

**Social Context and the Popular Reception of Poetry:  
The Examples of Dickinson and Longfellow**

by James Kristell

According to self-help pioneer Wayne Dyer, if you “change the way you look at things, [...] the things you look at change” (Dyer). Dyer may seem an odd authority to begin a paper on Emily Dickinson and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, but his maxim holds true in a variety of contexts beyond self-help. For instance, since his untimely 1968 death, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s image has morphed from a widely unpopular racialized radical to a national hero of racial equality (Dupuy). Alternatively, since his mid-twentieth-century suicide, Ernest Hemingway’s reputation has transformed from a paragon of American masculinity to an author whose work is widely seen as misogynistic and homophobic today (Kale 1-6). Neither King’s civil rights work nor Hemingway’s fiction has changed since their respective deaths. Nevertheless, the receptions and reputations of each have materially evolved over the past half-century. Dyer’s incisive aphorism hints at the driving force behind this phenomenon.

Every concept is perceived and evaluated amid a unique intersection of time, social forces, and cultural contexts. In the field of literature, the perception and (consequently) the reception of authors and their works inevitably vary over time due to myriad factors, including the ever-shifting criteria employed to assess an author’s literary merit and cultural significance. Yet despite the complex dynamics affecting an author’s reception over time, an analysis of two poets’ contrasting posthumous trajectories can elucidate the central driver behind such reception shifts: social context. As I demonstrate in the following pages, poets Emily Dickinson and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow represent optimal case studies for such a reception analysis. Dickinson and Longfellow illustrate that while factors like critical reception and conventionality

of poetic form are significant, social context is the most essential component in determining a poet's popular reception at any historical juncture.

One might assume that the perspective of intellectuals serves as the ultimate arbiter of low, middle, and high culture. The decline in Longfellow's mass appeal, however—and the uptick in Dickinson's broad popularity—have illustrated that social context presents an even more essential determinant of placement on the cultural spectrum than the erudite judgements of academicians. As depicted by Dickinson and Longfellow's opposing reception trajectories, the metamorphosis of the American psyche serves as a key driver of the nation's cultural taste. And that metamorphosis is the direct consequence of its social context.

To understand Dickinson's and Longfellow's relationship with social context over time, it is useful to consider their respective backgrounds. Despite their common nineteenth-century New England setting, the historical context, poetic work, and widespread reception of Dickinson and Longfellow have differed greatly over the decades. In fact, in their early days of posthumous reception, one *Chicago Journal* critic portrayed Dickinson “as a ‘[b]loodless, disembodied’ offshoot of a once rich New England ‘soil’ that had brought forth ‘Emerson, Lowell, Channing, Longfellow’” (Chaudron 8).

The personal backgrounds of Dickinson and Longfellow reveal the unique intersection of time, societal forces, and cultural context in which each poet produced their work. Among the most defining facets of Emily Dickinson's life were her gender and sexuality. During Dickinson's mid-nineteenth century adulthood, the vast majority of American society expected and demanded heterosexuality and domesticity from women. As such, the lesbian undertones in select Dickinson poetry along with her lack of marriage and childbearing exemplify the stark unconventionality of her life. Unsurprisingly, Dickinson's indifference to these cultural norms

resulted in a dearth of widespread societal understanding of her writing at the time. Her well-known reclusiveness further separated her from society's mainstream. Composed in her characteristically eccentric and experimental writing style, Dickinson's poetry reflects many of her aforementioned societal transgressions ("Emily Dickinson").

In contrast, Longfellow's popularity arose in large part as a result of his compliance with characteristics perceived as favorable in the context of nineteenth-century American society. Longfellow hailed from an aristocratic Maine family and was trained in literature by an elite American institution. Groomed for professorship by the most prestigious scholars during his postgraduate years travelling across Europe, Longfellow had already garnered a distinguished reputation as one of the poetic masterminds of his day by age thirty. Employing the widely-accepted stylistic forms and conventions of nineteenth-century academics (e.g. anapestic and trochaic lyric poems, sonnets, and ballads), Longfellow produced largely unobjectionable poetry that glorified America and delivered a widely palatable message of national identity to the general public ("Henry Wadsworth").

