Bloom's Literature

How to Write about Emily Dickinson
An Overview

One of the difficulties in writing about Emily Dickinson's poems is the temptation to write about Dickinson instead of her writing. As a character, Dickinson fascinates her readers. She also invites an odd familiarity. Even seasoned critics are guilty of referring to her as "Emily." Take care that you do not. As with any writer, if you do not use the entire name, simply refer to him or her by last name. You should be aware that Dickinson herself wrote to the transcendentalist Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse, it does not mean—me—but a supposed person" (Letters 412). You would not want to confuse Dickinson with the speaker of the poems. But we also would not say that the poet can divorce herself from all of her experience, and a biographical inquiry can be quite interesting and illuminating. A teacher may assign you to write about Dickinson's life, or a brief discussion of her background might find a place in a longer paper.

Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, on December 10, 1830. She was her parents' middle child; her brother, Austin (1829–95), preceded her, and she had a younger sister, Lavinia (1833–99), called "Vinnie." Although Dickinson has been often portrayed as a recluse and someone therefore out of touch with the concerns of her society, this is far from the truth. Dickinson came from a socially prominent family. The Dicksons were among the first families and founders of the town of Amherst and Amherst College. Dickinson traveled through the eastern states and spent some time in Washington, D.C., when her father served in the House of Representatives from 1853 to 1854. Still, her home, called the Homestead, and her family formed the core of her life.

Her youth was unremarkable. She loved her family and her friends exceedingly. She excelled at her studies, particularly botany. She enjoyed all the pursuits common to a girl of her class at the time. The sense that she was to be a poet was perhaps with her from her early girlhood, however. She speaks in letters of a sense of possibility. Her early letters also reveal a theatric way with language and a tendency toward questioning that was to mark all of her life.

Her education placed her among the more educated women of her time. As a youth, she attended Amherst Academy. At 17, she matriculated at the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (now Mount Holyoke College), for what was to be a two-year program of study. She stayed for only one academic year. Though it was not unusual for students to depart after one year, Dickinson's reasons for returning home have been much speculated about. The clearest reason seems to have been homesickness. Although Mount Holyoke is only 10 miles from Amherst, at the time, this distance was enough to make travel difficult. She only visited the Homestead at holidays. For someone as passionately attached to her home as Dickinson was, it was emotionally difficult to be so removed.

After the completion of her year at Mount Holyoke, she spent her 20s at home, again pursuing the normal activities of any young woman. In addition to tending to her family and the Homestead, she hosted parties and reading circles. Her circle of correspondents grew.

The years of 1861 and 1862 marked a turn in Dickinson's life. These were also the years of her greatest creativity. There is a great deal of evidence to support the belief that Dickinson underwent some grave emotional or psychological trauma at this time that somehow opened the floodgates of her poetry. The exact nature of that trauma is unknown. She wrote to Higginson about it, saying only, "I had a terror—since September—I could tell to none—and so I sing as the Boy does by the Burying Ground—because I am afraid" (Letters 404). She had already begun to turn more inward, but now her seclusion was near complete. She spent much of her time in her room. She rarely left her house or garden. Even to cross to Austin Dickinson's home, only a few feet away from her own, was something she rarely did.

This is particularly noteworthy because one of the most important relationships in Dickinson's life was with Susan Gilbert Dickinson, early friend to Emily Dickinson and later Austin Dickinson's wife. Like Emily Dickinson, Susan Gilbert was well read and interested in literature, and in their early years, their friendship was exceptionally close. Many of Dickinson's poems were written for or about "Sister Sue," as Dickinson sometimes referred to her. There has been some conjecture that this relationship was intimate and that Dickinson's disappointments in love stem from latent lesbian desires toward her sister-in-law and perhaps the disappointment of Gilbert's marrying her brother. The evidence of this is
scant and no more than the evidence that Dickinson's great love was one of the important men in her life, perhaps the minister Charles Wadsworth or the newspaper publisher Samuel Bowles. Time showed Dickinson and Gilbert to be very different people, and eventually the friendship took place only in correspondence. Sue and Austin Dickinson's marriage was notoriously unhappy, and perhaps this contributed to the breakdown of relations between the sisters-in-law. Still, the relationship has been a focal point for critics. Susan Gilbert Dickinson was one of Emily Dickinson's earliest and most trusted readers. Emily Dickinson sent her more than 300 of her poems. After Emily Dickinson's death, Sue became one of her editors and an authority on her sister-in-law. If you were to write about their relationship, you could consider them in terms of the intimate friendships conducted by girls in 19th-century America, family dynamics, homoerotic desire, or writer and editor, among other topics.

