

Lynn Shakinovsky: On 520 ("I started Early--Took my Dog--")

Poem 520 -- concerns itself, on the one hand, with the play of power between the female narrator and the Sea who is figured as male and, on the other, with the private internal world of the narrator, the workings of whose mind remain fundamentally inaccessible to the reader. "I started Early -- took my Dog -- " begins as conventionally as any narrative could but moves quickly into the bizarre, private world of the narrator.

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The apparent simplicity and conventionality of the beginning of the poem belies the complexities and obscurities of the universe into which we are suddenly thrust. The sense of cosy domesticity, created in the opening line of the poem by the description of the narrator taking her Dog for a walk and potentially maintained by the comparison of the Sea to a House, is undermined by the fact that it is Mermaids who live in the House's Basement, and that the Sea transforms into a Man later in the poem, a transformation which is not elucidated or clarified. Similarly, the Dog which originally appears to symbolize normality, ordinariness, and domesticity disappears out of the poem after the first line and is not seen again. Thus, even these apparent indicators of normality and ordinariness betray the reader and force her to question the framework in which the poem occurs.

In the second stanza, the Frigates are personified and fantasize the narrator as a "Mouse -- / Aground," implying that she should somehow be living in the Sea-House in the first place. The surreal spatial dislocations in the poem are playful and teasing, and the whimsicality and strangeness of the poem deny us a framework with which to read it. We find ourselves in a poetic universe where the poem seems to move from one metaphor to another without ever illuminating the connections between them.

The welcoming, "extend[ing]" hands of the Frigate are not entirely friendly and contain a slight sense of threat, as "Hempen" implies the possibility of trapping, tying, and strangling. This threat is made explicit as the Sea turns into a Man who follows the narrator, which serves to sexualize the image. The sense of increasing encroachment conveyed in the repetitions of "and" in the third stanza, and of personal threat contained in the repetition of "my" in the same stanza, reach their climax in "And made as He would eat me up." The threat here is that the narrator will be incorporated into the Sea and swallowed up just as "a Dew" might be. The relative size and impact of a drop of dew in relation to the ocean also serves to indicate the narrator's sense of her own powerlessness and fear of ravishment.

In contrast to the narrator's sense of helplessness, the Sea's power and competence is conveyed throughout the poem. The transitional movement from the world of sexual excitement to the solid world of respectability, imaged by the contrast between the liquid richness of the Sea and the solidity of the Town, is perfectly managed by the Sea and conveyed in the narrative by the social nicety of the phrase "No one He seemed to know -- ." His power is conveyed again by the idea of control and choice that is implicit in the fact that his withdrawal at the end of the poem is presented not only as voluntary but also as

temporary. In turn, the narrator's sense of the Sea's control over her is conveyed through the meaningfulness and intimacy of the "Mighty look -- " which he directs at her.

What is also evident, however, is the narrator's excitement. It is conveyed as early as the opening line of the poem, as it is she who originally chooses to visit the Sea. In this sense, the action of the poem is "started" by the narrator ("I started Early -- Took my Dog -- "), and her excitement is also present in the later repetition "And then -- I started -- too." The repetitions of "He" in the fifth stanza, the intimacy of the Silver Heel upon the "Ankle," the liquidity and richness of "Pearl," and the strong staccato rhythms of the poem in general, all function together to convey the narrator's sexual excitement.

Indeed, the sense of the narrator's fantasy pervades the poem. The poem is filled with whimsy and pretence and functions as a world of make-believe. Even the Sea appears to possess the capacity to play; "And made as He would eat me up -- ." The poem works so subjectively and in such a freely associative manner that the reader eventually gives up her expectations of a rational framework and accepts the strange transitions from concept to concept and from metaphor to metaphor. The central tenet of free association is, however, its private nature. Many of the connections in this poem remain unexplained or seem meaningful only in the narrator's private symbolic world. The movement from Dog to Mermaid to Mouse to personified Dandelion remains whimsical and private.

Since the meanings of the poem are elucidated mainly by reference to the narrator's private symbolic world, they may be said to remain closed to us. The phrase "Took my Dog" exemplifies this point. Usually, the notion of taking one's dog implies normalcy, domesticity, and companionship, but all of these factors are absent by the middle of the first stanza. The narrator's experience is characterised by the notable absence of notions such as normalcy or domesticity and remains strange, unexplained, and at times frightening. Indeed, her experience is dependent upon a sense of isolation and lack of companionship, so that the Dog not only fails to protect her but disappears inexplicably after the opening line. Thus, in spite of the intimacy present in the possessive pronoun "My," the connection between the narrator and her dog is never explained.

An attempt to work out the narrator's relationship with the Sea is equally complex. The Sea is imaged first as a House or a building which is inhabited, and then as a Man. It is easy to explain the threatening, engulfing, overwhelming effect that the Sea has on the narrator as it follows her, but all of this tends to contradict the idea of shelter, domesticity and immobility usually implied by the image of a building. In a discussion of Dickinson's symbols, Weisbuch comments that the Sea tends to be "the place of risk," while home is "almost always a place of safety and rest" (53). In fact, Weisbuch is actually commenting, at this point in his discussion, on the difficulty of attributing precise meanings to Dickinson's symbols, but it is interesting to note that even the kind of wide-ranging opposition that he suggests here is contradicted in this poem. The poem continually subverts and undermines the associations and connotations that it creates. The poem's irrational world never does provide its own containing framework. The lack of control is manifested in the overflowing tide, the absence of clarifying or containing connectives, and in the lack of a clear framework inside which one can read this poem. The only kind of framework that can exist is one that may be arbitrarily imposed -- by the poem's ending, for example. This poem ends without telling the end of the story: the sense that there will be another confrontation with the Sea is strong. Thus, Dickinson refuses to bind her meanings or to circumscribe her universe. "I started Early -- Took my Dog" takes for its subject matter the irrationality of free association, the private nature of the internal symbolic universe, and it explores both of these in the context of an unexplained confrontation with

male power. The evasiveness manifested by the narrator inside the poem finds its formal concomitant in the relative inaccessibility of the poem itself. The difficulties inside the poem appear to reflect the difficulties outside the poem, the difficulties for a woman writer of being received in the public external world.

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