

Infinity in a Finite Space: Emily Dickinson's Poetics of Space

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Abstract

This essay examines the poetics of space in Emily Dickinson's poetry from three interconnected dimensions: cognitive construction of space, innovative visual poetic form, and material carrier of envelope poems. From the cognitive level of poetic content, Dickinson infuses boundless spiritual profundity into physically restricted carriers such as houses and coffins, breaking the inherent bondage of physical size via imaginative cognition and turning confined entities into gateway toward eternity. In terms of visual poetic form, her use of dashes, irregular line breaks and title-free layout fractures linear temporal logic, constructing multi-layered textual space and independent spiritual dimensions on the page. Regarding material practice, Dickinson consciously opens, cuts, and completely flattens envelopes into new shapes, transforming their constrained physical space into a dynamic compositional field where material boundaries actively shape and are shaped by the handwritten lines. By embedding expansive perception within limited poetic and physical spaces, Dickinson reveals spatial constraint as an advantageous condition for poetic infinite interpretation. *Keywords:* Emily Dickinson, poetics of space, visual poetic form, writing material, envelope poems

When speaking of her own career as a poet, Emily Dickinson proclaimed in one of her most famous short poems "I dwell in Possibility" that her occupation is "To gather Paradise" (Dickinson, 1990, p. 215). She compared poetry to a house of "Possibility", fitted with more numerous windows, superior door and grander chambers.

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In her eyes, poetry brims with boundless possibilities. Its limited stanzas and lines are capable of embracing an infinitely vast spiritual world. She also resolutely willing to stretches “The spreading wide my narrow Hands” to embrace all such possibilities (Dickinson, 1990, p. 215).

While in a letter to Higginson, Dickinson wrote “I could not stop for that— /My Business is Circumference” (Dickinson, 1971, p. 176). She employs the image of Circumference to refer to her poetry and her life’s vocation. Professor Wang Wei (2017) pointed out that Dickinson might have been influenced by Emerson’s idea in his essay *Circles* (p. 90), where he claimed that “The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end” (Emerson, 1950, p. 280). But unlike Emerson, Dickinson continuously shrinks her circle and keep delineating the boundaries of her life. “Circumference” is an important image in Dickinson’s works, representing a spatial boundary. She likens her literary career to a circumscribed circle with defined boundaries, conveying her boundless spiritual world through poetic lines. Applying this consciousness of space in writing, she condensed the profundity of eternity and the complexity of human emotions into concise verses.

Within the limited framework of short poems, she uses fragmented expressions, a large numbers of dashes, and conscious layout of manuscripts, breaking the constraints of linear time, constructing a self-contained spiritual space that transcends physical limitations. This essay will focus on poetics of space in Emily Dickinson’s works, arguing that her poetry constructs a literary space that is at once limited and

limitless. Through the cognitive reconstruction of spatial boundaries, the innovative materialization of mental space in poetic form, and the embedding of meaning within constrained writing materials, Dickinson transforms finite spaces into sites of expansive perception, spiritual freedom, and imaginative possibility.

1. Review of the Study on Dickinson's Poetics of Space

In recent years, domestic and international scholars have already examined space in Dickinson's poetry from both metaphorical and formal layout aspects. They mainly focus on the symbolic meanings of spatial imagery, textual formal spatial experimentation and spatial innovation in Dickinson's poems. These studies have built a solid foundation for the study of Dickinson's poetics of space.

Some scholars have conducted in-depth analyses of the symbolic meanings of concrete and abstract spatial images in Dickinson's poems, exploring the linkage of concrete spatial scenes to the poet's spiritual world. Scholar du Plock (2013) interprets architectural imagery such as chambers, corridors and cellars as a metaphorical mapping of the "divided self". The author demonstrates that rather than serving as mere settings, these enclosed or fragmented spatial images directly reflect Dickinson's psychological fragmentation and spiritual tension. Fan Hangling (2021) focuses on the poem "Wild Nights—Wild Nights!", pointing out that the "house/boat" represents a safe spiritual haven while the "sea" symbolizes the attractive yet dangerous external world. The tension between the two spaces reveals Dickinson's ambivalence between self-enclosure and yearning for the outside. These study place emphasis on analyzing specific spatial images in Dickinson's poems, exploring their deeper symbolic connotations and their role in reflecting the poet's psychological state, existential dilemmas, and complex attitudes toward the self and the external world.

Apart from analyzing the specific spatial symbols in Dickinson's poems, Gazzaz

and Basnawi (2024) explore Dickinson's potential conception of the spatial construction of poetry from a more macro level. Analyzing the poem "I Dwell in Possibility," they argue that Dickinson constructs poetry as a house of possibility through architectural metaphors. Poetry is not merely described through architectural terms but is fundamentally equated with a dwelling space that unifies interior and exterior, the natural and the constructed. The house becomes an extended metaphor for the boundless freedom of artistic expression.

