

# Gender and Women's Literature: Thoughts on a Relationship Illustrated by the Cases of Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath

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In the effort to pull earlier women writers out of an undeserved obscurity, much useful spadework and some excellent dusting off of old judgements have been done in recent years, especially by feminist scholars. One approach has been to study this literature first of all as the work of women. Certain presuppositions have been formulated about the relationship between gender and writing. We have been told by "advanced" feminist theorists that there is such a thing as a *female* imagination; that women are in an identical position vis-à-vis men and society, everywhere and at any time, and that this has direct consequences for their lives as well as for their art; and that truly authentic work by women necessarily expresses basic differences compared with the work of men. Other, less extremist, feminist scholars have been content to shed light on the hidden artistic culture of women and, while recognizing the differing social and cultural conditions for creative men and women, they have adopted a largely individualist approach to the writings of women.

I have chosen to discuss some of these and related issues with the life and art of Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath as illustration. Dickinson's poetry has become a cherished object for feminist scholarship, and much truly valuable work has been done to explain the poet's life and art from such perspectives. As one of the very few nineteenth-century women writers to have been admitted into the literary canon, Dickinson is somebody for women poets to look up to as distinguished precursor and inspiring model. Working outside the literary community and disregarding literary as well as social norms, Dickinson the poet and the woman has been claimed as something of a proto-feminist heroine.

Less attention has been paid to Sylvia Plath by recent feminist theorists and critics. After the explosion of fascination immediately after

her self-inflicted death in 1963 and the posthumous publication of her strong and unusual poems, the Plath cult gradually subsided. The cult had celebrated the female protagonist in life and in art as martyr to an oppressive patriarchal system, and this may be one reason for its decline, for the most recent trend in feminist criticism is to move away from the view of woman as victim and towards a view of woman as powerful and autonomous survivor. It may also be that Plath's letters and journals, published in the mid-Seventies and early Eighties, embarrassed feminists with their disclosures of an outmoded female submissiveness and a willingness to play the competitive game according to rules set down by the masculine world.

Vigorous and useful as much feminist scholarship is, more than one such treatment of our two poets have failed to convince even the present sympathetic reader that an "advanced" feminist model can easily be applied to an *extended* and *encompassing* demonstration of feminist suppositions. At times the argument of womanhood as an explain-it-all is spread so widely that it loses in substance and persuasiveness. Occasionally the argument is directly applied to only a minor part of the material and the analysis. While sharing the general assumption that femaleness did play a significant role in Dickinson's and Plath's situation as poets and in the nature of their art, I propose to try to pinpoint what might actually be set down as links between gender and these women's writings. In this I have profited greatly from earlier work by feminist scholars.

Some basic, general questions are then: Is women's literature different from that of men? If it is, in what ways does it differ? in content? form? quality? Do women writers favor certain genres? certain types of imagery? motifs and themes? How might we explain such differences (supposing they do exist)? Does biology play a decisive role? What about psychological causes? and socio-economic conditions? Does the gender of the artist influence the interpretation and evaluation of her work?

I will discuss some of these questions under five different, but closely related, headings: (1) The syndrome of "a room of one's own"; (2) The issue of amateur vs. professional; (3) The syndrome of "the double bind"; (4) The place of the woman poet in the literary tradition; and (5) The issue of female life experiences as they are mirrored in literature.

Taking its name from Virginia Woolf's classic manifesto, the complex of socio-economic circumstances which prevent women from fulfilling their artistic potentials has been richly documented by historians and critics. Tillie Olsen's book *Silences* (1978), while evidencing hindrances of

race and class as well, gives an overwhelming record of the difficulties women writers have had to secure even the most fundamental conditions for artistic activity. The Swedish scholar Birgitta Holm typifies the situation of many women writers in the title of her article, "Att skriva i vardagsrummet" (To Write in the Living-Room) (*Ord och Bild*, 1979). The central practical problem is: Can the woman writer find time, energy, and quiet enough to work at all? Another related question is: Will she choose genres and forms that do not demand a concentrated effort for a long period of time?

