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Dickinson's Dash: a technology of feminist and queer resistance

ABSTRACT

This paper re-examines Emily Dickinson's distinctive use of the dash, moving beyond its printed appearance to explore its physical creation in her original manuscripts. While past views often saw her punctuation as odd or flawed, this research argues that the dash was a deliberate and complex tool of feminist resistance. We use material feminism and queer temporality to show how Dickinson's dashes work in two interconnected ways. First, as a physical and spatial act, the dash marks a gendered presence on the page, challenging 19th-century male-dominated publishing norms and their push for standardized typography. Second, as a sophisticated temporal device, the dash intentionally breaks up linear narratives and sentence structures. This creates a unique "queer temporality" that disrupts traditional ideas about life, productivity, and death. By closely analyzing *I'm Nobody! Who are you?* (Fr260) and *Because I could not stop for Death* (Fr479), and engaging with manuscript scholarship from Marta Werner and Susan Howe, this article highlights the deep political and aesthetic power of Dickinson's experimental syntax. Ultimately, the paper suggests that Dickinson's material poetics, particularly her strategic use of the dash, remarkably anticipates the fragmented, non-linear, and resistant communication styles seen in today's digital world. It offers a lasting model for challenging dominant norms through radical formal innovation.

Keywords: dash; material feminism; queer temporality; manuscript studies; feminist poetics; syntax; literary theory.

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El guion en la escritura de Emily Dickinson como tecnología de resistencia feminista.

RESUMEN

Este artículo reexamina el uso singular que Emily Dickinson hizo del guion, yendo más allá de su apariencia impresa para explorar su creación física en sus manuscritos originales. Si bien las perspectivas anteriores a menudo consideraban su puntuación extraña o defectuosa, esta investigación argumenta que el guion fue una herramienta deliberada y compleja de resistencia feminista. Utilizamos el feminismo material y la temporalidad queer para mostrar cómo los guiones de Dickinson funcionan de dos maneras interconectadas. Primero, como acto físico y espacial, el guion marca una presencia de género en la página, desafiando las

normas editoriales del siglo XIX, dominadas por los hombres, y su impulso por la tipografía estandarizada. Segundo, como un sofisticado dispositivo temporal, el guion rompe intencionalmente las narrativas lineales y las estructuras sintácticas. Esto crea una «temporalidad queer» única que subvierte las ideas tradicionales sobre la vida, la productividad y la muerte. Mediante un análisis detallado de ¡Soy nadie! ¿Quién eres tú? A partir de los poemas «Fr260» y «Porque no pude detenerme ante la muerte» (Fr479), y en diálogo con los estudios sobre manuscritos de Marta Werner y Susan Howe, este artículo resalta el profundo poder político y estético de la sintaxis experimental de Dickinson. En última instancia, el trabajo sugiere que la poética material de Dickinson, en particular su uso estratégico del guion, anticipa notablemente los estilos de comunicación fragmentados, no lineales y resistentes que se observan en el mundo digital actual. Ofrece un modelo perdurable para desafiar las normas dominantes mediante la innovación formal radical.

Palabras clave: guion; feminismo material; temporalidad queer; estudios de manuscritos; poética feminista; sintaxis; teoría literaria.

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O travessão de Dickinson: uma tecnologia de resistência feminista e queer

RESUMO

Este artigo reexamina o uso peculiar do travessão por Emily Dickinson, indo além da sua aparência impressa para explorar a sua criação física nos seus manuscritos originais. Embora as visões anteriores considerassem frequentemente a sua pontuação estranha ou falha, esta pesquisa defende que o travessão era uma ferramenta deliberada e complexa de resistência feminista. Usamos o feminismo material e a temporalidade queer para mostrar como os travessões de Dickinson funcionam de duas formas interligadas. Em primeiro lugar, enquanto ato físico e espacial, o travessão marca uma presença de género na página, desafiando as normas editoriais dominadas pelos homens do século XIX e a sua pressão por uma tipografia padronizada. Em segundo lugar, como um sofisticado dispositivo temporal, o travessão interrompe intencionalmente as narrativas lineares e as estruturas fráscas. Cria-se assim uma "temporalidade queer" única que rompe com as ideias tradicionais sobre a vida, a produtividade e a morte. Ao analisarmos de perto o livro "Eu sou Ninguém! Quem és tu?", descobrimos que o travessão é uma ferramenta de resistência feminista e queer. (Fr260) e Porque não pude parar para a Morte (Fr479), e dialogando com os estudos manuscritos de Marta Werner e Susan Howe, este artigo realça o profundo poder político e estético da sintaxe experimental de Dickinson. Em última análise, o artigo sugere que a poética material de Dickinson, particularmente o seu uso estratégico do travessão, antecipa notavelmente os estilos de comunicação fragmentados, não lineares e resistentes observados no mundo digital atual. Oferece um modelo duradouro para desafiar as normas dominantes através da inovação formal radical.

Palavras-chave: travessão; feminismo material; temporalidade queer; estudos manuscritos; poética feminista; sintaxe; teoria literária.

