

# Death Becomes Her



Death Becomes Her:  
Cultural Narratives of Femininity and Death  
in Nineteenth-Century America

Edited by

Elizabeth Dill and Sheri Weinstein



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Death Becomes Her: Cultural Narratives of Femininity and Death in Nineteenth-Century America,  
Edited by Elizabeth Dill and Sheri Weinstein

This book first published 2008 by

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

15 Angerton Gardens, Newcastle, NE5 2JA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2008 by Elizabeth Dill and Sheri Weinstein and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system,  
or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or  
otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-84718-561-4, ISBN (13): 9781847185617

She would step forward into it  
as if it were not a vacancy  
but a destination,  
leaving her body pulled off  
and crumpled behind her like a sleeve.

—From “The Nature of the Gothic,” by Margaret Atwood



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	ix
Introduction .....	xi

## **PART I: TEXTS**

“Scooping up the Dust”: Emily Dickinson’s Theology of the Crypt.....	1
Roxanne Harde	

Dying to be Heard: Morality and Aesthetics in Alcott’s and Hawthorne’s Tableaux Morts .....	19
Monika Elbert	

The Dead Woman in the Wallpaper: Interior Decorating and Domestic Disturbance in the Nineteenth-Century Ghost Story .....	37
Dara Downey	

The Reincarnation of the Sentimental Woman in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s <i>Pink and White Tyranny</i> .....	57
Elizabeth Dill	

<i>Charlotte Temple</i> , an Autopsy: The Physiology of Seduction.....	73
Angela Monsam	

## **PART II: CONTEXTS**

Fairy Tales and Prostitutes: Sexualized Corpses and the Enforcement of True Womanhood in Popular Nineteenth-Century American Literature... ..	89
Robin Gray Nicks	

Queer Specters of Rose Terry Cooke and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward ..	109
Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock	

The Macabre Magazine: Dorothy Parker, Humor, and the Female Body ..	131
Catherine Keyser	

Contributors.....	157
Notes.....	161
Index.....	189

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writers included in this volume are contributors in more than one sense of the term. Their contributions to the discipline and to their areas of study are significant, savvy, and innovative. We would like to express our full appreciation for their wisdom, wit, and originality. We also wish to acknowledge the participants on the panel “Death Becomes Her” that served as the origin of this project at the 2005 convention of the Mid-Atlantic Popular American Culture Association. In addition, the editors owe much to the City University of New York for their PSC-CUNY Research Foundation Grants that made the creation and editing of this collection possible.



## INTRODUCTION

The American woman was dying to be heard. Or so one might observe in even a brief perusal of nineteenth-century America's literary and cultural archives. It requires surprisingly little investigative tenacity to conjure up a shortlist of the most impressive female corpses of the era: Nathaniel Hawthorne's Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance*, Louisa May Alcott's Beth in *Little Women*, Edgar Allan Poe's Madeline in "The Fall of the House of Usher" and dozens more come to mind, not to mention the alarmingly long list of mortally ill mothers in popular sentimental novels, the chastely ashen victims of late Gothic tales, and the possessed women channeling the souls of the dead in spiritualist media. The shortlist, that is, does not stay short for very long, and it soon becomes clear that something ought to be said about why female corpses are so ubiquitously strewn about this body of literature.

*Death Becomes Her* is an attempt to grapple with American literature's dead and dying women, and the authors included in this collection offer diverse, intriguing insights about them. As distinct as each author's interests may be, however, some important common ground has emerged. Read together, the chapters that follow work through the relatively new critical insistence that the "separate spheres" ideology is an oversimplified, faulty way to view the gendering of spaces in the American nineteenth century. Our authors begin rather than end with the notion that while American literature once had a reputation for being a bit outdoorsy, the last half-century or so of literary criticism has toured the interiors of American literature and culture. The chapters in this volume participate in that turn inward in innovative ways. They note that while death is represented as a decidedly indoors affair, it is certainly not a strictly private event. Rather, in the literary and cultural texts that our authors examine, death occurs within the province of women and is treated as a domestic event that ruptures the public/private binary. Death is not imagined as a dreary capstone to a life of laundering, toiling, decorating, and childrearing or as the inevitable outcome of a bloody, westward frontiersmanship. Rather, death is presented as an extraordinary event, at once an upheaval of household serenity through an explosive, supernatural expression of agency and an appalling scene of pain and victimization. The sceneries of death are tastefully upholstered even when half the

corpse's face is missing, and the intersection of domesticity's most mundane details with the grotesqueries of death amplify for us as readers the drama of lives lived inside the house, regardless of whether that house is a brothel, an "ordinary" middle-class home or a castle.

Interdisciplinary study has, over the last few decades, become a dominant strain of scholarship and thought that has investigated again and again the ideological undercurrents running through such domestic spaces. This work has offered readers a dialogue about women's varying identities by creating a lens into the political, social, cultural, and aesthetic shapes of femininity in the nineteenth century and beyond. Studies of literature now routinely engage with the social and political realities of women's lives, the ways in which their historical contexts repeat, re-imagine and reveal their meanings, both literary and historical. *Death Becomes Her* contributes to and complicates this growing conversation by positing a vexed relationship between, on the one hand, contested definitions of femininity and power, and, on the other hand, cultural understandings of death and the afterlife in American literature and culture.

