

Emily Dickinson: Her Life, Her Poetry, Her Garden

By Judith Farr

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I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you - Nobody - too?
...
How dreary - to be - Somebody!
How public - like a Frog -
To tell one's name - the livelong June -
To an admiring Bog!¹

These playful words were written around 1861 by an earnest, shy, and brilliant young woman named Emily Dickinson, now one of the most celebrated and beloved of American poets. Of the nearly 1,800 poems she wrote before she died in 1886, several firmly renounced the classic mid-Victorian quest for fame. Fame, Emily Dickinson declared, was “the one that does not stay -”; “a fickle food / Upon a shifting plate” (F 1507, 1702). Perhaps because she feared that her poems were too original to please readers of her day—the essayist and social reformer T. W. Higginson to whom she once appealed found them “wayward,”² eccentric, and too delicate to publish—and certainly because she was modest and fastidious, she would not court celebrity.

Instead, she led a quiet but intensely active life in what she always called “my father’s house,”³ a Federal Revival mansion on a 14-acre property behind a hedge in the village of Amherst, Massachusetts. “If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her,” she remarked with great prescience (J 265). For when a silver-gilt volume containing a selection of her poems appeared posthumously in 1890, a charmed public made it a best seller and Dickinson a “Somebody” indeed.

However, Emily Dickinson *did* earn a measure of fame in her lifetime, not as a poet but as a diligent, knowledgeable, and artistic gardener. Her gardening skills, moreover, frequently helped shape her choice of themes and images in poems. Neighbors in Amherst, friends in Springfield, cousins in Boston were aware that Emily wrote poems, collecting them in booklets that were later called “fascicles,” a contemporary synonym for “bouquets.” Sometimes sent to a

small readership in letters, the Dickinson poems explored urgent and essential themes: the drama of deep feeling; the perplexities, joys, and anguish of love; the healing comforts or betrayals of friendship; the possible fortunes of the soul in what she yearned to think was immortal life.

The Dickinson poems were frequently about flowers, flowers that were regarded as symbolic. She does not merely describe the formal appearance of a flower or comment sentimentally on its gorgeous colors or silken textures. Rather, for example, she sees the arbutus as an emblem of candor, the violet as a type of humility, and the poppy as a fiery projection of doom.

Dickinson viewed her own garden as another Eden. There she contemplated the claims of religion and of the gospels. Uncomfortable with doctrines, she nevertheless wrote fervently of her Lord, “I know that He exists. / Somewhere - in silence - / He has hid his rare life / From our gross eyes” (F 365). She preferred to worship God not in church but “at Home - / With a Bobolink for a Chorister - / And an Orchard, for a Dome -” (F 236).

She died unmarried, yet her poetry analyzed quite frankly what might be the happiness of marriage and the ecstasies of sexual passion. The landscape of the earth became the landscape of her poems. And all the little beings that inhabited the Dickinson grounds appeared there: the cat, the horse, the snake, the mushroom, the mouse, the bird, the caterpillar, the bee, the spider, the butterfly, while the seasons were celebrated, each for its distinct and special radiance. If Dickinson is read today with continuing affection and with ever-increasing regard as the great poet she is, one may attribute it to the breadth of her subject matter, the complexity of her attitudes, and the originality of her style.

Still, it was chiefly as an accomplished and inventive gardener that Emily Dickinson was praised during her lifetime. In her garden as in the small conservatory her father built, she grew both rare and familiar blooms. Bourbon roses with elegant French names found a home near lilies and sweet peas, sweet sultans and lilacs, heliotrope and honeysuckle, phlox, campanula, carnations, lobelia, and asters—every time of year being honored for its characteristic flora.

Over a third of Dickinson’s poems and nearly half of her extant letters allude to flowers. She envisioned her own flowers as friends, children, and occasional emblems of herself.

