

Grace Productions

# Emily Dickinson: Her Poetry & Her Life!

By Ginger Grace

## Study Guide

### **ABOUT THE PLAY**

Based on the life and poems of Emily Dickinson, “*Emily Dickinson: Her Poetry & Her Life*” is an inspiring biographical portrait of a famous and eccentric spinster, who just happens to be one of America’s greatest literary figures.

### Ginger Grace stars as the passionate and mysterious poet

Emily Dickinson who takes us on a delirious romp through her life and times. Wit, wonder & wisdom are the order of the day! The audience finds itself in the midst of life-changing events and relationships as Emily defies the conventions of her time – and creates poetry for the ages. At times, Emily steps out of the play, calls out for ideas from the audience, weaves them into the fabric of the piece – and now, the possibilities are limitless!

Emily Dickinson remained secluded within the house and gardens of her father’s estate “The Homestead” for the last 30 years of her life while she created over 1,700 unpublished poems.

Playwright Ginger Grace’s script seamlessly weaves poetry and prose together in an entertaining and anecdotal revelation of Dickinson’s life and art, creating a portrait of the poet as a woman of deep sensitivity and lively intelligence with a wicked sense of humor. Love, Humor, Hope, and “that pale sustenance, Despair” drives Emily to speak out in her own unique voice through each word she puts on paper. The audience has simply to open up their hearts and embrace her genius in order to tap into their own!



Photos by Gerry Goodstein

*Emily once said “sometimes I am so amazed with life, I don’t know what to do with myself.” With this riveting fascination for life -- Emily*

*Dickinson's poems are  
immortal!*

## **ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT/ACTOR**

**Ginger Grace** is delighted to be returning to Fox Cities Performing Arts Center and bringing in **EMILY DICKINSON: HER POETRY & HER LIFE!** An actor, playwright and teacher – her credits include National Tour: *The Presidents* (opposite Rich Little) playing all the First Ladies from Jackie Kennedy to Hillary Clinton. Off-Broadway: *The Glass Menagerie* (directed by Austin Pendleton & Peter Bloch: *The Wild Project*). Her interactive performance piece *The First Ladies Coalition* (directed by Austin Pendleton) has played throughout the Northeast.

Other Off-Broadway credits include 4 years under the direction of Christopher Martin at Classical Stage Company (CSC) where she played leading roles in *Faust, Parts I & II*; *Peer Gynt*; *The Cherry Orchard*; *The Ghost Sonata*; *Wild Oats*; *Hamlet*, adapted by Karen Sunde; and Aeschylus's *The Oresteia*. With Mississippi Mud Productions: *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Vieux Carre* (directed by and playing opposite Austin Pendleton).

Favorite Regional Roles include: *Eleanor Roosevelt: Her Secret Journey*; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*; and *Doubt*.

She performs throughout the country with her two shows on Emily Dickinson: *The Belle of Amherst* (by William Luce) and *Inside Emily Dickinson: Her Poetry & Her Life* (an interactive performance piece written by Ms. Grace).

Film Work includes: *WEDDING MARCH*, Winner: PBS Reel 13 Competition and Amsterdam Short Film Festival; *6-Minute Mom*; and *The Trouble With Tuesdays*.

Ms. Grace has worked extensively with the CASA Program, helping inner city school children create their own shows – and thrives on bringing out the voices of children in the theater!

## **ABOUT EMILY DICKINSON**

**Emily Dickinson** was America's first great poetess, and perhaps, its greatest. She was born in Amherst, Massachusetts in 1830 into a New England Puritan heritage. She lived the last 30 years of her life at home, surrounded only by her immediate family, gaining notoriety as an eccentric and romantic recluse until her death in 1886.

Emily's father had an enormous library and she was a voluminous reader. Emily began writing at a very young age – and, with the greatest of these classical writers found right in that library serving as her earliest inspiration!

Emily Dickinson wrote 1,775 poems. Works that she submitted to editors were so daring in form and substance that they defied classification. Except for a very few, her poems were not published until after her death in 1890. At that time, her editors made what they thought were 'improvements,' changes so that her poems would more closely fit the 'fashions of the day.' Finally, in 1955, her poems were published as Emily herself had intended.

