

Emily dickinson still a mystery english literature essay

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Linda GongMrs. BonessEnglish period 3Emily Dickinson: Still a MysteryMore than seventy years ago, a delicate lady of age fifty-five passed away in the small village of Amherst, New England, undreamed of as one of America's most prolific poets. To feminists critics, Emily Dickinson places amongst the big-shots—Anne Bradstreet, Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Her poems can be both read in relation to the poems of contemporary poets such as Walt Whitman and to the 17th century metaphysical poetry of George Herbert and John Donne. Stylistically, Dickinson is a phenomenon—employing varying freedoms of expression, pushing at the conventional limits that define poetry. She crafted a new type of persona for first person poetry—sharp-sighted observers who perceive societal limitations and escapes. A poet of paradox, Dickinson strove to make the abstract tangible, to define meaning without constraining it. Interestingly, Dickinson's poetry was only found after her death—a whopping 1789 poems she managed to stow away from society. Dickinson was known as a social recluse in her hometown of Amherst, an eccentric pale wraith clad in all white. From surviving letters (many were burned) and her multiple poems, we can gather details and piece together the murky, incomplete jigsaw of Emily Dickinson's life. Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was born on December 10, 1830 to Edward and Emily (Norcross) Dickinson . Emily Dickinson's father was a dynamic figure of great power in the household and an ambitious lawyer outside of it; whereas, Emily's mother was a quiet wife with all the domestic female virtues, yet maddeningly withdrawn and aloof (Habbeger 45). Emily grew up with an older brother, William Austin Dickinson (known as Austin, Awe, or Aust) , and a younger sister, Lavinia Norcross

Dickinson (known as Lavinia or Vinnie). From a young age, Emily Dickinson exuded wit—a trait indispensable to a great poet. Her family and friends amply testified to her reputation as a precocious word juggler. She impressed her Aunt Lavinia (mother's sister) as well as her father's colleagues as various letters to her parents indicated. (Anderson 5) " She loved to fence in words with an able adversary. Circumlocution she despised. Her conclusions hit the mark and suggested an arrow in directness, cutting the hesitations of the less rapid thinker...She loved a metaphor, a paradox, a riddle" (Higginson on his visit to Amherst). Emily and her sister, Lavinia, attended a primary school on Pleasant Street. Her education was described as " too ambitiously classical for a Victorian girl" (Emily Dickinson Biography, 1), but Edward Dickinson insisted on having his children well educated. September 7, 1840, Emily and Lavinia attended Amherst Academy—a school that used to be only for boys. At the Academy, Emily attended English and classical literature, geology, Latin, botany, history, " mental philosophy" and arithmetic. Botany particularly interested her, and she would continue this interest throughout the rest of her life, as evidenced by her book of more than 536 preserved plants found after her death. At school, nothing escaped her observation. The natural world was on her doorstep. Her schoolgirl letters to Abiah Root (a friend) already began to show consciousness of the daily phases of nature: from watching birds in a cherry tree to the ceaseless motion and freight of ever-changing clouds. Being able to go to the academy was a privilege during Emily's time and she took full advantage of it. The Academy has four terms a year, but most people attended for less than two terms; Emily's worry was that she might be withdrawn for sickness. (Ward

10) School not only meant the joy of acquiring knowledge, it also meant the stimulation of contact with alert and informed minds. Dickinson's teachers were well educated young people in their twenties, meaning that they were old enough to excite her admiration, yet young enough to approach. They were the natural link for her to the larger world of the mind. The constant companionship of girls Emily's age meant an outlet for her affections and the flow of fanciful expression that came with the joy of living. Emily's childhood and teenage years was marked with plenty of mental stimulus from an unusual number of people of distinction and the privilege of education. (Ward 12). Emily's childhood, however, was not without turmoil. Deaths of friends and relatives brought Emily to the "intimidations of immortality" (Dickinson in a letter she wrote to a friend). Her house's near proximity to the town cemetery provided powerful imagery for Dickinson's later poems in which she questioned death. The death of her cousin, Sophia Holland, particularly scarred Dickinson, evidenced by her letters about it two years after the incidence. During her last year at the Academy, Dickinson became good friends with the young principal there, Leonard Humphrey. A wave of Calvinistic faith occurred during 1847-1848, Dickinson's teen years which she spent studying under Mary Lyons at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (Crumbley 2). Although her entire family joined the church, Dickinson remained "...one of the lingering bad ones" (Dickinson L36). The Calvinist approach to religion believed that men were inherently sinful and most humans were doomed to hell. The only way to be "saved" was to declare faith in Jesus Christ as the True Savior. Dickinson had always maintained an independent view towards religion and resisted the pressure of being

