

The new gnosticism: reading romantics in wuthering heights

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The New Gnosticism: Reading Romantics in Wuthering Heights Like the romantic poets who so influenced her, Emily Bronte explores the redefining of religious categories in her most famous novel, Wuthering Heights. Through the relations between her main characters, Catherine, Heathcliff and Edgar, Bronte displaces traditional secular attitudes into a natural, personal and erotic context. The result is a romantic representation of something like an earthly heaven and hell. One of the main mechanisms the reader can use to observe this dichotomy is the use of descriptive landscape and architecture. Wuthering Heights is characterized as a sort of castle on a hill. The landscape contains “ a few stunted firs at the end of the house; and a range of gaunt thorns all stretching their limbs one way as if craving the alms of the sun” (4). The quantity and variation of decoration is bare, and that unneeded comforts are sparse. The type of plants chosen to inhabit the yard are very telling as well: “ stunted firs,” symbolizing an unnourishing environment, and “ gaunt thorns,” meaning hidden dangers, give a dark and gothic image. The home is quite exposed to the natural elements, namely wind- a force so powerful and uncontrollable, yet invisible. And the very name of the estate has invaluable meaning: Wuthering being a significant provincial adjective, is descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its station is exposed in stormy weather. (4) Although Wuthering Heights is exposed, the reader is told that “ the architect had foresight to build it strong: the narrow windows are deeply set in the wall, and the corners defended with large jutting stones”(4). And before one is able to enter the threshold he must get past a disturbing display of “ grotesque carvings” about the stone walls, especially above the front door, depicting a “

wilderness of crumbling griffins and shameless little boys”(4). The Earnshaw household is exceedingly difficult to enter, both literally and metaphorically. And, as it becomes apparent throughout the progression of the novel, it is just as hard to get out. Strong walls, narrow windows and protective gargoyles show an unwillingness to allow any outside forces to enter. Mr. Lockwood, the parody of a 19th- century gothic reader (a quintessential voyeur), is treated with a very ill welcome- the same way young Heathcliff is originally received. Thrushcross Grange, however, appears to be Wuthering Heights’ near antithesis. It is primarily a place of light, flowers and comfort. Instead of “ narrow” and “ deeply set” windows, the Lintons do “ not put up the shutters,” and they leave their curtains “ only halfway closed,” (48) at night. Even the demonic Heathcliff calls the house...beautiful- a splendid place carpeted with crimson , andcrimson-covered chairs and table, and a pure white ceilingbordered by gold, and a shower of glassdrops hanging insilver chains from the centre, and shimmering with littlesoft tapers. (48)

Wuthering Heights is sprawled high on a bare, rocky hill. Thrushcross Grange is nestled in a grove of green, bountiful trees. By these initial descriptions of each estate we, the reader, might be lead to believe in a very black and white relationship between them: Wuthering Heights being hellish, and Thrushcross Grange being heavenly (save the altitude level, for the higher one is the more hellish, and the more heavenly is in a low valley). However, no such simple dichotomy exists. The path to understanding both estates lies in the exploration of their residing characters. And similarly the way to comprehend these characters, be they Earnshaws, Lintons, or even of the Heathcliff family, is by examining their relationships to their homes.

Heathcliff, the “ devil-child,” is originally brought into the Earnshaw house by force. Although he holds the power and sway of a favorite, in the eyes of the father and master of the house, he does not take the Earnshaw name, nor is he initially (and in some cases ever) fully accepted into the home. Hindley, and even Heathcliff’s later friend Catherine are so disturbed by his dark, dirty appearance and lack of grace and manners, that they secretly turn him out of the children’s sleeping chambers and banish him to sleep in the stairwell. An event like this shows both that Catherine and Hindley are appearance-driven and shallow, and that Heathcliff is in fact so demonic and disturbing in his natural state of youth that even though he is a child and must be primarily innocent, they still reject him as a playmate. The first paragraph of the novel provides a vivid physical picture of him, as Lockwood describes how his “ black eyes” withdraw suspiciously under his brows at Lockwood’s approach. Heathcliff is well described as a Byronic hero; he is misanthropic, passionate, rebellious, and has unknown origins. It is an important note to the story that Heathcliff was brought to Wuthering Heights as a homeless orphan from the streets of Liverpool, England. At the time Emily Bronte was writing child labor laws were practically non-existent and factory and living conditions in these industrial areas were strikingly heinous. These places were obviously dangerous, and despised by those who had to suffer them. Not only that, but the higher classes were quite abhorrent at them; the conditions were so awful, that the wealthy classes feared violent revolt. In 19th-Century literature these smoggy, miserable towns and cities were likened to religion, and often compared with hell. William Blake, in his 1804 poem, Jerusalem, referred to England’s “ dark, satanic mills.” (Ln. 8)

