I cannot live with You –

POEM TEXT

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 –

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 –

SUMMARY

I can't live with you because living with you would mean being fully alive, and life is something that exists elsewhere. It's over there behind the shelf that the churchyard keeper locks up; he puts away our lives as if they were his dishes.

Our lives are like a china cup that a housewife throws out because it's too old-fashioned or because it's broken. She'd prefer some fancy new French china; old cups just crack.

I couldn't possibly die with you, because one of us would have to watch while the other's eyes closed for the last time. You couldn't do that.

And what about me? Could I stand there and watch you die without wanting to claim my own right to die in that same moment?

I couldn't be resurrected with you on Judgment Day, either, because I'd prefer your face to Christ's.

Jesus's glorious visage would look dull and unfamiliar to my lovelorn eyes; I could only be happy if you were there, nearer to me than he was.

How would the heavens judge us? You were faithful to your religion, or tried to be. I couldn't be so faithful.

That's because your lovely face filled up my eyes. I didn't have any room left over to look at such a cheap pleasure as Heaven.

And if you were sent to Hell, I'd be in Hell too, even if all the heavens praised me as the greatest person who ever was.

And if you were sent to Heaven, and I to Hell (where you wouldn't be), it would be my own lonely self that would be my Hell.

Therefore, the two of us can only meet at a distance: you over there, and I over here, with only an open door between us: an open door made of distant oceans, and prayers, and that pale, blank nourishment: hopelessness.

THEMES

THE AGONY OF IMPOSSIBLE LOVE

Emily Dickinson's "I cannot live with You" is a tormented exploration of what it means to love someone you can't be with. The speaker's long explanation of why they "cannot live with" their beloved suggests that, in reality, there's nothing in Heaven or earth they want more. Alas, for reasons the poem only hints at, there's just no way the two can be together—an unendurably painful predicament. Impossible love, the poem suggests, can feel like Hell itself.

The poem's speaker adores their beloved so much that the mere sight of their face is everything to them: the beloved's beauty "saturate[s]" the speaker's "Sight," filling up their eyes until they can see nothing else. In fact, the speaker is certain that they worship their beloved even more than they worship their God. On Judgment Day, they imagine, they wouldn't be satisfied to gaze into the face of "Jesus" himself; they'd find that divine image "plain" if their beloved's face "shone closer by."

Unexpectedly, the speaker gives this overwhelming adoration as a reason they *can't* be with their beloved, not as a reason they *must* be. Their love is so powerful, they explain, that if it were consummated in marriage, it must one day transform into soul-destroying pain. First, one lover would have to watch the other die eventually (which they "could not" endure). Then, they'd have to risk of being separated in the afterlife (perhaps *because* their romantic love displaced their love of God!). That, too, would be unendurable: the speaker knows that even "Heavenly" joy would be "Hell to [them]" if their beloved weren't with them.

The trouble here, of course, is that the speaker seems likely to go on feeling this way about their beloved *whether or not* the couple live together and marry. It would only be reasonable to marry anyway and at least get some joy out of life. But something in their circumstances makes this impossible. The speaker resignedly observes that the possibility of a "Life" with their beloved is "over there," out of reach, hidden away like a churchwarden's "Porcelain" in a cupboard. This tidy, civilized metaphor suggests that fate or social convention prevents the couple from being together. The idea of marriage, for reasons the speaker doesn't reveal, has to be "put[] up," locked away like the good china.

The poem thus centers on a tragic irony. The speaker explains that the *future* pain of separation is the reason the couple couldn't possibly be together—but the pain of separation is exactly what they're suffering right now. Unfulfilled love, this poem suggests, is an unspeakable torment, leaving "Despair" in its wake.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-50

FEAR, AVOIDANCE, AND ISOLATION

This poem's speaker argument that they can't possibly be with their beloved might be a lament about a love that convention or fate makes impossible. On the other hand, it could reveal a deep fear that holds the speaker back. As the speaker observes, love inevitably comes with grief: even the most adoring married couple will have to say goodbye to each other on a deathbed someday. The speaker might thus be trying to dodge the agony of eventual separation by resisting a relationship now. Anxiously avoiding the inevitable pain of love, in this reading of the poem, means holding the fullness of "Life" and joy at bay, too.

To live with their beloved, the poem's speaker says, would mean being fully alive, relishing the joy of being with a person whom they adore more than "Jesus" himself. But such a "Life," they lament, is "over there," out of reach to them. That's because they're sure that, if they were married, neither they nor their beloved could possibly "shut the Other's Gaze down"—that is, watch while the other one died, as one day they would have to. If speaker had to do that, they fear, they'd want to claim their "Right of Frost," committing suicide so that they could fall into icy death at exactly the same time as their beloved.

Even if the pair died at the very same moment, the speaker frets, their problems wouldn't be over. There's no guarantee that they could be together in the afterlife, either in "Paradise" or "Hell"! Indeed, the speaker even feels frightened that their adoration for their beloved, having "saturated" them to the point that they no longer have room to love God, might be the very thing that will keep the couple from spending eternity together. All of these imagined fates, the speaker concludes, mean they simply "cannot live" with their beloved. The inevitable separation of death—and the possibility of separation *after* death—is too scary for the speaker to contemplate.

