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Critical Thinking Essay

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“I’m Nobody! Who are you?” by Emily Dickinson

Most people feel invisible at some point in their lives; whether it’s because they’re in the shadow of an older sibling, because they are shy, or simply because everyone around them has been busy, it doesn’t make much difference. It’s still a horrible thing to feel like no one even realizes you’re alive or that you’ve been doing things. Emily Dickinson felt this way often; she lived at home and didn’t leave the house much, mostly corresponding with people by letters. However, her invisibility didn’t bother her too much, and that is what this poem is all about. When you feel invisible, you aren’t alone, because someone else is feeling invisible too.

Dickinson starts out the poem introducing herself, “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” (1) Being nobody can mean a lot of things; it could mean she’s no one important, no one special, no one significant, or no one that everyone knows. However, she could also be nobody to many people simply because she doesn’t try to stand out or feel important. She is content just being herself, living her plain, simple life and doing things that make her happy. Being nobody makes her somewhat mysterious; she’s obviously a person, but most people don’t know who she really is.

This also relates to the second line in the poem, “Are you – Nobody – too?” (2) Dickinson’s question of the reader seems to show that being nobody is something everyone feels at some point in their life. Dickinson calls herself nobody, knowing there are others out there like her, who aren’t the center of attention or a main focus in the world. In asking this question,

it seems like she is sharing a secret with the reader; like being nobody is something special that not everyone understands, but those who do know something that the rest of the world does not.

The third line of the poem, “Then there’s a pair of us?”(3) is about there being a pair of nobodies, Dickinson and the reader, who was probably originally one of her friends or family members. The description of them as a pair just connects them more; it shows that being a nobody is anything but lonely. This shows more that being a nobody means not being someone famous or central in society, but still being important to someone. Nobodies know about each other and relate to each other without really letting the rest of the world know them. This again seems to imply some sort of secret within the pair that the rest of the world is not privy to. This shows that being a nobody really isn’t a bad thing at all; being a nobody to Dickinson means having someone around to share things with. A nobody might not be superficially adored or praised by everyone, but that person is truly important to someone.

The first stanza ends with Dickinson admonishing the reader, “Don’t tell! they’d advertise – you know!” (4) This line reinforces the idea of a secret between friends, because if everyone knows about it, it isn’t a secret anymore. If this secret of what it means to be a nobody was found out, everything would change, and they wouldn’t truly be nobodies anymore because everyone would know. The whole point of being a nobody is that no one notices you all the time, so you can be invisible when you want to be. If anyone found out about this idea, then they would tell the world, and being a nobody would no longer be possible. This just seems to emphasize how special it is to be a nobody. Being invisible is now exciting and special rather than lonely and different.

In contrast to the excitement of being a nobody, the fifth line of the poem, “How dreary – to be – Somebody!” (5) shows how boring it is to be a somebody. Being a somebody is being

superficially important; it's being like everybody else. While in some ways it's nice to be like everyone else and to fit in, it makes a person seem less special and unique. Everyone knows and assumes things about a somebody; they show themselves to the world for everyone to see. While this seems like a good thing sometimes, to Dickinson it just means that they are less unique and special. If a person is a somebody they are no longer mysterious or exceptional; everyone can figure them out and try to be like them.

The sixth line of the poem is "How public – like a Frog –." (6) The word public is a very telling description of what it means to Dickinson to be a somebody, and part of the reason she wishes to remain a nobody. Being a public person means that everyone knows a lot about that person. They often have little or no privacy and are judged and gossiped about by the public. Some people love being in the spotlight like this, but Dickinson did not. Being in the public eye all the time is really not all it's cracked up to be; everything a person does becomes public knowledge. This means that they need to be very careful about how they act around people or they run the risk of losing the respect and admiration of their peers. The word public in this line also seems to imply somewhat obnoxiously so; the simile "like a Frog" is certainly not a very flattering comparison. Bullfrogs especially are loud and obnoxious. It is impossible not to hear them when they are making their annoying sounds. This implies that public people are often very annoying, putting themselves forward when no one really wants to listen to them. They simply want an audience, attentive or not. This is a big contrast from Dickinson's nobody. The nobody does have a friend who will be attentive and caring. Being a nobody comes along with a few people who really care, as opposed to being a public person whom everyone knows of without really caring about them.

The idea of a frog continues into the next line in the poem. The frog is telling it's name the livelong June. Since June is mating season for frogs, this is when they are the noisiest, trying to attract as much attention from other frogs as possible. The somebody is like the frog in that they are constantly getting their name out in the media somehow so they can keep all the attention they want. If people want to continue to be famous, they need to find ways to keep their names from fading out of the public view. Because of this, they don't have as much time to just be themselves and enjoy life; they need to make sure their life stays public somehow. Being a somebody seems to be a very tiring task.

The last line of the poem describes the general public that is hearing about the somebodies as an "admiring Bog." (8) This is hardly a flattering description either, but it is more unflattering to the somebody than to the general public. A bog hears the frog croaking and admires the frog as being one of its best features, but the bog isn't going to care about the frog anymore than that. This is the way the general public looks at celebrities. The public admires them as being some of the most talented members of their society, but form no deeper relationship. People don't usually really listen to what celebrities are saying, and they don't have a personal relationship with them. Being a celebrity brings lots of recognition but not any real friends.

This poem is enhanced by its rhymes; the first and second lines rhyme, as well as the sixth and eighth lines. The rhyming of frog and bog was very creative; the two words fit together so well in this poem, and the rhyming only makes their connection stand out even more. Also, the last three lines of the poem are a simile comparing people to frogs and bogs, making these sentiments more noticeable. These literary elements help enhance the idea that being a

somebody really isn't that wonderful; there are so many more perks involved in being more private and less well-known.

Emily Dickinson does a wonderful job of sharing advice in this poem. She really gets the point across that being famous and well-known isn't all that important in life; all it gets you is lots of recognition. What is more important, however, is having a few people that really care about you and share your secrets. Being a nobody like Dickinson is much more special and unique; it allows for more freedom and individuality. Just being able to be yourself is a wonderful thing in this world, and we shouldn't take it for granted. Being popular isn't what is important; one of the biggest joys in life is just being loved for being you. This is something we should all remember and appreciate much more often than we ever do.

Works Cited

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“I’m Nobody! Who are you?” (Emily Dickinson)

- 1 I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- 2 Are you – Nobody – too?
- 3 Then there's a pair of us?
- 4 Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!

- 5 How dreary – to be – Somebody!
- 6 How public – like a Frog –
- 7 To tell one's name – the livelong June –
- 8 To an admiring Bog!