

AMHERST WHERE EMILY DICKINSON WAS BORN, LIVED AND WROTE HER POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Emily Dickinson was born on December 10, 1830 at Amherst. Amherst was a quite village in the farming district of Massachusetts. In the 1830's, like all the places in the Connecticut River valley, had a Puritan tradition. Emily Dickinson's father, Edward Dickinson was a conformist Puritan. He not only cherishes the orthodox Puritan tradition in which he had been born, but also made his children Austen, Emily and Lavinia to grow up and become good men and women, learn all they could so that they could teach others to do the right thing. He was dictatorial and possessive, austere and orthodox like the people of many generations living in the valley. Emily in her early childhood days found herself surrounded by a world of evangelical devoutness. From the very beginning, she tried very hard to accept the tradition. Her father was very strict and dictatorial but very gentle at heart and profound in his affection. Emily Dickinson like her father very much and risked social censure by refusing any invitation away from home and stayed at home. She did not like to be absent when her father would come home. But, in spite of her strong devotion to her father's will, Emily often tried to break away from the Puritan dictates. In this way, from the very beginning, she was unconventional and impulsive. She was a rebel against orthodoxies and disdained all conformist ideas which were against free thinking. She sometimes received visitors, even some members of the opposite sex. For this, she was taken to task by her father. One night she returned home at about nine o'clock, her father was waiting in great agitation. Her mother and younger sister were in tears. In this way, her tough father did not allow her any romantic stuff fearing that it might unsettle the young woman's faith, not even Charlotte Bronte's **Jane Eyre**. He was determined that Emily should go to church and read the Bible and other religious books. The

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problem was that Emily was equally determined that she will not go to Church and read Long Fellow, Keats, Dickens and the Brownings. It was very rare that she had the chance to take freedom even though she felt that she always had a right to it. Her death in 1874, far from giving her sense of freedom, put the final seal on her seclusion.

Keywords: evangelical devoutness, puritan, recluse, salvation, stubborn

INTRODUCTION

Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts which was a small New England town where everyone knew everyone else's business. It was a very homogeneous town. In this town news were travelled quickly by word of mouth at community gatherings like Church services and funerals. Social visits were very common and people would call upon neighbours and friends. Thus, Emily Dickinson and her neighbours knew intimate details about each other. In addition to this, gossips through a tightly woven web of convention and letters spread very easily. The gossipy nature of the small, inter-connected town was shown in a letter by the fourteen-year-old Emily Dickinson:

I do not understand your hints in regard to Abby taking so much of interest in Deacon Macks family. Now Sarah is about, I take it Williams is the member of the family whom you allude to. But I did not know as Abby had any partiality to him He is a young man I supposed. These music teachers are always such high souled beings that I think they would exactly your family.ⁱ

Plenty of gossip in Amherst causes marriage or crushes of young men and women or partiality for another person. Emily Dickinson herself exhibited a very unusual behaviour on her part as she has many crushes but she never married. This may be the reason of the myths that were created about her all the time.

Emily Dickinson's family was well-known and established long before. Amherst college was founded by her parental grandfather Samuel. In addition to this he funded various projects within town. The family was well-known for wealth and social prominence when Emily Dickinson father Edward Dickinson was born. The family ultimately came into financial trouble because of

Samuel Dickinson's expensive nature of funding many schemes. Edward Dickinson was forced to lead on a shoestring budget at school as he often sacrifices necessities that his classmates took for granted. Even then Edward Dickinson held very strong views and opinions about proper roles of men and women. He believed that it was a man's job to guard the women around him. He believed that women should serve society as wives and mothers. Even though he supported education for women, he felt that the types of books women read should be closely monitored and controlled. Edward Dickinson was a conformist of a severe kind. He cherished the orthodoxies into which he become good men and women. In addition to this he was dictatorial, possessive, orthodox and austere like many people of his generation. The people of Amherst were absorbed more in the severities of living than in its gaieties even in the late 1880s. Thus, Emily Dickinson, in her early childhood found herself surrounded by a world of evangelical devoutness which she tried hard to find it acceptable. She liked her father, inspite of his dreadful frowns. He was gentle at heart and profound in his affection. But, inspite of her love of her father and devotion to his will Emily Dickinson tried hard to break away from his Puritan clutches. Emily Dickinson was very stubborn in nature and she believe in herself and the way to achieve salvation.

