

INTRODUCTION

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Written in 1864 amid the social disruption and dreadful human sacrifice of the Civil War, Emily Dickinson’s poem “Color – Caste – Denomination – ” is a poignant and ironic commentary on the social distinctions—of race, class, and religion—that sharply divided American society then and continue to divide it even now. As such, this poem is eminently teachable to high school students, many of whom are sensitive to instances of prejudice and discrimination and activated by social justice causes.

As a member of a privileged family, Dickinson was by no means immune to social biases. Provoked, perhaps, by the arguments of abolitionist friends or the enlistment of Black townsmen in the Union’s armed forces or merely the wartime *zeitgeist*, Dickinson muses on the meaninglessness of social hierarchies, as “Death’s diviner Classifying” wipes them away. As is often the case in Dickinson poems, the reader is left with questions. Is the ultimate equality of human beings the gist, or the idea that only death can make it so?

This poem is included in [Fascicle 40](#), the final hand-sewn booklet in Dickinson’s collection and thus the culmination of that poetic project. Many poems in this fascicle reflect on death and what lies beyond with a blend of faith and doubt:

Unfulfilled to Observation –
Incomplete – to Eye –
But to Faith – a Revolution
In Locality – (F839)

Students who enjoy reading Dickinson’s work might find it interesting to compare several poems from the fascicle.

The lesson guide below offers an exploratory approach to teaching “Color – Caste – Denomination – ” that can be adapted to a range of experience levels. Its most important element is joy—born of collaboration, the search for truths, aesthetic appreciation, and personal connections.¹

SHORT-TERM OBJECTIVES

Engagement

Connect themes raised by Dickinson’s poem to current social justice debates reckoning with race, class, and religion.

Content Knowledge

- Explain the poem’s views on people’s physical traits.
- Connect the poem’s ideas to its Civil War context.

Process Knowledge

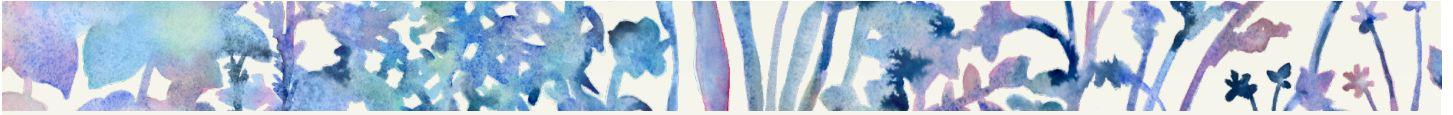
- Unpack the poem’s syntax to paraphrase its content.
- Interpret the role of Death as personified in the poem.

TRANSFER GOALS

- Recognize that the ideas expressed and the questions raised by poets and poetry of bygone eras can still meaningfully address issues of contemporary concern.
- Develop their appreciation for poetry as an art form and hone their skills of close reading, interpretation of figurative language, and analysis of themes.

¹ Muhammad, Gholnecsar (Gholdy). *Culturally and Historically Responsive Education*. National Council of Teachers of English, 2023.





Color – Caste – Denomination –
These – are Time’s Affair –
Death’s diviner Classifying
Does not know they are –

As in sleep – all Hue forgotten –
Tenets – put behind –
Death’s large – Democratic fingers
Rub away the Brand –

If Circassian – He is careless –
If He put away
Chrysalis of Blonde – or Umber –
Equal Butterfly –

They emerge from His Obscuring –
What Death – knows so well –
Our minuter intuitions –
Deem unplausible

(F836, 1864)

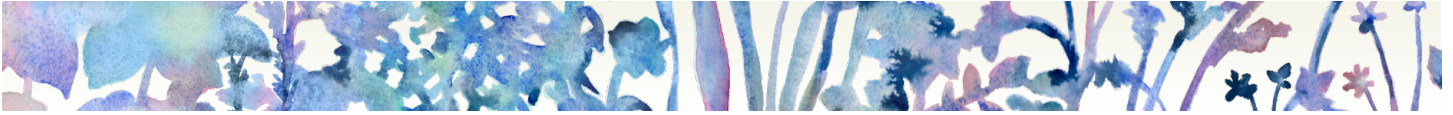
NOTES

Circassian: An ethnic group from the northwest Caucasus, including Chechnya, Circassians were in the news because in the final years of the Russian–Circassian War (1763–1864),

they were the victims of a genocide and forced migration perpetrated by the Russian Empire. In popular mythology and literature, Circassians were also renowned for unusual beauty, an

Orientalist trope. In this poem and one other (F162), Dickinson alludes to the stereotype of Circassian beauty.

Miller, Cristanne. “Becoming a Poet in ‘turbaned seas.’” In *Reading in Time: Emily Dickinson in the Nineteenth Century*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2012, pp. 118–46.



LESSON SEQUENCE AND FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

1. **Connecting:** Begin by posting or projecting the words **color**, **caste**, and **denomination** and asking students to write into the session for several minutes on the ways these concepts function in social contexts. Most students will understand *color* as a proxy for *race*. If they are not familiar with *caste*, supply a brief definition such as “a rigid system of social stratification.” The term *denomination* may be unknown to many students, so explain that it refers to subgroups within a religion, such as Catholic and Protestant within Christianity or Sunni and Shia within Islam.

