

### Emily Dickinson: The Higginson/Todd and Johnson Editions

Since her death and the discovery of a drawer full of poetry in 1886, there have been several editions of Emily Dickinson's poems edited and released by various individuals. The first edition came in 1890, and was compiled and edited by T.W. Higginson and Mabel Todd, who had both been in some way involved in Emily Dickinson's life; Higginson was a person with whom Dickinson often corresponded, and Todd was the wife of an astronomy professor who was also known for the affair she was having with Austin Dickinson. The first collection was simply titled *Poems* (handout).

A subsequent edition was published in 1955 and edited by scholar Thomas H. Johnson, who re-visited the manuscripts and produced a version retaining most of Dickinson's somewhat unorthodox punctuation and rhyming. This was the first complete edition of Dickinson's poems, as most of her poetry had been published since her death, but never all in the same volume. Johnson's version is titled *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (handout). This edition was the first that was considered to be a "scholarly" edition, as Johnson included all of the alternate word choices Emily Dickinson listed in her manuscripts. Dickinson herself never specified any type of "final" versions of her poems; they are all considered to be "rough drafts."

One would initially think that the editions would not be much different, that one edition of Emily Dickinson's poems would be just like another. But the Higginson and Todd version of her poetry is much different from Johnson's edition, and that is largely due to the amount of editing that Higginson did to Dickinson's work. In an attempt to make her poetry more "acceptable," he changed her work to make it more similar to what most people expected from

poetry at the time. When one compares it to Johnson's version (an edition that strives to be as accurate to the author as possible), one sees that the original publications of her poetry do not share much in common with the manuscripts. Higginson changed the visual presentation of the poems as well as sometimes the content, though his revisions were somewhat inconsistent.

Higginson attempted to make Dickinson's poetry fit into an accepted form – one for which it was not written.

There are some consistent changes that the Higginson and Todd edition of the Dickinson poems exhibit, most of them pertaining to the visual form of the poems. Higginson regularized the punctuation and capitalization of Dickinson's poems, and also removed most of her signature dashes. In some cases, this was the extent to which he edited the poems. For example, the second stanza of the Higginson/Todd version of "Wild Nights – Wild Nights!" reads as follows:

Futile the winds  
To a heart in port, -  
Done with compass,  
Done with the chart. (5)

The Johnson version, however, arranges the stanza somewhat differently:

Futile – the Winds –  
To a Heart in port –  
Done with the Compass –  
Done with the Chart! (114)

Dickinson's capitalization of important nouns remains intact, as do her dashes. Johnson's edition also leaves Emily Dickinson's use of quotation marks intact in poems like "I taste a liquor never brewed." Where Higginson's removes them, Johnson's edition leaves the quotation marks in the third stanza of the poem:

When "Landlords" turn the drunken Bee  
Out of the Foxglove's door –  
When Butterflies – renounce their "drams"  
I shall but drink the more! (98)

By removing the dashes and capitalization, the 1890 edition attempts to structure the poetry into sentence-like patterns. In Johnson's version, the dashes and extra capitalization fragment the poetry into non-sentence-like structures. A similar example can be found in the poem "A Bird came down the Walk --." Johnson's edition shows the third and fourth stanza as follows:

He glanced with rapid eyes  
That hurried all around --  
They looked like frightened Beads, I thought --  
He stirred his Velvet Head

Like one in danger, Cautious,  
I offered him a Crumb  
And he unrolled his feathers  
And rowed him softer home -- (328)

The Higginson and Todd edition includes this poem as well, but the same stanzas read differently:

He glanced with rapid eyes  
That hurried all abroad, --  
They looked like frightened beads, I thought;  
He stirred his velvet head

Like one in danger; cautious,  
I offered him a crumb,  
And he unrolled his feathers  
And rowed him softer home (13)

By inserting the semicolons into the two stanzas, the 1890 version creates a false sentence structure. In some ways, it is an attempt to simplify the poetry and make it easier for one to mentally associate the lines together that do not seem to be complete thoughts. By trying to force the lines into a complete sentence format and removing Dickinson's capitalization and dashes, the Higginson/Todd edition eliminates the natural power and emphasis that certain words

and lines innately contain in the original manuscripts. Compare the first line “Pain has an element of blank” (the 1890 edition) to “Pain – has an Element of Blank –” (the edition compiled by Johnson). The words *pain*, *element*, and *blank* have a greater presence in the second version because of their capitalization and their being separated by the dashes.