As an unmarried daughter in an economically and socially secure family - her father being a lawyer and politician - Emily Dickinson did have a room of her own - her bedroom - where she could write poems. But as often as not, the first drafts were put down hastily on any scrap of paper that was at hand in the kitchen where she helped out with the daily chores. (Squire Dickinson insisted on eating bread baked by his daughter Emily!) The typical Dickinson poem consists of 3-6 fourline stanzas. Can the brevity of her poems be attributed to practical circumstances? Perhaps snatches of time lend themselves to the composing of brief lyric poems?

While Emily Dickinson's real-life "room" provided her with some leisure and some space, it paradoxically took on aspects of what would seem to most of us a self-imposed purdah. Her gradual withdrawal from the outer world, her reluctance to participate in the normal forms of village life, her final refusal to meet face to face any but her closest relatives, these and other gestures of "The Queen Recluse" (as family friend Samuel Bowles teasingly named her) puzzle us, as they did her contemporaries. What caused her withdrawal? a neurosis? a psychosis? an emotional crisis? One of the most prominent feminist scholars, Suzanne Juhasz, may speak for several others when she rejects the view that Dickinson's seclusion was a symptom of psychosis or neurosis. Parallel with the move away from seeing woman as victim, this most recent development in interpreting the poet's behavior looks upon her choice of life as a deliberate decision and an expression of power. In her book, *The Undiscovered Continent: Emily Dickinson and the Space of the Mind*, Juhasz writes that Dickinson "chose to withdraw from the external world and to live her most significant life in the world of her mind," and that therefore her withdrawal was "strategy rather than retreat." She argues that "Dickinson was capitalizing upon a technique that women have always known and used, for survival, using the imagination as a space in which to create some life other than their external situation. What Dickinson did was to make art from it."<sup>1</sup>

Certainly there are neurotic features in Dickinson's gradual retreat and in a pattern of behavior that could take the extreme form of the poet hiding behind a half-open door, engaged in conversation with her charming neighbor, Mrs. Mabel Loomis Todd (who was later to edit her poems and letters for publication). This pattern may have originated in a sanely practical attempt to find time for her writing and perhaps also in a slightly arrogant wish to avoid the trivialities of social intercourse. This strategy may have grown into a fixed habit and finally into a sort of phobia. She may also have felt a special need for protection. After finally meeting the poet face to face, her "mentor," Colonel Higginson, expressed relief at not living near her: so intensely did she "drain" his "nerve power." "Without touching her, she drew from me," he confessed to his wife.<sup>2</sup> Apparently he did not speculate on whether her encounter with him drew from *her*!

For Sylvia Plath the question of "a room of her own" turned out to be a problem. Her time and milieu - white middleclass America in the postwar years - demanded that a woman be first of all wife and mother. (In *The Women's Room* Marilyn French has given us some of the finest insights into the dreams and dilemmas of that generation of young American women.) Young Sylvia, the exceptionally bright scholarship student, took it for granted that she would marry and have children, in addition to finding other outlets for her talents. Her ambition was to become a "triple-threat woman": wife, writer, and teacher.<sup>3</sup> She wavered between the two careers: the secure academic profession and the riskier one as professional writer. She seemed to be capable of playing all roles with bravura, but she did so at great cost. Seemingly she had no difficulty in placing her ambitions and interests as an artist second to those of her poet husband; she acted as his typist and literary agent. This self-imposed subordinate role may have slowed down her development towards greater independence and originality. The moment of triumph came shortly before her death, when after a painful separation from her husband, violent rage set her free as a poet. But the room of her own the poet had finally obtained turned out to be a cold and desperate place where the *woman* ended her life.

Both Dickinson and Plath knew that poetry was their metier, but while Plath, from early on, presented herself as a professional and was acknowledged as such, her nineteenth-century fellow artist remained to her contemporary world the gifted amateur. The wife of one of Dickinson's cousins wrote after the posthumous publication of the first volume of her poems:

Emily Dickinson was a past mistress in the art of cookery and housekeeping. She made the des[s]erts for the household dinners; delicious confections and bread, and when engaged in these duties had her table and pastry board under a window that faced the lawn, whereon she ever had pencil and paper to jot down any pretty thought that came to her, and from which she evolved verses, later.<sup>4</sup>

