Poems:

- 66. This is my letter to the world
- 67. I died for beauty
- 82. I had been hungry all the years
- 83. I gave myself to him
- 127. A narrow fellow in the grass
- 154. A word dropped careless on the page
- 161. What mystery pervades a well
- 181. The saddest noise, the sweetest noise

Written by Emily Bosco
# Table of Contents

Area of Study: Belonging ................................................................................................................................. 4

Composer and Context ...................................................................................................................................... 5

66. This is my letter to the world ................................................................................................................... 7

67. I died for beauty ...................................................................................................................................... 8

82. I had been hungry all the years ................................................................................................................ 9

83. I gave myself to him ................................................................................................................................ 10

127. A narrow fellow in the grass ................................................................................................................ 11

154. A word dropped careless on the page .................................................................................................. 12

161. What mystery pervades a well ........................................................................................................... 13

181. The saddest noise, the sweetest noise .............................................................................................. 14

Extended Response ..................................................................................................................................... 15
Area of Study: Belonging

Students explore the ways in which the concept of belonging is represented in and through texts.

Perceptions and ideas of belonging and not belonging will vary because they are shaped within:
- Personal contexts
- Cultural contexts
- Historical contexts
- Social contexts

Therefore our sense of belonging emerges from the connections we make with people, places, groups, communities, and the larger world.

Students may consider aspects of belonging in terms of experiences and notions of:

ACCEPTANCE + UNDERSTANDING + RELATIONSHIPS + IDENTITY

Texts explore MANY aspects of belonging:
- The potential of an individual to enrich to challenge a community or group.
- How attitudes to belonging change over time.
- Choices not to belong.
- Barriers preventing belonging.

Perceptions and ideas of belonging and not belonging are constructed through:
- Language modes
- Language forms
- Language features
- Language structures

(adapted from the NSW Board of Studies Prescriptions 2009-2014, p.10)
Composer and Context

Emily Dickinson was born in 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts, in the United States of America. She came from a well-known and well-to-do family, with her father and brother responsible for running the Amherst Academy.

Given that her family were instrumental in the founding of the Amherst Academy, Emily Dickinson received an education that far surpassed that of a typical woman of her time period. Importantly, her education exposed her to the works of the English Romantic poets – William Wordsworth and John Keats, in particular, as well as later poets Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and writers such as the Bronte sisters, George Eliot, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

This undoubtedly influenced the development of Dickinson’s own poetry, which drew heavily on the ideology of the Transcendentalist Movement. This helps to explain her poetic focus on ideas such as: human potential, beauty, truth, the natural world and immortality.

As Dickinson continued to write poetry, however, she progressively withdrew herself from her society. On those rare occasions when she did go out in public, she wore only white clothing. This, in conjunction with her reluctance to socialise and, in later years, to leave her own room, led to a widely held local perception of her as eccentric. Despite her reclusive behaviour, however, she did maintain several strong friendships over the course of her lifetime via letters. Of particular importance were her friendships with her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert, Presbyterian minister Charles Wadsworth and Samuel Bowles, the editor of the journal *The Springfield Republican*.

By the time of her death in 1866, Emily Dickinson had written nearly eight hundred poems – although less than a dozen of these were published during her lifetime.

Puritanism

Emily Dickinson was a descendent of the pioneers who fled from religious persecution in England in the period 1620-1640. These pioneers founded the colonies of New England, the largest of which was the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The Puritans were characterised by their strict adherence to Bible teachings, refusal to celebrate Christmas and the banning of secular forms of entertainment. Although there had been a softening of this strict way of life by the time of Dickinson’s birth, during her teenage years, there was a religious revival across New England.

In 1845, people were called upon to make a public profession of their faith in Christ, in order to be considered full members of the church. Many of Dickinson’s family and friends did make this profession, however Dickinson herself chose not to join the church. This decision, it seems, was not made out of defiance or rebelliousness, but rather from a desire to remain true to herself. This is
supported by her admission in a letter to her friend, Abiah Root: "I feel that the world holds a predominant place in my affections. I do not feel that I could give up all for Christ, were I called to die" (L13).

The Transcendentalist Movement

Emily Dickinson was writing her poetry at the time of the Transcendentalist Movement. This was a philosophical and literary movement, which developed in America during the 1830s and 1840s. It’s most well-known figures were writers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, both of whom Dickinson had studied.

Influenced by the English Romantic Movement and various German philosophers of the period, the Transcendentalists believed in the attainment of a spirituality that transcended the physical body, and was attainable only through the intuition of the individual and the belief that human potential could only be realised through close communion with the beauty and truth of the natural world – not through adherence to church doctrine.

