

Abigail Adams

Epistolarian

Born: November 11, 1744, Weymouth, Massachusetts

Died: October 28, 1818, Quincy, Massachusetts

Biography

Abigail Adams was born in Weymouth, Massachusetts, in 1744, to William Smith and Elizabeth (née Quincy) Smith. She, along with Barbara Bush, has been the only woman to be both the wife and a mother of a US president. She did not receive any formal schooling, not unusual for young women at the time, and as a child was frequently ill with rheumatic fever. Her mother was from the prominent Massachusetts Quincy family and was also a cousin of John Hancock. She taught Abigail and her two sisters, May and Elizabeth, to read and write, and the sisters had the advantage of their family's large libraries, which included religious as well as secular works. Her father was a prominent minister, serving as minister of the Weymouth Congregational Church since 1734.

Adams first met her future husband, John, in 1759, when he was brought to the parsonage by Richard Cranch, who was courting her sister Mary. Cranch also suggested that Adams read Shakespeare and other classics of literature, and the effects of her studies can be seen in how she quoted from authors in her letters. John graduated from Harvard in 1755 and then studied law. He did not begin considering Abigail seriously until 1762. Her first known letter to him dates from August 11, 1763, signing with the pen name Diana. They eventually married in 1764, although her mother was apparently

not happy that this match was with a country lawyer. They first settled in Braintree, Massachusetts, on a small farm he had inherited and later moved to Boston, though they moved back and forth several times. Nine months after getting married, she had her first child, one of six all together, of whom four lived to be adults. She had significant responsibility for managing the farm and the family's finances while her husband was practicing law. When he went to Philadelphia in 1774 for the First Continental Congress, she stayed behind. During the Second Continental Congress in 1776 she penned her most famous words in a letter to her husband, "to Remember the Ladies." In 1777, her husband was subsequently appointed as a commissioner to France, and he remained in Europe without her for most of the next seven years. All the separations led to the trove of correspondence that has made her reputation.

In 1784, Abigail and her firstborn, also named Abigail, joined John in Paris and then left for England in 1785, where he became the first US minister to the Court of St. James. They both returned to the United States in 1788. Although John was elected to the House of Representatives from New York, he never served, as he soon became the first vice president of the new republic in 1789 and was reelected in 1793. Abigail spent part of this time with him in New

York and then Philadelphia, when the capitol was moved. He then narrowly defeated Thomas Jefferson to become the second US president in 1797. They became the first residents of the White House in 1800, but of the entire time her husband was president, she was with him for at most 18 months. She nevertheless took her role as First Lady (a term not used until much later) seriously, and she saw herself as a public voice for the Federalist Party of her husband, in opposition to Jefferson and his followers. She continued her correspondence with John and also wrote extensively to family and other political leaders. When John lost the 1801 election to Jefferson, they retreated to Quincy, Massachusetts, where they had acquired the Peacefield house and farm some fourteen years earlier. Her letters from this period reveal her enduring interest in political issues, even as she devoted herself to family matters, including raising the children of her son John Quincy while he was off on diplomatic missions. She died of typhoid fever in 1818 and did not live to see her son become president.

Analysis

Adams's contribution to women's writing rests on her phenomenal output as an epistolarian. More than 2,300 of her letters have been preserved, although originally she did not see their value. At one point, in 1774, she commanded that her husband "burn all these letters," in case they should fall "from his pocket and thus expose" his "affectionate friend." Many years later, when she learned that her daughter Abigail Adams Smith intended to save some letters for her own daughter, Adams was upset, arguing that they were "trash." Fortunately for women's history, many of the letters were kept by her daughter, son John Quincy, and sister Mary Smith Cranch.

Because of the long periods of separation, Adams was responsible for both the domestic sphere and the world of work, as she managed the family's farm and investments while her husband pursued his political career. Although women in this time period had no property rights, she often referred to her home as her property. Thus, her famous call to her husband to "Remember the Ladies" as a plea for the Founding Fathers to consider establishing equal rights for women. She continued her argument by asking him to "not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands" for "all men would be tyrants if they could." She also threatened him with consequences: "If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation." Her husband dismissed her plea and responded that her "letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented." Nevertheless, he continued to seek her advice throughout his political career.

Some have interpreted her views on women's rights to include suffrage, although there is little hint of that in her writings. What is clear, though, is that she believed women had the right to own property, and in a remarkable demonstration of independence she wrote a will in 1816, with most of her personal bequests to women relatives, even though the laws at that time meant that it had no legal standing. She also bought property in her husband's name while managing the family farm.

Adams, like her husband, was also vehemently opposed to slavery, despite having grown up in a home in which her father owned four slaves. In 1774 she wrote that she "most sincerely" wished that "there was not a Slave in the province." In the same letter in which she asked

for remembering the ladies she claimed that “the passion for Liberty cannot be Equally Strong in the Breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures of theirs.” In 1791 she wrote to her husband about a neighbor’s complaint regarding her enrolling a young African American man in an evening school: “I have not thought it any disgrace to my self to take him into my parlor and teach him both to read and write.” Adams, however, was not a fan of immigration and supported the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, which undoubtedly contributed to her husband’s defeat in 1801.

