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# Wuthering Heights: “Curioser and Curioser”

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Amy Almeida

One critic compares entering the fictional world of *Wuthering Heights* to Alice going down the rabbit hole, into a world that gets “curioser and curioser.”<sup>1</sup> From the time of its publication in 1847, Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* began to shock and confound readers with its complete disavowal of nineteenth century literary conventions. In 1848, E. Rigby wrote that aspects of the novel were “too odiously and abominably pagan to be palatable even to the most vitated class of English readers.”<sup>2</sup> Author Glen Cavaliero explains that “the violent behavior of its characters is so realistically portrayed that it startled the author’s contemporaries.”<sup>3</sup> The novel is filled with boorish, antagonistic characters that endlessly betray, mistreat and enact violence and revenge upon each other. The characters do not conform to any recognizable set of social values or follow any conventional moral code. However, despite the uncivilized characters and the ambiguous morality of the novel, *Wuthering Heights* was exceedingly popular in its time, and has continued to be regarded in high esteem over the years. While the novel is much loved and consistently praised for its beautiful poetic writing style, *Wuthering Heights* raises countless questions and lends itself to numerous interpretations. Within its unconventional framework, *Wuthering Heights* deals with timeless themes; obsessive love, the thirst for revenge, and the precariousness of social classes. Interwoven with ghostly appearances and references to demons and other supernatural elements, *Wuthering Heights* is an example of Gothic fiction, although in many ways Brontë breaks the mold of the genre. By snubbing convention in numerous ways, *Wuthering Heights* is a curious novel which has attracted curious readers for many generations. The novel is curious in its convoluted narrative-within-a-narrative format, its embodiment of the Gothic genre, and its lack of concern with social conventions, but it also contains curiosities in the form of supernatural phenomena, the portrayal of the female, and the character of Heathcliff.

Curiosity in English culture, according to Barbara M. Benedict, can be defined as “the mark of a threatening ambition, an ambition that takes the form of a perceptible violation of species and categories: an ontological transgression that is registered empirically.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, curiosity has no regard for or allegiance to social structures, political parties or preexisting

categories, but breaks down the archaic structures and reorders society. In this way, curiosity is threatening and dangerous to those authorities trying to control society. People are labeled curious not only for their thirst for knowledge, but also for being objects of curiosity. "People can be deemed 'curious' in this sense not because they inquire but because they have socially irregular aspects: behavioral or physical traits that seem to violate accepted norms of use."<sup>5</sup> Monsters, dwarves, and people of ambiguous genders are paradigmatic of curiosities in the way they violate the physical human form. People who suffer from madness or mental disease are also typical examples of human curiosities, because the mind, the organ of reason and intellect, actually becomes the source of illness.

With the growth of the printing industry and the rapid expansion of print culture in early modern England, people of all social classes could become curious inquirers. Simultaneously, the novel began to rise in popularity. Gothic fiction and other newly introduced genres that challenged literary conventions and forced readers to accept a different kind of reality, grew in popularity. Benedict explains that "These genres and texts stimulate yet channel curiosity; they reproduce the physical trophies of travel, science, and discovery in the symbolic sphere of literature, shaping the reader into an explorer, investigator, conqueror, owner."<sup>6</sup> Texts can simultaneously be objects of curiosity, and present objects of curiosity within them. *Wuthering Heights* falls into this category; Brontë created a curious text through the use of curious elements. Furthermore, the creation of *Wuthering Heights* exhibits Brontë's extreme social ambition, a trait recognized as one of the central criticisms of curiosity.

Women themselves are both curious and objects of curiosity. Since biblical times women have been considered to be and punished for being too curious. The earliest example, Eve's curiosity in the Garden of Eden, resulted in women being labeled as weak, changeable and destructive. Due to their apparent inquisitiveness and prying, women became objects of curiosity for men who aimed to discover their hidden "secret." Benedict explains the female's unavoidable role as a curious object: "In this capacity to become objects, women exemplify the definitive trait of curiosity: the ability to shift beings, to violate ontological categories."<sup>7</sup> In the eighteenth century, female authors began to enter the literary sphere, a significant ascension in a society which still believed that women ought to remain in the private domestic sphere of the home. Female writers are already considered a curiosity solely based on nature, so when they begin writing, they inhabit a double role:

While as women they participate in the underground culture of illegitimate questioning, as writers they belong to the regulatory institution of journalism; they form the subjects of their own inquiry. Thus, writing about and by women in this period

vacillates between external and internal description, as the female subject wavers between object and agent.<sup>8</sup>

Keeping this in mind, Emily Brontë is the agent of creation of curious female characters, and simultaneously is an object of curiosity because of her natural role as a woman and in her culturally transgressive ambition to improve her present social position. Women are also the central perpetrators of the act of gossip, “an unregulated exchange of an unverified information that commodifies others,”<sup>9</sup> or in other words, a means of collecting curious information.

