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The American
University in Cairo

School of Humanities
and Social Sciences

**Womanist Poetics:
Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, and Audre Lorde**

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of

English and Comparative Literature

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Aya Telmissany

Under the supervision of

Dr. Ferial Ghazoul

March 2022

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To my mother, Hala, who surrounded me with hundreds of books ever since I can remember and who read me to sleep as a child. To my father, Yasser, who never thought twice when spending on my education and my book hoarding habits. To my husband, Mohamed, who encouraged me and believed in me every step of the way. To my supervisor, Dr. Ferial Ghazoul, who believed in my potential and gave me the space to grow academically throughout my undergraduate and graduate years at AUC. To my readers, Dr. Tahia Abdel Nasser and Dr. Martin Moraw who have always supported my unconventional ideas. To my recently departed high-school professor, Maha El-Zokm, who helped me discover my path in life and whose footsteps I followed into the department of English and Comparative Literature at AUC. You are still alive in me.

Abstract

Today, the sentimentality associated with poetry is often condescendingly dubbed in a patriarchal society as “feminine poetry.” The first women poets who dared to attempt the pen were often met with attacks on their femaleness and harsh critiques of their writing which was likened to sorcery and witchcraft. Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, and Audre Lorde are three American women poets who countered these attacks and turned them inside out in favor of their own womanist poetics. They wrote about experiencing the world as women and most importantly about experiencing poetry as women. What happens to poetry when a woman appropriates it as a craft? Is it altered in any fundamental way? Does it remain the same? Is it in a way recreated as a new and distinct genre? How does gender impact the poetry and poetics of Dickinson, Stein, and Lorde? and to what extent do their contributions appropriate and reshape patriarchal poetry? These are all questions which this project attempts to answer through an analysis of poetry extracted from works by these three women poets: Dickinson’s *The Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1955), Stein’s *Tender Buttons* (1914) and *Stein: Writings 1903-1932* (1998), and Lorde’s *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (2000). Poems are closely read and analyzed through Gilbert and Gubar’s methodology of sexual linguistics which uses aspects of the anatomy of the female body to reclaim the poetic craft for themselves and to challenge the existing sexist and patriarchal models on which the history of poetry and authorship is constructed.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
Introduction: Women Poets at a Linguistic Impasse	1
Chapter I. Poetry in the Domestic: The Poetry of Emily Dickinson	17
Chapter II. The Need for a New Language: The Poetry of Gertrude Stein	42
Chapter III. Poetics of the Black Feminine: The Poetry of Audre Lorde	65
Conclusion: Women Writing Women into Being.....	90
Works Cited	101

Introduction

Women Poets at a Linguistic Impasse

What people tend to call “feminine writing” is a style of writing that is excessively flowery and emotional, or writing that concerns itself with subjects such as nature, love, marriage, etc. Those same topics were frequently addressed by male Romantic poets and their writing was hardly ever characterized (or dubbed) as feminine; nor was it ever characterized as manly for that matter. Gender did not enter the writing equation until women dared to “attempt the pen” as Anne Finch (1661-1730) would put it. As their participation in the writing scene was not well received, the first women writers suffered much harsher criticism than male writers of their time. From there, the term “feminine writing” was used not only to ostracize women’s writing but also to critique bad male writing.

In this thesis, I examine the term “women’s writing” while keeping in mind the term “*écriture féminine*” and its existing connotations of female, feminine, or feminist, hence the title “Womanist Poetics.” The etymology of the word “womanist” in *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) states the following:

In the specific uses of the noun and adjective with reference to black feminism (compare *womanism n. 2b*) popularized by the work of U.S. writer Alice Walker (b. 1944) and used as a conscious alternative to *feminist n.* and *feminist adj.* respectively, partly owing to the more immediate association with *woman n.* and related words (as e.g. *womanish adj. 3b*).

I am using the term “womanist” while bearing in mind the politics of naming that lie beneath it.

As stated in the above cited OED etymological definition, “womanism” is a term coined by the

African American author Alice Walker as a “conscious alternative to ‘feminist’” (OED). Black women often viewed feminism (especially first-wave feminism) as a widely white cause that had no place for women of color. The term “womanist” is, in that regard, more inclusive than the term “feminist.” I also prefer to use “womanist” rather than “feminist” due to “the more immediate association with *woman n.* and related words (as e.g. *womanish adj. 3b*)” (OED). This notion of “more immediate association” is of importance to my argument because I aim to study the “womanness” of women poets’ poetry rather than its “femininity.” The term “feminist” finds its linguistic root in the classical Latin *fēmina* which means woman (OED); however, today’s common use of the root “*fem*” has shifted its meaning from “woman” to “the concept of a woman” (i.e. feminine, femininity). I believe that the term “womanist” grounds us in the study of womanness as it is experienced by women themselves rather than the study of society’s idea of womanhood. On those same grounds, I prefer to talk of “*écriture-femme*” (writing-woman) rather than “*écriture féminine*” (feminine writing), just like Béatrice Didier who did not feel comfortable using the term “*écriture féminine*” and titled her 1981 book *L’écriture-femme*, instead (qtd. in Jensen 6).

Additionally, feminism is more limiting than womanism in the sense that it is more critical of certain personal choices made by women--specifically, choices that concern domesticity. The domesticity of women throughout the ages has often been rejected and criticized by feminists even in cases where domesticity was not necessarily imposed by a patriarchal society or figure. In this thesis, the poetry that I analyze, which I categorize as womanist, celebrates such domesticity and elevates it to the level of poetry.

In the introduction titled “Womanism: On Its Own” of Layli Phillips’ edited book *The Womanist Reader*, the author delves into the origins and implications of the term womanist. She starts by saying that

Because the definition of “womanist” offered by Walker was *poetic in nature*, it became, on the one hand, immediately attractive to and resonant for many people who were searching for an alternative to “feminist” as an identity or praxis and, on the other hand, theoretically slippery and frustrating to scholars and activists accustomed to working within a decidedly feminist frame. (xix; emphasis added)

The poetic nature of the term “womanist” is perhaps what sets it the most apart from other social movements which are concerned with the condition of women (i.e. feminism, black feminism, etc.). This poetic nature of the term “womanist” is also the reason why I find the womanist lens more pertinent in the study of women’s poetry than the feminist lens which, in the word of Phillips, is more “exclusive” and “limited” (xx), and which carries more political activism than spiritual understanding. Like Phillips, “I take the perspective that womanism is not feminism. Its relationships to feminism (including Black feminism) are important, but its relationships to other critical theories and social-justice movements are equally important, despite being less frequently discussed or acknowledged” (xx).

Because of the “more immediate association with *woman n.*,” womanism feels more “natural” and in-tune with reality than feminism which sounds more conceptual and theoretical. Phillips explains this by stating that

[w]hat is interesting is that, since the beginning, the womanist frame has been applied more frequently than it has been written about. That is, more people have employed womanism than have described it. What this reflects is the tendency of womanism to be approached and expressed intuitively rather than analytically. (xxi)

This intuitive aspect of womanism is often found in women's poetry and specifically in many of the poems which I will analyze in this thesis.

The definition of womanism which I adopt in this thesis is the following:

Womanism manifests five overarching characteristics: (1) it is antioppressionist, (2) it is vernacular, (3) it is nonideological, (4) it is communitarian, and (5) it is spiritualized. (Phillips xxiv)

The antioppressionist and communitarian characteristics are more or less a given in any movement that concerns itself with the condition of women (or any other social group for that matter). I am more interested, here, in characteristics number 2, 3, and 5 which Phillips explains in more detail:

“Vernacular” identifies womanism with “the everyday”—everyday people and everyday life. [...] “Nonideological” refers to the fact that womanism abhors rigid lines of demarcation and tends to function in a decentralized manner. Statements like “You’re either in or you’re out” and “You’re either with us or against us” do not compute for womanists. Womanism is not about creating lines of demarcation; rather, it is about building structures of inclusiveness and positive interrelationship from anywhere in its network. [...] Womanism is not a rule-based system, and it does not need to resolve internal disagreement to function effectively. It is a nondisciplinary system; there are no “lines in the sand.” [...] “Spiritualized” refers to the fact that womanism openly acknowledges a spiritual/transcendental realm with which human life, livingkind, and the material world are all intertwined. For womanists, this realm is actual and palpable, and the relationship between it and humans is neither abstract nor insignificant to politics. [...] Perspectives that are more academic or ideological have typically avoided incorporation of spiritual/transcendental considerations. Womanism, on the other hand, is quite adamant about the reality and importance of the spiritual world, with less concern for the diversity of ways that it is conceptualized. Of all the characteristics that distinguish womanism from other critical, theoretical, or ideological perspectives, this one is perhaps the most unique and potentially controversial. (xxiv-xxvi)

My idea of womanist poetry and poetics is based on the above definition in the sense that womanist poetry is poetry which is grounded in the “everyday life” of women, it is fluid, and it is

openly and politically “spiritualized.” I do not mean “spiritualized” in the religious sense of the word but rather, as Phillips does, in the inner and intangible sense of the word.

I am interested in the effects of a woman’s sexual identity (her feelings of womanness) on her poetic production. More specifically I examine what women’s poetic writing is. What happens to poetry when a woman appropriates it as a craft? Is it altered in any fundamental way? Does it remain the same? Is it in a way recreated as a new and distinct genre? I analyze the works of three American poets from different eras: Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), and Audre Lorde (1934-1992). This analysis takes place through a series of close readings of individual poems and essays by the three authors rather than through the analysis of integral collections, with the intention of arriving at the specificity of what I call their womanist poetics. The poems I am dealing with are selected from Dickinson’s *The Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1955), Stein’s *Tender Buttons* (1914) and *Stein: Writings 1903-1932* (1998), and Lorde’s *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (2000).

The analysis of their poetical works is written in answer to the following question: How does gender impact their poetry and poetics? And to what extent do their contributions appropriate and reshape the existing patriarchal poetic discourse? I am reading these poets’ individual works through a gendered lens while acknowledging that there are many other possibilities for reading them which I do not wish to exclude. My thesis is organized in five sections: the first section is the introduction which outlines my project, Chapter I is concerned with Emily Dickinson, Chapter II with Gertrude Stein, Chapter III with Audre Lorde, and finally the last section consists of the conclusion.

Literature written by women has become a genre of its own. We often find many anthologies with titles such as *Eighteenth-Century Women* by Bridget Hill, *The Writings of*

Medieval Women by Marcelle Thiebaut, *Poetry by Women in Ireland* by Lucy Collins, *Victorian Women Poets* by Leighton and Reynolds, etc. We hardly ever find the same kind of anthologies for male poets, at least not in their titles. Most poetry anthologies that do not indicate any notions of gender in their titles are compilations of works by white male poets, because we live in a world where male is the norm and female is the other. The same could be said about anthologies of African American poets: there are many anthologies that amass the poetic works of African Americans while clearly stating so in their title; but on the other hand, it is very unlikely to find an anthology which states in its title that it is a compilation of white people's poetry because it has become assumed that white is the norm in the same way that male is the norm. As my thesis deals with the poetry of Audre Lorde, I am also interested in the effects of race as well as gender on women's poetry.

All three women poets included in my thesis were strongly aware of the patriarchal societies they lived in and they challenged them not only by the mere act of writing poetry but also by the content of their poetry. Even though American society differed greatly from Dickinson's time to Lorde's, patriarchal hegemony never ceased to exist; it only metamorphosed into different images. Challenging the patriarchy in the cases of these three women poets does not necessarily mean writing polemically. Sometimes, it simply meant embracing their femininity in their writing of poetry and making poetry as a woman, rather than applying the poetic mold which the "white forefathers" (to use Lorde's term) predetermined for them.

In my methodology, I resort to sexual linguistics to explore the metaphors that are used when discussing literature. Men often talk about literature in sexual terms that put the male author in the role of a father whose fertile pen(is) engenders the text. Along the same lines, when talking about translation, male philosophers such as George Steiner refer to the act of translation

as a penetrative act where the text represents a penetrated woman who was originally fathered by a male author and then ravaged by a male translator; he also adds that “eros and language mesh at every point. Intercourse and discourse, copula and copulation, are sub-classes of the dominant fact of communication [...] Sex is a profoundly semantic act [...] ejaculation is at once a physiological and a linguistic concept” (qtd. in Chamberlain 321). In my thesis, I revise these metaphors through the use of female sexual anatomy rather than androcentric sexual linguistics.

“If the pen is a metaphorical penis, with what organs can females generate texts?” Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest that question while admitting that it “may seem frivolous but [...] both the patriarchal etiology that defines a solitary Father God as the only creator of all things, and the male metaphors of literary creation that depend upon such an etiology, have long ‘confused’ literary women, readers and writers alike” (*The Madwoman* 7). Many of my theoretical texts address that question in one way or another but so do some of my primary texts.

Emily Dickinson wrote at a time when social restrictions for women and gender roles were much more prominent than they were during Stein’s and Lorde’s time. However, because she did not mean for her poetry to be read by the public, she allowed herself a lot of freedom to speak her mind freely and to express her womanhood the way *she* views womanhood rather than the way the patriarchy views it. At the same time, this allowed her to reshape poetry in many aspects: the most obvious peculiarity about her poetry might be the excessive use of hyphens and random capitalization, but she also wrote about topics that were not necessarily thought of as poetic and she resorted to new imagery that did not follow the ways of the “white forefathers.”

Paula Bennet puts it well when she says that in Dickinson’s poetry

[her] gender is central to [her] poetic development, not only yielding much of [her] poetic substance, but more importantly, comprising [her] lyric identity, or voice. [she does] not just write

poems about women, [she is a woman] in [her] poems and [her] identity as [a woman] is what [she writes] about. (8)

In my chapter on Dickinson, I analyze poems by her where she deals with specifically female and domestic activities such as sweeping, knitting, running errands, etc. Dickinson refused to marry and looked down upon the domestic life of a married woman. In fact, she even looked down upon her own mother for lacking intellect and for only devoting her life to her husband and her domestic existence. She hated house chores and rarely ever engaged in them, yet some of her best poems are about the engagement in such female activities. “The roles of ‘writer’ and ‘woman’ are in some way incompatible,” says poet and critic Anne Stevenson in her essay “Writing as a Woman” (160). She goes on:

Writing poetry is not like most jobs; it can't be rushed or done well between household chores—at least not by me. The mood of efficiency, of checking things off the list as you tear through a day's shopping, washing, cleaning, mending and so forth is totally destructive of the slightly bored melancholy which nurtures my imagination [...] I have to be a writer with a handicap. One way out of the dilemma of the woman/writer is to write poems about the dilemma itself. Though I have never considered myself to be a specifically feminist poet, many of my poems are about being trapped in domestic surroundings. (163-64)

While Dickinson does write of the life imposed on her as a woman, she does not always present it to her readers as a dilemma in the way Stevenson suggests. On the contrary, in some of her poetry she presents house chores as art and she often compares the woman at work in a domestic environment to a poet at work. Not to say that this suggests her fondness of house chores, but it does give an indication to her ability to transform a prison into a haven.

One thing to note about Stevenson's argument is her reluctance to identify as a feminist poet. Feminism as a political movement has engendered many controversies through the ages and to this day. We often speak of “true feminism” or “real feminism” or “original feminism” as

though suggesting that it has been stained or tampered with. That may be to some extent true as there are extremists in every political movement. Despite not considering herself a feminist, Stevenson does write poetry about feminist issues. Being a woman, existing in society as a woman, comes with challenges and issues that cannot be ignored or disregarded and will affect a woman's life whether she chooses to identify as a feminist or not. I prefer to speak of a "womanist" poetics rather than a "feminist" poetics for that reason specifically, because I am more interested in the effects of identifying as a woman on one's poetry rather than in the labels of the woman poet's political identification.

In an essay titled "Towards a Feminist Poetics," Elaine Showalter divides feminist criticism into two types:

The first type is concerned with *woman as reader*—with woman as the consumer of male-produced literature, and with the way in which the hypothesis of a female reader changes our apprehension of a given text, awakening us to the significance of its sexual codes. I shall call this kind of analysis the *feminist critique*, and like other kinds of critique it is a historically grounded inquiry which probes the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena. Its subjects include the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism, and the fissures in male-constructed literary history. [...]

The second type of feminist criticism is concerned with *woman as writer*—with woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women. Its subjects include the psychodynamics of female creativity; linguistics and the problem of a female language; the trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career; literary history; and, of course, studies of particular writers and works. No term exists in English for such a specialized discourse, and so I have adapted the French term *la gynocritique* 'gynocritics' [...] The feminist critique is essentially political and polemical, with theoretical affiliations to Marxist sociology and aesthetics; gynocritics is more self-contained and experimental, with connections to other modes of new feminist research. (25-26)

What Showalter calls gynocritics is the type of feminist criticism that is of more interest to me here and which I am attempting to apply in this thesis. The very fact that Showalter had to invent (or borrow) a term to describe this kind of feminist criticism is highly indicative of the patriarchal values that are instilled in the roots of the English language. The main difference that Showalter notes between feminist critique and gynocritics is that the former is political and polemical, meaning that it seeks social change in favor of women and condemns the patriarchal values of society. Gynocritics, however, are more “self-contained” in the sense that they are more concerned with the inner life of a woman’s mind rather than her relation to the society she lives in. This distinction explains why I choose to talk about a womanist poetics rather than a feminist poetics.

In addition to analyzing the role of the woman poet, my thesis also delves into an analysis of the role of women *in* poetry (that would fall under what Showalter calls “feminist critique”). Women have long been identified with poetry, however, not as agents but as objects. The Greek mythological representation of the nine muses who inspired artistic creation as women has long fed the western idea that women inspired art rather than created it. Petrarch’s Laura was often described not only as the lover who inspired the poet’s love sonnets, but as poetry itself. The name Laura resonates with the laurel tree of which was made the crown that topped poets’ heads (hence the term poet laureate). If we go even further back to Greek mythology again, Apollo the god of poetry pursued Daphne who did not love him back, tried to escape him, and called out for the goddess Gaia’s help who eventually transformed her into a laurel tree. The infatuated Apollo pursued his one-sided romance with the now objectified Daphne. Being the god of poetry and music, Apollo started the association of laurel trees with poetry, but that laurel tree was initially a woman.

Such myths have deeply affected society's view on the role of women when it comes to poetry. Women are identified thus with both poetry and nature. In an essay titled "Representing Women: Representing the Past," Gillian Beer suggests that

The identification of women with nature has sometimes empowered women but also acts as a restricting metaphor. It has been adopted by women themselves without always sufficient analysis of its implications. [...] The identification of woman with nature has prolonged the idea of separate spheres and has tended to figure woman as the object: an object of pursuit, enquiry, knowing. The pursuit representing man as pursuing, even, as an experimenter, entering and rupturing. (71)

While on one hand, nature is often gendered as female in western culture through the common use of expressions such as "Mother Nature" or "Mother Earth," on the other, science is gendered as male. To go back to my methodology of sexual linguistics, just as a male penetrates and impregnates a female, it is science which penetrates and impregnates nature. Science exploits, explains, classifies, and categorizes nature just like man does to woman in a patriarchal setting. In my analysis of the poetry of Dickinson and Lorde particularly, I focus on their approach to nature in order to determine how they relate to it or identify with it at times as women poets. "One of the problems of the feminist critique," says Showalter in her essay "Towards a Feminist Poetics," "is that it is male-oriented. If we study stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics, and the limited roles women play in literary history, we are not learning what women felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be" (27).