Other important researches focus on the spatial innovation of Dickinson's material and visual poetic form, highlighting how spatiality is engineered textually. Scholars have paid particular attention to the role of punctuation in shaping her poems' special forms and poetic effect. Wang Wei (2016) proposes that Dickinson's use of untitled short lines, irregular line breaks and unconventional punctuation together weaken the temporal linearity of poetry, erases chronological markers and compresses verse into tight, and visually distinct units, creating a spatial poetic form. Zuo Jinmei and Zhou Xinlei (2019) further analyze Dickinson's visual aesthetics, demonstrating how capitals, dashes, and conscious typography, including points, lines and planes, construct a visual text that complements and expands linguistic meaning.

Dickinson's use of dashes has also drawn sustained critical attention. The dash in Dickinson's poems particularly operates as a structural line that connects, divides, and suspends, turning the written page into a dynamic spatial landscape rather than a flat stream of words. Scholars have explored the dash from its manifestation in manuscript forms, its relation to authorial intention and its rhetorical function of suspension, as well as its thematic meanings. Edith Wylder (2004) notes that dashes, with varied lengths and slants, function as both spatial cuts and semantic connections, creating pauses and simulating vocal inflections to form an auditory spatialization

system. Fagan (2005) examines Emily Dickinson's use of the dash as an unutterable word that mediates between the sayable and the unsayable. She opposes over-emphasis on manuscript details when studying Dickinson's dashes, contending that the dash derives its power from its presence, ambiguity, silence, and openness. Readers may reinvest the dashes with new meanings in reading and tasting the poems. Mahoney (2015) further highlights that dashes embody the "Pause of Space", expanding textual space and destabilizing language to evoke the silence of mourning. These studies clarify the formal spatial logic but mostly focus on rhetorical functions and fail to connect form with content and material medium.

In addition, some scholars have investigated the poetic practice of Emily Dickinson's envelope poems. Antoine Cazé (2021) focuses on space-driven line breaks in Dickinson's envelope poems and exposes the processual trait of her drafts ignored by traditional printed texts. In her views, Dickinson's envelope poems are "simultaneously exposed and kept in the secret limbo of uncirculated rough drafts" (p. 2). She explored envelope's potency and potentiality of privacy for Emily Dickinson as well as how she blurred the borderline between poetry and letters and pioneered a poetics integrating poetic composition with epistolary medium. Scholar Wang Qiwen (2025) also studies Dickinson's envelope poems: he links spatial features to cultural context and imagery resonance. He points out that New England's frugal tradition frames Dickinson's writing mindset, envelope contours echo poetic images, and fixed margins restrict line length to match her alternating rhythm. Collectively, both scholars confirm envelopes function as meaningful poetic components instead of indifferent blank carriers.

Overall, the existing studies on space in Dickinson's poetry largely remains focused on the symbolic interpretation of spatial imagery and formal exploration of visual textual space, while some scholars conduct a few researches on the function of

envelope materials and line breaks in her envelope writing practice. Nevertheless, most relevant discussions separate thematic symbolism, formal layout and material writing medium in isolation. Broader poetics of space requires further supplementation and systematic synthesis. Building upon prior scholarship, this essay aims to explore Dickinson's poetics of space across three integrated dimensions: poetic content, textual form and material substrate. It further dissects the inner spatial construction of her poetic themes, the innovations in poetic form and her distinctive selection of writing materials. This essay aims to explore how Dickinson creates infinite poetic expression within the physically finite space of poetic lines.

2. Cognitive Construction of Space

Dickinson consciously constructs tangible physical spaces within her poetry, employing these bounded frames to convey a far deeper, more expansive artistic conception and spiritual realm. She figuratively conceives of poetry as a House of Possibility, declaring in her verse "I dwell in Possibility— / A fairer House than Prose—" (Dickinson, 1990, p. 215). In her views, poetry emerges as an open, free-flowing domain, while prose is rendered as a closed, restrictive structure.

They shut me up in Prose –

As when a little Girl

They put me in the Closet –

Because they liked me "still" –

Still! Could themselves have peeped –

And seen my Brain – go round –

They might as well have lodged a Bird

For Treason – in the Pound –

Himself has but to will

And easy as a Star

Look down upon Captivity –

And laugh – No more have I –

(Dickinson, 1999, p. 206)

In “They shut me up in Prose–”, Dickinson repeatedly frames prose as a space of confinement. The speaker is confined “in the Closet”, locked away “Because they liked me ‘still’”, her condition equated with imprisonment in “the Pound” and total subjection to “Captivity”. These images all underscore enclosure, restraint, and enforced stillness, portraying prose as a rigid, regulated form that limits both physical movement and imaginative freedom. Though the body may be locked away, the mind remains unshackled, whirling endlessly within the tightest space. Dickinson likens this futile attempt at constraint to caging a bird for “treason,” noting that the spirit need only assert its will to overlook captivity easily, breaking free of all limitations.

