

Meet a Poem

F519

“This is my letter to the World”

INTRODUCTION

By Tina Cane

“This is my letter to the World” (F519) is one of Emily Dickinson’s most widely known poems, and makes for a wonderful introduction to her work for students of all ages. Compact yet packed with meaning, it offers a fine example of how brevity and economy can effectively convey a complex, powerful statement. To me, Dickinson’s “Letter” expresses a sense of dejection, isolation, and fear of being judged. Despite feeling vulnerable and rejected, the speaker shares her “message” with the world, transforming this brief declaration into an appeal for connection and reciprocity. Many young people will appreciate and relate to the sentiments expressed here, and any lesson would be enriched by a class discussion about inclusion, belonging, fears of rejection, or judgment.

Although Emily Dickinson wrote almost 1800 poems, **fewer than a dozen of them were published during her lifetime.** While Dickinson’s reputation as a recluse often precedes her, Emily’s early life was quite convivial—filled with joy and music, playmates, education, and nature exploration. Emily began writing as a teenager and started composing poems in her twenties, just as she and her sister Lavinia took on caring for their ailing mother. In subsequent years, Dickinson’s own chronic health issues—including an eye disorder in her thirties that kept her inside much of the time—would restrict her lifestyle.

Correspondence was an important part of Emily Dickinson’s life. For decades, she exchanged letters with friends and relatives, and even with loved ones who lived

SHORT-TERM OBJECTIVES

Engagement

- Connect to students’ own experiences of writing and receiving messages, both analog and digital.
- Connect themes raised by Dickinson’s poem to the intersection of the personal and political in poetry.

Content Knowledge

- Define epistolary poetry.
- Explore the relationship between letters and poems in Dickinson’s personal and literary life.

Process Knowledge

- Appreciate the poem’s compact tension, its use of punctuation and capitalization, and the way in which it employs metonymy by conflating letter-writing with the act of writing a poem.
- Learn by doing: reinforce an appreciation for the poem’s merits through writing original poetry.

TRANSFER GOALS

- Recognize that genre can be fluid, that different kinds of writing are interconnected, and that poetry is a flexible form in which the rules of syntax can be bent.
- Develop an appreciation for poetry as an art form that is also visual and can be tactile.





close by—such as her beloved sister-in-law and neighbor, [Susan Huntington Gilbert Dickinson](#). For Emily Dickinson, the ritual of letter writing was closely connected to her practice of poetry. Dickinson ultimately sent over 500 poems or parts of poems to correspondents. Many of these dispatches reveal how the two genres overlapped and served as an ersatz means of “publishing” her poems within her intimate circle of confidants. Dickinson even composed or drafted several of her later poems on discarded envelopes, whose dimensions accommodated and informed the poet’s short lines and use of space. These “envelope poems”—photographed and collected in *The Gorgeous Nothings* (New Directions, 2013)—serve as an exquisite example of how literature, visual art, and artifact can intersect.

“This is my letter to the World,” however, is found in Fascicle 24—one of forty hand-bound booklets Dickinson created to organize and preserve her work. To our knowledge, this poem was never shared with any recipient. Written during the height of the American Civil War, [the poems in Fascicle 24](#) capture the trauma that death, uncertainty, and instability inflicted on the nation, and the personal toll it took on Dickinson. The alienation expressed in “This is my letter to the World” can, therefore, also be seen as a personal struggle set against a backdrop of political turmoil, with an appeal to Dickinson’s “Sweet – countrymen –” for empathy.

*This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me –
The simple News that Nature told –
With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see –
For love of Her – Sweet – countrymen –
Judge tenderly – of Me*
(F519, 1863)





LESSON SEQUENCE AND FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

The lesson below offers discussion points and a creative writing exercise for students with any level of experience with poetry. Recommended for grades 4 and up.

1. Connecting

- Begin by asking students: "Who here has ever written a letter?" Discuss briefly why one might write a letter, and what one generally expects or hopes for (a response).
- Brainstorm with the class a list on the board of synonyms for correspondence. Add some that may be new to students: "epistle," "missive," "dispatch," "communiqué," "memorandum," "memo," "note," etc.
- Brainstorm the various ways messages can be sent, some of which may be from another era, such as "letter," "postcard," "telegram," "fax," "email," "text message." Discuss how these forms vary, and how, when, and why they were/are used.
- Brainstorm a list of different types of letters (formal/informal) such as: "love letter," "cover letter," "thank you letter," "letter of complaint," "letter of resignation," "letter of acceptance," "letter of inquiry," etc. Discuss context, register of language, and tone: how might they differ between, say, a "love letter" and a "letter of complaint"?
- Wonder collectively about how it feels to send a message, and receive no reply.
 - » Connect to the experience young people might have being "left on seen" or "on read" with regard to posts and text messages.
 - » Discuss reciprocity and the tacit and explicit agreements of correspondence, and the inherent vulnerability of attempting to forge connections.

2. Reading

- Invite several students to read aloud "This is my letter to the World." Notice any variations in delivery and how dashes affect the way one reads and might interpret meaning.
- Discuss the poem's opening line: "This is my letter to the World," with its capitalization of "world," and what Dickinson's choice might signify.
- Notice other capitalized words and discuss: "Me," "News," "Nature," "Majesty, etc." Why might Dickinson have done this? What are the effects of capitalization here?

3. Contextualizing

- Provide the biographical context shared in the introduction, highlighting the role of letter-writing in Dickinson's personal and literary life. See the Museum's essay, "[Emily Dickinson's Letters](#)," for more.
- You may also wish to explore the role letter-writing played in nineteenth-century life as the predominant mode of communication, as well as letters from the battlefield as a crucial primary source in the study of the Civil War. The National Postal Museum's exhibit "[Letter Writing in America](#)" provides useful context.

