

The Multidimensional Metaphorical Network and Ecological Philosophy in Emily Dickinson's Garden Poetry

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Abstract

This thesis examines Emily Dickinson's garden poetry by establishing the epistemological commensurability between cognitive poetics and ecopoetics. Grounded in embodied horticultural practice, by applying Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT), this thesis reveals how Dickinson's verse achieves an "emergent structure" of mental spaces, dissolving boundaries between self, garden, and cosmos in her multidimensional metaphorical network. This network reevaluates the 19th-century reductionism through a "participatory consciousness" and a "relational self." Ultimately, Dickinson's "slant" truths in her garden poetry foster an ecopoetic holism, revealing the interconnectedness of all life.

Keywords: Dickinson, cognitive poetics, ecopoetics, garden poetry, metaphorical network

1. Introduction

The renowned American poet Emily Dickinson began her seclusion in her ancestral home in Amherst, New England, during her youth, devoting herself to poetry. Throughout her life, she composed nearly 1,800 poems, about one-third of which, along with half of her letters, feature plants, animals, and flowers.

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For Dickinson, her horticultural activities are not merely a way of life; rather, they constitute the “pre-conceptual Gestalt” of her poetic awareness. The plants and animals in her garden were not merely decorative imagery but served as crucial mediums for expressing emotions, exploring philosophy, challenging social norms, and defining the self. Through her unique poetic artistry, she drew upon the flora and fauna of her garden as source-domain material, reconstructing the conventional botanical meanings of her era into a private metaphorical network—a multidimensional metaphorical network designed to “telling the truth slant.”

The theoretical study of such metaphorical networks has evolved significantly since *Metaphors We Live By*, co-authored by American cognitive linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson. It first defined Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as a mapping from a concrete source domain to an abstract target domain—“The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5). This monograph established the systematicity of metaphors and laid the foundation for the cognitive study of metaphor, opening a new perspective for the study of metaphor in literature. Metaphors and the relevant mechanism thus have been the core topics in cognitive poetics. In *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (2003), Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner developed Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual domain theory by expanding metaphor studies from simple mappings between two domains to conceptual integration networks composed of at least four space—the Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT) network, in which metaphors were viewed as a “blending” operation. It involves two input spaces, a generic space, and a blended space. The key breakthrough in the theory of

CBT is that hybrid spaces give rise to “emergent structures”—structures that no single input space possesses on its own, thereby accounting for humanity’s extraordinary creativity and intricate network of metaphors. (Fauconnier & Turner, 2003). Reuven Tsur in *Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics* (2008) critiques Lakoff’s conceptual metaphor theory (e.g., “Life is a journey”), arguing that CMT might cause “the Stock Response” and overlooked the unique meanings and effects that different poets created within their specific texts. They specifically pointed out that reading poetry is a process of an “organized violence against cognitive processes,” explaining how poetry can evoke a profound aesthetic experience through perceptual “uncertainty” and “a sense of disorientation” (Tsur, 2008). Actually, Tsur’s critique proves the necessity of the combination of CMT and CBT for poetry reading and appreciation. On the basis of Tsur’s critique, Peter Stockwell in *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (2020) systematically integrates the CMT (Lakoff) with the CBT (Fauconnier), establishing them as a core toolkit for cognitive poetics to analyze the subjective experience embedded within texts (Stockwell, 2020). From the review of the metaphor studies in these classics of cognitive poetics, poetry reading needs to understand the metaphorical system by a more profound mechanism: conceptual metaphor theory unpacks cross-domain mapping underlying ordinary thought and conceptual blending explains the emergent meaning generated by multi-space interaction with embodied cognition.

Existing research on cognitive poetics has explored the operational mechanisms of Dickinson’s metaphors from multiple dimensions: Hamilton (2005), using cognitive rhetoric, analyzes the persuasive functions of Dickinson’s explicit metaphors, implicit metaphors, and analogies, revealing the universality of conceptual metaphors such as “difficulty implies