Emily Dickinson was a rebel against the conformist orthodoxies because of her unconventional and impulsive bent of mind. She was very much against any attempt to impede free thinking which would lead to moral stagnation. She used to visit people and received visitors but her father was not happy with her habit of meeting people freely. Her father would not bear her reading romantic novels, not even Bronte's **Jane Eyre**. Emily Dickinson's father was bent on making Emily Dickinson go the Church and read the **Bible** and other religious books. But Emily Dickinson, on the other hand, was determined that she would not go to Church and would read Longfellow's **Kavanagh**, Keat's **Odes**, and the novels of Charles Dickens and Browning's poems. But she always felt that she had a right to freedom, she rarely took that freedom to do whatever she like. When her father died in 1874, she was far from feeling a sense of freedom but she felt some kind of a final seal on her loneliness and seclusion. She was influenced by two young men in her struggle to established her identity in her early life. They were Benjamin F. Newton and Henry Vaughan Emmons. It will be not wrong if it is said that it was through Newton that Emily Dickinson realized her vocation of a poet. Newton was over ten years her senior and he was gentle

and a grave preceptor. A few references to him in her letters would not suggest that she had any romantic feelings for him. He was a new impetus that freed her from the dreadening tangles of tradition and gave her new values that showed her the way to becoming a poet. Emily Dickinson was influence by Emmons, with his gay and youthful manners and his talent and unconventional tendencies. He was a deep source of inspiration for her. The feelings with which Dickinson refer to Emmons in her letters would indicate that she was a little ecstatic about the young man with a bright future because of his beautiful writing full of poesy. Her father's stern gaze prevented any kind of love-affair that might have developed with the young man even though she might have some romantic ideas about the young man.

DISCUSSION OF HER LIFE AND POEMS

Emily Dickinson, in her letters she has referred to many names, both male and female demonstrating the gossip nature of teenagers of that very small and inter-connected town. She had the tendency and ability to jump from one person to another. Her ability to jump from Abby to Sarah, William, Hatly and Mr Eastcott has demonstrated her ease and familiarity with the personal details of a large number of people. In this connection, it will be relevant to refer to her relationship with various men. There was plenty of gossip in Amherst in this regard. It may be said that Emily Dickinson had many crushes or partiality for some men. However, she never married, and exhibited very unusual behavior in this regard. This may be the reason why various myths were created about her until the present day. Now, we cannot forget that the name of the Dickinson's family was well-known and established long before the birth of Emily Dickinson.

Emily Dickinson's father Edward Dickinson was forced into premature adulthood because of Samuel Dickinson bringing acute financial problem in the family. He was rather haughty and austere man, shy and gentle, laconic and silent. He dressed in broadcloth at all times. He wore a black beaver hat glossy and beyond compare with that of any young man and carried a handsome cane to and from his law office on the Main Street of his village. Finding a wife suitable to him was a challenge for him. However, he looks for marriage with a fix determination as he did when he was engaged with financial and career matters. Edward Dickinson fixed his attention on a gentle and pretty woman called Emily Norcross who was his classmate living in the neighbouring town

of Monson. This is how he came to marry Emily Norcross. Emily Norcross who was the mother of Emily Dickinson, however, projected a facade of compliance but she remains always independent in thought and action. It is thus, not surprising that her elder daughter would eventually display the same paradoxical mixture of compliance and quiet rebellion. As a matter of fact, Emily Dickinson may have modeled her way of self-imposed seclusion and the independence on her mother.

Homestead was the name of the house where Emily Dickinson was born, lived and spent most of her adult life. This house built by her paternal grandfather was a two-storied brick home with a property line running straight down the middle. It was owned and occupied by more than one family. Edward Dickinson, his wife and their children lived in one half of the house and the grandparents and Edward's sibling lived in the other half. Life in the joint family was crowded so it was difficult for anyone to have much privacy. The Dickinson children learned to adapt themselves to their close quarters. They played without disturbing the other members of the house and capitalized on any privacy they could find. These were the skills that Emily Dickinson employed as an adult in order to perform her creative activities.

