NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Reader Resources

The Poetry of Emily Dickinson

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"I find ecstasy in living—the mere sense of living is joy enough."

Preface

Emily Dickinson is not only one of the supreme lyric poets of American literature. She has also come to symbolize the purest kind of artistic vocation. Not merely unrecognized but virtually unpublished in her own lifetime, she developed her genius in the utmost privacy, invisible to all except a small circle of family and friends. Driven only by her own imagination, she created a body of work unsurpassed in its expressive originality, penetrating insight, and dark beauty.

What is the NEA Big Read?

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A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining The Big Read.

About the Book

Introduction to Emily Dickinson

"'Hope' is the thing with feathers –," "Because I could not stop for Death –", and "I dwell in Possibility –" are some of the most memorable opening lines in American poetry, written by an artist who was virtually unknown during her 55 years of life.

Filled with original metaphors and unexpected syntax, Emily Dickinson's poetry sometimes reads like a riddle. She regularly employs paradox—a statement that seems like a contradiction but actually is not—in order to get at the truth from an unpredictable angle. Twenty-first century readers must occasionally renounce a literal way of reading in order to appreciate her "certain Slant of light."

Her gift for figurative language—imagery, metaphor, personification, simile—emerges throughout her almost 1,800 poems in brilliant and subtle ways. Although she was not conventionally religious, her poetry often borrows the metrical patterns of the hymns and psalms of her childhood. Dickinson uses punctuation and capitalization of nouns uniquely. Her idiosyncratic use of the dash especially emphasizes her ideas. She rarely wrote a poem of more than twenty lines, and this brevity itself suggests her view of poetry: that it should "stun" and surprise, pleasing the reader with "Bolts—of Melody."

Her "flood subject" was immortality and she often wrote about death. Certainly Dickinson's life was filled with sorrow, and she grieved the deaths of many friends and family. But her poetry is also filled with the insightful happiness of a woman who had loved deeply and who relished the beauty of nature. Her belief in the promise of eternal life sustained her, and one of her poems begins: "Forever — is composed of Nows —."

As the poem below suggests, even after a poet dies, each age becomes a lens—like the lamp's glass or the sky's suns—"Disseminating" the poem's "Circumference," spreading light from age to age.

The Poets light but Lamps —
Themselves — go out —
The Wicks they stimulate
If vital Light

Inhere as do the Suns —
Each Age a Lens
Disseminating their
Circumference —
—Emily Dickinson, from "The Poets Light but Lamps"

About the Author

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

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Emily Dickinson, age 16 (Courtesy of Amherst College Archives and Special Collections)

Emily Dickinson, the middle child of Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson, was born on December 10, 1830, in the family house (called the Homestead) on Main Street in Amherst, Massachusetts.

The crowded house and Edward's growing legal and political career soon called for new quarters, and when Emily was 9 years old, her family purchased a house on what is now North Pleasant Street in Amherst. Close to her older brother Austin and younger sister Lavinia, Dickinson had a fond attachment to the house on Pleasant Street. Domestic duties like baking and gardening occupied her time, along with school, church activities, reading books, learning to sing and play the piano, writing letters, and taking nature walks to collect wild flowers that she pressed into an album called her "herbarium."

Dickinson's formal schooling was exceptional for a girl in the early nineteenth century, though not unusual for girls in Amherst. After a short time at an Amherst district school, she attended Amherst Academy for about seven years before entering Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (now Mount Holyoke College) in 1847. She stayed at the Seminary for one year, the longest time she ever spent away from home.

In Dickinson's early twenties, writing became increasingly important to her. Letters to her older brother Austin reveal a growing sense of "difference" between herself and others: "What makes a few of us so different from others? It's a question I often ask myself" (April 21, 1853). This sense of separation became more pronounced as she grew older and her poetic sensibilities matured. By 1855, the family returned to the Homestead, where Dickinson had her own upstairs room and developed her passion for gardening. That same year, Edward Dickinson's service in the House of Representatives brought the poet to Washington, DC—one of her only trips away from Amherst.

