Before I Got My Eye Put Out - The Poetry of Emily Dickinson: Crash Course English Lit #8

Crash Course: Literature
https://youtube.com/watch?v=R4WwhOdk_Eg
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/R4WwhOdk_Eg

Hi I'm John Green, this is Crash Course Literature, and today we're gonna talk about this lady, Emily Dickinson.

By the way we don't have a book today cause she's on my Nook. Emily Dickinson was a great 19th Century American poet who-

Mr. Green! Mr. Green! I already know everything about her: she was a recluse and you can sing all of her poems to the tune of "I'd like to buy the world a coke", like: [sings] "because I could not stop for death, he kindly stopped for me' -

Stop, Me from the Past, you cannot sing! Fortunately, your inability to sing does insulate us from copyright claims, because I, for one, did not recognize that as
"If I could buy the world a coke." Also, Dickinson's meter is more complicated than you're making it out to be, but yes, you could sing most of her poems to "If I could buy the world a Coke", also, "Yellow Rose of Texas".

More importantly, these poems have a lot to say about the relationship between death and life, between faith and doubt, between the power of god and the power of individuals, so let's focus on that, because it actually might change your life and stuff.

[intro music]

So Joyce Carol Oats once called Emily Dickinson "The most paradoxical of poets, the very poet of paradox", and this can really frustrate students and literary critics alike, particularly when Dickinson seems to contradict herself within a single poem.

Take, for example, this bit of light verse. "Faith' is a fine invention when gentlemen can see - but microscopes are prudent in an emergency". So this seems like a pretty pro-science, anti-religion poem right? I mean, faith is put in quotation marks and called an invention.

But she also implies the possibility of a different and valuable kind of sight, only available to some people at some times, "when" gentlemen "can" see. And this is where is becomes important to look at how Dickinson, for lack of a better phrase, "sees" sight.

Dickinson often imagines seeing as a sort of power, so much so that seeing, not just literal sight, but also the ability to witness and observe and understand, becomes the central expression of the self. Like her famous poem that begins "I heard a fly buzz when I died" ends with the line "I could not see to see" associating the lack of sight, with death itself.

Dickinson also often played with the fact that this "I" and this "eye" sound the same. Her poem beginning, "Before I got my eye put out" is about death, for instance, not just monocularizaton. In that poem, she clearly associates sight not just with the power to observe but ownership. She writes, "But were it told to me, today, that I might have the sky for mine, I tell you that my heart would split, for size of me - the meadows - mine - the mountains - mine -".
Of course in 19th century America, the idea that an eye, possibly a female eye, could own the mountains, the meadows, and the sky was a little bit radical. I mean, all the stuff was supposed to be under the control of God, not any human being who could see it.

All this is made even more complex and interesting by the fact that Dickinson's poems sounded like hymns, and throughout her life you can see her faith waxing and waning in her poetry.

In short, I don't think you can make easy conclusions about microscopes and faith in Dickinson's poetry, but that's precisely what's so important about it.

Dickinson's work reflects a conflicted American world view. I mean, we're a nation of exceptional individuals who believe that we control our success and our happiness, but we are also more likely to profess a belief in an omnipotent god than people in any other industrialized nation.

Alright, I know you guys want all the creepy, macabre details of Dickinson's biography so let's go to the thought bubble. So, Emily Dickinson was born in 1830 to a prominent family. Her father because a US congressman, and lived her whole life in Massachusetts. She was haunted, by what she called, the menace of death throughout her life. Although, then again, who isn't? Between 1858 and 1865, Dickinson wrote nearly 800 poems, but she also became increasingly confined to her home in those years, and eventually, rarely left her room. She usually talked to visitors from the other side of a closed door, and didn't even leave her room when her father's funeral took place downstairs.

Dickinson published few than a dozen poems in her lifetime. In fact, no one knew that she's been nearly so prolific until her sister discovered more than 1800 poems after Emily's death in 1886.

Dickinson was considered an eccentric in Amherst, and known locally for only wearing white when she was spotted outside the home. In fact, her only surviving article of clothing is a white cotton dress. This image of a pale wraith clad all in white is a symbol of the reclusive, brilliant poet, but it's worth noting that for Dickinson, white was not the color of innocence, or purity, or ghosts. It was the color of passion and intensity. "Dare you see a soul at the white heat? Then crouch within the door," she once wrote. She called red, the color most associate with passion, "fire's common tint". For Dickinson, the real, true rich life of a soul even if it was physically sheltered burned white hot. Thanks thought bubble.

Oh, it's time for the open letter? An open letter to the color white. But, first let's see what's in the secret compartment today. Oh, it's a Dalek. Stan, more flagrant pandering to the Whovians.

