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## UNIT 3 THE TEXT 2: EMILY DICKINSON

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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Our primary objective in this Unit is to give you some understanding of some of the most significant poems of Emily Dickinson.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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We have already told you that Emily Dickinson led a more or less secluded life in Amherst, Massachusetts. There is no wonder that she is preoccupied with the plight of an individual, especially a woman brought up in New England. Death and immortality are two major preoccupations in the sombre world created by Emily Dickinson. Solitude and introversion are two other preoccupations of the poet who published only seven poems in her life, that too anonymously. Her poems have also been described as her letters to the world. As she did not give titles to her poems, they are remembered either through the first line of the poem or through the numbers allotted to them in Thomas H. Johnson's standard edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*.

In our selection, we would focus your attention on 303 where the choice to live a completely secluded life has been affirmed. In 373, the poet fancies what her life would be if she were to become a queen. There is another poem, 430 in which the speaker walked as if her body had wings but suddenly she lost her elan and turned into a beggar. In 561, the protagonist tries to visualize the various faces of grief—including death. 712 is one of the most popular of Emily Dickinson's poems where death has been pictured as a most civil person. It is death that gradually leads the protagonist to the stately mansion of immortality. 754 is also a popular poem of Emily Dickinson where the protagonist visualizes her union and adventure with her Lord. In 1737, the poet affirms that she cannot become an obedient wife. She has learnt more from life than she could have ever learnt from being a mere wife. There is both an acceptance and a rejection of the limitations of a conventional woman's life in patriarchal New England. At heart, Emily Dickinson is a rebel, a dissenter.

### 3.2 "THE SOUL SELECTS HER OWN SOCIETY"

303, *THE SOUL SELECTS HER OWN SOCIETY* is a short poem in which Emily Dickinson presents the drama of her soul. The narrator says that the soul selects her own companions, her own society. Then, the soul shuts the door. She doesn't let in outsiders and intruders. The majority of the people outside the door may appear divine and enchanting to the ordinary people of the world but to the narrator the "divine majority" doesn't simply exist. The narrator is different and is quite contented to belong to the minority of one.

The narrator is unmoved, that is not disturbed by the exclusion of the so-called divine majority. She also notices a chariot stopping near her low gate. An emperor may get down from the chariot and kneel before the mat in front of the narrator's small, restricted kingdom. But the narrator is not influenced by the emperor's august presence.

The narrator says that she, perhaps the soul, is from a large, ample nation and she chooses one from the crowd and then closes the valves of her attention to the outsiders. In other words, her attention would be focussed on the chosen one.

Who is the chosen one? God? The Bridegroom? Father? The soul?  
Solitude? Guess.

303  
The Soul selects her own Society—  
Then—shuts the Door—  
To her divine Majority—  
Present no more—

Unmoved—she notes the chariots—pausing—  
At her low Gate—  
Unmoved an Emperor be kneeling  
Upon her Mat—

I've known her—from an ample nation—  
Choose One—  
Then—close the Valves of her attention—  
Like Stone—

### 3.3. "I'M SAYING EVERYDAY"

373, *I'm Saying Everyday* is a poem in which another drama is unfolded vividly. The narrator (I) says that if she becomes a Queen the other day, she will do it in her own way, that is in her own style. She will decorate herself a little. She will also find that she is not an ordinary person. She has become a Bourbon. Nobody will be able to treat her superciliously, that is with cold disdain. Nobody will be able to say that the day before she was a beggar in the market.

People say that the court is a grand, stately place. She will be able to mix and mingle with the Majesty. Who is the Majesty? The King or God? She will also feel that her rank has risen high. She can sing a song to please the Majesty. Her life may be brief but she will mix and mingle with the Majesty. There will be no cricket in the meadow, and no bee will be able to equal her accent.

She feels that she must be ready for the change, for the transformation. She doesn't want to meet the majesty in her old gown. She also doesn't want to be deemed a rustic, an uncivilized, barbarous fellow.

Emily Dickinson

373

I'm saying every day  
"If I should be a Queen, tomorrow"—  
I'd do this way—  
And so I deck, a little,

If it be, I wake a Bourbon,  
None on me, bend supercilious—  
With "This was she—  
Begged in the Market place—  
Yesterday."

