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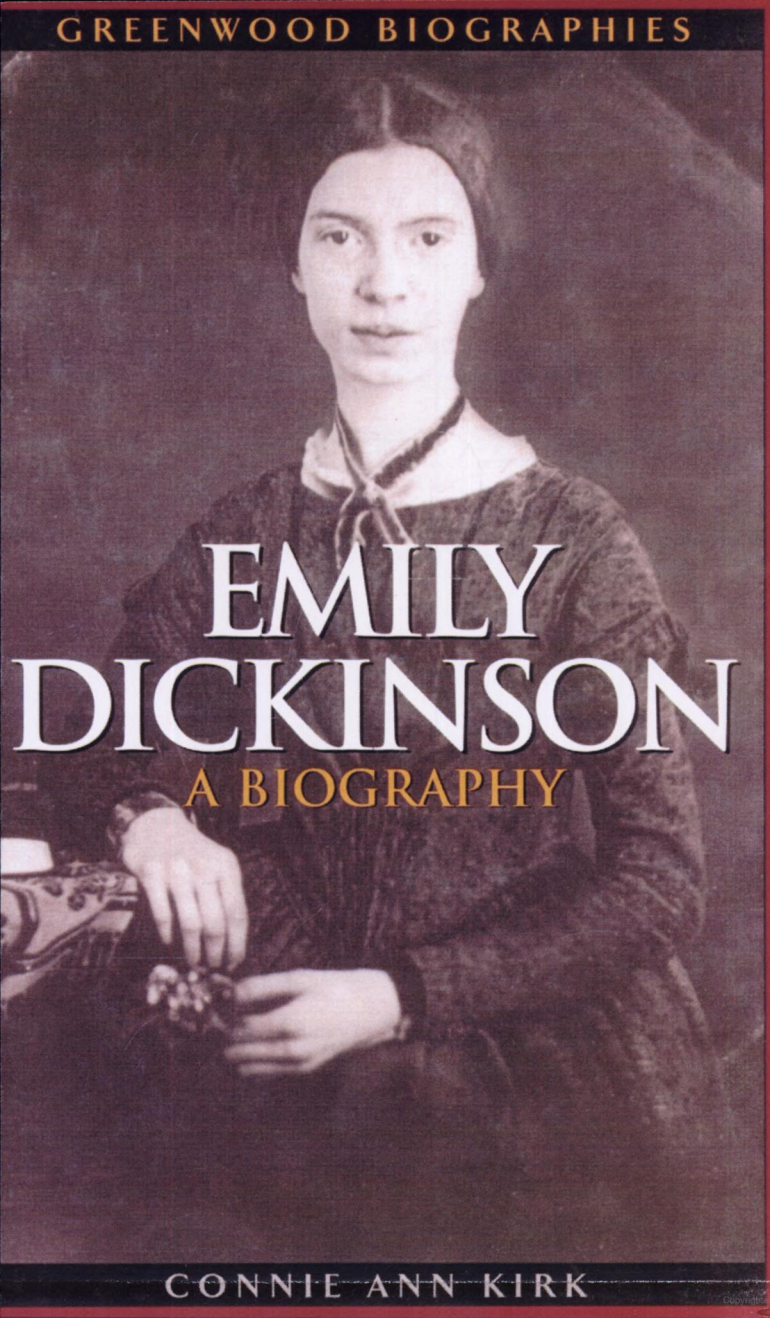

EMILY DICKINSON

A BIOGRAPHY

CONNIE ANN KIRK

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

. . . for the true lovers of the prose or poetry of Emily Dickinson, explanation of her is as impertinent as unnecessary.

—Martha Dickinson Bianchi
Introduction to *Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 1924

Emily Dickinson stood about five feet four inches tall and was of slender to medium build. She had fine, wavy chestnut-red hair, brown eyes, very white, lightly freckled skin, a long neck, and full lips set in an oval-shaped face.[1] She stepped softly but quickly and deliberately upon the earth. Acquaintances describe her voice as equally soft and sometimes childlike, but when she was ready to talk, she talked nonstop. In fact, her talk was full of opinions about a variety of subjects and utilized an ongoing smart sense of wit. Her conversation was so full of force that it once exhausted a veteran officer of the Civil War who had come to visit her. The officer wrote his wife that evening that he could barely keep up with Emily as she spoke, and he was glad he didn't live near her so as to be affronted with the experience on a more frequent basis. When it came to use of language, Emily Dickinson was a force to be reckoned with. Relatives, on the other hand, described her voice as low and rich as she would read letters from her older brother aloud to the family or occasionally read them a poem she had written. She was full of compassion for the less fortunate around her, not so much for those in economic hard times to which she could not relate but most especially for those who suffered from illness or grief over the loss of a loved one, which were experiences she knew intimately. This

was a soft spot she never seemed to get over, and since illness and death came much more often and unexpectedly in her time during the nineteenth century, death was an unsettling mystery that she puzzled over and pondered all of her life.

