



**Patron: Jim Broadbent**  
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**Friday October 27th 2017**  
**A Quiet Passion (Cert 12a)**

*dir:* **Terence Davies**

*Starring:* **Cynthia Nixon, Jennifer Ehle, Keith Carradine**

*Sponsors:* **3D Wines**

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**Synopsis:** Massachusetts, the mid-19th century. The teenage Emily Dickinson withdraws from Mount Holyoke Female Seminary and returns home to live with her lawyer father, mother and siblings Austin and Lavinia ("Vinnie"), with whom she is close. Emily asks her father if she may spend the early hours of the morning writing verses; he allows it, and she maintains this routine. She has poems published anonymously in the 'Springfield Republican'. Emily meets Miss Buffam, who excites her with her wit and intelligent conversation on politics, religion and female independence. The pair become friends and Emily is aggrieved at any separation from her. Austin marries Susan Gilbert and they have a child. Emily suffers an acute attack of pain. Susan and Emily exult in their newfound sisterhood. Admiring Reverend Wadsworth's sermons, Emily invites hi for tea. He reads her poems and finds them accomplished and moves away. Emily's father dies, and she becomes reclusive, wearing only white. When her sometime editor Mr Bowles pays a visit, Emily reproaches him for altering her punctuation. Becoming embittered and self-critical, Emily is unkind to visitors, including admirers of her work such as the eligible Mrr Emmons. Her pain persists and she is diagnosed with incurable Bright's disease. She catches Austin committing married infidelity with the married Mabel Todd. Appalled, she spars with him. Their mother dies following a stroke. Shortly afterwards, Emily dies, with Austin, Susan and Vinnie at her bedside.

The biopic is a difficult film to get right, all the more so when its subject is an artist whose significance was understood only after their death. The view from here - a vantage point that make plain the chain of influence linking Vincent van Gogh to his inheritors, and Emily Dickinson to hers - complicates our perception of the lives of these individuals. It is hard to imagine that Dickinson had no inkling during her life that her work would foment and transform the very principle of poetry - easier to think that she did, that she suspected all along. It's even harder to hold in mind that posthumous fame changes not a detail of the lived experience, Awfully, it is an afterlife to which all but the artist herself are invited.

To writer-director Terence Davies's credit, he has not, with his latest film, fallen prey to the temptation to imbue the poet's 55 years with a sense of building towards. On the contrary, Dickinson's life - as Davies represents it - is conclusively end-stopped, and the latter half of it is marred by her certainty that she will go to her grave unread. As a fan of Dickinson, Davies might have spared himself and us the discomfiting truth of her daily life by implying that she somehow chose it; that she paid for her imperfect present with posthumous renown.

Yet, instead of making her a martyr, he and actor Cynthia Nixon give us not the world-shy mouse of popular imagination but a woman who is sociable, who bobs downstairs like a kangaroo to make a new friend of the spirited Miss Buffam. This Dickinson is alive in her time: profoundly mindful of its politics of gender, religion and secession; responsive to its literature; awake to and disposed to discuss the fact of being overlooked as a writer of verses. Like a slant rhyme, she surprises, as when she smashes a plate on the edge of the table

when her father complains it is dirty. She is outspoken, overfull of feeling (often on the brink of tears, moved by an aunt's departure or for reasons less apparent) and frightened by mortality. Few biopics have achieved as full and rounded a subject as this one has.

Born in 1830, Dickinson saw fewer than 12 of the 1,775 (known) poems published. Davies's film proposes - justly, I think - that this was partly a condition of her context, partly owing to her pride. Dickinson's public recognition was prevented as much by the conservatism of publishers (the prevalent opinion that women "cannot create the permanent treasures of literature", as the editor of the *Springfield Republican* states here), and a general unpreparedness, unrelated to gender, for the uncompromising character of her verses, as it was by Dickinson's single-mindedness and her setting great store by 'integrity'. From start to finish, *A Quiet Passion* finds proof of these qualities in Dickinson. Beginning with her withdrawal from women's college because she "will not be forced to piety" by its headmistress, the film encompasses the origins of some of the poet's most important relationships, and two further withdrawals; her renouncing publication ("the Auction/Of the Mind" she would call it) and her retreat - in the later part of her life, which was crowded with losses and illnesses - deeper inside her father's house.

