

Name

Professor

Course

Date

### **Emily Dickinson**

Emily Dickinson was an American poet born in Amherst, Massachusetts. She was born on 10th December 1830 and died on 15th May 1886 at the age of fifty-six. Her father was an ambitious lawyer from Yale University. Little is known about her mother, and she is often portrayed as passive. However, evidence shows that she was very dedicated to her studies, especially sciences. Dickinson lived in isolation for most of her life. Those who knew her describe her as unconventional, and she had a liking for white clothes. Dickinson was never married, and most of her friendships depended on writing letters.

Dickinson was a prolific writer and wrote about 1800 poems. However, only ten poems and one letter were published in her lifetime (Kirk, 53). The work that was published was edited accordingly to fit the poetic rules of that era. The poems have short lines, no titles, used slant rhyme, and did not follow grammar rules of capitalization or punctuation. Her poems focused on death and immortality themes. She also wrote on aesthetics, spirituality, nature, and society.

Although her family and acquaintances knew that she was a poet, it was not until after she died that her work became public. Her sister discovered her collection of poetry, and together with Dickinson's acquaintances, they made the work public. Thomas Higginson and Mabel Todd, her acquaintances, published her work for the first time in

1890. They heavily edited her work, removing the word “Susan”. Dickinson wrote several poems dedicated to her sister-in-law, Susan. A complete version of her unaltered work was published by Thomas in 1955 when he published the book “The Poems of Emily Dickinson”.

When Emily Dickinson was eighteen, her family became friends with a young attorney named Benjamin Franklin. Newton influenced Dickinson to become a writer. Their relationship was platonic, and Dickinson refers to him as tutor or master. Newton introduced her to the work of William Wordsworth and gifted her poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Newton recognized her as a poet, and in one of her letters, Dickinson says that he taught her and opened touched a secret spring. When he was almost dying of tuberculosis, Newton wrote Dickinson a letter saying that he wished to live until Dickinson achieved all the greatness he foresaw.

Dickinson was familiar with the Bible and popular contemporary literature. She was influenced by *Letters from New York* by Lady Maris Child. Newton gifted her book, and after reading the book, she gushed. William Shakespeare influenced her too, and she referred to his plays in some of her work. In the early 1860s, Dickinson was immensely productive; she wrote most of her work at that time. Later, from 1866 she slowed down. She had suffered some losses, her house servant of nine years left her, and Carlo died, the dog that had provided her with companionship for sixteen years.

In 1867 Dickinson’s behavior began to change; she did not leave her homestead unless she had to and did not welcome any visitors. She did not even open the door to speak to people face to face; she spoke to them with the door closed. She was rarely seen by the people in her community, and when she came out, she was always dressed in white. She wrote an article about a white cotton dress. A few people communicated with her during her last fifteen years; the

communication was mainly through letters. Although she secluded herself, Dickinson had her own way of staying socially active, which included writing poems and letters.

She had a good relationship with her brother Austin and his wife, Susan. Austin was very protective of Dickinson's desires and ensured that her privacy was respected. When visitors came to her homestead, she would send them flowers and poems. She had a good relationship with children; her nephews and nieces described her as helpful. In 1868, Thomas Higginson requested her to come to Boston so that they would meet, she declined. She wrote a letter requesting him to come to Amherst as she did not want to go to another town. The two did not meet until 1870 when Higginson came to Amherst.

Some of Dickinson's poems were published in the Springfield Republican. They were heavily edited and published anonymously. The poems had conventional punctuation and titles. The first poem was published without the author's consent. The Republican edited the titles of Dickinson's work; for example, *A Narrow Fellow in the Grass* was changed to *The Snake*. In some poems, they re-wrote some lines. In 1864, *Drumbeat* edited and published Dickinson's poems to raise medical funds for soldiers in war. *Brooklyn Daily* published another poem in 1864. Higginson convinced Dickinson to publish some of her work, and she agreed to publish one poem anonymously. That was the last poem published when she was alive.

After she died, her sister Lavinia honored her wishes and burned most of Dickinson's correspondence. However, there were forty notebooks and loose papers that she had not said anything about. Lavinia was obsessed with the poems and wanted to see them published. There were feuds between publishers and the family, which led to the division of Dickinson's manuscripts between her family and publishers. This made it hard

to have her work published in one book. The first volume of Emily Dickinson's poems was published in 1890, and it was heavily edited to fit the grammar rules of the 19th century.

In the 20th century, Emily Dickinson's legacy was kept alive by her niece Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Millicent Todd Bingham. Bianchi inherited the copyright for her aunt's work and published the poems and letters. Bianchi's publications, *Emily Dickinson Face to Face* and *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, raised curiosity about Dickinson's work. Bianchi portrayed her aunt as a legend in the publications. Emily Dickinson is one of the most respected poets in America; she has been acknowledged for being innovative and pro-modernization.

In 1891, William Howells acknowledged Emily Dickinson. He wrote that if nothing else came out of their lifetime, there was the addition to literature by Dickinson. Dickinson is a major part of the American curriculum; she is taught from middle school to college. Her poetry has been used to compose songs. Several schools have been named after; the Emily Dickinson Schools in Montana, New York, Washington, and Bozeman. There are a few journals dedicated to studying her work.

The United States Postal Service issued a stamp in her honor. In 1973, Dickinson was inducted into the Hall of Fame (Kirk, 75). In 1976, her work, *The Belle of Amherst*, was performed on Broadway and won several awards. It was later taken up by a television network.

In 2006, Harvard University published Dickinson's *Herbarium*, which is in the Houghton Library at the university. The herbarium is an original work of Emily Dickinson, and it has 424 specimens of pressed plants arranged in sixty six pages of an album. The herbarium is available online. Jones Library in Amherst has a collection of seven thousand items that preserve the memories of Emily Dickinson. The collection has items such as original poem and letter scripts, books, newspaper cuttings, photographs, family correspondence, plays, and artwork. Amherst

College has a number of Dickinson's original manuscripts, her hair, and her only image.

The college purchased her homestead and used it as a residence for its faculty. In 2003, the homestead was converted to a museum, open to the public.

**Works Cited**

Kirk, Connie Ann. *Emily Dickinson*. Greenwood Press, 2004.