

## The Futility of Love

EAVAN HUTH



*WRITER'S COMMENT: Emily Dickinson writes in a way that I find to be uniquely linked to humanity—her words are strongly connected to the presences, absences, and in-betweens of life. After the discussions that occurred about her pieces in Professor Margaret Ronda and Teaching Assistant Marshall Callaway's course, Love and Desire in Contemporary American Poetry, and given my admiration of Dickinson since the time I was in high school, I decided that I wanted my paper to discuss one of her distinct and remarkable works. I chose her poem "I cannot live with You," which explores the despair and meaningfulness of the speaker's struggle with indefinite separation from her lover. Writing this essay was a wonderful experience. It was a welcome challenge of my close reading skills (for which I have my former teacher, Ms. Jennifer Wei, to thank) and also an interesting opportunity for reflection on the topic of interpersonal severance or disunion, and its significance within the greater context of one's life.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Eavan Huth's essay, "The Futility of Love" was written as the first paper assignment for my course, Love and Desire in Contemporary American Poetry (Eng 166). This assignment, a close reading paper, asks students to consider how one poem represents the complex psychological and social workings of love by way of its formal devices. I want students to attend to the ways poetic form creates emotion, drama, and action, particularly in that most affectively charged of aesthetic objects, the love poem. Eavan's essay offers a wonderfully nuanced reading of Emily Dickinson's "I cannot live with You (640)" that illuminates how formal dimensions such as caesuras, dashes, pronouns, and capitalizations dramatize what Eavan calls the speaker's "futile wish" for romantic union with the addressee. Eavan deftly maps each agonized turn in Dickinson's famously circuitous poem, coming at last to a brilliant assessment of its final conclusion: that there is something, finally, more ideal, more perfect, in this "unlived" love than in love that is fulfilled. Arguing that the poem's ending on a dash rather than a period "leaves the poem, in a sense, unfinished, just as the relationship is," Eavan makes a masterful case for the mutually illuminating relation between*

*Dickinson's content and form.*

*— Margaret Ronda, Department of English*

So We must meet apart –  
You there – I – here –  
With just the Door ajar  
That Oceans are – and Prayer –  
And that White Sustenance –  
Despair –

Emily Dickinson

The nearly ceaseless endorsement of the miraculous "happily ever after" ending in love stories and poetry has created the pervasive belief that but one type of love matters: consummated love. However, love is not always so simple, nor so ideal – some love is destined never to be realized fully or even at all. Yet it is still meaningful, even if it does not follow the "traditional" path that ends with fulfillment. This closing segment of Emily Dickinson's twelve-stanza poem "I cannot live with You" is the culmination of the speaker's struggles with a would-be lover, a struggle arising from the speaker's separation from this person. Though she desires to be with the unnamed individual, she cannot – it proves impossible for her to either live or die with her beloved due to their circumstances, and the poem, like their relationship, "ends" unresolved. In "I cannot live with You," the speaker navigates the frustrating, unachievable nature of her love, and through this exploration, Dickinson illustrates the futility of seeking to consummate a love that is not to be and speaks to the immense pain that being separated from it causes.

While there are glimmers of hope in the uncertainty of the would-be lovers' predicament, which could mean the love is worth pursuing, each instance of hope is minimized and shown to be fleeting. There is some promise in the speaker's saying to her absent lover, "So We must meet apart – ." Although the lovers are not together, they are, in some respect, able to "meet." Capitalizing "We" indicates the significance of the individuals as a whole – as two that have become one. Making "We" a proper noun endows it with more meaningfulness, and in fact, invests it with agency of its own. "We" makes space for itself in the poem in the same way that "We" make space for ourselves in the world – the word itself is stronger and more imposing with a capital first letter, just as two individuals are stronger and take up more space when they

are together. However, despite the hope of togetherness the word suggests, “We” is quickly torn apart. The two would-be lovers are no sooner brought together than they “must meet apart.” Not even a line is devoted to the possibility of “We” – it is a futile wish in the face of the certainty that they “must” be separate. This considered, the “So” beginning the line also feels like submission, rather than a potentially fruitful attempt at problem solving. There are no better alternatives, “So” the speaker must accept this defeat. The speaker and the subject are quickly made pointedly distinct from one another once again when the speaker refers to them as “I” and “You,” as they are named through most of the poem. In fact, in only three instances does the speaker use inclusive, plural pronouns, and in each, the idea of togetherness is similarly dismantled.

Hope is to some degree reestablished later, when the speaker describes herself and the subject of the poem as being in different places, between which “just the Door [is] ajar.” Though these two people are in different locations, whether physically or emotionally, a link between them remains – the Door is not shut, but rather is only “ajar.” This liminal space indicates a possible transition from the way things are now, which is characterized by separateness, and the way things could be – there is potential for the space to be crossed. However, this is the only link between the two places – it is “just” the Door providing any kind of potential connection – nothing else creates the possibility of unity. The fact that “Door” is capitalized also calls attention to it, reinforcing its prominence as a barrier between the would-be lovers, and again, endowing it with an extra strength. The noteworthy instances of dashed hope in a poem about two would-be lovers highlights their desire for romantic or sexual union, but also the ultimate lack of fulfillment, and the uselessness of seeking it.