In her own family only her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, seems to have properly recognized the quality of her writing, but as years went by her support was less forthcoming. Various degrees of appreciation and recognition came from other quarters as well: from Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the Boston-based man of letters; from the famous novelist Helen Hunt Jackson, an old acquaintance long lost out of sight; and from journalistic friends of the family. Mentor Higginson gently reproached her for breaking "rules" of grammar and prosody. He did not take her entirely seriously until after her death when her posthumous poems, cautiously regularized by himself and his co-editor, Mrs. Todd, were received with acclaim. In her letters Dickinson thanked him for the "surgery," as she called his criticisms,<sup>5</sup> but she never "corrected" what she had written or changed her ways. The result was a body of poems which continue to surprise and delight us with their startling imagery and incisive thought, poems which even now inspire poets by their bold modernity. To be an "amateur" was to be ahead of her time.

However, Dickinson's "amateur" status may help explain the unfinished condition of several of her poems. She left the choice open between two or more variant words or phrases in many of her poems. Since publication was out of the question for her – she protested that it was as foreign to her thought as "Firmament to Fin" (Letters 2:408) – there was no outer pressure put on her to make a final decision. It is possible that an occasional ambiguity in imagery or syntax arose because she had not finished the composition.

Some readers – presumably a minority – regret what they see as a lack of coherence in Dickinson's poetry. "Disabling freedom" is a term used by critic David Porter to account for the absence of a center in her work.<sup>6</sup> It would be easy to see this as a price paid by a poet who enjoys the freedom of the amateur. The amateur poet herself may have recognized a certain amount of fragmentation in her poems. In a letter to Higginson she complained: "**I** had no Monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself, and when I try to organize – my little Force explodes – and leaves me bare and charred –" (Letters 2:414). How genuine was the tone of self-accusation? How ironic was the contrite pose as dutiful disciple of the master (whose own poems surely no one reads today)?

Sylvia Plath chose to try to earn a living from her writing. In the early years of her career her professionalism was extreme in the sense that it committed her to a highly *academic* kind of verse. Poems collected in the only volume she herself published, *The Colossus*, were *tour de force* pieces, often composed in intricate and demanding stanza forms and metrical patterns. In this way she tended to exaggerate the professional aspect, perhaps in a conscious attempt to be as "professional" as her male colleagues. When she came into her own, she abandoned the strict patterns and wrote a freer kind of poetry. She took the risk of having her late poems judged as too free, too emotional, too private. Plath's poems, too, are often ambiguous and hard to understand. The reason does not lie in fragmentation or in an unfinished state; the crux usually lies in a blurring of lines between vision and reality and in a blurring of identities, for example, by a puzzling use of pronouns which makes it difficult to determine who or what is the referent.

We have already touched on the problem of the often conflicting roles of the woman writer – as wife, mother, and artist. American feminist scholars have defined one variant of this dilemma by the term "the double bind." The very phrase "woman poet," they argue, indicates a contradiction and a tension which threaten to undo the female writer, in either or both of these functions. In her book on modern American poetry Suzanne Juhasz formulates the dilemma this way:

To be a woman poet in our society is a double-bind situation, one of conflict and strain. For the words "woman" and "poet" denote opposite and contradictory qualities and roles. Traditionally, the poet is a man, and "poetry" is the poems that men write. The long history of Western literature makes this point painfully clear. It is men who make art, who make books; women make babies. "Women" are, according to society's rules, very different from "poets." A woman's identity is not defined by a profession, such as poet, but by her personal relationships as daughter, sister, wife, mother. Her art (if she presumes to have one) must necessarily conflict with her life. Usually she is pressured, or pressures herself ... to make a choice "woman" or "poet."

Juhasz goes on to specify the problems of the woman who wants to be a poet, emphasizing that "the double bind" is to be found in the writing itself. "How, then," she asks, "to succeed as a 'good' poet? If the woman poet 'writes like a man,' she denies her own experience; if she writes as a woman, her subject matter is trivial."<sup>7</sup>

The prime duty of the nineteenth-century woman was to be the Angel in the House, that is, to be of service, but other qualities are necessary for the artist: power, independence, and belief in her/his own abilities.

Out of such contradictory demands there is likely to arise an identity crisis.

