UNIT 7: EMILY DICKINSON: LIFE AND WORKS

UNIT STRUCTURE

7.1 Learning Objectives

7.2 Introduction

7.3 Emily Dickinson : The Poet

7.3.1 Her Life

7.3.2 Her Works

7.4 Let us Sum up

7.5 Further Reading

7.6 Answers to Check Your Progress

7.7 Model Questions

7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- give the biographical sketch of the popular American poet, Emily Dickinson
- identify the works of Emily Dickinson
- discuss the contribution of the poet in the development of American literature

7.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to Emily Dickinson, one of the famous American poets of the nineteenth century. According to A. C. Ward she was, "perhaps next to Whitman, the greatest American poet of the last century." Although, her share of fame came quite late in life, today she along with Walt Whitman, are considered as the pioneers of 19th century American poetry. Dickinson's poetry is a poetry of ideas, and it requires of the reader, a point of view, which is not an opinion, but a deep-seated philosophy that is fundamental.



Ivory Tower: The term Ivory Tower originates in the Biblical "Song of Solomon". In the nineteenth century, the term has been used to designate an environment of intellectual pursuit disconnected from the everyday life of practical concerns.

Dickinson was an intensely private poet without the slightest interest in the public. Because of her bold themes and experimentation, Dickinson is recognized as one of the greatest American poets who cast an enormous influence on how writers think about the possibilities of the poetic craft. Living in her **ivory tower**, she wrote on a great variety of subjects like life, death, the contemporary social scenes, mortality and immortality, pain and pleasure, hope and fear, love, Nature, God, religion, and virtue– all seen through her Puritan eyes, or, as she described it, 'New Englandy'. Though disinterested, she was quite aware of the current events and drew on them for some of her poetry. Another striking quality about her poems is their originality. She did not belong to any school of poets and hardly cared to imitate anyone's style. It is sometimes possible to extract autobiographical elements from her poems, but she was not a confessional poet; rather, she invented first-person speakers to dramatise the various situations, moods, and perspectives that she explored in her lyrics.

7.3 EMILY DICKINSON : THE POET

Emily Dickinson's poetry is not like any other poetry of her time, nor is it like any of the innumerable kinds of verse written today. It is, as mentioned earlier, a poetry of ideas; her poetry, characterised by startling imagery and extraordinary vocabulary, explored a wide range of subjects, including pain and joy, the relationship of self to nature, the intensely spiritual and the intensely ordinary. She wrote about the grim reality of death with a searing honesty, great humour and curiosity and above all, a refusal to be comforted. Taken individually, her poems are quite short; when collected in a volume though, her nearly eighteen hundred surviving poems have an epic feeling written by a woman who devoted her entire life to her art. Let us now have a look at the life and works of this great poet.

7.3.1 Her Life

The full name of Emily Dickinson is Emily Elizabeth Dickinson. She was born on December 10, 1870, in Amherst, Massachusetts and was one of the three children of Emily Norcross Dickinson and Edward Dickinson. Her father was a respected state legislator, US congressman and judge. Her family was

one of Amherst's most prominent ones, economically, politically and intellectually. But Emily turned out to be quite famous in her own right. She lived all her life in the spacious Dickinson family house in Amherst and attended Amherst Academy from 1840 through 1846 and Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. During her stay in Mount Holyoke, she became intensely homesick and also faced a religious crisis. Emily's father helped found Amherst College and was its treasurer for thirty-six years. Her early years were spent being engaged in the normal social activities of the daughter of a leading citizen, and during her father's term in the national House of Representatives, Emily visited him in Washington and stayed for a brief period in Philadelphia on the way back. But travel of any kind was unusual for her and gradually she began to withdraw from the world outside her home. Her closest friends included her elder brother Austin, and her younger sister Lavinia. Both sisters never married and stayed with their parents, as was typical of the unmarried middle and upper class women of the time. Emily became a total recluse, never leaving her father's house and dressing completely in white. She maintained a very obscure lifestyle and received very few visitors, carrying on most of her friendships through a regular correspondence with people like the novelist Helen Hunt Jackson and the Reverend Charles Wadsworth.

