
The Uncelebrated Nonhuman Citizens of Nature in Emily Dickinson's Writings

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that Emily Dickinson perceives natural phenomena and uncelebrated nonhuman beings from perspectives counter to exclusively theological, scientific or anthropocentric views. It demonstrates that Dickinson's writing depicts nature as not only a source of inspiration and aesthetic pleasure or a realm of imagination and scientific study, but also an actual living environment for every life-form, each significant in its own right but also profoundly affected by human action. This view of nature reflects an environmental and ecological awareness which challenges the assumption that nature exists for human use and that human beings rank higher than nature. It pays attention to natural beings beyond their usefulness to humans, listens to the voices of nature previously neglected, and encourages respect for nonhuman citizens of nature and an appreciation of their value. Such writing provides a bounty of knowledge and aesthetic pleasure, tuning readers in to the significant messages of uncelebrated beings—as Edward O. Wilson advocates—while changing their perspectives toward nature and nonhuman creatures, an eco-consciousness cited by Christopher Uhl and Lawrence Buell as a key factor in reducing the exploitation and destruction of nature and in dealing with environmental crisis.

KEYWORDS anthropocentric view, ecological/biological messages, aesthetic pleasure, uncelebrated citizens, countrymen, eco-consciousness

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During Emily Dickinson's lifetime, nature was generally perceived as "a divine dream," "a remoter and inferior incarnation of God."¹ Human imagination, natural theology, or scientific knowledge was employed to decode and explain God's creation. Born of this milieu, Dickinson's writings reflect the influences of natural theology, new sciences, and Emersonian Transcendentalism. Nevertheless, while Edward Hitchcock, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Darwin, William Smellie, and Louis Agassiz, subscribing to the concept of the Great Chain of Being, believe in the human ability to comprehend the natural world in scientific, anthropomorphic, anthropocentric or transcendental approaches and emphasize the interrelation between the study of nature and revealed religion and God,² Dickinson suggests that human attempts to grasp nature—which is always changeable ("Changeless is Nature's change" [L948]), reticent, and enigmatic—would ultimately fail despite her statement "Beauty – is Nature's Fact –" (Fr895A).³ The poet depicts nature as refusing definition, like the waning hue of the sky at sunset that "[d]efied to be defined" (Fr1416), and questions exclusively science-centered, theologically-oriented, or human-centered views of nature. Unlike Hitchcock, whose "[b]ook on the Flowers of North America" "comforted their Absence – assuring me [Dickinson] they lived" (L488), or Emerson, whose poems, especially "The Humble-Bee," are exalted by Dickinson, and whose mind is said to be "like a distinct Bird" (L457),⁴ Dickinson does not regard science or nature as an ally of her religious sentiment despite sometimes resorting to scientific reasoning and exploring the natural world through the lenses of natural theology, the new sciences,

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson states this idea in "Nature" and further remarks "the world is . . . a projection of God in the unconscious. . . . It is, therefore, to us, the present expositor of the divine mind." In "The Highest Use of Learning," Edward Hitchcock argues that "the heart which is alive to nature's beauties is well prepared to love the God of nature, as well as the God of revelation" (21). All Emerson's essays quoted are from *Essays, Lectures, and Poetry on American Transcendentalism Web*.

² In *The Religion of Geology and Its Connected Sciences*, Hitchcock describes modern science as the ally of Christian belief and avers that it contributes much to shaping and confirming Christian faith in the existence of a rational and intelligent Deity (27-28). Emerson asserts in "Nature" that nature is "made to conspire with spirit" to dispose man to divine truth. Highlighting scientific knowledge of the natural world, Darwin also suggests in *On the Origin of Species* that imagination enables him to illustrate the process of natural selection and utilizes human qualities to depict and understand animals. In *The Philosophy of Natural History*, a textbook included in the class catalogue when Dickinson attended Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (Capps 189), Smellie argues, "Natural Bodies, when viewed as they have a relation to men, are marked with characters so apparent, that they escape not the observation of the most unenlightened minds" (1). In "The Study of Nature," Agassiz lectures on "the subject of an Early Study of Nature" as "a means of developing the faculties of the young, and of leading them to a knowledge of the Creators" (74).

³ L refers to Thomas H. Johnson's edition of Dickinson's letters. Citation by letter number. Fr refers to R. W. Franklin's edition of Dickinson's poems. Citation by poem number.

⁴ Dickinson describes Emerson's poem as "a beautiful copy" (L30), remarking that "Emerson's intimacy with his 'Bee' only immortalized him" (L823), and interprets "Emerson's 'Squirrel'" in his "Fable" as "deathless" (L794).

romanticism, or transcendentalism.⁵ Consequently, neither nature nor science is exploited by her mind; instead, the mind is inspired and enlightened by both. Additionally, nature is portrayed as a place not simply where Dickinson may study the works of God (divine design) or witness beauty, sublimity, God's creation, and the power of imagination, but also where she experiences the inscrutable or indefinable, and where she learns about biodiversity, the limitations of science, aesthetic pleasure, and biological/ecological messages or knowledge, and reassesses logocentric presuppositions. Some writers who believe in divine design in nature and who presuppose that "every natural process is a version of a moral sentence" (Emerson, "Nature") and that a poet is a divine revealer, in effect confine themselves and their readers within a subjective theological judgment of nature. By contrast, perceiving the natural world not only theologically or scientifically but also aesthetically, imaginatively, and ecologically, Dickinson often presents observed natural details and aesthetic qualities poetically without the suggestion of transcendental conviction or conceptual mastery. Dickinson's composition—through her humble, exploring, experimental, keen scientific observations and creativity—reflects and inspires nonconformist imagination and perception of nature. More ecologically significant is that her nature writings, though stressing the limits of human ability to truly understand nature, often introduce the special significance and messages of some common undervalued species, show respect for their specialties and biodiversity, and present new scenes or images of uncelebrated beings outside the frame of anthropocentrism. However, critics have not said much about the ecological messages and eco-conscious self Dickinson's writing conveys. Among those who have is Christine Gerhardt, who in *A Place for Humility: Whitman, Dickinson and the Natural World* examines Dickinson's poetry in conjunction with the shift in nineteenth-century American environmental perception, focusing on her stylistic choices (such as dashes, parallelism, personification, a female perspective, the voice of a child, and sentimental conventions) and how they draw our attention to what Gerhardt calls "small nature" (31). Rosemary Scanlon Mctier, in "An Insect View of Its Plain": *Insects, Nature and God in Thoreau, Dickinson and Muir*, discusses Dickinson's presentation of insects and human connections to insects. Hubert Zapf, in "Literary Ecology and the Ethics of Texts," demonstrates Dickinson's reflection of "an ecoethical attitude of coevolution and partnership between the human and the nonhuman world" in three poems (Fr1096, Fr721, Fr895) (858). My article argues that Dickinson perceives natural phenomena and uncelebrated nonhuman beings from perspectives counter to

⁵ Emerson describes nature as the ally of one's "religious sentiment" in "Nature."

exclusively theological, scientific, or anthropocentric views. This distinguishes her outlook from those that are intent on controlling nature through theological interpretation, biological classification or scientific understanding. I will demonstrate that Dickinson's writing depicts nature as not only a source of inspiration and aesthetic pleasure or a realm of imagination and scientific study, but also an actual living environment for every life-form, each significant in its own right but also profoundly affected by human action. This view of nature reflects an environmental and ecological awareness which challenges the assumption that nature exists for human use and that human beings rank higher than nature. It pays attention to natural beings beyond their usefulness to humans, listens to the voices of nature previously neglected, suggests that every natural species has a right to exist and a function (separate from human interests) to perform, and encourages respect for nonhuman citizens of nature as well as an appreciation of their value. Such writing provides a bounty of biological/ecological knowledge as well as aesthetic pleasure, which can lead to not only an awakening to the significant messages of needless, unnoticed, or undesirable beings, as Edward O. Wilson advocates, but also a changed perspective toward nature and nonhuman creatures, an eco-consciousness cited by Christopher Uhl and Lawrence Buell as a key factor in reducing the exploitation and destruction of nature and in dealing with environmental crisis.

