I Sing of Myself, a Loaded Gun: Sexual Identity and Nineteenth-Century American Authors

by Christy Koester, Bachelor of Arts

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Advisory Committee:

Jessica DeSpain, Chair

Heather Johnson

Jill Anderson

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville
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ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

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INTRODUCTION

From all I did and all I said

let no one try to find out who I was.

An obstacle was there that changed the pattern

of my actions and the manner of my life.

An obstacle was often there

to stop me when I'd begin to speak.

From my most unnoticed actions,

my most veiled writing—

from these alone will I be understood.

But maybe it isn't worth so much concern,

so much effort to discover who I really am.

Later, in a more perfect society,

someone else made just like me

is certain to appear and act freely.

-Constantine Cavafy, 1911

Modern American culture dictates that we, as people, are defined by our labels. Without them, it is unclear how to act, how to define ourselves, and how to communicate with each other. These labels are typically based on binary categories (white/non-white, male/female, and heterosexual/homosexual). Within each binary there is the norm (the correct label) and the deviant (the incorrect label). Carrying a deviant label (non-white, female, homosexual), a categorization that a person has no real control over, can result in being cast aside in society. Although many of these same binaries existed in the nineteenth-century, the labels of homosexual and heterosexual did not. Any sex outside

of the marital bed was considered deviant, and sex between two people of the same sex was considered completely unnatural. Because of this temporal shift in how sexuality was understood, there is very little historical evidence regarding same-sex relationships in early American history. However, through diaries and personal letters, there are recorded instances of intimacy between same-sex lovers. Although these instances may shed some light upon the concept of same-sex love during that time, it does not allow for modern labels to be definitively placed upon those relationships. This is especially important when considering those who have added so much to our country's history in other ways, such as groundbreaking American poets Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman.

Through their work, journals, and letters, many have come to place the modern labels of "homosexual," "gay," or "lesbian" upon Whitman and Dickinson when they, themselves, are unable to confirm or deny such accusations. Whitman's poetry of the body and manly-love invites modern readers to make assumptions about his sexuality based solely on the definitions brought about by modern identity politics. Emily Dickinson's poetry of romantic love and longing leaves readers wondering who she was writing about. Typically, the reader assumes her longing is for the love of a man because that was/is the societal norm. However, reviewing the letters she exchanged with women through her life illuminates the possibility of a romantic yearning for women. This leaves modern reader with a dilemma.

It is understandable to want to place these authors into a sexuality-based category. It is, after all, how we interact with each other in modern society. The ways in which these labels originated, though, was not through a need for individual expression, but through a need for sociological control. Philosopher Michel Foucault discusses the ways

in which atypical sexuality was medicalized in order to make identity more regulated in society. He states that "a norm of sexual development was defined and all the possible deviations were carefully described, pedagogical controls and medical treatments were organized, around the least fantasies, moralists, but especially doctors, brandishing the whole emphatic vocabulary of abomination" (36). Medically defining specific types of sexual identity provided specific levels for deviance. Members of the medical community in the nineteenth-century also set out to "disentangle [disparate sexualities] from one another" in order to include them in "reality" and clear up the "utterly confusing" category of sodomy (41, 101). Although, these medicalized labels were created as ways to expose and control those of deviant sexual orientation, they also unintentionally allowed for people whose sexuality did not fit into the heteronormative paradigm to have a place in society and a way to more specifically identify themselves and each other. This allowed for the formation of non-heterosexually based communities and the feeling of acceptance therein.

Labeling the sexuality of nineteenth-century American authors affects the ways in which we, as a modern society, interpret and employ their work. Politically, it can be very helpful to include such important members of American history within the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) community. Due to the current struggle for equality in America, being able to employ the work of two such distinguished and deeply loved authors to further the cause can be incredibly helpful, providing a sense of historical validity to a fight that has been pushing on for nearly 40 years. Whitman, in particular, included themes of democracy and same-sex love in the same poems, exposing a connection between politics and sexuality that can be beneficial for providing a

historical background for the LGBT movement that precedes the Stonewall riots of 1969. On the other hand, by allowing our modern ideals to reflect upon those who lived before us, we are not considering the ways in which sexuality was viewed and approached during these poets' lifetime or the ways in which *they* viewed their own sexualities. This forces Whitman and Dickinson to be burdened by labels that, not only did not exist during their lives, but, even if they had, may not have suited them or their feelings about their own sexual identities. It limits them to only certain aspects of their sexuality, when in reality, their sexual identity may have been too complex to fall under the definitions set forth by others.

Dickinson allows us to think about the domestic sphere, not just in terms of the oppression of American women, but as a safe place for women to explore themselves and each other in terms of their sexuality. This made Dickinson's work an important and influential part of American women's history. By placing either of these poets into sexual categories we simplify complex aspects of both their authorial personas and their writings. In order to perform a more in-depth analysis of the work of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, we must achieve a balance between Victorian sexual discourse and contemporary identity politics. We can accomplish this by understanding the implications of specifically labeling them according to modern definitions of sexuality and instead, embracing the fluidity of sexuality. Through this balance we can more clearly understand the relationships they held, the works they created, and they ways in which we consume and employ their writings as well as their personas. By approaching their poetry, letters, and journals with the concept of sexual fluidity, we are able to observe distinct similarities and differences in how their relationships and belief systems regarding

sexuality, friendship, and marriage may have molded their work. Through acknowledging that Whitman and Dickinson's sexual identities lay somewhere *between* the labels of homosexual and heterosexual, we are able to remove obstructions of definitive sexuality when examining their poetry. This encourages our analysis to be more objective, which leads to a stronger, more honest level of discourse regarding these authors and their poetry.

In order to understand why this balanced approach is necessary for exploring the works of Whitman and Dickinson, in this introduction I begin by exploring the ways in which sexuality was viewed and discussed in nineteenth-century America. I then review how each poet embraced the concept of authorship in order to provide a further understanding of who Whitman and Dickinson were as authors and what they expected their work to achieve.

Nineteenth-Century American Sexuality

When considering life in nineteenth-century America, it is important to remember the emphasis placed on pride, spirituality, and community among most Americans. All of these concepts factor into the ways sex and sexuality were approached, discussed, and performed in society. Prior to the mid-nineteenth-century, sex was considered primarily a procreative activity, with sex of any kind outside of the marital bed deemed unconscionable. This made the possibility of same-sex relationships unfathomable. However, to define sexuality based on one concept or belief system during this time period would also greatly limit the diversity of opinion and behaviors of that period. What constitutes definitions of sexuality evolves over the course of time, and the nineteenth-century was no different. It would be easy to try to explain the sexual

identities of authors of the nineteenth-century based on our modern definitions of what human sexuality is. However, such definitions would be culturally, historically, and morally inaccurate.

In his introduction to the collection *Nineteenth-Century Writings on Homosexuality,* Chris White explains that the concept of homosexuality did not exist until the term was coined in 1869 by a man named Benkert, "a Swedish campaigner for the rights of those he called homosexuals" (White 4). The term did not migrate into American usage until 1892 and was then commonly understood as a label for those with “abnormal manifestations of the sexual appetite” (Rupp 8). This, of course, does not mean that prior to the usage of the term there were not people who romantically loved and had physically intimate relationships with others of the same sex. However, unlike in our current social climate, relationships such as these went unacknowledged for fear of punishments so devastating they literally could have had life-ending consequences. Prior to (as well as after) the use of the term, same-sex relationships held names such as "the mute sin" or "the love that dare not speak its name” (White 2). These relationships were regularly referred to using religious terminology (mostly from the Old Testament) such as “unnatural offences, disgusting depravities, [or] monstrous feats” of human interaction (2). Rather than attempting to name such acts appropriately, those in power (government and city officials, the church) turned to lists of insults and defamatory remarks, inspiring members of the community to do the same. The church claimed that those who committed such offences “were invariably wretches, intent on committing filthy acts through filthy lusts, to the detriment of social order, family happiness and racial health” (2). They also declared that these relationships were motivated strictly by the physical

aspects of sexuality and considered to be symptomatic of a disease or the devil presenting himself within one's body and soul. Just as with the idea of masturbation, these acts of sexuality were considered to be self-indulgent, and because they were not acts of procreation, they were deemed unnatural and therefore sinful. These sinners were punished in many ways, from being ostracized from their communities to physical punishments up to and including death.

It is also important to note that men were punished more frequently and severely than women. The double standard that we face today in which we find more fault and disgust in regards to male/male relationships than in female/female relationships also existed during this time. Men who were assumed to have been involved in any type of sexual relationship with another man were considered an abomination and mentally disturbed. In his book *Nameless Offences: Homosexual Desire in the 19th Century,* H.G. Cocks explains that "It was possible to charge offenders with 'meeting together' for the purpose of committing sodomy" (Cocks 34). Thomas Powell and George Murray were tried for such a "meeting" in 1839. The indictment said that they "unlawfully did meet…in a certain privy…with intent and for the purpose of committing divers filthy, wicked nasty lewd and beastly unnatural and sodomitical acts and practices" (34). Nothing actually took place, merely the *possibility* of these sexual acts were enough to have the men arrested and tried. Although arrest and prison were one concern, some men were sentenced to public humiliation, extreme torture, or even death.

Women, conversely, had and continually nurtured relationships with other women but they were usually not assumed to be sexual because, according to common knowledge, women had absolutely no sexual intentions. During the Victorian era, women

were considered inherently passionless. It was a common societal belief that women only involved themselves in sexual relationships within the bounds of marriage for the purposes of procreation or due to the obligation to please their husbands. Scholars John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, authors of *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America,* explain,

> [In the] late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century moralists suggested the women had fewer sexual desires than did men. Their lusts lay dormant, to be awakened, perhaps, by their husbands. The British physician William Acton [stated that] 'the majority of women (happily for society) are not very much troubled with sexual feelings of any kind…Love of home, of children, and of domestic duties are the only passions they feel' (70).

There was rarely concern that a romantic friendship bordered on the sexual, even when it was clear that women enjoyed touching, embracing, and kissing each other while expressing their undying love and longing for each other through letters, notes, and journals. In the book *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America,* scholar Carroll Smith-Rosenberg discussed the relationship between two young girls in the mid-1800s. Katherine Wharton (Katie) "maintained a long, intimate friendship with a girl [named Eng.] When a young man began to court [Eng] seriously, Katie commented in her diary that she had never realized 'how deeply [she] loved Eng and how fully'" (Smith-Rosenburg 71-72). Those around Katie and Eng never questioned their relationship, even though Katie's diary continually expressed how much she "loved her!" Boarding schools, women's colleges, and women's society groups, as well as friendships formed between wives and mothers within the domestic sphere, made intimacy between women much easier than expected in the nineteenth-century. Relationships such as these were common and even encouraged, especially considering the ways in which men and

women were separated in society. Separate social spheres kept men and women from mingling outside of their respective relationships, which forced same-sex friendships to become more intimate.

Although there is not as much documentation as there is speculation about same-sex relationships in nineteenth-century American history, there are documented cases of men who were deemed sodomites. Prior to 1885, sodomy was legally considered "the same kind of thing as bestiality [both being] unnatural offences of equal weight and grossness [and was] bracketed with prostitution and offences against the age of consent" (White 3). These laws provided an open forum for degradation of any man suspected of any sexual act deemed 'unnatural.' Sodomy was strictly a man's crime. These laws were geared toward and propagated by men, and men received the brunt of the punishments. It was reported that in "the Chesapeake, as in New England, church and court prosecuted sinners, levying fines on or whipping those who fornicated, committed adultery, sodomy, or rape, or bore bastards" (D'Emilio 11). Capital punishment was also considered a fair way to deal with such offenders, although according to court documents it was rarely used in America. Since those who typically reported such acts were townspeople, it is possible that such punishments did (sometimes) take place outside of the justice system. It was important to many members of these smaller communities to keep their towns safe and moral, leaving them to believe they could take matters into their own hands for the greater good of the community and for the safety of their children. It is also possible that such documents recording these punishments have been destroyed or were never thoroughly recorded.

