Biography Emily Dickinson

General Summary

Emily Dickinson, regarded as one of America’s greatest poets, is also well known for her unusual life of self-imposed social seclusion. Living a life of simplicity and seclusion, she yet wrote poetry of great power; questioning the nature of immortality and death, with at times an almost mantric quality. Her different lifestyle created an aura; often romanticised, and frequently a source of interest and speculation. But ultimately Emily Dickinson is remembered for her unique poetry. Within short, compact phrases she expressed far-reaching ideas; amidst paradox and uncertainty her poetry has an undeniable capacity to move and provoke.

Early Life Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson was born on 10th December, 1830, in the town of Amherst, Massachusetts. Amherst, 50 miles from Boston, had become well known as a centre for Education, based around Amherst College. Her family were pillars of the local community; their house known as “The Homestead” or “Mansion” was often used as a meeting place for distinguished visitors including, Ralph Waldo Emerson. (although it unlikely he met with Emily Dickinson)

As a young child, Emily proved to be a bright and conscientious student. She showed a sharp intelligence, and was able to create many original writings of rhyming stories, delighting her fellow classmates. Emily’s father was strict and keen to bring up his children in the proper way. Emily said of her father. “his heart was pure and terrible”. His strictness can be shown through his censorship of reading materials; Walt Whitman for example was considered “too inappropriate” and novels had to be smuggled into the house. In response, Emily was highly deferential to her father and other male figures of authority. But in her own way she loved and respected her father, even if at times, he appeared to be aloof. At a young age, she said she wished to be the “best little girl”. However despite her attempts to please and be well thought of, she was also at the same time independently minded, and quite willing to refuse the prevailing orthodoxy’s on certain issues.

Religious Influence on the Poetry of Emily Dickinson
A crucial issue at the time was the issue of religion, which to Emily was the “all important question.” The antecedents of the Dickinson’s can be traced back to the early Puritan settlers, who left Lincolnshire in the late 17th Century. Her antecedents had left England, so they could practise religious freedom in America. In the nineteenth-century, religion was still the dominant issue of the day. The East coast, in particular, saw a revival of strict Calvinism; developing partly in response to the more inclusive Unitarianism. Amherst College itself was founded with the intention of training ministers to spread the Christian word. Calvinism. By incrimination, Emily Dickinson would probably have been more at ease with the looser and more inclusive ideology of Unitarianism. However, the “Great Revival” as it was known,pushed the Calvinist view to greatest prominence.

**Religious Belief – Emily Dickinson**

The Calvinist approach to religion believed that men were inherently sinful and most humans were doomed to hell. There was only a small number who would be saved, and this could only be achieved by the adherent proclaiming his faith in Jesus Christ, as the true Saviour. There was subtle, but concerted effort, to encourage people to declare themselves saved. Both, at school and at college, there would have been much of this subtle pressure put on Emily to join the “saved”; but this she never did. She always retained an independent view towards the matter of religion.

“Faith” is a fine invention
For gentlemen who see,
But *Microscopes* are prudent
In an emergency!

– Emily Dickinson

Her father was not too concerned with the religious views of his children even though, later in his life, he also accepted this belief. Thus, on the crucial issue of the day Emily was relatively isolated. Amongst other reasons, Emily could never accept the doctrine of “original sin”. Despite remaining true to her own convictions, Emily was left with a sense of exclusion from the established religion, and these sentiments inform much of her poetry. There is frequent reference to “being shut out of heaven”. Yet despite this rejection of the orthodox religion, there is much in her poetry which reveals a profoundly religious temperament. For Emily religious experience was not a simple intellectual statement of belief; it could be more accurately reflected in the beauty of nature, and the experiences of ecstatic joy. Yet, although her poetry expressed intense inner experiences, this separation from established religion is a factor in her uncertainties and fluctuations in sentiment, evident in many poems.

It is a matter of speculation to what extent her poems could be considered autobiographical, but this poem gives an indication of the fleeting joy of spiritual experience, and also the more painful reality of life.

For each ecstatic instant
We must an anguish pay
In keen and quivering ration
To the ecstasy.

For each beloved hour
Sharp pittances of years –
Bitter contested farthings –
And Coffers heaped with Tears!

– Emily Dickinson

Emily was a bright conscientious student. At Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in South Hadley, she was able to study a range of subjects from Latin to English Literature. However, her studies were often interrupted by ill health. After a persistent cough developed, her father decided to remove her from college and bring her back home. Thus she left without any formal qualifications, but she had at least been able to broaden her education and vocabulary.

Emily Dickinson’s later seclusion from society gives an impression of a life of austerity and simplicity. This has been romanticised, with the frequently cited preference for her wearing all white dresses. However, Emily was both a keen artist and accomplished musician. In her college years she enjoyed singing; making reference to the similarities between poetry and singing. She also had a sharp eye for beautiful art; this visual sense and her appreciation of bright colours being evident in many of her poems. Emily was also well read, choosing writers such as; Emerson, Thoreau, Dickens, John Ruskin, and nineteenth-century poets like the Browning’s and the Bronte sisters.

