

# *Emily Dickinson*



Adnan Shakur  
Lecturer & Deputy Head  
Department of English  
University of Global Village (UGV), Barishal

**Emily  
Dickinson  
(1830-1886)**



# LIFE

Born (Dec 1830)  
and died (May 1886)  
in Amherst, Mass.

Strongly attached to  
her family (brother  
Austin and sister  
Lavinia, Vinnie)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dickinson\\_children\\_painting.jpeg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dickinson_children_painting.jpeg)



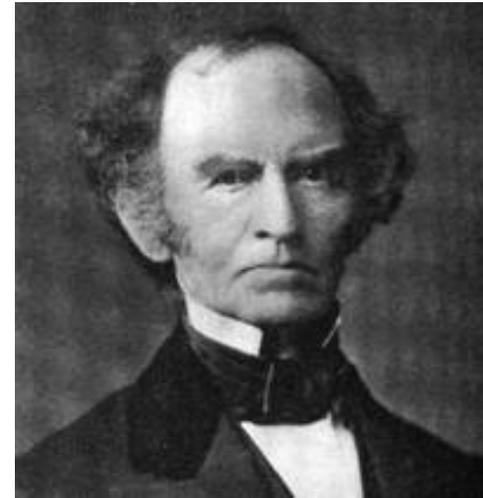
# LIFE

Complex relationship  
with his father:

“his heart was pure  
and terrible and I  
think no other like it  
exists”

... and her mother:

“My Mother does not  
care for thought...”



- My Mother does not care for thought - and Father, too busy with his Briefs – to notice what we do – He buys me many Books – but begs me not to read them – because he fears they joggle the Mind  
(E. Dickinson, letter to T. Wentworth Higginson, 1862)



# LIFE

The "deepening menace" of death, especially the death her cousin Sophia traumatized her in 1844

Religious revival in 1845:

"I never enjoyed such perfect peace and happiness as the short time in which I felt I had found my savior" (letter to a friend)

"Some keep the Sabbath going to Church / I keep it, staying at Home"



# LIFE

Solitary lifestyle  
(she “selected  
her own society  
and then shut the  
door”)

In 1858, she  
began to write  
clean copies of  
her work



# And she would produce....

- Forty bundles comprising nearly eight hundred poems – but no one knew of these until after her death



