

LETTERS NEVER SENT

LETTERS NEVER SENT:  
EMILY DICKINSON'S "DAISY" LETTERS AS EPISTOLARY FICTION

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## **Abstract**

This study examines both the form and content of three letters by Emily Dickinson commonly referred to by scholars as the “Master” letters. A consideration of the critical work that has been done on these texts to date, in addition to contextualizing these letters within the larger field of Dickinson’s creative work and correspondence, leads me to conclude that Daisy and Master are textual figures who are both integral to an understanding of Dickinson’s exploration of the nature of gender, power, and self-hood in the context of human relations. Similarly, the form of these texts is a testament to Dickinson’s attempt to examine these issues in terms of a single character’s psyche while simultaneously disrupting the boundaries between poetry and prose, public and private and fiction and fact. However, because Dickinson’s examination focuses solely on the anguished persona of Daisy, I believe that these letters should be renamed the “Daisy” letters to acknowledge this character’s centrality to the texts and their meaning.

Unlike the many Dickinson scholars who have sought to unmask “Master,” my argument suggests a new alternative: that not only is the search for the identity of the letter’s recipient of little importance and reward, but that such investigations neglect to consider the nature of the texts themselves, which point to a conclusion that the letters are fictional epistles. While my position springboards from Albert Gelpi’s argument that

Master has no identity grounded in reality per se, my feminist critical approach leads me to centre my argument in the politics of self-hood and in a literary form which both requires and examines a performative self created and maintained only through language. This study advocates a different way of looking at the “Daisy” letters in an effort to begin a new discussion of these texts, where the letters are not evidence of a woman in love but of an artist at work.

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## List of Abbreviations

L - letter

P - poem; from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*.



## Introduction

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Emily Dickinson had no “master.”

Undoubtedly, many Dickinson scholars would disagree with this statement, since for over 40 years critics have continued to discuss the potential identity of “Master,” the man (or woman) referred to in the three Dickinson letters commonly known as the “Master” letters. An air of mystery surrounds these texts. As R.W. Franklin notes, the “Master” letters “have had an uncertain history of discovery, publication, dating and transcription” (5)<sup>1</sup>. Dickinson scholars assume that the letters were found 114 years ago in the week following Emily Dickinson’s death on May 15, 1886, when Lavinia Dickinson, Emily’s sister, discovered a locked box containing seven hundred poems (Franklin 5). As per Dickinson’s final request, Lavinia destroyed all of the poet’s correspondence sight unseen and, thus, scholars have assumed that the “Master” letters must have been with Dickinson’s poems. However, the number of manuscript groups that were located is still unclear: Lavinia later maintained that she found two drawers of poems at once, totalling eighteen hundred poems, rather than the seven hundred initially thought (Franklin 6). The truth became further obscured when Mabel Loomis Todd, who edited three volumes of

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Copies of the three letters, as reproduced in Franklin’s text, are included in appendix A.

Dickinson's poems based upon manuscripts supplied to her by Lavinia Dickinson, asserted that she believed multiple groups had been located (Franklin 6). Whether the "Master" letters were with the first group of poems discovered or in a batch found at a later date remains unknown.

What is known, however, is that "[b]y the early 1890's Mabel Todd knew of the Master letters and included a snippet -- six brief sentences in the edition of Dickinson's letters [that] she brought out in 1894" (Franklin 6). It is notable, none the less, that there is no mention of the name "master" in the small selection she included since the identity of the recipient had been deleted and " a deliberately misleading date of 1885, almost at the end of Emily Dickinson's life, had been assigned" (Franklin 6). Richard Sewall's authoritative biography of Dickinson contends that Lavinia and Dickinson's brother, Austin, are responsible for the misleading date and that they suppressed the remaining letters for "protective reasons" (512). By 1931, Todd possessed the manuscripts but did not publish any further selections from the first letter or the other two in her revised edition (Franklin 6). She did, however, add a note to the passage that she had included in 1894, which indicated that she believed that the manuscript was in the handwriting that marked Dickinson's work of the 1860's (Franklin 6). It was only in 1955, over twenty years later, that the three letters were published in their entirety by Millicent Todd Bingham in *Emily Dickinson's Home* (Sewall 512). Previous to this, biographical and critical studies "were without knowledge of [the letters'] existence, text, or apparent recipient" (Franklin 6); following the 1955 publication, the inclusion of the letter in

Thomas H. Johnson's 1958 edition of Dickinson's correspondence, and Jay Leyda's *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* in 1960, the "Master" letters became widely available (Franklin 6) to scholars.

It is Leyda who is credited with dating the letters more precisely than his predecessors, although according to Franklin, the edition of the letters which Leyda produced is problematic because of the critic's editorial practice of creating a single version of each letter, cancelling out competing readings – sometimes selecting the cancelled readings and sometimes the un-cancelled ones -- resulting in a text that was appropriate for a compendium, but not a textual edition (7). Specific textual references to the "Master" letters in this thesis are based upon Franklin's edition,<sup>2</sup> which dates the first letter in Spring 1858, the second letter in early 1861 and the third letter in the Summer of 1861. This dating of the letters is generally accepted within the Dickinson scholarly community as accurate.

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Feminist scholars have objected to the fact that Franklin is the only scholar, apart from the curator of the manuscripts, who has been permitted unlimited access to the originals. As Susan Howe has commented:

Editing of her poems and letters has been controlled by gentlemen of the old school and by Harvard University Press since the 1950s. Franklin's edition of *The Manuscript Books* and now *The Master Letters* should have radically changed all readings of her work...But they haven't. This is a feminist issue. It takes a woman to see clearly the condescending tone of these male editors when they talk about their work in the texts. But on this subject there is silence so far. And this is a revolutionary way for women to go in Dickinson criticism. (170)

The manuscript of the first letter<sup>3</sup> is “composed of two leaves 187 x 123 mm” on stationery which is “woven, cream and blue-ruled and not embossed,” that has been “folded horizontally and vertically into quarters” (Franklin 11). Since Dickinson wrote this letter in ink, on stationery and “in a deliberate public hand,” Franklin maintains that the poet had intended to prepare a letter that would be suitable for mailing, but that this plan likely went awry when Dickinson miswrote “indeed” as “inded” on the second page and a drop of ink marred the top of page three (11).

The second letter<sup>4</sup> is composed on paper the same size as the first letter, but the stationery differs. Written on “[w]ove, cream, gilt-edged, lightly ruled and embossed FINE | NOTE | PAPER with a decorated vertical oval” measuring 13 x 11 mm., this manuscript has been folded horizontally into two halves (Franklin 21). Unlike the first letter, this manuscript has been written entirely in pencil and is without a salutation (Franklin 21). Dickinson revised the letter twice, again in pencil, though the second revisions were made with a sharpened pencil “cancelling words, substituting others...[and] making further revisions but leaving many aspects unresolved” (Franklin 21).

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<sup>3</sup> Letter 187 in Johnson’s text.

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Letter 248 in Johnson’s text; in his 1986 edition Franklin argues that this letter, which has long thought to be the third letter in the series is actually the second letter. According to Franklin the second two letters “belong to 1861, as all previous editors have thought about the second one and Leyda about both, though in a different order” and this assertion is based upon his analysis of aspects of Dickinson’s handwriting from the period (8). In the interest of clarity I have also labelled the copy of this letter in appendix A as “Letter 2.”

According to Franklin, the final letter<sup>5</sup>, dated the summer of 1861, unlike the other two, is written on two sheets of stationery “each comprising two leaves 202 x 207 mm. The paper is laid, cream with a blue rule, and embossed with a decorative frame (13 x 11 mm.) containing a queen’s head above the letter L” (31). Like the other two letters, the manuscript of this letter has also been folded, although this time horizontally and into thirds (Franklin 31). This letter was also edited by Dickinson; written in ink, it was then revised in both ink and pencil. Franklin further notes that

On the first page Dickinson neatly reworked “He” into “I don’t” so that the change was inconspicuous, and on the third page, for clarity, she touched up the “e” in “breast.” Although she continued on, the draft became intermediate on the fourth page. There, near the top, in ink, she cancelled the word “our”; further down, knowing that this would now not be a final copy, she wrote the alternative wording “remember that” above the line, also in ink. All the other revisions were made in pencil, made after she had finished with pen. She went back through the whole letter, making many changes, and added two passages at the end, one marked for insertion in the midst of a change on the second page, the other unmarked. (31)

Interspersed with Franklin’s descriptions are, of course, his assumption and assertion that these were letters to be sent. The fact remains, however, that while details of the manuscripts are informative and intriguing, they neglect to consider the letters as art.

Close examination of these texts in a literary sense reveals that they each have something to offer in understanding the progression of Dickinson’s experiment in epistolary fiction. While the first letter of this set holds many striking similarities to some

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<sup>5</sup> Letter 233 in Johnson’s text.

of Dickinson's other correspondence such as letters she wrote to console others, I propose that it is simply Dickinson's method of creating a realistic character with whom the persona Daisy may correspond. The two letters which follow, marked by their wild passion, do not demonstrate a woman in the midst of an illicit infatuation with some secret lover, but Dickinson's attempt to investigate the depth of passion and love in the context of power and gender relations. If anything, these letters prove that Dickinson's creative genius was too ingenious—she has fooled everyone, and perhaps too well since the letters are thought to be historical documents rather than artistic creations.

Yet whether critics are consumed by the desire to unmask “master,” or argue that the identity of this individual should be secondary to the work itself, like Franklin, all assume that the letters are actual correspondence and evidence of a secret, impassioned love affair. This approach to the text encourages speculation instead of critical interpretation. There is no real evidence that these letters were part of an ongoing correspondence; rather, the facts point in the other direction—that these letters are part of Dickinson's collected creative work. Dickinson requested that following her death all of her correspondence be destroyed; this set of letters did not meet this fate because they were with her poems. Why should one assume that the letters were simply misfiled? Indeed, such an assertion speaks more about what Dickinson scholars think of the artist whom they study, and the temptations of conjecture, rather than providing any useful information about the poet or her work.

It is the texts themselves, however, that are my primary interest. As with many of

Dickinson's creative works, these letters are a combination of precisely chosen words with ambiguous meanings that demand critical attention in order to disentangle the issues of power, gender and the construction of the self that sit at the heart of these texts. While the circumstances in which the letters were discovered and the fact that the letters were never sent are intriguing historical details that have gone almost completely ignored, the texts remain fascinating pieces of epistolary fiction both as individual works and as a collection.

This study will demonstrate that through these letters Dickinson created a set of texts which straddle the boundaries between both poetry and prose, and public and private, in an effort to prove that such boundaries are permeable. While it is not unusual to hear critics note Dickinson's ability to erase the boundary between poetry and prose, such statements are usually confined to (dare I say safe?) generalities: they speak of Dickinson's poetic style of writing correspondence, or of the way that Dickinson punctuates her poems being generally similar to the way in which she punctuates her letters, or even how her poems were her "letter[s] to the world" that never wrote to her (P 519). As Susan Howe says of Dickinson's work, "Sometimes letters are poems with a salutation and signature. Sometimes poems are letters with a salutation and signature" (81). Yet while contemporary scholars can accept Dickinson's individual conceptualization of creative writing and her blurring of the line between poetry and prose, they are reticent about fully accepting the presence of this creativity in her correspondence.

Historically, this should not come as a surprise; even in Dickinson's own time her work was received tentatively, at best. When preparing Dickinson's poems for publishing, editors felt a need to erase the peculiarities of Dickinson's poetry. In preferring to deal with conjecture rather than the complexity of the texts at hand, scholars erase the intricacies of both the form and the content of these works. Contemplating these letters as epistolary fiction allows us to consider some of the most intriguing aspects of the texts: as supposedly personal letters these texts employ the language of private discourse and as fictional epistles they present themselves as public representatives of a private, though fictional, world.

I have chosen to frame my discussion within the context of feminist literary criticism since this approach has allowed Dickinson critics to make the most progress in examining these letters as something more than mere autobiography. However, even feminist critics have not fully explored the notion of these texts as fiction. Jeanne Holland in her excellent discussion of "Master" in terms of "My Life Had Stood a Loaded Gun," hesitates to push her assertions as far as she should, stopping short at a mere mention of the obvious connection between the "Master" of this poem and the "Master" figured in the letters (143). Furthermore, other work which has made significant progress in understanding Dickinson's texts goes completely ignored by critics, such as two of Suzanne Juhasz's articles, the first, "Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters," published in 1984, and "Reading Dickinson Doubly," published in 1989. Juhasz understands that the doubleness in Dickinson's work is its own meaning, and that the multiplicity "present at all



levels of language in Dickinson's writing" ("Doubly," 218) must be discussed in the context of an examination of a patriarchal language system. Moreover, she realizes that Dickinson's daily correspondence is not autobiography, since "the letter creates and projects the self in terms of a particular interpersonal relationship" (Juhasz, "Reading," 171). Yet, Juhasz's work goes without notice. Instead, Dickinson scholars appear to prefer to imagine the possible identities of "Master" even today, after so many years of the same debate.