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INTRODUCTION

Emily Dickinson's poetry is a cornerstone of American literature, its history deeply tied to its complex and often debated editorial journey. Central to this struggle is how her unique punctuation, especially the dash, has been handled. This mark has been the subject of decades of critical discussion, systematic editorial changes, and scholarly reinterpretation. From the first posthumous publications, editors, including her respected correspondent Thomas Wentworth Higginson, frequently "regularized" her verse. This often meant replacing

her dashes with more conventional punctuation like commas and periods. While she stated the goal was to make her work more accessible to 19th-century readers, this editing was more than a stylistic choice. It represented an ideological attempt to impose mainstream grammatical rules on a poetic vision that actively defied them.

As Susan Howe (2007) powerfully argues in *My Emily Dickinson*, these editorial revisions were not harmless corrections. Instead, they "encapsulated broader issues of authority, meaning, and poetic voice" (p. 11). By altering Dickinson's original punctuation, editors effectively silenced the poet's radical intentions and obscured the intricate formal strategies embedded in her manuscripts. For generations, critics often continued this narrow view, dismissing Dickinson's dashes as signs of emotional excess, eccentricity, or simply difficult editorial challenges. This perspective unintentionally supported the idea that Dickinson was an untrained genius whose brilliance shone *despite* her unconventional forms, rather than *because* of them (Muñoz, 2009; Warner, 2011; Pierre, 2010).

This paper calls for an important re-evaluation of Dickinson's dashes, arguing they represent a highly sophisticated syntactic strategy central to a larger, deeply intentional project of feminist resistance. Her distinctive punctuation, far from accidental, was a deliberate rebellion against the rigid linguistic and social norms governing literary production and female behavior in her era. Howe (2007) brilliantly describes Dickinson's manuscripts as a "textual battlefield" where "punctuation becomes a form of resistance against grammatical patriarchy" (p. 19). Building on this idea, we propose that the dash functions as both a material and temporal tool of subversion, allowing Dickinson to create a unique space for her voice and vision.

To fully explore this complex claim, our analysis combines two powerful theoretical frameworks: material feminism and queer temporality. A material feminist perspective, influenced by scholars like Marta Werner and Susan Howe, sees the dash not as an abstract grammatical mark. Instead, it is a tangible, physical inscription of Dickinson's bodily presence and intellectual agency on a page historically dominated by male authority and patriarchal literary conventions (Infantes de Miguel, 1980; Riesco Terrero, 2002). Each dash, in this sense, represents a physical claim to space, a deliberate mark made by a woman's hand in a world that sought to confine her.

Secondly, queer temporal theory, particularly drawing on Elizabeth Freeman's (2010) concept of "temporal drag," helps us understand how these dashes actively disrupt linear narratives. They challenge the conventional, forward-moving timelines associated with traditional ideas of life, productivity, success, and even death. This creates alternative pockets of time that resist "chrononormative" expectations. To ground this theoretical exploration, we will conduct detailed close readings of *I'm Nobody! Who are you?* (Fr260) and *Because I could not stop for Death* (Fr479). These poems, though different in theme, perfectly show how Dickinson's dashes construct deep meaning across spatial, temporal, and agency-related domains. By examining the dash's role in expressing refusal, fostering intimacy, and "queering" narratives of mortality, this study aims to highlight the powerful, lasting, and insightful form of feminist poetics enabled by these material and rhythmic disruptions. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that Dickinson's formal innovations were not just stylistic quirks but deeply political acts that continue to resonate with contemporary discussions of language, power, and identity (Hughes & Silver, 2020; Hochschild, 2005).

While this article argues for the deliberate and political nature of Dickinson's dash, it acknowledges the nuanced relationship between authorial intent and the ideological effects of form. Our reading does not claim to uncover Dickinson's sole, private motivation. Instead, it traces how her material and syntactic practices—whether fully deliberate or intuitively developed—function as resistance within the patriarchal and chrononormative systems of her time. This approach aligns with material feminism, which locates agency and meaning in the interaction between the embodied act of writing and the cultural constraints it faces.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Critical Evolution of the Dickinson Dash

The academic discussion surrounding Emily Dickinson's punctuation has dramatically changed, reflecting broader shifts in literary theory, manuscript studies, and feminist scholarship. Understanding this journey—from early editorial removal and dismissal to profound feminist reclamation and sophisticated theoretical analysis—is crucial for appreciating this paper's contribution to the ongoing discourse about Dickinson's work.

Editorial Erasure: Standardization and Its Violence

The earliest editorial approaches to Dickinson's vast body of work were driven by a strong desire for normalization. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a prominent literary figure and one of Dickinson's key correspondents, famously described her poetry as "spasmodic" and "uncontrolled" (Higginson, 1890, p. v). While perhaps meant to convey untamed genius, this assessment unintentionally revealed a patriarchal anxiety about female artistic expression that deviated from established literary and grammatical norms. The posthumous editions of the 1890s, co-edited by Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd, systematically replaced Dickinson's dashes with conventional punctuation. This was a clear effort to make her work more "acceptable" and "palatable" for a commercial audience accustomed to Victorian verse's rigid grammatical structures.