Emily Dickinson was an innovator of form. She conducted a passionate inquiry into the nature of love, life and mortality. Dickinson has been the subject and inspiration for Broadway plays, films, television specials and a ballet, *Letter to the World*, created by Martha Graham.

In addition to her poems – many of the voluminous amount of letters she wrote -- were saved and are now available in book form!

*"I find ecstasy in living — the mere sense of living is joy enough."*

# **ACTIVITIES**

## **LIBRARY EXPLORATION**

**1. READ POEMS** written by Emily Dickinson. Form ‘Poetry Circles’ in which you select one of these poems, and discuss how the language, (“the chiefest words”), adds phosphorescence, imagery and emotion to her writing.

**2. “YOUR TRIBUTE TO EMILY”**  
Identify 3 of your favorite subjects (or themes) in the poems of Emily Dickinson. Then, write a poem of your own which includes these 3 subjects (or themes).

**3. READ LETTERS** of Emily Dickinson.  
What kind of personality do they reflect?

**4. BRING IN INFORMATION FROM BIOGRAPHIES or ESSAYS**  
on Emily Dickinson. Describe something in Emily’s life that has personal meaning for you.

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

# **VISUAL ART & PERFORMANCE EXPLORATION**

- 1. DRAW or PAINT** images from Emily's poems.
  
- 2. CREATE COLLAGES** which illustrate the poems and/or life of Emily Dickinson.  
Bring in Pictures or Illustrations found in newspapers, magazines, or on the internet for this project.
  
- 3. CREATE A POSTER** that embodies Emily's life. (One Image "that will entice you to enter her world").
  
- 4. "CLAIM A POEM AS YOUR OWN"** Select a favorite poem (of Emily's) and recite it for the class. Then, explain what feelings and emotions it elicits in you, so that you "CLAIM IT AS YOUR OWN."
  
- 5. RECITE THE POEM IN STARKLY DIFFERENT STYLES.** Form small groups. Each group will have a different poem written by Dickinson. Discusses its meaning and ideas. Then, while remaining true to the core meanings discovered, several students will recite their poem with radically different moods, expressiveness and performance styles.
  
- 6. "RECITATIONS ACROSS THE AGES"** One student recites one of Emily's poems, followed by another student's presentation of a modern-day poet. (ie. Something from Russell Simmons' "Def Poetry Jam", Robert Frost or Maya Angelou...). Then, compare these POEMS OF DIFFERENT ERAS, and explore what makes them ageless.
  
- 7. DEVELOP ACTIVITIES THAT RELATE TO THE PLAY.**  
**"A NEWSPAPER REPORTER TRAVELS TO AMHERST"**  
One student will play this Reporter of the 1860's who seeks out (desires) an interview with Emily.
  - a. Will she meet with the Reporter?
  - b. On what condition? Are there any specific conditions for the meeting?
  - c. If so, conduct the Interview. (Special Note: Reporter should prepare a list of questions).
  - d. The student who plays Emily should research her life and be motivated by a love for the poetry of Emily Dickinson.
  - e. The Reporter will interview other characters in the town (to be played by students in the class): Emily's father, sister (Vinnie), brother (Austin), schoolteacher (Mary Lyon), Franklin John Huffington, Sue Gilbert Dickinson and other of the locals. All students who play these characters should base their answers on their knowledge or perception of Emily's life and poems, as well as on their own creative impulses!

## **LIST OF POEMS WITHIN THE PLAY & WORDS FOR EXPLORATION**

*Emily Dickinson's poems were not titled and therefore have been indexed by their first line.  
Listed below most poems: Words for Exploration*

There is no frigate like a book  
**FRIGATE**

The child's faith is new  
**SCRUPLE**  
**SHAM**

Tell all the truth but tell it slant,  
**CIRCUIT**  
**INFIRM**

If I can stop one heart from breaking,  
**VAIN**

I dwell in possibility,  
**IMPREGNABLE**  
**GABLES**

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,  
**REVERY**

I'll tell you how the sun rose,  
**AMETHYST**  
**STILE**

It was the brave Columbus  
**NOTIFIED**  
**RESIDE**

I was the slightest in the house,  
**MINT**

I stepped from plank to plank  
**PRECARIOUS**  
**GAIT**

Surgeons must be very careful  
**INCISIONS**  
**CULPRIT**



Safe in their alabaster chambers,  
**ALABASTER**  
**STOLID**  
**SAGACITY**  
**CADENCE**

You'll know it—as you know 'tis Noon—  
**INTUITION**  
**ASSERT**  
**TERMS**

*Continued...*

***Words Contained (not in Poetry), but  
In Dialogue of Play for Exploration:***

Exultation is the going.