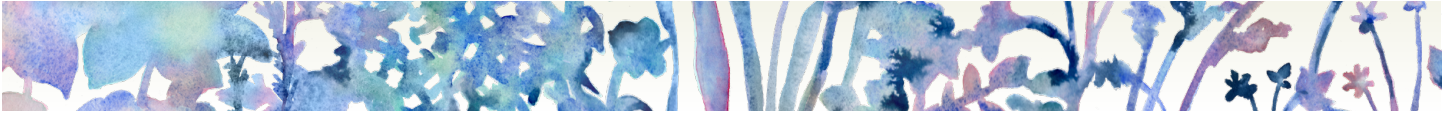
When students have finished writing, ask them to share their observations, and capitalize on opportunities to extend their knowledge. For example, while some students may recognize caste as a feature of traditional Hinduism, they may not realize that chattel slavery in the United States was also a caste system. Undoubtedly, one of the themes that will arise from the discussion is that these terms refer to social divisions that can cause conflict and even lead to violence. Then explain that they will be reading an Emily Dickinson poem that focuses on these divisions.

2. **Reading:** Read the poem aloud, observing natural sentence boundaries and stressing key words, as students follow along. Give them a few moments to reread silently and reflect on the poem, then ask if there are words that are unfamiliar or unclear in context. There may be many: **Hue**, **Tenets**, **Democratic**, **Brand**, **Circassian** (see note above), **Chrysalis**, **Umber**, **Obscuring**. Students may note that Dickinson has capitalized these important vocabulary words. Take some time to discuss them with the class, noting how they fit into the oddly punctuated sentences.

For a second oral reading of the poem, ask for four student volunteers, and go stanza by stanza. This

time, focus on helping students to tease out the paraphrasable content of the poem—what it says about color, caste, and denomination. Of special note in this process should be recognition that the principal actor in the poem is Death personified. Also interesting is the butterfly metaphor in the third stanza: whatever the color of the chrysalis, an “Equal Butterfly” emerges.

3. **Contextualizing:** As a transition to analyzing the poem, note its date: 1864. Ask students to consider what was happening then (the Civil War) and how it relates to the poem’s theme. By 1864, ending slavery had become a central goal of the Union cause, and many Dickinson family friends, as well as Black residents of Amherst, had participated in the war. Her brother Austin had not; he paid \$500 for a substitute, as had several others in the Amherst community. The Dickinson family embodied white Protestant privilege. (See Resources below to learn more).
4. **Analyzing:** Having worked through a close reading of the poem and presumably understood its explicit message stated in the first two stanzas, that the social distinctions that human beings make so much of in life are meaningless after death, students should be ready for a critical discussion of some deeper questions such as the following:
 - Why does Dickinson make Death the main character in the poem, the one who does the “diviner Classifying”? Why not God or Jesus, as Christianity would have taught her?
 - What makes Death “Democratic”? What is left after his fingers “Rub away the Brand”?
 - How does the butterfly metaphor relate to the overall theme of the poem? In what sense does Death “put away” a chrysalis? Adult butterflies are varied, so how are they “Equal”?



- What is it that Death “knows so well” that we consider “unplausible”? Note that Dickinson’s manuscript (linked in resources) adds “incredible” as an alternate last word. Is there a difference?

Students may also be able to generate questions of their own about the meaning of the poem. For discussion, small groups are most effective, as they provide opportunities for everyone to express their ideas and link them to passages in the text. Groups should have some choice of questions to consider as well as the opportunity to report on their deliberations to the class. Their findings may be variable and prompt further debate. Encourage this kind of exchange and resist the temptation (or students’ requests) to provide the “correct” interpretation. Faithful readers of Dickinson’s poems must have a tolerance for ambiguity!

- Write an op-ed or create an infographic promoting acceptance of people’s diverse identities.

RESOURCES

Manuscript

“Houghton Library – (213a) Color – Caste – Denomination –, J970, Fr836.”
Emily Dickinson Archive.

Fascicle

“Dickinson, Emily, 1830–1886. Poems: Packet XXXIX, Fascicle 40 (part). Includes 18 poems, written in ink, ca. 1864. MS Am 1118.3 (209a–213d).”
Harvard Library Viewer. Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Social Context

“Color – Caste – Denomination – Emily Dickinson’s Race and Class Contexts.” Emily Dickinson Museum. YouTube. May 5, 2023.

“The Civil War.” Emily Dickinson Museum. Accessed March 11, 2026.

Fielder, Brigitte. “Dickinson’s Black Contexts.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Cristanne Miller and Karen Sánchez-Eppler, 345–360. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

5. Responding: As a follow-up to the discussion and a **formative assessment** of the lesson, invite students to review the writing they did at the beginning of the session and then extend their reflections about social distinctions with thoughtful responses to the poem. Ask them to explain Dickinson’s ideas in their own words and cite textual evidence to support their observations and conclusions. The following sentence starters may help students to focus their comments:

- This poem makes me feel _____ about the categories that divide people because _____.
- The idea that death is the great equalizer of all people makes me think that _____.

6. Expanding: To extend their study of the poem, give students the opportunity to respond to its themes with some creative work or a civic engagement project. Here are some example prompts:

- Illustrate (or observe) the life cycle of butterflies and connect the poem’s theme of equality.