

Eclipse: Dickinson and Theological Patriarchy

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"My Business is Circumference," wrote Emily Dickinson in a letter to her mentor, and famed abolitionist, Thomas Wentworth Higginson (Johnson L268). She was referring to "the space to which both God's questions and the Devil's answers lay claim," and the subject of many of her poems (New 2). In "Good Morning - Midnight -" (Fr 382, J 425), for example, the speaker inhabits a sort of intellectual purgatory between Biblical "Day" and "Midnight." She initially appears to be pleading with Midnight for acceptance after Day has rejected her, but the poem transforms the request into a perlocutionary challenge of the bifurcation presented by Christian theology that one must be on the side of God or else risk eternal damnation. Dickinson's speaker, who refers to herself as "little Girl" (14), is therefore vying for a place of equality within a liminal space between light and dark, using the poem to navigate an individual's Reason through expression of feminine agency and the rejection of patriarchal forgiveness for Eve's mistake.

The very language within the first two lines of the poem suggests the speaker's familiarity with her residence, "Good Morning – Midnight – / I'm coming Home –" (1-2), and that she is returning, not arriving for the first time. According to Dr. Elisa New, "...the American poet wanders, seeking intelligence of God in an increasingly hermetic and experimental language of query" and it is through her questioning that Dickinson explores her desire to inhabit a liminal space in which she possesses her own agency as both human and woman (New 1). This might also explain why there is no sense of doom or abandonment within the poem: Day has merely tired of the speaker's queries and has sent her away for an unspecified amount of time, or until she adheres to theological propriety.

In her correspondence with T.W. Higginson, Dickinson repeatedly refers to faith and discusses his view that she is “wayward” and asks him to help her improve (Johnson L271). Most interestingly, however, is a letter she wrote him in April 1862, the year in which the aforementioned poem was written. Higginson had apparently asked her to tell him about herself and, as she reached the discussion of her family, Dickinson wrote, “They [my family] are religious – except me – and address an Eclipse, every morning – whom they call their ‘Father’” (Johnson L261). The idea of God being an “Eclipse” fits with the speaker of the poem’s desire to inhabit a personal space which has not been demarcated by light or dark, as both solar and lunar eclipses are the result of the Moon blocking out varying amounts of light by passing between the Sun and the Earth. Within this poem, Dickinson appears to have her speaker embody the Moon. In this respect, the lines “I can look - cant I - / When the East is Red?” (9-10) could describe a lunar eclipse, which usually makes the Moon appear a murky red when viewed from Earth. The speaker, who is searching for a way to exist between Day and Midnight, could find no better-fitting position than to exist as the constantly orbiting Moon.

The speaker-as-Moon metaphor also helps to express her agency within the poem. If the “little Girl” is not so much seeking paternal acceptance or even a place within the centre of Christian theology, meaning within light, she is thereby expressing discontentment with being forced to choose. Readers return to the concept of intellectual purgatory where Day is societally representative of God, or good, and Midnight the Devil, or evil. Although Day has sent the speaker away, she tells Midnight that “I chose - Day -” (13), which makes her request that Midnight not turn her away appear to be tongue-in-cheek. Day’s frustrations with the speaker could be attributed to her desire to chase the Red in the East, which would theologically reject the idea of the Garden of Eden. If God had so provided a perfect place

for humans then the lines, "The Hills - have a way - then - / That puts the Heart - abroad -" (10-11), might be enough of an insult to result in her being turned away, or cast out, of the garden because she was not thankful or content. This is supported through examination of the poem's diction, as the word "abroad" in this poem means "In far places; in foreign lands; out of this country; away from this geographic location" according to Dickinson's lexicon ("Abroad," *EDL* def. D). John Hildebidle explains that many of Dickinson's poems remain "riddles" and that "the solution ... seems as a whole to depend ... upon a principle of opposition: Dickinson the 'pugilist,' battling the late stages of the Puritan religious polity, especially the patriarchal deity it constructed" (377). In rejecting the position God has provided for her, Dickinson's "little Girl" subverts his paternal omnipotence and chooses the Hills.

In her article, New discusses Dickinson's use of the Kierkegaardian "tragic hero" which allows for the exploration of the poet's own sense of isolation from God and community through "identification with a Biblical model whose position on the circumference measures his fallenness before God, but also his isolation from the assembly or tribe" (15). The speaker of the poem might express herself in a sarcastic manner as mentioned earlier in this paper, but she also expresses anxiety over the possibility of being rejected by both Day and Midnight: "But – please take a little Girl - / He turned away!" (14-15). Dickinson mentioned her feelings regarding her family's religiosity and their prayers to a "Father," so it is possible the speaker of this particular poem is trying to navigate a personal existence which is both outside the boundaries of religion and family. Although Dickinson wasn't rejected by her family for her unorthodox beliefs, her letters and poems suggest she

at least felt isolated. One imagines it also wouldn't have helped Dickinson's anxiety to be called "wayward" by the man she chose as her mentor.

While this poem is not as overt in its rejection of theological models of Christianity which place women below men and require all humans to submit to a paternal deity compared to other poems written during this period of her life, Dickinson nevertheless remains critical. Her speaker says "Sunshine was a sweet place —" (4), but there is no reason for readers to assume she is vying for a place next to God, for although the tragic hero has fallen, he might not want to rise again. New explains that Dickinson's poetry during this time period is her most "assiduous" and onerous, but readers can begin to interpret each one by "keep[ing] in mind Dickinson's oxymoronic project of 'spreading wide the narrow,' or of finding God's limit by locating the limits of one's own Reason" (17). By the end of the poem, readers can be sure the "little Girl" no longer inhabits the realm of God and her heart often travels to distant places at the sight of "Hills," but readers cannot be sure that Midnight will take her or that she actually wishes to inhabit his realm. She was the one who rejected the idea of Eden and caused Day to tire of her, after all. Dickinson's riddle, in the case of this poem, might resist thorough interpretation, but it is well within a reader's understanding.

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