

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#322 (1861)

There came a Day at Summer's full,
Entirely for me –
I thought that such were for the Saints,
Where Resurrections – be –

The Sun, as common, went abroad,
The flowers, accustomed, blew,
As if no soul the solstice passed
That maketh all things new –

The time was scarce profaned, by speech –
The symbol of a word
Was needless, as at Sacrament,
The Wardrobe – of our Lord –

Each was to each The Sealed Church,
Permitted to commune this – time –
Lest we too awkward show
At Supper of the Lamb.

The Hours slid fast – as Hours will,
Clutched tight, by greedy hands –
So faces on two Decks, look back,
Bound to opposing lands –

And so when all the time had leaked,
Without external sound
Each bound the Other's Crucifix –
We gave no other Bond –

Sufficient troth, that we shall rise –
Deposed – at length, the Grave –
To that new Marriage,
Justified – through Calvaries of Love –

ANALYSIS

“Emily Dickinson’s great love poem is elucidated by the closing words in a letter to her friend and confidante, Mrs. Holland...early in 1883... The anniversary of the death of The Rev. Charles Wadsworth, April first of the previous year, is approaching. She writes: ‘All other surprise is at last monotonous. But the Death of the Loved is all moments – *now*. Love has but one Date – “The first of April” “Today, Yesterday, and Forever”.’ She then quotes the opening words of Tennyson’s ‘Love and Duty’: ‘Of love that never found its (his) earthly close, What sequel?’...”

That the poem had long been dear to her, and that it influenced her view of mature experience of a love ‘begotten by despair upon impossibility,’ is likely. Certainly she showed a boldness toward love rare in a woman of her time and background. Her championship of George Eliot is a case in point. But as a poet, coming to the practice of her art at the moment of great emotional crisis, it would be from “Love and Duty”

she learned what love could mean in terms of self-realization, and from that the power to transmute experience into poetry.

Like Tennyson's poem, Emily's is set at summer's full—the soul just passing the solstice. But for Tennyson's reasoned and argued approach to love's crisis, Emily sets *revelation*. Both pairs of lovers come to grips with love at full tide and acknowledge in their different ways its ripeness for fulfillment and make their renunciation fully realizing what they are renouncing. The protagonist of 'Love and Duty' enjoins against shying off from the full implications of experienced love, and describes a summer night in which the lovers '...closing like an individual life – In one blind cry of passion and of pain Caught up the whole of love and uttered it, And bade adieu for ever.' Using the terms of sparse Calvinistic theology, Emily brings her lovers (the fire of their love almost sings the symbol) into sacramental communion 'permitted,' 'Lest we too awkward show At supper of the Lamb.' After hours of silence these lovers 'Each bound the other's crucifix, We gave no other bond.'

The earthly sequel to Tennyson's poem is summed up in the creed: '...all life needs for life is possible to will.' The lover then admonishes his beloved: 'Live happy, tend thy flowers; be tended by My blessing.' Characteristically, Emily Dickinson saw no solution for renounced love in the philosophy of recompense. Her thwarted lovers 'rise' immortally to a 'new marriage' justified for them 'Through Calvaries of love!'"

Caroline Hogue
"Dickinson's 'There Came a Day at Summer's Full'"
The Explicator XI (December 1952) Item 17

"I am inclined to disagree with the explanation of Emily Dickinson's 'There came a day at summer's full' as a statement of the poet's emotional reaction to her experience with the Rev. Charles Wadsworth and with the parallel drawn between Miss Dickinson's poem and Tennyson's 'Love and Duty'....

The first of April was not significant to Miss Dickinson only because it was the anniversary of the death of the Rev. Mr. Wadsworth. In a letter to Mrs. Holland written in the fall of 1882, Miss Dickinson said: 'It sometimes seems as if special Months gave and took away. August has brought the most to me – April – robbed me most – in incessant instances' (*Emily Dickinson's Letters to Dr. and Mrs. Josiah Holland*, Harvard, 1951, p. 164). Though justification for Miss Dickinson's use of *incessant* has not yet been established, there was at least one other momentous event in her life that can be associated with the first of April. Benjamin Newton, one of her so-called tutors...died on March 24, 1853. His death was reported briefly in the *Springfield Republican* of Friday, March 26, 1853, an issue that would have reached the Dickinsons in Amherst close enough to April first to have that date associated in Miss Dickinson's mind with her receipt of the news of Newton's death.

