

A Socratic Approach to Interpreting Dickinson's Poetry

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Abstract

This article develops and applies a Socratic interpretive framework to the analysis of lyric poetry, using three poems by Emily Dickinson “*Because I could not stop for Death*”, “*Tell all the truth but tell it slant*”, and “*I’m Nobody! Who are you?*” as primary case studies. Traditional approaches to poetry often rely on either formalist assumptions that meaning resides wholly within the text or reader-response claims that meaning emerges from subjective experience. Both approaches risk bypassing the rigor of justification. Drawing on Socrates’ method of elenchus (questioning and refutation), aporia (constructive uncertainty), and maieutics (the emergence of insight), this article proposes a refined methodological articulation of dialogical interpretation: meaning as a product of dialogical inquiry between reader and poem. The Socratic framework is primarily hermeneutic, drawing on Gadamer’s dialogical understanding and Ricoeur’s reflective interpretation, while Derrida’s notion of *différance* functions as a critical reminder that interpretation can never achieve absolute closure. Through close readings of Dickinson’s poems, the study examines how metaphorical language produces interpretive tensions, ambiguities, and conceptual provocations that become sites of Socratic inquiry. In each poem, an initial interpretation collapses under elenchus, generating aporia, and generating provisional forms of understanding. Rather than approaching poems as fixed repositories of meaning, the Socratic method marks an interpretive shift toward dialogical engagement, where poetic language becomes a space for questioning, conceptual tension, and reflective inquiry rather than passive decoding. The article concludes that Socratic interpretation strengthens literary analysis by insisting that meaning must be

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earned through questioning rather than assumed through intuition or critical authority.

Keywords: Socratic method; Emily Dickinson; Hermeneutics; Literary theory; Poetry.

Emily Dickinson’ın Şiirlerini Yorumlamaya Sokratik Bir Yaklaşım

Öz

Bu makale, lirik şiirin çözümlemesine yönelik Sokratik bir yorumlama çerçevesi geliştirmekte ve uygulamakta; Emily Dickinson’ın “Because I could not stop for Death”, “Tell all the truth but tell it slant” ve “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” adlı üç şiirini temel inceleme örnekleri olarak ele almaktadır. Şiire yönelik geleneksel yaklaşımlar çoğu zaman ya anlamın bütünüyle metnin içinde bulunduğunu varsayan biçimci kabullere ya da anlamın öznel okur deneyiminden ortaya çıktığını ileri süren okur-tepkisi yaklaşımlarına dayanmaktadır. Her iki yaklaşım da yorumlamada gerekçelendirme titizliğini göz ardı etme riski taşımaktadır. Sokrates’in elenchos (sorgulama ve çürütme), aporia (yapıcı belirsizlik) ve maieutik (içgörünün ortaya çıkışı) yöntemlerinden hareketle bu makale, diyalojik yorumlamaya ilişkin geliştirilmiş bir yöntemsel çerçeve önermektedir: anlam, okur ile şiir arasındaki diyalojik sorgulamanın ürünü olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır. Sokratik çerçeve temelde hermenötik bir nitelik taşımakta; Gadamer’in diyalojik anlama anlayışından ve Ricoeur’nün yansıtıcı yorumlama yaklaşımından beslenirken, Derrida’nın différance kavramı yorumun hiçbir zaman mutlak bir kapanışa ulaşamayacağını hatırlatan eleştirel bir sınır işlevi görmektedir. Dickinson’ın şiirlerine yönelik yakın okumalar aracılığıyla çalışma, metaforik dilin nasıl yorumlayıcı gerilimler, belirsizlikler ve Sokratik sorgulamanın alanına dönüşen kavramsal kıskırtmalar ürettiğini incelemektedir. Her şiirde başlangıçtaki yorum, elenchos sürecinde çökmekte, aporia üretmekte ve geçici yorumlama biçimlerinin ortaya çıkmasına yol açmaktadır. Şiirleri sabit anlam depoları olarak ele almak yerine, Sokratik yöntem yorumlamada diyalojik etkileşime dayalı bir dönüşüm önermekte; şiirsel dili pasif bir çözümleme nesnesi olmaktan çıkarıp sorgulamanın, kavramsal gerilimin ve düşünsel inquiry’nin alanına dönüştürmektedir. Makale, Sokratik yorumlamanın, anlamın sezgiye ya da eleştirel otoriteye dayanarak varsayılmasını değil, sorgulama yoluyla kazanılmasını şart koşarak edebî çözümlemeyi güçlendirdiği sonucuna ulaşmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sokratik yöntem; Emily Dickinson; Hermenötik; Edebiyat kuramı; Şiir.

