

Emily Dickinson: Parental Expectations as Shackles of Existence

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Abstract

No matter how loving parents may be, the demands their expectations lay on their children result in an emotional pressure that goes unnoticed until, in most cases, it is too late and the damage to emotional maturity and the negative effect on personality has already occurred. Such emotional neglect is mostly unintentional. The life of nineteenth century American poet, Emily Dickinson, is an example of how the internalization of parental expectations and childhood emotional neglect can affect emotional maturity and adult behaviour. “Introvert” and “reclusive” are the two words commonly used to refer to her. However, this paper focuses not on what she was, but why she was so. In this paper, I examine a number of Dickinson’s letters to explore her experience of life within a “loving” home full of parental expectations which exerted unintentional pressure on her emotions and made her the socially withdrawn person she ultimately became. For this purpose, I base my discussion on the psychoanalytic feminism of Nancy J. Chodorow and Jessica Benjamin to show how Dickinson’s subjectivity is negatively influenced by patriarchal dominance represented within the family by her father and reinforced by her emotionally absent mother.

Keywords: patriarchy, emotional neglect, internalization, subjectivity, identification

I Came to buy a smile - today –
But just a single smile-
The smallest one upon your face
Will suit me just as well-

(Dickinson “I Came to buy a smile – today –” 1-4)

The fact that the 19th century American poet Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) confined herself to a life of isolation for most of her adult life is well known. What is not certain about her is why she removed herself from society and why her only interactions were limited to a slightly ajar door, an abundance of correspondence, and a submerged existence in poetry of which all except ten were published posthumously. Developments in psychoanalytic interpretation now allow us to piece together the reality of Dickinson’s psychic and emotional life, but one must be wary of possible misinterpretations if attempting to understand her through such an approach without taking into consideration the times and circumstances



she lived in. Her circumstances and times were a reality she could not escape and those who wish to understand her should not overlook them. Nancy J. Chodorow advances her view in this regard: “[E]ach person’s sense of gender – her gender identity or gendered subjectivity – is an inextricable fusion or melding of personally created (emotionally and through unconscious fantasy) and cultural meaning” (517). What she emphasizes here is that one should acknowledge that “perception and meaning are psychologically created’ and all “cultural meanings and images” are experienced “emotionally and through fantasy, as well as in particular interpersonal contexts” (517). She aligns her theories with that of Patricia Hill Collins who, she states, “emphasizes that consciousness is created and not determined and stresses the importance of feminists of keeping constant attention to both the social-cultural-political and the individual creativities of consciousness” (Chodorow 518). On the usefulness of psychoanalytic theory, Chodorow, in *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory*, contends that “until we have another theory which can tell us about unconscious mental processes, conflict, and relations of gender, sexuality, and self, we had best take psychoanalysis” (qtd. in Gardiner 439).

My discussion, therefore, shall include details not only of the interpersonal context of Dickinson’s social reality, but also interpretations of her emotional and psychic responses grounded in an analysis of her letters. Furthermore, for a complete understanding of the influence of her parents on her subjectivity, I shall analyze her relationship with her father with reference to the works of Jessica Benjamin who sees subjectivity as developed through “the structure of domination” (8), and with her mother with reference to the works of Nancy J. Chodorow who concentrates on the mother-daughter relationship in the development of subjectivity.

As Dickinson was reclusive and homebound for much of her adult life, “letters provided her with a social context that was otherwise lacking” (Pollack and Noble 17). Her much quoted line: “A Letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend” (D 196)¹, shows how she overcame the limitations of time and space to establish strong relationships through her letters. She was looking for an escape from her situation in a world beyond her ontological reality, thus she wrote letter after letter in response to all she experienced whilst she gradually isolated herself from her immediate surroundings. Dickinson’s letters clearly reveal a side of her that is deceptively hidden in her poetry. Passionately connecting and reaching out to all who would give her the time of day, her letters bubble with emotion and a sort of childlike liveliness and innocence that is missing in her poetry. Where her poetry seems intentionally restrained, much like her behavior in public, her letters are without restraint, extremely imaginative,

1 Unless otherwise indicated, the source of Emily Dickinson’s letters is *Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters*, edited by Thomas Johnson. In-text citations use “D” with the page number.

and playful. Yet, what is strongly seen and of special concern is that in her letters, especially those written to friends, there is a strong sense of self-deprecation and dependence. Furthermore, the discontent she expresses about her relationship with her parents speaks volumes about her emotional and psychological state.

