



JEAN MUDGE PRODUCTIONS

Films, Videos & Books About Historic America

Study Guide for:

EMILY DICKINSON: A CERTAIN SLANT OF LIGHT

— Producer/Project Director, Co-writer - Jean Mudge

— Director, Co-writer - Bayley Silleck



In this film, Julie Harris takes viewers into Emily Dickinson's home in Amherst, Massachusetts, to couple and contrast facts about the poet with her extraordinary, original insights. A recluse in her father's mansion on Main Street, Dickinson composed almost all of her remaining work here. From cellar to cupola, the film invokes her "certain slant of light" while Harris recites Dickinson's poetry or prose.

Other locations are Amherst College, Mount Holyoke Seminary, the town cemetery next door to her childhood home, and commanding views on the shores of the Connecticut River. The paradox of Dickinson at home

exercising a limitless imagination, announced in her startling poem, "The Brain is Wider than the Sky," underlies the whole program.

Topics for Discussion

1. Emily Dickinson lived all of her life in her father's houses in Amherst, and for the most part, in the Main Street mansion. She traveled very little, and even within town, preferred to stay at home rather than socialize with neighbors. How could she have experienced enough of life to make her today one of America's leading poets, not only in this country but abroad?
2. One exception to Dickinson's increasing life as a recluse was the year, 1847-48, spent at Mount Holyoke Seminary in nearby South Hadley, Massachusetts. Under the influence of the seminary's vigorous founder, Mary Lyon, she was stretched both intellectually and socially. Still, Dickinson did not protest when her father, fearing for her health, brought her home. In what way did this experience outside her father's gates change Dickinson?
3. Almost all of Dickinson's over 1700 remaining poems were written from the perspective of the Main Street mansion. How does her poetry, figuratively or literally, reflect the way she saw life from here?
4. Next door to Dickinson in the Evergreens lived her brother Austin and his wife – Emily's best schoolgirl friend – Susan Gilbert Dickinson. What role did that house play in Dickinson's life and poetry?

5. The mystery surrounding aspects of Dickinson's life, especially her love life, was compounded not only by her solitary habits but also by her chosen white dress, which she began to wear in her thirties. What was the meaning of that dress?

Related Areas of Study

1. Women writers in the nineteenth century were often denigrated. Hawthorne, for example, dismissed popular female authors as "women scribblers." Modesty encouraged shunning publicity, and Dickinson had to be encouraged to submit poems for publication. But what were her true ambitions? And how did she react to a slight brush with publication when seven of her poems appeared in the Springfield Republican?

2. Dickinson and Whitman are often at the top of the list of nineteenth century American writers. They could not be more different, nor in some ways, more alike. Contrast and compare them.

Film Fact

One of Dickinson's most famous poems, "Because I Could Not Stop for Death," takes the reader through the speaker's lifetime via a carriage ride, leading to cemetery scenes and to the suggestion of a life beyond. In this process, the film shifts from positive to reverse negative. Why did the filmmakers decide to use this technique?