

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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I'll Come When Thou Art Saddest

I'll come when thou art saddest
Laid alone in the darkened room
When the mad day's mirth has vanished
And the smile of joy is banished
From evening's chilly gloom

I'll come when the heart's real feeling
Has entire unbiased sway
And my influence o'er thee stealing
Grief deepening joy congealing
Shall bear thy soul away

Listen 'tis just the hour
The awful time for thee
Dost thou not feel upon thy soul
A flood of strange sensations roll
Forerunners of a sterner power
Heralds of me

Emily Brontë¹

☞ Reflections

In this case, the “I” of the poem is an ambiguous speaker — the muse, perhaps, or the beloved, or God. Or, more interestingly, all three as some “sterner power.” That is, the muse is also the beloved which is also God and comes when we are saddest, “laid alone in the darkened room.” Other critics propose that the speaker of this poem is a more ominous one: the grim reaper, perhaps, or an unwelcome ghost, something wicked.

But to me, the poem seems to be as much about sadness as about clemency and relief. It is almost always impossible for me to believe that any poem—even a bleak poem—is hopeless. I think that art is proof that hope is alive, and that mercy comes. I read this poem through a specific lens; realizing we are in the liturgical season of Epiphany, I cannot help but detect those elements of wonder, mystery, and the eternal gaze that define these weeks after Christmas.

¹ “I'll Come When Thou Art Saddest” by Emily Brontë. Public Domain.

Sadness and art have a long marriage. Poets, through the ages, have attempted to articulate the unsayable, to dice order from the chaos of the heart, to understand unspeakable despair. It has been said that poems are made from other poems and we are all, in a sense, trying to say the same things but in different ways, variations on a theme, generation after generation. I am reminded of Leon Bloy, the French writer, who wrote, “Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering, in order that they may have existence.” I have often thought that it is in our exploration of these new places that poems are born, that God feels closer. Perhaps it is these places the muse wishes to visit in order to tend to the “heart’s real feeling.”

So, despair is the opposite of poetry even if despair is the subject. The attempt at being true even, as Sylvia Plath says, “true to our own weirdnesses,” is the price we pay for self-awareness. And Carl Jung famously warned, “The artist’s life cannot be otherwise than full of conflicts, for two forces are at war within him [or her]—on the one hand, the common human longing for happiness, satisfaction and security in life, and on the other a ruthless passion for creation which may go so far as to override every personal desire ... There are hardly any exceptions to the rule that a person must pay dearly for the divine gift of the creative fire.”

We know very little of Emily Brontë’s life, but her limited biography tells us that she was lonely, shy, reclusive, and lived a rather sad and solitary life. With her rich imagination, she invented new worlds as a way to escape the harsh reality of her own. Many critics, at the time of her death, suggested that her now-classic novel, *Wuthering Heights*, could not possibly have been written by Brontë because her life had been too sheltered; how could someone as lonely as she written with such passion about the desires of the heart? This poem gives us some light by which to understand her private life and offers to us a sense of those “strange sensations” she might have felt, the “awful time” at once a despairing one and also, mercifully, an *awe-filled* and wondrous one.

✂ About the Poet

Emily Brontë never knew the extent of fame she achieved with her one and only novel, *Wuthering Heights*, as she died a year after its publication (at age 30, in 1848). Emily was the third eldest of the four surviving Brontë siblings, between the youngest Anne and her brother Branwell. She wrote under the pen name Ellis Bell. The only poems by Emily Brontë that were published in her lifetime were included in a slim volume by Brontë and her sisters Charlotte and Anne titled *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell* (1846), which sold a mere two copies and received only three unsigned reviews in the months following its publication. Myths about the Brontë family abound, but Emily seems to be the most mysterious figure of them all.



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