



## Risorse online per insegnanti e studenti: *Introduzione*

### ● **Descrizione del materiale**

L'unico modo per avvicinarsi alla poesia è 'nutrirsi' di poesie che riempiono la mente e il cuore con la ricchezza dei significati e delle emozioni che sanno trasmettere e l'uso speciale – cioè 'poetico' – del linguaggio a cui danno vita. Per questo le risorse online introducono sei ulteriori testi della Dickinson che potenziano la scelta delle poesie già inserite in *Emily Dickinson – Words and Images*.

### ● **Sequenza dei testi**

L'ordine dei testi proposti segue un criterio di crescente complessità.

### ● **Organizzazione del materiale informativo e didattico**

Il materiale relativo a ciascun testo poetico è organizzato nelle sezioni sottoelencate per renderne più agile lo sfruttamento da parte del lettore.

#### ● ***Notes and glossary***

Ogni testo poetico è corredato da note esplicative e/o linguistiche.

#### ● ***To understand the poem***

La sezione sollecita il lettore ad avvicinarsi al testo poetico dopo aver stabilito connessioni a livello di contenuto, esperienze personali, messaggio e lingua.

- ***How to summarize the poem's thought in a series of points***

I punti nodali di ciascuna poesia sono sintetizzati rispettando la struttura del testo. La sintesi proposta può essere strumento di confronto con il processo personale di lettura, stimolo per ulteriori approfondimenti, modello espositivo, ecc.

- ***How to visualize aspects of the poem***

La sezione sviluppa ulteriormente il processo di visualizzazione che contraddistingue *Words and Images*. I modelli suggeriti sono tuttavia solo un punto di partenza a cui avvicinarsi o da cui allontanarsi. Il lettore viene infatti sistematicamente invitato a fare scelte personali di altro materiale visivo che giustificherà con riferimento al testo poetico considerato e di cui riporterà (dove possibile) i dati utili alla sua identificazione: autore, titolo, locazione, anno di produzione, ecc.

- ***Further reading***

La sezione finale segnala una poesia o l'estratto di una lettera di E. Dickinson che sviluppa contenuti o tematiche collegabili con quelli del testo analizzato.

I testi segnalati sono tutti facilmente reperibili su Internet.

Silvana Ranzoli

Caspar D. Friedrich (1774-1840), *Woman at a Window*, Berlin, Old National Museum, 1822.



## Indice

1. A Letter is a joy of Earth – (1639)
2. To make a prairie (1755)
3. He ate and drank the precious Words – (1587)
4. Exultation is the going (76)
5. As If I asked a common Alms (323)
6. I reckon – When I count it all – (569)

*La numerazione e la datazione delle poesie sono quelle dell'edizione Johnson.*

A Letter is a joy of Earth<sup>1</sup> —  
It is denied the Gods —  
1885

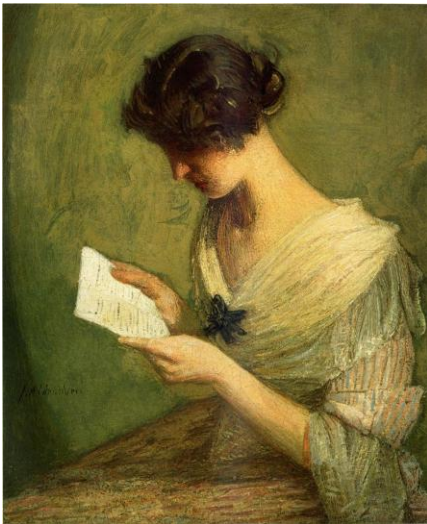
Una lettera è una gioia terrena,  
che non è concessa agli dei.

- **Notes and glossary**

1. **of earth** = earthly, relating to life on earth rather than to heaven.

- **To understand the poem**

Readers should think of the emotions and thoughts that the arrival of a letter may arouse and write a list of them. Their list could include words such as *expectation*, *hope*, *memories* and the words could be arranged around the painting below or around any other meaningful picture they might choose.



Julian Alden Weir (1852-1919), *The letter*, 1910-19, private collection.

- **Further reading**

In *The Way I read a Letter's — this — (poem 636)* Dickinson describes how to read and enjoy letters from friends.

[J 1755]

To make a prairie<sup>1</sup> it takes a clover<sup>2</sup> and one bee,  
 One clover, and a bee,  
 And revery<sup>3</sup>  
 The revery alone will do,  
 If bees are few.

undated

Per fare una prateria ci vogliono un trifoglio e un'ape,  
 un trifoglio e un'ape,  
 e immaginazione.  
 L'immaginazione da sola può bastare,  
 se le api sono poche.

