



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

English Literature

LIFE BEYOND WHITE-THE OTHER SIDE OF EMILY DICKINSON

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ABSTRACT

Emily Dickinson being one of the famous American poets of the 19th century has been a topic of discussion for decades; whoever has read her poems has garnered a sense of curiosity regarding her life. She has always been known for being an offbeat; portraying a curious lifestyle, her dressing sense, not meeting anybody draws many questions in the mind of the readers. The poems, even though they deal with a variety of topic but it is the love poems that draws maximum attention; her personal life has always interested the readers; but despite many researches nothing concrete comes out of it. Here in this research an attempt has been made to shed some light on the personal life of Emily Dickinson; the various relationships and the status of those relationships has also been discussed with the hope that her love life will come into light. The master letters and the love poems which she wrote during her courtship days have been taken as a backdrop to discuss her personal life.

INTRODUCTION

Emily Dickinson being one of the famous poets of her time was famously known for living an isolated life. She was more profoundly known for her obsession with death. There are more than 1600 poems that discuss the topic of death and many on the relationship between God, man and nature. She is remembered as a recluse who may or may not had any intimate relationship but that did not stop her from writing some of the most famous intimate poems on love.

Emily Dickinson's fascination with death is world known; but there are many facets of her life that is intriguing and needs to be discussed. Amongst all, one of the greatest attention seeking matter was her love life; very little is known about it so this study will try to highlight on this taking the help of the master letters and the love poems that she wrote during those period.

Dickinson's school days and young adulthood included several significant male friends among them Benjamin Newton, a law student in her father's office ; Henry Vaughn Emmons, an Amherst College student and George Gould, an Amherst college classmate of the poet's brother Austin. Early biographers of Dickinson have identified Gould as a possible suitor who might have been briefly engaged to the poet in the 1880's. Her female friendships notably with school mate and later sister in law Susan Huntington Gilbert and with mutual friend Catherine Scott Turner Anthon have also interested Dickinson's biographers who often argue whether these friendships represent typical nineteenth- century girlhood friendships or more intensely sexual and romantic relationships.

The Master Letters

The master letters is one of the most interesting mysteries of the American literature. They were a series of three letters drafted by Emily Dickinson to someone she called "master". Though there is no evidence that these letters were posted, but they do hint towards a long relationship geographically apart, where the letters would have been the sole means of correspondence. However there are no evidences of the letters received by Emily Dickinson as it was destroyed after her death. It was her wish that once she dies her personal should not get invaded so the entire cache of letters was destroyed by her sister Lavinia. very few copies of the epistles that survived were subjected to heavy censorship by her brother Austin and sister Lavinia probably to save their sister from the glares of the public. With this the curiosity among the readers increases because it is a common thought that if one tries to hide something then it definitely arouses interest so that is the case with Emily Dickinson as well. Much research has been done and the letters that have been found between 1858 and 1862 were just after her death so those letters might be the draft version of the letters that were probably posted to someone.

The letters could have been addressed to Reverend Charles Wadsworth, or Samuel bowels the editor of a newspaper in Springfield and a family friend or a professor named William Smith Clarke or it could be no person at all but God. Some of the lines of the letters might shed some light on it:

"Oh did I offend it –didn't want me to tell the truth –Daisy-offend it –who bends her smaller life to his(its) meeker every day-who only asks –a task something to do for love of it-some little way she cannot guess to make master glad.

A love so big it scares her, rushing among her small heart-pushing aside the blood-and leaving her (all) faint and white in the gust's arm- Oh how the sailor strains, when his boat is filling – oh how the dying tug till the angel comes, Master open your life wide, and take me in forever, I will never be tired- 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- built that is enough- I shall not want anymore- and all that heaven will only disappoint me will be (because) it's not so dear"

Going through the lines one thing becomes obvious that is definitely intended towards some real being, her emotions are clearly getting reflected here. Here if we go deep through the lines then one can clearly make out that she is making desperate attempts to convince the 'master' to reciprocate the love she has for him, she is convincing the master that she will do everything for him and will never get tired of it. Further she says that if she gets him she will not want anything else, but here is a sense of earnest request to the person who seems to be authoritative in nature. However there are some scholars who are of the different view, according to them since this letter does not mention any name so this letter could have been intended towards god as well. The language of the letter has a pleading tone; the letters present Dickinson at her most straightforward self- her passion ignited and her intentions unobscured but the identity of the master remains a mystery.