Powerful love, in this speaker's view, is thus better "put up," locked away, than embraced and consummated. But there's an irony here: by anxiously resisting entering a relationship now, the speaker has to undergo the very "Despair" of separation

they fear, without enjoying any of the pleasures of living with the person they love most. There's no escaping love, this poem suggests, and there's thus no escaping the pain of love; fearing and avoiding a relationship can't save the speaker from their intense feelings.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-50

LOVE VS. RELIGION

Explaining why they "cannot live with" their beloved, the poem's speaker observes that their adoration for this person has driven their Christian faith right out of their mind. Even Jesus's face itself, the speaker fears, would pale in comparison to their beloved's. Romantic love, this poem suggests, is so terrifyingly powerful that it can reorganize a lover's most fundamental principles and beliefs, perhaps even endangering their souls.

One of the biggest reasons the speaker feels they can't marry their beloved is that they "could not" go on being a faithful Christian if they did so. Imagining the Apocalypse (when, according to Christian tradition, all souls will rise from the grave and face God), the speaker feels certain that even the face of Christ himself would seem "plain – and foreign" next to their beloved's. In other words, they find their beloved's beauty so overpowering that their beloved has taken the place of God as the best thing they can imagine. The beloved has "saturated" the speaker's "Sight," filling them up until there's no room for anything as "sordid" (or cheap, paltry, and lowly) as "Paradise."

For that matter, the speaker feels their beloved's presence has *become* "Paradise" to them—so much so that, if they were sent to Heaven but their beloved couldn't come with them, they feel they'd be just as "lost" as if they'd been sent to Hell. If things went the other way and the speaker went to Hell alone, "condemned to be / Where You were not," the separation would be worse than any infernal torment.

The speaker thus rejects love in favor of their religion, not because Christianity has the stronger claim on their heart and mind, but because it's dangerously weaker than their earthly love! Intense romantic love, in this poem, can conquer a person so completely that even the fate of their own soul seems insignificant by comparison.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 21-44
- Lines 48-50

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

I cannot live with You –
It would be Life –
And Life is over there –
Behind the Shelf
The Sexton keeps the key to –

The first lines of this, one of Emily Dickinson's longest poems, are full of confused emotion. The speaker turns down a romantic proposal, not because they *don't* love the person in question, but because they love them too much. "I cannot live with You," the speaker tells this person, because "It would be Life –".

These first lines suggest that there's something both simple and overpowering about the speaker's love for the person they're speaking to. To live with them would mean nothing more nor less than life itself.

But the speaker doesn't feel they have access to life; life is something that's perpetually "over there" for them. If that's the case, they must be living something that isn't quite a life now—and, as the polyptoton on "live" and "life" points out, they expect to go on living that half-life in the future, without the beloved they "cannot live with." In other words, the speaker can't live with their beloved, and can't live without them! They're stuck in an awful limbo.

They get at the feeling of this choked-off predicament with an image of a tidy "Sexton"—a churchwarden, especially one in charge of a graveyard. This fellow, who raises shadows of both pious propriety and death, has a locked "Shelf," and "keeps the key" himself. The life the speaker and their beloved could live together isn't just locked up in that shelf, but "Behind" it, as if it's fallen down the back. One way or another, this life is out of reach and out of bounds.

The poem's shape mirrors the speaker's dilemma. These first few lines use an odd, jolting rhythm, alternating lines of iambic trimeter (that is, lines of three iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "Behind") and iambic dimeter (lines of just two iambs). Listen to the first two lines:

I can- | not live | with You –
It would | be Life –

Readers who are familiar with sonnets or Shakespeare might find that this unusual meter feels oddly familiar: if these two lines were fused, they'd make one line of good old iambic pentameter (five iambs in a row, as in "I would | you were | as I | would have | you be"). Fittingly enough, it's as if a line from an old love poem has been lopped in two.

Similarly, notice the confusion in the poem's very shape here.

The "Sexton" who keeps the keys to the "Shelf" only appears at the beginning of the next stanza. As readers will soon see, the way this poem uses enjambments that cross stanzas and line breaks means that there's more than one way to interpret these first words.

LINES 6-12

Putting up
Our Life – his Porcelain –
Like a Cup –
Discarded of the Housewife –
Quaint – or Broke –
A newer Sevres pleases –
Old Ones crack –

The strange, scrupulous Sexton, the speaker goes on, *hasn't* just lost their life "Behind the Shelf." Instead, he's stashed it away like the good china—or, rather, like the bad china. Their life is "his Porcelain":

> Like a Cup –
> Discarded of the Housewife –
> Quaint – or Broke –

This simile—in which the Sexton seems to have salvaged a cup the Housewife chucked out—suggests that there's something not-quite-right about the life the speaker and their beloved could share. If it's a "Quaint" cup, it's an old-fashioned, none-too-stylish one. If it's "Broke," it won't hold water—literally. No respectable housewife would keep such a cup around. She'd replace it with fashionable French "Sevres" porcelain, which "pleases" visitors when an old cracked cup would not.

Take a moment to look back over the evolution of these first few stanzas. Both the Sexton and the Housewife seem to forbid the couple's love, but in different ways and for different reasons. The pious Sexton neatly puts their imagined life together away, out of reach; the Housewife throws it out altogether, rejecting it in favor of something new and stylish.

Symbolically speaking, there's a lot going on here. The speaker's confused anxieties about china being locked away or discarded might suggest that they know their love simply won't pass muster in polite company:

- The Housewife suggests there's something socially inappropriate about this love, something that doesn't fit into polite society any more than a cracked cup fits among Sevrès china; perhaps this is an affair, perhaps it's a love between people from different social spheres.
- The speaker's idea that "Old Ones crack" might even suggest that they feel too old (and too *cracked*, too strange) to marry.

