

Self-Education and Narrative Power in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*: (Re)Discovering Marginal Women Characters

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ABSTRACT

Despite the secure position of Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights (1847) in academic and popular culture, the novel may not seem the first choice for a work that features both conventionally appealing characters and reliable narrators as well as modern delineations of class, gender, and race. This study argues that in Wuthering Heights reading, writing, education, and learning resist a unified interpretation, but nonetheless can provide a compass for navigating its unwieldy narrative. In the novel, the landed gentry is above the law of state, and women are at all stages disadvantaged. These depictions come in a continuous social spectrum: the woman who annotates sacred books to write her own story and chooses the cultured gentry but denies her own rough, wild nature (Catherine I), the woman exposed to culture from the cradle who educates the illiterate in a reconciliatory educator-disciple matrimony (Catherine II), the housekeeper born into the servile classes who moves beyond the limits imposed by gentility and social segregation, and has exclusive access to all the personal and social histories embedded within Wuthering Heights (Nelly Dean).

KEYWORDS

Victorian England; Emily Brontë; female education; book knowledge; marginal women

Introduction

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) contradicts the widely-held Victorian assumption that only educated, wage-earning, worldly men should be granted exclusive discursive freedom. According to such a view, men's home-running counterparts and their fictitious sentiments nourished by fiction and (self-)improving practices should be met with a great deal of hostility. Instead, *Wuthering Heights* concedes and hides at once the idea that solid knowledge, story-telling, and (self-)culture violate gender boundaries and make central what had been deemed marginal by the male literary canon and the 19th-century doctrine of separate spheres. The positive and negative effects of education are here subjected to a keen cross-questioning which brings to light a fatally destructive contradiction: like love, throughout the multivoiced narrative of *Wuthering Heights*, education is both destructive and constructive, both empowering and alienating the individual. Learning is a delicate and arcane gift (or sin, as Victorian conservators would have it), given to some, denied to others, with no court of appeal.

May Sinclair submits an exalted view of the famously private Emily Brontë, associating her with Blake – her vision is that of “the transcended spirit (...), the woman captive,” her language that of “the mystic who has passed beyond contemplation.”¹ Winifred Gérin traces Brontë's artistic development, piecing together literary influences such as Byron, Shelly, Scott, and *Blackwood's*

1 May Sinclair, *The Three Brontës* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1912), 176-177.

magazine.² In *Emily Brontë. The Artist as a Free Woman*, Stevie Davies describes Emily as a lover of privacy, a sceptic, a heretic, but at the same time a revolutionary. Most biographies and background studies that describe the four Brontë siblings seem to point out the fact that most of the characters in their writings grow up without the loving protection of a mother. Emily's own life had been marked by the consecutive deaths of her dearest and nearest: her mother and older sisters, Maria and Elizabeth. The pall of death that shadows *Wuthering Heights* can thus be rationalized away by Brontë's personal life, one similarly fraught with loss and grief. Even if Elizabeth Gaskell focuses on Charlotte's life in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, the reader is given information about Emily's "love of the moors," where "out of a sullen hollow in a livid hill-side, her mind could make an Eden"³ and about her fondness of "sitting on the rug reading, with her arm round her rough bull-dog's neck."⁴

Emily "did all the housework"⁵ and made herself as useful as a servant at Haworth, while still reading her way through her father's library and creating extravagant fantasy worlds in her mind. While her experience outside and inside the Haworth Parsonage may have been modest and crippled by domesticity, after the publication of *Wuthering Heights* Emily's imagination was transformed into the opium taken in by generations of adoring readers. Akin to Emily, the novel's Nelly Dean, with her imagination, tools of interpretation, mystifying observations and experiences, moves far beyond prescriptive social classifications, pointing the modern reader towards alternative readings, despite her liminality in the nuclear family structure.

