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Numb in Nature, Sensitive in Seclusion

Although born decades before her, Ralph Waldo Emerson considerably influenced Emily Dickinson's writing with his works such as *Nature* and "Self-Reliance." Dickinson, though relegated to her house for much of her life, embodied his ideas through her poetry and pioneered a new poetic style. In "I taste a liquor never brewed," Emily Dickinson espouses Ralph Waldo Emerson's ideas of nature and self-reliance using metaphor, personification, and juxtaposition to amplify her appreciation of nature and rebuff Calvinist morals.

To illustrate how nature desensitizes her to life's pain as Emerson describes in *Nature*, Emily Dickinson compares it to alcohol and personifies its insects as drunkards to create a personal and comical effect in "I taste a liquor never brewed." In *Nature*, Emerson remarks that Nature's sprightly breeze carries him from the coarse dirt into the void and numbs him to earthly despair. He feels immune to typical anguish and woe immersed in an ambience of life untouched by civilization (133). To recreate the point, Dickinson's speaker relates the euphoria she receives in nature to the influence of alcohol by describing it as the taste of a "liquor never brewed" (1), more fulfilling than a wine from "all the Frankfort berries" (3). Like alcohol, nature depresses the speaker's inhibitions as it does to Emerson. Extending the metaphor, the speaker continues with "Reeling – thro' endless summer days – / From inns of molten Blue" (7-8). "Reeling" illustrates both stumbling drunkenly under a cloudless summer sky, as well as fishing in an azure

pond surrounded by nature. The sheer allure of nature numbs the speaker's sense of time itself to make summer seem endless and time irrelevant. The speaker still acknowledges time, though. Dickinson depicts the passage of time by comparing bees' and butterflies' finishing their pollen collection as summer becomes autumn to drunkards being evicted. By declaring "I shall but drink the more!" (12), the speaker, approves of life's brevity as long as she can witness the beauty of it. As she personifies the insects as drunkards, Dickinson relays her appreciation of nature in a more relatable and lively way compared to a literal description of bees and butterflies. Dickinson even creates the impression of drunkenness with the form of the poem itself by using an alliteration of S's to deliver the impression of slurring and altering the otherwise constant meter in the final two lines, adding another dimension to the extended metaphor. The poem culminates in the speaker's rise above the Earth in the view of "Saints" and "Seraphs," which return the poem to a more thoughtful mood. As a "little Tippler / Leaning against the – Sun!" (15-16), the speaker transcends her trivial earthly problems and passes into the void, observed by heavenly beings and totally unharmed by the sun. The speaker's transcendence of time and space echoes the immunity Emerson feels to life's typical anguish while surrounded by nature. In a personal and lighthearted style, Dickinson's use of metaphor and personification evince Emerson's idea of a nature so magnificent, it can shield an observer from life's pain.

By using the themes of alcohol and isolation and juxtaposing them with religion in the context of a pious, Calvinist society, Emily Dickinson embodies Emerson's ideal of self-reliance in "I taste a liquor never brewed." In "Self-Reliance," Emerson encourages the reader to pursue an independent lifestyle: to enable your own heart and soul, you must allow yourself to diverge from established tradition. You cannot take the beaten path to find your own personal fulfillment

(152). Calvinist and Puritan morals strongly influenced Emily Dickinson's upbringing, and such philosophies eschewed excessive consumption of alcohol, especially for young women. By using inebriation from alcohol as the central metaphor and in a positive light, she disregards these restrictive standards in favor of her own contentment. People drink alcohol to relieve themselves from the fear and shame of acting against society's etiquette and to act according to their instincts and wants instead. Emerson espouses a similar lifestyle. He advises his audience to live life according to their own interests at the expense of established tradition and religion, and the metaphor of alcohol exemplifies this message. Dickinson also rejects Calvinist predestination in favor of her own desires. Predestination assigns believers to a life of labor rather than one of indulgence; to prove that they are part of those chosen to go to heaven. The poem's attitude toward nature is one of indulgence and "Reeling – thro' endless summer days" (7), admiring nature instead of working and exploiting nature for its resources. However, she ironically juxtaposes religion with her metaphor for alcohol in the form of angels and saints rushing to observe the speaker reveling in nature's sublimity. While Dickinson rejects the stringent Calvinist repudiation of alcohol and self-indulgence, she does not reject religion itself, trusting she has the approval of higher powers as she marvels at their creations. Furthermore, just as Emerson calls for moments of seclusion from crowds and civilization, Dickinson presents seclusion from society as another central theme. Her speaker derives her ultimate joy from simply watching bees and butterflies and being watched by saints and seraphs, each actor independent, rather than participating in organized society. With themes contrary to the Calvinist virtues of sobriety and predestination, her poem adopts a theme of Emersonian self-reliance.

With her use of metaphor, personification, and juxtaposition to develop her love of nature and rejection of Calvinist philosophy, Emily Dickinson illustrates Emerson's themes of nature and self-reliance in "I taste a liquor never brewed." By comparing her enjoyment of nature to the influence of alcohol and by personifying the bees and butterflies as drunkards, she presents nature's effect on her as immunizing and emboldening. By using alcohol, gratification, and solitude as central themes in the context of a Calvinist society, she practices Emerson's lectures on self-reliance. Despite the difference in generation, Emerson's ideas espoused in *Nature* and "Self-Reliance" shine through this poem.

Works Cited:

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