Her immediately succeeding letters to her brother Austin exhibit touches of a melancholy that are not noticeable in her earlier letters. There is the first hint of her withdrawal from physical social contacts in a letter to Austin dated June 20, 1853, when she says, apropos of the official celebration of the opening of the Amherst and Belchertown Railroad: 'I sat in Professor Tyler's woods and saw the train move off, and then ran home again for fear somebody would see me, or ask me how I did'.... About the same time she was reading and re-reading Alexander Smith's *Poems*, a volume given her by her brother.

Whatever may have been the personal relationship between Emily and Ben Newton, an impecunious clerk in her father's law office, a certain analogy can be drawn between their situation and that developed in the opening scenes of Smith's 'A Life Drama,' in which Walter, a page, presumes to aspire to the hand of his Lady. Smith's figure, with which the Lady emphasizes to Walter the impossibility of their love, 'We twain have met like ships upon the sea, Who hold an hour's converse, so short, so sweet,' is echoed in the fifth stanza of 'There came a day at summer's full' in Miss Dickinson's 'So faces on two decks look back, Bount to opposing lands.' This trope is completely foreign to the imagery of the rest of the poem (so much so that it might have accounted for the editorial emendation of *soul* to *sail* in the later editions of Miss Dickinson's work) and would seem to require some explanation other than the whim of the poet.

It might have been suggested, it is true, by the Rev. Wadsworth's sea journey to California, but the similarity of Miss Dickinson's image to that of Smith's is provocative. There is also the added association that might be established between another of Miss Dickinson's lines in the same stanza, 'The hours slid by, as hours will,' with the 'hour's converse, so short, so sweet' of Smith. The religious phraseology of the poem of course suggests the Rev. Wadsworth more than it does the budding lawyer, Newton, so that the total poem would seem to have associations involving both men.

There is little in 'There came a day at summer's full' to suggest the deliberate renunciation of an unconventional love affair advocated by Teenyson's 'Love and Duty.' The only bar to consummation that the Dickinson poem indicates is the physical one introduced by the ships 'bound to opposing lands,' and any figurative interpretation of this phrase becomes strained in the attempt to fit it to Miss Dickinson's relationship with either man. In the final stanza of the poem, Miss Dickinson uses the idea of the sacrifice of the physical pleasures of love ('Calvaries of Love') instead of a reference to Gethsemane which would better express the idea of a willed and deliberate renunciation.

On the whole, 'There came a day at summer's full' seems to be a commendation or a glorification of dedicated and eternal love (something of the Dante-Beatrice sort) and not an expression of the poet's instead of a reference to Gethsemane which would better express the idea of a willed and deliberate renunciation. On the whole, 'There came a day at summer's full' seems to be a commendation or a glorification of dedicated and eternal love (something of the Dante-Beatrice sort) and not an expression of the poet's personal feelings for any particular individual—a poem about ideal love and not a love poem."

William Howard
"Dickinson's 'There Came a Day at Summer's Full'"
The Explicator XII (April 1954) Item 41

"Emily Dickinson's view of love was conditioned by her horror of evanescence. She had to see that human attachments, like all other experiences, will be fleeting and transitory. No sooner are they founded than the attachments become vulnerable to the inroads of change and time. Perhaps the emotions themselves will somehow be transmuted. But regardless of the reason, any kinship, from the moment of its establishment, marches steadily toward disruption. And visualizing personal ties in this light, Emily Dickinson was compelled to regard them as essentially frightening and painful. That is the important point. It makes no difference actually what kind of relationship she wrote about, or even whether she had specific relationships in mind. Love, conceived of in any form, was bound to appall her simply because of its precariousness. Even the prospect of being emotionally committed to someone else would prove terrifying to her because the commitment would have a way of reminding her of finalities and of the 'Cavalry of woe' which finalities impose.

