

They are lonely; the spirit of their writing and conversation is lonely; they repel influences; they shun general society; they incline to shut themselves in their chamber in the house, to live in the country rather than in the town, and to find their tasks and amusements in solitude . . . this part is chosen both from temperament and from principle; with some unwillingness, too, and as a choice of the less of two evils; for . . . they have even more than others a great wish to be loved.

-“The Transcendentalist”, Ralph Waldo Emerson

Emily Dickinson’s isolated domain in her father’s house allowed her to create a canon full of mysterious metaphors while leaving behind a legacy of an eccentric woman in white, never destined for earthly peace. Was Dickinson’s isolation a sign that the world was too much for her, or was she simply too much for the world? Did her refusal to visit with close friends or to send flowers or wine instead of greeting visitors herself reveal a lonely spinster, or was her isolation a symbol for something much greater (Gelpi 167)? Despite her confinement to the upstairs of her Amherst home, Dickinson embarked on a journey to search for God and eternity while bound to the earth. The poems and letters of this “belle of Amherst” reveal Dickinson’s religious revelations to readers and critics. Genesis 29:1 shows Jacob embarking on a journey on which God’s grace raised him from his depths of loneliness to a glorious realm (Genesis 33:10). Dickinson’s journey from isolation to understanding parallels Jacob’s struggle.

Throughout her life, Dickinson wrestled with God, her position to him, and his power over human life. The mid-nineteenth century was full of revivalism and soul-searching Christians seeking to save every soul before the final judgement. The “saved”

accepted God and in return received eternal peace and salvation. Otherwise, due to the fall in Eden, humans experienced the consequence of original sin, destined to spend eternity in Hell. Ultimately, these religious uncertainties dominated Dickinson's "Business" in life. Although William Sherwood contends that "Emily Dickinson was at no time a profound religious thinker" her poems and letters reveal the opposite (9). Dickinson's thoughts did center on religion and God. But Sherwood's understanding that "Certainly, whatever her attitude toward God, she had little respect for man's manner of worshipping Him, nor, in the main, for the worshippers themselves" demonstrates that regardless of Dickinson's beliefs she continually challenged conventional religious worship (11). Understanding the nature of her questioning, theological mind, her view of "Circumference" can be approached.

In the summer of 1862, during a prolific period of writing, a letter Dickinson wrote to Thomas Wentworth Higginson became the focal point of study for many Dickinson critics. Letter 268 provides readers with concrete evidence of the challenges Dickinson continually posed to the conventional society surrounding her. She asked Higginson if he could "believe" her "without" a visual image (L268). Instead of sending him a portrait like another individual might do, she painted pictures with her words, destroying the need for a picture. Later in the letter she tells Higginson that when he reads her poems he must understand that "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse- it does not mean-me- but a supposed person" (L268). Although Dickinson used words to create herself, she warned Higginson about her poetic personas. Assuring Higginson he was not alone in desiring her picture, she told him of her father's wishes for

Emily's¹ portrait (411). But Emily's blithe dismissal of her father's worry over his lack of a portrait in the event of her death exposes her hope for immortality to keep her alive beyond the grave.

Dickinson acknowledges that Higginson probably finds her logic peculiar, "Perhaps you smile at me" but continues without apology, "I could not stop for that- My Business is Circumference" (412). Initially, Dickinson created a bounded "Circumference" where she dwelled outside the center of Amherst religious society, separated from God and his graceful promise of eternal salvation. Eventually the boundaries dissolved and "Circumference" became her infinite immortality and relationship with God that the earthly religious community of Amherst could not understand.

Various definitions for circumference include "outer surface" and "periphery" (OED vol. III 236). These definitions reflect the place Emily occupied within (or outside of) Amherst society. Removed from society in her father's house, Emily truly was on the "periphery" of the religious fervor that consumed numerous citizens. "Circumference" is also "the line that forms the boundary of anything of a rounded form" (OED vol. III 236). Dickinson's poems offer evidence of her "Business" with seventeen poems utilizing the word "Circumference" and sixty-four additional poems supplying close synonyms including circuit, periphery, extremity, and boundlessness (Rosenbaum). Beyond these synonyms, images of spheres, balls, columns, and other circular objects appear throughout Dickinson's work, supporting the claim of her "Circumference" business.

¹ "Emily" is used in place of "Dickinson" when discussing Emily in relation to other Dickinson family members in order to distinguish between who is mentioned.

The Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia claims that she held onto this “edge” of circumference (45). Writing to Abiah Root in 1846 she clings to this position, “I feel that I am sailing upon the brink of an awful precipice from which I cannot escape & over which I fear my tiny boat will soon glide if I do not receive help from above” (L10).