In "Nature," Emerson emphasizes a human-centered view of nature:

All the facts in natural history taken by themselves, have no value, but are barren, like a single sex. But marry it to human history, and it is full of life. . . . [T]he most trivial of these facts, the habit of a plant, the organs, or work, or noise of an insect, applied to the illustration of a fact in intellectual philosophy, or, in any way associated to human nature, affects us in the most lively and agreeable manner. . . . The instincts of the ant are very unimportant, considered as the ant's; but the moment a ray of relation is seen to extend from it to man, and the little drudge is seen to be a monitor, a little body with a mighty heart, then all its habits, even that said to be recently observed, that it never sleeps, become sublime.

This anthropocentric view of nature implies that nature has no value beyond its usefulness to human beings. By contrast, in "Touch lightly Nature's sweet Guitar" (Fr1403), Dickinson suggests that the mystery of nature should be treated prudently without overstatements or imposition of human notions lest man be scolded by natural creatures ("Or every Bird will point at thee") for

appearing capable of knowing the “Tune” (such as their manners, value, and symbolic meanings) well, a tendency often exhibited in the egoistical interpretation of nature by Romantic bards (eager to express the self through nature) and Transcendentalists. Like Emerson, Dickinson suggests that nature involves something (which) intelligent understanding or “Science cannot overtake” but “Human Nature feels” (Fr962).⁶ Simultaneously, enlightened by her scientific education, Dickinson developed a capacity for observing, analyzing, and judging natural phenomena with careful scrutiny, transcending the confines of learned philosophies (such as Emerson’s or Hitchcock’s) and preconceived notions. Consequently, echoing Socrates’s words “I know I do not know” (Fr848) and finding the mystery of nature not entirely accessible to the limited human scope, Dickinson reveals the limitations of a single perspective and theory as well as the impossibility of completely attaining truth or knowledge. Illustratively, observing the amazing flying capability of the hummingbird whose “spokes” make “a dizzy Music” (Fr370), Dickinson, whose approach to science, in Sabine Sielke’s words, “is critical and engaged rather than positivist and affirmative” (236), proposes that even the scientific evidence of ornithology cannot explain it, remarking that the bird is “the best Logician” who solves the riddle about its movement by performing it (Fr370). In other words, for the poet, even science cannot demystify nature or the vast plans of a divine intelligence if there is any. In “‘Nature’ is what we see –,” the poet eventually reveals the human inability to represent nature and the impotence of human wisdom in comprehending or expressing its simplicity (Fr721A) or sincerity (Fr721B):

“Nature” is what we know –
 But have no Art to say –
 So impotent our wisdom is
 To her Simplicity (Sincerity) – (Fr721A)

Similarly, recognizing the human incompetence at unraveling the enigma of nature, the poet-persona expresses sequent feelings of frustration and self-doubt: “There are that resting, rise. / Can I expound the skies? / How still the Riddle lies!” (Fr68) and definitively concludes that amazing natural creation undoes human wisdom just as the evolution of a bulb or a caterpillar mystifies both sagacious persons and peasants:

⁶ For Emerson, man’s application of science to nature alone is not enough. He suggests that the “problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty” be “solved by the redemption of the soul” and that man see the world “in the light of thought” and “kindle science with the fire of the holiest affections” so that God will “go forth anew into the creation” (“Nature”).

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Many a Bulb will rise –
Hidden away, cunningly,
From sagacious eyes –

So from Cocoon
Many a Worm
Leaps so Highland gay,
Peasants like me,
Peasants like Thee,
Gaze perplexedly – (Fr110A)

Significantly, Dickinson’s realization spurs—rather than stops—her constant observations on the natural world, “with the scrutiny encouraged by those engaged in making a scientific record” (Peel 91) and through diverse lenses, particularly a perspective unchained from theology and natural philosophy, or outside a human-centered view. Dickinson’s compositions, consisting of or vacillating between scientific observation and aesthetic celebration, may not completely get rid of an anthropomorphic or anthropocentric view. However, they are at least released from a perception of nature which focuses on its divine messages and usefulness to humankind because Dickinson attends closely to various species and elements: their significant presence, legitimacy, voices, specialties, experiences, and functions in the environment, and the ecological messages independent of human interests.

For instance, Dickinson suggests that the way a person perceives the essence of natural phenomena or creatures and their relation to human life is subjective; human perceptions are relative and interpretative, not absolute. Such relativity in the world of natural creatures is best illustrated in the figure of the worm in “Our little kinsmen – after rain” (Fr932). According to Dickinson’s descriptions in her letters, a worm is a pest harmful to her plants; an “Envious Worm” would attack (L746) and bite her “most precious bud” (L124). Religiously considered, compared with the holy and mighty God, it is vain and sinful.⁷ However, in “Our little Kinsmen – after Rain,” the poet suggests that the little angleworm, viewed as a needless and vain life from an anthropocentric or theologically-centered perspective, is in reality a precious source of food for a bird (“Until a little Bird / As to a Hospitality / Advanced and breakfasted –” [Fr932]) and thus an essential part of an ecosystem, discerned when the pink pulpy being is reevaluated less

⁷ In letter 193, Dickinson refers to the sinfulness and vanity of a worm when mentioning the theological concept of man as a worthless worm.

anthropocentrically (“I pondered, may have judged, / And left the little Angle Worm / With Modesties enlarged”). Dickinson’s presentation of an awakening to the value of angleworms, which appear plentifully on the tepid ground after rain, and her calling them “Our little Kinsmen” (despite a sarcastic implication of man as a vain worm) invite a reader with preconceived notions about worms to reassess their place/function in the environment. Dealing with environmental problems, Buell reiterates the importance of “finding a better way of imagining nature and humans’ relation to it” (2). In the poem mirroring a change of mind that begins with the speaker undervaluing the worm beneath her feet and then awakening to its ecological value beyond its usefulness to humans, whereby a humbler attitude toward the worm is formed,⁸ the poet sounds like an environmentalist who seeks to demonstrate the importance of a changed (nonanthropocentric) perspective and respect for a small nonhuman creature, a point also exemplified in her poem decrying deforestation.

