



The Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson Reader's Guide

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READERS GUIDE

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Dickinson never published any of her poetry during her lifetime; her work was discovered after her death. As Billy Collins notes in his Introduction, "It is fascinating to consider the case of a person who led such a private existence... as if she had lain asleep only to be awakened by the kiss of the twentieth century." What conclusions can you draw about the relationship of Dickinson's privacy during her life and the nature and texture of her art?
2. Dickinson's poetry continues to be extremely influential and important for twentieth-century readers; she remains one of the most widely read American poets to this day. What accounts for this remarkable, enduring popularity, in your view? What makes her poetry seem, to so many, so contemporary? What influence or legacy do you think her work has had or left?
3. Considering Dickinson in relation to some of the exemplary poetry of her time (for instance, Walt Whitman), what features seem to distinguish Dickinson's work? Are there contemporary poets that you would compare in some way to Emily Dickinson?
4. What innovations—stylistic or otherwise—do you find or notice in Dickinson's poetry? What themes or motifs seem to recur in her work, and what do these signify for you?
5. Which individual poems in this volume do you find most compelling and affecting? Which poems do you find most difficult, obscure, or hard to penetrate?

6. Billy Collins notes that Dickinson's poetry is particularly effective in its ability to "compress wide meaning into small spaces." Discuss this feature of her work in relation to poetry in general.

7. How do you think Dickinson's identity as a woman-in nineteenth-century America-plays into her art?