This attitude is clearly evident, I think, in ["There came a Day at Summer's full"], one of Emily Dickinson's best.... Separation and loss, as they are presented here, have obviously been generalized into the effects of passing time. Whom the poet has lost seems highly unimportant. It could be anyone: there is certainly no hint of a tragic renunciation, and the absence of silly 'narrative' details is a key reason for the superiority of this poem to 'When Roses Cease to Bloom, Sir.' What does emerge with tragic force, however, is the speaker's acute awareness of temporality, her perception that every relationship is foredoomed by change and can never be preserved from time's encroachments. The text, in short, is less about 'lovers' than about transiency, the transiency which weakens and destroys all human ties. The theme is deprivation, to be sure. But it is deprivation that involves a loss *to* time far more than the loss *of* a specific individual."

Clark Griffith
"Emily Dickinson's Love Poetry"
The University of Kansas City Review XXVII
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"In the 'scriptural irreligion' of Emily Dickinson there is much of the willful child. The rather charming audacity of calling God 'burglar, banker, father' has, with similar expressions, often been commented on. A different note is discernible in ["There came a Day at Summer's full"] an untitled poem of the early

sixties. Spiritual writers since the author of the *Canticle of Canticles* have searched the language of human love for analogies to approximate the experience of love of God. The 'bride of the Lamb' portions of the Apocalypse, while referring specifically to the Church as the new Jerusalem, employ enough of this traditional phraseology for Emily Dickinson to turn it back into purely human terms with breathtaking effect. One wonders what she knew either of the 'religion of love' of the medieval courtly code or of its sophistication in poems like Donne's 'Canonization.' The development of 'There came a day at summer's full' is strikingly consistent when the New Testament allusions are explored.

The first clue is the word 'revelations' at the end of the first stanza. The last book of the Bible, the Apocalypse in the Douay-Rheims translation, is called Revelations in the King James version. The highly personal import of the poet's vision is stressed—'Entirely for me.' John's vision was given by God 'to make known to his servants' (Apoc. 1:1). The contrast is thus subtly set in the first stanza and modulated in the second where the terms are the quotidian and the unique—the commonplace behavior of sun and flowers, and the soul-shaking 'solstice' of the poet-lover. Her experience, however, parallels that of the other visionary who, describing the garments and appearance of the 'one like to the Son of Man,' adds, 'his face was as the sun shineth in his power. And when I had seen him, I fell at his feet as dead' (1:13, 16-17).

Another strain than the strictly scriptural enters this pair of stanzas. The juxtaposition of the 'day at summer's full' with 'the solstice' points to Midsummer Night and its wealth of folklore associations, including one familiar from Barrie's *Dear Brutus*—the realization of 'what might have been' for those who ventured into the wood that magic night. Here is undeniable poignancy to any who read the Dickinson poem in its alleged context of biography or self-dramatization. Unexpected confirmation comes from the source of the second stanza's last line, 'That maketh all things new.' Apocalypse 21 gives us in its first verse 'a new heaven and a new earth,' and in its second 'the new Jerusalem...prepared as a bride adorned for her husband'; in the fourth, 'God shall wipe away all tears...: and death shall be no more, nor mourning, nor crying, nor sorrow shall be any more, for the former things are passed away'; finally 'he that sat on the throne said: Behold, I make all things new' (21:5).

The third and fourth stanzas can also be paired, with the key word 'time,' as opposed to eternity, pointing to a whole series of negative analogues between the two vision-experiences. The poet's time is signaled by silence, wordlessness; speech would be a profanation. The apostle's timeless vision is full of utterance, vouchsafed or specially bidden; indeed, here the Word is sacred. A bit of syntactical play in line two of stanza three, 'The symbol of a word,' reads the prepositional phrase ambiguously as 'consisting of a word' or as a subjective genitive. The latter reading, at first less obvious, comes through strongly in the light of the otherwise puzzling last line and a half of the stanza, 'as at sacrament / The wardrobe of our Lord.' The sacramental symbol is to be dispensed with in the presence of the reality symbolized—true in heaven, analogously true in the peculiar immediacy of the poet's (idolatrous) situation. The choice of 'wardrobe' to express the accidents of the Eucharistic Bread is a further link with the vision of the Son of Man 'clothed with a garment down to the feet, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle' (1:13).