Heathcliff is also frequently associated with hell in description and called “demon” throughout the novel. Heathcliff defies being understood. Because of his extreme cruel nature the reader is lead to wonder if he is something other than he seems. Perhaps his bad behavior and brutality are an expression for his unfulfilled love for Catherine, or his difficult childhood. Another possibility is that his sour external behavior is a literary costume for a traditional gothic romance hero. Even before Bronte was writing, the notion that a hard exterior encases a romantic heart was already a cliché of novels. However Heathcliff does not reform or reveal an inner-heart of gold. And his offensive behaviors cannot be easily explained away as revenge for past abuses by Hindley, or any other. The way he tortures Isabella is purely sadistic. It becomes a game to him to see how much abuse she can take and still remain submissive. The absurd nature of Heathcliff’s abuse toward Isabella mirrors what Bronte herself does to the reader. She tests how many times we can be shocked by Heathcliff’s violence, yet still view him as a sympathetic character. Catherine, as a child, is also a member of the Wuthering Heights household (although she is there by blood as opposed to Heathcliff). While Catherine delights in messy, boyish pastimes and play she is still able to fit in quite naturally with the Lintons and their genteel, luxurious way of life. After five childhood weeks spent at Thrushcross Grange, with Isabella and Edgar for playmates, instead of a wild, hatless little savage jumping into the house...there lighted from a handsome blackpony a very dignified person, with brown ringlets falling from the cover of a feathered beaver, and a long cloth habit which she was obliged to hold up with both hands that she might see in. (53) What ties little Catherine to

Thrushcross Grange is primarily her lust for fine things and comfortable surroundings (as opposed to many hours spent on her knees shivering and wet for a Sabbath sermon on piousness and self-restraint), as well as her desire for upward mobility. Although she feels the deep and mutual love between herself and Heathcliff, she is aware that such a marriage would demean her in class and social standing. As the novel's children grow toward adulthood Catherine more and more dismisses her eternal love, Heathcliff, for the immediate satisfaction of companionship and genteel comfort with Edgar. Motivated by social ambition, Catherine ...played the coquette, and evidently had an objection to her two friends meeting at all: for when Heathcliff expressed contempt of Linton, in his presence she could not half coincide, as she did in his absence; and when Linton evinced disgust and antipathy to Heathcliff, she dare not treat his sentiments with indifference, as if depreciation of her playmate were of scarcely any consequence to her.

(68) Heathcliff begs not to be turned out for "those pitiful, silly friends" Edgar and his sister Isabella. Catherine's actions are driven in part by her social ambition, which was first inspired by her five week stay with the Lintons, which eventually compels her to marry Edgar. On the other hand, she is also motivated by she strives to transcend social conventions, such as loving Heathcliff, having temper tantrums, and running about on the Moors. The contrast between these two impulses is as distinct as the contrast between her two men. It is as distinct as ...exchanging a bleak, hilly, coal country for a beautiful fertile valley; and [Heathcliff's] voice and greeting and [Edgar's] voice and greeting were as opposite as [Heathcliff's] aspect- He had a sweet, low manner of speaking, and he pronounced his words...less gruff and softer.