When the term "sodomy" is used within the context of nineteenth-century discourse, it is assumed that such perpetrators were (or would have been according to our terms) homosexuals. However, sodomy was nothing but a physical act which, during that time, had a broad definition; although its actions are connected to the idea of two men having sex, the term did not include the possibility of an emotional connection between two men. According to D'Emilio and Freedman:

> …the crime of sodomy was not equivalent to the modern concept of homosexuality. Sodomy referred to 'unnatural'—that is nonprocreative—sexual acts, which could be performed between two men, a man and an animal (technically considered buggery or bestiality), or between a man and a woman [and] because they so clearly defied the norm of reproductive sexuality, [these crimes] carried the death penalty. (30)

However, over the course of the nineteenth-century, certain states removed the death penalty from the punishments for sodomy making it punishable by imprisonment rather than death; specifically, Pennsylvania in 1787, New York and New Jersey in 1796, Massachusetts in 1805, New Hampshire in 1812, Delaware in 1826, North Carolina in 1869, and South Carolina in 1873 (Foster 6).

In contrast to sexual acts, long-term loving relationships between members of the same-sex were understood as nothing more than friendships, especially those between two women. However, even those women were sometimes concerned about societal repercussions. In 1849 at a boarding school in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, an intense and emotional life-long bond was formed between fourteen-year-old Sarah Butler Wister and sixteen-year-old Jeannie Field Musgrove. Each adopted a pseudonym to sign the letters they exchanged throughout their lives—Jeannie a female name and Sarah a male name. This alone speaks volumes about what these women were feeling for each other as well

as how they felt others (friends, family, or society) would respond to their relationship. There would be no reason to adopt secret names, especially those of the opposite sex, if there was nothing to fear. Sarah kept fresh flowers near Jeannie's picture and their letters teetered between friendship and intimacy through marriages, children, and well into old-age (Smith-Roseburg 4-5).

During this period, the family model was beginning to change, which introduced the concept of separate sexual spheres where "men commonly left their homes to seek their fortunes in the public sphere of paid labor [while] most women remained in the private, or domestic sphere, where they continued to perform their unpaid reproductive and household labors" (57). The male sphere also typically included attending meetings and parties and enjoying leisure time outside of the home primarily in the company of other men. Women, on the other hand, led their lives within the confines of the home or church, socializing primarily with other women. This segregation allowed for women and men to create bonds with others of the same-sex outside of their marriages and find comfort and solace in the arms and ears of their same-sex friends. Until the mid-to-late nineteenth-century, many marriages were not typically constructed of couples that confided in one another. Often, a marriage was more of a business arrangement, with the primary concerns being procreation, maintaining a household, and carrying on a family name. This is much different than our own modern definition of marriage, which considers it to be a union of partners who confide in and trust each other with emotions and secrets that we may not feel comfortable sharing with anyone else.

As the century progressed, a more defined concept of homosexuality emerged and a like-minded community began to unfold. In larger American cities, specifically New

York City, in the mid-to-late nineteenth-century, a nightlife that included underground clubs, back alley meet-ups, and secret societies began to grow and thrive despite the fact that the majority of the country's sexual focus was still on heterosexual marriage and family. With the death penalty no longer a concern, the fear of being caught lessened (although not completely diminished) and like-minded individuals had the opportunity to find each other a little more easily. The city served as an anonymous playground (more so specifically for men) to meet and engage in homosexual relationships outside the bonds of heterosexual marriages. Both married and single men spent more time outside of the household. During this time the state itself was not focused as much on morality as it was economic and industrial growth, therefore the authorities were not overly concerned with consensual sexual exploration—sodomy included. D'Emilio and Freedman state that:

> Between 1796 and 1873, New York City courts issued only twenty-two indictments for sodomy, and these usually involved the use of force or a disparity in the men's ages. [It wasn't] until the end of the century [that] New York criminalize[d] 'consenting to sodomy.' By then Americans had been alerted to the phenomenon of homosexuality, for as the opportunities for same-sex relationships grew, the first signs of a visible, urban homosexual subculture appeared... (D'Emilio 123)

It was within this subculture that the regular working man as well as well-known men such as Walt Whitman were able to embrace this part of their own sexualities. However, the city was not the only place that allowed men to engage in same-sex intimacies. Men who were soldiers, prisoners, miners, sailors, or cowboys, spent long lengths of time in close quarters with other men with little to no access to women. This left them to rely on each other for companionship (and possibly sexual release). In today's society, these men would be considered hyper-masculine and unlikely to engage in homosexual activities.

Homosexuality is an especially interesting subject in terms of the ways in which its definition has transformed over the course of time to become a specific type of sexual deviance that places people in specific boxes according to expected behaviors. Michel Foucault argues in the *History of Sexuality* that, "Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (Foucault 43). With this statement, Foucault demonstrates how the act of sodomy was transformed into the identity of homosexuality, leaving behind a more complex, yet definitive idea of what same-sex love is. It is more than just deviant sexuality. It is a lifestyle or "species" of human behavior. Within the context of modern society, homosexuality has become a visible subculture that is developing its own identity as a solid and integral part of the American political system. This subculture now strives not only to be recognized within the confines of homosexual communities but also to be considered an equal and relevant part of American society.

Authorship

By understanding how Whitman and Dickinson saw the concept of authorship, we are more full able to understand what they may have wanted their work to achieve. According to Foucault's work concerning the authorship involving the author's persona in scholarship is unavoidable because, much like the labels of "homosexual" and "heterosexual" that I explore above, authorship provides culture with a means of literary categorization. Foucault is quick to point out that the "author function" is not the same as the author him or herself. Rather the "author function" is an author's public persona

developed through the acts of publication and reception of texts. Foucault defines "author function" as "characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses in society" (284). Although the author function can be limiting, it provides readers with information about genre, content, and literary merit. When we study how authorship functions, as in the case of the sexual categorization of Whitman and Dickinson, we learn more about how our culture consumes and interprets literature itself. As a result, certain aspects of authors' lives can be of great value to the criticism of their work. By studying the author function, we are also able to enhance our understanding of the society in which an author lived.

Foucault also explains that, "The author serves to neutralize the contradictions that may emerge in a series of texts: there must be—at a certain level of his thought or desire, of his conscious or unconscious—a point where contradictions are resolved, where incompatible elements are at last tied together or organized around a fundamental or originating contradiction" (286). Although he is specifically discussing texts here, this concept can also be considered when discussing the authors themselves and the question of sexuality. In regard to our topic, contradictions within the discourse of the sexual identities of Whitman and Dickinson and the ways those identities reflected upon their work, can only be neutralized through the acceptance of the fluidity of sexuality. Since there is no specific evidence of these authors' distinct sexual orientations, that fluidity is where the answers lie.

It is also important to remember that as culture changes through time, so do the things we notice in a literary work. Similarly, the things we deem important for

understanding literature change. By studying the author's life and beliefs we can see how these changes have affected scholarship. Foucault explains that,

> …it is time to study discourses not only in terms of their expressive value or formal transformations, but according to their modes of existence, the modes of circulation, valorization, attribution, and appropriation of discourses vary with each culture and are modified within each. The manner in which they are articulated according to social relationships can be more readily understood in the activity of the author function and in its modifications than in the themes or concepts that discourses set in motion. (290)

In essence, Foucault is arguing that studying our critical and cultural responses to the life of the author becomes even more important to the validity and expression of the study of literary work over time. In order to perform this type of meta-criticism honestly in the cases of Whitman and Dickinson, we must consider both modern and Victorian concepts of sexuality. Because sexual identity has evolved so extensively over the course of time. it is not enough to understand how sexuality is expressed today when the author lived in the nineteenth-century. The balance between the two and the acceptance that both of those cultures have something important to offer the analysis provides a more well-rounded approach to literary study. This allows us to study literature not only from the perspective of the author but also compels us to understand how we let our modern cultural perceptions distort our criticism.

As authors, Whitman and Dickinson have become a part of our nation's history, leaving behind a paper trail that we use to determine not only how they lived their lives, but how others did too. The work they have left behind give us further insight into the history of our country and the ways in which people lived and loved. Still, thoughts expressed on paper expose secrets that even the authors themselves may not claim to

understand or be ready to fully acknowledge. For this reason, it is important to remember that although sexual identity has proven itself to be incredibly important in modern perceptions of individuality and authorship, in nineteenth-century America that concept of sexual identity was, at the very least, unclear. Our contemporary readings of Whitman and Dickinson may reveal more about our own time than theirs.

Although they had their commonalities, Whitman and Dickinson approached authorship in contrasting ways. Dickinson held tight to her work, while Whitman published and revised his poetry throughout his career. However, according to Foucault, authorship is not always within the control of those who write. Their authorship is a mass-consumed object that represents their work and their public identity. Despite the lack of control an author has over how his/her work once it has been published, the ways in which the work *is* published provides a small thread of authorial control. Dickinson and Whitman found ways to take control of their own work and present (or not present) their work and themselves in the ways in which they saw fit. Understanding these publication decisions can also help us figure out how to most effectively approach their works as readers.

To Dickinson, authorship was a way of expressing herself outwardly but privately. She wrote poem after poem for years but mostly only shared them with a few of her closest friends. She spent very little time or effort attempting to publish her work. This may have been out of fear of rejection or fear of damage to her family's reputation. Biographer Alfred Habegger suggests that her father's "heated opinions about literary females and staying at home exerted an immensely complicating effect on his daughter's position as a writer of genius. To publish her poems and proclaim her ambition would

have been extremely risky acts" (50). It is also possible that Dickinson did not publish, because, as a woman, she would have been risking social backlash, or perhaps she merely lacked interest in the public opinion or consumption of her work.

Whitman on the other hand, put his work out for the world to see and continued to mold and edit his public persona throughout his entire life. Biographer David S. Reynolds suggests that, "His entrance into the field of authorship was at least partly prompted by some terrible pain that his writings indirectly dramatized and perhaps helped to purge" (Reynolds 53). It seems as if Whitman feared nothing from the public and simply brushed off and ignored attacks on his masculinity or sexuality. He felt as if self-publishing made more of an impact on the work and was "appalled by the impersonality of modern publishing" (47). Yet, whereas Dickinson's self-publication was contained within a tight coterie of friendly correspondents, Whitman worked to distribute his self-publications widely. These differences in their approach toward authorship also illuminate the ways in which men and women were a part of separate sexual spheres. Whitman, being a man, had more opportunity and less conflict with publishing his work than Dickinson, merely due to his sex. Without understanding the ways in which authorship was approached in the past, we would be unable to see these differences. Through Foucault's work, we are able to employ the lives and personal ideals of these authors to create a more suitable discourse involving both past and present concepts of authorship and its relationship to sexuality.

Dickinson did not continually strive for publication, it was as if she wished only to write. Her words were written for herself and the ones she loved enough to share them with. Our ability to see and love her work has only to do with the fact that after her death,

her poetry was discovered in a drawer and others made the decision to share it with the world. Those who assume that her work was intended as a way to 'come out' to the world as a lesbian are neglecting to take this piece of history into account. When reading her poetry it is as if we are reading her diary. Unlike Dickinson, Whitman intended for his work to be publicized, read, and analyzed. Whitman's intent to make some sort of impact on the world is written in his poetry and in the actions of his publication process. He wanted his work to sway opinion and to evoke emotion and debate among strangers and within the country as a whole. Whitman wrote the myriad versions of *Leaves of* Grass throughout his lifetime to inspire and spur change. The following chapters will reveal the ways in which labeling the sexuality of these authors and placing them in these modern categories proves both enlightening and problematic in the presentation and consumption of their lives and work.

Chapter One is dedicated to Emily Dickinson, whose legacy tends to bring forth images of a sheltered and meek spinster with no outward form of sexual passion. This is because attempting to imagine a nineteenth-century woman of her stature as a sexual being of any kind, let alone a deviant one, is incredibly difficult. By ignoring her relationships with women, we leave out some very important details about her life and the ways in which she loved and saw the world. It is also important to accept that those intimate relationships with women do not completely define her. A balanced perception of her sexuality allows us to provide a more in-depth analysis of her work without projecting a sexual identity upon her that she, herself, may have rejected.

Chapter Two will focus on Walt Whitman and his notorious reputation for preferring the company of men to women. I will discuss his relationships with men as

well as the ways in which his work expresses his thoughts about the fluidity of sexuality, the love and beauty of the male body, and his specific need for privacy regarding the questioning of his sexual preferences.

Finally, in Chapter Three, I will consider the ways in which the labels themselves affect our thinking. Using several examples from popular culture, I will explore how these authors are represented. In so doing, I examine how authorship has functioned for Whitman and Dickinson in the wake of changing public opinion, and what role the labeling of their sexuality plays in the enduring legacies of these nationally prized authors.

