

# “It Beckons, and It Baffles—”: Resurrecting Emily Dickinson (and Poetry) in the Student-Centered Classroom

P. L. Thomas

Each school year's third quarter, I feel my soul die a little every time my students moan when I announce poetry will be the focus of that nine weeks. As both a teacher and a writer, I ache even more at their responses when I mention we will be reading and exploring Emily Dickinson.

“All she writes about is death,” they cry.

“She never came out of her

house,” they exclaim.

“I can't understand her,” they complain.

Then my saving moment comes when at least one student asks, “Aren't we going to do R.E.M. songs?”

The word is usually out—especially since my walls are covered with posters of R.E.M. (an alternative rock band from Athens, Georgia)—that we explore songs in my room. Even though most of my high school's students are country music fans, they look forward to deciphering songs—even songs by weird groups that their teacher enjoys.

Dealing with classic authors and works in a student-centered classroom can become an overwhelming chore; students are often immediately repelled by the classics—works and authors presented in texts and by teachers (and prescribed in curriculum guides). As well, students are often at a disadvantage concerning those traditional writers and works because the students have been through a system that tends toward epitome and simplification—often unintentionally reducing both those writers and their works in an effort to make them more manageable.

At some point most teachers of literature must decide which is more important—students or classic works; then teachers must determine how to balance the two. When teachers can abandon the notion that any

works or any writers are sacred *at the expense of student learning*, then presenting classic works has a greater chance at success.

A great deal of research (Brooks and Brooks 1993; Hillocks 1995) shows that student interest and open-ended assignments contribute positively to effective instruction in reading and writing. The instruction is more effective, and student products are superior, especially students' written works. If we desire independent readers and writers *who love language as we do*, Emily Dickinson—and all the classic authors—must be resurrected both for the teacher and for the students.

## TEACHER AS EXPERT— REVISITING DICKINSON

Presenting Emily Dickinson's works to students has improved dramatically since I have invested time revisiting her, reacquainting myself with her work and updating my college studies. I then share that research with my students. Recent critical and biographical works have resurrected Dickinson for me; my enthusiasm and deeper understanding have also been transferred to my students. Three works in particular have proven to be invaluable: Adrienne Rich's essay, “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson” (1984); Chapter 12 of Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* (1994); Judith Farr's excellent critical biography, *The Passion of Emily Dickinson* (1992).

Depending on the students' abilities and interests, I have presented my new understandings and questions—much of it speculative information that allows structured, but open-ended discussions of possibilities in Dickinson's works. These are provided either through notes and discussions or through sharing the entire essay by Rich and chapter by Bloom with whole classes and especially interested students.

*The author uses R.E.M.'s lyrics and group activities to teach Dickinson's poems.*

The revisiting has proven effective because the Rich and Bloom pieces offer approaches to Dickinson that are contemporary but philosophically and politically at odds. Bloom champions Dickinson as the only real female poet of worth (a tenuous position, one that he uses to discredit Rich, for example), but details Dickinson as essentially an intellectual poet. That perspective—that Dickinson’s poetry considers topics intellectually, not religiously—has helped my students immensely as they attempt to decipher her work. Prodding students to pause when considering a poem and ask, “What is Dickinson *thinking*, not what does she *believe*?” produces remarkable responses from students who are often inhibited by their own assumptions and religious convictions. When classic works are tossed out to students as if those works are static—only one official response counts, the teacher’s—that approach combines with students’ own limited perspectives to kill a piece of literature. Art must be allowed to remain organic for it to have meaning for students. Allowing students to be speculative and equipping them with the skills to be speculative on the academic level are the keys to improving, but not guaranteeing, greater student connection with a classic work.

Rich’s essay (originally published in 1976) is credited with turning the criticism of Dickinson in a new direction, seeing her through a post-modern, feminist lens that allows the reader to be more speculative when addressing Dickinson’s coded language. Adding a sensitivity for the eroticism and gender issues in Dickinson, Rich’s essay broadens students’ expectations for Dickinson, again helping them overcome their tendency to reduce and simplify. Students aware of both Rich’s post-modern perspective and Bloom’s New Criticism benefit from the fuller range of responses at their disposal, yet that awareness provides them with concrete academic boundaries for their consideration. Students still cannot just express any stance without some justification or perspective. When the academic world and art interact, the responses are educated interpretations; students deserve that opportunity as well.

