

FAILURE? WHO SAYS?

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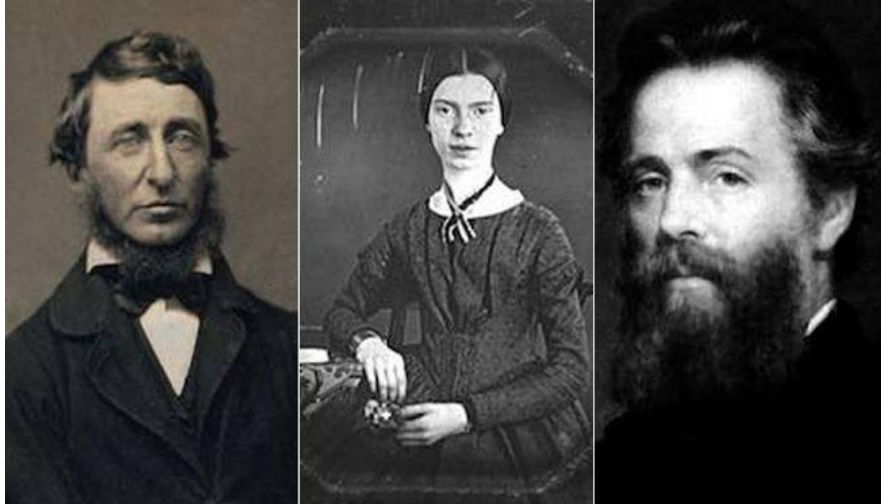
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10 famous people who died before they were household names

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Sometimes fame doesn't arrive until long after your gone, as the lives of Thoreau, Dickinson, and Melville prove. [Indeed,] fame is a fickle thing; it's elusive, it teases, it comes, it goes. At its most mischievous, it arrives with aplomb after those seeking it have died.

Among the following household names, not all actively sought fame; in fact, some may have assiduously avoided it (we're talking to you, Emily Dickinson). But whether they sought recognition or not, none of them could have known just how famous they would become posthumously. How profound it is to consider what unknown legacy may await us after we're gone.

The takeaway? Never give up. Who knows, you may become really famous after you die.

1. Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675)



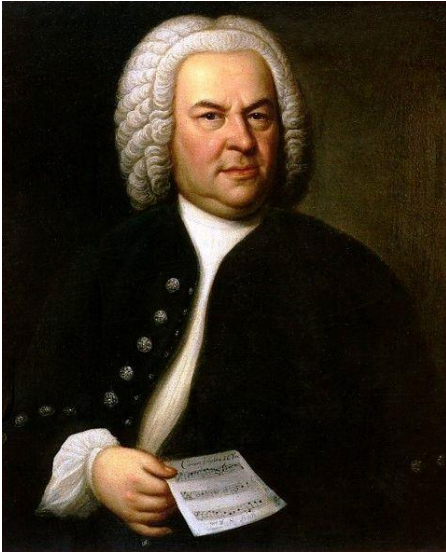
Vermeer painted 'Young Woman Seated at the Virginal' sometime between 1670 and 1672. (Photo: Johannes Vermeer [Public domain]/Wikimedia Commons)

The famed Dutch artist known for his paintings of domestic scenes of middle-class life was a mildly

successful local painter in his lifetime. But beyond the city of Delft, he was little known, and was certainly never wealthy. With 11 children, he worked both as an art-dealer and innkeeper along with his painting, yet it wasn't enough; his wife attributed his death the stress of financial pressure.

Upon his passing he quickly faded into obscurity and was omitted from surveys of Dutch art for centuries - until the discovery of a cache of paintings that was attributed to him in the 19th century, that is. He is now known as one of the great masters of Dutch painting; in 2004, "Young Woman Seated at the Virginal" (pictured here) sold at auction for \$30 million.

2. Johann Sebastian Bach, the composer (1685-1750)



Johann Sebastian Bach seen at age 61 in a portrait by Elias Gottlob Haussmann. (Photo: Elias Gottlob Haussmann [Public domain]/Wikimedia Commons)

It would be misleading to say that the German born Johann Sebastian Bach died before he was famous, since he was acclaimed for his talent as an organist. But he was not known as a composer, yet that is what he is most famous for now. Few of his works were published during his lifetime.

