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English Literature Thesis

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Flowers for Abiah: Emily Dickinson's Claim to Live According to Her Own Rules

"...and in our rambles we found many and beautiful children of spring..." - Emily Dickinson to Abiah, South Hadley, 16 May 1848

Wendy Martin's introduction to Emily Dickinson begins by painting a picture of Emily Dickinson that is layered, multi-faceted, and rigorously complex. Her work, like Dickinson, herself, was as intricate as the world we live in; nothing was black or white. Published mostly posthumously, her readers know only the version of *Emily* that is on paper. Readers struggle to understand who this woman really was, but the limits of language often fail us. Moreover, in her poetry and letters, Dickinson strategically coded her language to individual addressees.¹ Consequently, there have been various misconceptions and suppositions about who the woman behind these poems and letters really was. Besides her fascination with nature, her tendency to question and dispute, her love for her family and friends, there remain many gray areas in regard to Emily Dickinson. No one knows for certain who the Master Letters were for, why she chose to never marry, or why she lived as a recluse during her last few years, for example. Definitive answers cannot be accessed.

When studying her epistolary work, readers encounter various sides of Dickinson. There aren't two letters that are alike, and many times the letters seem to be written *by* different people depending on who they were addressed to. She often signed her letters with a signature that

¹ Hart describes this "coding" in *The Encoding of Homoerotic Desire*, (p 251).

show different spelling variations of her name, or by referring to herself as a “scholar,” “gnome,” or even “uncle.” It is obvious that the letters are facets of Emily Dickinson. Johnson states, “the letters are always self-portraits” (Johnson, “Selected Letters” XV). The letters serve as mirrors. However, they also reflect the different roles she was forced to play: the various sides of Emily Dickinson as would be accepted by the people she was close with and wrote to and, more importantly, as would be accepted by Victorian society’s rules. There are special qualities in Dickinson’s epistolary body of work, and these are evident in the letters she wrote to Abiah Root. Here, readers are presented with Dickinson’s earliest feelings and ideas of liberating herself from fixed systems and of her desire to encourage and celebrate feminine power. Dickinson disguises her ideas with the use of figurative language and symbolism, thus these letters show the intricacies that eventually become the foundation of her poetry. They are our earliest evidence of the mind behind the poet and of Dickinson’s inclination to create her own place in this world.

Emily Dickinson met Abiah Root in 1844 when they both attended Amherst Academy. Abiah Palmer Root had moved to Amherst to live with her cousins, but the following year she left Amherst to return to Springfield, Massachusetts, and so their relationship relied heavily on the letters they wrote to each other.² Emily writes to Abiah from the ages of 14 years old until she is 23 years old. At first the relationship flourished and the letters Dickinson wrote to Abiah show how close the girls were. The letters to Abiah discuss a wide range of topics: gossip, education, religion, time, nature, and female norms. In the span of almost ten years readers get a sense of Dickinson’s life in her younger years, but the letters also depict the evolution of Dickinson’s thoughts as she matures and becomes a young woman. Dickinson’s letters to Abiah

² R.W. Franklin, *Emily Dickinson to Abiah Root: Ten Reconstructed Letters*, (p. 1).

explore the life of a woman during the Victorian era and show a very distinct side of herself. The letters to Abiah all have similar tones, repeat the same symbols and thematically encourage female power.

While Dickinson remains a mysterious figure in many ways, we are aware that she challenged matters and could be “rebellious” at times, but Victorian societal norms and gender expectations maintained a hold on Dickinson.³ This causes her letters to Abiah to be open, honest, and unrestrained, yet layered and coded.⁴ They often have specific imagery and motifs that allow Dickinson to comment on the challenges of being a woman in Victorian society. Most importantly, the letters show women as bold and assertive. As Charlotte Nekola tells us in *Red in my Mind: Dickinson, Gender, and Audience*, “she more often spoke indirectly than directly; there are many kinds of impediments, curtains, and obstacles in her poetry. Her poems sometimes block understanding with their difficult analogies, multiple personae, conceptual landscapes, dashed lines, and other palimpsestic techniques” (40-1). This technique of “blocking understanding with difficult analogies” all began in her letters. Her letters to Abiah show the tendency to disguise ideas on multiple levels by using figurative language and symbolism. It is these letters that provide her with the otherwise unavailable opportunity to explore her sentiments and this certainly had an influence on her development, her writing, and ultimately her life.

³ Wendy Martin shares a myriad of examples that show Dickinson’s rebellious nature, especially in regard to religion, her act of writing, and even her poetry itself. She states, “Dickinson was a model for all women poets who followed - an example of eccentricity, autonomy, and rebellion” (p.1). She expands on this idea as she demonstrates that Dickinson held “rebellious” ideas about religion, writing, and calls her poetic style “a rebellion against the Victorian tendency to explain and narrow the world” (p.42).

⁴ In regard to the influence that Victorian societal norms and gender expectations of the time had on Dickinson, we must consider her upbringing at home. Edward Dickinson held high expectations for his daughters. Wendy Martin touches on this when she writes, “Edward Dickinson held very strong views and opinions, particularly about the proper roles of men and women...He also believed that women could best serve society as wives and mothers” (p. 3).

The letters to Abiah depict sisterhood, but they are also nonetheless complex in nature. They always show trust and a level of comfort that is unparalleled during these younger years, but they are also sites for conflict. In support of my argument, Betsy Erkkila states,

At a time when women were subject to the authority of the father in the home, legally ‘covered’ in marriage, and deprived of citizenship and political being under the constitution of the United States, Dickinson’s exchanges with women appear to have served the same function as gift giving in earlier societies, creating a non-institutionalized form of social commerce that affirmed the social being and solidarity of women even as it became the site of competition, rivalry, and contest. With her female friends Dickinson shared a culture of affection and dissidence, of writing and exchanging ‘papers’, of gardening, secrets, and a joyous irreverence toward male law. (162)

Her letters to women, Abiah especially, continue the earlier traditions of gift giving, but allow her to disrupt the expectations of Victorian gender norms. When Erkkila states that these letters “became the site of competition, rivalry, and contest,” she alludes to women’s nature, Dickinson included, to show traits that were traditionally considered to be masculine. In addition, this is where the women shared their concerns in regard to oppressive systematic control like “male law.” Dickinson’s letters to Abiah then serve as practice for a lot more than poetic devices. It is in the letters to other girls that she develops her wit, her intellect, and the power of her voice, which is at the core of what Dickinson, the woman and author, is known for. The possession and exhibition of those qualities show a form of resistance, on some level, of the ideas of the time. Moreover, in these letters she is not a docile young woman, and while letter writing itself allows her to follow tradition, she also uses this as an opportunity to challenge the status quo.

Significant exchanges between Dickinson and Abiah occur in 1845, as Dickinson sets a foundation for her metaphors and symbols: Flowers are a symbol for women, since they were already typically associated with femininity, while winter and time are symbols for male power (“Old King Frost” and “Old Father Time”), which she associates with destruction and death.

