

# Polysemous Concepts of *Eternity* in Emily Dickinson and Eliza R. Snow

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*The purpose of this article is to analyze the polysemic nature of the word eternity in the poetry of Eliza R. Snow and Emily Dickinson. Using one database of poems by Dickinson and another of poems by Snow, the author compares various ways in which the poets use the word eternity. Even though Snow and Dickinson are similar in many ways, they do not always employ the same meaning of eternity. The analysis shows that Snow mainly uses the word eternity to refer to a religious place, while Dickinson uses eternity to indicate a state of being.*

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) and Eliza R. Snow (1804–1887) were born twenty-six years apart, and there are many important similarities between these nineteenth century poets: their birthplaces, their religious upbringings, and their interest in poetry. They differed in religious affiliations, which may have affected their different definitions of religious terms. This article compares the similar and different meanings associated with the word *eternity* in the works of each poet and examines why these similarities and differences exist.

## Meanings of *Eternity*

*Polysemy* in Greek means “many senses,” so today we say that words are polysemous if they convey a coexistence of similar meanings. According to scholars, “communication would be greatly restricted if speakers had to have unique sounds for every concept; neither the human mind nor the human tongue is capable of wrapping itself around the number of individual words that would be needed” (Garcia et al. 2007). This is why Garcia commented that polysemy “is the workhorse of the English language.” Snow and Dickinson employ the use of polysemy with the word *eternity* in their poetry by giving it “many senses” or meanings.

The word *eternity* is interesting because it appears to have a simple meaning like “forever” or “endless”; however, based on the number of definitions both Dickinson and Snow apply to the word, it is evident that *eternity* is not a simple-to-define word. Dickinson uses the word sixty-one times in her 1,789 poems, while Snow uses it seventy-one times in her 507 poems. Dickinson employs 19 meanings of *eternity*, while Snow employs 12. Dickinson and Snow use seven similar meanings; Dickinson uses thirteen meanings that are unique to her, while Snow uses five that are unique to her.

# Similarities in Meaning

I found seven similar meanings that Snow and Dickinson used for the word *eternity* by using Hallen’s (2007) Dickinson lexicon and my Snow lexicon (Snow 2009). The following Venn diagram shows which of Snow’s and Dickinson’s definitions of *eternity* are similar as well as which are unique to each poet.

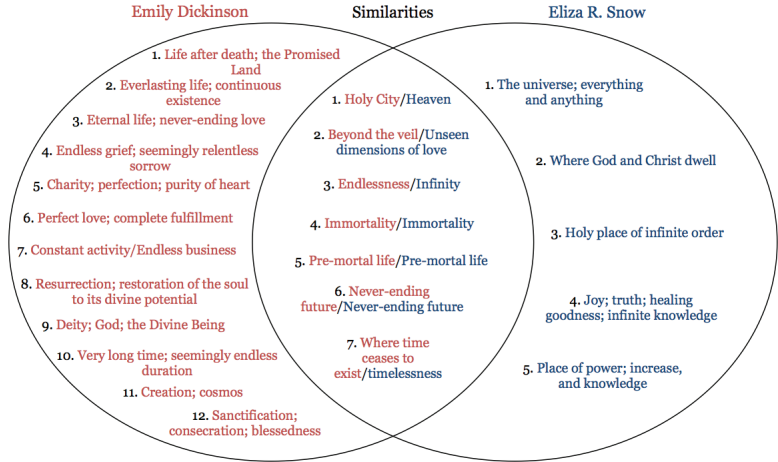


Figure 1. Venn diagram of meanings.

Out of the seven similar definitions, I will analyze two pairs of definitions. The first set of similar definitions pertains to locations. Dickinson expresses the following meanings with this overall sense: Heaven; paradise; infinite space; endless expanse of the sky; Paradise [word play on “East of Eden”]; the Garden of Eden; a new heaven and a new earth. Snow expresses the following meanings: Holy City; level of heaven; New Jerusalem.

These definitions are polysemous because they both refer to eternity as heaven. In her poem, Fr35/J13, Dickinson likens reaching eternity or heaven to witnessing a true sunrise: “Morning has not occurred / That shall Aurora be —/ East of Eternity—.”

Judith Farr (1994) explains her thoughts on what Dickinson might have been thinking about when writing these lines:

Thus, she [Dickinson] says, the real morning or break of day occurs when the soul enters eternal life. Dawn, Aurora, will really happen “East of Eternity”: a metaphoric place in which sun rises endlessly in a world that itself stands for sunrise or continued life. “East,” “Eternity,” and “break of day” are all linked here and all connote life everlasting in paradise.

