

I cannot live with You (640)

Emily Dickinson - 1830-1886

About the Poet

- Emily Dickinson was a reclusive American poet. Unrecognized in her own time, Dickinson is known posthumously for her innovative use of form and syntax.
- Emily Dickinson left school as a teenager, eventually living a reclusive life on the family homestead. There, she secretly created bundles of poetry and wrote hundreds of letters. Due to a discovery by sister Lavinia, Dickinson's remarkable work was published after her death — on May 15, 1886, in Amherst — and she is now considered one of the towering figures of American literature.

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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 Sexton pleases –
 Old Ones crack –

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?

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 no more Eyes
 For sordid excellence
 As Paradise

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 –

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

Word meanings

- Sexton- a church officer
- Sevres- porcelain ware manufactured at Sèvres, near Paris, from 1756, characterized by the use of clear colours and elaborate decorative detail

Stanza I

*I cannot live with You —
It would be Life —
And Life is over there —
Behind the Shelf*

- *I Cannot Live With You* opens with a curious line. The speaker is addressing a person and telling that person that she cannot live there with him. She tells him that to live with him “would be life”. It seems strange that she would not want to live with him if she herself admits that to live with him would be life itself. But then she goes into deeper detail. She claims that “life is over there” and describes it as being something “behind the shelf”. It is almost as if the speaker does not believe herself to have access to life.

Stanza II

*The Sexton keeps the Key to —
Putting up
Our Life — His Porcelain —
Like a Cup —*

- This stanza is a fascinating explanation from the speaker. She has already told the [subject](#) of *I Cannot Live With You* that she cannot live with him because that would be life, and life is not accessible to her. Now, she introduces another character- the Sexton. The Sexton was a person who would be in charge of the church yard. He was once referred to as the gravedigger. In the days of the gravedigger and the church yard watcher, people were occasionally buried alive. It is a terrifying idea, and because of this, the safety coffin was patented. The safety coffin had a bell the person inside could ring if for some reason he or she woke up to find themselves buried alive. The gravedigger, if he heard a bell ringing, would dig up the grave. The use of the “Sexton” to describe the one who has control of the speaker’s life suggests that the speaker believes herself to be dead already, figuratively. Somehow, the speaker does not feel in control of her own life, but at the mercy of one who might dig her up out of the grave. Still speaking to the same person she began speaking to, she says, “Our Life- His Porcelain- like a cup”. This reveals that the Sexton [symbolizes](#) God in *I Cannot Live With You*. However, the speaker does not portray a loving God that allows people to live, but one that seems to keep people in their graves, or on a shelf like a porcelain figurine or a decorative cup which gives him pleasure to look at, to own.

Stanza III

*Discarded of the Housewife —
Quaint — or Broke —
A newer Sevres pleases —
Old Ones crack —*

- This stanza brings a shift of [tone](#). The reader becomes aware that the words connect with the previous stanza in a way that brings in an entirely different meaning. Now, the porcelain or decorative cup is something that is “discarded” by the “housewife”. The one in control of the speaker’s life has switched from the Sexton to the housewife, and now she is discarded as though she were “quaint” and outdated or broken. She sees herself being replaced by newer models as the old around her “crack”. At this point, it is important to remember that *I Cannot Live With You* began with the refusal to live with someone. That someone, perhaps a lover, would offer the speaker life. But the speaker does not believe that life is accessible to her. She believes that it is meant to be something distant. She is not sure exactly why she believes this, other than the firm belief that someone or something outside of her is controlling her life. She compares these forces to a Sexton and then to a housewife. At this point in *I Cannot Live With You*, she anticipates feeling broken and discarded. This is one of her reasons for claiming that she cannot live with the person to whom she speaks. The first reason is that it would bring her life- life which she believes she cannot obtain. The second reason is that she believes she would eventually be discarded and replaced with someone new.

