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Emily Dickinson Seminar
December 3rd, 1999

Emily's Secret: Floral Imagery and the Blossoming of Emily Dickinson

“Nobody knows this little Rose-” begins Emily Dickinson’s Poem #35 (*Poems* 22). Sadly, she was right. For so long, Emily Dickinson, commonly referred to as the “Nun” or “Virgin” of Amherst was sadly misrepresented. Emily Dickinson was a woman who had a heart, and a mind, and a body like any other woman. Dickinson could feel love, passion, and heartbreak. She had a sensual body that longed for human touch and had desires and yearnings that craved fulfillment. Whether or not she acted upon these desires, we will never know, but she *did* leave us evidence of her sexuality in her poetry. This evidence always existed – but not many chose to see or believe it. Dickinson lived in a world where women’s sexuality was repressed and hidden forcing her to be subtle. While Dickinson uses numerous techniques to express her sensuality, her flower poems are her most explicit attempts to try and tell the world exactly who “this little Rose” really was.

Emily Dickinson, caught or imprisoned in the Victorian world of female piety, purity and domesticity, needed an outlet for her emotions. These emotions include her desires, sexual thoughts, and her passions. Dickinson used floral imagery as a “code” or symbolic means through which she could write and express feelings that were considered inappropriate for a woman in 19th century New England. Floral symbols worked well for Dickinson, as they were camouflaged by the Victorian “potpourri” of the times.

Dickinson's letters and poems are saturated with flower images and references. An avid scholar of nature, flowers and plants were some of her favorite topics. Of course, every mention of a flower in her work isn't automatically some kind of sexual reference, but her floral interest created a perfect hiding place for those poems that were in fact sexual.

It is important to look at Dickinson in the environment in which she lived. It is easy and tempting to forget that the poetess did not live in the 20th century, a place drastically different from 19th century New England. The culture in which she lived held contrasting views on women and sexuality in general. The treatment of nature and flowers, a seemingly consistent subject, was approached differently as well.

In order to set the stage for Dickinson's manipulation of floral imagery, we need to look at "The Culture of Flowers," a concept that Emily Dickinson could not possibly escape. As familiar as Dickinson was with this culture, it is fair to assume that most people today are ignorant to what "The Culture of Flowers" really was. One of the corner stones for this movement was women's interest in botanical art and illustration. Jack Kramer, in his book, *Women of Flowers: A Tribute to Victorian Women Illustrators*, dates the beginning of this practice as early as the 1700s (13). This practice was perfect for 19th century women as Kramer writes, "Victorian society imposed many restrictions on women, confining them to hearth and home, husband and children. With no other creative outlets, the cultivation of plants and flowers, gardening, drawing, and the study of botany provided much needed diversions" (21). Dickinson herself took part in this study and appreciation of nature. She lived in a community that prided themselves in education and knowledge and Dickinson became very knowledgeable about wildlife in general. While Dickinson had many teachers who had an influence on her, the Reverend Professor and President of Amherst College, Edward Hitchcock was one of the most

influential in the area of botany and nature studies. Richard Sewall writes, “Hitchcock was a remarkable man, the ‘pace setter,’ man of God and man of Science, who inspired a whole generation with a love of nature” (342). Hitchcock was known for his specificity within his nature writing and it seems to have had an impact on Dickinson as well, “Her own sense of precision was already showing itself, for instance, in one of the delights of her girlhood, her herbarium, with its carefully printed Latin name for each item; and she was known among her friends for her detailed knowledge of flora around Amherst” (Sewall 345). This *herbarium* or pressed flower album, showed her interest and knowledge of plants. The scientific background enabled Dickinson to look at flowers as elements of nature *as well as* sentimental articles and trifles, adding another dimension to her work on flowers.

