ABSTRACT

EMILY FRANCES MILKS. “Reimagining Female Friendships: Dickinson, Woolf, and Walker.” (Under the direction of Professor Elaine Orr.)

Female friendships often provide nurturance and a sense of community for women, yet our society condemns these friendships when it deems them too physically and/or emotionally intimate. In her gender theory, Judith Butler borrows Adrienne Rich’s term “compulsory heterosexuality” to argue that our society reinforces a sexual binary—on one end is heterosexuality and on the opposite end is homosexuality. Society encourages us to “perform” heterosexuality and, thus, when a same-sex relationship does not fit either side of the binary, society labels it as homosexual. This practice of labeling harms same-sex friendships by constraining them into prescribed codes of conduct. By analyzing three women writers in the context of Butler’s gender theory, this paper shows that these writers resist the binary and, in doing so, promote caring, devoted friendships among women.

Emily Dickinson’s poetry and letters reveal a woman who celebrated the human body, both male and female, and critics have often manipulated her eroticism to suggest that she was lesbian. However, her writings also indicate tenderness and devotion toward her female friends, which she seems to value more than her interest in sexuality. In her novel Orlando, Virginia Woolf clearly rejects the gender binary, as the male protagonist becomes a woman, and, in repudiating the notion of two distinct genders, Woof also subverts the notion of two distinct sexualities. Lastly, Alice Walker, in her novel The Color Purple, explores a sisterhood that includes both platonic and sexual love. The women defend each other against white patriarchy and function as models for healthy relationships. All three writers, then, underscore the benefits of female friendships and promote a vision of unrestricted love.