Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, to a family well known for educational and political activity. Her father, an orthodox Calvinist, was a lawyer and treasurer of the local college. He also served in Congress. Dickinson's mother, whose name was also Emily, was a cold, religious, hard-working housewife, who suffered from depression. Her relationship with her daughter was distant. Later Dickinson wrote in a letter, that she never had a mother.

Dickinson was educated at Amherst Academy (1834-47) and Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (1847-48). Around 1850 she started to compose poems - "Awake ye muses nine, sing me a strain divine, / Unwind the solemn twine, and tie my Valentine!" she said in her earliest known poem, dated March 4, 1850. It was published in Springfield Daily Republican in 1852.

The style of her first efforts was fairly conventional, but after years of practice she began to give room for experiments. Often written in the metre of hymns, her poems dealt not only with issues of death, faith and immortality, but with nature, domesticity, and the power and limits of language. From c.1858 Dickinson assembled many of her poems in packets of 'fascicles', which she bound herself with needle and thread. A selection of these poems appeared in 1890.

In 1862 Dickinson started her life long correspondence and friendship with Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823-1911), a writer and reformer, who commanded during the Civil War the first troop of African-American soldiers. Higginson later published Army Life in a Black Regiment in 1870. Of the four poems he received from Dickinson was the famous 'Safe in their Alabaster Chambers.'