1

Lesson One

FOCUS:
Word Choice and the Value of a Dictionary

Note: This guide provides a general overview of Emily Dickinson and is not specifically related to *The Essential Emily Dickinson*, the NEA Big Read book selection that includes an introduction by Joyce Carol Oates.

Words are to a poet what clay is to a sculptor: the basic material of his or her art. Poets see the shape of words, listen closely to their sound, feel their weight. Before a poem can be appreciated for its deeper meanings, it must first be read literally. We often overlook words we can already define. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in *Nature*, "Every word … if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance. *Right* means *straight*; *wrong* means *twisted*. *Spirit* primarily means *wind*; *transgression*, *the crossing of a line*; *supercilious*, *the raising of the eyebrow*." Students should even look up words that are commonly used to understand better the careful, conscious choices poets make. Several words from assigned poems are already defined in the margins of this Teacher's Guide.

VOCABULARY WORDS

From "A Route of Evanescence"

Evanescence, *n.*
The event of fading and gradually vanishing from sight

Resonance, *n.*
1. Intensification and prolongation of sound, especially of a musical tone, produced by vibration
2. Richness or significance, especially in evoking an association or strong emotion

Cochineal, *n.*
A vivid red; a scarlet dye

Tunis, *n.*
The capital of Tunisia, on the northern coast of Africa

Discussion Activities

Dickinson found great joy in exploring the mysteries of nature, and some of her poems read like riddles. A concise and complex poem like the one below forces the reader to slow down and consider each word and image. Read this poem aloud to your students twice, and see if they can figure out that the poem describes a hummingbird.

A Route of Evanescence,
With a revolving Wheel –
A Resonance of Emerald
A Rush of Cochineal –
And every Blossom on the Bush
Adjusts it's tumbled Head – *
The Mail from Tunis – probably,
An easy Morning's Ride –

To understand this poem, students must know the definition of nouns such as "evanescence," "cochineal," and "Tunis." Also important is an understanding of a hummingbird's flight patterns, wing speed, and eating habits—things Dickinson would have noticed from her meticulous observations of her gardens and the forests. Taking the poem line by line, discuss the ways Dickinson's words evoke the particular qualities of this beautiful creature.

Writing Exercise

Have students create four-line poetic riddles. Students should choose an element from nature or an object. Ask them to use the dictionary to incorporate at least one surprising word into their riddles.

Homework

Have students read the Reader's Guide essays "Emily Dickinson, 1830–1886" and "The Publication of Dickinson's Poetry." Read Dickinson's poems "Fame is the one that does not stay –," "Fame is a fickle food," and "Success is counted sweetest."

** The incorrect apostrophe in line six of "A Route of Evanescence," is in Dickinson's manuscript.*

2

Lesson Two

FOCUS: Biographical Criticism

Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. It considers the ways age, race, gender, family, education, and economic status inform a writer's work. A critic might also examine how poems reflect personality characteristics, life experiences, and psychological dynamics. To understand some poems, readers need knowledge of the poet's biographical facts or experiences.

As explained in the Reader's Guide essays "Emily Dickinson, 1830–1886" and "The Publication of Dickinson's Poetry," Dickinson did not experience fame during her lifetime. However, fame is a subject that several of her poems explore. Although she sent about one hundred of her finest poems to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, in some ways he failed to be the mentor she needed, altering her poetry and publishing only a handful of her poems before her death. Still, though Dickinson was writing during a period that discouraged women writers, Higginson was one of few men who actively championed the reading and publication of work by women.

VOCABULARY WORDS

From "Fame is the one that does not stay –"

Incessantly, *adv.*
Constantly; without ceasing

Insolvent, *adj.*
Unable to pay one's debts; bankrupt

From "Success is counted sweetest"

Strains, *n.*
A passage of melody, music, or song

Discussion Activities

Ask some students to share their riddles in class, seeing if their classmates can figure out what is described.

Emily Dickinson treated the subject of success with remarkable insight for someone who never experienced it. Compare the two poems "Fame is the one that does not stay –" and "Fame is a fickle food." How does she convey her attitude toward fame? What is the relationship between the crows and the men in the latter poem, and what might this suggest about success?