Placing a psychoanalytic grid on Dickinson's life and art, John Cody identifies a predicament with roots in a presumed difficulty to accept her femininity, a result of having been deprived of a mother's nurturing attention in childhood. It is true that in her *life* Dickinson acted out several subordinate roles, in accordance with the Victorian pattern. The New England version may have allowed for a certain slackening of rules, and young Emily was suffered to perform these roles somewhat wilfully: she read books her father did not want her to read; she was the only one in the family who did not join the church; she gradually opted out of social life and elected for herself the very unorthodox role of "Queen Recluse," to end up as "the Myth of Amherst."

In her poetry Dickinson often hid behind a childish persona: she was a little girl (or boy), a humble Daisy, a small river. These masks have frequently baffled readers who have been at pains to see them as authentic expressions of the same poetic genius that created bold and naked images of loss, loneliness, grief, even madness. These childish personas might be referred to what Richard Chase labelled her "rococo" style.<sup>8</sup> Adrienne Rich, who acknowledges Dickinson as a great precursor, has considered the issue of masks. In an article aptly titled "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson," she stresses Dickinson's need of a mask to hide her real power, a need which was turned into a strategy.<sup>9</sup>

Sylvia Plath, in her life, played the roles that her time and milieu prescribed: good daughter, ambitious student, conscientious teacher, adoring wife, self-sacrificing helpmate, loving mother. As a child she had experienced the premature death of her wilful, domineering father as an act of betrayal, but she also retained a feeling of guilt, for hadn't part of her wanted him dead? Her husband then took the father's place, and Sylvia Plath suffered yet another desertion. The demands put upon her by the conflicting roles of woman and poet may have contributed to the unbearable pressures which drove her to the final suicide.

The role Plath chose for the "I" of her early poems was often that of an observer who is able to note dispassionately the indifference and hostility of nature. The father appears as a powerful figure, indeed as a colossus; or he is a tyrant in black clothes, a man that the daughter loves and wants to rejoin. In the later poetry her persona is often a virago, a victor, one obsessed. The very last poems, which she composed in the early morning during the last few days of her life, deal mostly with death, and in them we find a naked "I" without personal traits (except where the persona is a man: in "Paralytic" and "Gigolo").

In recent years a couple of women scholars have adapted Harold Bloom's theories about literary influence and applied them to a study of Dickinson. One premise for the analysis has been that being a woman, Dickinson was by definition an outsider to the great tradition. Outsider-ship gives insecurity, but also freedom to try something new. These theoretical interests have inspired new interpretations of some of Dickinson's poems. One of them, "My Life had stood - a loaded Gun -,"<sup>10</sup> has become obligatory as an object of revisionist readings. The extended metaphor of the poem is a loaded gun which has been standing unused, till one day its owner comes by and begins to use it. The speaker-gun is happy to be put to use by its owner-master; this is what it/she was intended for. Many readers had interpreted this as a love poem, the woman appearing in the role of one whose duty and joy it is to serve, to be of use to a man. One revisionist reading has it that the owner of the gun represents the poet's Muse, thus exemplifying the paradoxical situation of the female poet in need of inspiration.

As we have seen, Sylvia Plath tried assiduously to place herself in a male literary tradition with her academic virtuoso pieces, but she was also strongly aware of her female predecessor Emily Dickinson and her own contemporaries, Marianne Moore and Anne Sexton. She learnt from them, as she did from male poets, above all Theodore Roethke and Robert Lowell. At the end she had matured into a poet with her own strong identity, whose poetry resembles no one's.

Suzanne Juhasz has postulated the existence of a new poetic tradition: a *women's* tradition, with Dickinson as one of the poets closest to us, but with links through the ages back to Sappho. *Solitary* all these early voices were; the new poetic voices are stronger, for they have the support of a female community. Juhasz looks with confidence at the situation for women poets in America today: by working out of "the double bind" the new poets - Plath, Rich, Sexton, Nikki Giovanni, and others - have formed a new tradition which itself is "a major force towards breaking the binds."<sup>11</sup>

Several of the elements we have considered so far are probably such as have a *direct* consequence primarily in the *lives* of women, affecting their opportunities for creative activity, but as suggested, their impact can also be seen in the *nature* of their *art*. The most concrete, and therefore the most fruitful, field for an investigation into the relationship between gender and literature is naturally the direct expression of life experiences in art. While we may be sceptical of the view that there is a one-to-one connection between life and art, it is obvious that, just as men do,

women draw on the material they are familiar with, and their particular experiences, whether lived or imagined, form an important part of their raw material.