Critical studies have begun to examine different parts of such relationships as they relate to the intersections between femininity and death. Elisabeth Bronfen's *Over Her Dead Body*, for example, offers a post-Freudian psychoanalytic reading of the figure of the dead woman as a site of cultural uncertainty and disorder.<sup>1</sup> More recently, Lucy Frank has presented us with an account of death's role in political semantics and iconography in *Representations of Death in Nineteenth-Century US Writing and Culture*.<sup>2</sup> In *NecroCitizenship*, Russ Castronovo analyzes the dangerous political passivity created by America's idealization of the afterlife.<sup>3</sup> These works have started an important conversation about this underbelly of American life. They have also in some ways made possible this collection's closer examination of the female corpse as the icon of an age. There is often the assumption in such works, however, that death signifies a punitive state, and mortality becomes a kind of endpoint with no room for ambiguity. Women die as victims of complex forces, but their death as such is simply and monolithically understood. It is often the case in such analyses, that while we learn of the crucial cultural workings of death as a political tool against a body, we do not read how death also performs functions *for* and *as* the body, especially in the case of women.

*Death Becomes Her* adds a new perspective to the conversation, then, with the unorthodox observation that in nineteenth-century America, death presents the perfect, albeit unstable, union of power and victimization in women. We hope that our readers will see, as we have, that taken together, the following chapters allow us to reject the binary between agency and its

absence and instead to read their simultaneity in narratives that unify death and the feminine. The antithesis of “agency” is indeed a slippery antonym at best, sometimes read as loss, sometimes as a disruption or cessation of biological life, sometimes as a removal of the spirit from one sphere to the “next.” The link between death and the feminine, treated as it is by the authors in this collection, rejects the agent/victim dichotomy that important but somewhat dated feminist scholarship has concerned itself with for so long. In the texts and lives under discussion by these authors, death itself is an agent that infuses the subject with both power and powerlessness. In the treatments that follow, then, death is the most radical of all imaginable ontologies.

Pronouncing as much immediately causes reverberations of the words of Edgar Allan Poe in his *Philosophy of Composition*: “the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.” For while her death is subject to the poetic gaze, so too is the subjectivity of the female corpse a radical problem for the world that wanted to see her die. Throughout this period of American literature and culture, women are depicted not only as figures representing death, but also as animated keepers of death. The nineteenth century had particularly fascinating rituals for death and mourning, almost always centered on feminine sexuality and performativity. Examples such as hair jewelry cultivated from the locks of the dead, elaborately prescribed mourning etiquette for widows, and spirit mediumship barely skim the surface of such signification. Similarly, the twentieth century has used classifications of mass and popular culture in order to interrogate further and expand upon literal and figurative linkings of women and death in social and cultural narratives. Death itself is often presented in such a way as to seem markedly if not problematically feminized: it is sensational (the penny press’s obsessive coverage of a dead prostitute) and sentimental (the heroine’s melodramatic deathbed scene); it is beautiful and noble (the sacrifice of the woman’s life as her most shining moment, morally and spiritually); and, overall, it is a source of great drama (just as any “good” woman is).

Women’s abilities to die beautifully, to mourn properly and to connect with the dead psychically all speak to an important intersection of cultural values and aesthetic principles in and of American life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This book addresses how and why, during this time period in particular, the artful and prolific feminization of death occurred. Contributors’ pieces ask questions such as: What layers does death add to female subjectivity as it was understood at the time? What is the cultural value of the feminine corpse? How is death feminized

theologically during this historical era? How is a woman's death (over)determined by exploitation? How do the spectacles of femininity and death contribute to a moral policing of women? And how do the same spectacles help to define the role of women as keepers of mor(t)ality within the home?

This collection explores the ways in which categories such as theology, eschatology, necrophilia, haunting, and murder all reveal how "death becomes her": that is, how death is portrayed both as an artificialized ornamentation of femininity and as the inevitable, ontological reality of femininity in particular (as opposed to humanity in general). The collection articulates how the seeming finality of the female corpse points beyond the physiological reality of death. It explores the multivalent connections between ideologies of femininity and the ambivalent authority that women wield over the culture of death. And finally, this collection traces the distinct trajectory of these tropes as their representational statuses evolve through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Some telling stereotypes emerge, converge, and collapse through a study of that trajectory. Hauntings in particular in gothic and domestic fiction investigate the subversive power of women as the representatives of death and of other-worldly or non-domestic spaces; at the same time, the domestic realm and the heavenly afterlife often converge in a language of sentiment that affirms the Christian "goodness" of women's work inside the home. It is thus all the more interesting when *women* writers script the death of a woman as both beautiful and heroic, moral and immoral; the idea is that the sentimentality of a woman predetermines her angelic presence in the home. The "angel in the house" is, then, not a mere stereotype of feminine virtue, but a complexly layered identity, for after women die, they become matriarchal figures of authority that "watch over" the household. The seeming contradiction of the "angel of the house" and the ruined woman's eroticized corpse is blurred in these scholarly analyses, because for both tropes, death is always a simultaneous reward and punishment. As our contributors' work illustrates, death is often the stage for and the response to female sexuality, showcasing a cultish fascination with the calamity, commotion, and corpse of the ruined woman's public life.

