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Foundations of Literary Study

“This World is not Conclusion.”

Shouts of “hallelujah!” resonate through the church hall as the preacher makes dramatic gestures from the pulpit. Sunlight streams through the stained-glass windows, which depict Biblical figures in stories of victory. However, a poet, dressed all in white, sits in the back and quietly examines the congregation; she is not impressed, and as the sermon continues, she engages in her own intense search for truth. Through her original poetic style, word choice, and use of devices, Emily Dickinson creates a startling statement about life after death in “This World is not Conclusion,” revealing man’s ignorance about his destiny.

Punctuation plays a crucial part in solidifying the meaning of the poem. The first line is sealed with a period, a rarity in Dickinson’s poetry, making her statement concrete and indisputable. She divides the confused society (some arguing that there is an afterlife while others insist that there is not) by declaring with absolute resolve, “This World is not Conclusion.” The bold punctuation causes this line to stand separately from the rest of the poem, as though it were a thesis, and the following lines serve to elaborate on this truth.

In the second line, the interesting word choice of “Species” is used to describe man after death. Though physical man goes through life supposedly accompanied by his soul, the intangible person who governs his actions and gives voice to his thoughts, his invisible, eternal self is foreign and alien to him. It is another species, and his final destination is just as strange as another planet. He has no real knowledge about existence

beyond the temporal realm that is not open to question or doubt. Commenting on this lack of understanding, Dickinson pokes a critical and even mocking finger at religion throughout the poem.

Dashes and commas carry most of the weight in setting up the meaning in the lines “Philosophy- don’t know-” and “Sagacity, must go-”. Philosophy and sagacity are presented and then quickly discarded; they are unable to complete the task that they set out to accomplish. Human wisdom and higher thinking “must go-” because they are utterly unable to make visible the “species” which “stands beyond.”

In the latter half of the poem, faith is personified in the lines “Faith slips- and laughs, and rallies-/Blushes, if any see-”. Dashes help create a visual image of the action occurring in these lines. Faith begins to slip and lose color, but then it pauses (with a dash) and laughs. It “rallies” itself and secretly stops to “Blush.” Dickinson takes words such as philosophy, sagacity, scholars, and faith, which generally hold some connotation of reverence, and chops them with her dashes.

Seemingly random capitalizations litter the poem, and dashes end nearly every line. The capitalizations give power, not necessarily to the specific meaning of each word, but to the sound. When read aloud, the orchestration of dashes, pauses, and capitalizations create a sing-song pattern of rising and falling, similar to a public speech or sermon. Lines such as “Invisible, as Music-/ But positive, as Sound-” do not seem as though they were thoroughly thought out and revised; rather, they were captured raw from a stream of consciousness. This pattern is significant to the meaning because it adds honesty and spontaneity to the tone of the poem. On a pulpit of her own, Dickinson

delivers a passionate message, pausing to catch her breath at every dash and comma, and moving to the next line with even more volume.

The final line ends in the complete opposite way from the first. Instead of a strong period, she leaves the line and the poem open-ended with a dash. Throughout history, man has been tortured by the riddle about where he will go after death. Concealed within that mystery is also the answer to the question about the meaning of his earthly life. With one dash, Dickinson abruptly and cruelly leaves mankind to its fate. No wisdom, no philosophy can piece together the puzzle that has tormented humanity for generations, and though they will try to remedy themselves with “Narcotics,” try to subdue the gnawing “tooth,” the unanswered question will continue to eat at the insides of every individual.

Minor details such as the placement of a dash or the capitalization of a word have significant influence over the entire meaning of the poem. These devices convey the passion in the poet’s voice, and therefore, they elicit a deeper emotion from the reader. Dickinson renders her reader slightly vulnerable with her sharp analysis of religion and the human condition of ignorance. Yet, despite the bewilderment that has pervaded history, she states with certainty, “This World is not Conclusion.”