By contrast, her formulation “I dwell in Possibility” reimagines poetry as a radically different spatial form. While the “House” of poetry remains a bounded structure, it is defined by permeability and expansion, featuring “More numerous of Windows” and “Superior – for Doors –” (Dickinson, 1990, p. 215). These openings enable vision, movement, and unimpeded connection to the outside world. Prose may be a cage, yet it can never fetter the free mind. Poetry, by contrast, is a house with gates opening to the exterior and luminous windows, a space where thought may wander, explore, and extend infinitely.

This reveals that Dickinson deliberately reflects on the spatial construction of poetry: the finite length and concise wording of poetry may seem to form a restrictive

framework, yet like the house in her conceit, it possesses gates to the outside, countless windows, and an open upper space that invites endless exploration and extension. Poetry, for Dickinson, is a finite form that nevertheless enables infinite extension through its openings. The house becomes not a site of confinement but a dynamic interface between interior and exterior, self and world. As Gaston Bachelard observes, “through the poet’s window, the home converses about vastness with the universe” (Gazza & Basnawi, 2024, p. 195). Dickinson’s poetic house similarly mediates between the finite and the infinite. In this sense, the limitation of poetic form, its brevity and its bounded textual space actually invite imaginative participation from the reader. Reading a poem, therefore, is not passive reception but an active spatial exploration: the reader must move through its openings, extend its boundaries, and complete its meaning.

In practice, Dickinson applies her cognitive construction of space through content, as she selects small, finite objects and imbues them with spiritual expansion and the breaking of boundaries.

In her poem “A Coffin - is a small Domain”, “The coffin” is introduced as a small and strictly bounded physical space, emblematic of death’s final enclosure. Similarly, a “Grave” is framed as a “restricted Breadth”, which is a narrow, buried, quantitatively tiny plot of earth, a space visibly and inescapably limited by its circumference, its depth, and its separation from the living world. On a literal and physical level, both coffin and grave represent the finitude.

A Coffin – is a small Domain,

Yet able to contain

A Citizen of Paradise

In it's diminished Plane –

A Grave – is a restricted Breadth –

Yet ampler than the Sun –

And all the Seas He populates –

And Lands He looks upon

To Him who on it's small Repose

Bestows a single Friend –

Circumference without Relief –

Or Estimate – or End –

(Dickinson, 1999, p. 386)

But Dickinson immediately destabilizes this expectation by declaring that “a coffin” can contain “A Citizen of Paradise/ In it's diminished Plane–” while “a Grave” is ampler than “the Sun” and vaster than “the Seas”. This is not a physical expansion since no coffin grows in size and no grave broadens its borders. She determines the meaning of space by the spiritual and existential significance held within it instead of physical measurement and bounds. The poet transcends the constraints of physical space and shatters cognitive boundaries, transforming the finite space of death into an entry point into transcendence. For the one who rests in that small space, and for the friend who bestows love and memory upon that grave, the tiny plot ceases to be a

confinement. It becomes a container for eternity, friendship, and divine belonging. In this way, the poem dismantles the ingrained equation of finitude with constraint, suggesting instead that spatial limitation can function as a threshold to infinity.

Dickinson's commitment to infinity within limitation is further reinforced through her persistent focus on small or seemingly insignificant objects. Rather than seeking grandeur through vast landscapes or monumental settings, she frequently turns to the tiniest and most ordinary presences in the natural world, such as flowers, butterflies, bees and so on. (Hong, 1996, p. 48) Her poetry often achieves profound insight through these minute observations. By delving into subtle details, she touches upon grand themes such as the essence of existence, uncovering boundless possibilities within the seemingly finite.

Pink – small – and punctual –

Aromatic – low –

Covert in April –

Candid in May –

Dear to the Moss –

Known to the Knoll –

Next to the Robin

In every human Soul –

Bold little Beauty –

Bedecked with thee¹⁰

Nature forswears –

Antiquity –

(Dickinson, 1999, p. 522)

Dickinson centers this poem on a tiny and common flower. Yet the poet associates grand themes of constancy and inner beauty with the flower's spatial frame, redefining beauty and constancy. She begins by outlining the flower's common physical traits: it is pink in color, tiny in size, and blooms reliably in its season. It grows close to the ground, stays hidden in April and reveals itself gently in May. It lives quietly beside the moss and on the slopes of small knolls, occupying an inconspicuous and unassuming corner of the natural world.

The little flower has a short blooming period, a small physical form, and a modest place in the order of nature. But Dickinson transforms this fragile, limited existence into a carrier of enduring beauty and universal spirit. The flower's small stature becomes a microcosm: its "punctual" and steady bloom does not merely mark a short spring moment, but also links the minute and finite life cycle of a single plant to the larger, unchanging order of nature and eternity.