She was an excellent student who loved her teachers and learning; she read widely, teaching herself as much, if not more, at home as she learned in a formal classroom. She was the kind of studious person who kept a large dictionary by her side when she wrote and often pored over it, studying its entries, their origins, and their alternate definitions for new and unique ways to use them in her work. Her teachers praised her early compositions and asked her to read them aloud to the class. Some of this early writing, playful and mischievous, was published anonymously in student publications.

Dickinson played the piano well and won awards in contests for her bread baking. Her bread was so well made (during a time that valued this task almost as an artform) that her father insisted she be the primary family baker. She liked to sketch cartoons inside letters she wrote to friends, which portrayed a vibrant sense of humor about politics and the personalities of people she and her correspondents knew in common. She dried the dishes while the family housekeeper washed, but she didn't like to clean house at all and left that task to the housekeeper or to her younger sister Vinnie as much as possible when the family could not afford to hire help.

Dickinson was frugal with time and didn't like to waste it in small talk with people she barely knew neither for political status nor for financial gain. Her father's position in town made this necessary for her family on a daily basis on the first floor of her house, and at her brother's house next door, and in the streets and shops of Amherst. Over time, she avoided involving herself in such boring situations and public places increasingly, until she managed to live almost exclusively in the relaxed, intimate company of her family, her dog Carlo, and the workers around her home. She maintained friendships through written correspondence where she could carefully compose her thoughts. She cherished letters written to her in reply, rereading them over and over in the solitary freedom of her room, behind a door she locked from the inside.

Emily Dickinson didn't like formal religion and never allowed herself to join the church her family attended regularly, eventually stopping attending herself entirely. However, there was something about the elegant words of the Bible she had grown up hearing and the fervor of faith she witnessed in people close to her that didn't allow her to dismiss altogether the possibility of an afterlife, the existence of God, or that a spiritual dimension might exist.

She loved the precision and clear observations of science, especially the earth sciences of botany and geology, but also the wondrous study of astronomy. She laughed easily and regularly got her hands dirty kneeling down in the garden, and she performed small experiments of her own by raising exotic plants in her conservatory. Dickinson also loved the precision of language and the deep ideas of literature, especially the poetry of British poets Browning and Brontë, as well as Shakespeare. She was well informed, reading the newspaper daily and discussing with her family the popular novels of her day, such as those by Brontë, Dickens, and Hawthorne.

As an aunt and neighbor, Dickinson was a special friend to children. She could be counted on to conspire with them to steal a cookie from the kitchen, or to lower some gingerbread she had made down in a basket outside her second-floor window as part of joining in their games in a playful way. Her dog, Carlo, a Newfoundland-St. Bernard mix, was a steady companion and of special comfort to her during 16 years of her adult life. Dickinson did not marry, but she was not afraid to love, and she seems to have had many loves walk in and out of her life at various times. Dickinson might agree that too much attention has been paid to their identities over the years, when it is the giving and receiving of love itself that matters most.

Like many women of her day, she was a frequent gift giver, often sending baked goods or a flower from her garden or conservatory in her letters, but increasingly sending a poem as a gift instead, or a letter that seemed to be more of a poem or a gift in itself, rather than an attempt to convey a simple message of regard. As the years wore on and Dickinson's life settled into the routine of an unmarried adult living in her father's house, she deepened her commitment to writing. She wrote from a need to write and a joy in language, and she is now known to have spent many nights staying up late in her room thinking and composing, and sewing together chosen poems into booklets of her own design. Her family and many of her correspondents knew of her interest, but fewer than a dozen of her poems were printed in her lifetime and most of these anonymously.

Dickinson more openly admired her father than her mother, who was often ill, but she had traits of them both in her personality. She loved reading and rigorous thought like her father; but she also preferred staying out of the limelight like her mother, and she was often ill like her, though never bedridden for as long. As the middle child, Dickinson admired and joked with her outgoing older brother Austin who, as the boy in the family, had so much more opportunity than she would ever have, and she leaned on her loyal younger sister Lavinia for emotional support and stability. Ironically, her own ambition and depth of emotional grasp, however, would outdo both of her siblings in terms of the reach of her impact and influence upon the world.

Emily Dickinson was a driven woman—a woman driven to create art. When she was alone and could do what she wanted, or even while performing routine household tasks, Emily Dickinson wrote extraordinary poems and letters. It is for this reason that we care about her life and attempt to study it today. Because of her lifestyle of avoiding the public, the people of her small town of Amherst, Massachusetts, used to talk. They talked as people of small towns sometimes talk about someone who appears to be different in any way from the accepted norms of their kind. Without the woman there to defend herself in these situations or to change the tone or direction of their stories, and with the Dickinsons being such a prominent family in town that they were visible and already talked about in so many other ways, the stories about Emily Dickinson grew until they took on near mythic proportions that continue to this day. Today, reclusive people are still thought to be strange or odd or not quite right—but they are given their space and are pretty much left alone. Dickinson's space, living in a family that was so much otherwise a part of the community, came at a price that she was aware of but did nothing to change. Her family and their employees protected her wishes, and so the mythmaking and gossip continued.