It is important, too, however, to look at the frilly sentimentalism of flowers at the time that was the core of “The Culture of Flowers.” Part of the attraction of flowers was their idealized purity. Kramer quotes Mrs. Sarah Josephena Hale in 1848 as commenting on flowers as “symbols of the affections, probably ever since our first parents tended theirs in the garden of God’s own planting. They seem hallowed from that association, and intended, naturally, to represent pure, tender, and devoted thoughts and feelings” (21). This religious outlook on the flower world stems back to the Garden of Adam and Eve and the recognition of flowers as beautiful creations of God. The association with religion further justified women’s involvement with botany and flowers as they were studying God’s work. Kramer points out specific examples of what he calls “worship” such as the five anthers of the passion flower symbolizing the five wounds of Christ at the crucifixion (25).

Beyond what seemed to be religious fervor, lay an unexplainable passion and obsession with flowers. Kramer writes, “Victorian women took to flowers with a passion that was

extraordinary. Floral decoration appeared everywhere – on wallpaper, jewelry, embroidery, textiles, architectural motifs, porcelain, fan-leaves, and clothing” (28). He goes on saying, “Fireplaces were adorned with all kinds of floral arrangements, dried or fresh. Drawing rooms were decorated with flowers made of paper, felt, shells, or glass” (Kramer 28). Outside the house, green houses or stove houses were built. The upper class showed their wealth by importing exotic flowers and showing them off at flower parties. Gardening was considered the *in* pastime by both men and women. People were reading extensively about plants, “The publication of flower books and botanical magazines exploded; more than twice as many botanical or horticultural works were published from 1800 to 1850 than during the entire previous century” (Kramer 31).

Separate from “The Culture of Flowers,” is “The Language of Flowers” or florigraphy (Greenaway and Marsh 9). Jack Goody, author of “The Secret Language of Flowers” defines it as: “the specific form this [the culture of flowers] took in the numerous 19th century books that attempted to analyze the language of flowers” (133). Goody is referring to the huge outpouring of flower dictionaries in the 19th century that assigned meanings to each flower, thus developing a “language” made up of flowers. In Sheila Pickles’ book, *The Language of Flowers*, she recreates what a 19th century flower dictionary might have looked like. The book is organized alphabetically, starting with Amaryllis and ending with Water Lily. Each flower is illustrated and given a meaning such as the Forget-Me-Not that means “true love” and the Marigold meaning “grief” (Pickles 36,65). Poems and quotes are included as small paragraphs on the origin of each flower and its myth. Every page is saturated with sentimental images such as young girls, children, ruffles and lace.

The custom of giving meaning to individual flowers comes from a variety of different places. Kramer believes it to be a Turkish custom of the 1700s when, because women were prohibited from speaking to men, they were forced to send messages – sometimes with flowers. For example, one might send a rose, which meant, “May I have all your love forever?” (Kramer 54). Goody sites possible origins of the custom as being an early Islamic tradition as well as a practice originating in the Orient (140). Jean Marsh, in her book with Kate Greenaway, *The Illuminated Language of Flowers* goes the farthest back in time citing the use of flowers in the Pharaoh’s tombs in ancient Egypt and the giving of flowers by the ancient Romans at the alter of Venus (10).

The sentimental “Language of Flowers” was sparked by Charlotte de la Tour and her book, *Le Language de Fleurs*, written in France in 1819 (Kramer 54). Her book began a cult like following that soon spread to England and not long after, to America. Kramer writes, “Here was an acceptable vocabulary allowing Victorian women to send and receive messages of love, affection, and passion without fear of interference from parents or chaperones. Secret lovers – and there were many in that repressed society – were afforded a rare opportunity to express their innermost feelings” (54-5). There were all kinds of rules dealing with the use of this new language. In an 1875 book written by Robert Tyras one major rule was described, “A flower, presented in an upright position, expresses a thought; and to express the opposite of that thought, it suffices to let the flower hang down reversed (Kramer 55). This language even went as far as being the focal points of parlor games for women. An anonymous 19th century book describes a game where each player chooses a flower from a bouquet and the meaning attached to that flower, according to “The Language of Flowers,” would describe their future lover’s character (Kramer 32).