4. Analyzing

- Open up for collective analysis of the poem's message, proceeding line by line, noticing the poem's compact form: 2 stanzas, 4 lines each, its alternating rhyme scheme, and its lack of punctuation, save for dashes.
- Looking at the opening line, what is Dickinson referring to by "This"?

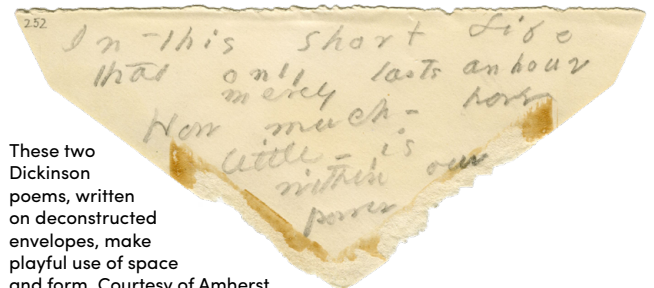
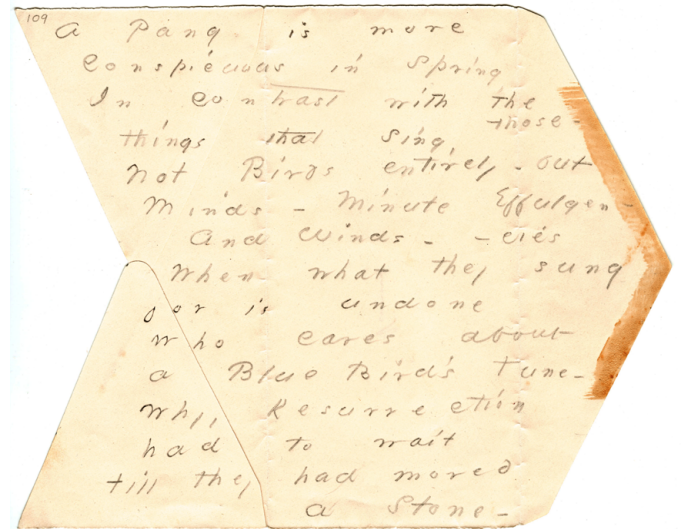


- » What connection might she be establishing between a "letter" and a "poem"?
- » What qualities do the two forms of writing share? How do they differ?
- Moving on to the rest of the poem:
 - » Who told "the simple News"? What might the "simple News" be?
 - » What role does "Nature" play here?
 - » Whose "hands"?
 - » What does the speaker make an appeal for?
 - » By whom is the speaker afraid of being judged?
 - » How might they judge the speaker and why?
 - » What underlying impulses might have driven Dickinson to write this poem? What internal and external forces could have been at play?

5. Expanding

A wonderful way to help students understand poetry and poetic thinking is through doing. The following exercises (one short, one long) serve as a **formative assessment** and are designed to encourage students to experiment with condensed language and space. They are also intended to be written by hand, on an unlined sheet of paper, and require that each student have a blank white envelope of any size.

Sharing images of Dickinson's "gorgeous nothings" envelope poems (link below), will give students visual insight into her process. As they write their own envelope poems, encourage them to deconstruct their envelope so that they can use its space how they see fit.



These two Dickinson poems, written on deconstructed envelopes, make playful use of space and form. Courtesy of Amherst Archives and Special Collections.

Short Writing Exercise

- On blank, unlined paper, invite students to write their own 8-line version of F519—a dispatch addressed to the "World" with whatever message they wish, in vernacular or a heightened register of language, rhyming or not, while experimenting with capitalization.

And/or

- On the blank envelope, ask students to write an 8-line poem in response to F519 that features the "World" as speaker. What might the World have to say—and why?



Long Writing Exercise

First, invite students to compose for ten minutes a two-paragraph prose letter to a person/ place/ idea they care about. Ask a couple of students to share their letters with the class.

- Instruct each student to review their letter sentence by sentence, and to circle the “juicy” words—ones that carry meaning, music, action, emotion—and to leave behind connectors like prepositions, conjunctions, etc.
- Invite the students who shared their letters to read aloud the “juicy” words they circled, so their classmates can compare the two versions.
 - » What does everyone notice?
 - » Does the message of the letter still come through?
 - » If so, to what extent? If not, what do the words evoke as an ensemble?

Next, ask students to compose a poem on the blank envelope composed solely of the “juicy” words they circled, with no restrictions on content or form. Dickinson’s poem can serve as an inspiration or guide, but students are encouraged to go in any direction they choose. For those who may need more explicit direction, try suggesting they borrow Dickinson’s first line: “This is my letter to...”

Once they have a draft, ask them to write a second draft on the other side of their envelope, now adding words to flesh out their lines, while still striving to emulate Dickinson’s taut use of language.

RESOURCES

Manuscript

“Houghton Library - (519a) - This is my letter to the World.” Emily Dickinson Archive.

Fascicle

“October 1–7, 1862: Poems from Fascicle 24.” *White Heat: Emily Dickinson in 1862*. Dartmouth College.

Context

Amherst College has digitized many scrap and envelope poems. See: Amherst College Archives and Special Collections. [Emily Dickinson Collection](#).

Bervin, Jen, and Marta Werner, eds. *The Gorgeous Nothings: Emily Dickinson's Envelope Poems*. New York: New Directions, 2012.

Emily Dickinson Museum. [Emily Dickinson's Letters](#).

Miller, Cristanne, and Domhnall Mitchell, eds. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2024. [Purchase from the Emily Dickinson Museum shop](#).

Smithsonian National Postal Museum. [Civil War Letters](#).

Werner, Marta, and Jen Bervin, eds. *The Envelope Poems*. New York: New Directions, 2016. [Purchase from the Emily Dickinson Museum shop](#).