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Unit: "No Prisoner Be": Exploring Freedom and Limitation in the work of Emily Dickinson

Student Examples

Please note: My Honors American Literature juniors gave me their permission to quote them anonymously to support the posting of this Unit. I was impressed by their observations and by their sheer pluck in plunging into their "imitation" poems. I have coded their responses for my own record keeping, and I ask that these pieces be used by teachers for reference only. Most responses are segments of larger pieces.

Sample Responses to Opening Prompt on Essential Questions

"Conflict – which is more often than not imposed by limitations—is at the heart of creativity. Our imagination is what allows us to cope with boundaries [which] flex our imagination and give us a structure from which we can free ourselves. Boundaries can set you free if you let them. All you have to do is let them." ACA

"Whenever a teacher or some other outside force presents a limitation, it almost always creates an opportunity for creativity to flourish. For example, by teacher in my jazz improvisation class often presents certain limitations that force us to use certain notes or scales during solos. While it may seem more difficult, it is very beneficial for the soloist because it often opens doors into new realms of improvisation that the soloist would not have thought of if he or she had total creative freedom." AAK

"The greatest progress in the arts comes when times are hard, and limitations are pressed on people, because to escape from the limitations on their lives, they find new ways to express themselves, and they find their own freedoms through their imaginations. The quintessential American example of this surge of creativity came from the most oppressed people in U.S. History, the African Americans during the beginning of the 20th century." AAS

"It is impossible to deny that "No Prisoner Be" is an economic poem: it is only nine words long, yet its meaning is penetrating. Dickinson states that one cannot be a prisoner if one feels liberated; that is, if one has his or her own thoughts. This is true of everyone: we should never feel imprisoned or trapped because we always have the liberty of our own imagination, which can take us anywhere a human mind can possibly fathom." EJH

Title: "No Prisoner Me" : "Some of the classic images everyone thinks of when they hear "boundaries on freedoms" include lists of banned books, gag rules, and the like. While it's true some rules can be overly harsh, the absence of boundaries can be equally detrimental to the creative process. Every writer knows the terror of the "blank pages" at the beginning of a project. All options are open, but somehow all possible ideas have fled the mind and can't be found. With so many choices, it's impossible to pick one. A few simple boundaries, though, can make beginning a piece much easier..Of course, some masters of the arts take this basic premise and stretch it to its furthest extremes in order to challenge themselves. They are the metaphorical equivalent of chefs who manage to turn out scrumptious five-course meals with only a few onions and last night's leftovers...."EKD

"A popular rapper, K'naan, often raps about his childhood in Somalia, where he was forced to

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experience the Somali Civil War and spent his days working to avoid death everywhere he went. One of his songs, "Strugglin'," expresses how he became an artist despite his dangerous situation....The lyrics show how K'naan incorporates his hardships and hard way of living into what are now popular songs that we listen to every day. Thus, artists are often able to better develop their creativity in strict environments because they are forced to find a way out; and when art and expression provide an outlet, beautiful things are created." EBC

"Although constraints encourage directional creativity, freedom of expression allows people to pursue their own interests in inspired thought. Without external boundaries, people are able to explore and delve into subjects that they find fascinating. Scientists such as Newton and Einstein embody this concept of following their passions, leading to the discovery of theories that forever changed the way we look at the natural world. Unlike directional creativity, this stems from their freedom in exploring their own interests and not from necessity to escape their surroundings." AKG

Sample Dickinson Paraphrases (students cited Johnson numbers because of PAL site; I switched here to Fr numbering)

Fr 1763: "Although the inner feelings of the heart are unseen and unheard, they cannot be stopped by anything or anyone. They are always there, and always growing." AAK

Fr 660: "I took all the power that I had and challenged life and society
I didn't have as much strength as David had, but I surpassed him with boldness
When I aimed my challenges and released them no one was affected but I
Had Goliath defeated me or was I too weak to succeed? " AJG

Fr 1286: "There are no vessels like a book
To take us to faraway lands
Nor are there any steeds that prance
Like a page of poetry
Even the poorest people may take this journey
Without worrying about hardship
How economical is the object
That supports the soul of humankind.

Synonym used in this poem: oppress
Other words search (in Lexicon) but ultimately unused:
boundary, territory, parameters, limitations, obstacles, perimeters" ECT

Sample Student "Imitation" Poems and response to Process

"1
He wanted to forget -
Revenge – they say
will do you better
Shout – release the fire
a fuse – lit -
expires soon, so – Rush!

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the Hawk targets Prey
but he sees the Ostrich -
Clearer
the bird – who stays on the Ground

He seeks no Yesterday
No – He sees the Horizon
– of Reincarnation
an untainted desert
Free from Anger – Retribution
Those – which do no
good.

It was not too difficult to think in the style of Dickinson while writing poem 1 (named with some Dickinson inspiration). Dickinson's often obscure language forced me to be more creative in my diction and contrive metaphors that question the reader. When reading a Dickinson original, it took me more commitment than I would have ever expected because her brief phrasing combined with her indirect references make the subject of the poem ambiguous. I wanted to make my poem offer a similar challenge. In this sense, the boundaries of Dickinson's style led me to go beyond minimal writing. For example, short lines require clever effective word choice; specific nouns may warrant capitalization. The limitations in some ways opened up new doors, such as the ability to toss in hyphens, capitals and enjambment with unrestricted freedom." EAV

"An Attempt at Being Emily Dickinson

It quivered—Over the ridge

A drop upon the Soul – tainted

Suspended – Pure

Into the abyss below

Evading a Touch by Evil's lure

Hope – an infinite future

While writing this brief, "Dickinsonian" poem, I cam to the conclusion that although freedom and the imagination immediately foster one another, restriction and creativity are perhaps detrimental to each other in certain circumstances. My rein was limited by the restrictions placed before me by Emily Dickinson's extremely characterized poetry. It limited the creative realms I wanted to expand into with my poetry, but encouraged me to branch off from my usual poetry "support blanket." In the end I suppose one could say that by imposing limits I was forced to be creative as a result of having to try something new. Although challenging, it was fulfilling because it helped me understand the effort

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that comes with true poetry. It can't simply be organic, it has to be 'calculated' organic. Indeed Dickinson must have put considerable thought and attention into every poem. They all follow a formula: confusing, profound, and quite comprehensible.

I added a slant rhyme into my poem with the hope that it would bring it up to par with the "Dickinson agenda." Similarly, I tried to capture the illusive [sp?] element of hope: how hope keeps the world on edge, dynamic but at the same time, completely unobtainable as it is a figment of human nature. The comparison of it on the soul and evading touch is rather hard to understand, but I though the ambiguity was helpful, as many of Dickinson's poems are hard to dissect. This was one of the universal themes that Dickinson would choose: the characteristics of hope." eQS

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