

Short Story

Empath

Part One – A series of diary entries

22 May 2330 - A dream

It has been raining all day, a strange concept as back home this continuous rain is simply unheard of. I suppose it is important to note exactly how I got here, and the truth is I am unsure. There is something about this place that is unfamiliar, similar to a dream-like state. I cannot help but feel as though I am not entirely present. Nevertheless, Empath is far from home.

25 May 2330 – Frances and the villages

I met Frances on the second day, she is truly beautiful. Her hair is long and golden and her eyes, bright. The women back home are grey, Frances is very much the opposite. We met in a sort of haze as she approached me when I still felt lost, although I am not entirely sure I feel any less lost now. I awoke in a stranger's bed; I have been using it as my own ever since, as the owner has not yet made an appearance. As I first opened my eyes, I could smell the fresh air. It was not like back home; it was sweet and refreshing. The room was dark and cluttered, glimmers of light seeped in through the slightly transparent white curtains as though I was being called upon, I felt the urgency to leave. As I made my way outside, I was astounded by the realisation that this was not home, I was somewhere else entirely. From the moment Frances stumbled into me I have felt enchanted. Since that day we meet most days, Frances takes on the role of a tour guide however she is not as informative as I wish. She has never asked how I got here.

On that day, we walked through the town square and nearby villages and I witnessed the ways of Empath for the first time. The people here live in quaint houses that remind me of old cottages in fairy tales, enchanting and filled with excitement. Empath is a welcoming place, one where you can feel safe. I was met with the sound of children laughing and the distant humming of birds in the trees surrounding this island. It seems nature has taken over, each house is filled with different types of plants, the outsides blooming with flowers beyond imagination. Flowers of every kind, every colour and more. It appears that they take great pride in the appearance of their homes and particularly the gardens. The wildlife is extraordinary, creatures and animals I have never even heard of reside here, peacefully. For the people of Empath do not eat meat or use animals for anything for that matter. The thought of animals roaming free would usually fill me with dread yet there is something beautiful about it here, they seem happy. It is difficult to remember these animals are free, back home this is unheard of, like the rain.

Everyone here knows one another and the terms 'he' and 'she' are simply not to be used although I am still unsure of why. This is not a rule as such, it is more of an unspoken courtesy. When I do use these terms, I am looked upon as though I am some sort of stranger from a faraway place (this isn't exactly untrue). Frances says Empath is something called a 'community', everyone is friendly and polite. I care not for politeness, as this is not a value treated with importance back home, yet the people of Empath seem deeply offended by my lack of please and thankyou's. Frances suggests I should be careful in the future as this is considered disrespectful. Although, despite her beauty, Frances lacks cultural knowledge and respect. I will not change my ways to accommodate other people's feelings and values as it is simply not in my nature and I am not obligated to do so. These disagreements we have happen

often, I try not to dwell on this as it is clear Frances lacks understanding, it is not her intention to upset me. Despite this, I remain charmed by her beauty.

3 June 2330 – The Markets

Today we visited the markets, they are very different to back home. Upon arrival I could hear live music and laughter, I was excited to explore. The stalls were what we would consider old fashioned back home, wooden frames with overhead coverings to provide shelter from the rain. However today was a sun-filled day, the light skipped across Frances's blushed cheeks as though it was meant to sit there. I couldn't help but notice the variety of things being sold, books, paintings, fruits, handmade lanterns and musical instruments, the list could go on. In my mind I cannot rid of the look upon Frances's face, she was glowing. As we made our way through the market, I could not help overhearing the conversations surrounding me. Back home, the markets were a practical place, not for socialising but for simply purchasing necessities, such as meat. I cannot say I visit the markets much back home, this is very much the role of a woman, they run the household and take pride in doing so. One day I hope Frances will do the same for me. Yet when I do visit the markets, it is the opposite to what I encountered today, it is calm and quiet and grey. I'm sure my surprise to overhear conversations of both, beautiful women and young men discussing their favourite books and artists is understandable as this is highly unusual to me. Frances says the arts are extremely valued in Empath and many people find great pleasure in discussing them. Although this seems like a pleasant experience, I cannot say I see the practicality in the arts, I have always considered them a waste of time. Frances seemed disappointed by this. Is the point of a market not to purchase things we need? She cannot see that wasting time socialising takes time away from practical tasks.