The female narrator reading in her master's library

The difference between outward and inward signs of gentility and education is initially clouded by the strangely symmetrical design of *Wuthering Heights* – the outer, enclosing, present-time narrative of Mr. Lockwood, the Byronic London tourist seeking refuge in isolated, distant Yorkshire pretending to cocoon in a remote farmhouse and brood over a hidden sorrow embeds the inner, enclosed, retrospective narrative of Ellen/Nelly Dean, the housekeeper of both the Heights and the Grange, two Victorian fictional settings that retain social and aesthetic significance and generate identity crises throughout the novel. Lockwood's flights of rhetoric introduce readers to the Heights and its residents. The way the male narrator wrests unconventional events into conventional shapes and unconventional individuals into conventional roles is hereby initiated: "1801. – I have just returned from a visit to my landlord – the solitary neighbour that I shall be troubled with. This is certainly a beautiful country!"⁶

The hyper-cultivated city-dweller coming from the South of England to the North is Emily Brontë's stand-in for the urbane, upper-class gentleman pretending to be a hermit, a dilettante cynic: "I felt interested in a man who seemed more exaggeratedly reserved than myself,"⁷ as

2 Winifred Gérin, *Emily Brontë: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 212-214.

3 Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 109.

4 Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 214.

5 Stevie Davies, *Emily Brontë. The Artist as a Free Woman* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1983), 19.

6 Emily (London: Collins Classics, 1847), 3.

7 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 6.

Lockwood admits. This “exaggeratedly reserved” comment reveals his real nature: a pleasantly social gentleman, possessing the type of linguistic competence that does not compensate for lack of folk wisdom. Hereby lies the brilliance of Brontë’s novel: if women are victims of indiscriminate reading, living in a voluptuous dream and exoticizing people and places because of (or perhaps, in spite of) their learning attempts, how is Lockwood’s verbal mimicry of real genteel behavior altogether unrealistic? Why does Lockwood expect people to behave and talk as they do in books – and, most importantly, why does he exhibit such bookish, mannered speech? His discourse is that of a sophisticated Regency dandy forging fashionable manners. In the preceding paragraph, Lockwood, caught within a real interchange of feeling, beyond the evasiveness of flirtatious love, is shown running away like a scared rabbit. In fact, this well-educated male narrator (otherwise a naïve, fantasy-prone reader) relates the first three chapters and continues to go deeper and deeper into misapprehension, misreading Cathy’s “favourites”⁸ only to find out that they are dead rabbits and assuming Hareton to be an ordinary servant at the Heights.

When the novel turns to Nelly Dean’s narration, the external reader may be relieved. Lockwood is finally initiated into the fictional realms of both the Heights and the Grange in the company of the cicerone Ellen Dean, the main narrator of the book. Nelly Dean transmits the story to Lockwood, who reports it using her words (with no degree of reported speech or free indirect speech involved) until chapters 31 and 32, when the two narrative voices are interposed. In chapters 32-34 Lockwood becomes the narrator of the novel, again reporting the events in Nelly Dean’s idiom. Although the external reader might expect otherwise judging by Lockwood and Nelly’s social positions, the two constitute what Mary F. Rogers has called specialist and generalist readers. While the first type (Nelly) comes prepared “to accommodate ambiguity, chase meanings, express and further discover a self,”⁹ the generalist reader (Lockwood) expects only to follow an unequivocal lead, to “largely accept [Nelly’s] words at face value, experience the types of selves [he] already know[s], and enjoy a story.”¹⁰ Along this dichotomy, texts and events will further on make different demands on Nelly and Lockwood. If Nelly is likely to bring knowledge about other texts to her interpretation of events as a well-read and proficient reader who has had open-access to her masters’ library, Lockwood is less likely to bring a social stock of knowledge to guide his interpretation, as Lockwood gears his imagination towards explicit elements of the text, (hence his reputation for verbosity).

As suggested above, in *Wuthering Heights*, narrative structure and the Victorian doctrine of separate spheres (along with the resulting ideological implications) are inextricably connected. While the importance of the socially subordinate servant, who serves as a surrogate mother, sister and friend, is apparently situated at the opposite pole from Lockwood’s high station, these relations are not as simple as they might seem upon first glance. There is an inherent contradiction in Nelly Dean’s position – divided between two houses and two cultures – which the narrative and her story-telling talents serve to resolve. Where the narrator of the public life seems to truckle the extratextual reader with stilted, pompous narrative discourses working on an

8 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 11.

9 Mary F. Rogers, *Novels, Novelists, and Readers. Toward a Phenomenological Study of Literature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 98.

10 Rogers, *Novels, Novelists, and Readers*, 98.

inflated rhetorical level, the narrator of the private, domestic life works to encourage more-nuanced, down-to-earth readings of the characters and the events based on lived and observed experience. Nelly's is a *language* that mediates between different writing conventions and the antagonistic classes of Victorian society.