Introduction

Literary interpretation often embanks as a matter of subjective impression both in the academy and the classroom, with readers declaring “This poem makes me feel...” or “For my interpretation,” suggesting an a priori belief that meaning is a matter internal to the reader, rather than an attribute of the text. Rosenblatt argues this posture represents an aesthetic or experiential approach, whereby readers ‘live through’ the text ‘on the basis of their own experiences’ (1994, 25-27). Such readings, although valuable as instruction, threaten to reduce the work of interpretation proper to mere psychological or aesthetic projections. Reader-response theorist Stanley Fish goes even further, asserting interpretation rests “not in the meaning of the text, but in the interpretive strategies of the community to which the reader belongs” (1980, 14). Fish’s theory of interpretive communities challenges the idea that meaning exists independently of historically situated reading practices. Interpretation, in this view, is shaped by shared assumptions, institutional conventions, and communal strategies of understanding rather than by direct access to objective textual meaning (Fish, 1980, pp. 322-337). However, this does not imply interpretive anarchy or unrestricted relativism. As Fish later emphasizes, interpretive communities are themselves structured by disciplinary norms, ideological frameworks, and institutional forms of authority (Fish, 1989, pp. 141-162). The present study therefore does not reject interpretive communities altogether; rather, it argues that interpretation within such frameworks still requires reflexive rigor, self-questioning, and justificatory accountability. In this sense, the Socratic method functions not as an alternative to interpretation, but as a disciplined practice of interrogating the assumptions that interpretive communities themselves may naturalize. Fish’s position, however, is more complex than a simple endorsement of interpretive relativism. While he maintains that meaning emerges through interpretive communities, his later work emphasizes that such communities are themselves shaped by institutional practices, disciplinary conventions, ideological assumptions, and structures of authority (Fish, 1989, pp. 141-162). Interpretation therefore does not occur in a vacuum of unrestricted subjectivity but within historically and socially conditioned frameworks that regulate what counts as legitimate reading. Nevertheless, the present study argues that even within such interpretive conditions, literary analysis still requires forms of epistemic accountability grounded in questioning, justification, and critical self-examination. As theory this provokes a question: how, then, will we

know an interpretation as rigorous or justified?

The Socratic method represents a remedy against this relativity of interpretation. The approach is characterized by the critique of assumptions rather than by making a claim to know the truth. As a standard approach in *Apology*, the wisdom of Socrates lies exactly in knowing what he does not know: “I know that I know nothing” (Plato, 1997a, p. 21). The method of elenchus operates through systematic questioning and refutation, exposing tensions and contradictions within apparently stable assumptions. Instead, the approach involves challenging the interpretation: “What exactly do you mean by that interpretation?” “What necessarily follows from your interpretation?” As spelled out by Vlastos (1994, pp. 11-15): “Socratic questioning is a procedure whereby an opponent is compelled to examine an argument or a theory, and as a result, comes to see that it contradicts something else which he believes, and alters his mind.” A critical approach in literary interpretation involves a transition from a projected interpretation (“I feel that this poem is saying...”), (agreeing to a truth by fiat) to a justified one (“What exactly does this poem claim, and how is this interpretation justified by evidence?”).

Emily Dickinson’s poetry is particularly well suited to the Socratic method because her poems consistently destabilize interpretive certainty through paradox, compression, and semantic indirection. As Cameron argues, Dickinson’s poetry frequently resists unified structures of meaning and stable referential closure, producing instead forms of lyric indeterminacy that compel sustained interpretive engagement. (Cameron, 1979). Rather than guiding the reader toward definitive semantic resolution, Dickinson’s poems often preserve contradiction and fragmentation as constitutive features of poetic understanding. This resistance to closure makes her poetry especially receptive to dialogical and Socratic modes of interpretation grounded in questioning, uncertainty, and epistemic openness. She destabilizes certainty through metaphor, compression, and paradox. Her poems resist immediate paraphrase and often produce *aporia*—conceptual uncertainty—in the reader. For example, “Tell all the truth but tell it slant—” (Dickinson, 1955, p. 507) simultaneously demands truth and prohibits direct revelation. Similarly, “Because I could not stop for Death—” personifies Death as courteous, yet the poem subtly undermines that assumption, inviting interrogation. As scholars such as Iser (1978) argue, poems create “gaps” that require active reader participation (pp. 167–168). Dickinson does not fill these gaps with answers;

she forces the reader to reason. In this respect, Dickinson and Socrates share a philosophical temperament: both produce knowledge by disturbing certainty.

Existing Dickinson scholarship has repeatedly emphasized the instability, indeterminacy, and epistemological complexity of her poetry. Cameron argues that Dickinson's poems frequently resist unified consciousness and stable reference, producing meanings that remain structurally unsettled rather than conclusively resolved (Cameron, 1979, pp. 3–12). Similarly, Richard B. Sewall observes that Dickinson's poetic voice persistently challenges conceptual certainty through compression, irony, and metaphysical ambiguity (Sewall, 1974, pp. 636–645). Cristanne Miller likewise notes that Dickinson's language often operates through indirection, syntactic disruption, and semantic multiplicity, compelling readers into active interpretive participation rather than passive reception (Miller, 1987, pp. 25–41). The present study builds upon these insights by arguing that the interpretive instability identified by Dickinson scholars can be productively examined through a Socratic framework of *elenchus*, *aporia*, and *maieutics*.

Philosophically oriented Dickinson criticism has likewise emphasized the epistemological and metaphysical instability that characterizes her poetry. Salska observes that Dickinson's poems frequently suspend conceptual resolution and resist fixed ontological certainty, compelling readers into ongoing processes of interpretive negotiation rather than definitive understanding (Salska, 1985, pp. 41–58). Similarly, Leiter argues that Dickinson's poetic language consistently destabilizes singular meaning through indirection, semantic layering, and rhetorical ambiguity, thereby requiring active intellectual participation from the reader (Leiter, 2007, pp. 112–128). The present study extends these philosophical approaches to Dickinson by proposing that the interpretive instability identified by such scholars can be systematically examined through the Socratic processes of *elenchus*, *aporia*, and *maieutics*.