When she died, her sister found the poems. There were so many poems in Emily's room that at first Lavinia did not know what to do with them. She knew her sister liked to read and think and write, and Lavinia had worked around her in the house so as to allow her sister to do this as often as possible. However, she did not know that Emily had managed to write so many poems over the years—nearly 1,800 in all. Those poems would later be published amid clouds of controversy that only expanded the stories already circulating about their reclusive creator.

Today we would suspect this controversy might be an intentional way of promoting interest in the poems, but this was only partially true. The controversies were genuine and arose from many complicated factors. However, the poems are of such quality and depth that they stand alone in spite of the mysterious trappings surrounding their publication. They have been cherished, studied, and written about by millions of readers around the world, while at the same time their author became an enigma.

Interest in the poet in the early twenty-first century is at an all-time high. In 2004, there were at least three full-length scholarly biographies of Emily Dickinson in print, numbering several hundred pages each. An internet search yielded over 200,000 hits, and a database search of the *Modern Language Association International Bibliography* yielded over 2,000 scholarly books and articles about the poet and her works. The difficult task of translating Dickinson's short but complex verses into different lan-

guages is still being conducted around the world. In the United States, children as young as preschool age are exposed to the poems through picture books, and the poems are discussed in English classes from elementary school through graduate school.

An author's society dedicated to the poet was founded in 1986, and by 2004 had hundreds of members around the world. The society hosts regular international conferences dedicated exclusively to the poet, which present the latest research by scholars.[2] Starting in 2002, an internet bookseller offered an online course in Dickinson's life and poems to its global audience, which filled up on an ongoing basis. In New York City, annual 24-hour marathon readings of the poet's works, which so frequently deal with the subject of grief and death, came into vogue as a response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. There have been Internet discussion groups dedicated to the poet, some running several years. Annual visitors to the Dickinson home in Amherst number in the thousands. As more information about the poet is uncovered through ongoing research, and as appreciation for the value of her poetry expands around the globe through translations, the need for meeting the needs of different kinds of audiences interested in Emily Dickinson's life and her work increases.

This biography is intended for the young adult student and the general reader who would like an overview of the current scholarship regarding the poet's life. Its major sources include Dickinson's own writing—poems and letters as primary material, both in manuscript form as well as published editions and the online *Dickinson Electronic Archive*. In researching this life story, the author also used published letters and accounts of the poet's family members and friends, and unpublished letters, papers, and artifacts available in the important Dickinson collections housed at the Emily Dickinson Museum, Harvard University, Brown University, Amherst College, and the Jones Library in Amherst.

In addition to primary material, the author made full use of these scholarly biographies: Alfred Habegger's 2002, *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* and Richard B. Sewall's 1974, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* in 2 volumes. Students and readers who would like a more detailed account of Dickinson's life are encouraged to seek out these important works. Literary criticism of the poems and letters has also been a useful tool in composing this general biography, especially whenever it illuminated facets of Dickinson's interests and writing practices. Correspondence and interviews with the curators of both Dickinson houses, librarians involved with Dickinson materials, and other Dickinson scholars have been used to clarify other issues as well.

Due to Greenwood's permissions and style policy for this educational biography series, direct quotes from the poems and letters are severely limited and in-text source citations are not provided in order to improve readability for students and general readers. As a scholar, the author appreciates the difficulty this house policy may cause serious researchers, but she must refer them to the bibliography or to the occasional brief note for source information at the end of each chapter. As an active member of the Dickinson scholarly community, the author is also available through the publisher to answer questions from readers about sources for specific information. Following the current practice in Dickinson scholarship, poems are referred to by their first lines (since most are untitled) rather than by editorial numbers from various printed editions. The edition used for most poems is *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, 2 vols., edited by Ralph W. Franklin, Harvard University Press, 1981.

Scholarship in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century has worked to debunk the clouds and layers of mythology surrounding the poet and attempt to find the real Emily Dickinson. Despite well-intentioned efforts and some valuable successes, this goal has not been, and will likely not ever be, completely achieved. This book will show that this fact has as much to do with the poet herself as it does with what others have done with her story over time. Over and over again, the life story of this artist tells us to look to her work to find out all we want to know about her, but perhaps the best way to appreciate this is to first look at what we think we do know about her life to see why this is so. As the poet herself once said, "Biography first convinces us of the fleeing of the Biographied—"[3]

When Emily Dickinson first introduced herself in person to a longtime correspondent who came to meet her at her house in Amherst, she placed two daylilies in his hand and said "These are my introduction."[4] While this is a mysterious way to introduce oneself, it is clear that the flowers did the trick. They made the meeting not only special but even more memorable than it was already likely to be, given that the visitor had been corresponding with her for eight years. The flowers associated the woman physically standing in front of him with the flowers he now held in his hand—both were soft, intricate, delicate, but perhaps more importantly—natural, real, and fully alive.

