



## EMILY DICKINSON'S CONCEPT OF LIFE AS PILGRIMAGE

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### ABSTRACT

Emily Dickinson's life is considered as a deliberately secluded one, away from the mainstream of the society. Her close relatives and the few friends knew her of having a very deep reflections of life as evident from the correspondences she had with them. Her meditation on eternity was intense as seen in her poems which coined her philosophy of life. Concept of a pilgrim in this life is a basic concept in Dickinson's poetic philosophy.

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### INTRODUCTION

Emily Dickinson was a private poet in her life time. Only ten poems were published while she was alive. Those publications were without her approval and published anonymously.<sup>[1]</sup> Only a week after her death the outside world came to know that she had preserved her better poems in a locked box in her living room<sup>[2]</sup>. Now we have almost Eighteen hundred poems written by her.<sup>[3]</sup> Her philosophy of life was molded by her Christian religious beliefs which were modified by her experiences, readings, reflection and understanding of the trends of her time.

#### A. Pilgrim symbols in Dickinson Poetry

Rich symbolism of life as pilgrimage is seen in her poetry at large. In poem 30, she speaks of the individual soul in the form of a little boat which is traveling to the 'nearest town' which is eternity or heaven: "Adrift! A little boat adrift! / Will no one guide a little boat / Unto the nearest town? / ... So angels say- On yesterday- / Just as the dawn was red / One little boat- O'erspent with gales- / Retrimmed its masts- redecked its sails- / And shot- exultant on!"<sup>[4]</sup>. The little boat continues its happy journey in eternity at the end of the poem.

Poem 35 symbolizes a rose as a pilgrim: "Nobody knows this little Rose- / It might a pilgrim be"<sup>[5]</sup> In this pilgrimage of life, the time given to us is like a lease. This idea is explained in poem 75: She died at play, / Gambolled away / Her lease of spotted hours, / Then sank as gaily as a Turk / Upon a Couch of flowers."<sup>[6]</sup>

Poem 76 explains this fact again using the sea imagery: Exultation is the going / Of an inland soul to sea, / Past the houses- past the headlands- / Into deep Eternity-"<sup>[7]</sup> The pilgrimage finds heaven not only destination but also the real home. The abodes on this earth then becomes temporary as expressed by the poem 79: "Going to Heaven! / ... / For you know we do not mind our dress / When we are going home."<sup>[8]</sup>

In poem 101 Emily pictures herself as a pilgrim who is in search of the place of eternal morning: "Oh some Scholar! Oh some Sailor! / Oh some Wise Man from the skies! / Please to tell a little Pilgrim / Where the place called "Morning" lies!"<sup>[9]</sup> Poem 113 shows a typical journey towards eternity: "Here a star, and there a star, / Some lose their way! / Here a mist, and there a mist, / Afterwards-day!"<sup>[10]</sup> Poem 132 clearly tells that life is a pilgrimage:

"And so I always bear the cup/ If, haply, mine may be the drop/ Some pilgrim thirst to slake."<sup>[11]</sup>

In poem 388, Expectation to meet the beloved and the struggles we underwent would be fulfilled and rewarded in the heaven to come: "Nearer to Your Courtesies/ Than this Sufferer polite-/Dressed to meet You-/ See in White!"<sup>[12]</sup>

#### B. Pilgrim's struggle

The pilgrim nature necessarily makes life a struggle too. This idea is seen in poem 147: " Bless God, he went as soldiers,/.... Please god, might I behold him/ In epauletted white-/ I should not fear the foe then-/ I should not fear the fight!"<sup>[13]</sup>The suffering of a pilgrim is seen in poem 148: "Gathered from many wanderings-/ Gethsemane can tell/ Thro' what transporting anguish/ She reached the sphodel!"<sup>[14]</sup>Struggle to stay away from other dimensions and focusing in the pilgrimage aspect of life is the expression of poem 279: "Tie strings to my life, My Lord,/ Then, I am ready to go!/.... But never I mind the steepest-/ And never I mind the Sea-/ Held fast in Everlasting Race-/ By my own Choice, and Thee-"<sup>[15]</sup>

