

E-Content

American Literature

Semester: III

Lecture 18

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COURSE CONTENT UNIT-IV

Lecture 18: Critical Discussion on Emily Dickinson: 'A Bird Came Down the Walk'

• *A Bird, came down the Walk* by Emily Dickinson is a five stanza poem that is separated into sets of five lines. As was common within Dickinson's works, she uses quatrains, or sets of four lines to structure the piece.

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- One will also immediately take note of her characteristic capitalizations and dashes, over which literary scholars are divided. In this particular poem, the dashes only appear at the ends of the lines. This might have been done to elongate a pause before a reader moves to the next line.

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•In regards to meter, the poem conforms to iambic trimeter. This means that each line contains three sets of two beats. The first of these is unstressed and the second stressed. The rhyme scheme is a bit looser. There is almost a pattern of ABCB, if not for a few half or slant rhymes, such as that which appears in stanza three.

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- The poem begins with the speaker describing a bird she sees. She is close by, making it so that she can look at the bird, but it does not immediately notice her. From where she is situated, she sees the bird pick up an “Angle Worm” and bite it in half. It moves quickly from place to place, showing the anxiety inherent to most of its species. It knows the dangers presented by the much larger and stronger world.

COURSE CONTENT UNIT-IV

Course Code : XXXXX

Course Name: Data structures using C

• In the last sections the speaker attempts to offer the bird a crumb. It does not want anything to do with a human being and flies away. Its movements are swift yet purposeful, as if it is swimming.

COURSE CONTENT UNIT-IV

- In the first stanza of this piece the speaker begins by describing the simple, yet beautiful movements of a bird. This particular bird is coming “down the Walk.” This is likely sidewalk or path of some kind near the speaker’s home, or where she is situated. The speaker is able to observe the bird’s actions without it immediately becoming frightened. This says something about humans and their interactions with nature. Birds are rightfully wary of the presence of humans. They will not behave in the same way if they are knowingly being watched.
- The speaker does not have any ill intentions though. She is simply reporting on what she’s seeing, and finding importance in the instinctual actions of the bird. It finds a worm, noted here as an “Angle Worm,” and eats it raw, biting it in half.

COURSE CONTENT UNIT-IV

- The next thing the speaker sees is the bird drinking the “Dew” from the grass. It doesn’t have to go anywhere else to find water, making the “Dew” and “Grass” “convenient.” So far, its life has been presented as a simple movement from need to need.
- In the next two lines another small life is introduced, the “Beetle.” While the two creatures might be simple to human eyes, the bird makes a conscious effort to “hop” to the side and “let” the beetle crawl past. The bird is very aware of its world, as will be seen in the final stanzas.

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- The bird's reactions to its world are carefully studied by the speaker. It is clear she is truly watching this creature and taking sound mental notes on what it is doing. She notices its inherent anxiety. No matter what it's doing it looks around "with rapid eyes." They move quickly, "all abroad," trying to see everything at once. It is very on edge and aware of the variety of dangers it might face.
- The speaker takes some liberties with the description and states how the bird's eyes appear like "frightened Beads." They are shiny, probably black, and moving or rolling around easily. The bird becomes scared of the speaker and "stir[s]" its "Velvet Head." This description of his feathers is interesting. Dickinson uses the word "Velvet" implying a kind of luxury about the animal. It is clear she, or at least the speaker she is channelling, sees the bird as a lovely thing.

COURSE CONTENT UNIT-IV

- The fourth stanza of *A Bird, came down the Walk* describes the one interaction the speaker attempts with the bird. She reaches out to him and offers “him a crumb” of food. The bird does not react positively to this intrusion on its space and as its instincts require, flies away.
- In Dickinson’s words, the action is much more complicated and elegant. The bird is said to “unroll...his feathers.” It is a process the speaker sees slowly and is able to study. Each feather passes her by in all its “Velvet” beauty. When he takes to the sky he is said to “row” to his “Home,” wherever that may be. The use of the word “row” here, as if applying to sailing, starts a metaphor that continues into the fifth stanza. Dickinson closely relates water and flight and the movements which make them up.

COURSE CONTENT UNIT-IV

- The last stanza is more metaphorical than those which came before it. The speaker is interested in how the bird's wings move through the air. She describes this process as being similar to "Oars divid[ing] the Ocean."
- The bird has a clear beauty that is compared to a butterfly that takes off from the "Banks of Noon" in the heat of the day. It jumps, and moves "splashless" through the air. It cuts through the air as an oar would through water.

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COURSE CONTENT UNIT-IV

Reference Page

<http://gn009.k12.sd.us/Fluency%20Norms%20and%20Fluency%20Passages/4th%20Grade%20Poetry%20Fluency/A%20Bird%20came%20down%20the%20Walk.pdf>

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