When Emily Dickinson was nine years old, Emily Dickinson entered Amherst Academy, a school which had recently begun to accept female student. As the Academy was founded to provide religious instructions, a typical school day began with prayer, continued with instructions with various academic disciplines and then concluded with more prayer. In this institution Emily Dickinson read a number of religious texts, including Milton's **Paradise Lost**, Edward Young's **Night Thoughts** and William Cowper's **The Task**. In addition to focusing on religious instruction, Amherst Academy also offered secular education rigorously. There Dickinson took courses on English, Latin, Geology, Algebra, Geometry, Botany and History. In addition to the facilities for religious and secular educations Amherst Academy gave Emily Dickinson opportunities for building up friendships. There she developed general school girl devotions and also intense literary friendships she maintained as an adult.

It is important to consider seriously that Amherst Academy gave opportunities for education to the young and sensitive girl along with very positive opportunities for building

friendships. There was a charming group of young women in the school when she joined it for the first time. Emily Dickinson enjoyed the coming together of women in the Academy. The sense of being a woman was very important to her and she was very proud of her woman friends and she urged on some kind of a proto – feminist insistence on calling them “women”. Some of her favourite young women friends were Abiah Root, Helen Fiske and Helen Hunt, who eventually became Helen Hunt Jackson. There was a very steady relationship with these friends. In addition to these friends, Emily Dickinson adored her teachers or instructors. When one of her beloved teachers married and left the Academy, Emily Dickinson tried to show happiness for her teacher but in one of her letters she has shown that she could not bear to think of her adored teacher leaving the Academy. Her beloved friend Abiah Root married some time in 1854 and their friendship ended. Emily Dickinson’s reaction to that was very complex. She knew that she could not compete with the affection given to her friend by her husband. As for her, the friends married and move away from her and she felt abandoned and alone.

In addition to her friends in her locality and in the Amherst Academy, Emily Dickinson was very close to her teachers. It may be said that she adored her teachers. In a letter to her friend Abiah, she expressed that she was in love with her teachers. She felt that a school room was a woman’s kingdom, a place where the woman could reign. This was a position of power when Miss Adams would lose when she married and became part of her husband’s household. Personally, Emily Dickinson felt that in addition to her sadness over the dethroning of a teacher, she felt lonely and strange about being left behind. This was a feeling that would happen to her again and again throughout her life. When her friends married, she felt abandoned, lonely and miserable. Anyhow, school was fun for the young and curious Emily Dickinson.

She enjoyed many of the subjects and acquired information on scientific language and mathematical diction. For example, she studied Botany in her school. Her letters and poems demonstrate her exposure to the scientific names and classifications of many plants and flowers. Even then she preferred to use their common names. She collected specimens from forest, fields and even her own garden. Even for her friends she collected plants, leaves and wild flowers. This tendency to be close to plants, leaves and wild flowers will be specially interesting for Emily

Dickinson's scholars, who see in it the beginning of the poet's love of nature, meticulous observation and scientific precision. One of her favourite flowers was the white saprophytic Indian pipe, and exquisitely delicate and different flower to cultivate. There is no wonder in the fact that on November 12, 1890, the very same flowers would grace the title page of the first edition of her published poems.

After her initial studies in Amherst Academy, Emily Dickinson joined Mount Holyoke for a short period. Her brother Austin Dickinson was, by that time, preparing for a career in law. All three Dickinson children wrote poetry. Like his sisters, Austin was a hero-worshipper, a partisan and a lover of all the rare and noble books. The disciplinarian father was very careful about the books read by his daughters because he feared that some of the books might confused the minds of his daughters. Her brother Austin read the books which were forbidden for the daughters. Emily Dickinson could read these forbidden books which were kept hidden by her brother. Austin was also writing poetry and he was very conscious of the nine muses which were behind the writing of poetry. Anyway, as a middle child in a tight-knit family writing of poetry was one of the ways through which she was able to distinguished herself from her elder brother Austin and younger sister Vinnie. But, although Dickinson could establish herself as a writer in the family, her future was quite uncertain.

