



Emily Dickinson, *Poems*, Boston: Roberts Brothers (1890), Amherst College Archives & Special Collections (image courtesy the Morgan Library & Museum)

## **Emily Dickinson Was Less Reclusive Than We Think**

I'm Nobody! Who are you? The Life and Poetry of Emily Dickinson at the Morgan Library reveals the poet to be far more socially engaged than we've believed her to

Emily Dickinson, Poems, Boston: Roberts Brothers (1890), Amherst College Archives & Special Collections (image courtesy the Morgan Library & Museum)  
Never before have Emily Dickinson's writings and belongings been brought together like this. Usually tucked away at various libraries and museums, the letters, daguerreotypes, and other ephemera are all under one roof for the first time at the Morgan Library & Museum. The constellation of objects in I'm Nobody! Who are you? The Life and Poetry of Emily Dickinson forms a new understanding of the poet. Mainly, it reveals a far more socially engaged Emily Dickinson than the recluse we've believed her to be. In fact, it might even debunk that myth.

Why does high school English introduce the poet as a recluse? Yes, Dickinson chose to socially withdraw in her late 30s, and it's hard to say exactly why. But she was social before then, and as the many documents on view attest, remained so in some critical ways after her so-called seclusion.

So let's dig deeper into the story before deciding whether that label is worth keeping. And let's not pull punches — misogyny has disfigured how Dickinson's story is told. We're missing out on a fierce mind when we reduce her to a spinster perseverating alone in her room writing poems to the ether.

The new movie on Emily Dickinson, *A Quiet Passion*, is also on a mission to rewrite the script. When Cynthia Nixon, playing Dickinson, waves her fan and laughs besides a friend, it's dissonant with what many of us first learned about the poet. The film dramatizes the social web the Morgan exhibition documents with its letters and mementos. Viewing the film before exploring the exhibition is a great way to internalize that Dickinson did, in fact, have a life and — gasp — friends.

So why is Dickinson remembered for her solitude in such a one-dimensional way? Starting in her late 30s, she seldom left her father's home, where she lived. She never married. And when she was seen about town, she always dressed in white. She started to speak to visitors through her bedroom door instead of face-to-face. When her father died, the funeral took place at the family home, but she remained in her room, creaked the door open, and just listened.

But there are other facts. Chief among them, Dickinson never stopped writing. And from that so-called seclusion, she regularly wrote and mailed letters to friends and family, some of which can be seen at the Morgan. She was prolific. Her famously preserved room was effectively a busy message dispatch center.

Recluses don't generally care enough about the outside world or other people to carry on such a voluminous correspondence or always appear in a signature white outfit, now do they? Perhaps, sequestering herself from society was a poetic and artistic choice, designed to attract attention by refusing it.

Dickinson was conscious of the mystery image she was crafting. She even wrote this untitled poem, most likely in 1861, about her persona:

A solemn thing – it was – I said  
A Woman – white – to be  
And wear – if God should count me fit –  
Her blameless mystery –

A hallowed thing – to drop a life  
Into the mystic well –  
Too plummetless – that it come back –  
Eternity – until –

I ponder how the bliss would look –  
And would it feel as big –  
When I could take it in my hand –  
As hovering – seen – through fog –

And then – the size of this “small ” life –  
The Sages – call it small –  
Swelled – like Horizons – in my vest –  
And I sneered – softly – “small”!

There is something prophetic in that last stanza. Amherst townsfolk dismissed the poet's life as small and pointless, and Dickinson softly sneered at all of them. She read Shakespeare and other great authors, tinkered with language for hours, and traded letters with publishers, which are on view at the Morgan.

So who was the Emily Dickinson behind this persona? It's the burning question in this show. This gathering of objects gives us clues but few answers. The challenge is that we don't have clear statements in her own words about the purpose of her seclusion, her thoughts on love, or the goals of her writing in the way that artists and writers make statements today. Much is left cryptic. So it makes it hard to definitely answer the big questions a reviewer or a biographer is supposed to answer. To make matters worse, after she died, her sister Lavinia Dickinson honored a deathbed wish and burned all the letters the poet had received from friends and family.

Only one authenticated photographic image of Dickinson survives, and it's on view at the Morgan. The daguerreotype, which dates to around 1847, required the poet at age

16 to sit still for a long time as the image developed. Because it's the only authenticated image, it's taken on an outsized role in representing the poet. Its rigidity and stoicism, likely caused by the daguerreotype process — no one can smile forever — has perpetuated her image as Puritan recluse. Even her siblings complained it was “too solemn, too heavy and that it had none of the play of light and shade in Emily's face.”

The Morgan is also displaying another, recently discovered daguerreotype that fiercely divides scholars. Some experts believe this image shows Dickinson in her late 20s with Kate Turner, whom some believe was her lesbian lover but all can agree they were at least friends. We know for sure it's Kate Turner because of comparison with other verified images. It's harder to confirm the other woman is Dickinson because we only have that one image. It's even harder to verify these two women had a romance. And when Turner sent her letters from Dickinson to the publishers, she sent copies and not originals. We will never know for sure if she redacted them. Though I'd be wary to make bold claims here and cast a woman who didn't marry and departed from gender norms as a closeted lesbian. Her father was rich and tolerant enough that she didn't have to marry to survive. She may have just wanted a room of her own.

“I am nobody, who are you?” Dickinson jests in her famous poem, after which the show is named. As the poem let's on, mystique entices and intrigues us more than those who loudly flaunt their existence. Perhaps that explains part of the poet's enduring appeal.

I'm Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you – Nobody – too?  
Then there's a pair of us!  
Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!  
How public – like a Frog –  
To tell one's name – to the livelong June –  
To an admiring Bog!

Emily Dickinson, Untitled (I'm Nobody! Who are you?) Poem in Fascicle 11 (ca. late 1861) (Houghton Library, Harvard University, image courtesy Morgan Library and Museum)

I'm Nobody! Who are you? The Life of Poetry of Emily Dickson continues at the Morgan Library & Museum (225 Madison Ave, Midtown East, Manhattan) through May 28.