The Sexton, meanwhile, seems perfectly happy to *have* the broken cup of the relationship, but not to *use* it. Perhaps this religious figure personifies fate, or even God: he has the metaphorical cup in his care, but forbids it from doing its duty as a cup. He might also simply suggest that the Church doesn't approve of the speaker's relationship any more than the housewife's polite society does.

These complex images go hand-in-hand with complex, disorienting sentence structure. There are many different ways readers can parse these lines. It's perfectly possible, for instance, *not* to read an enjambment between the first and second stanzas:

- In other words, here we're reading the first and second stanzas as if they're part of one continuous thought, which you could paraphrase like this: "Life is over there, behind the shelf that the sexton keeps the keys to. He puts away our life..."
- But it's equally possible to imagine that the speaker's thought ends at "life is over there, behind the shelf," and picks up again with a new idea: "The Sexton keeps the keys that allow him to lock our lives away."

The confusion here is intentional. Already, the speaker has shown they're stuck in a Catch-22: they can't live with their beloved or without them. The strange, shifty ground of their explanation here suggests that they feel dazed with conflicting anxieties: about what the wider world wants, about what God wants, and even about what they want.

LINES 13-16

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

The speaker has gestured (in a pained, confused way) at some of the social reasons they "cannot live with" their beloved. Now, in language that's suddenly much clearer and more direct, they explain their deeper, more personal fear: that neither member of the couple could bear to sit by the other's deathbed, as they'd have to one day if they spent their lives together.

Take a look at the way the speaker uses repetitions as they imagine the agony of their final moments with their beloved:

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

These declarations parallel not just each other, but the poem's opening words, "I cannot live with you." Neither life nor death in

each other's presence is possible, the speaker insists over and over. In short, they're in an *impossible* position: if you can't live *or* die together, what *can* you do?

These lines also reveal the speaker's intimacy with their beloved. They know perfectly well that this person couldn't handle sitting by and watching while the speaker's eyes closed for the last time. The couple must feel equally deeply for each other, then; the speaker isn't dodging the beloved's proposal because of any lack of love.

And consider the image of those closing eyes. It's not just that one partner must watch the other die, but that they must "wait / To shut the Other's Gaze down," a much more active proposition. Perhaps these words even suggest physically closing the other person's eyes when they die.

Picturing their own deathbed, then, the speaker imagines their beloved performing a tender act while suffering abysmal grief—and thinks it just wouldn't be possible. The pain would be too much.

LINES 17-20

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

Having pictured their beloved's unendurable pain beside their own imagined deathbed, the speaker considers their position if the tables were turned. Rhetorically, they ask if they could possibly watch their beloved die without immediately killing themselves. The implied answer to this question is, *Of course I couldn't.*

The speaker's imagination of these moments is horribly vivid. They just envisioned their beloved pulling their eyelids shut over dead eyes. Now, they imagine "see[ing] You – freeze," watching as their beloved's body turned cold and still, bit by bit.

Such a sight, they imagine, would make them demand their own metaphorical "Right of Frost," their right to be equally cold, still, and dead as quickly as possible. Perhaps there's even a dark pun here. That "Right of Frost" could also be a *rite* of frost, a suicide performed like a mourning ritual.

This "Right" is also "Death's privilege," another line full of ambiguous meaning. Perhaps death is the privilege the speaker wishes to claim; perhaps a personified Death's privilege is to produce that frosty chill. Perhaps both.

No matter what, the speaker isn't kidding around here. Living with their beloved, they're quite certain, would demand an eventual suicide pact; life together would have to mean death together.

Some modern readers might be tempted to ask: *Is that such a problem?* The idea of loving someone so much you'd want to follow them into death might come across as romantic. But, as the next stanzas will show, the speaker can't just blithely plan to die when their lover does. They're a believing Christian, for whom (when Dickinson was writing) suicide would be a sin—and that feeds into an even deeper anxiety about what it would mean to live and to die with their beloved. Not just life, but the afterlife must be considered.

LINES 21-28

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 –

The speaker has just finished explaining that they'd find it intolerable to watch their beloved die unless they could die at the exact same second. Even if they managed to die at the same time, though, their troubles wouldn't be over. The speaker couldn't "rise" with their beloved either: that is, they couldn't get out of their grave on Judgment Day, the Christian Apocalypse in which souls return to their bodies and face God.

Readers might imagine that Christian belief could be a consolation to the speaker, offering hope that the speaker and their beloved might meet in Heaven. The trouble is, the speaker's feelings for their beloved have overpowered their love of God. On Judgment Day, the speaker imagines, their beloved's face would "put out Jesus'." They wouldn't even care about looking at God himself unless their beloved were there to look at, too—and "closer by," for that matter.

Here, one of Dickinson's characteristic style choices takes on new weight. Dickinson often capitalized important words; all through this poem, the speaker capitalizes "You" and "Your," giving these forms of address the same weight as the capitalized "He" that refers to Jesus. The beloved is in direct competition with God. What's more, the beloved is winning.

That gets even clearer in the imagery the speaker uses here:

> That New Grace
> Glow plain – and foreign
> On my homesick eye –
> Except that You than He
> Shone closer by –

The image of Christ's luminous face as "plain – and foreign" suggests a glow that's at once humdrum and maybe a little eerie or alien, like the light of a fluorescent bulb. But that's only by comparison to the beloved's "sh[i]ne": if the beloved were standing nearer to the speaker than Christ was, then the speaker would be perfectly able to appreciate Christ's light, in a runner-up sort of way.

Notice that there's a parallel here with the metaphor of the "Sevres" porcelain versus the cracked cup. Like the fancy French pottery, Christ's face would be "new" and "foreign" to the speaker in comparison with the beloved's familiar shine, which feels *homey*, able to relieve the speaker's "homesick eye." The speaker isn't saying that the beloved is objectively better than Christ: only that they can't help preferring the beloved to God.

