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"God Would Certainly Scold!": Understanding Religion, Sex, and Nonconformity Through an Analysis of Dickinson's "Over the fence—" and Surrounding Poems

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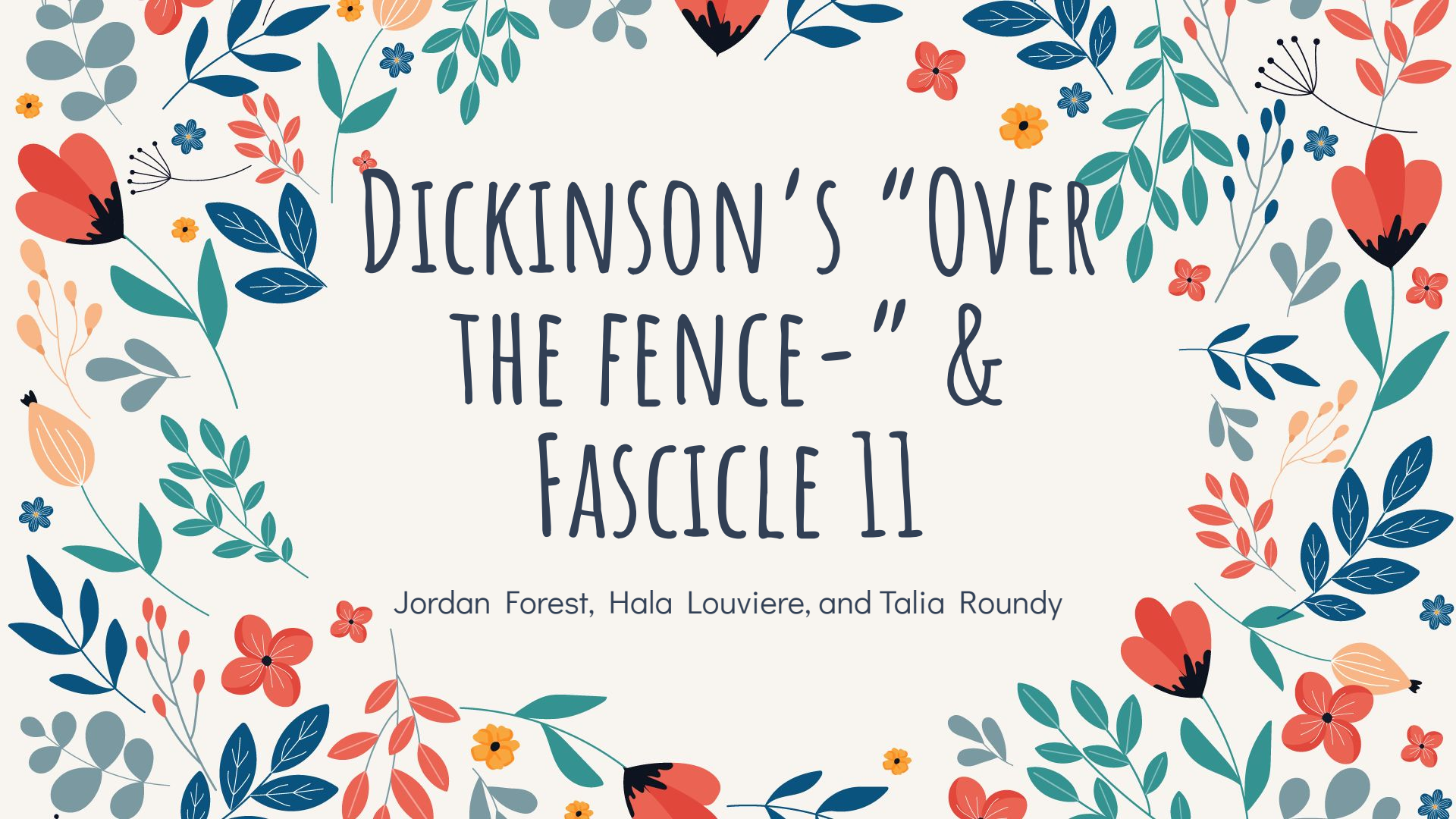
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DICKINSON'S "OVER THE FENCE-" & FASCICLE 11

Jordan Forest, Hala Louviere, and Talia Roundy



OVER THE FENCE

Fascicle 11, Sheet 8, Poem 4

Over the fence—
Strawberries— grow—
Over the fence—
I could climb— if I tried, I know—
Berries are nice!

