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# Rebel with a Pause: Emily Dickinson and the Making of a Personal Doctrine

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## Rebel With a Pause:

### Emily Dickinson and the Making of a Personal Doctrine

The life and work of Emily Dickinson have garnered the interest of countless scholars seeking to unravel the mysteries of either her work, herself, or both. The influence of religion on Dickinson's poetry has been of particular interest, as a vast amount of her poems include religious subjects. These religiously focused works pose a challenge for scholars, as they are full of contradictions both between and within poems. Dickinson's hometown of Amherst was pervaded with orthodox Calvinist values that offered a very grim outlook on the world, one which Dickinson was unable to accept as truth (Johnson 12, 19). Unsatisfied with the explanations given by the religion of her New England culture, Emily Dickinson strived to redefine the world for herself through her poetry. By exploring religious concepts that confused her and examining her own morals and ethics beyond the boundaries of religion, Dickinson began creating her own personal doctrine. However, she was ultimately unable to answer many of her own questions about both the world and religion. Dickinson's inability to form conclusions on several topics is highlighted by the internal and external contradictions of many of her works as well as her preference for dash punctuation. Additionally, this reading of her works as uncompleted doctrine is supported by her use of hymn structures in her poetry.

Emily Dickinson was born in 1830 in the town of Amherst, Massachusetts (Johnson 4). While more liberal religious movements were occurring in Boston during Dickinson's time, the town of Amherst was still deeply entrenched in orthodox Calvinism, and the ideas of original sin and predestination permeated the culture (Pickard 7). In order to officially join the Calvinist church and be considered "converted," one had to make a public declaration of faith. Despite the conversion of all her family and friends in Amherst, Dickinson never made this declaration

(Johnson 11-17). As Thomas H. Johnson explains in his biography *Emily Dickinson*, Dickinson could not accept the “doctrine of the arbitrary selection of an elect for salvation,” nor the belief in hell (19). Unable to accept the religious beliefs that structured her hometown, Dickinson began searching for her own explanations.

The metrical structure Emily Dickinson employs in her poetry reflects her fascination with religion and supports the reading of her poetry as personal doctrine. Essentially all of Dickinson’s poems are composed in a hymn meter of one form or another (Johnson 84). Dickinson was introduced to hymn meter through the hymnals of Isaac Watts owned by her father (Johnson 84-85). Johnson explains the meter most frequently employed by Dickinson was Common Meter, which uses alternating of iambic tetrameter and trimeter organized into quatrains, though she often employed other forms as well (Johnson 85-86). By setting her poems in a religious framework, Dickinson creates a strong connection between religion and her poetry. As Daniel Hoffman argues in his article on Dickinson, “[h]er use of this Common Measure stanza undermines its conventional assumptions of reinforcing piety,” (207). The weight of this structure lends importance to the religious contradictions in her poems by setting them in a framework that is normally used for worship. Adopting this format sets Dickinson’s poems in contrast to religious doctrine and enforces the reading of her poetry as personal doctrine. Additionally, Dickinson did not limit herself to the constraints of the established hymn meters, instead often combining meters or deriving new structures as her poems dictated it (Johnson 86). How closely Dickinson adheres to the hymn structure for a particular poem often reflects an underlying message in the poem, such as the breakdown of religious rhetoric, as will be examined later on with the poem “This World is not conclusion” (P 373). Dickinson’s creative

use of hymn structures allows her to set her poems in a religious framework that highlights their controversial statements and still maintain flexibility in the expression of her ideas.

It has often been proposed that Emily Dickinson neither fully adhered to nor fully rejected Christianity. Former University of Notre Dame English professor Roger Lundin wrote that Dickinson alternated between belief and disbelief in her poetry, experimenting with different answers to the religious questions that plagued her without conforming to definitive beliefs (150-51). James McIntosh declares in his book *Nimble Believing* that Dickinson's opposition to Calvinism led her to search for "an alternative faith that [would] be truer to her moral conceptions," (35). Dickinson herself essentially confirms this supposition in her poem "I dwell in Possibility," where she proclaims poetry to be the ultimate tool for "gather[ing] Paradise," (P 466). Poetry allows Dickinson to explore the world through all different viewpoints without conforming to one narrative. It is this freedom of the form that lends its use as a tool for capturing undefinable truths, which is essential in Dickinson's quest to redefine the world in a way she finds agreeable. Furthermore, Dickinson is well known for her use of dashes in her poetry. Hoffman explains that scholars often attribute Dickinson's preference for the dash to a desire to maintain a level of uncertainty in her poems, as the dash is more indeterminate than other types of punctuation (213-14). Even in her punctuation, Dickinson avoids restraining herself to conclusive statements that could hinder her search for the truth.