The love affair so many critics have had with "Master" began in 1958 when Thomas H. Johnson published Dickinson's correspondence in three volumes and has continued to be a topic of debate in contemporary discussions. In his editorial notes, Johnson argues that Reverend Charles Wadsworth was the "Master" referred to in the letters. The problem with Johnson's assertion, however, is that it is based entirely on circumstantial evidence, specifically a letter written by Wadsworth to Dickinson of an unknown date, which Johnson interprets to be a coy response to Dickinson's final "Master" letter. Almost twenty years later, Albert Gelpi takes a Jungian approach to the identity of "Master" in the mid-1970's when he suggests that the masculine in Dickinson's writing figures as versions of her animus, so that the text becomes a negotiation between the feminine self, which in this case would be represented by Daisy, and the masculine self that is also "other," which here is "Master" (256-57). Despite Margaret Homans' 1980 proclamation that "every reader of Dickinson should be grateful [to Gelpi] for putting to rest the search for the biographical identity of Master" (207), the search continued.

In 1986, well-respected Dickinson editor R. W. Franklin published the “Master” letters in an individual collection. Although he notes in his introduction that the letters were never sent, he nevertheless states unequivocally that “they indicate a long relationship, geographically apart, in which correspondence would have been the primary means of communication” (5). This opinion has been extrapolated by Robert Graham Lambert Jr. in his 1996 book, in which he views the letters as evidence of “Dickinson’s need to subordinate herself, especially sexually, to an overwhelmingly powerful lover” (35) and that he contends “along with David Higgins—that [Samuel] Bowles” is the “Master” in Dickinson’s letters (33-34). For each of these critics, “Master” is some unknown man of Dickinson’s acquaintance, but for Betsy Erkkila, Emily Dickinson’s “Master” is female, and is, according to Erkkila’s 1996 essay, Dickinson’s own sister-in-law and friend, Susan Gilbert Dickinson.

What all of these critics share is their belief that the identity of “Master” is key to an understanding of these texts. Yet in taking an autobiographical approach which privileges the supposed recipient of the letters rather than the writer, Dickinson scholars are mistakenly seeking answers in what is absent instead of what is present. One must wonder if the problem does not lie in the name used to commonly refer to these texts; in calling these works the “Master” letters, scholars have betrayed their own implicitly patriarchal readings -- an absent male still supercedes a female presence. In *Postscript to In The Name of the Rose* Umberto Eco notes that a title provides readers with a key to interpretation (3). Since scholars named these letters themselves, the name they have

given this set of texts is a key to how they have chosen to interpret these works. It is for this reason that these letters should be called the “Daisy” letters – in acknowledgement that they are more about the ideas and concepts that the letters’ “writer” Daisy expresses (partially through “Master”) than about a single absent and unnamed man that Dickinson envisions and metaphorically battles in a violent game of love.

My thesis will be organized into three chapters. The first will consider in greater detail the critical positions that scholars have adopted with regard to the “Master” letters, ranging from Sewall’s original assertions that the letters are autobiographical correspondence to an actual person and that the texts tell “us about Emily Dickinson in a crucial point in her life” (513), to contemporary discussions of a female “Master.” The second chapter of the paper will focus upon the “Master” letters as compared to Dickinson’s other correspondence, as well as her poems that share the Daisy persona.<sup>6</sup> The final chapter will specifically address my argument that the letters are epistolary fiction, as well as address the subject/object dynamics at work in the letters and the language and imagery used within the texts to facilitate the poet’s creation of the persona of Daisy. In this section I will also further extrapolate upon my argument that the letters should be renamed.

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It is perhaps important to note that given my approach to these texts as epistolary fiction, I will be using both Dickinson’s poetry and critical work which discusses her poetry to contemplate this fictional correspondence. Just as Dickinson blurs the line between poetry and prose, so too shall I blur the division between these letters and her other creative work, in an effort to demonstrate that Dickinson attempted to do more with these letters than simply betray a secret love affair.

It is time that we acknowledge Dickinson as a woman poet and creative genius who produced something more than critics have allowed for in the past, in addition to noting her contributions to the world of literature that these letters make, in both poetry and prose. It is only by returning authority to the text -- that which is present -- that we can acknowledge these letters as the work of art that they are, and begin a new discussion of these texts that is not limited by seeing the letters as evidence of a woman in love and not an artist at work. To simply assert without evidence, as Franklin does, that "Dickinson did not write letters as a fictional genre," as evidence of an illicit affair is a habit that Dickinson scholars must wean themselves from. There is every opportunity to read these texts as fiction; if Dickinson could write a poem which was her letter to the world that never wrote to her, then surely these letters may be something more than they, too, appeared to be.

## Chapter One

### Wadsworth, Bowles, Gilbert, Whoever: The Problems of Mastering Dickinson

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Have the critics who envision “Master” as a real individual drawn their conclusions from the letters themselves or do their assertions simply serve the arguments that they chose to make? Likewise, given my view that these letters are fictional rather than biographical, what do their arguments contribute to this study? In order to answer these questions, this chapter will provide a closer examination of the scholars I discussed briefly in my introduction, as well as a sampling of other Dickinson critics who have outlined their positions on the subject.

Aside from Millicent Todd Bingham’s short note in her 1931 edition of Dickinson’s correspondence, the first scholar to comment upon the “Master” letters was the editor of the next collection of Dickinson’s letters, Thomas H. Johnson. According to Johnson, the identity of “Master” was clear, although perhaps not easily proven. While he admits that “[t]here is no direct evidence that Reverend Charles Wadsworth was the man with whom she fell in love,” he nevertheless maintains that “the circumstantial evidence is impressive that such was true, and is at no point contradicted by other evidence” (388). As far as Johnson is concerned, “[a]t present one conjectures no other [than Wadsworth] whom she might thus have designated” (332). Part of the difficulty with this position is that Johnson does not provide any of the evidence, circumstantial or otherwise, that he

refers to in support of his assertion, unless one includes Johnson's own juxtaposition of a short letter from Wadsworth of an unknown date with the third "Master" letter published in his text. In this correspondence, Wadsworth expresses sympathy for Dickinson's suffering caused by some unnamed malady (L 248a). Yet Wadsworth also notes that he can offer little more than his sympathies and prayers for an affliction which he "can only imagine" (L 248a). Furthermore, the reverend appears to be a concerned friend rather than a rejecting lover, evident when he writes: "I am very, very anxious to learn more definitely of your trial—and though I have no right to intrude upon your sorrow yet I beg you to write me, though it be but a word" (L 248a). In his notes following this letter Johnson admits that the correspondence "may have been written at quite a different time" than the summer 1861 letter written by Dickinson, but defends his choice to include the Wadsworth letter at this point in his collection "because the present assumption is that ED thought of Wadsworth as 'Master'" (393). Nevertheless, the fact remains that Johnson provides little evidence to support his position and his explanations are unconvincing.

Despite Johnson's contention that he chose to include the letter from Wadsworth at *this* point in his three-volume work simply because it is generally accepted that Wadsworth is "Master," to position this letter so that it follows the third "Master" letter implies, whether Johnson intended to or not, that the Wadsworth letter of an "unknown date" is actually a response to the final letter in the series. Ultimately, however, Wadsworth's letter and its positioning in the text do not point to the conclusion that the Wadsworth letter is a response to an emotional outpouring by a woman in love with him,

but simply evidence of Johnson's own speculations about the relationship.

Yet what else could Johnson do than speculate? He admits that scholars have little information to go upon and that they do not even know when Dickinson first wrote to Wadsworth (332). Yet why should the identity of "Master" be important at all? What changes for scholars if the identity is one man over another—or even a woman for that matter? Is it merely some sort of voyeuristic curiosity or does how we understand such a text differ according to who we envision as the recipient?

Careful examination of Johnson's collection of Dickinson's correspondence reveals that there was another man whom Dickinson once called Master – T. W. Higginson. In a letter to him dated January 1876, Dickinson writes "That it is true, Master, is the Power of all you write" (L 449). This detail -- perhaps significant, perhaps irrelevant -- is fascinating not because it could hint of a new identity of the "Master" so passionately addressed elsewhere, but because it is a reference that has gone completely ignored by scholars. Of those who have noted the use of "Master" in this letter, of which Johnson must have been one, no one has assigned the usage any importance. Why? For Higginson to have been Dickinson's "Master" would have serious implications for the nature of their working relationship, and yet the reference has gone without remark, implying that it means nothing. Surely this discovery could be significant – Dickinson did not use the name "Master" anywhere else in her correspondence, with the exception of the "Master" letters – two of which were not even addressed to "Master," but some unknown correspondent. Her use of the term here could speak to the power relations at play in her

relationship with Higginson, as it does in the other letters, the latter point being one which I will return to in chapter three. However, pausing for a moment to give further consideration to the suggestion that Higginson could have been the intended recipient of the other letters, what Dickinson writes next could be interpreted as a hint of such a relationship. Dickinson notes that “Could it cease to be Romance, it would be Revelation, which is the Seed – of Romance–“ (L 449). In not being privileged to view the letter from Higginson that sparked such comments, one can only speculate about the nature of this “Romance.” Could Dickinson be referring to secret, though strong, feelings she harbors for her mentor? A reader can gain little assistance from the other letters which Dickinson wrote around this time period, and Johnson’s notes which follow the letter provide little insight. Speculation can easily become contention. Yet if I were to argue that Higginson is “Master,” what is to be gained?

On the face of things, little -- at least in terms of some sort of political agenda. Rather, one is more likely to say that one gains a better understanding of Dickinson’s life – that is surely what Richard Sewall claims that he set out to do when he wrote his two-volume 1974 critical biography of Dickinson. For him, the “Master” letters were so important that he devoted an entire chapter to them in which he notes that these three letters are nothing short of “vital” in Dickinson studies (512). According to Sewall, the letters “raise innumerable questions” but he is careful to point out that “the identity of the recipient, however intriguing, is among the least important” of the concerns that the letters create (512-13). Instead, “[f]ar more important is what they tell us about Emily Dickinson



at this crucial point in her life,” and while he acknowledges that it has “long been known” that “she went through a crisis, and probably a love crisis, about this time,” what is important to Sewall is that “[w]e see her coping with the experience with all of her imaginative and verbal power and thus partially, at least, transcending it” (513). Examination of the letters in this manner, then, is simply a method of attempting to understand the psyche and private life of a genius, and the search for the identity of “Master” is merely an off-shoot that seeks the same result. This being the case, the understanding that is gained, particularly in a text which claims that the search for “Master’s” identity is of the least importance (though it ironically spends the last half of the chapter addressing this exact question in detail), deserves to be scrutinized more closely.

Sewall concludes that all “we can be sure of is [Master’s] failure to understand her and respond to her love” and that this reaction is not without cause, since Dickinson simply demanded too much of others, whether they were friends or a potential lover (518). This assertion is supported by a quick outline of Dickinson’s social life:

Her early girl friends could hardly keep up with her tumultuous letters or, like Sue, could not or would not take her into their lives as she wanted to be taken. They had other concerns. The young men, save for a few who had amusing or edifying intellectual exchanges with her, apparently shied away. Eliza Coleman’s fear that her friends in Amherst “wholly misinterpret” her, was a polite way of saying, perhaps, that they could not respond with the intensity that she apparently demanded of everyone. She seemed unable to take friendship casually, nor could she be realistic about love. (Sewall 518-19)

Thus, through Dickinson’s letters, we can apparently come to understand the woman.

The “Master” letters reveal an intense poet and writer who failed to grasp the limitations of human relations when faced with powerful emotions, or perhaps to phrase it more in the tone which Sewall adopts, Dickinson was an almost pathetically lovesick woman (one who was “the captive of her own soaring fantasy about love” (Sewall 518)) who didn’t seem to know or care when she became too much for those around her to handle. The problem that arises from this type of reading of the text is that it is circular. Scholars, such as Sewall, seek to gain insight into the poet through her work, but this same insight is then used, in turn, to interpret and understand that same text: in other words, the “Master” letters are reduced to being a testimonial of Dickinson’s inability to ground herself within reality.<sup>7</sup> Attempting to gain understanding of a literary work merely by placing it solely in the context of the author’s life ignores that texts can transcend the details of their creation. I am not arguing that contextualizing/conceptualizing a text historically, culturally or biographically is invalid, but that it can be extremely limiting, and underestimates the

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I am not the only scholar who supports this opinion. Martha Nell Smith writes that:

What editors believe Dickinson was capable of intending dictates what is translated to the printed page. What critics believe Dickinson was capable of intending dictates what is interpreted. This may seem like stating the obvious, or, in these post-poststructural days, theoretically uninformed. But this struggle to “own an Emily of my own” (H B 4, P 1401, L 531) is at the heart of editorial, critical, and biographical endeavors that see themselves in competition with (instead of in complement to) other endeavors. For each of us to acknowledge investment in a particular Emily Dickinson and certain genera of texts is the first step toward taking critical and editorial responsibility. A crucial next step is to refuse to see different as “competing” and to cultivate an appreciation for other readers’ very different investments. (Smith)

dynamics of literature, just as the letters have been underestimated here. However, if we accept for a moment that Dickinson did tend toward an idealization of relationships, as Sewall argues she did, then it stands to reason that the ideal, being that which emanates from the mind, is a kind of fiction. To suggest, then, that these letters are fictional epistles is not unreasonable or improbable. Thus, even those who prefer to approach the text biographically can be open to this type of argument. It may be that Sewall also saw this possibility, though he was hesitant to make such a statement outright.

