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Project Seminar

12/14/2016

Final Project Write Up

### Was Emily Dickinson Bi?

I started out researching the function of celebrity in the Simpsons. I did a lot of research, collecting data of celebrity appearances in the show who played themselves. I developed theories based on my own thinking as well as things from articles such as “Framing Celebrity: New directions in Celebrity Culture”. I wrote about how Tony Bennet was the first celebrity to play himself on an episode (season 2 episode 5) about Homer becoming a sort of minor “celebrity” and then losing the limelight. I wrote about the Michael Jackson episode and how it sparked my thinking on the function of celebrity. The show uses little references, inconsequential celebrity appearances as signifiers, to symbolize the influence of popular culture. They want to point out to us the ridiculousness of our obsession with spectacle and our iconizing of the celebrity. Then I talked about how in doing so, they rely on our obsessions, thus participating in the ridiculousness of it all. They point the finger then perpetuate the cycle by becoming spectacle themselves. They laugh at the monetization of fame, then there are Simpsons video games, and shirts, and toys, and a feature film. They laugh at their own hypocrisy but continue to participate in it. But Then! My passions were diverted to a completely different direction. To a facet of a topic that we considered earlier in the semester. We talked about Emily Dickinson, and all of her poems about nature. Then for another class, we began to talk about Dickinson as well and I was forced completely due to the influences of my own obsession to change topics to: Was Emily Dickinson Gay?

This happened mostly by accident. I was going through the archive of her manuscripts and noticed that there were a lot of poems sent to one person in particular: Susan Dickinson, her sister in law. So I did what any of us would do, I created a google spreadsheet and I listed all of the poems that she wrote to Susan over the years and counted how many there were and then counted how many poems in general she wrote those years. Now, just counting the poems to Susan, it seemed like ridiculous numbers (44 in 1859, 49 in 1863) but then as you can see by the charts, she was just writing a ridiculous number of poems in general (178 in 1859, 498 in 1863). I did go through the years in the archive and find a way to get a count of all of the poems without

counting one by one. Now to be completely honest, if I had allowed myself more time, these numbers might have been different because there were a few duplicates in the list, but the numbers would have been pretty close. I found that out of 4,823 entries of poem manuscripts on the archive, 436 of them are sent to Susan Dickinson that's 9% of her total poems.

Going by Year didn't reveal too much because, although there were years with a high degree of poems written to Susan, those were years where she just wrote a high degree of poems. I then decided to read the poems and find letters that she sent, and that is where I found most of my evidence. Here's an excerpt from one of the letters:

"I cannot believe, dear Susie, that I have stayed without you almost a whole year long; sometimes the time seems short, and the thought of you as warm as if you had gone but yesterday, and again if years and years had trod their silent pathway, the time would seem less long. And now how soon shall I have you, shall hold you in my arms; you will forgive the tears, Susie, they are so glad to come that it is not in my heart to reprove them and send them home. I don't know why it is -- but there's something in your name, now you are taken from me, which fills my heart so full, and my eye, too."

And another from the closing of another letter to Susan:

"Now, farewell, Susie, and Vinnie sends her love, and mother her's, and I add a kiss, shyly, lest there is somebody there! Don't let them see, *will* you Susie? Emilie – open me carefully"

These quotes reveal a love and devotion for Susan that seems beyond friendship. Carroll Smith Rosenberg describes a world of homosocial relationships in a time when there are no other real options in her article "The Female World of Love and Ritual". She describes extremely strong bonds formed between females because of the abundance of time spent together and no real time of this nature spent with many other people. She also acknowledges the possibility of some of these relationships being romantic, but uses an example of an intense mother daughter bond to refute this. Now, this could be the case for Emily and Susan. They could have had an intense friendship, but reading over the poems sent by Emily to Susan give me pause. This poem, Emily sent Susan in 1854. This was after Susan had become engaged to Emily's brother and when Susan was away from Emily. One of the very few that she wrote that year. It reads:

"I have a Bird in spring  
Which for myself doth sing –  
The spring decoys.

And as the summer nears –  
And as the Rose appears,  
Robin is gone.  
Yet do I not repine  
Knowing that Bird of mine  
Though flown –  
Learneth beyond the sea  
Melody new for me  
And will return.  
Fast in a safer hand  
Held in a truer Land  
Are mine –  
And though they now depart,  
Tell I my doubting heart  
They're thine.  
In a serener Bright,  
In a more golden light  
I see  
Each little doubt and fear,  
Each little discord here  
Removed.  
Then will I not repine,  
Knowing that Bird of mine  
Though flown  
Shall in a distant tree  
Bright melody for me/Return.”

