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**EMILY DICKINSON AND SUSAN HUNTINGTON: A RELATIONSHIP  
THAT SURPASSES LABELS**

**STUDENT'S NAME: Abril (Kai) Brunet Argelés**

**TUTOR'S NAME: Rodrigo Andrés**

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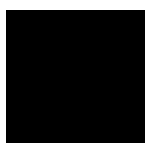


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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper offers a holistic analysis of the relationship between the North American poetess Emily Dickinson and her sister-in-law Susan Huntington as it explores, at the same time, the possibility of it being unclassifiable. Their correspondence and the perception the female poet had of Huntington, expressed in several of her poetic pieces and missives to other correspondents such as her brother, are thoroughly examined. Moreover, an overview of the evolution of interactions among women throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and up as well as a review of the literature that has been published thus far about the poetess' love-life and her potential lovers are provided. These serve as contextual tools so as to compare and contrast the nature of both women's bond in relation to those deemed conventional in their timeframe and also concerning Dickinson's relationships with her other potential lovers.

**Key words:** Emily Dickinson, Susan Huntington, romantic friendships, lesbianism.

## **RESUM**

Aquest treball ofereix una anàlisi holística de la relació que van mantenir la poeta nord-americana Emily Dickinson i la dona del seu germà, Susan Huntington. A la mateixa vegada, explora la possibilitat que aquest vincle sigui inclassificable. Per tal de fer-ho, el treball examina tant la correspondència que ambdues van intercanviar al llarg de la seva relació, com la percepció que tenia la poetessa de Huntington, expressada en la seva poesia així com en les cartes que els enviava a altres corresponents, com ara el seu germà. El treball també consta d'un resum sobre l'evolució de les interaccions entre dones al llarg dels segles XVIII, XIX fins l'època post-Freudiana i una anàlisi del que s'ha publicat fins ara en relació a la vida amorosa de la poetessa. Ambdues seccions tenen una funció contextual que permet comparar la relació que tenien les dues dones amb els vincles considerats convencionals a la seva època i amb les relacions que la poetessa hauria mantingut amb els seus altres possibles amants.

**Paraules clau:** Emily Dickinson, Susan Huntington, amistat romàntica, lesbianisme.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## *1. 1 Aim*

Emily Dickinson has been object of scholarly study ever since her poetry was first published by Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson after their editing process some years after her death. However, the poetess has not been exclusively of academic interest for her *oeuvre* but also for her intriguing life, personality, and relationships with several of her correspondents. Her love life, and her relationship with her sister-in-law Susan Huntington Dickinson in particular, has drawn many scholars' attention. Said attention has resulted in a number of speculations that have attempted to describe, label, and shed light on the real nature of their bond. Nonetheless, there has neither been a hypothesis nor a subsequent assignation of a label that has been able to encompass the complexity and magnitude of their relationship accurately. The objective of this paper is to revisit what has been published up until the present day about their unique bond and, after that, aim to offer a more holistic take on it by presenting the possibility that what united both women was a relationship that escaped the constrictions of labels then and now.

## *1. 2 Structure*

In order to be able to provide the most accurate and complete analysis of Dickinson and Huntington's relationship as possible, the paper is divided in three sections. The first part is devoted to the contextualization of social relations and the interaction between members of the same sex, more specifically women, in the nineteenth century up to the twentieth century. Within this contextualization there appear the concepts of romantic friendships, Boston marriages and lesbianism, which will be important for the understanding of the proposed take on Dickinson's relationship with her sister-in-law presented later on. In its turn, the second section comprises a review of the literature that has been published on the poetess' potential lovers, both male and female, including the various interpretations that have been given on both women's relationship. Lastly, the third part includes an examination of Dickinson and Huntington's interactions through their close-to-four decades bond, as well as the rebuttal of the theories written on the matter at hand prior to this paper, and the proposed approach to it as a relationship that cannot be classified into any known category.

## 2. THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIETY'S VIEWS ON FEMALE INTERACTION

### *2.1 The origin of romantic friendships and Boston marriages*

The way individuals engage in interaction with each other is subject to change as time progresses and society revises its values. Consequently, the way relationships are perceived in the eyes of others also varies. Thus, it is understandable that a label that is nowadays used to refer to a certain type of relationship might not have been appropriate in past times. In the same way, it is possible that a relation that sports a particular label in the present does not encompass the same dynamics as it used to, and vice versa. Said change in the understanding of relationships has to do with Sigmund Freud's claim that in proper romantic relationships love and lust have to go hand in hand, so "[t]o ensure a fully normal attitude in love, two currents of feeling have to unite...the tender, affectionate feelings and the sensual feelings." (Freud, 1912) Hence, our post-Freudian society finds it difficult to conceive that romantic relationships did not necessarily involve sexual contact in the past.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries society was organized in such a way that bonds between individuals of the same sex were favored. Hence, there prevailed a strong homosocial component that was taken as the central piece around which society was built. In the eighteenth century, for instance, coffee houses came to be a place of the utmost importance for the development of homosocial bonds between men. Whenever they had free time, they often met in such locals to discuss about daily matters or read newspapers, and many times, coffee houses eventually became the places where clubs, usually exclusive and closed to the public, surfaced. These incipient clubs that were formed in coffee houses were just the beginning of what turned into a club-organized society that, by the nineteenth century, found its number of clubs increased by fifty percent (Edwards, 2013, p. 28). An English traveller called Frances Trollope observed that "all the enjoyments of [were] are found in the absence of women. They din[ed], they play[ed] cards, they ha[d] suppers, all in large parties but all without women." (Faderman, 1985, p. 180)

A situation of the sort had women gravitating toward other individuals of their same gender, with whom they could hold meaningful interactions about the concerns they shared. The unlikeness of the manner in which men and women were raised to ensure that they grew to fit within the society's ideal of the male and female individuals impeded the possibility of members of the opposite sex engaging in meaningful communication. In addition, early in the 18th century, marriages between people of the aristocratic circle and upper-middle classes

were commonly arranged and had an almost transactional character. More often than not, bride and bridegroom did not have a say on the matter, which resulted in unhappy marriages, a frequent phenomenon at the time. The arranged nature of some unions, though, was not the only reason why many marriages were faced with an impending doom. By the time the mid 18th century arrived, many young couples married out of love, just to dejectedly realize they had vowed to love someone who was not their good match forever. (Moore, 2009, p. 8) The absence of love in marriages as well as the growing distinction between men and women's sets of values were key in the development and strengthening of homosociality present in New England, France, Germany and England among other countries.

