



BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EMILY DICKINSON



Paddy Lynn as Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson was born on 10 December 1830 in [Amherst](#), in western [Massachusetts](#), and died there on 15 May 1886. Her parents were Edward Dickinson (1803-1874) and Emily Norcross Dickinson (1804-1882). The family included three children: Austin (1828-1895), Emily, and Lavinia (1833-1899). Most of the family belonged to the [Congregational Church](#), though the poet herself never became a member. The Dickinsons were well-off and well-educated. Both Edward and Austin were college graduates, leaders in the community and of [Amherst College](#). Edward Dickinson was a Whig (later a Republican) representative to state and national legislatures. Emily had a strong secondary education and a year of college at South Hadley Female Seminary (later [Mount Holyoke College](#)).

The poet was born in, and died in, a house called [the Homestead](#), built by her grandfather Samuel Fowler Dickinson in 1813. This house was sold out of the family, however, in 1833, and not re-purchased by Edward Dickinson till 1855; so most of the poet's younger years were lived in other houses.

After her years at school, Emily Dickinson lived in the family home for the rest of her life. She cared for her parents in their later years and was a companion to her sister Lavinia, who also stayed "at home" for her entire life. Neither sister married. The extended Dickinson family included Austin's wife Susan Huntington Gilbert, who lived for many years next door in the house called The Evergreens, and Susan and Austin's three children.

The myth, of course, is of Dickinson as a reclusive spinster-poet, brooding over a deep romantic mystery in her past. The realities are more mundane. Especially among relatively wealthy families in 19th-century Massachusetts, it was far from unusual for grown women simply to keep house as a primary occupation, neither marrying nor working outside the home. The thing that sets Dickinson apart from other women of her class and generation is simply her poetic gift, something attributable more to nature and culture than to some emotional trauma.

We know much of Dickinson's life through her correspondences. She maintained a lifelong correspondence with Susan Dickinson, even though they were next-door neighbors; this correspondence, preserved by Susan, is the source for many of the poet's manuscripts. But Emily Dickinson also corresponded with school friends, with her cousins Fanny and Loo Norcross, and with several people of letters, including Samuel Bowles, Dr. and Mrs. J.G. Holland, [T.W. Higginson](#), and [Helen Hunt Jackson](#).

The central events, then, of Dickinson's life are those that are central to the lives of most writers: she wrote. She compiled a manuscript record of nearly 1,800 poems, along with many letters. In or around 1858 she began to keep manuscript books of her poetry, the "fascicles," hand-produced and hand-bound. In the early 1860s she produced hundreds of poems each year. In 1864 and 1865, failing eyesight, which impelled her to make two extended visits to Cambridge, Massachusetts for medical treatment, slowed her production of manuscript books. But her production of manuscripts continued at a slower pace until her last illnesses in 1885-86.

Though she wrote hundreds of poems, Dickinson never published a book of poetry. The few poems published during her lifetime were anonymous (see [Publishing History](#)). The reasons why she never published are still unclear. A myth promoted by [William Luce's play](#) *The Belle of Amherst* (1976) is that Higginson discouraged her writing; however, it is probably not the case that Dickinson met with rejection from the literary world. For one thing, Higginson was instrumental in getting her poetry published soon after her death, suggesting that her reluctance and not his disapproval was the barrier to him doing this earlier. Also, both Bowles and Hunt Jackson arranged for anonymous

publication of individual poems by Dickinson during the poet's lifetime. At Hunt Jackson's suggestion, Thomas Niles of Roberts Brothers publishing house tried to get the poet to submit a volume of poems for publication in 1883; she declined.

EMILY DICKINSON 1830 – 1886



Emily Dickinson was a lyric poet who was sometimes called the New England mystic.

"If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever 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?"

She spent her life creating an opus of 1,775 poems, only ten of which were published in her lifetime. She knew what made poetry. She was advised to study her craft further by an editor of "The Atlantic Monthly" who never offered to publish one of the poems she sent to him. After her death in 1886 and with the help of her sister Lavinia, Dickinson's poems started to be published.

Emily Dickinson is now considered one of the great American poets, read by adults and children alike, and translated into the major languages of the world.

