

33 SAMPLE RESEARCH PAPER

The student essay below was written in response to the following assignment:

Write an essay of 10–15 pages that analyzes at least two poems by any one author in your text and draws upon three or more secondary sources. At least one of these sources must be a work of literary criticism (a book or article in which a scholar interprets your author's work).

Richard Gibson's response to this assignment is an essay that explores the treatment of religion in four poems by Emily Dickinson; Gibson asks how conventional that treatment was in its original historical and social context. Notice that Gibson uses a variety of sources: literary critical studies of Dickinson's poetry; Dickinson biographies; historical studies of nineteenth-century American religious beliefs and practices; letters written by and to Dickinson; and a dictionary. At the same time, notice that Gibson's thesis is an original, debatable interpretive claim about Dickinson's poetry and that he supports and develops that claim by carefully analyzing four poems.

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English 301
4 March 2004

Keeping the Sabbath Separately:
Emily Dickinson's Rebellious Faith

When cataloguing Christian poets, it might be tempting to place Emily Dickinson between Dante and John Donne. She built many poems around biblical quotations, locations, and characters. She meditated often on the afterlife, prayer, and trust in God. Yet Dickinson was also intensely doubtful of the strand of Christianity that she inherited; in fact, she never became a Christian by the standards of her community in nineteenth-century Amherst, Massachusetts. Rather, like many of her contemporaries in Boston, Dickinson recognized the tension between traditional religious teaching and modern ideas. And these tensions, between hope and doubt, between tradition and modernity, animate her poetry. In "Some keep

Gibson establishes a motive for his essay by first stating a claim about Dickinson's poetry that a casual reader might be tempted to adopt and then pointing out the problems with that claim in order to set up the more subtle and complex claim that is his thesis.

Gibson does a great job of establishing key terms—"traditional religious teaching," "modern ideas," and "unorthodox beliefs." Notice how he repeats these terms and variations on them throughout the essay in order to link his various subideas.

Gibson simply paraphrases because his focus is the information in the source, not its words. Nonetheless, Gibson uses parenthetical citations to indicate where in the source one can find this information.

Gibson omits the author's name in this parenthetical citation because he is referring to the source indicated in the preceding parenthetical citation.

Gibson refers readers to all the pages in the source that discuss the debate to which he refers—not just to those pages where the quoted phrases appear.

the Sabbath going to church—," "The Brain—is wider than the Sky—," "Because I could not stop for Death—," and "The Bible is an antique Volume," the poet uses traditional religious terms and biblical allusions. But she does so in order both to criticize traditional doctrines and practices and to articulate her own unorthodox beliefs.

In some ways, Emily Dickinson seemed destined by birth and upbringing to be a creature of tradition. After all, her ancestry stretched back to the origin of the Massachusetts Bay Colony; her ancestor Nathaniel Dickinson "was among the four hundred or so settlers who accompanied John Winthrop in the migration that began in 1630" (Lundin 8). Winthrop and his followers were Puritans, a group of zealous Christians who believed in the literal truth and authority of the Bible; the innate corruption of humanity; the doctrine of salvation by faith, not works; and the idea that only certain people were "predestined" for heaven (Noll 21). A few decades after his immigration, Nathaniel Dickinson moved to western Massachusetts, where he and his descendants would become farmers and stalwarts in local churches (Lundin 9). Although Emily Dickinson's grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, and her father, Edward Dickinson, would give up farming to become lawyers, they, too, subscribed to the articles of their inherited religion (9). In short, for more than three hundred years prior to her birth, Emily Dickinson's family faithfully adhered to the Puritan tradition.

From early life to her year at college, Dickinson received an education that was "overwhelmingly religious" and traditional (Jones 295). The daily routine of the Dickinson household included prayer and readings from the Bible (296). She also received religious teaching regularly at the First Congregational Church and its "Sabbath [Sunday] school" (296). In her weekday schooling, Dickinson read textbooks such as *The New England Primer* and Amherst resident Noah Webster's spelling book that included "catechisms," or methodical teachings in religious doctrine and morality (296).

