

Reflection of Nineteenth Century Societal Pressure and Personal Trauma in Selected Poems of Emily Bronte

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ABSTRACT

The Bronte sisters are considered to be celebrated writers of English Literature and the two novels, Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights have been acclaimed as important novels of the nineteenth century. Charlotte Bronte and Emily Bronte are hailed as important writers of this period but at the time they were both living in the shadows of typical nineteenth century discrimination against women and personal tragedy. Emily Bronte, apart from being an accomplished novelist, was a talented poetess. This article takes into account a couple of her poems 'The Night Wind' and 'Hope'; in one she personifies a beautiful night but refuses to enter a new world described by it and in the other poem she points out the hopelessness of her life using her unique craft. This article aims to analyze and find out what is actually meant by the world into which the night wind wants to take the poetess into and why she refuses its beckoning. Secondly, it also analyses the inherent hopelessness that surrounds her. Could it be the nineteenth century society's attitude towards women or the tragic atmosphere at home which made her averse to meeting her full potential and lose hope?

Keyword: -Isolation 1, Discrimination 2, Patriarchy 3, Marginalization 4, Misogynistic 5

Introduction

Emily Bronte was born on July 30, in England. She died at an extremely young age by today's standards, at thirty. However, dying at such an age was hardly surprising in the 19th century. The killer disease Tuberculosisⁱ stalked the lanes of Europe like a sinister ghoul. It laid its claws on the hapless Bronte family. Disease and death were their lot. Emily, Charlotte and two other sisters were sent to a residential school. The two sisters developed TB and all the sisters were brought back home. Emily lost her siblings to this dreaded disease. Her mother too succumbed to cancer. The atmosphere of the house was poisoned by the fumes of misfortune. The Bronte house was secluded and remote on the Yorkshire moors, much like the house created in *Wuthering Heights* by Emily. It was exposed to the wailing, icy winter winds. The nineteenth century was not known for sanitary conditions and the Bronte household was no different. Emily's brother Branwellⁱⁱ contracted the same killer disease and died. At his funeral, Emily caught a debilitating cold. This led to her premature death. Like most of her family, Emily died young. During her illness, it is said that Emily refused medical treatment. Much later, however she relented and agreed to be treated. It was too little too late. Why did she refuse medical help? One can only guess. It does however reflect the mental status of Emily. She must have been deep down in a chasm of hopelessness. Was there anything to be happy about around her? Her siblings and parents were dropping dead; she herself was acutely ill. Where was hope? There was nothing to look forward to. No wonder in her poem *Hope* she personifies and describes it as a timid friend who takes flight leaving her to fend for herself.

1 The Night Wind:ⁱⁱⁱ

It is also possible that here lies the mystery of the poem '*The Night Wind*'. The night wind, like a bosom friend beckons her into a world of mystery and beauty symbolized by the moonlit, dew-drenched midnight.

It told me heaven was glorious,
And sleeping earth was fair. [EB,^{iv} *The Night Wind*, lines 7&8]

Emily Bronte's competence and talent come through in the beautiful articulation of her conversation with '*The Night Wind*' in her poem of the same name. This is a poem of unsurpassed beauty in just nine stanzas. Just like the blowing of the night wind, the poem moves softly and is 'mellow'. Like the advances of an amorous lover, the night wind makes advances. The rose trees are dew-drenched. Everything is beautiful and innocent. The setting of the poem is at 'midnight'. The sky was clear without a trace of a cloud and the pristine pure moonlight tiptoed into the room through the parlor window. Emily's voice here is serene and peaceful. There is no peace in her mind though, as is obvious in her demeanor.

As a writer Emily must have yearned to lose herself into just such a world of nature's mystery as promised by the insistent night wind. A world of rich imagination, ethereal beauty and deep feelings. And yet she shuns the night wind. She advises it to go elsewhere, to cast its spell on the flowers and boughs of the mysterious forest. The very determined persona of the night wind can barely tempt Emily. She wants to be left alone so that her emotions are not bound in any way. She advises the night wind to use its sway with non-human subjects. Her feelings need to be unhindered and unhampered. She claims the night wind is rather insistent and does not 'heed' her. Its embrace grows stronger and its urgings greater. The night wind is teeming with confidence and boastfully declares the ability to control her at any cost. Doesn't their relation have a history since her childhood? What started back then, according to the night wind will end only when the narrator or the poetess reposes in the deep, dark, cold recess of her grave. Then will be the time when she would be left alone by the night wind who will then take a breath and a moment to mourn for her, his friend of a long time. Both will remain undisturbed; one in her isolation and the other in its lamentation.