In “Who robbed the Woods –,” Dickinson implies that men take too much advantage of nature and thereby damage the natural environment (“The trusting Woods – / The unsuspecting Trees –”) by deforesting, bearing away something attractively curious, and removing some species which men think are useless (“Brought out their Burs and Mosses” [Fr57B]). In the twenty-first century, environmental activists and eco-conscious people try to give legal rights to forests and rivers. Dickinson, a nineteenth-century American poet who voices her protest against the destruction of the environment (trees) to create factories (Fr114) and agricultural land (Fr766), at the end of the poem raises a question: “What will the solemn Hemlock – / What will the Oak tree say?” (Fr57B). Drawing attention to the voice of trees, traditionally regarded as silent insentient beings and exploitable resources, this interrogation invites readers with such a view to rethink the destruction human beings wreak on the forest and to attend to the trees’ right to life. As in “Our little Kinsmen – after Rain,” Dickinson’s challenge to human destruction of natural elements encourages readers to reconsider their attitudes toward ostensibly voiceless beings. In *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau’s Journal*, Sharon Cameron argues that “to write about nature is to write about how the mind sees nature” (44). Dickinson’s nature writings reveal a view that every natural being, as well as landscape, has its right to exist and its intrinsic value worth respecting, no matter how small, trivial, or superfluous it may appear to humans. It is a perspective that questions anthropocentrism, which is further illustrated in the

⁸ Gerhardt comments that Dickinson’s “attention to nature’s most inconspicuous elements” goes with “a profoundly humbling change of mind” (*A Place for Humility* 28).

following poems.

In “Cocoon above! Cocoon below!” (Fr142), Dickinson suggests that the essence of a butterfly’s transformation signifies more than an analogy to the Christian metamorphosis;⁹ it illustrates the magic of natural evolution though it also exemplifies the transience of life (Fr571, Fr655). The poet especially describes natural creatures as wise enough to know the universe themselves without the need of a human intermediary (“a ‘Surrogate’” [Fr142]) to expound the secret or meaning of nature for them. Additionally, “How soft a Caterpillar steps –” mocks the eagerness of the speaker to figure out what use a little caterpillar or its career has for her when being fascinated by the larva (“It’s soundless travels just arrest / My slow – terrestrial eye –”) coming from “a Velvet world” and being intent on its own career (Fr1523). In “Those Cattle smaller than a Bee,” the poet-persona further asserts that human beings are unqualified to judge the “peculiar calling” of creatures but should “remand” them to nature to “justify or scourge” (Fr1393A).

Furthermore, in “Four Trees –upon a solitary Acre –,” Dickinson shows that the existence of natural beings neither is always planned nor signifies “particular spiritual facts,” as instanced by four trees standing on “a solitary Acre” with neither “Design” nor “Order or Apparent Action” but only the visit of the sun and the wind (Fr778).¹⁰ Those trees do not have “nearer Neighbor”; the “Acre” offers them a place to grow while they give “Him – Attention of Passer by – / Of Shadow, or of Squirrel, haply – / Or Boy” (Fr778). What deed theirs is to “the General Nature” or what plan they may severally “retard –or further” is all unknown (Fr778); they merely exist there. In the poem, Dickinson suggests the presence of God in nature without describing the natural scenes as emblems of the divine plan, as Emerson advocates.¹¹ To Dickinson, Emersonian Transcendentalism, natural theology, and the new sciences are useful but not the only approaches to understanding nature. Dickinson’s presentation of this geographical scene is ecologically significant as it reflects that even an unspectacular landscape has a right to existence and a function in the environment.¹² Significantly displayed is the ecological relationship between natural phenomena and creatures in the common landscape as the trees

⁹ In Dickinson’s time, death was depicted as a peaceful and beautiful transformation, just like the releasing of a butterfly from a cocoon as illustrated in “What is death?” (109-20) in W. H. McGuffey’s *New Fourth Eclectic Reader*, a popular children’s book then.

¹⁰ For Emerson, particular “natural facts are signs of particular spiritual facts” (“Nature”).

¹¹ In order to perceive divine ideas, Emerson demands a transparent self that can see all (“Nature”) and proposes that man “must look at nature with a supernatural eye,” converse with “the cause of nature,” and “draw from nature the lesson of an intimate divinity” (“The Method of Nature”).

¹² In “Often seen – but seldom felt’: Emily Dickinson’s Reluctant Ecology of Place,” Gerhardt presents a similar account (63).

nourished by the acre, the sun, and the wind attract passersby and provide shelter to both boys and the squirrel. It signifies that the interactions among natural elements are actively meaningful to the ecosystem at that place. In Dickinson's presentation, both the needless angleworm and the unspectacular landscape have their ecological significance, even though neither can be "associated to human nature" or "applied to the illustration of a fact in intellectual philosophy," the value of natural elements emphasized in Emerson's "Nature." In "To be alive is power," the poet-persona even declares that the fact of existence is "Omnipotence – Enough –" to justify the right to exist for a life seemingly without "a further function" by the human-centered measure (Fr876). These poems reflect the perception of significant messages of natural phenomena, especially those habitually undervalued, when Dickinson gets away from her culture's interest in the divine messages in nature or view of nature as an exploitable resource.

In Dickinson's time, when a transcendentalist or natural philosopher with logocentric presuppositions moved toward a system of thinking, nature became an ally of his/her philosophy, lending all its "pomp and riches" to his/her "religious sentiment" (Emerson, "Nature"). In other words, nature is, in Jean-François Lyotard's words in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, "'exploited' by the mind according to a purposiveness that is not nature's, not even the purposiveness without purpose implied in the pleasure of the beautiful" (137). By contrast, to Dickinson, the observation, study, and then presentation of nature should not be simply theological or scientific. Neither expounding nature exclusively in a human-centered or a scientifically-oriented vein nor regarding nature or science as an ally of her religion and philosophy, Dickinson exhibits her humble, creative, and meticulous observations on nature, and unveils its undervalued aspects or diverse images and traits, which can be superior to humans', without falling back on received philosophies and the conventional mission of a poet. Declaring that "'Seen of Angels' scarcely my [her] responsibility" when finding it "difficult not to be fictitious in so fair a place" (L330), the poet tends to simply be an observant and creative observer, exercising a restraint over an overconfident notion of human ability to decipher nature. As expressed in "The Robin's my Criterion for Tune –" (Fr256), Dickinson's poetry reflects an eco-conscious self that exhibits her concern for the seasons and the flora and fauna in Amherst. Such poetic writings not only introduce the natural messages in the small Connecticut River Valley town surrounded by swamps, but also offer aesthetic pleasure and inspire refreshing (green) perceptions of nature in this region.

As Uhl argues that humans should see "Earth, each other, and ourselves with new eyes—the eyes of interdependence" (206) and Buell proposes a new way to

imagine nature, the essential step in developing eco-consciousness is a changed perspective toward nature and the human-nature relationship. In order to arouse people's ecological consciousness in the face of threats to biodiversity, eco-friendly artists and photographers nowadays, such as Miroslav Hlavko, Josiah Launstein, and Dean Mason, present adorable images of some traditionally undesirable or uncelebrated animals. Some environmental activists emphasize the advantages of unwelcome weeds/plants that benefit mankind, such as their edibility and abilities to mitigate or clean up pollution in the air, soil, or water. Ignoring the reputed hierarchy in nature and paying attention to the "pretty people in the Woods" (Fr113), the "smallest Citizen" (Fr1407), and the vegetable countryman (Fr1414), Dickinson reveals an eco-conscious self that regards other members of creation as her countrymen instead of inferior life-forms.¹³ That self perceives nonhuman beings with a different, humble, creative, scientific, and aesthetic attunement, as illustrated in her verse on a bat, snakes, insects, birds, and weeds.