Returning from the market we walked through more of the villages. I cannot say I expected to see a number of women in so many professions. They worked at the markets, we saw teachers, mothers, farmers, construction workers, gardeners, anything you could think of. This is absurd to me, I thought a woman's natural passion was motherhood, due to a natural maternal instinct. I find the domestic role of a woman very respectable and pleasing, I struggle to understand why they would turn down the life of motherhood that brings everyone such great satisfaction, in return for occupations of hard labour. Of course, I understand that Empath is equal, I just cannot understand the motivations behind the choice of not raising a family. Frances says it is about choice, not everyone wishes to have a family and these roles are certainly not down to gender. After a lot of thought on her words, I still cannot comprehend them, for nothing would fill me with greater joy.

10 June 2330 – The night before the wedding

I find weddings noble yet somewhat boring. The romance of a man and woman promising their lives and loyalty to one another, their surnames becoming one, protecting one another, it's invidious. Of course, this doesn't always work out and that's understandable, after all men and women are free to make their own choices. However, boredom begins to bleed in when you have attended several weddings, they are all the same. Despite this, there is something satisfying about uniformed, controlled events, I enjoy being aware of my role. If I do remain here, on Empath, I wish this for Frances and me one day, I would love nothing more.

11 June 2330 – The Wedding

Boredom is very far from what I have experienced today, after attending a *wedding*, if you could call it that, all I can speak of is my shock. The guests attending consisted of couples of any gender and great big families, all dressed in their most extravagant, bright clothing. The

two brides, friends of Frances, entered the room together, also dressed in vivid clothing I have never seen before. There were no vows, nor rings, nor legal documentation. This ceremony was more like one great party, with singing and dancing, children running through the crowds and the same laughter I often hear whilst walking through the town square. It was almost as though the entirety of Empath attended this wedding. There was a tremendous number of gifts given to the newlyweds. Books, paintings, musical instruments, they were very similar to the items at the market stalls. However, they were decorated with a great deal of care, they were covered in intricate patterns, Frances said it is tradition here to give hand-made gifts. This is not the correct way to marry. Without the declaration of vows, the legal documents and rings, I cannot see how these people call this a wedding at all. As usual, Frances was delighted, almost swept away with the whole experience. She is beautiful. I know she is disappointed by my lack of enthusiasm; I just cannot see the point of this ‘wedding’, particularly the impracticality of the gifts. A wedding is a legal declaration, a ceremony of two people agreeing to spend their lives with one another, an opportunity for the man to take care of a family and his wife. This is not what I witnessed today and frankly, I am appalled.

Part Two – A conversation

Although I remain bewitched by Frances’s very charming presence, it has become clear to me that my feelings towards her are not reciprocated. I grow tired of this place. After Frances made her feelings known, I decided to make my concerns surrounding Empath known, for I only withheld them out of politeness (upon Frances’s wishes, not mine). I recall the conversation so clearly:

“You see my use of ‘he’ and ‘she’ as strange, this is perfectly normal and acceptable to me. Why do the people of Empath not refer to one another using these terms?” I spoke.

“Why would we resort to such impersonality when we were all given names? We feel it is not necessary to label each and every person with the same term, we are individuals. We all know one another; we socialise and dance and sing most evenings. Why would I refer to a friend with such coldness? It is not that your use of these terms is forbidden, it is just unusual” She replied.

“My dear Frances, this is not cold, it is simply habit and to be used for ease. I wish not to offend anyone although I cannot see how such a thing could!” I replied. She remained silent; I feel as though she felt that an explanation was unnecessary. I hoped that this was because she understood my perspective, it later became clear that she did not.

“And what of the wedding? Even you have to admit that this was not a ceremony, it was an excuse to celebrate and sing. In fact, how can you call this a wedding at all?” Said I.

“A wedding is simply a celebration of love between two people” She spoke warmly, a softness lingered throughout her words. “Why must one person legally devote their loyalty to another, when this is a natural occurrence within love. You spoke of women taking their husband’s surnames and this to me, is barbaric. Why must anyone abandon their identity, their connection to their family for the sake of marriage, it feels pointless and a great shame. Not only this, but the obligation also to wear a ring, a label, a declaration of their romantic status is also unnecessary. It is not an *excuse* to celebrate, it is the very reason. For there is nothing more beautiful than the love between two people, no matter their gender or appearance or past. It is a choice, why must a legal involvement enforce this upon two people when...?”

I interrupted: “You completely miss the point of marriage. It is an opportunity to declare love and make this publicly known, an agreement of obligation to care for one another. The rings symbolise eternal love, is it not even more romantic to legally agree to devote such care for another person? It is certainly more practical. This is a chance for a husband to have a wife, possibly a family and agree to protect and love them. To take a man’s surname is a great honour, it represents unity. You may deem this barbaric, but I see this as an organised, respectable celebration and plainly, I cannot label the wedding of your friends with such respectability”. She smiled, as I grew more frustrated Frances remained completely calm. It felt as though she thought herself better and more educated. She sees herself with superiority, she does not know there are greater things beyond Empath. Nevertheless, she looked beautiful. She just cannot understand my more practical ways of thinking.

