1. **Unit Title:** "No Prisoner Be": Exploring Freedom and Limitation in the Work of Emily Dickinson

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3. **Grade Level:** High School, Grade 11 Honors American literature

4. **Summary of Unit:** This 7-day unit gives students the opportunity to study and understand Dickinson and her work from a variety of perspectives. Students will reflect on the topic of Freedom and Limitation, learn something of Dickinson's relationship to that topic, discover poems of Dickinson on that topic, interpret and analyze those poems, and produce original poems that "echo" some of Dickinson's style. While the lesson can be adapted, it is preferable that both teacher and students have access to computers and the Internet for maximum impact.

5. **Essential Questions:**

    - How can severe limitations/strict boundaries foster creativity?
    - What is the relationship between freedom and the imagination?

    Enduring Understandings:

- That Emily Dickinson worked within strict boundaries of her own personal space and those of her predominant form of expression, poetry.
- That Dickinson used the tensions created by those boundaries to heighten and intensify the freedoms she took with words and ideas within strictly defined spaces.

6. **Assessment Evidence:** Journal response, paraphrase of poem, analysis of poem, original poem, journal reflection on experience of "echoing" Dickinson.

7. **Day 1: Introduction.** Brainstorm ideas/impressions about Emily Dickinson: what do students know, what would they like to know? After discussion, teacher shares brief biographical introduction to Dickinson's life and poetry as outlined on Emily Dickinson Museum website. Teacher should include a brief discussion of the boundaries of Dickinson's physical world, noting her observation that "I do not cross my father's grounds to any house or town," and noting, too, that Dickinson chose to write poetry, itself a restrictive form.

    Tell students that before they look closely at Dickinson's poetry, they should consider their own views on freedom and restrictions. Have students engage with Essential Questions of the Unit with the following Homework assignment:

    Homework: *In a one-to-two page typed paper, respond thoughtfully to the following questions. You may address each question separately or fold them together in your considerations. Use examples from life, literature, and music to support your views.*

    How can severe limitations and/or strict boundaries foster creativity?
    What is the relationship between freedom and the imagination?

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Day 2: The poetry. Students share their ideas about freedom and restriction based on the homework. Students can share in small groups with a bullet-point report out to class, or individual students can volunteer their impressions to the whole class. Next, teacher notes that Dickinson herself used her restrictions to explore freedom. Introduce the idea and step into Dickinson poetry with the following (put on overhead or on board):

No Prisoner be -
Where Liberty -
Himself – abide with Thee -

(Fr 742)

Read the poem aloud, then ask students to spend a few moments (again, as a class or in groups, according to nature/size of the class) to notice things about this poem: anything is game. Once students share what they have noticed (no title, capitals, dashes, length, rhyme, meter, Fr 742, etc.), teacher should confirm/respond to student observations, noting how the poem carries hallmarks of Dickinson's style. Then, move to Emily Dickinson Museum website on the overhead (LCD projector from computer). Together, read "Tips for Reading." http://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/read_poem Then link to the "Major Characteristics" subsection of that text and review together.

Homework: *Return to the website to explore more about Dickinson, including FAQs. Please also access Poets.org website* http://www.poets.org/ *to read a selection of Dickinson poems, looking for characteristics and becoming familiar with her style.*

(Alternatively, teacher could print and assign several poems for reading)

Day 3: Emily's Lexicon and Poem Search. (Teacher note: This assignment requires navigation of several websites and computer access. In the absence of supportive technology, the teacher could provide students with a list of first lines of Dickinson poems and adjust the assignment accordingly.)

Introduce students to Dickinson's engagement with words. Explain that a lexicon is a dictionary and was much used by Dickinson. Note that Noah Webster was her neighbor, and his book was her guide.

Next, Introduce Emily Dickinson Lexicon online: http://edl.byu.edu/
This tool allows a user to search words used by Dickinson. Without registering, users can see nuanced definitions attached to various words. By registering, users can discover which poems of Dickinson contain particular words. The poems are listed by both Franklin and Johnson numbers, with the searched word highlighted. IMPORTANT: The Lexicon does not link to the poem. Students must search the Lexicon and then go to the Perspectives in American Literature site to find the poem. This site has every ED poem from the Johnson edition:
http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap4/dickinson.html#poems

Please note that while this may seem complicated, most students are quite at ease with navigating the sites. The teacher should explore the sites beforehand and consider individual school guidelines when registering (on the byu site); that is, the teacher may want to register on own and help students search within the classroom, or she may encourage students to register to do their own searches.

Once the Lexicon is introduced, tell students that they will use it to search for poems that have to do with freedom or restriction. Have students brainstorm together and create lists of words that denote or

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connote those two concepts. Once they have a list, they can use the Lexicon to find those words that do appear in Dickinson poems. Then, students should use the PAL site to search through the poems and choose one to use for the next assignment. (this can be done in class or as a homework assignment.)

