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The supernatural and the occult in selected poems and letters of Emily Dickinson

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THE SUPERNATURAL AND THE OCCULT IN SELECTED POEMS
AND LETTERS OF EMILY DICKINSON

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY
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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapters</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <strong>Emily Dickinson's Reaction to the Cultural and Intellectual Aspects of Her Environment and Age</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <strong>Literary Exposure: The Supernatural and the Occult Influences in the Reading of Emily Dickinson</strong></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <strong>The Manifestation of the Supernatural and the Occult in Selected Poems and Letters</strong></td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <strong>Conclusion</strong></td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** | 73
A study of the supernatural and the occult in the poems and letters of Emily Dickinson might seem on the surface, to the unsuspecting reader, at once improbable and unsustained. However, to a scholar of Dickinson there is no such doubt. The supernatural and the occult are viable elements in a number of the poems and letters of Emily Dickinson.

Appearing at that point in the nineteenth century, 1830–to 1886, which allows her as a poet and selective reader to peruse the varied literary tradition behind her while remaining aware of and interested in the literary and intellectual outlook of her own day, Emily Dickinson is flanked by the growth and decline, or at least the tempering, of Puritanism and the spirituality of Transcendentalism. While the influence of the seventeenth century is recognized as almost inevitable within the scope of literary tradition, the concern of this thesis adheres to those influences, such as the rise of gothic romanticism and the growth of Spiritualism, which directly manifest themselves in nineteenth-century New England.
The use of the supernatural and the occult in the poems and letters of Emily Dickinson parallels the growth of an interest in the same. The nineteenth century is accepted as the cresting stage of a growth of an interest in the supernatural and the occult which has increased even to the present day. This spiraling interest in the supernatural and the occult can be seen as emerging anew with the fading of that assemblage of Puritan dogma which held the New England mind in devout theological bondage until the rise of Transcendentalism.

With the advancement of Transcendentalism, which exalted "the divine right of the individual to do each day what was pleasing,"¹ the way was paved for the sweeping type of individualism needed to advance interest in the supernatural and the occult. This reverence for the individual, particularly as presented by the transcendentalists, serves as a significant factor in the developments which led to the revolutionary nature of the nineteenth century.

As coincidental as it must seem, it is the nineteenth century that witnesses the work of Emily Dickinson and reform movements of all kinds. As the epoch of Emily Dickinson's lifetime, the nineteenth century is also the bearer of a great

wave of feminism and the struggle for women's rights. This wave of feminism included the far-reaching efforts of the abolitionist, Margaret Fuller, and those of the literary critic, Francis Wright, in the United States, as well as those efforts of Mary Wollstonecraft, the English champion for women's rights, who is also the first wife of the Pre-Romantic, William Godwin, and, subsequently, the mother of Mary Godwin, the wife of Percy Bysshe Shelley and the author of *Frankenstein*. With the alert consciousness afforded by a New England rearing and a regional history of active and dedicated women, Emily Dickinson is naturally a non-conformist. The spirit of the age — especially to her exceptional mind — demanded such.

The spirit of the age did not only provoke social reforms. The essence of individual freedom and expression, championed by Transcendentalist thought, influenced literature and manifested itself in the evolution of romanticism. With the rise of the romantic movement at the close of the eighteenth century, the European influence upon American literature and thought, as well as a growth in an interest in the supernatural, became apparent. While current American writers such as Thoreau and Whitman struggled to develop a literature and culture distinctively American, the romantic movement transcended distance, forming a bond between American and European thought, much of which was tempered by Gothicism:
In 1797, we are told that in America 'the dairymaid and hired hand no longer weep over the ballad of the cruel stepmother, but amuse themselves into an agreeable terror with the haunted houses and hobgoblins of Mrs. Radcliffe.'

Subsequent development of the gothic romance or the tale of terror, which originated in Europe and which was reflected through such American writers as Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, on the American continent, prompted American writers to pronounce, on the basis of a sense of cultural and nationalist pride, their literary efforts — gothic and otherwise — as being wholly original.

Amidst the social and literary ramifications of the nineteenth century, the spirit of romanticism crept into religion and science. Emphasis was placed upon the spirituality of man in a scientific world. With this view of man, interest in the supernatural and the occult in literature was firmly set. Again, the influence of European thought came to the fore, and the presence of the supernatural in American literature found interesting counterparts in the exploration of the spiritual side of man which opened the doors to other ideas and expanded exploration of the occult.

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The science brought in to help romanticism bears the stamp of the period and may be said to represent the cabalistic and Rosicrucian stages, while also highlighting the ideas of Mesmer -- magnetism and hypnotism -- or, in other words, a modern species of occultism.\(^3\)

In March, 1848, four years after the publication of Poe's *A Tale of the Ragged Mountains*, "which joins the Mesmeric state to the idea of transmigration of souls,"\(^4\) and when Emily Dickinson had reached the age of twelve, the religion of Spiritualism was founded. This new religion was, appropriately enough, uncovered in New England. The village of Hydesville, New York is the birthplace of modern Spiritualism, which establishes as a basis of its religion a belief in the practices of summoning up and communing with the dead. In keeping with the feminist movement of the nineteenth century, Spiritualism was founded by females -- the young Fox sisters, Margaretta and Catherine. Spiritualism, as discovered by the Fox sisters and as used in this thesis, while encompassing all the rituals of the occult influence -- such as the seance -- refers particularly to the more serious use and treatment of Spiritualism as a science, philosophy and religion. Thus, its use is in accordance with the declarations of the


American Associations of Spiritualist Churches.

All in all, in a century of feminism, reform, and revolt, the nineteenth century typifies the best of the inquisitive spirit. Therefore it would seem that Emily Dickinson, born in 1830, could not be aware of the upheavals of her age and remain completely indifferent, however aloof. While she is accepted as having withdrawn from public life, Emily Dickinson still read selectively, if not widely, and was aware of most of the major events before and during her lifetime.

The best route to an understanding of Emily Dickinson's reactions to her age and what it had to offer is probably by way of the reading materials to which she was exposed and her poems and letters. Using this design, this thesis is an effort to explore the presence and the use of the supernatural and the occult in selected poems and letters of Emily Dickinson.
CHAPTER ONE

EMILY DICKINSON’S REACTION TO THE CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL ASPECTS OF HER ENVIRONMENT AND AGE

The intellectual and cultural atmosphere which surrounds the life-span of Emily Dickinson is one of extensive religious and social significance. Culturally and socially, Emily Dickinson, as a New Englander, was exposed to the rigors of a society rich in Puritan tradition. Her mind and vision, domestic and artistic, are owing, in large part, to Puritanical instruction and a reaction to it. The impact of Puritanism upon Emily Dickinson was for her inescapable:

The evangelical devoutness of the world into which Emily Dickinson was born must be accepted as fact. It permeated all moments and all acts of living. Thus for those experiencing such existence, it was normal and natural. Those who encounter a rarefied atmosphere make an adjustment and are happy. The ones born into it are never aware that other atmospheric pressures are possible. The piety of the Valley became oppressive only when it was hypocritical or sanctimonious.\(^1\)

---

Nevertheless, Emily Dickinson, sensing a certain atmosphere of sterility about her environment quite early in life, grew increasingly and acutely sensitive to her surroundings and developed within her the desire to survive as a free spirit despite the pressures of her environment.

She was a product of her time and of her place, made by her New England past and present. But the result was not what New England had expected. Outward conformity turned into inner rebellion. The external New Englander, only one of many, became a supreme individualist.²

Emily Dickinson's life in Puritan New England is often presented as being colorless and without joy. This analysis is not binding. Emily Dickinson's life, broadened by the scope of her imagination, was one of selective and individualized moments of pleasure and happiness. William Sherwood, assistant Professor of English at Hunter College of the City University of New York, states that "the 'real life' in Amherst that Emily Dickinson described for Sue, Austin, and others in her many letters of this period (1851-1854) was primarily a repetitive, narrow, yet secure routine of domestic chores and entertainments."³ He cites, from a letter written to Susan Gilbert, Emily's version of her life-style:


I rise because the sun shines, and sleep has done with me, and I brush my hair, and dress me, and wonder what 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?4

Even so, in this letter, there exists a questing spirit, a type of subtle rebellion, as well as a suave type of anti-Puritanism -- joy in ambivalence.

Within the confines of the Puritan outlook, fostered by the limiting attitudes of the Dickinson household and the dictates of a Puritan society, Emily Dickinson was rebellious for the sake of her individuality and freedom. Emily's refusal to attend church evidences a type of unselfish anti-Puritanism. In a letter, written to Susan Gilbert, Emily states of her family and the expectations of church attendance:

They will all go but me, to the usual meetinghouse, to hear the usual sermon; the inclemency of the storm so kindly detaining me....5

In such a statement there exists the power of Emily Dickinson to delight in the different and to find consolation in the unusual. Ordinarily the storm might be expected to offend or to instill fright; here, with Emily, it affords an incomparable


5 Johnson, Letters, I, 181.
opportunity for privacy. Such occasions offered Emily the privacy which she desired and which she more explicitly expresses to her brother, Austin. In writing to her brother, Emily's rebellion — although cunning and humorous — is emphatic:

...I am at home from meeting on account of the storm and my slender constitution, which I assured the folks, would not permit my accompanying them today. It is communion Sunday, and they will stay a good while — what a nice time pussy and I have to enjoy ourselves! Just now the sun peeped out. I tell you I chased it back again behind the tallest cloud, it has not my permission to show its face again till after all the meeting, then it may shine and shine, for all pussy and I care! ⁶

As uncanny as it must seem, while finding consolation in defying the religious code of her day Emily Dickinson wishfully makes use — knowingly, or not — of the powers sought by the ancient Akkadians, and later by the Babylonians, as they found merit in the belief that the heavenly bodies held powers to control events on Earth. ⁷

Emily's equally inquisitive and rebellious nature was stimulated, in large part, by her environment and her innate temperament.

