

# Universality in Emily Brontë's "Remembrance"

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## Abstract

Universality in literature means that a piece of literary work is able to reflect universal emotions and evoke responses from men of every face. The essay believes that Emily Brontë's "Remembrance" is such a poem that achieves universality. It attempts to summarize three universal elements contained in the poem: the universal experience of grief at the death of the beloved, the universal question of "still remember or have forgotten" and the universal truth of living in struggles. These three aspects together reflect the universal emotional progress of a person in the face of long-term deep loss—grief, doubt, fears, guilt, and struggle between the restraint of sadness and indulgence in the wish of death. All these emotions can be seen as universal ways of how one remembers the dead. Besides, with Brontë's skillful application of poetic devices, it is not difficult for us to sympathize with the emotions expressed in the poem. In a word, Brontë is believed to have made "Remembrance" a poem of universality.

## Keywords

Emily Brontë, Remembrance, Universality, Death, Time

## 1. Introduction

Best-known as the author of *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Jane Brontë (1818-1848) actually started out as a poet and wrote more than 200 poems in her life. Although her poems are not as popular as her classic novel, her poetic genius is widely recognized. Notably, one of her famous poems, "Remembrance", also called "Cold in the earth", was highly regarded by F. R. Leavis as "the finest poem in the nineteenth-century part of *The Oxford Book of English Verse*" (Leavis, 1936: p. 6). However, Leavis did not further illustrate the "fineness" of the poem after he gave such high praise. In one of the few stylistic analyses of Brontë's poetry, C. Day Lewis particularly recognized the "extremely powerful" effect of the rhythm in "Remembrance" (Lewis, 1957: p. 91). Regrettably, he did

not relate such rhythmic effect to the emotions in context nor discuss its functions further. A systematic analysis of Brontë's "Remembrance" was not conducted until Janet Gezari published the essay "Fathoming 'Remembrance': Emily Brontë in Context" in 1999. Inspiringly, Gezari took into consideration the holistic emotional state of Brontë's contemporaries and read Brontë's poem "in the context of her century's fears of both remembering and forgetting the dead" (Gezari, 1999: p. 981). Different from Gerazi's perspective, the essay tries to focus on the universal and time-transcending value of the emotions expressed in the poem and to see whether the poem was up to the criterion of universality that William J. Long once proposed for testing good literature:

"The first of these is universality, that is, the appeal to the widest human interests and the simplest human emotions... good literature knows no nationality, nor any bounds save those of humanity. It is occupied chiefly with elementary passions and emotions—love and hate, joy and sorrow, fear and faith—which are an essential part of our human nature; and the more it reflects these emotions, the more surely it awakens a response in men of every face." (Long, 1909: p. 5)

From Long's perspective, universality is of uppermost significance in literature. Good literature should deal with the universal subject matter and convey the simplest human emotions so that it can evoke responses among different readers. The essay is going to reveal the universal significance of Brontë's "Remembrance" from the following aspects: the universal experience of grief at the death of the beloved, the universal question of "still remember or have forgotten" and the universal truth of living in struggles and pain in the face of long-term deep loss.

## 2. Universal Experience: Grief at the Loss of Beloved

First of all, as an elegy itself, the poem deals with the universal subject matter of love, death, loss and grief. Grief at the loss of the beloved is undoubtedly a universal experience for all human beings and one of the simplest and deepest human emotions. However, it does not mean that universality requires simply bringing up the universal subject matter; not all the elegies concerning grief, loss and death necessarily have the universal power. To gain universality, it also matters whether such grief in the poem is able to evoke a response in different people. The essay believes that there should be at least two aspects worth considering – one is the identity of speaker; the other is to what extent the grief is genuinely expressed in the poem and approximates the grief in real life. First, in Brontë's original manuscript, the title was found to be "R. Alcona to J. Brenzaida". R. Alcona is the heroine of the imaginary world created by the Brontë sisters named Gondal; and J. Brenzaida, a king, is Rosina's husband who was killed in a civil war. Besides, the original manuscript also referred to "Angora's shore" ("Angora" is one of the imaginary kingdoms in Gondal) instead of "northern shore" at the end of line 5 in the poem. However, when Brontë was preparing for

the publication of the poem, she deliberately removed all the references to Gondal and retitled the poem “Remembrance”. Such revision can be seen as an implication of Brontë’s intention to endow her poem with a universal quality. The obscurity of the speaker’s identity makes it easier for different readers to project themselves as the speaker, which thus increases the emotional appeal of the poem.