NOTES

1. See funeral record no. 31 in 1886 book of funeral director Edwin Marsh (in Longsworth, *World*, p. 112); Dickinson letter to Thomas W. Higginson, July, 1862 (in Dickinson, *Letters*, ed. by Johnson, 3 vol., # 268); lock of Dickinson's

hair in Special Collections at Amherst College; dress replica at the Homestead; Dickinson daguerreotype, Amherst College; Bianchi, *Face to Face;* Col. Higginson letter to Mary Higginson qtd. in Dickinson, *Letters*, ed. by Johnson, 3 vol., # 342a.

2. The Emily Dickinson International Society; Special Collections, Jones Library.

3. Dickinson letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, February, 1885. (Dickinson, *Letters*, Johnson, ed., 3 vols.

4. Thomas W. Higginson letter to Mary Higginson, qtd. in Dickinson, *Letters*, ed. by Johnson, 3 vol., # 342a.

Chapter 2

ANCESTRY, EARLY LIFE, AND FAMILY

Emily Dickinson's parents were Emily Norcross Dickinson (1804–1882) of Monson and Edward Dickinson (1803–1874) of Amherst. They both came from families that were influential in their respective towns, which are only a few miles apart from one another in western Massachusetts. The poet's ancestral heritage through her parents' marriage on May 6, 1828, sets a foundation not only for her home life but also for the life of the community into which she would be born.

EMILY NORCROSS DICKINSON

The history of the poet's maternal line is sketchier than the Dickinson one, owing in part, no doubt, to the lack of attention paid to women's histories and lack of public documents about them over so many years. Dickinson's maternal grandmother was Betsey Fay, a woman who was born in 1777, a year after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. She lived until 1829, the year before the poet was born, so Emily never knew her grandmother. In 1798, Betsey Fay married Joel Norcross and went on to bear nine children, the third of whom, Emily Norcross, would later be the poet's mother and share her name. Other sibling names that would repeat in the family line included Austin Norcross and Lavinia Norcross. Austin Norcross would die in his twenties in 1824. Emily Norcross, next in age, would honor his life five years later by naming her first son after him. Betsey's daughter Lavinia Norcross, the next girl after the poet's mother by approximately eight years, would go on to bear the cousins the poet loved most, Frances and Louisa (whom Emily would call "Fanny and

Loo"). Among Betsey's nine children, then, there was an Austin, an Emily, and a Lavinia. Though there were other children in between, these three shared the same birth order as the Dickinson siblings a generation later. It is also interesting to note that besides the names they bore in common, Emily Dickinson and her mother were both the eldest daughters in their respective households.

The poet's grandmother, Betsey Fay Norcross, was devoted to her husband and nine children. She suffered the loss of four of her children during her lifetime, including her first and second born, both sons, who died in their early adulthood. She was described in her obituary written by her minister as "humble and retiring in her disposition"[1] and as a woman whose talents and caring nature were most evident in relation to her family and the domestic sphere. In addition to her family, however, Betsey enjoyed the company of several friends, principally through her church's First Female Praying Circle, and she participated in charitable activities. The fact that her husband maintained several businesses around Monson, that her family was large, and that the family took in boarders, made her a person well known in the community for the efficiency of her work and her hospitality. The word *retiring* then takes on curious meanings, especially since it would reappear later on in descriptions of both Betsey's daughter and her famous granddaughter, as well.

Of Betsey's five children who survived, only two were daughters, Emily and Lavinia. This is significant because mothers and daughters took care of the entire household in those days, so the larger the house and family and the fewer the daughters, the more work that fell upon each one. The Norcross house in Monson was a converted tavern, large enough to accommodate their big family as well as boarders. In addition, events such as the deaths of not only Austin in 1824, but also five-year-old Nancy in the same year, must have taken their toll on Emily Norcross, who was still just a teenager herself. By all accounts, Emily Norcross worked hard as a girl and young woman, a fact that is often omitted in consideration of her later life as the poet's sickly, retiring mother.

Joel Norcross, Emily Dickinson's maternal grandfather, was a successful businessman in Monson and owned the most valuable property in town. He was a chief stockholder of the Hampden Cotton Manufacturing Company and had his own farm. His brother and other relatives owned other businesses in town, such as stores and taverns. Joel was wealthy by small-town standards and was therefore well known but not always well liked around Monson.

Joel Norcross did give of his time and treasure to the community, including helping to organize the Union Charitable Society of Monson's

First Congregational Church and building a branch chapel of the church in the nearby town of Maine, Massachusetts. His most substantial philanthropic donations, however, were for his favorite cause, Monson Academy. The academy was incorporated in 1804 and continued to be regarded as one of the best western Massachusetts schools until the 1830s. Joel was its largest individual benefactor.