“Why are the arts valued so deeply here? Do you not deem them impractical and useless?” I spoke. Frances seemed almost hurt by this question, I cannot say I enjoyed upsetting her. However, I do feel the questionings of this strange place necessary as I have not yet seen anybody else do so.

“Can you not feel when you hear music? Can you not sense emotional enjoyment from reading? The arts are a form of expression, we all have stories to tell and feelings we wish we could voice. You may deem them impractical, but a lot can be told from one’s artistic work. There is no greater gift than one given with thought and love. How can emotion be deemed impractical? Afterall, without emotion, empathy could not be achieved, and this is at the centre of any community. The arts bring us great pleasure, I am only saddened that you do not receive them

with the same amount of joy” She replied. I could sense the disappointment in her words. They were never spoken in anger; she was too soft for such an emotion.

“I care not for other people’s stories; I care for my own. The sense of joy and fulfilment from the arts is temporary and it is more important that we focus on survival” I replied. This led me to think of my next question.

Said I: “Why do the people of Empath not eat meat? I see the happiness of the animals that reside here, and it is pleasant. However, there comes a point where one must think of survival and ease. Eating animals would save hard labour”. As the conversation continued, the melancholy expression of Frances’s face grew more apparent.

“To this, I feel deeply sorrowed. What makes you so inclined to think of yourself of a higher importance to these beautiful creatures? They are just as part of this community as you and I. We live in peace, they are our friends, our companions and have the same emotions and feelings as us. There is beauty in the soul and difference in communication should not interfere into how we perceive other beings. You speak of avoiding hard labour as though we are forced to do so. We take great pride in our work and receive satisfaction from the harvest of food, just as we find pleasure in hand-crafted labour. It is not a chore; it is a pleasure” She replied.

“And what of the women? Surely, they take more pride in motherhood and domestic labour. This is a responsibility that comes with great pride and is to be considered the honorary role of a woman. Surely these women do not choose the occupation of farming and harvesting over such an admirable responsibility?” I spoke.

She replied: "It now becomes even clearer to me that you do not understand Empath at all." I felt that this was ironic, as she lacked understanding for my values, as she accused me of doing so to hers. "I wonder why you are so obsessed with order and fixed roles. Empath is a place surrounded by choice. You may see these roles of motherhood as a great honour, yet it is not your decision to decide this fate for others. Some may wish to be mothers, and some may not, it is simply the concern of the individual, not you nor I. You do not understand the meaning of true happiness here, we decided this for ourselves, it is not forced. We are not conforming to expectations or obligations similar to the ones you speak of, we choose to do the things that bring us most joy. You see beauty through a shallow lens, I see beauty in the soul and for this, I cannot reciprocate your feelings towards me. You are cold. You lack empathy and understanding. I only wish for you to one day realise there is more to life than the concerns of yourself". I will never forget how deeply these words hurt me, perhaps Frances was capable of anger after all.

It is clear I remain an outsider to Empath. I long to return home. I will forever remember Frances's true beauty, her golden hair and softly spoken words. I wish to forget her coldness towards me, for it is Empath that remains the problem. For a place of such beauty, filled with flowers and creatures of enchantment and excitement, it remains a dream to me and one that is undesirable and impractical. I hope to wake up soon and leave this place forever.

Commentary

‘Empath’ is a short story that adopts a nineteenth century style, reimagining William Morris’ *News from Nowhere* (Morris 2004). Focusing on both, Morris’ take on gender and themes of utopia, it aims to draw attention to the arguably problematic tones of Morris’ text, providing an alternative version of a utopia that depicts gender as equal. Presenting itself as a place in which the ‘inhabitants exist under seemingly perfect conditions’ (Britannica 2020), this short story aims to create a vision of utopia that draws on Morris’ text, as well as earlier utopias and addresses several elements such as the arts, the consumption of meat and work. With Empathy at the heart of this far away island, ‘Empath’ attempts to highlight key issues within Morris’ text and draw attention to the notion of impossibility surrounding utopias. Structured in two parts, the story draws on both the ‘classical form of utopian narrative [that] shows the visitor-protagonist arriving in a strange place, meeting the inhabitants, taking a guided tour and settling down for some time before eventually sailing away’ (Parrinder 2010) and takes direct influence from Morris’ ‘Chapter X: Questions and Answers’ (Morris 2004: 96). Part One, presented in diary entries allows the reader to gain insight into the thoughts and feelings of a stranger to the Utopian island, also acknowledging possible criticisms through this method. Part Two, presented as dialogue between the protagonist and love interest acts as a defence or answer to these criticisms and also provides the feminist voice, rejecting Morris’ view on gender.