This only progresses as the years pass and these symbols and metaphors allow Dickinson to display her attitude toward gender norms and to comment on the role of marriage, religion, and female independence. The exchange reaches its climax in 1850: the year that the approaching end of her friendship with Abiah is memorialized in the letters between them. By 1852 Dickinson returns to her original metaphor, flowers, and finally says one final goodbye to her childhood friend in Letter 166, dated July 25th, 1854.⁵

Dickinson's earliest letter to Abiah is most significant because it establishes the symbols and metaphors that she will reference for the next nine years. In Letter 5, dated February 23rd, 1845, she connects women to the spring season. She also connects men to the season of winter because similar to men, it causes various forms of destruction. She states, "What delightful weather we have had for a week! It seems more like smiling May crowned with flowers than cold, arctic February wading through snowdrifts. I have heard some sweet little birds sing, but I fear we shall have more cold weather and their little bills will be frozen up before their songs are finished" (p 9). Emily's diction is essential here. There are several connections made in these few sentences. In the first two sentences she associates the month of May, and therefore the season of spring, to royalty and power by *crowning* it. The crown is itself a symbol of supreme hierarchy, so when May is crowned, so is spring. Spring is already associated with growth and rebirth and is connected to typical images such as, birds, bees, greenery, and blossoms. Moreover, the crown she gives to spring is not an ordinary crown, but one made up of "flowers." By crowning May with flowers Dickinson is essentially trying to establish a connection between women and power, since flowers are typically associated with femininity. Therefore, she simul-

⁵ Johnson, Thomas H. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. USA, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958. All subsequent number of letters refer to this edition.

taneously connects power to both women and spring. *How is spring connected to women?* It is the giver of life to the world, as women are; both spring and women provide new life to the world.⁶ Dickinson continues the tradition of gendering nature that dates back to ancient Classical and Greek mythology, but she does so in fresh ways and as an approach to hint at her disregard for laws and social norms that don't allow her to be an individual that shapes her own identity. This connection becomes extremely significant further in their exchanges as Dickinson will begin to refer to Abiah and herself as flowers as she shares her observations on the innate power that women have, and yet lack in Victorian society.⁷ In order to understand the future metaphors, we must first understand the connections made here. Furthermore, Dickinson also equates the cold with stagnation, as she says the "little bills will be frozen before their songs are finished" (p 9). In this case the coldness silences the birds and impede them from doing what they must do. The cold controls and thus has power over the birds. Dickinson also writes, "My plants look beautifully. Old King Frost has not had the pleasure of snatching any of them in his cold embrace as yet, and I hope will not" (p 9). She refers to the winter season as "Old King Frost" (p 9), so while she connects spring to women, she connects winter to men by referring to the male gender. Spring is a giver of life and winter is the killer of it because it not only mutes the birds, it kills her plants. Associating the cold with masculinity and granting it the highest form of royalty by calling it "King" subtly comments on the destruction of male power and the life that it robs

⁶ Judith Farr explains the connection between seasons and life further as she states that Dickinson "eagerly addressed the traditional nineteenth-century topic of the seasons, those periods of the year that have classically described the development of human life as well as nature's" (p 268).

⁷ Bianchi and Farr both acknowledge that Dickinson associates flowers and people. Bianchi, Martha Dickinson, "Emily Dickinson's Garden" (p 3). Farr, Judith, *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson*, (p 270). Comparing women to flowers is meant to remind women of their power because what is more powerful than nature? Without the balance and resources of nature there wouldn't be a world.

from the world. The king is obviously more powerful than the queen. This becomes Dickinson's first acknowledgement that men have the most power, but they use it in a destructive manner that controls and thus robs women of their lives. A life without the ability to control is no life at all.

Dickinson later highlights male power in the poem titled "The Frost of Death was on the Window Pane," written in 1866 and sent to her cousins, Louise and Frances Norcross⁸. In this poem Dickinson captures the image of the cold winter surrounding the conservatory of a home:

The frost of death was on the pane -
 'Protect your flower' said he -
 Like sailors fighting with a leak
 We fought mortality -
 Our passive flower we held to sea-
 To mountain - to sun.
 Yet even on this scarlet shelf
 To crawl - the frost begun -
 We pried him back -
 Ourselves we wedged
 Himself, and her between -
 But easy as a narrow snake
 He forked his way along -
 Till all her helpless beauty bent
 And then our wrath begun
 We hunted him to his ravine
 We chased him to his den -
 We hated death and hated life
 And nowhere was to go -
 Than sea and continent there is
 A larger - it is woe.

Similar to the previous letter to Abiah, death and frost are characterized as masculine and "he" is a threat to the flower's livelihood. The speaker of the poem engages in a battle with the frost to protect the "passive flower." The use of the word "passive" implies the gender of the flower,

⁸ "The Frost of Death Was on the Window Pane". Dickinson Electronic Archives, www.emilydickinson.org

since that is a frequent term associated with Victorian women. However, unlike the “passive” flower, the frost of death succeeds with little effort. “But easy as a narrow snake/ He forked his way along/Till all her helpless beauty bent.” Death is victorious in killing the flower, which causes a “wrath” for the speaker of the poem and the dead flower and so they “hunt and chase him” with no success. It’s important to note that by the end of the poem the speaker of the poem says “We hated death and hated life/ and nowhere was to go/ Than/ sea and continent there is/ A larger - it is woe.” Essentially, the entire poem is about saving the life of the flower, so it becomes problematic when the speaker now says he “hates life.” Why fight with such fervor for something you hate? These lines demonstrate the complexity of life because the speaker obviously hates death because it killed the flower, but life brings the frost and causes death, so the speaker hates life too. Also, frost and death are depicted as a larger, more powerful, and unstoppable force that causes distress. These are the ornate qualities of life that are the foundation for the rest of Dickinson’s letters to Abiah and which influenced the poetry she wrote more than a decade later.

The progression of Dickinson’s symbols and metaphors continues in letter six, dated May 7th 1845, as she now connects men with time and uses flowers as a symbol for women to make her first comment on female independence. In this letter to Abiah she begins by saying, “Old Father Time has wrought many changes here since your last short visit...I was so vexed with him for it that I ran after him and made out to get near enough to him to put some salt on his tail, when he fled and left me to run home alone...” (p 13). Once again Dickinson links masculinity to something that not only upsets her, but is more powerful than she. Time, which in essence is

powerful, and cannot be controlled, thus making it free, is also able to control others. She, in her small feminine power is no match for “Old *Father* Time.”