Thus, this article argues that Dickinson's poems are best understood not as static texts to be decoded but as interlocutors in a dialogue requiring the reader to adopt a Socratic interpretive stance. Through systematic questioning—*elenchus*—interpretive assumptions are tested; through *aporia*, uncertainty becomes productive; through *maieutics*, a deeper meaning emerges. The purpose of this study is to formalize the Socratic method as a theoretical model for literary interpretation and to demonstrate how Dickinson's poems enact and reward that method. In short, Socratic interpretation transforms

reading from passive extraction of meaning into an act of intellectual inquiry.

The Socratic Method: Elenchus, Aporia, and Maieutics

The Socratic method, as represented in Plato's early dialogues, consists of a disciplined sequence of questioning that seeks not to answer but to interrogate. Interpretation—as with ethical inquiry—must begin with recognizing our ignorance. Socrates claims that his wisdom consists precisely in knowing that he does not know (Plato, 1997a, p. 21) At its core, the Socratic method operates through three interrelated processes: *elenchus*, *aporia*, and *maieutics*.

Elenchus (Refutation of Assumptions)

Elenchus refers to the method of refuting or testing assumptions through systematic questioning. In the early Platonic dialogues, Socrates interrogates the claims of his interlocutors not to discredit them personally, but to examine the premises underlying what they believe. He describes this process in Apology when he explains that his task is to “question and examine and cross-examine my fellow citizens” (Plato, 1997a, p. 33). Elenchus operates on the principle that assertions—whether philosophical or interpretive—must withstand scrutiny; if they cannot survive questioning, they must be revised or abandoned. Applied to poetry, elenchus allows readers to move beyond affective or intuitive interpretations such as “this poem is about...” and instead examine what the poem claims through its diction, imagery, and structure. Rather than accepting emotional impressions or cultural assumptions, the Socratic reader approaches the poem as an implicit argument requiring justification. For example, in Dickinson's “*Because I could not stop for Death –*”, the poem initially presents Death as courteous, noting that “He kindly stopped for me.” A Socratic reading treats this as a philosophical proposition and begins interrogation: Is kindness compatible with the uninvited removal of agency? Does civility operate here as a rhetorical mask that conceals coercion? Through *elenchus*, the poem's metaphor of Death as a gentleman caller becomes an argument that must be tested against internal textual evidence. Poetry, in this sense, becomes argument disguised as imagery, requiring not passive feeling but active interrogation.

Aporia (Productive Perplexity)

Aporia refers to the stage of interpretive perplexity that arises when prior assumptions collapse and meaning becomes uncertain. In the Socratic dialogues, aporia is not a sign of intellectual failure but an indication of pro-

gress. Socrates intentionally leads interlocutors into confusion so that previously unexamined beliefs can be dismantled; only through the recognition of ignorance can genuine inquiry begin. Vlastos (1994) explains that aporia “purifies ignorance” by emptying the mind of false certainty and opening conceptual space for discovery (pp. 11–15). In the context of poetry, aporia emerges when a poem contradicts itself, destabilizes meaning through ambiguous language, or offers metaphors that refuse reductive closure. Cameron (1979) similarly observes that Dickinson’s lyric structures frequently suspend interpretive completion, creating poems that resist totalizing explanation and remain structurally open to multiple conceptual possibilities (pp. 45–52). As Salska (1985) suggests, Dickinson’s poetry frequently resists conceptual stabilization, sustaining contradiction and uncertainty as permanent features of poetic consciousness. Such instability closely parallels the Socratic function of aporia, where uncertainty becomes not a failure of understanding but the necessary condition for deeper inquiry. Her poem “*Tell all the truth but tell it slant—*” exemplifies this strategy. At the level of assertion, the poem appears to advocate for honesty, yet it simultaneously commands concealment; truth should be revealed but only indirectly. This paradox forces the reader into a state of interpretive suspension: is truth being celebrated, or is its disclosure being resisted? The poem affirms transparency while simultaneously denying it, suggesting that truth is too powerful to be grasped directly. Dickinson thus transforms ambiguity into a philosophical tactic. She does not provide answers—she generates uncertainty. Aporia becomes the condition under which deeper interpretation becomes possible.

Maieutics (Midwifery of Meaning)

Maieutics, the third stage of the Socratic method, refers to the process of guiding another toward the emergence of understanding. In *Theaetetus*, Socrates asserts that he does not teach knowledge but assists others in bringing forth what they already possess: “My art of midwifery is in general like theirs; the only difference is that my patients are men, not women, and my concern is not with the body but with the soul that is in travail of birth.” (Plato, 1997b, p. 167). The goal of maieutics is therefore not transmission of information but the facilitation of intellectual birth. Applied to poetry, maieutics means that meaning is not imposed upon the text by an external interpretive authority; rather, meaning arises collaboratively through interpretive engagement. Interpretation becomes something co-created through a dialogue between the reader and the poem. Dickinson’s “*I’m Nobody! Who are you?*”

enacts this dynamic. The poem playfully destabilizes conventional identity categories—*Somebody* and *Nobody*—and immediately implicates the reader by asking, “Are you — Nobody — too?” Instead of presenting a fixed meaning or moral conclusion, the poem requires the reader to participate in the construction of meaning through self-positioning within its relational framework. Identity here is not revealed but uncovered through interaction. In this sense, Dickinson functions as a poetic midwife: she does not deliver meaning to the reader but invites the reader to recognize and “give birth” to meaning through interpretive participation.

