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Women Like That: Belles of Amherst

It is futile to play the "If-So-and-So-were-around-today-they-would ..." game. It's impossible to guess exactly how a figure from history would meld into modern society (probably they would be too fascinated by cars and airplanes to be of much use anyway). But it is awfully tempting to say "If Emily Dickinson were around today, she would be a lesbian".

Maybe. Maybe she would be a lesbian if she were around today — if Sue Gilbert were around too:

Oh, my darling one, how long you wander from me, how weary I grow of waiting and looking and calling for you ...

Victorian society had an interesting convention for young women called 'romantic friendship.' It was looked upon as a kind of emotional warm-up to marriage, an immature form of feminine love. Undoubtedly many of these relationships were also physical, but it is unlikely that such physical expression was the general way.

Emily Dickinson and Susan Gilbert met around 1847 when they were sixteen. By the time Dickinson was nineteen or twenty, she considered Sue to be her best friend. There were other intense friendships besides Sue; Abiah Root who also knew Susan in school; Emily Fowler to whom she wrote, "I cannot wait to be with you ... You make me so happy, so glad, life seems worth living for all the trials." And, in Dickinson's late twenties, Emily wrote to Kate Anthon; "Distinctly sweet your face stands in its phantom niche — I touch your hand — my cheek your cheek — I stroke your varnished hair."

But ultimately, it was Sue to whom Dickinson was devoted until her death in 1886. Susan Gilbert was charming and exciting. The entire Dickinson family was smitten by her, including the stern father. Even the mistress of Sue's husband, Mabel Todd, was charmed by Sue. She and Emily were very different. Susan's background was one of poverty and alcoholism, while the Dickinsons were privileged and rustic. Sue was restless and loved excitement. She often traveled alone to New York City, while Emily became famous for her reclusiveness.

Susie, will you indeed come home next Saturday, and be my own again, and kiss me as you used to? Shall I indeed behold you ...?

Sue was ambitious and worked hard to support herself. Some considered her to have a "mannish determination to better herself by means other than marriage." Nonetheless, after three years of engagement and a couple more before that of courtship, Sue, with some trepidation, married Emily's brother, Austin, in July of 1856. She was twenty-five.

Emily actively encouraged Austin's courtship of her friend. It is almost as if Emily would have it no other way, that it was *her* marriage

francesca susanna

more than it was Sue and Austin's. Austin was a lawyer in their hometown of Amherst, Massachusetts and if Sue married him, it meant she would remain in Amherst living next door to Emily.

Ourselves were wed one summer — dear — / Your Vision — was in June — And when Your little Lifetime failed, / I wearied — too — of mine — ...

'Tis true, Your Garden led the Bloom, / For mine — in Frosts — was sown — / And yet, on Summer, we were Queens — / But You — were crowned in June —

There is a wonderfully heated debate over whether Dickinson ever consummated these

There is a wonderfully heated debate over whether Emily Dickinson ever consummated her romantic friendships, and if so, just how she viewed such a consummation.

romantic friendships, and if so, just how she viewed such a consummation. (The general view at the time was that sex involved a penis.) Dickinson had a clear understanding of herself and where she stood in the world. She wasn't one to fool herself. Even as a teenager when a religious mania swept through Western Massachusetts, she didn't join in because she knew that she loved her friends more than she ever loved God. She knew that she was in love with Sue, and that she always would be.

"I have but one thought, Susie ... and that of you. I need you more and more ..." "... my father will be your father and my home will be your home, and where you go, I will go, and we will lie side by side in the kirkyard."

Dickinson understood that her feelings for Sue were sexual. Judith Farr in *The Passion of Emily Dickinson* interprets the poem "Her Breast Is Fit for Pearls" to represent Emily's sorrow at being unable to

court a woman as a man does. So if there were physical aspects to her romantic friendships then she was certainly cognizant of what they were and what they meant. She would have understood them as sexual in nature and as acts of love.

Her affair with Sue seems entirely one-sided. The letters that Sue wrote to Emily were destroyed after Emily's death and just what Sue felt for Emily or came to feel is difficult to surmise. It is likely that as a girl she returned Emily's affection but as a married woman — she would have considered Emily's ardor childish — there is evidence that she found it distasteful.

Private: "I have intend to write you Emily today but the quiet has not been mine. I send you this, lest I should seem to have turned away from a kiss."

No doubt she understood the nature of Emily's love for her, for after Emily's death she sorted out the poems by them — love, nature, death, and she marked this poem with an 's.'

Her sweet Weight on my Heart a Night / Had scarcely deigned to

lie — / When, stirring, for Belief's delight, / My Bride has slipped away...

Most scholars think that something specific happened to Dickinson around 1858 that led to her decision to become a recluse. Judith Farr believes that she realized then that she could be a poet. In the summer of 1861, when she was thirty, Emily deliberately moved from an ordinary social life to one of solitude.

Later in the mid 1860s, Emily stopped going next door to The Evergreens for some unknown reason. The friendship between the sisters-in-law cooled, though not entirely, until 1883 when Sue's favorite child, Gilbert, died. Emily returned to her friend's after an absence of almost twenty years, and Sue came to depend more on her emotionally.

"You asked would I remain? Irrevocably, Susan — I know no other way."

When Emily Dickinson >>