Secondly, the grief expressed in the poem should be genuine and deep enough to help arouse resonance in different readers, which requires some techniques and skills on the part of the poet. To achieve the effect, Brontë makes use of many poetic devices in the poem. One important device Brontë applies is repetition, which mainly takes two different forms in the poem—one is anaphora and the other epizeuxis. Anaphora appears in many places in “Remembrance”. Typical examples are in stanza 5:

*No later light has lightened up my heaven,  
No second morn has ever shone for me,  
All my life’s bliss from thy dear life was given,  
All my life’s bliss is in the grave with thee.*

The above anaphora, the repetition of “No...No” and “All my life’s bliss...All my life’s bliss” at the beginning of the sentences, emphasizes what the speaker has lost together with the death of the beloved—the light, the happiness, and all that was joyful in life. By means of anaphora, Brontë stresses how overwhelming the grief is to the speaker; it even changes the way that the speaker sees the world and lives his/her life. Besides anaphora, epizeuxis is also applied to help express the speaker’s grief: “Far, far removed,” the speaker says in line 2, describing how far away the speaker feels from his/her beloved and how far away the beloved is actually now from the speaker—death separates them; and the tomb of the beloved is also distant from the speaker. Through the poetic device of repetition, Brontë makes us feel the speaker’s grief and despair much more intensely.

Furthermore, on the level of sound and rhythm, Brontë also pays much attention to creating an atmosphere of solemnity and grief like that of a funeral. C. Day Lewis particularly shows his appreciation for the poem’s rhythm:

“The effect of this rhythm I find extremely powerful, extremely appropriate. It is a dragging effect, as of feet moving in a funeral march; an andante maestoso: it is the slowest rhythm I know in English poetry, and the most sombre.” (Lewis, 1957: p. 91)

It can be seen from the above that Lewis speaks highly of the slow rhythm of the poem, which contributes to a special “dragging effect” and the funeral kind of somberness. Take the first stanza as an example to see how the effect is achieved:

*Cold in the earth and the deep snow piled above thee,  
Far, far removed, cold in the dreary grave!  
Have I forgot, my only Love, to love thee,  
Severed at last by Time’s all-severing wave?*

Firstly, it is worth noticing that there are many monosyllabic words (i.e., “cold”, “earth” and “deep” etc.) instead of multisyllables used in this stanza, which thus slows down the pace at which the poem can be read in a large sense. Second, as for the meter, special attention can be paid to the trochee followed by an iamb at the beginning of line 1 and 4 (“Cold in|the earth”; “Severed|at last”). This actually renders an unusual syllable pattern of “Dum-da-da-Dum” and a sense of power and solemnity. Third, it is obvious that the lines are all end-stopped, and there are lots of caesuras, either marked by a comma or a dash, used within the lines. Such arrangement of pauses creates a steady, slow and patterned sense of pacing, just like that of a funeral march.

Besides the rhythm, the rhyme scheme of the poem also helps much to convey the speaker’s grief. The poem generally has a fixed, regular rhyme scheme pattern of “ABAB” in each stanza. Such regular pattern of sounds gives “a sense of stability and continuity to the poem”, and it also, to some extent, reflects “the poem’s theme of constant, enduring love over the passage of time” (Little, 2019: p. 17). Particularly, it seems that through rhyming, some line-ending words are connected together not only on the level of sound but also on the level of meaning. For example, in stanza 3, “spring” rhymes with “suffering”, which seems to indicate that the speaker still suffers much from the loss of his/her beloved even in the hopeful season of spring. Likewise, in stanza 6, “destroy” rhymes with “joy”, which implies that the speaker’s joy has been destroyed and there will not be happiness for him/her anymore. The rhyming of “pain” with “again” in stanza 8 indicates that, for the speaker, life without the beloved is like repeating pain. Furthermore, Brontë also deliberately pairs the speaker “I” with his/her beloved through the way of rhyming. For example, “thee” rhymes with “me” in stanza 4; “me” rhymes with “thee” again in stanza 5; and in stanza 7, “thine” with “mine”. Such arrangement of rhyming, to some extent, shows the speaker’s strong wish to be together with his/her beloved again. In a word, the regularity of the rhyme scheme in “Remembrance” and some particularly rhymed line-ending words help better convey the speaker’s grief on both the level of sound and meaning.