Understanding sexuality in nineteenth-century America lays a foundation for this discussion. Knowing that our modern labels for same-sex behavior did not exist during this time period allows us to take a step back and internalize what it may have been like to live in a society without those labels. This knowledge gives us the ability to consider how we, as people of the twenty-first-century, would choose to characterize our sexuality if we did. This will assist us in our attempts to also view authors within the context of how they thought about sexuality in the nineteenth-century, rather than only through our modern biases.

CHAPTER I

EMILY DICKINSON:

"THE WEB OF LIFE IS WOVEN"

Perception of an
Object costs
Precise the Objects'
loss –
Perception in itself
a Gain
Replying to its'
Price –
The Object Absolute –
is nought –
Perception sets it
fair
And then upbraids
a Perfectness
That situates
so far.
Emily -

Emily Dickinson: the name alone sparks visions of a romantic poet who locked herself away from society for reasons unknown, but Dickinson was not just what popular culture has made her out to be. Her complexities run deeper than most would care to imagine and suspicions regarding the objects of her affections invite analysis and scholarship into the darkest corners of her life and mind. Although most scholarship focuses on Dickinson's romantic intentions as if she were a heterosexual spinster, there is scholarship and evidence to suggest otherwise. Dickinson had many intimate friendships throughout her lifetime that expressed deep emotional connection and love, but those relationships were primarily with women. Even the most in-depth and clever of scholars may never be able to prove Dickinson's affections for women were anything more than

friendly, but that does not mean they did not exist. Either way, it is important to remember that such scholarship could have effects on Emily Dickinson's legacy, which is such an important part of our literary history. By ignoring the possibility of her intimacies with other women, we leave out what could be an integral part of her own sense of 'self.' By focusing solely on those relationships and then labeling her according to modern definitions of sexuality, we may be forcing upon Dickinson a label that she, herself, may not have chosen. However, by acknowledging and even affixing the label to her lapel, we instantly place her within the LGBT community where her fame, poetry, and respectability lends a historical edge to the current battle for equality.

Understanding the ways in which she viewed relationships not only with women but also within the confines of traditional marriage is important when attempting to understand what it means to impose our modern ideas of sexuality on Dickinson and her work. By studying her intimate relationships with women (especially the relationship she had with sister-in-law Susan Huntington Dickinson), and analyzing them to decide whether or not Emily Dickinson was, in fact, a "lesbian," we face obstacles regardless of the final conclusion. In her article *Imagine My Surprise: Women's Relationships in Historical Perspective,* Leila Rupp explains the importance of balance between the ideas of labeling women from the past using modern identifiers and understanding the complexities of same-sex female relationships throughout history. She states,

> Although it is vitally important not to impose modern concepts and standards on the past, I believe that we have gone entirely too far with the notion of an idyllic Victorian age in which chaste love between people of the same sex was possible and acceptable…as it stands now, we are faced with a choice between, on one hand, labeling women lesbians who might violently reject the label, or, on the other hand, glossing over the

> significance of women's relationships by labeling them Victorian, and therefore innocent of our post-Freudian sexual awareness. (158-59)

This is exactly the issue we face with Dickinson. Do we label her a lesbian because she shared romantic and intimate language with other women? Or do we simply brush it off as a typical Victorian friendship between women? To balance such important concepts in regard to how to understand Emily Dickinson herself, as well as employ these ideas to analyze her poetry, is not an easy task. This balance can be achieved by allowing a little leeway in terms of defining nineteenth-century sexuality and including that fluidity in our scholarship. By doing so we open up the possibility of homosexual relationships of the past, but do not automatically label any person who shows the slightest inclination of same-sex love. By accepting this balance, we make the conscious choice to involve *both* ideas when consuming Dickinson's work. This chapter will focus on Emily Dickinson's intimate relationships with women, as well as her stance on marriage and the ways in which she exposes these ideas through her letters and her work. It will also discuss how involving modern identity politics can affect the way we view these relationships and in turn analyze her work.

Girls Will Be Girls

Dickinson's intimate friendships, particularly with females, began at a very young age. Through her writings and letters, we are able to witness instances of sleeping and cuddling with other young girls and yearning for their presence when they are apart. Dickinson's friendship with Jane Humphrey began in 1841, in which she replied in letters after a visit, "What good times we used to have jumping into bed when you slept with me" and then years later writing, "How I wish you were mine, as you once were, when I

had you in the morning, and when the sun went down, and was sure I should never go to sleep without a moment from you" (Habegger 130). Even at the innocent age of eleven she seemed to be a deep feeling and vocally expressive young woman. She held no qualms regarding her feelings of love toward anyone or anything. Thinking about this in terms of the separate sexual spheres discussed earlier (public and domestic), it is interesting to consider how these same-sex connections were manifesting within the domestic sphere. This defies the concept of separating the sexes in order to keep control of the interactions women had with men in order to extricate any inappropriate intimacies. Instead, transgressive intimacy can be found within the domestic sphere and women have found a way to control their own happiness via intimate relationships *without* men.

It is clear that she was quite fond of her female companions throughout her life. Even prior to her most researched and criticized relationship with her sister-in-law, her intimate words and longing for the company of her female friends was not a new aspect of her personality. Unlike her more distant and respectfully dignified relationships with non-related men, Dickinson's female relationships were expressive and open and her feelings always unabashedly exposed and extraordinarily affectionate. However, Rupp reminds us that "it is enormously important *not* to read into these letters what we want to find, or what we think we should find. At the same time, we cannot dismiss what little evidence we have as insufficient when it is all we have; nor can we continue to contribute to the conspiracy of silence that urges us to ignore what is perfectly straightforward" (Rupp 167-68). What we *can* do is take into account the possibility of lesbian relationships without making the assumption that *all* of these relationships were

homosexual in nature. If we allow our own modern biases in relation to sexual identity to determine what the language in these letters is trying to express, then we are ignoring integral parts of the relationship between the writer (Emily Dickinson) and the recipient (Susan Huntington Dickinson) as well as their relationship to their own point in time. For example, in this portion of a letter between Dickinson and Susan, notice the way Dickinson addresses "Susie" and the way she expresses how she feels in her absence:

> …Your precious letter, Susie, it sits here now, and smiles so kindly at me, and gives me such sweet thoughts of the dear writer. When you come home, darling, I shant have your letters, shall I, but I shall have yourself, which is more – Oh more, and better, than I can even think…Tis only a few days, Susie, it will soon go away, yet I say, go now, this very moment, for I need her – I must have her, oh give her to me! (Hart & Smith 20)

Although it would seem that these emotional pleas would call for a label of homosexuality, this type of behavior was not entirely uncommon among young women during this time. The letter does *not* provide proof she was sexually *un*interested in Susan, but it does prove that we are unable to specifically label the complexities of human relationships during the nineteenth-century.

Dickinson attached herself to females in ways that a modern eye may see as almost desperate in nature. Some friends appreciated her openness, some shied away, but even those who returned her affections did not seem to be as forward as Dickinson herself. Consider her friendship with Abiah Palmer Root, "the two schoolgirls'…sat together; they walked together after school; they told each other their manifold secrets; they wrote long and impassioned letters to each other in the evening; in a word, they were in love with each other" (Habegger 178). However, according to Habegger, Dickinson had a "quickness in attaching herself to others and a fixity in holding on. [She] was by far

the most persistent in keeping the connection alive" (178-9). Habegger's analysis here could be true, or it could just be that, as scholars, we are lacking evidence to the contrary. All we have to base our theories on are her poems and what letters survive. It is quite possible, even probable, that there were other letters that have been lost or destroyed over time. According to scholars Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith, "Nearly all of Susan's letters to Emily were destroyed at the time of the poet's death. This would have been the result of a routine 'house cleaning,' reflecting the common practice in the nineteenth-century to destroy or return to the senders all letters received by the deceased" (Hart & Smith XIII). Since we are aware that letters between the two women were disposed of, it would be safe to assume that letters from others were discarded as well. Because of this, much of what we claim to know regarding Dickinson's relationships with both women and men is very one-sided.

It is difficult to decipher any relationship without understanding it from both sides. The same is true when considering the implications of labeling Early-American authors through modern identity politics. If we only consider the possibilities of Dickinson's relationships through heteronormative or conversely homosexual lenses, then we are only creating one-sided interpretations. Just because her close-knit, intimate relationships were typically with women that does not definitively prove her sexual orientation. These relationships do, however, allow us to understand her more fully and embrace this part of her identity. Knowing more about her relationships, we are able to read into her work more deeply and find a better understanding of Dickinson as a woman and as a poet. By looking at the poem "J1401/F1436 To Own a Susan of my Own" from

both the point of view of a woman who loves her sister-in-law and a woman who is *in love* with her, we may be able to understand Dickinson's feelings with more depth.

> To own a Susan of my own
> Is of itself a Bliss –
> Whatever Realm I forfeit, Lord,
> Continue me in this! (Franklin 543-4)

This poem, written in 1877, expresses Emily's love for Susan and her need to have her near always. She is willing to accept any punishment, even religious persecution, and forgo an afterlife (heaven being the main idea) to continue her relationship with Sue. Although friendships do not typically cause devout persons to believe they are sinning, or "forfeit realms;" romantic and/or sexual relationships do. If this poem is interpreted as such an expression, it could provide additional proof that this relationship went beyond the bounds of typical female friendships, even for the nineteenth-century. However, that would be but one interpretation and would not be based on any hard facts. If we were to consider this a poem of pure friendship, we could argue that Dickinson is merely happy to have such a close relationship with her dear friend and family member. Here "forfeiting realms" could be an expression of her own death. Also, according to the *Emily Dickinson Lexicon* "realm" can mean "earth, earthly possession, or thing," as if she does not care if she loses everything as long as she has Susan's friendship to lean on. Both of these interpretations are adequate and by allowing for both possibilities, we evoke a more involved level of discourse that provides more than one perspective. In doing so, we are more likely to arrive at a conclusion that, not only satisfies modern scholars and readers, but Dickinson herself.

Although in modern society not all wish to adhere to these labels, some find a sense of community through them. Specifically, the modern LGBT community whose political battle for equality finds depth by embracing those who came before them. By attaching a modern homosexual label to Emily Dickinson we are adding a level of validity to both her sexuality *and* the current LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) political fight for equal rights in our country. In *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism,* we discover that…

> Certain identities are needed in the political arena so that movements can make demands 'in the name of' and 'on behalf of' women, Latinos, gays, and so on. The political solution to this paradox widely accepted among feminist theorists and many others today is strategic essentialism, first formulated by Gayatri Spivak, which pairs an antirealist account of identity with a pragmatic acceptance of the necessity of using identity categories to advance political claims in the public domain. Thus, although no one 'knows' that identity is not real, that its purported homogeneity is an illusion, one can still deploy identity in the public domain as a way to displace hegemonic knowledges and structures of oppression. (Moya 322-3)

In order to fight a political battle that is directed toward a specific minority group, labeling is necessary in order to understand politically who is in need of what. In this case, if it can be proven that someone as important and pure as our beloved nineteenth-century American poet Emily Dickinson *was,* by modern definition, a lesbian (or bisexual, or asexual), consequently some who once opposed LGBT identities may change their position. The historical significance for the movement would be inflated, and Dickinson would be instantly imposed as a more prominent figurehead in the modern fight for equality. On the other hand, such a label could destroy parts of her remaining character and cause slander and disrespect to her legacy by those who oppose the homosexual political movement. This is a paradoxical position that leaves scholars and

readers without the answers that we seem so desperately to want. Either way, Dickinson's legacy will be changed according to modern standards and issues that we face, rather than the standards and issues of the nineteenth-century.

By denying the possibility of her same-sex desires, we, as critics, cripple the undeniably intimate nature of Dickinson's feelings for *specific* women in her life. This forces scholarship to follow a distinct heteronormative pattern with regard to her sexuality and make the same, all be it more typical, assumptions regarding the objects of her desires. In the 1980s and 90s, many critics and historians tended to focus on what are known as the 'Master' letters. These three letters lend little connection to Dickinson's other writings or letters. However, they have gained such widespread popularity that they have taken the place of any other possibilities in regards to Dickinson's romantic feelings for another person.