The protagonist of this short story acts as an exaggerated version of ‘William Guest’ in *News from Nowhere* (Morris 2004) and mainly represents Guest’s obsessions with the concept of beauty and sexist tendencies towards women he encounters throughout the text. This is supported by the main character’s tendency to only describe Frances fondly when talking of her physical appearance and attraction, despite their clear clash of personality and difference

of opinion. This directly links to Guest's consistent descriptions of appearance of any women he meets. By not allowing Frances to have a voice until part two, in which she defends 'Empath', the clash between the two characters is emphasized. As well as this, it is significant to note the protagonist's tendency to repeat himself throughout the short story, particularly the phrases 'cannot' and 'back home'. This is an intentional method used to draw attention to the narrator's constant struggle to understand differing opinions. The ambiguity surrounding 'back home' allows the reader to think about where exactly 'home' may be and due to the character's closed-minded, selfish and sexist tendencies, the reader can imagine 'home' as a centre and source of these traditional views. The negativity surrounding the repetition of the word 'cannot' foreshadows the ending scenes of the story, where the protagonist 'cannot' seem to accept or understand 'Empath', wishing to return home. Despite Morris' writings having 'always manifested a sympathetic view of the constraints on women's lives' (Boos, F. and Boos, W. 2008: 3), the devices within 'Empath' attempt to draw attention to the problematic nature of Morris' outlook that arguably provides a less-sympathetic view than expected. Thus, resulting in Frances' rejection of the protagonist, representing the rejection of Morris' view on gender.

As one of the sole motivations of Morris' *News from Nowhere* (Morris 2004) was to 'provide a different description of socialism [...] by means of a different way of writing and portraying utopia' (Kumar 1993: 134), it is significant to note this short story's acknowledgement of Morris' take on socialism and the political form of utopia. 'Empath' draws its influence from Morris' account of craft-based labour that provides genuine satisfaction, meaning work is not forced but a choice. Despite Morris' inclusion of some female workers, such as Philippa the 'head carver' (Morris 2004: 196), throughout the novel the majority of women are still shown to work within domestic roles, in which Guest finds impressive. Although the intention was to create a utopia that promoted gender equality, these roles along with Morris' physical

description of the majority of women, show that this equal depiction is not exactly evident. Therefore, this short story hints towards socialism, but chooses to focus more on the concerns of feminism within the concept of labour. The story may also raise the question: Does Frances have empathy for the main character? This is a question that is arguably unanswerable. However, the impact on the reader remains evident, as it enables them to question how utopian people deal with intolerable visitors. Similarly to William Guest, the protagonist in 'Empath' is 'a ghost and he unsettles the tranquillity of utopia' (Beaumont 2005: 185) and Frances' rather frustrated answers in Part Two are an example of this disruption. It could be argued that Frances does show signs of empathy. For example, when discussing the protagonist's lack of appreciation for the arts she replies with 'I am only saddened that you do not receive them with the same amount of joy'. This suggests Frances does show empathy to an extent as she wishes for the protagonist to enjoy the arts for his own enjoyment. However, it is also reasonable to argue Frances does not have empathy due to her cold, blunt rejection and seemingly lack of empathy for the protagonist's point of view. The openness of this question allows for the welcoming of criticisms, as Frances' lack of empathy directly contradicts the main concept of the utopia, therefore supporting the notion of a utopia as unachievable, as all individuals have different ways of thinking and struggle to accept those intolerable.

Unlike Morris, who uses the dream device to embody a 'realistic and densely historical understanding of the course of modern history' (Kumar 1993: 139), this story draws on the arguably 'more simple-minded techniques of earlier utopias' (Kumar 1993: 139). The use of the dream in 'Empath' is in order to enforce the notion of impossibility surrounding the idea of utopia. Placing itself in the conversation of whether a utopia is truly achievable, the story uses not only the dream, but the protagonist's wish to return home and romantic elements in order to support the statement of impossibility. The main characters' inability to compromise,

differing opinions and lack of understanding provokes the reader to question the believability of a utopia and this is supported by the use of the future. Taking on a less optimistic view than Morris' 'vision rather than a dream' (Morris 2004: 228), 'Empath' proves that the dream of the perfect world is in fact, delusional.

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