



Rewarding Learning

eGUIDE//English Literature

The Study of Poetry Pre 1900

Unit A2 2

Emily Dickinson

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Starting Point

In this Unit you will explore 13 of Emily Dickinson's poems (listed in Appendix 1).

In this Unit there are 4 Assessment Objectives involved – A01, A02, A03 and A04.

A01: Textual knowledge and understanding, and communication

In this examination, the candidate should be able to articulate informed and relevant responses that communicate effectively knowledge and understanding of poetry.

This Assessment Objective (AO) involves the student's knowledge and understanding of the poem or poems, and ability to express relevant ideas accurately and coherently, using appropriate terminology and concepts. Specialist vocabulary should be used where necessary and appropriate. Quality of written communication is taken into consideration in all units.

A02: Poetic methods

In this examination, the candidate should analyze the poet's use of such poetic methods as form, structure, language and tone. **This AO is the driver of Unit A2 2: Section A and is of primary importance.**

The student should analyse relevantly the ways in which meanings are shaped in poems. This means identifying poetic methods such as form, structure and particular uses of language, and showing how these methods relate to the key terms of the question.

Discussing poetic methods - advice to students:

1. The poetic method should be:

identified, using appropriate terminology if possible;

illustrated, quotation will be expected and this should be relevant and sufficient to illustrate the feature in full. It should observe the layout of the original text, and should follow the conventions with regard to smooth and syntactically appropriate combining of the quotation with the student's own words;

analysed so as to show that the student understands its operation and effect; and

related to the key term of the question.

2. Use of the terms “image” and “imagery”

For our purposes in this section “images” and “imagery” are to be sought and found in the language of the poems, and not in the mind of the reader. The student should be discouraged from such formulations as “In this poem the reader has the image of nature



as a destroying force” where “image” is really being used to mean impression. For the purpose of A02 analysis in this section, what we mean by “image” is a figure of speech, where the “figure” (simile, metaphor, personification, etc.) has a significance more than literal. Where there is no such significance, the student might be advised to use a term such as detailing.

3. Use of the term “tone”

Tone is usually understood as the poet’s words in combination with his or her attitude towards subject or reader. It may be considered both in the light of a poetic method and as an effect of other methods e.g. diction, syntax. This feature, if it is to be handled productively, requires careful treatment. As with all methods, the tone must be:

identified - here no specialist vocabulary is needed, merely a precisely chosen adjective or adjective phrase (e.g. acerbic, admiring, mocking);

illustrated - a full and apt quotation should be selected;

analysed – so as to demonstrate that the student understands how the tone is achieved (e.g. through a consideration of the syntactical features of the quotation offered); and

related to the key term of the question.

The importance of shifts of tone as a structural device (in e.g. contrast, characterisation or development) should be understood by students.

A03: Contexts

In this examination, the candidate should demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which poetry is written and received by drawing on appropriate information from outside the poem(s).

No specific sources are prescribed or recommended. Nevertheless, the questions address a contextual issue – social, cultural, historical, biographical, or literary – and candidates will be expected to provide appropriate information from outside the text. Contextual information of the stipulated type which is made relevant to the key term of the question will be rewarded. Students should be aware that little credit can be given for contextual information that is introduced merely for its own sake. They should remember that the text has primacy over the context. A good response will use contextual information sparingly and judiciously.

To meet the requirements of this Assessment Objective, you must:

- **Demonstrate knowledge of the context which shaped the poems** – this could include social, cultural, historical, biographical and/or literary detail.
- **Comment on the significance of chosen contextual information** – link your selected contextual details to their impact on the poems’ intention and/or creation.
- **Use only relevant contextual information appropriately applied** – as stated before, it is important to focus on what is actually asked and shape your information accordingly.

Be aware that while context is important in consolidating our understanding of the poetry, you should not overuse contextual information, especially at the expense of



textual analysis. A few contextual details, succinctly expressed and strictly related to the question, are far superior to entire paragraphs on the world outside of the poem(s).

A04: Connections

In this examination, the candidate should explore connections between and within poems discussing features such as similarities, contrasts, continuity and development in the handling of themes and poetic techniques, and in context. Significant, pointed connections which are made relevant to the key term of the question will be rewarded.

The following is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students as they begin to explore Dickinson's poetry. Students should be encouraged to be flexible in their thinking, realising for example that the text is likely to embody more than one theme, or that a writer's preoccupation may not receive explicit statement in a poem.



A01: Textual knowledge and understanding

As you read this guide, you will begin to develop knowledge and understanding of meaning and form your own interpretations of the poems. This guide will suggest areas for discussion and further research. You will need to adapt knowledge and understanding in order to frame an examination response that is relevant to the key terms of the question. You will need to support your ideas with relevant reference to the text, and present logical interpretations. You will need to use accurate and clear language and appropriate literary terms.

Introduction to Emily Dickinson's Poetry:

When students first encounter Emily Dickinson's poetry, extracts from her letters and descriptions of her singular life, they might be inclined to agree with Higginson's rather cruel description of her as his "half-cracked poetess". This initial reaction may be reinforced when they read radical statements such as the opening line of one of her poems:

*"Much madness is divinest Sense –"**

However, on closer reading, this paradox offers us key insights into how Emily Dickinson viewed herself and her poetry. "*Much madness*" is an ironic comment on how her contemporary, conservative society would have viewed original and creative thinking; "*divinest*" reminds us of the original meaning of inspired (breathed into the human mind or heart by a god); "*Sense*" implies genuine wisdom and sensitivity. These carefully chosen words open up Dickinson's readers to a deeper appreciation of her unique life and they provide us with general interpretative clues when reading and analysing her poetry. **N.B. asterisks indicate references to, or quotations from, poems that are not on your course. They are employed here to illustrate or exemplify key points.**

Dickinson's enigmatic verse, with its unorthodox syntax and ubiquitous dashes, does pose initial challenges for the reader. However, when students engage sensitively, thoughtfully and sympathetically with her poetry, she begins to speak to us with great artistry and power of expression, and with great courage and integrity of thought and feeling. Most students ultimately appreciate her evocative power to stimulate and stir the imagination. Far from being a "half-cracked poetess" Dickinson is now ranked amongst the finest of poets who have written in English. Since her death she has triumphantly made the transition from obscurity to worldwide recognition. "*Victory*"* did come "*late*" for her but it most certainly and deservedly came.

"My Business is to love": some key themes in the Dickinson anthology

In a typically candid, lyrical letter to Higginson Dickinson wrote, "My Business is to love [life]...my Business is to sing [she loved music but probably meant writing poetry]." Why did someone who loved life choose for many of her poems subjects such as death, rejection, suffering and bewilderment? A partial answer to this paradox is revealed in a letter to Mrs Holland, which illustrated Dickinson's extraordinarily sensitive and imaginative responses to life, "Friday, I tasted life. It was a vast morsel. A circus passed the house – still I feel the red in my mind." The vivacity of this memory and her highly



original manner of expressing it provide evidence of her profound love for the sensations of life – both actual and vicarious. There is also evidence here of her great love for “singing”, expressed with great originality in her use of vivid tactile and colour imagery. Ultimately, all of her experiences were to be embraced as powerful stimuli for the creative act of “singing” about her life in her music and her poetry.

