

Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems (1858–1955)

Study Guide Suggested Poems For Further Reading Discussion Questions

Study Guide (1992) for *Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems*

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That Emily Dickinson is an intriguing character is clear from the varied descriptions of her. She has been called everything from "the partially cracked poetess from Amherst" to "one of the greatest lyric poets of all time", from "a little homekeeping person" to "the female (Marquis de) Sade", from "the belle of Amherst" (her own term for her fourteen-year-old self) to "the greatest of women poets" and "the best American poet."

That she is an expressly American character is clear from her roots. Emily Dickinson was born to Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson in Amherst, Massachusetts, on December 10, 1830. Her brother, Austin, was born in 1829, and her sister, Lavinia (Vinnie) in 1833. Edward Dickinson, a descendant of Puritans who had been in the country since the mid-seventeenth century, was an attorney who eventually took his son into his practice, treasurer of Amherst College for nearly five decades, and for several brief terms a representative to the state legislature and Congress. He was evidently a strict, unsympathetic, uncommunicative man. And though dedicated to his family and determined that they should live in the Dickinson Homestead established by his father, he had little interest in his daughters' intellectual development. Still, he had a powerful influence on Emily, and when he died, she chose to dress always in immaculate white, her color of mourning.

Mrs. Dickinson was traditional homebody who was cared for by Emily and Vinnie from the time of Edward's death in 1874 until her own death in 1882. Vinnie, who, like Emily, never married, apparently tended to most of the domestic duties, leaving Emily free for her artistic pursuits. Next door to the Dickinson Homestead lived Austin and his wife, Sue, who became Emily's best friend, her confidante, and a key audience for her writing.

Though Emily's formal education was limited, it was excellent. He attended Amherst Academy from 1840–1847, and spent 1847–48 at Mt. Holyoke Female

Seminary. While at the Seminary, Emily was exposed to continuous religious influences, with frequent revival meetings and a curriculum based on the Bible and orthodox Trinitarian belief. The girls at the Academy were divided into three groups: those who were professed Christians, those who "had hope," and those "without hope." Emily belonged to this third group. She left the seminary, homesick and ill with the flu, but unconverted to church membership. She also resisted the Great Revival of 1850 in Amherst, even after her stiff-necked father finally succumbed. At nineteen, Emily wrote to her friend Abiah Root:

You are growing wiser than I am, and nipping in the bud fancies which I let blossom—perchance to bear no fruit, or if plucked, I may find it better. The shore is safer, Abiah, but I love to buffet the sea— I can count the bitter wrecks here in these pleasant waters, and hear the murmuring winds, but oh, I love the danger!

Her life-long struggle with and defiance of God, her "wrestling with faith", was thus established early.

One particularly intriguing aspect of Emily Dickinson's character is her reclusiveness. Her recorded travels outside of Amherst are few—visits to relatives in Boston, Cambridge, Springfield, and Washington, D.C. Twice, in 1864 and 1865, she visited Boston for eye treatments. (The only known photograph of Emily Dickinson shows that she, like her mother and Vinnie, was slightly wall-eyed. And her mother, Vinnie, and Austin also suffered from eye troubles.) The frightening eye disease may have been severe enough to threaten blindness, and after she returned home from the treatments, she became increasingly more reclusive. Her decision to stay always at home has caused much conjecture about her: was she a shy, awkward, half-crazy spinster spurned in romance? Or was she such a sensitive, gifted, intelligent woman that an uneventful life was necessary for her art? Was she, rather than Thoreau, the artist who carried out the doctrine of self-sufficient individualism by really living it?

The question of her romantic interests has prompted even more conjecture about her. Probably we will never know the details about any love interests she had. However, several men—besides her father and brother—played a role in her life. The first was Ben Newton, one of her father's law students, who shared an interest in poetry with Emily and who corresponded with her until his death in 1853. She referred to him in her letters as her "Tutor." He may have been

replaced in this role by her most well-known correspondent and critic, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, whom Emily chose as her "Preceptor" after reading one of his essays in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Her relationship with him was almost certainly platonic, and except for his two visits to her in Amherst, it was carried out through letters only. It was Higginson who introduced Emily to Helen Hunt Jackson, a then-famous writer, who encouraged Emily to publish her poems. Despite this encouragement, Emily published only seven poems—anonymous—during her lifetime.

Another man who affected Emily Dickinson was Charles Wadsworth, a married pastor with whom she corresponded from 1855 until he died in 1882. Like Higginson, he visited her twice at her home. After the second visit, he moved to San Francisco with his family. The next year, 1862, Emily wrote 366 poems; in fact, two-thirds of her nearly 2000 poems were written between 1858 and 1866.