As I noted earlier, despite the fact that Sewall is careful to mention that the identity of Master is one of the least important questions that these texts raise, he nevertheless devotes a substantial portion of the chapter to both the speculations of others and his own ideas about the potential identity of "Master." Sewall is adamant that while Dickinson was fully capable of carrying herself "to imagined heights with the slightest stimulus, these letters cannot, I think, be looked upon as fictions, even though passages in them show her artfulness" (520). After weighing the options carefully, he concludes that the evidence points most convincingly toward Samuel Bowles, since it "seems clear" that Dickinson loved him (528-529). What is most intriguing, however, is the contradictory contention which follows. Despite Sewall's declarations that the letters are not fictional, he then notes that although Bowles, rather than Wadsworth, would appear to be the "Master" scholars search for, "we look in vain in all three letters for the living presence of either one of them" and that, in his opinion, "Emily Dickinson appropriated the experience with Bowles to her own creative uses, and this (whoever the Master was) she clearly did with

the experience recorded in the Master letters” (529). This statement parallels a little-discussed position taken by William Robert Sherwood in 1968 in which Sherwood argues that in the “Master” letters Dickinson “constructed, out of her slight contact with Wadsworth, ‘a drama of passion, transgression, defiance, punishment, damnation, and despair, assimilating, as Hawthorne may have taught her to do, the conventions of medieval romance within a Calvinist framework’” (Sewall 521). Thus, regardless of Sewall’s initial statements, ultimately he acknowledges that a fictive/creative element is present in the “Master” letters, perhaps pointing to a conclusion that they are not, at first glance, what they appear to be. Still, Sewall is hesitant to admit that this is his position and instead chooses to tuck these revolutionary statements in a paragraph two pages from the end of his chapter and insists upon clinging to his contention that a man must have existed behind “Master.” What is most intriguing about this reading is that Sewall’s own biographical analysis of the letters and his review of the many positions on the true identity of “Master”, aside from his own brief outline of Sherwood’s contentions which he passes over quickly, do not support this interpretation of the texts’ creation and creativity. However cautiously, Sewall acknowledges that these texts are something more than critics have allowed them to be and that the argument over Bowles versus Wadsworth is more telling of the approaches taken to the text, and the arguments that critics make, rather than of the text itself.

The name of the recipient is especially important to the critical approach that a scholar adopts for his or her argument, regardless of whether the approach is implicit, as

in the work of Johnson and Sewall, or explicit, as in the arguments made by Betsy Erkkila and Albert Gelpi.<sup>8</sup> For Erkkila, who argues that Dickinson's "Master" is female, the endless speculations about a male "Master" are simply "narratives of heterosexual love" which "still dominate critical interpretations of Dickinson's life and work" (162). Set on revealing that Dickinson had a lesbian relationship with Susan Gilbert, Erkkila's approach requires a female "Master" to replace and subvert the potential of a male "Master" in order to situate her argument in opposition to other, often more implicitly patriarchal and hetero-normative, readings. The problem inherent in Erkkila's reading, however, is that she simply displaces one "Master" for another. Although Erkkila may be attempting to liberate the letters and Dickinson from the critical dominance of patriarchal masters, her emphasis on the absent figure in the text, rather than the female presence, closely parallels the tendency of many scholars to ignore Dickinson in favour of a speculative discussion of an absent male "Master." Erkkila's argument also experiences the same problem of circularity that Sewall's demonstrates, since she also interprets Dickinson's life through her letters, and, in turn, uses that interpretation to understand the work. Thus, arguments

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Of course, some interpretations are not always motivated by critical approaches. Bill Arnold, whose text asserts that Dickinson's love poems and letters betray her relationship with Samuel Bowles Jr., has perhaps the most individual approach to Dickinson's work that I have come across. Arnold supports his assertions through a combination of biographical details provided by "Miss Emily's" relations, decoding of anagrams, his own intrinsic understanding of poetry because he, too, is a poet and information supplied by Bob Francis, a friend of the writer. At this time, Arnold's motives are unclear, except for his stated desire to "set the record straight," – a record which he maintains has been maligned by scholars, particularly those who have given Dickinson's texts lesbian-feminist readings (15).

which first appear to be in complete opposition to each other are merely points on the same line. What is the difference if “Master” is Bowles versus Wadsworth or Gilbert? The answer, according to critics like Winfred Townley Scott, Ruth Miller, Robert Graham Lambert, and David Higgins – to name only a few -- is a great deal. The name of the letters’ recipient alters where they place authority, even if that individual is silent within the text. For some reason, however, many critics are reticent to assign that authority to Dickinson.

Gelpi’s Jungian approach, in contrast, nullifies the need for an actual or named recipient, since his argument relies upon interpreting Dickinson’s work as a fractured reflection of the poet’s psyche. This approach permits Gelpi to both accept and discuss the evidence that the letters were never sent, safe in the knowledge that the existence of the letters does not undermine the theory that he advances. He goes so far as to state this fact explicitly and notes that because of this, “[i]t is convincing to read the letters as diary-like addresses to a troubled aspect of herself” (Gelpi 256). Gelpi’s interpretation that the letters function for the poet as a journal holds its own problems. The fact that these letters were not found with Dickinson’s other correspondence, and, thus, not destroyed by Lavinia Dickinson as soon as she discovered them, could hint at the possibility that Dickinson intended, in the end, for these texts to be published. This could mean that she intended the letters to have a much larger audience than the single individual the letters are addressed to -- but admittedly, this supposition is mere speculation on my part. However, the epistolary nature of the texts mean that we cannot pretend, as Gelpi would have us do,

that the letters are not intended for a recipient, regardless of whether that individual is real or imagined, irrespective of whether the letters were ever sent or are Dickinson's creative explorations.

What Gelpi's theory offers readers is something similar to those offered by Margaret Homans, Suzanne Juhasz, Cynthia Wolff, Karen Oakes, and Jeanne Holland, who are only a few of the feminist critics who have attempted to expand the discussion of Dickinson's "Master" letters from a dialogue centered on absence to one addressing the dynamics of this work. As Margaret Dickie states in her survey of "Feminist Conceptions of Dickinson," feminist approaches to Dickinson's texts have dominated the field over the last twenty years so that "It is not that 'The Others look a needless Show' (P 533), but rather...the whole show has been largely feminist" (342). Yet as feminist literary studies have progressed, so too have feminist critics' perceptions and conceptualizations of Dickinson. Homans' study, for example, contributes to the examination of these letters through her argument that the texts must be read in the larger context of Dickinson's creative work in order to gain a fuller understanding of this "woman poet" (162). Her attempt to draw out some of the most important threads of Dickinson's work, like other studies, experiences the limitations imposed by critical models, weakening Homans' argument. As Dickie correctly points out, this attempt to create a model of the woman writer, as with many similar feminist works being done at the time, "fits Dickinson poorly" because Homans was attempting to "find a general explanation of the woman writer" rather than focussing on Dickinson as a specific and distinguished writer (345). I include

this example to demonstrate that despite my own position and critical approach to these texts, it is not the approach of other scholars that I find problematic so much as the limits of the results of their studies.

The contributions of these critics are nevertheless very important to the progression of Dickinson studies and an expanded understanding of the epistolary texts under discussion here. It is Juhasz who has been one of the most adamantly opposed to critics like David J. Higgins who attempt to use Dickinson's letters as autobiography, arguing, as I do, with Gelpi's notion of letter as diary, that "[a]s an autobiographical form, the letter may be distinguished from its cousins, the formal autobiography and the journal, specifically in its manner of self-representation" and that "the letter creates and projects the self in terms of a particular interpersonal relationship" ("Reading Emily," 171). Likewise, Juhasz's discussions of multiplicity in Dickinson's poems experiment with ways of reading Dickinson and take an interdisciplinary approach to the poet's work by applying the concept of the muted group developed by anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardener ("Reading Dickinson," 218-220). Cynthia Wolff's declaration that "the identity of the intended recipient is less important than the pattern of language and thought that is revealed in the 'Master' letters" (406), has led the discussion onto new ground. Working more generally with Dickinson's texts, Karen Oakes has explored the relationship between the author/poet, the text and the reader and argued that Dickinson sought a "culturally feminine (that is, not merely female) discourse which establishes or presumes a process of intimacy with a reader" (181). Jeanne Holland, in a discussion of Dickinson and the



Master figure in “My life had stood – a Loaded Gun,” has attempted to revise critical interpretations that either emphasize the poet’s submissiveness or argue that she ultimately obtains dominance (137). Robert Graham Lambert’s 1996 study of Dickinson’s correspondence, in contrast, offers readers little insight into the “Master” letters with claims that the texts are simply evidence of Dickinson’s need for “masculine domination” (xiv). While Lambert covers old patriarchal ground, feminist scholars have made roadways into furthering our understanding of Dickinson’s elusive work.

However, the fact remains that no matter how progressive or fascinating the theory that a critic advances about the letters, each gives a token nod to the belief that “Master” is an actual person and refuses to acknowledge that it is possible that the letters could exist somewhere between fact and fiction. Scholars prefer to attempt to dismiss “Master” and pretend that the rhetorical dance between Daisy and “Master” has nothing to do with absence and presence, or claim, as Homans did in 1980, that the search is over. It is just as problematic to focus solely on “Master” as it is to pretend that the letters have no recipient. In any creation, form and content are integral and understanding cannot be gained by sacrificing one for the other.

I am not the first to suggest this idea, merely the first to apply the notion specifically to these letters. This fact is reflected in more recent feminist studies of Dickinson’s poetry. In a 1996 article Wolff capitalizes on Juhasz’s notion of Dickinson’s “doubleness,” suggesting that “in our sophistication we are missing something when we do not respond to the *apparently* ‘biographical’ element in the poetry” (119). Wolff

explores the contrast she sees between the scholarly approach to Dickinson's text which has progressed from taking for granted that Dickinson's poems were "a direct, unmediated reflection of 'Emily Dickinson's state of mind'," ("[Im]pertient," 119) to a careful distinction between the poet and the woman. Yet while the sophistication of scholarship may have increased, Wolff ponders the possibility that something has been lost along the way – that perhaps we have lost touch with "something 'real,' a unique, 'Dickinsonian' tonality" ("[Im]pertient," 119). From this point, she seeks to identify a way that an "appropriate and useful construct of the 'author'" ("[Im]pertient," 122) can be formed, so that the work can be seen through a single lens which functions in multiple ways.

This concept of authorship is one comprised of a combination of fields: personal, situational, linguistic, aesthetic/moral and, finally, political (Wolff, "[Im]pertient" 122-23). Dickinson "the Author/Poet," as she is constructed by scholars, can encompass part of that "Dickinsonian tonality" that Wolff fears has been sacrificed in our attempts to claim intellectual objectivity. Moreover, through this lens, the Dickinson who befuddles so many can become clear. For Wolff, part of Dickinson's "author function" is her ability to apply the romantic grotesque to herself and it is this application that strikes readers as "incomprehensible" and makes Dickinson appear to be "unhinged" (129). With regard to my study, Wolff's point is well taken. Dickinson's work is not so simplistic that it may be treated as a diary, but neither can an approach which ignores the individual creator in favour of the figure of the "Author" be any more successful. Nevertheless, a compromise seems sensible: that the most respected Dickinson scholars acknowledge the creative

aspects of these letters but, until now, this aspect of these letters has remained unexplored.

Aside from the issues of critical approach that I have discussed earlier in the chapter, it is also important to note that in the larger context of Dickinson scholarship few have felt capable of addressing these letters. The “Master” letters are set apart by critics from Dickinson’s other correspondence and creative work, singularly notable for their passion and unbridled energy, quite unlike anything else Dickinson produced. Of those scholars who discuss Dickinson’s correspondence, few are willing to do anything more than make a few comments in passing about these letters. Critics who do consider the letters specifically, like Juhasz, still labour to understand them in the context of Dickinson’s other correspondence. According to Juhasz, the “sheer excess of feeling and language makes these letters qualifiedly different from any that we know she sent” (“Reading Emily,” 186). For her, these texts betray a Dickinson at her extremes, creatively and personally. In Juhasz’s opinion, the “Master” letters represent “the limits, both emotional and verbal, where she would at time[s] fling herself in privacy” (“Reading Emily,” 188). This category of critics excludes, of course, those who devote their studies to discovering the identity of “Master,” an undoubtedly safer task when faced with the violence of passion portrayed in the letters. Yet regardless of the tactics that scholars use to distract themselves from the dynamic creative power evident in the texts, the “Master” letters are unlike anything else in Dickinson’s body of work. Perhaps it is time that critics simply acknowledge and accept this difference, rather than attempting to erase it.

The “Master” letters are unarguably demanding and intense and there is still much

to be said about them. Many contemporary scholars may believe that they have surpassed the limited investigations of these works by declaring that the identity of “Master” is of no importance, but they, too, are mistaken. Numerous scholars, through their contentions that “Master” is one man or another, have also asserted that the identity of “Master” is (a) key to these texts. While their attention to “Master” has been a distraction from other issues that the texts raise, to dismiss their scholarship is ironically to commit the same folly. However, the dominating tendency even in contemporary readings to read Dickinson in these letters as some kind of hysterical woman who is submerged too far in the depths of her own emotions suggests that, despite what progress we believe we have made, how we read texts remains essentially unchanged. If one were to argue that this continued trend in Dickinson studies is simply a result of biographical readings, does that mean we simply must accept the fallout? My study of the work of other scholars in this chapter points to a realization that such a conception of biographical readings is unfair -- they provide one way of viewing these letters, and such an approach provides the reader with what it can. There can be no idealized feminist reading -- that, too, would be a kind of fiction.