P 378J illustrates the “terrifying” and “exhilarating” position she clung to,

I saw no Way- The Heavens were stitched-

I felt the Columns close-

The Earth reversed her Hemispheres-

I touched the Universe-

And back it slid- and I alone-

A Speck upon a Ball-

Went out upon Circumference-

Beyond the Dip of Bell-

(1862)

The speaker’s place on the edge of circumference magnifies her small self-perception as a mere “Speck” upon a “Ball,” a spherical object that perhaps represents the earth.

Clutching this “Ball,” the speaker is unsure of what lays beyond her realm. When she dares to touch “the Universe” it slides back, preventing her from grasping its essence and depriving her of the knowledge of what lies beyond her earthly sphere. The image of “The Heavens” as “stitched” can be interpreted as a boundary between Dickinson’s space and the “punctured” Heaven (OED vol. XV). The cylindrical columns (another circular image) close in on her as she reaches for the Universe.

This reading of the poem suggests a violent method of breaking through the boundary. As soon as the speaker reaches for proof of life beyond her world, she loses everything. The speaker is left like Jacob, completely alone (Genesis 32:24). If, as Margaret Homans suggests, the “Bell” is a church bell, then the reader can imply that Dickinson pushed beyond the typical earthly manner of Christian worship (symbolized by churches) and struggled to locate Heaven and God in her own space between the center and her boundaries (Homans 188). Although Dickinson realized “The shore is safer” she also acknowledged that “I love to buffet the sea – I can count the bitter wrecks here in these pleasant waters, and hear the murmuring winds, but oh, I love the danger! Christ Jesus will love you [Abiah] more. I’m afraid he don’t love me any!” (L39).

Richard Sewall views Dickinson’s “Puritan inheritance” as inescapable, “She could no more escape it, for better or worse, than she could escape breathing the air of her native Amherst” (Sewall 20). Numerous critics tie Dickinson and her religious revelations to Jonathon Edwards². Edwards’s staunch Puritanism gave way to “The Second Great Awakening,” a time full of soul-searching conversion for masses of sinners in the Connecticut River Valley (Greenberg 150). Emily’s grandfather, Edward Fowler Dickinson, was literally, “brought to his knees” in conversion after an illness ravaged his body and convinced him of the immanent need to be saved (Wolff 16). Emotion-filled conversions did not characterize these revivals. Instead, religion entered the communities through prayer services held in the homes and churches of Amherst and other small New England towns (Greenberg 150). From 1840 to 1862, no less than eight revivals swept through Amherst (Sewall 24). Neighbors, friends, and family created communities of

² Critics who discuss Dickinson and Edwards include: Alfred Kazin, Virginia Oliver, William Sherwood, Suzanne Juhasz, Albert Gelpi, and Robert M. Greenberg

prayer, asking God for forgiveness and eventually finding “awakening” (Greenberg 151). Emily’s pious sister Lavinia wrote to Austin and Emily in 1850, “ Oh! Austin, if the Spirit of God has awakened you, I entreat you not to grieve it away, Do become Christian *now*. How beautiful if *we three* could all believe in Christ!” (Wolff 102). But Vinnie’s dream never became reality. Although Emily eventually found God in her own realm, she never accepted the religion of her family, “They [the Dickinson family]³ are all religious – except me – and address an Eclipse, every morning – whome they call their “Father” (L261). Many converts sincerely believed that along with the “Awakening,” God brought his grace to mankind. The results of his kindness included “calmness, sobriety, spiritual seriousness, and reformation of morals” among the faithful (Greenberg 151). While images of the “chosen” the “elect” and salvation ran through her community, Dickinson confronted the choice of choosing religious salvation or taking her chances on eternity, alone.

Although throughout her life friends and family encouraged Dickinson to accept God, the pressure was probably greatest during her school years at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. The founder of Mount Holyoke, Mary Lyon, was a “deeply religious” woman who had a profound religious impact on her students: “Her regard for the Bible was so fervent, and her reverence for it so profound, that she would dwell on its beauty and sublimity with deep interest . . . she never omitted an opportunity of impressing on the minds of her pupils, the power wisdom, and goodness of God, as displayed in his works” (Wolff 99). Dickinson found herself among the few who never crossed over from the “No-Hoper” category to the glorious status of the “Hopers,” “There is a great deal of religious influence here and many are flocking to the ark of safety. I have not yet given

³ Author’s addition

up to the claims of Christ, but trust I am not entirely thoughtless on so important & serious a subject” (L20). The influence of organized religion on Dickinson’s mind appears even after she left the Seminary, “Abiah, you may be surprised to hear me speak as I do, knowing that I express no interest in the all important subject, but I am not happy, and I regret that last term, when the golden opportunity was mine, that I did not give up and become a Christian” (L23). The pressure to convert forced Dickinson to separate herself from Amherst society. But while she longed to find peace in organized religion, she also recognized her surrender would be at a great cost. Along with her validation of earthly religion she would find the God of humans who yearned for simple answers without true faith. She constantly pondered over how the “elect” knew that they were Christ’s chosen people (Greenberg 155). In a letter to Jane Humphery she wondered, “I can’t tell you what they have found, but they think it is something precious. I wonder if is?” (L35). At twenty-five years old, Emily stood defiant of the pressure to convert and never became an official member of The First Church of Amherst (Greenberg 150).

One of Emily’s frequently canonized poems embodies her rejection of organized religion as a community where she could not find God,

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church-

I keep it, staying at Home-

With a Bobolink for a Chorister-

And an Orchard, for a Dome-

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice-

I just wear my Wings-

And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little Sexton – sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman-
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last-
I'm going, all along.

(P324J, 1862)

This poem, included in her letter to Higginson about her “Business of Circumference,” rejects organized religion. One of the seven poems published in her lifetime, it was appropriately titled, “*My Sabbath*”⁴ (Poems 256). The title asserts ownership over her worship and religion without the influence of the “religious” on her writing. Just as she dwelled in her own realm, her writing was a part of this outside realm that the center could not claim as part of their church.

Most critics generally agree that P 324J is a statement against organized religion, and an affirmation of individual spiritual soul-searching.⁵ Dickinson creates her own “church” in a sphere where birds sing the hymns and trees provide her with a shelter where she can worship. Dorothea Steiner suggests that the placement of religious imagery alongside nature makes the statement that religious worship can take “a variety of shapes, not only the one dictated by society” (67). Dickinson’s insistence on worshipping in her own sphere demonstrates her dislike of community standards. Jane Donahue Eberwein

⁴ Author’s emphasis

⁵ Critics who support the idea of this poem as a statement against organized religion or an assertion of her independence include: Srihari J. Rao, Sally Burke, Dorothea Steiner, and Linda Munk

observes that “Dickinson withdrew increasingly from communal religious rituals- not because she ceased questing for God- and all he offered her . . . but because she was probably the only person she knew impelled to continue the quest” (Greenberg 155). But it is not clear whether or not she chooses to place herself above the religion of the Congregationalists. While the most common image of “Wings” conjures an angelic image, according to the OED “Wings” also may refer to a devil-like figure (OED vol. XX 393). While she may view her way of worship as higher than her “silly neighbors” she also realizes the low place they have put her in as a “no-hoper.”

Evangelical Protestants revered the Bible as the bastion of “moral truth” and a “remedy for death,” providing the faithful with tangible evidence of God’s promise of salvation (Wolff 67). Each morning Emily’s father read the Bible to the family, followed by a time for prayer (Wolff 70). Emily absorbed its teachings and later used it as a tool in her poetry. Cynthia Wolff notes that she “knew every line of the Bible intimately, quoted from it extensively, referred to it many times more often than she referred to any other work” (72). Many citizens of Amherst memorized most of the Bible because of the promise of eternal life it gave to believers (Wolff 72). A passage from Corinthians 15:3 proclaims this message: “Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures . . . But now is Christ risen from the dead . . . and become the firstfruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead . . . Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” This promise of resurrection, immortality, and everlasting life was an idea that Dickinson struggled with in regards to “Circumference.” If the Bible occupied the center, as some critics have suggested, then she dwelled on the outskirts of its authority. She

used parables as a tool for her writing, and her religious struggle. While Jacob is a figure closely associated with Dickinson's struggle to understand God's power, other followers such as Job endured great trials before receiving the full glory of God. Dickinson endured a similar journey before recognizing her fate.

Emily's exposure to death began at a very early age. The second of three children of Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson, she witnessed the difficult birth of her younger sister, Lavinia. Both Lavinia and her mother suffered from complications, serious enough that Lavinia would be the last of the Dickinson children (Wolff 59). While her mother and younger sister recuperated, Emily stayed at her cousin's house where a recently widowed aunt was also ill (Wolff 59). When Emily returned to her home, her father was in the process of dealing with the death of his own father and no one had the time to talk with young Emily about death (Wolff 61). As a young girl, she lamented the loss of her friend, Sophia Holland, "She was too lovely for earth & she was transplanted to heaven. . . . I told no one the cause of my grief, though it was gnawing at my very heart strings" (L11). Death was a common figure in nineteenth century America.