The narrative of *Wuthering Heights* itself is motivated by a curious inclination. Mr. Lockwood, a new tenant entering the world of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, is intrigued after his first encounter with Heathcliff and has a voracious urge to find out the history of the strange web of characters. Lockwood questions Nelly Dean, the longstanding housekeeper of Wuthering Heights, “hoping sincerely she would prove a regular gossip.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Nelly Dean does prove to be a gossip. The curious Lockwood gets a perverse kind of thrill out of Nelly’s stories, saying “I was excited, almost to a pitch of foolishness, through my nerves and my brain.”<sup>11</sup> Nelly also seems to gain a sense of pleasure out of gossip and begins her narrative, “waiting no further invitation to her story.”<sup>12</sup> Later, she vows to resume her narrative “in true gossip’s fashion.”<sup>13</sup> Gossip is one of the central forms of curious communication, or a “curious custom,” a means of collecting prohibited and taboo knowledge. Gossip embodies curious traits in that it “legitimizes idleness, spices up voyeurism, and threatens usurpation of other’s lives.”<sup>14</sup> Essentially, the entire narrative of *Wuthering Heights* is told through the mode of gossip as Nelly relates her own perspective of the story of Catherine and Heathcliff. In this sense, Nelly *does* usurp the lives of Catherine and Heathcliff, because she tells their story. The reader is actually one degree farther removed from the story, since we hear Nelly’s story through the eyes of Lockwood. In her discussion of gossip and curious customs, Barbara Benedict explains that “Just as curiosity cabinets rearrange items to suit an idiosyncratic system of classification, so curious customs reorder behavior according to specific ideas of a particular society.”<sup>15</sup> Hence, when trying to understand the reality of *Wuthering Heights*, one has to take into account the possible biases, omissions or misinterpretations of Nelly, who is telling the story, or Lockwood who is listening as a completely disconnected third party. Everything they relate has been re-organized according to their own hierarchies and opinions of what is relevant and imperative. Telling the story through a narrative-within-a-narrative style also sets the reader at a greater distance from the action and creates a greater sense of the possibility of fantasy and the supernatural. The inhuman violence and the other-worldly aspects of the narrative may seem less believable told straight from the mouth of Heathcliff or Catherine, but

since the narrative is told as gossip with hints of folklore, the outlandish elements are more acceptable to the reader. By relating the story through the eyes of a curious narrator, Brontë adds depth to the story and compels the reader to join in the narrator's inquisitiveness.

Though *Wuthering Heights* does not strictly adhere to the constraints of any literary genre, it is most commonly associated with the Gothic tradition. The Gothic genre, first represented by Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764, is a subtly transgressive genre, which presents the reader with a reality which does not coincide with traditional social and moral norms. The Gothic novel was curious because of its exclusion of any typical literary conventions, and its defiance of accepted moral and social codes. In addition, the Gothic novel often includes many tropes commonly accepted as curiosities, such as ghosts, vampires and madness. The Gothic genre is characterized by sentiments of naturalism, wildness, boldness, yearning, wonder, mystery, sensualism, supernaturalism, sadism and Satanism. The Gothic novel often has a setting which is slowly collapsing; a castle in ruins or a house in decay, such as the estate of *Wuthering Heights* itself. Perhaps the most famous feature of the Gothic novel is the presence of supernatural elements, such as ghosts and apparitions. Ghosts are a classic example of curiosity: ontological transgressions which defy nature by being alive and dead at the same time. Ghosts reject the laws of the universe by inhabiting the world of the living when they should have passed to the world of the dead. Ghosts and other forms of the "undead" refuse physical, temporal and spatial limitations.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the Gothic novel is unique in the way it presents the supernatural. The supernatural is usually portrayed in the mode of realism, as if there is no question as to the existence of such forces:

Techniques of realism cannot describe the marvels and wonders of the supernatural, which are by their nature unknown to empiricism. Nonetheless, the gothic consistently approached the supernatural as if it can be described or observed in the mode of formal realism. By novelizing the supernatural, the monstrous and the unspeakable, the gothic attempts to inscribe the passions of fear and terror.<sup>17</sup>

Gothic authors provided rational, empirical explanations and solutions for the supernatural occurrences within the novels.

