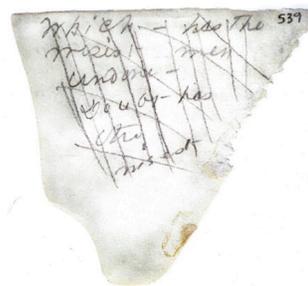


## Studying and Teaching the Ethical Dilemma of Emily Dickinson

by Brienna Barron

Readers of American poet Emily Dickinson are confronted by an ethical dilemma. Today, Dickinson is considered “one of the greatest American poets”, but the problem arises once the reader is made aware that she “rejected print publication of her poems” (*The Gorgeous Nothings*, 8, 10). The act of reading her work ignores that her consent was never given for the publication of her poetry. This is especially evident in Dickinson’s envelope poems that she wrote nearing the end of her life. In these poems, lines are frequently crossed out, pairs of words are present where she had yet to choose between them, and one poem (seen in Figure 1, titled “539a”) has been completely scratched out, but was still published in *Envelope Poems*, a partial collection of her envelope writings (*Envelope Poems*, 81).



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Reading Emily Dickinson, I am troubled by my own violation of her privacy, but as a student I believe there is value in studying Dickinson, as the ethical dilemma involved in reading her poetry presents a new kind of engagement with literature. The ethical question of Dickinson prompts conversations about private and public boundaries, like whether or not we should continue to read and teach Dickinson despite her disapproval. The nature of her work’s publication also challenged established literary theories like the intentional fallacy. These issues also raise questions about power structures in place in our society, like personal conviction versus academic obligation. These questions also allow students to analyze and understand their own reactions to the ethical questions that arise and teaches them to become sensitive readers, value biographical and historical context, and value the role of the author in a text. In this essay,

I will focus on the value of studying Dickinson through the lens of ethics by analyzing Dickinson's word choice, capitalization, and use of envelopes in three of her envelope poems, A842, A252, and A313, for the ethical dilemmas the poems address. To further understand the ethics of Dickinson, I will also look at responses to Dickinson's work and life in two biographies of her, one written by Alfred Habegger and one included in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature, Vol. B*.

In many ways, Emily Dickinson's poems already work through the ideas that are investigated by students in the classroom. They deal often with the crossing of private and public boundaries, a subject that is especially evident in her poem "A842" (It is important to note that Dickinson did not title her own poems, the labels for her poems were determined by others years later). The poem (seen in Figure 2) describes a plea for privacy. It reads, "As there are / Apartments in our / own Minds that - / we never enter / without Apology - / we should respect / the seals of / others -". Dickinson makes her appeal for privacy clear in this poem in three ways: with her diction, her chosen medium, and the poem's speaker. Focusing on her word choice, the word "apartments" stands out because it functions

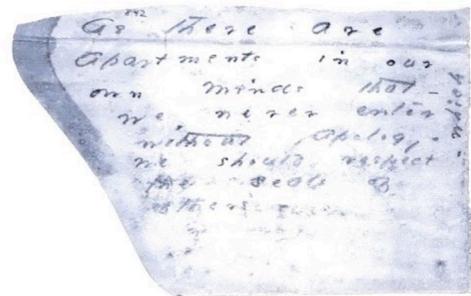


Figure 2: "A842", *Envelope Poems*, 90-91

as a metaphor. Dickinson uses it as a representation of private boundaries: the physical "apartment" makes the figurative boundaries of privacy less abstract. In reference to her medium, she wrote the poem on the inside flap of an envelope, the other side of which is addressed, which means it likely carried private correspondence at one time. The envelope itself is a "metaphor of containment, of exteriority and interiority, of enfolding and exposure." (*Envelope Poems*, 217). This gives more weight to the word "seals" in the poem, meaning not

only the figurative seals of privacy, but the physical seal of an envelope, protecting the privacy of the letter inside it. The poem also evokes the moral “golden rule” (“do unto others as you would have them do unto you”) through its speaker. By using the pronouns “our” and “we”, the speaker of the poem implies that the principles presented in it are so important that the speaker also must follow them. This is where the ethical question arises: if Dickinson felt so strongly about private boundaries that she wrote a poem about them featuring a speaker who was also convicted about it on the inside of an envelope, proceeded not to publish it nor give her consent for publishing, but it was distributed to the masses following her death anyway, should we—or anyone—read it? Or should we leave it alone and simply “respect the seals of others”?

