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# Willing Paradise: Death, Desire, and Shame in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

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## **Abstract**

Emily Dickinson's poetry engages, above all, with questions about selfhood and identity, anticipating the postmodern notion that the self emerges in response to the other. Dickinson individuates the other as Death, a male suitor at once alluring and repulsive, who stands in relationship with the self as the "enigmatic, inscrutable" other, to use Judith Butler's terms. Death's representations, then, are multitudinous: he presents himself alternately as a lover, a friend, and a foe, never the same, yet always demanding a response. Confronted with this overwhelming ethical responsibility, Dickinson's (often ungendered) speakers suffer deeply—psychologically and physically—from shame, which is both the blushing "tint divine" and the "shawl of Pink" that protects the soul (J 1412). Paradoxically, the self must embrace shame, simultaneously destructive and protective as it is, in order to attain paradise. Similarly, encounters with the other, often figured as Death, are necessary for self-formation even as they demand a suppression of the will in a Butlerian "recurring impingement." Instead of a negative emotion, shame in Dickinson's work is recognized and affirmed as necessary for ontological fullness.

*Keywords:* Emily Dickinson, Poetry, Literature, Death, Desire, Shame, Subjectivity

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Of all the themes that Emily Dickinson explores in her poems, shame has received relatively little attention from critics. The word “shame” and its variants appear, according to Rosenbaum’s *Concordance to the Poems*, just thirty-two times in Dickinson’s 1,775 extant poems.<sup>1</sup> Though she uses the word “shame” so infrequently, it is a theme intrinsic to many others, including death, sex, friendship, love, and faith, and thus warrants closer examination. Dickinson’s attitude toward these topics is often maddeningly ambivalent, making it admittedly “difficult to make a compelling point on the basis of a single brief lyric,” and shame is no exception (Dickie 537). Fundamentally, she assigns shame a more positive meaning than perhaps we would today, recognizing and affirming it as necessary for attaining a fullness of being. Emotional pain—and shame, though positive, is undeniably painful—in Dickinson’s poetry exhilarates the subject, forcing it to contend with its individuality and its Otherness among Others. Perhaps unsurprisingly for a woman of a relatively puritanical Calvinist background, Dickinson argues that we should accept shame as inevitable in our relationships, especially, as evidenced in her letters, our positive ones. In a letter written in about 1857 to Elizabeth Holland, one of her closest friends, she writes, “Shame is so intrinsic in a strong affection we must all experience Adam’s reticence” (*Letters* 171). “Adam’s reticence” is a sense of inadequacy experienced in the face of someone we value. And that painful feeling of inadequacy, while uncomfortable, is not undesirable; pain, after all, “pave[s] the way to” self-affirming “paradise” (Sielke 98), moving the subject beyond the limits of the restrictive “mundane, temporal world” (Simons 176).

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<sup>1</sup> *A Concordance to the Poems of Emily Dickinson* is based on Thomas Johnson’s 1955 edition of Dickinson’s poems; all of poems discussed in this essay are taken from Johnson’s 1960 edition.

Those who attempt to circumvent shame's discomfort by uncritically accepting the cultural practices of the "mundane, temporal world"—especially marriage—merely lose their sense of individuality, their identities subsumed by their imposed social roles. Many of Dickinson's poems directly question the female subject's place in the constructed world. Her desiring female (and ungendered) subjects move continually toward the infinite, dominant Other, feeling both "Adam's reticence" and the shame that female erotic expression and experience inhere. Dickinson uses shame's traditional female associations to her advantage, imbuing the painful emotion with a distinctly feminine strength and beauty in her definition poem "Shame is the shawl of Pink" (J 1412).<sup>2</sup> Dickinson's ideas about shame originate, as we will see shortly, in her reading of (and identification with) Eve's disobedience. Her ashamed speakers contend, like Eve, with their own alterity, simultaneously experiencing their painful consciousness and the overwhelming dual responsibility of "own[ing] a Body" and "own[ing] a Soul" (J 1090, 1, 2).