Gothic literature became popular while the print culture was thriving in England, and while the gothic novel was praised by the common reader, many intellectuals and conservative thinkers harshly criticized the genre. In its moral ambiguity, the Gothic novel was considered by some to be dangerous; "One anonymous critic argued that if the novel is to be 'useful', it 'ought to be a representation of human life and manners, with a view to direct the conduct in the important duties of life, and to correct its follies'."<sup>18</sup> This idea of the hazard of anything not "useful" to society connects strongly to

the condemnation of curiosity in early modern England. A major criticism of curious men was that their inquiries and discoveries were merely self-fulfilling, and did not produce any benefit for society. The Gothic genre was threatening in its redefinition of the novel and its position as something which was not able to be regulated. Some critics believed that novels ought to be an outlet for moral lessons to be taught, but rather than conveying moral lessons which would be useful in reality, the Gothic novel creates an entirely new reality. The gothic novel was considered particularly subversive because it created an “intimate and insidious relationship between text and reader, by making the reader identify with what he or she read.”<sup>19</sup> Since the characters of Gothic novels were often rude or immoral (imagine Catherine and Heathcliff of *Wuthering Heights*), it was feared that impressionable readers would lose grip of what is appropriate in their own reality. However, the Gothic novel was not intended to cause readers to detach from reality, but rather aimed to reassert values of the past which had become diluted in modern society. In a modern, increasingly secular world, the gothic novel advocated the need for the spiritual and the transcendent. In a world which based all knowledge on reason and empiricism, the gothic genre insisted on the use of the imagination. In a society of strict order and regulation, the gothic novel portrayed barbarism and disarray. During a time when scientific rationalism “sought to banish the fantastic by explaining it physically, sociologically, and psychologically,”<sup>20</sup> the gothic novel presented a world of ghosts, apparitions and unexplainable occurrences.

Given that women are natural curiosities, it is unsurprising that Gothic literature has an important relationship to feminism and a unique representation of the female. Examples of Gothic fiction which are written by women, depict female heroines, and discuss questions of gender, sexuality and the body are often referred to as the “female Gothic.” In her book, *Gothic Feminism*, Diane Long Hoeveler explains how the rise of the female Gothic was motivated by societal conditions. In the early 1800s, with the explosion of industrialization and the power of the new commodity-driven economy, “Women now had the opportunity to express themselves in widely disseminated and cheaply printed novels and dramas that became immensely popular with the new reading audience—largely middle class women enclosed in the newly created and bourgeois home.”<sup>21</sup> The female Gothic represented women and the domestic sphere in curious, new ways which reordered the power structure in society. The novels often portrayed heroines as obtaining “female power through pretended and staged weakness.”<sup>22</sup> Women in the female Gothic outwardly conformed to society’s expectations and carried out their designated roles as daughters, wives and mothers, while subtly undermining the patriarchal structure. Gothic heroines were commonly portrayed as innocent, morally pure, and blameless. Such a heroine represents a curiosity because she embodies a subversive ambition, which leads her to violate her prescribed role in society and seek greater power. In order to suggest the power of the domestic sphere

of the female, the female Gothic “ironically inverted the ‘separate spheres’ ideology by valorizing the private female world of the home while they fictively destroyed the public/juridical masculine world.”<sup>23</sup> This aspect of the female Gothic can be seen quite clearly in *Wuthering Heights*. The entire novel takes place within the domestic sphere and the action is split between two estates, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. While the atmosphere of these homes is not particularly bright or hopeful, they are stable environments. However, the introduction of anything from the foreign, public sphere is always the source of tumult and conflict. First, Heathcliff is introduced to the nuclear family of the Earnshaws as a “dirty, ragged, black-haired child” found “in the streets of Liverpool.”<sup>24</sup> Heathcliff and his untamed ways disrupt the calm household with a turbulent relationship with Catherine and arouse intense hatred and resentment from Hindley. Heathcliff’s foreignness is the source of all the conflict in the novel. Brontë never describes any of the scenes that happen in the public sphere, but leaves all to the reader’s imagination. For example, Heathcliff’s forays into the city to make his fortune are left as blank spaces in the novel, with not even an indication as to what may have taken place during the unexplained time period. Only the events of the domestic sphere, no matter how monotonous and quotidian, are included. In this way, Emily Brontë emphasizes the consequence and power of the home and familial relationships, and thus the power of women. Yet, it is important to note the distinctions between the two opposing domestic spheres, and recognize which ideal Emily Brontë endorses. Brontë’s domestic model does not have to do with familial love, kindness, or selflessness, but rather it represents a place of intense spirituality and freedom. The antithesis, represented by Thrushcross Grange, is a place of stifled passion, material possessions and conformity.

While Brontë valorizes the domestic sphere in *Wuthering Heights* (although in a manner distinct from most other female Gothics), a technique in keeping with the female Gothic tradition, the novel in other aspects shuns the characteristics of the female Gothic, and more importantly, conventions of the wider Gothic genre. Syndy Conger, in the book *The Female Gothic*, expresses that Brontë’s “contribution to the tradition was to give it aesthetic respectability and also to introduce liberating modifications into what had become an overly rigid plot form. The tradition provided her with a unique opportunity to define for herself and for her readers a new kind of Gothic heroine.”<sup>25</sup> This unique digression from the rule is most evident in Brontë’s characterization of the older Catherine, the heroine of *Wuthering Heights*. Brontë “reorders the Gothic experience in order to speak to women about themselves in a new way.”<sup>26</sup> Catherine is a strong, passionate and deeply flawed character. She is a curiosity in her defiance of the role society has prescribed for her, her secret, alluring sexuality, and her uncontrollable ambition. It is significant that the first appearance of Catherine in the novel is in the form of a ghost. Just as ghosts reject temporal and spatial limitations, Catherine rejects every kind

of limitation and boundaries throughout the novel. She feels isolated in the confines of the house walls, and thrives on running free outside in the moors. When her brother instructs her to stay within the house as punishment, Catherine writes in her diary: “we should appropriate the dairy woman’s cloak, and have a scamper on the moors, under its shelter. A pleasant suggestion.”<sup>27</sup> As a child, Catherine is described as “a wild, wicked little slip” that was “never so happy as when we were all scolding her at once, and she defying us with her cold, saucy look, and her ready words.”<sup>28</sup> At a time when girls were expected to submit to the will of their fathers and brothers, Catherine challenged all and went about her life in a way that felt natural. As her father is upon his deathbed, he asks his daughter, “‘Why canst thou not always be a good lass, Cathy?’ And she turned her face up to his, and laughed, and answered, ‘Why cannot you always be a good man, father?’”<sup>29</sup> Catherine won’t allow herself to be controlled by the patriarchal constraints her father tries to impose, and implies her awareness that the patriarchy itself is an unjust and hypocritical system.

Catherine is the antithesis of the traditional “Gothic heroine,” that is typically defined by submissiveness, passivity, dependence, and a small physical presence. Conger notes that Catherine’s “list of imperfections is so long one wonders that she is a heroine at all.”<sup>30</sup> Brontë characterizes Catherine with such descriptions as “angry animation,” having “a maniac’s fury,” and being in a “tempest of passion.”<sup>31</sup> Heroines in Gothic novels are often intellectually inferior and prone to emotional breakdowns and intense anxieties. However, since a heroine must still be portrayed as a powerful figure, the Gothic novel endows the heroine with moral superiority to every other character. “She never has a vindictive thought, even in the wake of abuses. She never dreams an unacceptable dream. Her innocence is so thorough in some cases that she has virtually no knowledge at all of evil.”<sup>32</sup> In contrast to the morally infallible heroine, Gothic novels also often include an opposite female portrayal, the femme fatale. The femme fatale “has the independence of spirit, the emotional vibrancy, the ingenuity, and the moral fallibility.”<sup>33</sup> In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë refuses to fulfill either one of the contrasting Gothic stereotypes used to characterize women. Rather, her female protagonist is a combination of characteristics. Catherine the “heroine” of *Wuthering Heights* embodies the independent spirit and flawed morality of the femme fatale, yet also represents the physical beauty and emotional volatility of the Gothic heroine. Catherine is intelligent and is capable of self-reflection, qualities which are traditionally absent from Gothic heroines. She does not merely relate her story, but she reveals her innermost feelings, thoughts and dreams. Catherine scolds Nelly, “Shake your head as you will, Nelly, *you* have helped to unsettle me! You should have spoken to Edgar, indeed you should, and compelled him to leave me quiet! Oh, I’m burning! I wish I were out of doors! I wish I were a girl again, half savage and hard, and free.”<sup>34</sup> Catherine’s speech would never