The authors here employ the methods and insights of various disciplines in order to foster an open inquiry into and analysis of the structural, imaginative and philosophical underpinnings of American understandings of death and women in the long nineteenth century. Researchers work from a multidisciplinary perspective, utilizing the methodologies and approaches of literary studies, sociology, history,

anthropology, women's studies and cultural studies. The chapters investigate the cultural values of the corpse, not just as biologically female, but as a feminized and eroticized subject.

Taken, of course, as parts of a whole, these chapters define in part how death defines and contains the feminine, but perhaps more importantly, they also show how the feminine helps us to define and contain death. They reveal that nineteenth-century American instances of the intersection between death and the feminine yield ideological explosions, too. The ensuing casualties of these explosions include domestic stereotypes, boundaries of the material world, and the oppression of women.

In the first essay of the collection, Roxanne Harde locates one such casualty by contending that Dickinson's poetry has been misread by critics who claim it is a strictly morbid, defeatist treatise on death as the champion over the human spirit. Instead, argues Harde, Dickinson juxtaposes life and death to commune with the corpse as a way to discover death's meaning. The corpse acts as a means of interpreting the world, not merely closing off from it. Offering close readings of Dickinson's poems on death, Harde argues that Dickinson's relationship not only to death but also to the corpse is affective and loving, as the poet locates salvation and draws reassuringly from Christian iconography in order to assay and assess human death.

In Chapter Two, Monika Elbert draws a connection between the works of Louisa May Alcott and Nathaniel Hawthorne, two writers typically occupying different positions within the literature of the American Renaissance. Investigating the death of a woman that is also *staged* by a woman, Elbert argues that sentimentality is at once subverted and celebrated through the dramatics of the dying woman. The moralizing woman, punished for her sentimentality with her death, manages nonetheless to write the script of her own deathbed scene. Reading Alcott's *A Modern Mephistopheles* and Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter" as well as examining other important deathbed scenes of both writers, Elbert works with the ways in which women's deaths are scripted—that is, determined and conceived—as well as inscribed. Elbert shows how the texts at once adhere to and abandon a sentimental subtext through the dramatic impact of death as it is staged by women rather than men. The figure of the active, creative male is thus disassembled through the final agency of women as subversive creators.

Dara Downey provides another way for us to understand the literary history of femininity and death and returns us to the import of metaphor. She interprets wallpaper and patterned material as a trope in nineteenth-century ghost stories by American women writers. Looking at authors

from Mary Wilkins Freeman's "The Southwest Chamber" to Charlotte Perkins Gillman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," Downey reveals the metonymy of wall coverings as representative of female presence. By simultaneously utilizing and disrupting the everyday signs of domesticity, the aesthetic trappings of the home are transcended as paper, upholstery, and wall coverings become monuments to dead women. They refashion the image of a dead woman as radical in her domesticity, and allow her an ambiguous afterlife in the home and an ensuing power over it.

In her contribution, Elizabeth Dill accounts for the role of death in the sentimental novel, especially its redemptive role in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Pink and White Tyranny*, a little-known instance of the sentimental genre. Dill's chapter centers upon the sentimental culture within the idealized domestic realm, and how that culture uses death to refashion corrupted femininity. In her examination of how that corruption is constructed and then deconstructed, Dill finds that sentimental death eschews actual loss, refuting the presence of the tragic, and instead insists upon using death to revise the character of a bad woman by reinventing her through her daughter. This refusal of loss, Dill argues, arrives in tandem with Stowe's anger regarding a patriarchy that produces women that must be "killed off" in order to become good.

Angela Monsam's chapter moves us toward an archival bend by studying the nineteenth-century medical preoccupation with pathology and contagion. This allows Monsam to explore the curious fact that early American novels of seduction often describe the transactions of courtship and seduction in medicalized terms. She analyzes the physiological and medical language in *The Power of Sympathy*, *The Coquette*, and *Charlotte Temple* as a response to these fears and preoccupations. She argues that the seduction novel specifically addresses erotomania as a disease and represents seduction as a means of contagion, a use of language that attempts to predetermine the ruined woman's death.

Robin Gray Nicks investigates the sensational 1836 murder of Chicago prostitute Helen Jewett, a cultural event that many scholars have argued worked as a catalyst for the fiction of Edgar Allan Poe. When Nicks examines reports of Jewett's murder alongside the fairy tales of Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, however, she discovers similarities between the journalistic writing of the dead woman and the fairy tale's fantasizing of the lifeless woman. Nicks argues that English language translations of Perrault's and Grimms' fairy tales laid the cultural groundwork for and encouraged a preoccupation with women's dead bodies, a tellingly necrophilic cultural desire that figured into the written accounts of the murder of women. After establishing the popularity and

prevalence of fairy tales in nineteenth-century America, Nicks turns to journalist James Gordon Bennett's descriptions of Jewett's body. As Nicks looks closely at news reports and illustrations of Jewett's murder in conjunction with the tales of Basile, Perrault, and the Grimms, she shows how similarities in the descriptions of the dead women and their surroundings render the female corpse both poetical and political.

