

Emily Dickinson: Person, Poetry, & Place

Curriculum Design Template (Adapted from UbD)

**Unit Title: There's a Certain Slant of Line:
Emily Dickinson's Sound, Sense, & Syntax**

GOALS

1. What learning standards will the unit address?

List the two to three Common Core (www.corestandards.org/the-standards/) and/or other content standards *most* relevant to your unit:

Craft and Structure:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.4

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

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.5

Analyze how a poem's form or structure (e.g., soliloquy, sonnet) contributes to its meaning

2. What essential questions will drive instruction in the unit?

Develop two or three essential questions that will focus the work in your unit:

What makes a poem memorable?

What factors contribute to the distinctive power of Emily Dickinson's poetry?

3. What key understandings of Emily Dickinson, her work, and her world will students develop from this unit?

Students will approach Emily Dickinson's poetry from three perspectives: **sound**, **syntax**, and **sense**.

Sound - Students explore the connections between Dickinson's verse and hymn (common) meter; they examine her rhyme scheme and slant rhyme; they learn to see and hear other musical elements that employ repetition at the level of sound: alliteration (initial sound), assonance (vowel sound), and consonance (consonant sound).

Syntax - Student will examine Dickinson's use of compression, parallelism, and repetition, with special attention to anaphora (repetition at the beginning of the line), antithesis (paired opposites), chiasmus (transposition), and isocolon (repetition of syntactical structures).

Sense - Students will read a short guide to "vivacity" in writing from the Dickinson family library. They will keep these guidelines in mind as they grapple with the meaning of a Dickinson poem.

PERFORMANCE TASK

4. What culminating performance task will demonstrate student understanding and skill?

Create an authentic performance task that will allow students to demonstrate their progress in meeting the standards and learning of the key understandings:

Students will:

- A. Read 25 (or more) Emily Dickinson poems. I will provide a reader of 15 major works.
- B. Construct a list of the poems that they have read. This list will include the first line, the date of composition (if known), the Franklin number, and the fascicle (if appropriate).
- C. Select three Dickinson poems to work with: one to memorize, a second to analyze, and a third to respond to in writing.
- D. Analyze one Emily Dickinson poem to demonstrate their understanding of the poem's structure. (examples attached).
- E. Memorize and perform a second poem to refine their sensitivity to sound and along with their public speaking skills.
- F. Compose a 1 - 2 page response to a third poem to explore this work's context, tone, and meaning. (examples attached)

LEARNING SEQUENCE

5. What skills must students develop in order to succeed on the performance task?

List (in order) the skills that students must develop in order to complete the task:

- A. Learning to read a poem aloud.
- B. The language of poetical analysis
 - i. terms related to Dickinson scholarship (manuscript, fascicle, Franklin number)
 - ii. terms related to basic poetic **structure** (line, stanza, octave, rhythm, tetrameter, trimeter)
 - iii. terms used to discuss **sound** (alliteration, assonance, consonance, elision, slant rhyme)
 - iv. terms related to **syntax** (anaphora, antithesis, chiasmus, diction, isocolon, syntax)
- C. Structural analysis of one poem
- D. Memorization of a second poem
- E. Written response exploring the **sense** (or meaning) of a third poem
- F. Recitation / performance of the poem

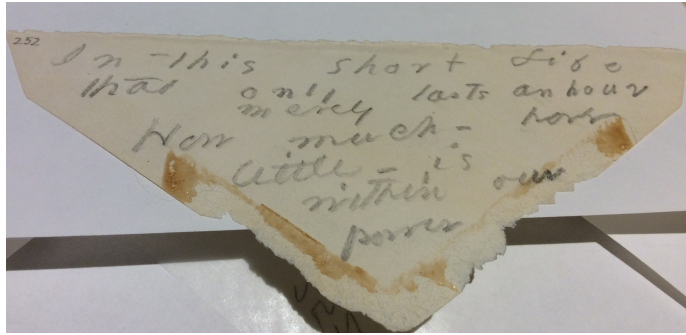
6. What learning experiences and mini-tasks (formative assessments) will enable students to develop the required skills and targeted understandings?

Create a sequence of learning experiences and mini-tasks for your unit, including information about the products your students will generate and how you will assess their progress. Include the introductory, instructional, and culminating elements of the unit:

Introductory:

(A) Setting the hook.