Stanza IV

*I could not die — with You —
For One must wait
To shut the Other's Gaze down —
You — could not —*

- At this point in *I Cannot Live With You*, the speaker's refusal to live with the person to whom she speaks is beginning to sound like the decline to a marriage proposal. Now, she is not only refusing to live with someone, but she is also refusing to die with someone. This implies that someone has asked her to spend her life with him. This coincides with the historical context of the poem. In the early 1800's, during Dickinson's lifetime, the only reason for one person to be asked to live with another would be in the context of marriage. Certainly two young people of the opposite sex living together would have been nearly unheard of, and would have brought shame upon the family. Thus, in the context of the speaker's answers and the time period in which *I Cannot Live With You* was written, it is safe to assume that the speaker is in fact declining a marriage proposal. She claims that she cannot live with this person, and then she claims that she cannot die with him. She offers a few reasons for this refusal as well. She claims that one person must wait to die until after the other person has died. After all, someone had to be there to shut the eyes of their beloved dead. This reveals the speaker's rather morbid and cynical approach to the idea of love. Even though she obviously feels alive being around this person, she refuses to live with him for fear that she would eventually be discarded. Then, she goes on to explain that even if she were not discarded, love could only end in one other way. One of them would have to watch the other die. It seems the speaker would rather avoid love than risk losing it through death or departure.

Stanza V

***And I — Could I stand by
And see You — freeze —
Without my Right of Frost —
Death's privilege?***

- Here, the speaker expresses her disdain at the thought of watching her lover die. She claims that she could not “stand by” and watch her lover “freeze”. If she were ever subjected to such tragedy, she should think she has a right to die herself. This is what she calls “death’s privilege”. Yet, she knows that life does not work that way. This is yet another reason she offers in defence of her choice to decline this marriage proposal.

Stanza VI

*Nor could I rise — with You —
Because Your Face
Would put out Jesus' —
That New Grace*

- At this point, *I Cannot Live With You* becomes even more shocking. After contemplating her own refusal to love and watch her lover die, she then explains that she could not “rise with” him. Because she has already mentioned death, the word “rise” here refers to resurrection. During Dickinson’s time period, most of the people around her believed not only in the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the basis of the Christian faith, but they also believed in what is referred to as the final resurrection, in which all who believed in Jesus would rise from the dead. Here, the speaker claims that she could not wish to be with him at the final resurrection because this person’s face “would put out Jesus’”. This is quite a shocking claim. The speaker obviously believes that the face of Jesus should shine the brightest at the final resurrection. But, she believes if she were to rise again with one whom she had loved in life, that person’s face would outshine that of Jesus. The speaker clearly believes that this would not be right, and thus she uses this as yet another reason for her refusal to marry the person to whom she speaks

Stanza VII

*Glow plain — and foreign
On my homesick Eye —
Except that You than He
Shone closer by —*

- Here, the speaker expresses her feelings toward the faith that surrounds her. She continues to describe the final resurrection and her feelings toward it- namely that it would “glow plain- and foreign”. She admits that the idea does not excite her. Rather, it all seems rather foreign to her. Her description of her “homesick eye” suggests that rather than looking forward to the new heaven and new earth as Christians were taught to do, she would miss the old earth. Then she says, “Except that You than He shone closer by”. The capitalization of the word “You” suggests that the speaker sees the person to whom she speaks as being as important as God himself. The [juxtaposition](#) of the capitalized “He’ and “You” supports this idea, as well as her claim that the one to whom she speaks “shone closer by” than God himself. The speaker implies that she believes these feelings are wrong, and yet she has them all the same. These are her reasons for refusing this marriage proposal.

Stanza VIII

*They'd judge Us — How —
For You — served Heaven — You know,
Or sought to —
I could not —*

- With these words, the speaker gives more insight into her refusal. It appears that she sees this person as one who serves God, and she knows that she cannot. She begins with “They’d judge Us”. It is unclear whether “They” refers to the Holy Trinity or the other people at the final resurrection, or whether she has reverted back to the present time period and is referring to their friends and family. In any case, she believes that she cannot be worthy of him because she has no desire to serve heaven.

Stanza IX

Because You saturated Sight —

And I had no more Eyes

For sordid excellence

As Paradise

- The speaker continues to give her reasons for her refusal, claiming that the one to whom she speaks is able to see, but she herself “had no more eyes”. Specifically, she claims that she has no eyes for paradise. As a Christian is often taught to keep his eyes set on paradise, this description of herself further allows the speaker to explain that she has no interest in faith and no eyes or heart for heaven. She believes this to be in contrast with the heart of the one she speaks to.

Stanza X

And were You lost, I would be —

Though My Name

Rang loudest

On the Heavenly fame —

- The speaker enters into the hypothetical, supposing that even if the one she loves is “lost”, she would be lost as well. With this, she implies that neither person would do the other any good. She claims that even if Heaven rang loudly for her, she could never respond. The speaker seems to be entering into every argument against this marriage, including the argument that even if the man is lost as she is, they could never help one another.

