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# EMILY DICKINSON AND THE POETICS OF LABOR

**Irene Lopez Sanchez**[1], Independent Scholar, PhD graduate of American Studies of the University of Kent, UK

**Abstract**

This article explores Emily Dickinson's poetics of labor and the relationship between work and leisure in both nineteenth-century and contemporary US culture. Historically, labor has been perceived as the axis of social and economic values. Individuals, however, are frequently encouraged to deviate from their work routines, making it difficult to appreciate them. Using a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, this study examines Dickinson's oeuvre in dialogue with the philosophical and sociological framework on the distinction between work and leisure and its implications for people's lives, as well as how the value of work has changed over time. Through a close reading of selected poems and letter fragments, this article demonstrates how Dickinson's work blurs traditional boundaries between labor and leisure, suggesting that creative work can hold intrinsic, self-validating worth irrespective of economic or societal pressures. Finally, Dickinson's perspective on work and time may inform contemporary debates around meaningful labor and life balance in a capitalist society.

**Keywords**: Emily Dickinson, poetics of labour, nineteenth-century, work ethics, leisure, values

## 1. Introduction

This paper explores Emily Dickinson's poetics on the relationship between labor (or work) and leisure.[2] Today, labor has become the axis of social, cultural, political, and economic values. Nonetheless, people are frequently urged to break away from

[1] Email address: ilopezsa666@gmail.com
Corresponding address: Calle Fluvia, 261 3-1, 08020 Barcelona, Spain

[2] While Hannah Arendt establishes a distinction between the activities of "work" and "labor" in *The Human Condition* (1958), the terms will be used as synonyms throughout this paper.

their work routines, which makes it harder to appreciate them, given that they are undertaken for the sake of external compensation. The centrality of work, according to Sigmund Freud (1930: 73), is closely related to people's willingness to sacrifice "a portion of [their] possibilities for happiness for a portion of security". For Michel Foucault (2003: 247), labor's regulatory technology has been designed to take control over people "insofar as they are living beings". In other words, most people's lives are shaped by work which is, simultaneously, determined by economic valuation. From a philosophical perspective, work was a well-established social value by the end of the nineteenth century (Just, 2017: 435). Both Hegel and Marx argued that labor was central to determining both individual productive potential and population well-being (Just, 2017: 441). Conversely, Nietzsche (1882: 183-4) referred to the contemporary exaltation of work as "the true vice of the new world", wherein leisure is not the diametric opposite of work but rather its natural equal; more specifically, leisure is not a *reward* for work; it is a *necessity* that enables one to do more work.

To place Dickinson's poetics within the philosophical and sociological context of work ethics and its implications for people's lives, it is necessary to consider how the value of work has evolved over time. Jiri Zuzanek examines the historical significance of work and leisure in Western culture. According to him (Zuzanek, 2021: 2), work, either vocational or alienated labor, emerges "as the glue that holds society together"; on the other hand, leisure is perceived as the arena "not only of individual gratification and respite but also of the experiment, breaking the rules, and looking for the infinite". To some extent, Dickinson's exploration of work and leisure provides a poetic framework that resonates with the changing nineteenth-century concepts of labor and time. Martha Ackmann (2020: 122) notes that Dickinson "looked upon her verse as constantly in play and the work of a lifetime". In light of Dickinson's obituary, Judith Farr (1992: 11) stresses the relationship between Dickinson's "worth" and "work", as well as the connection between her art and personal integrity. Paul Crumbley (2010: 7) points out that Dickinson frequently values the process over the outcome owing to her emphasis on action and individual autonomy. When reading some of her poems on work, Eileen John (2021: 187) suggests that Dickinson finds "immodest achievements" and certain knowledge in the routines and aptitudes inherent to working life. Bearing this in mind, Dickinson's perspectives on work help us in addressing questions that plague the modern worker, such as whether "non-waged" labor can be called work, how "waged work" can be intrinsically valuable, whether it is possible to separate "work" from the "rest of life" (or leisure time), or whether this distinction can be avoided entirely.

This paper situates Dickinson's poetics of labor within the larger socioeconomic and philosophical context of her time, by using an interdisciplinary approach that integrates literary research with economic, social, and philosophical perspectives. The literary approach focuses on Dickinson's poetic techniques, looking at how her use of form, imagery, and language reflects her unique philosophy of labor. Sociologically, the paper places Dickinson's work within the context of labor ethics, examining how her depictions of work align with or diverge from the Protestant ethic of labor and contemporary work values. Philosophically, the study explores how her poetic oeuvre intersects with critiques of capitalism and the valuation of time. Rather than

merely conducting a thematic or close reading, this analysis uses Dickinson's poems and letter fragments as a case study to interrogate broader socio-economic theories and questions, including the extent to which labor can hold intrinsic value outside of economic compensation and the potential to integrate work and leisure as a holistic approach to life. Key themes – such as the merging of work and life, the resistance to economic valuation, and the affirmation of time's intrinsic worth – are examined as part of an ongoing dialogue between Dickinson's poetry and intellectual history.

