

# Unveiling The Feminine Echo: An In-Depth Exploration Of Emily Dickinson's Poetic Voice

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## **Abstract:**

The research paper explores Emily Dickinson's role as a rebellious figure in the context of mid-19th century American poetry. The paper highlights how Dickinson challenged patriarchal norms and subverted traditional expectations for women's writing. It draws parallels between Dickinson and other women writers like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and George Eliot, who challenged societal limitations. The paper delves into Dickinson's struggle against the male-dominated literary hierarchy, her unique themes, and her defiance of societal norms. It discusses her reclusive lifestyle as a way to escape societal constraints and examines how her poetry became a vehicle to challenge repression and silence experienced by women. The paper underscores Dickinson's influence on later generations of women writers, such as Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, and Marianne Moore. It also highlights the rediscovery of Dickinson's work by feminist critics in the mid-20th century, emphasizing her contribution to the female literary tradition. Overall, the research emphasizes Dickinson's legacy as an empowering figure who defied patriarchal norms and continues to inspire women writers to challenge male-dominated literary landscapes.

**Keywords:** Emily Dickinson, women writers, patriarchal norms, rebellion, societal constraints, female literary tradition, feminist critics, empowerment, creative autonomy, poetry.

## **Introduction:**

Emily Dickinson is considered today as one of the most original voices of the mid-nineteenth century American poetry. She has secured a place among women writers like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, George Eliot and the Brontë's, who are firmly rooted in the "female literary tradition", developed in the nineteenth century. (Bennett, Emily Dickinson 14). The women writers mentioned in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Aurora Leigh" challenged the patriarchal notions of women's writing and broke free from the male-imposed limitations on their true selves. They rejected the images of being depicted as "ghosts, fiends, angels, fairies, witches, and sprites," and instead embraced their autonomy and right to express themselves as women and as women writers (Browning, "Aurora Leigh").

Emily Dickinson's poetry also exhibits a similar characteristic, displaying a rebellion against the male-dominated literary hierarchy. Her unconventional themes and style challenged the subjugation of women writers and showcased female literary prowess and authority. However, her uniqueness was not appreciated during her time, leading to critical neglect. Only in the mid-twentieth century did feminist critics like Paula Bennett, Joan Kirkby, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Judith Farr rediscover Dickinson's poetry and other publishers who sought to highlight neglected and

marginalized female writers (Bennett; Kirkby; Gilbert and Gubar; Farr). Emily Dickinson's poetry exhibits a rebellion against the male-dominated literary hierarchy. Her unconventional themes and style challenged the subjugation of women writers and showcased female literary prowess and authority. For example, in her poem "I'm Nobody! Who Are You?" (1862), Dickinson subverts the traditional expectations for women's poetry by refusing to identify herself or to conform to the conventions of feminine beauty. Instead, she celebrates her individuality and her own unique voice. "Dickinson's uniqueness was not appreciated during her time, leading to critical neglect" (Bennett, 1989). Emily Dickinson's poetry indeed embodies a rebellious spirit, as she defied the male-dominated literary hierarchy prevalent in her time. Through her unconventional themes and writing style, she boldly challenged the subjugation of women writers and showcased the strength and authority of female literary expression. An excellent illustration of this can be found in her poem "I'm Nobody! Who Are You?" (1862), where she deliberately goes against the traditional expectations for women's poetry. Instead of conforming to societal norms and revealing her identity or adhering to conventional notions of feminine beauty, she embraces her uniqueness and celebrates her distinct voice.

However, in the mid-twentieth century, feminist critics such as Paula Bennett, Joan Kirkby, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Judith Farr rediscovered Dickinson's poetry and championed her work. "These critics argued that Dickinson's poetry was not only a product of her own genius, but also a reflection of the broader social and political conditions of her time" (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000). They showed how Dickinson's poetry challenged the patriarchal norms of her society and offered a new vision of female empowerment. In contemporary times, both feminist critics and general literary scholars acknowledge Emily Dickinson as an extraordinary creative force and a highly esteemed female artist. Her poetic works have not only earned admiration from feminists but also from a broader audience of critics. Moreover, her influence extends beyond her own era, as she continues to inspire modern women writers like Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, and Marianne Moore. These contemporary authors have drawn inspiration from Dickinson's legacy and, in turn, have made significant strides in challenging the male-dominated literary landscape.

