

Tony Robertson

ENGL 4903

Explication 2

Final Portfolio

The Unknowable Afterlife in “This that would greet – an hour ago –”

Emily Dickinson’s poem #778, “This that would greet – an hour ago –,” speaks about the afterlife as an unknowable state that the living lack the ability to fathom (1).

Dickinson starts poem #778, “This that would greet an hour ago” making the reader wonder what or who the “This” is to which the speaker refers (1). In the context of the poem as a whole, the “this” is most likely a person that is now dead. The fact that the speaker does not refer to the “This” as a person, but rather as an article or a thing, gives an indication that the speaker does not consider the dead to be on the same level as the living.

The poem regards the dead as at of the living’s reach. The speaker goes on to say that which would “once greet / Is quaintest Distance – now –,” to convey her feelings that the dead are out of the living’s reach (2). The use of the word “quaintest” to describe the “Distance” the dead are from the living gives a hint that the speaker has questions about the nature of the afterlife. The word “quaint” is defined as “unusual or different in character or appearance.” The speaker is remarking that the body is still here, but something is certainly different. The character, or the person, that used to inhabit the body is somewhere else, somewhere, the speaker relays, that is unreachable for the living, and therefore “This that would greet” is no longer able to “greet” (1).

In the next line, “Had it a Guest from Paradise –,” the speaker continues to refer to the dead as an article, as an “it,” rather than as a person, emphasizing the speaker’s belief that the dead are no longer on the same level as the living (3). The “Guest from Paradise” is most likely a metaphor for God, and the next line “Nor glow, would it, nor bow –,” gives the reader an insight into the speaker’s feelings about death and God (3-4). The speaker seems to be saying that the “it,” what the living see of what used to be a person, is unable to greet anything, even God.

The speaker continues the religious allusion in the next line, “Had it a notice from the Noon,” (5). I am unsure as to what the speaker is trying to signify with “the Noon,” but the next line, “Nor beam would it nor warm –,” makes it clear, that whatever “the Noon” is supposed to signify, this “it,” as far as the living can tell, would not benefit from it (6). The “it” that the speaker continues to refer to is out of reach from the living’s perception, and whatever is going on, the living can not know.

The speaker then challenges the living to “Match me the Silver Reticence –,” (7). The word, “Reticence,” means “the quality or state of being reticent.” The adjective, “reticent,” means that something or someone is “inclined to be silent or uncommunicative in speech.” The use of the word “Silver” to describe “Reticence” implies that the speaker views this uncommunicative condition favorably. The speaker seems to be saying that the dead’s inability to “greet” us, the living, is a good thing. This inability allows the living the comfort of their beliefs about the afterlife without the possibility of being proven wrong by those that would actually know about the afterlife. The challenge to “Match me the Silver Reticence” could possibly be directed to all those living people that exhort their beliefs about the afterlife on others (7).

The speaker continues to challenge the living to “Match me the Solid Calm –,” (8). This time, however, the speaker seems to be saying that the living should try to be as “Calm” about life as the dead are about death. The dead, as far as the living know, no longer worry about what lies ahead of them. The dead are in a state of peace, a “Solid Calm,” that only the dead can know (8).

Dickinson’s poem #778 leaves the reader with the impression that the speaker believes death to be a state that the living is unable to know, and should not spend undue time worrying about.

Common meter: iambic tetrameter
alternating with iambic trimeter,
with variations

778

U / U / U / U /
This that | would greet | - an hour | ago - 8 a Iambic Tetrameter

U / U / U /
Is quaint | est Dis | tance - now - 6 b Iambic Trimeter

/ U U / U / U /
Had it | a Guest | from Par | adise - 8 c (Trochee | iamb | iamb | iamb)

U / U / U /
Nor glow, | would it, | nor bow - 6 b iambic trimeter

/ U U / U / U /
Had it | a no | tice from | the Noon 8 d iambic tetrameter

U / / U U /
Nor beam | would it | nor warm - 6 e (Trochee | iamb | iamb)

/ / U / U / U /
Match me | the Sil | ver Ret | icence - 8 f (Spondee | iamb | iamb | iamb)

/ / U / U /
Match me | the Sol | id Calm - 6 e (Spondee | iamb | iamb)
consonance