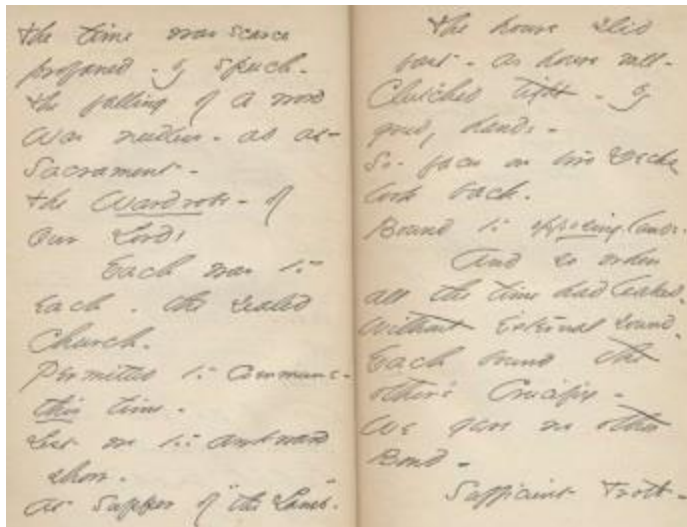


Teaching Emily Dickinson: A Common Core Close Reading Seminar



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GOALS

- To explore the poetry of Emily Dickinson, using close reading in order to develop useful discussion strategies for three of her poems.
- To frame questions that will engage students in finding key language tools that open the text for them and help them to make connections with relevant contexts and issues.

FROM THE FORUM

- In your experience have you found that Dickinson's poetry is especially appropriate to use with teenagers because of its emotional nature?
- What are we to make of Dickinson's unusual punctuation, capitalization, and metaphors?
- Are Dickinson's poems really all about death?
- To what extent is Dickinson reacting to Puritanism?



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*Daughters of Time: Creating Women's
Voice in Southern Story*
(1992)

When we do close reading, we go through a text carefully, examining and putting together all the striking elements of the text that produce its meanings. We trace patterns and make connections. As we read, we use as evidence the key, relevant language tools that a text gives us in order to gain a clear understanding of the author's ideas and purposes.

Some of the tools that are particularly important in reading poetry:

- the connotative and denotative meanings of words
- the impact of words as images (because of sound, diction, vividness, sensory effect)
- repetition of words and phrases
- figures of speech: metaphor, simile, metonymy, synecdoche, oxymoron
- logic and sequence of presentation or argument
- strategies of presentation or argument
- point of view (persona, speaker, voice)
- multiple perspectives
- the author's intent (to the extent we can discern it)
- tone and mood (stressing distinction between these)
- inference

Decide first what materials would you choose to provide BEFORE reading the poem including such information as:

- Biography
- Historical Contexts
- Allusions
- Vocabulary
- Outside critiques

"I ... am small, like the wren; and my hair is bold, like the chestnut burr;
and my eyes, like the sherry in the glass that the guest leaves."

"Christ is calling everyone here, all my companions have answered,
even my darling Vinnie believes she loves, and trusts him, and I am
standing alone in rebellion."

- Born December 10, 1830, died 1886.
- She lived in the time of the American Romantics (Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman), all interested in experimenting with language and poetic form (naming as knowing, structure, imagery, originality as ways of exploring, expressing, and defining or explaining the individual self); the poet as “seer.”
Transcendentalism stresses “Seeing,” especially seeing and relating/connecting nature and spirit (inwardness) through symbolism.

- Daughter of Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson, never married, and lived almost her entire life in Amherst, Massachusetts, with one or more members of her family.
- Her father was a prominent lawyer and civic leader who served in his state legislature and for one term as a US Congressman. He was authoritarian, and with Emily's mother and two siblings, became staunch members of the First Congregational Church of Amherst.
- Older brother Austin and younger sister Vinnie remained very close to her throughout her life. Emily alone in her family rejected church membership and often pronounced herself unable to "believe" in traditional religious faith.
- Reference: lines from "He Fumbles at Your Spirit" "This World is not Conclusion"

- Attended Amherst Academy, where she was particularly interested in science, and at age 15 began her first and only year of college, away from home, at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in nearby South Hadley, Massachusetts. Her interest in science and nature, cultivated in school, led to her predilection of using her poetry to question, to define, to illustrate the abstract through the concrete: Reference: “Faith is a fine Invention,” “Hope is the thing with Feathers.”
- Consciously turned away from marriage and began to write seriously at home, in the early 1850s.
- Myths: “reclusive,” antisocial, an “old maid,” did not want her poetry read or published.

