

# Module A:

## TEXTUAL CONVERSATIONS

### Emily Dickinson



#### 21 'To learn the Transport by the Pain'

##### Summary:

- Some people only learn what joy / transcendence (“Transport”) is through intense suffering (“by the Pain”).
- It is like being blind and having to learn the sun, or dying of thirst while suspecting water is close, or wanting to go home but being stuck offshore.
- This kind of suffering is “Sovereign Anguish” – the highest, ruling pain – a special category of human experience.
- Those who endure it become “patient ‘Laureates’”: people crowned by their suffering; their voices are trained “below” (on earth) and then rise in a constant song (“ceaseless Carol”) that ordinary people cannot hear.
- We are the “duller scholars / Of the Mysterious Bard” – too dense to fully understand the cosmic Poet (God / the universe).

##### Key themes & ideas:

- Pain as pedagogy: suffering is not just awful; it teaches. You “learn the Transport by the Pain”.
- Knowledge through deprivation: the speaker repeatedly imagines people who only truly understand something because they are cut off from it (blind, thirsty, homesick).
- Exile and homesickness: the “foreign shore” suggests spiritual exile – being in the world but longing for “native land” (heaven? true home?).
- Transcendence through anguish: the “Laureates” gain a higher voice; their suffering trains them to sing a carol that ascends beyond ordinary hearing.
- Human limitation: we are “duller scholars” of a “Mysterious Bard” – we study God / existence but never fully grasp it.

##### Useful theoretical framings:

- Romantic / post-Romantic spirituality: like the Romantics, Dickinson sees intense emotion and suffering as a route to heightened awareness or the sublime.
- Religious / metaphysical reading: “Sovereign Anguish”, “Carol”, “Laureates”, “Bard” all hint at a Christian or spiritual framework where earthly suffering leads to spiritual elevation.
- Existential tension: the poem also feels cruel: blind people learning the sun, dying of thirst suspecting water – it hints at a universe where clarity is glimpsed but not possessed, similar to Hamlet’s sense of being trapped between knowledge and action.

To learn the **Transport** by the Pain  
As Blind Men learn the sun!  
To die of thirst - suspecting  
That Brooks in Meadows run!

**Infinitive phrase**- Drops us into an abstract idea without a subject, like a thesis statement. It feels universal rather than personal.

**Capitalised**, slightly archaic word for ecstasy, rapture, overwhelming joy or spiritual elevation.

**Preposition** “by” makes pain the means of learning joy. This is a **paradox**: suffering teaches exaltation.

**Simile**- Blind men can't see the sun; they learn it indirectly (warmth on their skin). This creates a **paradoxical image**: knowledge comes via deprivation. **Capitalisation** “Blind Men” and “sun” and the **exclamatory tone** elevates the image into **symbolic** territory.

**Hyperbolic scenario**- extreme suffering / deprivation.

Dash before “suspecting”- Dramatic pause through **caesura**; emphasises the cruel **irony** that the sufferer suspects relief exists.

Gentle, **pastoral image**: flowing water, green meadows, intensifies the tragedy: relief is imaginable, maybe near, but not accessible.

The **juxtaposition** of “die of thirst” with the soft pastoral “Brooks in Meadows” builds tragic **irony**: the mind can conceive of comfort it cannot reach, mirroring the psychological torment of spiritual or emotional longing.

To stay the **homesick-homesick**  
feet  
Upon a **foreign shore** -  
**Haunted by native lands**, the while  
—  
And blue —beloved air!

**Anaphora**- Repeating the infinitive “To...” structures the stanza like a list of mental tortures.

**Repetition**- Emphasises the intensity and involuntary pull towards “home.”

**Synecdoche / metonymy**: “feet”- The body part stands in for the whole person; emphasises how desire to go home is almost physical and communicates a sense of fragmentation.

**Symbolic** of exile, displacement, a liminal space. **Caesura** prolongs the sense of being stranded. This image of “homesick feet” forcibly “stayed” on a “foreign shore” turns emotional longing into a bodily ache, intensifying the sense of exile and reinforcing the idea of being trapped away from one's true “home” (literal or spiritual).

**Personification**; memories of home are not gentle but oppressive; they stalk the mind.

“native lands” suggest a true origin, place of belonging. Could be read as childhood, homeland, or heaven. This **juxtaposes** the previous line.

Alliteration + colour symbolism.

“Air” becomes precious; the speaker longs not just for land but the atmosphere of home. Exclamation mark signals emotional intensity. The phrase “Haunted by native lands” personifies memory as a ghost that will not let go, while the sensory image of “blue—beloved air!” conveys how deeply identity is tied to place; exile becomes a form of spiritual suffocation.

This is the **Sovereign Anguish!**  
This —the **signal woe!**  
These are the **patient "Laureates"**  
Whose voices—trained—below—

**Definitions:**

*In the poem: "Sovereign Anguish"  
= the highest, ruling form of pain,  
the kind that dominates  
everything else.*

*In the poem, "signal woe"  
suggests a distinctive, marked  
kind of suffering, not just  
ordinary sadness.*

*Laureates- From "laurel"  
wreaths that were placed on the  
heads of poets and heroes in  
ancient Greece and Rome a  
person honoured for great  
achievement, especially in the  
arts (for example, Poet Laureate,  
Nobel Laureate).*

Ascend in **ceaseless Carol** —  
Inaudible, indeed,  
To us—the **duller scholars**  
Of the **Mysterious Bard!**

**Definitions:**

*Bard- a poet, especially one who  
recites epic or heroic poems  
(often linked to oral tradition).*

**Anaphora** points directly to the experiences described: this is what true suffering is. Also creates a sense of endlessness.