On a scale of pretentiousness, the language the characters use tells the readers how much Emily Brontë's textual constructs care about social norms. Also rendered problematic is the characters' relative type and level of education as well as their anxieties over reading, writing, and the narrative authority suffusing their diction. Why is the servant and appendage to the Victorian family Nelly Dean shown as the savvier and generally more sympathetic reader? This question suggests the idea of *possibility* lurking above and beyond the nineteenth-century social order. In considering her unappreciated social value as a working-class woman and her thwarted attempts at direct participation, the function of the character of Nelly Dean is indeed a tricky aspect of Brontë's text. Her role as mediator arbitrates among the unpredictable cause-and-effect relationships and the unfamiliar patterns of possibility and consequence the novel makes plain. It is my belief, however, that the self-cultured housekeeper's role in a novel generally assumed to conform to prescriptive social rules goes deeper than that. The novel is based on a constant awareness of a real, everyday world (conferred by the realist perspective of Nelly Dean's narrative) sprinkled with elements of folktale and Gothic romance. In the arrangement of what seems casual and accidental into coherent relationships in *Wuthering Heights* within homes with traditionally organized household roles, the characters' interpretative blunders and unsound judgments are foregrounded even more.

Like Dickens's Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*, brought to the public six years after the publication of *Wuthering Heights*, as well as the eponymous heroine of George Eliot's 1863 *Ramola*, Nelly is a private force for public change – the reformer who works from within the private sphere to cause a shift in the way female stories are perceived by the public. Like Daniel Deronda, Lockwood is able to recover, via Nelly and Catherine's long-forgotten journal, ancient family manuscripts. Women's stories have often been those of coercion and dispersal, more closely linked to oral modes of communication and often lost in the vortex of history. Keeping this context in mind, it is possible to see how Brontë, through Nelly, was constructing a major theme of *Wuthering Heights*: the need for women to use their voice (and pen) effectively to develop narrative modes that will best assert their concerns and interests. The themes of book-writing and book-reading continue without interruption throughout the novel, showing that cultural reconciliation is possible on an institutional level (by marriage) in having the educated (Catherine II) and the uneducated (Hareton) united by the book's end. In the following paragraph, Nelly's narration does not render the educated provincialism Lockwood would expect from Nelly in her servant role:

The *intimacy*, thus *commenced*, grew rapidly; though it encountered temporary interruptions. Earnshaw was not to be civilized with a wish, and my young lady was no *philosopher*, and no *paragon* of patience; but both their minds tending to the same point one loving and desiring to esteem, and the other loving and desiring to be esteemed they contrived in the end to reach it.¹¹

Is this the standard English with a regional flavor Lockwood is expected to admire in a folk informant as a language consistent with his own? To mitigate this view, one might say it

11 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 333.

is the language of the center, not the periphery, although this attitude may have struck many Victorian readers as “something heterodox,”¹² to use Lockwood’s phrase. In nineteenth-century English society, when “authority is no more inherited by birth, but conquered through personal merits,” Nelly Dean is a representative of the “traditionally lower classes, [...] reshaping the classical [social] pyramid” – thus, although on the “margins” of society, she is granted “access to the center”¹³ within the historical revolution of the period. Edgar Linton, as Nelly argues, would “shut himself up among books that he never opened.”¹⁴ In contrast, Nelly by her own admission has devoured every book in Edgar Linton’s library, and her reading practices allow her to construct what Nicholas Dames calls in *The Physiology of the Novel* (2007) a “virtual sociability”¹⁵ – the ability to communicate with other readers by virtue of habits of consumption rather than class affinity. Complex sentence-structure and the use of Latin- and Greek-derived words (*intimacy*, *commence*, *paragon*, *philosopher*) testify to Nelly’s ability to blur the line between consumption and comprehension, with the latter leading ultimately to production. Here social conversation is an elaborate form of social play in which only gentlewomen of the period are allowed to indulge, for it incorporates at its core the art of conversation. Nelly’s speech is an invitation to a double reading, revealing both that the mind trained to consume texts has the capacity to produce them, as well as that in order to become an efficient story-teller Nelly must have “made sense” on her own in all her listening to and serving others in manual work. Through her extracted data, the servant girl has absorbed the art of elongated narrative forms and can fashion her own storylines. Brontë cunningly subverts contemporary gender and class stereotypes: women are anything but lazy, inattentive, patchy readers, and lowly servants are in fact the ones who construct the most legitimate narratives.

