

Lit 379: Emily Dickinson Seminar

Tuesdays 3:10-4:10

Thursdays 3:10-5:30

Olin LC 208

I reckon – When I count at all –
First Poets – then the Sun –
Then Summer – Then the Heaven of God –
Then the List is done –
(Fr 620)

“On subjects of which we know nothing [...] we both believe and disbelieve
a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing Nimble” (*Letters* 728)

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Course Description: Although frequently depicted as working in relative isolation, Emily Dickinson was in fact vitally connected to the world around her. This seminar will be devoted to a close and careful reading of Dickinson’s poetry in the context of the historical moment and literary world of which she was a part. By exploring how her work both participates in and departs from the poetic practices and intellectual currents of her day, we will seek to sharpen our understanding of her unique, even radical, contribution to American poetry. Note that we meet for an extra hour each week: early in the semester, we’ll use these sessions to focus intensively on a single poem; later in the semester, we’ll turn our attention to developing the final paper.

Researching, drafting, and revising this final paper is a cornerstone of our work together. As a Literature Junior Seminar, this course is designed to prepare you for the challenge of senior project by asking you to write the equivalent of a single, citation-rich, thoroughly researched, well-revised chapter. We will begin working on this paper in earnest after spring break, tackling it in stages and addressing directly such important topics as library research, scholarly reading, and adept handling of sources. (If you are not a junior, we will work together to make sure you get what you need out of the writing component of the course.) It’s never too early to start planning a direction for your research.

Office Hours: Tuesdays 4:15-5:00, Fridays 10:30-11:30, & happily at many other times, but please send an email or see me after class to set up a time.

Email: You can expect a reply within 24 hours, except on weekends, when I may not reply until Monday morning. It is always appropriate to email me if, after reading the syllabus and/or our Moodle page, you need clarification about an assignment. I want you to know exactly what I am asking for, so please ask. If you have detailed questions about a piece of writing that you are working on, I prefer to do this in person, so the best thing is to email me to set up an appointment, including a few possible meeting times.

Our Books: The following four texts are available in the Bard bookstore.

1. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* [Reading Edition], edited by R. W. Franklin. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999. ISBN: 0674018249
2. *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson*, edited by Vivian Pollack. NY: Oxford University Press, 2004. ISBN: 0195151356
3. *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*, edited by Grabher, Haganbuchle, & Miller. Amherst: University of Amherst Press, 2005. ISBN: 9781558494886
4. *White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, by Brenda Wineapple. NY: Anchor Books, 2008. ISBN: 9780307456304

In addition, I will provide copies of readings in a series of handouts or packets during the semester. Please save everything organizedly.

Our course has a Moodle site, which I will use mostly to provide supplementary materials and important links to online resources. Please enroll promptly and check it each week. I will update it by Saturday at noon for the coming week. *Enrollment key: 1830*

Course Goals

I've designed this course with the following goals in the forefront of my mind:

1. By the end of the course, I expect that you'll be able to produce a close reading of a poem by Dickinson, taking into consideration questions of language, rhythm, syntax, rhyme, imagery, metaphor, etc. The question we will repeatedly ask is not *what* does a poem mean but *how* does it mean?
2. I also expect that you'll be able to explain how a poem by Dickinson fits into her overall body of work and into the greater context of her century, noting the ways it shares, resists, and/or reworks the cultural and poetic traditions of her day.
3. The above two goals are, in my view, complementary, and yet they represent different ways of approaching a text. A small but important goal for this seminar is that we come to understand the different ways of reading a poem and to see their relative strengths and weaknesses. We will ask such questions as, What role should biography play when interpreting a poem? What contribution should intellectual, historical, or cultural context play? What is gained and what is lost if we analyze the poem without any mention of biography or context?
4. By the end of the class, I want you all to become stronger writers. You should be able to present your close readings and historical contextualizations with

increasing clarity, concision, and persuasiveness. In addition, this course is specifically designed to ensure that you are adept at finding and using secondary sources as you develop a long (20-page) research essay.

5. Finally, and also related to writing, I want all of us to develop a keen practice that links reading and writing. My experience working with seniors has taught me that a great deal of time can be saved, angst avoided, and joy harnessed by simply becoming a more efficient reader. This inevitably involves writing, whether it be in notebooks, in the margins of pages, in free writes, or in myriad other ways. There is no single way to do this, but it's important for each of us to develop a way that is ours. For now, you should know that I expect you to engage with the reading process *via writing*. If writing slows us down, so be it. Reading too fast, like eating or driving too fast, is a public hazard.