A woman was acceptable as a teacher, nurse, or governess in the early 19th century New England township. But Emily Dickinson was not interested on any of these. There were however, few opportunities for a woman interested in writing and literature as Emily Dickinson became a literary woman after defying her father. Emily Dickinson's literary guides were the authors she read at night in her room. She hung pictures of Thomas Carlyle, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot in her bedroom. Sometime in 1849, a friend lent Dickinson a copy of **Jane Eyre**, a controversial new book. Critics complained that the heroine in the novel was too self-reliant, independent and common to be a moral model for woman. Emily Dickinson was aware of the controversy but she loved the novel. Gradually Dickinson own interest in writing increased and her fascination with prominent, controversial woman writers also increased. Sometime in 1859, another controversial novel, **Adam Bede** became quite popular but controversial. The writer

George Eliot was actually an English woman name Marian Evans. At the time these controversial books were published, Emily Dickinson was a young impressionable girl in her twenties. In this way Emily Dickinson's school and college career ended.

After her short term in Mount Holyoke, Emily Dickinson returned to her family's second home on West Street, which was adjacent to the village cemetery. Life in the second home affected her thinking process as she saw the funeral trains entering the gate of the church yard. It may be said that the vantage point of her bedroom in the new house provided a lot of poetic materials for her later poems. It will be relevant to observe that she took note of individual mourners and families when she saw the funeral processions through her window. In this way the young poet started to contemplate the nature of death and the life after that. The West Street home was quite comfortable and her father Edward Dickinson tried hard to restore the prestige of the family in the first house. He soon bought back The Homestead, remodeled it and built a new home called The Evergreens for his son Austin. However, new problems cropped up when the family returned to the Homestead in 1855. Looking after the primary responsibilities of the household fell on her daughters as their mother became an invalid. In this way, from an early age, Emily Dickinson learned that pain and loss were inextricable parts of life and that it was women and not men who were expected to deal with sickness and death. It was indeed, noteworthy that the Dickinson daughters took care of their invalid mother for the next twenty-seven years. Emily Dickinson and her sister were compelled to run the Dickinson household but looking after a household and running it was not an easy thing. Particularly, receiving and entertaining guest was a demanding task for the Dickinson sisters. The father, Edward Dickinson was an attorney and a member of the Massachusetts legislature. The house had to host clients, lawyers, speakers, politicians, clergy men and even students. Thus, the sisters felt beleaguered almost all the time. They felt that they had no time to do all those things. Even then the Dickinson women were frequently lonely as well, particularly when Edward Dickinson had speaking engagements which took him away from home very frequently. When he was at home, he tried to control his home life with a sense of strict order. He was adamant about his daughters remaining indoors. In fact, many of the activities that Emily Dickinson enjoined like taking walks, picking wild flowers and going to school were prohibited by the father. Edward Dickinson's stern instructions had a powerful impact on the Dickinson family, particularly, the

Dickinson sisters. Emily's relationship with her father was very important to her life. Nearly hundred years later another American poet Sylvia Plath had almost the same paternal relationship, which influence her poetry. Sylvia Plath relationship with her father had some negative effects. Emily Dickinson's relationship with her father was not like that but both poets experience conflicting emotions for their stern and distant fathers. As a young woman Emily feared her over-protective, domineering father. However, as she matured, she was able to negotiate with him, took the largest bedroom in the house for her own and started to retreat from everyday society. Perhaps the strict father and the talented daughter had some kind of tacit agreement about her talents.

In addition, Emily Dickinson's relationship with her stern father, the academic programmes that she goes through at Amherst Academy and the Mount Holyoke Seminary as very important to her in the extremely impressionable mind. Particularly, the programme at Mount Holyoke was very important. The Female Seminary at Mount Holyoke was founded by Mary Lyon. The programme sought to instill religious values and prepare young woman to become good wives and mothers. Emily Dickinson felt homesick in the strictly controlled environment of the Seminary. She complained about the food in the dormitory and many other things even though she kept the whole thing secret from her parents. Even there she tried to sound independent even though she was homesick. The important point to be noted is that the artificial cloister of her education must have been very frustrating. Emily Dickinson longed to know the details of the world outside Mount Holyoke and requested her brother Austin to send news to her. In various letters she wrote at that time, Dickinson demonstrated her sharp wit and ability to discuss serious issues. She longed for knowledge about politics and war. At Mount Holyoke Emily Dickinson's roommate was her cousin, Emily Lavinia Norcross. Like many of Dickinson's friends and relatives, Lavinia Norcross suffer from consumption or tuberculosis. At that time people did not know well about this disease and that it was transmittable by air. Because of Dickinson's proximity to her cousin and her own faltering health, some critics surmised that Emily Dickinson also was infected with T.B. Actually, early in her first year at Mount Holyoke, Dickinson became sick and developed a cough. She herself wrote a letter describing her effort to conceal her illness from her parents. But the secret of her illness was revealed by a well-intentioned but treacherous friend.