A public fascination with the crime-dramas of dead prostitutes was not the only way that the bodies of dead women were fetishized, accessed and mediated. Indeed, the popularity of spiritual culture in the second half of the nineteenth century offers us another kind of access to the history of the "ghostlike" and haunting woman. In particular, Jeffrey Weinstock's essay orients us away from the physicality of Jewett's body and toward the metaphysical, suggesting that nineteenth-century American women made use of the supernatural tale as a flexible tool to express a range of anxieties related both to the domestic realm of the home, marriage, and children and to the burgeoning world of the American marketplace. Weinstock argues that while both participating in and manipulating the nineteenth century's fascination with the supernatural, Rose Terry Cooke and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward, two oft-overlooked American female authors, crafted a coherent body of supernatural literature that articulated cultural anxieties about agency and sexual identity. Weinstock focuses on the ways in which the supernatural genre provided nineteenth-century American women with a powerful means to critique heterosexual normativity and to convey same-sex desire in a more sanctioned form. Focusing on fiction by Cooke and Ward, he reveals the ways in which same-sex desire finds its expression only once consummation of the relationship becomes impossible—that is, once one of the women has died. As he contends, the subsequent "derealization" or "ghosting" of the lesbian relationship has a subversive and paradoxical effect of foregrounding its potentiality and its uncanny potency.

The anthology's inclusion of a chapter about Dorothy Parker, writing in the first decades of the twentieth century and at remove from nineteenth-century America, helps nonetheless to guide us into the abiding intersections of literary and feminine cultures and to highlight their continued import. This chapter reveals that the concerns and pleasures surrounding cultural study of the links between death and the feminine in no way disappears as the nineteenth-century winds down. Keyser reads Parker's work within the social and popular contexts of twentieth-century magazine and intellectual cultures, showing us how Parker's reputation as a witty, urbane female literary figure is in fact quite multifaceted and carefully constructed by Parker herself. Doing so allows Keyser to

explore both the “feminine disease” *and* the dis-ease with the feminine that characterize the early decades of the twentieth century.

Much as Keyser’s work on Parker reminds us that the linkage we have been studying is by no means obsolete, twenty-first century American writing continues that trend. No where is this better exemplified than in a book called *Remember Me: A Lively Tour of the New American Way of Death* by Lisa Takeuchi Cullen. Cullen writes about everything from “green” burials to how funeral directors package their sales. Her traveling companion is her infant daughter, whose presence is peppered throughout the book and whose existence Cullen ponders in her introduction, both as a mortal being and as a difficult responsibility that her friends assure her only a crazy new single mother would try to take along on a year’s worth of travel research. Cullen encourages us to revel in the feminism and in the morbid absurdity of moments such as when she finds herself pushing a stroller at the National Funeral Directors Association convention in Nashville and bumps into her first human diamond: that is, a diamond made from the carbon of a human corpse (a sort of modern day hair ornament).

*Remember Me* is a twenty-first century sequel to a nineteenth-century obsession with linking death to the feminine for Cullen’s writing is insistently gendered. As she addresses her own purpose as a researcher, as a writer and as her own subject of inquiry, she takes on the powerfully gendered role of consumer. She writes that her main purpose is to answer the question: “What’s it like to be a consumer shopping for after-death options today?”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, her first line is as gendered as it gets. In a book about death rituals, she asks a debutante’s question, but with a twist: “What do you wear to crash a funeral?” Yet ever so swiftly, this wry feminine stance evolves into a wry, feminine, maternal stance. Standing at her closet, she observes her excessively black wardrobe and remarks: “Here is a classic black shift that used to look great on me before a small person came out of my abdomen. . . . I settle on black pants and a black sweater, both snug in weird places but relatively free of dog hair and spit up” (x). Cullen thus uses herself to present a woman who has given birth at her least romanticized, least sentimentalized moment. She narrates with a dry, witty self-scrutiny that nineteenth-century female writers largely lacked the opportunity to craft.

Cullen is simultaneously self-possessive and vulnerable, becoming a prototype for contemporary femininity: while she is strong, she not superwoman; while she is bright and assured, she is also self-deprecatingly aware of her posture and of the difficulties of maintaining that posture. She reflects, “I felt confident I would take a reporter’s detached approach

to the subject of changing death rites, a journalistic interest in their social, cultural, and business implications. Until I had a child” (xv). This new link between death and the feminine—one that poses a sentimental juxtaposition reminiscent but also transcendent of the nineteenth-century—is at least part of the inspiration behind this volume.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Bronfen’s work is more interested in what troubles representations of woman as a dying figure; she argues that the art that attempts to contain the disruptive essence of femininity and death through representation simply bespeaks a deeper tension about a failure of containment. As she writes, “The threat that death and femininity pose is recuperated by representation, staging absence as a form of re-presence ... And yet .... [t]he recuperation is imperfect, the regained stability not safe” (xii).

<sup>2</sup> Lucy E. Frank, *Representations of Death in Nineteenth-Century US Writing and Culture* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Russ Castronovo, *Necro-Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and The Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Lucy Takeuchi Cullen, *Remember Me: A Lively Tour of the New American Way of Death* (New York: Collins, 2006) xii. Subsequent citations will occur parenthetically and in-text.



