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An Ongoing Battle: Emily Dickinson and Adaptation

In *A Quiet Passion*, Terrence Davies grapples with Emily Dickinson's poetry and offers an explanation for her life of isolation. Through the themes in Dickinson's poetry and her obsession with "the looming man", the author reveals her desire to share a connection with her readers. However, she is fearful that her work will be widely accessible to the public. While *A Quiet Passion* attempts to address the author's reluctant relationship with her readers, the film demonstrates that adaptations can never fully honor the wishes of their source material.

Dickinson addresses her reader in her poem, "I'm Nobody! Who are you?":

I'm Nobody! Who are you?

Are you—Nobody—Too?

Then there's a pair of us!

Don't tell! they'd advertise—you know!

How dreary—to be—Somebody!

How public—like a Frog—

To tell one's name—the livelong June—To an admiring Bog!

Dickson appeals to the reader through the meaning of her piece. In this poem, Dickinson refers to herself as “Nobody”, and emphasizes that “Nobody” is a name by capitalizing the word. She declares that being “Nobody” is preferable to being “Somebody,” and uses this to establish a connection to her reader. By calling herself and the reader “Nobody”, she treats her audience as if they are part of the same group, and pits the “Nobodies” against the “Somebodies.” She withdraws from the possibility of fame and notoriety in favor of establishing a relationship between her work and her readers. Despite exploring themes of isolation, she is not simply celebrating loneliness, but using it to create a connection between reader and author.

In *A Quiet Passion*, Davies explores this connection between artist and reader by addressing Dickinson’s obsession with “the looming man.” In one scene, which is a long take, the camera focuses on a closed door partly lit by sunlight accompanied by the non-diegetic sound of Dickinson’s voiceover. She recites, “He will mount the stairs at midnight, the looming man in the night. No ordinary bridegroom, he. But I will wait...All my days. And he will come, before the afterlife. Oh, please! Let him come. Let him not forget me.” Next, the shot fades out into the darkness, and when the camera fades in, the door slowly opens. Dickson sits on the other side of the door, dressed in a white gown as she stares at the viewer. The camera slowly pans on Dickson’s face. As the camera draws closer, Dickson’s eyes close and she smiles in an expression of ecstasy. The shot of Dickson’s face dissolves into a second door opening—this door is to the front of Dickson’s house, and a dark silhouette stands in the doorway. The lighting is low-lit, and the camera follows the silhouette as they enter the house and approach the stairs, and the singing continues. As the figure passes a wreath of flowers and leaves, the camera slowly pans inwards on the flora. Next, in a high-angle shot perched over the silhouette, the figure is

shown climbing the stairs. This dissolves into the next shot, where Dickson is seated while smiling with her eyes closed. She slowly opens her eyes to gaze into the camera. Her smile disappears in an expression of shock. Her eyes dart away from the camera and linger on her lap, and she glances again at the camera as it zooms out. The door closes, and the shot dissolves into blackness.

In poems such as “I’m Nobody,” Dickinson demonstrates her desire to shy away from the public eye in favor of a connection with individual readers. In Davies’ film, this desire is communicated more explicitly through the scene with the looming man and is more passionate than a shared sense of community. Dickinson refers to the looming man as a bridegroom, which indicates that she views the act of sharing her work as intimate. Her readers are the ideal suitor, and by drawing this parallel she hints that she is “married” to her work. With the opening of the door, Dickinson invites the reader and is thrilled by the thought that by opening her poetry up to the public, her work could appeal to someone. As eagerly as she anticipates her suitor, Dickinson’s ecstasy disappears once the looming man enters her room. Instead of being delighted, she is horrified, and as the camera zooms out the door closes. By closing the door in on the viewer, the camera forces the audience to retreat and they are shut out. Although Dickinson repeatedly writes that she does not wish to have fame, this scene depicts an internal struggle in her poetry, which is an ongoing battle of becoming public or to remain private. The ecstasy on her face when considering a potential passionate connection disappears when she is confronted with her audience. As eagerly as Dickinson awaits readers who can appreciate her work, she is horrified when the door opens. She is excited to have an audience but reverts back to her state of isolation once she discovers her reader is not who she anticipated. The concept of the looming man represents the ideal reader, who is invited into Dickinson’s world of seclusion. But,

in this scene, the looming man becomes an unwelcome guest and is dismissed as quickly as he was invited.

