
Emily Dickinson's Symbolism: Exploring Multiple Meanings

High (9th – 12th grade)

Time required: 40 minutes

Specific recommendation: 11th grade Language Arts

Goals/ Objectives:

- Identify symbolism in "Papa Above!"
- Determine Dickinson's response to death in "Papa Above!" as reflected in both poetry and music

Common Core Standards:

- RL.11-12.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone
- W.11-12.9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research

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/>

Song of America "Papa Above!" song page: <http://songofamerica.net/song/papa-above-from-op-108>

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 Great Awakening and Revivalism in America":

<https://songofamerica.net/artists-movements-ideas/the-great-awakening-and-revivalism-in-america/>

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 and the historic religious revivals in the mid-19th century using timelines

<https://songofamerica.net/downloads/emily-dickinson-timeline/>

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

Teachers may also find this webpage helpful: <https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/church>

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Created for the Hampsong Foundation's Song of America Curriculum Initiative (<http://songofamerica.net/for-educators>)

This lesson plan may be used free of charge for educational purposes.

Please reference the creators of the handout, the Hampsong Foundation and Song of America when necessary.

For more information, please visit <http://songofamerica.net/> & <http://hampsongfoundation.org/>

- The teacher introduces the poem “Papa Above!” [<http://songofamerica.net/song/papa-above-from-op-108>] and the teacher or a student volunteer reads aloud the poem. Students receive a paper copy of the poem on which to take notes.
- Class discussion and analysis of the symbolism in “Papa Above!”: “What do the cat and mouse represent? And the rat? What does the speaker mean by ‘Cycles’? What is the speaker asking of ‘Papa’? How might this poem relate to religion? What could be the speaker’s relationship to religion?”
- *Guided Practice*
 - Students listen to the song “Papa Above!” [<https://songofamerica.net/program/emily-dickinson-letter-to-the-world/>] at 33:27, or with Thomas Hampson introduction at 32:26]
 - Turn and Talk: Students discuss with a partner the relationship that they hear between the poetry and the music in this song. Questions could include:
 - How does the music support the figurative and connotative meanings within the poem?
 - What mood does the music add to the poem, and how does that mood shift?
 - What do you think are the purposes of the piano interludes (the music in between the sung words)?
 - Do you believe the speaker is a child or an adult, and why would Emily Dickinson choose this voice for her poem?
 - Refer to the *Song of America* Basic Musical Elements handout for an easy guide to talking about music: [<https://songofamerica.net/downloads/basic-musical-elements-handout/>]
 - The class listens to the song again with all of these above questions in mind and discuss in more detail after this second listening. (Discussion questions should be written on the board or visible via projector as the song plays.)
- *Independent Practice*
 - Students individually choose who they believe the speaker of the poem is and write 1-2 paragraphs defending their choice using evidence from the poem, the song, and historical knowledge, using the given timeline
 - Students separate into two teams to debate their side of the argument using general rules for debate [<https://highschooldebate.org/rules/>]

Going Further:

- Students receive a copy of Dickinson’s poem “It’s Coming—the Postponeless Creature”; the poem is read aloud (or silently), and then the class listens to Ernst Bacon’s musical setting of the poem

[<http://songofamerica.net/song/its-coming-the-postponeless-creature>] Page 3 of 3

- Class discussion: How are Dickinson's response to death and reference to God different in this poem from in "Papa Above!"? How does the music illuminate those differences?
 - When comparing with "Papa Above!", it may be helpful to play the recording of this song and/or read the poem aloud again.

Extension: The language arts teacher may consider collaborating with the American history teacher for this lesson to enrich the students' understanding of Emily Dickinson's time period and as a result, her work.