Adams often expressed her concern that she had not received a formal education. In a letter to her sister in 1809, who would “well know” what their early education was, she explained “it was not the fashion for Females to know more than writing, and Arithmatic.” She argued that public education should be available to girls as well as to boys. As she wrote her husband in 1778, “you need not be told how much female education is neglected, nor how fashionable it has been to ridicule female learning.” She regretted the “narrow contracted education of the females” in this country. Adams ultimately believed that access to education would also better prepare women for the roles of wives and mothers.

Achievements

Adams is most remembered for her 1776 letter to her husband, in which she urged him to “Remember the Ladies” in the “new code of laws.” She was an early advocate of women’s rights, an abolitionist, and a supporter of education for women. Her writings provide great insight into the making of the nation that became the United States.

Selected Works

Letters and Correspondence

Letters of Mrs. Adams, Wife of John Adams, 1840

New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788–1801, 1947 (edited by Mary Smith Cranch and Stewart Mitchell)

Adams Family Correspondence, 1963 (edited by L. H. Butterfield et al.)

The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams, 1988

My Dearest Friend: Letters of Abigail and John Adams, 2007 (edited by Margaret A. Hogan and C. James Taylor)

Letters, 2016 (edited by Edith Gelles)

Selected Bibliography

Abrams, Jeanne E. *First Ladies of the Republic: Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison, and the Creation of an Iconic American Role*. New York UP, 2018. Shows the role played by these three First Ladies in political life, despite not having the vote.

Adams, Abigail. *Letters*, edited by Edith Gelles. The Library of America, 2016. The definitive source for her correspondence. The volume includes 430 letters, more than a hundred published for the first time.

_____. *New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788–1801*, edited by Mary Smith Cranch and Stewart Mitchell. Houghton Mifflin, 1947. A collection of letters preserved by her sister.

_____, et al. *Letters of Mrs. Adams, Wife of John Adams*. C. C. Little and J. Brown, 1840. First published by her grandson Charles Frances Adams in 1840 and then later enlarged into two volumes, with more letters added in a fourth edition in 1848, representing the first books published about a First Lady. These letters include those preserved by John Quincy Adams.

The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams, edited by Thomas Jefferson et al., U of North Carolina P, 1988.

Adams Family Correspondence, 11 vols., edited by L. H. Butterfield et al., Harvard UP, 1963. This collection contains many of her letters and is also available in a digital edition at <https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ADMS>.

Akers, Charles W. *Abigail Adams: An American Woman*. Little, Brown 1980. First biography since the Adams Papers were made available.

Barker-Benfield, G. J. *Abigail and John Adams: the Americanization of Sensibility*. U of Chicago P, 2010. A close reading of their letters, through the lens of gender.

Gelles, Edith B. *Abigail Adams: A Writing Life*. Routledge, 2002. This is the second of two biographies written by Edith Gelles. This one stresses the subject's persona as a writer, with particular attention to her writing process.

_____. *Portia: The World of Abigail Adams*. Indiana UP, 1992. A collection of essays, each focusing on a particular relationship between Adams and her correspondents, including her husband, Thomas Jefferson, and John Lovell, among others.

Holton, Woody. *Abigail Adams*. Free Press, 2009. A recent biography, which makes an argument that she was more influential in politics than had been previously recognized.

My Dearest Friend: Letters of Abigail and John Adams, edited by Margaret A. Hogan and C. James Taylor, Harvard UP, 2007. A selection of 289 personal letters between Abigail and John.

Withey, Lynn. *Dearest Friend: A Life of Abigail Adams*. Free Press, 1981. A biography that focuses on her concern for women's rights.

—Melinda Knight

Kate Chopin

Fiction Writer

Born: February 8, 1850, St. Louis, Missouri

Died: August 22, 1904, St. Louis, Missouri

Biography

Kate Chopin was born Katherine O’Flaherty on February 8, 1850, in St. Louis, Missouri, into a socially prominent family with roots in the French past of both St. Louis and New Orleans. Her father, Thomas O’Flaherty, an immigrant from Ireland, had lived in New York and Illinois before settling in St. Louis, where he prospered as the owner of a commission house. In 1839, he married into a well-known Creole family, members of the city’s social elite, but his wife died in childbirth only a year later. In 1844, he married Eliza Faris, merely 15 years old but, according to French custom, eligible for marriage. Faris was the daughter of a Huguenot man who had migrated from Virginia and a woman who was descended from the Charlevilles, among the earliest French settlers in America.

