StudySync Lesson Plan
The Railway Train

Objectives

1. Engage students in the figurative language, imagery, diction, sounds, and themes of “The Railway Train” so that they may develop an understanding of the poem’s meaning and are prepared to discuss and write about the piece’s cultural commentary.

2. Practice and reinforce the following Grade 9 Common Core Standards for reading literature, writing, speaking and listening, and language:

   - **READING: LITERATURE — RL.9-10.1-6**
   - **WRITING — W.9-10.1-10**
   - **SPEAKING AND LISTENING — SL.9-10.1-6**
   - **LANGUAGE— L.9-10.3-6**

Time

115 minutes (with up to an additional 155 minutes of extension possibilities)

Materials

SyncTV Premium Lesson on Emily Dickinson’s “The Railway Train”

Overview

Dickinson’s “The Railway Train” has at once a simple, song-like appeal that reveals darker tones under closer inspection. Additionally, the poem’s intricacies of both literal and figurative language give way to its complexity on a more global level, addressing themes of industrialization and development. As students examine the poetic dexterity the piece illustrates, they will be prepared to read with multi-level comprehension, discuss in small groups and with the class, and write both critical and creative, textually-rooted responses consistent with the Common Core Standards for the high school grades.
Background (10 minutes)

1. **Watch the Preview** *(SL.9-10.2)*. As a group, watch the video preview of the premium lesson. Ask the students to share what they know about the time period in which this poem was written and use the following questions to spur discussion about the preview:

   a. This poem was written during the Industrial Revolution. What do you know about this period in American history—what were the fears, hopes, and expectations of the American public at this time? What were some of the major developments of the Industrial Revolution?

   b. What came before and after the train in the timeline of transportation innovation? How did people get from place to place before the train was invented and how did that change with the railway system?

   c. What do you know about poetry or literature written at this time? Can you think of any other works written in the mid-19th century? Are there any common themes?

Extension (additional 20 minutes)

d. **Write Creatively** *(W. 9-10.2-3)*. What words stood out for you in the preview? Did you notice words such as docile, punctual, and omnipotent? Look up the meaning of these words if you don’t already know them. Brainstorm a list of at least five animals or things that you would associate with each word and combine them into a poem or vignette.

Engaging the Text (90 minutes)

2. **Read the Text (25 minutes)**

   a. **Read and Annotate** *(RL.9-10.1-6)*. Ask students to read the introduction and the poem “The Railway Train.” Be sure to give them enough time to both read and annotate the text. If your classroom has a projector, you may want to model note-taking skills by reading and annotating the first paragraph as a class. If students are reading “The Railway Train” as a homework assignment, ask them to write any questions they have into the annotation tool—these questions are visible to you after the students submit their writing assignments or beforehand if you use the “Mimic” function to access the students’ accounts.

      i. **Read.** Ask the students to read the introduction and have a student volunteer read the poem aloud. Each student should have the poem in front of them. If possible, it should also be projected on the board.

      ii. **“What do you notice?”** After hearing it for the first time, ask the students, “What do you notice?” Allow responses to take the form of a free-form discussion; anything that attracts attention in the poem is worth mentioning. If the conversation is having a hard time getting started, tell the students to pretend you’ve taken the poem away from them after the first reading and you just want to know what they remember about it.
iii. **Read again with a pencil.** Have another student read the poem aloud a second time, or use the audio feature on the site. This time, students should underline any image, phrase, or line that appeals to them. Anything goes—something that sounds nice, a phrase that rings true, or something that is clearly stated. Ask that they underline at least three things as they listen to the poem. At the same time, they should circle any words or phrases that are unfamiliar to clarify later.

iv. **Ask questions.** Each student should write at least two specific questions they have about this poem.

**Extension (additional 45 minutes)**

b. **Listen** (*RL.9-10.1-4, 6*). As a class, listen to the audio reading of the text. Ask students to use context clues to define key terms from “The Railway Train.” Note the place or situation in which one might hear a particular word (e.g., people use this word when they are talking about cooking; when they talk about working in a mine). As a group, work to define any other unclear terms or ideas not listed in the glossary.

c. **Comprehend** (*RL.9-10.1-4*) Either distribute the multiple-choice questions or read them aloud to the class. As a class, reread and discuss any passages of the text about which students remain unclear.

d. **Think Creatively** (*ELL*). Discuss the use of rhyme in the poem. First ask if students can find any rhymes and have someone deduce or explain the definition of rhyme through example. This poem features “slant rhyme,” a technique Dickinson is known for in which pairs of words provide a near-rhyme by changing a vowel sound (either changing the vowel entirely, as in “up”/“step” or by changing the length of the vowel as in “while”/“hill”). Ask students to rewrite the slant rhymes as perfect rhymes. They may rewrite one entire line per stanza to make their new vocabulary choice make sense. For example:

To fit its sides, and crawl between,  
Complaining all the while  
It gives a cry so shrill  
In horrid, hooting stanza;  
Then chase itself down hill

Encourage students to experiment—if one rhyme doesn’t produce a line that makes sense, tell them to try working with another rhyming word. You could have students come up with a bank of rhymes for each slant-rhyme word as a class and list them on the board if (for English Language Learners), their vocabulary is not broad enough to come up with the rhymes independently. This exercise should help students synthesize the meaning of the poem with its poetic devices. Ask a few students to read their re-written poems aloud and ask what the class makes of the effect of perfect rhyme vs. slant rhyme.