Whether by accident or by design Dickinson’s chosen lifestyle emancipated her brilliant creativity, allowing her freedom to explore subjects on the frontiers of human understanding and imagination. Through her poetry she was a pioneer of the infrequently charted aspects of the human condition. This artistic attitude of candid, sceptical questioning, expressed in succinct, precise and evocative imagery, resulted in, and inspired her communication of her awed wonder at the rich complexity of the universe, infinity, eternity, humanity and nature.

In her choices and treatment of subject matter, Dickinson was a private rather than a public poet. She did not write explicitly about current affairs and her references to religion, the role of women, love or death tended to be subjective. Paradoxically, in writing about a world mediated by her own imagination, which blurred the conventional lines between vicarious and actual experiences, she achieved a universality of relevance because of the enormous scope of her inspiration and expression.

Her attempt to capture in poetry the sensations of the experiences of life, as they occurred or resonated in her vivid imagination, rather than merely seeking to understand them *rationally*, was a very bold and impressive artistic endeavour. This approach to writing inspired her to write intensely powerful poetry; Ted Hughes speaks of “the wonderfully naked voltage of the poems”. This very modern sense of subjective immediacy in her best poetry is brilliantly expressed through original and effective uses of poetic imagery, tones, rhythms and punctuation.

Her vicarious experiences and her embellished actual experiences were sources of inspiration that were equally powerfully felt and expressed. Some of her subjects might appear to many to be mundane (such as a bird walking up a path) but when experienced and articulated by an exceptionally imaginative artist even the mundane takes on an aura of wonder.

Death and immortality

It is clear that from an early age Dickinson’s inquiring mind would not accept the comforting beliefs of her inherited religion, especially with regard to death and immortality. She credited one young man as having helped to shape her very radical inquiry into the nature of immortality. His name was Benjamin Newton who – according to Dickinson – “taught me Immortality”. Having lost some (like Newton, who died in 1853) who were close to her during her lifetime, and with her great outpouring of poetry occurring during the years of the American Civil War, Dickinson wrote about death and dying, with the powerful immediacy of the sensations and implications of death as a personal yet universal human experience. Poems such as ‘I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –’, ‘I felt a Funeral, in my Brain –’, ‘Because I could not stop for Death –’ and ‘It was not Death, for I stood up’ all employ powerful auditory, visual and tactile images to explore with great artistic boldness the sensations she attributed to the experience of death, and the creative exploration of what lies beyond it. Occasionally, Dickinson employed the imagined sensations of physical death as a metaphor for mental or emotional “*Death*”.

‘I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –’ uses auditory imagery to convey the sensations of the narrator during and immediately after death. The poem expresses the satirical bathos



created by the advent of the fly, rather than the “*King*” at the moment of death. The rather Gothic choice of the fly to create an isolated sound also signifies how inconsequential one life appears to be. Awareness of this moment of death is expressed as a dramatic confinement to a single sense. The second verse almost dispassionately portrays grieving relatives and friends, who are anonymously described as having wept but who are now dry-eyed. All wait in hushed silence for “*that last Onset*”, the entrance of “*the King*” (Christ, to gather the dead Christian to Himself?). The third verse is an interlocution by the narrator, informing the reader that she has disposed of all that she owned that was “*Assignable*”. Then we return to the fly, which has come in place of “*the King*”. The final verse moves from the “*Blue*” of the fly, with its onomatopoeic sound, to the light (symbolic of understanding, which the fly obscures by distraction). The final line indicates the ultimate incomprehensibility of immortality, in the absence of the “*King*”. Dickinson always assumes the certainty of some sort of existence after death but she expresses and explores an immortality without the solace of religious or philosophical certainty.

‘Because I could not stop for Death –’ explores the theme of death more assertively than most of Dickinson’s poetry, which generally searches for and feels out the truth of an experience rather than stating truth as a philosophical proposition. Not that this poem is rational in the conventional sense of that word, as its assertiveness lies in the highly imaginative narrative approach she takes to the subject of death. The poem begins with a playful, tenderly ironic tone, conveying a picture of “*Death*” personified as a gentleman caller, irresistibly inviting the female narrator into his “*Carriage*”. However, as early as the opening verse there are some profound observations about the experience of death, as she imagines it. The opening lines indicate the powerlessness of the female narrator to dictate when and how she will die. She goes on to envisage a “*Carriage*” that contains “*Death*”, “*Immortality*” and her. Death is consciously and deliberately portrayed as a kind gentleman (“*Civility*”) but it is he who dictates this after-life experience (“*He knew no haste*”). Her ultimate renunciation of mortality is stated without self-pity; she had to “*put away*” her “*labor*” and her “*leisure*”. Nothing from this life can be conveyed into the next. The final verse (having dealt with transformed space in previous verses) considers the nature of time in eternity. The image of the horses’ heads in the penultimate line takes us back to the conceit of the opening verse. Once again Dickinson’s ending (“*Eternity*”) is thought-provoking yet incomprehensible. In a letter to her friend, Abiah Root, she once asked, “Does not Eternity appear dreadful to you?”

‘The last Night that She lived’ is a sensitive, imaginative exploration of the death of an unnamed woman. Like several of Dickinson’s other poems about death there is a focus on the actions of the mourners, on the individual’s experience of death and dying, and on the role of religion to give (or fail to give) meaning to death and immortality. With tender understatement this final night of life is described as “*a Common Night*”, indicating the fact that this final episode of mortality is common to all of mankind; and it is also common in that nothing extraordinary happened that night – except her death. Paradoxically, the death of the unnamed woman is significant because it “*Made Nature different*”. The speaker in this poem is among the ranks of the mourners, witnessing the death of this anonymous woman. The immediacy of the poem makes it read as if it were based on a real event. However, there is nothing of biographical detail in the poem, giving it universal significance. The second verse considers the impact on the onlooker’s mind of the experience of watching someone die. The language here is lucid and simple and the tone is poignant. Once again the “*smallest things*” take on new meaning because it was the “*last Night*” that this woman lived. In verses 3-4 the tone is one of guilt (“*a Blame*”); those witnessing the death will be alive tomorrow, whereas their friend or relative will not. The emotions felt by the mourners take an unexpected twist when those watching her death become jealous. In a Puritan society mortal life was considered to be a preparation



for a heavenly eternity with God, and death was merely a doorway into that eternity. Verse 5 speaks of the “*narrow time*” of waiting while the unnamed woman dies. The mourners are now silent, too full of their own thoughts and memories to speak. Verse 6 is tender and touching in its candid focus on the moment of dying. The dignity of this death is described through the simile of the reed (the woman) bending into the water (eternity) then, with soft alliteration, she “*struggled scarce*” (she stoically consented to her death). This simple but moving portrayal of death is highly evocative. There is a complete shift in tone in the first two lines of the final verse, which describe the preparation of the corpse for burial. After this the perspective changes again, to express the speaker’s ambiguous treatment of religious beliefs about death. The final dash implies an unspoken question on the speaker’s part.