The struggle and fight in this life and the courage to overcome problems are expressed in poem 292: "If your Nerve, deny you-/ Go above your Nerve-/ Ae can lean against the Grave,/ If he fear to swerve-"<sup>[16]</sup>The last stanza says: "If your Soul seesaw-/ Lift the Flesh door-/ The Poltroon wants Oxygen-/ Nothing more-"<sup>[16]</sup>

Poem 1001 thinks the strength of a pilgrim to proceed in his journey towards eternity is the desire to experience His Countenance. It gives everybody the strength and support, even after the grave. "The Stimulus, beyond the Grave/ His Countenance to see/ Supports me like imperial Drams/Afforded Day by Day."<sup>[17]</sup>

In poem 319, for a pilgrim, Heaven is the nearest dream which recedes unrealized: "The nearest Dream recedes- unrealized-/The Heaven we chase,"<sup>[18]</sup>

Poem 320 is aware of the fact that this life as practice for the next: "We play at Paste-/Till qualified, for Pearl-/.../ And our new Hands/Learned Gem-

Tactics-/ Practicing Sands-"<sup>19]</sup>Prayer of the pilgrim is answered in the form of the kingdom of God in poem 323 . As if I asked a common Alms,/And in my wondering hand/ A Stranger pressed a Kingdom"<sup>[20]</sup>Poem 325 deals with the pilgrim aspect of life. Pilgrimage to eternity, to the community of the saved: "Our panting Ankle barely passed-/ When Night devoured the Road-/But we- stood whispering in the House-/And all we said- was "saved"<sup>[21]</sup>

Life as a pilgrimage makes work meaningless in poem 360 "With "This was last Her fingers did"/Industrious until-//The Thimble weighed too heavy-/ The stitches stopped- themselves-/And then 'twas put among the Dust/.../Whose Pencil- here and there-/Had notched the place that pleased Him-/At Rest- His fingers are-"<sup>[22]</sup> Scholars say that she is saying about reading a book which was given by a friend who is no more alive. This friend may be Benjamin Newton who gave her book of Emerson as Thomas Johnson tells.<sup>[23]</sup>

In poem 470, as a pilgrim, she enjoys both the lives: one here and one in the next. "How good- to be alive!/ How infinite- to be/ Alive- two fold- The Birth I had-/ And this- besides, in- Thee!"<sup>[24]</sup> it hints at the pilgrim aspect of life as well.

Poem 533 says that life, being a journey, is brief: "Two butterflies went out at Noon-"<sup>[25]</sup> In second stanza, she observed two butterflies who after playing in the farm, firmament, resting on a beam went to the sea and never returned: "And then- together bore away/ Upon a shining Sea-/ Though never yrt, in any Port-/ Their coming, mentioned- be-"<sup>[25]</sup> In third stanza, the bird, a small warship and merchantmen never told they met these butterflies again.

Poem 478 is a beautiful poem on enmity and love. She has no time to waste for enmity: "I had no time to Hate-/Because/ The Grave would hinder Me-/ And Life was not so/ Ample I/ Could finish- Enmity-"<sup>[26]</sup> Enmity takes a long time to end. So she prefers not to opt for enmity. Also she has no time for love. But "Some Industry must be-". So she prefers love in this life: "The little Toil of Love-/ I thought/ Be large enough for me-"<sup>[26]</sup>

In poem 624, present moment is also important. Our life as pilgrims is important in its aspects even though it has not yet reached its destination. This poem has basic presumption that eternity is continuation of this life: "Forever is composed of Nows-/'Tis not a different time-". It is not different from 'Anno Dominis' <sup>[27]</sup>

The struggle aspect of life is depicted in poem 1188: "'Twas fighting for his Life he was-"; "It aims once- kills once- conquers once-/There is no second war-/In that Campaign inscrutable/ Of the Interior."<sup>[28]</sup> The struggle to be alive is over when death comes is a reality of everyone's life. In poem 1234, She is very much aware that this life is on its journey to get back immortality which is hidden from us now. "Mortality's Ground Floor/ is Immortality."<sup>[29]</sup> Next life is the base of this life and its continuation.

