



Dickinson's Transcendentalist Vision in Verse, Non-Heteronormativity, & the Saga of a Timeless Literary 'Couple'

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Abstract— Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was born to Edward Dickinson and Emily Norcross Dickinson in Amherst, Massachusetts. The following study intends to critically locate Dickinson's non-heteronormative stance, adopted in selected love-poems, while also focusing on her personal letters addressed to her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert. Dickinson, while detesting the submissive docility of a wife, often accepted the burden of acquiescence as a woman of a conservative household and a constrictive era. Nevertheless, prompted by her resentment against that anaemic passivity, she ceaselessly attempted to amend her 'prescribed' role – one that goes against the grain of her prized individuality. However, with her final compromise of staying within the periphery of a sequestered existence – she vented her rebellion in the words, expressions, and language that drive her 'radical' and often 'esoteric' poetry. Dickinson's verse is markedly bold. In fact, Dickinson's "God" is nothing short of a patriarch, trying to fortify the male-female binary. Besides examining her feminism, we readers cannot ignore her erotic voice too. Therefore, we must probe into Dickinson's experiences of 'otherness' within the politics of 19th century's heterosexual culture. Anticipating the late-twentieth-century Sapphic poems and the 'Lesbian Existence' as we know it today, Dickinson was already way ahead of her times. The paper explores her treatment of the 'body' as a metaphor of transcendence from obligatory heterosexuality, and a quest for alternative gender ideologies. Dickinson's poetry indeed emerges as a faithful mirror of her turbulent mind, and accordingly follows an uneven trajectory – seeking to sabotage, overturn, and demolish the very notions that it willingly, at times capriciously, erects.



Keywords— femininity, gender, heteronormativity, homoeroticism, marriage, otherness

INTRODUCTION

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) lived a solitary life in Amherst, Massachusetts. Dickinson's self-imposed seclusion from the patriarchal forces of her decade automatically freed her of the need to adjust with and conform to the 'identity' and 'language' sanctioned by its rigid culture. She was unfettered as a woman whose sensual impulses sneered at censorship. To dismiss Dickinson's love for Susan as something speculative or controversial would be wrong, because she did in fact love Sue passionately enough, irrespective of whether or not their love had sexual

dimensions. Rather, acknowledging her romantic attachment facilitates an understanding of her eccentricities and her enigmatic verse. Dickinson palpably celebrates the 'body' and the infrequently ventured domain of 'homosexuality' even though there exists scholarly debate on the topic of classifying her love as 'lesbian.' Carroll Smith Rosenberg and Lillian Faderman have evidenced a certain degree of homoeroticism in pre-20th century diaries and letters as well as mainstream literature written by women – back in the days, homosexual themes were subtly incorporated into works through the technique of 'encoding' so as to make the audience casually accept them. This was

because 19th century American life segregated sex and women. Relegated solely to the domestic sphere, women increasingly relied on each other, therefore emotional intimacy was expected and even encouraged. Before the onset of a 20th century psychology that vilified homoerotic desire, emotional affinity between women was the driving force of female lives, and a woman's sexual orientation held great sway over her consciousness. Hetero-sexism aimed to wipe out such discourses of free sexuality, stressing on the fact that women could find emotional or physical pleasure only through a male. Adrienne Rich, writing in the 20th century, reveals the problematics of female existence: "lesbian existence is potentially liberating ... women will remain dependent upon the chance or luck of particular relationships and will have no collective power to determine the meaning and place of sexuality in their lives" (Rich 659). Lillian Faderman defines lesbianism precisely as a relationship characterised by women's strongest affections towards each other, which may or may not include sexual touch. But the problem of recognizing such relationships lied in the fact that misogynist societies would forcefully censure them. Faderman's argument in *Surpassing the Love of Men* is that passionate love in female 'friendship' or 'sisterhood' would not always be labelled unusual because women were perceived as asexual or having "little sexual passion" until around 1900. Romantic friendships began to be pathologized soon after, in order to curb the female independence to refuse marriage to a man and crush the hope of living a long loving relationship with a woman for life.

As for Dickinson, scholars argue as to whether she perceived her love for Susan as erotic at all. But then again, there were those like Martha Nell Smith who considered Dickinson's love an "emotional devotion of a lifetime" and suggested that Dickinson's correspondences to her beloved, often expressing her need to caress or kiss Sue, sets off a tone of carnal as well as emotional longing. In Smith's arguments, Dickinson definitely desired an orgasmic fusion because some of her letters were in fact "too adulatory to print." Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith's collection titled *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson* proves that Susan was undeniably at the core of Dickinson's emotional and creative life, towering far above other male figures who might have been part of the poet's literary life. Faderman's *Chloe Plus Olivia: An Anthology of Lesbian Literature from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* includes a lot of Dickinson's letters addressed to Susan as well as to Kate Anthon, along with poems such as "Her breast is fit for pearls," "The Lady feeds her little Bird," "I showed her heights she never saw," "You love me – you are sure," "Like Eyes that looked on Wastes," "Ourselves were wed one

summer – dear" and others. While Dickinson adopts a male persona in some of these works, she also explicitly paints a picture of women loving women in many. Some "letter poems" of hers were also meant exclusively and privately for Susan, e.g., "Her Breast is fit for pearls," and "I showed her heights she never saw." On the other hand, feminist readers also tend to interpret her work 'heterosexually' – through their reading of poems like "the Daisy follows soft the Sun" – therefore highlighting her relationship with a man, popularly known as the 'Master.' Dickinson was known to have a somewhat jealous affinity towards male power – she was actively seeking ways, ranging from subversion and seduction to duplicity and evasion, to alter her unfortunate subordinate condition. Dickinson mostly depicted male sexuality or obligatory heterosexuality in a way that revealed how she was repulsed by it. Contrarily, poems that were evidently an ostentatious celebration of female sexuality "could not be more open, eager, and lush" (Bennett 109-10). For instance, Dickinson was undoubtedly receptive to the bonfire of feminine sensuality, most unabashedly, in "I tend my flowers for thee," "Come slowly – Eden," and "Wild nights – wild nights." Dickinson took delight in her generous usage of clitoral images too, and in doing so, she asserted and reasserted a concept of 'female textuality' that leaves poetic discourse around heteronormativity nothing but irrelevant.

As evidenced by Dickinson comparing her love for Susan to Dante's for Beatrice and Swift's for Stella – the Emily Dickinson-Susan Gilbert Dickinson relationship has been one of the most significant as well as one of the most controversial ones in the annals of literature, and continues to generate discoveries of newer interpretations. Though Susan has been miscellaneously acclaimed and denigrated by Dickinson scholars and critics, her association with Dickinson has been acknowledged as immensely crucial even by Susan's harshest detractors. Despite the evident elements of sexual undercurrents that characterised the relationship, one must admit that its foremost value consists of literary dimensions, essentially in terms of the impact it had on the evolution of one of the greatest poets of all time. The study of Dickinson as a poet as well as a human being that I purpose to pursue would be one such woman-centric narrative, its often-unconventional contours defined by 'homoerotic' overtones, while also taking into consideration her concurrent preoccupation with 'death' as well as her nonconformist stance vis-à-vis 'religiosity' – all crucial fixtures comprising the toolkit of her cautious confidentiality. We venture into the tantalising waters of Dickinson's intricate individuality through close readings of relevant poems interspersed with the analyses of their linkage to the unique workings of her psyche, within the private periphery of her seclusive sanctum. The most

remarkable result of recent forays in criticism and biographical probing into Dickinson has been the repositioning of the focus on the covert dimensions of her companionship with sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert, her beloved 'Sue.' The poems yield an abundant harvest of textual hints to the deep intimacy that kept the sisters-in-law, who Jean McClure Mudge calls "nearly twins, born eight days apart" (Mudge 94), bound to each other across four decades.

I embark on the study with the awareness that it would lead me to a psyche embedded with a mystique, sourced from a sexuality that was never allowed its healthy fruition. The prisoner in a "pathologically hostile environment," Dickinson was "a case of permanently arrested development," while her identity crisis, which often seems the source of her stasis, was essentially "a crisis of sexual identity" (Pollak 9). Among the several poems that underpin this stilled sexuality is "What mystery pervades a well!" Apparently about nature, which is one of Dickinson's prime antagonists, this poem allures us towards the unfathomable mystery that exists in the dark underbelly of nature. However, in earlier drafts of the very same verse – "nature" was replaced with "Susan." The cognizance of the fact that Dickinson had begun the penultimate stanza with "But Susan is a stranger yet" instead of "But nature is a stranger yet" (Dickinson, line 17) must not be ignored – for it alludes to Nature's overbearing but asexual attachment to Lucy in Wordsworth's "Three years she grew." An uninitiated reader might even interpret the verse as a male lover's brazenly patriarchal proclamation of ownership over his lady love.

The clarion reverberations of this same possessiveness ring through the four lines of "To own a Susan of my own," written in the same year. God – one of Dickinson's foremost adversaries, alongside nature and time – is invoked as we are conveyed a hint of the hostility that prevails between the poet and the Almighty who seems to dispose of anything she desires. But now when it involves Susan, the poet would not endure any hostility from the "Lord" – a nomenclature that breathes a note of imperialist or autocratic domination and sustains it with the usage of the word "realm." At the same time, illegitimacy, from the socio-political perspective, is implied by "forfeit." Despite its apparent petiteness, the poem is an impetuous war cry from the relentless lover who declares that she will cling to her beloved even if it compels her to digress into immorality. The note of possessiveness in this poem underpins the self-contradictory forces in Dickinson, as we find her espousing the same possessiveness that she felt repulsed by, when it came from a man.

