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## Emily Dickinson Biography

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for Kore Press & Big Read Tucson*

**Emily Dickinson** was born December 10, 1830 to Emily Norcross and Edward Dickinson, prominent members of the Amherst community. She spent her childhood at the Dickinson Homestead surrounded by a vivid social life, responsible at an early age for doing chores, housework, and entertaining visitors. She excelled in all but delighted in particular in cooking and baking and was renowned throughout for her culinary skills, winning her first baking contest at age twenty. However even at a young age she preferred family life to the bustling politics of upper class Amherst, famously once acerbically directing an out-of-town visitor to a nearby graveyard for a good time, rather than inviting her into her father's home. In a family full of "monarchs," Emily's realm was in "thinking," a task she took to by writing poems, few of which were published in her lifetime. She believed "Publication is the Auction of the Soul," and despite her fascination with Immortality is even reported to have directed her maid Maggie to burn her papers after death. However, happily no one obliged in destroying her work, leaving the world nearly 1800 poems, gathered into self-bound collections she called "fascicles."

Dickinson is well known as a recluse, and in fact saw few people during her most productive periods, and, towards the end of her life, allowed only a few people to visit with her, upon the condition that her visitor would speak with a barrier, such as a wall or closed door, between the two of them. Scholar Judith Farr notes, "When Emily Dickinson died at the age of fifty-five, most who knew her had not seen her face for a quarter of a century." Her sister-in-law Susan said famously of her in an obituary for the *Springfield Republican* that Dickinson was "Not

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disappointed with the world, not an invalid until within the [final] years [of the poet's life], not from any lack of sympathy, not because she was insufficient for any mental work or social career—her endowments being so exceptional—but the "mesh of her soul," as Browning calls the body, was too rare, and the sacred quiet of her own home proved the fit atmosphere for her worth and work."

Preferring the quietness of domestic life to the bustle of Amherst society, Dickinson continued to cook, bake, and garden for her family-but also the community, to whom she would continue to address, albeit only in writing. Her thousands of letters were often delivered with homemade bread, a pressed flower from her garden, or a handwritten poem. Upon publication in the years following her death, these poems, reticent, parsed, and riddle-like, were hugely popular with the American public, cementing her reputation along with Whitman as one of the two first 'American poets." And later, along with Stein, she was considered the mother of the American avant-garde in poetry. The compressed richness of her work—a business she called "Circumference"—continues to fascinate both readers and scholars today in the thousands of letters and poems she bequeathed upon a "World that never wrote" to Dickinson within her lifetime, but has written ceaselessly to her, about her, inspired by and in honor of her, since her death in 1886.