The most significant part of this letter occurs when Dickinson informs Abiah that her father and Vinnie have gone away to Boston “...and I am left alone in all my glory” (p 13). Dickinson is obviously enjoying the limited freedom stemming from her father’s absence and refers to it as a “glory.” Immediately after Dickinson writes that she has gone on a walk while the rest of her family is not there and begins to share details of this walk with Abiah. She writes, “I have been to walk to-night, and got some very choice wild flowers. I wish you had some of them” (p 13). Flowers have already been linked to a “crown” in the last letter, so she continues with this idea of flowers and their connection to femininity, spring, and thus female power. This time the flowers are *wild* and this time she wished she could share this type of flower with Abiah. Everything is connected here. There is reason why the flowers she picks are wild flowers, there is reason why during the time her father is away is when she references wild flowers, and there is reason why Dickinson will follow these sentences about flowers with sentences that comment on expected female behavior. Stephanie Tingley is essentially correct in “Blossom[s] of the Brain: Women’s Culture and the poetics of Emily Dickinson’s Correspondence,” when she asserts, “Since flowers spoke so significantly to her, Emily Dickinson often used flowers to speak for her. Comments in letters, as well as the pressed blossoms that often accompanied them, indicate that she regularly used the Victorian language of flowers as a kind of visual and verbal shorthand... a language without words, for the flowers function as nonverbal texts with which Dickinson knew that her female correspondents, in particular, were likely to be familiar” (71). When Dickinson asks to share wild flowers with Abiah she is really inviting her to think about the idea

that women could find their own place in the world, even if that must happen without approval or societal support.⁹ Martha Dickinson Bianchi wrote, “Flowers, so centrally important to Dickinson’s life and art, obviously had immense meaning for her, but the precise meanings, at least those we can decipher, derived primarily from the poet’s own idiosyncratic worldview rather than from standardized formulae.”¹⁰ Bianchi’s point that the specific meanings attached to flowers rely on Dickinson’s own “idiosyncratic worldview” and the definition and qualities of wild flowers explain the meaning attached to this specific detail in this letter to Abiah. In true Emily Dickinson fashion, everything is a metaphor. In many cases you cannot distinguish the metaphor from real life. In addition, every single word is chosen strategically and thus the diction is essential. This letter could be a typical Dickinson letter combining news, insight, humor, and wit or it could be a metaphor meant to share her views and inspire her friend to challenge the expected roles dictated by society.

In the same close lines when she is left without the ruling force in her life (her father), she alludes to flowers and begins to discuss her herbarium. While this was a common hobby for women in Victorian society, in the letter she states, ““most of the girls are making one” (p13), Dickinson was never one to do what most people did without purpose. Most of the girls were also engaging in other domestic duties, such as cleaning and cooking and it is known that she readily avoided those tasks. Therefore, she is continuing with the metaphor that plants and flowers equate to women and uses this to celebrate feminine power. When Dickinson mentions plant-

⁹ Wildflowers are known as plants that grow without human assistance. Dickinson yearns for growth even if that needs to occur without human assistance as well.

¹⁰ Martha Dickinson Bianchi, “Emily Dickinson’s Garden”. *Emily Dickinson’s International Society Bulletin*. Vol. 2, No. 2, p 3, Emily Dickinson Museum, www.emilydickinsoninternationalsociety.org

ing flowers to Abiah she really is encouraging Abiah to live life on her own terms.¹¹ Judith Farr affirms, “That her gardening- like writing poetry- was the manifestation of profound and even occasionally rebellious desire...” (p 294).¹² The irony that gardening (a traditionally accepted avocation for Victorian women) leads her to observe the natural world and gather the imagery and symbols necessary to disguise her nontraditional ideas in her letters, and that eventually the same images and themes are used to create poetry (a less acceptable avocation for women during this time) is the essence of Emily Dickinson. These complexities represent her attitude about life. Everything she does is attached to her own desire for individuality. In this moment, she is in control of the plants in her herbarium and therefore of life on this planet. The control and power that she lacks in her personal life, she has here with the flowers. Having an herbarium is symbolic of the innate power she’s aware she has, but that she can’t access due to Victorian societal gender norms.

It’s also essential to consider that once we associate plants to life then we can uncover the metaphor in all of Dickinson’s hobbies. Dickinson never liked to cook, but enjoyed baking bread, another symbol of life. Even letter writing she refers to as life in a letter to Abiah, dated August 3rd, 1845, when she says, “My writing apparatus is upon a stand before me, and all things are ready” (p 15). Once again she places herself in control of another symbol of life. Emily Dickinson treats letter-writing like a surgeon at the operating table. This is all intentional and metaphoric. She cannot fully control her life, so she found something she could control that symbolizes a life as a way to make a societal comment about it.

¹¹ Once again, Bianchi’s assertion that the meaning Dickinson associated with flowers and gardening depended heavily on her own peculiar and independent thoughts needs to be considered.

¹² Judith Farr with Louise Carter, *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson*.

When Emily Dickinson notes that the flowers she chose, the flowers *near her* in Amherst happen to be wild flowers and wishes to share those with Abiah, she is strategically making further connections between feminine power and her decision to access that power. “Have you made your herbarium yet? I hope you will if you have not, it would be such a treasure to you... If you do, perhaps I can make some additions to it from flowers growing around here” (p 13). Cleverly, Dickinson links the wild flowers to her by reminding Abiah where they grow. They’re both from the same place: Amherst. Therefore, Dickinson is a wild flower too. The flowers are a symbol for Dickinson’s own wild nature.¹³ Dickinson is already showing an interest in wanting to control her own life and for her choices to not be at the mercy of anyone else. This kind of thinking would be considered wild in Victorian society. When she asks to add flowers from her environment to Abiah’s herbarium, she is inviting Abiah to join her in this *wildness*.

If Abiah chooses to join Dickinson and become a “wild flower,” they would not be like most of the other women in this time. Dickinson is aware of that and communicates that to Abiah in this letter. In the same paragraph that she is primarily talking about seeds and flowers blossoming, she also mentions, “I expect you have a great many prim, starched up young ladies there, who, I doubt not, are perfect models of propriety and good behavior. If they are, don’t let your free spirit be chained by them” (p 13). Here she shows she is completely aware of the expectations of the time. Once again Dickinson says to her, do not let their ideas, which are repre-

¹³ Bianchi shares, “The language of flowers was based on the ancient belief that, as emblems, flowers were eloquent messengers” (p,3). Martha Dickinson Bianchi, “Emily Dickinson’s Garden”. *Emily Dickinson’s International Society Bulletin*. Vol. 2, No. 2, p 3, Emily Dickinson Museum, www.emilydickinsoninternationalsociety.org. Also, Dickinson’s “wild nature” is already evident at this time in her tendency to question, challenge, and in her interest in the intellectual. Richard Sewall asserts, “Emily was just then (age fourteen) showing signs of smartness and brilliancy herself and enjoying them in others” (p 353). These qualities are not typically celebrated in women during this era referred to as “The Cult of Domesticity”.

sentative of Victorian society control you. Be a wild flower, Abiah. This letter shows the beginning of Dickinson's use of figurative language to push the envelope as much as she could to get closer to the freedom to be who she wants to be. When women begin to explore those types of ideas they challenge the prim and proper behavior dictated by Victorian gender norms. Women can only do this in confidence with other women and certainly not with men around and in control. This is why she begins this letter by saying that she is left in all her "glory" without her father at home, and once she begins to challenge the status quo she becomes a "wild flower."