The speaker's adoration for their beloved, in other words, binds them to earthly things and distracts them from Heaven. In the context of Judgment Day, when souls are sent permanently to Heaven or Hell, that creates a serious problem, though perhaps not the one readers might guess. In the coming stanzas, the speaker won't worry about being damned, but about being separated from their lover—again.

LINES 29-32

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

The speaker now turns to their beloved conspiratorially, warning that "They"—that is, the ominously anonymous authorities of Heaven itself—would "judge Us" for preferring each other to God. Take a closer look at the first line of this stanza:

> They'd judge Us – How –

This could mean something like a despairing "How would they judge us?"—or it could mean something more like "Oh, how they'd judge us." Either way, the speaker seems sure that this judgment would be bad news.

That's because the speaker and their beloved had different approaches to "serv[ing] Heaven":

- The beloved, the speaker says, *did* serve Heaven, trying to be a good Christian—"Or sought to," at least. Note the hint of uncertainty there; the beloved seems to have stumbled in their service from time to time.
- The speaker, meanwhile, unequivocally "could not" serve Heaven, and in comparison to their beloved, perhaps they didn't even try that hard.

Besides giving Dickinson biographers a tantalizing hint of possible autobiography (some conjecture that this Heaven-serving beloved might have been the minister Charles Wadsworth, Dickinson's close friend), these lines evoke both the couple's intimacy and their earthly struggles. The beloved, here, seems to have done their best to be an upstanding person; the speaker, meanwhile, forgot about religion the second they fell in love with this person they "cannot live with." Their vehement certainty that they love their beloved more than they love God suggests that this kind of passion feels both inescapable and frightening.

So does the stanza's broken meter. The first two lines are straight-ahead iambic dimeter and trimeter, respectively. But listen to the last two:

> Or sought to –
> I could not –

These lines again seem to be one line split into two pieces: put them together and they make a neat line of iambic trimeter. Broken up this way, they bring the poem to a choked halt. It's as if the speaker, in their anxious agitation, can barely get the words out.

LINES 33-36

Because You saturated sight –
And I had no more eyes
For sordid excellence
As Paradise

The speaker caps their admission that they "could not" serve Heaven by explaining what readers have probably already guessed: their adoration for their beloved means they no longer care about God or "Paradise." Paradise, to them, is right there on the ground, wherever their beloved is.

They explain as much with a vivid metaphor. There's no more room in their "eyes" for God because their beloved has "saturated sight," soaking through their eyes until, like a sodden sponge, they can't hold one drop more. Besides suggesting a kind of lush, living, liquid feeling (in contrast with the rigid "Frost" of death the speaker described earlier), those saturated eyes evoke helpless tears—maybe of joy, maybe of grief, maybe both.

Take a look at the way enjambments set up a rather blasphemous joke in this stanza:

> Because You saturated sight –
> And I had no more eyes
> For sordid excellence
> As Paradise

- In line 34, readers might think for half a second that the beloved didn't just soak through the speaker's eyes, but *steal* them, so they had "no more eyes" at all.
- But no, that line's enjambed: the speaker had no more eyes for some "sordid excellence," some paltry and lowly pleasure. There's clearly another enjambment here, so the reader expects to learn what this "sordid excellence" is...

- ...and the punchline is, it's "Paradise." Heaven itself seems "sordid" as a cheap funfair to the speaker's love-soaked eyes.

Another shortened line strengthens the punch here: there's just one stress in "As Paradise." The speaker knows that this confession is darkly funny. They also know it's dangerous. Loving a person more than God might not look too great on the day of the Last Judgment. The ominous, bureaucratic-sounding "They" who the speaker warned would "judge Us" in line 29 won't like that one bit.

LINES 37-44

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 –

Since the speaker has just laid out the case against themselves in the courts of Heaven—that they love their beloved more than they love God—the beginning of the next stanza might come as a surprise. Here, the speaker imagines what would happen if their *beloved* were condemned to Hell.

In fact, this is just another way for the speaker to stress how thoroughly their beloved has supplanted even eternal "Paradise" in their heart. They put it very simply: "And were You lost, I would be," they say. In other words, if the beloved went to Hell, the speaker would be in Hell too, even if the angels sang their praises "loudest" of anyone's in Heaven.

Nor has the speaker's love only made Heaven seem pale and "sordid." Hell also seems to be a matter of near-indifference to them. If they went to Hell and their beloved to Heaven, they say, it would hardly matter that they were being eternally tormented. Being all by their own lonely "self" would be worse than whatever else Hell threatened. (Readers might reflect here that some writers who have vividly imagined Hell have defined it as the absence of *God*. The speaker consistently puts the beloved in God's place.)

Yet again, in other words, the speaker is describing an impossible situation. So long as there's even the slightest chance that they and their beloved might be separated in the afterlife, they can't rest easy: Heaven or Hell would equally be Hell if the beloved wasn't there. The anaphora that begins these two stanzas—"And were You lost" versus "And were You – saved"—underscores that damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't dilemma.

LINES 45-50

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

All through this poem, the speaker has described impossibilities and paradoxes. They can't live with their beloved because they can't live without them; Heaven would be Hell if their beloved weren't there. The final stanza, an unexpected sestet, begins with another impossibility. The only way forward, the speaker concludes, is for the couple to "meet apart." With "You there" and "I – here," this hardly sounds like a meeting at all; the best they can hope for, the speaker feels, is to have a distant acquaintanceship.

