Exploring Emily Dickinson

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The Poet, Circa 1846
Birth and Death of Dickinson

• Born on December 10, 1830, at the Homestead, in Amherst, MA, her paternal grandparents’ home. (Her parents and her older brother Austin had moved into the Homestead to live with her grandparents two months earlier.)

• Died there on May 15, 1886, age 55, after a period of declining health. Cause of death: Bright’s disease.
Some Basic Facts

• Parents: Edward Dickinson, a lawyer who later served in Congress, and Emily Norcross Dickinson, who gave birth to Austin, Emily, and Lavinia.

• Education: Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. She stayed at the Seminary for one year, the longest time she spent away from home.
Dickinson’s Home

In 1833, the Homestead was sold out of the family, but Edward Dickinson’s family remained there as tenants for about 7 years until he bought a house on Pleasant St., where the family lived until late 1855, when he bought back the Homestead and moved his family there. In 1856, Austin married Susan Gilbert, a close friend of Emily’s, and the couple moved into the Evergreens, a new home that Edward had built for them. Austin joined his father’s law practice, and Emily and Susan wore a trail between the two homes.
The Homestead
The Evergreens

Herman--Capital Conference 2014
The Dickinson Property

• Edward added a conservatory to the Homestead because Emily enjoyed raising exotic plants.

• After the death in 1899 of Lavinia, the last survivor of Dickinson’s immediate family, the two homes ended up in the hands of Dickinson’s niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, who lived in the Evergreens until her death in 1943. The Homestead was occupied by tenants until 1916, when it was sold to the Parke family. In 1963, the home was designated a National Historic Landmark, and in 1965, the Parkes sold the home to the Trustees of Amherst College.
Emily Dickinson Museum

- Today, both homes are museums owned and maintained by Amherst College.
- In 2013, the museum began a renovation of Dickinson’s bedroom. The 20th century wallpaper and floorboards were removed, revealing clues to how the room had appeared in Dickinson’s time.
Dickinson . . .

• played the piano;
• enjoyed baking bread and sweets and sharing what she baked with family, friends, and neighbors;
• had red hair and hazel eyes;
• had a beloved dog named Carlo;
• eventually dressed in white dresses the year round;
• was treated for eye problems in Boston in 1864 and 1865;
• was a prolific correspondent with many people.
Some of Dickinson’s Reading

- Shakespeare (She posed the rhetorical question, “Why is any other book needed?”)
- The Brontës
- The Brownings
- Tennyson
- Ruskin
- Dickens
- Emerson
- The Bible (especially Revelation)
Her Lifestyle

• Somewhat reclusive after 1862; almost totally reclusive from 1870 on. (Went next door for the first time in 15 years when Gib was dying in 1883.)

• Later, saw Austin’s children, servants, and few others. While visitors sat in the parlor, she sat in the hall, typically behind a half-open door.
Important People in Dickinson’s Life

• Her immediate family.
• Benjamin Franklin Newton, her father’s law clerk.
• Charles Wadsworth, a Presbyterian minister.
• Samuel Bowles, editor of the *Springfield Republican*.
• Susan Gilbert Dickinson, her sister-in-law.
• Thomas Wentworth Higginson.
Relationship with T. W. Higginson

• Dickinson wrote to Higginson in response to an article he published in the April 1862 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* titled “Advice to a Young Contributor” in which he lamented the quality of the writing that was being sent to the magazine. Dickinson sent him four poems, asking him if her verse were “alive” and if he would help her “grow.” He urged her to delay publication. They continued to exchange letters, with Higginson telling her that some of her lines were “beyond his knowledge.”
Relationship with T. W. Higginson

Dickinson and Higginson corresponded but did not meet until August 1870 in Amherst. (He had to come to her because, as she told him, “I do not cross my father’s ground to any house or town.”) By this time, she had sent him about 100 of her poems. Of his visit with her, he later wrote that he had never met anyone who “drained my nerve power” so much as Dickinson. He also described the visit as one to “my partially cracked poetess at Amherst,” terming her “eccentric.” He visited her once more, in 1873.
Relationship with T. W Higginson

- Writing about Dickinson in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1891, Higginson asked, “What place ought to be assigned in literature to what is so remarkable, yet so elusive to criticism? . . . I still stand somewhat bewildered.”