After dropping out in less than a year from Mount Holyoke and returning home, Dickinson embarked on a lifelong course of reading. She was a voracious reader; the Bible and classic English authors, such as Shakespeare and Milton being among her favourites. She also became acquainted with the full range of the English and American literature of her time. The novels of Charles Dickens and the poems of Robert Browning and Tennyson greatly pleased her. However, Emily reserved her greatest affection for her contemporaries, the Bronte sisters, Anne, Charlotte and Emily, George Eliot, and above all, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning's wife. It is sometimes assumed that Elizabeth Browning may have helped Dickinson realize her vocation and become one of the greatest American poets.

Dickinson had to put up with health-related problems during the latter period of her life. She suffered from eye-pain and was concerned about losing her vision. She also suffered heavy personal losses; her father died after taking an injection of morphine for his pain, and one year later, her mother had a stroke and remained indisposed till her death in 1882. Her favourite nephew

died from typhoid fever and her dear friend Helen Hunt Jackson also died suddenly. These tragic events may have led to her seclusion from public life. Emily Dickinson died on May 15, 1886, perhaps from a kidney disorder called "Bright's Disease", which was the official diagnosis, but it was just as likely that she died of hypertension.



LET US KNOW

We have already discussed that Emily Dickinson dropped out from Mount Holyoke without completing her studies. This was as much a result of her homesickness as it was of religious crisis. Much of her anxieties stems from her religious doubt as she could never conform to the orthodox religious faith of her friends and schoolmates. The school was presided over by Mary Lyon who very vigourously tried to develop women intellectually and spiritually so that they might at some time be able to serve as Christian missionaries. But Emily refused to bow to the demands of orthodoxy and dropped out from Mount Holyoke. But she asserted that her very failure to convert may have helped liberate her to think independently and have a mind of her own.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1 What did Emily Dickinson's poems mostly deal with?

Q.2 What were the names of Emily's siblings?

Q.3 What are the names of the two educational institutions that Emily attended?

Q.4 Why did Emily drop out of Mount Holyoke?

Q.5 Emily Dickinson married once during her life. True/False.

Q.6 List some of the authors whom Emily enjoyed reading.

Q.7. What, in your opinion, may have led to Emily's withdrawal from public life?

Q.8. Name the Bronte sisters.

7.3.2 Her Works

You can assume that Emily Dickinson became interested in the morbid aspects of life due to the sad incidents which marred her short life. We also discussed how she became a recluse and started living an intensely private life. She, however, sent some of her poems to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the minister, author and critic. Higginson encouraged Emily a lot and assumed the role of her mentor, and she has a lot to be thankful to him in the most intense and prolific period of her creative life. However, Higginson never tried to get her poems published. In fact, only around a dozen poems appeared during her lifetime, even though she wanted all her poems to be published. After Emily's death, her sister Lavinia found over a thousand poems in her room, all bound neatly in booklets. They were all mostly short lyrics, untitled and undated. Emily had developed a friendship with Mabel Todd, wife of the astronomer David Todd, and Mabel considered Emily to be a genius. After Dickinson's death, Mabel Todd transcribed many of her poems and persuaded Higginson to publish the first volumes of Dickinson's poetry in 1890 and 1891. However, the critical reception was not very favourable. Dickinson had written quite a collection of private letters which Mabel Todd went on to publish in 1894 and also a third volume of poems in 1896. Many of her poems were edited by Todd and Higginson as they violated the laws of metre so as to make them more conventional. Other volumes were edited by her niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Alfred Leete Hampson, and these were published in 1914, 1924, 1929, 1970, 1975 and 1977. Had Martha Dickinson Bianchi not resumed the publication of her aunt's poetry in 1914, as by 1900 or so, Dickinson's work might have fallen out of favour, her writings might never have achieved the popularity it enjoys today. The volume, *Bolts of Melody: New Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Todd and her daughter Millicent Todd Bingham, was published in 1945. Thomas H. Johnson's *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1955), containing all 175 known poems, is now accepted as the standard edition. Her massive correspondences, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, which appeared in 1958, were edited by Johnson and Theodora Ward. We will discuss

the subjects and themes of Emily Dickinson in the following unit.