(70)The descriptions of Catherine's suitors very much match each's respective home and estate- Wuthering Heights being represented by the "bleak, hilly, coal county," and Thrushcross Grange by the "beautiful fertile valley." Edgar serves as an opposite frame of reference for Heathcliff. He is brought up well with grace and a gentlemanly aspect. He is instilled with civilized virtues, and symbolizes the constancy of tamed culture. This aspect is what eventually causes Catherine to choose Edgar over Heathcliff, and there begins the rivalry. Yet ultimately Edgar's refined qualities prove useless in his battle for Catherine's eternal affections. Edgar is proved particularly impotent when placed face to face with Heathcliff in a physical challenge. With spite, Catherine states that Heathcliff would as soon lift a finger at [Edgar] as the king would march his army against a colony of mice.

(115)Although Catherine makes the choice for comfort at Thrushcross Grange, her true loyalties lie with Heathcliff and Wuthering Heights. After having a dream of having gone to Heaven, Catherine confides to Nelly that if she should really go there she would "be extremely miserable." (80) The realization Catherine took from this dream helps to explain her respective relationships with Edgar and Heathcliff. She explains:...heaven did not seem so be my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out, into the middle of the heath on the top of Wuthering Heights; where I awoke sobbing for joy.

(81)First of all the presence and mention of "heath" in this dream is no accident. Heath is an English word that can mean a kind of shrubby plant, a flower similar to "heather" or a tract of wasteland, called uncultivated or with poor soil. Any one of these hardy definitions can be associated with

Heathcliff. In Catherine's dream heaven can be likened to Thrushcross Grange, and the dream becomes an allegory for Catherine's true feelings regarding Edgar and Heathcliff. In her own words, Catherine confesses: I've no more business to marry Edgar Linton than I have to be in heaven. (81) Catherine is of the self-conception that she is not a woman of virtue. Edgar appears to have the qualities of heaven, and Heathcliff is consistently likened to hell. Therefore, if not heaven, Thrushcross Grange and Edgar, then Catherine is choosing the Underworld, Wuthering Heights and Heathcliff. However, because of naivety the situation is imperfect. Catherine concedes to a safer and less demanding life with Edgar. She tells Nelly It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff, now; so he shall never know how I love him; and that, not because he's handsome, Nelly, but because he's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same, and Linton's is as different as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire. (81) Catherine goes on to describe a notion she has that "there is, or should be, an existence of yours beyond you. What were the use of my creation if I were entirely contained here?" (82) This idea she describes is all at once a description of true love and the presence of the religion of Romanticism. Bronte's novel is set in a landscape where no god exists. If there was a God present in this world then Catherine would be no need to ask if there is an existence beyond her, or what the use of her life is contained in one place. God would be the existence beyond her. God would control the purpose of her life. Instead, the worship of God is replaced by the faith of Romanticism. Through Catherine's relationship with Heathcliff she is able to exist somewhere "beyond" herself. In the world of Wuthering Heights and

Thrushcross Grange, there is no existence imaginable outside of even the neighborhood. None of the characters the reader trusts ever leave the surrounding hills and meadows. But through their divine connection Catherine is able to exist everywhere at once. Her “ great miseries in this world have been Heathcliff’s miseries.” That is to say that they exist so profoundly within one another that they possess the same tools with which to view the world. They process events through the same lenses and arrive at one set of emotions. Catherine says “ if all else perished and he remained, I should still continue to be; and, if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the Universe would turn to a mighty stranger.” She would not know how to view the world. Their presences are so connected that one thinks of a pair of Siamese Twins, or of the hermaphrodites in Plato’s Symposium. When one of them dies, the other can only exist in a state of half-limbo until he dies as well. Without Heathcliff Catherine would not be able to use her half of their shared life tools, and the Universe would turn to a mighty stranger, indeed. When Catherine eventually dies in Edgar’s home at Thrushcross Grange, while Heathcliff waits outside in the bushes and trees, the location of her burial is quite significant: The place of Catherine’s internment, to the surprise of the villagers, was neither in the chapel, under the carved monument of the Lintons, nor yet by the tombs of her own relations, outside. It was dug on a green slope, in a corner of the kirkyard, where the wall is so low that heath and bilberry plants have climbed over it from the moor; and peat mould almost buries it. Her husband lies in the same spot, now; and they have each a simple head-stone above, and a plain grey block at their feet to mark the graves.” (170) And when Heathcliff dies,

