

## BIOGRAPHY OF EMILY DICKINSON (1830-1886)



Emily Dickinson grew up in a prominent and prosperous household in Amherst, Massachusetts. Along with her younger sister Lavinia and older brother Austin, she experienced a quiet and reserved family life headed by her father Edward Dickinson. In a letter to Austin at law school, she once described the atmosphere in her father's house as "pretty much all sobriety." Her mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson, was not as powerful a presence in her life; she seems not to have been as emotionally accessible as Dickinson would have liked. Her daughter is said to have characterized her as not the sort of mother "to whom you hurry when you are troubled." Both parents raised Dickinson to be a cultured Christian woman who would one day be responsible for a family of her own. Her father attempted to protect her from reading books that might "joggle" her mind, particularly her religious faith, but Dickinson's individualistic instincts and irreverent sensibilities created conflicts that did not allow her to fall into step with the conventional piety, domesticity, and social duty prescribed by her father and the orthodox Congregationalism of Amherst.

The Dickinsons were well known in Massachusetts. Her father was a lawyer and served as the treasurer of Amherst College (a position Austin eventually took up as well), and her grandfather was one of the college's founders. Although nineteenth-century politics, economics, and social issues do not appear in the foreground of her poetry, Dickinson lived in a family environment that was steeped in them: her father was an active town official and served in the General Court of Massachusetts, the State Senate, and the United States House of Representatives.

Dickinson, however, withdrew not only from her father's public world but also from almost all social life in Amherst. She refused to see most people, and aside from a single year at South Hadley Female Seminary (now Mount Holyoke College), one excursion to Philadelphia and Washington, and several brief trips to Boston to see a doctor about eye problems, she lived all her life in her father's house. She dressed only in white and developed a reputation as a reclusive eccentric. Dickinson selected her own society carefully and frugally. Like her poetry, her relationship to the world was intensely reticent. Indeed, during the last twenty years of her life she rarely left the house.

Though Dickinson never married, she had significant relationships with several men who were friends, confidantes, and mentors. She also enjoyed an intimate relationship with her friend Susan Huntington Gilbert, who became her sister-in-law by marrying Austin. Susan and her husband lived next door and were extremely close with Dickinson. Biographers have attempted to find in a number of her relationships the source for the passion of some of her love poems and letters, but no biographer has been able to identify definitely the

object of Dickinson's love. What matters, of course, is not with whom she was in love--if, in fact, there was any single person--but that she wrote about such passions so intensely and convincingly in her poetry.

Choosing to live life internally within the confines of her home, Dickinson brought her life into sharp focus. For she also chose to live within the limitless expanses of her imagination, a choice she was keenly aware of and which she described in one of her poems this way: "I dwell in Possibility." Her small circle of domestic life did not impinge upon her creative sensibilities. Like Henry David Thoreau, she simplified her life so that doing without was a means of being within. In a sense she redefined the meaning of deprivation because being denied something--whether it was faith, love, literary recognition, or some other desire--provided a sharper, more intense understanding than she would have experienced had she achieved what she wanted: "heaven," she wrote, "is what I cannot reach!" This line, along with many others, such as "Water, is taught by thirst" and "Success is counted sweetest / By those who ne'er succeed," suggest just how persistently she saw deprivation as a way of sensitizing herself to the value of what she was missing. For Dickinson hopeful expectation was always more satisfying than achieving a golden moment.

Writers contemporary to her had little or no effect upon the style of her writing. In her own work she was original and innovative, but she did draw upon her knowledge of the Bible, classical myths, and Shakespeare for allusions and references in her poetry. She also used contemporary popular church hymns, transforming their standard rhythms into free-form hymn meters.

Today, Dickinson is regarded as one of America's greatest poets, but when she died at the age of fifty-six after devoting most of her life to writing poetry, her nearly 2,000 poems--only a dozen of which were published anonymously during her lifetime--were unknown except to a small numbers of friends and relatives. Dickinson was not recognized as a major poet until the twentieth century, when modern readers ranked her as a major new voice whose literary innovations were unmatched by any other nineteenth-century poet in the United States.