Through a comparative analysis of Dickinson's poems alongside theoretical insights from these disciplines, this paper aims to illustrate Dickinson's vision of labor as an inseparable part of life's continuum, prompting us to reassess the boundaries between work and leisure. Similarly, it opens a space for contemporary discussions on labor and the poetics of everyday life. Dickinson centrality in this study stems from the notion that her exposure to Greek culture and philosophy gave her access to a distinct order of things that she could use to challenge the nineteenth-century view of labor and leisure that became dominant in later centuries. First, I will briefly analyse some of Dickinson's poems that contain the term *work* or its cognates. The paper then delves into the intellectual history of work ethics that shaped Dickinson's own formation as well as environment, such classical tradition and the Protestant virtue of work. Likewise, it compares Dickinson's views on the intertwining of work and leisure – as well as the value of time itself – with current scholarship on the topic to shed light on both the paradox of modern labor and the possibility of a post-work society. Finally, the paper reflects on Dickinson's relevance to contemporary debates about labor, underscoring the capacity of her work to question, and perhaps reimagine, the role of labor in a life worth living.

## 2. Dickinson's poems on the value of work

Dickinson addresses the topic of work explicitly in several poems, emphasizing its intrinsic value rather than its economic function. In more detail, her descriptions of work call into question traditional concepts of productivity, arguing that work does not have to be motivated by economic necessity and can be valuable as a process in and of itself. For instance, Dickinson reflects on a spider's web-making as a form of artistry in the following poem:

> The Spider as an Artist
> Has never been employed -
> Though his surpassing Merit
> Is freely certified
> By every Broom and Bridget
> Throughout a Christian Land -
> Neglected Son of Genius
> I take thee by the Hand -[3]

[3] Emily Dickinson, Poem 1373, vol. 3, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, edited by Ralph W. Franklin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). Hereafter cited in-text according to the editor's numbering system.

The speaker's admiration for the spider's artistry is contrasted with the acts of a maid who indiscriminately removes its web. Dickinson's use of short, concise lines conveys precision and purpose, evoking the spider's meticulous weaving. Likewise, she compares the spider's web-making to artistic labor, which does not require employment or external recognition. More specifically, the lines "Has never been employed -/ Though his surpassing Merit / Is freely certified" imply that, like the spider, the poet's work can stand apart from employment and financial compensation. Dickinson's depiction of the spider's work mirrors her approach to poetry, a vocation she pursued without concern for publication or profit, aligning her more closely with the timeless, non-monetized aspects of labor. This viewpoint is consistent with Foucault's, who questioned the reduction of all activities to utilitarian labor and economic concern (Just, 2017: 443). According to Helen Vendler (2010: 418-9), Dickinson "commends a Creature like herself, anthropomorphizing him to such a degree that she can take him 'by the hand'". As discussed in following sections, Dickinson's oeuvre underscores the significance of the present moment, the value of processes, and the vastness of earthly existence. As a result, labor (or work) and leisure are inextricably linked, as both are essential components of what can constitute a life worth living by Dickinson's standards. For instance, the following stanza depicts how intertwine labor (or toil) and leisure (or rest) may be:

> What respite from her thrilling toil
> Did Beauty ever take -
> But work might be Electric Rest
> To those that Magic make – (Fr1556)

The speaker here suggests that work may be perceived as "Electric Rest". This phrase captures the paradoxical restfulness of creative activity, implying that labor can be both gratifying and self-sustaining. Moreover, the poem questions the binary between labor and leisure, positing that work, for those who "make magic" (such as poets), can embody both effort and renewal. This integration shows Dickinson's views of work as an essential part of life, rather than a separate activity. The poem's rhythmic structure may illustrate how labor in her poetics becomes an ongoing, regenerative force.

By invoking "Electric Rest", Dickinson's speaker presents work as an energizing force, contrasting with the view of labor as exhausting or alienating. The latter view is consistent with Marx's definition of labor, which contended that alienation and commodification exhausts the worker's essence (Arendt, 1958: 162). Dickinson's perspective implies a type of work that is intrinsically rewarding and regenerating, blending with the act of living. Given the non-distinction between labor (or "thrilling toil") and leisure in nature, some of Dickinson's poems reinforce this notion. In more detail, the process of creation itself, like with the spider in the aforementioned poem, is what confers an artist's work value, not the fact that they are paid for it. The merit of a working activity is determined by the process rather than the income. As a result, work is no longer reduced to a purely human activity, or tied to a salary, as the speaker asserts below:

The Frogs got Home last Week -
Are settled, and at work -
Birds mostly back -
The Clover warm and thick- (Fr983)

This stanza delves into the integration of work within the natural world. Here, the seasonal rhythms of animal life reflect a continuous cycle of work that occurs regardless of human-imposed schedules or reward. Lines like "Birds mostly back - / The Clover warm and thick -" suggest that, for Dickinson's speaker, nature is "at work" in a state of constant activity that does not require external validation. This naturalized view of work critiques the capitalist structure that allocates value based on economic productivity, proposing instead that value may lie in continuity and process rather than in measurable results. Regardless of employment, both humans and animals work. Furthermore, Dickinson's lifetime poetic project, despite the fact that it was never tied to a salary because she was never externally employed, was "rewarded work" for her.[4] In more detail, Dickinson considered poetry to be a meaningful working activity, and her daily routine did not distinguish between work and leisure time.[5] Today, however, there is a clear distinction between these two categories.

