1.3: Emily Dickinson (1830 - 1886)

Born into an influential and socially prominent New England family in 1830, Emily Dickinson benefited from a level of education and mobility that most of her contemporaries, female and male, could not comprehend. The middle child of Edward Dickinson and Emily Norcross, Dickinson, along with her older brother Austin and younger sister Lavinia, received both an extensive formal education and the informal education that came by way of countless visitors to the family homestead during Edward Dickinson’s political career. Contrary to popular depictions of her life, Dickinson did travel outside of Amherst but ultimately chose to remain at home in the close company of family and friends. An intensely private person, Dickinson exerted almost singular control over the distribution of her poetry during her lifetime. That control, coupled with early portrayals of her as reclusive, has led many readers to assume that Dickinson was a fragile and timid figure whose formal, mysterious, concise, and clever poetry revealed the mind of a writer trapped in the rigid gender confines of the nineteenth century. More recent scholarship demonstrates not only the fallacy of Dickinson’s depiction as the ghostly “Belle of Amherst,” but also reveals the technical complexity of her poetry that predates the Modernism of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Marianne Moore by almost three-quarters of a century. In the selections that follow, Dickinson’s poetry displays both her technical proficiency and her embrace of techniques that were new to the nineteenth century. Like her contemporary Walt Whitman, Dickinson used poetry to show her readers familiar landscapes from a fresh perspective.
The selections that follow, from Dickinson’s most prolific years (1861-1865), illustrate the poet’s mastery of the lyric a short poem that often expresses a single theme such as the speaker’s mood or feeling. “I taste a liquor never brewed—,” our first selection, celebrates the poet’s relationship to the natural world in both its wordplay (note the use of liquor in line one to indicate both an alcoholic beverage in the first stanza and a rich nectar in the third) and its natural imagery. Here, as in many of her poems, Dickinson’s vibrant language demonstrates a vital spark in contrast to her reclusive image. Our second selection, “The Soul selects her own Society –,” shows Dickinson using well-known images of power and authority to celebrate the independence of the soul in the face of expectations. In both of these first two poems, readers will note the celebrations of the individual will that engages fully with life without becoming either intoxicated or enslaved. The third selection, “Because I could not stop for Death –,” one of the most famous poems in the Dickinson canon, forms an important bookend to our second selection in that both poems show Dickinson’s precise control over the speaker’s relationship to not only the natural world but also the divine. While death cannot be avoided, neither is it to be feared; the speaker of this poem reminds readers that the omnipresence of death does not mean that death is imminent. This idea of death as always present and potential comes full circle in the final selection in this unit, “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –.” Here Dickinson plays with our preconceptions not only of death, but also of energy which appears always to be waiting for someone to unleash it. Considered carefully, these four poems demonstrate the range of Dickinson’s reach as a poet. In these lyrics, mortality and desire combine in precise lyrics that awaken both our imagination and our awareness of the natural world.

1.4.1 “I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed”

I taste a liquor never brewed,
From tankards scooped in pearl;
Not all the vats upon the Rhine
Yield such an alcohol!

Inebriate of air am I,
And debauchee of dew,
Reeling, through endless summer days,
From inns of molten blue.

When landlords turn the drunken bee
Out of the foxglove’s door,
When butterflies renounce their drams,
I shall but drink the more!

Till seraphs swing their snowy hats,
And saints to windows run,
To see the little tippler
Leaning against the sun!

1.4.2 “The Soul Selects Her Own Society”

The soul selects her own society,
Then shuts the door;
On her divine majority
Obtrude no more.

Unmoved, she notes the chariot’s pausing
At her low gate;
Unmoved, an emperor is kneeling
Upon her mat.

I’ve known her from an ample nation
Choose one;
Then close the valves of her attention
Like stone.

1.4.3 “Because I Could Not Stop For Death”

Because I could not stop for Death,
He kindly stopped for me;
The carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality.

We slowly drove, he knew no haste,
And I had put away
My labor, and my leisure too,  
For his civility.

We passed the school where children played,  
Their lessons scarcely done;  
We passed the fields of gazing grain,  
We passed the setting sun.

1.4.4 “My Life Had Stood a Loaded Gun”

My Life had stood a Loaded Gun In Corners till a Day  
The Owner passed identified And carried Me away

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods And now We hunt the Doe  
And every time I speak for Him The Mountains straight reply

And do I smile, such cordial light  
Upon the Valley glow It is as a Vesuvian face  
Had let its pleasure through

And when at Night Our good Day done I guard My Master’s Head  
‘Tis better than the Eider-Duck’s  
Deep Pillow to have shared

To foe of His I’m deadly foe None stir the second time  
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye Or an emphatic Thumb

Though I than He may longer live  
He longer must than I  
For I have but the power to kill, Without the power to die

1.4.4 Reading and Review Questions

1. Many of Dickinson’s poems are rhythmically similar to popular nineteenth-century songs. How do those similarities help us to understand Dickinson’s poetry?

2. Death and isolation are common themes in Dickinson’s poetry, yet her poems rarely seem melancholy. What elements prevent her poems from becoming too solemn?

3. How do Dickinson’s poems support or challenge what we think we know about gender roles in the nineteenth century?

4. Compare and contract Dickinson’s isolation with Whitman’s aggressively public persona.