Readers might object that *that* hardly seems possible, either. Everything the speaker has said all through this poem suggests that they literally love the person they're speaking to more than God. It's too late for them *not* to feel that way. The tragic irony of this speaker's predicament is that, in refusing to be with their beloved because they couldn't endure separation, they put themselves through exactly the "Hell" that they claim they're trying to avoid—and turning down the brief joy of "Life" at the same time.

Of course, the poem hints that there might be other reasons for the speaker to turn their beloved down than sheer anxiety. The "Sexton" and the "Housewife," the church and the polite world, both seemed to forbid their union. That doesn't make the tragedy any less keen. What the speaker has repeated and repeated, all through this poem, is that separation from their beloved is a kind of damnation, and it's precisely this damnation the pair will have to endure.

The speaker concludes the poem with a complex metaphor. All that can be left between the speaker and their beloved is:

> [...] just the Door ajar
> That Oceans are – and Prayer –
> And that White Sustenance –
> Despair –

Both "Oceans" and "Prayer" make difficult doors. Those oceans suggest a separation of many miles, hard to cross. "Prayer" sounds like cold comfort when the God you're praying to is only a "plain," "foreign" face next to your beloved. In both images, there's a sense of a door as an obstacle as much as a passageway. The lovers *could* cross a literal or metaphorical ocean to be with each other; they *could* pray for each other and hope that God will pass the message along. But both possibilities are difficult, indirect, frustrating.

The final "door" layers a metaphor on top of a metaphor: it's the "White Sustenance" of "Despair." Presenting despair as a pale, blank, perhaps not-very-nourishing food, the speaker suggests

that it's nevertheless *something* to live on—barely. Perhaps feeling "Despair" is at least next door to love. If the lovers despair over not being with each other, then at least they still know they love each other.

Next to "Prayer," though, that "White Sustenance" might also suggest a communion wafer—the bread that represents (or *is*, depending on who you ask) the body of Christ in a Christian religious service. In other words, the speaker may be returning to their religion here, falling back on the hope of Heaven since their Heaven on earth has been denied to them.

Everything they've said suggests that this is the coldest possible comfort. The poem's final, hollow, one-word line—"Despair"—shows that, if they "cannot live with" their beloved, the lonely speaker can't have "Life," nor any hope of it. They've described the unendurable—and it's exactly what they must endure.

SYMBOLS

THE SEXTON AND THE HOUSEWIFE

The poem's mysterious Sexton and Housewife might symbolize the power and oppression of the Church and Society, respectively.

A sexton is a churchwarden with special responsibility for the graveyard. When the speaker describes a sexton who "keeps the key to" the cupboard where their life is stashed away "Like a Cup," then, they suggest that both piety and the threat of death prevent them from being with their beloved. (The speaker's later anxieties about religion and deathbeds bear that reading out.)

For that matter, the cracked "Cup" that is their shared life would be thrown out at once by any "Housewife," who'd prefer "a newer Sevres" (that is, a stylish new French teacup). This image hints that there's something not quite respectable about the speaker's love: polite society would reject it, seeing it as unseemly.

Together, the Sexton and Housewife thus suggest that all of society—religious and secular, male and female—disapproves of and forbids the relationship between the speaker and their beloved.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-12:** "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 –"

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors help the speaker convey the pain of their predicament.

When the speaker explains that they "cannot live with" their beloved because they'd have to watch them die one day, their metaphors turn this imagined moment into something out of a horror story:

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

This image of freezing evokes the silence, stillness, and chill of a corpse. But what's really horrific here is the idea of *seeing* the loved one "freeze"—helplessly watching as rigid cold takes over the beloved body. The speaker imagines needing to claim their own "Right of Frost," killing themselves to follow their beloved; perhaps there's even a pun here suggesting a rite of frost, a ritual suicide.

Elsewhere, the speaker's adoration of their beloved takes the form, not of ice, but of water, "saturat[ing]" the speaker's "sight." Here, the joy of looking at the beloved seems to soak right through the speaker's eyes, an image that suggests both overwhelm—there's no room left for *anything else* in those eyes—and a kind of liquid aliveness, in contrast with the frozen stiffness of death.

Such an overwhelming love proves too frightening for the speaker, who decides at the end of the poem that they and their beloved can only "meet apart," maintaining a distant relationship. The sole "Door" between them, the speaker says, will come in the form of "Oceans," "Prayer," and "Despair." This final complex metaphor pushes the beloved away at the same time as it claims to hold a door open. Those oceans suggest almost insurmountable distances, while the "prayer" seems like a fairly chilly consolation, addressed to God rather than directly to the beloved.

"Despair," meanwhile, the speaker presents as a "White Sustenance," a pale (and perhaps rather anemic) food—not the red meat of committed love. If it's "sustenance," though, it provides some kind of nourishment; maybe despairing over an impossible love is one way for the speaker to cling to it, however painful that might be.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-20:** "Could I stand by / And see You – freeze – / Without my Right of Frost – / Death's privilege?"
- **Line 33:** "You saturated sight –"

- **Lines 47-50:** "just the Door ajar / That Oceans are – and Prayer – / And that White Sustenance – / Despair –"

ALLUSION

When the speaker declares that they cannot "rise" with their beloved, they're looking a long way down the road of their imagined life together, past death and past the end of the world. The speaker is alluding here to Judgment Day, the day when (according to Christian tradition) all the dead will rise from their graves, meet God face to face, and make their final journey to Heaven or Hell.