With her commentary on shame's relationship to the female body, Dickinson delineates an ethic that anticipates the postmodern notion of selfhood as emerging in response to the Other. She shares what Roland Hagenbüchle identifies as the Romantics' "disturbing discovery that the subject, having lost its transcendental origin, cannot ground itself and that its autonomy is spurious" (1). In arguing for a "fragmented" lyrical "I," she opens her subjects to the "invasion of something exterior," which often manifests as Death, an alluring and enigmatic male Other (Craig 208, 226). Dickinson's ideas about subjectivity and selfhood prefigure, in many respects, Judith Butler's. In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler draws on Foucault, Nietzsche, Levinas, Laplanche, Hegel, and Adorno to propose a conception of ethics grounded in the "fragmented" subject, arguing, like Dickinson, that the subject's "autonomy is spurious." This vision of ethical

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<sup>2</sup> Dickinson never titled her poems; accordingly, I refer to each poem as numbered in Johnson's 1960 edition of her poems.

responsibility, as we will see in Dickinson's treatment of the figure of Death, lies not in the subject's ability to account for some past transgression, but in the subject's ability (and obligation) to respond to the Other. In that respect, "I," the subject, "cannot disavow my relation to the Other, regardless of what the Other does, regardless of what I may will" (Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* 91). I want to argue that the "overwhelming" relation between the self and the Other—especially Death—naturally gives rise to the subject's feelings of shame.

Shame seemingly functions as creating an Otherness for the self. We find an example of this in Dickinson's frequent use of the story of Adam and Eve, a *topos* that allows her to explore desire and shame in both her poems and her letters. Though she felt that we must experience "Adam's reticence," she was, as I noted, particularly interested in the figure of Eve. In a letter to her dear friend Abiah Root, dated January 12, 1846, fifteen-year-old Dickinson writes in her characteristically witty style, "I have lately come to the conclusion that I am Eve, alias Mrs. Adam. You know there is no account of her death in the Bible, and why am I not Eve?" (24). While fifteen-year-old Dickinson's playful musings may not carry the philosophical or theological weight of, say, thirty-year-old Dickinson's, the seeds of her thinking about women's alterity are evident in this letter. One imagines that her upstanding Calvinist mother, for example, would have frowned on such an enthusiastic self-identification with Eve. But again, unlike her mother, Dickinson was not interested in being a "Brittle Lady" of Amherst society (J 401, 11). Instead, she "dwell[ed] in Possibility," rejecting marriage and motherhood in order to write her poems (J 657, 1).

Eve's disobedience was evidently much more exciting than traditionally pliant womanhood to the bright and intellectually curious poet. Indeed, Dickinson "celebrated Eve's duplicity, her invention of the art of concealment" (Homans, *Women Writers* 216). Eve's

“concealment” was both material and immaterial. Ashamed of her nakedness, she covered her body; moreover, her identity as a singular, autonomous being was concealed by her union with Adam (thus her transformation from Eve to “Mrs. Adam”). Perhaps thinking of Eve’s “duplicity,” Dickinson genders shame as female, presenting “concealment” as a uniquely feminine source of strength. She offers these definitions in the characteristically ambiguous J 1412:

Shame is the shawl of Pink  
In which we wrap the Soul  
To keep it from infesting Eyes –  
The elemental Veil  
Which helpless Nature drops  
When pushed upon a scene  
Repugnant to her probity –  
Shame is the tint divine.

This poem, like many of what Jed Deppman calls Dickinson’s “self-corrective” definition poems, begins assertively before trailing off into ambiguity, “repeat[ing] the definitional gesture by introducing a series of metaphors, nuancing and seemingly refining the meaning and creating subtleties of mood without following any apparent order or progression” (Deppman 54). The thoughts that she articulates in this poem are not as fully-formed as they seem at a first glance; unlike dictionary definitions, which establish the limits of a word’s meaning, Dickinson’s metaphors prompt the reader to ask further questions (Deppman 50). What makes this poem slightly different from other definition poems, however, is the fact that not one, but two, definitions frame it. Dickinson takes the atypical syntactic step of closing this poem with a

period, lending the concluding statement a sense of finality that the definitions lack.

Uninterested, however, in conceptualizing shame concretely, she instead evokes images that “interlock and interact to form a composite canvas of harmony” (Deppman 69). How are we to make sense of the “shawl of Pink” without the “elemental Veil?” What is the “tint divine” without the preceding descriptors? They work together to form a cohesive picture.

