Emily Dickinson  
(1830–1886)

A brief outline of Emily Dickinson’s life reads like the plot of a story destined to become a legend. Once upon a time there was born to a religious and well-to-do New England family a daughter, whom they named Emily. As a child, she was lively, well behaved, and obedient; she took pleasure in the busy household of which she was a part and in the seasonal games, parties, and outings of a village snowy cold in winter and brilliantly green and flowering in summer.

At home Emily learned to cook and sew. When she was old enough, she was sent to a school where strict rules did not dampen the girls’ high spirits as they enjoyed the entertainments of boarding-school life. Emily took part in these, but not always with as much enthusiasm as she might have. As she said many years later, something sad and reserved in her nature made her “a mourner among the children.”

To her family and friends everything about the young Dickinson seemed normal. No one doubted that she would grow gracefully into womanhood, make a good marriage, and settle into a village life of churchgoing, holiday gatherings, and neighborly harmony. Then something happened in her life, something that has been the subject of speculation for decades.

When Dickinson was twenty-four years old, her father, who had become a U.S. congressman, took her with him to Washington, D.C., and then on to Philadelphia. The journey seems to have marked the start of a turning point in her life. Her father may have taken her with him because she had fallen in love with someone she could never marry. This person might have been a married lawyer, older than Emily, a man who would die that year of tuberculosis.

Whatever happened, it seems likely that in the course of the journey, Emily fell in love with someone else: Charles Wadsworth, who was also married and who was pastor of the Arch Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. Letters to Wadsworth show that Dickinson saw him as a “muse,” someone who could inspire her, someone she could love passionately in her imagination.

In 1862, Wadsworth took up a new assignment in San Francisco. His leaving seems to have caused a great crisis in Dickinson’s life: “I sing,” she wrote around this time, “as the boy does by the burying ground, because I am afraid.”

The Recluse of Amherst

The young woman quietly and abruptly withdrew from all social life except that involving her immediate family. Within a few years, dressed always in white—like the bride she would never become—she had gone into a state of seclusion. Her only activities were household tasks and the writing of poems that she either kept to herself or sent as valentines, birthday greetings, or notes to accompany the gift of a cherry pie or a batch of cookies.

Around the time that Wadsworth was preparing to move to California, Dickinson sent a few of her poems to Thomas Wentworth Higginson. As an editor of The
Atlantic Monthly, Higginson had been encouraging the work of younger poets. Higginson never became a substitute for Wadsworth, but he did serve as a kindly, distant “teacher” and “mentor.” Eventually Dickinson gave up hope of ever finding a wider audience than her few friends and relatives.

During her lifetime, Emily Dickinson published no more than a handful of her typically brief poems. She seemed to lack all concern for an audience, and she went so far as to instruct her family to destroy any poems she might leave behind after her death. Still, she saw to it that bundles of handwritten poems were carefully wrapped and put away in places where, after her death, friendly, appreciative, and finally astonished eyes would find them. The poems were assembled and edited by different family members and friends; they were then published in installments so frequent that readers began to wonder when they would ever end.

Then, in 1955, a collection called The Poems of Emily Dickinson was finally made available. This was the devoted work of Thomas H. Johnson, a scholar who, unlike Dickinson’s earlier editors, refrained from making “presentable” entities of poems whose punctuation, rhyme schemes, syntax, and word choice were frequently baffling. Instead, he attempted to remain faithful to the original manuscript.

As a result of Johnson’s research, whole generations of readers who had grown up on Dickinson poems were faced with new versions of those poems, versions that sometimes rescued Dickinson’s originals from the tamperings of her first editors. Sometimes these originals made emphases that, in the interest of “smoothness,” those editors had overlooked.

Here is an example of how one stanza was changed by the original editors. Johnson’s version is first:

We passed the School, where Children strove  
At Recess—in the Ring—  
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—  
We passed the Setting Sun—

This is how the early editor changed it:

We passed the school, where children played  
Their lessons scarcely done;  
We passed the fields of gazing grain,  
We passed the setting sun.

The Secret of Genius

When Dickinson died, at the age of fifty-five, hardly anyone knew that the strange, shy woman in their midst was a poet whose sharp and delicate voice would echo for generations to come. Some seventy years after her death, when the quarrels among her relatives who had inherited her manuscripts had died down and all her poems were finally published, she was recognized as one of the greatest poets America, and perhaps the world, had produced.
The self-imposed restrictions of Dickinson’s actual life were more than matched by her ability to see the universal in the particular and vice versa. She perceived the relationship between a drop of dew and a flood, between a grain of sand and a desert. These perceptions helped her make metaphors that embraced experiences far beyond the limited compass of Amherst village life.

Still, no matter how far her imagination ranged, Dickinson never denied those experiences their truth as aspects of a cycle of existence important in itself. When an Amherst neighbor’s barn caught fire and lit up the sky, it was a real barn at the edge of a real pasture, and its loss became a matter of local anguish. These local actualities did not prevent Dickinson from regarding the incident as a reminder of ultimate doom, of the biblical prophecies of destruction of the earth by fire.

Behind the now famous legend of Emily Dickinson, and the plays and novels that have romanticized and sentimentalized her life, is a woman whose genius made its own rules, followed its own commands, and found its own fulfillment. Emily Dickinson’s life as a recluse may have been richer, more varied, and—in the satisfactions that come with the exercise of natural talent—even happier than the lives of those around her. In the prospect of history, we can see that the untold secret of Emily Dickinson’s emotional life is secondary to the great secret of her genius, the secret that destiny would not let her keep.