This new language acquired by 19th century women allowed for a type of communication they were never before “allowed” to experience. Petrino writes, “Because women especially were expected to embody piety and domesticity and were limited to these topics in public, their passion needed to be mediated through a rhetoric of ‘silent eloquence’ – a language of gesture that implied meaning through a series of codes rather than overt statement” (130). In other words, they manipulated “silence” by using flowers instead of words.

Dickinson took “The Language of Flowers” to an entirely different level than most women at the time. What places Dickinson apart from the other women seemingly obsessed with flowers, isn’t what she did with flowers in her lifetime, but how she carried them with her after death. Dickinson left strict instructions as to how her funeral should take place. The field she was to be carried through was saturated with daisies and buttercups, which, according to “The Language of Flowers” mean innocence and childishness (Greenaway and Marsh 22, 28). It was almost as if, traveling over these flowers while dead, she was letting her stereotypes die with her. She carried in her hand a bouquet of heliotropes for a friend in heaven as they meant faithfulness and devotion. At her throat she wore a bundle of violets, representing modesty and constancy or faithfulness in love (Greenaway and Marsh 58). These same flowers formed a wreath around her coffin, as if sealing her with her own emotions.

In life, Dickinson partook in this language of flowers, but added a twist. Dickinson didn’t fall into the mushy sentimentality of the times, but instead used the idea of flowers as a language and created her own floral symbols that represented not just love, but sexual passions as well. We have all become accustomed to Dickinson’s multiple meanings, and this multiplicity exists here as well. Dickinson’s flower poems appreciated nature as well as delved into the world of sexuality. Petrino writes, “She partook of the common rhetoric of flowers that created a

distinctly ‘feminine’ style of this period, yet in her poems sent to friends and relatives she expanded these images to play on the very limits of expression, to put words into emotions previously unspoken” (142). These “previously unspoken emotions” encompassed desires a 19th century woman would otherwise have had to keep to herself.

While at times it seems that Dickinson is playing along with this whole idea of a “Language of Flowers,” at other times she appears to be mocking the institution. Instead of sending a note with an attached flower, she would send a note with attached poems. These poems she referred to as flowers themselves, playing on the idea of sending messages through bouquets. In a note to a Mr. Henry V. Emmons, Dickinson writes, “Since receiving your beautiful writing I have often desired to thank you thro’ a few of my flowers, and arranged the fairest for you” (*Letters* 103). A recipient of this note would expect actual flowers, but Dickinson sends a few of her poems instead. What is Dickinson saying by paralleling flowers and poetry? Is she commenting on their similar roles as messengers? Or is she referring to their similarities in beauty and creation? Perhaps she is doing both as well as addressing the issue of multiplicity of meaning of both flowers and poems. Even when she did send flowers as many 19th century women, she added her own angle. Petrino explains, “In poems accompanying a flower, she collapses the distinction between poetry and flowers, thus enriching and complicating the act of self presentation” (143). Petrino uses Dickinson’s Poem #86 as an example of the melting of flowers and poetry:

South Winds jostle them –
Bumblebees come –
Hover – hesitate –
Drink, and are gone –

Butterflies pause
On their passage Cashmere –

I – softly plucking,
Present them here!

(*Poems 44*).

In this poem Dickinson is playing with the idea of presentation. Sewall ties together the practice of sending flowers and the sending of poems as he says that poems are “as flowers, things of nature that had come with no practice at all” (545). Dickinson gives the impression that these poems were found by “plucking” words from her brain just as bouquets are created by “plucking” flowers from the ground. The ambiguity created between flowers and poems is just what Dickinson is going for. The formation of bouquets through the fastening of her poems together in fascicles is another example of the interconnectedness of poetry and flowers. Each poem in her fascicle bouquet becomes a different flower. It isn’t always clear to us as readers as to why Dickinson places certain poems in certain fascicles. If we look at the fascicles as bouquets, however, each fascicle becomes an arrangement of flowers that compliment or pleasingly contrast with one another. The overall bouquet Dickinson has created by interweaving flowers and poems together throughout her work, goes against the norm. It is devices such as these, where she plays with one’s previously conceived notions that allow us to expect the unexpected from Dickinson and not be shocked when she takes the manipulation even further into the realm of sexuality.

