

Dickinson Questions

This Is My Letter to the World

1. Dickinson loved both writing and receiving letters. “A letter,” she wrote to a friend, “Always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone” that one’s encounters, without the physical presence of the person. How might this sense of immortality be related to her speaking of her poetry as “my letter to the World”?
2. If the message of her poetry is “the simple News that Nature told,” it is a message “committed/ To Hands I cannot see.” How does this develop the idea about a letter and the world in lines 1-2?
3. At the end the speaker asks that she be judged “tenderly.” How is this related to the “tender Majesty” of line 4?

“I Never Saw a Moor”

4. The first stanza deals with something that is “known” without having been seen—as we might “know what a desert or jungle looks like from pictures or descriptions. In what way is the knowledge presented in the second stanza different from that of the first stanza?

“I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed”

5. Dickinson again presents a feeling of transcendence in terms of intoxication. A) What words and images refer to drinking or drunkenness? B) What things intoxicate the poet in stanza 2?
6. What religious references in the final stanza suggest that the intoxicating communion with nature is also a reaching towards divinity?

“Hope Is the Thing with Feathers”

7. Why does Dickinson make hope “a little Bird” in the poem?
8. Hope exists without our being aware of it. We simply draw on hope when we need to. How do the last two lines support this idea?

“Success Is Counted Sweetest”

9. According to this poem, why is success valued by the losers more than the victors?
10. This poem uses words in unexpected ways for emphasis. A) What is the meaning of “comprehend” using in line 3? B) What is the ear of the defeated man “forbidden” in line 10? C) Why might the sound of triumph be “agonizing” to the defeated man?

“I Took My Power in My Hand”

11. The context for this poem appears in the biblical references to David and Goliath. If the speaker is David, taking her “Pebble” in her hand, in what makes the world Goliath?
12. A) What causes the defeat of the speaker in the second stanza? B) What is implied about the speakers defeat when she says that she “was twice as bold” as David?

“Much Madness Is Divinest Sense”

13. The first line of the poem inverts the ideas of madness and sense. Explain how this paradox is true.
14. If “madness” is interchangeable with individuality in the poem, what becomes of the individual by the end of the poem? What causes this?

“Apparently with No Surprise”

15. A) What is the effect of the speaker saying that death comes to the flower “Apparently with no surprise”? B) Why is the frost’s destruction of the flower considered an “accidental power”?
16. Readers often feel that the poem turns serious in the final two lines. A) What is meant by “an Approving God” in the final lines? B) What is the criticism of nature’s indifference in the poem?

“My Life Closed Twice Before Its Close”

17. The final two lines indicate that the events had to do with “parting.” A) How is the suffering caused by parting or separation “all we need of hell”? B) In what way is parting “all we know of heaven”?

“The Bustle in a House”

18. Dickinson describes the activity after a death as the “Bustle in a House.” What do the phrases “Sweeping up” and “putting Love away” convey about what truly happens during a time of grief?