

9

Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Poetry and Ideas

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “*This World is not conclusion*”

Sagacity, n.

The quality of being discerning; sound in judgment

Contempt, n.

The feeling that someone or something is worthless or beneath consideration

Vane, n.

A blade, plate, sail, etc., as in the wheel of a windmill, to be moved by the air

“No man was ever yet a great poet,” said Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “without being at the same time a profound philosopher. For poetry is the blossom and fragrancy of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotions, language.” Exceptional poets can pursue their craft without aspiring to greatness, as Coleridge defines it here, but the greatest poets through the ages are distinguished by their willingness to confront life’s biggest questions: Does God (or do the gods) exist? What is the purpose of life? What happens when we die?

?? Discussion Activities

Dickinson’s belief in the promise of eternal life sustained her through many sorrows, illnesses, and losses. The Christian doctrine of the resurrection and the belief that the body and soul will be united after death were especially precious to her. What evidence of this do you see in such poems as “This World is not conclusion” or “I know that He exists”? Use Handout Three: Dickinson’s Final Sorrows to guide students’ interpretations of Dickinson’s “flood subject”—immortality.

How might these two poems shed light on the following sentence, which Dickinson wrote to Higginson on April 25, 1862: “[My family] are religious – except me – and address an Eclipse, every morning – whom they call their ‘Father.’”

How does her poem “Forever – is composed of Nows –” reflect on both life’s trials and joys? Remember that despite all her pain, she told Higginson: “I find ecstasy in living – the mere sense of living is joy enough.”

Writing Exercise

The poem “This World is not conclusion” asserts that “Faith slips – and laughs, and rallies –,” suggesting that faith may have more in common with the rising and falling tide than with a rock or fortress. Ask students to write a one-page response that considers how understanding faith, doubt, or religious conviction furthers an understanding of Dickinson’s poetry. Ask students to return to at least one poem from a previous lesson that includes this theme.

Homework

Have students choose from the essay topics suggested on page 14. Ask them to come to the next class with a draft of the essay.