Writing Exercise

Dickinson's poetry often describes inner states of mind. However, several of her poems composed during the Civil War employ images of battle, including her popular poem "Success is counted sweetest." Ask students to explain, in writing, the following two paradoxes: Why can't "Victory" be defined by those who "took the Flag"? How and why can the "defeated" and "dying" hear a song of triumph?

Homework

Have students read Handout One: Emily Dickinson and the Victorian "Woman Question." Ask them to consider the relationship between her poems on success or fame and the changing opportunities for women during the nineteenth century. Read Dickinson's poems "They shut me up in Prose –," "I dwell in Possibility –," and "Crumbling is not an instant's Act."

3

Lesson Three

FOCUS: The Speaker of a Poem

Examining an author's life can inform and expand a literary text. Readers should be careful not to assume that the speaker of a poem is necessarily the poet. When we read a poem, one of our first questions should be: Whose "voice" is speaking to us? Sometimes a poet will create a persona, a fictitious speaker, and this speaker may not always be human. A speaker may be an animal or object, and good poems have been written from perspectives as various as a hawk, a clock, or a cloud.

Because the opening lines of more than two hundred of Dickinson's poems are expressly written in the first person (either the singular "I" or the plural "we"), it is difficult to resist reading most of her poetry as autobiographical. Yet many of her poems do not concern the experiences of an "I" but describe natural phenomena (like Lesson One's "A Route of Evanescence"), characterize states of mind, or define abstractions through metaphor (like Lesson Two's "Fame is a fickle food").

Discussion Activities

In many of her poems, Dickinson attempts to describe psychological states objectively, as in "Crumbling is not an instant's Act." In these kinds of poems, she does not use the first person, or any overt reference to her life. Examine each stanza of this poem with your students, noticing the imagery Dickinson uses in her declarative statements about the slow process of decay.

Discuss Handout One: Emily Dickinson and the Victorian "Woman Question." Have the class analyze the poems "I dwell in Possibility –" and "They shut me up in Prose –." Although the speaker of these two 1862 poems may be Dickinson, who else could it be?

Writing Exercise

Have students write a two-page essay on Dickinson's treatment of houses and nature in all three poems. How does she use imagery to portray both confinement and liberation? What might this suggest about her own struggles and triumphs as a poet?

Homework

Ask students to read "Dickinson's Poetry" from the Reader's Guide. Also have them read "The Moon is distant from the Sea –" and "After great pain, a formal feeling comes –."

VOCABULARY WORDS

From "I dwell in Possibility –"

Impregnable, *adj.*
Difficult or impossible to attack, challenge, or refute

Gambrel, *n.*
A roof having a shallower slope above a steeper one on each side

From "Crumbling is not an instant's Act"

Dilapidation, *n.*
A state of decay due to old age or long use

Cuticle, *n.*
Botany. A protective layer covering the epidermis of a plant

Borer, *n.*
A tool used to pierce or form a hole; an auger

4

Lesson Four

FOCUS:
Imagery and Personification

Poets use figurative language to help a reader imagine the events and emotions described in a poem. Imagery, a word or series of words that refers to any sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste), helps create a visceral experience for the reader. Personification is a figure of speech in which a thing, animal, or abstract term (truth, death, the past) takes on human qualities.

To comprehend Emily Dickinson's poetry, the reader must understand the importance of figurative language as a way to suggest what cannot be literally stated. To appreciate her work, one must forgo readings that view truth as black or white. Dickinson's poetry is consciously mysterious and elliptical. The reader must attempt to use Dickinson's own logic, remembering that "Much Madness is divinest Sense – / To a discerning Eye –."

Discussion Activities

Have students research the relationship between the moon and the sea, the tides, and the monthly lunar cycle. Then ask them to read "The Moon is distant from the Sea –," noticing that Dickinson personifies the connection by invoking the human body, saying that the moon's "Amber Hands" lead the sea "Along appointed Sands." In the second stanza, she deepens this personification by noting the sea's obedience to the moon's "eye," suggesting a scientific reality: that the moon controls the length and timing of the sea's tides. The poem turns to address a person ("Signor") in stanza three. How does the relationship between the moon and the sea parallel that between the mysterious "Signor" and the speaker's heart?

Writing Exercise

List each example of personification in the poem "After great pain, a formal feeling comes –." Ask students to answer the following questions: Which image resonates best with your experience of "great pain"? How do the images in stanzas one and two build to the final image of "First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –"?