When speaking in metaphor, diction is critical because we are not speaking in literal terms. Dickinson could very well have picked wild flowers in her walk, they could very well be blossoming all around her. However, we must also consider that we do not know when the metaphor begins and ends in Dickinson's letters: it's difficult to decipher when she is speaking figuratively or literally. We do know that she frequently uses metaphors that connect masculinity to power and control over others and femininity to things that are at the mercy of other forces that are more powerful. Dickinson wishes to control this fragility and grant it power, which is why she initially uses flowers to make a crown. She associates them with power as a way to make a statement about the power that she knows women have innately, but is denied to her because of Victorian gender norms. Women are at the mercy of men, just as the flowers are at the mercy of Old King Frost.

In letter number 7, dated August 3rd 1845, Dickinson doesn't introduce any new symbols, but adds to the connections she already made with the existing ones: flowers and time. She writes, "I had no flowers before me as you had to inspire you. But then you know I can imagine myself inspired by them and perhaps that will do as well" (p15). This could be Dickinson's ex-

pression of self- inspiration because she is a flower, and thus can inspire herself and it could also serve as a reminder to Abiah of the power of her mind. In regard to time, Dickinson writes, “For my part I see no particular change in his movements unless it be that he goes on a swifter pace than formerly, and that he wields his sickle more stern than ever” (p 16). Time goes by quickly and people are dying. This has a lasting impression on Dickinson as she witnessed many deaths and knows how important time is. She frequently ponders about how she spends her time. Once again calling time “Old father time” is a connection between masculinity, control, and the power to rob others of their lives. Similar to how time steals a person’s life, men have robbed women of theirs by denying them power. Thus, after she opens this letter by reminding Abiah of the symbols she has established that disclose her opinions of Victorian society and gender inequalities, she shares Amherst news and states, “In the first place Mrs Jones and Mrs S Mack have both of them a little daughter. Very promising children I understand. I don’t doubt if they live they will be ornaments to society. I think they are both to be considered as embryos of future usefulness Mrs. Washburn. Mack has now two grand daughters. Isn’t she to be envied” (p17). Emily is making a remark about the lack of power women have by calling the daughters “ornaments,” and when she says that they are “embryos of future usefulness” and that people are “envied” for having grand daughters, she is obviously resorting to sarcasm. Dickinson’s mocking and playful commentary is explained by Domhnall Mitchell, “That is to say, Dickinson wrote lightly because she had been brought up to expect her opinions about these matters not to be taken or expressed seriously” (p 195).¹⁴ While it may appear as playful commentary on the surface, beneath there is genuine sentiment in regard to a woman’s limited opportunity. This is key in understanding the

¹⁴ In this essay titled, “Emily Dickinson and Class”, Mitchell explores Dickinson’s noninvolvement in historical and political events and experiences (p 191).

logical patterns of Dickinson's letters. She uses her established symbols to criticize the current Victorian system of oppression for women as she did in this letter by reminding Abiah that men are like time because they rob women of their lives by not allowing them to live to their fullest potential. Essentially, because men take a woman's power away they are left only to be "ornaments." All of this leads her to also include toward the end of the letter, "My garden looks beautifully now. I wish you could see it. I would send you a bouquet [sic] if I could get a good opportunity. My house plants look very finely now...Have you got any forget me not in your garden this summer. I am going to send you as a present in my letter next time. I am pressing some for all the girls and it is not dry yet" (p. 18). She ends by making another reference to gardening and flowers. The purpose of this is to remind Abiah that they can access the power that is being denied to them by becoming wild flowers, which essentially means not submitting to the established norms. *In what ways could they oppose?* Women could pursue life on their own individual terms. She wants for women to be wild flowers: She wants to celebrate her power, which lies in her intellectual ability and in her writing.

By now it should be evident that Dickinson's most important letters to Abiah are an extended metaphor about Victorian oppression and show a woman's desire and capability to access the power denied to them by society. This metaphor progresses as she continues to comment on all forms of oppression in Victorian society. In letter eight, dated September 25th 1845, Dickinson makes another reference to Old Father Time, a lady's expected behavior as dictated by society, and of course, she makes the connection to flowers and gardening. In regard to time, she writes, "I never knew the time to pass so swiftly, it seems to me, as the past summer. I really think some one must have oiled his chariot wheels, for I don't recollect of hearing him pass, and

I am sure I should if something had not prevented his chariot wheels from creaking as usual. But I will not expatiate upon him any longer, for I know it is wicked to trifle with so reverend a personage, and I fear he will make me a call in person to inquire as to the remarks which I have made concerning him” (p 20). Dickinson associates “Old Father Time” with death and the end of time spent here on this Earth. She often writes about her concern with how she spends her time here.¹⁵ Dickinson obviously wants to maximize her limited opportunities to create her own place in this world. This requires time and the thought of not having enough time to accomplish her goals haunts her. She uses masculine pronouns purposely and warns, “But I will not expatiate upon him any longer for I know it is wicked to trifle with so reverend a personage” in an effort to show a clear hierarchy between men (father, husband, clergy, or political figure) and her. In her usual fashion she refers to time to allude to male power. This continues when she talks about her garden later in this letter. “Have you any flowers now? I have had a beautiful flower-garden this summer; but they are nearly gone now. It is very cold to-night, and I mean to pick the prettiest ones before I go to bed, and cheat Jack Frost of so many of the treasures he calculates to rob to-night. Won’t it be a capital idea to put him at defiance, for once at least, if no more? I would love to send you a bouquet if I had an opportunity, and you could press it and write under it, the last flowers of summer. Wouldn’t it be poetical, and you know that is what young ladies aim to be now-a-days...” (p 21). These lines show her natural rebellious nature as she shares her desire to cheat, Jack Frost, the masculine power that “robs” the world of the pretty “flowers” by killing them. The letter is also very similar to her first letter to Abiah in which she

¹⁵ In a Letter 13 to Abiah, dated September 8th, 1846, Dickinson writes, “How swiftly summer has fled & [sic] what report has it borne to heaven of misspent time & [sic] wasted hours?” (Johnson, p.36) The idea that time, like currency, shouldn’t be wasted appears in Dickinson’s letters often.

observes the relationship between her flowers and the cold. This letter is yet another example of Dickinson's thoughts about resisting male control and it uses her garden as a symbol for her rebellion. In her preface, Judith Farr states, "Whether she wrote about love or war, ugliness or beauty, vanity or virtue, heaven or hell, her flower garden often provided her with the narratives, tropes, and imagery she required" (p vii). What is most interesting is that her observation of her gardens gives life to her writing, which is one of the few ways that she was able to claim a different path in life.

This is also the letter in which she makes her first negative comment about a wedding. After referring to Abiah's letter to her in which Abiah had provided her with news about a wedding, Dickinson writes, "Are you quite sure Mr. F, the minister, told them to stand up and he would tie them in a great bow-knot? But I beg pardon for speaking so lightly of so solemn a ceremony" (p 20). Speaking lightly, as she says, is an indication of her lack of respect for it. Also, she chooses the word "solemn," which in addition to meaning formal and serious, also has the connotation of being a word to describe something that is not joyous. The statement made in regard to marriage is significant because as previously stated this is all intentional on Dickinson's behalf. One way women could not submit to the established forms of oppression is by not marrying. When a woman chooses not to marry they are also making the conscious decision to not allow yet another man to control their life. By rejecting marriage, she engages in a significant act of resistance because this allows her to carve out the freedom to pursue her own personal desires.