When a female poet uses a first person singular perspective, the speaker is naturally most often a woman. A very large part of Dickinson's poems are spoken by an "I." When the gender of the assumed personality is identifiable, it is nearly always female. There is, as we have seen, the lyric self as little girl, as Daisy, as small river. In a group we might term "Wife" poems, the speaker rejoices at her exalted status, as in the following lines: "I'm 'wife' - I've finished that - / That other state - / I'm Czar - I'm 'Woman' now - / It's safer so -." The persona may be known by her attributes: for example, a bonnet, as in the poem beginning "I sing to use the Waiting / My Bonnet but to tie"; or a hat and shawl: "I tie my Hat - I crease my Shawl -." At times the speaker is identified by the role she plays, for example, as one attended by a suitor ("Because I could not stop for Death - / He kindly stopped for me -").

When the gender of the lyric self is given or suggested in Plath's poems it is nearly always female. Often the role is that of a daughter. She appears, for instance, in the early poem "The Colossus," where in a drastic mixture of mythical reverberations and humorous gestures she tries to restore the cracked father-idol; and in the darker "Electra on Azalea Path," where once more "borrow[ing] the stilts of an old tragedy," the speaker - "hound-bitch, daughter, friend" - grieves at the loss of her father and confesses her guilt for having loved him too much.<sup>12</sup> In the famous poem "Daddy" she exorcizes the haunting memory of the father.

The daughter-mother relationship plays a very small part in Plath's work. In "The Disquieting Muses" the persona reproaches her mother who, in an uncomprehending eagerness to be of help, always did the wrong thing; the daughter "learned elsewhere, / From muses unhired" by her "dear mother." The lyric self as mother addresses her child yet to be born ("The Manor Garden"), or newly born ("Morning Song"); she delights in the child whose clear eye "is the one absolutely beautiful thing" ("Child"). Three women in different roles enact three different experiences of motherhood ("Three Women"): the Wife, whose pregnancy ends in birth; the Secretary, whose fate is a series of miscarriages; and the Girl, who is not ready for the responsibility of motherhood. In "Lady Lazarus" the speaker is an indestructible woman who performs tricks of resurrection as a female counterpart of Lazarus. In another poem she is the bee-keeper who rejects any identification with the "winged, unmiraculous women," the drudges; she sees her own triumph in the terrible, glorious flight of the queen bee ("Stings").

One of the first things that strike a reader of Dickinson's poetry, above all in comparison with poetry written by men, is the large place that a mid-nineteenth-century *woman's life* and *milieu* have in it. A very large part of her *imagery* is taken from the domain of the house and the home. In such a guise phenomena in nature may be domesticated: in the glorious New England fall the maple takes to wearing "a gayer scarf" ("The morns are meeker than they were –"). The sunset is a housewife carelessly sweeping the sky with her broom ("She sweeps with many-colored Brooms –"). Heaven is a place with mansions and "seraphic" cupboards, where the poet hopes God will reserve a nook even for the rat ("Papa above!"). A scene dramatizing an inner crisis – a moment of utter despair or a mental breakdown – takes places within a brain pictured as a room where a funeral ceremony is enacted, as in the poem "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain –." Textile imagery makes abstract concepts concrete: the poet speaks sarcastically of those genteel women who hold "Such Dimity Convictions" ("What Soft – Cherubic Creatures –"). A poem about status and change mixes domestic and religious imagery in a manner characteristic of Dickinson: the speaker has put away her dolls and her string of spools together with her childhood; having come into her own, she is baptized to a higher rank, and as a sign of her new Queenhood she chooses "just a Crown" ("I'm ceded – I've stopped being Their's –").

In her essay, "The Wayward Nun beneath the Hill," Sandra M. Gilbert describes Dickinson's personal code, both in life and art, as "a language of flowers and glasses of wine, of pieces of cake and bread and pudding – and of a white dress ..." She argues that Dickinson "placed herself quite consciously in a great tradition of women writers who have scorned patriarchal male definitions of what is important in history and what is not important."<sup>13</sup> Gilbert's description of Dickinson's code takes care of an essential aspect, but it does not cover the totality of the poet's system of signs. Dickinson also spoke in the language of law, economy, and science, domains of the male, (She could pick them up from her lawyer-politician father and her lawyer brother, as well as from the local newspapers and the national magazines which were read in the Dickinson household.)