The ethics of Emily Dickinson emerge in pedagogy as well: considering how her poems were released to the world, should Dickinson’s work be taught at all? If her work is assigned in a classroom, should students refuse to participate and risk a failing grade in order to respect Dickinson? And what does education risk losing if she is omitted from every syllabus in the future? In the introduction to his biography of Dickinson, *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson*, Alfred Habegger explains that “one of the reasons readers at all levels respond to her with passionate enthusiasm is that, knowing something of her life and character, they approach her work with these in mind.” (Habegger, xii) Habegger reaffirms the importance of biographical context in literary studies, but he later says that reading with the author’s intention in mind is “generally a mistake” because it gives readers the idea that they can “zoom into her life and penetrate her secret being.” (xii, xiii). The problem Habegger discusses here relates to a widespread idea in literary theory: the intentional fallacy. Relying too much on Dickinson’s biography to explain her work does a disservice to her and to the reader themselves, but the question of the intentional fallacy is not easily answered when it comes to Emily

Dickinson. The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines the intentional fallacy as the notion that “a literary work, once published, belongs in the public realm of language, which gives it an objective existence distinct from the author’s original idea of it...” (182) The key words in this definition are “once published”, something Dickinson herself never did. The ethical dilemma continues: does the intentional fallacy of literary theory apply to Emily Dickinson’s works if she never consented to sending them out into the public sphere? To answer this question, Habegger’s Dickinson biography quotes critic George Steiner who said, “At certain levels, we are not meant to understand *at all*, and our interpretation, indeed our reading itself, is an intrusion.”

(Habegger, xii). Steiner’s point is that because Dickinson did not release her work of her own volition, she could have had no larger intention when it came to her readers, as she did not aim to have any readers. Therefore, in studying Dickinson as a literary figure, readers are faced with the knowledge that because the poet had a “reluctance to publish” (Habegger, xii), under the larger field of literary theory, her works contradict established precedents like the intentional fallacy.

Another aspect of the ethical problem in teaching and studying Dickinson lies in the academic obligation of students and the inherent structures of power and control of professors and students. For example, in a literature class, a professor might insist that their students focus solely on Dickinson’s work rather than the biographical context surrounding it. Should those students express reluctance to do so considering the nature of the works’ publication, they may risk a reprimand or even a failing grade. In this way, the authority this literature professor possesses influences how their students study Emily Dickinson. Another literature professor might design a more global study of Dickinson, including her personal relationships, her “avoidance of public life”, and her “reluctance to publish” (Habegger, xii). These contexts also influence the study of Dickinson, but in a different way. The choice to teach Emily Dickinson at

all raises its own ethical issues, especially concerning the matter of her work's publication without her consent but acknowledging the control a teacher has over how students interact with the subject of Emily Dickinson sheds light on structures of power and control throughout academics and society.

In fact, Dickinson herself worked through the ideas of these inherent structures of power in her own work. In "A252", another of Dickinson's envelope poems (seen in Figure 3), she

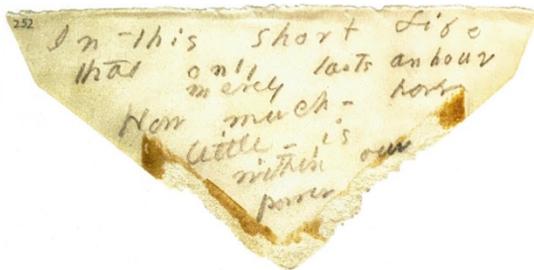


Figure 3: "A252", *Envelope Poems*, 30-31

writes "In this short Life / that only lasts an hour / How much – how / little – is / within our power" (*Envelope Poems*, 30-31). This poem, again written on the inside flap of an envelope, conveys