It wasn't until 1829 when German composer Felix Mendelssohn reintroduced Bach's "Passion According to St. Matthew" that Bach began to receive posthumous praise for the work of his musical compositions. Now he is generally regarded as one of the major composers of the Baroque period, if not one of the greatest composers of all time.

3. Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)



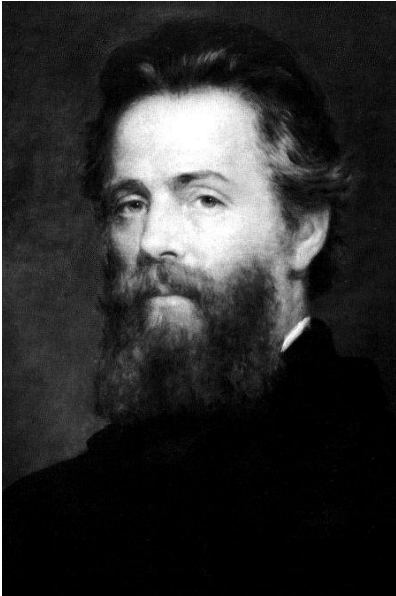
It was a biography written 30 years after his death, that brought Henry David Thoreau to the forefront. (Photo: villy [Public domain]/Wikimedia Commons)

Although the publication of "Walden" brought American author, poet and philosopher Henry David Thoreau modest success, his political writings had little

impact during his lifetime. He earned his living by working in a pencil factory, lecturing occasionally and by publishing essays in newspapers and journals. He never made much money, which probably suited him fine. But nearly three decades after his death, Henry Stephens Salt wrote a biography of Thoreau, earning him great posthumous fame.

His political writings went on to influence leaders like Mohandas Gandhi, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., U.S. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, and Leo Tolstoy, as well as artists and authors including Edward Abbey, Willa Cather, Marcel Proust, William Butler Yeats, Sinclair Lewis, Ernest Hemingway, Upton Sinclair, E.B. White, Lewis Mumford, Frank Lloyd Wright, Alexander Posey and Gustav Stickley. Not to mention all of us who love to take a meandering meditative walk in the woods.

4. Herman Melville (1819-1891)



Herman Melville had more financial success from his work as a customs inspector than he did from his writing. (Photo: Joseph O. Eaton and an unknown etcher/Wikimedia Commons)

Although the American-born writer from New York City had a flirtation with early success, his writing career took a nosedive after the publication of his second book. He continued writing, but after the age of 35, critical and financial success from writing remained elusive. By 1876, all of his books were out of print. All told, he earned a mere \$10,000 from writing.

He eventually took a job as a customs inspector on the New York docks, which finally brought him a secure income. He held the position for 19 years.

In the 1920s, a Melville biography written by Raymond Weaver brought renewed attention to the writer and sparked the “Melville Revival” by which the man finally got his due. Melville's opus, "Moby-Dick," is now hailed as one of the world's literary masterpieces.

5. Gregor Mendel (1822-1884)

Austrian-born Gregor Johann Mendel discovered the basic principles of heredity through experiments in his monastery garden, but both his Law of Segregation (dominant and recessive traits are passed on randomly from parents to offspring) and the Law of Independent Assortment (traits are passed on independently of other traits) were little promoted and mostly misunderstood by the contemporary scientific community.

In 1868, Mendel became a school abbot and between his schoolwork and failing eyesight, he pretty much abandoned science. Upon his death, his work was largely unknown. Yet during the ensuing years, other scientists began to refer to his early work; his system eventually proved to be



one of the foundational principles of biology, and many consider him to be the father of modern genetics.

6. Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)



This daguerreotype of Dickinson was taken around 1848. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

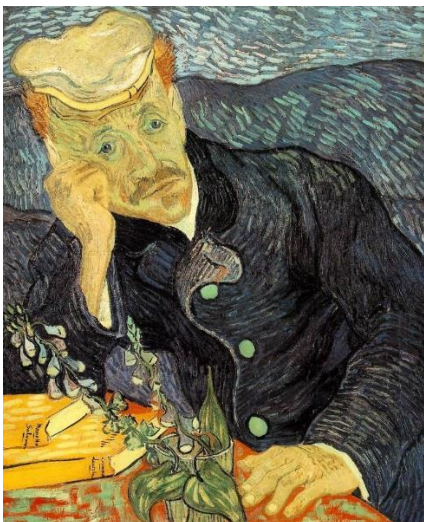
One of America's national treasures, the poet Emily Dickinson had a mere 10 poems

published while alive, and she may have been unaware of their publication. While she was extremely prolific as a poet and regularly shared her work with friends and family, she was not publicly recognized during her lifetime.