Sometime when Emily Dickinson was gradually showing her talent as a young poet, the family's financial status became a crucial problem. The essential duties required to maintain a healthy household in the early to mid-nineteenth century America, included purchasing of goods, growing vegetables, baking, cooking, cleaning, laundering, ironing, providing pumped water and nursing the sick etc. All the chores had to be borne mainly by Emily Dickinson and her sister Lavinia. There was always some stress and strain. Expectations of their brother, for example, were quite different. Austin was a young man, assumed to be stronger, healthier and more fit than his sisters. He received preferential treatment because he was the eldest and the only one able to pass on the Dickinson name. He was obligated to follow in his father's footsteps, by taking up law as his career. His sisters, although given a longer experience of education in the schools, were expected to maintain the household and eventually married. Against these expectations the girls dedicated their lives to the household and to each other. In this context it is necessary to remember that Emily Dickinson could not have developed her creative activities without some release from many of the domestic duties expected of a nineteenth century American woman. Her sister Lavinia gave her some of the necessary release from domestic activities. She looks extra care to give Emily time to write and maintain peace between her and family members. For example, when Emily wanted to remain in her room in privacy Lavinia manage to graciously and diplomatically turn visitors away. In addition to this Lavinia also carried calling cards and messages from the outside world to Emily's bedroom. That helped the young poet to keep herself up-to-date on news. Lavinia herself wrote poetry like her brother but she devoted most of her efforts to encourage and promote Emily's talent. When hordes of visitors and speakers descended upon the Homestead and the Evergreens, Lavinia played hostess, organizing the food and the drinks and thus facilitated conversation. Thus, in the context of their mother's illness and her sister's desire for privacy, Lavinia took on the responsibility of running the household. She was a girl who sacrificed many of her own wishes and dreams for the benefit of her family, particularly for Emily Dickinson.

In 1848 Emily Dickinson was seventeen years old. At that point of time, she came into contact with her many male mentors. Benjamin Franklin Newton who was a young attorney working under Edward Dickinson was one of them. Newton was nine years older than the young poet. He had fresh and invigorating ideas which stood in stark contrast to the more traditional

religious and literary views of most people in Amherst. Emily Dickinson and Newton became friends, engaging in long conversations about literature and aesthetics. He gave Dickinson her first copy of Ralph Waldo Emerson's poems published in 1847. When Newton died, Emily Dickinson felt lost because Newton was a gentle and grave preceptor, teaching her what to read, which authors to admire, what were the grand and beautiful in nature. In addition to that Newton gave her something sublime and a faith in things unseen. Emily Dickinson's used of the term (Preceptor) has a biological resonance. It is the same term she used to describe the highly educated, refined and artistically sensitive men whom she chooses as her mentors and literary guides throughout her life. Emily Dickinson befriended another important male Preceptor. While travelling with her father in Philadelphia, she visited the Arch Street Presbyterian Church and hear the Reverend Charles Wadsworth speak. Wadsworth deliver striking and persuasive lectures and made a deep impression in the mind of Emily Dickinson. She wrote to him seeking his guidance. Wadsworth responded and they became friends. Another important man also became Emily Dickinson's Preceptor in 1856. By that time Samuel Bowles was the owner and editor of the **Springfield Republican** and a close friend of Austin and his wife Susan. When Bowles began to correspond with the couple and visited them, he noticed the shy woman in the house next door. Soon after, his friendship with Dickinson developed through long, personal letters.