The woman who annotates sacred books

Though Brontë’s dark hero Heathcliff is an arresting figure in his own right, a transgressor of social codes and limitations, he cannot stand aloof from the elder Catherine and her crippled attempts at challenging the boundaries of her society. Their relationship is, initially, a *cri de coeur* against the Victorians’ patriarchal family structure, which hides behind its apparent stability intrafamilial psychological abuse, domestic violence, and protracted revenge plans, along with issues of child custody and married women’s property, none of which were isolated from the timeless moors. In the view of Stephen Greenblatt, the violence, confinement, miseducation, and the legal nonexistence of Victorian women in *Wuthering Heights* make the reader alert to “the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which [they have] emerged and for which – as metaphor or, more simply as metonymy

12 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 117.

13 Codrin Liviu Cuțitaru, *The Victorian Novel. A Course in the 19th century English Novel. A Critical Approach* (Iași: Al. I. Cuza University Press, 2004), 7-8.

14 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 126.

15 Nicholas Dames, *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 43.

– [they] may be taken by a [reader] to stand”¹⁶ and have “cultural resonance”¹⁷ in a novel functioning as a witness to “the violence of history.”¹⁸

At first, Catherine exposes the gendered dimensions of domestic realism by rebelling against persecution and repression. Her antidomestic gestures, nevertheless, will later on be demolished by her own chosen incorporation into the contented middle-class family of the Lintons. In her childhood diary (notably written in the blank spaces of an old Bible), Catherine describes the nature of her early relationship with Heathcliff. When the “awful Sunday”¹⁹ Catherine describes occurs, Mr Earnshaw is dead and Hindley is master of the Heights. Catherine and Heathcliff are persecuted together, forced to sit shivering in a garret, listening to Joseph’s sermon, while the master Hindley and the mistress of the house Frances “basked down stairs before a comfortable fire.”²⁰ When after his father’s death Hindley returns from college (Cambridge or Oxford, where he presumably would be schooled into genteel fashion and taught to speak the received Midlands standard), he brings with him a cultured lady as a bride. Hindley, “altered considerably in the three years of his absence,”²¹ proceeds to segregate the servants, sending them to the “back-kitchen.”²² It is fairly safe to assume that the patriarch Hindley has decided to comply with sacrosanct class boundaries by making labor less noticeable, creating a distinction between kinfolk and servantry in the domestic space of his rising middle-class home. At this point, exiling Heathcliff from this culture by no longer allowing him to avail himself of the curate’s teaching is highly relevant, even urgent, as Heathcliff will in turn relegate the Victorian heirs to the status of illiterate pariahs in a few years. Surely it was comforting for Hindley as the new *pater familias* to turn his house into an idealized Victorian home once the “light-footed and fresh-complexioned” Frances, the stereotypical Victorian angel in the house, took her due place at the Heights, where “[e]very object she saw, the moment she crossed the threshold, appeared to delight her”²³.

One response to the practice of enforced, shared religious reading is rebellion. Writing then becomes, not surprisingly, a reaction to such perceived persecution. Catherine feels called upon to submit an old text – the Book of Books cherished by countless generations of readers – to her own tough questioning. Here women’s revenge, the reader notices, takes the form of written or spoken missives. Throughout the novel, female anger is limited by gender and turned inward in acts of self-directed violence (which in Catherine’s case proves fatal). One cannot actually observe Catherine Earnshaw reading *per se* throughout the novel, but we stumble upon her book repository through the narrator Lockwood, who by force of circumstances has no other choice but to spend the night in Heathcliff’s unfriendly home. In his bedchamber having trouble sleeping, Lockwood discovers a few dusty old books with Catherine Earnshaw’s name on them, and he signs a new “tenancy” agreement with their author:

16 Stephen Greenblatt, “Resonance and Wonder,” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 43, no. 4 (1990): 20.

17 Stephen Greenblatt, “Resonance and Wonder,” 34.

18 Stephen Greenblatt, “Resonance and Wonder,” 22.

19 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 21.

20 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 22.

21 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 48.

22 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 48.

23 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 47.