Born in 1804, Emily Norcross was Betsey and Joel's third child; she would become the eldest surviving child after the deaths of her two older brothers. In many ways, her growing-up experience mirrored her famous namesake's years later. Her family had extended family in town, was well known, and she lived in a house that entertained visitors regularly. With her sister Lavinia, she cared for her mother Betsey when she grew ill. This was particularly the case when Betsey confronted the deaths of four of her nine children.

Bedridden women fighting illness in the nineteenth century could have been fighting diseases and ailments that are regularly treated with medications today. Severe diseases such as consumption (or tuberculosis) were common and devastating in the period. There was little medical help available for such common ailments as hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, gynecological infections, postpartum and other depressions, physical changes of life such as menopause, and others. The prevalence of multiple pregnancies during a period when prenatal and postnatal care was also not as sophisticated as it is now wore on women's bodies. Often the only defense they had in the form of home treatment was to take the advice of male doctors and their nurses—usually their own mothers, daughters, and sisters—and take to their beds to get as much rest as possible.

Added to this medical defenselessness was a patriarchal society that believed that women should be kept indoors, at home, and protected, and a legal system that limited women's rights and opportunities. It is small wonder that women who suffered with various ailments over their lifetimes were often described as invalids, sickly, hysterical, or chronically ill. No one today would expect a woman with chronic hypertension to suffer through the deaths of one or more of her children and not be hit with a physical setback, probably with a bout of depression to go with it; and this was the type of scenario women of the period lived out over and over again. The period of the nineteenth century is filled with accounts of women caring for their bedridden counterparts within their families, and the Norcross-Dickinson story is no different.

With her father's wealth and support of education, Emily Norcross had the opportunity to be educated at Monson Academy, and then later at the

Herrick School in New Haven, Connecticut, where her brother attended Yale. She was intelligent, interested in books and religion, and held high standards of moral conviction. When Edward Dickinson came to Monson in January of 1826 on business, she found an instant rapport with him; however, her letters to him during their epistolary courtship were sparsely written and few between. The poet's later accusation that her mother did not care for thought may have come from her mother's hard years of labor as a young woman helping to run a large household while helping her mother go through the deaths of four of her children. Early hard, physical labor, especially under dire circumstances, tends to keep one's priorities set on practical matters and often does not afford one the luxury of time spent in the deep thought that Emily Dickinson grew up enjoying. On the other hand, the poet was not foreign to physical work herself, especially at certain periods when the family was unable to hire help, and perhaps she erroneously measured the depth of her mother's thoughts in proportion to the rarity of her sharing them. Both women enjoyed their solitude.

In 1828 when Emily Norcross left home to move with her new husband into a duplex in Amherst they shared with the Montague family, she put her intelligence and high standards into the practical matter of managing a spotless, efficient kind of household that would be comfortable for the type of guests she, and especially her husband, expected to cultivate. She knew that Edward, like her father, Joel, was ambitious and had influential family connections in the community, and she no doubt shared in his vision of establishing a new branch of both families that would continue to contribute in a prominent way. Emily Norcross Dickinson learned early that daughters care for their ill mothers, and some might say that she prepaid dues owed to her daughters in her relationship with their grandmother, which left her with less physical and emotional energy for her own children. Betsey Fay Norcross bore children and worked hard until she was spent and needed help; Emily and Lavinia Norcross provided it. In turn, Emily Norcross Dickinson expected, and received, the same amount of doting devotion from the poet and her sister.

In her letters, the poet suggests that her relationship with her mother was not an intellectual one, but a mother omitted from one's letters and artistic and other interests is not a mother absent in life. Dickinson's early health and upbringing were certainly tended to and accomplished by her mother. Mrs. Dickinson took the job of parenthood seriously, if perhaps a bit dutifully, by reading up on the practice of childrearing early in her marriage and even taking notes from sermons as a single woman about what mothers should teach their children concerning morality. The func-

tioning of the family's responsibilities for Edward's public events needed to run smoothly and without a hitch. No doubt she read faithfully her copy of *The Frugal Housewife* by Lydia Maria Child, which Edward gave her in about 1830. Consulting this book and others for advice on housekeeping and child rearing shows more of a literary tendency than has been previously afforded the poet's mother. Edward and Emily N. Dickinson's high standards required knowledge and discipline, especially since many functions often involved opening their home and hosting visiting officials and other guests there.

Traits the poet appeared to share with her mother include her appreciation of home and nature. As a young woman, Emily Norcross missed Monson while she was away at Herrick, and she enjoyed and appreciated country life, commenting easily on the pleasant songs of birds. If she did not enjoy writing, she did read faithfully and apparently could turn a witty phrase in conversation.

That the poet said in a letter that she did not hold much affection for her mother until their roles reversed in later years and she was tending more to her mother's needs, suggests that there may have been an ongoing battle of wills between them in the household, perhaps over how best to spend one's time.