For instance, the nocturnal bat is often associated with the devil in Western culture, as shown in many western paintings which portray the devil with bats' wings. However, Dickinson presents her scientific observation on the inactive bat in a vivid and figurative language, spotlighting its attractively unusual features, including its habit of sleeping in dark corners with wings tucked in, its imperceptible sound, special umbrella-like wings, motions, and astuteness.

The Bat is dun, with wrinkled Wings –
Like fallow Article –
And not a song pervade his Lips –
Or none perceptible.

His small Umbrella quaintly halved
Describing in the Air
An Arc alike inscrutable
Elate Philosopher.

Deputed from what Firmament –
Of what Astute Abode –
Empowered with what malignity
Auspiciously withheld –

¹³ In a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Dickinson asks, "I know the Butterfly – and the Lizard – and the Orchis – Are not those *your* Countrymen?" (L268).

To his adroit Creator
Ascribe no less the praise –
Beneficent, believe me,
His eccentricities – (Fr1408)

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In the creative description, which offers both aesthetic pleasure and knowledge of the bat's characteristics, the poet-persona especially asserts that its reputed "eccentricities" are "[b]eneficent" (Fr1408). Indeed, take its peculiarly and tactfully constituted wings as an example, they have many functions of other mammalian hands while being useful airfoils.

Viewing natural beings with novel eyes, Dickinson alters the image of not only eccentric but reputedly evil creatures and wilderness, as demonstrated in her writing on snakes. As Thomas J. Lyon mentions in "The Age of Thoreau, Muir, and Burroughs," Dickinson's contemporaries "associated wilderness with the evil opponent to Christian civilization" as their Puritan ancestors did (49). In letter 378, Dickinson's narration of an encounter with the "narrow Fellow in the Grass" occasionally passing by reveals a rooted bias toward snakes. However, Dickinson's recollection of her childhood experience shows that she would not succumb to ingrained notions; being told "the Snake would bite" her or "Goblins [would] kidnap" her when "much in the Woods as a little Girl," she still "went along," actively exploring and experiencing nature herself (L271).¹⁴ Sensing that most people preoccupied with the stereotypical concept of a snake never meet one (either "Attended, or alone") without the feelings of anxiety and terror ("Without a tighter Breathing / And Zero at the Bone" [Fr1096]), Dickinson reports a different encounter with the being, which goes beyond the reach of her intellect and religious upbringing; she presents the reptile in a distinct way, unchaining her poems (Fr1096, Fr1519) from the received notions or symbolic meanings of a snake.¹⁵ In Dickinson's description, its notice is instant, it divides the grass as "with a Comb" as it moves, and it likes a boggy acre, a floor "too cool for Corn" (Fr1096).

¹⁴ So fascinated by nature, Dickinson even included a poem expressing her intention to enjoy wild nature as much as possible in her "finite eyes" and life (Fr336).

¹⁵ A snake is defined as evil in Emerson's "Nature": "this origin of all words that convey a spiritual import,—so conspicuous a fact in the history of language, . . . [e]very appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, . . . a snake is subtle spite, . . ." Dickinson's experience offers a good example of a poetic encounter (with a natural being) that is beyond human intellect and irrespective of the being's value to humans in order to reconnect with nature to animate Earth, an idea advocated by Stephan Harding, Resident Ecologist at Schumacher College, in *Encountering Another Being* (Empathy Media, 2017), a segment of a documentary in progress about David Fleming's work.

In both poems, the snake is no longer portrayed as a wicked or terrifying creature. Instead, it becomes a frightened narrow fellow in the grass, which wrinkles and leaves (Fr1096) or begs “for the life” (Fr1519). Embodying Emerson’s view that a poet has to release readers from an inherited idea instead of imposing a concept on them, Dickinson, a writer who is not confined to Emerson’s idea of a poet as a divine revealer with a supernatural or transparent eye for the “kingdom of man over nature” (Emerson, “Nature”) but intends to extract “immense” aesthetic value from “familiar species” (Fr446) and observes nature with new eyes, introduces her contemporary readers “to a new scene” of the snake and inspires new perceptions.¹⁶ In addition, ecologically significant is her introduction on the snake’s habitat in Amherst, a grassy, boggy, and cool acre which is so unfit for cultivation as to remain untapped.¹⁷ These nonconformist descriptions, which exhibit both the knowledge and aesthetic pleasure the uncelebrated species can offer, invite disruption of one’s preconceived notions and dispose one to new ideas of the creatures, which may lead to much attention to their characteristics, rights, experiences, and positions in nature as well as a recalibration of human’s place among—rather than above—them.

Observing small creatures beyond their usefulness to humans and outside an anthropocentric view, Dickinson discerns their special traits, which could be “heartier” (Fr1407), “mightier” (Fr444), and “higher” (Fr1559) than those of human beings. Consequently, she exhibits admiration for the self-reliant simple life of a squirrel that is satisfied with a simple meal (“a Loaf”) in the tree and that keeps its cutlery, which can put Birmingham (famous for its factories of knives and cutlery) to shame, within its “Russet Lips,” proclaiming,

Convicted – could we be
Of our Minutiae
The smallest Citizen that flies
Is heartier than we – (Fr1407A).

Likewise, the poet reveals great admiration for the freedom of an independent gnat, which is small but has the “privilege to fly” and “seek a Dinner” itself, remarking, “How mightier He – than I!” (Fr444), and “A Gnat’s minutest Fan / Sufficient to obliterate / A Tract of Citizen –” (Fr415A). Similarly, perceiving the amazing

¹⁶ Emerson states in “The Poet,” “we love the poet, the inventor, who in any form, . . . has yielded us a new thought. He unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene.”

¹⁷ Zapf remarks that the verse describes “the presence of a snake as a special creature in a certain natural environment” (858).

construction of the chestnut, whose fit “Umber Coat” is “Combined without a seam,” the poet identifying the chestnut as a countryman wonders who “spun the Auburn Cloth” and exclaims:

We know that we are wise –
Accomplished in Surprise –
Yet by this Countryman –
This nature – how undone! (Fr1414A)

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In these poems, the special traits of the nonhuman beings, which diminish human supremacy, are especially highlighted in comparison with human artificiality (“A Saucer holds a Cup / In sordid human Life” [Fr1407]; cutlery produced in Birmingham), human restricted life (“It would have starved a Gnat / To live so small as I –” [Fr444A]), and human intelligence (Fr1414). They illustrate human inferiority, an awareness of which contributes much to a less arrogant but more eco-conscious perspective.

Without human arrogance, Dickinson often displays eco-consciousness that questions human supremacy and scientifically-oriented attitudes toward natural beings, argues for animal rights, and cares about small uncelebrated creatures themselves without the suggestion of transcendental conviction, conceptual mastery, or biological classification. Recognizing that all creatures are subject to death, the poet reveals her dissent from the Great Chain of Being, which was still part of the metaphysics taught in nineteenth-century education:

Death is the Common Right
Of Toads and Men –
.....
The Privilege –
Why swagger, then?
The Gnat's supremacy is large as Thine – (Fr419; emphasis added).