In light of these examples, one can argue that Dickinson redefines labor as a transformative, self-affirming process. In contrast to the nineteenth-century commodification of work, as shown in the following sections, where productivity was often measured in economic terms, Dickinson's views of labor challenge the societal trend toward economic valuation and externally driven definitions of work. Furthermore, the notion of labor as a creative process transcends the economic imperatives of her time, illustrating a philosophy of work that embraces the intrinsic worth of action, much like the Greek ideal of *schole*.

## 3. The value of *Schole* (leisure) in Greek tradition vs. the virtue of labour in Protestant ethics

Dickinson's poetry reflects a nuanced understanding of labor and leisure that draws implicitly on ancient Greek and Protestant traditions. In Greek philosophy, *schole* (or leisure) was regarded as the highest prerequisite for intellectual and spiritual growth, whereas the Protestant ethic redefined leisure as idleness and labor as divine duty (Zuzanek, 2021: 2). Dickinson's poetics of labor oscillates between these two perspectives, agreeing with neither the exaltation of work nor the detachment of *schole*. Instead, she combines labor and leisure, drawing on elements from both traditions while crafting her own vision. Dickinson's exposure to Greek

[4] This idea is well-expressed in her poem "The Service without Hope" (Fr880).

[5] The distinction between meaningful and non-meaningful working activities will be examined in light of Jean-Philippe Deranty's (2021) essay in the last section of this article.

philosophy, through periodicals and American intellectual circles,[6] introduced her to a form of leisure that was not a mere absence of work but a pursuit of reflective, creative engagement. For Sebastian de Grazia (1962: 2), Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle introduced the concept of *schole*, and the Greek and Latin terms for work were *un-leisure*. Plato's *schole* referred to ideal and gratifying leisure, an opportunity to experience "excellence, creativity, and meaning" (Zuzanek, 2021: 22). Like Plato, Aristotle (1996: 274) underscored the value of *schole* while depriving labor of moral worth and limiting its function to providing leisure; in his own words, "we do business in order that we may have leisure". Since then, work and leisure have been perceived as distinct.[7]

For Dickinson, poetic creation could be seen as a kind of *schole*, a process inherently valuable not because of productivity or economic return, but due to the fulfillment and insight it provides. In other words, because she did not have to make a living from her art – due to her privileged economic position – she was able to prioritize human values over economic ones. For instance, in her poem opening "Publication - is the Auction / Of the Mind of Man -", her speaker is reluctant to "reducing" any "Human Spirit / To Disgrace of Price-" (Fr788). More specifically, this phrase suggests a fundamental incompatibility between artistic work and economic valuation. According to David Hills (2021: 178), Dickinson "renounced and condemned literary investment" and "literary commerce". The "Disgrace of Price" might thus be viewed as the ignominy of external economic valuation or, as Aristotle put it, the need to "do business in order that we may have leisure". Dickinson's artistic project, on the other hand, integrates these two categories, for what the Greeks called *schole*'s domain was also part of Dickinson's work domain, as a place of "Electric Rest". As a result, her work could be viewed as *schole*, an invitation to engage in contemplation (thinking), meaning, and creativity.

By integrating labor and leisure, Dickinson's poetics challenge the dichotomy established by both Greek and Protestant traditions. In opposition to the classical ideal, the Protestant ethic – particularly as it evolved in America – valued labor as a moral and spiritual undertaking, prioritizing productivity, diligence, and the responsible use of time.[8] According to Bennett Berger, the influence of Greek

[6] Dickinson became acquainted with Greek culture and tradition through U.S. periodicals and literary figures such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Henry David Thoreau. For instance, there were numerous articles in *The Atlantic Monthly* at the time Dickinson read it that made references to Greek culture and philosophers. According to Caroline Winterer, before the late nineteenth century, classicism was America's most important intellectual endeavor after Christianity, and "reverence for ancient models helped to structure ethical, political, oratorial, artistic, and educational ideals". See *The Mirror of Antiquity: American Women and the Classical Tradition, 1750 – 1900* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007: 2-10).

[7] Nonetheless, historian Keith Thomas points out that, prior to Capitalism, there was a smaller disparity between the concepts of work and leisure than there is today – for instance, during the middle ages. See Keith Thomas, "Work and Leisure in Pre-Industrial Society," in *Past and Present*, 29 (1964: 50-66).

[8] According to Cynthia Estlund, "the idea of work as a moral imperative runs deep in Western religious thought, though its religious foundations bear little weight for many citizens yet". See *Automation*

tradition on the value of leisure intersects with the concept of labour as a moral obligation in U.S. culture, as shown below:

> We no longer feel that idleness is sinful, but we still retain something of the expectation that work should have moral content and feel rather cheated and slightly betrayed when we discover that moral content has simply disappeared from much industrial work … We are, in short … compromised Greek citizens longing for leisure, who carry the burden of compromised Protestant ethics. (qtd. in Zuzanek, 2021: 2)

