

At the Edge of the Abyss

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Artist Judy Chicago's best-known work is entitled *The Dinner Party* in which there are 39 place settings, complete with hand-painted plates, on a large triangular table. Created between 1974 to 1979, these place settings commemorate historically notable women throughout history, ranging from a mythical goddess to Georgia O'Keefe.

When I viewed the installation at its permanent location in the Brooklyn Museum several years ago, my imagination took flight. What if, after the lights are downed and the guards have gone home, the spirits of these women come alive to carry on lively conversations. Tonight we are privileged to eavesdrop on two authors, Virginia Woolf and Emily Dickinson, who have quite different views about writing, sex, and, of course, the edge of the abyss.

Virginia: My dear little Emily, I'm so delighted that we will have an opportunity to chat about your poetry. I'm not familiar with your writing but, of course, your reputation lingers in the hallowed halls of immortality.

Emily: Indeed! I would be delighted to recite all of my 1,800 poems.

Virginia: Truly, you jest. Poets are such a tiresome lot. As soon as one shows a modicum of interest, they immediately start spouting reams of rhymes. Perhaps you

would like me to read aloud my eleven novels in their entirety but, since our time is limited, I'll shorten it to my 1925 masterpiece Mrs. Dalloway.

Emily: Oh, please do! But if I may, I would like to just recite one poem. Here it is:

I'm Nobody! Who are you?

Are you -- Nobody -- too?

Then there's a pair of us!

Don't tell they'd advertise--you know!

Virginia: Stop right there! I've never heard such rubbish. I'm not a Nobody. I'm a Somebody, and I certainly did my part in advertising it, by establishing the Hogarth Press to publish my works. Of course, Emily, all this is not possible if you don't have a room of your own.

Emily: After father died in 1874, I had a house of my own.

Virginia: Emily, a room of one's own is a metaphor, signaling a woman's independence. Indeed I lived in a time of robust creative energy. In our Bloomsbury Group, there were formidable writers, intellectuals, and artists, and us literary women were called Bluestockings.

Emily: I liked wearing white stockings myself.

Virginia: Heavens, Emily, don't be so literal. But perhaps you can't help it, sheltered in that Amherst mansion all your life. While I drank life to its dregs, loving men, women, and, well, others. Tell me, Emily, did you know a man in a Biblical way.

Emily: Well, I know many men in the Bible -- Abraham, Isaac, Jacob etc.?

Virginia: No, no, I mean did you ever experience, er, passion.

Emily: Oh yes! Listen to this: Wild nights - Wild nights!

Were I with thee

Wild nights should be

Our Luxury!

Virginia: YOU! Emily, I'm utterly shocked.

Emily: nods and winks.

Virginia: Well did you ever feel the opposite of sublime love and that is despair, the hopelessness that drives one to the edge of the abyss.

Emily: Yes, that, too. In fact, I did write about the abyss in this unpublished poem:

There is a pain - so utter -

It swallows substance up -

Then covers the Abyss with Trance -

So Memory can step

Around - across - upon it -
As One within a Swoon -
Goes safely - where an open eye -
Would drop Him - Bone by Bone

I wrote the poem because pain was a constant theme, and the trance suggests an altered state that makes it possible to step around the abyss.

Some say I suffered from seasonal disorder or that I was bipolar.

There's a certain Slant of light
Winter Afternoons --
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes --

In this poem I use the imagery of winter light to create a connection with my internal conflict over meaning and despair.

Virginia: Emily, if you have to explain your poetry, either your words have failed or you have listeners who are ignoramuses. I am not of that sort. Indeed, I have made no secret of the fact that I suffered from bouts of severe depression most of my life, with periodic stays in institutions for women, as they said back then, with nervous dispositions. I once wrote: "And so I pitched into my great lake of melancholy. Lord how deep it is! The only way I keep afloat is by working. What if I told you I'm incapable of tolerating my own heart?"

Emily: So, Virginia, here we are two different women, different times, different countries, but we both have stood at the edge of the abyss. So can we not conclude it doesn't matter whether one wears white or blue stockings?"

Virginia: I scarcely imagine what the color socks has to do with anything.

Emily: It's a metaphor, Virginia! But to continue our topic of discussion, the Edge of the Abyss, you did topple into it, did you not, on March 28, 1941. You stepped into the river Ouse (oose), with heavy stones in your pockets . . .

Virginia: I had left a suicide note to my husband: "Dearest, I feel certain that I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and I can't concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. "

Emily: Virginia, Did you have any regrets, as you were sinking to the bottom of the river, perhaps looking up at the last blue patch of the sky you would ever see?

Virginia: Only one regret. . . that I didn't stuff my pockets with heavier rocks. It took a bloody long time to drown.

Emily: Virginia, I see that the lights at the Brooklyn Museum have been turned on. Our time is almost up, and we must fade away once again. Surely, we can't end our discussion, us slipping into the abyss.

Virginia: My dear, there is a silver lining to the abyss. And it is this: many great writers, artists, thinkers have stood at the edge of the abyss and gleaned great truths that expose and express our mortal condition. Do you think anyone would have remembered us if we were chirpy Pollyannas? So I say this: to all those who seek immortality, who want to be read long after they are dead, who want to be a legend in someone else's time and who wish to come to the attention of important opinion makers, such as, Judy Chicago, an artist so famous they named a Midwestern city in America after her, then take my advice, dear listeners. Don't hesitate a moment longer. Step up to the Edge (pause) and plunge, plunge into the Abyss.