

Dickinson's Medieval Dedication

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Essay Type: Poetry Analysis

#330

He put the Belt around my life –
I heard the Buckle snap –
And turned away, imperial,
My Lifetime folding up –
Deliberate, as a Duke would do
A Kingdom's Title Deed –
Henceforth – a Dedicated sort –
A Member of the Cloud –

Yet not too far to come at call –
And do the little Toils
That make the Circuit of the Rest –
And deal occasional smiles
To lives that stoop to notice mine –
And kindly ask it in –
Whose invitation, know you not
For Whom I must decline?

In her poem #330, Emily Dickinson makes a statement about a life dedicated to a cause. Dickinson constructs a scene of a royal court as royalty commissions the persona of the poet. The commission, maybe even knighthood, is a reward and a responsibility. The persona of the poet is set apart and placed in a position that is perceived as higher; he is now a "member of the Cloud" (8) yet his life is also now one of service, as the poet receives and carries out orders. Tension is developed as the poet executes his duties and comes into contact with people but is unable to develop traditional relationships because his commission has set him apart, and his choice to uphold it causes the willing sacrifice of not being a part of others' lives in a conventional way.

Dickinson uses sense imagery to create a mental vision of a royal court. One is able to feel the constraint of the belt as it encircles, and this sense is emphasized by the sound of the buckle snapping closed. The belt and buckle are also symbols of a commitment, as the poet has made a choice to devote his time, energy, thought, and will to a cause. The commitment is binding and the "He" (1) has great power and authority because not only has he fastened the buckle but also he is "Imperial" (3). Together the words evoke an image of an oath of fealty to a king.

A simile that compares the poet's devoted life to "A Kingdom's title-deed" (6) is used to stress that the commitment sets the poet apart from others. Just as a valuable document would be placed apart from other papers, Dickinson's persona has his "lifetime fold[ed] up" (4). His life no longer belongs to him to choose what he desires to do. The nature of the deed is important; it is the deed to a kingdom. A kingdom implies people and groups of people imply community. The deed makes the community possible but it does not actually take part in society.

The poet is not only isolated from others but he is also placed above the common with the metaphor that he is now "A member of the Cloud." (8). Clouds are found in the air above the earth that people walk daily. Clouds are often associated with purity and angels, beings that possess higher knowledge than mortal men possess. Although the tone of the poem is grand and lofty, Dickinson uses the cloud to input a note of irony as the phrase brings to mind a reference to Aristophanes' *The Clouds* with its comical Socrates. Unlike that Socrates, the poet serves community as a knight or soldier would guard the king's territory. The isolation is not necessarily a physical one but more one of relationship as the poet performs his duties.

Dickinson brings the narrator back down to earth and humanity with the use of the words "Toils," "Circuit," and "Smiles." Toil is labor and it is difficult. The dedicated narrator must

work like other people and it serves to humanize him. Toil also carries a connotation of farming or working the soil to produce food, an essential human need. "Circuit," a regular tour around an assigned territory, also sets the poet back into society. A soldier must make circuits as he travels around the territory he is assigned to protect. A circuit is also a boundary and the poet has a distinct role that he has chosen to fulfill and he must not cross the boundary if he is to complete his circuit. There is a relationship present as indicated by the word "Smiles." A smile is a uniquely human and universal facial expression. The tone causes one to reach for ideals while the more common words make the goal attainable.

To obtain a goal, work must be done and sacrifices made by the person striving to reach the goal. Dickinson, through the narrator of the poem, uses a rhetorical question to emphasize the sacrifices as the poet "must decline" (16) to take part in the conventional relationships of the people he is in contact with. She uses irony again to produce a tension between abstract ideas and the commonplace by the phrase "lives that stoop to notice mine" (13). The poet has been set apart and above yet the people must bend over to see the poet. This is a paradox that to achieve a higher mark one must become lower.

The persona of the poet is comparing his life with a royal commission. A choice to reach a goal or serve a cause has consequences. In the poem, relationships are sacrificed for a higher goal. Dickinson conveys this point through the unidentified narrator with an unnamed cause so that the connection between choice, sacrifice, and goal is stressed.

Work Cited

Dickinson, Emily. "XLVI." *Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson*. New Jersey: Grammercy, 1982. 101.

Sandra Austin is a Psychology Major.

Dr. Walter's Comments: *Sandra's reading of Emily Dickinson's brief poem is an excellent example of what the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge called the "willing suspension of disbelief" absolutely essential to deep imaginative work. Her trust in the possible synthesis of all the connotations of every word in the poem discovers a powerful message about the meaning of vocation.*