

EMILY DICKINSON

POET

b. December 10, 1830

d. May 15, 1886

*“If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain.”*

**She is one
of America’s
greatest poets.**

Emily Dickinson was a reclusive American poet whose stylistic ingenuity challenged conventions and profoundly influenced poetry in the 20th century. Unrecognized in her own time, she has been celebrated since as one of America’s greatest, most original voices.

Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, to a prominent, conservative Protestant family. Her grandfather helped found Amherst College. Her father, a lawyer, served one term in the U.S. Congress. Dickinson attended Amherst Academy, where she excelled in the sciences, Latin and composition.

At age 15, Dickinson pursued higher education at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. She departed a year later. Against her upbringing and the religious norms of the day, Dickinson never joined a church denomination. Her feelings about religion were influenced by transcendentalism and the poetry of one of its central figures, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

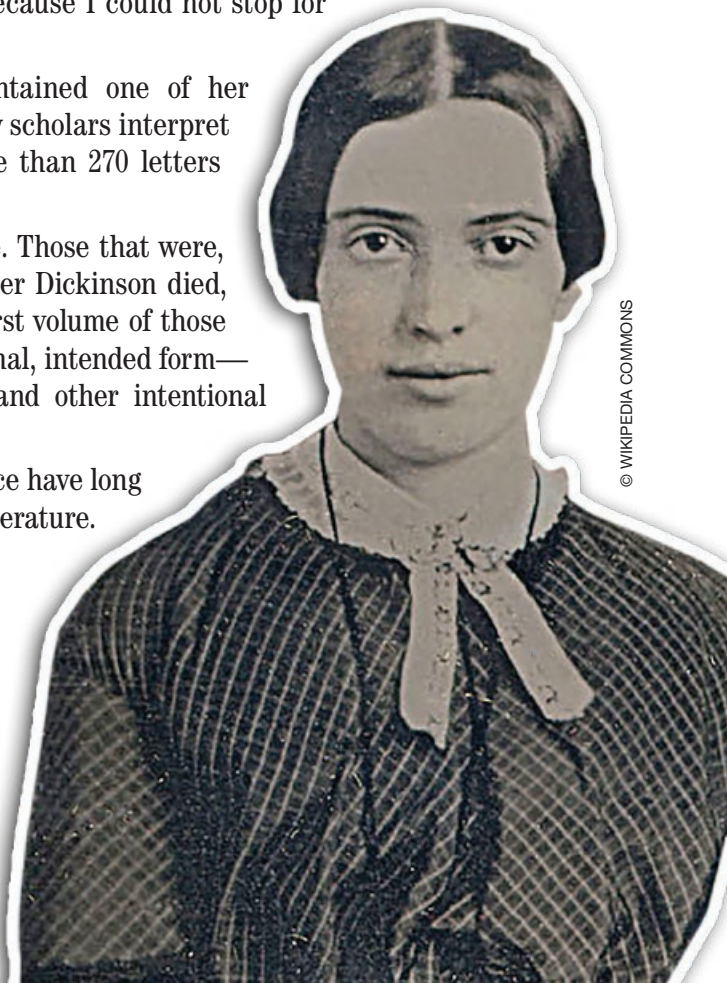
Dickinson lived with her sister, Lavinia, on the family homestead. In her early 20s, Dickinson began to restrict her social activity, staying home for communal events and cultivating intense relationships with a small number of correspondents. She and Lavinia cared for their ailing mother for years until her death, after which, Dickinson further withdrew.

By the late 1860s, Dickinson rarely left her home. She became a prolific poet. Over seven years, she created 40 booklets containing roughly 800 poems on themes such as nature, love, death and spirit, including the favorites “A Bird came down the Walk,” “If you were coming in the Fall,” “Because I could not stop for Death” and “‘Hope’ is the thing with Feathers.”

Dickinson expressed ambivalence toward marriage. She maintained one of her strongest relationships with her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert. Many scholars interpret the relationship as a romantic one. Dickinson sent Gilbert more than 270 letters enclosing her poems.

Very few of Dickinson’s poems were published during her lifetime. Those that were, were altered to conform with literary conventions of the day. After Dickinson died, Lavinia discovered hundreds of her sister’s poems. In 1890 the first volume of those works was published. It wasn’t until 1950 that her work in its original, intended form—complete with random capitalization, imaginative word usage and other intentional quirks—reached the public.

Dickinson’s poignant, compressed verse and haunting personal voice have long established her as one of the most important figures in American literature.



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