Daniel Just investigates the historical development of this "burden" by means of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930). He contends that the virtue of work, or God's worship through labor, will have "far-reaching social and psychological consequences for modernity" (Just, 2021: 436-7). To be more precise, the Protestant emphasis on labor as a means to venerate God and generate economic profit spread rapidly throughout the Western world. While the longing for wealth has always existed and is unrelated to capitalistic conduct, Weber (2001: 10) ties the spirit and origins of capitalism to the ethics of austere Protestantism. In the eighteenth century, the importance of the Protestant work ethic in American society is well exemplified in Benjamin Franklin's passage:

> Remember, that *time* is money. He that can earn ten shillings a day by his labor, and goes abroad, or sits idle, one half of the day, though he spends but sixpence during his diversion or idleness, ought not to reckon *that* the only expense; he has really spent, or rather thrown away, *five shillings besides*. (qtd. in Weber, 2001: 14)

Weber observes that the spirit of capitalism existed prior to the capitalistic order, especially in Massachusetts, where both Franklin and Dickinson were born, albeit its spiritual foundation had vanished by Franklin's time.[9] Consequently, "the values of achievement and profit" formed the basis of a mentality that endured until the end of the nineteenth century (Just, 2021: 438).

Dickinson's nineteenth-century context emerges historically as a complex phenomenon. At the advent of the mass consumption age, the poet was exposed to a wide variety of voices and experiences, including a religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening and the American Civil War. Linda Freedman (2011: 2) asserts that Dickinson's Puritan heritage, combined with liberal Christianity and classical mythology, was "a source of poetic enrichment" rather than a barrier. Despite the fact that the Protestant ethic of work was prevalent in her milieu, Dickinson's poetic labor was neither reduced to a profit-making activity nor subjugated to "Disgrace of Price". The term "business" in Dickinson's cosmology did not refer to commercial trade, but rather to artistic occupation. "My business is circumference", the poet wrote in a letter to the editor T.W. Higginson in 1862.[10]

*Anxiety: Why and How to Save Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021: 69).

[9] Weber (2001: 123) asserts that there was "a peculiarly calculating sort of profit-seeking in New England, as distinguished from other parts of America, as early as 1632".

[10] Emily Dickinson, Letter 268, vol. 1, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1958). Hereafter cited

Later that year, Dickinson declared to her friend Elizabeth Holland, "My business is to love" and "My business is to sing" (L269). Moreover, "singing – as she often called writing poetry", Ackman n (2020: 122-3) notes, "had become to her the work of a lifetime and as fundamental as breathing". Dickinson's work challenged "the values of achievement and profit" prevalent in her environment by associating the term "business" with notions that did not rely on economic valuation.

Unlike Franklin, time did not equal money for Dickinson.[11] Time is priceless because it is limited, which is why individuals should not waste it, but not for fear of losing their money. As Dickinson expressed in a letter, "I fear we think too lightly of the gift of mortality which, too gigantic to comprehend, cannot be estimated" (L524). In other words, time itself is of greater value than money, since mortality – or time on Earth – "cannot be estimated". Another example is the poem below:

> We do not know the time we lose -
> The awful moment is
> And takes its fund a mental place
> Among the certainties -
>
> A firm appearance still in flates
> The card - the chance -the friend -
> The spectre of solidities
> Whose substances are sand - (Fr1139)

The persona emphasizes the value of time here by stating that one day, a person's existence – or the presence of a friend – looks to be solidly anchored on this world and, the following day, this person may just be gone. In more detail, "We do not know the time we lose" because people do not know how much time they have left before death, or "the awful moment", which is the only thing that is guaranteed. For Ackmann (2020: xxi), "creative expression was the fundamental force" of Dickinson's work and life, and "writing poetry both defined and sustained her". To be more specific, Dickinson's integration of *schole* into her working routine, together with a rejection of the Protestant work ethic and its emphasis on profit, opens her poetics to broader interpretations of labor as an intrinsic and self-validating practice, as well as the significance of time in people's finite existence.

Some of Dickinson's poems address work as an activity integrated into her way of life, presenting an image of labor that transcends economic worth and spans the realms of work and leisure. As a result, her poetry tackles the contradiction between self-fulfillment and societal expectations, arguing that labor does not need to be justified by external validation or economic production. In fact, the "Electric Rest" of labor holds intrinsic value. Nevertheless, the premise of modern labor proved to be the least self-rewarding activity since its value generally resided in external compensation. In merging work and leisure, Dickinson anticipates the post-

in-text according to the editor's numbering system. According to Judith Farr (1992: 29), the term "circumference" is one of Dickinson's "metaphors for poetry".

[11] Dickinson's views of time will be further examined in following sections.

work view advocated by theorists like David Graeber, who critiques modern work as often devoid of human *value*, serving more as a filler in a society obsessed with productivity and economic worth.