By the middle of her life, Dickinson lived in almost total physical isolation from the outside world, but no one is sure why she chose such a reclusive life. Upon her death, her sister Lavinia discovered 40 hand-bound volumes of nearly 1,800 of her poems; although Lavinia had promised to burn all of Emily's correspondence, fortunately for poetry lovers everywhere, no such instructions were given for her poems.

The first volume of her work was published posthumously in 1890 and the last in 1955; she remains one of the most highly regarded of American poets.

7. Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)



'Portrait of Dr. Gachet' was painted in June 1890, during the last few months of Van Gogh's life. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

Dutch-born Vincent van Gogh was a post-impressionist painter whose work was hugely influential after his death. Although he was a member of the artist community, his struggle with mental illness led to a number of stints at institutions and fresh starts, none of which had any lasting salubrious impact. He was known

amongst other artists and the art scene in general but remained poor and otherwise unknown. At the age 37, he died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

During his lifetime, he sold one painting; in 1990, "Portrait of Dr. Gachet" (pictured here) sold for \$82.5 million (that's about \$148.6 million, adjusted for current inflation) making it the sixth most expensive painting sold at the time.

8. Franz Kafka (1883-1924)



Franz Kafka had asked that all his unpublished work be destroyed upon his death. Luckily for us, that didn't happen. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

Born in Prague, writer Franz Kafka grew up in a middle-class Jewish family, and went on to study law and work in insurance. Although he wrote prolifically in the

evenings, few of his works were published when he was alive.

In 1923, he moved to Berlin to focus on writing, but died of tuberculosis shortly after — never knowing the huge impact that his work would have on future generations of writers and scholars.

Before his death, he requested that Max Brod, his friend and his literary executor, destroy any unpublished manuscripts. Brod defied this wish and in 1925 published "The Trial," and the rest is history. Kafka is now considered one of the most prominent writers to come out of the late 19th and early 20th century, and his name has even become an adjective. As defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary: "Kafkaesque: of, relating to, or suggestive of Franz Kafka or his writings; especially: having a nightmarishly complex, bizarre, or illogical quality."

9. Vivian Maier (1926-2009)

Born in New York City and raised in France, Vivian Maier moved to Chicago in 1956 where she spent most of her life as a nanny. But when not tending to her charges, the unassuming caretaker took to the streets, cataloging the people and sites with her handy *Rolleiflex* camera. Eventually, Maier became [...] destitute, but was ultimately taken care of by three of the children she had cared for earlier in her life. No one who knew her was aware of her secret life as a street photographer, a documentary-type genre of photography that relies on candid shots of strangers in public. Taking snapshots well into the late 1990s, Maier would leave behind more than 100,000 negatives, in addition to other forms of media.



In 2007, a young man working on a historical book of Chicago bought a mystery box of 30,000 Maier prints and negatives from a thrift auction house that had acquired the media from a storage facility, where Maier had been delinquent with her fees. Following her death, the man figured out who she was through an obituary, and he began sharing her work. Since then, her photographs have been exhibited all over the world, have appeared in print in numerous countries, and there is now a book and a [Oscar-nominated documentary film] about her and her work.

10. Stieg Larsson (1954-2004)

Anyone who observed a reader with a book on a subway, or plane, or beach, or basically anywhere [since] 2010 knows who Stieg Larsson is: the Swedish author of "The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo," "The Girl Who Played With Fire," and "The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets' Nest."

Although Larsson was known in Sweden as an outspoken journalist and editor, his legacy as a seriously famous writer is all posthumous. He died of a sudden heart attack in 2004. He had finished the trilogy of detective novels, none of which had yet been published.

So far, his trilogy has sold more than 73 million copies worldwide, and there's little indication that sales will ever cease.

