

1-1-1989

A Feminist Critic Responds to Recurring Student Questions About Dickinson

Cheryl Walker
Scripps College

Recommended Citation

Walker, Cheryl. "A Feminist Critic Responds to Recurring Student Questions About Dickinson." *Approaches to Teaching Dickinson's Poetry*. Eds. Robin Riley Fast and Christine Mack Gordon. *Approaches to Teaching World Literature Series*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1989. 142-147.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Scripps Faculty Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scripps Faculty Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

A Feminist Critic Responds to Recurring Student Questions about Dickinson

Cheryl Walker

The questions that concern students when they encounter Dickinson's work are not so different from the critics' questions. In fact, many of our best critics acknowledge that teaching has refined their sense of priorities. In the remarks that follow, however, I want to suggest not how teaching has improved my criticism but how feminist criticism has affected my teaching. Like most other feminist critics, I read a great deal that is not feminist, and in the classroom I often employ analytical techniques that made their appearance long before the revolution in women's studies. But my assignment here is to clarify how a specifically feminist critic might answer frequently asked student questions by drawing on recent feminist research. I confine myself to three questions about the poet's life and three about the poetry.

"Why did Emily Dickinson become a recluse?"

Students want to know the answer to this question because they find the life of a recluse unfathomable. As a feminist critic, I use history to resurrect the experience of gender. In an article in 1895, Rebecca Harding Davis wrote that in the "Gray Cabins of New England" were many such women. Davis's exemplar had not let a human being cross the threshold for five years, yet "nobody thought her conduct odd or remarkable" (621). We know that Lavinia, her sister, did not find Emily's seclusion startling. She said that it occurred gradually, became habitual, and was not the result of any one experience.

Instead of concentrating on the losses Dickinson sustained in her retreat, recent feminist criticism endeavors to make the poet's withdrawal seem like a positive choice. Works like Mary Kelley's *Private Woman, Public Stage* and my *Nightingale's Burden* provide a context for the drive toward seclusion by exploring nineteenth-century society's insistence that women remain within the private sphere. Suzanne Juhasz celebrates Dickinson's choice to "live in the mind" in *The Undiscovered Continent*, and Wendy Martin makes an extensive response to the question of withdrawal in *An American Triptych*:

Paradoxically, by simplifying her world—by remaining single, by excluding random social encounters, by always wearing white—she remained receptive to the intricate patterns and complicated textures of her experience. In order to protect herself from social obligations, Dickinson turned the code that confined nineteenth-century women

to the private sphere into a privilege that permitted her time and space to write. (127)

“Why did she wear a white dress?”

Students will enjoy looking at the picture of Emily's white dress in Jean McClure Mudge's *Emily Dickinson and the Image of Home*. The dress is not at all nunlike; to our eyes it looks bright and even stylish. Working out from the visual signifier helps counteract an impression often left with us by traditional male critics who speak of the poet's “protestant self-excruciation in life's name” (Sewall, *Critical Essays* 85). Unlike an R. P. Blackmur, feminist critics emphasize the ambiguity in the poet's conception of “a woman white.” In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar provide a whole series of interpretations of her, such as maid, virgin, nun, bird, madwoman, corpse, and ghost.

This ambiguity may at first seem intimidating to students, many of whom would prefer a simple answer they could apply to their reading of the poems. But the poems themselves insist on no less than a circle of significations. It should be possible to explore such a circle by considering the poet's use of metonymy. The “polar privacy” of 1695 (“There is a solitude of space”) exists in tension with the queenly white of such “ermine poems” as 117 (“In rags mysterious as these”) and 704 (“No matter—now—Sweet”) where the color has social and political significance. We should not forget that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh, one of Dickinson's favorite heroines, wore white when she chose poetry over love. Other nineteenth-century women poets like Maria Brooks and Christina Rossetti dressed in white. What is the “White Election” Dickinson speaks of in 528? Perhaps it is literary ascendancy. Seen from this vantage point, the white dress comes to represent almost the opposite of what many thought it before: not the nun's renunciatory impulse, but the politician's hunger for inclusion and the earl's arrogance of claim. “I think that what we *know*—we can endure that others doubt, until their faith be riper” (*L* 2: 419), Dickinson once wrote. The white dress can evoke the confident poet as well as the nunlike mask.