Dickinson's character is established primarily through lively dialogue, scripted by Davies, and secondarily through her poetry in the form of voiceover. (These are whole poems, not odds and ends, read emphatically by Nixon) There is a third way; an excursion into the poet's imagination, an erotic reverie in which a man slowly climbs the stairs to her room. The synergy between the traditional song on the film's soundtrack, and the phosphorescing flowers at the foot of the stairs, Florian Hoffmeister's languid camera and the intensity of Dixon's expression makes this the film's most powerful scene. The yearning for intimacy it expresses is almost unbearably moving, being at odds with the way the poet puts distance between herself and others at this stage of her life.

Physical remoteness and effulgent imagination are also the concerns of a recent biopic by another filmmaker from the north of England. (To borrow, anachronistically, the words of Wendy Cope, bloody biopics about women writers are like bloody uses; you wait for years and then two or three appear.) Broadcast on British television at the end of 2016, around the time that Davies's film was initially to be released, Sally Wainwright's *To Walk Invisible* - about Charlotte, Anne and Emily Brontë - is, as the title indicates, *A Quiet Passion*'s twin.

More or less contemporaries (Emily Bronte, whose name and novel are mentioned more than once in *A Quiet Passion*, died when

Dickinson was 18), Dickinson and Brontë had more in common than simply the trials of publication. Wainwright and Davies take like approaches to these writers' lives, each filmmaker relaying the complexity not only of the subjects' social and economic situations, but also of their practical and emotional accommodation of them. Most interestingly, both films depict the loss of a relative, and in each the treatment of disease and death is direct, unflinching. The material losses these women suffer body forth losses of the non-material kind. They gesture towards the dispossession of something that was never theirs to be taken, and is difficult to show on film: cultural opportunity. Its refusal is more painful in *A Quiet Passion*, Dickinson harder hit. The Brontës had each other at least, though even this had its pitfalls, namely the conventionality that moved Charlotte to demean her sisters' authorial integrity, blocking the republication of Anne's second novel and writing a jaundiced foreword to Emily's *Wuthering Heights*. Wainwright's intimation of the pervasiveness of the dominant culture - the risk of cultural integration, of assimilation by the literary establishment - is among her film's many merits. That risk came knocking at the Brontë parsonage, just as it called for Dickinson at Amherst. It was the Emilys who denied it entrance and stood their ground, adamant that their writing should not be raked or interfered with. Resisting assimilation may not look like much: these films say it is.

That both productions chose to have replica houses built is not incidental. *A Quiet Passion* has its Dickinson Homestead, *To Walk Invisible* its Howarth Parsonage - places whose comfort and containment formed these women and ministered to their creative and spiritual lives. As Virginia Woolf wrote after a visit to the parsonage in 1904: "Howarth expresses the Brontës; the Brontës express Howarth; they fit like a snail to its shell."

By the conclusion of *A Quiet Passion* we are left in no doubt as to the kind of woman Emily Dickinson was, or how deeply she felt. And yet she remains a mystery. Davies appears not to have wanted to manage his subject, to be overbearing and work her like clay on his wheel. It isn't for us, he seems to say, to see with her eyes or walk in her shoes. After all, to be a poet is not, in all cases, to wish to be transparent. Not all poetry is confessional, not all of it is even personal.

Conveying to a publisher how his adjustments to her punctuation had galled her ("it feels like an attack"), Dickinson explains - with a brusqueness characteristic of the older poet - that there is a difference between "clarity" and "obviousness". Davies grasps this distinction. *A Quiet Passion* has all the wished-for clarity - of vision and of character - but it is not so certain of its subject as to enclose her and divest her of what she prized most: her soul's independence.