The poetry of Emerson was introduced to Emily by one of her brother’s friends, Benjamin Newton. Newton was a young law student, who was well versed in contemporary literature. He was one of the first people to recognise the poetic capacities of Emily, and encouraged her to write poetry. The works of other poets, in particular Emerson, were important for Emily Dickinson in opening up spiritual ideas beyond the strict Calvinism. Emily had innovative views and unorthodox beliefs, but she often doubted her own convictions; thus influences of Emerson and other poets were of great importance.
On returning home from college, Emily Dickinson learnt much of the domestic chores, helping her mother with cleaning, sewing and entertaining. She sought as much as possible to maintain the ideals of the early American travelers following principles of honesty, simplicity and high minded morals. Emily was said to be beautiful, with a soft voice and dark eyes. She dressed in a relatively simple way and surviving photos show she kept her hair in a simple straightened style (somewhat like the Puritan style).

Emily was quick witted and intelligent; she had a good sense of humour, but was often ill at ease in other people’s company. She gave the impression of being somewhat agitated and intense. Her friend and literary critic, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, would later say how tense the meeting with her was.

“I was never with anyone who drained my nerve power so much.” However, he did comment that this “little plain woman” was also ingenious, childlike and seemed very thoughtful of others.” Also, although she did feel awkward in some social situations, with her close friends and sisters she could easily indulge in innocent childlike humour.

Emily herself often thought of herself like a child; even tomboy and she referred to this in many of her poems. In this frame of mind, she portrayed a degree of vulnerability looking to others for protection. This was particularly marked in her relationship with her authoritarian father, whom she was eager to defer to.

For a time, her father served in the House of Representatives, and on occasion Emily visited Washington. It was here that she was able to come into contact with the charismatic preacher, the Reverend Charles Wadsworth. From her letters, it is clear she held him in high esteem, despite their apparent differences in theological beliefs. The 2 exchanged letters for many years, including responses to Emily’s request for spiritual guidance.

**Emily Dickinson’s Seclusion**

Because of her discomfort and shyness in social situations, Emily gradually reduced her social contacts, going out less and less into society. By her late twenties, this has led to an almost complete seclusion; spending most of her time in the family house, rarely meeting others from outside a close family circle. Her sister explains this wasn’t a sudden decision, but a gradual process that happened over a period of time. However, despite the physical seclusion, Emily still maintained written contact with a variety of thought provoking people. It is also clear from her poetry that her decision to live life as a recluse did not close her mind, but in many ways allowed the flow of new avenues of thought and inner experiences.

Despite her family’s strong political tradition, Emily appeared unconcerned with politics. At the start of the American civil war she commented little on the event, and choose not to help the war effort, through making bandages. To be fair, this attitude of distancing from the war was quite common in the north. For example, her brother Austin choose to pay $500 to avoid military service; however as the war years advanced and Amherst experienced its first casualties of war, inevitably its citizens were drawn further into the conflict. Emily and her family, were particularly affected when friends of the family were killed in battle. Death of close friends was a
significant feature of Emily’s life; many close to her were taken away. This inevitably heightened her interest, fascination and perhaps fear of death, which informed so much of her poetry. The Civil War years were also the most productive for Emily; in terms of quantity of poems, it appears Emily Dickinson was influenced imperceptibly by the atmosphere of War, even if it appeared somewhat distant to her.

As well as writing over 1,700 poems, Emily was a prolific letter writer; these letters giving her the opportunity for contact with others, that in other respects she denied herself. Her letters show her love of language and are often not too dissimilar to her style of poetry. She went to great length to express her personal sentiments of gratitude and love to others, though it should be remembered this emotional style of writing and communicating was fairly common for the time. They should also be seen in regard to Emily’s other letters, which freely express intense emotional sentiments.

Many of her poems refer to an invisible lover, – an object of devotion. Biographers have inevitably speculated about who this is. There is strong evidence that towards the end of her life she had some kind of emotional relationship with Judge Otis Lord (many years her senior and highly respected within the community). However, the poetry of Emily Dickinson was often deliberately vague. The object of her devotion may have been no person in particular, but some unknown aspect of the divine.

Emily Dickinson died at the age of 55 from Bright’s disease, which is caused by kidney degeneration. Her doctor suggested that the accumulation of stress throughout her life contributed to her premature death.

Despite Emily’s seclusion and frail health, her poetry reveals that she did experience moments of great joy. Through nature and life she was able to glimpse into a mystic dimension beyond worldly distractions; although it is also clear this did not become a permanent feeling. For every ecstatic joy there seems to be a contrasting doubt and uncertainty. But she was able to offer a concise and direct revelation of thought provoking ideas through a powerful command of language. Even critics of her poetry, who point to inconsistencies in style and form, cannot deny the inherent power of her poetry and this explains the enduring popularity and success of her poetry.

My life closed twice before its close.
It yet remains to see
If immortality unveil
A third event to me,
So huge, so hopeless to conceive
As these that twice befell,
Parting is all we know of heaven,
And all we need of hell.

After her death, her close sister Vinnie, had been instructed to burn her letters. In doing so she came across a box of 1,700 of Emily’s poems. Thankfully Vinnie ignored any request to burn old manuscripts. After a couple of years, Vinnie handed them to a family friend, Mabel Todd.
Although Mabel had never met Emily, she had often been to Evergreens, the Dickinson family home. She typed up 200 letters becoming increasingly enthusiastic about the beauty and power of the poems. With the help and encouragement of Terrence Higginson, Emily’s long standing friend, the first edition of poems was published in 1893. Her poems soon received extraordinary praise from leading magazines and newspapers. The New York Times claimed Emily Dickinson would soon be known amongst the immortals of English speaking poets.