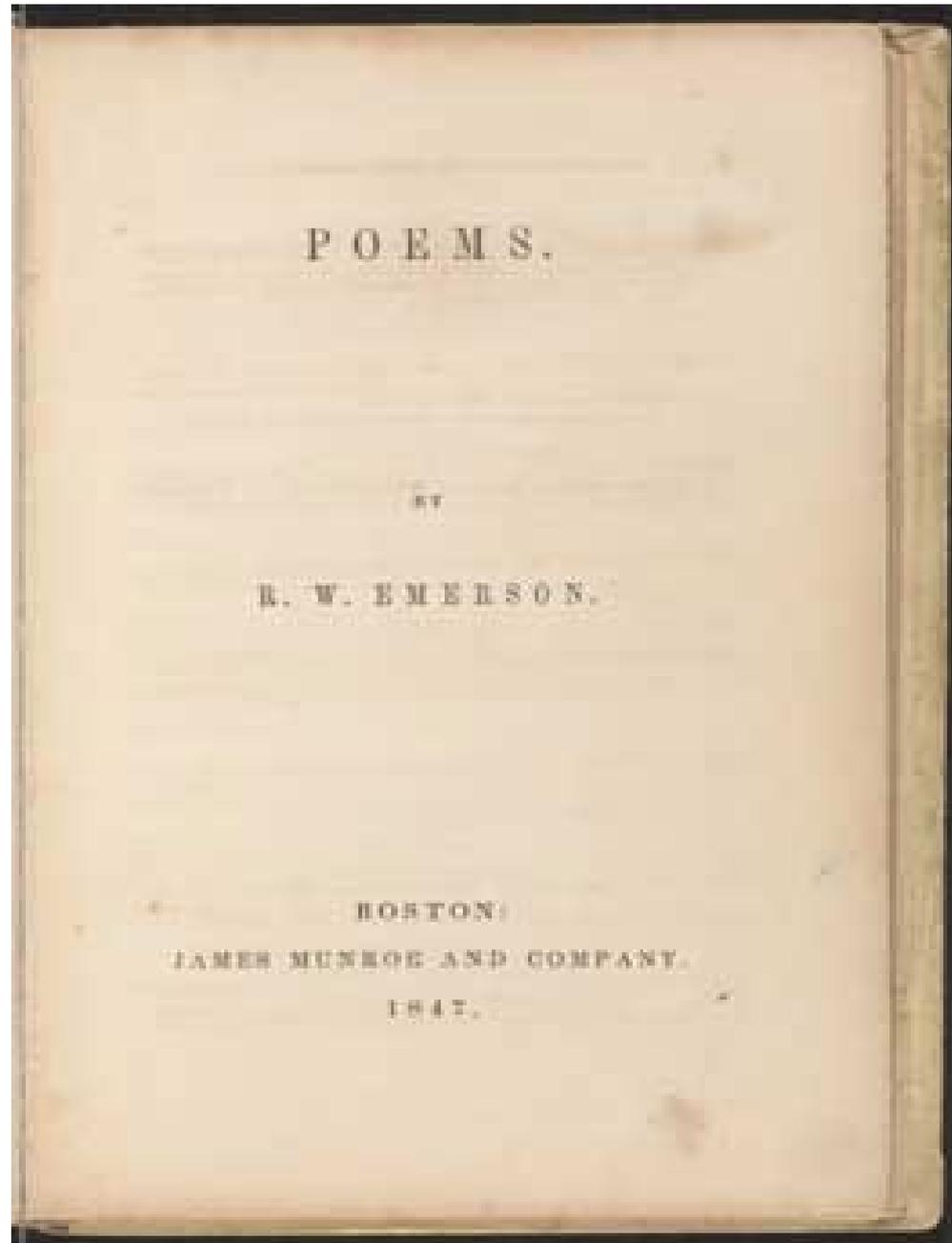
# Formal education

- Attended Amherst Academy for seven years and then, for only ten months, Mount Holyoke Female Seminary
- Reasons for leaving are not known:
- either she was in poor health, she rebelled against the evangelical fervour present at the school, or she was simply homesick

# Formative influences

Benjamin F. Newton:  
introduced her to  
Wordsworth,  
Coleridge, Emerson

"When a little Girl, I  
had a friend, who  
taught me  
Immortality – but  
venturing too near,  
himself – he never  
returned



**And her sister  
in law, Susan**

“my most  
beloved friend,  
influence,  
muse, and  
adviser”



# Other important influences

- Charles Wadsworth (“my Philadelphia”, “my clergyman”)
- Samuel Bowles, owner and editor of *Springfield Republican* (“The Master Letters”)



# The Life of a Writer

In the summer of 1858 she started revising her poems, making clean copies and writing in earnest

By 1860 she had withdrawn from social life

The first half of 1860s: her most productive writing period.



- They shut me up in Prose –  
As when a little Girl  
They put me in the Closet –  
Because they liked me "still" –
- Still! Could themself have peeped –  
And seen my Brain – go round –  
They might as wise have lodged a Bird  
For Treason – in the Pound –



# The Life of a Writer

In April 1862,  
Thomas Wentworth  
Higginson, general  
editor of *The Atlantic  
Monthly*, wrote  
“letter to a Young  
contributor”

Dickinson’s reply: Is  
"my Verse ... alive?"