Although Emily Dickinson's calling as a poet began in her teens, she came into her own as an artist later, during a short but intense period of creativity that resulted in her composing, revising, and saving hundreds of poems. That period, which scholars identify as 1858–1865, includes many passionate love lyrics and three poetic letters to the mysterious person she calls "Master," and overlaps with the most significant event of American nineteenth-century history, the Civil War.

In her early thirties, Dickinson underwent treatments for a painful eye condition, now thought to be iritis—sensitivity to light. While under the care of Henry W. Williams for seven months in 1864 and six months in 1865, she boarded with her cousins, Frances and Louisa Norcross in Boston.

After these visits and treatments, Dickinson's lifestyle further developed into the one that we mythologize today—a more reclusive, quiet existence. Although she rarely ventured beyond the Homestead, she did entertain several significant visitors, including the famous essayist and social reformer Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, whom she finally met in 1870 after a long correspondence when he visited her at home in Amherst.

Dickinson's adult life was marked by the illness and death of friends and loved ones, including her father, who died in 1874, and her mother, in 1882. Her friendship with Judge Otis Phillips Lord resulted in a marriage proposal that she turned down in 1882; he died two years later. The poet became ill herself shortly after her eight-year-old nephew died—as she wrote to a friend late in 1883, "The Crisis of the sorrow of so many years is all that tires me." She remained in poor health until she died at age 55 on May 15, 1886. She was buried four days later in the town cemetery, now known as West Cemetery.

The Homestead and The Evergreens

Used with permission of the Emily Dickinson Museum

In 1855, Emily Dickinson moved with her family back to "the Homestead," the house in Amherst where she had been born and lived her first nine years. Her father purchased the home in early 1855 and made significant renovations to it. In 1856, the Homestead became part of an enhanced Dickinson estate when Dickinson's adored older brother, Austin, married her close friend Susan Huntington Gilbert, and Edward Dickinson built the couple a home next door known as The Evergreens.

That household was a lively nexus for Amherst society, and Dickinson herself took part in social gatherings there early in Austin and Susan's marriage. Their lifestyle eventually would contrast markedly with her own more reclusive manner. The couple's three children—Ned, born in 1861; Martha, in 1866;

and Gilbert, in 1875—brought great joy to Emily's life. In addition to providing close proximity to her brother and his family, the renovated Homestead offered Dickinson several other advantages. Her father added a conservatory where Emily could engage year-round in her beloved hobby of gardening and raise climate-sensitive plants.

Perhaps most importantly, Dickinson had a room of her own, the southwest corner bedroom on the second floor, a space essential to her writing. The two Dickinson daughters, who never married, remained at the Homestead for the rest of their lives. After Emily's death in 1886, Lavinia lived on at the Homestead until she died in 1899, championing the publication of her sister's poetry.

Today both houses are open to the public year round.

For more information about the Homestead, visit emilydickinsonmuseum.org.

From *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson*

By Judith Farr

During her lifetime, Emily Dickinson was known more widely as a gardener, perhaps, than as a poet. Susan Dickinson's unfulfilled plan for a memoir of her sister-in-law listed "Love of flowers" as Emily's first attribute. Her poetry, for the most part privately "published," was often enclosed in letters pinned together by flowers, or in bouquets that made the poem concealed at the flowers' center and the flowers themselves one message. […] Even before she wrote poems, Dickinson was engaged in gathering, tending, categorizing, and pressing flowers. After writing poetry became her central preoccupation, cultivating bulbs, plants, and flowers within a portion of her father's land and in the glass enclosure of a conservatory (built just for her), remained a favorite occupation.