heaviness” (Hamilton, 2005); Freeman, starting from imagery schemas and conceptual metaphors, points out that Dickinson employs the “container–change” schema to subvert the linear metaphor “life is a journey,” thereby reconstructing the cognitive foundation of her poetics (Freeman, 2002); O’Donoghue, while shifting toward connectionist theory, similarly emphasizes the contextual dependence and reader participation in metaphor comprehension through a reasoning analysis of “X is Y” - structured “impossible metaphors” (O’Donoghue, 2021). However, these studies predominantly focus on individual poems or single theoretical frameworks, failing to systematically examine the metaphorical network within Dickinson’s garden poetry as a whole. On the other hand, although ecological criticism studies focus on the ecological implications of gardens—Gerhardt proposes “garden ecology” and uncovers its crisis narrative (Gerhardt, 2022), Campos employs semiotic analysis to examine the indexicality of pressed flowers and poetry, thereby highlighting non-human subjects (Campos, 2025), and Wang Bohua extracts a “process poetics” from botanical processes (Wang, 2025)—none of these approaches delve deeply into the cognitive generation mechanism of metaphors. Therefore, integrating CMT with the CBT to systematically interpret the multidimensional metaphorical network of “garden–universe–poem line” in Dickinson’s garden poems, and thereby elucidate her ecological philosophy, needs further exploration.

To unpack the complexity of Dickinson’s metaphorical network in her verse, this study establishes an integrated theoretical model grounded in the “epistemological commensurability” between cognitive poetics and ecopoetics. This model might explain Dickinson’s profound metaphorical network by integrating two complementary cognitive tools: Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT). CMT, as defined by Lakoff

and Johnson, explains the stable, unidirectional mappings from a concrete source domain (the garden) to an abstract target domain (the self). While Fauconnier and Turner's CBT model could help us to understand the "dynamic fluidity" of Dickinson's verse—where boundaries between garden, self, and cosmos shift seamlessly. By incorporating "online synthesis" of multiple "mental spaces," in Dickinson's verse, could we better understand how Dickinson generates "emergent meanings" that transcend their source domains.

Cognitive poetics and ecological poetics may appear to belong to distinct domains: the former focuses on the mind and language, while the latter centers on the relationship between humans and their environment. Nevertheless, they share profound commonalities at the epistemological level—both argue that knowledge is not merely a mirror-like reflection of the objective world, but rather a product actively constructed through embodied cognition. The meticulous textual analysis of cognitive poetics combined with the holistic interpretation of ecological poetics can form a beneficial interaction (Pang & Liu, 2009, p. 21). Based on this, the cognitive synthesis (CMT and CBT) thus could function as an ecological instrument to explore the ecological meaning in the intricate metaphorical network. The meticulous textual analysis of cognitive poetics, paired with the holistic spiritual interpretation of ecopoetics, reveals that the self in Dickinson's garden is no longer an isolated subject but a "relational self" embedded within the environment. Within this integrated framework, Dickinson's garden becomes a dynamic cognitive model that invites readers to engage in an unending inquiry into the universe through the minutest phenomena of life.

Grounded in the theoretical framework of cognitive poetics and ecopoetics, this thesis discusses the generative pathways of Dickinson's metaphorical network and the holistic

ecological vision embedded within it. It argues that Dickinson, through embodied engagement with horticultural practice, constructed an embodied metaphorical conceptual model. The complex interactions she observed between humans, garden life, and natural landscapes became the metaphorical nodes that propelled her to build a highly personal poetic system. Within this network, Dickinson foregrounds human imagination and participatory consciousness, forming a distinctive ecopoetic holism where the self is no longer an isolated entity but is “embedded” within the environment.

2. Experiential Identifications: Garden Flowers and the Conceptual Metaphors of the Relational Self

Metaphor is not merely a matter of language; it constitutes the very foundation of the human conceptual system. “In actuality we feel that no metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 19). Metaphor is inextricably linked to the basis of human experience; it is only through this experiential grounding that metaphor can be understood. Dickinson’s experiential grounding is in her garden. “Even before she wrote poems, Dickinson was engaged in gathering, tending, categorizing, and pressing flowers.” (Farr & Carter, 2005, p. 3) For Dickinson, the flowers, grasses, and trees in her garden served as metaphor origin domain for the “unknown and unknowable,” providing a “simulated environment” where the limits of human cognition could be tested and expanded through active inference. Horticultural practice provided the pre-conceptual gestalts for Dickinson’s cognition; her active engagement in gathering, tending, and pressing flowers was not merely a hobby but the source of embodied engagement that allowed her to construct complex metaphorical networks. These concrete interactions with garden life

provided the experiential grounding necessary for her to map the minutiae of the flora onto the vastness of the cosmos, thereby challenging the rigid, analytical boundaries of 19th-century reductionism.

