Almost unknown as a poet in her lifetime, Emily Dickinson is now recognized as one of America's greatest poets and, in the view of some, as one of the greatest lyric poets of all time. The past fifty years or so have seen an outpouring of books and essays attempting to explain her poetry and her life. Some critics have used her life to try to explain her poetry, and others have tried to explain her life by referring to her poems, which they assume are autobiographical. Psychologically-oriented readers have subjected her to psychoanalytical diagnoses and labels, such as "a helpless agoraphobic trapped in her father's house"; her poetry has been interpreted as the last gasp of New England Puritanism; feminist critics see her as a victim of patriarchy in general or her father in particular; gender critics find homosexuality in her life and writings. These are just a few examples of the theorizing which Emily Dickinson and her poetry have inspired.

The large number of poems she wrote (over 1700 of them) makes it easy for critics to find support for their theories. And the fact that her life, her poems, and her letters are often difficult, if not impossible to understand invites speculation.

**Dickinson's Life**

Emily Dickinson can be seen as eccentric or as psychologically unbalanced or even crazy (less tolerant views). For example, from her late teens through her twenties she adopted the more childish spelling of her name, "Emilie"; her letters repeatedly express the wish to remain a child. She wore only white for almost her entire adult life. Of course there is a great deal of conjecture about her love life and her never marrying: are the references in her poems and letters to actual men whom she was in love with, or are the men and love imaginary? She became increasingly reclusive in her thirties until finally she almost never left the house. Her behavior at social gatherings in the Dickinson home, while she still attended them, was distinct. She asked whether a guest would rather have a glass of wine or a rose. One guest described her manner of appearing at such occasions: "a moment when conversation lagged a little, she would sweep in, clad in immaculate white, pass through the rooms, silently curtseying and saluting right and left, and sweep out again."

As a recluse, she occasionally stayed in her room rather than meet even close friends and rushed away when strangers visited; sometimes she talked with friends while hidden behind a partially open door. She stayed in her room and listened to her father's funeral service, which was held on the lawn of her home. She stayed in the next room to listen to a young woman play her piano and then sent her notes of appreciation. Even when ill, including when she was dying, she kept aloof; her doctor had to diagnose her as she walked by an open door. This does not mean
that she cut herself off entirely from people; she had an extensive and active correspondence and saw an occasional, special visitor; she loved her brother's children and lowered baskets of baked goods via a pulley outside her window for neighborhood children.

And throughout her seclusion, Dickinson wrote poetry in her room. Some critics speculate that her withdrawal enabled her to write her poetry; it gave her both the space to write (her room) and the time to write by freeing her from woman's duties. Not even her sister Lavinia, on whom she depended, knew the extent of Emily's writing, not until she came across over 1700 poems after Emily's death.

**Dickinson's Poems**

Only a few of Dickinson's poems were published during her lifetime. For an editor preparing her poems for publication, determining the text of many poems presents problems.

- Some poems are unfinished; a few even seem to be rough drafts.
- More than one version exists of a number of poems. Because she did not publish these poems, she did not have to make a final decision about which word, line, or stanza she preferred. Also, she included poems in her letters, changing them to fit her correspondent or the subject of the letter.
- In her letters, she sometimes writes poems as prose and prose as poetry, so that it is hard to distinguish them.
- Her occasionally idiosyncratic spelling, punctuation, and word choice can be distracting to readers, so that editors have to decide whether to change her text to conform to modern usage.

**Our Approach to Dickinson in This Class**

Truly, the general reader does not have to be concerned with all these issues. If they catch your attention, by all means pursue them. But what matters is that Emily Dickinson's poetry speaks powerfully to us. It captures her insights and recreates meaningful events in living; it helps us to understand and even to re-live our own experiences through her intensity and with her emotional and intellectual clarity.

**General Comments**

Like John Keats, Emily Dickinson is a passionate poet. Though she lived in seclusion, she lived a passionate life. Within the confines of the family home, the garden, and her circle of family and friends, she felt
with her whole heart, thought with intensity, and imagined with ardor, and she shared herself in her poetry and in her letters. She wrote of her life, "I find ecstasy in living, the mere sense of living is joy enough" (letter, 1870). Her intensity is reflected in the dramatic quality of both her poetry and her life.

Like Keats, Dickinson saw writing poetry as an exalted calling (or profession) and dedicated her life to poetry. She was willing to give the name of poetry only to verse that moved the reader profoundly:

“If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?”