The relationship between the human and natural worlds

In the poem ‘This is my letter to the world’* Dickinson spoke of her poetry as a kind of “*letter*”, expressing the “*simple News that Nature told*”. This sounds like the manifesto of a Romantic poet, with its personification of Nature and the assertion of its singular power to inspire. For Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, nature was the ultimate source of inspiration and enlightenment. However, because of the vastness of the unexplored wilderness, hostile Native Americans and dangerous animals, it is worth noting that the view of American authors towards nature was more ambivalent than that of their European counterparts.

Dickinson generally wrote about nature in very personal ways, employing natural landscapes, events or creatures as metaphors for her own thoughts and feelings. For example (in poems such as ‘The Reticent Volcano Keeps’*) she wrote powerfully about natural phenomena which she could only have read about; she transformed the Romantic subject matter of storms (‘An awful Tempest mashed the air –’) and the sea into very personal symbols to explore the impact of power, terror and eternity on the creative imagination. Even in the poem ‘A Bird came down the walk’* the apparently simple subject of the bird became a metaphor for Dickinson herself. The bird’s “*rapid eyes*” reveal a state of nervous uncertainty that seems to be shared by the speaker. This very subjective creation of symbols, motifs and metaphors using natural creatures and phenomena, is boldly exemplified in the powerful poem ‘I dreaded that first robin so’* (1862) in which Dickinson uses the robin to symbolise and even mythologise the pain of sacrificial love.

In ‘How the old Mountains drip with Sunset’ the reader is presented with three coalescing scenes, each more abstract than its predecessor. From the outset, there is a wonderfully expressive exploration of the relationship between nature and art. We are initially presented with an exuberant (note the use of the exclamatory “*How*”) description of a sunset when light (“*Sunset*”) takes on a physical, liquid form (using synaesthesia), almost like honey, which then “*drip[s]*” on to and from the “*old*” mountains. This sounds like the opening to a powerfully imaginative Romantic poem but the descriptions immediately afterwards take on a more ambivalent tone, with shifts in images to “*Hemlock*”, “*Cinder*” and with colour images changing from yellow and red to “*Dun*”. The power of Nature is sustained with reference to the “*Wizard*” sun but this adjective has mixed connotations. Dickinson goes on to portray a highly descriptive scene, blending the man-made and mundane with the natural and exotic. Twilight lends this description the qualities of a dreamscape. In verse 5 time becomes a more overt theme with the introduction of limitless time and space. The final verse expresses a third development of focus in the poem, as it speaks of the power of the creative imagination to transcend time. “*Paralyzed*” (frozen for all time in a moment of creative ecstasy) “*with Gold*” ends the poem with a triumphant defence of the enduring beauty of human creativity.



'An awful Tempest mashed the air –' is one of a number of poems in which Dickinson responds to the power of natural forces. These both stimulate and correspond to the power of her imagination. This poem offers a horrified, then relieved descriptive narrative of the interaction between nature and man. The opening line employs several devices to draw the reader into the writer's experience: "*awful*" means inspiring wonder and terror; the "*Tempest*" (more powerful than "storm") is given a capital letter to accentuate its force; and the violent verb "*mashed*" with the noun "*air*" portrays a sense of turbulent confusion and menace. Dickinson is drawn to the subject – being in awe of the power of nature – but she describes nature and her experience of it in Gothic rather than Romantic terms. The dark colours and the transformation of the familiar into the terrifying create a tone of awed horror at the power and malevolence of the storm. The tone is completely different in the third verse, when the personified storm turns away from her house to its "*native coast*" and peace is restored. This poem is an excellent example of Dickinson's tendency to be drawn into a powerful experience, only to renounce it. The final line contains examples of Dickinson's distinctive sureness of touch with language and rhythm: the final "*And*" connects with the previous conjunctions to form a kind of breathless narrative but this time it introduces a tone of "*peace*" (calm in the air and in the soul); the dash forms a caesura that introduces the explanatory metaphor "*was Paradise*" – a heaven of calm and joy, in contrast with the earlier experience of turmoil. The volatility of nature may well be an extended metaphor for the volatility of human emotions.

States of suffering

It is in the highly expressive precision of her language that we see, at its best, Dickinson's inspired need to understand and express meaning and experiences, no matter how painful or elusive. Her inquiring and imaginative mind, and her suffering, were the inspiration for her poetic style and themes. How can even the most brilliant and honest of poets express notions of eternity, for example, without the comfort of conventional religious or philosophical answers? This agony of not knowing, yet needing to search for meaning, is particularly modern. Many of her poems speak of varying degrees of suffering – whether physical, mental or emotional.

One source of creative agony for Dickinson was the rejection of her love by an unnamed man and her subsequent renunciation of the possibility of romantic love to bring her happiness. An example of the poignant exploration of this theme is expressed in the unusually long poem, 'I cannot live with You –'. The poem is structured as a series of negative assertions, which are then explored in subsequent lines and verses. By masterful control of rhythm and punctuation, and by use of precise and imaginative imagery, the female speaker methodically lists the negatives that prevent the consummation of her love. This apparently methodical argument and the control of rhythm and rhyme form a stylistic framework within which shades and shifts of tone poignantly convey the pain of separation and the dashing of one hope after another. Each verse features combinations of six, four or three syllables, sensitively deployed to convey the particular sense of that verse. Note especially where the emphases fall. Similarly, the dashes are used for a variety of carefully considered purposes: especially effective is the increasing use of dashes in the final two verses, when the speaker confronts the ultimate impossibility of this relationship. These technical devices, including the use of bold, original imagery, convey the agonizing thought processes of dignified despair caused by the increasingly conscious recognition that this love must be unrequited. The poem begins with a statement that should not be misunderstood; in Dickinson's society the word "*live*" meant to share her life with Him in marriage. The life she had hoped for is portrayed through an extended metaphor as a cracked, delicate cup, hidden away, and considered worthless by others.



The antithetical statement (she cannot live with *Him*: she cannot die with *Him*) is introduced in line 13. Her thoughts include the agonised contemplation of one lover watching the other die (note the uses of tactile images to convey the physicality of death and its psychological impact on the survivor). The sixth verse challenges the orthodoxy of her received religion – the man whom she loves would “*put out*” (be superior to) Jesus’ face. Their love has taken on a holy significance (it is a “*New Grace*”) and this man outshone Jesus because he was closer to her in her affections. Verse 8 begins with the idea that unnamed people would judge them to be ill-matched.

Not only could they not share life or death, they could not share their faith (is this Wadsworth, the Calvinist minister?). The controlled agony of her agnosticism compared with his assured Christian faith is sustained throughout the rest of the poem. Verses 10 and 11 contemplate the possibility that they may spend eternity apart. The language in these verses employs evangelical Christian idioms but the speaker describes “*Hell*” in very personal, psychological terms; her eternal self, apart from him, would exist in a kind of hell. The suffering of the impossibility of their union is expressed in the final, longer verse, by employing the oxymoron “*meet apart*”. Their only consolation throughout eternity is poignantly expressed as the “*White* [innocent but colourless] *Sustenance*” of “*Despair*”. Note the tone and effectiveness of this final line and the use of the dash to convey that which is finally incommunicable, which is perhaps too painful to contemplate. The two syllables and cadence of this final line evocatively convey the enduring agony of this unrequited passion.

