

Emily Dickinson's Concept of Love: The Far side of Paradise

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) is concerned with the concept of love as a source of harmony in the universe. She believes that the earth is created for lovers. Her love poems are closely related to her personal experience. She portrays the development of the emotional life until it reaches maturity that makes her persona immortal.

Dickinson's speculation, unlike the mystics, is based on imaginative and sensory experience. She explores it with profundity. She does this by experiences all forms of contradictory emotions to reflect her phases of suffering in a metaphysical way. Furthermore, what marks her modernity is the realistic basis of her images which are written in a condensed and vague way.

**Sometimes with the Heart
Seldom with the Soul
Scarcer once with the Might
Few - Love at all**

(Emily Dickinson , 1680)¹

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) lived in the Calvinist New England, Massachusetts. She hardly left her town of Amherst except for brief visits to several states and one year at Mount Holyoke College. After the tragic end of a love story by the death of the young man, Emily resolved to be a recluse.² In her seclusion, she never left her father`s house and refused to meet relatives and friends.³ Letters were the only means by which she communicated with the outside world. Since her youth she used to dress in white, indicating her complete abandonment of the social life.⁴ Nevertheless, she had rich imagination which enabled her to write poetry. Emily was not a distinguished literary figure in her time because none of her Poems was read or published during her life. It was only in the 1920 s that her poems and letters were published by her relatives and friends to mark her as a poet.

Emily's poetry is almost personal and rich in variety. The economy of style, the fusion of sensibility and thought, the feeling of the mind and the thinking of the heart, all make her akin to the Metaphysical poet, John Donne (1572-1631).⁵ The complexity of her style appears when one reads her poems for the first time. They seem to be piles of unrelated and puzzling words, but with keen perception one can comprehend the meaning behind the vague imagery.

Her poems reveal her love for words, abstract ones, which are usually taken from various fields: Medicine, mathematics, philosophy, and geometry.⁶ the effect is precise and intellectual. Emily strongly believes that words are powerful as swords.

There is a word
Which bears a sword?
Can pierce an armed man.

(8)

And in another place words breathe as the spirit, they are eternal:

A word that breathes distinctly
Has not the power to die
Cohesive as the spirit

(1651)

As an example of an unusual way of using words, when she talks of heaven using railway checks and the conductor, to guarantee her proceeding on the right way: "Yet certain am I of the spot / As if the checks were given" (1052). Another example when she links the heart and the mind with the "capital" and the "state".

The Heart is the capital of the mind
The mind is a single state
The Heart and the mind together make

A single Continent.

(1354)

Through the imagery which is taken from life, Emily seeks to intensify the inward spiritual side rather than the sensational and the outward. She attempts “to reconcile the finite to the infinite without relinquishing the integrity of the human soul or the vitality of physical nature.”⁷ Thus she celebrates the drama of the private soul. The intention is to “affirm a universe in depth ... In which ... distinction must be made between ... man, nature, and God.”⁸

Emily's poetry is limited in scope and experience. Her themes range from love, death, and nature, to the more complex ideas of God, man, truth, and immortality.⁹ In order to come to true realization of these ideas, Emily advocates the spiritual experience as the secure way to truth. She has "her own society"

The soul selects her own Society-
Then- shuts the Door-
To her divine Majority-
Present no man-
.....
Choose One-
Then- close the Valves of her attention-
Like stone-

(303)

The chosen "one" to whom she pledges her devotions marks her emotional and spiritual maturity. She sees experience as a motivation of action preferred to the mind, “Experience is the angled road/ preferred against the mind.” (910). The inward journey indicates the struggle of the soul in search of a awareness and identity.¹⁰ It includes fighting for survival instead of walking aimlessly in life.¹¹ Though such experience is linked with pain, yet it will lead to truth “ I like a look of

Agony,/ Because I know it's true "(241). Through the experience one reaches a balance, or "a mathematical equation", as Emerson says.¹² It includes the interplay of contradictions: loss and gain. Emily looks at loss as something superior because it enables her to understand the value of gain. Hence one should feel happy and hopeful for "Hope is the thing with feathers.../ That perches is the soul.../... And never stops"(234).