In short, Brontë’s “Remembrance” presents the universal emotional experience of grief at the loss of the beloved. As an elegy, it naturally deals with the universal subject matter of death, loss and grief; but to achieve universality, it also matters whether the universal emotion, the grief, expressed in the poem can evoke the response from the part of readers or listeners. To achieve such effect, Brontë deliberately makes the identity of the speaker unknown to readers, particularly applies the device of repetition in the poem to intensify the emotion, uses an extremely slow and steady rhythm to make the poem sound like that of the funeral, and adopts a regular and specially-designed rhyme scheme to show the speaker’s grief. All of these techniques help intensify the expression of the speaker’s grief at the death of his/her beloved and thus increase the emotional appeal of the poem to the readers or listeners.

### 3. Universal Question: Still Remember or Have Forgotten

Besides the universal grief at the loss of beloved, it is worth noticing that fifteen years of separation by Death is a long time. If the poem only and simply deals with the emotion of grief, it may lose some genuineness of human beings' real emotional experience. For one who has lost his/her beloved for a long period of time, there should be something more than grief. In "Remembrance", Brontë is well aware of the impact of Time and other factors on a person; and more than once the speaker poses the question of "still remember or have forgotten" to himself/herself in the poem.

For example, in the first stanza, the speaker asks, "Have I forgot, my only Love, to love thee,/Severed at last by Time's all-severing wave?" The speaker's act of questioning does show the speaker's fear of Time's power of wiping out memories and severing people apart. "All-severing" indicates that all people will be eventually separated by Time's wave, which also embodies Brontë's philosophical concern about the relationship between Time and human beings as well as her poetic tendency to write for the whole human race. Given the impact of Time, the speaker questions whether he/she has forgotten to "love" his/her "only Love". Yet, the repetition (specifically, polyptoton) in the question suggests that the question is "circular"—the speaker has not forgotten to "love" his/her "Love" since the speaker is now calling him/her "my only Love" (Little, 2019: p. 12). Besides, in the second stanza, the speaker continues to ask if his/her "thoughts no longer hover" by his/her beloved's grave. The question is also a rhetorical one: the later description of the details of the landscape surrounding the grave ("heath and fern-leaves cover...") does show that the speaker's thoughts do "hover" there and that he/she has not forgotten, but still remember his/her beloved. It is clear that the two above-mentioned rhetorical questions both present the speaker's faithfulness and constancy to his/her "Love". To some extent, the act of questioning itself can be seen as a way of remembrance of the dead. Furthermore, in stanza five, the speaker expressed his/her guilty about occasionally forgetting the beloved and made an apology:

*Sweet Love of youth, forgive me, if I forget thee,  
While the world's tide is bearing me along,  
Other desires and other hopes beset me,  
Hopes which obscure but cannot do thee wrong!*

In this stanza, the speaker points out several things that may cause him/her to forget the beloved sometimes—the influence of the world, the passage of time, other desires and hopes. Like all human beings, the speaker is unavoidably influenced by the world, overwhelmed by time's power and driven by secular desires and hopes. All these factors in reality are likely to distract him/her from thinking about his/her beloved. However, despite the occasional distractions, the speaker, deep in the heart, still remembers and loves the person he/she loved fifteen years ago as the poem suggests. Here, Brontë seems to imply that remembrance and love do not mean every-minute body-and-soul kind of thinking,

which is unrealistic for someone who has lost his/her beloved for a long time and still tried to live the life.

All the emotions mentioned above—the doubt about whether he/she still remembers the departed beloved, the fear of Time’s erasing power, and the guilt about forgetting the beloved occasionally—can actually be seen as ways of how one remembers the dead besides grief. The process of questioning whether one still remembers is itself a way of remembrance. Through the question, the poem exquisitely reveals the universal yet rarely-mentioned emotions of a person in the face of long-term deep loss.