The editorial labours that Todd, Susan Dickinson, her sister-in-law and Bianchi, her niece undertook, helped to make Dickinson's poetry available to the public and establish her as one of the greatest American poets. They also made her poetry available to American modernist poets such as Hart Crane and Marianne Moore. And, as we can rightly say Dickinson's reputation was that of the most innovative of nineteenth century poets who exerted the greatest influence on American poetry.



LET US KNOW

Emily Dickinson wanted to get her poems published during her lifetime as she knew her prowess as a poet. She sent her poems to Samuel Bowles, one of the men she was supposedly involved with, hoping that he would publish it in the Springfield *Republican*, of which he was the editor. Although he did publish a few poems, he edited them into a more conventional form. Editor Josiah Holland at Scribner's, to whom she sent some poems, chose not to publish her poems. However, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* evinced interest in her poetry despite her so-called imperfections and he eventually became one of the editors of her posthumously published poetry.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.9 Who was Emily Dickinson's mentor?

Q.10 Who published the first volumes of Dickinson's poetry?

Q.11 Who had a hand in reviving the interest in Dickinson's poetry in the 1900s?

Q.12 Which is the authoritative version of Dickinson's poems?

Q.13 Johnson and Theodora Ward edited the *Letters of Emily Dickinson*. True/False.

Q.14 Hart Crane and Marianne Moore are British modernist poets. True/False.



7.4 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have been acquainted with Emily Dickinson who is one of the famous American poets of the 19th century and along with Walt Whitman, is deemed as the pioneer of 19th century American poetry. You have learnt about the short life and numerous beautiful poems written by her. She wrote on a great variety of subjects like life, death, the contemporary social scenes, mortality and immortality, pain and pleasure, hope and fear, love, nature, God, religion, and virtue, seen through her Puritan perspective as she described it, 'New Englandy'. A very striking quality about her poetry is its originality.

Her poems are quite short and she has nearly eighteen hundred surviving poems which bear the stamp of being written by a woman who had devoted her entire life to her art. It is one of the most significant poems as it underscores the possibility of a life after death. The theme of death and immortality is a common theme in Dickinson's poetry which was of a very new kind, with a distinctive voice and style. Her poetry is replete with startling figures of speech, familiar words in unfamiliar uses, learned expressions, sudden shifts of tone, metrical irregularities, deliberate imperfect rhymes and grammatical difficulties. Although earlier critical views regarding her poetry were not very encouraging, but all said and done, Dickinson remains one of America's and the world's best loved poets.



7.5 FURTHER READING

1. Baym, Nina. Ed. (2007). *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
2. Ousby, Ian. (1992). *Companion to Literature in English*. London: Cambridge University Press.
3. Narasimhaiah, C. D. Ed. (1997). *Indian Response to American Literature*. New Delhi: Kalyani Publishers.



7.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: She wrote on a great variety of subjects like life, death, contemporary social scenes, mortality and immortality, pain and pleasure, hope and fear, love, nature, God, religion and virtue.

Ans to Q No 2: Emily Norcross Dickinson and Edward Dickinson

Ans to Q No 3: Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke Female Seminary.

Ans to Q No 4: Being homesick and facing a religious crisis.

Ans to Q No 5: False

Ans to Q No 6: Shakespeare, Milton, Dickens, Tennyson, Bronte Sisters, George Eliot and Elizabeth Browning.

Ans to Q No 7: Her untimely loss of tragic events of her family members.

Ans to Q No 8: Anne, Charlotte and Emily Bronte

Ans to Q No 9: Thomas Wentworth Higginson

Ans to Q No 10: Her sister Lavinia who published her poems after Emily's death.

Ans to Q No 11: Mabel Todd, Higginson and Martha Dickinson Bianchi.

Ans to Q No 12: Thomas H. Johnson's *The Poems of Emily Dickinson.*

Ans to Q No 13: True.

Ans to Q No 14: False.



7.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q.1 Briefly discuss the reclusive or solitary life of Emily Dickinson.

Q.2 Who were Dickinson's favourite authors?

Q.3 Write the titles of some of Dickinson's poems.

Q.4 Discuss the life and works of Emily Dickinson.

Q.5 What are the main features and aspects of Emily Dickinson's poetry?

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