Some critics have theorized that the dashes and capitalization are supposed to serve as a guides for how the poems are to be read aloud. Not only would they then provide a sense of visual emphasis on certain words in her poems. But they could also be understood to convey an oratorical emphasis. By including such devices, one could conclude that Dickinson intended for her work to be read aloud. The removal of her dashes and capitalization also removes her suggested way of reading the poems, which in some ways lessens the connection between the reader and the poet.

In “Pain – has an Element of Blank,” the 1955 edition leaves Dickinson’s second line of the second stanza as “Its Infinite contain” (323). In the same poem, the Higginson/Todd version adds a word to make the line “Its infinite realms contain” (31). This also attempts to make the line a complete “thought” in terms of having a grammatically correct sentence. Higginson attempted to “fix” the form of her poetry, but in the end he forced it into an organization that does not necessarily suit its meaning or sense of language.

In his attempts to regularize Emily Dickinson’s form in her poetry, Higginson and Todd also sometimes made changes to the content of the poetry, though this is a much more inconsistent trend than the revisions to the visual format. These attempts to alter content seem as though they were perhaps haphazardly undertaken, and were also maybe never ideally “completed.” One of these instances lies in the titling of the poems. Johnson’s edition does not

give a title to any of the poems; they are simply numbered, and an index of the first lines is also provided as a means of locating and identifying the poetry (Johnson).

In the 1890 Higginson and Todd edition, a portion of the poems is left untitled, while some of the items are given titles which differ from the opening lines. Already mentioned above, Higginson gave “A Bird came down the Walk –“ the title “In the Garden” (13). He listed “A narrow Fellow in the Grass” as “The Snake” (44). “Because I could not stop for Death –“ became “The Chariot” (35). And “Pain – has an Element of Blank” he captioned “The Mystery of Pain” (31). Yet other poems such as “Victory comes late –“ and “I taste a liquor never brewed –“ remain untitled in the Higginson/Todd edition (2, 34). The titles that Higginson and Todd gave to certain poems were not much more than simplifications of the poems themselves. Ultimately, their titles detract from the poems by naming what Dickinson managed to describe in her poetry without using labels. She never mentioned a snake in her poem “A narrow Fellow in the Grass,” but lines such as “The Grass divides as with a Comb – / A spotted shaft is seen – / And then it closes at your feet...” suggest the image of a snake moving across the ground (44). The title also eliminates the sense of surprise in Dickinson’s poem. The title gives the “surprise” away, and therefore makes the poem somewhat less intriguing because the sense of wonder about the poem is lost. It becomes ordinary.

Another inconsistent change that the Higginson and Todd version of Emily Dickinson poems has is the change of gender. In some cases, Higginson changed a poem to be gender neutral when the original manuscript included lines from a male perspective. For example, in “A narrow fellow in the Grass,” the Higginson edition presents the third line of the third stanza as “Yet when a child, and barefoot” (44). The Thomas Johnson edition of the poetry gives the same line as “Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot –“ (459). Higginson more than likely made such a

change with the intent to regularize the voice behind the poems – so that they were all feminine or could be taken to be feminine since the author is female.

Yet, the 1890 edition does not consistently contain this revision, either. In Dickinson’s “There’s been a Death, in the Opposite House,” Higginson’s version of the last two lines of the third stanza is similar to the same lines as printed in the Johnson edition. Higginson’s interpretation reads, “They wonder if It died on that, – / I used to when a boy” (16). Johnson’s rendering maintains the use of the dashes and capitalization: “They wonder if it died – on that – / I used to – when a Boy –“ (185-6). In this case, the manuscript’s masculine perspective is retained. On the one hand, the Higginson/Todd edition alters the content of the poetry by removing a perspective that is not feminine or gender-neutral. Yet this version does not consistently include such alterations to all of her poetry, and therefore seems to be promoting useless changes to the original content of Dickinson’s work.

In some of the poems included in the original publication of Dickinson’s work, Higginson went so far as to re-write or reorganize the wording of the stanzas in order to eliminate the “slant” rhyme that Dickinson used in many of her poems instead of having all perfect rhyme. One such poem is “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –.” Higginson made a variety of changes in the first three stanzas, and they read:

I heard a fly buzz when I died;  
The stillness round my form  
Was like the stillness in the air  
Between the heavens of storm.