Dickinson began to conduct more of her relationships (outside those with her immediate family) by correspondence. Some of those who came to know her later in her life never actually met with her face to face. She dressed almost entirely in white and became known as an eccentric. One of her endearing habits was to lower a basket of her baked goods from her bedroom window as schoolchildren passed on their way home.

Despite her seclusion, she was in correspondence with many of the prominent intellectuals of her time, including Bowles, editor of the *Springfield Republican*, and Higginson, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*. Many of her poems were included in letters or were mailed as messages. She wrote, particularly, in times of illness, death, or other hardship. Her letters make wonderful reading because you see the mind of the poet at work in her prose. If nothing else, you may wish to take a look at Dickinson's *Master Letters*, written in the years just prior to 1862. Dickinson's passion for the one she called "Master" is painfully evident in them. You may wish to consider what critics and biographers have said about Dickinson's relationship with "Master," whose identity remains one of the great literary mysteries. Dickinson's letters to this person are emotionally raw and painful. It is unclear whether they were ever sent.

The most often surmised reason for Dickinson's retirement from the world is a disappointment in love. This may be so, but Dickinson was also predisposed to this sort of life. She achieved happiness in it. The poems show someone who knew what it was to feel romantic passion. She had flirtations in her youth. Her *Master Letters* show that she suffered in love as a young woman. She was involved with Judge Otis Phillips Lord, a friend of her father's, in the years leading to his death in 1884. Dickinson died on May 15, 1886, of what was then called Bright's disease, an illness of the kidneys.

After Dickinson's death, her sister found drawers full of several hundred poems. Some were bundled in hand-sewn volumes that came to be known as Dickinson's fascicles. Though her family was aware that she wrote (seven of her poems appeared in print during her lifetime), they had no idea that she had written this much or this seriously. Lavinia Dickinson wished to see the poems through to publication. Inadvertently, her efforts caused a battle that was to last nearly a century. She gave some of the poems to Sue Dickinson, her brother's wife, who had literary leanings of her own. Disappointed that Sue Dickinson was not moving as quickly with the project as she would have liked, Lavinia Dickinson gave another group of poems to another literary woman she knew, Mabel Loomis Todd. But, as Todd was Austin Dickinson's mistress, the two editors had nothing but enmity for each other. (The story of the love affair between Austin Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd is recounted in Polly Longsworth's *Austin and Mabel: The Amherst Affair and Love Letters of Austin Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd*.) In 1890, Todd and Higginson published the first collection of approximately 100 Dickinson poems. The two editors normalized spelling and punctuation and attempted to "normalize" Dickinson's verse. They also gave her poems titles, something Dickinson did not do. This changing of the poet by her editors was to happen so often that it is still possible to pick up a book of Dickinson's work and find something other than what she intended. One possible writing assignment stemming from this is to compare Dickinson's originals with the versions of her poems that were changed by others.

In 1945, Millicent Todd Bingham, Mabel Loomis Todd's daughter, released 600 more of the poems that were in her family's possession. Meanwhile, between 1914 and 1973, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, Austin and Sue Dickinson's daughter, brought out eight volumes of her aunt's verse. The definitive edition of Dickinson's poems was not released until 1955, when Thomas H. Johnson's edition was published by Harvard University Press. He returned the poems to the form of the poet's original manuscripts. In his edition, the poems are numbered in an attempt to build a chronology. Today, Dickinson's poems are often titled by Johnson's number along with the poem's first line.

One useful line of inquiry when writing about almost any writer is to consider his or her literary influences. In her letters, Dickinson left some record of her reading. The preservation of the Dickinson Homestead allowed for a record of the Dickinson library. A description of that library can be found in Richard Sewall's biography. It may not surprise you to learn that Dickinson was exceedingly well read, though you may be surprised to learn that she was rather catholic in her tastes. She read the popular works of her day, romances and fictions, periodicals, and newspapers. She read William
Shakespeare and the Bible but also such contemporaries as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Henry David Thoreau. Among her favorite writers were George Eliot, George Sand, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

If you wish to consider Dickinson in the context of history, you will find ample material for discussion, but she is not easily pinned down. In spite of her living through some of her country's most formative events, she seems both of her time and removed from it. Some of her verse is startlingly contemporary, yet you will see in Dickinson traces of a true New England sensibility. Her religious thought was grounded in Calvinist teaching. Some of her poems reflect the influence of transcendentalism. One of the misperceptions about Dickinson that can be refuted by considering the conditions in which she lived is that she was obsessed by death. On the contrary, she was simply surrounded by it. The country was in a civil war. Mortality due to childbirth and illness was extremely high. Furthermore, the Dickinson Homestead bordered a graveyard. Death was an integral part of life.

