

# Haunted Homes and Uncanny Spaces: The Gothic in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson

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## Introduction

The poetry of Emily Dickinson has been and continues to be a subject of much lively scholarship as well as avid readership, engaging wide sections of society.<sup>1)</sup> From academics and schoolchildren to botanists and manuscript scholars, her work remains a significant force in the literary world today. One of the most important aspects of her oeuvre is its multifaceted nature, its inability to be pinned down into any one genre. This essay does not seek to categorize all of Dickinson's works by placing them in affinity with the motif of the house in Gothic literature. Instead, a consideration of poems and their interpretations will assist in proving that the Gothic house in Dickinson's poetry has a similar dualistic nature to those of the houses in the Gothic canon. A brief history of women's place in the home and the Gothic as well as of Emily Dickinson's life will provide background to the poems and to Dickinson's interaction with the Gothic genre; close readings will magnify the threads of Gothic interwoven into her poems and establish a basis for which to read the houses and homes in Dickinson's poetry as uncanny.

The motif of the house is central to the construction of the Gothic as a genre because of its role in creating and perpetuating the anxiety felt by

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1) This paper follows the currently accepted citation format for Dickinson scholarship according to the journal published by the Emily Dickinson International Society. Numeration of the poems is according to the edition edited by R. W. Franklin, with each citation beginning in Fr, followed by the number of the poem. The edition of her letters cited is that of Thomas Johnson, and follows a similar citation method, with L preceding the letter number.

the characters with regard to their image of family and home. The discourse of nostalgia for a prior age, rife with Gothic excess, evokes anxiety concerning the characters or objects in the story: one of these objects is the house and/or home and another is the image of the family. The two are actually deeply connected: a family occupies a house and loves each other and their home. Therefore, the image of the house should symbolize growth, nurturing, and mothering, and the motif of home present in the text should elicit warm, fuzzy feelings from the reader. Yet in the Gothic, disturbing elements are introduced, which displace the nurturing nature of the home. The results are ghastly: the destruction of the idyllic image of home. Such destruction relates to the Gothic's connections with the discourse of the sublime and abject, a discourse that reminds us of events and objects that can simultaneously inspire overwhelming awe, superb happiness, dismal spirits, or helpless fear.

Women, whose place in society has been and remains very centered in and around the home, maintain an important perspective on the significance of the house. Women authors therefore utilize the motif of the house to express their domain, their position in society, and how it affects them. Their perspective differs from their male contemporaries because they are discussing their own gendered experiences within the home, which possesses a dualistic nature of freedom and oppression, canny and uncanny. Drawing from the broader notions of space in fiction, this paper primarily concerns the dualistic nature of the home, which can be both familiar and uncanny. This theme is easily viewed in the context of Gothic literature, in which settings are made unknown, horrific, or grotesque due to the underlying changing nature of those settings; that is, while they recall the familiar, they are the face and fact of the familiar changed into the unfamiliar. This leads the characters, and by extension the reader, to question the socio-cultural structures present in the text.

Emily Dickinson's poetry, being partially a product of this phenomenon, must be representative of it. The Gothic homes in her poems are repositories for dreams and nightmares, which make ambiguous the feeling of reality in the text and connect the Gothic to the fantastic. They

are also the locus for the collision of different ideas about how society should be structured, especially with regard to the role of women. Thus, any approach to examining the meaning of home in Dickinson's poetry must first include a discussion of the Gothic, of women's place in 19<sup>th</sup> century society, and of uncanny space. The Gothic house is both a locus of anxiety (which is expressed with the motif of haunting), and of uncanny persons, events and/or objects. The rooms of the house may represent the repositories of dreams (both to be feared and desired), and provide the setting for happiness as well as sorrow, crime or transgression to occur. Thus, the house is itself essentially both familiar and frightening.

### **Gothic Architecture and Literature, and Uncanny Space**

In America and Britain during the nineteenth century, both male and female writers of fiction were highly concerned with the domestic sphere, as evidenced in themes of journeying home, creating home, nostalgia for home and the absence of home. The motif of home was thus established as essential to the English literary canon. As an ideal space, it functioned as a key component in the creation of characters' identities as individuals, rendering visible the dualistic nature of the connection between physical structures and those who inhabit them. From the inside, for example, a house or home can offer protection, but at the same time it can stifle. Similarly, from the outside, it can cause feelings of longing and affectionate nostalgia, or alienation, and loneliness. Hence, the image of home retained the ambiguous ability to be at once intimate and yet strange, a tension that agitated anxiety. This anxiety was also dual: on one hand, it could be driven by the desire to leave the home or to change it, and on the other, it could arise from a lack of home or a desire to return to it. The separation between public and private, the juxtaposition of the microcosm of home to the macrocosm of society, or rather, interior versus exterior worlds also played an important role in the creation of anxiety (Bogan, 138).

The distinction afforded to the ideal of home also supported the integration of family and community with burgeoning new philosophies of the time period. Emily Miller Budick states: "Neoplatonism,

Romanticism, Transcendentalism—these are only some of the systems whereby men and women have tried to familiarize and domesticate the world” (307). Furthermore, Budick tells us that the motifs of house and home are prominent in the works of many nineteenth century American and British authors who wrote both Gothic and mainstream narrative such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Ann Warner, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, Henry James, and even Herman Melville. British authors thoroughly concerned with the idea of home include such famous figures as Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, the Brontë siblings, and Charles Dickens. These authors’ novels, which examine such issues as class and social inequality, gender inequality, the utopian society, and familial strife, are at the same time examining the role these issues play in forming the basis for a very real anxiety about home. This anxiety was increasingly felt as the structure of society changed and people became more mobile throughout the long 18<sup>th</sup> century and into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2)</sup>

These authors were also undeniably influenced by and interested in discussing the changes in the world surrounding them. When considering the motif of home and the fact that the house became central to the idea of home, it is important to also address major social, architectural and psychoanalytical theories that touch upon that idea and its relation to the Gothic. Gothic is more than just a literary motif, or an architectural style; it is a philosophy that affected society and then, in turn, was repurposed and re-influenced by the society it changed.

Gothic as a motif is interconnected in the genres of architecture and literature, and continued to be so for at least one hundred years. Beginning in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and continuing until the fin de siècle, Gothic was an important part of the public’s consciousness: they saw it everywhere. Some authors created or lived in their own Gothic manses, and critics and scholars took an increasing interest in the genre. According to Kenneth

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2) A further point of interest is that Emily Dickinson and her friends are known to have read and discussed all of the above authors; it is clear that their themes had a deep impact upon the image of home in her writing.

Clark, the Gothic Revival's motives:

... were never very strictly architectural, were rather literary, patriotic, archaeological, and moral, and though this does not account for the movement's failure ... it suggests that the chief legacy of the Gothic Revival is to be found not in buildings, but in a body of principles and ideals (Clark, 219).

In other words, Gothic, from its inception, was motivated by more than simple aesthetic values, which separated it from other architectural styles. While Clark goes on to point out that Gothic architecture has deep connections to a variety of genres, its relationship to literature benefits our discussion the most.

Beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, architecture and literature were often considered together. In fact, the aforementioned forefather of Gothic, Horace Walpole, was also very important to the spread of Gothic into both culture and art. Although he did not originate the style, through his writing fiction and his passion for archaeology, and most importantly, through his building of Strawberry Hill, his Gothic manor, he was a highly influential figure in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Gothic imagination (Clark, 41).<sup>3)</sup> Having purchased Strawberry Hill in 1747, renovations for its metamorphosis into the Gothic manse Walpole dreamt of when he wrote *The Castle of Otranto* were completed in 1753. Walpole should be given credit for spreading his notion that his Gothic castle from his novels was more than imaginary, it was buildable. And while his was considered the first foray into making the Gothic manses of novels into reality, it was certainly not the last. Further, Walpole's writing was responsible for disseminating the concept that Gothic ruins were more connected to a medieval past: "any ruin might inspire melancholy, but only a Gothic ruin

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3) Additionally Clark provides an account of the extent of Walpole's Strawberry Hill's influence on the romantic and Gothic imagination of those who read his books. See Clark, 46-65.

could inspire the chivalry of a crusader or the pious enthusiasm of a monk" (*Ibid.*, 48). Thus, the creation of Strawberry Hill was significant both for its embodiment of the Gothic imagination, a symbol of Gothic literature manifesting in the physical world, and for inspiring later generations of authors, designers and builders to use Gothic elements in their creations.

Another prime example of Gothic lies in the works of John Ruskin, whose architectural and social criticism relates the creation of Gothic buildings to the literature that inspired them. Through his essay entitled "The Nature of Gothic," included in the three volume collection *The Stones of Venice*, he explores the uses of the term Gothic while describing both the buildings of Venice and the social constructs that both support and disparage those structures. He defines Gothic as visible in two forms: within the building and within the builder. Within the building, the qualities he assigns are: "1. Savageness, 2. Changefulness, 3. Naturalism, 4. Grotesqueness, 5. Rigidity, 6. Redundance" (Ruskin, 1851-53, 155). In the builder, Gothic becomes: "1. Savageness or Rudeness, 2. Love of Change, 3. Love of Nature, 4. Disturbed Imagination, 5. Rigidity, 6. Redundance" (*Loc. cit.*). Gothic is thus a conglomeration of qualities, not any particular one quality (and one notes this definition fits closely with that given by scholars of Gothic literature.) Losing one or more of those elements does not change the essential Gothic nature of the architecture, but removing most of them would set that particular structure apart from the Gothic genre. While Ruskin's definition certainly aims to identify specific details and qualities of Gothic buildings, it is underwhelming in its ambiguity and overwhelming in its obvious commentary on the people who construct and inhabit those spaces. Gothic is therefore more than a style or a form, it is imbued with "various moral or imaginative elements" that contribute to its place in the public imagination (*Ibid.*, 205).