- (i) Distribute this fragment. Read it aloud.
- (ii) What is it? Who wrote it? What does it mean?



(iii) Students glue on a sheet of paper & compose a short piece reflecting on the meaning of the poem.

(B) Debrief

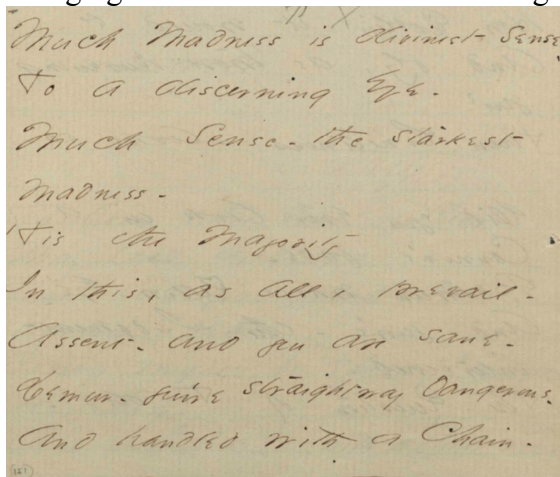
One hundred and forty-four years ago, in 1873, Emily Dickinson wrote this tiny, powerful poem on a small scrap of paper—the flap of an envelope. At that point, Dickinson had composed more than 1200 poems, yet only a handful of people had read her poetry. Today, Dickinson's work is required reading for students across the country.

(C) Introduce the essential questions:

- (i) What makes a poem memorable?
- (ii) What factors contribute to the distinctive power of Emily Dickinson's poetry?

Instructional:

(A) We will begin by reading this Dickinson poem aloud. Listen carefully. We will change the reader with the changing of each line. We'll read it through twice . . . and then a third time as a chorus.



**Much Madness is divinest Sense -
To a discerning Eye -
Much Sense - the starkest Madness -
'Tis the Majority
In this, as all, prevail -
Assent - and you are sane -
Demur - you're straightway dangerous -
And handled with a Chain -**

(B) Titles . . . or not!

Notice . . . there is not a title. Emily Dickinson rarely titled her poems. Because of that, students of poetry refer to the poems using the first line, in this case "Much Madness is divinest Sense." Many scholars use R. W. Franklin's manuscript numbering system. This poem, composed in 1863, is also referred to as Franklin number 620, or F 620. You can find the Franklin number by consulting *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*. Fascicle information can be found using the index in Crisanne Miller's *Emily Dickinson's Poems As She Preserved Them*. Digital images of the manuscripts can be found at the Emily Dickinson Archive, www.edickinson.org.

(C) Transcription

Neatly and accurately transcribe this poem on a sheet of lined paper. Skip lines to leave room for your annotation and analysis.

(D) Punctuation

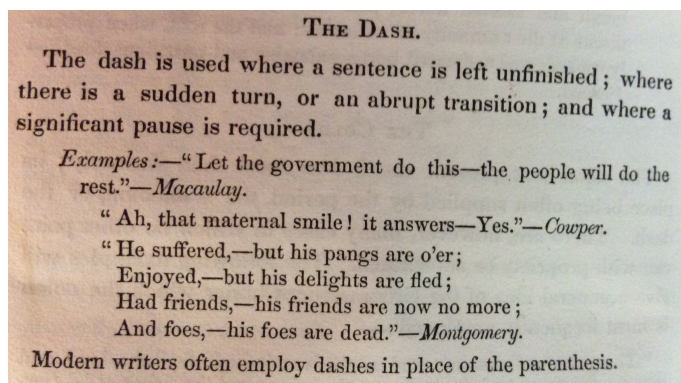
Look at the punctuation. What do you notice? Highlight Dickinson's punctuation using a yellow colored pencil.

Much Madness is divinest Sense -
 To a discerning Eye -
 Much Sense - the starkest Madness -
 'Tis the Majority
 In this, as all, prevail -
 Assent - and you are sane -
 Demur - you're straightway dangerous -
 And handled with a Chain -

*How many times does she employ a dash in this short poem?
 Can you describe the different ways that Dickinson uses her dashes?*

Dickinson seems to employ dashes to meet a variety of punctuation needs: to pause, to separate syntactical units, for apposition (or renaming); for contrast; as a vehicle for parallel construction.