Some flowers seemed special to her. Because of her auburn hair, she compared herself to the *Hemerocallis fulva*, the red daylily of the fields; daisies gave her her nickname: “Daisy”; dandelions and clover, though commonplace, earned her profound respect. During the course of her life, she often altered the rank assigned her blossoms. Thus in 1877 she informed Higginson (by then an amiable correspondent despite his misgivings about her verse), “I am glad if [my

jasmine] pleased your friend. It is next dearest to Daphne — except Wild flowers - those are dearer” (J 513). Perhaps because it was given to her by the editor Samuel Bowles (possibly the lover or “Master” to whom she addressed impassioned lyrics and three letters), she tended jasmine for over 25 years in her conservatory. Readers of Victorian floral dictionaries, wherein every flower had a meaning⁴, might note that jasmine signified passion—to give someone jasmine meant “You are the soul of my soul.”

But it was the strange and ghostly Indian pipe that eventually adorned the silver-gilt cover of Emily Dickinson’s first book. She called it “the preferred flower of life,” a “mystery” that she had clutched from the woods “when a wondering Child” (J 769). Significantly, Dickinson consecrated three poems to the gentian, the wildflower that bloomed late. She seems to have associated gentians with herself as a poet, for she imagined that her poetry was doomed to be admired late. It thrived on the deprivations and sorrows that may, in part, have led to her wearing white exclusively.

Born on December 10 in 1830, a time when young women were usually educated in dame schools or needlework academies, Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was given a sophisticated education, first at Amherst Academy (where her studies included botany) and then at Mary Lyon’s Female Seminary, now Mount Holyoke College. There she read Milton and Pope; performed at drawing, mathematics, and German; and continued the botanical studies that led her to roam fields and meadows for specimens to press in her herbarium. Begun in her early teens, the herbarium was a collection of over 400 pressed and labeled flowers she had gathered from the fields, meadows, and windowsills of Amherst. It was her first effort to commit to memory the appearances of those rustic flowers in particular that she loved and would soon write about.

The textbook that Emily used in her studies was Almira H. Lincoln’s *Familiar Lectures on Botany* (1815), which included a floral dictionary listing the metaphoric significance of each floral species. Most Victorians knew “the language of flowers.”

Not a school but her own mother, however, gave Emily Dickinson her first lessons in botany. “I was reared in the garden,” the mature Emily told a favorite cousin, Louise Norcross, explaining that, if she knew about vegetables, it was thanks to her mother’s comprehensive training (J 206). Not only Mrs. Dickinson but all the Dickinsons loved gardens: Emily’s practical father could enjoy the sight of blossoming fruit trees; her brother, Austin, became notorious for scouring the countryside to acquire rhododendrons; her sister, Lavinia, is fondly described by the poet “prospecting for Summer” in seed catalogs and assisting Emily with transplanting, deadheading, and fertilizing the garden she would care for after Emily died (J 689).

Thus Emily Dickinson had two vocations. Art came first and then, cultivating nature: “First Poets - Then the Sun -” (F 533). But her second vocation was allied to the first since flowers provided her with the themes, tropes, narratives, and images upon which she constructed poems. She confessed that she was “a Lunatic on Bulbs” and it was in her bedchamber, writing often at dawn, with tulip, hyacinth, and narcissus bulbs in their pots at her window, that Emily Dickinson was especially happy (J 823). In the conservatory, she often placed a writing table near the hanging jasmine, oxalis, gardenias, and camellias. Such rich perfume ensued, she said, that “I have but to cross the floor to be in the Spice Isles” (J 315).

She preferred scented flowers and compared poetry itself to their perfume. When she made artistically arranged bouquets for those who were ill or grieving or missed by her tender heart, she would tuck a sprightly lyric into the center of the arrangement. Thus, she emphasized the sensitive connection between her “posies” (often a Victorian synonym for “poems”) and her verse.

The poet spoke always, early and late, of her “*own dear HOME*” (J 18). “Home” was a distinguished, lively but strict environment. Her father, Edward, a Yale graduate, was an ambitious attorney with an interest in politics. Eventually he served as a member of the House of Representatives. In 1855, Emily visited him in Washington, one of the few occasions on which she left the house where she was born. Emily’s grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, was a Dartmouth-educated patriot who praised New England as a “garden, adorned with the richest fruits, and finest flowers.”⁵ He helped to found Amherst College and lost his fortune in the venture.