According to Alan Windsor, in Ruskin's attempt to define the term "Gothic" he actually committed what seems to be an intentional faux pas. That is, instead of mainly devoting his attention to breaking down and defining the way the Gothic edifices were erected, he "used the subject as a platform for a much wider and deeper argument about the cultural and

social morality of modern Europe" (24).<sup>4</sup> In other words, by describing both the form and the people who built it, Ruskin's attention is also on the culture brought forth by the space. For Ruskin, Gothic does not necessarily describe the architecture of northern Europe, nor does it describe the architecture invented by the Goths. Instead, the style has more to do with the feelings it evokes of "sternness and rudeness" (Ruskin, 1851-53, 156). Further, Gothic offers a juxtaposition to the Romans' whose civilization became the cornerstone of all that is civilized in Western Europe. Ruskin tells his readers that this particular juxtaposition gave birth to the equating of Gothic with the Middle Ages: "the word Gothic became a term of unmitigated contempt, not unmixed with aversion" (*Loc. cit.*). He concludes that despite its "rude and wild" nature, the Gothic "deserves our profoundest reverence" (*Loc. cit.*).<sup>5</sup> Despite eliciting feelings of distain, Ruskin's determination is that we should respect Gothic architecture, probably because of its innate quality of being honed by man's instincts. These instincts are, in term, informed by the building itself as art. Art, he says, should inspire its inhabitants as well as its creators to certain behaviors that follow a moral code of conduct. If it does not, he reminds us, the purpose of the art/building becomes murky and shadowed (Ruskin, *Op. cit.*, 191-192). This inspiration, however, must come with balance: "there is virtue in the measure, and error in the excess, of both these characters of mind, and in both of the styles which they have created" (*Ibid.*, 205). To be truly Gothic architecture, therefore, is to insert a certain level of ambiguity into human creation, and by extension, into our interpretations of our domestic way of life.

Beyond Ruskin's theories on architecture and the Gothic, his writings

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4) Windsor also points out that Ruskin, in focusing on culture over architecture, also misses the fact that structures such as pointed arches, stained glass windows, vaulted ceilings, pillars, spires and reliefs in Venice actually differed greatly from other parts of Italy, as well as from similar structures in France, Britain and Germany, to which he purported to be offering a comparison. For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Windsor, 25-26.

5) In this sense, he is perhaps evoking the Burkean sublime—we cannot understand it, therefore we either reject it or are in awe of it.

are important when considering Dickinson's works because he also examined gender roles in the home. Regarding gender issues, he advocated the idea of separate spheres. Scholarship has pointed out that one of his most enduring works, *Sesame and Lilies*, is credited as one of the "foundational apologies" that forms the basis for liberal arts education (Jones, 241). Unfortunately, it also contains two essays, "Of Kings' Treasuries" and "Of Queens' Gardens," which "offer gender-specific guides for reading that are founded in 'natural' differences between the sexes" (*Ibid.*)<sup>6</sup> These works purport that women should act as the moral compass of men, bringing peace and order to the household and maintaining a sense of innocence apart from the "evil" outside the house, the spheres of commerce and work. Of this work, Nina Auerbach offers the critique that it serves as an example of the "undiluted form" of "the Victorian stereotypes we love to hate" (1982, 59).<sup>7</sup> The Victorian woman, as described by Ruskin, is termed an angel, "a bizarre object of worship," by Auerbach (*Op. cit.*, 72). While men are depicted as archangels, angels of vengeance or protection, and masculine angels' wings take them anywhere, Auerbach explains that the female angel is a captive in her own home, which is radically different from the image we have of the freedom of winged creatures. Essentially, she explains, "the Victorian angel is defined by her boundaries" (*Loc. cit.*). Instead of domestic angels (women) having freedom, their lack of it is what differentiates them from their male counterparts; this difference becomes an expression of their oppression. The lack of freedom, binding women to the sphere of the domestic without hope of escape, significantly influences women's rebellion against or subversion of social norms. Subversion/rebellion thus juxtaposes against the homely/canny, and emerges as an important underlying theme of

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6) Jones also points out, however, that reading Ruskin as a supporter of separate spheres has also been refuted. See also Birch and O'Gorman. Birch and O'Gorman's book addresses the topic of Ruskin and gender from a variety of angles, including education and childhood, feminism and women's rights, and masculinity.

7) See also pp. 58-61.



uncanny texts.

Ruskin's social commentary on the place of women in the home, however, was merely a summary of the prevailing opinions of the time, which painted the house as a sacred space and positioned the woman as caretaker of that space. The doctrine of separate spheres put pressure on women to refine men's morals and affections; in the home, this translated into a romanticized image of family and house:

By the nineteenth century, these economic and social changes were idealized in a vision of the "family circle" as a private and protected place, the peaceful repository of higher moral and spiritual virtues deemed to be threatened by commercialization—a safe arena for the sentiments and affections of family members. The doctrine of separate spheres represented family as a sanctuary from the evils of the world outside, and the cult of true womanhood asserted that women were peculiarly suited to their new role as priestesses of the sanctuary by their unique qualities of passionlessness, piety, passivity, and domesticity, which rendered them morally superior to men (Halttunen, 140).

The space of home, where the family slept, ate, and enjoyed leisure activities, was a sacred space in the 19<sup>th</sup> century not only because it provided privacy in juxtaposition to commerce's public sphere, but also because it came to symbolize a harmonious place where women created a haven for their families. Women's role was to maintain the moral and spiritual sanctity of the home so that those who inhabited it could live comfortably, safely away from the perceived dangers of the outside world. This overly canny or familiar ideal necessarily had its opposite in the outside world of business, which came to be considered immoral, full of crime, passionate and debasing to those who worked in it. Therefore, men (who necessarily worked outside the home) required a retreat into the home, and, according to the doctrine of separate spheres, also required women to cleanse them of the stain of the outside world. In this way,

women took on a role of caretaker, of “priestess” of the sacred space of home; further, qualities attributed to the sacred were thrust upon them. Inseparable from the domestic, they acquired its symbolic status. This status was not limited to British women, either; in America, where women looked towards England for all of the latest trends in domestic living and decorating, the doctrine of separate spheres had also taken firm hold.

Further, as a precursor to Bachelard and Freud, Ruskin’s philosophical inquiries and apologies played an incredibly important role. By influencing close to a century’s worth of social, architectural and literary theory, Ruskin provided one of the cornerstones for the way people viewed the home. However, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the home was increasingly associated with both privacy and hidden social problems, which in turn influenced the burgeoning field of psychoanalysis by catching the attention of one Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). The ambiguity associated with the architecture of the homes in Gothic works is essential to its nature, and Freud’s treatise on “The Uncanny” (“Das Unheimliche,” 1919) remains pivotal in the study of space as disturbed by repressed emotions or nostalgia. Written at the beginning of the modern period, it may seem redundant to compare it to modern literature; however, the concept was conceived of before two world wars, and its publication was heavily influenced by a technological boom that changed not only how we live, but where we live and what we use while living in those spaces. It is therefore important to consider “The Uncanny” as both a precursor and a cornerstone to the way modern authors consider the home and its ability to elicit terror, longing, and happiness.

Basically, Freud’s approach is twofold: an etymology and a phenomenology of the uncanny. The associated feudal system and religious superstitions manifest an image of excess; additionally, they call forth nostalgia and anxiety by their very nature: an uncanny nature. He not only discusses the very same fear of the unknown and what arouses it that is present within the Gothic genre, but also discusses how nostalgia for a “familiar” or “homely” (*heimlich*) situation may be shrouded upon recollection, rendering it “unfamiliar” or “unknown” (*unheimlich*) (Freud,

1919, 219). His fundamental argument is that “the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (*Ibid.*, 220). Therefore, his definition draws a connection between the nostalgia the Gothic evokes and the uncanny atmosphere it contains. It also explains how the uncanny, derived from once-familiar objects, places or people, can lose familiarity, and frighten us. He then continues by pointing out that uncanny is frightening because it is unknown, but that not everything new or foreign must necessarily be frightening (*Ibid.*, 221). Indeed, upon sojourning to a distant land for vacation, one may find that country strange and its customs unfamiliar, but have a very pleasant time just the same. Thus, it is important to differentiate Freud’s uncanny from its predecessors because he indicates the close connection between canny and uncanny. The familiar and the unfamiliar are like a spectrum, with one running into the other until it becomes the other.

Freudian analysis was problematic for some because it turned literary narrative into case study and marginalized the female voice; thus other scholars and theorists have sought to depict the duality of the home in other ways. The philosopher who contrasts most with Sigmund Freud, and who deftly challenges John Ruskin’s image of what defines the “happy house” is Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962). He provides a more balanced investigation of both the disquieting and comforting aspects of space. While his theory of space draws upon similar themes to Freud’s “The Uncanny,” examining space as both a literary and a physical place, he explores its facets intimately from immensity to furniture in his seminal work on the relationship between poetry and space, *The Poetics of Space* (1958). Bachelard’s is an almost philosophical enquiry into sentiment, the phenomenology of poetic space, and its “resonance,” contrasting with Freud’s methodical, scientific, case-study approach. His language twists and twirls around his point, describing it but never exactly pinpointing what he means; he knows that he is trying to explain the unexplainable. He values the house for its effect on the psyche and its connection to the formation of identity. He explains that the “reverberation” of poetry surpasses “all psychology or psychoanalysis,” uniting with the power of

words innate within all humans (Bachelard, *xxiii*). This juxtaposition calls into question whether the uncanny is related to repressed memory, or whether it is closer to a response from some deeper part of human nature. For the purpose of this dissertation, we shall assume the former; however, the latter is certainly a valid strain of enquiry.

