

# Emily Dickinson

## Cornell Notes

Essential Question: What is important regarding Emily Dickinson and her poetry?

- **Emily Dickinson** was an American poet from Amherst, Massachusetts, who lived from 1830-1886.
- Wrote almost 1800 poems, although only 10 were published during her lifetime.
- Known for being a recluse (often wearing white), who in the last 25 years of her life rarely left her bedroom. She never married or had children.

*E. Dickinson*



Emily's bedroom is on second floor, right corner. It is here where she did most of her writing.



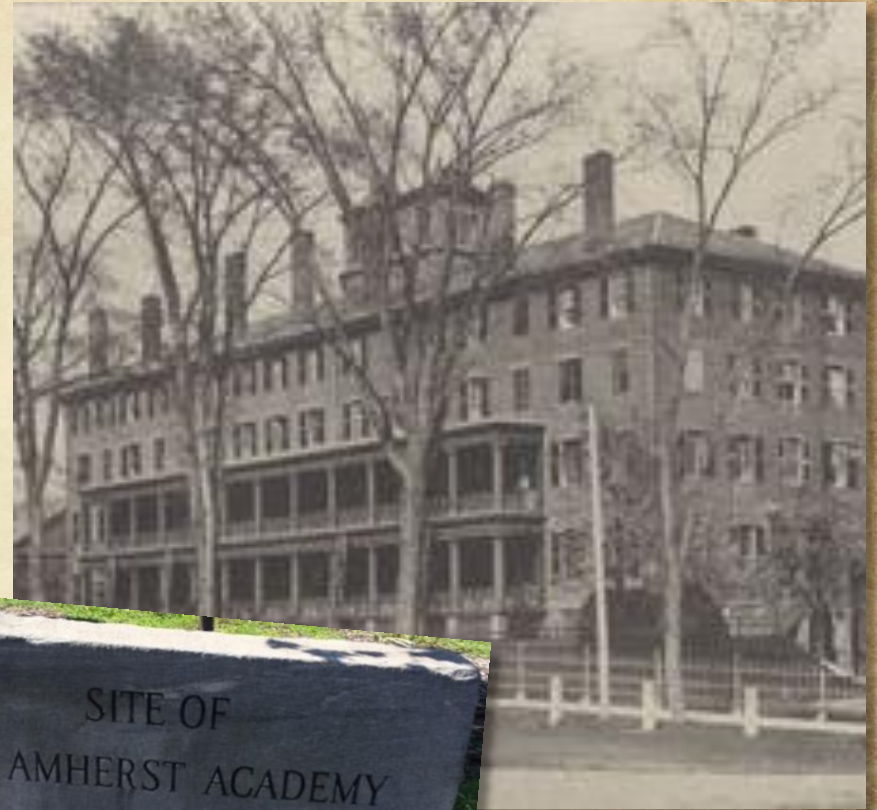
Emily  
DICKINSON  
Museum  
THE HOMESTEAD &  
GREENS

**Emily Elizabeth Dickinson** was born in this house in Amherst, MA on December 10, 1830. She continued to live in the house for most of her life.