Homework

Read "'Hope' is the thing with feathers –," "There is no Frigate like a Book," and "Tell all the truth but tell it slant –."

VOCABULARY WORDS

From "The Moon is distant from the Sea –"

Docile, *adj.*
Easily managed or led, teachable

Impose, *v.*
1. To force to be accepted, done, or complied with
2. To take advantage of someone

From "After great pain, a formal feeling comes –"

Quartz, *n.*
A hard, transparent mineral

Stupor, *n.*
A state of helpless amazement

5

Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Figurative language asks us to stretch our imaginations, finding the likeness in seemingly unrelated things. A *simile* is a comparison of two things that initially seem quite different, but are shown to have a significant resemblance. Similes employ a connective, usually "like," "as," or "than," or a verb such as "resembles." A *metaphor* also compares two seemingly different things, but it states that one thing is something else that, in a literal sense, it is not. By asserting that a thing is something else, a metaphor creates a close association that underscores an important similarity between them.

Discussion Activities

As a class, identify the opening comparison in Dickinson's poems "'Hope' is the thing with feathers –" and "There is no Frigate like a Book." What correspondence exists between hope and something with feathers in the first poem, and between a ship and a book in the second? Take the time to go through each line of the poem as a class. Discuss the way Dickinson develops these particular metaphors throughout each poem to make a more comprehensive point about "the Human Soul." What other metaphors can students find in these two poems?

If time permits, discuss Dickinson's use of metaphor in other poems referenced in this Teacher's Guide.

VOCABULARY WORDS

From "'Hope' is the thing with feathers –"

Gale, *n.*
A very strong wind

Abash, *v.*
Cause to feel embarrassed, disconcerted, ashamed

From "There is no Frigate like a Book"

Frigate, *n.*
A warship with a mixed armament, generally lighter than a destroyer

Courser, *n.*
A swift horse

Traverse, *n.*
A route or path across or over

Frugal, *adj.*
Economical; thrifty

Writing Exercise

In the 1872 poem "Tell all the truth but tell it slant –," Dickinson compares "Truth's superb surprise" to lightning. Have students write a one-page analysis of what Dickinson's comparison between light and darkness might suggest about how we discern truth.

To expand this question, consider the development of our scientific understanding of light and lightning since the nineteenth century, as well as Dickinson's own problems with her eyes and sight.

Homework

Read "Before I got my eye put out –" and "Because I could not stop for Death –."

6

Lesson Six

FOCUS:
Rhythm and Meter

A poem's meaning can be found in its structural, stylistic, and verbal components. Two such components are rhythm and meter, long regarded as distinguishing features of verse. Poems may be written in *fixed forms*—traditional verse forms that require certain predetermined structural elements of *meter*, *rhythm*, and *rhyme*, such as a *sonnet* or a *ballad*—or open form. Not all poets write in fixed forms or meter, but all poets employ rhythm. Rhythm is created by the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a poetic line. Scansion is the art of listening carefully to the sounds of a poem and trying to make sense of it. This includes paying attention to each poetic foot, each *stressed* or *unstressed* syllable, and—if applicable—to the poem's rhyme scheme.

Most nineteenth-century poets, including Emily Dickinson, wrote primarily in fixed forms with identifiable meters. Dickinson drew her meter from Protestant hymns sung in the churches in Amherst, Massachusetts.

VOCABULARY WORDS

From "Because I could not stop for Death –"

Gossamer, *n.*
1. An extremely delicate variety of gauze, used especially for veils
2. A cobweb

Tippet, *n.*
A woman's fur cape or woolen shawl

Tulle, *n.*
Fine (often starched) net used for veils, tutus, or gowns

Cornice, *n.*
An ornamental molding around the wall of a room just below the ceiling

Discussion Activities

When scanning a poem, use an accent (´) over each stressed syllable and a breve or "little round cup" (˘) over each unstressed syllable. Here are examples of how to scan one of Dickinson's poems:

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

Have students scan "Because I could not stop for Death –." Ask your students how scanning a poem helps them understand its meaning.

Find a recording of the hymns "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" and "Oh God Our Help In Ages Past." Notice that one can "sing" the poem above to the tune of both hymns.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to consider a favorite song and write a short comparison to Dickinson's poetry. Does it employ meter, rhythm, or rhyme? How do fixed forms help the listener memorize the song?

