
WOLFGANG BUTZKAMM

EMILY DICKINSON -

A GREAT AMERICAN POET

THREE SHORT POEMS TO REMEMBER
(ab Klasse 8)

Notes for the Teacher

Objectives

The students should learn three short poems of a great American lyric poet by heart and, hopefully, learn to appreciate them.

The Topic

Former football players of the German national team attended a football coach training course. Some of the players were reported to have broken out in a cold sweat when it came to speaking freely in front of the group and explaining what a wall pass (*Doppelpass*) was - you just do it, said one of the players. This scene reminded me of our literature class. There we would sometimes talk painfully long about the various aspects of a poem, such as rhyme, rhythm, assonance and dissonance. Only rarely, it appeared to me, did the poem gain by this, only rarely did it become more beautiful in our eyes. Sometimes the opposite of what had been intended occurred. The poem would be over-discussed, over-analyzed. Therefore, we would like to make another suggestion here. We present the poet, explain the text with translations or by paraphrasing it, recite it to the group and, with the help of eraser techniques, impress it upon the memory. Perhaps that way it will be really appreciated. "Le véritable éloge d'un poète c'est qu'on retient ses vers." In English, "the greatest praise that one can give a poet is to retain his verses." After all, in poetry the sounds are as

important as their specific meanings. Do we really need to bring out all the implications, to identify the poetical devices etc. in order to appreciate a poem? Instead, we hope that at the end the very lines of the poem will reverberate in the minds of our pupils.

Note: Only one poem per lesson should be learned. The rest of the lesson should be dedicated to other work.

Suggested Treatment

STEP 1

The teacher introduces Emily Dickinson in a short lecture (see Text 1). Alternatively, a student receives the assignment to give a five minute lecture about the poet. He/she will use the internet or other sources.

STEP 2

The teacher recites the poem by heart - without the text. Afterwards, he/she shows the poem on an overhead projector or writes the poem on the board and then recites it once more.

STEP 3

"Let's briefly translate the poem. I'm not asking you for a really good translation. Let's quickly translate so that there are no misunderstandings about the meanings. Let's stick closely to the text."

Work out as clearly as possible what has been said. We look for the closest natural equivalent, but give clarity through the addition of conjunctions

and typical German modal particles. The translation, of course, only aims at rendering what is said, and thus sounds clumsy, is too comprehensive, too detailed in a way, and thus contrasts nicely with the neatness and rhythmic brevity of the original. Remember: The voice, the tone, the texture, and the poetic form - i.e. the way of saying what the poem is saying - are fundamental parts of what is said.

However, if you want to avoid German, English paraphrases could also do the job. (Solutions 1)

STEP 4

This is the major step where the students commit the text to memory with the help of eraser techniques. First, ask the class to read the poem for themselves - quietly, slowly, concentrating on the text. Then rub out a couple of words from any of the eight lines or cover them with pens or strips of paper. And after each rubbing out ask someone to read the full eight lines of the poem.

Make it a sort of learning game (*Lernsport*). How much can one cover at one time? You can remove a complete line each time. But it's better not to rush them, not to push them, and to proceed gently. You may begin with the rhyming words only:

I'm nobody! Who are ...

Are you nobody, ...

Then there's a pair of us - don't tell!

They'd banish us, you know.

How dreary to be somebody!
How public, like a ...
To tell your name the livelong day
To an admiring ...

Gradually, the students will be "reading" more and more words that aren't there. If a word is forgotten, point to the exact place where it was before - this spatial cueing often brings it back to mind. Finally, the students should be able to "read" the full eight lines from a completely blank screen/board, i.e. the text should be completely covered/erased.

"I am going to cover (rub out) words from the text, and then I am going to cover more words and entire lines. And each time I cover something, you are to read out the whole poem and supply the missing words and lines from memory. At the end you will see that we know the whole poem by heart. Let's try and see how it works."

Step 5

We consciously forego literary analysis, and let the poem speak for itself. Perhaps this way our students can experience the thrill of discovery and personal appreciation. Naturally, one can add on a few questions and if someone wants to express something about the poem, he or she should be given the opportunity to do so. (See the questions on **Worksheet 1.**)

I'm nobody! Who are you?
Are you nobody, too?
Then there's a pair of us - don't tell!
They'd banish us, you know.