The eyes beside had wrung them dry,  
And breaths were gathering sure  
For that last onset, when the king  
Be witnessed in his power

I willed my keepsakes, signed away  
What portion of me I

Could make assignable, – and then  
There interposed a fly, (21)

One can compare this to Johnson's rendition of the same poem:

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  
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 – (223-4)

In changing the verses to fit a perfect rhyme scheme, Higginson changed the meaning of Dickinson's poem. He placed emphasis on the king by referring to "his power," a focus which was not something Dickinson attached to the poem. (In fact, one finds at the end of the poem that the "king" figure never really appears.) Higginson also violated the tightness that is often found in Dickinson's poetry. The changes to the stanza that begins "I willed my keepsakes" make the wording seem much clumsier, even if it does now follow a complete rhyme scheme. One can understand what Dickinson meant in the Johnson version of that stanza, and she achieved that in a much more direct and tighter way than Higginson did in order to make her poetry rhyme.

These kinds of revisions are also seen in the poem "Because I could not stop for Death –". The third stanza in Higginson's edition says:

We passed the school where children played,  
Their lessons scarcely done;  
We passed the fields of gazing grain,

We passed the setting sun. (35)

By contrast, Johnson's version of the text reads:

We passed the School, where Children strove  
At Recess – in the Ring –  
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –  
We passed the Setting Sun – (350)

Again, the Higginson/Todd publication eliminates part of the tightness of the verse for the sake of a rhyme scheme. "Their lessons scarcely done" allows there to be a rhyming word for "sun."

This is another case in which Higginson – in trying to "fix" the form of Dickinson's poetry – simultaneously altered the content from the original to a point where it was no longer

Dickinson's words in the stanza. Her depiction of the children in the schoolyard was far different from what Higginson placed there. He changed a line in a later stanza of the same poem from "The Cornice – in the Ground –" to "The cornice but a mound" (35, Johnson 350).

This was more than likely done so that the use of 'ground' twice in one stanza could be avoided.

Yet the absence of "in the Ground" detracts from the grave imagery and suggestion of death;

"but a mound" does not have the same ominous effect that the line put forward by Johnson does.

Another interesting change that the 1890 version makes to this poem is the elimination of a stanza. Of the poems examined, this is the only one in which an entire verse is removed from the poem. In Johnson's representation of the poem, this stanza is the fourth one, and immediately follows the stanza about the school children, and apparently represents the setting sun, which is the last thing referenced in the stanza before it:

Or rather – He passed Us –  
The Dews drew quivering and chill –  
For only Gossamer, my Gown –  
My Tippet – only Tulle – (350)

One could surmise that Higginson chose to remove this entire stanza for a plethora of reasons. But the effect of the subtraction is a change in the overall tone of the poem. “The Dews drew quivering and chill –“ suggests a colder and darker atmosphere as the sun sets. This also supports the grave imagery in the next stanza, which Higginson also downplayed in his version of the poem. Perhaps he was attempting to make the poem a little less dark for those that would be reading. Perhaps he did not find there to be enough important detail in the stanza. Higginson also removed the only lines in the poem that suggest the gender of the character; perhaps he made the change to give it a more “gender neutral” experience. Whether these are the real reasons or viable reasons or not correct at all, they do not change the fact that Higginson again altered the content of the Emily Dickinson manuscripts. The poem does not have the same meaning as the version displayed by Johnson. Higginson also proceeded inconsistently, as this was the only poem in the sample that had an entire stanza removed.

Both versions of Emily Dickinson’s poems (and editions based off of these versions) are still in circulation and being published today. But when one compares the two, one finds that the editors Higginson and Todd and Johnson provide very different representations of Emily Dickinson’s work. When one views one of her original manuscripts, it becomes clear that Johnson’s version is a more accurate portrayal of what Dickinson actually put down on paper herself. Yet, one should also understand that the 1890 edition was an important step in the history of Dickinson’s work. Without Higginson and Todd’s work (which would have been considered a valid edition of Dickinson’s poetry in terms of being “scholarly”), her poetry could have very well been lost. But the Higginson and Todd edition is a product created more so through revisions making Dickinson’s poetry reflect what poetry was ideally supposed to be at the time she was writing. Not only did Higginson and Todd edit the visual presentation and the

form of her work, but they also sometimes decided to change the content of the poems – therefore manipulating the tone and meaning. Though they attempted to “regularize” her punctuation and structure, there is nothing regularized about their revisions to her words – which are eventually not really her words anymore.

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