The letter dated January 31st, 1846 is especially important because it is the first record of Dickinson sharing her religious struggles with Abiah, which eventually is the main reason the

friendship ends. However, committing to religion is obviously an idea that conflicted Dickinson. The main reason for that conflict was the further granting of control. Born a woman in Victorian society leaves Dickinson at the control of her father, her future husband, society, and also religion. Therefore, resisting religion is another way women could challenge the systems that aim to control them. She is very much aware of this at a very young age and progressively communicates her feelings to Abiah. This slowly evolves into Dickinson's subtle rebellion from Victorian norms. After all she doesn't ever marry and in this letter she begins to explore why she will never commit to religion. She says, "There is an aching void in my heart which I am convinced the world never can fill. I am far from being thoughtless on religion..." (p 27). *What has caused this aching void she speaks of?* I believe it's the oppression of women. Wendy Martin asserts, "Dickinson was conflicted about organized religion. As a young adult, she envied the comfort her peers found in a fixed religious system with clear-cut laws, guidelines for behavior, and assurance of heavenly salvation. As an adult, however, she preferred the mortal certainty and mystery of death as well as the ability to define faith and spiritual relationships on her own terms" (p 26). As was a young girl, she might've "envied them," but ultimately she still did not share their willingness to allow religion to impose their laws and guidelines. As she matures, the idea of another established patriarchal system in control of her life halts her commitment. Dickinson had thought extensively about the control religion had on people and in this world. She depicts this control when she writes, "It seemed as if those who sneered loudest at serious things were soonest brought to see their power, and to make Christ their portion. It was really wonderful to see how near heaven came to sinful mortals. Many who felt there was nothing in religion determined to go once and see if there was anything in it, and they were melted at once. Perhaps you

will not believe it Dear A. But I attended none of the meetings last winter” (p 27). Dickinson isn’t comfortable giving that much power to a system that contributes to the world that causes her an “aching void” and to a system that contributes to the oppression of women. Moreover, these lines bring to Dickinson’s attention the irony of who converted and how bold the conversion was. There may be some questions about how genuine the conversions really were for most people. At this moment it’s about more than control. It’s about Dickinson’s need to be true to herself and the idea that she might’ve been disappointed in God, which is another reason why she doesn’t attend a meeting.¹⁶ In typical Dickinson fashion, toward the end of that letter she writes “I can hardly wait for spring to come, for I long to see you” (p 27). This is an intentional association between Abiah and spring meant to remind Abiah about women and their right to blossom freely, without the control of religion or marriage. Discussing serious societal issues and that being directly followed by ideas of nature is a frequent pattern in Dickinson’s letters to Abiah.

Over a year after the January 1846 letter previously discussed Dickinson writes Abiah another significant letter that continues to show Dickinson’s idea that women should assert their power in whichever way they can, while making the connection between women and flowers to share her opinions. On March 14th, 1847 (Letter 15) Dickinson shares news that Miss Adams is leaving Amherst and will not be a teacher anymore because she is getting married. Dickinson states, “ I suppose you know that she has left Amherst, not again to return as a teacher. It is in-

¹⁶ In addition to being disappointed in this oppressive world, Polly Longworth notes that as a girl of thirteen Dickinson had actually joined a girls’ prayer group, but her older cousin Sophia’s “sudden death from a brain fever stripped Emily’s illusions leaving her depressed and fearful of making such a mistake again” (p 338). The “mistake” refers to trusting God, to which Dickinson also says, that if she does put her trust in God, “I might again be deceived” (p 338).

deed true, that she is to be married. Are you not astonished?...I cannot bear to think that she will never more wield the sceptre, & sit upon the throne in our venerable schoolhouse ...” (p 45).

Dickinson has shown her disapproval of social systems that control her ability to be who she wishes to be. This is why she has shared that she has trouble conforming to religion and it’s a similar notion when considering marriage. In both marriage and religion women are succumbing to complete control of man made systems and to men themselves. For Dickinson, Miss Adams, as a teacher in her classroom, is in control of the lives of her students and has power in her own right doing so. By using the words “sceptre,” and “throne,” Dickinson is once again making the connection between this woman’s role as teacher and power. However, by getting married Miss Adams is renouncing this to be at the power of her husband. “I think that Abby - you & I had better write her a congratulatory letter after she arrives at her new home, telling her of our joy at her union with so worthy a man & giving her sundry bits of advice on the importance of her station & her ‘household cares’” (p 45). According to Dickinson, Miss Adams left her role as teacher to be in a station where her priorities are domestic duties. She offers the idea of writing a “congratulatory letter” as a combination of sarcasm and her genuine wish for life to go well for her teacher.

Dickinson’s poem, “I’m ‘Wife’ - I’ve Finished That”, written 14 years after this letter is full of imagery that echoes the ideas brought up in this letter to Abiah¹⁷:

I’m “wife - I’ve finished that -
That other state -
I’m Czar - I’m “Woman” now -
It’s safer so -

¹⁷ “I’m ‘Wife’ - I’ve Finished That ”. Dickinson Electronic Archives, www.emilydickinson.org

How odd the Girl's life looks
 Behind this soft Eclipse -
 I think that Earth feels so
 To folks in Heaven - now-

This being comfort - then
 That other kind - was pain -
 But Why compare?
 I'm "Wife"! Stop there!

The poem shows the comparison of being a wife and "woman" to being single and a "girl." In the first stanza the speaker of the poem connects the title of "wife," to womanhood, and power, "I'm 'wife - I've finished that -/That other state/ I'm Czar - I'm Woman now -/ It's safer so-." When the speaker of the poem becomes a wife, she also becomes a woman and leaves behind adolescence. It's important to note that this woman is now "Czar", which shows that the wife believes she has more power than the girl. Her power may lie in the idea that she is "safer" now, since a wife is accepted by societal norms. The expected route is always considered the safe route.

In the second stanza the wife compares her life now to her life as girl. Now that she is married she is "in Heaven" and the girl's life seems "odd" from this new place. However, the wife is "behind this soft eclipse," which means in her husband's shadow and power. This marriage could be heaven to the women seeking safety and acceptance, but it could also be hell to the "girl" who doesn't want to live in someone else's shadow and direct control.

In the last stanza the wife continues to reminisce about life before marriage and eventually asks, "But why compare?" The question seems troublesome because the entire poem is a juxtaposition, but also the comparison of her life as wife to her past life as a girl implies that mar-

riage isn't necessarily better than being a single woman. Moreover, the last line, "I'm 'wife'! Stop there!," alludes to the idea that being a "wife" is a woman's life goal and doesn't need to be validated. This is interesting because according to Dickinson's letter to Abiah Miss Adams is giving up the power that she has in teaching for marriage. Yet in this poem, the wife initially thinks she is the one with the power because she has done as expected and is safe from judgment. The abrupt end to the poem may indicate the opposite is true.

