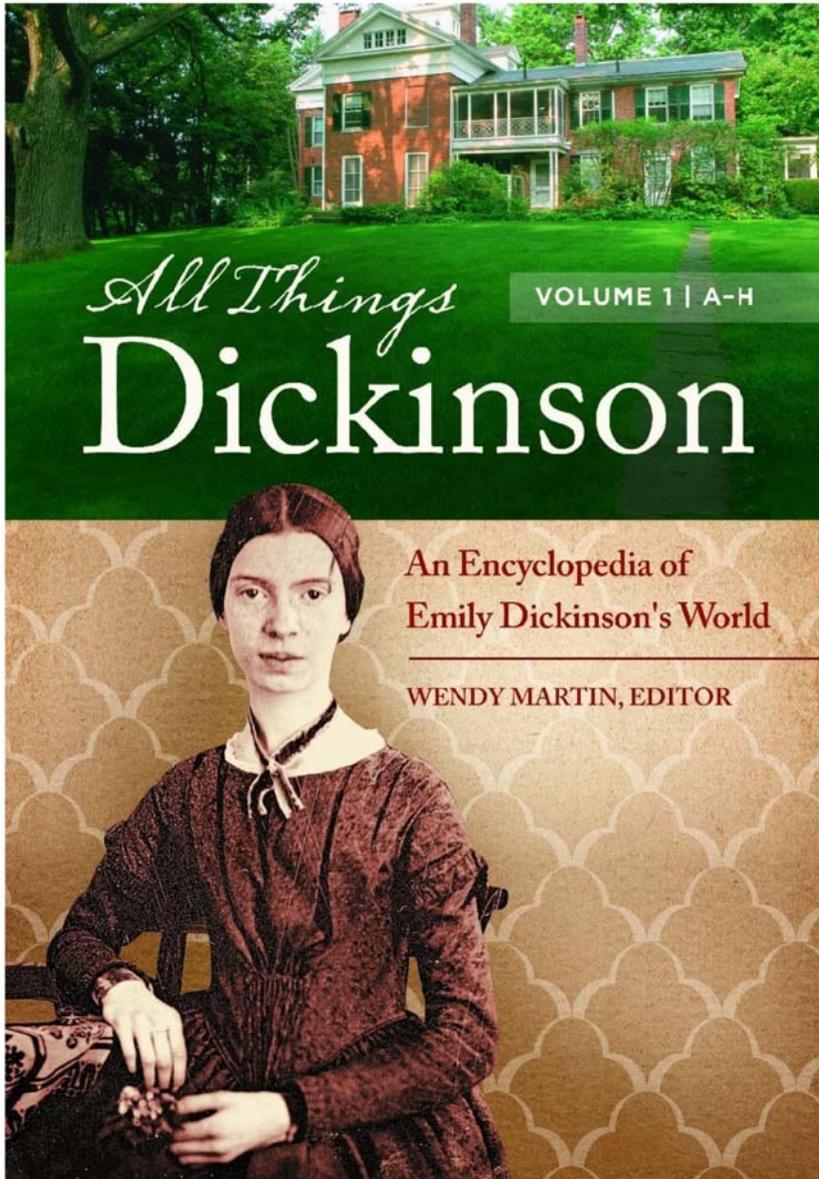


Magnet, Alec. "Shops." *All Things Dickinson: An Encyclopedia of Emily Dickinson's World*. Ed. Wendy Martin. Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO/Greenwood, 2014. 2:775-779.



## Shops

For a poet so associated with otherworldly reclusiveness, Emily Dickinson wrote a lot of poems about retail. Roughly 10 percent of Emily Dickinson's poems employ economic metaphors, according to Robert Merideth (1964, 438), and among those "[t]he merchant situation [recurs] like a leitmotif" (440). Many of these poems introduce shops, merchants, or commerce for just a stanza or less, whereas a number seem to take place entirely in shops or to comprise extended scenes of bargaining and negotiation.