It is possible that these letters were meant for no one other than herself. However, since our modern conceptualization of human interaction instantly proceeds to the relationship paradigm, these letters have typically been discussed as a bridge between Dickinson's spinsterhood and a possible relationship with a mystery man. According to R.W. Franklin, the 'Master' letters "stand near the heart of [Dickinson's] mystery" (Franklin 5). Considering the nearly 1800 poems she penned, and most likely hundreds of letters, claiming that these *three* letters are at the 'heart of her mystery' seems unlikely. Especially when taking the time to analyze her letters to Susan and other female companions, there is a deeper intimacy with them than with that of the "Master." Here, in letter one, we see a concern for "Master's" well-being, but the letter does not seem to express a feeling of romantic love…

> 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 week no more….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 you tell me, please to tell me, soon as you are well- (Franklin 12-16)

Because we are unaware of to whom these letters were actually written, all that can truly be said about them is that they are not as emotionally expressive as those written to Susan. As we have previously witnessed, Dickinson swoons for Susan and romanticizes their relationship. Their letters are less poetic and more straight-forward concerning the love, emotion, and embraces between them.

Smith, too, asks why the 'Master' letters are seemingly more important in determining Dickinson's thoughts and feelings while her letters and poems relating to Susan are left scattered about or ignored all together. Her claims also conclude that this is because the 'Master' letters seem to be referring to Emily's possible relationship with a man;

> …stories of romantic thralldom with men or of relationships with a male mentor are proliferatively familiar and so more easily and readily scripted than that of a lifelong passion for another woman…the 'Master letters' have been interpreted literally, as unselfconscious disclosures of unrequited female longing for an unobtainable male...and used to suppress and repress Dickinson's passionate writings to other women. (Gilroy & Verhoeven 102)

This path leads critics and scholars to believe that Emily Dickinson *was,* in fact, merely a spinster who closed herself off from society. In his book *the Lonely House: A Biography of Emily Dickinson,* Paul Brody implies that "Dickinson realized that marriage would mean a complete sacrifice of her own hopes and ambitions. So, just as she avoided a

public conversion and the giving over of herself that act would require, so too did she turn away one suitor after another…She was a romantic, but something always prevented her from taking the full plunge into romance" (Brody 194). These assumptions regarding her sexuality leave no room for the possibility of a love of women. So, by denying the possibility that Emily *did* love those women, *did* have intense emotional responses to them, even sexual feelings for them, we could be taking something away from who she was. It is difficult to ignore the ways in which she expressed her love differently for men as compared to women. What those differences mean is where the gray area lies. Her letters written to unrelated men were buttoned-up, respectful, and humble as a student would write to her teacher, or a daughter would write to her father. Her letters written to certain women were passionate, poetic, and aggressively intimate. The difference here matters, but is not definitive proof of a lesbian identity. It shows a deeper level of comfort toward women, which invites intimacy and emotional vulnerability.

Samuel Bowles is one of the few men that Dickinson wrote to regularly. As you can see by the following letter, her tone is much less poetic and romanticized than those she sent to female friends.

> Friend, Sir, - I did not see you. I am very sorry. Shall I keep the wine til you come again, or send it by Dick? It is now behind the door in the library, also an unclaimed flower. I did not know you were going so soon. Oh! My tardy feet.
> Will you not come again?
> Friends are gems, infrequent. Potosi is a care, sir. I guard it reverently, for I could not afford to be poor now, after affluence. I hope the hearts in Springfield are not so heavy as they were. God bless the hearts of Springfield…(Dickinson 218-220)

This letter is friendly, yes, but not swoony or romantically poetic like her letters to Susan. A letter written to Sue in 1852 begins, "So sweet and still, and Thee, Oh Susie, what need

I more, to make my heaven whole? Sweet Hour, blessed Hour, to carry me to you, and to bring you back to me, long enough to snatch one kiss, and whisper Good bye, again" (Hart & Smith 23). There is such a difference in the formality between the two. The longing and love felt in the words she sent to Sue versus the friendly respectfulness she expressed in her letter to Samuel gives us a more exposed version of Emily Dickinson. It allows us to see where her passions lie outside of societal assumptions. Because of this difference, we are able to look at her poetry and see more than just a woman entranced by heterosexual norms, but a woman whose sexuality is complicated; she loves who she loves, not who she is supposed to love.

Dickinson's female relationships have been both brushed off as friendships and regarded as proof of a lesbian identity. Neither of these theories are completely and thoroughly correct, but both offer important aspects to her identity, which in turn offer important elements to consider in relation to her poetry and to her role as a poet central to the formation of national identity. Balance is the key to fully understanding the sexual identity of Emily Dickinson. With balance we see aspects of her identity that the definitions of heterosexual or homosexual would ignore, making any analysis of that identity incomplete.

Here Comes the Bride

As she aged, Emily Dickinson watched as her female friends married off one by one. She often showed jealousy with regard to their new relationships. Not only because of her intense connection to them, but because Dickinson found fault in the concept of marriage. She found it just as difficult to commit to a man as she did to undyingly commit herself to 'the Savior.' She wrote many poems that explore the concept of

marriage and religion, however the poem J1072/F194 "Title Divine, is Mine" reveals the ways in which she connects the two and her qualms about them both:

> Title divine, is mine.
> The Wife without the Sign –
> Acute Degree conferred on me –
> Empress of Calvary –
> Royal, all but the crown –
> Betrothed, without the swoon
> God gives us Women –
> When You hold Garnet to Garnet –
> Gold – to Gold –
> Born – Bridalled – Shrouded –
> In a Day –
> Tri Victory –
> "My Husband" – Women say
> Stroking the Melody –
> Is this the way – (Dickinson 92)

This poem compares the expectation of women to marry themselves to both God and a man. "Title divine, is mine. The Wife without the Sign" refers to a woman who now carries the title of the wife of the divine (God) without the ring or the legalities of a marriage certificate. It also represents a woman who has taken the name of the man she has married and no longer carries her own "Sign" (or name) leaving that part of her identity behind and becoming a part of his. This says so much about how Dickinson feels about marriage. The concern of losing a part of her own identity and independence is a part what she fears. She does not wish to be the "Empress of Calvary." Calvary, according to the *Emily Dickinson Lexicon*, is representative of the crucifixion and its consequential anguish, misery, and pain, none of which are feelings someone would want associated with their marriage.

Dickinson writes that she was "Born" to be "Bridalled" and "Shrouded." Not only does the term "Bridalled" mean to be wed, but it is also a homophone for the word

bridled, which is when a harness is placed on a horse to break and eventually ride her, much like a woman during this time was brought into a marriage with the understanding that she is now owned and controlled by her husband. The term "Shrouded" may mean dressed in wedding attire, but it also means shadowed, covered up, and in darkness. Through these descriptions, Dickinson is exposing her concerns and beliefs about what marriage does and does not provide for a woman. It provides a title, control, and social acceptance. However, it also diminishes freedom and identity.

In her poem J493/F280 "The World – Stands – Solemner – to Me -," Dickinson reveals a backdrop of sadness and loneliness in regard to marriage.

> The World – stands – solemner – to me –
> Since I was wed – to Him –
> A modesty – befits the soul
> That bears another's – name –
> A doubt – if it be fair – indeed –
> To wear that perfect – pearl –
> The Man – opon the woman – binds –
> To clasp her soul – for all –
> A prayer, that it more angel – prove –
> A Whiter Gift – within –
> To that munificence, that chose –
> So unadorned – a Queen –
> A Gratitude – that such be true –
> It had esteemed the Dream –
> Too beautiful – for Shape to prove –
> Or posture – to redeem! (Dickinson 125)

The first two lines specifically express the marriage to a man and the negative emotions that union has created. She now sees the world through the eyes of a kept woman. She does not see the beauty and happiness in the world; she sees a 'solemner' world. According to the *Emily Dickinson Lexicon*, to be solemn is to be "sedate, sad, or gloomy", as well as "holy, sacred, or devout." It does not express the joy or love that

marriage in modern society has come to represent. Also, 'Him' is capitalized. In this context, we can conclude the reason for the capitalization of such a seemingly unimportant word is that marriage is an institution of patriarchy, giving the man of the house the power over the woman and all else the house entails. Something else to consider are the ways in which God is referred to as 'Him' within the context of religion. By capitalizing this word, she equates the power her husband holds to the power of God. This power is unshakeable and unable to be defeated. 'His' word is law, she is but a follower, a parishioner, a sheep.

This solemn sentiment expresses suppression as she reveals "The Man – opon the woman – binds – To clasp her soul – for all –." She feels restrained by this union, as if he owns her very soul and will never release her. Using words as confining as 'binds' and 'clasp' allowed Dickinson the freedom to truly express how she felt about marriage. She considered it a prison, an enclosed space with no air to breathe and no room for creativity or independence. The poem concludes with discussions of value and posturing. As if the woman, whose value was enough to gain her a husband, masks her disdain for her new life by creating a persona that is outwardly perfect despite being inwardly tormented. The last few lines seem as if she may have once considered this life and pictured herself as a "queen" but feared that such dreams were too good to be true and the reality would leave her less like a "queen" and more like a peasant, again addressing the ways in which women are inferior and owned by men. A queen is obviously of more value than a peasant, but more importantly, a queen is of more value than a man who is not of royal blood. This solidifies the argument that her dream of being that queen was, in fact, too

good to be true, because it is doubtful that in many marriages in the nineteenth-century women were treated as queens.

Dickinson also discusses her anxiety regarding marriage with Susan through her letters. As with most anything she feels the need to share with Susan, the ways in which she discusses these unions is poetic and less than straightforward; however, it is clear she is struggling with fears of domination and submission.

> This union, my dear Susie, by which two lives are one…how it will take us one day, and make us all it's own, and we shall not run from it, but lie still and be happy…to the wife, Susie, sometimes the wife forgotten, our lives seem dearer than all others in the world; you have seen the flowers at morning, satisfied with the dew, and those same sweet flowers at noon with their heads bowed in anguish before the mighty sun; think you these thirsty blossoms will now need naught but – dew? No, they will cry for sunlight, and pine for the burning noon, tho' it scorches them, scathes them; they have got through with peace – they know that the man of noon, is mightier, which we cannot resist! It does so rend me, Susie, the thought of it when it comes, that I tremble lest at sometime I, too, am yielded up. (Hart & Smith 30-1)

Marriage will 'take' and 'make' and own Dickinson. Those forgotten wives are now dependent on their husbands, just as the flowers are the sun. Although the sun of the "man of noon" "scorches" and "scathes" them, they know no better than to embrace that dominance in their lives. Women were, and to a certain extent still are, expected to marry a man in order to survive. Marriage was one of the few ways women were able to leave home and start a new life; however, that life was still not their own. Now, instead of being owned by their fathers, women would be owned by their husbands. They had household duties to complete and children to raise. They had no need for independence. Although Dickinson lived with her family, she had an independence she was not willing to give up. According to Habegger, "Emily [had] perfected the art of living separately in

close proximity" (92). She loved living with her family, and, in her own way, she found independence there.

Dickinson's view of marriage was based on her assessment of the relationships around her, her parents' relationship being the most prominent. Habegger explained that she "saw her father as a figure of great power and her mother as small and pinched and over busy, without that sense of questioning 'Amplitude, or Awe' that she herself valued" (56). Considering how she viewed their relationship, it is easy to see how she would pull away from such a future for herself. As her friends began to commit themselves to the church and then to men and a lifetime of control and stagnation, Dickinson found it harder and harder to accept the choices of her friends. She found herself feeling heartbroken and betrayed as each became more connected to a man and less attached to her. This jealousy exposes the raw emotion and intimacy she felt toward those women and how important those relationships were to her.

These concepts are also extraordinarily important in considering how Dickinson may have viewed her own sexuality. If she had an aversion to spending her life with a man, it is possible she had no intimate emotions for men. Because we, in modern society, connect marriage to sex, we instantly consider how Dickinson's feelings about marriage could impact her sexuality. She was a woman in the nineteenth-century, therefore marriage *is* where her sexuality (supposedly) existed. Since, as we discussed in the introduction, sex outside of the marital bed was considered deviant, *especially* for women, considering the sexuality of women outside of the bonds of marriage was unclean. As Dickinson had no desire to marry, it would not be completely unfounded to consider these to be her feelings about sexuality in general. Therefore, by considering the

possibility that her sexuality could have been indicative of a heterosexual woman, a woman of sexual deviance, or a woman of no sexuality at all, we are able to withdraw much more from her poetry than just a one-sided claim of homosexuality or heterosexuality. Instead we are inviting a discourse that reflects both contemporary and nineteenth-century American culture and providing a more honest and fair analyzation of her work.