3. **Watch SyncTV (30 minutes)**

a. **Watch.** Either watch the SyncTV discussion associated “The Railway Train” as a class or ask students to watch it on their individual computers.

b. **Discuss** (*SL.9-10.1-6*). After students watch the model discussion, divide them into small groups (2-3 students). Move around the room monitoring the groups as students use the SyncTV episode to discuss some of the following questions:
i. What makes this poem, as the SyncTV students suggest, seem “simple” at first? Think about the way the poem sounds, its structure, and the language Dickinson uses.

ii. Suggest an adjective to describe the tone of each stanza (for example: worried, steady, joyous) and discuss how/why the poem moves through various emotional states.

iii. Review what the SyncTV students say about the word “prodigious” marking a turn in tone in the poem. What does the word mean, and how does it change the feeling of the poem? Relate this to what you know about the Industrial Revolution and the larger themes of the poem having to do with change. What are the specific moments of the poem that are directly related to a perspective on the Industrial Revolution’s impact on American life?

iv. The “I” in the poem is only mentioned once. Assess the role of this speaker throughout the poem— is the speaker present throughout the poem? Use the text to support your answer.

v. Find all the prepositions in the poem. How do they affect the way the poem operates and why do you think the poet uses them in this way?

vi. Track the extended metaphor of the horse in the poem by underlining or listing each line, phrase, or word that belongs to this trope. Why do you think Dickinson compares the train to a horse? What do they have in common and how are they different? What do we see or notice about the train when it is described to us as a horse? Are there other metaphors or similes used to describe the train? What do they add to the poem?

vii. Choose one of the questions you wrote down while annotating the poem and discuss it with your group members.

Extension (additional 20 minutes)

c. Evaluate (RL.9-10.1-3, 6; SL.9-10.1-6). Watch the SyncTV episode again (as a whole class if possible). Before watching, assign each of your students one of the two students in the episode to follow. Have your students keep a running list of points that each SyncTV student makes. Ask students to pay close attention to how the students in the episode prove their points (e.g. citing textual evidence, using personal examples, outside research). When the episode has finished, discuss each of the characters. Compare the questions they ask one another and evaluate how they attempt to answer them. When they offer an interpretation of a part of the poem, what makes their assumptions seem valid? What are some of the best and worst points made about the text? How and why?

4. Think (10 minutes)

a. Respond (W.9-10.3, 4, 9). Ask students to read the “Think” questions, watch the corresponding video clips, and respond to the questions.
5. **Write (30 minutes)**

   a. **Discuss** *(W9-10.5; SL9-10.1)* Whether you’re assigning the writing portion of the lesson as homework or as an in-class writing assignment, read the prompt as a group, or have students read it individually, and then solicit questions regarding the prompt or the assignment expectations. Whichever prompt you have chosen, make sure you are clear about the assignment expectations and the rubric by which you and the other students will be evaluating them.

   b. **Organize** *(RL.9-10.1-3, 5-6; W9-10.1, 4, 5)* Ask students to go back and annotate the text with the prompt in mind. They should be organizing their thoughts and the points they’ll address in their writing as they make annotations. If you’ve worked on outlining or other organizational tools for writing, this is a good place to apply them.

   c. **Write** *(W9-10.1, 3-5)*. Have students complete and submit their writing responses.

   **Extension (additional 30 minutes)**

   e. **Prepare** *(W.9-10.5)*. Use the writing prompt [excluding the creative response] that you did not assign and the StudySync rubric labeled “Basic Essay Structure – CCS W9-10.1.” As a class, outline an essay on “The Railway Train.” Walk students through the structure of a basic 5-paragraph essay.

      i. First, have students individually develop thesis statement ideas. Then ask several students to share these ideas.

      ii. Choose a solid idea that does not yet make an argument, and then as a class develop that idea into an argumentative thesis.

      iii. Break the students into small groups (2-3 students each) and ask them to develop supporting points for the class’s thesis.

      iv. Have the groups list 2-3 examples from the text and 1-2 examples from their own experiences that could bolster each point. Ask them to rank their supporting evidence from strongest to weakest and eliminate the weakest 2 ideas for each point.

      v. Bring the whole class together again to discuss good conclusions. Go through the criteria given in the rubric for a good conclusion. Ask students to write their own concluding sentences.

      vi. By the end of the exercise, each student should have his/her own essay outline template.

