

**Agency and Resistance: A Feminist Reading of Shakespeare's "Shall I Compare Thee to a
Summer's Day" and Dickinson's "My Life Had Stood – a Loaded Gun"**

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Introduction

Feminist literary criticism interrogates how literature constructs, reinforces, or subverts gendered power dynamics. Applying this framework to William Shakespeare's "*Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day*" (1609) and Emily Dickinson's "*My Life Had Stood – a Loaded Gun*" (1890) illuminates contrasting approaches to female agency and resistance. Shakespeare's sonnet, a canonical expression of male poetic authority, positions the speaker as arbiter of the beloved's value, demonstrating how patriarchal norms are inscribed into literary production. In contrast, Dickinson's poem presents a female speaker who appropriates metaphorical power to assert autonomy and resist patriarchal constraints. This analysis contends that while Shakespeare perpetuates patriarchal authority, Dickinson exemplifies radical feminist agency, revealing the continuum of gendered representation in literature and the transformative potential of poetic resistance (Barron, 2025; Cameron, 2020; Ghorpade & Samy, 2023).

Feminist Critical Framework

Feminist literary theory examines the ways texts reinforce or challenge patriarchal structures, emphasizing concepts such as agency, resistance, and subversion (Ghorpade & Samy, 2023). Agency refers to the capacity of individuals, particularly women, to act independently and assert control over their identities and circumstances. Resistance encompasses strategies for challenging oppression or normative expectations. Subversion occurs when authors disrupt traditional power dynamics through language, narrative voice, or metaphor. According to Barron (2025), feminist criticism can illuminate how women's voices are silenced, appropriated, or redefined, offering insight into the interplay of societal constraints and literary expression. In poetry, feminist critique involves analyzing voice, perspective, imagery, and metaphor, focusing

on how power and identity are negotiated within and against patriarchal contexts (Cameron, 2020).

This theoretical framework provides a lens to interpret Shakespeare's depiction of the beloved as a passive object of male gaze, alongside Dickinson's assertion of autonomy and agency. Feminist theory allows the critic to ask critical questions: Who holds power in this text? How is female identity constructed or controlled? How do linguistic choices signal resistance or compliance with societal norms? Applying these questions yields a richer understanding of both poems' engagement with gendered power.

Shakespeare's Sonnet: Male Authority and Control

Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 exemplifies patriarchal control in its depiction of the beloved's identity. The opening line, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" (Shakespeare, 1609/2018, line 1), immediately establishes the speaker's evaluative authority. The rhetorical framing positions the speaker as the arbiter of the beloved's beauty, implying that her value exists primarily in relation to his poetic gaze. Feminist scholarship emphasizes that this mechanism enforces male control over female representation, a hallmark of patriarchal literary authority (Ghorpade & Samy, 2023).

The sonnet further asserts male dominance through the claim of poetic immortality:

"So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee" (Shakespeare, 1609/2018, lines 13–14).

Here, the beloved's enduring identity is contingent upon the speaker's poetry, illustrating that female subjectivity is mediated by male literary authority. Shakespeare's deployment of metaphor, rhythm, and the sonnet's volta reinforces the speaker's dominance, while the female beloved lacks a voice or perspective within the text. This absence of agency aligns with

Ghorpade and Samy's (2023) observation that women in Shakespeare's works are frequently defined by male desire and authority, rendering them objects of poetic preservation rather than autonomous subjects.

The middle lines of the sonnet, "Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, / And summer's lease hath all too short a date" (Shakespeare, 1609/2018, lines 5–6), utilize natural imagery to reflect male control over female temporality. The ephemeral nature of beauty is framed as a vulnerability, which the male poet then mitigates through poetic intervention. The use of metaphor here is not neutral; it illustrates the systemic patriarchal logic whereby women's lives and attributes are externalized and controlled by male authority.

Even the celebrated conclusion, with its promise of immortality through verse, reinforces a hierarchical dynamic: the beloved's continued existence in cultural memory is conditional upon the speaker's agency. Ghorpade and Samy (2023) argue that such constructions exemplify the persistent literary mechanism of female objectification and male narrative control in early modern poetry.

Dickinson's Poem: Metaphorical Power and Female Agency

Dickinson's "My Life Had Stood – a Loaded Gun" presents a stark contrast. The speaker's agency is foregrounded through metaphorical imagery:

"My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun – / In Corners – till a Day / The Owner passed – identified – / And carried Me away –" (Dickinson, 1890/2016, lines 1–4).

The loaded gun functions as a symbol of latent power and potential for action, representing the speaker's ability to assert control despite societal structures designed to suppress female autonomy. Barron (2025) emphasizes that the poem exemplifies subversive feminist

strategies, allowing the speaker to negotiate autonomy and authority in a patriarchal literary landscape.