“SCOOPING UP THE DUST”:  
EMILY DICKINSON’S THEOLOGY  
OF THE CRYPT

ROXANNE HARDE

In a letter to Thomas Higginson written on the death of his infant daughter, Emily Dickinson offers sympathy and commentary on the small one’s move to heaven: “The flight of such a fraction takes all our Numbers Home—”; she then critiques the offer of heaven as small recompense for his loss: “Heaven must be a lone exchange for such a parentage—”.<sup>1</sup> The letter then considers looking to heaven’s wonder even as it is rejected, and finds comfort in the thought of immortality, the afterlife with God, even in light of the terror death holds:

These sudden intimacies with Immortality, are expanse—not Peace—as  
Lightning at our feet, instills a foreign Landscape. [ . . . ]  
The route of your little Fugitive must be a tender wonder—and yet  
    A Dimple in the Tomb  
    Makes that ferocious Room  
    A Home—  
Your Scholar—<sup>2</sup>

While discussing the commonplace that “any religion worth its salt has to be able to deal with death, not by avoiding it, but by readying for it,” theologian Gail Ramshaw argues that when “the ritual is Christian, it will remember the dead, it will pray for the dying, it will contemplate the cross. Even the triune God, by including Christ, contains human death.”<sup>3</sup> Dickinson’s contemplation of death, the dead body and its crypt, the dimpled cheek in the “ferocious room,” works in the way Ramshaw has described. By holding death close, Dickinson works to remove the terror, to set it aside and see past the corpse.<sup>4</sup> Although Dickinson’s articulation of the corpse has often been read as morbid, this essay argues that she theologizes death and the dead body, shaping an eschatology that offers salvation; she “deals with death,” in the way that Ramshaw suggests, “by

offering it one last meal, one more bite of fresh bread, one more gulp of good wine—the person ministering and the person dying both holding onto a precious gleaming goblet as round as life itself.”<sup>5</sup> Drawing from theorists of death contemporary to Dickinson, including Edgar Allan Poe, and from today's theorists of the body and death, including Elisabeth Bronfen and Maurice Blanchot, this essay seeks to understand Dickinson's juxtapositions of life and death as she communes with the corpse to seek death's ultimate meaning. Through her poetic explorations of the corpse, necrophilia, and the aesthetics of the crypt, Dickinson reaches a conflation of love and the body, including the dead body, that enables her to conflate love and salvation.

As often as Dickinson delves deeply into the living body in her eschatological quest, in poems such as “I am afraid to own a Body,” she models the dead body as part of the same enterprise.<sup>6</sup> By touching, examining, pondering, and even being the corpse, Dickinson casts both a cryptaesthetic and a crypto-theology, a theology hidden within the crypt.<sup>7</sup> Of course Dickinson is known for her cryptic language, a use of language along the lines of the “cryptonyms” uncovered by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok in their study of Freud's Wolf Man. Or, as Jacques Derrida points out in his introduction to that volume, the crypt is meant to hide something, the body, but it also disguises the act of hiding, and “cryptic incorporation always marks an effect of impossible or refused mourning.”<sup>8</sup> The dead body affords a density of verbal play that, while sometimes horrific for Dickinson, also becomes the foundation for faith and a seeking towards eternity. Derrida asks, “against what does one keep a corpse intact, safe from both life and from death, which could both come in from the outside to touch it? And to allow death to take no place in life?”<sup>9</sup> While Derrida is not focused particularly on matters theological, his questions might be Dickinson's as she brings the corpse into the light, into contact with life, in order that she may seek answers to her eschatological quest(ion)ing. For Dickinson, the corpse becomes an agent of theology: she begins with loss in order to know the sacred.

Given Dickinson's historical contexts, the corpse seems a likely site of theological negotiation. In her biography of the poet, Cynthia Griffin Wolff describes at length the cultural customs surrounding death that affected almost the whole of Dickinson's life. The cultural mores of Dickinson's time juxtaposed uneasy oppositional approaches to death; for example, the horror and fear felt by her family at the many untimely deaths due to tuberculosis did not prevent them from having other of their young people, including Dickinson, attend to the details of dying and death. As it fell to women in general to sit with the dying, to lay out the

corpse, and to watch over the dead until the funeral, a peculiar set of circumstances dictated that from early childhood through her formative years, Dickinson was often in contact with death and the dead. As a young woman, she described watching over the death of her fifteen-year-old classmate Sophia Holland: “when they told me I must look no longer I let them lead me away. I shed no tear, for my heart was too full to weep, but after she was laid in her coffin & I felt I could not call her back again I gave way to a fixed melancholy.”<sup>10</sup> Millicent Todd Bingham attributes Dickinson’s preoccupation with death partly to the frequent loss of dear friends, her mother’s anxieties about death, her own illnesses, and the location of her home, for “the Dickinson orchard adjoined the burying ground. [ . . . ] Every funeral procession must pass their house. The wonder is, not that Emily as a young girl thought and often wrote about death, but that any buoyancy of spirit remained.”<sup>11</sup> Dickinson herself reveals that this contact with the corpse insisted that she take seriously the role of the dead body in salvation, as she wrote early in 1856: “to live, and die, and mount again in triumphant body, and *next* time, try the upper air—is no schoolboy’s theme.”<sup>12</sup> She does not regard the corpse as a dangerous other, and instead locates fear and danger in what comes after death and how the corpse operates as an interpretive device.

