

## **TITLE OF PROJECT: EMILY DICKINSON AND THE MEANING OF FRIENDSHIP**

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**GRADE LEVEL** Project was taught to a small elective class of three 7<sup>th</sup> and one 8<sup>th</sup> grader, and to a class of 6<sup>th</sup> graders (18 students). This project could be adapted for 5<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders quite readily.

### **OVERVIEW**

This series of lessons explores the nature of friendship as seen through the words and descriptions of Emily Dickinson in her letters and poetry. Students will not only develop their understanding of what friendship meant to the poet, but also develop their own personal ideas about what friendship means to them in their adolescence. In celebration of their learning and the beauty of friendship, students will create a friendship token and bestow it on someone special to them.

### **THE “BIG IDEA”**

Social relationships such as friendship can shape artistic effort in both content (what art is about) and purpose (what art is for).

### **LEARNING STANDARDS that the project addresses ([www.corestandards.org/](http://www.corestandards.org/)):**

Reading Standards (I've used 7<sup>th</sup> grade, as a middle ground)

*Key Ideas and Details:*

1. Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
2. Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.

*Craft and Structure:*

4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of rhythms and other repetitions of sounds (e.g., alliteration) on a specific verse or stanza of a poem or section of a story or drama.

Writing Standards

*Text Types and Purposes:*

1. Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

*Production and Distribution of Writing:*

4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

*Range of Writing:*

10. Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

**KEY UNDERSTANDING(s) of Emily Dickinson, her work, and her world that students will develop from this project:**

One of the key themes of Emily Dickinson's writing is friendship; in her poetry and letters she thinks about what friendship means through metaphor, simile, and symbol. In her writing she thinks about what it *means* to be a friend and what the *value* is in having friendships.

Emily Dickinson's poems also have importance as material objects, as tokens of friendship. The presence of a poem in a letter or as an attachment to a gift makes it an object born of friendship (akin to a friendship bracelet today.) From the contemporary Webster dictionary that ED used, a token is "a memorial of friendship; something by which the friendship of another person is to be *kept in mind*" (emphasis mine).

**THE CULMINATING PERFORMANCE TASK that demonstrates student understanding:**

Writing-and-Token Project

I will provide for the students relevant letters and poems written by ED. After a variety of lessons (see number 8 below for a list of works) to scaffold their learning and thinking through formative assessment, they will then pursue the culminating performance task, called the Writing-and-Token Project, which will be a summative assessment, with a letter grade designation. The assignment will be in paragraph and craft/artwork form.

**Attachment A** shows the assignment as given to 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders. I would adjust slightly for 6<sup>th</sup>s. (In fact, the 6<sup>th</sup>s did not pursue the writing portion of the project; just the mini-lessons and the token.)

**Attachment B** shows a sample of a student's writing.

**SKILLS that students must develop or improve to succeed on the culminating performance task:**

For the Writing Task:

- Review of poetry terminology (especially metaphor, symbolism, personification, speaker, simile, and stanza) so that students may use terms appropriately when interpreting poetry.
- The ability to use quotations marks, a slash to denote line endings, and poem line numbers properly in their paragraph responses.
- Writing process: drafting, editing, revising, and publishing.
- Knowledge of proper paragraph format with topic sentence, supporting details, and concluding sentence.
- The ability to comprehend, to interpret, and to discuss challenging reading materials.
- The ability to compare and contrast a perceived attitude about a particular theme (poetry) with their own nascent feelings about the same theme.

For the Token Task:

- Artistic, culinary, literary, musical, or other creativity to imagine an appropriate friendship token and then make it.
- The willingness to learn a new craft; in this case plastic lace weaving (also called “boondoggle” or “gimp”).
- Planning ahead to account for time and materials to produce a friendship token.

**SEQUENCE OF LEARNING EXPERIENCES, MINI-TASKS, AND FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS that you used to enable students to develop the required skills and targeted understandings:**

I used the following ten activities in this basic order. They could be rearranged and/or paired (say, slideshow with webquest).

1) Webquest: a scavenger hunt based on the website of the Emily Dickinson Museum. Ask students to visit the site [www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org](http://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org). In my context, each student will be on a laptop computer, or a visit to the computer lab could also work. Ask the students to find the answers to the following questions using only this website. They should write down their answers in full sentences and be prepared to share them when asked and hand in for checking. These questions are meant to pique students’ interest, and could be replaced with any similar ones of your own creation.

