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“I’ll Tell You How the Sun Rose” by Emily Dickinson: Analysis on the Theme of the Circle of
Life and the Idea of Uncertainty

Emily Dickinson was an American poet from Massachusetts who was famous for her poems on nature, death, religion, self-identity, love, and immortality. Often her poems sound like a desperate cry for help as she grapples with the concept of uncertain immortality and death. She wonderfully combines religious ideas with philosophical meaning, while deeply connecting to the natural world, discussing grief and fate, and comfortably writing about death. Dickinson stands out as a writer with her unique sense of punctuation. Often times when reading her poems, sporadic dashes can be found that may affect the deeper meaning of the poem. Unconventional capitalization prompts many readers to question the importance of particular capitalized words. As a student, Dickinson attended Amherst, a college in her hometown. Throughout her life, she was closely surrounded by her family and by those who deeply loved her. “I’ll Tell You How the Sun Rose” was written in 1890. The poem combines themes of death, appreciation for the natural world, and the circle of life in a sixteen-line masterpiece. As a reader, the poem feels as if you are traveling quickly through one single day of the sun rising and the sun setting, although looking at it from a metaphorical sense, this poem can also reflect the cycle of the human life, and the realities that come with it.

Dickinson uses the theme of the circle of life by structurally splitting up the poem in terms of the sunrise and the sunset; this reveals the balance between day and night, which

eventually leads to death in the very end. Additionally, Dickinson discusses the theme of uncertainty in terms of the speaker's knowledge of how the sun sets and rises. This uncertainty clearly represents the speaker's difficulties in perceiving the world and the inability to explain natural phenomena, which increases the wonder and curiosity of said natural phenomena. This curiosity leads to the increased use of imagery and personification that allows the reader to paint a picture in his or her mind of what is being portrayed.

In lines 1 through 8, the speaker paints an action-filled picture by using verbs that describe busy activities in the morning, such as in, "The Steeples swam in Amethyst — / The news, like Squirrels, ran — / The Hills untied their Bonnets — / The Bobolinks – begun –" (Dickinson 3-6). These actions show nature waking up to the start of a new day. In a written conversation with Dickinson about the poem, Colonel Higginson says, "This comprises in its eight lines a truth so searching that it seems the condensed experience of a long life" (Wells). This glimpse at the first half of the poem helps reveal the circle of life and the inevitability that this one day that is described may help explain an entire lifetime. In lines 1 through 2, the speaker says, "I'll tell you how the Sun rose — / A Ribbon at a time," giving the reader a sense of setting to start out the poem, with the start of the day and the beginning of the circle of life (Dickinson 1-2). Helen Vendler notes, "The poet's work of thinking fills up the rising of the sun with serial 'ribbons.' In each case, the impression is given that all of the manifest phenomena have been noted, since the rising of the sun is followed in the poem by its setting" (Vendler). As the setting of the sun is followed by the rising of the sun once more, this reveals the everlasting opportunities that are present in life as a new day brings a fresh start, as this circle of life continues.

Dickinson uses the theme of uncertainty to represent wonder and curiosity. This confusion emerges when the speaker states, “But how he set – I know not,” which reveals a grasp at trying to understand the incomprehensible (Dickinson 9). This questioning of natural phenomena ultimately leads to more curiosity and more in-depth observations of the natural world. Oliver Tearle comments on this uncertainty by highlighting the, “eight-line section, introduced by the turn on that word, ‘But’, describing the speaker’s lack of knowledge of the sunset” (Tearle). The inability to explain the sunset allows for in-depth descriptions of nature that supplement the lack of knowledge of the sunset. Directly following this line of uncertainty, the speaker mentions, “There seemed a purple stile / That little Yellow boys and girls / Were climbing all the while” (Dickinson 10-12). This imagery of the rays of sun, represented by little boys and girls, allows for the speaker to grasp a sense of understanding of the natural world by taking the first step of describing the surroundings. Also, the use of children as rays of sun shows the speaker’s perception of the gentleness of death, as the children at the end of the day are put away behind bars, representing the end of the day and the end of a life. Tearle also says, “from the soft violet colour of the ‘Amethyst’ sunrise, we move to a darker ‘purple stile’, denoting a boundary – perhaps, here, suggesting the horizon, that boundary between land and sky” (Tearle). These thorough observations made by the speaker make up for the lack of knowledge on how the sun sets. The imagery that is described sheds light on the belief that death of humans is inevitable, despite nature’s stunning immortality.

The first eight lines of the sunrise symbolize the birth of a new day and the excitement that it brings. Quickly following, the last eight lines of the sunset symbolize death, but not in a way that is dark or frightening. The speaker reveals no sadness about death, as there is a sense of quiet acceptance for what is to come at the end of life, almost as if death is gentle. The

uncertainty about how the sun sets allows the speaker to express difficulties in perceiving the world while contributing significant imagery to paint a picture in the reader's mind. The speaker not only figures out her own perspective on death, but also invites the reader to do the same in his or her own way.

Sources

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