Individual consciousness and emotion

This is quite a broad theme so a wise choice of relevant poems is very important. Many of Dickinson’s poems could be selected, as they convey something of her unique personal sensibilities in relation to actual or imagined events, thoughts or experiences. Even the poems that explicitly explore the themes of death or physical dying may be read as extended metaphors, which implicitly communicate the speaker’s decline into mental illness or disorder. Individual images or groups of images within each extended metaphor powerfully express the anguish of each significant stage of the speaker’s descent into ever more profound states of alienation, isolation and perplexity. Note, for example, the use of the coffin in ‘I Felt a Funeral, in my Brain’ as a physical image of the speaker’s psychological sense of confinement, and of her alienation from those around her – those who were once her friends and family, but who have now become her “*Mourners*”.

Some of the poems in the anthology are more overtly expressive than others of Dickinson’s self-awareness as a woman, a human being and a poet. One such poem is ‘One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted –’, which explores, by use of an extended Gothic metaphor, the haunting of a mind by a thought, memory or traumatic experience. The poem displays a profound level of psychological self-awareness as it is really the speaker who is her own subject. The pronoun “*One*” expresses a formal and candid sense of detachment. “*One*” also implies a universal relevance: any human being who is sensitive and reflective will have to confront haunting thoughts and memories that repeatedly cause pain or fear. The main assertion of the first line is that the mind, as well as physical spaces, can be haunted. Having expressed this startling proposition Dickinson explores it through a series of metaphors and analogies. For example, rooms are connected within the “*House*” of the “*Brain*” by corridors, linking conscious with subconscious thought; and linking memory with the here and now. These rooms and corridors of the mind are more palpable than any “*Material Place*” because painful memories, thoughts and feelings can travel along or between these corridors anywhere, at any time. In the second verse Dickinson ironically uses a classic Gothic image to contrast these mental ghosts with the supernatural ghosts of Gothic literature. She states that it is “*Far safer*” to meet an



“*External Ghost*” at “*Midnight*” than to experience the internal “*Confronting*” of a “*Cooler Host*”. In the third verse a sinister, Gothic scene is set, with rhythm, punctuation and imagery used to create a sensation of excited fear, which is then contrasted with the even more terrifying prospect of “*one’s a’self encounter*”. This latter sense of dislocation from self indicates the power of the thought that is haunting her: it is so sinister and awful that it has taken on its own identity and torments her conscious mind. The fourth verse acknowledges that there are many thoughts and memories that we hide from ourselves, as human beings:

“Ourself behind ourself, concealed –”

This line is an example of Dickinson’s anticipation of the insights into human psychology popularised during the following century. The supernatural, terrifying embodiment of memory or mental anguish takes on a more sinister aspect as it becomes an “*Assassin*” which is hidden in the “*Apartment*” of her mind. When she is alone and least expecting it, this traumatic thought or memory emerges to haunt her, and it attempts to kill her joy and sanity. In the final verse she describes her desperate defence mechanisms against the attack of this “*superior spectre*”. The poem ends with a dash. Will the protective measures work? Or, in this terrifying, uncompleted thought, is there a hint of greater anguish and fears to come, which are as yet un-encountered?

‘I felt a Funeral, in my Brain’ employs elements of Gothic, metaphysical and lyrical poetic genres to explore, by use of a macabre extended metaphor, the process of the narrator’s decline into a state of mental disorder. Several traumas in her life may have inspired Dickinson to imagine a condition of existence after physical death as a metaphor for her potential psychological state after a mental or emotional breakdown. Dickinson likened mental and emotional trauma to death in a letter to Higginson: “My life closed twice before its close”. The metaphor sustains a narrative by an unidentified speaker, of her imaginary experience of anguished sensibility immediately after death. As the mental breakdown increases in intensity throughout the poem, note how Dickinson employs syntax, punctuation and imagery to explore this decline, from the initial sense of confinement and separation through to the final, terrifying “*Plank in Reason*” breaking.

The setting for the metaphor is the speaker’s own funeral, which she experiences from within her own coffin. Dickinson makes highly effective use of tactile and auditory images to convey what the narrator feels and hears from within her restricted space. This macabre and challenging subject is dramatically presented to the reader using stark and palpable language. Confined as the narrator is to her coffin, auditory images portray and echo the sounds of those outside the coffin – all is heard but not seen (except in her imagination). This disconnection from human society and the world around her is deeply disturbing. The initial exploration of death as a physical and mental experience gives way to the final death of conscious, rational thought.

In line 12, the speaker explores themes of immortality and mental chaos by using a series of images, beginning with the word “*Space*” (not heaven, or any religious notion of infinity). As the narrator enters this limitless void the sounds change and the curve of space is likened to the curve of the interior of a church bell, which reverberates through infinity and eternity. The afterlife and her vision of a chaotic mental state are terrifyingly conveyed as a place and a condition of eternal “*Silence*”. Having arrived at this dreadful vision, the narrator feels “*Reason*” (all understanding) break like a “*Plank*” and she feels herself falling into a void. She ultimately “*hit a World*”. She “*Finished knowing*” (what?). The dash conveys a sense of mystery, of comprehension withheld or postponed. The isolated word “*then*” ends the poem with a terrified paradox – her imagination has



illuminated her final condition to a limited extent but, ultimately, it remains impenetrably mysterious.

'It was not Death, for I stood up' can be read, like 'I felt a Funeral, in my Brain', as an extended metaphor for decline into mental disorder. It opens with a whimsical, quizzical tone as death has not led to expected outcomes. This almost mischievous tone is continued (with macabre, child-like whimsy) by having the "[church] *Bells/Put out their Tongues*". The use of irony subverts conventional religious ideas about life after death, and indicates her agnosticism as a possible contributory factor to the mental agitation of the narrator. The first verse describes a state of altered consciousness after this death and the use of negatives conveys a compulsive but fruitless search for understanding. The second verse continues with more negatives but shifts to a tactile, macabre description. "*Frost*", "*Flesh*" and "*Fire*" are connected by alliteration and capitalization to convey the paradoxical, tormented nature of her picture of her final state.

The third verse is poignantly personal: the narrator has seen a row of corpses, set out for burial, which reminded her of her own mortality. As the poem continues, the dashes increase in frequency to indicate her struggle for comprehension, and also the intense agitation of her awed imagination. In the final verse, the tenfold use of punctuation forces us to consider the significance of each word or phrase, by slowing the rhythm and by creating a tone of solemn gravity and reflectiveness. It also evocatively conveys a state of mental and linguistic breakdown. Dickinson employs an extended metaphor of shipwreck and drowning to explore life beyond this death as an emotional and intellectual state that is beyond despair, with no hope of comprehension. The first line of the final verse is a fine example of her imaginative and incisive use of language: "*most*" is enigmatic and elliptical (perhaps meaning "most importantly/ultimately"); the simile of "*Chaos*", with its capitalization, speaks of the great void of nothingness beyond this deadly experience; "*Stopless*" is a neologism that is indicative of time without end; and "*cool*" (one of her motifs for fear) is a palpable, tactile image for the sensation of encountering "*Chaos*". This is Dickinson at her most enigmatic and powerful, courageously exploring the possibility of the ultimate void that lies beyond sanity and beyond this life:

"But, most, like Chaos – Stopless – cool –"

There is nothing to cling to in in this terrifying vision of immortality and chaos (the sea was often used by Dickinson as a symbol of eternity or the subconscious). There is nothing in this posthumous vision that could even justify "*Despair*". This is a bleak but candid conclusion, communicated with great intensity by the use of punctuation, assonance and capitalization.