But the most important male preceptor of Emily Dickinson was Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Higginson was a Unitarian minister with a degree in divinity from Harvard. He was also a writer and enthusiastic supporter of women's rights and Abolition. Like Samuel Bowles, he was also a literary editor. In 1866 he edited a magazine entitled **Atlantic Monthly** which was received with great interest and read by Emily Dickinson. In one of the publications of the magazine, he published an article, (Letter to a Young Contributor) in which he offered advice to young writers. Dickinson read the article. She was deeply moved by it that she immediately wrote a letter to Higginson asking him to read her poems and expressed his views in them. Higginson replied positively and their friendship began. In one of her letters, she even asked him if he could be her Preceptor. In this way, their friendship began and Higginson acted as a guide and friend for Dickinson. Their friendship through correspondence lasted until the month of her death. In this way Newton, Wadsworth, Bowles and Higginson gave Dickinson literary guidance and support.

They also acted as father figures and friends. In some of the relationship's critics show romantic resonances. However, there was something which was genuine. She sought their approval, but when she felt that their advice would lead her astray, she chooses to have confidence in her own ideas. When Higginson criticize her poetry, she could not accept it. Many critics of Dickinson believed that one of Dickinson's male Preceptors was a love of the young poet. Among the letters which were not necessarily mailed that were found among her papers after her death, there were three letters in which a woman who refers to herself as Daisy, expresses deep longing for someone she calls Master. This Master may have been one of Dickinson's male friends or an imaginary projection of Dickinson herself, or even the woman who was the most important friend in Dickinson's life, Susan Huntington Gilbert.

The relationship of Emily Dickinson and Susan Huntington Gilbert was very important in the life of the young poet. They became friends as teenagers. Susan shared Dickinson's love of literature, gardening and nature. Both of them dislike household chores. The young poet trusted Susan very sincerely, valuing her opinions and advice. Their friendship lasted nearly five decades. Actually, Emily Dickinson was eagerly looking for a personal friend to replace the friends who had married and move away. Susan was also eagerly looking for a chance to become a part of a family because she became an orphan at a young age. Among all the friends and relatives to whom Dickinson wrote letters, she wrote most of the letters to Susan whom she addresses as her 'Sister Sue'. Eventually Austin feels in love with Susan and they married in 1856 and moved into the Evergreens. Susan Dickinson was very happy to live so close to her friend Emily Dickinson. Dickinson's close connection to 'Sister Sue' is evident in her poem of 1858 starting with the first line, "One Sister have I in our house". In this poem Dickinson acknowledges that, according to biological standards, she has only one sister, Lavinia, however, Sue's compassion, friendship and love have transcended mere biology and Sue belonged to Dickinson as a very close sister to the young poet. In the poem Emily Dickinson compared Sister Sue with a star in a very romantic manner. The woman who lives with her brother Austin only "A hedge away", was intricately connected to Emily Dickinson. Some scholars have even argued that the two women had an erotic relationship. Actually, the affection between the two women was very deep and mutual. Susan's

daughter, Martha Dickinson Bianchi said that Susan recognized Emily Dickinson's genius from the first, and hoarded every scrap of paper Emily sent her.

Emily Dickinson showered love and attention on her sister-in-law and in 1861 she celebrated when Austin and Susan had their first child, a son named after their grandfather, Edward Dickinson. Now, along with the gradual building up of literary preceptors, the luxury of domestic help, the support of a beloved father and a sister, the return to the family home and the arrival of Susan Dickinson – all these served as resources for Dickinson's poetry. It can be said that these events served as the groundwork for the bursts of her creative activities. According to Dickinson's major biographer, Ralph W. Franklin, in the summer of 1858 Dickinson began a big project. She began to collect all her poems, copied them in ink on folded stationary. She stitched the pages together and destroyed the original drafts. However, nothing is known about her organizational methods. Perhaps, the poems were reordered several times after her death. Although Emily Dickinson, as a recluse, almost all the time separated herself from society because of her intellect and unusual disposition. She became more and more removed from the social life of her community. From 1860s onward she began to dress all in white, especially Edward Dickinson's death in 1874. Whether the choice of dress was symbolic or practical, no one knows very well.