But— if I stained my Apron—
God would certainly scold!
Oh, dear,— I guess if He were a Boy—
He'd— climb— if He could!

A decorative border surrounds the page, featuring various stylized flowers and leaves in shades of red, orange, blue, and teal. The border is composed of several distinct floral motifs, including large red flowers, smaller blue and yellow flowers, and various leaf shapes, all arranged in a continuous, repeating pattern.

QUESTION

What is it that we learn through this manuscript book that contributes to our understanding of how Dickinson approaches nonconformity?

A decorative border surrounds the text, featuring various stylized flowers and leaves in shades of red, orange, blue, and green. The border is composed of several distinct floral motifs, including large red flowers, smaller blue and orange blossoms, and various leaf shapes, all arranged in a circular pattern around the central text.

ANALYSIS

“Over the fence—” encapsulates the scope of Dickinson's eleventh manuscript book, in which she suggests through her speakers that nonconformity, while an honest and exploratory stance, brings with it negative social and religious ramifications.



RELIGION



NONCONFORMITY OF BELIEF

Nimble Believing: “believing for intense moments in a spiritual life without permanently subscribing to any received system of belief” (1).

Nimble Believing, James McIntosh



THE COST OF NONCONFORMITY

“Christ is calling everyone here, all my companions have answered, even my darling Vinnie believes she loves, and trusts him, and I am standing alone in rebellion, and growing very careless...” (Dickinson 94).

Emily Dickinson’s Letters



I'VE KNOWN A HEAVEN, LIKE A TENT—

I've known a Heaven, like a Tent—
To wrap its shining Yards—
Pluck up its stakes, and disappear—
Without the sound of Boards
Or Rip of Nail— Or Carpenter—
But just the miles of Stare—
That signalize a Show's Retreat—
In North America—

No Trace— no Figment— of the Thing
That dazzled, Yesterday,
No Ring— no Marvel—
Men, and Feats—
Dissolved as utterly—
As Bird's far Navigation
Discloses just a Hue—
A splash of Oars, a Gaiety—
Then swallowed up, of View.

Fascicle 11, Sheet 1, Poem 4



I'VE KNOWN A HEAVEN, LIKE A TENT—

**I've known a Heaven, like a Tent—
To wrap its shining Yards—
Pluck up its stakes, and disappear—**
Without the sound of Boards
Or Rip of Nail— Or Carpenter—
But just the miles of Stare—
That signalize a Show's Retreat—
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Fascicle 11, Sheet 1, Poem 4



OVER THE FENCE

Fascicle 11, Sheet 8, Poem 4

Over the fence—
Strawberries— grow—
Over the fence—
I could climb— if I tried, I know—
Berries are nice!

But— if I stained my Apron—
God would certainly scold!
Oh, dear,— I guess if He were a Boy—
He'd— climb— if He could!



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PUBLICATION



I SHALL KEEP SINGING!

I shall keep singing!
Birds will pass me
On their way to Yellower Climes -
Each - with a Robin's expectation -
I - with my redbreast -
And my Rhymes -

Late - when I take my place in summer -
But - I shall bring a fuller tune -
Vespers - are sweeter than matins - Signor -
Morning - only the seed - of noon -



RELIGION AND SEXUALITY



RELIGION LIMITS (WOMEN'S) SEXUALITY

Wild nights – Wild nights!
Were I with thee
Wild nights should be
Our luxury!

Fascicle 11, Sheet 8, Poem 2

Futile – the winds –
To a Heart in port –
Done with the Compass –
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden –
Ah – the Sea!
Might I but moor – tonight –
In thee!



RELIGION LIMITS (WOMEN'S) SEXUALITY

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Over the fence—
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Berries are nice!

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God would certainly scold!
Oh, dear,— I guess if He were a Boy—
He'd— climb— if He could!

Fascicle 11, Sheet 8, Poem 4



“I shall keep singing!”

“Wild nights – Wild nights!”

“OVER THE FENCE—”

“I’ve known a Heaven, like a Tent –”



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