

Interaction as Analysis: Emily Dickinson
by Timothy Dyke
ex: Elementary School Poet-in-Residence 2010

Grade Level: Middle school to high school

Time Frame: 90 min

Learning Objectives: To involve students in a close encounter with at least one of Emily Dickinson's poems. (This close encounter is often referred to as "close reading," "analysis," or "explication."); demonstrate that working with a single poem can be fun; to promote interest in Emily Dickinson and in poetry.

Materials Required: "[Hope is a thing with feathers.](http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/19729)" (can be accessed for free at <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/19729>) markers, pens, pencils, crayons, paper; copies of poem with the lines cut up (see directions below).

Prior Skills and Knowledge: none

Arizona Language Arts State Standards Addressed (Reading):

Strand 1: Reading Process

Concept 4: PO 2, PO 3; Concept 6: PO 2, PO4, PO 5

Strand 2: Comprehending Literary Text

Concept 1: PO 2, Concept

Sequence of Activities:

General Introduction: (10 min) Ask students what they know about Emily Dickinson. Ask them what they know about her poetry, which poems? Introduce the idea that today we are going to work primarily with one poem, not because it is the best poem of hers or completely representative, but because by working in depth with one poem, students might get ideas about how to work in depth with another. Check in with students about how they usually read a poem. Do they have a method? Do they "close read?" This time we are going to "sneak up" on the poem by playing with it, asking it questions, interacting with it. Hopefully, by doing this, meaning should emerge.

Specific Introduction: (10 min) Tell students you are going to read a poem to them, and you want them just to listen to it as they might listen to a song. Read #254 ("['Hope' is the thing with feathers-](#)"). After you read it once, just ask them to turn to the person next to them and mention anything they heard or that stuck out to them. Read it again. Do the same. Okay, now we are ready to look at the poem. Show the poem, via handout and/or poster paper. Start with the concept of metaphor. Remind them that the first line employs metaphor and ask them what that word means.

Playing with the metaphor: (20 minutes) Take a big piece of paper, like poster paper, and draw a line vertically from top to bottom. One side of the line is the “hope” side and the other side is the “thing with feathers” side. Start with “hope”: what does the word mean? What are some words that hope makes you think of? Under the word “hope,” write some of these definitions and synonyms. Switch to “The thing with feathers.” What are some things with feathers? What are the characteristics of things with feathers, of feathers themselves? Write some of these definitions underneath “The thing with feathers.” Compare the two sides of the page. In what ways do the two sides match up? What seems to make sense about the comparison? What do you wonder about the comparison? Why might the poet have compared hope to a thing with feathers?

Visual Representation: (20 minutes) Give each student a piece of paper and access to markers, crayons, pens, pencils. Read the poem again, and ask students to draw what they hear. Perhaps they will draw hope as a thing with feathers. Perhaps they will draw hope perching in the soul. If they don’t see themselves as great visual artists, then tell them they can write words from the poem on the page in a specific arrangement or pattern. Students should be encouraged to work towards depicting what images, ideas, concepts the poem evokes in their mind, rather than merely representing the words in the poem. Show them an example or two. After 15 minutes or so, allow students to share and look at each other’s work.

Poem Reconstruction: (10 minutes) Give students packets or envelopes that contain this poem cut into pieces. Each piece is a line from the poem, so students have the lines, out of order. Make sure you have removed copies of the original poem from their vision. Tell them to reconstruct the poem, by putting the strips of paper in order, as best as they can.

Debrief, Discussion: (20 minutes) Review the fact that you all have just worked with this poem in a variety of ways. You all have listened to it, discussed its metaphors, drawn it, and treated it like a puzzle. You haven’t yet talked about “meaning,” but perhaps meaning has become apparent through interacting with it. So now let’s talk a bit about meaning. Read the poem again, or have students read it to each other. Talk, first in small groups and then as a big group, about what the poem says, what it means to you, how it makes meaning, what you notice and think about it. Talk a bit about Emily Dickinson: based just on the experience of this one poem, what do you think she writes about? What does she do with language? Another way to talk about meaning indirectly (thereby opening the discussion to more authentic responses from students) would be to ask questions about what the poem is doing. For example, some questions that could be asked include: As you worked through the variety of exercises we did together, what do you notice the poem doing in your mind? What does a particular line or image from the poem do for the line or image that comes before or after?