The separation of the speaker and the subject ultimately dominates the space of the poem, and although there are examples of hopefulness, they are eclipsed by the prominence and inescapability of disunion. There are numerous dashes, and they are often very close together. All but one line in this passage, and nearly every line in the rest of the poem, ends with a dash, which means that nearly every line begins in its own singular way after a pause, rather than in a fluid way as continuous lines do. Caesura in the line “You there – I – here –” is particularly significant, as the dashes on either side of “I” very noticeably create a considerable space between “You” and “I,” even within the context of a single line.

Dickinson’s use of caesura throughout the poem both draws attention to silence and absence, building the poem on what is missing rather than what is there, and in the separation of the words, emphasizes the separation of the would-be lovers. The fact that the false hope of the door being “ajar” is the kind of “ajar” “That Oceans are – and Prayer” also emphasizes the immensity of the distance between them, even in light of some kind of connection. The “Oceans” are incredibly vast – too vast and too turbulent to be traversed – and are therefore an impossible obstacle, never to be crossed, just as it is impossible for the two lovers to close the gap between them. “Prayer,” too, highlights the impossibility of a meaningful interconnection between the two lovers, because although praying has the potential to offer some kind of comfort, it cannot here. One may speak to God, but God will never directly speak back. Prayer as an act is purely an intangible one – it relies on an internal, individual, spiritual process, which does not and cannot offer any tactile or bodily interaction between the “two” entities involved. The foundation of any hope the speaker has access to is built on emptiness – in the end, it is frail and fleeting, and cannot make a real difference in her situation.

The speaker’s love was never meant to be consummated, and its existence leads only to suffering, ultimately proving to be futile. The presence of the “White Sustenance” points to this nonfulfillment – white is associated with being untouched and pure, and especially considering the speaker’s mention of “Prayer,” the whiteness is indicative of ultimately leaving the space in one’s heart and one’s body empty to better relate to God through religious virtue. However, the “White Sustenance” is also sexual – it evokes seminal fluid, which would indicate that the love, or at least the desire, was fulfilled. However, this is not the case. The utilitarian “Sustenance,” the nourishment that keeps a person alive for a time, indicates a fleeting provision to the speaker. It is unsustainable, and even while it is there, it is not rich, or truly satisfying. This “White Sustenance” is also immediately followed up by “Despair –,” and this is how the poem ends. So it is clear then that the love has not led to a happy ending, nor has it even truly been resolved. “Despair –” occupies its own line, indicating the singular, resounding effect it has on the speaker. It also does not conclude the poem decisively – rather than ending the thought with a period, which would create a certain finality, the line ends once again with a dash. Ending on this pause emphasizes the silence once again, but also leaves the poem, in a sense, unfinished,

just as the relationship is.

To conclude, in “I cannot live with You,” despite her immense desire for unity and togetherness, consummated love is never attainable for the speaker, and even with some distant hope, any attempts to realize her desires are futile as well. The impossibility of love is truly the central concern of this poem. However, this does not mean that love is not meaningful, or that one should never hope to experience love. Rather, it shows that a form of love – possibly one of the most consequential – is love that remains unconsummated, or unfinished. Although throughout Dickinson’s poem, love is portrayed as futile in the sense that nothing tangible amounts from it, it still has the potential to be impactful. Great suffering was yielded from this love, and there is meaning both in the pauses and in the silence, of the poem, and of life.

### Works Cited

Dickinson, Emily. “I cannot live with You.” *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*. Ed. David Lehman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 176-77. Print.

## Familiar Strangers

AUDREY TORREST



*WRITER’S COMMENT: After developing an understanding of the major visual pathways of the human brain in the neurobiology curriculum at UC Davis, I was excited to delve deeper into the world of visual processing from a more disease-oriented perspective. When I learned about prosopagnosia, a condition in which individuals cannot recognize faces, I was captivated by its interesting neurobiological basis and the experiences of individuals with this disorder. For Theresa Walsh’s course, “Writing in the Health Professions,” I interviewed a neuroscientist living with prosopagnosia. Inspired by the Sacksian case study, which strives to reveal clinical manifestations of disease in the framework of real, relatable human experiences, I produced this story of a life lived without recognizing faces. I hoped that my work would bring this obscure disorder, with a complex and poorly understood neurophysiological basis, into the hands of a broader audience.*

*INSTRUCTOR’S COMMENT: My 104F class is designed in such a way that students compose in different genres for different audiences that they might encounter in the health professions. I assign a case study in which students interview subjects and then report on their illness or condition to an audience of professionals. Students then reshape that content for a broad audience. In doing so, writers refocus the subject of the piece from the illness to the patient. This sequence of assignments typically reveals each student’s strengths and weaknesses, as some tend toward objective scientific reporting, while others show a propensity for empathic narratives.*

*Throughout this course, Audrey repeatedly demonstrated her drive to write well and she naturally excelled in scientific writing. In her narrative case study, however, Audrey would be writing for an audience that included the subject of the piece. Early in the process of composing the essay, Audrey expressed her desire to write an essay that honored her subject. With tremendous sensitivity to the central character of the piece and a keen awareness of the science that informed his condition, Audrey wrote “Familiar Strangers,” which displays her rhetorical and professional maturity, as well as her ability to deftly*