1.1 Hope^v:

The second poem of Emily Bronte's that I have taken into consideration here is very significantly call '*Hope*'. Bronte writes about hope because she wanted it badly. She uses her talent to describe hope as a friend who has trouble asserting her friendship and just watches from outside the cage in which Emily is imprisoned. Hope refuses to act or attempt to rescue Emily. This cage surely is the manifestation of her circumstances. Emily also mentions selfish men who must be the symbols for the world around her that did not understand her and alienated her. So hope just turns her face away from Emily. Hope just spins a false web and ultimately turns out to be a traitor. Later in the poem hope is described as a bird that just soars into the blue yonder leaving Bronte with her joys lying around her in shambles. There is no better evidence than the poem *Hope* of Bronte's abject disillusionment and disappointment with life which was caused by the society and her personal tragedies.

The rich wordings of both the poems display dejection on the part of the poetess and the source of it must have been her circumstances both at home and in the society of her time.

2 The Creative Bronte Siblings and their World:

It is quite certain that the night wind embodies a world far removed from that of the narrator. It is a world on a different and probably on an elevated plane. It could very well be the world of creativity, imagination, beauty and emotions. This must be just that world which Emily would like to inhabit. Emily Bronte was an extremely talented writer. The Bronte siblings often concocted stories and most of the siblings became writers. This was their favourite pastime and only entertainment. The three sisters Charlotte, Emily and Anne created an imaginary land of Gondal- a faraway land. Why then did Emily deny the night wind's wish?

'*Wuthering Heights*' the only novel written by Emily showcases her inherent talent. It has a unique plot, narration and characters. Its passion is intense and offers a glimpse into the passionate heart of Emily. One who had such a boiling ocean of emotions within her roiling and raging, how could she deny to step into such a world as promised by the night wind? Her heart must have yearned to fly in the sky of creativity, playing with the gossamer clouds of poetry and stories. And yet she refuses the night wind's beckoning. Whenever the name of Emily Bronte crosses our way, we cannot but think about her fascinating novel. What better example of imagination penned down on paper

can there be? The repercussions of lost love, the psychological impact of it on the protagonist Heathcliff and all the Gothic elements of supernatural elements, the isolated house, its setting of the moors with the howling and cold wind lashing on winter nights are all extensions of Emily's imagination. Readers are left wondering to this day about this woman who led a secluded life with her family in the 19th century England and faced untold misery in the form of death of her siblings and parents playing out around her like a life-like but tragic drama. The climax being her own capitulation to tuberculosis. *Wuthering Heights* and its setting mirror the setting of the Bronte family's existence.

2.1 Isolation

It is needless to say that isolation and solitude were entwined closely with the Bronte household. More so for Emily and it turned out to be a boon and a bane at the very same time. It made a home in her heart and spread its tentacles of loneliness, one of its undeniable manifestations. However, this very same loneliness made her keenly observant which makes her a sensitive writer.

'Early in youth, Emily developed her imagination around the influence of her natural setting as a keen observer of sky, animals, plants, rocks, soil and water, but also around romantic contrivances of fictional worlds influenced by her reading' [Hermitary, 1].

The Night Wind is one of Emily's nature poems and it, apart from being a display of her imagination, reveals the sensuality of nature so obvious in the lover-like amorous night wind. It is filled to the brim with enchantment into which the wind tries to lure her and into which she is unwilling to venture.

For Emily isolation was almost a habit. In fact, when she was sent to school, she felt stifled by the rules she had to follow and wanted to escape from the bondage. This ingrained aloneness was what she was used to and could have been one more reason for her rejection of the night wind's offer. Probably, she was apprehensive of the unknown and what it might bring up. She was completely devoid of a need to be known or perhaps was fearful of it. She was not happy about Charlotte's plan to publish her poems. Emily's attempt at getting meaningful employment too did not yield much because she could not deal with the requirements of any job. She was disillusioned by what happened to her brother's attempts at leading the so-called normal life. He failed miserably, developed certain addictions and eventually died adding to the body-count in her life.

2.1 Flawed Gate to glory:

Emily Bronte's gate to glory opened with her only novel '*Wuthering Heights*'. However, her poetry is no less impressive opening other doors. But it has to be noted that all her works are stamped with the solitude that was an undeniable part of her life. She lost her mother at the age of two and her sisters Maria and Elizabeth at six. One can only imagine the impact this would have had on her delicate and immature child's psyche. The swirling storms of death and the real wailing of the wild wind on the desolate and bleak moors of Yorkshire where she was brought up merge into a terrible storm. It was a secluded and isolated existence without access to any social interactions or even formal education. Nature always endows its creations with enhanced keenness to one faculty when another is deficient. Much like the blind man who has extremely sharp sense of hearing. Thus, Emily, deprived of real company, had a spectacular sense of observation. She observed the flora and fauna around and created fictional worlds with her siblings. Although she did not have real romance in her life, she could well imagine romance and its complexities. The all-consuming passion of Heathcliff is evidence of this rare ability. The world of Gondal with its kings, queens, castles are other manifestations of the Bronte siblings' flights of fancy.