Two critical letters to Abiah are written in 1848. The first one is addressed to "my dear Abiah," and dated January 17th, 1848. This letter shows further insight into Dickinson's resentful feelings regarding gender and societal expectations. She proclaims, "Father wishing to hear the piano, I like an obedient daughter, played & sang a few tunes, much to his apparent gratification" (p 59). Dickinson repeats the phrase "obedient daughter" in a couple of letters to Abiah. Dickinson must always do what is asked of her. Dickinson ends this letter by referring back to religion and draws a parallel to this other form of control. "There is a great deal of religious interest here and many are flocking to the ark of safety. I have not yet given up to the claims of Christ, but trust I am not entirely thoughtless on so important & serious a subject" (p 60). Emily may think that people are not genuine in their devotion to God and are, on the other hand, selfishly seeking the promised notion of "safety" and eternity. It was obviously important to Dickinson to do things genuinely. However, she continues to mention the same notion of not being able to commit, but states that she hasn't fully removed it from mind. It's hard to decipher whether that is genuine concern or a way for Dickinson to ease Abiah's mind, since Abiah was clearly more accepting of religion. Directly following her thoughts on religion, she asks, "Do you not think we have had some delightful weather for winter & does it now remind you of spring?" (p

60). Restating how strategic and intentional Dickinson is when it concerns language, it is important to note the placement of this question. She mentions the idea of spring, which is associated with rebirth, change, growth, and blossoming directly after making a statement of religion, which is another fixed system and traditional route. Dickinson is attempting to create her own place in this world and to remain independent in thought and action. This letter shows two different types of control that would delay any sort of independence for women.

The second letter to Abiah is dated May 16th, 1848 and this one is especially significant because it is layered with Dickinson's innate ambition, the oppression she feels, and her acknowledgement of women's lack of power. Most importantly, Dickinson uses flowers as a symbol for change. This letter begins with Dickinson's expression of academic ambition. While expressing to Abiah that she did not wish to leave school and go home, she writes, "You must not imbibe the idea from what I have said that I do not love home - far from it. But I could not bear to leave teacher and companions before the close of the term..." (p 65). Dickinson's letters frequently depict Dickinson's passion for education. As a woman in the 19th century, the idea that studying is superior use of your time is in itself an act of resistance. When Dickinson's mind was engaged, it made her feel less oppressed. She continues to explain to Abiah that she had been sick, but didn't want to write home about it in fear that her parents would make her go home from school. A friend of Dickinson's, however, informs Dickinson's parents and she is made to return. She writes,

Austin arrived in full sail, with orders from head-quarters to bring me home at all events. At first I had recourse to words, and a desperate battle with those weapons was waged for a few moments, between my sophomore brother and myself. Finding words of no avail, I next resorted to tears. But woman's tears are of little avail, and I am sure mine flowed in

vain. As you can imagine, Austin was victorious, and poor, defeated I was led off in triumph. (p. 65)

It has been some time since Dickinson discusses the lack of power for women and subtly comments on the hierarchical system she is a victim of. She depicts the anger she feels at not being in control of her own life. This, however, doesn't keep her from losing this battle to Austin and her father. Austin still arrives in "full sail" from the "head-quarters" and is "as you can imagine victorious" in the end. Dickinson recognizes the power he has and she understands her role as a woman in Victorian society. When she calls Austin "victorious" and refers to herself as "poor" and "defeated" and states, "Woman's tears are of little avail," she shows that she must follow orders and surrender. Societal expectations dictate so. This society makes men the ones in control of everything. They have the power to do as they please and to control others (specifically women) as well. Dickinson shares another example of the power over her and women in general when she says, "Father has decided not to send me to Holyoke another year...(p 66). It is not her parents decision, but her *father's*. All the women in the Dickinson household must abide by the men in their life as would be expected. "Father wishes to have me at home a year, and then he will probably send me away again, where I know not..." (p 67) This statement shows the lack of control over her own life, which definitely haunts Emily Dickinson.¹⁸

Once Dickinson has set the foundation of symbols to represent the oppression of women, she continues to reference spring and flowers in her letters to Abiah. "How glad I am that spring has come, and how it calms my mind when wearied with study to walk out in the green fields

¹⁸ In "Performances of Gender in Dickinson's Poetry, Juhasz and Miller analyze the role of gender in Dickinson's life and poetry. They state, "Gender is so important because it serves as one of the most crucial factors in the social and psychic construction of identity" (p 112). Dickinson clearly makes the connection between gender and decision-making and gender and control.

and beside the pleasant streams in which South Hadley is rich! There are not many wild flowers near, for the girls have driven them to a distance, and we are obliged to walk quite a distance to find them, but they repay us by their sweet smiles and fragrance” (p 66). Here she revisits the idea of “wild flowers.” She shares with Abiah that the girls have been picking them, so she has to walk further to get them. She also writes, “The older I grow, the more do I love spring and spring flowers. Is it so with you?” (p 66) The older she becomes the less ability she has to conform; the “longer walk” to find wild flowers now makes more sense. In other words, Dickinson’s inability to accept the norms validates the longer walk. Nothing is black or white; there continue to be complexities. When she says to Abiah, “...many and beautiful children of spring” (p 66), she straightforwardly makes the clear connection between flowers and children. Thus, confirming the symbolic relationship between flowers and life, and flowers and people, specifically women. When women are flowers they bloom. She wishes that for all women, but definitely for herself. She makes further associations in this same letter as she continues to make her connection between women, flowers, and independence. She states, “...instilling many a lesson of wisdom into the *budding* intellect of my only sister” (p 66). The use of the word budding is crucial. Although it’s a “normal” or typical word choice for what is being communicated, it’s still worthy to note that once again a woman is being connected to a flower. In a letter where she couldn’t make the decision to stay at school, in which her mother had no say in it either, and in which she shows how both her father and, to an extent, her brother control her life, she also associates her sister’s intellect with a budding flower, alludes to the season of spring, and also returns to her discussion about wild flowers. This is all intentional. It is Dickinson’s way to encourage the “blossoming” of women and to subtly note the destructive forces of male control.

The year 1850 is the most significant year in Dickinson's epistolary record to Abiah. This is when her letters reach a climax and Dickinson's sentiments and ideas become most obvious; the evolution of Dickinson's symbols hits a peak. A pivotal letter this year is Letter 36, dated May 1850. In this letter Dickinson makes the connection between her oppression for being a woman, the "wicked world" God has created, and her decision to rebel in the only ways she could. She begins her letter by informing Abiah of her current circumstances, as her mother is sick and she is caring for her and the household. She writes, "I have always neglected the culinary arts, but attend to them now from necessity, and from a desire to make everything pleasant for father, and Austin" (p 97). Dickinson would usually neglect duties that are associated with gender norms, cleaning and cooking weren't activities she was interested in, either out of genuine lack of interest or protest.¹⁹ In fact she often negatively commented on both and although Dickinson was interested in baking (bread mostly) and gardening, which can also associated with Victorian gender norms, baking and gardening are both symbols of creation. She enjoyed doing these activities because they both represent life and figuratively gives her the opportunity to be in control of a life (even if fictitious), something she lacks in a literal manner. It's important to note that she writes that she participates in these domestic duties in a "desire to make things pleasant for father and Austin" (p 97). This could've been a genuine attempt, but it definitely was her and Lavinia's duty regardless of desire. Dickinson has noted a woman's (a wife, a daughter) duty to take care of men frequently in her letters. Tingley notes, "Dickinson describes and participates in a world in which women did much of the work to establish and sustain networks of kin,

