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ENG 314

7 Feb 2011

A Book Worth Judging:

An Analysis of "Sonnet 10" by Emily Dickinson

"Don't judge a book by its cover." This commonly heard phrase usually references meeting a new person. In her poem "Sonnet 10," Emily Dickinson uses the literal meaning of this phrase. A book should not be judged according to its cover but by the information written on the pages. Although a book may look old and mangy from the outside, as the book Dickinson writes about is described, it is inside the pages where the true value is found. Through the use of diction, allusions, and imagery, contrast is created to further the idea that through old literature, knowledge and wisdom can be gained.

The physical appearance of the book is personified through contrasting words. The speaker of the poem uses the words "precious" and "mouldering" to describe the subject of the poem, an "antique book" (1-2). Right in the beginning of the poem, the speaker is using contrast by saying the book is not only of great value and held in high esteem, but decaying, crumbling, and rotting; the book is old, but is also valuable. Although the "antique book" is so old it is crumbling, the speaker still mentions reading the book is pleasurable because the book contains something beloved and of worth. These words contain another contrast as well. The connotation of the word precious is something new or young, such as a newborn child. The word mouldering contains the sounds of the word "old" within it. These contrasting words suggest that although the work might be old, the ideas within it are as new as a child, because they can still be appreciated and loved. The contrasting description continues from the word chosen to describe

the pages of the book. The speaker tells how the “Old volumes shake their vellum heads” (27). Vellum is a material made of calfskin, lambskin or kidskin, and was used for the pages and bindings of books. The cover of this book is falling apart, but the pages, upon which are written the wise words of old, and the binding that keeps these precious pages together, are made from the skins of young animals. This entire description of the book, from the covers to the ideas between them, is a literal interpretation of the phrase “don’t judge a book by its cover”.

The ideas presented upon those pages have contrasting description as well. The speaker uses the word “quaint” to describe the ideas and “opinions” within the book (9). Although the definition of quaint is something ingenious, wise, or knowing, the connotation of the word is something old-fashioned, such as a quaint little village. This contrast in denotation and connotation influences the idea of gaining knowledge and wisdom from a book that would seem out-dated. The book, although quaint and described as “literature of old,” has “knowledge to unfold” (10, 12).

Allusions are also used to contrast old literature with older literature and show the possibility of knowledge and wisdom contained within the worn covers. The first allusion “When Plato was a certainty/ And Sophocles a man” is a contrast between philosophy and drama (15-16). Plato was a philosopher who believed that poetry was irrational (Plato par. 1). In this allusion, the speaker is referencing Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” in which Plato addresses the idea of what is reality, or what is a “certainty,” and what is merely shadow. In this case, the speaker is showing that in the antique book, Plato’s theories and philosophies are a “certainty.” The second part of this allusion is of Sophocles. He was a dramatist and poet (Sophocles par. 1). The speaker alludes to the sphinx’s riddle in Sophocles work *Oedipus Rex*. The answer to this riddle is “a man.” Both of these allusions deal with finding the answer to a difficult question,

however one question is more philosophical and the other question is part of a hero's trial in a play. The methods used by these men, although quite different from each other, show that wisdom can be found when reading philosophy or a drama.

The second allusion made is in the lines "When Sappho was a living girl/And Beatrice wore/the gown that Dante deified" (17-19). Both of these authors were poets, but the themes they wrote about were different from each other. Sappho was an Ancient Greek who wrote lyric poetry centered on passion and love. Little is known about her life; the only biographical source is her poetry (Sappho par. 1). This is why the speaker alludes to Sappho's poetry as a "living girl," because it is through herself, her poetry, that the ideas of passionate love were conveyed. Dante was an Italian poet. His muse was a woman named Beatrice, who wore a white dress the second time that the two met (Beatrice par. 7). Dante used Beatrice as an example of the ideal woman of courtly love (Dante par. 1). The speaker alludes to Dante's "deified" description of Beatrice wearing that white dress. These two poets have conflicting ideas about love, as one focuses on chivalrous love and the other on fiery passion. This comparison is used to show that although these works contain differing ideas, the knowledge of both these ideas of love can be gained.

All of the allusions mentioned can also be contrasted with each other because of the time periods in which the authors lived. Plato, Sophocles and Sappho were all from Ancient Greek, and Dante lived during the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The speaker uses this contrast to show the wisdom and knowledge that can be can come from literature that is very old, ancient even, or literature that is slightly newer, but still considered to be old, as the "literature of old" contains the knowledge that "concerns our mutual minds" (11-12).

However, the ideas presented in old literature are not as out-dated as they would appear to be and can still influence a young learner's mind. The speaker uses imagery to contrast the expectation of the literature being boring and old, but having something of value within its pages. The antique book is described as "He who traverses familiar/As one should come to town" (21-22). The book is imagined to be an old traveler. The speaker describes how the old book can "tell you all your dreams were true" (23). This is because the old book "lived where dreams were born" (24). The image presented here is representative of a young child, the reader of the antique book, talking with the old traveler. Although the child would think his dreams are new to him, the old traveler has lived through the same dreams and has the knowledge and experience that he can share with the child. The antique book's wisdom and life experience is important to the reader for his success. The speaker describes the old book's influence upon the reader, "His presence is enchantment" (25). The reader is entranced by the book's ideas, just as a young child would be interested in hearing stories from an old traveler and hearing his experiences, and becoming "tantalized" as the speaker suggests (28). The young reader "begs him [the book] not to go" (26); the reader has become so interested in the old literature, he wants to continue reading and gaining the knowledge and experience from the antique book, because they now have a "mutual mind" (11).

Dickinson chose her words and allusions precisely to contrast and prove the point that a book, no matter how old and aged it is, should not be judged but read, studied, and learned from. The pages within an old, musty, "mouldering" book contain troves of knowledge and wisdom to be treasured. This knowledge is "precious" and "enchanting" to a reader that opens up his or her mind and allows it to give the wisdom needed to fulfill desires and dreams. The knowledge can come from many different sources, such as poetry and philosophy. What matters most is that the

knowledge and wisdom has been preserved and written down for the reader, who only needs to open up the cover of the antique book and absorb the experiences.

Works Cited

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