EXULTATION  
HEADLANDS

A spider sewed at night

ARC

A great hope fell,

CUNNING  
TROUGHS

I'm nobody! Who are you,

BOG

I cannot live with you,

AJAR  
SUSTENANCE

Some keep the Sabbath

BOBOLINK

Will there really be a "Morning,"

PILGRIM

After great pain a formal feeling comes,

CEREMONIOUS

Had I not seen the sun

BORNE

She died – this was the way she died,

"Hope" is the thing with feathers,

PERCHES  
EXTREMITY

They say that "Time assuages"

ASSUAGE  
SINEWS

I reason earth is short,

ABSOLUTE  
VITALITY

This is my letter to the world,

COMMITTED

PHOSPHORESCENCE  
CIRCUMVENT  
EDIFIED  
FLEETING  
RIVETED

***ACTIVITY: List Your Favorite***

**Words** —Words that have Phosphorescence.

Then, write a short poem using these words and the specific images they create.

# HISTORICAL EXPLORATION

1. **WRITE A ‘LEGEND’, ESSAY OR POEM** about life for a woman in 1860’s America.
2. **WRITE A POEM THAT REFLECTS YOUR FEELINGS ON THE WARS GOING ON IN THE WORLD TODAY.** The years of the Civil War were the most prolific for Emily. In her own words: “My wars are laid away in books...”).
  - i. Why do you think she was compelled to write so much during such a dark time and place in our country’s history?
  - ii. What is the importance to write of one’s feelings, especially during a time of national turmoil?
3. **RESEARCH THE “FIRE AND BRIMSTONE” RELIGION OF EMILY’S DAY.** Compare it to the wide variety of faiths and spiritual ideologies which are practiced in our country today.
4. **“A CHRONICLER OF GREAT STORIES”:** ‘Interview’ someone in your family - someone from an older generation. (Assignment: “Get this relative to tell a story of theirs very ‘unlike’ our times today. By putting their story in writing – you will become a chronicler of their time – a “keeper” of their story – or stories!”) Following this, write a poem about an event in this relative’s life that surprised or interested them the most!

# FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

1. EMILY DICKINSON: HER POETRY & HER LIFE! is a one-woman show, but the stage is peopled with other characters in Emily's life. Who are the other characters that are mentioned, but not seen in the play? How were they brought to life by the actress and the playwright?
2. Emily Dickinson was a recluse who spent her life writing poetry. She wrote about what she felt and what she perceived. At times she used only her imagination (especially when writing about places outside the 'realm of Amherst') – rather than on experience as a basis for her writing. Do you think this made her poetry better?
3. What is the difference between a poem and an essay? Do you think a poem should rhyme?
4. When Emily's poems were finally published, four years after her death by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, he changed some of the words to make them "rhyme" so that they would be more "sellable" and he gave "titles" to the poems (which Emily wrote 'untitled'). This volume went through 11 editions and was a great success. Finally, in 1955, the poems were put back into their original form (as written by Emily!). How would you feel if someone "changed" your work – without your permission to make it more "sellable"? Do you think this still happens today? How? And Why?
5. RUSSELL SIMMON'S DEF POETRY JAM, (the Tony-Award Winning Production that played on Broadway), was filmed for HBO. If you have had the opportunity to see it, "What do you think Emily would think of it"?
6. Here is what a critic said about DEF POETRY JAM: "a powerful message – intelligent, edgy and provocative – that will open your eyes to a changing world." After seeing "EMILY DICKINSON: HER POETRY & HER LIFE!" describe how that quote could apply to Emily Dickinson's poetry as well.
7. In what other situations have you heard poetry read – or set to music? What would Emily think of these situations?
8. After seeing the play, describe what Emily Dickinson was like. Do you know anyone like her? Describe her (or him). What do you have in common with Emily? Do you think that she chose the life she did because she was a woman?