In an attempt to find the emotional comfort and solace that their marriages lacked, women often turned to their female friends and sought that affectionate intimacy they craved in their friendships. The bonds these women forged could become the strongest, most intense and intimate ones in their lives. These tight friendships between women were called romantic friendships, and the members involved were referred to as kindred spirits or sentimental friends. Displays of affection between sentimental friends such as kisses, caresses, and even sharing a bed were not uncommon occurrences. The language they used in the epistles they sent to each other was no different from the one of heterosexual lovers. "They pledged to remain 'faithful' forever, to be in 'each other's thoughts constantly,' to live together and even to die together." (Faderman, 1985, p. 16) All in all, romantic friendships shared the same traits that characterized romantic (heterosexual) love, excluding, perhaps, that of carnal desire and sexual intercourse. However, husbands did not feel threatened by them, and friendships of the sort were even deemed to be virtuous.

Romantic friendships, nevertheless, were tolerated under the premise that women did not experience lust by nature, and, therefore, did not engage in sexual acts with their kindred spirits. In addition, "spinsters" were not well regarded either, and their engagement in romantic friendships was disapproved. Spinsters were unmarried women, usually beyond the age considered appropriate for wedlock, who belonged in the middle classes. The figure of the spinster or old maid was seen pejoratively, as it was a role taken by women who defied the purpose of what was assumed to be their true nature, which was to get married and have children. They represented a threat for society at that time, which was greatly characterized by its patriarchy, for they sought to economically maintain themselves, without depending on a male figure to provide them with financial stability. In order to be able to sustain themselves financially, women slowly crept into the working world; their presence, although weak, supposed a menace to men, who had now competition in a field that used to belong



exclusively to them. A life that did not revolve around marriage and motherhood and which, in addition, did not involve subordination to a male individual, was not one that women had been capable of imagining until some members of their same sex came forth and opened the door to said possibility.

The publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's provocative pamphlet, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), inspired many other women to advocate for their rights. By the mid nineteenth century, several female activists and writers began speaking up about the inequalities the female sex faced for simply being women. Harriet Martineau wrote several texts in which she "urged upper-class women to obtain a proper education and profession in order to make themselves financially independent," (Diniejko, 2011) and women writers such as Charlotte Brönte and George Eliot denounced women's relegation to the private sphere. Such encouragement brought forth a wave of educated, well-read women of the middle and upper classes who strived for financial independence. Moreover, they actively participated in social betterment organizations and fought to gain those democratic rights they had been denied until then. This new female figure that strayed from the Victorian ideal of "the angel in the house" challenged the idea of femininity that had been socially established, as women who followed it adopted what were thought to be "masculine" traits. These women would later on be referred to as New Women; a term first used by the Irish writer Sara Grand in 1894 in her article "The New Aspect of the Woman Question."

At the same time all these female public figures started speaking up, several women colleges such as Vassar and Wellesley, founded in 1861 and 1870 respectively, began emerging, granting women the possibility to access higher education, as they had been demanding. Members of the female sex that fit the aforementioned criteria and were desirous to keep studying, learning and also willing to earn their own money, found their loyal companions in other women who had similar values and interests. They established long-term, committed relationships with their like-minded female partners and even moved in together. "Boston marriage" was the name these relationships were given, the term being coined in New England in the nineteenth century, as pointed out by Teresa Theophano in her GLBTQ Archives' entry by the name Boston Marriages (2004). The traits that characterized Boston marriages were those that described eighteenth century romantic friendships, the only difference that set both concepts apart being the qualities of the women involved; women that committed to Boston marriages openly shared their thirst for knowledge and financial independence at the same time they strived and fought for equality, while those that were part of romantic friendships did not necessarily satisfy said criteria. Moreover, the vast majority

of female individuals that were part of Boston marriages did not have a male partner outside of it, contrary to kindred spirits, who often had husbands aside from their romantic friends. Whether Boston marriages were the parallel of what we nowadays call a lesbian relationship or if they were simply tight and intense friendships we shall never know for sure.

Boston marriages were such a frequent occurrence that American author Henry James aspired to provide a description of a Boston marriage, which he regarded as “very American,” in his novel *The Bostonians* (1885-1886). James himself was quite familiar with these relationships considering that his sister Alice was in a long-term, committed relationship with another woman named Katherine Loring, despite it not being, strictly speaking, a Boston marriage. Loring, who was a bright, lively woman, participated in charities and was involved in several social betterment organizations and events. There, in one of those organizations, she met Alice James, who spent a vast amount of her life in clinics after suffering from a nervous breakdown in 1878. As their relationship flourished, their opposing characters being the main force that attracted them to one another, Henry James was allowed to witness the positive effect Loring had on his sister and the genuineness of the love they felt for each other. It was in Katherine that Alice found the incentive that brought her out of her reclusion and socially distant attitude, as she opened up to her female friend. In a letter to his mother, James wrote: “The blessing that Miss Loring is to [Alice] it would be of course impossible to exaggerate. She is the most perfect companion she could have found,” (1881) proving further that he did not have anything against same-sex love, a notion that is also reinforced by the fact that James himself is thought to have been a homosexual by scholars.

Nonetheless, as much as Boston marriages were accepted, they were, just as romantic friendships, only tolerated under the premise that the women involved did not engage in sexual intercourse, for women who showed carnal desire were demonized.

### *1.2 From condoned to condemned*

All these changes that were occurring at the time had a severe impact on society, and were accompanied by some very unpleasant reactions. There was an emergence of derogatory concepts used to refer to these new figures that brought with them the destabilization of widespread rules and values ingrained at the core of Victorian society.

For a New Woman to be able to economically support herself, she needed a job, and hence, the insertion of women in the working world occurred. However, their presence in the

laboral market was not well received as it led to men having to compete for something they used to have exclusive access to.

