

## Emily Dickinson- I Can Not Live With You

"I Cannot Live With You" is one of Emily Dickinson's great love poems, close in form to the poetic argument of a classic Shakespearean sonnet.<sup>1</sup> The poem shares the logical sensibility of the metaphysical poets whom she admired, gradually moving her thought about her lover from the first declaration to the inevitable devastating conclusion. However, unlike most sonnet arguments or "carpe diem" poems, this poem seems designed to argue against love. We can break down the poem into 5 parts. The first explains why she cannot live with the object of her love, the second why she cannot die with him, the third why she cannot rise with him, the fourth why she cannot fall with him. Finally, we get the utterance of impossibility. The poem begins with a sense of impossibility. I cannot live with You –

It would be Life –  
And Life is over there –  
Behind the Shelf  
The Sexton keeps the Key to –  
Putting up  
Our Life – His porcelain -  
Like a Cup –  
Discarded of the Housewife –  
Quaint – or Broke –  
A newer Sevres pleases –  
Old Ones crack –

As the first four lines' abstraction is dispensed with, the domestic metaphor of china is entered in the second and third stanzas. China is variously described as having been discarded, broken, quaint and cracked, put up on the shelf and forgotten. If life is "behind the shelf," it is completely outside the experience of the china, as is the speaker's life. The impact of the first line is put on hold as the reader is also caught within haunting cup and shelf verses that are disturbing in their silence. The china is locked away by the sexton a representative of the official or practical face of religiosity. It suggests that it is not only the domestic sphere that the speaker is caged in. In fact, that she is also caged in the binds of the church. At least the binds of the daily administrative function of the church. Which Dickinson thought to be quite separate from the passion behind it.

The lines alternate between long and short. The difference between the lines grows more pronounced in the second and third stanzas. The dainty, agitated, "broken" lines describing the china seem to become physically crushed by the lines about the housewife or sexton. Between the second and third stanzas, the enjambment (pausing on "cup") compounded with the dash, which emphasizes the pause and line break, allows life to be hopefully like a "cup" for the fraction of a second it takes the reader to make it to the next line, where it is discarded "of the housewife." This line reads as both "the housewife discards the cup" and also "the Sexton puts away the cup discarded by the housewife," as if what is not good enough for marriage is good enough for the church. Incidentally, it is the word, Quaint, that Dickinson in her letters, writing about her reclusiveness, uses to describe herself, while T. uses half-cracked. H. Higginson, who exchanged letters with her, would describe her as such.

In the second part of the poem, Dickinson imagines that the alternative to living with someone is dying with them, but that also has been denied to her:

I could not die – with You –  
For One must wait  
To shut the Other's Gaze down –  
You – could not –  
And I – Could I stand by  
And see You – freeze –  
Without my Right of Frost –  
Death's privilege?

The stanzas not only express that she is dead, if she cannot live with her love, but also the fact that the "with" is taken from her. She may die, but not with him because death is necessarily private. She argues, first of all, that she must wait to "shut the Other's Gaze down". This might literally mean to close his eyes. However, the word Gaze implies that there is something sustaining about looking upon another and loving him/her. In other words, it is the act of looking (with love) that creates life, and she must actively shut that down for death to occur. She envisions that he wouldn't be able to do that for her because he's weak. Within this section, she claims the "Right of Frost" will never be given to her and at the time of his death, she would desire death.

In the third section of the poem, Dickinson imagines the final judgment, and how it might be overwhelmed by her earthly love:

Nor could I rise – with You –  
Because Your Face  
Would put out Jesus’ –  
That New Grace  
Glow plain – and foreign  
On my homesick Eye –  
Except that You than He  
Shone closer by –  
They’d judge Us – How –  
For You – served Heaven – You know,  
Or sought to –  
I could not –  
Because You saturated Sight –  
And I had not more Eyes  
For sordid excellence  
As Paradise

She cannot see or experience paradise, she is so focused on her vision of him, for not only does his face “put out” Jesus’s face like a candle, but he “saturated her sight” so much in life that she cannot “see” paradise, which may mean he distracted her from devoutness. The speaker’s experience in this poem is closely tied to sight, and suggests that what is not seen cannot be experienced. The breakdown of rhyme occurs in the stanza that begins, “They’d judge us.” When she declares, “I could not,” there is no rhyme and the stumbling echoes a certain broken fragility in the first lines. There is something metaphysical about the phrase “sordid excellence” and also it reflects a characteristic moment of Dickinson transforming an abstraction into its opposite with a strangely chosen epithet.

In the fourth section of the poem, the speaker describes why she cannot be in hell with her lover:

And were You lost, I would be –  
Though My Name  
Rang loudest  
On the Heavenly fame –  
And were You – saved –  
And I – condemned to be  
Where You were not –  
That self – were Hell to Me –

Just as she cannot see heaven because his face obscures her view, her perspective of hell is confined to being without him. If she were saved and he were lost, then she would be in hell without him, and if they were both saved, but saved apart, then that would also be hell. In admirable pursuit of the conclusion of this radical argument, which has grown ever more impossible as she chases it, she passionately refuses to believe that there is an alternative where they are both saved together or both condemned.