



CRITICAL CONTROVERSY OVER THE LOVE POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON

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ABSTRACT

The paper argues that most critics failed when they reached conclusions that did not reflect the essence of Emily Dickinson's love poetry. The paper initially aims to refute critical allegations that attempted to link Dickinson's poetry either to the special circumstances surrounding the poet's private life or the sexual ideas prevailing in the United States during the nineteenth century. Moreover, the paper seeks to disprove critical assumptions of critics who limited their interest in the fact that the poet in reality has refrained from any positive contact with men as reflected on the imagery disseminated in her poems. The aim of this paper is to analyze five models of erotic imagery emblematic of female /male sexual relationships in Dickinson's love poetry to point out that Dickinson's poems constitute an authentic work of art in isolation from any personal, historical or psychological considerations. This study also reveals that Dickinson's poetry incarnates beyond any doubt the poet's liberal and progressive view of the sexual relationship between men and women through a poetic expression characterized by meticulous style, high transparency and through the structure of a complex of symbols and images that have no equal.

Critics such as Clark Griffith and Joan Dobson approached Dickinson's love poetry from a psychological perspective and came to the consensus that her poetry reveals fear of male oppression and self-immolation at the hands of men. Furthermore, critics such as Paula Bennett and Rebecca Patterson mistakenly reached conclusions that did not reveal the true nature of Dickinson's love poems. They see that the poet has never experienced any conscious attraction to any man and that her sexual imagination is haunted with ideas inherent in homosexuality, lesbianism, and sexual self-agitation. In their analysis, Paula Bennett and Rebecca Patterson depended on an alleged extrapolation of images that refer to female genitalia and the poet's replacement of male pronouns with female counterparts. Interpreted with an eye to biography, these images also suggest that this female-centered eroticism was one of the primary enabling factors in Dickinson's emergence as a strong woman poet (155).

Further Critic such as John Cody applies a psychoanalytic approach to Dickinson's love poetry, to conclude that her poetry does not indicate a true interest in marriage. The poet in his claim is afraid of having sex because she associates the beloved person with the figure of her abusive father who rejected her love. Cody considers Dickinson's love poems as daydreams about imaginary lovers. As a whole, most critical approaches to Dickinson's poetry are intransigent, exaggerated and subjective particularly with regard to determining the sexual orientation of the poet. Critics such as Paula Bennett, Griffith, Dobson and Cody have failed to understand Dickinson's poetry because they approached the poems from a lesbian perspective in the light of their self-interpretation of the poet's letters¹. Apparently, these critics, and others have ignored the

¹ All citations, from Dickinson's letters, are quoted by Paula Bennett, in her book *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet*. pp. 155, 156, 157.



aesthetic and textual dimensions of the poems and instead they centered their attention on female sexuality issues.

Bennett argues that Dickinson's love poems such as "come slowly - Eden", "Did the Harbell loose Her Girdle" and "Wild Nights" are "imbricated with layer upon layer of female sexual imagery - Eden, lips, bashful, sips, jessamine, faint, flower, round, chamber, nectar, balm, girdle, paradise, yield, pearl, sea - but Dickinson focuses entirely on the delight these images project" (167). On the other hand, Rebecca Patterson assumes that Dickinson was a woman who never experienced a conscious attraction to a male. Patterson points out that Dickinson's love poems are "disguised affirmation of love for women and the poet regularly substituted masculine pronouns for feminine ones" (87).

Moreover, John Cody claims, in his psychoanalytic study of Dickinson's poetry that her love poems do not reveal a real tendency for marriage. Cody also states that the poet has many sexual reservations and fears. He argues that the poet was afraid of the sexual act probably because she associated the lover with her father. Cody concludes his argument claiming that Dickinson's love poems "were daydreams fabricated around a non-existent lover" (388).