In the conclusion titled "A Feminine Tradition" to her book *Women Writers and Poetic Identity*, Margaret Homans discusses the interchangeability of Eve with Mother Nature in "masculine culture." She opposes that to Dickinson's reading of Eve as "the first human speaker to learn non-literal language, and therefore the most suitable prototype for poetic subjectivity [...] Dickinson celebrates Eve's duplicity, her invention of the art of concealment." Homans then

suggests that “to become poets, women must shift from agreeing to see themselves as daughters of nature and as parts of the world of objects to seeing themselves as daughters of an Eve reclaimed for their poetry” (215-16). Homans’s argument is in line with Dickinson’s poetics in the sense that she fights the patriarchy by subverting its existing discourse rather than refusing it altogether. She moves on to claim that “Patriarchal culture may have particularly misused language in its perceptions of women [hysteria and its relation to the womb for instance], as feminist arguments maintain, but language is inherently fictive and creates masks whether or not the speaker or writer wishes it” (216). This fictionality of language is specifically the main aspect of discourse which the three women poets I am analyzing tend to make the best use of. Since language is fictive, it is malleable and can be used in many different ways to either undo or counteract the damage done by commonly-used language in the first place.

The methodology of sexual linguistics is often at the very heart of our approach to literature even though we are hardly ever aware of it. Sometimes, it is grounded in the roots and origins of language. In their essay on “Sexual Linguistics,” Gilbert and Gubar take a closer look at T.S. Eliot’s poem “Hysteria”:

The speaker of the prose poem ‘Hysteria’, for instance, staring into the deep throat of a laughing woman, surely suffers from a hysteria he has caught from her, a hysteria about her *hyster*, her womb and its mysterious ‘hystery’. Contaminated by the female, he has been feminized and paralyzed. (83)

Hysteria which is associated with psychological and mental disorders finds its root in the word *womb*. In other words, it is as if hysteria is the disease of owning a womb which translates itself into symptoms of exaggerated and uncontrollable emotion. Female genitalia are used linguistically to oppress and ostracize women. However, in chapters II and III when I deal with the poetry of Dickinson and Stein, I analyze their use of hysteria and witchcraft into their own

advantage. Hysteria and witchcraft are two main accusations many women have faced over ages, especially women who dared to be poets. In my chapter on Emily Dickinson I discuss how and why she often referred to women's poetry as witchcraft. But perhaps it is more linguistically apparent in Stein's use of excessive repetitions in her poetry, intending to sound hysterical in her writing, producing thus a language that is only accessible to *hyster* owners, to women.

Gertrude Stein turns poetry into a female body by completely altering the grammar and structure of it. Metaphorically and, generally speaking, poetry was a male body fathered by a male author— neat and unambiguous with little mystery involved. Stein, however, transforms that overtly obvious male body into a female body full of charm and mystery; “as Stein digs her hands into the materiality of language,” says Jeanne Holand, “abetting its resistance to patriarchal law, the very faces of the words play along as well” (546). Stein writes in a secret codified language that challenges patriarchal views on poetry, limiting thus their access to her poetry but also allowing herself to speak freely without fearing repercussion or censorship.

Women's need for a language of their own has been around for ages. Their exclusion from the world of man, and often times, from the language of man, has birthed this need. Gilbert and Gubar focus on this issue in their essay on “Sexual Linguistics,” asserting that “such ‘literary daughters of educated men’ knew that the education in the classics which their brothers received – that is, education in Latin and Greek – functioned [...] as a crucial step in gender demarcation” (86). Latin and Greek were considered for a long time in the West to be the official language of the state and of theology, but also of history. Having access to such languages, opened many doors to men that remained closed to women. Gilbert and Gubar give us many examples of women authors such as Fanny Burney, Christina Stead, Louie Pollit, Edith Wharton, Willa

Cather, and many others who attempted to create a secret female language in their literary works which was often associated with “female sorcery” (87).

Even this approach to language can be seen through the lens of sexual linguistics. Our first language is often referred to as a “mother tongue”; it is an easily accessible tongue which requires almost no effort of acquiring because it is fed to us by our mothers just like milk. Latin and Greek, however are—as Ong put it—“inherited as land is, an external possession [which] refers to a [legalistic] line of conveyance, not to personal origins” (qtd. in Gilbert & Gubar, “Sexual Linguistics” 91). Women who were not allowed to inherit for centuries in the West, couldn’t possibly be allowed to inherit these culturally valuable languages. This father tongue which was the original tongue of poetry couldn’t possibly be passed on to women. So women poets wrote in their mother tongues but altered them into a secret coded language that could not be accessible to men who dismissed these languages as hysteria, witchcraft, and female sorcery. “Women’s imaginary languages,” suggest Gilbert and Gubar, “arise out of a desire for linguistic primacy and are often founded on a celebration of the primacy of the mother tongue. For men, however, the case is different. ‘Sexism in language,’ as Christiane Olivier has pointed out, ‘[may be] the result of man’s fear of using the same words as women, his fear of finding himself in the same place as the mother’” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar “Sexual Linguistics” 95).

Audre Lorde, in her famous essay “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” defines women’s poetry: “for each of us as women, there is a dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises, ‘beautiful/and tough as chest-nut/stanchions against (y)our nightmare of weakness/’ and of impotence” (*Sister Outsider* 25). In these lines, Lorde cites her poem “Black Mother Woman,” and ties it in with what she believes poetry represents. Her description of the dark place within each woman where our true spirits are “hidden and growing” is evocative of the image of a

womb. In answer to Gilbert and Gubar's question we could say that the organ with which females write is the womb. Lorde forms a parallel between poetry and procreation, or rather poetry and childbearing. As a Black lesbian feminist poet, Lorde seems to negate the role of the male in procreation with her mention of the "nightmare of weakness/and of impotence," where she likens poetic writing to an asexual form of childbearing. Lorde also defines poetry as a secret language that women are naturally born with or that they inherit from their mothers. She contrasts this maternal definition of poetry to "the white fathers'" poetry which she believes to be a "sterile word play" (26).

In my analysis of Lorde's poetry, I focus on her role as a Black woman poet and mother because she often resorts to metaphors where poetry is being birthed from different organs of the woman's body. Gilbert and Gubar mention Erich Neumann's *The Great Mother* and oppose it to "more fatherly works by Freud and Lacan." They go on citing Neumann: "'the positive femininity of the womb appears as a mouth ... and on the basis of this positive symbolic equation the mouth, as 'upper womb,' is the birth place of the breath and the word, the Logos'" ("Sexual Linguistics" 97). Gilbert and Gubar comment then on Neumann's ideas suggesting that "the very fact that one can metaphorize the mouth as a womb, the Word as the child of female power, implies that women need not experience any ontological alienation from the idea of language as we know it" (97). Audre Lorde has often referred to the throat and/or the mouth as the birthplace of her poetry. Neumann's metaphor of the mouth as an "upper-womb" rather than the hand which holds the pen for instance, or the mind which comes up with the words, suggest that poetry is first and foremost oral. The orality of poetry is of great interest to Audre Lorde who argues that poetry is present at the very heart of Black female speech. In fact, in my chapter

on Lorde I discuss her relationship to her mother's speech which she believes ignited her passion for poetry.

Women's poetry has been around for centuries and has been critiqued in negative terms, in positive terms, and in sexist terms. Almost all of these critiques were accompanied with political views and agendas. My thesis analyzes the writings of these three female poets in order to extract out of this analysis a womanist poetics which concerns itself with the effect that gender has on women's poetry psychologically speaking rather than just politically. I aim to analyze the way these women viewed themselves as poets rather than the way society viewed them as poets.

Chapter I.

Poetry in the Domestic: The Poetry of Emily Dickinson

One of the most important notes to keep in mind when analyzing Dickinson's poetry is that we were not meant to be analyzing it at all. Dickinson did not write with the intention of being published; in fact, she despised publication and likened it to "the Auction/ of the Mind of Man" in one of her famous poems (J709/ pp. 348-49 [using the abbreviated way of referring to Dickinson's poems followed by the pages of the poem in the source I used]). Many theories have been put forward in answer to why Emily Dickinson did not publish her poetry and only shared it in letters with a selected circle of close friends and relatives. Some theories propose that she could not publish her writing (although she wanted to) because of her father and the patriarchal society in which she lived that did not allow women to enter the writing scene. This is the theory that Apple TV Plus went with when they produced the 2019 TV series *Dickinson*. However, many critics challenged this theory while claiming that Dickinson was unpublished by choice because she viewed publication as part of the commodification system which she fought against in her poetry. That explains why she viewed it as the auction of the mind of *man* specifically. In any case, this refusal of publication gave Dickinson the liberty to speak her mind much more freely than she would have if she were writing for a wider public. She still disguised her thoughts in metaphors for safety *and* for aesthetic effect.

Emily Dickinson lived at a time when society viewed the woman's right place to be the house and her duties consisted of obeying the husband or the parents while helping around with housework and chores. This is the example that Dickinson saw in her mother but she detested it and wanted to be more like her father, to have an intellect and have opinions about the world.

However, she wanted to keep these opinions private; she only shared them in letters to her direct entourage and refused to publish any of her writing. This modesty is very similar to the feminine modesty that her society imposed on women—women in public must cover their bodies, lower their voices, try to exist as little as possible in order not to ‘tempt’ men into sin the way Eve tempted Adam out of heaven. But is that really the reason why Dickinson refused publication so intensely? To answer that, let us take a closer look at her famous anti-publication poem:

Publication – is the Auction
Of the Mind of Man –
Poverty – be justifying
For so foul a thing

Possibly – but We – would rather
From Our Garret go
White – Unto the White Creator –
Than invest – Our Snow –

Thought belong to Him who gave it –
Then – to Him Who bear
Its Corporeal illustration – Sell
The Royal Air –

In the Parcel – Be the Merchant
Of the Heavenly Grace –
But reduce no Human Spirit
To Disgrace of Price – (J 709/ pp. 348-49)

The poem has a satirical tone that imitates the puritan sin-obsessed discourse that Dickinson was surrounded by. If we were to rewrite the first stanza into a puritan discourse it would read like this: “Prostitution is the auction of the body of woman, poverty justifying such a foul thing.” The word play is no coincidence here, both “prostitution” and “publication” start with the same sound and have the same number of syllables. Dickinson is trying to revert the patriarchal discourse by using its same form while attacking it. She accuses men of shamelessly selling their writing (and by extension their intellect) and justifying it with their need for money.

This stanza raises an implicit but important question: why is it unacceptable for a woman to “sell” her body but acceptable for a man to “sell” his mind? Even though puritan thought has always glorified the reign of the mind and/or soul over the body, wouldn’t then selling one’s mind, in that case, be even more sinful than selling one’s body? Vivian R. Pollak quotes one of Dickinson’s letters where she says “I would as soon undress in public, as give my poems to the world” and raises an important question about it: “can Dickinson have believed that female modesty was inconsistent with print; that men were to carry on the business of literature, women to write for themselves or for the elect few possessing ‘the rare Ear/ Not too dull’” (229). To answer Pollak’s rhetorical question, Dickinson is far from modest in her literature; she has written sexuality and sensuality into her poems and letters on many occasions. Perhaps her refusal to be read in print is not so much a female modesty as it is a general disdain for the concept of writing one’s soul out in exchange for money. It is the same idea as a woman who does not mind extramarital sexual encounters but does mind being paid to have these encounters. The woman in that example is an immodest woman by the standards of a nineteenth-century society, but still refuses the transactional quality of prostitution. It is this transactional aspect which Dickinson hates about publication.

Dickinson uses the same theological concepts as male puritans to attack them for their oppression of women. At the same time, by comparing publication to prostitution, Dickinson recreates the concept of feminine modesty. Feminine modesty is a concept created, adopted, and imposed by men. As a woman poet, Dickinson could have just refuted this concept by denying it. However, she deploys that concept but changes what it means. In this poem, feminine modesty does not consist of being hidden away in one’s room and speaking softly in the presence of men; rather it consists of the act of guarding and hiding a woman’s most precious belongings—her

thoughts, not because they are shameful but because her higher intellect would not let her be so base as to boast of her thoughts.

In the second stanza of the poem, Dickinson implies that she would rather meet her creator free of sin than to sell her mind to escape poverty. Again, the vocabulary in this stanza evokes that of puritan thought about female virginity. The use of the words “White” and “Snow” do not only evoke the empty wordless page but also a virginal sinless woman. This metaphor presents the act of publication as a tantalizing sin that one must steer away from in order to meet God as a “White” page free of sin. Just as men justify the sinfulness of prostitution by claiming that it is the selling of a thing which a woman does not own (because her body is owned by God), Dickinson insinuates that a man who publishes his work is selling the “Thought [that] belong to Him who gave it/ Then—to Him Who bear /Its Corporeal illustration” (ll. 7-9). In the same manner in which puritan theology forbids the selling of one’s body, Dickinson forbids the selling of one’s thoughts on the basis that they only belong to God and to the person upon whom these thoughts—or rather their “Corporeal illustrations,” as she says—were bestowed. She portrays intellect as a highly private concept that deserves the same amount of privacy that men give to concrete notions of sexuality.

“The Royal Air” which Dickinson uses to refer to one’s intellect is an interesting choice of words. This air is considered royal because it was blown into one’s mind by God, but the expression can also be read as the royal *heir*, in which case the intellect would be likened to an offspring of the mind. Just as it is sinful to sell one’s offspring (that of the body) it is equally sinful to sell one’s intellect. The selling of an offspring is not a literal transaction here, but rather evokes the act of getting rid of the resulting product from prostitution, an illegitimate child. In

other words, the writing we sell for publication is like an illegitimate child while that which we keep to ourselves is a legitimate one.

In the final stanza of the poem, Dickinson accuses the man who sells his writing of being “the Merchant” “in the Parcel,” he is both the seller and the sold. By being both the seller and the sold, he transforms “Human Spirit” into a piece of merchandise which has to endure the “Disgrace of Price.” In the same way that the existence of female prostitutes drives men to label and punish all women for the fault of some, so does Dickinson insult all “Human Spirit[s]” by saying that they are a merchandise because some men sold their writing.

Emily Dickinson, the historical woman, had her own reasons against publication which she never openly declared in any documented manner. However, Emily Dickinson, the poet, used that refusal of publication as a playful poetic motif that undermines publication as a product of a patriarchal society.

While undermining the mundane tasks of men as dictated by society, Dickinson glorifies those of women by making them worthy of poetry at a time when only men decided what was and was not worthy of being the subject of a poem. In her poem number J1138, Dickinson tells the very short story of a spider:

A Spider sewed at Night
Without a Light
Upon an Arc of White.

If Ruff it was of Dame
Or Shroud of Gnome
Himself himself inform.

Of Immortality
His Strategy
Was Physiognomy. (J1138/ p. 511)

This poem is one of many where Dickinson tells short tales of insects, birds, and animals. Like bees, which the poet has written excessively about, spiders are also hard-working insects. They are also associated with femaleness because they weave their own homes, or as the poet puts it, they sew at night. In the first stanza of the poem, the spider who sewed at night evokes the picture of the woman poet herself as she writes. The intrinsic work that goes into the making of a poem is often mirrored in feminine crafts such as weaving, sewing, lacing, knitting, beading, etc. We could, therefore, say that the spider is a metaphor for the woman poet. Not only the analogy works because sewing evokes poetic composition, but also because the spider, like the woman poet, works in secrecy, in the dark “Without a Light” (l. 2), and its process is hardly ever noticed before we see the final outcome. Even though the spider evokes the woman poet, it is still referred to in the masculine mode, “Himself.” Paula Bennett suggests that:

In identifying her spider-artists as male isolates, working in a void, but in nevertheless attributing conventionally feminine material-centered activities—knitting, spinning, and sewing—to them, Dickinson was [. . .] both expressing and attempting to resolve the tensions that her waffling between these two antithetical poetics created in her work [. . .] on the one hand she wanted immortality, that is, the status of the transcendent (male) artist [. . .] on the other, such use of her art as she made came (as it did for many nineteenth-century women) through her materially channeled connections to others. (221)

While Dickinson highlights the natural female capacity of producing poetic material (almost as natural as it is for a spider to weave its own web), she still attaches this capacity to a male figure, but a male figure that engages in a feminine activity. This perhaps evokes her views on the conventionality of a male-dominated poetics; a woman writing poetry is just as unconventional as a man sewing or weaving. However, instead of just inverting those gender roles (assigning the sewing

to the man, and the poetry to the woman) she dilutes the limits of gender by bringing both genders into one being: the spider.

While an excessive amount of work and effort goes into making a spider web, it is still fragile and easily brushed away by human hands, just like female poetry was (and sometimes is) by the hands of men. The analogy in the poem was very carefully picked by Dickinson, as it is a known fact about spiders that they usually spin their webs at night guided by the “arc of white” (l. 3) which alludes to moonlight.

While the first stanza of the poem is concerned with sewing, the second one is concerned with the sewed. In that second stanza, the poet moves to musings about what could the spider be sewing and she offers us two possibilities: “If Ruff it was of Dame/or Shroud of Gnome” (ll. 4-5). The poet supposes that the spider is either sewing a lady’s neckline fringe, or a gnome’s shroud. Two very different images that progress from the mundane to the extraordinary. Sewing the ruff of a dame is somewhat the mundane item of clothing here but it was also chosen carefully to evoke a certain meaning in contrast to the following image. Ruff is the garment that is placed around a woman’s neckline so it evokes restriction and oppression almost like the chains around a slave’s neck. So the spider, that sews that ruff, evokes the woman poet writing of women’s oppression. On the other hand, the gnome’s shroud can be read as an undermining of men. Instead of opposing “woman” and “man,” the poet opposes “Dame” and “Gnome.” The woman is presented in a glorified societal position: the mistress of a household, or the lady of the house, while the man is presented as a dwarf. While gnomes are mythical magical creatures that guard the inside of the Earth’s treasures, due to their size perhaps, they are positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy of magical creatures. It is interesting that the poet chose a gnome rather than a dwarf because the gnome’s role alludes to the man’s task of guarding Earth’s treasures but

of course he monopolizes, misuses, and wastes it instead. Therefore, the spider sewing the gnome's shroud can be read as the woman poet writing against patriarchy.

In the last line of the stanza "Himself himself inform" (l. 6), Dickinson tells us that the spider is weighing between the two possibilities and should inform himself which one to choose. This line is very evocative of the poet's task of choosing their battles in writing. The repetition of "himself" is not only used to keep the rhythm of the stanza, but also to accentuate the importance of the poet's own private and personal choice which should not be dictated by society, or publication by extension. Dickinson identifies the spider as a 'he' which also alludes to the male monopoly over the poetic craft.

The third and last stanza of the poem culminates in Dickinson's own poetic vocation. When she says, "Of Immortality," it is meant to be read along the lines of "of Dame" and "of Gnome." So there is a third possibility other than the "Ruff of Dame" and the "Shroud of Gnome", and that is "Immortality." "Ruff" and "Shroud" are items that can be sewn but here we finally have an immaterial concept which the spider sews and that further intensifies the spider-poet metaphor.