A vast amount of Emily Dickinson's questions about the world derive from religious concepts. Of the many religious questions that plague Dickinson, she has a particular obsession with the theory of an afterlife. In her poetry, Dickinson examines the effect the belief in an afterlife has on people, and her conclusions as to both its existence and its virtue are ultimately unclear. In "This World is not conclusion," she examines the positive idea of an afterlife and

how people insist on believing in it despite opposition from society and their own nagging doubts (P 373). Dickinson opens this poem by strongly asserting the existence of a world after death, describing it as “positive, as Sound” (P 373). The afterlife is a certainty to the narrator in this case, and yet she is still preoccupied with man’s inability to prove its existence. Here, Dickinson seems to project her own frustrations with uncertainty into her poem as she confounds scholars and philosophers with a question she herself cannot answer (P 373). And yet, she is also fascinated with the lengths believers are willing to go to in order to achieve the promised afterlife. They will bear “Contempt of Generations / And Crucifixion” for an afterlife that Dickinson shrouds in uncertainty (P 373). While the speaker of this poem believes in an afterlife, she is completely uncertain what that afterlife will be like, and thus it confounds her that people would endure so much to reach it. Additionally, the poem casts a rather negative view of faith and religion. Dickinson portrays faith as bumbling and guided by chance, and she contrasts the bold affirmations of the devout with her final lines “Narcotics cannot still the Tooth / That nibbles at the soul,” (P 373). By equating the “Hallelujahs” of the congregation with “Narcotics,” Dickinson implies that their religion only acts as a drug meant to numb them to their own doubts, which are truly the doubts of her speaker that are thus attributed to the rest of the world. Through “This World is not conclusion,” Dickinson explores her own doubts about the afterlife as well as its place in the greater religious construct. The structure of this poem is particularly interesting, as it is one that does not directly follow a hymn meter, though the number of syllables per line and its iambic feet are still highly reminiscent of the form. With the breakdown of the religious hymn structure, Dickinson reflects the breakdown of religious certainties within her poem, and the lack of separated stanzas mirrors the conglomeration of opinions and ideas within the text. Dickinson uses the structure to emphasize the confusion of her speaker as she tries to reconcile

all of the different viewpoints on the afterlife that are shown in the poem. In this way, Dickinson parallels her own struggle to understand people's responses to the idea of heaven.

Emily Dickinson approaches the concept of the afterlife in a radically different manner in her poem "The Whole of it came not at once," (P 485). In *The New England Quarterly* (1988), Shira Wolosky provides a fascinating analysis of this poem that ties itself to Dickinson's Calvinist surroundings. As she explains, Dickinson directly criticizes the religious ideal of living life for the afterlife in this poem, describing it as a torturous way to live (227). Wolosky sums up Dickinson's message with the statement "[a]s long as one remains short of the goal, the promised fulfillment does not fulfill but intrudes, disrupts, destroys, the cruel play of an absolute Cat tormenting its helpless and fated mouse," (228). There are two crucial parts to this summary. First, Wolosky explains the stance Dickinson takes in this poem: that striving throughout life to be pious enough to achieve entrance to heaven will only cause suffering as the individual becomes so consumed by the quest for the afterlife that they are not able to enjoy the life they are currently living. Second, she illuminates a greater meaning in the second stanza of the poem with the connection to Calvinism. Dickinson writes "The Cat relieves the Mouse / She eases from her teeth / Just long enough for Hope to tease- / Then mashes it to death-" (P 485). By describing the cat as "absolute" and the mouse as "fated," Wolosky puts this stanza into the context of the Calvinist beliefs of original sin and predestination (228). The "Cat" stands for God who has given humans (the "Mouse") the "Hope" of being fated for heaven, which provides them with just enough reprieve from the crushing weight of damnation that is hanging over their heads so they might live a pious life. However, this hope is ultimately only a "tease," and when death comes all of their hard work becomes meaningless. Dickinson attacks the doctrine of Calvinism in this poem, exposing it as cruel and detrimental to life. Unlike in "This World is not

