

Wild Nights with Emily: American poet Emily Dickinson undone by gender politics

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Written and Directed by Madeleine Olnek

“I like Truth—it is a free Democracy,” Emily Dickinson, in a letter.

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), who spent her entire life in Amherst, Massachusetts, was one of the greatest English-language poets of the 19th century. Barely (and anonymously) published in her lifetime, Dickinson produced some 1,800 elliptical, allusive and elusive verses that still startle and illuminate.

Wild Nights with Emily, directed by Madeleine Olnek, purports to be a “humorous yet bold reappraisal of Dickinson.” In fact, it is a largely degrading work that obliterates or trivializes history, demeaning not only Dickinson, but also, in passing, the remarkable abolitionist and literary figure Thomas Wentworth Higginson.

By concentrating almost exclusively on Dickinson’s supposed sexual relationship with her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, Olnek and her collaborators recreate the poet in their own petty, self-absorbed image. This is postmodern-feminist mythologizing at some of its worst *so far*.

The problem, to be clear, is *not* simply that the filmmakers invest Dickinson with a particular sexual orientation, overconfidently brushing aside all ambiguities and uncertainties in that regard, but that they render this brilliant, witty and insightful artist’s life and work essentially puerile and detach both life and work from their turbulent, revolutionary times.

Emily Dickinson disdained convention in her way of life and her manner of composition. She did without traditional rhyming or punctuation, producing intensely compressed responses (the longest poem occupies less than two printed pages) to what she considered the great questions of existence. Although she still formally and structurally displayed “the Puritan discipline of restraint” (in a biographer’s phrase) inherited from New England’s past, Dickinson’s work bursts out with almost unbearable emotion.

A few of her first lines—she also avoided titles—give some indication: “After great pain, a formal feeling comes,” “Banish Air from Air,” “Before I got my eye put out,” “Fame is the one that does not stay,” “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers,” “Because I could not stop for Death.”

She could write, characteristically, in defense of her oblique but lacerating approach:

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—

Literary History of the United States (1957) arg

in Dickinson’s “half-rhymes, her irregularity of speech and rhythm, her spasmodic quality, she mirrored the incongruities and frustrations of human experience; the awkwardness in her poetry became a metaphor of life itself.” The essay suggests further that “from one point of view, Emily Dickinson is a realist examining, as she says, each splinter in the groove of the brain; a witty piquant perceptress on all the common life about her, and also on its divine origins.”

Her great cultural influences included prominently the Bible, Protestant hymns, Shakespeare, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charles Dickens, the Brontë sisters and George Eliot. Dickinson, notes literary historian Brenda Wineapple in *White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, was “firmly ensconced in her prodigious reading,” which included, in addition to the figures already mentioned, Ralph Waldo Emerson, “the beloved Elizabeth Barrett Browning ... Tennyson, [the early 17th century English poet] George Herbert, Robert Burns, Keats, popular novels.”

In the face of all that, we are presented with *Wild Nights with Emily*.

In her film, as noted, Madeleine Olnek takes one portion of the poet’s life, her connection to her sister-in-law Susan, wife of her older brother Austin—which is memorialized in various letters and poems—and transforms it into the central experience and driving force of the poet’s artistic and emotional life. Although “Wild nights” is the first line of one of Dickinson’s poems, from around 1861, the film’s title and poster, which shows two women in bed, are intended to outline a specific and narrow agenda.

The opening sequence sets the tone: Emily (Molly Shannon) and Susan (Susan Ziegler) greet one another before quickly embracing and having sex behind the living room couch in the Dickinson family home. The absurdities continue. Susan—married to Austin (Kevin Seal)—and Emily pursue a full-blown romantic relationship and Susan’s children deliver countless notes back and forth between the lovers. A recently widowed Kate Scott Turner (Allison Lane) comes to stay with Susan, but ends up sleeping with Emily. Susan becomes jealous because Emily makes Kate a pair of garters!