What You'll Need

1. You will need a spiral notebook for taking notes and for in-class writing.
2. You will need all four of the required texts.
3. You will need to register on our Moodle site, which I will use to send emails to the class about any changes in the syllabus or assignments. As a rule, I'll update the site by noon on Saturday for the following week. I won't post something every week, but on any given week I might post tips on how to approach the reading, which poems to focus on, etc. (Weekly updates will be in red in the uppermost box.)

What You Can Expect

This course is a seminar: our main activity together will be conversation. This means that each of us bears a significant responsibility to come prepared to share ideas (even half-baked or seemingly far-fetched ideas) so that, as a group, we can think well together. We will frequently write in class and use this writing as a springboard into discussion.

The short writing assignments in weeks 2-7 are designed to help organize our thinking about the readings and also to start working toward the longer essay. I may ask you to read from them in class and/or to share them in small groups before handing them in.

As we progress to the research essay, you can expect to explore the writing and re-writing process. You will both give and receive feedback. I am a demanding reader, but I am also committed to teaching you what you need to know in order to succeed. I will meet with each of you individually to review your writing and to make sure you get the most out of the semester as a writer.

I want to make this class as useful as possible for each of you. You should feel free to seek me out whenever it might be helpful – I am excessively available and always happy to talk. You are free to just stop in, but because my schedule is erratic—I am a man with too many meetings—I recommend making an appointment to ensure that I am free.

What I Expect of You

Attendance: I expect perfect attendance. *More than one unexcused absence is, in my view, problematic, and it may affect your grade.* If something serious comes up, please contact me, but barring something extreme, I'd like for you to be here. In part, this is simple courtesy to me and to your classmates who have made the effort, but it's also pragmatic: much of what we discuss in class feeds directly into the next writing assignment, and part of each class is designed to give you tips on the upcoming readings.

Participation: I hope you will be here on time, ready to write and participate. As with any class, I expect each of us to actively engage in both the writing and discussion components of each class. Bring coffee if you need to; bring chocolate; do jumping jacks before sitting in your chair; bake brownies for the class. Come prepared to be fully present. *Please do not have laptops, cell phones, Ipads, or other devices out during class.* Pen(cil)s, paper, and the relevant texts are all we need.

Writing: Participation extends, too, to your written work. Taking it seriously, dedicating time to it, and embracing the chance to re-write with the feedback you receive – these are practices that could make this a truly transformative semester.

Grading

Grades are assigned based on the quality of the work and the extent to which it responds fully, thoughtfully, even ambitiously to the assignment. I will make every effort to make sure you know what is expected, but if you have any doubts, please ask for clarification. Because we often work with our written work in class, late assignments are truly a bummer and will be penalized. Far better to bring what you have than to bring nothing.

Short Papers (weeks 2-7)	30%
Bibliography assignments (weeks 9, 10, & 12)	10%
Essay drafts (weeks 11 and 13)	20%
Final Research Essay (due in week 14)	30%
Class participation (includes attendance and in-class writing)	10%

Accommodations

If you need disability-related accommodations in this class or have any particular concerns regarding making this class accessible to you, please see me.

Academic Honesty

I doubt this issue will arise in our class, but I feel duty-bound to address the topic of plagiarism. If you present work as your own when in fact it was done by someone else – friend, tutor, random website, author – that is plagiarism. In my experience, it often results from carelessness; for example, a student might copy something into a notebook

(or cut and paste it from the web) and forget where it came from and then forget to mention that it's from somewhere else. But even when accidental, plagiarism is a serious academic problem and will lead, at a minimum, to an F on the assignment. Failing the class is also possible. We will work in this class to find efficient and graceful ways of building the works and words of others into our own writing. If you undertake this project with care, you'll not only skirt trouble but emerge as a stronger writer.

A Few Words About the Writing Assignments

Short writing assignments (weeks 2-7) should be *no longer than 600 words*, or roughly two pages double-spaced.

The assignment due in week 7 begins our work on the final 20-page research essay. After spring break, we will use our Tuesday writing labs to work on this project, breaking it down into smaller steps. But it's never too early to think about what you want to write about – keep an eye out for what intrigues or puzzles you, especially in the area of Dickinson's relationship to other writers, thinkers, poets, etc. Feel free to see me at any time to discuss your ideas and to begin to gather resources.

