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English 105

July 16, 2020

“Hope” is the thing with feathers by Emily Dickinson: Explication

Emily Dickinson was an American Poet of the nineteenth century known for her metaphysical poetry. Dickinson spent her entire life in evangelical New England, studying and honing her literary skills at Amherst College where her Grandfather was a founder. She has been labeled with many titles from “half-cracked” recluse to a religious skeptic to simple, however many modern critics have praised her for her powerful poetry provoking the reader down a multiplication of questions about immortality and death. Living in a period where women’s rights were still dreams, she lacked popularity throughout her career only publishing seven poems in her lifetime. It wasn’t until her sister published her collection of 1800 works after Dickinson’s passing that she became the influential poet that she is today. Published within the collection of nineteen poems, “There’s a certain Slant of light” in 1891, “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers” seeks to explore the abstract of hope through the use of binary oppositions, metaphors, and repetition. The poem is broadly about a bird representing unwavering hope. (Pettinger 1)

Many critics believe that the poem was written for those to realize they need the powerful song of the bird or the voice of hope. Sean Robisch states that a reader can not begin to consider the meaning behind one of Dickinson’s poems without being

familiar with hundreds of her other works. He compares trying to find meaning in a single Dickinson poem is like trying to interpret a Shakespearean play from a single line. Robisch discusses the multiplication of questions throughout the reading of “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers”. First, starting with the metaphor of feathers and the answer of “it is a bird”. Next, the reader is led down a path of more questions, “Why does Hope sing the tune without the words?” and “Do birds sing in bad weather?” (Robisch 1). These questions can either be answered with information within the poem or from experience. Yes, a bird does sing in a storm. But Robisch emphasizes that these questions result in a tree of more questions like, “So what if birds do sing in bad weather? How does that influence our reading of the poem?” (Robisch 1). He later concludes that the string of questions are hard to answer and can be never ending if read with enough depth. Generally, I suspect that these questions lead readers closer to the intended take away message. In this case that the bird, Hope, is always with us, unwavering with support.

Critic Aziz Yousif Al-Muttalibi dives into the choice of using so many binary oppositions with this poem beginning with a quote from *The Well-Wrought Urn*, “the language or poetry is the language of paradox”. In “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers”, Dickinson uses many binary oppositions *soul/body, hope/despair, warmth/cold, end/start, inward/outward*. Al-Muttalibi deciphers this as, “Hope is life and despair is death. Hope, is thus, the thing and despair is nothing. Soul is permanent and body is temporary. End is maturity and start is naivety. Inward refers to something genuine, and outward suggests that which is superficial” (Al-Muttalibi 146). The use of binary

oppositions gives the reader the ability to make sense of the powerful poetry ridden with implied messages. Hope becomes a concrete thing necessary to live.

The first piece of the poem to unpack is the title which is also the introductory line, the choice to put “Hope” within quotation marks indicates that hope is an abstract concept, that hope is unknown or lacks an accepted definition. Throughout the poem Dickinson defines Hope giving the idea substance through the metaphor of the bird or “the thing with feathers”.

The first stanza introduces the bird. The second line, “That perches in the soul -” (Dickinson 2) the bird is shown taking refuge with a human soul where the bird may rest and leave its food in safety. This implies purity and safety and permanency. Anything that touches one’s soul leaves a mark and the bird resides within the soul indicating the necessity of hope. By ending the stanza with the lines, “And sings the tune without the words -/ And never stops - at all -” (3, 4) Dickinson further emphasizes the idea that hope is constant, always there singing, never stopping.

The second stanza describes the relentless nature of the bird being present even throughout the worst of conditions, “And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -/ And sore must be the storm -/ That could abash the little Bird/ That kept so many warm -” (5, 6, 7, 8). The bird, hope, continues to sing “in the Gale” (5) or the strong winds and the storm. The B in Bird is capitalized in the seventh line giving even more substance to Hope making Hope like a person with a name. This stanza is mainly used to reinforce that support of the bird is unwavering and the constant presence of hope.

The third and final stanza highlights the power and perfection of hope. "I've heard it in the chilliest land - /And on the strangest Sea - /Yet - never - in Extremity, /It asked a crumb - of me." (9, 10, 11, 12). The bird never asks for a crumb, it is selfless even after the harshness of all the storms. That hope never asks for anything in return after supporting a person through the darkest of times. The separation of "It asked a crumb" and "of me" (12) with the dash places emphasis on "me" encouraging a person to take the bird's song, the voice of hope. Throughout the entire poem, Dickinson repeats "That" at the beginning of three lines as well as "And" at the beginning of five lines. This repetition highlights the indecisiveness of humans and constant nature of changing one's mind. The inclusion of this repetition reinforces the idea that even with change, hope is constant.

Overall, many critics discuss literary concerns of Dickinson's work but all come to the conclusion that the intentional inclusion of things like question provoking lines and binary oppositions add meaning and intensify the message. Dickinson does a fantastic job at capturing the feeling of hope through the constant metaphor that hope is the feathered thing. Emily Dickinson was anything but simple and her poetry proves that.

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