



THE BELLE OF AMHERST

BY WILLIAM LUCE



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I first became acquainted with Emily Dickinson's poetry when I was a boy in sophomore English. Years later, a friend gave me a gift of Emily's collected letters. When I read those letters, I saw more clearly into the heart of the shy woman whose poems I had loved and admired for so long. I came to know her way of balancing richness and spareness, ecstasy and despair. There is a mystical energy, an inner tone in her writings. Emily's poems and letters radiate an invisible light. It is much like looking obliquely at a star in order to see it.

When I undertook the writing of *The Belle of Amherst*, it was my hope to depict the humanity and reasonableness of Emily Dickinson's life. I say reasonableness because I believe that she consciously elected to be what she was — a voluntary exile from village provincialism, an original New England romantic, concisely witty, heterodox in faith, alone but not lonely, "with Will to choose, or to reject."

"And I choose," she said. In recent years, Emily's choice has been the subject of psychoanalytic studies, some of which have portrayed her as social isolate possessed of disordered impulses and mentally alienated from reality. The strange faces of genius are enigmatic to the structured mind, probing for final answers. Causation seems as elusive as "melody or witchcraft." Emily wrote,

Much Madness is divinest Sense —
To a discerning Eye —

The essential Emily of my play is secretly saying to the audience, "Pardon my insanity, Pardon my jubilation to Nature, my terror of midnight, my childlike wonder at love, my white renunciation. Nothing more do I ask than to share with you the ecstasy and sacrament of my life." In my play, Emily's life is presented as a deliberate covenant with Nature and Art, a premeditated channeling of creative desire. With the same mind by which she exquisitely fashioned poems of chaste brevity, Emily superbly set the timepiece of her life. She even knew when her Coachman Death would come, and sent to her cousins a last message just before she died: "Little Cousins, — Called back. Emily."

I consider the one-person play to be uniquely suited to the telling of Emily's story. She was reclusive, an individualist of the highest order. To interpolate other actors and actresses seemed unnecessary to me. I decided that Emily alone should tell her story, sharing with the audience the inner drama of the poet's consciousness in an intimate, one-to-one relationship.

I am often asked to explain the process by which I wrote *The Belle of Amherst*. It was a creative effort founded on intensive methodical research. For two years I read and reread the several biographical studies of Emily, the three-volume collection of her letters, and the three-volume variorum edition of her poems. During this study, I took extensive notes, culled dramatically workable anecdotes, poems, and excerpts from Emily's letters; catalogued them under subject headings; rearranged them in a chronological pattern; and interwove them in a conversational style, blending my own words as seamlessly as possible, and with the cadence and color of Emily's words. Gradually, Emily's story emerged, as if she were telling it herself.

My colleagues — “The Emily Committee,” we called ourselves — also pored over the Dickinson material, and their contribution to the play was wonderfully inspiring and significant. Julie Harris, Charles Nelson Reilly, and Timothy Helgeson are all Dickinson students. Particularly, Julie's familiarity with Emily resulted from her years of dedicated research into her life and works; she also recorded two albums of the letters and poems for Caedmon Records. We all seemed joined together in love in this enterprise of simple beauty. We felt it for Emily, for each other, and for the play. And we felt it for the audiences who have taken our “Belle” to their hearts.

The Belle of Amherst is a love affair with language, a celebration of all that is beautiful and poignant in life. As it turns out, shy Miss Emily was writing for theater as surely as she breathed. In her every evocative phrase there is theatrical texture. On stage, the strange ways of Emily Dickinson become dramatic qualities in an arena large enough to give them the look of “divinest Sense.” Thus, the theater seems a thoroughly appropriate setting for Emily's life and art, enabling actress and audience to “climb the Bars of Ecstasy” together.