Beyond text criticism, both the teacher and students need rich biographical understanding to approach a classic author. Farr’s biography (1992)—like many other biogra-

phies of Dickinson published in the 1990s—offers both a fresh perspective on her life and works along with a solid revisiting of traditional views of Dickinson, including Richard Sewall’s standard biography. Again, Farr’s discussion is academic, but reflective, enriching the reader with a host of possibilities; Dickinson is no longer epitomized, reduced to a hermit pondering death. Both instructors and students need classic works and classic authors to be reanimated—through the most recent and available critical biographies—to counter education’s tendency to deflate and reduce all that we deal with (in a sincere effort to make information manageable for students). Farr equips the teacher with essential biographical material and recurring problems that are necessary to consider with students all the mysteries in Dickinson and her poetry and to prepare young readers for difficult reading that is not as crystallized as the academic world often portrays.

After revisiting a classic writer such as Dickinson, teachers and students benefit little from that resurrection if the instruction remains static. Student-centered activities and assessment are enhanced with Dickinson if instruction begins with non-traditional pieces of hers—such as “This World is not Conclusion” (*Complete Poems* 501), beginning by ironically and atypically ending the first line about “not Conclusion” with a conclusive period, and “Wild Nights—Wild Nights!” (*Complete Poems* 249), a poem charged with sexuality and puzzling gender questions about the speaker.

#### **STUDENTS AS READERS, STUDENTS AS CRITICS, STUDENTS AS WRITERS**

As a teacher with a deeper and renewed understanding of Dickinson, I found myself creating a more efficient and more open-ended sequence of instruction activities for my students as they experimented with reading, deciphering, and mimicking Dickinson. The instructional sequence I have found most effective is:

1. Begin with a song that best prepares the student for the poetry to follow;
2. Deal with literary techniques, topics, themes, and form with the song first;
3. Transfer to discussing the poetry with open-ended, speculative group activities that culminate in class presentations;
4. Move toward individual written assignments on the same poetry covered in

- group activities leaving the choice of poems for analysis to the students;
5. Assign poetry writing by students that mimic the poet in form, subject, and technique.

I had remarkable success with this sequence when using songs by R.E.M. and when covering poems by Dickinson, notably “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers,” “I like to see it lap the miles,” and “Because I could not stop for Death—.”

### Using R.E.M. Lyrics

Having used songs in my classroom for over a decade, I have learned that the greater the parallels in topics, forms, techniques, and style between the songs and the poetry, the more effective the strategy is. R.E.M. lyrics are a perfect match for Dickinson; the main lyricist, Michael Stipe, employs a wide variety of topics, incorporates a great deal of figurative language (especially imagery, personification, and metaphor), and presents an elliptical style similar to Dickinson. Farr argues through much of her book that Dickinson writes in code; much the same can be said of R.E.M.

Through R.E.M. lyrics, we review and introduce literary techniques such as allusion, metaphor, diction, imagery, etc. Since understanding Dickinson depends heavily on being able to distinguish between literal and figurative language, I discuss that distinction with each song introducing a mini-unit. In R.E.M.’s “Low Desert,” for example, students identify numerous examples of personification—such as “The mountains yawn, the clouds let out a sigh”—then we move to “Because I could not stop for Death—,” identifying the actual events and the figurative language applied to emphasize Dickinson’s topics, themes, and tones.

#### “Forgiveness” Is a Briar Patch Ashley Mason

*Walking over Reality with bare-feet,  
Thorns  
Eating at my arches.  
Scratched again—  
Anointed with ointment.  
But the Cut stings  
incessantly.  
Forgotten by simple cell growth  
—Healed by Amnesia.  
Yet scar tissue remains  
I must  
Forget  
Remembering.*

#### “Life” Is a Quilt Leigh Hix

*“Life” is a Quilt  
starting as scraps and shreds—  
a multiplicity of patches—  
detailed Memories  
eloquent dreams—  
Sewn together  
with the threads of Love*

### Group Work

After a few songs and most of the literary techniques are covered, we turn to a single poem that the entire group discusses. “This World is not Conclusion” and “Wild Nights—Wild Nights!” work well because they present complex ideas on a variety of topics and themes, they allow a great deal of legitimate speculation, and they reveal provocative topics (Dickinson has erotic poetry?) and techniques (Why does she use so much scientific diction?). From the whole group discussion, where we establish ground rules for analysis (keep close contact with the text and with the biographical information we have covered), the class is broken into small groups of three or four with each group assigned three or so poems by Dickinson included in the text. (Most of the poems already discussed are not in the text, but provided as photocopies.)