Given their backgrounds, it remains unsurprising that Longfellow enjoyed widespread popularity throughout his life whereas Dickinson not only lacked public fame, but also suffered from the negative criticism of intellectuals and the general public of the time. By all indications of Dickinson and Longfellow's milieu, it seems astonishing that less than 150 years after their respective deaths, the Poetry Foundation describes Longfellow as the "best-loved American poet *of his lifetime*" ("Henry Wadsworth"; emphasis added), yet holds Dickinson in higher national and poetic regard as "one of America's greatest ... poets *of all time*" ("Emily Dickinson"; emphasis added). However, in this comparison lies a misnomer. In fact, there was one point in time when Dickinson was lauded by nearly no one as a great writer: her own time. Of her nearly

2,000 poems, only a dozen were published during her life (“Biography”). Nevertheless, nowadays, journalist-bloggers like Dean Rader rank Dickinson far ahead of Longfellow in lists of the best poets of all time (Rader). Moreover, according to Ranker.com’s collection of ratings of nearly sixteen-thousand internet voters, there is consensus in Rader’s judgment (“The Greatest”). This raises the question: How could such a seismic shift in popularity occur in so few generations of readership?

Dickinson’s and Longfellow’s divergent reception trajectories highlight three essential elements of a poet’s popular reception and its evolution over time: social context, critical reception, and conventionality. While critical reception strongly drives a poet’s reputation and legacy, this input seldom molds the poet’s popular reception (which instead stems from the poetry’s congruence with social norms). Similarly, even though the conventionality of poets’ styles and bodies of work can predict their reception at any given historical moment, this category also depends on temporally-shifting standards. In contrast, due to its superordinate nature over the former two elements, social context plays the most salient role in shaping how the general public judges a poet. By analyzing the opposing reception trajectories of Dickinson and Longfellow, we can clearly see that social context ultimately dictates a poet’s dynamic popular reception over time.

In a 2006 essay, Agnieszka Salska emphasizes the strong correlation between social context and Longfellow’s early popular success. Salska’s reception study of Longfellow’s work relates his initial mass popularity to the resonating themes of his poetry: themes that captured the spirit of the United States’ blossoming national identity. Furthermore, in her investigation of the reasons behind America’s collective reverence of Longfellow during (and for many years after) his life, Salska details Longfellow’s keystone role in exposing “America’s literary potential and

glory” (611). In fact, Salska traces Longfellow’s contributions to “the birth of American cultural self-sufficiency” (612). As Salska’s analysis illustrates, the widespread allure of Longfellow’s oeuvre resulted not solely from its veneration or promotion by academics, but rather as a result of his keen pen that chronicled the vibrant spirit of the early American experience. As historian David Barber put it in his introduction to a selection of Longfellow poems, in a 2000 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*,

Longfellow deserves no less than to be remembered as the native bard who gave mythic dimension to the country's historical imagination, a national poet of epic sweep and solemn feeling who came along right at the moment when the emerging nation had the most need for one. The forest primeval, the village smithy under the spreading chestnut tree, the midnight ride of Paul Revere, the Indian princeling Hiawatha in his birch canoe—such were the iconic images Longfellow forged out of the American collective consciousness in volume after lionized volume. (qtd. in Salska 612)

Clearly, Longfellow’s esteemed memorialization of American culture won him widespread popularity. In the societal context of a nation forging its identity and character, Longfellow represented a boon in his ability to capture America’s prideful and diverse spirit in the literary realm. For this, Salska explains, Longfellow’s work became a supranational artifact that portrayed American glory and represented a relic of the American psyche that nearly all could support.

While Longfellow undertook the largely unobjectionable task of glorifying shared images of Americana already revered by many, Dickinson assumed a more societally-challenging task of greater personal significance, thereby precluding the allure enjoyed by Longfellow in his heyday. As columnist Johann Hari explained in his 2011 review of Michael Bronski’s *A Queer History of*

*the United States*, early American society's views on sexuality originated from European Puritan beliefs. Such principles "looked on in revulsion" at homosexuality and "forced to the margins" those with sexualities like Dickinson's (Hari). Dickinson's incongruence with mainstream societal expectations of sexuality resulted in the composition of poetry that challenged many of her time's notions of sexual propriety.

Even in today's more progressive culture, Dickinson's work still stands at the cutting edge of such discussions. Sylvia Henneberg concludes that Dickinson is revolutionary in "allow[ing] the sexual identities of her speakers and addressees to oscillate between lesbian and straight, thus letting the erotic experiences she describes in her love poetry shift back and forth along a continuum of multiple eroticisms" (1). Yet Henneberg also argues that some scholars adopt an incomplete and more simplistic perspective: "critics frequently ... subdivide Dickinson's love poetry into 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' poems and then produce readings that enable them to fit each poem into one of the two categories" without reading into the depth of Dickinson's writing or acknowledging the fluid nature of sexuality (2). Reducing the nature of Dickinson's poetry to singular depictions of homosexuality minimizes the sexual complexity of her ideas and provides a convenient basis to superficially reject the merit of her writing. For years, Dickinson's work faced the bottleneck of institutionalized homophobia which resulted in popular and scholarly stagnation in the interpretation and appreciation of her poetry's nuanced, multifaceted meanings. Fortunately, today's social context fosters an academic environment that generally embraces scholarship in this historically-controversial area of human exploration. As Henneberg notes, in today's climate, "Dickinson's textual-sexual body is [now] in constant motion" (15), thereby enhancing her popularity and reshaping her legacy into one congruent with

the current social context. That is to say, the sexual ambiguity in Dickinson's poetry aligns with today's increased understanding and tolerance of sexuality's fluidity.