Such manipulation was necessary in the world in which Victorian women lived. Robert C. Spiller says it well in his essay on Dickinson, “There was something about the way women lived in the 19th century that encouraged repression” (110). He goes on to say, “The sex that was not permitted expression in literature was not even openly acknowledged in life” (Spiller 110). His point is that while writers like Dickinson had constraints placed upon their writing, they also

had constraints upon their life that led them to be unappreciated, taken for granted, and at times, ignored.

The atmosphere of the 19th century in New England was anything but “free” for women. Besides being under appreciated, they had a number of expectations to live up to. Women were supposed to be domestic, pious, pure, and quiet. Harvey Green speaks of such expectations in his book, *The Light of the Home: An Intimate View of the Lives of Women in Victorian America*, “Entrusted with the future of the race, women were supposed to be virginal and innocent in their youth, and then they were to become pure and nurturing mothers” (115). The sexuality of women was kept quiet and greatly misunderstood. Society attempted to crush their normal sexual feelings and desires. In his book, *Prudery and Passion*, Milton Rugoff writes, “It is difficult to overstate the extent and intensity of prudery in America in 1840. The most sweeping form of suppression was the denial that a ‘normal’ woman experienced desire” (46). The concept of prudery evolved through history. In Puritan times, “sensual pleasures” were bore down upon by “the wrath of God” while in the Victorian era these pleasures were treated with “suppression, euphemism, and silence” (Rugoff 40). This culture of silence created the backdrop for institutions such as “The Language of Flowers.”

Young girls were trained in purity and prudery very soon after puberty. There were a number of rules mentioned in Rugoff’s book:

- they were discouraged from using soft beds or soft chairs (fear of arousal?)
 - they were discouraged from sitting with their legs crossed or astride like on a see-saw
 - they were discouraged from drinking stimulating drinks such as coffees and teas
 - they were not allowed to go to the theater or dance with boys (temptation?)
 - they were expected to discipline their bodies with corsets
 - they were cautioned to sleep alone (especially at boarding schools)
- (49).

Rules that would seem absurd and ridiculous to us today were common practice in the 19th century. A lot of this misunderstanding was rooted in lack of technology and advanced biological and scientific knowledge, but a great deal of this paranoia also stemmed from the different morals and ethics of the time. Being accused of any scrape upon one's honor in any way was deathly feared. It was often said, and meant, "dishonor, meaning seduction, was worse than death" (Rugoff 41). So, this was the type of world Emily Dickinson lived in. As difficult and suffocating as it was, Dickinson never gave into the expectations that were placed upon her. She didn't pretend to believe something she didn't just to conform. The poetess never married or had children, and avoided a number of "womanly duties" such as the practice of "calling" on neighbors and friends. In her book on Dickinson, Wendy Martin writes, "There were many times when she (Dickinson) felt extreme anxiety, helplessness, and anger, but no matter how confused or despairing she became, Dickinson did not subdue her existential fears and frustrations with the soothing assurances of salvation, filial piety, marriage or a dutiful poetic apprenticeship" (79). Dickinson refused to take the easy way out and become like every other Victorian woman just to live an "easier" life.

Beyond being a woman during a time of repression, Dickinson also had to deal with being a Woman Writer as well. In her book, Joanne Dobson approaches this subject, "Women writers were under a heavy obligation to introduce nothing into their writing that would disturb preconceptions about woman's moral nature, or would sully the souls of impressionable readers" (6). According to some people, women writing *at all* was wrong, Angela Leighton, author of *Victorian Women Poets* says, "Publication seemed like unwomanly self-display, or even sexual self-exposure" (199). This idea seems to stem from societal sex roles that dictate that men are the providers and women are the homemakers.