In her spiritual experience, Emily recognizes two crucial moments: The moment of love and the moment of death.¹³ Both lead to immortality because she considers them as two acts of communion with God.¹⁴

Through her love experience, this seems to be more imaginative than real, Emily displays the emotional from physical pleasure to the spiritual level, to end with the divine one. The renunciation of earthly love for the sake of heavenly love, worldly marriage that leads to the heavenly marriage where the persona of the poems imagines herself the bride of Christ.

Given in marriage unto thee,
Oh, thou celestial host!
Bride of the Father and the Son,
Bride of the Holy Ghost!
(817)

Emily Dickenson sees love as the "sunrise"(480). One derives his personality from love, as the daisy derives its colour and odor from the sun. The image of the daisy is significant since it is among the first flowers to blossom, and it is one of the flowers of paradise.¹⁵ This indicates Emily's thinking of transcending love to a heavenly level:

The daisy follows soft the sun-

And when his golden walk is done-
 Sits shyly at his feet
 He - walking – finds the flower there-
 Wherefore ... art thou here?
 Because, sir, love is sweet!

(106)

Love is identified with a god that immortalizes both lover and beloved.

Unable are the loved to die
 For love is immortality,
 Nay, it is Deity

(809)

The lover live in her mind only, he is turned into a symbol of spiritual joy, which is remote “absorbed into the idea of heaven.”¹⁶ He has no physical presence, hence he is transformed into something metaphysical and idealistic. Thus Emily’s lover is different from others. He lacks individuality. This Exactly what elevates the love relationship to a future paradisiacal fulfillment.

In all her love poems Emily emphasizes the impossibility of fulfilling earthly love, as if “a single all - mastering love, frozen in the moment of ecstasy by a supreme act of renunciation.”¹⁷ The ecstasy for her includes the physical love and the happiness of the spiritual love which spring from the depth of human soul.¹⁸ Both are imprisoned by the limitation of time. Hence she looks for a more purified and sublimated love that can be attained in heaven, and which guides to salvation and finally to God’s love.

In poem "My Life Had Stood-A Loaded Gun" Emily expresses her need for the fulfillment through her commitment to love. The central metaphysical conceit of a "gun" which is loaded signifies the

potential energy within the explosive power. This inert force released by the active hunter who possesses the passive woman.¹⁹ She sees her life as a "loaded gun" filled with emotional force and sensitivity, waiting for identity, as the lover claims her as his own:

My life had stood _ a loaded Gun
In corners - till a Day
The owner passed - identified-
And carried Me away....

(754)

She stresses the power of her emotions to protect her lover. It is like the (gun). But with the death of the lover, the gun will be futile. She remains inert has the power to kill, but lacks the right to die: "For I have but the power to kill,/ without - the power to die." Hence she wishes to die to be united with her lover whose soul transcends the Eden of mortal love and enters the paradise of immortal heavenly love. Thus the owner of the gun (the lover) and the gun (the beloved) will be immortal. Finally she achieves identity.

At last, to be identified!
At last, the lamps upon the side
The rest of life to see!

(174)

Thus she finds herself "He found my Being - set it up "(603).

It is a new identity he gives her which makes her forget "her own locality"(284).

But lovers are preys to the speeding time. Physical separation causes much suffering to them. This exactly what make her realize the fleeting nature of earthly love.

How fleet - how indiscreet an one

How always wrong is Love
The Joyful little Deity

(1771)

She finds her real identity as she becomes aware of deep sense of pain
which is the essence of spiritual love.

You left me - sir - two legacies-
A legacy of love
A heavenly father would suffice

.....

You left me Boundaries pain-
Capacious as the sea

(644)

She accepts suffering as long as this pleases her lover and God.
Through suffering she finds herself growing wiser. It is precisely what
Emerson's "Compensation" advocates: man's strength grows out of
suffering and weakness.²⁰ She describes herself as a bankrupt
searching for money from rent houses and buildings.

Elder, today, a session wiser
I find myself still softly searching
For my Delinquent palaces

(959)

To transcend the limitations of mortality is usually motivated by
conscience and faith. It is not an easy resolution. It requires sacrifice. It
is the "scarlet way" in which one walks against one's mortal hopes.