Homework

Read "A little East of Jordan," "Come slowly – Eden!," and "All overgrown with cunning moss." Look up at least three words from the poems. Read "From *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson*" from the Reader's Guide.

7

Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Allusion

Most poets have an audience in mind when they write—a reader who will understand and appreciate their work. In trying to communicate with that audience, poets sometimes use overt or subtle references—allusions—to tap shared cultural memories, or enlarge the scope of their work. Allusions may appear in a poem as an initial quotation, a passing mention of a name, or a phrase borrowed from another writer—often carrying the meanings and implications of the original. When, for instance, poets allude to a person, image, or event in Homer's *Iliad* or the Bible, they presume readers will be familiar with those texts. In the same way, poets amplify the scope of their work by connecting images and ideas to outside sources.

Emily Dickinson drew from Greek and Roman myths, the Bible, and British writers for inspiration. Her poetry is rife with references to religion, botany, biology, history, art, music, and literature (especially Shakespeare). For example, her poem "All overgrown by cunning moss" refers to the grave ("little cage") of Currer Bell (the pseudonym of Charlotte Brontë) in Haworth, Yorkshire County, England—a detail that would have been familiar to readers due to the popularity of Brontë's 1847 novel, *Jane Eyre.*

VOCABULARY WORDS

From "A little East of Jordan"

Waxing, *v.*
Becoming larger or stronger

Worsted, *v. tr.*
Gained the advantage over; defeated

From "Come slowly – Eden!"

Jessamines, *n.*
A variant of jasmine; a shrub or climbing plant with fragrant white, pink, or yellow flowers

Balm, *n.*
1. A fragrant ointment; something soothing
2. A tree which yields a fragrant, resinous substance

Discussion Activities

Hundreds of Dickinson's poems either directly or indirectly refer to God, Jesus Christ, the crucifixion, resurrection, heaven, or hell. In "A little East of Jordan," Dickinson responds to a long-cherished story of Jacob as recorded in Genesis 32:24-32. One night when Jacob is alone, a man—thought to be an angel—wrestles with him until dawn. The unknown man injures Jacob's hip in the fight, but Jacob refuses to let him go and demands a blessing. To his surprise, Jacob then realizes he has wrestled with God.

Break up your class into four groups, asking each to read the original Old Testament story. Then read "A little East of Jordan" out loud. Ask each group to go through the entire poem, noticing each allusion. Then ask each group to report its discoveries to the class. In light of these literary allusions, what is the significance of the poem's final stanza? Might Emily Dickinson have felt that she, at times, was wrestling with God? What might she mean when she says Jacob "had worsted God"? Explain.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a two-paragraph interpretation of "Come slowly – Eden!" How does Dickinson portray Eden? How does the poem's treatment of Eden differ from the Old Testament view of paradise?

Homework

Read "Now I knew I lost her –," "Wild nights – Wild nights!," and "You left me – Sire – two Legacies." Then read Handout Two: Wild Legacies, and the Reader's Guide essay "The Homestead and The Evergreens."

8

Lesson Eight

FOCUS: Analyzing a Poem's Context

Hundreds of Emily Dickinson's poems deal with love and loss, denial and desire. Scholar Judith Farr identifies two thematic "cycles" in the poems as the "Sue cycle" and the "Master cycle."

Emily Dickinson had several long and passionate loves. As a teenager, she deeply loved her friend Susan (Sue) Huntington Gilbert, who later became her sister-in-law when Gilbert married Austin Dickinson. After their July 1, 1856, wedding, Austin and Sue moved into The Evergreens, the house next door to the Homestead, the Dickinson family home. Their lifelong friendship was emotional and volatile; to Emily it was an "endless fire" that complicated both their lives due to their proximity. Sue is the "beloved woman" mentioned in many poems who taught Dickinson joy and renunciation.

In the 1860s, another prominent name—"Master"—often appears in Dickinson's poetry. "His" exact identity remains debated; some believe "Master" is God, or even Sue. (Three enigmatic letters were found after Dickinson's death. However, no one knows to whom they were addressed, or whether they were ever sent.) Sue once wrote a letter wherein she revealed that she had seen Dickinson "reclining in the arms of a man" in her drawing room. It is often assumed this man was Judge Otis Phillips Lord, who proposed marriage to Dickinson when she was in her fifties. Although she loved him, Dickinson refused. Before Judge Lord was her suitor, Dickinson loved Samuel Bowles, a married man and close friend of Austin and Sue. Some scholars believe that "Master" was Bowles, evidenced by the poetry that she sent to him such as "Title divine – is mine! / The Wife – without the Sign!"