These critical assumptions were guesswork because all of these critics in spite of the different critical perspectives - biographical or feminist or Freudian have built their views to a great extent in the light of the male-female sexual conventions which were popular during the poet's life time. Such nineteenth century conventions, according to Seymour Gross and Frank Rashid, "depicted the male as a sexual brigand to be resisted by the female at any cost lest his advances lead for her to secular perdition, if not worse" (25). According to this tradition, sexual intercourse, even in marriage, is something the male did to-not with-the female. In this way, the female becomes a sexual victim and the sex act for her is without physical pleasure.

It is not a surprise therefore that a biographical critic such as Griffith in his article "Emily Dickinson's love Poetry" assumes that in Dickinson's poetry the female is a sexual victim and the male is a rapist. Griffith argues that the male figure in poem 520 "I started Early-Took My Dog-" is an adult pursuing the female child wanting to corrupt her sexually. Griffith adds that the snake in poem 986 "A Narrow Fellow In The Grass" is a male rapist "coiling his phallic shape before the stricken poet" (98). "The Imperial Thunderbolt" in poem 315 "He Fumbles At Your Soul", according to Griffith, personifies all the force and savagery of sexual assault which strips the female of "her purity and leaves her a bundle of anxieties" (100). According to this view, the dominant motif in Dickinson's love poems is either a fear of rape or an aversion toward masculine grossness and the personal debasement which it threatens.

Equally feminist critics such as Patterson and Bennett attempted to force their lesbian ethics on the love poems of Dickinson by analyzing the poems in the light of Dickinson's personal letters to her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert and her widowed friend, Kate Scott Anthon. For example, Bennett's analysis of Dickinson's love poems as revelations of the poet's lesbian attitudes was irrelevant because such an analysis was based on a misinterpretation of Dickinson's letters to her female friends.

I will demonstrate parts of Dickinson's letters to Susan Gilbert and Kate Scott Anthon which were quoted by Bennett and used as a basis for her interpretation of Dickinson's love poetry in order to reveal that Bennett's interpretation of Dickinson's letters as revelations of the poet's lesbian attitudes was over-exaggerated because the text of the letters did not carry any lesbian overtones or suggestions.

The following extracts are taken from Dickinson's letters to Susan Gilbert in 1852 and 1853²:

"Susie, I had'nt any appetite, nor any lover, either, so I made the best of fate and gathered antique stones and your little flowers of moss opened their lips and spoke to me" (letter, 202).

² All quotations from Dickinson's letters which are used in this study with the exception of citations by Paula Bennett, are taken from *Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters*. ed. Thomas H. Johnson.



"It is sweet to talk dear Susie.... you and I have tasted it and found it very sweet , even as fragrant flowers, o'er which bee hums and lingers" (L, 221).

"You have seen flowers at morning satisfied with the dew, and those same sweet flowers at noon with their heads bowed in anguish before the mighty sun oh Susie, it is dangerous, and it is all too dear, these simple trusting spirits and the spirits mightier, which we cannot resist !" (L, 210).

The following extracts are quoted from letters to Anthon in 1859:

"Dare you dwell in the East where we dwell ? Are you afraid of the sun ?" (L, 349).

"And should new flowers smile at limited associates I rise, wearing her - so I sleep, holding - sleep at last with her fast in my hand and wake bearing my flower" (L, 350).

Bennett argues that women in these letters are flowers. As flowers, women or "their sexual parts are to be held, savored, lingered over and physically enjoyed" (156). Bennett equally states that the "sweetness", Dickinson and her female friends share can substitute for the emotional and physical pleasure of male lovers.

According to Bennett, Dickinson is prepared to accept the little pleasure enjoyed through lesbian contact "since her fear of the "sun" (The heat of male love) is much greater than any regret she might experience respecting the "small" dimensions of a woman to - woman affection" (157). Bennett's interpretation of Dickinson's letters which she used as an entry to her analysis of the poet's love poems is irrelevant and ambiguous. For example there is no relevance in interpreting the "sun" and the "moon" images in Dickinson's letters as male sexual symbols. Equally, there is no logical reason for interpreting "The East", "The dew", and the little "antique stones" as female sexual symbols.

