

Secret Power: Emily Brontë (1818 – 1848)



Although Emily Brontë is best known for her only novel, *Wuthering Heights*, she also wrote some fine and moving poems.

Emily was the second youngest of six children and her mother died when she was just three years of age. Three years later, her family moved to Haworth in Yorkshire where her father was appointed as curate. Her three older sisters were sent to the Clergy Daughter's School at Cowan Bridge and Emily joined them for a brief period. The living conditions at the school were grim and this resulted in an outbreak of typhus and the two eldest daughters died but Emily and Charlotte survived.

The three remaining sisters and their brother, Bramwell were educated at home by their father and their aunt. The children escaped from the confinement of their lives by creating imaginary worlds in which toy soldiers took the place of people. Emily felt closest to her younger sister, Ann and together they created an imaginary island called *Gondal* which was believed to be set in splendid isolation in the Pacific Ocean. Some of Emily's most memorable poems were written in the voice of the island characters she created. The voice of many of Emily's poems is the voice of the marooned. Although Emily was not imprisoned by sea,

she was imprisoned by her intense shyness and her inability to feel at ease with other people. In so many of her poems, she can find no other release than in death and that is why she writes of death with such longing. To enter into death was for Emily to enter more deeply into the mysterious source of life.

The Prisoner

Still let my tyrants know, I am not doomed to wear
Year after year in gloom and desolate despair;
A messenger of Hope comes every night to me,
And offers for short life, eternal liberty.

He comes with western winds, with evening's wandering airs,
With that clear dusk of heaven that brings the thickest stars:
Winds take a pensive tone, and stars a tender fire,
And visions rise, and change, that kill me with desire.

Desire for nothing known in my maturer years,
When Joy grew mad with awe, at counting future tears:
When, if my spirit's sky was full of flashes warm,
I knew not whence they came, from sun or thunderstorm.

But first, a hush of peace -a soundless calm descends;
The struggle of distress and fierce impatience ends;
Mute music soothes my breast -unuttered harmony
That I could never dream, till Earth was lost to me.

Then dawns the Invisible; the Unseen its truth reveals;
My outward sense is gone, my inward essence feels;
Its wings are almost free -its home, its harbour found;
Measuring the gulf, it stoops, and dares the final bound.

O dreadful is the check -intense the agony -
When the ear begins to hear, and the eye begins to see;
When the pulse begins to throb, the brain to think again,
The soul to feel the flesh, and the flesh to feel the chain.

Yet I would lose no sting, would wish no torture less;
The more that anguish racks, the earlier it will bless;
And robed in fires of hell, or bright with heavenly shine,
If it but herald Death, the vision is divine.

At the age of seventeen, Emily attended Roe Dead Girls School where Charlotte was a teacher but her homesickness was so intense that she left after just three months. Out of financial necessity, Emily became a

teacher in Halifax but she could only endure some six months of extreme unhappiness there. She returned home and undertook the domestic chores of life in

the parsonage.

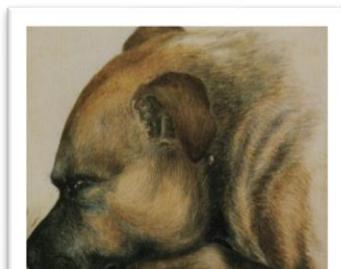
In 1842, Emily accompanied Charlotte to a girl's academy in Brussels in order to perfect their French and German with a view to opening a school of their own. However, both sisters returned to Haworth due to the death of their aunt. Their long proposed school came to nothing. Every attempt which Emily made to escape the confines of home ended in failure; it was only in the apparent imprisonment of home that she experienced any sense of freedom. She was only felt truly alive when wondering across the moors with her beloved dog, Keeper or when she was engaged in the passion of writing.

Emily had been writing poetry in secret for years and her poems were first discovered by Charlotte in 1845. At first, Emily was furious with her sister for reading her poems without permission but she reluctantly agreed to have her poems published alongside those of her two sisters. They decided on the pseudonyms, Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell in order to conceal their identity and not be subject to the dismissive attitude which female writers were accorded at that time. Sadly, this was another loss making venture as they had to pay for the cost of printing the volumes and only two copies were sold.

Two years later, the Brontë sisters paid a considerable sum of money to have their first novels published. *Wuthering Heights* was printed in a three volume edition alongside her sister Anne's, *Agnes Grey*. Emily's novel received rather mixed reviews and shocked readers by what they regarded as its immorality and it was a commercial failure. Her sister, Charlotte shared those readers' moral outrage and some scholars suspect that she may have burnt the manuscript of the second novel which Emily was believed to be working on before illness struck. Whatever the truth, there

is little doubt that Emily must have experienced a deep sense of failure.

In the following year, her dissolute brother, Bramwell died. At his funeral service, she developed a lung infection which led to tuberculosis. Emily refused all treatment as she had an understandable mistrust of doctors, given the limited state of medical knowledge of the time. Month after month, she slowly wasted away and she died just a few days before Christmas, 1848. The carpenter said that he had never made such a narrow coffin for an adult. Her much loved dog followed her coffin to the grave and howled



outside Emily's bedroom door for week after week.

Emily was never able to form a friendship outside of her family. She is often compared with that other reclusive poet, Emily Dickinson but we now know that she had romance in her life but Emily Brontë appeared to have no such romance. Despite this, many of her poems might be read as love poems but for her, love is an imagined, unattainable ideal untarnished by reality.

There is so often a note of expectancy in Emily's poems, the sense that if she just could go on waiting patiently, something wonderful would happen; a mysterious someone would at last come to claim her for his own. One of her most beautiful and touching poems is called *The Visionary*.

Silent is the house: all are laid asleep:
One alone looks out o'er the snow-wreaths deep,
Watching every cloud, dreading every breeze
That whirls the wildering drift, and bends the groaning trees.

Cheerful is the hearth, soft the matted floor;
Not one shivering gust creeps through pane or door;
The little lamp burns straight, its rays shoot strong and far:
I trim it well, to be the wanderer's guiding-star.

Frown, my haughty sire! chide, my angry dame!
Set your slaves to spy; threaten me with shame:
But neither sire nor dame nor prying serf shall know,
What angel nightly tracks that waste of frozen snow.

What I love shall come like visitant of air,
Safe in secret power from lurking human snare;
What loves me, no word of mine shall e'er betray,
Though for faith unstained my life must forfeit pay.

Burn, then, little lamp; glimmer straight and clear—
Hush! a rustling wing stirs, methinks, the air:
He for whom I wait, thus ever comes to me;
Strange Power! I trust thy might; trust thou my constancy.