The poem's imagery of roaming and hunting underscores the speaker's active role:

“And now We roam in Sovereign Woods – / And now We hunt the Doe –” (Dickinson, 1890/2016, lines 11–12).

Cameron (2020) interprets these images as deliberate appropriations of masculine domains, illustrating how Dickinson's speaker asserts power and autonomy. First-person narration amplifies agency, situating the female speaker as both observer and agent, challenging conventional narratives of passivity.

Dickinson further conveys resistance through her use of language and punctuation. The capitalized words, em dashes, and enjambed lines function as formal disruptions, signaling subversion of literary and societal norms. The poem's later lines, “And every time I speak for Him / The Mountains straight reply” (Dickinson, 1890/2016, lines 23–24), exemplify the speaker's ability to exert influence beyond conventional bounds, metaphorically resisting male control and societal expectation. This interplay between action and metaphor illustrates feminist strategies of empowerment and disruption.

Historical and Cultural Context

Shakespeare's sonnet reflects Elizabethan gender norms, in which women were largely defined by appearance, virtue, and male perception. Female subjects in poetry were frequently idealized and objectified, existing primarily as objects for male admiration and poetic preservation (Ghorpade & Samy, 2023). This context explains why Sonnet 18 situates agency entirely in the speaker's hands and why female subjectivity remains largely absent from the poetic discourse.

By contrast, Dickinson wrote in 19th-century New England, a society that constrained female agency both socially and professionally. Dickinson's poetry subverts these limitations by centralizing the female speaker's voice, employing metaphor, syntax, and narrative perspective to claim autonomy and resist societal expectations. Barron (2025) and Cameron (2020) emphasize that Dickinson transforms private spaces into arenas for female assertion, revealing the latent potential for feminist resistance within literature historically dominated by male authority.

Comparative Analysis: Contrasts in Agency and Resistance

The juxtaposition of these texts illuminates a spectrum of gendered representation. Shakespeare's sonnet exemplifies male-controlled authority: the female subject exists only as an object of poetic observation. Conversely, Dickinson's poem foregrounds female autonomy and agency, employing subversive metaphorical and linguistic strategies to assert power. Feminist literary criticism elucidates these dynamics, revealing the mechanisms through which texts reinforce or challenge gendered hierarchies (Ghorpade & Samy, 2023; Barron, 2025; Cameron, 2020).

A closer reading of textual strategies highlights these contrasts. Shakespeare relies on fixed metaphor and structured rhyme to assert enduring male authority, reinforcing the passive position of the female subject. Dickinson, by contrast, employs dynamic syntax, punctuation, and metaphor to convey energy, power, and resistance. The speaker's engagement with traditionally masculine imagery, such as weaponry and hunting, allows Dickinson to inhabit an empowered position, highlighting the potential for subversive expression within literary forms historically constrained by patriarchal norms.

The feminist lens further illuminates the evolution of literary agency. Shakespeare's idealized beloved reflects the codification of female passivity, whereas Dickinson's speaker represents emergent female self-determination. This comparison underscores the importance of analyzing literary works not only for content but also for the ways form, voice, and metaphor interact with gendered power dynamics.

Broader Implications

The study of these texts demonstrates that poetry can function simultaneously as a vehicle for patriarchal reinforcement and feminist resistance. Shakespeare's work illustrates the systemic limitations imposed on women in early modern literature, while Dickinson exemplifies strategies for negotiating and resisting those limitations. Feminist criticism allows scholars to trace patterns of agency and subversion across historical contexts, revealing the continuity of female resistance and the transformative potential of literary expression.

Furthermore, this analysis emphasizes that understanding agency in literature requires attention to both historical context and textual form. The contrast between Shakespeare and Dickinson highlights how gendered power is both enacted and challenged, offering insights that extend beyond literary studies to broader cultural understandings of autonomy, resistance, and social constraint.

Conclusion

A feminist reading of Shakespeare's "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day" and Dickinson's "My Life Had Stood – a Loaded Gun" reveals a pronounced contrast in the representation of female agency. Shakespeare's sonnet enforces patriarchal authority, with female identity contingent upon male poetic mediation. Dickinson, in contrast, constructs a speaker who asserts autonomy, wields metaphorical power, and resists conventional gender

roles. Through detailed textual analysis, historical context, and feminist theoretical frameworks, it becomes clear that poetry can either reinforce or disrupt patriarchal norms, providing a rich site for examining agency, resistance, and subversion across literary history. This study underscores the critical importance of feminist literary theory in evaluating how gender, power, and creativity intersect in poetry.

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