

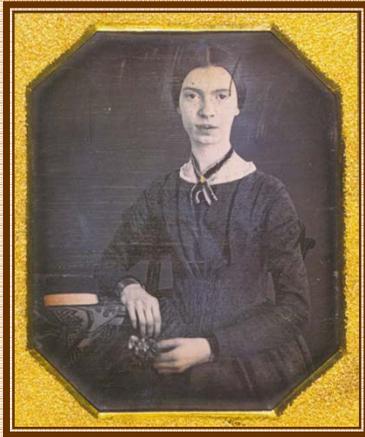
Poetry, Letters, Messages: Emily Dickinson's Poems

How do poems mailed in letters by Dickinson relate to the rest of her work?

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Prolific Output

Emily Dickinson wrote almost 1800 poems over her life, most of which were neither published, nor shared with any of over a hundred correspondents to whom she wrote letters.

Poems were stored either in hand sewn booklets called fascicles, loose sheets folded together called sets, or on various odds and ends of paper.

Fewer than twenty percent of these were circulated to anyone.

Poems to Susan Dickinson

Dickinson's close friend, primary correspondent and sister-in-law, Susan Dickinson received about 300 poems from Emily. Almost half of the poems that Emily Dickinson circulated went to Susan Dickinson.

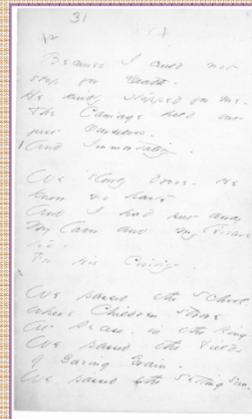
- Before 1866, most of the poems to Susan are serious poems. Until 1861, approximately half the poems entered into fascicles are first sent to Susan.
- Further, most of the poems sent to Susan are exclusively sent to her.
- About a fourth of the poems sent to Susan are not retained by Emily. However, there is a difference between poems sent before 1865- when a mere handful are not retained by Emily in any given year- and after 1866, when almost half the poems sent to Susan are not retained.
- Although less than half the poems sent to Susan are in pencil, between 1861-65, the percentage is only 30%, while after that till 1886, it is 63%.

1858-1865

This was the most productive period for Dickinson's poetry writing, during which she wrote 1116 poems.

Most of them were recorded in 40 fascicles- books prepared by sewing pages together. Only a very small percentage (less than 20 percent) of poems recorded in fascicles were shared with others.

Dickinson circulated a mere quarter- 259- of these poems, primarily to a few close correspondents- among them, Susan Dickinson, Samuel Bowles, T. W. Higginson, Elizabeth Holland and Francis and Louise Norcross- to whom a bulk of her letters throughout her life went. For only 22 of these poems circulated did Dickinson retain no draft or fair copy of the poem for herself.



'Because I could not stop for Death'
Recorded in Fascicle 23 in 1862, not sent to any correspondents.

Differences between Poems Sent and Poems Kept

Around 15 percent of poems circulated are explicitly occasional- that is, written for a specific occasion such as birthdays, deaths, well wishes and thanks. Many more can be seen as part of the letter's overall message when read in context.

The poems sent to others also tend to be much shorter. In most years, between 50 to 100 percent of the poems which are five lines or less in length are mailed to others. A significant proportion of these are mailed with no draft retained by the poet.

A striking majority of poems circulated were written in pencil and mailed. Given that fair copies in fascicles and sets tended to be in ink while drafts on pieces of stationery after 1866 were almost exclusively in pencil, this might indicate that poems sent to others were not viewed as completely serious poetry, or as final versions of poems.

1866-1886

*Lest any doubt that we are glad that they were born Today
Whose having lived is held by us in noble holiday
Without the date, like Consciousness or Immortality —*

-In pencil, sent to Susan Dickinson on her 40th birthday, in 1870. No copy retained with Dickinson.

*A little Madness in the Spring
Is wholesome even for the King,
But God be with the Clown —
Who ponders this tremendous scene
This whole Experiment of Green.
As if it were his own!*

In pencil, sent to Susan Dickinson and Elizabeth Holland, in 1870. A copy in pencil is retained with Dickinson.

Number of poems written per year falls dramatically after 1866, totaling 564 between 1866 and 1886, and never exceeding more than 50 in any year.

Poems are written mostly in pencil, on various fragments of stationery. Until 1875, some poems are recorded in 'sets'- books formed by folding pages together- but this is completely discontinued after 1876. However, number of poems shared with others increases- 240 poems are mailed to others, and for half- 119- of these no copy is retained by Dickinson for herself. The number of people to whom Dickinson mailed poems also shoots up, especially after 1876, to include various acquaintances like Mabel Todd and the lawyer of a close friend, to whom only a few poems are sent.

Letter-Poems?

Critics often describe all of Dickinson's poetry as a new genre of poetry- that of the 'letter-poem'.

Dickinson had over a hundred correspondents, however she sent poems to only a fraction of them.

During the years she writes the most poems (1858-1865), she sends out a smaller percentage of them in letters than in the subsequent years when her overall output drops drastically.

Hence, poems sent to others were not a major part of her poetry writing, neither was poetry a huge part of the letters she sent. In that sense, they were almost two separate forms of writing for her, with some overlap. This makes the claim of an overarching genre of the 'letter-poem' unlikely.

References:

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