Being a financially independent woman often came hand in hand with the rejection of the idea of marriage and motherhood. Instead, the New Woman frequently sought the company of a woman with a set of similar values rather than that of a man. Many New Women were involved in Boston marriages, something that did not necessarily imply the existence of a homosexual bond between them, and therefore, their relationships had not been deemed as obscene or threatening.

Feminism was commonly associated with this new stream of women who challenged the gender roles that had established a breach between both sexes. The blurring of these lines that had so clearly separated the male and female genders brought forth the idea of the “masculinization” of the female figure that shared the same traits associated with the New Woman. This did not sit well with the sexologists of the time, who firmly believed that there were specific roles that had been naturally designated to each gender, and hence, believed feminists went against the laws of nature. In addition, they also related the feminist movement with sexual abnormality (Faderman, 1991), which led to the demonization of same sex relationships as had been romantic friendships or were Boston marriages. Behind the concept of the “invert” used to refer to those people who felt romantic and/or sexual attraction toward their same sex hid sexologists’ intention to have women stick to the same gender roles they had been abiding to for a long period of time. The close bonds between women in romantic friendships or Boston marriages, no matter if romantic or purely platonic, that had been deemed virtuous had transformed into something corrupted and obscene.

A great contributor to this newfound depraved view of same-sex relations and a salient figure in the field of sexology was Richard von Krafft-Ebing. His theories, as well as those of other psychiatrists and sexologists such as Freud, were key in the classification of heterosexuality and sexual inversion, which came to be named homosexuality by Krafft-Ebing himself, in a spectrum that ranged from normality to depravity. According to such arrangement, heterosexuality was placed within the end of the spectrum that comprised normalcy and sanity, while sexual inversion was located in the opposite end, the one that encapsulated degenerate behaviors. (Foucault, 1976) The use of such adjectives in order to describe sexual inversion makes obvious its fixation with the subjects of pathology and abnormality, as Lucy Bland and Laura Doan pointed out in “Introduction,” part of the larger piece of work *Sexology Uncensored*. (1998)

Krafft-Ebing was a firm believer that sexual appetite was nothing but a result of the specie's need to reproduce, and hence, claimed that lust being acted upon in a context other than for reproduction was obscene and unnatural. Moreover, taking into consideration the urge most members of the male sex felt to preserve the "natural" gender roles of men and women, the possibility of a woman engaging in any type of relationship that did not involve her submission to a man but rather encouraged her desire to be independent and self-sufficient was completely ruled out. Then, homosexuality and carnal desire outside of the frame of reproduction within marriage were harshly condemned, especially in women, who were believed to lack a libido by nature.

In his work *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), Krafft-Ebing compiled a number of cases of "sexually deviated" patients or individuals who exhibited other psychosexual behaviors that strayed from the norm. In *Psychopathia Sexualis*, homosexuality –both male and female– does not go unmentioned, proving further sexologists' concern with disease. The psychiatrist hypothesized about the innate and biological aspects of same-sex attraction and its hereditary quality as well, which, in their turn, make homosexuality akin to mental illnesses, also considered to be hereditary. In fact, in the same way homosexuality was likened to a mental illness, feminists were also associated with hysteria, a mental affliction presumed to affect only women, so it did not take long for psychiatrists and sexologists to connect them both together.

Years after *Psychopathia Sexualis* was published, Freud argued against his colleague's theory, which he considered "a very untrustworthy picture of reality" (Freud, 1905) and claimed that sexuality nothing but aleatory. Hence, the latter dedicated a portion of his written work to the analysis of the origin and causes of homosexuality. In "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Female Homosexuality" (1920), Freud attributed the patient's homosexual desires and relationship with another woman to the disappointment she felt towards her father for not being able to fulfill her feminine Oedipus complex and getting her pregnant with his child. Nevertheless, the girl's initial hatred towards her mother, her rival in a competition for the father's affection, became subdued when the male parent was not able to satisfy his daughter's desire to bear his child. Such letdown arose a feeling of revenge and resentment toward her father which led her to recoil from men altogether and rediscover her "earlier love for her mother," (Freud, 1920, p.158) which culminated in her lesbian tendencies. It is relevant to point out as well that the female patient Freud talked about in "The Psychogenesis..." presented masculine traits as are "her acuteness of comprehension and lucid objectivity" (Freud, 1920, p. 154), for he thought women incapable of developing a

sense of objectivity and morality, unlike men, and deemed female homosexuality to be immature. The aforementioned conceptions Freud had of women and of lesbianism led to the conclusion that female homosexuality is the result of a combination of two factors: On the one hand, it is due to the repression of heterosexual desire as the daughter turns away from men after a disappointing experience with her father. On the other, it is also the result of underlying male homosexuality, for the female patient in question exhibited qualities associated with masculinity that ended in her adopting a “masculine” position toward a “feminine” love object (Roof, 1990, p. 21). All in all, both considerations have men as the imperative figure, relegating women to a secondary position in the discussion of their own sexuality.

### 3. EMILY DICKINSON’S POTENTIAL LOVERS: A CHRONOLOGY

Emily Dickinson’s persona has always been surrounded by an enticing aura of mystery that has lured many scholars and readers into the probably impossible mission to solve the puzzle that she herself and her works were. To be able to do that, academics have often turned to the poet’s biography in an attempt to eventually achieve a better understanding of her literary oeuvre (Ackmann, 1998). Thomas Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd were the first important sources of biographical information as well as the initial editors of Dickinson’s poems, which were published in three different volumes named *Poems by Emily Dickinson* in 1890, 1891 and 1896 each. Initially, the enigmatic poet’s numerous manuscripts had been handed to Susan Huntington by the poetess’ younger sister, Lavinia, for them to be edited and subsequently published. However, Susan worked at a slow pace, and Lavinia, who was becoming increasingly impatient, did not like that. Hence, she promptly decided to pass her sister’s fascicles to Todd, who readily accepted the task.

Todd, with the professional aid of Higginson, took it upon herself to modify Dickinson’s poems, taking some creative licenses in order to make them fit within the 19th century’s conception of poetry, making, that way, Dickinson’s unique style and essence dissipate. In between the publishing of the second and third volumes of *Poems by Emily Dickinson*, Todd also compiled and edited the poetess’ extensive correspondence with her friends, which was published in 1894 in the shape of two volumes that went by the title of *Letters of Emily Dickinson*.