Dickinson lived in an era suffused with “the Wordsworthian age of devout nature worship” (Farr & Carter, 2005, p. 29). As an accomplished gardener, she keenly and lucidly perceived the creative power of nature not as a passive object of study, but as a vital partner. This is evident in her personification of nature’s agency in an early poem:

She beckons, and the woods start

She nods, and all begin

Surely – such a country

I was never in! (Dickinson, 1999, p. 66)

Although this early poem employs a relatively simple form of CMT, the underlying cognitive mechanisms it embodies already show promising signs. By making an initial conceptual integration between the “garden” and the “social space,” Dickinson endows the forest with human social traits such as “inviting” and “nodding.” This marks the beginning of her attempt to break down the binary opposition between subject and object, laying the cognitive foundation for the more complex “plant-universe” integrative network that would emerge in her later works.

Furthermore, Dickinson’s embodied engagement with garden plants enables dynamic conceptual blending as framed by Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT). In this cognitive process, her self-perception merges with botanical attributes of flowers to forge a novel construct—the relational self. Dickinson maintains acute awareness of her poetic gift and her

dual existential disposition: a fusion of fiery passion and unvarnished plainness. Her garden imagery is far from one-sided self-projection; instead, tending and contemplating secluded flora such as violets, dandelions, and daisies triggers the real-time integration of distinct mental input spaces. These modest blossoms supply the emergent structure that shapes her poetic self-image. Within her verse, flowers are no inert symbolic vehicles; they operate as embodied manifestations of an identity rooted in quiet seclusion and enduring life force, flourishing at the juncture of her private domestic garden and the boundless poetic universe. This formation precisely corresponds to CBT's definition of the blended space: blends inherit generic frameworks shared across input spaces yet develop unique, emergent structures that cannot be generated by either input domain in isolation (Fauconnier & Turner, 2003, p. 47).

For instance, in her poetry, the pansy functions as a site of conceptual composition where the flower is likened to a woman of few words yet unyielding integrity. The persona identifies as the "little Heart's Ease," establishing a blend where botanical resilience and human moral duty are fused:

I'm the little 'Heart's Ease'!

I dont care for pouting skies!

If the Butterfly delay

Can I, therefore, stay away? (Dickinson, 1999, p. 167)

In another verse, the "Daisy" following the sun represents an online synthesis where botanical phototropism and human emotional sweetness are blended into a single emergent structure. By blending the flower's natural rhythm with the "sweetness" of human love, Dickinson dissolves the binary opposition between the poetic subject and the natural object,

showcasing a new emergent structure—participatory consciousness of a relational self defined through its dynamic interaction with the environment: “The Daisy follows soft the Sun —/Because, Sir, love is sweet!...” (Dickinson, 1999, p. 161)

A verse about dandelions demonstrates Dickinson’s mastery of cross-scale mapping, where the minutiae of the flora are dynamically integrated with the vastness of the cosmos:

The Dandelion’s pallid Tube

Astonishes the Grass

And Winter instantly becomes

An infinite Alas

The Tube uplifts a signal Bud

And then a shouting Flower

The Proclamation of the Suns

That sepulture is o’er – (Dickinson, 1999, p. 1565)

The “pallid Tube”—a product of her embodied engagement with the soil—is synthesized into “The Proclamation of the Suns.” This dynamic conceptual blending generates a powerful emergent meaning: the vitality of a humble weed is cognitively equivalent to the cosmic laws of the universe. By elevating a common garden plant to a celestial scale, Dickinson provides a profound critique of 19th-century reductionism, asserting that nature’s “Revelation” cannot be detained by the rigid “Analysis” of science.

The lily is transformed into a nun whose cool exterior conceals an ardent heart; The lily’s passage through the “Dark Sod” is mapped onto “Education,” an online synthesis that portrays a relational self-overcoming environmental adversity:

Through the Dark Sod – as Education

The Lily passes sure

Feels her white foot – no trepidation

Her faith – no fear... (Dickinson, 1999, p. 559)

Similarly, the following poem constructs a blended space merging winter frost and the flower's selfhood. The input space of frigid northern winters stands for Dickinson's stifling life conditions, while the floral domain embodies her suppressed poetic vitality. Their integration yields emergent meaning: she waits enduringly for creative inspiration amid hardship. Far from unilateral projection, the flower's plea to the Creator encapsulates her quiet struggle to blossom artistically under restrictive surroundings.