Remarkably, instead of inventing a new framework that transgresses patriarchal language, Dickinson uses it to her advantage in this poem, “identify[ing] possibilities of female power within patriarchal languages themselves” (Noble 23). She uses delicate, feminine imagery to evoke strength. Here, shame is as stereotypically feminine as the “shawl of Pink,” the “elemental Veil,” and the blushing “tint divine.” A feminized “Helpless Nature” protectively “drops” the “elemental Veil” upon the offending subject; we “wrap the Soul” in the “shawl of Pink” “to keep it from infesting Eyes” (5, 4, 2, 1, 3). This short, relatively obscure poem’s unexpected subversiveness makes it brilliant. As Terence Diggory argues, the “shawl of Pink” and the “elemental Veil” do not suggest “helplessness,” or even “vulnerability,” despite Dickinson’s using the former adjective in describing the feminized nature-figure (139). Rather, the “exclusively feminine” articles of clothing serve as “armor,” offering protection, comfort, and strength (Diggory 139). But what of her last (and, without a doubt, most ambiguous) definition, “Shame is the tint divine”? Diggory does not, in his brief analysis of this poem, name it among the other metaphors as describing female strength. Unlike the first two definitions, it implies that shame physically marks the body in some way, though it is uncertain whether it is a positive or negative marking. Apparently the “tint” isn’t the youthful blush that we typically associate with shame; being “divine,” it has an “immortal significance,” marking the subject everlastingly (“Divine”). Perhaps the tint is simply “[t]he ‘proper’ reaction of a woman to the mere thought of

nakedness” (Diggory 139). As an Other among Others, that “thought of nakedness,” or vulnerability, is never far from the subject’s mind; to exist as a self is to be painfully aware of one’s relation to the Other.

Friendships demand the “feeling of nakedness” that, as her biographer Thomas Johnson writes, Dickinson “more than once identifies with Eve’s discovery” (53). In J 1199, she explores the negative and positive aspects of that “feeling of nakedness,” asking, “Are Friends Delight or Pain?” (1). It seems that they are both, but the boundary is porous. A friend’s generosity, for example, proves pleasing and embarrassing at once; it levies a responsibility that its recipient may find overwhelming. In 1878, Dickinson enigmatically claims in a brief note to her friend Mrs. Stearns that “[t]he seraphic shame generosity causes is perhaps its most heavenly result. To make Heaven more heavenly, is within the aim of us all” (*Letters* 378). Her alliterative coupling of the words “seraphic” and “shame” and her preceding declarations about “Heaven” echo her definition of shame as the “tint divine” in J 1412. This language suggests a close connection between shame and a blissful paradisiacal state. The “Heaven” that Dickinson describes in her letter to Mrs. Stearns is, however, not the Christian afterlife. She found such an idea “inconceivable,” contending instead that “human mortality is fundamental to a person’s very essence,” a boundary experienced in the subject’s encounters with Death (Ernst 6). She contends in her letter that shaping paradise—“mak[ing] Heaven more heavenly”—is something that individuals choose for themselves. She found the idea that God arbitrarily selects those who attain the afterlife anathematic; she rejects the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, preferring “human determinism” instead (Simons 177). In J 1069—quoted here in full—Dickinson details her vision of a willed paradise:

Paradise is of the option.



Whosoever will  
Own in Eden notwithstanding  
Adam and Repeal.

This vision of paradise is what Simons describes variously as a constructed “hallucinative world of fantasy” and “a manifest metaphor for exotic release from unacceptable reality” (176). That “unacceptable reality” manifests not necessarily as pain (or, implicitly, shame), since both paradise and pain “are part of a dialectics of a subjectivity-on-edge” (Sielke 97). Paradise does not negate pain (or pleasure, for that matter): in some cases, as we will see in J 663, it amplifies them. Dickinson’s paradise is, however, fundamentally incompatible with the social strictures imposed on women by a patriarchal society. Paradise, for her, is only an “option” to those willing to overcome the “blocking figures” of “Adam and Repeal,” which oppress “the desirous self” in this poem (Simons 179). Paradise gives the creative subject freedom to practice her art; it is only by “gathering paradise” that the woman poet, for example, can write her poems (J 657). And as an unmarried woman poet living in a restrictive puritanical and patriarchal society in which “the...corseting of women’s bodies, choices, and sexuality” was the norm, Dickinson was no stranger to such “forces of oppression” (Rich 102). Accordingly, she “exercise[d] her gift as she had to, making choices” (Rich 101), dedicating her time to writing and rejecting what she perceived as the unstimulating life of the “Soft – Cherubic Creatures” that populated Amherst society (J 401, 1). Their shameless artificiality and prideful refusal to overcome “Adam and repeal” repulsed Dickinson. She could not abide by the voluntary relinquishing of identity and selfhood that marriage, in her view, inevitably brought.