While the idea of death pervades much of Dickinson’s work, and has been addressed at length by critics, her theological examination of the corpse remains largely absent from this discourse. Barton St. Armand discusses Dickinson’s “science of the grave” as an examination of the many times she “witnessed deathbed behavior” and from which she formulated “dress rehearsals” of the loss of a loved one and her own death.<sup>13</sup> He ties her poems on death to her theological questing, as do I, but his concerns are with the spirit she writes into the room rather than the dead body. In her discussion of the role of death in Dickinson’s eschatology, Virginia Oliver touches briefly on the roles the poet assigns the dead. Without pausing to discuss Dickinson’s corpses, Oliver notes that many poems bring the dead body into relationship with the living, influencing their actions, holding certain attitudes about them, reacting to them.<sup>14</sup> While corpses do not come into play in Elisa New’s readings of the poet’s theology, New argues that Dickinson is one of those poets concerned with beginnings and ends, who focus on eternity and salvation. While my own focus is on Dickinson writing the corpse as a theology and New is concerned with Dickinson’s use of circumference as theological limit, her work informs mine in her reading of the poet’s “chastened attraction to an unformed realm where she exercises little power to speak of” and the ways in which she develops a religious attitude that is

meditative and speculative.<sup>15</sup> As New notes in her comparison of Dickinson and Kierkegaard, the poet replaced the center with circumference, the known with the unknown, because “the very nature of religious experience requires that we yield up our sense of God as centered in our world.”<sup>16</sup> As she develops a theology of death, Dickinson uses the corpse to locate divinity in and outside of this world. Her examinations of the corpse gradually allow her to make the replacements that New suggests.

Even when her discussion of the corpse does not provide clear theological conclusions, Dickinson's visualization of the dead body often works to afford her access to the truths of human existence and death.<sup>17</sup> While Elisabeth Bronfen's particular concern is the male gaze on the dead female body, when she asks “does the image of the corpse [. . .] invite the viewer to look over the body to a knowledge about sexuality, death, and spiritual survival?”, she provides insight into any poetic investigation of the corpse.<sup>18</sup> In Poem 614 (1862), Dickinson takes a body through the stages of death. This body invites, even insists, that the speaker/viewer discover what it hides:

‘Twas warm—at first—like Us—  
Until there crept upon  
A Chill—like frost upon a Glass—  
Till all the scene—be gone.<sup>19</sup>

This first stanza abruptly closes its visualization of the act of dying; the scene is suddenly gone and the line is end-stopped, one of the handful in Dickinson's oeuvre. The poem continues as the body hardens into a corpse:

The Forehead copied Stone—  
The Fingers grew too cold  
To ache—and like a Skater's Brook—  
The busy eyes—congealed—<sup>20</sup>

As the face turns to stone and the eyes congeal into ice, the corpse in Poem 614 becomes object. Using the corpse as an example, Maurice Blanchot argues that the traditional understanding of the image hides an ontological understanding, that the difference between object and image is already within the object that presents itself as image just when it presents itself as phenomenon. It thus reveals a gap within being, not merely between image and being. Blanchot suggests that we learn from cadavers that “man is made in his image: this is what the strangeness of the cadaver's

resemblance teaches us. But this formula must first be understood as follows; man is unmade according to his image.”<sup>21</sup> While Blanchot does not use his theory of the imaginary in any theological fashion, I find his work useful in reading Dickinson. For Blanchot, the image of a dead person hides understanding: does it present object or person? For Dickinson, the corpse presents the person, the living being that mattered to others, but the corpse also presents the unmaking of that person; the presence of the cadaver ensures the absence of that living and loved person. Having made the corpse, and by that act, unmade the person, the poem rings with frustration as the corpse continues to be a closed cipher—the “fading ratio,” as Dickinson defines it in Poem 78—that the speaker cannot understand:

And even when with Cords—  
 ‘Twas lowered, like a Weight—  
 It made no Signal, nor demurred,  
 But dropped like Adamant—<sup>22</sup>

If Dickinson’s goals in unmaking the person are to discover the truths behind death, she fails in this poem. There is no signal here, only stone. Following Elaine Scarry’s contention that representation can work either to bring pain “into visibility or it can push it into further invisibility,” I think that Dickinson’s preoccupation with death and the mystery it holds for her loved ones caused her pain that she works to make visible.<sup>23</sup> In the essay “Friendship,” from the collection of the same name, Blanchot ties together images and consolation, writing that after the death of a loved one, “we will still be able to follow the same paths, we can let images come, we can appeal to an absence that we will imagine, by deceptive consolation, to be our own.”<sup>24</sup> Dickinson imagines absence with the presence of the corpse, and whether her agenda is theological or not, she seems aware that any consolation offered by a corpse might be deceptive, and she casts further for a crypto-theology that might tell her what she needs to know.