Dickinson’s poems were not the only victims of Todd’s “creative freedom,” a liberty that stripped the author’s soul out of them. Her epistles also suffered from several modifications,

all of them having to do with the erasure of important elements such as allusions to particular individuals or names of addressees as well. Coincidentally, these obliterations all had to do with the figure of Susan Huntington, Dickinson's beloved friend and her brother Austin's soon-to-be wife. These "mutilations," as Martha Nell Smith calls them (2008), were the main cause of the ongoing neglect Susan's presence in the poet's life and works faced for decades by academics up until recent years. The erasures in the poet's manuscripts ranged from overwritten words on top of Dickinson's own, the modification of female pronouns in favor of male ones—known as "bearded pronouns"—to the editing out of lengthy fragments about or meant for Susan. Instances of these multiple obliterations can be found in her correspondence with Austin. While Loomis Todd is suspected to be the main culprit behind those mutilations, Austin and Lavinia are not exempt of liability, and, in fact, are considered to have been possible practitioners of such erasures.

A clear example is a letter the poetess sent to her brother in the early 1850s, after he managed to have a date with Huntington. In it, part of Susie's name is erased to turn it into the first person plural pronoun "us" (Smith, 2008):

Dear Austin, I am keen, but you are a good deal keener, I am *something* of a fox, but you are more of a hound! I guess we are very good friends tho', and I guess we both love [S]us[ie] just as well as we can. (A 597; L110)

It is convenient to remember that both Emily and Austin had been trying to court Huntington for some time, hence, the manipulation of her name served the purpose of both, disguising the underlying tension that existed between the Dickinson siblings and hiding the expression of romantic fondness under one of sibling affection. Despite many of these mutilations being flagrant, a major sector of scholars did not deem them as objects worth of study, perhaps precisely because they were so visible. In any case, it is curious that these omissions were reiterated time and time again in the following years after they first appeared in the edited volumes Todd published, regardless of whether they were recoverable or not. Consequently, Susan's presence was completely overlooked for several decades in the Dickinson studies, as scholars and readers looked for and speculated about the object of the poet's love interest in her correspondence with her male friends.

Once Todd had finalized the task of editing and publishing the writer's manuscripts, Lavinia tried to recover her sister's work. Nevertheless, the attempts were only partly successful for Todd managed to keep about half of Dickinson's original handprinted

scriptures, ones that she would pass on to her daughter Millicent Bingham Todd. On her part, Lavinia returned the manuscripts she had managed to salvage to Susan once again, who would continue working on them until her death in 1913.

Todd was not only Dickinson's earliest editor, but she also became a professor who imparted lectures on the eccentric poetess' life. In her speeches, Todd offered a description of the late poet that did not coincide with reality, but rather a depiction molded to fit the image that in the nineteenth century was associated with the figure of the "Poetess." According to Todd's words, Emily Dickinson had been an unapproachable hermit, always secluded in her room, a fragile spinster, sensitive and childlike, who suffered from an unrequited love. The creation of this new character had its origin during the poet's lifetime, when neighbors began commenting on her eccentric behavior and her unwillingness to participate in the social events that took place in her hometown. However it was in the hands of Higginson and Todd that the myth of the poetess became widespread, overtaking the female poet's authentic persona; a myth that could not be further away from the truth, for, in reality, Dickinson was acutely aware and vastly engaged in external affairs, despite being a homebody. In addition, she was known to be witty and possess a sharp tongue in her school days.

Later on, in the 1930s, George Frisbie Whicher's *This Was a Poet* (1938) was published, and it offered a more insightful look in the life of the poetess, giving special attention to the intellectual circle and the cultural influences that she was exposed to from an early age and which shaped her in a way. Moreover, it closely examined her reading projects and close friendships. A few years prior, though, Dickinson was painted to be a "romantic figure," deeply invested in her garden—she was an avid flower lover and studied botany—delicate and ethereal and always dressed in white. The author of said depiction was her niece Martha Dickinson Bianchi, daughter of Austin Dickinson and Susan Huntington, the poetess' brother and arguably closest friend respectively, who took over her mother's editorial work and published *Face to Face* in the year 1932. Coupled with *The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson* (1924), also written by Bianchi, *Face to Face* meant to portray a romantic and almost mystical Dickinson living in the idyllic environment that was Homestead, so as to strengthen, yet again, the enigmatic air people often attributed to her persona and that seemed to set her apart from mortality and place her closer to a mythical figure. The underlying purpose of Bianchi's depiction of her aunt was that of "[deflecting the] negative attention from Austin and Susan's marital discord," (Eberwein, 1998) which had sprung with the eldest of the Dickinson's siblings thirteen-year-long affair with none other than Mabel Loomis

Todd. The magnitude of the strife between the Dickinson and Todd families was such that it came to be known as the “War Between the Houses” in Amherst.

Several years after Loomis Todd’s death in 1932, her daughter Millicent Todd Bingham published *Bolt of Melody: New Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1945) and a number of other texts that in their vast majority revolved around the lives of the Dickinson family. Similarly to Bianchi’s works, Todd-Bingham’s narrations were filled with “inconsistencies and manipulative half truths,” as well as an assortment of inaccurate reconstructions of Dickinson’s poetry which showed poor editorial choices (Smith, 1998). The latter of the mentioned faults was specifically and consciously carried out in order to make the late poet’s unconventional poems adjust to the nineteenth century’s reader’s desires.

