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Lesson Two

FOCUS: Biographical Criticism

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “Fame is the one that does not stay—”

Incessantly, *adv.*
Constantly; without ceasing

Insolvent, *adj.*
Unable to pay one’s debts;
bankrupt

From “Success is counted sweetest”

Strains, *n.*
A passage of melody, music, or
song

Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author’s experience. It considers the ways age, race, gender, family, education, and economic status inform a writer’s work. A critic might also examine how poems reflect personality characteristics, life experiences, and psychological dynamics. To understand some poems, readers need knowledge of the poet’s biographical facts or experiences.

As explained in the Reader’s Guide essays “Emily Dickinson, 1830–1886” (pp. 4–6) and “The Publication of Dickinson’s Poetry” (p. 10), Dickinson did not experience fame during her lifetime. However, fame is a subject that several of her poems explore. Although she sent about one hundred of her finest poems to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, in some ways he failed to be the mentor she needed, altering her poetry and publishing only a handful of her poems before her death. Still, though Dickinson was writing during a period that discouraged women writers, Higginson was one of few men who actively championed the reading and publication of work by women.

Discussion Activities

Ask some students to share their riddles in class, seeing if their classmates can figure out what is described.

Emily Dickinson treated the subject of success with remarkable insight for someone who never experienced it. Compare the two poems “Fame is the one that does not stay—” and “Fame is a fickle food.” How does she convey her attitude toward fame? What is the relationship between the crows and the men in the latter poem, and what might this suggest about success?

Writing Exercise

Dickinson’s poetry often describes inner states of mind. However, several of her poems composed during the Civil War employ images of battle, including her popular poem “Success is counted sweetest.” Ask students to explain, in writing, the following two paradoxes: Why can’t “Victory” be defined by those who “took the flag”? How and why can the “defeated” and “dying” hear a song of triumph?

Homework

Have students read Handout One: Emily Dickinson and the Victorian “Woman Question.” Ask them to consider the relationship between her poems on success or fame and the changing opportunities for women during the nineteenth century. Read Dickinson’s poems “They shut me up in Prose—,” “I dwell in Possibility—,” and “Crumbling is not an instant’s Act.”