Enter the self-important, condescending Thomas Wentworth Higginson (Brett Gelman), who in a brief scene tells Emily her poems are not ready for publication and presumes to rearrange one. The Civil War, the titanic event that in one way or another shaped the lives of all the historic figures represented in this foolish work, receives its two minutes or so of attention when a few black soldiers aggressively and skeptically demand to know Higginson’s military credentials. (Higginson was, in fact, colonel of the First South Carolina Volunteers, the first authorized regiment recruited from freedmen for Union military service.)

Decades later, Mabel Todd (Amy Seimet), who has a lengthy affair with Austin and helps edit and publish Emily’s work after the latter’s death, condescendingly lectures about the poet to crowds of respectable middle class women. (What should not go without mention: Emily’s well-

known reclusiveness is comically “explained” by the filmmakers as an act of self-confinement due to Austin and Mable’s frequent and obtrusive sexual escapades in the parlor!) Meanwhile, philosopher and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson (Robert McCaskill) is shown mumbling incoherently at a party.

Wild Nights with Emily is crude and amateurish for the most part, and not amusing. One feels for the talented comedic actress Shannon, who is out of her depth here. She mugs and plays for relatively cheap laughs; her character is physically and intellectually the near opposite of the poet. The secondary personalities don’t fare much better in the film’s historical mash-up and obsession with identity politics.

Olnek boasts in a director’s statement that the “film features a strong female-centered and LGBTQ narrative and has a cast and crew that is predominantly made up of women.” She claims some sort of historical authority based on Harvard University Press having permitted her access to Dickinson’s letters and poems, which she distorts and subordinates to her ideological ends. Olnek transforms Emerson and particularly Higginson into foppish or repressive cartoons, while Austin is a weasel engaged in presumably disgusting, adulterous sex. The filmmaker picks and chooses the relationships about which she moralizes.

Olnek’s method and outlook are thoroughly subjective, promoting a historical view, or a pseudo-historical view, in which anything goes.

No one knows, frankly, the precise nature of Dickinson’s relationship with her sister-in-law. Susan was not the only female correspondent to whom Emily wrote effusively and even adoringly. (One commentator: “Her words are the declarations of a lover, but such language is not unique to the letters to Gilbert. It appears in the correspondence with [girlhood friends Emily] Fowler and [Jane] Humphrey.”) By all accounts, the poet also had infatuations or stronger feelings for several men. One hopes, in fact, that Dickinson was able to experience a physical relationship with someone, female or male. But knowing what one does about mid-19th century New England society and its self-restrictedness, one tends to doubt she ever had the opportunity.

Wineapple, in her remarkable *White Heat* (about which more below), writes that at present “Sue Gilbert was considered the prime recipient of Dickinson’s erotic outpourings, but there were doubtless other loves as well, female and male, most of whom we do not know.” She also observes that “Dickinson’s early notes and letters to Sue, churning with unmistakable passion, ripened in later years but were not less affectionate, admiring, or pointed; Sue was, as Dickinson characterized her, the sister a hedge away” (Susan and Emily’s brother lived next door to Emily in Amherst).

“All forms of oppression of people are based on myths,” Olnek writes. No, oppression is rooted in socio-economic relationships and interests. In any case, the filmmaker’s comment implies that one should counter oppressive myths with “liberating” myths. Presumably, this is how she sees her film and justifies interpreting facts and inventing entire episodes in the most self-serving fashion.

The critics have predictably rallied around the film. In the *New York Times* review, Teo Bugbee writes: “In Madeleine Olnek’s *Wild Nights With Emily*, the life and work of Emily Dickinson are subject to a delightfully droll—even gay—reinterpretation.” The *Hollywood Reporter* enthuses that “[d]ebates over Emily Dickinson’s personal life are a staple not just among literary scholars and poetry lovers but with assemblers of LGBT histories eager to add another gay genius to the pantheon.”

In the obligatory identity politics jargon, Pat Brown of *Slant* pens: “Olnek’s comedy does two favors to Dickinson: First, it reclaims one of few women poets firmly in the literary canon as a distinctly queer voice, and second, it revitalizes a corpus of poems familiar to every American schoolchild. The film contextualizes Dickinson’s works within the life of a woman secretly devoted to another woman.