In the early nineteenth century, though, traditional churchgoers in western Massachusetts began to look warily to the east, especially to Boston, where nontraditional religious thinking had developed among both the "liberal Congregationalists" and the "free-thinking rationalists," or "deists" (Noll 138–42, 143–45). Because these theologies were

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distinctly European and philosophical, they won few converts outside Boston (143, 145). The greater threat was Unitarianism, which had sprung up in Congregational churches. The Unitarians rejected many of the foundational beliefs of the Puritans and instead “promoted a benevolent God, a balanced universe, and a sublime human potential” (284). Former Unitarian minister and transcendentalist philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, an author whom Dickinson admired, gained national attention through his writings and speeches on self-reliance and the individual’s “direct access” to the “divine spirit” that is behind all “religious systems” (Dorani 18; Norberg xiii–xv). Binding these Bostonian theologies together is an agreement that reason should be applied to religious beliefs. Each then concluded that some—or, in a few minds, most—of the traditional Christian doctrines (to which Amherst adhered) should be abandoned or revised.

Many Bostonian thinkers were influenced by recent developments in science and philosophy that contested the traditional Christian conception of the universe and of the Bible’s literal truth. Earlier generations of scientists and philosophers had postulated that the universe obeys fixed laws, which led to ongoing debates about whether the miracles described in the Bible were plausible, even possible (Noll 108). The new astronomy discredited biblical passages describing irregular movements of the sun and the stars. The foremost contemporary dispute, though, concerned the age of the universe. The traditional Christian interpretation of the Bible stated that the universe had existed for about six thousand years (Lundin 32). Early-nineteenth-century geologists, though, had discovered fossils and rock formations that suggested that the Earth was significantly older. Some Christians dug in their heels, while others, like Amherst College professor Edward Hitchcock, attempted to “reconcile orthodoxy and the new geology”—an effort in which the young Dickinson “took comfort” (32). The intellectual scene of Massachusetts at the time of Dickinson’s youth thus offered many competing answers to questions about divinity, the historicity of the Bible, and the cosmos. The reign of the old Puritan beliefs over the minds of New England was beginning to wane.

Dickinson herself began to confess doubts about her ability to join the First Congregational Church while still a teenager. In nineteenth-century Amherst, “to ‘become a

Gibson uses double quotation marks to enclose words he’s taken from a source, single quotation marks to enclose words quoted in that source.

The term *sic* indicates that a spelling or grammar problem within the quotation is present in the original. Gibson encloses the term in brackets to indicate that it is his addition.

Christian' and join the church" required "only" that one "subscribe to the articles of faith and offer the briefest of assurance [*sic*] of belief in Christ" (Lundin 51). At age fifteen, though, Dickinson felt unable to do even this much, writing to her friend Abiah Root that she "had not yet made [her] peace with God." Unable to "feel that [she] could give up all for Christ, were [she] called to die," she asked her friend to pray for her, "that [she] may yet enter into the kingdom [of God], that there may be room left for [her] in the shining courts above" (8 Sept. 1846).

During her stay at Mount Holyoke Women's Seminary, from September 1847 to May 1848, Dickinson was frequently invited, even pressured, to become a Christian. Mary Lyon, headmistress of the college, "laid stress on the salvation of souls" and asked her "students to classify themselves according to their religious condition at the beginning of the year" (Jones 314). Asked to identify herself as a "No-Hoper," "Hoper," or "Christian," Dickinson chose the first of these options (Lundin 40–41). A few months into the school year, she informed Root that "there is a great deal of [religious] interest here and many are flocking to the ark of safety." Dickinson confessed, though, that she "[had] not yet given up to the claims of Christ," but was "not entirely thoughtless on so important & serious a subject" (17 Jan. 1848). In her final letter to Root from Mount Holyoke, Dickinson describes herself as "filled with self-recrimination about the opportunities [for salvation] [she had] missed," fearful that she might never "cast her burden on Christ" (16 May 1848). She thus left Mount Holyoke just as she came to it—a "No-Hoper."

