

INTERPRETATION OF OMITTED WORDS OR THE UNSAID INFORMATION IN EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY

Marina Yaghubyan*

Yerevan State University

The use of omissions by Emily Dickinson is one of the major characteristics of her poetry. She tried to reach maximum ellipsis and achieve the tightest structural compression. The unique feature in her use of omission is that most of the unsaid information in her poems is portrayed with the help of dashes. They indicate a missing word, phrase, emphasize a break, or they depict a sudden change in thought. Throughout the author's writing, the imagery and metaphors are drawn from her observations of nature and imagination. Emily's use of specific words resulted in one - inability of comprehending her poetry with just one reading. The present article focuses on the examination of the omitted words in Emily Dickinson's poetry. The analysis shows that she refined and removed inessential language and punctuation from her poetry. In many of her poems, abstract concepts and material things are used to describe one another, but the relationship between them remains elusive and uncertain.

Keywords: *ellipsis, compression, omitted information, punctuation marks, poetry, ambiguity.*

Introduction

As a keen observer, Emily Dickinson used images from nature, religion, music and everyday activities to explore universal concepts such as love, death, wonders of nature, immortality and self-identity. One of Dickinson's unique skills as a poet was her ability to express abstract ideas through concrete images. She created familiar, ordinary contexts in her poems and then drew great significance from them. She expressed her ideas through a variety of personas and ideas, thus showing various aspects of belonging such as connection, commitment, alienation and recognition. Emily Dickinson's poetry is well-distinguished by the lack of rhyme and regular meter, the use of omitted

* yaghubyan.marina@ysu.am

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words and compression. Although her poetry is considered to be incomprehensible and unintelligible by some people, many think of her irregular poetic forms as original attempts at liberating American poetry from its heritage. Her poetry was the precursor to the spirit of modernity with transcendentalist influence. Her simple language derives rich meanings from common words.

Dickinson's poetry definitely represents her personal individualism and her views about conformity. Despite her poems being short, they are considered quite intense as she says too much in very few words. She is often obscure, making her poems inexplicable and sometimes enigmatic. Emily Dickinson's quest for the essence of experience affected her style. She left out linking words, dropped verb and noun endings. Very often she punctuated her poems with dashes, rather than with the array of periods, commas, and other punctuation marks that were more expected. At her best, by compressing the language, she produced breathtaking results. One explanation why the critics of the twentieth century found her so fascinating was her indifference towards the rules of grammar and sentence structure (Halliday, & Hasan, 2001).

In this article we are going to examine her use of omitted words, vocabulary, style, rhythm and punctuation marks which are as special as her lifestyle.

The language and style in Emily Dickinson's poetry

While experimenting with words, Dickinson tried to eliminate as many of them as possible. She was an economizer. She sought maximum omission, the tightest structural compression her language could achieve.

One need not be a Chamber — to be Haunted —

One need not be a House —

The Brain has Corridors — surpassing

Material Place —

Far safer, of a Midnight Meeting

External Ghost

Than its interior Confronting —

That Cooler Host.

Far safer, through an Abbey gallop,

The Stones a'chase —

Than Unarmed, one's a'self encounter —

In lonesome Place — (Dickinson, 1960, p. 333)

Dickinson either writes in short, simple, subject-verb-object sentences or in highly complex ones. The first one is typical of most of her poems. Successive short sentences allow a particularly quick switch from metaphor to metaphor, from an event to conclusion, etc. For instance, in *My life has stood - a Loaded Gun* the rapid sentence and stanza movement draws attention to the shifts from line to line and provides the reader little syntactic breathing space in which to consider the implications of the shifts. The poem is so dazzling and baffling as each stanza provokes its own interpretation as well as the need to link its direction with that of the preceding line or lines.

*My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –
In Corners – till a Day
The Owner passed – identified –
And carried Me away –*

*And now We roam in Sovereign Woods –
And now We hunt the Doe –
And every time I speak for Him
The Mountains straight reply –
And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow –
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through – (Dickinson, 1960, p. 369)*

Dickinson was fascinated by language. She loved reading dictionaries and enjoyed the words and their definitions. This interest provided a number of her poems their form, which actually are definitions of words, for example, *Pain has an element of blank*, *Renunciation is a piercing virtue*, or *Hope is the thing with feathers*.

