

The Mysticism in Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson was born one hundred and twenty-eight years ago, and lived for fifty-six years. Some years after her death (upon the publication of her poetry) people began to probe into the details of her life. Even now, seventy-two years later, the greater part of her life-history is still in shadow. The reason why we know so little about her today is that her contemporaries knew very little about her. Besides living a secluded life in a small Massachusetts town, there were two mysterious "forces" in her life which very few people knew about—one was her religion, the other her love affair. I do not call these (religion and love) mysterious in themselves, but they are mysterious in the way in which they affected her. These two forces alone were the subject matter of her deepest thought and deepest feelings as a poet.

Before dealing with these I shall mention a few character traits that will make the essay more easily understood.

Emily Dickinson might be pictured as being, in her young life very determined, and independent. She also had a sagacious and witty nature about her. And, as all her critics say, she was brilliant.

She was determined (or sensible) enough to resent the authority of Miss Lyon, the redoubtable schoolmistress at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, where Emily boarded when she was seventeen. Miss Lyon is pictured by all as being the essence of Puritan severity; two of her favorite dicta were: "Fun is a word no young lady should use" and "Learn to sit with energy".

Her wit is first betrayed in her letters to her family when she was at school. In writing to her brother from Holyoke she said, "Has the Mexican war terminated yet, and how? If so, do inform me of it, for I would be glad of a chance to escape, if we were about to be stormed. . . ." In another letter she wrote, "Mother sends her love and your waistcoat thinking you'll like the one and quite likely need the other." And again in a poem written for a small magazine, we find:

"During my education
It was announced to me
That gravitation, stumbling,
Fell from an apple tree."

Emily, as a young girl, had sense enough to see (as her people never saw) the extremeness of the rigorosity and severity in the Puritan religion. She was subject to Puritan rules both at home and at school; she never knew any other, yet she would not accept them. The teachers at Holyoke tried to convert her, but they failed in any attempt at spiritual intrusion. Her father, too, had the minister, Dr. Dwight, visit the house and try to "move" her, but this attempt failed. These attempts may have been the cause of Emily's needing to find a way of relieving her feeling—which she did by breaking dishes behind the barn.

She often referred to herself as "wicked", and wrote of her family in 1862 that "they are religious, except me, and address an eclipse, every morning, whom they call their 'Father'". In this latter statement she is only trying to preserve her own integrity as against an 'evangelicism' that could not satisfy a heart hungry for God. I see this poet as one who revoked conventionalism, especially in religion, because it had nothing to offer her. She was a person of deep spiritual insight who knew that Puritan doctrine and practices were inadequate. Even though Emily never knew any other religion, she had insight enough to see that hers was too extreme in some respects. From a religious point of view I can't describe this poet as being anything other than a deist. This, I think, is suggested in the following poem:

Some keep the Sabbath going to church;
I keep it staying at home,
With a bobolink for a chorister,
And a orchard for a dome.

Some keep the Sabbath in surplice;
I just wear my wings,
And instead of tolling a bell for church,
The little sexton sings.

God preaches—a noted clergyman,—
And the sermon is never long;
So, instead of getting to heaven at last,
I'm going all along!

Along with a special insight, the following poem expresses, or shows in the author, a deep yearning for spiritual truth:

Though earth and man were gone,
And suns and universes ceased to be,
And Thou wert left alone,
Every existence would exist in Thee.

As a deist, there must have been times when she doubted her own beliefs. Yet her poetry indicates that she continued a kind of mental inquiry. In her distress of spirit she wrote such lines as:

Of heaven above the firmest proof
We fundamental know,
Except for its marauding hand,
It had been heaven below.

Her own deistic form of religion must have satisfied her conscience, for in most of her poems on religion (and death) she is very happy and optimistic—and always sincere. The poem you are about to read was written in her later years (not earlier than 1884) when the end was anticipated, for she was then a paralytic. No poem could be more personal and passionate than this. This is the embodiment of all her poems on religion:

A wife at daybreak I shall be;
 Sunrise, hast thou a flag for me?
 At midnight I am yet a maid—
 How short it takes to make it bride!
 Then Midnight, I have passed from thee
 Unto the East and Victory.

Midnight, 'Good night'!
 I hear them call
 The Angels bustle in the hall,
 Softly my Future climbs the stair,
 I fumble at my childhood's prayer—
 Soon to be a child no more!
 Eternity, I'm coming, Sir,—
 Master, I've seen that face before.

Having considered the religion "myth" in the early life of Emily Dickinson, we now move on to the love episode. There are many "theories" as to the identity of Emily Dickinson's lover. One of them says that she loved the husband of Helen Fische. Another says that she loved an apprentice lawyer, Ben Newton. Of the three theories, I would rather agree with the one that identifies the mystical lover as the Philadelphia minister, Rev. Charles Wadsworth. The entry into her life of this man changed her whole future. Though she was left in great sorrow upon the death of this man she became, after about a decade, very expressive of her feelings. During these years in which she couldn't force herself into expression she would console herself with such lines as "The small heart cannot break". Of this genuine episode of love she wrote:

I took one draught of life,
 I'll tell you what I paid,
 Precisely an existence—
 The market price, they said.

They weighed me, dust by dust,
 They balanced film with film,
 Then handed me my beings worth—
 A single dram of Heaven.

Again she speaks of the love which she kept in her heart:
 Heart, we will forget him!
 You and I, tonight!
 You may forget the warmth he gave,
 I will forget the light.

When you have done, pray tell me,
That I my thoughts may dim;
Haste! lest while you are lagging,
I may remember him!

Emily Dickinson, the "white nun" of Amherst, author of more than sixteen hundred poems, thus became a poet, only after she had been disappointed in love and had learned to accept that disappointment.

—DES MULLALLY

Emily Dickinson's Views on Death

The theme of death is central in much of Emily Dickinson's writing. She viewed it from many angles in her poems.

To understand her poems on death, a knowledge of the two intellectual and spiritual forces that shaped her thinking, may be helpful. These were the Puritan traditions into which she was born and the romantic and transcendental doctrines shared by the New England intelligentsia of her time. In her home Puritan convictions were strongly held. And they were enunciated by the First Church, which her family attended. Though she often rebelled against them, these convictions remained at the root of her thinking. Such religious traditions held that man is a dependable creature not perfectable in this life or by his own effort. His intuitions are untrustworthy. She refused to believe that a chosen few were saved or that God would punish anyone. The doctrine of original sin to her was not a reasonable concept. The Puritan religion expounded more a jealous God than a compassionate Savior, and this she could never convince herself to accept.

New England transcendentalism asserted the primacy of spiritual over material values, and maintained that sense experiences are fundamental in reality. It taught that man's inner nature is unique, that every man must follow his own intuitions or his own "inner light". Transcendentalism was never a religion. It rejected a belief in an arbitrary God and asserted the perfectability of man. Deity was a pervading principle to be found in all men everywhere. For the transcendentalists, revelation is supplanted by intuition and man is the source of the moral law. These views stirred Emily Dickinson but did not greatly affect her thinking. The Puritan traditions of her family and community were too deep to be easily supplanted by any outside force such as transcendentalism. Throughout her life she was troubled by religious convictions and did not formally adopt any religion.