

Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters

Exam-Oriented Notes

1. Letter to Mrs. A. P. Strong — 29 January 1850

Summary

The letter to Mrs. A. P. Strong is an early example of Emily Dickinson's intimate and reflective correspondence. The letter centres on friendship, memory, emotional attachment and the changes brought by time. Dickinson's communication conveys her affection for her friend and her awareness that the passage from childhood to adulthood can alter relationships. The letter has a nostalgic quality. Dickinson looks back at the intimacy and experiences associated with earlier days and expresses a desire to preserve the emotional bond of friendship despite the changes that life brings. It therefore becomes more than a simple personal communication: it reflects Dickinson's sensitivity to time, separation, memory and human relationships. The letter also provides an early glimpse of the sensitive, introspective and imaginative literary personality that would become characteristic of her poetry.

Major Themes

- Friendship — the emotional bond between Dickinson and her correspondent is central.
- Memory and the past — past experiences acquire emotional significance through recollection.
- Passage of time — growing older brings changes in relationships and circumstances.
- Separation and distance — physical or emotional distance creates a sense of longing.
- Nostalgia — Dickinson looks back affectionately at an earlier period of life.
- Emotional sensitivity — the letter reveals her sensitive and introspective personality.
- Change and loss — changing circumstances create anxiety about losing familiar relationships.
- Literary self-expression — personal correspondence becomes a means of expressing deeper thoughts and emotions.

Important Points

- Written on 29 January 1850.
- Addressed to Mrs. A. P. Strong.
- It is an early letter of Emily Dickinson.
- Friendship and emotional attachment form its central concern.
- Dickinson reflects on the past and the changes brought by time.
- It reveals her nostalgic and introspective temperament.
- Ordinary personal experience becomes an occasion for deeper reflection.
- The letter helps us understand the development of Dickinson's distinctive literary voice.

2. Letter to William A. Dickinson — 17 November 1851

Summary

The 17 November 1851 letter is addressed to Dickinson's brother William Austin Dickinson, generally known as Austin. The letter is primarily an affectionate expression of sibling love and longing for his presence at home. Dickinson remembers Austin's recent visit and notices his absence after he has left. Ordinary surroundings remind her of him, making his absence emotionally significant. She thinks about his journey

and expresses concern for his well-being. The approaching Thanksgiving is particularly important because it represents the possibility of the family's reunion. Dickinson imagines the family together again and expresses her wish that Austin could return home. The letter therefore presents home as a place of love, security and togetherness, while separation produces longing. It turns an ordinary family communication into an intimate reflection on family affection, absence, memory and reunion.

Major Themes

- Sibling love — Dickinson's affection for Austin is the emotional centre of the letter.
- Family affection — the family is presented as an important source of emotional security.
- Home — home represents belonging, comfort and togetherness.
- Separation — Austin's absence produces a strong feeling of longing.
- Memory — memories of Austin's recent presence make his absence more noticeable.
- Reunion — Thanksgiving becomes a symbol of the family's anticipated togetherness.
- Domestic life — ordinary family details become meaningful.
- Love and absence — separation intensifies affection.

Important Points

- Written on 17 November 1851.
- Addressed to William Austin Dickinson, Emily's brother.
- It is an early family letter.
- Dickinson misses Austin after his departure.
- Memories of his recent visit make his absence particularly vivid.
- She worries about him while he is away.
- The family at home is described with affection.
- Thanksgiving represents the hope of family reunion.
- The letter presents home and family as sources of emotional security.
- It reveals Dickinson's affectionate, imaginative and emotionally expressive personality.

Comparison of the Two Letters

Letter to Mrs. A. P. Strong	Letter to William A. Dickinson
29 January 1850	17 November 1851
Addressed to a friend/acquaintance	Addressed to her brother
Friendship is central	Family/sibling affection is central
Focuses on memory and changing relationships	Focuses on absence and anticipated reunion
Nostalgic tone	Affectionate and homesick tone
Reflects on time and emotional distance	Reflects on home, family and separation
Shows personal sensitivity	Shows domestic and familial affection

Common Themes in Both Letters

- Love and affection
- Memory
- Absence and separation
- Human relationships
- Emotional sensitivity
- The importance of personal bonds
- Transformation of ordinary experience into literary expression

Important Exam Questions and Answers

1. Discuss the major concerns of Emily Dickinson's letter to Mrs. A. P. Strong.

Answer: The letter is primarily concerned with friendship, memory, time and emotional attachment. Dickinson's reflections reveal her strong affection for her correspondent and her awareness that relationships change as people grow older. The past is remembered with nostalgia, while emotional distance creates a sense of loss. The letter explores the desire to preserve meaningful relationships despite the changes brought by time and reveals Dickinson's sensitivity and introspective nature.

