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Applying Feminist Criticism to “My Life Had Stood – a Loaded Gun” by Emily Dickinson

When the reader focuses on gender in Emily Dickinson's cryptic poem, "My Life Had Stood - a Loaded Gun," the poem can be seen as an exploration of Dickinson's own marginal status in a male-dominated literary canon. First of all, the narrator compares her life to a “Loaded Gun.” The meaning of the metaphor is not quite clear at first; however, it is central to an understanding and appreciation of the overall work. Obviously, a loaded gun is a very powerful image; it could, moreover, suggest a form of empowerment. However, the gun’s power rests in its owner’s hands. This “Owner” (or “Master”) is male as the pronouns “He” and “Him” are used throughout the poem. If the loaded gun represents the narrator’s life, then it seems significant that the owner is male, especially since a tension between the narrator and the owner seems to exist. For example, the narrator “guard[s] [her] Master’s Head” (14), but at the same time, she describes herself as a “deadly foe” (17). In addition, the tone of the poem seems to add to this tension. That last lines of the poem, especially, seem to communicate feelings of both anger and frustration: “For I have had the power to kill,/ Without – the power to die –” (23-24). Like the gun’s power that is controlled – or limited – by its owner, these lines suggest both power and impotence. The sense of frustration that is felt in the reading of the poem seems to come from these limitations. It seems all the more important, then, that the owner of the gun is male. The male owner seems to impede the narrator’s – or the gun’s – ability to assert its own power. This makes sense when we consider Emily Dickinson’s life. After all, she was an isolated, unheard female voice in male-dominated society. Her talents obviously rivalled those of the most famous and vocal male poets of the time such as Walt Whitman. However, none of her poems were published until after her death. Perhaps this accounts for the anger and frustration in the poem. Like the bullets of the gun, her expression is ready to be released, yet it is dependent on the male owner.