“Introduced here, Higginson will prove to be one of the antagonists in

Emily Dickinson’s life, characterized as a self-styled woke bro who offers her patronizing advice instead of taking her work seriously. He’s one of several men the film ridicules for preventing Dickinson’s recognition before her death.” Brown adds that “Austin is a mediocre bourgeois outmatched by the clever women around him.”

Dickinson will survive this mess intact. The smearing of the lesser known Higginson, who conducted a near-quarter-century correspondence with Dickinson and co-edited the first two collections of her poems, is perhaps more damaging.

The Emily Dickinson Museum website notes that Higginson “was a man of astonishingly varied talents and accomplishments. A lifelong radical, he was an outspoken abolitionist, advocate of women’s rights, and founder of the Intercollegiate Socialist Society [in 1905]. During the Civil War, he served as commander of the first Union regiment of freed African American soldiers. An ordained Unitarian minister, Higginson was also a prolific writer; his most highly regarded work was a memoir of his war years, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*.” In regard to his Union army command of former slaves, the abolitionist Sojourner Truth declared that Higginson had been appointed by God. Literary critic Edmund Wilson described *Army Life* as an “excellent book,” “as simple and precise” as General Ulysses S. Grant’s memoirs.

In fact, Higginson was more than an “outspoken” abolitionist, he was one of the most radical in the anti-slavery movement. An advocate of the violent struggle for freedom, who wrote about the slave revolts of Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner for the *Atlantic* magazine, Higginson belonged to a minority among the abolitionists, “the ultras,” as they were insultingly termed by their opponents.

When John Brown came to Massachusetts to raise funds for his anti-slavery activities, he met with Higginson. The latter joined the clandestine group, known ultimately as the Secret Six, who helped support and finance Brown’s plan in 1859 to ignite “an insurrection that would eradicate slavery once and for all.” (Wineapple, *White Heat*)

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Wineapple writes, “Of the Secret Six, Higginson alone would remain loyal to Brown’s plan, for good or ill, and was the one who never let fear for his own safety interfere with what he believed to be right. ... ‘The world has always more respect for those who are unwisely zealous,’ he noted, ‘than for those who are fastidiously inactive.’ As it began in blood, he said of slavery, ‘so to end.’” After Brown and his comrades were executed, Wineapple adds, “Higginson stood fast. ‘John Brown is now beyond our reach,’ he declared, ‘but the oppressed for whom he died still live.’”

Higginson’s relationship with Dickinson was complicated and intense. Wineapple’s *White Heat*, a fascinating account of their friendship, was published in 2008. Wikipedia points out that the book was “a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, a winner of the Marfield Prize for Arts Writing, and a *New York Times* ‘Notable Book.’ It was named one of the Best Books of 2008 by *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Washington Post*, *The Economist*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Providence Journal*, and *The Kansas City Star*, among other publications.”

In other words, when she set out to direct a film about Dickinson and Higginson, Olnek could not possibly have been unaware of the meticulously researched book, which refuted in advance many of her film’s contentions. *Wild Nights with Emily*, from that point of view, is a deliberate intellectual provocation.

There are many questions discussed in Wineapple’s book. We will merely point to two.

Wild Nights with Emily largely ignores the Civil War and American social life as a whole. Far from repudiating “conventional” views of Dickinson, Olnek’s film, in the most revealing sense, confirms the

principal existing commonplace: that the poet was someone cut off from the broader world, solely concerned with her immediate relationships (gay or otherwise) and her own mental state.

Wineapple, to her credit, disputes the notion: “That Dickinson seldom mentioned the war directly inspired literary critics for many years to assume she inhabited only a supernal realm of poetry, far removed from the miserable squabbles of petty men. That can hardly be the case.”

Dickinson first wrote and sent poems to Higginson in April 1862, inquiring whether her verses “breathed.” She was responding *immediately* to a piece Higginson had written for the *Atlantic*, “Letter to a Young Contributor.” But Wineapple asks the more profound question: “Why write to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, of all people, when she could have contacted any number of the luminaries she admired ...?” The Dickinson household was relatively conservative in its views, while “as stalwart hero or fanatic or both, Higginson was a staple of New England newspapers, his sermons reprinted or quoted, especially his enraged requiem of the Burns affair [an effort to rescue a slave from being returned to captivity]. Had Emily Dickinson read those accounts—or the sermon? Doubtless both had been discussed at the Dickinson dining table. Did she know of him, too, from Amherst gossip?”

