play? The fact that you're an incompetent writer? I mean, that's no sin, I'm sure you can't help it.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

No, no, it's not me. It's you! I've been researching you for three years and I still don't have the answer. Or rather, I have too many answers. Everyone has a theory about you—something to help them complete their PhD thesis, or get them a bestselling book, or just generally get them some publicity. They're literary grave diggers digging you up over-and-over, and they all sound right at first. But then...

Why did you have them destroy your correspondence? I mean, researchers have pieced together thousands of letters but the ones that really matter, the ones that really answered the questions, destroyed, all destroyed.

EMILY

The riddle we can guess, we speedily despise.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

So we extrapolate from hints in the letters that survive.  
We read clues into your poems, hoping that they offer  
truths.

EMILY

Tell all the truth but tell it slant. The truth must  
dazzle gradually, or every man be blind.

I'll tell you a truth. When Jesus tells us about his  
Father, we distrust him. When he shows us his home, we  
turn away, but when he confides to us that he is  
"acquainted with grief," we listen, for that is an  
acquaintance of our own.

*[Walking to the window and looking out]* It's as if the  
plague had ravaged the streets, nothing doing, no visiting,  
no gossiping, no sociability, no railroad...all is still  
enough. I am homesick here, even if it is home.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Do you still write?

EMILY

I have no other playmates.

*[She removes a scrap of paper from a book on the dresser.]*

I was the slightest in the House;  
I took the smallest Room.  
At night, my little Lamp, and Book,  
And one Geranium

So stationed I could catch the Mint  
That never ceased to fall.  
And just my Basket,  
Let me think—I'm sure—  
That this was all.

I never spoke, unless addressed,  
And then, 'twas brief and low.  
I could not bear to live aloud,  
The Racket shamed me so.

And if it had not been so far,  
And any one I knew  
Were going—I had often thought  
How note-less, I could die.

*[Puts the paper on the dresser]*

My own words so chill and burn me.

*[THE PLAYWRIGHT takes the paper containing the poem, pulls some reading glasses from his pocket and begins to examine the scrawl on the page]*

Spectacles won't help you understand my poems. *[Laughing]*  
I don't think a telescope would assist you. Perhaps they  
are not meant to be understood.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Will you help me?

EMILY

*[Firmly]* No.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Just a little. Just enough to keep your words alive.

EMILY

*[Hesitatingly]* No.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

People aren't reading poetry anymore. If we don't do  
something, your poetry might die. Then what would happen  
to you?

EMILY

Maybe I'll help just a little. Nothing specific, mind you.  
So, where do you want to start?