The clothing was different and therefore noticed by everyone and it became a subject of small-town gossip. Sometime in 1869 when she was 38 years old, Emily Dickinson started remaining permanently on the grounds of the Homestead and the Evergreens. She didn't leave the grounds and the gardens of the two houses. She never left the two houses and receded from public life completely. What cause Emily Dickinson to withdraw herself from society and become a recluse, is a question that continues to perplex generations of Dickinson scholars. Sometime in the 1800s pregnant women were expected to live separately from society for some months. This was a custom which was called "confinement" by the Victorians. It may be that Dickinson used this practice or ritual and transformed it from something negative to something positive. She might have confined herself in order to devote herself to creative thinking and feeling to give birth to her poetry. The fact of the matter is that readers, scholars, fans, critics and historians will, however never know for certain the motivations behind Dickinson's decision to live a life of seclusion.

This, however, led to a creative outburst in the life of the young poet. Looking at it from a normally rational perspective, it may be said that Dickinson liberated herself from time-consuming social activities like lectures, parties, picnics, weddings and funerals in order to devote herself emotionally and intellectually to her family, her correspondence, the news of the world and her creative life. Sometime Dickinson may have received a marriage proposal from a close friend called Otis Phillips Lord, a friend of Edward Dickinson. He was a judge on the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. He was closer to her father's age than her's. However, the two began a friendship of their own fed with affectionate letters. But unfortunately, there was nothing more than that. It may be that the man was very close to her for a long time, her father's disapproval and her own reservation about marriage and leaving her family, might have prevented the marriage.

For Emily Dickinson, The Homestead and its ground was always something very central in her life as a young woman and the life of her imagination. The home and the garden surrounding it always gave her companionship and a shelter from the jarring demands of the outside world. One may simply accept that she grew as a poet and spent a lot of time in her room because it was the place in which she created poetry. The important thing was that her confinement in her room and grounds of her house allowed her to see only the people who were important to her and free herself from the time-consuming but meaningless interactions and pleasantries that are usually expected in social life every day. Her decision to keep herself away from society is reflected in a poem **The Soul selects her own Society** written in 1862:

The Soul selects her own Society

Then – shuts the Door –

To her divine Majority –

Present no more –

Unmoved – she notes the chariots – pausing –

At her low Gate –

Unmoved – an Emperor be kneeling

Upon her Mat –

I've known her – from an ample nation –

Choose One –

Then – close the valves of her attention –

Like Stone –ⁱⁱ

In this way the number of people that Emily Dickinson allowed to go through the “Valves” of her attention grew smaller and smaller every year. The visitor could be a friend or an “Emperor”. Each was treated equally. Among these visitors Thomas Wentworth Higginson was one of the chosen few. In this way Emily's life as a recluse began. The picture of the young poet with pure white dress began. In any kind of interaction with other people, an initial hesitancy and childlike shyness characterized the young poet's interaction with any one from the society outside.

In this way it has become quite clear that the establishment of literary Preceptors, the luxury of domestic help, the support of a beloved father and sister, the return to the family home, and the arrival of Susan Dickinson in the family – all these served as influences and resources for Emily Dickinson's poetry. It can be said with some degree of certainty that the events and the background laid the groundwork for the creative outburst to follow. Sometime in 1858, the young poet began collecting all of her poems, copying them in ink and stitching the pages together by hand and destroying the original drafts. Although the fascicles were meticulously collected, nothing is known regarding her organizational method. Even today the original order of the poems by Dickinson herself is an area of speculation. However, the best modern ordering indicate that the poems were not necessarily in chronological or thematic order.

The important phase of Dickinson's life and her art is the most analyzed and debated aspect of her biography. Always separated from society because of her intellect and unusual disposition, Dickinson became more and more withdrawn from the social life of her community. Now, what cause Dickinson to remove herself from society, is a question that continues to perplex generations of her readers. One can even argue that Dickinson took up her unusual way of life and transformed it from something negative to something positive. This argument can continue by expressing and

confirming that her strange way of life gave birth to her poetry. Even then the mystery remains completely unexplained even today. At most, one can say that her radical way of life was necessary for her poetry. For Dickinson, The Homestead and its grounds had always functioned as a source of imagination, companionship, and a shelter from the demands of the outside world. It is possible that as she grew as a poet, she spent more and more of her time in her room because it offered her the space to create poetry. Soon, although her internal, intellectual and poetic life were blossoming, Dickinson's physical health declined rapidly. Everyone in the Dickinson family suffered from some type of problem in the eyes. In this context, it is relevant to note that the young poet's eyes problems were the most serious. Early in 1871, the problems of her vision change drastically. For this she travelled to Boston again and again for treatment. As she relied upon her eyesight for reading and writing, the serious problems of her eyes became threatening to her.