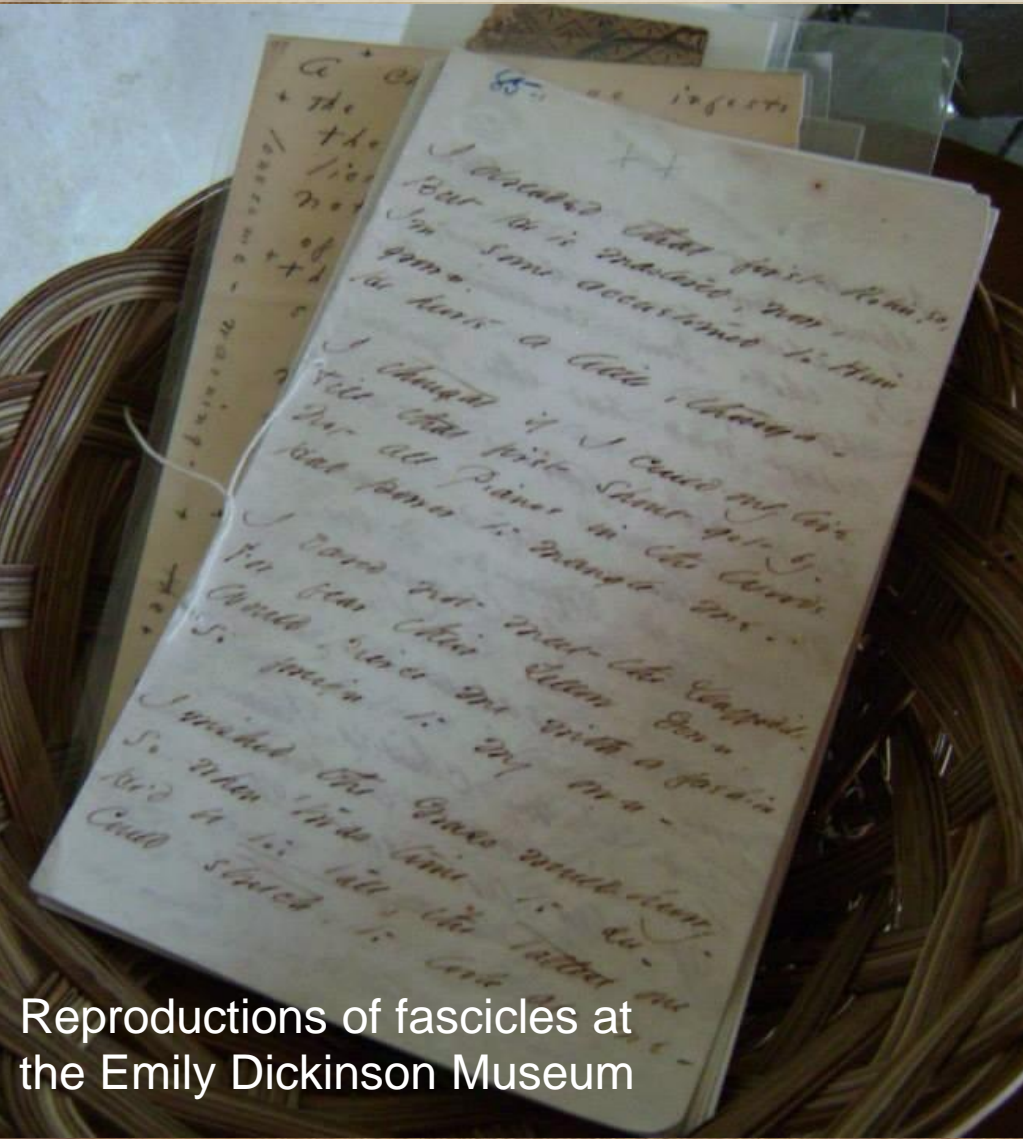
# Youth & Education

- Dickinson's father was a lawyer, and her grandfather was one of the founders of Amherst College.
- She attended Amherst Academy and then went to college at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (now Mount Holyoke College) in 1847. She stayed at the Seminary for one year, the longest she spent away from home.