How dreary to be somebody!
How public, like a frog
To tell your name the livelong day
To an admiring bog!

2.

Much madness is divinest sense
To a discerning eye;
Much sense the starkest madness.
'T is the majority
In this, as all, prevails.
Assent, and you are sane;
Demur, you're straightway dangerous,
And handled with a chain.

3.

Exultation is the going
Of an inland soul to sea, -
Past the houses, past the headlands,
Into deep eternity!

Bred as we, among the mountains,
Can the sailor understand
The divine intoxication
Of the first league out from land?

Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, in 1830 and died there in 1886. As a seventeen-year-old girl she attended a seminary in another town. When she returned to Amherst after a year, she never again left it, except for very brief visits to Washington, Boston and Philadelphia. She never married. From her middle twenties on she became a real recluse (That's someone who chooses to live alone and perhaps does not like seeing other people or talking to them. In German one would say: *Sie lebte sehr zurückgezogen*). She was so shy that when visitors came, she went to her room immediately. During all those years of retirement, she wrote about 700 poems, but less than a dozen were printed in her lifetime. She once said of her work: "This is my letter to the world that never wrote to me." So she gained a wide audience only posthumously, i.e. after her death.

She remains incomparable because her originality sets her apart. Some people think she is the most important American poet of the nineteenth century.

Most of her poems are quite short. They have few lines, and the lines are also quite short. So few words must do the trick. I have selected poems which are easily accessible and have often been anthologized, i.e. that have been published in anthologies, in collections of poems by various authors.

Worksheet

1

NOTES AND QUESTIONS ON THE POEMS

First Poem

Notes

livelong - pronounced with a short /i/ sound, not /ai/. Textual variant: the livelong June

Questions

1. Have you ever had the feeling of being (a) nobody?
2. Have you ever wished to be (a) nobody rather than somebody? Have you ever felt the need to withdraw, even to disappear, to vanish, to be invisible?
3. Why would "they" banish you?
4. "I am small like the wren," Emily informed a correspondent who had not met her. Does the poem convey a similar attitude?
5. Emily was known to have an appreciation of children. Could this poem be written especially for children or appeal to children?

Second Poem

Notes

discerning - showing the ability to make good judgements, especially about art, music, style (*urteilsfähig, kritisch*)

stark - stark naked: completely naked (*splittermackt*); stark mad, stark folly, stark nonsense; stark is of course related to the German word. They are cognates. However, today it only occurs in fixed collocations like the German word "blond"; it is archaic, or obsolete. It is used as an intensifier (such as German "sehr"). It has been replaced by strong, stout, stiff, rigid.

prevail - a belief or custom prevails: it exists, it is generally accepted. If an idea, principle, or proposal prevails, it gains a position of controlling influence. "Justice prevailed in the end." (*überwiegen, verbreitet sein, sich Geltung verschaffen, sich durchsetzen*) Prevailing wind, idea, trends (*vorherrschend*)

assent - formal: to agree to a suggestion after considering it carefully; approve (*billigen; Zustimmung erteilen*)

sane - opposite: insane; noun: sanity. Able to think in a normal and reasonable way; based on sensible thinking. "A sane solution to a delicate problem." (*bei Verstand; vernünftig*)

demur - formal: express doubt or opposition to. "They demurred at the idea of working on a Sunday." (*Bedenken erheben, Einwände geltend machen*)

Questions

1. There are many sorts of madness. What could she have meant by the term "madness"?
2. Isn't the message that this poem delivers antiquated? After all, we have freedom of speech, haven't we?

