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## EMILY DICKINSON AND HER MEN



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## **Emily Dickinson and Her Men**

### **Synopsis:**

Though never married, Emily Dickinson "espoused" herself to several men. She viewed most of them as "teacher" and one in particular as "Master." My research paper reflects her life and her imagined lovers.

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### Emily Dickinson and Her Men

Examining the life of Emily Dickinson regardless of the topic or theme requires one to dwell in the profundity of an asylum. When reading her poetry in college, I thought her eccentric, yet after reading many of her letters, which give insight to her personality and character, I've come to the conclusion she may have suffered from bipolar disorder and agoraphobia. Even so, she maintained a high level of communication with family and friends via letters. It is in these letters to female friends and male friends alike that we learn what activities she enjoyed, whom she respected, whom she emulated in her writing, and whom she enjoyed reading. A review of letters sent to the men in her life avails us insight to Emily Dickinson's relationship with the opposite sex. She is usually intimate with her male recipients regardless if they are married or single. It is obvious the majority of the men in her social network influenced her reading and writing. The following letter, written to a Mr. Elbridge G. Bowdoin, a young man who worked in her father's office, exemplifies her strong emotions and her poetic form in her younger years. Most of her letters to him are sensuous like the one sent to him on Valentine week of 1850 when she was twenty:

Awake, ye muses nine, sing me a strain divine,  
Unwind the solemn twine, and tie my Valentine.  
Oh the earth was made for lovers, for damsel, and  
Hopeless swain,  
For sighing, and gentle whispering, and unity made of  
Twain,  
God hath made nothing single but thee in His world so

Fair!

Adam, and Eve, his consort, the moon and then the sun;

The life doth prove the precept, who obey shall happy be... (Linscott 237)

Men were her preceptors, masters, mentors, and lovers. Yet, from the age of thirty on, she rarely left her home and corresponded solely by mail. Men visited her but she rarely set foot out of doors.

Thomas Higginson claims she had a delicate nature. Her letters to him suggest a troubled mind, for who would maintain correspondence to an editor who suggests her poems are “spasmodic” and “uncontrolled.” She continues writing to him for eight years, calling him her “surgeon”, yet she rarely takes any of his advice on form, style, or punctuation and is admittedly not concerned with being published, “I smile when you suggest that I delay “to publish,”” that being foreign to my thought as firmament to fin” (Higginson).

Thomas Higginson, in his article written shortly after her death, openly admits he cannot understand her poetry and is baffled by her “defiance of form, never through carelessness, and never precisely from whim, which so marked her... she was intent upon her thought, and it would not have satisfied her to make the change.” Yet, she does consider his remarks and corrections if only to validate his instructions but there is no evidence she edited her poems on his direction.

When Higginson visits her in the summer of 1870 (she was then forty years old and had been communicating with him for nearly a decade), he is surprised by her appearance and deportment. He likens this adult woman to a “homely child with delicate features.” She had already begun wearing her white dress and had stopped going out of doors. When the visit was over, he confided in his wife, “The impression undoubtedly made on me was that of an excess of tension, and of an abnormal life... She was much too enigmatical a being for me to solve in an hour’s interview, and an instinct told me that the slightest attempt at direct cross-examination would make her withdraw into her shell; I could only sit still and watch...”(Higginson). He was a married man, yet reading her letters to him seems to imply a closer relationship if only on her end. She views him as her preceptor and she signs her letters to him as his Scholar, his Gnome. After Higginson’s brief visit to her home in Amherst, she writes a letter that suggests

her eminent death though she is only forty years old and in good health as if she asks for pity or empathy for her behavior during his visit:

Enough is so vast a sweetness, I suppose it never occurs only pathetic counterfeits. Fabulous to me as the men of the Revelations who “shall not hunger any more.” After you went, I took “Macbeth” and turned to “Birnam Wood.” Came twice “To Dunsinane.” I thought and went about my work....

The vein cannot thank the artery, but her solemn indebtedness to him, even the stolidest admit, and so of me who try, whose effort leaves no sound. .. If I ask too much, you could please refuse. Shortness to live has made me bold (Linscott 20)

Emily Dickinson was molded by every person she met, every relative, every life and every death. Her poetry sprang with the birth of Transcendentalism, perhaps even before. One may propose that there were those who influenced her writing, yet I would venture to say that had she been published in her lifetime, *she* would have influenced the multitudes. Her topics are Transcendental in form and subject including nature, death, love, life, God, eternity, mortality, spirituality, and immortality. Every doubt, question, curiosity, and passion she thought, she wrote about in detail or in brevity, depending on the impact made on her senses. Her themes are not so different from the usual poetic themes; however, it is her style that is different and that is a style that is reflective of whom she was as a human being with the complexity of her exceptional personality. She was wistful, insightful, lonely, depressed, overjoyed, morose, and jubilant. Her poems reflect hints of other writers male and female, yet she is undoubtedly and uniquely Emily.