With the lack of modern medical knowledge, illness often led to death. No antibiotics counteracted common killers such as typhoid, pneumonia, smallpox, cholera, and malaria (Wolff 68). If surgery was performed, anesthesia was absent (Wolff 68). The Dickinson children stayed home from school when the flu ransacked the children of Amherst (Wolff 68). Because of the immanence of death, it became a common trope and received a "form and face" as the "Angel of Death," sent from God (Wolff 68). Dickinson spoke of her ill friend Abby Haskel, characterizing death as an almost human

figure, “I verily believe she will live in spite of the ‘angel of death’” (L30). Death also invaded the literature of the nineteenth century. Women writers such as Lydia Sigourney and Helen Hunt Jackson produced numerous elegies, mourning the loss of loved ones, but satisfied with the conviction of a reunion in Heaven. (Petrino). Even the bedtime prayers of children were saturated with images of death, providing young children with a constant reminder of death: “I in the burying place may see/ Graves shorter there than I:/ From death’s arrest no age is free-/ Young children too may die/ My God, may such an awful sight/ Awakening be to me!/ O! that by early grace I might/ For death prepared to be!” (Wolff 69).

P 943J weaves the concepts of death and circumference together:

A Coffin- is a small Domain,

Yet able to contain

A Citizen of Paradise

In Its diminished Plane.

A Grave- is a restricted Breadth-

Yet ampler than the Sun-

And all the Seas He populates

And Lands He looks upon

To Him who on its small Repose

Bestows a single Friend-

Circumference without Relief-

Or Estimate- or End

(1864)

David C. Estes points out the comparison between the infinitely large and minutely small in this poem, perhaps suggesting Dickinson's place in relation to the space she occupied (Estes 212). Images of confined areas (A Coffin, A Grave) become even more restricting in comparison to the vast images of "Paradise," "Breadth," "Seas," and "Lands." The speaker stands small in relation to these images while outside the "comforting position in an ordered and bounded world" (Estes 213). Dickinson yearns for a place in an ordered universe, but remains frightened by the space which separates her from the rest of the world, leaving her quite "lost" (Estes 213).

P 943J also provides an excellent text to study Dickinson's variants and how they related to her idea of circumference. The idea of "choosing" and "not choosing" as discussed by Sharon Cameron is addressed later in this paper when the fascicles are examined. Dickinson's refusal to choose one single version of her poems demonstrates the power she coveted over her writing. Rather than conform to literary standards by allowing the center to govern her poetry, she acknowledged the fluidity of her poetry through her use of word choice. In the manuscripts there are four alternate word choices for Poem 943. "A Rudiment" can be substituted for "A Citizen;" "a restricted" becomes "an inferior;" "small" becomes "low;" "Conferred" can replace "Bestow" (L683). These simple substitutions create complexity in how Dickinson's poetry is viewed. Did she intend for all the variants to be substituted together as a set or could each individual word conjure up completely new combinations and meanings within her poetry? Why did she initially choose one word over the other and did she intend for the poems to be published

with the variant versions? All of these questions stem from contemporary standards that Dickinson would have most likely rejected. Dickinson's use of variants demonstrates her determination to dwell outside the center of society that supported poems of a standardized format.

Religion in nineteenth century Amherst directly related to death, immortality, and the possibility of life beyond the grave. For many, heaven was an actual "geographic" place for the soul (Petrino 96). Even Dickinson acknowledged the glory of heaven when discussing a deceased friend in a March 1846 letter to Abiah Root, "She is now with the redeemed in heaven & with the savior she has so long loved according to all human probability" (L11). A reunion with one's ancestors, friends, and acquaintances, was entirely possible. Victorian hymns brought consolation and comfort to those who waited in anxious anticipation of their own salvation (Morely 29). This "culture of mourning" which focused on the earthly life as a preparation for what was beyond, was simply obsessed with the idea of where the body and soul traveled after earthly life (Petrino). A transition in Congregationalism, from the view of God as "arbitrary" to a view of God as loving and compassionate who provided for his followers after death, did not end Dickinson's struggle (Oliver 35). Her intellectual battle with the concepts of a divine being who controlled her world and the possibility of what lay beyond her earthly sphere, could not be resolved with a simple conversion. In P 712J, Emily expresses her exasperation with the concepts of death and immortality:

Because I could not stop for Death –

He kindly stopped for me –

The Carriage held but just Ourselves –

And Immortality.

(1863)

Although Death “kindly” stopped for the speaker, the tone expresses doubt. The “saved” believed there was no death, simply a passing from one world to the next (Kazin 146). Dickinson anticipated the moment of death, wondering whether it would be her final breath or the beginning of eternity. Although she continued to dwell on the outskirts of the Amherst religious community, her hopes for immortality were not lost.

Rather than conforming to a religion she did not admire, Dickinson chose to struggle with God and his kingdom until she found the answers to the questions that kept her isolated from the world. P 712J offers circular images of “ring” and “sun,” alluding to her idea of “Circumference” and mentions a journey towards “Immortality” and “Eternity.” The variant word choices show Dickinson’s refusal to condense her poems into a single version for publication.