Thus the gentian exhibits an "emergent structure"—compression of vital relations, where external "Frosts" are internalized as the plant's "Condition," enabling a cross-scale dialogue between the botanical and the Creator:

The Frosts were her condition

The Tyrian would not come

Until the North – invoke it

Creator – Shall I – bloom? (Dickinson, 1999, p. 520)

As a "bold little beauty," the ground ivy shatters the earth's "antiquity" through an emergent structure that redefines the world's temporal scale. This mapping challenges 19th-century reductionism, proving how embodied cognition can elevate a simple plant into an instrument of profound ecological philosophy:

...Bold little Beauty —

Bedecked with thee

Nature forswears

Antiquity – (Dickinson, 1999, p. 1357)

Through these dynamic conceptual blending between garden flowers and self-concepts, the poet's multifaceted self-perception comes into view: a synthesis of unadorned silence, bold passion, and steadfast courage. These flowers function not as static symbols, but as embodied incarnations of a relational self that is defined by its resilient vitality and quiet solitude. As cognitive poetics posits, and as Lakoff argues, the self is not an isolated entity separate from its environment, but a "perspective of man as part of his environment," focusing on "constant interaction with the physical environment and with other people" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 229–230). Viewed through the lens of Conceptual Blending Theory, Dickinson's garden serves as a simulated environment where her embodied engagement—the daily labor of tending, observing, and writing—blends and allows for the emergent structure of mental spaces. In this process, the garden, as the mediating ground for her cognition, dissolves the rigid boundaries of the subject-object dichotomy. Her seclusion is thus redefined not as social isolation, but as a profound mode of participatory consciousness and co-existence with all beings. The flowers blooming across her lines stand as the emergent structure of a relational self, continuously shaped and enriched through the intricate plant-universe network that defines her ecopoetic holism. Knowing this, readers in the process of understanding her metaphorical network "can end up with a deeper satisfaction," because "the moment of tangible, global understanding comes when a network has been elaborated in such a way" (Fauconnier & Turner, 2003, p. 57).

3. Dynamic Synthesis: Garden Visitors and the Structural Metaphor of Ecological Holism

Beyond the systematic mapping of self-concept onto garden flora, the visitors that frequent the garden—bees, butterflies, birds, beetles, and even the broader natural landscape—serve as pivotal nodes within a dynamic conceptual blending process. Within her verse, the metaphorical system exhibits a dynamic fluidity, where the biological boundaries between flowers, insects, and the broader natural landscape shift seamlessly in the radiance of ultimate meaning. This fluid mechanism allows for the emergence of a complex structure: a structural metaphor of the “unity of all things.” In this blended space, every living being—whether a flower blooming in silence or an insect bustling in haste—is integrated into a relational network as a distinct manifestation of the cosmos’s life force. Ultimately, this is not merely a linguistic reconfiguration but a product of Dickinson’s embodied engagement and participatory consciousness, transforming the garden into a dynamic cognitive model that explores the interconnections between life, death, and eternity.

While Lakoff and Johnson’s theory focuses on the unidirectional projection of stable conceptual structures, the complexity of Dickinson’s “multidimensional metaphorical network” necessitates a more dynamic model of meaning construction. Specifically, Fauconnier and Turner’s Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT) expands upon this foundation by introducing the “online synthesis” of multiple “mental spaces”—a real-time cognitive process where transient conceptual packets are integrated during the act of reading. Unlike the static mapping of source to target, CBT operates through a dynamic conceptual blending process involving at least four connected spaces: the two inputs, the generic and the blend. By selectively projecting elements from mental spaces into a blended space, it generates emergent structures. “Emergent structure arises in the blend that is not copied there directly from any input. It is generated in three ways:

through composition of projections from the inputs, through completion based on independently recruited frames and scenarios, and through elaboration” (Fauconnier & Turner, 2003, pp. 40–46). This process effectively compresses diffuse conceptual networks into human-scale meaning, fostering global insight and creativity. It accounts for how new, “emergent meanings” are generated within a blended space—a process that explains the “dynamic fluidity” in Dickinson’s verse, where the boundaries between the garden, the self, and the cosmos often shift seamlessly.

For instance, in Dickinson’s poem, the “bloom” and the “butterfly” are integrated into an emergent structure through online synthesis in a spiritual space. Under the mechanism of composition, the projections of these two input domains are combined, making them appear as manifestations of the same life force at different stages. The “meridian” sun, positioned at the zenith of the sky, functions as the ultimate point of integration, symbolizing light, fulfillment, and eternity. By introducing the “Meridian”—an independently recruited framework—the poem completes the cognitive journey from the concrete growth of plants to the cyclical nature of cosmic life:

Bloom – is Result – to meet a Flower

...

