

## I CANNOT 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. The poem shares the logical sensibility of the metaphysical poets whom she admired, advancing her thoughts about her lover, slowly, 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. The poem can be broken down into five 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, and the final 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 –

Moving from the abstraction of the first four lines, the second and third stanzas enter into the domestic metaphor of china, which is described variously as 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 power of the first line is temporarily muted, and the reader is similarly trapped inside a haunting verse of cups and shelves, eerie in their quietness. That the china is locked away by the sexton, a representative of the official or practical face of religiosity, seems to imply that it is not only the domestic sphere that the speaker is trapped in, but also the binds of the church, or at least the administrative daily function of the church, which Dickinson viewed as being quite separate from the passion behind it.

The lines themselves alternate between long and short, and the disparity between the lines becomes more dramatic in the second and third stanzas. The delicate, halting, "cracked" lines that describe the china seem physically overwhelmed 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. "Quaint," incidentally, is a word that Dickinson used to describe herself

in letters, when writing about her reclusiveness; "half-cracked" is a word that T. H. Higginson, her poetic correspondent, used to describe her.

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?

These stanzas express not only the fact that if she cannot live with her love she is dead, but also that the "with" is taken from her—she can die, but not with him because death is necessarily a private act. First she argues that she must wait to "shut the Other's Gaze down," which might literally mean to close his eyes, but also the word "Gaze" implies that there is something sustaining about the act of looking upon another with love; it is that which creates life, and it must be actively shut down for death to occur. She imagines that he would not be strong enough to do that for her. Her second argument within this section is that, upon his death, denied the "Right of Frost," she would long for 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 is unable to see or experience paradise because she is so consumed with her vision of him—not only does his face "put out" the face of Jesus like a candle, but he "saturated her sight" so much in life that she is unable to "see" paradise, meaning, perhaps that he distracted her from piety. The speaker's experience in this poem is deeply linked to sight, and suggests that that which cannot be seen cannot be experienced. In the stanza beginning "They'd judge us," there is a complete breakdown of rhyme; when she writes "I could not," she does not rhyme, and the faltering echoes the broken fragility of the first lines. The pairing of "sordid excellence" is both a metaphysical touch and a characteristic Dickinson moment of transforming an abstraction into its opposite with an oddly chosen adjective.

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.

The final stanza acts structurally like the final couplet of a sonnet, finishing the argument, but leaving a question for the reader to consider:

So We must meet apart –  
You there – I – here –  
With just the Door ajar  
That Oceans are – and Prayer –  
And that White Sustenance –  
Despair –

In the line "You there – I – here" we can see a perfect example of how the poet's dashes work to hold the words and ideas of "you" and "I" apart.

As in a sonnet, the rhyme scheme tightens up quite a bit in this final section. Dickinson internally rhymes "are" with "ajar," half-rhymes "apart" and "ajar," "despair" with "there," "here" and "prayer," then closes up the stanza in rhyme. It is as if she intends the final rhyme to show the perfection of her argument in the poem's conclusion. Additionally, those four words that she rhymes quite eloquently express the problem itself, with prayer standing in for its close synonym, hope. The intricacy of the rhyme leaves "sustenance" as unrhymed, underscoring that "White Sustenance" does not nourish. Incidentally, early publications of the poem replaced "white" with "pale" as if softening the conclusion that she reaches by modifying the degree of her language; "pale sustenance" seems somehow more sustaining.

However, even as she closes the argument, it opens up a little, because in this despair she has found a kind of sustenance, however undernourishing it is. There is something holy about this kind of despair, and "white" seems also to be "heavenly," as if in losing her hope for the afterlife, she has found a new earthly devotion to replace it, and then elevated it to celestial levels. This stanza is notably the first time she uses the word "We," capitalized for emphasis, and creates a paradox where "meet apart" seems possible, or at least more possible than any of the other alternatives she has rejected throughout the poem. She claims that the door is just "ajar" but then compares it to oceans, making "ajar" as wide open as the earth itself, and then linking it to prayer, or hope. In this amazingly deft bit of wordplay, Dickinson reverses everything as she's saying it—the lovers are apart but meeting; the door is ajar, like an ocean; and the speaker is somehow sustained by despair. In a final touch, she ends the poem with an elongated endstop, printed as a dash, and whether it is meant to be "ajar" or more definitively shut is as unanswerable as the final question of the poem.