Unlike Freud's account of the uncanny and theorists who later built upon or criticized Freud's theory, Bachelard uses French poems as exemplary texts, and meanders from point to point, discussing such concepts as the house, various types of furniture, the dichotomy of interior and exterior, and the universe. Above all, he investigates how space and the human imagination influence each other. He puts forward the idea that "all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home" (Bachelard, 5). The places we dwell in, whether they are corners, bedrooms, attics or vast palaces, somehow leave their mark on our consciousness as an area we have laid claim to. Further, in any situation that a human has claimed a space as his or her shelter, Bachelard posits that the imagination builds walls:

He [the sheltered person] experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams. It is no longer in its positive aspects that the house is really "lived," nor is it only in the passing hour that we recognize its benefits. An entire past comes to dwell in a new house (*Loc. cit.*).

Not only is the house a positive influence, it also possesses an inherent duality: its corporal form, and its form in the human imagination. Therefore, it is both the repository for and the subject of dreams. Humans thus have the ability both to create new exterior spaces using found objects such as wood, metal, and glass, and the gift to build interior spaces through our imaginations.

Intimately related to imagination is the subject of memory, and it is for this reason that Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* is deeply connected to the concepts of the uncanny and the Gothic. Time and again, he elucidates the

role of memory, its primary function to make ambiguous that which seemed logical and real to us at the time of the remembered events. Memories can metaphorically take the shape of the familiar rooms and furniture of our dwellings. They can also invoke size by ideas such as vastness, verticality, great depths and great heights.<sup>8)</sup> Of the underground, Bachelard insists that the cellar is a receptacle of fear and exaggeration. It is thus a potentially Gothic space, if we are to follow Ruskin's definition of Gothic. Bachelard explains:

The cellar dreamer knows that the walls of the cellar are buried walls, that they are walls with a single casing, walls that have the entire earth behind them. And so the situation grows more dramatic, and fear becomes exaggerated. . . . The cellar becomes buried madness, walled-in tragedy. Stories of criminal cellars leave indelible marks on our memory, marks that we prefer not to deepen. . . . (*Ibid.*, 20).

Unlike Freud, who associates it with repressed desires and urges, and with the unconscious, Bachelard focuses on the dream itself and the effect of the dream, but does not attempt to interpret its meaning. As such, his theories are in affinity with the poetry of Emily Dickinson.<sup>9)</sup> They are also in affinity with Dickinson's writing because his notion of cellars and attics—of depths and heights.

While Bachelard does not mention the Gothic genre as such, his phenomenology touches upon several poets and novelists that utilize Gothic themes such as Zola, Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Verlaine. He even

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8) Regarding size, Bachelard discusses both the large (immensity) and the small (nests, shells, and corners). He discusses the idea of "intimate immensity," which concerns the feelings evoked by a space that seems at once homely and vast. Curiously, he also discusses the concept of "roundness," which is likely related to what Dickinson had earlier termed "circumference."

9) The first scholar to point this out was Jean McClure Mudge. See Mudge, 13-14, in which she explains that Dickinson also has a propensity for approaching phenomena by circumventing the logical descriptions. See also p. 20.

mentions Edgar Allan Poe's "Cask of Amontillado" in his addressing of the role of the cellar in human consciousness, a veritable Gothic work, and recognizes that the horror it elicits is an agent of repulsion. Of Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* and its relationship to the Gothic, Maurice Lévy deftly explains that even works like *The Castle of Otranto* are connected through both the recognition of imagined Gothic space as liminal. They are related to what Bachelard terms the "dream labyrinth" and are only "triggered upon reaching the threshold of the Gothic castle" (Lévy, 168-169; translation mine). At the instant the hero reaches the castle, he is the reaffirming power that the door belongs to a "malevolent abode" (*Ibid.*, 169). On the entrance to the Gothic manse, in that liminal placement, Bachelard's theory defines the connection between memory, dreams, and the fear and excess elicited by the Gothic mode.

Finally, *The Poetics of Space* is an important work to consider in juxtaposition to Freud's theory, as it concentrates simply on space itself, how space evokes emotion, and how authors express that emotion through poetry. Instead of complicating the literary analysis with psychoanalytic theory, Bachelard uses poems as his supporting evidence. He neither attempts to over-analyze the texts, nor does he attempt to rewrite them. He extracts the house's human qualities, what he determines to be "virtues of protection and resistance" that are both admirable and inviting to the reader (*Ibid.*, 46). In this positive interpretation, space becomes more than a mere container for fear and apprehension—it becomes a space of possibility and creation. It is this duality, in light of the notions of the homely and the unhomely, that concerns the discourse of the Gothic as written by women authors, especially Emily Dickinson.

### **Dickinson's Domestic Influences and Home Ownership**

Before delving into poetical analysis, it is important to provide a brief historical background to the cultural and social image of house and home. Between 1796 and 1862, the U.S. Congress passed a series of public land acts in order to entice people to become settlers by taking advantage of extremely low land prices. Acts such as the Public Land Act of 1796 and

the Homestead Act of 1862, as well as federal land grants to veterans, all helped Americans purchase their own land in greater numbers than ever before. In the public consciousness, and thus in literature, homebuilding was seen not only as an idea, but also as a project. For those who could afford it, building or purchasing a house was a necessity, especially in communities like Amherst, where families grew with each generation (Mudge, 126). This was also true for the Dickinson family—as with both her grandfather’s building of the Dickinson home, the Main Street Mansion, and later, her father’s building of The Evergreens just next-door for her older brother.

Emily Dickinson’s lifestyle was entangled with her family’s socioeconomic status and the ownership of their house(s). She was born in 1830 in the house her grandfather Samuel Fowler Dickinson built. She was the middle child of three (older brother Austin and younger sister Lavinia), and led the financially comfortable life of a well-respected community member. Her grandfather was a founder of Amherst College; her father was a lawyer, elected representative to the United States Congress, and Treasurer of Amherst College for thirty-seven years (Martin, 1). The prestige of the family, however does not match the story behind the houses they inhabited. The Dickinson family ownership of the house Samuel Fowler built in 1813 is a convoluted tale of debt, one caused by his supreme commitment to the founding and support of Amherst College, into which he funneled much of his money and eventually bankrupted his family. The ensuing debts caused the house to be mortgaged and then rented; the Dickinson family could occupy only half of the house and shared it with the family of preacher David Mack. For the first nine years of her life, young Emily shared that house; she was very aware that the house was divided along a line that went down the front hall.<sup>10)</sup>

The story of the Dickinson family’s home ownership does not stop

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10) Both Mudge and Bianchi describe the emotional difficulties that the Dickinson family faced in sharing what they felt should be *their* space of home with the Macks. See Mudge, 26. See also Bianchi, 3.

there; two versions of the loss and reclamation of the deed to the Homestead exist. According to most Dickinson scholars, including Sewall and Mudge, when she was nine, her father found himself unable to continue paying for the space the family occupied in the Main Street Mansion, so he moved the family to a house located on Pleasant Street. She lived there from ages nine to twenty-five. However, Alfred Habegger presents a very different version of the story. He explains that it was not in 1833 that Samuel Fowler Dickinson was unable to keep up the deed and title to his house, but in some indistinct period between 1826 and 1828, much earlier than previous scholarship has suggested (Habegger, 1998, 165). After that, the newly wed Edward was forced to find other living arrangements; it put great stress on his marriage. He thought at one point that he would be able to purchase a cousin's house, and even began to order furnishings and curtains for it, but the deal fell through (*Ibid.*, 167-168). Thus, Edward must have felt some sort of relief when he finally arranged to share the Homestead with the Macks around 1830. It was not to last, however, as he had to move his family again to the Pleasant Street house, and then finally back to the Homestead when he was able to re-purchase it.<sup>11</sup> The whole ordeal spanned a time period of about 1826 to 1855, all of the early years of her parents' marriage and into Dickinson's young adulthood. This sort of rootlessness must have been very nerve-racking for Dickinson's parents, who had both grown up in stable households. Habegger concludes:

These repeated uprootings have rich implications for our understanding of some of the peculiar later events of Dickinson family history: Edward's extraordinary generosity in building the

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11) After living in the Pleasant Street house for fifteen years, Emily's father re-purchased the Main Street Mansion in full from the Mack family. For Edward Dickinson, the return to the house his father built was public evidence of his ability to reinstate the Dickinson fortune and honor in the community, which had been lost in the 1830s. For specific information on the re-purchasing of the house and the minute details associated with the purchase, see Leyda, 332. See also Habegger, 1998, 184-188.



Evergreens for his own son . . . and his older daughter's powerful attachment to the home on North Pleasant Street and then to the Dickinson Homestead. Edward's early dream of domestic security was spoiled repeatedly by his father's financial mismanagement, and he was determined that his own offspring would escape the painful uncertainties he had known at the time they were born (*Ibid.*, 189).