Assisting in the Bright Affair

So intricately done

Then offered as a Butterfly

To the Meridian – (Dickinson, 1999, p. 1038)

In this poem, by composing the actions of different species—the bird’s flight posture,

combined with the human “rowing” (rowed/Oars) and the butterfly’s “swimming” and employing frameworks such as navigation and swimming to fill in the gaps (completion), and through the readers’ active inference (elaboration) that continually refines this hybrid space, readers ultimately arrive at an emergent structure that produces dynamic fluidity which brings the erosion of biological boundaries. It is this erosion that challenges 19th-century reductionism and embodies “participatory consciousness”:

He bit an Angleworm in halves

And ate the fellow, raw,

...

And then he drank a Dew

From a convenient Grass —

...

And he unrolled his feathers,

And rowed him softer home —

Than Oars divide the Ocean,

...

Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon,

Leap, plashless as they swim. (Dickinson, 1999, p. 359)

Furthermore, in her renowned short poem *To Make a Prairie*, Dickinson demonstrates a masterclass in the online synthesis of mental spaces, illustrating how the human mind constructs reality through a dynamic emergent structure.

First, this poem reflects an embodied engagement with the natural world, where

horticultural labor provides the experiential grounding for high-order philosophical inquiry. Dickinson, as a gardener, recognizes that the essential condition for the propagation of life in horticulture lies in the minimal ecological combination of “a clover and one bee”:

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,

One clover, and a bee,

And revery.

The revery alone will do,

If bees are few. (Dickinson, 1999, p. 1779)

Second, the poem operates through an online synthesis of mental spaces, blending the biological “bee” with the cognitive “revery.” Within this blended space, a cross-scale mapping occurs: the mind’s creative power is equated with nature’s generative force. This dynamic conceptual blending elevates human imagination to an agency as potent as natural law, generating a new, emergent meaning regarding the mind’s role in creating reality.

Ultimately, the “Prairie” functions as an emergent structure—a spiritual ecological reality that transcends scientific “analysis.” By dissolving the subject-object dichotomy, Dickinson achieves a participatory consciousness, where the mind and nature co-create a vision of original unity. The poem thus reveals a relational self that transforms a simple garden scene into a vast, interconnected cosmic network.

In the garden poems discussed above, Dickinson transcends the conceptual metaphors grounded in everyday horticultural practice, elevating the abstract cognition of the “unity of all things” into a dynamic and creative poetic wisdom. Through the online synthesis of mental spaces—facilitating multiple mappings between flower and insect, bird and butterfly, and

nature and poetics—she does not merely describe the dissolution of boundaries; she achieves their thorough dissolution through the dynamic fluidity of poetic language itself. The core driving force of this dissolution lies in the deep operation of structural metaphor, which no longer rests on static “A is like B” comparisons. Instead, it functions as a blended space where complete and systematic conceptual structures organize diverse experiences into a single, interconnected network of meaning. These dissolutions are achieved by incorporating diverse life forms into a shared emergent structure of meaning-generation, reflecting the essential nature of life as sharing a common origin and undergoing mutual transformation. Thus, the profundity of Dickinson’s ecological vision lies in her use of dynamic conceptual blending to transform the abstract “unity of all things” into a simulated environment and a cognitive landscape that can be perceived, experienced, and poetically articulated.

4. Cognitive Instruments: The Inferential Network and the Critique of 19th-Century Reductionism

Dickinson’s garden poetry functions as a sophisticated site for “attempting the impossible,” where she reconfigures everyday language into a potent cognitive instrument to approach the generative force of nature. Her metaphorical network presents an inferential labyrinth of “intricate and paradoxical logic,” characterized by “gaps, ruptures, and white spaces” that demand the reader’s active inference (O’Donoghue, 2021, p. 122). This process is not a mere decoding of static symbols but an online synthesis of mental spaces, where the reader must mobilize their embodied engagement with horticultural practice to navigate her “syntactically compressed” verse.

On the basis of CMT and CBT, contemporary cognitive poetics, bolstered by relevance theory in pragmatics, provides a critical framework for deciphering the density of Dickinson's metaphorical labyrinth. This approach posits that metaphor is not a poetic deviation but a profound extension of standard interpretive processes, where comprehension hinges upon the reader's active inference. To navigate this complexity, readers must root their interpretation in horticultural practice, mobilizing cognitive resources—such as embodied experience and mental spaces—to dynamically reconstruct meaning within the “simulated environment” of her poems. By appealing to these “standard inferential mechanisms,” Dickinson depends on our cognitive capacity to “impose order on the unknown and unknowable” through her metaphorical constructions (O'Donoghue, 2021, p. 114).

