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Lesson Three

FOCUS: The Speaker of a Poem

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “*I dwell in Possibility –*”

Impregnable, *adj.*

Difficult or impossible to attack, challenge, or refute

Gambrel, *n.*

A roof having a shallower slope above a steeper one on each side

From “*Crumbling is not an instant’s Act*”

Dilapidation, *n.*

A state of decay due to old age or long use

Cuticle, *n.*

Botany. A protective layer covering the epidermis of a plant

Borer, *n.*

A tool used to pierce or form a hole; an auger

Examining an author’s life can inform and expand a literary text. Readers should be careful not to assume that the speaker of a poem is necessarily the poet. When we read a poem, one of our first questions should be: Whose “voice” is speaking to us? Sometimes a poet will create a persona, a fictitious speaker, and this speaker may not always be human. A speaker may be an animal or object, and good poems have been written from perspectives as various as a hawk, a clock, or a cloud.

Because the opening lines of more than two hundred of Dickinson’s poems are expressly written in the first person (either the singular “I” or the plural “we”), it is difficult to resist reading most of her poetry as autobiographical. Yet many of her poems do not concern the experiences of an “I” but describe natural phenomena (like Lesson One’s “A Route of Evanescence”), characterize states of mind, or define abstractions through metaphor (like Lesson Two’s “Fame is a fickle food”).

Discussion Activities

In many of her poems, Dickinson attempts to describe psychological states objectively, as in “Crumbling is not an instant’s Act.” In these kinds of poems, she does not use the first person, or any overt reference to her life. Examine each stanza of this poem with your students, noticing the imagery Dickinson uses in her declarative statements about the slow process of decay.

Discuss Handout One: Emily Dickinson and the Victorian “Woman Question.” Have the class analyze the poems “I dwell in Possibility –” and “They shut me up in Prose –.” Although the speaker of these two 1862 poems may be Dickinson, who else could it be?

Writing Exercise

Have students write a two-page essay on Dickinson’s treatment of houses and nature in all three poems. How does she use imagery to portray both confinement and liberation? What might this suggest about her own struggles and triumphs as a poet?

Homework

Ask students to read “Dickinson’s Poetry” (pp. 8–9) in the Reader’s Guide. Also have them read “The Moon is distant from the Sea –” and “After great pain, a formal feeling comes –.”