Emily was always sending these letters and poems of intense longing and missing Susan. Now, some would say that some of these correspondence are normal for female friendships of the time. In a letter to trusted friend, Thomas Wentworth Higginson (to whom she sent quite a few letters and poems to look over) Emily said to him that she sometimes would write from the perspective of a man to a possible love interest. Now, I could have just taken that at face value and say hey,

that's probably it. Like this poem from 1858 – during her writing boom – that she sent to Susan, the first line being “Morns like these”:

Morns like these - we parted -  
Noons like these - she rose -  
Fluttering first - then firmer  
    To her fair repose.  
Never did she lisp it -  
    It was not for me -  
She - was mute from transport -  
    I - from agony -  
Till - the evening nearing  
    One the curtains drew -  
Quick! A sharper rustling!  
    And this linnet flew!

In case that poem wasn't so convincing, the next one is from 1859, the first line being “Her breast is fit for pearls”:

Her breast is fit for pearls,  
But I was not a "Diver" -  
Her brow is fit for thrones  
    But I have not a crest.  
Her heart is fit for home -  
I - a Sparrow - build there  
Sweet of twigs and twine  
    My perennial nest.

I have a bunch more, some more specific than others. The title to the next one is “You love me- you are sure” which sounds like a song from the 30s about someone being spurned by love.

Let's see if that is true:

You love me -- you are sure --  
    I shall not fear mistake --  
    I shall not cheated wake --

Some grinning morn --  
To find the Sunrise left --  
And Orchards -- unbereft --  
And Dollie -- gone!  
I need not start -- you're sure --  
That night will never be --  
When frightened -- home to Thee I run --  
To find the windows dark --  
And no more Dollie -- mark --  
Quite none?  
Be sure you're sure -- you know --  
I'll bear it better now --  
If you'll just tell me so --  
Than when -- a little dull Balm grown --  
Over this pain of mine --  
You sting -- again!

Dollie, by the way was a nickname that Emily had for Susan.

Next is from the same year:  
Is it true, dear Sue?  
Are there two?  
I should'nt like to come  
For fear of up joggling Him!  
If you could shut him  
In a Coffee Cup,  
Or tie him to a pin  
Till I got in -  
Or make him fast  
To "Toby's" fist -  
Hist! Whist! I'd come!

I could be reading too far into this, but I read it as Emily's heart brokenness over Susan choosing her brother over her. Especially since her brother was a cheater who had a long term affair with a friend of Emily's actually who helped her with some of her work. Mabel Loomis Todd. The next poem is from the following year and it sort of solidified this theory for me:

He fumbles at your Soul  
As Players at the Keys  
Before they drop full Music on –

He stuns you by degrees --  
Prepares your brittle Nature  
For the Etherial Blow  
By fainter Hammers -- further heard --  
Then nearer -- Then so slow  
Your Breath has time to straighten --  
Your Brain -- to bubble Cool --  
Deals -- One -- imperial -- Thunderbolt --  
That scalps your naked Soul --  
When Winds take Forests in their Paws --  
The Universe -- is still –

This is my last piece of poetic evidence, because I got tired and I thought that it would be the perfect poem to end this presentation with. It is from 1877:

To own a Susan of my own  
Is of itself a Bliss --  
Whatever Realm I forfeit, Lord,  
Continue me in this!

Susan was elusive, stubborn, even – according to Austin's mistress – mean to Emily. Writer, Rebecca Patterson wrote the book *The Riddle of Emily Dickinson*, which was joint biography on Emily and her friend Kate Turner. Rebecca received more insight into the life and thoughts of Kate Turner than anyone not related to her ever has. When Turner's grand-nieces – who allowed Patterson all of the access to Kates diaries and letters – found out the nature of her argument from her findings, they rescinded their permission. There has also been evidence of

Emily possibly having an affair with one of her father's friends, after her father's death: Judge Otis Phillips Lord. There is even evidence that they might have been engaged before he died in 1884, which is only 2 years before she did. I even read an article that said that Susan claimed to see her in the sitting room in the arms of some man once, so in conclusion: Maybe she's bi?

The reason that I find all of this important is because it is Emily Dickinson. She is regarded as one of the most influential writers in American history. She is heavily quoted and admired and taught, and we know nothing about her. Christopher Benfrey put it in a way that I never could in the New York Times in 1986: "She is part of our language without quite being part of our history". We read her and we write her and we try to use her poetry and her letters to force her into the history of our nation in any way that we can, but it is so difficult; she is a "Myth". Maybe finding out that she loved could give us deeper insight into her poetry. Maybe finding out that the love was forbidden could give us deeper insight into her. It is true that at this point any research done is purely speculation. There is no way to find the truth for sure, especially since she didn't keep a lot of letters. She was so reclusive that we can't even get to her today, with all of our technology and our intelligence, she still eludes us. I just want to coax her out.

## Research Materials

<http://www.edickinson.org/works>

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