

Erica Womer

Dr. Libertin

English 345

5 October 2009

To Kindle the Soul

They came with fire. Painting portraits of words with flame-tipped pens. Emotion burned onto the page with a heat strong enough to engulf you from the inside out. A sensation so potentially devastating, so potentially destructive. Why then are so many drawn to the flame?

I don't think I have an answer. I've written since before I can remember and probably before that. I love to write but I never had to fight for it. It makes you wonder, doesn't it? What must it have been like to live in a time or place where your one way of creating was frowned upon by everyone around you?

The truth, I think, is that everyone, everyone in this world has kindling inside them. For some it's a wick that when lit will allow wax to drip gently down, creativity always flowing, ideas then hardening, taking solid form. For others it's a wildfire, one that can't be contained no matter how many times people try to douse the flame. There's something both tragic and beautiful about this, I think. What a wonderful thought that everyone innately has this passion within them – but why does it so often go unnoticed? The unfortunate truth, I think, is that like a real match to be lit, first friction must occur.

Sometimes it's by anger. Many times it's because of trauma or grief. Less often, I think by love, but for that reason cherished all the more. For me it was happiness, in the beginning;

when I was in elementary school reveling in the idea that I could actually win contests doing something I enjoyed anyway. Later it was frustration and loneliness, or that's what it seemed like at the time. When I went to a new school in eighth grade, left the home away from home my private school had become for me. It was pride at the success I continued to have entering writing contests as well as how much confidence my English teacher seemed to have in me.

Desolation. Desperate attempt to understand and cope when we lost one of the best.

Now moving on, growing up, and learning necessary truths despite the desire I sometimes have to remain naïve. These are all the feelings that struck the fire within me.

It's different for everyone. No two sparks are exactly the same; no two fires burn with the same flame. It's what makes art the miracle it is – it's human fire preserved with paint, the piano, the page.

It's all the more apparent, I think, how this internal fire has touched the artist when their subject happens to be the fire itself. Emily Dickinson is a woman who, during her time, and perhaps even in this one, was gravely misunderstood. She was different. And Dickinson lived in a time when difference just meant odd. I don't love all her poetry; what I think, however, is that her difference often translated into brilliance. The life Dickinson lived ignited a fire in her soul that was strange and amazing. It had 1000 different voices and then one more. And when she wrote about fire, it probably goes without saying *her* fire blazed bright.

Poem 365 of Dickinson's deals almost exclusively with the imagery of fire. She uses the concept of forging metal as an extended metaphor throughout the poem to achieve an interesting effect. In this poem, Dickinson uses fire as the catalyst for change; metal is not as malleable if it is not heated to such intense temperatures. The poem describes the metal being heated by the

flame which at the beginning of the poem is red but is changed by the metal: “Red – is the Fire’s common tint - /But when the vivid Ore/ Has vanquished Flame’s conditions,/ It quivers from the Forge/ Without a color but the light/ Of unannointed Blaze” (lines 3-8). This indicates that while the heat of the fire is affecting the metal, forcing it to become pliable to the forger, the metal is also having an effect on the fire. This poem is about being forced into a shape, whether of your own volition or not. What I think is interesting about the poem, though is that this change does not occur without having an effect on the agent of change as well.

The last lines of the poem are the most interesting to me. Dickinson writes, “That soundless tug – within -/ Refining these impatient Ores/ With Hammer, and with Blaze/ Until the Designated Light/ Repudiate the Forge –” (12-16). These lines are fascinating to me mostly because of a single word: repudiate. In the end of the poem, Dickinson writes that the “Light” essentially rejects the “Forge” as having no power or authority over it. This is particularly significant because throughout the poem we are being shown imagery that describes how both the fire works for the Blacksmith and how the metal bends to the force of his Hammer. However these last lines indicate to me a sense of inner freedom is still residing within.

This poem is profound to me. The depth Dickinson managed to create in sixteen lines is something amazing, something I strive toward every time I pick up a pen. This poem to me is an infinitely interesting study on how humans affect other humans and the reactions that are created through this. Is her fire contagious? Is yours? Has it left you feeling wonder as you think about all the people who shaped you, how many people you have helped to shape? It makes me think about my family, people who I’ve known for years, people who I was only lucky enough to meet one time. Do I carry a piece of that person I talked to at the concert with me? Are they part of what makes me who I am? Am I a part of them?

Undoubtedly others play a role in sculpting the people we become. This is apparent in many writers' works but another stunning example is Michelle Cliff. Cliff is native to Jamaica; I think her struggle with identity was probably more difficult than most. Cliff is biracial and bisexual, and grew up in a time and place where neither was considered acceptable. Her story "If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire" is a narrative of part of her journey.

Cliff's fire is a low burn; it's quiet but all consuming. What I love most about the way she writes is the way her prose turns into poetry, again with a calm that doesn't draw attention to it – it just is. She speaks about everyday life, relatable anecdotes and interweaving them with horrible realities. She does this all with a casualness, again that low burn, that allows her to say what she wants and make readers keep reading.

She walked up to racism and stripped it of its power. And did it with fire in her heart.

So – as I write this, I am not composing a soliloquy. I am joining a chorus; a chorus of broken down, broken spirited women – people – who found another way to be strong. I've found my fire, as Cliff, Dickinson, and thousands of others have before me. I will be part of the legacy.

Try to put me out.

Acknowledgements

Cliff, Michelle. "If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire." *The Longman's Anthology of Women's Literature*. Ed. Mary K. DeShazer. New York: Addison-Wesley, 2001. 917-28. Print.

Dickinson, Emily. "Dare you see a Soul at the White Heat?" *The Longman's Anthology of Women's Literature*. Ed. Mary K. DeShazer. New York: Addison-Wesley, 2001. 969-70. Print.