Mid-Victorians liked to pun on the aesthetic associations between "posies" and "poesie." Her flowers were Emily Dickinson's other "poems," which the conservatory could safely enshrine in an age when what Hawthorne contemptuously called women "scribblers" were not always received in society. Indeed, to be a notable gardener was a much more acceptable avocation for mid-Victorian women (meant to be the angel of their house) than to be a poet. Edward Dickinson, who was prouder of his only son's letters than of his brilliant daughter's poems, may have given Emily a conservatory not only because he wished to please her but because growing flowers was, to him, a more suitable occupation for a woman than writing verse.

Emily had assisted her mother in the garden since she was twelve: first, at a house on West (now North Pleasant) Street, then in the mansion on Main Street. During her years of greatest artistic productivity (1858-1865), she was also developing skills at growing gardenias, jasmine, sweet peas, camellias, Gallica roses, oleander, lilies, heliotrope, and many other naturalized and native flowers. Just as her poems were uncommon, some of the flowers she chose to grow are unusual, gorgeous, and complex, requiring the grower's knowledge, prudence, and insight. Others like gentians and anemones were wildflowers, associated for her with simplicity of mind and heart, with youth and humility, fresh imagination, and the possibility of everlasting life. All were indices of her own spiritual and emotional state, while in her letters and poems, she continually associates flowers with herself and making gardens with making poems.

Historical and Literary Context

The Life and Times of Emily Dickinson

1830s

- 1830: Emily Dickinson is born on December 10 in the family home, called the Homestead, in Amherst, Massachusetts.
- 1837: Queen Victoria takes the throne and becomes the longest-reigning British monarch, living until 1901.
- 1838: Dickinson's father, Edward, begins his first term in the Massachusetts General Court.

1840s

- 1844-1845: Religious revival seizes Amherst, but Dickinson "attended none of the meetings."
- 1848: More than two hundred people–including Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucretia Mott—attend the first women's rights convention, in Seneca Falls, New York.
- 1849: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow publishes his novel *Kavanagh,* which Dickinson's brother smuggles into the house; the book is an early influence on Dickinson.

1850s

- Religious revival permeates Amherst once more. Dickinson’s father, sister, and future sister in-law recount their conversion experiences and join the church. Emily Dickinson declares: “I am standing alone in rebellion.”
- 1853: Amherst-Belchertown Railroad opens through efforts of Edward Dickinson.
- 1855: The Dickinson family moves back to the Homestead.
- 1857: As banks begin to collapse, the Panic of 1857 leads to a severe economic depression in America that lasts three years.
- 1858-1865: Dickinson’s most prolific years as a poet.

1860s

- 1861: Abraham Lincoln becomes president; the Civil War begins as Confederate forces attack Fort Sumter.
- 1865: Civil War ends with the surrender of Confederate General Robert E. Lee at Appomattox Courthouse in Virginia; Lincoln assassinated.
- 1865: The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution is passed, abolishing slavery in the U.S.

1870s

- 1870: After corresponding with her for eight years, Thomas Wentworth Higginson meets Dickinson for the first time.
- Dickinson's father dies in 1874; her mother becomes paralyzed after a stroke in 1875. Dickinson will nurse her mother for the next seven years.
- 1874: Alexander Graham Bell first conceives of the telephone, after conducting experiments at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and develops it two years later.

1880s

- Impressionist movement creates works of art known for intentionally visible brushstrokes, striking use of light, and ordinary subject matter.
- Dickinson's health fails in 1883; she dies in 1886.
- 1884: Writer Helen Hunt Jackson (1830-1885), a friend of Dickinson's, publishes the bestselling novel *Ramona.* She was the only writer who urged Dickinson to publish her poems.

Other Works/Adaptations

The Publication of Dickinson's Poetry

By the time Emily Dickinson was 35, she had composed more than 1,100 concise and powerful poems that astutely described the nature of love and art, pain and grief, joy and loss, the idea of heaven and the beauties of earth. She recorded about 800 of these in small handmade booklets (sometimes called "fascicles"), very private "publications" that she shared with no one.

