

# Faith suspended

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Emily Dickinson is perhaps one of the most intriguing American poets studied. The remote look in her eyes mirror her life, which she mostly spent secluded in her home in Amherst, Massachusetts. While leading an outwardly reclusive life, she unleashes the faculties of her mind in her powerful poetry. She addresses compelling themes such as death, depression, human despair, individual capability, and the art of poetry. Her feelings on these subjects emerge in her poems, but her exact thoughts are difficult to uncover since her poetry is so highly enigmatic. Likewise, the subject matter of Christianity in her poetry remains one the most inconsistent of Dickinson's reoccurring themes. It is known that she stopped attending church at an early age and eventually withdrew from Mount Holyoke Female Seminary because she could not accept the idea of Original Sin (Conarroe 74). Furthermore, Dickinson also "resisted the local religious revivals in which other family members and friends . . . became involved" (884). Despite her dislike for revivals, as did many clergymen during her time, Dickinson incorporates central Christian themes in her poetry. She often makes Biblical references such as "Because Your Face / Would put out Jesus'- " (22-23), and "The Brain is just the weight of God- " (5). It is also noted that "She loved the Bible," among a list of other great writers and their works, and said, "'Why is any other book needed?'" (Conarroe 73). In addition, her form and meter imitate the hymnal ballads that she had heard throughout her life. Consequently, it may be difficult to conclude how she feels about Christianity, for there is evidence both ways. Because Dickinson's stance is not plainly obvious, she compels the reader to excavate her poetry for further evidence. In her poem "'Faith' is a fine invention," Dickinson puts

quotes around the word “ Faith,” bringing to attention the irony between the word’s original meaning, which is the belief in God, and its more contemporary meaning, the religion of Christianity. There is a sense of loss in the speaker’s voice on faith and what it has become. The first line reads, “ Faith’ is a fine invention” (1). Instead of “ faith” referring to the unadulterated belief in God, Dickinson suggests that it has become merely an “ invention” (1), something that is man made and no longer sacred. The first two lines, “ Faith is a fine invention / When Gentlemen can see- ” (1-2) also imply that the men, or mankind, cannot see, which makes man-made religion not such a “ fine” invention. The next line begins with, “ But Microscopes are prudent” (3). Dickinson is saying that many times, people looking towards faith are missing the grand scheme of Christianity by trying to look at it through a microscope. Perhaps Dickinson is criticizing how people have become so overly focused on the doctrines of Christianity, rather than simply having faith in God. Dickinson herself, disagrees with the church on the issue of Original Sin, yet she continues to seek “ spiritual solace away from the family pew,” as she says, “ Some keep the Sabbath going to Church- / I keep it, staying at Home- ” (Conarroe 74). In the final lines of the poem, she says that microscopes are “ prudent / In an Emergency” (4), pleading Christians to stop wasting their brief lives on earth looking down through microscopes and start looking up to God. In this poem, Dickinson appears to criticize what man has made of “ Faith,” not the belief of God in itself. Another one of Dickinson’s poems, “ I cannot live with You- ,” seems to be a love poem, perhaps addressing Rev. Charles Wadsworth, with whom she appears to have had a close personal relationship with (884). The

poem is full of tender words that yearn for her deceased lover, but, like so many of her poems, it is consistent with more than just one interpretation. This poem can also be seen as Dickinson's love poem to Christ. In addition to the imagery of her lover's face being able to put out, or smother even Christ's brilliant face, Dickinson might be using the phrase also in the more literal sense, of her lover revealing or putting forth the face of Christ. In this reading of the poem, she speaks to Christ as if He were her lover, as she expresses anguish and grief for not being able to be together with Him. In the beginning stanza, Dickinson says, I cannot live with You-It would be Life- And Life is over there-Behind the Shelf- (1-4) Dickinson equates Christ to life, just as Christ did in John 14: 6, " I am the way and the truth and the life." Moreover, she suggests that Christ is hidden behind the shelf, with the shelf possibly representing religion. It is interesting that she uses the image of the shelf to separate Christ from her because shelves oftentimes hold books, which are symbols of human knowledge and understanding. Dickinson may be inferring that human reason and interpretation of the Bible have in fact, stood in the way of God and mankind. In the second stanza, Dickinson writes that the " Sexton keeps the Key to- / Putting up / Our Life- His Porcelain- " (5-8). Here, she likens mankind to Christ's porcelain, something fragile and beautiful, a precious belonging of Christ's. She also points out that the sexton, who according to the Oxford English Dictionary is a church officer who carries out the menial duties of the church, has the key to " Putting up / Our Life- " (7-8). Dickinson uses the image of the sexton as a symbol of the technical, or dogmatic elements of religion, thus, implying that man's belief in God have been disrupted by the very doctrines of Christianity. Dickinson

makes an allusion to Christ's crucifixion in the fourth stanza, " I could not die- with You- " (13), and His resurrection in the sixth stanza, " Nor could I rise- with You- / Because Your Face / Would put out Jesus'- " (21-23). Again, when taking the phrase in the literal sense of putting forth or revealing one's face, she is telling Christ that she regrets not being able to die or resurrect with Him. She longs to be with Christ and no longer want to fuss over religious doctrines such as the idea of Original Sin. There is a definite tone of guilt in these lines, the guilt of not being able to whole-heartedly believe the Christian doctrine in its entirety. She says to Christ, They'd judge Us- How- For You- served Heaven- You know, Or sought to- I could not- (29-32) It is true that Rev. Charles Wadsworth served God, but in a sense, Christ too served God as He descended to earth as a heavenly sacrifice. In the eleventh stanza, Dickinson continues to seek her lover, Christ. She describes His absence as being hell. " And I- condemned to be / Where You were not- / That self- were Hell to Me- " (41-44). Finally, Dickinson realizes that she and Christ can never come together on earth because of the discrepancies between herself and the teachings of the Christian religion. " So We must meet apart- / You there- I- here- " (45-46). She resolves that the only way is for her to keep the door, or the communication between them, open as wide as the oceans are with prayer. " With just the Door ajar / That Oceans are- and Prayer- " (47-48). She also includes that her despair, caused by the confusion of the Christian doctrine, keeps her leaning towards God, " that White Sustenance" (49), for spiritual solace. The Christian readings of these poems offer an interesting glimpse into Dickinson's views on Christ and religion. Her passionate monologue addressing her lover in the last poem

reveals the clear distinction she makes between her faith in God and her belief in the Christian doctrine. Throughout the poem she longs for Christ, and finally accepts the fact that Christian truths may never be discovered while on earth. Perhaps her feelings of uncertainty are manifested in her frequent use of the dash, which effectively suspends the reader just as she is suspended from the truth. Works Cited Conarroe, Joel. *Six American Poets*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.