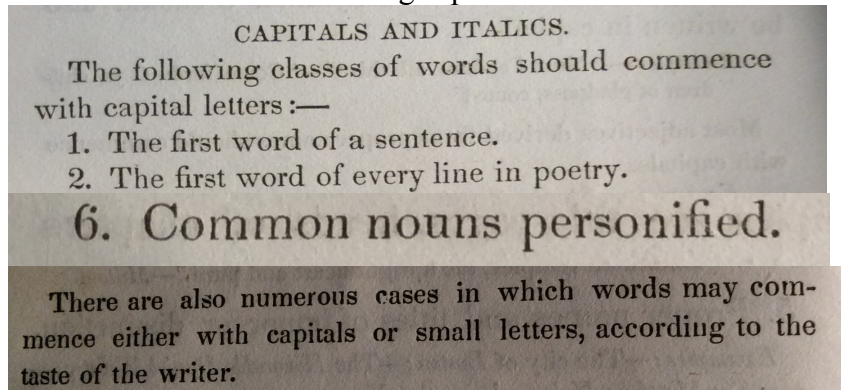
The Dickinson library included a copy of Well's *A Grammar of the English Language* (1846). Here are the instructions for the use of dashes:

**(E) Capitalization**

What do you notice about Emily Dickinson's use of capitalization? Highlight her capital letters using a green colored pencil.

Much Madness is divinest Sense -
 To a discerning Eye -
 Much Sense - the starkest Madness -
 'Tis the Majority
 In this, as all, prevail -
 Assent - and you are sane -
 Demur - you're straightway dangerous -
 And handled with a Chain -

The Dickinson library included a copy of Wells's *A Grammar of the English Language* (1846). Here are the lessons concerning capitalization of letters:



(F) Stanza Form

Count the lines! Number them!

1. Much Madness is divinest Sense -
2. To a discerning Eye -
3. Much Sense - the starkest Madness -
4. 'Tis the Majority
5. In this, as all, prevail -
6. Assent - and you are sane -
7. Demur - you're straightway dangerous -
8. And handled with a Chain

The poetic term for a stanza with eight lines is an OCTAVE. While Dickinson wrote many octaves, she often composed using the quatrain, or four-line stanza.

(G) Line Length

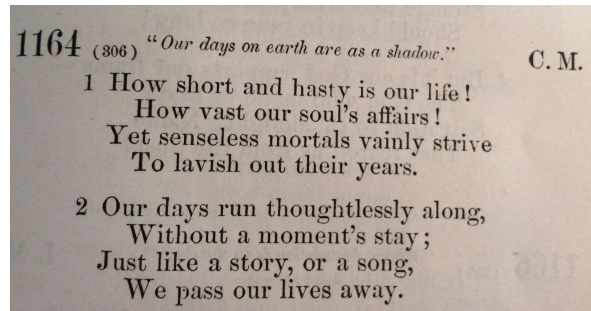
Read the poem silently and make a mark for each syllable. Can you find see or hear pattern in the length of Dickinson's lines?

Much Madness is divinest Sense -	8 syllables
To a discerning Eye -	6 syllables
Much Sense - the starkest Madness -	7 syllables
'Tis the Majority	6 syllables
In this, as all, prevail -	6 syllables
Assent - and you are sane -	6 syllables

Demur - you're straightway dangerous - 8 syllables

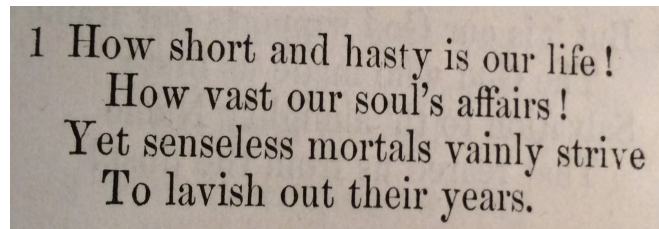
And handled with a Chain 6 syllables

In fact, Emily Dickinson paid careful attention to the rhythm of her lines. Most (but not all) of her poems feature lines with six to eight syllables. The family library included *The Sabbath Hymn Book*, which featured many hymns like this one by Isaac Watts:



(H) Rhythm

This hymn, composed in common meter, can be sung to the tune of "Amazing Grace." Try singing it!