Dickinson has been variously interpreted as "erotically bereaved, a self-reliant solitary, or merely weird." The multiplicity of meanings inherent in her poems bring forth the true reality of her enigmatic persona. Even a poem like "Going-to-Her" that appears to be an articulation of love, confounds the reader as the writer of the letter juggles with the "verb" or the "pronoun." Dickinson saying "...the page I never wrote" (Dickinson, lines 3-4) could insinuate content discarded by the poet in apprehension of the disgrace that it would have earned – it could have been something too radical for the late nineteenth-century sensibilities. She confesses to have written only "the Syntax — / And left the Verb and the Pronoun — out" (Dickinson, lines 6-8). These could be deliberate omissions necessitated by the trepidation of eliciting disgrace. Despite the cautionary observation that Dickinson's "collapsed syntax, her economic omissions, her use of vague symbols encourages subjective interpretations of the wildest kinds, and it is vital to avoid any explanation of her life that must be supported by such interpretive evidence alone" – Lillian Faderman refers to the "explicit" protestations of attraction expressed in the poet's letters, especially those addressed to Susan, and offers these as possible clues to read into her "psychosexuality" (Faderman 200). We can merely conjecture what these omissions in "Going-to-Her" were: possibly a "she" or a "her," and a "love" or a more daringly explicit "lust." The poem's "vocabulary of abstraction" becomes a vehicle for the sexual identity crisis suffered by this "laureate of sexual despair" (Pollak 9). Lately, critics and scholars have largely concurred that Susan was Dickinson's steady object of romantic interest, and the warmth of the poet's ardour, irrespective of her apprehensive concealment of feelings, often made her dangerously toy with the idea of exceeding the smothering perimeters of nineteenth-century decorum while venting her revulsion caused by her powerlessness.

"Her Breast is Fit for Pearls," is one poem that indicates the poet's conformity to the patriarchal norms of the day. The lover here knows that the immaculateness of her ladylove's physical beauty deserves adornments as chaste and pristine as pearls, yet she lacks the ability to bedeck her with the same. Alternately, the line, "Her breast is fit for pearls, but I was not a Diver..." (Dickinson, lines 1-2) might suggest her desire to shun those material and mundane embellishments for her woman. She would not be offering her these material tokens of superficial and specious feelings, things that a male lover tends to shower upon his woman. Instead, she would rest perpetually within the cosy cockles of her beloved's heart, making it her "perennial nest."

"To know her an intemperance / As innocent as June," writes Dickinson in the poem titled "To see her is a Picture."

The poem thrives on the concept of "intemperance," which, ironically, is a specimen of the delimitations imposed by the dour nineteenth century on women, and at once, pushes the rebellious stance the poet often seems restive to adopt. However, she is aware that she must stay shackled by the norms that make the lack of restraint on her part scandalously inappropriate. She must garb her "intemperate" desires with friendship, by staying distant, and by admiring her beloved from a mannered remoteness. This calls for the poet's docile acceptance of the ruinous realisation that her relationship with her beloved is never destined for a fairy-tale ending.

The acceptance of this tragic distance that is destined to eternally prevail between her and Susan assumes a different and divine dimension in "Title Divine is Mine," where through religious allusions to Christ via "Calvary" or to the devotees of Lord Krishna who thrive on the idea of a metaphysical union with their deity, she fancies a permanent unification with the woman she loves beyond the confined compass of a marital union. The "Empress of Calvary" is the "Title divine" she deeply cherishes, to be attained from the Lord through marriage. But by correlating the verb "Bridalled" to marriage – a verb that is generally associated with a master taming an unruly horse – she denudes the master-slave binary on which the sacrosanct institution of marriage is founded. Her surmise, in this poem written around 1861, anticipates Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869): the crux of which lays bare the master-slave bond between husband and wife. The "Born — Bridalled — Shrouded" triad of Dickinson, reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's iconic pronouncement in "Sweeney Agonistes" – "Birth, and copulation, and death / That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks" (Eliot, lines 80-81), gives a sarcastically anti-climactic synopsis to life's haloed glory. Her inability to address the object of her love as "My Husband" seems to ooze sadness, preparing us for the tragic termination effected by her query, "Is *this* — the way?" (Dickinson, line 15) reflecting the sad fate of her relationship with Susan.

Dickinson, the intensely private soul that she was, never revealed her dark privations, except to exceptionally close souls, which often made her feel like a solitary sailor left to fend for herself amid a terribly turbulent tide and an imminent devastation. In "Wild nights - Wild nights," Dickinson likens her predicament to that of a sailor marooned in the elemental waters of desire. The secular beginning segues into the overtly religious image of "rowing in Eden" near the end, denoting the innate human yearning for the bliss of Paradise. The idea of "mooring" in the penultimate line epitomises the quintessentially human desire for finding an anchor in an abode of permanence, a metaphor for the heart of the beloved. The same "mooring,"

invested with the satiety and complacency that a sense of closure generally brings, connotes that the soul has finally found its lodging – thus rendering redundant the "Compass" and "Chart" (Dickinson, lines 7-8) which are metaphysical conceits for nineteenth-century imperialism. A curious combination of religiosity and secularism, this odyssey of a solitary sailor on a stormy sea, longing to share 'wild nights' with an absent lover and searching for the harbour of love, might also be articulating a desire to be closer to God. Reaching the secure blissful abode of God is akin to reaching a "port," coloured by the resplendence of homecoming. Inversely, the same "port" might denote sexual satiety, the irresistible hunger for resting in the "port" of her love, implying a sexual innuendo. The poem ultimately portrays passionate love as paradoxical: divine yet earthly, perilous yet safe, and emerges as a mystifying specimen of the mighty pull of contrary forces that characterised Dickinson's poetry as well as personal life.

In love, Dickinson attained eternity and discovered new dimensions to her otherwise quotidian existence. This exposes one of the contradictions that hunted her lifelong: though she firmly refused to subscribe to the 'conventional woman' image keen to love and marry, she most eagerly sought love throughout her life. Based on the same contraries, Suzanne Juhasz defines Dickinson's poetry as: "a manifesto about her own ambition" (Juhasz 5). "Father, I bring thee not myself" is one of her unambiguous articulations of private feelings for Susan. What she seems to establish in the poem is the sanctity of her relationship with Sue, which is unsullied by baseness or impropriety, though her family or the world at large tends to treat it as a stigma. By transcending self-obsessive bigotry or the repressive mundaneness of the heteronormative, their relationship soars to deific heights. Dickinson strives to say that the love which makes an individual surpass egotistic limits can never be ignoble or squalid.

The opening line of "A solemn thing — it was — I said —," strongly resembling section nine of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Isobel's Child," leads to Dickinson's enunciation of the frail fragility of the feminine existence. A woman is an exclusive being – something that the patriarchal ecosystem, with its circumscribed comprehension, is incapable of interpreting. A woman is nothing but "blameless" purity with an impenetrable enigma at her core. Yet, deep within, she is a vulnerable entity. The poem marks another facet of dichotomy in Dickinson, who while celebrating her diminution as a "timid thing," also glorifies herself as a heroic figure, i.e., a "woman white" who can "sneer" at the 'smallness' of the so-called wisdom of the Sages.

God's glorious proclamations, "Behold, I make all things new" (Revelation 21:5) and "the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:9), are evoked in the beginning of the poem, "There came a day at Summer's full." The poem, ostensibly an expression of unquestionable faith and religiosity, implants a dichotomy in its heart. With an awareness of the fact that Dickinson lifelong was a crusader against institution-based piety, we realise that she is speaking about the radical choice she has made in the matter of love. This love will culminate in "that New Marriage" (Dickinson, line 27) as the two lovers help each other to their respective Crucifixions. It is Dickinson's way of celebrating her unconventional love, which can never have its fulfilment in a world that cannot think beyond the constricted chauvinism of the heteronormative.

Through the poems briefly analysed above, it is easy to map Dickinson's non-heteronormative approach to love. But for Dickinson, the enunciation of her overwhelming surge of passion, though overt and bold on occasions, was never grossly carnal because Susan was not merely her most intimate friend but also, as Jean McClure Mudge defines, "sometimes a mother-substitute, a fellow poet and poetry-lover, and above all, a knowledgeable reader and critic of her" (Mudge 91) – thereby leading Mudge to conjecture, "Emily might have written less were it not for Sue, especially fewer poems and letters of quality" (Mudge 106). This passion, in fact, was a private moment in Dickinson's life that moulded itself into eternity, while also being a personal mutiny on her part that she silently nurtured within the exclusive shrine of her room. With respect to the powerfully antagonistic trends of the time, and being essentially a solitary woman – Dickinson's radicality was accentuated with the blend of a nonconformist spirituality.

Lesbianist is the tag that Martha Nell Smith gives to the Dickinson-Gilbert relationship, terming Dickinson's love for Susan as "a carnal as well as an emotional affection." Smith's editorial collaboration of 'letter poems' with Ellen Louise Hart, entitled *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson* (Paris Press 1998), provides the reader with overwhelming evidence to disprove the popular notion of the presence of a shadowy male figure in Dickinson's life. Dickinson's attachment to Susan, visibly homoerotic in its slant, underlines its predominantly 'psychological' character, which is also one of the foremost indicators of lesbianism, as defined by Catharine Stimpson: "Of course, a lesbian is more than her body, more than her flesh, but lesbianism partakes of the body, partakes of the flesh. That carnality distinguishes it from gestures of political sympathy with homosexuals and from affectionate friendships in which women enjoy each other, support each other, and commingle a sense of identity and well-being. Lesbianism represents a commitment of

skin, blood, breast, and bone" (Stimpson 364). Upon reading Hart and Smith's *Open me Carefully*, it is easy to figure that the Dickinson we all know is a rather 'edited' version – one that conforms to 19th century "verse decorum" and its resulting distinctions between prose and poetry, evades all radical experimentations of a bold original verse, and pushes to obscurity her life-long erotic exchanges with her sister-in-law. Contrary to this, *Open me Carefully* uses feminist criticism and new techniques of handling age-old manuscripts, thereby forming a coherent narrative that skilfully highlights Sue's centrality to Dickinson's imaginative spirit. Hart and Smith collectively aim to unedit Dickinson on the grounds of her poetic interchanges. Their volume reproduces the poet's unconventional line breaks as well as her use of capitalization and punctuation, quite faithfully – while also allowing the readers a glimpse into the very private world of her signed note poems, for instance, "To be Susan / is Imagination" from the 1880s. *Open me Carefully* honours Dickinson's writing, representing it in its truest form, a form "more full and varied" and more capable of speaking for itself than the collections edited by Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Susan Howe too believed that all characteristics of Dickinson's manuscripts, including her line breaks, should be preserved in print. However, there were others like R. W. Franklin who overruled Dickinson's unnatural line breaks, and took liberties in regularising them. Such a control over editorial practices regarding Dickinson's poetry by 'gentlemen of the old school' was definitely a feminist issue. As a response to Franklin's claim that Dickinson must have composed her poems in stanzas, Howe replied, "As a poet, I cannot assert that Dickinson composed in stanzas and was careless about line breaks. In the precinct of Poetry, a word, the space around a word, each letter, every mark, silence, or sound volatilizes an inner law of form." Franklin rearranged Dickinson's loose verse into a tight quatrain that goes: "The incidents of Love/ Are more than it's Events –/ Investment's best expositor/ Is the minute Per Cents –" but Hart and Smith preserve her widely spaced words, her lineation, and other 'idiosyncrasies' in a verse that reads, "The incidents of/ Love/ Are more than/ its' Events –/ Investment's best/ Expositor/ Is the minute/ Per Cents –" while also keeping her closing signature intact. Hart has also argued that the discomfort felt by certain editors has also pushed them to exclude certain passionate exchanges from the poet's literary canon. "Morning might come by Accident" was one of those exchanges, initially denied its rightful status as a poem, contributing to a kind of biographical censorship – with the evidence of Dickinson's love for Sue being purposefully left out. "Morning" printed in *Open me Carefully* celebrates the arrival of love's night, lamenting the coming of 'morning'