Conclusion

Classification of the sexuality of Emily Dickinson according to the standards of modern identity politics may allow for more of a connection between the past and the present in terms of lesbian culture, but that classification may overshadow the deep complexities of female relationships in America in the nineteenth-century. To eliminate this problem, it is important to maintain balance between the two and accept that no matter if we choose to label her or deny that label, the outcomes will both help and hinder, and in this uncertain position, that is completely acceptable. Balance between homosexual and heterosexual provides the fluidity necessary to include all aspects of Dickinson's sexual identity, not just the parts that fit into one category or the other.

CHAPTER 2

WALT WHITMAN

"THE DRIFT OF IT EVERYTHING"

I project the history of the future.
-Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: To a Historian*

I do not come to conclusions. I provide that which may lead to conclusions. I provoke conclusions.
-Horace Traubel*, With Walt Whitman in Camden*

Unlike the reclusive Dickinson, Walt Whitman was a social and worldly man. Although he did have points in his life where he tucked himself away from the world, his many connections to other people ranged from distant adoring fans and condemning critics to close personal comrades. His poetry was flooded with love for the male body and his adoration for other men, as well as an admiration for his country, through which he connected democracy with sexuality. This has led to Whitman being named a forefather of the LGBT movement in American social history. However, in his life, Whitman specifically avoided questions and insinuations regarding his sexuality, leaving the final answers completely ambiguous. It was not that he was ashamed (his work rarely seeming veiled enough to be based in shame). Rather, Whitman felt sexuality was too fluid to define and too personal to divulge to every person who felt the need to ask. His writings and attitudes about sexuality were well-advanced for the nineteenth-century and although they were met with both gratitude and critical waves of disdain he held little back in his writing. Much of what he had to say about sexuality was already expressed in his poetry. However, since modern society requires specific labels to know how to

interact with and categorize people; readers, critics, and scholars alike continually label him a 'homosexual.' Did Walt Whitman love men? Yes. Did he have physical, sexual relationships with them? Yes. Was he a homosexual? We do not know. Placing him in this category destroys the gray area that Whitman himself was so fond of. Claiming that Whitman was, in fact, a 'homosexual,' forces him to claim a label that he specifically avoided through his entire life.

However, it is extraordinary to be able to claim that the great American author Walt Whitman *is* a member of a community that has continually faced backlash from society and is still striving for equality and basic civil rights 120 years after his death. As such an intricate part of our country's history, being able to connect that fight historically to Whitman is a substantial piece to the foundation of such an extensive and ongoing political battle. Both of these effects are completely valid, in that they cause a rift in Whitman's legacy either way, but their validity is not what is at stake here. What is at stake is his own control over his sexual identity. Since Whitman felt so strongly about the concept of sexual fluidity, the balance between homosexual identity and non-homosexual identity is what is most important. What Whitman has is a *sexual* identity (not homosexual, not heterosexual, just *sexual*). In his poetry he is very open about sexuality but refuses to label himself not just because the labels did not exist, but because, even if they did, their definitions would be incomplete. This chapter will discuss Whitman's belief in the fluidity of sexuality as well as the ways in which his work discussed the concept of manly-love and camaraderie. It will discuss how providing a balance between modern and Victorian sexual concepts can provide a better understanding of the way

Whitman saw his own sexuality and employed that in his work, as well as the effects of specifically labeling Whitman according to the modern definition of homosexuality.

Unfair and Impossible

Critic and Whitman Scholar Betsy Erkkila, makes the claim that using modern language to describe Whitman's sexuality "imposes [those] later categories on Whitman's [work]" (102). Instead, we should "focus on the terms Whitman actually used to name what he could—in the popular, legal, and religious language of his time—only to be named as onanism [masturbation], sodomy, bestiality, or the 'sin that has no name'" (102). Other critics, such as Peter Bowers and Hershel Parker, use the terms 'homosexual' and 'gay' freely to describe him and his sexual identity. Critic Alan Helms also uses the term 'homosexual' but places it in quotation marks, allowing it to be a looser definition that was not available for Whitman to use to define himself during his own time (102). Erkkila claims that "as a twentieth-century signifier of a distinct sexual identity, the term *gay* might keep us from hearing the deliciously sensuous, erotically fluid, and finally poetic words Whitman actually used in 'Live Oak, with Moss' and 'Calamus' to give voice to a world of men-loving men" (114). There is valid reasoning behind each of these critics' methods, however the differences cause some turmoil in how the reader may choose to define Whitman's sexuality. It may also place too much of a blanket stereotype upon his work, leaving a reader to make the assumption that since Whitman is a gay (or homosexual or "homosexual") poet, that all of his work must reflect that in some way, leading to a biased reading of Whitman's work.

Whitman's poetry is well known for its focus on the male body. Erotically charged and deeply personal, his writing not only told his story, but the story of many

other men who internalized their sexual and emotional feelings for other men. In his work *Calamus,* several of the poems specifically explode with erotic tension for the male form. This piece, "Not Heat Flames Up and Consumes," uses natural imagery to describe an occurrence of sexual intercourse between two men:

> Not the heat flames up and consumes,
> Not sea-waves hurry in and out,
> Not the air, delicious and dry, the air of the ripe summer,
> bears lightly along white down-balls of myriads of seeds,
> wafted, sailing gracefully, to drop where they may;
> Not these, O none of these, more than the flames of me,
> consuming, burning for his love whom I love—O none, more than
> I, hurrying in and out;
> Does the tide hurry, seeking something, and never give
> up?—O I the same, to see my life-long lover;
> O nor down-balls, nor perfumes, nor the high rain-emitting
> clouds, are borne through the open air, more than my copious soul
> is borne through the open air, wafted in all directions, for
> friendship, for love.— (Whitman, *Live Oak, with Moss*)

This particular version of the poem was originally a part of Whitman's 1859 unpublished cluster of poems *Live Oak, with Moss*. This cluster has been nearly ignored by critics for the more favorable and less obscene versions that appeared in the 1860-61 and 1881 versions of *Calamus.* According to Erkkila, Whitman "meticulously copied [this] sequence of twelve poems of male intimacy and love in a small notebook of white wove paper" (99). It was then revised twice for inclusion in *Calamus*. Erkkila claims that "*Live Oak, with Moss* is an ultimately triumphant account of the poet's accepting his homosexuality and surviving a thwarted love affair" (101). The most interesting change made to this poem is the line "to seek my life-long lover" which was removed in the both the 1860-61 and 1881 versions. By removing such an intricate and personal line from this poem, Whitman hides the more solid evidence of a possible homosexual identity. He

specifically uses “not” throughout this poem to remind the reader that these are not truly the things that are happening, but they are representative of the truth. Therefore, it is as if he is prompting readers to recognize that this is a poem and that these words are not to be taken at face value, but are to be analyzed for what they can represent. He wants his readers to look past the earthy imagery and see the erotic connection to man-love within those words. He employs the help of the four elements of nature (earth, air, fire, and water) to describe this erotic and natural form of bodily expression. The “flames” and “burning” express the deep erotic passion felt between two men, the friction caused by the ways in which their bodies touch and press together, and the feeling of complete ecstasy between them. Passion is the key to many of Whitman’s poems regarding male intimacy, and passion is regularly described as a ‘burning’ or ‘smoldering’ emotion, one which is not only physical but burns deep down into the souls of lovers. The “sea-waves, tide, and rain” are reminiscent of the ebb and flow of sexual intercourse and its tendency to “hurry in and out,” not just physically but emotionally and mentally. Sex can be turbulent, moving fast then slow then fast again, culminating in an explosion of emotional and physical surrender. Much like an ocean, or a river whose movement depends on the weather, passion can be unpredictable and unruly as well as peaceful and comforting. The “seed” of man being spilled (ejaculation) to “[sail] gracefully, to drop where it may” uses imagery of plant-life to represent the element of both earth and air. Whitman’s purpose in the use of these elements was to indicate the naturalness of manly-love in a world that deemed it unnatural.

In the poem “Trickle Drops! My Blue Veins Leaving!” Whitman is again describing a sexual act between two men; however, here his focus is more on the physical

body rather than the act of sex, describing body parts and fluids to bring forth religious as well as sexual imagery.

> Trickle Drops! my blue veins leaving!
> O DROPS of me! trickle, slow drops,
> Candid, from me falling, drip, bleeding drops,
> From wounds made to free you whence you were
> prisoned,
> From my face, from my forehead and lips,
> From my breast, from within where I was conceal'd, press
> forth, red drops, confession drops,
> Stain every page, stain every song I sing, every word I
> say, bloody drops,
> Let them know your scarlet heat, let them glisten,
> Saturate them with yourself, all ashamed and wet,
> Glow upon all I have written or shall write, bleeding drops,
> Let it all be seen in your light, blushing drops. (*Leaves of Grass,* 1891-92 ed, 104)

Here there is a fine line between the pleasure of sex, resulting in male ejaculation and the pain of Jesus Christ's crucifixion. Whitman has been able to blur the boundaries between 'homosexual' sex and religion through blood imagery, which is also representative of ejaculate and sweat. Both blood and semen provide life, one through creating life, the other through sustaining it. Although manly-love cannot, in itself, create a *human* life, it can create a life free from hiding and shame of one's own sexuality. By coming forth to embrace another man rather than lying to himself, a comrade can embrace a new life through this admission of love and lust for other men.

Blood, on the other hand, flows through us all, no matter the life we live, the choices we make, or the people we love. We all require blood to live. As something all humans have in common, Whitman is imploring us to embrace our similarities and remember that through blood, we are all brothers and sisters. *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, offers criticism of this poem which reveals the blood

imagery as an outlet of Whitman's pain from living a "largely lonely life suppressing his adhesiveness, his only compensation the creation of his poems" (97). In the commentary on *Calamus [1860],* it states:

> "Trickle Drops," the bloodiest of all Whitman's poems, might well be read as an anguished confessional poem—indeed the opposite of celebratory. The blood-drops come from his face, from his forehead and lips, and from his breast—"from within where I was conceal'd." The drops are "confession drops" that "stain every page, stain every song I sing, every word I say." The poet exhorts the drops to saturate his pages "with yourself all ashamed and wet. (LeMaster & Kummings 96)

Indeed, the image of blood does provide an instant connection to pain. However, despite this analysis, there is something celebratory here, both a religious celebration and a sexual one.

Whitman's imagery is reminiscent of Jesus' crown of thorns that he was forced to wear at the crucifixion as a symbol for sin and as a way to painfully mock him for claiming to be a king. Many images have represented this crown with blood dripping from the thorns and down his face, neck, and body. Although this is a horrifying image, those who follow such religious ideologies find the crucifixion's message something to celebrate. However, if we recognize the "trickle drops" as semen rather than blood, dripping from the bodies of two men embracing, there is an element of shock in that connection. The image of drops "of me" on the "face, forehead, and lips" of a man bring about thoughts of oral sex between two men, one of which has ejaculated upon the other in the throes of passion. The connection between the two lies in the opposition of sins. The crucifixion is seen as an absolution of sin, whereas the concept of male-male lust embodies what is considered to be so sinful it cannot be named. Whitman, however, not only made this connection he also exposes the relevance of the religious or spiritual

aspects of manly-love and comradeship. He wanted to indicate that love, in its many forms, is not sinful, and physical love is a part of that. This is especially true within the bounds of comradeship.

Comradeship is more than just a friendship, it is a spiritual connection between men who have experienced something extraordinary (either good or bad). Author Juan A. Hererr Brasas' book *Walt Whitman's Mystical Ethics of Comradeship: Homosexuality and the Marginality of Friendship at the Crossroads of Modernity* states that "in his work, Whitman elevates the idea of comradeship to quasi-mystical levels. It is, indeed, the love of comrades that reveals the original meaning and purpose of Whitman's work" (83). Comradeship brings the relationship to a higher plane. Comrades have a deeper understanding of each other because they have both (or all) experienced the same things (war, death, love, etc.) Something else to ponder is Whitman's mention of "shame" and being "candid." Both concern male-male intimacy more so than the religious imagery itself, however it is because of those religious ideals that male-love is draped in these negative and self-destructive emotions. Whitman uses his poetry to encourage people to be who they are and not to be afraid of persecution because without those who would step out of the shadows, the world will never change.