## 4. The paradox of modern work: value vs. values

Dickinson's poetics of labor confronts a paradox central to modern work culture: the tension between economic *value* and human *values*. Referring back to Foucault, this dichotomy frames labor as a means of achieving material security, often at the expense of individual fulfillment. In contrast, Dickinson's work challenges the commodification of labor, advocating instead for a perspective where the process itself holds intrinsic worth, independent of its productivity. Following the industrial revolution, Western societies increasingly measured work by productivity and profit, relegating personal well-being to secondary importance. According to Graeber (2018: xxiv), "we have evolved into a work-centered civilization, not even 'productive work' but work as an end and meaning in itself". In his analysis, Graeber looks at Thomas Carlyle's "Gospel of Work" (1843), which argues that labor should be considered as the substance of life itself, rather than a means to satisfy material wants (Graeber, 2018: 228). Carlyle (1843: 173-4), unlike Aristotle, highlights the moral value of work, provided that "a man perfects himself by working" since "all true work is sacred" and "this is the noblest thing yet discovered under God's sky". Likewise, across the Atlantic, Abraham Lincoln stated in his first annual address to Congress in 1861, "labor is prior to and independent of capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration" (qtd. in Graeber, 2018: 230). Further, the "Gospel of Work" gave way to the "Gospel of Wealth" after the American Civil War, with consumption replacing production as the "source of status".[12] Consequently, the consumerism cult emerged as a reaction to the fact that individuals have little control over their time and rarely act or live their lives as they would like (Graeber, 2018: 247).

Graeber unveils "the paradox of modern work" through surveys and research on work conducted during the twentieth century. He (Graeber, 2018: 241) claims that "most people's sense of dignity and self-worth is caught up in working for living"; however, "most people hate their jobs". More specifically, workers "gain feelings of dignity and self-worth *because* they hate their jobs" (Graeber, 2018: 242). For Graeber, modern work returns to Carlyle's standpoint, which consists of "a peculiar diatribe against happiness" on a daily basis, as shown in this excerpt: "the only happiness a brave man ever troubled himself with asking much about was, happiness enough to get his work done. It is, after all, the one unhappiness of a man that he

[12] It was "no longer the ability to make things", as Harry Braverman points out, "but simply the ability to purchase them" that represented "a monumental shift in popular consciousness" (qtd. in Graeber, 2018: 233-4).

cannot work, that he cannot get his destiny as man fulfilled" (Carlyle, 1843: 134). It is unsurprising that the work routine would be a torment for Carlyle and ascetic Protestantism; however, being unemployed would be far more tormenting, as man's "destiny" was to labor. For this reason, work's value rests on being an obligation rather than a choice. Likewise, its economic *value* – and the need to make a living from it – discourages people from prioritizing other *values*. According to Hannah Arendt, the instrumentalization of work "makes value itself impossible" since it causes a "limitless devaluation of everything existing", reducing "nature and the world into mere means, robbing both of their independent dignity" (Arendt, 1958: 156-7).Like Arendt, Graeber asserts:

> If you just want to make a lot of money, there might be a way to do it; on the other hand, if your aim is to pursue any other sort of value – whether that be truth (journalism, academia), beauty (the art world, publishing), justice (activism, human rights), charity, and so forth – and you actually want to be paid a living wage for it, then if you do not possess a certain degree of family wealth, social networks, and cultural capital, there is simply no way in. (Graeber, 2018: 253)

Fortunately, Dickinson did "possess a certain degree of family wealth", and her poems show how she was able to pursue other sorts of values.

Modern work subordinates human values in favor of economic ones, and it depreciates daily experience. Conversely, Dickinson's poetry subverts this utilitarian view of work and her poems offer an alternative to nineteenth-century and modern standards, confronting Carlyle's "peculiar diatribe" against the value of every day. In fact, *day* is by far the most commonly used noun in Dickinson's poetry, which appears 232 times (Keane, 2008: 26). This shows how important each day was in Dickinson's poetic life. When it comes to the distinction between *value* and *values*, some of her poems equate concepts like price or income with abstract worth rather than economic valuation. For Greg Sevik (2022: 146), "the only values" Dickinson truly recognizes are "the contingent ones here on Earth". For instance, in her poem "One blessing had I than the rest" (Fr767), her speaker discusses a "Value in the Soul -" which is the "Supremest Earthly Sum -". Thus, this "Value in the Soul" is priceless. Likewise, the following stanza highlights the inestimable worth of existence in itself:

> *One life* of so much consequence!
> Yet I - for it - would pay -
> My soul's *entire income* -
> In ceaseless - salary – (Fr248)

In this case, the terms "salary" and "income" do not refer to any waged labor since her life's intrinsic value does not require any additional economic compensation. In a similar vein, Dickinson wrote in a letter, "to have lived is a Bliss so powerful - we must die - to adjust it -" (L523). Death here is perceived as a necessary prerequisite for estimating bliss. To be more precise, time in itself is priceless because it is finite.

All of these poems and letter fragments show Dickinson's refusal to succumb to the exigencies of valuing wealth accumulation over the processes and activities

that lead to it. In other words, her poetics underscore the qualitative, non-economic dimensions of labor, presenting it as an integral, self-validating activity. Besides, Dickinson articulates a view of time that transcends economic measurement, positioning it as a precious, irreplaceable element of human existence.