that separates lovers. Dickinson was after all keeping a lifelong arduous faith in love through her writing. Readers need to dispel the myth that posits Susan simply as a late-adolescent crush in Dickinson's life, ultimately subsumed by Dickinson's pining for a male 'Master' soon after. Philadelphia minister Charles Wadsworth was a supposed candidate for this unaddressed 'Master.' In this context of censorship, however, we remember Thomas Higginson's famous words, "One poem only I dread a little to print – that wonderful "Wild Nights" – lest the malignant read into it more than that virgin recluse ever dreamed of putting there." Dickinson's biography and private correspondences were often mutilated either by neglect or by intent. However, Dickinson's faith was reserved with her 'sister' even in moments of such doubt.

It is through Dickinson's letter poems that we see the power of profound female relationships in propelling feminine creativity. Her letters bespeak sexual inclinations. According to Catharine R. Stimpson, Dickinson deployed the conventions of courtly love, which continue to linger in modern lesbian literature – she elevated her beloved to a position of worship. Emily and Susan became sisters-in-law in 1856, after Susan's marriage to Emily's brother Austin, after which Emily started sending Sue her poems, drafts of poems, and letter-poems, therefore intermingling the two distinct forms. In April, 1852, she wrote, bluntly yearning for Sue, "Sweet Hour, blessed Hour, to carry me to you, and to bring you back to me, long enough to snatch one kiss, and whisper Good bye, again." It is believed that one of Susan's children was acting as a courier in the midst of these exchanges. Emily's consoling poems to Susan, following the death of Sue and Austin's youngest child in 1883, are heart-wrenching. Austin was also known to be having an affair with Mabel Loomis Todd, a friend of Susan's, around the time. Todd was also one of the eventual posthumous editors of Emily's works, and she portrayed Emily as fragile and cloistered in her misleading account. Susan's daughter, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, was another of Dickinson's editors. Nonetheless, the sheer brilliance of Emily Dickinson was recognized, ages ago, especially when three volumes of her letters were published in 1958 by Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward. Dickinson was metaphysically intense and unmatched in her wit, her metaphorical vitality, and her linguistic artfulness. In 1876, Emily wrote, "Susan knows/ she is a Siren –/ and that at a/ word from her/ Emily would/ forfeit Righteousness –" (Dickinson 210). Shortly after, Dickinson wrote again, "To own a/ Susan of/ my own/ Is of itself/ a Bliss –" (Dickinson 215). Johnson and Ward however decided to distance the women, unscrupulously. While they mention Judge Lord as the one being at the receiving end of Emily's letters, and declare the two as mutually in love – they bring up merely

the 'friendship' aspect in Emily and Sue's relationship. For Johnson and Ward, such a friendly association was a direct and natural effect of Austin and Susan living next door to Emily. In her thirties, Dickinson possibly also shared a heterosexual relationship with Samuel Bowles, besides Judge Otis Lord, as conjectured.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have spoken of how Dickinson used art as a means of both expression and camouflage. The Dickinson persona comes off often as a curious mix of authority and girlishness, unparalleled bravado and coyness – her poetry abounds with images of the cosmic as well as the mundane. We, readers, can interpret this dichotomy as a contrast between women's conventional roles sanctioned by society and their personal grander ambitions. Dickinson uses a 'feminine' vocabulary to put forward her take on larger things in life, not normally belonging to the female sphere, as she says, "My Basket holds – just – Firmaments –/ Those – dangle easy – on my arm" (Dickinson, lines 5-6). Talking of berry-picking quite naively in the poem "Perhaps I asked too large," Dickinson also discusses 'earths' and 'firmaments' and conjures up a world where planets and skies are nothing but accessible to her, as are berries to young maidens. This analogy is a bold attempt, balanced with femaleness, at bringing together – berries and earths. Dickinson aims to revert the generic notion of comfort as she says, her basket easily holds firmaments but smaller bundles cram in there. The firmaments in her basket are after all her own aspirations, larger than life. To our confusion and ecstasy, Dickinson is known for her ambiguities – she says two things at once, conflating her sense of self and that of the world. She counters domestic achievements like berry-picking with her self-defining act of 'planet picking' and purposefully makes the two worlds overlap. Clearly, the ontological situation of women, as suggested by Shirley and Edwin Ardener in "Belief and the Problem of Women" (1972), is that they constitute a muted group, and that the boundaries of their culture and their reality overlap. As a response, Elaine Showalter comments in "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" – "Both muted and dominant groups generate beliefs or ordering ideas of social reality at the unconscious level, but dominant groups control the forms or structures in which consciousness can be articulated ... all language is the language of the dominant order, and women, if they speak at all, must speak through it" (Showalter 262).

Dickinson, like all women, was taught to believe in love, empathy, affection, marriage and motherhood being the special provinces of womankind. Yet, she kept resisting the loss of self traditionally brought about by marriage. She wrote to Susan, "Oh, Susie, it is dangerous ... It does so rend me, Susie, the thought of it when it comes, that I tremble lest at sometime I, too, am yielded up" (Dickinson

210). But then again, we know, how intensely Dickinson sought love, if not marriage, throughout. Despite participating in the dominance-submission paradigm of romantic love at times, Dickinson actively attempted to alter the gender roles that silenced her unique voice and vitality. Her poetry too subverts the very same premises. As we draw a comparison between the female sphere of love and the essentially male sphere of writing – we tend to notice, that the woman trying to write faces greater hardships than the woman in love, for the woman with a pen is seen willingly catapulting herself into a no-woman's land, i.e., the profession of poets. A woman's verse is bad or mad or of no substance at all, in a world that sanctions her silence over her speech. Mocking this world, Dickinson writes, "I would not paint – a picture –/ I'd rather be the One ... I would not talk, like Cornets –/ I'd rather be the One" (Dickinson, lines 1-10). The god-like male poet only reminds us of the compulsorily male lover in a position of egotistic triumph over the female partner. Dickinson continually reinterprets the artist's role from the female viewfinder: she, as an iconoclast, strips apart all pretensions of traditional gender distinctions, and reinvents the insipidness of contemporary morality with an uncompromising personal vision. Dickinson was forever attempting to write the female experience, and in her, it is not a poet's existence we witness but a woman's.

Rebecca Patterson, after having published *The Riddle of Emily Dickinson* (1951), claimed that the primary poetic inspiration for Dickinson was Kate Anthon, provoking quite a stir in the academic community. Decades later, after multiple scathing responses, Patterson's revelation of Dickinson's homoeroticism is unignorable. John Cody, Paula Bennett, Hart and Smith, Vivian R. Pollak, Judith Farr have all argued that Susan was one of those who did share an erotic relationship with the poet. Often placed under the rubric of a 'romantic friendship,' Sue and Emily's relationship is perceived to be free of 'sex' and 'self-consciousness' – therefore, it isn't hard to reject the term 'lesbian' when it comes to the two. However, if the "Master letters" can be interpreted as 'heterosexual' automatically and without evidence, readers then shouldn't be waiting for 'proof of sexual consummation' in order to classify Dickinson's yearning for Sue as 'lesbian.' Lillian Faderman, especially known for this 'romantic friendship' thesis, wrote: "Perhaps [Dickinson] was somewhat self-conscious about this poetry, not because she formulated it specifically as lesbian (she would have seen it as an expression of romantic friendship), but because it revealed so much of her" (Faderman 44). On the other hand, Cody discussed Dickinson's 'bisexuality' at length, calling it 'repressed' – he felt like the Emily-Susan-Austin triangle was a renewal of the Oedipal dilemma. Dickinson was greatly influenced

by Shakespeare and often, her writing was aided by Shakespearean allusions. Her poetic design then may have been a tad bit inspired by Shakespeare's. In fact, the omnipresence of sexuality in Shakespeare's works may have motivated Dickinson's sexual metaphors too. She often chose the most carnal of all Shakespearean tragedies to represent her own relationships. Both Bennett and Farr were of the opinion that Dickinson alluded to *Antony and Cleopatra* in her letter poems, largely because it echoed her love-affair with her sister-in-law. Such an explicitly sexual allusion says, "Susan's Calls are like Antony's Supper" and it brings to mind, Act 2, scene 2 of *Antony and Cleopatra*. Indeed, the carnality in Antony and Cleopatra's relationship captured Dickinson's interest. Smith observes, "... when [Dickinson] characterizes their love to Sue, she does not compare it to the adolescent, swept-away passion of Romeo and Juliet, but to the sophisticated, persistent, if tired love of Antony and Cleopatra" (Smith 39). It could be that losing Susan to Austin made Dickinson adopt a more sophisticated and rather private way of expression. Martha Bianchi is known to have toned down Dickinson's identification with Antony in *Emily Dickinson Face to Face: Unpublished Letters with Notes and Reminiscences* (1932), therefore obscuring the poet's sexual intent. Bianchi went to great lengths to convince us of Dickinson's involvements with young men too, especially bringing to light the one time Dickinson visited Philadelphia and was completely 'overtaken' and 'doomed once and forever' by her love for a man. However, it must have been merely an exaggeration, because Dickinson herself never believed in loving 'once and forever' – she even wrote, "We outgrow love, like other things..." Dickinson's frequent correspondences were addressed mostly to her cousins, Willie Dickinson and John Graves, James Kimball and Henry Emmons, and even if she was invested in any young man at the time, there is hardly any concrete evidence proving the depth of such a relationship. Her letters to women during her late teens prove to be far more significant. The uninformed acceptance of presumably 'non-sexual' female friendships in Dickinson's era has misled even contemporary feminist critics into discarding any possibility of conscious eros between 19th century women. But there should be no scepticism about Dickinson being innately aware of her same-sex desire, which she was deliberately 'encoding' all the while.

