

MISS EMILY

BY Burleigh Mutén

ILLUSTRATED BY Matt Phelan

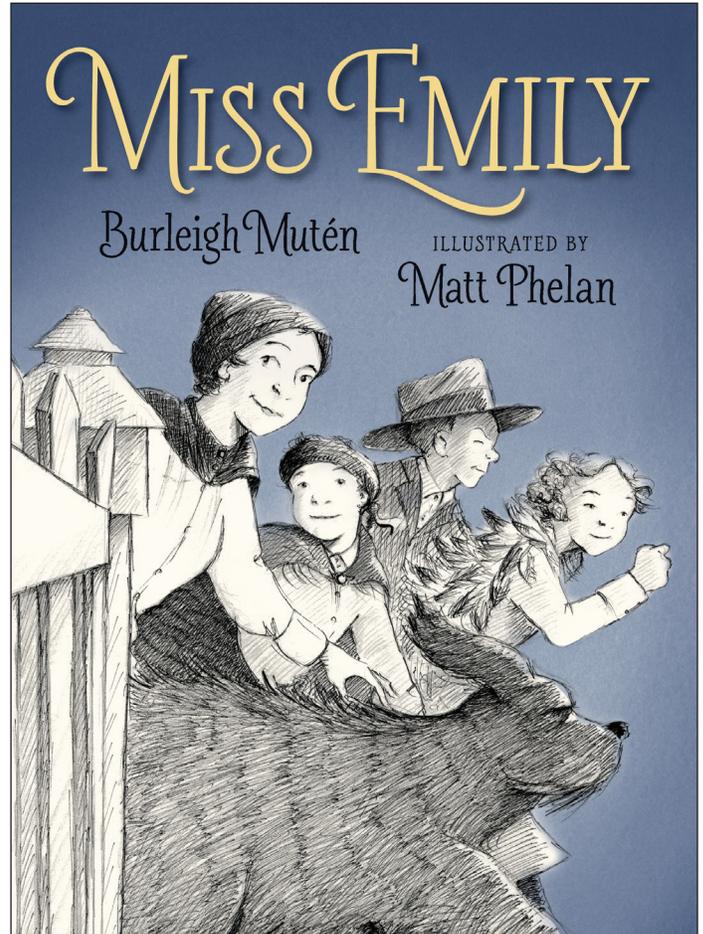


About The Book

Poet Emily Dickinson is a loner, but she is a friend to Mac, Sally, Mattie, and Ned, four children who live near her home in Amherst, Massachusetts. She sends them frequent letters—sometimes written in riddles—and calls upon their imaginations to solve them. When Ned delivers an invitation from Miss Emily for the children to come to her garden, they suspect that the best adventure is about to begin. Mac, the youngest member of the group, tells what happens when the reclusive Miss Emily and her band of pretend gypsies sneak away late at night to watch for the midnight circus train. They lurk in the shadows of the train station for fear of being seen, but their midnight caper is revealed when Mac hurts his ankle and must be carried home by Ned. Mac's father, the pastor, scolds his son for making poor choices, but recognizes a child's need for adventure. Reverend and Mrs. Jenkins take Mac and Sally to the circus, and the children think about Miss Emily as they witness the amazing acts. Eager to share their experience with her, they plan their own circus in the Dickinson barn. It is there that Miss Emily grants them yet another unforgettable surprise.



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Common Core Connections

This short novel in verse reveals the childlike nature of the reclusive Emily Dickinson and invites young readers to explore the complexity of her character through the adventures she shares with four neighborhood children. The Thematic and Curriculum Connections in this guide are layered to accommodate the learning needs of most students in grades 3–5. Students are called upon to be careful readers without jeopardizing the pleasure they gain from reading. It is best to allow students to read the entire novel before engaging in a detailed study of the work. They should come away with an understanding of Emily Dickinson as a poet and friend.

There are notes throughout the guide that correlate the discussion and activities with specific Common Core Language Arts Standards. For more information on specific standards for your grade level, visit the Common Core website at www.corestandards.org.

Pre-Reading Activity

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Reading: Literature: Key Ideas and Details RL. 3–5.1; Reading: Craft and Structure RL. 3–5.4; Writing: Text Types and Purposes W. 3–5.2.