Snow uses the word *eternity* in her poem *Paraphrase* (Snow 38:8) in a similar way as Dickinson. The poem centers on the grandeur of “the upper eternity heaving in sight.” This upper eternity is heaven. Both poets use similar definitions for the word *eternity* in relation to an event in nature: sunrise. In *Paraphrase*, Snow writes, “See, yon atmosphere is parting— / See it roll in waves of blue / on either side, and brightly darting— / Glorious light is darting through.” Snow could be talking about a sunrise, just as Dickinson does in her poem.

Another example of similar definitions for the word *eternity* is relating to a dimension of time. Dickinson’s related senses are as follows: Timelessness; all-encompassing time; period before birth, during life, and after death; ocean upon ocean of reality. Snow uses the following senses: Where time ceases to exist; period between this earth life and eternal life.

In her poem, Fr1690/J1684, Dickinson personifies eternity as an unfailing friend: “He joins me in my Ramble / Divides abode with me / No Friend I have that so persists / As this Eternity.” Used in this context, the word *eternity*, Dickinson’s friend, is timeless; he is with her now, he was with her before birth, and he will be with her after death.

Snow’s poem *Time and Change* has a similar theme. She personifies time as a tourist whose travails and wanderings end “On the broad threshold of eternity. / There his deep folded drapery

will be / Unroll'd" (Snow 76:60). In this case, *eternity* envelops and ends time.

## Differences in Meaning

In her poetry, Dickinson tends to define *eternity* as a state of being, while Snow tends to define *eternity* as a place. The pie charts below show that Dickinson uses considerably more *state of being* definitions for the term than Snow, and conversely that Snow uses more *place* definitions than Dickinson.

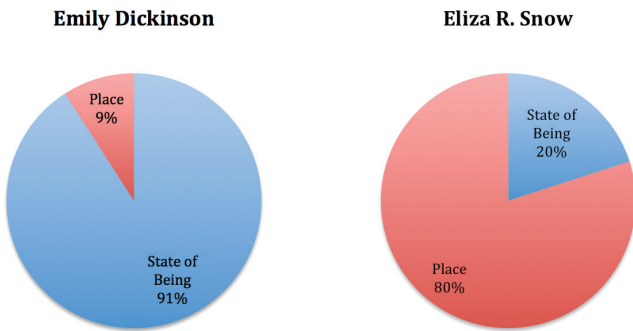


Figure 2. Comparisons of meanings.

These charts illustrate that eleven out of the twelve definitions unique to Dickinson are *state of being* definitions and four out of the five definitions unique to Snow are place definitions. The following is an example of a Dickinson state of being definition: Endless grief; seemingly relentless sorrow: the depths of despair. Dickinson uses this definition for *eternity* in her poem, Fr574/J372. She uses the word *eternity* in a very different way compared to Snow. Instead of meaning something positive, in this case it has a negative meaning: "I know lives, I could miss / without a Misery – / Others – whose instant's wanting – / Would be Eternity." She is saying that there are people she knows in life that, if they were to die, she would not be saddened by it; but that there are others that, if the same were to transpire, she could not

bear it. There would be endless grief and seemingly relentless sorrow.

Snow uses place definitions for the word *eternity*, most of her definitions being religious in nature. For example, in the lines 114:30–32, Snow uses the definition “holy place of infinite order.” The following excerpt shows the word in context: “I’ll confide in His goodness forever— / I’ll obey him. Eternity’s records will show . . .” Here the word *eternity* is definitely a holy place—most likely heaven, as the capitalized pronoun *His* is referring to God—and places that keep records are places of order; thus, the definition “holy place of infinite order” is fitting.

## Religious Upbringing

The differences in these poets’ uses of *eternity* can be in part attributed to their religious experience. Both Dickinson and Snow were born in Massachusetts, Dickinson in Amherst and Snow in Becket. Each was born into a religious family, and both were exposed to the Bible from an early age.

According to Jane Wald, Dickinson received her own Bible from her father at age 13, and “her familiarity with the Bible and her facile references to it in letters and poems have long impressed scholars” (2009). Dickinson grew up in a Calvinist household where she learned the principles of salvation and eternal consequences, major aspects of Calvinism. In addition to the Calvinist religion, exposure to other religions also influenced Dickinson’s writings. “The two types of religions present in Emily Dickinson’s life, Puritanism and Transcendentalism, had great influence over her poetry” (Wald 2009).