The fifth chapter of the Apocalypse introduces the Lamb who alone is 'worthy to open the [seven-sealed] book, and to loose the seals thereof' (5:2). We have already (1:4) met the 'seven churches which are in Asia' (and thereby entitled, in New England, to some aura of exoticism) and which are to receive the mystic communication of the prophet. And the Church (we repeat) as 'new Jerusalem' is 'the bride, the wife of the Lamb' (21:9) who in 14:1,4 was attended by a throng of virgins specially singled out as such. By 19:7,9 'the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath prepared herself.... Blessed are they that are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb....' Can this elaborate construct back the ellipsis of stanza four of the Dickinson poem?...

The preference (of earth to heaven, man to God, time to eternity) has been put more plainly, more quaintly and therefore more acceptably (read as part of the Dickinson manner, as frank hyperbole) in poems like 'I cannot live with you,' especially in the lines: '...you saturated sight, / And I had no more eyes / For sordid excellence / As Paradise.' In 'There came a day at summer's full' the rejection is less playful, and the mood no longer conditional. The unitive experience, this virginal marriage of souls (how delicately insinuated by 'sealed church' as sacrosanct and unconsummated, although with haunting ambiguity in the chain of associations started—sealed church, sealed book, Lamb-Bridegroom, opening seals), takes place

on a purely human level; the determination to rest there has become a *fait accompli*, recognized apparently ('Permitted') by the vestigially Calvinistic Arbiter of their spiritual destinies; the here and now ('this time') is the chosen substitute for eternity, on the plea of incapacity ('Lest we too awkward show') to participate ('to commune,' with Eucharistic overtones) in the heavenly *agape* or love feast, the marriage supper of the Lamb.

The evanescence of time ('The hours slid fast') and place ('Two decks... / Bound to opposing lands') is concretely imaged in stanza five, which at first glance seems without scriptural reference. But a background in vision literature is strongly implied. In the Old Testament no man could see God face to face and live (Ex. 33:20). The consequence of the communion of stanza four is, logically, loss, and, appropriately to the exclusively human character of the relationship, mutual loss. Again, there is a significance in 'hands' and 'faces,' and nothing else, representing the persons involved. These attributes may be thought of as distinctively human, but as approaching the Divine (the 'hand' and 'face' of God often symbolize his power and presence) at the same time as they differentiate man from beast.

To return to our vision literature, the four living creatures of Apocalypse 4:7 were respectively 'like a lion...like a calf...having the face [italics mine] of a man: ...like an eagle flying.' Ezechiel's vision, upon which John's is based, records of the same living creatures that 'they had the hands of a man...and they had faces....' (Ez. 1:8). Incidentally, both sets of living creatures were in rapid motion: 'according to the impulse of the spirit' (Ez. 1:12), 'they rested not day and night' (Apoc. 4:8), praising God. Are we then in the way of reconciliation (with God) through renunciation (of what is merely human)?

The last two stanzas point to sacrifice, even to sacrificial 'death,' mutual and voluntary, followed by resurrection and 'that new marriage' in eternity, 'justified' through suffering. We are not without ambiguity here, of course, but those who wish can press for a happy (Christian-inconsistent?) ending in sublimation. A word might be added in support of the sacrificial aspect. Elsewhere Emily Dickinson writes: 'Of tribulation these are they / Denoted by the white; The spangled gowns, a lesser rank / Of victors designate...' To the bride of the Lamb it was 'granted...that she should clothe herself with fine linen, glittering and white. For the fine linen are the justifications of saints' (19:8). The biographers tell us that Emily the recluse wore only white."

Mother Mary Anthony
"Emily Dickinson's Scriptural Echoes"
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Michael Hollister (2014)