- i. Where is the Emily Dickinson Museum located? Have you ever been to this state?
- ii. Watch the short video under the “Emily Dickinson” tab. Who lived next door to Emily?
- iii. In the 1886 map of Amherst, what is shown to lie behind the town on the horizon?
- iv. What was Main Street, Amherst like in the 1850s?
- v. How many poems did Emily write and what were the circumstances of their publication?
- vi. What two significant events in Emily’s life occur in 1861?
- vii. Who is Abiah Root?
- viii. What is “My Uncle Emily” and what does it cost?
- ix. What are Emily’s birth and death dates?
- x. What are the names of the two homes that now form the Emily Dickinson Museum?

*Formative assessment:* verbally assess or collect written answers for a Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory grade. I gave 5 participation points for the activity and 1 point per question for finding the answer.

2) Slideshow viewing: personal photos taken during my NEH workshop (2011) as well as a variety of powerpoint slides that contain factual information, historical overview, slides of manuscripts and handwriting examples, etc. Teachers who do not have personal photos can request a press packet of images from the museum; in addition, a Google images search for “Emily Dickinson Museum” brings up many appropriate images that can be copied into powerpoint slides.

*Formative assessment:* visually assess students’ attention and/or collect their note-taking for a Satisfactory/ Unsatisfactory grade. I gave 5 participation points for paying good attention.

3) Simile Activity that reviews the definition of the term and then asks paired students to create their own similes of friendship, then explain them.

*Formative assessment:* I gave a few writing points for a decent exploration; examples students came up with were “friendship is like a rollercoaster,” or “friendship is like a journey.”

4) Creation of a “friend profile” on an index card, where they choose a friend and give three biographical details, a photo or sketch of their friend, and a statement at the bottom about how they met and why this person makes a good friend.

*Formative assessment:* Check for completion, effort, details, sincerity, and give a score out of 5 points. (These cards should likely not be posted or shared, because this activity could invite ridicule or jealousies if there are strict social hierarchy factors at play. Teachers should use their judgment.)

5) Journaling: This will take place for the first 10 minutes of each class session. They will be asked to free write on the following topics, one per day:

- i) relate a time when they believe that they showed meaningful friendship
- ii) relate a time when they suffered a disappointment in a friendship
- iii) choose an historical figure they would have loved to be friends with and explain why
- iv) describe a friendship token or a gift from a friend they once received
- v) consideration of Facebook “friends” and what it means to be friends in 2012
- vi) describe a friend they’ve had for a long time, describe a friend who is new.
- vii) respond to the old verse: “Make new friends, but keep the old; one is silver and the other gold”

*Formative assessment:* 5 points per journal entry.

6) Writing Process: Review the stages of prewriting, drafting, editing and publication of paragraphs for the summative assessment. Formative assessment for participation points.

7) Brainstorming about friendship tokens: teacher-guided, along with a teacher-led conversation about the avoidance of ‘buying’ affection. List could include baked goods, paintings, photos, scrapbook pages, letters, sculpture, jewelry, poems, woodwork, and so forth. Almost anything, really!

*Formative assessment* for participation points (demonstrating creative thinking, showing enthusiasm, willingness to help others come up with ideas, etc.)

8) Teacher-demonstrated group craft project: weaving bracelets out of 2-3 colors of plastic lace, which we will all exchange with one another in celebration of our unit in a group token exchange which will precede individual token projects. These are meant to be *easy* bracelets to make, even for people who do not consider themselves crafty.

There are a surprising number of videos on these bracelets, so teachers can choose for themselves. Several of my students had learned techniques at camp and were more than willing to share their know-how with their peers. If one student knows how to do it, he/she can show the rest pretty easily (demonstration worked best in my experience).

*Formative assessment:* participation points for earnestly trying to learn the bracelet making (all my students were capable although some are naturally better at it) and for contributing a bracelet to the “token bowl,” from which eventually everyone got to name a color and I pulled a bracelet out that had that color in it (a semi-random way of making sure everyone got a bracelet but avoiding favoritism).

Helpful links:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ozs5byoR9\\_4&feature=results\\_main&playnext=1&list=PL768207B31CCED95](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ozs5byoR9_4&feature=results_main&playnext=1&list=PL768207B31CCED95)

Sample tokens (plastic-lace zipper pulls, Danny G.):



9) Song Critiques: I used the following songs, but teachers can use anything that they know or find relevant. I made a powerpoint slide with links to youtube for each song. We took each song on its own terms but also compared them with one another; for example, the Newman song actually uses an identical line from the King and is very similar in sentiment, while the Beatles stands apart and is lighter in tone. The Withers song emphasizes reciprocity in friendship, and so forth.