Most of her poems are poems of the interior, poems that seem to speak to the emotional condition of the poet or the poem's speaker. Her punctuation, you'll notice right away, is one of the clearest identifiers of a Dickinson poem. Like her poems, her letters also commonly employ the dash as their principle mark of punctuation. Why she chose to punctuate in this manner has been much debated, and the earliest editions of her work regularized the punctuation and the capitalization. However, most agree that something is lost from the poems if the poet's original is tampered with.

Often, Dickinson's meaning may be initially obscure. You may find that only in repeated readings will the meaning of the poem begin to yield itself. She never wrote a long poem. So, although you might be initially gratified to note that a poem contains only, say, eight lines, those eight lines may require just as much thought and time on the part of the reader as any longer work of literature might. The poems will ask you to slow down and pay close attention to the diction, or the word choice, of the poet. A dictionary will prove a good companion.

It is tempting to let Dickinson speak for herself, for it is a delight when she does. Here is the description she sent to Higginson when he requested a portrait: "I had no portrait, now, but am small, like the Wren; and my Hair is bold like the Chestnut Bur; and my eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves. Would this do just as well?" (Letters 411).

One well-known quotation from Dickinson on her definition of poetry comes from Higginson's account of their first meeting: "If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?" (Letters 474). Her letters are always worthwhile. But you should consider that her brother and sister felt that Dickinson assumed a persona in her poems that was not in keeping with the sister they knew. Since the letters are wonderfully in keeping with what readers expect from Dickinson the poet, it is possible that she was aware of herself as a literary figure when composing them.

The letters and the poems are the first place to go to begin to dispel the misperceptions that have gathered around Emily Dickinson. You will not find in them a mad poet or a frail eccentric. But these perceptions persist, so it is worthwhile to consider why. Her life was perhaps unorthodox. She was certainly original. She was a poet. And her originality of voice and vision has, for the most part, been now recognized as character and conviction. She knew what she was about.

### Topics and Strategies

The sample topics provided below will give you some ideas to consider as you approach an essay about Emily Dickinson's work. Although many of the following topics will include some suggested poems that are later discussed in depth in this book, most of these topics can be applied to any number of Dickinson's poems. After you have decided what poems you will be discussing, you will be able to arrive at your own thesis. But again, you will find some possibilities discussed below.

### Themes

There are nearly as many themes in Dickinson's work as there are poems. Following are but four important ones. Dickinson regularly returns to the idea of home in her work. Although her characterization of home is almost unfailingly positive, home does take on a variety of forms and meanings. For the most part, Dickinson tends to favor "home" above any other place, including heaven. In one letter, she wrote, "Home—is the definition of God" (Sewall 270).
Loss is a theme important to all people, and Dickinson's poems about this topic hold universal relevance. Dickinson seemed to consider loss a painful but expected part of living. Being alive necessitated it. The most final loss is likely death, but her poems look at all sorts of loss, including those in battles, or between friends and lovers.

Isolation is another common theme in Dickinson. In addition to isolation, you might examine related concepts, such as seclusion, imprisonment, solitude, and loneliness. Like loss, isolation is often portrayed as a positive in Dickinson's poems. It serves to set the speaker apart from other people, proving that she is special, even exalted. The isolation can be spiritual, physical, or psychological.

Dickinson is often characterized as a poet in love with death. Death is one of her most prevalent themes. Her poems tend to consider what death is. What is its nature? How are we to understand it? What will it be like when it comes?

Sample Topics:

1. **Home:** What is the importance of home in Emily Dickinson's work?

   Some poems you might consider on this subject are "Some kept the Sabbath going to Church," "They shut me up in Prose," "I dwell in Possibility," and "I taste a liquor never brewed." You might wish to argue that in her work there is "no place like home," simply tracing the image throughout a number of poems to arrive at some idea of how exalted the place is in her poetry.