The poet’s relationship with her own father was complex. It may have contributed to her apparent need for open affection. Because he was temperamental and “step[ped] like Cromwell when he gets the kindlings,” he amused her (J 339). But there was also an element of fear and disappointment in her reaction to Edward’s overbearing control of the household and his failure to suspect her literary genius (though he did praise her baking). Emily’s mother was the daughter of Joel Norcross, a well-to-do Connecticut farmer. She attended finishing school, admired fine clothes, enjoyed entertaining, and was, above all things, a capable gardener. The poet’s attitude toward her rather timid, sometimes depressive mother was changeable, dramatic. In youth she spoke condescendingly of a maternal parent who did not “care for thought,” by which she may have meant study and books (J 261). On the other hand, her later letters glow with affectionate portraits of the mother who doted on lobelias, and Dickinson served devotedly as her mother’s nurse when Mrs. Dickinson was paralyzed after a stroke in 1875.

Girlhood friends like Susan Gilbert (Dickinson) alluded to the vivacious Emily she once knew. Other contemporaries, however, found the poet's avoidance of crowds and strangers, which began in her early 30s, both fascinating and peculiar. Why did Emily abandon brown dresses to wear white ones (with a pocket to hold a poem she was planning as she sewed or baked)? Why did she sometimes refuse to see friends? Why did she often garden at night? And why did she never marry?

Her brother, Austin, claimed that Emily had been in love several times in her own way. She called Samuel Bowles her "Sun" (J 908). Among her most luminous love letters were those addressed to the dignified Judge Otis P. Lord, whose proposal of marriage she declined in her 40s. Susan Dickinson proclaimed that Emily was smitten at 24 with a married minister, Charles Wadsworth. Some contemporary feminist scholars believe that it was Susan herself for whom Emily harbored frustrated desire. Certainly she was deeply fond of the sophisticated, aesthetic, literary Sue, though the latter's quixotic temper and conduct often wounded her.

It may have been fortunate for American poetry that Emily Dickinson never married for it was difficult for Victorian wives to find time for creative activity, unless they were wealthy with many servants and few social duties. Lavinia—Emily's lifelong, protective companion and champion—said of her sister's single state that it was only "a happen."⁶ With her porcelain complexion, fine firm hands, and slender figure, Emily was thought "handsome,"⁷ even at her death. She corresponded with several friends, some (like Higginson and Helen Hunt Jackson) famous. Preferring deep loves to light ones and enjoying solitude, she thus selected the society of a rewarding few. This was thought to be odd, like her habit in the early 1860s of gardening at night. But the last had a simple explanation: sunlight hurt her eyes.

And the white dress? Dickinson's poems tempt their readers to explain it by alluding to what she named her "White Election" (F 411). One poem asserts, "A solemn thing - it was - I said - / A Woman - white - to be - ." Such a woman appears to be a bride, "her blameless mystery" a marriage like a nun's to a "Master." This marriage involves both commitment and deprivation, for white is also the garb of a ghost (F 307). White was a hallowed signifier for Dickinson: it could mean snow or integrity; it could dress a virgin, a bride, a martyr, a goddess, a nun, or a saint.

She lived, said her family, for her flowers and chosen friends. She found ecstasy in living, she told Higginson (J 342a). And she lived also for literature: for favorite poems like George Herbert's or Robert Browning's, for novels like George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, for plays like Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Emily Dickinson died on May 15, 1886, probably of a stroke. She was buried in a white coffin with heliotrope in her hands and lady's slippers at her throat. According to her wish, servants carried her through fields of buttercups to a grave heaped with flowers, being careful to keep always in sight of the house. There, a few days later, Lavinia was to discover hundreds of Emily's poems in a cedar chest. Afterward, with the help of T. W. Higginson—now convinced of their merit—the poems of Emily Dickinson were at last brought before the world.

Endnotes

¹ R. W. Franklin, ed., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1998), #260. All references to Emily Dickinson's poems are to this edition and will henceforth appear in the text as F followed by the poem's number.

² Willis J. Buckingham, ed., *Emily Dickinson's Reception in the 1890s* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 8.

³ Thomas H. Johnson, ed., *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1958), #724. All references to Emily Dickinson's letters are to this edition and will appear henceforth in the text as J followed by the number of the letter.

⁴ Judith Farr, *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004), 42–74.

⁵ Richard B. Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1974), Vol. I, 30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁷ "Handsome" was her dressmaker's description of Dickinson. See Jay Leyda, *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1960), Vol. II, 480.