Mount Holyoke  
Female Seminary

# Dickinson's Writing



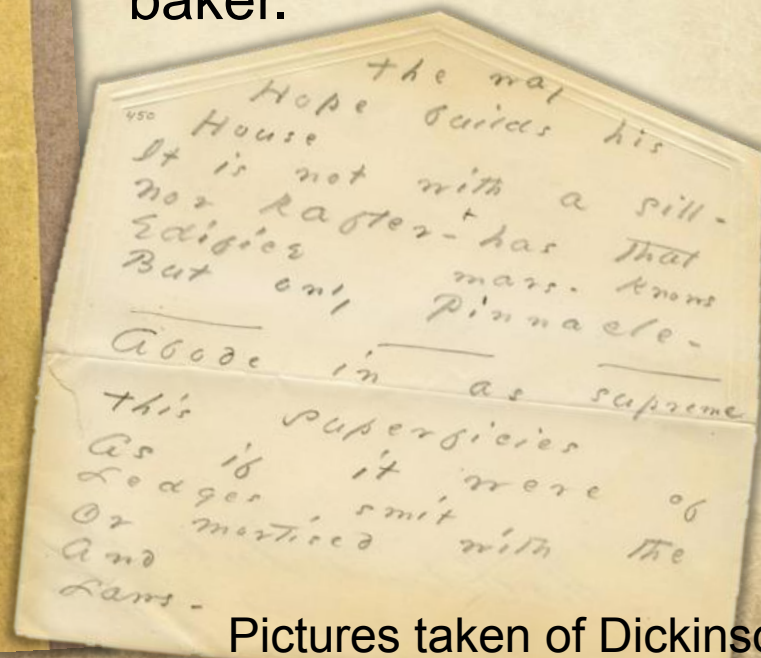
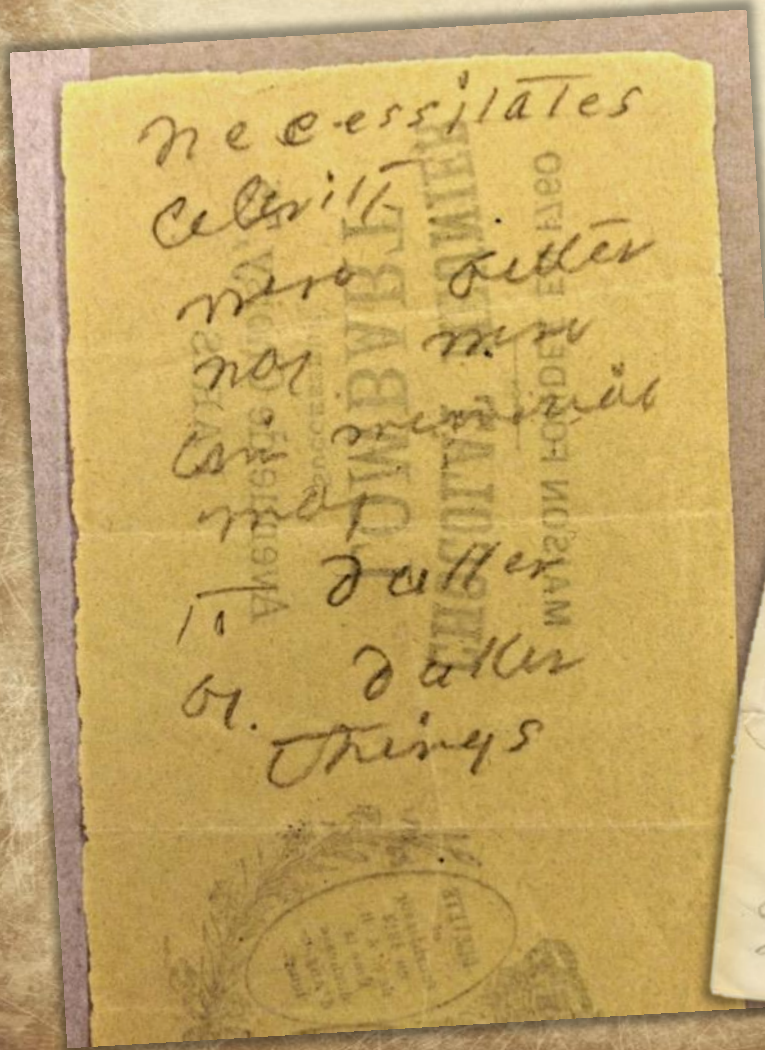
After leaving college, Dickinson wrote prolifically on anything she could find – paper from the stationer's, envelopes, scraps of wrapping paper, and even on the back of a chocolate wrapper.

In 1858, Dickinson started reviewing poems she had written previously and began making clean copies of her work, assembling manuscript books called **fascicles**.

