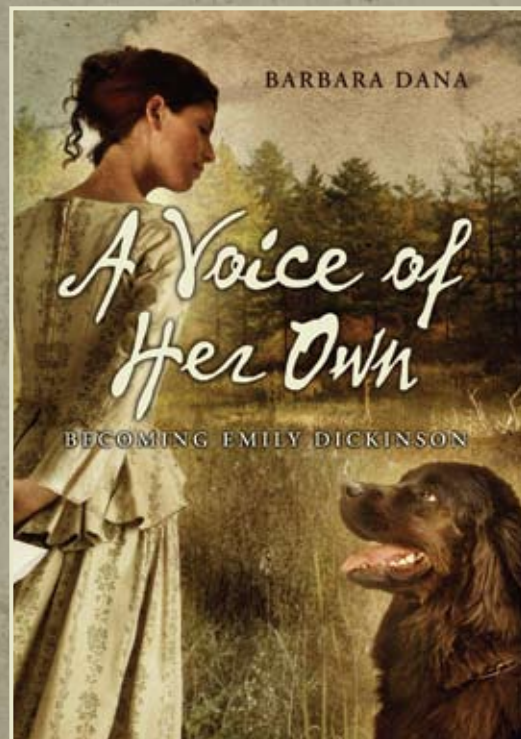


# *A Voice of Her Own*

BECOMING EMILY DICKINSON

BY BARBARA DANA

## *Teaching Guide*



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### **About the Book**

Long before she was recognized as a great American poet, Emily Dickinson was a spirited girl challenged to define herself on her own terms. In *A Voice of Her Own: Becoming Emily Dickinson*, Barbara Dana re-creates Emily's girlhood, capturing the cadences of her unique voice and bringing her to radiant life. The story begins in 1840, when nine-year-old Emily moves from the Dickinsons' ancestral Homestead to a house on North Pleasant Street, both in Amherst, Massachusetts. The book ends in 1855, when the family returns to the Homestead, where Emily remained until her death. As the narrative unfolds, Emily realizes that she must be a Poet and that she must make sacrifices to be true to her Self.

## Discussion Questions

1. What were Edward Dickinson's positive and negative qualities? Would you like him for a father? Why or why not? How did he influence Emily in finding her voice?
2. Describe Emily Norcross Dickinson. Why did young Emily not want to assume the same roles as her mother?
3. Describe Emily's relationship with her brother, Austin. What were their Night Talks? How did Austin encourage Emily? Do you have a sibling who understands you and with whom you discuss important issues? For additional insight, research whether or not Emily and Austin remained close later in life.
4. How were Emily and her sister, Lavinia, similar? How were they different? What might their choice of pets suggest about their personality differences?
5. In the mid-nineteenth century, half of the United States was illiterate; yet Amherst, Massachusetts, promoted literacy beyond what would be expected for a town of its size. What types of literature influenced Emily's personal growth? Consider newspapers, literary magazines, bookstores, and educational institutions.
6. Death affected Emily's formative years and colored much of her poetry. Why might death have seemed more "real" in the 1800s than it does today? Keeping in mind Emily's preoccupation with death, why do you think she wore white exclusively as she grew older?
7. How did Emily's relationship with God and the church influence her poetic voice?
8. What books did Emily read? Were any of these books written by women? Who were her favorite authors? Were any of them poets? Did Emily read books by contemporary authors? How did Emily's reading influence her poetry?
9. How were Emily's interests and insights determined by her natural surroundings? Why did flowers often accompany her poems as gifts to friends? Do you think Emily was more attuned to nature than young people are today? Explain.
10. What types of things did Emily do with her friends that you do with yours? How did her friends help Emily find her poetic voice? Research Emily's childhood friends to learn what happened to them beyond this book. Which ones also went on to become writers?
11. On several occasions, Emily suffered from the "Dungeon Fear" or "Fear of the Fear." What were these attacks? Why did she have them? How might they have contributed to her seclusion later in life? If Emily had discussed her fears with family or friends, do you think she would have felt better, or would she have been institutionalized?
12. Emily felt that her closest and most faithful friends were Words. How would you explain her fascination with words? Why do you think she became a poet rather than a novelist? Considering the various ways words are used, how is a writer of poetry different from a writer of prose?
13. Of all the influences on Emily Dickinson, which one do you think was most important in helping her develop her unique voice? Why was Emily compelled to write poetry? Do you have an interest that you find equally compelling? Describe.