## 5. The value of time in Dickinson's work

Unlike the dominant tendency to equate time with productivity, Dickinson's work reveals a deep reverence for time's intrinsic worth. Starting in the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century, time became increasingly commodified, as demonstrated by Franklin's dictum "time is money". Influenced by Protestant principles, the American work ethic transformed time into a resource to be maximized. By the early twentieth century, thinkers like John Maynard Keynes predicted that technological advancements would reduce work hours, but instead, time was further subordinated to the demands of economic gain (Suzman, 2019: 31). In fact, Juliet B. Schor (1993: xvii) asserts that the "culture of time" in the United States is harmful to well-being, and the decrease in leisure time contrasts sharply with the increase in productivity. In more detail, Schor (1993: xviii) argues that the capitalist drive to increase productivity and profits has actually led to longer working hours and less leisure, counter to earlier projections that economic advances would grant individuals more free time. In the 1950s, it was expected that as productivity rose, labor hours would decrease. For instance, *The Harvard Business Review* (1959) critically scrutinized the assumption that leisure time was about to increase and pondered: "what would regular Americans do with all of that extra time?" (Schor, 1993: 4). However, the leisure panic subsided when it failed to arrive. Besides, people's stress levels increased as a result of juggling the responsibilities of work, family, and life, and their "work-and-spend" cycle hindered them from living more leisurely (Schor, 1993: 5-9). Schor (1993: 11) questions what she calls a "conventional wisdom", that capitalism has created the world's first truly leisured societies. This claim is valid only when contrasted to eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe and America; however, it is false when we go "a bit farther chronologically".[13] Consequently, she (Schor, 1993: 9-10) argues that increased levels of wealth and prosperity brought by capitalism's higher living standard come at the expense of a significantly busier workweek.

Like Schor, James Suzman (2019: 33) discusses both the devastating consequences of our worldwide economic system and primitive prosperity as characterize by the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins. Sahlins disputes the premise that people now live better than those in the past by analyzing hunter-gatherers' approach to happiness. Rather than boosting their work effort to obtain more things, as we do today, their lifestyle was predicated on having few possessions and few

[13] Schor (1993: 6-7) notes that "the lives of ordinary people in the Middle Ages or Ancient Greece and Rome may not have been easy, or even pleasant, but they certainly were leisurely".

wants. Despite being materially impoverished by contemporary standards, primitive people were affluent in one dimension: the disposal of their time (Schor, 1993: 10). These notions contrast significantly with the 1950s' American dream, which celebrated "the ability of capital, industry, and ultimately plenty of good honest hard work to narrow the gap between an individual's material aspirations and their limited means" (Suzman, 2019: 38). According to Suzman (2019: 38), the notion of primitive affluence challenges the idea that "Europe and America [are] at the vanguard of humankind's journey to bigger and better things", as exemplified in his book's epigraph by Seneca: "true happiness is to enjoy the present, without anxious dependence upon the future, not to amuse ourselves with either hopes or fears but to rest satisfied with what we have, which is sufficient, for he that is so wants nothing" (Suzman, 2019: 1). By centering time's worth in the present moment, rather than future productivity, Dickinson's work indirectly challenges the capitalist ethic that subordinates all aspects of life to labor's economic function and aligns with the idea of primitive affluence.

Returning to the presumed crisis of leisure addressed at *The Harvard Business Review*, it appears improbable that time would ever feel as "extra" for Dickinson given her tremendous appreciation for the "gift of mortality". As an example, she wrote to her sister-in-law Susan two years before her death, "tell the Susan who never forgets to be subtle, every Spark is numbered" (Leyda, vol.2, 1960: 430). Likewise, the poet's niece Martha depicted an incident in which the poet's appreciation for her limited time is well illustrated: "once in that happy place [Dickinson's room] I repeated to Aunt Emily what a neighbor had said – that time must pass very slowly to her, who never went anywhere – and she flashed back Browning's line: 'Time, why, Time was all I wanted!'" (Bianchi, 1970: 46). In other words, time was all she wanted and needed. For Albert Gelpi (1971: 82), Dickinson valued time over eternity, "for the one is still, but the other moves". Likewise, the poet believed that the fluidity and precariousness of time is what gives life meaning. In Martin Hägglund's (2019: 10) words, "we are free because we are able to ask ourselves what we ought to do with our time". Certainly, Dickinson was able to ask herself this question.

Dickinson's view of time contrasts sharply with the temporal pressures of modern work culture. Some of her poems show how her speakers both kept their wants low in the contest between *having* and *wanting*, and highlighted the value of the present. For instance in "The missing all -prevented me / From missing minor things -" (Fr995), the persona cherishes all that was unreachable to her, or missing, because it allowed her to focus on those "minor things" that, while not normally appreciated by some people, were essential to her. In reality, those "missing all" were never so "large" as to force her to forsake her "work for curiosity". In this context, work refers to activities – such as poetry writing – that are both rewarding and present in the speaker's world; activities that are "Sufficient for my Own" (Fr11036), as Dickinson declared in another poem. Like Seneca's sufficiency in enjoying the present, Dickinson's speaker posits, "How much the present moment means / To those who've nothing more -" (Fr1420). According to David Reynolds, Dickinson's awareness of "the momentousness of the Present" surpassed all her contemporaries'

(Reynolds, 2011: 34). Having nothing more than the present moment may only be assessed by those who deny the existence of eternity, such as atheists, or by those who recognize that "every spark is numbered".

For Dickinson, time cannot be subordinated to the mechanistic needs of productivity without losing its essence. Some of her poems and letter fragments imply that the meaning of time emerges only when individuals have the freedom to engage in fulfilling work, an idea that modern critiques of work culture – namely Graeber, Schor, and Suzman – similarly emphasize. Besides, Dickinson's approach promotes a more attentive, present-centered understanding of time and work that departs from economic necessity or social obligation.