More importantly, Dickinson posts the flower within "every human Soul", bridging the gap between the natural world and human inner life. The small, localized plant expands beyond its physical boundaries to become a shared, universal presence that resonates in every person's inner world. The finite, small-scale world of the flower becomes a doorway into the infinite, proving that true vastness does not lie in size or

scope, but in the spiritual depth that a common and limited thing can reveal.

Dickinson's poetry insists that spatial experience is fundamentally cognitive—shaped by mental orientation, emotional intensity, and imaginative reach. Infinity, therefore, is not located in boundless physical extension but in the mind's capacity to reconceive the finite.

3. Space Construction of Visual Poetic Form

One distinctive character of Dickinson's poems is her unique visual poetic form. It has long drawn critical attention for its concise language, extensive use of dashes, irregular line lengths, departure from traditional rhythm, and the use of line breaks and capital letters to enhance rhythm and emphasis. Dickinson herself never issued any direct explanation or statement in her writings about her distinctive formal construction. Nevertheless, glimpses of her attitude can be found in her correspondence with her mentor, Thomas Wentworth Higginson.

Dickinson's first letter to Higginson was written on April 15th, 1862, after she had read his article "Letter to a Young Contributor," the lead piece in the *Atlantic Monthly* for April (Dickins, 1971, p. 172). In this article, Higginson offered practical advice to beginning writers and elaborated on his views of writing, particularly the way he weaves his thoughts together and shape them into words. He wrote: "When I think how slowly my poor thoughts come in, how tardily they connect themselves, what a delicious prolonged perplexity it is to cut and contrive a decent clothing of words for them" (Higginson, 1965, p. 572). For Higginson, words are "palaces to dwell in, treasure-houses to explore", and "it is easy to see that a phrase may outweigh a library"

(Higginson, 1965, p. 572). The joy of writing lies in the constant process of polishing and revising, of selecting the right words to dress one's thoughts appropriately.

Dickinson, however, responds to this perspective in her second letter to him, revealing a markedly different attitude. In reply to Higginson's notion of "cutting and contriving a decent clothing of words" for his thought, she wrote: "While my thought is undressed – I can make the distinction, but when I put them in the Gown – they look alike, and numb" (Dickinson, 1971, p. 172). She considers that thoughts are unique and meaningful precisely in their undressed state. Once clothed in a public, uniform "Gown", their distinctiveness is erased, and they become identical and lifeless. This conviction informs her own poetic practice: she broke with traditional prosody, employs extensive dashes, favors condensed language, and creates deliberate pauses and spatial gaps on the page. In doing so, she refuses to "dress" her thoughts in conventional garments, preserving their breathing particularity and obscurity.

Based on the original manuscripts released later on, it is clear that Dickinson's poetry not only can be interpreted and understood with readers' different choice of the words' meaning, but also allows for multiple interpretations regarding line length, stanza breaks, word spacing, and line spacing. Susan Howe points out that handwriting affects meaning (Wang, 2016, p. 104). In interpreting Dickinson's poetry, readers should pay attention to the deliberate construction of her poetic form. In the letter to Higginson on June 7th, when her mentor critiqued the form of her poetry, Dickinson defended herself by stating that "You think my gait 'spasmodic' – I am in danger – Sir – / You think me 'uncontrolled' – I have no Tribunal" (Dickinson, 1971, p. 174). Clearly,

Dickinson's use of punctuation and poetic form, though not widely appreciated by the public at the time, carried deliberate artistic intention. Her extensive use of dash, conscious arrangement of words and lines and ignorance of headline are not only defenses of her singularity of thoughts, but they also construct both intuitive visual and sensory levels of space poetics.

In terms of punctuation, Emily Dickinson's poems make extensive and deliberate use of dashes. She pays much attention on the spatial distribution in the formal arrangement of her poetry, employing dashes to build a distinctive internal space for each line, and the placement of these dashes further shapes the inherent meaning of the verses. On the one hand, dashes create spatial partitions within individual poetic lines, lending each sentence an unfinished, lingering charm and appeal that suggests unspoken thoughts (Fagan, 2005, p. 72). On the other hand, when considered within the full scope of a poem, dashes visually segment the text to craft a fragmented yet unified spatial sense, while also hinting at the divisions and complexities within the poet's psychological space.

In "Because I could not stop for Death —", the dash appears precisely at the end of this opening line, marking the close of the line. Placed at this terminal point within the verse's spatial layout, the dash does not serve as a firm, conclusive stop but rather extends the line's unfinished resonance, leaving a silent, unspoken gap that defies closure. It functions as a gentle yet unmissable caesura that softens the line's end, preserving the sense of ongoing movement and hinting that death is not a final termination but a continuous, unspoken transition. This embodies the tension between

life and eternity, and turning the line's spatial end into a gateway to the poem's broader, unutterable themes of mortality and immortality.

A sepal – petal – and a thorn

Opon a common summer's morn –

A flask of Dew – A Bee or two –

A Breeze – a' caper in the trees –

And I'm a Rose!

