

Emily Dickinson and the Power of Punctuation

Middle (6th – 8th grade)

Time required: 15-20 minutes

Specific recommendation: 7th grade Language Arts

Goals/Objectives:

- Explain the importance of punctuation in poetry
- Re-write the punctuation in the poem “Dear March, Come In!” to create a different emphasis or tone than the author intended

Common Core Standard:

- RL.7.5 Analyze how a drama’s or poem’s form or structure contributes to its meaning.

Materials:

- **Song of America** links

To print:

Emily Dickinson printable timeline: <https://songofamerica.net/downloads/emily-dickinson-timeline/>
Basic Musical Elements handout: <https://songofamerica.net/downloads/basic-musical-elements-handout/>
“Dear March, Come In!” worksheet: <https://songofamerica.net/downloads/dear-march-come-in-worksheet/>
Song of America “Dear March, Come In” song page: <http://songofamerica.net/song/dear-march-come-in>

To reference:

Song of America online timeline: <http://songofamerica.net/timeline/>
(Expansion & Reform; Civil War & Reconstruction)

Song of America Artists, Movements, and Ideas essay “The American Renaissance and Transcendentalism”:
<http://songofamerica.net/library/ami/the-american-renaissance-and-transcendentalism>

Song of America Emily Dickinson page: <http://songofamerica.net/writer/dickinson-emily>

To listen to:

Song of America Emily Dickinson radio program: <https://songofamerica.net/program/emily-dickinson-letter-to-the-world/>

Instruction:

- The teacher introduces the poet Emily Dickinson, the time period in which she lived, and her connection to nature, including the Transcendentalist movement.
<https://songofamerica.net/downloads/emily-dickinson-timeline/>
<http://songofamerica.net/timeline/>
(Expansion & Reform; Civil War & Reconstruction)
<https://songofamerica.net/artists-movements-ideas/the-american-renaissance-and-transcendentalism/>

- The teacher (or a student volunteer) reads aloud the poem “Dear March, Come In!” [<http://songofamerica.net/song/dear-march-come-in>] without emphasizing punctuation. The class briefly discusses the personification in the poem and Dickinson’s message.
- The teacher (or a student volunteer) reads aloud the poem again while emphasizing the punctuation of the song setting
 - Note: the punctuation of the song setting is different than Dickinson’s intended punctuation because Aaron Copland wrote his song in 1950. At that time, editors still sought to “correct” Dickinson’s punctuation, as well as other grammatical elements in her poetry. Only in 1955 were her poems published in the form that she intended, including her intended punctuation. This topic will be addressed later in the lesson.
 - For more information about the history of Dickinson’s publication, please see:
<https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/node/110>
<https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/node/236>
- Class discussion: “Does the punctuation in ‘Dear March, Come In!’ change the tone of the poem?”
- *Guided Practice*
 - Students listen to Aaron Copland song setting of “Dear March, Come In!” [<https://songofamerica.net/program/emily-dickinson-letter-to-the-world/> at 1:50] and highlight the punctuation
 - Turn and Talk/Class discussion: With a partner, students answer the questions “Does the song sound like our first reading of the poem or our second reading? How?” Students then discuss their findings as a class.
- *Independent Practice*
 - Students independently re-write the punctuation in “Dear March, Come In!” using the given worksheet
 - Students volunteer to read aloud their new poem while others in the class identify the tone of the poem
 - Students receive a copy of “Dear March, Come In!” with Emily Dickinson’s intended punctuation (different than the punctuation used in Aaron Copland’s song setting—see above note). A student reads this version of the poem
 - Class discussion: Why do you think Emily Dickinson used so many dashes in her poetry?
 - For more about Emily Dickinson’s use of dashes, please see:
https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/poetry_characteristics
http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/dickinson/dash.htm