Significance of these facts about the publishing history of her verse.

- She did not title her poems. Part of her strategy of indirection. Refer to “I’m Nobody”
- She used the dash and capital letters – conscious open-endedness, anti-tradition/authority? Belief in incompleteness?
- Few poems were published during her lifetime. By 1860 she had written over 150 poems and sewn them into packets. By 1865 she had over 1000. Shared with many friends. Saw her self as a writer, who took great care with language. (first volume of her poetry was not published until 1890, four years after her death.)
- “The Soul Selects her Own Society”
- Letter to Higginson:

Mr. Higginson, Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive? The Mind is so near itself—it cannot see, distinctly—and I have none to ask— Should you think it breathed—and had you the leisure to tell me, I should feel quick gratitude— If I make the mistake—that you dared to tell me—would give me sincerer honor—toward you— I enclose my name—asking you, if you please— Sir—to tell me what is true?

We will present the 3 poems using the R.W. Franklin 1999 “Readers Edition” in order to show Dickinson’s own unique (or idiosyncratic) use of dashes and capitalization of some nouns in her handwritten versions.

Franklin’s edition is now considered the definitive one, with the best transcription of her decisions about how she wanted her poems to look on the page.

Teachers must decide how much time to spend on Dickinson’s “trademarks” or whether to use versions that regularize the lines and capitalization to conform with “standard” grammar.

Dickinson's definition of poetry stresses power of images:

“If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?”

- Making image lists. We will begin the discussion of each poem by asking students to write an image list. While reading the poem, more than once, they will make a list of any word that has a strong visual and sensory impact, any word that is concrete, descriptive, evokes a feeling, is “photographable,” or that simply strikes them as important, for any reason.
- Grouping Images. After making a list, students can group images into categories based on similar sense or meaning. Teachers can offer categories based on themes or contradiction. Students can then look for patterns based on clusters of similar or contradicting images, on repetition, on key ideas.
- Recognizing key poetic devices (refer back to list) that enhance understanding.

- Dickinson did NOT give the poem this definitive title. Would you include this title in teaching the poem? Would you use versions that DO or DO NOT use capitals and dashes?
- Do you need to explain the allusion to “Boanerges”? or ask students to look up other particular words in the poem before they read it? Which ones? (prodigious and supercilious, omnipotent – a diction choice?)

Language Tools:

- Personification
- Extended metaphor
- Alliteration
- Diction

“I like to see it”

I like to see it lap the Miles -
 And lick the Valleys up -
 And stop to feed itself at Tanks -
 And then - prodigious step
 Around a Pile of Mountains -
 And supercilious peer
 In Shanties - by the sides of Roads -
 And then a Quarry pare
 To fit it's sides
 And crawl between
 Complaining all the while
 In horrid - hooting stanza -
 Then chase itself down Hill -
 And neigh like Boanerges -
 Then - prompter than a Star
 Stop - docile and omnipotent
 At it's own stable door –

~Franklin edition

I like to see it lap the miles,
 And lick the valleys up,
 And stop to feed itself at tanks;
 And then, prodigious, step
 Around a pile of mountains,
 And, supercilious, peer
 In shanties by the sides of roads;
 And then a quarry pare
 To fit its sides, and crawl between,
 Complaining all the while
 In horrid, hooting stanza;
 Then chase itself down hill
 And neigh like Boanerges;
 Then, punctual as a star,
 Stop--docile and omnipotent--
 At its own stable door.

