

Wild Legacies

by Diane Thiel

Dickinson's love poems are not the ones most often chosen to represent her, but they reveal complex aspects to her work. Much speculation exists about whether an actual relationship inspired these poems. While biographical matters are always interesting, it is even more important to recognize a writer's life of the mind, for the work of a writer often addresses aspects of a life that has been imagined or a life re-invented. The poems "Wild nights – Wild nights!" and "You left me – Sire – two Legacies –" are both seemingly simple poems, emblematic of Dickinson's compressed style, each offering a compelling example of Dickinson's love poetry with their expressions of deep longing and the "Boundaries of Pain" that accompany loss or unfulfillment.

"Wild nights – Wild nights!" is a love poem of intense longing. Perhaps the most evocative aspect of the poem is the way the speaker yearns for the wild experience of love and passion. The poem might be read as the expression of longing for a love that can bring the speaker's "Heart in port." Yet, the words also reveal the craving for wild abandon or "luxury."

The poem's final lines encourage one to read and re-read the poem. The final word "thee" invites multiple interpretations. Is "thee" the apparent beloved in the poem, or is she addressing the sea? Is the speaker asking to be moored in the sea? It seems as if the speaker, drawn to the wild nature of the sea and the beloved, wants to be "moored" in this wildness. The poem has an overtly erotic quality, from the desire for "wild nights" in the first line to the wish to "moor – tonight / In thee!" in the last.

These layered possibilities occur in much of Dickinson's poetry, and take the reader of even a short poem through often unexpected turns. "You left me – Sire – two Legacies –" portrays, in a few lines, the legacies of loving someone, describing the intensity of feeling that can barely be captured in words. But when intense love ends, whether by death or separation, another legacy remains.

The language in "You left me – Sire – two Legacies –" is simple but abstract, but the intensity is both deeply personal and universal. While the poem seems to speak about a romantic affair, it could also be interpreted as referring to any relationship that has left the legacies of love and loss. The intensity of such a love is summed up emphatically in the first stanza, a devotion that would "suffice" even a "Heavenly Father." The second stanza speaks to the nearly inevitable loss that follows. As in "Wild nights – Wild nights!," Dickinson also evokes the sea in this poem. While "Wild nights – Wild nights!" seems to cast the sea as wild and erotic, "You left me – Sire – two Legacies –" emphasizes the vast nature of the sea and connects it to the incalculable pain that such a loss of love leaves behind. The final lines of this poem also offer multiple meanings, as one might understand the sea to be the divide that now exists between the two.

Dickinson's ability to capture such intensity of emotion is emblematic of her spare, compressed, highly charged style. These short poems highlight Dickinson as a poet who writes evocatively about love. In just a few words and lines, she traverses the scope of longing, realization of love, and the layered legacies it leaves.