Kate was one of three children born to her parents and the only one to live to mature years. In 1855, tragedy struck the O’Flaherty family when her father, now a director of the Pacific Railroad, was killed in a train wreck; thereafter, Kate lived in a house of many widows—her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother Charleville. In 1860, she entered the St. Louis Academy of the Sacred Heart, a Catholic institution where French history, language, and culture were stressed—as they were, also, in her own household. Such an absorption in French

culture would influence Chopin’s own writing, an adaptation of French forms to American themes.

Chopin graduated from the Academy of the Sacred Heart in 1868, and two years later she was introduced to St. Louis society, becoming one of its ornaments, a vivacious and attractive girl known for her cleverness and talents as a storyteller. The following year, she made a trip to New Orleans, and it was there that she met Oscar Chopin, whom she married in 1871. After a three-month honeymoon in Germany, Switzerland, and France, the couple moved to New Orleans, where Chopin’s husband was a cotton factor (a businessman who financed the raising of cotton and transacted its sale). Oscar Chopin prospered at first, but in 1878 and 1879, the period of the great “Yellow Jack” epidemic and of disastrously poor harvests, he suffered reverses. The Chopin family then went to live in rural Louisiana, where, at Cloutierville, Oscar Chopin managed some small plantations he owned.

By all accounts, the Chopin marriage was an unusually happy one, and in time Kate became the mother of six children. This period in her life ended, however, in 1883 with the sudden death, from swamp fever, of her husband. A widow at 30, Chopin remained at Cloutierville for a year, overseeing her husband’s property, and then moved to St. Louis, where she remained for the rest of her life. She began to

write in 1888, while still rearing her children, and in the following year she made her first appearance in print. As her writing shows, her marriage to Oscar Chopin proved to be much more than an “episode” in her life, for it is from this period in New Orleans and Natchitoches Parish that she drew her best literary material and her strongest inspiration. She knew this area personally, and yet as an “outsider” she was also able to observe it with the freshness of detachment.

Considering the fact that she had only begun to have her stories published in 1889, it is remarkable that Chopin should already have written and published her first novel, *At Fault*, by 1890. The novel is apprenticeship work and was published by a St. Louis company at her own expense, but it does show a sense of form. She then wrote a second novel, “Young Dr. Gosse,” which in 1891 she sent out to a number of publishers, all of whom refused it, and which she later destroyed. After finishing this second novel, she concentrated on the shorter forms of fiction, writing 40 stories, sketches, and vignettes during the next three years. By 1894, her stories began to find a reception in eastern magazines, notably in *Vogue*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Century*. In the same year, her first short-story collection, *Bayou Folk*, was published by Houghton Mifflin to favorable reviews. Even so, because short-story collections were not commercially profitable, she had difficulty placing her second collection, *A Night in Acadie*, which was brought out by a relatively little-known publisher in Chicago in 1897.

Although having achieved some reputation as an author of what were generally perceived to be local-color stories set in northern Louisiana, Chopin was still far from having established herself as a writer whose work was commercially profitable. Under the advice of editors that a longer work would have a broader appeal, she turned again to the novel form, publishing

The Awakening in 1899. *The Awakening*, however, received uniformly unfavorable reviews, and in some cities it was banned from library shelves. In St. Louis, Chopin was dropped by friends and refused membership in a local fine-arts club. Chopin had never expected such a storm of condemnation and, although she withstood it calmly, she was deeply hurt by the experience. She wrote little thereafter and never published another book. In 1904, after attending the St. Louis World’s Fair, she was stricken with a cerebral hemorrhage and died two days later.

With her death, Chopin’s reputation went into almost total eclipse. In literary histories written early in the century, her work was mentioned only in passing, with brief mention of her local-color stories but none at all of *The Awakening*. Even in the first biography of Chopin, Daniel S. Rankin’s *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories* (1932), *The Awakening* was passed over quickly as a “morbid” book. The modern discovery of Chopin did not begin until the early 1950s, when French critic Cyrille Arnavon translated *The Awakening* into French and wrote an introduction to the novel in which he discussed Chopin’s writing as early realism comparable in some respects to that of Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser. In the mid-1950s, Robert Cantwell and Kenneth Eble called attention to *The Awakening* as a neglected work of classic stature.

Analysis

The belated recognition of *The Awakening* gained momentum in the 1960s when Edmund Wilson included a discussion of Chopin in *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (1963), in which he described *The Awakening* as a “quite uninhibited and beautifully written [novel] which anticipates D. H. Lawrence in its treatment of infidelity.” By the mid-1960s, *The Awakening* was reprinted for the

first time in half a century, and critics such as Werner Berthoff, Larzer Ziff, and George Arms all praised it warmly; Ziff called the novel "the most important piece of fiction about the sexual life of a woman written to date in America." With the publication of Per Seyersted's *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (1969) and his edition of her writings, *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, Chopin's work became fully available. While Chopin is of particular interest to feminist scholars, interest in her work is not limited to a single group. It is now generally conceded that Chopin was one of the significant writers of the 1890s, and *The Awakening* is commonly viewed as a small masterpiece.