If possible, print everything for this class double-sided. Use font 12 and line spacing 1.5 or 2. No cover pages needed, but names, due dates, staples, and page numbers are appreciated. Because we will sometimes work with your writing in class, you must come to class with it in hand.

A Few Words about the Reading Assignments

Poems: For most classes, I have assigned roughly 20 poems. This is relatively few, but my expectation is that you will read, re-read, and annotate them in preparation for class. *You should expect to spend roughly two hours on the assigned poems each week.* I will sometimes tell you which poems to focus on, but if I don't, you will want to pick a few poems to read especially closely. In either case, please read all of the poems listed, as there is no substitute for reading broadly, especially with a poet like Dickinson. There is much to be learned from the sheer variety of moods, forms, voices, and perspectives.

Critical Readings: I recommend reading them in the order given. (The poems and occasional letters, by contrast, are yours to explore as you wish.) For each reading, you should come to class prepared to discuss (1) the author's main claim or claims, (2) how these claims are supported, particularly with poems, and (3) whether you agree or disagree with the author, and why.

Historical Texts: When reading texts from the nineteenth century (e.g. essays by Emerson or poems by Dickinson's contemporaries), look for ideas, perspectives, and approaches that they share – or *don't* – with Dickinson's thinking and poetic practice.

Syllabus

All poems are identified by the number in the edition by Franklin. “Handbook” refers to the *Emily Dickinson Handbook*. “Guide” refers to *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson*. “Wineapple” refers to *White Heat*. “Packet” refers to materials distributed by me in class.

Week #1: Biographical Studies

1/27 Writing Lab: Close Reading & Writing Session

1/29 Poems: Fr 199, 222, 236, 288, 425, 426, 445, 446, 448, 453, 454, 466, 586, 589, 596, 700, 800, 1249

Reading: (1) “Emily Dickinson, 1830-1886: A Brief Biography” (*Guide*)
(2) “Biographical Studies of Dickinson” (*Handbook*)

Reading Questions: As you do this week’s reading, make a list of (1) important events and dates in Dickinson’s life, (2) important facts about the era in which she lived or important people of her day, and (3) intriguing questions, paradoxes, uncertainties, and interpretive dilemmas concerning her life and work.

Week #2: Calvinism & the Connecticut Valley

Beginning this week and continuing until spring break, there is a two-page (roughly 600 words) writing assignment due each Thursday. Papers are due at the beginning of class. Note that you might be asked to share them with one or more of your classmates.

2/3 Writing Lab: Close Reading & Writing Session

2/5 Poems: Fr 124, 128, 139, 173, 185, 221, 264, 269, 325, 353, 373, 426, 634, 769, 800, 934, 1528, 1581, 1675

Reading: (1) Excerpt from *My Wars are Laid Away in Books* by Alfred Habegger (Packet)
(2) Letters 1849-1850 (Packet)
(3) “Dickinson’s Local, Global and Cosmic Perspectives” (*Handbook*)

Short Writing Assignment #1: In under 600 words, compose a close reading of one of the poems listed for today. You are free to pick any poem *except* Fr 124 or Fr 221, as we will probably discuss these in detail on Tuesday. Be as precise as possible as you explore how the poem works: what do you notice about its structure, form, language, rhythm? (You can’t address all of these aspects in 2 pages, but pick one or two to focus on.)

Week #3: Nineteenth-Century Contexts

Beginning this week, everyone is required to memorize at least 16 lines of Dickinson's poetry and to recite it in class. You can either recite a full 16-line (or more!) poem or two 8-line poems. (In the latter case, they can be on different days.) I'll ask for volunteers each class meeting, but please fulfill this assignment before spring break.