Accordingly, in a poem on a rat, which most men dislike, the poet-persona claims its legitimacy of being an integral part of nature:

The Rat is the concisest Tenant.
He pays no Rent.
Repudiates the Obligation –
On Schemes intent

.....
Hate cannot harm
A Foe so reticent
Or decree prohibit him
Lawful as Equilibrium – (Fr1369A)

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She even pleads to “Papa above” to reserve within his kingdom a mansion for the rat which is “[o]’erpowered by the Cat” and “[s]nug in seraphic Cupboards” to “nibble all the day” as time goes by (Fr151B).¹⁸

In addition, Dickinson’s poems on such beings as bees, butterflies, birds, the mushroom, and the weed exhibit her scrutiny of specific features and relations of ordinary creatures as well as “an extraordinary vividness of descriptive and imaginative power” (Higginson 11). So keen an observer is Dickinson that she views the “unnoticed” inhabitants (insects) of the grass as the “most important population” (Fr1764), and detects a little road which is “not made of Man” or enabled “of the Eye” but found accessible only to the thill of the bee or cart of the butterfly (Fr758). The poet particularly expresses more concern about the fact that the grass is full of “bumble bees and other nations [species]” than identifying the insects: “Their names, unless you know them, / ’Twere useless tell” (Fr1764). In these poems, Dickinson reveals much attention to the ecological role of insects and the biology of butterflies and bees, anticipating a modern-day entomologist who tries to trace the hidden route of their migration.

Observing that insects as well as birds provide an angle for the humans to explore and understand the intensity and subtlety of the environment surrounding them and seasonal changes, Dickinson presents their characteristics, the stages of their lifecycles, and their interrelations to other natural elements. For instance, her descriptions of the moth, the bee, the cricket, and the butterfly illustrate her scrutiny of their proclivity, physical characteristics, and biological traits as well as her creativity:

A Moth the hue of this
Haunts Candles in Brazil –
Nature’s Experience would make
Our Reddest Second pale – (Fr944)

¹⁸ According to Franklin, the poem was given to Susan Dickinson in 1860. Accordingly, Dickinson anticipates the idea of Theodore Parker (a “poison” writer the poet claims her preference for in letter 213)—the smallest creature should not be overlooked in *Prayers* (1862): “Father, we thank thee for thy loving-kindness and thy tender mercy, that thou watchest over every little fly” (19).

His Feet are shod with Gauze –
His Helmet, is of Gold,
His Breast, a single Onyx
With Chrysophrase, inlaid – (Fr979)

The dreamy Butterflies bestir!
Lethargic pools resume the whirr
Of last year's sundered tune –
From some old Fortress on the Sun
Baronial Bees march – one by one –
In murmuring platoon! (Fr162A)

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In the poems, a moth's disposition to turn toward lights is highlighted (Fr944), a common bee's feet, head, and thorax are depicted as delicate art showing its aesthetic value (Fr979), and the way bees and butterflies become energetic and whirr in groups in summer is pictured (Fr162A). In addition, the cricket's song is portrayed as a harbinger of autumn (Fr935, Fr1312): as summer "lapsed away" imperceptibly, there were few flowers left on the hill, birds migrated south, and the maple decorated the road, making the somber place wear a single color ("Invested sombre place – / As suddenly be worn / By sober Individual / A Homogeneous Gown"), the cricket inherited the land ("the Floor") and sang loudly ("spoke so clear" Fr935B).¹⁹ That crickets stop singing signifies the beginning of winter ("Twas sooner when the Cricket went / Than when the Winter came" [Fr1312A]). Likewise, in a description of a night scene, Dickinson introduces the biological

¹⁹ In addition to the "most beautiful" season: autumn (L57), Dickinson gives fascinating delineations of other seasons in Amherst, where seasonal variations are exhibited with different creatures and colors. For example, the return of spring is signified by the appearance of robins, phoebes, daffodils, bees, birdsongs, and blossoms (Fr347), the growth of the dandelion (Fr1565), and the array of the earth in green and "then a frock of all colors" "laced up with blossoms and grass" (L86). Summer is pictured as a season consisting of rainbows, a vision of (semi-)tropical gardens ("Some Vision of the World Cashmere [Kashmir] –"), a peacock's purple train, the butterfly's resuming the whirr, baronial bees marching on in "murmuring platoon," a flock of robins standing on fence, roof, and twig, the orchis revisiting the bog binding her feather on for the sun, and the countless forest creatures standing in "bright detachment" automatically ("Without Commander" Fr162B). These poetic lines reveal the ecological messages of some beings in Amherst in summer. Such creatures as butterflies, bees, robins, and phoebes flourish. The orchis and the wild rose reappear in their habitats, the bogs. The aster and gentians unfold their petals and blossom. Toward the end of summer, peacocks finish shaping their tail feathers as their stunning plumage gradually falls off. On the other hand, in Dickinson's delineation of winter, Amherst is covered in white and there are austere snows and hibernation of creatures (Fr921). Winter can be so cold (Fr551) that rivers freeze (Fr950) and so harsh that all the cattle starve (Fr532). All these poems provide useful information about the seasonal changes and natural evolution in Amherst.

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features of crickets, which primarily sing (“The Crickets sang / And set the Sun”), and bees, which perish from the scene to rest, when the “low Grass [is] loaded with the Dew” at night (Fr1104B).

On the other hand, in a poem on the butterfly seemingly emerging without detectable design, purpose, or function (Fr610), Dickinson proclaims,

The Butterfly upon the Sky
That does’nt know it’s Name

And has’nt any Tax to pay
And has’nt any Home
As just as high as you and I,
And higher, I believe, (Fr1559A; emphasis added)

Here Dickinson suggests that a small life-form can be inherently equal to human and even much superior from an eco-conscious view. Recognizing that the emergence of a butterfly from a cocoon without a traceable design is one of the mysteries of nature beyond the human intellect (“By me! But who am I, / To tell the pretty secret / Of the Butterfly!” [Fr171]), Dickinson still tries to represent the metamorphosis of the insect in several poems. Spotlighting the magical evolution of butterflies in “A fuzzy fellow, without feet –” (Fr142), Dickinson pictures the process of the metamorphosis figuratively—from a dun velvet caterpillar that dwells in the grass or on a bough, from which it sometimes descends in plush upon the passerby in summer, to chrysalis formation (pupa) in autumn (“But when winds alarm the Forest Folk, / He taketh *Damask* Residence – / And struts in sewing silk!”), and then to butterfly in spring (“Then, finer than a Lady, / Emerge in the spring! / A Feather on each shoulder!” [Fr171]). “My Cocoon tightens –” (Fr1107), which describes the dynamic biological transformation—the tightening of the cocoon, its molting into a colorful dress, and then striving for the air—focuses on the final two stages, a pupa and a full-winged butterfly:

A dim capacity for Wings
Demeans the dress I wear –

A power of Butterfly must be –
The Aptitude to fly
Meadows of Majesty concedes –
And easy Sweeps of Sky – (Fr1107)

In these poems, Dickinson poetically represents the observed biological process and introduces two kinds of butterflies with different life cycles without scientific terminology: one is very short (Fr142, Fr655), while the other lasts for several months (Fr171). According to Gerhardt in *A Place for Humility*, this could be an illustration of Dickinson's "keeping a distance from the controlling gestures of biological classification" (32). Additionally, according to Dickinson's depiction, without caring about genealogy or lineage, butterflies as well as bees go on their "journeys to the peak" of some unperceivable things (Fr1650), which is a secret that entomologists have endeavored to decode. Although Dickinson could not unriddle the enigmas of the small beings, her poetic delineation more or less animates one's imagination and clues the biology of the insects in Amherst. Similar illustrations are also found in her writing on birds.