The family's economic troubles lead to anxiety, but they also lead to Edward's generosity towards his children. His understanding of the importance of providing a stable home to his children lead him not only to build a house for his son, but also to provide for both his daughters, who never married. Thus, the "home" for Dickinson's family was both a cause of worry and an ideal to strive towards.

Emily Dickinson may have developed many of her ideas about home while she was living in the Pleasant Street house. The happiness she experienced in her youth inside that house must have informed her later vision of the canny, familiar, and welcoming home in her poetry. However, the move from the Pleasant Street house disturbed her—she remarked in a letter to a friend: "I cannot tell you how we moved. I had rather not remember. . . . Such wits as I reserved, are so badly shattered that repair is useless—and still I can't help laughing at my own catastrophe" (L182). Emotionally attached as she was to the Pleasant Street house, moving away from it had a devastating effect on her mental state. Curiously, however, this "catastrophe" would be the precipitating event for her to write significantly in the very same letter: "They say that 'home is where the heart is.' I think it is where the *house* is, and the adjacent buildings" (*Loc. cit.*). In other words, for Dickinson, house, home, and heart are all equivalent, the center of her emotional landscape. Further, this equation even suggests that the three are inextricable. Mudge asserts that "the signal importance of this house is in its influence in forming Emily's ideas about the idyllic possibilities of home, despite moments of despair and frustration she suffered there" (Mudge, 4). Because she spent all of her adolescence there and quite a bit of her later childhood, she

must have made many memories in the Pleasant Street house, despite the circumstances of her moving there (her family's dire economic situation) having been far from ideal.

Moreover, the Pleasant Street house's proximity to the Amherst town cemetery might also have influenced her fascination and familiarity with death rites; the funerary processions passed the back of the house in full view from the indoors. This gives the house, very literally, an uncanny face. The house itself is a place of life, even a place where life is mourned, but the cemetery is a place for the interment of dead bodies, a place of death. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, death was a real possibility during both childhood and adulthood, a fact Emily knew well from the experience of losing acquaintances and loved ones. But she also knew it because she had seen it outside her very own bedroom window. In her poetry, the association between death and house arises as a visual confusion or ambiguity between images of tombs and homes, sepulchers and houses. For example, the speaker in "There's been a Death, in the Opposite House," (Fr547) describes viewing a funerary procession across the street from a window. In the poem "Sweet—safe—houses" (Fr684), the reader realizes the houses are actually tombs upon the description of their "Lids of Steel—on Lids of Marble." Moreover, the "House that seemed/ A Swelling of the Ground—" in "Because I could not stop for Death—" (Fr479) seems a gravesite, and the topic of "I died for Beauty—but was scarce" (Fr448) is adjusting one's self to being in a Tomb as if it were a new place of habitation. All of these are all good examples of a house as a structure with a metamorphic nature, echoing her ambivalence towards the image of home. Further, this image is presented in her poetry as both representative of the physical spaces that she inhabited during her lifetime, and closely to her emotions associated with those physical spaces.

### **Dickinson's Gothic Influences and the Haunted Home**

Just like the works of many female Gothic authors, such as Ann Radcliffe, and Emily and Charlotte Brontë, Emily Dickinson's poetry presents a dichotomy of homely and uncanny influenced by the patriarchal

order. Therefore, an additional analysis of the domestic spaces described in her poetry and their connections to Gothic symbols and themes will lead to further insights about the integral role the house contributes as a symbol of the destabilization (or stabilization) of the social order. The Gothic mansion is the apex of two powers struggling against each other—patriarchal control of female will and sexuality, and the rebellion of the female will against that control. In 19<sup>th</sup> century works of literature by female writers, including Emily Dickinson, this struggle plays out primarily in the theme of homelessness, and the juxtaposition of home as both a mental and a physical space.

Emily Dickinson was very familiar with the Gothic mode and it greatly influenced her literary consciousness. In fact, it would be fair to say that it was among her favorite genres. According to her friend Emily Fowler Ford, the two “were reading Byron, Lowell, Emerson, Motherwell, and Margaret Fuller’s translation of *Günrode*” (Gelpi, 60). This wide array of authors includes Romantics, Transcendentalists and Gothicists, all of which shaped Emily Dickinson’s writing. Not only did the plots and themes important to these genres contribute greatly to Dickinson’s ideas on writing, they also provided inspiration for the symbols and the motifs that would figure prominently in her poems. Furthermore, Habegger asserts: “. . . frequently drawing on the machinery of Gothic romance, her poems treat memory as a place best avoided—a long-abandoned house, a closet that had better not be dusted or swept, a cellar not to be opened lest something ‘in its Fathoms’ be roused to pursuit” (2001, 532-33). It is understood from her treatment of subjects like “memory” that the uncanny has the ability to haunt us, a subject often treated in Gothic literature. As discussed earlier, especially with regard to Freud and Bachelard, remembrance and forgetfulness are a fundamental to the uncanny nature of the Female Gothic.<sup>12)</sup> Thus her poetry contained elements of Gothic;

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12) The “Female Gothic” is a term coined by Ellen Moers in her book *Literary Women*, published in 1963. In the most basic sense, Female Gothic is defined by Moers as a sub-genre of Gothic in which the main character or focus of the action is female. Most Female Gothic works depict women as threatened by

more importantly, it used the Gothic to describe space as an uncanny house—a house that should not be opened, even for cleaning, because some frightening event or unfortunate happening might be recollected. Habegger is not the only scholar to make this claim. Jean McClure Mudge, in her ground-breaking study on the image of home in Emily Dickinson's poetry, states:

Not only does Emily Dickinson describe physical views of her house and home, fulfilling the common first understanding of the word image as something seen or represented, as in a painting. She also packs into these words her felt life and her memories, expanding the sense of image beyond the visual to the experiential and the remembered (Mudge, *xviii*).

Here, Mudge wishes the reader to recognize that house and home can be both literal (as in a full explanation of the speaker's surroundings in the poem as imagined by Dickinson) and figurative (as in a metaphor or symbol to describe the way the speaker is feeling or what the speaker is experiencing). This is important to remember, as the Gothic relies more upon the figurative rather than the literal, and, in fact, the confusion between the two may be considered essential to Gothic as a genre. While in poetic terms, this ambiguity would merely be another expression of metaphor, in Gothic, it has the uncanny effect of blurring fantasy and reality.

Comparisons between Dickinson's poems and 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Gothic fiction lend emphasis to the similarities between the two. Daneen Wardrop, who wrote the first full-length study of Dickinson and the Gothic, begins her analysis by attempting to illustrate the resemblance between Dickinson's poems and several Gothic novels that form the heart of Gothic canon, specifically *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Castle*

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men (both strangers and known persons alike) or unknown, supernatural forces.

of *Otranto* (1764); she also discusses *Jane Eyre* (1847). Her first conclusion regards the secretive and destructive nature of Gothic. Wardrop states that because a discovered or secreted manuscript is central to both of Radcliffe's novels and because Dickinson's poems were discovered secreted away in a box, the fictional novels are related through the uncanny nature of their placement to Dickinson's oeuvre (4). Wardrop goes on to explain that in *Udolpho*, Emily St. Aubert burns her father's manuscripts; that act is connected to Emily's request that Lavinia burn hers upon her death, too (*Loc. cit.*). However, as far as comparison goes, it should be pointed out that the burning of documents is not unique or even a mimic of the actions of a literary figure as Wardrop would have us believe. While Dickinson may have been inspired by the story, there seems to be no solid evidence that that was the impetus for her request to her sister. Further, it is a very common practice for authors to burn manuscripts or ask for them to be burnt.<sup>13</sup> Dickinson's wish to destroy her letters and poems explains that she took her writing seriously; it also indicates her wish for secrecy. It is unclear if those wishes were inspired by the Gothic. Since she published

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13) Book, letter, and/or manuscript burning is a common enough practice, although it is mostly engaged in to destroy a cultural heritage or for ceremonial reasons. In literature, it is certainly not unique to Ann Radcliffe's story. It figures in other famous books that Dickinson had read, such as *Don Quixote*, in which the priest and the housekeeper try to burn the books that they believe are driving their master mad, and in Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story collection *Mosses from an Old Manse*, which features a tale about a society that burns all of the books they find offensive. Amongst famous literary figures, the burning of manuscripts may be a sign of frustrated genius. For example, it is a well-known story that ten days before he died in 1852, Nikolai Gogol burnt the second half of his masterpiece, *Dead Souls*, his take on Dante's *Inferno*; the first half managed to escape the flames to become one of his most famous works. Moreover, Franz Kafka's situation was similar to that of Emily Dickinson: it is said that Kafka asked his literary executor to burn his papers after his death. Thomas Hardy, too, wanted his papers to go up in smoke, but luckily his second wife saved them. Even contemporary British poet Phillip Larkin did not want anyone else to read his correspondence and his preferred method of disposing of it was to have his will's executor to burn everything. See M. A. Orthofer, "Weighing Words over Last Wishes" in *Poets & Writers* (November-December 2003). See also Elif Batuman, "Kafka's Last Trial," *The New York Times* (September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010).

so few poems during her lifetime, one can also suppose that she did not wish her work to be edited posthumously when she could not control its published form.