### C. Determination of a pilgrim

'Progress' is important in pilgrimage as in poem 483 where awareness of the growth of self is a solemn feeling. "A Solemn thing within the Soul/ To feel itself get ripe-"<sup>[30]</sup> So every day we find the "Single" harvest day for some lives; i.e. everyday some ripened harvest is gathered to heaven – analogy for death of people. In other words, everyday some pilgrims reach their destiny of travel.

This concept of life makes the soul as someone who has come for a temporary shelter in the body as in poem 578. The body can grow even without the spirit but the spirit makes it a temple. This idea is based on St Paul's saying on Holy Spirit. The body doesn't betray the soul which has come for shelter: "It never did betray/ The Soul that asked its shelter/ In Solemn honesty".<sup>[31]</sup> No one can detect the presence of soul in the body, because of the solemn honesty of the body.

The yearning in the heart of a pilgrim is the theme in poem 501. The yearning of the soul for eternity is clearly stated: "Narcotics cannot still the Tooth/ That nibbles at the soul-"<sup>[32]</sup> Poem J 542 tells us of the poet's preparation for journey to reach heaven. She chooses gown, prayer and reach heaven: "So choosing but a Gown-/And taking but a Prayer-/ The only Raiment I should need-/ I struggled- and was

There-"<sup>[33]</sup> In poem 581, she experiences a kind of 'existential tension' with regard to the concept of immortality: "I found the words to every thought/ I ever had- but one-/And that- defies me-". It reflects her search for the meaning of immortality while here in the mortal existence.<sup>[34]</sup>

In poem J 586 we talk about everything except about our death is the nature of life on earth: "We speculated fair, on every subject, but the Grave-/ Of ours, none affair-". The notion Man proposes, God disposes referred to in second stanza: "We handled Destinies, as cool-/As we- Disposers- be-/ And God, a Quiet Party/ To our Authority-". which proved wrong later. The parting with promise to write and remember never actualized as death took away the friend. "But heaven made both, impossible/ Before another night."<sup>[35]</sup> Such unexpected events decorate our lives here as pilgrims to show the temporariness of this abode on earth.

Poem 615 tells us that life is a pilgrimage to eternity: "Our journey had advanced-/ Our feet were almost come/ to that odd Fork in Being's Road-/ Eternity- by Term-". Though our journey reached near eternity, we were reluctant. But retreat was also not possible: "Retreat was out of Hope-/ Behind- a Sealed Route-/ Eternity's White Flag- Before-/ And God- at every Gate-"<sup>[36]</sup>.

How would be the life of a person who targets immortality? This question is answered beautifully in poem 657. Emily as a poet is busy writing poetry: "I dwell in Possibility-/A fairer House than Prose-/ More numerous of Windows-/ Superior- for Doors-". Precious visitors come often in this house: "The fairest-". this notion is like J 298, "Alone I cannot be- / For Hosts- do visit me." The household works inside this home: For Occupations- This-/ The spreading wide my narrow Hands/ To gather Paradise-"<sup>[37]</sup> it seems meditation of eternity was her only serious work as we see in this poem.