Dickinson's living environment sheltered many kinds of birds. However, because of the natural and climatic changes and human activities, some species struggled to survive and some described in Dickinson's poetry are now seldom found around homes in New England, such as bobolinks (Fr22, Fr54, Fr63, Fr82, Fr88, Fr204, Fr236, Fr266, Fr721, Fr766, Fr1348, Fr1620), whippoorwills (Fr7, Fr208, Fr333), meadowlarks (Fr44, Fr86, Fr262, Fr754, Fr905), bluebirds (Fr1194, Fr1383, Fr1545), and cuckoos (Fr256), many of which lost their habitats when farms replaced meadows or forests and large developments replaced fields or orchards. For example, according to Dickinson's descriptions, one of the common grassland birds—bobolinks—used to be in Amherst in spring (Fr82) and summer (Fr22). "We should not mind so small a flower –" depicts their habits of foraging on or near the ground and their breeding habitats usually as open grassy fields ("That who sees this little flower / By Faith may clear behold / The Bobolinks around the throne" [Fr82]). They would begin to sing at sunrise (Fr204). Their enchanting songs were commonly heard ("Nature is what we hear – / The Bobolink – the Sea –" [Fr721]) and defined as "An Anodyne so sweet" (Fr88, Fr766), or as songs of a chorister (Fr236). Dickinson especially highlights its jaunty, exhilarating song, suggesting that the way to distinguish the bobolink from other birds is through the "Joy of him" and that the meadow will be nullified when the "Bird of Birds is gone" and the "Sorcerer withdrawn" (Fr1348). In "No Bobolink – reverse His Singing" (Fr766), Dickinson, noticing the threat the bird faces, exclaims, "Brave Bobolink – / Whose Music be His / Only Anodyne –." The poet particularly describes how the bobolink, struggling for life, keeps on singing even though its home is taken away by a farmer ("When the only Tree / Ever He minded occupying / By the Farmer be –" [Fr766A]), which implies the cause of its disappearance in the region. Revealing of the impact of human activity on the

bobolink, Dickinson's poems also offer significant biological message of the species which is disappearing in Northeastern United States.

Undeniably, Dickinson's poems on birds sometimes focus on their anthropomorphic traits or behavior,²⁰ but her poetic descriptions often present a scientific observation of the biological characteristics of birds. Illustratively, "It did not surprise me –" exhibits a close study on the behavior of a birdling that will "stir her pinions," fledge soon, and traverse "broader forests" (Fr50). "Upon his Saddle sprung a Bird" (Fr1663) focuses on a bird expressing the freedom inside with its song, flitting aimlessly, and stopping where it wants without being bound by duties. Another three poems (Fr1489, Fr359, Fr370) record the motion of birds, including a bird on the wing whose presence is identified by the stir of blossoms on the bush (Fr1489), as if the poet uses a video camera to keep track of it. "A bird came down the walk" exemplifies Dickinson's careful scrutiny of a bird, which, initially unaware of being observed, "bit into an Angeworm halves," "drank a Dew" from "a convenient Grass," and "hopped sidewise to the Wall" to let a beetle pass (Fr359). After it "glanced with rapid eyes" that hurried all around, became no longer at ease, but "looked like frightened Beads" when finding a human around, it eventually "stirred his Velvet head," "unrolled his feathers," and "rowed him softer home" while being offered a crumb (Fr359). "A Route of Evanescence" presents a bird's fast beats of its wings flying among flowers and making "every blossom on the bush" adjust "its tumbled head" (Fr1489C). The flying bird is portrayed as a "route of evanescence" with "a revolving wheel," a "resonance of emerald," and a "rush of cochineal" (Fr1489C). Without the given title, Dickinson's delineation of the unnamed colorful figure remains a riddle, which invites readers' decipherment and imagination. According to Dickinson's description of its physical characteristics and movement, the creature should be a ruby-throated hummingbird, the most common species in New England.²¹ Delicately the poet captures the swift motions of the bird feeding on nectar: he "never stops, but slackens" above "the Ripest Rose," "[p]artakes without alighting," and "praises as he goes" till "every spice is tasted" (Fr370). She also reveals a bird's relation/interaction with other beings, such as an angleworm, a beetle, grass, and humans (Fr359), without the controlling gestures of scientific expositions or theological interpretation.

²⁰ There are examples such as the blue bird's optimism (Fr1383), the owl's wisdom and inscrutability (Fr728), the phoebe's shyness (Fr1009), and the jay's boldness and directness (Fr1022, Fr1596).

²¹ The adult birds are metallic green above and grayish white below, and the male has a ruby-red throat patch. In *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Johnson remarks, "she identified it in the letter" to Higginson "by title as 'A Humming-Bird'" (1011).

In addition to birds' relations with other beings, Dickinson also records birds greatly influenced by climatic change. According to *The Climate of Amherst, Massachusetts 1836-1985* published in 1987, it is likely that the timing of first and last frosts, the amounts of snow and rain, and the extremes of temperature changed over those one hundred and fifty years. Therefore, birds, which are so sensitive to the subtle phenomena in nature as to sense impending storms as described in letter 89 ("how the birds sing before a thunder storm, a sort of hurried, and agitated song – pretty soon it began to thunder"), have to struggle against bad weather. For example, according to Dickinson's descriptions, the confusing cycle of nature made the phoebe and the crow appear and the nuts ripen in the wrong season (Fr1697). Winter in Amherst could be so severely cold (Fr551) that there was not a berry for a "wandering Bird" (Fr950). Dickinson also wrote down the effects of bad weather on birds during April snowstorms in 1879 and during a heat wave in August, 1881:

The last April that father lived, . . . there were several snow-storms, and the birds were so frightened and cold they sat by the kitchen door. Father went to the barn in his slippers and came back with a breakfast of grain for each, and hid himself while he scattered it, lest it embarrass them. (L644)

I think everything will get ripe today . . . for such heat was never present. . . . We have an artificial Sea, and to see the Birds follow the Hose for a Crumb of Water is a touching Sight. They wont take it if I hand it to them – they run and shriek as if they were being assassinated, but oh, to steal it, that is bliss – I cant [sic] say that their views are not current. (L721)

Both letters reveal friendly human actions to help birds in a predicament as well as birds' fear of humans, who could be terrifying predators.

In fact, in addition to habitat destruction and climate change, bird shooting by the thousands and bird feathers in great demand as decorations for women's hats threatened some birds with extinction in the late 1890s.²² Being concerned about nature, Dickinson proposes the preservation of not only natural environment but also nonhuman life-forms as further exemplified in "His Bill is clasped –" (Fr1126), "Split the Lark – and you'll find the Music –" (Fr905), and some poems on the wildflower and weed. Anticipating modern environmentalists, Dickinson revealed the problems of hunting for birds as well as destroying their habitats. In

²² See Schuman and Hodgman xx.