# In 1874

- Emily's father suffered a stroke and died—she only opened her door a crack for the funeral, and did not attend service
- A year later, her mother suffered a stroke, and was left in bad physical and mental state
- Around this time, Emily stopped going out in public, but still had visitors and wrote to close friends

A solemn thing  
– it was – I said  
–  
A Woman –  
White – to be –  
And wear – if  
God should  
count me fit –  
Her blameless  
mystery –



## LATER LIFE, DECLINE AND DEATH

- “Home is so far from Home”.
- Otis Phillips Lord, a late-life romance?
- Autin’s affair with Mabel Loomis Todd
- Death of Emily’s mother and nephew Gilbert
- “a great darkness coming“ ...

- Helen Hunt Jackson convinced Emily to publish “Success is counted sweetest” anonymously in *A Masque of Poets*
- This was the last poem published in her lifetime

Emily died at the age of 55 of Bright's Disease

Her coffin was carried through daffodils, and Higginson read "No Coward Soul is Mine" by Emily Bronte, Emily's favorite poem

She was buried at West Cemetery on Triangle Street in Amherst



# Lavinia promised....

- That she would burn Emily's correspondence after her death
- No instructions were left regarding the forty notebooks and loose sheets Emily left in her chest
- Vinnie sought to have them published



# Reading Dickinson's life

No critical consensus as to the cause for Emily's withdrawal and extreme seclusion

Was she agoraphobic?



- Judith Farr claims that it was a combination of a profound shyness with artistic ambition what motivated the poet's choice of life:
- “By turning the key of her bedroom door she avoided having to meet others, while being free to write poetry.”

- Emily Ford has attributed the poet's retirement to an aesthetic sensibility:
- “Dickinson's choice of life was related to the romantic idea that the life of an artist should be a life apart.”



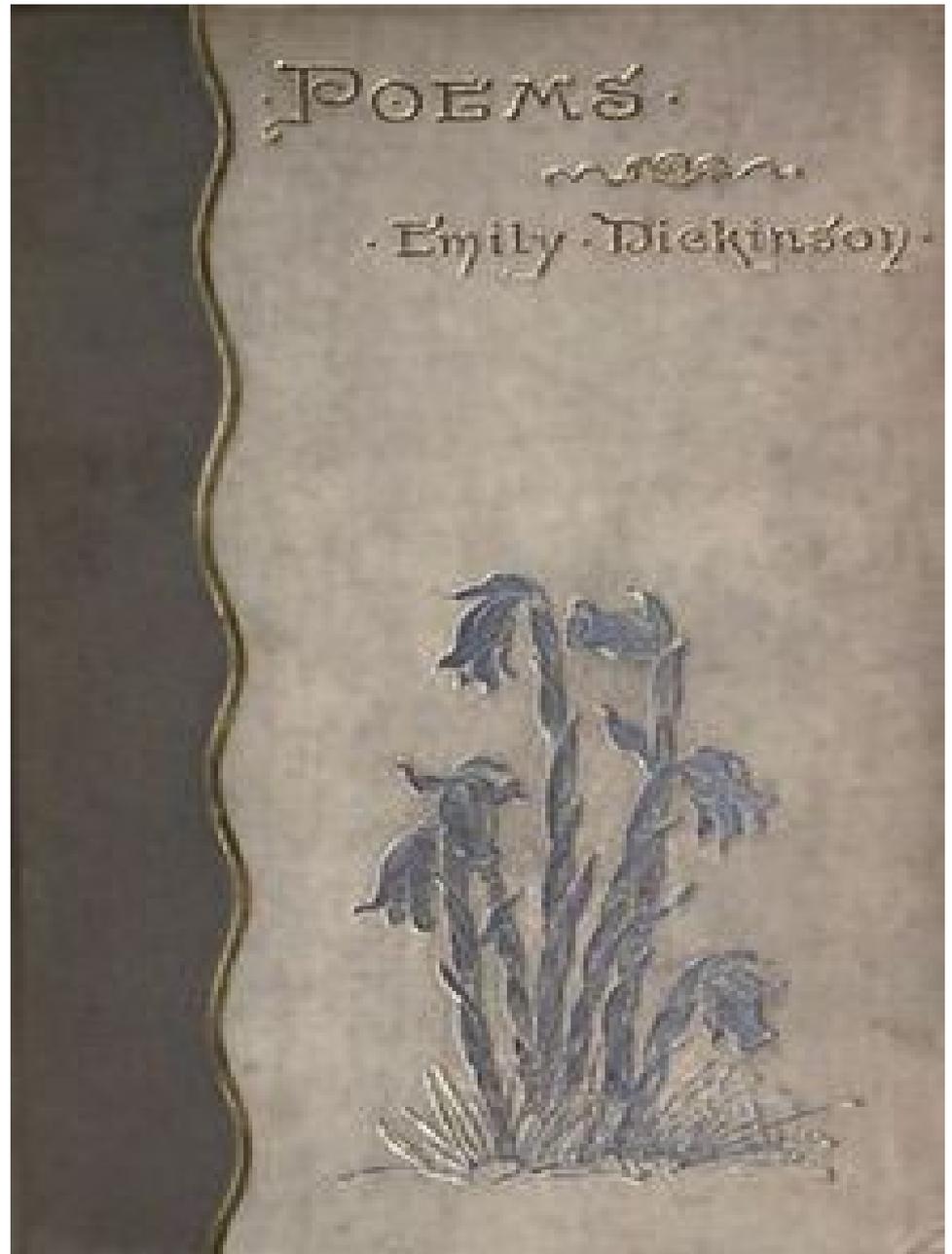
- O poet! Thou shalt leave the world,  
and know the muse only!  
(Emerson, “The Poet”, 1840)