- However, in “Literature as an Art,” Higginson wrote: “Probably the truth is, that art precedes criticism, and that every great writer creates or revives the taste by which he is appreciated.”
Her Poetry

• Most productive year: 1862, in which she wrote over 300 poems.
• “Flood subject”: immortality.
• Other primary subjects: life, death, love, nature.
• Characteristics of her style: common meter, liberal use of dashes (in lieu of conventional punctuation), capitalization of most nouns, abundant use of slant rhyme, and in general, a “compressed” style.
Other Important People in Dickinson’s Life

- Helen (Fiske) Hunt Jackson
- Judge Otis Phillips Lord, Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court.
- Gilbert (Gib) Dickinson, her nephew.
- Mabel Loomis Todd, Austin’s mistress, and the woman whom Lavinia asked for help with her sister’s poems after Dickinson’s death.
Her Poetry

• Much of her poetry was apparently written in her bedroom, the southwest corner room on the second floor, with windows facing the street and her brother’s house.
• Dickinson wrote over 1,700 poems; only a few were published in her lifetime.
• Dickinson bound between 800 and 900 of her poems together using cotton string. She sewed the left edges together and tied the ends in a bow, creating “fascicles.” She included poems in letters and also simply gave poems to others.
• After Dickinson’s death, Lavinia found her sister’s stash of poetry.
Last Days

• Eagerly anticipated a biography of George Eliot that was to be published in 1885.
• Enjoyed (with her Norcross cousins) a novel entitled *Called Back*, written by Hugh Conway.
• Became what Richard Chase terms “very ill” by 1886.
• Just before her death, she wrote her cousins: “Little Cousins,--Called back. Emily”
Her Funeral

- A small group of mourners gathered at the Homestead. Notwithstanding Dickinson’s failure to join the church, Scripture was read by the Rev. Jenkins, whose children had played around the Homestead. T. W. Higginson read “Immortality” by Emily Brontë, a poem that Dickinson had liked and had read aloud to Lavinia.
Her Funeral

• Higginson recorded that Dickinson’s face reflected “a wondrous restoration of youth—she looked 30, not a grey hair or wrinkle, the perfect peace of the beautiful. . . . [Her sister Lavinia] put in two heliotropes by her hand to ‘take to Judge Lord.’”

• As Dickinson had requested, her coffin was carried out the back door and across three fields to the West Cemetery on Triangle St., where she was buried near her parents.
Her Tombstone

• Originally bore only her initials.
• Appropriately, the words “Called back” were later added by Martha Dickinson Bianchi.
Some of Dickinson’s Aphorisms (Courtesy of T. W. Higginson)

• “If I read a book & 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.”

• “Truth is such a rare thing, it is delightful to tell it.”

• “I find ecstasy in living—the mere sense of living is joy enough.”
Publication—at Last

• After discovering her sister’s poems a few days after Dickinson’s death, Lavinia asked for Mabel Loomis Todd’s help. She in turn sought assistance from Higginson, and in 1890, the first volume of poems was published. Todd and Higginson edited (and sometimes rewrote) the poems, standardizing punctuation, meter, rhyme, etc. The poems were also given titles.
Noteworthy Dates of Publication

• A second volume of poems was published in 1891.
• Todd collected and edited Dickinson’s letters, in two volumes, in 1894.
• Todd edited a third volume of poems in 1896.
Noteworthy Dates of Publication

• In 1945, Todd and her daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham, produced another book of poems.
• In the mid-twentieth century, the scholar Thomas H. Johnson issued a newly edited version of her poems, attempting to preserve her unconventional capitalization and punctuation. He also edited some letters and wrote a biography of Dickinson.
Some Observations on Dickinson

• Richard Chase relates that William Dean Howells stated that “Emily Dickinson’s poetry bespoke a mind which the New England scene had made better acquainted with death than with life.” Dickinson herself stated that she saw “New Englandly.”

• Harold Bloom states that Dickinson had “a mind so original and powerful that we scarcely have begun, even now, to catch up with her.”
Sources


Adrienne Rich in “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson”:

“It is always what is under pressure in us, especially under pressure of concealment—that explodes in poetry.”
A Look at Some of Dickinson’s Poems
UIL Literary Criticism 2014-15

Best wishes to you and your students as you study Emily Dickinson in the coming year!