Susan Howe (2007) meticulously analyzes this editorial process, identifying it not as a benign act of literary care, but as "an act of the violence of standardization" (p. 11). This act was harmful in two ways. First, it erased Dickinson's unique artistic signature—a signature that rejected patriarchal ideas of how women should write and what poetry should look like. By imposing conventional punctuation, editors stripped Dickinson's poems of their radical distinctiveness, forcing them into a mold they were never intended for (Ortega Blanco, 2013; Gimeno Blay & Trenchs Odena, 1986). Second, this standardization compelled Dickinson's work to conform to the "industrialized print culture of the time," which strictly enforced grammatical rules and controlled access to publication (Howe, 2007, p. 12). The print industry, a powerful arbiter of literary taste, favored uniformity and legibility, often at the expense of artistic originality. Thus, the editorial impulse set a long-lasting precedent, framing Dickinson's dashes not as a deliberate artistic technique, but as a "problem" to be solved, a flaw to be corrected, or an eccentricity to be tamed. This perspective dominated Dickinson scholarship for much of the early to mid-20th century, obscuring the profound formal innovations central to her poetic project.

Feminist Reclamation: The Dash as Subversive Instrument

A crucial shift in Dickinson scholarship began in the late 20th century, largely led by feminist critics who initiated a vital reclamation of Dickinson's punctuation. This new wave of scholarship reinterpreted her supposed eccentricities as intentional and sophisticated acts of disruption and resistance. Susan Howe's work was central to this paradigm shift. In *My Emily Dickinson*, Howe (2007) reimagined Dickinson not as a reclusive spinster, but as a brilliant and self-aware "poet-grammarian" whose manuscripts were "vibrant sites of linguistic rebellion" (p. 19). For Howe, the physical page itself becomes a "battlefield," where each dash represents "a deliberate act of defiance against grammatical patriarchy" (p. 19). This perspective elevated Dickinson's formal choices from mere stylistic quirks to profoundly political statements, showing how her aesthetic decisions were intertwined with her critique of societal norms.

Marta Werner's (1995) groundbreaking work, *Emily Dickinson's Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing*, further developed this materialist focus. It urged critics to move beyond clean, standardized versions of Dickinson's poems in printed anthologies and engage directly with the original manuscripts. Werner's meticulous scholarship revealed that Dickinson's dashes are not uniform marks; instead, they are highly variable inscriptions,

differing significantly in length, angle, pressure, and placement. These subtle yet crucial variations, Werner contends, are not accidental but "traces of her physical engagement with the page"(Werner, 1995, p. 45). They offer tangible evidence of the poet's hand, body, and intellectual process. Werner's innovative "manuscript forensics"transformed the critical focus from the static printed poem to the dynamic, living manuscript, full of textual ambiguities and physical nuances. In this light, the dash ceases to be mere punctuation and becomes a profound "material-discursive event"—an act of writing that simultaneously embodies the poet's creative process, physical presence, and intellectual resistance. This materialist turn allowed scholars to appreciate the dash as a dynamic element that actively participates in constructing meaning, rather than a mere separator of clauses (Rey, 1997; Cárdenas, 2001).

Contemporary Syntactic Analyses: Disobedience and Spatial Form

Building on this foundational work of feminist and materialist reclamation, contemporary scholars have delved deeper into the specific syntactic and semantic functions of the dash. Alexandra Socarides (2012), in *Dickinson Unbound: Paper, Process, Poetics*, meticulously demonstrates how Dickinson's dashes create pervasive "grammatical disobedience" that visually and rhythmically represents complex psychological and social states. Analyzing lines like "How dreary -- to be -- Somebody!", Socarides argues that "the dashes visually replicate the confinement of Victorian womanhood, creating a powerful metaphor for societal constraints"(p. 54). The strategic pauses enforced by these marks compel the reader to experience the tension between public expectation and private identity, transforming reading into an empathetic engagement with the poet's struggle against conformity. The dashes, in this view, are not merely breaks in thought but active participants in shaping the reader's emotional and intellectual response, forcing a deceleration that allows for deeper contemplation of implied social critiques.

Furthermore, scholars like Cristanne Miller (1987) have explored the dash's role in creating ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning. Miller argues that Dickinson's dashes often function as "open parentheses," allowing for several possible grammatical connections and semantic interpretations simultaneously, thereby resisting definitive closure and inviting the reader into an active co-creation of meaning (Miller, 1987, p. 120). This deliberate ambiguity, she suggests, is a hallmark of Dickinson's modernism, anticipating later experiments in poetic form. The dash, therefore, becomes a site of semantic richness, where multiple interpretations can coexist, challenging the singular, authoritative meaning often sought by traditional grammar.