### • **Notes and glossary**

1. **prairie** = a large flat area in central North America covered with grass and farmland but without trees.
2. **clover** = a small plant, often fed to cows, with purple or white flowers.
3. **revery** = imagination. 'Revery' can also be translated as '*capacità di sognare*'.



### • **To understand the poem**

Readers should analyse the features of imagination and write down a list of adjectives which describe them.

### • **How to summarize the poem's thought in a series of points**

1. To make a prairie, which is very large, you need only two small physical items like a clover and a bee and a spiritual one, revery.

The word "revery" is given a central position by the layout of the poem.

2. If one of the small items is scarce, revery will be enough to create a prairie.

The poet/speaker aims to stress the importance of imagination: revery alone can create a prairie in the mind.

- ***How to visualize aspects of the poem***

Readers should consider their list of adjectives describing imagination and modify it, if necessary. Then they could create a 'wordle' or 'word cloud', a graphic representation of the adjectives which in their view describe imagination in this poem and in their lives.

The wordle below is offered as a possible example, but readers should feel encouraged to add to it.



- ***Further reading***

***Not knowing when the Dawn will come*** (poem 1619) is one of the many poems by Dickinson that show imagination at work.

[J 1587]

He ate and drank the precious Words –  
 His Spirit grew robust –  
 He knew no more that he was poor,  
 Nor that his frame<sup>1</sup> was Dust<sup>2</sup> –

He danced along the dingy<sup>3</sup> Days  
 And this Bequest<sup>4</sup> of Wings<sup>5</sup>  
 Was but a Book – What Liberty  
 A loosened<sup>6</sup> Spirit brings –

c. 1883

Mangiò e bevve le preziose parole;  
 il suo spirito divenne vigoroso.  
 Non avvertiva più di essere povero,  
 né che il suo corpo era destinato alla polvere.

Danzò nei giorni cupi e tristi  
 e questo dono delle ali  
 non gli derivò che da un libro. Quanta libertà  
 dà uno spirito affrancato!

### • *Notes and glossary*

1. **Frame** = body of a human being.

2. **Dust** = cf Bible: Genesis 3:19, “For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return”.

3. **dingy** = gloomy and dull.

4. **Bequest** = gift of personal property by will, heritage.

5. **Wings**, wings suggest agility and mobility: a winged creature is very agile in dancing.

Wings are often associated with divinity and beauty and can also be symbolic of human potential or of goals man intends to achieve.

A winged human being enjoys great freedom as he is free from earthly ties.

6. **loosened** = the book had set the spirit free disentangling it from ties and constraints.

- ***To understand the poem***

*He ate and drank the precious words* focuses on how radically a book can change a man, provided the man reads the book with great attention, meditates on its “precious words” and lets them shape his life.

Before reading the poem readers could consider if they have ever had a similar experience with a book and how much the book has influenced them.

- ***How to summarize the poem’s thought in a series of points***

1. A man fed on the “precious words” of a book which made his mind and soul “robust”. As a result, the man was no longer limited by his poverty and his earthly condition.
2. Even if placed in a negative context, he could dance joyfully as the book had turned him into a winged-creature, cf Note 5. The process can be described as a spiritual metamorphosis. (In biology the term refers to a major change in the physical form of an insect or other animal as it develops.)
3. The book had made him a free man, a man who could then fly high and fulfil his dreams and potential.

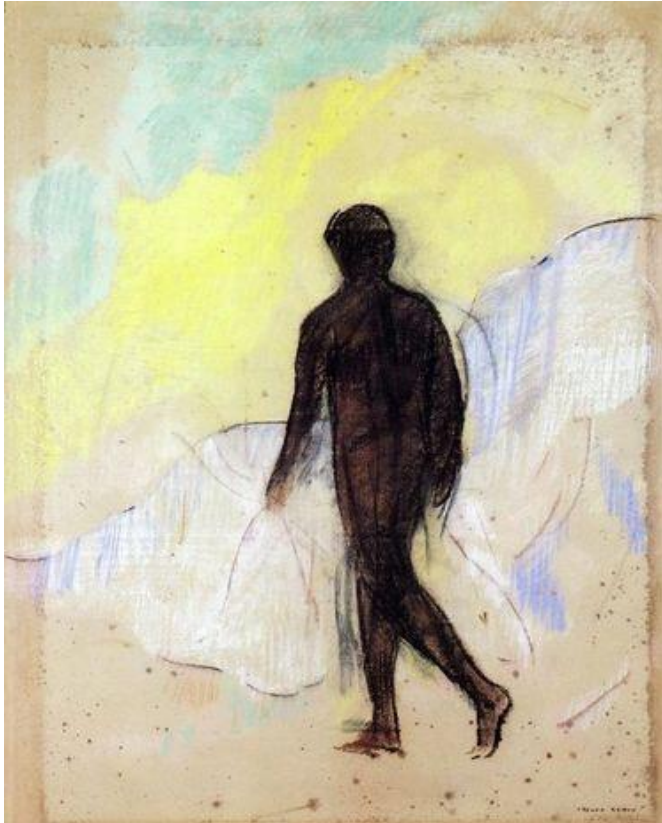
- ***How to visualize aspects of the poem***