While “it would be an oversimplification to claim that all of [Dickinson’s wife poems] can be strung on the skein of a single narrative,” she expresses her negative feelings about the

subject in a number of poems (Harris 45). The shamelessness and inauthenticity that the “Soft – Cherubic Creatures” exhibit, for example, appear inextricably linked in J 473, one of Dickinson’s less flattering “wife” poems. The speaker, “[s]o late a Dowerless Girl,” anxiously awaits her nuptials: “I am ashamed – I hide – / What right have I – to be a Bride –” (3, 1-2). Using similar language and imagery to “Shame is the shawl of Pink,” Dickinson again depicts shame in terms of concealment and hiddenness. The speaker conceals herself in “[f]abrics of Cashmere” and “[r]aiment instead – of Pompadour – / For Me – My soul – to wear –” (8-9, 11-12). And while those garments “wrap the Soul / To keep it from infesting Eyes –” (J 1412, 2-3), the speaker worries about her naked “dazzled Face,” her painful exposure to the Other that she cannot conceal (4). Overcoming—or, one surmises, suppressing—her shame in the end, the blushing bride beckons, “Bring Me my best Pride – / No more ashamed – No more to hide / Baptized – this Day – A Bride –” (22-24, 26). Instead of putting on the “armor” of shame, the bride chooses pride and, in doing so, seemingly relinquishes her agency and her subjectivity. Only in the first few stanzas of the poem, when she expresses her anxiety about her impending wedding, does she think of herself as an “I”: “I am ashamed,” “What right have *I*” (emphasis added). Her identity is bound in the very real and painful emotions that she feels in those moments. After her marriage, that painful self-exposure ironically disappears as she comes out of “hiding.” Her “pride”—her refusal to feel ashamed—precludes her from feeling “the heights and depths” of the “full spectrum of human emotion,” forcing her to adopt a new, inauthentic identity (Craig 225). She remains trapped, like the “Soft – Cherubic Creatures” whose hypocritical “Dimity Convictions” disgusted Dickinson (J 401, 5).

Dickinson resists this narrative not by directly challenging it, but, as we saw in J 401, satirizing the power that wifhood ostensibly inheres. This was a personal as well as a creative

endeavor for her; “[w]e know,” as Suzanne Juhasz points out, “that Dickinson, a young woman who wanted to be a poet, emphatically resisted the kind of dominance and commensurate loss of self that love and marriage traditionally brought” (“Writing Doubly” 9). She celebrates love in a number of her poems, but she could not abide by the voluntary relinquishing of self that marriage seemingly brought. If Eve becomes “Mrs. Adam,” then we cease to think of her as an individual. Her husband’s identity subsumes hers, and her new status as a respectable “Soft – Cherubic Creature,” malleable to society’s expectations, offers no, or at least very little, recompense (J 401, 1). The speaker’s excessive (and presumable insincere) enthusiasm in “Title divine – is mine! / The Wife – without the Sign!” (J 1072, 1-2) cleverly illustrates this dilemma, evoking biblical language in describing wifely trepidation. Dickinson punctuates short lines composed of monosyllabic and disyllabic words with exclamation marks before introducing dashes and, in the last line, uneasy, whispering italics. The speaker’s attitude shifts subtly from pretentious enthusiasm to quiet, contemplative regret. Awakening to her self-sacrificial fate, the speaker reflectively likens marriage to being “Born – Bridalled – Shrouded – / In a Day – ” (10-11). The married woman conceals her body and, implicitly, her identity; she ceases to recognize herself (and be recognized) as an autonomous subject, becoming instead an object of male desire. The speaker, realizing this, ends the poem skeptically and sardonically: “‘My Husband’ – women say – / Stroking the Melody – / Is *this* – the way?” (13-15). (The suggestion is, of course, that marriage is *not* “the way.”)