Writing poetry may have served Dickinson as a way of releasing or escaping from pain--from the deaths of loved ones, from her inability to resolve her doubts about God, from the terrors, however faint, which she saw within herself, in others, and in the world outside yet nearby. To say that she may have sublimated her pain into poetry does not invalidate her view of the power of poetry; both may be true and exist at the same time. Perhaps the sublimation of pain, as well as other powerful emotions, into poetry is one source of the power that it has to move readers profoundly. If this theory is valid, shouldn’t it also apply to other literary forms--novels, plays, movie scripts, and television dramas?

Like Keats, Dickinson was concerned with the transitory and the permanent, with mortality and immortality, though her views and her poetry differ from his.

Dickinson was concerned with the essence of living. She distilled or eliminated the inessential from experience until what was left was pure, what was left was the quality or qualities that made the thing or experience itself, that distinguished it from all other things or experiences. This was one way she achieved the absolute. Henry W. Wells explains another result of her concern with essence, "Life is simplified, explained, and reduced to its essence by interpreting the vast whole in relation to the minute particle."

In her poems, Dickinson adopts a variety of personas, including a little girl, a queen, a bride, a bridegroom, a wife, a dying woman, a nun, a boy, and a bee. Though nearly 150 of her poems begin with "I," the speaker is probably fictional, and the poem should not automatically be read as autobiography. Dickinson insisted on the distinction between her poetry and her life: "When I state myself, as the Representative of the
Verse, it does not mean--me--but a supposed person."

Finally, Dickinson's sense of whimsy and sense of humor, at their best, manifest themselves in charmingly playful poems which have a childlike quality. At their worst they are childish and cloying.

**Dickinson's Style**

Her seeking the crux of experience affected her style. As part of her seeking essence or the heart of things, she distilled or eliminated inessential language and punctuation from her poems. She leaves out helping verbs and connecting words; she drops endings from verbs and nouns. It is not always clear what her pronouns refer to; sometimes a pronoun refers to a word which does not appear in the poem. At her best, she achieves breathtaking effects by compressing language. Her disregard for the rules of grammar and sentence structure is one reason twentieth century critics found her so appealing; her use of language anticipates the way modern poets use language. The downside of her language is that the compression may be so drastic that the poem is incomprehensible; it becomes a riddle or an intellectual puzzle. Dickinson said in a letter, "All men say 'what' to me"; readers are still saying "What?" in response to some of her poems.

Her seclusion may have contributed to the obscurity of her poetry. One danger of living alone, in one's own consciousness, is that the individual may begin to create private meanings for words and private symbols, which others do not have the key to. So language, instead of communicating, baffles the reader. Dickinson does fall into this trap occasionally.

Dickinson was enamored of language; she enjoyed words for their own sake, as words. One of her amusements was to read *Webster's Dictionary* (1844) and to savor words and their definitions. This interest gives a number of her poems their form--they are really definitions of words, for example "Pain has an element of blank," "Renunciation is a piercing virtue," or "Hope is the thing with feathers." Sometimes consulting the 1844 dictionary clarifies a line, for a meaning appearing in her dictionary may no longer be used.

Her linguistic mastery and sense of the dramatic combine in the often striking first lines of her poems, such as "Just lost when I was saved!," "I like a look of Agony," and "I can wade grief." Look at the first lines of the poems in your textbook for other examples.

Dickinson consistently uses the meters of English hymns. This is undoubtedly one reason why modern composers like Samuel Barber and Aaron Copland have set her poems to music and why the dancer Martha Graham choreographed them as a ballet.

Knowing other stylistic characteristics may help you read her poetry: She uses the dash to emphasize, to indicate a missing word or words, or to replace a comma or period. She changes the function or part of speech of a word; adjectives and verbs may be used as nouns; for example, in "We talk in careless--and in loss," careless is an adjective used as a noun. She frequently uses be instead of is or are. She tends to capitalize nouns, for no apparent reason other than that they are nouns.

To casual readers of poetry, it may seem that Dickinson uses rhyme infrequently. They are thinking of exact rhyme (for example, see, tree). She does use rhyme, but she uses forms of rhyme that were not generally accepted till late in the nineteenth century and are used by modern poets. Dickinson experimented with rhyme, and her poetry shows what subtle effects can be achieved with these rhymes. Dickinson uses identical rhyme (sane, insane) sparingly. She also uses eye rhyme (though, through), vowel rhymes (see, buy), imperfect rhymes (time, thin), and suspended rhyme (thing, along).

There are numerous common themes in her poetry: the inner world; death; pain, separation, and anxiety; love; God and religion; and nature;