Letters have long been read as primary sources of biography and history. As Steven Stowe observes, “Few historical texts seem as familiar – or as compelling to read – as personal letters and diaries. They are plain-spoken, lively, and full of details. Both letters and diaries seem to emerge *directly* from the writer, fresh and intimate, bringing us close to what that person was” (Stowe). The importance of letters in analyzing the perceived reality of an artist within her own social and emotional relationships cannot be denied. The information of “historical changes and continuities in self, social relations, work and values” (Stowe) that personal letters carry, facilitate understanding of the development of personality. “It is impossible,” as William Merrill Decker empathetically observes, “to read extensively in the literature of personal correspondence without becoming aware of the conditions of human isolation that generate such texts, and of the vulnerability, sorrow, folly, and crudity, as well as the invention, eloquence, and lyricism, that such conditions bring out” (6). Thus, in this paper, I use evidence from letters written by Emily Dickinson, analyzed from the theoretical perspectives of psychoanalytic feminism, to understand the relationship she had with her parents, which influenced the development of her personality to such an extent that she came to be commonly known as an “introvert” and a “recluse.”

Dickinson had mixed feelings about both her parents. They were good people but they could not fulfil her intellectual or emotional needs. As she writes in one of her letters to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, her literary mentor and friend, “My Mother does not care for thought– and Father, too busy with his briefs – to notice what we do – He buys me many Books – but begs me not to read them – because he fears they joggle the Mind” (D 173). This statement clearly shows that she felt emotionally neglected by her parents as one was too busy with his official business while the other lacked interest in her intellectual pursuits, so much so that neither was ever there to encourage her.

Parental expectations in the nineteenth century American family of Amherst were strong and binding in more ways than one. As mentioned by Michael E. Lamb,

[a]ccording to Pleck and Pleck (1997), for example, Euro-American fathers were viewed primarily as moral teachers during the colonial phase of American history ... [and] responsible for ensuring that their children grew up with an appropriate sense of values, acquired primarily from a study of the Bible and other scriptural texts. (3)

But Dickinson was not religious in the traditional sense of the word. She writes of this difference between her family and herself to Higginson: “They are religious – except me” (D 173). This made things more complicated for her. The stoicism usually encouraged by religious beliefs was absent in her. As a result, internally she was in constant conflict about the circumstances of her life. Being a woman with acute sensibility and above average intelligence was difficult in the 19th century American environment. Within the constraints of her family, Dickinson was not happy and she could not change her attitude towards the life she had. She felt trapped.

She expresses this feeling of entrapment to her brother Austin, on 8th June 1851 when she writes, “I miss you very much. I put on my bonnet tonight, opened the gate desperately, and for a little while, the suspense was terrible – I think I was held in check by some invisible agent, for I returned to the house without having done any harm!” (D 48). The harm she mentions here is more about harm to the family reputation than her own and fear of adding agitation to the family atmosphere once such a transgression occurs. The thought of the possible rage such an action would incur from her father was the type of psychological barrier that prevented her from stepping outside the boundaries of her home.