Plath's poems mirror a woman's world and life experiences less often and less consistently than Dickinson's do. Many of her poems, especially the early ones, are associated with the outdoors; the setting may be a seashore, a moor, a garden, a street. The house and the home only occasionally provide setting and imagery for entire poems. There is the kitchen setting of "Lesbos" with its "hiss[ing]" potatoes, its "stink of fat

and baby crap." A satiric hostess shows an unwanted visitor around her house, which flaunts its sloppiness and disorder ("The Tour"). A claustrophobic lack of freedom for women is imaged within the confines of an Oriental "women's room" ("Purdah"). The maternity ward is another female setting used ("Three Women"). Female household chores can be employed to create a loving tone: the child is affectionately addressed as "my little loaf" ("You're"). (In the same poem, the poet uses other images as well which are not associated with gender: the child is "like a well-done sum" and a "clean slate.")

The organs and functions of the female body - womb, menstruation, pregnancy, abortion, childbirth - appear in many contexts. Some poems deal with pregnancy and childbirth as a central motif; others use such imagery with other motifs and themes. The poem "Metaphors" cleverly employs number nine in the prosody - nine lines consisting of nine syllables each - as metaphors for the pregnancy period, "the train there's no getting off." In "Mystic" an oppressive atmosphere is suggested by the image of "the fetid wombs of black air under pines in summer." Trees in winter, true and untiring, know "neither abortions nor bitchery" ("Winter Trees"). "Blood" is a frequent word in this poetry and may be a function of femaleness: poetry is the "blood jet" ("Kindness").

On the whole, though, other kinds of imagery put their most unforgettable stamp on Plath's poetry, for example, the elemental water and stone, and the moon, the poet's exacting ideal of identity. Especially in the late poetry the imagery is kaleidoscopic, as in a surrealist film or painting: forms, colors, identities shift rapidly, and fragments of a woman's experiences, feelings, and dreams are juxtaposed with shards of our common twentieth-century reality, such as wars and the holocaust.

Are there particular *themes* that women poets favor? Sandra M. Gilbert argues that many of Dickinson's themes belong in the female world. She identifies them as female "mysteries."<sup>14</sup> Among them there is, in addition to the mystery of domesticity, the mystery of nature - "figuratively speaking, a woman's analog, or likeness" - and there is the mystery of romance, which Gilbert singles out as a woman's literary genre. Another "mystery" named by Gilbert is, in my view, more relevant to the work of Dickinson as a woman poet: the mystery of renunciation. This theme, with its many dramatizations of separation and loss, of hunger and thirst, can easily be associated with a general nineteenth-century conception of the duty of the Angel in the House. In Dickinson's poems some outside - or inner - power may force the

persona to renounce what she most desires. The poem "There came a Day at Summer's full" dramatizes the ecstatic-tragic moment when the persona renounces her beloved at the very climax of their love. The bitterness of separation is muted by the hope of a reunion in the here-after. A poem embodying the paradox of unwanted fulfillment uses the metaphors of food and drink. The persona's wonted state of deprivation makes it impossible for her to eat and drink her fill when the moment of plenitude - her "Noon" - is unexpectedly offered her: "The Plenty hurt me - 'twas so new - / Myself felt ill - and odd -." She found that "Hunger - was a way / Of Persons outside Windows - / The Entering - takes away -" ("I had been hungry, all the Years -").

There is a pervasive paradox in Plath's poetry: a passionate commitment to life may lead to a yearning for death. The lyric self loves life and movement: "What I love is / The piston in motion" ("Years"). Life and warmth are embodied in the child: "The blood blooms clean" in him ("Nick and the Candlestick"). At the same time the persona seeks the stillness of perfection, and since life in movement is imperfect, she is drawn to death: the dead woman is "perfected" ("Edge"). The poem "Getting There" with its train metaphor realizes life and motion, but the destination is death. At journey's end the speaker gets out of the carriage, free of "this skin / Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces"; from this "black car of Lethe" she steps "Pure as a baby."