She uses the dash to mark or point out a missing word or words, or to replace a comma or period. Quite often she changes the function of the part of speech: for instance, adjectives and verbs are used as nouns as in *We talk in careless – and in loss*, where *careless* is an adjective used as a noun. She prefers capitalizing interior nouns, not just words at the beginning of a line. Her reasons for that are not quite clear.

Coming to the **dashes**, it can be said that while Dickinson was far from being the only person to use them, she might have been one of the few poets to

depend upon it. Dashes were used to indicate a missing word or phrases, as in the poem *My Reward for being, was This*.

*My Reward for Being, was This—
My Premium—My Bliss—
An Admiralty, less—
A Sceptre—penniless—
And Realms—just Dross—* (Dickinson, 1960, p. 163)

Dashes were also used to replace a comma and emphasize a break as in the poem *I never saw a Moor —I never saw the Sea—*

*I never saw a Moor —
I never saw the Sea —
Yet know I how the Heather looks
And what a Billow be —*

*I never spoke with God
Nor visited in Heaven —
Yet certain am I of the spot
As if the Checks were given* (Dickinson, 1960, p. 480).

In the poem *My period has come for Prayer —No other Art— would do*, the dashes express a sudden change of thought:

*My period had come for Prayer—
No other Art—would do—
My Tactics missed a rudiment—
Creator—Was it you?*

*God grows above—so those who pray
Horizons—must ascend—
And so I stepped upon the North
To see this Curious Friend—* (Dickinson, 1960, p. 274)

This type of writing was definitely against the accepted writing style of her period. While analyzing the use of the dash in Emily's poetry, it is important to visualize the works exactly as Emily wrote them in order to understand the functioning of the dash in its original context. For instance, in the poem *The*

Soul that hath a Guest, addressed to her friend Susan, there are several dashes to view:

The Soul that hath a Guest
Doth seldom go abroad—
Diviner Crowd at Home –
Obliterate the need –

And Courtesy forbids
The Host's departure – when
Upon Himself – be visiting
The Emperor of Men — (Dickinson, 1960, p. 335)

When analyzing the use of punctuation throughout this poem, it is easy to notice the different lengths of the dashes at the end of the lines. The longer dashes or the dashes that appear to convey more emotions and are placed after the second and the ending line. The dash in the line *Doth seldom go abroad—* can mean that Emily's heart will not wander or leave Susan because it is already full of love. It may also be considered a subconscious act on Emily's behalf to express her emotions associated with Susan. The dashes can undergo changes when they impart strong emotions. The final dash of the poem more than likely symbolizes the completion of a thought. So while the first dash is used due to the emotional excess, the last one occurs for the completion of a thought. As for the dashes in the middle, they express no real sign of having any emotions behind them. These dashes are mainly used to separate a continuing line of thought, such as the modern day use of "..." in text messages (Wylder, 2004).

Compression in Emily Dickinson's poetry

As Samuel Levin claims, one of the main features differentiating poetic language from ordinary language is the use of compression (Ross, 2002). Using the verses of Dickinson as his test model, he argues that the omission of a part (or parts) is often non-recoverable in poetry; the omitted part cannot be recovered from the deep structure of the sentence. Ordinary speech, on the contrary, allows only recoverable omissions.

Compression characterizes not only Dickinson's syntax but also the structure of her poems. Her stanzas and the poems themselves are shorter than those of her contemporaries. While language compression by Dickinson takes

all kinds of form, it tends to function in three complementary ways. First, compression enhances the poem's ambiguity and a number of meanings; it helps the poet to express more than one thought at a time or to disguise one thought behind another. In other words, it allows Dickinson to present what may be considered unpopular or dangerous thoughts and to express complex feelings. Second, compression may convey a sense of withheld power, that is to say the poet may conceal her strength. Not to show one's power may make it seem greater. Third, compression may indicate untold wisdom. Obscure revelation seems to hold deep meaning (Miller, 1988, p. 24)

Much of the compression of Dickinson's poetry can be recovered under the rules of ordinary language use. This kind of omission is similar to ellipsis in meter: **the poet might omit syllables, as doing so makes the use of some metrical effects possible (mostly keeping the proper pattern and number of syllables in a line) without affecting the clarity or meaning.** The poet omits some syllables which makes it possible to use certain metrical effects. Hence the proper pattern and number of syllables in a line is kept, without affecting the clarity or meaning. Very often Dickinson removes an auxiliary verb, a repeated subject, a verb, or a pronoun to maintain the rhythm of the line, to emphasize its meaning, or avoid redundancy. For instance, in the last stanza of the poem *My life has stood* much of the omitted language is easily recoverable.