The work of women in the 19th century lacked what were seen as “deviant qualities” for women, sexual passion, desire, personal anger, the want for recognition and appreciation, the desire for fame or accomplishment, a life outside the home and intimate emotions (Dobson 2). But, Dickinson was different. A great deal of her work was created *with* and *about* and *for* emotions, desires and passion. Dickinson’s writing was monumental for the times - she expressed herself while other women huddled under the knife of censorship. She found ways, through multiplicity of language and representations such as floral symbolism to express her sexuality. Dickinson did not let the society take away her desire to express herself; instead she outsmarted them, letting the naïve believe she was conforming, when in reality, beneath her multiplicity she was rebelling.

As we have seen, the world of female repression and sexual silencing juxtaposed with a culture obsessed with flowers cultivated and forced the perfect situation for Dickinson’s use of floral language to represent sexual images. Now, with the stage set, and her motivations explored, we can look at Dickinson’s most common flower themes. One of her most known themes is “Bees and Flowers.” These poems are more often than not misunderstood and seen as cutesie or childlike because of the conforming and sentimental 19th century women writers at the time. Dickinson took a much different approach to the subject, adding her own lighthearted and sexual angle on the theme. In her book, *Emily Dickinson: Personae and Performance*, Elizabeth Phillips writes, “When she took up the topic of bees and flowers, which were especially popular among the sentimentalists of the period, she was more daring, more observant, and less serious than they” (165). It is hard to convince me that Dickinson’s Bee and Flower poems are anything *other* than moments of sexual expression. Robert McClure Smith in his intriguing book, *The Seduction of Emily Dickinson*, states it quite simply, “The interaction between bee and flower

described within these poems is inevitably suggestive of sexuality. After all, a flower is more than a convenient representation of a sexual organ: *it is a sexual organ*” (2). Dickinson chose the bee and flower to act out these sexual scenarios, not just because of the scientific reproductive connotations, but because of their multiplicity as well. Peter M. Daly who studies the function of emblems and symbols writes, “It is fact that the bee makes sweet honey, but stings sharply, and that the rose cannot be separated from the thorn” (74). This same multiplicity is found throughout Dickinson’s poetry and works very well here because of the issues that come along with sexual encounters. When looking at the Bee and Flower poems we need to ask:

- Who desires whom?
- Are these acts consensual?
- Who has the active role in the situation?

Looking at the Bee and Flower poems as a whole, it is clear that Dickinson creates a plethora of different situations where the answers to the above questions are anything but constant. Poem #1224 is an example of a Bee and Flower poem where the bee seems to be the character in control:

Like Trains of Cars of Tracks of Plush
I hear the level Bee –
A Jar across the Flowers goes
Their Velvet Masonry

Withstands until the sweet Assault
Their Chivalry consumes –
While He, victorious tilts away
To vanquish other Blooms.

(*Poems* 539).

The roles of the bee and flower are quite clear in Poem #1224. Right from the start we are given an aggressive and powerful image of the suitor. The Bee is compared to a “Train of Cars” in the first line, leaving us with anything but a peaceful image (line 1). The tracks are

made of “plush” creating a very contrasting image that makes the train seem even harder and more forceful (line 1). The second line tells us that the bee’s approach is known, or rather “heard,” implying that the suitor is making no attempt to be sly or sneak up on the flower (line 2). The word “Jar” in the next line describes the bee’s arrival on the flower (line 3). This is an important word as it can simply mean a harsh sound like that of a train, or it can refer to something disturbing or irritating, or, lastly, it can refer to a bump or shake. This single word gives us insight into how the bee is received. There is nothing gentle about the bee’s landing on the flower, and if we look at jar as meaning irritating, the flower doesn’t seem to be totally welcoming. The flower is described in the next line to have “Velvet Masonry,” probably referring to the soft, erotic texture of the flower and its complex construction (line 4). The word “Masonry” by itself is interesting as one thinks of a house being built of brick, and this bee is seemingly entering the house, or perhaps entering the female sexual organs. The next line says that the flower or house withstands until after the “sweet Assault” (line 5). The word “Assault” is a key word in the poem, as it defines the encounter between the bee and flower – a violent attack. The problematic part of the line is that the assault is referred to as “sweet.” This implies that while this was indeed an assault, it wasn’t entirely unwanted by the flower. The next line calls the act chivalrous, perhaps saying that the act takes place out of duty or obligation. The institution of marriage came to mind when reading this line as sexual relations in marriage at times become a kind of chore or obligation, especially in the 19th century when not every couple was married for love. The poem seems to indicate a relationship that is understood by both the bee and flower. The flower in no way resists the bee, but at the same time total acceptance isn’t portrayed either. In the second last line the bee is described as “Victorious” a term used after a winning battle or conquest, not after a totally consensual sexual experience (line 7). This