In Amherst, because of the nature of the social and intellectual organization, the standards of tradition were applied to children a few of whom grew restive

⁶ Johnson, Letters, I, 140.

and sometimes rebellious. Such is at all times the nature of questing spirits.\textsuperscript{8}

At the same time, Emily respected and recognized the value of her Puritan background with a type of duality which is more understandable than baffling. In so doing she maintained an enlightened but structured vision which accommodated her firm outlook.

Respect for the religious convictions of others she most certainly felt, but the nature of her own enthusiasm was not evangelical.\textsuperscript{9}

Hence she could also utter to Jane Humphrey, in a letter written in 1850:

\begin{quote}
The path of duty looks very ugly indeed -- and the place where I want to go more amiable -- a great deal -- it is so much easier to do wrong than right -- so much pleasanter to be evil than good, I don't wonder that good angels weep -- and bad ones sing songs.\textsuperscript{10}
\end{quote}

At this point, Emily quietly and cautiously opens the door to her constant speculation about her personal reevaluation of evil.

As regards the second intellectual and spiritual force that shaped her thinking, Transcendentalism, Emily Dickinson is able to move about more freely within the bounds of personal

\textsuperscript{8} Johnson, \textit{Interpretative Biography}, p. 15.

\textsuperscript{9} Johnson, \textit{Interpretative Biography}, p. 10.

\textsuperscript{10} Johnson, \textit{Letters}, I, 82.
convictions and the realm of the imagination, while still experiencing a certain agony as the misplaced, rebellious soul. "Emily Dickinson was an existentialist in a period of Transcendentalism," and it becomes clear that she, as an artist and rebel of the highest order and calibre, outgrew the limitations of her age.

She was keenly aware of the decline of orthodoxy from the stern Calvinism of her grandfather to the growing secularism of her own day. Through the light of her own reason and imagination, Emily Dickinson realized her predicament and she -- however painfully -- was able to cope:

She knew instructively that in any age the artist, as well as the philosopher, must go his own way. The new science and new thought about religion had broken into the stronghold of Amherst College, it is true, and she probably learned of them from the students who were friends of her brother as well as from a young Unitarian in her father's law office who presented her with a copy of Emerson's Poems as early as 1849. But her reading seems to have confirmed rather than initiated her revolt, for she had passed the crisis in her religious life and struck out on her own road of spiritual pioneering long before she knew the writings of Carlyle, Thoreau, and most of the other new lights.

——


13 Anderson, Stairway of Surprise, p. 261.
One such new light, occurring not in the shape of a person but as a religion, was Spiritualism, founded in 1848 by Margaretta and Catherine Fox of Hydesville, New York. Enormously popular during the 1850's, Spiritualism appeared at a time when even previously unquestioned religious doctrines were being re-examined for proof of relevance and truth. In this light, speaking approximately fourteen years after the discovery of Spiritualism and when most of the satiric skepticism which had greeted it had somewhat subsided, Emily Dickinson could speak:

This world is not Conclusion.
A Species stands beyond--
Invisible, as Music--
But positive, as Sound--
It beckons, and it baffles--
Philosophy--don't know--
And through a Riddle, at the last--
Sagacity, must go--
To guess it, puzzles scholars--
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
And Crucifixion, shown--
Faith slips--and laughs, and rallies--
Blushes, if any see--
Plucks at a twig of Evidence--
And asks a Vane, the way--
Much Gesture, from the Pulpit--
Strong Hallelujahs roll--
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
That nibbles at the soul--

---

There is no evidence to be found in the poems or letters which directly connects Emily Dickinson to a knowledge of Spiritualism as it is known today, but there does exist some correlation between the type of interests exhibited by the spiritualists of the nineteenth century and some of the views, which are usually articulated as religious doubts, of Emily Dickinson. In the following letter, written to Mrs. J.G. Holland on July 15, 1880, Emily expresses one of the very same ideas upon which Spiritualism is founded. The idea, as uttered by Austin Dickinson, encompasses the idea that the Saints exist only as examples and not nearly as heroic as Biblical connotation prescribes.

Austin and I were talking the other Night about the Extension of Consciousness, after Death and Mother told Vinnie, afterward, she thought it was 'very improper.' She forgets that we are past 'Correction in Righteousness'--' I don't know what she would think if she knew that Austin told me confidentially 'there was no such person as Elijah.'

It would seem, on the basis of this correlation, that Emily Dickinson's views exist not so much out of rebellion as the products of an increased awareness. An awareness, like the wave of romanticism, which, in due time, challenged the old order with a serious intent to relieve the individual of

intellectual restrictions.

Capturing the spirit of the age, Emily Dickinson writes to her brother Austin in the winter of 1848:

Your welcome letter found me all engrossed in the history of Sulphuric Acid!!!! I deliberated for a few moments after its reception on the propriety of carrying it to Miss Whitman, your friend. The result of my deliberation was a conclusion to open it with moderation, peruse its contents with sobriety becoming my station, and if after a close investigation of its contents I found nothing which savored of rebellion or an unsubdued will, I would lay it away in my folio and forget I had ever received it.16

Precisely how much Emily Dickinson was impressed by the romantic movement probably depends upon her empathy for the rebellious spirit and the merits of the revolutionary and inspiring thoughts of her day. Unique and original as a poet and cloistered citizen, Emily could only applaud — however timidly — the spirit of romanticism. Writing to Jane Humphrey in the spring of 1850, after she has spoken of her "daring to do strange things," Emily cautions, exposing the exuberance felt by the individual unchained.

I hope human nature has truth in it—oh I pray it may not deceive—confide—cherish, have a great faith in—do you dream from all this what I mean? Nobody thinks of the joy, nobody guesses it, to all appearance old things are engrossing, and new ones are not revealed, but there now is nothing old,

things are budding, and springing, and singing, and you rather think you are in a green grove, and it's branches that go, and come. 17

Within the free moments of a period of thought converging on the dignity of man and the worth of the individual, discoveries and achievements -- scientific and intellectual -- broadened the mental horizon of nineteenth-century man. With this liberality came a resurgence of an interest in the ultimate, the finite -- the unknown. Naturally this quest came in the form of an inquisition of the cycle of life, as well as an emphasis upon the secrets of death -- the afterlife and the hereafter -- which, more often than not, intrigued

Emily Dickinson:

It was a quiet way--
He asked if I was his--
I made no answer of the Tongue
But answer of the Eyes--
And then He bore me on
Before this mortal noise
With swiftness, as of Chariots
And distance, as of wheels.
This World did drop away
As Acres from the feet
Of one that leaneth from Balloon
Upon an Ether street.
The Gulf behind was not,
The Continents were new--
Eternity it was before
Eternity was due.
No Seasons were to us--
It was not Night nor Morn--

But Sunrise stopped upon the place
And fastened it in Dawn. ¹⁸

Ultimately, nineteenth-century investigation of the supernatural expectantly reflects, as evidenced in the above poem, the nineteenth-century view of God. The nineteenth-century viewed God as divine dictator, omnipotent and revered. Yet Emily Dickinson could still provide a shrewder appraisal of God's character which is also indicative of nineteenth-century thought.

To One denied to drink
To tell what Water is
Would be acuter, would it not
Than letting Him surmise?

To lead Him to the Well
And let Him hear it drip
Remind Him, would it not, somewhat
Of His condemned lip? ¹⁹

The power of God, while reaching the propriety of the superhuman and surpassing the supernatural, remains natural within the natural order of the universe, but is beset by nineteenth-century thought with "the opposition and choice between romantic intensity on the one hand, and a vapid sweetness and piety on the other" ²⁰ which places the lure of the supernatural in an impressive light. The same type of intellect which

¹⁸Johnson, Complete Poems, p. 480.
¹⁹Johnson, Complete Poems, pp. 235-236.
guided the romantic movement and the quest for individual freedom during the nineteenth-century lent itself to the exploration of the supernatural and the occult. With a type of religious vigor, exploration of the supernatural and the occult was "wholly concerned with worlds unrealised as yet, requiring heroic venture and the challenging of the obsolete and effete." 21

Nevertheless, any impressions of Emily Dickinson's concerning the supernatural and the occult would have to come by way of the gothic element or influence in much of the romantic and Victorian literature of the day. Other literary sources which are capable of soliciting impressions from Emily Dickinson would probably include, among others which will be more fully discussed in Chapter Two, which deals primarily with literary influences, Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights, published in 1847. As was to be expected, with a resurgent interest in the supernatural and the occult, the devil, as a supernatural being of evil, became a figure more glamorous and more grand because man would have it so. As much of literature is surveyed, it becomes clear that men have both a natural tendency to assert and a craving to hear the sensational, the exaggerated, and the impossible and to

fly in the face of both reason and experience in order to believe the incredible, to affirm the extravagant and to be able to say that they have seen or done what no one else has seen or done.²²

Therefore, as an interest in the supernatural and the occult developed, it received the attention and support of an eager and attractive following, which included, among others, the authors Arthur Machen, W.B. Yeats and Algernon Blackwood and the writer-magician, Aleister Crowley.²³ Typifying the spirit of the age and the popularity of selecting the evil over the good, the following poem demonstrates Emily Dickinson's questioning appraisal of the elements — the ghost, demonic beings, and even the devil himself — which are used in the terror-romantic literature of her day.

