

Title of Lesson Plan: Dickinson’s “loaded” words: A critical essay assignment using the on-line Dickinson Lexicon to trace one of her frequently used words across three poems in search of the meaning of that particular word for Dickinson

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Grade level: For juniors or seniors in high school

Brief Summary, including overall learning goals of the assignment:

This assignment is a critical essay where students will craft an argument that traces Dickinson’s intellectual, spiritual, or emotional journey using a recurrent and meaningful word across three of her poems.

Dickinson works with the same words across many of her poems, and many of these words are pregnant with meaning. Popular examples of such words are “wife,” and “brain.” Tracing her word usage has been made easier as a result of the on-line lexicon, where students can look up a word in the database that they are interested in pursuing, and find reference to the poems that make use of that word. Students will be given a list of possible words where there are no more than 10 referenced poems, but may also like to search for one of their own choosing. The challenge is finding a word that is manageable to work with—while “house” is an evocative word of EDs, there are 93 poems that use the word—too much to sort through for a short essay. Once students have a viable word to search, they will be asked to locate that word in the lexicon, which will give them the definition of the word from Dickinson’s own time, as well as the references to the poems that contain that word. Brainstorming towards the essay can now begin! Learning goals include gaining:

- Knowledge of and familiarity with a lexicon
- experience in annotating and analyzing poems in comparison to one another: when reading poems united by a common word, how does our interpretation differ from when we read the poems in isolation? Is there a difference in the use of the word when the word is the focus of the poem versus when it is a more tangential feature?
- an understanding of the importance of a “principle of selection”—if there are more than three poems to choose from, how does one narrow down the selection? What are the criteria? Learning this task will make for a more unified essay.
- experience with rethinking interpretations by revisiting poems.
- Practice in writing thesis statements that seek to understand Dickinson’s recurrent usage of particular loaded words.
- comfort with ambiguities and writing process

Note: *This plan primarily refers to Dickinson’s poems as published in The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Reading Edition (ed. R.W. Franklin), Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1999. Dickinson’s poems are numbered; numbers are preceded by “Fr” (for “Franklin”). “J” refers to Poems by Emily Dickinson edited by Thomas Johnson, 1955.*

Big ideas/understandings/essential questions.

How can examining a series of poems chosen on the basis of a recurrent word across those poems bring a greater depth of understanding to her poetry?

Students should understand that Dickinson's poems gain power when they stand together. Students should see her intention to focus on particular words in her poetry as a way of puzzling through life's greatest questions. Students should recognize how Dickinson returns to certain words, and therefore, ideas, over her lifetime as a writer, and should be able to identify both similarities and differences in her language, imagery, and intent. They should see that she does not have all the answers, but seeks the answers.

Assessment evidence

Students will turn in all of their brainstorming notes, along with draft and final draft. Students will be graded on three components, which are averaged together for one essay grade: concept (thesis), development (clarity and depth of analysis), and mechanics (clean and elegant prose style). Collecting brainstorming notes will help ensure that students develop a writing process for themselves, and can be used to show students where they might have pulled more analysis.

Learning plan/Learning activities

Day 1: Introduction to assignment for full class period.

Hand out assignment sheet, which will include this topic: trace Dickinson's intellectual, spiritual, or emotional journey using a recurrent meaningful word across three of her poems. ~3 pages.

In introducing the assignment, the teacher will model the process involved, using the word "Brain" (earlier in the course, the teacher will have led a few class sessions on the "wife" poems). The teacher will demonstrate how to find the on-line lexicon (<http://edl.byu.edu/index.php>), how to register to gain full access to poem references, and how to distinguish between the Franklin/Johnson edition abbreviations to locate the referenced poems.

Below are the definitions and poem links to the word "Brain" taken directly from the lexicon:

- A. Imagination; cognition; sensory perception; cognition; center of emotion.
Fr340/J280 I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- B. Intelligence; understanding; consciousness; center of thought; seat of the soul.
Fr598/J632 The Brain – is wider than the Sky ... deeper than the sea ... just the weight of God
- C. Cerebrum and cerebellum; master organ of the body; terminus of the central nervous system; soft viscus mass within the skull; center that enables various human functions, abilities,

capacities, connections, and sensations.

Fr384/J426 It don't sound so terrible ... Brain – “Dead”.