Dickinson neither completed many poems nor prepared them for publication. She wrote her drafts on scraps of paper, grocery lists, and the backs of recipes and used envelopes. Early editors of her poems took the liberty of making them more accessible to nineteenth-century readers when several volumes of selected poems were published in the 1890s. The poems were made to appear like traditional nineteenth-century verse by assigning them titles, rearranging their syntax, normalizing their grammar, and regularizing their capitalizations. Instead of dashes editors used standard punctuation; instead of the highly elliptical telegraphic lines so characteristic of her poems editors added articles, conjunctions, and prepositions to make them more readable and in line with conventional expectations. In addition, the poems were made more predictable by organizing them into categories such friends, nature, love, and death. Not until 1955, when Thomas Johnson published Dickinson's complete works in a

form that attempted to be true to her manuscript versions, did readers have an opportunity to see the full range of her style and themes.

. . . . Dickinson found irony, ambiguity, and paradox lurking in the simplest and commonest experiences. The materials and subject matter of her poetry are quite conventional. Her poems are filled with robins, bees, winter light, household items, and domestic duties. These materials represent the range of what she experienced in and around her father's house. She used them because they constituted so much of her life and, more importantly, because she found meanings latent in them. Though her world was simple, it was also complex in its beauties and its terrors. Her lyric poems captures impressions of particular moments, scenes, or moods, and she characteristically focuses upon topics such as nature, love, immortality, death, faith, doubt, pain, and the self.

Though her materials were conventional, her treatment of them was innovative, because she was willing to break whatever poetic conventions stood in the way of the intensity of her thought and images. Her conciseness, brevity, and wit are tightly packed. Typically she offers her observations via one or two images that reveal her thought in a powerful manner. She once characterized her literary art by writing "My business is circumference." Her method is to reveal the inadequacy of declarative statements by evoking qualifications and questions with images that complicate firm assertions and affirmations. In one of her poems she describes her strategies this way: "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant--/ Success in Circuit lies." This might well stand as a working definition of Dickinson's aesthetics.

Dickinson's poetry is challenging because it is radical and original in its rejection of most traditional nineteenth-century themes and techniques. Her poems require active engagement from the reader, because she seems to leave out so much with her elliptical style and remarkable contracting metaphors. But these apparent gaps are filled with meaning if we are sensitive to her use of devices such as personification, allusion, symbolism, and startling syntax and grammar. Since her use of dashes is sometimes puzzling, it helps to read her poems aloud to hear how carefully the words are arranged. What might seem intimidating on a silent page can surprise the reader with meaning when heard. It's also worth keeping in mind that Dickinson was not always consistent in her views and they can change from poems, to poem, depending upon how she felt at a given moment. Dickinson was less interested in absolute answers to questions than she was in examining and exploring their "circumference." from Michael Myers, *Thinking and Writing About Literature*, 138-



**“I cannot Live with You” (640)**

*I cannot live with You –  
It would be Life –  
And Life is over there –  
Behind the Shelf*

*The Sexton keeps the Key to – 5  
Putting up  
Our Life – His Porcelain –  
Like a Cup –*

*Discarded of the Housewife –  
Quaint – or Broke – 10  
A newer Sevres pleases –  
Old Ones crack –*

*I could not die – with You –  
For One must wait  
To shut the Other's Gaze down – 15  
You – could not –*

*And I – could I stand by  
And see You – freeze –  
Without my Right of Frost –  
Death's privilege? 20*

*Nor could I rise – with You –  
Because Your Face  
Would put out Jesus' –  
That New Grace*

*Glow plain – and foreign 25  
On my homesick Eye –  
Except that You than He  
Shone closer by –*

*They'd judge Us – How –  
For You – served Heaven – You know, 30  
Or sought to –  
I could not –*

*Because You saturated Sight –  
And I had no more Eyes  
For sordid excellence 35  
As Paradise*

*And were You lost, I would be –  
Though My Name  
Rang loudest  
On the Heavenly fame –* 40

*And were You – saved –  
And I – condemned to be  
Where You were not –  
That self – were Hell to Me –*

*So We must meet apart –* 45  
*You there – I – here –  
With just the Door ajar  
That Oceans are – and Prayer –  
And that White Sustenance –  
Despair –* 50

**“I’m wife—I’ve finished that”**

*I’m “wife” – I’ve finished that –  
That other state –  
I’m Czar – I’m “Woman” now –  
It’s safer so –*

*How odd the Girl’s life looks,      5  
Behind this soft Eclipse –  
I think that Earth feels so  
To folks in Heaven – now –*

*This being comfort – then  
That other kind – was pain –      10  
But why compare?  
I’m “Wife”! Stop there*