Third Poem

Notes

exult - formal: show that you are happy and proud. "They exulted at their victory." "They exulted over their fallen enemies." (*jubeln, frohlocken*)

headland - an area of land that sticks out from the coast into the sea

intoxication - the state of being drunk. "The driver was clearly intoxicated." Intoxicated with the experience of freedom = happy, excited, unable to think clearly. Intoxicating drinks.

league - "be in the same/a different league;" here it is an old unit for measuring, equal to about five kilometres

Questions

1. 1. Could you suggest a title for this poem? ("Setting sail" has been suggested by an editor.)
2. The poem ends with a question. (The poet has engaged our imagination and now invites us to go without her.) What keeps the sailor from understanding the intoxication?
3. Can you remember a similar experience? Something which at first filled you with joy, a joy that has become less intense, which might even have completely faded away?
4. Could the poem have another level of meaning? Could the poem also function on a figurative level of meaning? (A skilful artist has the capacity to go in more than one direction at once. "Eternity" could point to the magic and wonder that lies in death.) Or would that be a misreading? Can "eternity" be seen as intoxicating? Have you ever contemplated eternity? (This ambiguity effectively triggers our own vision of things, conveys an indecision, a suggestive indefiniteness.)
5. Do you think in modern times the joy of seeing the sea for the first time would be diminished because one would have already experienced the sounds and images of the sea on TV?

After all of the poems have been memorized:

1. In which of the poems do you notice a tendency towards seclusion and rejection of society?
2. Critics have mentioned the epigrammatic shortness of her poetry, the compression of thought in a few lines of packed intensity. To which of the poems would this best apply?
3. Which of the poems appeals to you most? Have you got a clear preference for a poem?

Solutions

Translations

1.

Ich bin (ein) Niemand. Und du?
Bist du auch ein Niemand?
Dann sind wir schon zwei - aber nicht weitersagen!
Sie würden uns wohl in Acht und Bann tun.

Wie öde, (ein) Jemand zu sein!
Wie ein Frosch, öffentlich
Den lieben langen Tag lang seinen Namen zu verkünden
Vor einem staunenden Sumpf (Und sich von einem Sumpf bewundern zu lassen)

2.

Vieles Verrückte ist göttlichster/erhabenster/tiefster Sinn
Für ein kluges/gescheites/kritisches/hellsichtiges Auge;
Vieles Vernünftige/Sinnvolle (dagegen) stärkster/barer Unsinn.
In diesem, wie überall,
Setzt sich die Mehrheit durch.
(Es ist hier wie überall schlicht eine Mehrheitsentscheidung).
Sag ja/stimmt zu und du giltst als vernünftig,
Mach Einwände/äußere Bedenken und du bist geradewegs gefährlich
und man legt dich in Ketten.

3.

Jubel/Frohlocken/Verzückung ist,
Wie wenn ein Landmensch an das Meer geht,
Vorbei an den Häusern, vorbei an den Landspitzen
Hinein in die tiefe Ewigkeit!

Aufgewachsen wie wir in den Bergen,
Kann eigentlich ein Seemann
Den göttlichen Rausch noch verstehen (wie berauscht wir sind, wenn ...)
Der ersten Meile fort vom Land?

There seem to be two readings for the second stanza:

--> Auch wenn er wie wir in den Bergen aufwuchs, kann ein Seemann noch verstehen ...

—> Wir aber sind in den Bergen aufgewachsen - Kann eigentlich ein Seemann ...

The second reading seems less grammatical, but it makes sense, too.

Paraphrases

Someone talks to someone else and says: "I'm nobody. What about you? Are you nobody, too?" It seems that the other one says yes (so he or she gets an affirmative answer) and then the speaker continues: "That means we are two nobodies. Don't tell anyone else about this. Because they don't like people like you and me and they would banish us."

Then he or she goes on and explains why it is good to be nobody and why it would be boring to be somebody. In that case, one would be like a frog in a pond or swamp which croaks all day and thus keeps telling everybody who he is (so he advertises his name) and thinks that everyone around him would admire him for this.

To people who know, and who know deeply, what looks like madness in some cases could be really meaningful. This is true also the other way round: what seems the sensible thing to do could in a deeper sense be foolish. What most of the people think, will be regarded as good and reasonable. If you agree, that's fine, you are alright. But if you disagree and express doubt, they will lock you up and put you in chains.

If you have lived all your life far away from the sea and approach it for the first time, you will feel a deep sense of happiness or joy. The vast expanse of the sea reminds one of eternity. Although a seaman might have been bred up in the mountains, he will no longer be able to feel this joy, he will not be able to understand your emotions towards the sea (which could stand for the unknown).