Dear White, you are a complicated and symbolic -- AH! DALEK! They're not very bright. So, white you're often associated with purity, like wedding dresses. You can symbolize heaven, or the creepy infinite nowhere where parts of Harry Potter, and all of Crash Course Humanities take place. But, many 19th century writers inverted those associations. Like, Melville's famous great white wall of whale, that terrifying blankness of nature. And to Dickinson, white, you were the color of passion and intensity. This reminds us that our symbolic relationships aren't fixed. We are creating them as we go, communally. I mean, other than Daleks, which are universally terrifying no matter what color they come in. Best wishes, John Green.

Okay, let's take a close look at a poem we've already mentioned, sometimes called Poem 465, and sometimes known by its first line "I heard a fly buzz when I died,". Speaking of which, here in the studio we've had a genuine plague of flies in the last few weeks. I mean, in the lights up there, there are thousands of fly carcasses. Okay, let's out aside the fly carcasses, and read a poem together about flies.

I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air -
Between the Heaves of Storm -

The Eyes around - had wrung them dry -
And Breaths were gathering firm

For that last Onset - when the King
Be witnessed - in the Room -

I willed my Keepsakes - Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable - and then it was
There interposed a Fly -

With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -
Between the light - and me -
And then the Windows failed - and then
I could not see to see -

Okay, first let's talk about the dashes. Some critics think that Dickinson's use of dashes as punctuation is just eccentric handwriting, or else an accident. I mean, they point out that Dickinson also similar dashes, for instance, in her cake recipes. Others argue that the use of dashes are a typographical attempt to symbolize the way the mind works, or that the dash is used as a punctuation stronger than a comma but weaker than a period. Regardless though, the appearance of a dash at the end of this poem at the moment of death is a very interesting choice.

So, in this poem the speaker is dying, or I guess, has died in a still room surrounded by loved ones. A will is signed, and then the fly with a "blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -" comes between the light and the speaker. This makes it so the narrator cannot see to see, and by now you know what happens in Dickinson poems when people can't see. They're dead.

So, Dickinson was just a smidge obsessed with death, which means she got to imagine death in a lot of different ways: as a suitor, as a gentle guide, but here death is a buzzing fly. So, everyone in the room is waiting for the arrival of "the king", which before Elvis took over the title in 1958 was a reference to God. But, instead of the quiet, peaceful arrival of God they're expecting it's a dirty little fly with "uncertain stumbling buzz" that gets between the narrator and the light.

So, this poem features Dickinson at her most formal. The lines are very iambic, (John speaks rhythmically) "I heard a fly buzz when I died the stillness in the room,", and they alternate between tetrameter, four feet, and trimeter, three feet.

The rhyme scheme throughout the poem is ABCB, which means that the first line ends with one sound, the second line with yet another, the third line with another still, and then the fourth line rhymes with the second line.

But, Dickinson employs her famous slant rhymes here. Like in the first stanza, "room" is matched with "storm". In the second, "be" with "fly". These words sort of, almost rhyme like "room" and "storm" both end in /m/ sounds. "Be" and "fly both end in hard vowel sounds, but they don't rhyme. This discomforting lack of closure is a hallmark of Dickinson's poetry, also of most of my romantic relationships.

Only in the final stanza, when death comes do we get a full rhyme. "Me", the eye, is rhymed with "see" the thing the eye can no longer do. So, is this a peaceful death? Hardly. I mean, the stillness in the room is broken by the buzzing fly, and yet with that final full rhyme, Dickinson offers us a bit of peace and closure that we didn't get in the first two stanzas.

To return to an old theme, even though we live in an image drenched culture, this is a good reminder that language is made out of words, and it might sound like over reading to you to say that a full rhyme brings peace. But, I'm remind of the story of Mozart's children playing a series of unfinished scales in order to taunt their father, who would eventually have to go to the piano and finish them.

Poetry isn't just a series of images. It's rhythmic and it's metric, and we crave the closure of a good rhyme at the end of a poem. That's why sonnets end with couplets. Dickinson gives us that closure, and the she gives us a Jose Saramago-ine dash. The poet of paradox, still haunting us. Thanks for watching our Crash Course Literature Mini Series. Next week, we begin a year of learning about US History together.

(explosions and patriotic guitar riffs)

Now begins the complaining by non-Americans that we're shallow and self-interested and call ourselves Americans, even though in fact, this is America. But even my friends, if you don't live her the history of the United States matters to you because we are always meddling in your affairs. Thanks for watching. See you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Miller. Our script supervisor is Meredith Danko. The associate producer is Danica Johnson, and the show is written by me.

Every week instead of cursing, I've used the name of writers I like. That tradition is ending, but a new one will begin next week. If you have questions about today's video, you can ask them down there in comments, and be answered by our team of literature professionals including Stan's mom. Thanks for watching, and as we say in my hometown, "Don't forget to be awesome!"