When Kate Chopin began to publish, local-color writing, which came into being after the Civil War and crested in the 1880s, had already been established. Bret Harte and Mark Twain had created a special ambience for their fiction in the American West, Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman had drawn their characters in the context of a New England world in decline, and the Creole culture of New Orleans and the plantation region beyond it had been depicted by George Washington Cable, Grace King, and Ruth McEnery Stuart.

A late arriver to the scene, Chopin was at first, as her stories show, uncertain even of her locale. *At Fault*, her first novel (1890), was a breakthrough for her in the sense that she found her rural Louisiana "region." The novel is set in the present, a setting that is important to its sphere of action. Place-du-Bois, the plantation, represents conservative, traditional values that are challenged by new, emergent ones. David Hosmer, from St. Louis, obtains lumber rights on Place-du-Bois, and with him comes conflict. *At Fault* deals with divorce, but beyond that, it addresses the contradictions of nature and convention. Place-du-Bois seems at times idyllic, but it is shadowed by the cruelties of its slaveholding past, abuses created by too rigidly held

assumptions. St. Louis is almost the opposite, a world as much without form as Hosmer's pretty young wife, who goes to pieces there and again at Place-du-Bois.

A problem novel, *At Fault* looks skeptically at nature but also at received convention. Intelligent and well thought out, it raises a question that will appear again in *The Awakening*: Is the individual responsible to others or to him- or herself? The characters in *At Fault* tend to be merely vehicles for ideas, but in the short stories written after the novel, her ability to create characters with emotional richness becomes apparent. If *At Fault* suggests the symmetrical social novels of Howells, *Bayou Folk* gives the impression of southern folk writing brought to a high degree of perfection. The dominant theme in this collection is the universality of illusion, while the stories in *A Night in Acadie* prepare for *The Awakening*, in which a married woman, her self-assertion stifled in a conventional marriage, is awakened to the sensuous and erotic life.

Comparable in kind to Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857; English translation, 1886), *The Awakening* (1899) is Chopin's most elaborate orchestration of the theme of bondage and illusion. Dramatic in form, intensely focused, it makes use of imagery and symbolism to an extent never before evident in Chopin's work. The boldness of her possession of theme in *The Awakening* is wholly remarkable. Her earliest effort in the novel, *At Fault*, asks if the individual is responsible to others or to him- or herself, a question that is raised again in *The Awakening*. *At Fault*, however, deals with its characters conventionally, on the surface only, while in *The Awakening* Chopin captures the deep, inner life of Edna Pontellier and projects it powerfully onto a world of convention.

In *The Awakening*, Chopin achieved her largest exploration of feminine consciousness. Edna Pontellier, the heroine, is always at the

center of the novel, and nothing occurs that does not in some way bear on her thoughts or developing sense of her situation. As a character who rejects her socially prescribed roles of wife and mother, Edna has a certain affinity with the “New Woman,” much discussed in the 1890s, but her special modeling and the type of her experience suggest a French influence. Before beginning the novel, Chopin translated eight of Guy de Maupassant’s stories. Two of these tales, “Solitude” and “Suicide,” share with *The Awakening* the theme of illusion in erotic desire and the inescapability of the solitary self. Another, “Reveil,” anticipates Chopin’s novel in some incidents of its plot. At the same time, *The Awakening* seems to have been influenced by *Madame Bovary*. Certain parallels can be noticed in the experiences of the two heroines—their repudiation of their husbands, estrangement, and eventual suicides. More important, Flaubert’s craftsmanship informs the whole manner of Chopin’s novel—its directness, lucidity, and economy of means; its steady use of incident and detail as leitmotif. The novel also draws on a large fin de siècle background concerned with a hunger for the exotic and the voluptuous, a yearning for the absolute. From these diverse influences, Chopin shapes a work that is strikingly, even startlingly, her own.

In its own time, *The Awakening* was criticized both for its subject matter and for its point of view. Reviewers repeatedly remarked that the erotic content of the novel was disturbing and distasteful, and that Chopin had not only failed to censure Edna’s “morbid” awakening but also had treated it sympathetically. The reviewers failed to take into account the subtlety and ambiguity of the novel’s vision, for if Chopin enters deeply into Edna’s consciousness, she also stands outside it with a severe objectivity. A close examination of *The Awakening* reveals that the heroine has been involved in illusion from the beginning. Edna sometimes meditates, for

example, on the self-realization that has been blunted by her roles as wife and mother, but in her rejection of her responsibilities she constantly tends toward vagueness rather than clarity.

In the mid-1950s, Van Wyck Brooks described *The Awakening* as a “small perfect book that mattered more than the whole life work of many a prolific writer.” In truth, *The Awakening* is not quite “perfect.” Chopin loses some of her power when she moves from Grand Isle to New Orleans. The guests at her dinner party, characters with names such as Mrs. Highcamp and Miss Mayblunt, are two-dimensional and wooden, and at times the symbolic connotations of incidents seem too unvaried. *The Awakening*, certainly, would be embarrassed by comparison with a large, panoramic novel of marital infidelity such as Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (1875–77; English translation, 1886). Within its limits, however, it reveals work of the finest craftsmanship, and it is a novel that continues to linger in the reader’s consciousness well after it has been read.