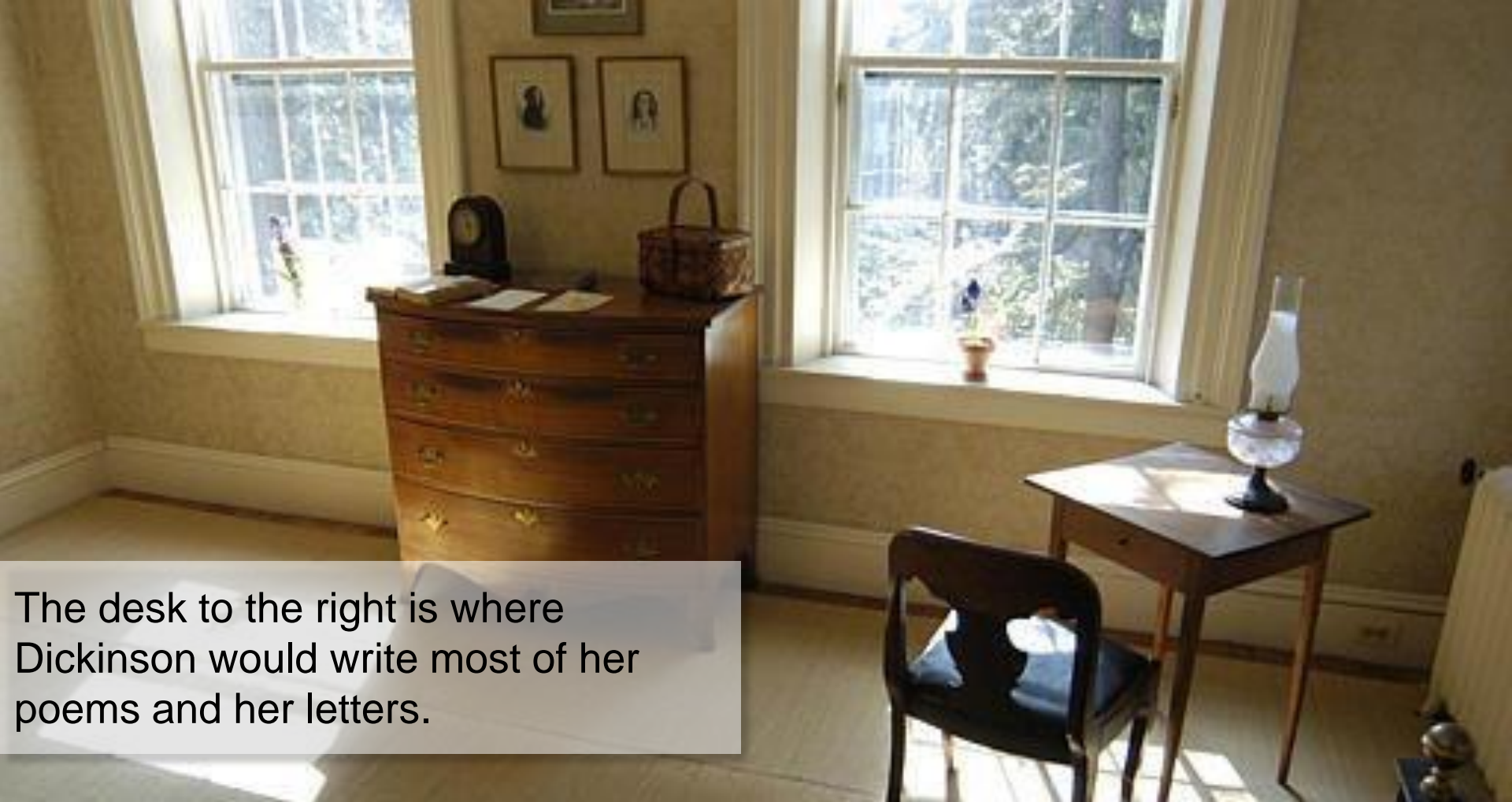
Reproductions of fascicles at  
the Emily Dickinson Museum

# Dickinson's Writing

Dickinson trying out a poem on the back of a wrapper for French baking chocolate. In addition to writing, Dickinson was a prolific baker.



Pictures taken of Dickinson's writings at the Amherst College Archives



The desk to the right is where Dickinson would write most of her poems and her letters.

# Dickinson's Bedroom

The room has recently been renovated to show things as they would have been when Dickinson occupied the space.

# Emily Dickinson in Pictures

The only authenticated picture of Emily Dickinson in the one below, was taken around 1847 when the poet was 16.