Why the Socratic Method Fits Dickinson

Emily Dickinson’s poetry lends itself especially well to a Socratic mode of interpretation because her poems repeatedly unsettle interpretive certainty through ambiguity, paradoxical structures, compressed expression, and indirect modes of meaning. Dickinson’s poetry has frequently been characterized by critics as philosophically paradoxical and resistant to conceptual stability. Sewall (1974) argues that Dickinson’s poetic imagination persistently inhabits states of metaphysical uncertainty, where contradiction and ambiguity are not accidental features but essential components of her intellectual temperament (pp. 636–645). Rather than resolving tensions between belief and doubt, certainty and uncertainty, presence and absence, Dickinson often sustains these oppositions simultaneously. Such poetic instability closely aligns with the Socratic movement toward aporia, in which the collapse of assumed certainty becomes the beginning of deeper inquiry rather than its failure. Rather than offering resolved philosophical conclusions, Dickinson frequently positions readers within states of intellectual tension and ambiguity. Such characteristics make her poetry especially receptive to forms of interpretation grounded in questioning, contradiction, and epistemic inquiry.

In Socratic elenchus, assumptions are challenged through questioning; likewise, Dickinson frequently introduces a seemingly stable proposition only to undermine it from within. In “*Because I could not stop for Death –*”, Death appears courteous and civil, yet as the poem progresses, this polite guide gradually reveals predatory undertones, forcing the reader to revise the initial assumption. The stage of aporia—Socrates’ intentional cultivation of productive confusion—corresponds to Dickinson’s persistent destabilization of certainty. In “*Tell all the truth but tell it slant—*”, truth is both asserted and

withdrawn, revealed and concealed, leaving the reader suspended between competing interpretive possibilities. Finally, Socratic maieutics, the “mid-wifery of ideas,” parallels the relational emergence of meaning in Dickinson’s “*I’m Nobody! Who are you?*”, where identity is not presented as intrinsic but produced through dialogue with an interlocutor. Rather than resolving ambiguity, the poem invites the reader into complicity, making interpretation itself an act of relational discovery. In this way, Dickinson’s poems do not function as objects to be decoded but as interlocutors who provoke, unsettle, and refuse interpretive finality. Leiter (2007) similarly notes that Dickinson’s rhetorical strategies repeatedly require readers to negotiate multiple and often competing layers of meaning rather than arrive at singular interpretive conclusions. Sewall (1974) similarly observes that Dickinson’s poetry consistently confronts readers with metaphysical paradoxes and unresolved existential tensions rather than stable philosophical certainties (pp. 640–645). Her poetic method often depends upon sustaining contradiction rather than resolving it, a tendency that closely parallels the Socratic movement from confident assumption toward productive uncertainty. Her poetry demands the same intellectual humility and open inquiry that Socrates required of his interlocutors, making a Socratic framework not only appropriate but essential for engaging her work. Dickinson’s persistent resistance to semantic closure has also been emphasized by Cameron (1979), who argues that her poetry frequently fragments unified consciousness and destabilizes fixed interpretive centers (pp. 78–85). This interpretive instability aligns closely with the Socratic method, which likewise refuses premature certainty and instead privileges inquiry through contradiction, hesitation, and self-questioning.

Methodology: A Socratic Framework for Poetic Interpretation

This study employs the Socratic method — structured around elenchus, aporia, and maieutics — as a systematic interpretive framework for the analysis of poetry. Rather than approaching the poem as a fixed object awaiting decipherment, the methodology conceives of the text as a dialogical interlocutor capable of advancing implicit philosophical claims. Interpretation is therefore understood not as the extraction of predetermined meaning, but as a process of critical inquiry and argumentative engagement between reader and text. The framework unfolds through four interconnected stages.

Stage One: Identifying the Poem’s Implicit Claims

The first step requires treating metaphors, structural choices, and tone

as propositional content, not merely ornament. Following Fish's (1980) description of meaning as constructed through interpretive communities (pp. 322–337), the goal is to isolate what the poem appears to assert *before* questioning it. Metaphors and figurative structures are approached as linguistically mediated sites of ambiguity and conceptual tension that invite interpretive questioning rather than fixed propositional resolution. As Gadamer (2004) notes, *understanding is always an engagement with a claim to truth* (p. 302). The first step is therefore not interpretation but recognition of what the poem appears to be asserting about experience, ontology, or truth. Operational questions guiding this step include: “What proposition does this metaphor advance?” or “What worldview or philosophical assumption is embedded?” For example, Dickinson's “*Because I could not stop for Death –*” asserts a surprising premise: that Death is courteous. Identifying this implicit claim prepares the ground for *elenchus*.