The restriction imposed on her movement is affirmed by what she mentions a few paragraphs before in the same letter, “Tutor Holland was here as usual, during the afternoon – after tea I went to see Sue – had a nice little visit with her – then went to see Emily Fowler, and arrived home at 9 – found Father in great agitation at my protracted stay – and mother and Vinnie in tears, for fear that he would kill me” (D 47). This may seem unwarranted at that time in history when democracy and various movements were flourishing and changing society. Surprisingly, the freedom flourishing in the form of the Women’s Rights Movement did not touch the Dickinson household. The atmosphere for expression was not exactly inviting for her within her home. Protective steps were taken to keep the inside in: “Father takes care of the doors, and mother of the windows, and Vinnie and I are secure against all outward attacks” (D 47). Her home was a fortress against outside bodily harm but it seems her parents failed to understand what harm this seclusion caused her both emotionally and psychologically.

Writing of the freedom of girls in the democratic American family in the 1930s, De Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*, states: “Long before an American girl arrives at the marriageable age, her emancipation from maternal control begins: she has scarcely ceased to be a child, when she already thinks for herself, speaks with freedom, and acts on her own impulse” (qtd. in Goodsell 15). But Dickinson was living in the suburbs of Amherst where, in 1845, a religious revival took place. As

a result, parental control was strong and grounded in religious teachings, as such the breaking of family norms would indeed result in angry outbursts especially in a family such as Dickinson's of which the father was considered one of the most prominent men in Amherst, Massachusetts. In 1871, the *Amherst Record* published a note about her father under the title "Pen Portraits of the Prominent Men of Amherst" that reads: "Honorable Edward Dickinson ... The name of Dickinson ... is so identified with everything that belongs to Amherst, that any attempt to speak of town history in which that name should not appear the most prominent would be impossible" (Pollak and Noble 27). One can imagine the pressure of expectation such a reputation would inadvertently place on a child of that family.

Dickinson tries to be the dutiful daughter, in accordance with early 19th century conservative standards. But such responsibility saddened her and though she didn't express discontent in front of anyone she was disillusioned by the circumstances. Jessica Benjamin interprets a girl's attempt to be a good little girl by willingly giving up agency in the hope of recognition from the father as the result of failed identification with her fantasized male ideal (Benjamin 107). In May 1850 Dickinson writes to her friend Abiah Root, "I have always neglected the culinary arts, but attend to them now from necessity, and from a desire to make everything pleasant for father, and Austin ... When I am not at work in the kitchen, I sit by the side of mother, provide for her little wants – and try to cheer, and encourage her" (D 38). Her main concern was "to make everything pleasant for father, and Austin" and to comfort her ailing mother. This letter clearly points out how circumstances had forced her to become a "mother" to her parents, caring for and supporting them in ways that she herself was denied.

The relationship between Dickinson and her father, Edward Dickinson, strongly influenced her subjectivity. Dickinson could sense the sternness that was infused in her father's attitude. In referring to Edward's effect on his daughter, Dickinson's niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, informs, he "evidenced his displeasure by taking his hat and cane and passing out the door in silence, leaving an emptiness indicative of reproof, a wordless censure more devastating to her than any judgement day" (qtd. in Martin 12). The extent of fear she had of her father is clear when she writes "I never knew how to tell time by the clock till I was 15. My father thought he had taught me but I did not understand & I was afraid to say I did not & afraid to ask anyone else lest he should know" (D 210). While growing up, the people from whom children expect most support and encouragement are their parents. Unfortunately, Dickinson found that her parents were unapproachable and unable to provide the support she so desperately needed and yearned for. That Dickinson had conflicting feelings about her father is clear from a letter written to Higginson in July 1874, after her father's death, where she states: "His heart was pure and

terrible and I think no other like it exists” (D 223). Here the juxtaposition of the words “pure and terrible” indicates a mixture of respectful awe and terrifying fear present in her thoughts about her father.