Love and marriage

Dickinson's poems about love are frequently ambivalent, portraying love as a source of unusual joy and also of profound pain. In 'There came a Day at Summer's full' Dickinson harmoniously combines images of nature, religion and human relationship to describe the initial sense of tender innocence, joy and love, when she and he met. (The reader may wish to assess to what extent the male figure appears insubstantial throughout.) The poem touches on the piquant pain of sacrificial love, using both religious and romantic imagery. Some commentators have interpreted this poem as a description of the relationship between the narrator and Christ but it is more likely that her religious vocabulary is employed to express the importance and holiness of her experience, during one day, with an unidentified but very significant man. The poem begins with a sense of fate "*There came a Day*" is an acknowledgement that so much that affects human happiness lies outside the control of the individual. This "*Day*" is capitalized, to give it full



significance in her memory and imagination. *“Summer’s full”* speaks of a time of warmth and perfect fulfilment, when nature, spiritual awareness, time and human emotion were all in complete harmony. The second line expresses the touching innocence of the joy of love. This sentiment could appear egocentric but love can only be felt in the heart of the individual. This is such a pure, innocent experience of love that the speaker had thought that only saints could experience it. Throughout the poem nature is so much in harmony with the two lovers that it almost becomes a third character. Religious imagery is used both to describe what is, in the speaker’s opinion, the almost holy innocence of their relationship and also (despite the word *“full”*) its necessary lack of fulfilment and its ultimately sacrificial nature.

Paradoxically, despite the lack of contact or conversation the very silence and separation heighten, for the speaker, her obvious sense of joy and fulfilment. Her experience takes on, through religious and natural imagery, the significance of a harmonious blend of the romantic, the spiritual and the natural. This sense of wonder and significance is expressed using Christian symbolism: the two lovers are bound together by each other’s *“Crucifix”* (pain and sacrificial love), separated in life but ultimately united in a *“Marriage”* after death. Her final verse conveys a courageous acceptance that in this life their love will not be fulfilled but that after *“the Grave”* there will be an ultimate justification of their relationship in a new *“Marriage”* which will be immortal. The final phrase acknowledges that this eternal happiness can only be achieved through an act of renunciation and suffering in this life. Note, throughout, the highly effective uses of rhythm, imagery, punctuation and tone to convey the poet’s various emotions and sensations.

In her 1861 poem, ‘I’m “wife” – I’ve finished that –’, Dickinson employs a female speaker who has just married to explore, with considerable satire, questions of female identity within a patriarchal society. In Dickinson’s contemporary Puritan society girls were required to be married, as their rite of passage into a new state called *“Woman”*. She treats this idea of conformity with considerable irony, especially in her use of the apparently positive word *“safer”*. The poem begins with a pastiche of the conventional contemporary view of marriage. However, as early as the first line we may detect an ambiguity of tone. Independence of thought and devotion to her creative genius were Dickinson’s *“other state”* that would have been *“finished”* by conventional marriage. Given her age and inclinations, she may well have decided by then to renounce marriage as her preferred destiny, choosing instead to create an identity which did not require a patriarchal figure to complete her. The ironic tone is sustained in line 3 with the obvious hyperbole of the masculine *“Czar”* – indicating that, for a wife, authority in her own home was an illusion. The speaker refers in the third person to her girlish identity, now obscured by *“this soft Eclipse”* of marriage. Moving back to the first person, and employing more frequent dashes in lines 8 - 10, she once again compares the relative *“comfort”* of her married state to the pain of *“That other kind”*. The poem ends with a tone of resignation, as the speaker accepts that all reflection and inquisitiveness must now end. Being *“Wife”* brings comfort and is *“safer”* but at what cost?

‘She rose to His Requirement’ explores a theme introduced by the antithetical verbs *“rose”* and *“dropt”*. The poem expresses strong negative emotions, inspired by the demands of the anonymous male figure who features so dominantly in her poetry. In this poem Dickinson explores, using the third person, the price of accepting the expected role of women in a patriarchal society. We should not underestimate the cost of her refusal to conform to this role, the pain it caused, and the courage it took to fashion her preferred life of independent creativity. One of the key words in the opening line is *“Requirement”* – a commanding standard to which *“She”* must rise. The cost of rising to this requirement is immediately introduced by the verb *“dropt”*. There is irony in the next three lines, as



her former activities would be viewed as “*Playthings*” by this anonymous male figure – despite being the activities of “*Her Life*” (note the pathos in tone here). It is worth remembering that for Dickinson these “*Playthings*” included independence of thought and the time to pursue her music and her writing. Play is contrasted with the “*honorable Work*” of “*Woman*” and of the woman transfigured into “*Wife*”. The intended irony of “*honorable*” (perceived as worthwhile by society) is indicated by the dullness of “*Work*”. There is no mention of love, simply a renunciation of her former life that would be demanded by any husband this society might provide for her. The second line of the second verse reinforces the fact that the “*Playthings*” so despised by her society are actually “*Amplitude*” (the extensiveness of her freedom of thought and her creativity) and “*Awe*” (the capacity to be inspired by wonder). All this wonder and creativity, which are innate in her, would be worn away by marriage, like the “*Gold*” of a ring. The third verse uses the familiar extended metaphor of the sea to represent the subconscious. Were she to marry, her pearls (things of beauty created out of pain) would be hidden among seaweed. Even her secret thoughts and creativity would be known to her husband (“*Himself*”), who would be content to let them remain (“*abide*”) unappreciated and unexpressed in the “*Fathoms*” (depths) of her mind.

Dickinson made very different use of the term “*wife*” after her final renunciation of conventional marriage (around 1862). Having accepted that her love would find no human fulfilment, she embraced her isolation to dedicate herself to her poetry. In a poem which begins, ‘Title divine - is Mine!’* Dickinson transformed the notion of marriage into a highly personal dedication of her life to her creative genius. This renunciation of ordinary life and a whole-hearted embracing of vocation was sometimes expressed in language similar to that of a nun, who shuns the pleasures of this life to be *married* to the Divine.

Religion

Dickinson cannot be described as a religious poet in the usual sense of that term. However, largely because of her upbringing and society, religious ideas and language and the rhythms of hymns feature prominently in her poetry. Dickinson contrasted her own lack of faith with the religious observance of her family in a letter to Higginson, written in April 1862, “They are religious, except me, and address an eclipse, every morning, whom they call their ‘Father’ [God]”. Her sharply critical and independent mind took Dickinson, intellectually and imaginatively, well beyond the received beliefs of her own society. She did, occasionally, refer directly to God (in poems such as ‘God made a little gentian’*) however, despite being raised in a Calvinist town by Unitarian parents, she never expressed any orthodox Christian beliefs in her poems. She was agnostic by disposition and experience.

