

A Note on Teaching Plath or Dickinson in High School

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I have taught both Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson to high school students in Honors English classes for the last two years, and after finding Dickinson difficult for my students, I feel that Plath (with the exception of a few poems [“Daddy” and “Morning Song,” perhaps “Cut,” “Ariel,” “Tulips,” and “Lady Lazarus,” of course]), is more than just “difficult.”

I believe that Dickinson’s metaphors immediately explain her vision to first-time readers, while Plath’s metaphors, brilliant and original as they are, remain too private and obscure, not only for first-time readers, but also for more sophisticated and learned readers.

Death is the supple Suitor
That wins at last –

Dickinson says in #504 from Final Harvest (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1961), p. 287.

Plath writes in “Death & Co.”

Two. Of course there are two.
It seems perfectly natural now—
The one who never looks up, whose eyes are lidded
And balled, like Blake’s,
Who exhibits

The birthmarks that are his trademark—
The scald scar of water,
The nude
Verdigris of the condor. (Ariel : The Restored Edition, Harper Collins, 2004,
p. 35.)

Where am I to go with these complex lines that deserve graduate school analysis? A case could be made for comparing in our high school classes Plath’s wonderful “The Moon and the Yew Tree” with Dickinson’s #141:

Of Course –I prayed—
And did God Care?
He cared as much as in the Air
A Bird – had stamped her foot—
And cried “Give Me”— (85)

Here is Plath:

Inside the church, the saints will be all blue,
Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews,
Their hands and faces stiff with holiness.
The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild. (64)

Yet should we teach such poetry in our high schools? Can we? Given the near hysterical reaction by our religious, right-wing local and national legislators to anyone who wonders, doubts, or asks questions? (Not to even bring up our secondary curriculum). Plath writes in “The Moon and the Yew Tree:”

The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary.
Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls.
How I would like to believe in tenderness— (64)

In “Magi” she declares:

They mistake their star, these papery godfolk.

They want the crib of some lamp-led Plato.
...
What girl ever flourished in such company? (37)

In her difficult “Medusa,” she says:

Ghastly Vatican.
I am sick to death of hot salt.
Green as eunuchs, your wishes

Hiss at my sins.
Off, off, eely tentacle!

There is nothing between us. (60)

In what context, should I engage my students in a discussion of Plath's bitterness?

In Dickinson's #507, we see:

"Heavenly Father" . . .
We apologize to thee
For thine own Duplicity- (288)

In #525, we read:

The Bible is an antique Volume—
Written by faded Men . . .
Sin—a distinguished Precipice
Others must resist—
Boys that "believe are very lonesome—
Other Boys are "lost"—

How do I explain the real irony behind her quotes around key words? Her choice of "boys" instead of "men," given my own context as a "High school" teacher? Do I begin the usual discussion about repression vs. sexual freedom? Dogma vs. free thought? Wars waged under "Faith" vs. "the peace of atheism," as some theorists maintain. Not likely. Not for me, here, for my job, as a single mother.

And what about this brilliant & humorous poem by Dickinson:

"Faith" is a fine invention
When Gentlemen can *see*—
But *Microscopes* are prudent
In an Emergency. (20)

It takes me back to the facts of my son's childbirth, in its own emergency when he was born, breech, and not breathing. It takes me back to Plath's "Morning Song:"

The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bold cry
Took its place among the elements. (5)

I teach in a large, urban high school with a school board pressuring to bring back the teaching of Christianity in our classrooms. Public pressures in recent elections have expressed anger at doing such. I see myself "in the middle," and when I asked a colleague what he would do, he said: "No way would I bring in as side poets Dickinson or Plath. "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" would be too scary for my students. And Plath's "The Moon and the Yew Tree?" I can just hear parents to my students now, at our 'Open House!'"

Any advice or response is welcome on this website. I'd be happy to respond.