If “desire is the *driving force* behind her oeuvre,” as Roland Hagenbüchle claims, then the expression of female desire forms a central part of Dickinson’s poetry (2). Desire is notably absent from her wife poems, replaced, as we have seen, by unwarranted pride. Desire, whether erotic or creative, is self-affirming in Dickinson’s poetry. I contend that Dickinson uses

“patriarchal languages” “to...first...generat[e] a radical critique of the specularity and the hierarchical structure of language and of metaphor”—as exemplified most powerfully by her skeptical “wife” poems—“and then by imagining a place from which female sexuality can speak for itself, a rhetorical of female pleasure to replace the silencing rhetorical of male desire” (Homans, “Syllables of Velvet” 576). Poems like the famous “Wild Nights – Wild Nights!” (J 249) chart the speaker’s unfulfilled desire, while others, such as “He put the Belt around my life –” (J 273) and, as we will see shortly, “Again – his voice is at the door –” (J 663), exploit “the power of the male lovers to restrict and mold the objects of their desire” (Pagnattaro 35). The latter two poems express the ungendered (though presumably female) speaker’s masochistic desire for the endlessly alluring Other, illustrating at the same time the porous boundary between shame and erotic expression. Pain is an “inexpressible,” “unshareable,” and individual experience that takes the subject beyond the artifice that prompts the subject to choose their own paradise (Sielke 97). In J 241, for example, Dickinson argues for the intermingling of pain and pleasure:

I like a look of Agony,  
Because I know it’s true –  
Men do not sham Convulsion,  
Nor simulate, a Throe –  
  
The Eyes glaze once – and that is Death –  
Impossible to feign  
The beads upon the Forehead  
By homely Anguish strung.

Dickinson's subjects seemingly take a masochistic pleasure in experiencing shame. Shame, like agony, is "true," empowering the subject. "Desire," after all, "quickness in response to a force from without, and its pleasure/pain occasions new understandings or interpretations of herself and the world" (Juhasz, "Amplitude of Queer Desire" 26). When Dickinson asked, "And why am I not Eve?", she might as well have asked, "And do I not desire?" For the female subject to pursue her desire is to claim a kind of power ordinarily denied her. Mieke Bal, in her reading of Genesis 1-3, claims that Eve radically "promotes her own status in the narrative. Her disobedience is the first independent act, which makes her powerful as a character" (331). Dickinson's subjects enjoy this power, but, like Eve, they face the consequences of pursuing their desires. Moreover, Eve embodies the dualism of body and soul that so fascinated Dickinson. Bal points out that this "split...was retrospectively projected upon Eve as a character, as she was interpreted after the working of the retrospective fallacy: so attractive in body, so corrupt in soul, and hence, dialectically dangerous because of her attractiveness" (320). Women's supposed moral and physical inferiority marks them as Other, beguilingly and repulsively anchored in their corrupt, desiring bodies. This is perhaps why Dickinson defines shame as something that simultaneously conceals the body and protects the soul.

Death is desirable above all to Dickinson's subjects because he represents the ultimate lack. Though the speaker in "I like a look of Agony" claims that "Men do not shame Convulsion / Nor simulate, a Throe," they can, and do (Benfey 91). Death, on the other hand, is "[i]mpossible to feign" (6), fulfilling, in many ways, a similar function as paradise; both force the individual to apprehend herself "as a being who encounters her ultimate individuality and subjectivity, even her isolation" (Ernst 5). Though she cheekily speculates that Eve never died, Dickinson draws important connections between Death—the biological process and the figure—

and shame. For her, confrontations with Death are life-affirming. As Katharina Ernst explains, the “unbridgeable distance” between the self and the Other “leads to an endless desire for the other, i.e., a process that endlessly confirms the individuality of each” (14). Death proves insurmountable, and “[d]esire evinces the power human life has over death precisely by participating in the power of death” (Butler, *Subjects of Desire* 90). Death’s unconquerability is precisely what makes him so enticing. Sensing a fundamental lack, Dickinson’s speakers (engaging, it seems, in a Freudian death-drive) move continually and desirously toward Death, despite the shame that arises inevitably in such an overwhelming relation (Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* 98).

