

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#199 (c.1860)

I'm "wife" – I've finished that --
That other state --
I'm Czar – I'm 'Woman' now --
It's safer so --

How odd the Girl's life looks
Behind this soft Eclipse --
I think that Earth feels so
To folks in Heaven -- now - -

This being comfort -- then
That other kind -- was pain --
But why compare?
I'm 'Wife'! Stop there!

ANALYSIS

“Some critics have interpreted this as a wry anti-marriage poem extremely unusual in a day when marriage was extolled as the highest good. The fact is that American women's wrongs literature had long portrayed the suffering of wives; in particular, several works in the literature of misery, such as Cary's *Married, Not Mated* and Blake's *Southwold*, had underscored the impossibility of happy marriages. Indeed, the year before Dickinson wrote the above poem there had appeared a dark women's novel, *The Autobiography of a Married Woman*, whose heroine becomes so disillusioned with marriage that she exclaims: 'Oh, mothers! Train your daughters to self-reliance, and not to feel that they are to marry simply because everybody does marry.... There are very few happy marriages; there can be but few where interest and self-love form the tie.'

Dickinson's poem stands out not for any new statement about marriage it might contain but for its playful fusion of opposing views about the marriage relation that were circulating in American culture. One view, related to the Conventional ethos of domestic fiction, was that marriage was a state of heavenly bliss and of remarkable power for woman. In Dickinson's own life, this idealization of domesticity was reflected in her well-known enjoyment of housekeeping activities and in certain statements in her letters, such as her 1851 message to Susan Gilbert: 'Home is a holy thing--nothing of doubt or distrust can enter its blessed portals.'

In the poem, this view is enforced by the images of the home as heaven and the wife as 'Czar' and 'Woman'--images that invest the marriage relation with both bliss and power for woman. The contrasting view, related to the more cynical outlook on marriage held by some suffragists and women's wrongs authors, saw marriage as an unequal state in which women suffered a range of ills, from economic deprivation to loss of independence. In spinsterhood and in direct cries of protest in letters, such as her exclamatory note to Abiah Root: 'God keep me from what they call *households*' or her early comment to Susan Gilbert that their unmarried state must seem enviable to 'the *wife*...sometimes the *wife forgotten*.' In the poem, the anti-marriage view is crystallized in subtle images, such as 'soft Eclipse' and 'Stop there!,' suggesting the termination of a woman's independence in marriage.

Dickinson was not the first American writer to incorporate both positive and negative views of marriage. Sara Parton, the author whose 'spicy passages' Dickinson had read to her father, had done this in successive sketches in *Fern Leaves*, and many women writers of the 1850s had studied tensions between

womanly independence and heterosexual love. Dickinson was the first, however, to *fuse contrasting views in a single text and individual metaphors*. The literary fusion enables her to achieve a far more rounded view of marriage than was advanced by either the pro-marriage or anti-marriage groups. The message, if any can be gleaned, is that marriage is a heavenly state of power in which woman gains safety and comfort but at the same time loses the painful but exhilarating self-sufficiency of maidenhood. More important than the poem's message, however, is its stylistic power.

How concisely Dickinson communicates the treatment of wife as the husband's objective possession through the quotation marks around 'wife' and 'Woman'! How subtle are the tonal shifts in the poem, as the persona wavers between enthusiasm and skepticism about marriage! How potently does the phrase 'soft Eclipse' communicate that cushioned banality she envisages in marriage! As always in Dickinson's poetry, the highest triumphs here are stylistic. Given Dickinson's literary aims, it is not surprising that she directly rejected women's rights and was notably inconsistent on women's issues. In the course of her close relationship with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, she never showed interest in one of his favorite reforms, women's rights, and when the progressive popular novelist Elizabeth Stuart Phelps wrote her in 1872 asking for her aid in the women's cause, she burned the letter and mailed her a flat refusal. This indifference to political feminism was part and parcel of serious authorship during the American Women's Renaissance."

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Beneath the American Renaissance
(Harvard 1989) 421-23