Some scholars argue that Dickinson suffered from an emotionally distant mother and grew up missing that affection all of her life. They point to her frequent praise and admiration for her father in her letters. In part, children learn to honor a parent by modeling the respect the other parent pays to him or her, and this was likely a factor in Dickinson's feelings for her busy and accomplished father. Her mother and the entire household clearly revolved around his comings and goings, and much of the town did as well. That perhaps the poet did not learn to appreciate her mother's contribution may be as much a testament to Edward's self-centeredness and neglect of teaching his children to respect their mother's importance in their lives as it was a factor of the times in which she lived. Like many men of the period, Edward downplayed women's roles.

Rather than lack of affection per se, it may be the case that the Emilies, both mother and daughter, were very much alike and perhaps did not get along especially well because of it—a condition that has been known to happen in many families. There are several letters where the poet does not sign "Emily" but chooses other names or spellings, such as "Emilie," perhaps to distinguish herself from her mother. Perhaps there was some subconscious competition for Edward's attention, or perhaps Emily the elder was as strong-willed that bread be baked a certain way and silver be

polished to a specific sheen as Emily the younger was fierce about guarding time in the day for reflection and engaging in verbal fencing matches. Given the difference in their upbringing, one with more emphasis on and need for the practical, the other with the liberty to pursue a few more of her own interests because of her comparatively comfortable life, differences over how best to spend one's time may be as good a reason as any for tensions that may have existed between them.

Whatever their reasons, the poet gradually withdrew from the public and attention outside the Homestead, and her mother may have gradually withdrawn from the family as well, having suffered an overdose of family responsibilities too early in life to fully enjoy her spirited and independent children. Whatever the cause, in both cases in later years the solution to dealing with circumstances the Emilies would rather not contend with apparently fell into a mutual pattern of turning inward, spending more time in their respective chambers, and closing the door.

EDWARD DICKINSON

What scholars know about the poet's paternal side of the family, which is considerably more than is known about the maternal side, despite more recent efforts at remedying that problem,[2] stretches back as far as seventeenth-century England. Puritans Nathaniel and Ann Gull Dickinson left Billingborough parish in Lincolnshire around 1637 for America, arriving in Wetherfield, Connecticut, which was then not much more than a British outpost. They came, as did many of the Puritans, for religious freedom. In 1659, the couple and their children moved into Native American Norwottuck territory in what is now western Massachusetts. They and others established a town they called Hadley, which still exists today. In Hadley, Nathaniel began what would be a Dickinson family tradition—he became heavily involved in the establishment of the town's government, education, and religious infrastructures. During fighting with the Indians in 1675, Nathaniel and Ann lost three of their nine sons. Despite this diminishment, the family extended its line in depth and breadth in the community and the surrounding rural area.

In 1759, a new town was formed out of the eastern end of Hadley. It was named Amherst after Lord Jeffrey Amherst, among whose claims to fame included an alarming desire and strategy for genocide against the Native Americans—he suggested that they be eradicated by having blankets infected with smallpox thrown over them. As a large family from Hadley, the Dickinsons populated Amherst as it developed.

The poet's grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson (1775–1838), grew up in Amherst and attended Dartmouth where he graduated with a degree in Latin, thinking he might become a minister. Like his male predecessors before him, Samuel was a leader in the community, but perhaps unlike some of them, he did not always have the stability of character to handle the responsibilities that went with this distinction. Rejecting the ministry but still clinging to the doctrine of Calvinism, Samuel became tutored in law by Judge Simeon Strong in Amherst. Soon Samuel owned wide land holdings in the area that earned him the honorary designation of Squire. While the land in his name bestowed him power in the community, behind the scenes, Squire Dickinson was not quite making all of the payments on the mortgages. His prestige grew as he cofounded Amherst College, but at the same time, his own personal and business affairs undermined the financial stability this should have brought to his family.

Samuel married Lucretia Gunn of Montague on March 21, 1802, who was by most accounts, reserved in nature and abrupt in her dealings with others. Many years later, her grandchildren, the poet and her siblings, remarked at their own occasional losses of temper or foul moods claiming that it was not their own personalities but their Grandmother Gunn's that was manifesting itself. Her daughter, Elizabeth, born after Edward, inherited some of her mother's traits—Emily trembled at the sound of her boots. The poet once called her the only male relative in the family on the female side.

By 1813, Samuel and Lucretia had a large family with five children; four more would eventually arrive. They needed a larger home. The Squire built the first brick house in Amherst on an elevation above Main Street. It was built in the Federal style, with four large rooms on both the first and second floors. Several additions and alterations later, this structure became the Dickinson Homestead where the poet was born and where she eventually died, though she lived at one other location for a time in between. Squire Dickinson, seeking to establish a legacy in the town, had no idea how important this brick house would become to American letters.