The Devil--had he fidelity
Would be the best friend--
Because he has ability--
But Devils cannot mend--
Perfidy is the virtue
That would but he resign
The Devil--without question
were thoroughly divine.²⁴

Reacting to all the forces which combined to shape her view of mankind, Emily Dickinson subtly acknowledges the possibility


of the existence of the supernatural and the occult, not as doctrines, but as facts of life.
In attempting to determine the influence upon Emily Dickinson of that literature which deals with the supernatural and the occult, one must first consider, as much as possible, the broadened scope of her reading. Likewise, in considering the reading scope of so selective a reader as Emily Dickinson, attention must be given to those forces which helped to shape much of Emily Dickinson's attitude toward those materials she actually read. As an intelligent and eager reader, Emily Dickinson felt the sway of variegated opinions about most of what she read, as well as about a good deal of what she decided never to read. These opinions, if not prompted by Emily's own sentiments, were offered by persons -- her family and close friends and acquaintances -- whom Emily held in high esteem.

Edward Dickinson, the stern father of Emily, must, in any examination of the forces which helped to shape the extent of Emily's reading and subsequent literary influence, be given
the recognition he deserves for his role in the molding of Emily's attitude toward the literature of her day. While it is clear that Edward Dickinson exerted what he considered to be reasonable control over a great deal of what his daughter, Emily, read, he was, at the same time, responsible for introducing Emily to all kinds of books, many of which were clearly not those of his preference. Thus, within the Dickinson family, it is Edward, the father, and Austin, the brother, who offer most direction in the literary consciousness of Emily. Writing to Thomas W. Higginson in April of 1862, Emily, while emphasizing her mother's lack of influence, sheds light upon the interest of her father in her literary exposure...

My Mother does not care for thought--and Father, too busy with his Briefs--to notice what we do--He buys me many Books--but begs me not to read them--because he fears they joggle the Mind."25

Emily's brother, William Austin Dickinson, like his father, Edward, who continually stimulated his children's interest in contemporary as well as classical reading by his admonitions regarding their choice of authors,26 was instrumental in Emily's choice of books. If Austin


recommended a book, Emily would not neglect reading it.\textsuperscript{27} Because of the intimate relationship shared by Emily and Austin, his opinions were respectfully accepted by Emily. Exercising the advantage of this relationship, and revealing a sincere interest in his sister, William Austin could well write to his sister...

\begin{quote}
I don't think of anything I know that would interest you like Irving's 'Life of Columbus.' I'll bring that and anything else I fancy you would like.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

In this instance Austin proves a vital force in the shaping of Emily's selection of reading materials.

The members of Emily's family who were influential in helping to color her literary exposure were not the only active forces. Outside the Dickinson family, Emily had friends who proved to be eager sharers of information about and, in some cases, copies of books which they particularly liked and felt that Emily might likewise enjoy. Foremost among this set of friends and acquaintances are her mentor, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and her friend, Dr. Josiah G. Holland. Because of her close association with each, Emily Dickinson's critical vision very often reflected ideas which, while remaining true to her convictions, in turn reflected the

\textsuperscript{27}Capps, \textit{Reading}, p. 122.

\textsuperscript{28}Martha Dickinson Bianchi, \textit{Emily Dickinson: Face to Face} (Boston, 1932), p. 113.
thought of her dear friends. Putting faith in her relationship with Dr. Holland,

it is worth notice that all her literary judgements... strikingly parallel opinions held by Dr. Holland. As a friend of the doctor, and as a close reader of his *Scribner's Monthly*, she may well have allowed her taste to be guided by his, especially in judgments about current writers.29

Likewise, the influence of Higginson is one of no small measure. Emily Dickinson's respect for Higginson as author and mentor allows the Colonel to sustain an immeasurable influence.

During the summer of 1879 Higginson got together a series of brief essays which he titled *Short Studies of American Authors*. The book devotes about ten pages each to Hawthorne, Poe, Thoreau, Howells, Henry James, and Helen Hunt.... Higginson sent a copy of it to Emily Dickinson as a seasonal greeting.30

Beyond the filial ties and friendships which helped to guide the critical literary vision of Emily Dickinson, there exists the literary background of her age, to which she was not a total stranger. While it is clear that Emily Dickinson's reading was closely guided, this knowledge does not alter the fact that Emily Dickinson "was fascinated by any forbidden fare."31 Hence it is not mere idle conjecture that Emily


Dickinson, who was deeply affected by the Bible and the verse of the Metaphysicals and the hymn writers, would have encountered some of the terror-romantic literature of the nineteenth century, as well as that literature of the Romantics, of the Victorians and of the Graveyard Enthusiasts which serves as medium to the supernatural and the occult in selected writings of Emily Dickinson.

She had absorbed basic materials from the two great Renaissance works, the King James Bible and Shakespeare's plays; to these she added the subtle wit and concrete imagery of the Metaphysical poets and the control of the neoclassical era. Although her reading was not the orderly process that this implies, she was well qualified as a potential disciple of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Romantic Movement.

Able at once to maintain her faith in the merits of the Bible while also remaining aware of current literary efforts and achievements, Emily Dickinson was set in the peculiar position of being able to maintain a sensible observation of, and an interest in, the supernatural and the occult as it appeared in numerous sources of the literature of her day. With this in mind, Emily Dickinson's reverence for the Bible, while significant for a study of the use of the supernatural and the occult in her poems and letters, is neither the

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32 Capps, Reading, p. 77.
33 Capps, Reading, p. 72.
primary source nor the central focus of this study. The literature of particular interest to this examination of the supernatural and the occult in selected poems and letters of Emily Dickinson is that literature of the nineteenth century — American and British — which reflects the current resurgence of an interest in the supernatural and the occult.

Pertinent to an examination of the literature which helped to shape, or at least which reflects, Emily Dickinson's interest in the supernatural and the occult is the perusal of those reading materials which were immediately available in the Dickinson household. Contrary to widespread opinion, Emily Dickinson's reading at home, not all dreary and completely closed, was expansive with the presence of numerous current magazines and newspapers.

In the Dickinson household, The Springfield Republican, The Hampshire and Franklin Express, and The Amherst Record were important.... Along with these newspapers, the Dickincsons subscribed to Harper's New Monthly Magazine, Scribner's Monthly and The Atlantic Monthly.34 These magazines and newspapers were, for the most part, reasonably well-written, and usually contained editorials about current issues and affairs, cultural and social.

Just as the Bible was expected to keep the family spiritually well-informed, so were the pages of The Springfield Republican and The Hampshire and

34 Capps, Reading, p. 128.
Franklin Express expected to keep them politically well-informed. Emily found these newspapers as well as the literary magazines constantly before her inquisitive eyes; they exposed her unavoidably to the living language of nineteenth-century America and, in doing so, contributed to the variegated array of subjects and ideas that she could treat knowledgeably in letters and poems.\(^{35}\)

With so firm a foundation of responsible periodical literature, Emily Dickinson could confidently branch out and seek to sample the world of literature. In order to accomplish this feat, Emily Dickinson possessed an interest in reading equal only to her tenacity in seeking seclusion. With such an assessment of the value of books, she could speak:

> Unto my Books—so good to turn—
> Far ends of tired Days—
> It half endears the Abstinence—
> And Pain—is missed—in Praise—

> As Flavors—cheer Retarded Guests
> With Banquettings to be—
> So Spices—stimulate the time
> Tll my small Library—

> It may be Wilderness—without—
> Far feet of failing Men—
> But Holiday—excludes the night—
> And it is Bells—within—

> I thank these Kinsmen of the Shelf—
> Their Countenances Kid
> Enamor—in Prospective—
> And satisfy—obtained—\(^{36}\)

\(^{35}\)Capps, *Reading*, p. 143.

As inclusive as Emily Dickinson's reading was, she still maintained a high degree of selectivity which she cordially exercised. Yet it remains clear that Emily Dickinson did not close her mind to meritorious opinions and observations.

Emily Dickinson never completely abandoned the conservative Puritan ethic under which she was reared, but the proximity of Concord and the contagious nature of Transcendental thought exposed her to liberal, Romantic doctrines. Consequently Emily Dickinson prospered from her intellectual milieu, and she was always willing to listen to the enlightening view of a mentor, or friend, or relative. Such is the case with Higginson, who...

stimulated her interest in contemporary American literature, particularly her interest in current magazines.