Now sing **this**:

Much Mad ness is di vine est Sense -	8 beats	4 feet	tetrameter
To a discern ing Eye -	6 beats	3 feet	trimeter
Much Sense - the starkest Mad ness -	7 beats	3 feet	trimeter
'Tis the Ma jo ri ty	6 beats	3 feet	trimeter

(I) Rhyme Scheme

Students of poetry use letters to "map" the rhyme of a poem. Let's map this poem together:

Much Madness is divinest Sense -	A
To a discerning Eye -	B
Much Sense - the starkest Madness -	A
'This the Majority	B
In this, as all, prevail -	C
Assent - and you are sane -	D
Demur - you're straightway dangerous -	A
And handled with a Chain -	D

Sense, madness, and dangerous all end on the "s" sound; sane and chain clearly rhyme.

But what about "Eye" and "Majority"?

(J) Slant Rhyme

Much Madness is divinest Sense -	A
To a discerning Eye -	B
Much Sense - the starkest Madness -	A
'This the Majority	B

Students and scholars of poetry use the term slant (or "half") rhyme to describe a partial rhyme. Dickinson is a master of slant rhyme! She will complete or close her rhyme using an incredible array of approaches: repeating the first letter (alliteration), repeating a vowel (assonance) or consonant (consonance) sound, repeating a single letter, or a sequence of letters that look the same yet sound different (eye rhyme). There are many other strategies she used that are waiting for your discovery!

(K) Alliteration

One way of making a poem more memorable--and more musical--is by repeating the initial sound of a word. You can think of this as being a bit like the opposite of rhyme: instead of repeating the ending sound, a writer is repeating (or echoing) an initial sound.

Much Madness is divinest Sense -

(L) Consonance

Powerful writers bring careful attention to diction, to their word choice. Sounds can also be repeated across and within many words or lines. Read the first two lines aloud. What sounds do you believe that Dickinson is playing with?

Much Madness is divinest Sense -
To a discerning Eye -

(M) Anaphora

Authors repeat sounds; they also repeat words. Repeating a word (or words) at the beginning of a line is called anaphora.

Much Madness is divinest Sense -
To a discerning Eye -
Much Sense - the starkest Madness -

(N) Chiasmus

Authors also repeat words but change their order. Chiasmus means "crossing." Thinking mathematically,

A	B	B	A:
	A		B
	Much Madness is divinest Sense -		
	B		A
	Much Sense - the starkest Madness -		

(O) Antithesis

Antithesis is the parallel presentation of paired opposites.

Much Madness is divinest Sense -
To a discerning Eye -
Much Sense - the starkest Madness -
'This the Majority
In this, as all, prevail -

Contrast

Madness
Discerning
Demur

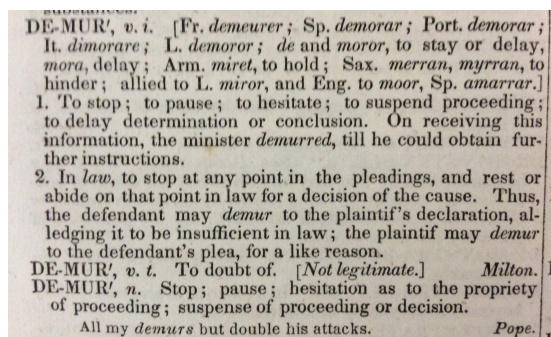
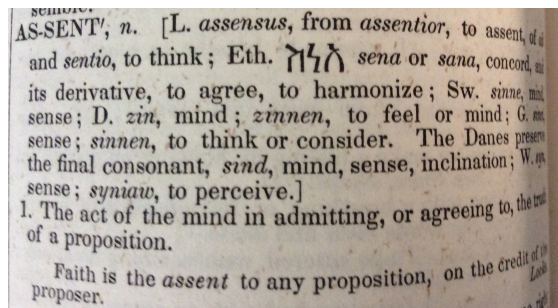
Sense
Majority
Assent