Does the longing for death expressed in Plath's poetry have to do with the poet's gender? Feminist scholars may tend to claim that it does; others may point to Robert Lowell and Adrienne Rich as examples of poets contemporary with Plath who embody mutually contrary drives in their works: the male poet may seem more like Plath in his concern with anguish and madness, while the woman poet's work is more consistently an affirmation of life.

Do women poets favor certain *genres*? Suzanne Juhasz asserts that women writers in general try to transform the *personal* experience to something *universal*. Dickinson's frequent use of the aphoristic form is, according to Juhasz, a consequence of her gender. Since Dickinson was a woman, she was shut out from knowledge of the "great" events in history and current affairs, and aphorism became a means for her to reach the "greatness" of universality.<sup>15</sup> As we have noted, Sandra M. Gilbert considers the *romance*, that is, a story that tells of the mystery of love, as a specifically female genre, which she finds in Dickinson's poetry. Neither of these two supposedly female genres characterizes Plath's poetry. This may be a result of changes that have taken place in the position of women during the hundred years that have elapsed from

the 1860s, when Dickinson wrote most of her poetry, to the early 1960s, when Plath did her best work.

We may conclude that gender certainly has had great, and often grave, consequences for the woman poet as a *producing* artist. Socio-economic and cultural circumstances have largely determined the *practical* conditions for creative activity: time and energy available for imaginative work, material circumstances in the form of "a room of one's own." Gender may also have affected the amount of encouragement and acceptance the woman artist received as an aid to greater self-confidence. Socio-cultural factors may have influenced the woman artist's view of herself as a professional and the consequences this may have had for the form given to the work. It may be questionable whether gender has had consequences for the choice of genre, but it is likely that with only snatches of time at her disposal for imaginative work, the woman poet should of necessity favor the brief lyric. It seems natural that the female life experience should be used as raw material for women's poetry, most obviously in the choice of personas, but also in diction and imagery, as well as in subject matter, and perhaps also in themes.

Femaleness is an important key to the work of the poets discussed here, but it is worth stressing that it is not the only key. Emily Dickinson's poems are a *woman's* work but they are also and, in my view, even more significantly the work of a deeply *religious* individual who pondered her personal existential questions against a background of a general predicament created by the weakened position of an old theology and the rise of new theories about deity and human existence.

It is probably true that women readers in particular respond deeply to Sylvia Plath's dramatizations of female quandaries. Being closer to us in time, her world and her problems are easily recognizable to other women. However, the greatest power of her work lies elsewhere and concerns problems that women *and* men in the second half of the twentieth century share: horror at the many forms of violence, anguish at the vulnerability of the individual and the species, and longing for a new kind of purity and security.

#### NOTES

1. *The Undiscovered Continent: Emily Dickinson and the Space of the Mind* (Bloomington, 1983), pp. 10, 4, 11, resp.
2. Quoted in Jay Leyda, *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* (New Haven, 1960), vol. 2, p. 152.

3. See George Stade, "Afterword" in Nancy Hunter Steiner, *A Closer Look at Ariel: A Memory of Sylvia Plath* (London, 1974), p. 84.
4. Quoted in *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 482.
5. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, eds. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), vol. 2, p. 404. Further references will be given parenthetically in the text.
6. *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981); see esp. ch. 5.
7. *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women: A New Tradition* (New York, 1976), pp. 1 f., 3, resp.
8. *Emily Dickinson* (New York, 1951), p. 100 and passim.
9. The article is reprinted in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York, 1979).
10. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Including variant readings critically compared with all known manuscripts, 3. vols., ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass., 1955). All Dickinson poems cited will refer to this edition.
11. *Naked and Fiery Forms*, op. cit., p. 207.
12. Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London, 1981). All Plath poems cited will refer to this edition.
13. "The Wayward Nun beneath the Hill: Emily Dickinson and the Mysteries of Womanhood," in *Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson*, ed. Suzanne Juhasz (Bloomington, 1983), pp. 37, 38, resp.
14. "The Wayward Nun beneath the Hill," *ibid.*, p. 30.
15. *The Undiscovered Continent*, op. cit., pp. 53, 34, resp.