While Susan’s presence and role both in the writer’s everyday and creative life continued to be overlooked, scholars took a keen interest in other figures, male figures, to be more precise, with whom Dickinson established a frequent epistolary exchange. Among the numerous correspondents, there were a few names that were particularly salient; they were those of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Samuel Bowles and Otis Lord. Dickinson’s correspondence with Higginson, who was a renowned author, was of particular importance, firstly because it was what allowed the poetess to engage in “professional exchanges” with other writers and publishers that became part of her carefully woven intellectual circle (Salska, 1998, p. 167). Yet an even more prominent reason as to why Higginson being one of the main recipients of Dickinson’s letters was relevant, was that of establishing an appropriate readership for her poetry, one that would offer her suitable responses to her art. Missives also granted her a means to explore her creative style and consolidate what would be the basis of her poetry while at the same time they enabled her to receive quality input from her literary peers before she found her judgement to be trustworthy enough to properly judge her own writing (Salska, 1998). Higginson’s close personal and professional relationship with the poetess along with his being well-versed in the business of editing were key motives as to why Loomis Todd requested his aid in revising (and altering) Dickinson’s work, which resulted in both working side by side for the first two volumes of *Poems by Emily Dickinson*.

Despite every academic’s fascination with the female poet’s *oeuvre* and the overall intriguing aura that surrounded both her own being as well as her works, a very small number of (presumably unsent) epistolary drafts garnered the special attention of multiple scholars. These few drafts, three of them to be precise, were addressed to someone Dickinson called “Master,” (from here derived the name of the “Master Letters,” title by which the small



collection of drafts is referred) yet whose real identity was never revealed. Nonetheless, what piqued experts' interest above all was the raw, intense, and even visceral emotional component ingrained in them. The "Master Letters," disclose the tumultuous and passionate nature of a relationship so extreme that the poetess, in a newfound need to suppress the overflowing sentiment, resorted to experimenting with a "stylized formalization of expression" through which she attempted to control the intensity of the feelings she experienced (Salska, 1998, p. 174). However hard Dickinson tried to disguise the raw emotions that bubbled inside her, the straightforwardness of the language used in those drafts emphasized the intensity of what she so wanted to constrain rather than actually repressing it. The "Master Letters" became a space for experimentation; a blank canvas for Dickinson to play with language on, and what allowed her to discover that concentration and restriction were the key to convey fervent emotion, which would subsequently become one of the main traits of her poetry.

In spite of the fact that experts collectively agree that the importance of said drafts lies in their contents, for they served as a tool for Dickinson to test language and develop her style until it became the cryptic yet infinitely poignant one she is known for nowadays, that did not subdue the curiosity to discover who might have been the recipient to whom they were addressed. The numerous speculations and hypotheses academics have come up with have resulted in a debate that has marked the origin of profound disagreements within the community of Dickinson scholars. Some have argued that the figure of the "Master" was an imaginary ideal character that combined certain traits of individuals she was close with, while others claim that what hid behind the character of the "Master" was Dickinson's flesh and blood love interest. In any case, among the multiple candidates proposed and the dozen males that were romantically linked with the poet throughout the years, there were two notably salient names: Samuel Bowles and Charles Wadsworth.

Bowles, born in 1826, was the owner and editor chief of *Springfield Republican*, a greatly known newspaper at that time. Close friends with Austin and Susan Dickinson, he established an acquaintanceship with the poetess through them when he visited the "Evergreens," the couple's house, which was right next to the Homestead. Both went from acquaintances to close friends, their correspondence becoming one of the most voluminous out of Dickinson's epistolarium. He was married to Mary Bowles, with whom Emily Dickinson would also exchange letters in the future. The resemblance between the type of letters Bowles received from the poetess and the "Master Letters" struck scholars such as Richard Sewall and Judith Farr to be an indicator of the editor potentially being the addressee of those drafts. The

imagery evoked in her letters to Bowles was acutely similar to that which she envisioned in the “Master Letters,” to the point that “so precise is the complicity of metaphor used for both men that it is eminently possible to construe them as one and the same. “(Farr, 2004, p. 36) In addition, Dickinson often likened her dear friend to the sun, and called the biography George Merriam wrote of Bowles “a Memoir of the Sun, when the Noon is gone–” (L908), the second half of the statement alluding to the editor’s death in 1878, which explains the mention of the personified “Noon”’s departure. Farr continued to substantiate her point with a comparison between the name with which the speaker of the “Master Letters,” who refers to herself in the third person, identifies and the nickname Bowles himself gave the poetess, both being “Daisy.” The scholar claims that “[w]ithin Dickinson’s prevailing imagery of redemptive light, “Master” is the “Sun” his “Daisy” follows (F161), just as Bowles himself (...) was given the title of the luminous celestial body that makes daisies grow (L908),” that, paired with the various flower-related poems she dedicated to him, make the editor a plausible candidate for the figure of the “Master.” (2004, p. 36) Moreover, in the “Master Letters,” which are presumed to have been written between 1858 and 1863, Dickinson bemoans the ill health of her lover. Coincidentally, Bowles, who was sickly throughout adulthood, was suffering from a great number of ailments then, point that Sewall and Farr also thought to be relevant to support their theory.

The other potential candidate to be the man behind the character of the “Master” was the Reverend Charles Wadsworth, born in 1814. He and the writer would have met in 1855, when the Dickinsons were in Washington paying a visit to the Colemans –family of one of the eccentric poet’s female friends. According to Bianchi, her aunt would “me[e]t her fate” there and fall in love with Wadsworth after attending one of his preachings. They would begin corresponding in 1858, when Dickinson sought his advice on her mother’s ill health, also the same year the poetess wrote the first of the three “Master Letters.” Her attachment to the clergyman was such that she would refer to him as her “closest earthly friend” (L765). Despite the fact that no correspondence between them has survived, it is known that “friends, including possibly Eliza Coleman, sent her copies of his published sermons,” moreover, “[s]everal scholars have noted similar poetic images in his sermons and her poems.” (Strickland, 2004, p. 105) With a wife and two children, Wadsworth was out of the poet’s reach, her infatuation for the pastor was not requited, yet his “unattainability, status, character, age, and intellect make him the logical object of the poet’s tortured expressions of love,” (Buell, 1989, p. 326) a notion that Dickinson’s niece corroborated in *The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson* (1924).

