

INTO DEEP ETERNITY



Introduction

There are simpler poems in the world than these, but Emily Dickinson is never simple. She was one of the greatest poets in all the history of the world.

Loving what is

One of the first traits that these poems reveal is the great love the poet had for God's creation. Many people in Emily Dickinson's time (and before and after) thought that it might be more noble to "turn away from the world." She wouldn't do it. She loved what God had made. I think the love was a great part of the strength and holiness of this poet.

She loved life and she loved beauty, but she also knew a great deal of sadness, both in her own life and in the lives of the people who were all around her. She doesn't turn away from the problem. It is a part of many of her poems.

76

Exultation is the going
Of an inland soul to sea,
Past the houses - past the headlands -
Into deep Eternity -

Bred as we, among the mountains,
Can the sailor understand
The divine intoxication
Of the first league out from land?

Paraphrase

"Exultation" is the feeling known to the person who has always lived far away from the sea, and then is on a ship that carries him past all that he has ever known. We have grown up with mountains all around. Can the sailor understand the dizzying yet wonderful experience we have when we move out of sight of land?

In many of her poems, Emily Dickinson wrote definitions. This poem defines exultation by using images of going to sea. I have a friend who grew up among the hills in western New York state. He was in the navy during World War II, and he told me how it felt when first he went to sea. He thought this poem was exactly right in catching the special feeling when the ship passed all the familiar sights of land such as the houses, and then passed the unfamiliar sight of the rocky headlands about the harbor. After that all sight of land was gone and all the world was unfamiliar.

To move trustingly into such a new world is said in the poem to be a little like being mixed up because of being drunk, but the poem says much more than that. It says that the experience give one a sense

of being alone with God, dependent on his power and his care. It is a divine intoxication.

Into the Deep

What does “into deep eternity” mean? The images of the poem invite us to think about the new experience of leaving the land in order to be far out on the sea. But the poet really wants us to think about what it might be like to go “into eternity,” as we move from everything that was once familiar in the life we all know.

What do the words mean, “Can the sailor understand?” The poet asks whether someone who does it all the time can understand the feeling of that special moment of entering a world of only sea and sky. I talked once with a navy Captain, captain of the battleship Iowa, and he said to me that whenever he goes to sea he thinks of this poem.