

WHAT'S IN A POEM?

Eleanor Morton* Tries to Explain Emily to a Friend

*The Day grew small, surrounded tight
 By early, stooping Night —
 The Afternoon in Evening deep
 Its Yellow shortness dropt —
 The Winds went out their martial ways
 The Leaves obtained excuse —
 November hung his Granite Hat
 Upon a nail of Plush —*

Emily Dickinson

Oh, that poem is horrible. It should never have been written! Nobody can understand a d@#\$ thing in it! A waste of ink or screen, whatever. Maybe not a screen. We're talking about something that's pretty old, right?

I love that poem! It's so calming. It makes me think about the seasons and the way their passing cannot be stopped, that it's a natural process. Nothing is ever permanent, you know. And no, don't ruin things by talking about computers

or smart phones. That's kind of sad when we've got such beautiful writing by this woman, who did everything by hand, with pen and ink. She was born in 1830 and died when she was 55. Of course she wrote the old-fashioned way. Don't you like things like that?

What? Old stuff? Handwritten? I can't read cursive and don't plan to learn. Besides, the poem is depressing and I shudder when I read it. November, whoever he is, must be a real killer. Everything seems to be dying off and it's the killer's fault. That's what I read in it. It's a sad world where November's in charge.

What are you talking about? The poem is about how the seasons change, and how the earth goes to sleep in November. Things slow down, turn inward, all the stuff we learned in elementary school. November isn't somebody, it's a something. You know that.

Not quite, dear. In fact, November, just like I said, is a person. Did you not notice that it says he "hung his Granite Hat" in the next-to-the-last line? Why did Emily write it if it wasn't what she was thinking?

Of course I noticed, honey. But that's a metaphor or an anthropomorphosis of the thirty days of the month, so it seems like November is a person. So his Granite Hat makes him seem like somebody we might run into. It's just a way of enhancing the image of late autumn.

Yeah, what's with a hat made out of stone, anyway? Nobody wears a stone hat! Not a very brilliant thing to write. Gibberish, even. I can't get my head around anything that heavy sitting on top of a head of a person who's actually alive.

Dear, you might want to consider that granite is also a metaphor and that means thinking about what a granite hat actually is, that is, what it symbolizes.

Well, what is it? If it's not the material the hat's made out of, then what is it? I'm not up on my definition of symbols these days. Memory's not what it used to be....

Have you thought granite might not refer to stone literally, but instead might refer to the color? In that case it would, in this particular context, serve as an adjective for a hat that is the color of stone.

Oh, so the hat is gray? Why not say so? Why make us beat around the bush?

It's easy to use color to describe things directly—black, white, blue, green, gray, etc.—but granite is rather original. Maybe the poet was thinking gray...and out came *graynite*, or rather, granite. Quite clever, I'd say. Searching for an echo of the first gra- she came up with a really unique color. That is poetry.

I suppose it is possible that granite might refer to weight, not color. But anyway, why make November into a person? Everybody knows it's a month, the eleventh of the year.

True.

Plus, when a hat is hung, as it is in this poem, what does that mean? Has the wearer just arrived and left his hat by the door on entering the hallway?

Back in the 1800s, every home had a row of pegs beside the door for people to hang their hats and cloaks. Kind of conjures up old customs and—

No, wait, I've heard that if somebody says, "I'll hang my hat on that," it means I can believe or rely on it, that it's trustworthy. Still, I don't get it. What does November trust? The poem doesn't tell us. I don't think that's what's happening here. Besides, nobody says "I'll hang my hat" on anything anymore. Just for the purpose of making a joke as bad as your metaphors, I'd say the phrase is too "old hat" to impress modern readers. This is an old poem, you know. Not my style.

I know. Analyzing poems and stories is not all that easy. You have to study a lot in order to figure out what the authors were trying to say. Maybe here it does mean November has come calling. He politely removes his hat when he enters. Can't you go along with that?

But he has hung it on a nail of plush? No, I'm not buying that. Nails—assuming we're referring to the ones used in building things—are sharp. There's nothing plushy about them. You lean up against one, it can hurt. You could certainly ruin a good hat.

Since the hat and the nail are metaphors, probably we could get something out of knowing what the plush is all about.

What is plush anyway? And while you're at it, Prof, you might be so kind as to explain what a metaphor is. You keep using that word. I don't even think it's English.

Let's look it up. That might help you understand better.

What? You don't know what a word means, you who were nicknamed Walking Dictionary in fifth grade?

I'm referring to how I know it can be a noun or an adjective. Just give me a moment and I'll find it so you can read it. Ah, here it is. I'm citing from an online source, not just making this up. The noun *plush* refers to a fabric that can be made of silk, cotton, wool or all three. It is soft and rich, with a long nap.

That's one. What's the other?

Used as an adjective, *plush* refers to something as being luxurious, rich, and probably expensive.

Well, that's wrong. When I think of *plush*, I think of pink and fuzzy. I hate pink, and fuzzy makes my skin crawl. It's too much like a caterpillar. Browntail moth caterpillars are so freaking fuzzy, and their poisonous hairs drive some people crazy. They're not pink, those browntail monsters—who probably came over here from Britain—but they make me itch until my skin's raw. No, I don't like plush at all, not as a noun, not as an adjective.

Don't be silly. *Plush*—

(Shudder)

can simply suggest something soft, if we like. So a nail of plush won't damage the hat. Surely that'll work. I'd hate to have you get really upset by this poem....

