



“Moses Was’nt Fairly Used—”: In the Footsteps of Harriet Tubman in Emily Dickinson’s “So I Pull My Stockings Off”

Cristiana F. Toscano & Vladislav Areshka

To cite this article: Cristiana F. Toscano & Vladislav Areshka (29 Oct 2024): “Moses Was’nt Fairly Used—”: In the Footsteps of Harriet Tubman in Emily Dickinson’s “So I Pull My Stockings Off”, The Explicator, DOI: [10.1080/00144940.2024.2414327](https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2024.2414327)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2024.2414327>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.



Published online: 29 Oct 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

“Moses Was’nt Fairly Used—”: In the Footsteps of Harriet Tubman in Emily Dickinson’s “So I Pull My Stockings Off”

Cristiana F. Toscano^a and Vladislav Areshka^b 

^aIndependent Scholar; ^bUniversity of Portsmouth

KEYWORDS Emily Dickinson; Harriet Tubman; Moses; slavery

In the early 1870s, the memory of the American Civil War was fresh, and so was the spirit of the issue that ignited it—the abolition of slavery. In those years, poet Emily Dickinson put down on paper the following verses:

So I pull my Stockings off
Wading in the Water
For the Disobedience’ Sake
Boy that lived for “Ought to”
“or’ter”
Went to Heaven perhaps at Death
And perhaps he did’nt
Moses was’nt fairly used –
Ananias was’nt – (*Poems* 513)

The poem’s language and symbolism have been previously analyzed to unveil Dickinson’s commentary on the concept of rebellion, its moral consequences, and the validity of divine standards. Cecily Parks notes, for instance, that “Dickinson likens gender disobedience [in the first strophe] to religious disobedience in the second half of the poem” (18), while Shira Wolosky sees Dickinson “shift[ing] from the question of how the divine might judge, to question the divine judgement altogether” (212–13).¹

This essay would like to propose a new way of reading the poem that links it to a more specific subject—slavery. In these verses, the speaker’s meditation on unruly behavior has always been analogized with the fate of the most notable biblical transgressor—the prophet Moses, who disobeyed God and was refused entry to Canaan, the Promised Land.² But, if the secular reality of nineteenth-century America is considered, the poem might have an ulterior interpretation, for in those years there was another person popularly

associated with the name “Moses.” Harriet Tubman was born a slave as Araminta “Minty” Ross around 1820 in the southern state of Maryland, but after her successful escape in 1849, she became an iconic figure for the quest of freedom. In the 1850s, she organized multiple perilous journeys back to the South and—just like the prophet did in the Bible—piloted dozens of slaves to the promised land of Liberty. For that she became known as “Moses.” Later, during the Civil War, she rendered her services to the Union Army as scout, nurse, and spy.³

The present article begins with the question: was it possible that Dickinson could have registered in the poem her reflections on Tubman specifically, this one-of-a-kind woman?⁴ The poet very likely heard of Harriet Tubman, who became a legendary character of her times. Talks of the latter’s extraordinary exploits in the antebellum period went far beyond intimate salons. She was a frequent guest at abolitionist meetings and conventions in Massachusetts (Humez 35–42, 48); while Col. Thomas Wentworth Higginson—the distinguished man of letters, commander of the first African American regiment of the Union Army, and, coincidentally, friend of Dickinson and Tubman—described the brave fugitive as “the greatest heroine of the age,” adding that “[h]er tales of adventure are beyond anything in fiction and her ingenuity and generalship are extraordinary” (Higginson 81). As the war came to an end, her story did not lose esteem, and in 1869 Sarah Hopkins Bradford helped immortalize it in a book, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (entitled *Harriet, the Moses of Her People* in its revised edition of 1886). The book was widely advertised across multiple national newspapers, including the *Springfield Republican*—of which all the Dickinsons were avid readers.⁵ For example, the second page in the *Springfield Republican* issue of Jan. 6, 1869, recorded:

No more romantic life than that of Harriet Tubman, the Maryland fugitive slave, has been celebrated in story or ballad, and ... Mrs Bradford’s ... little volume is still of remarkable interest, particularly to the many friends of that dusky Joan of Arc. (“Books, Authors and Art”)

It would not be difficult to imagine how Dickinson could be impressed by the extraordinary figure of this Joan of Arc of her time and could decide to put her impression on paper.⁶ As follows, several principal indicators of this reference are illustrated, and the poem is reread in light of this evidence.