a feeling of insignificance, or of feeling small. Dickinson's careful capitalization, which is common in many of her poems (e.g. "A232" and "A394"), seems lacking in this poem, limited to "In", "Life", and "How" (though "Life" is the only capitalization that feels especially out of place). But the lack of capitalized letters is just as important here as their presence is in other Dickinson poems. The choice to leave letters lowercase reflects the lack of power the speaker communicates: the lowercase letters seem timid, shy, even afraid when confronted by larger, bolder things like the capitalized "Life". This poem expresses Dickinson's struggle with authority, power, and control, and in a biographical context, seems hopeful rather than bleak. For instance, a different biography of Emily Dickinson mentions her expulsion from the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary due to her "refusal to capitulate to the demands of orthodoxy" (*The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Vol. B*, 2555). Dickinson's unwillingness to conform to her school's ideologies and expectations "helped to liberate her to think on her own—to 'pause,' as she put it, 'and ponder and ponder'" (2555). Even her refusal to

publish her work, as many people attempted to persuade her, illustrates the strength of her own personal conviction. Essentially, though the poem “A252” deals with feeling powerless, Dickinson herself was no stranger to rebutting established structures of power in her own life.

Additionally, Dickinson wrote one poem that seems to predict the future of her work. In “A313” (seen in Figure 4), she wrote, “Myself compu- / ted were they / Pearls / What Legacy / could be / Oh Magnanimity - / My Visitor in / Paradise -”.

This poem illustrates Dickinson’s process, which the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* describes as working in “fits and starts as the spirit moved her” (2554), evidenced in the dash in “computed”. That dash, positioned directly next to the crease at the bottom of the envelope, implies that Dickinson wrote this poem on the paper before

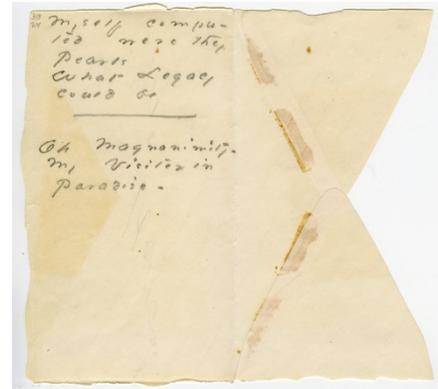


Figure 4: “A313”, *The Gorgeous Nothings*, 74-75

shaping it into the form we see in Figure 4. In Jan Bervin’s introduction to *The Gorgeous Nothings*, “Studies in Scale”, she describes the care Dickinson showed the envelopes:

Dickinson’s poems and correspondence attest to the considerable care she gave to the ritual act of opening a letter. These envelopes have been opened well beyond the point needed to merely extract a letter; they have been torn, cut, and opened out completely flat, rendered into new shapes. (9)

This poem then must be a product of Dickinson’s “fits and starts”, if she wrote the poem prior to shaping the envelope, which Bervin explains she took great care to do. The “Pearls” of “Legacy” represent her poems, since we know from “A252” that size is no indication of meaning, and the line separating the two stanzas represents her death, due to the capitalization of “Paradise”, meaning the afterlife. By stating that “Magnanimity”, or generosity, visits her after her death,

and that her poems are her legacy, Dickinson predicts the published future of her work that has since come to pass: a generosity that creates her legacy. Still, the ethics of reading her work are called into question. Does Dickinson's prediction that her work would be published permit us to read it?

Still, there is value to be found in the problematic nature of studying and teaching Emily Dickinson. By working through the ethical dilemmas studying her work entails, students are given an academic space to investigate and evaluate their values as literary critics, writers, and even as members of society. While I am undecided on the issues of abolishing the Emily Dickinson Archive or omitting her from the American literary canon, I do believe that Emily Dickinson's work must only be taught alongside the biographical context of her life. Rather than teaching only her poems, students must also be presented with the moral and ethical questions of studying her because it is within those conversations that Dickinson's greatest value lies.

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