

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#76 (c.1859)

Exultation is the going
Of an inland soul to sea,
Past the houses – past the headlands –
Into deep Eternity –

Bred as we, among the mountains,
Can the sailor understand
The divine intoxication
Of the first league out from land?

ANALYSIS

“Exultation is the going” displays typical characteristics of Dickinson’s poetry: The subject is a *feeling* that becomes “divine intoxication”—religious *ecstasy*, the *goal* of a *quest* by the *soul*. The symbolism is *archetypal*, the universal language of humanity fundamental to dreams, literature and religion: The *quest* is from *land* (what is known, conscious, stable, conventional, limited, mundane, and temporal) to *sea* (all that is unknown, unconscious, fluid, wild, unlimited, divine, and eternal. Hence, this poem (c.1859) is a parallel to *Moby-Dick* (1851), where Ishmael says, “Consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself?” (LVIII) And: “In landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God.” (XXIII)

The speaker of the poem defines herself as an in-land *soul* bred among *mountains*, archetypal symbols of spiritual elevation above the “headlands,” or lands of the *head*. As in *Moby-Dick*, going to sea is going to *see* in a visionary sense. She contrasts herself to the “sailor,” or Melville, in feeling greater exultation due to her inexperience. Her “going” to sea is not literal as well as figurative, as it was with Melville. It did not need to be. The many creatures she discovered in her garden were her equivalent of the white whale. Her “going” is her poetry. Less frequent than in subsequent poems, her use of dashes here to convey movement and endless Eternity is perfectly apt and thrilling.

Michael Hollister (2014)