Already in the first stanza, the image of “Wading in the Water/For the Disobedience’ Sake” easily conjures up a famous episode during one of Tubman’s missions to rescue “two stout men” from slavery. In fact, this episode, as narrated by the eminent Underground Railroad conductor Thomas Garrett (1868), occupied a prominent place in the January 25, 1869, issue of the *Springfield Republican*. According to the testimony, in one instance on her usual escape route,

she said that God told her to stop, which she did; and then asked him what she must do. He told her to leave the road, and turn to the left; she obeyed, and soon came to a small stream of tide water; there was no boat, no bridge; she again inquired of her Guide what she was to do. She was told to go through. It was cold, in the month of March; but having confidence in her Guide, she went in; the water came up to her arm-pits; the men refused to follow till they saw her safe on the opposite shore. (2)

After doing so, she soon “wad[ed] a second stream,” finally bringing her party to safety. Curiously, “Wade in the Water” is a title of a famous gospel song which is now strongly associated with Tubman. Given that “[t]he spirituals have held a persistent place in black performance practices throughout the history of the American Diaspora in North America” (Jordan 37) and probably because of the emotional force of Tubman’s river-crossing story, the popular imagination has been left with the tale of how Tubman would use this very spiritual as *code* to invite fugitives to turn off the road and “wade in water . . . so that hunting dogs would lose traces of their scent” (Larson 187).⁷

The act of “Disobedience” can relate to escape and rebellion of a—now former—slave, “Boy that lived for ‘Ought to.” Under historical circumstances, it would be no wonder that Dickinson could have enclosed Tubman within a masculine form. This woman definitely did not embody the traditional mid-nineteenth-century female image: a fugitive slave known for her physical strength, soldier and even commander in the war—which are roles associated with men and masculinity. Leading abolitionist John Brown called her “General Tubman” and claimed that “He (Harriet) is the most of a man naturally that I ever met with” (Bradford, *Harriet* 117, 96).

Further, Dickinson tinted the verse with unprecedented personality: it is singular for the poet’s writings how the expression “Ought to” was graphically specified by the poet in its dialectal transcription “or’ter” (or “or’ter”).

The spelling of the transcription echoes a representation of African American slang in the nineteenth century, and it coincides with how Harriet Beecher Stowe transcribed the phrase in her phenomenally popular *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (which Dickinson read),⁸ or how another antislavery writer, Lydia Maria Child (1883), transcribed a political speech delivered no less by Tubman herself: “Dat’s what Massa Linkum orter know” (161). It is interesting to consider how Dickinson would infuse her poem with the essence of Tubman through the way she spoke.⁹

Such attention to the language may well be as crucial to reading the second stanza. The line “Moses was’nt fairly used” is usually interpreted as a reference to the biblical character, who had been *treated* unfairly by God.¹⁰ But thinking about Tubman, the poet might have meant that the nickname “Moses,” as a positive term of comparison, wasn’t fairly used (as *employed*) to describe Tubman. Then, in the last lines, we can read a contrast: the name “Ananias”—an emblematic antagonist in the New Testament who was struck dead for lying to Peter¹¹—“was’nt” right to describe Tubman too. Stylistically, we may thus observe that the antithesis expressed in the first two verses of the stanza (between going to “Heaven” or not) is reprised and reinforced by the last two verses.

Bearing Tubman in mind as a potential subject of the poem, what could these lines tell us? Positioned in the actualities of its time and place, the poem is granted a refreshed vision, opening the door to the novel interpretative dimension of Dickinson's thought. Not only would it add credit to the recent opposition to the rhetoric of Dickinson's withdrawal (both social and creative), but it also would shed more light on the poet's opinions on Black people and slavery.¹² This is particularly timely since nobody in the Dickinson's family (the poet included) has left us a clear message about their stance on slavery—or clear sentiment about Black people. Perhaps one could be keen on judging one's views by their list of friends: Higginson, Samuel Bowles (editor of the *Springfield Republican*), and other abolitionists and political activists were guests of the Dickinsons household. Or, perhaps one would notice a painting that today crowns the mantelpiece of Emily Dickinson's room. A Black man's place, as the only servant of a “fishing party,” is clearly depicted by the mother of the house, Emily Norcross Dickinson (Figure 1).

Such an ambivalent context enforces a multitude of interpretations, one of which is that the poem seems to embark on a path of reflection. Introducing a self-projecting thought with the use of the interjection “So,” it is as if the speaker



Figure 1. Painting *Fishing Party* by Emily Norcross Dickinson (Dickinson, Emily Norcross, 1804–1882, artist. [Monson, Massachusetts], 1827. Dickinson family artifacts, Dickinson Room, 2011M-137. Houghton Library, Harvard University. <https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/ids:45565737>).

imagines being in Tubman's shoes to better understand her situation. In the progress of thinking, shifting from the present tense to the past and from the first person to the third, the poetic plane moves from a more personal to a more absolute tone. In the end, Dickinson appears unable to make a moral judgment on Tubman's actions. If this is the case, one might wonder why Emily Dickinson would be unable to place with certainty in heaven a character considered heroic not only in our time, but already in her own, and whether this hesitation would be an allegory of duplicity of the human soul, or a certain hint at her perception of race.