VOCABULARY WORDS

From "Now I knew I lost her –"

Transmigration, *n.*
The passage of a soul into another body after death

Penury, *n.*
Destitution, poverty

Restitution, *n.*
Restoration to a former or original state

From "Wild nights – Wild nights!"

Moor, *v. tr.*
To attach (a boat or buoy) by cable or rope to a fixed object

Discussion Activities

Read "Now I knew I lost her –," a poem that laments lost love despite physical proximity. List all the words in the poem connected to time or travel. How does the speaker's love defy time and distance? How does the beloved seem to respond to this love? First discuss the literal references in this poem, and then move to the symbolic. Does understanding the poem require knowledge of its context?

Writing Exercise

Have students write about the figurative language used in two of Dickinson's love poems: "Wild nights – Wild nights!" and "You left me – Sire – two Legacies." Does the imagery of these poems suggest that Dickinson wrote them to Susan Gilbert Dickinson, Samuel Bowles, or someone else? Does it matter if the object of the poem is identified?

Homework

Read "This World is not conclusion," "I know that He exists," and "Forever – is composed of Nows –." Then read Handout Three: Dickinson's Final Sorrows.

9

Lesson Nine

FOCUS:
Poetry and Ideas

"No man was ever yet a great poet," said Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "without being at the same time a profound philosopher. For poetry is the blossom and fragrancy of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotions, language." Exceptional poets can pursue their craft without aspiring to greatness, as Coleridge defines it here, but the greatest poets through the ages are distinguished by their willingness to confront life's biggest questions: Does God (or do the gods) exist? What is the purpose of life? What happens when we die?

VOCABULARY WORDS

From "This World is not conclusion"

Sagacity, *n.*
The quality of being discerning; sound in judgment

Contempt, *n.*
The feeling that someone or something is worthless or beneath consideration

Vane, *n.*
A blade, plate, sail, etc., as in the wheel of a windmill, to be moved by the air

Discussion Activities

Dickinson's belief in the promise of eternal life sustained her through many sorrows, illnesses, and losses. The Christian doctrine of the resurrection and the belief that the body and soul will be united after death were especially precious to her. What evidence of this do you see in such poems as "This World is not conclusion" or "I know that He exists"? Use Handout Three: Dickinson's Final Sorrows to guide students' interpretations of Dickinson's "flood subject": immortality.

How might these two poems shed light on the following sentence, which Dickinson wrote to Higginson on April 25, 1862: "[My family] are religious – except me – and address an Eclipse, every morning – whom they call their 'Father.'"

How does her poem "Forever – is composed of Nows –" reflect on both life's trials and joys? Remember that despite all her pain, she told Higginson: "I find ecstasy in living – the mere sense of living is joy enough."

Writing Exercise

The poem "This World is not conclusion" asserts that "Faith slips – and laughs, and rallies –," suggesting that faith may have more in common with the rising and falling tide than with a rock or fortress. Ask students to write a one-page response that considers how understanding faith, doubt, or religious conviction furthers an understanding of Dickinson's poetry. Ask students to return to at least one poem from a previous lesson that includes this theme.

Homework

Have students begin their essays. Ask them to come to the next class with a draft of the essay.

10

Lesson Ten

FOCUS:
What Makes a Poet Great?

Poets articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of figurative language inform the themes and characters of the work. A great poem is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

If one mark of a great writer's work is that it moves us to return to it again and again—whether for enchantment, wisdom, or consolation—then Emily Dickinson is surely one of our greatest writers. In her verse, we experience the "Transport" or pleasurable excitement that she herself looked for in poetry: "If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can 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[?]"

VOCABULARY WORDS

From "The Poets light but Lamps –"

Vital, *adj.*
Indispensable; essential

Inhere, *v.*
To be fixed or permanently incorporated within something

Disseminate, *v.*
To spread widely

Circumference, *n.*
The outer boundary, especially of a circular area

Discussion Activities

Guide your students in a close reading of "The Poets light but Lamps –." This short poem contains a metaphor so complex that it may inspire several interpretations. Have your class consider the various symbolic meanings of objects such as the lamp, the wick, the light, and the sun. Does everyone have the same interpretation of the symbols and the poetic metaphor?