The poem’s content is mainly spiritual, but its lines describe in concrete terms how a man read a “precious” book and the effects this had on his personality and his life.

Readers could choose or create an image which expresses the transformation the man underwent after reading the “precious words”. Then they could write a caption to justify their choice.

Here is an example of a suitable image and a possible format for the accompanying caption.





Odilon Redon (1840-1916), *The Man*.

Possible caption:

*The painting by the French artist Odilon Redon shows an earthly dark man and a pearly winged-man whose body seems to have lost the conditioning weight of flesh and bones. The winged-man comes from a luminous colourful background with which his body seems to merge. This is an appropriate choice for the image because of the symbolic quality of Odilon Redon's art.*

- **Further reading**

***I fear a Man of frugal Speech – (poem 543)*** is a poem by Dickinson which expresses her reactions to how men use words.

[J 76]

Exultation<sup>1</sup> is the going  
Of an inland soul<sup>2</sup> to sea<sup>3</sup>,  
Past the houses – past the headlands,  
Into deep Eternity –

Esultanza è l'andare  
verso il mare aperto di un'anima vissuta sempre a terra,  
oltre le case – oltre i promontori,  
nella profonda eternità.

Bred<sup>4</sup> as we, among the mountains<sup>5</sup>, Can the sailor<sup>6</sup>  
understand  
The divine intoxication<sup>7</sup>  
Of the first league<sup>8</sup> out from land?

Cresciuto come noi, in mezzo ai monti, può chi  
intraprende il viaggio per mare comprendere la divina  
ebbrezza  
della prima lega al largo della terraferma?

1859

### • *Notes and glossary*

**1. Exultation** = Latinate abstract word denoting feeling of extreme joy, a joyous feeling at the achievement of something.

The verb is *to exult* and the adjective is *exultant* = *filled with or expressing extreme joy*.

**2. inland soul** = a person who has lived his/her life “inland”, far from the coast and the open sea.

**3. going.. to sea** means taking a journey by ship.

**4. Bred** = brought up.

**5. among the mountains**, the phrase suggests a valley surrounded by mountains, i.e. a safe and secluded living area.

**6. Sailor** = Dickinson is referring to any person voyaging at sea.

**7. intoxication** = the state of being inebriated = exhilarated and excited.

**8. league** = an old unit for measuring distance, equal to about five kilometres.

- ***To understand the poem***

*Exultation is the going* is usually described as a 'definition poem', a poem which aims to define a term. As often happens with Dickinson, a Latinate abstract noun like "exultation" is defined by native words which denote a concrete action, like "going... to sea".

By creating a metaphor and not a simile Dickinson produces a definition which is more immediate and more memorable.

- ***How to summarize the poem's thought in a series of points***

1. A person who has spent his life in a familiar but secluded place feels exultation when he decides to change radically and accepts the risk of exploring the boundless sea.

2. The gradual movement away from the familiar inland environment into the unknown and mysterious sea is suggested by the repetition of "past" (line 3). The journey by sea can bring the 'new daring sailor' "into deep Eternity", into an everlasting after-life. The sea which is endless and never-changing is an appropriate metaphor for eternity.

3. The speaker wonders whether the people who are sailing for the first time over the sea are aware of the new inebriating experience they are going through.

- ***How to visualize aspects of the poem***

Readers could look for a seascape in which the vast sea is an appropriate setting for the new joyful experience the poem suggests.

A possible choice could be the seascape below by the American artist A. T. Bricher. His sea, his cliffs and his coast are a faithful rendition of nature, but his luminous and serene atmosphere makes it fitting scenery for a first exciting journey which can produce exultation.



Alfred Thompson Bricher (1837-1908), *Maine Coast*, Blue Hill, Blue Hill Bay Gallery, c. 1875.