Many critics, including recent biographer Roger Lundin, see the year at Mount Holyoke as a turning point in Emily Dickinson's life, the time when it became clear that she would never "become a Christian" according to Amherst's standards (47–48). Dickinson would never join the First Congregationalist Church and, by the age of thirty, stopped going to services altogether (99). She would likewise never join the Unitarians. Many of her spiritual ideas would resemble those of the transcendentalist Emerson, yet important distinctions remained (171). Throughout her life, she wrote to Christian friends, including ministers, on spiritual topics, despite their doctrinal differences (Lease 50–51). Dickinson thus eschewed New England's religious congregations and

In order to make quoted material fit grammatically and syntactically into his sentences, Gibson changes pronouns and adds explanatory words, enclosing all changed or added words in brackets.

The author's name is omitted from this parenthetical citation because it is included in the sentence.

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asserted her independence in spiritual matters. Yet she always remained interested in the traditional perspective, and, as a poet, she relied on the traditional terminology in order to relate her new thinking.

Dickinson's well-known poem "Some keep the Sabbath going to church—," which she wrote around 1860, demonstrates this tendency. The opening line places the poem's events on the "Sabbath," the day of worship in Judeo-Christian traditions (Oxford). Thus, while the speaker does not follow her traditional peers "to Church," she nonetheless observes the traditional day (line 1). The speaker finds a "Bobolink," a native bird, to be the service's "Chorister" (line 3), the official term for the leader of a church choir (Oxford). A few lines later, the speaker calls this bird "Our little Sexton," the title of the manager of the church grounds. Normally, the sexton "[tolls] the Bell, for Church" (line 7), yet this sexton "sings" (line 8). The "Orchard" where she sits resembles an important part of church architecture, "a Dome." In this intimate setting, "God preaches, a noted Clergyman— / and the sermon is never long" (lines 9–10). The sermon satisfies two desires that most people have at church: first, to encounter God, and, second, not to be bored. In this natural scene "instead of getting to Heaven, at last— / [She's] going, all along" (lines 11–12).

The poem is so pleasant that it is easy to overlook the fact that its central message, that staying at home can be a spiritual experience, is subversive, for church attendance was important in traditional Congregationalist towns like Amherst (Rabinowitz 64–77). In fact, the word "some" might be an understatement, as, in 1860, most citizens in Amherst probably attended a church on Sunday. The speaker's situation instead resembles Emerson's 1842 description of the transcendentalists, those "lonely" and "sincere and religious" people who "repel influences" and "shun general society" (104–05). Furthermore, the speaker claims access to God without the aid of a religious community, a pastor, or a sacred text, all of which, as seen above, were essential to Puritan religious experience. In this poem, then, the speaker frames her spiritual experience in traditional terms and even keeps a few of the traditional practices, yet she simultaneously describes the benefits of departing from traditional practice.

While "Some keep the Sabbath going to church—"

This citation refers to a line in the poem, not to a page number. The page number is indicated in the list of works cited.

A slash mark indicates a line break.

Gibson carefully leads the reader from one section of his essay to another with a transitional sentence that first summarizes the claim developed in the last section and then articulates the claim that he will develop in the next section.

reveals Dickinson's changes in practice, "The Brain—is wider than the Sky—," composed perhaps two years later, shows her shift in theology. The speaker asserts a confidence in the power of the human intellect that resembles that of Boston's nontraditional thinkers. In each stanza, she invites the reader to measure the brain by comparing it to some other enormous entity. First, she finds that the brain "is wider than the Sky" and urges the reader to "put them side by side" and see that "the one the other will contain / with ease" and the reader "beside" (lines 1–4). Second, she observes that the brain "is deeper than the sea" and, again, urges the reader to "hold them" and see that "the one the other will absorb / as Sponges—Buckets—do" (lines 5–8). The speaker has a complicated imaginative method: her materials thus far are all physical—brain, sky, sea—but the qualities that she compares are mixed—physical length and depth versus metaphysical length and depth.