Of American literature in particular, Emily Dickinson felt reverence for that share of it for which she could maintain a liking. Yet, in most instances, the truth of the matter is that Emily Dickinson looked beyond America for a great deal of the inspiration which she derived from prose and poetry. This also remains true of her interest in the supernatural literature of her time.

37 Capps, Reading, p. 112.
38 Capps, Reading, p. 127.
On the whole, Emily Dickinson found the poetry and prose of American authors less attractive than that of the British writers of the Romantic and Victorian periods. Aside from her interest in Emerson and Higginson, she showed none of the sustained enthusiasm for American prose writers that she showed for the Brontes, Dickens, and Eliot. \(^{39}\)

The written word was, for Emily Dickinson, the beacon of the nineteenth century. She read profusely, and accepted those writers who met her fancy. She approached all writers with the exactitude of a connoisseur of fine vintages who measures the degree of superiority of each.

She liked Bryant, but some of the later poetry of New England seems to have affected her more deeply. She was moved by Emerson and Thoreau, yet never lost her grip on reality. \(^{40}\)

Even throughout her reading of those works which reflect the supernatural and the occult, Emily Dickinson never loses sight of reality.

On a broader scale, that portion of Emily Dickinson's reading which reflects her reaction to the presence of the supernatural and the occult in selected nineteenth-century literature provides for an unveiling of the poet's variegated literary background. The use of elements of the supernatural and the occult, while featured widely throughout the nineteenth century, adheres to no one doctrine or pattern of

\(^{39}\) Capps, Reading, p. 121.

\(^{40}\) Capps, Reading, p. 112.
treatment. The seriousness with which the subject was treated depended upon the author and his personal evaluation of the resurgent interest in the supernatural and the occult as elements of contemporary literature. The eighteenth century interest in the supernatural and the occult in literature serves as a preface to that interest demonstrated during the nineteenth century, in that the eighteenth century fostered the increasing popularity of the use of the supernatural and the occult as elements of popular literature. Primarily European in origin, the background for Emily Dickinson's interest in the supernatural and the occult naturally grows out of an extensive listing of noted writers. It is no established fact that Emily Dickinson read extensively, or otherwise, many of the authors listed, but it stands to reason that the possibility exists that Emily Dickinson did not go unexposed to that tradition of writers which flourished during the latter eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Included in this group are such authors as Horace Walpole, who, as early as 1764, established, in *The Castle of Otranto*, a precedent for Clara Reeves' *The Champion of Virtue: A Gothic Story* (*The Old English Baron*) in 1777 and Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolph* in 1794. Highlighting the presence of the supernatural as a viable element in literature, William Beckford's *Vathek*, published in 1784, came
almost ten years before Mathew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk*, which appeared in 1795. Together these authors set the pace or trend for romanticized gothic horror in England.41

In America, the literary background which may possibly serve as a factor of influence in Emily Dickinson's exposure to the supernatural and the occult was taking shape with the aid of such writers as the author of *Edgar Huntly; or Memories of a Sleep-Walker* (1799), Charles Brockden Brown, who was influenced by the success of the gothic romance both to use elements of horror and to examine the mysteries of man scientifically. Edgar Allan Poe is another American who, employing the supernatural in such stories as "The Masque of the Red Death" and others, shaped a colorful background for an interest in the supernatural and the occult in America. Likewise, Nathaniel Hawthorne's studies of evil and the power of Gothic description permeates *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) and helps to tint American interest in the supernatural. Even so, however colorful, the literary background of the supernatural was not all serious in tone. The use of satire and parody followed hard upon the heels of serious treatment of the supernatural and the occult by such authors as Walpole, Brown and Poe, who respected the nature of their writings

because of innate convictions. Occurring somewhat closer to Emily Dickinson's actual lifetime, satire on the use of the supernatural and the occult became popular. Like the growth of an interest in the supernatural and the occult, satire on the same was not limited to the American shore. Americans and Europeans alike took part in prankish treatments of horror as an element in fiction. An example of this type of treatment can be found in the fourteenth chapter of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Typical of the satire used against the serious concept of the supernatural and the occult in fiction, this section of *Anna Karenina*, which is an exchange of dialogue between Countess Nordstrom, Kitty, Vronsky and Levin, symbolizes a systematic denunciation of the principles of spiritualism and an interest in any other aspects of the supernatural and the occult.

With these literary developments behind her, Emily Dickinson moved into the many realms of literature and found a peculiar liking for the Gothic romance and the terror-laced literature of the Romantics and Victorians. Evidencing her affinity for English literature, Emily Dickinson found satisfaction with numerous writers. Included among these are the writers who made impressive use of the supernatural and the occult. As is shown in the third chapter of this thesis, the connection between the supernatural and the occult and Emily
Dickinson's choice of favorite authors is most often linked to the presence or threat of death, which, more often than not, also permeates most of Emily Dickinson's poems and letters which have been chosen as manifestations of her use of the supernatural and the occult. Hence it is not surprising that the list of influential writers and their works includes books and poems which treat at length the matter of death. This study of the supernatural and the occult in selected poems and letters of Emily Dickinson, while not limited to the presence and threat of death, does take note of its appeal to the poet Emily Dickinson and its presence in the poems and letters selected for this study.

In this light, foremost among such literary sources is Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, which, with all its diabolical leanings, gratifies the courageously imaginative inclinations of Emily Dickinson. It is evident that *Wuthering Heights* impressed Emily Dickinson, for she parodies it when writing to Mrs. J. G. Holland upon the death of Mrs. Holland's sister, Minnie:

> Sweetest love for Kate, and Annie when you see her, and say with 'Heathcliff' to little Katrina — 'oh Cathie — Cathie!'\(^{42}\)

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\(^{42}\) Johnson, *Letters*, III, 798.
Just how much Emily Dickinson was influenced by the works of Emily Bronté is evidenced through Emily Dickinson's respect for Bronté as an artist and as a person. Indicative of the respect held for Bronté, Emily Dickinson held similar respect for another woman author, George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans). Writing to her cousins, Louise and Frances Norcross, Emily Dickinson draws upon the unnaturalness of life and cites Eliot's ability to portray the same with words:

Life is a spell so exquisite that everything conspires to break it.

'What do I think of Middlemarch?' What do I think of glory—except that in a few instances this 'mortal has already put on immortality.' George Eliot is one. The mysteries of human nature surpass the 'mysteries of redemption,' for the infinite we only suppose, while we see the finite....

Emily Dickinson, in this instance, expresses in her opinion of Eliot what she also appreciates in Emily Bronté. The psychological mystery of the human personality and its effect upon the question of immortality is earnestly examined.

The thanatotic concern manifests itself in both Bronte's Wuthering Heights and George Eliot's Mill on the Floss. There exists proof that Emily Dickinson read and referred to The Mill on the Floss. The reference, while not richly indicative of the supernatural and the occult or of the reputed connection with death, illustrates Emily Dickinson's humorous and

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satiric use of what she read. With sardonic wit and memories of *The Mill on the Floss* in her mind, Emily Dickinson describes one of her Aunts quite candidly to Mrs. J. G. Holland.

While Little Boys are commemorating the advent of their Country, I have a letter from 'Aunt Glegg' saying 'Summer is nearly gone,' so I thought I would pick a few seeds this afternoon and bid you Good bye as you would be off for Winter. I think persons don't talk about 'Summer stopping' this time of year, unless they are inclement themselves.44

The actual influence of Emily Dickinson's reading upon her thought is evident. She was selectively impressionable.

The extent of Emily Dickinson's reading expands itself to include an interest in the works of the Metaphysical poets. Of these, perhaps her liking for Henry Vaughan can be more readily traced. In Letter 653 Emily quotes Vaughan's "They Are All Gone Into The World Of Light." Again, the cosmic suggestion is that of death, and an interest in the after-life indicates inquiry into the unknown and the power of inevitable cosmic harmony — that is, a natural order in the design and demise of all things:

Dear beauteous death! the Jewel of the Just,
Shining no where, but in the dark;
What mysteries do lie beyond thy dust;
Could man outlook that mark.45

44Johnson, Letters, III, 666.

45"They Are All Gone Into The World Of Light (lines 17-20)" can be found in The Metaphysical Poets, edited by Helen Gardner (Baltimore, Maryland, 1967), or can be found in Henry Vaughan's Collected Works, and other anthologies.
Equally impressive among the reading of Emily Dickinson is the presence of famous authors such as William Shakespeare, Thomas Gray, and Charles Dickens. The works accompanying each, according to Letter 31, are respectively "Macbeth," "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," and "The Haunted Man and the Ghosts' Bargain." The implication of the death images in both "Macbeth" and Gray's "Elegy," as well as the manifestations of the supernatural and the occult in "The Haunted Man and the Ghosts' Bargain," are enough to speak for Emily Dickinson's interest in the matter of the supernatural and the occult.

More explicit regarding Emily's concern for the question of the after-life, for death and its connection with the supernatural and the occult, is the book Called Back, written by the British novelist Frederick John Fargus ("Hugh Conway"), which serves to set a satisfactory seal upon the reading which influenced Emily Dickinson's interest in the supernatural and the occult. Called Back recounts the agony of an amnesia victim who is abruptly and miraculously rejoined to a previously forfeited life. In Letter 962, written to her cousins, Louise and Frances Norcross, Emily says of the story...