Assent - and you are sane -

Demur - you're straightway dangerous -
And handled with a Chain -

(P) Diction

Clearly, Dickinson cares about her diction, her word choice. She also owned and used the 1844 edition of Noah Webster's dictionary. Below are the 1844 definitions of assent and demur:



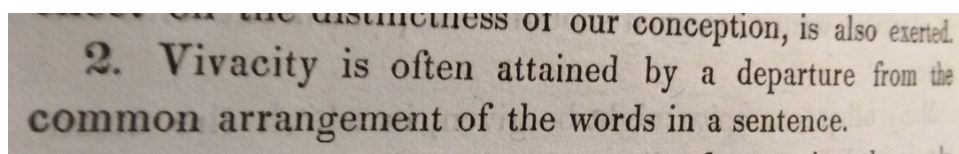
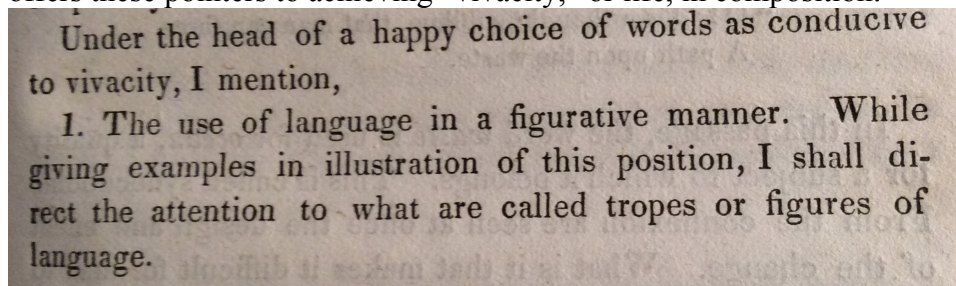
Please consult Webster's Dictionary to find the meanings of new words. Another important tool is the Emily Dickinson lexicon (<http://edl.byu.edu/>).

(Q) Is My Verse Alive?

On April 15, 1862, Emily Dickinson wrote to T. W. Higginson and asked, "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?"

Clearly it is alive: vibrant, compressed, and startling.

Curiously, Newman's *A Practical System of Rhetoric* (1839), part of the Dickinson family library, offers these pointers to achieving "vivacity," or life, in composition:



3. Vivacity is promoted by the omission of unnecessary words and phrases.

4. Vivacity is sometimes attained by the omission of conjunctions and the consequent division of the discourse into short sentences.

5. Vivacity is sometimes attained by the use of certain forms of sentences, which might in distinction be called figures of sentences. Of these I mention the Climax, Antithesis, Exclamation, Repetition and Interrogation. Some examples with accompanying remarks will be given.

6. Vivacity is promoted by the use of those forms of construction, which represent past actions and events as transpiring at the present time, and absent individuals as present, speaking and listening. This has been called Rhetorical dialogue, and is found most frequently in narrative writing.

Do you see these qualities in Dickinson's work?