Although Dickinson wishes to open her poetry to the public, sharing her work leaves her vulnerable. Throughout the film, she is criticized for her “ugly” poetry that deals with themes such as eternity, death, and loneliness. These themes are not a celebration of the bleakness of the world, but a way of drawing a connection between readers who can relate to Dickinson’s ideas. By targeting a select group of readers, Dickinson avoids rejection and appeals to her audience. “I’m Nobody” demonstrates that she writes poems with the intention of reaching those who can relate to her fears and anxieties.

Dickinson’s refusal of fame in favor of a more meaningful connection connects with the second theme of her work, which is shown in “For Each Ecstatic Instant,” a poem about the price of joy and the bittersweetness that follows. The ecstasy on Dickinson’s face when considering a potential passionate connection disappears when she is confronted with her audience. To connect with her readers, she must sacrifice her isolation for a meaningful connection. Dickinson paints isolation as a discipline and an internal process. Seclusion is a discipline and a means of creating a more significant connection between the artist and the public.

Dickinson must also face the possibility that her work could be misinterpreted or scrutinized. The fear that Dickinson is paralyzed by could be represented through a motif in the looming man scene—the wreath of flowers. Many scholars have speculated that Dickinson had a secret romance with Susan Gilbert, based on the letters between the two. In addition to the letters, Dickinson expresses constant loneliness, and loneliness so overwhelming that she must distract herself from it. Female sexuality is often represented through the use of flowers, which

could alter the meaning of Dickinson's privacy. She emphasizes that her privacy is a discipline, but it could be a survival tactic to conceal her relationship with Gilbert. Dickinson plays a constant tug-of-war with the concept of revealing herself to the public and remaining private—while it might be best to remain secluded from the rest of the world, Dickinson does not always seem eager to hide away. Hiding from the world does not simply mean concealing her poetry for the sake of misinterpretation or criticism, it means hiding her work in fear that someone may discover her sexuality.

*A Quiet Passion* not only speculates the reasons for Dickinson's privacy, but it also demonstrates that the author had a complex relationship with her reader and is used to communicate with the author's literature about the nature of this relationship. While she did not desire fame, she was fearful about the possibility of connecting with her audience, despite the brief joy a mutual connection would cause her to feel. Dickinson thought of her audience as the ideal suitor but could have been fearful about the possibility of her work being widely accessible. In the context of a lesbian relationship with Gilbert, her poetry about self-imposed isolation could be interpreted as secrecy, and her themes of being deprived of love could be translated to mean heterosexual love. Ultimately, the conversation between Dickinson's poetry and the film matters because it represents the interpretation of her work. On one hand, it could be argued that the film does the very thing that the poet feared—speculate. However, the film celebrates the way that Dickinson defied the social norms of her society, from her position on religion to her refusal to settle for a male suitor. The film honors Dickinson's poetry and asserts that her insistence to be a "Nobody," is what makes her legendary.

*A Quiet Passion* portrays Dickinson's anxieties about her poetry by utilizing audiovisuals and storytelling techniques that her poetry cannot. In doing so, Davies addressed the fears the

author had about her work but is ultimately paradoxical. Dickinson did not desire her poems to be widely accessible to the public—likely least of all through a medium such as film, where viewers would be able to sit for two hours and experience her work. Despite Davies’ meticulous attention to analyzing and adapting her poetry, the very act of translating her work onto screen defies the wishes of Dickinson.