"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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DICKINSON’S “Over the Fence—” & Fascicle 11

Jordan Forest, Hala Louviere, and Talia Roundy
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!
What is it that we learn through this manuscript book that contributes to our understanding of how Dickinson approaches nonconformity?
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.
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—
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 plash of Oars, a Gaiety—
Then swallowed up, of View.
I’ve known a Heaven, like a Tent—
To wrap its shining Yards—
Pluck up its stakes, and disappear—
Without the sound of Boards
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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 plash of Oars, a Gaiety—
Then swallowed up, of View.
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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Berries are nice!

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Publication
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
Wild nights – Wild nights!
were I with thee
Wild nights should be
Our luxury!

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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Fascicle 11, Sheet 8, Poem 4
“Over the fence—”

“I’ve known a Heaven, like a Tent—”

“I shall keep singing!”

“Wild nights – Wild nights!”


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