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Intro to Critical Reading

29 March 2019

The Intangible World Explored Through Emily Dickinson's Poetry

Emily Dickinson, an American poet who lived in the nineteenth century, was quite particular about her word selection. Every word she included in her poems were chosen with care and meticulous perusing. She refers to her "lexicon" as "her only companion," which many scholars believe was Noah Webster's Dictionary (Hallen). To align with her captivation with words, she viewed every word as if it was its own poem and "every content word in a Dickinson text can be read as a poem" (Hallen). In this essay, we will explore how she uses the word "atom" in three of her poems and how it is integrated into the poems to influence their meaning. According to the Emily Dickinson Archive, the poet uses the word "atom" to mean many different things, including element, fragment or small part of a whole, a wordplay of Adam of the Bible, or a feeling or mood. These definitions are not consistently used, but rather variously chosen and differ between poems. Exploring the usage of the word "atom" in the poems of Emily Dickinson reveals a fascination with the intangible and a belief in the importance of the smaller and supposedly insignificant parts that make a whole.

In poem 664, "Of all the Souls that stand create," Dickinson uses the word "atom" to demonstrate a purer substance than what can be found on Earth; intangible but meaningful. The poem is written like a devotional hymn, displaying a light and flowy ABCB rhyme scheme. Her devotion is clearly stated in the first couplet: "Of all the Souls that stand create - / I have elected -

One-” (167 ll.1-2). The word “One” is capitalized and separated from the rest of the line by dashes, thus emphasizing its importance and solidarity. The narrator goes on to say how when human souls and their physical bodies are “Apart - intrinsic - stand,” their true quintessence is revealed without human disguises (6). Each word in this line is isolated by a dash, which accentuates the separation of the two entities. When the souls are stripped to their very essence, only the one to whom the narrator is devoted will remain pure. This “One” is referred to as the “Atom” in the last two lines of the poem: “Behold the Atom - I preferred - To all the lists of Clay!” (167). Dickinson uses “clay,” which easily erodes, to represent the dirtier and fallible human, or the human part of the self. Clay is earthly and illustrates the physical body, which is associated with the flesh or a surface that is hiding a deeper and more authentic interior. It is juxtaposed with the atom, a soul that is unadulterated by inauthenticity or deception.

One can interpret that poem 664 uses the word “atom” as a wordplay on Adam, who was the first human to ever exist according to the Bible and who was elected by God to be the father of all creation. Dickinson could be writing from the perspective of God before Creation and describing Adam the one pure soul that existed before Eve brought sin into the world. In the first line, Dickinson writes: “Of all the Souls that stand create -”. Instead of using the word “created,” as in already existing, she uses the word “create,” leaving an ambiguity around the meaning of the word. To align with this theory, this word selection could be interpreted to mean that God still has yet to create the human population and is contemplating the future of mankind. In line 7, the narrator refers to “this brief Drama in the flesh,” intimating that he/she has a bigger picture in mind. This allusion to the temporariness of life could illustrate God’s knowledge of the coming

apocalypse. However the reader chooses to interpret this poem, the word “atom” remains a symbol of purity.

In her poem “Somewhere upon the general Earth” (number 1231), Dickinson gives “atom” a less abstract definition of smaller parts of a whole, which happens to be the narrator. The poem is about her desire for immortality or her fear of death. The narrator speaks of Seasons, which continue on forever in a never-ending cycle, as existing where she has the right to be, referring to eternity. The poem has an ABCB rhyme pattern, which is consistent with a prayer-like melody. However, there is one deviation from this rhyme pattern in line 2, when she speaks of the “The Magic passive but extant That consecrated me” (262 ll. 3-4) “exist Today” (2). The word at the end of the line: “Today” does not rhyme with anything else in the poem except for “play” in line 5, but that does not add anything to the interpretation of the poem. As a result, “Today” seems out of place, which may serve to emphasize a day’s temporariness and thus juxtaposes it with eternity. The dashes in this poem are evenly spaced at the end of every line, which again is consistent with the fluidity and rhythmic nature of a prayer. This aligns with the audience of the poem, as she is addressing the poem to God: “Oh God of Width, do not for us / Curtail Eternity!” (11-12). Her reference to the God of Width speaks to the deity having control over how long a life may last and God limiting the measurements of longevity. The narrator says that she “Would pay each Atom that I am / But Immortality” (7-8). The word “Atom” in this line refers to the smallest parts of her physical being. Capitalizing “Atom” appears to give every individual particle of the narrator’s being a notable value. It gives greater significance to her statement that she would sell every atom that comprises her existence for immortality. The word “but” before immortality instead of “for” gives the impression that immortality is the thing she