Edward Dickinson (1803–1874), the poet's father, was the eldest of his parents' nine children and lived, perhaps, most aware of the continuing pressures of his father's unsupported ambition. One example of this was that in his sophomore year at Yale, Edward had to drop out two different times and go home to take classes at Amherst College because his father could not afford Yale's tuition. He eventually did graduate, but with a 2.4 average, not with the high honors one might expect of the future father of a genius.

Interestingly, the young Edward Dickinson took a special interest in women's conditions in society at his time. Instead of recognizing their plight in terms of women's suffrage and fighting for increased women's rights, as would increase in popularity a few decades later, Edward took the opposing view that women should be protected from the messy and cruel world that existed outside the domestic sphere. He interpreted his role as helping them deal with the roughness and unfairness of society by keeping the women he loved financially secure (something his own father had not accomplished) and at home in a comfortable house that he provided.

Influenced by a book *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* by Hannah More, (*Coelebs* is Latin for bachelor), in 1827, Edward helped found the first newspaper in Amherst, *The New-England Inquirer*. In it he wrote five articles about the education of females. Using an anonymous penname, Coelebs, Edward described the role of women's education as enhancing their ability to perform at domestic tasks and to be a social partner to their husbands' professional lives in that they may hold up their end of intelligent conversations without dominating them. In no way, Coelebs asserted, should women ever overtake men in such conversations or in literary matters, such as reading and writing novels. Rather, they remain happier if they sacrifice their energies in these regards to the maintenance of a warm and orderly household.

While Edward's writing was harsh enough to receive criticism even in its own day, his beliefs on the subject are actually more complex than his young bachelor writings would suggest. He later bought books, for example, for his daughter Emily, then asked her not to read them. He outwardly put down women having a role in public literary life, yet at the same time he read their books. This ambivalence suggests that Edward had perhaps the secret desire to see women be intelligent, educated, and their writing be published, but he also held a fear of what might happen to the sanctity of the family afterward if this were to happen. Ambition had ruined his family's stability once with his father. What could happen if women were allowed to act on their ambitions at will as well? Edward's urge to protect his family overrode all else. Small wonder that many years later, his daughter the genius poet would find herself negotiating publication between the private and public spheres.

Added to school troubles brought on by his father's overreaching ambition, Edward knew that his father was putting up the Homestead as collateral to pay for debt after debt. This meant that rather than a fixed place of valuable property from which the family could draw security and prosper, Samuel had so many liens against it that the family really didn't own the Homestead at all. Not only that, but Edward's father had borrowed

money from almost every relative with means, degrading any safety net they would have for the future and putting more and more family members at financial risk and strain.

While Edward's younger brother William bucked at the foolishness of their father and sought work elsewhere, Edward, as the eldest and with his views of the males in the family as protectors, shouldered more of the responsibility of rebuilding the family name. Whether through a sense of duty or of personal pride, Edward apparently made a decision that he would work to bring back the family from the brink of financial ruin and disgrace.

In the meantime, the serious young man met Emily Norcross when he sat next to her at a chemistry lecture in Monson. In courtly fashion, on February 8, 1826, Edward entered into a wooing correspondence with the woman who would be the poet's mother. He told her of his affections, and she replied in kind, though her letters were never as forthcoming as his and were characteristically and sometimes frustratingly for Edward, short and far between. They courted for two years in this way; Edward sent Emily Norcross 70 letters; she sent him only 24.

In Vivian Pollak's edition of the courtship letters, *A Poet's Parents*, readers glimpse a view of Edward's personality and treatment of women. Small wonder his eldest daughter grew up to prefer staying at home when her father wrote the excerpt below in a letter to her mother several years earlier when they were engaged. The letter appears on page 174 of the collection:

> I can't say that I approve of your being "out almost every evening"—I am in constant anxiety that you will expose yourself so much that you will destroy your health. You *must be a little more careful*, Emily—I can not feel easy to think, every evening, whether it "rains or shines" that you are *out*, whether I know it, or not.

On page 193 of the collection, Emily Norcross responds to another of Edward's letters, closing her short note with her characteristic, quick style that so frustrated the young lawyer—"I now leave you yet my thoughts will not cease to act. This haste you must excuse." To win her hand, Edward had to not only win over Emily Norcross but also her father, Joel, whose standing in Monson made him a particularly good prize to have on Edward's side. In addition, Edward needed to establish himself more fully in his law practice. Showing some of his father's ambition, the poet's father managed to succeed at all of these.

EARLY FAMILY LIFE

On May 6, 1828, the coupled married and moved into one-half of a house in Amherst that Edward had repaired and furnished for their married life and that his bride-to-be's father had previously visited and approved. Joel Norcross even sent a new cast-iron stove as a gift to be installed before the wedding. The other half of the house was occupied by Jemima Montague, so the young Dickinsons began their lives together in shared housing. Edward's father owned the house, at least on paper, so Edward believed this benefit would give them a foothold and a start.