To study Dickinson is not merely to study the person of Dickinson or her work. One hundred and fourteen years following her death the questions that her texts raise continue to be applicable to contemporary issues. This is why an examination of three of Dickinson’s letters can have implications for the progression of feminist scholarship and bring into question the basis of one of the most common approaches to literature. If we

are to further our understanding of these letters, we must re-examine our own assumptions and positions and permit new ways of reading Dickinson so new discussions of Dickinson's creative genius can begin. In the chapter that follows I will consider Dickinson's letters and poems irrespective of the boundaries of genre, in an effort to further disentangle the issues of power, gender and self identity within the letters -- but without, trying to "Master" Dickinson but simply to understand.

## Chapter Two

### The Boundaries of Genre: Understanding the “Master” Letters

#### Through Dickinson’s Correspondence and Poems

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Close examination of Emily Dickinson’s letters and poems reveals an individual who moved fluidly between the genres, particularly as she gained maturity as a woman and as an artist. In some instances her letters were complete or partial poems, while at other times her poems were her letters to a world that never wrote to her. Even scholars such as Johnson and Lambert, who contend that the “Master” letters are autobiographical confessions of some secret love affair, acknowledge the poetry of this correspondence. It stands to reason, then, that one of the most logical approaches to take to these letters is to contextualize them within a framework of Dickinson’s other letters and poems.

Comparing these letters to Dickinson’s other correspondence and considering aspects of these texts which are also apparent in Dickinson’s poetry, such as Dickinson’s usage of the Daisy persona, daisy imagery, and the figure of “Master,” reveals that facets of both genres inform the nature of these texts. It is for this reason that the “Master” letters can best be understood by treating them as both epistles and poems.

This latter statement is as much a declaration of my belief that Dickinson attempted to create something new with these texts, as it is an assertion that present approaches to literature, being divided and based upon genre, are individually of limited

use in dealing with these literary creations. It is important to acknowledge here that these letters (in the very least, visually) conform to epistolary conventions,<sup>9</sup> and that, if forced to select a generic category under which I would file these texts, it would be that of correspondence. That said, however, as this study will demonstrate both in this chapter and the one which follows, such categorization tells us nothing about the letters themselves, merely that literary boundaries are artificial.

Obviously, I am not the first to see Dickinson's work in this manner. Even in 1858, Johnson could see this aspect of Dickinson's texts. According to Johnson, "early in the 1860's, when Emily Dickinson seems to have first gained assurance of her destiny as a poet, the letters both in style and rhythm begin to take on qualities that are so nearly the quality of her poems as on occasion to leave the reader in doubt where the letter leaves off and the poem begins" (xv). Here Johnson speaks of Dickinson's habit of including poems in the body of her letters and to the poetic form and tone of many of those letters. However, there are some important differences between the "Master" letters and Dickinson's other correspondence that Johnson's comment fails to take into account. A brief comparison of the literary qualities or characteristics of the "Master" letters and

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I believe it is important to clarify my statements at this point, particularly given my earlier argument with Gelpi's interpretations of the texts. As I outlined in Chapter 1, Gelpi's contention that the letters function as a kind of diary for the poet is problematic since this approach portends that the letters have no intended recipient, real or imagined, and this position ignores the epistolary nature of the texts. Rather than favouring one genre for another, and thereby ignoring specific aspects of the texts for my convenience, I am attempting to examine these letters in all their complexity.

letters Dickinson wrote during two comparable periods -- 1858 and 1861, respectively -- provides the basis for this contention.

Take, for example, the first "Master" letter (L 187) written "about 1858" and letter 189, addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Bowles, dated the same year. The letters differ in tone, poetic content, punctuation, and the inclusion of imagery. Indeed, letter 187 could be a poem, although admittedly a long one, particularly by Dickinsonian standards. While on the surface the letter to "Master" is one of condolence, a type of letter that Dickinson commonly wrote,<sup>10</sup> it does not contain the references to daily events, places and mutual friends that the letter to the Bowles brims with. In the latter letter to her friends, Dickinson writes: "I rode with Austin this morning. He showed me mountains that touched the sky, and brooks that sang like Bobolinks. Was he not very kind?" (L 189). The language is fluid and Dickinson employs the poetic forms of metaphor and simile. However, these poetic elements are commonly used in prose. Letter 187, on the other hand, is inclined toward statements whose meanings are obscure and beg interpretation: "You ask me what my flowers said-- then they were disobedient--I gave them messages" (L 187). If these lines were restructured so that a new line began following each dash, what would be created would appear strikingly similar to the line breaks, visual format and style of Dickinson's poetry. Likewise, Dickinson's words here may be read on a number of levels (literally, figuratively and allegorically, to name but a few) and the rhythm is more

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<sup>10</sup> A point which I shall return to later in the chapter.



consistent with that of her poetry than her prose correspondence. The latter is soon evident upon scanning one of Dickinson's poems written in 1858 – poem 63 – reproduced here for the reader's convenience:

I keep my pledge.  
 I was not called –  
 Death did not notice me.  
 I bring my Rose.  
 I plight again.  
 By every sainted Bee –  
 By Daisy called from hillside –  
 By Bobolink from lane.  
 Blossom and I –  
 Her *oath*, and mine –  
 Will surely come again.

Like the passage I cited from letter 187 the language of this poem has a simple, yet abrupt tone. Lines are strung together with the use of dashes and Dickinson constructs statements that are not in the form of sentences in contrast to letter 189 where Dickinson writes a complete sentence when she notes that “I rode with Austin this morning.” Similarly, the meaning of either the poem or letter 187 is obscure, unlike letter 189 where content and meaning are one and the same. In both the passage from letter 187 and poem 63 the reader must decipher the meanings of metaphors and images. Who/what are the flowers that she speaks of in the letter? What does the Rose signify in the poem? Who/what is the Blossom? In this poem Daisies and Bobolinks are personified and bees are “sainted,” just as flowers are given messages in letter 187. Dickinson employs metaphor and simile in letter 189 so that she may better (and more romantically) describe the sights she witnesses and so that her point is communicated more clearly and explicitly.

Unlike letter 189 which is dominated by references to the Bowles' visit, letter 187 is marked by imagery that is developed throughout the course of the "Master" letters.<sup>11</sup> In his notes which follow this first "Master" letter Johnson shares his assumption that letter 187 was a reply to a correspondence he believes "Master" previously sent to Dickinson, a fact which is supposedly evident in "the allusion to his question" (333). However, more careful examination of this "allusion" reveals that it is part of the imagery Dickinson weaves throughout the letter. Dickinson writes that "Master" has asked what her flowers said, and that, being disobedient, they apparently said nothing so that Dickinson can instead only give them messages. However, in complete contradiction to this line, the one which follows claims that "They said what the lips in the West, say, when the sun goes down, and so says the Dawn --" (L 187). Despite the fact that the flowers would not speak, Dickinson knows what it is they say. Yet it is Dickinson who appears to be the disobedient one, since she knows what the flowers say, but tells "Master" that she could only give them messages, since they would not tell him what he desired to know. Nature speaks to Dickinson in "God's house" where she has Violets by her side, "the Robin very near," and "Spring...going by the door" and "Master" can only try and obtain information through her (L 187). One of the most intriguing aspects of this vision is how Nature encompasses God's house, rather than the other way around -- it is both inside and out.

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Here I make reference to Joanne Dobson's position, as put forth in her article, "Oh, Susie, it is dangerous": Emily Dickinson and the Archetype of the Masculine," in which she argues that through the three "Master" letters Dickinson develops a theme of Christian imagery which Dickinson employs in order to explore the notion of redemption.

Similarly, while Dickinson may at first appear to the reader to be acting in a subservient role to “Master,” it is the opposite that is true: “Master” may make requests of Dickinson but she is under no compulsion to fulfill them, and, in fact, chooses not to tell “Master” what he seeks to know. Dickinson then chides “Master” to “Listen again” because she had not told him that this day is the Sabbath (L 187). The obscurity of these lines parallels much of Dickinson’s poetic work, pointing to a conclusion that the text is similarly creative.

Turning for a moment to the technical aspects of these letters, it is notable that letter 189 contains no dashes whatsoever. It could be argued that the presence of dashes is not direct evidence of poetic expression, and that conventions of punctuation at the time dictate that there were no differences in the punctuation of letters versus poems (McGann 270). However, most Dickinson readers are familiar with this particular characteristic which marks so much of Dickinson’s poetic work. Furthermore, while Dickinson’s other correspondence shows that the poet employed dashes in the punctuation of her letters, their usage in many of those instances shows greater conformity to the manner in which dashes are used in prose today. For example, in letter 191, written in the early summer of 1858, Dickinson writes: “Have you – or has Mr. Haven – in his Library, either ‘Klosterheim,’ or ‘The Confessions of an Opium Eater,’ by De-Quincey?” Here the dash is used in place of a comma to indicate pause and another alternative to the subject that the writer is addressing. However, when the dash is not used in this manner, its employment results in a much more poetic construction, as is evident when Dickinson

writes to Joseph Haven in August of the same year that, “Though I met you little, I shall miss you all – Your going will redden the maple – and fringe the Gentian sooner, in the soft fields” (L 192). In this instance the dash is not only used to indicate pause but to create a pregnant pause where the initial statement does not reach completion, but is a stepping stone to the next thought, related to the first in varying degrees. Nevertheless, while striking, this is not the only facet of this “Master” letter which distinguishes this correspondence from Dickinson’s other letters. This discrimination is important because it acknowledges that the texts are different from Dickinson’s regular correspondence, no matter how artistically they have been composed. The fact that these letters share such similarities (and such differences) with Dickinson’s poetry is significant; it means that these letters could well be fiction – perhaps inspired in the same manner in which Dickinson’s poetic work was -- by daily events and ponderings.

Letter 187, unlike the letter to the Bowles and much of Dickinson’s other correspondence as published in Johnson’s texts, contains three cancelled readings that Johnson includes in his version in parentheses. Aside from the other two letters in the “Master” series, none of Dickinson’s other correspondence – numbering over one thousand letters in total – has this particular element. This is not to say that Dickinson did not edit her other correspondence, but that even letters which are obviously drafts, such as letter 226 to Susan Gilbert Dickinson,<sup>12</sup> do not possess this potential for multiple readings

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Johnson asserts in his footnotes to the letter that this was not a draft that was intended to be sent, what he refers elsewhere in his text to as a “fair copy.”

resulting from Dickinson's edits. I do not seek to draw a conclusion from this peculiarity, merely to note that it sets this letter, as with the other "Master" letters, apart from Dickinson's other correspondence.

Letter 248 and letter 233, the remaining "Master" letters, are also markedly different from other letters Dickinson wrote during 1861. Like the 1858 letter to the Bowles, letter 238 to Susan Gilbert Dickinson makes specific references to people and situations of daily life, such as when Dickinson writes, "Your praise is good – to me – because I *know* it *knows* – and suppose – it means – Could I make you and Austin – proud – sometime – a great way off – 'twould give me taller feet" (L 238). The point that Dickinson intends to communicate with this letter is fairly clear, even though readers may not be certain what praise Dickinson refers to in the first line, since obviously this letter cannot be read in context with Susan Gilbert Dickinson's initial letter to her sister-in-law. Indeed, the third "Master" letter which begins "If you saw a bullet hit a Bird—and he told you he was'nt shot – you might weep at his courtesy, but you would certainly doubt his word" (L 233), shares much more in common with letter 240, a note which Dickinson wrote to Austin in 1861 that consists almost entirely of a poetry. These creative letters bear small resemblance to letters such as the one to Susan Dickinson or others written to Samuel Bowles in the early 1860's.

This is not to say that the second two "Master" letters do not differ from the first in the series. In fact, letter 248 is notable in that it contains the first use of the persona "Daisy" within any of Dickinson's correspondence. The persona appears only one more

time in Dickinson's epistolary writings in letter 233, the third "Master" letter.

Interestingly enough, almost nowhere else in the 1049 letters credited to Dickinson does she adopt a persona, or one in which she refers to herself in third person narration. There are two instances where this does occur, but the infrequency of the occurrence and the singular use of these references point to a conclusion that they are of little import.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, while scholars of Dickinson like Margaret Homans have noted this use of the persona Daisy and the prevalent images of the flower of the same name in Dickinson's poetry, no one has yet noticed that 1858 not only marked the first "Master" letter but also the first use of "Daisy" or Daisies in Dickinson's poetry. The use of this image, which I will return to later in this chapter, began in 1858, was employed repeatedly in 1859, and continued on almost a yearly basis from 1860 to 1865 (excluding 1861, during which none of Dickinson's poetry made any references to Daisy or Daisies). After 1865, Dickinson wrote only one poem in 1874 which made reference to "Daisy." The frequent use of the persona at this time in her poetry, combined with its sudden appearance in these letters in 1861, further differentiates the "Master" letters from the other letters written by the poet and draws further parallels between these texts and

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In Letter 887, written in 1884 after the "Master" letters had been written and the persona of "Daisy" had reached its full development, Dickinson refers to herself as a little flower (thereby potentially adopting a vague persona), though its usage here could also be assigned to poetic license rather than the creation of an alternate persona, as she did with Daisy. Likewise, in a letter to Susan Gilbert Dickinson dated April 1861 Dickinson refers to herself in third person when she asks, "Will Susan please lend Emily 'Life in the Iron Mills' -- and accept Blossom" (L 231).