Beyond the possible male candidates hiding behind the “Master” figure, there was another man that was romantically linked with Dickinson. It was her father’s old friend, Otis Lord, who frequented Amherst with his wife either for business reasons or for mere diversion and visited the Homestead occasionally. The epistolary exchanges began close to two decades before their relationship stepped into romantic waters, and their conversations were often laced with a tinge of humor, which “may have been what first endeared the judge to Dickinson.” (Guthrie, 1996, p. 29) The poet’s missives were replete with legal references and even flirtatious remarks disguised under a humorous façade, like in “The Judge is like the Owl,” a poem she wrote in 1863, where she not only mocked both Otis Lord and her own father for underestimating her, but she invites the former to meet her at midnight: “At Midnight – Let the Owl select / His favorite Refrain” (F728A) (Guthrie, 1996, p. 31). Their affair, however, did not begin until after Judge Lord’s wife’s death in 1877, when the poetess was already in her forties. The remaining pieces and excerpts that remain from their letters suggest that the couple contemplated marriage. It was also within their possible plans to have the by then already recluse poetess move into Lord’s house in Salem. Nonetheless, none of those ideas became a reality, although it is not clear whether it was because obstacles, such as the fact that Dickinson’s mother’s declining health, kept getting in the way, or because the poetess rejected the judge’s proposal.

The startling possibility that Dickinson’s love lyrics could have been meant for another woman instead of a man was not laid on the table until 1951 when Rebecca Patterson’s *The Riddle of Emily Dickinson* was published. There, Patterson provides a biography of both Emily Dickinson and her potential female lover Kate Scott Turner, who was also friends with Susan Huntington. So as to bring the separate biographies together, the scholar used their affair –which she reconstructed– as a link. The book, although not well received by the scholarly public, was what pioneered the analysis of Dickinson and her *oeuvre* in feminist and queer theory. Almost two decades later, Dorothy Lochridge wrote her thesis “A Study in the Sexuality of Emily Dickinson, the Spider and the Flower: Manifest Homosexuality and its Significance to Critical Comprehension of the Poetry and the Poet” (1970) where she carefully analyzed the homosexual component of Dickinson’s poetry.

It was not until years later, toward the end of the twentieth century, that Susan Huntington was proposed to be one of the main, if not the main, homoerotic relationship in the poet’s lifetime after decades of neglect. Several scholars such as Lillian Faderman, Martha Nell Smith, Ellen Hart or Judith Farr among others have pointed out the pivotal importance of the later to become Dickinson’s sister-in-law in every aspect of the writer’s life, with arguments

that were clearly supported by the voluminous correspondence they exchanged throughout their approximately four decades of friendship. While academics found it easy to agree that the relevance of Dickinson and Huntington's relationship was unquestionable, difficulties arose when it came to labeling their relationship. For some, it fell within the category of "romantic friendship"; intense, passionate unions between woman friends which were common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The main advocate of such vision of their relationship is Faderman, who, while studying the poetry and epistles Dickinson sent Susan, delved into the world of love between women "from the Renaissance to the Present," as the subtitle of her book *Surpassing The Love of Men* (1981) says, where she discovered that women openly engaged in emotionally charged, intimate and deeply committed friendships that were remarkably similar to heterosexual love with their female friends without feeling any sense of wrongdoing centuries before "the gay liberation days." (1985, p. 15) The scholar also argues that classifying Dickinson's relationship with her sister-in-law Susan as "lesbian" is anachronistic for the understanding our post-Freudian society has of female friendships and homosexual love differs greatly from that of the nineteenth century and has made their relationship become the central pillar of her thesis on romantic friendships.

Another supporter of said categorization is Farr, who, in "Emily Dickinson's 'Engulfing' Play: Antony and Cleopatra," discusses the erotic component of the poet's relationship with her sister-in-law as she explores Dickinson's identification with Antony's character from Shakespeare's play *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607) and the parallelism she established between her relationship with Susan and that of Antony and Cleopatra in the play. She claims that Dickinson was well aware of how sexually charged Shakespeare's piece was, and despite her being a gentlewoman who should find it indecent and vulgar, the poetess felt that the play deeply resonated with her personal relationships, especially her bond with Susan and later on with Otis Lord. Nonetheless, Farr also asks readers to not misinterpret her message, as she "do[es] not mean to suggest, as some recent critics have, that this affection was distinctly lesbian, though Dickinson's wistful delight in both Susan's appearance and her kisses have their measure of eros." (1990, p. 249)

Putting Dickinson's relationship with her sister-in-law under the rubric of "romantic friendship" has not been well received by everyone. In fact, Smith ventured to label their bond as inherently lesbian, arguing that lack of genital contact does not make a same-sex relationship less homosexual. To support her arguments she mentions how Susan deemed some of the poetess' love declarations to be "too adulatory" to be published, hence, their union did not properly "fit under the umbrella of Smith-Rosenberg's nineteenth-century

female world.” (1992, p. 25) Smith provides further justification by stating that Dickinson’s choice of words when professing her love for Susan was neither harmless nor inoffensive, and so “to connote both the eroticism and difference of Dickinson’s affection, *lesbian* [emphasis not mine] [...] is most appropriate for characterizing this relationship.” (1992, p. 25) Moreover, later on, both Smith and Hart would insist, yet again, that “as [their] correspondence shows, [...] Emily and Susan’s relationship surpassed in depth, passion, and continuity the stereotype of the ‘intimate exchange’ between woman friends of the period.” (Hart and Smith, 1998, p. XIV)

Dickinson’s relationship with her sister-in-law is still an object of debate. No matter what labels are thrown into the table, none seems an adequate enough option on which scholars can unanimously agree, perhaps because the essence of its nature was too vast to be placed in a space as constraining as a label.

#### **4. A RELATIONSHIP THAT SURPASSES LABELS**

Dickinson’s relationship with her sister-in-law Susan Huntington has been, as mentioned previously, a source of discord in the scholarly community of Dickinson Studies. While many hypotheses have surfaced in an attempt to shed light on their ambiguous bond and several labels have been used to classify it within a specific category that we, as a society, are already familiar with, one might realize that the shoe does not fit, making all those theories limp. Perhaps if more unblemished primary sources from both parties had survived and were subsequently within our grasp, one of the already existing labels would prove to be an adequate candidate to faithfully describe such a complex relationship.

It is in our human nature to feel uneasy when faced with uncertainty and questions the answers to which we will never know. Hence, it is only natural that individuals insistently attempt to provide solutions to those issues that are beyond reach. Dickinson’s and Huntington’s relationship is no exception, which explains scholars’ desire to unravel the mystery surrounding it. However, the possibility that the scope a label provides is far too narrow to encompass the entirety of their relationship has not been considered in the midst of this quest for knowledge.

