19th Century American Literature

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**Lecture Notes: Emily Dickinson**

1. Biography.
   1. Family Life.
      1. Birth: Emily Elizabeth Dickenson was born on December 10th, 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts.
      2. Family: Her father was one of the most important men in the city. He was a lawyer, politician, and the treasurer of Amherst College, one of America’s oldest universities.
      3. Her closest friends were her older brother, Austin and her younger sister Lavinia. She also had an incredibly close relationship with her brother’s wife, Susan.
      4. Neither she nor her sister ever married.
   2. Social Life.
      1. When Emily graduated from Amherst Academy (like a middle school and high school) she attended Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (a kind of religious college for women), ten miles from her home.
      2. Although the program was to last three years, she quit the school and came home after staying there for less than one year. She was extremely homesick at that time. She wrote home often of how she missed her “*own* DEAR HOME.”
      3. She never left her home again, except for a few overnight trips. She felt that her home was a place of “infinite power.”
   3. Home Life.
      1. Emily has been called a “recluse” (a person who chooses to live away from other people) and she certainly loved her home **but** this description may not be exactly correct.
      2. She had extremely close friendships with several people and seems to have fallen in love with two men and at least one woman.
      3. She had a large and beautiful flower garden and she worked in it every day. Many of her poems are about birds, flowers, and bees. She also loved children and was often seen playing with them in her garden.
   4. Death.
      1. Emily died in 1886, possibly of a kidney disorder. Prior to her own death she endured the death of her father (1874), mother (1882), nephew Gilbert (1883), and her best friend Helen (1885).
2. Themes:
   1. Society: Although Emily chose to stay away from other people, she seems to have done so for a reason: she says that to be famous and popular is often problematic. (See Poem #1: “I’m Nobody....” And Poem #5: “This is my letter to the world....”)
   2. Eternity: Emily writes a lot of poems about life and death. She seems to have a very unique idea about human existence: the human soul is eternal. Her ideas are influenced heavily by the thinking of Emerson and the British Romantic poets, especially Wordsworth and Blake. (see Poem #2: “Because I could not stop for death…” and Poem #9 “I heard a fly buzz when I died…”)
   3. Nature: Her love of nature as a metaphor for human emotions and experience places Emily Dickenson firmly within the Romantic tradition. Although her nature is not “wild” nature, but the quiet and peaceful nature of the garden, she still finds many symbols and messages there.
   4. Love: For Emily Dickinson, love was life. She was incredibly passionate in her love and devotion to her family and had many “affairs of the heart,” although she is not believed to have ever taken a lover. Many of her poems are plainly erotic.
   5. Language: She also writes about the act of writing. Some of her best poetry explores the relationship between the word and reality, and she considers, like all great poets, the writing of a poem to be an act of creation.
3. Style.
   1. Emily Dickinson’s poetic style is very unique but it has been compared to William Blake, who also wrote short, passionate poems on similar themes: joy and pain, the relationship between self and nature, descriptions of intense spiritual experiences.
   2. She writes mostly in a meter called a “fourteener:” pairs of seven beat lines, often broken up into two lines of four and three beats. This form is very simple but she finds many ways to creatively expand the pattern. It is the common form for “hymns,” or religious songs in the Christian church: rhythmical and easy to memorize.
   3. Her poetry was a lot like “drawings” on the paper. She used a lot of dashes and lines, She also wrote in fragments rather than complete sentences: ideas come in bits and the relationship between the ideas is not always clear, adding to the potential interpretations.
   4. She makes use of what is sometimes called “slant” rhymes. These rhymes are close but not exact. These sounds are an important part of her poetry. Sometimes the rhymes sound wrong and this adds a message in the poem.
   5. She also experiments with the way she uses words. She sometimes uses verbs in the subject of a sentence, breaks the rules of subject/verb agreement, and plays with language in other ways. Her main poetic tool in other words is surprise: she doesn’t say what you expect her to.
   6. All of these things lead the reader to experience a kind of poetic irony in the language of Emily Dickinson’s poetry: the simple “fourteener” becomes a complex form, the sounds of her rhymes are a little bit strange, and her use of the English language is creative and strange.
4. Interpretation.
   1. The key to finding meaning in Dickinson’s poetry (or any poetry for that matter) is to ask questions. Here are some questions you can ask to try to begin to see the deeper meaning in the poetry you are reading.
   2. Questions.
      1. What is the poem’s subject?
      2. What are the rhyme and meter of the poem?
      3. What is the primary metaphor in the poem? For example, she often uses flowers in her poetry to represent life, or death, or beauty.
      4. Is there any symbolic language? If so, what are the symbols and what could they symbolize?
      5. How does the language of the poem reinforce its message?
      6. Are there any words missing? Sometimes Emily leaves out words or shrinks sentences down.
      7. Are there any references to other literature? Emily often used Biblical images or references to Shakespeare in her poetry, for instance.
      8. The most important thing is to question everything. Why did she choose “that” word? What did she leave out? Everything is there for a reason.
5. Critical Thinking Exercises
   1. Poetry Analysis: Choose one of the poems from the selections in the book and read it carefully. Use the questions in the section above to analyze the poem. Send me an email with your thoughts about the poem. Remember, I am most interested in your thinking. Try to explain what you think about the poem to me. You may put your answer in the email body. In the email subject box write Dickinson Poem Analysis, Your Name, and Your ID Number. Please send to me by Sunday night at 8pm.
   2. Extra Credit: Choose a poem from the *Complete Poems of Emily Dickenson*, which can be found at <http://www.bartleby.com/113/>. Print the poem in a separate email and tell me why you like it. In the email subject box write Dickinson Poem Extra Credit, Your Name, and Your ID Number. Please send to me by Monday night at 6pm.