This study firmly places itself within this powerful and evolving trajectory of material, feminist, and syntactic reclamation. It extends the conversation by combining Werner's meticulous material analysis with Socarides's nuanced syntactic insights under a unified theoretical framework. Moreover, it systematically integrates the critical lens of queer temporality, a dimension that, while implicitly present in discussions of Dickinson's rhythmic disruptions, has not been fully explored in relation to the dash itself. While scholars have long noted Dickinson's rhythmic disruptions and non-linear narrative structures, reading these formal innovations through theorists like Elizabeth Freeman (2010) allows for a deeper understanding of the dash as a "technology for fracturing normative time,"offering profound new insights into her radical feminist critique of life, death, and social expectations. By bringing these diverse critical perspectives into dialogue, this paper aims to offer a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the enduring power and subversive potential of Emily Dickinson's iconic dash (Teberosky, 1990; Teberosky, 2000).

Critical Counterpoints and Scholarly Debate

While the material-feminist reclamation of Dickinson's punctuation has been transformative, it is important to acknowledge scholarly perspectives that caution against over-determination. Some critics, such as R.W. Franklin (1998), have maintained a more conservative stance, viewing the dashes primarily as "rhythmic markers"rather than "encoded political statements".

Furthermore, biographical critics have occasionally attributed Dickinson's unconventional punctuation to "isolation or a lack of formal editorial guidance". This study contends that such interpretations, while historically relevant, risk depoliticizing Dickinson's formal choices by separating them from the gendered context of literary production.

Theoretical Framework: Material Feminism and Queer Time

Our analysis of Emily Dickinson's dashes is firmly based on two intricately connected and mutually reinforcing theoretical frameworks: material feminism and queer temporality. Together, these perspectives provide a coherent, robust, and powerful lens through which to interpret the profound political and aesthetic work performed by Dickinson's unique punctuation. They allow us to move beyond purely linguistic or biographical interpretations to understand the dash as an active agent in shaping meaning, challenging norms, and embodying resistance. While this study draws on insights from new materialist thinkers, it primarily positions itself within a material feminist tradition, emphasizing gendered embodiment, authorship, and power relations rather than a generalized ontology of matter.

Material Feminism and the Politics of the Page

A material feminist perspective fundamentally emphasizes the critical importance of the physical, tangible, and embodied aspects of cultural production. It asserts that matter itself is not passive but an active agent in creating meaning, shaping power dynamics, and influencing subjective experience. This approach challenges traditional dualisms that separate mind from body, culture from nature, and discourse from materiality. When applied to Dickinson's work, this perspective compels us to treat her manuscripts not merely as preliminary drafts for eventual print, but as primary, self-sufficient artifacts of her intense creative labor and intellectual engagement (Lozano Castro, 2021; Herrera Ferrer, 1996).

The very texture of the paper, the specific chemistry of the ink, the idiosyncratic variations in her handwriting, and, most crucially, the distinctive marks of her punctuation—especially her dashes—are understood as active, co-constitutive forces that shape and imbue the poem's meaning. They are not incidental; they are integral.

This materialist view deeply resonates with Hélène Cixous's et al. (1976) evocative concept of "the masculine preserve of the blank page" (p. 886). In Cixous's formulation, the traditionally empty page, waiting for inscription, is not a neutral space. Instead, it is a territory historically claimed, dominated, and defined by a patriarchal voice and a male-centric literary tradition. The act of writing, particularly for women, thus becomes an engagement with this pre-existing power dynamic (Chakraborty, 2013; Biesecker, 1992). From this perspective, Dickinson's assertive and pervasive use of dashes can be read as a deliberate and strategic "incursion into this preserve." She does not merely fill the void of the page with words; she actively and aggressively structures it, using the dash to carve out distinct spaces for hesitation, ambiguity, rupture, and resistance where conventional grammar and patriarchal discourse would demand seamless continuity and definitive closure. In this light, the dash becomes a physical sign of female agency, asserting itself within a literary world that has historically constrained women.

Furthermore, the dash, as a material mark, becomes what new materialist philosopher Karen Barad (2007) terms a "material-discursive practice" (p. 140). Barad's concept of "agential realism" proposes that matter and meaning are not separate entities that interact, but rather are inextricably entangled and co-constitutive. Phenomena, including linguistic phenomena, emerge from the "intra-action" of various material and discursive forces. In this framework, each dash functions as an "agential cut"—a physical manifestation of female presence and defiance against the homogenizing pressures of patriarchal print culture and its insistence on grammatical conformity (Oppermann, 2015; Dunk, 2020). The dash is not merely a symbol of resistance; it *is* resistance, enacted through the very act of its inscription. It embodies the poet's hand, her breath, her thought process, and her refusal to be contained by pre-established linguistic boundaries. The material dash thus becomes a site where Dickinson's

body, mind, and political will converge, making a tangible claim on the page and, by extension, on the literary sphere itself.

To clarify this theoretical position, material feminism in this study is not treated as an abstract philosophical stance. Instead, it is applied as a practical reading strategy that prioritizes the physical act of writing. Therefore, Dickinson's dashes are more than style; they are political statements—acts of self-determination, written onto the page.