It is equally significant to argue that the text of Dickinson's letters did not reveal any obvious lesbian symbols which refutes Bennett's critical suggestions. Bennett has obviously failed to explain Dickinson's love poems because she analyzed them in the light of her interpretation of Dickinson's letters which were explored from a purely lesbian perspective. Like Bennett, John Cody forced his psychoanalytic perspective on the love poems of Dickinson interpreting them in the light of the poet's relationship with her father using Freudian psycho-analytic theories as a medium. critics such as Griffith, Bennett, Cody and others have not interpreted Dickinson's love poetry properly because they forced their critical perspectives on Dickinson's poems using biographical or feminist or psycho-historical data as a medium ignoring the aesthetic and textual dimensions of the poems themselves. In my argument, which will focus on the text of the poems, I will examine five patterns of imagery which pervade Dickinson's love poems in order to explore the aesthetic value of her love poetry. I will equally argue that Dickinson was not a lesbian poet and she did not adopt any perverted sexual morality. Nevertheless, her love poetry reveals her liberated and advanced sexual philosophy which could not be easily understood by her contemporaries or by modern critics who interpreted her love poems within the cultural environment and the socio-historical background of the nineteenth century.

In her love poems, Dickinson uses the sea image, the bee-flower image, the home image, the day and daisy images as indications of male-female sexuality. Dickinson's love poems, according to John Emerson Todd, show that the poet has been involved in love situations of great emotional intensity (36). Such an emotional intensity is carried out by erotic images from the sea or by the convention of the bee ways with his flower. In poem 249 "Wild Nights"³ Dickinson uses the sea as a sexual symbol. Moreover, the poem conveys the ecstasy of physical union: "Wild Nights-Wild Nights!/Were I with thee/Wild Nights should be/Our luxury!" (114). The poet obviously employs sexual imagery with unabashed frankness. The word "luxury" includes the meaning of lust. The meanings of the word "wild" include the idea of breakdown of control and primitive, orgiastic and violent behavior. The word "wild" also indicates a feeling of ecstasy and a complete self-abandonment to

³ All quotations from Dickinson's poetry are cited from *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson.



passion. The "Wild Nights" are nights of passion the poet longs for. They are apparently luxurious, lustful nights of unrestrained passion and intense sexual activity.

The sexual imagery extends to the second stanza: Futile-The Winds-/To a Heart in port-/Done with the chart!" The images of violent winds, compass and chart abandoned emphasize the erotic atmosphere of the poem. The wind is a symbol of a welcomed erotic experience. The erotic imagery reaches a climax in the third stanza: "Rowing in Eden-/Ah, the Sea!/Might I but moor-Tonight- In Thee!". The images of the Tossing sea, rowing, the word "moor" and the phrase "in port" in the second stanza all suggest a peaceful idyllic atmosphere suitable for love-making. "Eden", according to William Shurr is introduced in the poem as "The paradise of sexual security and enjoyment" (19). I agree with Shurr's view because "Eden" is used in Dickinson's letters and poems as a recurring image for earthly paradise and sexual love. Eden, for example in poems 180, 211, 213 and 1518 is a symbol of earthly love.

The word "night" is used in poems 461, 518 and 580 to suggest a time of realized love. The sea is used as an erotic symbol in poem 520 as well as other poems. In "Wild Nights", the phrase "Ah, The Sea" marks the climax of the poet's sexual activity and ecstasy. It is obvious that the first and third stanzas of the poem reflect an emphasis on unrestrained sexual passion on the part of the poet. The second stanza which interposes the contemporary state of peace and motionlessness suggests the fulfillment of the sexual act. The erotic imagery in "Wild Nights" reveals a liberal view of male-female sexuality. The poem is a good example of heightened erotic stimulation and it reveals no fear of sexual encounter on the part of the female poet. The erotic imagery in the poem also refutes assumptions made by critics such as Paul Faris that the poem is "a display of suffering" (264).