have been spoken by a traditional Gothic heroine. She is overly harsh and demanding, even in her sickness she remains authoritarian and unforgiving. Catherine's desire to be in nature and return to her youth shows her refusal to conform to the norms society laid out for her as a wife and mother. She even recognizes herself as "savage" and "hard." Through the complex emotions of Catherine, "A heroine's mind, Brontë is insisting here, need not be a blank tablet. It may sometimes be plagued by contradictory or self-defeating desires."<sup>35</sup>

Catherine never lets herself be controlled by the men in the novel. As a child, she rebels against her father and later her brother, while she has Heathcliff completely in her own control: "the boy would do her bidding in anything."<sup>36</sup> Later, when she has moved to Thrushcross Grange and married Edgar Linton, Catherine again has the upper hand in the relationship. In a reversal of conventional gender roles, Linton is the submissive personality, who complies with Catherine's every whim and demand. Likewise, Edgar's sister, a woman more sophisticated and cultivated than Catherine, cedes control and power to Catherine. Nelly Dean remembers that "They were both very attentive to her comfort, certainly. It was not the thorn bending to the honeysuckles, but the honeysuckles embracing the thorn. There were no mutual concessions; one stood erect, and the others yielded."<sup>37</sup> It is evident that Catherine has not only the strength to match herself which those considered more powerful by society, but she has the power to exert dominance over them. Even as she is dying, Catherine remains strong-willed and speaks her mind without concern of being too harsh or unfeeling. She tells Heathcliff, "I wish I could hold you till we were both dead! I shouldn't care what you suffered. I care nothing for your sufferings. Why shouldn't you suffer? I do!"<sup>38</sup>

While she does not let societal expectations or boundaries control her in her position or behavior as a woman, Catherine is nonetheless aware of the workings of her society and has ambition to ascend to a higher social status. The first description of Thrushcross Grange presents a stark contrast to the dreary, dingy estate of Wuthering Heights, and is Catherine's first introduction to a more civilized culture. Heathcliff and Catherine are introduced to this new lifestyle through curiosity—the children are lured to the window by "getting a glimpse of the Grange lights"<sup>39</sup> and desire to know whether the life within those walls resembles their own. Heathcliff describes the first sight of the luxurious Grange: "and we saw—ah! it was beautiful—a splendid place carpeted with crimson, and crimson-covered chairs and tables, and a pure white ceiling bordered by gold, a shower of glass-drops hanging in silver chains from the centre, and shimmering with little soft tapers."<sup>40</sup> The children's peeping reveals a much more refined, bright and elegant atmosphere, glowing with wealth and splendor. In this scene, Catherine is literally dragged into civilized society, as the Linton's dog seizes her ankle and keeps her from running away. After her recuperation at Thrushcross Grange,

Catherine has been exposed to the luxuries and civilities of high society, and she returns to the Heights an outwardly changed person:

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.<sup>41</sup>

While Catherine outwardly conforms to society's fashions, she still retains her free spirit, brutal honesty, and boldness. Her conflicting relationships with the civilized Lintons and the barbaric Heathcliff "led her to adopt a double character."<sup>42</sup> Superficially, Catherine desires to be a person of class and culture, yet she can never suppress her wild nature. She desperately attempts to become a person of respectability and refinement, but only ostensibly for the fineries and the comforts wealth can bring. Catherine never actually expresses the desire to be a good, respectable wife and raise a family, as society (and Edgar Linton) encourages. Catherine explains, "It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now," and asks Nelly, "did it never strike you that if Heathcliff and I married, we should be beggars?"<sup>43</sup> thus choosing to advance into the more reputable world of Thrushcross Grange. In response to Catherine's newfound desire for material wealth, Heathcliff goes out into the world to acquire riches and power. Finally, both realize that "such essays at material possession are finally not as satisfying as they anticipated, surely not as fulfilling as spiritual possession would be."<sup>44</sup> Catherine exemplifies the innate curiosity often attributed to women: the curiosity for luxuries, wealth and a more lavish way of life. Due to Catherine's initial curiosity to peep into the window of Thrushcross Grange, she is dragged into the temptations elicited by high society. Although Catherine desires all the comforts of a wealthier lifestyle, she refuses to conform to the expectations of her class, and rebels constantly against her husband. Through the character of Catherine, Brontë has reorganized the idea of a Gothic heroine, communicating the idea that women do not have to be perfectly obedient, pure and submissive.