Chopin was not prolific; all but a few of her best stories are contained in *Bayou Folk* and *A Night in Acadie*, and she produced only one mature novel, but these volumes have the mark of genuine quality. Lyric and objective at once, deeply humane and yet constantly attentive to illusion in her characters’ perceptions of reality, these volumes reveal Chopin as a psychological realist of magical empathy, a writer having the greatness of delicacy.

Achievements

Kate Chopin’s reputation today rests primarily on her two short-story collections, *Bayou Folk* and *A Night in Acadie*, and her novel, *The Awakening*. *Bayou Folk* collects most of her fiction of the early 1890s set in Natchitoches Parish. The characters it generally portrays, although

belonging to different social levels, are Creole, Acadian (Cajun), or African American. In many cases they are poor. Not all of the stories in *Bayou Folk* are perfectly achieved, for when Chopin departs from realism into more fanciful writing she loses her power, but three of the stories in this volume—"Beyond the Bayou," "Désirée's Baby," and "Madame Célestin's Divorce"—are among her most famous and most frequently anthologized.

A Night in Acadie collects Chopin's stories from the middle and late 1890s. In many of the stories, the protagonists come to sudden recognitions that alter their sense of the world; Chopin's recurring theme is the awakening of a spirit that, through a certain set of circumstances, is liberated into conscious life. Passion is often the agent of liberation; whereas in the fiction of William Dean Howells, for example, characters frequently meet and fall putatively in love, in Chopin's fiction they do so from the inmost springs of their being. There is nothing putative or factitious about Chopin's characters who are brought to the point of love or desire. *A Night in Acadie* differs from *Bayou Folk* somewhat in the greater emphasis it gives to the erotic drives of its characters.

Chopin's authority in this aspect of experience, along with her concern with the interaction of the deeply inward on the outward life, sets her work apart from other local-color writing of the time. In her early novel *At Fault*, she had not as yet begun to probe deeply into the psychology of her characters. David Hosmer and Thérèse Lafirme are drawn too much at the surface level to sustain the kind of writing that Chopin does best. After she had developed her art in her stories, however, she was able to bring her psychological concerns to perfection in *The Awakening*. Chopin's achievement was somewhat narrowly bounded, without the scope of the fiction of manners that occupied Howells and Henry James, but in *Bayou Folk*, *A Night in*

Acadie, and *The Awakening*, Chopin gave to American letters works of enduring interest—the interest not so much of local color as of a strikingly sensuous psychological realism.

Selected Works

Short Stories

Bayou Folk, 1894

A Night in Acadie, 1897

The Complete Works of Kate Chopin, 1969

Novels

At Fault, 1890 (self-published)

The Awakening, 1899

Selected Bibliography

- Bonner, Thomas, Jr. *The Kate Chopin Companion*. Greenwood Press, 1988. Alphabetically arranged guide provides information on the more than 900 characters and more than two hundred places that affect the courses of Chopin's stories. Also includes a selection of her translations of pieces by Guy de Maupassant and one by Adrien Vely. Supplemented by interesting period maps and a useful bibliographic essay.
- Boren, Lynda S., and Sara de Saussure Davis, eds. *Kate Chopin Reconsidered: Beyond the Bayou*. Louisiana State UP, 1992. Collection of essays presents extensive discussion of *The Awakening*, with several contributors also addressing such stories as "Charlie," "After the Winter," and "At Cheniere Caminada." Other topics include a comparison of Chopin with playwright Henrik Ibsen in terms of domestic confinement and discussion of Chopin's work from a Marxist point of view.
- Hackett, Joyce. "The Reawakening." *Harper's Magazine*, vol. 307, no. 1841, Oct. 2003. Lengthy review of the Chopin collection *Complete Novels and Stories* provides an overview of Chopin's life and career and offers analysis and commentary on *The Awakening*, which Hackett describes as "the book that both culminated Chopin's career and ended it."