The man who most clearly was romantically involved with Emily Dickinson was Judge Otis Phillips Lord. She probably met him in the 1840's or 1850's, when he was associated in the Whig party with Edward Dickinson. Drafts of her love letters to him date from 1878, a year after his wife died. Though Emily referred to herself in one letter as "Emily....Lord," the couple postponed marriage, primarily because Emily felt duty-bound to care for her ailing mother. Lord died of a stroke in 1884.

One pattern prevails in all these relationships: Emily Dickinson's attractions to men were maintained always at a distance or through separation.

In 1883, Emily's beloved nephew, Gib Dickinson, 8, died of dysentery. His death left the whole family grief-stricken, but Emily seems to have suffered exceptionally. She may have already been in the early stages of Bright's disease, a wasting kidney disease. Her weakness from the disease was increased by her grief. In May 1886, she wrote to her cousins Louisa and Fanny Norcross:

Little Cousins,
Called Back.
Emily

She died a few days later, at the age of fifty-five. Higginson, who attended the funeral, described her appearance: "She....looked 30, not a gray hair or wrinkle, & perfect peace on the beautiful brow."

After Emily's death, Vinnie was astonished to discover a locked box that contained 1775 of Emily's poems. She apparently then became obsessed with having her sister's poetry published. She asked her sister-in-law, Sue, to help, and then she turned to Mabel Lommis Todd, a family friend, who edited both the poems and Emily's letters. The letters were later also edited by Thomas H. Johnson (in 1958) into three volumes containing nearly 10,000 letters. Johnson, who edited *Final Harvest*, also edited (in 1955) three volumes of Emily's poems "with variant readings compared with all known manuscripts."

In a gift to a friend, Emily once enclosed a note that said merely, "Area—no Test of Depth." That might serve as a comment on Emily Dickinson and her writing. No other American writer has been so isolated (with the possible exception of J. D. Salinger). No other poet of the English language has said less about social or political events. She told Higginson, "My business is Circumference." One critic suggests that for Emily this notion came from an image of a "sphere of which the center is everywhere, the circumference nowhere.... (Dickinson) expanded it into a symbol for all that is outside. Her center is the inquiring mind whose business is circumference, intent upon exploring the whole infinity of the universe that lies before her." The ambitiousness of her "business" is made even more startling when one considers another of her observations from another letter: "The Bible dealt with the Centre, not with the Circumference." A recent biographer of Dickinson's maintains that Emily was indeed attempting to do something the Bible did not—she was using language to expose what she conceived as God's tyranny, developing a poetic voice that would "counter God's attempts to dominate us."

Emily Dickinson's use of language is one of her major contributions to American literature. She used quite ordinary poetic forms—the rhythms common to English hymns. The ordinariness of the forms is reflected in the well-known contention that people can sing most of her poems to the tune of "The Yellow Rose of Texas. But in those forms she condensed meaning and created riddling ellipses, thereby inventing a new means of poetic expression.

If Thoreau is generous, even careless with words, Emily Dickinson is parsimonious. Words mattered greatly to her. She wrote to one friend that words were "mighty" and that "sometimes I write one, and look at his outlines until he glows as no sapphire." In her second letter to Higginson, who had apparently asked her about her friends, she said, "For several years, my Lexicon—was my only companion." However, not everyone can respond in kind to her experimentation. Readers are often left feeling very ambiguous about her poetry: they can't understand her very well, but they are sure that she is a superior artist. And they agree that although she is frustratingly cryptic at times, she nevertheless meets some deep need in them.

Suggested poems for discussion; numbers are from *Final Harvest*

- #7, "I Never lost as much but twice"
- #11, "Success is counted sweetest"
- #23, "These are the days when Birds come back"
- #28, "A *Wounded* Deer—leaps highest"
- #35, "How many times these low feet staggered"

- #46, "I taste a liquor never brewed"
- #47, "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers"
- #49, "She sweeps with many-colored Brooms"
- #54, "I like a look of Agony"
- #58, "Wild Nights—Wild Nights!"