Catherine's library was select and its state of dilapidation proved it to have been well used, though not altogether for a legitimate purpose; scarcely one chapter has escaped a pen-and-ink commentary – at least, the appearance of one – covering every morsel of blank that the printer had left. Some were detached sentences; other parts took the form of a regular diary, scrawled in an unformed, childish hand. At the top of an extra page, quite a treasure, probably, when first lighted on, I was greatly amused to behold an excellent caricature of my friend Joseph, – rudely yet powerfully sketched.²⁴

Catherine Earnshaw's vandalism of the "good book" by writing in its margins can be seen both as an act of insubordination and as a radical measure of self-assertion which comes out posthumously. The book motif in *Wuthering Heights* paradoxically conveys both "a civilizing force" and a "bulwark of that convention which seeks to cover naked experience."²⁵ Vandalism takes other troublesome forms in the novel. As noted by Lockwood, the apparently archaic "Hareton Earnshaw"²⁶ of the Heights' official threshold emerges as an up-to-date human presence. The clandestinely carved variations "Catherine Earnshaw," "Catherine Heathcliff," "Catherine Linton"²⁷ now label a more private threshold, the discovery of which gives rise to a moment in which "the air swarm[s] with different surnames spelled out in a 'glare of white letters' as 'vivid as spectres.'²⁸ In the third chapter of the book the worldly, well-educated frame narrator becomes a mere transcriber of a female-authored text as he nearly burns Catherine's musty-smelling Testament after having decided to illicitly read her damaged Bible-diary.

Notes made in books by readers have always constituted a part of the textual landscape. Catherine's marginalia are reactive: they demand to be read as they are written, in concert with the parallel text. The prior and the subsequent texts blend and adjust each other for Lockwood to reconstruct the mental experience of the wordsmith. Through Catherine's marginal supplement to the Bible as private property, Brontë challenges the idea of women projecting their voice onto the margins of books standing for male power. The presence of the Bible in Catherine's old room, however, comes as no surprise: it merely echoes the societal demand that every child – girls in particular – be trained to read the Bible. The female character's invasive method of disfiguring the "good book" and crowding out the logocentric word chronicles the dangers which accompanied women's struggles to assert themselves as writers in the Victorian era. The fear that female writing might push the patriarchal order over the edge – or, rather, to the margins – might have catalyzed Brontë's own commentary on the relationship between literacy, social status, and gender. Catherine Earnshaw, likewise, starts writing her diary *ex nihilo* in rebellion against another text – a religious tome embedding the sacred Logos which cannot be seized equally by men and women – to make room for her own thoughts.

"I reached this book, and a pot of ink from the shelf, and pushed the house-door ajar to give me light, and I have got the time on with writing for twenty minutes; but my companion is impatient and proposes that we should appropriate the dairy woman's cloak, and have a scamper on the moors,

24 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 21.

25 Robert C. McKibben, "The Image of the Book in *Wuthering Heights*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 15, no. 2 (1960): 162.

26 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 4.

27 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 21.

28 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 21.

under its shelter. A pleasant suggestion – and then, if the surly old man come in, he may believe his prophecy verified – we cannot be damper, or colder, in the rain than we are here.”²⁹

What do Catherine’s marginal notes in the Bible actually mean? Can we read her diary as a complex parody of Joseph’s limited views, as a playful distortion of a well-established writing convention, or a serio-comic contraction of the matrix text (a locus of the sacred)? In Judeo-Christian based cultures, the Bible has been an exemplary frame of reference, across centuries and reading generations. Thus, Catherine’s diary is implicitly a form of literary criticism, an experimental game of *metareading* – reading against reading. Catherine is *avant la lettre* Baudelaire’s *hypocritical lecteur* – the reader who is or becomes hooked on reading, rereading and, inevitably, rewriting. In reality, every reader is a mental rewriter, recomposing the meaning of the written words. Russian formalists have associated rewriting with norm deviation, while structuralists and post-structuralists have placed it in the context of intertextuality. Others (for instance, Harold Bloom) have deemed rewriting as essential, with the meaning of one writing always coming through in another writing in a never-ending fashion. Gérard Genette also dealt with the issue of rewriting in his 1982 *Palimpsestes*, a theoretical work in which he approaches the notion of “literature in the second degree” or literature that has been subjected to a process of “transtextualization” through earlier literature. In Catherine’s case, her diary is a deliberate transposition, as her marginal notes in the Bible become part of the “paratext,”³⁰ as do prefaces, postfaces, book covers and illustrations, all considered secondary signposts, be they allographic or autographic. According to Genette, “transposition” is “without doubt the most important of the hypertextual practices,”³¹ as exemplified by *Faust* and *Ulysses*, intense cases of parody. Can we see in Catherine’s transformation of the Bible into her own diary a self-consciously ludic process? Transforming an old and famous text into a new one is often a ludic game, as in writings that expand on calembours, palindromes, and the like. The lord (the Bible) versus tenant (Catherine as reader) relationship is thus completely reversed, for it is Catherine who ultimately owns and decrees her textual property *post-mortem* to Lockwood.