To put this world down, like a bundle-
And walks steady, away
Requires energy -possibly Agony-
'Tis the scarlet way
Trodden with straight renunciation

(527)

Thus she finds herself looking at the opposite side of loss, the
prospect of gain in heaven – she feels as if something

Like finger
Touches my forehead now and then
That I am looking oppositely
For the site of the kingdom of Heaven
(959)

Moreover, she denies the union with her lover in heaven because her lover would prevent her from acknowledging her true Saviour. She imagines herself the “bride of the son” (817). Such Divine marriage is a kind of resurrection and rebirth into immortality, where she is the bride of “permanence.”²¹

Bride of the Holy Ghost!
Other betrothal shall dissolve,
Wedlock of will decay
Only the keeper of this seal
Conquers mortality.
(817)

To sum up, Emily Dickinson's concern with the theme of love comes from her realization that love creates harmony in the universe and earth was made for lovers. Her poems are closely related to her personal experience ,but as a work of art, they portray an independent of the emotional life until it reaches such a stage of maturity that the persona of the poems becomes ready to put the gown of immortality. Her speculation , unlike the mystical communion with the Divine, is based on imagination and sensory experience.²² In her poems she explores the imaginative experience with depth and she dives at the bottom of the human mind and heart to give this experience a realistic quality. She also experiences all forms of contradictory emotions in this inward journey as she passes through various phases of suffering. Emily deals with the theme of love in a metaphysical witty way by using conceits which remind us of John Donne. This way is what

afforded the concept of love its suggestive scope. Furthermore, what marks her modernity is the realistic basis of her imagery. All her images are taken from life and written in a condensed, brief and to some extent, vague way.

Notes

¹ All line references to Dickinson's poems are taken from The complete poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, (1975).

² Cary Nelson, "Emily Dickinson," in literary Kicks. URL: <http://www.google.com>. 3/3/2010.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Albert Gelpi, Emily Dickinson (London: Oxford university press, 1985), p.9.

⁶K.P.Saradhi, Emily Dickinson: selected poems (Agra: Rashtriya Art Printers, 1990), p.10.

⁷Robert E. Spiller, The cycle of American literature (New York: The New American library, 1957), p.132.

⁸Richard V. Chase, Emily Dickinson (London: West Port Press, 1973), p.23.

⁹Richard B. Hauck, "Emily Dickinson,:" in The new Monarch Notes. URL:<http://www.google.com>. 4/4/2011.

¹⁰Kenneth Stocks, Emily Dickinson and the Modern Consciousness (Hound-mills: The Macmillan Press, 1988), p.21.

¹¹Gelpi, Emily Dickinson, p.15.

¹²"Compensation," in Emerson's Essays, E.M.Haze,ed. (London: Oxford Press, 1962), p.30.

¹³Jack Arlington , The Art of Emily Dickinson (New York: The University Press, 1992), p.35.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., p.40.

¹⁶Richard B. Sewall, ed. Emily Dickinson: A collection of critical Essays (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1963), p.134.

¹⁷James Reeves, ed. "Introduction" to Selected poems of Emily Dickinson (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1973), p.xx1.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Emily Dickinson: An evaluation of Her Poetry, Ramji lall (New Delhi: Rama Brothers India PVT.LTD, 2009), P.145.

²⁰Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Compensation" in Emerson's Essays, ed. E.M. Haze (London: Oxford Press, 1962), P.

²¹Nath Kher, The landscape Absence: Emily Dickinson poetry (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p.160.

²²Lall, P. 196.

مفهوم اميلي دكنسون للحب: أقصى الفردوس

م.د. نادية علي اسماعيل

الملخص باللغة العربية:

تهتم الشاعره اميلي دكنسون (1830-1886) بفهوم الحب كمصدر للانسجام في الكون. تؤمن أميلي بان الأرض قد خلقت للأحباء. ان قصائد الحب التي تكتبها لها علاقه وطيده بتجربتها الشخصيه حيث انها تصور تطور الحياة العاطفيه حتى تصل مرحلة النضج التي تخلص شخصياتها. ان تامل الشاعره مختلف عن النظرة الصوفيه, حيث انها تعتمد على التجربة الخباليه و الحسيه التي تكتشفها الشاعره بعمق, حيث انها تجرب كل اشكال المشاعر المتناقضه. ان ما يميز حداثة الصور الشعريه لاميلي دكنسون و المكتوبه بصوره مكثفه و غامضه هو الجذور الواقعيه لتجربتها.