## *Extension Activities*

1. Guide your students in researching Emily's later life, including family, friends, illnesses, travel, and the men with whom she formed professional and personal relationships. Have students explore the following questions during their research: Why did Emily Dickinson become a recluse? Why was she regarded as a "myth" in her own town and time? Why were only a few of her poems published during her lifetime? Why is she considered one of the greatest American poets?
2. Show your class the DVD of the one-woman play *The Belle of Amherst*, starring Julie Harris. This play inspired Barbara Dana's interest in Emily Dickinson, and "Belle of Amherst" was the title Emily bestowed upon herself when she was seventeen. Help students discover the subtleties of Emily's Amherst life as elucidated in dramatic form by encouraging them to note her dress, mannerisms, and sense of humor, as well as the furnishings in her home and what she chooses to tell the audience about her life.
3. Try these nineteenth-century projects with your students:
  - a. Emily enjoyed baking and worried what would happen if she was not at home to make her father's bread. Find recipes for rye and Indian (cornmeal) bread, black cake, gingerbread, and "puddings." Ask students to prepare these foods at home and then to bring them in to share with the class.
  - b. Have groups of students collect local flowers, press them, and prepare an herbarium similar to the one Emily and her friends made. Prepare a list of the flowers and trees mentioned in Barbara Dana's book and inquire at a local nursery whether these flowers grow in your area.
  - c. Before daguerreotypes were available, likenesses were preserved as silhouettes made of black cut-out paper glued onto another sheet of paper and framed. Project your students' profiles and help them make and frame their own silhouettes.
  - d. Charades was a popular game during Emily's teenage years. Play this game with your class using nineteenth-century literature, people, and places familiar to Emily Dickinson.
4. Emily's father was a member of the Whig party, and Emily grew up well versed in politics and current events, even though these topics were not always considered suitable for young ladies. Have your students research the early political parties in the United States and learn about their platforms, policies, and members. Ask your class to imagine that presidential contenders James K. Polk (Democrat) and Henry Clay (Whig) traveled by train to Amherst, Massachusetts, to give campaign speeches in 1844. Have pairs of students research, write, and deliver speeches as these candidates. How might Emily and her family have responded to hearing these two politicians speak?
5. Emily Dickinson attended the Amherst Academy and the Mt. Holyoke Seminary for Women. Many of the great centers of higher learning in the United States started in colonial New England and grew out of seminaries and universities offering training for the clergy. Assist your students in researching these early schools. What were their names and what courses of study did they offer? What famous men and women received their education at these institutions? Are these schools still in existence today?
6. Because religion played such an important role in Emily's life and poetry, help your students research the tenets of the various New England Protestant groups of the mid-1800s as well as the nature of the popular religious revivals. What topics were addressed in typical sermons? How did the renewed interest in religion inspire a wave of social activism, including promoting temperance and the abolition of slavery?

## Creative Writing Activities

1. As a class, read the poetry of Emily Dickinson aloud. What sorts of things did Emily write about? In what ways did her poetry not conform to the accepted standards of her time? Why did many critics feel her verses would not be popular? Have each student select a favorite Emily Dickinson poem and write a journal entry explaining why the poem is personally meaningful. Then have students recite these favorite poems to the class.
2. The poetry of Kay Ryan, 2008–2009 Poet Laureate of the United States, has been compared to that of Emily Dickinson. Share examples of Kay Ryan's poetry with your class. Ask students to compare these two poets, whose lives are separated by more than a century and a half. Then have each student write a poem inspired by one of Emily Dickinson's or Kay Ryan's poems.
3. Assign pairs of students a topic that Emily Dickinson wrote about, such as animals, death, nature, or self-awareness. After partners have discussed their topic, ask one person to write a poem about it while the other writes a short prose piece. Have students share their writing with their partners and then discuss the similarities and differences between poetry and prose. Which is more difficult to write? Why? Then assign student pairs a different topic and have those students who wrote poems the first time try their hands at prose, while those who wrote prose try poetry. Now that they have tried both writing forms, have any students changed their opinions about which one is more difficult?
4. Read some of Emily Dickinson's letters to your class and review the correct form for writing a letter. Then have each student write a letter seeking advice from a mentor or contacting a friend or relative who lives a great distance away. Why has the art of letter writing largely been abandoned in the twenty-first century? What valuable aspects of letter writing have been lost to new means of communication?
5. The Dickinson children subscribed to *Parley's Magazine*, while Mrs. Dickinson read *The Frugal Housewife*. Emily and her family also read *The Atlantic Monthly*, which is still published today. Share copies of these publications with your class. Then ask each student to write one of the following in the style of the corresponding publication: a story for children to be published in a modern version of *Parley's Magazine*, an article for a junior version of *The Atlantic Monthly*, or several sections for a modern edition of *The Frugal Housewife*.
6. Ask each student to read a portion of one of the books, plays, or essays read by Emily Dickinson, as documented in *A Voice of Her Own*. Then have each student write a short essay explaining how the work relates to one of Emily Dickinson's poems or letters.



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