Loo asked 'what books' we were wooing now--watching like a vulture for Walter Cross's life of his wife.

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46 Johnson, Letters, I, 90.
A friend sent me *Called Back*. It is a haunting story, and as loved Mr. Bowles used to say, 'greatly impressive to me.'

Ironically, it is the title of this book that Emily uses to constitute the last letter written to her cousins some sixteen months later, in May, 1886.

The scope of Emily Dickinson's reading is broad and comprehensive for a lady of her literary tastes and selectivity. The interest explored in this chapter reflect the particular concern of this thesis and not the full extent of Emily Dickinson's interest in literature. Precisely how much Emily Dickinson was influenced by what she read must depend in part, on the power of the authors whose works she read and reviewed. On the other hand, Emily Dickinson was, fortunately, none too easily swayed and was, by conviction, a strong character who wielded a mind of her own. As her poetry portrays and her choice of authors indicates, Emily's interest in, and being influenced by, any matter of concern must be taken as only a conceivable portion of the shaping of her own view.

Emily Dickinson's poetry is not derivable from her reading. The most we can say is that she found food for reflection in books as in life, and that in a very general way her interest in both heart and mind was prefigured in her choice of authors. But the secret of her style was like a melody or witchcraft unconveyed, neither imitated nor capable of facile

imitation. She earned it by the whole of her life, and it was hers unmistakably, hers only.\textsuperscript{48}

Likewise, Emily Dickinson's interest in the supernatural and the occult, as well as in the literature connected with this interest, reflect the authors involved, but the focus finally rests upon Emily Dickinson as individual selector and interpreter of all that she read and appreciated.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MANIFESTATION OF THE SUPERNATURAL AND THE OCCULT

IN SELECTED POEMS AND LETTERS

In this chapter, the manifestation of the supernatural and the occult in selected poems and letters of Emily Dickinson, as well as the connection between Emily Dickinson's balanced interest in the supernatural and the occult and inevitable death, are presented. The poems selected for use in this chapter make use of supernatural and occult terms which reflect Emily Dickinson's fascination with the supernatural and the occult. The letters chosen for this study include those letters which were written primarily after the death, in October, 1883, of Emily Dickinson's nephew, young Gilbert Dickinson, the son of Austin and Susan Dickinson. The contention is that this death, even though the deaths of other treasured persons did not go unnoticed, ushers Emily Dickinson into a further confrontation with the "old Emperor Death" which even she could not have anticipated.

For Emily Dickinson, who thought she had plumbed every emotional depth death could offer, this latest stroke was overwhelming. Must one be required by
well-intentioned platitude to hear that the worst is not so long as we can say "This is the worst?"
Involved in Gilbert's death, as she well knew, was the stable happiness of all the members of her family as well as her own.49

Serving as a pivotal point, the death of young Gilbert strongly colors Emily Dickinson's interest in the afterlife, a direct link to the supernatural and an interest in the occult.

The whole matter of the presence of death as a link between the supernatural and an interest by Emily Dickinson in the occult is basic to an understanding of the supernatural and the occult in the poems and letters of Emily Dickinson. Inevitably, death is a key to the mysteries of life. As a seeker of the truth, Emily Dickinson is fascinated by the subject of death because of its inevitable importance in the cycle of life and not so much because, as William Sherwood contends in Circumference and Circumstance, she...

initially...chose to write of death because the "graveyard" poets demonstrated that it was a fashionable and proper subject for the aspirant poetess.50

Closer to the real reason behind Emily Dickinson's decision to treat death in her poems and letters is the lesser idea, advanced by Sherwood, that death is so adequately served in the

49 Johnson, Interpretative Biography, p. 43.
50 Sherwood, Circumference and Circumstance, p. 103.
poems and letters of Emily Dickinson because the poet sees death as the ideal place from which the secrets beyond the grave might be uncovered.\textsuperscript{51} Hence Emily Dickinson's link to the supernatural and the occult is made clear. At the same time, the metaphoric use of death in the poems and letters of Emily Dickinson is not to be summarily discounted. Admitting the influence of the "graveyard" school of writers upon Emily Dickinson, the poet's use of metaphors nonetheless does not necessarily hinder explication of the use of the occult in her poems and letters. Her use of metaphors, like

her reflections on death, \textit{does not condition, but is conditioned by whatever attitude toward immortality is dominant at the time that they are composed.}\textsuperscript{52}

Therefore, in a poem such as "The Only Ghost I Ever Saw,"

death becomes, as is asserted by Thomas H. Johnson, "a person and a force of nature."\textsuperscript{53}

\begin{verbatim}
The only Ghost I ever saw
Was dressed in Mechlin—so—
He wore no sandal on his foot—
And stepped like flakes of snow—
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{51} Sherwood, \textit{Circumference and Circumstance}, p. 103.


\textsuperscript{53} Johnson, \textit{Interpretative Biography}, p. 220.
His Gait—was soundless, like the Bird—
But rapid—like the Roe—
His fashions, quaint, Mosaic—
Or haply, Mistletoe—

His conversation—seldom—
His laughter, like the Breeze—
That dies away in dimples
Among the pensive Trees—

Our interview—was transient—
Of me, himself was shy—
And God forbid I look behind—
Since that appalling Day!\(^{54}\)

Convincingly enough, the person and the force of nature can be sensed in this poem. Why, then, cannot the presence of a ghost be sensed? Perhaps the suggestions of metaphors in this poem provide sustenance to an otherwise unbelievable subject matter. Yet the choice of terms — the suggestive nature of "mechlin" and the explicitness of "ghost" — justifies an interest in death and the supernatural demise of man. Indifference does not exist here. Emily Dickinson captures in this poem the full effect of confrontation with the dead. She does so with extraordinary and respectful description. While Emily Dickinson's imaginative approach is not fully in keeping with such fundamentally rational, non-intuitive philosophers as John Stuart Mill, who insists that...

\(^{54}\)Johnson, *Complete Poems*, p. 125.
it takes place,\textsuperscript{55}
a rational seriousness is nevertheless maintained throughout.

With mention of the supernatural or the occult in the poems and letters of Emily Dickinson, attempts are made to call attention to these references as being simply metaphors which avert direct interest in, and mention of, the supernatural. The attempt is made to convince the reader that Emily Dickinson has no interest in the supernatural. Just as Thomas H. Johnson transforms the ghost in "The Only Ghost I Ever Saw" into a force of nature, other scholars attempt similar transformations. William Sherwood advances the idea that, even though...

The eminent geologist and president of Amherst College, Edward Hitchcock, had testified that the observation of nature did indeed reveal evidence of the supernatural, it is a credit to Emily Dickinson's integrity that she refused to allow such respected authorities to distort her vision or compromise her experience.\textsuperscript{56}

Here the intention is honorable. The ghost in "The Only Ghost I Ever Saw" is a force of nature, and Emily Dickinson does recognize the fallibility of the human mind, but beneath this attempt by Sherwood to save Emily Dickinson from a serious


\textsuperscript{56}Sherwood, \textit{Circumference and Circumstance}, p. 181.
interest in the supernatural there remains the evidence of
the poet's inclinations. Writing to Susan Dickinson in early
October of 1883, Emily Dickinson, having just learned of
young Gilbert's death, writes with the eyes of a seer:

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 57

Perhaps to the uninquisitive there is no "mystery" of death,
and there abide no "secrets" beyond the grave. Clearly, this
philosophy is not embraced by Emily Dickinson. Death is a
natural occurrence, in that it is inevitable, yet its pene-
trative powers are supernatural and its hidden influences are
suggestive of strange powers. Over this link between inevi-
table death and the human living hovers the occult. Therefore
it would seem that Emily Dickinson's attitude toward the super-
natural and the occult would be anything but one of indiffe-
rence.

On the bases of Emily Dickinson's sensitive and per-
ceptive nature, as well as of the evidence in her poems and
letters, examination of the supernatural and the occult in
selected poems and letters is divided into three categories.
These include one, Witchcraft and Magic; two, Ghosts and Life

57 Johnson, Letters, III, 799.
After Death; and three, Dreams and Revelation. These divisions are not designed to be independently definitive. Naturally, some overlapping of divisions may be expected. The divisions occur as the result of the evidence in the poems and letters, and not as the result of some pre-designed notion of Emily Dickinson's interest in the supernatural and the occult.

Of the few poems and letters of Emily Dickinson which seem to evidence an interest in the supernatural and the occult, there appears in those which have to do with magic and witchcraft the mention of either witchcraft or magic. These implied references usually occur as reflections of the nature of witchcraft and the art of magic. Practically no one who is aware of the grim and sinister history of the growth of witchcraft and the witch-hunts which followed can deny its ability to inspire reaction even in contemporary society. A century closer to the actual devastation entwined in the history of witchcraft and sorcery, Emily Dickinson, in many instances, suggests the emotional impact of this history. Whether she uses the mention of witchcraft and magic to achieve poetical effect only is, however significant, not the primary factor here. Only the use of the supernatural as it relates to the manifestation of the supernatural and the occult in selected poems and letters is under consideration in this thesis.
In poem number 593, which Jack L. Capps categorizes as a tribute to Elizabeth B. Browning, Emily Dickinson goes to great length to portray the ecstasy of being "enchanted."