A number of the other poems in this anthology take on the theme of religion (sometimes as contextual colouring for another theme), or they employ religious language as a set of metaphors, symbols and similes.

‘There’s a certain Slant of light’ may be discussed under the themes of nature, religion or human pain or suffering; it also touches (in its final line) on the limitless voids of time and space. Dickinson’s symbolic use of light and shade demonstrates the visual powers of her imagination. The cold light of a winter afternoon symbolizes the cold, unquestioning certainty of received religious beliefs. This particular light, paradoxically, oppresses because it does not allow for independence of thought and rather than giving life, it imposes, in the final line, a kind of “*Death*”.

Taking this cold light of a winter’s afternoon as her extended simile, the speaker introduces the reader to the cold “*light*” of her society’s religious certainties. By line 3



this light “oppresses” rather than emancipates by illumination. Then, in an evocative extended simile, she uses synaesthesia to blend the ideas of music and weight, to convey her sensations when in a “Cathedral” (a church) listening to religious “Tunes”. By line 5 the oppressiveness has intensified to become “Heavenly Hurt”. The alliteration of this highly original paradox intensifies the tone of disillusionment and betrayal: Heaven (God, by metonymy) had promised solace and salvation, whereas Dickinson’s experience is one of “Hurt” and ultimately “Death”. This poem expresses an emotional and intellectual rejection of the religion of her family and society. Her questioning mind, her “*internal difference[s]*”, contrasts with the apparent certainties of orthodox Christianity:

“None may teach it – Any[thing] –”

Dickinson was no public reformer – a woman of her time and place would have found such a role almost impossible – so she poured her doubts into poems such as this.

By line 11 the tyranny of religion is expressed in the powerful phrase “*imperial affliction*” – a sickness or pain imposed by an irresistibly dreadful being. When this strange affliction comes – because it has imperial authority – everything falls silent, and when this visitation of imperial presence and affliction leaves, all is still and lifeless. This religious oppressiveness affects everything in nature and in her world. It leaves a “*Distance*” between God and man and between His promised freedom and her sense of oppressed vivacity. It leaves:

“Distance/On the look of Death –”

N.B. The selection of poems under the thematic headings are offered merely as guidance for the student. Many of the poems in the Anthology will relate to a number of themes. The important examination issue is to choose a poem that may convincingly be argued to express the theme identified in the question.



A02 Poetic Methods

You will need to analyse ways in which the poet uses form, structure, language and tone to shape meanings in poems. You will need to communicate clear, well-developed exploration of the writer's methods, in relation to the key terms of the question.

“My Business is to sing”: some key features of Dickinson's poetic style

Much has been made of the fact that Dickinson saw only seven of her poems in print during her lifetime, all of which were heavily edited. This represented a tiny proportion of the 1,775 poems and fragments discovered in a bureau after her death in 1886. The apparently un-crafted nature of her poems has posed considerable challenges for her editors, publishers and critics - especially her almost ubiquitous use of dashes. Was this a necessary facet of her style; or should a more orthodox approach to punctuation or syntax be imposed upon the poems?

It could plausibly be argued that Dickinson's preferred poetic style – employing as it does highly original approaches to diction and imagery, along with unconventional syntax and uses of capitalization and punctuation – may well be the result of conscious or intuitive artistic choices rather than the accident of a lack of re-drafting. These artistic choices enabled her to communicate, in a highly distinctive manner, the pace, immediacy and intensity of the act of responding to, or reflecting upon, the experiences that inspired her. These methods make her poems read as if they were written at the very moment of inspiration. She stated her own poetic success criteria, in a letter to Higginson in 1862 asking him whether her poems were “alive” and “true” and if they “breathed”? These terms indicate a growing confidence in her own poetic voice and they also tell us that vivacity and honesty were imperative to her artistic aims. Her express desire was that her poems would come alive of themselves and that they would also communicate life accurately (as she experienced and “loved” it). Dickinson's achievement of brilliant originality is extremely rare.

Genre

In a letter to Higginson, Dickinson stated that she read Keats, Elizabeth and Robert Browning, Ruskin and the Bible. In some of her poems there is a calm, wondering and even joyful tone, expressing an obvious harmony between the poet observer and her natural environment. Such poems are reminiscent of the Romantic Movement, though the location of the observer (in a room or house, looking or listening) should be noted. Poems celebrating twilight (such as ‘Fairer through Fading – as the Day’*) and poems such as ‘A narrow Fellow in the Grass’* or ‘An awful Tempest mashed the air –’ are clearly not conventionally Romantic, though they take natural subjects. The Gothic genre, made popular by Edgar Allan Poe during Dickinson's lifetime – with its intensely psychological exploration of horrified awe, terror and the supernatural – may well have influenced poems such as ‘One need not be a Chamber - to be Haunted –’. Most of Dickinson's poems could be described as lyrical narratives, insofar as they recount the sequential re-telling of subjective, emotional experiences, often using a series of conjunctions such as “and” or “then” and dashes to link or isolate ideas and images.

Verse form

Dickinson's favoured verse form is the quatrain. Occasionally, these quatrains are



amalgamated to create a single, longer verse. There are rare examples, such as ‘To hear an Oriole sing’* when she wrote in verses of three lines (rhyming a,a,a).

Imagery

One of Dickinson’s most characteristic stylistic features was her use of strikingly original and precise imagery, especially tactile and auditory (as well as visual) imagery. Her tactile imagery makes even the most abstract of sensations and thoughts palpable; and they, with her auditory images, make poems such as ‘I felt a Funeral, in my Brain’ eerily dramatic. One of the most striking images in the whole of poetry was coined by Dickinson, in the final line of ‘A narrow Fellow in the Grass’* (a poem about a meeting with a snake):

*“But never met this Fellow
Attended or alone
Without a tighter Breathing
And Zero at the Bone.”*

And it is the accumulative effect of a series of related, intense images, which makes her poetry so rich in evocative meaning and so powerful in its impact.

Rhythm

Dickinson was inspired by the familiar rhythms of the hymns and ballads she heard and read. These rhythms suited her poetic aims admirably. Her poems were generally composed either in Common Meter - employing alternating lines of eight syllables (iambic tetrameter) with lines of six syllables (iambic trimeter) - or in Short Meter, which consists of quatrains of six syllables (iambic trimeter) for lines 1-2 and 4, and eight syllables for line 3 (iambic tetrameter). Ultimately, her slow, deliberate meter (with its abundance of punctuation) forces us to focus on every phrase, word and syllable, thus allowing the reader to appreciate the richness of her language and thought. Rhythm also has a significant influence on tone, especially when it indicates calm, agitation or excitement.