- Petry, Alice Hall, ed. *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin*. G. K. Hall, 1996. Comprehensive collection of essays on Chopin reprints early evaluations of the author's life and works as well as more modern scholarly analyses. Begins with a substantial introduction by the editor and includes original essays by such notable scholars as Linda Wagner-Martin and Heather Kirk Thomas.
- Seyersted, Per. *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*. 1969. Reprint. Louisiana State UP, 1980. Provides invaluable information about the New Orleans of the 1870s while examining Chopin's life, views, and work. Devotes substantial discussion not only to *The Awakening* but also to Chopin's many short stories. Seyersted views Chopin as a transitional literary figure, a link between George Sand and Simone de Beauvoir.
- Skaggs, Peggy. *Kate Chopin*. Twayne, 1985. Overview of Chopin's life and work includes a brief biographical chapter and discussion of the author's work in terms of the theme of the search for identity. Includes a chronology and a select bibliography.
- Streater, Kathleen M. "Adèle Ratignolle: Kate Chopin's Feminist at Home in *The Awakening*." *Midwest Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 3, Spring 2007, pp. 406–16. Presents analysis of the character Adèle Ratignolle, arguing that she is a less radical feminist than Edna Pontellier but is admirable because of her feminine virtue and ideals of motherhood. Maintains that Ratignolle, whom Chopin portrays as a sexually confident woman as well as a mother, defied the sexist stereotypes of the period.
- Taylor, Helen. *Gender, Race, and Religion in the Writings of Grace King, Ruth McEnery Stuart, and Kate Chopin*. Louisiana State UP, 1989. Chapter on Chopin is divided between the novels and the short stories, some of which are given extensive feminist readings. Focuses on Chopin as a local colorist who uses regional and historical themes to explore gender issues. Offers invaluable discussion of Chopin's literary influences, particularly Guy de Maupassant, and the intellectual climate of the time.
- Toth, Emily. *Kate Chopin*. William Morrow, 1990. Definitive biography is a thoroughly documented, exhaustive work, an excellent starting point for Chopin research. Covers not only Chopin's life but also her literary works, discussing many of the short stories in considerable detail and addressing the alleged banning of *The Awakening*. Includes a bibliography of Chopin's work and a helpful chronology of her life.
- _____. *Unveiling Kate Chopin*. UP of Mississippi, 1999. Using newly discovered manuscripts, letters, and diaries of Chopin, Toth examines the source of Chopin's ambition and passion for her art, arguing that she worked much harder at her craft than previously thought.

—Robert Emmet Long

Emily Dickinson

Poet

Born: December 10, 1830, Amherst, Massachusetts

Died: May 15, 1886, Amherst, Massachusetts

Biography

Emily Dickinson, born in Amherst, Massachusetts, on December 10, 1830, was the daughter of Edward Dickinson and Emily Norcross Dickinson. Her father, a graduate of Yale College, practiced law in Amherst, engaged in politics, and was treasurer of Amherst College for 37 years. After graduation from Amherst College and Harvard Law School, her brother, William Austin Dickinson, eldest of the three children, took up the practice of law in Amherst and succeeded his father in 1872 as college treasurer. At the time of Austin's marriage in 1856 to Susan Gilbert, his father built the couple a house on land adjoining the family homestead. Both Emily Dickinson and her younger sister, Lavinia, remained single, living in the family home all their lives. A year after Edward Dickinson's death in 1874, Emily Norcross Dickinson became paralyzed, and the sisters shared the task of caring for their invalid mother until her death in 1882. Thus, Emily Dickinson throughout her life was intimately a part of the daily routines of all members of her family. The closeness of ties regulated the poet's domestic existence.

Small in stature, with chestnut hair and brown eyes, Dickinson was remembered for her vivacity. Even as a girl her droll wit gave her singularity, and all her life she maintained an eager interest in people and books. During her youth

on one or two occasions she visited relatives in Boston, and her letters home report events with sprightly detail. Having completed her preparatory training at Amherst Academy, at 16 she was admitted to the second-year class at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in September 1847. Though Dickinson was enthusiastic about her new life there, at least during the first months, and completed the year creditably, she did not return to graduate. Early in 1855 she and Lavinia spent a month in Washington, DC, with their father, then a member of Congress. During the years 1864 and 1865, she was compelled to stay for several months in Cambridge and Boston to undergo treatment for an eye affliction. Other than these early sojourns, the poet remained at home, tending to her domestic duties and her art.

Though none of Dickinson's early poetry survives, the supposition is that she began writing verse in her early 20s. Benjamin Newton, a young law student in her father's office, encouraged this pursuit but died in 1853. His importance is reflected in the poet's continued references to him as her earliest guide. She seems to have experienced seven or eight years of great poetic creativity, commencing in 1858. In that year she began collecting into "volumes" the brief, neatly transcribed lyrics that for the most part were known only to a few people during her lifetime. These packets each consist of a few



Emily Elizabeth around 1840. (Detail from painting by Otis Allen Bullard)

sheets of folded stationery, loosely threaded at the spine. By 1862 Dickinson clearly felt enough assurance in the quality of her verse to respond to Thomas Higginson's *Atlantic Monthly* article "Letter to a Young Contributor." She enclosed with her letter four poems, asking, "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?" Thinking the poet wished to publish (according to the poet, something she never intended), Higginson apparently responded by describing her original approach to metric and rhyme patterns as "spasmodic" and "uncontrolled" and by suggesting that she defer publishing. Although Dickinson never took Higginson's conventional advice, she counted him among her closest friends, and they maintained a correspondence until the poet's death.