The very thought makes the speaker anxious, but not for the reasons one might expect. They don't seem to care much about facing God's justice; the only consequence that matters for them is whether they and their beloved will end up in the same place. Heaven without the beloved, the speaker fears, wouldn't be any different from Hell. For that matter, the Beatific Vision itself—looking God right in the face—won't hold any special pleasure for the speaker if their beloved's face isn't "closer by" than Jesus's.

This allusion makes this poem's stakes clear. To this speaker, Judgment Day is a matter of fact, something they'll definitely face one day; in one sense, they're a pious Christian. In another, they're anything but. Their efforts to "serve[] Heaven" falter in the face of their earthly love, which has taken the place of "Paradise" in their mind and heart. The speaker's romantic dilemma isn't just a matter of life and death to them, but a matter with eternal consequences.

Next to these powerful images of resurrection and judgment, the speaker's other allusion—to fashionable Sevrès porcelain—sounds rather low-stakes. But there's real sadness here. The speaker refers to elegant French pottery to suggest that the life they could live with their beloved is a chipped, "Broke[n]" cup, something that has to be stashed away and replaced with something flashier. The implication here is that their love, in one way or another, *looks bad*: it's not the sort of relationship suited for a genteel tea party!

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "A newer Sevres pleases –"
- **Lines 21-28:** "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 –"
- **Lines 29-32:** "They'd judge Us – How – / For You – served Heaven – You know, / Or sought to – / I could not –"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambments help to create this poem's complex layers of meaning.

For example, take a look at the enjambments in these lines:

> [...] 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 –

One way to paraphrase these lines would be: "Life is over there, behind the shelf that the Sexton has the keys to. He puts away our life, which is his china. Our life is like a cup a housewife threw away..."

But there are several other possible readings here, too. It all depends on which lines the reader *treats* as enjambed:

- For instance, one doesn't absolutely have to interpret lines 4-5 as enjambed. Without the enjambment, they'd mean something more like "Life is over there, behind that shelf. The Sexton has the keys that allow him to lock away our life..."
- Similarly, it's possible to interpret lines 7-8 as a continuous thought, which would run like this: "Our life is the Sexton's porcelain—one example of which is a cup a housewife threw out..."

The enjambments here thus blur possible readings into each other, inviting readers to think carefully about exactly who this scrupulous "Sexton" is and what his powers might be.

Elsewhere, enjambments simply alter the poem's rhythms, creating drama, tension, and surprise. Listen to lines 33-36, for instance:

> Because You saturated sight –
> And I had no more eyes
> For sordid excellence
> As Paradise

The way the speaker breaks up a sentence here introduces a shock drip by drip:

- For a split second, the reader might believe that the speaker is saying their beloved didn't just *fill up* their eyes, but *took* them, so they had "no more eyes" at all!
- That brief moment of confusion resolves in the next line: ah, the speaker had "no more eyes" for some kind of "sordid excellence." But what is this "sordid," cheap "excellence" they're rejecting?
- Then comes the blasphemous answer: "Paradise"

itself seems "sordid" to the speaker, compared to the presence of their beloved.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "Shelf / The"
- **Lines 6-7:** "up / Our"
- **Lines 8-9:** "Cup – / Discarded"
- **Lines 14-15:** "wait / To"
- **Lines 22-23:** "Face / Would"
- **Lines 24-25:** "Grace / Glow"
- **Lines 25-26:** "foreign / On"
- **Lines 27-28:** "He / Shone"
- **Lines 34-35:** "eyes / For"
- **Lines 35-36:** "excellence / As"
- **Lines 38-39:** "name / Rang"
- **Lines 39-40:** "loudest / On"
- **Lines 42-43:** "be / Where"
- **Lines 47-48:** "ajar / That"

IRONY

This poem's speaker knows they "cannot live" with their beloved, not because they don't want to, but because they couldn't endure *not* to.

The prospect of sitting at their beloved's deathbed one day, waiting for death to "freeze" them, strikes the speaker as not just painful, but unendurable: they'd feel they had no choice but to die, too. And they're pretty sure their beloved "could not" watch them die, either. The speaker therefore decides that they and their beloved can only "meet apart," staying in distant contact at most.

Alert readers might notice a painful irony here. The speaker feels they can't be with their beloved because being separated one day would be too painful—so, instead, they're choosing to be separated *now*, giving up even the temporary (but intense!) happiness of sharing a life with their beloved.

Trying to avoid the pain of parting, the speaker thus does away with the possibility of joy without managing to avoid crushing "Despair." This, the poem suggests, is all part of the broader difficulty of love. In this speaker's vision, love might be as much a curse as a blessing, since even the deepest love inevitably brings grief and pain in its wake, one time or another. Flee though they might, the speaker can't actually save themselves from the pain of love: they're at love's mercy.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "I cannot live with You – / It would be Life –"
- **Lines 45-50:** "So we must meet apart – / You there – I – here – / With just the Door ajar / That Oceans are – and Prayer – / And that White Sustenance – / Despair –"

SIMILE

The poem's lone simile hints at the reasons the speaker and their beloved may not be able to marry. The full life that's out of reach to the couple, the speaker says at the beginning of the poem, is "Like a Cup"—a discarded cup, too broken or "Quaint" (that is, old-fashioned or unstylish) to keep around. A "Housewife," the speaker imagines, would chuck this cup out without a second thought, preferring "a newer Sevres," a fashionable new piece of French pottery.