Rhyme

Most commonly, Dickinson’s rhyme scheme runs a,b,c,b. She often employed half rhymes, which frequently relied on assonance for their effect. As well as emulating some of the popular hymns of her day, the rhyme scheme sets up connections between rhymed ideas; it allows her to end her poems on a note of dramatic emphasis; and it provides a sense of poetic order within which some highly emotional or intellectual disorder can be conveyed.

Tone

Understanding Dickinson’s tone and tonal shifts is essential for a full appreciation of each poem’s creative intent. Across the canon of her work she ranges in tone from self-deprecatory whimsy to baffled pain or terror. The student should analyse the initial tone of each poem, followed by any tonal shifts during the poem, and finally the tone of the last line or lines.

Capitalization

Capitalization was used by Dickinson to draw attention to particularly significant common nouns or pronouns. These often add emphasis to that thing or person (e.g. “His”).

Punctuation

The use of dashes and the personification and capitalization of common nouns were condoned by the grammar text adopted by Mount Holyoke Female Seminary and



employed by those preparing for admission. Rather than being viewed as an authorial limitation, the dashes should be analysed for the contribution each makes to the impact and meaning of a word, phrase or line of poetry. Such an approach will arrive at the conclusion that Dickinson used dashes for a variety of purposes, each intrinsically consonant with her choices of expression to achieve these purposes. A few of her poems adopt more orthodox approaches to punctuation but they should all be read (whenever possible) in the form bequeathed to us by the poet herself.

Dramatic openings and endings

Dickinson's opening lines are arresting – they often set out a novel proposition, sometimes expressed as an exclamation or a question. Note her highly original thinking in, and her expression of, her first lines (she avoided giving her poems titles). Her approach to endings was often to employ cadences, dashes and shorter lines to leave a thought hanging, as it were, inviting further reflection and exploration. Occasionally the poems end on a note of baffled incomprehension, as if nothing more can or should be said about the matter.

All of these poetic devices combine to create a highly original and powerfully immediate poetic style, which is unique to Dickinson. She utilized a naturalness and candour of expression – perhaps because she wrote mainly for herself – that is profound and unsentimental yet strikingly emotive and daring. Dickinson's poetry is so radical and unique that it defies categorization. In many significant ways she anticipated modern movements in poetry. For example, as detailed above, her experimental approaches to poetic style allowed her to create a unique and powerful poetic voice. Her inquiring mind, which seldom accepted the received wisdom of her day at face value, also strikes us as very modern in its treatment of themes and subject matter. Moreover, the importance she attached to subjective consciousness also anticipated the poetry of a post-Freudian age.



A03 Contexts

Dickinson's Life, Contemporary Events and Society, and Literary Influences

Emily Dickinson was born in the New England town of Amherst, Massachusetts, in 1830. Her father was a lawyer and she grew up with one sister and a brother. She was educated at Amherst Academy from 1840-1847 and then for one year at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. She remained in her paternal home throughout her life. During her early years she was well known for her wit and vivacity and her house was often a venue for social gatherings, generally to host her father's wide circle of influential friends. Dickinson showed little interest in travelling beyond the limits of her native town: at the age of twenty-four she wrote, "I don't go from home, unless emergency leads me by the hand." Her circle of friends and family remained largely constant throughout her life.

The few extant photographs of Dickinson portray a petite young woman, with auburn hair. Her prim appearance and fine features are dominated by her vivacious, brown eyes. She described herself to Higginson as, "small, like the Wren, and my hair is bold, like the Chestnut bur – and my eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves."

Dickinson gradually developed a lifestyle of self-imposed solipsism. This isolation was intensified and was made permanent by some deep emotional traumas, one of which she seems to have experienced in 1862. The reader must not assume that this isolation led to any self-pity; indeed, it seemed to liberate her imagination and allowed her to focus on her creativity. However, she did suffer from bouts of depression or illness. These periods of mental anguish were more frequently expressed in her poetry than in her letters.

There is much speculation as to why, in social or psychological terms, isolation should have become her chosen way of life. One influence cited by commentators was the fact that Dickinson adored her father but found him daunting. Also, the puritanical evangelicalism accepted as orthodoxy in Amherst, coupled with the conventional expectations imposed on women, seemed from the evidence of her poetry and letters to be a set of constraints that weighed heavily on her and from which she wished to escape. Perhaps most significantly there is speculation about a failed, hopelessly one-sided love that reached its anguished conclusion in 1862. Whatever the truth of the matter it inspired a flood of composition – perhaps as many as 1,000 poems in six years. The most likely candidate for the theory of unrequited love was the Reverend Charles Wadsworth, who was a happily married and very orthodox Calvinist minister. After a meeting in 1854, Dickinson began to correspond with him. It is highly unlikely that he encouraged any romantic notions in her but she appears to have developed deep feelings for him. In 1862 Wadsworth accepted an invitation to move from Philadelphia (near Amherst) to Calvary Church in San Francisco. Dickinson now concluded that her enormous gift of love would never be requited in conventional ways. She became in her early thirties, according to the language of the period, a *spinster* and thus she would remain for the rest of her life. It was typical of her to choose this destiny, which was articulated thereafter as an act of creative renunciation.

As early as her late twenties Dickinson seemed to have abandoned the idea of a conventional future, preferring instead to pursue a poetic destiny. Her life gradually



became one of domestic isolation, of reading, writing and reflecting. This tendency towards isolation was no doubt hastened by her shyness and her lack of self-confidence. However, we should not assume that she always experienced loneliness because of her chosen lifestyle. She wrote, in typically paradoxical fashion:

*"It might be lonelier
Without the Loneliness"**

Her occasional interactions with others took place mainly at her home and were often intense and self-consciously dramatized; she would often greet callers dressed in white, with a flower held in her hand. This dramatizing of interaction was not because of vanity, rather it was because of her need to enhance what she regarded as her plainness:

*"I take a flower – as I go –
My face to justify –" **

Dickinson's rare conversations with visitors were – on her side – poetic, intense and epigrammatic. She seemed to prefer correspondence to actual meetings, though the latter occasionally gave her great joy. Unlike some of her poetry there is no sense of gloom in her letters. Her frank correspondence with Higginson was especially significant; he was critical of her verse but Dickinson had sufficient artistic confidence to continue to write in her bold, unique style.

The impact of strong but rather aloof male figures bred in her a deep sense of personal unacceptability. The *he* in some of her poems seems to be an amalgam of several male figures who were all fascinating yet daunting. We also see in her an understandable ambivalence towards her own talent for composition and the possibility of its wider recognition. On one hand, Dickinson did not seek publication and fame, yet on the other, she sought Higginson's opinion of her work. She treated the whole notion of popular acclaim in 'Success is Counted Sweetest'* with a rather knowing irony. In a letter to Higginson she wrote, "I smile when you suggest I delay 'to publish', that being foreign to my thought as firmament to fin [metonymy for "bird to fish"]. If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her; if she did not...My barefoot rank is better". However, in the poem 'This is my letter to the world'* Dickinson expressed a very decided sense of having something important to say to a wider audience; she seemed convinced that Nature's "simple news" was being transformed by her poetic imagination into her own "letter to the world".



A04 Connections

Students should be keenly aware that there are equal marks available for their treatment of the given poem and the second poem selected in the exam.