I think I was enchanted
When first a sombre Girl--
I read that Foreign Lady--
The Dark--felt beautiful--

And whether it was noon or night--
Or only Heaven--at Noon--
For very Lunacy of Light
I had not power to tell--

The Bees--became as Butterflies--
The Butterflies--as Swans--
Approached--and spurned the narrow Grass--
And just the meanest Tunes

That Nature murmured to herself
To keep herself in Cheer--
I took for Giants--practising
Titanic Opera--

The days--to Mighty Metres stept--
The Homeliest--adorned
As if unto a Jubilee
'Twere suddenly confirmed--

I could not have defined the change--
Conversion of the Mind
Like Sanctifying in the Soul--
Is witnessed--not explained--

'Twas a Divine Insanity--
The Danger to be Sane
Should I again experience--
'Tis Antidote to turn--

58Capps, Reading, p. 84.
To Tomes of solid Witchcraft--
Magicians be asleep--
But Magic--hath an Element
Like Deity--to Keep--

The use of illusion, in stanzas one through four, is suggestive of magic and transformations reminiscent of fairies and elves. The seriousness of the poet's intention is made increasingly clearer in the remaining stanzas. Finally, in the very last stanza, cryptic as ever, Emily Dickinson sums up the value of her experience by equating witchcraft and magic, that which is "witnessed" with deity, that which is "not explained." Perhaps it is this intrigue that helps to attract Emily Dickinson to the supernatural and the occult. At any rate, the fascination possessed by witchcraft is, in many instances, linked to Emily Dickinson's view of nature itself. In the following poem, some idea of the respect for ritual is used to enfold royalty and witchcraft with the mystery of nature.

Purple--
The Color of a Queen, is this--
The Color of a Sun
At Setting--this and Amber--
Beryl--and this, at Noon--

And when at night--Auroran widths
Fling suddenly on men--
'Tis this--and Witchcraft--nature keeps
A Rank--for Iodine--

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59 Johnson, Complete Poems, p. 291.
60 Johnson, Complete Poems, pp. 378-379.
The power of nature to strike with awe as a type of magic in itself is more clearly seen in the following poem, number 1585, in which Emily Dickinson uses the bird as the voice of nature, uniting the earthly with the celestial. The effect is magical.

The Bird her punctual music brings
And lays it in its place—
Its place is in the Human Heart
And in the Heavenly Grace—
What respite from her thrilling toil
Did Beauty ever take—
But Work might be electric Rest
To those that Magic make--

Regardless of its shape, the bird embodies a "magic" that is supernatural in effect.

Making further use of the beauty and power of nature, Emily Dickinson, in poem number 1722, again demonstrates the mystery of the supernatural embodied in a moving description of a woman who is possibly a witch but, by any estimation and without question, also a ghost.

Her face was in a bed of hair,
Like flowers in a plot—
Her hand was whiter than the sperm
That feeds the sacred light.
Her tongue more tender than the tune
That totters in the leaves—
Who hears may be incredulous,
Who witnesses, believes.

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61 Johnson, Complete Poems, p. 657.
Somehow, nature is shown possible to condone all that has been created and ultimately linked to the universe as a whole. Appropriately summarized in the last two lines is the very way in which the supernatural and the occult are usually accepted...

Who hears may be incredulous,
Who witnesses, believes.

Few things in life affected Emily Dickinson as much as the threat and power of death. She speaks of it at times with reverence and at times with disdain. Yet whenever she speaks of it, she speaks with respect for its power:

I've dropped my Brain--My Soul is numb--
The Veins that used to run
Stop palsied--'tis Paralysis
Done perfecter on stone

Vitality is Carved and cool.
My nerve in Marble lies--
A Breathing Woman
Yesterday--Endowed with Paradise.

Not dumb--I had a sort that moved--
A Sense that smote and stirred--
Instincts for Dance--a caper part--
An Aptitude for Bird--

Who wrought Carrara in me
And chiselled all my tune
Were it a Witchcraft--were it Death--
I've still a chance to strain

To Being, somewhere--Motion--Breath--
Though Centuries beyond,
And every limit a Decade--
I'll shiver, satisfied.63

Emily's treatment of death in this poem is no exception to her usual portrayal of death, except that in this confrontation witchcraft is presented as a force viable as death. In the fourth stanza the speaker stands equally aroused "to strain to Being" against either foe, witchcraft or death. It is in this poem that witchcraft as such achieves the incomparable distinction of being associated with the powerful element of death. Likewise, in poem number 1708 witchcraft is virtually accepted as being practically innate:

Witchcraft has not a Pedigree
'Tis early as our Breath
And mourners meet it going out
The moment of our death--

Here the mystery of life is somewhat entwined with the secrets of witchcraft. It could not be placed in any light which would better guarantee its affinity to, and acceptance as a part of, the natural order of things.

In yet another poem, the study of witchcraft is hailed as a worthwhile pursuit and challenge to the mind, no stranger than the study of a subject such as Geometry.

Best Witchcraft is Geometry
To the magician's mind--
His ordinary acts are feats
To thinking of mankind.

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64 Johnson, Complete Poems, p. 694.
65 Johnson, Complete Poems, p. 517.
More significantly, the suggestion here is that "Best Witchcraft" and magic share kinship. More basic to the examination is the implication that those acts of magic within the framework of the poem are natural. This conclusion sheds light upon Emily Dickinson's ability to see the full breadth of things.

Again, using nature as the primary element in discussion of the supernatural and the occult, Emily Dickinson distinguishes between astronomy and astrology.

Nature assigns the Sun—-
That—-is Astronomy--
Nature cannot enact a Friend—-
That—-is Astrology.66

In astronomy, nature is accepted as remaining active. In astrology, nature is rendered void. This is the framework of this poem. The ironic limitations of nature are virtually self-negating. Nevertheless, nature is admitted as being present in both astronomy and astrology. What is more important to the manifestation of the supernatural and the occult is the admitted acceptance of astrology, with its rescue from the scientific limitations (laws and hypotheses) of astronomy; thus astrology is left open to the occult wisdom of the universe.

Besides the use of the supernatural and occult elements

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66 Johnson, Complete Poems, p. 578.
of magic, witchcraft and astrology, in the poems of Emily Dickinson, there exist in one or two of the letters written after the beginning of 1884 similar references to the nature of magic and witchcraft. In a letter possibly written early in 1885 to Maria Whitney, an acquaintance of the Dickinson family, Emily Dickinson describes some of the flowers in the family garden...

There are scarlet carnations, with a witching suggestion, and hyacinths covered with promises which I know they will keep.\(^67\)

The "witching suggestion" could very easily symbolize the enchanting effect not merely of "good wishes," but of the power of witchery as well. In any case, the writer most clearly accepts the effect of "witching" as being, in this instance, favorably overwhelming. Likewise, in another letter written to Mrs. Frederick Tuckerman in January of 1865, Emily Dickinson salutes the birth of her acquaintance's daughter Margaret. So doing, Emily refers to the "Burden of life" as a "bewitching weight."

Bringing a New Year to one who never saw one, is roguishly portentous, and if the Basket tips a little, is it the Porter's fault? Is not that which is called the "Burden of Life," a bewitching weight?\(^68\)

\(^{67}\)Johnson, *Letters*, III, 862.

Here the implication points toward the inevitability of life and not a condemnation of it. Beyond this conclusion, this inevitability is given the character of a supernatural spell — supreme in its mystery. Again, the use of supernatural and occult inclinations is presented as involving elements with which human beings, once having noticed them, must reckon.

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. 69

In this instance, Emily Dickinson's Christian faith in inevitability joins forces with the occult powers of predestination. Distinction between the two defies intelligence and remains a source of speculation — occult and religious.

Ever attaching significant reverence to the subject of death, Emily Dickinson again finds such an opportunity when writing to Mrs. J. G. Holland, wife of her dear friend, Dr. Josiah G. Holland, in March of 1884:

When I tell my sweet Mrs. Holland that I have lost another friend, she will not wonder I do not write, but that I raise my Heart to a drooping syllable — Dear Mr. Lord has left us — After a brief unconsciousness, a Sleep that ended with a smile, so his Nieces tell us, he hastened away, "seen," we trust, "of Angels"

69 Johnson, Complete Poems, p. 470.
—"Who knows that secret deep"—"Alas, not I—"70

Sounding much like a devout Spiritualist, and yet adhering sincerely to her Christian principles, Emily Dickinson renders believable that aspect of spiritualism which sets forth the belief that guardian spirits or "Angels" guide the newly dead into the spiritual world of the "secret deep." This belief, however improbable, does not interfere with the literary sources suggested by Thomas H. Johnson.71 In keeping with earlier development of Emily Dickinson's use of the supernatural for descriptive emphasis and its inherent quality of intense mystery, another part of this same letter further develops this premise.

Do you remember writing to us you should "write with the Robbins?" They are writing now, their Desk in every passing Tree, but the Magic of Mates that cannot hear them, makes their Letters dim—72

Again, the power suggested by the term "magic" implies the natural but irreconcilable power of the inevitable. Coupled with this implied power is the explicit and unquestionable presence of nature.