The woman who educates the illiterate menfolk

As critics have often suggested, Catherine Earnshaw’s death is paired with the birth of her daughter, who takes her place in the narrative structure of *Wuthering Heights*. The continuation of the story into a sequel has in fact been prepared *ab initio*. Lockwood first encounters Heathcliff, the second Catherine, and Hareton all at once. He assumes that Catherine is Heathcliff’s wife and that Hareton is Heathcliff’s son. This lack of uncertainty attached to the two generations produces a peculiar sense of narrative expansion or postponement, which anticipates the extension of the initial story into the life of another, strangely analogous young couple. In *Can Jane Eyre Be Happy? More Puzzles in Classic Fiction* (1997), John Sutherland suggests that the first Catherine returns via the second Catherine as a child ghost not to “starve Heathcliff to death in order that [Catherine and

29 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 23.

30 Gérard Genette, *Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 3.

31 Gérard Genette, *Literature in the Second Degree*, 212.

Heathcliff] may be reunited for a spot of posthumous adultery,"³² but to prevent Heathcliff from taking his long-desired revenge, sidetracking him from his stratagem to disown the successors of her daughter and Hareton from their right of abode of Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights.

Catherine's daughter is, after all, "culture's child, a born lady," as Gilbert and Gubar³³ argue. She belongs to a strikingly different generation of readers, overcoming her own deprivation of rights by polishing Hareton's literacy skills. Here, the mother-daughter theme is skillfully introduced. When Lockwood sees Catherine as a potential lover, he fears that she is poised to become a second edition of the mother. This is what critics have called in Gothic literature "matrophobia," or the fear that "a young woman whose mother has died, is compelled to seek out the center of a mystery, while vague and sexual threats to her person from some powerful male figure hover on the periphery of her consciousness."³⁴ In this view, Lockwood is anxious that the younger Catherine has inherited her mother's rebellious and transgressive nature. Is Catherine Earnshaw's daughter doomed to repeat her mother's oppression? Does she repeat her mother's experience with domesticity or defeat it? Such questions must be addressed in a broader context. The sophisticated Catherine Linton Heathcliff initially repudiates the illiterate Hareton's attention, refusing to read to him and ridiculing his "vile mistakes and mis-pronunciations."³⁵ She hates hearing her much-loved books "debased and profaned in his mouth."³⁶ After Catherine rejects his gift of books, the "sensitive though uncultivated"³⁷ Hareton makes a significant gesture – he hurls them into the fire, reenacting the rebellious actions of Catherine's mother and Heathcliff, who once hurled Joseph's books into the dog kennel.

How men treat women in *Wuthering Heights* is implicitly a mirror of men's reading patterns and attitudes towards the printed text, a connection which might not surface readily for the external reader. Emily Brontë's women function as printed words divorced from referential reality, as abstract signs of human relationships. In relationship with Catherine Earnshaw, Edgar Linton is a consumer of texts. He is presented throughout the novel as an ardent reader who retreats to the library at the first sign of difficulties. What about Heathcliff, however? Much of his reading must have taken place outside of the events of *Wuthering Heights*, unseen to the reader. Nevertheless, he does seem to detest one literary genre: he is infuriated that Isabella, another born lady and the spoiled product of her gentrified household, insists on "picturing in [him] a hero of romance" and expects from him "chivalrous devotion."³⁸ Maggie Berg describes the discrepancy here: "unlike Lockwood, Edgar and Hareton, Heathcliff does not treat books as though they were women; instead, he treats women as though they were texts."³⁹ More baffling still, Isabella Linton,

32 John Sutherland, "Who gets what in Heathcliff's will?" in *Can Jane Eyre Be Happy? More Puzzles in Classic Fiction* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 66.