This obscure image hints that the speaker's relationship with their beloved might itself not quite be suitable for polite company:

- If it's "Quaint," it simply might not fit with society's expectations about how a relationship should be; perhaps there's even something about the intensity of the speaker's passion that feels out of place in a world where housewives lay out the good china.
- If it's "Broke," then something about the relationship might be spoiled before it's even had a chance to begin. Perhaps there's something impossible about this relationship's circumstances; perhaps this cracked cup of a romance just won't hold water.

Still, an imagined "Sexton" (a churchwarden responsible for the graveyard) stashes this cup away—either hiding it "Behind the Shelf," or just "putting [it] up," locking it in a cupboard. This grave, neat figure might even evoke an orderly God, acknowledging the existence of this relationship and its impossibility all at once.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-10:** "Like a Cup – / Discarded of the Housewife – / Quaint – or Broke –"

VOCABULARY

Sexton (Line 5) - The keeper of a churchyard (and often a gravedigger, too).

Putting up (Line 6) - Putting away, storing.

Quaint (Line 10) - Old-fashioned, unstylish.

Sevres (Line 11) - A kind of fashionable French porcelain, popular in the 19th century.

Nor could I rise – with You – (Line 21) - Here, the speaker alludes to the Christian idea of Judgment Day: the day at the end of the world when all the dead rise from their graves to be judged by God.

Sought to (Line 31) - Tried to.

Saturated (Line 33) - Completely soaked. The speaker is saying

that the sight of their lover filled their eyes up to the point that they could no longer see anything else.

Sordid (Line 35) - Squalid, cheap, paltry.

The Heavenly fame (Line 40) - In other words, the voices or cries of Heaven.

Sustenance (Line 49) - Nourishment, food.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"I cannot live with You" uses a ragged form that reflects the speaker's turmoil and torment. At first glance, the poem looks fairly regular, as if it might be another of Dickinson's familiar, steady common meter poems. But readers who listen closely will find all sorts of variations in rhythm and shape:

- The first 11 stanzas, for instance, are quatrains, meaning they have four lines apiec). But they're interrupted by a surprising sestet (a six-line stanza) at the end, capped with a grim one-word closing line: "Despair."
- The meter, meanwhile, is mostly iambic: that is, the lines are built from iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "Behind." But within that basic rhythm, there are all sorts of unpredictable variations, making the speaker sound halting and agonized.

There's thus a difference between how the poem *looks* (pretty orderly, except for that last sestet) and how it *sounds*. The apparently calm surface of this poem might reflect the speaker's predicament: feeling they have no choice but to stay distant from their beloved, they're hiding a whole apocalypse of passion and pain behind an illusion of formal restraint. Only at the end, in that overflowing final stanza, do those feelings burst out visually as well as metrically.

METER

Dickinson picks an unusual meter for many of her quatrains here: not common meter, her go-to, but a dance between iambic trimeter and iambic dimeter. That means that she switches between lines of *three* iambs—metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "behind"—and lines of *two* iambs. Here's how that sounds in the first two lines:

> I can- | not live | with You –
> It would | be Life –

This is a pretty unusual meter, but readers might find it doesn't *sound* too unfamiliar or jolting. That's because each *pair* of lines here adds up to five iambs—and thus lands on the ear like a *single* line of iambic pentameter (five iambs in a row, the familiar meter of sonnets and Shakespeare—as in "My fa- | ther had | a daugh- | ter loved | a man").

In other words, much of this poem feels like it's made from broken iambic pentameter—fitting, considering the speaker is talking about heartbreak.

Even this broken rhythm doesn't stay consistent throughout the poem, though. For just one example, listen to what happens in lines 29-30:

> They'd judge | Us – How –
> For You – | served Heaven – | You know,
> Or sought to –
> I could not –

Here, the speaker *begins* with iambic dimeter, moves into trimeter, and then closes the stanza with two strange lines: put them together and they'd be one line of iambic trimeter, but instead they're split down the middle into a one-stress line and a two-stress line. This strange break suggests the difficulty of the moral dilemma the speaker's grappling with: as they confess that their earthly love has displaced God in their heart, their voice sounds almost strangled.

The twelfth and final stanza, an unexpected sestet after all those quatrains, does something similarly unexpected. Listen to what happens in the last four lines of the six-line stanza, lines 47-50:

> With just the Door ajar
> That Oceans are – and Prayer –
> And that White Sustenance –
> Despair –

Line 49 uses two strong stresses in unpredictable places, and the closing line 50 is just one sad iamb on its own. As the speaker prepares for a final separation from their beloved, the poem's rhythm seems to break down in tears.

RHYME SCHEME

Much of the poem uses this simple rhyme scheme:

ABCB

Dickinson often used this pattern, tempering it with subtle slant rhyme—just as she does in the very first stanza here, rhyming "Life" with "Shelf."

Over the course of this poem's 50 tormented lines, though, the speaker breaks from this pattern more than once. Listen to what happens in lines 29-32, for instance:

> They'd judge Us – How –
> For You – served Heaven – You know,
> Or *sought* to –

I could *not* –

There's only the faintest link between "know" and "not"—and it's nearly drowned out by a much stronger internal rhyme between "sought" and "not." These broken, off-kilter rhymes reflect the troubled, broken faith the speaker describes here.

The poem's most dramatic variation appears in the strange closing stanza. With its six lines, this last stanza already breaks from the pattern of quatrains the poem has laid down. Its rhymes, meanwhile, weave together in a pattern that you'd need a detective's pinboard to map out neatly:

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

There's just one perfect end rhyme here: the final sledgehammer of "Prayer" and "Despair." But there's also:

- A delayed internal rhyme between "ajar" and "are"
- A thread of assonant slant rhyme that connects the /uh/ and /ah/ sounds of "apart" to "ajar"
- Consonance that links "apart" and "ajar" to "Prayer" and "Despair"
- And the ghost of a slant rhyme between "ajar" and "Prayer."

