

## Commentary on Emily Brontë's "The Old Stoic"

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### Abstract:

Renowned for its linguistic austerity and philosophical depth, "The Old Stoic" rejects materialism while celebrating inner liberation, juxtaposing freedom with worldly desires. Emily Brontë celebrates inner liberation with her dismissal of "riches" and "fame" while pursuing an unshackled existence. Through rejecting conventional values and foregrounding the "chainless soul" as an eternal ideal, the poem articulates Brontë's contemplation upon intrinsic freedom and the meaning of life. With its distilled language and metaphysical resonance, the work exemplifies Brontë's stoic inclination and her poetic mastery.

**Keywords:** Emily Brontë; "The Old Stoic"; Stoicism; freedom; materialism critique

### The Old Stoic

Emily Brontë

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Riches I hold in light esteem,

And Love I laugh to scorn;

And lust of fame was but a dream,

That vanished with the morn:

And if I pray, the only prayer

That moves my lips for me

Is, "Leave the heart that now I bear,

And give me liberty!"

Yes, as my swift days near their goal:  
'Tis all that I implore;  
In life and death a chainless soul,  
With courage to endure. (Brontë, 1992, pp. 33)

Emily Brontë's "The Old Stoic" is a compelling meditation on stoicism, freedom, and the transient nature of worldly desires. Through its succinct and powerful verses, Brontë reveals a profound philosophical stance that critiques materialism and exalts the value of inner freedom. This poem, notable for its austere beauty and intellectual rigor, stands as a testament to Brontë's philosophical depth and poetic prowess.

The poem opens with a resolute dismissal of conventional pursuits, epitomized in the lines, "Riches I hold in light esteem, / And Love I laugh to scorn." Brontë's speaker rejects the traditional sources of value and fulfillment, suggesting a deep-seated skepticism about their worth. This dismissal is not merely rhetorical but reflects a fundamental shift in the speaker's values, indicative of a stoic indifference to external pleasures and pressures. The notion of "lust of fame" as a fleeting dream further underscores the impermanence of such pursuits, contrasting sharply with the enduring nature of inner conviction.

The speaker's singular plea, "Leave the heart that now I bear, / And give me liberty!" serves as a powerful expression of stoic desire for freedom from emotional and material constraints. This plea for liberty is framed not as a wish for escape from suffering but as a pursuit of a higher, unshackled existence. It reveals Brontë's engagement with stoic philosophy, emphasizing the speaker's wish to attain a state of self-determined freedom both in life and death.

The concluding stanza, "Yes, as my swift days near their goal: / 'Tis all that I implore; /

In life and death a chainless soul, / With courage to endure,” encapsulates the poem’s central themes. The imagery of “swift days” underscores the inevitability of mortality, while the aspiration for a “chainless soul” highlights the speaker’s ultimate goal: to live and die unfettered by the chains of worldly concerns. The valorization of courage as a means to endure life’s trials further aligns with stoic principles, where inner strength is paramount in facing both life’s challenges and its inevitable end.

Brontë’s use of language in “The Old Stoic” is marked by its clarity and intensity. The poem’s brevity and simplicity are deceptive; beneath its surface lies a complex philosophical reflection that challenges conventional values. By eschewing the allure of material wealth and fame, the speaker embraces a stoic ideal of self-mastery and inner freedom.

Ultimately, “The Old Stoic” by Emily Brontë offers a profound exploration of stoic philosophy and the pursuit of inner freedom. Through its incisive language and philosophical depth, the poem invites readers to contemplate the nature of true liberty and the enduring strength of the human spirit. Brontë’s work remains a significant contribution to poetic and philosophical discourse, reflecting her nuanced understanding of human values and the quest for authenticity.

## References

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