“What was the nature of Emily Dickinson's sexuality?”

An heir to romantic notions about sexuality herself, Emily Dickinson uses highly charged rhetoric when addressing both males and females, raising questions in students' minds about the nature and range of her sexual interests. Since undergraduates are likely to be concerned about their own sexuality, these questions are often loaded. It is hard for many students to accept homoeroticism in a writer they wish to admire. It is equally hard

for lesbian students not to dismiss Dickinson's heterosexual passion as a mask.

Helpful perspectives on nineteenth-century female friendships can be found in Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's classic article "The Female World of Love and Ritual" and Lillian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men*. Vivian Pollak faces squarely the possibility that the poet had the homoerotic feelings she expresses in some poems and letters but says that carnality "was not the major focus of her relationship with Sue" (79) and that Susan Gilbert Dickinson was Emily's most intense female love object.

Since critics continue to imagine a heterosexual love plot for Dickinson's life, feminists provide useful ballast in their insistence on the importance of women to Emily's intellectual and moral growth. Adalaide Morris discovers that same-sex relations in Dickinson's poems point toward an ethic of mutual empowerment whereas male-female relations take form within a patriarchal hierarchy where the woman may achieve at best a subversive role reversal.

Dickinson expresses a good deal of curiosity about sexual matters in both poems and letters. As a feminist, I find her range and flexibility (taking us from the horror of "In Winter in my Room" [1670] to the exultation of "Wild Nights—Wild Nights" [249]) more intriguing than the identity of the beloved whom she addresses in the "Master" letters. Students often share this protean territory of desire and prefer its exploration to the biographical guessing game.

"Why does the poet write so many poems about death, about God?"

Growing up in a secularized and sanitized environment where both God and death are carefully segregated from daily life, few students have suffered over religious doubts or watched with fascination to see the "glee glaze." After reminding a class about the intensity of religious concern during the Second Great Awakening, after discussing death rates, deathbed watches, and the poet's own experiences with loss, I try to make students focus on the politics of death and belief in Dickinson's poems. What kinds of human interactions does she use to model her imagined encounters with the absolute?

Long ago Albert Gelpi suggested that Dickinson's relation to the "papa above" might be derived from the poet's interactions with her father (*Mind of the Poet*). Barbara Clarke Mossberg followed up this lead with her formulation of the "daughter construct" in *When a Writer Is a Daughter*. Psycholinguistic feminists like Mossberg focus on the development of Dickinson's psyche, seeing in the various coy, submissive, and resentful

postures she assumes with the deity a variety of psychological survival strategies.

Theorists like Margaret Homans and Joanne Feit Diehl interpret the poetry as a feminine response to a masculine tradition. Homans believes that the discovery of the fictiveness of language freed Dickinson from the burdens of the past and resulted in a liberated theology. In *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* Homans writes, "She uses that linguistic power first to reverse the ordinary direction of power between a feminine self and a masculine other, and then, as in the poems where she undoes antithetical language, uses it to discard the idea of dominance altogether" (201). Discussing the poet's relations to muse, God, and death, Diehl demonstrates how Dickinson appropriates the terms of authority for her own use and refuses to be overwhelmed.

The tactic I'm most familiar with, however, is that of placing Dickinson in a female poetic tradition. After exposing a class to selected passages from *The Nightingale's Burden*, I might ask them to compare a poem about death by Lydia Sigourney with a poem about death by Dickinson. It is useful if they can discover on their own the way Sigourney aims to confirm her reader's expectations, Dickinson to surprise and confound them.