Queer Temporality and the Poetics of Interruption

Queer temporality offers a radical and insightful critique of the linear, progressive timelines that primarily structure heteronormative society—a phenomenon Elizabeth Freeman (2010) meticulously analyzes and names "chrononormativity" (p. 3). This concept describes how time is systematically organized to direct individual lives toward specific, socially approved milestones such as heterosexual marriage, biological reproduction, stable employment, and productive labor. In doing so, it implicitly or explicitly marginalizes and devalues alternative ways of living, relationships, and life paths. Chrononormativity dictates not only what constitutes a "normal" life path but also *when* certain events should occur, creating a rigid framework that punishes deviation (Hochschild, 2018; Davies, 1996).

Freeman's notion of "temporal drag" is particularly illuminating for understanding Dickinson's poetics. It describes a fundamental "resistance to forward movement" that deliberately creates pockets of alternative time, often laden with historical, emotional, and political weight (p. 62). This "drag" is not a failure to progress, but a deliberate deceleration, a lingering, a refusal to rush towards a predetermined future. Dickinson's dashes are a prime and powerful example of temporal drag in action. They actively halt the reader's smooth progression through a line, suspend moments of ambiguity and contemplation, and stubbornly resist the conventional literary imperative toward narrative closure and teleological resolution. This structural rebellion against teleology—the idea that all events are directed towards a final purpose—is profoundly political, especially in poems that address sensitive and socially charged topics such as life stages, love, and mortality.

The dash, by creating these deliberate interruptions, constructs a fragmented, "stop-motion" journey through the poem. This fragmentation prioritizes a subjective, non-normative experience of time, one that values lingering, reflection, and the present moment over a relentless march toward a future dictated by societal expectations. By "queering time," Dickinson models a mode of female experience that exists defiantly outside of patriarchal scripts. It is a mode that embraces stillness, introspection, cyclical patterns, and moments of intense subjective experience over the linear, productive, and often externally validated progression demanded by chrononormativity. This aligns powerfully with José Esteban Muñoz's (2009) concept of "ecstatic time," which he describes as a "rupture in linearity that reveals glimpses of utopian potential" (p. 32). Muñoz argues that queer experiences often reside in these moments of rupture, offering fleeting but powerful visions of alternative futures. Dickinson's dashes, therefore, create these "ecstatic moments"—brief, intense pockets of eternity within the conventional flow of temporal experience, offering a glimpse of a different way of being and perceiving. They are not merely pauses but portals to alternative temporalities, challenging the reader to inhabit a non-normative rhythm of thought and feeling.

These theoretical perspectives provide the foundation for the following close readings. In the analysis that follows, Dickinson's dashes are examined not as abstract symbols, but as material and temporal interventions that shape meaning within specific poems.

Research Objectives

This study aims to re-examine Emily Dickinson's use of the dash by shifting critical attention from its standardized printed form to its material and temporal functions within her original manuscripts. The specific objectives of this research are:

1. To analyze the dash as a material inscription that asserts female authorship and bodily presence within a patriarchal 19th-century print culture.
2. To examine how Dickinson's use of the dash functions as a spatial practice, shaping the visual and structural organization of the manuscript page.
3. To investigate the dash as a temporal device that disrupts linear syntax and narrative progression, producing forms of queer temporality.
4. To demonstrate how Dickinson's punctuation challenges chrononormative models of life, productivity, and death, particularly through close readings of selected poems.
5. To situate Dickinson's manuscript practices within contemporary debates in material feminism, queer theory, and manuscript studies.
6. To argue that Dickinson's formal experimentation anticipates non-linear and fragmented modes of communication characteristic of digital textual culture.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive methodology based on close reading and manuscript analysis. Rather than relying on quantitative data, the research focuses on textual detail, formal structure, and theoretical interpretation to examine the cultural and political significance of Dickinson's punctuation. The primary method used is close reading, with particular attention to punctuation, spacing, interruption, and visual arrangement. The dash is analyzed not as a neutral grammatical marker, but as a deliberate formal choice that shapes meaning, rhythm, and reader engagement.

To support this approach, the study draws on manuscript scholarship, particularly the work of Marta Werner and Susan Howe. Manuscript facsimiles and editorial descriptions are consulted to account for variations in dash length, placement, and pressure, which are treated as meaningful material features rather than accidental irregularities.

The analysis is theoretically informed by material feminism and queer temporality. Material feminism guides the reading of the dash as a physical trace of embodied authorship and resistance to typographical standardization. Queer temporal theory provides a framework for interpreting how Dickinson's punctuation disrupts linear time and challenges normative life narratives.

The corpus for focused close reading consists of two thematically representative and critically central poems: *I'm Nobody! Who are you?* (Fr260) and "Because I could not stop for Death" (Fr479). These poems were selected because they clearly and powerfully demonstrate the spatial, temporal, and political functions of the dash across different thematic contexts (social identity and mortality). While this focused approach allows for deep, illustrative analysis, the patterns observed are corroborated by Dickinson's broader practice. Our conclusions are intended to provide a methodological and theoretical framework applicable to a wider study of her manuscripts. Future research, as noted in the conclusion, would benefit from a more extensive quantitative and qualitative survey of dash usage across the fascicles.