Dickinson has the keen awareness that the logical language humans rely on is often clumsy and impoverished, serving as a potential source of misinterpretation. Driven by a creative stance of attempting the impossible, she sought to shatter the shackles of conventional expression. Through nimble reconfigurations, she recast rigid and desiccated everyday words into poetic utterances of infinite possibility. In doing so, Dickinson transformed her metaphorical network into a cognitive instrument that does not merely describe nature, but endeavors to approach—and even echo—the ceaseless, generative force of the cosmos (Wang 36).

Take her lilac poem *The Lilac is an ancient shrub* as an example:

The Lilac is an ancient shrub

But ancients than that

The Firmamental Lilac

Upon the Hill tonight—

The Sun subsiding on his Course

Bequeaths this final Plant

To Contemplation—not to Touch—

The Flower of Occident.

Of one Corolla is the West—

The Calyx is the Earth—

The Capsule's burnished Seeds the Stars— (Dickinson, 1999, p. 1261)

First, the stanzas above reveal the poet's embodied horticultural experience: 1) The lilac is a perennial shrub, with rough bark, winding roots, and branches that sprout year after year. 2) The purple hue and fragrance of the lilac create a synesthetic "color-scent" experience, drawing the gardener to pause—to gaze—to touch. 3) The lilac's growth form includes a corolla, calyx, and seeds enclosed within a capsule.

Second, an inferential maze is constructed through an assertive opening, an incomplete analogy, and shifting perspectives. "The Lilac is an ancient shrub" is a typical assertion, yet it does not close off meaning. The poet provides no complete analogy; her "elliptical dashes" and sudden shifts in perspective (such as "The Firmamental Lilac") serve as an explicit summons to the reader's reasoning. As one encounters "the west," "The Flower of Occident," and "Seeds the Stars," one perceives the ontological metaphor embedded in botanical terminology: the corolla becomes the dome of the western sky; the calyx becomes the earth; the seeds within the capsule become the stars clustered in the firmament. Leaping from the

source domain of the lilac's color and form to the mapped domain of cosmic components, one arrives at a conceptual metaphor: the plant is the cosmos.

Finally, the poem ascends from a relatively static conceptual metaphor to a relatively dynamic structural metaphor. A structural metaphor refers to "use one highly structured and clearly delineated concept to structure another"—that is, from the fixed botanical structure of the lilac, Dickinson maps and constructs a macroscopic conception of the cosmos (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 61). This cross-domain metaphor of "plant-cosmos" invites the reader into sustained reverie: the purple of sunset corresponds to the purple of the lilac; the afterglow at the mountain's foot corresponds to the lilac's corolla; the earth beneath our feet is the calyx that upholds the corolla; the star-strewn firmament after sunset is the capsule enveloping its abundant seeds. The plant's cycle from seed to blossom to fruit and back to seed is an unending rhythm of life—a quality that, when mapped onto the cosmos, reveals the cosmological vision Dickinson seeks to illuminate: all things in the universe are likewise caught in a cycle, from sunset over the hills to the blazing of the stars. In the cosmic depths beyond the limited senses confined by time and space, life pulses unceasingly, and eternal power abides.

At the conclusion of *The Lilac* is an ancient shrub, Dickinson's critique of "The Scientist of Faith" and his "Synthesis" (Dickinson, 1999, p. 1261) gains new meaning when viewed against the backdrop of 19th-century botanical taxonomies. By asserting that "Flora" remains "unimpeachable / To Time's Analysis," Dickinson is not rejecting science but rather challenging a reductionist mode of cognition. Her metaphorical network serves as an alternative ecological epistemology, one that preserves the "revelation" of the living organism against the "theses" that seek to dissect and staticize it:

The Scientist of Faith

His research has but just begun—

Above his Synthesis

The Flora unimpeachable

To Time's Analysis—

“Eye hath not seen” may possibly

Be current with the Blind

But let not Revelation

By Theses be detained— (Dickinson, 1999, p. 1261)

Dickinson utilizes her embodied horticultural experience to construct an inferential maze in her metaphorical network that transcends literal observation to reveal a macroscopic cosmological vision. Through an online synthesis of mental spaces, she facilitates a cross-domain mapping where the botanical anatomy of the lilac is integrated with the components of the universe: the western sky becomes the “Corolla,” the earth functions as the “Calyx,” and the stars are envisioned as “burnished Seeds” within the cosmic “Capsule.” This dynamic conceptual blending allows the poem to ascend from a static plant to a “Firmamental Lilac,” establishing a structural metaphor of the “plant-cosmos” network where the unending rhythms of botanical growth and cosmic cycles are unified. Ultimately, by placing the “unimpeachable” Flora above the reach of scientific “Analysis,” Dickinson’s verse mounts a definitive critique of 19th-century reductionism, inviting a participatory consciousness that recognizes the eternal, generative pulse of the environment and the cosmos.

