

ANALYSIS OF A THEME

Ambivalence toward Faith and Immortality in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

When she was only seventeen, Emily Dickinson attended a series of revival meetings at Mount Holyoke Seminary after which she decided that she could not become a professing Christian. She had too many unanswered questions. This was no easy decision for her; she gained no pleasure from her integrity. In a letter to Abiah Root, she describes herself as "one of the lingering bad ones." She says, "I slink away, and pause and ponder, and ponder and pause [. . .]" (Wilbur 49). The pondering did not stop with this youthful decision. Many of Dickinson's poems begin with a strong affirmation of faith which unravels throughout the poem until the final stanza expresses a strong doubt, not so much of the existence of God, but of immortality and of a caring God. Her poetry often reflects the tugging in her mind between belief and disbelief.

Several poems begin with strong statements of faith. "I know that He exists" (#338) begins with a simple declarative sentence that appears to boast of verifiable knowledge of God's existence. In the same vein she announces, "This World is not Conclusion. / A species stands beyond" (#501, 1-2). The first lines emphatically assure the reader that there is indeed a world beyond death that we cannot see but can understand intuitively as we understand music. In "Going to Heaven!" (#79, 1) Dickinson once again begins with an orthodoxy that indicates her excitement and assurance of a heavenly existence after this life. In fact, the entire first stanza shouts with joy, anticipation, and confidence:

Going to Heaven!
I don't know when --
Pray do not ask me how!

Indeed I'm too astonished
 To think of answering you!
 Going to heaven! (1-6)

Another poem in which Dickinson demonstrates her sense of faith is the first version of "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—" (#216). The tone is solemn. The first stanza presents a generalized picture of the dead in their graves unaware of the life continuing around them. They are "meek members of the resurrection" (4) as they passively await their future. The line implies that they may eventually awake, resurrected, in heaven. Stanza two continues in a tone of promise. Images of spring and nature suggest that life is not entirely over.

Although all of these poems begin with certainty, each begins to destroy that confidence as the poem continues. David Rutledge notes that the confident tone of the first two stanzas of "I know that He exists" (#338) changes in line 9 with the "single, doubt-filled word 'But'" (83). Rutledge points out that faced with the reality of death, the speaker's doubts begin to appear (83). In the second stanza the speaker refers to God as someone who playfully remains hidden in order to make death a "fond Ambush" (6). In the third stanza she anticipates that the game may "Prove piercing earnest," (10) and the fun could turn into terror if "Death's – stiff – stare" (12) is revealed to be something murderous. If God turns out to be a trickster who enjoys watching the foolish anticipations of people, the "jest" would "Have crawled too far!" (16). The doubt is undeniable.

This struggle with faith appears in three additional poems. Much the same as "I know that He exists" (#338), "This World is not Conclusion" (#501) dramatizes a conflict between faith and severe doubt in immortality: "It beckons, and it baffles – / Philosophy – don't know" (4-5). The conflict acknowledges that although immortality is attractive, it is puzzling. Even

wise people are not sure. The speaker seems to struggle to affirm faith. She notes that some have stood up for their beliefs and suffered Christ-like deaths, “Men have borne / Contempt of Generations / and Crucifixion, shown” (10-12). She wishes she had their faith, but admits, “Faith slips” (13). The speaker indicates her increasing doubt as she notes that although preachers try to convince her, “Narcotics cannot still the Tooth / That nibbles at the soul” (19-20). As in “I know that He exists” (# 338), this poem ends in a state, not of affirmation, but of doubt. Similarly, “Going to Heaven” changes affirmation to non-belief in stanza three when the speaker states, “I’m glad I don’t believe it” (20) and says of those who have already died that she has not been able to find them “Since the mighty Autumn afternoon / I left them in the ground” (26-27). “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers” (#216) although solemn in tone, is also ironic. The hint that the “meek” dead are awaiting resurrection becomes questionable in version two. Paul J. Ferlazzo points out that the last stanza in version two uses images drawn from “the cosmos rather than from the earth’s natural phenomena” and that rather than giving “promise and familiarity,” they imply “relentless power and indifference.” They do not promise rebirth. Humans appear unimportant. Extinction, not resurrection, is all there is (38).

Other poems demonstrate this questioning of faith, although they often do not begin with such a positive statement of belief. “Of Course – I prayed” (#376) indicates frustration and doubt that God cares about the speaker’s prayers. The speaker questions, “And did God Care?” (2) and answers that he cared no more than if a bird had stamped its foot and demanded “Give Me” (5). “Those – dying then” (#1545) bemoans the fact that in earlier times people had more faith in immortality than the speaker does. Both poems question salvation after death. In “Their Height in Heaven comforts not” (#696) the speaker contemplates heaven and decides she cannot determine if it exists. “This timid life of Evidence / Keeps pleading – ‘I don’t know’” (15-16).

These poems do not indicate that Dickinson rejects belief altogether. Rather, in each, she struggles with her doubt. She steers between faith and skepticism. Just as she could not agree to join the church and affirm her faith when she was a girl, she does not absolutely reject, but refuses to accept without further proof than she is able to muster. She is able to see many truths where others can see only one; she cannot accept pat answers to complicated philosophical questions. As Bruno Leone notes concerning Dickinson's poems, "Each poem on hope, or nature, or God, shows that there is not a single all-encompassing truth, but many delicate truths that change from person to person, day to day, poem to poem" (24).

Works Cited

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