The group activity I have had recent success with is a structured process of analysis for each poem. The group discusses each poem assigned one at a time and fills in a simple chart we designed. Turning a sheet of notebook paper sideways, we divide the sheet into three columns—the first column labeled “LITERAL,” the second column labeled “TECHNIQUES,” and the third column labeled “FIGURATIVE.” Each column contains lists of specific references and line numbers of direct quotes. A typical sheet for “I like to see it lap the miles” would include under “LITERAL” that the poem is about a train (with references to lines 5 about circling mountains and 11 about the “hooting,” for example); under “TECHNIQUES” that she incorporates metaphor (a train as a horse, some recognizing it as a conceit or extended metaphor) and horse imagery and diction (noting many lines as examples); under “FIGURATIVE” that she characterizes the train as a horse (leading to a debate of that metaphor as personification—is that personification?). This poem is an excellent one for beginning to reveal the subtle play between literal and figurative references.

### Presentation and Discussion

Next as an entire class discussion, students in each group present the poems to the whole class for consideration, starting with the information on their charts; after several days of discussion and questioning (focusing on justifiable speculation instead of definitive conclusions), students write critical essays

concerning one or two poems by Dickinson of their choice. The rich discussion both in small groups and as a whole class provide ample pre-writing consideration; I also expect and allow my students to rewrite—that revision having to focus on presenting a fuller understanding of the poem and greater clarity in expressing that understanding, not just editing mechanics (Hillocks 1995).

### Mimicking Acitivity

A final activity that I often run parallel with the classroom activities is assigning students to mimic “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers.” I require that they present something abstract, such as hope, as something concrete, such as a bird. Along with emphasizing literal and figurative language, I always stress the importance of presenting the abstract as concrete whenever a writer is writing, especially in poetry. I allow students both to prepare poems in their own format and to attempt mimicking Dickinson’s style. The result has been some of the best student poems I have ever received (see sidebar for samples of poems by tenth graders).

### A HOST OF RESURRECTIONS

The classics present a complicated dilemma: some of the works best suited for instilling a love of language and for fostering advanced reading and writing skills in students are the ones students are least likely to read. Experience and research also tell us that what we force will probably be ineffective and even counter-educational.

If classics such as Dickinson are to succeed in the classroom, teachers must revitalize themselves as experts, and classroom instruction and activities must ultimately revolve around students, not sacred works, worshipped writers, and definitive interpretations. The irony is that my students now value Dickinson more than when I presented her in the traditional way—dictating all the tired trivializations about her life (many are unfounded, I now realize), lecturing about what her poems definitely state (since most high school students could not possibly decipher Dickinson), and plowing through only the well known and narrow selections by Dickinson most often anthologized.

Now we explore Dickinson together and consider her deeply, enjoying that we are not sure about some of the puzzles of her life and many of the codes in her poetry. That specu-

lation has brought her to life for us and made her poetry alive—something we can keep and consider always.

### Works Cited

- Bloom, Harold. 1994. *The Western Canon*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Brooks, Jacqueline Grennon and Martin G. 1993. In *Search of Understanding: The Case for Constructivist Classrooms*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Dickinson, Emily. 1960. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Thomas H. Johnson, ed. New York: Little, Brown, and Company.
- Farr, Judith. 1992. *The Passion of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hillocks, George, Jr. 1995. *Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Rich, Adrienne. 1984. “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson.” *Critical Essays on Emily Dickinson*. Paul J. Ferlazzo, ed. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co.
- Wallace, Robert and Michelle Boisseau. 1996. *Writing Poems*, fourth edition. New York: HarperCollins.

*P. L. Thomas teaches at Woodruff High School in South Carolina. He is currently writing a biography of educator Lou LaBrant. His e-mail address is plthom3@aol.com.*

### Pride Lauren Caldwell

*a giardia  
lurking in darkness  
groping for victims  
seeping through barriers  
feasting upon every heart soul mind*

*a Bubonic plague  
never cured  
only covered with  
a sheet*

*a living virus  
with a hardened capsid  
we refuse vaccination  
the cycle continues*

### Stone Kris Harrill

*Faith is grains of salt—  
at the pit of a man’s heart—  
forming a stone over time—  
oppressing minds—*

*and lifting hearts—  
in a joyous chorus of silence  
at the tent revival on the hill.*

*The deacons’ laughter and whisper—before  
a perspiring man  
and a sleeping crowd—  
decked in lace and stiffness—*

*With heaviness around their necks—  
waiting to fall off their pews—making a  
clatter—*

*waking the choir  
and pressuring the man to talk even louder—*

*Of a transparent being  
and a transparent feeling  
and nothingness isn’t dead.*