

Using Tradition to Inform Perspective and Explore Worldview

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Kandice Sharren's English 206 course, *19th Century Literatures in English*. The assignment asked students to develop an argument that places two of the texts we discussed in class in conversation with each other. One of those texts was to be drawn from "List A" (British texts) and the other was to be drawn from "List B" (American texts). The paper uses MLA citation style.

This paper breaks down the way that competing perspectives of the Romantics period are expressed through the poetry of Felicia Hemans and Emily Dickinson. It looks at the way that individual identity and world view are articulated and addressed in both poems through the use of similar language and imagery.

Perspective informs the way in which people are raised to view and value the world, and Felicia Hemans and Emily Dickinson showcase how and why this is important in the way that they both embody the perspective they are representing in each of their poems. Felicia Hemans's "The Homes of England" (1828) and Emily Dickinson's "This World is Not Conclusion" (1862) take on two competing perspectives when speaking about identity and world view. Both do so upon the basis of tradition and conventional beliefs; however, while Hemans embraces and finds comfort in tradition, Dickinson rejects conventional wisdom and challenges Hemans's perspective. Dickinson ultimately pushes the boundaries that Hemans's poem finds comfort in, and encourages radical change to values such as religion and conformity. This can be seen in the inherent formal similarities (and hidden differences) between both poems, as well as in the way that specific imagery is used to promote each competing point of view.

In "The Homes of England," Hemans embraces conventional wisdom and tradition and does not step outside of the bounds of those traditions. She

does not ask the question of “why,” but rather states things as they exist in the world and is perfectly satisfied doing so. For Hemans, uniformity is the desired state of reality. This is represented in her descriptions of nature: the use of phrases such as “pleasant land,” “silvery brooks,” and “glowing orchards” are all indicative of comfortability and stability in nature and what it provides (4, 27, 29). In these phrases there is a sense of security that is implied and rooted in positive connections to the land, and this can be found specifically in each adjective that Hemans uses to describe things in nature. None are unconventional, and none of them indicate that Hemans is searching for more or that the way that these natural elements exist should be questioned. This is further demonstrated when she says, “and green for ever be the groves” (37). By way of this line and its image of eternal fulfillment resulting from everlasting greenness, Hemans continues to express comfort in conformity, in tradition, and in predictability. Green grass is often a symbol of life and of peace, and can also often be found in religious books such as the Bible. By using this specific imagery, Hemans is implying that by following tradition and being connected to faith, we as humans will always find fulfillment and happiness in our lives.

Where Hemans’s poem is founded in comfortable and traditional values, Dickinson takes those values and actively questions them. She rejects what is traditionally seen as stable and instead suggests that there is something more for humans to believe in and discover. This can be seen immediately within the title and first line of the poem: “This World is not Conclusion” (1). This simple statement opposes the traditional view that the current state of the world is the “end” of development and innovation, and instead suggests the existence of More: something that is beyond what many people have already decided is the end of the development of the natural world. The final destination for humans as a species, and even for the Earth in its simple form, is not rooted in tradition or classic faith. Dickinson pushes this idea further when she says, “Narcotics cannot still the Tooth / That nibbles at the soul—” (19-20). She challenges the idea that what we know is all that we will ever know; she implies that there is a constant searching for what is beyond the bounds of our knowledge, and it is a search that we can never fully complete. The “soul,” as Dickinson mentions, is representative of the human race, and by invoking this image of the soul being picked at and challenged, the reader is left feeling that burning desire for more and curiosity for what may come next.

Dickinson explicitly rejects conventional wisdom and what is classically perceived to be true when she says, “Sagacity must go—” (8). With the word

“sagacity” encompassing wisdom and knowledge, Dickinson is very clearly resisting any form of conventional truth and what it means to be wise and insightful. The idea that faith and religious virtue must be upheld and maintained is also critiqued by Dickinson when she says, “Faith slips— / and laughs, and rallies / Blushes, if any see—” (13-14). By saying that Faith “Blushes” if anybody notices its “slips,” in this case being a person’s failure to uphold the religious values they claim to believe in, Dickinson actively personifies religious beliefs and creates an image of a façade that is shown by those who hold religious values. Whereas for Hemans, the homes are described in a way that directly roots them in religion and classic beliefs, indicating a sense of familiarity and trust in religion because it is unchanging. Alongside this, Hemans uses language such as “*rejoicing stream*,” “*blessed Homes*,” and “*holy quietness*,” all of which have religious connotations and suggest a sense of comfortability in the way that people live (8, 17, 19, italics mine). This directly contrasts Dickinson’s view of how people should consider the world around them.

“The Homes of England” embraces the status quo and classic ideas of what is “typical,” which is predominantly represented in the structure of the poem: it is written in stanzas that are all eight lines long, each describing a type of home, and that all contain the same rhyming scheme. There is comfort in repetition, and in the sense of completion and satisfaction that repeated rhyme and an unchanging structure can bring. It is obvious that Hemans is not making any effort to deviate from this classic style of poetry. Contrastingly, Dickinson’s poem does take a classic structural form, however she uses the form of her poem as the basis of her resistance to tradition and conformity. This is demonstrated in the way that she uses capitalization as a device. On the surface, one would see her poem as being visually typical of classic poetry, which it is, but with closer analysis the reader can see that Dickinson chooses to capitalize words that are representative of the unknown. By doing this, Dickinson personifies the things that we know to exist, but cannot see and only experience, and creates greater emphasis which distracts from the traditional meter of the poem. Words such as “Music” and “Sound” are capitalized, suggesting that these invisible things are what make up the world, and because we cannot physically hold sound or see music, there are no boundaries to how far we can go (3-4). We never truly know how much space sound occupies, where music ends and begins, and how long they can go on for. It is in this way that Dickinson actively uses tradition as the basis of her resistance and showcases her strong sense of trust in the future and of the things that are unknown.

Felicia Hemans's "The Homes of England" and Emily Dickinson's "This World is Not Conclusion" showcase competing perspectives of the world. Though these perspectives differ and hold opposing views, they exist in conversation with one another, and this can be seen in the way that Hemans's strong belief in tradition is used by Emily Dickinson as a way to inform her own perspective; tradition is the basis of Dickinson's view in that she critiques many of the vital pieces that Hemans values and strongly weaves throughout her poem in order to present the faults in them and showcase her belief in the unknown and the future. Particularly in the choice of describing words and in formal similarities between Hemans's and Dickinson's poems, the reader is able to closely analyze both poems in order to truly see where the differences lie and the way that each poet uses structural and written devices to present their point of view to the reader.

Works Cited

Hemans, Felicia. "The Homes of England." 1828. Scanned document, retrieved from Canvas course page.

Dickinson, Emily. "This World is Not Conclusion." *Complete Poems*, number 501, published 1862. Scanned document, retrieved from Canvas course page.

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