

Cristanne Miller: On 601 ("A still??Volcano??Life??")

"A still -- Volcano -- Life -- " begins by making disruptive thoughts or feelings of "Life" concrete through the metaphor of a (nongendered) volcano. . . .

The poem's first two stanzas emphasize the secrecy of such a life. At the end of the second stanza, however, Dickinson moves out from the abstract soul to the physical (and in this case implicitly gendered) body to give more intimate and immediate impact to her metaphor:

The North cannot detect

The Solemn -- Torrid -- Symbol -- The lips that never lie -- Whose hissing Corals
part -- and shut ? And Cities?ooze away--

The multiple suggestive aspects of female sexuality in the final stanza's images (the speaker's undetected, clearly non-phallic, metonymic ability to "ooze"; the coral lips which might belong either to the mouth or to the more frighteningly "quiet" vagina; and perhaps even the volcanic heaving bosom) point to the centrality of the body in imagining this Life's eruption.

As with all of Dickinson's metaphors of grotesquerie, this stanza offers two surreal pictures. In the first, a speaker's "hissing Corals" part to release lava--like words, expressions, or fluid so destructive that "Cities" are destroyed. One of the more chilling aspects of this image lies in the lack of anger or intention in the volcano's action: whether the speaker utters curses or merely parts her lips in a smile, the result is equally destructive. At the same time, the metaphor depicts a volcanic mountain with the "lips" of a siren, sensuously "hissing," "part[ing]" and "shut[ting]" as it slowly releases its molten rock. In either case, the body disappears except for the magnified and red lips, which give immediate and frighteningly controlled release to the "Volcano -- Life" within. In a grotesque metonymy, a woman becomes a mouth--or that other dangerous and lipped female orifice--spewing violent destruction. Here there is no obvious humanity to which a victim of the "hissing Corals" might appeal.

[. . .]

A human volcano, with lips prominent and sensual, whose expressions make "Cities -- ooze away" evokes horror, disbelief, but also amusement at the incongruity of the speaker's self-aggrandizing fantasy: the speaker implies that she might at any time choose to open her coral lips and release destruction, that beneath her white dress lies volcanic fury. . . .

This poem suggests a sensibility that values a sexually female power wholly alien to (or in tension with) notions of femininity in a staid New England community. . . .

[T]he speaker reveals a kind of glee in knowing what the "North cannot detect" The speaker is not interested in politeness but in volcanic honesty that simultaneously reveals and devastates.

From *Comic Power in Emily Dickinson*. By Suzanne Juhasz, Cristanne Miller, and Martha Nell Smith. (University of Texas Press, 1993). Copyright © 1993 by the University of Texas Press.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

Emily Dickinson [2]

Author:

Cristanne Miller [3]

Poem:

601 (A still??Volcano??Life??) [4]

Source URL: <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/cristanne-miller-601-still%E2%80%94volcano%E2%80%94life%E2%80%94>

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