Dickinson's poems have contributed to the recognition of women writers who were previously ignored or misunderstood by patriarchal traditions, securing a strong position for them in the literary world. As a self-created woman poet, Dickinson defies the notion that women are inconsequential or "small" as some male critics have claimed. She celebrates women's artistic creativity and their ability to transcend limitations, much like a phoenix rising from the constraints of a limited life to one of greatness through their poetic art. Dickinson cleverly inverts the idea of women's "smallness" to showcase women writers' infinite potential. This is evident in the lines from one of her poems:

"And then – the size of this 'small' life – The Sages – call it small – Swelled – like Horizons – in my vest – And I sneered – softly – 'small!'" (Dickinson 271, lines 13-16). In this verse, Dickinson dismisses the notion of women's smallness and implies that women writers possess boundless horizons of creativity and expression.

"Emily Dickinson, born on 10th December 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts, lived in a culture that limited women's opportunities and aspirations (Gilbert and Gubar 24). Despite societal pressures to conform to traditional roles of marriage, motherhood, and religious duties, she chose a life devoted to art, rejecting the male-defined womanhood that confined women to subservience. Instead of marrying, she remained a spinster and focused her life on poetry, refusing to let patriarchal norms dictate her choices. Dickinson's decision to lead a reclusive life in her father's home was her way of escaping the mundane and oppressive existence that women of her time were forced to endure under male dominance. She was keenly aware of the sexual rhetoric and subordinate status of women in

her culture, where patriarchy deemed them inferior and incapable of intellectual pursuits (Pollak 29).

Patriarchy's restrictions on women's intellectual development are evident in the views of male writers like Aristotle and Ruskin Bond, who considered women unfit for certain pursuits (Gilbert and Gubar 24). Even within her family, Dickinson faced discrimination, as her father discouraged her from reading books, fearing it would affect her mental health (Franklin 603). Her brother, on the other hand, was encouraged in all his intellectual pursuits. Despite these challenges, Dickinson tenaciously pursued her passion for poetry within the confines of domestic life. Her poems reveal her acute awareness of women's pathetic plight, trapped under the authority of a dominant father or husband (Franklin 603). Women were relegated to a dependent and insignificant existence, denied autonomy and the right to pursue their ambitions and self-definition. Dickinson's personal experiences in a puritanical patriarchal household shaped her understanding of the repression women faced (Mossberg 17). Her mother, suffering from chronic illness, epitomized the passivity and helplessness imposed on many women. As a poet, Dickinson became the voice of silenced and repressed women, using her own pain and repression as inspiration to challenge societal norms and give a voice to the voiceless.

Her poetry exposes the subjugation of daughters in 19th-century New England households, where women were expected to be meek and insignificant (Franklin 603). The use of the word 'Racket' symbolizes the oppressive patriarchal norms that humbled and silenced women. Emily Dickinson's struggle for survival as a female poet is evident in her defiance of patriarchal cultural norms and her determination to establish herself in the male-centric literary domain through her unorthodox and original poetry (Gilbert and Gubar 24). Outwardly, she appeared to conform to conventional passive femininity, fulfilling her duties as a dutiful daughter immersed in domesticity. However, inwardly, she nurtured her poetic vocation secretly, subverting the patriarchal norms that discouraged women's pursuit of creative and intellectual endeavours within the confines of the private feminine sphere. Similar to Virginia Woolf, Dickinson sought to break free from the male-constructed repressive femininity, often referred to as the "angel in the house," to emerge as a woman writer (To the Lighthouse).

Dickinson's journey as a female poet involved challenges, alienation, restrictions, and disappointments. She chose a life of solitude, withdrawing from the male-centric society that imposed limitations on women's personal, religious, and intellectual lives. In her poems, she expressed a desire to be recognized as a poet and faced criticism for her unorthodox style and form (Pollak 227). To protect her identity from harsh male critics and societal censure, Dickinson sometimes neutralized herself by referring to "Nobody" to evade personal scrutiny (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 555). Dickinson's poetic strategy involved adopting various roles and symbols, such as child, woman, daughter, wife, bride, nun, and daisy, to protest against female subordination (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 583). Her poetry served as a covert means of revealing the truth about women's repression while maintaining her anonymity as a woman poet (1129, 1-2).