At the same time, poems about the corpse that do not deal overtly with theological matters regularly work with ontological content. She tends to construct dichotomous corpses, dead bodies that might signify two very different things simultaneously, and very often those two things are opposites. For Dickinson, dead is dead and not dead, and her dialectic of the corpse is a finely honed reasoning which, as it grants to the dead body the quality of opposition, also grants the corpse autonomy and activity. To Dickinson, the corpse and death are both this and that: making and unmaking (as Blanchot would have it) and appalling and exhilarating, or

killing and life-giving. Poem 341 begins:

'Tis so appalling—it exhilarates—  
 So over Horror, it half captivates—  
 The Soul stares after it, secure—  
 To know the worst, leaves no dread more—<sup>25</sup>

As the dead body enters the crypt, the dumbfounded soul stares after it. The sudden indeterminacy that Dickinson gives the cadaver sets it as both viable mystery and cold inertia, so it then becomes an emblem of the labiality of all things. In the large portion of her corpus that deals with the body and soul, whether Dickinson positions them in opposition or in connection and applies to them a tone of suspicion, these tropes ultimately form a hermeneutics of faith. I rely on Paul Ricoeur's terms here, but suggest that whereas he describes an attitude as belonging to the surface of the text, Dickinson's text signifies the dead body; in fact, she moves past superficial interpretation into the eschatological realm.<sup>26</sup> Her hermeneutics of faith would demand an interpretation of faith closer to Wilfred Cantwell Smith's than to Ricoeur's.<sup>27</sup> Dickinson's urge is to unmask the corpse, to demystify, to demythologize it; if she holds it as text, then she offers a strategy of unremitting textual resistance. At the same time, the corpse as text engages dramatically with her continuous religious questioning and questing. Rather than simply debunking or resisting the corpse, she examines its unique and alien way of speaking, and brings herself into relationship with it. She cannot hold herself safely above or outside the corpse as text but must become vulnerable to it, entering into an intimate encounter with a difficult and potentially disorienting knowledge. This hermeneutics of faith insists on the risk of seeing and knowing in other ways, other forms, other-ness. And, for Dickinson, this hermeneutics of faith ultimately involves religious faith. Though she may claim, "I am afraid to own a Body— / I am afraid to own a Soul—", Dickinson describes a consistent ontological intent in her body and soul poems as both body and soul always know what the other knows.<sup>28</sup> Thus, in Poem 341, the corpse now knows what comes after Horror, and so does the soul, which knows the worst and no longer dreads. Or, as Edgar Allan Poe's narrator notes in "The Pit and the Pendulum," "it was not that I feared to look upon things horrible, but that I grew aghast lest there should be *nothing* to see."<sup>29</sup> Having separated dead body and soul, although both are active and with access to the same knowledge, Dickinson's speaker fashions death as easier than an expectation of something that might result in nothing:

To scan a Ghost, is faint—  
 But grappling, conquers it—  
 How easy, Torment, now—  
 Suspense kept sawing so—<sup>30</sup>

There is no talk of heaven here, but death nevertheless becomes a victory. The corpse becomes a way of knowing, a “Truth” which “is Bald, and Cold—,” where there is “Fright at liberty— / And Terror’s free—.”<sup>31</sup> At the end the corpse is on a “Gay, Ghastly, Holiday!”<sup>32</sup>

While Dickinson allows this dead body a knowledge that it celebrates by going on its grim vacation, she figures other ways of knowing that are much darker. Poem 340, the famous “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” functions as a companion poem to Poem 341, but its epistemology, while repeatedly tantalizing the speaker with complete knowledge, results in a desperate finality. The poem fashions the speaker’s own funeral in the first three stanzas: the mourners tread until sense seems to break through, the service beats until she thinks her mind is going numb, then the “same Boots of Lead” creak across her soul. The final stanzas suggest the gaining of knowledge that ultimately proves unwelcome:

As all the Heavens were a Bell,  
 And Being, but an Ear,  
 And I, and Silence, some strange Race  
 Wrecked, solitary, here—

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,  
 And, dropped down, and down—  
 And hit a World, at every plunge,  
 And Finished knowing—then—<sup>33</sup>

The poem becomes a breathless narrative, relying on the anaphoric “And” for the suggestion of a rushed description of a traumatic experience. The essence of existence before and after death is concentrated into the sense of hearing in a place where there is nothing to hear. The nothing anticipates a mental crisis where reason breaks, and the speaker falls, bouncing off worlds into knowledge. Dickinson’s plank appears in a handful of poems, and faith may be its best synonym in each poem. For example, Poem 926 figures the speaker on a plank with her head in the stars and her feet in the sea, and Poem 1459 sees God sending “his Son to test the Plank.”<sup>34</sup> The plank in Poem 340 may be the conflation of faith and reason, both of which break down when faced with the crisis of the speaker’s own funeral. If, however, this poem offers a moment of religious crisis, that crisis is exacerbated by the silence that runs through the poem,

broken only by the funeral service and the pallbearers; silence culminates in the penultimate stanza when its nothingness becomes everything to the speaker. In those terms, the poem may be read as a crisis of poetry as much as of faith, in that for a poet, the absence of sound will ultimately equal the absence of language, therefore the absence of everything.