#### 4. Universal Truth: Living in Struggles and Pain

Besides the emotion of grief, the question of whether the speaker still remembers or not, the poem also presents a cruel yet universal truth for those who have lost their beloved: living in ongoing struggles and conflicts between “sense and sensibility”, between self-reminding of cherishing life and indulgence in the wish of quick death. On one hand, the speaker knows that life needs to be continued and cherished (“Then did I learn how existence could be cherished, strengthened...”) and that he/she is supposed to restrain the intense grief (“...check the tears of useless passion—/Weaned my young soul from yearning after thine; /Sternly denied.../dare not indulge in memory...”); on the other hand, the speaker sometimes simply cannot hold himself/herself back and only wants to join the beloved in the tomb (“All my life’s bliss is in the grave with thee. /... burning wish to hasten/ down to that tomb already more than mine”). Such struggle still exists in the speaker’s life even though it has been fifteen years since the death of the beloved.

To help express such emotional struggle more intensely, the poet also deliberately applies some poetic devices in the poem. First is the use of enjambment. As mentioned before, most of the lines are end-stopped, which helps produce a steady, even, and slow rhythm in the poem. Such rhythm not only creates an atmosphere of somber funeral, but also suggests the speaker’s restraint of sadness. In contrast to the prevalence of end-stopped lines, the places where enjambment occurs naturally stand out and cause a different effect. Take stanza 7 as an example:

*Then did I check the tears of useless passion—  
Weaned my young soul from yearning after thine,  
Sternly denied its burning wish to hasten  
Down to that tomb already more than mine.*

Among the end-stopped lines, the enjambment between the third line and the fourth creates a special tension and urgency in the poem and as well indicates the speaker’s emotional crisis – the speaker cannot hold back his/her grief anymore and only wishes to hasten to the tomb and stay with the beloved. Such unusual enjambment seems to indicate “the [speaker’s] longing to overcome the gaps—of the line endings, which also suggest the gaps of space and time —to be

with her [/his] beloved” (Little, 2019: p. 11). In addition, special attention should also be paid to the use of various punctuations at the end of each line in the stanza: first is a dash, second a semi-colon, then no punctuation (enjambment), last is a full stop. As for the function of punctuations in poems, Alan Helms holds that “far from operating as a peripheral part of a poet’s work”, punctuation “is central to our understanding of poetic meaning” (Helms, 1980: p. 177). Punctuations are not likely to be used randomly by a poet and there should be some special design and meaning underlying the special use of punctuations. Back to the punctuations in the above stanza, the decreasing time of pauses between the first three lines indicates an increasingly strong wish for death; and the full stop at the end of the fourth line can be seen as a kind of control and restraint again—the speaker is holding back the grief so as to continue the life. Through the use of enjambment and various punctuations, the speaker’s inner struggle and conflict is outstandingly expressed in the stanza.

Besides, unlike other elegies that are accustomed to conveying hope and positivity in the end, Brontë expresses the idea that “finality and composure in the face of deep and irretrievable loss are unattainable” (Gezari, 1999: p. 968). With the deep loss of the beloved, life may hardly find its real bliss again; existence could only be “fed without the aid of joy”. This may sound too passive and pessimistic; yet this is what most likely happens to those who have experienced such loss. There is no real composure and easy let-go in the face of deep loss – living in ongoing struggles and pain is the universal truth.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the essay has mainly summarized three elements that render Emily Brontë’s poem “Remembrance” universal: the universal experience of grief at the loss of the beloved, the universal question of “still remember or have forgotten” and the universal truth of living in ongoing struggles. These three aspects are not separate, irrelevant parts but together reflect universal emotional progress of a person in the face of long-term deep loss. First is the intense and simple grief caused by the death of the beloved; then follows the doubt, fear and guilt about forgetting the beloved occasionally owing to the impact of time; and the last is the struggle between a hastening wish of death and a restraint of sadness, which, compared with the simple grief at the beginning, contains more thoughts about life and death. In other words, the three aspects can be seen as three universal ways of how one remembers the dead—by grieving tears, by doubt, fear and guilt, and by the struggle between hope and despair. Whatever form it takes contains love and remembrance of the departed beloved. No matter whom we are, or what cultures we live in, we, as human beings, are no strangers to these emotions. With Brontë’s skillful application of poetic devices in the poem, it is not difficult for us to sympathize with what Brontë tried to express in “Remembrance” either. In a word, Brontë has successfully made “Remembrance” a poem of universality.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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