While it is true that it would not be surprising if Dickinson was only reflecting in her verses some fear of racial contamination and social distrust by which she was surrounded,¹³ the prevailing element of the poem appears to be the concept of disobedience—rather than race or gender. In such a reading, Dickinson does not judge Tubman's actions as a *Black* individual, but dwells on Tubman's actions as a *person* who decides to disobey the status quo. Is it just or unjust to go against the established system? Dickinson may have been investigating here her own disobedience against patriarchal values of the time through the prism of a notable individual like Tubman, who opposed the established norms of society. Dickinson, nevertheless, is not able to form a conclusion whether such social morality equates to the divine one. Trying to penetrate the inner world of Tubman, Emily Dickinson is subliminally making an important political statement of her own: she does not ponder on the racial or social distinction between her and Tubman, but their different life conditions are subject to equal moral scrutiny. This exercise in criticism uncovers an unprecedented perspective of the privileged, White woman putting herself in the shoes of a fugitive slave, Black woman.

Notes

1. For more interpretations (also evaluating meanings from the perspective of child disobedience) see Small 196–97; Crumbley 44; Dobson 65–66.
2. For instance, see readings by: Capps 35–36; or Bennett, *Emily Dickinson* 65–66.
3. Henceforth, biographical accounts and descriptions derive from Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*; and Humez, *Harriet Tubman*.
4. No published studies connecting the poem to Tubman or the issue of slavery have been detected.
5. Pieces on Bradford's biography of Tubman figured at least five times in the *Springfield Daily* (and *Weekly*) *Republican* issues in a year encompassing its publication—July 1, 1868; January 6 (reprinted on January 9 in the *Weekly*), and January 25, 1869 (reprinted on January 30, *Weekly*). Additionally, “the female Moses” was mentioned in the papers dated June 1, 1868 (reprinted on June 6, *Weekly*) and February 19, 1872, and Tubman's marriage was announced in the March 25, 1869 issue (reprinted on March 27 and April 10, *Weekly*). This adds up considerably to the possibility of Dickinson (and her circle) familiarizing herself with Tubman at least at that time.
6. About influential female figures' appeal to Dickinson, see Finnerty, “On the wall”; and Finnerty, “If Fame Belonged to Me.”

7. Kate Clifford Larson reports on the current myth: “The gospel song, written by an unknown composer, was sung during musical performances featuring the Fiske University Jubilee Singers starting in 1871. ... ‘Wade in the Water’ was not originally associated with the Underground Railroad and was not widely popular until the 1920s. ... No evidence has been uncovered to corroborate these claims [that Tubman sang and used this very song]. ... She used songs to relay information, including the Methodist spirituals ‘Bound for the Promised Land’ and ‘Hail, Oh Hail Ye Happy Spirits’” (187, 190).
8. For example, “‘It don’t seem to comfort me, but I spect it orter,’ said Aunt Chloe” (Stowe 142). The book makes part of the Dickinsons’ family library (now in Houghton Library at Harvard). In 1853, Dickinson lamented in a letter to her brother that their father “gave [her] quite a trimming about ‘Uncle Tom’” (*Letters* 200).
9. Dickinson notably incorporated representations of diverse accents into her writings, including Scots English (see Murray 120–21), and her native New England dialect (see Areshka 362).
10. Miller notes that Dickinson “refers [here and] in other poems to God’s treatment of Moses as unjust” (*Poems* 774). See also Parks 27; Wolosky 213; Dobson 66.
11. See Acts 5:1–5.
12. Few scholarly speculations connecting Dickinson’s work and contexts of slavery include, for example, Fielder, “Emily Dickinson’s Black Contexts”; Friedlander, “Auctions of the Mind”; Pollak, “Dickinson and the Poetics of Whiteness”; Bennett, “The Negro Never Knew”; Erkkila, “Emily Dickinson and Class.”
13. See Erkkila, “Dickinson and the Art of Politics” 170; Miller 15, 156–58, 208; Bennett, “The Negro Never Knew.”

