

Kate Rasmussen Davis

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Dr. Edward Cutler

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### The Brain is Wider than the Sky: Emily Dickinson Lexicon

According to Dickinson, “The Brain – is wider than the Sky.” Dickinson’s poem, number 598, is a rich and inquisitive examination of human perception and intellect in comparison with other substances. With a careful and close examination of the poem paired with a deep dive into the lexicon of Emily Dickinson’s era, a meaningful message is revealed. Dickinson makes an argument that the brain, or intellect, is more important than Diety and religion. By extension, this implicates traditional Christianity and its religious practices as well.

The first stanza sets up a rich comparison between “The Brain” and “the Sky.” In the lexicon of Dickinson’s time, the brain could have a variety of connotations. Some of these include the human imagination, sensory perception, even the seat of the soul. The overarching idea from these connotations is human perception and sensation. The sky has a broad lexical meaning in this case, as well. It can be referring to the firmament above earth, or Heavenly power—even diety. This dichotomy presented contributes to the idea that the brain is greater than and more powerful than a belief in an abstract God. Continuing on through the stanza, the line “The one the other will contain” suggests that human intellect and wit is powerful and strong enough to encompass the ideas of religion and spirituality and supercede them. However, it’s important to note that Dickinson isn’t casting off religion as useless or unnecessary, but merely recognizing its place in comparison to one’s intelligence and mind.

The second stanza continues with this notion. “Sea” has a rich array of possible meanings, but most relevant are those defining the ocean as a passage to death. Since Dickinson is proposing that the brain is deeper than the sea, she seems to suggest that there’s something eternal about the brain that will outlast even death and dying. She even continues to do this in a way that lessens the importance of religion—since the brain, rather than deity, is deeper (meaning more profound or complete, in Dickinson’s lexicon) than death. The wording “absorb” and “sponge” contribute to this idea, as well. Both words contain meanings of incorporation, assimilation—to take something into another thing. In this case, the brain, or intellect, can, in essence, absorb the sting of the passing into death.

The third stanza appears to be a bit more clear in its religious overtones. It ties up the overarching idea of the poem, with a more accepting and gracious viewpoint. The word “weight” in the first line can have associations of the mortal essence of something. Thus, the brain is just the mortal essence of God Himself. Circling around from her initial argument, which was often subverting the importance of divinity in favor of the human intellect, this final message clarifies that the brain’s power likely comes from God himself. In order to reconcile these two ideas, the implication would be that the brain, being the weight of God and endowed with heavenly power, can then be capable of greater things than divinity, or at least the wordly form of practicing organized religion, can provide. God and intellect differ “As syllable from Sound,” or, as an expression of something differs from actually examining and probing the thing, according to Dickinson’s lexicon.

Poem 598 is representative of Dickinson’s stunning ability to pack a rich and nuanced meaning into very few words and lines. In this work, she crafts a powerful argument about the nature of human intelligence and its relation to concepts of the divine. In varying methods,

Dickinson is proposing that the divine and worship of such, though not lacking a place in the world or the life of mankind, lies in a place of lesser importance than human thought.