Stage Two: *Elenchus* — Systematic Interrogation of Assumption

Within the Socratic framework of literary interpretation, the process of *elenchus* is sustained through a series of critical questions that test the coherence of an initial reading. The reader must ask whether the poem contradicts its own assumptions elsewhere in the text, what alternative interpretations might arise from reconsidering specific word choices, and whether diction functions to conceal underlying tensions of power, coercion, or instability. This process parallels Socrates' own method of cross-examination, in which he declares, “I question and examine and cross-examine” (Plato, 1997a, p. 33). The aim of such questioning is not to expose error for its own sake but to transform contradiction into a site of interpretive possibility. Within this model, inconsistency becomes a productive space through which deeper insight can emerge. This approach also safeguards interpretation from what Derrida (1978) describes as the “metaphysics of presence”—the illusion that meaning is immediately available and self-evident (pp. 278–280). Ricoeur (1970) calls this hermeneutics of suspicion, arguing that interpretation must interrogate surface meanings to uncover deeper structures (pp. 32–36). Instead, meaning is treated as something constructed through the reader's critical engagement with textual ambiguities and absences. *Elenchus*, therefore, redefines contradiction not as a flaw in the poem but as something revealed through interrogation rather than assumption.

Stage Three: Aporia — Suspending Closure

Aporia is treated as an intentional interpretive phase. Rather than resolving ambiguity prematurely, the researcher must hold conflicting possibilities in productive tension. Aporia refers to productive perplexity—the interpretive space where assumptions collapse and meaning has not yet emerged. Vlastos (1994) notes that Socrates deliberately creates aporia to “purify ignorance” (pp. 11–15). Derrida likewise argues that meaning is found not in resolution but in the play of deferral — *différance* (Derrida, 1978, p. 291). *Aporia* constitutes the interpretive moment of suspension that follows the collapse of a prior assumption. Within the Socratic tradition, *aporia* is not a sign of interpretive failure but an indication of intellectual progress, for only through the recognition of one’s ignorance can genuine understanding begin. Socrates deliberately cultivates this condition in his dialogues, leading interlocutors to a state of perplexity so that inherited beliefs might be reconsidered and new forms of knowledge made possible. Vlastos (1994) describes *aporia* as the moment that “purifies ignorance,” clearing an epistemic space for discovery (pp. 11–15). In literary analysis, *aporia* arises when the text resists synthesis—when contradiction, ambiguity, or linguistic indeterminacy interrupts interpretive certainty. Dickinson frequently engineers this state of productive confusion. In “*Tell all the truth but tell it slant—*”, she presents a paradox that both commands and conceals truth, asserting that truth must “dazzle gradually” rather than arrive fully disclosed. The poem thereby destabilizes the very act of revelation it appears to advocate, forcing the reader into interpretive hesitation. This oscillation between affirmation and withdrawal exemplifies aporia’s function as a site of intellectual possibility: meaning emerges not through the resolution of ambiguity but through sustained engagement with it. Dickinson’s strategy mirrors the Socratic aim—to make uncertainty the condition of inquiry and to transform confusion into an instrument of understanding. This stage aligns with Gadamer’s view that understanding requires “openness to the otherness of the text” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 361). As Sewall (1974) notes, Dickinson repeatedly transforms metaphysical uncertainty into a central poetic principle, compelling readers to inhabit ambiguity rather than escape from it (pp. 636–645). In this respect, her poetry resembles the Socratic cultivation of aporia, where confusion becomes an essential condition of intellectual inquiry.

Stage Four: Maieutics — Emergent Interpretation

Maieutics is the “midwifery of knowledge,” where interpretation arises

not by imposition but by discovery. Socrates insists that he does not teach truth but helps others to give birth to it (Plato, 2002, p. 879. Ricoeur's theory of understanding confirms this: interpretation becomes a "second naïveté," a renewed meaning formed after critical distance (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 351). Once assumptions have been interrogated and ambiguity embraced, interpretation can emerge organically. In *Meno*, Socrates characterizes his role as that of a philosophical midwife, claiming that the deliverance of the soul is his art. (Plato, 2002, p. 879). The maieutic process presupposes that knowledge cannot be transmitted ready-made but must be born through active intellectual participation. Within the context of literary interpretation, *maieutics* redefines reading as a dialogical process in which meaning emerges through engagement rather than application. The critic's task is not to impose significance upon the poem but to facilitate the conditions under which meaning can arise organically from the interplay between text and reader. Dickinson's "*I'm Nobody! Who are you?*" exemplifies this *maieutic* dynamic. By playfully dismantling the binary between Somebody and Nobody, the poem directly addresses the reader—"Are you—Nobody—too?"—and demands participation in its logic of self-definition. The reader becomes complicit in producing meaning; identity, like understanding, is co-created through dialogue. In this sense, Dickinson assumes the role of Socratic midwife, prompting recognition rather than revelation. Her poetry thus enacts a hermeneutic of emergence: meaning is not given, but born through the reader's encounter with linguistic paradox and philosophical play. Meaning does not precede questioning; rather, questioning generates provisional and revisable interpretive possibilities.