Self-proclaimed "kink, politics, and anthropology" blogger Samuel Zaber's underscores this "constant motion" of "Dickinson's textual-sexual body" as he reflects upon the sticking point that initially prevented Emily Dickinson's extensive popularity (Zaber). Certainly, in the social context of Puritan-inspired nineteenth-century New England, bisexual undertones in women's poetry would prove fatal to any attempt at garnering widespread acclaim. However, with the emergence of prolific and esteemed poets of female and queer backgrounds over the last several decades, critical rereadings of Dickinson's work in distinctly different social contexts have engendered a renaissance of Dickinson scholarship and mass appeal. In his 2013 blog analysis, Zaber anecdotally expounds upon Dickinson's personal significance: "Emily Dickinson the Lesbian was so exciting to me because I felt less alone. To a young high school student in rural Vermont with few queer heroes around it was thrilling to see that I could be queer and also achieve greatness" (Zaber). Queerness, of course, did not equate to heroism in Dickinson's time; the shift in social context, however, provides a new lens through which Dickinson's work can be read and ultimately venerated.

While Zaber's connection to Dickinson's work illustrates a personal sentiment that many of today's readers experience when engaging with Dickinson's content, the ramifications of a greater societal acceptance of sexual diversity also extend into academia. In contrast to Longfellow's poetry, which provided critics with "sturdy models for Romantic nationalism" to study (Burt 511), Dickinson's poetry presented themes so inaccessible that no one was able to conduct intelligent study on her oeuvre in the nineteenth century. However, in today's social context, the fields of gender and sexuality continue gaining traction in academia. *The New York*

*Times* art critic Holland Cotter credits Dickinson's rise in popularity to the growth in gender and sexuality scholarship, explaining that "feminist theory and queer studies have contributed to reshaping her personality profile. A shy, passive, recessive figure has been transformed into an active, mettlesome, gender-challenging presence, a poet in control of her art and environment, and fully conscious of the mechanics of personal myth" (Cotter). Clearly, despite her writings remaining constant, the social context in which Dickinson's poetry is now interpreted has radically altered their popularity. Without the context and terminology of the relatively nascent fields of feminist and queer studies, the sexual dimensions of Dickinson's work would remain too abstruse for many readers to intelligently analyze and appreciate. This shift in social context transformed Dickinson's poetry and personal image from societally-withdrawn to actively challenging the conventions of sexuality in poetry.

The diverse content of Dickinson and Longfellow's poetry clearly played an outsized role in their differing receptions over time. Admittedly, however, their poetry itself also takes remarkably disparate forms. Yet even these formal differences surely relate directly to their respective backgrounds. As a product of nineteenth-century high-literature pedagogy, Longfellow's poetry complied with all of the accepted conventions of diction, meter, and verse. By obeying these widely-accepted poetic customs, Longfellow's poetry enjoyed immediate positive reception ("Henry Wadsworth"). In fact, Longfellow's widespread fame arose due to the rapid propagation of his poetry throughout the general public. As Harvard professor Stephanie Burt expresses in her critique of the decline in mainstream American culture's consumption of poetry, Longfellow's work consisted of "the poems a child could perform or memorize, later to take their place among the 'best-loved poems' remembered in adult life, [and] could demonstrate the persistence of the child 'inside' the adult" (511). In the climate of

nineteenth-century America, Longfellow's poems presented accessibility to the masses as their style and messaging aligned with the beloved forms and narratives of the day. While once an advantageous characteristic, the accessibility of many of Longfellow's poems disqualifies his work from high placement on the cultural spectrum today. Longfellow's work now reads only as a trite middlebrow presentation of the hackneyed images of Americana.