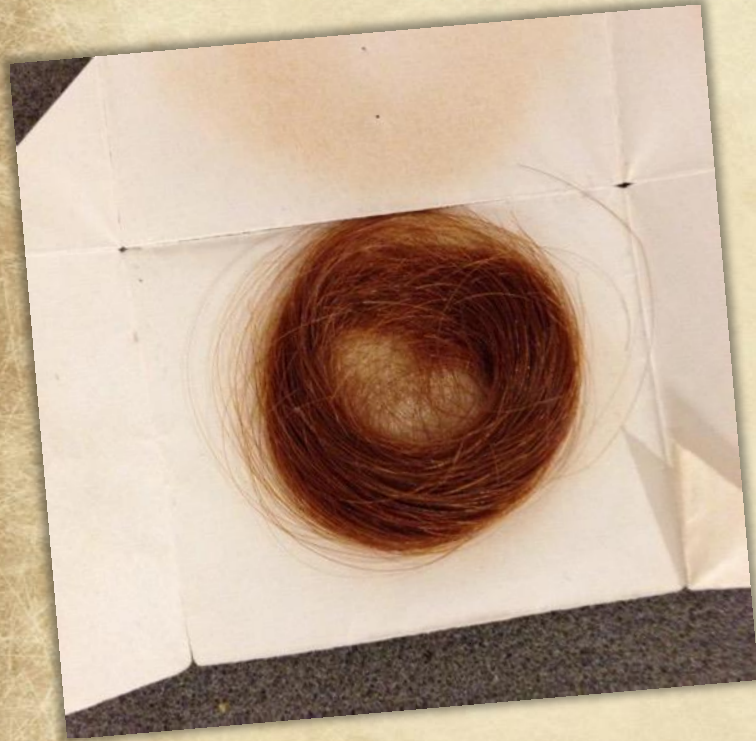
# Emily Dickinson in Pictures

In 1995, the daguerreotype below was discovered, an alleged to be Dickinson (left) with her friend Kate Scott Turner. It has not yet been authenticated.





# Emily Dickinson Artifacts



The Amherst College Archives has a lock of hair that Dickinson sent in a letter to her friend: “I shall never give you anything again that will be half so full of sunshine as this wee lock of hair.”

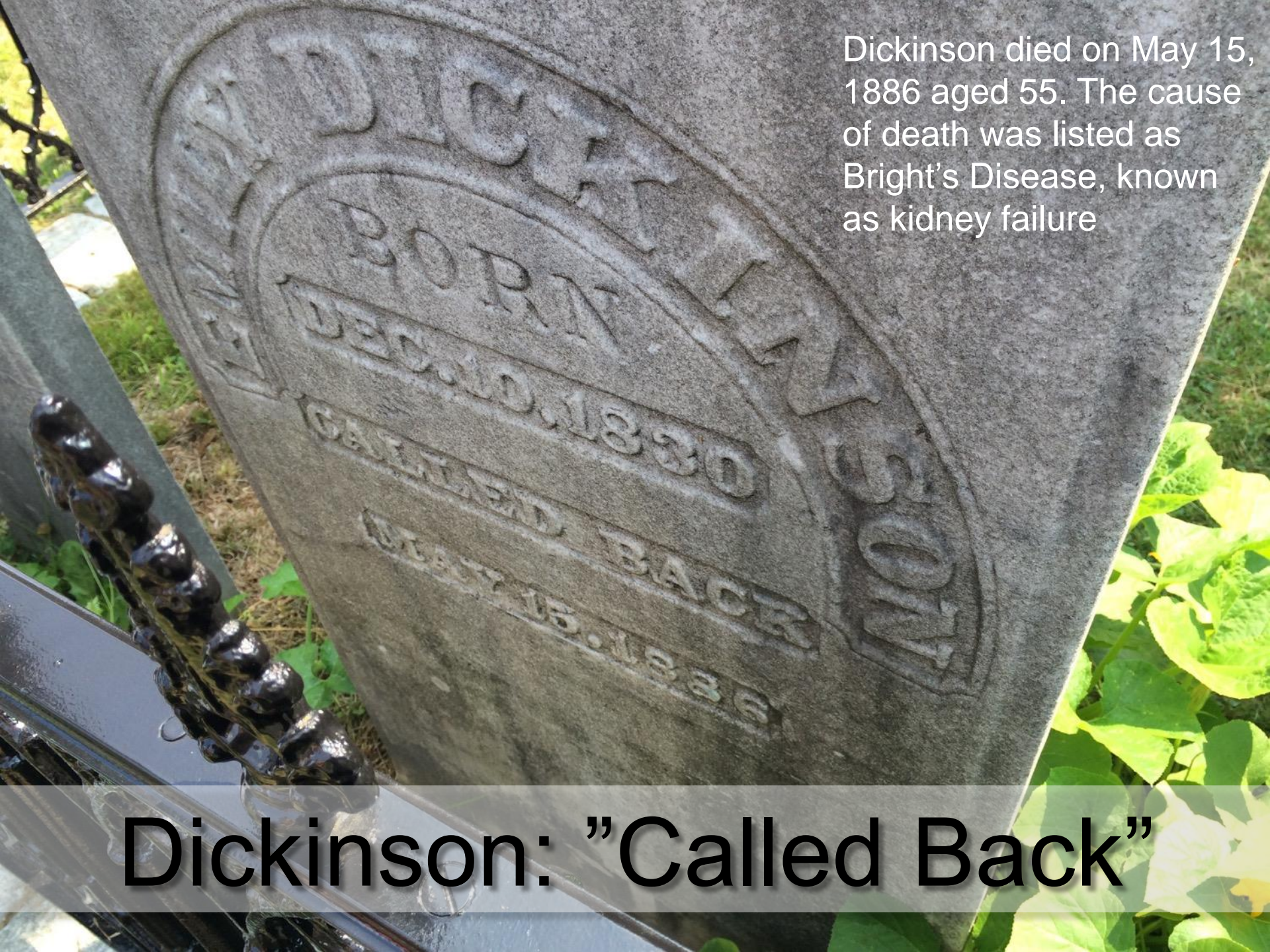
**Are you surprised by the hair color? Does it match what you’ve learned about Dickinson thus far?**