Moreover, the dualistic nature of the house itself is as essential to the Gothic works Emily Dickinson read as it was to her poetry. For example, the houses of *Jane Eyre* defy Jane's expectations of comfort: Lowood does not provide proper shelter; her aunt's house does not provide love or familial affection; and finally, Thornfield Hall is both brilliantly illuminated and obviously hiding a multitude of secrets, with its locked attic rooms and strange noises echoing in the walls. These houses challenge Jane's definition of home, cause in her a deep anxiety towards the space of home and symbolize the problematic relationships she has with those who inhabit those structures with her. Dickinson, influenced by her reading of literature like *Jane Eyre*, may have incorporated this problematized image of home into her poetry. According to Daneen Wardrop:

Dickinson . . . dissembled the material of gothic novelists she read. She read many. Foremost among her gothic tutors are the "electric" Brontës, as she called them (L822). She read *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* by Charlotte Brontë and *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë. . . . Not only does her imagination engage with the characters of the Brontës—Catherine Earnshaw, Jane Eyre, Bertha Mason, Lucy Snowe—but with the Brontës themselves. The Brontë family invited interpretation as a gothic invention in its own right: the unwed sisters subject to the dictatorial preacher-father and the alcoholic brother. Dickinson, in the process of creating her own persona, must have found them riveting. Indeed, she was so familiar with the family that she could mention offhandedly to her Norcross cousins, "Vinnie has a new pussy the color of Branwell Brontë's hair" (L471).<sup>14</sup> Such frequent references to the Brontës pepper Dickinson's

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14) Photography was available but not yet prevalent during Dickinson's lifetime; one might sit for a photograph anywhere between once to a handful of times in

letters (Wardrop, 9).

Wardrop asserts that because she read and felt affinity with the heroines of the Brontë sisters' novels, her imagination "engaged" with these characters. Thus, she consciously or unconsciously wrote poems in which the speaker had a presence very much like those heroines. Furthermore, Emily was inspired by more than one character, and by more than one type of character. For example, Catherine Earnshaw is an atypical heroine (one might term her the anti-heroine to Heathcliff's anti-hero) whose story ends in death; this may have inspired some of the many unrequited love poems and reoccurring images of death from love. Another example may be found in Jane Eyre, who represents a rebellious heroine and whose story ends in marriage; her struggles, loneliness, and outcast circumstances may have inspired poetry about those themes. These two characters juxtapose against the mention of Bertha, who may be considered Jane's enemy, her foil, symbolic of her darker self, but also the catalyst in Jane's growth into awareness of the real world; Bertha may have inspired some of the darker poems about the uncontrolled nature of creativity and the secretive nature of the home. The proliferation of the appearance of these character types signaling that the influence of these Gothic works was, as Wardrop indicates, something that in all likelihood Dickinson made a conscious effort to incorporate into her oeuvre.

Finally, Daneen Wardrop is not the only scholar to argue that Dickinson's reading of the Brontës inspired her creatively. In her book *The Passion of Emily Dickinson*, Judith Farr takes special care to review the influences of Gothic and romantic novels on Dickinson's writing, with attention to the effect that *Jane Eyre* had on the composition of the so-called "Master Letters."<sup>15</sup> She asserts that the Master Letters could be a character

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a lifetime during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Dickinson writing about Branwell Brontë's hair color indicates that she was very familiar with the family indeed.

15) The "Master Letters" are a set of much-debated letters addressed to an unknown person whom Dickinson refers to as "Master" in the letters. Judith Farr gives considerable textual evidence that these letters both refer to Samuel

study of Jane writing to Mr. Rochester and professing her love, or that Dickinson is apprehending Jane's attitude and narrative voice in order to express her repressed feelings for a person she loves. Because Dickinson's poetry has a great amount of ambiguity, and because she very often made literary references, it is possible to argue that these letters are also associated with Gothic literature.

In summary, it can be said that Dickinson's poetry lies in affinity with Gothic literature. Further, it can be said that the dichotomy of familiar and unfamiliar, public and private, exposed and secret, is also a major concern addressed in her poetry. The definition of home vacillates between two extremes, and is sometimes placed in the liminal space between them. In the following close readings of the poems, architectural metaphor and Gothic imagery will be examined in close reading.

### **The Gothic Home in Dickinson's Poetry**

According to the *Emily Dickinson Lexicon*, there is a broad range of meaning attached to "house" and "home," illustrating the irreducibility of these terms in Dickinson's vocabulary.<sup>16)</sup> The poetry contains approximately 93 references to the word "house," which mean: biological family, home or dwelling, nest, heaven, theater audience, tomb, church, wealth or estate, residence of the soul, nursery for plants, Earth, light house (*EDL*). Ninety-four references are made to "home" as a noun, which define it as nest, haven, habitation, familiar dwelling, native country, family, heaven, mortal existence (*Loc. cit.*). The phrase "at home" can mean: comfortable, able to receive guests, alive and at one's place of residence. "Home" is also listed as an adverb, with 89 references

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Bowles, Emily and Austin's very close friend and editor of the newspaper the *Springfield Republican*, as well as to the events in the novel *Jane Eyre*. She concludes that the connection is a purposeful one drawn by Dickinson to perhaps show the similarities between Rochester and Mr. Bowles. See Farr, 178-244.

16) The *Emily Dickinson Lexicon* (*EDL*) itself, by presenting so many variants and definitions, stands as proof that it is impossible to read any Dickinson poem in any one way, underlining the fundamental ambiguity present in her oeuvre.



(*Loc. cit.*).<sup>17)</sup> These include definitions for “home” such as homeward, heavenward, back, away, and domestically. Dickinson, in being so inclusive of various meanings of home, demonstrates an effort to show the reader the multifaceted nature of the home. She also seems to ask the reader to suspend his or her personal definition of those two words, or perhaps more correctly, expand it.

Because of the complexity of the definition of home, it may be said that the image of home is haunted by contradictions, demonstrating a fundamental ambiguity. According to Jean McClure Mudge, whose work on Emily Dickinson specifically addresses the image of home, Dickinson’s use of “house” and “home” refers both to actual physical structures as well as “a beloved, security, fulfillment, immortality, a state of peace or rest—or their reverse” (Mudge, 12).<sup>18)</sup> Just as is evidence in the *Lexicon*, Mudge points out the difficulty in pinning down any one meaning for the two terms, indicating the complexity of the concept of home in Dickinson’s poetry. Further, Mudge implies that just as the home possesses positive aspects, it also has “their reverse”—in other words, if the house is comfortable, it may also become uncomfortable. This paradox, which floats ambiguously and uneasily in the background of her poetry, puts her “home” and “house” in affinity with Freud’s uncanny and Bachelard’s phenomenology of space. Thus, the architecture of Home in the poetry of Emily Dickinson extends beyond its connections to the works of her contemporaries. First, this is seen in her usage of the words “house” and

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17) Each definition also references a variant of the poetic line in which it was found.

18) Mudge’s seminal work on the image of home in Dickinson’s poetry remains the only full-length study on the topic. Diana Fuss’s *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them* dedicates only one chapter to Dickinson. While Fuss’s is a very detailed contribution to Dickinson scholarship on the image of the house, it does not have the same impact as an entire book. Other studies of Dickinson simply mention the symbolism of house or the motif of home in passing. Considering the significance of this topic to Dickinson’s oeuvre, it deserves to be revisited as an updated, full-length study in the near future.

“home” and other related items such as doors and windows; second, it is understood in her behavior, as it is well documented that during her life, Dickinson became increasingly reclusive. Understandably, then, Dickinson had an undeniably intense attachment to her family’s dwellings.<sup>19)</sup>

By the Reconstruction period during the post-Civil War era, she barely left the house even to visit her neighbors. Even when she was asked to make a trip to Boston in order to meet Editor T. W. Higginson, regarding the prospect of publishing her poetry, she wrote to him in reply (1869): “Could it please your convenience to come so far as Amherst I should be very glad, but I do not cross my Father’s ground to any House or town” (L330). Even for her own benefit, even to ask the advice of a man she considered important to her writing life, she would not leave her father’s house to travel.<sup>20)</sup> In fact, she was so attached to her house that she requested that upon her death, her funeral procession should march through the house first, and then out through the garden and down to the family plot, but always staying within sight of the house (Sewall, 610).<sup>21)</sup> Even in death, she did not want to be parted from the Homestead, indicating her relationship with her physical home was profound, inextricable from her identity and possibly also her mental stability.

Speculation on the connection between Dickinson’s desire for hermitage and the appearance of house imagery in her poetry has been the

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19) This was true even prior to her hermitage.

20) Maryanne Garbowsky posits that this was due to psychological illness—namely, agoraphobia. She states with scientific fact and thorough research that Dickinson’s agoraphobia lead to her seclusion in the home. Garbowsky’s work is in a similar vein to John Cody, whose book *After Great Pain* attempts to psychoanalyze Dickinson through use of her works. However, Garbowsky’s research encompasses letters and historical facts that would lend greater authentication to the idea that Dickinson really suffered from the inability to leave her house. In particular, see Garbowsky, 17-30.

21) Today, visitors to the Dickinson Homestead and the neighboring Evergreens (her brother’s house) can take a short walk down the road to the Dickinson family plot; it is about 5 minutes away from the house by foot. The plot itself is not in view of the Dickinson Homestead. But it is close enough that Dickinson, even in death, must feel its presence.

subject of scholarly curiosity for decades. Alfred Habegger, in his lengthy biography on Dickinson, questions regarding "I Years had been from Home" (Fr440):

What does it mean that memory is so often a "house," and that the threatening rooms are associated with storage and rubbish, and that the idea of not entering, or escaping, is always coming up? Does this material have something to do with the strict spatial limits Father seemed to mandate, or with the fact that her memories were divided between two houses? (2001, 534)

Habegger, in discussing this poem, briefly touches upon the idea of memory, and that Dickinson's memory of her houses disturbs her. While she is attached to her houses, it does not mean that she always depicts them in an idealized or homely fashion. In fact, as Habegger seems to imply, Dickinson's treatment of the image of home is much closer to our discussion of the uncanny and to Bachelard's phenomenology of home than it is to Ruskin's vision of separate spheres and a happy home. Dickinson's vision of home is complicated by ideas of entrapment and of escape. Further, her poems describe home not only as existing in the present but also in the past and the future. Her focus on memory, then, is related to a nostalgia that may elicit uncertainty and fear.