***Homework**: Once you have chosen a Dickinson poem that focuses on some aspect of freedom/restriction, copy it over and then try to paraphrase it to the best of your ability. What is Dickinson saying here? Keep in mind that you may not understand the entire poem, but do your best to solve whatever seems puzzling to you and to restate the poem in prose. Turn in the poem and your paraphrase tomorrow. Please include the words you searched to find your poem.*

(Teacher: to acknowledge the difficulty of this task, refer students to the following quotation by Joyce Carol Oates):

> "All good poets resist paraphrase; Emily Dickinson frequency resists simple comprehension. And should we "sense" her meaning we are inevitably excluded from her technique, marveling at the rightness of certain images, sounds, strategies of punctuation—the ellipses of a mind accustomed to thinking slantwise— yet unable to grasp the poem's ineluctable essence. (And the identity of the poem's narrative "I," shifting as it does from poem to poem.) When we read Dickinson the nerves tighten in sympathy and wonder. Fragments leap out at us as powerfully as fully realized poems...." (http://jco.usfca.edu/emily.html)

Day 4: Formal Analysis. First, have students share their paraphrases and discuss the difficulties they encountered in trying to approximate what Dickinson is saying.

Next, review the ideas of formal poetry analysis with students, once again looking at the "Characteristics" portion of the Emily Dickinson Museum website and referring to the poets.org website analysis of a Dickinson poem (http://www.poets.org/page.php/prmID/308

(Alternatively, teacher could refer students to previously established methods/lessons on analyzing poetry.)

***Homework:** Take the same poem you paraphrased and analyze it in a scholarly/academic fashion. Work on a draft the first night and bring it to school tomorrow to discuss and revise. The finished analysis is due in two days. As you work, refer to previous lessons on analysis and/or the following two sites:* http://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/ed/node/111

http://www.poets.org/page.php/prmID/308

Day 5: In-class workshop. Students work on analyses together, with teacher determining the need for mini-lessons on aspects of analysis or of Dickinson's work.

***Homework:** Complete analysis*

Day 6: "No Prisoner Be": Students experience freedom/restriction by writing an original poem on the topic of their choice in a style imitative of Dickinson. Note to teacher: you may want to refer to this excerpt from Mary Oliver's chapter, "Imitation" in *A Poetry Handbook:*

> "You would learn very little in this world if you were not allowed to imitate. And to

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> repeat your imitations until some solid grounding in the skill was achieved and the slight but wonderful difference—that made you *you* and no one else—could assert itself. Every child is encouraged to imitate. But in the world of writing it is originality that is sought out, and praised, while imitation is the sin of sins.
>
> Too bad. I think if imitation were encouraged much would be learned well that is now learned partially and haphazardly. Before we can be poets, we must practice; imitation is a very good way of investigating the real thing" (Oliver 13)

Ideally, this class time could be spent in a different environment: outside, in the library, on a walk through the halls. Give students the opportunity to observe their environment for a spark, a moment, or an image that "speaks to them." Have them bring a notebook to jot down ideas. When you return to the classroom, let them pursue their thoughts on their own, then give them the final assignment:

Homework*: Write a poem on any subject in the style of Dickinson. Try to incorporate what you have learned about what she says and how she says it as you write. Enjoy!!*

Day 7: Sharing and Closure. Students should share their poems in small groups. When the sharing is completed, have each student write informally about his/her experience of creating a Dickinson-like poem. What were their challenges? What were their opportunities? What did they discover in the process? How did their experience provide insight regarding Essential Questions? Have students attach this to their poem before handing it in.

Teacher summary: Engage class in closing discussion about the Essential Questions, focusing on what class may have come to understand both about Dickinson and about the creative process itself.

8. **Materials**: Computer and Internet access

Resources:

Academy of American Poets. *Poets.org*. 1997-2010. Web. 28 June 2010. <http://www.poets.org>.

Brigham Young University. *Emily Dickinson Lexicon.* 2007-2010. Web. 28 June 2010. < http://edl.byu.edu/>.

Franklin, R. W., ed. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson.* Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999. Print.

Johnson, Thomas H., ed. *Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1986. Print.

Longsworth, Polly. *The World of Emily Dickinson.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990. Print.

Oates, Joyce Carol. *Joyce Carol Oates on Emily Dickinson*.1997. Web. 28 June 2010 . <http://jco.usfca.edu/emily.html>.

Oliver, Mary. *A Poetry Handbook*. Orlando: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1994. Print.

Pollak, Vivian R., ed. *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. Print.

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Reuben, Paul P. *"Chapter 4: Emily Dickinson." PAL: Perspectives in American Literature- A Research and Reference Guide.* Web. 28 June 2010. <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap4/dickinson.html>.

Trustees of Amherst College. *Emily Dickinson Museum.* 2009. Web. 28 June 2010. <http://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/>.

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