

Poetry analysis: wordsworth and dickinson

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William Wordsworth is considered one of the instigators of English Romanticism. The publication of his *Lyrical Ballads*, co-authored by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey, is considered the landmark occasion which ushered in the Romantic era in literature. Wordsworth came to literature with a particular philosophy of what poetry should be, and he explained this philosophy in detail in his extended Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* published in 1802. In it he expressed the belief that true poetry is only a “spontaneous overflow” of the emotions (Wordsworth 1989, p.

164). It was really a violent reaction against the neoclassical strain which has infused literature in the 18th century, and which emphasized the measured and rational approach. Wordsworth and his co-Romanticists meant to break the shackles that rationalism had come to impose on poetry, and more generally on the European mind. They meant to usher in a sense of spontaneity and feeling. Wordsworth set himself the aim that his poetry would be understood by the common reader, and that it should not require high learning in order to enjoy.

“I wandered lonely as a cloud” is one of the best examples of Wordsworth’s poetry written in this vein. Such a poem can be said to have a two fold audience. On the one hand there is the common man, whose affinity to nature is what the poem draws on for inspiration. But Wordsworth is also making a statement to the learned wits, which the elaborate Prelude to the *Lyrical Ballads* attests to. It is a carefully crafted poem, and therefore cannot be called spontaneous, even though it hints at the spontaneous imagination of the poet. Rad also We grow accustomed to the dark The poem gives us a

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glimpse of the sublime, as it impresses on the poet's mind on seeing a vista full of daffodils. It is that fleeting and overwhelming vision that is the entire subject matter of the poem. It is a vision that can only be found in the heart of nature, away from the bustle of society. For this reason almost all the images in the poem are borrowed from nature, and the poet describes himself as "wandering like a cloud" in his sojourn through nature. Suddenly he comes upon a lake whose opposite bank is carpeted with an endless array of daffodils. It was as if they were "[t]ossing their heads in sprightly dance", and the breeze swept through them in waves.

Such waves they were that even the golden reflection-bearing waves in the lake were not their match. It was as if the daffodils were spreading their joy and beauty all around them, and in such "jocund company" the poet could not help but be touched with the same spirit. So strong was this impression of beauty on the poet's mind that it never fades for him. Afterwards, in pensive, solitary moments, it comes back to him, flashing upon his inward eye, reinstating the joy then felt (Wordsworth 1992, p. 44).

The poem is also about reminiscence, and hints at the golden memories of childhood. It is a golden vista of daffodils that the poet comes across, and childhood memories are known to be golden. Wordsworth believed that poetry comes from "emotion recollected in a state of tranquility" (Wordsworth 1989, p. 164). The tranquil state is said to be proximate to heaven.

Wordsworth believed that we are born with the aura of heaven around us, and in childhood we experience the remnant of heaven within us. We lose

this aura as we grow older and become more and more involved in the mundane world. This is why childhood memories are always wrapped in a golden haze. Just as we remember childhood with bliss, so the poetic vision of beauty is also a recollection of heaven. In this poem Wordsworth is likening the poetic imagination with childhood reminiscence. In this sense the poem is written as a demonstration of his theory of poetry.

This aspect of the poem is directed towards a more sophisticated audience. But this does not take away from the sheer pleasure to be had reading the poem, whose simple diction and musical cadence will delight all readers. Wordsworth meant to be spontaneous, but could not avoid being calculated. This is because he is essentially a philosophical poet, and Romanticism is, in the end, a philosophy. Emily Dickinson is a far more spontaneous poet, even though she strives for a very calculated effect, and crafts her poems intricately, down to the last punctuation.

The crucial distinction, that which makes her poems spontaneous, is that she is not philosophical at all. Dickinson published only 9 of her nearly 1800 poems during her lifetime, and her reputation has come down as being reclusive spinster, averse to publication, and averse to society in general. While this may be largely true, she is by no means indifferent to her fellow human being, which the brilliance of her poetry, and its universal scope, attests to. It is a mistake to suppose that she only wrote to satisfy herself. The poet is first of all a communicator, and a poem is not a poem unless it is read and appreciated by another.

It is not true that Dickinson did not publish. She distributed her poems among a large body of correspondents, and even made bound books of handwritten poems for distribution. Dickinson is even more a poet, because she chose a very personal mode of publication, and eschewed the impersonal mode of the printed book or magazine. She selected her audience, from among her relatives and acquaintances, and wrote for their ears only. According to Smith, “ Dickinson’s ‘ publications’ reveal her regard for language as a dynamic exchange between speaker/author and listener/audience and for poetry as an art fashioned in those processes” (Smith 1992, p. 73).

Dickinson frequently strayed into the morbid and the macabre for her themes. Two such examples are the poems “ I felt a funeral in my brain” and “ I heard a fly buzz when I died”. The theme of the first poem is the losing of one’s sanity. The poet wants to convey the utter horror that this entails. Reason is the precious possession of man that sets apart from the beasts.

Reason discovers the purpose of man, and is therefore the rope to salvation. The loss of reason, therefore, has the severest consequence. To depict the severity, the poet alienates herself from her mind, and witnesses it as if a funeral were taking place in the brain. We know that the mind is still lucid, being capable of description at all. The funeral is merely a premonition.

Activity stimulates it back to life, and even with the treading of the mourners “ it seemed / That sense was breaking through” (Dickinson 1994, p. 184) But once they settle down and the service begins, the mind becomes numb again. Motion is a crucial aspect of the poem, depicted through frequent

alliteration and long dashes. Through activity the mind survives, and the staid funeral service is not helping. Even as the mind plunges to its abyss, in the final stanza, each plunge “ hit[s] a world”, suggesting that the mind accosts a series of realities in its downward motion, each of which is a straw back to survival.” I heard a fly buzz when I died” is astonishing in that the poet describes her own death.

Her aim is do depict death as commonplace. If death is the greatest fear of many, it is because it is something they do not understand. Religion introduces the afterlife in order to explain death. But Dickenson does not bring the consolation of religion to bear. If at the very moment of dying one is conscious of a fly buzzing, and even able to notice that it has “ blue, uncertain, stumbling buzz”, then death cannot be that mysterious after all (Ibid, p.

169). The final clarity of death is emphasized by employing full rhyme in the final stanza (me/see), whereas all the other rhymes in the poem are merely half-rhymes. In these first three stanzas we are concerned with merely the preliminaries to death, for example, the somber stillness, the making of the will, the anticipation of facing the Almighty (“ when the king / Be witnessed in his power”). The poem is certainly the fruit of a morbid imagination. It is aimed at a Victorian audience who relished such themes.