(Dickinson, 1999, p. 28)

Besides, in the short poem “A sepal – petal – and a thorn”, Dickinson consciously uses dashes to divide and highlight space, enabling the poetry present with a three-dimensional quality and a strong visual sense. When reading “A sepal – petal – and a thorn,” readers can envision a three-dimensional rose in their mind. Dickinson deconstructs a small flower, presenting it by its distinct spatial components: a curling sepal, layered petals above, and a thorn on the stem below. The dashes not only separate the upper and lower parts of the blossom but also create a lingering effect, inviting readers to dwell on and intimately perceive each element of the flower. Subsequently, the poet shifts to describing the scene of a common summer's morn, “A flask of Dew – A Bee or two – / A Breeze – a' caper in the trees –” also present a vivid spatial depiction of nature. Dew typically drips onto leaves or grass, bees flutter around flowers at a slightly higher level, while trees stand tall as the highest presence, occupying the uppermost layer of the entire space. The poem constructs an infinite three-dimensional natural space that gradually unfolds within a few lines. Through its progression from

lower to higher elements, it creates a stratified and immersive visual scene, drawing the reader into a layered portrayal of the nature.

Pain – has an Element of Blank –

It cannot recollect

When it begun – Or if there were

A time when it was not –

It has no Future – but itself –

It' s Infinite contain

It's Past – enlightened to perceive

New Periods – Of Pain.

(Dickinson, 1999, p. 339–340)

Apart from physical division of space, the use of dash also refers to a sign of psychological space. In the upper poem “Pain – has an Element of Blank –”, dashes run throughout the entire poem. Working through the dimension of time including past, present, and future blurs the temporal boundaries of pain, constructing a psychological space without beginning or end. Besides, the formal pauses and resumptions created by dashes reflect pain' s inscrutable and cyclical nature while the rupture and continuity mirror the blockage and repetition inherent in the experience of pain.

Besides, another noticeable characteristic of Dickinson's poems is that most of them don't have headline. When the first collection of Emily Dickinson's poems was published, the collected poems are classified through their themes and their creation

date were still puzzles. According to professor Wang Wei (2021), Dickinson's omission of titles and creation dates renders each poem an "isolated fragment", breaking the linear progression of time and reinforcing the poem's nature as a self-sufficient spatial entity (p. 107).

4. Limited Material Space and Envelope Poems

Beyond the thematic concerns and formal innovation of the poems, Dickinson's choice of writing substrates also plays a crucial role in shaping her poetics of space. A significant number of her poems were written within or enclosed by letters addressed to friends, blurring the boundary between personal correspondence and poetic composition. Many surviving manuscripts have been described by scholars as "scraps" (Bervin & Werner, 2013). They are small in relation to the compositional space, floating in its firmament.

After 1870, Dickinson increasingly developed the habit of composing on fragments and envelopes. As Bervin and Werner observed in their book *The Gorgeous Nothing*, "her attitude of astonishing recklessness is reflected in her new practice of writing on anything and everything near to hand: chocolate wrappers, the margins of books, scraps of paper" (Bervin & Werner, 2013). These unconventional writing surfaces transform the poem into a spatial and visual object rather than a purely verbal text. Bervin further notes in the book that Dickinson's poems are "quite visual to begin with.....It's utterly necessary. And especially with the variants—how they are positioned or multiple gives an exciting glimpse into Dickinson's mind in process with a poem". The fragmented substrates, shifting textual placements, and conscious

margins together create a poetics featuring openness and spatial possibility.

These manuscript fragments are at once restricted by the physical dimensions and social conventions of the envelope and yet marked by openness, contingency, and improvisation. Wang Qiwen (2025) pointed out that although the envelope imposes clear material boundaries, Dickinson's handwriting often appears loose and unregulated: capital letters merge together, words disperse across unusually brief lines, and the spatial arrangement of the text seems intuitive rather than carefully structured (p. 62). Such characteristics imply that Dickinson's envelope writing emerged less from deliberate design than from moments of sudden inspiration and the free movement of imagination.

The envelope therefore functions both as a limitation and as a source of poetic possibility. On the one hand, its physical shape determines the destiny of the poem's form, transforming the poem into the outline of an object itself (Arsić, 2005, p. 238). On the other hand, the material constraints of the writing surface do not discipline the poem into rigid order. Rather, they operate as a generative frame in which spontaneity and limitation intersect, enabling Dickinson to convey expansive perception and imaginative possibility within sharply confined spaces and fragmented lines.

Dickinson often wrote on the back of old envelopes. The shape, size and creases of the envelopes directly contributed to the formation of the meaning of the poetry. For instance, triangular envelopes echo sharp angular images such as "scabbards" and "beaks", while rectangular envelopes simulate the rectangular Spaces of "doors" and "coffins".

In the published collection of Dickinson's envelope poems, the spatial arrangement of the poem "One note from One Bird" is as follows in a relatively neat way.

