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## Lesson One

### FOCUS: Word Choice and the Value of a Dictionary

#### VOCABULARY WORDS

From “A Route of  
Evanescence”

**Evanescence, n.**

The event of fading and gradually vanishing from sight

**Resonance, n.**

1. Intensification and prolongation of sound, especially of a musical tone, produced by vibration
2. Richness or significance, especially in evoking an association or strong emotion

**Cochineal, n.**

A vivid red; a scarlet dye

**Tunis, n.**

The capital of Tunisia, on the northern coast of Africa

Words are to a poet what clay is to a sculptor: the basic material of his or her art. Poets see the shape of words, listen closely to their sound, feel their weight. Before a poem can be appreciated for its deeper meanings, it must first be read literally. We often overlook words we can already define. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in *Nature*, “Every word . . . if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance. *Right* means *straight*; *wrong* means *twisted*. *Spirit* primarily means *wind*; *transgression*, *the crossing of a line*; *supercilious*, *the raising of the eyebrow*.” Students should even look up words that are commonly used to understand better the careful, conscious choices poets make. Several words from assigned poems are already defined in the margins of this Teacher’s Guide.

### ?? Discussion Activities

Dickinson found great joy in exploring the mysteries of nature, and some of her poems read like riddles. A concise and complex poem like the one below forces the reader to slow down and consider each word and image. Read this poem aloud to your students twice, and see if they can figure out that the poem describes a hummingbird.

A Route of Evanescence,  
With a revolving Wheel –  
A Resonance of Emerald  
A Rush of Cochineal –  
And every Blossom on the Bush  
Adjusts it’s tumbled Head – \*  
The Mail from Tunis – probably,  
An easy Morning’s Ride –

To understand this poem, students must know the definition of nouns such as “evanescence,” “cochineal,” and “Tunis.” Also important is an understanding of a hummingbird’s flight patterns, wing speed, and eating habits—things Dickinson would have noticed from her meticulous observations of her gardens and the forests. Taking the poem line by line, discuss the ways Dickinson’s words evoke the particular qualities of this beautiful creature.

### Writing Exercise

Have students create four-line poetic riddles. Students should choose an element from nature or an object. Ask them to use the dictionary to incorporate at least one surprising word into their riddles.

### Homework

Have students read the Reader’s Guide essays “Emily Dickinson, 1830–1886” (pp. 4–6) and “The Publication of Dickinson’s Poetry” (p. 10). Read Dickinson’s poems “Fame is the one that does not stay –,” “Fame is a fickle food,” and “Success is counted sweetest.”

\* The incorrect apostrophe in line six of “A Route of Evanescence,” is in Dickinson’s manuscript.