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)

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
doors”)

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By 1860 she had withdrawn from social life.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*)
• 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 19th 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
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emily_Dickinson

• http://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/letters

• http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2008/08/04/080804crbo_books_thurman