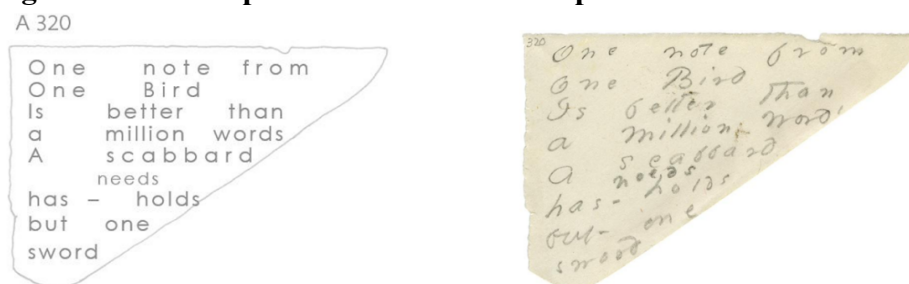
One note from One Bird

Is better than a Million Word

A scabbard has – but one sword

(Dickinson, 1999, p. 555)

Figure 1 Manuscript of Dickinson's Envelope Poem A320



Note. From Dickinson, Emily. (2017). *Emily Dickinson envelope poems*, with transcriptions by Marta Werner and Jen Bervin. Christine Burgin/New Directions. p.48–49

When we examine Dickinson's original manuscript, however, we find that the poet consciously chose an unusually shaped writing material, a triangular envelope. The final word "sword" is precisely inscribed on the triangular tip of the envelope. The sharp form of the triangle visually mirrors both the pointed contour of a "scabbard" and the delicate tip of a "bird's beak", creating a resonant interplay between textual meaning and spatial shape (Wang, 2025, p. 63). Here, the poetic meaning extends beyond the lexical level and is intuitively manifested through its physical form and space.

The triangular envelope poem A252 offers another striking example of how Dickinson's choice of substrate directly reinforces poetic meaning. Written directly

onto the unfolded flap of an envelope, the poem conforms to the descending triangular shape of the writing material itself.

In this short Life that only lasts an hour
How much – how little – is within our power
(Dickinson, 1999, p. 502)

Figure 2 Manuscript of Dickinson’s Envelope Poem A252



Note. From Dickinson, Emily. (2017). *Emily Dickinson envelope poems*, with transcriptions by Marta Werner and Jen Bervin. Christine Burgin/New Directions. p.30–31

The opening line, “In this short Life,” stretches across the broadest upper edge, where the spatial field appears comparatively open and expansive. Yet as the reader’s gaze moves downward, both the physical writing space and the semantic scope of the poem progressively contract. At the bottom of the triangle, the poem converges into the sharply narrowed point containing the lines “How much – how little – is / within our / power.” Here, the word “with our /power” is positioned at the very tip of the triangle, the smallest physical space on the page. This minimal spatial occupation not only mirrors the poem’s gradual contraction of imagery but also reinforces the poem’s meditation on the limits of human agency.

The spatial constriction of the text mirrors the thematic constriction it describes: the reader not only understands limitation conceptually but experiences it visually through the diminishing dimensions of the poem itself. Dickinson transforms the envelope from a passive writing surface into an active poetic structure. The geometry of

the page dictates rhythm and perception, creating a form of visual prosody in which the poem's material shape embodies its reflection on transience and finitude.

A great Hope fell

You heard no noise

Oh cunning wreck that told no tale

And let no Witness in

The mind was built for mighty Freight

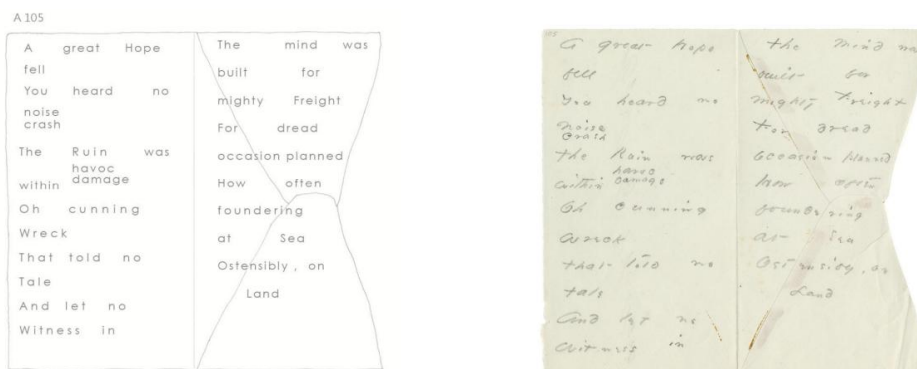
For dread occasion planned

How often foundering at Sea

Ostensibly, on Land

(Dickinson, 1999, p. 472)

Figure 3 Manuscript of Dickinson's Envelope Poem A105



Note. From Dickinson, Emily. (2017). *Emily Dickinson envelope poems*, with transcriptions by Marta Werner and Jen Bervin. Christine Burgin/New Directions. p.8–9

Dickinson's envelope manuscript A105 is composed on a nearly complete rectangular envelope, naturally split into two vertical textual columns by the envelope's original central crease. The left column carries the first stanza revolving around the silent collapse of hope: "A great Hope fell / You heard no noise / The Ruin was within",

depicting inner spiritual devastation that deeply hide within mind. Meanwhile, on the right folded flap of the envelope, the poet writes “The mind was built for mighty Freight... How often foundering at Sea /Ostensibly, on Land”. It compares the human mind to a robust ship constructed to bear heavy spiritual loads yet susceptible to unseen shipwreck despite the self’s stable earthly existence.