In his study of American Poetry, Denis Donoghue commented, “When a nineteenth-century American quarreled with God, his quarrel was here: that God put hard questions into the pilgrim’s mouth and never answered them” (New 1). Dickinson’s anger was rooted in her soul where she did not understand the God of the Amherst religious community. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to believe, in fact her letters demonstrate that she longed to be a part of the group of “Hopers” at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. An early letter to Abiah Root in January of 1846 sheds some light on her troubles:

I was almost persuaded to be a christian. I thought I never again could be
thoughtless and worldly- and I can say that I never enjoyed such perfect peace and

happiness in the short time in which I felt I had found my savior. But I soon forgot my morning prayer or else it was irksome to me. One by one my old habits returned and I cared less for religion than ever. I have longed to hear from you to hear what decision you have made. I hope you are a christian for I feel that it is impossible for any one to be happy without a treasure in heaven. I feel that I should never be happy without I love Christ. (L10).

It is apparent from Dickinson's encouragement of Abiah's acceptance of Christ, that she felt no animosity towards the center of society who accepted him as their Saviour. Her yearning to be the object of God's grace occupied her thoughts and emotions. She hears "Christ saying to me Daughter give me thine heart . . . Perhaps you have exchanged the fleeting pleasures of time for immortality . . . I hope sometimes the heavenly gates will be opened to receive me . . . I am continually putting off becoming a christian" (L10).

While the faithful Christian converts stood in the center, occupying a place of glory, Dickinson roamed the space outside this center. The borders "Circumference" separated Dickinson from divine immortality.

Dickinson feared the possibility of breaking through the limits that separated her from the divine, ". . . I attended none of the meetings last winter. I felt that I was so easily excited that I might again be deceived and I dared not trust myself . . . I was almost inclined to yield to He who is greater than I" (L10). Yielding to a divine power encompassed Dickinson's greatest hope and her greatest fear. While she longed to be his disciple, "The few short moments in which I loved my Saviour I would not now exchange for a thousand worlds like this. It was my greatest pleasure to commune alone with the great God . . . I determined to devote my whole life to his service" she could not

release herself to his power, “. . . I had rambled too far to return & ever since my heart has been growing harder & more distant from the truth. . .,” she couldn’t reconcile her beliefs with the Amherst Christians (L11).

Sending P 303J to Sue, Dickinson refused both changes that Sue suggested for the poem. Her rejection is not a refusal of Sue but of her outside influence upon Dickinson’s creation (Poems 225),

The Soul selects her own Society –
Then - shuts the Door –
To her divine Majority –
Present no more –

(1862)

Dickinson’s longed to find peace and the promise of eternity. But she could not reconcile her faith and questioning with the earthly ways of worship and the tyrannical God with whom she was presented. In order to reconcile her faith, she depended on “intense privacy, solitude, and loneliness of Puritan experience”(Kazin 152).

In the Dickinson home, Emily’s father identified with his Puritan heritage. Emily’s early exposure to basic Puritan ideals while growing up may have influenced her religious thinking (Sherwood 140). Gelpi suggests that Dickinson and Jonathon Edwards were alike in their love for earthly existence (Tenth 229). Dickinson struggled with her earthly attachment while searching for the divine realm. P 160J embodies this dilemma:

Just lost, when I was saved!
Just felt the world go by!
Just girt me for the onset with Eternity,

When breath blew back,
 And on the other side
 I heard recede the disappointed tide!

Therefore, as One returned, I feel,
 Odd secrets of the line to tell!
 Some Sailor, skirting foreign shores-
 Some pale Reporter, from the awful doors
 Before the Seal!

Next time, to stay!
 Next time, the things to see
 By Ear unheard,
 Unscrutinized by Eye-

Next time, to tarry,
 While the Ages steal-
 Slow tramp the Centuries,
 And the Cycles wheel!

(1860)

Wolff suggests that the speaker in this poem travels between time and eternity, dwelling on the boundaries of the poem where immortality resides (Wolff 236). The tone is triumphant: the speaker proclaims her salvation within earthly space. Unlike P 378J

where the Universe and the Heavens retreat after the speaker gets close enough to reach them, the speaker in this poem steps onto the edge of immortality and glimpses the other side. Ultimately, she returns to her earthly sphere, but with the knowledge, “Odd secrets of the line to tell!,” of what lies beyond the boundary. The line not only separates the Heavens and the Earth, but also symbolizes a physical line of poetry and a measure of “circumference,” where “two hemispheres meet” (Wolff 238). Dickinson’s vision of “circumference” as a boundary between her realm and the realm of immortality is certainly present in this poem. Stanza three proclaims that she will return again with her promise of immortality, “Next time, to stay!,” and forever dwell beyond the line. She knows that much remains unseen and unheard by humans, but hopes to gain the entry to the world mortal beings cannot see. While she can understand the beauty of the earth, she also knows its pain. Clinging to the earth allows her to return, but with the knowledge that salvation is beyond her boundary.