Immortality is a subject which Dickinson has written many poems about, this line is thus a direct allusion to her own self as a poet. The final couple of lines state that the spider's "Strategy/ Was Physiognomy" (ll. 8-9). Physiognomy is known as the study of appearance but it is also used to refer to the art of predicting the future based on the features of the face. During Dickinson's time, the poet was often viewed as a prophet. Perhaps this is due to the Latin word for poet *vates* which means prophet. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the poet and essayist whom Dickinson read, corresponded with and viewed as a mentor, defined the poet as a "transparent

eyeball” who can transcend and predict (18). Which allows us to view these last couple of lines as a statement of the poet’s own poetic vocation.

Another poem where Dickinson poetizes women’s mundane chores and mobilizes them against patriarchal views:

I tie my Hat—I crease my Shawl—
Life’s little duties do—precisely—
As the very least
Were infinite—to me—

I put new Blossoms in the Glass—
And throw the old—away—
I push a petal from my Gown
That anchored there—I weigh
The time ’twill be till six o’clock
I have so much to do—
And yet—Existence—some way back—
Stopped—struck—my ticking—through—
We cannot put Ourselves away
As a completed Man
Or Woman—When the Errand’s done
We came to Flesh—upon—
There may be—Miles on Miles of Nought—
Of Action—sicker far—
To simulate—is stinging work—
To cover what we are
From Science—and from Surgery—
Too Telescopic Eyes
To bear on us unshaded—
For their—sake—not for Ours—
’Twould start them—
We—could tremble—
But since we got a Bomb—
And held it in our Bosom—
Nay—Hold it—it is calm—

Therefore—we do life’s labor—
Though life’s Reward—be done—
With scrupulous exactness—
To hold our Senses—on—” (J443/ pp. 212-13).

The first line of the poem opens *in media res* of the Victorian woman's mundane duties. While the "I" in the poem may not actually be Emily Dickinson's voice, it is still a female voice which she borrowed to speak on behalf of the average Victorian woman. Dickinson, as we discussed before, despised doing house chores and hardly ever did them, but that does not mean that she did not use them for inspiration in her poetic endeavors. The acts of tying her hat and creasing her shawl indicate that the speaker is getting ready for a long day of house chores. The creasing of the shawl may also evoke the folding of paper as the poet begins to work. The speaker then seems to be expressing her worry over the "infinite" "little duties" of life which she is about to embark on. That first stanza only introduces the speaker as she is getting ready and worrying about the day's chores.

Then, in the second stanza, the chores begin. The first chore the speaker accomplishes is "put[ting] new Blossoms in the Glass—/ and throw[ing] the old—away—" (ll. 5-6). While this act is a common house chore for the Victorian woman, it is presented here in a manner that allows us to read more into it. Instead of putting the flowers in a vase, the poet chooses the word "Glass"; this metonymy of the vase makes way for the glass/vase to be read as a mirror, too. Putting flowers in the mirror is evocative of the writer's poetic and mimetic craft: she is copying reality while also embellishing it, and by that she "throw[s] the old— away—," the old flowers here are a stand-in for reality and the new flowers in the mirror are a stand-in for poetry.

In the following lines, the speaker "push[es] a petal from [her] Gown/ That anchored there"; how heavy is a petal, anyway? Surely not heavy enough to "anchor" the speaker's gown, unless we read this anchoring as a metaphor of reality which is represented by a petal of the old flowers weighing down the woman poet by "anchoring" her gown. The same line that starts with "anchored" ends with "I weigh." While one would normally associate weighing with anchors as

they are heavy, but interestingly enough it is not the anchoring petal that is weighed, but the time. The speaker “weigh[s]/ The time” as she feels she is running out of it before she can finish her chores. Time, here, is a heavy weighty burden that gets heavier the more it carries undone chores and duties. After these lines, we start to see less of the Victorian housewife and more of the woman poet who muses on the fact that “Existence—some way back—/Stopped.” The poet interrupts the speaker’s weighing of time to declare that existence, and by extension time, has stopped, so why bother weighing time? Existence “struck—[the] ticking—through,” there is no more time left to weigh. The poet then says that “We cannot put Ourselves away.” Read out of context, this line can be a metaphor of self-achievement, where self-accomplishment is not comparable to a female task, chore, or duty that one can just put away and get over with. But when we read the following lines, “We cannot put Ourselves away/As a completed Man/Or Woman—,” it takes a different meaning: women are not able to be men nor are they left to be women; they are forced to be what the patriarchy dictates. Then the poet compares life to an errand, just another house duty that must be done: “When the Errand’s done/ We came to Flesh—upon—/There may be—Miles on Miles of Nought—/ Of Action—sicker far” (ll. 16-18). In this extended metaphor, life is an errand and the years are miles: the miles of inaction or “Nought” are childhood years which are hard to remember and mostly lacking in action, and miles of action which are far “sicker” because they represent adulthood years. This extended metaphor is a good description of the life of a Victorian woman which ends with the end of her childhood. When the errand that is life comes to an end, when we die, “We came to Flesh,” we become soulless flesh. However, a woman’s death is her ascension into womanhood, as this is the time where she is viewed as soulless, brainless flesh.

The poet moves on to say that “To simulate—is stinging work,” the stinging act of simulation here is the act of producing mimesis through poetry to veil reality and embellish it, “To cover what we are / From Science—and from Surgery—/ Too Telescopic Eyes/ To bear on us unshaded—/For their—sake—not for Ours.” The science, surgery, and telescopic eyes are all evocative of the male gaze here. A gaze that regards the woman as a dead corpse being dissected, monitored, and scrutinized. While Dickinson’s capitalization may often seem random, it extends actually throughout: the opposition of “their” and “Ours” clearly valorizes the capitalized “Ours” which represents women over the “their” which represents men. Women are represented as flesh that is only gazed at by men either for sexual purposes or for inspection and control. This comparison of the woman to a dead corpse culminates in lines 25-26 where the poet says “’Twould start them—/ We—could tremble—,” women are viewed as corpses so it would startle men to see them tremble, in other words, it would destabilize men to see women react in any way indicative of life, such as expressing passion, intellect, etc.

Dickinson ends this comparison of women to dead corpses by reminding the reader that they still have a beating heart and must go on living anyway: “But since we got a Bomb—/ And held it in our Bosom—/ Nay—Hold it— it is calm—.” The woman’s heart is referred to as a bomb not only because it pumps blood to the woman’s body but because it holds within it the female passion and sensuality that threatens the patriarchy. The switching from past to present tense in “held” and “Hold” evokes the female perseverance at existing still as they are, though inwardly, regardless of the patriarchal views that sentence them to an intellectual death.

In the last stanza of the poem, the speaker’s “I” turns into a “We” suggesting thus that the speaker is making a larger claim about women’s cause rather than just complaining about her own life. She says that women go on through life, completing the same frivolous tasks imposed

on them with such “scrupulous exactness” as though these tasks were in themselves “life’s Reward” just for the sake of staying alive. Vivian R. Pollak reads the last line of the poem “To hold our Senses—on—” as suggesting that women purposely lose themselves into “Life’s little duties” in order to escape their frustration with their condition and instead of committing suicide (203). Pollak is, in a way, putting suicide and living as a housewife on the same foot: she presents them as two different kinds of deaths, and the state of being a housewife is the lesser of these two evils.

It is important to note that the structure of the poem is reflected in the content of the poem itself: a long stanza is bookended by two very short stanzas. This structure is evocative of the cycle of life where life is a long timeline bracketed by birth and death. While it may seem like the speaker admits defeat in the last stanza, the poem in itself proves otherwise: the frivolous tasks, chores, and duties deemed as feminine and imposed on women by the patriarchy are the same motifs that Dickinson uses to describe her poetic craft, to muse on existence, and to resist the patriarchal society in verse. She imposes her own genre on literature as women’s poetry.

In another poem, Dickinson uses as feminine motif, another house chore: brooming.

She sweeps with many-colored Brooms—
And leaves the Shreds behind—
Oh Housewife in the Evening West—
Come back, and dust the Pond!

You dropped a Purple Ravelling in—
You dropped an Amber thread—
And how you’ve littered all the East
With Duds of Emerald!

And still, she plies her spotted Brooms,
And still the Aprons fly,
Till Brooms fade softly into stars—
And then I come away— (J219/ p. 101)

In these three stanzas, we learn that a housewife is brooming the sky using “many-colored Brooms” (l. 1) while leaving some broom bristles behind. While a broom during Dickinson’s time is considered a feminine object, because it should only be used for cleaning by women, here in the poem it is used as a masculine object: a paintbrush that colors the sky. Painting, like poetry writing, is a profession that belonged to men, while brooming was a woman’s duty. The speaker of the poem chastises the housewife for not completing her task properly and leaving “Shreds” of the broom on the “Pond.” The chastising tone in “Come back, and dust the Pond!” (l. 4) reads like a satire of the masculine voices which scold and oppress women. The bristles that fall on the surface of the pond are the reflection of the colored sky in the water; and “shreds” are not the only thing this careless housewife drops, there are also “Purple Ravelling,” “Amber thread,” and “Duds of Emerald.” Ravellings, threads, and duds are all terms associated with the woman’s house chores. However, purple, amber, and emerald are colors associated with refinement. The color purple has been associated with royalty and nobility, while amber evokes beauty and the ornamental since it is named after the tree resin which is commonly used in jewelry; and emerald, of course, evokes rarity because it is named after a gemstone. The association of common house-hold items with these colors elevates them and by extension elevates the housewife who uses them. The mundane act of brooming the floor is thus likened to the act of painting with expensive colors. Dickinson brings out the artist in the housewife; instead of complaining of this feminine house chore, she elevates it to the level of art creation.

In poems such as “I tie my Hat—I crease my Shawl” and “She sweeps with many colored Brooms,” Dickinson performs gender as dictated by a patriarchal society. Even when the speaker of the poem is an anonymous lyrical “I,” we see a gender performance that allows us to tell that the speaker is a woman. While Dickinson never directly speaks of gender in her poetry or her

letters, she is obviously deconstructing it by giving these feminine gender roles (sweeping, sewing, running errands, etc.) a new meaning that relates to poetry writing. Suzanne Juhasz and Cristanne Miller both turn our attention to the similarities between the lyric and gender: “both gender and the lyric poem in and of themselves constitute performances [...] reading a lyric poem interpretively—that is, reading it seriously—also constitutes a performance” (107). In this fascinating *mise en abyme*, we find ourselves (as readers and scholars) performing (interpreting) within a performance (gender) within a performance (lyric). When it comes to Dickinson’s lyric poetry, gender is inescapable, it is at the very heart of her poetry, as is the case with women’s poetry in general. Women perform gender in society whether by choice or by force. They are also performing it in poetry. However, in poetry (unlike in society) they can do more with this performance than just perform it, they can alter the meaning of this performance, they can condemn this performance *while* performing it.

Being a housewife in the nineteenth century was seen as every little girl’s destiny (and perhaps dream); to Dickinson this was every little girl’s doom. We know that Dickinson has never been married and that she often had a negative view of marriage. Some of her poems against marriage bring out her views of girlhood and womanhood, but also her views of what it means to be a woman. In one of her poems, the speaker begins triumphantly (and sarcastically):

I’m “wife”—I’ve finished that—
That other state—
I’m Czar—I’m “Woman” now—
It’s safer so—

How odd the Girl’s life looks
Behind this soft Eclipse—
I think that Earth feels so
To folks in Heaven—now—

This being comfort—then
That other kind—was pain—

But why compare?
I'm "Wife"! Stop there! (J199/ p. 94)

In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker contrasts two states of being: "wife" and "That other state." This "other state" which the speaker doesn't name directly is actually Dickinson's state: a spinster. Dickinson presents us in this first stanza with what society defines as a woman, and that is simply a wife. In order to be wholly woman, one must be a wife. She even likens being a married lady to being a czar to accentuate the extent to which the patriarchal society values a married woman over an unmarried one. Her valorization of the status of wife is actually meant to be somewhat ironic. Vivian R. Pollak proposes that "the tone of the poem is not precisely ironic, yet the quotation marks around 'wife' and 'Woman' suggest that the speaker is still resisting these terms" (173). Dickinson highlights the safety of marriage for the woman, not only because it protects her financially from male relatives who later become inheritors but mostly because it introduces her to the fabric of society. An unmarried lady is an outcast of society, as was Emily Dickinson herself, which leads us to read this poem as her defense against marriage because, as Pollak suggested, "what the poem examines best is not marriage (for where, after all, is her husband?) but the speaker's need to defend herself against her original social context" (173)—that of an unmarried woman. The comparison continues in the second stanza when the speaker evokes a celestial object that hangs between a girl's life and a woman's thus creating an eclipse. This stellar metaphor turns into a theological one where the girl's life is compared to life on earth and the married woman's is compared to life in heaven. In this metaphor, the fill-in for God (who is the owner of both earth and heaven) is the man who is the owner of both girl and woman. The patriarchy—or men—is the ultimate judge who sends a girl to heaven by giving her the elevated role of wife. A girl is tricked into the chains of marriage the same way believers can be tricked into needless hardship for the sake of heaven. The speakers compares being a girl with

“pain” and being a married woman with “comfort,” right after that she interrupts her comparison with a rhetorical question: “But why compare?/ I’m “Wife”! Stop there!” (ll. 11-12). In those final sarcastic lines, Dickinson highlights the struggle of writing “woman-ness” into literature: it is futile (hence the “why compare?”) but she does it anyway (hence the poem); she says “Stop there!” but she doesn’t really stop there; it is the patriarchal society that stops there.

The use of a religious metaphor to express her views on marriage is seen often in Dickinson’s poetry, as in the following poem:

Title divine – is mine!
The Wife –without the Sign!
Acute Degree—conferred on me –
Empress of Calvary!
Royal – all but the Crown!
Betrothed – without the swoon
God sends us Women –
When you – hold – Garnet to Garnet –
Gold – to Gold –
Born – Bridalled – Shrouded –
In a Day –
Tri Victory
“My Husband” – women say –
Stroking the Melody –
Is *this* – the way? (J1072/ p. 487)

In this single-stanza poem, the speaker, again, begins triumphantly and sarcastically by announcing that she is now a married woman. The state of being a wife is referred to here as “Title divine.” The poem begins on the speaker’s wedding day and it seems like everything before that first line was leading uphill, and everything after it leads downhill. Starting from the second line of the poem, the speaker starts to question the validity of that divine title: a wife . . . without a sign to legitimize the marriage? holder of an “Acute Degree” . . . but it was imposed on her? a royalty . . . without a crown? Married . . . without love? The speaker starts to realize that she has been deluded into viewing marriage and wifhood as something other than what it

really is when she finds herself “Empress of Calvary.” Calvary is the place where Christ was crucified which allows us to read this line as a metaphor where the bride walking down the aisle is like Christ on his way to his crucifixion. Marriage is thus likened to pain, suffering, and sacrifice; but, like Christ’s crucifixion, it is suffering that elevates him to a higher divine title. The woman’s wedding day is described as both her birthday and the day of her death: “Born— Bridalled—Shrouded/ in a Day—/ Tri Victory.” As soon as a woman enters society, she is already excluded from it. On the day of her wedding she is born as a woman, betrothed, and then shrouded because she must live in the enslavement of house duties, excluded from the outside world of men, thus from society, thus from life itself.

Emily Dickinson often relates to poetry writing as an aspect of her personality that contributes to her essence as a free woman. Therefore, she uses prose as a representation of patriarchy’s oppression:

They shut me up in Prose –
As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet –
Because they liked me “still” –

Still! Could themselves have peeped –
And seen my Brain – go round –
They might as well have lodged a Bird
For Treason – in the Pound –

Himself has but to will
And easy as a Star
Abolish his Captivity –
And laugh – No more have I – (J613/ p. 302)

The first (and titular) line of this poem is a blunt accusatory statement: “They shut me up in Prose—” where the use of “They” in that first line is almost childlike as in sentences uttered by children to the likes of ‘they made me do it!’ This childlike aspect is in keeping with the metaphor that is developed in the following line and extends to the following stanza, but also in

keeping with the way women are viewed and represented in Dickinson's nineteenth-century society: innocent, irrational, unintellectual, etc. "Prose" is represented as a place of confinement, and I believe it is no coincidence that the musicality of the word conjures up that of the word "prison." Prose can be read, here, as the dictations of women's lives by men, it can be read as representative of the discourse imposed upon nineteenth-century women by a patriarchal society.

This confinement turns into a child-disciplining act in the following lines when it is compared to putting a little girl in the closet "Because they liked [her] 'still'" (4). Again, it is hard not to notice the repeated [z] sound in "Closet" as in "Prose," which conjure up "prison". In an analysis of another poem by Dickinson which also deals with the prose/poetry dichotomy, Wendy Barker suggests that prose "is not only enclosed by humanly constructed dimensions but is also, the poet suggests, more constraining than protecting, more imprisoning than liberating" (77).

Back to our "Closet": The reason why "They" shut up our speaker as a little girl in the closet is what is of interest here. It is a common adult complaint that children are not "still," they are often wild and uncontrollable; just like women were viewed at that same time. Women, like children, must be contained and controlled. However, the desired stillness of a child is nothing like the desired stillness of a woman. A patriarchy wishes to "still" the minds of women and keep them occupied only with what they dictate. Poetry, however, is anything but still. It is dynamic, constantly moving from image to image, and constantly creating space for several meanings out of the same word. Unlike prose, which is "still" in that it is straight-forward and sterile; it does not generate multiple meanings and layers. Even when we do come across a piece of prose which is dynamic and generative, we tend to call it "poetic."

In the following stanza, the speaker disapprovingly exclaims the word “still!” Even though our speaker may seem “still” on the outside, her mind is “go[ing] round” on the inside. The speaker’s mind, like Dickinson, is constantly creating poetry because it views the world and interacts with it poetically. For a nineteenth-century woman (like Dickinson), poetry is a way of life, not just a profession as was the case for most male published poets of her time. In the following lines, the prose/closet/prison metaphor takes a slight turn from just an ordinary place of confinement to a place of confinement where the confined does not belong or fit in: “They might as wise have lodged a Bird/ For Treason—in the Pound—” (ll. 7-8). Dickinson subverts the traditional metaphor of the bird in the cage and substitutes it with a bird in the pound. A pound is typically a place meant for detaining stray four-legged animals, a bird does not belong there because it could easily “Abolish his Captivity/ And laugh” (ll. 11-12) by the flap of a wing! The bird, here, can be read as Dickinson herself. She is confined to her household by society but she embraces this confinement and actively chooses seclusion while having all the freedom she wants by writing poetry. Poetry was her freedom, her escape; while prose was her prison. Just like the bird, Dickinson “Abolishes [her] Captivity/ And laugh[s]” in her poetry writing.

Dickinson explores the prose/poetry dichotomy in several of her poems. In order to define what poetry meant to Dickinson as a woman, we must also define what its absence meant to her. Wendy Barker dives into the etymology of the word prose:

“‘prose’ which comes from the Latin *prosa*, is ‘straight-forward discourse.’ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it is ‘the ordinary form of written or spoken language, without metrical structure.’ It is ‘plain, simple, matter-of-fact’ (and hence) dull commonplace expression, quality, spirit.’ It can refer to ‘a dull, commonplace, or wearisome discourse or piece of writing.’ And in an archaic colloquial meaning, it can refer to ‘familiar talk, chat, gossip.’” (78).