71 Johnson, *Letters*, III, 817. Johnson states that the quotation "seen of Angels" is from I Timothy 3.16., and that "Who knows that secret deep" may attempt to recall Paradise Lost, XII, 575-578.

The second division of the supernatural and the occult manifested in the poems and letters of Emily Dickinson concerns the subject of ghosts and life after death. The poems of Emily Dickinson which provide glimpses of her view of the afterlife are numerous and not all clearly connected to the supernatural and the occult. Therefore the few poems chosen for this division strongly imply the supernatural aspects of ghosts. In the letters chosen for this section of the thesis, the focus is on that which is beyond the grave. In the letter which follows, the supernatural and occult powers operative beyond the grave are highlighted. The significance of death and the possible doors that it opens for the dying sustain in Emily Dickinson's poetry and letters the belief that the grave is but the path to resurrection. Likewise, Emily Dickinson always awaited and consciously sought any possible unveiling of secrets by those earthly beings who were immortality-bound.

Writing to Forrest F. Emerson, a consoling friend during the time of young Gilbert's death, Emily Dickinson states her interest in the peculiar search for possible secrets of the dying.

Dearest Clergyman

In a note which you sent my brother soon after the dying of our child, was a passage, our only spar at the time, and solemnly remembered.

We would gladly possess it more accurately, if convenient to you. "And I can but believe that in such a mysterious providence as the dying of little
Gilbert, there is a purpose of benevolence which does not include our present happiness." Vinnie hoped, too, to speak with you of Helen of Colorado whom she understood you to have a friend, a friend also of hers.

Should she know any circumstance of her life's close, would she perhaps lend it to you, that you might lend it to me? Oh had that Keats a Severn!  

In this letter, Emily Dickinson is reminded of Gilbert's death as she seeks information about the passing of her literary protege, Helen H. Jackson. Emily Dickinson inquires about the last words of Mrs. Jackson in a manner which almost suggests over-confidence in the capturing of some guarded pass-word or enlarged and privileged vision of life as it closes for one who is summoned from earth. The intensity of this interest also indicates a similar interest in the existence of ghosts and in the nature of life after death.

As for Emily Dickinson's optimism in finding some clue to the "unknown," as related to the act of dying, she is nearer to discovery than might be thought at first glance. In a reply to a letter written to her in mid-August, 1885, Thomas Niles, Emily Dickinson's publisher, satisfies some of the curiosity generated by Emily Dickinson's interest in the "closing words" of her friend:

In her last letter to me, rec'd. since the news of her death, she says she "has but a few days to live and shall be thankful to be released" and closed

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73 Johnson, Letters, III, 890.
thus: "I shall look in on your new rooms some day, be sure--but you won't see me--Good bye--Affy. forever, H.J."
And by this you will know that she thinks it is the "beginning." 74

The contents of this letter evidence the belief that life continues beyond the grave, while also suggesting the existence of psychic powers of foreknowledge. Equally significant in buttressing Emily Dickinson's hope of immortality is the implication of Mrs. Helen Jackson's reply to her concerning an accident in which Mrs. Jackson suffered a fall:

Helen of Troy will die, but Helen of Colorado, never. Dear friend, can you walk, were the last words that I wrote her. Dear friend, I can fly -- her immortal (soaring) reply. 75

Here Mrs. Jackson speaks with an uncanny lack of fear which Emily Dickinson can condone.

In poem 75, the act of dying, in the tradition of Christian faith in resurrection, is merely the way to a fuller life.

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,

74 Johnson, Letters, III, 886.
75 Johnson, Letters, III, 889.
Her vestments as the silver fleece—
Her countenance as spray.⁷⁶

After the act of dying, the ghost in the poem is mysteriously transformed into a form that is half-hidden and incalculable—as the gift of life through death:

Death is a Dialogue between
The Spirit and the Dust.
"Dissolve" says Death—The Spirit "Sir I have another Trust"—

Death doubts it—Argues from the Ground—
The Spirit turns away
Just laying off for evidence
An Overcoat of Clay.⁷⁷

Embracing this hope of immortality, Emily Dickinson expresses the same belief in resurrection in a letter written to her Aunt, Mrs. Joseph A. Sweetser, in November of 1884:

The beloved lilies have come, and my heart is so high it overflows, as this was mother's week, Easter in November. Father rose in June, and a little more than a year since, those fair words were fulfilled, "and a little child shall lead them,"—but boundlessness forbids me....⁷⁸

Emily Dickinson attributes no permanence to any demise, and her faith in resurrection is resolute as, in this case, she treats each "death" as a "birth."

However resolute, Emily Dickinson's faith in resurrection is merely the beginning of her patronage of life beyond

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⁷⁶Johnson, Complete Poems, p. 39.
⁷⁷Johnson, Complete Poems, p. 456.
⁷⁸Johnson, Letters, III, 851.
the grave. In Emily Dickinson's poems and letters which deal with life after death, she goes a step beyond resurrection and sanctions the possibility, not simply of immortality, but of full immortality—consciousness included. The ghost in poem 274, portrayed as "death" or not, possesses full consciousness---one that transcends human awareness...

The only Ghost I ever saw
Was dressed in Mechlin—so—
He wore no sandal on his foot—
And stepped like flakes of snow—

His Gait—was soundless, like the Bird—
But rapid—like the Roe—
His fashions, quaint, Mosaic—
Or haply, Mistletoe—

His conversation—seldom—
His laughter, like the Breeze—
That dies away in Dimples
Among the pensive Trees—

Our interview—was transient—
Of me, himself was shy—
And God forbid I look behind—
Since that appalling Day! 79

As presented here, the consciousness retained is of a common order, but the seriousness of the foundation of Emily Dickinson's belief in the retention of consciousness beyond the grave is not to be slighted. In a letter written to a family friend, Mrs. J.G. Holland, Emily Dickinson recounts a private discussion which took place between her brother, Austin and herself:

79 Johnsen, Complete Poems, p. 125.
Austin and I were talking the other Night about the Extension of Consciousness, after Death and Mother told Vinnie, afterward, she thought it was "very improper."

She forgets that we are past "Correction in Righteousness---" I dont know what she would think if she knew that Austin told me confidentially "there was no such person as Elijah."80

Here the belief in the extension of consciousness after death on the parts of Emily and Austin implies the possibility of communication with the so-called "dead." This same line of thought is transmitted when Emily speaks of her deceased nephew, Gilbert, in a letter written to Gilbert's mother, Susan Gilbert Dickinson:

Twice, when I had Red Flowers out, Gilbert knocked, raised his sweet Hat, and asked if he might touch them---Yes, and take them too, I said, but Chivalry forbade him---Besides, he gathered Hearts, not Flowers---Some Arrows slay but whom they strike---But this slew all but him---Who so appareled his Escape---Too trackless foe a Tomb---81

However imaginary, the faith behind the idea of spiritual life is only strengthened. One might debate whether Emily Dickinson actually communicated with Gilbert in this instance, but, on the other hand, doubt of the supernatural is lessened as some of the "unnaturalness" of Gilbert's "leaving" is unveiled:

"Open the Door, open the Door, they are waiting for me," was Gilbert's sweet command in delirium. Who

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81 Johnson, Letters, III, 842.
were waiting for him, all we possess we would give
to know—Anguish at last opened it, and he ran to
the little Grave at his Grandparents' feet—All
this and more, though is there more? More than
Love and Death? Then tell me it's [sic] name.82

Powers of the occult are evident in this account of the demise
of Gilbert. Through her follow-up to Gilbert's statement,
Emily Dickinson gives sustenance to the "unknown." When she
asks "Who were waiting?," she takes for granted the idea that
Gilbert's behavior was not simply delirium. It is something
more. It is a voice from the brink upon which selected
mortals take a backward look while moving forward into the
"unknown." In this instance, Emily Dickinson also realizes
the futility of any quest to uncover the "unknown." However
persistent in her mental search and evident anguish, Emily
Dickinson temperately resolves her quest to allow...

her personal situation and her psychic necessities to
join forces with her religious and philosophic heri-
tage to make the experience of living in constant
awareness of the coming of death, and the imaginative
realization of dying, the climactic experiences of
living.83

So doing, Emily Dickinson remains in a position to scrutinize
the known and the unknown, the natural and the supernatural.
Standing at the door of death, she sees the grave as the path

82Johnson, Letters, III, 803.
83Hyatt H. Waggoner, American Poets: From the Puritans
to the Present (Boston, 1968), p. 182.
to everything -- demise and resurrection -- however "unnatural" the possibilities.

The third and final division of the supernatural and the occult manifested in selected poems and letters of Emily Dickinson concerns the matter of dreams and revelation. On the basis of an examination of the poetic use of dreams by Emily Dickinson, it seems that, when used as indicators of the supernatural, Emily Dickinson's use of dreams differs very little from traditional -- that is, mainly Biblical -- reverence for dreams as being more than simply psychological and fully operative as harbingers. In the letters selected for this division, this idea is adequately sustained. It is also made clear that Emily Dickinson's use of dreams as a type of revelation centers fully on neither telepathy nor extra-sensory perception. Nevertheless, depending upon the reader, revelations manifested in the poems and letters can be, strangely enough, suggestive of either.