Snow’s parents were devout Baptists. As the name of the religion suggests, the most significant aspect of the Baptist faith is the ordinance of baptism, which is believed to be necessary for salvation. This idea of salvation or being saved influenced how Snow viewed the afterlife and the concept of eternity. The Snow family valued learning: “At the time when many families lacked the means or desire to educate their daughters, ‘our

parents extended to us the best educational facilities attainable at that time, without preference to either sex” (Davidson and Derr 2013). Snow’s love for learning, religion, and language made her an excellent poet. In the spring of 1835, Snow was baptized a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) (Davidson and Derr 2013). The teachings of the LDS Church focus on the atonement of Jesus Christ and emphasize the importance of eternal families. The LDS theology greatly influenced the topics, words, style, and tone of Snow’s poetry, especially the different definitions she used for the word *eternity*.

## Later Religious Activity

Probably the biggest difference between the poets is their religious affiliations after leaving home. Each poet believed in God and had strong convictions. As stated previously, both Dickinson and Snow grew up in religious homes in a strong religious area. They were both influenced by the Bible and other good books and they both attended church and learned about God. Dickinson agonized over her relationship with God but ultimately did not join the Congregationalist church. She did this not to defy God, but rather to remain true to herself. She said, “I feel the world holds a predominant place in my affections. I do not feel that I could give up all for Christ were I called to die” (Wald 2009). Dickinson’s poetry leads us to believe that at times she was angry at God: “Of Course—I prayed—/ And did God care? / He cared as much as on the Air / A Bird—had stamped her foot—/ And cried “Give Me” (Fr581). Wald (2009) explains:

Despite her non-participation in public religious life, Dickinson’s poems reveal a keen interest in issues of faith and doubt, suffering and salvation, mortality and immortality. Deaths of friends and family members, the Civil War, and close observation of nature’s cycles prompted poetic musings on religious themes throughout her life.

One such religious theme in Dickinson's poetry is *eternity*; twelve out of the nineteen definitions of the word *eternity* in her poetry are religious in nature. Dickinson's religious family helped her build a foundational belief in God and instilled in her religious curiosity. This foundation allowed Dickinson to search for meanings in trials in her life and to turn to God in prayer when things got difficult. She was able to learn and grow by writing her thoughts down in her poetry. This religious foundation is why more than sixty percent of Dickinson's *eternity* definitions are about religious topics. There were two religions that greatly influenced Dickinson's poetry: Puritanism and Transcendentalism.

Puritanism allowed Dickinson to remain grounded in her faith of God, while Transcendentalism permitted her to release herself from limiting conceptions of humanity which enabled her to view herself as an individual with an identity. (Wald 2009)

When Snow left home, she had a very different experience than Dickinson did. Snow said of her parents: "although my parents adhered to the Baptist creed, they extended their children to the right, and afforded us every opportunity we desired, to examine all creeds—to hear and to judge—to prove all things" (Davidson and Derr 2004). Between the years 1825 and 1829, Snow changed dramatically both in her poetry and her religion. She began publishing poems in the *Western Courier*, an Ohio newspaper, and she committed herself firmly to the Campbellite faith. Shortly after joining the Campbellites, Joseph Smith, the prophet of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) visited the Snow household. He bore testimony of the Book of Mormon, an ancient set of scriptures written by prophets in the Americas. Snow commented that the testimony the Prophet bore that day was one of the most powerful she had ever heard. Within a year, Snow's mother, Leonora, was baptized into the LDS Church, but Eliza wanted to wait a while before making such an important life change. She commented that she wanted to see if



the work was going to “flash in the pan and go out” (Davidson and Derr 2004).

Even though Snow had a positive first impression with the Prophet Joseph Smith, she still worried that everything seemed too good to be true. Eventually, Snow received personal revelation that God wanted her to join the LDS Church. Her conversion dramatically changed her poetry. The teachings of the LDS Church focus on families, eternal life, Jesus Christ, and that God has a perfect, eternal plan for all his children. These teachings and beliefs are evident in her poetry, especially in her definitions of the word *eternity*. Three out of the five definitions unique to Snow refer to heaven, or the place where God and Christ dwell.

## Conclusion

Dickinson and Snow were both very religious women who clearly had great faith in a supreme being. This is evidenced in their poetry and especially in their use of the word *eternity*. While they both had great faith, their beliefs later on in life were quite different as Snow joined the LDS Church and Dickinson decided not to affiliate with an organized religion. Their religious affiliations affected the definitions each poet decided to use for the word *eternity* in their poetry. While both poets used definitions with religious themes, Dickinson tended to use more state of being definitions while Snow used more place definitions.

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