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Sexual Imagery: Why Does It Still Matter?

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Sexual Imagery: Why Does It Still Matter?

Sexual imagery, why does it still matter today? Or better yet, why does it still matter in Emily Dickinson's poetry? Dickinson is one of the many writers that touch up on topics about sex and sexuality. Two taboos that for years have been demonized by western society.

Dickinson's work matters today because it allows discussion on sexual liberation, sexuality in literature, teaching queer studies, and the removal of heteronormativity. Dickinson's work investigates these societal plagues that started during the 19th century and continue today.

The sexual imagery in Dickinson's work opens discussion on the taboos of sex because they demonstrate a speaker who is sexually liberated. For example, *Wild Nights*, "Wild Nights - Wild Nights! / Were I with thee/ Wild Nights should be/ Our luxury!" ("Poem 249", lines 1-4). Here the speaker freely and passionately speaks on a steamy night with a non-gendered lover. They express their desire without hesitation, which influences how scholars read sex in poetry. In seeing an open speaker, the topic of sex in poetry is no longer focused on shame, but on the speaker's indulgence. Here the speaker is arguably feminine through the tone being used, it is very expressive and sensual. It is a tone not typically used by masculine speakers. With this speaker being more feminine, the poem then removes the shame in female sexuality as well. Women have always been more stigmatized when speaking about sexual joy. It has always been viewed as improper and even monstrous for women to speak on their sensuality in a positive way. The conservative view has always forced women to paint themselves as pure with no thoughts on temptation; this goes all the way back to the story of Adam and Eve. This story has long since placed a shame on the topic of sex and sexuality, especially for women.

Through the poem *Wild Nights* this shame is removed as the speaker freely discusses their want to express their sensuality and their sexuality as well. In Dickinson keeping the lover

gender-neutral, she makes the poem universal to people of all sexualities including her speakers. Raymond Frontain recognizes this aspect of the speaker as well in his article *Those Wilder Nights*, “the suggestion is that the way to regain paradise is not through renunciation of the physical appetites, as a traditional moralist have argued, but through the "luxury" of sensual self-indulgence with her gender-unspecified partner,” (2). In the first suggestion that moralists write, they demonstrate a more conservative view. They view the speaker as merely lusting over the gender-neutral partner when the poem is about a speaker longing for the luxury to self-indulge with their partner. The second suggestion of the poem that I agree with demonstrates a more loving aspect and removes that shame of labeling things as ‘sinful’ for longing for a partner. In this poem, it is important to acknowledge the gender-neutral lover because they allow readers to do a heterosexual reading or queer reading.

However, Dickinson does have poems where there is a specific sexuality being portrayed which allows the introduction of queer studies into literature and simultaneously removing the taboos around it. Poem 340, for example, highlights the fears that the speaker has when deciding to indulge in their lesbianism. “Is Bliss then, such Abyss/ I must not put my foot amiss/ For fear I spoil my shoe? / I’d rather suit my foot/ Than save my Boot-/ For yet to buy another Pair/ Is possible, At any store-,” (“Poem 340”, lines 1-8). The speaker is using the boot as a metaphor to describe their lesbian desires. What this poem does for literature is open queer studies, because now scholars can analysis what it means to be a queer speaker and what does queer literature look like. This is important because it does not compare to heterosexual studies. This poem for one, does not highlight two lovers separated by family like Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. This poem highlights a lesbian speaker afraid to indulge in their desire out of fear of being

shunned by society and God. Dorothy L. Lochridge analyzed this best in her research paper on Emily Dickinson's sexual metaphors:

Applying Freudian analysis to the present poem, one finds that the foot represents woman's penis, the shoe, the feminine genitalia.² Both belong to the Lady speaker. The Abyss, which is both the Bliss and the muddy road that the speaker must cross to reach it, is inherently suggestive of the vagina. On the symbolic level then, the speaker wishes to fulfill her apparently homosexual desires, but is afraid of damaging her own femininity in gaining bliss through sex with another woman. She decides not to run the risk. (101-102).

Lochridge brings up the fear of the speaker damaging their own femininity, which could also tie into that the speaker is afraid of damaging their own reputation. Being queer during the 19th century was considered a huge deviation that the people in these communities were often shunned and possibly killed. Tying this back to Dickinson, her own brother, Austin Dickinson, had Susan's name erased from letters and poems that Dickinson wrote. He changed the names in these poems so Dickinson's and Susan's reputation would not be damaged. He did not want people to believe that Dickinson and Susan were having an affair. Dickinson's own editors also often urged her to change the tones of her speaker to match the accepted heteronormative culture at the time out of fear of Dickinson's work receiving backlash for being Queer.