2.2 Societal Pressure:

Wuthering Heights was published under the pseudonym of Ellis Bell. The predicament of the nineteenth century woman is obvious here that Emily had to publish her creation in this way. Even published thus she could not escape the criticism directed at her novel as being replete with violence and crudity. Her publishers cheated her. All this was enough to completely turn her away from the real world and the world of imagination and creativity. No wonder the night wind is unable to attract her.

I needed not its breathing
To bring such thoughts to me;

But still it whispered lowly,
How dark the woods will be! [EB, *The Night Wind*, lines 9-12]

For *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Bronte was censured deeply. The Victorian society leaned heavily on conventions and it did not allow for women to be novelists. Probably, the outburst of passion in the novel is Bronte's protest against her sedate life or against the enforced morality of the Victorian Era. The society believed that women writers certainly did not have what it takes to create something that is really original and relevant simply because women were considered to be just inferior.

It is ironic that Emily's work was worthy of praise as long as people believed that it was written by Ellis Bell, Emily's pseudonym and obviously a man's name. How could the same novel which was hailed as being original turned into a coarse and disgraceful one, once Emily's identity was revealed? No wonder, she rejects the call of the night wind into the world of creation and imagination.

3 Victorian Vendetta:

A woman in the Victorian era was what men wanted her to be. In other words, whatever was convenient for men. She should be soft, pliant and motherly, only then would she succeed to be inspirational for men. The hearth and the home were strictly her domain. Not for her the exposure to nature and its raw and violent manifestations.

The only way for a woman to achieve anything worthwhile was by getting married to a rich man. Such an opportunity was not available to the Bronte sisters. Their depleted social life probably did not allow them to meet eligible men. Moreover, the marriages of the nineteenth century often were like arrangements without the role of love. Unhappy unions were quite common. Novelists like Jane Austen and Emily Bronte pointed this out in their novels. Catherine in *Wuthering Heights* makes a socially viable decision by marrying Edgar but suffers the loss of her love for Heathcliff.

A novel written by Anne Bronte, *The Tenant of the Wildfell Hall* was criticized for its feminist content. This was the typical reaction of the patriarchal and materialistic society of the nineteenth century.

To escape the vindictive Victorian times of marginalization, the Bronte sisters created their own world, an isolated world of imagination. Gondal^{vi} and Angria^{vii} were the manifestations of their desire to escape. According to the New York Times article '*A Family Revealed*' by Suzi Feay:

'In the introduction to her exhaustive thousand-page biography of the (Bronte) family in 1994 Barker admitted, of Emily and Anne, that "the known facts about their lives could be written on a single sheet of paper". In one of her rare notes, Emily confesses that writing a long letter is "a feat that I have never performed". [Feay, 1997]

This is proof enough of the secluded life of the Bronte sisters. And yet, they had such flights of fancy. Further the article states referring to letters written by Charlotte Bronte to her friend Ellen Nussey:

'Within a terrible nine-month period Charlotte and her father Patrick first lost Branwell, who fell down in the street and died two days later of tuberculosis masked by alcoholism, then Emily, then Anne'. [Feay, 1997]

Tuberculosis, the malaise of the nineteenth century took a heavy toll on all these young prodigies. Seclusion, death and disease were thus Emily's lot. Alongside was discrimination-even within the family. *A Family Revealed* further states:

'After Branwell's death, Charlotte commented: "My poor father naturally thought more of his only son than his daughters". Branwell's (funeral card) is ornate, embossed with a neo-classical casket, drapes and flowers; Emily's utterly plain, Charlotte's equally so...' [Feay, 1997]

How obvious the gender discrimination of the Victorian age is! Even in the throes of grief, the family designs a decorative card for the son and plain ones for their daughters. How can a woman give vent to her hidden emotions

and climb the steps of imagination and enter a creative world when there are so many hindrances put in her path from within the family and from the society?

3.1 Inherent Loneliness:

The impact of social isolation is devastating. Emily and her family were subjected to such isolation. Poverty and disease were some of the causes for this alienation. According to Jerf W. K. Yeung and Cindy P. S. Fan in their article *Being Socially Isolated is a Matter of Subjectivity: the Mediator of Life Meaning and Moderator of Religiosity*:

‘Social life and functioning are framed within a framework of interpersonal relationships, in which we strive for inclusion and belongingness and endeavor to avoid exclusion and rejection’. [Yeung & Fan, 207]

Inclusion and belongingness are undoubtedly human desires. Like food which turns into nourishment for the existence of our bodies, social acceptance provides succor to our minds. Emily and her siblings were starved of the latter. The article reiterates the point by asserting, ‘...all forms of social isolations are detrimental to human positive development and growth...’ (Yeung & Fan, 206).