In 1860 Dickinson struggled furiously with God. She is not one of his “elect” on the path to salvation, but this poem shows her hope of immortality. In an 1860 letter to Vinnie after the death of their Aunt Lavinia, Emily consoles her sister but her words do not seem completely sincere, “Well, she is safer now than ‘we know or even think.’” (L217). The quotations around “we know or even think” imply that these words were not Emily’s own, but her use of them shows the doubt she has about her aunt’s position after death. While she longs to comfort Vinnie with the hope that Aunt Lavinia is resting peacefully above, Emily suggests that she neither knows nor necessarily thinks that Lavinia lives on in a safer place. P 160J suggests the inadequacy of God. While the speaker is allowed to see the other side and is promised to return, Wolff reminds us of

Emily's questioning that surrounds her relationship with God (237). Her struggle centers on her understanding that the God her Aunt Lavinia worshipped was a God who would plant a flower and then pluck it from its root (P 921J). The poet assumes the duty of "repair[ing] God's deficiency by recounting the privileged insights from moments of heightened perception" (Wolff 237). Thus, while Dickinson has seen the other side, she cannot be sure that a tyrannical God will grant her Aunt Lavinia access to eternity.

Robert Gillespie urges readers to look at Dickinson's "Business of Circumference" in relation to the idea of a "journey" (Gillespie 250). Dickinson certainly does embark on a journey throughout her life, beginning with the rejection of organized religion and the Amherst community while constantly struggling to define her relationship with God. William Sherwood suggests that this struggle came to a halt in 1862, the year she produced her greatest number of poems: three hundred and sixty-two, more than twice the number she composed in any following year (Sherwood 157). He argues that during this year, Emily experienced "grace," that resolution of inner turmoil that every Puritan soul longed for when "God reached out to man with His grace, man reached out to God with his faith" and something between the two was resolved (Sherwood 139). This description is distinct from the description of a "religious" conversion where one publicly acknowledges their faith in front of the community. Extending earlier assumptions that Dickinson would have been exposed to a Puritan ideology in her home, Sherwood asserts that she accepted God and his divine power over humans, a concept that included grace even for her (Sherwood 141). In November she wrote to Samuel Bowles, "Forgive me if I prize the Grace – superior to the Sign"

(L277). God invaded her boundaries, leaving her space wide open to the universe of immortality.

Although Emily's new understanding of God may be interpreted by some as an acceptance of the religion she so vehemently opposed, she contends this notion with P 508J:

I'm ceded – I've stopped being Their's –
 The name They dropped upon my face
 With water, in the country church
 Is finished using, now,
 And They can put it with my Dolls,
 My childhood, and the string of spools,
 I've finished threading – too –

Baptized before without the choice,
 But this time, consciously, of Grace –
 Unto supremest term –
 Called to my Full – The Crescent dropped –
 Existence's whole Arc, filled up,
 With one small Diadem

My second Rank – too small the first –
 Crowned – whimpering – on my Father's breast –
 A half unconscious Queen –

But this time – Adequate – Erect,
 With Will to choose or reject,
 And I choose, just a Crown –

(1862)

If any doubt lingered about whether or not Dickinson's understanding of grace and the presence of God in her life made her more sympathetic to organized religion, it is erased. Dickinson asserts herself as a woman given the opportunity to choose with her own free will how to worship her God. No sentimentality for the Amherst religious community remains. Instead of placing them at the center of her circle, she becomes the center with God's earthly and heavenly kingdom filling the space around her.

Boundaries and lines dissolve and nothing binds her to her lonely sphere any longer. She becomes fully conscious and aware of her decision to choose whether or not to accept God and the earthly religion she was initially forced to accept. With the advent of grace, Dickinson reigns over those who longed to make her a part of their belief system. In the face of their evangelizing she stands "Adequate – Erect" and on her own. Eberwein agrees that P 508J consciously makes an autobiographical reference to her "initiation into the church and for its renunciation of that parentally and societally imposed identity" (Eberwein 94). With eleven variant word choices, Dickinson continues to assert herself as creator and editor of her own realm (Poems 390).