Poem 698 says, "Life- is what we make it-/ Death- we do not know-". We all have roles to play and goals to fulfill in this life. In this journey as pilgrim, Jesus is the role model. Though death lies in unknown frontiers, "Christ's acquaintance with Him/ Justify

Him- though-".Jesus' endorsement of Death is enough for the poet. He is the "Tender Pioneer-". Christ is shown as a Pilgrim who travelled first. This his successful travel gives us courage: "Base must be the Coward/ Dare not venture- now-" [38]

Poem 708 deals with sorrows and struggles in the life. Sometimes we have to drop the woe and be consoled in the "Thought to be alive-" because "Would look too far- to Die-" Her love of life and struggle in it are expressed. Pilgrim imagery of life in this poem is in the form of a sailor: "The Sailor doesn't know the Stroke-/Until He's past the Pain-" [39]

Her determination as a pilgrim is seen in poem 1046 F 1088. She will strive for being even if it's centuries away. "To Being, somewhere-Motion-Breath-/ Though Centuries beyond,/ And every limit a Decade-/ I'll shiver, satisfied." [40]

Poems J 510, "It was not Death, for I stood up,/ And all the Dead, lie down-" [373] On the subject matter of the poem, Clark Griffith says that it is proved to be a naturalistic affliction, "an agony of the living rather than of the dead, a waking bad dream as opposed to the nightmare that comes in sleep." [41]

Poem J 598 may be on her real experience of near-death. "Three times- we parted- Breath- and I-" She may be speaking how she outlived the great crisis of 1862 of her life. "The Waves grew sleepy- Breath- did not-/ The Winds- like Children- lulled-/ Then Sunrise kissed my Chrysalis-/And I stood up- and lived" [42]

The main duty of a pilgrim is to be hopeful always. Poem 1264 beautifully explains it in these lines: "This is the place they hoped before,/Where I am hoping now." [43] 'They' are the ancestors who had lived here and whose duty of hoping is taken over by us now. The pilgrim is to be aware that this life is very short. Poem 1287 says on this idea, "In this short Life/ That only lasts an hour" [44] Our power is very little in this short life.

#### D. Relevance of 'hunger' in life as a pilgrimage

Comparison with pilgrim days and the heavenly days is the theme of poem 579. Previous one was of expectation, thirst and hunger; present heavenly state is of plenitude, plenty, fulfillment.

"'Twas this on Tables I had seen-/ When turning, hungry, Home/ I looked in Windows, for the Wealth/ I could not hope- for Mine-" After years of fantasy of the great table, she is at last before it. But now she is not hungry and the table is offering plenty of food. But she could see hunger in the people who wait for entering there: "Nor was I hungry- so I found/ That Hunger- was a way/ Of Persons outside Windows-/ The Entering- takes away-" [45]

In contrast, Poem 791 is on the food of a pilgrim. "God gave a Loaf to every Bird-/ But just a Crumb- to Me-" In the bible we find God feeding every bird; the poet imagines that He gave only meager food to her. But without eating it, the poet find her luxury in starving: "I dare not eat it- tho' I starve-/ My poignant luxury-" But she is proud "To own it- touch it-". The possession of the crumb makes the poet supreme: "with but a Crumb-/ Am Sovereign of them all-" [46]

In poem 773, she is speaking similar theme of hunger as part of her journey on earth. "Deprived of other Banquet,/I entertained Myself/At first- a scant nutrition-/ An insufficient Loaf-". She calls the hungry bird robin a fellow pilgrim: 'A Robin's famine able-/ Red Pilgrim, He and I-/ A Berry from our table/ Reserve- for charity-' Her philosophy of the importance of hunger in this life is clearly seen in poem 1036 which says that to be content and long for immortality is an anomaly: "Want- a quiet Commissary/ For Infinity.//To possess, is past the instant/ We achieve the Joy-/ Immortality contented/ Were Anomaly." [47]

#### E. Focus Of Pilgrim Is Eternity

Emily Dickinson finds life basically a pilgrimage on its journey to eternity. Poem 1664 beautifully narrates the pilgrim aspect of life which ultimately leads us to God. In this journey, "Sahara is too little price/ To pay for thy Right hand". After the long journey of pilgrimage in this life, death arrives which takes us closer to eternity: "Three rivers and the Hill are passed-/ Two deserts and the sea!/Now Death usurps my Premium/ And gets the look at Thee." [48]