The interpretive framework proposed in this study should not be understood as a fully unified synthesis of Socratic dialectics, Gadamerian hermeneutics, Ricoeurian suspicion, and Derridean deconstruction. Rather, it functions as a layered interpretive model structured through the productive tensions among these approaches. Within this framework, Socrates provides the dialogical method of interrogation through elenchus, compelling interpretations to justify themselves through questioning and self-critique. Gadamer contributes the hermeneutic principle of openness to the text and the recognition that understanding emerges dialogically through engagement with alterity (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 269–305). Ricoeur extends this process through a reflective hermeneutics of suspicion, encouraging interpretation to move beyond surface coherence toward concealed tensions, symbolic structures, and implicit assumptions (Ricoeur, 1970, pp. 32–36). Derrida, however,

functions as a critical limit to interpretive closure: his concept of *différance* resists the idea that questioning culminates in definitive meaning, emphasizing instead that meaning remains provisional, deferred, and perpetually open to reinterpretation (Derrida, 1978, pp. 278–293). Accordingly, the present study does not claim that literary interpretation can achieve final truth; rather, it argues that disciplined questioning generates provisional and revisable interpretive possibilities.

Methodological Outcomes

This interpretive framework differs significantly from dominant approaches in literary theory. Reader-response criticism begins from the reader's subjective experience, treating meaning as a projection of personal feelings or associations, which makes interpretation inherently projective. Although interpretive communities shape the conditions under which meaning becomes intelligible, the Socratic framework proposed here seeks to introduce a further level of reflexive interrogation by requiring interpretations to account for their assumptions, contradictions, and justificatory grounds. New Criticism, by contrast, insists that meaning is recoverable through close attention to textual structures, imagery, and form, rendering interpretation primarily analytical. Hermeneutics of suspicion approaches texts as ideological constructs, reading them to expose hidden power structures or unconscious assumptions, which makes interpretation fundamentally deconstructive. The Socratic dialectical method offers a different orientation: instead of beginning with individual emotion, textual autonomy, or ideological critique, it begins with the questioning of assumptions. Interpretation becomes dialogical rather than projective, analytical, or deconstructive. The emphasis is not on asserting meaning but on interrogating what the poem appears to claim and testing whether that claim can withstand rigorous scrutiny. The Socratic framework proposed here does not deny that interpretation occurs within socially conditioned interpretive communities. Rather, it introduces a reflexive dimension into interpretation by requiring readers to interrogate the assumptions, conceptual tensions, and justificatory grounds that shape their readings. Interpretation therefore becomes not merely an expression of communal interpretive habits, but an ongoing practice of critical self-examination. Thus, the Socratic method builds epistemic humility into literary analysis; rather than asking, "What does this poem mean to me?", the reader asks, "What does the poem claim, and can that claim survive questioning?" Meaning emerges not as an opinion to be declared, but as an insight

earned through systematic inquiry.

Socratic Interpretation of Emily Dickinson's Poems

The three selected poems "*Because I could not stop for Death*", "*Tell all the truth but tell it slant—*", and "*I'm Nobody! Who are you?*" — all perform the very gestures that Socratic dialectic seeks to enact: they resist certainty, expose contradictions, and compel the reader toward self-reflective interpretation. Each poem will be examined using the methodological sequence defined earlier: (1) identifying implicit claims, (2) performing *elenchus* to interrogate these claims, (3) allowing *aporia* to arise, and (4) arriving at a new interpretation through *maieutics*.

"Because I could not stop for Death —": Interrogating the Gentle Death Narrative

The poem opens with what appears to be a benign proposition: "Because I could not stop for Death — / He kindly stopped for me —" (Dickinson, 1955, p. 12). The assumption embedded here is that Death is courteous — he "kindly" stops, as one might offer a gracious gesture. *Elenchus* begins with questioning that assumption: If Death is kind, why is the encounter unrequested? Why must he stop for her, rather than the speaker freely consenting to go? The poem itself destabilizes the initial assumption through diction that implies seduction or abduction: "I had put away / My labour and my leisure too, / For His Civility —" (p. 12). Socratic questioning reveals that civility does not equal virtue; "civility" becomes a rhetorical mask covering loss of agency.

Aporia intensifies in the third and fourth stanzas, where the tone shifts from politeness to eeriness. The speaker passes familiar scenes — school, grain fields, the setting sun — but these markers of life transition toward deathlike estrangement: "Or rather — He passed Us — / The Dews drew quivering and chill — / For only Gossamer, my Gown —" (p. 12). The metaphysical reversal (*He passed Us*) implies that she is no longer moving within time; time moves beyond her. The Socratic question becomes: if Death is a companion, why is the speaker's clothing inadequate for the cold? Why does time no longer behave naturally? *Aporia* exposes a contradiction — the polite Death is also a thief of agency.

Maieutic insight emerges only in the final stanza: "Since then — 'tis Centuries — and yet / Feels shorter than the Day / I first surmised the Horses' Heads / Were toward Eternity —" (p. 12). She did not understand the destination until the journey had already begun. Meaning is born through realization

— the poem functions as an epistemological trap. Only through Socratic interrogation does the reader discern that Death's civility conceals coercion. Dickinson's irony produces philosophical awakening: Death as gentleman caller is a misdirection, and the true narrative is one of surrender, not choice.