In one classic scenario of the Dickinsonian shop poem, the speaker attempts to buy something—often from God—that, by its very nature, cannot be bought or sold. In the famous "I asked no other thing," for example, the speaker unsuccessfully attempts to bargain with "The Mighty Merchant" to exchange her "Being" for something rare, exotic, and vibrant—in this case, "Brazil" (*P* 306, no. 621, 3–5). According to George Monteiro, "Brazil" here refers to cloth steeped in the orange-red dye of the brazilwood tree, which Dickinson alludes to elsewhere as well (1969, 205; c.f. *P* 279–80, no. 574, and *P* 406, no. 842). As a metaphor, it participates in Dickinson's tendencies both to use exotic fabrics to mean divine wisdom or grace, immortality or salvation (as in *P* 614–15, no. 1446), and to use "names of places in the South, such as *India, Peru, Brazil, Italy, Sicily, Teneriffe, and Jamaica,*" as synonyms for delight (Zapedowska 2012, 4; italics in original). But the Mighty Merchant is out of "Brazil" and condescendingly asks her if she—"Madame"—would not prefer something else in the shop (*P* 306, no. 621, 7). Scholars have approached this poem from several different directions. According to Merideth, it criticizes a society so enthralled by finance capitalism that it "had no sense of the intrinsically valuable," of value not determined by commercial exchange and profit (1964, 440). For Monteiro, the poem uses "the total resources of a native tradition of humor" to satirize the God of Puritan tradition as well as contemporary institutionalized religion by constructing an "image of irreverence toward an incompetent God barely worthy of irreverence" (1959, 456). Peter Stoneley, on the other hand, adapts both points to his reading of the poem as a critique of gendered imbalances of power. As in many of Dickinson's merchant poems, he writes, the female buyer's "power is closely circumscribed by [the] masculine interests" of the male shopkeeper (2000, 586). By making such an impossibly large demand, however, the speaker of 306 pretends "to expect more from consumerism than it could ever deliver in order to subvert it." She thus refuses to be "bought off" or bribed into submission with inferior goods. By associating this oppressively masculine consumer economy with religion, moreover, she "ironize[s] the notion of God, the symbolic father of patriarchy" (587).

The power relations of the shop poems can go in either direction, however. In some, the dominant party is the one representing patriarchal or commercial control. Stoneley mentions “I Came to buy a smile – today –” (*P* 102–3, no. 223)—in which a male shopkeeper rejects a female customer’s attempts to cross two incommensurable orders of exchange, the emotional and the monetary—as another example of “woman’s powerlessness . . . conveyed through this discourse of retail” (2000, 588). Similarly, the tragicomic speaker of the early poem “I haven’t told my garden yet –” internalizes the sneering shopkeepers’ social control to such a degree that she refuses to admit to anyone the fact of her own death, out of fear in part that the “shops would stare at [her]” for having the audacity, as “one so shy – so ignorant,” to do something as attention-getting as die (*P* 27–28, no. 50, 6–7). On the other hand, the “Shopman” in “A Clock stopped –” is utterly powerless in the face of eternity (*P* 132–33, no. 287). He can do nothing to restart a clock, the stopping of which materially represents death. Like the “Doctors” who are also working on it and “Geneva’s [that is, the manufacturer’s] farthest skill,” he cannot cross the “Decades of arrogance between / The Dial life – / And Him” (*P* 132–33, no. 287, 10, 3, 16–18).

“Oh give it Motion – deck it sweet” portrays a similar impotence, but with a twist (*P* 639, no. 1527). As Melanie Hubbard (1998) explores, the poem incorporates its engagement with the culture of retail even into the material circumstances of its composition. A number of Dickinson’s drafts, notes, and even fair copies of poems have been found scribbled on advertising flyers, newspaper ads, and old shopping lists. Recent scholarship has paid attention to the possible relationships between these scraps and what Dickinson wrote on them as evidence of what she might have been thinking about as she wrote. Dickinson copied this poem out neatly, however, and she did so on the back of a printed guarantee from The German Student Lamp Co. which promises that, “[s]hould this Lamp not fulfill this Guarantee, another will be supplied in its place” (qtd. in Hubbard 1998, 33). According to Hubbard, the poem reads as if it were “calling in the guarantee in the most direct way—writing a letter to the company” (Hubbard 1998, 33). Adopting the characteristic voice of ironic over-identification with the claims of retailers and advertisers, Dickinson has her speaker petition an unnamed interlocutor to repair an unspecified “it.” The language is vague enough to preserve the possibility that “it” is a lamp that will not light. As the poem progresses, however, the suggestion becomes increasingly strong that “it” is in fact the soul of someone recently dead, which the poem’s speaker would like returned to its body. The impossibility of that demand thus ironically contrasts the insouciant promise of mass production that any item can be exchanged to the fact that, unlike commodities, human beings are each irreplaceable.

A related set of Dickinson’s shop poems contrasts the triviality of commercial value to things of more fundamental significance. “So large my Will,” for example, imagines that, from the perspective of the afterlife, Earth with look as petty as toys that we buy, take home, and then wonder “At our Conceit / In Purchasing” (*P* 471, no. 1024, 15–16). Even things bought in paradise are far less valuable, by nature of their having been bought, than things achieved through moral labor. For example, the speaker of “Joy to have merited the Pain –” celebrates the fact that, having accomplished the strenuous work of a living moral life, she has earned entrance to heaven, where “to look upon thy face,” she says, “With these old fashioned Eyes –” is “Better than new – could be – for that – / Though bought in Paradise –” (*P* 384, no. 788, 5–8).