- i) “Lean on Me” by Bill Withers (1972)
- ii) “A Little Help from My Friends” by Lennon and McCartney (1967)
- iii) “I’ll be There For You” by the Rembrandts (1995), which was the theme song from the “Friends” TV show, which my students were familiar with

- iv) “You’ve Got a Friend” by Carole King (1971)
- v) “You’ve Got a Friend in Me” by Randy Newman, for the movie “Toy Story” (1995), which was by far the most familiar to my students

*Formative assessment* could be made song by song, or group by group. My lessons were informal and discussion based, so I gave participation points. (Bonus points for dancing!)

10) Mini-lessons on specific Dickinson poems and letters: students either read from a photocopy or from a projection. We went through the text, discussing and “rewording” ED’s language into our own way of speaking. Paraphrase was the fundamental technique here to help students understand the 19<sup>th</sup> century language of the poems and letters. I took a free-form, informal lecture approach.

**Appendix C includes texts that I found particularly helpful, as well as** the most significant points of interpretation that I tried to illuminate. These are designed to highlight friendship, and do not reflect much “outside reading” on my part, but my own personal take. Other teachers with different populations may come up with a variety of responses. Dickinson’s letters are available in *Selected Letters: Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas Johnson, 1958.

*Formative assessment*: I gave points to students for their note-taking entries for each individual poem that we discussed. I expected to see 4-5 observations for each poem or letter that we discussed.

### **SUGGESTED RESOURCES helpful to or suitable for the project:**

A teacher wishing to pursue this unit will want to have access to the following:

- *The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Reading Edition*, ed. R.W. Franklin (1998)
- *Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters*, ed. by Thomas Johnson (1958)
- *The World of Emily Dickinson* by Polly Longworth (1990)

The following specific suggestions and additional sources will also be useful:

- Letter 193 to Samuel Bowles in which ED writes “My friends are my ‘estate.’ Forgive me then the avarice to hoard them”
- Poem 380 “All the letters I can write” which included a flower token
- biography excerpts from chapters titled “Early Friendships” and “Susan and Emily” in Richard B. Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*
- the Emily Dickinson lexicon (<http://edl.byu.edu/index.php>), where 16 meanings of “friend” are given from the contemporary Webster’s and 71 poems are listed as using the word “Friend” (teachers can use this resource to search for their own “friend” poems of choice)
- *Poetry for Young People: Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Francis Schoonmaker Bolin and Chi Chung
- *My Uncle Emily* by Jane Yolen

## TEACHER REFLECTIONS

I feel quite rewarded in working through this material and the above lessons with my students. They do not come into these lessons with any biases or preconceived ideas. I know that I have fostered a recognition of and an affinity for this poet and she now has big name recognition amongst them. Many of them feel that they are “experts” on Dickinson now. The plastic lace bracelets took off like wildfire in my 6<sup>th</sup> grade class, with students sitting around making bracelets during their lunch hour and the 5<sup>th</sup> grade class begging to be involved also. The 6<sup>th</sup>s ended up teaching the 5<sup>th</sup>s. It felt profound to read ED’s letter to Abiah with adolescents, in which Emily is full of doubt about their friendship and pleading to be clued in to the situation; adolescents understand this because they are living it themselves in their own friendship dramas, and it is profound to point out that some human experiences, like friendship, do not really change over time, even though the letter from Dickinson to her friend is 164 years old!

### **How did the project help you to facilitate and assess student learning?**

This was a wonderful way to cover a fair bit of poetic ground. The 6<sup>th</sup> grade class read or heard me read approximately a dozen poems alone, since I also supplemented with the picture books *Poetry for Young People: Emily Dickinson* and *My Uncle Emily*. The numerous formative assessments made for discussion-heavy class sessions, and the relevancy to the students made a *huge* difference I believe. ED was not old and stuffy, but a poet who truly lived and experienced things not so differently from them. I was able to make easy formative assessments “on the spot” when students were able to “translate” ED’s words into their own and share experiences from their own lives. I was able to gauge with my 6<sup>th</sup> grade their ability for abstract thinking and the frankly surprising sophistication of their interpretations of ED and their facility with her language, especially as time went on.