In fact, after 1870, letters became almost Dickinson's sole way of maintaining association

with her large number of friends. It is in this manner that she "published" many of her poems, either incorporating a poem into the text of her missive or enclosing it with the letter. Over the years many friends thus came to know her work. Along with Higginson, these included her sister-in-law, Susan Dickinson; Samuel Bowles, publisher of the *Springfield Republican*; Elizabeth and Josiah Holland, Bowles's associates and founders of *Scribner's Monthly*; and the poet and novelist Helen Hunt Jackson. Fewer than a dozen poems are known to have been published in Dickinson's lifetime, all anonymously, and most of them surreptitiously by friends who wished to see them in print.

A source of conflict in Dickinson studies centers on several draft letters, very passionate and sensual but addressed only to "Master." For decades, scholars tried to identify this correspondent and connect this person with both the poet's reclusive behavior and her poetry. A popular reading suggested that Dickinson lived at home and wrote poetry because of a broken heart. Beginning especially in the 1980s, feminist scholars and cultural studies have focused instead on the limited possibilities open for women at that time. Feminist scholars have also defined the poet's seclusion as a strategic retreat, her method of giving herself the time and space needed in order to write the 1,775 poems that compose her opus.

Dickinson died on May 15, 1886, of complications arising from Bright's disease, a form of kidney disease characterized by nephritis. After her death, Lavinia Dickinson discovered the many hundred manuscript poems, and she persuaded Mabel Loomis Todd, who in turn persuaded Higginson, to edit a slender volume: *Poems* (1890). Though the reviews were somewhat discouraging, the demand for the volume was heartening, and in the following year the two editors brought out *Poems: Second Series*.

Todd edited two volumes of Dickinson's letters in 1894, and two years later a further selection of verses: *Poems: Third Series*. No more appeared until Emily Dickinson's niece Martha Dickinson Bianchi issued *The Single Hound* in 1914, followed by *Further Poems* in 1929 and *Unpublished Poems* in 1936. In 1945 Todd and her daughter Millicent Todd Bingham brought out *Bolts of Melody*; with its appearance, virtually all the Dickinson poems were finally in print.

Analysis

The distinguishing nature of Dickinson's revolutionary poetry is its conciseness and intensity. The lyrics are brief, unlike the loquacious poems of Walt Whitman, her contemporary who also eschewed the conventions of the day reflected in such works as those by the popular "fireside poets." Dickinson's poems are often described as being concerned with such "flood subjects" as the phenomena of nature and the themes of love, death, and immortality. Her prosodic patterns all stem from meters familiar to her in hymn books, but her skill at introducing new rhymes, metric forms, and varying poetic feet—often within a single poem—are originalities that have given added richness to versification and in many ways set the stage for the modern poets. Never commonplace, her language draws upon the homely phrases native to her speech. Her diction is laconic, stripped to the fewest words in order to gain power. She delighted, like the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets, in the paradox: in balancing side by side the concrete and the abstract, the minute and the transcendent, the serious and the comic, the usual and the least expected. The unconventionality of her style no longer offends, as it appears to have done before the public was awakened to her true inventiveness, for it is now recognized as the manner by which her startling paradoxes are quickened and given their immediacy.

Achievements

Though almost entirely unpublished in her lifetime (at most 10 poems were published during her life), Emily Dickinson's originality places her, alongside Whitman, at the pinnacle of the American literary landscape.

While she was a prolific poet, penning nearly 1,800 poems (most of which were discovered by her family after she died) she was not understood or recognized during her life. The first collection of her poems was not published until 1890. Despite her near publication anonymity during her life, poets Hart Crane and Alan Tate were two of the first High Modernist poets to promote interest in her writings and to bring them to the fore. Today, there is much interest in her work and life.

Dickinson's home is now a popular museum destination, The Emily Dickinson Museum (The Homestead) and her brother's home is also a registered museum (The Evergreens). The Homestead has its own Instagram page with over 5,000 followers.

Selected Works

Poetry

Poems, 1890

Poems: Second Series, 1891

Poems: Third Series, 1896

The Single Hound, 1914

Further Poems, 1929

Unpublished Poems, 1936

Bolts of Melody, 1945

The Poems of Emily Dickinson, 1955 (3 volumes; edited by Thomas H. Johnson)

The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, 1960 (edited by Thomas H. Johnson)

Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems, 1962 (edited by Thomas H. Johnson)

The Gorgeous Nothings: Emily Dickinson's Envelope Poems, 2013 (edited by Jen Bervin and Marta Werner)

Letters and Correspondence*Letters*, 1894 (2 volumes)*The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 1958**Selected Bibliography**

Barnstone, Alike. *Changing Rapture: Emily Dickinson's Poetic Development*. UP of New England, 2006. A study of Dickinson's poetry that challenges the notion that she wrote at the same level and in the same style throughout her career. This work chronicles her progression as a writer and breaks her poetry into four distinct stages that exemplify her growth and changing style from youth through old age.

Bervin, Jen, and Marta L. Werner, eds. *The Gorgeous Nothings: Emily Dickinson's Envelope Poems*. New Directions, 2013. The first full-color facsimile edition of Dickinson's manuscripts from later in her career. Presents all 52 so-called enveloped writings, reproduced in full color with an accompanying transcription.