33 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman and the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 299.

34 Claire Kahane, "The Gothic Mirror," in *The (M)other Tongue. Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 334.

35 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 318.

36 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 318.

37 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 319.

38 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 158.

39 Maggie Berg, *Wuthering Heights: The Writing in the Margin* (London: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 57.

though she has had the same educational and financial opportunities the younger Catherine has been granted, is a marginal character habituated with the language of domestic violence. Throughout the narrative, Isabella emulates the embedded violence of the knightly adventures she consumed as a young, impressionable young woman. Eventually, however, misreading turns into a more suitable reading: Isabella does manage to flee the escapist, wish-fulfilling logic of chivalric fiction, defying both the principle of coverture and Heathcliff, its incarnation.

In stark opposition to Isabella, her niece Catherine eventually becomes Hareton's reading instructor. Upon Lockwood's return to the moors, he finds Catherine and Hareton sharing the act of reading. Their love is no longer carried out in secrecy from the other members of the household. Towards the denouement, Heathcliff is a supplementary executioner of reading and readers in a novel in which texts are always pushed to the periphery. This time, however, his struggles incite no subversive action, for the second Catherine has incorporated her mother's anathematized text – the Book of Books – within herself. Once incorporated into one's reading inventory and taken for granted, texts can safely be placed into the custody of other readers. The view that the dispossessed children of the second generation stand for a reassuring affirmation that love can overcome all circumstances, and that plain reading no longer troubles the Victorian patriarch Hareton requires further exploration.

The end of chapter 30 of *Wuthering Heights* stands for the end of Nelly Dean's oral story: Linton Heathcliff's death cause Lockwood to resume his seat and his narration. In January 1802, before returning to London, Lockwood provides the reader with an account of his revisiting the Heights. Surprisingly, Lockwood is no longer taken aback by what he sees at the Heights. His reentry into the archetypal story told by the ethnographer Nelly serves as a most unusual event. The once passive outsider Lockwood meets Catherine and Hareton again and, instead of misreading the events and indulging in all sorts of interpretative blunders, he now enjoys the peculiarly privy knowledge of a reader of fiction – it seems that Lockwood is abruptly dispatched into the territory of a book he has been reading:

'Mrs. Heathcliff,' I said, after sitting some time mute, 'you are not aware that I am an acquaintance of yours? so intimate that I think it strange you won't come and speak to me. My housekeeper never wearies of talking about and praising you; and she'll be greatly disappointed if I return with no news of or from you, except that you received her letter and said nothing!'⁴⁰

Even when Catherine lays charges against Hareton, who has allegedly robbed her library, Lockwood is subpoenaed, obstinately, as it were, as a psychological expert in a civil case, coming to the illiterate young man's defense:

'Mr. Hareton is desirous of increasing his amount of knowledge,' [he] said, coming to his rescue. 'He is not *envious*, but *emulous* of your attainments. He'll be a clever scholar in a few years.'⁴¹

What is more, when Catherine mocks Hareton's attempts at self-help, Lockwood seems to put into application Nelly's compassionate sagacity to gauge both Hareton's learning objectives and Catherine's scoffing:

40 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 316-317.

41 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 317.

The young man evidently thought it too bad that he should be laughed at for his ignorance, and then laughed at for trying to remove it. I had a similar notion; and, remembering Mrs. Dean's anecdote of his first attempt at enlightening the darkness in which he had been reared [...].⁴²

The commonsense wisdom of a folk informant and the rationalism of a city dweller are assimilated, thus enabling in chapter 32 the description of the Heights in new light:

That is an improvement! I thought. And I noticed another, by the aid of my nostrils; a fragrance of stocks and wall flowers, wafted on the air, from amongst the homely fruit trees. Both doors and lattices were open; and, yet, as is usually the case in a coal district, a fine, red fire illuminated the chimney, the comfort which the eye derives from it, renders the extra heat endurable. (...)

'Con-trary!' said a voice, as sweet as a silver bell – That for the third time, you dunce! I'm not going to tell you, again – Recollect, or I pull your hair!

'Contrary, then,' answered another, in deep, but softened tones. 'And now, kiss me, for minding so well.' 'No, read it over first correctly, without a single mistake.'