### **What did you learn that helped you to revise or strengthen the project for the next time?**

Students who are not very self-motivated or have poor time management have a difficult time in committing to a token project and following through not only on making the token, but also on presenting it to a friend. A teacher cannot actually monitor the last part, and so there is a certain amount of honor system at work. For instance, one student planned to write and perform a song; her organizational skills and motivation were lacking, and this turned into making a sandwich for a friend instead, something that was done last minute. Next time, I will stress more firmly that the writing portion of the culminating performance task be taken as seriously as any other English written assignment (There was a bit of informality to the whole unit that affected the perception, I think, on the part of the students about the effort they had to put into the paragraph responses.) The token-making was just so fun that it sort of outshone the more traditional, written, assessment.

### **What suggestions do you have for teachers who might try this project?**

Any craft might be able to be adopted if it ties in to friendship. For example, a teacher who knows how to quilt might formulate the unit based on friendship quilt squares, or a teacher who crochets could perhaps have students work on Granny squares. It would be best to choose

something out of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century realm. I am not a crafty person, but it was fun to integrate the some tactile creativity into the English classroom.

## APPENDIX A

### Writing-and-Token Friendship Project (guidelines for students)

#### Writing:

Each of the following questions should be answered in paragraph form (topic sentence, supporting details, concluding sentence) of no less than 5 sentences per paragraph

- What does friendship mean to the poet Emily Dickinson? Support your answer with evidence by way of both quotation and paraphrase from at least TWO poems and ONE letter. (2 paragraphs)
- What does friendship mean to *you*? Give examples of experiences you have had that illustrate your understanding of friendship. (1 paragraph)
- Compare your personal take on friendship to that of Emily Dickinson. Would you say that you think of friendship in a similar or different way than the poet? (1 paragraph)

#### Token:

Think about a physical object that you can create, whether a piece of writing (letter, poem), art, craft, song, food item, jewelry, etc., that you can give to a friend outside of Ashbrook as a token of your friendship. Discuss your idea with the teacher, especially if you need help getting materials.

Fill in the token planning sheet and show Ms. Gottlieb.

Prospective token: \_\_\_\_\_  
Who will receive your token: \_\_\_\_\_  
Materials needed: \_\_\_\_\_  
Timeframe for the creation of the token: \_\_\_\_\_  
When you plan to present your friend the token:  
How you will show Ms. Gottlieb: (photograph or bringing in the token):  
\_\_\_\_\_

Fill in the planning guidelines below:

Type of item: Painting

Why this item (does it relate to your friendship in some way? Are you good at making this sort of thing?)  
This is item because my friend and like art very much

Materials needed:  
Acrylic paint (green, blue, black, white), canvas, paint brushes

Length of time needed to make token: 1 day

When you will give your token to your friend:  
Memorial day weekend.

Sample token planning guide (Artemis K.)

## APPENDIX B

Sample 8<sup>th</sup>-grade written portion:

### Emily Dickinson Friendship

Maggie S.

Emily Dickinson thinks of friendship as a lovely, very cherished thing. Her letters to Abiah Root were very truthful and friendly. In one of her letters, Emily talks about one of her sick friends named Susie to Abiah telling her how she is doing. In another Emily isn't sure Abiah remembers her or not because she hasn't replied to her letter. She explains how she tried to forget Abiah but even if she tried very hard she couldn't. Abiah was permanently a part of Emily and Emily could never forget how wonderful of a friend she is. "*Six long months and I have tried to make us strangers but I love you better than ever notwithstanding the link which bound us in that golden chain is sadly dimmed, I feel more reluctant to lose you from that bright circle, whom I've called my friends I mailed a long letter to you the 1<sup>st</sup> of March, and patiently have I waited a reply, but none has yet cheered me.*" Emily doesn't want to lose Abiah as a friend, she loves her very dearly.

An example of great friendship is in the poem "We Talked as Girls Do" by Emily Dickinson. The whole poem is about two girls talking late at night about everything (except the grave). This poem shows great friendship because it resembles a sleepover to some extent. The girls must be great friends if they're talking about everything, their destiny and future and life that they want to have. Only very good friends talk about everything, why would you tell someone your whole life plans if they weren't your friend?

