Ashley McGuire

ENG 102, CRN10851

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Drunk on the Beauty of Nature

Debauchee ­- not a word that is heard every day. It means to succumb to indulgence or overwhelming pleasure. The term often refers to a male who has been consuming excessive amounts of alcohol to the point that he has become tipsy. It is bewildering why a female within a traditional society of the nineteenth century would decide to write about intoxication because it is simply not lady-like to do so. Emily Dickinson conveys the concept of irony in “I Taste A Liquor Never Brewed” through her paradoxical style of poetic writing that encompasses ingenious metaphors and striking imagery with unconventional use of grammar and punctuation.

The writer does anything but conform to the ordinary and desires to have her own voice. To oppose customary views, Dickinson artfully injects irony into her literary works using the language of paradox. Paradoxical writing takes contradictory ideas and unites them into a similar, whole idea (Cirakli 4). Butterflies and bees form the single idea of nature, even though they are two different insects with contrasting qualities. Butterflies are synonymous with the ideal, perfect, and utopian views of society; however, the writer chooses to see herself as the bee that is associated with anguish and agony. The poem, though, may not even be Dickinson looking through the lens of her own eyes; rather, she leaves the reader to determine whether she is speaking from the viewpoint of a creature, such as a hummingbird, a daisy, or a bee (Cuellar 36). It seems ironic that a poet would write references in first-person about someone or something other than themselves.

Contrasting statements, such as the butterflies versus the bee, throughout “I Taste A Liquor Never Brewed” show yet another use of the author’s skill of irony in the piece. Freedom and awareness are shown through the image of the “endless summer days” and “inns of molten blue,” which contradicts the insanity of the “drunken Bee” and “Inebriate of air.” Opposite topics in the latter two of these direct quotes from Dickinson’s poem show paradox as the author has taken two of the main ideas within her poem, alcohol and nature, and combined them into a single stanza. The third stanza addresses a “drunken Bee,” a “Foxglove” flower, “Butterflies” renouncing their “drams,” and that “I shall drink the more!” (Dickinson lines 9-12). These lines splendidly pull together stanza one and two because the first stanza is solely about liquor and the second stanza is mostly words regarding nature. In the fourth stanza, another contrast of ideas is seen when “snowy” precedes the idea of the “Sun.”

Mysterious word choice, random capitalization, and contradictory lines within “I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed” makes it seem as if Dickinson’s take on the definition of community is actually the uniqueness of each individual and her past of seclusion (Pollak 19). Socially acceptable norms are rejected in Dickinson’s poetry as she explicitly writes about drunkenness using the words “drams,” “alcohol,” and “Tankards.” A specific line that captures her odd capitalization and choice of words would be “Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats” (Dickinson line 13). The line is ironic because Christians typically imagine Seraphs as angels in light, not snow. In fact, instead of using the typical word angel, Dickinson chose to use Seraph, incorporating alliteration alongside “swing” and “snowy” to indicate to the reader that summer is slowly winding down and that the poem is coming to an end.

Not only is the grammatical usage of capitalization bizarre, but the punctuation is another unusual aspect of “I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed.” Dickinson uses dashes to connect every thought except for three lines that end with an exclamation point. There are no periods or commas - only dashes and exclamation points. If the reader looks closely at these lines: “Reeling - thro’ endless summer days -” (Dickinson line 7) and “And Saints - to windows run -” (Dickinson line 14), they will notice the odd breaks in the flow of the poem. Dickinson might have paused here while writing, or perhaps, she wants the reader to pause and contemplate the words and phrasing. It seems ironic for an educated, prolific writer to break convention with the basic rules of the English language, such as capitalization and punctuation; however, this is how Dickinson chooses to display her extraordinary wit.

Irony is a key aspect of Dickinson’s writing, which makes perfect sense when considering her past and personality. Dickinson believed herself to be a “nobody” and was considered reclusive in nature (Pollak 9). What is uncanny about this is that the writer’s family was highly respected within their community. Her brother was a Harvard Law School alumnus and her father graduated from Yale College (Pollak 9). Dickinson graduated from Amherst College (Pollak 15), yet still considered herself unfit to publish her writings for the public eye. Despair and choice of exile by the writer could explain why she assumes the role of the bee and her choice to use unlady-like language directed toward alcohol in “I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed.”

Dickinson could not be more accurate with her statement: “Assent, you are sane - Demure - you’re straightway dangerous” (Cirakli 2). In her writing, it is easy to discern that expressing one’s truest self is respected while shyness or modesty is opposed. This message of self-expression and individualism is essentially a gift the author gives us to inflect on ourselves. If every person tried to act and look the exact same as the people around them, there would be no color or variety in the world. Staying true to oneself and daring to be different is not wrong or crude. If we never branch out of the norm and follow in everyone else’s footsteps, Alfred Hershey and Martha Chase would have never discovered that DNA is genetic material and John Snow would not have ended the Cholera epidemic because these scientists did not listen to the majority. We are allowed to go beyond what society tells us to be, and if we use our personal strengths and stand for our own beliefs, we might just be able to change the world someday.

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