assumes that the bee is in control and has the power in the situation, not the flower. The bee is portrayed as a “ladies man” of sorts as he then moves on to “other blooms” (line 8).

Poem #1224 is a great example of Dickinson’ subtle sexual allusions. This poem, looked at by a nature lover, seems innocent enough. It is when we start looking closer at her choice of language that we can see the sexuality of the piece. Words such as “assault” and “vanquish” juxtaposed with words such as “velvet” and “plush” and “blooms” creates an erotic situation. This poem can be looked at as a “rape fantasy” poem, where the flower *wants* this aggressive sexual experience. Poem #1339 is another example of a Bee and Flower poem, though one that takes a very different approach to the sexual encounter:

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

(*Poems 579*).

In this poem, the Bee is no longer a conquering, violent suitor, but a visitor instead. The first line displays the bee as a shiny “Carriage,” not as a train (line 1). The bee or carriage alights upon the flower, in no way jarring the petals. The key word of the poem is “received” (line 5). The rose doesn’t merely withstand the visitor, or regard him with ambivalence, but *receives* him with “tranquillity” (line 6). The next two lines are probably the most sexually explicit in the poem as we are told that the rose doesn’t withhold anything from the bee and his “cupidity” or

desire (line 8). In Poem #1224, the flower merely puts up with the bee, but here we see the flower giving up her whole self willingly.

Poem #1339, like Poem #1224 thrives on Dickinson's word choice. Words such as "consummate," "rapture" and "cupidity" are obviously sexually charged, but are protected from society by multiple meanings. Dickinson continues this manipulation of words in another popular theme in 19th century women's poetry, the Daisy. The Daisy was a reoccurring fixture in Dickinson's work and life. It seems that she felt some sort of bond with the flower – perhaps its simplistic beauty attracted her or the idea of the daisy as the "days eye" that is always watchful. Wendy Martin comments on Dickinson's connection with the daisy, "In contrast with the cultivated flowers, the daisy is a wildflower that grows in abundance in the fields of New England; nevertheless, this unpretentious flower also waits patiently for release" (156). This paralleling with Dickinson herself is very interesting and most likely deliberate. Daisies, according to "The Language of Flowers" mean "innocence" – perhaps this is one of Dickinson's ironic twists, as while she very well might have been innocent physically, there is nothing innocent about her Daisy poetry, or any of her work for that matter (Greenaway and Marsh 28). Remember also that the field that Dickinson requested to be carried through at her funeral was covered with daisies (Sewall 274).

A good Daisy poem to look at is Poem #106:

The Daisy follows soft the Sun –
 And when his golden walk is done –
 Sits shyly at his feet –
 He – waking – finds the flower there –
 Wherefore – Marauder – art thou here?
 Because, Sir, love is sweet!

We are the Flower –Thou the Sun!
 Forgive us, if as days decline –
 We nearer steal to Thee!

Enamored of the parting West –
 The peace – the flight – the Amethyst –
 Night's possibility!

(*Poems* 51).

