

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)



Emily Dickinson was born and raised in Amherst, Massachusetts. She came into the world to a wealthy, puritan New England family. In her youth, she was educated at the Amherst Academy for a period of seven years. Then, for a year, she went to Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, which is a women's art college. "Whether because of homesickness, ill health, or her defiance toward the church---or because of

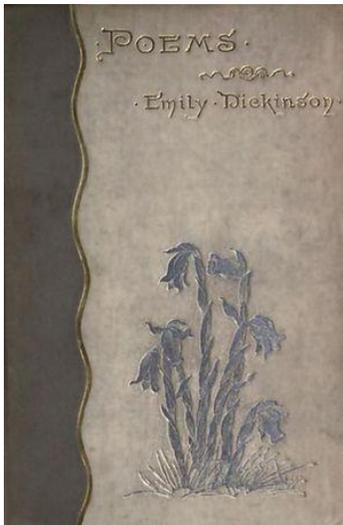
all three--Emily returned home without ever finishing her studies. (Bloom)"

Her brother, Austin, married one of Emily's childhood friends, Susan Gilbert. Emily particularly liked her brother's wife; rumours said that she could have been in love with her because of the content of the letters by which they communicated.

By the 60's, Dickinson almost never left her room and lived in total seclusion. Her principal contacts with the outside world were her younger sister Lavinia, who never married and lived all her life in her father's house, and the correspondence she maintained with over ninety different people. In addition to the fact that she lived isolated from the world, Emily Dickinson wore only white clothes. Because of her lifestyle and her life habits, people must have thought that she was mad or strange. However, according to her "Much Madness is divinest Sense – To a discerning Eye – [...] Assent –

and you are sane – Demur – you’re straightway dangerous – and handled with a Chain – (poem #435)” “Eye” could also be interpreted as “I”, in the sense that to her madness is not bad but more a sign of supreme intelligence. The part when she writes “Assent” and “Demur” could be seen as society’s critics. In fact, she is saying that women who agree to be what society asks them to be are seen as good and “sane” women, while women who refuse to marry or to have children are bad, “dangerous”, and have to be controlled and restrained. While everybody else thinks that madness is an illness, a curse, she celebrates it, saying that it is divine.

During her lifetime, only seven of her poems were published. She was not a well-known artist. “This is my letter to the World/ That never wrote to Me,” no one knew her and it was what she wanted; she did not want fame. She wrote “I’m Nobody! Who are you? Are you – Nobody – too? Don’t tell! They’d advertise – you know! How dreary – to



be – Somebody! How public – like a Frog – (poem # 288)” The speaker of the poem is saying that being famous must be boring, that fame is devalorizing, that being “Nobody” is better than being “Somebody”. We cannot say that Dickinson is the speaker of the poem, but what she wrote perhaps illustrates the reason why she lived the way she did.

Emily Dickinson died at the age of fifty-six, of

Bright’s disease, which attacks the kidneys. “Upon her death, Dickinson's family discovered 40 handbound volumes of more than 800 of her poems, or "fascicles" as they are sometimes called. (Academy of American Poets)” She had to die for the world to know of her brilliance.

Works Cited

Author, unknown. "Emily Dickinson." Biographies of American Poets. Academy of American Poets (2006): 97.

Bloom, Harold. "Biography of Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)." Bloom's Major Poets: Emily Dickinson. Infobase (1999): 11-13.