As the personification of patriarchal dominance, Death is undoubtedly Dickinson’s most famous character. Alternately friend, foe, and lover, he provokes (and evokes) strong feelings, whether friendly, murderous, or erotic. His representations are multitudinous, and each of his personas demands a different response from the one on whom he affixes his gaze. As Fred D. White argues, “Death, like the sword of Damocles, hangs over our heads every moment of our lives, and for that reason must be acknowledged and confronted” (98). Dickinson’s speakers react to Death’s advances with a mixture of trepidation, mockery, and desire. They cannot simply ignore him, even if they want to; he demands a response from the subject. An encounter with Death, the male Other, “inaugurates” the subject (Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* 55); and, as Butler argues, one only “giv[es] an account of oneself through yielding to another’s word, another’s demand” (Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* 126). This means that recurring encounters with the Other cause the subject to create itself, to dispense with identity and start afresh. Death demands silently, but his silence demands the subject’s yielding just the same.

As a dominant masculinized figure in Dickinson's poems, Death is recrudescient, concurrently desirable and repulsive, frighteningly serious and laughable. Johnson describes him as a "protean figure, part element of nature, part erlking, part Grendel, but mostly country squire: a suave, elusive, persuasive, insinuating character, but always a very genteel and attentive Amherst friend and suitor" (219). Designating him as "*always* a very genteel...friend and suitor" is problematic and reductive (emphasis mine). I think that his "friendship" is ostensible rather than genuine—that is, he identifies and exploits the vulnerabilities of the living. He recognizes that his charisma induces the female's blushing shame, and he does not seem to care—it's part of his ploy. Dickinson's speakers are painfully aware of the finality—literally, the end to life—that friendship with Death incurs. It is generally best to avoid him. Some speakers advise confusing or distracting him. The speaker of Poem J 1716 advises "baff[ling]" Death "if it cost you / Everything you are" (7-8), but admits that Death, figured in that poem as a burrowing insect, can will himself "[o]ut of reach of skill –" and one is therefore left with no choice but to tolerate his presence (7-8). Like all friendships, his is not without its difficulties; even as he presents himself as kind and self-effacing, he demands the ultimate sacrifice: the loss of one's life. The dying must agree to Death's terms.

Death's erotic allure draws his victims into an inescapable relation, and those victims sometimes find themselves abandoning their sense of shame in the face of overwhelming desire. He is, despite—or perhaps because of—his "protean" nature, an eminently recognizable figure, and there exists a reciprocal desire between Death and Dickinson's speakers for mutual recognition even as the living attempt to thwart Death's authority. Those who seek recognition by Death risk "arresting" their desire altogether. As Butler helpfully elucidates, "To revise recognition as an ethical project, we will need to see it as, in principle, unsatisfiable. For

Hegel...the desire to be, the desire to persist in one's own being...is fulfilled only through the desire *to be recognized*" (Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* 43). Recognition, however, can never be truly fulfilled "because the terms by which recognition operates may seek to fix and capture us, they run the risk of arresting desire, and of putting an end to life" (Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* 44). If identity is "fixed" or "captured," then the potential for becoming a recognizable subject is also arrested. The desiring subject faces a conundrum: the end of desire is the end of life, but, as Dickinson demonstrates in a number of her poems, frustrated or forbidden desire shames the subject.

It seems possible that Death does not—cannot—desire recognition, since that would put an end to his evasive (and invasive) antics. However, he is, as I mentioned, a highly recognizable figure. He calmly, carefully, and shamelessly pursues Dickinson's subjects, who suffer blushing as he demands their recognition: he is, after all, "the supple Suitor / That wins at last" (J 1445, 1-2). He ensnares and bears his victim away from what's familiar. Furthermore, the subject *wants* to recognize Death, as he "sets a Thing significant" (Poem J 360, 1). Encounters with Death prompt the subject's self-reflection, and life takes on new meaning through that self-reflection. This desire for recognition by the Other requires a radical self-exposure by the subject, quite the opposite of "Adam's reticence" or ashamed concealment.