"Why does she use so many odd images, like those from commerce, law, medicine, military science, and politics?"

Like Dickinson's geography of Tunis, Himmaleh, and Timbuctoo, her vocabulary can seem exotic to some students. They need encouragement, however, to use a dictionary and to risk their own interpretations in discussion. Once hooked, they may become demon devotees of *Webster's*.

But vocabulary—like other aspects of Dickinson's style—can be a different stumbling block for the feminist teacher. The ease with which Dickinson enters verbal territories historically off-limits for women may seem to undermine an argument urging gender divergence. Critics have used recent French theory to make a number of arguments about Dickinson's linguistic behavior, but a feminist critic like Cristanne Miller uses it to locate Dickinson's language within a gendered linguistic system. Applying a set of theories about *l'écriture féminine* to the American poet's work and drawing on the writings of Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray, Miller identifies Dickinson's style as explosive, protean, hard to categorize, and always changing. *L'écriture féminine* makes comprehensible Dickinson's sudden shifts from domestic imagery, nature metaphors, and metaphysical conceits to worldly talk of guns, microscopes, and legal documents. Yet Miller also insists on Dickinson's particular female histor-

ical existence. That existence created the alembic in which the poet distilled “essence expressive of her life.”

Another question to consider is how Dickinson imagined her audience. Karl Keller answers with the masculine pronoun: “Imagining her audience to be male gave Emily Dickinson opportunity to play the deviant. Perhaps she could have played that among women, too, but she would not have had to be as brisk, as nasty, as coy, as teasing, as sure. These postures were created by the men in her mind” (“Notes” 69–70).

Students have fun examining a poem like 1466 (“One of the ones that Midas touched”) from the point of view of how it would strike them if written by the “rural man” the poet claims to be. Knowing what we do about Dickinson, we might ask, how does the poem affect us differently? How does persona determine audience and how does an educated audience determine persona?

“Why does the poet speak of herself as male?”

Even the common and uncontroversial “A narrow Fellow in the Grass” (986) brings the students face-to-face with Dickinson’s use of the male pronoun. Refusing to be silenced by the oft-repeated comment that all voice in the lyric belongs to a persona, the feminist critic is likely to agree with Susan Gubar that literary cross-dressing is never completely innocent. Even Dickinson’s insistence to Higginson that her poems were not personal should be assessed in terms of its strategic potential.

The feminist teacher might ask students what specific activities seem to Dickinson to require a male pronoun: the “plashing in the pools” of 652 or the barefoot roaming of 986? These activities surely have their counterparts in the free play of the imagination Dickinson valued so highly. Wendy Martin explains the poet’s habit of personifying herself as male in terms of “an acute conflict between her active and passive and creative and conventional selves” (103). Adrienne Rich, in “Vesuvius at Home,” also interprets the poet’s choice of the male pronoun in these terms: “Since the most powerful figures in patriarchal culture have been men, it seems natural that Dickinson would assign a masculine gender to that in herself which did not fit in with the conventional ideology of womanliness” (Gilbert and Gubar, *Shakespeare’s Sisters* 105). One poem that might stimulate a very interesting discussion along these lines is 196, “We don’t cry—Tim and I,” long ago analyzed by Rebecca Patterson in “Emily Dickinson’s ‘Double’ Tim.”

Piqued by the stimulating analyses I have mentioned and by books like Alicia Ostriker’s *Writing Like a Woman* and *Stealing the Language*, students in the contemporary classroom should have the opportunity to con-

sider connections between gender and genre. Emily Dickinson is a fascinating example of a poet who both affirms and denies those connections. Her own words are the best incentive for continuing discussion:

The Poets light but Lamps—
Themselves—go out—
The Wicks they stimulate—
If vital Light

Inhere as do the Suns—
Each Age a Lens
Disseminating their
Circumference— (883)