This poem is interesting because the question of control and initiation is not totally clear. The daisy in the first line is described as following the sun, seemingly an act of submission. To further this idea, the daisy “Sits shyly at his feet-” an act placing the daisy literally and figuratively below the sun (line 3). The power issue is still not clear, however, because it is the daisy, not the sun that professes their love, “Because, Sir, love is sweet! (line 6). This portrays the daisy as the aggressor of the situation, or, like the bee in the previous poems, the “suitor.” This concept is perpetuated by the way the sun addresses the daisy as he calls her “Marauder” or one who steals or pillages (line 5). In the second stanza the daisy explains her attraction to the sun and her enamoration with the “parting West” (line 10). Dickinson uses the word “Amethyst” to describe the setting sun, a word that stems from intoxication, displaying the effect of the sun upon the daisy (line 11). The very last line of the poem is what ties the whole poem together as an erotic scenario with the words “Night’s possibility!” (line 12). The daisy is fantasizing about the sun after dark. In her explanation to the sun, the daisy is basically propositioning him, saying, ‘if you let me follow you, the night holds numerous possibilities for us.’ What is interesting about this poem is the inequality in size and supposed power or influence. Somehow, this little daisy has the courage to approach the sun with confidence. If we place a 19th century woman in the place of the daisy, and a prominent, perhaps older man in the place of the sun, it would be absolute scandal. The idea of a woman in the role of aggressor would have been unheard of, but the role of a woman as *seducer* would have been ten times worse. In my mind this poem is a sexual fantasy poem, a notepad to sketch forbidden ideas. Dickinson, as a 19th

century woman, was not supposed to have desires, and as in this case, the Daisy poems allowed her to express these desires secretly.

The Daisy poems and the Bee and Flower poems were not the only place where Emily Dickinson expressed herself sexually. There are many more even more explicitly sensual poems in her repertoire. Critics such as Camille Paglia believe that sexuality is abundant *throughout* Dickinson's poetry, "Dickinson can sexualize any situation, even the picking of a flower" (642).

This comment is in reference to Poem #91:

So bashful when I spied her!
 So pretty – so ashamed!
 So hidden in her leaflets
 Lest anybody find –

So breathless till I passed her –
 So helpless when I turned
 And bore her struggling, blushing,
 Her simple haunts beyond!

From whom I robbed the Dingle –
 For whom betrayed the Dell –
 Many, will doubtless ask me,
 But I shall never tell!

(*Poems* 45).

The words Dickinson uses to describe the flower are vivid comparisons to a young lover. She describes her as "bashful," "ashamed," "struggling," and "blushing." The speaker or "picker" is "breathless" and "helpless." Those words alone, taken out of context of the poem, sound extremely sexual. Paglia writes, "Even Dickinson's most innocuous poems stir with dark undercurrents" (642). Once again, Dickinson is able to describe a very erotic moment undetected. She compares the deflowering of a virgin with the actual deflowering of a plant from the garden. The last line "But I shall never tell!" resonates throughout her whole mission. She has left it up to us as readers to do the "telling," while she smirks, hidden behind the flowers

in her garden. If the poems discussed above have not proven themselves enough in their sexuality, Poem #334 might just be the ultimate convincer:

All the letters I can write
 Are not fair as this –
 Syllables of Velvet –
 Sentences of Plush,
 Depths of Ruby, undrained,
 Hid, Lip, for Thee –
 Play it were a Humming Bird –
 And just sipped – me –

(Poems 158).

Dickinson takes her usual multiplicity to a new level in this poem. The speaker can be talking about a flower and a hummingbird, the richness of her poetry, or about female genitalia. Taking the sexual interpretation, we can paraphrase the poem as saying (excuse the graphic content): all the poetry and letters I write cannot equal the language of my body, more specifically my sensuality, my genitalia. My body has been saved and hidden, waiting for you to fulfill me sexually. The key words that suggest female genitalia are the adjectives, “velvet, plush, ruby” and the most explicit word, “Lip.” The image we get when the Hummingbird “sips” the flower is extremely sexual, needing no explanation. But, once again, Dickinson lets us as readers bring to the poem what we want – and chose the reading we want to believe. By using suggestive but not literal language Dickinson is able to describe the most sensual scene without crossing 19th century boundaries. Margaret Homans believes that Dickinson imagines “a place from which female sexuality can speak for itself, a rhetoric of female pleasure to replace the silencing rhetoric of male desire” (576). It seems that Homans is right, Dickinson does imagine such a place and I will take it farther to say that she succeeds in finding that place in poetry such as Poem #334.

