

TITLE OF PROJECT: “WHAT INSPIRED EMILY? WHAT INSPIRES YOU?”

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GRADE LEVEL: piloted with 11th grade, but can be modified for any grade level in an English/language arts class.

OVERVIEW: After an introduction to Dickinson’s life and work, my students had to choose one poem to analyze. The analysis included a poster creation wherein the students identified the poetic devices in the piece and discussed how these devices achieved the writer’s purpose and message. On this same poster, students also reflected on what they believed inspired Dickinson to write it based on the background knowledge they received regarding her life. In addition to this reflection, students had to identify a source of inspiration for themselves and create their own piece of poetry or art.

THE “BIG IDEA” *A writer’s context, including people met and places seen, lends understanding and insight into the writer’s literary meaning.*

LEARNING STANDARDS that the project addresses (refers to the Common Core Standards at <http://www.corestandards.org/>):

- **Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.** (Common Core Reading Anchor Standard 7) RI.11-12.7. Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.
- **Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.** (Common Core Writing Anchor Standard 7) W.11-12.7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- **Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.** (Common Core Writing Anchor Standard 9) Apply *grades 11–12 Reading standards* to literature (e.g., “Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics”).

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

- Emily Dickinson relied on observation of people and nature within her personal boundaries to frame her understanding of human relationships and life.
- Through questioning and reflection, Emily Dickinson revised an art form that demonstrated personal ferocity and depth.

CULMINATING PERFORMANCE TASK(S) that demonstrate(s) student understanding:

Research. After assigning various poems and letters of Dickinson's, students will conduct research using a letter and poem as background to derive meaning from the poem. Research will include discovering archived primary and secondary sources on the Internet and using this information in conjunction with the context of the letter to analyze the assigned poem.

Poster. Students will then create a poster where they posit a thesis of what the poem's message is, using evidence from the letter, poem and research. They must also include a reflection piece where they discuss how Dickinson's background and life affected their interpretation of the poem. Finally, students will include an original piece of poetry or art that demonstrates how they identified a source of inspiration from their own lives.

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

- The ability to **paraphrase and annotate poetry**
- The ability to **extract context from nonfiction writing and apply it to poetry**
- The ability to **navigate through a library website to acquire primary sources**
- The ability to **sort through primary sources that reflect a time period's language in order to discover evidence**
- The ability to **critically review primary sources in order to assess their liability**
- The ability to **conduct close readings to connect poetry to contextual evidence when performing textual analysis**

SEQUENCE OF LEARNING EXPERIENCES, MINI-TASKS, AND FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

1. Prefacing the assignment with a Dickinson poem, students (without extensive background knowledge of the poet and poem) will discuss possible meanings. I used "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" (Fr 260) because I think it's a great one to come back to after the lesson because students see it in a different light. Students will then receive background information regarding this *poem* and discuss how this information changes their understanding of the poem (information could include images of references or passages of allusions).

2. Students will then be exposed to the online Emily Dickinson Lexicon (<http://edl.byu.edu/index.php>) and Jones Library website (<http://www.digitalamherst.org/>) The purpose of sharing and modeling these resources is to show students how to look up words that they may not know and also to show them a website that includes primary sources.
3. Students will then be able to choose a poem and letter (these should be coupled beforehand by the teacher) to research. This research will include Dickinson's life, as well as Amherst, Massachusetts, in general, to accumulate contextual evidence. Throughout the duration of the research, students in class will be exposed to imitation fascicles and antiques of that time period. The purpose of handling these objects is to give the students a sense of what they may read about in the research.
4. To demonstrate how to assess a source's liability, the class, as a whole, will be exposed to two sources regarding a contemporary topic and critique how the sources treat this topic. This activity will also show students how to choose the information that is most relevant to understanding context.

SUGGESTED POEMS, LETTERS, AND OTHER RESOURCES:

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)
- *Emily Dickinson A Poet's Grammar*, by Cristanne Miller (1987) (pages 49-59)

Many poems fit the scope of this project; the letters are easy to correspond as long as one notes the dates and relates them to poem dates. I used Letter 442 to introduce the students to the idea that Emily did reach out to others and showed her regard to people by items she may give, such as lemon drops or flowers. This letter also shows how she does ponder death and life, which relates to these subjects within her poems, such as "I heard a fly buzz when I died" (Fr 591). We also looked at Letter 868 and then viewed a poem from 1883, "Who has not found the Heaven – below –" (Fr 1609) to better understand her view of death. Then we compared this understanding to the tone in "Oh Future! thou secreted peace" (Fr 1652). "Sweet hours have perished here" (Fr 1785) also shows her sad/hopeless tone after a death.

TEACHER REFLECTIONS

I really enjoyed this project because it was the first time I have taught Emily Dickinson and felt that the students truly appreciated learning about the poet and her writing. I was able to facilitate and assess student learning because it allowed me to incorporate skill development, such as annotation and literary device analysis, into the enriching content of the poems. The students really enjoyed the fact that the poems, once analyzed, were about topics that they could easily relate to, such as friendship and death.

I think I would actually like to extend the project the next time I do it because I feel that a longer period of time will encourage the students to refer back to the poetry in other units we study. For instance, when we studied Walt Whitman later in the year, many students found it difficult to reference the Dickinson poetry we had studied earlier.

I would also like to use more artifacts when learning about the time period—my suggestion to other teachers is to visit antique shops to see if there are any pieces of flatware or décor that would mimic what Dickinson observed. I'd also suggest using flowers and having the students brainstorm what they want to bring from home that could symbolize who they are.