6. **Peer Review (30 minutes)**

   f. **Peer Review** *(W.9-10.4–6)*. Use the StudySync “Review” feature to have students complete one to two evaluations of their peers’ work based on your chosen review rubric. Have the students look at the peer evaluations of their own writing. In pairs, ask the students to discuss briefly the peer evaluations. Suggested questions: What might you do differently in a revision? How might you strengthen the writing and the ideas? What was the most interesting or compelling part of the essay? Why did it appeal to you?
Extension (additional 20 minutes)

g. **Self-Assess (W.9-10.4-6)**. Use the StudySync assignment creation tool to create a “Writing” assignment that asks students to address the following prompt:

Reread your essay and the reviews of your essay on “The Railway Train.” After reading these reviews, what do you believe were the greatest strengths of your essay? What were the greatest weaknesses? If you were to go back and write this essay again, what would you change about your writing process? How has writing this essay made you a better writer?
SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Key Vocabulary

1. prodigious (adj.) - remarkably or impressively great in extent, size, or degree; monstrous
2. supercilious (adj.) - displaying arrogant pride, scorn, or indifference
3. shanty (n.) - a small, crudely built shack or cabin
4. quarry (n.) - a place—typically a large, deep pit—from which stone or other materials are or have been extracted; an animal pursued by a hunter, hound, predatory mammal, or bird of prey.
5. pare (v.) - to trim (something) by cutting away its outer edges; cut off the outer skin of something
6. stanza (n.) - a unit of a poem consisting of two or more lines that are usually of the same length and following a pattern of meter and/or rhyme; from the Italian word meaning room
7. Boanerges (n.) - a loud preacher or orator from the 19th century; biblical: “Son of Thunder”
8. punctual (adj.) - on time, prompt; precise, exact; having the nature of a point in space; from the Latin meaning sharp, pointed

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. Who is the narrator?
   a. A passenger on the train.
   b. The conductor of the train.
   c. Someone who sees the train going by.
   d. The inventor of the train.

2. What type of figure is acting the verbs “lap,” “lick,” “feed,” and “step” in the first stanza?
   a. dog
   b. human
   c. road
   d. horse

3. What is an example of slant rhyme or a pair of words that nearly rhyme?
   a. and/and
   b. lick/up
   c. star/door
   d. horrid/hoooting

4. Which of the following is an example of hyperbole?
   a. “I like to see it lap the miles”
   b. “step // Around a pile of mountains”
   c. “chase itself down a hill”
   d. “punctual as a star”
5. What part of speech is the word “step”?
   a. verb
   b. adjective
   c. noun
   d. adverb

6. What type of poetic device is NOT used in the poem:
   a. metaphor
   b. simile
   c. meter
   d. onomatopoeia

7. What does the phrase “peer // In shanties by the sides of roads” show us?
   a. This is a passenger train.
   b. The train is passing through a small town.
   c. The train has gone off track.
   d. The train is built over a highway.

8. The vehicle is named as a train in the body of the poem
   a. TRUE
   b. FALSE

9. The line “Complaining all the while” is meant to describe:
   a. how tired the horse is
   b. how anxious the train passengers are to get to their destination
   c. how loud the train is
   d. how long the speaker has been traveling

10. “Punctual as a star” is which type of literary device:
    a. metaphor
    b. personification
    c. consonance
    d. simile

Answer Key

1. C
2. D
3. C
4. B
5. A
6. D
7. B
8. B
9. C
10. D
Further Assignments

1. Notice that for many of the words in the glossary, there are multiple definitions. Have students focus on one stanza and look up the words within (even if they already know what they mean), searching for as many definitions, synonyms, and associations as possible. Students may use the Internet to search several different dictionaries at once and note the etymology or origin of the words. Each student should choose one or two words with several definitions and explain how Dickinson’s work incorporates several meanings at once. (L.9-10.4-6).

2. Have students read Walt Whitman’s “To a Locomotive in Winter” and compare/contrast the two, focusing on diction, tone, use of figurative language, line length, and formal structure. (RL.9-10.4-5).

3. Have students compare this poem to others of Dickinson’s that operate in a similar fashion (“[Whether my bark went down at sea]” for example) and examine the role of the speaker. (RL.9-10.1-5).

4. Dickinson was famous for being a recluse, seen by nearly no one for the final decades of her life, but was also known as a faithful correspondent, keeping intimate relationships with many friends through letters and poems. Have students do biographical research on Emily Dickinson and create a Facebook page for her, translating her network of correspondents to a contemporary social network. (W.9-10.7-10).

5. Have students study Dickinson’s poem for its formal and structural elements, noting the number of lines, structure of stanzas, meter, rhyme, POV, etc. Have them use these notes as “rules” for an original poem on any subject that mimics the form of “The Railway Train.” Have students introduce the assignment with a few sentences explaining how the structural elements affected the content of their poems. (L.9-10.3, 5).

6. Have students list all the verbs in the poem they can find and then exchange their lists with another student to see whether either of them found verbs the other missed. Then have students create a 4-column chart with the headings “Moving,” “Eating/Drinking,” “Sounds,” “Other.” Ask them to list the verbs they found in the appropriate columns and discuss with one another why they organized the verbs as they did. (ELL)