In Faderman's words, around forty poems from the Dickinson canon were dedicated to or were about women. Dickinson apparently claimed, to her literary editor Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "When I state myself as the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean me – but a supposed person" but it is difficult to believe so in the absence of plot, persona or dramatic value in her poetical

works. Going by Dickinson's words, we may assume that the supposed persona she attempted to create in "Her breast is fit for pearls" is that of a sparrow, but it would be naive of readers to ignore the obvious metaphors. Patterson was indeed the very first biographer to have considered Dickinson's homoeroticism. Dickinson's syntax, style, and symbols clearly lacked the modern perspective of sexuality, but she was as explicit in her affections as she could have been back in the 19th century, devoid of a modern vocabulary. Faderman believed that Dickinson's love for Sue was 'homosexual' in the same sense, that Dante's love for Beatrice was 'heterosexual.' Her overwhelming affection for Sue continued, quoting letter 172 dated August 1854, "I do not miss you Susie – of course I do not miss you – I only sit and stare at nothing from my window, and know that all is gone..." In late January 1855, Dickinson wrote to Susan, "I miss you, mourn for you, and walk the Streets alone – often at night, beside, I fall asleep in tears, for your dear face..." John Ciardi has compared this style of letter-writing to "the sentimental extravagance of the Romantic and Gothic novel." Dickinson also enjoyed girlhood friendships with Abiah Root, Abby Wood, Harriet Merrill, and Sarah Tracy and their group was called "the five." Around the time, Dickinson was also thoroughly moved by a young woman named Emily Fowler. While Dickinson lovingly wrote to her friend Abiah, on 29th January 1850, "I miss you very much indeed, think of you at night when the world's nodding" – she simultaneously wrote in her 'billet doux' to her beloved Fowler, "I cannot wait to be with you – Oh ugly time, and space ... I was very lonely without you." In the summer of 1860, Dickinson wrote to Kate Anthon, as Patterson points out, "Kate, Distinctly sweet your face stands in its phantom niche – I touch your hand – my cheek your cheek – I stroke your vanished hair, Why did you enter, sister, since you must depart?" This language did not conform to 19th century standards of friendliness. Nineteenth century America was homosocial, and women were together for each intimate ritual – a social configuration that intensified emotional attachments, physical gestures and other pronouncements of love between women such as kissing and caressing. But unless women had enough money to be financially independent and live on their own terms, like the Llangollen Ladies, they were forced to choose between marriage and their parents' home, and of course they chose the former.

Coming to Martha Bianchi once again – Bianchi, a post-Freudian, should have been familiar with Freud's theories on homosexuality as articulated in "Three essays on the Theory of Sexuality" (1905) – therefore, it is understandable as to why she desperately attempted to hide the real relationship between her mother and her aunt in *The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson* (1924) and *Emily*

Dickinson Face to Face (1932), thereby suppressing all brewing conjectures. Bianchi carefully omitted considerable chunks from the letters and notes sent to her mother. In *Face to Face*, she only included – "Susie, will you indeed come home next Saturday? Shall I indeed behold you" while what Dickinson originally wrote was "Susie, will you indeed come home next Saturday, and be my own again, and kiss me as you used to? Shall I indeed behold you..." These omissions by Bianchi were surely not considerations of length but were supposed to alter the narrative of Susan's life. Bianchi also misdated some of the letters, and consistently addressed Sue as 'Sister Sue' to establish a sisterly friendship between the two. Also, Bianchi tells us, in *Face to Face*, "In accordance with Aunt Emily's request, my mother before her own death destroyed such letters as she considered confidential" (Bianchi 176). Austin may also have been bothered by this relationship and acted no different, for he too deleted the references to Sue in Emily's letters as he handed them over to Mabel Todd for the publication of *Letters of Emily Dickinson* (1894). But today, we do know that Emily's obsessive interest was reciprocated by Sue – as Dickinson quotes Sue's assurance in a letter of 1852 and writes, "Thank you for loving me, darling, and will you "love me more if ever you come home"? – it is enough, dear Susie, I know I shall be satisfied." Biographers observe gaps in their correspondence though, especially after Sue's marriage in 1857. Dickinson's letters to Austin often mention her depressive episodes: "Somehow I am lonely lately – I feel very old every day, and when morning comes and the birds sing, they don't make me so happy as they used to." These letters, in the eyes of modern-day critics, almost seem to bring out a passive-aggressive manner. Dickinson writes to Austin, after having spent an evening with Susan, "I have taken your place ... but I will give it back to you as soon as you get home." We cannot ignore a kind of 'jarred intimacy' between the two women soon after Sue's marriage – such a crushing alienation has been discussed by John Cody in *After Great Pain*. Emily could have lapsed into self-pity and silence, following her loss of Sue, because Faderman claims that there are no letters to anyone from Emily, none at all, around 1856 to 1858. This is certainly out of character for her, and according to Cody, she was probably navigating through a nervous breakdown at this point in her life. Then again, Cody's assertion is simply based on circumstantial evidence and there is no way for us to determine the validity of his arguments. Dickinson turned to writing poetry, more seriously and dedicatedly, in 1858, and after her supposed 'traumatic loss' – she began sharing her art again with Sue around 26th September, 1858. In Jerome Charyn's *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson*, Charyn is unable to lay to rest any unfinished potential for love. In a final dream

sequence by Charyn, Dickinson is reunited with her imagination – “Suddenly I have flashes of Austin and Sue on my ride between house and barn, but it’s Sue before her marriage ... And I long to shout, Do not marry, my dears. It will all come to bitterness and strife” (Charyn, 347).

Dickinson was after all one of the most confusing conundrums. Her love poetry with its range of eroticism gives rise to ambiguity. Unclear about the nature of sexuality in her poems, critics like Judith Farr and Vivian Pollak find both homosexual and heterosexual aspects in them. Dickinson allows erotic possibilities to oscillate between multiple sexualities. However, Adalaide Morris opines, “the kind of love Dickinson desires and develops with a woman is very different from the love she desires and develops with a man” (Morris 102). Paula Bennett refuses to acknowledge a male influence on Dickinson’s poetry, saying, “But if she did [fall in love with Master/a man], ... Dickinson’s relationship with this man was not the shaping experience of her life” (Bennett 157-58). We, readers, should therefore not be misled by the disfigured version of her works produced by editors, and acknowledge that the ‘male’ clearly lacks presence and substance in her verse. Even the most progressive feminist scholars seem to forget, at times, that Dickinson could also be characterised by a multitude of ever-changing erotic emotions at the same time. Thus, subjecting her to the binary opposition between ‘homosexuality’ and ‘heterosexuality’ limits both her and her writings. Instead, one should begin to understand how Dickinson resists definition. Her text can become a site of ‘jouissance’ only when it defies all phallogocentric precepts. Un-grasped by an ideological linguistic system, Dickinson’s liberated language and playful expression leads to unintelligibility. Basically, her stylistic and thematic vagueness leaves her ‘open’ and ‘vulnerable’ in the eyes of critics. Suzanne Juhasz points out the locale of interaction between Dickinson and her audience – “she teases her audience ... Her words attract us, and we want to know what they mean; we want her words to lead us to her” (Juhasz 28). But after all, this instability of hers is precisely the source of her versatility and her emotional or erotic mobility. The result of her elusiveness, coupled with the inconclusive biographical evidence we have of her, is that Dickinson remains forever undefined, never trapped within binaries, always in constant motion – textually, sexually and otherwise.

In the 1950s, women were referred to by their husbands’ names – a bias that considerably erased the significance of Dickinson’s correspondences with women. Most glossary entries usually said “see [husband’s name]” when it came to married women. Many women were known to have preserved Dickinson’s letters with a date of receipt, all of which they contributed to Todd’s *Letters* (1894). Calling

these women by their own names and aligning them with their own life choices and accomplishments, however, would have led to greater accuracy. After all, the ultimate editorial goal is to come up with ‘determinative’ editions, rather than ‘definitive’ ones. Lots of recent scholarship, even today, refer to “Loo” Norcross as “Louise” because they rely on *Letters*. Misinformation has lingered beyond *Letters*, long after biographers and critics’ efforts to correct names, dates, orders, and other particulars of extant letters. Emily’s letters were especially known and treasured for her genuinely sociable habit of marking certain special occasions related to her dear ones. Yet, critics understand her nature as completely unsociable – a reclusive hermit. Gossips form Dickinson’s portrait as some kind of Puritan nun in people’s minds. The fact that Dickinson led herself to her grave, forever unmarried, invited quite some speculation. In 1880, Dickinson possibly answered to Judge Lord’s invitation to marry, asserting her will decisively, “Don’t you know, you are happiest while I withhold and not confer...” (Dickinson 562). She was a spinster by choice. Then again, the posthumous publication of her *Poems* (1890) by Thomas Higginson, containing her ardent lyrics of love, made reviewers assume that Emily had experienced some grand, compelling, unrequited romance. Dickinson was caught up in the stillness of her world, characterised by the unconventionality of her artistic vocation, her aversion to organised religion, and her isolation from worldly surroundings – such a life could not have permitted the pressure of marriage, house-keeping, domesticity, and church-going. There was a touch of free-spirited independence in Dickinson’s solitude. She never yearned to bear or rear children of her own. Alfred Habegger noted how Dickinson, as a young girl herself, was curiously interested in patriarchs like Moses and in the “paternal order that mandated her own disabling exclusion as a female” (Habegger 118). It could be that Dickinson chose her single state, due to the alarming surrender of identity that she suspected a wedding would demand. A marital contract did ensure rank and respect, but Dickinson as a ‘wife’ would be entirely eclipsed and overshadowed by her husband. Marriage was certainly not the only union Dickinson envisioned – she wrote about the charm of friendship, and the lasting glory of romance, and the permanence of an emotional contract between human beings. In poems such as “Ourselves were wed one summer – dear,” Dickinson poetically paints a picture of marriage that leads to fruition but ultimately consumes the bride’s identity. According to her 1885 message to Eugenia Hall Hunt, Dickinson viewed marriage as “the Etruscan Experiment.” While Etruscan marriage sculptures are known for the broad smiles of the sculpted husband and wife, it is surprising to see the usage of the word ‘experiment.’ Dickinson may have carefully

selected such a word – 'experiment' – in order to convey a certain sense of trial, error, and uncertainty in marriage. Another important feature of the Etruscan sculpture is that it portrays 'equal-sized' husbands and wives – therefore, Dickinson's Etruscan metaphor was indeed mature and revealing. Moreover, Dickinson in her early twenties reacted to the vision of her friends' marriages with fear – almost as if they were headed towards the grave instead of the altar. She wrote to Susan in her 1852 letter, "I have thought today of what would become of me when the "bold Dragon" shall bear you ... away" – pointing clearly enough at the man who would take her Susan away in captivity, as a 'dragon' does. In her letter of 1852, Emily referred to marriage as some "sweet and strange adoption" – marriage then, indeed, was foreign and fatal in the minds of women like her.