#### Credits

<b>Cynthia Nixon</b>	Emily Dickinson
<b>Jennifer Ehle</b>	Lavinia Dickinson 'Vinnie'
<b>Jodhi May</b>	Susan Gilbert
<b>Catherine Bailey</b>	Vryling Buffam
<b>Emma Bell</b>	Young Emily
<b>Austin Dickinson</b>	Duncan Duff
<b>Keith Carradine</b>	Edward Dickinson
<b>Noemi Schellens</b>	Mabel Loomis Todd
<b>Director</b>	Terence Davies
<b>Written by</b>	Terence Davies
<b>Director of Photography</b>	Florian Hoffmeister
<b>Editor</b>	Pia Di Ciaula
<b>Production design</b>	Merijn Sep
<b>Sound</b>	Johan Maertens
<b>Costume</b>	Catherine Marchand

**UK/Belgium/USA 2016**  
**125 mins**

#### Another View

A quiet passion trickles through Terence Davies' eighth feature, starting with the title, forming a tributary around a character, then pooling in the film's centre, which is poetry itself. When John Goodman screamed, "I'll show you the life of the mind!" in the Coen brothers' 1991 film, *Barton Fink*, they could have been gesticulating towards a volume by Emily Dickinson.

In this flighty biopic, the life of the overlooked-in-her-time 19th century American poet is drawn from six biographies and an examination of her own words. It shows what a life looks like when a sensitive genius places reflections on existence ahead of existence itself. Strengths lie in this film's commitment to understanding an extraordinary, reclusive woman, its weaknesses in a dogged fidelity to relaying the small events of each passing year.

Had the film offered an atmospheric and impressionistic slice of life, in the vein of Davies' best film, 1992's *The Long Day Closes*, it would have been even more potent. To an extent, this is autobiography. Davies often laments his lack of physical beauty. Despite being played by Cynthia Nixon, who radiates a pale fire, this Emily Dickinson is too self-deprecating to conceive of romance. She will not appear before a young male admirer, convinced that her looks would both repel him and shatter his attachment to her poetry.

This character logic is not established in order to be overcome by a dashing hero in the third act. It is the stubborn conviction of a woman reconciled to focusing only on the page and family.

We begin by watching her precocious teen graduating from an academy (young Dickinson is played by Emma Bell). So begins a tussle to be taken seriously as a female poet as the years roll by until her untimely death aged 55 from kidney disease. How to cinematically render a life lived in the invisible space of mental wrangling? Anyone looking for action rather than conversation may want to apply elsewhere. A perky, parasol-twirling newcomer to the village constitutes an event, and the rest is milestones of time: sickness, death, the marriage of a sibling.

Dickinson is a lifelong spectator, but Nixon imbues her with pathos via an exquisitely pained sensitivity. Her brother Austin's infidelity hits her hard, not because of busybody outrage, but because of passionate principles. She boldly challenges the religious norms of her household, but her soul remains her work station, and she holds loved ones to its punishing standards.

As Dickinson's world is small, Davies makes sure that we occupy it fully alongside her. The detailed intimacy with which the interiors of her lifelong home are rendered makes the set feel almost theatrical. The best moments of the film are when Nixon reads Dickinson's poetry - Davies having contrived a context. 'I'm Nobody! Who are you?' is read joyfully to a baby, but usually the poems are narrations over quiet scenes. Either way, her inflections match the beats and meaning of the words, and we see how Dickinson fleetingly ascends from the confines of life into the divinity of poetry.

#### Little White Lies

**Our next film: Friday November 3rd, 7.30pm**

**The Olive Tree (dir: Icíar Bollain. Spain 2016. Cert 15)**

Icíar Bollain's family drama - written by her partner Paul Laverty - touches on ideas of the importance of family life, community and man's connection to the land in Spain. These more country-specific issues are married to global concerns about the environment and corporatization in general.

Alma is devoted to her ailing grandfather and believes his condition is being worsened by the family's decision to sell the olive tree that has been a feature of their farm for hundreds of years to a German company, where it adorns their headquarters. She hatches a plan to track down the tree and return it to the farm. This charming film is a story of optimism and determination and in nature's ability to find a route - and, indeed, root - to survival