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Lesson Eight

FOCUS: Analyzing a Poem's Context

VOCABULARY WORDS

From "Now I knew I lost her –"

Transmigration, n.

The passage of a soul into another body after death

Penury, n.

Destitution, poverty

Restitution, n.

Restoration to a former or original state

*From "Wild nights –
Wild nights!"*

Moor, v. tr.

To attach (a boat or buoy) by cable or rope to a fixed object

Hundreds of Emily Dickinson's poems deal with love and loss, denial and desire. Scholar Judith Farr identifies two thematic "cycles" in the poems as the "Sue cycle" and the "Master cycle."

Emily Dickinson had several long and passionate loves. As a teenager, she deeply loved her friend Susan (Sue) Huntington Gilbert, who later became her sister-in-law when Gilbert married Austin Dickinson. After their July 1, 1856, wedding, Austin and Sue moved into The Evergreens, the house next door to the Homestead, the Dickinson family home. Their lifelong friendship was emotional and volatile; to Emily it was an "endless fire" that complicated both their lives due to their proximity. Sue is the "beloved woman" mentioned in many poems who taught Dickinson joy and renunciation.

In the 1860s, another prominent name—"Master"—often appears in Dickinson's poetry. "His" exact identity remains debated; some believe "Master" is God, or even Sue. (Three enigmatic letters were found after Dickinson's death. However, no one knows to whom they were addressed, or whether they were ever sent.) Sue once wrote a letter wherein she revealed that she had seen Dickinson "reclining in the arms of a man" in her drawing room. It is often assumed this man was Judge Otis Phillips Lord, who proposed marriage to Dickinson when she was in her fifties. Although she loved him, Dickinson refused. Before Judge Lord was her suitor, Dickinson loved Samuel Bowles, a married man and close friend of Austin and Sue. Some scholars believe that "Master" was Bowles, evidenced by the poetry that she sent to him such as "Title divine – is mine! / The Wife – without the Sign!"



Discussion Activities

Read "Now I knew I lost her –," a poem that laments lost love despite physical proximity. List all the words in the poem connected to time or travel. How does the speaker's love defy time and distance? How does the beloved seem to respond to this love? First discuss the literal references in this poem, and then move to the symbolic. Does understanding the poem require knowledge of its context?



Writing Exercise

Have students write about the figurative language used in two of Dickinson's love poems: "Wild nights – Wild nights!" and "You left me – Sire – two Legacies." Does the imagery of these poems suggest that Dickinson wrote them to Susan Gilbert Dickinson, Samuel Bowles, or someone else? Does it matter if the object of the poem is identified?



Homework

Read "This World is not conclusion," "I know that He exists," and "Forever – is composed of Nows –." Then read Handout Three: Dickinson's Final Sorrows.