How does Dickinson use the word "Circumference" to represent both a literal circle of light that surrounds the lamp stand and the power of great poetry that shines out to others over centuries? What is she saying about the eternal nature of great poetry?

Ask students to list the characteristics of a great poet. Put these on the board. What elevates their poems to greatness? Have students discuss, within groups, other poems or songs they know that include some of the same characteristics. Do any of these works remind them of Dickinson's poems?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a one-page essay on their favorite Dickinson poem.

Homework

Students should continue working on their essays. Final drafts are due during the next class.

Emily Dickinson and the Victorian "Woman Question"

When Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792, women were still confined by law and custom to the domestic, "private" sphere, in contrast to the professional, "public" sphere of men. By the time Queen Victoria took the throne of England in 1837, this so-called "woman question"—what is a woman's proper place in society?—was hotly debated by many politicians, theologians, educators, and writers.

A king in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem "The Princess" (1847) succinctly summarizes the viewpoint of many Victorians: "Man for the field and woman for the hearth: / Man for the sword and for the needle she; / Man with the head and woman with the heart, / Man to command and woman to obey." Yet women were denied basic liberties even in the domestic sphere. For example, women had no legal rights to their own children until 1839 when Parliament passed the Custody of Infants Act, allowing a divorced mother to obtain custody. It took until 1882 for the Married Women's Property Act to pass, giving women the right to keep pre-existing land and money in their own names.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the proper education for women in England and America comprised music, languages, art, and needlework. An important milestone came in 1837 when Mount Holyoke College was founded in South Hadley, Massachusetts, and the school's principal, Mary Lyon, decided to teach her female students traditionally "masculine" subjects such as mathematics, botany, theology, rhetoric, logic, chemistry, and astronomy. This pioneering opportunity in women's education enabled Emily Dickinson to receive a uniquely privileged education. This successful "experiment" also led several universities to open their doors to women or create colleges especially for them, although women sometimes could not earn formal degrees.

The "woman question" was especially pointed in literary circles, where women remained subordinate in the mid-nineteenth century. In England, writers Charlotte Brontë and Mary Ann Evans used pen names—Currer Bell and George Eliot, respectively—to avoid public censure for the radical ideas and passionate heroines described in their novels, especially *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). Greater barriers existed for female poets, since the genre of poetry traditionally belonged to men. A notable exception to Victorian prejudice against women writers was Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whose life and poetry deeply influenced Dickinson. In Barrett Browning's radical verse-novel, *Aurora Leigh* (1857), the poet-heroine refuses to renounce her artistic ambition, when the man she loves expects her to give up her writing to become his helpmeet.

In America, it was even harder for women writers to publish and succeed. The young United States was slower to address women's rights than England. In an age that looked down upon women "scribblers," and as the daughter of parents who did not fully understand her intellectual pursuits, Dickinson may have composed such poems as "I dwell in Possibility –" and "They shut me up in Prose"—both written in 1862—to express her own frustration.

Wild Legacies

by Diane Thiel

Dickinson's love poems are not the ones most often chosen to represent her, but they reveal complex aspects to her work. Much speculation exists about whether an actual relationship inspired these poems. While biographical matters are always interesting, it is even more important to recognize a writer's life of the mind, for the work of a writer often addresses aspects of a life that has been imagined or a life re-invented. The poems "Wild nights – Wild nights!" and "You left me – Sire – two Legacies –" are both seemingly simple poems, emblematic of Dickinson's compressed style, each offering a compelling example of Dickinson's love poetry with their expressions of deep longing and the "Boundaries of Pain" that accompany loss or unfulfillment.

"Wild nights – Wild nights!" is a love poem of intense longing. Perhaps the most evocative aspect of the poem is the way the speaker yearns for the wild experience of love and passion. The poem might be read as the expression of longing for a love that can bring the speaker's "Heart in port." Yet, the words also reveal the craving for wild abandon or "luxury."

