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Emily Dickinson

In 1830, Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts. She attended Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in South Hadley, but severe homesickness led her to return home after one year. Throughout her life, she seldom left her house and visitors were scarce. The people with whom she did come in contact, however, had an enormous impact on her thoughts and poetry. She was particularly stirred by the Reverend Charles Wadsworth, whom she met on a trip to Philadelphia. He left for the West Coast shortly after a visit to her home in 1860, and some critics believe his departure gave rise to the heartsick flow of verse from Dickinson in the years that followed. While it is certain that he was an important figure in her life, it is not certain that this was in the capacity of romantic love—she called him "my closest earthly friend." Other possibilities for the unrequited love in Dickinson’s poems include Otis P. Lord, a Massachusetts Supreme Court Judge, and Samuel Bowles, editor of the Springfield *Republican*.

By the 1860s, Dickinson lived in almost total physical isolation from the outside world, but actively maintained many correspondences and read widely. She spent a great deal of this time with her family. Her father, Edward Dickinson, was actively involved in state and national politics, serving in Congress for one term. Her brother Austin attended law school and became an attorney, but lived next door once he married Susan Gilbert (one of the speculated—albeit less persuasively—unrequited loves of Emily). Dickinson’s younger sister Lavinia also lived at home for her entire life in similar isolation. Lavinia and Austin were not only family, but intellectual companions during Dickinson’s lifetime.

Dickinson's poetry reflects her loneliness and the speakers of her poems generally live in a state of want, but her poems are also marked by the intimate recollection of inspirational moments which are decidedly life-giving and suggest the possibility of happiness. Her work was heavily influenced by the Metaphysical poets of seventeenth-century England, as well as her reading of the Book of Revelation and her upbringing in a Puritan New England town which encouraged a Calvinist, orthodox, and conservative approach to Christianity.

She admired the poetry of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, as well as John Keats. Though she was dissuaded from reading the verse of her contemporary Walt Whitman by rumor of its disgracefulness, the two poets are now connected by the distinguished place they hold as the founders of a uniquely American poetic voice. While Dickinson was extremely prolific as a poet and regularly enclosed poems in letters to friends, she was not publicly recognized during her lifetime. The first volume of her work was published posthumously in 1890 and the last in 1955. She died in Amherst in 1886.

Upon her death, Dickinson's family discovered 40 handbound volumes of nearly 1800 of her poems, or "fascicles" as they are sometimes called. These booklets were made by folding and sewing five or six sheets of stationery paper and copying what seem to be final versions of poems in an order that many critics believe to be more than chronological. The handwritten poems show a variety of dash-like marks of various sizes and directions (some are even vertical). The poems were initially unbound and published according to the aesthetics of her many early editors, removing her unusual and varied dashes and replacing them with traditional punctuation. The current standard version replaces her dashes with a standard "n-dash," which is a closer typographical approximation of her writing. Furthermore, the original order of the works was not restored until 1981, when Ralph W. Franklin used the physical evidence of the paper itself to restore her order, relying on smudge marks, needle punctures and other clues to reassemble the packets. Since then, many critics have argued for thematic unity in these small collections, believing the ordering of the poems to be more than chronological or convenient. [*The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/redirect?link_code=ur2&camp=1789&tag=poetsorg-20&creative=9325&path=ASIN/0674548280) (Belknap Press, 1981) remains the only volume that keeps the order intact.

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