Unfortunately, a month after their marriage, Samuel Dickinson was discovered to be, for all intents and purposes, bankrupt. He had not paid the taxes on several of his properties, which put the Montague house at risk. Keeping his head and developing still more of the set jaw and stoic attitude that people in town would come to know so well, Edward consulted with his father-in-law, Joel Norcross, who had been successful in Monson without the backsliding his own father had experienced. Through that advice and with some help from his cousin Nathan Dickinson, Edward managed to secure, for the time being, his right to the property that he had repaired and refurnished. In the meantime, Emily Norcross Dickinson became pregnant.

The Norcrosses responded to Emily's predicament with support and concern. Her sister Lavinia spoke for mother Betsey and others in the family when she wrote that they wished Emily would not take it upon herself to work so hard at scrupulous housekeeping with no help. When they sent her a recommended woman to hire, Emily did not keep the person employed. Preferring to do all the work herself and without the medical care hard workers like her benefit from today, Emily's health began to suffer. The many years of running her mother's household, and now her own when she was newly married, pregnant, and under financial strain in shared housing, began taking their toll. After at least two failures at sending her someone to help her, the Norcrosses finally sent their own housekeeper, Mary, to lend her a hand. That the poet's mother's ambition and pride matched her father's is evident in the fact that she took in boarders from Amherst College during the very semester when she would deliver her first child. At a time when the young couple was trying to make a go of it, Mrs. Dickinson was as hard a worker as her husband. Like him in Amherst, she had come from a family prominent in Monson and did not want to lose face in the community over money.

The boarders did not work out much longer after William Austin Dickinson was born on April 16, 1829. Despite the joy of bearing their first

child, the couple continued to endure further hard times early in their marriage with the death of Emily's mother, Betsey Fay Norcross, on September 5, 1829, and the news from now-married Nathan Dickinson in Michigan that he could no longer help Edward financially with the Montague house. Edward again sought his father-in-law's advice (not his money and not his own father's help), but this time he managed to work out a deal before Joel Norcross's reply arrived.

In March 1830, Edward Dickinson bought one-half of the Homestead back from his cousin Nathan. They would be moving from one duplex situation to another, but Edward believed the Homestead, his childhood home, would eventually offer his little family the security they so badly needed. Again that summer, with a toddler underfoot and now pregnant once more, Emily took in boarders to help with the finances. By September 1, the Dickinsons moved to the Homestead on Main Street, occupying the west half of the house, with Edward's parents and remaining siblings living on the east side. It is a testament to Squire Dickinson's (Samuel Fowler) instability that he was not able to offer this part of the house to his young son and his family himself because he did not own it.

That fall, news came from Monson that Joel Norcross would soon be remarrying. This was an essential move since Betsey's death and Mrs. Dickinson's marriage had left only Lavinia to care for the tavern house and her siblings, Alfred and Joel Warren. Sarah Vaill, the poet's stepgrandmother, had been a teacher. She was well thought of, in her forties, and had never previously married. She had a good disposition. She and Joel married January 6, 1831, and she became the only grandmother the poet knew on her mother's side.

By the time the baby girl was born who would, years later, grow to be of such interest around the world, a small sense of security about their living arrangements appears to have been achieved by the young family living in the Homestead. Edward held the mortgage in his name for the west side of the house. It seemed that as long as they could make the payments, they would not have to contend with the property being sold out from under them again, at least for awhile. Perhaps their new surroundings added to the pleasure of the birth of their first baby girl. Edward recorded their first daughter's birth in his wife's Bible: "Emily Elisabeth, their second child / was born Dec. 10. 1830. at 5. o'clock A.M."[3] The poet was born in the Homestead, in the same side of the house where her famous bedroom would be visited by thousands of poetry pilgrims years later. Given how important the house became to her life and work, it seems now that there is no other place on earth where the poet could have possibly been born.

EMILY DICKINSON
A BIOGRAPHY
CONNIE ANN KIRK

Emily Dickinson saw fewer than a dozen of her poems published in her lifetime, but she has since become one of the most revered and beloved of all American poets. As a shy woman living in 19th century New England, Dickinson wrote about large subjects through close observation of small, everyday details. After her death, her sister found more than 1,775 poems and solicited help in seeing them into print. Dickinson preferred to live most of her life at home among those she loved, but over time, some of the more unusual facts of her life became mythologized and distorted. Using updated scholarship and never before published primary research, this new biography peels away the myths surrounding Emily Dickinson and takes a fresh look at the complex and busy life of this genius of American letters.

As a research tool, the volume is also useful for its explanation of current nomenclature for the poems, mysteries, and controversies, and the poet's influence on American poetry and culture. A chronology is set alongside significant historical and cultural events of the period. Also included are locations of major holdings for Dickinson study, a listing of poems published in her lifetime, and a full bibliography of primary and secondary sources.

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