

TEXT	THREE POEMS
AUTHOR	Emily Dickinson
THEMES	Give me a Hand (unit 10), Telling the truth (unit 15), Challenging Fate (unit 18)
VOCABULARY	Abstract nouns (<i>hope/fame</i>), describing poems
WRITING	Students write clauses of contrast and concession.
SPEAKING	Students make a short presentation about a female writer.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson (1830–1886) was an American poet, who was born in Amherst, Massachusetts into an important family. She studied at the Amherst Academy before returning home to Amherst.

It seems she lived a very solitary life, spent a lot of her time alone and had a reputation for eccentricity. She wrote around 1,800 poems, although only a few were published in her lifetime. She was an extremely original poet who experimented with line length, punctuation and imagery in a way that was almost entirely new at that time.

She is sometimes seen as part of the group of writers who were deeply influenced by the American civil war and felt that life had changed beyond recognition. This sense of darkness and disturbance explains what can be called the gothic aspects of her writing.

WARMER

Ask students to look at the picture on the worksheet and talk about where this picture was taken and what the statue represents. This should link to the theme of 'hope' in the first poem. You can also use the image to point out the nationality of the poet.

ABOUT YOU

The questions introduce some of the themes of the poems. They can be used to get students thinking about personification and symbols, depending on whether these are literary concepts they are familiar with.

Go through the information about Emily Dickinson. Ask students why they think so few of her poems were published in her lifetime. Suggestions might include that she wasn't interested in being famous / women weren't published much at that time / people thought her poems were too strange, etc.

- 1 Students identify and discuss which words are related to the senses and then compare their ideas about which sense is most important. Tell students to think about whether they see pictures, hear sounds, imagine physical sensations, etc. when they read the poems.

Suggested answers

Poem 1 – sings/tune/words / sweetest/wind/warm/chilliest/crumb (taste perhaps?) feathers (touch perhaps?)

Poem 2 – song/sting

Poem 3 – sweet/sunshine (touch perhaps?) / look

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Suggested answers

- 1 Hope, like a bird, can be seen as something very hard to catch or keep. It moves quickly and can disappear in a moment.
- 2 By comparing 'fame' to a bee she might be saying what a small thing it is in reality. Also, two of the characteristics of a bee are the 'sting' (something that hurts) and a 'wing' (something that can disappear very quickly).
- 3 The 'he/him' of the poem seems to be 'day'. Day is personified as a person who the poet chooses to be with, but who leaves and rejects her.
- 4 The question is intended to get the students to notice the sound and rhythm of the poems. In doing so, they should pay attention to the sound qualities of the verse.

VOCABULARY

3

Answers

- 1 perched 2 disturbed 3 crumbs 4 chillier

4

Answers

- 1 stung 2 fair 3 In extremity 4 turns away

WRITING

- 5 As part of the activity, you might want to revise the relevant grammar, particularly the difference between noun/gerund patterns (*after despite, in spite of, etc.*) and verbs after linkers (*although, etc.*). Check students understand the task and talk about the importance of 'balancing' ideas in an essay so that you present different ideas about a topic in the same piece of writing.

MIXED ABILITY

While weaker students can create individual sentences, set stronger students the task of using five of the sentences to create a short, connected text.

SPEAKING

- 6 Form groups of four or five students. Tell each group to choose a writer. This can be someone well-known like JK Rowling or Jane Austen, or a writer they know about or have read. Help with suggestions, if necessary.

Discuss what makes a good presentation: for example, clear information, some pictures and information about the time the writer lived. You can also suggest that students read a short extract of something written by the writer. It's important to be strict about time – five minutes is sufficient, as this gets students to focus and prepare more carefully. Decide whether everyone should speak. If you are using presentation software, some of the group can take responsibility for preparing this, while others give the actual presentation.

MIXED ABILITY

An advantage of group presentations is that everyone can participate according to their ability. More confident students may want to give most of the presentation, while others may be happier doing the research and finding information about the writer, or creating the visuals and graphics.