Dickinson's parents' relationship however did not mirror the equal authority of Etruscan sculptures. Interestingly, Edward Dickinson, Emily's father, was extremely opposed to women's suffrage. He stood for equal education being granted to both genders, but innately believed, that the educational spheres should differ, i.e., the women's sphere would be nothing but the 'home' and the men would inevitably take on the 'world.' Typically, almost as a Victorian father would, he promoted Austin's efforts while taking limited interest in Emily's love for literature and eventually went ahead to build, for Emily, a conservatory for her to experiment with rare flowers.

Dickinson was often criticised for not being a convincing thinker or a thinker at all. She did express religious doubt, especially in relation to concepts of an afterlife, through much of her poetic canon. It is fair to say – Dickinson scoffed at Christianity from within, and doctrines from the Bible failed to move her in the traditional sense, she in fact questioned rigid notions about the existence of an omnipotent singular God. The Bible, for her, was simply a repository of evocative symbols and images – for Dickinson heavily relied on Biblical terms like heaven, Eden, grace, paradise, Jesus, crucifixion, Gethsemane and others to communicate metaphysically. This Christian linguistic universe often helped her express the essential truths of her life ironically or subversively. Her poems "Because I could not stop for Death" and "I heard a Fly Buzz – when I died" popularly bring to light her perspective on death. Death is the end of worldly life and a doorway to an eternity in the aforementioned poems, which clearly romanticize death. Dickinson discusses her own demise too in several of her poetical works. Dickinson's isolation from society could have spurred her obsession with death. Even her letters were sent only to a selected few. She gave up a considerable amount of her early teenage years, inside a room next to that of her ailing mother, shrouded in mystery, writing. She

thought of death as a companion – attributing to it qualities such as patience and civility, and personifying death in the lines, "We slowly drove – He knew no Haste/ And I had put away/ My labor and my leisure too/ For His Civility" (Dickinson, lines 5-8). However, describing 'death' as 'civil' could be ironic on Dickinson's part, because she ultimately has to put away her labour and leisure in exchange of death – it could be that Dickinson perceived death as cruel, cold, and lonely. She could be pointing out how death denies her a full life, and takes away her will. Losing many of her friends and relatives to grave illnesses, Dickinson may have wanted know if at all there exists any life after death, or any possible scope of reuniting with the ones lost. She lost Edward Hitchcock, a mentor, besides Susan Huntington and her own father – all of which intensified her preoccupation with death. To Dickinson, her father was a man with a pure and terrible heart, and she had slowly learnt to adapt to his autocratic ways. She witnessed her mother's paralysis and eventual passing away, each day, in a series of consecutive heart-wrenching episodes. And thus, to understand death's cause and nature, she wrote. Dickinson, forever aware of the Biblical teachings on life and death, also constantly faced an inner struggle between faith and doubt. She attended religious services, and knew how religion firmly established the theory of God's creation of humankind. But then again, with ongoing scientific developments and the coming of Darwin's theory of evolution, Dickinson found it hard to keep her faith intact. Dickinson also seemed to believe in the inevitability of death – death accompanies everyone, everywhere, and there is no surpassing when it comes to death. In "I Heard a Fly buzz when I Died," Dickinson writes – "The eyes around – had wrung them dry" (Dickinson, line 5) – she was obviously hinting at the gruesome suffering experienced by those left behind, mourning, i.e., the bereaved. Dickinson's transcendentalist vision therefore encourages her readers to think critically beyond death.

A poem that ideally embodies Dickinson's response to the experience of death would be "I heard a Fly buzz — when I died." Dickinson gives a radically different twist to the conventional optics of the deathbed, portraying life's climax as the mundane buzzing of a fly. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, one of the poems Dickinson admired greatly, and a contemporary poem by Florence Vale, titled "Are we almost there?" about a dying girl suspended between life and death, are presumed to be the dual sources of the poem. The buzzing of the fly and the situation in which the young woman finds herself listening to it can be termed Dickinson's *memento mori* – transporting us into the suffocating innards of an airless room where we become the co-beholders of the speaker's surrender to death, as she recollects the entire experience.

The most striking and startling thing about the poem is Dickinson's unique analogy of the 'buzzing fly' — a disconcerting banality projected into the climactic moment of grim seriousness. The only thing that surpasses this, is the young woman's assertion that she has heard the sound of death, witnessed her own demise, and survived to tell. Dickinson begins her poem by hurling at us a flurry of contradictory ideas and convinces us of the simultaneity of the speaker's life and death. To a large extent, the aesthetic pleasure of the poem issues from our inquisitiveness about how the woman will reconcile the extreme tension between subject matter and tone, subject matter and point of view — and whether she can make it possible at all. Dickinson's poem thus emerges as a harshly ironic inversion of the sentimental tradition of 'death' being a 'calming visual' that consoles the beholders. Dickinson's representation of death does not allow a closure to the poem — it exposes death's deception on the dying, by suspending them in nothingness and depriving them of their anticipations of rebirth. This is a poem about deception, i.e., the ultimate deception a mortal is subjected to after enduring a series of deceptions throughout life. Doubts as well as speculations regarding what the fly stands for prevail. But we are certain of the immense importance of the fly, mentioned as a thing of utmost importance by the corpse at the very outset. Dickinson finds in the 'fly' — her most convincing, though unlikely, 'symbol' of the truth of mortality itself.

"The last Night that She lived" is evidently about the sad demise of the poet's beloved — a young woman, and hence a premature death — this sensitive poem, among her most famous, is also one that deceives us with its apparent simplicity and candour. A young woman is dying, and around her, the onlookers from her family have congregated as if in a wake. As life goes on in its unperturbed rhythm in the world outside — for people inside the house, it comes to a standstill on this day and hour. Stanza number six contains the crux of the poem — in the deathbed visual and the occurrence of death. This is the only stanza allowing us to behold the dying woman, making us derive our impression of her persona from the optics of the deathbed. Dickinson moulds the woman in the fragile simile of an unassuming "Reed" — an exceptionally delicate thing among the sturdier shrubs and trees. "Lightly as a Reed" (Dickinson, line 22) insinuates a supple yielding to death, akin to the choreographed elegance of a dancer, implying the graceful docility with which the woman not only embraced death, but also had borne herself in real life. The woman, gracious and polite, was loath to disturb those gathered by her bedside with an indecorous confrontation with death. Her death is a virtuous one, comparable to the "happy death" in Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," and thus is tinged with Christian piety. With her final breath, the

woman therefore appropriates the moment of death, yielding voluntarily to it. Alternate rhythms of activity and its suspension define the psychological reactions of the woman's family. They feel the "great light" (Dickinson, line 7) of death's momentousness and a futile protest against irrevocable mortality — that "she must finish quite" (Dickinson, line 14), while others go on living. The dying woman, ironically, feels none of these. This poem has its focus not on the woman's dying, but on "our" surviving.

Dickinson's "I felt a funeral in my brain" is a "famous account of a mental breakdown" as described by Helen Vendler. Steeped in death and reverberating with its grimly triumphal stride, it articulates a state of consciousness that follows literally each stage of a funeral procession: the mourners tread, the service is conducted, the pallbearers bear the casket, the church bells toll. Subjected to a figurative burial, Dickinson actively analyses her own situation, mourning herself repetitively. The exceeding intensity of her mental affliction makes it almost physical: "it seemed / That Sense was breaking through" (Dickinson, lines 3-4). Her inner faculties, symbolised by the "treading" Mourners, are eventually seated at the funeral. But just when it generates the expectation of some mental relief — assaultive "Service" keeps beating and beating at her until she stands on the brink of her mind becoming "numb." The "Service" is followed by the heavy steps of "Boots of Lead" (Dickinson, line 11). Throughout the time, her threatened self is within a "Box" — her coffin — which is being borne to her grave. Once the ritualistic proceedings of the funeral are over, Dickinson passes to the terrible isolation suffered by the mentally ill. She listens to her death knell that occupies all of space — the last sound that she hears. With silence replacing audibility — a new analogy is conjured. It is that of a shipwreck with only two survivors: herself and Silence. She now belongs to the "strange race" of Silence, marooned in an eternal island of solitude. The collapse of mental faculties in the poem is virtually indistinguishable from death because it obliterates all consciousness. The poem is most often seen as the representation of a 'state of mind' rather than a literal funeral — describing, among other things, repression (a kind of burial), dread (which involves the obliteration of rational knowledge), spiritual crisis (feeling trapped in the ceaseless treading of the congregation), and a kind of writer's block (where sense almost breaks through, but numbness and silence prevail). Strangely, Dickinson, in the last couple of lines, is found appropriating and aiding her own extinction. While dropping through the universe, she hits the world at every "plunge" instead of involuntarily crashing down in one go. Dickinson thus "reclaims agency in her own obliteration, before leaving madness for a merciful unconsciousness" (Vendler 143).