All in all, the dense, jarring echoes in this closing stanza suggest the pressure of the speaker's tightening "Despair."

SPEAKER

Readers might be pretty tempted to interpret this poem's speaker as Dickinson herself. The notoriously reclusive Dickinson never married, but she nursed several great passions; some critics read this poem's lines about the beloved "serv[ing] Heaven" as an allusion to Dickinson's intimate friendship with the minister Charles Wadsworth.

But the poem itself tells readers only that this speaker is a person consumed by deep, frightening passion: so much in love that their beloved's face seems more beautiful than God's. Perhaps this love is even more overpowering because the speaker "cannot live" with their beloved; instead, they must love from afar, living only on the anemic "White Sustenance" of "Despair."

SETTING

The poem only hints at a setting comes through its metaphor of the cup in the sexton's cabinet. The civilized image of a churchwarden's "Porcelain" and the reference to fancy French "Sevres" china (fashionable in the 19th century) suggest that this poem takes place in Dickinson's own era.

Beyond that, the poem's tale of love and "Despair" is timeless—literally. The speaker imagines their love (and their torment) carrying on past the end of time, right past Resurrection Day and into eternity.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) published almost nothing during her lifetime, and after 1865 she rarely even left her family home in Amherst, Massachusetts. But from within her circumscribed world, she explored the heights and depths of human experience through her groundbreaking, world-changing poetry.

No one else sounds quite like Dickinson. Her poems use simple, folky forms—ballad stanzas, for instance—to explore profound philosophical questions, passionate loves, and the mysteries of nature. This poem uses plenty of Dickinson's characteristic dashes, which make many of the lines here seem to hold their breath in awe or in pain.

While Dickinson didn't get too involved in the literary world of her time, she was still part of a swell of 19th-century American innovation. Her contemporary Walt Whitman (who became as famous as Dickinson was obscure) was similarly developing an unprecedented and unique poetic voice, and the Transcendentalists (like Emerson and Thoreau) shared her deep belief in the spiritual power of nature.

Dickinson herself was inspired by English writers like William Wordsworth and Charlotte Brontë, whose works similarly found paths through the everyday world into the sublime, terrifying, and astonishing.

After Dickinson died, her sister Lavinia discovered a trunk of nearly 1,800 secret poems squirreled away in a bedroom. Published at last, Dickinson's poetry became internationally famous and beloved. Dickinson's work and her life story still influence all kinds of artists.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This intense, tormented love poem might draw on Dickinson's own romantic experiences. Dickinson never married; later in life, she even became something of a recluse, rarely emerging from her family home. However, her quiet life didn't stop her from having a number of passionate attachments. Her school

friend (and eventual sister-in-law) Susan Gilbert and her father's friend Judge Otis Philips Lord (with whom she weighed the possibility of a later-in-life marriage) were two especially important figures in her romantic history.

Some critics speculate that this particular poem might have been written with Dickinson's friend Charles Wadsworth in mind. Wadsworth was a minister with whom Dickinson had a long correspondence (though almost none of their letters survive now); the notion that the beloved "served Heaven"—or at least "sought to"—might allude to his profession. Wadsworth is also a candidate for the intended recipient of Dickinson's mysterious "Master letters," a series of passionate love letters addressed only to an anonymous "Master." Draft copies of these were found among Dickinson's papers after her death; no one knows whether she sent final copies, or whom she might have intended them for.

Whether or not this poem was intended for one of Dickinson's beloveds, it plays with similar ideas to those mysterious "Master letters"—including the idea that a beloved might "master" her so much that they'd displace God in her affections.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/fguMDl1FUHE)
- The Poem in Dickinson's Hand — See a manuscript of the poem at the Emily Dickinson Archive. (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/12175550)
- The Emily Dickinson Museum — Visit the Dickinson Museum's website to learn more about Dickinson's life and work. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/)
- Dickinson's Loves — Learn more about Dickinson's love poetry (and the loves that likely inspired it). (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/emily-dickinson/biography/special-topics/emily-dickinsons-love-life/)
- Dickinson's Influence — Listen to contemporary writer Jo Shapcott discussing what Dickinson means to her. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/audio/2013/feb/15/jo-shapcott-emily-dickinson-poetry-podcast)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- A Bird, came down the Walk
- After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
- A narrow Fellow in the Grass
- An awful Tempest mashed the air—
- As imperceptibly as grief
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- Before I got my eye put out
- Fame is a fickle food
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I cautious, scanned my little life
- I died for Beauty—but was scarce
- I dwell in Possibility –
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- If I can stop one heart from breaking
- I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- I like a look of Agony
- I like to see it lap the Miles
- I measure every Grief I meet
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- I started Early — Took my Dog —
- I taste a liquor never brewed
- It was not Death, for I stood up
- I—Years—had been—from Home—
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- One need not be a Chamber — to be Haunted
- Publication — is the Auction
- Safe in their Alabaster Chambers
- Success is counted sweetest
- Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
- The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
- The Bustle in a House
- There came a Wind like a Bugle
- There is no Frigate like a Book
- There's a certain Slant of light
- There's been a Death, in the Opposite House
- The saddest noise, the sweetest noise
- The Sky is low — the Clouds are mean
- The Soul has bandaged moments
- The Soul selects her own Society
- The Wind – tapped like a tired Man –
- They shut me up in Prose –
- This is my letter to the world
- We grow accustomed to the Dark
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

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