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“His Bill is clasped –,” the poet-persona articulates her indignation at the cruel scene of a murdered bird and a protest for the bird being deprived of joyful tunes and life:

Assassin of a Bird
Resembles to my outraged mind
The firing in Heaven,
On Angels – squandering for you
Their Miracles of Tune – (Fr1126)

Additionally, in a sarcastic description about the dissection of a lark’s body for scientific study, the poet-persona concludes this practice to be “Scarlet Experiment” and satirizes that the lark dying a bloody death will not experience a revival:

Loose the Flood – you shall find it patent –
Gush after Gush – reserved for you –
Scarlet Experiment! Sceptic Thomas!
Now do you doubt that your Bird was true! (Fr905)

Likewise, in “Arcturus’ is his other name –,” the poet-persona sarcastically defines a person (including herself) who “slew a worm,” “pull[ed] a flower from the woods,” and made a butterfly a specimen (“He sits erect in ‘Cabinets’ –”) in order to study them, as a “monster with a glass” (Fr117), revealing her disapproval of treating natural beings simply as objects of scientific study.

Moreover, Dickinson also speaks for her vegetable countrymen, especially uncelebrated wildflowers and weeds, arguing that even the weed despised by men has a place in the world despite its derided home and function in nature. According to Dickinson’s description in “To her derided Home,” not knowing its “station low” or “Ignominy’s name,” the weed bestows “a summer long” upon “a frameless flower” and sweeps lightly “from Disdain” (Fr1617A). At the end, the poet-persona particularly proclaims, “The Dandelion’s Shield [foliage] / Is valid as a Star –” (Fr1617A). In her poem, Dickinson suggests that even though the grass seems too ordinary to be noticed (“A Duchess were too common / For such a noticing –” [Fr379A]), it is a part of a shared ecosystem. “A Sphere of Simple Green” is at least useful to “brood” butterflies, “entertain” bees, and “thread the Dews” (Fr379A). Significantly it provides a breeding ground and habitat for many species and holds “the Sunshines in it’s [its] lap,” but it remains so humble as to “bow to everything” (Fr379A). Additionally, the poet-persona remarks that although the “smallest

Housewife in the grass” is ignored as a wildflower superfluously blown and unnoticed “as a single dew” that lies on the acre, “some wide-wandering Bee[s]” and butterflies visit it and its presence “made *Existence – Home*” (Fr173A). Hence she sighs for the disappointing result of its being plucked: “Yet take her from the lawn / And somebody has lost the face / That made *Existence – Home –*” (Fr173A). Dickinson’s expression that the presence of a wildflower (Fr173A) exists on its own terms despite its being considered superfluous in a human-centered view anticipates what Wilson advocates to defend biodiversity in *The Future of Life*:

Each species offers an endless bounty of knowledge and aesthetic pleasure. The creature at your feet dismissed as a bug or a weed is a creation in and of itself. It has a name, a million-year history, and a place in the world. . . . The ethical value substantiated by close examination of its biology is that the life forms around us are too old, too complex, and potentially too useful to be carelessly discarded. (131)

In “We should not mind so small a flower –” (Fr82), Dickinson proposes that though being unspectacular, a small wildflower vitalizes the lawn by bringing a “little garden” back to the lawn in spring. It plays a significant role in the ecosystem by intoxicating the bees and making them reel because of its nectar. In addition, whoever sees the little flower may behold dandelions gold and the bobolinks “around the throne” as the breeding habitats of the bird are usually grassy fields (Fr82). Significantly Dickinson exhibits the interconnectedness of vegetation, insects, and birds. Nevertheless, when the natural elements are destroyed to create agricultural land, the lives of some creatures are forced to sink into a predicament. For instance, no bobolink reverses its singing when the only tree is “Clove to the Root” and its “Spacious Future” and “Best Horizon” are gone (Fr766). Accordingly, instead of disregarding or discarding a wildflower, Dickinson articulates, “The career of flowers differs from ours only in inaudibleness. *I feel more reverence* as I grow for the mute creatures whose suspense or transport may surpass my own” (L388; emphasis added), and proclaims, “To be a flower, is profound / Responsibility –” (Fr1038). In “Bloom – is Result – to meet a Flower,” the poet especially represents the difficult process and hazards a plant must undergo to produce a flower: a plant has to “pack the Bud,” “oppose the Worm,” obtain its “right of Dew,” adjust “the Heat,” “elude the Wind,” and escape “the prowling Bee” in order to bloom (to survive) (Fr1038).²³ These writings demonstrate Dickinson’s eco-conscious self as well as

²³ The depiction implies that bees may pierce the corollas or damage floral tissues when collecting nectar.

her rich botanic knowledge gained from her education and gardening experience.

In fact, during her lifetime, Dickinson, who “was reared in the garden” (L206), was perhaps known much more as a gardener than a poet as Judith Farr points out in *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson* (3).²⁴ In the poet’s conservatory and gardens which were the sources of inspiration for her poetry, there were many newly “foreign” plants (L315) as well as some native wild species. Not only did Dickinson spend much time observing, cultivating, gathering, categorizing, and pressing plants and flowers,²⁵ but she also took botany courses at both Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke Female Seminary.²⁶ Consequently, she was sensitive to the changing seasons, weather, and insects as well as birds dwelling or foraging among the plants, and had a sophisticated knowledge of various plants and of the interrelation between natural elements. Impressively, Dickinson’s writings often exhibit her close observations on the growth of plants and the enchanting charm of some wild species.²⁷ For example, letters 479 and 769 show Dickinson’s fascination with the mystery of Indian pipe, which “seems almost supernatural” (L769) and usually pops up in Amherst in late summer and early autumn. Additionally, in Dickinson’s depiction, the native fungus is “the Elf of Plants” independent of the usual cycles of nature; it stops upon a spot in “a Truffled Hut” suddenly in the morning as if “it tarrie[s] always,” while its “whole Career” is “shorter than a Snake’s Delay” and “fleeter than a Tare” (Fr1350). Its growth seems like a trick of a magician who plays with nature without exposing its secrets as does a bubble seen rising to the surface of water and then vanishing without a trace. Therefore, the poet defines the mushroom as “Vegetation’s Juggler,” the “Germ of Alibi” (Fr1350).

Along with her creative presentation of the biological messages and aesthetic values of the native wild plants, Dickinson’s writings also show her fondness for

²⁴ Dickinson enjoyed gardening since her childhood as expressed in letter 492: “There is a Dove in the Street and I own Mud beautiful – so I know Summer is coming. I was always attached to Mud, because of what it typifies – also, perhaps, a Child’s tie to primeval Pies.” Even though later living a reclusive life, Dickinson still looked after her plants: “All are very naughty, and I am naughtiest of all. . . . I am very busy picking up stems and stamens as the hollyhocks leave their clothes around” (L771).

²⁵ Dickinson’s sixty-six-page herbarium contains more than four hundred specimens and even includes algae.

²⁶ Dickinson’s contemporary botanists tended to apply botanic knowledge to the illustration of God’s perfect creation or Christian beliefs as demonstrated in Almira H. Lincoln Pheleps’s *Familiar Lectures on Botany* (1815), “Dickinson’s botanical textbook at Amherst Academy” (Farr 84). However, Dickinson did not confine her knowledge within this application.