(Suggestively, Wineapple points out that “according to the poet Susan Howe, one of Dickinson’s most intuitive readers, Higginson’s Nat Turner essay may well have inspired the poet’s unforgettable ‘My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—.’” What a line/title!)

Loss is a powerful and recurring theme in Dickinson’s poetry. Wineapple refers to the “futile” quest to “rake over Dickinson’s life, hunting for the concrete experiences that might account for her obsession with it, particularly during her most prolific years.” She identifies several incidents in the writer’s personal life, then wonders out loud, “Or was it the war? Certainly the world outside the Homestead [the Dickinson home] was besieged by narrative: each day villagers listened at the telegraph office for the ominous clicks and scanned the newspapers for names of the wounded and dead. ‘Sorrow seems more general than it did and not the estate of a few persons, since the war began,’ Dickinson sadly observed. ‘They dropped like Flakes—,’ she wrote in a poem Higginson later called ‘The Battle-Field.’”

The entire poem:

They dropped like Flakes—
They dropped like stars—
Like Petals from a Rose—
When suddenly across the June
A Wind with fingers—goes—
They perished in the seamless Grass—
No eye could find the place—
But God can summon every face
On his Repealless—List.

Numerous critics and biographers merely report the fact, without offering an explanation (and of course this is of no interest *whatsoever* to Olnek and company), that Dickinson’s poetry writing reached a fever-pitch in the years immediately preceding the Civil War and especially the war years themselves.

The Dickinson Museum website, for example, writes that although her “calling as a poet began in her teen years, she came into her own as an artist during a short but intense period of creativity that resulted in her composing, revising, and saving hundreds of poems. That period, which scholars identify as 1858–1865, overlaps with the most significant event of American nineteenth-century history, the Civil War.” The four years 1862–65 alone account for more than half of Dickinson’s known poetic

output.

No doubt, the “spirit” of an epoch works “imperceptibly and independently of the subjective will,” and finds reflection in the work of artists “who accept it and who embody it, as well as in those who hopelessly struggle against it,” in Leon Trotsky’s words. But the record suggests that Dickinson, in her own distinctive manner, “accepted and embodied” the spirit of her epoch far more than she has been given credit for. The impulses set off by earthshaking events must affect even the most reclusive soul, if his or her antennae are properly aligned.

The final point concerns Higginson’s supposed overbearing attitude toward Dickinson’s poetry during her lifetime and his editorial heavy-handedness when organizing it, along with Mabel Todd, after her death. After his first encounter with Dickinson and her poetry, Higginson admitted to being overwhelmed and bewildered by her work, as well as entranced. “A man of limits, to be sure, Higginson was gifted enough to sense what lay beyond him,” Wineapple writes.

Wineapple explains that Todd and Higginson were both “eventually pilloried for bowdlerizing the poet’s work. But they did not suppress or occlude it; rather, they presented it to an audience like them that, after many years of saccharine poetasting and propaganda, hungrily devoured the fresh, intricate, and dramatically novel verse.” The volumes of Dickinson’s poetry whose production they oversaw were enormously successful with the public in the 1890s. Higginson and Todd were hardly alone in their effort to “correct” or “improve” Dickinson’s work. The first scholarly publication of her poetry, whose goal was to present the pieces as the poet had left them in her manuscripts, did not come until 1955.

One can leave the final word on their friendship to the poet herself. In *White Heat*, Wineapple refers to a letter from Dickinson to Higginson in June 1869. “Of our greatest acts we are ignorant—,” she told him and then recollected, in Wineapple’s words, “what his attention, his courtesy, his comprehension offered her during their first months of correspondence,” before adding, “You were not aware that you saved my Life.”

Olnek’s *Wild Nights with Emily* exists in a different moral and intellectual universe.



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