One of Emily Dickinson's most famous poems is "I'm Nobody! Who Are You?" (<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15392>). Read the poem aloud to the class. Engage the students in a discussion about the meaning of the poem. Who is the speaker? What is the theme? Explain the meaning of the line "How public—like a frog." What does the poem reveal about Dickinson? Then have students write a paragraph that explains whether they think they are a "Nobody" or a "Somebody" as described by Dickinson.

Thematic Connections

FAMILY

Describe Mac and Sally's family. What is their relationship with their father? Why does he have such high expectations of his children? Explain how he shows love for Mac even when he reprimands him. What does Sally mean when she says to Mac, "It is nearly the hour for our distant family to arrive" (pages 16–17)? Who is their "distant family"?

FRIENDSHIP

How might Mac, Sally, Ned, and Mattie describe their friendship? What is their relationship with Miss Emily? Explain why Miss Emily is more comfortable with the children than she is with adults. Why does Miss Emily refer to all the children as "boys" despite the fact that two are girls? Is she being sexist? Why does she call the group the "Amherst gypsies"? Take a look at the illustrations on pages 33, 42–43, 55, and 58. How does Matt Phelan visually convey the friendship between the children and Miss Emily? Why does Miss Emily need the children's friendship more as she grows older?

IMAGINATION

Describe the imaginations of the four children. Why must they rely on their imaginations in play? Explain how Emily Dickinson's "riddles" call upon the children to use their imaginations. In what other ways does she encourage their imaginations? At what point does Mac's imagination grow wild? In the Historical Notes, the author states that Mac Jenkins and Mattie Dickinson grew up to become writers. Debate whether Emily Dickinson and the children's vivid imaginations might have contributed to their careers.



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GUILT

Miss Emily tells the children that she wants them to join her at midnight to see the circus train arrive. She thinks that the group must watch the train from the shadows of the station. Discuss what she means when she tells the children that being seen may cause them all “to wear mud on Sunday” (page 29). Sally becomes sick and can’t go, and Mac injures his ankle. Explain Mac’s feelings of guilt when his father learns of his midnight adventure. Why is Miss Emily willing to accept the blame for Mac’s actions?

RESPONSIBILITY

Why does Mac’s father feel that his son has a responsibility to be a good role model for the community? Explain what Mac’s dad means when he says, “When you forget this, Mac, you become injured — sometimes in body, always in spirit — and I become injured, too” (page 72). Debate whether Mac’s father places too much responsibility on his son. Cite evidence that Mac’s spirit isn’t injured when he hurts his ankle.

COURAGE

Discuss the relationship between fear and courage. When Mac is frightened to join Miss Emily, Ned, and Mattie without Sally, Sally gives him their mother’s purple shawl to use as a cloak. How does the cloak give Mac courage? Cite other times in the book when Mac shows fear. How do Ned and Miss Emily calm his fears? At what point in the novel does Mac display the most courage?

PRIVACY/DARKNESS

Emily Dickinson is known to have been reclusive. Cite evidence from the novel that Miss Emily likes privacy. How does this relate to her willingness to meet the train? Is there a difference between being shy and liking privacy? Can one be shy with some people and not with others? Read aloud “We Grow Accustomed to the Dark” (CCSS Appendix B: Text Exemplars) and discuss the symbolism of darkness. Discuss the meaning of the last two lines of the second stanza:

“Then fit our Vision to the Dark,
And meet the Road erect.”

This adventure takes place in the dark because that is when the train arrives. What does this poem convey about Miss Emily’s familiarity with darkness? How can you tell if Mac shares this familiarity?

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Reading: Literature: Key Ideas and Details RL. 3–5.1, 4–5.2, 3–5.3; Reading: Craft and Structure RL. 3–5.4, 3–5.5; Reading: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas RL. 3–5.7; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 3–5.1; Language: Knowledge of Language L. 3–5.3, 3–5.4; Speaking & Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration SL. 3–5.1, 3–5.2, 3–5.3; Speaking and Listening: Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas SL. 3–5.4, 3–5.6.