²⁷ Dickinson enjoyed exploring wild flowers very much as expressed in her recollection of her rambles with Abiah Root in the green fields or beside the streams: “There are not many wild flowers near, for the girls have driven them to a distance. . . . The older I grow, the more do I love spring & spring flowers. . . . [I]n our rambles, we found many & beautiful children of spring. . . . The trailing arbutus, adder’s tongue, yellow violets, liver leaf, blood root & many other smaller flowers” (L23).

dandelions, buttercups, and clovers, and speak for these uncelebrated wild plants. First, not viewing the dandelion as an undesirable weed to be uprooted, Dickinson deems it precious and expresses its importance to her:

I had hardly recovered myself from the dismay attendant upon entering august assemblies, when with the utmost equanimity you ascended the stairs, bedecked with Dandelions, arranged, it seemed, for curls. I shall never forget that scene. . . . Oh Abiah, you and the early flower are forever linked to me; as soon as the first green grass comes, up from a chink in the stones peeps the little flower, *precious 'Leontodon,'* and my heart fills toward you with a warm and childlike fullness! (L91; emphasis added)

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Dickinson, defining its foliage with irregular and jagged margins as valid as a star, portrays its outstanding pallid tube that surprises the grass greatly and its vital blooming that signifies the end of winter (period of underground dormancy) and heralds spring:

The Dandelion's pallid Tube
Astonishes the Grass –
And Winter instantly becomes
An infinite Alas –
The Tube uplifts a signal Bud
And then a shouting Flower –
The Proclamation of the Suns
That sepulture is o'er – (Fr1565A)

Knowing Dickinson's love for dandelions, in 2010 Todd Forrest, who designed an exhibition called *Emily Dickinson's Garden: The Poetry of Flowers* at the New York Botanical Garden, particularly included the yellow flowering plant among the types of flowers which Dickinson might have planted.²⁸ Forrest's tribute to the poet is the best illustration of how Dickinson's writings on dandelions can raise people's attention to the plant which most gardeners would eradicate.

The buttercup is another Dickinson's favorite wildflower. It is the flower that she chose for the centenary of the American Revolution—"I have only a Buttercup to offer for the centennial" (L436)—and for herself on a "Memorial Day" when people would "carry Blossoms" to the deceased family—"When it shall

²⁸ See Neary.

come to my turn, I want a Buttercup – Doubtless the Grass will give me one, for does she not revere the Whims of her flitting Children?” (L901). Dickinson even particularly asked to have her coffin “carried through fields of buttercups to the West cemetery” (Farr 3). Common as it is, Dickinson introduces its ecological significance in some poems. For instance, a buttercup is a host plant for caterpillars (Fr655), and bees like to visit it as it is the sources of nectar/pollen for them (“the Meadow Bee” would “flirt all Day with Buttercups” [Fr1056]; “the Bee hangs all Noon in the Buttercup” [Fr915]). In “A Lady red, amid the Hill,” Dickinson presents the way breezes, trees (woods), red flowers, white flowers, orchards, buttercups, and birds together contribute to constant resurrection in nature even though the landscapes appear still (“And yet, how still the Landscape stands!” [Fr137]). Often her writing on wildflowers (weeds) suggests that their existence, which would support bees, butterflies, and birds, is essential to an ecosystem, emphasizing the interconnectedness of vegetation and other life-forms and natural diversity. Another best illustration is in Dickinson’s poems on clover, the other common wild plant dear to Dickinson.

The flower of clover is depicted as a source of nectar favored by bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds:

There is a flower that Bees prefer –
And Butterflies – desire –
To gain the Purple Democrat
The Humming Bird – aspire – (Fr642)

Other insects attracted also feed on the nectar:

And Whatever Insect pass –
Honey bear away
Proportioned to his several Dearth
And her – capacity – (Fr642)

Recognizing its features, Dickinson vividly delineates its figure, color, growth period, contention with grass, pollination, and fading because of frost. According to Dickinson’s description, the physiognomy of purple clover is rounder than the moon and “ruddier than the Gown” (Fr642) worn by orchis in the pasture or rhododendron, and its sturdy little countenance appears against the wind before the earth becomes green in June. Often clover must compete with the grass for space and sunlight:

Contending with the Grass –
Near Kinsman to Herself –
For Privilege of Sod and Sun –
Sweet litigants for Life – (Fr642)

Nevertheless, it does not retract “a single spice” when the hills are full of other plants (“And newer fashions blow –” [Fr642]). Instead, pollinated by bees (“Her Progress – by the Bee – proclaimed – / In sovereign – Swerveless Tune –”), clover struggles against adversities of life until frost comes:

The Bravest – of the Host –
Surrendering – the last –
Nor even of Defeat – aware –
When canceled by the Frost – (Fr642)

Intimate is its relation with bees, which is frequently shown: “This, and my heart, and all the Bees / Which in the Clover dwell” (Fr17); “Like the June Bee – / . . . / Stoops – to an easy Clover – / Dips – evades – teazes – deploys – (Fr304); “What tenements of Clover / Are fitting for the Bee” (Fr1358); “Fatigued at last, a Clover plain / Allures his [the Bee’s] jaded Eye” (Fr1562). Dickinson depicts the relationship between the plant and the insect as interdependent and mutually beneficial: the clover is the source of nectar for bees when bees pollinate the clover and in turn contribute to its growth and reproduction. The poet exclaims, “A single Clover Plank / Was all that saved a Bee / . . . / From sinking in the Sky” (Fr1297). In one later verse, she further remarks, “To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee” (Fr1779), suggesting their importance to the environment. In addition, Dickinson reveals that although clover is unspectacular, some other animals enjoy eating it as the cow remembers it as a nice tidbit (“The Clover’s simple Fame / Remembered of the Cow –” [Fr1256]). She further suggests that this fact is “better than enameled Realms” of “notability,” inviting readers undervaluing clover to recognize its significance as well as its beauty (Fr1256).

Dickinson’s writing reflects her perceptions of nature, which resist the influence of anthropocentric, theologically-centered, and science-centered views while embracing an eco-conscious one focused on natural phenomena themselves and speaking for them. Dickinson’s poetry on common, uncelebrated beings suggests that even though they may appear trivial or superfluous from a human-centered viewpoint, their interactions, interrelation, and interdependence contribute to ecosystems and possibly a sustainable natural environment, just as a clover and a

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bee can create a prairie. In addition, these poems embody her impression as a poet who distills extraordinary insight (“amazing sense”) from ordinary meanings and immense aesthetic pleasure (“attar”) from “the familiar species” that “perished by the Door,” and who unfolds pictures rather than inculcates or imposes concepts (Fr446). Foregrounding the aesthetic traits of ordinary beings and inspiring a new or creative imagining of them, Dickinson brings beauty and value to both printed words and common beings. Her poetic works, which create new scenes and images of uncelebrated creatures, describe nonhuman life-forms as her countrymen, and spotlight their features and natural diversity, providing plenty of knowledge as well as the aesthetic pleasure those beings can offer, and inviting reevaluation of stereotyped perceptions. More significantly, these works draw more attention to traditionally undervalued beings and encourage respect for their right to existence and their ecological significance. They embody the insightful sensibility of a poet who perceives the ecological value of an angleworm, a wildflower, a bee, and a clover; the superior traits of a squirrel, a gnat, a chestnut, and a butterfly; or the interconnectedness of diverse elements contributing to constant resurrections in the environment. Imbued with admiration, respect, and concern for uncelebrated nonhuman citizens of nature, Dickinson’s nature writing renews a reader’s mental eye, potentially helping to reduce and prevent the exploitation and destruction of nature.

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