# Emily Dickinson Artifacts

In her later years, Dickinson allegedly began wearing all white, including this dress (a reproduction on display at the Emily Dickinson Museum).

**What inferences do you make about the dress? What symbolism is there in wearing white? What type of dress is this? Is it to be worn in private? Public? How do you know?**





Dickinson died on May 15, 1886 aged 55. The cause of death was listed as Bright's Disease, known as kidney failure

**Dickinson: "Called Back"**

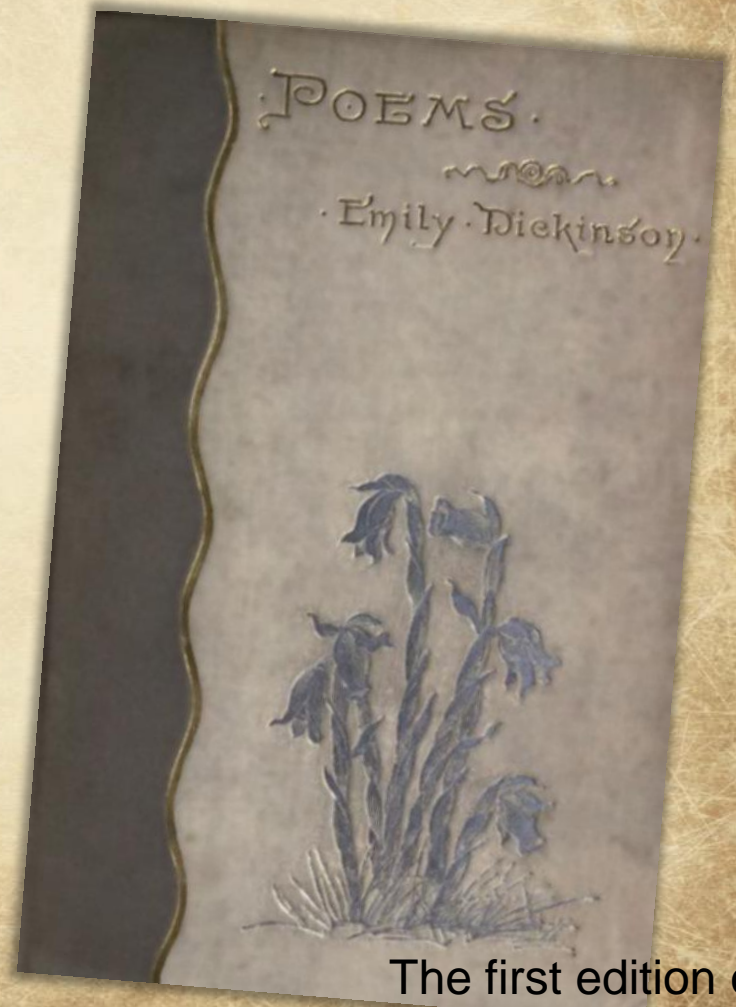
# Dickinson: "Called Back"



Dickinson was buried wearing a white dress in a white coffin in the family plot of the West Cemetery in Amherst, MA.

