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American Literature

Final Essay

“The Poet” and Personae: Dickinson & Crane

The role of the “I” is important in any poet’s work. Most poems are written from a first-person point of view that can be considered “the poet him/herself.” Other poems are written in personae, in the voices of characters who are not the poet. Emily Dickinson and Stephen Crane offer unique perspectives in both of these categories. From Dickinson writing from beyond the grave in “Because I could not stop for Death” to Crane writing as a man wandering the desert in “In the Desert,” writing in personae allows each poet to deliver a level of insight and irony that is out of reach writing as “the poet.” Both poets utilize writing in personae by becoming approximations of themselves, characters who are very much like “the poet,” but with one or two slight differences. Dickinson and Crane touch on the same or similar topics in both roles.

Life and death are subjects that Dickinson focuses on as “the poet” and in personae. One example of addressing this theme as “the poet” comes in Dickinson’s “To be alive - is Power.”

“To be alive - is Power -
Existence - in itself -
Without a further function -
Omnipotence - Enough -

To be alive - and will! -
'Tis able as a God -

The Maker - of Ourselves - be what -
Such being Finitude!"

Here, Dickinson treats the role of "the poet" as an authoritative figure, providing declarative statements that detail encouraging and thought-provoking concepts. The poet uses her voice to speak truth and become larger than the woman behind the pen. This is one of Dickinson's many strengths writing as "the poet," moving beyond the personal and tapping into the universal. Of course, Dickinson's personal poems are also universal in their own understated way. Another instance where Dickinson addresses death comes in the lovely, "Were nature mortal lady."

"Were nature mortal lady
Who had so little time
To pack her trunk and order
The great exchange of clime—

How rapid, how momentous—
What exigencies were—
But nature will be ready
And have an hour to spare.

To make some trifle fairer
That was too fair before—
Enchanting by remaining,
And by departure more."

Dickinson uses her role as "The Poet" to provide wisdom and respect for death and the passing of time. As in many of her poems, Dickinson's appreciation of nature proves to be a catalyst for addressing a larger concept. The tone is conversational and nostalgic, a departure from the exuberance found in "To be alive - is Power." The range in tone that Dickinson demonstrates in her poems as "the poet" speak to both her prolificness and mastery of verse. In "The grave my little cottage is," Dickinson addresses the often grim subject of death with grace and whimsy.

"The grave my little cottage is,

Where “keeping house” for thee
 I make my parlor orderly
 And lay the marble tea.

For two divided, briefly,
 A cycle, it may be,
 Till everlasting life unite
 In strong society.”

Dickinson is nothing if not unafraid. Her role as “the poet” here is one of comfort, providing levity where there is little. One might suggest that the more personal a poem, the more profound it is. At times, like in this poem, Dickinson conforms to this notion. However, throughout her vast catalogue, the poems in personae have just as devastating of an impact as her poems as “the poet.” In “Because I could not stop for Death,” Dickinson’s writing in personae accomplishes many things impossible to accomplish as “the poet.” The poet writes from beyond the grave on her journey with Death to somewhere unknown.

“Because I could not stop for Death -
 He kindly stopped for me -
 The Carriage held but just Ourselves -
 And Immortality.

We slowly drove - He knew no haste
 And I had put away
 My labor and my leisure too,
 For His Civility -

We passed the School, where Children strove
 At Recess - in the Ring -
 We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain -
 We passed the Setting Sun -

Or rather - He passed Us -
 The Dews drew quivering and Chill -
 For only Gossamer, my Gown -
 My Tippet - only Tulle -

We paused before a House that seemed
 A Swelling of the Ground -
 The Roof was scarcely visible -
 The Cornice - in the Ground -

Since then - 'tis Centuries - and yet
 Feels shorter than the Day
 I first surmised the Horses' Heads
 Were toward Eternity -“

Dickinson produces an eerie mood with her elaborate imagery, while leaving enough space in the narrative for the imagination of the reader to take hold. The wonder in her tone allows the audience to believe their journey outside of time with the poet, toward eternity. The haunting tale could not be further from Dickinson's humble garden musings, for instance, and lends credence to the idea that alternating between writing as “the poet” and in personae frees the writer to become another storyteller. In this case, offering the perspective of the dead, detailing dreamscapes of an unknown or altered world.