Prose represented to Dickinson everything that she despised about nineteenth-century society. It represented the kind of talk that was culturally imposed on women: familiar talk, chat, gossip. But it also represented the kind of poetry that she was consciously straying from: the conventional poetry of the nineteenth-century male poets which seemed prosaic to her in the sense that it was “dull, common place, or wearisome,” especially in comparison to her lively and dynamic poetry that lacked all the straight-forward rhythmic and metric rules and was packed with an abundance of punctuation marks and random capitalization. She made a conscious effort, as a poet *and* as a woman, to speak in a different way than men, to have a language of her own making it comprehensible to like-minded women, unfairly accused of being irrational, emotional, excessive, and incapable of proper literary production. Dickinson creates a poetic space for women where it is not only acceptable to be all of those things which society condemns, but, most importantly, where the frivolous roles allotted to women by society are embraced and used as means of poetic production.

Dickinson experienced poetry as a worldview rather than just a literary genre. Whenever she referred to poetry, it was not always to refer to composed verse. Wendy Barker cites one of Dickinson’s letters to Susie, her sister-in-law, where she says “We are the only poets, and everyone else is *prose*” (83). It is interesting that in comparing herself and her possible lover to the rest of the world, she compares poetry producers to produced prose; she could have said “we are the only poetry and everyone else is prose,” or “we are the only poetic and everyone else is prosaic,” or “we are the only poets and everyone else is prose writers.” In other words, she could have compared the producers to each other, or the states of being to each other, or the final products to each other. Instead, she contrasts poets to prose writers, highlighting thus the element of creativity that resides within poetry; poetry is always created, it is always crafted and shaped

and polished. Prose, on the other hand, just seems to *be there*, without any noticeable effort of creation, sort of an ongoing and imperceptible time: a concept that is just there and which doesn't trigger much thought about its creator because we often experience it not as a creation but as a concept. "Poetry for Dickinson," says Wendy Barker, "is the antithesis of bland, tired phrasings, of the status quo" (83).

Dickinson's poem that follows speaks to the one I have just analyzed. It tackles the same idea of being confined or shut. However, instead of discussing being shut up in a place, she discusses being shut *out* of a place.

Why — do they shut Me out of Heaven?
Did I sing — too loud?
But — I can say a little "Minor"
Timid as a Bird!

Wouldn't the Angels try me —
Just — once — more —
Just — see — if I troubled them —
But don't — shut the door!

Oh, if I — were the Gentleman
In the "White Robe" —
And they — were the little Hand — that knocked —
Could — I — forbid?" (J248/ pp. 113-14).

The heaven in this poem seems to be a literary field that is male-dominated. The speaker is excluded from the field because she "sings too loud," she is too forward and eccentric in her poetic writing while the male-dominated field requires conformity and timidity especially from a female writer. The speaker, offers a compromise in order to be included in literature and that is to "say a little 'Minor' / Timid as a Bird!" (ll. 3-4). Those lines are meant to be read sarcastically to denounce men's expectations of literature by women. The male masters of the field are referred to here as "Angels" and the speaker pleads to them sarcastically to "try [her] / Just—

once—more/ Just—see—if [she] troubled them—” (ll. 5-7). The sarcasm in these lines takes a challenging tone. While it reads as a timid and beseeching discourse, the speaker seems to be challenging the “angels” and intimidating them, or perhaps even outshining them in singing, which is why they will not let her in. The ambition and challenge in her tone goes up one more level in the last stanza where the speaker imagines herself as the “Gentleman/ in the ‘White Robe.’” The speaker imagines herself as a man because the field is male-dominated and she couldn’t even dream that a woman could dominate it. When she reverses the situation, and represents herself as the one in charge of deciding who writes good literature and who does not, she still wonders if she “could [...] forbid” not if she *would*, but if she even *could*!

The male dominant poets are also referred to as angels in the last stanza of another Dickinson poem: “For such the Angels go—/ Rank after Rank, with even feet—/And Uniforms of Snow” (J126, ll. 10-12). This insistence on portraying male poets as angels marks Dickinson’s frustration with the fact that women who attempt the pen are doomed by society to be devils. This metaphor also reinforces her views on white male poetry: it is an “auction of the mind” which only seeks higher ranks. The angels walking “with even feet” in a procession highlights male poet’s interest in the formality of poetry but not in the content or purpose: those angels are walking around aimlessly not knowing where they’re going but only taking pride in the fact that they are walking rhythmically dressed in “Uniforms of Snow.” In both poems Dickinson dresses the white males in white which evokes her views on male poetry’s virginity and infertility: their poetry is sterile and non-generative because it is prosaic and straight-forward. This poem, like the previous one, and like many others by Dickinson, denounces male-domination over the literary field, and the ways a woman writer can escape this male domination—not by a

revolution or by any sort of outward force, but just by the mere and simple act of writing against the grain anyway regardless of publication and regardless of merit.

While Emily Dickinson is famous for many of her nature poems, she makes an obvious break with the way nature motif was used in male romantic poetry. She writes extensively about bees, spiders, flowers, seas, trees, etc., but without romanticizing and feminizing them the way the Romantics did. “Association with nature and exclusion from speaking subjectivity,” says Margaret Homans, “amount to two different ways of placing the woman in dualistic culture on the side of the other and the object” (215). In romantic poetry, women are often compared to flowers or other natural phenomena, and nature is often feminized and viewed as “motherly” (hence mother-nature). The recurrent point of comparison between women and nature was often a superficial beauty objectifying women. Homans speaks of a “general and continuing tradition of the objectification of women” (215). While this was written in 1980, it is still much relevant today but on a much larger scale than just poetry or literature; the objectification of women has become normalized in the mass media and arts.

Dickinson portrayed the woman as a person, not only by allowing us into the female subjectivity but also by portraying the average middle-class nineteenth-century woman going about her normal daily routine of house chores and errands. Being aware of the patriarchal imposition of that “feminine” role, Dickinson uses the many feminized tasks as metaphors for other intellectual pleasures that women were not expected to enjoy.

The fight which Dickinson fought as a recluse from the privacy of her desk is still ongoing today. “Women poets today,” says Homans, “might learn from the nineteenth century’s range of failed and successful strategies for writing within the same tradition” (215). This was true during Homans’ decade and still just as true today in 2022. Women today are free to become

published scholars and poets, but that does not mean that they are not still confined to specific themes and motifs that are thought suitable for women. “The women poets then and now must distinguish the advantageous from the detrimental in their inheritance from Eve,” says Homans; adding that “Eve as she is read by masculine culture is interchangeable with Mother Nature: the object of men’s conversation, beautiful but amoral [...] and best kept under control and silent” (215).

Dickinson, however, makes nature speak *to* woman not *as* woman. Nature is genderless in Dickinson’s poetry, it is a medium of transcendence towards the poetic realm. “Eve as Dickinson reads her,” Homans continues, “and as she might be read by others is the first human speaker to learn a non-literal language, and therefore the most suitable prototype for poetic subjectivity” (215). Perhaps nature *is* that “non-literal language” that women were predetermined to speak in poetry. Perhaps that is why Dickinson’s poetry could not have been accepted by the public of a patriarchal society who could not read her non-literal language which is primary and raw as compared to the prosaic and controlled language they are used to.

Chapter II.

The Need for a New Language: The Poetry of Gertrude Stein

Gertrude Stein is less known for her literary genius and more known for her literary soirées which gathered (and started off) many writers and painters such as Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce, Sherwood Anderson, Henri Matisse, Juan Gris, and Pablo Picasso. If the American literary scene of the twentieth century were a house, Stein would be its matriarchal figure. The reason why she was not known for her literary genius is mainly because her writing was often deemed illegible and incomprehensible. Stein's writing style was highly and purposely unconventional. At this point in our study of the tendencies of women poets, we may be starting to notice a pattern: women poets often steer away from poetic convention. Just like Dickinson refused to follow the rules of punctuation, letter capitalization, rhyme, meter, etc. so did Stein refuse to follow the rules of English grammar, and poetic vocabulary. A main contrast, however, between the poetics of Dickinson and Stein is that the former addresses various themes while resorting to an eccentric use of English language to challenge conventional patriarchal poetry, while the latter depends almost entirely on this linguistic eccentricity in her fight against patriarchal poetry with little regard to thematic. Her prose poems often consist of repetitions and fairly simple and plain verbs and nouns. They are antinormative texts in the sense that they are semi-mimetic and semi-narrative. They defy almost all attempts at close readings and seem to have been written for the mere pleasure of the poet herself rather than that of the reader who will read them. Like Dickinson, Stein did not write for a public, she wrote for herself; even though she was a published (sometimes a self-published) poet, a necessary evil which Dickinson could not tolerate.

When I say that Stein's prose poetry defies close reading, I do not mean that it cannot be read closely. On the contrary, I mean that *because* it defies close reading it *must be* read closely. However, a text's ability to be read closely does not automatically guarantee its resolution. In fact, most (if not all) of Stein's poems remain unresolved. The text may outwardly seem to have the kind of unity that allows us to call it a text, but it is actually made up of several sub-texts that do not necessarily amount to what we conventionally call a text. Each word is an event of its own, even when certain words are repeated multiple times in a row, each word is still a distinct event. Therefore, it becomes difficult to classify Stein's poetry in terms of thematic; she precisely works *against* themes and against unity. As we read Stein, sense always eludes us right after we think we have grasped it. In this chapter, I intend to closely read selected Steinian poems from *Tender Buttons* (1914) and the poem "Sacred Emily" (1913) which features Stein's most infamous line of poetry: "Rose is a rose is a rose."

Tender Buttons is divided into three chapters in the following order: objects, food, rooms. The book title along with its chapter titles are already indicative of a feminine domestic kind of theme. The sexual connotation of the book title is obvious to many, as it is an English translation on the French word *boutons* which refers to the female nipples, but it could also refer to the clitoris which is often referred to in literature and culture as a button. Most editions of the book use as their cover illustration a picture of sewn or unsewn buttons which brings to mind the feminine and domestic sort of activities that we studied in Dickinson's poetry: knitting, sewing, etc. In the first chapter titled "Objects" we find poem titles such as "A box," "A piece of coffee," "A plate," "Mildred's umbrella," "A new cup and saucer," "A long dress," "A red hat," "A blue coat," etc. Almost all of the poem titles in this first chapter belong to a feminine domestic

lexicon. In an essay titled “‘Familiar Strangers:’ The Household Words of Gertrude Stein’s ‘*Tender Buttons*,’” Marguerite S. Murphy suggests that

[i]ndeed, *Tender Buttons* does make “familiar words seem almost like strangers,” and such familiar strains help lead us, I believe, to some of the “sense” behind these difficult compositions. Where have we heard such words before? In the home – in the kitchen and in the parlor where women sew and where women dress. (383)

That may be true of the poem titles, but not necessarily of the poems themselves; as we will now see, the titles of the poems are hardly ever of any relevance or significance to the poems themselves. Even though the brief poems textually look like a page of definitions from the dictionary, they do not speak directly to or define their titles. Let us start with the first poem of the first chapter:

A Carafe, that is a Blind Glass.

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading. (*Tender Buttons* 3)

The title of the poem seems like a dictionary entry: a word and its definition. A carafe is a glass container used to serve water, but in this poem, it is a “blind glass.” This evokes perhaps a dark lens taken from a dark pair of glasses which when worn can make one temporarily blind. It could also be a blind glass because it is filled with water and the water distorts the image seen through the glass. There is an optical lexicon throughout the poem: “blind glass, glass, spectacle, color.” Why is the carafe a “kind” and a “cousin?” What the carafe and the pair of spectacles have in common is that they are both made out of glass and are both see-through, perhaps that makes them “cousins” of the same “kind.” What one sees through this carafe is a “single hurt color” which makes one think of a basic physics rule: when a single ray of white light is incident on a

prism, it splits into seven colors. So white is that “single hurt color” and it is hurt because it is split open and seven different colors come out of it, the seven colors in which we experience the visual world. Therefore we can read “the arrangement in a system of pointing” as a reference to the seven colors that help us see and distinguish the world, and in that definition, the act of seeing and distinguishing would be the “system of pointing.” Her description of the scene as: “Not ordinary,” “not unordered,” and “not resembling” are all true of Stein’s book in that her style of writing is unconventional and unique but not random. At this point, it is safe to say that the carafe can be read as representative of Stein’s book: *Tender Buttons* is the carafe – the blind glass – through which we observe the world in a way we have not seen it before. Therefore, “the difference is spreading” by having more and more people read the book and view the world from this Steinian linguistic point of view. Wittgenstein’s famous quote “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (*Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, 68). is uniquely true in the case of Stein’s poetry. Her unique approach to language develops into a unique view of the world in relation to language. As Murphy argues,

Stein exploits the vocabulary, syntax, rhythms, and cadences of the conventional women’s prose and talk, the ordinary discourse of domesticity, to create her own new “language.” This language is not only, according to her own terms, a “poetic” one, but one which is highly unconventional. (383-84)

This first poem of the book serves as an introductory poem or a “frame poem” that establishes Stein’s style and language throughout the book both in terms of content and in terms of subject matter.

“Nothing Elegant” is another poem from *Tender Buttons* that consists of a single long sentence bookended by two brief sentences:

Nothing Elegant.

A charm a single charm is doubtful. If the red is rose and there is a gate surrounding it, if inside is let in and there places change then certainly something is upright. It is earnest. (*Tender Buttons* 6)

The title is already steering us away from the typical way of referring to the feminine; for Stein, there is nothing elegant about the feminine. The poem then starts with yet another *topos* of the feminine: charm. However, in the usual Steinian way, the feminine charm is associated with an adjective that is not normally associated with charm: doubtful. In what ways can charm be doubtful? The repetition with variance of the word “charm” also makes us think that it is not charm in general that is doubtful, but it is the quality of having a *single* charm that is. Perhaps the singleness of charm is referring to outward beauty as opposed to the kind of charm which reflects on the whole of someone’s character. Moving on to the middle and longer section of the poem, “If the red is rose and there is a gate surrounding it,” Stein is using two colors here, the red as a noun and the rose as an adjective. The red is a subject in that sentence as it is in many other poems of *Tender Buttons* and it seems to be a reference to woman-ness. Red is raw woman-ness without any alteration to it as opposed to rose which is woman-ness diluted by the patriarchy to make it easier to control. As an art collector, Stein was interested in painting even though she lacked that talent, which often made her think of her poems as cubist or impressionist paintings. She uses color in her poems the same way painters do in their paintings. The use of the colors red and rose by a poet other than Stein may have been read very differently; they would have been read through a literary lens which translates each color as representative of an abstraction: for instance, red is revolution and rose is femininity. That is not to say that those two readings are necessarily wrong; on the contrary, they are valid in our reading of “Nothing Elegant” because the sort of woman-ness that Stein evokes is in fact revolutionary, and the sort of femininity and

softness evoked by rose as opposed to red is in fact part of the patriarchal agenda. Because we are dealing with Stein, however, colors must not be read individually, but rather in relation to one another. What is red to rose? and what is rose to red? what happens to red to make it rose? and what can happen to rose to make it red again? These are the kinds of questions evoked by Stein's use of color. Going back to the poem, we can now think of the "gate" that is "surrounding" the red. It may seem obvious by now, that the gate is a product of the patriarchy that is meant to restrain and control women and submit them into "rosiness." The second clause of that sentence is "if inside is let in and there places change then certainly something is upright." "Inside," here seems to refer to what is behind the gate which is the red, or it could refer to what is inside the red, and that would be the female mind. The female mind is that place where "places change" because of the power of thought and imagination. But what does it mean for the mind to be "let in"? This may just be the Steinian way of saying that the mind is free, it can let in whatever thoughts it wishes. If a woman is being submitted into the patriarchy's idea of what a woman should be, but that woman has a free and active mind, "then certainly something is upright," then there is hope for liberation. "It is earnest" is the final sentence of the poem and it reads like a religious hopeful affirmation of what has just been said, as when at the end of a prayer people say "amen."

Another poem from the "Objects" poems that also deals with gendered use of color is "A Red Stamp":

A Red Stamp.

If lilies are lily white if they exhaust noise and distance and even dust, if they dusty will dirt a surface that has no extreme grace, if they do this and it is not necessary it is not at all necessary if they do this they need a catalogue. (*Tender Buttons* 6)

While Stein does not choose poem titles that necessarily define or represent the poem, she does not choose them randomly. Rather than deem them irrelevant, one might do them justice by treating them at best as separate poems that depend on the intertextuality of other poems for their meaning, or at worst as a line in the poems which they are attributed to. This is applicable to most of Stein's poetry in *Tender Buttons* and "A Red Stamp" serves as an exemplary poem for that matter. Read out of context, the title of the poem would make little sense. Read as the first line of the poem, the title would still not make much sense. But then again, is Stein's poetry at all about making sense? Perhaps we can make better sense of the title after our close reading of this single-sentence poem.

The opening line of the poem "if lilies are lily white" throws us right into a gender stereotype. There are several kinds of flowers in the lilies' family. The white lily is known as "the mother of all lilies" and is also called "the Madonna lily" because it was often depicted in paintings of the Virgin Mary. Therefore, the white lily is usually thought of as a symbol of purity and virginity. Stein's specific use of white lily evokes and condemns the patriarchal view of women as pure, virginal, and motherly beings. On another note, there has been a long tradition of assimilating women to flowers in literature which allows us to read this sarcastic opening line as follows: if women are virginal mothers.

The second conditional "if" of the poem is "if they exhaust noise and distance and even dust." The "they" which refers to the lilies refers to women who challenge the patriarchy by "exhausting noise and distance and even dust." Noise, distance, and dust are three very different concepts: noise is material but intangible and invisible, distance is not material nor tangible nor visible but is representational, and dust is material, tangible, and visible. While the three nouns represent very different concepts, they are all treated equally here as quantities capable of being

used up by women. 'If women use up noise, distance, and dust' is synonymous to saying 'if women are beings that exist in space.'

Unlike the first two conditional "if"s, the third one has a result: "If they dusty will dirt a surface that has no extreme grace." Perhaps this is the most straightforward sentence in the poem regardless of its dismissal of grammatical rules. If lilies (women) are dusty, they will cause a surface to be dirty, and that is unforgivable. What does it mean for women to be dusty? Since these women are represented in the poem by a Madonna lily, we can safely assume that their being dusty is equivalent to their being sexually promiscuous, and the surface that is dirtied as a result would thus be their honor. The extreme grace, in that case, would be God's heavenly grace, whom Stein often portrays as a founding part of the patriarchal system.

The fourth conditional "if" of the poem is inclusive of all the previous "if"s: if women do all of which has just been listed "and it is not necessary it is not at all necessary if they do this they need a catalogue." The fifth conditional "if," like the third has a result: the women that are expected to behave in a certain pure and virginal way which robs them of their existence and autonomy, the women that push against this patriarchal ideal and exist as they are—as dusty white lilies—the women that do this through no force of necessity but simply by their own choice, these women are red stamps in a catalogue. The "need" for "a catalogue" may express the poet's dissatisfaction with the rarity of that kind of women; they are so few and rare that they can be collected in a catalogue, but it can also be read as a sign of their high value which makes them collectible. The antithesis formed by the juxtaposition of the title "Red Stamp" and the first words of the poems "If lilies are lily white" evokes a certain dichotomy between women who challenge the status quo and women who maintain it. What is interesting here is that, to this day, the expression "needing a catalogue" is often said of women but in a completely different sense.