## 6. The existential value of work: Beyond economic and social validation

Some of Dickinson's poems, by intertwining labor with existential fulfillment and present awareness, show that work can hold deep personal meaning outside societal expectations of productivity and financial gain. This approach is consistent with contemporary debates about the purpose of labor and the pursuit of happiness, which are examined by theorists who argue for reinventing work as a practice that fosters individual identity and societal cohesiveness rather than meeting economic imperatives. Cynthia Estlund (2021: 63) sheds light on a current debate about how to attain the three components of a life worth living – work, money, and leisure – in the face of automation and technological advancement. In her (Estlund, 2021: 67) own words, this debate is vital "to enable people generally to achieve a better balance between work and the rest of life – that is, a better societal work-life balance". On the one hand, waged labor is fundamental "to most people's identities and to our social and political life" (Estlund, 2021: 15). Americans, in particular, have primarily used employment to measure their own and others' worth and status (Estlund, 2021: 70-1). On the other hand, as exemplified in Keynes's envisioning, "most humans throughout history have aspired to a life with more leisure and less toil"; nonetheless, "free time without an adequate source of income is just the malaise of long-term unemployment" (Estlund, 2021: 15).While work is not as popularly valued as leisure and income, Estlund (2021: 76-7) contends that labor and working interactions have a social value that is much less likely to occur in other sorts of associations.

Like Estlund, Jean-Philippe Deranty (2021: 1) underscores the social benefits of work, and argues that, while revising the existing work ethic under capitalism is necessary, we should nevertheless adhere to some "ethic of work". This approach contrasts with other post-work theorists, such as Graeber, who point out the inherent discord in making work the axis of economic and cultural values, given that it is an instrumental activity by definition (Deranty, 2021: 4). In his (Deranty, 2021: 7) own words, "if we take seriously the idea that human society operates as a cooperative scheme that ensures its own reproduction and that of its members, then it is unrealistic and misguided to advocate for 'post-work' societies". In his essay, "work" is defined

as an activity, and he highlights the perks of work from an activity-centered rather than an economy-centered perspective. For Deranty (2021: 8), "the success of the working activity is not defined by the worker but by the addressee", provided that there is always an "external authority". While this authority corresponds to the various tiers of management in waged work, it can also be linked to society's expectations in non-waged work. Therefore, work, when seen as an activity, can be waged and non-waged. These working activities represent potential for "self-development" and "self-realization" for the individual only if they create "a challenge that must be met", which is typically external rather than 'self-defined'. In Deranty's (2021: 10) words, internal challenges "rarely provide the rigid frame within which the subject needs to mobilise all her powers to achieve tasks", considering that "mastering any complex task is difficult', and "involves renouncing comfort and habits".

While work can be characterized as an activity, not all activities are meaningful. For Deranty (2021: 11), a "meaningful activity" is directed at producing a specific outcome, "one that will fulfil a need", and it relies on "outside pressure" and "normative expectations". As a result, if the outcome is private, it is likely to be less meaningful for individuals. Some of "the social goods of working" are its "social recognition", the perks of "cohesive work collectives" and "occupational culture", as well as "effective cooperation", which undercuts "discriminations and ideologically based inequalities" (Deranty, 2021: 12-17). For all these reasons, in a "post-work society", he (Deranty, 2021: 12) suggests that "we would get very bored, as we would have to come up with meaningful activities that would need to be supported solely by our own self-motivation". Further, he (Deranty, 2021: 18) claims that "insisting on the goods of work is even compatible with a demand that work take less place in our lives". While both Estlund and Deranty distinguish between "work" and "the rest of life", Dickinson's merging of work and life calls this categorization into question. For instance, in her poem opening "Adversity if it shall be" (Fr1616), her speaker depicts "This Me" as someone "that walks and works -". By placing *walking* and *working* on equal terms, Dickinson's speaker points out that both the act of moving through life and the act of laboring are intrinsic to her sense of self. In a similar vein, when T.W. Higginson detailed his encounter with Dickinson in a letter to his wife, he wrote:

> I asked if she [Dickinson] never felt want to employment, never going off the place & never seeing any visitor "I never thought of conceiving that I could ever have the slightest approach to such a want in all future time" (& added) "I feel that I have not expressed myself strongly enough". (L342a)

Dickinson, "in all future time", did not feel any "want to employment", because her work as a poet was fully assimilated within her living practices, much like "the Spider as an artist", who performs his laboring activity without regard for any external authority or valuation that may "certify" his task.