Dickinson, although not generally considered a Transcendentalist herself, was certainly influenced by some of the ideas and beliefs of this movement. In particular, her commitment to individualism, rejection of conformity and contentment in communing with the natural world share much in common with writers and poets of the Transcendentalist tradition. The notable difference, however, is her reluctance to assume the role of a ‘prophet’ or instructor through her poetic voice; rather focusing on self-discipline and self-improvement in her search for universal truths. In this way, her poetry takes on the quality of humility, with her desire to achieve personal transcendence taking priority over achieving external validation of her identity and values.
66. This is my letter to the world

In this poem, Emily Dickinson offers the “simple news that nature told” to the world, in the hope that the significance of this message, and by implication, her interpretation of Nature will be respected by future generations. In this way, she is entrusting her poetry to literary posterity; a solemn reminder that her poetry was not embraced in her own time and hence she was not accorded a level of recognition that enabled her to feel a sense of belonging.

The Key Belonging Concepts

- Belonging to literary posterity
- Belonging to place
- Individuality
- Alienation

Textual Analysis & Deconstruction

1. In what ways can this poem be viewed as a metonymical representation of Dickinson’s poetry in general?
2. Explain how the tone of humility characterises Dickinson’s hope for a place in the world of literature.
3. How does Dickinson reveal that her poetry was not well received in her lifetime?
4. Explain why the line “simple news that nature told” is significant to the poet’s sense of belonging.
5. Although withdrawn from her society, Dickinson still expresses a desire for connection with others. How does the poet communicate this throughout the poem?

Evaluating 66. The is my letter to the world

How has Emily Dickinson used poetic and structural devices in 66. This is my letter to the world to communicate a perception of self, which successfully reveals her feelings of belonging within the larger world?
In this poem, two speakers – one who died “for beauty” and the other “for truth” join each other after death and are united in virtue of sharing a commitment to high ideals; ideals, which they believe have gone unrewarded by society and have caused them to experience social rejection and exclusion. The speakers appreciate that ‘beauty’ and ‘truth’ are mutually defining, and hence they attain a kind of sad comfort in each other’s presence.

The Key Belonging Concepts
- Belonging to time and place
- Shared values as a means of experiencing connection
- Individuality
- Acceptance
- Rejection

Textual Analysis & Deconstruction
1. How does Dickinson communicate the kinship between the two speakers in the poem?
2. Both speakers have devoted their lives to high ideals: “beauty” and “truth”. Explain what their commitment reveals about the tension between individuality and conformity.
3. In what ways can the setting of the poem inside a tomb be viewed as symbolic? What do you think the poet is suggesting about this universal resting place and its connection to belonging?
4. What is the significance of the final lines of the poem: “We talked between the rooms,/Until the moss had reached our lips/And covered up our names”? What do you think the poet is suggesting about the cost of experiencing individuality by committing oneself to high ideals? Do you agree with the implication inherent in these final lines?

Evaluating 67. I died for beauty
Explore how Emily Dickinson shows that connection and solidarity are integral in achieving a sense of belonging.
In this poem, a persona who has become used to an existence of subsistence is given the opportunity to eat at a table of plenty. Initially eager to participate, the persona chooses to partake of the feast, only to find it a sickening experience. This leads to the persona’s realisation that she prefers “the crumb... in Nature’s dining room”; showing that in satisfying our desire to conform, we do not always find contentment and fulfilment.

The Key Belonging Concepts
- Individuality
- Conformity
- Exclusion

Textual Analysis & Deconstruction
1. Explain how Dickinson has used the extended metaphor of hunger to convey her inability to belong to her social and cultural milieu. In your answer, make detailed reference to the poem.
2. Identify TWO other techniques (i.e. techniques other than extended metaphor) that show the poem’s persona to be an outsider and explain what each technique reveals about belonging/not belonging.
3. Explain the comparison being made in the lines “berry of a mountain bush/Transplanted to the road”. Comment on the success of this simile in conveying the extent to which the persona feels excluded from her society.
4. Where does the persona decide she really belongs? Explain the poetic devices Dickinson has used to convey the persona’s acceptance of where she belongs, despite her initial desire to attain belonging within mainstream society.

Evaluating 82. *I had been hungry all the years*

‘In this poem Dickinson thwarts the notion that conforming results in contentment.’

Do you agree? Discuss this statement in light of your understanding of poem 82. *I had been hungry all the years.*
83. I gave myself to him

This poem explores the mutual commitment between two people. In doing so, the poet suggests that it is only when people offer themselves fully and freely to one another that it is possible to attain a true understanding of the other person. This understanding, whilst ultimately rewarding, also makes a person vulnerable to rejection and alienation.

The Key Belonging Concepts
- Belonging within relationships
- Commitment

Textual Analysis & Deconstruction

1. Explain how Dickinson uses commercial and mercenary terminology to establish the commitment between the two personas in the poem. In using the conceit of love as akin to a business transaction, what do you think the poet suggesting about belonging within a marriage?

2. What does the analogy to a spice merchant in the lines “But till the merchant buy,/Still fable, in the isles of spice/The subtle cargoes lie” convey about the relationship between understanding and belonging?

3. In the lines “The daily own [possession] of Love/Depreciate the vision”, the poet suggests that there is a potential cost to belonging within this relationship, even though both parties have entered into the commitment freely. What ‘cost’ of belonging is the poet implying?

4. In these lines of the poem, what does the poet reveal about the nature of belonging within an intimate relationship?

5. In the final lines of the poem, the poet suggests that to owe a “Sweet debt of life, each night” and be “Insolvent, every noon” is a characteristic of belonging absolutely to another person. Explain how the tone and diction convey this as a positive experience.