The concept of coming forth is one that is important in many aspects of sexuality, modern or not. Erkkila explains that with Whitman's attempt at, "naming his all-consuming love for another man, he [is] advocating a code of secret and silent love, which seems less like a gay manifesto and more like a nineteenth-century version of 'don't ask, don't tell.' It is only when Whitman bravely decided to publish these poems…that they became part of what might be called a gay manifesto" (Erkkila 114).

"Trickle Drops," implores its readers to come out of their closets and show the world who they are. To love the way in which they wish to love and embrace the bodies of those they love regardless of their sex. He exclaims, "Let them know your scarlet heat, let them glisten…Let it all be seen in your light blushing drops!" Poems such as this could be interpreted through a modern lens, making it seem only natural to label Whitman a homosexual. However, he is not necessarily staking a claim for gay independence here. He is staking a claim for *sexual* independence for all.

As a poet, Whitman has been regularly recognized as contradictory in his ideas. This is actually a very important detail regarding his stance on sexuality as a whole. He found fluidity in sexuality even before Alfred Kinsey created and published the now infamous Kinsey Scale in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Kinsey (1894-1956) was a scientist whose research into human sexuality broke barriers and turned heads all over the country. After years of research involving the gall wasp, Kinsey came to the realization that no two of these wasps were the same. This extraordinary find, as well as his family history of sexual repression, led him to question the human population and the impossibility of humans to be one single archetype. Kinsey claimed "the only kinds of sexual dysfunction are abstinence, celibacy and delayed marriage" and that placing people in strict binary categories is unfair and impossible (PBS *Kinsey*).

This directly ties to the ways in which Whitman describes physical love in his poems as well as the ways in which he avoided questions regarding his sexuality. Modern identity politics dictate that he was strictly a homosexual male. However, without his acknowledgement, that judgment is unfair. Making the assumption that people who have had even the slightest of homosexual experiences are, in fact, homosexual would be the

same as saying any person who has ever had a heterosexual experience is strictly heterosexual. This would mean that those who regard themselves to be bisexual would be mistaken regarding their very own identities because that identity would not exist. Kinsey did extensive research into the sexuality of both men and women and came to the conclusion that, much like his wasps, no two people were exactly alike or found the same things sexually arousing. He then developed what is now known as "the Kinsey Scale." This scale shows sexuality on a continuum that ranges from zero to six (zero being exclusively heterosexual behavior and six being exclusively homosexual behavior) instead of a strict heterosexual/homosexual binary. As humans, we tend to want to categorize and label everything in our lives. We have an unending *need* to place labels on things and see them only in black and white; otherwise, life would be chaotic and confusing. Kinsey claims:

> It is a characteristic of the human mind that it tries to dichotomize in its classification of phenomena. Things either are so, or they are not so, sexual behavior is either normal or abnormal, socially acceptable or unacceptable, heterosexual or homosexual; and many persons do not want to believe that there are gradations in these matters from one to the other extreme (Kinsey 469).

This is why we find it so important to place the label 'homosexual' upon historical authors such as Whitman and Dickinson. Society *needs* to determine if they were 'normal' or 'abnormal' in terms of their romantic or sexual lives. It is the only way to truly understand who they were because, in our modern lives, sexuality is of extreme importance to understanding who a person really is. It is too difficult to comprehend the possibility of someone finding their sexuality somewhere in between heterosexual and

homosexual. However, Kinsey discovered that on the scale, most people fell somewhere in the middle, between one and five instead of a zero or a six.

Whitman's inconsistencies are an excellent example of the fluidity and fluctuation of human sexual identity. People change over time, they fall in and out of love, and they are, in a word, imperfect. Some days we wish to take on the world, others we would rather stay in bed, and these concepts carry over into our sexual identities. Whitman saw this fluidity and mimicked it in his work. In this section of the poem "Starting from Paumanok #7," Whitman portrays himself as ready to stand tall for his comrades and encourage them to embrace their own feelings and urges:

> …I will sing the song of companionship
> I will show what alone must finally compact These;
> I believe These are to found their own ideal of manly love, indicating it in me;
> I will therefore let flame from me the burning fires that were threatening to consume me;
> I will lift what has too long kept down those smoldering fires;
> I will give them complete abandonment;
> I will write the evangel-poem of comrades and of love;
> (For who but I should understand love, with all its sorrow and joy?
> And who but I should be the poet of comrades?) (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* 1872 ed, 17)

Here he is inspired, unafraid, and presents himself as a leader to those who feel as if they must hide. He is offering himself as a spokesman for all who feel manly love because he alone understands what they are struggling with. However, in *Calamus #8,* he pulls back. He changes his mind and claims that he can no longer be the man they turn to for guidance:

> …That you each and all find somebody else to be your singer of songs,
> For I can be your singer of songs no longer—One who loves me is jealous of me, and withdraws me from all but love,

> With the rest I dispense—I sever from what I thought would suffice me,
> for it does not—it is now empty and tasteless to me,
> I heed knowledge, and the grandeur of The States, and the example of
> heroes, no more,
> I am indifferent to my own songs—I will go with him I love,
> It is to be enough for us that we are together—We never separate again.
> (Whitman, *Calamus* 1860 ed, 354-55)

These types of inconstancies are important in determining how Whitman felt about sexuality and how we, as scholars, use his sexuality to decipher his identity and his work. With this change, Whitman, as a person and a poet, does not become a different man. His mind may have changed, or his attitude toward his original declaration, but *he* is still Walt Whitman. Determining who a person is through one aspect of his being is, just as Dr. Kinsey stated, "unfair and impossible".

The Wound Dresser

Politically speaking, Whitman being labeled as 'homosexual' could be extraordinarily positive, especially for the current ongoing political battles concerning LGBT equality in America. Being able to include someone as distinguished and respected as Walt Whitman in the LGBT community is an excellent way to provide validity and historical context to a movement with a relatively un-established recorded history. A large portion of Whitman's work was deeply political, much of which was birthed from his time as a volunteer at Washington hospitals during the Civil War. His poetry often mixed the themes of democracy and same-sex love to express a connection between the two and act as a reflection of what he wished his poetry would accomplish. Being able to view Whitman as a kind of prophet for the LGBT movement could provide a foundation that the movement lacks and so desperately needs; a foundation that precedes Stonewall, a foundation that even precedes the twentieth-century. Whitman found a way to embrace

the connection between same-sex love and democracy through his poetry, leading the way to equality before there was even a path.

Prior to the Civil War, Whitman's feelings regarding America were bleak. He was concerned his nation was headed for disaster claiming the "quicksand years that whirl me I know not whither…Your schemes, politics, fail, lines give way, substances mock and elude me" (Qtd. in Reynolds 406). He found that unity and true democracy were being overshadowed by the personal plights of politicians and an over-concern with industrialization. For ten years, Whitman lived in Washington, where, during and after the war, he spent the majority of his free time in local hospitals tending to thousands of sick and wounded soldiers.

It was there that he found a release for his feelings regarding same-sex love in an environment that allowed him to do so without shame or judgment. The war allowed for intimate connection between men within the bounds of the war. Reynolds discusses this in his book *Walt Whitman's America.* He states, "It was a war of brutal violence but also of male bonding and loving comradeship. It was normal for a soldier to assume the role of parent, sibling, or spouse for a dying comrade…a role Whitman often assumed in the hospitals" (428). This was extremely important in the emergence of Whitman's attempt to self-identify. It gave him a safe haven to explore those feelings and concerns regarding his desire for other men within the restrictions of heterosexual societal norms. Scholar David S. Reynolds explains that "the war validated [Whitman's] sense that same-sex affection was…a common part of public behavior in America" (427). Throughout his time in the hospitals, he became very close to the men (his comrades) and loved them as they healed or held their hands as they passed on. It was those moments that led Whitman

to conclude that his theories concerning manly love as an unbreakable bond that could make America a stronger country were supported by the war "since it sanctified comradeship in the arms and gave him the tender 'wound dresser' role that was both patriotic and emotionally satisfying" (414).

In his writing, he regularly discussed ways in which America would benefit from opening up to more intense friendships and same-sex love. From *Calamus,* the poem "For You O Democracy*"* reveals that connection between the political and the sexual by urging Americans to follow Whitman as he exposes them to a new country based on camaraderie.

> Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,
> I will make the most splendid race the sun even shone upon,
> I will make divine magnetic lands,
> With the love of comrades,
> With the life-long love of comrades.
>
> I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers of America,
> And along the shores of the great lakes, and all over the prairies,
> I will make inseparable cities with their arms about each other's necks.
> By the love of comrades,
> By the manly love of comrades.
>
> For you these from me, O Democracy, to serve you ma femme!
> For you, for you I am trilling these songs. (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* 1891-92 ed)

Here, Whitman describes a country united rather than divided. Brought together through same-sex love and companionship. He reminds the reader that America is a nation that is supposed to embrace democratic thought and action and that the American people should embrace each other. Again he uses images of nature to reestablish the connection to the earth and reclaim same-sex intimacy as a natural occurrence. By claiming this type of companionship can be "plant[ed] thick as trees," Whitman argues that this love can be

cultivated and nurtured into something long lasting, beautiful, and strong, much like he wishes his nation to be. He calls out to all corners of the country, as if calling them to arms, to follow him into a battle fought not with weapons or violence, but with love and respect for everyone. In the poem "I Dream'd in a Dream*,"* this theme continues. Here he poses the possibility that such love could provide protection to the country that they do not currently possess.

> I dream'd in a dream I saw a city invincible to the attacks of the whole rest
> of the earth,
> I dream'd that was the new city of Friends,
> Nothing was greater there than the quality of robust love, it led the rest,
> It was seen every hour in the actions of the men of that city,
> And in all their looks and words. (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* 1891-92 ed)

Whitman truly believed that by being able to find more intimate connections with each other, men would be more apt to run a cleaner, more honest democratic society. This utopian dream would require the love that is understood within the realm of the war and between soldiers to also be acceptable in everyday society. It would have required a change in religious thought and a new outlook on what democracy truly stood for. These are all aspects of modern society that have only recently begun to evolve, particularly within the last forty years or so. With that in mind, it is possible to see that these poems call out past the nineteenth-century, revealing something to modern American society about equality.

In the midst of a fight for basic civil rights in America, the LGBT community has found itself in a forty-five year battle that has only recently begun to make significant strides. With gay marriage being such a hot button political issue, those who lead an "alternative lifestyle" are forced to fight for the same rights as heterosexuals (or those

considered to be "normal"). Since much of Whitman's poetry speaks to the concept of equality as well as same-sex love, it is easy to see how he has been embraced as a historical figurehead for the movement. Because he is able to connect sexuality and democracy so seamlessly in his work, it makes sense to use his poetry to make a political statement. In this piece from "Song of Myself," Whitman embraces both the sexual and the political in a way that places the author on the same social level as everyone else. He calls out to his readers to stand up to their oppressors and he will stand with them:

> Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,
> Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding,
> No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them,
> No more modest than immodest.
>
> Unscrew the locks from the doors!
> Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!
>
> Whoever degrades another degrades me,
> And whatever is done or said returns at last to me.
> Through me the afflatus surging and surging, through me the current and index.
>
> I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy,
> By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms…
>
> …Through me forbidden voices,
> Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil,
> Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd.
>
> I do not press my fingers across my mouth,
> I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head and heart,
> Copulation is no more rank to me than death is.
>
> I believe in the flesh and the appetites,
> Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle…(Whitman *Leaves of Grass,*1891-92 ed, 48).

He stirs images of the concept of "being in the closet" even before such an idea existed. He tells the reader to "Unscrew the locks from the doors! Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!" (64) He speaks of being "veil'd" and exclaims that he will not keep quiet as long as there are others who may be degraded. His attempt to empower the reader is impressive and incredibly inspiring, even within the context of the modern world. As the poem progresses further, Whitman uses erotically charged descriptive language such as "Your milky stream pale strippings of my life" and "soft-tickling genitals" to specifically express ideas regarding sexuality so as not to allow the intentions of this poem to become misplaced. There is also an element of shock that acts as a catalyst for this call to action. To read this poem *is* to be inspired. This poem makes people want to change the world.