The Bronte siblings left home occasionally for work or studies but soon returned to the protected cocoon of their home. The lonely moors of Yorkshire, in the village of Haworth was the parsonage-their home. It was in the midst of decay and far away from civilization but this was only home they knew. They reveled in its harsh surroundings. It could be that they knew no better, were not used to mingling with others. To escape the death and desolation that surrounded them, the siblings created their own worlds of fantasy and recorded them in tiny hand-made books. At one point, the world of make believe isolated them further from the real one. They were thus introverts with limited social skills. The call of the night wind probably was a call to reality too and so Emily was averse to it. She wanted to stay in the fantastic world of her own creation and did not want to venture into another world-whether imaginary or real. Emily’s early career only added to her disenchantment with the world. The Bronte sisters were forced to publish under pseudonyms fearing the consequences of publishing with their own name. The sisters did not get married. Who knows if their lonely hearts ever imagined love and married bliss? Or were they too frightened to even consider it or were totally disillusioned?

According to Jitendra Nath and Ajay Kumar in their article *‘Victorian England and Women in Victorian Society: A Study*:

‘Victorian women were willing to struggle for emancipation, even if it meant dying for it. Victorian women had to live under many societal constraints which kept them subservient and shackled to their relationships. When women struck out for independence and vitality, they were crushed by an unbending society whose mores did not encourage personal growth and empowerment of women’. [Nath & Kumar, 79]

The last sentence of the quote is most vital because this is exactly what Emily Bronte wanted to do. She wanted to be independent and so did her sisters but the Victorian norms did not allow this. Creativity for women was a crime and so the Bronte sisters had to collude to remain anonymous. Hence there was little hope for the Bronte women and Emily has indicated so in her poem *Hope*:

Hope Was but a timid friend;
She sat without the grated den,
Watching how my fate would tend,
Even as selfish-hearted men.

She was cruel in her fear;
Through the bars one dreary day,
I looked out to see her there,
And she turned her face away! [EB, Hope, lines 1-8]

Hope, instead of being a strong ally was actually a 'timid friend' initially and later cruel enough to turn her 'face away'. She just lays back and glances at Emily's fate cursorily. Emily compares this phenomenon with 'selfish-hearted men'. How obvious her disillusionment is! Her society, her death-ridden family, her fate and the misogynistic opposite sex have all driven hope out of her life.

Generally a balm to all, Hope merrily bursts into a song while watching Emily shed tears. Hope is false, heartless and by the end of the poems takes flight while Emily's joys are strewn on the floor.

Conclusion:

Both the poems *The Night Wind* and *Hope* are poignant and extremely sensitive. Apart from being rare gems in their own rights because of their beauty, the poems reveal the sense of dejection and disappointment which dogged Emily Bronte's life. A close study of the status of women in the Victorian times and the family life of the Brontes reveals their isolation physically, psychologically and socially. Thus deep despondency and disillusionment arising from societal pressure and immense personal trauma in Emily Bronte's life are mirrored in *The Night Wind* and *Hope* just the way the setting of the Brontes' home on the Yorkshire moors is mirrored in *Wuthering Heights*.

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Notes

ⁱ Tuberculosis, also known as Consumption and White Plague, took the lives of millions throughout history. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_tuberculosis/aaccessed31.12.18

ⁱⁱ Branwell was the only son of the Bronte family. On 24 September 1848, Brontë died at Haworth parsonage, most likely due to tuberculosis aggravated by delirium tremens, alcoholism, and laudanum and opium addiction. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Branwell_Bront%C3%AB/aaccessed31.12.18

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Night Wind* by Emily Bronte was published in 1846. <http://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/75/poems-of-emily-bronte/5158/my-comforter/aaccessed31.12.18>

^{iv} I have used the abbreviation EB for Emily Bronte while quoting lines from her poems.

^v *Hope* by Emily Bronte was also published in 1846. <http://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/75/poems-of-emily-bronte/5152/hope/aaccessed31.12.18>

^{vi} Gondal was an imaginary world or created by Emily Brontë and Anne Brontë. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gondal_\(fictional_country\)/aaccessed1.1.19](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gondal_(fictional_country)/aaccessed1.1.19)

^{vii} Charlotte and Branwell Bronte created the world of Angria, another fictional world. <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/bront-juvenilia-the-history-of-angria/aaccessed1.1.19>

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