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### Transfer of Power from Christ to Self: A Close Reading of Emily Dickinson's Poem 454

Many European settlers sought religious freedom in North America, and the United States was founded partly for this very cause. Emily Dickinson takes this freedom and uses it to challenge the ideas of her New England Calvinist church in her poem 454 by suggesting that real spiritual power and authority lies within the individual, as well as in Christ himself, rather than with the official church. This essay will look at Dickinson's use of the word "he" as Christ, the word "I" as the poet herself, and the importance of her use of capitalization to show shifting power between Christ and self. This argument will be supported by the comparison of poem 454 with lines from other Dickinson poems that deal specifically with religious matters.

In poem 454, Emily Dickinson's use of the word "he" refers to Christ. The first stanza makes this clear:

I rose - because He sank -  
I thought it would be opposite -  
But when his power dropped -  
My Soul grew straight. (lines 1-4)

In Christianity, salvation is gained through the death of Christ. Because of Christ's death, and his resurrection, believers in him are assured of eternal life and eventual physical resurrection from the dead. The apostle John sums this up in the New Testament where it is written: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Beginning with this first stanza, the poet has a specific purpose for capitalizing words referring to Christ and to herself. The “He” is capitalized in the first line to show that initially Christ is seen to be the one in power. It becomes lower cased when the third line states “his power dropped”. With this apparent dropping of Christ’s power, her own “Soul” becomes capitalized to show the transfer of power from Christ to herself, and also that she has “risen” to the occasion. This shifting in power is seemingly unexpected, as the poet states, “I thought it would be opposite”.

The second stanza expands and confirms this reading:

I cheered my fainting Prince-

I sang-firm-even-Chants-

I helped his Film-with Hymn- (lines 5-7)

“Chants” and “Hymn” refer to Christian songs of worship. However, it is important to note that although hymns and chants are traditional church elements, the use of the word “I” here asserts that these songs are personal and are not orthodox. Rather, they are her own songs, which essentially break from tradition. This interpretation is further proved by the fact that the words “Chants” and “Hymn” are capitalized, along with the words “I” and “Prince”. Here we see Dickinson using capitalization in the poem to express a sharing of power between herself and Christ. By capitalizing the “Chants” and the “Hymn” alongside the “I” and the “Prince” Dickinson connects the two on a personal level. The connection becomes even more personal when we see that the word “Hymn” is singular rather than plural and that the word “I” replaces what traditionally should have been “we” to refer to a more congregational church association with Christ. Making the “Hymn” singular implies that this hymn stands separate from those accepted and sung in

her church. Also, by replacing the “we” with “I” Dickinson claims that spiritual power is held within the individual, rather than by her established New England church.

The reference to Christ as the fainting prince in this stanza relates back to the biblical telling of Christ at the crucifixion, who was mockingly labeled King of the Jews and who in Old Testament scripture was prophesied to be the Prince of Peace. Isaiah, an Old Testament prophet, wrote:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)

The interpretation of the “him” as Christ or God in 454 also fits because the preceding poems, poems 452 and 453, both discuss the idea of God and eternity, and the transition from God into “he” seems only natural. This same transition can also be seen in poem 390 which states:

I need no further Argue-  
The statement of the Lord  
Is not a controvertible-  
He told me, Death was dead- (lines 13-16)

As the “he” in this poem is read as Christ, it also makes sense to read the “I” as Emily Dickinson herself. Dickinson had experience with the teachings of the Calvinist church and so had knowledge of church tradition. In fascicles 15 and 16 she frequently uses the word “I”, and her displeasures with the confines of Calvinist Christianity run parallel with the interpretation of this poem. This parallel can also be seen in stanza one of poem 437:

I never felt at Home – Below –  
And in the Handsome skies  
I shall not feel at Home – I know –  
I don't like Paradise – (lines 1-4)

This discontent with church teachings appears further in the poem when she writes in the fourth stanza:

Perennial behold us –  
Myself would run away  
From Him – and Holy Ghost – and all –  
But there's the "Judgment Day"! (lines 13-16)

The term "Judgment Day" in this stanza refers to the mainstream Christian belief that Christ will return to the Earth to judge the living and the dead. It is specifically talked about in the last book of the Bible, Revelation, in which a terrifying picture of judgment and eternal hell for sinners is prophesied. Within this stanza, Dickinson describes how she herself would leave the teachings of Christianity, except that this threat of a doom filled judgment day holds power over her.