2. What is the central idea of the letter to William A. Dickinson?

Answer: The central idea is Emily Dickinson's affection for her brother Austin and her longing for his presence at home. His absence makes her more conscious of the importance of family and home. She recalls his recent visit and looks forward to Thanksgiving, when the family may be reunited. The letter presents home as a space of love and belonging, while separation produces homesickness and longing.

3. Discuss the theme of separation in Dickinson's two letters.

Answer: Separation is an important emotional element in both letters. In the letter to Mrs. A. P. Strong, Dickinson's reflections on friendship are connected with the changes and distances that occur as people grow older. In the letter to Austin, separation is expressed through her longing for her brother's return home. In both cases, absence makes personal relationships more emotionally significant and produces memory, nostalgia and a stronger awareness of affection.

4. How does Dickinson present the idea of home in the letter to William A. Dickinson?

Answer: Dickinson presents home as a place of love, comfort, belonging and family unity. Austin's absence makes her more conscious of the emotional importance of home. She remembers him in domestic surroundings and looks forward to his return. Thanksgiving strengthens the idea of home as a place where the family can come together. Home is therefore not merely a physical location but an emotional space created by the presence of loved ones.

5. What do these letters reveal about Emily Dickinson's personality?

Answer: The letters reveal Dickinson as affectionate, sensitive, introspective and imaginative. She attaches great importance to friendship and family relationships. She is deeply affected by absence and separation and transforms ordinary experiences into opportunities for reflection. Her attention to memory, time and emotional relationships shows the introspective quality that later became characteristic of her poetry.

6. How do Dickinson's letters transform ordinary experiences into literary expression?

Answer: Dickinson begins with ordinary experiences—friendship, family visits, absence, home and the anticipation of Thanksgiving—but gives them deeper emotional significance. A changing friendship becomes a reflection on time and memory, while a brother's absence becomes a meditation on home, love and reunion. Her ability to discover deeper meaning in everyday life is an important characteristic of her writing.

7. Compare Dickinson's relationship with Mrs. A. P. Strong and William A. Dickinson.

Answer: Dickinson's relationship with Mrs. A. P. Strong is presented through friendship and emotional attachment, while her relationship with William A. Dickinson is based on sibling and family affection. In both letters, however, Dickinson values intimate human relationships deeply. Both relationships involve memory and emotional responses to distance or absence.

8. Why are these two letters important for studying Dickinson as a life-narrative writer?

Answer: They provide direct insight into Dickinson's personal relationships, domestic world, emotions and developing literary personality. The letters allow readers to encounter Dickinson through her own voice and show how she responded to friendship, family, absence, memory and everyday events. They demonstrate how personal correspondence can become a form of literary self-expression.

Short Questions for 1–2 Marks

When was Dickinson's letter to Mrs. A. P. Strong written? 29 January 1850.

Who was the recipient of the January 1850 letter? Mrs. A. P. Strong.

When was the letter to William A. Dickinson written? 17 November 1851.

Who was William A. Dickinson? He was Emily Dickinson's brother, William Austin Dickinson.

What is the main concern of the letter to Mrs. A. P. Strong? Friendship, memory, time and changing relationships.

What is the central concern of the letter to William A. Dickinson? Dickinson's affection for her brother and her longing for his return home.

What does Thanksgiving represent in the second letter? The anticipated reunion and togetherness of the family.

Mention two qualities of Dickinson revealed by these letters. She is sensitive and introspective.

What does home represent in the letter to Austin? Love, belonging, security and family unity.

Mention two common themes of the letters. Love/affection and separation/absence.

Quick Revision

Mrs. A. P. Strong: Friendship → Memory → Time → Change → Nostalgia

William A. Dickinson: Brother → Absence → Home → Thanksgiving → Reunion

Both: Personal relationships + emotion + memory + separation + literary self-expression.