We often hear the expression “women need a catalogue” (or a manual), that is to imply that they are so emotional, irrational, and incomprehensible that men simply need a manual in order to understand them. Stein plays with that expression and turns it inside out to women’s favor.

The colors red and white have often made appearances as a pair in many of Stein’s poems in *Tender Buttons*. Let us now turn our attention to this descriptive semi-narrative poem:

Suppose An Eyes.

Suppose it is within a gate which open is open at the hour of closing summer that is to say it is so.

All the seats are needing blackening. A white dress is in sign. A soldier a real soldier has a worn lace a worn lace of different sizes that is to say if he can read, if he can read he is a size to show shutting up twenty-four.

Go red go red, laugh white.

Suppose a collapse in rubbed purr, in rubbed purr get.

Little sales ladies little sales ladies little saddles of mutton.

Little sales of leather and such beautiful beautiful, beautiful beautiful. (*Tender Buttons* 16)

In this prose poem, we finally have a form that could resemble verse. The poem is composed of six paragraphs, five of which are brief and single-sentenced. The title “Suppose an Eyes” implies a metonymy of a person who is referred to as a pair of eyes. In the first paragraph, we suppose that there is a person who is watching and that that person is standing within a gate. The line “is open at the hour of closing summer,” indicates that it is the beginning of the fall season. By the second paragraph, we realize that the gate could be the gate of a church yard, or the doors to a church because of the seats and the white dress mentioned which conjure up a wedding ceremony.

The poem states: “A soldier a real soldier has a worn lace a worn lace of different sizes that is to say if he can read.” The mention of the soldier right after the mention of the white dress could easily be read as part of the wedding scene where the soldier is the groom. However,

because the soldier is wearing “worn lace” I chose to read him as the bride herself. The bride in the white dress is a soldier because she is sent down the aisle to her doom the same way a soldier is sent to meet his doom at war. The white dress is made of “worn lace of different sizes” which implies that this dress has been worn many times before by different women of different sizes. Marriage is thus described as a war that so many female soldiers fell at before, an image not very different from the ones Dickinson used to describe marriage in her poetry. The “worn lace of different sizes” is followed by “that is to say if he can read, if he can read he is a size to show shutting up twenty-four.” The ability to read here is used as an indicator of size and thus of age. This implies that younger women as well as grown women have fallen victim to marriage.

The following paragraph which almost reads like a chant “Go red, go red, laugh white” is evocative of the patriarchal society’s stance on marriage: “go red” which is repeated twice like a sports team anthem could refer to the animosity between the two genders. In the wedding ceremony, they are like opposing sports teams on the field and the minister joining them is like a referee. The color red has often been attributed to masculine energy in *Tender Buttons* and that allows us to read this chant as an act of cheering in favor of men and to the detriment of women which are represented by the virginal color white. That said, this chant could also refer to the bride’s loss of virginity, as the red represents the blood from the broken hymen while the white “laughs” in irony of this lost virginity. A third reading of this chant could be that the color red represents the physical and emotional violence that women often suffer through within the bond of marriage but are expected to “laugh” about it, to be fine and happy with it.

In the following paragraph, the sexual energy grows further: “Suppose a collapse in rubbed purr, in rubbed purr get.” The “collapse” mentioned here seems to refer to a climax, or an orgasm which is often referred to in French as *la petite mort* (the little death). The “rubbed purr”

presents us with a metonymy of a cat, or a “pussy,” a term which gained sexual connotation in the nineteenth century and started being used interchangeably with the word “vagina” (or female genitalia in general) until this day. The “collapse” takes place “in rubbed purr” so it is safe to assume that we are talking about a male orgasm that takes place inside female genitalia.

The focus on the sexual pleasure of the male partner is intentional and is further explained by the following couple of concluding paragraphs: “Little sales ladies little sales ladies little saddles of mutton./ Little sales of leather and such beautiful beautiful, beautiful beautiful.” These two sentences which do not include any verbs sound like a call; the speaker is calling on the “little sales ladies” which, being little ladies who offer their leather (their skin) for sale, are basically prostitutes. These ladies are compared to “saddles of mutton” because the saddle is made of soft skin like the ladies themselves, and because the act of riding a mutton on a saddle evokes sexual objectification of the woman. The sales of these ladies extend to “leather and such beautiful beautiful, beautiful beautiful.” Adding a comma in the middle of the four consecutive “beautiful”s implies that the first and third repetitions are adjectives while the second and fourth are nouns. The sales ladies are selling their skin and their beauty, but that beauty is not limited to their exterior: the “beautiful” as a noun can be read as representative of the heart, the soul, and the mind; while “beautiful” as an adjective is representative of physical beauty. By the end of the poem we may wonder, how did we go from a bride in a white dress to these “little sales ladies”? The answer to that is that the agreement of marriage under a patriarchal society is not that different from the sexual transaction that takes places between a man and a prostitute. Both the bride and the prostitute are selling themselves; the latter sells herself for money, and the former for respectability, reputation, safety, social status, etc.

Stein's peculiar use of grammar in "Suppose an Eyes" brings us to one important lecture that she gave in the United States in 1934 under the title "Poetry and Grammar." This lecture (among other revised lectures) was later adapted and published in 1935 in a book called *Lectures in America*. Stein starts off her lecture by addressing the famous question that all poets attempt to answer: "What is poetry?" According to Stein, in order to define poetry we must also define prose and grammar because "words have to do everything in poetry and prose" (*Writings 1932-1946* 313). In her lecture, Stein delves into the uses of all kinds of words: nouns, verbs, adverbs, articles, prepositions, etc. She is particularly averse to nouns because "a noun is a name of anything, why after a thing is named write about it[?]" (I added the question mark for clarification because Stein does not believe in such punctuation marks and she brings this up in this lecture as well). In Stein's logic, it seems that a name is only useful when it suggests something new about a thing, nouns however keep saying the same thing about the same thing, and in that sense, they are useless. By extension, the adjectives which describe nouns are also useless: "the thing that affects a not too interesting thing is of necessity not interesting" (314).

Let us think about that last line in "Suppose an Eyes": "Little sales of leather and such beautiful beautiful, beautiful beautiful". I analyzed above the four repetitions of the word beautiful separated by the comma as adjectives affecting nouns, perhaps Stein's use of these words in this way is itself a statement about the uselessness of nouns and their affecting adjectives. This is similar to the concept of repeating a word on and on and on until it becomes a sound and just stops making sense. Stein refers to Shakespeare at several points in this lecture, alluding to the fact that he treated grammar similarly. At one point she notes that "a noun has been the name of something for such a very long time. That is the reason that slang exists it is to change the nouns which have been names for so long" (316). While we might today think of

Shakespeare's use of English as refined and dignified, it was actually considered slangish at the time when he wrote. He is known for having invented many English words that started off as slang and are now established words in the English dictionary. It seems as if Stein had an ambitious project similar to Shakespeare's. It is also similar to Dickinson who has her own lexicon which can be consulted on the web. However, instead of creating new nouns or adjectives, she wanted to create a new English grammar. Just like Shakespeare invented his new words simply by writing them into his art, so did Stein. Even the logic behind her like or dislike of certain grammatical units is often metaphorical and poetic; for instance, she does not like the apostrophe of possession because it is "all alone [...] outside the word when the word is a plural" (317); she does not like colons, semi-colons, and commas because she believes that "writing should go on" and should only be stopped by a period (318). One way to think about Stein's lecture on "Grammar and Poetry" is to think of it as one long poem describing her subjective uses and misuses of grammatical agents.

Women poets' stray from conventional grammar and punctuation results in poems that read like magic spells. It was not uncommon for women's lively and metaphorical speech to be treated as signs of sorcery and witchcraft in the middle ages, a sign which often led them to be burnt at the stake. Centuries later, however, women poets started referring to their works as "sorcery" and "witchcraft". Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in an essay on "Sexual Linguistics: Gender, Language, Sexuality" speak of Emily Dickinson praising Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry by referring to it as "witchcraft" and "divine insanity" (85).

Gilbert and Gubar justify a different mode of expression: "That women like Dickinson should feel the need for an alternative speech is not of course surprising in light of the different educational opportunities accorded to the two sexes until the late nineteenth century" ("Sexual

Linguistics” 86). Until the late nineteenth century, boys in America were required to learn Greek and Latin while girls were not allowed to do so. Girls could only speak in their mother tongue and were sometime required to learn to speak in the mother tongue of neighboring countries (French for instance). Dead languages, however, were sacred. They were used by churches and states, and in patriarchal societies this means that they were exclusively used by men. Ancient Greek and Latin are not mother tongues because everyone who spoke them as a mother tongue no longer exists. Perhaps we could think of Greek and Latin as father tongues as opposed to English which is the mother tongue at hand.

Why is a mother tongue called so anyway? Perhaps that is because we inherit this tongue simply by being born of our mothers and nurtured by them. What I call the father tongue, however, is an acquired tongue, a privilege that is bestowed upon a son by his father. We can think of it as an inheritance at a time when women weren’t allowed to inherit. We should imagine what it must have been like for a women poet in the nineteenth century to have a father and/or a brother who could converse in a language that she had no access to.

The woman poet therefore deals with this exclusion by inventing her own language and making it as inaccessible as possible. Gilbert and Gubar give the example of Dickinson as “the foremother who articulates a fantasy about female linguistic power that empowers not only her verse but – magically – the voices of both her precursors and her successors” (“Sexual Linguistics” 85). With Dickinson as the foremother of this female language trend, Gilbert and Gubar go on listing some of Dickinson’s successors among which figure H.D., Virginia Woolf, and Gertrude Stein: “Gertrude Stein remakes English itself into a foreign language when she seems to speak in tongues, testifying to the authority of her own experience” (87-88).

Stein not only dallies with the rules of English grammar and plays with its sounds in order to make words have a meaning other than their original meaning, she also intentionally chooses a vocabulary that is associated with women and their domestic activities which are often deemed “frivolous” by a patriarchal society. Murphy argues that “Stein's strategy, of course, is subversive: to subvert conventional feminine prose and talk, while intimating her own new language and ways of seeing” (385), however, I do not believe that Stein’s use of female domestic talk undermines it, on the contrary, I believe that it elevates it to the level of poetic language. She makes female domestic talk worthy of poetry thus challenging the patriarchal pretentiousness of poetic language and at the same time challenging the patriarchal view on women’s talk and activities.

In an essay titled “Queer Sonorities: Sound as Persuasion in Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*,” Chani Anine Marchiselli suggests that:

Tender Buttons foregrounds the sounds of those domestic conversations, and in this way lends gravity to derided, and traditionally feminine, forms of communication: quotidian chatter, gossip, babble, or social “noise.” Despite its visual opacity, *Tender Buttons* especially encourages the reader to hear and speak the sounds of Stein’s domestic experiences. (70)

The incorporation of what Marchiselli calls a domestic female “social noise” into Stein’s poetry is exactly what elevates this female kind of speech to the level of poetic speech. The importance of quotidian female speech in women’s poetry is yet another pattern which we will further explore in the poetry of Audre Lorde in the next chapter of this thesis.

Marchiselli’s interest in *noise* is interesting since “Stein often was accused of merely making ‘noise’” (75). As she delves into a study of sound and noise in literature, Marchiselli quotes sound scholar Douglas Khan and explains that

many dadaists and futurists invoked “noise” as a means to reinvigorate Western art, music, and poetry. Acceptable and implicitly masculine forms of “noise” might include military and industrial sounds or the mimicked voice of “primitive” others. Hence, “noise” generally referred to abject sounds, sounds associated with or expelled from the physical body or the body social [. . .]. The “noise” associated with women, however, often was left out of the avant-garde’s restorative project [. . .]. Moreover, Stein elevates the sociability of the ear; her attention to listening, to everyday communication, and especially to domestic conversations resuscitates interpersonal forms of speech and persuasion often dismissed as trivial, feminine babble. (75)

Being an avant-garde writer herself, Stein made use of the fact that “noise” became an acceptable motif in art and poetry. The criticism she faced and the accusations that likened her poetry to mere noise are but proof of the patriarchal society’s double standards which would only accept noise as long as it is masculine.

Gilbert and Gubar give an example from Stein’s statement about her poetics which is to “only excreate, only excreate a no since.” They translate this spell-like statement into “to only excrete nonsense” (“Sexual Linguistics” 88). Stein’s statement of her poetics not only plays with sound but also with meaning: the prefix “ex” means “out of” or “from” so we can define “excreate” as “create something out of something,” which applies to excrement. “No since” implies something that has never been heard of before, which also applies to nonsense. Stein’s fabricated language consists of bending the rules of grammar and spelling to her will and make use of English phonetics while she does so.

In addition to her play with sound and meaning, another aspect of Stein’s poetry which assimilates her poetics to “sorcery” and “witchcraft” is simply her extensive use of repetition. Stein’s most renowned line of poetry is “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” (Stein, *Writings, 1903-1932* 395). It was first used in the poem “Sacred Emily” and then later in other poems, lectures, and essays. This line is often either criticized for lacking meaning at all or misinterpreted as

“things are what they are.” Criticism and misinterpretation of this Steinian line was not only limited to literary scholars, it was often the discussion of scholars in the arts. In an article titled “More Than a Rose,” the visual arts scholar H.S. Broudy quotes Stein’s line “A rose is a rose is a rose” and considers it as one of the “three modes of discourse about the arts.” “What one is to make of Gertrude Stein’s remarks on the rose is not clear,” says Broudy, “but is it true that a rose is never more than a rose? If so, art, especially poetry, is in a bad way” (1). Broudy considered the four roses in Stein’s line to be one and the same, hence misinterpreting the line to mean that a rose is nothing but a rose and could never be anything more than that. However, that is the exact opposite of Steinian poetics which is to give an infinity of meanings to a single word each time it is uttered or written.

Robert F. Fleissner wrote a short article titled “Stein’s Four Roses” where he attempts to explain the Steinian line “rose is a rose is a rose” and where he also presents his readers with the criticism faced by Stein because of this line. “The skeptic,” says Fleissner, “may still make fun of her by saying that all her line makes him think of is the worn-out bromide, ‘Business is business.’” (326). However, like Fleissner, I do not believe that such *c’est-la-vie* finality was intended by Stein in this famous line. On the contrary, Stein endorses the idea that the same word is never repeated twice, it might look and sound the same but it carries a different meaning, a different tone, a different intent, etc.

Let us dissect Stein’s most famous line according to her own poetics of play with sound, meaning, and repetition. “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” in her poem “Sacred Emily” (*Writings, 1903-1932* 395). Since the poem consists of references to many female names we can safely assume that the first Rose in the line is actually a girl’s name. In fact, Stein herself publicly corrected a misquotation of this line which said, “a rose is a rose is a rose.” “She

claimed,” says Fleissner, “that what she wrote was "Rose is ..." not "A rose is . . ." In other words, she is referring to a woman called Rose and describing her in rather traditional terms, but emphasizing her beauty by reiterating the identification” (326). The first “is a rose” can be interpreted as an actual reference to roses which implies that Rose was named after a flower. The second “is a rose” if read aloud, can be interpreted as “is arose,” she has woken up. The word “arose” can also mean emerge and is often used with problems and issues, as in “a problem/issue arose;” so the last “is a rose” can mean that Rose’s issues and problems have woken up with her. Stein’s famous line which was reduced to pessimistic finality has an abundance of semantic possibilities.

Possibility in women’s poetry has a strong presence. Dickinson’s line “I dwell in possibility—a fairer house than prose” can be regarded as the origin behind this literary tendency. Possibility being contrasted to prose implies that the word possibility is used interchangeably with the word poetry thus accentuating the fundamental role of possibility in women’s poetry. Women’s poetry invites endless readings and interpretations and does not care for the sort of patriarchal finality which was imposed on Stein’s famous line by male readers and scholars. “This criticism,” says Fleissner in his article “Stein’s Four Roses,”

has usually taken this form: the poetry is an example (or symbolic of esoteric modern verse which fails to communicate to the average reader because it does not inform in a commonsense manner; it is aestheticist, not just aesthetic, in that it stands for the whole “*l’art pour l’art*” movement—indeed the very line itself would seem to echo the movement's name, suggesting meaningless repetition. Finally, from a logical standpoint the concept of the four roses is boring, dizzying, and (worst of all) tautological rather than, say, teleological. (325)

It is true that Stein’s poetry relied heavily on repetition, but to deem it tautological would be to miss the point. Repetition is not synonymous to tautology. Tautology necessarily implies an

undeniable truth by virtue of its logical form alone, it involves not only repetition of the language but also of the meaning, it explains meaning by repeating the same meaning. On the other hand, repetition (or at least the kind of repetition employed by Stein) is repetition with variation: the words are repeated but the meaning is changed with each repetition. As suggested by Fleissner, “there are as many meanings as there are roses” (327). The word “rose” does not refer to the same rose each time it is written or uttered. If the line “Rose is a rose is a rose” does not carry much poetic significance or meaning on its own, it certainly carries a valid commentary on the poetics of repetition which, for once, is not limited to musicality but also and more importantly to meaning and the variety and possibility of endless meanings.

In the rest of Stein’s poem “Sacred Emily” we see many more incidences of repetition besides the rose line. The poem begins with the lines “Compose compose beds/ Wives of great men rest tranquil” (*Writings, 1903-1932* 387). The repetition of the word “compose” twice implies the existence of two different meanings. The word *compose* can mean write, arrange, or form. The connotation given by the word “beds” moves me towards the second synonym, because a bed is arranged, and it is often done so by a woman. We also tend to use the expression “make the bed” to imply arranging the sheets and covers. However, the expression “make the bed” when read literally means creating a bed. If this bed is an actual bed, then it is formed, if it is a metaphorical bed then it is written. In both cases, it is “composed.” The first line of “Sacred Emily” highlights women’s role as poets who create metaphorical beds and their imposed roles as housewives who make the beds. In the second line, the poet addresses women directly by referring to them as “wives of great men.” This sarcastic line accentuates further the imposition of the housewife role upon women. The patriarchy views them as wives to great men but never as great women. The expression “rest tranquil” that follows offers these women a consolation but

also an implication that things are about to change, if not in the real world, at least in the world within this poem. Later in the poem, Stein writes “push sea push sea push sea push sea push sea push sea push/ sea push sea” (ll. 20-21) and “Leave us sit./ I do believe it will finish, I do believe it will finish./ Pat ten patent, pat ten patent” (ll. 28-30). The eight seas which the speaker invites the readers to push are perhaps the seas of change; it seems that a sea-change is about to take place and the speaker confirms this when she asks for women to be left to sit and follows it with a prayer-like statement “I do believe it will finish, I do believe it will finish.” The “pat ten patent” line hardly makes sense as it is, but if we were to read it using Stein’s poetics of sound and meaning we could translate it into “patience, patient” and the repetition of this expression is again a consolation offered to these women poets who are not recognized as great women but as wives of great men. The beginning of the poem reads like a coded message on the radio intended for a revolutionary group to ask them to have patience and to give them hope that the revolution is drawing near.