Conclusion,” Dickinson does not make any assertions about the existence of an afterlife in this poem; instead she focuses solely on the negative effects its supposed existence has on its believers. Neither does Dickinson show any admiration for the suffering endured by the believers in this poem. While the believers in “This World is not Conclusion” bear contempt and crucifixion, those in “The Whole of it came not at once” are murdered and mashed (P 373, P 485). The first description of suffering reflects a certain amount of respect, while the second is much more gruesome and dismissive. Through these poems, Dickinson explores her feelings about both the afterlife and Calvinist teachings in an attempt to ascertain what her true beliefs are. Unfortunately, this is one of the many questions she never definitively answers.

The internal contradictions of “Faith —is the Pierless Bridge” illustrate Emily Dickinson’s inability to determine the value of religious faith. As Wolosky writes, Dickinson attempts in the poem to expose the illogical nature of faith, but instead she ultimately shows precisely why faith is needed (219-20). Dickinson opens her poem by calling faith a bridge between the seen and unseen worlds, and she does not allow her narrator to access this unseen world. Instead, the bridge disappears “behind the Veil,” out of the narrator’s reach (P 978). By characterizing faith as a bridge into the unseen world, and yet not allowing that world to become visible to the narrator of the poem, Dickinson questions the validity of faith as she shows its inability to prove the existence of the heavenly realm. Faith is meant to connect believers to the world of God, but they remain unable to see that world throughout their lives. Dickinson highlights the primary problem with faith in the first two stanzas of her poem: its inability to prove existence. She emphasizes her narrator’s uncertainty about faith with the use of dashes in these stanzas, particularly in the first line where faith is separated from its description as a bridge, which adds hesitance to the statement. However, the final stanza of Dickinson’s poem changes the

perspective of the narrator completely. She writes that if one knew what was beyond the bridge, faith would no longer be “a first Necessity,” (P 978). In this stanza, Dickinson turns the message of her poem around and instead proves why faith is needed in the first place. She asserts that faith is necessary *because* we cannot see or prove the existence of God, and she ends this declaration with a conclusive period. This poem illustrates the struggle Dickinson faced when attempting to define the world for herself, as she often alternated between viewpoints, even within a single poem.

While examining aspects of religion in her poetry, Emily Dickinson often characterizes God, and the varying portrayals of the deity emphasize Dickinson’s differing ideas about the true nature of God. When discussing Dickinson’s view of God, McIntosh writes that Dickinson struggles with the idea of an uncaring and impersonal God as was taught by her Calvinist upbringing, and she often rebels against this harsh image of God in her poetry (38-41). Two examples of this are the poems “It’s easy to invent a Life” and “‘Heavenly Father’ —take to thee” (P 747, P 1500). The first attacks God for being uncaring as he creates and ends lives, describing men as nothing more than pieces in his plan for the world (P 747). The second has much stronger Calvinist ties, as Dickinson actually blames God for original sin, her narrator taking a sarcastic tone as she apologizes to God for God’s own deceit of humans (P 1500). It is clear from these poems that Dickinson took issue with the God of Calvinism, and from this stems her struggle to characterize God in her poetry. She often alternates between a resentful view of God and a respectful one. This can be seen in the comparison of “God is indeed a jealous God” and “God made no act without a cause” (P 1752, P 1192). The first portrays God as jealous of humans paying attention to each other rather than to him (P 1752). The second poem features an omnipotent God who has set the fates of humans, and the narrator asserts that to question this

God is humanity's greatest folly (P 1192). When comparing the two characterizations of God, one can see how the God of "God is indeed a jealous God" may be presumed to act spontaneously according to his own whims, while the God of "God made no act without a cause" has preset everything for humanity according to his great wisdom. One poem attacks God, while the other praises him. Although both poems are written in Common Meter, the second and fourth lines of "God made no act without a cause" rhyme perfectly, while the coinciding lines of "God is indeed a jealous God" do not rhyme at all (P 1192, P 1752). This provides the first poem with a pleasant sounding conclusion, while the second ends on a highly discordant note. Dickinson's manipulation of the structure reflects the differing tones of her two poems, and thus the differing portrayals of God. The contradiction between the Gods of these poems parallels the process of their poet as she alternates between beliefs, striving to find a view of God she agrees with.