Moreover, the sea metaphor in "Wild Nights" reverses expected sex roles and affirms that Dickinson is not influenced by the sexual conventions of her own days. In the poem, the female is the ship which seeks to "moor-Tonight-An Thee!" The female is the initiator of the sexual act. It is stereotypically the woman who is "Port" to the wandering male. Equally in poem 429 "The Moon is distant From The Sea", Dickinson gives the sea male attribution. However, the sea is a "Boy", docile, obedient and strictly confined. He comes and goes only "so far" along his mistress's appointed sands. The moon, in the poem, is the female who controls the male. This argument shows that Dickinson's love poems do not reveal any fear of the masculine as Dobson and Griffith claim.

In poem 643 "I could suffice for Him", Dickinson uses the tide or sea metaphor to indicate eroticism. The female narrator wonders whether she can adjust herself to the male requirements: "Adjust her tides-Unto- his proposal". According to Christanne Miller, the adjustment remains her personal decision and it occurs entirely under her control (137). The poem also achieves the success of shifting the gender tags in the last stanza so that each of the lovers, male and female, can be seen as obedient to the magnetic command of the other. The sea as a sexual symbol is also used in poem 162, which starts with "My River Runs To thee" and ends with the climactic line: "Say-Sea-Take me". The sea imagery attains a climax in poem 520 "I Started Early-Took my Dog-/And visited The Sea". The poem is a fantasy in which the passionate male, figured out as the sea, pursues the not entirely unwilling damsel all the way up to "The Solid Town" and then withdraws his pursuit when ethical bounds and social mores impede. The third stanza indicates a shift, a rapid development of physical responses that the female speaker has not experienced before: "But no Man moved Me-Till The Tide/When past my simple shoe---". In the middle of the poem, we find the quiet natural sense of fear on the part of the speaker, however, the progression of details from "Shoe" To "apron" to "belt" to "boddice" makes it plain that the experience was sensuous and that the female speaker enjoys the flirtations of the male.

Judith Weissman argues that Dickinson's love poetry is characterized by a "long poetic tradition that associates flowers with women's genitals" which are frequently visited by male bees (410). Moreover,



Suzanne Juhasz claims that in the poems which the bee is used as a sexual symbol, the sexual act with its pleasure is shown to destroy individuality and the power of the self (105).

Juhasz equally implies that sexual encounters in Dickinson's poems are acts of exploitation of the female by the male. I do not agree with Juhasz because her view contradicts with the text of Dickinson's flower/bee poems. In poem 1339 "A Bee his burnished Carriage", Dickinson reveals her liberal view of male-female sexual relationship. The female figure in the poem exhibits no phallic fear of the male. Instead she welcomes the sexual encounter and takes consummate pleasure in it. The female, the rose, has no remorse even after the sexual act is over and after the departure of the male. She does not feel that she is the abandoned sexual object of the male's desire.

In poem 1339, moreover, Dickinson uses bees and flowers to explore human sexuality. The bee lover and the flower are both drawn to each other sexually. The bee is drawn to the flower by its nectar and the burnished beauty of the bee makes him irresistible to the flower. The poem shows no sex melodrama; instead, the rose offers herself to the bee completely. The affair results in consummation for both of them. The poem shows that the rose does not feel humiliated or hurt by the departure of the bee-lover. In the poem, the rose surrenders totally to the bee, consummation takes place, and both of them are fulfilled. The rose shows no phallic fears but she knows exactly what the bee has come for and she accepts it willingly. The word "humility" in the poem does not imply a feeling of being degraded or diminished. There is difference between humility and humiliation and the poet chooses a word that signifies the lover's devout submission to the beloved, rather than any charge of exploitation of the female by the male.