From this poem, we can discern Dickinson's sophisticated mode of constructing her metaphorical network—ascending from relatively static conceptual mappings to a dynamic conceptual blending that operates through an online synthesis of mental spaces. This process invites readers to push the limits of their intellect through active inference, navigating the inferential labyrinth prompted by her embodied engagement with the natural landscape. As Josie O'Donoghue observes, "inference is central to Dickinson's poetic method, but in a distinctly double-edged way: her recourse to inference betrays an insecurity about the limits of what can be known even as it seems to exert some form of control over uncertainty" (O'Donoghue, 2021, p. 136). This inferential model, inherently fraught with uncertainty, implies that her metaphorical network is not a closed symbolic system, but a defense of a direct, vivid, and embodied mode of cognition rooted in observation—one that resists the constraints of 19th-century reductionism and rigid dogma. Her garden thus becomes a dynamic and open cognitive model, or a simulated environment, inviting readers to act as both gardeners and scientists. Through this participatory consciousness, they engage in an unending inquiry into the universe and faith, discovering the eternal pulse of life within the minutest phenomena of the flora.

5. Participatory Consciousness: The Relational Self and Ecopoetic Holism

Dickinson's construction of a multidimensional metaphorical network does more than just celebrate nature; it challenges the very limits of human cognition to awaken a modern ecological consciousness. As David Wheatley suggests, ecopoetics questions whether we can know nature on its own terms rather than as a mere human projection (Wheatley, 2015, p. 138). In Dickinson's verse, this is achieved not through static observation, but through an embodied

engagement that facilitates the online synthesis of mental spaces. Her garden functions as a simulated environment where the rigid boundaries of anthropocentrism are dissolved through dynamic conceptual blending. By mapping the minutiae of the flora onto the vastness of the cosmos, Dickinson creates an interconnected network of meanings that forces the reader to infer and experience the profound interactivity between humanity and the natural world.

The philosophical cornerstone of this network is holism, an ontological foundation where the self is no longer an isolated subject but a relational self embedded within the environment. Cognitive poetics reveals that human thought constructs the world through embodied experience, while ecopoetics calls for a re-embedding of humanity within nature. These two perspectives converge in Dickinson's poetry as a form of "participatory consciousness." In the blended space of her poetry, she does not merely use flowers as symbols; she achieves a unity of human and plant through the compression of vital relations. Here, humans are no longer observers or conquerors, but co-creators of meaning. Her observations of the interactions between animals, plants, and natural landscapes lead to an emergent structure—the "oneness of all things"—which serves as a powerful critique of 19th-century reductionism and scientific "Analysis."

The nineteenth century in which Dickinson lived was not yet marked by the environmental crises so pronounced today. Dickinson's enthusiasm for gardening aligned with the spirit of her age, high society followed Victorian horticultural fashions, eagerly cultivating various flowers and using them as a medium for social interaction. Though motivated in part by a desire to display refinement, this fashion nevertheless fostered, to some extent, a connection between humanity and nature. Entering the twenty-first century, however, with the

intensifying crisis of ecological imbalance, the plight of human existence has become a widespread concern. The relationship between literature and the environment, and between literature and nature, has increasingly become a focal point of interdisciplinary inquiry under the lens of ecological consciousness. David Wheatley, in *Contemporary British Poetry* (2015), defines ecopoetics as “the full spectrum of contemporary engagement with the natural world in poetry, criticism and prose” (Wheatley, 2015, p. 138). According to his definition, ecopoetics examine the relationship between literature, environment, and nature, as well as its representation in poetic and other literary works, with the goal of awakening ecological awareness—a task that holds constructive significance for the pressing environmental issues of our time. Ecopoetics questions whether humans can truly know nature in itself, rather than merely as a projection of the human perspective. This critique of anthropocentrism is itself a crucial pathway toward awakening ecological consciousness. “How do we know nature on its own terms, and not just as a human projection? ... the idea of the ‘more-than-human’ itself aims to satisfy purely human, and mainly sentimental, ends” (Wheatley, 2015, p. 136–137). By constructing a metaphorical network that challenges the limits of human cognition, Dickinson invites readers to infer and experience the interaction between humanity and the natural world, rather than positioning herself as a moral arbiter. This very act of construction is itself a departure from anthropocentrism.

