

INTRODUCTION

By Sylvie Cathrall

I write fantasy novels to process the realities of my everyday life . . . and I’m certainly not alone in that! Through fantasy and science fiction, writers can create a better world or critique our own, challenge societal norms or abandon society entirely, and cultivate imaginary spaces for reconnecting with wonder and the simple joys of living. While Emily Dickinson wasn’t a “fantasy author” herself, many of her poems mix the prosaic with the fantastic, resulting in imaginative images: a carriage ride with courtly Death (F479), a house-shaped ocean with mermaids bobbing about the basement (F656), and, in this particular poem, a cosmic dream-landscape where “Earths” grow in abundance and a basket of “Firmaments” is an easy burden to bear.

For me, “Perhaps I asked too large – ” is an excellent introduction to the poet’s exceptional imagination, which helps her to envision a universe where such lofty concepts and entities as time and space, the planets and the heavens, can be gathered in baskets or organized by the most ordinary means. In fact, “If you were coming in the Fall”, another poem from this same fascicle—one among many of Dickinson’s handmade poetry booklets—involves a speaker who pledges to “wind the months in balls / And put them each in separate drawers” (F356).

Due to the prevalence of speculative fiction in today’s pop culture, the fantastical elements in this poem may make it an intriguing choice for students new to Dickinson. This lesson guide provides a playful, imaginative approach to teaching with “Perhaps I asked too large – ” that focuses on the power of fantasy as a tool for self-expression. At the end of the lesson sequence, students will engage in a creative collaboration with Emily Dickinson by writing short-form prose responses that reflect their own interests and imaginations.

SHORT-TERM OBJECTIVES

Engagement

Connect the fantastical imagery in Dickinson’s poem to contemporary genres that students enjoy.

Content Knowledge

- Describe the imagery featured in the poem.
- Identify how the poem relates to representations of the cosmos from Dickinson’s era.

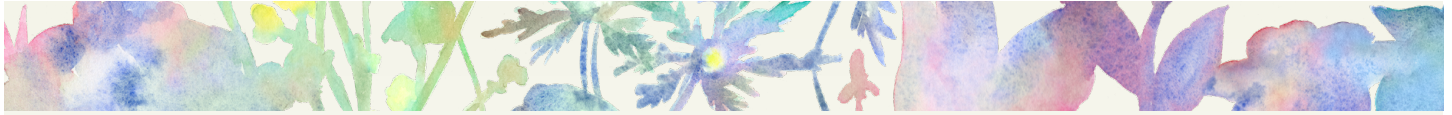
Process Knowledge

- Analyze the poem’s cosmic metaphors to interpret its content.
- Write a creative response inspired by the poem.

TRANSFER GOALS

- Recognize that modern fantasy and science fiction emerged from a history of writers, artists, and thinkers using their imaginations to transform reality.
- Demonstrate how engaging with historical poetry can prompt new writing, art-making, and creative expression across genres and media.





*Perhaps I asked too large –
I take – no less than skies –
For Earths, grow thick as
Berries, in my native Town –*

*My Basket holds – just – Firmaments –
Those – dangle easy – on my arm,
But smaller bundles – Cram.*

(F358, 1862)

NOTES

While it’s impossible to know precisely what each word in this poem meant to Emily Dickinson, these definitions in the 1844 edition of Webster’s *An American Dictionary of the English Language* from the Dickinson family library may help to provide some context.

Earths: In the planetary sense, Earth is described as “The terraqueous globe which we inhabit . . . revolving round the sun in an orbit which is between those of Venus and Mars.” (Students may be intrigued by how well this

simple explanation from another century aligns with astronomy as we know it!)

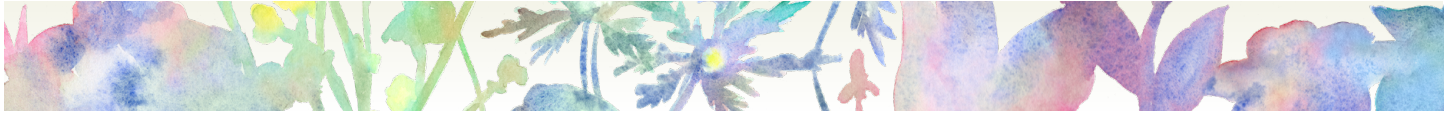
Native: The adjectival form, as Dickinson likely meant it, is defined as “pertaining to the place of birth; as, *native soil; native country* . . .” The poet considered Amherst, her place of birth, to be her “native Town,” and uses that phrase in other poems (such as “Frequently the woods are pink” (F24)); of course, the Amherst that she called home is, as Nan Wolverton puts it, a “‘native Town’ standing on what was

(and is) Native ancestral land.”

Firmaments: The mention of “Firmaments” in this poem may be intended to evoke “the sky or heavens . . . the great arch or expanse over our heads, in which are placed the atmosphere and the clouds, and in which the stars *appear* to be placed, and are *really* seen.”

Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. (Amherst, MA: J.S. and C. Adams, 1844), Dickinson Family Library copy, EDR 113, vols. 1–2, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Nan Wolverton, “‘The Wanderers Came Last Night’: Dickinson and the Material Culture of Indigenous Basket Sellers,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Karen Sánchez-Eppler and Cristanne Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

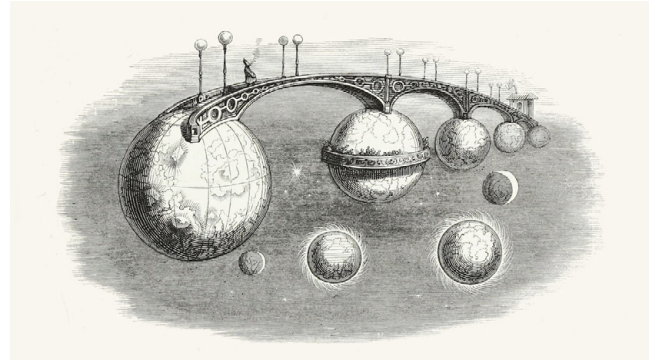


LESSON SEQUENCE AND FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

1. **Connecting:** Write or project the words **Science Fiction and Fantasy** on the board. You might explain that these familiar genres (sometimes described with the catch-all term of “speculative fiction”) encompass many types of imaginative storytelling across media. Invite students to call out words or phrases that they associate with these genres, and write their answers in a word-cloud. (Responses might include themes, subgenres, or specific books, films, and so forth.) As a transition, emphasize that this sort of imaginative storytelling is nothing new, and that many writers across the centuries—including poets, such as Emily Dickinson—have used fantastical or speculative elements in their work. Explain that you are about to spend some time getting to know an Emily Dickinson poem that’s full of fantastical imagery.

2. **Reading:** Invite students to pay attention to thoughts or images that come to mind as you read the poem aloud for the first time. Some students may prefer to close their eyes while listening or simply stare at a fixed spot to help them focus.

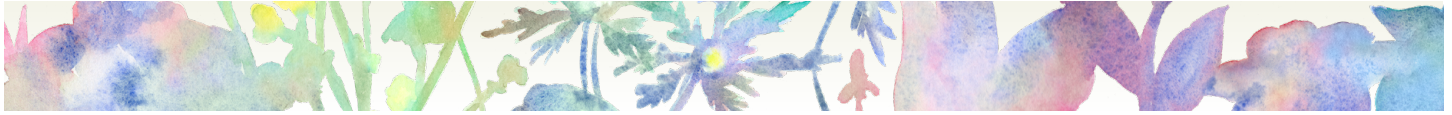
Afterwards, set a timer so students can spend five minutes freewriting or sketching in response to the poem, exploring what they thought or pictured during the reading. Then, prepare students to participate in a second reading as a group. Project the poem and/or distribute paper copies, and lead everyone in reading together, slowly, from start to finish. After a few moments of quiet, ask students to form pairs and work together to describe the poem’s imagery, informed by their freewriting and sketching: in other words, what sort of scene is Emily Dickinson creating for the reader? Assure them that they are not expected to determine exactly what that imagery represents or means, for now . . . though they may already have some ideas!



“A Bridge Leads from One World to the Next” by J.J. Grandville (1844).
Courtesy of the Public Domain Image Archive / Boston Public Library.

3. **Contextualizing:** Now that students have acquainted themselves with the poem’s cosmic imagery, help them to connect it with other fantastical visions of the universe from this time period. Ask if they know any nineteenth-century authors of science fiction and fantasy (answers could include Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Jules Verne, or even Edgar Allan Poe); some students might be unaware that these genres existed during this time period. It might be relevant to mention that Jules Verne’s *From Earth to the Moon*, which describes a voyage through outer space, was first translated into English in the 1870s.

To provide a visual representation of nineteenth-century cosmic fantasy, you could share the illustration “A Bridge Leads from One World to the Next” from J.J. Grandville’s *Un Autre Monde* (Another World), which was published in 1844, when Emily Dickinson was a teenager. Invite students to describe what they see in the image (a scene from an alternative universe in which people stroll casually between planets) and compare it to “Perhaps I asked too large –”, considering how each plays with the notion of planets/worlds.



To conclude this discussion, remind students that Emily Dickinson probably didn't intend for this poem to be taken as a literal work of fantasy or science fiction, like *From Earth to the Moon* or Grandville's book. Instead, Dickinson uses cosmic *metaphors* in her own uniquely poetic way . . . which can sometimes prove a little enigmatic to readers!