Court is a stately place—  
I've heard men say—  
So I loop my apron, against the Majesty  
With bright Pins of Buttercup—  
That not too plain—  
Rank—overtake me—  
And perch my Tongue  
On Twigs of singing—rather high—  
But this, might be my brief Term  
To qualify—

Put from my simple speech all plain word—  
Take other accents, as such I heard  
Though but for the Cricket—just,  
And but for the Bee—  
Not in all the Meadow—  
One accost me—

Better to be ready—  
Than did next morn  
Meet me in Aragon—  
My old Gown—On-

And the surprised Air  
Rustics—wear—  
Summoned—unexpectedly—  
To Exeter—

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### 3.4 "IT WOULD NEVER BE COMMON—MORE—I SAID"

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430, *It Would Never be Common-More-I Said* is again a poem in which difference is celebrated. The narrator (I) says that her plight is not common. She is extraordinary. She is unique. She is different—different from everyone. It is morning. The narrator has been in bliss. She has had much joy. There has been a red glow upon her cheeks. There has been a red glow in her eyes as well. She has no need to speak. It is so eloquent, so palpable. She has been walking as if she had wings. Her feet have been as unnecessary to her as boots will be for birds. She has also been bubbling, bursting with joy. She has been giving love to every creature she met. She has been showering gifts on the whole world.

Suddenly, everything changes, changes for worse. She loses her riches, her wealth. There is a Goblin who deprives her of all warmth, all joy. Something fearful happens to her palace. She becomes a beggar. She tries to hold on to sounds. She gropes after shapes. She feels wilderness all around her. Her golden lines are wiped out. She is able to see sackcloth hanging upon the nail. She begins to wonder where her India made brocade is, that is her riches, her wealth.

430

It would never be Common – more I said –  
Difference – had begun –  
Many a bitterness – had been –  
But that old sort – was done –

Or – if it sometime – showed – as 'twill –  
Upon the Downiest – Morn –  
Such bliss – had I – for all the years –  
'Twould give an Easier – pain –

I'd so much joy – I told it – Red  
Upon my simple cheek –  
I felt it publish – in my Eye –  
'Twas needless – any speak –

I walked – as wings – my body bore –  
The feet – I former used –  
Unnecessary – now to me –  
As boots – would be – to Birds –

I put my pleasure all abroad –  
I dealt a word of Gold  
To every Creature – that I met –  
And Dowered – all the World –

When – suddenly – my Riches shrank –  
A Goblin – drank my Dew –  
My Palaces – dropped tenantless –  
Myself – was beggared – too –

I clutched at wounds –  
I groped at shapes  
I touched the tops of Films –  
I felt the Wilderness roll back  
Along my Golden lines –

The Sackcloth – hangs upon the nail –  
The Frock I used to wear –  
But where my moment of Brocade  
My – drop – of India?

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### 3.5 "I MEASURE EVERY GRIEF I MEET"

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561, *I Measure Every Grief I Meet* is a poem that shows the narrator's (I) preoccupation with grief that she finds in the world. She examines the origin and intensity of grief carefully. She also wonders if there is any grief in the world like her grief. She is not sure if other people are able to endure their grief for a long time. She marvels at the old roots of her pain. She can't remember the date her pain began.

She wonders if life will continue to be full of hurt. She also wonders if others would like to die so that pain might come to an end.

Emily Dickinson

She can see a smile on some faces—a faint, weak smile. It is like the light of a lamp that has very little oil. She wonders if there is any balm for their grief. She wonders if they would continue to bear pain. Perhaps, their pain would touch infinity.

Life is, for the narrator, bristling with pain. Death comes only once. It nails the eyes. She is comforted when she thinks of her pain. And also when she thinks of the cross.

561

I measure every Grief I meet  
With narrow, probing, Eyes—  
I wonder if It weighs like Mine—  
Or has an Easier size.

I wonder if They bore it long—  
Or did it just begin—  
I could not tell the Date of Mine—  
It feels so old a pain—

I wonder if it hurts to live—  
And if They have to try—  
And whether—could They choose between—  
It would not be—to die—

I note that Some—gone patient long—  
At length, renew their smile—  
An imitation of a Light  
That has so little Oil—

I wonder if when years have piled—  
Some Thousands—on the Harm—  
That hurt them early—such a lapse  
Could give them any Balm—

Or would they go on aching still  
Through Centuries of Nerve—  
Enlightened to a larger Pain—  
In Contrast with the Love—

The Grieved—are many—I am told—  
There is the various Cause—  
Death—is but one—and comes but once—  
And only nails the eyes—

There's Grief of Want—and Grief of Cold—  
A sort they call 'Despair'—  
There's Banishment from native Eyes—  
In sight of Native Air—

And though I may not guess the kind—  
Correctly—yet to me  
A piercing comfort it affords  
In passing Calvary—

To note the fashions—of the Cross—  
And how they're mostly worn—  
Still fascinated to presume  
That Some—are like My Own—

### 3.6 "BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH"

712, *Because I Could Not Stop For Death* is one of the most popular and anthologized poems of Emily Dickinson. The narrator (I) says that she couldn't stop for death but death was kind enough to stop for her. In the carriage where she was travelling there were only two companions' death and immortality. They drove slowly. Death, the driver of the carriage, was not at all in a hurry. The narrator had given up her life of labour and her leisure as well. She did it because death was not frightening. Death looked civil and acceptable to the narrator.