But it's a *granite* hat. Not much is going to damage that, I'd say.

Hmmm. Maybe we ought to go about this another way. Maybe the *plush* part refers to autumn with its bright leaves that flutter to the ground and act like a blanket, soft and luxurious....

Now you're getting all poetic. And you've lost the nail. You've turned it into a plush carpet of...leaves? Oh, I'm starting to sound like you. Is literary criticism contagious? I certainly remember loving the fall when we raked up the

leaves and jumped in big piles and started all over again.... Maybe that works. But only if we use plush to refer to the big piles of red and yellow—not pink—leaves that are like a carpet on the ground. Maybe that'll keep the horrible pink color from coming to mind. If we've got to have plush, I need it to be red and yellow.

I think we can agree on that. So, if we understand that there's a metaphor for leaves on the ground, what does granite refer to, even if only metaphorically?

Well, would stones be involved?

I doubt it. But you might be on the right track, because stones are heavy and when it gets colder, we kind of huddle inside ourselves. Cold means snow, but also ice, which can be as heavy as stone. A block of ice = a block of stone. See how we've got the freedom to make our own meanings using the poem? We might have come upon a polysemic use of language and that should make us happy, don't you think?

We only agreed about the last two lines. I have serious doubts about the other six.

What do you mean? You don't understand the rest of the lines? First of all, we've got:

*The Day grew small, surrounded tight
By early, stooping Night —*

That makes next to no sense. Too much anthropomorphism for my taste. It's a downer to start off with the end of the Day, like everything's over. It wouldn't be so depressing if the Night weren't old. Shouldn't the Night be young, if it's just arriving? This makes me feel kind of hopeless, as if everything were disappearing. What good is there in writing about slow, sad things when we can have lots of video games and TikTok or whatever they call it? I like the animal rescue videos, too.

(Ignoring the attempt to divert the discussion from poetry to fun things.)

Might we not consider the possibility that the Night arrives and protects the Day? Look at that phrase 'surrounded tight.' Doesn't it make you think of a hug, an embrace, an expression of caring and intimacy? Isn't there a sense of intimacy and caring?

No way. I am very claustrophobic. Almost sounds like Night is stalking Day, sneaking up on it. On top of that, Night is old. What would Day want with something like that? Something that steals Day's light but does nothing with it? I don't even want to think about that image.

I sense a calmness, a gradual passing of the days of summer into shorter days during the cold season. It feels natural, like there is nothing to fear.

That's your opinion, and clearly you know more than I do, since you know about metaphors and anaphora and maybe even euphemisms and onomatopoeia...none of which were invented in this country and which therefore might not even be reliable.

I believe I've only mentioned metaphors and maybe one other trope. Where did you learn about those other figures of speech? Who taught you those? Who's trying to usurp my role?

As you were saying? What do those lines mean?

I wasn't saying anything, but I am curious about your issues with pink. It's just a color.

Let's just say it's not to be trusted. It used to be for boys and now it's switched to girls. Girls get pink things and wear pink things because pink is for girls. Isn't that one of your tautologies? Or is it a solipsism? Let's stick to the darn poem.

I am extremely puzzled about where you picked up these literary terms you're throwing around. You could get into trouble if you don't use them properly.

Not on your life. Nobody else will ever hear them come out of my mouth. You forget I'm not a poetry lover. I'm not a lover either, but that's beside the point. You tell me

what you think. Give it a go, and I'll let you know what I think. Just let's be done with Dickinson so I can go home and walk the dog.

(Parenthesis)

What's your dog's name?

Lavinia.

Did you know that Emily's sister's name was Lavinia?

Now I have to rename my dog!

All right, let's wrap this up.

The Afternoon in Evening deep
Its Yellow shortness dropt —

Looks like Afternoon is turning into evening, kind of like a painting where the bright sky fades to a purple darkness at dusk. Afternoon, in Emily's poem, has sunk deep into Evening. It is already less Yellow, lasts a shorter time. Or maybe there is a reference to the way the sun drops over the horizon as the day turns to night.

Yawn. Tell me something interesting. So afternoons get shorter as summer ends. There's nothing very poetic about that. It's something everybody over three years old knows. This is no justification for having written about

days getting shorter and calling it a poem. It kind of looks like false advertising.

???

I'm also not a fan of how the poet spelled *dropped*. Dropt? Didn't she go to school?

Of course she did—for a while, at least. But she was quite well read, perhaps more so than if she had gone to public school. As for the image you find so trite, you can't take it out of context. You have to read it within the rest of the poem and get a sense of the rhythm, the mood....

What about the next line?

The Winds went out their martial ways

That's just wrong. I never saw a wind, even a strong one, carrying a sword or a rifle. It's just air. This is too over the top for me.

All right. Just one more line. Have a go at it:

The Leaves obtained excuse —

You must be kidding. That's probably the worst line in the whole lot. I thought the November Man in the hard, heavy, gray granite hat was a stretch, but this one is incomprehensible. Leaves, whether they are human or

not—and at this point I haven't a clue which they are—
never have to request permission from anybody. If leaves
want to leave, they do. It is within their natural rights as
leaves because they are a part of nature and it is what they
do. It is what it is...and....

(Thoughtful silence)

It wasn't the metaphors Emily had created long ago.

It was something far fiercer.

*Note: Eleanor Morton is a Scottish comedian. It's not clear if
Ms. Morton knows anything about poetry, but if she were to
meet a poem she certainly would not remain silent.