Curriculum Connections

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Language: Vocabulary Acquisition and Use L. 3–5.5; Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas SL. 3–5.4.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Language: Vocabulary Acquisition and Use L. 3–5.5.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Writing: Text Types and Purposes W. 3–5.3.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Writing: Text Types and Purposes W. 3–5.2; Writing: Research to Build and Present Knowledge W. 3–5.7.

LANGUAGE ARTS

1. Review the following types of imagery that are commonly used in poetry:

Visual: Things we can see

Tactile: Things that appeal to the sense of touch

Auditory: Things we can hear

Olfactory: Things that appeal to the sense of smell

Kinesthetic: Things that show action or motion

Gustatory: Things that appeal to the sense of taste

Then have students find examples of each type of imagery in *Miss Emily*. Have them share their examples in class and state how the imagery makes the text richer and more interesting.

2. Mutén uses similes to create certain images in the novel, such as, “The town is as still as an unplanted seed” (page 10). Ask students to find other examples of simile in the novel. Then have them write a simile that best describes Miss Emily’s circus act at the end of the novel.

3. The Historical Notes at the end of *Miss Emily* state that MacGregor (Mac) Jenkins wrote a book about his friend and neighbor Emily Dickinson. Ask students to think about whom Mac may have dedicated his book to. Perhaps it’s Emily Dickinson, Sally, Ned, or Mattie. Have students write the dedication in verse.

SOCIAL STUDIES

Have students use library books or the Internet to read about the history of the circus. What acts might one expect to see in the 1800s? The following PBS website is helpful: <http://www.pbs.org/opb/circus/in-the-ring/history-circus/>. Then have students write letters from either Mac’s or Sally’s point of view, describing to Miss Emily the most dangerous, the most unusual, or the funniest acts they saw at the circus. Instruct students to use proper format for a “friendly” letter. Have them make small illustrations in the margins. Ask them to read their letters aloud in class.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Writing: Text Types and Purposes W. 3–5.2; Writing: Research to Build and Present Knowledge W. 3–5.7, 3–5.8.

SCIENCE

Miss Emily loved flowers. Divide the class into small groups and ask them to use library books or the Internet to find out the types of plants or flowers that might be found in Miss Emily’s garden in the spring and summer. Have them write and illustrate a brochure called “The Mansion Garden.” Find an appropriate quote from a Dickinson poem to place on the cover of the brochure.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 3–5.1; Speaking and Listening: Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas SL. 3–5.4, 3–5.6.

DRAMA/ART

Emily Dickinson was born on December 10, 1830. Have the class plan a tribute to Dickinson and her poetry on her birthday. The following website may provide helpful information: <http://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org>. Small groups should be in charge of the following: a brief oral biography, choral poetry readings, an enactment of the circus performance in the Dickinson barn, and party favors and decorations that symbolize Dickinson as a person and a poet. Make and send a party invitation to another class.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Reading: Literature: Key Ideas and Details RL. 4–5.2; Reading: Integration of Knowledge & Ideas RL. 3–5.7.

ART

Matt Phelan used pencil to sketch the illustrations for *Miss Emily*. He then finished them using ink and graphite to create “smudges” for tone. What tone is he communicating? Explain how Phelan captures motion and emotion in his illustrations. Have students read and think about the theme of Dickinson’s poem “The Railway Train” (CCSS Appendix B: Text Exemplars). Then have them illustrate it using Phelan’s style of illustration.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Language: Vocabulary Acquisition and Use L. 3–5.4.

VOCABULARY/USE OF LANGUAGE

Ask students to jot down unfamiliar words and try to define them by taking clues from the context. Such words may include:

trowel (page 6)	menagerie (page 51)	tawny (page 100)
enticed (page 14)	deception (page 59)	proclamation (page 106)
silhouetted (page 23)	escapade (page 64)	confinement (page 106)
contrive (page 25)	fortnight (page 66)	equestrian (page 111)
honed (page 30)	commence (page 77)	
diversion (page 32)	writhed (page 80)	
swiveled (page 47)	pavilion (page 97)	

Then have students use a dictionary to check the meaning of each word. How well did they do?



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