In direct contrast to Longfellow's more classical technique, Dickinson's mostly untitled verse, lack of stanza breaks, and unspecified first-person speakers exemplify widely inaccessible yet groundbreaking advancements in poetry ("Major Characteristics"). This disregard for poetic convention proved deleterious to her nineteenth-century popular and critical reception. For instance, upon reviewing select Dickinson poems for publication in 1883, editor Thomas Niles suggested that her verse was "quite as remarkable for defects as for beauties and ... generally devoid of true poetical qualities" (qtd. in Johnson xlv). Today's highly positive reception of Dickinson contrasts starkly with such criticism. In fact, in his documentary history of Dickinson's reception, scholar Willis J. Buckingham notes "an inclination among younger critics to be less submissive to formalist preoccupations than their older colleagues" (xiv). In an age where poetry education in the United States is less prevalent and in vogue, formalist style offers less value and influence in determining popularity. Instead, nowadays, Dickinson's verse attracts the general public and critics alike for its "expression ... free[d] ... from conventional restraints" ("Emily Dickinson"). The experimental nature of Dickinson's poetry — with its avant-garde punctuation, unorthodox noun capitalization, and innovative diction choices ("Major Characteristics") — indubitably contributed to its rise on the cultural spectrum. As a result of its liberation from the stifling poetic customs of the day, Dickinson's poetry reads more esoterically and lacks universal accessibility. The sophistication in her poetry's textual form and its many

layers of meaning elevate Dickinson's work above the intellectual grade of more conventional writing: a defining characteristic of high art. Clearly, Dickinson and Longfellow's opposing positions on the conventionality spectrum ultimately impacted their reception in differing social contexts.

Irrefutably, Longfellow's popularity at his peak represented an unequalled force in the American poetic sphere. However, one could argue that Longfellow's background and early popularity served as a springboard to his later fame of supranational proportion. Such an argument implies that Dickinson's widespread popularity of today only reflects a fleeting trendiness in her poetry's style and content. While this line of thought seems cogent given the transient high repute of Longfellow, a scathing criticism of Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* refutes that authorial popularity lies primarily in name recognition or even the fame of an author's earlier compositions. Rather, social context always represents the principal arbiter of a particular work.

As a December 1855 review from the *New-York Daily Times* (now *The New York Times*) illustrates, even Longfellow was not immune to the rejection of a work's merit on the basis of society's lack of readiness to navigate certain themes. In a critical review of *The Song of Hiawatha*, his recently published epic poem, *New-York Daily Times* editors polemically lambasted Longfellow's choice of subject matter. For a poet so widely respected for authoring the narratives of (white) America, the poem's reviewers openly questioned why Longfellow would want to portray "an Indian saga, embalming pleasantly enough the monstrous traditions of an uninteresting and, one may almost say, a justly exterminated race" before declaring that "as a poem, it deserves no place" ("Longfellow's Poem"). To the mid-nineteenth century middlebrow white newspaper reader, Native Americans carried the perception of savages and menaces to the

common good. As a result, *The Song of Hiawatha* initially received an unfriendly reception by many. Seemingly, neither Longfellow's privileged background nor his high regard could shield him from the social forces of his time.

Notably, critics and the public now view this epic poem as one of Longfellow's and America's magna opera. Demonstrating the correlation between a work's social context and its popularity, today's audience of *The Song of Hiawatha* adopts a gentler stance toward Native Americans. Nowadays, Americans embrace indigenous people as part of the national identity rather than systematically shunning and oppressing them toward extinction.

In the case studies of Dickinson and Longfellow, the supreme role of social context in dictating a poet's popularity is evident. Despite their divergent reception trajectories, Dickinson and Longfellow's respective pursuits of identity played a substantial role in the reception of their work over time. At his peak popularity, Longfellow satisfied the desires of a people yearning for a national identity. His sketches of Americana captured stories of collective heritage, folktales, and everyday life that resonated with a still-nascent nation. As Longfellow scholar Stephanie Burt espoused, the poet's intergenerational allure resulted from his ubiquity in the many facets of the American identity: "Adults and children learned from Longfellow ...how to be Americans" (510). However, as time proceeded, America's national identity has veered away from the glorification of heartbroken Acadian girls, village blacksmiths, and prideful sea captains. In contrast, today's climate has reframed Dickinson's sesquicentenary work as a novel revelation in the exploration of the complexities of gender and sexuality. In the midst of a cultural awakening where heteronormativity lacks its former dominance, the layers of Dickinson's work can finally be appreciated in a social context conducive to such ideas.

With this shifting of cultural identity, the lens of social context demands that both critics and the general public view poets like Dickinson and Longfellow differently. Critical reception and adherence to conventional standards bear a significant impact on a poet's popularity over time, of course, but social context's superordinate position over these other two categories suggests that social context ultimately dictates a poet's reception over time. After all (to borrow Wayne Dyer's logic), given that their respective works have remained unchanged, Dickinson's and Longfellow's extreme shifts in popular reception can only have resulted from a change in vantage point. Given the inevitability of the passage of time, such shifts in popular reception must originate from the evolution of social context.

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