Many critics, including Sewall, suggest that the fascicles were Dickinson's personal substitute for publishing while she waited for when "the world should be receptive" (537). Critics offer numerous interpretations for why Emily chose "circumference" as her business. Some speculate that she put herself at the center while

others believes she dealt with abstract spatial areas including: time, eternity, elevated versus lower spheres, and her brain (Oberhaus 31). Dorothy Huff Oberhaus connects the poems in F 40 with the theme of “Circumference” with the word “circumference” appearing six times in the seventeen poems (31). Composed during 1864, many of the poems appeared two years after Emily’s supposed “acceptance” of grace. Following earlier logic, Emily now dwells at the center of her circle and the concepts Oberhaus relates to “Circumference” occupy the space surrounding her. If Dickinson rejected Amherst’s religious society, it is reasonable to assume that she did not want to publish her poetry for fear that she would be criticized by those whose earthly judgement was inadequate. She did not want the outside world to have unlimited critical access to her creations, so she published the fascicles in her own sphere. These unconventional texts embody her “Business of Circumference.” Sharon Cameron asserts that it is problematic to see Dickinson’s fascicles as either bounded or limitless (Cameron 4). Throughout her fascicles, Dickinson is continually “choosing” by placing poems in separate fascicles, and “not choosing” by allowing her variants to occupy prominent places in her writing (Cameron 4). By “choosing” to remove herself from Amherst society, Dickinson ultimately refused to “choose” between being saved or not being saved through rejection of earthly definitions.

Oberhaus understands F 40 to center around the idea of “Circumference” as an “elevated sphere as opposed to a lower one” (31). Continuing the idea that Dickinson removed herself from society because of difficulty in reconciling her “religious” thinking with society’s beliefs, she dwelled within this “Circumference” in an elevated sphere. Oberhaus states that Dickinson reached, “an elevated poetic and spiritual sphere,

where she is even more content as she once was with her past lower sphere” (31). It is at this point that Dickinson’s poetry and spirituality become indistinguishable from each other. Poetry communicated the ideas and spiritual revelations that Dickinson could not share with the public in ordinary interactions or prose. Her refusal to give her gift of language to the outside world was not simply a sign that she feared criticism, rather she feared the earthly influence that could draw her into society, the “lower sphere” in which she had once dwelled. By publishing her creations in fascicle form, Dickinson preserved herself in her “elevated” sphere without subjecting her poetry to earthly religious conventions.

Oberhaus highlights the numerous appearances of “Circumference” in Dickinson’s poems. Whether using it as a metaphor for time, the brain, different spheres, or religious thinking, F 40 is devoted to her “Business” (Oberhaus 30). Dickinson’s original “Circumference” was bounded, with the boundary separating her from God and immortality. Eventually left behind the idea of a “Circumference” with boundaries and moved into an infinite space where God, immortality, and she, could co-exist. Oberhaus acknowledges that fascicle 40 addresses the “relation between finite and infinite spheres,” serving as the pinnacle of Dickinson’s life “Business” (33). Throughout previous fascicles Dickinson struggled with renunciation, doubt, anger, and resistance to God. F 40 became a “resolution” for all her prior religious struggles (Oberhaus 89). Her separation from society and rejection of earthly worship is reconciled with the belief that she found the grace of God through her journey.

Poems five through eight in F 40 center around the idea of “home”, the attachment to and renunciation of “home” and the new metaphorical “home,” gained

from struggle and questioning of one's place (Oberhaus 93). P 902J illustrates this questioning with Christ as the interrogator and Dickinson as the subject of his curiosity (Oberhaus 94),

“Which choose I”?

That- I cannot say-

“Which choose They”?

Question Memory!

Lines eleven and twelve , “My tenderer Experiment/ Toward Men-“ signal Dickinson's view of her relations with other humans as “Experiments” conducted in order to discover her place in relation to theirs, in a higher, “elevated” realm. She is asked to make a choice and though she refuses a direct response, “They” also refuse to reply. The final stanza recalls the biblical story of the house built on the rock (by the wise man) and the house built on the sand (by the fool) (Oberhaus 94). The one with the stronger foundation ultimately survived. Dickinson's choice between the physical “house” (upon a rock) and the idea of “home” (upon the sand) is not stated in her poem (Oberhaus 94). If she rejected the physical, she rejected the earthly physical church, but also rejected her physical creations upon the page. If she rejected the ideals behind revivalist salvation, she also rejected the idea of a graceful immortal God. Dickinson's refusal to choose is evident not only in P 902J but in the complicated nature of her bounded, yet limitless, variant-filled journey.