In as much as Dickinson’s representation of God as “The Mighty Merchant” does criticize the commercialization of religion, it comments on a longstanding rhetorical tradition of using economic metaphors to explain religious concepts. As Vivian R. Pollak points out, this tradition stretches back the Bible and is a strong feature of Puritan hymns and literature on both sides of the Atlantic (1973, 166). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, evangelical movements in both Britain and America strengthened the association between Christian feeling and consumerism via the rhetoric of sensibility. Closely associated with the rise of sentimental literature and women’s writing in the eighteenth century, “sensibility” referred to the psychophysical concept of receptiveness to feelings, especially elevating feelings such as sympathy, compassion, religious veneration, and the appreciation of beauty. G. J. Barker-Benfield reports that “eighteenth-century consumerism . . . was basic to [women’s] cultivation of sensibility” (1992, xxv). The culture of sensibility, in turn, was fundamental to John Wesley’s (1703–1791) revival movement, which began in England in 1729 and led to the rise of Methodism. The culture of sensibility was also a crucial element of America’s three evangelical “Great Awakenings”—especially to the first two, which took place in the mid-eighteenth century and between 1790 and the 1840s, respectively. In America, Lori Merish writes, “[b]y the 1830s, a wide range of Protestant authors acknowledged the ‘civilizing’ influence of luxury and tasteful . . . domestic surroundings. Refined objects were, by many, deemed essential to the emotional culture of ‘civilized’ persons” (2000, 91).

Through the figure of the shopkeeper God, Dickinson responds to this conflation of religion, sentiment, and consumerism in several ways. Most straightforwardly, she satirizes the idea that divine punishment and reward can be compared to a commercial transaction. The poem “You’re right – ‘the way is narrow,’” for example, exaggerates this rhetoric to absurdity in order to suggest how ridiculous it already was to begin with (*P* 107, no. 234). The Kingdom of Heaven, according to the poem’s faux-naïve speaker, is “Costly – So are *Purples!*” (5). The price is death. For those who

make it, heaven is a “*Dividend*” on a good investment (10). For those who don’t, the alternative seems to be not Hell but debtor’s prison—“I guess,” concludes the speaker, abruptly ending the poem and indicating its sardonic intent (12). “Ostensibly, the speaker . . . is agreeing with her minister,” writes Merideth. “Really, by extending his economic imagery further than he would perhaps wish, by identifying his values with those of the . . . market, . . . she criticizes his economic interpretation of salvation” (1964, 448). She thereby implicates the clergy in the same trivial commercialization of ethics and value for which she criticizes the emerging middle class.

Dickinson’s satire on commercialism, however, also participates in the robust Christian countertradition of denouncing “the values of the . . . market.” The opening lines of “You’re right – ‘the way is narrow’” (P 107, no. 234) quote a famous passage from the Matthew 7:14. Elsewhere in the Book of Matthew appears one of the New Testament’s strongest condemnations of materialism: “It is easier for a camel to go through a needle’s eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God” (19:24). To some degree, Dickinson’s religiously themed shop poems echo the ambivalence at the heart of Puritan and Evangelical Christianity’s relationship to consumerism. Indeed, for all that this poem mocks the commercialization of the heavenly reward, other of Dickinson’s shop poems closely follow the logic of Jesus’s exhortation earlier in the Sermon on the Mount: “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon the earth, . . . but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, . . . for where thy treasure is, there will thy heart be also” (6:19–21). The poem “His Mind like Fabrics of the East,” for example, compares God to a merchant displaying exotic commodities that few can buy (P 614–15, no. 1446). The problem is not that they are too expensive. It is that, in order to buy them, “An humble Purchaser” must have the aesthetic and spiritual taste to recognize their value (4). In that sense, “it is not capitalism, or even ‘acquisitiveness’, which [Dickinson] sees as the enemy,” according to Pollak. “Indeed, the self of her poems is an inveterate hoarder and represented as spiritually greedy, distinguished not by passivity or generosity, but by its superior ability to discriminate true worth” (1973, 166). Similarly, the early poem “I never lost as much but twice” represents spiritual unwellness as the loss of inventory (P 27, no. 49). Pollak reads the speaker as a “shopkeeper whose ‘store’ has been burgled” and now must beg for reimbursement from God (169), the “Burglar! Banker – Father!” who—as in the Book of Job 1:21—giveth and taketh away (P 27, no. 49, 7). Material and spiritual wealth do not oppose each other here. The speaker’s “store” (6)—her supply of goods—simply represents her emotional and spiritual prosperity. And occasionally Dickinson just replicates the basic metaphor of salvation as economic exchange. Both “The hallowing of Pain” (P 377, no. 772), for example, and “I took on Draught of Life –” straightforwardly present one’s life as the price of entry to heaven (P 700, no. 1725).

*See also:* Banking and Property; Biblical Allusions; Businesses; Consumer Economy; Cosmetics; Fashion, Clothing, and Accessories; Hats; Jewelry; Money; Property Rights; Puritanism; Religion; Shoes; Social Class; Textiles and Sewing; Women Writers; Women’s Rights and Gender Debates.

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## Social Class

Emily Dickinson’s letters and poems are interspersed with class-conscious and class-divisive comments, revealing a portrait of a nineteenth-century homebound woman who, despite her self-removal from the social world, possessed a keen sense of social class distinctions. Although her writings