Death's victims find their self-exposure both pleasurable and painful. J 663 exemplifies this presciently, exploring the "raw agony of an apparently illicit relationship" between an ungendered, though presumably female, speaker and a mysterious, Death-like male Other (Pagnattaro 34). In describing this imbalanced relation, Dickinson lends her "patriarchally determined, abject language" an undeniable eroticism (Noble 22). The poem introduces us to a timid, blushing ingénue who finds the presence of a man outside her door unnerving. She



uneasily observes that “[a]gain – his voice is at the door,” “ask[ing] the servant / For such an one – as me –” (1, 3-4). Her apparent familiarity with his voice does nothing to assuage her fears. The speaker affirms her subjectivity as “an one”—an individual—but simultaneously objectifies herself in perceiving herself through the Other’s eyes as something he desires. The Other affirms his individuality, too, as he shockingly addresses the speaker with “*his face – nothing more!*” (12). This face addresses the speaker “in a way,” as Butler writes, “that is singular, irreducible, and irreplaceable,” implicating the subject in an unwilling relation of ethical responsibility (Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* 91). Though his presence is at once unnerving and desirable, the speaker implies that choosing him—going out with him at night despite its impropriety—is an escape from “unacceptable reality,” or, at least, the confines of her home (Simons 176). This “exotic release” is also ecstatic and erotic; without “the usual structures and cultural trappings” that protected the speaker before she ventured beyond the door, “[the] exposed self, acutely aware of its body, experiences an ecstatic moment of utter being” (Ernst 12). The desire staged in this poem remains necessarily unfulfilled, however, as evidenced by the speaker’s infinite longing for the Other’s return.

The speaker’s hypersensitivity to the impropriety of desiring the mysterious male does not prevent her from “cross[ing] the Hall with *mingled* steps” to leave the familiarity of her home and join him on the other side of the threshold (9). He takes her on a solitary midnight stroll, and she marvels at the fact that “they are *alone*” without the moon’s maternal vigilance (21). She recognizes, it seems, that this is unbecoming and inappropriate; yet together, as “angels,” they glimpse paradise, “*try[ing]* the sky” (23). After this ecstatic experience, the speaker offers to harm herself if it means spending more time with this elusive male figure, claiming that she would give “[t]he *purple – in my Vein*” to “live that hour – again” (27, 26). She regards this as

her natural “*price for every stain!*” (29). Marisa Anne Pagnattaro traces the fine line between pleasure and agony in other poems, such as “This dirty – little – Heart” (J 1311) and “For each ecstatic instant” (J 125) (34). The latter illustrates Dickinson’s thoughts more clearly:

For each ecstatic instant  
We must an anguish play  
In keen and quivering ratio  
To the ecstasy. (1-4)

We should prepare, in other words, to exchange agony for ecstasy. Pain, as Marianne Noble notes, “achieves an assault upon the self, decentering and destabilizing the individual, who is thereby opened and in a state of readiness for sublime elation” (26-7). The speaker’s determination to self-harm so that she might again “feel the old *Degree*” (2) of ecstasy seems extreme, but according to “For each ecstatic instant,” she may have no choice (3). Shame, as we saw, is the pained response “intrinsic to a strong affection”: anguish, then, is “intrinsic” to ecstasy. If she desires pleasure, the speaker “*must* an anguish play” “[f]or each ecstatic instant” ([emphasis added] 2, 1). Not only *must* she do this, she must do it “keen[ly] and quivering[ly]” (3).

Choosing to engage with Death is, in J 663, willing a kind of paradise. He takes the subject beyond her immediate experiences but remains, somehow, tethered to the temporal. This point is perhaps best illustrated by looking at J 472, a poem with a narrative similar to that of “Again – his voice is at the door –.” In this poem, “Heaven,” evidently embodied, “[s]o seemed to choose My Door,” much like the mysterious male Other does in J 663 (2). The speaker pridefully turns Heaven away, claiming that “[t]he Distance would not haunt me so – / I had not hoped – before –” (2-4). Her invulnerability deceives her, and she believes that a “Heaven” of

her own is unnecessary. She regrets this apparently foolish thinking almost immediately: “But just to hear the Grace depart – // Afflicts me with a Double loss” (5, 7). I do not think it would be too much of a reach to suggest that if the speaker had opened herself up to the possibility of “seraphic shame,” she wouldn’t feel regretful.