Analysis of Dickinson's Poetics

Spatial Resistance in "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" (Fr260)

In Emily Dickinson's enigmatic and subversive poem, "

I'm Nobody! Who are you?, the dash acts as a primary architectural tool. It meticulously constructs a poetic space of intimate solidarity and strategic resistance against the pervasive public and patriarchal sphere of the "Somebody." The poem opens with an immediate, almost conspiratorial invitation, its rhythm and tone carefully shaped by the strategic placement of dashes:

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you -- Nobody -- too?

From these first lines, the dashes perform a crucial function: they create a hushed, confidential tone, drawing the reader into an exclusive dialogue. The deliberate pause after "Are you" builds subtle suspense, inviting the reader to consider their own identity in relation to this radical proposition, effectively drawing them into a shared secret, a quiet rebellion. More significantly, the dashes that carefully bracket the word "Nobody"—both in the initial declaration and in the subsequent question—visually and rhythmically set off the term. This act of punctuation transforms what might conventionally be seen as a label of social insignificance into a badge of honor, a symbol of shared identity, and a deliberate choice. As Socarides (2012) might observe, this is a quintessential act of "grammatical disobedience" that actively redefines social value, turning a perceived negative into a powerful positive. This dash-mediated intimacy fosters a nascent community among those who consciously reject the societal pressures of public recognition, fame, and conventional achievement.

Spatial Resistance in "They shut me up in Prose -"(Fr445)

This spatial defiance is not isolated. A similar gesture occurs in "They shut me up in Prose – / As when a little Girl / They put me in the Closet – / Because they liked me 'still' –". The dashes here punctuate the memory of confinement and the silent, rebellious resilience that follows, materializing the very "stillness" imposed and then weaponized.

This spatial function of the dash, its ability to outline and define conceptual territories, culminates powerfully in the poem's central, defiant pronouncement: "How dreary -- to be -- Somebody!" A close reading of the original manuscript facsimile reveals the profound physical impact and intentionality embedded within these marks. The dash immediately following "dreary" is often rendered as a long, downward-slanting stroke, physically embodying the weight, burden, and profound sense of weariness associated with the sentiment. The subsequent dashes, carefully placed around the infinitive phrase "to be," create a distinct "space of performance" around the very act of public existence. They frame the condition of being a "Somebody" not as an aspiration, but as a burdensome, theatrical role, a performance enacted for an external audience rather than an authentic state of being. Socarides (2012) rightly observes that these marks "visually replicate the confinement of Victorian womanhood" (p. 54), suggesting how the societal pressure to conform to public roles could feel like an oppressive enclosure. However, they simultaneously provide a syntactic "escape hatch," a means of intellectual and emotional evasion. Here, the dash embodies the speaker's refusal to engage with a society obsessed with status, fame, and external approval. It is a material manifestation of a chosen withdrawal, a deliberate act of non-participation.

This assertive spatial claim directly confronts and subverts what Hélène Cixous et al. (1976) famously termed "the masculine preserve of the blank page" (p. 886). Dickinson does not merely write upon the page; she aggressively and intentionally structures its pristine white space with her dashes, transforming what might otherwise be perceived as silence or emptiness into articulated rebellion. Each elongated dash, each carefully placed interruption, is, in essence, a "land-grab on the page"—a material assertion of her inherent right to exist, to speak, and to define herself outside the conventional grammar of social acclaim and patriarchal expectations (Batular, 2019). The very physicality of the dash—its varied length, its precise angle, the pressure with which it was inscribed—becomes the tangible trace of a body asserting its presence and agency in a literary landscape historically designed for its erasure or marginalization. The dash, therefore, is not merely a formal device; it is a political act, a feminist declaration etched onto the very fabric of the page, creating a sanctuary for those who choose the liberating anonymity of "Nobody."

Temporal Disruption in "Because I Could Not Stop for Death"(Fr479)

In *Because I could not stop for Death*, Emily Dickinson masterfully employs the dash to profoundly subvert the linear, teleological narrative that typically governs our understanding of life's journey toward its inevitable end. The poem's progression is not depicted as a smooth, continuous carriage ride toward a singular destination, but rather as a series of jarring, dash-

mediated tableaux that actively resist chronological certainty and conventional narrative flow. The journey, ostensibly towards death, becomes instead an exploration of fragmented moments, each imbued with its own distinct temporality:

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess -- in the Ring --
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain --
We passed the Setting Sun --

Here, the dashes function not as mere connectors but as structural joints that fracture rather than seamlessly link the stages of the journey. Each dash creates a caesura, a deliberate pause, a moment of what Elizabeth Freeman (2010) would term "temporal drag" that actively interrupts the carriage's otherwise inexorable forward movement. This disruption is crucial. It rejects a single, predetermined life story. Instead, the poem presents life as a series of separate but resonant moments, each worthy of pause. The dash after "Ring," for instance, halts the poem's momentum, forcing the reader to linger in the vivid image of childhood play before being reluctantly pulled forward. This pause creates a crucial space for contemplation, effectively "queering" the journey by suggesting that time is not a continuous, unbroken line but a series of profound, suspended instants, each holding its own significance outside of a teleological progression. The dashes here are not just breaks in the sentence; they are breaks in the experience of time itself, inviting a non-linear engagement with the narrative.