2. **Loss:** How do Emily Dickinson's poems confront the idea of loss?

   You might want to read "Success is counted sweetest," "After great pain, a formal feeling comes," and "My life closed twice before its close." Does Dickinson offer the reader some help in dealing with loss? What is it like to lose? Is it possible to be victorious in it?

3. **Isolation:** How is isolation depicted in Dickinson's poems?

   You might consider "There's a certain Slant of light," "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" and "Much Madness is divinest Sense." Dickinson isolated herself from other people. Did she see this as a virtue or a failing, or both? Is there a difference between physical and psychological isolation?

4. **Death:** Is Dickinson a poet of death?

   Poems in this book on the subject of death include "Success is counted sweetest," "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died," and "Because I could not stop for Death." She wrote many more, although she is hardly macabre. Death is a universal subject. Do her poems at all enlarge our understanding of it, or do they simply reveal another person's questions about death?

**History and Context**

One way to approach your discussion of Emily Dickinson is to consider her place in 19th-century America. On the subject of death, you may recognize that mortality rates were much higher than they are today. The role of women was far different. Her work captures some of her place and time.

Her most prolific period coincided with the Civil War, though few would characterize Dickinson as a war poet. There are no poems that address the war specifically, but there are many that consider violence and warfare in a general fashion, as there are many on the subject of death. One of the few poems she allowed to be published was "Success is counted sweetest," and that was published in the *Brooklyn Daily Union*, a publication that diverted funds to the war effort.

Keeping in mind the caution that poetry should not be read as strictly biography, it is at times impossible to get away from the poet's biography. In some of Dickinson's poems, the "I" is very clearly Dickinson, despite claims to the contrary. However, you cannot take this at face value. And the poems would not be as valuable to readers if they were only about the poet. There must be something beyond that. But an interesting paper can be made that knowingly looks at a work in light of the biography.
One curious fact about Dickinson is that her poems were published in the 20th century. It was then that she came to have the standing she still enjoys today. In some ways, Dickinson appears to be more of a 20th-century poet than a 19th-century poet. Some of her poems seem particularly modern in concern and in execution.

Sample Topics:

1. **The 19th century**: How can you argue that Emily Dickinson is a 19th-century poet?

   You might wish to consider "Success is counted sweetest," "Some kept the Sabbath going to Church," "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died," and "Because I could not stop for Death." You might argue that Dickinson's work proves her to be a poet of her time and place, uniquely American, uniquely 19th century.

2. **The Civil War**: Can Emily Dickinson be called a poet of the Civil War?

   You might wish to consider "Success is counted sweetest," "I like to see it lap the Miles," and "My life had stood—a Loaded Gun." These poems speak to the violence and progress of this time. Do you find in them any national concerns, or are their concerns all personal?

3. **Biographical contexts**: Do Dickinson's poems help you to understand her life?

   "My life had stood—a Loaded Gun," "My life closed twice before its close," and "This is my letter to the World" are but a few of Dickinson's poems that could be read in light of her biography. You might argue that a poem only reveals so much about its writer. You might also wish to provide your audience with knowledge about the poet from biographical sources.

4. **The 20th century**: Can you argue that Emily Dickinson is a 20th-century poet?

   Some poems that could be discussed on the topic of the 20th century are "My life had stood—a Loaded Gun," "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant," "After great pain, a formal feeling comes," and "There's a certain Slant of light." Dickinson has been embraced as a feminist, a curiously 20th-century way of reading her work. Some might call her a modernist. Others argue that she would not have enjoyed the acclaim she has received had she been published in her lifetime.

**Philosophy and Ideas**

Religion is a common theme in Dickinson's poems, as is any number of questions regarding faith. Often she draws a contrast between organized religion and private faith. Individual faith is depicted as more deeply felt and perhaps more true. Many of Dickinson's poems are so questioning that they border on the blasphemous.

Dickinson is often characterized as a nature poet. Certainly the love of the natural world figures prominently in her work. But in the poem "I reckon—when I count at all," she places poets ahead of both nature and heaven. Still, her poems tend to take great joy in nature and feature some of the most original depictions of the natural world and its inhabitants.