These fears of being judged are represented in the poem, the dirt on the boot represents fear of judgement and being 'soiled'. The boot is pure, it is a symbol of the speaker's genitalia, that is why when the boot steps into the Abyss it is tainted. It goes back to the Christian view that same sex relations are wrong. Same sex relationships have been demonized by the Christian bible for two reasons: 1. They believe that God made man and woman and gave them two

different sexual organs so the two could populate the earth, so sex is then meant only for procreation and not pleasure. Pleasure is highly frowned upon as it means indulging in sin in these Christian beliefs. And 2. the Christian bible specifically states that “Man shall not lie with man”. Even though this line in the bible was purposefully translated to be homophobic and push the Christian agenda in shaming sex, many take this as the word of God and therefore believe that same sex relationships are an abomination.

For these reasons, I propose that what Dickinson is doing in this poem is having her speaker acknowledge her fears of being viewed as ‘spoiled’ in the eyes of God’s and in the Christian society. Which is why the speaker is afraid of damaging their reputation if they should acknowledge their sexuality and sexual desires. What this poem does is expose scholars everywhere to queer studies. Queer studies is a subtopic in literature where scholar’s analysis gender, sex, sexuality, and think critically how they tie back into and are affected by culture and societal norms. Queer studies has been a study that is too often tip toed around in the classroom out of fear of backlash. In the article *Wasn't She A Lesbian?* Kristin M. Comment admits that when she first heard this question being proposed she quickly dismissed her student for the sake of staying within the norm even though she is a part of the LGBTQ community. Queer theory allows scholars to be exposed to the perspectives and lifestyles of the LGBTQ community. As to how queer theory relates back to the poem, the poem normalizes the fears of being queer and allows society to read from it and understand the queer perspective. It is still important today to read these works even if they do date back to Dickinson’s time and further because these works are creating a path in acknowledging that certain authors were gay icons but couldn’t express themselves due to the societal structures that are still plaguing us today.

Historians and scholars now even like to deny that certain authors, like Dickinson, were queer to continue to erase queer studies. They way these scholars and historians view the evidence of a queer identity in work is to dismiss the relationship between the lovers as friendship. Removing Dickinson's poetry and looking at her history she was a queer writer. It is alluded that Dickinson was a lesbian or at the very least a bisexual due to letters that revealed conversations between a male and female lover. Dickinson is too often dismissed as being a heterosexual writer by scholars because Dickinson had love letters to a male and that she has used a gender-neutral lover throughout her poetry. As for the queer sexual images in Dickinson's poem they dismiss that sensual love as being a romantic friendship between two women. The modern term for this love is "gals being pals" a phrase used to remove queer analysis in literature. An example of this term being used today is in news outlets such as Daily Mail who write, "Kristen Stewart gets touchy with her live-in gal pal," (MailOnline Reporter, 2015). It's understandable where these scholars come from, the social contracts that were placed on women during Dickinson's time-imposed women to rely on each other and therefore they did have a more romantic friendship. Comment wrote about this issue in her journal on recognizing Dickinson as a lesbian in literature:

Rosenberg suggests that the reason for this was the sex-seg- regated nature of 19th-century American life; women's relegation to the domestic sphere forced them to rely on each other rather than on men for emotional support and for instruction in domestic tasks, so their intimacy was encouraged and expected. Moreover, 20th-century psychology had not yet pathologized homoerotic behavior, which allowed these relationships to exist as a norm within the culture. (64).

One of the scholars that does this is Martha Ackmann Norton. She displays this behavior in her novel, *These Fevered Days*, where she goes over the 10 pivotal moments of Dickinson's life, one of them being the announcement of Susan's marriage to Austin, which arguably revealed the affair between the two. Ackmann makes no comment at all of Dickinson's sexuality or her sexual poems to Susan. The way she portrays the relationship between the two is that they were overly romantic friends and so that is what made Dickinson upset when Susan announced her engagement to Austin. Frontain criticizes Ackmann on this in his journal as well, he states:

In her desire to produce a Dickinson who is palatable to a general readership, Ackmann strategically avoids those pivotal moments when Dickinson boldly puts on display her "freckled Human Nature"-that is, her exploration of her deepest desires and fears. Ackmann's tight focus reveals in sharp detail certain parts of Dickinson's life and work. Unfortunately, it also reminds us of the damage done to the larger picture by such a myopic view. I find it difficult to believe that not one of Ackmann's "ten pivotal moments" should reveal anything about the poet who wrote "Wild Nights" and "Come Slowly-Eden!" (2).