In the poem,

Dreams are the subtle Dower
That make us rich an Hour--
Then fling us poor
Out of the purple Door
Into the Precint raw
Possessed before--,

one might be inclined to think that the poet is only recounting

84 Johnson, Complete Poems, p. 592.
the feelings of loss prompted by the close of a common dream -- nocturnal or diurnal. Another way to view this same poem would not be simply to suggest a loss of imagined accomplishments provided by the receding dream, but also to note the possibility that the same poem could just as well demonstrate the loss of that interesting glimpse of the "unknown" or the supernatural which is sometimes provided by fleeting dreams of more than psychological bearing. The loss in either case has the same effect -- cessation of vision, whatever its origin. The suggestion of "the purple Door" accentuates the mysterious royalty of the celestial too well to be ignored. The implication regarding the dream state, as being conducive of a connection between the "known" and the "unknown," invites a discussion of the viability of dreams. Invariably, the question of verisimilitude is confronted by the poet, who maintains that the interest of any discovery of that which is not clearly shown, or that which remains enveiled in the supernatural, can best be served through the execution of caution in assigning insignificance to the reality of dreams.

Within that little Hive
Such Hints of Honey lay
As made Reality a Dream
And Dreams, Reality--85

Another "hint" might well be in the form of a need for bound-

85Johnson, Complete Poems, p. 664.
lessness of perception.

Cautiously adhering to the boundless nature of perception, Emily Dickinson often refers to the nature of dreams in general. She is content in the knowledge that her dreams and those of others which affected her were of an incomparable, if at times bewildering, value.

Vinnie dreamed about Fanny last night, and designing for days to write dear Loo,—dear, both of you,—indeed with the astounding nearness which a dream brings, I must speak this morning. I do hope you are well, and that the last enchanting days have refreshed your spirits, and I hope the poor little girl is better, and the sorrow at least adjourned.86

Emily Dickinson senses and assigns a premonitory quality to the nature of dreams. In this case, dreams are recognized as capable of encouraging revealing urgency.

In added mention of the power of cognition transferred by dreams, Emily Dickinson, in a letter written to an undisclosed recipient, describes her faith in the strangeness of dreams as a whole:

Dear Friend,
I dream of your little Girl three successive Nights—
I hope nothing affronts her—87

Emily Dickinson's respect for the strange nature of dreams is here evidenced.

86 Johnson, Letters, III, 855-856.
87 Johnson, Letters, III, 766.
More directly related to the occult or psychic powers of déjà vu, Emily Dickinson appropriately captures the sensation of foreknowledge and what is often accepted as being indicative of dreams which come true.

A thought went up my mind today--
That I have had before--
But did not finish--some way back--
I could not fix the year--

Nor where it went--nor why it came
The second time to me--
Nor definitely, what it was--
Have I the Art to say--

But somewhere--in my Soul--I know--
I've met the Thing before--
It just reminded me--'twas all--
And came my way no more--

The subtle hint of reincarnation is given sustenance by the poignancy of the ninth line, which ties the "thought" to an association that is deeper than the "mind" and safe from mortality. Appropriately, Emily Dickinson allows the desirable knowledge of the "Art" to remain in the "undisclosed realm" of the "Soul."

With all the foresight granted to a seer and those whose vision is finally made more acute by the approaching light of death, Emily Dickinson, in what is perhaps the last display of her psychic powers, writes a letter to her cousins, Louise and Frances Norcross, a few days before her death. So

88 Johnson, Complete Poems, p. 345.
doing, she recalls the impact of Hugh Conway's *Called Back*:

Little Cousins,
Called Back.
Emily.89

The letter is simple and yet not devoid of mystery. Just as the amnesia victim in "the haunting story," *Called Back*, is rejoined to his past life, Emily Dickinson sees her death as being equally regenerative. Fulfilling Emily Dickinson's use of and interest in uncovering the "unknown," that is, going beyond the obvious, it is generally thought that in writing "Called back" Emily Dickinson announces her impending death. If this is so, this final intuition complements Emily Dickinson's link to the supernatural and the occult. However cautious and delicate, Emily Dickinson's link to the acceptance of the supernatural and the occult in her life, and the manifestation of it in selected poems and letters of her writings, are convincingly woven into an interesting theme. As shown in the two other divisions of the supernatural and the occult as seen in selected poems and letters of Emily Dickinson, her handling of the nature of witchcraft and magic, as well as the nature of ghosts and life after death, connects with the significance of dreams and revelations as equally indicative of a second nature, rarely unveiled, yet artfully available

to those who perceive that the existence -- birth and death --
of man is Circumference, vast and unrivaled.
CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

As a nineteenth-century poet, Emily Dickinson was placed in an historically fortunate position from which she surveyed literary achievements, past and current. Equally important to her were the social, religious and intellectual attitudes of her milieu. Fortunately, Emily Dickinson was born at a time when Puritanism, though still a potent force, was on the wane and the more buoyant concepts of Transcendentalism could complement her idealism and zestful individuality. From this interesting and variegated background evolved the nineteenth-century poet who defied the tradition of her day in order that her soul might "seek its own society." In so doing, Emily Dickinson withstood pressures from her family and from the strict New England society of her native Amherst.

In choosing her own society, actually a world of her own not totally imagined, Emily Dickinson found much consolation in her variegated selection of literature which served to buttress her ideas of life and death, existence and immortality. Fulfilling this idealism, Emily Dickinson widely explored the
realms of literature with a selectivity indicative of her stern constitution. Of particular significance is Emily Dickinson's interest in the use of the supernatural and the occult elements in literature. Concerning this use, Emily Dickinson drew on the colorful history of the supernatural and the occult in literature, past and current. The nineteenth century gave rise to Romanticism, and the arrival of new ideas and many discoveries. Other results of the spirit of the nineteenth century were a wave of reform movements which included the feminist movement for women's rights and the discovery of spiritualism. Especially noticeable was a growth of an interest in the supernatural and the occult.

In Europe and America alike, the influence of the Romantic revival spread to literature. As the emphasis upon the spirituality of man increased, so did an interest in the exploration of the supernatural and the occult. This exploration was buttressed by a large number of authors who found delight in the supernatural and the occult. Among these authors were such noted figures as Horace Walpole, Clara Reeve, Ann Radcliffe and William Beckford. Others who helped to provide a respectful interest in current exploration of the supernatural and the occult in literature were Matthew Gregory Lewis and Charles Brockden Brown.
Aside from the historical treatment of the supernatural and the occult, Emily Dickinson was fortunate in having at her reach current writers such as Emily Bronte, Nathaniel Hawthorne and George Eliot, whose Gothic treatment of fiction served to feed her fascination with the supernatural and the occult. To such a variegated background of authors, Emily Dickinson added the works of the Metaphysical poets and the Graveyard Enthusiasts such as Henry Vaughan and Thomas Gray. Indicative of her interest in the supernatural and the occult, this literary background is also demonstrative of Emily Dickinson's use of the supernatural and the occult as elements in her poems and letters.

The manifestation of the supernatural and the occult as used in the poems and letters of Emily Dickinson is related to her interest in the cycle of life, which includes the birth and demise of man. It is the demise of man that sparks Emily Dickinson's interest in the supernatural and the occult. In her poems and letters Emily Dickinson explores the possibility of uncovering the hidden and unknown facts on the other side of the grave. The poems chosen for this study cover subjects which include magic, witchcraft, déjà vu, predestination and even astrology. The letters which evidence the manifestation of the supernatural and the occult, primarily dated after the death in October, 1883 of Emily Dickinson's young and mysterious
nephew, Matthew Gilbert Dickinson, further evidence Emily Dickinson's association of the supernatural and the occult with the element of death. In these letters the subjects covered include predestination, reincarnation, and ghosts and traditional resurrection.

It is clear that Emily Dickinson, as an individualist and free spirit, found reasonable comfort in her inquisitive nature. This inquisitive nature, coupled with her intellectual attributes -- her desire to read widely and her ability to draw her own conclusions -- make her exploration of the supernatural and the occult probable. As a nineteenth-century poet, Emily Dickinson's lifetime was preceded by an impressive history and interesting treatment of the supernatural and the occult in literature. Beset by the popularity of current writers of fiction which embraced the use of the supernatural and the occult as viable elements, Emily Dickinson did not go unexposed to current literary achievements. The impressive history of the supernatural and the occult, as well as the resurgent interest in the supernatural and the occult generally, both have power in the shaping of a reasonable portion of Emily Dickinson's interest in the supernatural and the occult. Nevertheless, in all of her reading and in all of her poems and letters which evidence manifestations of the supernatural and the occult, Emily Dickinson remains the stern poet and
personality that she is known to be. Emily Dickinson read what she liked and shaped her own ideas about whatever she read. She manifested these ideas in her own writings and willingly accepted, with a sight typically three-dimensional and ever in touch with reality, the responsibilities of her choices:

On a Columnar Self--
How ample to rely
In Tumult--or Extremity--
How good the Certainty

That Lever cannot pry--
And Wedge cannot divide
Conviction--That Granite Base--
Though None be on our Side--

Suffice Us--for a Crowd--
Ourself--and Rectitude--
And that Assembly--not far off
From Furthest Spirit--God--90

90 Johnson, Complete Poems, pp. 384-385.


References:


