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"He Could Have Settled Her With a Well-Planted Blow": Rethinking Domestic Violence in Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights

Allison Stegeland
Trinity College, allison.stegeland@trincoll.edu

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"He Could Have Settled Her With a Well-Planted Blow": Rethinking Domestic Violence in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*

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Director: Sarah Bilston

Reader: Katherine Bergren

Reader: David Rosen

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Introduction

On March 15th 1844, *The Times* published an article entitled "Oxford Circuit" concerning a court case in which Richard Butler was sentenced for the murder of his wife, Ann Butler, in Tipton in Stafford. Several neighbors were called as witnesses to describe what they saw on the night of the murder. One witness, Mary Hughes, explained:

> "On the evening of the 19th of February last I heard some screams in Butler's house, and went in. I saw [Richard Butler] strike his wife several times. She sat in a chair which was in the kitchen, into which the door opened. She had a child about 11 weeks old in her arms. She had the child in her apron. I saw blows struck on her head with his fists. He was standing not a yard from her. I saw him kick her twice. During this time she was stooping over the chair to save the child from the blows, and it was while she was in that position that the kicks were given, in the lower part of the body behind." ("Oxford Circuit")

The article goes on to describe how Ann Butler ran from her house screaming "Murder!" as her husband chased after her, beating her until her death. A coroner reported that, though Mrs. Butler suffered from many different injuries, she was ultimately killed by the rupturing of a large blood vessel located under her pubic bone. In the face of this evidence, Robert Butler was sentenced to prison for the rest of his natural life.

We have no evidence to believe that a small Yorkshire family, the Brontes, read of this terrible killing one hundred miles from their door. However, as this published account does reflect, this was certainly an age of increased knowledge about the prevalence of violence within the home and, consequentially, a time when public attitudes regarding domestic abuse began to

shift. In 1828, sixteen years before Ann Butler was murdered by her husband, the Offenses Against the Person Act became the first piece of nineteenth century legislation passed to directly address this issue of wife assault and battery. Although domestic abuse had surely been a common occurrence in the home for quite some time, this Act finally allowed reports of abuse into the public arena, and newspapers were suddenly flooded with reports of marital violence. However, this sudden uncovering of abuse in the public sphere was not readily welcomed by Victorian society. As Lisa Surridge explains in her book *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction,* many people maintained the notion that, although it was distinctly wrong for a husband to beat his wife, such domestic affairs should not be publically discussed. Amidst reports of abuse, newspapers "evinced considerable anxiety and doubt as to whether this kind of violence belonged in the courts at all" (*Bleak Houses* 18-19). Many people found themselves torn between their domestic values dictating that affairs of the home had no place in the public arena and the ugly truth about the prevalence of harm inside the supposedly safe home.[1]

In this thesis, I will shed light on systems of domestic violence that are embedded in the roots of Charlotte and Emily Bronte's works by explicating *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights.* Though they did not make domestic abuse the focal point of their novels, violence is a consistent element throughout each of these works. Both novels present complicated arcs and systems of abuse that can be studied through the lens of our modern understandings of the emotional, psychological, and social implications of domestic violence, reflecting the attention to detail that Charlotte and Emily paid in crafting this layer of their novels. Violent relationships produce more than terrible physical suffering: they have intense emotional, intellectual, and

[1] Nancy Tomes explains that this prevailing point of view shifted between 1840 and 1875. The Bronte sisters published many works during the 1840s, right at the beginning of this shift and would have undoubtedly been inspired by their society's reluctance to acknowledge instances of abuse, as well as by how this ideology had slowly begun to change.

psychological consequences. My thesis shows the Brontes' deep understanding of this effect of abusive relationships through their depictions of both the ways in which abusers perpetuate their abuse and the ways in which the abused find themselves drawn into terrible patterns of all-consuming violence.

In my first chapter, I discuss Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* as a novel of abuse. Unlike her sisters, Charlotte Bronte has rarely been recognized as a writer who incorporated commentary on the experience of domestic abuse into her novels. Indeed, she frequently chastised her sisters for their unabashedly incorporating violence into their novels: in her Editor's Preface to the New Edition of *Wuthering Heights* in 1850, Charlotte writes to excuse her sister of her strange creation, especially in regards to the particularly malicious Heathcliff, and to convince her sister's audience to see past the novel's oddities in order to understand its more moral messages. Concerning Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* whose main heroine was a blatant victim of domestic abuse, Charlotte was much less kind. In an 1850 letter to W.S. Williams, Charlotte wrote that the novel "hardly appears to me desirable to preserve. The choice of subject in that work is a mistake—it was too little consonant with the character—tastes and ideas of the gentle, retiring, inexperienced writer. She wrote it under a strange, conscientious, half-ascetic notion of accomplishing a painful penance and a severe duty" (Smith 176). Yet, for all of Charlotte's critiques of Anne's representations of violence, her own novel is full of violent relationships. Violence, as I show, can be traced throughout the novel as a physical indication of some greater social authority, showing that abuse is, in a society where domestic violence is a common occurrence against women, a core aspect of a young woman's life journey.

In my second chapter, I explore the intricacies of Emily's violent world of *Wuthering Heights.* I suggest that there is a distinctive pattern to the seemingly wild violence that permeates

the novel. Whereas *Jane Eyre* focuses on a single narrative arc that simulates an individual woman's experience with a pattern of abuse, *Wuthering Heights* contains a multitude of abusive relationships, making the novel a compelling study about how many instances of violence create a community in which abuse is ingrained into the logic of that environment. Emily then frames this world of violence through a layered narrative scheme that criticizes her society's willful ignorance concerning marital violence in the private realm, demonstrating how such passive behavior only perpetuates violence within the home.

It is significant to note that the terminology I employ throughout this study is, at times, anachronistic to when the Bronte sisters were writing. Today, the United Kingdom government defines domestic violence and abuse as: "any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. The abuse can encompass, but is not limited to: psychological, physical, sexual, financial, and emotional" ("Domestic Violence and Abuse"). These terms, and our modern understandings of these terms, did not exist in the 1840s. However out of place these terms technically may be, I have chosen to use them in this study. Kate Lawson and Lynn Shakinovsky, authors of *The Marked Body: Domestic Violence in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Literature*, similarly appropriate this term into their study, giving the following explanation of their choice:

> We have chosen to employ [the term domestic violence in this book] since the ongoing critical analysis of nineteenth-century bourgeois women's lives in relation to the *domestic* sphere provides the critical backdrop for our interest in texts in which *violence*—actual or threatened—challenges the integrity of that domestic sphere from within…[we have additionally] chosen to use the term

> *domestic violence* to signify the rupturing of the privileged sphere of nineteenth-century women's lives by threats of, or more particularly, actual physical violence. (Lawson and Shakinovsky 2)

In the spirit of Lawson and Shakinovsky's study, I use the terms domestic violence and domestic abuse interchangeably with nineteenth-century terms such as "marital cruelty," "wife beating," "spousal abuse," and "marital violence" throughout this study. The term "domestic violence" emphasizes violence within the domestic sphere in a way that speaks to how violence functions within the plots of these novels. Additionally, this thesis employs these terms in order to capture what we know now about the psychological, as well as physical, implications of violence, demonstrating Charlotte's and Emily's attention to the social and psychological truths of abusive relationships and just how ahead of their time these works were. In addition, many instances of abuse within these novels occur outside the institution of marriage, making many Victorian terms—such as "marital cruelty"—unsuitable.

Anne Bronte's 1848 novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has long been recognized as a rare intervention into private abuse within the home. Undeniably influenced by the prevalence of marital violence in Victorian society, Anne often receives praise from modern critics for writing about such a pressing topic, and this novel frequently gets cited as one of the first feminist novels. Though their works are more widely read and they themselves are heralded for many other aspects of their writing, Charlotte and Emily Bronte are typically not credited for their portrayal of how women in Victorian society did experience abuse. This thesis shows that the other two, more famous Bronte sisters were themselves deeply aware of the patterns of abuse in nineteenth century England.

Chapter 1
"Every Morsel of Flesh on My Bones Shrank When He Came Near": Social Power and Physical Violence in *Jane Eyre*

There is no shortage of critical discourse surrounding Charlotte Bronte's writing, specifically in regards to *Jane Eyre*. In particular, critics have studied Charlotte's work for signs of social commentary that reflects signs of early feminist thinking. Critics such as Adrienne Rich have praised Charlotte for empowering women in her writing, while critics such as Virginia Woolf have criticized her for submerging explicit social commentary. But these critics have failed to notice, in their analyses of women's experience her works, the part that violence plays and, more particularly, Charlotte's subtle exposure of the deep costs of violence. As a result of this oversight, critics have both misread Charlotte's work, most notably *Jane Eyre*, and risked misunderstanding the more general motif of domestic violence as it appears in Victorian literature.

Violence is a common trope in Victorian literature. In their study *The Marked Body*, Kate Lawson and Lynn Shakinovsky explore the ways in which domestic violence against bourgeois women was portrayed in fiction of the mid-nineteenth century. They argue that the abuse endured by middle class women was excluded from literary works of this time, as public violence imposed on women of this status was largely "non-narratable": it was simply too inappropriate for women of this higher class to discuss in the public sphere, and was therefore suppressed. They argue that domestic violence experienced by bourgeois women is generally written in the margins of Victorian literature and, in their study, seek to prove that "domestic violence is a crucible in which the female body is placed, where it becomes marked by scars, disfigurement, even erasure; yet these marks point beyond the violence that begets them to

broader areas of female experience, sexuality, and consciousness" (Lawson and Shakinovsky 21). In essence, their study narrates the previously non-narratable and explores the ways in which Victorian literature finds ways to reflect attitudes and instances of violence against bourgeois women of that time.

While I also believe that domestic violence has been underexplored in Victorian literature, I disagree with Lawson's and Shakinovsky's suggestion that this is because Victorian authors wrote instances of domestic abuse largely in textual gaps.[2] Critics consistently ignore clear instances of violence and domestic abuse that are readily apparent in Victorian literature, as is especially true in analyses of Charlotte's writing. Lawson and Shakinovsky themselves are guilty of overlooking Charlotte's portrayal of violence: they mention the role of Bertha as an example of violence located within the bourgeois home in the introduction of their book, but the abuse of Jane by John Reed and the violence that underscores Jane's relationship with Rochester goes astonishingly unnoticed. Additionally, no mention of Charlotte or of *Jane Eyre* appears further into the heart of the book, reflecting the larger critical tendency to overlook Charlotte's role as a writer of domestic violence. Lawson and Shakinovsky instead focus on works written in the 1850s, although the study ranges from 1840 to the 1870s. This exclusion of *Jane Eyre* is both an under-appreciation of Charlotte's commentary and a misunderstanding of the literary history of Victorian domestic violence. Violence permeates many Victorian novels but, as with *Jane Eyre*, critics and readers have tended to not see it. In order to understand the ways in which violence relates to "broader areas of female experience", as Lawson and Shakinovsky discuss, *Jane Eyre* becomes a fundamental case study.

[2] Lisa Surridge explains in *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction* that this is where her argument differs from Lawson and Shakinovsky as well.

Indeed, few Bronte scholars have recognized the role of violence in *Jane Eyre.* Sandra M. Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's famous "A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress" completely ignores the many instances of violence and abuse in the novel. In the chapter, Gilbert and Gubar specifically discuss *Jane Eyre* as the story of Jane's progression into adulthood. They explore the ways in which Jane's story is one that takes her from imprisonment to freedom. This, Gilbert argues, is a result of Jane's irreligious rebellion, which ultimately allows Jane to be both content and free at the close of the novel. Although their chapter focuses on both instances of physical containment in the novel and the plight of young women in Victorian society, Gilbert and Gubar's assessment of *Jane Eyre* is oddly deaf to the violent actions and imagery that in many ways shape Jane's experience of imprisonment.[3] This exclusion of violent incidents seems to have set a trend in subsequent discussions of Charlotte's writing, as this chapter in particularly is heavily cited in analyses of *Jane Eyre*'s feminist qualities.

In this chapter, I will restore violence to critical conversations concerning Charlotte Bronte through a focused analysis of *Jane Eyre*. In doing this, I will highlight the presence of domestic violence in the novel and trace its correlation with social power to understand exactly how abuse functions in the novel and what social purpose it may serve. In order to do this, I will imitate Gilbert and Gubar's step-by-step walkthrough of the novel, focusing on the different domestic spaces in which violence shapes Jane's experience, to track her progression through life while highlighting what I believe to be key moments in her development: points during which Jane experiences violence or is physically forced into subordination, and how she makes her journey out of this power dynamic.

[3] Lawson and Shakinovsky similarly comment on Gilbert and Gubar's lack of explicit analysis of domestic violence in *Jane Eyre*, although they do not address it as a critical fault in their argument as I do here.

Gateshead

Jane Eyre's iconic opening scene establishes the protagonist as a repressed outsider. Jane quietly hides and reads in solitude, while her cousins gather around their mother Mrs. Reed. This opening image, Gilbert and Gubar argue, establishes Jane as an outcast within her family, confined by her difference. They point out that this is made particularly clear in the red-room, which is representative of her confinement and isolation in society. This famous interpretation of the opening chapters of the novel, while convincing, underemphasizes the ways in which violence drives the narrative from its very first chapter, and how the early scene's startling portrayal of physical violence at Gateshead spearheads the prominent impact of abuse that continues throughout the book.

This image of Jane as a powerless and vulnerable entity within her family unit is accentuated through physical acts of aggression and control. As a whole, violence permeates Jane's relationship with the Reed family and shapes her experience living at Gateshead. This becomes particularly evident in Jane's explanation of her relationship with her cousin John:

> He bullied and punished me; not two or three times in the week, nor one or twice a day, but continually: every nerve I had feared him, and every morsel of flesh on my bones shrank when he came near. There were moments when I was bewildered by the terror he inspired, because I had no appeal whatever against either his menaces or his inflictions. (*Jane Eyre* 8)

Many critics have previously noted how Jane is marginalized through her gender and poverty. However, this scene clearly reveals that Jane also is disenfranchised as a result of the abuse she is forced to endure. The language invoked in this passage reflects the thoughts of a battered and abused child. The violence she suffers affects every part of her body and her sense of being. The

effects of such violence are unrelenting, and she feels constant fear and distress in "every morsel of flesh on [her] bones", deep within the core of who she is. Jane's experienced violence pollutes her sense of comfort and makes her an ultimately vulnerable figure in the home.

This abuse transcends her personal relationship with John; she details how the other members of the household enable his abusive, violent behavior. She explains that, in the face of this violence, "the servants did not like to offend their young master by taking my part against him, and Mrs. Reed was blind and deaf on the subject: she never saw him strike or heard him abuse me, though he did both now and then in her very presence, more frequently, however, behind her back" (*Jane Eyre* 8). John's abuse of Jane, through the actions (or inactions) of other members of the house, becomes a central component in setting Jane up as an outsider, one who is not only alone, but abused. Jane's role as an outcast, previously established by critics such as Gilbert and Gubar through her class and family background, gets reinforced through her role as a victim of enabled, systematic abuse. Jane's awareness of her position in this family consistently prevents her from feeling at ease. Her position as a victim of domestic abuse further fuels her feelings of isolation and loneliness at Gateshead. In other words, the abuse has done its terrible work: it has attacked her sense of self.

Soon into the novel, Jane presents the reader with a specific example of how he abuses her. He sees her reading quietly in the corner, Jane's way of momentarily escaping her life with the Reed family, and immediately strikes her, before berating her for her impudence. He orders her to bring him her book, and she obeys. Jane had begun reading her book, Bewick's *Natural History of Birds*, earlier in the chapter because she was not welcome in the drawing room with the Reed family. She had turned to this book in order to find some solace in her isolation. The book therefore becomes a symbol of Jane's difference and her ability to forge her own escape

from her isolation. The fact that Jane relied on that book as a coping mechanism makes the next instance of abuse all the more poignant. After Jane hands him the book, she realizes what he is about to do and "instinctively started aside with a cry of alarm: not soon enough, however; the volume was flung, it hit [her], and [she] fell, striking [her] head against the door and cutting it. The cut bled, the pain was sharp: [her] terror had passed its climax; other feelings succeeded" (*Jane Eyre* 8). In using Jane's source of comfort and a symbol of her potential autonomy to beat her, John uses violence to reinforce the fact that Jane is powerless at Gateshead. Painfully, Jane herself hands John his weapon of choice: she had no choice but to physically surrender her own comfort to her abuser, making her vulnerability even more heartbreaking. He attacks her both physically and emotionally by striking her with a book, an act that was carefully orchestrated in an attempt to make Jane feel weak and vulnerable within the Reed family.

After John hits Jane with the book, she looks as him and clearly sees within him "a tyrant: a murderer" (*Jane Eyre 9)*. That image of John clouds her judgment and restricted her ability to control herself. Abandoning her usual defensive posture, Jane explains: "these sensations for the time predominated over my fear, and I received him in a frantic sort. I don't very well know what I did with my hands, but he called me 'Rat! Rat!' and bellowed out aloud" (*Jane Eyre* 9). Jane then finds herself being pulled off of John and being sent to the Red Room. Attempts to physically defend herself against John have failed. She cannot hurt him as he had previously hurt her. Jane's inability to be physically assertive stems from a lack of authority in the scene, produced from years of violence and abuse. Whereas John has the advantage of being accepted within the household and of being a physically domineering person, Jane lacks the power to control him in any sense. This is reflected in her inability to control her own acts of violence. Jane claims that she was "a trifle beside [herself]; or rather *out* of [herself]" when she

attacked John (*Jane Eyre* 9). This is supported by the lack of details in the description of her outburst. It happens so quickly, Jane is not even aware of what she is doing; she is out of control. Unlike John, whose cruelty had been premeditated and conscious, Jane's violence signifies a lack of control over her own body. To this aim, John's abuse has been successful: Jane has lost her agency and, consequentially, her sense of self.

Her subsequent experience in the red-room functions on two levels. On one hand, this imprisonment is an extension of John's abuse that occurred just moments earlier. Gilbert and Gubar cite the red-room as a place where Jane reflects significantly on her confinement and why she is made to suffer. They see this scene as a moment of clarity for Jane, in which she is able to connect with her inner self. What they fail to acknowledge is the role of physical torment in her captivity. It is violence that places her there, entwining physical abuse and imprisonment in a way that systemically supports John's abuse of Jane and reinforces the notion that it is violence that is embedded within and shapes her experiences living at Gateshead. In another vein, the red-room reminds Jane of her inability to be a powerful being. Her attempt at retribution fails, and she is sent to the red-room to highlight her own lack of control over both her body and her fate at Gateshead. At this point in the novel, Jane is still, despite her desperate attempts to defend herself, a victim.

Gilbert and Gubar claim that the beginning of *Jane Eyre* acts as a "paradigm of the larger drama that occupies the entire book: Jane's anomalous, orphaned position in society, her enclosure in stultifying roles and houses, and her attempts to escape…" (Gilbert and Gubar 68). These opening chapters are exemplary of how violence functions in the rest of the novel. The violence that Jane experiences at Gateshead during her formative years sets the foundation for how abuse shapes Jane's life and view of power dynamics in later relationships. These passages

additionally establish violence as a fundamental component of Jane's personal experiences and as a key motif in the novel. Additionally, the violence portrayed in the early stages of the novel lays out the journey that Jane must go through as she matures: she must learn how to effectively resist physical violence and how to see herself not as a powerless victim, but as an autonomous woman.

Lowood

At Gateshead, Jane continues to suffer from physical abuse, and her attempts at resistance continue to fail. Mrs. Reed reaches her breaking point when Jane boldly questions whether Mr. Reed, Jane's uncle, would have stood to see the way Jane was treated as an outcast in the household. Jane's constant questions concerning why she is made to suffer create tension in the novel: Jane refuses to accept her physical and social inferiority, and the Reed family refuses to treat her any differently. This tension caused by Jane's resistance renders her unable to live at Gateshead, and Mrs. Reed sends her away with Mr. Brocklehurst, saying that she is a passionate and disobedient child.

In the next stage of her life, Jane goes to Lowood, a charity school for girls. Here she meets Helen Burns, a fine example of a devout Christian girl. Gilbert and Gubar discuss Helen as an impossible ideal of "self-renunciation, of all consuming (and consumptive) spirituality" (Gilbert 72). Many other critics frame Helen as a paradigm of a devout Christian. Adrienne Rich, meanwhile, classifies Helen as an important mother-figure for Jane.[4] Through her didacticism, Helen serves as a model from whom Jane learns correct behavior. However, it is not spirituality

[4] Rich argues that Jane's motherless role is significant in terms of her character development and that various female characters in the novel serve as surrogate mothers for Jane.

or a moral high ground that particularly influences Jane, but rather a compulsion to endure and, in a sense, for adaptive reasons, accept her abuse.

During her second day at Lowood, Jane witnesses Helen being flogged. She explains that Helen:

> …immediately left the class, and, going into the small inner room where books were kept, returned in half a minute, carrying in her hand a bundle of twigs tied together at one end. This ominous tool she presented to Miss Scatcherd with a respectful curtsy; then she quietly, without being told, unloosened her pinafore, and the teacher instantly and sharply inflicted on her neck a dozen strokes with a bunch of twigs. Not a tear rose to Burns' eye; and, while [Jane] paused from [her] sewing, because [her] fingers quivered at this spectacle with a sentiment of unavailing and impotent anger, not a feature of her pensive face altered its ordinary expression…as she emerged from the book-closet; she was just putting back her handkerchief into her pocket, and the trace of a tear glistened on her thin cheek. (*Jane Eyre 45)*

This flogging parallels Jane's abuse by John Reed. In particular, the way that Helen was sent to retrieve her own method of torture painfully mirrors Jane's fetching of her book for John. In both of these depictions of violence, a young girl is unfairly punished, and her humiliation and powerlessness is emphasized by the active role she is forced to play in her own abuse. Unlike Jane, however, who previously lost control of herself and fought back with a fit of self-defense after she experienced abuse, Helen does not become passionate or externally enraged after being flogged. Rather, she accepts her punishment in a dutiful manner. Even as Jane finds herself

getting angry on Helen's behalf, Helen tries to show no emotion. She does not question why she is being abused or try to resist. Rather, she remains stoic, refusing to even openly shed a tear.

Jane questions Helen's reaction later that day. She explains that, had she been in Helen's position, she would have resisted the teacher's punishment, as she could not bear the idea of being flogged. Here, Helen reminds Jane that that would have been a poor and fruitless reaction. Rather, she explains that "it is far better to endure patiently a smart which nobody feels but yourself than to commit a hasty action whose evil consequences will extend to all connected with you…it would be your duty to bear [the flogging], if you could not avoid it: it is weak and silly to say that you *cannot bear* what it is your fate to be required to bear" (*Jane Eyre* 47). Helen's perspective on domestic violence starkly contrasts with Jane's perspective. While Jane represents the questioning, struggling individual woman who must navigate her way through a culture of domestic violence and of feminine inferiority, Helen accepts and, in comparison with Jane, embodies the social idea that women should not speak out against brutality in the private sphere, and consequently that women should not speak out about power inequalities. In asserting that it would be futile to resist physical punishment, Helen reinforces to Jane that it is best for her, and for women, to accept these acts of control and to repress a more passionate means of rebellion. In this sense, Helen is exemplary of the real-life victims of abuse who have learned through their experiences that it is best to not speak out, and to instead endure suffering, all the while finding inner solace to cope with their external mistreatment. Helen tells Jane that "it is not violence that best overcomes hate—nor vengeance that most certainly heals injury" (*Jane Eyre* 49). In order to cope with her physical mistreatment and her inability to resist such abuse, Helen has adopted a very Christian mindset, a reason to not fight back, that allows her to establish feelings of dignity rather than shame and humiliation.

Jane ponders what Helen has told her about accepting punishment. Although she does not completely understand or agree, she thinks: "Helen Burns considered things by a light invisible to my eyes. I suspected she might be right and I wrong; but I would not ponder that matter deeply: like Felix, I put it off to a more convenient season" (*Jane Eyre* 47). This tension between Jane's passion and Helen's repression stays with Jane after Helen's death and throughout her years at Lowood. The resentment that forced Jane out of Gateshead does lessen. However, she never completely buys into Helen's idea of accepting repression and abuse. Rather, these conflicting values of passionate freedom and restraint constantly clash within her character until the "more convenient season" when she finally resolves this conflict: when she learns about Rochester's treatment of Bertha.

Thornfield: Bertha's Madness

Perhaps the most famous scene in *Jane Eyre* is the introduction of Bertha Mason, Rochester's estranged wife whom he secretly locks away into his attic. Like Marta Caminero-Santangelo, author of *Madwomen Can't Speak: Or Why Insanity is Not Subversive*, I believe that there is "an underlying similarity between madness and violence; [and] the similarity lies not in their 'chaos' but in their contributions to a dominant order" and that, in that sense, understanding Bertha's madness is crucial for understanding the violence imposed upon her (Caminero-Santangelo 4). Over many years of critical discussion, Bertha Mason has emerged as a prime example of the madwoman in literature, and as a result there is no shortage of interpretations of her mental state. Many of these interpretations treat Bertha's madness, and subsequently the use of literary female madness in general, as a form of early-feminist rebellion. Derived from Gilbert and Gubar's interpretation of Bertha's madness as a double of both Jane and Charlotte's anger

towards Victorian gender hierarchies, critics have seen "madness [as a signifier of] anger and therefore, by extension, protest" (Caminero-Santangelo 1). Caminero-Santangelo goes on to develop this point, saying that "in its most extreme form, this interpretive model reads madness, whenever it appears in women's texts, as a willed choice and a preferable alternative to sanity for women" (Caminero-Santangelo 1). Sanity, for these critics, signifies compliance within a patriarchal system, and by "going mad", women are subverting gender conventions by refusing to conform to restrictive female roles.

Caminero-Santangelo calls into question this viewpoint, saying that madness is not a subversive act, and certainly not a productive means of protest. She points out that madwomen in literature are often silent, with no voice or means of expression, and as a result, they are limited in their ability to protest against patriarchal systems.[5] She explains that Bertha's madness specifically "offers the illusion of power, although she in fact provides a symbolic resolution whose only outcome must be greater powerlessness (Caminero-Santangelo 3). Therefore, Caminero-Santangelo claims that this understanding of madness as rebellion is not a productive way to read gendered commentary in Victorian novels.[6] Because of this, she argues, we must not see madness as a subversive act, but as a common trope in Victorian literature that serves a different purpose. I agree with this common view that Bertha's imprisoned state demonstrates what comes of women who do not fit into the existing gendered power structure. Building on this point, I will also show the key role of violence and physical conflict in her relationship with her

[5] Caminero-Santangelo also criticizes Gilbert and Gubar's interpretation of Bertha's madness because they did not consider Victorian perspectives of female insanity, and rather relied on more contemporary ideas of madness.
[6] Elizabeth Donaldson arrives at a similar point before discussing this reading of madness as harmful towards our understanding of mental illness and ultimately arguing that critics should consider the lives of the mentally ill and Victorian psychiatry in discussing madness.

husband. Through descriptions of Bertha's madness and actions, this reveals, to both Jane and to the reader, this abusive system's confining and ultimately harmful nature.

Upon entering the attic, Jane's attention is drawn to the far corner of the room. She clearly sees a figure, but "what it was, whether beast or a human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it groveled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face..." (*Jane Eyre* 250). As the party engages in conversation with Grace Poole, Jane continues to reference the "clothed hyena" with her "shaggy locks" in the background (*Jane Eyre* 250). In these vivid descriptions, Bertha is never referred to as a woman, or even a human being. Rather, she is described as a wild, undomesticated animal. The comparison of women to animals is not uncommon in Victorian literature that deals with domestic violence. However, it usually takes a different form than this. Often times beaten women are compared to weak, battered animals.[7] Nothing about Bertha's characterization reminds the reader of an abused animal. Rather than portraying a woman who has been beaten into a system of power with domesticated imagery, Charlotte invokes wild language to describe Bertha. This language demonstrates that Bertha is not an example of a woman who conforms to standard Victorian gender dynamics, but that she is a woman who, like a wild animal, cannot be tamed by men, specifically her husband. Thus, Jane, at this stage, appears to accept the idea that the caged woman is subhuman, as I will discuss at further detail later in the chapter.

As the scene proceeds, Rochester maintains that he was justified in locking Bertha away. As he explains it, Bertha's outbursts were "so strong, only cruelty could check them; and I would not use cruelty" (*Jane Eyre* 261). Rochester then explains that hiding Bertha away was the most

[7] Lisa Surridge highlights this parallel in Anne Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in *Bleak Houses.*

humane course of action to take, for both her safety and the safety of those around her. It would be a misreading of the scene to readily accept Rochester's assertion that he was not being cruel towards Bertha. True, he does not engage in more common depictions of wife beating. Even when Bertha attacks him in front of everybody, he does not fight back. As Jane observes, "he could have settled her with a well-planted blow; but he would not strike: he would only wrestle" (*Jane Eyre* 250). However, this is not to say that Rochester does not abuse Bertha. Few people can rationalize locking a woman in isolation as a non-abusive act. However, Rochester does not see this as an act of abuse or cruelty: he explains it as his non-violent solution to Bertha's madness. By including this particular type of abuse, and this reaction to the abuse, Charlotte manipulates the narrative in order to both comment on the legal and social attitudes of abuse in her own time and explain the specific power dynamic between Rochester in Bertha accurately while maintaining her correlation between physical control and social authority.

Victorian law addressed issues of marital cruelty in a very limited manner. Much of the legal discourse surrounding these cases was derived from Sir William Scott's definition of marital cruelty in the 1790 case *Evans v. Evans*. Although this did leave room for women to seek refuge from abusive marriages, Scott's restricted judgment did not account for the different forms that cruelty could take. While his definition of marital cruelty—"bodily injury, either actual or menaced"—did account for the severity of violent threats, it was functionally ineffective as "in practice the body of a woman normally had to be able to provide clear and compelling evidence of physical violence if a verdict of 'marital cruelty were to be supported…If evidence in a case suggested injured 'mental feelings' rather than 'bodily injury' then the 'suffering party' had to bear with the situation or decently resist it, *or* 'both must suffer in silence'" (Lawson and Shakinovsky 13). As Lawson and Shakinovsky explain, Scott ignored the

structure of gender relations that prevented marriages from being safe. Additionally, through his idea that both man and wife suffer when this type of abuse is prevalent in society, he further ignored "the fact that if there is one 'suffering party' then there may well be another who inflicts that suffering" (Lawson and Shakinovsky 13). Rochester is a clear embodiment of this flawed judgment.

Although Rochester clearly engages in domestic violence, he insists that his means of handling his marriage are not abusive. However, this (albeit false) assertion of innocence does not, as Rochester might suggest, reflect an unwillingness or an incapability of engaging in such physical violence. A consistent study of Rochester's character shows that he is capable of being a cruel, violent person in more conventional ways, and that he does indulge in these practices. When Mason walks into Rochester's and Jane's wedding, Rochester has a visibly aggressive reaction: "on hearing the name, [Rochester] set his teeth: he experienced, too, a sort of strong convulsive quiver; near to him as I was, I felt the spasmodic movement of fury or despair run through his frame…and he stirred, lifting his strong arm—he could have struck Mr. Mason—dashed him on the church floor" (*Jane Eyre* 248). Rochester's anger quickly manifests itself into physical aggression, demonstrating a clear ability to be cruel and violent. Jane later experiences this for herself when Rochester explains his actions. When she does not seem to want to listen to Rochester's explanation, he exclaims: "'Jane! will you hear reason?' (he stooped and approached his lips to [her] ear) 'because, if you won't, I'll try violence.' His voice was hoarse; his look that of a man who is just about to burst an insufferable bond and plunge headlong into wild license" (*Jane Eyre* 258). In this violating and harrowing statement, Rochester completely contradicts his previous assertion that he could never be cruel. The mere threat of Jane not listening to his rationale apparently justifies Rochester to invade her personal space and whisper threats of abuse

in her ear. As he does so, this violent nature infects his physical being. Rochester, we must suspect, has "tried violence" before.

In light of Rochester's demonstrated willingness to employ physical violence, the reader must then question his choice to imprison Bertha, rather than to engage in the more common practice of wife beating. The answer lies within the difference between Bertha and characters like Jane and Mason: Rochester cannot sustain control over her, both physically and socially. When the party first enters the attic, Bertha "sprang and grappled [Rochester's] throat viciously, and laid her teeth to his cheek: they struggled. She was a big woman, in stature almost equaling her husband, and corpulent besides: she showed virile force in the contest—more than once she almost throttled him, athletic as he was" (*Jane Eyre* 150). Bertha physically differs from other women, like Jane and Blanche Ingram, in that she is a strong, overpowering force who can—quite easily—attack her husband. Rochester does not beat her during this episode, but rather, with the help of Grace Poole, wrestles her into a chair and ties her to a chair to restrain her. Bertha's size is mentioned later in the novel, when Rochester explains to Jane that, although he had hoped his wife would die and leave him a free widower, he knew that "she was likely to live as long as I, being as robust in frame as she was infirm in mind" (262). Bertha has a larger stature and her physical abilities are more similar to men like Rochester than to women like Jane. Her physique puts her on equal grounds with Rochester, and he therefore cannot exercise control over her.

Bertha's physical dominance is correlated to her power in her marriage with Rochester. Bertha's social authority, while never overtly expressed, lies within Rochester's complaints about their marriage. In explanations to Jane, Rochester never precisely defines what her madness is or how it manifested itself in their early relationship. While Jane's description of

Bertha in the attic is vivid and filled with ferocity and physical aggression, Rochester's account of his marriage with Bertha contains no explanation of specific horrific physical acts. Rather, most of his justifications for his actions center on exclamations of despair that he had been put in this situation in the first place. The few details he does provide concerning the nature of their relationship do not shed light on the aspects of Bertha's character that make her unsuitable, but rather on Rochester's misfortune:

> '…I found her nature wholly alien to mine; her tastes obnoxious to me; her cast of mind common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher, expanded to anything larger—when I found that I could not pass a single evening, nor even a single hour of the day, with her in comfort: that kindly conversation could not be sustained between us, because whatever topic I started immediately received from her a turn at once so coarse and trite, perverse and imbecile—when I perceived that I should never have a quiet or settled household, because no servant would bear the continued outbreaks of her violent and unreasonable temper, or the vexations of her absurd, contradictory, exacting orders…' (*Jane Eyre* 261)

Although this explanation is meant to prove Bertha's madness to Jane, it instead highlights Rochester's inability to cope with a relationship in which his wife was physically dominant.[8] These proposed examples of Bertha's insanity do not reflect any subversive intentions on her part, nor any intrinsically violent habits that negatively influence Rochester. Rather, his complaints with their relationship center on the fact that that she did not provide him any comfort

[8] Significantly, Rochester and Bertha spend the beginning of their marriage in the West Indies where Bertha grew up. Rochester's powerlessness can be seen as further articulated through his position in an outsider. Even further, part of Rochester's way of regaining authority in his marriage is to move to England, where he has more authority to confine his wife in an attic in his own domestic sphere.

as a docile wife and that she did not conform to his preferred topics of conversation. Further, his expressed fear that her behaviors would prohibit them from having a proper home reflect his anger that Bertha did not meet his expectations for a wife. Traditionally, the wife's proper sphere was the domestic sphere, and they were to make it an acceptable domain for the family. His assertion that no servant would be able to live in that house with Bertha reveals Rochester's awareness that his wife did not fit this mold for the ideal Victorian wife, demonstrating his underlying frustration within his marriage: Bertha was not the ideal Victorian woman who conformed to restrictive gender norms. As a result, Rochester found himself faced with a difficult situation: he could not will nor beat his wife into submission, and he could not bear a relationship in which he did not have that power. As a result, he does the only thing he can think of: he locks Bertha away in the attic so he does not have to confront the question of power relations she presents.

Bertha's madness is not, then, her violent outbursts or her disturbed mind, but rather her difference from, and incompatibility with, Rochester. She did not choose to be mad to escape gender norms: she simply did not conform to these standards to the extent that Rochester expected, and she is punished by Rochester for not fitting into the system he hoped to have in his marriage. By the time Jane meets her, Bertha has come to physically embody this difference and Rochester's rejection of her. She is a wild, violent animal who has been locked away for years. Her character has suffered in a tangible, physical way because of her resistance to Rochester's physical and social control, and the result is the iconic image of Bertha the madwoman.

Thornfield: A More Convenient Season

The effect Bertha's reveal has not gone unnoticed by critics. Famously, Gilbert and Gubar analyze Bertha as Jane's maddened double. According to their analysis, Bertha's attic is the "complex focal point where Jane's own rationality…and her irrationality…intersect" (Gilbert and Gubar 74). Bertha is a manifestation of this conflict. She is, in a sense, the "'bad animal' who was first locked up in the red-room… [who is] still lurking somewhere, behind a dark door, waiting for the chance to come out" (Gilbert and Gubar 74). Bertha is Jane's darker double, who acts according to Jane's deepest desires that she has tried for years to repress. For Gilbert and Gubar, Bertha's imprisonment in the attic thus parallels Jane's past experiences of imprisonment.

Again, Gilbert and Gubar fail to factor in the prominent role that violence plays in terms of Jane's relationship to Bertha, thus oversimplifying Jane's decision to leave Rochester. As I have previously argued, Bertha's "madness" is her incompatibility with Rochester's ideal image of a wife, and her imprisonment is thus her punishment. Therefore, if we understand Rochester's principle concern with his marriage to Bertha as his inability to control her, then we must recognize the further parallels between that marriage and his relationship with Jane in regards to social equality and physical control. In many ways, Rochester thinks of Jane as an intellectual equal: this is what sets her apart from women such as Celine and Blanche Ingram.[9] However, many of these instances in which Rochester's physical actions accent his feelings for Jane, ultimately undermine the supposed equality within their relationship. During his proposal, Jane relates the following statement by Rochester: "'my bride is here,' he said, again drawing me to him, 'because my equal is here, and my likeness…" (*Jane Eyre* 217). Even as Rochester tells Jane that they are equals, he restrains her, pulling her close to him, overpowering her physically.

[9] Gilbert and Gubar accept this apparent equality, claiming that it is subversive of Victorian ideals.

This type of bodily control is prevalent throughout their engagement. Rochester at various points refers to Jane as a little elf or fairy. About a month after the two become engaged, Jane recounts a moment when she goes out on the moors to meet Rochester as he returns. He sees his bride coming towards him, stops his horse, and holds out his hand, telling Jane "'[she] can't do it without [him], that is evident. Step on [his] boottoe; give [him] both hands: mount!'" (*Jane Eyre* 237). She obeys, and he greets her with "some boastful triumph; which [she] swallowed as well as [she] could" (*Jane Eyre* 237). Although Rochester claims that Jane is his intellectual and spiritual equal, his physical actions reflect a desire to physically dominate her—and, as we see as Jane mounts the horse, he reacts with "boastful triumph" when he succeeds in doing this. Clearly, Jane is uncomfortable with these instances. It is not until she meets Bertha, however, that she realizes that Rochester's physical actions are symptomatic of a larger cycle of violence and abuse.

The type of control that Rochester asserts over Jane is not the control he asserts over Bertha: rather, it is the control he wished he could assert over Bertha come to fruition in his relationship with Jane. Even further, this interaction with Bertha shows Jane that, should she marry Rochester, her marriage would be much the same. When she questions whether or not he would treat her similarly should she go mad, Rochester attempts to soothe her, telling her that "if [she] raved, [his] arms would confine [her], and not a strait waistcoat—[her] grasp, even in fury, would have a charm for [him]: if [she] flew at [him] as wildly as that woman [Bertha] did this morning, [he] should receive [Jane] in an embrace at least as fond as it would be restrictive" (*Jane Eyre* 257). Bertha is not, then, merely Jane's repressed double who acts according to her innermost feelings, and Gilbert and Gubar suggest. She is simultaneously Jane's present other and her potential future.

In addition to this revelation about the nature of her relationship with Rochester, Bertha's reveal forces Jane to confront these realities of how she now functions within a larger system of violence. In this instance, she is, for the first time, on the side of the abuser, rather than that of the abused. She enters the attic with Rochester and the rest of their party. In this parallel to her experience at Gateshead, she is no longer the excluded member: finally, she is welcomed into a sort of dominant family unit. As a result, she is able to see Bertha from both the perspective of the abuser and the abused. It is through her eyes that we see Bertha as an unruly monster. It is Jane, not Rochester or Grace Poole, who calls Bertha a "clothed hyena" and a "wild animal". However, Jane has not undergone a complete transformation: because of her past experiences with violence, she cannot entirely separate herself from the abused Bertha. Nobody else in the party seems to question Rochester's assertion that he did not inflict cruelty on Bertha: they strongly assert that Rochester cannot marry because of the mere fact that he has a wife, but nobody comments on the treatment of said wife. This is not true of Jane, who seems to recognize on some level the injustice that has been inflicted upon Bertha and even goes as far as to sympathize with the estranged wife. After listening to him excessively complain about Bertha's faults and inexcusable madness, Jane interrupts Rochester, telling him that he is "inexorable for that unfortunate lady: [he speaks] of her with hate—with vindictive antipathy. It is cruel—she cannot help being mad" (*Jane Eyre* 257). This is a kindness that no other character seems to treat Bertha with: a recognition of her as a person, on some level. These two perspectives create a tension within Jane: she simultaneously sees Bertha as an animal and as a person, sees Rochester as sympathetic husband and as a violent tyrant.

In this moment, when Jane occupies these two roles, she must make a critical decision that will determine her fate. It is, perhaps, the "more convenient season" she alludes to in

Lowood when Helen advises her on how to deal with such systematic abuse. For years, Jane has put off this conflict, and now is the time when she must make the decision how she will deal with the violence in her life. Through Bertha, Jane has become acutely aware of the violence in her life and can no longer ignore it. She knows that she cannot change the systematic violence that a relationship with Rochester would inevitably bring, and she cannot resign herself to Bertha's fate under such a repressive system. Therefore, she forges a third option: unable to reconcile these two roles, or pardon these truths about her relationship with Rochester, she leaves, temporarily opting out of this system of violence.

Jane resolves that she cannot be with Rochester. She now knows that she cannot break this system of violence or take part in a relationship that directly suppresses her through physical abuse. From the moment Jane makes this decision, the reader sees a distinct shift in her character. She is resilient in this choice, in a way she has not been previously in the novel. Amidst Rochester's numerous threats and explanations, Jane does not falter in her thinking. She reflects that she "felt an inward power; a sense of influence, which supported me. The crisis was perilous; but not without its charm: such as the Indian, perhaps, feels when he slips over the rapid in his canoe" (*Jane Eyre* 258). Even when Rochester further exhibits his willingness to "try violence," Jane maintains her composure: "a wild look raised his brows—crossed his features: he rose; but he forbore yet. I laid my hand on the back of a chair for support: I shook, I feared—but I resolved" (*Jane Eyre* 270). Jane, in mentally disengaging with this system, has finally become a powerful being in her own right.

Rochester's reaction to Jane's moment of clarity is exemplary of both the violence that has plagued Jane throughout her life and Jane's momentary liberation from that form of control.

Despite all of Rochester's attempts to explain away his actions and appeal to her senses, Jane maintains that she will not be with him, leaving Rochester enraged:

> His fury was wrought to the highest: he must yield to it for a moment, whatever followed; he crossed the floor and seized my arm, and grasped my waist. He seemed to devour me with his flaming glance: physically, I felt, at that moment, powerless as stubble exposed to the draught and glow of a furnace...his grip was painful, and my overtasked strength almost exhausted...'Never,' said he, as he ground his teeth, 'never was anything at once so frail and so indomitable. A mere reed she feels in my hand!' (And he shook me with the force of his hold.) (*Jane Eyre* 271)

This shocking act of physical aggression immediately validates Jane's decision to leave Rochester. The violence that was implied in his relationship with Bertha finally becomes evident in his character when his social power is threatened. He acts with the violence that Jane knew he was capable of. His sudden fury that he "must yield to for a moment" exemplifies, through his violently grabbing of her, that Rochester participates in the same system of violence that suppressed her in Gateshead and that she saw at Lowood. Just as these abusers used violence to support their own authority, Rochester shakes Jane and reminds her of her "frail and so indomitable" figure to both abuse and emotionally devastate her. However, significantly, Rochester's physical manifestation of anger does not effectively force Jane to succumb to his desires. Still shaking Jane, Rochester reflects on the effects of his abuse:

> 'I could bend her with my finger and thumb; and what good would it do if I bent, if I uptore, if I crushed her? Consider that eye: consider the resolute, wild, free thing looking out of it, defying me, with more than courage—with a stern

> triumph. Whatever I do with its cage, I cannot get at it—the savage, beautiful creature! If I tear, if I rend the slight prison, my outrage will only let the captive loose. Conqueror I might be of the house, but the inmate would escape to heaven before I could call myself possessor of its clay dwelling-place. And it is you, spirit—with will and energy, and virtue and purity—that I want: not alone your brittle frame.' (*Jane Eyre* 271)

For the first moment in the novel, physical violence does not directly correlate with more generalized social authority. Even as Rochester brutally seizes her body and "[devours her] with his flaming glance", he finally recognizes that Jane will not bend to his will. She is not a mere reed, and he cannot "bend her with [his] finger and thumb"—nor can he reach her spirit that resides within her brittle frame. Their visions of how their marriage should function are not compatible. Just as Rochester knows he cannot beat Bertha, he now discovers that he cannot physically will Jane into staying with him. In this moment, Rochester begins to realize the limits of his violence. Thus, he knows it would do him no good if he "bent, if [he] uptore, if [he] crushed her"—she has gained a new authority through the personal revelation that Bertha prompted, and his violence will not make her yield.

Jane thus leaves Rochester, not only, as some have argued, to remain chaste or because of irreconcilable economic disparities, or even because he has a wife.[10] Rather, Jane must leave Rochester because she can no longer be such an active participant in this system of domestic violence that has plagued her entire life, and that would certainly follow in their marriage.[11] This

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[10] Helene Moglen, in her article "The End of *Jane Eyre* and the Creation of a Feminist Myth" argues that Jane leaves "to discover her own capacities and strengths. She must learn the pleasures of independence and self-sufficiency. But only economic independence and social position will give her the status essential to the recognition which is the better part of equality" (Moglen 51).

[11] As some critics have pointed out, Jane is not divorced from this systematic violence: however, they, somewhat problematically, misread the situation. As she leaves Rochester, he acts as though she is abusing him by leaving, by rendering him powerless and alone. Jane has even internalized this. As she leaves Thornfield, she reflects: "I had

is, of course, only temporary: Jane does return to Rochester. However, in order for this relationship to work, the physical strength of Rochester must be diminished in order to allow for a safe and equal partnership for Jane.

Ferndean[12]

Rochester's partial realization of the limitations of his abusive behaviors sets the scene for Jane's return. Jane arrives at Thornfield, apparently compelled by supernatural forces, after spending several months at Marsh End where she witnessed moments of intense physical control and restraint through St. John. Although St. John's physical mannerisms are vastly different from, and less abusive than, Rochester's, Jane still rejects his proposal, as she also cannot accept that form of physical confinement. Thus, she goes to return to Rochester, to see what became of him in her absence. When she arrives, however, she finds that this home no longer exists. As she approaches the estate, she sees that "the lawn, the grounds were trodden and waste: the portal yawned void. The front was, as I had once seen it in a dream, but a shell-like wall, very high and very fragile looking, perforated with paneless windows: no roof, no battlements, no chimneys—all had crashed in" (*Jane Eyre* 362). The destruction of Thornfield itself is symbolic of the reconciliation that is to come. This domestic space, which had been home to such awful domestic violence and abusive behaviors, has been demolished.

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injured—wounded—left my master. I was hateful in my own eyes. Still I could not turn, nor retrace one step" (*Jane Eyre* 274). Gilbert and Gubar again ignore the violent and suppressive context of this quote, thus reading Jane's inner thought as truth. They argue that, in leaving, "the moon has elicited from her an act as violent and self-assertive as Bertha's on that night" (Gilbert and Gubar 88).

[12] I have chosen not to discuss Jane's experience with the Rivers siblings at Marsh End because, while it is a crucial place for Jane's personal development, it does not actively exhibit instances of physical abuse. While arguably St. John Rivers engages in a form of emotional abuse and torture (as he holds the threat of eternal violence over her to try to compel her to marry him through his talk of hellfire and brimstone), there is no physical violence in the Marsh End scenes, making this the only domestic sphere in which violence is not directly tied to Jane's experience of living there.

After speaking with a local innkeeper, Jane learns the truth about what happened to the house.[13] Months after Jane left, Bertha started a fire. She died after jumping from the attic, and Rochester, refusing to leave the house until everyone else had gone, was left with "one eye…knocked out, and one hand so crushed that Mr. Carter, the surgeon, had to amputate it directly. The other eye inflamed: he lost the sight of that also. He is now helpless, indeed—blind and a cripple'" (*Jane Eyre* 365).

Rochester's disability has been interpreted by critics as punishment for his infidelity. Helene Moglen, for example, explains in her article "The End of *Jane Eyre* and the Creation of a Feminist Myth" that Charlotte "has afflicted her hero with the Christian punishment appropriate to one who has 'committed adultery in his heart' and 'put aside his wife'" (Moglen 58).[14] However, I believe that this assessment ignores another significant consequence of his mutilation: with the loss of his hand, Rochester can no longer engage in domestic violence. This allows Jane and Rochester to be together; not just because of the death of Bertha or because of Jane's newfound economic independence, but because Rochester no longer has the physical ability to control her. Given his condition, Rochester will never be able to hit her as John Reed hit her or wrestle her as he previously wrestled Bertha. His inability to physically abuse her resolves the tension caused in their last meeting: Jane no longer has to worry that a relationship with Rochester will be filled with domestic violence, thus allowing them to be together.

When Jane first approaches Ferndean, his new residence, she sees Rochester from afar. She appeals to her audience: "reader, do you think I feared him in his blind ferocity?—if you do,

[13] This innkeeper, not knowing who he was speaking to, describes Rochester's fiancé, saying that "she was a little small thing, they say, almost like a child" (*Jane Eyre* 363). Even now, her physical inferiority is emphasized.
[14] Moglen also argues that Rochester's mutilation is his "spiritual death" (Moglen 60). She argues that Rochester is a Byronic hero for most of the novel, and that this accident transforms him into a more contemporary male literary figure.

you little know me" (*Jane Eyre* 367). Jane has no reason to fear Rochester, as he can no longer break her resolve with his physical force. Although his body has been weakened, their relationship has been strengthened. Rochester questions Jane as to whether or not she could love him with his mangled body. She assuages his fears in her answer, telling him that "[she loves him] better now, when [she] can really be useful to [him], than [she] did in [his] state of proud independence, when [he] disdained every part but that of giver and protector" (*Jane Eyre* 379). Jane recognizes that Rochester will not be able to fulfill these two—quite physical—roles as he previously did. She loves him now because his physical handicap prevents him from doing physical acts to lessen her personal authority. While this has, in the past, meant doing things like helping her unnecessarily onto horses and dressing her in fancy clothes like a little doll, this handicap also removes the threat that he will use his violent agency to physically and mentally undermine her.[15]

In this context, the ending of *Jane Eyre*, although it includes a marriage, is not the perfect ending to a bildungsroman. Rather, it is quite unsettling. The domestic abuse that has followed Jane throughout her journey has not been eradicated. Rochester does not learn the error of his ways and repent for his abuses. Rather, he is very much still the man who locked his wife in the attic and who shook and threatened Jane. The change in their relationship is not that violence has ceased to be a method of control in a relationship: the change is, rather, that Rochester is no longer able to use such methods against Jane. Thus, because he cannot perform violence, he is still an equivocal choice for Jane, despite the fact that he never consciously learns his lesson.

[15] Rochester's blindness also gives way to a more equal relationship, in that it allows Jane to be a more autonomous woman. As Bodenheimer argues, "Rochester's blindness leaves Jane in sole command of the narrative field; she becomes the single source of evidence, the voice which tells what her audience cannot see, and the arbiter of what is and is not to be told" (Bodenheimer 102-103)

However, although their relationship is successful, abuse and domestic violence still lie within the foundation of their union, giving the reader an ultimately unnerved feeling as a result of violence's harrowing presence.

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In *The Marked Body*, Lawson and Shakinovsky discuss the ways in which marital cruelty is portrayed in Wilkie Collins's 1870 novel *Man and Wife*. They explain that in the novel, "Collins utilizes violence as an image and analogue of all possible inequities. Cruelty and violence within individual marriages become a mode of investigating large social, cultural, and legal problems" (Lawson and Shakinovsky 128-129). This is not the first time such a depiction of domestic violence occurred in Victorian literature. As I have argued, Charlotte accomplishes something similar in *Jane Eyre* through her correlation between violence and power. This particular interpretation of a book ignores the work done by Charlotte Bronte twenty two years prior.

I bring up this example for three reasons: to further demonstrate the exclusion of *Jane Eyre* from domestic violence discourses, to prove *Jane Eyre*'s worth in such discourses, and to illuminate the danger of leaving *Jane Eyre* out of these conversations. *Jane Eyre* did not make an insignificant commentary on the nature of domestic abuse in Charlotte's society. Rather, the novel did exactly what other works did years later, after legislation concerning the dangers of domestic abuse came to light. However, Charlotte's work has not gained recognition for this theme: *Jane Eyre* in particular is distinctly absent from these conversations. Indeed, generations of critics and readers have tended, if anything, to romanticize these scenes of hitting and hurting, to see Rochester's feelings for Jane as nothing more than romantic desire and passion. Yet Bronte's hero is not celebrated by the novelist herself for his behavior: rather, as I have shown,

he is punished, losing the action of his right hand. Given the sheer number of abusive incidents in the novel, it is clear that much is to be gained from understanding them in a deeper way. In overlooking the over violence and its function in Charlotte's work, critics have done a disservice to the study of domestic violence in Victorian domestic novels. By including *Jane Eyre* in these discussions, we open ourselves up to understand works like *Man and Wife*, that have been recognized for their commentary, in a more rich, contextualized way.

A major claim that Gilbert and Gubar make in their chapter on *Jane Eyre* is that, ironically enough given the gaps in their argument, many critics have misread the novel, underestimating the role of Jane's anger. They argue that contemporary critics did not share the horror that Victorians experienced while reading the novel. In order to effectively do this—understand the social context of the novel as Charlotte's contemporaries did—we cannot ignore the role of violence any longer. Rather, we must illuminate these instances in order to recognize the powerful nature of *Jane Eyre* and understand it as social commentary in a more informed, complete manner.

Chapter 2
"Take the Law Into Your Own Fists": The Violent Community of *Wuthering Heights*

Unlike *Jane Eyre,* Emily's *Wuthering Heights* has long been recognized for its harrowing portrayal of domestic violence. The novel's earliest audience found the novel to be, in the words of a January 1848 *Examiner* review, "wild, confused; disjointed, and improbable" ("*Examiner* January 1848" 285). Many readers condemned Emily's graphic examples of abuse as something that was horrific and ultimately fantastical: her characters were strange and unfamiliar, and their actions could not possibly have a foundation in reality. Despite allegations that Emily as a writer was detached from larger social issues, her portrayal of domestic abuse within *Wuthering Heights* suggests that she was highly aware of the abuse that occurred in the private sphere and, significantly, critical of how such abuse was handled in the public sphere. Though many readers have noted numerous incidents of abusive behaviors within the novel, few people have recognized *Wuthering Heights* as a novel that shows the psychic costs of abusive communities. Thus, in this chapter I will reveal how this novel depicts domestic violence as communal, cyclical, and systematic, resulting in a complicated and multi-layered commentary on public attitudes toward violence and an attempt to uncover the reality of how abuse functioned within the domestic realm.

Emily's interest in connecting her work with social issues becomes evident when her writing is studied in her social context. Lisa Surridge, in her chapter "*Wuthering Heights*, Women, and the Law: A Historical Approach," refers to Emily's work as a response to a larger culture of violence by explaining that reading court cases about marital violence in that time often enriches her students' understandings of the novel. She explains that, "for students, the

remoteness of the Heights from other habitations in the novel all too readily translates into a sense that the plot is isolated from Victorian cultural and political forces" ("*Wuthering Heights*, Women, and the Law" 113). This misconception is quickly rectified when Surridge presents her students with primary texts concerning domestic abuse from the 1840s and 1850s. Surridge has found that teaching *Wuthering Heights* in conjunction with these documents has "[enabled] students to view *Wuthering Heights* as part of a broader ideological debate on the legal nonexistence of Victorian women and to focus on issues such as coverture, child custody, married women's property, and wife assault" ("*Wuthering Heights,* Women and the Law" 113). This method of teaching has had a meaningful impact on how many students understand the novel, thus demonstrating the significant connection between Emily's work and social issues of her time, as well as highlighting how necessary it is for Bronte scholarship to focus on such a connection.

As Surridge demonstrates, Emily Bronte wrote works that responded to and commented on the world around her, particularly concerning issues of marital cruelty in her time. Moving forward from this understanding, a critical question emerges: if Emily Bronte's work was so in touch with the world around her, why was it set in such an isolated location? The answer to this question, I suggest, can be found in I.E. Gorak's article "Border Countries: 'Wuthering Heights' and Shirley' as Regional Novels." In this article, Gorak describes *Wuthering Heights* not as an oddity, but rather as a Victorian regional novel. This genre of fiction is "a type of discovery narrative in which the codes and conventions unraveled by one group of characters are imagined as another group's familiar way of life" (Gorak 451). Regional novelists typically isolate their settings in order to create a microcosm that parallels a larger society. Regional novels are frequently "praised for their 'universal' qualities, which are supposed to 'transcend' mere

'region,'…'Regional' peculiarities, in turn, transmit a hidden cultural message: the need for a single dominant center as the lens through which all other cultural life is passed" (Gorak 451). Still, Emily's novel rarely gains recognition for its attention to social concerns, particularly in relation to domestic violence. Going forward, I believe it is important to reframe *Wuthering Heights* in regards to Gorak's argument and recognize that its alienation does not thematically separate the novel from its social context: rather, such isolation serves a significant function used to build commentary within the novel.