Stanza XI

*And were You — saved —
And I — condemned to be
Where You were not —
That self — were Hell to Me —*

- In stanza eleven of *I Cannot Live With You*, the speaker then enters into a possibility which contradicts the one proposed in the previous stanza. She suggests that if the one she loves is “saved” then she is still “condemned”. Thus, even if they spent their lives on earth together, someday, she would go to “Hell” and would be where he was not.

Stanza XII

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

- After having explored every possible ending to the marriage from life together, to death, to the final resurrection, to judgement day, the speaker concludes that in any case, they would end up parting ways. She tells him, “You there- I here”, thus stating that they would be better off remaining apart, for they were sure to part ways either in this life or the next. She claims that they would always be apart “with just the door ajar” between them, making it seem as though there were oceans and prayer separating them. It is interesting that she uses “oceans” and “prayer” in the same line to explain to her love what is separating them. It is almost as if his prayer and his faith causes there to be chasms like oceans between the two, for his faith is something she believes she can never understand. These feelings bring to her heart a feeling that she can only describe as “white sustenance”. That feeling is

General analysis of the Poem

- “I cannot live with You—” (the title is not [Emily Dickinson](#)’s, since she did not title her poems) is a poem of fifty lines divided into eleven four-line stanzas and a concluding twelfth stanza of six lines. The poem is an unusually long poem for Dickinson. It is written in the first person from the point of view of a speaker addressing a lover.
- Structurally, the poem is a list of things the speaker and her lover cannot do together and the reasons why they cannot. In the first three stanzas, the speaker announces to her beloved that she cannot “live” with the person because of the nature of “Life” itself. Life as it is ordinarily conceived of by those who deal with it daily on its most basic levels—the “Housewife” and the “Sexton” who locks up and unlocks (“keeps the Key to”) both earthly possessions and the graveyard—is something subject to decay: It can “crack” and be “Discarded.”
- The speaker goes on to assert in the fourth and fifth stanzas that neither could she “die” with her beloved, because one of them would have to remain alive in order to close the other’s eyes (“For One must wait/ To shut the Other’s Gaze down”). The speaker asserts further that logically it would be impossible for her both to “see” the beloved die (“freeze”) and to be dead at the same time (to have her “Right of Frost”).

Contd..

- In the sixth and seventh stanzas, the speaker explains why she could not “rise,” or be resurrected, with her beloved. Her reason is that resurrection to the “New Grace” of Jesus requires placing Jesus at the center of one’s life, acknowledging him to be, metaphorically, the brightest sun. The speaker’s “homesick Eye,” however, is focused on her beloved: “Because Your Face/ Would put out Jesus’.” The beloved not only is more central than Jesus to the speaker’s life but also entirely blots out the face of Jesus. The eighth and ninth stanzas then predict the inevitable judgment that would be brought about by the speaker’s blasphemy. The speaker’s only defense, however, is a reiteration of her blasphemy: Her beloved “saturated” her “Sight” so completely that she could no longer see (“had no more Eyes/ For”) more shadowy, “sordid” types of “excellence” such as God’s “Paradise.”
- In the tenth and eleventh stanzas, the speaker cites further difficulties that could arise should the two lovers be resurrected and judged together: One of them could be damned and the other saved. Regardless, the speaker insists, her own “self” would be a “Hell” to her if she were separated from her lover. It is these reasons that lead to the conclusion of the final and longest stanza: “So We must meet apart.” Since the two lovers cannot be together, they can only be with each other by being apart and sustaining themselves with the only things they share: distance and “Despair.”

Forms and Devices

- One of the most important devices used in the poem is [metaphor](#), a [figure of speech](#) in which one thing is seen in terms of something else. The speaker of the poem uses the language of love—specifically, that of the renunciation of love—as a way of both denouncing and renouncing the traditional paradigm for human life set forth by Christianity.
- The poem is structured according to the stages of human life as defined by this traditional Christian paradigm: life, death, resurrection, judgment, damnation/salvation, eternity. Rather than overtly criticize the adequacy of this model for human life, however, the speaker considers the value and “Sustenance” afforded by this paradigm through an examination of its implications for a love relationship.
- Within this larger metaphorical structure, the poem incorporates a parallel metaphor of sensory experiences that underscores the speaker’s rejection of both traditional definitions of “Life” and conventional modes of experiencing and perceiving “Life”; the speaker invokes images of eating, seeing, hearing etc.