Passing from present to a new phase is the reality of our lives. Poem 1292 has something to say on it: "Yesterday is History/"Tis so far away-/ Yesterday

is Poetry/'Tis Philosophy-/ Yesterday is mystery/  
Where is it Today". The passing phenomenon of the  
aspect of life is that while we speculate on yesterday  
and today's mysteries, they flutter away: "While we  
shrewdly speculate/ Flutter both away."<sup>[49]</sup>

The failure of our human plans in this life is  
evident in the poem 1293. "The things we thought  
that we should do/ We other things have done/ But  
those peculiar industries/ Have never been begun."<sup>[50]</sup>  
In the same way, poem 1335 says that Life is full of  
surprises as we see in Eden as well. But we expect to  
continue the dream we saw the other night: "What  
edifices azure/ For butterflies and me-/.../Without a  
rhythmic rumor/ Or an assaulting guess."<sup>[51]</sup>  
Transcendence element added to life in poem 1341:  
"Has "All" a further Realm-/ Or Utmost an  
Ulterior?"<sup>[52]</sup>

Poem 1387 focuses on our needs in this  
pilgrim life. The butterfly which has "Numidian Gown"  
from North Africa cannot be affected by sun burn. But  
often it needs to rest on clover leaf. "The Butterfly's  
Numidian Gown/...Is proof against the Sun/...And  
panting on a Clover lean"<sup>[53]</sup> In J 1244,1266 butterfly  
was symbol of immortality. In that sense, this journey  
of the butter fly may be a symbol for our journey to  
heaven and in this journey we need enough rest and  
care and consolation.

The pilgrim image of us as travellers is  
pictured in poem 1450 in the imagery of a horse man,  
"Traveller on a Hill" who found the "Road was lit with  
Moon and star-" Lines 6-7: "To magic  
Perpendiculars/Ascending, though Terrene/ Unknown  
his shimmering ultimate-"<sup>[54]</sup> The horse man climbing  
up a hill at night may be symbolic of our journey  
towards the 'magic perpendiculars' of eternity and  
shimmering ultimate of heaven.<sup>[55]</sup>

Our only hope in the struggle of this life is  
eternity. This notion is seen in poem 1499: "How firm  
Eternity must look/ To crumbling men like me."<sup>[56]</sup> The  
insecure people read their future in the mighty face of  
eternity. Unless in reference to/ hidden in the  
prospect of Eternity, no human face properly fits  
together.

In poem 1618 she depicts her philosophy of  
life in grammar terms: "There are two Mays" i.e. two  
options of good and evil. "And then a Must", means  
the must of death; "And after that a shall" which  
means the 'shall' of eternity. "How infinite the  
compromise/ That indicates I will!"<sup>[57]</sup> this may mean  
that we have very few time to decide for good and act  
accordingly before approaching eternity.

Being a pilgrim, she is aware of the sweetness  
of this life as well in poem 1741: "That it will never  
come again/ Is what makes life so sweet."<sup>[58]</sup> Poem is  
of opinion that our half-belief in immortality is no  
compensation for this life, because, if it exists at all, it  
will be existence with this life's sweetness taken away  
from it and make us hungry for its opposite.

With regard to this life, the pilgrim aspect is  
affecting our real living. This idea is seen poem 1758:  
"Where every bird is bold to go".<sup>[59]</sup> Paula Bennett  
convincingly expounds this poem. Only we human  
beings are 'foreigners' in this life, because only we are  
aware that death is coming and may be our end. So  
we have to push back the tears before we knock on  
the door of death, while birds and bees boldly play in  
front of it without fear.