—William Luce

THE BELLE OF AMHERST premiered on Broadway at the Longacre Theatre, opening on April 28, 1976. It was directed by Charles Nelson Reilly; the scenic and lighting designs were by H. R. Poindexter; the costume design was by Theoni V. Aldredge; and the production stage manager was George Eckert. Emily Dickinson was played by Julie Harris.

CHARACTERS

EMILY DICKINSON

PLACE

The Dickinson household
in Amherst, Massachusetts.

TIME

1845–1886.

Me — come! My dazzled face
In such a shining place!
Me — hear! My foreign Ear
The sounds of Welcome — there!

The Saints forget
Our bashful feel —

My Holiday, shall be
That They — remember me —
My Paradise — the fame
That They — pronounce my name —

—*Emily Dickinson*

THE BELLE OF AMHERST

ACT ONE

The curtain is always up. The entire action of the play takes place in the Dickinson household in Amherst, Massachusetts, 1845–1886. The stage suggests two rooms. Stage right is Emily Dickinson's bedroom. It contains a narrow iron bed with railings at the head and foot. At the end of the bed is a trunk. By a window seat, a doll sits on the floor. Downstage area: a small square table and chair, at which Emily does her writing. A kerosene lamp is on the table. On the floor beside the table is a carved box or chest containing Emily's finished poems. Stage left is the Dickinson parlor. It has a square piano of the 1850 period, settee, chair books, table, pictures, low chest, tea cart, and hall tree.

It is 1883. Emily Dickinson enters from stage left. She is fifty-three years old. Her hair is auburn, parted in the center and pulled back. She is dressed in a simple full-length white dress with an apron over it. She enters carrying the teapot and calling back over her shoulder.

EMILY. Yes, Vinnie, I have the tea, dear. *(Places the tea on the teacart, then looks up wide-eyed at the audience. Slowly picks up a plate with slices of dark cake on it, walks shyly downstage, and extends it to the audience.)* This is my introduction. Black cake. It's my own special recipe.

Forgive me if I'm frightened. I never see strangers, and hardly know what I say. My sister Lavinia — she's younger than I — says I tend to wander back and forth in time. So you must bear with me. I was born December tenth, 1830, which makes me — fifty-three?

Welcome to Amherst. My name is Emily Elizabeth Dickinson. Elizabeth is for my Aunt Elizabeth Dickinson Currier. She's my father's sister. Oh, how the trees stand up straight, when they hear Aunt Libbie's little boots come thumping into Amherst! She's the only male relative on the female side. Dear Aunt Libbie. She'd look perfectly at home in a Greek chorus.

But I don't use my middle name anymore, since I became a poet. Professor Higginson, the literary critic, doesn't think my poems are — well, no matter. I have had seven poems published — anonymously, to be sure. So you see why I prefer to introduce myself to you as a poet.

Here in Amherst, I'm known as Squire Edward Dickinson's half-cracked daughter. Well, I am. The neighbors can't figure me out. I don't cross my father's ground to any house or town. I haven't left the house in years. When the census taker asked my occupation, I just said, "At home."

The Soul selects her own Society —
Then — shuts the Door.

(Turns to the window, still holding the cake.) Why should I socialize with village gossips? Oh, there goes one of them now! Henrietta Sweetser. Everyone knows Henny. She'd even intimidate the Antichrist. Look at her. She looks more like a jar of sweetmeats every day. Now, she's strolling by the house, trying to catch a glimpse of me. Would *you* like that?

So I give them something to talk about. I dress in white all year round, even in winter. "Bridal white," Henny calls it. *(Imitating Henny.)* "Dear, dear! Dresses in bridal white, she does, every day of the blessed year. Year in, year out. Disappointed in love as a girl, so I hear. Poor creature. All so very sad. And her sister Lavinia, a spinster too. Didn't you know? Oh yes. Stayed unmarried just to be at home and take care of Miss Emily. Two old maids in that big house. What a lonely life, to shut yourself away from good people like us." Indeed!

