



CIRCUMSCRIBING MEANING: HOW EMILY DICKINSON USES RIDDLES AND LETTERS TO EXPRESS OPEN-ENDED IDEAS

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Abstract: *This study explores the indirect and open-ended poetic style of the American poet Emily Dickinson (1830–1886). Rather than giving direct answers or clear moral lessons, Dickinson creates poems that leave room for multiple interpretations. This article focuses on two central strategies in her writing: first, her practice of blending poems into her personal letters; and second, her use of riddle structures—specifically enigmas—that describe a topic indirectly without ever naming it directly. By analyzing her original handwritten manuscripts alongside critical studies, this paper shows how early print editors altered her line breaks, punctuation, and poem-letter structures to fit traditional Victorian expectations. The study concludes that Dickinson’s evasive style is not an accidental flaw or lack of formal skill, but an intentional technique designed to show the complexity of nature, death, and human thought.*

Keywords: *Emily Dickinson, poetic style, letters and poetry, riddle form, textual editing, open-ended meaning*

Introduction

The American poet Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) remains one of the most intriguing figures in nineteenth-century literature. Unlike famous poets of her era such as Ralph Waldo Emerson or Walt Whitman, Dickinson published very few poems during her lifetime and wrote no essays explaining her poetic theories [Barnstone, 1990: 12]. Instead, she spent most of her life in Amherst, Massachusetts, writing over eighteen hundred poems on loose sheets of paper, household scraps, and inside private letters sent to friends and family [Hart, 1996: 21; Higgins, 1996: 58]. When her early editors, Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis

Todd, published her poems after her death in the 1890s, they believed her writing was full of grammatical mistakes and irregular rhythms [Hart, 1996: 48]. As a result, they changed her punctuation, normalized her rhymes, and added titles to make her poems fit traditional Victorian tastes [Franklin, 1967: 141; Hart, 1996: 48].

Modern literary scholarship has shown that Dickinson's unusual writing style was not an accident, but a deliberate creative choice [Barnstone, 1990: 15; Hart, 1996: 12]. In a famous 1862 letter to Higginson, Dickinson wrote: "My Business is Circumference" [Catherine Henning, 1967: 9]. This statement suggests that her goal was not to state truths directly, but to describe around a subject—to "circumscribe" it—leaving the final meaning open to the reader [Catherine Henning, 1967: 9; Nelson, 2020: 62]. Rather than forcing a poem to deliver a single moral message, Dickinson created texts that explore what Daniel A. Nelson calls an open-ended poetics, where meaning develops through suggestion, mystery, and indirect description [Nelson, 2020: 62].

This article focuses on two specific ways Dickinson achieves this open-ended quality in her work. First, it investigates how she mixed prose and poetry inside her personal correspondence, making it difficult to separate her letters from her poems [Hart, 1996: 21; Hewitt, 2000: 103]. Second, it examines her use of riddles—particularly the "enigma"—as a literary device to describe natural phenomena and complex emotions without naming them explicitly [Catherine Henning, 1967: 11].

Research Methods

To examine Dickinson's poetic techniques, this study uses a qualitative literary methodology that combines manuscript analysis with formal textual criticism. We examine Dickinson's handwritten manuscripts, letters, and fascicles (her homemade booklet collections) as published in facsimile editions by scholars such as Ralph W. Franklin, Ellen Louise Hart, and Martha Nell Smith, comparing these original materials with early published versions to see how editors altered her line breaks, capitalization, and dashes. In addition, we apply structural theories of

the riddle form (identifying categories such as enigmas and charades) and epistolary theories of letter-writing to categorize how Dickinson blends poetic verse into everyday correspondence, demonstrating how her material choices support her indirect approach to meaning.

Result

Our investigation highlights two major findings regarding how Dickinson creates indirect, open-ended meaning in her verse.

1. The Blurring of Poems and Letters

The first major finding is that Dickinson did not keep a strict boundary between her private letters and her formal poetry [Hart, 1996: 21; Hewitt, 2000: 103]. After 1865, she stopped binding her poems into small homemade booklets called fascicles [Franklin, 1981: xi; Socarides, 2007: 103]. Instead, her main way of sharing her writing became her letters to friends, relatives, and literary advisors such as Susan Huntington Dickinson, Samuel Bowles, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson [Hart, 1996: 21; Higgins, 1996: 167].

In these letters, Dickinson frequently embedded poetic lines directly into her prose sentences without using special marks or stanza breaks [Hewitt, 2000: 103]. For example, in an 1876 letter, she wrote:

"A mellow Rain is falling. / It wont be ripe till April—How luscious is the dripping of Febuary eaves! It makes our thinking Pink / It antedates the Robin—bereaving in prospective that Febuary leaves—" [Higgins, 1996: 276].