Conclusion

Whitman's sexuality is complex and undefined for a reason. He is human and those complexities are part of his identity. By defining him according to our modern ideals we can damage his own sense of self by ignoring his belief in a fluid sexuality. However, we can also improve the LGBT political standing by providing a more stable foundation on which to build a history of homosexual identity. By acknowledging that we can both help and hinder through these labels, we are able to provide a much more open and clear analysis of his life's work. If, as a united front, people would allow each other to fluidly express love and sex, not through labels, but through the actions that each individual person experiences, we could see that through those actions there truly are no binaries. We are all different and defy categorization. Understanding that Whitman

viewed sexuality as fluid changeable is extraordinarily important for understanding both his authorial persona and his poetry.

CHAPTER 3

MODERN CONSUMPTION AND THE EFFECTS OF LABELING ON AUTHORIAL IDENTITY

Contemporary American culture is inundated by the mass media. From advertisements to television shows, it is nearly impossible to escape its pull. Anything (and anyone) can, and will, be used to invoke your interest, sway your decisions, or sell you a product or an idea. According to Margaret A. Blanchard, author of *History of the Mass Media in the United States: An Encyclopedia,* "The mass media in the United States are arguably one of the most powerful institutions in American Society today. As sources of information and entertainment, the mass media often are omnipresent institutions exercising their influence in a variety of ways" (vii). With such a level of power, the media are able to use just about anyone or anything to get their message across. Due to the popularity of Whitman and Dickinson, the media are able to use their personas specifically presented in ways that perpetrate stereotypes and specific aspects of their identities to further their own personal social and political agendas. Specifically focusing on the how modern culture views the sexuality of these two authors, we are able to see a distinctive pattern in regard to each poet.

Emily Dickinson is typically portrayed as a hermit or spinster. These descriptions carry an incredibly negative connotation with them, leading people to picture her as an imprisoned woman, rather than an enlightened one. Something that is not as often discussed are the intimate relationships she carried on with women. This is partially due to the regular appearances of Emily Dickinson in mass media as a woman who hid from

the world, squirrelling away her poems without a man to save her from herself. Since we as a society are constantly bombarded with the images the media presents, those images have become a part of how we think and feel about everything and everyone. We are unconsciously swayed by the images that are presented to us and those images stick with us, even if they only present half-truths, or part of the story. In his book *Media and Society: A Critical Perspective,* author Arthur Asa Berger explains that "the media entertain us, socialize us, inform us, educate us, sell things to us (and sell us, as audiences, to advertisers), and indoctrinate us—among other things. The media help shape our identities, our attitudes toward racial and ethnic minorities, our attitudes about sexuality, and have many other effects" (15-6). Allowing our decisions to be swayed by our own modern conceptions of sexuality and identity causes analysis and scholarship based on what we believe to be true, rather than what is true. The media perpetuate the concept of analysis of these authors based solely on modern identity politics. Without the balance of past and present concepts of sexual identity, what the media are presenting are half-truths regarding the legacies of Whitman and Dickinson. Since the media has become such an undeniable part of our everyday thinking, this effects how we invoke discourse about the authors, especially in terms of younger generations. This chapter will discuss the effects of labeling these authors according to modern sexual identity politics. Through analyzation of modern media representations of Whitman and Dickinson, it will discuss how the media have exploited these labels, perpetuating stereotypes that offer a one-sided view of Dickinson and Whitman and how that affects scholarly discourse.

Effects of Labeling

Our culture requires everybody to accept several labels that place us into specific categories. Without these, it seems nearly impossible to understand who we are, who others are, or even how to interact with each other. This issue is partially the result of a need for power and the utter lack of equality within American society. Particularly, with sexual identity, we are faced with a black and white binary that leaves anyone without a heterosexual or homosexual label out of the societal structure. This is due to the heteronormative hierarchies that exist in American culture. These hierarchies motivate categorization to understand how to treat each other based on the amount of power that each person's label holds, exposing what is truly important in American society. According to psychologists Malcolm Cross and Franz Epting,

> Power…[is] the right to define reality…[it is] the ability to get other people to accept your definition of reality…[and it is] the ability to have an impact on the other's construction of reality. [It is important] to understand the differences between what we can and cannot choose. It provides a way to begin to recognize those things that are constructed as possessing certain influence, as if they were given in the world, when in fact they were not. (Cross and Epting 54)

It is power that dictates what labels exist and what they mean. That power is established on the concept of heterosexuality as the basis for normativity. This places anyone who labels themselves as 'heterosexual' in a position of power and allows them privilege in society. To step beyond the boundaries of such labels instantly defines you as deviant and powerless, especially in terms of gender and sexuality, mostly because outside of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, gender and sexuality are *extremely* complex and difficult to understand. However, for some, these labels are constricting, and do not allow for a complete analysis of the self. Cross and Epting explain that "homosexuality, as

defined and understood by an individual, may be at odds with the core values or constructs that principally define who that person is" (57). This is particularly true for any person struggling with the concept of labeling their sexuality based on the terms of someone else's definition of what it means to be homosexual. Although some may find it comforting to be included in a certain category or community, it should be up to each person to make that choice for themselves because

> [the] implications of owning a homosexual identity may be positive or negative, depending on the consistency of this identity status with an individual's personal notion of their ideal self…The unintended consequence of privileging of sexual orientation as the primary marker of identity is to risk bleaching the uniqueness and diversity that characterizes the person …Self-definition through adoption of a ready-made homosexual identity may run the risk of stifling the plurality of meaning making, forcing those who 'sign-up' to subscribe to commonality and rhetoric and ignore individual divergence from the popular concomitants of homosexuality. (57, 61)

It is important to allow people the freedom to express their own senses of self in their own ways. What may be a negative consequence to one person, may be positive to another and vice versa. To assume that one's sexuality is what makes them who they are is not true of all people. For instance, most heterosexual people do not feel the need to let the world know they *are* heterosexual. They find other ways to define themselves outside of their sexuality; however those who fall outside of that heteronormative behavior are all but forced to accept their sexuality as the root and foundation of who they are. This is a form of control by social norms. Philosopher Mary McIntosh states:

> The practice of social labeling of a person as deviant operates in two ways as a mechanism of social control. In the first place, it helps to provide a clear-cut, publicized, and recognizable threshold between permissible and impermissible behavior…Secondly, the labeling serves to segregate the deviants from others and this means that their deviant practices and the self-justifications for these practices are contained within a relatively

> narrow group…However, the disadvantage of this practice as a technique of social control is that there may be a tendency for people to become fixed in their deviance once they have been labeled (McIntosh 183-4).

Because of this, people tend to label themselves accordingly to fit into society when, in fact, they do not necessarily fit the definition completely. In this action, they lose a part of themselves and a part of what makes them unique.

This particular sect of social labeling according to sexuality was not always the norm. For instance, "in the process of claiming a homosexual identity, sexuality is often foregrounded as the main marker of self…prior to this classification 'gay people expressed their sexuality and formed gay relationships but did not necessarily construct their whole lives around their sexual orientation'" (60). This applies directly to both Dickinson and Whitman. They lived in a society that had yet to enforce these societal labels, allowing their sexualities to be something that was a *part* of who they were but not *everything* that they were. However, since modern society is so consumed with the concept of labeling and categorizing each and every person, it is almost an involuntary action to attempt to define them according to our modern ideals.

No matter what the situation, it is important to embrace both the negative and positive aspects of labeling. Cross and Epting agree that:

> Labeling has individual, social, and political implications that are neither all good nor all bad, nor do those implications exert the same influence on all individuals, with the same effect. Labels can obliterate or wipe out possibilities and crush creativity. They may also provide a ready-made solution, option, or answer to a puzzling question. Labels can become platforms from which to make new meaning, in this sense acting as a launching ground for creativity, defining and new, unique, and whole self (54).

Although the negative effects seem to be the most prominent, there are also positive effects to labeling authors like Whitman and Dickinson. When considering the current struggle for equal rights in America, including Whitman and Dickinson in the LGBT community gives the political battle further sustenance and more historical validity, in turn, boosting support for the cause. Some may find comfort in the possibility of acceptance in an already formed community of like-minded individuals. This is especially true of the younger generations and those who live in smaller, less condensed areas of society where there are fewer like-minded peers. Finding a place with other people in which having a specific label allows you the freedom to express yourself and be who you feel to be can be invigorating and comforting.

However, even within that community there are judgments based on the label a person chooses for themselves. Claiming a sexual identity outside of the homo/hetero binary causes issues even within the LGBT community in terms of those who consider themselves to be bisexual, or choose to not label themselves at all. Although the binary means something completely different to the LGBT community as it does to the heterosexual community, the binary does still exist, continuing to cause strife for those who feel their sexuality is fluid. Typically, the expectation of strict binaries reflects what is considered to be the way to decipher between the correct and incorrect category, labeling the person as either 'normal' or 'deviant.' The concern that a person is too androgynous to be able to rightly reflect a specific sex, or a person whose sexuality is based on a more fluid definition, allowing for love and lust to be of all genders and sexes rather than only of a person of opposite *or* same-sex love, causes confusion and distress among other members of society. This leaves no room for movement outside of binaries,

leaving people like Whitman and Dickinson, whose sexualities are not specifically labeled by their own words to pose both a mystery and a challenge.

Mass Media Representations

Understanding the extent to which the modern media uses and is able to use the legacies of both Whitman and Dickinson to promote specific agendas is an extremely important part of understanding why we seek to label these poets' sexualities. Often, these representations are distorted or embellished to express certain attributes of Whitman and Dickinson (or assumed attributes of them) that can be employed as catalysts for gain by those who employ them and/or their work. By using modern aspects of life and culture, these entrepreneurs are able to express anything from love to hate through the words and images of these amazing poets by virtue of their sexuality (or supposed lack thereof). I focus on media interpretations, rather than other forms of popular culture because the media is such an important influence on people, especially the youth of America. The average person is more likely to be aware of Whitman and Dickinson through what they have seen and heard on television, in a film, or on the internet, than to read about the authors or their work in depth.

Emily Dickinson

Because Dickinson's name, face, and poetry are so well-recognized, media outlets have found her notoriety useful in their endeavors where, within the confines of popular culture, she is rarely (if ever) shown as a sexual being. Most modern representations provide artistic or romantic idealizations of her as an uptight spinster, a starry-eyed romantic, or a hermit. According to biographer Connie Ann Kirk,

> …the Dickinson public persona can be described as a reclusive, possibly agoraphobic, woman who *never* left her father's house (presumably her entire adulthood)…She always wore white (again, presumably her entire adult life, most probably in response to the jilting of a lover.) In fact, the persona works best when she is a victim of male dominance-she behaves as she does because of a father, a brother, a lover, her 'Master,' her minister, her God, and almost any other male figure one can think of. This public persona is intensely shy because she thinks that femininity means coyness, and it is attractive to males...the Dickinson public image is a fiction and a ghost manufactured out of half-truths and exaggeration…this abuse of Dickinson's images itself has become an industry all its own. (136-7)

These stereotypical descriptions of Dickinson are the result of the media's constant reiteration of them in popular culture. If a sexual presence is ever alluded to, it is prudish and typically heterosexual in nature, which completely ignores the possibility of Dickinson as a lesbian. This leaves the stereotype to define her in the eyes of society, rather than considering all of what she could have been.

The television series *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, season 4, episode 3 called *Jealousy,* uses Dickinson's name and likeness (or at least, a woman with chestnut hair pulled back in a bun and a Victorian dress), to settle a dispute about writing. When "Dickinson" offers her advice that is contrary to what Sabrina wants to hear, Sabrina calls her a "shut-in" and makes her disappear. This show makes a joke out of the characterization of Emily Dickinson as a recluse, "Dickinson's" eyes get wide, and she seems shocked and offended by the accusation, but before she has the chance to respond to society's stereotypes of the author, Sabrina cast her spell and Dickinson dematerializes. That, in itself, is representative of the way in which Dickinson is seen as being *not seen* in her lifetime due to her supposed antisocial behavior. This scene is a

prime example of the ways in which the media exploits partial-truth assumptions about Dickinson, never exposing other aspects of her behavior or identity.