In her search for "an original relation to her universe," as it is characterized by Hoffman (224), Emily Dickinson often explores ethics and philosophy outside of direct religious contexts, or rather beyond the boundaries of religion. Her poem "If I can stop one Heart from breaking" is an existential examination without direct religious references (P 982). Dickinson's narrator declares that her purpose in life will be to ease the lives of others, and thus she "shall not live in vain," (P 982). While the poem reflects Christian values of charity, Dickinson does not use overtly religious vocabulary as she often does in her other poems. Here, she is creating a code of conduct that does not require religious connection in order to be fulfilled, and she even appears to be taking the Christian ideal of charity to an extreme: to help others is the most essential action and the one that gives life meaning. The other aspects of religion do not come into play for the narrator of this poem, and this allows Dickinson to ignore the questions that plague her about the faith she was raised with. This poem reads as a proclamation from Dickinson – or at

least from her narrator – that despite her inability to solve her conflicts with religion, she can still find a way to live a purposeful life. The certainty of the poem is emphasized by the complete lack of dashes, as Dickinson chooses to leave the poem unpunctuated until the final period. There is no hesitation in the statements of this poem, indicating that Dickinson believes she has finally found a definitive answer to one of her many questions.

Another poem that speaks to Emily Dickinson's examination of ethics is "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" (P 260). Her narrator is clearly thrilled to be "Nobody," and she complains about the "Somebod[ies]" that are always bragging about themselves (P 260). Dickinson's narrator takes the definitive stance that separating from society is a positive endeavor. Society itself is cast in a very negative light, as it is described as a bunch of frogs croaking at a bog all day (P 260). The use of a bog implies indifference, as clearly the bog does not care about what the frogs are saying, and this reflects the narrator's view of society as a place of falsities and delusions. Dickinson once again indirectly alludes to a Christian value – specifically that of privately practicing virtue – and she extends that value into a generalization without religious connection, a strategy that seems to allow her to form more solid conclusions. Her narrator believes there is virtue in solitude because one can act without needing the approval of others. Conversely, she does appear to be excited to meet someone who shares her opinion, which implies a certain loneliness in being "Nobody." Dickinson explores both the virtue and the loneliness in solitude in this poem, but she ultimately comes to the conclusion that solitude is worth the price.

Emily Dickinson's poem "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" aligns with her own search for understanding through her poetry (P 1263). As John Pickard explains in his book on Dickinson, poetry may be used to uncover truths through indirect language that may be too difficult to understand directly (46). This is part of the message of Dickinson's poem, as she

writes that, "Success in Circuit lies," (P 1263). The only way to communicate the whole truth is to do it in a roundabout manner, such as the way poets write about truths without openly stating them because they are often impossible to describe directly. Dickinson's ending lines, "The Truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind," speak to this issue of understanding (P 1263). The essential truth must be revealed a little at a time in order to avoid overwhelming the receiver, which might result in the truth being missed completely. Thus, Dickinson herself is finding the truths of the world through her own poetry, as she cannot understand them outside of it. Additionally, the poem connects with Dickinson's inability to form conclusions about many of the issues that plague her. As the final lines state, the truth must be a gradual process, and this statement may be seen as an acquiescence by Dickinson that she is not meant to understand all the truths of the world at once.

For Emily Dickinson, the world was full of mysteries. When the religion of her hometown was unable to answer these mysteries to her satisfaction, Dickinson went looking for her own answers. Through her poetry, Dickinson explored topics such as the afterlife, the character of God, the value of faith, the grace in solitude, and the importance of selflessness. While she never expressed definitive conclusions about many of these topics, her poems allowed her to experience different viewpoints on these subjects and approach a more personally satisfactory understanding of the world around her. Dickinson's use of hymn structures placed these experiments into a religious framework, creating tension between her poems and the religion they often opposed and also lending weight to their own claims. Her choice employment of dashes carefully reflects her desire to remain undecided on some subjects and confident on others. Dickinson's unfinished personal doctrine does carry many definitive messages, such as her commentary on the overwhelming nature of truth, but she generally avoided finalized

assertions that would have constrained her view of the world. Dickinson rebelled thoughtfully, considering every angle to each of her questions. Reading her poetry as a personal journey to define her world does allow one to reconcile the contradictions in her works, but, most importantly, it allows the voice of a poet with endless perspective to be properly heard.

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