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The Compensations of Solitude in the work of Emily Dickenson and the Sarah Orne Jewett

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EMILY DICKINSON’S legendary solitude, both physical and spiritual, serves paradoxically to place her in the midst of a host of nineteenth-century female figures. Most of her closest counterparts are fictional, although some interesting biographical parallels to Dickinson exist in the lives of such literary figures as the Bronte sisters, Mary Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett. Typically, the isolation of a woman in this culture is brought about through an unhappy experience leading to rejection of or by the male world; a disastrous love affair, an unsuitable marriage, or widowhood are the most frequent examples of this experience. In the world of fiction, at least in that created by female authors, a woman’s solitude becomes an opportunity to explore her own resources. She deals with the intense anguish of her isolation by discovering an inner strength, an innate nobility that allows her to transcend her circumstances in a manner particularly adapted to her peculiar characteristics. The combination of loss and compensation occurs in characters like Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre, Louisa May Alcott’s Mrs. March, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Mary Scudder, Frances Hodgson Burnett’s Mrs. Errol, and most of the heroines of Mary Wilkins Freeman’s short stories.

Probably the most comprehensive creation of a world populated by solitary, sometimes anguished, but always triumphant women is Sarah Orne Jewett’s The Country of the Pointed Firs. Jewett’s gallery of valiant widows and spinsters portrays the many possible choices for the woman isolated from a powerful masculine world. Most of these characters represent attitudes which are adopted, at one time or another, by a persona, that “supposed person” of Dickinson’s poetry which, in her lyric style, comes dangerously close to revealing the poet herself. In their exploration of loss, loneliness and compensation, Jewett and Dickinson often reach the same conclusions about female spiritual survival in an uncompromising social environment.

In The Country of the Pointed Firs, the figure who serves as a back-

ground against which all other events and characters are measured is Almira Todd. The powerful yet sympathetic representative for matriarchal culture, Mrs. Todd serves as Jewett’s first fictional rebellion against the nineteenth century’s expectations for widowhood, a role that Ann Douglas summarizes: “The widow had become a source of sentimentality; a woman without a man was an emblem of frailty and unproductivity.” In contrast, the narrator assesses Mrs. Todd in a last backward glance that realistically accepts her vulnerable social position as it acknowledges her personal achievements: “Close at hand, Mrs. Todd seemed able and warm-hearted and quite absorbed in her bustling industries, but her distant figure looked mateless and appealing, with something about it that was strangely self-possessed and mysterious.” Mrs. Todd is certainly as multi-faceted as this summary suggests; the narrator conceived of her as playing many roles, including “enchantress” (p. 69), “landlady, herb-gatherer, . . . rustic philosopher,” “mariner” (p. 71), and a personification of “some force of nature” (p. 209).

The infinite variety of her accomplishments is largely a result of Mrs. Todd’s dual grief. The lost love of her youth and her husband’s untimely death have allowed her to develop knowledge and skills that she might otherwise lack. Her rustic wisdom especially has grown from the experience of grief; in fact, her bittersweet memories seem to lend her an insight into the sorrow and loneliness of others. Mrs. Todd has an inner life in which the ill-fated love of her past is constantly fresh. It is in this memory that she is most clearly connected to the various personae of several of Dickinson’s poems; they have each experienced what John Cody calls “the spiritual joy of her masculine beloved’s recognition despite the insuperable external barriers to their union.”

As Mrs. Todd confesses “all that lay deepest in her heart” to the narrator, her anguished fidelity to that spiritual ideal is apparent: “I ain’t seen him for some years; he’s forgot our youthful feelin’s, I expect, but a woman’s heart is different; them feelin’s comes back when you think you’ve done with ‘em, as sure as spring comes with the year” (p. 51). The intervention of time and activity can only temporarily dull the edge of such pain. The presence of the pennyroyal, which “has the power of recall,” stimulates Mrs. Todd’s reminiscences and emphasizes her role as “herbalist and conjurer.” This theme, and its occult implications, is also captured in one of Dickinson’s later poems:

Long Years apart—can make no
Breath a second cannot fill—

The absence of the Witch does not
invalidate the spell—

The embers of a Thousand Years
uncovered by the hand
That fondled them when they were fire
Will stir and understand—

Fidelity to these vital memories is explored in other poems as well, such as “If recollecting were forgetting” (J 33) and “Again—his voice is at the door—” (J 663).