Willingly or not, Dickinson’s father was her ideal and, for her, represented “home.” In her words, “Home is so far from Home, since my Father died” (D 230). But that home did not accommodate her feelings nor understand her need for acceptance. Her father would praise her baking and culinary skills but was wary of encouraging her literary pursuits. She did not agree to publish extensively because she knew her father would not approve. As she was a woman, her father expected her to care for domesticity and disregard any intellectual pursuit or expression of emotional excess. Her father’s patriarchal domination forced her to refrain from publishing her poetry yet he valued even his son’s letters and thought them worthy of publication. We know this from Dickinson’s letter to Austin dated 6 July 1851, “Father says your letters are altogether before Shakespeare, and he will have them published to put in our library” (D 53). This bias in favor of Austin’s correspondence over her own poetic and intellectual endeavors is what Dickinson had to suffer at the cost of her emotional balance. The pain of knowing that no matter how much she developed her art, she would never receive the encouragement that her brother got, was enough to frustrate her.

Dickinson could not consciously go beyond her father’s restrictions. Burdened with a sense of shame she felt for her emotional conflict, she became all the more attached to her father and the compliance he demanded of her. This fear of disgruntling him was something she could not overcome in her lifetime and it became a mode of thinking that determined all her future decisions and actions. She never felt good enough to expect her father’s appraisal. By extension, this is also possibly the reason behind the “painful self-abasement present in her ‘Master’ letters” (Martin 87).

Dickinson’s turn towards extreme submissiveness and self-denigration can be understood in Benjamin’s observation about the effect on a girl’s subjectivity when she is not able to establish an “identificatory” bond with the father:

A confirmed recognition from the father – “Yes, you can be like me” – helps the child consolidate the identification and so enhances the sense of being a subject of desire. But the lack of recognition and the denial of the identificatory bond damage the sense of being a sexual subject and lead the woman to look for her desire through a man – and frequently to masochistic fantasies of surrendering to the ideal man’s power. The search for identificatory love is thematic in many relationships of submission. (“Father and Daughter” 289)

Benjamin further speculates that “the more confirmation and the less humiliation a

girl meets with when she tries to fulfil the wish for identificatory love, the more the wish emerges free of self-abnegating or masochistic elements” (292). In accordance with the wishes of her father whose conservative views preferred a woman’s role in domesticity over self-development, Dickinson’s home-centeredness grew as she was “coopted by Edward’s recluse fantasy” (Pollak, Introduction xxxii). She could not go beyond these imposed limits even if she tried because her father’s wishes had become her own guidelines for living a “decent” life. In the first half of the 1860s Dickinson had largely withdrawn from social life. Even after his death in 1874, she did not feel free as his absence made him all the more present in her psyche.

To compensate for the denied recognition she sought from her father, Dickinson turned to men outside her family. Benjamin describes this behavior thus: “the wish for a missed identificatory love with father inspires adult women’s fantasies about loving men who represent their ideal” (288). She desperately requested Higginson for honest critical judgment of her poems. Beginning in 1862, when he was a contributor to *The Atlantic Monthly*, this was a friendship that was to last until Dickinson’s death in 1886. Her sincere appeal was: “Will you tell me my fault, frankly as to yourself, for I had rather wince, than die. Men do not call the surgeon, to commend – the Bone, but to set it, Sir, and fracture within, is more critical. And for this, Preceptor, I shall bring you – Obedience – the Blossom from my Garden, and every gratitude I know” (D 176). Though Higginson has been blamed for ruining her poems by changing punctuation and vocabulary to suit Victorian tastes, one cannot easily cast aside the role of a person whom Dickinson herself considered as the person who saved her life. She emphatically writes him in June 1869, “Of our greatest acts we are ignorant – You were not aware that you saved my Life” (D 197). Even though, like her father, he clearly let her know she should not publish, she still wrote to him and sent him her poems. Eventually, being attentive to her and her creativity, he did for her much of what a psychoanalyst does for his patients, that is, relieve her of the burden of suppressed desires and uncertainties that a person typically hides from others. Though she was sometimes confident of her abilities, mostly she was in doubt and sought acceptance, she “at times asserted herself above the judgments and opinions of her male friends, while at other times she almost grovelled for acceptance” (Martin 71). Dickinson knew she had talent yet having internalized her father’s treatment of her, she is afraid to think that she deserves better treatment and appreciation from others. From that comes the excessive gratitude toward anyone who is willing to spare time for her.