In addition to her challenging physical problems, in 1874, while giving a speech, her father, Edward Dickinson collapsed and died soon after. It was a very unhappy time of the whole Dickinson family. However, Austin and Susan's third child gave some relief to the family. Emily Dickinson was very fond of all the children in the family. Although their aunt Emily remained always confined in her bedroom and refused to meet any visitors, the young children were able to pester their aunt for sweets and other problems. Over the next decade Emily Dickinson suffered the loss of many close friends. Samuel Bowles died in 1878. This was soon followed by the death of Reverend Wadsworth in 1879 and her own mother in 1882. In this way more and more people close to her left the world. In addition to this, the strain and conflict among the surviving family members increased. The Homestead and The Evergreens also became entangled with the unhappy development in the Dickinson family.

In the last years of her life, Dickinson spoke to friends and visitors from behind a door or curtain. Even during her father's funeral in the house, she remained in her bedroom upstairs, listening to the service below. Even to Mabel who was supposed to be part of her inner circle, came to know her mainly through the sound of her voice. It is really amazing to come to know that Mabel who became the first published editor and authority of her poetry, she never saw Dickinson in person. It was actually a fact that the family conflict, the death of her parents and many of her

friends – thirty-one had died of tuberculosis alone – failing health took their toll on Emily Dickinson. On June 14, 1884 she collapsed in the kitchen of the Homestead. Fainting spells continued and on May 13, 1886 Emily Dickinson permanently lost consciousness. Her family members gathered around her when she died at the Homestead on May 15, 1886. Susan Dickinson arranged for her burial. A self-described “Woman-white-to be”, Dickinson was placed in a white casket wearing a white flannel robe. Only close friends and the relatives were able to pay their respects to the departing poet. Thomas Wentworth Higginson was deeply moved by her beauty in death. Actually, at 55 years old, Dickinson had still a head full of auburn hair and smooth, youthful skin.

The funeral was modest and private, held in the Homestead library on May 19, 1886. One of her mentors, Higginson read one of Emily Dickinson’s favorite poems by Emily Bronte, “No Coward Soul is Mine”. This poem written on January 2, 1846 was Bronte’s last poem. When Higginson stood in the Homestead library and read the final line, “And what thou art may never be destroyed”, he was trying to comfort the people around him. He may also be indicating his faith in Dickinson’s poetic legacy. After Emily Dickinson’s death, Lavinia went through her sister’s possessions. She was surprised to find pages and pages of writing. These were surprisingly more than any one new or guessed to have existed. Several months after her death, the poems and letters that were the works of Emily Dickinson in her life began a new life of their own. In this context, it is necessary to try to understand the series of socio-political happenings in America particularly in New England. So many incidents took place in that period that something about the world view which was supposed to govern the society of that time.

CONCLUSION

So, living in Amherst as a poet was a hard task for Emily Dickinson being in a strict family under the supervision of a stern and stubborn father. She avoided ambiguity and verbosity in the use of language as it was a very important aspect of writing poetry. Emily Dickinson’s capacity to perceive the significant and her desire to express her perceptions in tense poetic forms became an important aspect of her poetic technique.

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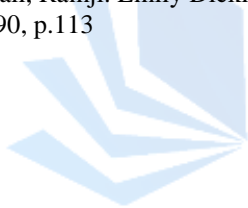
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ENDNOTES

ⁱ Martin, Wendy. The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson. Cambridge University Press. 2009, p.2

ⁱⁱ Lall, Ramji. Emily Dickinson (An Evaluation of her poetry). Rama Brothers Educational Publishers-New Delhi. 1990, p.113



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