4. Analyzing: In small groups, students may proceed to a more focused interpretation of the poem's potential meaning(s). Set expectations for this activity by reminding students that Emily Dickinson's poetic style can be playfully ambiguous, and that there isn't one objectively "correct" interpretation of "Perhaps I asked too large – ". Consider providing conversation starters to inspire group discussion, such as:

- **What might it mean to “ask too large” and “take no less than skies”?**

To answer this question, students might consider English-language idioms that are similar in both theme and imagery—such as “ask for the moon” or “shoot for the stars.”

- **What is the metaphorical role of the “Basket” in the poem? How do baskets tend to be used, and what types of things can be gathered or carried in them?**

Students might start by reviewing the roles of baskets—e.g. laundry baskets, shopping baskets — in their own lives, or other associations from history or pop culture that these objects evoke.

- **Dickinson sets up a comparison between “skies”/“Firmaments”, which the speaker takes and collects, and “Earths,” which are too common to catch their interest. What could “skies” and “Earths” represent?**
- **What might the “smaller bundles” of the last line symbolize? Why would such**

bundles “Cram” on someone’s arm when the “Firmaments” do not?

When discussion concludes, give each student an index card or sticky note. Ask them to summarize, in a sentence or so, their opinions about what the poem means, and then stick their completed note or card on the wall to form a collaborative installation of interpretations.

- 5. Responding:** With these interpretations in mind, students can now “collaborate” with Emily Dickinson from the future by writing a short prose response (perhaps 200–300 words, or a handwritten page) inspired by the poem, which will function as a **formative assessment** of the lesson.

Begin by writing or projecting the line **“I take – no less than skies –”** and ask students to copy it down. Just like that, they've already written the first six words of their responses! Explain to students that it is now their task to continue writing a few paragraphs from the perspective of an original character, exploring what it means for this character to “take no less than skies.”

This response might take the form of a very short story told in first-person point-of-view or a brief monologue in the character's voice.

The character's voice, of course, depends on the student's interpretation of this line. Is “I take – no less than skies – ” a statement of empowerment, uttered by someone standing up for themselves at last? Are these courageous words, spoken by a hero or protector? Or could this be the bold declaration of a dreamer, who's bored of the ordinary?

To prepare, students may reread their initial thoughts about the poem and interpretations from the collaborative installation; they may also return to the word cloud from the beginning of the lesson and consider examples of other fictional characters or



tropes that they enjoy. Some students might even try speaking this line out loud, with different emotional emphases, to help them imagine a character saying it! For a more guided approach, give the class the chance to brainstorm, in pairs or small groups, general character archetypes that align with themes of the poem, with the goal of assembling a joint “character bank” for students to draw upon before they start writing.

When the writing activity is complete, you might also provide an opportunity for students to share their responses—whether by hosting an in-class reading, posting the responses to a course blog, or printing them in a homemade anthology.

6. Expanding: Students can continue their engagement with this poem and the theme of speculative fiction through a multi-media creative project. Prompts for projects could include:

- Make a zine inspired by the poem, using collage, drawing, or painting to illustrate and respond to Dickinson’s words.
- Identify a recent creative work (video game, artwork, novel, etc.) that also contains cosmic imagery, and write a blog post comparing this work with the poem.
- With a small group, create a short film that adapts the poem’s themes into an original story, using music and visuals to bring the imagery to life.

Classes interested in exploring social history and material culture may expand the lesson by viewing examples of real baskets used for more ordinary purposes by the Dickinson household, which can be found by searching for “basket,” under the “object name” field in the “Advanced Search” section of the Emily Dickinson Museum’s online [collection catalog](#). Nan Wolverton’s “‘The Wanderers came last Night’:

Dickinson and the Material Culture of Indigenous Basket Sellers,” mentioned previously, also explores the Dickinson family’s interactions with the artists who created some of these baskets.



The basket as a vessel of imagination also features in the poet’s biography. When the neighborhood children played at pirates “storm-tossed, starving on some barren isle,” (Jenkins, 39) Dickinson would come to their aid by slowly lowering a basket of gingerbread from her bedroom window.

RESOURCES

Manuscript

“Amherst – Amherst Manuscript #fascicle 85 – I dreaded that first robin, so – asc:17621 – p. 10.” *Emily Dickinson Archive*.

Fascicle

Dickinson, Emily. “Fascicle 17.” Amherst College Archives and Special Collections.

Social Context

Grandville, J. J. “A Bridge Leads from One World to the Next.” In *Un autre monde: transformations, visions, incarnations... et autres choses*. Paris: H. Fournier, 1844. High-resolution image available at Public Domain Image Archive.

Jenkins, MacGregor. *Emily Dickinson: Friend and Neighbor*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1930.

Emily Dickinson Museum. [Online Collections Catalogue](#).

Wolverton, Nan. “‘The Wanderers came last Night’: Dickinson and the Material Culture of Indigenous Basket Sellers.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Karen Sánchez-Eppler and Cristanne Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.