You should see them come to the door, bearing gifts, craning their necks, trying to see over Vinnie's shoulder. But I'm too fast for them. I've already run upstairs two steps at a time. And I hide there until they leave. You can imagine what they make of that! One old lady came to the door the other day to get a peek inside. I surprised her by answering the door myself. She stammered something about looking for a house to buy. *(Mischievously.)* To spare the expense of moving, I directed her to the cemetery. *(Suddenly realizes she is still holding the cake.)*

Oh, the cake! I do all the baking here at Homestead. I even banged the spice for this cake. My father always raved about my baking. He

would eat no cake or bread but mine. (*Sampling it.*) Lovely. (*Pause.*) No, no — it's easy to make. (*Pause.*) The recipe is really very simple. I'll go slowly. (*Places the cake on the teacart.*)

Black cake: two pounds of flour, two pounds of sugar, two pounds of butter, nineteen eggs, five pounds of raisins, one and a half pounds of currants, one and a half pounds of citron, one half-pint of brandy — I never use Father's best — one half-pint of molasses, two nutmegs, five teaspoons of cloves, mace, and cinnamon, and — oh, yes, two teaspoons of soda, and one and a half teaspoons of salt. (*Pause.*)

I'm sorry, am I going too fast?

(*Removing her apron.*) Just beat butter and sugar together, add the nineteen eggs, one at a time — now this is very important — *without beating*. Then beat the mixture again, adding the brandy alternately with the flour, soda, spices and salt that you've sifted together. Then the molasses. Now! Take your five pounds of raisins, and three pounds of currants and citron, and gently sprinkle in all eight pounds — slowly now — as you stir. Bake it for three hours if you use cake pans. If you use a milk pan, as I do, you'd better leave it in the oven for six or seven hours. Everybody loves it. I hope you will. (*Hangs her apron on the back of the chair. Then sits down and pours tea.*)

Sometimes I bake one for a neighbor, and I enclose a short note that is usually so obscure no one can understand it. I hear my little notes are becoming collector's items in the village. People compare them to see who has the strangest one. Excuse me.

(*Writing note.*) "We must be careful what we say. No bird resumes its egg." That'll keep them guessing. Oh, that reminds me. I must send a note to Mrs. Hills. She's just been admitted to the Maplewood Infirmary. (*Reads aloud as she writes.*)

Surgeons must be very careful
When they take the knife:
Underneath their fine incisions
Stirs the Culprit — *Life!*

That'll cheer her up.

I'm told one woman in Amherst is imitating me now. Probably Clarissa Cartwright. Just what Amherst needs — another eccentric. Oh, I do have fun with them. My menagerie. I guess people in small towns must have their local characters. And for Amherst, that's what I am. But do you know something? (*Confidently.*) I enjoy the game. I've never said this to anyone before, but I'll tell you. I do it on purpose. The white dress, the seclusion. It's all deliberate.

(Moves downstage and sits on a low chest.) But my brother, Austin — he knows. He says, “Emily, stop your posing!” Austin knows me through and through, as no one else does. Father and Mother never understood me. And Vinnie — Vinnie doesn’t know me, either. Austin and I are unlike most everyone, and are therefore more dependent on each other for delight. But I do think sometimes the stories about me distress him.

In a way, the stories are true. Oh, I believe in truth. But I think it can be slanted just a little. Do you know what I’m saying?

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind —

(Moves to the parlor chair.) Words are my life. I look at words as if they were entities, sacred beings. There are words to which I lift my hat when I see them sitting on a page. Sometime I write one —

(Writes “Circumference” on a page and holds it up.) “Circumference” — and I look at its outlines until it starts to glow brighter than any sapphire. I hesitate which word to take when I write a poem. A poet can choose but a few words, and they have to be the chiefest words, the best words.

A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.
I say it just
Begins to live
That day.

If I read Keats, Shelly, Shakespeare, Mrs. Browning, Emily Brontë — oh, what an afternoon for heaven, when Brontë entered there! — and they make my whole body so cold, no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. Have you ever felt that way?

