

Berlin film festival 2016

# A Quiet Passion review - Terence Davies' Emily Dickinson biopic finds beauty in the little things

★★★★☆

The *Sunset Song* director's film about the reclusive American poet overcomes the challenge of her closed, interior life, with the help of a great performance by Cynthia Nixon



A Quiet Passion Photograph: Berlinale

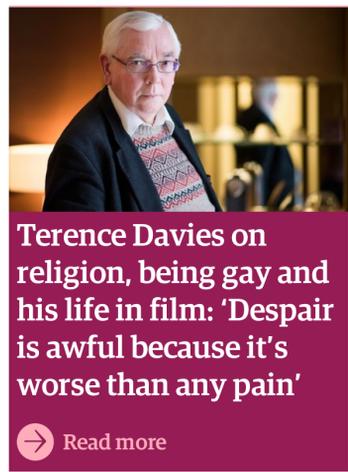
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In 2015 Terence Davies released *Sunset Song*, his expansive adaptation of Lewis Grassic Gibbon's novel of Scottish hill-farm life; now, early in 2016, another film has emerged: a biopic of 19th-century American poet [Emily Dickinson](#), who died in 1886 after a lifetime of respectable frustration. On the face of it, the two couldn't be more different: the former revels in its sweeping landscapes and full-blooded screaming matches, while the latter is a resolutely-controlled miniature, barely setting foot outside the Dickinson house in Amherst, Massachusetts.



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For all that, *A Quiet Passion* sees Davies returning again to some familiar themes. His Dickinson - superbly played with a sort of restless passivity by Cynthia Nixon - is, like *Sunset Song*'s Chris Guthrie, a figure trapped by history and circumstance, desperate to find an outlet for the overwhelming emotions surging inside her. The internal politics of the family plays a dominant path in both - though in *A Quiet Passion*, the Dickinson paterfamilias Edward (Keith Carradine) is a figure of stern rectitude, for sure, but a long way from the demonic, violent father-figures in which Davies has previously specialised.

Dickinson, in her emotional isolation and determination to confound suffocating social norms, also shares something with the Lily Bart of Davies' 2000 masterpiece *The House of Mirth*.

Dickinson's circumscribed life, with its interiorised focus, is certainly a challenge for film adaptation, and Davies' solution - perhaps inevitably - is to cast it as a chamber drama, almost literally. *A Quiet Passion* rarely ventures outside Dickinson's study, bedroom or living room, and makes the most of even the most minor of incidents. When Dickinson conceives a characteristically understated passion for a local clergyman - so understated, it's only after an argument with her sister that you realise she was ever in love with him at all - the act of inviting him and his sanctimonious wife round for tea becomes a highly charged, meaningful encounter.



Dickinson's exchanges with her family - sister Lavinia (Jennifer Ehle), brother Austin (Duncan Duff), mother Emily (Joanna Bacon) - as well as their witticism-spouting friend Vryling Wilder Buffum (Catherine Bailey) form the meat of the film, which is designed to articulate Dickinson's principled stand against social convention, and to somehow humanise a figure that has become a byword for introversion and reclusiveness. In this it must be said Nixon does a brilliant job, and Davies' self-written script, which dwells on the quotidian as much as grand gestures, gives her the tools.

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Above all, though, it is Davies' ability to invest even the most apparently-humdrum moments with some form of intense radiance that sustains his film. Every shot is beautifully composed and lit - as we have come to expect - and the actors deliver every line with absolute conviction. Dropping key poems on to the soundtrack may be a conventional move, but Davies' selection is unerring and reinforces the emotion at every point. Classical though his shooting style may be, Davies isn't afraid to try a little digital trickery: he overcomes the awkward age-jump moment when the younger actors are jettisoned by a smart ageing process in a portrait-photography studio.

After a long period in the wilderness, *A Quiet Passion* is Davies' third feature since his comeback documentary *Of Time and the City*, following the Terence Rattigan adaptation *The Deep Blue Sea*, and then *Sunset Song*. We should be relieved that there's no diminution of powers: rather, the opposite, in that Davies appears to be getting better every time.

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