- ***Further reading***

***Presentment – is that long Shadow – on the lawn (poem 764)*** is another definition poem by Dickinson.

[J 323]

As if<sup>1</sup> I asked a common Alms<sup>2</sup>,  
 And in my wondering hand  
 A Stranger pressed a Kingdom,  
 And I, bewildered<sup>3</sup>, stand –

As if I asked the Orient<sup>4</sup>  
 Had it for me a Morn –  
 And it should lift it's<sup>5</sup> purple Dike<sup>6</sup>,  
 And shatter<sup>7</sup> Me with Dawn<sup>8</sup>!

Come se chiedessi una comune elemosina,  
 e nella mia mano stupita  
 uno sconosciuto racchiudesse un regno,  
 ed io, confusa, restassi.

Come se chiedessi all'oriente  
 se avesse un mattino per me –  
 ed esso alzasse le sue dighe purpuree  
 e mi sommergesse con l'aurora!

### • *Notes and glossary*

1. **As if** introduces an analogy between A, something that happened to the speaker, and B, two situations the poem describes.
2. **Alms** = anything given gratuitously to aid the poor, such as money, food or clothing. The word is singular in its form.
3. **bewildered** = very confused and unable to understand what is happening.
4. **Orient** = the East, the part of the horizon where the sun first appears in the morning.
5. **it's** = its
6. **Dike** = barrier constructed to contain the flow of water.
7. **shatter** = overwhelm. A previous version of the poem used 'flood'.
8. **Dawn** = the beginning of daylight in the morning.

- ***To understand the poem***

The poem refers to a situation people have often experienced. We can ask a person for something little or ordinary and get much more than we expected - an extraordinary gift or a very generous answer. We can be overwhelmed by powerful emotions that we are able to convey only through analogies.

To understand the text readers should know what an analogy is. They could start from the following statement, “the operation of a computer presents an analogy (= resemblance in some respect) to the working of the brain”.

Analogy is a comparison between two things to show the similarities between them. Analogies are often used to explain something unfamiliar or abstract by comparing it to something familiar or concrete.

The two items being compared in an analogy are similar in some respect, but not identical.

- ***How to summarize the poem’s thought in a series of points***

1. The situation which generates the poem is the following – the poet/ speaker has asked for something little or ordinary and has got in return something unexpected and extraordinary.

2. The poet does not mention what she actually asked for. She describes how she reacted by creating two analogies which are signalled by “as if”.

In the first stanza the speaker compares herself to a beggar asking for “a common alms”. In return she gets a kingdom that the donor “presses into her outstretched hand”.

In the second stanza the speaker compares herself to a person asking the East for a morning, probably for the kind of sunrise she had often observed and enjoyed. In return she gets a magnificent dawn which overwhelms her eyes and soul with its colourful and luminous light.

3. In both situations the response is out of proportion compared to the request and the speaker is totally bewildered and overwhelmed. The emotions she feels are so strong that she doesn’t know how to express them.

- ***How to visualize aspects of the poem***

Readers should focus on two aspects of the poem:

a) the notion of a gift as an answer to a request;

b) the two analogies through which the speaker conveys what she felt and how she reacted.

They could decide to concentrate on a) or b) or on both.

The example below is only a tentative proposal which is a combination of three images:

1 *A Beggar Woman*, a painting by the French artist Hugues Merle, in which the outstretched arm suggests the act of asking for “common Alms”.

2 *St Edward's Crown* represents the “Kingdom a stranger pressed.. in my wondering hand”.

3 *Flint Castle*, a painting by J. M. W. Turner of a Welsh coastal landscape at dawn.

All the scenery is flooded with the radiant golden light of a clear early morning. The sun's rays across the sky and its reflection off the water give the coastal landscape a dreamlike quality.



Hugues Merle (1823-1881), *A Beggar Woman*, Paris, Musée D'Orsay, 1861.



- **Further reading**

There are three versions of this poem. The text on slide 13 refers to the second version which was incorporated into a letter that Dickinson wrote to W. T. Higginson<sup>1</sup> in 1862.

She had asked Mr Higginson for some help but she got much more than she expected.

Here is a short extract from her third letter to him.

Letter 265

(7 June 1862) *T. W. Higginson*

“ Dear Friend,

....Would you have time to be the "friend" you should think I need? I have a little shape: it would not crowd your desk,..... If I might bring you what I do -- not so frequent to trouble you -- and ask you if I told it clear, 't would be control to me. The sailor cannot see the North, but knows the needle can. The "hand you stretch me in the dark" I put mine in, and turn away.

....

But, will you be my preceptor<sup>2</sup>, Mr. Higginson?”