The most fundamental philosophical stance of ecopoetics is holism, which studies the complexity of the environment in which we are already embedded. This relationship of “embeddedness” constitutes the ontological foundation for both the materiality and objectivity of the world and the interactivity between humans and their environment, because “the study

of ecopoetics as what addresses the unique potential of poetry to reveal the complexities of the environment in which we are embedded” (Alison, 2015, p. X). Ecopoetics also emphasizes the constructive power of language, holding that poetry, through the reconfiguration of signs, can transform the material conditions of our lived reality. This constitutes a clear affirmation of human intentionality and agency, “...our symbols, so poetry, especially in its care for language, may begin to reset those antecedents to alter the facts of our living” (p. X).

Furthermore, cognitive poetics also emphasizes human experience as grounded in the material body: “Ecopoetic studies attend to the material nature of human embodied experience, and foreground how language participates in material processes” (Alison, 2015, p. XV). This aligns with the experiential view of metaphor advocated by cognitive poetics. Within cognitive poetics, one key focus of research is the examination of metaphor through the lens of embodied experience. As *Metaphors We Live By* states: “our conceptual system is grounded in our experiences in the world... in our constant interaction with our physical and cultural environment” (Lakoff, 1980, p. 119). The experientialist view in cognitive poetics, grounded in pre-conceptual bodily experience, generates abstract conceptual structures through metaphorical or hierarchical projection, thereby guiding human interaction with the environment and nature. “Within the experientialist myth, ... We understand experience metaphorically when we use a gestalt from one domain or experience to structure experience in another domain” (Lakoff, 1980, p. 230).

This experientialist approach to metaphor provides a powerful methodological framework and analytical tool for ecopoetics. “The meticulous textual analysis of cognitive poetics, paired with the holistic spiritual interpretation of ecopoetics, complements each other

perfectly” (Pang, 2009, p. 21). Through an analysis of the metaphor web of the classical conceptual and structural metaphors within cognitive poetics as manifested in Dickinson’s garden poetry, this essay verifies “the epistemological commensurability between ecopoetics and cognitive poetics.” This commensurability is first manifested in their fundamental transcendence of the “subject-object dichotomy,” that is, cognitive poetics reveals that human thought constructs the world through embodied experience and conceptual metaphor, while ecopoetics calls for humanity to re-embed itself within the natural world—both point toward a form of “participatory consciousness,” in which humans are no longer mere observers and conquerors of the world, but rather co-creators and participants in its meaning. Dickinson’s embodied experience in the garden allowed her to see herself in flowers, achieving a unity of human and plant. Her observations of the interactions between animals, plants, and humans in nature led her to recognize the oneness of all things—a realization that first and foremost dissolves anthropocentrism. The intricate metaphorical network in Dickinson’s garden poetry further reveals the forward-thinking nature of her ecological vision. In the Victorian era’s atmosphere of reverence for nature, Dickinson did not deify the natural world; rather, she regarded human intellect and imagination as bridges connecting humanity, nature, and the environment. While she is aware of and acknowledges the limitations of language, she also appreciates the agency of human language in stimulating intellect and imagination. Within the intricately constructed labyrinth of her metaphorical network, Dickinson “tells it slant”—suggesting that the unity of heaven and humanity must be achieved by mobilizing the vast and subtle powers of human thought. Grounded in the body’s situated experience in the world, and continuously working within the metaphorical network to bridge the chasms that

anthropocentrism has carved—and continues to carve—between humanity and nature, humans and animals, humans and all things, we may realize a return to an original unity with environment, nature, and the cosmos.

In conclusion, Dickinson's garden poetry begins with conceptual and structural metaphors, using a metaphorical network as its warp and weft to thoroughly dissolve anthropocentrism through relational reconfiguration and transcendent integration, thereby constructing a unique ecological vision. In her garden poetry, flowers, insects, animals, and natural landscapes intertwine in mutual relation, not only reconstituting the power dynamics between humans and animals and plants, and between humanity and nature, but also reshaping our understanding of holism within ecopoetics. This understanding reveals a dynamic, process-oriented philosophy: grounded in embodied experience, continuously dissolving the boundaries erected by anthropocentrism through the cognitive network of metaphor, and ultimately achieving, in thought and imagination, the unity of heaven and humanity. In our contemporary era of ecological crisis, Dickinson's metaphorical network offers more than cognitive challenges and aesthetic pleasure; it provides a cognitive roadmap for re-embedding the human self within the more-than-human world, ultimately achieving a unity of thought, imagination, and environment.

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