The relationship between both women presumably began in their teen years, although the first written record there is of an interaction dates from 1850. The affectionate component was present from the very initial stages of their friendship if the language Dickinson used in her missives to her dear friend was anything to go by. Susan clearly held a very special place

in the poetess' heart, seeing as the latter would refer to Huntington with terms of endearment such as "dear one" or "my darling one." In addition, the words laced with a sense of urgency, need, and, perhaps, what could even be a tinge of desperation that Dickinson sent Susan's way when the latter was teaching in Baltimore give away, yet again, the importance of Huntington's figure in the young poet's life:

Oh my darling one, how long you wander from me, how weary I grow of waiting and looking, and calling for you; sometimes I shut my eyes, and shut my heart towards you, and try hard to forget you because you grieve me so [...] (L73)

That Dickinson profoundly missed her friend is undeniable, her yearning for being close to Susan again is so strong that it becomes painful. In this letter the poetess even confesses to having thought about forgetting the other woman altogether, an option she considered to be less painful than her longing. Of course, this does not imply that their relationship was any more intimate than a typical nineteenth century romantic friendship, for the bond between two close female friends at that time encompassed behaviors that nowadays are considered exclusive of couples. Among these practices were kisses, caresses and effusive expressions of devotion in which they promised to love each other eternally. There are several other instances of affective declarations in Dickinson's correspondence with Susan that at first glance seem to be appropriate within the context of a romantic friendship, like the one in the letter she sent Huntington early in 1852: "Thank you for loving me, darling, and *will* [emphasis not mine] you 'love me more if ever you come home'? – it is enough, dear Susie, I know I shall be satisfied," (L74) or when a couple of months later Dickinson writes "I remember you, Susie, *always* [emphasis not mine] – I keep you ever here, and when *you* [emphasis not mine] are gone, then I'm gone." (L85) From these pieces of evidence, one might agree with Faderman and believe what they had was a tight, intimate friendship like the ones many other female kindred spirits were engaged in at the time.

Nonetheless, the notion of their relationship being exclusively a romantic friendship begins to tremble when at the beginning of 1853 Austin Dickinson started formally courting Susan. The poetess was initially unaware of such thing happening, her letters to the other woman were still lighthearted, sometimes even charming in a teasing way. It was when Austin's engagement to Susan was announced that jealousy caused strife between the Dickinson siblings, who had been fighting for Huntington's affections for years. Emily made no attempt to hide her resentment, and in one of her epistles to her brother she wrote: "Dear

Austin, I am keen, but you are a good deal keener, I am something of a fox, but you are more of a hound!” (L110)

The jealousy that Austin’s betrothal to Susan sparked in the poetess could be explained as an intense reaction to the impending change in the dynamics of her friendship with her so-called darling one and the subsequent detachment marriage would imply. Bearing in mind Dickinson’s devotion to her soon-to-be sister-in-law, said understanding of the poet’s reaction would be plausible. However, what needs to be taken into account as well are the mutilations that were found to appear in the poetess’ letters to her brother; erasures whose presence is first perceived in a letter from as early as 1851. As previously mentioned, the vast majority of these obliterations were of affective comments and anecdotes related to Huntington. In another letter to the eldest of the Dickinson siblings, some of the poetess’ words “are removed and overwritten [...] to masculinize agency” (Smith, 2008):

I shant see *him* this morning, because [*s*]he has to *bake* saturday, but [*s*]he’ll come this afternoon, and we shall read your letter together, and talk of how soon you’ll be here *seven lines erased*. (A 601; L116)

In other occasions, full sentences were censored and removed when the correspondence between both women was published, precisely because the language was too suggestive and erotic, and hence, not condoned neither in the nineteenth nor in the twentieth centuries. In 1852 the poetess wrote Susan a letter in which she desperately declares she aches to have the other woman’s body pressed close to her own:

Susie, will you indeed come home next Saturday, and be my own again, and kiss me as you used to? [...] I hope for you so much, and feel so eager for you, feel that I *cannot* wait, fell that *now* I must have you – that the expectation once more to see your face again, makes me feel hot and feverish, and my heart beats so fast [...] my darling, so near I seem to you, that I *disdain* this pen, and wait for a *warmer* language. (L96)

These modifications might pique one’s curiosity, for if romantic friendships were condoned in the nineteenth century, what need was there to hide the close bond the poet and her dear one shared? Whether those feelings were reciprocated in the early years of their friendship is uncertain, for little to no manuscripts from Susan have survived. Nonetheless, if Dickinson’s

words are any indicator, it is possible that previous to Huntington's engagement to the poetess' brother, they might have been returned.

Not only the tweaks and deletions, but also Susan's admission that a few of Dickinson's expressions of adoration were "too adulatory" to be made public seem to point at the fact that their union had a bigger homoerotic component than the usual romantic friendships. Dickinson's play of choice to represent hers and Susan's relationship being Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, which she knew to be erotically charged, appears to support such notion. The assignation of Cleopatra's role to Huntington while the poetess assumed the position of Antony is suggestive of Dickinson's desire for Susan, as Farr pointed out in "Emily Dickinson's 'engulfing' play: *Antony and Cleopatra*" on the one hand, but also of the sexual dynamic between both women, particularly "Dickinson's unrequited yearning for Susan" on the other. (Comment, 2001, p. 170) Antony, who was mesmerized upon seeing Cleopatra for the first time, was left unsatisfied when he was not able to consummate the sexual desire the woman had ignited in him, consequently "pay[ing] his heart for what his eyes can eat, only," a line Dickinson would use in her letter-poem to Susan in 1883:

Will my great  
Sister accept  
the minutiae of  
Devotion, with ti-  
midity that it is  
no more?  
Susan's Calls are  
like Antony's  
Supper –  
"And pays his  
Heart for what  
his Eyes eat,  
only,"

Emily' (OMC232; L854)

As Kristin M. Comment (2001) claims, Dickinson's recurrent adoption of Antony's role when she expressed the physical yearning she experienced for her sister-in-law fits within the pattern of the "literary game" both women played, and more specifically, proved to be a



consistent way to “encode” her carnal lust. The poetess’ awareness of this ardent desire and her conscious allusion to it through the use of Shakespeare’s play suggest that the homoerotic element of their relationship extended past the intimate displays of physical affection between two romantic friends.