Dickinson's poetry.

Of course, the "Master" letters are not the only letters addressed to unknown recipients in Dickinson's correspondence. Aside from this series, five other letters in Johnson's collection have correspondents who remain a mystery. What is intriguing about these letters is the fact that there is no evidence that any of them ever left Dickinson's desk, and in many cases the "letters" are entirely poems or contain poetry which dominates the letter. A quick survey of these texts illustrates my theory that, like the "Master" letters, a number of these letters were not intended for correspondence as much as acting as drafts of Dickinson's creative work.<sup>14</sup>

Letter 446, the first of the letters to an "unknown recipient" is dated "about 1875" and its first line, although it appears to conform visually to epistolary conventions, simply states, "Sweet is it as Life, with it's enhancing Shadow of Death." Following this statement, Dickinson immediately begins into a poem and ends the letter without a signature. Letter 568, in contrast, is dated three years later, quotes a passage of Corinthians, and notes that "It is strange that the Astounding subjects are the only ones we pass unmoved." Of all of Dickinson's correspondence without named correspondents, this letter alone appears most likely to be one which was a draft of a letter to be sent for it was signed "Emily," and what Johnson calls a "fair copy, bearing every mark of completion" (621).

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Copies of these letters are included in appendix B, as reproduced from Johnson's text.

The next letter supposedly addressed to an unknown correspondent (L 720) is not really a letter at all, containing merely a line from the Bible, the words being those of the angel who has been wrestling with Jacob in Genesis 32:26 (Johnson 705), and the letter has neither a named recipient or a signature, or any other element which would make it identifiable as of epistolary construction.<sup>15</sup> Phrases from this letter appear in other correspondence that Dickinson wrote later on, namely letter 1035 and 1042 (Johnson 705). It seems more reasonable, or as reasonable, to conclude that this was simply a passage that Dickinson chose to note for herself rather than actually being a correspondence. The fourth letter in this grouping (L 809) is very similar.

Written in March of 1883, this letter includes two poems which also appear in two other letters, nos. 802 and 808, both of which were addressed to Mrs. J. G. Holland. However, letter 809 is simply addressed to a “friend” and is unsigned. It could be that this poem is simply evidence of Dickinson’s creative side at work, a supposition I make based upon close reading of the letter. In the first section of the letter, just prior to Dickinson’s insertion of the poem which begins “To see her is a Picture–,” Dickinson writes, “I dream of your little Girl three successive Nights–I hope nothing affronts her” (L 809). Johnson makes no attempt in his notes to decipher the intended recipient of this letter, and the first line may indeed point to the reason why. The first line is grammatically peculiar, noting

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Dickinson did often send letters which contained a single biblical quotation, but these texts are marked by the fact that they conform to other epistolary conventions, such as salutation and signature which are absent here.



that “I dream of your little Girl” as if it were an event that is happening, rather than one which has already transpired, as one would expect in a letter which would sensibly be written in past tense -- that she “dreamt” of the addressee’s little girl. The first poem is joined to the second by a brief sentence again mentioning the little girl, claiming that Dickinson sends her “Playmates” that she met in “Yesterday’s storm” (L 809). Could it be that this text is evidence of Dickinson experimenting once again, as she does in the “Master” letters, with the creation of another fictional epistle, this time strewn with poetry?

One might wonder the same about letter 993, the last of the letters to unknown recipients, penned two years later. This letter is simply a four-line poem drafted in pencil on a sheet of stationery, folded as if it could have been enclosed in an envelope, but not discovered with one (Johnson 877). Almost none of these letters addressed to “recipients unknown” actually appears to be a letter; instead, as Dickinson wrote to Mabel Louise Todd in 1882, they are “little sentences I began and never finished—the little wells I dug and never filled—“ (L 748). These letters open up the possibility that despite Franklin’s contention that Dickinson did not write in the genre of epistolary fiction, the “Master” letters could signify an experiment of writing fictional epistles – an experiment with language and themes combined in a form of communication which dominated the lives of nineteenth-century women and men - and one that Dickinson toyed with as she drafted letters to family and friends.

Let me return for a moment to a point which I raised earlier in the chapter, that

being the issue of the first letter in the “Master” series as a letter of condolence, a type of correspondence which Dickinson wrote with some frequency. What differentiates this letter from others that Dickinson wrote in consolation? On the surface, the first “Master” letter is very similar to Dickinson’s other correspondence of this type. Susan Juhasz sees such a similarity, though she does not limit the parallels she sees simply to condolence, but envisions this type of letter as merely one more method through which Dickinson may obtain what she emotionally needs from others. In her study of Dickinson’s letters Juhasz posits a seduction theory through which she argues that each of the poet’s letters is carefully written for a particular correspondent so as to “seduce” him or her into an intimate relationship which would fulfill Dickinson’s emotional needs (“Reading Emily” 171-172).<sup>16</sup> For Juhasz, the condolence letters that Dickinson wrote so often were merely an especially effective means by which she could create the intimacy which she used to “seduce” her correspondents. Yet while this is Juhasz’s interpretation, an examination of letter 187 in terms of other consoling letters Dickinson wrote causes me to take a differing

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On second consideration, despite my belief that Juhasz puts forward some excellent points in this study, I must confess that, to an extent, her position is not so far from that advanced by Sewall, when he interpreted “Master’s” apparent lack of interest in a relationship with Dickinson as a result of her overwhelming emotional needs and thereby the demands that she placed upon intimate friendships and relationships. Indeed, Juhasz discusses this part of Sewall’s biography of Dickinson, noting that “what was too much for most people was what she wanted to have. Therefore, she learned, quite early, the strategy of conducting her relationships at a psychological distance” so that she could both gain control of the interaction and expand the possibilities of getting what she desired from the relationship (171-172). Juhasz simply envisions a manipulative Dickinson, set on fulfilling her own needs, whereas Sewall interprets Dickinson as needy and incapable of fulfilling her outlandish emotional needs.

view.

Letter 187 is much longer than any of Dickinson's other correspondence written in this vein and goes to great lengths to develop the image that she paints of "God's house" whereas in other letters, even though she does employ both imagery and metaphor, they are used to simply clarify the point that she is communicating and are not employed thematically throughout the letter. Take, for example, letter 216 written to Mrs. Samuel Bowles on the sad occasion of the miscarriage of a third child. For the purposes of this discussion, and because the letter is quite short, I shall include it in its entirety here:

*To Mrs. Samuel Bowles*

*1860?*

Don't cry, dear Mary. Let us do that for you, because you are too tired now. We don't know how dark it is, but if you are at sea, perhaps when we say that we are there, you won't be as afraid.

The waves are very big, but every one that covers you, covers us, too.

Dear Mary, you can't see us, but we are close at your side. May we comfort you?

Lovingly,  
Emily

In this letter, as in letter 187, Dickinson employs the image of being at sea to represent a feeling of loss and despair. Yet in this letter, Dickinson uses the image to communicate to Mrs. Bowles that she empathizes with her pain at the loss of this child, though she admits that she can never truly understand with the qualification that "We don't know how dark it is" (L 216). While Dickinson continues to use the image of being lost at sea from the first into the second paragraph, the third paragraph, while comforting in nature, does not further develop the theme. Letter 187, on the other hand, draws connections between the

Sabbath Day and the sea, and while the latter could be interpreted to represent suffering as it does in letter 216, there are still other interpretations that could be made in a similar vein to the biblical reading that Dobson proposes. Furthermore, the idea that Dickinson draws out through a dance of Christian imagery and references to Nature in letter 187, points toward the conclusion that this letter, as with the other two in the series, cannot simply be grouped with Dickinson's other correspondence.

Other letters that Dickinson wrote, however, may be of some assistance. The majority of scholars from Sewall to Homans agree that the "Master" letters are the most passion-wracked letters in all of Dickinson's correspondence. I agree that violent emotion is clearly evident in these texts, particularly the second two. Yet examination of Dickinson's correspondence demonstrates that Dickinson writes most poetically when she contemplates the possibilities of the human condition, and by this I mean when she explores the depths of strong feelings such as love, despair, and sorrow.

Such an assertion is supported by Dickinson's epistolary writings; one such case is letter 868, written to Susan Gilbert Dickinson following the untimely passing of Gilbert, Emily Dickinson's nephew. This letter celebrates the boy's life and mourns his passing. The text strikes the reader as a mixture of both eulogy and elegy; in his death, Dickinson sees a "Vision of Immortal Life...fulfilled," attempting to come to terms with the end of a life of one so young, noting that "The Passenger and not the Sea, we find surprises us—" (L 868). Dickinson goes on to claim obscurely that "No crescent was this Creature – He traveled [sic] from the Full – Such Soar, but never set – I see him in the star" (L 868).

Gilbert's death causes Dickinson to cry out in poetic prose, perhaps trying to re-create a sense of the boy that has been lost. The tone and vibrancy here are similar to the tortured energy displayed in the "Master" series. Dickinson explores emotions creatively, but why she does this -- whether it is to create distance between herself and the events at hand and thus gain a semblance of control, to parallel the argument that Sewall and Juhasz each make, or whether she does this purely out of intellectual fascination -- is of no importance to me. In the context of this discussion it is enough to draw from this comparison the point that Dickinson uses language in this manner, and, therefore, approaching the "Master" letters in this way (as a creative exploration of emotion) is consistent with how Dickinson wrote, regardless of whether that writing may be classed as correspondence or poetry.

As this study has shown thus far, the "Master" letters cannot be understood simply in the context of Dickinson's correspondence. Dickinson's poems raise a number of important questions with respect to the "Master" letters, particularly those which contain references to Daisy or Daisies, either in imagery or the persona:<sup>17</sup> How is the persona used differently in the letters versus the poetry? Should these texts be read in conjunction with each other? Must they be read so? And what was the poetic intention behind Daisy? Twenty poems make reference to Daisy or daisies, and I contend that many of these poems have something to offer in our attempts to understand the "Master" letters and

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Namely poems 19, 30, 36, 63, 75, 85, 87, 95, 106, 108, 149, 161, 184, 238, 367, 424, 1014, 1026, 1256.

what Dickinson sought to accomplish with them.

By now most readers are familiar with Dickinson's well-known statement to Higginson that when she wrote, it is not her voice we hear emanating from her poems, but that of a "supposed person." It is through the personas that she creates that Dickinson can experiment with a topic and the psychology of identity – alternating from being the little girl to the bride/wife to experiencing death. When Dickinson first began including allusions to daisies in her poems in 1858, the poet referred only to the flower, and, as in poem 36, such references often pointed to daisies as a sign of death. This use of the flower continued through many of her poems written in the following year. However, beginning in 1859 some of the poems which Dickinson wrote began to refer to "Daisy" as a potential person. Poem 87 which begins "'They have not chosen me,' he said," is an eight-line work which addresses the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and which ends by noting that "I could not have told it,/ But since Jesus dared—/ Sovereign! Know a Daisy/ Thy dishonor shared!" (P 87) Used in this context, "Daisy" could be interpreted as drawing a connection between God and Nature, since it is a single flower that Dickinson paints as sharing Christ's experience of rejection by those he came to save. This use of the term "Daisy" could also refer to Dickinson, as an individual or as woman, or may also represent womanhood in general, and the suffering of Jesus' women followers who cared for his body once it was removed from the cross. Multiple readings are possible here. Perhaps what is most important is that "Daisy" was born in Dickinson's poetry, and even at this point, two years before the second and third "Master" letters were written, her character is

complex and her identity is unclear, and likely anything but straightforward.

The same multiplicity of interpretation is present in a reading of poem 161, “The Daisy follows soft the Sun –,” in which Daisy takes a much more subdued role, following her supposed “Master,” the Sun, and sitting “shyly at his feet” when “his golden walk is done.” This Daisy quietly loves, though the Christian theme may be present here as well, evident in the play on words Sun/Son in reference to Jesus Christ, and lines 9 and 10 which read: “Forgive us, if as days decline –/ We nearer steal to Thee” (P 161). Daisy here represents more than a mere individual, however, a contention supported by the second stanza’s claim that “We are the Flower – Thou the Sun!” (P 161) We could indeed be all of humanity. I should admit, however, that this reading is troubled by the reference in the first stanza to the “Sun” as “Marauder” (P 161). Yet who *is* “Daisy”?

In each case “Daisy” is represented as something smaller, something lesser than the entity it is placed in opposition to: in poem 87, Daisy is juxtaposed with Jesus; in poem 75 daisies point the way for the poem’s persona’s “Master” to find his way to heaven; poem 161 sees “Daisy” sitting shyly by the sun’s feet – the latter being an image of a life-giving force; and in poem 1256 “The Daisy that has looked behind/ Has compromised its power–.” These are only a sampling of the allusions to daisies in Dickinson’s poems from 1858 to 1874. Nevertheless, irrespective of whether Daisy is placed in the shadow of Jesus or Death itself, each reference shows us a glimpse of the “Daisy” of the “Master” letters – who there, too, is placed in opposition to a supposedly greater force -- “Master.” Obviously, “Daisy” develops most fully during the course of the second and third

“Master” letters, which interestingly enough were both written in the same year during which Dickinson’s poetry is marked by an absence of “Daisy” imagery or references. I contend that this absence, or, rather, what appears to be an absence, is really not one at all. Instead, Dickinson simply chose to develop the “Daisy” persona in a new form, one which would allow for the expansion of the character and her voice.

