

An attempt to make the intent known

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Emily Dickinson's poem "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" speaks of the universal idea of truth and the notion that truth should be revealed gradually. The language is vague, however, and deconstructs itself in many ways. Lack of punctuation, blurred line structures, and a focus on the logocentric idea of truth all create a confusion of meaning. The language is ambiguous and words work against one another. The multiple meanings of particular lines make any "absolute truth" impossible to find. By using the assumptions of transcendental signified, logocentrism, and binary oppositions, these deconstructive elements are easily recognized. According to Deconstruction, the language in this poem undermines itself from the first line. The transcendental signified that is exposed in this poem is that of truth. Truth is portrayed as an idea that must be approached carefully and strategically. Because it is such an abstract term, however, multiple readings are possible. Truth may refer to an ultimate truth or simply honesty. If there is an ultimate truth, then it has the ability to serve as the center for all thought and reason. This idea, according to Derrida, although flawed, is impossible to completely avoid (Bressler, 121). The fact that the word truth is capitalized in this poem also enhances the idea of a universal truth. If this poem were to presuppose that there is such a thing as ultimate truth, however, then the rest of the poem would be centered on that very same idea, leading to logocentrism. The word Truth can also function as a logocentric term, but because the text is so vague regarding the actual meaning of the word, reason would fit more suitably in this category. Although reason is never directly mentioned in this excerpt, it exists in the argument that is presented. The writer reasons that truth should not be

disclosed fully at any given time. Rather, truth should be presented in fragments in order to ease minds into the consequences of knowing the full truth. Perhaps the text presupposes that people cannot handle complete honesty or that the giver of truth is too cowardly to be completely honest. The intent of the author is unknowable and thus creates problems for the reader looking to benefit from the reasoning. The poem is also vague concerning the correlation between delight and truth's "superb surprise" (Dickinson, 4-5). Without the proper punctuation, success may be either "too bright" simply or "Too bright for our infirm delight" (Dickinson, 4). This question relates to question of meaning in the line "Truth's superb surprise" (Dickinson 4). This surprise could be expressed in the thought "for our infirm Delight / The Truth's superb surprise," if in fact success is too bright for delight, or it may be an implied and personal delight (Dickinson 3-4). The text is unclear as to whether it holds one of those meanings. Truth as an intended center is thus decentered, lacking clarity. In addition, because of the subversion of those lines, according to Derrida, truth proves to be a faulty "center" of thought. Binary oppositions exist, including that of truth/falsehood. The idea of truth is understood because it is the lack of falsehood; however, the poem states that truth must be told "slant" (Dickinson, 1), or "must dazzle gradually" (Dickinson, 7). Truth at its core suggests the lack of falsehood. A slant, however, implies the need to hide part of the truth. In this case, it is impossible to both tell the truth and tell it with a slant or any fragment of falsehood. Equally unclear is whether the word "truth" actually means ultimate truth or merely honesty. In this case, if truth is honesty, the opposition would be mendacity. Interestingly, the word

“ lies” is located on the poem’s second line (Dickinson). Again the phrasing is too loose to understand the idea of one word. On one hand, the text may mean that “ Success in Circuit [exists] / too bright” (Dickinson, 2). At the same time, however, the word “ lies” may refer to the act of lying. The wording and lack of punctuation leave the reader questioning if success may be found in telling lies. Both oppositions, those of truth/falsehood and honesty/mendacity, work against one another to deconstruct the meaning of truth. Even the word “ slant” has different connotations that work against one another. A slant can exist in two different directions: one way heading in an upward motion, possibly toward truth, or downward, toward lies or even nothingness. Just by considering the basic shape of a slant, it is obvious that a slant can be considered negative or positive. It might seem more likely, given the poem, to suppose the writer means to speak of the positive properties of a slant, believing that slight derivations of the truth are ultimately beneficial. However, consider the other connotation. If the slant is headed in the opposite direction, then the ultimate result could be lies or nothingness. Another line in which the language undermines itself is the last one. The text states “ Or every man be blind” (Dickinson, 8), but gives no clear indication to whether blind represents a true physical blindness or a figurative blindness against some other thing. Perhaps the blindness is against truth. Even this would presuppose that truth is the greater element and worthier of pursuit. If the text is suggesting that telling the complete truth has the ability to blind all men, then truth would be something to be feared. Truth, however, connotes goodness because it lacks dishonesty. Goodness, at its very core, is not something to be feared. Thus, the

confusion of the line stems from the way it blurs together different connotations, leaving unclear which is the intended interpretation. Of course, Deconstruction has its flaws. The idea of logocentrism is based on a center from which it is nearly impossible, if not completely impossible, to separate. Without a center, or fixed point of reference, there is no way to be consistent in ideas and beliefs. While each person's center of reference is different, at least consistency exists in those centers. The only other option is chaos. Most importantly, for a Christian whose entire worldview is centered on the teachings of Christ and the transcendental ideas of truth, faith, and love, Deconstruction attacks the very core of that belief. In fact, the very definition states that Deconstruction is a "denying [of] any center of truth, such as God, humanity, or the self" and that we can "never be certain about our values, beliefs, and assumptions" (Bressler, 337). For this very reason, a text's meaning can give way to multiple meanings and the reader may never be sure as to which is the "true" meaning. Faith, however, means believing in a fixed point of reference often with or without visible proof. That said, Deconstruction can be interpreted as simply an attempt to recognize the ways in which language can signify different things for different people; authors have an entire dictionary of words to work with and the ability to make up their own words if they so wish. They alone have the power to put their exact thoughts into words, which the reader will then interpret. This does not necessarily mean the author's meaning must be inherently unknowable. Works Cited Bressler, Charles E. *Literary Criticism: an Introduction of Theory and Practice*. 4th ed. Upper Saddle River: Prentice

Hall, 2007. 120-337. Dickinson, Emily. "Poetry by Emily Dickinson: Tell All the Truth But Tell It Slant." Peaceful Rivers. 11 Nov. 2007.