The **capitalisation personifies** Anguish as a ruler (Sovereign) and gives pain an almost royal or defied status.

The **exclamatory statement** suggests a distinguishing mark of high-level suffering.

Dickinson elevates this kind of deprivation and exile, suggesting that such pain is not ordinary but a ruling, defining human experience that marks those who endure it as different.

Turns the sufferers into a category, almost a class of people with the **collective language**.

The **historical allusion** evokes images of poets crowned with laurel wreaths; here, the crown comes from suffering.

Quotation marks around "Laureates" signal a slightly **ironic** or re-defined use of the term.- **Metaphor**: sufferers as poets.

Their experience is a kind of training.

"voices—trained—below—" - Dashes fragment the line, **caesura**, suggesting a slow, painful training process. "below" implies earth, **contrasted** with "Ascend" in the next stanza.

**Antithetical framework** as **contrasts** the previous stanza, now moving vertically as a spiritual or heavenly direction.

**Alliteration** + spiritual / Christmas connotations from "carol" that suggests eternal worship or praise, furthers the **antithetical framework**.

**Paradox** as the song is constant but cannot be heard by us.

The "trained" voices of the sufferers from the last stanza rise into an unending spiritual song that ordinary humans cannot hear, reinforcing the idea that suffering can open access to a level of experience that exceeds normal perception.

Sudden shift to **first person plural**: includes speaker and reader.

**Self-deprecating metaphor**, we may study, but we are slow, blunt, lacking sharpness as we have not experienced or learnt from pain and suffering.

"Mysterious Bard"- **Capitalised**; likely a **metaphor** for God, or the ultimate Poet/Author of existence. "Mysterious" as an **epithet** acknowledges the limits of human understanding.

The speaker humbly positions "us" as slow learners trying to interpret the work of the "Mysterious Bard", suggesting that human beings can only partially comprehend the meaning of suffering and transcendence.

## Linking to Textual Conversations & Hamlet

### Shared concerns:

- Pain as a path to insight
- Dickinson: “learn the Transport by the Pain”; spiritual knowledge through suffering.
- Hamlet: learns the truth about corruption, mortality, and his own nature through grief, disgust and despair (father’s death, mother’s remarriage, Ophelia’s death).
- Exile and not-belonging
- Dickinson’s “foreign shore” vs “native lands” mirrors Hamlet’s sense that Denmark is “an unweeded garden / That grows to seed”; he feels spiritually foreign in his own home.
- Limits of human understanding
- Dickinson: “duller scholars / Of the Mysterious Bard!” – we can’t fully read God’s text.
- Hamlet: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy” – reason cannot grasp everything.
- Voice, art and suffering
- Dickinson’s “patient ‘Laureates’” whose painful experiences train their voices.
- Hamlet as a kind of “Laureate” of grief: his soliloquies transform suffering into language; the play itself is a carol rising from anguish.

### You might also compare specific moments:

- Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be” with Dickinson’s first stanza:
- Both weigh the idea that to continue in pain is to remain in a world of thirst and homesickness, but that death is also unknown.
- Dickinson imagines “dying of thirst, suspecting / That Brooks in Meadows run”; Hamlet fears “the undiscover’d country”; both imagine a reality beyond their grasp that might contain relief, but they cannot access it.
- The end of Hamlet vs “ceaseless Carol”:
- Hamlet’s death leads to a new regime (Fortinbras) and a story that will be told: “report me and my cause aright”.
- Dickinson’s “Laureates” also have their suffering turned into song, but one we cannot fully hear. Both suggest that suffering generates narratives and “songs” that outlast individual pain.

## Context

### Emily Dickinson:

- Time & place: Mid-late 19th century, New England (Amherst, Massachusetts).
- Religious background: Post-Puritan, Protestant culture, strong focus on sin, salvation, individual soul.
- Transcendentalist influence: Nearby movement (Emerson, Thoreau) emphasising inner spiritual experience, nature, and the individual’s relationship with the divine.
- Female, semi-private writer: Wrote largely for herself; most poems unpublished in her lifetime → intense, inward, experimental voice.
- Form: Short lyric poems, hymn-like rhythms, dashes, slant rhyme, compressed imagery.
- View of suffering: Pain as a potential path to spiritual insight or “Transport”, but also deeply ambiguous and isolating.
- Attitude to God / the divine: Often figured as distant, enigmatic (“Mysterious Bard”), not straightforwardly comforting.

### Shakespeare:

- Time & place: Turn of 16th–17th century, Elizabethan–Jacobean England.
- Religious tension: Reformation aftermath → Catholic vs Protestant beliefs about death, purgatory, ghosts, sin.
- Political context: Anxiety about royal succession, unstable monarchy, fear of disorder in the state.
- Humanism / Renaissance thought: Interest in reason, inner consciousness, the complexity of the individual.
- View of suffering: Pain tied to political corruption, family betrayal and existential dread (“to be or not to be”).
- Attitude to the divine / afterlife: God and the afterlife present but uncertain; generates fear, hesitation, philosophical questioning.