



Common Core State Standards: Reading Literature

Focus: The Poetry of Emily Dickinson

Overview

Students will use reading strategies such as pre-reading questions, class discussions, and KWL charts to explore the life, imagery, language, and poetic personas of Emily Dickinson.

Standards

9-10.RL.1. Cite strong and thorough evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

9-10.RL.2. Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

9-10.RI.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

9-10.RL.5. Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots) and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

Objectives

- To determine strategies for reading literature in general
- To introduce Dickinson's poetry
- To reinforce strategies for reading poetry

Materials

- Computers for each student
- Copies of Dickinson's "[We Grow Accustomed to the Dark.](#)"
- Butcher paper and a way to tack it up on the board
- Markers

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- Discussion cards/tickets/coins. You may make these from paper slips. Choose four colors or letters. Make enough of each color/letter so that one person of each group has five of them. For example, if your class is large enough for seven groups, then you will need 7x5 or 35 cards of each letter.

Activity 1: “We Grow Accustomed to the Dark”

Review with students any necessary information about learning effective reading strategies, emphasizing the importance of keeping strategies in mind.

Class Poster

Using the butcher paper, tack it on the board and title it “Reading Strategies.” Write student comments about effective reading strategies they use onto the paper. Add to paper as the class progresses. You can have students keep their own copies.

The Importance of Context

Listen to part of [Steven Pinker’s Keynote Speech](#). (This bit focuses on the concept of the blank slate and highlights several sources to put his concept in context. Point out that Pinker creates a web of context for understanding just as we and our students must create a web of context for the material we read.)

- Instruct students to listen carefully for Pinker’s key concept.
- Tell students to write down the key concept as they hear it or after the speech has concluded.
- After the speech, ask students to share their responses.
- Then ask what reading skill was just implemented. (Ideally, students should respond with “Summary.”)

Individual Writing

As preparation for reading poetry, students should be asked to write down responses to the following questions in their journals or their notes:



Poetry Pre-reading Questions

- What is poetry?
- What is a poem?
- How can you tell? (That is, if I were to plunk a piece of literature on your desk, how could you tell it was a poem as opposed to a story, a novel, a shopping list, et cetera?)
- What poets have you previously read?
- What poems have you ever read?
- Have you yourself ever written a poem?

Note: About three minutes in to the exercise, ask students to narrow down their experience with poetry to all they have encountered about [Emily Dickinson](#).

Small Groups

Have students share journals for a few minutes and then lead them in a quick group discussion of their knowledge of poetry in general and of Dickinson specifically. During the Dickinson portion, create a [KWL Chart](#). [This can be done by each student on her own paper.]

Reading and Annotation

Pass out copies of "[We Grow Accustomed to the Dark](#)." (Ideally, teachers should use the facsimile edition; however, Franklin's text is preferable to Johnson's.)¹ Have students read and annotate the poem and answer the following questions as they read:

"We Grow Accustomed to the Dark"

- Who is the persona? That is, who is the person speaking, and how (or is) she different from "Emily

¹ Whereas Johnson ordered Dickinson's poems by subject, Franklin restored them to their original fascicle order - the order in which Emily herself placed them. Contemporary scholarship favors Franklin's edition. Indeed, now that we have the fascicles reconstructed, an entirely new line of scholarship has opened up to Dickinsonians - that of her interplay of poems within and between the fascicles. Some Dickinson scholars, myself included, hold the belief that Emily placed her poems with other poems for a reason. I champion the idea that each fascicle is a tenet of Dickinson's philosophy and that to understand the individual poem we must look at it within the fascicle context; however, since this is not a Dickinson class, I will leave that exploration to those students who wish to pursue the study on their own time. - Amanda Gardner, M.A.



Dickinson”?

- Underline key words that you believe “carry” the poem - that is, key words that are crucial to the poem’s meaning.
- Why are these key words so crucial?
- Note the line breaks. Why did Emily Dickinson finalize the stanzas in this manner? Why did she end them in this way (as opposed to a different way)?
- Note the use of the dash. What effect does the dash give to the lines? How does it affect the way in which we read or “hear” the poem?
- Why does Dickinson make the choice to capitalize certain words?
- What is the overall theme or message of the poem? What is Dickinson suggesting we should understand by the time we are finished reading this work?

Small-Group Discussion

Students should be in groups of three to four. Each group member gets her own set of discussion cards. Every student must use every card. They put one in when they contribute to the discussion. They need to cover every question. (While students discuss, be certain to walk about the groups and note what they are saying about the work.)

Remind the groups that their goal is to understand as much as they can of Dickinson’s work and to know what they still want to learn about Dickinson’s work. (Continuing with the KWL chart would work here.)

Activity 2 - Exploring the Poet and Poems

Computer Work

Have the computer set up to the [Emily Dickinson Lexicon](#) as well as the [Emily Dickinson Museum](#) home page. The first will be used for looking up vocabulary that students find important to the poem so that we can see nuances in the denotation that may have fallen out



of contemporary use; the latter is to explore the space that fed Dickinson's soul and, therefore, her poetry. (These sites you may want to become familiar with before teaching the class.)

Reading

- First, have several students read the poem. After, ask them why they read it as they did: that is, what formed their choice to take a breath where they did, to pause or emphasize as they did.
- Next, discuss persona. Make it clear that Dickinson has many voices, many personas and that she is not necessarily the same person as the persona in her poems. A helpful comparison might be to Edgar Allan Poe: Although Poe often writes in first person, we can be confident that he never eviscerated someone's heart and buried it (and the rest of his unfortunate victim) in the floorboards as his persona did in "The Tell-Tale Heart." (Or so we hope.)
- Keep encouraging students to support their ideas with evidence from the poem by asking the following questions:

- "What word or phrase made you think that? Can you find the best one for us?"
- "What is there about that specific word that gave you this idea?"
- "What would have been different if we had substituted [XYZ synonym] for this word?"
- "Why did you find this word especially important to Dickinson's meaning? To her tone?"

- Search the museum to see how learning more about Dickinson's Homestead, a place so very important to her as a writer, helps students interpret the poem².

Individual Reflection

After discussion, have students review their additional notes and reflect on their original conception of the poem. Then, have students write their analysis of Dickinson's work.

Share journals. Focus on how students use the text to support their views and note how views changed pursuant to the class discussion and delving into Dickinson's work.

² I found this understanding of Dickinson's place opened new levels of understanding her work when I first visited her back porch in 2001. From that back porch, the kitchen entrance of Susan's house is plainly visible and the path the two wore between the homes shone.



Closing

Closing: For homework, have students find other poems by Dickinson, delving further into the connections between her life and her art, the physical spaces she inhabited and the art she produced, between one poem and another, or between poems by Dickinson and those of other American authors.

Resources Specific to this Lesson

- Emily Dickinson Museum
- Introduction to her writings
- Exploring her language
- Lesson Plans
- Pinker Lecture: *The Stuff of Thought* video lecture
- Emily Dickinson Lexicon
- Emily Dickinson International Society (EDIS)

General for ELA

- Intervention Central
- Reading Comprehension Fix-up Kit
- The Savvy Teacher's Guide to Reading Strategies That Work
- Reading Strategies for the Secondary Classroom
- How To Improve Reading Comprehension