Dickinson's rejection of orthodox religious beliefs stemmed from their oppressive control over women and exclusion from cultural and literary traditions (Wolff 636). Her poems served as a refutation of the Calvinist beliefs that upheld male hierarchies and suppressed women. She challenged the male-centric projection of a transcendent male deity and criticized the Bible as a tool for maintaining male dominance over women. Dickinson's refusal to conform to society's expectations extended to her approach to publishing her poetry. She resisted revising her verse according to arbitrary standards, as it could compromise the originality and integrity of her work

(Pollak 229). Instead, she pursued her poetic ambition on her own terms, writing her poems relentlessly in her private space without seeking self-definition as a woman poet in the male-dominated literary world (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 24).

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Women writers who dared to challenge the male-prescribed notion of feminine virtue and propriety faced severe consequences and were branded as unfeminine and monstrous by orthodox men, due to the prevailing belief that creative energy was a male trait (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 8). Dickinson's journey as a female poet involved challenges, alienation, restrictions, and disappointments. She chose a life of solitude, withdrawing from the male-centric society that imposed limitations on women's personal, religious, and intellectual lives. In her poems, she expressed a desire to be recognized as a poet and faced criticism for her unorthodox style and form (Pollak 227). To protect her identity from harsh male critics and societal censure, Dickinson sometimes neutralized herself by referring to "Nobody" to evade personal scrutiny (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 555). Dickinson's poetic strategy involved adopting various roles and symbols, such as child, woman, daughter, wife, bride, nun, and daisy, to protest against female subordination (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 583). Her poetry served as a covert means of revealing the truth about women's repression while maintaining her anonymity as a woman poet (1129, 1-2). However, her struggles were not limited to poetic expression; Dickinson faced psychic fragmentation, expressed through poems that reflected her fears of madness and psychotic breakdowns (410, 17-20) (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 583).

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Dickinson's poems affirm feminine experiences and female sexuality that were condemned and denied by patriarchal culture and literary traditions. By invalidating the objectification of women as

mere possessions and discourse, she becomes an ancestral voice inspiring women to find their own language and achieve self-fulfilment (McNeil 36). Her poetry delves into the troubled relationship with female identity and the struggle for autonomy in the face of patriarchal conventions. Dickinson's poems express the pain of self-definition as a woman artist, the lack of autonomy for women's self-assertion, and the stifling femininity that condemns them to passive roles and domestic servitude (Kirkby 76). Emily Dickinson challenges conventional poetic style and discourse, which often suppress women's creativity. Critics like Thomas Wentworth Higginson may have disapproved of her style, but her unique approach allowed her to establish herself as a formidable woman poet (Leder and Abbott 189). Feminist critics, including Adrienne Rich, Sandra M. Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, view Dickinson's poetry as a subversive and empowering force for women. Her verses challenge traditional gender roles and offer a revised pattern of relations between the sexes (Dickie 344).

### **Conclusion:**

Emily Dickinson's poetry stands as a powerful testament to her rebellion against the patriarchal norms that sought to silence and constrain women in the 19th century. As a self-created woman poet, she defied societal expectations and chose a path of creative autonomy, rejecting marriage and the conventional roles prescribed for women of her time. Through her unique and unconventional poetic expression, Dickinson challenged the male-dominated literary hierarchy and asserted her right to be recognized as a significant female artist. Her poems explored the struggles of women in a society that denied them autonomy, intellectual pursuits, and self-expression. Dickinson's verses delved into the complexities of female identity, the suppression of female sexuality, and the confined roles imposed upon women. In doing so, she provided a voice to the voiceless and empowered women to seek their own language and self-fulfilment. Although she didn't receive the recognition she deserved in her lifetime, feminist critics of the mid-20th century acknowledged her importance and the impact of her contributions to the female literary tradition. Today, she is highly regarded as one of the most unique voices of 19th-century American poetry and a cherished female artist. Her poetic works continue to inspire and empower other women writers to challenge the male-dominated literary world.

Emily Dickinson's legacy is a beacon of hope and inspiration for women across generations, breaking free from the confines of a limited life to one of artistic greatness. Her defiance of patriarchal conventions and her determination to establish herself in the literary domain serve as a reminder that women's creative potential knows no bounds. As we continue to celebrate her poetry, we also acknowledge the ongoing importance of promoting and supporting women writers, ensuring that their voices are recognized, appreciated, and valued in the literary world.

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