

7

Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Allusion

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “A little East of Jordan”

Waxing, v.

Becoming larger or stronger

Worsted, v. tr.

Gained the advantage over; defeated

From “Come slowly – Eden!”

Jessamines, n.

A variant of jasmine; a shrub or climbing plant with fragrant white, pink, or yellow flowers

Balm, n.

1. A fragrant ointment; something soothing
2. A tree which yields a fragrant, resinous substance

Most poets have an audience in mind when they write—a reader who will understand and appreciate their work. In trying to communicate with that audience, poets sometimes use overt or subtle references—allusions—to tap shared cultural memories, or enlarge the scope of their work. Allusions may appear in a poem as an initial quotation, a passing mention of a name, or a phrase borrowed from another writer—often carrying the meanings and implications of the original. When, for instance, poets allude to a person, image, or event in Homer’s *Iliad* or the Bible, they presume readers will be familiar with those texts. In the same way, poets amplify the scope of their work by connecting images and ideas to outside sources.

Emily Dickinson drew from Greek and Roman myths, the Bible, and British writers for inspiration. Her poetry is rife with references to religion, botany, biology, history, art, music, and literature (especially Shakespeare). For example, her poem “All overgrown by cunning moss” refers to the grave (“little cage”) of Currer Bell (the pseudonym of Charlotte Brontë) in Haworth, Yorkshire County, England—a detail that would have been familiar to readers due to the popularity of Brontë’s 1847 novel, *Jane Eyre*.

Discussion Activities

Hundreds of Dickinson’s poems either directly or indirectly refer to God, Jesus Christ, the crucifixion, resurrection, heaven, or hell. In “A little East of Jordan,” Dickinson responds to a long-cherished story of Jacob as recorded in Genesis 32:24-32. One night when Jacob is alone, a man—thought to be an angel—wrestles with him until dawn. The unknown man injures Jacob’s hip in the fight, but Jacob refuses to let him go and demands a blessing. To his surprise, Jacob then realizes he has wrestled with God.

Break up your class into four groups, asking each to read the original Old Testament story. Then read “A little East of Jordan” out loud. Ask each group to go through the entire poem, noticing each allusion. Then ask each group to report its discoveries to the class. In light of these literary allusions, what is the significance of the poem’s final stanza? Might Emily Dickinson have felt that she, at times, was wrestling with God? What might she mean when she says Jacob “had worsted God”? Explain.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a two-paragraph interpretation of “Come slowly – Eden!” How does Dickinson portray Eden? How does the poem’s treatment of Eden differ from the Old Testament view of paradise?

Homework

Read “Now I knew I lost her –,” “Wild nights – Wild nights!,” and “You left me – Sire – two Legacies.” Then read Handout Two: Wild Legacies, and the Reader’s Guide essay “The Homestead and The Evergreens” (p. 7).