- According to Gilbert and Gubar, Dickinson's radical seclusion was a necessary strategy to free her from 'feminine' obligations which might otherwise have hindered her art. (*The Madwoman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*)

- Her decision to dress in white has been read as an unconscious way to fictionalize herself into the roles of the little maid, ‘the angel in the house’ or the eccentric artist.
- “Like the blank page, the white dress suggests paradoxically both a way to inscribe herself as an invisible woman and as a self-assertive poet.” (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*)

Fisto edition,  
***Poems of  
Emily  
Dickinson,***  
appeared in  
1890, edited by  
Mabel Loomis  
Todd and T. W.  
Higginson



- 1894 ***Letters of Emily Dickinson***  
Edited by Mabel Loomis Todd
- 1924 ***The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*** by Martha Dickinson
- 1955 ***The Poems of Emily Dickinson***, by Thomas Johnson



# In 1894....

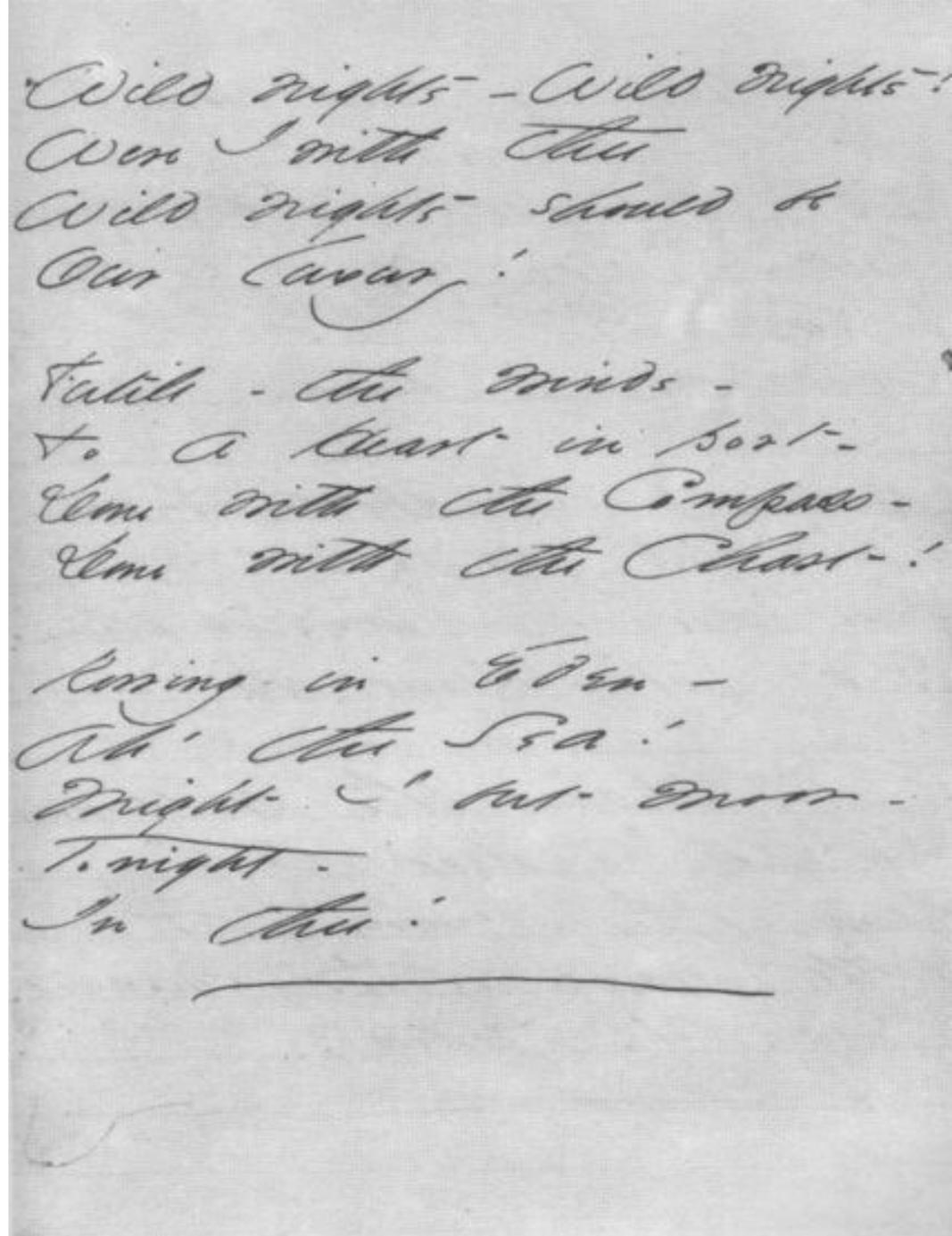
- Two volumes of Emily's letters, highly edited, appeared
- Susan Dickinson (Austin's wife) published some poems in literary magazines, such as *Scribner's Magazine* and *The Independent*
- Martha Dickenson Bianchi (Emily's niece) published a series of collections between 1914 and 1929
- Other volumes followed throughout the 1930s

# In the 1960s....

- *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* was published by Thomas H. Johnson
- It contained all 1,775 of her poems—all unedited
- Various books of her poems and letters have been published since

# Dickinson's poetry is known for

- Random capitalization
- Unconventional broken rhyming meter
- Use of Dashes
- No titles
- Unconventional punctuation
- Use of metaphor



# Dickinson is considered....

- Considered one of the most original poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century
- Placed alongside such poets as Walt Whitman and Robert Frost
- Taught in grade school, high school and college
- A powerful and persistent figure of American culture
- Heralded as the greatest woman poet in the English language

- “Emily Dickinson.” Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. 12 July 2008

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emily\\_Dickinson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emily_Dickinson)

- “Emily Dickinson.” The Literature Network. 12 July 2008      <http://www.online-literature.com/dickinson/>

- <http://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/letters>
- [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2008/08/04/080804crbo\\_books\\_thurman](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2008/08/04/080804crbo_books_thurman)