In the third stanza, when the speaker observes that the brain "is just the weight of God" (line 9), she introduces theological material into her experiment. She asks the reader to "Heft," or weigh (Oxford), the two "Pound for Pound" and forecasts that "they will differ—if they do— / as Syllable from Sound" (lines 10–12). The poet switches from physical science to linguistics in this closing simile, the meaning of which divides scholars. William Sherwood argues that "each syllable is . . . finite" and "includes only a fraction of the total range of sound," yet "at the same time the syllable is the instrument by which sound is articulated" (127–28). Robert Weisbuch tries to take into account the context of the simile, arguing,

We must take the qualifying "if they do" ironically. The difference of weight between "Syllable" and "Sound" is at once minute and absolute, the difference of a hair. It is the difference between the thing itself and its imperfect, itemized explanation. It is the difference, say, between paraphrase and poetry, poetry and thought. The brain is not quite and not at all the weightless weight of God. (84)

Weisbuch is right to note that the phrase "if they do" is ironic, as "Syllable" and "Sound" undeniably differ. Sherwood helpfully argues that these are differences in quantity and clarity. Thus, though the brain "As Syllable" is, ultimately, less

Gibson's reference to "scholars" tells the reader that he's about to describe and consider other interpretations.

Because this quotation is over four lines, it is indented to create a block quotation. Gibson doesn't need to enclose the whole quotation in quotation marks, but he does use quotation marks to set off words quoted within the quotation.

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than "the weight of God," it is more intelligible, perhaps more intelligent, than "the total range of sound."

The speaker of this poem is of a scientific bent; her measurements of length, depth, and weight recall the instruction in science that Dickinson received throughout her schooling (Jones 309; Lundin 30). Yet the speaker also believes that there are things beyond or outside the physical world of science and is just as eager to apply her scientific method to them. She perceives both that the human intellect is enormously expansive and that there is a God behind the cosmos. The divinity that she describes, though, is not the one her ancestors worshipped in Amherst: the speaker's God is more like a force than a person, more like the spirit of the universe than its sovereign. In "Some keep the Sabbath going to church—" Dickinson's orchard still seemed planted in Amherst. In "The Brain—is wider than the Sky," it becomes conspicuously a satellite of Boston.

This departure from traditional theology caused Dickinson to revise her vision of the afterlife, as suggested by her 1863 "Because I could not stop for Death—." The poem begins by personifying Death as a carriage-driver (lines 1–3). This personification of death echoes several biblical passages; Dickinson's Death "may," for example, "represent one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" (Bennett 208). The poet's "kindly" personification is, of course, both more benevolent than the destructive biblical figure and, with his carriage, more modern (line 2). The carriage ride takes the speaker past a school, "Fields of Gazing Grain," the "Setting Sun," and then "[pauses]" at a "House," before proceeding "toward Eternity" (lines 9, 11, 12, 17, 24). The "House" "[seems]" a Swelling of the Ground," and is, in fact, a grave (lines 10–11). Thus, the carriage drives the speaker through the stages of life—from youth to maturity, decline, death, and, ultimately, the afterlife.

Although Dickinson may draw her image of Death from the Christian tradition, her Death drives the speaker into a distinctly nontraditional afterlife. The speaker tells the reader early on that Death's carriage "[holds]" "Immortality" and then, in the closing stanza, that she has "surmised" that the carriage's direction is "toward Eternity" (lines 3, 4, 23, 24). In the Puritan theological tradition, death leads to Heaven or Hell, paradise or perdition. Yet Dickinson's carriage does not drive toward either destination; rather, the afterlife is just a

Rather than letting other scholarly interpreters have the last word, Gibson concludes the paragraph by stating his own interpretive claim.

Again, notice how Gibson touches back on key terms: "Amherst," "Boston," "traditional theology," etc.

continuous movement, a continuation of consciousness. "Some keep the Sabbath going to church—" prepared us, quite subtly, for this conception of the afterlife; there, too, Heaven is not a not place one "[gets] to," "at last," but a state to which one can be "going all along" (lines 11–12). In "Because I could not stop for Death—," the speaker sounds neither blissful nor pessimistic about this state. Her consciousness has adapted to her new existence: "centuries" pass now, "and yet / [it] feels shorter than the Day" when she "first surmised" the carriage's direction (lines 21–23). The word "surmised," though, signals that she is not entirely certain about what, if anything, is to come.