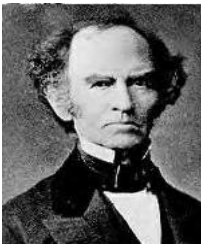
EMILY'S CHILDHOOD



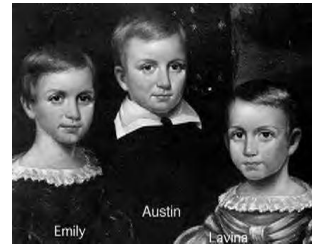
The Dickinson Homestead (Left) was built on Main Street in Amherst by Samuel Fowler Dickinson and is recognized as being the first brick home



constructed in the town. Emily's grandparents had nine children with the oldest being Emily's father, Edward. Edward married Emily Norcross on May 6, 1828. Their first child, a son, William Austin was born less than a year later. The following year in April, the family purchased the western half of the Homestead. Edward, his wife, and their young son Austin moved in to this half of the house along with Samuel and his family. In December 14, 1830, Emily Dickinson was born and three years later in February of 1833 her sister Lavinia was born



Edward Dickinson (Emily's father - left) improved his financial position sufficiently enough to be able to move the family to the house on North Pleasant street (Above Right) where they lived until 1855. This afforded them much more room than they



had previously. From her window on North Pleasant street, Emily looked upon the West Street Cemetery where she witnessed almost daily, the burial of local townspeople. In fact, five of her school friends died of consumption and were buried during her time on North Pleasant.

WHEN SHE WAS 10:

1840 - EMILY ATTENDS AMHERST ACADEMY

Emily attends Amherst Academy from 1840 until 1847. Here she fell under the tutelage of Edward Hitchcock. Hitchcock was remarkable in that he was both a man of god and a man of science and just as importantly, his writing and teaching was often poetic. Hitchcock's influence on Emily was strong. Similar to many of Hitchcock's lectures, many of Emily's poems describe the changing of the New England seasons...

"The morns are meeker than they were-
The nuts are getting brown-
The Berry's cheek is plumper-
The Rose is out of town."

It was her time at the academy that stimulated her perception and observation of the natural world. She excelled in botany and horticulture, which became life long pursuits.

WHEN SHE WAS 17:

1847 - EMILY ATTENDS MT. HOLYOKE SEMINARY

Emily attended Mt. Holyoke Seminary for seven months. The short length of her attendance has been credited to her poor health, her fathers influence, dislike for the teachers, homesickness, and the religious fervor which enveloped the school.

The president of the school at the time, Mary Lyon, divided the student body into three groups: "Christians" those who had accepted Christ, "Hopers" those who expressed hope of accepting Christ, and "No-Hopers" of which Emily was one.

A legendary anecdote relates that during a school assembly Mary Lyons requested that all of those who wanted to be Christians rise. With the pressure exerted from the school's president all the students did eventually stand, except one. Emily explained: "they thought it queer I didn't rise...I thought a lie would be queerer."

1865 - 1886 EMILY LIVES IN SECLUSION

When her father died, Emily separated herself from society. However, she kept in constant contact with friends and family through cards and letters. She remarks in a poem: "Alone, I cannot be-for-Hosts- do visit me-" Tasks around the homestead also kept her busy. She was the baker of the family bread, the caretaker of the conservatory and garden, and with her sister Lavinia, nursed her invalid mother who was confined to her bed.

1890 - FIRST EDITION OF POEMS IS PUBLISHED

After Emily's death, Lavinia found her poems. The poems, tied into packets with string, were untitled and most had never been read by anyone other than Emily

herself. Lavinia thinking that the poems should be edited for publication, sought the help of Susan Dickinson. Receiving no response from Susan, Lavinia elicited the help of Mabel Todd, a move that further fueled the feud between Susan and the rest of the family. Mable did indeed edit the poems. Three editions were published, one in 1890, one in 1891 and again in 1896.

After the publication of Mabel Todd's edited versions of Emily Dickinson's poetry in 1890, 1891 and 1896, the collection of poems was locked away in a box for the next sixty years. In the years leading up to 1955 other edited versions of Emily's poetry was published such as an edition published by one of Emily's nieces, Martha Bianchi in 1914.

It was not until 1955 that the original poems were published in her original style. This caused a renaissance of interest in Emily Dickinson that led to many critical essays written about her work and many new interpretations about this mysterious poetess.
