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Crafting Identity Through Generations

Every writer has sought out to be different from the last. Competing to be the next big author or poet. To expand into writers that will be studied long after they are gone. Emily Dickinson was a self-proclaimed “nobody”, who lived to see only very little of her work published and was happy with that. Her reluctance to make a mark with her writing is arguably what makes her individual. On the other hand, Marianne Moore was as unique as they come. She embraced her individualism and encouraged others to do the same. Her writing and personality gave her the opportunity to make the mark she did on American literature and modernism. Individualism, one of the most ordinary themes in literature, may not be that ordinary. While individualism has multiple closely related meanings, individualism enhances the work to shine through differently depending on the literary period and time.

As stated above, Emily Dickinson had lived in the shadows which makes her different from most of the writers of her time. Unlike the famous Walt Whitman, Dickinson had chosen to keep her writing private. She wasn't trying to draw attention to herself; instead, I believe that she was trying to find a “nobody” just like herself. In her poem, “I'm Nobody! Who are you?” Dickinson was searching for someone like herself. Someone who didn't crave the spotlight. Emily Dickinson was asking her audience if they were “nobodies” as well. The poem reads like she is trying to ask secretly. “Are you- Nobody- too” (line 2)? The poem leans toward the idea that people who were different, “nobodies,” were frowned upon. If a writer was to be different, it

had to be within a certain parameter. Different was expected and refreshing unless it didn't fit inside of the 19th century social standards. I come to this conclusion towards the end of the first stanza. "Don't tell! they'd banish us- you know" (line 4)! Who is they? Were "they" the public? Or maybe literary "somebodies" like Walt Whitman. The first stanza gave a cautionary tone towards the reader.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines individualism in the 1860's as "The principle or theory that individuals should be allowed to act freely and independently in economic and social matters without collective or state interference" (OED). This definition was only used a few times before the 1900's but would eventually spike in popularity. Another definition that was used more frequently in the 1800's was "Individual or distinctive character" (OED). I believe both definitions can be used for Dickinson and her poetry. Her distinctive character and writing style still draw attention to her writing over 100 years later.

Walt Whitman, as one of the most notorious, scandalous Romantic poets of the time, had further pushed the need for fame with his writing. Since Whitman was such a character, Dickinson looked dim in comparison. Dickinson was doing original work, different from anything ever done before, but since she didn't fall into the lines of society, she was seen as an outcast rather than an individual. Having a loud personality was not her ideal lifestyle or writing style. Her individuality was authentic and not for the fame. Although Whitman did produce Romantic poetry like nothing seen before, some could argue that his loud personality was overplayed.

While Emily Dickinson was before her time, her gender could have been a key figure of her individuality. Walt Whitman was extremely vulgar. If Dickinson were to write the way Whitman wrote, it would have been frowned upon in her day and age. In "Invisible Lady: Emily

Dickinson and Conventions of the Female Self.” by Joanne Dobson, Dobson focuses on how gender affects not only the writer, but the characters within their work. Dobson studied how some writers chose little girl characters to enhance the feminine self. “Nineteenth-century women writers chose to use the little girl persona or protagonist in one of two distinctly separate ways: as an expression of feminine obedience and perfection, or as female anger and rebellion...” (Dobson 45). I believe that Dickinson uses feminine obedience and perfection to create her image. She hardly writes anything vulgar, and when she does, it takes analysis to figure out what she is writing about. While Dickinson’s lack of vulgarity is not the primary reason, she had been a “nobody”, she had stayed busy maintaining her image as a religious woman. Dobson perfectly portrays this image, “Although these girls ultimately achieve model womanhood, it is only through loss of individuality that they do so” (Dobson 46). She maintained an image of “model womanhood,” yet because of her obedience to gender expectations, she drowned in a sea of ordinary.

Individualism is nonidentical throughout history. In 1860, the word individualism was at its lowest of use, less than one million occurrences of the word, but by 1940 the word peaked at right beneath 6 million uses. 1940 still has the highest usage of the word individualism. “A feature or characteristic that is peculiar to a particular individual” (OED). Modernists, like Marianne Moore, were trying to create new, original work; everyone was trying embrace their individuality. Moore was highly influenced by Emily Dickinson. In her poem “Silence,” it feels as if she is speaking directly to Dickinson. “The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence/not in silence, but restraint” (lines 11-12). In this poem, specifically these lines, it feels like Moore is sticking up for Dickinson. Moore is telling her audience how a superior writer does not need to conform and be like everyone else; they can be their own individual person. Their

individuality is what made the writer superior to begin with. That silence is the way one can truly interpret the world around themselves. Emily Dickinson seemed to always be observing rather than showing off.

Professor Brittany Musselman, who studies literature after the Civil War, studied Marianne Moore's poem "Silence." Her analysis included this fascinating take at the "inn." "The inn represents temporary grounds to get one where they need to be" (Musselman). This interpretation can be true for both Dickinson and Moore. The inn is the temporary grounds for superiority and success. Although Dickinson did not live to see her superiority and success, she has continued to live, not only her own poetry, but Moore's as well. Moore's temporary grounds may have been her inspiration of Dickinson, but soon she became a highly successful poet. Her individuality and deep interpretations of the world around her brought her to her superiority.

In Moore's poem, "Roses Only," she highlights the qualities that truly makes one an individual, to highlight the "ugly" parts of yourself. "the remark that it is better to be forgotten than/to be remembered too violently,/your thorns are the best part of you" (lines 24-26). Moore loved being peculiar and showing her "thorns." She would take ordinary topics, like roses, and create individual interpretations that completely changes the perception of the topic. Moore's uncommon interpretations and uniqueness made her the celebrated writer she is known for today.

With World War 2 in the horizon, women were ditching their homemaking titles. Women were expected to start working to keep the country moving while the men were off in war. Marianne could be seen as the "Rosie the Riveter" of literature. Many female writers were undervalued at the time; writing was still considered a "boys club." Many critics were harsh on female work over males, and their writing was relatively invisible. Unlike Emily Dickinson, Moore was not afraid to be seen by the world, and to make herself known. Marianne Moore did

not let this affect her; she pushed through and made it clear that she was not like any other writer that they had read previously.

Both Emily Dickinson and Marianne Moore's poetry and individualism was affected by the historical and cultural pressure of their time. While Dickinson preferred to stay home, Moore was out living her life and writing poetry. The two women were so different. The commonality of the two would be that their gender had the biggest affect on their identity. Women were not universally accepted as writers and had different expectations than men. When women wrote, it was seen as a hobby rather than a career. How both women chose to deal with societies expectations could not have been any different, but allowed them to make their mark on the world.

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