This kind of physically destructive shame manifests as the “tint” in Poem J 559, which describes it as “the little Tint / That never had a Name” (9-10). The subject’s silence and passivity are key for the Other’s impingement, as they are in Poem J 663. Unlike Poem J 663, however, we aren’t privy to the suffering woman’s thoughts. “Temerity,” seemingly an external force, draws the woman into paradise, the sight of which prompts her decline (12). Paradise may paradoxically signify something illicit, just as it does with Poem J 663. If paradise is “of the option,” as Dickinson claims in Poem J 1069, then those who choose it do so despite the shame that will inevitably follow (1). Perhaps an Other tempted the woman, and she found herself committing some moral transgression. Like Eve, she is silent as someone else describes her fall from grace. She simply endures “it,” an unnamed psychological ailment that “no Medicine” can cure (1). Her body decays despite the ailment’s psychological origin; she loses her beauty and health, her cheeks receding and profile becoming “plainer” (14). The “tint divine” offers little consolation, replacing her youthful blush and rendering her body corpselike. The speaker invites the reader to imagine the “little tint” as a death mask of sorts: “You’ve seen it on a Cast’s face –” (11). As such, the tint both conceals and distinguishes the female’s previously lovely features. Shame silently and utterly consumes her body; her inability to self-narrate puts an end to her life.

For the women in poems J 663 and J 559, “temerity,” or boldness, draws them in from outside; it’s not necessarily a native quality. Neither seems particularly bold prior to the Other’s approach. The speaker in J 663 resists the male’s influence at first, despite its attractiveness.

Eventually, she gives in to her desire, the “old *Degree*.” The woman in J 559, apparently having done something similar, finds herself suffering physically and psychologically from her “temerity.” Body and mind suffer from shamelessness; shame is the soul’s natural protector against the effects of illicit behavior. “Adam’s reticence” ultimately arises from the conflict between the mind and the body’s primordial desires. For Dickinson, the mind and body are separable, though interdependent, and each presents a uniquely overwhelming responsibility.

The speaker in J 1090, for example, finds the prospect of contending with both body and soul overwhelming: “I am afraid to own a Body – / I am afraid to own a Soul” (1-2). Shame protects the soul, but it may prevent the body from reaching paradise. The body matters, and it creates problems and responsibilities. However, the body is not, for Dickinson, a “mute facticity,” nor does it necessarily signify what Butler terms “the fallen state: deception, sin, and the premonitional metaphors of hell and the eternal feminine” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 129). Identity rests at least partially in bodies despite the soul’s everlastingness. As “damning” as it is, the “otherness of the flesh” is as vital to self-formation as the “inspiring otherness of the spirit” (Gilbert and Gubar 26). It offers the “hope” of pleasure as well as pain. In Poem J 1691, suggesting she may one day return to her body, the soul “inscribes her ‘Not at Home’” onto her own flesh, claiming ownership of her body even as she succumbs to Death (1). This image speaks exclusively to women—not simply because Dickinson uses female pronouns in this poem, but because women are perceived primarily as bodies. Females are punished (or punish themselves) physically and psychologically for shamelessness. And shame, while it protects the soul, can debilitate if one doesn’t simply accept it as a part of existence. Death shames, and he recognizes escaping him is impossible. “Accomplish[ing] Death,” that is, authoring one’s fate, is for women a solitary act that is as painful as it is triumphal. Facing Death—the male Other—the

female must embrace both the “monstrous” and “angelic” elements of her own Otherness. She must refuse, in other words, to abide by the dichotomous representation of femaleness proffered by the “faded Men,” as Dickinson calls them, who wrote the Bible (J 1545, 2). The speaker in J 663 seemingly does this, embodying both monstrous and angelic qualities. She transforms into an angel, but her later enthusiastic musings about giving her blood in order to see her male companion seem horrifying when contrasted with the celestial imagery in the preceding stanza (28). Unlike the woman in J 559, however, she hopes for the future. Perhaps she does, in a sense, “accomplish Death.”

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