In this chapter, I shall explore how isolation functions to create a pervasive culture of violence in *Wuthering Heights*. I will argue that the alienated setting of the novel serves as a means of commenting on the occurrence of marital abuse in Victorian England and criticizing contemporary views of the issue. By isolating the community of *Wuthering Heights,* Emily creates a microcosm of society within which she explores the effects of violence. While *Jane Eyre's* plot centers on a single arc of abuse involving Jane, *Wuthering Heights* includes several different character relationships in which one or both people are abused, ultimately allowing Emily to depict abuse as a cyclical, communal, and cultural experience. I will show how the narrative strategies of the novel uncover violent truths by immersing the reader into a community ruled by learned abuse, ultimately depicting violence not as a series of individual instances, but a learned and dangerously shared truth that cannot be ignored.

The Isolated Community of *Wuthering Heights*

Isolation is a major theme in *Wuthering Heights.* Although the novel is expansive in terms of time and characters involved, all of the action occurs within a concentrated, otherwise uninhabited location. Several critics, such as J. Hillis Miller in "Themes of Isolation and Exile"

and Eric P. Levy in "The Psychology of Loneliness in *Wuthering Heights*," discuss the complicated effects of seclusion and separation on individual characters as it affects their interpersonal relationships. While I agree that isolation is a crucial element in the novel that motivates much of the plot, I believe that, in attempting to understand the nature of the violence presented in the novel, close character readings such as these are not fruitful. Rather, I view the alienated setting of the novel as an element that allows a logic of abuse to fester within and perpetuate itself throughout the homes depicted in the work.

Today, many domestic abuse prevention and awareness organizations cite isolation as a warning sign for abusive relationships.[16] In a March 2013 pamphlet entitled "Information for Local Areas on the change to the Definition of Domestic Violence and Abuse," the Home Office of the United Kingdom government defined controlling behavior within the context of an abusive relationship as "a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behavior" ("Information" 2). Similarly, New Hope for Women, an American-based organization that works to end domestic and dating violence, cites isolation as an "abuser trick," as abusers frequently "attempt to isolate the victim by severing the victim's ties to outside support and resources…accuse the victim's friends and family of being 'trouble makers'… [and] block the victim's access to use of a vehicle, work, or telephone service in the home" ("Abuser

[16] These warning signs are, of course, anachronistic to the study of Emily's nineteenth century work. However, I find them instrumental in understanding the abuse depicted in *Wuthering Heights*. Although Emily's society did not officially acknowledge these behaviors as abusive, the psychological effects of isolation were likely similar, as the human mind has not undergone such drastic changes in the last two hundred years to make today's understanding of isolation and abuse inapplicable.

Tricks"). By cutting off all ties that the victim may have with the outside world, the abuser puts themself into a powerful position in which they are able to define reality for the abused.

This concept of isolated abuse gets expanded into a discussion of how violence functions as a learned spatial practice in James A. Tyner's study, *Space, Place, and Violence: Violence and the Embodied Geographies of Race, Sex, and Gender*.[17][18] In his chapter concerning the home as a place of violence, Tyner explains that the home is a space that reinforces norms: our families teach us what is socially acceptable, and what is not. Unfortunately, despite the fact that the home is often thought of as a place full of comfort and safety, "for many women and children, violence is most often experienced at 'home'" (Tyner 27). Because the home serves as a primary socializer in which norms are reinforced, domestic spaces in which violence is prevalent often normalize abuse for those living there, thus perpetuating a cyclical and all-consuming atmosphere of abuse. As Tyner describes, conversations concerning violence generally center on violence experienced in public spaces, partially because we want to keep thinking of the home as a safe space. However, while we continue to look at publically experienced violence, abuse continues to fester within private homes.

Although Tyner writes about a modern American society, his explanation of domestic violence rings true within the structure of abuse within *Wuthering Heights.* Emily's novel is largely localized. The entire plot of the novel occurs between Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, spanning only about two miles. Other than Lockwood, whose presence serves a distinctive narrative function, and an occasional visit from a doctor from the nearby

[17] Again, as Tyner's book focuses on modern American society, this is an anachronistic application to *Wuthering Heights*. However, similar to the point made in my previous footnote, I find this information helpful in structuring a sociological understanding of the community Emily creates in the novel.
[18] Tyner defines the term "spatial practice" as an "arrangement of buildings and pathways, and rules and regulations that constrain the behavior within those spaces" (Tyner 25).

village Gimmerton, all of the characters have spent most of their lives in this area. They have all been socialized within a very small portion of the world, and have had limited contact with the world around them. Following the logic of Tyner's description of the home as a space of violence, I interpret this to mean that the residents of Wuthering Heights had little interjection from the outside world, allowing a communal and shared experience of violence to saturate the home environment.

Through this scheme, the violence in the novel depicts a systemic world of abuse. Catherine R. Hancock, in her chapter "Teaching the Language of Domestic Violence in *Wuthering Heights,*" makes a similar argument as she details her steps in teaching the novel to students. She explains that the system of violence is often difficult to teach because of its complexities, so she, in the classroom, tries to "emphasize that violent words, desires, and deeds function as a language of sorts that Heathcliff, Hindley, and the elder Cathy use in expressing a range of emotions, from love and passion to hate and even indifference… [and she encourages] students to translate this language" (Hancock 60). Hancock takes special care to highlight instances of violence within the novel and helps her students understand that violence manifests itself both physically and verbally, defines characters in relation to violence, and can be manipulated as a concept in many different ways. In this isolated environment with nobody to stop the persistent abuse, "violence [becomes] the principal means of understanding reality in the passionate world of *Wuthering Heights"* (Hancock 66). Thus, abuse becomes normalized in this space and violence is used to communicate both love and hatred, as well as other strong emotions. When Hindley comes home in a drunken stupor, Nelly attempts to hide Hareton from either his father's "wild beast's fondness or his madman's rage; for in one he ran a chance of being squeezed and hugged to death, and in the other of being flung into the fire, or dashed

against the wall" (*Wuthering Heights* 57). In this environment, the persistent presence of violence has led to distorted conceptions of the nature of human relationships, such that a man's excessive mood swings are indistinguishable as either loving or furious, and a child is just as endangered from his father's embrace as his father's fist. Thus, this environment does not lend itself to facilitating healthy relationships or means of contact.

The communal, social nature of abuse at Wuthering Heights has frequently been overlooked because of the prevailing interpretation of Heathcliff as a root of violence within the context of the novel. Heathcliff does act on violent and vengeful impulses throughout the novel, and it would be a disservice to the novel to undermine his role in this abusive scheme of *Wuthering Heights*. However, abuse has been well-established at the Heights before Heathcliff's arrival. As Jacobs explains, Mr. Earnshaw is the first character at the Heights to use violence as, in order "to discipline the members of the household as he sees fit is both the legal and moral right of the master of the house, and in the Earnshaw family…this right leads to frequent abuse" (Jacobs 213). When Earnshaw returns from his trip, Catherine learns that her father has lost her gift on the way and "[shows] her humor by grinning and spitting at [Heathcliff], earning for her pains a sound blow from her father to teach her clearer manners" (*Wuthering Heights* 30).[19] Hindley also, through his various punishments for abusing Heathcliff, comes to "regard his father as an oppressor rather than a friend" (*Wuthering Heights* 31). As a result—and similar to the lesson that consistently gets ingrained into Jane throughout her journey—"the Earnshaw children understand very early that social power legitimizes violence" (Jacobs 214).

Heathcliff's violence must then be seen as his ability to adapt within this environment of normalized violence. As a child, Heathcliff was frequently physically and verbally abused by

[19] Jacobs also uses this example to demonstrate a similar point.

Hindley. Eventually, Nelly notes, Heathcliff was: "hardened, perhaps, to ill-treatment… [and] would stand Hindley's blows without winking or shedding a tear" (*Wuthering Heights* 30). Although Heathcliff clearly suffers from abuse at a young age, he learns to work within the system of violence and uses it to his advantage. After suffering another bout of abuse, Heathcliff tells Hindley that "'[he] must exchange horses with [Heathcliff]…and if [Hindley refuses Heathcliff] shall tell [Earnshaw] of the three thrashings [Hindley has] given [Heathcliff] this week" (*Wuthering Heights* 31). In a fit of anger, Hindley lashes out and "[throws an iron weight], hitting [Heathcliff] on the breast, and down he [falls], but [staggers] up immediately, breathless and white, and had [Nelly] not prevented it he would have gone just so to the master, and got full revenge by letting his condition plead for him" (*Wuthering Heights* 31-32). Heathcliff reacts in an unexpected and perverse way to his abuse. Rather than resisting, he welcomes the violence as an opportunity to gain authority within the Earnshaw family and, "although Heathcliff's bruises are a visible manifestation of Hindley's dominion, Heathcliff transforms these marks of humiliation into a weapon he uses against Hindley and thus diminishes Hindley's power within the Earnshaw family" (Hancock 61).[20] Ultimately, it is Heathcliff's success in learning to work within the established logic of violence within Wuthering Heights that establishes him as a powerfully abusive figure in the novel.

This strategic isolation serves two thematic purposes in *Wuthering Heights*: it first creates a microcosm within which abuse is depicted as a complex structure that is perpetuated within communities. Thus, Emily depicts abuse not as a series of single occurrences in the lower class, but as a cyclical and cultural phenomenon that cannot be taken lightly. Secondly, it calls into

[20] Hancock also argues that characters in the novel are defined through their ability to adapt to and manipulate violence to serve their own purposes. She explains that Hindley's violence frequently fails, suggesting his lack of authority in this system.

question the Victorian debate concerning when to intervene in situations of private abuse by illuminating how destructive such an environment can be. The social responsibility of Emily's contemporaries is questioned through the foolish, willingly ignorant narrator Mr. Lockwood.

The Narrative Reveal

Famously, *Wuthering Heights* is structured around a frame narrative. Lockwood, a new tenant of Thrushcross Grange, visits Wuthering Heights and does not understand anything he sees there. Scholars have widely acknowledged Lockwood as a foolish narrator who needs to have the circumstances and histories of the residents of Wuthering Heights explained to him. From the minute Lockwood enters the threshold of Wuthering Heights, he foolishly misinterprets everything he encounters. Famously, as he walks into the living room, he tries to make conversation with Cathy by asking "'Ah, your favourites are among these?' [while] turning to an obscure cushion full of something like cats" (*Wuthering Heights* 8). Cathy sneers at this statement and, upon further inspection, Lockwood observes that "unluckily, it was a heap of dead rabbits" (*Wuthering Heights* 9). Lockwood continues to demonstrate his inability to understand the family relations of those living at Wuthering Heights. He assumes that Cathy and Heathcliff are married and, after being told that this is not the case, he "[perceives himself] in a blunder, [and attempts] to correct it" (*Wuthering Heights* 10). However, as he continues to assume how they are related, he finds himself more and more wrong, until he finally "[begins] to feel unmistakably out of place in that pleasant family circle" (*Wuthering Heights* 11). These misunderstandings stem from Lockwood's prevailing assumption that Wuthering Heights will be similar to the atmosphere he has experienced in other homes. Based on his previous experiences, he expects that a cushion filled with fur would hold living cats, not dead rabbits, and he expects

that the young mistress of a house would be married to the master or that the young man living in the home would be the master's son. When his assumptions of the truth are ruthlessly disproved, Lockwood appears to the reader as a fool and an incompetent observer.

N.M. Jacobs, in her article "Gender and Layered Narrative in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" discusses the function of this narrative structure, and suggests that this construction of Lockwood as a foolish outsider is an authorial strategy that serves several purposes. Jacobs explains that Emily, as well as Anne, uses gender as a masquerade in characterizing her narrator. Like her sister, she begins with a male narrator and, through the plot, delegitimizes his perception in order to deem him an unfit narrator. From there, the role of narrator is passed to a woman, who more efficiently relates the story to the reader. This frame narrative, for Jacobs, serves a gendered function, as it "replicates a cultural split between male and female spheres that is shown to be at least one source of the tragedy at the center of the fictional world" (Jacobs 204). While I find this to be undeniably true, and find foolish Lockwood's gender significant, I believe that Jacobs' argument concerning the male narrator's outsider status more significant to the commentary within *Wuthering Heights.* Jacobs compares *Wuthering Heights* to other gothic frame tales of the time, in that the narrator comes from a culture that the reader is familiar with, although Lockwood differs from his "gothic predecessors in that [he] and the official standards [he represents] are shown to be in part the cause of the shocking reality [he encounters]" (Jacobs 206). Through his various misunderstandings, particularly the ones regarding the abusive behavior at Wuthering Heights, Lockwood parallels the many people in Victorian society who maintained that marital abuse was a private issue and therefore inappropriate to publically discuss. Thus, the function of Lockwood's flawed perception is twofold: it demonstrates both how deeply communities of abuse can affect people

and how painfully unaware people who look at private violence from a public standpoint are in regards to the severity of such abuse.

Specifically, what Lockwood seems to misunderstand to the greatest degree—and with the greatest consequence—is the violence that occurs before his own eyes. Upon first meeting Heathcliff, Lockwood thinks of him as "a capital fellow!" and says that his "heart warmed towards [Heathcliff] when [Lockwood] beheld his black eyes withdraw so suspiciously under their brows" (*Wuthering Heights* 3). Lockwood, after receiving cold and unusual treatment from Heathcliff, realizes that he misjudged his host. However, he still continues to misunderstand Heathcliff's character. He writes in his diary: "I know, by instinct, his reserve springs from an aversion to showy displays of feeling—to manifestations of mutual kindliness. He'll love and hate, equally under cover, and esteem it a species of impertinence to be loved or hated again—No, I'm running on too fast—I bestow my own attributes over-liberally on him" (*Wuthering Heights* 5). Based on his preconceived notions about how Wuthering Heights should function, Lockwood assumes that he can judge its master. However, even in this early assessment of Heathcliff, it is evident to the reader that Lockwood misreads the signs in front of him. Lockwood finds comfort in Heathcliff's "black eyes" that withdraw "so suspiciously" under his eyebrows. Most narrators would recognize this as an ominous appearance. However, as he admits, Lockwood imposes his own assumptions about how a gentleman behaves onto Heathcliff, excusing his moody behavior as a sensible reserve. He underestimates the violence that Heathcliff is capable of simply because he himself has been socialized within a society that does not publically acknowledge such warning signs. Lockwood has not been prepared with the awareness necessary for him to act or intervene in this violent setting, so instead he rationalizes it until it is no longer an issue.

From Lockwood's early interaction with a dog in Wuthering Heights, it should become clear to him that the house is riddled with violence. In a moment of awkward silence, Lockwood "[attempts] to caress the canine mother, who had left her nursery and was sneaking wolfishly to the back of [his] legs, her lip curled up, and her white teeth watering for a snatch. [The] caress provoked a long, guttural gnarl" (*Wuthering Heights* 5). Heathcliff warns Lockwood to leave the dog alone, as she is prone to biting. Lockwood reacts:

> Not anxious to come in contact with their fangs, I sat still; but, imagining they would scarcely understand tacit insults, I unfortunately indulged in winking and making faces at the trio, and some turn of my physiognomy so irritated madam, that she suddenly broke into a fury and leapt on my knees. I flung her back, and hastened to interpose the table between us. This proceeding aroused the whole hive: half-a-dozen four-footed fiends, of various sizes and ages, issued from hidden dens to the common centre. I felt my heels and coat-laps peculiar subjects of assault; and parrying off the larger combatants as effectually as I could with the poker, I was constrained to demand, aloud, assistance from some of the household in re-establishing peace. (*Wuthering Heights* 6)

This passage emblematizes both the portrayal of violence and Emily's critique of public attitudes towards violence that follows in the novel. Violence has permeated to every part of Wuthering Heights. The space is so saturated with abuse that even the canines are cruel. This passage also serves to further illustrate that Lockwood refuses to understand the severity of violence within the home. He assumes that the dog will not be bothered by "tacit insults," despite the fact that her owner has specifically told him otherwise. Still, he minimizes the danger of the situation,

assumes that he has a firm understanding of the situation, and gets attacked when he acts on these assumptions.

This passage additionally reveals how violence has been normalized in the culture of Wuthering Heights. Heathcliff does not rush into the room to Lockwood's rescue when he hears the attack: Lockwood has to specifically ask for help. When Heathcliff sees the situation, he does not respond with compassion or concern: he simply says that Lockwood should have listened, as the dogs "won't meddle with persons who touch nothing… [and] the dogs do right to be vigilant" (*Wuthering Heights* 6). This does exemplify Heathcliff's cruelty, as he cares little for the wellbeing of his houseguest. However, I propose that this passage also suggests that Heathcliff does not recognize this as being out of the ordinary or a violent attack. He has lived in this household for so long that this type of physical aggression seems acceptable and even encouraged, based on his statement that the dogs "do right" to act in such a manner.

The most problematic of Lockwood's misconceptions is his perception of Cathy Heathcliff, a young widow who lives like a prisoner in Wuthering Heights. Cathy's imprisonment is entirely lost on Lockwood. He describes her physical appearance as being very lovely: she has "the most exquisite little face that [Lockwood has] ever had the pleasure of beholding [with] small features, very fair [and] flaxen ringlets, or rather golden, hanging loose on her delicate neck" (*Wuthering Heights* 9). He sees her solely as what he would expect her to be: a beautiful young woman. He ignores her curt way of speaking and her seemingly unhappy disposition, because he has been socialized to see such a woman as merely a potential romantic match. Lockwood does not change this perception even when he witnesses Heathcliff verbally abuse her. Heathcliff barks orders at Cathy "so savagely that [Lockwood starts]. The tone in which the words are said revealed a genuine bad nature" (*Wuthering Heights* 10). Though this

clearly affects Lockwood's perception of Heathcliff, he does not change his view of Cathy, though she is quite clearly characterized as a victim.

Lockwood continues to ignore the horrific reality of Cathy's situation as the scene progresses. He asks her for directions home and she responds that she "cannot escort [Lockwood because Heathcliff] wouldn't let [her] go to the end of the garden-wall" (*Wuthering Heights* 13). She clearly tells him that Heathcliff has kept her as a prisoner, yet Lockwood does not react. Rather, "he sidesteps this fact by gallantry" and insists that he would never ask a lady to walk so far with him (Jacobs 215). His actions here continue to reflect the actions of those who believe that it is inappropriate to publically discuss instances of abuse. He finds the subject too delicate to openly discuss, and proceeds as if he is unaware of the situation.

Lockwood later witnesses a blatantly abusive scene between Cathy and Heathcliff. He enters the room as Heathcliff curses and yells at Cathy. As the scene progresses, "Heathcliff [lifts] his hand, and [Cathy springs] to a safer distance, obviously acquainted with [the hand's] weight. Having no desire to be entertained by a cat-and-dog combat, [Lockwood steps] forward briskly, as if eager to partake the warmth of the hearth, and innocent of any knowledge of the interrupted dispute" (*Wuthering Heights* 25). Again, Lockwood acts as a bystander in a situation of horrific violence. He assures himself that this is not a seriously violent scene, but rather a game-like "cat-and-dog combat." He simply allows the situation to play out before him, which contributes to his overall foolish characterization.[21]

Lockwood spends the first few chapters of the novel demonstrating his incompetence as a narrator to both the reader and to himself. Thus, he turns to Nelly Dean, a maid who has been serving the Earnshaw family since she was a young girl. Unlike Lockwood, Nelly has been

[21] Jacobs makes a similar argument with these examples in her argument regarding Lockwood's perception of Cathy.

socialized within Wuthering Height's world of abuse. Therefore, after Lockwood proves himself utterly and completely unable to understand, much less narrate, the world of Wuthering Heights, the novel gives Nelly the authority needed to properly narrate the story.[22] This transition from Lockwood's perspective to Nelly's illustrates how, because pervading Victorian values caused public society to largely ignore the harsh realities of violence experienced within the home, domestic abuse is a complex institution that cannot just be looked at in fractions and instantly understood: it is composed of patterns that need to be understood. Because neither Lockwood nor Emily's reader has taken the time to understand abuse in this fashion, they need Nelly to translate this world of abuse into something legible.

It is important to note that, while Nelly's narration brings the reader closer to reality at the Heights than Lockwood's perspective, her narrative role is imperfect. Jacobs calls her story "one of impotence and suppression," as, "despite her dependence on the families she serves, she attempts to protest or correct the injustices she sees, to soften Hindley's and Heathcliff's anger, to reconcile Edgar and Isabella, to moderate Catherine's outburst, and later to protect the second Catherine from Heathcliff's schemes" (Jacobs 216). Similarly, in his article "The Unreliable Narrator in *Wuthering Heights*," Gideon Shunami points out that, though Nelly is widely seen as more reliable than Lockwood, she "lacks the qualities and qualifications necessary for her to be a reliable narrator" because she is a character with a distinctive personality whose actions directly influence the course of the plot (Shunami 449). Nelly's role in the plot of the novel is undeniable: as J.F. Goodridge says in his article "Nelly as Narrator," "[Nelly] brings us very

[22] Lyn Pykett, in her research, also notes the significance of the narrative's turn to Nelly's perspective and, similar to Jacobs, notes that this transition in narrative voice marks a transition from the outer, public realm to the inner, domestic realm. Pykett focuses her analysis of what makes Nelly a competent narrator not on her position as a victim, but rather on her position as both a woman and a housekeeper, as those roles have taught her to not focus her narrative on her own life, but rather on the lives and actions of her male superiors.

close to the action and is, in one way, deeply engaged in it" (Goodridge 69). As a result of Nelly's proximity to the action of the novel, analyzing her narration gets messy. Her judgment, as with any person's judgment concerning things that directly relate to them, is flawed. However, I believe the problems with Nelly's narrative voice are complicated and that calling her unreliable is a gross oversimplification of her role in the novel.

I believe that Nelly's proximity to the story, and to the culture of Wuthering Heights, is both what allows her to and prevents her from being an entirely trustworthy narrator. She, along with all of the other characters who reside at Wuthering Heights, has experienced abuse and physical violence on countless occasions. Thus, I suggest that the quality of her narration that Jacobs would call impotence and suppression and that Shunami would call unreliability is a result of her long-suffered abuse. Just as a victim of abuse excuses the behavior of their abuser, Nelly frequently delivers her story in a matter-of-fact manner. A particularly revealing example of this can be found in Nelly's retelling of one of Hindley's particularly violent moments. She tells Lockwood: "[Hindley] held the knife in his hand, and pushed its point between my teeth: but, for my part, I was never much afraid of his vagaries. I spat it out, and affirmed it tasted detestably—I would not take it on any account" (*Wuthering Heights* 58). Nelly's reaction seems far too casual and out of place given the severity of her situation. She has normalized abuse to such a degree that her principle concern when her master attempts to shove a knife down her throat is that she does not care for its taste. This startlingly casual reaction to violence reveals that Nelly, after living in Wuthering Heights for most of her life, has become acculturated to the prevailing logic of violence within that domestic space. Whereas Lockwood's narration fails as a result of his distance from the issue, Nelly's suffers from her proximity to the situation, which prevents her from seeing the situation with clarity.

The complex, convoluted, and questionable narrative structure of *Wuthering Heights* serves to methodically force the story into the perspective of the abused, thus forcing the reader directly into the cyclical, convoluted world of regularly experienced violence. Within this frame narrative, the novel presents countless incidents of abusive actions and violent language that all function within this predominating culture of violence at Wuthering Heights. For the purposes of this study, I have isolated three distinctive relationship arcs that function within this pattern of abuse: Catherine and Edgar's marriage, Heathcliff and Isabella's marriage, and the forced relationship between Linton and Cathy by Heathcliff. In the remainder of this chapter, I will walk through the stages of these relationships, explaining how they all demonstrate how violence is a cyclically experienced phenomenon that a person can, without proper intervention, be easily sucked into.

Catherine and Edgar

From his first introduction into the novel, Edgar Linton, along with his sister Isabella, appears to be entirely dissimilar from all of the residents at Wuthering Heights. Whereas Catherine and Heathcliff constantly run around and play roughly with one another under Hindley's cruel watchful eye, Edgar engages in more sheltered, feminine activities. When Catherine and Heathcliff first see Edgar and Isabella, the two spoiled children are crying and fighting over who can pet the dog. Heathcliff, who like Catherine sees this behavior as ridiculously petulant, tells Nelly that he would "not exchange, for a thousand lives, [his] condition here, for Edgar Linton's at Thrushcross Grange - not if [he] might have the privilege of flinging Joseph off the highest gable, and painting the house- front with Hindley's blood!" *(Wuthering Heights* 38). This excerpt—significant in that it exemplifies Heathcliff's tendency to

equate privilege with an ability to perform violence—defines the Lintons at Thrushcross Grange and Heathcliff and Catherine at Wuthering Heights in distinct opposition to one another. However, as the novel progresses, Edgar's relationship with Catherine drags him into this abusive cycle, demonstrating that, under certain circumstances, many types of men can easily become violent characters. This forces the reader to question how a culture could facilitate such a consuming abusive force.

Catherine's relationship with Edgar begins when she injures herself on their property. She resides at the Grange for five weeks, in which time "her ankle was thoroughly cured, and her manners much improved" (*Wuthering Heights* 41). Upon her return to Wuthering Heights, she resembles very little of her old self: "instead of a wild, hatless little savage jumping into the house, and rushing to squeeze us all breathless, there 'lighted from a handsome black pony 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 sail in" (*Wuthering Heights* 41). It appears that Catherine's time at Thrushcross Grange has curbed her rude and reckless behaviors. Indeed, whenever she sees the Lintons, she acts like a perfect gentlewoman. However, as Nelly clearly observes, her character has not been decidedly altered: rather, Catherine "[adopts] a double character without exactly intending to deceive any one. In the place where she [hears] Heathcliff termed a 'vulgar young ruffian,' and 'worse than a brute,' she [takes] care not to act like him; but at home she had small inclination to practise politeness that would only be laughed at, and restrain an unruly nature when it would bring her neither credit nor praise" (*Wuthering Heights* 52). Despite her appearance of being gentle and kind, Catherine continues to display her ability to be wild and violent. The Lintons' failed attempt at correcting Catherine's violent manners mirrors how larger social structures dealt with issues of wife assault:

they alter the surface level issues concerning the violence, but their lack of understanding prevents them from dealing with the root of the issue, meaning that violence is never fully eradicated or resolved.

This becomes painfully clear when Edgar Linton proposes to Catherine. According to Victorian ideals, Catherine should behave like a docile, domestic young lady as she gets engaged. However, Catherine's violence corrupts the core of the action in the scene. Catherine becomes upset with Nelly for not leaving them unattended and, "supposing Edgar could not see her… [pinches Nelly], with a prolonged wrench, very spitefully on the arm" (*Wuthering Heights* 55). Catherine becomes increasingly upset as Nelly scolds her for doing such a thing until, "irresistibly impelled by the naughty spirit within her, [Catherine slaps Nelly] on the cheek: a stinging blow that filled both eyes with water" *(Wuthering Heights* 56). Her violence expands as she shakes Hareton for calling her wicked. When Edgar tries to restrain her, he "[feels her hand] applied over his own ear in a way that could not be mistaken for jest" *(Wuthering Heights* 56). Despite Catherine's appearance as a gentle and well-mannered young woman, her affinity for violence remains. Because she was raised in a household where violence begets reward, Catherine resorts to violence when she does not get her way in this scene, demonstrating that her ability to perform violence persists throughout her outward transformation.

In the aftermath of this slap, Edgar stares at Catherine, stunned, and attempts to leave. Catherine begs him not to leave, threatening that if he leaves, "[she'll] cry – [she'll] cry herself sick!" (*Wuthering Heights* 56). Hancock explains this scene, as well as the countless other instances in which Catherine threatens to hurt herself in order to hurt those around her, as Catherine turning violence into herself because it was not socially acceptable for women to act

violently towards the men in their lives (Hancock 65).[23] However, this type of behavior is significantly similar to the type of emotional manipulation that plagues many abusive relationships today. Susan Forward and Donna Frazier discuss four types of emotional abusers in their book *Emotional Blackmail: When the People in Your Life Use Fear, Obligation, and Guilt to Manipulate You,* including the "self-punishers" who guilt their partners into staying with them or getting their way by threatening to harm themselves if they do not. This modern understanding of patterns of abuse is clearly underscored within Catherine's internalization of abuse, as she threatens to physically harm herself in order to gain control over Edgar.

Catherine's manipulation and guilting ultimately works. Nelly observes:

> "[Edgar] possessed the power to depart as much as a cat possesses the power to leave a mouse half killed, or a bird half eaten...there will be no saving him: he's doomed, and flies to his fate! And so it was: he turned abruptly, hastened into the house again, shut the door behind him; and when I went in a while after …I saw the quarrel had merely effected a closer intimacy - had broken the outworks of youthful timidity, and enabled them to forsake the disguise of friendship, and confess themselves lovers."*(Wuthering Heights* 56-57)

Nelly's analysis of Edgar as utterly powerless in his ability to leave Catherine reflects the successfulness of her emotional abuse. She has effectively emotionally manipulated him into staying with her, causing their relationship to be closer than ever. Edgar has, for the first time, seen Catherine's true violent potential, and overlooks it because he underestimates the implication that this singular episode has on his and Catherine's potential future relationship.

[23] Further examples of this behavior can be found when Catherine "[fasts] pertinaciously, under the idea, probably, that at every meal, Edgar was ready to choke for her absence" and when she tells Nelly that "'if [she] were only sure it would kill [Edgar]… [she'd] kill [herself] directly!" *(Wuthering Heights* 94-95).

Thus, although the scene ends in a scene of perfect contentment, Nelly specifically calls this a "disguise," leaving a shadow over their engagement. Abusive behaviors both dominate Edgar's proposal to Catherine and convince him to return to her. Thus, Edgar begins the process of becoming consumed by this vicious cycle.

The two continue in a happy marriage for three years following this scene; however, their happiness, like Catherine's gentility, is surface-level. To keep his wife happy, Edgar bends to her every will, like "honeysuckles embracing the thorn" (*Wuthering Heights* 72). Whenever Catherine suffers from "seasons of gloom and silence…they were respected with sympathising silence by her husband, who ascribed them to an alteration in her constitution, produced by her perilous illness; as she was never subject to depression of spirits before" (*Wuthering Heights* 72). The Lintons maintain a happy marriage through Edgar's willingness to yield to Catherine's mood swings. However, this leads to many issues in the relationship that ultimately lead to their destruction. Catherine defines her relationship through acts of violence and manipulation. Happiness comes to her whenever she feels she has successfully controlled her husband, and she defines his love for her in his willingness to excuse her abuse towards him, explaining to Nelly that "[she has] such faith in Linton's love, that [she believes she] might kill him, and he wouldn't wish to retaliate" (*Wuthering Heights* 77). The success of their marriage entirely depends on Edgar's ability to keep Catherine happy. However, Catherine's conception of violence as an integral part of any relationship clearly complicates their relationship, as clearly demonstrated in her notion that Edgar's love for and compliance towards her should be defined through his willingness to withstand violence from her. Violence infects the foundation of their marriage, making it impossible for Edgar to both live outside of the realm of violence and maintain a happy marriage, thus creating an omnipresent tension in their relationship.

This becomes painfully evident upon Heathcliff's return. Catherine, in a fit of excitement, runs to Edgar to tell him the good news, "flinging her arms around her neck… [and tightening] her embrace to a squeeze" (*Wuthering Heights* 74). Later, she "[seizes] Linton's reluctant fingers and [crushes] them into [Heathcliff's]" (*Wuthering Heights* 75). The conflict between Catherine's joy and Edgar's hesitancy concerning the return of Heathcliff gets physically expressed as Catherine squeezes her husband's neck and crushes his hand into that of his adversary. Again, Catherine defines their relationship in physical terms, restricting Edgar's ability to push back against her in any nonviolent form.

Edgar ultimately comes to a breaking point in which he actively tries to banish Heathcliff from his home and from seeing his family members. In this interaction, Edgar is goaded by both Heathcliff and Catherine into using physical force to get his way. Heathcliff sneers at Edgar's request, commenting: "'Cathy, this lamb of yours threatens like a bull!' he said.'It is in danger of splitting its skull against my knuckles. By God! Mr. Linton, I'm mortally sorry that you are not worth knocking down!'" (*Wuthering Heights* 90). Catherine echoes this sentiment, stating that "'if [Edgar has] not courage to attack [Heathcliff], [Edgar should] make an apology, or allow [himself] to be beaten [as] it will correct [him] of feigning more valour than [he possesses]" (*Wuthering Heights* 90). Heathcliff and Catherine, both raised in an environment in which violence effects reward, equate an ability to perform violence with self-worth and masculinity. Edgar desperately continues his attempts to curb Catherine's behavior, though "taken with a nervous trembling, and his countenance grew deadly pale" (*Wuthering Heights* 90). Finally, after being goaded, teased, and emasculated, Edgar "[springs] erect, and [strikes Heathcliff] full on the throat a blow that would have levelled a slighter man" (*Wuthering Heights* 91). Suddenly and with great force, Edgar fully yields to the culture of violence surrounding him: he uses physical

force to assert his authority over Heathcliff, to reclaim his own masculinity, and to work within the system of violence his wife has so long used against him. Thus, Edgar becomes fully consumed by this culture of abuse.

After this scene, Edgar's and Catherine's marriage comes to what seems like a sudden end: Catherine, consumed by her passion for Heathcliff and her dedication to hurting Edgar, starves herself until she falls ill and dies, shortly after giving birth to her daughter. This death completes Edgar's descent into violence. The moment he resorts to violence, Edgar becomes part of the larger culture that engages in physical action to establish oneself as powerful or masculine and that beats his wife into submission. While Edgar's overall relationship arc with Catherine exemplifies how all-consuming this type of environment can be unless approached with a certain amount of awareness on the behalf of the outsider, Catherine's death and the dissolution of their marriage reflects how deeply and completely this type of abuse affects the institution of marriage and the Victorian family.

Heathcliff and Isabella

Like her brother, Isabella Linton appears at the beginning of the novel as a silly, insolent young girl. In her article "'My name *was* Isabella Linton': Coverture, Domestic Violence, and Mrs. Heathcliff's Narrative in *Wuthering Heights*," Judith E. Pike criticizes scholars for not recognizing the significant changes that occur within her character. Pike argues that Isabella Linton undergoes a drastic personal transformation as she becomes Isabella Heathcliff, due to the tremendous abuse she suffers at the hand of her husband. Pike also restores significance to Isabella's role as a third narrator, as, other than Lockwood and Nelly, her's is the only voice

heard directly in the novel, through her letters.[24] Her story, through her transformation from a silly young girl to a battered wife, is that of a victim of spousal abuse. Like Edgar, Isabella both undermines the danger associated with her romantic relationship and suffers from a lack of interference, ultimately resulting in her destructive marriage and separation from her family.

Soon after Heathcliff's return, Isabella develops "a sudden and irresistible attraction towards the tolerated guest" (*Wuthering Heights* 79). As her feelings for Heathcliff develop, Isabella becomes increasingly sullen as a result of Catherine's insistence that they not pursue a courtship. After being accused of deliberately keeping Isabella and Heathcliff apart, Catherine explains the true nature of Heathcliff's character. Nelly relates that "[Catherine seems] to speak sincerely… [when she calls Heathcliff] an unreclaimed creature, without refinement, without cultivation; an arid wilderness of furze and whinstone… he's not a rough diamond - a pearl-containing oyster of a rustic: he's a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man… [who would] crush [Isabella] like a sparrow's egg…if he found [her] a troublesome charge" (*Wuthering Heights* 80-81). Although Catherine may very likely act out of pure selfishness and jealousy when she refuses to validate Isabella's feelings for Heathcliff, Nelly notes that Catherine appears to be sincerely caring for her sister-in-law's well-being. Previously in the novel, Nelly never made pains to excuse the behavior of Catherine, a young woman whom she does not much love. Thus, Nelly's emphasis on Catherine's supposed intention highlights the truth of what she is saying. However, Isabella does not listen to Catherine's analysis of the situation. Her only reaction is to tell Catherine that "[she is] worse than twenty foes, [a] poisonous fiend!" (*Wuthering Heights* 81). Even as Nelly reiterates Catherine's assessment of Heathcliff's character, Isabella refuses to

[24] Pike's argument also centers on the issues that arise as a result from the differences between Isabella's letter in chapter thirteen and Heathcliff's account of their courtship provided in chapter fourteen and tracing Heathcliff's deep understanding and interest in laws of coverture and marriage in with Emily's interest in the subject.

"listen to [her] slanders" (*Wuthering Heights* 82). Isabella ignores the urgings of those who know Heathcliff best, assuming that there cannot be truth to such allegations. She assumes that she understands a person as nonviolent because that is more convenient in terms of what she expects Heathcliff to be, which ultimately locks her into a dangerous situation.

Unfortunately, Catherine does not always act so kindly in dealing with Isabella and Heathcliff. After Catherine tells him of Isabella's crush, Heathcliff muses on her position as Edgar's heir and the potential legal ramifications of their union. The conversation ends quickly and Catherine "[did dismiss it] from her thoughts. [Heathcliff, Nelly believes, recalls] it often in the course of the evening. [She sees] him smile to himself - grin rather - and lapse into ominous musing whenever Mrs. Linton had occasion to be absent from the apartment" (*Wuthering Heights* 84). Heathcliff clearly has dark thoughts concerning a future relationship with Isabella. Catherine, although she was raised within violent community and does recognize Heathcliff's violent potential, fails to recognize this in her friend. Similarly, Nelly, restricted by her servile position within the home and previously ignored by Isabella, does not intervene as she knows that her attempts will be futile. Within the microcosm of the novel, Catherine and Nelly thus become enablers, ultimately putting Isabella in great danger.

Inevitably, Isabella, with no one to intervene, begins to pursue a courtship with Heathcliff. Nelly observes as Heathcliff "[steps] across the pavement to [Isabella], and [says] something: she [seems] embarrassed, and desirous of getting away; to prevent it, he [lays] his hand on her arm. She [averts] her face: he apparently put some question which she had no mind to answer…supposing himself unseen, the scoundrel had the impudence to embrace her" (*Wuthering Heights* 87). This scene is not representative of a romantic, ideal Victorian courtship, but is rather quite unsettling. Heathcliff appears predatory as he pulls Isabella into him as she

tries to lean away. His theoretical potential to do violence manifests itself in his physical manhandling of Isabella. However, despite the dangerous implications of this scene, Isabella's wellbeing goes unnoticed: this scene prompts an argument between Edgar, Catherine, and Heathcliff that results in Catherine's starvation. In the midst of this chaos, nobody seems concerned with Isabella, making it easy for her to slip away and elope with Heathcliff. Although it was his negligence as an elder brother to care for his sister, Edgar assumes no responsibility for his sister's fate or for letting her go. Edgar merely states that Isabella "'went of her own accord… [and] hereafter she [will only be his] sister in name: not because [he disowns] her, but because she has disowned [him].' And that [is] all he [says] on the subject: he [does] not make a single inquiry further, or mention her in any way" (*Wuthering Heights* 104). Legally speaking, Edgar no longer has an obligation to care for Isabella. However, something seems distinctly off about his brotherly negligence. Edgar acts too passively after hearing of his sister's whereabouts, though he has been presented with enough information to infer the danger she may suffer at Wuthering Heights. This passage, then, comments on the passive bystander behavior that this Victorian convention facilitates. Through highlighting Edgar's apathy towards his sister, the novel forces us to question whether or not Isabella's subsequent abuse could have been avoided had her brother intervened.

This abuse begins the instant Isabella walks in the doors of her new home Wuthering Heights. In a letter addressed to Nelly, Isabella explains that "[her] heart returned to Thrushcross Grange in twenty-four hours after [she] left it…[she] can't follow it, though—(those words are underlined)" (*Wuthering Heights* 106). As soon as Isabella is inducted into the strange, perverse world of Wuthering Heights, she becomes able to see with clarity its oddities and dangers. As she notes, now that she has become part of that community, she will be unable to go back to who

she was before. She now understands that Catherine, Heathcliff, and Nelly come from a different background that has affected them profusely. She questions how Nelly could live in this house and still "preserve the common sympathies of human nature when [she] resided here [as Isabella] cannot recognize any sentiment which those around share with [her]" (*Wuthering Heights* 106). Isabella immediately realizes that this world is different from anything else she has previously known, cementing Bronte's commentary on the intricacies and complexities of homes in which domestic abuse is prevalent.

In her letter, Isabella highlights several violent scenes she comes across: little Hareton snaps and yells at her violently, while his father mumbles in support of his son in a drunken stupor. She accepts Joseph's cruel zealous religious speech, and learns the extent to which violence pervades the home as Hindley shows her his gun and explains that she should lock her door at night, as he cannot be sure that he won't accidently kill her. However vocal Isabella is about the violence at the Heights, her most extreme abuse lies within the margins of the novel. She asks Nelly: "Is Mr. Heathcliff a man? If so, is he mad? And if not, is he a devil? I shan't tell my reasons for making this inquiry; but I beseech you to explain, if you can, what I have married" (*Wuthering Heights* 106). Similarly, she ends her letter with a decision to keep the specifics of a violent situation to herself, as she writes: "[Heathcliff] swore…he'd—but I'll not repeat his language, not describe his habitual conduct; he is ingenious and unresting in seeking to gain my abhorrence! I sometimes wonder at him with an intensity that deadens my fear: yet, I assure you, a tiger or a venomous serpent could not rouse terror in me equal to that which he wakens" (*Wuthering Heights* 114). The effects that the abuse has on Isabella's character resonates throughout her letter, through her questioning whether her husband is man or devil and explaining that he "rouses terror" in her equal to the most terrifying and dangerous animals.

However, despite this, Isabella deems the specifics of her abuse inappropriate to share. Her story is told in an odd contradiction, in which she makes it evident that she has an abusive marriage, but refuses to share the details of what Heathcliff does to her. This relationship thus recalls the many battered wives in Victorian societies who, like Isabella, were bound to silence. Isabella's situation highlights the inherent contradictions in Victorian ideals of protecting women from violence versus the notion that women should keep private details of their domestic lives private, thus exposing through concealment the way this tradition traps women further into their abusive relationships.

Isabella is, in one sense, able to escape her abusive marriage. After Catherine's death, Isabella comes to Thrushcross Grange in torn clothes and "a white face scratched and bruised, and a frame hardly able to support itself through fatigue" (*Wuthering Heights* 132). After being restrained from attending Catherine's funeral and suffering from Heathcliff's bouts of "murderous violence," Isabella escapes from Wuthering Heights (*Wuthering Heights* 132). She tells Nelly that she would like to live at Thrushcross Grange once again and care for Catherine's baby, but knows that Edgar will not have her. After suffering from terrible abuse, Isabella comes into a problem of displacement, as she could not live with her husband but social forces prevent her from going home to live with her brother. She escapes to the southern part of the country; however, her place in this cycle of abuse does not necessarily end. She gives birth to Heathcliff's ailing, sickly son Linton, whose physical weakness reflects the unhealthy and destructive nature of his parents' relationship. Though Isabella escapes, she is never shown in any other context, solidifying her in the reader's mind as an absent presence within this abusive cycle, evermore so as it continues on with her son.