The male speaker began *to read* – he was a young man, respectably dressed, and seated at a table, *having a book before him*. His handsome features glowed with pleasure, and his eyes kept impatiently wandering from the page to a small white hand over his shoulder, which recalled him by *a smart slap on the cheek*, whenever its owner detected such signs of inattention.

Its owner stood behind; her light shining ringlets blending at intervals, with his brown locks, as *she bent to superintend his studies*; and her face – it was lucky he could not see her face, or he would never have been so steady – I could, and I bit my lip, in spite, at having thrown away the chance I might have had, of doing something besides staring at its smiting beauty.⁴³

One key word pervades the whole passage quoted above at length, for no summary could render its calm flow and reconciliatory tone: *improvement*. Gates and doors previously sealed are now unlocked, flowers can be spotted among the fruit trees. The whole cultural atmosphere of the sophisticatedly civilized Grange as described in chapter 6 applies now to the once hostile and primitive farmstead, a place where utilitarianism once took priority over luxury and leisure. The language of romance fiction is overtly present: voices like silver bells, small white hands, handsome features glowing with pleasure, light shining ringlets blending at intervals, the woman's face with its smiting beauty – the words used have all the features of conventional fairytales in which young royals are engaged in noble duties, continuing the effortless approaches to glamour that their long-gone relatives had championed and cherished in their lifetime. The reader can also notice that while Catherine's initial mockery of Hareton's illiteracy resulted in retaliation in the form of "a manual check given to her saucy tongue," her later "smart slap on [Hareton's] cheek"⁴⁴ concludes with no retribution.

The cycle of violence comes full circle with Catherine's love-taps during the second generation's *reading lesson*. The woman – not the man – is the reading instructor of the vulnerable outcast. Violence, it seems, has been domesticated within the world of the Heights. Book-love, instead, becomes a means of domestic enjoyment. In this chapter, Lockwood returns to his position as *voyeur* – envious of their love, he gives Catherine and Hareton a wide berth. He listens to their

42 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 318.

43 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 324-325, my emphasis.

44 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 325.

story via Nelly, thus restoring the two lovers to their positions as characters in fiction. Reconciliation thus materializes on the common ground of literature: even the Heights and the Grange are assimilated into one household that can encapsulate family life and its blissful domesticity. Catherine and Heathcliff, as the reader has seen, could not survive (in) the world of domestic realism. They continuously rail against the story they inhabit, for they belong to a different era and different writing conventions where the world of feeling prevails over the world of reason.

Conclusion

This study has suggested thus far that literature (and reading, for that matter) plays a major role in maintaining the *status quo* in a society by taking hold of that society's discrepancies and settling them into myths of like-mindedness and compromise. While a novel may deal imaginatively with discrimination, social injustice, poverty, and tyranny, its real purpose is not to castigate such evils and banish them altogether (which is a political activity), but to give the *lector* (Catherine I, Catherine II, Nelly Dean) an imagined experience of social resolution, in this case making gentility and social segregation seem tolerable, perhaps unavoidable.

If the twenty-first-century reader is curious about what *Wuthering Heights* has to say, he or she should not look into its symmetries and completeness, but into its breaches and discrepancies, its rough edges and glitches where it has not succeeded in transforming the objectionable into the "unobjectionable" harmony of literature. Such a breach is offered to the audience, for instance, in the third chapter of Emily Brontë's novel, when Lockwood finds Catherine's worn-out Bible, but instead of reading the text itself, he proceeds in reading the marginalia, an act which displaces the main text itself. Lockwood even seeks to find out more about what is scribbled on the margins of the sacred religious tome, which brings him face to face with the Other, with the uncanny, with the unknown in all of its forms, including what is unknown within himself but has not yet been brought to the surface (in other words, with the reality that literature strives to conceal). When the spectral Catherine attempts to break through the window at the Heights, Lockwood again, rationalist as he is, decides to protect himself against the creature by erecting a pile of books. If this is not the real tragedy of the novel, what is? Nevertheless, the second generation of lovers is united in the act of reading, symbolically rewriting the tragic story of Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff, the lovers separated by the act of reading (allowed to Catherine, denied to Heathcliff). Reconciliation as a mode of cultural and ideological resolution occurs yet again in the binomial pair Lockwood-Nelly Dean – the constant battle between oral and written literature, romance and realism, formal education and self-instruction is drawn to an end, without the novel ceasing to be literature in its own right.

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