This is not to say that the bond the poetess shared with her sister-in-law was inherently lesbian, for as Faderman argued, said perception is completely anachronistic and subsequently not coherent, not because there is no proof of physical consummation, but rather because the concept of “lesbian” encompasses a number of social implications that were unthinkable in the nineteenth century.

Most importantly, despite the fact that a voluminous amount of their correspondence has survived, it is not unscathed, and barely any epistles from Susan’s side remain, as they were probably burnt as requested by the poetess. Either way, Dickinson’s letters seem to imply that her passionate feelings were not returned with the same intensity, for while she admitted to being weak for her sister-in-law, “Susan knows / she is a Siren – / and that at a / word from her, / Emily would / forfeit Righteousness –” (OMC188, L554) she felt neglected by Huntington, who after becoming the wife of the prestigious lawyer was swallowed up by the airs and mannerisms of the higher classes, which “st[u]ng [Emily] – again.” (P156)

Nonetheless, Farr (1990) points out that when Otis Lord began courting Dickinson between the late 1870s and early 1880s, Susan, who appeared to have been jealous, fiercely reacted to the happenings, which resulted in her claiming that “[Emily and her sister Vinnie] have not, either of them, any idea of morality,” in a letter she wrote to Loomis Todd in 1881. Such a response could suggest that, deep down, Huntington did return the poetess’ ardent feelings and physical desire, or perhaps, what hid behind that jealousy was the crippling fear of losing what had been one of the most important constants in Susan’s life (it is appropriate to remember that those years constituted a period plagued with the multiple losses of loved ones on both parts.) Yet if cooled down and slightly more distant, Susan’s profound esteem for the poetess never dissipated, her nursing Dickinson through her final moments is solid proof of that as well.

We must not forget either that among this entanglement of romantic, erotic and platonic feelings that constituted their complex relationship, Dickinson’s bond with Susan also explored the author-critic and writer-reader dynamics throughout their almost four-decade lasting tie. Huntington was Dickinson’s most trusted reader and the one person who had the chance to enjoy the most number of verses the poetess wrote while she was still alive, “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers” is an example. Dickinson confided some of her poems to the

other woman, who offered her opinion and suggestions on them, when she deemed her own judgment to be not trustworthy.

Emily Dickinson's relationship with Susan Huntington, then, should not be restricted by means of giving it a label, as that only contributes to the simplification and trivialization of it. A bond like the one they shared, complex and most probably changing throughout the different phases of their lives, has so many layers that make it difficult, if not impossible to place it, at least, under any of the currently existing rubrics. Their relationship was one of a kind; so grand and unique, encompassing platonic and romantic love, as well as eroticism and jealousy, that it persistently entralls us even to this day. It is also the mystery by which their union is enveloped, the knowledge that the real nature of their relationship will never be unveiled for there are many missing pieces of the puzzle, which sparks our fascination.

## 5. CONCLUSION

It is fairly safe to claim that no matter how many times North America's most eccentric female poet's life and correspondence with her beloved sister-in-law Susan Huntington Dickinson are revisited and reanalyzed, the true nature of their intense relationship will always remain in the dark. Speculations, theories and labels can be laid down on the table in an attempt to describe their bond and uncover the truth hidden behind the drapes of mystery that shield it. Nonetheless, however much amount of effort has been put, and keeps on being put on shedding light on the link that united both women, it is obvious that, for one reason or another, there isn't any label that fits just right.

The loss of Susan's side of the correspondence –which in itself could constitute proof that the interactions between her and the poetess were a few steps further from a nineteenth century romantic friendship– raises even more questions on the matter. As mentioned, the very destruction of the missives could speak volumes about the nature of the relationship, but again, such conjecture cannot be proven, and hence, it hangs by a thread despite having a mattress of other arguments that support it right below in case it collapses.

That their relationship as a two-way channel of equal emotional reciprocity cannot be classified with finality under a rubric is not to mean an understanding of Dickinson's feelings toward Susan cannot be reached. Although, again, we will never know for sure, her effusive messages and the fervent expressions of love and desire present in several of her epistles addressed to Susan as well as in other lyrics can help one build an idea of the type of feelings the poetess harbored for her sister-in-law. If her allusions to Shakespeare's play *Antony and*

*Cleopatra* in her correspondence with Huntington are any indicator of the real nature of her sentiments toward her beloved friend, the premise that Dickinson's affections fell within those characteristic of romantic friendships is difficult to uphold. The lust and eroticism in the poetess' references of choice to Shakespeare's most carnal play are too intense, especially for a lady of the upper-middle classes who should be scandalized by the contents of such a theatrical piece, heavily frowned upon at the time.

While labeling Emily Dickinson as a lesbian is anachronistic, seeing as such concept encompasses a number of social and cultural implications that the poetess did not follow as they were introduced later in the twentieth century, it is well-founded to state that her feelings for Susan were, at some point, similar to those of women loving women feel toward their romantic partners, even if perhaps unrequited. However, that does not rule out the idea that Dickinson had affairs with male individuals such as Otis Lord throughout her lifetime, as both notions are not mutually exclusive.

As for Huntington, it is undeniable that she held the poetess close to her heart and loved her dearly; her nursing a sickly Dickinson through her last days of her life is proof of that. Nonetheless, the depth and intensity of Susan's feelings for her beloved poet friend, if we base ourselves on Dickinson's account of events, could not be matched to the poetess', even though the jealousy she made explicit in her letter to Loomis Todd when her dear Emily was being courted by Otis Lord may indicate otherwise. In any case, little to no manuscripts of her side of the correspondence she established with Dickinson's have survived, which makes this puzzle impossible to solve.

In the end, a bond as complex and magical as theirs should not find itself constrained by the confinements of a label. No matter the true nature of their relationship, it is clear even to the naked eye that care, mutual respect and affection were at the base of the union that joined both their lives for nearly four decades.

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