There are several poems in which Dickinson more explicitly links her cryptaesthetic to a poetic crisis. In her re-visualizations of the unseen, Dickinson charts the movement towards resolution in the attention she lavishes "On the Longed for Dead."<sup>35</sup> She looks for an understanding that has not existed before, and, like Edgar Allan Poe, she often looks to the corpse for that understanding. Her cryptaesthetic may be best described by the juxtaposition of two statements made by Poe who describes his aesthetic in this way: "when men speak of Beauty, they mean, precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect—they refer, in short, just to that intense and pure elevation of *soul*."<sup>36</sup> Poe then offers this description of his poetics: "the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world."<sup>37</sup> As the site of Poe's art, then, the female corpse provides the experience of beauty and the sublime that shapes the poetry, and the means of understanding the product of his literary activity. As the site of Dickinson's poetic investigation into the meaning of immortality, the corpse also provides her with beauty and the sublime, but with the invitation to investigate the cipher it presents her through poetry. Dickinson describes one of her earliest necrophilic impulses in a poem written on the death of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Poem 637 ostensibly means to thank the poet, but develops instead into a sensual image of her crypt: "I went to thank Her— / But She Slept— / Her Bed—a funneled Stone—"<sup>38</sup> Attracted like Poe to the image of a dead woman, Dickinson holds herself to the here and now, to her affection for the corpse at hand. Both poets develop techniques and theories of imagery and visuality as they aspire to rebuild not only subjective experience, but the "real" itself, although to vastly different ends.

In her earliest corpse poem, Poem 62, Dickinson writes about visiting a wake, again describing the corpse's active passivity:

There's something quieter than sleep  
 Within this inner room!  
 It wears a sprig upon it's breast—  
 And will not tell it's name.<sup>39</sup>

After hinting at the mystery the body withholds from her, she casts about for some guide in the actions of the bereaved, but again must turn to the body:

Some touch it, and some kiss it—  
 Some chafe it's idle hand—  
 It has a simple gravity  
 I do not understand!<sup>40</sup>

The speaker finds the grave-ity of the corpse a closed cipher, then turns from the unsatisfactory touching and kissing to criticize another manifestation of grief: “I would not weep if I were they— / How rude in one to sob!”<sup>41</sup> She then locates herself as a poet in a gesture that is both self-effacing and authoritative:

While simple-hearted neighbors  
 Chat of the “Early dead”—  
 We—prone to periphrasis,  
 Remark that Birds have fled!<sup>42</sup>

With “periphrasis” the speaker undermines her authority as poetic speaker, suggesting that she relies on trite euphemism to talk about death instead of the precise and immediate language of her poetry. At the same time, as one of those prone to circumlocution, she sets herself apart from the “simple neighbors,” since she does speak poetically. Further, the final line is more than periphrastic small talk; throughout her work, Dickinson positions birds as the privileged; they are one of her most complex metaphors and it is their business to sing, their business to love. When they flee they do so because what matters is no longer present. Therefore, with her anticlimactic last line, the speaker suggests that what matters, the loved one now replaced by a corpse, is no longer in this room.

She works to this same end, solving the mystery, in two other early poems, Poems 78 and 238. Poem 78, “As by the dead we love to sit—” sets the speaker by the corpse, although she realizes that even as the body is “so wondrous dear—,” the rest is lost.<sup>43</sup> The poem ends,

In broken Mathematics  
 We estimate our prize  
*Vast*—in it's *fading* ratio  
 To our penurious eyes.<sup>44</sup>

Given her long struggle with severe eye problems, we can assume that Dickinson uses penurious here to mean poor, rather than grudging. Thus as whatever flees—and this is written before she began her long poetic exploration of body and soul—the speaker cannot see, and as in the above poem, does not understand. But in both this poem and Poem 62, she suggests that the means of understanding comes through poetry, which can

repair the vision through imagination, through visualizing what the dead body means and how it can inform the living. Conversely, Poem 238 begins with a dead poet, as indicated with “these” rather than “those” feet, who keeps her own secrets: “How many times these low feet staggered— / Only the soldered mouth can tell—”.<sup>45</sup> The feet indicate both poetry’s metrical foot and the feet of the speaker, staggering under her burden. The mouth, sealed by death, could not summarize events before and cannot after death. The second stanza lingers over the corpse that will never again create in the poetic or the domestic sense:

Stroke the cool forehead—hot so often—  
Lift—if you care—the listless hair—  
Handle the adamantine fingers  
Never a thimble—more—shall wear—. <sup>46</sup>

While this stanza has been read as sardonic, petulant, or solemnly regretful, I contend its interest lies in the absoluteness of the corpse’s secrecy. This body will never communicate again. The final stanza describes the corpse’s room with its dirty window and cobwebbed ceiling, then declares: “Indolent Housewife—in Daisies—lain!”.<sup>47</sup> The speaker argues for a strange doubling, where she will not speak for herself, like any well-behaved corpse, even as she speaks for the critical view of others. The poem may level an implicit critique at cultural customs that bury women in housework, but the modeling of the dead body by the speaker begins a cycle of poems in which Dickinson develops her cryptaesthetic into a theology.

Dickinson models the dead body in poems where the “I” goes about dying, or where the speaker comes into contact with a corpse. Poem 341, discussed above, claims that “Looking at Death, is Dying,” and Poem 243 begins, “That after Horror—that ’twas *us*—”.<sup>48</sup> Poem 355 most clearly explains the process by which corpse begets corpse as the despair of mourning begs relief. The poem begins with a series of negative suppositions: “It was not Death, for I stood up,” nor was it night, frost, or fire.<sup>49</sup> Each suggestion and answer place the speaker firmly within her body as she stands, hears the noonday bell, then feels warm winds and her cold feet. She internalizes all these situations through her sense of taste and explains why she must model her own corpse in the middle two stanzas:

And yet, it tasted, like them all,  
The Figures I have seen  
Set orderly, for Burial,