wants but also the very thing that is stopping her. She knows the price of immortality: selling every atom in her. But without atoms she would be nothing and therefore cannot achieve immortality, which becomes an intangible entity. Capitalizing the word “Atom” produces a sense of importance, which is amplified by the narrator putting a price on it. Again, Dickinson explores the gravity and importance of the intangible and less physical parts of the human entity.

In contrast to the two previous poems, Dickinson presents the word “Atom” in a less positive light in her poem “Of course - I prayed” (number 376), which strips away the meaning to its simplest form as the smallest molecular unit. The poem portrays the narrator speaking out in frustration that God never answers her prayers. The dashes present in the poem are irregular and form fragmented lines that give the impression of a rant. There are less dashes towards the end of the poem, signifying that the narrator has gathered her thoughts and is now speaking in less fragmented sentences. The rhyme scheme is sporadic and unorganized, which supports the notion of a ranting narrator. The first rhyme is in lines 2 and 3, which is prior to the rant, with “Care” (2) and “Air” (3). The next rhyme presented carries throughout the rest of the poem in lines 5, 8, and 11, with “Me,” “Charity,” and “Misery,” respectively. This rhyme is barely noticeable and only an oblique rhyme. This provides structure to the rant while also maintaining its frustrated and impulsive quality. The only other rhyme is “Tomb” (9) and “numb” (10), which is only a near rhyme in which they look like they could rhyme but do not. This sporadic and occasional rhyme adds to the poem’s intention of analytical contemplation rather than gentle musing. When expressing her frustration at God’s seeming lack of caring, the narrator compares herself to a bird who “on the Air / [...] had stamped her foot - / And cried ‘Give Me’” (85 ll. 3-5). This comparison alludes to the perception of birds as background noise. They are always

chirping but are largely ignored leading to the common phrase of birds or people “mindlessly chirping in the background.” Stamping one’s foot produces the image of a child, again reducing the narrator to an apparent annoyance. The word “foot” is the only noun in the entire poem that is not capitalized, emphasizing its insignificance and its small to nonexistent impact. The narrator tells God that even though He gave her life, it would have been “better Charity / To leave me in the Atom’s Tomb / Merry, and Nought, and gay, and numb” (8-10). “Atom” in this line is defined as the extremely small part of a molecule, so the narrator would rather be reduced to an undistinguishable state than to live without a reason. Line 10 begins with capital letters “Merry, and Nought” but then shrinks to lowercase letters with “gay, and numb” towards the end of the line, symbolizing the deterioration of mentality into defeat. The atoms that are in existence are merry and gay, since they do not have a purpose other than to roam around mindlessly. However, they lack everything that makes a human human, such as knowledge and an awareness of purpose, and so they are “nought”. All the narrator wants is a reason for life, but she is not given answers from God, so she would rather roam around, admittedly without purpose, but also without the need of a purpose.

All three of the poems discussed above mention the concept of death or explore an alternate option to death. Dickinson, preoccupied with not knowing what happens after life, was also fascinated by the thought of nothingness, or those aspects of life that are so small they may seem insignificant to some. However, these small units, or atoms, were essential to creation and life on earth, which Dickinson explores in giving the word and concept importance in both structure (capitalization) and meaning (purity and a preferred state of being). This exploration of the seemingly insignificant intimates a tendency to appreciate the smaller things in life rather

than be overcome by her own importance. Although readers must allow distance between the author and the narrator of a poem, for Emily Dickinson, who is considered to be one of the great American poets, to write about her own insignificance and a preference for being a smaller entity is ironic. Also in allowing distance between the author and narrator of a poem, readers must consequently allow a hypocritical nature in a series of poems. Dickinson writes that she would rather be an insignificant nothing rather than live without a reason, but would also sell every atom that she is to gain immortality. These beliefs come from two separate poems, which may be the narrator's beliefs rather than Emily Dickinson's herself. However, drawing connections between all three poems discussed in this essay reveals a consistent appreciation of the immaterial and unidentifiable.

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