When considering emotion as existing as or within a physical architecture with rooms, corridors, doors and windows, one may consider numerous poems, many of which focus on the anxiety present within the mind of the speaker. The presence of home in Dickinson's poetry offers a dual image: it is both a physical space (the house) and a mental space (the mind). These spaces present positive possibilities as well as menacing confinement. Architectural metaphors lend support to her inherently ambiguous and often uncanny subject matter. For examples of these metaphors in her poetry, one might examine "I Dwell in Possibility" (Fr466) in which the speaker finds that Possibility, as a house, is "more numerous of Windows" and "Superior—for Doors—," citing the structures

of the home that exist as borders and in borderlines (walls) that allow one to be transported in or out. One might also examine, "I Years had been from Home" (Fr440), which portrays the fear of returning to a place one used to call home only to see that strangers live there and one is unwelcome: the first two stanzas are grounded by the image of standing before the door of the house, poised to knock; the second two stanzas are full of ambiguity, detaching her from possession of the house by reflections of nostalgia for a time when the speaker could call that place home. Additionally, in her letters she describes two very different images of home: she felt a house could be both her "palace in the dew" (L89) and also a place where "skeleton cats ever caught spectre rats in dim old nooks and corners" (L52). These images also translate into a dual image of house, which could be both delightful and uncanny.

Her letters and poems often speak of a borderline mental state, tenuous and ambiguous. Using symbolism of the house, they provide a connection between the speaker, her consciousness, the threat of descent into an abject state, or some place in her unconscious that frightens her. A prominent explanation of this situation is offered by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their landmark study, *The Madwoman in the Attic*. They state: ". . . at this point in the fiction of her life (J475), a wound has become Dickinson's ontological home" (Gilbert and Gubar, 604). They also assert this wound symbolizes "her guilt . . . her powerlessness . . . and her retributive fate" (*Loc. cit.*). They are referring to their argument that Dickinson's poetry is an attempt to write herself away from the stereotypical woman who is categorized as either angelic or monstrous; Dickinson's wound then stems from her inability to change the way people see her or think of her; she is trapped by the patriarchal view of what she ought to be and punished for even subversively rebelling against the patriarchal order. Stemming from their combined reading of several poems that give clues to Dickinson's mental state, they use the poem "A not admitting of the wound" (Fr1188) to make their claim.<sup>22)</sup> Yet the speaker's statement that "That all my Life

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22) It should be noted here that while Franklin numbers this poem 1188, Johnson

had entered it" [the wound], establishes that it is her *life* being overtaken by the wound, not her home. The dichotomy presented in this poem is rather one of life and death, not home and homelessness. Gilbert and Gubar link this poem to the image of house in "Doom is the House without the Door" (Fr710), stating that "house" transforms from the possibility of "fulfillment" into the "certainty of abandonment."<sup>23</sup> But their reading never addresses the symbolism of door or ladder, the possibilities of entrance and escape presented in the poem; nor do they utilize its dual structure of interior/exterior to support their claim. There seems no cause to place her "ontological home" in a "wound." However, with regard to the guilt and powerlessness that Gilbert and Gubar associate with anxiety towards home, one may offer an alternative theory: these feelings relate to that class of the frightening, which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar, the uncanny. As previously explained in detail, Sigmund Freud, in his work "The Uncanny" (1919), gives us a basic explanation of this term: the "homely" or "familiar" (*heimlich*) and "unknown" or "uncanny" (*unheimlich*) are juxtaposing terms that describe a situation of duality in the mind in which something that was once familiar somehow loses its familiarity and, in the process, becomes something frightening to us. In other words, the anxiety felt by Emily Dickinson is not caused by some "wound" in her conscious or subconscious mind, but by her mutable perception of the home and its structure, and its ability to become both familiar and unfamiliar at any given point in time.

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has numbered it 475; these two point to completely different time periods in Dickinson's life: the former in the 1870s and the latter in the 1860s. The difference may certainly have influenced Gilbert and Gubar's reading of the poem, as the 1860s were Dickinson's most prolific period and coincided with the American Civil War, a topic much discussed in recent Dickinson scholarship.

- 23) Gilbert and Gubar have also neglected the etymology of the word "doom," which indicates law, condemnation, and judgment, and is derived from the Old English *dom*. More modern implications of the word may insinuate the finality of Judgment Day in the Christian faith, which is clearly related to the poem's themes.

The uncanny power of the home saturates Emily Dickinson's entire body of works, and she utilized a multitude of metaphors and images to describe it. Each poem addresses it in a slightly different way, but all address a similar ambiguity, which renders the speakers haunted by the idea of "home" and its duality. The poems examined here in close reading, "I learned—at least—what Home could be—" (Fr891), "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" (Fr591), and "One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted—" (Fr407) best address the home's uncanny nature, ultimately describing the speaker's feelings of physical homelessness. Each poem will also be included in the close reading so that the *sound* of the words may also make clear the architecture of the stanzas.<sup>24)</sup>

Using symbolism of haunted chambers, corridors and other physical spaces in "One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted—" (Fr407), Dickinson describes the feelings that Gilbert and Gubar have mentioned of guilt, powerlessness, and her retributive fate.

One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted—  
 One need not be a House—  
 The Brain has Corridors—surpassing  
 Material Place—

Far safer, of a midnight meeting  
 External Ghost  
 Than it's interior confronting—  
 That cooler Host—

Far safer, through an Abbey gallop,  
 The Stones a'chase—  
 Than unarmed, one's a'self encounter—

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24) It may be of interest to note at this point that the word "stanza" comes from the Italian for "standing, stopping place"—poets sometimes refer to each stanza as a "room."

In lonesome Place—

Ourself behind ourself, concealed—

Should startle most—

Assassin hid in our Apartment

Be Horror's least—

The Body—borrows a Revolver—

He bolts the Door—

O'erlooking a superior spectre—

Or More—

In "One need not be a chamber—," (Fr407) the interior, or the speaker's mind, has different "chambers" or "rooms" in the conscious and subconscious, which exist in opposition to the external world. Further, these spaces are ruled by opposing forces: the narrative voice of the poem and the assassin that chases her. The outer world, mentioned as abbey stones, the implied horse galloping, and the midnight hour, juxtaposes against the inner world, giving layers to the scenery of the poem. The inner world with its "Assassin hid in our Apartment" and "that cooler Host," who disturb the mind, support her declaration that "the Brain has Corridors—surpassing/ Material Place." In other words, there are more endless winding hallways in the mind than exist on the corporeal plane.

The assassin mentioned remains ambiguous; the reader cannot be sure of its identity. However, speaker's reaction towards it hints that it may be a memory, a fear, a desire, or an anxiety given such power as to become a corporeal being that chases us with the intent to kill. Indeed, the line "Ourself behind ourself, concealed" reminds us that such anxiety can become our doppelganger. Besides, ever present is the concept that one may also feel haunted by one's urges and desires as if chased by ghostly apparitions. "Far safer" she repeats twice, reminding us that facing one's self alone is much more frightening than any spectre or spook one might meet at midnight, or be chased by through an abbey at a gallop.

The idea presented here is one of “haunting” oneself, as if the brain is a chamber and the body a house. The poem touches upon the idea that imagined ghosts are more frightening than any real threat because they can chase us eternally. Barbara Mossberg tells us that the mental landscape of this poem reveals “the persona . . . dodging yawning chasms and fissures as she flees from the hound Identity, running from the self down the mind’s ‘corridors’ whose terrors surpass ‘Material Place’” (18). Mossberg’s statement illustrates the relationship between building features and the speaker’s mind, creating an image of identity’s constructions, which, through the chase, provides a link between the levels of the house of the conscious and subconscious.

Further, the speaker’s narrative indicates how startlingly or unsettling the concealment of our true nature may be, and that whatever hides in the “Apartment” of our mind has deadly potential. The phrase “Ourself behind ourself, concealed—” clearly illustrates how the layered chambers of a labyrinthine house are superimposed on the mind in order to describe its complexity. The comparison becomes even more complicated when Dickinson introduces violent power in the form of a revolver as rival to that maze-like potential. The gun adds urgency to the anxiety that permeates the poem, and illustrates the length to which one should go to protect one’s own mind—even violence is acceptable. One should also note that in the variants to this poem, Dickinson has written an alternative for “Body” in the line “The Body—borrows a Revolver—” so it may be read “The Prudent—borrows a Revolver.” But even a prudent person who bolts door and arms herself with a revolver cannot fully conquer this interior intruder; it belongs just as much to the house as the speaker herself, as she states, in the final truncated lines “O’er looking a superior spectre—/ Or More—” No matter how one tries to flee from one’s true nature, it is impossible—the mind is a “superior” ghost.