Halfway into “Sacred Emily” we start to understand where the poem gets its title:

Not writing not writing another.
Another one.
Think.
Jack Rose Jack Rose.
Yard.
Practically all of them.
Does believe it.
Measure a measure a measure or.
Which is pretty which is pretty which is pretty.
to be top.
Neglect Waldberg.
Sudden say separate.
So great so great Emily.
Sew grate sew grate Emily.
Not a spell nicely. (*Stein: Writings, 1903-1932* ll.
135-149)

In those lines, the speaker seems to be struggling with the process of poetic creation. This is a writing technique that Stein often uses in her poetry. She writes as if it was her mind's hand that is writing. Unlike what is presented to us in literature and film, the mind does not experience full eloquent and seamless monologues, not single flowing streams of consciousness, but rather random, abrupt, mingling spurts of words. The mind does not produce full sentences when we think to ourselves, it does not organize words into units of meaning unless we will it to do so in speaking or in writing.

The speaker here is thinking to herself saying, "Not writing not writing another./ Another one./ Think." It seems she is displeased with a certain way of writing and refuses to adopt it and so is forcing herself to think of an alternative. The line "Measure a measure a measure or." evokes the resistance to meter: the mind keeps blurting out "Measure a measure a measure" but then at the end of the line there is an "or" that suggest that there could be an alternative but then the line ends there with a period and we do not know what the alternative is. Because we are reading Stein's poetry, we understand that her own poetics *is* that alternative so we become entrapped in a sort of *mise-en-abyme* of poetic creation. The abrupt "or" is followed by a wondering: "Which is pretty which is pretty which is pretty." The repetition of the wondering is, again, evocative of the inner workings of the mind. The mind is repetitive, it does not work as smoothly as we may like to think it does. The "Which" in the speaker's wondering implies that she is torn between two choices: "a measure" and the choice that should have come after the "or." The line "Sudden say separate." implies that some sudden idea or inspiration has touched the speaker's mind: "So great so great Emily./ Sew grate sew grate Emily./ Not a spell nicely." The reference behind the name Emily here begins to become clearer as a reference to Emily Dickinson. The "Yard" on line 139 was an early indicator because Dickinson often wrote of/in

her yard and said that this is where she got her inspiration. It seems like the speaker of Stein's poem was trying to get to her own "yard" of inspiration and that is when Emily Dickinson inspires her. The phonetic resemblance between the two lines "So great so great Emily./ Sew grate sew grate Emily." is more than evident, but what is not evident is the meaning behind the homophones that Stein chose specifically for the words "so great."

In her poetry, Dickinson often refers to the act of poetic creation as weaving, sewing, and many other "female" handcrafts. Therefore, the "sew" instead of "so" is an implicit reference to Dickinson. The word "grate" as a noun is synonymous for the word "fireplace," and as a verb it implies "producing a jarring sound" (OED). If we apply these definitions to line 148, it takes on a whole new meaning: the speaker was praising Emily for being "so great" in line 147, then in line 148, she is praising her for "sewing grate" which means for composing poetry that would set fire to conservative poetics and poetry that had a sound which would cause the patriarchal scholars an annoyance. Then on line 149, the speaker says "Not a spell nicely." which alludes to Dickinson's assimilation of female poetic writing to spells and witchcraft but also to Stein's own poetics of misspelling.

Gertrude Stein is certainly emblematic of revolutionary female poetry. While Dickinson also challenged conservative patriarchal poetics in her poetry, she did so anonymously without intending to impose any radical change in the literary scene. Stein on the other hand was quite intent on provoking and challenging the patriarchy through her poetry and her essays. Perhaps her poetic work that is deemed most unreadable and unintelligible by her own readership and by her harsh critics alike is "Patriarchal Poetry." This forty-page long poem is filled with what Stein would call a "no since," it is wordy, long, and exhausting. It isn't until the last five pages of "Patriarchal Poetry" that we see actual mention of the words "patriarchal poetry" repeated many

times as if the speaker was calling someone out on a crime they have committed, and some other times as if the speaker is trying to define the terms. The end of the poem takes a Dickinsonian turn when Stein randomly and inconsistently starts capitalizing the words “Patriarchal Poetry.” At one instant she says, “Patriarchal Poetry not patriarchal poetry” (606) which implies that the capitalization of the words alludes to the institutionalization of patriarchal values in the literary field. But then at a later instant she says, “Patriarchal poetry might be found here” (606) which implies that her own poem contains signs of patriarchal poetry. That might allow us to view the entire poem as a satire of patriarchal poetry, since the title of the poem is patriarchal poetry, and the poem itself announces the existence of patriarchal poetry in it, and it is purposely made unintelligible, then we can safely say that it constitutes a joke which entails that patriarchal poetry is unintelligible, wordy, and needlessly long. Perhaps the best way to close this chapter is with one final quote from this long poem, “patriarchal poetry might to-morrow/patriarchal poetry might be finished to-morrow” (606).

Chapter III.

Poetics of the Black Feminine: The Poetry of Audre Lorde

During the 1960s and 1970s in the United-States, African American artists united to form an art movement called the Black Arts Movement (BAM) as a manifestation of Black pride and in reaction to white supremacist literature. As a feminist African American poet, Audre Lorde constituted the (almost underground) “feminine side” of the BAM. Although belonging to the Feminist movement and the Black Arts Movement, she felt underrepresented in both as the former was dominated by White women and the latter by Black men. Because there was no space for her as a Black female artist, Lorde created that space for herself through her poetry and theory where she developed a poetics of the Black feminine which presents poetry as an intrinsically black feminine experience.

The growing power of the Black Power movement in the late 1960s called for an art movement as well. Sagri Dhairyam argues that “for Black American poets it meant a call to a poetics of Blackness which emphasized the role of poet as activist and leader and the role of poetry as expression of an intrinsically Black vision” (232). Amiri Baraka’s poem “Black Art,” is widely considered to be the “manifesto” of the Black Arts Movement. I personally consider Audre Lorde’s essay “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” to be the “manifesto” of the poetics of the Black Feminine in the sense that it addresses black women directly inciting them to embrace the poetry which relates to their womanness and to bring it out into the world.

In the beginning of her essay “Poetry is Not a Luxury” (*Sister Outsider* 25-28), Lorde presents “poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt” (25). This

initial definition of poetry is more of a general one which has not yet touched upon the Black Feminine, but we can already sense a hint of femaleness associated with the birth of ideas. This concept of birth and generativity is taken one step ahead in the next sentence where she says: “That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding” (*Sister Outsider* 25). While the more sensical verb in this enumeration would have been “precede” as she mentions it between parentheses, Lorde uses the verb “birth” on purpose to prepare the reader for her views on the female roots of poetry which are often associated not only with womanhood but also with motherhood.

She then dives right into her unique definition of poetry: “For each of us as women, there is a dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises, ‘beautiful/and tough as chest nut/stanchions against (y)our nightmare of weakness/’ and of impotence” (*Sister Outsider* 25). In these lines, Lorde cites her own poem “Black Mother Woman,” and ties it in with what she believes poetry represents. Her description of the dark place within each woman where our true spirits are “hidden and growing” is very evocative of the image of a womb. This offers us with a potential answer to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s somewhat rhetorical question: “If the pen is a metaphorical penis, with what organs can females generate texts?” (*The Madwoman* 7).

Lorde creates a parallel between poetry and procreation, or rather poetry and childbearing. As a Black lesbian feminist poet, Lorde seems to negate the role of the male in procreation with her mention of the “nightmare of weakness/ and of impotence,” which is why I believe it is more accurate to relate her poetics of the Black Feminine to a corresponding parallel between poetry and childbearing (an asexual form of childbearing). A woman poet has to negate

the role of the white-father-poets, she has to negate the role of the “pen(is)” (as Gubar and Gilbert would put it); in other words, she has to birth her poetry ‘asexually’ by getting rid of the influence of the “white forefathers” as Lorde calls them.

Moving on with her essay, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” Lorde associates this place within women from which power and poetry springs with darkness because it “is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep” (*Sister Outsider* 26). This negation of whiteness and superficiality can be read as a response to the widely white feminist movement from which Lorde felt left out as a Black woman. Lorde defines Blackness here —by opposing it to Whiteness—as something that runs deeper than the surface of the skin, something ancient that is inherited from the Black ancestry of African Americans. These features can be easily attributed to wombs; they are dark because there is no light inside them, ancient because they have been around since the beginning of humanity but also because life originates in them, and deep because they can carry the entire inner world of a whole human being. To categorize wombs as dark organs is to say that all women (including white women specifically) carry a little bit of Blackness inside them, Blackness in the sense explained by Lorde.

Lorde opposes this Black woman mother within each woman with what she calls “the white fathers.” According to her, ‘white fathers’ have a problem-solving approach towards life, unlike the ancient ancestry of African Americans which approaches life as “a situation to be experienced and dealt with” (*Sister Outsider* 26). Lorde defines poetry by Black women as the combination of these two approaches to life: a combination of surviving and living. This kind of poetry is “poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean—in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight” (*Sister Outsider* 26). We see here again Lorde overemphasizing the

‘Black woman mother’s’ fertility and opposing it to the ‘White father’s’ sterility. She likens poetry to a generative experience, an experience out of which springs something new, something “revelatory.”

In another attempt to define poetry as an intrinsically Black feminine experience, Lorde refers to the sexist views on women which make them view themselves as “diminished or softened” (*Sister Outsider* 27) then she breaks down this sexist stereotype not by directly denying it, but by claiming the power that feelings and emotions have over thought: “feeling births idea” (*Sister Outsider* 25). Lorde defines poetry almost as a Black feminine school of thought by opposing the “white father’s” dictum “I think, therefore I am” to “the Black mother within each of us—the poet—[who] whispers in our dreams: I feel therefore I can be free” (*Sister Outsider* 27). Lorde’s Black feminine poetics rejects the idea that “the head will save us [,] the brain alone will set us free” (*Sister Outsider* 27). She describes thought as a sterile experience when compared to emotion which is a fertile and generative experience. “There are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us as women, as humans,” she says, “there are no new ideas, only new ways of making them felt” (*Sister Outsider* 27).

In Lorde’s poetics, ideas are not only meant to be thought, they are meant to be experienced wholly: to be thought *and* felt. Because it is feeling that gives way to newness, freshness, and originality: “feeling births thought” and then the thought is felt in a new way and so that new feeling births another thought, etc. Lorde gives a lot of weight to the heightened female instinct that is translated into Black female poetry, it “is not idle fantasy, but a disciplined attention to the true meaning of ‘it feels right to me’” that is because “poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives” (*Sister Outsider* 26). She argues that this female instinct is not only limited to Black female poets but to black women in general.

In an interview with Adrienne Rich, Lorde talks about what she learned from her mother's relationship to language: "My mother had a strange way with words; if one didn't serve her or wasn't strong enough, she'd just make up another word, and then that word would enter our family language forever, and woe betide any of us who forgot it" (715). Lorde learned one of the most essential concepts of her own definition of poetry as a way of "giv[ing] name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless" from her mother, a black woman who was never an actual poet or a reader of poetry. Poetry as defined by Lorde is not about writing or composing, it is about living; it is a way of life and a school of thought. And according to her, Black women's experience in the world forces them to think in poetry.

E. Patrick Johnson speaks to Lorde's feminized concept of "it feels right to me" saying that "both poetry and the erotic, then, are about trusting one's feelings, not in a pedestrian or banal way, but in a radical way that recognizes our [he quotes Lorde] 'incredible reserve of creativity and power' and 'heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all [our]experience'" (Johnson 312). Johnson uses Lorde's feminized poetic instincts to make a claim about the relation between poetry and the erotic in general, especially as a let-out and solace for the LGBTQ community.

In the poetics of the Black feminine, the cycle of "feeling births thought" is much like a generation of women birthing men who birth women that birth men, etc. A cycle where patriarchy and sexism have attributed feeling to women and thought to men. But Lorde doesn't fight that by inverting the roles, she fights it by explaining why feeling is primal in the same way that woman is primal. There can be no man who was not birthed from a woman, just as there can be no thought that was not birthed from a feeling. Women's "feelings were not meant to survive.

Kept around, as unavoidable adjuncts or pleasant pastimes, feelings were expected to kneel to thought as women were expected to kneel to men” (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 28).

Let us look at one of Audre Lorde’s most famous poems:

Coal

I
Is the total black, being spoken
From the earth's inside.
There are many kinds of open.
How a diamond comes into a knot of flame
How a sound comes into a word, colored
By who pays what for speaking.

Some words are open
Like a diamond on glass windows
Singing out within the crash of passing sun
Then there are words like stapled wagers
In a perforated book—buy and sign and tear apart—
And come whatever wills all chances
The stub remains
An ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge.
Some words live in my throat
Breeding like adders. Others know sun
Seeking like gypsies over my tongue
To explode through my lips
Like young sparrows bursting from shell.
Some words
Bedevil me.

Love is a word another kind of open—
As a diamond comes into a knot of flame
I am black because I come from the earth's inside
Take my word for jewel in your open light.” (*The Collected Poems* 6).

The poem starts with a one-word line: “I,” then on the second line the poem continues “Is the total black, being spoken/ From the earth’s inside” (ll. 2-3). The isolation of the “I” is both empowering and expressive of Lorde’s feelings of isolation in society as a Black lesbian woman. In an essay accounting of Lorde’s most famous speech “The Master’s Tools Will not Dismantle the Master’s House,” C. Lester Olson explains how Lorde was invited to the “Second Sex

Conference” which was a tribute to the thirtieth anniversary of Simone de Beauvoir’s book *The Second Sex* and how she ended up giving a speech where she laid out all her concerns about white feminism, its complicity, and its exclusion of black women and other minorities. Olson says that “in her speech, to reclaim ‘difference’ for women, Lorde stressed, ‘[i]nterdependence’ between women is the way to a freedom which allowed the *I to be*, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative” (qtd. in Olson 268). The long journey between the Black female “I” and the “be” in that statement can be seen in the isolating line break in the first line of “Coal” where verb to be only comes in the second line of the poem.

The lines “I/ Is the total black” feature a poetic use of the Black vernacular English which asserts the poet’s racial identity. At this point in my project, I have shown how women poets’ approach to language was always intentionally different and fresh. While Dickinson added a new use of punctuation to English language, and Stein added a new grammar to English language, Lorde did not have to invent a new aspect of language as she already spoke a language derived from English which was stigmatized on racial grounds much like Dickinson’s and Stein’s use of language was stigmatized on sexist grounds.

The blackness inside the earth can be read as reference to the title of the poem: it is coal. But it can also be read as expressive of the primal aspect of Blackness. Blackness is “dark and ancient and deep,” as Lorde suggests in her essay. The earth (like mother nature) is often viewed in female terms, perhaps because of its generative abilities. So here again, we have a birth analogy: the earth births the coal, the poet is the coal and she births feelings into poems and poems birth actions and actions birth change. It is also important to note that the coal is “being spoken/from the earth’s inside,” the earth is speaking the coal and the coal is the poet. The earth (as a poet) is speaking a poem and Lorde (the poet) *is* that poem. The earth’s inside (its womb)

reminds us of that “woman’s place of power,” that “dark place within where hidden and growing [women’s] true spirits rise” in Lorde’s essay (*Sister Outsider* 25).

In Dhairyam’s reading of “Coal,” “the feminized trope of the womb” is “both receptive and violated” (233). It is receptive because the earth’s generativity depends on its receptivity of outer elements, and violated because of the abuse of the earth in the exaggerated extraction of coal as a staple fuel. The coal here also stands for the abducted Black people of Africa and the Americas who suffered slavery. Dhairyam refers to Margret Homan’s “deconstructions of the tropes of passive feminized nature playing muse to male poet” commenting that this deconstruction showed that literary history has often viewed “the act of poetic creation as male” (233), which echoes with the “masculinized violence” which Lorde’s “Coal” evokes not only to women in general but even to “the figure of woman in poetic tradition” (234). The generative role of men as the producers of the seeds of humanity has been celebrated throughout history, while women were only seen as the fertile ground where the seeds are planted. In that view, men were the active agents and women were the objectified and passive ovens. In the same way, male poets were seen as the active agents in producing poetry and women only served them as an object for inspiration. Lorde’s poem is recreating the trope of the woman figure (through nature and earth) in poetry as active rather than passive. She does not dwell on the earth’s violation but on its generativity and its ancientness. She is also not a muse who serves as an object of inspiration to a male poet, she is the poet herself.

The image of birth in “Coal” does not stop at the earth’s birthing of coal. At the end of the middle stanza of the poem, the speaker says: “Some words live in my throat/ Breeding like adders. Others know sun/ Seeking like gypsies over my tongue/ To explode through my lips/ Like young sparrows bursting from shell” (ll. 16-20). Poetry is described here in terms of birth as

it is in Lorde's essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury." Words are alive inside the poet's throat as a fetus is alive in its mother's womb. They are multiplying in her throat like snakes, which takes us back to the parallel created between the inside of the female poet and the inside of the earth. The words that are breeding inside the poet's throat are not yet fully formed, but the ones on her tongue who "know the sun" are ready to be birthed. The birth-giving takes place through the poet's lips and the words (the sparrows) fly away, she does not own them forever, she doesn't raise them. This description of poetry as a Black feminine bodily experience affirms Lorde's poetics of the Black feminine.

The fact that the impregnation and the birth of these words take place in the poet's throat and mouth hints back to the beginning of the poem where "the total black [is] being spoken." Lorde seems to associate poetry with speech more than she does with writing. She presents Black women as women who think in poetry, as I previously mentioned, almost as if they do not need to write because this is their normal stream of thought and their habitual speech. James W. Smethurst explains that "certain aspects of the Black Arts Movement cause [him] to think more deeply about textuality, the material production of texts, and the relation of texts to performance" then he moves on to quote "one of the most perceptive scholars of the Black Arts Movement, Mike Sell" who "persuasively argues that it was "a textually supported anti-textual movement." (qtd. in Smethurst 176). This anti-textuality of BAM appears in Lorde's "Coal" and in her essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" almost as a reaction to the white fathers' obsession with textuality.

Audre Lorde often addresses in her poetry that "dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises" which she mentioned in her essay "Poetry is Not a Luxury." In her poem "Bloodbirth" she experiments further with this female internal reservoir of poetry:

Bloodbirth

That which is inside me screaming
beating about for exit or entry
names the wind, wanting winds' voice
wanting winds' power
it is not my heart
and I am trying to tell this
without art or embellishment
with bits of me flying out in all directions
screams memories old pieces of flesh
struck off like dry bark
from a felled tree, bearing
up or out
holding or bringing forth
child or demon
is this birth or exorcism or
the beginning machinery of myself
outlining recalling
my father's business—what I must be
about—my own business
minding.

Shall I split
or be cut down
by a word's complexion or the lack of it
and from what direction
will the opening be made
to show the true face of me
lying exposed and together
My children your children their children
bent on our conjugating business. (*The Collected Poems* 35)

Lorde refers to the poetry inside of her which longs to be let out as a creature that is “screaming” and “beating about for exit or entry” (ll. 1-2). This screaming creature reminds us of the fetus that is born in her throat in “Coal.” The poet insists that this creature is not her heart, in order to speak back to the romantic idea that poetry springs from the heart (especially when it comes to women’s poetry). The insistence that she is trying to “tell this/ without art or embellishment” (ll. 6-7) is a perplexing one since this is, after all, said in a poem which is a product of art. However, the speaker is trying to insinuate that poetry for her as a woman does

not take art or craft, it springs naturally from within almost like a sneeze or a cough “flying out in all directions” (l. 8).