D. Memory; mind; remembrance; recollection; mental awareness.

Fr518/J596 That Woman and her Boy / Pass back and forth, before my Brain

E. Intellect; reason; logical capacity.

Fr891/J944 I learned – at least – what Home could be ... Your Problem – of the Brain

F. Nucleus; core; kernel.

Fr1112/J945 This is a Blossom of the Brain – / A small – italic Seed

The teacher will hand out a pre-prepared packet of these six “brain” poems. We will read them together, and discuss how reading six poems that contain the same word choice help us understand her intention with that word. (If the teacher could have introduced at least one of the poems in earlier assignments—consider “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain”—then this exercise would become a valuable “revisiting” of the original interpretation). We will notice that in some poems, the use of “brain” is more integral to the poem than in others. We will discuss which poem we would like to choose as the ‘heart’ of our essay. Which poem will anchor our study of the others? We will notice that “I felt a Funeral, in my brain” has a counterpart in “This is a Blossom of the Brain,” for “funeral” is also mentioned in that poem, in the phrase “When it is lost, that Day shall be/The Funeral of God,” referring to the “Blossom of the Brain.” Is there a spiritual dimension to the way she writes about ‘Brain’? That might be one angle to approach this assignment. Or perhaps one might want to focus on the existential questions she raises—what happens when thought ends? In a poem where “brain” is less integral, might we use the one reference, as in FR891, “Your problem-of the Brain” to establish in our introductory paragraph that Dickinson saw the brain as a “problem.” But what kind? Is it a problem with an answer? Meaning, the problem is that when thought stops, soul stops? Or is it a problem with no answer? Is Dickinson arguing that the Brain is a form of God? Through a discussion where these and other points and questions are raised, the class will decide which three of the six poems they would choose to make up the material for their essay if they were writing on this particular word choice. For the actual assignment, students will have the option to use additional poems, but sparingly. The idea is to achieve a depth of analysis on 2-3 poems.

Homework after Day 1: Use the given list of possible words, or one of your own, and search through the Lexicon for a word you can trace across at least 3 poems, but fewer than 10 referenced poems (it is too time consuming to pour through more than 10 poems). Read and annotate the referenced poems. After considering a few possibilities and some brainstorming, select the word choice you will focus on for your essay.

Day 2: Time in class to brainstorm your essay ideas: principle of selection: which poems will you focus on? Which poem will be the “heart” of your essay? Does her use of the word stay consistent across the poems? Does it evolve? Is it contradictory? Complementary?

HW: Draft a working thesis

Day 3: Computer lab time to work on essay; Turn in working thesis; receive teacher feedback

HW: Start drafting essay

Day 4: Computer lab time to work on essay; read FR#1268 “A Word dropped carelessly on a Page” for editing inspiration

Day 5: Turn in essay; write cover letter explaining the challenges and successes of this project; Share essay ideas with classmates

Materials

Web access to the Lexicon (<http://edl.byu.edu/index.php>)

Packet of “Brain” poems (FR# 340, 598, 384, 518, 891, 1112)

List of possible words for students to focus on (the below words have fewer than 10 entries, so the assignment can be more manageable; it is worth showing students the long list of poem references for a favorite word of EDs like “snow” or “sunset” or “tomb”):

Bread
Church
War
Crow
Funeral
Pencil
Gem
Spider
Beetle
Lilac
Roof
Ruby/rubies
Train
Chair
Bridegroom
Glove
Violin
Nail
Thunder

Teacher comments/reflections

This assignment has yet to be tested officially. I plan to use it in fall 2010 when I teach a new elective to seniors entitled “Emily and Friends.” The course description is as follows:

Two portraits of famous 19th century British women writers hung on Emily Dickinson’s bedroom wall: George Eliot and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Clearly, she revered these British

predecessors, but why? Was it their explorations of love, both tortured and romantic? Their philosophical views on faith and immortality? Through an alternating study of Dickinson's own poetry and letters and some of the classical texts that she loved, including Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, Eliot's *Silas Marner*, Shakespeare's *Othello*, and selected poetry, we will explore these and other questions in an effort to know more about the "real" Emily Dickinson. You will have the opportunity to read and research Dickinson through a powerful biographical lens, where we will study her writing and reading to get closer to knowing her own tortured heart, why she did not publish, and what life was like for her as she cooked, cleaned, and wrote some of the most esteemed poetry in the world! The course will conclude with a final project where you will view the film version of the famous one-woman play "The Belle of Amherst," and write and perform your own one-woman show where you imagine Emily in conversation with some of her literary friends you will have studied.

Prior to this assignment, students will have had some biographical context, discussed her poems in class, including a focus on the "wife" and "housewife" poems, and will also have written a short paper comparing two versions of her poem FR#291, "It sifts from Leaden Sieves." Analyzing the "variorum," as they are called, will prepare students for the comparative work involved in *this* assignment.

This assignment is challenging, but I also think it will be rewarding. Whether the final paper offers clear analysis or not, the process of preparing to write the paper will no doubt strengthen students' critical thinking skills. Their "Brains," then, will be improved, one hopes!