Overall, “One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted—” (Fr407) supports the proposition that the mind is the only “home” she possesses *now* and there is an urgent need to retain and maintain that home. As she stated in a letter, “. . . consciousness is the only home of which we know



*now*. That sunny adverb had been enough were it not foreclosed" (L591). We can know only the current assembly of our minds: our fears, hopes, dreams, and desires; these inhabit our consciousness, and lurk in our unconscious, the same way people inhabit a house. The house can only be haunted and frightening if it is first familiar, just as we fear more what is inside us because we know it best. This poem may also be representative of unseen or unstoppable forces impinging their will upon the speaker and punishing her (psychologically) for a crime she is not sure she committed or did not commit at all.<sup>25</sup> It may also be the scene of those forces haunting the speaker so that she cannot feel safe or at home anywhere, even in her own mind.

The concepts of being driven out of or questioning the safety/comfort of the home is brought to light in "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" (Fr591). With its strong imagery of a chamber and its theme of physical ownership, the poem describes a space that parallels our consciousness, indicating that the latter could be maintained or foreclosed like a house. In this poem, the speaker is a dead (or dying) person, who asks us to listen to his or her last remembrance of being in the home. The speaker describes the grotesque sound of a fly, the sobs of the mourners gathered at the wake, the reading of the will. Finally, the speaker's conscious thoughts succumb to nothing; the speaker can no longer "see."

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—  
The Stillness in the Room  
Was like the Stillness in the Air—  
Between the Heaves of Storm—

The Eyes around—had wrung them dry—  
And Breaths were gathering firm

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25) This theme is also discussed in such poems as "Why—do they shut me out of Heaven?" (Fr268) and "They shut me up in Prose—" (Fr445). All of these poems utilize pieces of the house, especially doors, to illustrate an almost antagonistic relationship between the interior mind and the exterior world.

For that last Onset—when the King  
Be witnessed—in the Room—

I willed my Keepsakes—Signed away  
What portion of me be  
Assignable—and then it was  
There interposed a Fly—

With Blue—uncertain—stumbling Buzz—  
Between the light—and me—  
And then the Windows failed—and then  
I could not see to see—

Death, life, and the adherence to or questioning of the social order all place this poem clearly in the discourse of the Gothic in Dickinson's poetry. This poem presents a disturbing scene: with its dying speaker on her deathbed surrounded by mourners, signing away her possessions and leaving the mortal world in an anticlimactic moment of blindness, which forces us to consider the boundaries between the physical room the speaker's body is in, and what lies beyond the windows of that room that the speaker "could not see to see." The speaker's disquieting descent into death in the last stanza of the poem recalls death as taboo; images of the corpse, a fly-ridden, putrid and rotten shell of the body, lurk underneath the speaker's every word. Death's implications charge her words—it seems clear that while she knows what will happen to her body and her earthly possessions when she is gone, she is not sure where her conscious mind will be housed.

Liminal moments are described in the poem, moments of an otherworldly serenity that serve to emphasize the relative frenzy of the speaker's internal state as she anticipates her move from one state of consciousness in this world to another state in the next.<sup>26)</sup> These calm

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26) "Liminal," a term coined by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep and later used

periods occur “Between the Heaves of Storm,” could allude to both the mourners’ wails and weeping as well as the chaos scene prior to the Last Judgment. These moments are termed a “Stillness in the Room” and the speaker uses them to wait for a sign that the “King” who will be “witnessed—in the Room” may come. The storm, the stillness, the “King” all imply an apocalyptic situation, in which the “waiting” may be for resurrection or the afterlife, and the King may be God. Thus, her anticipation is energized, anxious to witness a sign from the “King” of her promised home, a sign that redemption is waiting for her after she passes away. Her expectation also serves to emphasize her liminal placement: she feels she should be transitioning between the physical earthly room that holds the living mourners and the more ephemeral location of another room that holds Heaven.

In the third stanza, her preparations are veritably symbolic, expressing her adherence to societal norms still present in the room as well as her conflict with them. She must approach the border between life and death as part of the social order; the loss of that life is represented by the patriarchal laws that require the passing of ownership of earthly goods. She describes how those who mourn her cease to weep as the bequest is made: “the Eyes around—had wrung them dry.” Aware that death separates the belongings of this world from those of the next she “willed her keepsakes—signed away/ What Portion of me be Assignable—.” There is significance to the connections to patriarchal laws evoked by these lines in the willing away of the keepsakes, especially in the confusion of “sign” and “assignable” in this context. According to Joan Kirkby: “. . . in death, the subject relinquishes the power to sign, to signify, to mark with characters, and to assign, to transfer or designate by writing. The corpse is

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by Victor Turner, has its basis in Jungian psychology, and is prominently featured in Turner’s books *Forest of Symbols* and *The Ritual Process*. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, liminal is defined as “of or pertaining to the threshold or initial stage of a process” or “of or pertaining to a ‘limen’ or ‘threshold’” (*OED*). Houses are often described in conjunction with the liminal in Dickinson’s poetry and are deeply connected to ambiguity.

outside the sign, outside the system of differences inscribed by the social order" (Kirkby, 102). The corpse is separated and removed from the order that governs both the mourners and the house that surround it. Moreover, it is curious that the speaker should be within the house, as the house can symbolize the social order itself.<sup>27)</sup> It seems, then, that the ceremony of the mourners and the space of the house is in conflict with the flight of the soul.

The room full of the living contrasting with the destination of the dead is also symbolic of the social order. Richard Sewall comments:

In "I heard a Fly buzz," there is the drama of the deathbed scene, the watchers by the bedside, the dying person—quite composed, signing away the "assignable"—and the buzzing fly accentuating the stillness. It is dying dramatized; but there is no shock, no lamentation, nothing mortuary. Few poets have dealt with this all-engrossing subject with such intense feeling under such perfect control (718).

There is a startling lack of any mourning from the corpse at loss of life, or acknowledgement of the mourners beyond the implied sobs in line 5. The whole situation is described, rather, in the context of a storm gathering in the room and a fly buzzing. The speaker's body inside the house exists in a borderline state, unable to name the house as a corporeal home (the living occupy houses), but unable to ascend to the eternal home of paradise. The Fly "interposed" at this point in the poem, seems a symbol of the ambiguity expressed by the situation of the speaker as it blocks out the light of differentiation between states of life, death, and the liminal.

Between the windows and the unfolding scene of the wake, the fly circumscribes the inside/outside/in-between nature of the speaker and

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27) One may note also that this is not the only poem in which Emily Dickinson discusses the "signs" of Death in the context of sign versus assignable. In particular, see "There's been a Death, in the Opposite House" (Fr547).

motif of the home here, synthesizing the uncertain quality of the speaker's eyesight and the sound of whirring wings. The "blue" of its "buzz" suggests that it has confused the senses of the dying, a sort of synesthesia, an inability to differentiate sight from sound. The fly leads the speaker to the windows, which presents the option of escape or exit. But then the windows "failed"—an event that heavily saturates this final stanza with meaning. As the wake or vigil ends, we may assume this means the corpse's "consciousness" or "soul" ascends to judgment in the final line, which renders the speaker-corpse blind. Moreover, Farr indicates that the liminal state of the speaker connects back to the image of home even further:

The speaker isolates the precise moment of death as the failure of light: not only of daylight but of the ocular mechanism by which light is received, and (by analogy) of the light of the spirit. Just as this happens, however, the windows fail—that is, the apertures of the house darken as do those of her body's house, her eyes—she hears a buzzing fly. . . . All has proceeded so far with the ceremony, even to the willing of keepsakes, while what is expected is the storm of dissolution, the sublime moment of passage. Instead the speaker relates, the last thing she sees on earth is that household nuisance, a blue-bottle fly, its stupid aimlessness a suggestion of the puzzlement that is life as well as its homely sweetness (310).

First Farr mentions the common association of the body as a home in Dickinson's poetry. She then draws a connection between the visual symbolism of the eyes and the house, but takes it a step further by also linking it with light. By associating the fly (symbolic of death) with home (symbolic of life) here, Farr also easily manages to capture the closeness of death to the everyday life of a Victorian. Without the benefit of modern medicine, any sickness could spell death; lifespans were shorter overall, leading to an acute awareness of the fragility of life. Thus, the proximity of death becomes even more evident in consideration of the fly, which plays

an important role in helping to decompose in addition to its occupation as a kitchen nuisance.

The cryptic last stanza of this poem ties together its doubt of the social order and its imagery of home. For example, in the symbolism of windows, if one considers the multiple functions they have, one may ponder one's ability to see through it to view the outer world.<sup>28)</sup> This may be related to the oft heard adage "the eyes are the windows to one's soul." If the corpse becomes blind, then the "windows" to his or her soul have "failed." Or, the failure of the windows implies the total breakdown of the experience of "life" for the corpse and the radical separation of the consciousness of the dead body from that of the mourners. Yet another reading is that the speaker's soul escapes through the window and tries to look back inside the house, but is no longer able to see in as she is radically separated from the mortal plane. Additionally, if the failure means her soul cannot exit the room, it may indicate the un-meaning of the whole social order implied by the wake, the mourners, the willing away of items and the room itself. Those who live by placing too much faith into what lies beyond the moment of death are fooling themselves because we are truly blind to what is to come. In that sense, the central problem of the speaker in "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—" is her inability to journey from her corporeal home to her spiritual home, and the overwhelming doubt in the meaning that either home provides through an adherence to the social order. If one obeys, one should ascend to one's Heavenly home, but the lack of ascension here denotes that patriarchal directives may not lead to salvation.

