

1. *Lesson Plan Title*

Emily Dickinson: Luminous Letters

2. *Teacher names and School name*

Courtney Rein and Jonathan Howland, The Urban School of San Francisco

3. *Age of students*

Junior/Senior

4. *Brief lesson summary, including overall learning goal(s) of the unit.*

Dickinson's letters comprise form of self-publication, even as her poems constitute a form of private inquiry, a conversation with the self. The learning goal is to help students construct an understanding of these overlapping dimensions of Dickinson's poetry and persona.

Students will read selected letters and poems of Emily Dickinson and construct their own understanding of the ideas and questions at play therein.

5. *Big ideas/understandings/essential questions. (In other words, what will students know and/or be able to do?)*

- What can we learn about the poet and her way of seeing by examining her "letter[s] to the world"?
- How do the letters alter and inform our reading of the poet and the poems?
- What does Dickinson offer and withhold as she invites others into her interior conversations?

Dickinson is capable of intimate expressions of ardor; she can entice and withhold with equal power and deliberation. In her person and in her poetry, Dickinson's Vesuvian passion vies with the discipline and control that are hallmarks of her poetic *métier*. Dickinson is mercurial and elusive and ultimately unknowable, but searching is fun.

6. *Assessment evidence (e.g., performance tasks, quizzes, tests, observations, homework, journals, etc.)*

After our work with the letters (over two days), students will be asked to posit a relationship between the letters and the poetry. Students will find 2-3 poems that gain greater illumination through juxtaposition with the letters.

Assignment: Write a 1-2 page poem exegesis whose central premise and related ideas are steeped in textual evidence from both the poems and the letters.

We will use several of these exegeses as the basis for further inquiry into and discussion of Dickinson's work.

7. *Learning plan/Learning activities*

Class activity – Day One

With the above framing questions in mind:

Read selected letters to Higginson:
#260, #265, #268, #330

Read the Master letters:
#233, #238, #248

Homework: read around in the letters and the poems to identify and explore a relationship between them.

Students will use a chart of selected poems (see pages 3-6: "Constellations of Emily Dickinson") as a way of orienting themselves topically to related poems.

Class activity – Day Two

Discuss some of the students' findings (35 min.)
Pose prompt for the exegesis and consult with individuals (35 min.)

Homework: poem/poetry exegesis

Class activity – Day Three

Entertain several presentations and guided readings based on the students' findings and papers.

8. *Materials (e.g., primary and secondary sources, etc.)*

Final Harvest, a selection of 500+ Dickinson poems from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (1964)

Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters, a selection of Dickinson's letters from *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (1958)

Constellations in the Cosmos of Emily Dickinson
(poem numbers refer to those in *Final Harvest*;
if using another edition, look up the poem by the first line)

Mystery/All/Questing

14 “Exultation is the going / Of an inland soul to sea”

34 “ ‘Faith’ is a fine invention”

81 “The Drop, that wrestles”

105 “He fumbles at your Soul”

142 “I saw no Way”

202 “This World is not Conclusion”

231 “My period had come for Prayer”

284 “As if the Sea should part”

327 “She staked her Feathers”

374 “The Heart has narrow Banks”

380 “A Nearness to Tremendousness”

388 “The Missing All”

411 “Perception of an object costs”

507 “ ‘Heavenly Father’ – take to thee”

Pain and Despair

28 “A Wounded deer”

54 “I like a look of Agony”

97 “The difference between Despair / And Fear”

122 “After great pain, a formal feeling comes”

164 “We grow accustomed to the Dark”

204 “It was not Death, for I stood up”

206 “The Soul has Bandaged moments”

230 “I measure every Grief I meet”

248 “There is a pain – so utter”

269 “Pain – has an Element of Blank”

283 “They say that ‘Time assuages’”

318 “The Loneliness One dare not sound”

380 “A nearness to Tremendousnes”

Poetry/Art/Inspiration

14 "Exultation is the going / Of an inland soul to sea

66 "There's a certain Slant of light"

85 "I'm Nobody! Who are you?"

92 "Your Riches – taught me – Poverty."

105 "He fumbles at your Soul"

114 "I cannot dance upon my Toes"

164 "We grow accustomed to the Dark"

176 "This was a Poet – it is That"

192 "She dealt her pretty words like Blades"

270 "I dwell in Possibility"

347 "To own the Art within the Soul"

426 "Shall I take thee, the Poet said"

427 "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant"

497 "I have no Life but this"

505 "Your thoughts don't have words every day"

546 "A Word made Flesh is seldom"

572 "To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee"

Love and Loss

6 "Heart! We will forget him!"

179 "Love – thou art high"

187 "Except the Heaven had come so near"

196 "To One denied to drink"

197 "While it is alive / Until Death touches it"

205 "If you were coming in the Fall"

265 "I cannot live with You"

418 "I cannot live with You"

563 "My life closed twice before its close"

Death

47 “Safe in their Alabaster
Chambers”

78 “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain”

177 “I died for Beauty – but was
scarce”

184 “I heard a Fly buzz – when I
died”

219 “The Province of the Saved”

290 “Because I could not stop for
Death”

375 “A Coffin – is a small Domain”

422 “The last Night that She lived”

Poems with “Circumference”

142 “I saw no Way – The Heavens were stiched”

327 “She staked her Feathers – Gained an Arc”

360 “Crisis is a Hair”

375 “A Coffin – is a small Domain”

Merge Poems

58 “Wild Nights – Wild Nights!”

209 “I started Early – Took my Dog”

Faith and Doubt

34 “ ‘Faith’ is a fine invention”

45 “Did the Harebell loose her girdle”

48 “Savior! I’ve no one else to tell”

162 “I never felt at Home – Below”

Nature of the Self – Nature of Existence

- 95** “The Soul selects her own Society”
- 129** “ ‘Tis Opposites – entice”
- 147** “No Rack can torture me”
- 203** “I’m ceded – I’ve stopped being
Theirs”
- 246** “The Battle fought between the
Soul”
- 262** “The Brain – is wider than the Sky”
- 282** “The Soul unto itself / Is an
imperial friend”
- 296** “Behind me – dips Eternity”
- 307** “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun”
- 318** “The Loneliness One dare not
sound”
- 327** “She staked her Feathers – Gained
an Arc”
- 338** “This Consciousness that is aware”
- 362** “Of Consciousness, her awful Mate”
- 425** “Oh Sumptuous moment”
- 432** “The Props assist the House”
- 472** “I thought that nature was enough”
- 487** “The Heart is the Capital of the
Mind”
- 554** “On my volcano grows the Grass”
- 555** “The Blunder is in estimate.”
- 558** “There is a solitude of space”