Uncertainty about the afterlife would remain with Dickinson throughout her life and, in 1882, would result in her asking the Reverend Washington Gladden, a somewhat unorthodox Congregationalist, "Is immortality true?" (Lease 50; Gladden). At this time, one of Dickinson's friends, a pastor, had recently died and another friend had become seriously ill (Gladden). Gladden's attempt to reassure her of the truth of immortality draws mostly from his argument that the authoritative figure "Jesus Christ taught" immortality. At the same time, he admits that "absolute demonstration there can be none of this truth."

In perhaps the same year, Dickinson wrote "The Bible is an antique Volume," which shows a mix of skepticism and optimism about the source of Gladden's arguments. The first three lines undermine the Bible's authority; it is an "antique Volume," authored by "faded Men / at the suggestion of Holy Spectres." The poet then provides a list of biblical "Subjects" that "reads like the playbill of a cheap traveling show" (Lundin 203): Eden is "the ancient Homestead"; Satan "the brigadier"; Judas "the Great Defaulter"; David "the Troubadour"; and sin "a distinguished Precipice / others must resist" (lines 4–10). The speaker then uses quotation marks to show her dissatisfaction with religious categories, saying, "Boys that 'believe' are very lonesome / other boys are 'lost' " (lines 11–12). Thus far, the speaker has given us every reason to abandon the Bible—she has discredited its authors, shown the silliness of its subjects, and revealed the tragic culture that surrounds it.

Yet the speaker believes that "had but the Tale [the Bible] a warbling Teller— / all the Boys would come" (lines 13–

No page number is needed in the parenthetical citations for Gladden because the source is only one page long (see Works Cited).

Notice how Gibson leads the reader from one idea/paragraph to the next with a transition sentence that states the coming paragraph's main idea (This poem "shows a mix of skepticism and optimism about the" Bible) by referring back to the concerns of the last paragraph ("Gladden's arguments").

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14). A "warbling Teller" is one whose voice is "thrilling," "ardent," or "friendly" (Bennett 430). For an example, she borrows the poet Orpheus from Greek mythology. His "Sermon," unlike the one the "believing" and "lost" boys now hear, "captivated— / it did not condemn" (lines 15–16). In addition to drawing distinct lines between the saved and the damned, like headmistress Mary Lyon, Puritans often used condemnation, in the now-infamous "fire and brimstone" style, to rouse the immoral to seek salvation (Lundin 11–12; Rabinowitz 5). Instead Dickinson here favors a passionate or intellectual response to a captivating speech over a moral response to a condemning one. She remains a believer in "the emotional force of the Scriptures and [their] expositors," even if she doubts the Bible's historical accuracy and rejects the claims of traditionalist preachers (Dorani 198). The implication of these closing lines, then, is that the Bible is—when read in the right spirit—still a valuable "Volume" for building a community. The Bible has reduced religious authority, but, when performed properly, retains inspirational power. The subtle magic of the poem is that Dickinson herself, in her parodies of biblical "Subjects," enlivens the Bible, "captivates" readers with the old "Tale" through her "warbling" poem.

Though Emily Dickinson might not be a "Christian poet" in the traditional sense of the term, she does beautify and hand down a few beloved pieces of her inheritance, New England Puritanism. She "[keeps] the Sabbath," but at home. She imagines eternity, but without a Heaven or a Hell. She calls the Bible's authors "faded men," but frequently enlivens their "antique" passages in her poems. Over the years, her ideas about God, the universe, and the afterlife changed, but her yearnings to encounter the divine and to experience immortality remained. Emily Dickinson may have physically withdrawn from Amherst society, yet her mind did not withdraw from the intellectual struggles between traditional Amherst and modern Boston. Her spiritual questions and insights are distinctively personal and deeply honest; she is neither a purely skeptical nor a purely religious poet. Her intellect kept her, to her death in 1886, a "No-Hoper" by Mary Lyon's standards, yet, for modern readers, who understand her doubts and share her longings, she is a refreshingly hopeful poet.

Gibson begins his conclusion by returning to the issue he raised in his introduction (Dickinson's status as a "Christian poet"). He then summarizes his argument by briefly reiterating his key points and using a few key words from Dickinson to do so, thus reminding us of how grounded his argument is in textual evidence. Finally, he moves from summarizing his argument to considering its implications for our overall view of Dickinson's poetry.

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