There has been scholarship done on Dickinson's poetry that delves into an even more specific sexual realm that has definite relevance on our topic of floral imagery and sexuality. Paula Bennett has written an article entitled, "Critical Clitoridectomy: Female Sexual Imagery and Feminist Psychoanalytic Theory" that focuses specifically on clitoral images in Dickinson's work. Her theory is that in her poems, Dickinson uses images of small, compact things such as pebbles, berries, gems, peas, pearls, drops, and especially *buds* to represent the female clitoris. They are symbols of "small but precious objects" (Bennett 236). Bennett also argues that the poems that use buds create a "largely self-contained sexuality, concentrating on the bud more than on the flower, and it is clitoricentric and paradoxical in essence" (243). The following passage, the second stanza of Poem #1416, is an example of one of these poems:

Inquire of the closing Rose
Which rapture she preferred
And she will point you sighing
To her rescinded Bud.

(*Poems* 604).

This poem, according to Bennett, deals with the question of pleasure. The Rose, argues Bennett, is proclaiming that the pleasure she feels while partaking in clitoral masturbation is better than the pleasure she feels during sexual intercourse with a man. The preferred means is due to the fact that a woman knows her body better than any man could really know it. Nineteenth-century women poets wrote this clitoral-centered poetry because they were writing in a time when "women in Western culture were just beginning to know themselves as a truly distinctive 'other' sex rather than as inferior and incomplete to men" (Bennett 247). Whether or not Dickinson was consciously aware of this theory, I do believe that the clitoral and genital images in her poetry were deliberate. I think these clitoral focused images were Dickinson's way of showing the female's sexual freedom and beauty.

This issue of intent is an important one when reading Dickinson's poetry. There are definitely skeptical readers that cannot imagine our little Nun of Amherst writing anything erotic or sexual. However, it would be insulting to Dickinson's intelligence if we were to assume that she was just writing about "pretty flowers" and dreamlike pictures in some of her poems that are loaded with sexual imagery. Paula Bennett remarks on Dickinson's images, "In employing these 'dreamlike' images, however, Dickinson was not writing in ignorance of their latent sexual content. Rather, she was using a semiprivate code that, on one level or another, most bourgeoisie of her day would have recognized for what it was – a highly advanced discourse of female erotic desire – even though few, if any, might have publicly admitted to using or understanding it as such" (241). Just as we assume Dickinson's intelligence, we must give the readers some credit as well. They were not blind to Dickinson's sexual references; they were just restrained by society not to admit what they saw.

When Dickinson wrote Poem #35, and said, "Nobody knows this little Rose-" she had no idea that we would some day come to understand her as a sensual woman. There was no way for her to know that there would be people in the 20th century who would dig past the repression of 19th century women and their sexuality. Dickinson could not have imagined that her code, hidden behind "The Language of Flowers" would someday be cracked, and heartily embraced. Her hundreds of Bee and Flower poems, Daisy poems and other Flower poems tried so hard to create the person that the "little Rose" really was beneath the repressive Victorian garb. Her "Syllables of Velvet" and "Sentences of Plush" have come a long way and are now celebrated for their courageous expression of womanhood (Dickinson *Poems* 158). Dickinson expresses her fear in Poem #35 that the "little Rose" would die unnoticed. Hopefully that fear has not been realized.

Nobody knows this little Rose –
It might a pilgrim be
Did I not take it from the ways
And lift it up to thee.
Only a Bee will miss it –
Only a Butterfly,
Hastening from far journey –
On it's breast to lie –
Only a Bird will wonder –
Only a Breeze will sigh –
Ah Little Rose – how easy
For such as thee to die!

(Poems 22).

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