“Tell all the truth but tell it slant—”: Truth and Socratic Indirection

Dickinson's second poem performs epistemology. The first line asserts a command: “Tell all the truth but tell it slant—” (Dickinson, 1955, p. 507). The proposition assumes that truth ought not be stated directly. *Elenchus* challenges this premise: If truth is valuable, why should it be delivered obliquely? What is lost — or protected — by indirection? The poem answers by arguing that truth is too overwhelming to be encountered directly: “The Truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind—” (p. 507). Truth, then, is compared to lightning — powerful, dangerous, requiring mediation. Like Socrates, Dickinson asserts that knowledge cannot be forced; it must be guided.

Aporia surfaces when we ask: is indirection deception, or pedagogy? Is “telling truth slant” ethically responsible, or evasive? Socrates frequently adopts indirection himself (Plato, 2002, p. 881), suggesting that gradual revelation is necessary because the mind resists abrupt illumination. Thus, *maieutics* manifests in Dickinson as it does in Socrates — truth is something the reader must “give birth” to through mediated encounter. The poem becomes a philosophical argument: truth cannot be possessed; it must be approached.

“I’m Nobody! Who are you?”: Identity as Dialogical Knowledge

The third poem radically shifts the site of inquiry from mortality or epistemology to identity. It opens with an arresting claim: “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” (Dickinson, 1955, p. 57). The implicit assumption is paradoxical: that being “Nobody” constitutes an identity. *Elenchus* questions this: How can non-being function as self-definition? What does it mean to reject the category of Somebody? The speaker immediately invites the reader into complicity: “Are you — Nobody — too?” (p. 57). Identity becomes co-produced through dialogue; there is no solitary “Nobody.”

Aporia emerges when the poem presents the alternative: being “Somebody” means public exposure and loss of autonomy. The social world is depicted as a swamp of superficiality: “How dreary — to be — Somebody!” (p. 57). Again, Socratic questioning animates the insight: To what extent is individuality destroyed by recognition? What does the desire to be

unseen reveal about power? Through maieutic emergence, the reader sees that identity is relational rather than inherent — we become ourselves only through dialogue with others. The poem functions as a philosophical act: identity is not discovered; it is performed.

Synthesis: Dickinson as a Socratic Poet

Across these three poems, Dickinson consistently positions the reader in the same epistemic and psychological space that Socrates creates for his interlocutors. Each poem begins with an apparent premise that seems stable—Death is courteous, truth can be told, identity can be named—yet this premise is deliberately unsettled as the poem unfolds. The reader enters the poem with an assumption, only to have the poem expose the assumption's inadequacy or internal contradiction. This destabilization produces a state of *aporia*, a productive confusion in which interpretive certainty becomes impossible and new possibilities must be entertained. Dickinson's use of ambiguity, withheld information, and semantic indirection forces readers to pause, reconsider, and think more rigorously. Meaning, therefore, does not arise immediately or intuitively but emerges only through interpretive struggle—through the reader's willingness to interrogate metaphors, examine language, and confront contradiction. This process mirrors Socratic *maieutics*, where knowledge is not transmitted but midwifed; the poem refuses to provide answers and instead compels the reader to participate in the construction of meaning. Dickinson, like Socrates, is less concerned with what we know than with how we come to know it. Her poems do not confirm interpretations—they generate inquiry. In this way, Dickinson functions as a Socratic poet: she invites the reader into dialogue and demands intellectual humility as the price of understanding.

Theoretical Implications for Literary Interpretation

The integration of the Socratic method into literary interpretation challenges dominant paradigms in contemporary criticism by shifting the interpretive task from decoding meaning to interrogating assumptions. In traditional New Critical close reading, the text is treated as a stable object whose meaning resides within formal structures. Reader-response theory, by contrast, situates meaning within the reader's experience, asserting that interpretation emerges through the reader's engagement with the text (Rosenblatt, 1994, pp. 17–25). Stanley Fish extends this further by claiming that interpretation is determined by interpretive communities rather than by textual

meaning (Fish, 1980, pp. 322–337). The Socratic method introduces a third position: meaning is neither contained wholly within the text nor freely generated by the reader — it emerges through interrogation.

Unlike New Criticism, which assumes meaning is fixed, Socratic reading begins from not-knowing. Unlike reader-response approaches, which often legitimize subjective reactions as interpretation, Socratic reading rejects untested intuition as epistemically insufficient. Socratic interpretation thus occupies a middle ground: it is dialogical, not subjective; investigatory, not expressive.

At the heart of this interpretive stance is *elenchus* — the systematic questioning of assumptions embedded within the poem. Dickinson’s metaphor “He kindly stopped for me” (Because I could not stop for Death –) initially invites a sentimental reading. A reader-response approach might focus on feelings of comfort or peace. A New Critical reading may explore meter, tone, and imagery to uncover coherence. But a Socratic reader asks: What is the poem claiming, and can that claim withstand scrutiny? By interrogating “kindness” ascribed to Death, *elenchus* reveals instability in the metaphor and exposes the speaker’s lack of agency. The interpretive validity is grounded not in intuition but in contradiction.

Aporia plays an equally central role in the theoretical implications of this method. Socrates values confusion because confusion restructures cognitive frameworks. Vlastos (1994) describes aporia as “purifying ignorance” (pp. 11–15). Dickinson’s poetry produces this state intentionally. “*Tell all the truth but tell it slant—*” (Dickinson, 1955, p. 507) is fundamentally aporetic: truth is praised, yet withheld; revelation is demanded, yet delayed. The poem, like a Socratic dialogue, destabilizes the rational ground on which certainty rests. *Aporia* becomes not a failure of interpretation but the condition of possibility for deeper insight.

