



## Activity 3: Emily Dickinson

In this activity we will be looking at two poems by Emily Dickinson called 'There came a Wind like a Bugle' and 'The Soul has Bandaged moments'.

### There came a Wind like a Bugle

There came a Wind like a Bugle-  
It quivered through the Grass  
And a Green Chill upon the Heat  
So ominous did pass  
We barred the Windows and the Doors  
As from an Emerald Ghost –  
The Doom's Electric Moccasin  
That very instant passed –  
On a strange Mob of panting Trees  
And Fences fled away  
And Rivers where the Houses ran  
Those looked that lived – that Day –  
The Bell within the steeple wild  
The flying tidings told -  
How much can come  
And much can go,  
And yet abide the World!

#### Glossary

**bugle:** a small trumpet often used in hunts and army exercises

**moccasin:** a soft leather shoe worn by Native American tribes

**tidings:** news. Tiding can also mean to drift with the tide

**abide:** stay, endure, tolerate, survive

'There came a Wind like a Bugle' is tentatively dated to 1883, although it was not published in Emily Dickinson's lifetime. What do you think is happening in this poem? The 'Green Chill upon the Heat' suggests a sunny day that suddenly darkens. A strong wind is blowing, so it's likely that this describes the beginning of a storm. A bugle is a small trumpet, generally used to announce a hunt, or a military exercise, so 'a Wind like a Bugle' might suggest approaching thunder, like the sound of horses' hooves. The literary critic Helen Vendler argues that the Bugle in this poem is the trumpet of the angel Gabriel, and that Dickinson is alluding to the Book of Revelation from the Bible, in which the world ends and the dead rise from their graves.<sup>7</sup> Moccasins were soft shoes worn by Native American Indians, so Vendler argues that a dead tribe is passing by the door, returning to their stolen lands. '

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Doom's Electric Moccasin' might also evoke a shiny, poisonous snake, fleeing from the approaching storm.

The 'Mob of panting trees' is another unusual description, as if the trees are a frenzied crowd of people. A *mob* is an excitable rabble, but it could also mean, by 1839, 'gang of criminals'.<sup>8</sup> The barring of doors and windows in this poem suggest both a fear of being stolen away, and perhaps a fearful guilt at living on stolen land. The 'Fences', which usually draw boundaries between people and keep intruders out, are all 'fled away', echoing the language of Revelations 16, in which 'every island fled away'.<sup>9</sup>

### Structure

The poem is mostly in hymn meter – the meter used in church hymns like 'Amazing Grace' – which consists of lines of eight syllables, alternating with lines of either six syllables or seven syllables. Many of Dickinson's poems use hymn meter: in this poem, the pattern is 8/6. She breaks the meter only once: when she writes 'How much can come / And much can go', she divides the usual eight-syllable line in two. Why do you think that she breaks the structure of the poem at this point? She also shifts from full rhymes at the beginning of the poem (Grass/pass, away/day) to half-rhymes at the end of the poem (told/World). Is the half-rhyme unsettling to your ears? Why might she want to unsettle you at the end of this poem?

### Context

Emily Dickinson lived through the American Civil War (1861–1865), in which southern states (on the Confederate side) and northern states (on the Union side) went to war over President Abraham Lincoln's opposition to expanding slavery. The North opposed slavery, while the South defended it. Although the Dickinson family were 'never set on fire by the abolitionist movement' (to abolish slavery), they supported the Union side in the war.<sup>10</sup> Emily Dickinson was not closely involved in the conflict, but her poems often borrow the language of battle, and she wrote several poems lamenting dead soldiers. The ending of 'There came a Wind like a Bugle' – 'How much can come / And much can go, / And yet abide the World!' – evokes the aftermath of a battle which feels like the end of the world, yet some witnesses, and 'the World', do still 'abide' the poem's end. On one level, you could read this as simply a poem about a storm, but she also alludes to other conflagrations and battles for territory, as well as the Biblical Revelation.

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Emily Dickinson's own religious beliefs were rebellious and somewhat mysterious. In the 1850s, Amherst (the town where she lived all her life) went through a 'religious revival', involving fervent preaching. In the Calvinist, Puritan Christian tradition that Amherst residents followed, souls were divided between 'established Christians', those 'with hope', and those 'without hope' of salvation. In order to convert, the subject had to believe that they were chosen by God to be among the saved. Emily Dickinson, alone among her family, remained unconverted. 'I am standing alone in my rebellion', she wrote to her friend Jane Humphrey in 1850.<sup>11</sup> Her poems often advance an image of the soul as an unfettered, free entity, able to escape, as in the following poem, written around 1862.

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### This Soul has Bandaged moments

The Soul has Bandaged moments –  
When too appalled to stir –  
She feels some ghastly Fright come up  
And stop to look at her –

Salute her, with long fingers –  
Caress her freezing hair –  
Sip, Goblin, from the very lips  
The Lover – hovered – o'er –  
Unworthy, that a thought so mean  
Accost a Theme – so – fair –

The soul has moments of escape –  
When bursting all the doors –  
She dances like a Bomb, abroad,  
And swings upon the Hours,

As do the Bee – delirious borne –  
Long Dungeoned from his Rose –  
Touch Liberty – then know no more –  
But Noon, and Paradise

The Soul's retaken moments –  
When, Felon led along,  
With shackles on the plumed feet,  
And staples, in the song,

The Horror welcomes her, again,  
These, are not brayed of Tongue –

### Glossary

**goblin:** small monstrous/  
mischievous creature

**accost:** greet

**delirious:** excited to the point of  
madness

**borne:** carried

**felon:** prisoner or criminal

**plumed:** feathered

**staples:** in Dickinson's time,  
these were heavy metal fastenings  
on carriages and doors

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### **Structure**

In this poem, Dickinson breaks from hymn meter more often, beginning with a seven-syllable line rather than her usual eight syllables. How might this go with the idea of 'Bandaged moments' that the poem plays with? You might find her characteristic use of dashes (–) as punctuation more noticeable in this poem, too. What effect do these dashes have? They might feel like pauses for breath, making the poem stutter: they live out or embody the 'Bandaged moments' that the poem describes. As with 'There came a Wind like a Bugle', the poem contains both full rhymes and half-rhymes, such as doors/Hours, borne/more, which might be subtly unsettling.

### **Further Analysis**

As well as the poetry of John Keats and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Dickinson loved the novels of Charlotte and Emily Brontë. If you read Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847), the Gothic imagery of this poem might feel familiar. A 'Goblin', who seems to be the same thing as the 'Fright', comes in place of the 'Lover' who was there before. Fear is intruding on love. However, the 'Bandaged moments' then become 'moments of Escape', dancing like a Bomb. We wouldn't usually think of a bomb 'dancing': this description feels gleefully destructive, and the 'delirious' Bee seems to be escaping from prison. By the end of the poem, the 'moments of Escape' finally become 'The Soul's retaken moments'. How does this change the mood of the poem? A shift has occurred whereby horror isn't *just* horrifying. It's also exhilarating.

### **Tasks**

1. The Soul begins by meeting a 'Fright', and her hair is 'freezing': what does this suggest to you? Is the speaker of the poem outside in the cold, or sleeping next to an open window?