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ENGL100

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Smith, Martha Nell. *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson*. Texas UP, 1992.

In Martha Nell Smith’s analysis of Emily Dickinson’s renowned poem entitled, “I’m ‘wife’–– I’ve finished that––”, the concepts of womanhood and privilege are used to demonstrate the limitations women possess in her transition from girlhood into married life. She begins the argument by discussing Dickinson’s line, “How odd the Girl’s life looks / Behind this soft Eclipse––,” claiming that the ‘soft Eclipse’ refers to the total or partial covering of woman’s former self before she was married. The Eclipse of which Dickinson is referring is the process of man displaying his privilege in patriarchal society and marrying a woman, impressing her with all of the experiences he has in his life which she has not encountered. Dickinson continues her poem to read, “I think that Earth feels so / To folks in Heaven––now––,” to which Smith says that transition from ‘Girl’ to ‘wife’ must be synonymous to ‘folks in Heaven’s’ view of Earth after they departed; ‘odd’. This new state which woman is in is described by Dickinson as comfort, and the previous compared to its antithesis, pain. The comparison between comfort and pain, namely ‘Girl’ and ‘wife’, is obsolete as Smith explains that the titles in the poem serve to comment on the experiences of women in 19th century America. In this context, it is inferred that, “[...] matrimony’s value for women was not even questioned.” for the labels of womanhood were safer than those of remaining unwed. This prompts discomfort within the woman as she begins to ponder on her limitations upon her transition from girlhood to womanhood. She writes, “With that assertion and reaffirmation of her position she stops both reflecting upon her position and speaking about it.”

Speaking more about the use of pronouns in “I’m ‘wife’–– I’ve finished that––,” Smith asserts that the use of quotation marks in the piece set a sarcastic tone and are used to remind the readers that these words are only appellations, having no real significance to the true meaning of woman’s identity. However, these appellations become insignificant once she is married because as wife, a woman is seen as able to claim her full status of womanhood. While Smith claims that this status is the fulfillment of womanhood, she claims that this newly found title can also be deadening as a woman who has been wooed and won may also be disappointed in her new state of existence as it is not the romantic transition into womanhood that she had hoped; there are no new rights or privileges associated with ‘wife’ above ‘Girl’. To handle this disappointment, Smith argues that Dickinson realizes that the woes of woman will only be strengthened if she spends time comparing her nuptial state to that “other singular state”, leading her to pridefully claim her title as wife, ending the poem by writing, “But why compare? / I’m “Wife”! Stop there!”

The analysis of “I’m ‘wife’–– I’ve finished that––” by Martha Nell Smith provides comprehensive commentary on the transition into womanhood and the struggle of woman contemplating the assumption of the title ‘wife’. However, Smith does not provide a substantial analysis of the context of 19th century conditions of women in society other than the internal struggle of title acquisition. By omitting an analysis of the greater societal conditions, the connotation of Dickinson’s work cannot be wholly comprehended. The use of quotations provide insight to societal conditions as ‘wife’ and ‘Woman’ contrast Czar and Girl. While Smith discusses patriarchal culture in the 19th century, the quotation of pronouns above others demonstrate the different connotations of the words. ‘Wife’ and ‘Woman’ are the titles by which women are expected to abide, while Czar and Girl are labels which woman can never claim once they are titled the former. While Smith analyzes ‘wife’ and ‘Woman’ to understand its significance to the identity of woman, the title is only discussed in relation to its counterpart, husband. The comparison of woman to Czar, which is heavily connoted to power and influence, demonstrates the power struggle of woman in 19th century America, never being able to possess a title associated with power.

Smith’s analysis provides strong interpretations of the imagery in Dickinson’s “I’m ‘wife’–– I’ve finished that––,” through explaining the comparisons in relation to feminine identification. In the line, “How odd the Girl’s life looks / Behind this soft Eclipse––” the Eclipse is identified as the presence of man, supporting the argument that patriarchal society imposes itself on the identity of woman. While recognizing the shielding of girl behind the presence of man, this interpretation also demonstrates the inability of women in 19th century America to self-identify based on conditions other than their relation to men. This argument can be reaffirmed through reflection on Dickinson’s own life, never marrying and receiving societal backlash. While Dickinson never possessed the title of ‘wife’, the speaker of the poem uses the title as only an appellation rather than a self-proclamation. The title is then commenting on the conditions of women and their identity being defined by labels. By looking at the context of societal discrimination against women in the 19th century and continuing Smith’s analysis, the poem can be read through the perspective of women in society as a whole rather than an individual struggle of the transition into womanhood. The poem may even be understood as commentary on the woman experience beyond the defining assignment of titles. That is, being unable to prevail past the presence of male dominance, or Eclipse as Smith interprets Dickinson’s words supporting “I’m ‘wife’–– I’ve finished that––” demonstrating the lack of influence women are allotted in society, restraining them to a defining attribute of woman or wife.