

Poetry journal response literature review examples

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Dickinson's "Crumbling is not an instant's act" and Shakespeare's "That time of year thou mayst in me behold"

Emily Dickinson's poem, "Crumbling is not an instant's act," is a fascinating description of how a person's life or self disintegrates. Reading this text by Dickinson gives the feeling of seeing a deeper truth about a common concept, which in this case is personal "crumbling," "dilapidation," or "slipping" (1, 3, 12). Emotions that are depicted in the poem include wonder, detachment, and resignation. The wonder felt about "crumbling" comes from the visual descriptions that Dickinson gives to the process, calling it "a Cobweb on the soul" and "Devil's work" among other things (5, 9).

Dickinson describes the process of "crumbling" as if from a detached distance, yet having described the slow and perhaps inevitable process, it is clear that she is well acquainted with it. The emotion of resignation is felt throughout; like dust, rust, and formal work that is "Consecutive and slow," the poem appears to depict "crumbling" as something that happens so slowly and methodically that it cannot be avoided (10).

The last two lines, "Fail in an instant, no man did/ Slipping—is Crash's law" contain the essence of the poem (11-12). In this line, "we are told that the beginning of a process contains and predicts its conclusion" (Cameron 241). According to critic Cameron, Dickinson's poetry serve to demonstrate "a powerful discrepancy between what was 'inner than the Bone' . . . and what could be acknowledged" (223). In other words, this poem is used to talk about inner thoughts, feelings, and realizations that could not be discussed with others or expressed to others in any other method. If people were to address the problem of "crumbling" with others in conversation or prose, it

would not be able to paint so powerful a picture. At first read, the poem seemed to be about mental decline, such as the onset of depression, but a further read allows a much broader definition of “ crumbling.” For example, aging could be an aspect of “ crumbling” that people must inevitably experience. The poem may have had a specific aspect of “ crumbling” as its genesis, but it expresses the helplessness anyone may feel about any type of personal decay that can be experienced.

William Shakespeare’s sonnet, “ That time of year thou mayst in me behold,” is written from the view of an elderly speaker to his friend or beloved. Its visual description captures the imagination and makes it a poignant kind of pre-elegy for a man who has lived a full life. Emotions that are depicted in the poem include resignation, melancholy, anticipation, appreciation, tenderness, and love. The resignation is shown in the selection of phrases that evoke autumn such as “ When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang,” evoke a late time of day such as “ twilight,” “ sunset,” and “ black night,” or depict endings, such as “ Death’s second self” and “ deathbed” (2, 5-8, 11). These words and phrases describe things that are inevitable and are used as a metaphor for the stage of life the poet has reached. The melancholy is portrayed throughout with the same phrases that evoke the feeling of resignation; they are not positive words, but the lyric way Shakespeare uses them prevents them from descending to complete despair. Anticipation is also found in the same words and phrases, because this is a part of life the poet has come to expect, if not accept. Appreciation, tenderness, and love are found in the final couplet of the poem, where Shakespeare uses phrases like “ makes thy love more strong” and “ To love that well which thou must

leave ere long” (13-14). Love is declared in a fairly straightforward fashion; the appreciation and tenderness come from being able to face the inevitable fact of an ending and learning to appreciate what is left even more as a result.

A phrase that is particularly vivid is “ In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,/ That on the ashes of his youth doth lie” (9-10). Just past the midpoint of the poem and following descriptions of decline, this line asserts that the end has not been reached yet. Literary critic Berkleman writes about Shakespeare, “ We find that often the poet's lively word pictures, like characters in a play, are pitted against one another either by sharp contrast or by actual conflict” (138). This is the case in this sonnet, in which the image of a fire still glowing provides a contrast with the descriptions of dying or ending in the beginning of the poem. It is very important that Shakespeare included this image, because it is important to express to the reader that the end has not yet arrived.

Upon first reading the poem, it appears that it is written to a lover. However, further reading shows that the sonnet could be just as easily addressed to a friend or relative. Shakespeare is famous for his love sonnets, and the form often carries with it a reputation of having been popular as a means of wooing a lover. Literary critic Jacqueline T. Miller describes the relationship and conflict between a poet and his lover, writing, “ the beloved woman contains and exerts an art of her own that, while it inspires and provides a model for the poet, also threatens to subsume, deny, or, at the least, diminish his art” (541). In the case of this sonnet by Shakespeare, it is not a woman who threatens him, but life and aging. Therefore, it is not exactly

clear to whom this poem is written. In fact, it may not matter; the poem could be addressed equally to either.

Works Cited

Berkelman, Robert. The Drama in Shakespeare's Sonnets. College English 10. 3, Dec. 1948. Print. 138-141.

Cameron , Sharon. " Dickinson's Poems of Definition." Critical Inquiry 5. 2, Winter 1978. Print. 223-251.

Dickinson, Emily. " Crumbling is not an instant's act."

Miller, Jacqueline T. "" Love Doth Hold My Hand": Writing and Wooing in the Sonnets of Sidney and Spenser." ELH 46. 4, Winter 1979. Print. 541-558.

Shakespeare, William. " That time of year thou mayst in me behold."