

Emily dickinson safe in their alabaster chambers essay

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' Safe in their Alabaster Chambers' is unusual because a version of it was published in Dickinson's lifetime on March 1st, 1862 in The Springfield Republican. However, the punctuation was changed, the unorthodox use of capital letters was rectified and the lineation was also changed (Sewell 489). The editor was keen to publish more poems in the following winter, but Dickinson refused, reluctant perhaps to allow her poems to be changed so radically. This poem also exists in different versions - as Dickinson kept returning to it and re-drafting it. The version that is being used for this paper will be submitted with it.

Emily Dickinson was born in 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts, into a family prominent in legal and academic circles. Her father greatly valued education and, after primary school, she was educated at Amherst Academy which had a very innovative curriculum for the time, and where she studied for seven years. She was then sent to Mount Holyoake Female Seminary, but only stayed for two terms. As far as we can tell, she was homesick and in poor health, but also suffered a crisis in her Christian belief (Sewell 301). She returned to her parents' home in Amherst. For a reasonable period she seems to have taken part in the normal social activities of a woman of her age. However, her contemporaries married or moved to pursue careers, and, with her mother a house-bound invalid, Dickinson herself became more and more of a recluse, hardly leaving her own house for the last twenty-five years of her life. There has been constant speculation by biographers as to the reasons for her self-imposed seclusion: a disastrous love affair, religious doubt or some psychological disorder: we can never be certain, but it is true that in 1862, the year that began her isolation, there was a remarkable

increase in her poetic putout (Sewell, 495). Recent biographers have tried to make the case that Dickinson was not as isolated as we have assumed, citing her extended correspondence with friends and members of her family. For example, Mitchell (259) writes that she and her sister-in-law exchanged many poems:

The correspondence between the two women acted as a kind of poetry workshop for both, and demonstrates that Dickinson was therefore not a remote a writer as past representations of her would have us believe.

Dickinson died in 1886, leaving behind over 1500 poems, only seven of which had been published in her lifetime.

The period that Dickinson lived through was one of great changes. America was one of the most progressive countries on earth with a growing system of secondary education and universities. There were new industries and new technology, such as the railways, which were changing the fabric and pace of everyday life (Barney 144). New social and political movements were gaining momentum, such as the campaign for women's rights, the temperance movement and movements for the reform of the educational system and prisons (Freidel 486). At the same time there were throwbacks to the past. The Civil War caused enormous casualties and the tradition of New England Puritanism was still strong in Massachusetts. The American frontier had still not been officially 'closed' and the US Army was engaged in a policy of genocide against Native Americans. So Dickinson lived in a society that was still influenced by the past and also facing rapid and challenging changes - isolation in her house may have seemed an attractive option. Her poems very rarely address contemporary issues directly, but they often involve

conflict and tension which could be argued to be the keynotes of her age. In some of her poems (especially 'Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers') she seems to celebrate an escape from the restless, changing world that she lived in. In terms of literature, the pre-Civil War period produced some great writers - Emerson, Thoreau, Poe, Whitman, Melville and Hawthorne - and was clearly identifiable as a national literature in its own right (not a branch of English Literature).

In 'Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers' Dickinson seems to celebrate the quiet, untroubled existence of the dead. The opening word "Safe" (1) sets the tone for the whole poem. The "meek members of the Resurrection" (4) are calm and at peace, "untouched" (2, 3) by earthly concerns, the dull quotidian realities of "Morning" (2) and "Noon" (3). They are also associated with smooth and elegant materials - "alabaster" (1) and "satin" (5). Alabaster is white; the linings of coffins were often made of white satin. The language is so calm and peaceful that the readers have to remind ourselves that Dickinson is writing about corpses and coffins. Dickinson creates euphony by using assonance on the letter 'a' in the opening line, the repetition of "untouched" (2, 3), the alliteration of "meek members" and the alliteration of "Resurrection - /Rafter... Roof" (4, 5). The final line of the first stanza the two phrases - "Rafter of Satin" and "Roof of Stone" (5) which are balanced and complement each other.

The second stanza begins, as did the first, with a stressed syllable with the same vowel sound - "Grand" (6). In this stanza Dickinson suggests through her choice of words that life and the entire universe carries on - on a huge scale. She speaks of "Years", "Worlds" and "Firmaments" to suggest the

entire cosmos continuing to evolve and alter. On our planet there are momentous political changes: “ Diadems - drop - and Doges - surrender -” (9). Diadems are jewels often worn in crowns; the Doges were the political leaders of Venice: Dickinson seems to be suggesting that enormous political changes are taking place, but what is their effect on the dead? To the dead, they are “ Soundless as dots - on a disc of snow.” (10) The last two lines create euphony with the repetition of the letters ‘ d’ and ‘ s’. Dickinson seems to be suggesting that the huge events of the cosmos and the global events that we pay such attention to are, in the long run, meaningless compared with the life of the individual and the peace and safety that death can bring.

Works Cited

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