The poem's final lines encourage one to read and re-read the poem. The final word "thee" invites multiple interpretations. Is "thee" the apparent beloved in the poem, or is she addressing the sea? Is the speaker asking to be moored in the sea? It seems as if the speaker, drawn to the wild nature of the sea and the beloved, wants to be "moored" in this wildness. The poem has an overtly erotic quality, from the desire for "wild nights" in the first line to the wish to "moor – tonight / In thee!" in the last.

These layered possibilities occur in much of Dickinson's poetry, and take the reader of even a short poem through often unexpected turns. "You left me – Sire – two Legacies –" portrays, in a few lines, the legacies of loving someone, describing the intensity of feeling that can barely be captured in words. But when intense love ends, whether by death or separation, another legacy remains.

The language in "You left me – Sire – two Legacies –" is simple but abstract, but the intensity is both deeply personal and universal. While the poem seems to speak about a romantic affair, it could also be interpreted as referring to any relationship that has left the legacies of love and loss. The intensity of such a love is summed up emphatically in the first stanza, a devotion that would "suffice" even a "Heavenly Father." The second stanza speaks to the nearly inevitable loss that follows. As in "Wild nights – Wild nights!," Dickinson also evokes the sea in this poem. While "Wild nights – Wild nights!" seems to cast the sea as wild and erotic, "You left me – Sire – two Legacies –" emphasizes the vast nature of the sea and connects it to the incalculable pain that such a loss of love leaves behind. The final lines of this poem also offer multiple meanings, as one might understand the sea to be the divide that now exists between the two.

Dickinson's ability to capture such intensity of emotion is emblematic of her spare, compressed, highly charged style. These short poems highlight Dickinson as a poet who writes evocatively about love. In just a few words and lines, she traverses the scope of longing, realization of love, and the layered legacies it leaves.

Dickinson's Final Sorrows

In a letter of 1883, Emily Dickinson declared that "The Crisis of the sorrow of so many years is all that tires me." Later she cited a line from one of her favorite poems: "As Emily Brontë to her Maker, I write to my Lost 'Every Existence would exist in thee – '."[1]

The darkest season of Dickinson's life began after her mother's death in 1882, followed by the death of her eight-year-old nephew Gilbert from typhoid fever in 1883. After this, she wrote to his mother: "I see him in the Star, and meet his sweet velocity in everything that flies – His Life was like the Bugle, which winds itself away, his Elegy an echo – his Requiem ecstasy –." Dickinson's posthumous editor, Thomas H. Johnson, claimed that "no death during Emily Dickinson's lifetime more deeply shocked and grieved her" for "with his departure went a certain inner light." Her final "poems" more closely resemble fragments, although she continued faithfully writing letters to many family members and close friends.

One such friend who sustained her toward the end of her life was Judge Otis Phillips Lord, who had been one of her father's closest associates. He pursued a romance with Dickinson after the death of his wife. Although Dickinson loved him, she refused his marriage proposal. Lord's death from a stroke, only six months after Gilbert's, led Dickinson to write the following short fragment:

> Each that we lose takes part of us;
> A crescent still abides,
> Which like the moon, some turbid night,
> Is summoned by the tides.

In June 1884, Dickinson suffered a second "nervous prostration" and never fully recovered. Intimations of immortality haunted Dickinson until the end, and from her earliest poetry to her final letters, a central theme emerges—what she identified as her "flood subject": immortality. In a letter dated November 19, 1884, she confessed that "to 'know in whom' we 'have believed,' is Immortality."[2]

That final day came for her on May 15, 1886. Despite her inability to "declare for Christ" during her year at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, despite her failure to "keep the Sabbath going to Church," Dickinson wrestled with God to the end. One of her last letters to Thomas Wentworth Higginson ended with a citation from the Genesis 32 story of Jacob's fight with the Angel: "'I will not let thee go except I bless thee' – Pugilist and Poet, Jacob was correct –." This was a story she had dramatized earlier in the poem "A little East of Jordan." Dickinson's faith conformed neither to Calvinist orthodoxies nor to the fashions of Amherst, which makes Brontë's poem—which Higginson read at Dickinson's funeral—even more poignant:

> No coward soul is mine
> No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere
> I see Heaven's glories shine
> And Faith shines equal arming me from Fear …

[1] "Every Existence would exist in thee" is a line from Emily Bronte's poem "No coward soul is mine."

[2] This Dickinson line clearly refers to a line in the New Testament epistle of First Timothy: "For I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day" (1:12).