Dickinson has thus been rightfully described as a poet “whose central mode is an intense suffering” (Bloom 350) – because much of her poems evince experiences of a tortured mental space, dread, death, despair, depression, madness, and alienation. Her most intense experiences are those in which her loving desire found some brief fulfilment or those in which she faced abandonment and finally emotional trepidation. Dickinson scrutinised her own consciousness, lifelong. Love was the one sole topic, for Dickinson, carrying extreme metaphysical and existential value. She wrote, “Love – is anterior to Life –/ Posterior – to Death” (Dickinson, lines 1-4). Because even as we are haunted by the uncertainties of our ultimate destiny, as humans, love fleetingly allures us with promises. “Love is like Life – merely longer” and “Love – is that later Thing than Death” in Dickinson’s verse. On innumerable poetic occasions, Dickinson has used the figure of Jesus to symbolise ‘love’ and its uniquely human capacities. She has repeatedly rejected an authoritarian Jesus, in favour of a more ‘humane’ Jesus filled with love, kindness, courage and compassion. Jesus’ love extends to embracing death for humankind: “Christ – stooped until He touched the Grave,” Dickinson wrote. She also wrote in a letter of 1878, “Love makes us ‘heavenly’ without our trying in the least...” (Dickinson 242). Dickinson’s spiritual stance – once negligent of a transcendent God but also worshipful of her Creator, once hopeful of an afterlife but simultaneously dreading the possibility of it, once confident of her experiences of divine love but also equally horrified by the resulting anguish of love – is unstable and self-contradictory. Her faith falters. Safe to say then, Dickinson was a thinker riddled with ambiguities.

De Rougemont believed, “romance only comes into existence where love is fatal, frowned upon and doomed by life itself” – such a romance is usually frustrated by familial and societal prohibitions. Emily Dickinson too wrote poems of a thwarted love, imagining a transcendence into an otherworldly, heavenly union with her beloved. Dickinson’s depiction of love is ‘metaphysical’ according to René Girard’s usage of the term. After having derived ideas from De Rougemont, Girard makes it clearer that the nineteenth century lover understands his love as something utterly beyond any earthly or bodily implications. In fact, the beloved is nothing but God, with an extreme ability to bestow on the lover – his whole existence or being. Dickinson shared Girard’s view that ‘metaphysical love’ offers a certain ‘fullness of being’ that the lover otherwise lacks. As a result, she often blurred the fine lines between a terrestrial beloved and a celestial god. She forever insisted on the greatness of the metaphysical, as compared to the corporeal, through verse: “The Love a Life can show Below / Is but a filament, I know, / Of that diviner thing”

(Dickinson, lines 1-3). Dickinson’s poems usually unfold in three consecutive stages: the lovers, far above quotidian existence, experiencing a fulfilment of their ‘being’ through their devotion; the loss of a lover, deprivation, and despair; followed by an imaginary reunion beyond life and death. Dickinson concentrates as intensely on the torment of separation as she does on the bliss of reconciliation beyond the grave.

Besides her verse of love, Dickinson had an equally powerful homo-erotic voice, if we may. Adrienne Rich suggests, hetero and homosexuality are not two ‘dichotomized opposites’ – they are rather two extreme ends of a continuum. Rich states, all women, irrespective of the century they live in or the sexual orientation they identify with, exist on the lesbian continuum. Rich has been criticised often due to forcing such a ‘lesbian’ label on heterosexuals, thereby inaccurately defining them. We understand though that her prime intent was to break down certain inflexible dichotomies. Dickinson often used ‘affectionate’ language, as most adolescent females of her time did, as she expressed to Sue. There was tenderness, there were sad confessions of loneliness, there was a mark of emotional reliance: “Oh my darling one ... How vain it seems to write, when one knows how to feel — how much more near and dear to sit beside you, talk with you, hear the tones of your voice; ... Susie, write me of hope and love, and of hearts that endured” (Dickinson 73). The letters have also gotten explicitly sexual around 1852, suggesting physical arousal: “Susie ... the expectation once more to see your face again, makes me feel hot and feverish, and my heart beats so fast ... my darling, so near I seem to you, that I disdain this pen, and wait for a warmer language.” Dickinson began seeking a ‘warmer’ language, when a verbal language failed to suffice. These letters were all heavily edited when they were first published in 1932. Homosexuality was after all more of a ‘threat’ in the twentieth century, than it was in the nineteenth. Dickinson felt her own heart breaking with the love she had for Sue, she said so in clear words, “dearer you cannot be, for I love you so already, that it almost breaks my heart” (Dickinson 74). The lesbian continuum differs, from century to century. While in the 19th century, it highlighted and stressed upon platonic or romantic sisterhood; the 20th century continuum created and emphasised upon a concept of lesbianism built around genital sex. Rich did not take into account such a difference. Dickinson’s language of desire is perceived as ‘sexual’ or ‘erotic’ from a 20th century perspective.

Dickinson’s erotic amplitude – nuanced, edgy, complex and outlandish – serves as a means of interacting with the world. Her erotic desire might be understood as ‘queer’ in the sense that it is strange and suspicious. Dickinson uses the guise of language to further her queer desire, especially putting to

use – the tool of poetic metaphor. For instance, an exemplary masochistic poem, “He fumbles at your Soul,” deals with a masculine gendered subject, and a non-gendered object referred to as “you” whose naked soul is peeled apart. Reading into the metaphors used in the poem – we are to assume, as many have, that it is a description of a masochistic sexual act of great aggression. Dickinson writes, “He fumbles at your Soul/ As players at the Keys - ... Prepares your brittle substance/ For the ethereal Blow” (Dickinson, lines 1-6). But it could be that the ‘you’ here is not so much submissive, as he or she is erotically charged by the inflicted pleasure-pain. The reference to scalping of the soul in the line “Deals One - imperial Thunderbolt - / That peels your naked soul” (Dickinson, lines 11-12) might have to do with reaching the climax of the sexual act, therefore carrying a tinge of sweet torment. Suzanne Juhasz says, “In the transgressive body that she envisions, the divisions of male/female, active/passive, sadist/masochist, and poet/reader would be queered for good” (Juhasz 32). Dickinson’s poetics and politics venture into a “spectrum of possibilities” (Morris 98). Her sexual ambiguities, textual variations, her mysterious unnamed lovers, and her vast range of emotional intensities – all placed together with wild abandon – release Dickinson’s explicit poetic persona from repressions of an unforgiving society. Dickinson daringly describes female anatomy in a way that brings to mind Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. She writes of perky nipples, saying, “The Hills erect their Purple Heads” and graphically denotes a woman’s genitals as ‘heaven’ in the lines: “I went to Heaven – / ‘Twas a small Town – / Lit – with a Ruby – / Lathed – with Down –” (Dickinson, lines 1-4). By not publishing these poems, she made an active choice to keep her work far from the public eye of scrutiny and strictures of convention.

Then again, Dickinson’s letters and poems are hard to distinguish. Isolating the two forms distinctly would be incorrectly imposing whimsical differences on them – ones that the manuscripts do not back up. We definitely cannot cease to make distinctions but it is fair to realise that there exists a certain blurring of boundaries. As Judith Farr explains, “Writing letters that scan, enclosing poems in letters, composing poems that are letters, revising and re-revising both, Dickinson did not always sharply distinguish between the uses of her art” (Farr 16).

The literary and literal Susan inspired Dickinson daily, so much so that Susan enjoys a corporeal presence in the works of Dickinson, figuring as the “Universe,” “Eden,” “Infinity” and “Imagination.” Cristanne Miller points out how “poetry allows Dickinson both to express the urgent intimacy she feels and to establish the distance that allows her to maintain control of her actions, if not her feelings” (Miller 10). Her notes to Sue are often indicative of her need to control or

orchestrate the responses she wished to receive – such was the force of her passionate nature. She wrote, “...just write me every week one line, and let it be, ‘Emily, I love you,’ and I will be satisfied!” Also, “Be Sue – while/ I am Emily” is what Dickinson asked of Susan, for it is only through Susan’s ‘being’ that Dickinson could envision her own existence in the world. Susan is a static reference point, around which she posits herself. Dickinson “inscribes a dialectic of infinite desire” (Howe 84) in every piece of writing addressed to Sue. “To be Susan/ is Imagination” for the lack of quality-time spent with Susan, in person, fosters Dickinson’s imagination. “To have been/ Susan is a Dream” because the closeness she envisages can never be real. Susan is divine, unreachable – even when human. Dickinson’s desire for corporeal contact with Sue lingers on, even as she gets increasingly aware of the distance.

The biggest challenge for Dickinson scholars would be the absence of any stable edition. Dickinson’s works have had multiple editors, from Todd and Higginson, Johnson and Franklin to Cristanne Miller. She left behind around 1800 of her poems, with no way for us to know whether they were finished or abandoned works. Miller acknowledges, with respect to her edition of *Emily Dickinson’s Poems: As She Preserved Them*, “In this edition I present some individual punctuation marks differently from the Franklin edition, typically to agree with Johnson’s or Hart and Smith’s judgments, but I do not thoroughly revise earlier interpretations of these marks.” Miller including variant notes from Dickinson’s revised manuscripts, in the right-hand margin of her edition, is also an editorial choice that Dickinson may not have intended. With no existing ‘authorised’ printed version, the problem for Dickinson studies is that the poet’s tone and cadence is put at risk with every editorial choice.

We aim to discuss a few more of Dickinson’s poems in an attempt to understand her better, for feminist criticism only begins when we put the twin pieces of her identity together – ‘woman’ and ‘poet.’ The poem, “I tend my flowers for thee,” speaks to love’s pristine sanctity through its association with flowers and a subtle delineation of the anticipation of union that sustains two lovers across all adversities. The keynote is struck in the opening line itself and the note of unspoiled purity is sustained along the rest of the poem that witnesses Dickinson envisioning her love’s allegiance to the epitomes of unblemished sanctity, i.e., flowers. A considerable diversity of flowers is named, underpropping and intensifying the note of chastity further, with the naming of each new variety. The poem journeys between the fragrant polarities of the Fuchsia to that of the Daisy, punctuated in between with variants of myriad hues and shapes — Carnations, Hyacinth, Globe Roses — imparting to the reader a feeling akin to that of tramping

through a richly resplendent grove. The flowers contribute a quaintly personal note to the poem with respect to Dickinson's close acquaintance with botany. This poem, though characterised by the presence of love, begins ironically with a reference to absence and returns to it in the line: "Yet — thou — not there —," implying that the agony caused by the distance that has come to be between the two lovers is rankling deep inside of her. Distance is the flip side of the proximity that constitutes the foremost bliss of love, yet it is one of the many insuperable calamities suffered by lovers. The poet, emboldened by her seasoned realisations regarding life, however, accepts this distance with the optimistic conviction of its impermanence. Dickinson invests her love with a religious undertone via the reference to her beloved as "Her Lord" — implying that she is ascribing to herself the role of the more docile and unassuming partner in this intricate arithmetic of love. Inversely, it gives the poem an imperialist construal. The lover's ultimate proclamation of staying inside the "Calyx" (Dickinson, line 24) — a reference to the sepals that comprise the whorl enclosing the petals, forming a protective layer around a bud — enhances the idea of shielding a woman's virginity, carefully preserved for the beloved. This might be Dickinson's muted expression of the 'sexuality' underlying one's avid anticipation, i.e., the physicality that would be unleashed once the lovers reunite.