*Though I may live longer than He [may live]
He must [live] longer than I [live]
For I have but the power to kill,
Without [having] the power to die* (Dickinson, 1960, p. 369).

Like recoverable omission, non-recoverable deletion may serve to increase the density of a poem. It may also affect a poem's meaning by creating syntactic or logical ambiguity. In *This was a poet* there are several ways to recover the omitted information of the first line. One possible way is the following:

*This was a Poet – It is [the fact] That [this was a poet who]
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary meanings
And [distills an] Attar [that is] so immense...*
(Dickinson, 1960, p. 215)

Another possible version of recovery could be *This was a Poet - It is That [the poet which]*. The recovery of the omitted information here is inseparable from the interpretation of the poem. In non-recoverable omissions, this is always the case.

Dickinson's most characteristic type of non-recoverable omission is phrase omission providing logical links between the statements or stanzas. In *He fumbles at your Soul* there is no explanation of how the couplet *When Winds take Forests in the Paws—/The Universe—is still—* concludes or summarizes the preceding lines. It can be said that what is omitted between the sentences or phrases in Dickinson's work is most frequently non-recoverable or multiply recoverable depending on the reader's interpretation of the poem.

Conclusion

We can conclude that in the interpretation of poetry, the reader's state of mind is definitely an essential aspect in the process of literary communication. A writer may create a work of literature that depicts the dynamics of life as expressed in nature and society, yet the reader may not understand or respond to them as fully as the writer would expect. Thus it can be said that interpreting poetry is a complex process with all the interrelated aspects and characteristics of the given poem and, of course, the consciousness of the reader. Analyzing Emily Dickinson's poetry is firmly linked to the consciousness of every reader. The possible explanation to her uses of dashes of different lengths is that they convey emotions of different intensity.

It can be said that Emily Dickinson's poetry is challenging as it is radical and original in its rejection of most traditional nineteenth-century themes and techniques. Her poems require active engagement from the reader because she seems to leave out so much with her elliptical style and remarkable contrasting metaphors. These gaps are filled with meaning if the readers are sensitive to her use of **expressive means** such as personification, allusion, symbolism, and startling syntax and grammar.

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ԲԱՑ ԹՈՂՆՎԱԾ ԲԱՌԵՐԻ ԿԱՍ ՉԱՍՎԱԾ ՏԵՂԵԿԱՏՎՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՄԵԿՆԱԲԱՆՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ ԷՄԻԼԻ ԴԻՔԻՆՍՈՆԻ ՊՈՆԶԻԱՅՈՒՄ

Մարինա Յաղուբյան

Բաց թողնված բառերի օգտագործումն Էմիլի Դիքինսոնի պոեզիայի հիմնական հատկանիշներից է: Չասված տեղեկատվության մեծ մասն արտացոլված է կետադրական նշանների միջոցով, հատկապես՝ գծիկներով: Ըստ այդմ, սույն հոդվածը նվիրված է Դիքինսոնի բանաստեղծություններում բաց թողնված բառերի ուսումնասիրությանն ու մեկնաբանությանը: Դրանք նշում են բացակայող բառը, արտահայտությունը, շեշտադրում են դադարը կամ՝ պատկերում իմաստի հանկարծակի փոփոխությունը: Վերլուծությունը ցույց է տալիս, որ երբեմն դժվար է անմիջապես հասկանալ բաց թողնված բառերի իմաստը համատեքստից: Թեև վերացական հասկացությունները բանաստեղծություններում օգտագործվում են մեկը մյուսին նկարագրելու համար, բայցնայնպես, նրանց միջև կապը մնում է անորոշ:

Բանալի բառեր. բաց թողնված բառեր, սեղմում, չասված տեղեկատվություն, կետադրական նշաններ, պոեզիա, երկիմաստություն: