

Challenging Literary, Religious and Social Authority: A Study of Emily Dickinson's Selected Poems

Rohmingmawii Pachuau

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government Aizawl College, India

Abstract

Emily Dickinson's poems have been a subject of much discussion and debate in academia due to the originality of her writing style, inconspicuous nature of her poetry and her unique poetic techniques. This paper attempt to locate her as a poet who challenges the status quo through two selected poems. The focus is not so much on the theme of the poem which are quite traditional but the way Emily Dickinson handled them. In voicing the inner conflicts of her mind, Dickinson dared to voice the questions and doubts of her age against the establish institutions of her society. Emily Dickinson didn't care for what was socially acceptable and lived life on her own terms.

KEYWORDS: rebel, faith, woman, tradition

It is impossible to read Emily Dickinson's poetry without encountering copious examples of her subversive rebellion against established social and religious institutions. Much have been said and written about her reclusive style of living and the peculiar way she interacts with the society. But her prolific writings reveal to us that her outward life was very different from how her mind functioned. Her lifestyle greatly impacted her writing style as well. Her writings reflect her attempt at recreating herself. Madeleine Olnek has a very different take on the notion that Emily was shy and a recluse, she states, "I think the true Emily Dickinson was very much a rebel. She led her life on her own terms. She refused to go to church. She only saw the people she wanted to, which is very different from being afraid to leave your room. She wasn't a recluse; she was socially selective, and she only saw the people she wanted to. Her family was the most prominent family in town, so that was extremely scandalous of her."

Emily Dickinson's unique style of writing has been a subject of much curiosity. She disregarded conventional rules of writing, rhyming and sentence structure. Emily Dickinson made extensive use of unconventional punctuations like her use of dashes to divide the sentences and phrases and provide pauses which made her ahead of her time and an iconoclast.

Traditionalist will probably find fault with her technique of writing and attribute the perceived flaw to her lack of education or mentors in writing. But her writing style is a testament to her philosophy of life and her conviction in asserting her unique individuality. In her poem "Because I Could Not Stop For Death" considered to be the most technically perfect in terms of stylistics, her poetic excellence is seen in her concise selection of words. Commenting on how Emily Dickinson began the poem, S.S.Chopra comments, "Compression, aphorism and epigrammaticality are Dickinson's tools with which she proceeds. Without any preparation or apology, she takes the reader by surprise by her abrupt beginnings and by the sharp sudden zigzags". The revolutionary nature of

her writing style has been lauded by modern scholars who see in her a modernist poet in the making.

Emily Dickinson belonged to a very influential family. Her grandfather and her father were public figures and the Dickinson home was a center of the Amherst society. Her father dominated the family and the rest of the family including his wife lived in awe of him. Emily Dickinson was too painfully aware of how her sex limits her participation in the politically active lives of the men in her life. In a letter to her future sister-in-law Susan Gilbert, she whines, "Why can't I be a Delegate to the great Whig Convention?...don't I know all about Daniel Webster, and the Tariff and the Law?" She channeled her frustrations with the patriarchal society in which she lived and her conviction about her worth and ability into her poems.

In the poem, "My Life had stood- a Loaded Gun", the poet-persona refers to herself as 'a Loaded Gun' standing in a corner of the house. The analogy is fitting here as it depicts Emily's own place in her household. Her sex denies her the opportunities that should have been hers. The loaded gun by itself is helpless to do anything even though it is a powerful tool because without an owner claiming it, it cannot be put into use.

My Life had stood- a Loaded Gun-

In Corners-till a Day

The Owners passed-identified-

And carried me away-

The poet persona went on to say that the owner uses her/the gun to hunt a doe in the woods and also to guard its Master's head at night. In other words, the gun is an asset to its Master. The poet persona, who we can safely assume is a woman knows and understands its own worth and value. The poet person goes on to assert how powerful it is by pointing out how the gun has the power to kill but laments at the same time that it doesn't have the power to die. Tremendous power exists with a sense of helplessness in the loaded gun which represents the life constraints on the life of a woman in a patriarchal society which privileges men.

Emily Dickinson had a complicated relationship with the Puritan faith. She was the only girl in her class who refused to publicly confess her faith when she was studying at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. In a letter to one of her friends she writes, "Christ is calling everyone here, all my companions have answered, even my darling Vinnie believes she loves, and trusts him, and I am standing alone in rebellion"(375,1994). This resistance in the face of popular opinion echoes Emily Dickinson's opposition of established institutions of faith or society. The poem "Those -Dying then" clearly shows that Emily couldn't escape from the influence of her faith despite her apparent dislike of it. The Christian doctrine of life after death, of Christ ascension is clearly depicted in the first three lines of the poem,

Those-dying then,

Knew where they went-

They went to God's Right Hand-

But Emily's own lack of faith and disparagement of God's power and sovereignty enters in the next three line as the poet persona declares that "God cannot be found". A conflict can be located in the final paragraph as the poet persona admits that 'The Abdication of Belief Makes the behavior small.' In spite of her rebellion, Emily Dickinson couldn't deny the transformation in the lives of the people that is bought about by a life lived in faith. She concludes by saying that maybe a false faith, an "ignis fatuus" would be better than a total lack of Godly values in a person's life. Emily Dickinson rebel against the coercive forces working through institutionalized religious system.

Dickinson showed that a woman can transcend the limitations of oppressive traditional institution to expressed her female self and break away from the confine of her private space. From the confine of her room, Dickinson resists subordination and created a body of subversive feminist text through her body of works.

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