2/10 Writing Lab: Close Reading & Writing Session

2/12 Poems: Fr 169, 180, 187, 337, 416, 431, 463, 479, 584, 591, 605, 648, 657, 747, 832, 836, 1031, 1088, 1274, 1571, 1773, 1781

Reading: (1) Chapter 2 from *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture* by Barton Levi St. Armand (Packet)
(2) "Is Immortality True?: Salvaging Faith in an Age of Upheavals" (Guide)
(3) Selection of poems by Lydia Sigourney (Packet)

Short Writing Assignment #2: In no more than 600 words, summarize and then respond to Eberwein's argument in "Is Immortality True?: Salvaging Faith in an Age of Upheavals." First, explain (in a paragraph or two) her central claim(s) about Dickinson's relationship to faith, including some examples of how she supports her argument. Then (in another paragraph or two) respond to her argument: do you agree, disagree, or want to qualify what she writes? Try to use at least *two* other texts to support your position – feel free to use this week's readings, last week's reading, or any of the poems or letters we've read so far.

Week #4: Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century

2/17 Writing Lab: Close Reading & Writing Session

2/19 Poems: Fr 157, 183, 330, 348, 358, 359, 401, 475, 477, 513, 517, 550, 620, 945, 1163, 1263, 1691, 1743

Reading: (1) "Dickinson in Context: Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets" (Guide)
(2) "Vesuvius at Home" The Power of Emily Dickinson" by Adrienne Rich (Packet)
(3) Selected poems by Helen Hunt Jackson, Frances Osgood, and others (Packet; more available on Moodle)

Short Writing Assignment #3: In no more than 600 words, summarize and then respond to "Dickinson in Context: Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets" by Cheryl Walker. First, explain (in a paragraph or two) the author's central claim(s) about Dickinson, including some examples of how she supports her argument. Then (in another paragraph or two) respond to her argument: do you

agree, disagree, or want to qualify what the author writes? Try to use one or two of the poems by other poets on the syllabus for this week. That is, Walker focuses on one of Dickinson's contemporaries: can you extend what she says to another poet or find a counterargument in the work of another poet?

Week #5: Poets, Publishing, & Portfolios (a.k.a. Being a Poet in the Nineteenth Century)

2/24 Writing Lab: Working with secondary sources

2/26 Poems: Fr 278, 348, 481, 517, 519, 533, 536, 788, 930, 1161, 1243, 1268, 1355, 1428, 1663, 1702, 1715, 1788

Reading: (1) Chapter 2 from *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence* by Joanne Dobson (Packet)
(2) "The Poet" by Ralph Waldo Emerson (Packet)
(3) "New Poetry" by Ralph Waldo Emerson (Packet)
(4) "Letter to a Young Contributor" by Thomas Wentworth Higginson (Packet)
(5) "Open Portfolio" by Thomas Wentworth Higginson (Packet)

Short Writing Assignment #4: In no more than 600 words, compare Dobson's argument in chapter 2 of *Strategies of Reticence* with the argument by Adrienne Rich in "Vesuvius at Home," which we discussed last week. First, summarize each essay in a paragraph or so, and then consider in what ways they agree or disagree. Ultimately, are their views more alike or more different?

Week #6: Language & Music

During this week, I will meet with each of you to discuss your short papers, prepare for the research essay, and talk generally about your work in the seminar. In preparation for our meeting, please look at the short assignment due next week (week #7) and give some thought to what topic might interest you. We will not meet for our writing lab this week.

3/3 NO WRITING LAB TODAY

3/5 Poems: Fr 112, 134, 178, 268, 270, 310, 320, 351, 354, 355, 356, 378, 381, 588, 654, 945, 962, 1348

Reading: (1) "Influences on the Poet's Language" by Cristanne Miller (Packet)
(2) "A Musical Aesthetic" by Judy Jo Small (Packet)

Short Writing Assignment #5: Write an annotated bibliography for one of today's two readings.

Week #7: Re-Reading Emily Dickinson

If everyone is free to do so, we will meet for a full seminar meeting on Tuesday (3:10 – 5:30) instead of Thursday. If not, we will return to our usual schedule.

3/10 Poems: Fr 23, 122, 205, 303, 314, 402, 535, 614, 656, 712, 737, 764, 772, 888, 905, 935, 1064

Reading: (1) “Searching for Dickinson’s Themes” (*Handbook*)
(2) “Prisming Dickinson, or Gathering Paradise by Letting Go” (*Handbook*)

Short Writing Assignment #6: Write two to three pages about what you are considering investigating in your research. See Moodle for a (growing) list of possible topics. You might want to glance at some of the future readings on the syllabus to see if something there sparks your interest. What you hand in today is *not* binding, and if you are torn between two ideas, say so. Try to end your 2-3 pages with a few questions that might serve to orient your initial investigation.