In the course of their journey, they passed a school where children were playing with vigour. They also passed the fields where the ears of grain were gazing at them. They passed the sun as well, the sun that was setting. The narrator had a gown made of gossamer. She also had a tippet around her neck and a tulle made of soft, fine silk. In other words, she was attired like a bride.

They also passed before a House that seemed like a swelling of the ground. The roof of the House was hardly visible. The cornice was in the ground. Centuries have passed from that day. Yet it seems it has been shorter than a day. The narrator felt that the carriage in which she had travelled in the company of death was heading towards Eternity. In other words, it is only through death that the narrator attains immortality. The poem is justly celebrated and is a remarkable acceptance of death. It also reminds one of Keats' dictum that death is the meed of life.

712

Because I could not stop for Death—  
He kindly stopped for me—  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—  
And Immortality.

We slowly drove—he knew no haste  
And I had put away  
My labor and my leisure too,  
For His Civility—

We passed the School, where Children strove  
At Recess—in the Ring—  
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—  
We passed the Setting Sun—

Or rather—he passed Us—  
The Dews drew quivering and chill—  
For only Gossamer, my Gown—  
My Tippet—only Tulle—

We paused before a House that seemed  
A Swelling of the Ground—  
The Roof was scarcely visible—  
The Cornice—in the Ground—

Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet  
Feels shorter than the Day  
I first surmised the Horses' Heads  
Were toward Eternity—

751, *My Life Had Stood – A Loaded Gun* is another popular and anthologized poem by Emily Dickinson. It is a poem in which the narrator (I) admits that her life has been a loaded gun. It is an extremely striking image which perhaps, conveys the explosive potential of the narrator. The loaded gun has been kept in a corner of her apartment. The implication, perhaps, is that the explosive potential of the protagonist has remained confined to a small corner of her apartment. She has had no opportunity to realize her potential in all its fullness. One can also safely affirm that there is something dangerous, something fierce about the protagonist. She is not an ordinary, conventional woman of nineteenth century New England. She is different.

The second phase of the poem indicates a kind of change in the protagonist's life style. She is chosen by her Master. She is also carried away from the narrow confines of her apartment. They live a life of freedom, a life of pioneers. They roam freely in excellent woods. They hunt the doe. When she speaks to her Master, her voice is echoed by the mountains. When she smiles, the whole valley glows. It seems that as the pleasure of companionship bursts out of her face it looks like Vesuvius, a volcano in Italy full of pent-up lava.

When night comes and the day is over, the ardent protagonist guards her Master. She acts like a vigilant watchman. The protagonist says that she is a deadly foe to any intruder who may dare to harm her Master. If she can spot the guy, she would release the trigger of the gun and shoot him dead. The "gun" in the poem is more than a metaphor. It is also literal. The protagonist knows how to wield the gun. There is something of the pioneer and the frontier in this excellent poem. The protagonist is such a deadly shot that the intruder has no chance to escape. He dies.

The protagonist, however, says at the end that He (perhaps the Master) is more likely to live longer than her. It would be better that he lives longer than the protagonist. It is true that the protagonist can press the trigger of the gun and kill, like a pioneer, but she does not have the tenacity and the power to accept death. What the narrator wants to say is that only those who can accept death, who have the power to die, can redeem themselves. One can see the poem 751 affirm the core of the poem 712. Accepting death calmly is a greater virtue than killing the foe.

## 751

My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—  
In Corners—till a Day  
The Owner passed—identified—  
And carried Me away—

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods—  
And now We hunt the Doe—  
And every time I speak for Him—  
The Mountains straight reply—

And do I smile, such cordial light  
Upon the Valley glow—  
It is as a Vesuvian face  
Had let its pleasure through—

And when at Night—Our good Day done—  
I guard My Master's Head—  
'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's  
Deep Pillow—to have shared—

To foe of His—I'm deadly foe—  
None stir the second time—  
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye—  
Or an emphatic Thumb—

Though I than He—may longer live  
He longer must—than I—  
For I have but the power to kill,  
Without—the power to die—

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### 3.8 "REARRANGE A WIFE'S AFFECTION"

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*Rearrange a Wife's Affection* is a poem in which the narrator (I) has denounced the miserable plight of a wife. She has also portrayed the sad life of a single woman. The society pretends to put in order, that is tame and domesticate a woman into the mould of a traditional wife. This is to be achieved by amputating ruthlessly her spotted heart. In other words, through stifling her natural impulses. It is also to be achieved by making her look like a man with a beard. That is, not only her natural impulses are ruthlessly curbed but even her natural looks are made to appear harsh and forbidding.