The poem's profound temporal disorientation deepens and becomes more explicit in its final stanzas, where the speaker, now presumably in eternity, notes that the carriage ride occurred centuries ago, yet the passage of such immense time feels paradoxically shorter than a single day:

Since then -- 'tis Centuries -- and yet
Feels shorter than the Day --

The dash strategically placed between "then" and "'tis" creates a vast, almost unfathomable temporal gulf, dramatically separating the event of the journey from its subsequent telling and eternal aftermath. This dash signifies a rupture, a leap across an immense chasm of time. The subsequent dash after "Centuries" further complicates this temporal landscape, creating another deliberate pause that holds two fundamentally contradictory experiences of time—objective chronology ("Centuries") and intensely subjective feeling ("shorter than the Day")—in a state of unresolved tension. This is the very essence of queer temporality in action. The dash, by forcing this juxtaposition and holding these disparate temporalities in suspension, actively dismantles the "chrononormative" expectation that death provides a definitive, linear closure. Instead, death, in Dickinson's poetic universe, opens into an eternal, non-linear present where time itself becomes fluid, plastic, and profoundly subjective. The queering of mortality's timeline finds a parallel in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (Fr340), where dashes structure a psychological collapse that defies linear sense: "And then a Plank in Reason, broke, / And I dropped down, and down -- / And hit a World, at every plunge --". The dashes after "down" create a vertiginous, recursive fall into a subjective eternity, disrupting any coherent narrative of mental event and recovery.

By fracturing the conventional narrative of mortality and disrupting the linear march towards an end, Dickinson challenges the patriarchal and societal demand for clear endings, definitive conclusions, and a life trajectory that culminates in a predictable legacy. Instead, she offers a radical model of existence that embraces ambiguity, perpetual reflection, and the eternal present. The dashes, in this context, are not merely formal devices but philosophical statements, creating a rhythm of thought that resists the tyranny of the clock and calendar. They invite the reader to inhabit a time that is not measured by external standards but by internal experience, a time that is "queer" in its refusal to conform to normative expectations of progression and closure. This allows for a profound reimagining of what it means to exist beyond conventional life and death, creating a space where the past, present, and future are

not distinct points on a line but fluid, intermingling experiences. The dash, therefore, becomes a gateway to an alternative, non-linear eternity, a testament to Dickinson's radical vision of time and being.

Consideration of Digital Adaptations:

Dickinson's work, far from being a relic of the past, continues to invite exploration, reminding us of the enduring power of interruption, pause, and the materiality of expression as fundamental tools for challenging, rethinking, and ultimately transforming our understanding of language, time, and identity. Her dashes, seemingly simple, hold a universe of meaning yet to be fully uncovered.

As Cristanne Miller (1987) notes, Dickinson's dashes function as "open parentheses," refusing closure and inviting multiple interpretive pathways, much like the associative movement enabled by digital hyperlinks. Exploring the dash as a proto-hyperlink or a visual marker in digital environments could offer novel insights into its communicative potential and its capacity to transcend traditional textual boundaries.

Discussion: The Enduring Legacy of Resistance

The preceding analyses demonstrate that Emily Dickinson's dash functions as a sustained and deliberate technology of resistance, inseparable from her feminist and queer poetics. Across, *Im Nobody! Who are you?* and *Because I could not stop for Death*, the dash emerges not as an idiosyncratic stylistic habit but as a systematic formal strategy through which Dickinson negotiates authorship, power, and time. As Susan Howe persuasively argues, Dickinson's manuscripts constitute a textual battlefield where grammar itself becomes political (Howe, 2007, p. 19). The dash is one of the most visible weapons in this battle, repeatedly asserting itself against normative expectations of coherence, fluency, and closure.

At the level of gendered authorship, Dickinson's refusal of standardized punctuation directly challenges the patriarchal conventions governing nineteenth-century literary production. The dash resists what Howe terms "the violence of standardization" imposed by editorial and typographical regimes that sought to discipline Dickinson's verse into acceptable forms (Howe, 2007, p. 11). Each dash marks a moment of resistance to linguistic domestication, privileging hesitation and rupture over grammatical obedience. Rather than pursuing authority through conformity, Dickinson embeds dissent into the material surface of her writing. In this sense, the dash exemplifies what Marta Werner describes as "a trace of embodied compositional struggle", revealing the poet's physical and intellectual engagement with the page (Werner, 1995, p. 45). Feminist resistance here operates not as thematic declaration but as a formal practice.

Dickinson's poetics also complicate dominant feminist assumptions about visibility and recognition. In *I'm Nobody! Who are you?*, anonymity is not a condition of lack but a chosen position of autonomy. The dashes that frame Nobody intensify this refusal, transforming obscurity into solidarity. This resonates with Alexandra Socarides's observation that Dickinson's punctuation enacts "grammatical disobedience" that makes social refusal visible on the page (Socarides, 2012, p. 54). By rejecting the demand to be publicly legible as Somebody, Dickinson anticipates later feminist and queer critiques of compulsory visibility. Her dash-mediated syntax suggests that resistance may reside not only in speaking, but in controlling when, how, and whether one is seen.