Dickinson is a strong example of how the effects of emotional neglect find expression at an improper level of emotional maturity. In April 1853 she writes, to her brother Austin, “I wish we were children now. I wish we were always children, how to grow up I don’t know” (D xii). This wishful regression to a younger self reflects the desire

to deny responsibility in the face of the traumatic emotional void created by a sense of insignificance and burdened by a feeling of loss.

Dickinson had more than her fair share of trauma when she lost close friends such as Leonard Humphrey in 1850 and Ben Newton in 1853. She had depended on Newton as well as Humphrey, for literary guidance and encouragement. Their deaths strongly added to her melancholy and feeling of loss. She loved her friends so intensely that she could not make sense of their sudden and, in most cases, untimely departures from this world. Being confronted with the reality of death, she wondered what could possibly be good about these incidents. Deprived of emotional support from her family who could not anticipate the extent of her grief she felt all the more helpless and alone. She clearly expresses the resentment and helplessness she feels in her letters to Thomas Wentworth Higginson: “I never had a mother. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled” (qtd. in Pollak, Introduction xxv) and “I always ran Home to Awe when a child, if anything befell me. He was an awful Mother, but I liked him better than none” (qtd. in Pollak xxv). Indeed, she felt isolated because she was afraid of her father and felt her mother emotionally absent. She “revered and despised her father’s patriarchal values. Rather, more consistently, she viewed her mother as a negative role model for an empowered woman poet” (xxvi). As mentioned by Pollak, the same is noticed in her poetry: “Her poetry too is haunted by patriarchal emblems; matriarchy functions as an absence, a ‘Missing All’” (Introduction xxvi).

The emotional absence of Dickinson’s mother devastated her. She constantly felt lost. Evidence from Emily Norcross and Edward Dickinson’s courtship letters shows her mother to be overly concerned about her Norcross relations. In one of Edward Dickinson’s final courtship letters he could not refrain from “[t]aunting his future bride about her tenacious attachment to her parents’ home” (xix). Emily Norcross’s extreme attachment eventually caused such grief to her that it distanced her from her own family. According to Pollak and Noble, “[h]er mother’s illness and death, together with the deaths of four of her siblings affected Emily Norcross Dickinson deeply and reinforced her tendency toward anxiety and introversion” (21). This caused her to be emotionally absent from her daughters (Austin was always present in her thoughts) and she also drifted away from Edward. The stress of such despondency created a void in the atmosphere of the Dickinson family which affected Emily Dickinson the most. If the outer social world and engagements had taken her father away, the overburdened inner world of emotions and consciousness had taken away her mother. Understandably, after editing the Norcross-Dickinson correspondence and getting to better understand Dickinson’s parents through them, Pollack comes to acknowledge Richard Sewall’s wisdom “that Dickinson’s final affection for her mother was a major moral and psychological victory” (xxvii).

What is interesting is, how this “final affection” came about. The illness of Dickinson’s mother had caused the roles of mother and child to be reversed. In 1855, her mother was afflicted by a strong bout of depression from which she never fully recovered. Accordingly, Dickinson’s household responsibilities increased as “[t]he twenty-four-year-old Dickinson and her mother reversed roles, with the young woman taking responsibility for housekeeping and caretaking. In fact, the Dickinson daughters would take care of their ailing mother for the next twenty-seven years” (Martin 11). In 1882, of her relationship with her mother, Dickinson wrote, “We were never intimate Mother and children, while she was our Mother – but Mines in the same Ground meet by fulfilment, and when she became our Child, the Affection came” (qtd. in Pollack, Introduction xxvii). But the emotional and psychological pressure she faced as a child caused Dickinson to be caught in a paradoxical situation where the love for the parent, brought about by her mother’s dependence on her sister and her, conflicted internally with a feeling of injustice towards herself.