In this examination, the candidate should explore connections within and between Dickinson's poems, discussing similarities and differences in the handling of themes and poetic techniques, and in contexts. Significant, pointed connections which are made relevant to the key term of the question will be rewarded.

To meet the requirements of this Assessment Objective, you must:

- **Explore the connections** between the poem printed in the Resource Booklet and the poem you choose, and the external/contextual information you have studied. Always bear in mind that the Driving Objective for this unit is **A02** (Poetic Methods).
- **Note both similarities and differences** – this could be between voices, themes, aspects of imagery or any other techniques you find.
- **Make sure the connections noted are significant and relevant.**

Specimen question:

By referring closely to *I felt a Funeral, in my Brain* (Poem **5(a)**), printed in the accompanying Resource Booklet and one other appropriately selected poem, and making use of relevant external biographical information, examine the poetic methods which Dickinson uses to write about the experience of mental anguish.

N.B. Equal marks are available for your treatment of each poem.

Advice:

- unpack the key terms of the question;
- plan your response;
- choose the other poem carefully;
- ensure your comments relate to the chosen theme (“the experience of mental anguish”) and are based on a detailed analysis of the poetic methods of both poems;
- follow the advice above, for A04, for making connections between the two poems;
- biographical information (A03) should be relevant and used judiciously, to illuminate your understanding and analysis of the theme and its treatment in the poems selected;
- give equal treatment to the poems.

You may find it useful to:

- create topic sentences to introduce each new paragraph;



- offer an introductory remark about the nature and significance of the identified theme and why Dickinson may have chosen to treat it in the way(s) that she did;
- comment on how biographical information helps the reader to understand the theme and style of the poems;
- offer an overview of form, structure, speaker and situation, and how these add meaning and significance to the poems;
- analyze the poetic methods employed in the poems, including tone, tonal shifts, imagery, figurative language, punctuation, rhythm, rhyme (and other auditory devices), etc. (see advice above for A02); this will make up the bulk of your essay;
- conclude by articulating your final thoughts on the nature and significance of the poet's treatment of the theme and on the effectiveness of the poetic methods used to communicate it.

Remember:

- Stick to the key terms used in the question
- Think what the question is really asking you to do
- Make connections throughout, demonstrating your knowledge of the poems and the poet, and your ability to link concepts, ideas and references.



Appendix 1

Selected Poems named for study:

I'm "wife" - I've finished that -
There's a certain Slant of light
I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
How the old Mountains drip with Sunset
There came a Day at Summer's full
I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
It was not Death, for I stood up
I cannot live with You -
One need not be a Chamber - to be Haunted -
Because I could not stop for Death -
An awful Tempest mashed the air -
The last Night that She lived
She rose to His Requirement

Activities and Revision Exercises

1. Taking the poem 'I'm "wife"- I've finished that -' as an example, analyse the contribution made to the impact and meaning of the poem by Dickinson's uses of dashes and capitals. This analysis might be applied to the other prescribed poems.
2. Take every opportunity in class to test your theories against peers and with your teacher.
3. Each pupil, if given the opportunity, should take one of the poems in the anthology and make and present a power-point seminar to the class (remembering to use relevant contextual material to illuminate the text). Analysis of style should always follow the advice: identify, illustrate, analyse, relate.
4. Discuss how her experiences, gender and the contemporary conservative views of her society seem to have influenced Dickinson's ideas about love and marriage (or any other key theme).
5. Discuss in class how the poems in this anthology offer a unique exploration of the theme of death as a physical, spiritual and metaphorical experience.
6. Given your understanding of Dickinson's views and doubts about immortality – based as they were on her reactions to the orthodox religious beliefs of her community and family – discuss how she explores this theme in two of her poems.
7. Practise writing further essays, at home and in class, along the lines of the CCEA Specimen Paper.

**GLOSSARY** - this glossary is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive.

Alliteration	the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of two or more words in close proximity.
Anaphora	a rhetorical feature where the same word or phrase is deliberately repeated at the beginning of a sentence or clause.
Assonance	the repetition of vowel sounds across words to help create a consistent effect. It can be quite subtle, so only comment on it if you feel you can link it to the effect created. As with alliteration, these can be various.
Bathos	a juxtaposition of the important with the insignificant or trivial – often to comment ironically on the actual insignificance of what is deemed important. This figure of speech can also be used purely humorously.
Cadence	inflection or emphasis, sometimes used for poetry based on a “musical phrase” of language rather than a strict metre.
Caesura	a break or pause in the middle of the poetic line, usually indicated by a punctuation mark such as a semi-colon, colon or full stop. The effect is to break the rhythm of the line.
Conceit	a far-fetched metaphor which compares two things which are dissimilar, with the intention of producing shock or surprise or amusement.
Diction	the language used in a work of literature to enhance meaning or to establish register. This term particularly applies to vocabulary choices but is not limited to these.
Epigram	a short, pithy saying, conveying a profound thought in an economical and arresting way.
Eulogy	a speech or a written piece in praise of someone or something.
Hyperbole	language that uses exaggeration for particular effect.
Imagery	This word generally applies visually, to vivid or figurative language that stimulates a picture in the imagination. Tactile imagery appeals to the sense of touch. Auditory imagery appeals to the imagination by echoing or creating sound effects. (See advice on discussing imagery).
Juxtaposition	deliberate placing of two contrasting characters, things, ideas close together for a particular purpose.



Metaphor	where one thing is described directly as another, to enhance meaning or effect. When this is used for a more protracted purpose it is called an extended metaphor.
Meter/Metre	metre is the measurement of rhythm, expressed as the number and kind of metrical feet in a line of poetry. This measurement considers the number of syllables and where the stresses fall in each foot.
Metonymy	a figure of speech where a word associated with the subject is substituted for the subject (e.g. “fin” for “fish”).
Motif	a dominant or recurring idea or figure of speech within a work of art or within the work of an artist, musician or writer.
Neologism	a new word, sometimes a compound of two or more existing words, or an existing word with an unusual prefix or suffix added.
Oxymoron	a figure of speech where two juxtaposed words or phrases appear to be contradictory.
Personification	to attribute human characteristics to a non-human subject.
Paradox	where two ideas, expressed in close proximity, are apparently contradictory; whereas, on closer examination, they are meaningfully related.
Pastiche	an imitation of another work of art, or set of well-known ideas, sometimes for satirical purposes.
Pathos	the quality in a literary work which evokes strong feelings of pity, tenderness or sorrow.
Satire	the use of humour – often through mimicry – to expose as absurd a society, a belief or ethic, or a person or class of people.
Simile	where something is directly compared to something else, using “like” or “as”.
Solipsism	a way of life or philosophy that places self at the centre of all that can be known or understood.
Symbol/symbolism	where what is shown, often a material object (the symbol) comes by association to stand for or represent something else, usually non-material.
Synaesthesia	the expression of a deliberate confusing of the senses (e.g. describing music as a colour, or light as a liquid).
Theme	a main idea or concern explored in a work of art.
Tone	the emotion or attitude intended by the writer, conveyed through use of language, rhythm and punctuation. (See advice on tone).