The same sense of un-meaning of home in this world and the next is again addressed in the poem "I learned—at least—what Home could be—" (Fr891). The poem, with its nature imagery and Christian symbolism, establishes a canny image of home but then deconstructs it over the course of a day's time-frame, ending with the cryptic statement that the place of

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28) For another interpretation of the role of the windows in comprehending the value of "sight" in this poem, see Wolff, 226-227.

the speaker “seems a home” but “home is not” in the final stanza.

I learned—at least—what Home could be—  
How ignorant I had been  
Of pretty ways of Covenant—  
How awkward at the Hymn

Round our new Fireside—but for this—  
This pattern—of the way—  
Whose Memory drowns me, like the Dip  
Of a Celestial Sea—

What Mornings in our Garden—guessed—  
What Bees for us—to hum—  
With only Birds to interrupt  
The Ripple of our Theme—

And Task for Both—When Play be done—  
Your Problem—of the Brain—  
And mine—some foolisher effect—  
A Ruffle—or a Tune—

The Afternoons—together spent—  
And Twilight—in the Lanes—  
Some ministry to poorer lives—  
Seen poorest—thro’ our gains—

And then away to You to pass—  
A new—diviner—Care—  
Till Sunrise take us back to Scene—  
Transmuted—Vivider—

This seems a Home—And Home is not—

But what that Place could be—  
 Afflicts me—as a Setting Sun—  
 Where Dawn—knows how to be—

This particular poem has received very little scholarly attention with regard to its treatment of the image of Home, despite the fact that Home is mentioned in the poem four times. It is this frequency, as well as the vibrant domestic imagery present in the poem, that draws us to include it in close reading. The poem unites representations of homely elements, such as a warm hearth and a garden inhabited by birds and bees, but curiously never mentions a house directly. Instead, its focus complicates home with images of the eternal versus the mundane, as in the previous two poems.

The poem describes home as both a religious situation and an earthly manifestation in marriage. “Covenant” and “Hymn” describe a religious situation—hymns being songs of praise to God, and covenant referring to either the Covenant of Works bestowed on Adam and his posterity, or the Covenant of Grace with the Second Adam and his elect for deliverance from their transgressions. Religious meaning then combines with the “pretty ways” and the speaker’s “awkward”ness to imply marriage, a more earthly manifestation of “covenant.” Subsequently, the “new Fireside” and “This pattern—of the way” also support the domestic symbolism in this poem—a fireside is a symbol of home-life—and according to Fordyce R. Bennett, “‘the pretty ways of Covenant’ of marriage are shadows of heavenly things; the ‘patterns of things in the heavens’ are instantiated by that unity of Christ and Church, husband and wife” (Bennett, 264). The garden mentioned in the third stanza then also takes on a dual meaning—the garden outside the married couple’s house where they spend pleasant hours together, or an allusion to the Garden of Eden or Paradise, where they may spend eternity. The “Theme” of stanza three then refers to the daily rhythm of domestic life—“play” and “task” alike. The poem continues with scenes in afternoon and in twilight, where the married pair devoted themselves to charitable activities, which should contribute to



their "life to come."

Liminal moments in time render the placement of this poem's *home* in a perpetual borderline state. As "You" passes away at the end of the day, symbolically finishing his lifetime—the subsequent "Sunrise" that brings a "Transmuted—Vivider—" scene alludes to the afterlife, but seems not to meet the expectations of the speaker's vision of what that should be—a final coming home to God. Until this "Sunrise" the speaker does not mention any real emotion and merely describes the action. Yet upon witnessing it, she admits her "affliction"—this *seems* to her like home but is not. She is trapped, associating home with the horizon at ambiguous times of day such as sunset and dawn. Upon viewing a sunset, the speaker knows the potential of dawn exists therein, but can only prove the day's end, not the coming of the next day. This potential recalls the speaker's retributive fate, that following these "pretty ways" and abiding by this "Covenant" may not lead to "A new—diviner—Care—" for her. In other words, her existence in an unhomely or uncanny situation leads to doubt that either home is reachable at all. The situation is not unlike that of "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—" because there is a disjunction between the speaker's knowledge of the potential of the situation and her perception of the now. All of the togetherness with her partner morning, afternoon, and twilight may culminate in some unmeaning—as the fly's coming coincides with the speaker's loss of sight, the speaker here supposes an affliction by the "transmuted—vivider" Sun, whose monotonous rise and set leads her to doubt the meaning of the apocalyptic—the end of days.

The transformation from a state of safety to one of fear, from life to death, and from stability to instability establishes these poems as exemplary of the motif of the Gothic home in Dickinson's poetry. Especially in "I learned—at least—what Home could be—" speaker has begun with the promise of establishing a home in both this world and the next, imagines the activities with her partner across morning, noon and evening, but ultimately doubts the fulfillment of the circle. This reflects the fundamentally dualistic image of home present in Dickinson's poetry

that Home could be “a paradise of possibility,” and yet “be transfigured by the poet into a prison, which she felt either as a confinement, or, more menacingly, as nowhere, ‘Homeless at home’” (Mudge, 12). Thus, the motif of the house in Dickinson’s poetry is central to the construction of her interpretation of the Gothic: it creates and perpetuates the anxiety felt by her speakers with regard to their image of family and home.

## Conclusion

The discourse of nostalgia for the safety of home evokes anxiety concerning the characters or objects in the poems. One of these objects is the house and/or home and another is the image of the family, expressed in the relationship between the speaker and her partner, or inner and outer worlds. The image of the house should symbolize growth, nurturing, and mothering, and the motif of home present in the text should elicit warm, fuzzy feelings from the reader. Yet just as in the literature of the Gothic, Emily Dickinson’s oeuvre introduces disturbing elements that displace the nurturing nature of the home. The result—the destruction of the idyllic image of home—is ghastly. Such destruction relates to the Gothic’s connections with the discourse of the sublime and abject, a discourse that reminds us of events and objects that can simultaneously inspire overwhelming awe, superb happiness, dismal spirits, or helpless fear. According to Domhnall Mitchell, who wrote on Emily Dickinson’s perception of the world, “the trope of home . . . provides the speaker with a means of exploring this paradox of simultaneously inner and outer states: the home is connected with privacy and interiority, of course, but also exists as a structure, which is subject to other, outside, forces” (47-48). This trope becomes redefined in light of the preceding discussions on the multifaceted image of the home, and one realizes that Emily Dickinson’s poetry does not present an ideal of home, but rather a search for it.

The complicated relationship between speaker and house/home is often reflected in Dickinson’s poetry. Behind the doors and the windows, inside the chambers and underneath the gables of the houses in her poems, there exist social values of hospitality, gentility, and distinction, the joy and

comfort associated with a happy home, but also anxieties, guilt, and fears. Home, as a place representative of a secure identity, is evoked in terms of the architecture of a house, which circumscribes the speaker's psyche as well as the action that goes on within it. Thus, domestic scenes are intimate and at the same time inherently ambiguous. The imagery of the house uses the symbolism of buildings to anchor impossibly vague concepts such as "possibility" and other ambiguous terms such as "remembrance," "despair," and "eternity" that can be present and interpreted only within her mind. While houses and their contents present the home inscribed by the social order, a home accepted and beloved of the speaker remains as elusive as these concepts. That is why Dickinson's speakers approach home as a paradox of canny and uncanny forces perceived by the human mind. Within her poems, imagery of houses haunted by phantasms, funerary rites, and daily activities all present themselves as metaphors describing the boundless nature of the human imagination, the only home we have within which we cannot be confined. Connected with interiority yet subject to outside forces, Emily Dickinson's perception of home and rendering of domesticity is complex. Its architecture addresses the image of Home as metaphor for Heaven, for the Afterlife and for the Tomb; further, it proposes that Nature, the Mind/Brain, and even Possibility can be Houses. As throughout the canon of her poetry, these themes and images intermingle and cannot be separated. Therefore, by deeply considering the relationships between them, we will be one step closer to bridging the divide between her intended authorial voice and interpretations of it.

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## **Abstract**

This essay will explore the image of the Gothic home in Emily Dickinson's poetry using close readings of her poems and historical sources. Analysis of nineteenth century Gothic texts will provide evidence that an admiration of female Gothic authors lead Dickinson to emulate many of the themes, motifs, and symbols they used. Their influence combines with her preoccupation with the space of the home, a predilection reflected in her letters and her poetry. Readings of Dickinson's poems demonstrate that the home may be seen as both a physical space (the house) and a mental space (the mind). These spaces present positive possibilities as well as menacing confinement, a duality fundamental to the Gothic genre. Dickinson also discusses houses in a similar way to Gothic authors—namely, she writes of the house's dual nature, that it can be both familiar and frightening, and that it is an uncanny space. She treats the house as an ambiguous subject and a powerful setting that can indicate a radical differentiation between the meaning and unmeaning of events, and the significance or insignificance of persons.

Overall, Dickinson's poetry presents the reader with a phenomenology of home inextricable from the Gothic mode. Tangible constructions in the form of architectural metaphors lend support to her inherently ambiguous and often uncanny subject matter. Behind the doors and the windows, inside the chambers and underneath the gables of the houses in her poems, there exist social values of hospitality, gentility, and distinction, the joy and comfort associated with a happy home, but also anxieties, guilt, and fears. She employs numerous themes and symbols to illustrate the various significances attached to space, but her poems are most Gothic in their use of the loss of the house, which condemns her narrators to a marginal existence, disturbed, and unable to find a place to call "home."