3/12 NO CLASS TODAY [if all agree to the switch]

---- Spring Break ----

Week #8: Ways of Reading

We now begin using the Tuesday Writing Labs to develop, write, and revise the final paper. Full details will be distributed mid-semester.

3/24 Writing Lab: **We will meet in the library** today for a review session on databases. If we stay beyond 4:10, I’ll repay you on Thursday, deal?

3/26 Poems: Fr 75, 133, 241, 427, 305, 357, 360, 372, 395, 398, 428, 514, 515, 554, 619, 697, 710, 743, 760, 867, 1283

Reading (1) Wineapple, 1-98 (section I)
(2) Assorted critical readings (Packet)
(3) Selected Letters: “Master Letters” (Packet)

Week #9: Dickinson & the Civil War

3/31 Writing Lab: **Preliminary bibliography including one annotation due today**

4/2 Poems: Fr 52, 195, 256, 340, 363, 384, 420, 465, 467, 518, 524, 530, 616, 665, 704, 838, 1045, 1212

- Reading: (1) Wineapple, 101-267 (section II)
(2) “Public and Private in Dickinson’s War Poetry” (*Guide*)
(3) Selected Letters: Civil War and Higginson (Packet)

Week #10: Dickinson in the 1890s

4/7 Writing Lab: **Preliminary annotated bibliography assignment due today**

Note: If you haven’t already finished Wineapple’s book yet, try spending some time with the poems assigned for this week before reading section III.

4/9 Poems: The entire text of both the 1890 and 1891 volumes of Dickinson’s *Poems* is available on our Moodle site. Browse around and find a handful of poems that intrigue you. Then find their counterparts in the version we are using by Franklin. (You’ll need to use the first line of the poem and Franklin’s index to locate them.) What differences, if any, do you see? More generally, as you skim these books as a whole, what do you notice about them? Come prepared to talk about a few interesting discoveries.

- Reading: (1) Wineapple, 271-318 (section III)
(2) “Emily Dickinson’s Letters” by Higginson (Packet)

Week #11: Dickinson’s Reception in the 20th Century

4/14 Writing Lab: **5-7 pages toward your research paper due today, including a bibliography of proposed readings and at least 5 fully annotated sources. More details and examples will be available mid-semester, but this can either be writing *toward* your draft (describing what you plan to investigate) or writing that *is an early draft* of your paper.**

4/16 Poems: We’ll focus on the poems mentioned in the assigned essays.

- Reading: (1) “Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Judgment” (1938) by Ivor Winters (Packet)
(2) “Emily Dickinson’s Notation” by R. P. Blackmur (Packet)
(3) “Emily Dickinson” (1957) by Austin Warren (Packet)
(4) “Dickinson’s Critical Reception” (*Handbook*)

Week #12: Manuscripts, Fascicles, & the Variorum

4/21 Writing Lab: **New entries for either one full book or three articles on your annotated bibliography due today**

4/23 Poems: TBA [we will focus on one or two of the fascicles, partly determined by what members of the class are researching]

Reading: (1) "Dickinson's Manuscripts" (*Handbook*)
(2) "Dickinson's Fascicles" (*Handbook*)

Week #13

4/28 NO CLASS Advising Day

4/30 **Initial Draft of Essay Due:** Please bring two copies of at least 10-12 pages of your essay to class today. We will devote today's seminar to reading each other's work, providing feedback, and resolving any problems that have emerged along the way. Please come prepared to roll up your sleeves, work hard, and be generous. If someone wants to bake brownies for the class, I won't object. If someone wants to make Dickinson's famed gingerbread, I will provide the recipe.

Week #14: Late Poems, Letter Poems, & Envelope Poems

5/5 Writings Lab: Writing Excellent Introductions

5/7 Poems: Fr 1132, 1265, 1292, 1443, 1506, 1512, 1545, plus we'll look at texts available in online archives, especially *Radical Scatters: Emily Dickinson's Late Fragments and Related Texts, 1870-1886* (see Moodle for link). More details as the date gets closer.

Reading: (1) "Materiality and the Poet" (*Handbook*)
(2) Selected Letters (Packet)

Week #15:

5/12 Writing Lab: **Revised Essays Due** (hand in with all previous drafts)

5/14 [Completion day & our last seminar] Looking back and looking ahead

Week #16

5/19 [Completion day and our last lab] TBA