Boruch, Marianne. "Dickinson Descending." *The Georgia Review*, vol. 40, 1986, pp. 863–77. Boruch, a gifted writer and poet, pays tribute to Dickinson in this lively, conversational discussion. She criticizes the parasitic "cottage industry" that feeds off speculative details of Dickinson's life and praises and explains Dickinson's heavy use of dashes. Includes a good explication of "I Heard A Fly Buzz" and notes to other criticism throughout. Contagious interests and excellent writing.

Carruth, Hayden. "Emily Dickinson's Unexpectedness." *Ironwood*, vol. 14, 1986, pp. 51–57. This essay, one of seven in a special Dickinson issue, declares Dickinson's significance in Western literature and urges readers to read her as a poet, without constant reference to useless biographical information. Carruth explains four poems with great skill and sincerity, without overusing intellectual jargon.

Dickenson, Donna. *Emily Dickinson*. Berg, 1985. A well-researched and accessible literary biography meant to fill the gap between the detailed

scholarly criticism and the outdated popular image of Dickinson as the lovelorn recluse. The author does not try to make the poet's life explain her poetry, nor does she stretch the poetry to fit the life. The notes after each chapter indicate useful avenues for further study.

Dickinson, Emily. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Edited by Thomas H. Johnson. Little, Brown and Co., 1960. The text of the three-volume edition with the variant readings omitted.

_____. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Edited by Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward. 3 vols. Harvard UP, 1958. The definitive editions of Dickinson's poetry and letters. They have been arranged in the most accurate chronological order possible and numbered. In 1890, the first collection of Dickinson's poems was brought out by Mabel Loomis Todd and Higginson, with two more volumes in 1891 and 1896, all in disorderly, random selections, with gross editorial violations of the poet's spelling and syntax. Johnson has therefore done an invaluable service to American literary scholarship by taking Dickinson's jottings, scribbles, and semifinal drafts and sorting them out. Even so, his choices of alternative language have sometimes been questioned by other Dickinson specialists.

_____. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Edited by Thomas H. Johnson. 3 vols. Harvard UP, 1955. "Including variant readings critically compared with all known manuscripts."

Eberwein, Jane Donahue. *An Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia*. Greenwood Press, 1998. Edited by a founding board member of the Emily Dickinson International Society as well as a professor of English. Covers a wide range of topics, from people important in Dickinson's life to her stylistic traits.

Farr, Judith. *The Passion of Emily Dickinson*. Harvard UP, 1992.

Ferlazzo, Paul, ed. *Critical Essays on Emily Dickinson*. G. K. Hall, 1984. Contains 32 essays that range in publication date from 1890 (Thomas Wentworth Higginson's "Preface to *Poems* by Emily

- Dickinson”) to 1984. Includes a solid gathering of writings by well-known critics, Dickinson scholars, and both nineteenth- and twentieth-century poets. A brief, comprehensive, and well-documented survey.
- Grabher, Gudrun, Roland Hagenbüchle, and Cristanne Miller, eds. *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*. U of Massachusetts P, 1998. A collection of up-to-date essays covering Dickinson’s poetry, poetics, and life. Useful reference with extensive bibliography.
- Habegger, Alfred. *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson*. Random House, 2001.
- Juhasz, Suzanne, ed. *Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson*. Indiana UP, 1983. The title essay explains how feminist criticism can correct some partial or “false” criticism that has always split Dickinson into “woman” and “poet”—elements that should go together. Bibliography.
- MacNeil, Helen. *Emily Dickinson*. Pantheon Books, 1986. In this short critical biography intended for the general reader, the author reveals how strongly Dickinson distinguished between oral expression, which is restrained by convention, and written self-expression. Includes a bibliography, an index, and eight pages of plates.
- Robinson, John. *Emily Dickinson: Looking to Canaan*. Faber & Faber, 1986. Accurate facts, deft insights, and a readable prose style make this volume of the Faber Student Guide series a useful introduction. Robinson reveals a Dickinson who sought to escape from history and time and whose work was satiric, yet defined by Protestant ethics.
- Sewall, Richard B. *The Life of Emily Dickinson*. 2 vols. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974. The most comprehensive Dickinson interpretive biography. Sewall devotes his first volume to Dickinson’s family, his second to her friends, and intertwines her life with both circles with great tact, sympathetic understanding, and impressive learning. The prose is clear and often eloquent. An admirable modern literary biography.
- _____, ed. *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Prentice-Hall, 1963. A rich and diverse collection of critical essays, displaying an almost bewildering range of interpretive views. Such important critics and scholars as Charles Anderson, R. P. Blackmur, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and George Whicher are represented.
- Wineapple, Brenda. *White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson*. Knopf, 2008. This book provides the history and details of their friendship and the role he played in publishing her poetry.

—Anna Dunlap Higgins