Equally significant is the dash's temporal force. In *Because I could not stop for Death*, the dash fractures narrative continuity and destabilizes chrononormative assumptions about life's progression toward a definitive end. Elizabeth Freeman defines chrononormativity as the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity (Freeman, 2010, p. 3). Dickinson's dash interrupts this temporal discipline by suspending forward motion and cultivating what Freeman calls "temporal drag", a resistance to compulsory progression (p. 62). The pauses created by the dash linger between moments, allowing contradictory

temporalities—movement and stillness, immediacy and eternity—to coexist without resolution. Death, in this framework, is not a terminal point but an opening into what José Esteban Muñoz terms "ecstatic time", a rupture in linearity that gestures toward alternative modes of being (Muñoz, 2009, p. 32).

Taken together, these spatial and temporal disruptions position Dickinson's material poetics as strikingly prescient. Her fragmented syntax and resistance to linear progression anticipate communicative logics more commonly associated with digital textuality. As Cristanne Miller notes, Dickinson's dashes function as "open parentheses", refusing closure and inviting multiple interpretive pathways (Miller, 1987, p. 120). In this sense, the dash operates analogously to a proto-hyperlink, enabling associative movement rather than a fixed sequence. Dickinson thus demonstrates that form itself is political: the architecture of syntax shapes not only meaning but also the possibilities of resistance. Her dash, far from an eccentric mark of the past, endures as a model for challenging dominant structures of authority, temporality, and representation.

CONCLUSION

Viewed through the combined frameworks of material feminism and queer temporality, Emily Dickinson's dash emerges as a powerful and intentional technology of resistance. This study has shown that the dash operates simultaneously as a material inscription of embodied authorship and as a temporal device that disrupts linear syntax and normative narratives of life, productivity, and death. Far from a mere stylistic eccentricity, the dash is integral to Dickinson's radical reconfiguration of poetic form.

In *I'm Nobody! Who are you?*, the dash functions spatially, carving out an intimate, resistant community defined by refusal rather than recognition. In *Because I could not stop for Death*, it functions temporally, fragmenting chronological progression and opening a queer, non-teleological experience of mortality. Together, these readings demonstrate that Dickinson's formal rebellion is embedded in the smallest units of her writing, where punctuation becomes a site of political and aesthetic intervention.

By foregrounding the dash as both material practice and temporal disruption, this study contributes a refined framework for reading Dickinson's manuscripts—one that emphasizes how formal minutiae participate in broader struggles over gender, authority, and time. Dickinson's work reminds us that resistance need not announce itself through overt declaration; it can reside in pause, interruption, and refusal. Her manuscripts stand as enduring evidence that even the smallest mark on the page can unsettle dominant norms and imagine alternative ways of being. In an age increasingly defined by fragmented, non-linear communication, Dickinson's dash continues to speak with undiminished urgency, affirming the lasting power of formal innovation as a mode of feminist and queer critique.

Future Directions for Research

While this analysis has focused intensively on two pivotal poems, future research could productively expand upon these findings in several promising directions, further enriching our understanding of Dickinson's profound innovations. Future studies may benefit from the inclusion of manuscript facsimiles, where publication guidelines allow. Visual access to Dickinson's dashes would further support material and spatial readings of her work.

Diachronic and Expansive Manuscript Analysis: A broader, comprehensive study of Dickinson's fascicles could trace the evolution of her dash usage quantitatively and qualitatively. A larger corpus analysis, perhaps leveraging digital humanities tools to map dash frequency, length, and positioning across her entire oeuvre, would test and potentially amplify the claims made here. This would move the argument from compelling case studies toward a comprehensive theory of her graphical poetics.

Comparative Feminist and Queer Poetics: Comparative analyses with contemporary poets who also employ innovative syntax, white space, and visual poetics to challenge normative narratives could illuminate a longer, perhaps overlooked, lineage of feminist and queer poetics. Examining figures such as Claudia Rankine, whose use of spacing and repetition confronts racial injustice, or Ocean Vuong, who employs fragmented lines and unconventional punctuation to explore trauma and identity, could reveal fascinating parallels and divergences with Dickinson's methods. Such comparisons would demonstrate the enduring relevance of Dickinson's formal experiments in contemporary literary landscapes, highlighting a transhistorical conversation about formal innovation as a mode of social and political critique.

Intermedial and Digital Adaptations: Interdisciplinary approaches connecting Dickinson's work to visual arts and digital media could further reveal the multi-modal nature of her resistance strategies. How do artists interpret her dashes visually? Can her fragmented poetics be mapped onto digital interfaces or interactive texts? Exploring the dash as a proto-hyperlink or a visual marker in digital environments could offer novel insights into its communicative potential and its capacity to transcend traditional textual boundaries. Dickinson's work, far from being a relic of the past, continues to invite exploration, reminding us of the enduring power of interruption, pause, and the materiality of expression as fundamental tools for challenging, rethinking, and ultimately transforming our understanding of language, time, and identity. Her dashes, seemingly simple, hold a universe of meaning yet to be fully uncovered.

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