Your friend

E Dickinson -

1. A Unitarian minister and a literary critic who had written an article of advice to young writers.

2. A preceptor is a person who teaches, counsels, and supports the growth of an individual for a fixed amount of time



I reckon<sup>1</sup> – When I count it all –  
 First – Poets – Then the Sun –  
 Then Summer – Then the Heaven of God –  
 And then – the List is done –

But, looking back – the First so seems To  
 Comprehend the Whole –  
 The Others look a needless Show –  
 So I write – Poets – All –

Their Summer – lasts a Solid<sup>2</sup> Year –  
 They can afford a Sun The East – would deem  
 extravagant<sup>3</sup> –  
 And if the final Heaven<sup>4</sup> –

Be Beautiful as they Disclose To Those who worship  
 Them<sup>5</sup> –  
 It<sup>6</sup> is too difficult a Grace<sup>7</sup> –  
 For justify<sup>8</sup> the Dream –  
 1862

Quando faccio una classifica ,  
 prima metto il poeta, poi il sole,  
 poi l'estate, poi il cielo di Dio,  
 e poi l'elenco è completo.

Ma, ripensandoci, il primo pare proprio comprendere il  
 tutto  
 e gli altri sembrano una fila inutile di parole.  
 Così scrivo 'poeta' e basta.

La sua estate dura un anno intero,  
 può permettersi un sole che l'Oriente riterrebbe un  
 prodigio.  
 E ammesso che il cielo finale

sia bello come quello che egli dischiude a coloro che lo  
 ammirano con venerazione,  
 esso è una grazia troppo ardua da ottenere  
 per giustificare il sogno.

### • *Notes and glossary*

1. **reckon** = value

2. **Solid** = with no pauses or interruptions.

3. **extravagant** = impressively great, a sun that is so vivid that even the real East cannot afford it.

4. **final** = the heaven beyond life as opposed to the earthly heaven that poets create in their poems.
5. **Those who worship Them** = ‘those’ refers to the faithful and admiring readers of the poet (“Them”).
6. **It** refers to “the final Heaven”.
7. **Grace** = a gift, a favour of God to man.
8. **For justify** = to justify, i.e. to make the dream worthwhile.

- ***To understand the poem***

Readers should think about how they view the poet and summarize in a few sentences what and how he does – for example, the poet concentrates meaning into a few words or lines.

A graphic presentation of readers’ conclusions could take the format of a wordle centred around the word ‘poet’ and based on the sentences they wrote – for an example of wordle cf slide 6 of these *Online Resources*.

- ***How to summarize the poem’s thought in a series of points***

1. When the poet/speaker makes a list of precious things, ‘poets’ head her list followed by the sun, summer and “the Heaven of God”.
2. On second thoughts, the speaker realizes that the work of poets includes also nature and God and therefore decides to cancel Sun, Summer and the Heaven of God and keep only poets.
3. Poets are more precious because of their visionary power and the permanence of what they create. Their summer does not fade away and their sun is more brilliant and astonishing than the real sun.
4. Heaven beyond life can be as beautiful as the heaven which poets shape for their readers, but it is definitely more uncertain and difficult to reach.

- ***How to visualize aspects of the poem***

To create a visual summary of the main features of Dickinson’s poetry, readers could choose a painting and justify their choice by adding words that define those features (using nouns, adjectives, verbs or very short sentences).

An example of a suitable choice is the painting *Woman at a Window* by C. D. Friefrich which links up with characteristics of Dickinson’s life and poetry like the ones below:

-She lived in physical isolation observing the external world from the inside of her bedroom and filtering life through her inner self.

- Her poems are often about everyday experience but frequently reveal hidden meanings.
- They are both concise and condensed and usually progress through a series of astonishing visual images.
- They make use of extremely personal vocabulary, capitalization, punctuation, syntax, etc. that she developed in her contemplative isolation.

.....

Here are some of the words (adjectives) readers can add to the painting: *inward looking, individual, personal, concentrated, visual*, etc.

The next slide shows how the adjectives can be arranged around the painting.

### • ***Further reading***

*I reckon – When I count it all* – is not the only poem by Dickinson which expresses her view of the poet and of the functions of poetry. The same topic is dealt with in ***This was a Poet – It is That (poem 448)***.

This poem should be read in the light of what she replied when asked for a definition of poetry,

"If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever 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? "

(Quoted by T. W. Higginson in a letter to his wife after a visit to Emily Dickinson in 1870.)

*Dickinson's  
poetry*

*inward  
looking*

*individual*

*compressed*

C. D. Friedrich (1774 -1840), *Woman at a Window*, Berlin,  
Old National Museum, 1822.

*visual*