Poetry was the question that concerned Dickinson above most others. What is poetry? How does it affect us? What is life without it? How is the poet to live? These are just a few of the questions addressed in her poems. Sometimes she writes of how poetry exalts us. Sometimes poetry seems a substitute for more conventional religious belief.

Dickinson has been embraced as a feminist poet. What does she have to say on what has elsewhere been termed the *woman question*? Unlike many of her contemporaries, Dickinson seems unafraid to be frankly passionate, violent, or "unwomanly." Many of the choices she made, her seclusion, her unwed state, her unwillingness to publish, have been offered as evidence of a character that was not of her time, essentially a more modern sensibility.

Sample Topics:

1. **Faith**: What do Dickinson's poems say about faith?
"The Soul selects her own Society," "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church," "Much Madness is divinest Sense," and "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" could all be discussed in terms of faith. Do you see Dickinson as a religious poet? If so, how would you characterize the religion of the poems? What does she seem to distrust about organized worship?

2. **Nature:** Would you characterize Emily Dickinson as a "nature poet"?

Some poems you might consider on this subject are "Some kept the Sabbath going to Church," "This is my letter to the World," "I reckon—when I count at all," and "I taste a liquor never brewed." Does she often suggest that nature is superior to the made world? How does nature disappoint? Does it ever fail? Is nature her primary concern in these poems, or does nature suggest or symbolize something else?

3. **Poetry:** Does Dickinson's work amount to a philosophy of poetry?

On this topic you might discuss "This is my letter to the World," "This was a Poet—It is That," "I reckon—when I count at all," "They shut me up in Prose," and "I dwell in Possibility." What are Dickinson's beliefs about poetry? What does it "do" for her?

4. **Women:** What does Emily Dickinson have to say on the subject of women?

Some poems you may wish to consider are "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant," "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun," "They shut me up in Prose," and "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" Do you find evidence in her poems of a feminist sensibility? Do you think she would have embraced current views of womanhood?

**Form and Genre**

The following topics are general and broad. They can be applied to any poems in Dickinson's canon. You might also choose to examine them very broadly, first doing background reading on the terms themselves before considering Dickinson's work.

**Sample Topics:**

1. **The lyric:** How is Dickinson a lyric poet?

Dickinson is generally considered to mark the beginning of a lyric tradition in America. After doing some background reading on the subject of the lyric, you might wish to argue for or against this title. How are her poems conventional lyrics? Are there any that do not fit this definition? How does she deviate from European lyric tradition to create something new and American?

2. **Common meter:** What can be said about Dickinson's reliance on and use of common, or hymn, meter?

An overwhelming majority of Dickinson's poems are in common meter. How is it different from the form of the ballad? How does this metrical pattern function to create music? Why did Dickinson choose to work in it so often? How does she change it from its traditional religious function? These are but a few questions you might address in a paper on this topic.

3. **The fascicles:** What do the fascicles reveal about the poet or her work?

Many of Dickinson's poems were found in volumes put together and hand sewn by the poet. You may wish to look at copies of these "fascicles." From them it is possible to conjecture about many things, such as why the poet arranged the poems as she did. For instance, do you sense any narrative in the books that Dickinson made? Did she make them for herself or for an audience? What do the fascicles reveal about her disinclination to publish?

4. **Punctuation:** Does Dickinson's unorthodox system of punctuation tell us anything about the poet or her work?

This has been a subject of interest to a number of scholars. Dickinson's punctuation is unusual and idiosyncratic.
She relies heavily on the dash and very rarely employs the period. To some, this gives the work a sense of urgency and open-endedness. For others, accustomed to more conventional grammar, it can be frustrating. Her early editors considered it an error and corrected it. Why do you think she makes the decisions she does? What effect do you find it has on the poems?

Symbols, Imagery, and Language

The bird is a conventional stand-in for the poet throughout all poetry, and this is also true in Dickinson's work. Often in Dickinson's poems, the birds are possessed of a knowledge that human beings do not have. Think about the ideas and emotions we associate with birds and then ask yourself how Dickinson's birds meet or fail to meet our expectations. Poem #130—"These are the days when Birds come back" could be discussed in terms of religious imagery or the images of the seasons.