Stephen Crane too is fluent in writing as “the poet” and in personae, using each to his advantage, altering tone and use of irony. His collection, “The Black Riders & Other Lines” features 68 numbered poems. Poem XXIX sees Crane's usage of personae paralleling Dickinson's “Because I could not stop for Death,” writing from beyond the grave.

“Behold, from the land of the farther sons
 I returned.
 And I was in a reptile-swarmed place,
 Peopled, otherwise, with grimaces,
 Shrouded above in black impenetrableness.
 I shank, loathing,
 Sick with it.
 And I said to him,
 “What is this?”
 He made answer slowly,
 “Spirit, this is a world;

“This was your home.””

This pointed and jarring conclusion is indicative of Crane’s flare for the dramatic. This is only one instance of many in “The Black Riders & Others Lines” where the poet presents the idea that things are not what they seem. To some extent, this theme is also present throughout “War Is Kind.” In both collections, Crane successfully defies the reader’s expectations, questions moral conventions, and offers alternative points of view. In the following poem, XXX, Crane changes course and uses the role of “The Poet” to explicitly subvert the authority of virtue.

“Supposing that I should have the courage
To let a red sword of virtue
Plunge into my heart,
Letting to the weeds of the ground
My sinful blood,
What can you offer me?
A gardened castle?
A Flowery Kingdom

What? A hope?
Then hence with your red sword of virtue.”

This poem offers insight into Crane’s skeptical outlook. Much like Dickinson, Crane looks within to find understanding in life and death. However, Dickinson is more reluctant to scoff at hope. One great irony in Crane’s poetry is his deep longing for righteousness being outweighed by his reluctance to receive any authority offering passage towards the ideal. In poem III, Crane writes in personae.

“In the desert
I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
Who, squatting upon the ground,
Held his heart in his hands,
And ate of it.
I said, “Is it good, friend?”
“It is bitter—bitter,” he answered;

“But I like it
 Because it is bitter,
 And because it is my heart.”

Like Dickinson, Crane uses personae to become another storyteller. In this story, the poet paints a grotesque picture to convey a dark and severe beauty. Acceptance seems to be at the core of its meaning. One might argue that same acceptance is at the core of “Because I could not stop for Death.” Dickinson goes with Death willingly: “He kindly stopped for me.” Again in “The Black Riders & Other Lines,” Crane uses the desert as a setting for a poem in personae.

“I walked in a desert.
 And I cried,
 “Ah, God, take me from this place!”
 A voice said, “It is no desert.”
 I cried, “Well, but—
 “The sand, the heat, the vacant horizon.”
 A voice said, “It is no desert.”

This eight-line revelation returns to the concept that things are not what they seem. Both Dickinson and Crane suggest that the unknown outweighs the known in matters of the heart and mind. Alternating between writing as “the poet” and in personae allow Dickinson and Crane to address these concurrent concepts from a variety of angles, providing the reader a greater perspective, appreciation, sensitivity, and understanding for the curiosity and acceptance that they endorse. The beauty that each poet draws from a dream or from the every day provides the foundation for their gentle encouragement and brutal honesty.

As Mustafa Zeki Cirakli states, “Emily Dickinson’s poetry is characterized by her emphasis on ironic use of discourse that amounts to her persistent manifestation of individuality against hypocrisy and vanity. She exerts her peculiar poetic language in a way that helps deplore as well as explore the paradoxical human condition.” Certainly, Crane also insists on individuali-

ty and detests hypocrisy and vanity. The poets common goals are evident in their respective works and suggest a shared reverence for the complexity of an ever-evolving understanding of the self. In “The Craft of Stephen Crane,” Arno Karlen provides a quote from a letter Stephen Crane wrote where he insists his intent was to “show people to people as they seem to me.” Undoubtedly, Crane accomplishes this. And, indeed, Crane shows himself to people as he seems to himself. Both poets fully merge with their characters. Dickinson writes as “the poet”,

“In the name of the Bee -
And of the Butterfly -
And of the Breeze - Amen!”

Dickinson sees herself in the Bee, and the Butterfly, and the Breeze, just as Crane sees himself in the creature his persona encounters in the desert. This intimacy creates a unique opportunity for the reader to look through the eyes of “the poet” and the persona. It is no coincidence that these considerably different poets share the inclination to incorporate the natural world into their writings. They see the personal in the universal and “the poet” in the persona. Writing as “the poet” and in personae allows each poet to address the same and similar topics providing a variety of perspectives and offering complementary insights to greater truths that enrich their deeply personal poetry.

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