¹⁹ Wendy Martin quotes Aife Murray, "a scholar who has studied the connections between the Dickinson family and their servants", saying, "By their socially active teenage years, Emily and her sister, Lavinia, rebelled against the ongoing demands of labor-intensive work necessary to maintain their prominent family" (p 54).

neighbors, and friends and defined themselves, in large part, in terms of both the quantity and quality of the work they cheerfully (or at least without complaint) did for others” (57). She doesn’t have the right to question her duty. Women were expected to obey and act in accordance to the rules. There was little room to complain, but being a daughter and a woman is a burden to Dickinson. She continues to say, “I went cheerfully round my work, humming a little air till mother had gone to sleep, then cried with all my might, seemed to think I was much abused, that this wicked world was unworthy such devoted, and terrible sufferings, and came to my various senses in great dudgeon, at life, and time, and love for affliction, and anguish” (p 98). The responsibility of being a daughter and a woman cause Dickinson to feel “much abused” and as if she lives in a “wicked world.” This is a wicked world because she is oppressed and lacks control over her own life. However, she must comply. When she complies she acknowledges that she is powerless. She states,

I call it kind obedience in the books the Shadows write in, it may have another name. I am yet the Queen of the court, if regalia be dust, and dirt, and have three loyal subjects, who I’d rather relieve from service. Mother is still an invalid tho’ a partially restored one - Father and Austin still clamor for food, and I, like a martyr am feeding them. Wouldn’t you love to see me in those bonds of great despair, looking around my kitchen, and praying for kind deliverance, and declaring by “Omar’s beard” I never was in such plight. My kitchen I think I called it, God forbid that it was, or shall be my own - God keep me from what they call households, except that bring one of ‘faith’! (p 99)

In typical Dickinson fashion these sentences are layered with meaning and intent. She begins with the words “kind obedience” because she is at the lower end of this societal hierarchy and she must obey and be kind. Dickinson must follow orders and those orders were dictated by gender norms. She adds on to the idea of societal levels and says that in this “wicked world,” she could only be “queen” when it concerns domestic duties and attending to the men in her household. The woman who once crowned herself with flowers to bring symbolic power to females

acknowledges that the only power she is allowed to have in this world lies in domestic duties; this was every woman's only expectation in Victorian society. All of this makes her a "martyr". The use of the word "martyr" is significant because it purposely draws attention to religion, which she has previously had doubts about because of the giving of control and also because of her disappointment in God. It is intentional that she says she "prays" to a God to save her from a life that He responsible for creating. This is a vulnerable moment for Dickinson as she shares her inner most personal thoughts and sentiments with Abiah, even those that would be considered wild and problematic, which in turn helps her cope with the reality of her circumstances.

The letter also repeats the patterns established by earlier letters to Abiah, such as intentional diction and specific symbols and imagery. Dickinson continues to use the word "little" and "tiny" when referring to herself, her mother, and her domestic duties. She proclaims, "We are sick hardly ever at home, and don't know what to do when it comes, wrinkle our little brows, and stamp our little feet, and our tiny souls get angry, and command it to go away" (p 97). In addition her mother's desires as well as the sink-room is also "little". She says, "While I washed the dishes at noon in that little 'sink room' of ours..." (p 97). The use of "little" and "tiny" are meant to stress women's "little" power and it leads into Dickinson's intimate thoughts that life is "unjust."²⁰

Dickinson revisits this trope in the poem "I Was Slightest in the House."²¹ The poem is told from the perspective of a person that is so "small" that she takes no space, cannot speak

²⁰ Judith Farr examines this point and notes, "But to the Victorian ideal of the submissive woman, Dickinson always paid lip service, often exaggerating her 'small[ness]' to entice or to excite..." (p75-6).

²¹ "I was the Slightest in the House ". Dickinson Electronic Archives, www.emilydickinson.org

freely, doesn't own but a few basic possessions, and shamed to the extent that this person will die unknown and uncelebrated:

I was the slightest in the House -
 I took the smallest Room -
 At night, my little Lamp, and Book -
 And one Geranium -

The use of the words "slightest," "smallest," and "little" to describe the person and their belongings evokes the sentiments she expressed to Abiah more than a decade before when Dickinson felt like the "slightest" in her house when compared to her father and Austin.

So stationed I could catch
 the mint
 That never ceased to fall -
 And just my Basket -
 Let me think - I'm sure
 That this was all -

I never spoke - unless addressed -
 And then, 'twas brief and low -
 I could not bear to live - aloud -
 The Racket shamed me so -

The second and third stanza highlight that the *smallness* the speaker feels is in relation to power. The word "stationed" alludes to being put in a particular place with specific role or job and phrase "That this was all" makes it definitive. There isn't anything else for this person but this place and these few objects. Additionally, this person "never spoke - unless addressed" and didn't have the audacity to live "aloud" for fear of being "shamed." This paints the picture of passive person without the power to speak and live freely, and of a person living a limited life.

And if it had not been so far -
 And any one I knew
 Were going - I had often thought

How noteless - I could die -

In this final stanza the speaker addresses death. The one aspect of life guaranteed to all is their ultimate demise, so it's natural for anyone to think of its occurrence. In this instance, the speaker feels when death arrives, the type of life they have lived will leave no proof of existence. It's important to note, however, that the entire poem is written in past tense as if this idea of being the "slightest" is not currently happening for this person. Also, that this person had a book and a "geranium." If you think of this person as woman because a man would never be "small" in the manner that is depicted in this poem, and make the connection that by having a book this woman is tapping into her intellectual ability and blossoming like a flower, then the past tense is understood. If women continue to follow the traditions and expected norms set upon them then they will die "noteless," but if they carve their own place in this world, as Dickinson did with her writing, then the result is obviously different.

As Dickinson continues to express her personal truth, she is led to share her doubts with Abiah about God and religion. For her, it's difficult not to associate this "wicked world" and the "abuse" brought upon women with God. She asks, "What shall we do my darling, when trial grows more, and more, when the dim, lone light expires, and it's dark, so very dark, and we wander, and know not where, and cannot get out of the forest - whose is the hand to help us, and to lead, and forever guide us, they talk of a "Jesus of Nazareth", will you tell me if it be he?" (p 98). In other words, Dickinson asks can and will Jesus help them now? Or will Jesus save them in death? And so, is death then the only savior from the current wicked world they live in? Dickinson questions God because of her disappointments in life, that being death of loved ones and the limited control of her own life. If this world is a reflection of God, what does it reveal

about Him? All of this she could only share with her childhood female friend, Abiah. These were Dickinson's main problems with religion and why she couldn't commit. In fact, she says, "...I have been dreaming, dreaming a golden dream, with eyes all the while wide open, and I guess it's almost morning, and besides I have been at work, providing the 'food that perisheth,' scaring the timorous dust, and being obedient, and kind" (p 99). *What is her golden dream?* The obvious answer is salvation. However, she can't it to salvation because duty calls. Her reference to "providing the food," "scaring the timorous dust," and "being obedient and kind" perpetuate the theme of women's expected role. While she's dreaming of religious and societal salvation, these domestic responsibilities remind her of the disappointment she feels and why she cannot genuinely commit to religion. So, she is forced to abandon the golden dream and tend to her daily responsibilities as a woman. That is the life of a Victorian woman.