The speaker then explains that the poetry that she spits out of her mouth brings back memories of “old pieces of flesh” (l. 9). This flesh which seems to refer to a child being born, is referred to as being born from a tree, a felled tree. In lines 14-16, the speaker starts to wonder whether this offspring is “child or demon/ is this birth or exorcism or/ the beginning machinery of myself.” This reminds us of Emily Dickinson’s comparison of female poetry to female witchcraft. Lorde is comparing the process of getting the poetry out of her to two processes that are generally affiliated with women: the first and most obvious is childbirth, and the second less obvious one is sorcery and witchcraft. Lorde is trying to exorcise the poetry out of her. Does that mean that the poetry is viewed as demonic? Perhaps so. Most importantly, however, it is viewed as something with a force of its own. It is not the poet’s creation, but rather imposed on the poet just as much as childbirth is imposed on an impregnated woman or a demon is imposed on a possessed woman.

After this pondering on the origins of the “old piece of flesh” the last suggestion that the speaker makes is that this could be “the beginning machinery of [her]self”. Childbirth can be viewed as a machinery, and it is the “beginning” machinery of the speaker because it is literally how she, like everyone else, has originated and come into being. The poet reflects on the origins of human life and the origins of poetry, insinuating thus that they have both originated around the same time. In other words, she is declaring that poetry is as old as human life and it is as generative as human life, while stressing that the generativity comes specifically from women.

In the second and final stanza of the poem, the speaker imagines herself as the impregnated or possessed tree and muses on the different ways that she can bring out of her the

child or the demon: “shall I split/ or be cut down/ by a word’s complexion or the lack of it” (ll. 21-23). The speaker alludes here to the trauma that some women go through in order to birth their children and that is the cesarian surgery. The options of being split or cut down resonate with the two cesarian methods of cutting horizontally or vertically. While the surgical cut happens by the means of a scalpel, the speaker’s cut happens by the sharpness of a “word’s complexion or the lack of it.” The racial connotations of this line are evident. The blackness or whiteness of a word are what cuts open the poet and brings the poetry out of her. In poetry as in childbirth, the woman has to endure violence, intervention, and pain in order to revel in the beautiful outcome.

The speaker moves on to wonder “from what direction/ will the opening be made/ to show the true face of me/ lying exposed and together” (ll. 24-27). The birthing of the poem shows the poet’s true face; it inherits the poet’s face the same way a child inherits some of the mother’s facial traits. The poet explains that this *true* face is a face that is “exposed and together.” The feelings of exposure are valid for a woman giving birth as it involves exposing the lower half of her body to whomever attends and tends to the birthing process. For the woman poet birthing the poem, the feelings of exposure spring from the rawness and honesty of her poetry which exposes her vulnerability to her readership. The speaker closes the poem with “my children your children their children/ bent on our conjugating business” (ll. 28-29). We understand from the extended metaphor of the poem that the child being birthed is actually made of words because it is a poem. So this reference to her children, the woman reader’s children and other women’s children is actually a reference to their powerful reservoir of words and poetry, and that these women’s children will inherit the trade and become “bent on [their] conjugating business.” The conjugating business is a direct reference to writing, and being bent on it conjures

up the image of a writer bent on her writing desk, but also the image of a woman, a mother, a wife, bent on her house chores and her childrearing. The extended metaphor of childbirth and female witchcraft in this poem is a manifestation of Audre Lorde's womanist poetics.

A poem where Lorde speaks directly about the poet as a woman is "Death Dance for a Poet."

Death Dance for a Poet

Hidden in a forest of questions
unwilling to embrace blackthorn trees
to yield
to go into madness gracefully
or alone
the woman is no longer young
she has come to hate slowly
her skin of transparent metal
the sinuous exposure without reprieve
her eyes of clay
heavy with the fruit of prophetic dreaming.

In the hungers of silence
she has stolen her father's judgments
as the moon kneels
she lies
with her lover sun
wild with the pain
of her meticulous chemistry
her blind answers
the woman is eating her magic alone
crusts of quiet
breed a delusion
she is eternal
and stripping herself of night
she wanders
pretending
a borrowed fire
within her eyes.

Under the myrtle tree
unconcerned with not being
a birch
the woman with skin of transparent metal

lies on a cloak of sleep grass
closing at the first touch
unrelieved
clay-eyed and holy beyond comfort or mercy
she accepts the burden of sun
pouring a pan of burning salt
over her shining body
over the piercing revelations
of sinew and bone
her skin grows
soft and opaque.

And out of the ashes
and her range of vision
the executioners advance. (*The Collected Poems* pp. 291-92)

The questions which form the forest that the woman poet is hidden in at the beginning of the poem could be the questions she ponders over regarding her role as a woman poet. This pondering, however, is interrupted by the “blackthorn trees” which she refuses “to embrace” or “to yield” to. The blackthorn trees represent the restrictions that the white forefathers have imposed on poetry. The woman poet’s unwillingness “to go into madness gracefully/ or alone” also speaks to her refusal to follow the white forefathers but also her refusal to refute them “gracefully or alone.” She wants her poetry to be a show of ungraceful madness as opposed to the well-behaved rational poetry of her white forefathers. The isolation of “or alone” on a separate line shows Lorde’s insistence on the importance of going into this “madness” together as a community of women. Audre Lorde gave a lot of importance to the sense of community among women, and women poets specifically, as did Emily Dickinson in her women poets group and correspondences. In the following lines, we discover that the woman poet is getting older and is starting to “hate slowly/her skin of transparent metal” (ll. 7-8). The body of the woman poet is described here as colorless and cold. The racial connotation of this line drives us to read it as a dispute of the claimed racial impartiality of poetry. While the lack of color of the speaker’s

skin forms a racial argument, the cold quality of the metal forms a feminist one. Women are often described as too passionate and “hot-headed,” and are expected to be colder, calmer, and more collected. This coldness also refers to Lorde’s description of the white forefathers’ poetry as “a sterile word play.” The black woman poet is expected to write as a “transparent metal” without any indication to her complexion nor to her gender. In other words, if she wishes to be taken seriously as a poet, she is encouraged to write as a white man.

The woman poet goes on listing two more things that she was beginning to “slowly hate” while she was hidden away in that forest of questions: “the sinuous exposure without retrieve/ her eyes of clay/ heavy with the fruit of prophetic dreaming” (ll. 9-11). The “sinuous exposure” could be read as the woman poet’s supple attempts at fitting in and belonging to the white male-dominated poetic scene and yet “without retrieve,” without pardon of her being a woman and her being black. As for the “eyes of clay/ heavy with the fruit of prophetic dreaming,” when read along with the “skin of transparent metal” they form a direct reference to Ralph Waldo Emerson theory of the role of the poet as a “transparent eye-ball” who functions as a prophet (“Nature” 18). The eyes are made of clay to accentuate the role of the white forefather as the molder of those unnatural eyes. By the end of this first stanza, the woman poet has finally come to resent herself for trying to reproduce white patriarchal poetry.

In the second stanza of the poem, the woman poet starts to develop her own poetics. Because of the “hunger of silence,” the woman poet was previously obliged to fill the silence with “her father’s judgments.” These two lines could be referring to the woman poet’s submission to patriarchal values because before the second wave of feminism in the 1960s, there was nothing to fill the silence with but patriarchy. Patriarchy was the norm but the woman poet still resented herself for submitting to it. However, once the woman poet starts to connect with

her female “meticulous chemistry,” she starts to see that her answers to the questions raised in the “forest of questions” are in fact “blind answers” (l. 19) and she starts “eating her magic alone.” Again, this resonates with the connection that Emily Dickinson created between women poets and witches. The following couple of epigrammatic lines declare that “crusts of quiet/ breed a delusion” (ll. 21-22). These two lines are almost opposed to the act of eating one’s magic alone: while eating “crusts of quiet” can “breed a delusion,” “eating her magic” will deliver her from this delusion and into her liberation. By the end of this stanza, the woman poet is empowered and ready to take on the task of being a woman poet who is going against the grain of patriarchal poetry, “she is eternal/ and stripping herself of night/ she wanders/ pretending/ a borrowed fire/ within her eyes” (ll. 23-28). The act of pretending is justified by the act of borrowing the fire. However, the fire is not borrowed from the white forefathers, but from “her lover sun” (l. 16).

In the beginning of the third stanza, the woman poet is sitting “under a myrtle tree” which often symbolizes the Greek goddess of love and beauty, Aphrodite. However, the woman poet lies in the shade of that myrtle tree “unconcerned with not being / a birch” (ll. 30-31), she does not care if she is not as god-like as Aphrodite. The mention of birch is important for another reason, and that is that birch wood was made into flogs that were used to beat up African American slaves as punishment. Right after the mention of the birch which evokes this monstrous flogging, the speaker draws our attention back to “her skin of transparent metal” (l. 32) but this time in a positive connotation as the flogging cannot affect her metal skin. While the following lines insinuate that the woman poet is about to find her peace while she “lies on a cloak of sleep grass/ closing at the first touch” (ll. 33-34), we are struck with a single-worded line that tells us otherwise: “unrelieved” (l. 35). In the following line the woman poet is still

“clay-eyed and holy” in an Emersonian sense “beyond comfort and mercy” (l. 36). The sun which was her love in the second stanza has become a “burden” which she accepts in line 37. She explains then that the sun has become a burden because it is “pouring a pan of burning salt/ over her shining body/ over the piercing revelations/ of sinew and bone” (ll. 38-41). The sun has become a burden because it has revealed an ugly reality to the poet while she had been living in the “bred delusion” that came from “eating crusts of quiet” (ll. 21-22). While being a burden, the sun was not an enemy to the woman poet, it was her savior but it had to hurt her in order to save her. In the final couple of lines of the third stanza, we see the woman poet finally rid of her transparent metal skin: “her skin grows/ soft and opaque” (ll. 42-43), she is no longer writing impartially, she has embraced her “opaque” complexion and the “soft[ness]” of her gender.

In the fourth and final stanza of the poem, the woman poet is completely transformed and has reached her ultimate potential as she starts to rise from her “ashes” as a black woman poet. This transformation has, of course, caused “the executioners [to] advance”—the executioners being the white supremacists following the white forefathers’ legacy. However, the woman-poet has been hardened by the sun and is ready to confront the threat of her executioners as “she is eternal” (l. 23). The role of these executioners might suggest that the title of the poem points us towards the eventual death (or silencing) of the black woman poet. However, a more thorough understanding of the poem’s title; would be that the poem consists of a “death dance for a poet” because it celebrates the death of white male poet within and the birth of the black woman poet in her true form.

Lorde’s constantly reaffirmed her identity as a black female lesbian poet; this identification has made her the object of many intersectionality studies. Identity politics are almost always central both in Audre Lorde’s poetry and non-fiction. “Audre Lorde,” says Kaisa

Ilmonen, “had already developed ‘intersectional’ perspectives in the early 1970s by combining class interests with gender-specific issues in racial categorizations, thus articulating the problems of multiple simultaneous oppressions (without actually naming such combinations as intersectional)” (11).

Ilmonen goes on to explain that, “the writers of Black feminist aesthetics invite us to discover theory in poetry, and vice versa” (12). Lorde’s essay “Poetry is Not a Luxury” is a theoretical work that is built entirely on a poetic metaphor, and poems such as “Artisan” (which we will get to shortly) are full of theoretical remarks that reinforce Lorde’s poetics. Lorde’s intersectionality does not only lie in her identity as a woman, an African American, and a lesbian, but it also lies in the constant interlacement of her poetry and theory. “In the recent discussion of intersectionality,” says Ilmonen, “Lorde’s writings and activism are also often recalled when it is felt that intersectionality has been depoliticized or to have lost its radical coalitional potential” (12). While intersectionality studies—focusing on the overlapping of two or more oppressions—often tend to move away from radical politics and closer to identity politics, Lorde’s intersectionality brings both action and identity into play; it does not suffice to identify with a certain group, she calls for action in order to protect and establish the existence of such group (see Lorde’s essay “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” in *Sister Outsider*).

Let us now move on to one of the poems where Lorde blends the theoretical with the poetic. Another poem where Audre Lorde experiments with the female energy that she deems intrinsic in the process of poetic creation is “Artisan.”

Artisan

In workshops without light
we have made birds

that do not sing
kites that shine
but cannot fly
with the speed
by which light falls
in the throat
of delicate working fire
I thought I had discovered
a survival kit
buried
in the moon's heart
flat and resilient as turtles
a case of tortoise shell
hung
in the mouth of darkness
precise unlikely markings
carved into the carapace
sweet meat beneath.

I did not recognize
the shape
of my own name.

Our bed spread
is a midnight flower
coming
all the way down
to the floor
there
your craft shows. (*The Collected Poems* 301)

The speaker starts the poem by announcing that a certain “we” have created birds “in workshops without light” (ll. 1-2). This “we” refers to the community of women poets, and more specifically the community of black women poets which Lorde has always identified with. The workshops without light bring back two metaphors that Lorde often uses when speaking about women’s poetry and which we have previously analyzed: the metaphor of the womb as the “dark place within” from which women’s poetry originates (*Sister Outsider* 25) and the metaphor of the throat and the mouth being the growing and birthing sites for women’s poetry (“Coal”).

However, even though Lorde borrows her own metaphors of nurturing and birthing poetry inside the body of the woman poet, in the case of “Artisan,” in the workshops without light, birds (rather than words) are being created (rather than birthed). These fabricated birds “do not sing” (l. 3) as they are not real, they are not organic, and they stand in for the white patriarchal poetry. Patriarchal poetry is a crafted creation that is meticulously restricted by rules of form, meter, and rhyme, as opposed to womanist poetry which comes more naturally, and is organic and free of artifice. Moreover, womanist poetry is the true bird that sings, in the sense that it says something, it speaks to the reader on a personal humane level, while the patriarchal poetry is a creation that looks like a bird but cannot sing in the sense that it looks like formal poetry (because it rhymes and uses poetic wordings) but does not say much to the reader, it is “sterile word play” as Lorde puts it in her essay “Poetry is Not a Luxury” (*Sister Outsider* 26). That same idea is taken a step further in the following lines: “kites that shine/but cannot fly/with the speed/by which light falls/in the throat/ of delicate working fire” (ll. 4-9), again patriarchal poetry is viewed as something that looks like an object but does not fulfill that object’s function. The incapacity to “fly” is interesting here because it suggests that patriarchal poetry does not go above, it does not make its reader transcend into lofty meaning. However, the disappointment is not in the incapacity to fly (because apparently this kite can somewhat fly) but it is in its incapacity to fly at a certain speed: “the speed/by which light falls/ in the throat/ of delicate working fire.” The speed of light is ultimately the highest speed known to humans, so why would the speaker expect a kite to fly at that speed? The speaker is setting a very high standard for poetry that assimilates it to natural phenomena rather than human creation. The mention of “the throat of delicate working fire” brings to mind the poetry that was birthed in the speaker’s throat

in “Coal” as the delicate working fire conjures up the warm and delicate environment of the growth of a creature inside a body.

Starting from the second half of that first stanza, the speaker begins to realize that she should not have been trying to make birds that do not sing and kites that do not fly fast enough. She is beginning to realize the lack of sense in patriarchal poetry: “I thought I had discovered/ a survival kit/ buried/ in the moon’s heart/ flat and resilient as turtles” (ll. 10-14). The “we” that created the non-singing birds in the first half of the stanza turns into an “I” in the second half of the stanza marking thus the woman poet’s isolation from patriarchal poetry and her newly found personal female voice. Poetry is “the survival kit” that the speaker thought she had discovered but the fact that the kit was found buried in “the moon’s heart” and that it was “flat and resilient as turtles” indicates the speaker’s initial fascination with poetry as a way of experiencing the world and her misconception that patriarchal poetry was set in stone (“in the moon’s heart”) and that it was very resistant to change, growth, and improvement just as flat and resilient as a turtle’s shell. This metaphor stretches onto the following lines: “a case of tortoise shell/ hung/ in the mouth of darkness/ precise unlikely markings/ carved into the carapace/ sweet meat beneath” (ll. 15-20). Patriarchal poetry is likened to a tortoise shell because it is only a hard and dark surface to the endless world of poetry underneath it which is referred to here as “sweet meat beneath.” The “precise unlikely markings” present us with an interesting way of looking at patriarchal poetry as just “markings”; they look like signs, letters, they look like they should be conveying something but they do not. Yet they are “precise” because patriarchal poetry is heavily controlled by metrics and rhyme schemes, and “unlikely” because it is not poetry that is derived from real life, but rather poetry that deals with utopian ideals.

Underneath this hard shell of patriarchal poetry, the speaker was able to find the sweet meat that is true poetry. In the following lines the speaker says: “I did not recognize/ the shape/ of my own name” (ll. 21-23). Those three lines which stand as a stanza on their own reveal to us that the “sweet meat” beneath the shell was shaped into the speaker’s name but she did not recognize the shape of her own name. True poetry appeared to be much more intimate and personal than the speaker had imagined, and she was so brainwashed by patriarchal poetry that when she saw her own poetry she was unable to recognize it as poetry at all. In Lorde’s biomythography (as she calls it herself) *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, there is an early section titled “How I became a Poet” and that section begins with “My mother had a special and secret relationship with words, taken for granted as language because it was always there” (32). Lorde often refers to her mother’s language as poetry, but because she lived and spoke that poetry all the time, she could not recognize it was poetry and took it for granted as language. The title of her biomythography takes on the same idea as in lines 22-23 of the poem “Artisan”: the idea of speaking of poetry in terms of one’s name is present in both, the shape of the speaker’s name is the same as the new spelling of her name. A *new* spelling of her name is found when she discovers womanist poetry which relates to the poet’s identity as a woman, as opposed to the old spelling of her name which is stained with patriarchal views that were unknowingly internalized.

The speaker of the poem switched from writing in the first-person-plural point of view to writing in the first-person-singular point of view in the first and second stanza. In the third stanza she went back to first-person-plural point of view: “Our bed spread/ is a midnight flower/ coming/ all the way down/ to the floor/ there” (ll. 24-29). After having discovered her own personal female poetic voice, the speaker goes back to “we” but it is not the same “we” as in the beginning of the poem. This “we” refers to woman poets who, like her, have discovered their

own voice. They all share the same bed spread which is made of the petals of a midnight flower falling to the floor. The fall of a flower is slow, soft, and gradual; just like the fall of these women poets from the delusion of patriarchal poetry to the ground of reality where they become women poets aware of their identity. They are grounded in reality when they reach the floor.

The final stanza is a single sentence, “your craft shows,” and it was preceded by “there” on a single line in the previous stanza. The “there” refers to the floor that the flower has landed on, which is the grounds of reality. In other words, it is only when women poets write about their own individual realities that their true craft shows, this is when they discover their own poetry.

A very important point that Gilbert and Gubar raise in *The Madwoman in the Attic* is that in Western civilization, God is male and thus generative powers are only reserved to males: “Defining poetry as a mirror held up to nature, the mimetic aesthetic that begins with Aristotle and descends through Sidney, Shakespeare, and Johnson implies that the poet, like a lesser God, has made or engendered an alternative, mirror-universe in which he actually seems to enclose or trap shadows of reality” (5). Women poets respond to these aesthetics in different ways: some choose to view God as a genderless force, some choose to negate the existence of a god altogether, and some such as Audre Lorde, turn God into a woman.