Dickinson did share a portion of her poems with family and select friends whose literary taste she admired. Her sister-in-law, Susan Dickinson, received more than 250 poems throughout the two women's forty-year friendship; and to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, her cherished correspondent (and editor after her death), Dickinson sent about 100 of her finest. The few poems published in newspapers during her lifetime were altered and printed anonymously—apparently without her prior consent. In 1863, her most prolific year, she wrote "Publication – is the Auction / Of the Mind of Man –." During her life, most of her poems were known only to their author.

After her death in 1886, Dickinson's sister, Lavinia, found a chest of poetry in Emily's bedroom. According to R. W. Franklin, this previously unread "mass of manuscripts" contained "forty fascicles, ninety-eight unbound sheets, and seven or eight hundred individual manuscripts." In 1890, the family published the first volume of Emily Dickinson's poetry, which met with surprising success: it went through eleven editions in two years. Other editions followed, all with Dickinson's original words and punctuation either altered or omitted. Harvard University acquired the rights to Dickinson's work in 1950. In 1955, Thomas H. Johnson published the first edition of Dickinson's collected poetry that was faithful to the poet's original manuscripts.

R. W. Franklin's 1998 edition—titled *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*—is now considered the most reliable source. It contains all 1,789 of her known poems, including manuscripts and poems that have been identified since 1955.

Dickinson's Poetry

"Truth is such a rare thing it is delightful to tell it," Emily Dickinson once told Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and in 1,789 poems, she expresses her truth in ways often mysterious and elliptical.

Dickinson's joy for the natural world pervades her work. Hundreds of poems express her inquisitive wonder at the sun, moon, sea, birds, flowers, bees, and butterflies. One example is "The Moon is distant from the Sea," where she compares the relationship between the moon and sea to her feelings for one she calls "Signor."

Dickinson describes turbulent psychological states—especially grief, passion, and mourning—with poignant metaphors that help articulate what cannot be literally stated. In the erotic poem "Wild nights—Wild nights!," the compass and map are forsaken as the poet longs for her beloved. The poem "After great pain, a formal feeling—comes" conveys the abstractions of grief with powerfully evocative figurative language, for as anyone who has lost a beloved knows, nerves *do* "sit ceremonious, like Tombs" as the shock of tragedy sets in. When she says in another poem that "Crumbling is not an instant's Act," she describes the kind of despair that builds slowly, a state that time does not always heal.

This despair sometimes takes a spiritual form, and many of her poems deal with God, the Bible, and heaven in unorthodox ways. Despite social pressure during the fervor of the Second Great Awakening, Dickinson would not publically "declare for Christ" and stopped attending church with her family. But her poetry does not necessarily reject God or deny personal faith. A poem like "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church—" may, upon first glance, appear to disavow the rituals of Sunday rest and worship. Instead, Dickinson actually says that she keeps this holy day, but at home or in her garden, rather than in a public place.

In contrast to her well-known contemporary Walt Whitman, who often dealt with larger issues of democracy or war in his poetry, Dickinson is a poet who describes inner states of mind. However, several of her lyrics composed during the Civil War years employ images of battle, including one popular poem "Success is counted sweetest / By those who ne'er succeed." Despite an external "Victory" due to the acquisition of the enemy's "Flag," the poem paradoxically suggests that only those dying on the battlefield can hear a song of triumph.

If one mark of a great writer's work is that it moves us to return to it again and again whether for enchantment, wisdom, or consolation then Emily Dickinson is surely one of our greatest writers. In her verse, we experience the "Transport" or pleasurable excitement that she herself looked for in poetry: "If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way[?]."