What is especially admirable about Mrs. Todd, at least for the narrator, is that her private tragedies have not destroyed her gifts. She is a fine, warm, useful woman in spite of her inner world of reminiscence: “An absolute, archaic grief possessed this countrywoman; she seemed like a renewal of some historic soul, with her sorrows and the remoteness of a daily life busied with rustic simplicities and the scents of primeval herbs” (pp. 84–85). That daily life, the requirements of mere existence in the face of insurmountable pain, is also explored by Dickinson:

. . . the world—if the world be looking on—
Will see how far from home
It is possible for sense to live
The soul there—all the time. (J 1727)

Naturally, the separation of sense and soul for Mrs. Todd is an affirmation of sanity, an acceptance of the physical realities which will not be denied. She creates a valuable life out of her spiritual disappointment and loneliness, an existence that can only be maintained through balance and good sense:

Through those old grounds of memory,
The sauntering alone
Is a divine intemperance
A prudent man would shun. (J 1753)

Mrs. Todd is the archetypal survivor in The Country of the Pointed Firs; she is faithful to grief and love, but she finds in them the inner strength to mold a satisfying outer life.

Like her daughter Mrs. Todd, Mrs. Blackett is a widow who defies conventional categories. Her frailty is entirely due to age and is far from sickly; she is highly productive. In her role as salvific woman, she is one of the most sentimental characters in the novel. The narrator finds in her such social and sympathetic gifts that she “wondered why she had been set to shine on this lonely island of the northern coast” (p. 82). Highly sensitive and kind-hearted, Mrs. Blackett treats even a forlorn

outcast like Mrs. Tolland with exceptional generosity of spirit. Equally applicable to her are the narrator’s remarks about many of her neighbors: “... a narrow set of circumstances had caged a fine able character and held it captive” (p. 131). Mrs. Blackett is only “captive” in the sense that her innate nobility has a very limited scope in such a meager and isolated community; she has made the most of her “narrow set of circumstances.” In “Except to Heaven, she is nought,” Dickinson also emphasizes the value of an exceptional character, even in the most limited of spheres:

Except to Heaven, she is nought.
Except for Angels—lone.
Except to some wide-wandering Bee
A flower superfluous blown.

Except for winds—provincial.
Except by Butterflies
Unnoticed as a single dew
That on the Acre lies.

The smallest Housewife in the grass,
Yet take her from the Lawn
And somebody has lost the face
That made Existence—Home! (J 154)

Dickinson’s ironic reversal of worldly values makes her point; the “smallest Housewife” may be unknown to much of humanity, but she is recognized by the great forces of Heaven and Nature. This is the kind of limited glory established by the island-dwelling Mrs. Blackett at Dunnet Landing. Her fame is restricted, as are the numbers of her admirers, by the small town, but Mrs. Blackett’s value to the community is apparent throughout the novel. Although widowed and elderly, she is a vehicle for the joy and loving acceptance essential to making “Existence—Home!”

There are also two artists in the community at Dunnet Landing, one conscious and the other unconscious, although equally absorbed in her creation. The first of these is the narrator herself, a woman who is aware of and revels in her isolation: “Perhaps now and then a castaway on a lonely desert island dreads the thought of being rescued” (p. 89). This independent character filters the experiences of the equally self-sufficient women around her through a “sensibility ... which is finely enough developed to determine where her friend is treading in the herb garden by the different odors of the crushed plants wafting through the windows.” Her writing, which provides her with artistic fulfillment and monetary means, is her accomplishment as a solitary woman. It both allows her independence and is the result of her independent spirit; like Mrs. Todd’s herb-gathering and Mrs. Blackett’s kindesses, art is the narrator’s discovered strength.

The second representative of the power of imagination is Abby Martin, the Queen’s twin. Out of her spiritual isolation, her unhappy marriage and widowhood, and her yearning for a grander destiny, comes her vision of sisterhood with Queen Victoria. As truly an artistic creation as the narrator’s work, Mrs. Martin’s fantasy is the result of the “lovely gift of imagination and true affection” which is her natural talent (p. 216). Mrs. Todd, with loving insight, assures her that “... for folks that have any fancy in ’em, such beautiful dreams is the real part o’ life” (p. 218). Mrs. Martin’s imaginary world serves as a comfort to her, a bulwark against the loneliness of her entire life. With her “beautiful dreams,” as Mrs. Todd says, “it ain’t as if we left her all alone!” (p. 219).

Dickinson also records the involuntary creation of an imagined world that prevents the artist from experiencing total isolation:

Alone, I cannot be—
For Hosts—do visit me—
Recordless Company—
Who Baffle Key—

They have no Robes, nor Names—
No Almanacs—nor Climes—
But general Homes
Like Gnomes—

Their coming, may be known
By Couriers within—
Their going—is not—
For they’re never gone— (J 298)

Out of solitude, the artistic imagination naturally creates company. The great achievement of the narrator, Abby Martin, and this Dickinson persona is the construction of another world, an aesthetic one in which personal fulfillment does not depend on the proximity of real human beings. In these cases, isolation breeds art.

