

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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from *Master Letter 3*

If you saw a bullet hit a Bird—and he told you he wasn't shot—you might weep at his courtesy, but you would certainly doubt his word.

One drop more from the gash that stains your Daisy's bosom—then would you *believe*?

Thomas' faith in Anatomy, was stronger than his faith in faith. God made me—Master—I didn't be—myself. I don't know how it was done. He built the heart in me—

Emily Dickinson<sup>1</sup>

## Reflections

Emily Dickinson, one of literature's more mysterious figures, was of course a well-known poet, a recluse, a tormented puritan. She was also a beautiful letter-writer. When her body of work was discovered by her sister after her death, many of the poems were destroyed as was most of her correspondence—both letters she had received as well as the drafts of those she sent. What survives are three drafts now known as “the Master letters.” There is no record of them ever being sent, and no way of knowing to whom, specifically, they might be addressed.

Scholars are mystified. Without a clear context, it is difficult to make heads or tails of them, impossible to know for certain what that word—Master—should mean. In 1861, though, the word is especially loaded: Master/slave, Master/servant, Master God, Master Devil. We do know enough of Dickinson's life to know that her personal relationship with religion was a complicated one. Raised in a strict, puritan household, she questioned much of what was being taught to her and often found herself at odds with the general religious fervor of the world around her. There is some speculation that her religious ambivalence was inextricable from—or perhaps a contributor to—her feelings of isolation.

And so, it's anyone's guess who the Master is and what it all means. For me, that's the kind of mystery that makes poetry Poetry. As far as I'm concerned, autobiography is interesting, but not essential. I am endlessly fascinated by these letters, as many are, but where some might feel simply stumped, I feel inspired by possibility.

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<sup>1</sup> “Correspondence with unknown recipients” by Emily Dickinson. [archive.emilydickinson.org](http://archive.emilydickinson.org). Public Domain.

Religious imagery is found throughout all three Master letters and I find the parallel between the human being and God the Master to be the most provocative lens through which to read them. Dickinson pleads with “Master” to forgive her for nameless faults, to allow her to be closer to him; the letters are unified by an interesting blend of fervor, masochism, prayer, subversion, and poetry. When I used to teach Dickinson, I often subtitled my talks “the spiritual predicament” as a way to embrace rather than spurn what is, in the case of good literature, the growing shadows of ambiguity: it is a sometimes uncomfortable position to realize that the more we study and the closer we look, the more we realize how much we do not and cannot know.

What I have excerpted here strikes me as a telling illustration of the strangeness of these letters, mystery injected into mystery. The Bird—a figure found frequently in her poetry, (among other small creatures, bees and flies and snakes)—appears here as an introductory symbol for a puzzle Dickinson seems to be working out concerning the physical and the spiritual. What does the body have to do with the soul? It might be noted that she refers to herself by a pet name here, Daisy, and that there is a parallel image at work: the Bird being shot, and Daisy being gashed. Physical suffering seems inextricable from the “spiritual predicament,” the marriage of faith and doubt.

And then there’s Thomas—doubting Thomas, who had to see to believe, insisting that he must touch the wounds of Christ before he would believe it was indeed Christ before him—who perhaps Dickinson identifies as a relatable figure. Though she admits, “I don’t know how it was done” she, in the very same breath, affirms that if there were no God then she herself could not *be*. It is as though she confirms, even if momentarily, a profound faith. The final two phrases echo a kind of call and response: “I don’t know how it was done. He built the heart in me.” It is as much an affirmation as a resignation, perhaps, akin to some of those more ineffable experiences of the human condition, a reminder of the marvel of life: I don’t know *why* we love, but we *do*. I don’t know *why* we’re here, but we *are*.

### ✂ About the poet

Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts on December 10, 1830. She lived a reclusive life on the family homestead and, with few exceptions, her poetry remained virtually unpublished until after she died on May 15, 1886. She is now considered one of the most towering and most influential figures of American literature.



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