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Vladislav Areshka  <http://orcid.org/0009-0006-6369-9324>

Works Cited

- Areshka, Vladislav. “Hearing ‘New Englandly’: Emily Dickinson’s Rhymes.” *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 97, no. 3, 2024, pp. 345–79. doi: [10.1162/tneq_a_01035](https://doi.org/10.1162/tneq_a_01035).
- Bennett, Paula. *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet*. U of Iowa P, 1990.
- Bennett, Paula. “‘The Negro Never Knew’: Emily Dickinson and Racial Typology in the Nineteenth Century.” *Legacy*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2002, pp. 53–61. doi: [10.1353/leg.2003.0001](https://doi.org/10.1353/leg.2003.0001).
- “Books, Authors and Art.” *The Springfield Daily Republican*, 6 Jan. 1869, p. 2.
- Bradford, Sarah Hopkins. *Harriet, the Moses of Her People*. G. R. Lockwood, 1897.
- Bradford, Sarah Hopkins. *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*. W. J. Moses, 1869.
- Capps, Jack L. *Emily Dickinson’s Reading, 1836–1886*. Harvard UP, 1966.
- Child, Lydia Maria. *Letters of Lydia Maria Child*, edited by John Greenleaf Whittier and Wendell Phillips, Houghton, Mifflin, 1883.
- Crumbley, Paul. “Child Role.” *An Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia*, edited by Jane D. Eberwein, Greenwood P, 1998, p. 44.

- Dickinson, Emily. *Emily Dickinson's Poems: As She Preserved Them*, edited by Cristanne Miller, Belknap P of Harvard UP, 2016.
- Dickinson, Emily. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Cristanne Miller and Domhnall Mitchell, Belknap P of Harvard UP, 2024. doi: [10.4159/9780674296640](https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674296640).
- Dobson, Joanne. *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence: The Woman Writer in Nineteenth-Century America*. Indiana UP, 1989.
- Erkkila, Betsy. "Dickinson and the Art of Politics." *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson*, edited by Vivian R. Pollak, Oxford UP, 2004, pp. 133–74.
- Erkkila, Betsy. "Emily Dickinson and Class." *American Literary History*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1992, pp. 1–27. doi: [10.1093/alh/4.1.1](https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/4.1.1).
- Fielder, Brigitte. "Emily Dickinson's Black Contexts." *The Oxford Handbook of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Cristanne Miller and Karen Sánchez-Eppler, Oxford UP, 2022, pp. 353–71. doi: [10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198833932.013.16](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198833932.013.16).
- Finnerty, Paraic. "‘If Fame Belonged to Me, I Could Not Escape Her’: Dickinson and the Poetics of Celebrity." *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2017, pp. 25–50. doi: [10.1353/edj.2017.0013](https://doi.org/10.1353/edj.2017.0013).
- Finnerty, Paraic. "‘On the Walls of Her Own Room Hung Framed Portraits of Mrs. Browning, George Eliot, and Carlyle’: Dickinson's Heroes and Hero-Worship." *The Oxford Handbook of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Cristanne Miller and Karen Sánchez-Eppler, Oxford UP, 2022, pp. 336–52. doi: [10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198833932.013.11](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198833932.013.11).
- Friedlander, Benjamin. "Auctions of the Mind: Emily Dickinson and Abolition." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, vol. 54, no. 1, 1998, pp. 1–26. doi: [10.1353/arq.1998.0018](https://doi.org/10.1353/arq.1998.0018).
- Higginson, Thomas Wentworth. *Letters and Journals of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1846–1906*, edited by Mary Thacher Higginson, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1921.
- Humez, Jean M. *Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories*. U of Wisconsin P, 2003.
- Jordan, P. Kimberleigh. "‘Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around’: Spirituals as Embodied Acts of Resistance." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2016, pp. 37–45. doi: [10.1080/00064246.2015.1119623](https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2015.1119623).
- Larson, Kate Clifford. *Harriet Tubman: A Reference Guide to Her Life and Works*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2022.
- Miller, Cristanne. *Reading in Time: Emily Dickinson in the Nineteenth Century*. U of Massachusetts P, 2012.
- Murray, Aife. *Maid as Muse: How Servants Changed Emily Dickinson's Life and Language*. U of New Hampshire P, 2009.
- Parks, Cecily. "The Swamps of Emily Dickinson." *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1–29. doi: [10.1353/edj.2013.0004](https://doi.org/10.1353/edj.2013.0004).
- Pollak, Vivian R. "Dickinson and the Poetics of Whiteness." *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2000, pp. 84–95.
- Small, Judy Jo. *Positive as Sound: Emily Dickinson's Rhyme*. U of Georgia P, 1990.
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly*. Vol. 1, John P. Jewett, 1852.
- "Thomas Garrett's 'Testimony.' A Negro Heroine. Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman." *The Springfield Daily Republican*, 25 Jan. 1869, p. 2.
- Wolosky, Shira. *The Bible in American Poetic Culture*. Springer Nature Switzerland, 2023. doi: [10.1007/978-3-031-40106-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-40106-0).