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Emily Dickinson: Her Concept of Love

Love is the most recurring emotional theme in the poetry of Emily Dickinson and no less than a hundred poems were written by her on this subject. Perhaps her unfulfilled emotional life made her comprehend the meaning and significance of love more acutely than any other poet. She felt and understood love in its myriad moods and forms, and in her poetry she tried to perceive this great, rather the greatest motive force of the universe in its varied aspects from different angles. To her "Love is that one perfect labor naught can supersede" (Letters, 484) and "To be loved is heaven" (Letters, 487). Love makes us "Heavenly without our trying in the least" (Letters, 601). Again "Love is always safe place" (Letters, 897) and "Each new width of love largens all the rest" (Letters, 720). To her "Love is Letters, 523) its own rescue" (Letters, 594) and "Love, like literature, is its exceeding great reward" (The moment of love is to her the moment of "Love marine and love Terrence / love celestial too" (Poem, 543).

She sings of human and divine love are so intermingled in most of her lyrics that it becomes difficult to tell whether she is speaking of both at the same time or like Plato, trying to attain celestial love through the profane. The intensity and passionate tone of their love lyrics led her biographers to find out the source of her love poetry. Various names have been suggested like that of Newton, her tutor and Wadsworth, a married man, in a letter to Higginson she writes, "When I state myself as representation of the verse, it does not mean me, but a supposed person" (Letters, 411). In one of her poems she identifies love with God and says that both the lover and the beloved become immortal because love confers divinity upon them.

*Unable are the loved to die
For love is immortality,
Nay it is deity -
Unable they that love - to die
For love reforms vitality
Into divinity.
(Poem No . 809) .*

The object of her poems is a divine rather than an earthly lover. Many of her poems appear to be

lyrics addressed to a human being. But her poems does not describe the physical features of her lover, nor did she describe or anticipate the lover's response, as conventional poems like Shakespeare's sonnets do. Emily Dickinson, like Donne, could wade through different experiences of love and tally earthly love with spiritual love. Ruth Miller says that "she has pictured herself as the bride, the woman in white, the wife of Jesus" (Miller, 80) with reference to a few of her poems.

Commenting on the transition from earthly love to celestial love, J.B. Pickard says, "The human lover remains shadow as her vision of the lovers, heavenly marriage changes to an actual celestial union with God?. The love that she describes reflects that inner experience of the soul which has no earthly lover as its object. Emily (Pickard, 90) identifies love with "Deity" and "Divinity" (Poem 809). The imperceptible divine quality of love is expressed in terms of perceptible phenomena in poem 673.

*The love a life can show below
Is but a filament, I know,
Of that diviner thing.*

*That faints upon the face of Noon -
That smiles the Tinder in the Sun -
And hinders Gabriel's Wing - ...
(Poem 673)*

None of earthly lovers can replace the "Him" and "He" of the poem, love that is glorified in such terms as in the following poem transcends the earthly love of ordinary mortals :

*You left me - sire - Two Legacies -
A Legacy of Love.
A Heavenly Father would suffice
Had he the offer of -
You left me Boundaries of Pain -
Capacious as the Sea -
Between Eternity and Time -
Your Consciousness - and M-*

Love breathes spiritual and heavenly atmosphere and even the pain used by it makes the lovers taste the very bond of eternity, and is as infinite as the sea. Such an ecstasy of love and its concomitant pain cannot be said to belong to earthly life. Her song of love, there-

fore, heightens love to the love of eternity. Again in poem 817 she considers herself to be the bride of trinity and believes that her marriage will "Celestial Host" shall "Conquer Mortality". She often sought of Lord Christ as her divine lover and some of her bridal poems celebrate her marriage to the savior. In poem 279 she expresses her wish to go with her divine lover if she marries her :

*Tie the Strings to my life, my Lord
Then, I am ready to go !
Just a look at the Horses -
Rapid ! That will do !
Put me in on the finest side -
So I shall never fail -
For me must ride to the Judgment -
And it's party, down Hill -
But never I mind the steepest -
And never I mind the sea -
Held fast in Everlasting Race -
By my own Choice, and the -
Goodby to the life I used to live -
And the world I used to know -
And kiss the Hills for me , Just once -
Then - I am ready to go !*

(Poem 279)

The poet decides to be with her lover (My Lord) "in everlasting Race" and to bid Goodbye to the life I used to live". The poet waits as a blissful, blushing maid for Omnipresence to come and claim her as His bride.

*I am ashamed - I hide -
What right have I - to be a Bride -
So late a Dowerless Girl -
Now here to hide my dazzled face -
No one to teach me that new Grace -
Nor introduce - My Soul -*

(Poem . 422)

The marriage that she is thinking of is not an ordinary earthly marriage. In order to be the bride of Christ, she has to achieve the purity and perfection which she lacks. She wonders how she should adorn herself with trinkets or " Fabrics" of cashmere" to cover her imperfections and finally emerges confident, ready for marriage, hoping to be " Baptized - this day - ABride". Emily always thought of divine marriage as love's baptism or a seemed baptism.

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The discussion of her bridal poems shows Emily Dickinson's absolute dedication to Lord Christ and her surrender of the self to him. She believed that divine love was the only source of all wisdom and it is through it that human life and its multifarious activities can become meaningful. Here she reminds the devotional songs of Mira Bai who always used the imagery of profane or earthly love in expressing divine love. A companion poem which more inherently blends spiritual love and human passion, is "Title Divine - is mine"(Poem 1072). Here the ritual of an actual marriage outhunt the human bride groom is so fully developed that are can almost feel the human passion being transformed into divine love :

*Title divine - is mine !
The wife - without the Sign !
Acute Degree - Conferred on me -
Empress of Calvary ! (Poem 1072)*

Thus , we see that Emily's love poems present spiritual concept of love. Her experiences of passion, love, devotion to her divine lover develop into a feeling of sacramental union with God. Prior to Emily Dickinson poets like Edward Taylor have celebrated spiritual union with God the as symbol of marriage.

In some poems of Emily Dickinson, love for man serves as a ,means to grasp Omnipresence, and has been transmuted into love of God. Here also she seems to follow Donne's example in utilizing human love as a step to divine love : "Here the admiring mind did whet / To seek thee God. So streams so show their head".(Bennet,14) Emily Dickinson realizes the image of God in all mortals and chooses that divine quality as her object of devotion: " Of all the souls that stand create - / I have elected - One - " (Poem 664) Vision of the speck of divine love reveals to the poet that the earthly love is nothing but a "brief tragedy of flesh." Thus we see that Emily's love poems presents a spiritual concept of love and, though some poems in which personal experiences are transformed into celestial ecstasy, could be explained in temporal terms as well, yet a general survey of the cluster of love poems would reveal that her concept of love is basically spiritual and divine. The poems that best exemplify her spiritual attitude toward love are woven around the ritual of wedding. Her love poems transcend human world to the divine one where the soul merges with the supreme in eternal bonds.z