~Poem Hunter regularized edition

“I like to see it”

I like to see it lap the Miles -
And lick the Valleys up -
And stop to feed itself at Tanks -
And then - prodigious step

Around a Pile of Mountains -
And supercilious peer
In Shanties - by the sides of Roads -
And then a Quarry pare

To fit it's sides
And crawl between
Complaining all the while
In horrid - hooting stanza -
Then chase itself down Hill -

And neigh like Boanerges -
Then - prompter than a Star
Stop - docile and omnipotent
At it's own stable door –

- Create an image list.
- Highlight words that are allusions, word pairs that are opposites, words that sound alike through similar endings or similar beginning sounds (alliteration).

Example: Alliteration: "*like*," "*lap*," "*lick*"; "*supercilious*," "*shanties*," "*sides*"; "*horrid*, *hooting*“; "*star*," "*stop*," and "*stable*"; "*docile*" and "*door*.”

“I like to see it”

I like to see it lap the Miles -
And lick the Valleys up -
And stop to feed itself at Tanks -
And then - prodigious step

Around a Pile of Mountains -
And supercilious peer
In Shanties - by the sides of Roads -
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To fit it's sides
And crawl between
Complaining all the while
In horrid - hooting stanza -
Then chase itself down Hill -

And neigh like Boanerges -
Then - prompter than a Star
Stop - docile and omnipotent
At it's own stable door -

- Using the concept of Personification, group images of action that suggest animal behaviors. Note the **contrast to any image that does NOT suggest an animal (star). Make a case for which animal or animals** are being described. What animal dominates (iron horse?).
- Also group images that oppose one another. Ex: docile and omnipotent, shanties, tank, and quarry (human) vs. valleys and hills (nature). Are there oppositions in diction as well? (formal or multisyllabic vs. simple, even childlike)

“I like to see it”

I like to see it lap the Miles -
And lick the Valleys up -
And stop to feed itself at Tanks -
And then - prodigious step

Around a Pile of Mountains -
And supercilious peer
In Shanties - by the sides of Roads -
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To fit it's sides
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In horrid - hooting stanza -
Then chase itself down Hill -

And neigh like Boanerges -
Then - prompter than a Star
Stop - docile and omnipotent
At it's own stable door –

Discussion Questions

- The poem is a riddle. What do riddles generally try to do? If the poem asks this “riddle”: what is being described here? then, what is your answer, and your proof?
- Note the poem’s beginning: “**I** like to see “**it**.” Throughout the rest of the poem, how are these two pronouns related?

“I like to see it”

I like to see it lap the Miles -
And lick the Valleys up -
And stop to feed itself at Tanks -
And then - prodigious step

Around a Pile of Mountains -
And supercilious peer
In Shanties - by the sides of Roads -
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Discussion Questions

- Does the poem give any clear indication of WHAT it is that the speaker “likes” or perhaps doesn’t like about the train? Point to specific images as evidence.
- Is the poem purely descriptive or does it suggest a definite attitude toward the train. Is the poem a commentary on what for Dickinson’s time was by some considered to be the threat of industrialization, or a new kind of conflict between Nature and Technology/ Progress?

Pre-Teaching Decisions:

“Because I could not stop for Death”

- Some editions of this poem drop stanza four. Any ideas why? Does the exclusion make a difference in its meaning? Would you include this information in your discussion?
- Are there any words you would ask students to define before reading the poem?

“Because I could not stop for Death”

Language Tools:

- Repetition with Variation (repeated words and grammatical constructions; “passing,” parallelism, verb tense)
- Classification
- Inference

“Because I could not stop for Death”

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He passed Us –
The Dews drew quivering and Chill –
For only Gossamer, my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity –

~Franklin edition

“Because I could not stop for Death”

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
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- Make your image list.
- Group and relate images of activity and images of passivity or inaction, motion vs. non-motion, and the shift from concrete images to abstract ones.
- Make a list of images that give a sense of TIME and those that give a sense of PLACE and those that give a sense of TEMPERATURE or feeling. How do these 3 kinds of images relate to one another? Note the one verb that is NOT in the past tense and consider why it is in the present tense?

“Because I could not stop for Death”

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He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He passed Us –
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For only Gossamer, my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –

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A Swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity -

Discussion Questions

- Visualize the scenes of the poem. At what point does the “scenery” become more abstract? Can you visualize the “house” in the 5th stanza? C
- Consider the relationship between the 3 figures in the carriage.