The argument that Frontain presents is that Dickinson's sexuality does matter when it comes to reading her poems. It is important to recognize Dickinson's sexual liberation in her poems as well as they reveal what the poet's relationship was with Susan. There are poems and letters out there that had Susan's name mentioned but were later erased by editors and family members so Dickinson's sexuality would not be revealed. For example, Poem 156, the name used instead of Susan is a nickname, "Dollie". This poem is filled with romantic lines such as "You love me- you are sure-" (line 1), "When frightened - home to Thee I run-" (10), "To find the Sunrise left-/ And Orchards - bereft-/ And Dollie - gone!" ("Poem 156", lines 6-7). The

editors kept the name “Dollie” because it didn’t explicitly state Susan’s name or even her other nickname “Sue”. Lochridge discusses these name changes in her essay,:

Mr. Dickinson stipulated that if Emily's letters to him were to be used, the name of one of her girlhood friends must be left out—that of Susan Gilbert, his wife. But omitting her name was not enough. Before turning over the letters he went through them, eliminating Susan Gilbert's name and in some instances making alterations to disguise a reference to her. . . . Sometimes, after obliterating what Emily had written, pronouns were altered; "she" to "he" or to "you." In other cases "Sue" was changed to "she" or to "Lucy," even to "Vinnie."... ^the mutilations^ first appear in the fall of 1351 when Emily began to show a special interest in Sue after she had gone to teach in Baltimore. But not until more than a year later does the image intrude itself upon the reader so insistently that he is unable to forget the bitterness of Austin's life,” (9).

Despite this attempt to remove Susan from Dickinson’s queer narrative, Dickinson’s poetry still presents their relationship and scholars can read their letters and see that Susan and Dickinson were having an affair. The reason I bring this up is because what Ackmann is doing in not addressing Dickinson as a queer and sexually liberated poet is preventing the advancements of queer theory in literature. What Ackmann contributes to the conversation of literature, in terms of Susan And Dickinson’s relationship, is reducing them down to a loving friendship.

This historical narrative pushes heteronormativity which Dickinson was trying to remove using sexual imagery and metaphors. Poem 211, for example, “Come Slowly- Eden! / Lips unused to Thee-/ Bashful - sip thy Jessamines-/ As the fainting Bee-/ Reaching late his flower, / Round her chamber hums-/ Counts his nectars-/ Enters- and is lost in Balms,” (“Poem 211”, lines

1-8). H. Jordan Landry explains the theory of a heteronormative triangle, man, god, and wife. This is the heteronormative idea that is presented in Christian culture which sets the ground rules of what a “normal” couple looks like. Poem 211 goes against these structures as it uses the metaphor of the ‘Bee’ to present a female male hybrid. This presents a masculine female, reaching a female “flower” to engage in sexual intercourse. This removes the idea of the heteronormative trinity and only presents two figures, a female and a female. Landry analysis more in how this triangular structure is broken in the poem:

This lesbian male bee, this feminine phallic body, is also imaged as a guide to the "I" in such poems as "Come slowly – Eden!".... a triangular dynamic underpins these two other poems; the "Bee" is the model for the "I" in approaching another beloved body, the object of desire. In essence, in René Girard's terms, the bee functions as the mediator of desire; seeing or imagining the bee allows the "I" a model for how to desire, worship, and indulge in the body of another. (49).

In Dickinson removing this heteronormative trinity in her work with a trinity of same sex love with desire she introduces scholars to the world of queer studies. Dickinson provides a perspective beyond the heteronormative that allows us to understand those in the LGBTQ community and how they view the world. The heteronormative structure only allows for literature to be read from a heterosexual point of view, which prevents us from reading issues that is being presented in Queer literature. Poem 211 is not only about the heteronormative structure, but also about masculinity and femininity in a relationship of same sex partners. Same sex partners are often asked “Which one is the girl/guy?” but there is no partner who symbolizes either gender. In some relationships there might be a partner that prefers to identify with a certain gender but that doesn’t mean that all same sex couples are like this. It is common for two

partners to be constantly switching between gender roles which is why there is no set “girl” or “guy”. This poem raises more of a question on gender than it does sex which in heteronormative literature isn’t a relevant topic because of how much sex influences it. For this reason, Dickinson is extremely influential in topics of same sex relationships in literature, she provides a new perspective to queer theory.

In conclusion, Dickinson’s sexual imagery does still matter. Dickinson’s literature allows readers to have a more open conversation on sex. It allows them to see sexual poetry in the terms of human nature and the emotional aspect behind it. The sexuality in Dickinson’s poems contributes to the expansion of LGBTQ studies, as well as provide a queer lens for when reading literature. Her poetry highlights a big issue in our history, which is the “gals being pals” trope that prevents us from reading women poets as lesbian poets. As we expand and learn more about the sexual liberation, sexuality in literature, and the removal of heteronormativity, Dickinson continue to make a difference in today’s teachings of queer studies, so forth that I conclude this essay by saying Emily Dickinson was a gay icon.

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