

## **"Break a Leg"** **Lydney Kamine**

How wonderful it would be if our greatest fears and regrets could be hidden in the untouchable depths of the subconscious with just the influence of a strong imagination and some persuasive theatrics – Or would it? Richard Hughes has created a character, ten year old Emily Thornton, who does just this throughout the novel, *A High Wind in Jamaica*. Young Emily, who is kidnapped (along with her siblings and friends) by a mild bunch of pirates, stands out as Hughes's most complicated and interesting character; after all, considering her knack for catching lizards – with their tails still in-tact, of course – and her flair for snuffing off a Dutchman aboard a pirate ship at the ripe old age of ten, Emily is quite the fascinating little girl. So how does Emily manage when she has the guilt of killing a man poking at her conscience? Emily's ability to submerge her conscience within her theatrical imagination allows her to avoid coping with mature issues such as death, sin, and ultimately, her loss of innocence.

Death and tragedy are often utilized as theatrical tools to extract sympathy from the audience, but Emily bypasses the reality of tragedy in her own life and handles the death of her beloved cat, Tabby, by remembering the earthquake she survives as her very own life-changing performance (35). Emily could not bear to think of poor Tabby's fate; the cat that once seemed invincible (After all, how many cats could survive the bite of a rattler and live to "meow" about it (7)?), was taken from her by a crew of wild cats in a chaotic display of reality. Instead of coping with Tabby's death by listening to her mother recite Psalms, Emily "held an actual performance of the earthquake" in her head (35). Until the dreadful thought of Tabby reentered her thoughts, she relived her earthquake anecdote in a variety of different genres to "the awed comments of her imaginary English audience." Then, "as an only remaining straw," she examines the world around her, trying to "fix her interest on every least detail of the scene" (36). The narrator's word choices – performance, audience, scene – throughout Emily's struggle to cope with Tabby's death indicate that she aches to escape from that moment into her own drama where she may become the director of her own reality. Especially considering "it was her first intimate contact with death," Emily naturally adjusts her attitude in a way which suits and calms her mental wellbeing. Though her theatrical approach at life seems to alleviate her pain for now, it leaves Emily refusing to accept her reality, leading to a very naïve perception of her life and the consequences of her actions.

When Emily overreacts in a fit of panic and stabs the practically helpless Dutch captain to death (175), she commits a crime against God and against her religion. Many references to Christianity exist throughout the novel to support the idea that the Thorntons actively practice Christian moralities: "[The negroes] were, of course, Christians, so there was nothing to be done about their morals" (9). This once innocent little girl now carries one of the strongest of moral crimes on her conscience, but later she copes with her sinful deed by acting as though she is going to kill her little sister Rachel: "Emily picked up a piece of iron . . . 'I'm going to kill you! I'm turned a pirate, and I'm going to kill you with this sword'" (202). She rationalizes killing the Dutch captain by putting on her own performance which includes chasing poor Rachel around with the gigantic "sword" (203). Afterwards, "Emily went on chuckling for some time at the memory of her sport" (203) which seems odd since the reader knows that Emily actually has killed someone with none other than a less imaginative form of a sword: a knife. Emily reenacts her murder scene but adds imaginative details that put her conscience to rest; she converts her act of slaying a man into nothing more than a silly play, but that is not to say that she does not at some level internalize the consequences of life, as her more intimate soliloquies suggest.

It could be argued that Emily could not quite grasp the concept of Tabby's death, or death in general, but she certainly internally struggles with the concept of dying. When remembering her life in Jamaica, Emily most clearly recalls "the death of Tabby, she would never forget that as long as she lived . . . that awful night when Tabby had stalked up and down the room . . . his voice melodious with tragedy" (150-51). Through the narrator's direct discourse, the reader now knows for certain that Tabby's death has registered with Emily. Therefore, when she questions her father after the trial, "Father, *what* happened to Tabby in the end, that dreadful windy night in Jamaica?" the reader knows that she has buried the hard truth of Tabby's death to avoid having to deal with such a nightmarish performance of reality (277).

Emily also displays her internal struggles with her guilty conscience after killing the Dutch captain. The prospect of her being God, once so possible, was now out of the question for someone who felt that "she was the most wickedest person who had ever been born" (187). With these slight glimpses into Emily's ten and a half year old mind, the reader may perceive Emily as less naïve than her theatrical, imaginary mindset implies. In a perfect metaphor to illustrate Emily's awareness yet reluctance to accept reality, the narrator explains, "Emily lay in the bunk below, her eyes shut – conscious again, but her eyes shut" (177). She has shut her eyes in an attempt to block out reality, but all the while her conscious still remains aware. When Emily seems totally oblivious to Tabby's death and the fact that she murdered the Dutch captain, the reader may refer to these glimpses of Mature Emily and understand that she has hidden these grown-up thoughts so deep within her subconscious that she successfully kills her fears and buries the truth, consequently hiding the permanent damage she has inflicted upon her childhood innocence. As for the concept of "innocence," how does *A High Wind in Jamaica* define such an abstract word?