Chodorow looks into the impact of the mother-daughter relationship on the subjectivity of the daughter. In one of her case studies, she gives an example of how the relationship of a certain Ms. R with her mother affects her needs and wants. Since Ms. R identifies with the mother, she refuses to blame her for “being passive and subservient” and, instead, cries seeing her in such a helpless condition where she is bullied by her (the mother’s) husband. Chodorow analyzes the situation of Ms. R thus: “She is caught in a conflictual personal dilemma: how can she not feel guilty and sad toward her mother, . . . who was the agent (through maternal teaching and modelling) of her daughter-self’s sense of female inferiority?” (“Gender” 535). Similarly, it seems, Dickinson was affected by the helpless situation she was in with her own mother. On the one hand, she felt deprived of affection and love out of which arose a sense of resentment and anger; and on the other, she identified with her mother and the pressure her mother may have felt within the demands of domesticity that caused her to be depressed and ultimately fall ill. What is fatal for Dickinson is that she over-identified with her mother. As a result of such over-identification between mother and daughter, female dependency is perpetuated (Westkott 18). Dickinson was forced to stay close to her mother and to care for her in the capacity of a mother. Chodorow concludes in her discussion of identification and dependence that “social and psychological oppression, then, is perpetuated in personality” (qtd. in Westkott 17). Thus, it seems, the blurring of ego boundaries stopped Dickinson from developing an individuated sense of self. This confusion of self with other ultimately leads to the dependency on others that Dickinson experienced so strongly.

Dickinson suppressed her own needs and adopted a life submissive to patriarchal values, constantly considering the possible shame she might bring upon everyone

concerned if her excessive emotions were let loose. Thus she denies and moves away from her first love interest. Forced to choose between the family and her love for a life where she could roam freely, she breaks down in tears that no one sees. This is clear from her letter to Abiah:

While I washed the dishes at noon in that little “sink-room” of ours, I heard a well-known rap, and a friend I love so dearly came and asked me to ride in the woods, ... and I wanted to exceedingly – I told him I could not go, and he said he was disappointed – he wanted me very much – then the tears came into my eyes, tho’ I tried to choke them back, ... and it seemed to me unjust. Oh I struggled with great temptation, and it cost me much of denial, but I think in the end I conquered, not a glorious victory Abiah, where you hear the rolling drum, but a kind of a helpless victory (D 39)

Such helplessness and surrender to one’s circumstances lay a burden ever so heavy that the relationships that are denied become all the more valuable, all the more fantasized. Every moment of possible connection becomes a highly valuable lost chance of interaction. Just to be able to talk to someone who cares and understands would be a blessing. And the reaction to being deprived of such a blessing is expressed strongly to Abiah in the following:

I went cheerfully round my work, humming a little air till mother had gone to sleep, then cried with all my might, seemed to think I was much abused, that this wicked world was unworthy such devoted, and terrible sufferings, and came to my various senses in great dudgeon at life, and time, and love for affliction, and anguish ... Wouldn’t you love to see me in these bonds of great despair, looking around my kitchen ... *My kitchen* I think I called it, God forbid that it was, or shall be my own – God keep me from what they call households. (D 39-40)

She feels life to be a “dungeon.” Use of words and phrases such as “all my might,” “abused,” “wicked,” “terrible sufferings,” “affliction,” and “anguish,” in such a short paragraph all emphasize the intensity of her plight and, eventually, reveal the reason for not wanting a household to call her own. After saying “*My kitchen*,” she immediately retracts it by saying, “God forbid that it was.” The bitterness and helplessness she associates with her situation grew into a deep fear that the same may be repeated in any marriage she would agree to.