"Come slowly — Eden!" kindles the fire of passion and leads it to its zealous climax. To the poet, the avidly awaited proximity with her beloved is analogous to entering the idyllic precincts of heaven, in terms of the unearthly delight it entails. Dickinson moulds the whole experience in the shy syntax of a first-ever physical union, a portal of forbidden pleasure, which she approaches with wobbly knees. The experience is something she envisages to savour drop by drop, as if ambrosia, which she wants to savour in luxurious leisureliness. Vivian R. Pollak, in her book, *Dickinson: The Anxiety of Gender* (1984), defines "Eden" in the present context as the signification of "the intense pleasure released by an unaccustomed visitation." Dickinson here "sexualises" Eden and illustrates "a loss of self-confidence which is beautifully controlled by the flower-bee analogy." Pollak elaborates further: "This analogy simultaneously screens her from sexual anxiety and perpetuates it within a paradoxical attitude toward resolutions that are both desired and feared: feared because they are unknown, unknown because they are feared. Building on her anxiety of gender, Dickinson achieves an insight into the relationship between the quality of an experience and the duration of it. This sexualised imagination of alteration, an imagination of excess activated by her experience of want, remains a continuous problem for her" (Pollak 113). The reference to "Jessamines" or jasmines, a flower traditionally associated

with passion, enhances the sultry note of desire that runs through the poem. The significance of passion in Dickinson's private life is evident when we peek into her 'herbarium' (Dickinson's meticulously composed collection of 424 wildflowers), her personal repository of flowers, which opens with a tropical jasmine. Judith Farr, in her illuminating book, *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson* (2004), locates a symbiosis between Dickinson's nurturing of the jasmine and her penning of poems of verboten love, while describing the attachment to jasmine as representative of Dickinson's "profound" attraction for the exotic. Dickinson compares herself to the "fainting Bee" (Dickinson, line 4), the passionate delver into the realm of love, smothered by the ardour of love's agency. As described by Dickinson — the bee, following its ritualistic regimen of circling the shrine of the flower, finally wills itself into the flower's private core, a voluntary surrender to clement captivity.

"I showed her heights she never saw" is one of those Dickinson poems that exemplify the lover's endeavour to measure the profundity of the beloved's feelings. Alongside feelings of ecstasy, the lover often passes through junctures of doubt regarding the intensity of her beloved's involvement in the relationship. Hence, the lover often places the beloved face to face with new challenges in an attempt to judge her intensity of feelings. The lover fancies taking her love interest to unfriendly terrains, namely new "heights" — a metaphor for adversities, dark, tumultuous times, and inclement weathers. Placing her beloved amid uncharted regions or unprecedented complications, she questions whether her lady love is prepared to be by her side during murky turns of events in the future that might necessitate surmounting intractable "heights" of hardship together. On Dickinson's part, these were crossroads she often found herself standing at, in the course of her topsyturvy affair with Susan. The Emily-Susan attachment too had its fair share of insecurities, mostly on Emily's end — such complications were exacerbated by the prescriptive social structure and the heteronormative incline of society. It is quite understandable, under such circumstances, that Dickinson being her quintessentially private self, felt like a solitary vessel amid the high seas ravaged by the surge of such cataclysmic emotions. Dickinson's original version of the poem began: "He showed me Heights I never saw —," which when she addressed it to Susan, was redrafted as "I showed her Heights she never saw —" around the summer of 1862. The amended version — in which the distant "he" is substituted with a discernibly private "I" — accentuates the acutely personal depths the poem as well as her relationship with Sue navigates. Calling this a "perplexing poem," Jean McClure Mudge groups this poem among the significantly few that Dickinson wrote to Susan during the emotional

distance that prevailed between them from around 1854 to the early 1860s. The poem, conforming to the general thrust of the poems of this period, sees "the injured lover seeking reassurance" (Mudge 101), because Susan's silence makes her apprehensive that she might have lost her.

The poem "You love me – you are sure," essentially, is yet another expression of the lover's desperation to elicit a confirmation from the beloved. An unsettling insecurity and saucy doubts keep tormenting the lover, so much so that Dickinson seeks a candid and categorical response from Susan. She prefers to be told the truth, however unsavoury it might be, rather than being kept under deception. She dreads the very idea of awakening to a bright and beaming morning, only to be subjected to the subsequent agony of realising that Susan has deserted her, that her life is now bereft of sunshine and love. She envisions her life, in Susan's absence, as a never-ending night of impermeable dark. Dickinson is dismayed by that imagined ill-fated night when she would rush back to a home devoid of Susan, occupied by a murky void instead. Dickinson, desperate and restive, repeats her query with even greater gusto in the concluding stanza, goading Susan to come up with an earnest disclosure of feelings. Staying under deception would attune Dickinson to exist peacefully with a lie, and the truth would be too abrupt and agonising a shock for her to bear. A vast rubric of poems, such as this, were addressed to Susan during their emotional detachment of the early 1850s and 1860s. Mudge conjectures that the accumulation of familial chores on Susan, including the additional responsibility of being a mother, had made her somewhat less enthusiastic about the relationship. The fervour, however, remained unaffected on Dickinson's end, who was deeply agonised by the obvious aloofness from Susan and repeatedly sought Susan's time and affirmation with almost the same desperation with which a child seeks its mother's attention.

Dickinson wrote "Ourselves were wed one summer – dear" as a poem expressive of the lover's dirge regarding the variance of the respective situations she and her beloved are in – in terms of their personal lives. From the date of the poem (c. summer 1862) and its tone, we can surmise Dickinson's despondency as an obvious outcome of her aversion to Sue's marriage, enhanced by the displeasure caused by Sue's emotional aloofness. The poem presents the problematics of obscure symbolism — one of the most common traits of Dickinson's poetry — which, however, yields meaning on deep reading. The poet begins by underlining the fundamental antagonism between Susan's outlook and hers. The former's approach to life is one that is typically normative, short-sighted, and easily gratified by meagre and convention-bound attainments, such as marital bliss. Dickinson, on the other extreme, looks at the ritual of

marriage as one that has been devised by the patriarchal society to rob women of their freedom, and hence, abhors it. But as her existence is emotionally bound to Susan's, Sue's ill-advised decision affects the course of Dickinson's life. And with Susan's "little lifetime" failing, the poet is devoid of any interest in her own. There are multiple layers to Dickinson's attachment to Susan. Apart from its predominantly romantic predilection, it evinces a strong filial undercurrent. Dickinson's verse often seems to imply that Susan had borne her with the loving intensity of a mother before abandoning her. The abandoned infant – the metaphorical representative of the poet – was salvaged by "Someone carrying a Light" (Dickinson, line 7), someone who endowed the infant with illumination. Based on the implications in the first two stanzas, one tends to interpret the "Sign" (Dickinson, line 8) received by the poet as a 'sign' of love. But again, in the third and fourth stanzas, she resumes comparing herself to Susan, rendering futile any anticipation about the advent of a new lover – thereby underscoring the fact that Susan is the primary passion of her lifetime. To Dickinson, it seems that nature too is partial to Susan in the distribution of its bounties, bathing her cottage with a bright and invigorating sunshine every morning, while Dickinson's homestead is stuck in its sun-deprived tedium, held up perpetually in its lightless limbo of gloomy oceans and "the North" (Dickinson, line 11). "Garden" in the concluding stanza illustrates the vivacity and domestic bliss characterising Sue's private orb, alongside symbolising the "richness of her sexual nature." Conversely, Dickinson's is "a lesser triumph over sterility, because she never effectively renounced her love for Sue, transferred her affection to anyone else, or recovered from Sue's betrayal of her" (Pollak 142).

In the poem "The Malay — took the pearl," the conceptual rivalry with a supposed male figure continues. It seems to allegorise three people enmeshed in a triangular tussle of a relationship. A simplistic reading supposes Susan, Austin, and Emily represented by the Pearl, the Malay, and the Earl respectively. The poem elegantly underscores the cardinal lesson that the one waiting in fear shall gain nothing, neither wealth nor paradise, nor a realisation of the true meaning of things, nor any of the potential values the 'pearl' signifies. Dickinson brings her sexual temptations into the poem – she's one who merely covets the pearl instead of wooing it. She, however, accords a rather cursory treatment to the Sea, the most potent emblem of the poem, leaving its potential incompletely explored. The Sea can be several things, such as the poet's unconscious, or female sexuality, or nature, or even death, and hence, we find the cautious aura of mystique surrounding it. This poem hints at the triumph of physical covetousness over the poet-speaker's Puritanical self-restraint – something that Dickinson forever stays a

helpless witness to, for she fails to manifest masculinity. According to Pollak, the “most poignant moment” of the poem is when Dickinson articulates her inhibition: “I — feared the Sea — too much / Unsanctified — to touch” (Dickinson, lines 3-4). The incoherent syntax obscures her own backstory and her sense of reasoning, while sexual anxiety deranges her thought. Pollak interprets the final lines of the poem as follows: “The poem’s three figures represent the internal divisions of a single nature. The unattainable ideal self (the Pearl), the paralyzing conscience (the Earl), and the admired and despised id (the Malay-Negro) are locked together ... Dickinson satirizes the primitivism of male dominance, fears the sea-change of homosexual conquest, and laments an unlived life” (Pollak 156).