Dickinson's poetic work was a meaningful activity for her, despite the fact that some of the features that Deranty associates with such activities might conflict with her approach. While her poetic work proved crucial in her life, it is unclear

how it fit into "a cooperative scheme". Dickinson shared several of her poems with friends and family, and these poems may have helped them on various occasions. Nonetheless, the primary reason for engaging in this activity was not "producing some useful outcome", but rather that writing poetry – and thinking through poetry – was meaningful and valuable for its own sake. Dickinson's poetic contribution to the world was neither "clear" nor "concrete", and yet, her poetic activities were meaningful. Moreover, did Dickinson want "external authority" to legitimize the "success" of her poetic work? On the one hand, it is true that when Dickinson first wrote T.W. Higginson in 1862, she included four poems and inquired whether her verse was "alive" (L260). She also signed several of her messages to him as "your scholar" and expressed gratitude for his advice and recommendations. His authority, however, was insufficient to overpower hers. Likewise, while Dickinson shared a substantial portion of her writing with her sister-in-law Susan – her primary addressee – this act did not signify a search for "external authority" but rather one of reciprocal involvement and interest in poetry. According to Ackmann (2020: xx), when Dickinson sent her poem "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" (Fr124) to Susan "for critique", she listened to her "advice but went in another direction", and she reacted in a similar way to "Higginson's recommendations: open to his criticism, but holding fast to her own point of view". As one of Dickinson's speakers claimed: "The pedigree of Honey / Does not concern the Bee" (Fr1650). The external validation of Dickinson's creative endeavor did not interfere with her own appraisal or that of the process itself. Dickinson's poetry was not made public during her lifetime, yet that did not render it any less meaningful to her. Her privileged socioeconomic status, as previously stated, freed her from both the need to make a living from her poems and, in Deranty's words, "the anonymous gaze of society's expectations", given that her poems were published posthumously.[14]

Deranty's critique of a "post-work society" in which people "would get very bored" looking for meaningful and self-motivating activities echoes the question posed by *The Harvard Business Review* sixty years earlier. Individuals' perceptions of the mechanics, goals, and value of work appear to have not changed much over time, and it is still perceived as a kind of activity – whether or not meaningful and socially valued – that is performed out of obligation rather than choice, externally assessed and rewarded rather than internally, and separated from the rest of the activities that individuals freely choose to do. Would Dickinson have preferred that her work had taken 'less place' in her life? This question may have seemed irrelevant to her since the space that her poetic work occupied was the one she wished it to take, no more, no less, and its process spanned her entire life. To be more precise, Dickinson's poetics of labor were incorporated into her daily activities, and as a result, her work intertwined with her life, and vice versa.

[14] Dickinson published ten poems in her lifetime. They were published anonymously and were apparently "made public against her wishes" (Franklin, 1967: xv).

## 7. Conclusion

Emily Dickinson's poetics of labor present an alternative to both her nineteenth-century context and contemporary understandings of work. Through her unique integration of labor and leisure, Dickinson challenges dominant economic and social paradigms that equate work with productivity. Beyond that, her poetry positions labor not as a transactional activity but as a deeply personal and existential endeavor, one that holds intrinsic value irrespective of external validation or material outcomes. By drawing on both Greek philosophical ideals of *schole* and Protestant work ethics, Dickinson develops a vision of labor that transcends the conventional divide between work and rest. Her poetry blurs these boundaries, suggesting that labor could be inherently fulfilling, akin to leisure, and intrinsically tied to the joy of creation. This approach confronts the capitalist commodification of both work and time, advocating for a model where each moment − and each act of labor − is meaningful in its own right. Within her life's circumference, Dickinson's aim was not that work would "take less place" in her life, as Deranty implied, or to separate work from "the rest of life", as Estlund pointed out. Furthermore, she did not engage in "business" in order to have leisure, as Aristotle advocated, or to turn time into money, as Protestant ethics urged. Instead, Dickinson's poetic endeavor and its activities intended to merge life and work, and they became one and the same. Therefore, Dickinson's poetics of labor and its emphasis on the worth of processes highlights the benefits present in her lifetime journey through poetry. Finally, Dickinson's work resonates with contemporary debates about work-life balance, personal fulfillment, and the social impact of labor, offering a timeless critique of the forces that continue to shape modern work culture. By embracing Dickinson's views, we find a pathway to a more holistic understanding of work − one that values presence and process over mere productivity, and affirms the potential of labor to bring deeper meaning and connection into our lives.

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# EMILI DIKINSON I POETIKA RADA

## Apstrakt

Ovaj članak istražuje poetiku rada Emili Dikinson i odnos između rada i dokolice u kontekstu američke kulture 19. veka i savremenog društva. Istorijski gledano, fizički rad percipira se kao osnova društvenih i ekonomskih vrednosti. Međutim, pojedinci su često podstaknuti da odstupaju od svojih radnih rutina, zbog čega je teško sagledati njihovu vrednost. Koristeći komparativni i interdisciplinarni pristup, ova studija analizira opus Emili Dikinson u dijalogu s filozofskim i sociološkim okvirom koji razmatra razliku između rada i dokolice, kao i posledice koje ta razlika ostavlja na živote ljudi, ali i način na koji se vrednovanje rada promenilo tokom vremena. Detaljnom analizom odabranih pesama i delova pisama, ovaj rad pokazuje kako dela Dikinsonove brišu tradicionalne granice između rada i dokolice, sugerišući da kreativni rad može imati fundamentalnu, samopotvrđujuću vrednost, koja nije uslovljena ekonomskim ili društvenim pritiscima. Naposletku, njen pogled na rad i vreme može doprineti savremenim raspravama posvećenim uspostavljanju smislene ravnoteže između rada i života u kapitalističkom društvu.

**Ključne reči:** Emili Dikinson, poetika rada, devetnaesti vek, radna etika, dokolica, vrednosti