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Lesson Four

FOCUS: Imagery and Personification

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “The Moon is distant from the Sea –”

Docile, *adj.*

Easily managed or led, teachable

Impose, *v.*

1. To force to be accepted, done, or complied with
2. To take advantage of someone

From “After great pain, a formal feeling comes –”

Quartz, *n.*

A hard, transparent mineral

Stupor, *n.*

A state of helpless amazement

Poets use figurative language to help a reader imagine the events and emotions described in a poem. Imagery, a word or series of words that refers to any sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste), helps create a visceral experience for the reader. Personification is a figure of speech in which a thing, animal, or abstract term (truth, death, the past) takes on human qualities.

To comprehend Emily Dickinson’s poetry, the reader must understand the importance of figurative language as a way to suggest what cannot be literally stated. To appreciate her work, one must forgo readings that view truth as black or white. Dickinson’s poetry is consciously mysterious and elliptical. The reader must attempt to use Dickinson’s own logic, remembering that “Much Madness is divinest Sense – / To a discerning Eye – .”

Discussion Activities

Have students research the relationship between the moon and the sea, the tides, and the monthly lunar cycle. Then ask them to read “The Moon is distant from the Sea –,” noticing that Dickinson personifies the connection by invoking the human body, saying that the moon’s “Amber Hands” lead the sea “Along appointed Sands.” In the second stanza, she deepens this personification by noting the sea’s obedience to the moon’s “eye,” suggesting a scientific reality: that the moon controls the length and timing of the sea’s tides. The poem turns to address a person (“Signor”) in stanza three. How does the relationship between the moon and the sea parallel that between the mysterious “Signor” and the speaker’s heart?

Writing Exercise

List each example of personification in the poem “After great pain, a formal feeling comes – .” Ask students to answer the following questions: Which image resonates best with your experience of “great pain”? How do the images in stanzas one and two build to the final image of “First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –”?

Homework

Read “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers –,” “There is no Frigate like a Book,” and “Tell all the truth but tell it slant –.”