- #63, "'Hope' is the thing with feathers"
- #66, "There's a certain Slant of light"
- #78, "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain"
- #85, "I'm Nobody! Who are you?"
- #95, "The Soul selects her own Society"

- #112, "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church"
- #114, "I cannot dance upon my Toes"
- #116, "A bird came down the Walk"
- #112, "After great pain, a formal feeling comes"
- #126, "I dreaded that first Robin, so"

#154, "What Soft-Cherubic Creatures"
#168, "Much Madness is divinest Sense"
#172, "This is my letter to the World"
#177, "I died for Beauty—but was scarce"
#184, "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died"

#209, "I started Early—took my Dog"
#243, "I like to see it lap the Miles"
#262, "The Brain—is wider than the Sky"
#265, "I cannot live with You"
#270, "I dwell in Possibility"

#290, "Because I could not stop for Death"
#307, "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun"
#357, "The Poets light but Lamps"
#389, "A narrow Fellow in the Grass"
#427, "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant"

#447, "A word is dead"
#446, "There is no Frigate like a Book"
#508, "A Route of Evanescence"
#542, "Apparently with no surprise"
#563, "My life closed twice before its close"

For Further Reading

By Emily Dickinson (Dates are original publication date.)

The Letters of Emily Dickinson. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward. 3 Vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1958.

The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson (Harvard, 1960)

About Emily Dickinson

Johnson, Thomas H. *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography* (Harvard, 1955)

Leyda, Jay. *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* (Yale, 1960)

Martin, Jay. *Harvests of Change: American Literature, 1865–1914*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1967.

Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. *Emily Dickinson* (Addison–Wesley, 1988)

Discussion Questions for Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems

1. Emily Dickinson experienced death close at hand many times in her life. In fact, it was common for the women during the 1800's to sit in "watches" with dying friends and relatives. Her father, her mother, her nephew, Bowles, Wadsworth, Lord, Helen Hunt Jackson, all died in the last few years of Emily's life. Furthermore, she experienced many separations from friends and family over the years. Therefore, it is not surprising that the theme of loss would appear in several of her poems. Discuss this theme as you see it dealt with in her poetry.
2. The varied opinions about Emily Dickinson as a character are most often based on her varied "voices" in her poems. She may appear to be a child, reveling in the wonders of nature; or a lover, caught up in passionate thought; or a bitter, even defiant questioner of god and his dealings with humankind; or a pessimistic commentator on death; or a poet describing her art. Which "voices" do you hear in her poetry? How does she vary those voices in speaking to you?
3. Admittedly, many of her poems are quite difficult to understand. Can you put your finger on just *what* makes them so tough to decipher? What strategies have you used in trying to understand them? Discuss these with the other members of your discussion group.
4. According to her sister, Emily Dickinson's retirement from society was "only a happen." That is, it was a slow process, the result not of a sudden decision, but of many small, separate decisions. Nonetheless, she never did marry nor have children. Consequently, her only "descendants" are her readers. Now, over a century after her death, how do you—as her descendant/reader—respond to her writing? Do you feel that she is speaking directly to you? Or not? How does she create this effect on you?
5. One of her most famous poems is #172, "This is my letter to the World/That never wrote to Me----." Now we all have a chance to write to Emily Dickinson. What would you say in a letter to her?
6. One critic maintains that three of the strongest currents of mid-nineteenth century New England "came to a confluence in her poetry: the Puritan tradition in which she was nurtured; the Yankee or, more broadly, American humor that

was just coming out of the ground; and the spiritual unrest.... which was everywhere melting the frost of custom." Where, if anywhere, in the poems you have read do you see evidence of these currents?

7. In another of her poems, #270, Dickinson begins "I dwell in Possibility—/A fairer House than Prose—." As we seek to discover what her poems "mean," we might consider that she is just "dwelling in Possibility," perhaps more thinking out loud, examining an idea, than she is asserting anything in particular. Do you see this as a way to approach her poems? With which poems might this approach work?

8. Obviously, words were important to Emily Dickinson. She referred to them as "Playmates" and commented on their "lovely wiles," yet they were "mighty." They were indeed her source of power—the power to create. And it is her words that have assured her immortality. Discuss your own reactions to her choice of words in any one poem.

9. The poems on the reading list are arranged not only numerically but also chronologically. Emily did not actually date all of her poems and drafts, but Thomas H. Johnson added the dates based on his research: he noted that her handwriting changed from year to year; he traced those variations in her letters, which were dated; then he matched the letters with the poems. In some cases, poems were included in the letters, so they were easy to date. Given that this may not be a foolproof method, can you see any contrasts in the approaches to subjects that Dickinson makes over the years? For instance, does her attitude toward death change as you progress through the poems? How about her comments on nature? Other topics?

10. Do you think that Emily Dickinson's works are an expression of a life lived or a life repressed? Explain.