This fear of marriage and commitment, which would further bind her, loomed large in her psyche and she remained a spinster even though there were rumors of a number of passionate intimacies. For example, the strength of her relationship with Judge Otis Lord (who is suspected to be her late-life romance) can be gleaned

from her letter to him stating: “While others go to Church, I go to mine, for are you not my Church, and have we not a Hymn that no one knows but us?” (qtd. in Sewall 652). The strong expression of grief after his death is clear as she writes to Elizabeth Holland, “Forgive the Tears that fell for few, but that few too many, for was not each a World?” (D 302). The amount of emotional investment she had in the relationships with her friends “brought not only joyful and transcendent communion but deep anguish, betrayal, and abandonment” (Martin 70-71). This overdependence on those she considered her friends and dear ones indicates how emotionally deprived she was within her family.

As Chodorow, in “Mothering, Object-Relations, and the Female Oedipal Configuration,” apprises, “A girl’s family setting creates a different intrapsychic situation for her than that same family setting creates for a boy, and contributes to the quality of women’s relational qualities and needs” (154). So, though Dickinson and her brother were brought up by the same parents, the experience of life was quite different for them. For the lack of motherly attention, Dickinson’s subjectivity was affected to the extent that she constantly needed and sought assurance of love and care, especially from her female friends. In one of her poems, she asks “Dollie”: “You love me – you are sure –” (156) – most probably referring to the sisterly love of Sue (Susan H. Dickinson), her childhood friend, and later, her brother, Austin’s wife, who was a lifelong presence in her life, though she too became gradually distant as responsibilities of her own household and children demanded more of her time. Dickinson expected her friends to reciprocate her concerns with equal intensity. In most cases, her over-exuberance was met with what she considered as neglect.

Dickinson lacked emotional maturity and was much like a child in her craving for affection. Due to the lack of emotional maturity, she was extra sensitive to rejection. The slightest delay in responding to her letters has her accusing her friends of not caring enough about her wellbeing. For example, she rebukes Abiah Root strongly with the words, “Hardhearted girl! I don’t believe you care, if you did you would come quickly and help me out of this sea; but if I drown, Abiah, and go down to dwell in the seaweed forever and forever, I will not forget your name, nor all the wrong you did me!” (qtd. in Martin 73). Such anger and feelings of rejection are common where the emotional absence of the mother is looked to be fulfilled by relationships with other women, and Dickinson is angry or sad when there is a breach. Such a high level of dependency needs can be explained as follows: “not having been forced to emotionally separate from their mothers, women continue to long for the emotional intimacy provided by close relationships. This unconscious desire to form attachments to others, lead women to develop greater dependency needs, as their self-identity is tied to their relationships with others” (Appelrouth and Edles 349).

The contradiction apparent within her personality and the pendulum-like movement between her love of socializing and self-imposed isolation created a space of conflict that influenced the development of her subjectivity. All the complications in her relationships, her excessive dependence on friends, her melancholy and feelings of betrayal, feelings of imagined injustice, all come from one source – that of the unintentional emotional neglect of her parents. Unknowingly, they had forced her to suppress her needs. Unwittingly, they had deprived her of the life she desired. Eventually, because of them, she became the self-isolated childlike person who would never truly mature into adulthood. She became a person who was afraid of her own desires.

To conclude, the discussion above shows how, as a daughter within the Dickinson household, Emily Dickinson was expected to hold herself with pride, never give in to her emotions, never bring shame on the family name, never pursue intellectual development through intense reading, and never place her own needs before that of her family members. She did all that was expected of her by internalizing her father's patriarchal demands, by being conflicted because of her mother's emotional absence, and by becoming a recluse so that the risk of transgression should never come up. But, in the process, her subjectivity suffered. This psychoanalytic feminist reading of Dickinson's subjectivity based on evidence from her letters and taking into account her social situation, to analyze both the father-daughter relationship and the mother-daughter relationship, clearly shows that parental expectations became the shackles of her existence, forcing her into self-isolation as she could not cope emotionally or psychologically with the demands placed upon her.

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