When mid-twentieth-century editors like Thomas H. Johnson printed her collected works, they separated these letters into two distinct categories: "poems" and "prose" [Hart, 1996: 21; Socarides, 2007: 12]. However, looking at the original manuscripts reveals that Dickinson viewed all her writing holistically as a single creative form [Hart, 1996: 14]. Furthermore, her habit of writing draft lines on domestic items—such as back of envelopes, brown paper wrappers, and market

lists—shows that her daily household life in Amherst was deeply connected to her artistic process [Higgins, 1996: 58].

2. Describing Without Naming: The Riddle Strategy

The second key finding is Dickinson's extensive use of the riddle, especially the enigma form [Catherine Henning, 1967: 11]. In literary studies, an enigma is a type of riddle that describes the qualities, movements, or effects of an object without ever stating its name [Frye, 1957: 299; Catherine Henning, 1967: 9]. This method allows the poet to build a "circle of words" around an idea while keeping the subject mysterious [Catherine Henning, 1967: 9].

Dickinson applied this riddle technique frequently in her poems about nature and weather [Catherine Henning, 1967: 41]. Rather than describing nature as a simple background, she used enigmas to show how strange and unpredictable natural forces can be [Nelson, 2020: 55].

The table below outlines how Dickinson used different riddle forms in her poetry:

Riddle Type	How it Works	Common Subject	Example Poem
Enigma	Gives clues and metaphors about a subject without ever naming it directly [Frye, 1957: 299].	Nature, weather, and physical phenomena	"It sifts from Leaden sieves" (Snow)"A Route of Evanescence" (Hummingbird)
Charade	Uses wordplay, sudden shifts, and puzzles based on sounds or images [Catherine Henning, 1967: 14].	Grief, mortality, and the passage of time	"I felt a Funeral, in my Brain""Some things that fly there be"
Conundrum	Uses short puns, word humor, or playful questions [Catherine Henning, 1967: 15].	Faith, doubt, and social rules	"Faith is a fine invention"

A clear example of the enigma technique appears in her poem about snow (P311):

"It sifts from Leaden sieves— / It powders all the Wood / It fills with Alabaster Wool / The wrinkles of the Road..." [Catherine Henning, 1967: 23].

Throughout the poem, Dickinson never uses the word "snow." Instead, she describes its actions—how it "powders," "fills," and "denying that it was"—forcing the reader to actively visualize the scene and participate in making sense of the poem [Catherine Henning, 1967: 23; Nelson, 2020: 55]. A similar technique is used in "A Route of Evanescence" (P1463), where a hummingbird is described only through motion and color: a "revolving Wheel" and a "Resonance of Emerald" [Catherine Henning, 1967: 35]. By withholding the name of the subject, Dickinson keeps the reader's attention focused on the experience of seeing rather than just naming [Catherine Henning, 1967: 35].

Discussions

These findings help us understand why Dickinson's poetry felt so radical to nineteenth-century readers and why her work remains so dynamic today [Barnstone, 1990: 18]. Early editors tried to clean up her texts because Victorian literary tradition valued clarity, regular rhymes, and fixed moral conclusions [Hart, 1996: 48]. By adding titles to her poems and removing her dashes, early publications treated her work as if it were incomplete or incorrectly written [Franklin, 1967: 141; Hart, 1996: 48].

However, when we study her work through her original manuscripts and letter networks, we see that her choice to avoid direct statements was deliberate [Hart, 1996: 21; Hewitt, 2000: 103]. By mixing poems into letters and using riddles, Dickinson challenges the reader to accept uncertainty [Nelson, 2020: 62]. Instead of telling the reader what to think, her poems create a space where meaning remains flexible and open to interpretation [Shakinovsky, 1998: 118]. This approach reflects a sophisticated understanding of language: Dickinson recognized that deep human experiences—such as grief, spiritual doubt, and awe before nature—cannot be easily captured in simple words [Stephenson Huffer, 1988: 45; Peterson, 2000: 160].

Conclusion

In conclusion, Emily Dickinson's poetic style is defined by a refusal to offer easy, definitive answers. By blending her poems into private letters and employing riddle structures like the enigma, she developed a unique poetic technique that describes around subjects rather than defining them rigidly. Although nineteenth-century editors tried to standardize her writing to fit conventional print rules, modern manuscript studies remind us that her pauses, indirect phrasing, and mixed formats are central to her art. For students and researchers of literature, recognizing Dickinson's open-ended style allows us to appreciate her not as an undisciplined writer, but as an innovative artist who expanded the possibilities of American poetry.

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