he is buried just the same on Catherine's other side. Once again, the presence of the "heath" plant, which grows over her plot is quite purposeful. This time the addition of the "bilberry" plants completes the metaphor: bilberry, as opposed to the roughness of heath, is a beautiful leafy plant that often produces white berries. Most often the leaves, (as are used earlier as a simile for Catherine's love for Edgar) and sometimes the buds, are used as soothing medicine in the form of a transparent, green syrup. The heath is dark and immovable like Heathcliff and the rocks he is likened to. The green leafy medicine with soothing white berries is Edgar. In the end, Edgar is more like a comforting ointment, to Catherine, than a real love. Catherine and Heathcliff's love is obsessive and self-consuming. Their great passion burns bright and fast, and cannot be maintained long in an earthly atmosphere, much like the exquisite but abbreviated lives of the Romantic poets. At the end of the novel the reader is left with the feeling that Catherine and Heathcliff will go to neither heaven nor hell. The developing folklore in the countryside suggests that the deceased couple will roam the moors together as spirits- in a manner similar to Lockwood's dream. Catherine and Edgar's love, on the other hand, is more manageable but not strong enough to surpass the superficiality of time. Ultimately neither relationship is successful. But Bronte continues to experiment with her romantic representation by creating various genetic mixes of the Earnshaw, Heathcliff, and Linton blood. Between Hindley Earnshaw and his wife, Frances, we get Hareton Earnshaw. Catherine Earnshaw and Edgar Linton produce Cathy Linton. And Heathcliff and Isabella Linton parent Linton Heathcliff. The names are simply recycled. The geographical radius of influence is quite small, and

the habitual practice of marrying cousins seems to contribute to these few families funneling into themselves while adopting much the same roles and script from century to century. It is as if the driving force in the novel recognizes its mistakes and seeks a second chance in a new generation. Linton Heathcliff develops into a kind of mutant as a result of his lineage. He has the pale, inbred look and triviality of Isabella paired with the mad selfishness and sadism of Heathcliff. His combination is so polluted that he cannot live in the world very long, and his marriage with Cathy is terribly ill-fated. However, the longing for a more functional romance is better satisfied by another combination of the second generation. A mix of the best qualities from both the Earnshaw and Linton families seems to be the key. Cathy Linton possesses the heart and lively spirit of her mother, but is well mannered and gentle, like Edgar, instead of wild and tempestuous. Hareton Earnshaw has the blood of Hindley and his wife, but was raised primarily by Heathcliff. This provides him with a strong and proud soul, but one that is molded by demonic abuse and a lack of education. But when Cathy and Hareton engage together to...clear a large space of ground [at Wuthering Heights]from currant and gooseberry bushes... and plan an importation of plants from the Grange, (317)this collaboration becomes the symbol of change. To bring “ flower beds” from Thrushcross Grange to Wuthering Heights allows the “ foliage” (beauty) of one estate to grow together with the “ rocks” (soul) of the other. Cathy makes amends to Hareton for his sadistic treatment and cultures his character by teaching him to read. After Wuthering Heights is passed on to the new generation Lockwood recounts: I had neither to climb the gate, nor to knock — it yielded to my hand. That is

an improvement! I thought Both doors and lattices were open. (307)The physical ability for one to freely enter or exit the estate is a symbol of its improving aspect. The comparison between the “ heavenly” Thrushcross Grange and the “ hellish” Wuthering Heights culminates in the expression of romanticism as religion. An ecclesiastical vocabulary is displaced into the context of romanticism as a kind of faith. Romanticism is present in the secular dichotomy between Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange; thus it is also present in Bronte’s relationship between hell and heaven. Catherine and Heathcliff’s only sense of religion is their own communion. Their spiritual emphasis is on the desire to transcend limiting conventions such as the body, space, and time. To be tied to such an unattainable ideal is ultimately mentally or physically lethal. As Wuthering Heights comes to a close the reader is provided with no definitive conclusions. The open-ended finish is in itself a demonstration of the romantic desire to transcend the limits of time and place. Yet ultimately, the only contentment experienced in Wuthering Heights belongs to those that are willing to cooperate with these limits.