

The Difficulty that is Marriage

We disagree to disagree, we divide, we differ;
Yet each night as I lie in bed beside you
And you are faraway curled up in sleep
I array the moonlit ceiling with a mosaic of question-marks;
How was it I was so lucky to have ever met you?
I am no brave pagan proud of my mortality
Yet gladly on this changeling earth I should live for ever
If it were with you, my sleeping friend.
I have my troubles, and I shall always have them
But I should rather live with you for ever
Than exchange my troubles for a changeless kingdom.
But I do not put you on a pedestal or throne;
You must have your faults but I do not see them.
If it were with you. I should live for ever.



From *Teresa's Bar* - 1976



Summary and analysis:

The words 'difficulty' and 'marriage' in the title of the poem tell us that the theme is likely to be love and challenge.

The opening line of the poem is a twist on the usual phrase 'We agree to disagree'. The couple cannot even do that: there is friction and tension but also an acceptance of this as the way their marriage works. They 'divide' and 'differ', all words which are more usually associated with separation than with unity. The alliteration here is interesting in that the repeated 'd' sounds are rather harsh and jarring, perfectly reflecting the idea of a couple often at odds with one another. In the first line, therefore, we are presented with disagreement, division and difference – hardly the stuff loving unions are made of. However, the use of the word 'we' unites them as does the poet's directly addressing his wife. This creates a sense of intimacy and makes the poem a conversation between husband and wife which we, the readers, observe from without.

The word 'Yet' at the start of the second line also alerts us to the fact that all may not be as it seems. Despite these differences and disagreements, the poet loves his wife dearly and marvels at the fact that she is with him at all: 'How was I so lucky to have ever met you?' He thinks this while they lie together at night, close yet far apart in that she is in the world of sleep while he is awake. The beauty of their love is captured in the poet's creating a mental mosaic of question marks on the ceiling. The poet's question remain unanswered, which is appropriate for the intangible nature of love.

Durcan says that he is not brave enough to reject the idea of an afterlife as a 'brave pagan' might. By describing the pagan as 'brave' rather than foolish or

uninformed, Durcan presents himself in a humble light. He may wish to have the courage to face the fact that this life is all we have, but he cannot.

The word 'Yet' appears again and marks a turn in this rather informal sonnet. Durcan says that he would gladly swap the comforting constancy of immortality in heaven – 'a changeless kingdom' - for the inconstant 'changeling earth' with all its ups and downs if it meant he could stay with his wife. Durcan honestly admits that he has his own troubles and 'shall always have them' but he would be willing to tolerate this imperfect existence forever if it were possible to remain with her eternally.

Durcan claims that he does not believe his wife is perfect, but immediately contradicts this by saying that although he knows she must have faults, he cannot see them. (Durcan has often been accused of idealising women. In March 2015 he published 'The Days of Surprise' which contained 'a cross between a send-up and a love poem' [celebrating] the special allure of the weather women in Met Éireann who deliver the weather forecasts on RTÉ!)¹

The final line of the poem sets the seal on the poet's emotions. Every word bar the last is monosyllabic (think of Yeats' 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' which uses almost exactly the same technique to add emphasis and drive home the message). 'If I were with you, I should live forever.' There is a sense that the poet has come to a definite conclusion here and his affirmation of his love for his wife is a positive note on which to end a poem which began with difficulty and division.

¹ John Spain - *Temperatures soar in Durcan's love poem to the weather women* 'The Irish Independent' – 28th February 2015