Stanza three ends, "I met him – Balm to Balm" (lines 10-11). The capitalization in stanza three works to show a moment of equality with Christ. The word "Balm" is used to symbolize both the "I" and the "him" in death. By capitalizing the Balm that belongs to "he" and the Balm that belongs to "I", the author portrays death as an equalizer of the two. To confirm Dickinson's view of death in this way, we can look to her previous poem 441. In this poem the poet exposes the realization that death must be suffered by all men and women, and that it cannot be escaped. Here is stanza one of poem 441:

You'll find – it when you try to die –  
The easier to let go –  
For recollecting such as went –  
You could not spare – you know. (lines 1-4)

The word Balm could also be referencing healing or comfort. She uses the word to reference healing in death in poem 491. Stanzas 1 and 3 of that poem state:

The World – feels Dusty  
When We stop to Die –  
We want the Dew – then –  
Honors – taste dry –

Mine be the Ministry  
When thy Thirst comes –  
Dews of Thessaly, to fetch –  
And Hybla Balms –

The ancient town of Hybla was well known for its honey; this, in combination with the word Balm, conveys healing or soothing properties. If this role of comforter is paralleled in poem 454, then it is feasible to say that through the capitalization of “Balm to Balm” in the third stanza, Dickinson shares in this specific power of Christ, and therefore comforts him just as he comforts her.

The shift in capitalization and in terms of spiritual power continues in stanza four of 454 as Dickinson writes, “I told him Best – must pass” (line 12). Here the capitalization of power is now transferred to the “I” leaving “him” lower cased. It is also

evident that the power has shifted here because Dickinson seems to have taken on Christ's role of determining who was fit for eternity, and instead she tells Christ that "Best – must pass".

The equality in the form of experience or in terms of knowledge however, returns in stanza five of the poem when it appears that the poet herself is reminding Christ of God's promise of eternity if he only continues in the task set out for him. The traditional Calvinist perspective however, would be the reverse. In other words it is not the individual who reminds Christ, but rather that Christ holds this knowledge on his own. Here is stanza five:

I told him Worlds I knew  
Where Emperors grew –  
Who recollected us –  
If we were true

In this stanza the poet depicts the promise of reward in connection with obedience to God. The word "recollected" can be defined in two ways. The first is to remember. The second is to take back, or literally to re-collect. Both are biblical concepts as scripture states that God would not forget his true followers and that he would also take them to be with him in his kingdom. After Christ would complete his mission of salvation for mankind on Earth he would return to this state of power in Heaven. The book of Revelation confirms this when it states:

They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and Kings of kings – and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers. (Revelation 17:14)

The last line of the poem is the final declaration of the power shift, “I lifted Him” (line 23). This particular line asserts once more that it is not Christ alone who holds the power, but rather that the two in their humanity hold a kind of shared power. A traditional Calvinist reading of this line would argue that the lifting here is speaking in terms of the resurrection of Christ. The word “lifted” here could also be referring to the lifting of one’s spirit, in other words to cheer up or to encourage. However, the fact that Dickinson uses the “I” to do the lifting, instead of recognizing the scriptural power of Christ’s resurrection as a symbol of salvation for mankind accomplished, shows the true intent of the poem. At this point, the capitalization of both the “I” and the “Him” show Dickinson’s conclusion that she and Christ are not all that different in terms of being subject to death, sharing the role of comforter, and finally having the power to lift one another whether it be spiritually or physically. The struggle seen between the shifting of capitalization from the words referring to the poet herself, to the words referring to Christ, and finally to the conclusion that the two are on equal planes, suggests that Dickinson is speaking directly to Christ’s humanity. She uses the same technique in poem 437 when she uses capitalization to differentiate between power held by herself and power relating to God in terms of his person of the Holy Ghost and perhaps as a final judge:

If God could make a visit –

Or ever took a Nap –

So not to see us – but they say

Himself – a Telescope

Perennial beholds us –

Myself would run away

From Him – and Holy Ghost – and all –

But there's the "Judgment Day"! (lines 9-16)

In this poem the word "us" is lower cased both times, signifying that the "us" does not hold power but is actually subject to the "God", "Him", and "Holy Ghost" which are all capitalized. Even the word "Myself", although it is capitalized simply because it is at the beginning of a line, seems to not be able to escape because it is bound by the threat of "Judgment Day". The reading of poem 437 against poem 454 confirms this interpretation.

In conclusion, Emily Dickinson uses the word "I" as herself, "him" as Christ, and capitalization as power in poem 454 to subtly challenge the idea that it is Christ or the church that is needed to sustain her. Instead what Dickinson suggests, is that it is herself, or in a broader sense the individual, who shares power with Christ. It was radical in her day to suggest that she would not be happy in paradise, that she does not want Heaven, as she does in poem 437, but it is even bolder to suggest that she shares similar power and experience with Christ as is shown in the last line of 454. By doing this, she essentially reclaims Christ from her Calvinist church. As Dickinson was an American poet, it is important to note that while this country was founded largely on the basis of religious freedom, Dickinson writes as one who seeks freedom from the traditional beliefs and confines of her own religion. Her use of religious phrases and references to Christ as a tool to argue who truly holds the power in the Christian church, was a technique successfully used to challenge the teachings of her New England church and to assert herself as an individual who found pride in her own thoughts as well as freedom through the idea of death and equality with Christ without the confines of Calvinist teachings.



## Works Cited

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