declared " saved". Thus, began Dickinson's slow process to isolation from society. Dickinson was brought back to Amherst in 1848 by her brother, Austin who was told to " bring [her] home at all events" (Habegger 211). Without school, Emily Dickinson took to household chores and gardening, having maintained her fascination with botany. It was at this time that Dickinson narrowed down her circle of correspondences to family and friends—most notably Susan Gilbert (Sue), who would later become her sister-in-law (Eberwein 6). Sometime later in the year, Emily Dickinson befriended Benjamin Franklin Newton, a young attorney and close friend of her father's. Newton would be the second man in Dickinson's life to be called a tutor, or master, and presented an early influence on Dickinson's poetry (Habegger 216). In the early 1850's, Leonard Humphrey died—leaving Emily Dickinson depressed (Sewall 340); the extent of her depression was proved when she wrote to Abiah Root (Academy friend) 2 years later "... some of my friends are gone, and some of my friends are sleeping – sleeping the churchyard sleep – the hour of evening is sad – it was once my study hour – my master has gone to rest, and the open leaf of the book, and the scholar at school alone, make the tears come, and I cannot brush them away; I would not if I could, for they are the only tribute I can pay the departed Humphrey" (Sewall 341). Dickinson's mother became bedridden with chronic illness in 1850 and finally died 1882. During these years, Dickinson's responsibility compelled her to stay at home and tend to household chores—overtaking the role her mother usually would. In the late 1850's, Dickinson befriended Samuel Bowles, owner and editor-in-chief of the Springfield Republican (Sewall 463). He would be the third person Dickinson referred to as ' Master' or ' tutor'

(Sewall 464). Dickinson ceased going to church in the 1860s. Whatever little in person correspondence Dickinson had was made up with her frequent letters of correspondence to her close friends, even the very ministers of the church she stopped going to (Eberwein 9). While withdrawn from society, Dickinson had access to many books and intellectual materials for company as well as the previously mentioned letters of correspondence. The Civil War occurred during 1861-1865; Dickinson chose to politically abstain, but many close family friends died, traumatizing her (Sewall 400). The 1860s was not the start of Dickinson's writing career, but the start of her most productive times. Most scholars identify this period as Dickinson's "Writing Years", ranging from 1858-1865. By the time Dickinson turned 35, she had composed more than "1100 concise, powerful lyrics that astutely examine pain, grief, joy, love, nature, and art" (Emily Dickinson Museum 2). Most of these poems were private and would remain undiscovered until after Dickinson's death; however, Dickinson did share a few poems with her close correspondents—notably Sue Gilbert Dickinson (married to her brother, with 3 children) and Thomas Higginson, who authored an article in an 1862 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*. Since Dickinson had little interaction with the outside world, whatever interaction she had greatly influenced her poetry. Dickinson greatly valued Higginson's opinion on her poetry, and his interest in her work early on provided her moral support. In 1862, Dickinson would inform Higginson that he "saved [her] life" (Wolff 244). Dickinson's ambivalence towards publication perplexed Higginson, so he did not push the matter. However, many scholars now agree that if Dickinson had been pushed, she would have published (Wilson 461). Significant friendships with Samuel

Bowles, Rev. Edward Dwight, and Rev. Charles Wadsworth changed during this time as Dickinson felt an increasing need for a "preceptor" (Emily Dickinson Museum 2). Entering the year 1866, Emily Dickinson began writing fewer poems. This period is known to most researchers as her "Later Years" (Emily Dickinson Museum 3). She maintained her status as a social recluse, although she did meet Thomas Higginson in person in 1870. Although Dickinson continued writing poems, she stopped assembling and organizing them. Manuscripts from this period also appear to be less polished than those of her 'Writing Years' (Emily Dickinson Museum 3). The reason for this is unknown, like much of Dickinson's daily actions. It may have been due to the leaving of the Dickinsons' family servant in 1866, besetting Dickinson with more domestic activities (Habegger 517). She began talking to visitors through a screen door instead of meeting with them face to face, giving her a local notoriety (Habegger 516). During this period, Dickinson is theorized to have had a romance with Judge Otis Phillips Lord, her father's. A widower when he began courting Dickinson, Lord lived in Salem, Massachusetts. Drafts of letters to Lord suggest that she considered marrying him, though she never did. (Emily Dickinson Museum 3). A succession of deaths began in this period beginning with her father's death in 1874—the funeral of which she didn't show up to even though it occurred in the Homestead's entrance hall. Dickinson's mother's death by stroke followed in 1875, then her nephew Gib's death at age eight in 1883, Otis Lord's death in 1884, Helen Hunt Jackson's death in 1885. Dickinson contracted illness shortly after Gib died, claiming that "The Crisis of the sorrow of so many years is all that tires me"

(L873). She remained sickly for two more years, dying at age 55 on May 15, 1886 (Emily Dickinson Museum 3). After[New England culture][Poem]