“I cannot live with you” is a poem of heartbreak, predominated by the poet’s obdurate dilemma which finds her divided between three choices: living with her beloved, dying with her, or discovering a world beyond nature — each moulded in negativity. Helen Vendler describes this array of disconnected lines and passages throughout the poem as “the irregular spasms of a voice in perilous disequilibrium” (Vendler 300). Despite the disjunctive content and apparently broken metre, Dickinson sounds her rebellious best with the blasphemous declaration that if she and her beloved ascend heaven together, the glory of her beloved’s face would “put out” Jesus’s divine visage. Compared to the shining countenance of her beloved, Paradise is foul and filthy. Contrasted with the beloved’s excellence, Paradise is base. And Paradise is spitefully avaricious for it wants to keep her beloved isolated from her. The crux of the poem, its central conflict, issues from the fact that the poet is forbidden the union she so fervently seeks. And this is because of the opposite binaries she and her beloved belong to: her beloved serves or at least attempts to serve Heaven, while she is a nonbeliever. Dickinson, however, does not end the poem in separation. Though the concluding stanza does not specify any cause for this insufficiently motivated suffering, it does suggest a comprehensive closure. She leaves us surprised by allowing her star-crossed lovers to “meet apart.” She and her beloved exist in two different rooms with a door left ajar between them, but that door is “oceans” wide, thus signifying their existence in two different far-off continents. Yet they meet, through their love, though physically apart. Despite their paradoxical union, they stay spiritually disjoined, courtesy the beloved’s Christian faith and the poet’s blasphemous despair. Usually, poems in which Dickinson’s imagination receives an unbarred freedom to soar, invoke a distant world beyond the periphery of our mundane concept of sexuality. The current poem underpins the truth about Dickinson’s religion of love which is also a religion of despair. To return

to Vendler, it is “a poem of torture, as with every alternative logical dilemma enacted in the verse, the lovers are wrenched further and further away from each other” (Vendler 303).

We finally take a glimpse at “One Sister have I in our house” as an account of an increasingly distressing relationship. Written in 1858, the poem opens with a comparison between the sister in the house, Vinnie; and the one living “a hedge away” – Susan, who lived next door – in the Evergreens, Susan’s home with husband Austin. Stanza three provides an important input: Sue was less concerned about public opinion than the Dickinsons and was happier than them. The analogy between her and a singing bird in stanza two is transformed here into a comparison with the “Bumble bee of June.” The phallic symbolism, generally associated with Dickinson’s references to the bumble bee, is absent here. Stanza four takes a nostalgic trip – contrasting the present with the bliss of childhood, while describing a journey, presumably into womanhood. Dickinson’s characteristically cryptic note, absent till now, occurs in stanza five which brings into the poem the drastically novel motif of deception. Dickinson’s language assumes a marked obscurity with the introduction of the deception motif. Susan’s eyes are depicted as unmaligned by the mortality that affects violets of May. Those eyes are also said to “lie” – which may or may not be a deliberate pun, perhaps chosen merely to sustain the cadence. The poem is one of Dickinson’s letter-poems addressed to Susan, written after Sue and Austin had settled down in the Evergreens. Emily sent many poems to Susan, some as messages while the others for her evaluation and critical response. As neighbours, the two women often passed notes and poems during face-to-face encounters: the folded paper proving to be a helpfully handy medium of conveying intimate thoughts. The fascicle version of the poem is entirely redacted, hinting that someone, probably Mabel Loomis Todd, tried to blot it out on finding its brazen expressions of fondness ‘offensive.’ This mutilation suggests an attempted erasure of “Sue” as the prime addressee of erotic verses such as “Her breast is fit for pearls.”

Dickinson dedicated an entire canon of her poetry to her beloved Sue, seeking almost nothing in reciprocation. Dickinson loved frequently, attentively, and loyally – she made a practice of exceeding limits. As Rich says, “it is always what is under pressure in us, especially under pressure of concealment – that explodes in poetry.”

For those like John Cody and George Whicher, it was Dickinson’s failure as a woman that pushed her towards poetry: an incredibly masculine skill. But in Dickinson, we find a ‘woman’ and a ‘poet’ – not mutually exclusive of

each other – her poetry cannot be divorced from her persona. Perhaps, it was only as a poet that Dickinson wished to finally fulfil all that she could not as a woman. Dickinson's 'retreat' allowed her to experience a risk, range and depth that, as a woman, she would never achieve. As a poet, she could explore and satiate her psychological and emotional needs. As Margaret Homans claims, "Dickinson's earliest extant poems, the poems in which she first tests the possibility of being a poet, are love poems: the verse valentines of 1850 and 1852..." (Homans 115). Dickinson's identity was essential to her poetic self-achievements. Even with poems that she never published – keeping herself inconspicuous with her hidden art – Dickinson's poetry invites, rather demands, its audience. Dickinson constructed her life and work around a myriad of 'mysteries' that were essentially female – exploring and exploiting the very characteristics and constraints of womanhood that she chose to transcend. Conflating the language of love and the vocabulary of Christianity, Dickinson presented her poems with alternate concepts of quasi-religiosity and heteronormativity – embodying an 'otherness' that would tend to threaten traditional orientations. Sandra Gilbert points out in the context of Dickinson, "Certainly her fivefold transformations – of romance, renunciation, domesticity, nature, and woman's nature – tell us truths about her own religion while hinting at paradoxical enigmas ... her poetic "witchcraft" involves both esoteric and ordinary arts ... As she mythologizes herself, moreover, she even transforms her own life into a kind of "miracle-play," a mysterious existence" (Gilbert 42). Consequently, Dickinson's poetry emerged as a faithful mirror of her mind and accordingly, followed an uneven trajectory. Criticism, during Dickinson's lifetime, was a 'male' genre and male critics were free to judge her for her irrelevance, deviance, irregularity, eccentricity, and freakishness. But one must study Dickinson's nature as a woman in order to cross over to her intellectually.

Living in a masculine realm – Dickinson has forever presented in her poetry a certain arbitrary rapacious, at times murderous, masculine power showcased as God, as Death, or as any unnamed man. This is evidenced in lines such as: "He fumbles at your Soul ... He stuns you by degrees ... For the Ethereal Blow" (Dickinson, lines 1-6). Such a representation in poetry should thwart all confusing 'romantic' speculations regarding the 'masculine' in her life then. Dickinson did not want to risk her precious selfhood being overwhelmed or annihilated by the masculine. In this context, we may go on and quote Rich, "the real question, given that the art of poetry is an art of transformation, is how this woman's mind and imagination may have used the masculine element in the world at large ... including the men she knew; how her relationship to this reveals itself in

her images and language." The powerful emotional effect of these masculine figures in her work come from their intangibility, their godlike qualities, her fascination with them and ultimately, her fear of them. Dickinson's 'Master' letters are indeed strange and intriguing in their intense avowals of passion and self-abasement, and in their destructive dynamic of romance. The final lines of the third Master letter are: "I will never be noisy when you want to be still. I will be ... your best little girl – nobody else will see me, but you – but that is enough ..." – such is the perverse negation of self, and the repeated acknowledgement of smallness on the writer's part. Her Master letters, according to Richard Sewall, progress in the following manner – the first "represents the early stages of her love, the second the climax when she could still imagine herself as having hope, and the last a final cry of despair following a rejection which her Master never explained" (Sewall 25). Dickinson's struggle with her 'ghostly lover' – the nameless "He" – may have drained her strength, generating the most debilitating anxiety. But it is no wonder, that in grappling with the spectre of her own anxiety, she found for herself her true salvation: her art. Her repulsion towards the masculine remains, till today, one of her primary motifs.

Dickinson coded into her poems a certain power structure – while a "Master" only occupies a world of difference and hierarchy, a "Sister" inhabits a world of similarity and equality. While Dickinson's Master letters linked her to a feeling of subordination, making her existence contingent to his encompassing power – she felt free to locate and measure Sue's heart by her own in the lines "For largest Woman's Heart I knew – / 'Tis little I can do – / And yet the largest Woman's Heart / Could hold an Arrow – too – / And so, instructed by my own, / I tenderer, turn Me to" (Dickinson, lines 1-6). Using Simone de Beauvoir's terminologies of subject and object, 'self' and 'other' – we deduce easily, the Master letters offer a testimony of the writer's 'self' turning into an inessential 'other.' Conversely, the letters and poems to Sue record a fundamentally different struggle, but one that involves two autonomous beings. The relationship of the sisters was governed by reciprocity – thus for every act of aggression, there was a desire to soothe and shelter. There was no dominion but a daily sharing of emotions and events. There was nurturing instead of conquering. Dickinson declared, "Why Susie – think of it – you are my precious Sister, and will be till you die, and will be till you die, and will be still" (Dickinson 315).

CONCLUSION

Dickinson's non-heteronormative approach has been ignored for ages – "women's choice of women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, tribe, has been crushed, invalidated, forced into hiding and disguise; and second, the virtual or total neglect of lesbian existence in a wide range of writings, including feminist scholarship" (Rich 632) has been recurrent. Adrienne Rich spoke of the manifestations of male power, as listed by Kathleen Gough, in her essay: "men's ability to deny women sexuality or to force it upon them; ... to confine them physically and prevent their movement; to use them as objects in male transactions; to cramp their creativeness; or to withhold from them large areas of the society's knowledge and cultural attainments" (Rich 638). In such a scenario, heterosexuality remains as the only choice left to women. Absence of choice was the great unacknowledged evil for women of the 19th century. Within a male sexual purview, according to Rich, it is therefore important to fight against the brutal enforcement of heterosexuality before fighting against gender inequality and mere taboos. Because, "lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life" (Rich 649). Rich talks about the brilliant autonomy of Dickinson, "a nineteenth-century white woman genius," in the exact words: "Dickinson never married, had tenuous intellectual friendships with men, lived self-convented in her genteel father's house, and wrote a lifetime of passionate letters to her sister-in-law Sue Gilbert and a smaller group of such letters to her friend Kate Scott Anthon" (Rich 651), while also calling Emily a marriage-resister, committed to her own work and selfhood.

As we all know, love, for Dickinson, was a prism, with a spectrum of possibilities and choices. In a world where women were expendable – 'poetry' was Dickinson's royal coach, her vehicle for realisation and transformation. Far beyond the rhetoric of hierarchy and gender, beyond men and women, beyond the heteronormative, beyond religion, and beyond death – Dickinson, standing in the 19th century, identified an imagined state of being, a life that transcends all, maybe an afterlife, that carries with it: a promise of new vistas of hope, love, freedom and expression.

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