ESSAY

WHY EMILY DICKINSON IS A NEW PIN-UP FOR THE INSTAGRAM GENERATION

A reclusive 19th-century poet obsessed with death might not sound like a millennial icon, but Emily Dickinson is just that, says Lotte Jeffs

Lotte Jeffs | Sunday October 20 2019, 12.01am, The Sunday Times

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Sad-girl autumn is in full flow. We are all Lana Del Rey and gingerbread lattes. Our social-media feeds are less ersatz "good times" and more "getting real moments", as the influencers we once looked to for light-hearted and aspirational escapism plunge into the depths of their neuroses for some serious — trigger warning — authenticity.

And who has been appointed the official face of this new mood? Is it Lana in the Charlie's Angels music video, weighed down by her black angel wings as she stomps moodily alongside Miley and Ariana? Is it Greta Thunberg scowling at world leaders? Is it you, queuing in the rain at 6pm for a no-reservations restaurant, only to be told after an hour that there's only a sharing table available?

Nope. Emily Dickinson, the groundbreaking 19th-century poet, is, as Lizzo would put it, "100% that bitch". For a start, no one else has so elegantly articulated the complicated dichotomy of desire for public profile and privacy that shapes the way we navigate our online lives as we slide into the DMs of a new decade. In her poem I'm Nobody! Who Are You?, first published, as were all but 10 of her nearly 1,800 works, after her death in 1886, the stanza that begins "How dreary — to be — Somebody!" could well sum up the influencer ennui of today.

Hailee Steinfeld as the poet in Dickinson
MICHAEL PARMELEE/COURTESY OF APPLE

It has long been believed that Dickinson was a recluse who rarely left the small bedroom of her home in Amherst, Massachusetts, and was fiercely against her poetry being read by others. But more recent, "woke" understandings of Dickinson posit instead that she was gutsy and ambitious. Carolyn Vega, who curated an exhibition of her letters and manuscripts in 2017, told the BBC: "While it is true that she did retreat from society, it is also true that she was deeply connected to her world through family, friendships and literary mentors and editors. She also read widely and was aware of political realities, including the American Civil War, that were going on around her. It is not true that she lived in a vacuum."

It's this revisionist version of the writer that has informed the series Dickinson, launching on Apple TV+ on November 1. Hailee Steinfeld plays Emily as a moody "FML dude!" millennial, anachronistically existing in Civil War-era America. (Wiz Khalifa plays Death, which gives you a further sense of how much viewers are expected to suspend their disbelief.) No doubt Dickinson's well-documented love affair with her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert will also be a key focus of the show. Amid our current obsession with labelling the nuances of gender and sexual identity, Dickinson's veiled queerness takes on a new appeal.

It's not just this series, either — the fashion world has long had a love affair with all things ED. Karl Lagerfeld was known to adore reading Emily Dickinson; on his death, Silvia Fendi posted a tribute on Instagram, quoting the poet: "Dear friend, I felt it shelter to speak to you ..." Elsewhere, the fashion designer Chen Xuzhi presented a collection more overtly inspired by the poet for his SS19 Xu Zhi show, with dramatically tasselled shirts and dresses in all-white or bold colours, alluding to the mythology surrounding Dickinson. A quick swipe through Instagram, meanwhile, brings up more than 119,000 posts hashtagged Emily Dickinson — a snapshot of a new generation of superfans.

I asked Charly Cox, author of the poetry collections She Must Be Mad and Validate Me, who has built up a fanbase by sharing her writing on social media, if it matters that people today may get Emily Dickinson's poetry "wrong", posting her exquisitely crafted lines on Insta as though they are just another #inspo quote.

"Who's to say who understands what?" Cox asks. "It's a bit like castigating someone with a knock-off Banksy in their bedroom for not being able to wax lyrical about anti-fascism. Nobody necessarily understands Emily Dickinson's poetry other than Emily Dickinson. You don't have to be a certain type of person to enjoy it. That idea in itself devalues what poetry is about before it says anything about her work."

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The very form of Dickinson's verse plays with this idea of space in between meaning. She uses dashes and ellipses to symbolise the pauses and the silences of interpretation, and her sporadic capitalising of words subverts their expected power. It also makes her poems look very much like Instagram captions — minus the emojis. Part of the resurgence of popularity among young people now may well be down to her work's snackable presentation. These are metaphors as memes, ideas tightly packed in so few words you could almost tweet them in their entirety. Hers is a voice our attention spans can compute.

One cannot help but wonder, though, what the poet would make of Hailee Steinfeld's Emily-inspired hit single, Afterlife (Dickinson), currently at more than 7m downloads; the video sees her being pulled around in a corset and cavorting through the wilderness in various states of historic undress. It is said, from close readings of her correspondence, that Dickinson did, at least, have a sense of humour.

Most of the themes explored in her work, however, err on the darker, deeper side of being human. This is another reason for Dickinson's resurgence as a voice of the new generation. We have the language to talk about our mental health like never before, but some feelings can only be explained through a poetic image. Cox, who has written poems about her own struggles with depression, says: "Dickinson navigates pain in a way that doesn't sell it short: she paints stormy pictures of how it really feels — not what we want it to look like in an over-romanticised/tortured soul way." Her favourite Dickinson line is "Unable are the Loved to die". She told me: "I had it scribbled in the back of my homework planner at school — admittedly next to the names of boys in years above that I fancied. It's such a hopeful statement in its darkness. The idea that feeling is enough to be your legacy, that what is so innate within you and so vulnerable, something that can feel crushing or delicate, is also the strongest fighter against your mortality. I love that and believe it, too."

The narrative around a female poet who died aged 55, who may or may not have struggled with her mental as well as her physical health, who was in love, possibly, with a woman, and who battled to receive respect for her writing while also being acutely aware of how vulnerable this made her, will continue to change with our changing times. One thing is certain, though: Emily Dickinson will remain a constant source of inspiration, wisdom and support, for Sad-Girl Autumn and beyond.

"I am out with lanterns looking for myself," she wrote. Not one of our contemporary bards, from Billie Eilish to Phoebe Waller-Bridge, could better define what it means to be a woman in the 21st century.

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Emily Dickinson poems prescribed for modern predicaments

■ For when you don't know if you should go out for a quick drink with work people
'I taste a liquor never brewed'

■ For when you've got Tinder dates every night this week
'Wild nights — Wild nights!'

■ For when you don't know who you are on Instagram any more
'Tell all the truth but tell it slant'

■ For when you literally just can't
'"Hope" is the thing with feathers'

■ For when you're still streaming that series that stopped being good at about episode three
'The Heart asks Pleasure — first'