The envelope’s practical flap structure physically mirrors the poem’s thematic core. When the right flap is folded inward along the central crease, all lines of the poem get concealed inside the envelope’s hidden inner space. Such spatial arrangement corresponds to the poem’s lines “The Ruin was within” and “let no Witness in”. The envelope keeps a whole, unblemished outer appearance to onlookers, yet its sealed interior locks away words of hidden disappointment and mental collapse that no one can discover. Confined by the fixed physical border of the rectangular envelope, Dickinson converts the carrier’s natural foldable structure into poetics of space, expanding the narrow and bounded paper into boundless poetic reflection on invisible inner affliction.

Sharing a similar epistolary spatial design with “A great Hope fell”, the poem “A not admitting of the wound” is also wrote on a nearly complete rectangular envelope. The spatial arrangement is as follow.

A not admitting of the wound

Until it grew so wide

That all my Life had entered it

And there were troughs beside –

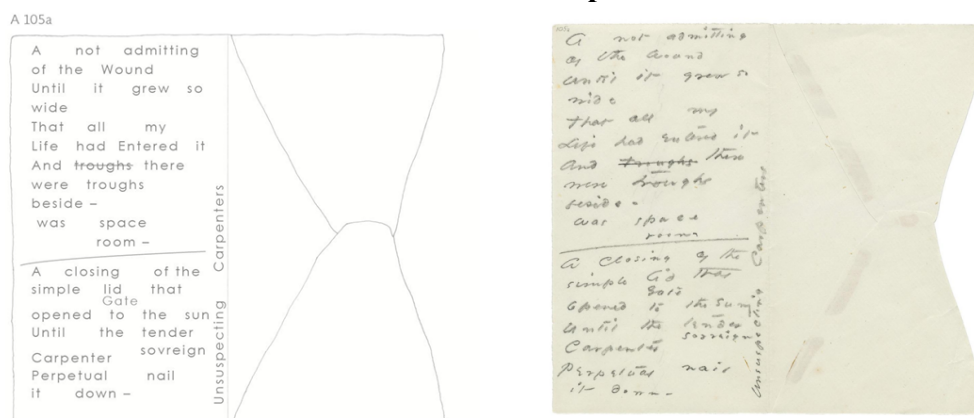
A closing of the simple lid that opened to the sun

Until the tender Carpenter

Perpetual nail it down –

(Dickinson, 1999, p. 472)

Figure 4 Manuscript of Dickinson's Envelope Poem A105a



Note. From Dickinson, Emily. (2017). *Emily Dickinson envelope poems*, with transcriptions by Marta Werner and Jen Bervin. Christine Burgin/New Directions. p.12–13

It was initially written on the inner side of a rectangular envelope. The neat, rectangular borders simulate a “door”, while the act of sealing the envelope echoes the imagery of “nail it down” in the poem, transforming the physical gesture of closure into a poetic expression of sealed trauma. The spatial form of the envelope extends the emotional texture of the poem. Besides, given that Jesus is referred to as a “carpenter” in the Gospel of Mark, this tender Carpenter in the poem serves as an alternative title for Jesus. The sender, the envelope, and the recipient take on a sacred Trinitarian dimension, imbuing the material act of mailing with profound religious significance (Wang, 2025, p. 65).

Notably, when Thomas H. Johnson edited *The Complete Poems of Emily*

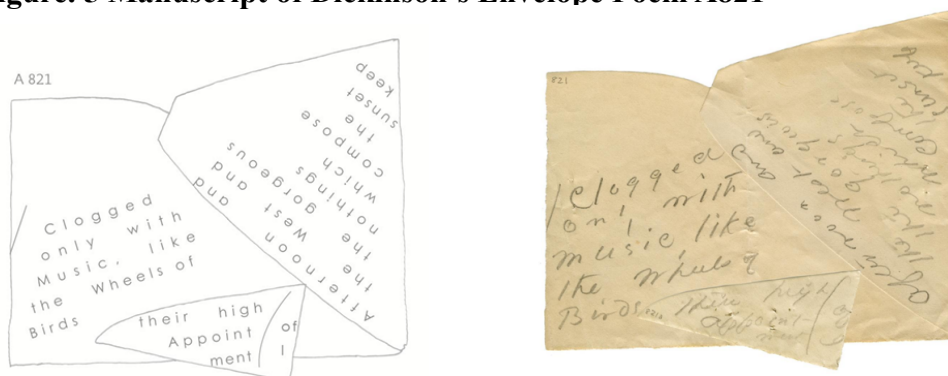
Dickinson (Dickinson, 1960), he grouped the two pieces into a single unified poem J1123. By contrast, R.W. Franklin adhered rigorously to archival evidence of original epistolary manuscripts and published the two textual fragments as separate independent poems in his edition of Dickinson's poem. Nevertheless, from the perspectives of spatial construction and thematic affinity embedded in these two envelope poems, Johnson's editorial decision is reasonably grounded.