The Second Generation

Violence continues to exist at Wuthering Heights within the relationships and actions of Cathy Linton, Linton Heathcliff, and Hareton Earnshaw. Significantly, much of the abuse experienced by this younger generation echoes the violence performed and experienced by their parents. The functional purposes of these relationships are not to exemplify the presence of, but rather the persistence of abuse. Through the various actions in the second half of the novel, Bronte illustrates that abuse within the home transcends specific people and a specific time, and rather is more of a social issue.

The names of this second generation reflect the continuation of the cycle of abuse. Confusing to most first-time readers, first and last names often repeat themselves throughout the novel—Cathy Linton-Heathcliff shares a name with her mother Catherine Earnshaw-Linton, Linton Heathcliff bears his mother's maiden name and his uncle's surname, and Hareton Earnshaw often gets confused with both Heathcliff and Hindley. Consequentially, these characters are often thought of in a confused, muddled manner. This messy replication alludes to the commonality between these characters, bolstering their shared experiences with domestic violence. On a grander scale, this claustrophobic repetition of names speaks to the claustrophobic gas-lighted community, where outside influences are not allowed to disrupt the norms, thus allowing normalized violence to fester.

Cathy's storyline in many ways follows that of her father and aunt: she mistakenly assumes that Wuthering Heights will be a safe place for her, becomes sucked into that world, and suddenly finds herself immersed in a world of abuse that she cannot escape. For the first twelve years of her life, Catherine's father shelters her from the world around her—especially the neighboring estate—in an attempt to shield her from the dangers that plagued her parents.

Without any background in the abusive atmosphere of Wuthering Heights, Cathy easily gets seduced by the mysterious intrigue of the Heights, just as her aunt was attracted to the aloof Heathcliff. Significantly, after beginning her courtship with Linton, Cathy lashes out when Nelly tries to prevent her from reading his letters and, as "[Nelly sets an] extinguisher on the flame, [she receives] as [she does] so a slap on [her] hand [from Cathy]" (*Wuthering Heights* 173). This passage directly mirrors a scene nearly twenty years earlier when Catherine, upset with Nelly for not leaving her alone with Edgar, "[slapped Nelly] on the cheek a stinging blow that filled both eyes with water" (*Wuthering Heights* 56). This harrowing parallel, while exposing the fact that hiding someone from the reality of violence will not protect them nor anybody else from the effects of that violence, shows that abuse is a learned cultural behavior that can invade any generation.

Similarly, the self-punisher method of abuse continues in this generation. Setting the scene for this sort of manipulation, Heathcliff convinces Cathy and Nelly to come to the Heights to see Linton by "[swearing] Linton is dying…and grief and disappointment are hastening his death, Nelly…[and that] he pines for kindness, as well as love; and a kind word from [Catherine] would be his best medicine" (*Wuthering Heights* 180). Heathcliff manipulates his son's physical handicaps in order to play on Cathy's emotions and put her in a position where she can be manipulated by Linton. In order to coerce Cathy into coming back to the Heights, he says: "'Oh!...I cannot bear it! Catherine, Catherine, I'm a traitor too, and I dare not tell you! But leave me and I shall be killed! *Dear* Catherine, my life is in your hands; and you have said you loved me—and if you did, it wouldn't harm you. You'll not go, then? kind, sweet, good Catherine! And perhaps you *will* consent—and he'll let me die with you!'" (*Wuthering Heights* 204). Although Linton is not threatening to hurt himself in order to manipulate Cathy, he puts his well-

being at stake in order to coerce her into forging forward with their relationship, ultimately garnering the same result. The repetition of this sort of behavior—perpetrated now by Linton rather than Catherine—illuminates the fact that this is not merely the characteristic of one individual, but rather a readily available tool that this type of environment teaches people to use.

Linton's manipulation of Cathy reflects not an inherently bad nature, but rather a learned behavior. Heathcliff pressures his son into manipulating and controlling Cathy in order to further abuse her himself—and, by extension, her father—in an act of revenge. When Cathy and Nelly enter the Heights after Linton begs them, Nelly notes that Linton seems suddenly much more relaxed and "[guesses] that he has been menaced with an awful visitation of wrath if he failed in decoying us there; and, that accomplished, he had no further immediate fears" (*Wuthering Heights* 208). Heathcliff's coercion of his son into this abuser position mimics how Heathcliff himself learned violence from Mr. Earnshaw many years before. Through his son, Heathcliff continues this cycle of violence in order to achieve power over a certain person, illustrating exactly how violence becomes a learned spatial practice in this community.

The Rainbow After the Storm?

The whirlwind of violence and abuse that circulates throughout the atmosphere of *Wuthering Heights* seemingly ends quite abruptly. Lockwood returns to the region after several months away, and finds a much different community than the one he left. The once looming and uninviting home becomes warm and welcoming. Sounds of yelled threats have been replaced by pleasant aromas and the laughter of lovers as Cathy and Hareton, now happily in love, read together. As Nelly explains, Heathcliff, after a series of violent incidents, fell into a self-destructive spiral after Lockwood's departure and has since died. Without his looming presence,

the surviving family members heal from the decades of violence they had suffered through. A review published in the January 1848 edition of *Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper*, which overall thought that the novel was strange and confusing, called this picturesque ending a "pretty, soft picture, which comes like the rainbow after a storm" (*Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper* 285).

This suddenly saccharine ending to an overwhelmingly dark and violent novel begs a second reading. I have previously in this chapter discussed the role of narration in uncovering the violence experienced within the domestic spaces of *Wuthering Heights.* The conclusion of the novel, I believe, challenges readers one last time to believe the narrative they are presented with. As Nelly concludes her story about Heathcliff's downfall and tells Lockwood about the peace that has come to the Heights since his absence, she seems reassured that all will be well. However, as I have previously explored, Nelly's narrative perspective has a tendency to downplay or underestimate certain violent truths. By her own omission, she has been wrong before about her estimation of how violent a person could be. In describing Heathcliff as a young boy, Nelly tells Lockwood: "I really thought him not vindictive—I was deceived completely" (*Wuthering Heights* 32). Later in her story, as she describes the three years in which Heathcliff had left, she says that she truly believed that Catherine and Edgar (and, by extension, the rest of them) "were really in possession of deep and growing happiness": the sentence immediately following this thought is stated simply: "it ended" (*Wuthering Heights* 72). Violence has a way of reinstating itself at Wuthering Heights, in different times and in different relationship arcs. What we must learn from Emily's deliberately crafted repetition of violent relationships—from Hindley and Heathcliff's dangerously competitive relationship to the forced marriage between Linton and Cathy—is that abuse is cyclical and repetitive. In many ways, this happy scene that

Lockwood finds upon his return is a repetition of Catherine and Edgar's early years as a married couple: Heathcliff had disappeared, they moved to Thrushcross Grange, and everyone seemed to be perfectly happy. However, even under those circumstances, violence made its way again into the inhabitants of Wuthering Heights. Cathy and Hareton's engagement, like that of Catherine and Edgar, comes to be after an instance of physical violence: before Lockwood quits Thrushcross Grange after hearing Nelly's tale, he once again goes to Wuthering Heights where he sees Hareton deliver "a manual check…to her saucy tongue" (*Wuthering Heights* 230). In light of these harrowing parallels, despite this seemingly peaceful moment, we cannot be assured that violence will never again shake the foundation of this domestic bliss.

Most critics do not share my reading of this scene. The assumption—held by Lockwood and Nelly—that evil leaves Wuthering Heights with Heathcliff still resonates with some more modern day critics. Jacobs explains the end of the novel by pointing out that "only the death of Heathcliff can free those in his 'family' from their degradation and semi-slavery" (Jacobs 216). She goes on to explain that "the novel's concluding image of fluttering moths and soft winds around the graves of those who had perpetrated the violence of the past, then, underlines the resolution of that violence, which occurs with the reunion of Catherine and Heathcliff and the new union of the younger lovers" (Jacobs 216). She goes on and calls this ending a "return to the world of normality, as Hareton and Cathy will return to Thrushcross Grange and some version of the domestic bliss that was the Victorian ideal. But we have seen an under-world or other-world that is still latent in the structures of the comfortable reality" (Jacobs 217). While I agree with Jacobs' assessment that the structure of *Wuthering Heights* does serve to reveal to the reader a violent "under-world" that lies within the foundation of their "comfortable reality," reading no

potential for future violence seems an abrupt and inappropriate ending to a novel that focuses so heavily on the presence and cyclicality of violence.

In fact, the novel does not completely abandon its violent tendencies at its conclusion. When Lockwood first walks into Wuthering Heights, before he learns from Nelly that Heathcliff has died and that the surviving family members have begun to heal, he sees a seemingly perfect Victorian domestic scene: Cathy teaches Hareton to read, an idyllic image of the perfect Victorian woman civilizing a savage man, in a state of complete domestic bliss. Hareton, distracted by his fiancé, seeks kisses as rewards for a job well done. As Lockwood observes, Hareton's eyes "impatiently [wandered] 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" (*Wuthering Heights* 234). Lockwood, just as he previously dismissed signs of violence, thinks nothing of this slap, and goes on to find Nelly. As he leaves the Heights, Lockwood acts as though this small act of violence never happened. Some critics read this slap in a similar vein that Lockwood does. For example, Jacobs refers to this slap as a "love-tap, a playful remnant of the blows he has given her in the past, and that diminution of force suggests the waning of the violence that had inhabited the house they will soon abandon" (Jacobs 216). Hancock offers a similar reading of this scene by claiming that this slap is a sign that "the cycle of violence [has come] full circle… [as] Cathy's love-taps are a signal that the violence has been domesticated and civilized within the world of the Heights" (Hancock 66). However, based on the violent content preceding this scene, I find this justification lacking. Rather, I read this slap as a disturbing sign that violence is in fact cyclical, remains an omnipresent threat within the household that can be activated at any moment.

This smart slap, I suggest, is a test that Emily gives both Lockwood and, by extension, the readership he represents. The novel teaches the reader, through complicated narrative schemes and a large web of abusive individual relationships, the danger of underestimating small signs of violence. The years of abuse and violence culminate in one small slap on the cheek. Lockwood, our foolish narrator, sees this scene and does not recognize the potential violence it could allude to, thus failing Emily's narrative test. I would also venture to argue that critics from *Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper* to N.M. Jacobs, by falling deaf to the threat of continued violence in the future, also fail. In ending her novel with a slap, Emily Bronte does not offer a resolution to the violence contained within her pages. Rather, she ends with a quiet yet unsettling image that serves as both an invitation and a challenge. The culmination of her intricate commentary and portrayal of abuse hinges in the reader's ability to note and understand this small signifier of potential abuse.

Conclusion

"What makes a classic a classic is that the story always has relevance to whatever generation is reading it. If it didn't, it wouldn't be a classic — it would be forgotten. And I think that what gives them relevance is the human dilemma at the center of it. The period details — the pretty (or not) costumes, the great or dingy houses, the carriage and candlelight and long-lost customs — are all icing, but they are not the cake"

–Douglas McGrath

In a 2011 *New York Times* article "Another Hike on the Moors for 'Jane Eyre,'" Charles McGrath discusses Cary Fukunaga's 2011 film adaptation of Charlotte's novel and questions why this particular story has been adapted so many times—to date, *Jane Eyre* has spurred eighteen film adaptations, nine television miniseries, and several spin-off novel adaptations, such as Jean Rhys's popular 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea.* He concludes that we adapt *Jane Eyre* for the same reason we continue to read any work that is thought of as a classic: they contain valuable insights into humanity and history that continue to affect, challenge, and, ultimately, broaden the horizons of a modern audience. We adapt works because we see their commentary or their portrayal of the human condition as something worth preserving.

With this in mind, it is clear why *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* are staples in literature courses: Jane's story about a young girl's journey to find herself and the intense converging of passions within the Heights are transcendent tales that modern readers continue to learn from and be challenged by. However, a majority of Bronte adaptations reflect critical discourses surrounding the source material in that they systematically underrepresent the many

instances of violence in the respective novels. Many adaptations of *Wuthering Heights*, stemming from one of the earliest film versions, William Wyler's 1939 film of the same name starring Lawrence Olivier, depict Heathcliff not as an abusive figure but as a scorned, misunderstood, overly passionate Romantic hero. Additionally, many adaptations, including the most recent 2011 film by director Andrea Arnold, end the story soon after Catherine's death, either diminishing the significance of or eliminating entirely the second generation of characters. The multiplicity of violence and its severity frequently gets lost in these retellings, weakening the deeply unsettling portrayals of domestic abuse in Emily's novel. *Jane Eyre*'s modern remakes similarly write out the various physical and emotional abuses that Jane is made to suffer. Continuing his discussion of Fukunaga's film, McGrath explains that *Jane Eyre* is "the story of an orphan who becomes a governess, sticks up for herself and finds true love in a spooky, haunted-seeming mansion, all the while pouring her heart out on the page in prose that is lush, romantic, almost hypnotic, "Jane Eyre," is both a Gothic horror story and arguably the first and most satisfying chick-lit novel" (McGrath). By focusing on the horrific and romantic parts of the novel, the film destabilizes commentary on the presence of abuse in a young Victorian woman's experience.

We keep telling and retelling classic stories because they contain insights that can expand and shape the way we see the world. Yet, a major point of connection and revelation consistently gets undermined or entirely written out of the story. Ignoring this violence not only erases the very real experiences of the countless women who suffered from abusive families and neglectful societies, but limits the ways in which readers are able to read, respond to, and understand the texts. Within these classic stories by Charlotte and Emily Bronte lies a harrowing logic of abuse that closely traces current discourses concerning domestic violence. Despite the numerous

resources available for victims of domestic abuse, it is frequently not enough. A 2014 *The Guardian* article reports that thirty percent of women in England and Wales have experienced domestic violence since turning sixteen, amounting to almost five million women ("Domestic violence experienced by 30% of female population"). In light of these terrible statistics, the portrayal of abuse in these novels should be more significant than ever. In order to truly understand the commentary that these authors made on the state of womanhood in the middle of the Victorian period, to fully recognize parallels between these novels and modern society, and to understand the previously-erased history of suffering—as well as the Bronte sisters' deep understanding of how this abuse is perpetuated—we must give a new life to these previously unread stories and restore domestic violence to critical conversations of the Bronte sisters.

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