This letter is full of powerful paragraphs that show Dickinson's conflicts with gender expectations, her desire that life could be different, and most importantly her comments on the kind of God that allows this to happen and whose only promise of change comes after death, which is why she couldn't commit to religion. However, unlike Dickinson, Abiah has made that commitment. She says, "I presume you are loving your mother, and loving the stranger, and wanderer, vision the poor and afflicted, and reaping whole fields of blessings" (p 99). Dickinson tells Abiah that she knows she is living a "holy life" and because Dickinson cannot make that commitment she tells Abiah "save me a a little sheaf - only a very little one! Remember, and care for me sometimes, and scatter a fragrant flower in this wilderness life of mine by writing me, and by not forgetting, and by lingering longer in prayer, that the Father may bless one more!" (p 99) In that statement Dickinson removes herself from the expected Victorian societal norms that accept

the control from systematic systems like religion, education, marriage, and this she describes as a “wilderness.” That is the only power she can access. The power is small, but bold. She resists the forms of oppression as best as she could and asks Abiah to pray for her since she will not join her. This could’ve been interpreted as impious to Abiah, but Dickinson takes that risk. The wild flower that she was has now evolved into an even wider idea of societal freedom.

In late 1850 Dickinson writes the last letter of that year to Abiah and in it writes, “...you are growing wiser than I am, and nipping in the bud fancies which I let blossom - perchance to bear no fruit, or if plucked, I may find it bitter. The shore is safer, Abiah, but I love to buffet the sea - I can count the bitter wrecks here in these pleasant waters, and hear the murmuring winds, but oh, I love the danger! You are learning control and firmness. Christ Jesus will love you more. I’m afraid he don’t love me any!” (p 129) Once again she makes the connection between women and flowers. She also connects the idea of change to blossoms. These ideas about change may not be good (“bitter”) and may not yield any results (“bear no fruit”), but these are Dickinson’s ideas of a woman’s evolution. These are her wishes to limit the amount of control from man-made systems that continue to perpetuate her oppression. In this letter Dickinson depicts herself once again as that wild flower that “blossoms” and evolves. Essentially, Dickinson is also making a distinction between herself and her friend Abiah. She is stating that she could be like Abiah and accept the truths of the doctrine of life that have been forced upon her, which then also means accepting the power of man in religion, marriage, law, and life, but she prefers to challenge and question, even if that behavior has risks. This complete transparency regarding her beliefs about God and religion are eventually what Martin Orzeck calls a “risk” and what he

argues leads to the demise of the friendship. He remarks, “Whether Abiah intended the cut to Dickinson or not is irrelevant at this point. The fact remains that Dickinson perceived the silence as a cut, directly resulting, we can safely assume, from her own sense of a too ‘presuming’ and perhaps too frank confession of her spiritual condition” (p 141). Apparently Dickinson’s willingness to share her true thoughts and sentiments with Abiah hurts their relationship in the end. Dickinson continues to be honest and forthcoming to her childhood friend, but perhaps she has begun to notice that their friendship had been affected by her problematic, but nonetheless, honest sentiments. While Dickinson recognizes that her thoughts and ideas may have been rejected by her friend, she doesn’t change her position and still owns her truth. Moreover, she doesn’t retract what was said, but agrees to keep quiet in the future.

In this same letter, and as a response to one of their friend’s passing, she also writes, “I don’t think there will be any sunshine, or any singing-birds in the spring that’s coming. I shall look for an early grave then, when the grass is growing green; I shall love to call the bride there if it has gentle music, and the meekest-eyed wild flowers, and the low, plaintive insect” (p 103). Dickinson brings up sin and her rebellious thoughts and how she doesn’t wish to ruin matters for any of her friends. More importantly, she returns to the original metaphor, but this time, spring will not bring the sunshine or the singing birds. She is losing faith that Abiah will accept her “wild” ideas. In essence, Abiah never accepts Dickinson’s wild flowers into her herbarium.

Dickinson writes two more letters to Abiah: One in 1852 and the last one in 1854. Letter 91, dated May 1852, shows Dickinson fondly remembering the first day they met. She says, “Oh, Abiah, you and the early flower are forever linked to me; as soon as the first green grass comes, up from a chink in the stones peeps the little flower, precious ‘leontodon,’ and my heart

fills toward you with a warm and childlike fullness! Nor do I laugh now; far from it, I rather bless the flower which sweetly, slyly too, makes me come nearer you. But, my dear, I can't give the dandelion the privilege due to you, so good-by, little one!" (p 206). Dickinson shares her love and appreciation for Abiah's friendship. A friendship that has existed since they were children and possessed the innocence that they have both exhausted. This final time she reminds Abiah that they will forever be flowers and children of spring.

The correspondence between Dickinson and Abiah provides a deeper understanding of Dickinson's development from young girl to woman and depicts how her attitude toward gender roles, religion, and power evolved over time. When Emily Dickinson began sharing her poems with Higginson, she wrote, "When I state myself, as the representative of the verse-it does not mean-me-but a supposed person" (Johnson, "Selected Letters" p 176). This was her attempt to differentiate Emily Dickinson the person from the speakers of her poems. This was essential because as a woman she didn't have the freedom to openly express her challenging ideas without the repercussions of being judged or outcast in Victorian times. However, while she could attach the idea of a "supposed person" to her poetry, she could not do the same with her letters. Thus, she had to be more creative with her letters, often coding her messages, as she did with Abiah. This set of letters show a writer of prose that is assertive, compelling, and raw. Unlike the poems, the epistolary work cannot be passed as fiction, but as reflections of the true Emily Dickinson and these reflections are layered and complex. More importantly, Dickinson's letters reveal her personal struggle being an ambitious woman with talent and intelligence in the 19th century. Specifically her letters to Abiah tend to show this struggle, since Abiah is one of the people she wrote to most during the years when she is developing her self awareness and, simultaneously,

her writing style. Tingley remarks, “Emily Dickinson used her words, both poems and letters, as well as her deeds, to help her fulfill her duty to serve and nurture others” (58). While it is true that Dickinson’s letters serve as her way to maintain her responsibility as a woman of her class during this time, we must also acknowledge that she used her writing to protest the same oppressive system she is participating in. This is the intricate world of Dickinson’s letters. They say and don’t say, they comply and object, they allow the person to have her mind and not have her body, and it is this that most depicts the life Dickinson lived in Victorian society. She had a life, but also didn’t because of her lack of authority over it. And so for Dickinson her life was one full of potential, but not full of the possibility to be her most authentic self because she was a woman. However, she found a way to be wild, to gain control in the only ways she could, and it is all memorialized in her letters to Abiah.

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