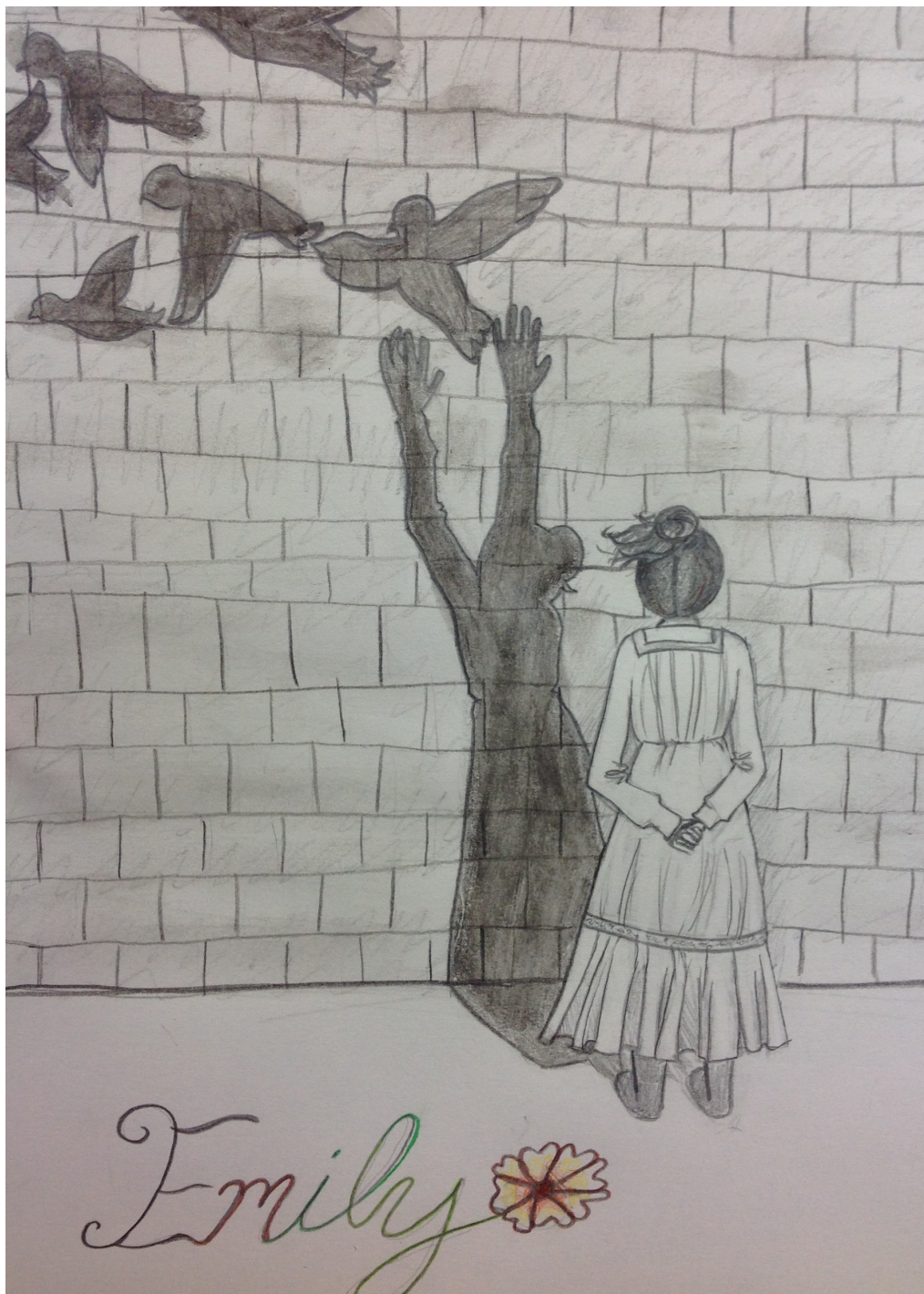
Culminating:

Over the next week (or two), students work individually to complete their portfolios. I will check 20 - 25 books out of Baker-Berry Library at Dartmouth College: Miller's *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Franklin's variorum and reading edition, *The Manuscript Books*, Dickinson's collected letters, etc.

Unit checklist:

- Read 25 (or more) Emily Dickinson poems.
- Construct a list of the poems read. This list will include the first line, the date of composition (if known), the Franklin number, and the fascicle (if appropriate).
- Select three Dickinson poems to work with: one to memorize, a second to analyze, and a third to respond to in writing.
- Analyze & illuminate one Dickinson poem to demonstrate their understanding of poetic structure.
- Memorize & perform a second poem to refine their sensitivity to sound and hone public speaking skills.
- Compose a 1 - 2 page response to the poem to exploring the work's context, tone, and meaning.
- **CULMINATING CLASS PRODUCT:** The illuminated poems will gathered into a class fascicle
- **CULMINATING CLASS PERFORMANCE:** Students will recite poems at the Emily Dickinson Museum on December 10, the poet's birthday.

Examples of student work:



Emily Dickinson Poet 1830-1886

Amherst, Mass.

"Perhaps you'd like to buy a flower," (92)

Rhyme Scheme	Beats	Feet
A	8	4
B	6	3
C	7	3
B	6	3
D	7	3
E/A	6	3
C	8	4
E	6	3
F	8	4
E/A	6	3

Perhaps you'd like to buy a flower
 But I could never sell -
 If you would like to borrow
 Until the Daffodil
 Unites her yellow Bonnet
 Beneath the village door
 Until the Bees, from Clover rows
 Their Hock, and sherry, draw,
 Why, I will lend until just then
 But not an hour more!