Poems 12 through 16 (906J, 907J, 908J, 967J, 968J) address the limitless “Circumference” Dickinson experienced in her reunion with God and Christ in their “eternal circumference” (Oberhaus 117). As Dickinson broke through the boundary that

separated her from immortality and grace, her bounded sphere became part of God's infinite realm. The persona in poem 16 (P 968J) dissolves the boundaries that separate her from Christ and eternity. Her journey peaks when she is united with Christ and can transcend the boundaries into eternity (Oberhaus 137). Dickinson's reconciliation of her spiritual realm with the grace of God allows her to look towards the promise of immortality. The first stanza, which begins the first of two "sonnets," proclaims, "Fitter to see Him, I may be/ For the long Hindrance- Grace- to Me." (Oberhaus 137). After overcoming the boundaries which separated her from Christ, the speaker receives "Grace" and finally sees (or understands) Christ in her own realm instead of through the church. In the second stanza the speaker describes the "Waiting," "pain," and "blame" that characterized her journey towards the acceptance of "Grace." The third stanza supports God's view of the persona's acceptance:

Time to anticipate His Grace
 It's first- Delight- and then- Surprise-
 The turning o'er and o'er my face
 For Evidence it be the Grace-

The speaker dreams of the time she will meet with Christ in eternity and understands that "Time" functions as a tool to prolong her period of anticipation of the "Grace" God chooses to bestow upon her (Oberhaus 139). The final lines of the poem, "The Beauty that reward Him most-/ The Beauty of Demand- at Rest-" echo Rev. 21:4, "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes . . . neither shall there be any more pain" (Oberhaus 140). This passage from Revelations provides the comfort and reassurance Dickinson longed for. From her earliest letters to Abiah Root where she felt herself clinging to the

edge, passionately desiring to be saved yet unable to submit to earthly organized religion, Dickinson's "Business" centered around the idea of immortality and grace. P 968J, written in 1864, demonstrates Dickinson's understanding of grace as something she could receive even though she skirted the urgings from her community to be "saved" in an earthly matter.

Beyond her prolific years from 1860 to 1864, as Dickinson matured she gave religion, God, and immortality, her devoted attention. These topics were never far from her thoughts and occupied a prominent place in her canon of letters and poems. The year of 1862 provides numerous examples of Dickinson's understanding of God's grace and a place beyond death into which the living passed. Towards the end of her life, she continued to address these issues in letters to friends. Writing to Mrs. James S. Cooper in the spring of 1886 she expressed sympathy for her grieving friend, "Though the first moment of loss is eternity, other eternities remain" (L1036). Although Dickinson understood how painful death could be to those left behind to mourn, she reassured her friend that death was not the final hour. Eternity waited for her loved one. Dickinson's reassuring voice towards the end of her life informs the reader that she herself must have felt sure of God's promised eternity. Her originally bounded "Circumference" continued to expand outwards towards eternity. Included in this letter was a poem written about 1884:

Though the great Waters sleep,
They are still the Deep,
We cannot doubt.

No vacillating God

Ignited this Abode

To put it out.

P 1599J urges the reader to look beyond the surface of the “Waters” which may appear to sleep, but are infinitely deep. The depth is beyond the sight of the living who cannot see the infinite amount of life and movement below the surface. Because the living cannot see beyond the surface, they “cannot doubt” the eternity that dwells beyond their human comprehension. In the second stanza, Dickinson contends that God is not indecisive or unfair. This position is far from the temperamental, unreasonable God she imagined in her earlier days. As she heads towards her own death, God becomes much more reasonable and it is unlikely that he would give humans one life with no hope of immortal life. The double meaning of “Abode” as either a dwelling place or a state of waiting suggests that whether humans hope for a life beyond their earthly realm or live their lives in anticipation of eternity, God will not leave them without eternal life (OED vol. I).

Dickinson continues her religious thinking (that thought process that William Sherwood denied the existence of) throughout her later life, until her death in 1886. Another letter in 1886 to Mrs. Edward Tuckerman illustrates her view of God’s acceptance of his children to his kingdom, “‘Eye hath not seen nor ear heard.’ What a recompense! The enthusiasm of God at the reception of His sons! How ecstatic! How infinite! Says the blissful voice, yet not a voice, but a vision, ‘I will not let thee go, except I bless thee.’” (L 1035). Johnson notes that this letter was sent to Mrs. Tuckerman during the same month of her husband’s death (L 1035).

In regards to the presence of Jacob in Dickinson's final letters, Johnson refers the reader to Corinthians 2.9 where God speaks of the life he has "prepared for mankind." (L1035). The final quote in the letter comes directly from the passage where Jacob wrestles with the angel, an ever-present figure in Dickinson's religious thinking (L1035). The quote is repeated in a letter to Higginson in spring of 1886, demonstrating the prominent position Jacob occupied in Dickinson's theology (Letters 903). But in contrast to her original view of Jacob as a figure that God left completely alone, L1035 shows Dickinson's religious thoughts at full maturity. Jacob's struggle becomes part of his journey to immortality and redemption is received from the saving, graceful hand of God. Dickinson experiences that same journey full circle, from the feelings of utter loneliness to the rejoicing state of being able to peacefully pass from her realm to eternity without having to break through the borders of "Circumference." In her final year, Dickinson understood her "Circumference" to be fully united with God and eternity.