Although the stereotypical portrayal of Dickinson is one in which her spinsterhood is at the forefront, the film *Being John Malkovich,* uses her persona as way to draw attention to a specific performance (or television show, or film, etc.). Craig (a puppeteer) sits on the couch, watching television while reading the newspaper when the newscaster announces "Puppeteer Derek Mantini [a rival puppeteer] thrilled onlookers as he performed *The Belle of Amherst* with a sixty-foot Emily Dickinson puppet." The puppet is being dangled off the side of a bridge. It is dressed in a white Victorian dress, holding a book, while people gawk at her through binoculars from a distance. Craig then shakes his head, scoffs and says, "Gimmicky bastard." He looks over to the monkey sitting on the couch with him and says, "You don't know how lucky you are being a monkey, because consciousness is a terrible curse. I think. I feel. I suffer. All I ask in return is the opportunity to do my work and they won't allow it…because I raise issues." Using Dickinson's persona in the media is, in fact, "gimmicky." It is as if the media reflects upon itself with this scene. It draws attention to the concept of social manipulation through the use of easily recognizable and respected people and ideas. The discussion Craig has with the monkey is important as well. He sounds like a poet. "I think. I feel. I suffer." It as if Dickinson is the one sitting on that couch watching herself on television, being "conscious" of it. There is of course added significance to Dickinson's appearance as a mere puppet, with someone else pulling the string behind her life story. How perfect it is to think of her as a tool to be used for other's enjoyment rather than as a vibrant, sexual woman.

Depictions of Dickinson in the modern media are one-dimensional. Those who have taken the time to look past these representations and assumptions of her understand that. Dickinson had a spark, she had friends, relationships, stories to tell, and a sexual identity. Although that identity may not fit into a perfect little box, it did (and does) matter in terms of an expression of her own sense of self. However, popular culture may find it difficult to think of her that way, because her legacy has been burdened with these stereotypes for so long that it may seem unimaginable.

Walt Whitman

It is easier and more acceptable to think of Dickinson as a hermit and a spinster than a sexual being in any form, especially in a form that is considered deviant. This is because she was a woman who lived in an age where women were considered to be inherently asexual. Whitman, on the other hand, is compared to everything from an intensely masculine man of democracy through Levis jeans commercials, to a flamboyant community college professor (Eustice Whitman) in the television show *Community.* His modern media presence presents him in many different lights. However, with regard to his sexuality, the media has emblazed his legacy with some possible truths, but also some deeply troubling assumptions.

In the 1990s television series *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, which followed the life and career of a woman practicing medicine in nineteenth-century America, Walt Whitman visits Colorado Springs, the frontier town in which the series takes place in the episode “The Body Electric.” Dr. Mike (Michaela Quinn) and Preston begin the show excited to meet such a prestigious poet, but the rest of the community is buzzing with rumors and gossip. The townspeople are concerned because they have heard that

Whitman "advocates free love" and "he is peculiar…a deviant…he prefers the company of men." The entire episode exposes the fear and oppression that people who stepped out of the heteronormative relationship paradigm faced in nineteenth-century America. As the rumors spread through the town, even Preston and Dr. Mike begin to be concerned with Whitman's lifestyle and question his intentions. Particularly, Dr. Mike begins to worry about her young son spending time alone with Whitman in the woods. However, she tries to dissuade the community and even tells Whitman he should send for his "soul-mate" because he is so lonely. When he does, the entire town is flabbergasted that a man (Peter Doyle) arrives by train and greets Whitman with a kiss on the cheek. They walk through town together arm in arm. "Look at em will ya? A couple a Nancy-Boys!" one man calls out. They are refused a room in the hotel and are made to feel completely unwelcome by the majority of the town. Although Dr. Mike has her own reservations, she offers them a place to stay. Even the other doctor in town is up in arms, telling Dr. Mike about a study he read that "suggests that sexual deviancy may be a genetic defect…these people cannot control themselves…and the normal procedure [for treatment] is placement in an asylum." A disturbing, yet true, statement regarding the ways in which deviant sexuality was viewed and treated in nineteenth-century America. It was not unheard of for men and women alike to be taken into custody because of an accusation of same-sex love or another form of deviant sexual behavior.

What is so interesting about this portrayal of Whitman, is that it very well could have been a true occurrence. It is very blunt in terms of what the townsfolk were so afraid of and even showed Whitman spending time with another man. Because of the rumors and assumptions regarding Whitman's sexual identity, this representation of him is quite

believable. What is particularly important to notice is the way in which he is not labeled "gay" or "homosexual" because those terms did not exist. The closest description is the explanation of Whitman "preferring the company of other men." However, even men who prefer the company of other men are not necessarily homosexual. Modern identity politics may dictate that we claim homo/hetero status to stake a claim in our own society, but for men like Whitman, fluidity in sexuality is important and identity is a private and personal decision that does not involve the opinions or definitions of others. Whitman's representation in *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* may have meant to portray him as a homosexual but because things were left open-ended and lacked those labels, they actually may have represented a very positive and accurate portrayal of our beloved poet.

Not all modern presentations of Whitman's sexuality in film are so positive. Michael Cuesta's film *L.I.E.* (Long Island Expressway) is a perfect example of the use of Whitman's work and sexuality to expose deviance in sexuality in America. By including Whitman's poetry in the film, the viewer is able to connect the many deviant forms of male-male intimacy to him because of his already imposed modern label of "homosexual." It was the director's intention to use Whitman's work and identity to connect the sexuality of the characters to the poet who was believed to be homosexual, and who was believed to be interested in younger men.

This film encompasses nearly every deviant sexual behavior imaginable: incest, voyeurism, homoerotic fantasy, sexual harassment, masturbation, pedophilia, prostitution, sodomy, pornography, and, of course, homosexuality. The film is meant to make the viewer as uncomfortable as possible, and it succeeds. The director attempts to connect these deviant sexual ideas to Whitman due to his openness about the male-form

and homoerotic sexuality. It is also reflective of Whitman's supposed propensity for younger men. This film portrays such a disturbing sexual atmosphere, taking these *truly* deviant sexual behaviors (pedophilia, incest, sexual harassment, etc.) and intermingling them with socially labelled forms of sexual deviancy (homosexuality, sexual curiosity amongst adolescents, masturbation, etc.). However, since Whitman's image and poetry are being associated with these negative sexual ideals, it is as if the director is attempting to expose him as if he had also been so deviant.

The plot follows fifteen-year-old Howie who is striving to find his own identity. Howie's life is in a shambles after the death of his mother. The boy ends up in a pedophilic relationship with a much older man named Big John. Howie's adolescence takes a strange turn as he begins to feel himself being attracted to his best friend Gary. When the boys spend time together they play fight and wrestle, tease each other flirtatiously, and talk about sex. Although Gary runs away before anything physical happens between them, we are aware that Gary prostitutes himself to older men. This is how we are introduced to Big John. After catching the boys breaking into his home and stealing Nazi memorabilia from him, he tracks Howie down and begins to manipulate him into trusting him. In order to keep him from calling the police, John not so subtly propositions him. Although Howie is scared, he craves attention and is questioning his sexuality, which leads him to become curious about John.

Throughout the film, Big John finds ways to create a bond between himself and Howie in order to seduce him. Halfway through the film, Howie is driving Big John's car and suddenly and unexpectedly quotes Whitman:

> Demon or bird! (said the boy's soul,)
> Is it indeed toward your mate you sing? or is it really to me?
> For I, that was a child, my tongue's use sleeping, now I have heard you,
> Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake.
>
> Never more the cries of unsatisfied love be absent from me,
> Never again leave me to be the peaceful child I was before what
> there in the night,
> By the sea under the yellow and sagging moon,
> The messenger there arous'd, the fire, the sweet hell within,
> The unknown want, the destiny of me." (*L.I.E.* 2001)

Big John is shocked and impressed; he responds, "My God. Walt Whitman." It is at this point in the film where Howie's fear of John begins to subside and he starts to trust him and get close to him despite knowing his depraved intentions. Whitman's words coming from the mouth of a boy so young, in such an eloquent manner, offers him an instant surge of maturity. In Howie's own eyes, he has control over his situation with John and even begins teasing him and attempts to seduce *him* before walking away from the car. Since many instantly relate Whitman and his work to sexual relationships with younger men, this scene perpetuates that assumption and plagues Whitman's legacy with questions regarding his appropriateness regarding his sexual identity, as well as his intentions, dignity, and morals.

Due to his negative behavior, Howie is sent to see the school counselor. Although their conversation seems pretty typical in a counselor/student dynamic, the context within which it connects Howie to Whitman's beliefs regarding sexuality in such a simple, yet flawless way is extraordinary. She informs Howie, "I know you are different. You're not a nerd. You're not a jock. You're not a scholar or a Romeo or a clown." He replies, "So what am I then?" She says "You. Are a Howie Blitzer." Howie, seeming pleased but with a typical adolescent attitude replies, "My own category" (L.I.E. 2001). It is as if Howie is

channeling Whitman, a man who is one of a kind and wishes to be a part of his own category rather than the category forced onto him by society. Howie is misunderstood by his peers and his sexual curiosity is being exploited for the use of another. Much like Whitman, who lived in a time where same-sex love was confusing and unacceptable, leaving him misunderstood, not only then, but in modern society as well. Whether this was an intentional nod to Whitman's sexual fluidity or not, this type of representation more in tune with Whitman's view of his own sexuality. It breaks free of those stereotypes and considers another, less discussed aspect of his sexual identity. However, this is not the norm. Typically, Whitman's sexuality is exploited through modern media outlets for the use of their own personal agendas.

Conclusion

The modern mass media is such a large part of our everyday live that to be able to squash its use of famous historical figures would be nearly impossible. What can be done though is to present a more well-rounded expression of who these authors were, what *else* they can represent, and to stop labeling them according to these perpetuated stereotypes. The media thrives on these labels, it uses them, just as it uses Whitman and Dickinson to persuade you to watch, listen, buy, sell, come, or go.

CONCLUSION:

BALANCING ACT

It seems rather self-involved to decide for them, over 100 years later, whether or not an author would identify according to modern definitions of sexuality. Walt Whitman may have been questioned about his sexuality during his lifetime, but Emily Dickinson was not. Although Whitman never responded one way or another, it is known that he was, at the very least, asked by fans and accused of unnatural love by others. However, Dickinson was not considered anything short of an affectionate friend, since women were well-known to be more intimate with each other in the nineteenth-century. The world would much more quickly have assumed her to be a spinster or hermit than to be a woman who romantically loved other women, exchanging one negative stereotype for another.

Though modern concepts of sexual identity may be unfair in terms of what our authors would have wanted for themselves, it can be incredibly important to place them in these categories to create a more stable historical stance in the current political battle for LGBT rights in America. By employing such labels, the oppressed are able to connect their identities to a well-known and respected member of American history, resulting in a stronger foundation for the movement.

Media interpretations of Whitman and Dickinson however, are in desperate need of reformation. While using the images and words of these beloved poets can be good for business, the perpetuation of stereotypical half-truths are bad for their reputations. By thinking outside of those stereotypes, and considering all aspects of the poets' identities,

we may be able to employ these images in more interesting and honest ways, drawing more attention to their products, shows, or films through the light of different information and a more well-rounded representation of who these authors were.

Balance between the binaries is the key. The gray area between heterosexuality and homosexuality that Whitman was so comfortable in is where we should be when considering the sexual identities of those who came before us. Taking the time to consider all aspects of Whitman and Dickinson regarding their sexual identities will allow for a more involved discussion and wider range of possibilities within the analysis. If we can learn to use the concept of sexual fluidity to our benefit, it could open up scholarship and analysis opportunities, not just with regard for Whitman and Dickinson, but throughout literary and social history. This kind of acceptance in society could bring equality to the LGBT community, ending the current political battle for civil rights.

Whitman and Dickinson have been manipulated into sexual categories that may or may not suit them. Since they cannot speak for themselves, we are speaking for them through scholarly writing, analysis of their work, modern media, and artistic expression of all types. This requires a sensitive approach and an open mind. It is important to understand all aspects and repercussions of the ways in which we use the work they created. Maintaining a balance between Victorian and contemporary identity politics offers a significantly larger realm of discourse than to only represent them through modern thoughts and expectations. That balance allows for the fluidity of sexuality and helps to prevent biased analysis and discourse regarding the presence of sexual ideology in their work. Only after this balance is achieved, will our representations of them be accurate enough to be fair.

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