Audre Lorde has often talked about her relationship to Afrekete in her autobiographical work *Zami* and in her poetry. Afrekete is an African-derived name of a black mother Goddess whom Lorde eventually renames herself (or Kitty the protagonist of *Zami*) after. Lorde has shifted her main referential world and mythology from Western to African, thus highlighting that the prevailing of male over female is but a fault of Western civilization rather than the result of an innate inferiority in women. In her famous essay “Poetry is not a Luxury” which I have previously analyzed, Lorde uses sexual linguistics in favor of women poets. In that essay and in

her poetry, she describes poetry as a female experience similar to giving birth, which thus excludes all males from this experience in the same way their fathering a text through their pen(is) metaphor excludes all females from the process of poetic creation.

Audre Lorde's approach to female anatomy interacts with Freudianism. In Sigmund Freud's essay "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" (1924), he makes one of his most famous claims which stipulates that "anatomy is destiny" (178). He then goes on explaining:

[t]he little girl's clitoris behaves just like a penis to begin with; but, when she makes a comparison with a playfellow of the other sex, she perceives that she 'has come off badly' and she feels this as a wrong done to her and as a ground for inferiority. For a while still she consoles herself with the expectation that later on, when she grows older, she will acquire just as big an appendage as the boy's. Here the masculinity complex of women branches off. A female child, however, does not understand her lack of a penis as being a sex character; she explains it by assuming that at some earlier date she had possessed an equally large organ and had then lost it by castration. She seems not to extend this inference from herself to other, adult females, but, entirely on the lines of the phallic phase, to regard them as possessing large and complete—that is to say, male—genitals. The essential difference thus comes about that the girls accepts castration as an accomplished fact, whereas the boy fears the possibility of its occurrence. (178)

In Lorde's poetics, the approach to female anatomy attempts to resolve what Freud calls "the masculinity complex of women," not by hoping that she will acquire a penis when she grows older, as Freud suggest, but by substituting the penis with the womb. Such poetics do not reduce women to mere wombs no more than Harold Bloom and George Steiner's poetics reduce men to mere penises. However, the existence (or lack thereof) of such anatomical aspects in female and male authors are used as synecdoches which, to a great extent, affect, not only their writing, but also their authorial perception of themselves.

In a literary world where male is the generator of text, female is either the muse or the text. Gilbert and Gubar address this issue quoting Norman O. Brown: "Poetry, the creative act,

the act of life, the archetypal sexual act. Sexuality is poetry. The Lady is our creation, or Pygmalion's statue. The Lady is the poem; [Petrarch's] Laura is, really, poetry" (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman* 13). Because in Western belief, God created Eve out of Adam's rib, then male author is thought to be creator of female. This concept is, to a certain extent, true when it comes to the image of the virtuous woman which male authors have created—in Honoré de Balzac's words "woman's virtue is man's greatest invention" (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar *The Madwoman* 13). In other words, male authors did create women, just not real women, they created their own version of women. Just like the "birds that do not sing" and the "kites that cannot fly" that were referred to in Lorde's poem "Artisan."

Audre Lorde, who as a child suffered from speech delay, approached poetry as a language of its own. As she grew up into the woman poet that we know, she resorted to poetry because she felt it was the only way for her, as a Black woman, to become politically engaged in both the feminist struggle and the racist struggle. Instead of just making use of this language that is poetry to her advantage, she claimed it, owned it, and appropriated it for all Black women who, like her, have suffered from social, political, and literary exclusion.

Conclusion

Women Writing Women into Being

After having looked microscopically at the works of Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, and Audre Lorde we realize that the idea which defines “feminine writing” as writing that is excessively flowery and emotional, or writing that concerns itself with subjects such as nature, love, marriage, etc. is a common misconception about women poets. If we were to make a generalization about women poets’ writing it ought to be that it is mostly writing about being a woman or writing about writing *while* being a woman. While this generalization is not untrue it is often used to discredit women poets’ writing and categorize it as plaintive because it involves women continuously complaining about their condition.

In her essay, “La notion de nature dans les théories de l’«écriture féminine»,” Merete Stistrup Jensen examines Simone de Beauvoir’s attitude towards women’s writing :

Vers la fin de son livre *Le deuxième sexe*, Simone de Beauvoir a quelques remarques sur la création littéraire des femmes qu’elle juge médiocre à tout point de vue. Les femmes ne saisissent pas le monde sous sa figure universelle, mais à travers une vision singulière. Elles restent en grande majorité conformistes, n’enrichissant pas notre vision du monde, et les rares insurgées (Jane Austen, les sœurs Brontë, George Eliot) ont «dû dépenser négativement tant d’énergie pour se libérer des contraintes extérieures qu’elles arrivent un peu essoufflées à ce stade d’où les écrivains masculins de grande envergure prennent le départ ; il ne leur reste plus assez de force pour profiter de leur victoire et rompre toutes les amarres». . . .Aucune femme n’a donc été à la hauteur des *Confessions*, du *Procès*, *Moby Dick*, *Ulysse*. (1)

Jensen says here that de Beauvoir criticized women’s writing while deeming it mediocre because women do not have a universal, but an individualistic view of the world which makes them conformists. She believes that Austen, the Brontë sisters, and Eliot are the rare exceptions, but

they had to spend too much energy in order to liberate themselves from external constraints so much so that they run out of breath by the time they reach the same stage from which valued male authors take off. By then, women writers do not have enough strength to make good use of their victory and break all the chains that hold them back. Therefore, no woman writer has reached the sublimity of *The Confessions*, *The Trial*, *Moby Dick*, or *Ulysses*.

Jensen believes that the reason why women's writing has been considered for a long time a "*littérature limitée*" is that they have not been given the same privileges as male authors and so they were not allowed to develop their writing styles or even be allowed into genres that were heavily-male dominated. Women were forced into more intimate and personal genres which Jensen describes as "pre-aesthetic," such as letters and diaries (2).

While de Beauvoir answers the question "why did women write badly?" in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous answers the question "why did women not write at all?"

And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it. I know why you haven't written. (And why I didn't write before the age of twenty-seven.) Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it's reserved for the great—that is, for "great men"; and it's "silly." Besides, you've written a little, but in secret. And it wasn't good, because it was in secret, and because you punished yourself for writing, because you didn't go all the way; or because you wrote, irresistibly, as when we would masturbate in secret, not to go further, but to attenuate the tension a bit, just enough to take the edge off. And then as soon as we come, we go and make ourselves feel guilty--so as to be forgiven; or to forget, to bury it until the next time. [...] writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her. (876-77, 880)

Cixous compares the act of writing to the sexual act. A masculine metaphor is often used by male authors (such as George Steiner) when talking about writing. However, Cixous builds her metaphor on the grounds that women's sexuality has been a taboo in patriarchal societies for

ages and ages while male sexuality is celebrated and perceived as natural. Cixous encourages women to take ownership of their bodies.

But why poetry? why do I write of women poets and not women authors in general?

Cixous answers this question in her essay by saying:

But only the poets--not the novelists, allies of representationalism. Because poetry involves gaining strength through the unconscious and because the unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive: women, or as Hoffmann would say, fairies. She must write herself, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history, first at two levels that cannot be separated. (879-80)

Poetry as a genre has given more freedom to women writers because poetry does not have to conform to reality as prose does. And because it is a genre that presented many stylistic constraints to break; it was the perfect genre for women to appropriate and reshape in revolt against patriarchal literature. Women who were denied the pen had already lived many lives inside their heads, they were already used to poetry, they thought in poetry, they were just not writing it down. As Dickinson says in her poem "They shut me up in prose" (J613) the bird in the locked cage "has but to will/ And easy as a Star /Abolish his Captivity" (302).

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have written two long books that I consider to be the "manifesto" of womanist poetics. The first one is *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* published in 1979. The second one is *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* which was published in three volumes in 1988, 1989, and 1994. In these books, Gilbert and Gubar analyze the writings of many woman writers including Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, and Audre Lorde who are of interest to me in this project. However, I am more interested in reproducing their methodology

rather than using their analyses of the three women poets I am concerned with. The methodology they use in their writings on women writers is explained in their essay: “Sexual Linguistics: Gender, Language, Sexuality” (published in 1985).

Looking at literature from a sexual stand point proved to be useful in identifying many internalized views and concepts on the role of women poets. I say “sexual” rather than “sexist” because I am approaching the issues from an anatomical point of view rather than a social and societal one. Gilbert and Gubar raise the question: “Is anatomy linguistic destiny? is a womb a metaphorical mouth? a pen a metaphorical penis?” (“Sexual Linguistics” 81). It is more useful to speak of poetry in sexual terms rather than sexist or feminist terms because sexual anatomy is a much clearer dichotomy than gender roles. In other words, there is always space to discuss the validity or invalidity of gender roles, of what men and women should and should not do. On the other hand, sexual anatomy classifies the sexes into a binary (even though there are indeterminate cases such as in hermaphroditism and transgenderism).

Sexual linguistics reveal why male literature has always been held at a higher regard than female literature, and that is simple because the male sex has always been regarded as the more productive and fertile sex as compared to the female sex which was only regarded as the keepers of the male’s precious fertile juices.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar suggest that “the notion that the writer ‘fathers’ his text just as God fathered the world is and has been all pervasive in Western literary civilization, so much so that, as Edward Said has shown, the metaphor is built into the very word, *author*, with which writer, deity, and *pater familias* are identified” (Gilbert and Gubar 4). They then go on quoting Edward Said’s meditation on the word authority which was explained

by the OED: “a person who originates or gives existence to something, a begetter, beginner, father, or ancestor, a person also who sets forth written statements” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 4).

If male sexual anatomy is at the very roots of the word author, how can we not study women’s writing through sexual linguistics? The very meaning of the word authority excludes women on the basis that they lack the fertile juices that can make them authors. It is important to note that we often refer to a person who is creative as a person who has a flow of “creative juices” and while that may not be sexualized in isolation, it definitely can be when read in terms of sexual linguistics. If a man’s semen is read as “creative juices” then perhaps a woman’s breast milk is the equivalent of these “creative juices.” In *La jeune née*, Hélène Cixous refers to the woman writer’s voice as “*un lait intarissable*” (an inexhaustible milk) and elaborates that “*la femme écrit à l’encre blanche*” (the woman author writes in white ink [i.e. breast milk]) (173).

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf imagines a world where women are given the privilege of being allowed to inherit money from their working mothers:

We could have been sitting at our ease tonight and the subject of our talk might have been archaeology, botany, anthropology, physics, the nature of the atom, mathematics, astronomy, relativity, geography. [...] we might have dined very tolerably up here alone off a bird and a bottle of wine; we might have looked forward without undue confidence to a pleasant and honorable lifetime spent in the shelter of one of the liberally endowed professions. We might have been exploring or writing; mooning about the venerable places of the earth; sitting contemplative on the steps of the Parthenon, or going at ten to an office and coming home comfortably at half past four to write a little poetry. (24-25)

In this long tirade-like statement, Woolf presents us with two male privileges endowed by the patriarchy. One of them is obvious and that is the twentieth century male privilege of choosing any profession and making money from it. The second less obvious privilege, which is of more interest to me here, is that men have the luxury of discussing things other than their gender over

a bottle of wine. Perhaps if women poets did not have to suffer for being born women, they would have written poetry about other fascinating topics and the patriarchy wouldn't have deemed their poetry as facile.

We hardly ever find male poetry that brings up gender issues, but when we come across it, it is modernist twenty-first century poetry that is influenced by the rise of the LGBTQ+ community and the rise of awareness against toxic masculinity which the patriarchy had instilled in the first place. In today's global world, which is highly concerned with political correctness, we still come across sexist arguments that accuse women's poetry of being plaintive because their poems address disparity of privilege between men and women for centuries, while men's poetry is innovative and thus always celebrated.

Let us go back to the questions raised in the introduction of this thesis. What happens to poetry when a woman appropriates it as a craft? is it altered in any fundamental way? does it remain the same? is it in a way recreated as a new and distinct genre? How does gender impact the poetry and poetics of Dickinson, Stein, and Lorde? and to what extent do their contributions appropriate and reshape the existing patriarchal poetic discourse?

To address these questions directly, we must think of patriarchal poetry and poetics and how these three women poets affronted them. Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* is a fundamental critical work in the field of literary history. However, it is built on an entirely masculine (or rather patriarchal) view of literary history that defines authorship as a male craft or trade inherited from father to son. According to Gilbert and Gubar in their chapter "Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship" (*Madwoman* 45-92), this Bloomian anxiety of influence consists of the male artist's

fear that he is not his own creator and that the works of his predecessors, existing before and beyond him, assume essential

priority over his own writings. [...] Thus Bloom explains that a 'strong poet' must engage in heroic warfare with his 'precursor,' for, involved as he is in a literary Oedipal struggle, a man can only become a poet by somehow invalidating his poetic father. Bloom's model of literary history is intensely (even exclusively) male, and necessarily patriarchal. (46-47)

In this pivotal and fundamental work of Western literary psychohistory, the woman does not exist as a writer but as a muse since Bloom "defines the poetic process as a sexual encounter between a male poet and his female muse" (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman* 47). The woman poet does not fit in in this model: she does not want to annihilate a forefather that she does not relate to in her writing, and has no acknowledged literary foremother to invalidate. Gilbert and Gubar even go on questioning: "does she have a muse, and what is its sex?" (47).

Try as we might, there is no way of inverting this Bloomian model in order to make the woman poet somehow fit into it. If analyzed through the sexual linguistics method, this Bloomian model invalidates the role of the woman as a poet simply because she is anatomically unable to "'beget' art upon the (female) body of the muse" (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman* 49). The woman poet does not suffer an anxiety of influence but rather an anxiety of authorship as Gilbert and Gubar suggest in the subtitle of their chapter "Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship." The woman poet's struggle is not that she is trying to upstage her nonexistent predecessors, it is that she is trying to assert her existence as a potential precursor. This is the point where Elaine Showalter's gynocritics come in the equation: "[t]he programme of gynocritics," says Showalter in "Towards a Feminist Poetics,"

is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture. (Showalter 28)

Surrounded by what Stein calls “patriarchal poetry,” Dickinson, Stein, and Lorde refashioned the art of poetic writing through their innovative use of new poetic techniques. Instead of writing polemically and attacking the patriarchy directly in their works, they simply write *as* women about the experience of *being* women. They overthrew the patriarchal discourse by offering a new poetics of female representation and liberation. Domestic existence was not portrayed as an obstacle in women poets’ writing careers nor was it derided in their poems, instead, it was used for poetic inspiration and formulated to show its overflowing creativity.

Dickinson’s isolation made it so that her household and her backyard were the limits of her world and she made use of that world for poetic inspiration. Hats, shawls, needles, brooms, and vases are all mundane domestic objects out of which Dickinson was able to make poetry. The frivolities and domesticities which are often thought to preoccupy idle women’s time are exactly what Dickinson writes about in relation to poetic creation. In her writing, weaving a cloth is no different than making a poem and sweeping the floors with a broom is much like painting with a brush. She does not try to appropriate the masculine poetic craft by acting and writing in a masculine manner, but simply by introducing and forcing the feminine into and unto the poetic realm. Dickinson’s use of eccentric punctuation and metaphoric language made her points even more striking and woman-centered. Her attempts at asserting her existence as a woman poet are also apparent in her refusal and disregard to publication. She did not wish to be a poet in the same way that men of her time were poets, that is to say, she did not wish to sell her poetry like male poets of her time did. While Dickinson was somewhat known as a nature poet, she also went against the Bloomian patriarchal view which Juliet Mitchell describes, saying: “the girl learns (in relation to her father) “that her subjugation to the law of the father entails her

becoming the representative of ‘nature’ and ‘sexuality’” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman* 49). Nature has no gender in Dickinson’s poetry, it does not represent the poet nor its muse, it is but the woman poet’s medium of transcendence to the poetic realm.

Gertrude Stein made household objects perceived in a new light as well, but in a language and grammar completely different from Dickinson’s. She gave life and intimacy to material things in a domestic scene: glasses, carafes, umbrellas, dresses, stamps, etc. Much like Dickinson, Stein introduces objects in her poetry that are categorized by society as feminine and domestic: “A box,” “A piece of coffee,” “A plate,” “Mildred’s umbrella,” “A new cup and saucer,” “A long dress,” “A red hat,” “A blue coat,” all of these poem titles from *Tender Buttons* invoke objects most likely owned by women which address issues much deeper than the surface of these mundane objects, often issues that have to do with gender. Stein’s assertion of her identity as a woman poet was more embedded in her innovative use of English language, grammar, and punctuation (or rather lack of punctuation). While Dickinson used punctuation excessively and differently from traditional English grammar, Stein hardly used any punctuation at all and even went to the extent of writing about the reasons why she likes or dislikes certain punctuation marks. Both women poets asserted their existence as writers by going against the rules of English punctuation but one used excess and the other used restraint. Stein writes in a derivative English that is hardly accessible to the average reader. We have seen how and why the creation of a new language is sometimes crucial for women poets and we have seen that this was true for both Dickinson and Stein. Stein wrote in this derivative English sometimes with the intention of hiding sense and making the reader work for it, and some other times with the intention of purposely making no sense at all. However, even her lack of sense has intentions behind it mainly concerning bringing about the fall of patriarchal poetry. Stein’s assertion of her

identity as a woman poet also shows in the literary soirées she held which gathered and started off many famous twentieth century male authors and artists, like Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Joyce, Matisse, and Picasso. This demonstrated her power and confidence as a woman poet who places herself not only as the anxiety-causing precursor of the Bloomian model, but also as the goddess who created all these precursors.

Audre Lorde constantly asserted her identity by describing herself as “black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet.” She looked into blackness and creativity as womb-like attributes and engendered new codes of aesthetics built on gyno-centric metaphors. Out of the three women poets I worked on, she is the one to whom sexual linguistics apply the most. In her own description of what poetry is and where it comes from, she likens it to an offspring that grew in a mother’s womb but was birthed out of her mouth. Sometimes in her poetry, many organs in the female body become wombs such as the throat and the tongue. Lorde invented a matrilineage of women poets that is capable of competing with Harlod Bloom’s masculinist model of literary psychohistory. She accused white male writing of being “sterile word play” which invalidates the Bloomian sexual male claim on authority. Her poetics were not just womanist poetics, but also black poetics. She wrote often about the experience of the black woman poet particularly as a person doubly oppressed by the patriarchy and white supremacy. She shifted her entire referential world from the usual western Greek and Roman mythologies to gods and (mostly) goddesses of African origins such as Afrekete.

Studying the poetry of Dickinson, Stein, and Lorde closely and comparatively has demonstrated that women poets have resorted to the same strategies over the years to appropriate and reshape patriarchal poetry. Their insistence on holding on to the poetic craft even in societies which deny their womanly existence so long as they identify as poets is the seed which birthed

what I like to call a womanist poetics. Even when the sexism resided within language itself, they still defied it and recreated language by writing themselves into existence as women poets.

Women poets then invite the readers to shed their normative way of reading and partake in interpreting and assimilating a new mode of poetics. The reader is thus a partner in the poem and not a simple consumer.

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