# Publishing Dickinson's poems

- During her lifetime, Dickinson published only 10 poems, all of them anonymously.
- She wrote almost 1800 poems, which were discovered after her death.
- Her sister found and published the poems (with help from her brother's mistress), but made numerous edits.



The first edition of  
Dickinson's poems

# Dickinson's Poetic Style

- Emily Dickinson's poetry is often in what is called **common meter**:
  - A line of four metrical feet followed by a line of three metrical feet.
  - A **foot** is composed of two syllables, so using common meter would mean having a line of eight syllables followed by a line of six syllables.
    - iambic tetrameter
    - iambic trimeter
  - An **iamb** means the emphasis is placed on the second syllable of the metric foot





# Common Meter

**Here are some lines written how most poets would write:**

Ashes tell us that there has been a fire  
So please respect the grey remains left here

**Dickinson writes:**

Ashes denote that fire was –  
Revere the grayest pile – [F1063]

**What differences do you notice  
between the two types?**



A black silhouette sculpture of Emily Dickinson is positioned on a large, light-colored rock in a lush green garden. The sculpture depicts her in profile, facing left, with her right hand raised in a gesture. The background is filled with dense green foliage and trees. The overall scene is peaceful and natural.

How odd the Girl's life looks  
Behind this soft Eclipse  
I think that Earth feels so  
To folks in Heaven – now –  
[F225]

Sculpture of Emily Dickinson in Amherst, MA

# Dickinson The Poet

# The Dickinson Dash

In addition to challenging the meter of traditional English poetry, Dickinson also challenges the rules when it comes to punctuation. Instead of only using the obvious punctuation marks we're used to, she frequently uses the **dash**.

A **dash** is a horizontal stroke in writing or printing to mark a pause or break in sense, or to represent omitted letters or words

A Bird came down the Walk –  
He did not know I saw –

[F359]



# The Dickinson Dash

Some literary critics claim the **purpose of the dash** is to:

- Break up expected meanings
- Makes the reader work to decode the meaning of her poems
- Take the place of up to eight words
- Can account for a change in mood
- Are a form of rebellion
- Do not communicate closure



# Slant Rhyme

Dickinson employed a lot of what is known as **slant rhyme (or sometimes half rhyme)**.

→ **Slant rhyme**, as defined by literary critic Helen Vendler, is: "relation between words in which the final consonant syllables agree but the vowels that precede them differ"

Hope" is the thing with feathers—  
That perches in the **soul**—  
And sings the tune without the words—  
And never stops—at **all**—

[F314]



# Slant Rhyme Reasons

Critics suggest that **slant rhyme** could be used for the following purposes:

- Prevent a conclusive interpretation
- Call into question an understanding that might be too simplistic
- Avoid creating a sing-song effect
- Create a sudden contrast
- Rebellion from the norm



# Capitalization

Dickinson used **unconventional capitalization**, often capitalizing words in the middle of a line, not just those at the beginning. The reasons for this are not exactly clear.

Possible reasons, suggested by critics:

- German, a language Dickinson knew, typically capitalizes nouns
- To retain and give additional emphasis on key words
- Just her handwriting?



# Poetic inspiration

A vibrant garden scene featuring a variety of plants. In the foreground, there are several pink and yellow lilies with long, slender green leaves. To the right, there are purple flowers and large green leaves. The background shows a well-maintained lawn and more dense foliage, creating a lush and colorful environment.

These gardens behind her house served as inspiration for her poetry, as many of her poems deal with the natural world!



# Poetic Themes

There are many recurring themes and images in Emily Dickinson's poetry. Among them:

- Death
- The natural world
- God and religion
- The afterlife
- The possibilities of the soul
- Spiritual growth
- And yes, there are a few poems that read like steamy love poems (but not many)



# What's up with the titles?

Dickinson **never gave any of her poems titles**. Therefore, most of her poems are referred to by their first line.

You will also see poems referred to by a number, which indicates the editor (Franklin) and the order in which Dickinson wrote the poems (based on his research of her manuscripts).

**For example:** [F112] or “Success is counted sweetest”



# Emily Dickinson: The Poet



This was a Poet –  
It is That  
Distills amazing sense  
From Ordinary Meanings

[F446]

Emily Dickinson mural near West Cemetery  
in Amherst, MA