John Evangelist Walsh in his new book Emily Dickinson in Love: 'the case for Otis Lord, presents his own peculiar theory about the recipient of the master letters. Walsh stated that the letters might have been intended for Judge Otis Phillips Lord, a close friend of Dickinson's father and the man with whom she began a relationship in the late 1870's or early 1880's. Eighteen years her senior Lord served the Massachusetts Supreme Court and was very close to the Dickinson's family that in 1875 he advised on the creation of Emily and her mother's will. Shortly thereafter he began a rapturous correspondence with Dickinson that eventually turned into a romantic relationship and a proposal of marriage in 1883, which Dickinson either declined or neglected to answer. Lord died a few months later, on March 13, 1884. Their relationship was full of vigor and vivacity; there were multiple exchanges of letters which is a proof of that. The relationship between

Dickinson and Lord is perhaps the best documented romantic relationship of her life; but Dickinson referred to numerous men in her life as 'master' including Benjamin Newton who was her tutor and possible holder of the title, or it could be the Amherst Academy principal Leonard Humphrey whose death prompted her to exclaim that "master has gone to rest".

There are many poems written by Emily Dickinson that might give us an idea of her relationship with her male friends.

Some of them are as follows:

Wild Nights/Wild Nights- It is a poem written by Emily Dickinson where she longs to share 'wild nights' with an absent lover. She imagines herself as a sailor on a stormy sea, searching for the harbor of her love. The lover in the poem is a reference to the desire of the speaker to be intimate with another person. The speaker begins by exclaiming 'wild nights, wild nights' as if looking out into a storm. She further imagines how her life would be if her beloved was there during such storm. Apart from the literal storm the speaker through the words 'wild nights' suggest an imaginative sexual encounter with her beloved. The whole poem revolves around the sexual intimacy with her beloved and togetherness which she longs for. In this poem readers get no real clue about the speaker's identity but it is commonly held that it is Dickinson who is venting out her feelings. A few group of critics hold the opinion that the poem is directed towards Susan, possibly when their relationship was blooming but it got bitter when Susan moved to Baltimore for ten months to work as a teacher but even when she came back their relationship had already hit a hard rock as it was evident from the letters that were exchanged between them. During Susan's Baltimore days she had written 'I need her-I must have her-Oh give her to me'; and when she got engaged to Emily's elder brother her anger was evident from the letter she wrote to Austin "Dear Austin I am keen, but you are a good deal keener. I am something of a fox, but you are more of a hound! I guess we are very good friends tho, and we both love sue just as well as we can".

I Gave Myself to Him

I gave myself to Him-And took himself for Pay, was ratified this way-The wealth might disappoint...of love-Insolvent-every Noon-

As compared to her other poems this poem is much clearer but here the language is of a different kind; her choice of words has multiple implications which at times become hard to identify. Like many of her poems when we read through it we find a tone of hunger or an earnest desire to get accepted and associated. Here in this poem she uses more of a financial language to express her inner self. She compares herself to 'subtle cargoes' where she lied still as a cargo unbought, the merchant did not know her worth; but now since she has given herself fully she wonders whether her worth will rise or if she will depreciate. There is a sense of uncertainty as in a case of some financial transaction; at the end the company becomes insolvent so is their relationship. Now the question is whether the speaker is referring to herself and her lover as 'ruined' or something else.

While the letters and her love poems are excellent examples of Dickinson's power with words they are studied with the intention of identifying and understanding the intended recipient. The lengthy list of proposed candidates includes Samuel Bowels, family friend, newspaper editor and publisher; William Smith Clarke, a scientist and educator based in Amherst; Charles Wadsworth a minister whom Dickinson heard preach in Philadelphia; as well as George Gould and Susan Dickinson; while many have stated that the letters are simply literary exercises or the author might be trying to resolve an internal crisis. Here unrequited love can be seen as the trigger for her excellent compositions. Her devastating failed love life seems to be a moving force to let her vent out her feelings. She chose literary devices to fight with her inner self which in turn led out some excellent

masterpieces of work. At the end we can only say that Emily Dickinson had different crushes with teachers and friend along her life. She had many enthusiasms through her life, many of them were extra special without them she couldn't live, yet she moved on. She had many relationships but none of them succeeded, so those failures and the pain that came through were expressed through her poems and master letters. But as stated by some of the critics and Richard Sewall, author of 1974,s "the life of Emily Dickinson"- 'she had many enthusiasms, couldn't live without them, and went at a time but from one to another, perhaps even two at a time but for different reasons' 'Susan wasn't the only one, but was definitely the only constant'.

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