The question remains, however, as to what Dickinson accomplishes with the “Daisy” persona. Karen Oakes has put forward an interesting theory in her reading of poem 431, in which the speaker discusses her lover’s dead body with a mixture of polite courtesy and a casualness which Oakes finds shocking (190-191). However, Oakes’s contentions about Dickinson’s careful use of language – so that the identity of the person with whom she speaks is withheld from the reader – that I find most intriguing and applicable to this study. To clarify, Oakes says of Dickinson and poem 431:

By beginning in an elliptical manner, she assumes that we are familiar with her context and situation; with her confidential tone addressed to “Thee” and with the imperative, Dickinson assumes the most personal of relationships, internal to the poem, between the “I” and the “you,” who is eventually defined as “Lover.” By withholding his identity, she entices us to become the “Lover,” the poem’s intimate other. (191)

Here is an interesting parallel; in writing such extensive and passionate letters to an unknown recipient, Dickinson accomplishes the same result with the “Master” letters. By writing letters addressed to a recipient who we come to understand is her lover, the reader becomes the recipient, and thus becomes “Master.” This idea is supported by the sudden appearance of “Daisy” in the second and third letters in the “Master” series, written only



one year prior to poem 431. By adopting a persona who may speak in the place of Dickinson (and therefore cannot be mistaken for her), the poet effectively frees herself from the confines of identity, for either writer or correspondent, so that all that exists within the text is the anonymous but intimate “I” and “you.” Thus, here the drama of the love relationship between “Master” and “Daisy” can be played out, free from the limitations of epistolary convention, or the constraints of her poetic work. Then again, it may simply be that Dickinson chose this form as a new place to exercise her abilities and examine the ideas dealt with in the letters.

The form of the “Master” letters is experimental -- and any reading of these texts put forward should therefore be expansive rather than limiting. In this chapter, I have sought to conceptualize these texts within the larger scope of Dickinson’s work, since to do so acknowledges what Dickinson has made evident: that the boundaries of genre are permeable. If we are to understand the “Master” letters as something more than leftovers of an unfortunate love affair, we must take a similar approach: one of exploration. I have merely brushed over certain aspects of this “correspondence” thus far. The letters’ rich imagery and language are key to an understanding of these texts as an exploration of power and powerlessness and its relation to gender and identity, in terms of love, sorrow, and despair. It is with these topics that I will therefore begin my discussion in chapter three.

### Chapter Three:

#### The “Daisy” Letters as Epistolary Fiction/ Fictional Epistles

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One of the most important ways in which the “Master” letters can be set apart from both Dickinson’s correspondence and poetry is simply by their name; none of Dickinson’s other works have been named by scholars as a collection as these letters have been. This is not a trivial fact, nor is what the texts were named any less significant. The letters may be addressed to “Master,” but why does an absent male supercede the female presence of “Daisy”? However, in the interest of clarity, I must state that I do not contend that references to these texts in previous studies as the “Master” letters is a misnomer per se, since that name accurately reflects the dominant school of thought and the approach to these works that many of those studies took, as I made evident in chapter one. Nor is my suggestion that these letters be renamed an attempt to usher in a new wave of Dickinson scholarship (though I am not against it, I must confess), but rather as a way of returning authority to the texts themselves.

When I first read these letters as an undergraduate, I was so struck by their powerful portrayal of “Daisy” that, despite all the research I had done on the letters, I gave a seminar presentation during which I unwaveringly referred to these texts as the “Daisy” letters. At first the reference was unconscious and unintentional, but later I realized that there was something more to this: that regardless of all her vacillation,

“Daisy” represents something just as important, if not more central, than the blank wall that is “Master.” If, as Umberto Eco has argued, a title is a key to interpretation (3), I contend that “Daisy” is a key to these letters. An examination of the tone, language and imagery used in the letters, in addition to Daisy’s oscillating references to herself, first as subject and then as an object, illustrates Dickinson’s exploration of the nature of power, gender, and self-hood. Yet form is as important as content in setting these letters apart from Dickinson’s other work. Thus, this chapter will also explore my assertion that these letters are fictional and will include a discussion of Dickinson’s exposure to epistolary fiction and whether these letters are epistolary fiction or actually an entirely different genre -- what I have termed fictional epistles.

The letters are characterized by a humility which Dickinson achieves by employing deferential language and adopting a similar tone, both of which are particularly present in the second and third letters of the series. At first glance, letter 187, the first of the group, is perhaps the least submissive of the three. However, the writer does state that she wishes to worship her “Dear Master,” evident when she writes that “I wish that I were great, like Mr. Michael Angelo, and could paint for you” (L 187). This statement illustrates the woman’s desire to serve and please a Master whom she writes to even in the depths of great pain, as she indicates in her letter when she notes that “I cannot talk any more (stay any longer) tonight (now), for this pain denies me” (L 187). Yet while letter 187 remains unsigned, it also does not make any specific reference to Daisy as the speaker/author of the text. While the usage of the term “Master” binds all three letters

and the similarity between the tone and topics of this letter with the other two may allow us to assume that Daisy “composed” this letter, it is in the second and third letters that Daisy’s use of deferential language becomes most important, since it is also here that she asserts most strongly her own persona.<sup>18</sup>

Daisy’s anger at Master peaks in the second letter, and with it Daisy transforms powerlessness into power, even if that transformation is momentary. In the first line of this letter to Master or, more accurately, to “Recipient Unknown,” Daisy writes: “Oh, did I offend it—[Didn’t it want me to tell it the truth] Daisy—Daisy—offend it—who did bend her smaller life to his (it’s) meeker (lower) everyday” (L 248).<sup>19</sup> Master has become an object to Daisy, as indicated by her reference to him as “it,” instead of the subject status that the terms “Master” and “Sir” convey.<sup>20</sup> It is notable, however, that even before the end of this

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Franklin’s reversal of the second and third letter in the dates he assigns to them has particular significance for readers’ interpretations. Previously the letters have been organized in the manner in which Johnson orders them. If one reads the letters ordered 233 and then 248, the image of Daisy is much different from the one presented if the letter order is reversed, as Franklin maintains it should be. This Daisy becomes progressively more hostile and less subservient, whereas Franklin’s order creates a Dickinson whose hostility peaks in the second letter and then becomes more (at least on the surface) deferential.

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It is notable that unlike the letter 187 and letter 233, letter 248 is not specifically addressed to “Master.” Instead, Dickinson simply begins the letter by addressing him as “it,” a point which combined with her failure to either include a salutation or simply the name of addressee as she did in the second letter, strongly demonstrates the change in the power dynamic that has taken place.

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The third letter is perhaps most deferential of the set, containing eleven deferential references to the letter’s recipient as either “Master” or “Sir.”

statement the object becomes a subject once again, when Dickinson herself chooses to modify her inclusion of the word “it’s”<sup>21</sup> instead selecting the subject term “his.” This change is significant. In the moment that Daisy reduces Master to an object she reverses their relationship and creates herself as a subject. This is why the language, as well as her voice, loses its deference and the angry, accusatory voice that we witness, is allowed through. It is thereby in the simple forms of address that Dickinson first illustrates the complex relationship between powerlessness and powerfulness that she is playing out in these letters. This contention is reinforced by the fact that this letter, unlike the other two, has no salutation whatsoever. Instead, Daisy launches full force into an angry stream of rhetoric designed to castigate Master for his treatment of her at the same time she begs his forgiveness, praying that it will at least come some day “before the grave” (L 248). Daisy is not simply powerless, nor is she completely powerful. The language with which she refers to herself in the second letter further demonstrates this assertion.

In the lines in which she asks if she has offended Master, Daisy’s status as a subject or an object also transforms. As he becomes “it” she is now “I,” and when Master returns to “he” Daisy refers to herself in third person point of view. Daisy also likens herself to a flower, a bloom (but not a rose), a little mother, a little girl and a culprit. Again, as with the references to Master, many of the terms Daisy uses to refer to herself are diminutives,

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In Franklin’s text as it is reproduced in appendix A, this is indicated through the use of parentheses: “it’s” appears in round parentheses to indicate that Dickinson inserted this term “either above or below the main line of inscription” (Franklin 9).

and imply she is of little importance. However, this submissive image of Daisy is again cracked when she “kneels a culprit” (L 248). To be a culprit requires a certain degree of power, since it implies that Daisy was guilty, and therefore had the capability of committing some act which she should not have -- at least in “Master’s” eyes.

Intriguingly, the act for which she is guilty is that of telling the truth, which offended Master (L 248). There is power both in her expression of the truth and in her ability to offend Master. The use of such power is a threat to the subjectivity of Master, evident in the fact he is reduced to the object status of “it,” and this is part of the reason she must confess herself and be punished by Master, an act which acknowledges his power. This single description of herself as a culprit, compared to the multiple diminutive references she makes to herself, is important in that it is an unexpected contrast to her normal deference to him. This display of power betrays Daisy’s deferential language and tone and implies that she seeks to accomplish much more.

An examination of the duality of Daisy’s voice demonstrates that this is indeed true. When she momentarily grasps subjective status, thereby reducing Master to an object, Daisy seizes the power offered in a patriarchal language system. Luce Irigaray contends that if the image of the female, who is deemed merely a mirror image of the male (in phallogentric discourse), is suddenly recognized as a subject, our entire language system would crumble, partially because one of the standard reference for *objects* is by “*she*” (Moi 136). If it is understood that the “signs” that language are supposed to signify are fluid and arbitrary, as Saussure argued, then the study of language communicates not

just what is said, but how it is used. Examining language through the lens of gender, then, would demonstrate how patriarchal attitudes and agendas have become implicit in language. If language is understood in this fashion, then Daisy, in the use of this language, could only be a subject when Master is an object and vice versa. In other words, there are two options – either to be the entity whose image the mirror reflects, or the image reflected. Daisy's duality of voice is required in such a system of language. Daisy's action is subversive and a momentary grasp at the power of the dominant group. The deferential language in the letters is the language available to the group that is not dominant and not normally allowed power in language or society.

My application of Irigaray's theory to these letters is supported by anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardener's theory of the "Muted Group" popularized in feminist literary studies through an essay written by Elaine Showalter. In this theory the Ardeners contend that communication in a "society may be dominated...by the model (or models) generated by one dominant group within the system" and that this model may not be congruent with the needs of expression for subdominant groups (Ardener xii). Furthermore, women, as the subdominant group, who seek to communicate issues that men, as the dominant group, do not accept, will have difficulty communicating their concerns and be reticently heard (Ardener ix). However, the Ardeners also "suggested that women's ideas or models of the world around them might nevertheless find a way of expression in forms other than direct expository speech, possibly through symbolism in art, myth, ritual, special speech registers, and the like" (Ardener ix). Showalter expanded this idea into feminist critical

theory when she argued that “women’s fiction can be read as a double-voiced discourse containing a ‘dominant’ and a ‘muted’ story” (266). In Dickinson’s writing this can be seen when Daisy asks “Master” in the third letter why he will not believe that her soul is in pain and she has been wounded, then noting that, “Thomas’ faith in anatomy – was stronger than his faith in faith” (L 233). It is not acceptable for Daisy directly to challenge Master’s failure to love and care for her as she believes he should. Instead, she resorts to a metaphorical reference to speak for her, and through this she communicates her point. This is not merely creative license; Dickinson is doing exactly as Ardeners asserted women must do if their views are such that they are not acceptable, or challenging to those held by the dominant group. Furthermore, Showalter’s notion of a “double-voiced discourse” (266) is evident in the duality of the language<sup>22</sup> and the dual voice of the letters which I addressed above. To read only the deference in Daisy’s words means that we fail to understand how the language of the texts functions.

I am not the only feminist scholar who has seen the ties between the Ardeners’ theory and Dickinson’s work. In a 1989 article Susan Juhasz came to the same conclusion about what she calls Dickinson’s “doubleness,” although Juhasz’s study focusses upon the connection between the Ardeners’ theory and Dickinson’s poetry rather than her correspondence. Juhasz summarizes her understanding of the application of the theory of

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This is evident throughout the text in the images Dickinson invokes. For example, the name “Daisy” makes double references to the flower and the speaking persona, so that even that single word may be interpreted multiple ways. I will discuss this point more fully later in the chapter.



the “Muted Group” to literature when she states that “[w]hen a woman writes at all, she speaks a difference customarily identified by its very silence” (218). She sees this duality in Dickinson’s poetry as a key to “the contradictions, evasions, and ambiguities that characterize Dickinson’s poetic language” because “they derive from and textualize this profound doubleness,” – a doubleness which, for Juhasz, reveals both the power of the patriarchy and the difference which is the “female perspective” (218). Juhasz’s vision of what Dickinson accomplishes in her poetry also parallels what I believe takes place in these letters. For Juhasz, the most intriguing aspect of Dickinson’s creative work is that she “will accept a cultural ‘given,’ enact it, challenge it, transform it, even deny that transformation – often in the same poem” (218). This is exactly what takes place in these texts: Dickinson takes a cultural form, the love letter, and experiments with the concepts and issues that it embodies – passion, pain, love, fear, guilt, anger, and power.

