Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, in 1830. She attended Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in South Hadley, but severe homesickness led her to return home after one year. Throughout her life, she seldom left her house and visitors were scarce. The people with whom she did come in contact, however, had an enormous impact on her thoughts and poetry. She was particularly stirred by the Reverend Charles Wadsworth, whom she met on a trip to Philadelphia. He left for the West Coast shortly after a visit to her home in 1860, and some critics believe his departure gave rise to the heartsick flow of verse from Dickinson in the years that followed. While it is certain that he was an important figure in her life, it is not certain that this was in the capacity of romantic love—she called him "my closest earthly friend." Other possibilities for the unrequited love in Dickinson’s poems include Otis P. Lord, a Massachusetts Supreme Court Judge, and Samuel Bowles, editor of the Springfield Republican.

By the 1860s, Dickinson lived in almost total physical isolation from the outside world, but actively maintained many correspondences and read widely. She spent a great deal of this time with her family. Her father, Edward Dickinson, was actively involved in state and national politics, serving in Congress for one term. Her brother Austin attended law school and became an attorney, but lived next door once he married Susan Gilbert (one of the speculated—albeit less persuasively—

Dickinson's poetry reflects her loneliness and the speakers of her poems generally live in a state of want, but her poems are also marked by the intimate recollection of inspirational moments which are decidedly life-giving and suggest the possibility of happiness. Her work was heavily influenced by the Metaphysical poets of seventeenth-century England, as well as her reading of the Book of Revelation and her upbringing in a Puritan New England town which encouraged a Calvinist, orthodox, and conservative approach to Christianity.

She admired the poetry of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, as well as John Keats. Though she was dissuaded from reading the verse of her contemporary Walt Whitman by rumor of its disgracefulness, the two poets are now connected by the distinguished place they hold as the founders of a uniquely American poetic voice. While Dickinson was extremely prolific as a poet and regularly enclosed poems in letters to friends, she was not publicly recognized during her lifetime. The first volume of her work was published posthumously in 1890 and the last in 1955. She died in Amherst in 1886.
“Hope” is the thing with feathers -  

BY EMILY DICKINSON  

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -  
That perches in the soul -  
And sings the tune without the words -  
And never stops - at all -  

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -  
And sore must be the storm -  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm -  

I've heard it in the chilllest land -  
And on the strangest Sea -  
Yet - never - in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb - of me. 

Much Madness is divinest Sense -  

BY EMILY DICKINSON  

Much Madness is divinest Sense -  
To a discerning Eye -  
Much Sense - the starkest Madness -  
'Tis the Majority  
In this, as all, prevail -  
Assent - and you are sane -  
Demur - you're straightway dangerous -  
And handled with a Chain -