Discussion Questions

1. Begin your discussion by reading a few of Emily Dickinson's poems out loud. Notice the different ways in which Dickinson uses rhyme. What sounds and rhythms can you hear?
2. In "Because I could not stop for Death –," how does Dickinson use the extended metaphor of a carriage ride to describe a journey we all have to take?
3. Scholar Judith Farr notes that although "not entirely orthodox in her Christian faith," Emily Dickinson "held certain doctrines to be precious, especially that of the Resurrection and the union of body and soul after death." What evidence of this do you see in such poems as "This World is not conclusion" or "I know that He exists"?
4. More than anything, Dickinson loved tending her garden and writing poetry. What parallels exist between the two activities?
5. "Wild nights – Wild nights!" was not published in Dickinson's lifetime. In 1891, why might editors have been worried about publishing this poem?
6. How is Dickinson's quiet life reflected in her poems? Consider how poems such as "I dwell in Possibility –" or "They shut me up in Prose –" might be autobiographical.

Additional Resources

Dickinson's Bookshelf

Emily Dickinson's somewhat solitary life is often misunderstood. She was neither misanthrope nor recluse, and her days were often busy. When Thomas Wentworth Higginson asked her if she ever felt any "want of employment," she replied, "I never thought of conceiving that I could ever have the slightest approach to such a want in all future time." Despite her self-imposed restrictions, she had a close circle of friends, remained informed about current events, baked all the bread in the Dickinson household, performed works of charity, and considered her books "the strongest friends of the soul." She consistently read the Bible, Shakespeare, the poetry of John Keats, and the Brontës. Here are three of Dickinson's favorite books.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) [by Currer Bell, pseudonym]
The three Brontë sisters published their works of fiction under pseudonyms, as it was not considered appropriate for Victorian middle-class ladies to write novels. *Jane Eyre* remains a beloved classic and captures the struggles of a poor orphan who passionately longs for love and experience. Dickinson's poem that begins "All overgrown by cunning moss" refers to Charlotte Brontë's grave in Haworth, England.

Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Poems* (1847)
Emerson was primarily known for his lectures and essays, but this book became one of Dickinson's most treasured. Although Susan Dickinson entertained Emerson at least twice at The Evergreens, there is no record of a meeting between him and Emily. In 1878, Emily was shocked to learn that her poem "Success is counted sweetest" was published in a magazine—and attributed to Emerson.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856)
In *Aurora Leigh,* the English poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning created a verse novel that chronicles the struggles of a woman who wants nothing more in life than to be a great poet. Political, controversial, and widely popular, the poem tackled the Victorian "woman question"—what is the proper role of women in society—in a way few other works dared to do. After Barrett Browning died in 1861, Dickinson wrote three poems in tribute to her.

Collected Poetry

The three-volume Variorum Edition of The Poems of Emily Dickinson, edited by R. W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1998), is the most reliable edition of Dickinson's collected poems. The paperback "Reading Edition" of this collection is suggested for readers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

Selected Poetry

Recommended editions include *Final Harvest,* edited by Thomas H. Johnson (New York: Back Bay Books, 1964); *The Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Modern Library, 2004), which includes an introduction by Billy Collins; and *Essential Dickinson* (New York: Ecco, 1996), which includes an introduction by Joyce Carol Oates.

Emily Dickinson's Letters

Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters, edited by Thomas H. Johnson. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958.

"I had a terror — since September — I could tell to none — and so I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground — because I am afraid [. . .]

You ask of my Companions Hills — Sir — and the Sundown — and a Dog — large as myself, that my Father bought me — They are better than Beings — because they know — but do not tell — and the noise in the Pool, at Noon — excels my Piano. I have a Brother and Sister — My Mother does not care for thought — and Father, too busy with his Briefs — to notice what we do — He buys me many Books — but begs me not to read them — because he fears they joggle the Mind. They are all religious — except me — and address an Eclipse, every morning — whom they call their 'Father.' But I fear my story fatigues you — I would like to learn — Could you tell me how to grow — or is it unconveyed — like Melody — or Witchcraft?"
—Emily Dickinson, *A Letter from Emily Dickinson to Thomas W. Higginson April 25, 1862*

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www.poetryfoundation.org

Visit the Poetry Foundation's website for a biography and bibliography of Dickinson, along with many of her poems.

Credits

Works Cited

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