In these letters Dickinson constructs a “flower” of a woman in love with a man whom she deferentially considers her “Master,” but then makes that woman alternately loving and angry, giving and demanding. At first Daisy accepts society’s implicit treatment of her as an object, then bestows subjectivity on herself through the same language which denigrates her. Daisy is a female presence who speaks and then shouts to a male absence, insisting that she be heard, and yet appearing to be teetering on the brink of emotional collapse, or, in other words, someone whose rants are to be ignored..

This duality in Daisy’s voice is Dickinson’s exploration of love, gender and power. However, I find readings of Daisy’s language as duplicitous or manipulative problematic,

such as the argument that Margaret Homans has advanced.<sup>23</sup> Homans contends that the language employed in the letters was heavily influenced by one particularly important literary source which Dickinson was known to have admired (205). According Homans, the “manipulation of power in the relationship between Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester in Charlotte Brontë’s novel,” inspired Dickinson’s language choices in these letters, particularly those forms of address which are deferential in tone (205). She notes that in *Jane Eyre* Jane refers to Rochester as her master first in a literal sense as her employer, and later “generically, as her private deity” (Homans 205). The continuing use of deferential references is, in Homans’ view, a mask intended to conceal Jane’s growing sense of equality (205). Thus, Daisy’s deference to Master is a mockery intended to shield the change in the relationship which could incite external criticism so that what exists instead is a “parody of servility” (Homans 206) that gives Daisy power rather than taking power from her. According to Homans, this latter statement is made evident in Brontë’s novel when Jane returns to the blind and helpless Rochester; she is now in a recognizably more powerful position, but she equalizes power in the relationship through her reference to Rochester as “Sir” (206). The use of “sir” and “master” in both texts is supposed to permit the man and woman in each case to be powerful and ignores those situations where one individual obviously has a greater degree of power, whether that person is Rochester or Jane Eyre (Homans 206). Homans’s argument is limited by a paradigm of Daisy’s and

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Similarly, I also find Juhasz’s vision of Dickinson as a manipulative seducer problematic, as I noted in my discussion of her seduction theory in chapter two.

Master's relationship which allows only power, and not powerlessness, to exist. This is perhaps symptomatic of the feminism of the early 1980's in which feminist scholars sought to create a Dickinson who was empowered and angry. Further examination of the texts reveal that, like so much of Dickinson's other work, these letters are complicated mixtures of contradictory compounds. To demonstrate this point, a discussion of the meanings of "Daisy" and "Master" and the images each name invokes illustrates how even simple terms are internally conflicted.

To the reader, Daisy is a woman whose power is equivalent to that of a flower. Yet in Old English Daisy's name means "the day's eye" which refers to the sun (Dobson 94). The sun is life-giving, a star with unarguable power over life on Earth. As a sun, Daisy is granted some of this power by virtue of her name, at least figuratively. However, within this name Dickinson has invoked a paradox. In contrast to the power in the meaning of Daisy's name, in reality a daisy is just a flower and flowers do not have any power and are associated with people and characteristics that denote a lack of authority. For example, a daisy can be associated with: the feminine - in that it has no specific purpose other than to look appealing; the weak -- in that a flower may be broken and damaged easily; and, finally, plainness, since it is not a spectacularly beautiful flower and beauty can be its own form of currency/power. All of these things are associated with a lack of power. So even in name Daisy is simultaneously imbued with power and drained of it.

Compare this with the name Master and what it incites—that of the image of a

master and a slave—and another contradiction is evident. If Daisy, who is presumably the figurative slave in their relationship since he is her “Master,” is interpreted as having the power which her name “day’s eye” gives her, what role is “Master” left with? The sun has no known master, and therefore it is possible to interpret Daisy’s master as a false master—one who in fact does not own or rule Daisy, despite his name. However, it could also be possible to interpret “Master” as God and therefore he could also be seen as all-powerful.<sup>24</sup> One interpretation can easily be made as another. What is important here is that each differing interpretation reflects a different power balance in the relationship between the lovers, and it is here that I see Dickinson’s experiment with the nature of love and human relations on linguistic and figurative levels.

This interpretation of the text is supported by a momentary return to the second letter in the series in which Dickinson includes some of her most violent sexual imagery which is present in these texts. Dickinson writes: “I’ve got a Tomahawk in my side but that don’t hurt me much. [If you] Her Master stabs her more--” (L 248). This portion of the second letter is a striking conceptualization of love between a man and a woman. This image speaks to the sacrifice, pain, and the loss of self that must occur for a woman to become so disassociated from her own body that to be stabbed incites nothing more than the observation that it is happening again. Yet is this love? It is desperate, sickening and unnatural. Daisy accepts this brutality in hopes that she may receive “her Master’s” love.

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A statement based upon the interpretations of critics such as Joanne Dobson and Alike Barnstone.

This letter speaks to the cost of abandoning the self, choosing instead to worship societal ideals of romance and love. Of course, there is also a sexual dynamic in the image.

Master has penetrated Daisy's body and this wound continues to cause her to bleed and suffer. Interestingly, though, this sexual aspect of the image is an obvious parallel to the fifth stigmata of the crucified Jesus, bleeding from his side from a wound caused by the spear of a Roman soldier, and sacrificed for humanity. Daisy suffers for Master, even though it is he who has done this to her.

Daisy's disassociation from her self continues in another violent image which Dickinson begins the third letter in the series with. This letter is accusatory and asks Master "If you saw a bullet hit a Bird—and he told you he wasn't shot—you might weep at his courtesy, but you would certainly doubt his word. One drop from the gash that stains your Daisy's bosom—then would you *Believe?*" (L 233). This passage demands that Master tell Daisy why he cannot give her the same empathy that he would to an injured bird, yet curiously Daisy phrases her demand so that it is in third person point of view. For a first person narrator to speak of herself in third person demonstrates her disassociation from her individualized self; the most intriguing aspect of this reading, however, is that it can signify both a loss of self, as I noted above, and a narrator who can see all players in this game of love – Daisy and Master – and thereby has an understanding of the truth impossible from any other viewpoint.<sup>25</sup> To have grasp of the truth is to be in an awesome

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25

This is also what the letter reader must do; s/he actively takes part through the act of reading this "private" letter yet also stands outside of it. This is a point I will return to

position of power. Thus, again, Daisy is powerful and powerless simultaneously.<sup>26</sup>

For certain critics, like Joanne A. Dobson, Master's power in the text is undeniable, although how he obtains that power is a complicated issue. For her, Master is both God and a man and what the letters speak of is a contest between the potential bliss and peace of heaven and the passion of love. In a 1983 article<sup>27</sup> Dobson unites the theme of love with the theme of Christian imagery which dominates all three letters. For her, it is through the development of these themes that Dickinson communicates how "lost" Daisy truly is, and that the power that Master appears to have has actually been projected onto him by Daisy. According to Dobson, the theme of Christianity is first apparent in letter 187 when Dickinson describes the world as God's house and speaks of angels and the gates of heaven; in the second letter she builds on this theme of Christian imagery with the notion of redemption—which Daisy seeks from Master, only to receive "something else"; finally, in the third letter Daisy feels that "heaven will only disappoint" her (92-93). Here,

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later in the chapter.

26

A similar argument can be made for the image of Daisy as a little girl which occurs both in the second and third letters of the series. By painting herself as a child to which Master is apparently the parent, Daisy appears to release all authority and power in the relationship. But there is more to this: for Daisy asks Master to "Take [in] me in forever." (L 248) In doing this Daisy and Master become joined, and therefore her powerlessness and his powerfulness become one and the same. (Please note: square brackets indicate cancelled readings.)

27

Readers should be aware that Dobson's theory is based upon an ordering of the letters as per Johnson's text, rather than Franklin's revised order. Therefore, what she believes is the second letter in the grouping may in fact be the third, and the third may be the second letter.

the passion is so overwhelming that Daisy is neither mature nor autonomous (Dobson 93). This is evident in the fact that she refers to herself as a little girl and because of her desperate need to be taken into his life and absorbed (L 248). Heaven is not “achieved through Christian redemption” but is located in Master, or rather in “that promised state of bliss” (Dobson 93). Thus, Daisy must sacrifice her self in order for her to be loved by Master. For this to occur, she must become one with him<sup>28</sup> and be consumed by Master’s life and self. Could it be that Master is simply a reflection of what Daisy wants? That he represents her desire for escape and rescue, all of which is wrapped in the blanket of romantic love? Normally idealized, when explored through language the notion appears so violent and extreme that readers, like so many Dickinson critics, do not know what to make of it.

Perhaps, then, the true power of these texts should be attributed solely to the language and words that create them. For even those whose arguments rely upon the Christian theme in the texts nevertheless return to the issue of language. Take, for example, an essay by Alik Barnstone included in a text which he co-edited that dealt with *The Calvinist Roots of the Modern Era*. In his discussion of Dickinson’s “appropriation of crisis conversion” (142), Barnstone points out that in these letters Dickinson contemplates issues of faith and redemption (157). Barnstone ultimately concludes that Dickinson comes to believe that redemption can only be achieved through language and

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28

Potentially through marriage since she suggests to him that she will come “in white” (L 233).

“suspects that language can invent what she desires”: redemption (156-157). However, Dickinson soon finds that she cannot escape doubt. According to Barnstone, this experiment with language is evident in the structure of letter three which

constantly questions and affirms what the reader can infer from either words or from the phenomenological world. That is to say, the letter vacillates between doubt and faith, words and phenomena. Thus, after asking the Master to have faith in her metaphorical wound, in the depth and pain of love, she undercuts the notion of belief: ‘Thomas’ faith in Anatomy, was stronger than his faith in faith.’ (156)

What is created with words can therefore be dismantled with them. Yet what is significant here is that Dickinson is experimenting with language, with themes, with issues, and, as my discussion will turn to next, with form.

What is important about language is not simply what is said, but how it is used. To approach these works as literature demands that we acknowledge the significance of their form; as Northrop Frye has written, the truth of literature is not one of correspondence to external facts, but of something more found in its form (17). As this study has shown thus far, Dickinson used these letters to attempt to achieve something different, perhaps even something greater, than the limitations of her poetic work would permit. Sherwood<sup>29</sup> suggests that the drama of Daisy and Master was inspired by Hawthorne. Sewall aptly demonstrates in his biography that Dickinson was inclined toward using the work of others as points of inspiration.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the titles of

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<sup>29</sup> Sherwood’s theory is discussed in chapter one.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Sewall’s discussion of a poem by Scottish bard, Charles Mackay



thirty books which contained marks made by either Dickinson or one of the family which Sewall lists as being part of the Dickinson Collection at Harvard,<sup>31</sup> do not point to a conclusion that Dickinson was reading any epistolary fiction which could have inspired her use of this form; however, the poet was highly familiar with the Bible, and that text's prevalent use of the epistle could reasonably have stimulated Dickinson to envision the potential for the letter as a creative form. This supposition is admittedly mere speculation, though also possible. In her work on these letters Wolff has drawn a connection between Dickinson and her interest in faith and the chosen form of the texts. According to Wolff, in these letters "the microcosm of the lovers assumes the same tragic configuration as the macrocosm that is ruled by God: it is a world desolated by wounding and by the loss of face to face communication" (408). For her, the use of the letter form represents this loss of connection – in this case with one loved so intensely, whether that entity is a lover or (a) God. Yet for Dickinson, as her biographers have demonstrated time and time again, her letters were often her only connection to others and the only form she chose to communicate with them; likewise, she did not limit her correspondence to polite niceties but provides intense emotional exchanges. Her relationship with Higginson was a prime example of her preference for correspondence: Dickinson met with him in person on only

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which appeared in *The Springfield Republican* in 1858 entitled "Little Nobody" which he believes inspired Dickinson's poem 260 which begins, "I'm Nobody! Who are you?"

31

Please see the note on page 678 of Sewall's *The Life of Emily Dickinson* for a complete listing of these texts.

a handful of occasions. Given these facts, what form could be better to explore the tumultuous relationship between Daisy and Master?

Furthermore, the fictional letter creates an audience wholly unlike that of poetry or even genuine correspondence. The fictional epistle both complicates and reveals the experience of the reader. As readers, we have the sensation of reading something we should not: that which is constituted from the private sphere. According to Patricia Meyers Spacks, the intention of epistolary fiction is to fuel this desire for voyeurism: “[t]he claim of a novelistic text to comprise private letters solicits the reader’s discomfort, emphasizing his/her status as an eavesdropper—but the claim’s fictionality converts the guilt of eating stolen fruit into yet another fiction” (164). Thus, while the epistolary fictional text supports our experience as the privileged, unseen but all-seeing “other,” it simultaneously nullifies that status and our guilt because what we are reading is fiction constructed for the purpose of being read, and we know it. Dickinson complicates this because she does not explicitly state that these texts are fictional; indeed, because her family believed these texts betrayed a secret love affair, they refused to allow the letters to be published and even went so far as to assign them a misleading date. We may eat the “stolen fruit,” but the guilt remains with us because the texts do not fulfill certain expectations that we have of epistolary fiction: unlike the genuine letter, the fictional text is more self-explanatory.