Another image and symbol in Dickinson's work is light and other images of seeing. If you chose to look at this image through a number of her poems, you might find yourself wondering what the importance of light is to Dickinson. Basically, is there a meaning that the poet attaches to this that is greater or other than the meanings we conventionally assign to it? Alongside this, you might also want to look at the color white. We know that Dickinson, after she became a recluse, exclusively wore white, but no one knows why. Did the color have symbolic value to her? You might look at poems such as "Publication is the Auction" or #365—"Dare you see a Soul at the White Heat?" to try to answer that question.

References to "little girls" are almost considered insulting when the subject is a grown woman, but in Dickinson's poems you will find references to this small person. A particularly interesting poem on this subject is Dickinson's #454, which includes the lines "It was given to me by the Gods— / When I was a little Girl." Other poems seem to contrast the power of the adult woman with the powerlessness of the child. Strangely, Dickinson also wrote a number of poems in which the speaker talks of being a boy.

Circumference is a key word and idea in Dickinson's work, as are its variants. In "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant," Dickinson writes that "Success in Circuit lies," and circuit becomes synonymous with circumference. In a letter to Higginson dated July 2, 1862, Dickinson famously wrote, "My Business is Circumference." By reading Dickinson's various references to this word, you may be able to arrive at some approximation of her definition of it. She was always, it seems, concerned with the idea of circumference.

Sample Topics:

1. **Birds**: What does Dickinson's use of the bird as a symbol reveal about the poet or her work?

   In addition to those poems discussed above, you may wish to read "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church" or "This was a Poet—It is That." You can also consult a concordance to find other mentions of birds throughout her work. Does Dickinson seem to envy the bird its song and its freedom?

2. **Light**: What meaning does Dickinson assign to light and its variants?

   If you wished to consider this question, you might look at such poems as "I taste a liquor never brewed," "There's a certain Slant of light," "I reckon—when I count at all," and "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant." And these are simply the ones discussed at length in this book. There are many other Dickinson poems that contain imagery relating to light and seeing.

3. **The little girl**: What role does the little girl play in Dickinson's work?

   In addition to the poems discussed above and others you might locate with the help of a concordance, you might find yourself wishing to discuss "They shut me up in Prose," "This is my letter to the World," and "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" "They shut me up in Prose" speaks literally of the time when the poem's speaker was a little girl. The other two poems seem to echo the feeling of being silenced. Does reading Dickinson's work and considering her portrayal of the girl child make her seem any more or less a feminist?
4. **Circumference**: What does this word mean in Dickinson's lexicon?

Some poems you may wish to consult for an essay on this topic include "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant," "I dwell in Possibility," "I reckon—when I count at all," and "This was a poet—It is That." Dickinson's use of the word *circumference* is an example of how a poet can take a quotidian sort of word and cause the reader to consider its implications until the word seems to encompass vast realms of meaning.

**Compare and Contrast**

You will notice that the following topics do not have suggested poems mentioned. This is because any of these topics could be applied to nearly any of the poems. If you have a choice in what you write about, choose those poems that seem to have the most to say to you.

**Sample Topics:**

1. **Self-portrait**: Do Dickinson's poems create a portrait of their writer?

   Dickinson declined to send Higginson a portrait of herself, though she sent him poems. How can the poems be said to stand in the place of a portrait? If you were asked to characterize Dickinson using her poems as a guide, what could you say about the person?

2. **Definition of poetry**: Can you find a definition of poetry in Dickinson's work?

   Poetry is difficult to define. Some of Dickinson's poems seem to attempt to. Looking at the poems, can you elucidate a definition of poetry? How close is it to Dickinson's own? Do any of her poems make you feel "the top of your head" was taken off?

3. **Didacticism**: Would you consider Dickinson a didactic writer? That is, does she seem to want to teach her readers?

   Some of her poems have been taken as lessons on how to write poetry. Others have been read in times of mourning or loss by those who would hope to find a way to recover. Do you believe Dickinson's poems teach anything? Was she trying to teach?

4. **Other writers**: How does Dickinson compare to other writers? What influence has she had on other writers?

   This is a very broad topic. Perhaps in your reading you have noticed other writers that Dickinson bears an affinity to. You might contrast her with other women writers, either of her time or later. Adrienne Rich is a 20th-century poet who has thought deeply about Emily Dickinson. You might look to other poets' poems about Dickinson. Billy Collins has an interesting one. She is often placed next to Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson, among her contemporaries.

**Further Information**


Higginson, T. W., and Mabel Loomis Todd, eds. Poems by Emily Dickinson. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1890.


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