Slant rhyme
 ↳ different parts of "draw" come from different words
 door
 rows
 draw
 consonance
 alliteration

A poetic foot/iamb

• A short syllable followed by a long syllable

• i.e. "Perhaps" short long

A couplet

• A two line stanza

A quatrain

• A four line stanza

tetrameter
 • a line of verse with 4 feet
 trimeter
 • a line of verse with 3 feet



a stanza	C
consonance/alliteration	↪
slant rhyme at the end of a line	↪
One beat	.
repetition	↪
Personification	—
assonance	↪
triple rhyme	↪

Capitalization in the middle of a line

That it will never come again

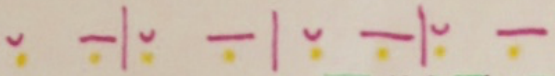
That it will never come again
Is what makes life so sweet.
Believing what we don't believe
Does not exhilarate.

That if it be, it be at best
An ablative estate -
That instigates an appetite
Precisely opposite.

In her poem, "That it will never come again", Emily Dickinson expresses a bittersweet truth about life and why it is so hard for us to accept that we are mortal. Dickinson says that our love for our life and the life of other beings comes from the fact that we know that things last for only a moment in the vast passage of time. Paradoxically, it is also the fact that life is sweet that makes us want to hold onto it so tightly. When we pick a flower, we are entranced by its beauty at the height of its bloom, partly of our wonder that it can only last for a short amount of time and still be so entrancing. Then we wish that it would stay longer when it begins to fade, without realizing that its fleetingness makes up some of what we find lovely about it.

In her line in the in the of the second quatrain, "That if it be, it be at best,," Emily Dickinson illuminates two very different insights. The common meaning of the words "at best" indicate that it's all that you get. She could be implying that all we ever have is the state of things being very fleeting, and that we have to know and understand that in order to be happy and to enjoy and get the full meaning from our experiences. In a more emotional interpretation, she is showing us that it is actually better for us and for the world if everything is short lived and beautiful. We wouldn't have the idea that something so glorious can be short lived if things lasted forever, which is one of the attributes that makes them beautiful to us in the first place. The poem also seems to imply that our hopeful beliefs can paradoxically be harmful to us when we use them as a support when we feel down. Drenching yourself in an idea that makes you feel happy even when you know in your heart of hearts that it can't happen only lifts you up on a dream cloud to drop you when you most need to feel joy. The exhilaration that you feel is false, but you don't realize it until you are spiraling in a quick downward path. Emily Dickinson is speaking in awe of the small things in life that merely wave at us as they go by, and yet have enough power to make a person's day so much brighter.

When I first read this poem, I felt immediately convinced of her message, even though I wasn't completely sure of what it was yet. Her poem has quiet firmness, and she uses very strong emotional words (sweet, exhilarate, appetite) in a very cool way. This suggested to me a narrator that had experienced the feelings related to the poem, but was beyond them now, and who seemed to almost dissect these ideas, which gave me a sense of trust in her and the clarity of her words. Her punctuation is also quietly determined and definite. In the first stanza, her use of periods after every other line give the lines a sense of being an unquestionable fact. She seems almost happy that our lives are so short, and embraces the truth so boldly, without a great deal of emotion. The way that she does not stress upon the theme of death and yet it hangs in the background made me believe that there is a reason why she chose to dwell upon fleeting beauty. I feel as though she emphasizes these things in part because she was feeling that the only constant things in life are the topics that we don't enjoy: change, death, loss, or war. This poem raises the question: if death was a fleeting thing that didn't happen often, would we still fear it, or think of death as something as beautiful as a blossom in Spring.


 Tell all the truth but tell it slant-

Success in Circuit lies

Too bright for our infirm Delight

The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased

With explanation kind

The Truth must dazzle gradually

Or every man be blind-

RHYME
SCHEME

HYMN
METER




A	TETRAMETER 8
B	TRIMETER 6
C	TETRAMETER 8
B	TRIMETER 6

CONSONANCE -

The repetition of a consonant sound

ALLITERATION

Similar to consonance, but it is the repetition of the initial sound.

-  - Extended metaphor of Light
- - syllables
-  - Rhyming words
-  - lamb