Of course, this is rarely found in the texts themselves, as Natascha Würzbach has noted. She points out that readers need “commentary which tells us who the

correspondents are, what they are hinting at in this or that passage, [and] which important events indispensable for the understanding of the whole are missing,” (x). Yet she also admits that such information is rarely found in the text, but “is usually given in an introduction and in notes, not in the text itself” (x). Then what is to say that these letters were not part of an abandoned creative project? After all, it is the intention of epistolary fiction to mimic the form, style and language of genuine letters; they both describe personal feelings and events. The difference is merely that one text is part of a fictional narrative while the other is part of a narrative of someone’s life. For all intents and purposes, these texts appear to be written for a real correspondent and this appearance is what is most intrinsic to the fictional epistolary form.

The key to epistolary fiction is in its authenticity. It must maintain an illusion of reality in order to make its reader believe, even momentarily, that the text is authentic. It is obvious that Dickinson achieved such authenticity, and regardless of whether she was inspired by aspects of her own life or simply created Daisy and Master out of the depths of her imagination, these letters are creative texts and in writing these letters Dickinson blurred the line between fiction and reality. Würzbach says that the first step to writing epistolary fiction is to create a “fictitious second self” (xii) which is precisely what Dickinson does when she invites Daisy out of her poems and into her letters. Similarly, as the silent recipient, Master is a perfect figure for our imaginations; for the reader he is a blank wall and is Dickinson’s way of allowing us space to paint what we will from our own minds.

Nevertheless, these letters are different from the epistolary novel: admittedly, they

are not a novel. While they do develop specific themes despite their short span, the term epistolary fiction tends to refer to the novel of letters rather than letters simply as fiction, and therefore a different term is required to categorize and describe these texts. They are fictional epistles – letters which appear authentic yet mimic genuine correspondence. Yet, these letters should also be viewed as creative exercises; a workshop space where the poet could explore ideas that she would use in her poetry while at the same time experimenting with the potential of creative form. In essence, these texts are an echo; they are Dickinson listening to herself. Conceptualizing the letters in this manner is important because it is only then that we can truly free ourselves as readers from the distraction of attempting to prove their authenticity at the cost of ignoring some of the most fascinating aspects of the letters: their exploration of the issues of love, power, faith, and sorrow, their creative construction, and, finally, Dickinson's ingenuity.

## Conclusion

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In a discussion of the historical accuracy of the Bible, Northrop Frye claims that “if there is anything in the Bible which is historically accurate, it is not there because it is historically accurate, but for quite different reasons” (13); the reasons for this are that the stories of the Bible cohere as stories. The same is true of Dickinson’s three letters which chronicle the relationship of Daisy and Master. If aspects of Dickinson’s real life are included in the letters, it is not because these texts are evidence of a secret love affair, but because Dickinson was an artist who used the things around her to inspire her to new levels of creativity.

My survey of the Dickinson scholarship which deals with these letters demonstrates that the search for Master’s identity is merely a way to distract ourselves from the difficult complexities of these texts. They are quite unlike anything else Dickinson wrote – seeming to sit at a cross-roads between prose and poetry, adopting a form which makes us question what the difference is between that which is considered fictional and that which is deemed genuine. Ultimately, however, the existence of letters such as these calls into question how we define what is true. Can truth exist without correspondence to some external factual account which approves what is true with some kind of rubber stamp? As literary scholars we already know that the answer is yes. Yet with regard to these texts we appear to have forgotten that truth is something larger than

historical correlations and details.

This study has shown that returning authority to the texts demonstrates their contradictions and complexities. Just as Daisy is both powerful and powerless simultaneously, these letters are both what they appear to be and something more. No “character” in these texts better portrays the contradictions that Dickinson explores than Daisy and re-naming these texts the “Daisy” letters is, if nothing more, an acknowledgement of Dickinson’s creative accomplishment. In these letters Dickinson has transformed the possibilities of form and content, creating a fiction which appears startlingly like reality. Rather than trying to “own an Emily of my own,” as Martha Nell Smith suggests that scholars so often attempt, I have sought to search out the creative limits of the poet and envision her talent in the broadest sense possible so that we not limit her artistic achievements by our beliefs about the woman.

“No Rose, yet felt myself a’bloom,  
No Bird – yet rode in Ether –”

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## Appendix A:

## The "Master" Letters

From R.W. Franklin's *The Master Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. R.W. Franklin.  
Amherst: Amherst College Press, 1986.

## Letter 1/Letter 187

*Spring 1858*

Dear Master

I am ill – but grieving more that you are ill, I make my stronger hand work long  
eno' to tell you – I thought perhaps you were in Heaven, and when you spoke again, it  
seemed quite sweet, and wonderful, and surprised me so – I wish that you were well.

I would that all I love, should be weak no more. The Violets are by my side – the  
Robin very near – and "Spring" – they say, Who is she – going by the door –

Indeed it is God's house – and these are gates of Heaven, and to and fro, the  
angels go, with their sweet postillions – I wish that I were great, like Mr – Michael  
Angelo, and could paint for you.

You ask me what my flowers said – then they were disobedient – I gave them  
messages –

They said what the lips in the West, say, when the sun goes down, and so says the  
Dawn –

Listen again, Master–

I did not tell you that today had been the Sabbath Day.

Each Sabbath on the Sea, makes me count the Sabbaths, till we meet on shore –  
(will the) and whether the hills will look as blue as the sailors say –

I cannot talk any more (stay any longer) tonight (now), for this pain denies me –

How strong when weak to recollect, and easy, quite, to love. Will you please tell  
me, please to tell me, soon as you are well –

## Letter 2/Letter 248

*Early 1861*

Oh – did I offend it – [Did'nt it want me to tell the truth] Daisy – Daisy – offend it – who bends her smaller life to his (it's) meeker (lower) every day – who only asks – a task – [who] something to do for love of it – some little way she cannot guess to make that master glad –

A love so big it scares her, rushing among her small heart – pushing aside the blood and leaving her faint (all) and white in the gust's arm –

Daisy – who never flinched thro' that awful parting, but held her life so tight he should not see the wound – who would have sheltered him in her childish bosom (Heart) – only it was'nt big eno' for a Guest so large – *This* Daisy – grieve her Lord – and yet it (she) often blundered – perhaps she grieved (grazed) his taste – perhaps her odd – Backwoodsman [life] (ways) [troubled] (teased) his finer sense (nature) -- Daisy [bea] knows all that – but she must go un-pardoned – teach her grace – (preceptor) – teach her majesty – Slow (Dull) at patrician things – Even the wren upon her nest learns (knows) more that Daisy dares –

Low at the knee that bore her once unto [royal] wordless rest [now -- she] Daisy [stoops a] kneels, a culprit – tell her her [offence --] fault – Master – if it is [not so] small eno' to cancel with *her life*, [Daisy] she is satisfied – but punish – do [not]nt banish her – Shut her in prison, Sir – only pledge that you will forgive – sometime – before the grave, and Daisy will not mind – she will awake in [his] your likeness.

Wonder stings me more than the Bee – who never did sting me – but made gay music [ ] with his might wherever I [may] [should] did go – Wonder wastes my pound, you said I had no size to spare –

[H] You send the water over the Dam in my brown eyes –

I've got a cough as big as a thimble – but I dont care for that – I've got a Tomahawk in my side but that dont hurt me [h] much, [If you] Her Master stabs her more–

Wont he come to her – or will he let her [ ] seek him, never minding [whateve] so long wandering (, if) [out] to him at last –

Oh how the sailor strains, when his boat is filling – Oh how the dying tug, till the angel comes. Master – open your life wide, and take [in] me in forever, I will never be tired – I will never be noisy when you want to be still – I will be [glad as the] your best little girl – nobody else will see me, but you – but that is enough – I shall not want any more – and all that Heaven will [prove] will (only) disappoint me – (because) will be it's not so dear

## Letter 3/Letter 233

*Summer 1861*

Master.

If you saw a bullet hit a Bird – and he told you he was'nt shot – you might weep at his courtesy, but you would certainly doubt his word –

One drop more from the gash that stains your Daisy's bosom – then would you *believe*? Thomas' faith in anatomy – was stronger than his faith in faith. God made me – [Sir] (Master) – I did'nt be – myself – [He] I dont know how it was done – He built the heart in me – Bye and bye it outgrew me – and like the little mother – with the big child – I got tired holding him -- I heard of a thing called "Redemption" – which rested men and women – You remember I asked you for it – You gave me something else – I forgot the Redemption [in the Redeemed – I did'nt tell you for a long time, but I knew you had altered me – I] (and) was tired – no more (+) [–so dear did this stranger become that were it, or my breath – the alternative – I had tossed the fellow away with a smile.]

I am older – tonight, Master – but the love is the same – so are the moon and the crescent – If it had been God's will that I might breathe where you breathed – and find the place – myself – at night – if I (can) never forget that I am not with you – and that sorrow and frost are nearer than I – if I wish with a might I cannot repress – that mine were the Queen's place – the love of the – Platagenet is my only apology – To come nearer than the Presbyteries – and nearer than the new coat – that the Tailor made – the prank of the Heart at play on the Heart – in holy Holiday – is forbidden me –

You make me say it over –

I fear you laugh – when I do not see – [but] "Chillon" is not funny. Have you the Heart in your breast – Sir – is it set like mine – a little to the left – has it the misgiving – if it wake in the night – perchance – itself to it – a timbrel is it – itself to it a tune?

These things are [reverent] (holy), Sir, I touch them [reverently] (hallowed), but persons who pray – dare remark [our] "Father"! You say I do not tell you all – Daisy "confessed – and denied not."

Vesuvius dont talk – Etna – dont – [They] (2) said a syllable – (1) one of them – a thousand years ago, and Pompeii heard it, and hid forever – She could'nt look the world in the face, afterward – I suppose – Bashful Pompeii!

"Tell you of the want" – you know what a leech is – dont you – and ([remember that]) Daisy's arm is small – and you have felt the Horizon hav'nt you – and did the sea – (n)ever come so close as to make you dance?

I dont know what you can do for it – thank you – Master – but if I had the Beard on my cheek – like you – and you –had Daisy's petals – and you cared so for me – what would become of you? Could you forget (me) in a fight, or flight – or the foreign land?

Could'nt Carlo, and you and I walk in the meadows an hour – and nobody care but the Bobolink – and *his* – a *silver* scruple? I used to think when I died – I could see you – so I died as fast as I could – but the "Corporation" are going to Heaven too so [Eternity]

(Heaven) wont be sequestered – [at all] (now) –

Say I may wait for you –

Say I need go with no stranger to the to me – untried [country] (fold)– I waited a long time – Master – but I can wait more – wait till my hazel hair is dappled – and you carry the cane – then I can look at my watch – and if the Day is not too far declined – we can take the chances [of] (for) Heaven –

What would you do with me if I came “in white”?

Have you a little chest to put the alive – in?

I want to see you more – Sir– than all I wish for in this world – and the wish – altered a little –will be my only one – for the skies –

Could you come to New England – [this summer – could] (Would) you come to Amherst – Would you like to come – Master?

[Would it do harm – yet we both fear God] Would Daisy disappoint you – no – she would’nt – Sir – it were comfort forever – just to look in your face, while you looked in mine – then I could play in the woods – till Dark – till you take me where sundown cannot find us – and the true keep coming – till the town is full. [Will you tell me if you will?]

I didn’t think to tell you, you did’nt come to me “in white,” nor ever told me why

–

+No Rose, yet felt myself a’bloom,  
No Bird – yet rode in Ether –

## Appendix B

## Letters to Unknown Recipients

From R.W. Franklin's *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. R.W. Franklin. Cambridge, Mass. : Belknap Press, 1998.

## Letter 446

*To recipient unknown*

*About 1875*

Sweet is it as Life, with it's enhancing Shadow of Death.

A Bee his burnished Carriage  
 Drive boldly to a Rose –  
 Combinedly alighting –  
 Himself – his Carriage was –  
 The Rose received his visit  
 With frank tranquility  
 Withholding not a Crescent  
 To his Cupidity –  
 Their Moment consummated –  
 Remained for him – to flee –  
 Remained for her – of rapture  
 But the humility.

## Letter 568

*To recipient unknown*

*About 1878*

Were the Statement "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed," made in earthly Manuscript, were his Residence in the Universe, we should pursue the Writer till he explained it to us.

It is strange that the Astounding subjects are the only ones we pass unmoved.  
 Emily.



## Letter 720

*To recipient unknown**About 1881*

“Let me go for the day breaketh.”

## Letter 809

*To recipient unknown**about March 1883*

Dear friend,

I dream of your little Girl three successive Nights – I hope nothing affronts her –

To see her is a Picture –

To hear her is a Tune –

To know her, a disparagement of every other Boon –

To know her not, Affliction –

To own her for a Friend

A warmth as near as if the Sun

Were shining in your Hand –

Lest she miss her “Squirrels,” I send her little Playmates I met in Yesterday’s Storm – the lovely that first came –

Forever honored be the Tree

Whose Apple winter-worn –

Enticed to Breakfast from the sky

Two Gabriels Yester Morn.

They registered in Nature’s Book

As Robins, Sire and Son –

But Angels have that modest way

To screen them from renown –

## Letter 993

*To recipient unknown**about 1885*

Betrothed to Righteousness might be  
An Ecstasy discreet  
But Nature relishes the Pinks  
Which she was taught to eat –