Close to the end of the novel, the reader is presented with an unexpected, unfamiliar protagonist, a negro cook from the pirate ship, who reveals how to define innocence in this novel. The cook declares gratitude for his innocence in the face of his hanging as he speaks to the rest of the crew who also await the deathly gallows: "You know that I die innocent: anything I have done, I was forced to do by the rest of you"; in other words, he claims that any injustices he has committed were commanded of him by the pirates (278). This statement reveals a central viewpoint of innocence that may be applied to the entire novel: those who lack a sense of personal responsibility towards any sins they have committed are considered innocent. Of course, who can really identify any one, absolute definition of innocence? Though because of the commanding tone this unfamiliar character presents, and because of the placement of his speech in the book (after the climactic trial and right before Emily returns to "normal" life), the reader may perceive his attitude as Hughes's fundamental idea of innocence.

Nowhere is the subject of innocence more important than in a court room as Emily proves while she presents her rehearsed testimony in an atmosphere brimming with theatrical drama. Emily "sang out her responses" and describes the costumes of the court: her attorney "in fancy dress," the "old wizard," and the "wiggid men" (274) which furthers the reader's perception that this trial is nothing but a performance to Emily. The moment Emily breaks down in tears in the court room, it almost seems as if her conscience has finally gotten to her; she is finally going to accept responsibility for her sins and thus her lack of innocence. But the words audible through her tears indicate that she does not associate her hand with the Dutchman's death: "He . . . died, he said something and then he *died!*". She distances herself from his death by only recalling that he has died, and never revealing that she has played any part in his death (276). Once again she avoids reality through an act; she hides within the theatrics of the court room to rationalize her guilt away.

In addition to continuing her pattern of avoiding reality, Emily shines as an actress in this court room performance that would undoubtedly win an Oscar for "Best Portrayal of Innocence." After her short-lived display of hysteria, "she became herself again with surprising rapidity," much as an actress would after playing a role (276). Hughes also provides us with an earlier parallel between Emily and her knack for acting: the theatrical vernacular for "good luck" – "break a leg" – cannot possibly be ignored, especially considering Emily suffers from a deep cut to her calf that leaves her literally and figuratively immobilized through much of her journey on the pirate ship (166); Emily cannot physically or emotionally move from her current state. "Break a leg" is often said before an actor or actress steps on stage to perform. This analogy further establishes the overwhelming presence of theater in

Emily's life, and her use of it to displace her reality. The fact that she hurts her leg is also another indication that she is playing a part, a role she has carefully rehearsed.

Emily is merely going through life playing the part of an innocent little girl, and everyone holds sympathy for the corruption she has apparently witnessed. Everyone's inability to recognize Emily's lack of innocence suggests that children are most often assumed to possess this inherent goodness that adults cannot perceive; everyone, that is, except for her father, the theater critic who can see right through Emily's theatrical façade.

Emily has reduced her life to such an elaborate performance that the narrator openly admits that he no longer knows what is in her mind, and her father, the theater critic, becomes the only one who holds any promise of deducing her thoughts. The narrator "can no longer read Emily's deeper thoughts, or handle their cords" because Emily has become such a talented actress whose conscious is no longer evident (271). One night Mr. Thornton watches Emily sleep and "he realized, with a sudden painful shock, that he was afraid of her" (271). The narrator gives further credibility to Mr. Thornton's newfound fear of his daughter by saying, "To his fantastic mind, the little chit seemed the stage of a great tragedy" (270). Being a theater critic, he continues to analyze his daughter, much as one would expect him to analyze the elements of a performance. Emily's once childlike technique of separating herself from the sadness she felt for Tabby has progressed and consumed her so much so that only her father can see through her act – her act which has evolved into an entire theatrical production.

Emily has turned her life into a theatrical spectacle in order to avoid responsibility and maturity. So why is it such a problem that Emily employs her imagination to help cope with traumatic events? Emily has inflicted a figurative growth stunt on her maturity; even after all she has seen and experienced, Emily still remains no more grown-up than the girls she mingles with at the end of the book: "Looking at that gentle, happy throng of clean innocent faces . . . perhaps God could have picked out from among them which was Emily: but I am sure that I could not" (279). Emily buries all of her experiences surrounding death, sin, and responsibility ultimately denying the basis of human nature in its entirety: the ability to grieve, to learn, and to feel. As a result, her sensibility has been lost in a world where everyone's lines are scripted and their parts carefully rehearsed; a disfigured reality where the phrase, "break a leg," means nothing more than a figurative vernacular for "good luck," but as she lies practically helpless with her own wounded leg, Emily shows no indication that she realizes the dangerous extent to which she has manipulated her reality into nothing more than a theater show.