While explaining meaning of poem 1099,  
Linda Freedman tells that the poem "focuses on the  
process of becoming rather than on fixed states of  
being, and that is the enabling power of the  
constraining cocoon."<sup>[60]</sup> This vision of Emily on the  
need of becoming also sets the necessity of pilgrimage  
for the beings in search of a better state than the  
present stasis. In this sense, life becomes a process.  
This process is called 'Liminality' by Freedman.  
"Liminality is the place of the in-between.". Speaking  
in terms of religious context, "it concerns the  
movement between sin and salvation, passivity and  
activity, humanity and divinity."<sup>[61]</sup>

Life as a mystery was upheld in her poems  
irrespective of the realistic observations she offers in  
the analysis of life. Life of others also remained a  
mystery for her. Charles Anderson observes, "She was  
content to let others remain a mystery."<sup>[62]</sup> This is  
largely due to the fact that life here on earth is  
oriented towards eternity. This dimension basically

transforms life into a pilgrimage. She beautifully expresses this creed in the poems: 'This world is not conclusion'. That's why she declares, 'Mortality's ground floor is immortality'.

#### F. As a Christian Concept

Christianity finds life basically a pilgrimage. It becomes a pilgrimage as the destination of the individual soul and the community of the believers is the heavenly Jerusalem where God is the ruler. The concept of the church itself is that it is a community of pilgrims. *The Christian Faith* explains: "The time of the Church extends between the two poles of Christ's glorification establishing Him as the Lord and of His final epiphany at the Parousia. During the entire period, the pilgrim People of God, by responding freely to God's communication of Himself through His Son in the Spirit, advances through its final fulfilment, awaiting in hope the transfiguration of the world."<sup>[63]</sup> In his public audience in June 2013, Pope Francis told people, "I am a pilgrim". This vision of the church is beautifully adapted in Emily Dickinson's poems.

#### Concluding observations

Emily Dickinson locates life between eternity and immortality 'Behind Me- dips Eternity- Before Me-Immortality-' Emily loved this life which is a pilgrimage. Dickinson did not profess her faith publically mainly because she didn't want to leave 'world'. As John Timmerman observes, "The question for Dickinson essentially becomes this: when this life of images is over, what will be God's reaction to these images?"<sup>[64]</sup> That's why her poems demand God that her 'confiscated gods' whom she lost in death, be given back in eternity. As Nancy Meyer says, Dickinson refuses to be consoled, in her poems generally, by the prospect of eternal life because it "banishes the mortality that teaches us to love"<sup>[65]</sup>

Thirst and starvation are integral part of this pilgrimage. As Vivian Pollak says, Dickinson's food and drink imagery "describes a cycle of deprivation, self-deprivation, and attempted self- sustenance. Typically, her persona is starving, unaccountably and unjustly, in a world of plenty."<sup>[66]</sup>

She considered her own life as a pilgrimage. Roxanne Harde is of opinion, "That Dickinson's last note

informs the Norcrosses, "Little Cousins, Called back"(L1046), suggests an assured faith at the end of a lifelong Christological inquiry."<sup>[67]</sup> Her attitude towards life is beautifully summarized in her letter to Susan Gilbert Dickinson: "In a life that stopped guessing, you and I should not feel at home."<sup>[68]</sup> In her poetry, we find someone who tried to focus her attention fully on the eternal aspects than the changing scenarios of this life.

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##### Abbreviations in foot notes

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(E.g. J 1 means first poem in Johnson edition)  
F -R W Franklin (ed), *The Poems of Emily Dickinson 3vols*, Harvard Uni Press, Cambridge, 1998. Citation by poem number.

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The Emily Dickinson Museum website avers, "The cause of that terror is unknown"; one biographer suggests it was fear of blindness from her eye ailment. But the beginning of this poem, written in the same year as this letter and invoking a similar image of singing to ward off fear, makes me doubt this explanation: The first Day's Night had come. And grateful that a thing. More than a practical convenience for a life spent at home, the legendary white dress was, I believe, Emily's silent protest. I recently went on a literary pilgrimage to the Dickinson Homestead. I saw Emily's room and a replica of her white dress, held facsimiles of her poems, visited her grave.