If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way? My friend, Helen Hunt Jackson — oh, you’d love her — she’s

moved to Colorado — Helen is a fine scholar of words and a well-known writer. You may have read her book, *Ramona*. She has the facts, but not the phosphorescence. Oh *phosphorescence*. Now there's a word to lift your hat to. Can you spell it.

(*Writes.*) To find that phosphorescence, that light within — is the genius behind poetry. We have an Irish girl who's been with us for a long time. I was here yesterday at tea, when she asked me how to spell "genius." (*Conversing.*) Why do you ask, Maggie? No, leave the tray dear. (*Pause.*) Oh, writing to your brother, I see. And who are you describing? (*Pause.*) Me? Oh, Maggie! (*Long pause.*)

G-E-N-I-U-S. Genius. (*Pause.*) Oh, don't ask me that. I don't know what it means. But wait. (*Opening dictionary.*) Let's see what Mr. Webster says. (*Reading.*) "Genius. Tutelary spirit of a person, place, et cetera; opposed spirits seeking one's salvation or damnation; persons influencing one powerfully for good or evil." (*Closing book.*) He doesn't know. Either. No one knows that, Maggie. No one. Thank you, dear.

(*Rises and addresses the audience.*) Do you know that every one of you is, to me, a poem? You, and you — each one, a rare creation. I suppose that's why I love you and you love me, whether we realize it or not. I discovered that secret a long time ago about the souls of people.

(*Comes downstage.*) And I thought that *being* a poem oneself precluded the writing of poems, but I saw my mistake.

The Poets light but Lamps —
Themselves — go out —

But the light goes on and on. Essences are marked for — no, that's not the best word. *Labeled*. That's better. Essences are labeled for immortality.

If I can stop one Heart from breaking
I shall not live in vain
If I can ease one Life the Aching
Or cool one Pain

Or help one fainting Robin
Unto his Nest again
I shall not live in Vain.

People find it hard to believe that I had a normal childhood. They visualize instead a miniature version of me as I am now, a pint-sized little Emily, dressed all in white, lispng riddles and aphorisms in

THE BELLE OF AMHERST

by William Luce

1W

In her Amherst, Massachusetts home, the reclusive nineteenth-century poet Emily Dickinson recollects her past through her work, her diaries and letters, and a few encounters with significant people in her life. William Luce's classic play shows us both the pain and the joy of Dickinson's secluded life.

"The text is marvelously comprehensive, emotional and revealing. Mr. Luce has woven it in graphic portrait without playing any literary tricks."
—Brooks Atkinson

"The play has been skillfully crafted by William Luce ... An unforgettable playgoing experience."
—Variety

"Should be seen in every state of Emily's America."
—Newsweek

"Playwright William Luce has chiseled a perfectly detailed cameo. ... By some interior kind of magic, Luce has avoided all the pitfalls associated with literary figures brought to life onstage. He has made an Emily so warm, human, loving and lovable that her ultimate vulnerability will break your heart."
—The Boston Globe

"A drama of the spirit."
—The Philadelphia Inquirer

"Adroitly fashioned by William Luce, so emotionally varied, so cumulatively riveting that it functions just as a full-fledged play does. ... Vivacious, vigorous, teasingly honest."
—The New York Times

"... magnificent ... An arresting, riveting experience unlike any I've known. ... An overwhelming, meticulous adventure full of passion and poetry and heart. William Luce's text is like poetry itself."
—New York Daily News

"A fine miniature done with the smallest brushes on pure, clean linen, THE BELLE OF AMHERST is an enthralling evening."
—The Washington Post

"William Luce is every inch a playwright — there is not a false line, not a single awkward transition in the evening that he has provided for Emily Dickinson."
—The National Observer

"Around this deeply paradoxical figure, William Luce has woven his absorbing and moving one-woman play."
—The Evening News (London)

Also by William Luce
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