“Because I could not stop for Death”

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He passed Us –
The Dews drew quivering and Chill –
For only Gossamer, my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity -

Discussion Question

- “Map” the journey of the carriage, paying particular attention to the use of the verb “Passed.” Do you get a sense of some kind of progression or change in terms of what the speaker passes during the journey? Where do you begin to see a change from what seems “real” to what seems unreal or dreamlike?

“Because I could not stop for Death”

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He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
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The Roof was scarcely visible –
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Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity -

Discussion Questions

- Can you tell from the speaker's tone or imagery what she thinks or feels about her companion, Death – whether he is kindly or indifferent or cruel?
- Consider the words that describe the speaker's clothing. What do they indicate about her state of mind or her readiness for Death?

There is some potential confusion between “the Neighbor” in the first stanza, holding her lamp – and whether SHE holds it to “witness” her own goodbye or whether she holds it so that “WE” can witness her goodbye. Then, it seems as though “We” are the ones who are leaving and need the lamp. How would you handle this confusion, and would you begin your discussion of the poem with this problem?

“We grow accustomed to the Dark”

Language Tools:

- Slant rhyme
- Absence
- Simile
- Tone
- Mood

“We grow accustomed to the Dark”

We grow accustomed to the Dark --
 When light is put away --
 As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp
 To witness her Goodbye --

A Moment -- We uncertain step
 For newness of the night --
 Then -- fit our Vision to the Dark --
 And meet the Road -- erect --

And so of larger -- Darkness --
 Those Evenings of the Brain --
 When not a Moon disclose a sign --
 Or Star -- come out -- within --

The Bravest -- grope a little --
 And sometimes hit a Tree
 Directly in the Forehead --
 But as they learn to see --

Either the Darkness alters --
 Or something in the sight
 Adjusts itself to Midnight --
 And Life steps almost straight.

“We grow accustomed to the Dark”

We grow accustomed to the Dark --
When light is put away --
As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp
To witness her Goodbye --

A Moment -- We uncertain step
For newness of the night --
Then -- fit our Vision to the Dark --
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Either the Darkness alters --
Or something in the sight
Adjusts itself to Midnight --
And Life steps almost straight.

- Make your image list. Group images of dark or darkness or night, against images of light.
- Trace what happens, through imagery, to “The Bravest” in stanza four. Why do these things happen only to “the Bravest”?
- Note specific places in the poem where something is missing or absent, where there is a “gap” in logic, information, or wording. What is the effect for you, the reader, of these absences?

“We grow accustomed to the Dark”

We grow accustomed to the Dark --
When light is put away --
As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp
To witness her Goodbye --

A Moment -- We uncertain step
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Directly in the Forehead --
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Either the Darkness alters --
Or something in the sight
Adjusts itself to Midnight --
And Life steps almost straight.

Discussion Questions

- Note the use of the pronoun “We.” What does this indicate, in comparison to the “I” of other Dickinson poems.
- Look carefully at each appearance of the words “dark” and “darkness,” and the words connected with “night.” Does the scene around these words change? What is the “Larger Darkness” associated with?

“We grow accustomed to the Dark”

We grow accustomed to the Dark --
When light is put away --
As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp
To witness her Goodbye --

A Moment -- We uncertain step
For newness of the night --
Then -- fit our Vision to the Dark --
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Directly in the Forehead --
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Either the Darkness alters --
Or something in the sight
Adjusts itself to Midnight --
And Life steps almost straight.

Discussion Question

- Where does the scene change from a literal place (neighbor with lamp) to an interior or “inner” one (the brain). To what do you connect “The Larger Darkness”?

“We grow accustomed to the Dark”

We grow accustomed to the Dark --
When light is put away --
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A Moment -- We uncertain step
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Either the Darkness alters --
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Adjusts itself to Midnight --
And Life steps almost straight.

Discussion Questions

- Note the choice offered in the last stanza. Does the speaker indicate if one choice seems more likely or preferable to the other? If so, does one choice give the ending of the poem a more hopeful tone? Distinguish between the “tone” and the “mood” of the poem.
- Note the switch in the last line, where it is not “We” who are “erect” but “Life” is. What is the effect of this switch?

Final slide.

Thank you.