Considering the theme and its narration, A105 depicts the origin of spiritual collapse while A105a unfolds its subsequent traumatic consequence. "A great Hope fell" caused a spiritual ruin. The mind, figuratively a "mighty Freight" vessel, sinks into invisible spiritual shipwreck while the outward self remains seemingly unharmed on solid ground. Refusal to acknowledge concealed psychological injury allows the wound to swell ceaselessly until "Life had entered it", culminating in the permanent confinement of inner agony. Centered upon the identical core motif of invisible internal suffering, the two poems echo and complement one another to forge a coherent logical progression. Their parallel spatial layout further indicates an intrinsic compositional link. For both manuscripts, folding down the envelope's flap visually embodies the line "The Ruin was within", sealing away private torment and severing inner pain from outside observation. Such delicate spatial correspondence suggests that Dickinson may have deliberately split her integrated poetic conception across two separate envelope scraps out of limited available writing space at the moment of composition.

Besides, Dickinson would open, cut and completely flatten the envelope into a new shape. The following poem "Clogged | only with | Music, like | the Wheels of |

Birds” is composed by piecing together two fragments of envelopes. According to Marta Werner wrote in her book *The Gorgeous Nothing* (2013), “The larger section of the collage is the inside of the back of an envelope, the address face of which has been torn or cut away. The vertical crease bisects the document, turning the halved envelope into a simple diptych that resembles the hinged wings of the bird.”

Figure. 5 Manuscript of Dickinson’s Envelope Poem A821



Note. From Dickinson, Emily. (2017). *Emily Dickinson envelope poems*, with transcriptions by Marta Werner and Jen Bervin. Christine Burgin/New Directions. p.86–87

On the left wing, it wrote “Clogged | only with | Music, like | the Wheels of | Birds” while on the right wing, it wrote “Afternoon and | the West and | the gorgeous | nothings | which | compose | the | sunset | keep” The two envelope fragment wings stretch eastward and westward, embodying sunrise and sunset. The left wing leans east and symbolizes dawn’s vitality while the rightwing slants west and evokes dusk’s tranquility. The vertical crease bisects the work, separating eastern and western spaces, and day and night time. (Bervin & Werner, 2013) This spatial-temporal division merges form and theme, turning the envelope’s physical constraint into a poetic meditation on the eternal cycle of day and night within limited space.

In addition to the several envelope manuscripts mentioned above, Dickinson also utilized various writing materials such as envelopes cut into house shapes or those

with deliberate gaps. In her poetic and epistolary practice, she consciously selected and creatively shaped the spatial form of her materials, merging the essence of poetry with its physical carrier. Through these finite, tangible forms, she evoked infinite interpretation and contemplation.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has explored Emily Dickinson's poetics of space through 3 dimensions of content, form, and medium, demonstrating how her poetry continually transforms finite spaces into sites of infinite imaginative and spiritual expansion. Through close readings of poems centered on coffins, graves, flowers, and other seemingly small or enclosed objects, the study shows that Dickinson reconceives space not as a fixed physical category but as a cognitive and emotional construction shaped by perception, memory, and imagination. In her poetry, the smallest spatial forms are capable of containing immense spiritual depth, dissolving the conventional opposition between limitation and infinity.

Furthermore, this essay explores how Dickinson materializes mental space through innovative poetic form. Her extensive use of dashes creates pauses and openings that disrupt linear temporality and produce dynamic textual spaces filled with silence, suspension, and interpretive possibility. The omission of titles and chronological markers likewise isolates each poem as a self-contained spatial entity rather than a sequential narrative unit.

In the dimension of material medium, Dickinson's envelope poems and manuscript fragments further illustrate her spatial poetics: the physical constraints of

writing substrates: triangular or rectangular envelopes, cut scraps, and folded paper are not mere limitations but generative frames that embed meaning into material form. The shape, crease, and closure of an envelope visually echo poetic themes such as confinement, transience, and eternity, transforming the written page into an active spatial structure.

Across all these dimensions, Dickinson consistently transcends finitude, cultivating an infinitely expansive spiritual and imaginative realm. The poetic of space in her poems suggest that boundaries do not restrict imagination but generate it. Limitation becomes the very condition through which poetry opens onto boundless spiritual and imaginative possibility.

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