Emily was greatly influenced by the men in her family, her male friends, and several male writers. When asked by Higginson in one of his correspondences with the poet, which poets she read, she replied, “For poets, I have Keats, and Mr. and Mrs. Browning. For prose, Mr. Ruskin, Sir Thomas Browne, and the Revelations (sic)” (Higginson). One only needs to examine these poets and authors in order to evaluate how they may have influenced her writing, yet it is also important to understand that other men in her life influenced her passion for reading and writing. Benjamin Newton, a young man she

befriended and adored encouraged her to read Emerson. He even bought her a book of Emerson's poetry and prose. She and Newton studied together and he quickly became her mentor. He had such an impact on her life that for decades she continued to regard him as her teacher and as one who, taught her, "what to read, what authors to admire, and what was most grand or beautiful in nature, and that sublime lesson, a faith in things unseen, and in a life again, nobler, and much more blessed - - of all these things he spoke - - he taught me of them all, earnestly"; she wrote to Rev. Hale shortly after Benjamin Newton died. She was only twenty-three and deeply saddened by the passing of her friend and preceptor. In her letter to Rev. Hale, she asks for reassurance that his death was without pain and prayed that his life in heaven was without troubles (Wagner).

It was Benjamin Newton "who had the greatest impact on the eighteen year old woman, doing more to make a poet out of her than all previous teachers combined" (Habegger 216). Benjamin Newton probably suggested Emerson to Emily because he knew she needed someone who encouraged individuality, autonomy, and creativity. Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self Reliance" is the type of motivational and inspirational writing suited for the likes of Emily Dickinson. The essay encourages individuals to move away from the norm, the conventional, and the expected, "to believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men, - that is genius" (Baym 269).

Higginson writes of her poetry (even though he never published a poem of hers while she lived), "The impression of a wholly new and original poetic genius was as distinct on my mind at the first reading of these four poems as it is now." Her first letter to him included four poems one of which was

"The nearest dream recedes unrealized."

The nearest dream recedes unrealized

The heaven we chase,

Like the June bee

Before the schoolboy,

Invites the race,

Stoops to an easy clover,  
 Dips - - evades - - teases - - deploys- -  
 Then to the royal clouds  
 Lifts his light pinnace,  
 Heedless of the boy  
 Staring, bewildered, at the mocking sky.  
 Homesick for steadfast honey,--  
 Ah! The bee flies not  
 Which brews that rare variety.

Benjamin Newton encouraged her to read Emerson and in turn she developed a love for Emerson's transcendental theology to "be a nonconformist... Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of our own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world" (Baym 271). Undoubtedly, she was influenced by his prose rather than his poetry for he was not particularly well known for his poetic talents. Matthew Arnold, a well known and highly respected British poet of the times, suggests that Emerson was not born with the poetic gift (Moore). An analysis of his poem "Berrying" suggests his obvious talent with rhythm yet it lacks passion as though he is more reminiscent of a Pastoral poet rather than a nature poet.

Berrying  
 "May be true what I had heard,  
 Earth's a howling wilderness  
 Truculent with fraud and force,"  
 Said I, strolling through the pastures,  
 And along the riverside.  
 Caught among the blackberry vines,  
 Feeding on the Ethiops sweet,  
 Pleasant fancies overtook me:

I said, "What influence me preferred  
 Elect to dreams thus beautiful?"  
 The vines replied, "And didst thou deem  
 No wisdom to our berries went?" (Moore)

Both Emily Dickinson's and Ralph Waldo Emerson's nature poems examine nature's beauty and singularity. They both reverse syntax and both rely on alliteration, yet even though Emerson emphatically advocates one to turn from conventionality, it seems Emily Dickinson does so much more readily than he. Her meter relies solely on her message and not on any particular rhythm. Emerson shifts little from five, six or seven syllables per line; whereas, Emily plays meter going from five to eight syllables per line depending on the intent of her words and message. *His* message is much more powerful in essays, especially when he declares, "...But do your own thing, and I shall know you. Do your work, and you shall reinforce yourself" (Baym 273). These words must have made an impression on Emily who wrote, "The mind is so near itself it cannot see distinctly, and I have none to ask" (Higginson). She continued to ask for assistance; nonetheless, she remained true to herself, "I marked a line in one verse, because I met it after I made it, and never consciously touch paint mixed by another person. I did not let go it, because it is mine" (Higginson).