In only one of the women at Dunnet Landing does the combination of isolation and compensation result in union with a man. For Esther Hight, the renunciation of William Blackett’s love is a voluntary action, unlike widowhood, which is necessary because of her conscientious adherence to duty. The narrator admires her self-sacrifice; Esther is one “gray with the ashes of a great remembrance. She wore the simple look of sainthood and unfeigned devotion” (p. 170). Her devotion to both her mother and William is the essence of Esther’s dilemma, which she has resolved with truly saintly selflessness: “There was all the remembrance of disappointed hopes, the hardships of winter, the loneliness of single-handedness in her look ...” (p. 172).

Many of Dickinson’s poems explore love in the light of renunciation and ultimate reunion, of “both an immediate sanctifying grace—the privilege of the lover’s presence in this world—and a long-term justify-
ing grace—the assurance of his company in the world beyond.” Like Esther and William basking in the transient joy of their yearly meeting, one Dickinson persona values the presence of the lover for its immediate happiness and its sustaining power in the less fortunate days to come:

The Luxury to meditate
The Luxury it was
To banquet on thy Countenance
A Sumptuousness bestows

On plainer Days, whose Table far
As Certainty can see
Is laden with a single Crumb
The Consciousness of Thee. (J 815)

In Dickinson’s poetry, the ultimate reunion of the lovers is not an earthly one. In spite of Esther and William’s eventual marriage, their case is not much different. Their union is necessarily a sterile one because of their advanced ages, and is virtually passionless. Unless they both live to an unusually old age, they probably have no more than a decade or so to share each other’s earthly company. In any event, those of Dickinson’s poems which focus on the anticipation of a loving reunion, even in an afterlife, accurately echo Esther’s experience; for example, “I tend my flowers for thee—” is reminiscent of Esther’s patient role as shepherdess:

I tend my flowers for thee—
Bright Absentee!

Thy flower—be gay—
Her Lord—away!
It ill becometh me—
I’ll dwell in Calyx—Gray—
How modestly—alway—
Thy Daisy—
Draped for thee! (J 339)

Other poems, such as “There Came a Day at Summer’s Full” (J 322) and “Rearrange a ‘Wife’s’ affection!” (J 1737) continue the theme of patient suffering that will eventually be rewarded by reunion with the absent beloved. Esther, like the personae in Dickinson’s poems, discovers compensation for her lost youth through her joy in William’s visits, her selfless devotion to her duty, and her dedication to a new and valued activity, the tending of her sheep. She also has the earthly reward of marriage with William, but that is a result of chance and not one of the compensations for her act of renunciation. Her true achievement is the creation of a useful, satisfying life that gives her peace in spite of her great loss.

The only character who corresponds more closely to a recurrent Dickinson persona than Esther does is Joanna Todd. She is an inversion of Almira Todd; instead of reacting to her devastating love affair by becoming more useful to others, she withdraws into a world of her own. The anguish of loss and betrayal that Joanna experiences at first is summarized by Mrs. Todd in an acute character judgment: “She was full o’ feeling, and her troubles hurt her more than she could bear” (p. 101). Dickinson also explores this agony of separation in many poems, such as “I got so I could take his name—” (J 293) and “The Auctioneer of Parting” (J 1612). One of the most powerful is “Empty my Heart, of Thee—”:

Empty my Heart, of Thee—
Its single Artery—
Begin, and leave Thee out—
Simply Extinction’s Date—

Much Billow hath the Sea—
One Baltic—They—
Subtract Thyself, in play,
And not enough of me
Is left—to put away—
“Myself” meant Thee—

Erase the Root—no Tree—
Thee—then—no me—
The Heavens stripped—
Eternity’s vast pocket, picked— (J 587)

For both Joanna and Dickinson, the pain of loss is cruelly emphasized by its proximity to happiness. Joanna was about to marry her lover when he deserted her; the speaker in several of Dickinson’s poems is overwhelmed by a sense of contrast:

Except the Heaven had come so near—
So seemed to choose My Door—
The Distance would not haunt me so—
I had not hoped—before—

But just to hear the Grace depart—
I never thought to see—
Afflicts me with a Double loss—
’Tis lost—And lost to me— (J 472)

Obviously, both characters have a great emotional experience in common: the intensity of anguish and disillusionment that follows suddenly upon an unexpected happiness.