Another great poem about friendship is "Are Friends Delight or Pain" by Emily Dickinson. This poem questions a true friend. Whether friends bring happiness and joy to your life or sadness and pain and no matter what they'll cause some sort of heartbreak. It also mentions in line four through six that if they stayed but wanted to leave then the happiness in friendship would be sad. You never want a friend that doesn't like you enough. Then they won't want to be around you when you maybe need them and you can't rely on them.

Friendship to me is absolutely wonderful, but only when you have the right type of friends. If you have an actual friend who's willing to text you every day, Skype you while the both of you are working on homework, and wants to always be with you, those are true friends. The friends that every time you think about them they make you smile, or you remember a funny joke or time about them and you actually laugh out loud. Those friends bring happiness and joy to your life. There will also be hard times between them, but those patches will easily heal by the bond of your friendship. I have a few great friends like that, and every moment I get to hang out with them I cherish it so much. One of those friends came to my play, and before had never come to any activity I had invited him to before. I was so excited when I heard this I couldn't stop talking about it for weeks. And then eventually when he came I was extremely giddy and excited. Then after the play I still couldn't stop talking about it. I don't get to see this friend of mine that much so it was very exciting. And a great act of friendship on their part.

I think that Emily Dickinson and I share a similar take on friendship as we both believe it to be this great and amazing thing, a bright circle where we can call you a friend, because you show that you belong in that circle. I also believe Emily and I are both similar in the way we believe who our friends are. After Emily isolated herself she picked the true friends she had, not the plain friends that aren't always there for you. I don't call someone my friend unless they are

a true friend and are always there for me. I also understand her poem “Are Friends Delight or Pain” because I know if friends are painful or not to have. And it is true that some friends cause you pain because they don’t want to be with you they want to be somewhere off or with their other friends.

But the true friends will always make you laugh, smile, and you’ll never be able to keep your mind off of them, no matter where you are.

## APPENDIX C Sample Dickinson Texts

*Below are suggestions for letters and poems to use with students as part of this project. [Full texts will be included once publisher permission is granted (pending 11/9/12)].*

### **Letter 26 from ED to Abiah Root (1848)**

ED is very anxious and unsure; she worried that she was audacious to use the word “dear” with Abiah, she calls the suspense “intolerable.” She uses a symbol found throughout her poetry, that of a bird, in the phrase “the bird had flown” to describe missing out on a chance to speak with Abiah at Holyoke.

### **Letter 305 from ED to Sue Dickinson, on the death of Sue’s sister (1865)**

This is a letter because it is addressed “Dear Sue” and signed “Emily,” but the entire content is a poem of three lines. We talk about how the heartfelt emotion that is the impetus of the letter is also the topic of the short poem, and that the writing of the letter/poem is an act of friendship. I did not teach it, but letter 306 would make a good pairing, in which ED makes her strong feelings of friendship for Sue very evident.

### **Poem F71 “My Friend Must Be a Bird”**

The last two lines of this poem “Ah, curious friend!/ Thou puzzlest me!” work really well with the letter to Abiah. Again we see ED’s uncertainty, and like the poem “Are Friends Delight or Pain?” a certain negative light, in which friends fly, die, and sting. WE discuss the “barbs” of friendship, for the most part, the idea of hurt feelings.

### **Poem F392 “We talked as Girls Do”**

There is so much relevant content here to adolescents that it’s hard to do justice in a short space. In the main we set up this poem as a slumber party, there the girls chatter all night about themselves and their futures, that they are becoming women by degrees (bit by bit, hardly discernible), that they do not contemplate death, that only God hears their exchange, and that sadly and suddenly, something happens that prevents the friendship from continuing. The 6<sup>th</sup> graders *really* enjoyed this poem and puzzled it out without too much difficulty. The boys liked to tease the girls about being chatty.

### **Poem F1224 “Are Friends Delight or Pain**

This is my personal favorite. It sets up a positive and negative dichotomy in contemplating friendship. At first the students all say they think friendship is a happy, positive thing, but when pressed to think a little more deeply, and in light of the journal writing that they’ve done, they all admit to pain and disappointment in friendship. I point out the imagery of “bounty” and “riches” as relating to the idea of the “value” of friendship. We talk over the definition of “ampler” (more likely), again more bird imagery with “flying away,” and finally, the twist at the end where instead of “bad,” which the reader would expect with the previous stanza’s ending in “good,” ED gives us “sad,” which the students are able to come to see with some prodding as a more emotional and less judgmental conclusion, fitting of the poems’ opening question.