Edward Dickinson's professional background as lawyer and Senator had an obvious influence on her writing. Often she was asked by him to sign her name to various legal documents when no other witness was available. It is likely she read the documents before signing her name, for he did not raise an ignorant child; after all, she was sent away to college and he believed in education for his daughters as well as for his son who like his father attended Harvard law school and proceeded to join his father in the family law firm. In "I gave myself to Him," one can easily note the impact of Edward's affect by her chosen legalistic language, "The solemn contract of life/ was ratified, this way" (Habbeger 137). Her father also influenced her readings. In a letter to Austin, her brother, she declares how she and her father argued about the authors she read "... we don't have much poetry, father having made up his mind that it's pretty much all real life" (Linscott 252). It is no surprise then that most of her poems were hidden

from view. According to a letter to Thomas Higginson, Emily commented that Whitman was not allowed in her house because her father did not find him tasteful (Higginson). Yet, one can easily spot the similarities between several of her poems and Whitman's, specifically repetition such as in the poem, "Because I could not stop for Death." The third stanza in the poem repeats lines one, three and four:

We slowly drove, he knew no haste,  
 And I had put away  
 My labor, and my leisure too,  
 For his civility.  
 We passed the school where children played  
 At wrestling in a ring'  
 We passed the fields of gazing grain,  
 We passed the setting sun. (Collected 195).

In the following poem, Whitman analyzes imminent death as it must come to all of us:

To think of time.... To think through the retrospection  
 To think of today.. and the ages continued henceforward  
 Have you guessed you yourself would not continue? Have you dreaded those  
                   Earth-beetles?  
 Have you feared the future would be nothing to you?  
 Is today nothing? Is the beginning less past nothing?  
 If the future is nothing they are just as surely nothing.  
 To think that the sun rose in the east.... That men and women were flexible and  
                   Real and alive.... That every thing was real and alive;  
 To think that you and I did not see feel think nor bear our part,  
 To think that we are now here and bear our part. (U.S. 65).

Whitman's poetic style, especially repetition and alternative punctuation may have been an influence for Emily, yet there are other writers whom she turned to as masters.

Emily openly admits in a letter to the Norcrosse's (her mother's side of the family) that she reads both Robert Browning and Elizabeth Browning and that she is in awe of his frequency in writing poetry then remembers how much she enjoys doing the same (Linscott 292). Her poems are not lengthy as his are, if anything they are snippets of life rather than narratives, yet her punctuation and themes lean toward Robert Browning's subjects and technique. In regard to Browning's multiple and continuous revisions and his ability to oppose conventional punctuation, Allan Dooley states, "Certainly he was responsible for the frequent instances in the first and subsequent editions where the punctuation defies conventional rules" as in the following examples:

What though It be so?—if indeed the strong desire

Eclipse the aim in me— if splendour break (Part I, ll. 329 -331)

I surely loved them- that last night, at least (xi).

Apparently, Emily was trying different approaches to poetry relying mostly on alternative punctuation, length of lines, themes, syntax, and more. She too revised her work, but much more so for wording and each word's precision in meaning rather than syntax and meter ("Major"). In Robert Browning's "Ferishtah's Fancies," one can find the genesis of Emily's poetic voice. One has but to view segments of his poetry to find Emily's Master and mentor though she never met him.

Not with my Soul, Love!—bid no Soul like mine

Lap thee around nor leave the poor Sense room!

Soul,—travel-worn, toil-weary,—would confine

Along with Soul, Soul's gains from glow and gloom,

Captures from soarings high and divings deep.

Spoil-laden Soul, how should such memories sleep?

Take Sense, too— let me love entire and whole—  
 Not with my Soul!  
 Eyes shall meet eyes and find no eyes between,  
 Lips feed on lips, no other lips to fear!  
 No past, no future— so thine arms but screen  
 The present from surprise! not there, 'tis here—  
 Not then, 'tis now:—back, memories that intrude!  
 Make, Love, the universe our solitude,  
 And, over all the rest, oblivion roll—  
 Sense quenching Soul! (Dooley 189)

Compare Robert Browning's love poem to Emily's sensual letter to Samuel Bowles:

Dear Friend, — It was so delicious to see you — a peach before the time — it makes all seasons possible, and zones a caprice.

We, who arraign the "Arabian Nights" for their understatement, escape the stale sagacity of supposing them sham. We miss your vivid face, and the besetting accents you bring from your Numidian haunts.

Your coming welds anew that strange trinket of life which each of us wear and none of us own; and the phosphorescence of yours startles us for its permanence.

Please rest the life so many own— for gems abscond. In your own beautiful words — for the voice is the palace of all of us,—

"Near, but remote." (Linscott 306).

The nineteenth century was not kind to women poets. They were not revered or highly respected, but it is obvious men were not the only poets. Emily's fame after her death proves that there was an audience for female poets even though there were few publishers who would take the risk. Regardless of which male poet influenced her writing, it is safe to say she wrote as

she lived whether she was baking bread, “Twin loaves of bread have just been born into the world under my auspices, — fine children, the image of their mother,” (Linscott 234) sewing, or gardening, “ The peaches are very large— one side a rosy cheek, and the other a golden, and that peculiar coat of velvet and of down which makes a peach so beautiful... The vine looks like a kingdom, with ripe round grapes for kings... The apples are very fine — it isn’t quite time to pick them... The vegetables are not gathered, but will be before long” (247) she lived each moment indulging every aspect of life, “At last to be identified!” (70).

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