Evaluating 83. I gave myself to him

‘Belonging within a relationship is ultimately a rewarding experience.’

To what extent is this true of the poet’s message in the poem 83. I gave myself to him?
This poem is concerned with the persona’s encounter with a snake. This experience gives rise to a reflection concerning the need for a harmonious relationship with the natural world, despite the natural world sometimes occasioning sensations of fear, which threaten our feelings of connection to it. The poem also explores the notion that despite feeling as though we belong to Nature, we are often reminded of Nature’s power to push us away.

The Key Belonging Concepts

- Belonging to place
- Belonging within the natural world
- Acceptance
- Rejection

Textual Analysis & Deconstruction

1. Identify and briefly explain TWO examples which show the snake belongs within the natural world.
2. Whilst the snake belongs within the natural world, the speaker finds herself unable to accept the presence of the snake. Why is this?
3. Explain how the poet shows that both the snake and the persona must share the natural and the man-made world.
4. With reference to this poem, explain how Dickinson effectively conveys that a sense of belonging in Nature is often tempered by our understanding of its power to injure and alienate us.

Evaluating 127. A narrow fellow in the grass

‘To successfully achieve a sense of belonging, we must overcome our fears.’

To what extent is this explored in the poem 127. A narrow fellow in the grass?
154. A word dropped careless on a page

In this poem Emily Dickinson conveys that words committed to the page have a power that far outlives the writer. As such, she suggests that words must be chosen carefully, if damaging repercussions are to be avoided in the future. For this reason, the poem reveals much about the nature of belonging to literary posterity.

The Key Belonging Concepts

- Belonging to literary posterity
- The power of language to endear or alienate

Textual Analysis & Deconstruction

1. What is the purpose of the metaphor of the written word as an agent of infection?
2. What does Dickinson suggest are the potential consequences of attaining belonging to the poetic pantheon?
3. How does the poet convey the notion words do not belong to the writer, but rather to the world of literature?
4. Compare poems 66 and 154. In what ways does Dickinson show recognition to be an aspect of belonging?

Evaluating 154. A word dropped careless on a page

‘The act of writing is a means for achieving a sense of belonging, but pursued carelessly can result in alienation.’

How is this explored in the poem 154. A word dropped careless on a page?
161. What mystery pervades a well!

Using the concept of “mysteries”, Emily Dickinson suggests that many who claim to understand Nature have only really scratched the surface as “nature is a stranger yet”; her secrets perhaps impenetrable. In this way, Dickinson may be suggesting that in order to truly belong to Nature, we must be prepared to accept its mysteries without full knowledge or understanding of them.

The Key Belonging Concepts

- Belonging to place
- Belonging within Nature

Textual Analysis & Deconstruction

1. What reflection does the poet offer on the relationship between the idea of a “mystery” and the concept of understanding?
2. Explain how the poet successfully transforms familiar places (the well, the sea) into alienating places in this poem.
3. In what ways does this poem convey the persona’s uncertainty concerning whether or not she belongs with Nature?

Evaluating 161. What mystery pervades a well!

‘In order to belong in a world which can be alienating and overwhelming, we must accept its mysteries.’

How does Dickinson use language forms, features and structure to explore this idea in the poem 161. What mystery pervades a well?
181. The saddest noise, the sweetest noise

In the poem, the beauty of a Springtime birdsong is paradoxically painful because it occasions feelings of loss and grief. It acts as a reminder of the speaker’s place in the present, where she can only feel connected to those who have already passed via nostalgic reminiscence, which is painful. This paradoxical relationship is extended through the poem’s exploration of the ways in which the speaker’s connection with the natural world both strengthens her feelings of belonging, whilst also amplifying her feelings of loss.

The Key Belonging Concepts

- Loss occasioning feelings of grief and disconnection
- Belonging to Nature
- Belonging via nostalgic reminiscence

Textual Analysis & Deconstruction

1. What poetic device is used in the lines “It makes us think of all the dead/That sauntered with us here,/By separation’s sorcery/Made cruelly more dead” to amplify the speaker’s feelings of loss?
2. Explain how the metaphorical treatment of Spring and the references to the temporal emphasise the speaker’s awareness of her position of belonging in the present; a place where those she is remembering no longer belong.
3. Identify and explain another THREE poetic devices, which intensify the speaker’s experience of loss. Make sure you provide appropriate quotations in your response.
4. In what ways has the poet conveyed that the speaker’s connection with the natural world simultaneously strengthens her feelings of belonging, whilst also exacerbating her feelings of loss?

Evaluating 181. The saddest noise, the sweetest noise

How does Emily Dickinson use poetic form, features and structure to explore the relationship between belonging and loss in the poem 181. The saddest noise, the sweetest noise?
Extended Response

‘Whilst most individuals search for belonging, some reject the notion of belonging, opting for solitude.’

Discuss this validity of this point of view with detailed reference to at least THREE poems in Emily Dickinson’s collection Selected Poems

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