Nevertheless, the origins of the reclusive reaction to pain in Joanna and Dickinson are not explained simply by this common experience. In a letter written in her youth to Susan Gilbert, Dickinson considers the fate of women who unite with the male world: “they [wives] have got through with peace—they know that the man of noon is mightier than
the morning and their life is henceforth to him. Oh Susie . . . it does so rend me . . . the thought of it when it comes, that I tremble lest at sometime I, too, am yielded up.” Margaret Homans claims that the “sacrifice of autonomy goes far to explain Dickinson’s resistance . . . to marriage.” A characteristic inclination to avoid marriage is revealed here; interestingly, Mrs. Todd evaluates Joanna in similar terms: “as I look back, I can see that Joanna was one doomed from the first to fall into a melancholy. She retired from the world for good an’ all . . . All she wanted was to get away from folks . . . and . . . to be free” (p. 97). Later she adds that “’Tis like bad eyesight, the mind of such a person: if your eyes don’t see right there may be a remedy, but there’s no kind of glasses to remedy the mind” (p. 107). In both women, withdrawal from society is an inborn response to an unsatisfactory world, while a painful emotional crisis serves only as a catalyst.

The actual hermitages of both Joanna and Dickinson have some interesting parallels; like Dickinson in her life and her art, Joanna was drawn by the natural world in the forms of gardens and birds. She was innately sympathetic to nature, and so could adjust well to her isolated life on Shell-heap Island. Like Dickinson also, it could be said of Joanna that “She was as truly a nun as any vowed celibate, but the altar she served was veiled from every eye save that of God.” In both women, there develops a kind of pride, a sense of self-sufficiency in their solitude. Joanna shuns visitors and only reluctantly accepts the gifts of the kindly and curious townspeople. Dickinson invests solitude with majesty:

The Soul selects her own Society—
Then—shuts the Door—
To her divine Majority—
Present no more—

Unmoved—she notes the Chariots—pausing—
At her low Gate—
Unmoved—an Emperor be kneeling—
Upon her Mat—

I’ve known her—from an ample nation—
Choose One—
Then—close the Valves of her attention—
Like Stone— (J 303)

In “Title divine—is mine!” (J 1072) and “It might be lonelier” (J 405), a preference for the chosen isolation and fear of returning to the social world are the themes. Solitude becomes self-perpetuating; removal from humanity becomes an increasingly powerful end in itself.

The narrator of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* feels a strong identification with and admiration for this solitude of Joanna’s. She concludes that “the recluses are sad kindred, but they are never commonplace” (p. 109). She sees a certain nobility in Joanna’s actions that is also apparent in Dickinson’s poems: “This plain anchorite had been one of those whom sorrow made too lonely to brave the sight of men, too timid to front the simple world she knew, yet valiant enough to live alone with her poor insistent human nature and the calms and passions of the sea and sky.” (p. 111) For both Joanna and Dickinson’s persona, “Renunciation—is a piercing Virtue—” (J 745). They transform the anguish of loss and the melancholy of their spirits into a seclusion that is noble in itself. They both forge a new kind of existence based on their personal strengths, and on the necessity of their exclusion from the world of men.

The narrator applies Joanna’s experience generally when she muses that “In the life of each of us . . . there is a place remote and islanded, and given to endless regret or secret happiness; we are each the unaccompanied hermit and recluse of an hour or a day . . .” (p. 111). In the female worlds of Jewett’s novel and Dickinson’s poetry, each individual is ultimately alone. The great gift of this solitude, however, is the strength within oneself. Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett lead useful, social lives, the narrator and Mrs. Martin create private aesthetic worlds, Esther Hight develops devotion and the selflessness of renunciation, and Joanna Todd retreats from humanity into the strength of solitude. One of the miracles of Dickinson’s poetry is that it encompasses all of these choices, proposing numerous compensations for the anguish of loss and isolation. Dickinson’s own spiritual survival, her triumph over her circumstances, is the creation of this art which is in itself an escape from pain.

Both Jewett and Dickinson are rebelling against the sentimental tradition even as they covertly support it. Although they are suggesting useful and valid achievements for women who are forced to isolate themselves from the male world, the salvific strength of many of these women indicates an underlying acceptance of the sentimental, matriarchal values of nineteenth-century America. The difference lies mostly in the object of salvation; the focus for Jewett and Dickinson is on the self. Their characters gain in self-knowledge, develop inner strength, and become whole through the process of loss and compensation. Although consequently they may be of help to others, their inner journey is primarily one of self-discovery.

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