Note: the phrase "freckled bosom," perhaps, refers to the weaknesses and foibles that a woman is likely to have.

The narrator urges her strong natural impulses to blush that is to feel a sense of shame. She also urges her desires as a woman to blush, that is to feel a sense of shame. The compound of shame and guilt is due to the pressures exerted by the society in New England. The reality, however, is that the protagonist, a single woman—has learnt far more as a spinster than she would have learnt as a traditional wife. She has had no experience of wifehood, that is domestic drudgery and slavery yet seven years of solitary life as a spinster has taught her an unforgettable lesson.

Her life has been such that love has not leaped its socket, that is love has not fulfilled her natural hunger. She also could not experience trust that is basic for one's growth. As a result of which pain, narrow stifling pain, has been entrenched in her life. She has also no taste of constancy in love that would have given her a sense of fulfillment. There has been no balm, no medicine for the anguish and grief that has seared her. Life has been a terrible burden for her, although so far she has endured the burden triumphantly. She is not likely to be crowned, that is to attain fulfillment and happiness. Till sunset, that is till the end of her life, she would be pricked by thorns. It is, perhaps, only after her death that she would finally be crowned. In other words, she would put on her diadem. These lines appear to be prophetic because Emily Dickinson got recognition as a great poet only after her death. As a Romantic poet, her poetry is a mirror of her apprehensions and hope.

There is, however, a big secret in her life. It is big but it is also a sort of bandage over her eyes. That secret, that mystery would never vanish. It would disappear only the day she would die and her tired flesh would at last have some rest. She would be then released from the fever, the agony and the prison of life. She would be buried in the grave and later on she would be united with him, that is the bridegroom.

In other words, it is only after death that she would attain fulness and triumph. She could not endure to be a wife. She also could not be happy as a single woman in nineteenth century New England. That was the dilemma of Emily Dickinson expressed so vividly and trenchantly in 1737.



1737

Emily Dickinson

Rearrange a "Wife's" affection!  
When they dislocate my Brain!  
Amputate my freckled Bosom!  
Make me bearded like a man!

Blush, my spirit, in thy Fastness—  
Blush, my unacknowledged clay—  
Seven years of troth have taught thee  
More than Wifehood ever may!

Love that never leaped its socket—  
Trust entrenched in narrow pain—  
Constancy thro' fire—awarded—  
Anguish—bare of anodyne!

Burden—borne so far triumphant—  
None suspect me of the crown,  
For I wear the "Thorns" till *sunset*—  
Then—my diadem put on.

Big my Secret but it's *bandaged*—  
It will never get away  
Till the Day its Weary Keeper  
Leads it through the Grave to thee.

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### 3.9 LET US SUM UP

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Emily Dickinson led a large secluded life in Amherst, New England. Solitude led to a life devoted to reading and writing.

She had, however, a number of literary mentors. Her poems were, however, her letters to the world. She had published only seven poems in her life. They were anonymous publications.

It was only after her death that her poems were published on a large scale. She made her reputation as one of the most intense and Romantic poet of New England. Her poetry is largely a poetry of rebellion and confession.

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### 3.10 QUESTIONS

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1. What is the significance of the narrator (I) in most of the poems of Emily Dickinson?
2. Bring out the implication of the queen-beggar syndrome in 373 and 430.
3. How does Emily Dickinson visualize grief in 561?
4. Do you agree with the statement that *Because I Could Not Stop For Death* is the most perfectly realized poem written by Emily Dickinson?
5. Compare and contrast 712 and 754 in their treatment of death.
6. "Wifehood seemed a curse to Emily Dickinson." Is it a fair assessment of the poet's outlook as reflected in 1737?
7. "Emily Dickinson's poetry is that of a rebel." Discuss with reference to 1737.

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### 3.11 GLOSSARY

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<b>Bourbon:</b>	Royal dynasty of France in medieval age.
<b>Aragon:</b>	a Christian kingdom in North East Spain in eleventh century.
<b>Exeter:</b>	a university town in Devonshire, England.
<b>Calvary:</b>	hill outside Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified.
<b>Vesuvius:</b>	a mountain in Italy which erupts and emits fire and lava.
<b>Eider-Ducks:</b>	wild ducks.

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### 3.12 SUGGESTED READING

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1. *Modern American Poetry 1865-1950* by Alan Shucard, Fred Moramaco, William Sullivan (Twyane Publishers, Boston, 1989).
2. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* edited by Thomas H. Johnson (Little, Brown and Co., Boston, Toronto, 1960).
3. *Nineteenth-Century American Poetry* edited by A. Robert Lee (Vision and Barnes Noble, London, 1985).