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978-0-521-67270-2 - The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson

Wendy Martin

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*The Cambridge Introduction to  
Emily Dickinson*

Emily Dickinson is best known as an intensely private, even reclusive writer. Yet the way she has been mythologized has meant her work is often misunderstood. This introduction delves behind the myth to present a poet who was deeply engaged with the issues of her day. In a lucid and elegant style, the book places her life and work in the historical context of the Civil War, the suffrage movement, and the rapid industrialization of the United States. Wendy Martin explores the ways in which Dickinson's personal struggles with romantic love, religious faith, friendship, and community shape her poetry. The complex publication history of her works, as well as their reception, is teased out, and a guide to further reading is included. Dickinson emerges not only as one of America's finest poets, but also as a fiercely independent intellect and an original talent writing poetry far ahead of her time.

Wendy Martin is Professor of American Literature and American Studies at Claremont Graduate University and the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson* (2002).

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## *Preface*

Emily Dickinson (1830–86) was a deceptively quiet nineteenth-century American woman who wrote with the fire, innovation, and skill of a twentieth-century master. Long before the Modernist and feminist movements, Dickinson wrote astonishingly prescient poetry that embodied principles of fragmentation, isolation, independence, and self-reliance. The “half-cracked poetess” and “Belle of Amherst” was misunderstood and mythologized in life and in death, leaving a trail of editors, readers, and scholars perplexed by her idiosyncratic use of meter, rhyme, capitalization, and punctuation.

Dickinson dared to live according to her own rules rather than by conventional social codes and carved a space for herself in a period that allowed women very little room. Often misunderstood as a victim of Victorian culture, Dickinson deliberately worked within cultural constraints, often assuming an ironic and playful stance toward conventional values while finding American individualism, self, and voice through her poetry and letters.

This book is an introduction to the woman behind the myth, to the life, letters, and poetry of one of America’s most cherished artists. It is divided into four main chapters: Life, Context, Works, and Reception.

The first chapter of the book provides a portrait of Dickinson’s life, from her childhood in Amherst to her momentous decision to retreat from the world and focus on the art of poetry. As a precocious girl, Dickinson loved books, nature, friends, and school. She grew up in a narrow, provincial town where anyone who did not follow the status quo was vilified. Despite rigid instruction from teachers, society, religion, and her own demanding father, the young Dickinson began to break away from society’s expectations and forge her own distinct place in the world. This chapter describes the family that influenced Emily Dickinson, the homes where she spent her childhood and adulthood, and her life at school and college. It also describes her intense friendships and relationships, including the women she corresponded with for decades and the male “Preceptors” who had a powerful impact upon her writing. Knowledge of Dickinson’s biography helps the reader understand the life events and personal motivations that influenced her extraordinary letters and poetry.

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The second chapter of this book examines Dickinson as a Civil War poet and places her in the context of cultural and historical events. On the surface, Dickinson's writings may suggest a naïve ignorance of the sweeping changes taking place in nineteenth-century New England, but Dickinson's investment in this world and this life meant that she was keenly aware and deeply interested in the shaping influences of industrialization, the Abolition and women's rights movements, Transcendentalism, and the Civil War. While Dickinson was never a public figure engaged in political movements, their consequences and ramifications could not fail to affect her. Dickinson's poetry and letters explore the ideas behind these movements on a personal level; her poetry captures the struggle between independence and subjection that is very much at the heart of the Civil War and the women's rights movements. Her internal conflicts between self-determination and obedience to alien social and religious codes – to master herself or be mastered by others – mirror the larger political and social issues of her day.

Discussions about the rights of the individual soul, about independence and autonomy that were crucial to the Abolition and women's rights movements were also crucial to Dickinson; her poetry is a nuanced and profoundly personal chronicle of the larger social struggle in regard to selfhood and submission. Likewise, Dickinson's love for nature is informed by and responds to Transcendentalism and Industrialization, but again in a deeply personal way. This chapter of the book links Dickinson to the momentous social, political and economic challenges and crises through which she lived.

The third and longest chapter of the book deals with the body of Dickinson's writing, including discussions of her poetry and letters. It provides an introduction to Dickinson's unique worldview and poetic style. This chapter also discusses the ways her work maps the soul and records the experience of each moment. It moves on to discuss Dickinson's use of domestic images in her poetry and her use of the Bible to describe her devotion, not to God, but to her loved ones and to nature. Dickinson found both ecstasy and devastation in her relationships with others, and she recorded these feelings in her work. She felt a similar connection to nature – its beauty as well as terrors. These themes – love, friendship, and nature – constantly reappear in Dickinson's work and are treated in separate sections within the chapter.

Of course, the darkest aspect of nature and a theme around which Dickinson wrote some of her greatest poetry is the problem of death, which is accorded a separate section of its own. Intrigued by its mystery and inevitability, Dickinson was determined to fully explore the concept of death and to experience the emotions it aroused to their fullest extent. Dickinson's acceptance of death allowed her to treasure life in all its complexity.



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The book's final chapter explores the complex and controversial publication history of Dickinson's manuscripts and how they have been received by critics and scholars over the last 150 years, tracing Dickinson's movement from an obscure and unknown poet to one of the most popular and influential poets in American history.

Finally, the Guide to Further Reading provides an annotated list of the most important and helpful resources for beginning a study of this great American poet.

## Note and abbreviations

*L* followed by page and letter number: Thomas H. Johnson (ed.), *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986)

*P* followed by page and poem number: Thomas H. Johnson (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1960)

Dickinson's original spellings, punctuation, and capitalization have been retained. *Sic* has been omitted throughout this book.

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