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Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Poet Great?

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “*The Poets light but Lamps –*”

Vital, *adj.*
Indispensable; essential

Inhere, *v.*
To be fixed or permanently
incorporated within something

Disseminate, *v.*
To spread widely

Circumference, *n.*
The outer boundary, especially of a
circular area

Poets articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer’s voice, style, and use of figurative language inform the themes and characters of the work. A great poem is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

If one mark of a great writer’s work is that it moves us to return to it again and again—whether for enchantment, wisdom, or consolation—then Emily Dickinson is surely one of our greatest writers. In her verse, we experience the “Transport” or pleasurable excitement that she herself looked for in poetry: “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way[?]”

Discussion Activities

Guide your students in a close reading of “The Poets light but Lamps –.” This short poem contains a metaphor so complex that it may inspire several interpretations. Have your class consider the various symbolic meanings of objects such as the lamp, the wick, the light, and the sun. Does everyone have the same interpretation of the symbols and the poetic metaphor?

How does Dickinson use the word “Circumference” to represent both a literal circle of light that surrounds the lamp stand and the power of great poetry that shines out to others over centuries? What is she saying about the eternal nature of great poetry?

Ask students to list the characteristics of a great poet. Put these on the board. What elevates their poems to greatness? Have students discuss, within groups, other poems or songs they know that include some of the same characteristics. Do any of these works remind them of Dickinson’s poems?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a one-page essay on their favorite Dickinson poem.

Homework

Students should continue working on their essays. Final drafts are due during the next class.