Finally, maieutics positions the reader not as a decoder but as a participant in meaning-formation. In *Meno*, Socrates insists that he does not insert knowledge into the interlocutor; he helps it emerge from within (Plato, 2002, pp. 885, 886). Similarly, Dickinson’s “*I’m Nobody! Who are you?*” constructs identity dialogically — the poem is incomplete without the reader’s participation. Meaning is not delivered; it is born. This mirrors the Socratic premise that knowledge must be discovered, not given.

Thus, the theoretical contribution of this paper is that the Socratic method introduces epistemic accountability into literary interpretation. Interpretation becomes valid not because it is clever, emotional, or aesthetically pleasing, but because it has survived questioning. Socratic reading does not ask “What do I think the poem means?”, but “on what grounds can any interpretation claim validity?” Interpretation becomes a hypothesis tested against contradiction. Where other approaches seek closure, Socratic interpretation insists on openness. It values the discomfort of uncertainty. It demands rigor from the reader. Dickinson’s poetry does not resist interpretation; rather, it requires a reader willing to interrogate what they assume they understand.

Conclusion

As Cameron’s (1979) reading of Dickinson suggests, poetic meaning in Dickinson frequently remains unresolved and dynamically open rather than conclusively determined, reinforcing the article’s claim that Socratic questioning is particularly productive precisely because Dickinson’s poems resist definitive closure. Dickinson’s poetic indeterminacy has been extensively discussed within Dickinson scholarship itself. Cameron (1979) argues that Dickinson’s lyric structures frequently resist closure and unified consciousness, producing forms of semantic fragmentation that remain deliberately unresolved (pp. 3–12). Rather than presenting stable meanings recoverable through direct interpretation, Dickinson’s poems often sustain ambiguity as a constitutive feature of poetic experience. Such indeterminacy closely resembles the Socratic condition of *aporia*, in which the collapse of certainty becomes the beginning of inquiry rather than its end. The present study therefore does not impose instability upon Dickinson’s poetry from outside theoretical frameworks; rather, it argues that the dialogical uncertainty already identified by Dickinson scholars can be productively interpreted through the epistemic structure of Socratic questioning.

This article has argued that integrating the Socratic method into literary interpretation transforms reading from passive reception into dialogical inquiry, thereby proposing a replicable interpretive framework based on systematic questioning rather than subjective responses or strict textual determinism. By asking not what the poem means, but rather what assumptions the poem asserts and whether those assumptions can withstand questioning, interpretation gains theoretical rigor. The readings of Dickinson’s “*Because I could not stop for Death –*”, “*Tell all the truth but tell it slant—*”, and “*I’m*

Nobody! Who are you?” demonstrate the power of *elenchus*, *aporia*, and *maieutics* as interpretive strategies. In each poem, surface-level interpretations — Death as gentle companion, truth as revelation, identity as essence — were revealed to be unstable under interrogation. Meaning emerged not from assertion but from the collapse of assumption.

At a deeper level, the Socratic method introduces epistemic humility into literary studies. Socrates’ insistence that “I know that I do not know” (Plato, 1997a, p. 21) becomes a methodological stance rather than a philosophical anecdote. Dickinson’s poems resist immediate understanding; they demand that the reader dwell in uncertainty. In “*Tell all the truth but tell it slant*—”, truth is not rejected — it is deferred, bent, mediated. In this, Dickinson acts as a Socratic poet: she does not deprive the reader of truth, but teaches the reader to approach truth obliquely, without presumption of mastery. Truth must be earned.

Maieutics reinforces this point. Socrates does not teach answers but draws out thinking. Dickinson does not declare meaning; she midwifes it. In “*I’m Nobody! Who are you?*”, identity is not discovered within the self but emerges through relational dialogue: we become through conversation. Meaning, whether philosophical or poetic, is not an object to be possessed but a process of becoming. Reading becomes an act of participation.

The implication is profound: interpretation is ethical insofar as it demands accountability to questioning rather than reliance on intuition or interpretive authority. When we interrogate our assumptions, we acknowledge the limits of our own perspective. Socratic interpretation refuses interpretive arrogance. It rejects the idea that any reading can be final or complete. The poem becomes a site of mutual transformation: the text shapes the reader, and the reader shapes the text — not through projection, but through questioning.

This shift has consequences for literary theory. New Criticism valorised textual closure: reader-response theory valorised subjective experience. The Socratic method introduces a third mode: inquiry as a shared pursuit of understanding. Meaning becomes an event — something that happens between reader and poem through rigorous engagement.

Sewall’s (1974) characterization of Dickinson as a poet of paradox and metaphysical tension further reinforces the central argument of this study: Dickinson’s poetry does not seek interpretive finality but instead invites

sustained inquiry into the instability of knowledge, identity, truth, and perception. In an era of rapid information, instant opinion, and interpretive relativism, Socratic reading offers something countercultural: deliberateness. To read as Socrates questions is to slow down, to resist the urge to declare, to inhabit uncertainty as an intellectual virtue. As Dickinson teaches through metaphor and misdirection, and as Socrates teaches through dialogue and contradiction: Meaning is not what we possess — it is what we pursue.

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