The bee-flower imagery is also used in poem 211 "Come Slowly-Eden!". The female figure in the poem is the sensuous bee sipping the nectar of the flower. Then we have a shift in pronoun genders "his flower", "her chamber". Such a shift is not an indication of Dickinson's lesbian tendencies as Bennett claims, because Dickinson's persona in her love poems either takes the role of the male or the female. Equally, the female speaker in her love poems can be the bee or the flower. The bee imagery extends to poem 1042, "Spring comes on the world". In this poem bee and blossom are an analogy for an erotic experience. Poem 213 "Did the harbelle lose her girdle" reveals some erotic images connected with the bee-flower tradition. The poem raises two possible questions: would the bee lose his holy awe of the flower if she surrenders to him or would the female "flower" lose her honor after the sexual act? The erotic details of the bee convention are also explored in poem 334 where the poet uses a "Humming Bird" as a substitute for the bee.

Erotic imagery can also be traced in poem 461 "A Wife-at Daybreak I shall be". Marriage and daybreak are equated in line one. Virginity and midnight are equated in line three: "At midnight, I am dut a Maid". In the poem the female speaker describes her marriage experience. There are also sexual implications as the poet describes in an erotic way how the bridegroom is climbing the stairs coming to claim his bride. The transformation from a maid into a bride carries obvious sexual overtones. The female speaker shows no fears of the inevitable sexual encounter. "Day" is a familiar time in Dickinson's poem for love. In 638, a poem which describes a moment of ecstasy, the speaker shows that when the "fire" of her lover comes to her "hearth" it was day. "Day" is also associated with love in poem 1072 "Title Divine is mine". "Day" is the time when the wife is bridalled. In poem 732, "She Rose To His Requirements" marriage equals "Her New Day".

Sexual imagery in Dickinson's love poetry is also displayed through daisy images as well as home images. Poem 96 "Sexton My Master's Sleeping Here" is interpreted by critics as a little allegory on the coming of spring. However, the poem is a love poem full of eroticism. The word "Master" and "Daisies" are used to indicate a male-female sexual relationship. This view is supported by letters 233 and 248 which contain the words "Master" and "Daisy". These letters are written in erotic language which reveals the sexual intensity of the poet's passion. The letters are addressed to the poet's beloved and they carry obvious sexual implications which show no phallic fear of the masculine. In letter 233 Dickinson says: "If it had been God's will that I might



breathe where you breathed-and find the place-myself-at night-If I (can) never forget that I am not with you ---" (160). In letter 248, Dickinson thinks of herself as a "Daisy" bending her "smaller life to that of her Master. Dickinson finally uses the home image in poem 190 "He was weak and I was strong-then" to indicate a love meeting between a male and female. The poem carries erotic implications aroused by the home image. The meeting, however, does not lead to the consummation of the lovers' passions. It ends with the lover accompanying the poet to the doors of her nearby house. The separation of the lovers happens peacefully without any fears on the part of the female.

This critical paper has proved through documented evidences that critics have failed to evaluate the love poetry of Dickinson because of some particular reasons: they desperately attempted to adapt the poems to the personal life of the poet or to the sexual conventions of her own time ignoring the authentic and aesthetic characteristics of the poems' text. They manipulated biographical, psycho-historical and feminist perspectives in order to force their critical judgments on the poems. Critics also misinterpreted Dickinson's love poems when analyzing them using various critical approaches - biographical, psychoanalytic and feminist - because they misinterpreted Dickinson's sexual morality as well as her relationships with her family and friends.

Throughout the examination of five major imagery patterns in Dickinson's love poems, this paper critically argues that the love poetry of Dickinson is a genuine art in itself regardless of any biographical or historical considerations. The paper equally demonstrates that Dickinson's love poetry reveals the poet's liberal and advanced view of the male-female sexual relationship which is originally expressed in a highly elaborate and refined style through a complex pattern of symbols and images.

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