Heathcliff, the brooding and violent male protagonist of *Wuthering Heights* is presented as a curiosity in many ways. Although he is clearly human, Heathcliff is constantly associated with the devil and monsters. When Mr. Earnshaw first brings Heathcliff into Wuthering Heights, he notes that "it's as dark almost as if it came from the devil."<sup>45</sup> Not only is Heathcliff described as possibly born from the devil, he is referred to as "it," stripping him of his humanity from the earliest age. He is repeatedly compared to animals, emphasizing his savageness and his intense connection with nature. Catherine warns that Heathcliff is a "fierce, pitiless, wolfish man,"<sup>46</sup> and Isabella Linton compares him with a "tiger or a venomous serpent."<sup>47</sup> When Heathcliff comes

to Catherine's deathbed, Nelly recalls that he "gnashed at me, and foamed like a mad dog" and that "I did not feel as if I were in the company of a creature of my own species."<sup>48</sup> Heathcliff is always associated with vicious, predatory animals, which is indicative of his role within the novel. Since his childhood, Heathcliff is always in competition or conflict with another male—Hindley, Edgar Linton, Joseph or Hareton. His position as a predator is emphasized when Nelly worries about the relationship of Heathcliff and Isabella: "I felt that God had forsaken the stray sheep there to its own wicked wanderings, and an evil beast prowled between it and the fold, waiting his time to spring and destroy."<sup>49</sup> Most importantly, the animal references emphasize Heathcliff's innate connection with nature and the spiritual. In fact, the text identifies Heathcliff so heavily with the natural world that he seems to belong out in the moors more than he belongs in the civilized home. There is no distinction made between nature and Heathcliff, because he is intrinsically *part* of nature. Heathcliff chooses to inhabit natural spaces rather than spaces greatly affected by human society. Particularly in moments of great trauma and emotional stress, Heathcliff seeks out the solace of the wilderness. When he overhears Catherine explaining her choice to marry Edgar Linton, he runs out of the house into a rain storm to escape. Later, as Catherine is dying, Heathcliff does not remain inside the Linton household, which is highly ornamented with material wealth, but waits all night outside in the garden, "leant against an old ash-tree, his hat off, and his hair soaked with the dew that had gathered on the budded branches."<sup>50</sup> In both cases, Brontë portrays Heathcliff as being interwoven in the natural scenery. In the description, as he stands against a tree, covered in dew, Heathcliff seems to be just another natural element in the landscape, rather than an intrusive human. At one point Catherine describes Heathcliff as, "an arid wilderness of furze and whinestone."<sup>51</sup> Even the natural landscape with which Heathcliff is compared is not redeeming. Nature is usually employed as a symbol of fruitfulness and life, yet Heathcliff is compared with an infertile landscape that is inhospitable to life; a landscape without physical beauty or bountiful plants and animals. The metaphor of a desolate no man's land in effect makes Heathcliff more of an enigma, a man essentially one with nature, yet connected with a harsh, unforgiving landscape. Like the wild, unpredictable environment of the moors, one gets the sense that no one will be able to tame Heathcliff's stormy personality. His role as a force of nature in the text adds to his curiosity, increasing the ambiguity of his humanity.

Heathcliff's exoticism is a major factor in his role as a curiosity in *Wuthering Heights*. Isabella Linton wonders, "Is Mr. Heathcliff a man? If so, is he mad? And if not, is he a devil?"<sup>52</sup> Heathcliff is increasingly mysterious because Brontë never reveals where Heathcliff came from, what his parentage may be, or how Mr. Earnshaw came to bring him into the family. "Emily Brontë insists on Heathcliff's gypsy lack of origins, his lack of orientation

and determination in the social world, his equivocal status on the edge of the human.”<sup>53</sup> In the nineteenth century, as world travel and extensive trading became more prevalent and convenient, people were intrigued by curiosities which were brought from far-away, exotic lands, or described in travelogues. The travel narrative genre, as Barbara Benedict explains, “defines wonders primarily as hidden, unorthodox, or illegal cultural and social practice—theft, gluttony, cruelty, sexual ‘perversion’ from bestiality to lechery, murder, rhetorical manipulation, deception.”<sup>54</sup> Heathcliff can be seen as a curiosity brought from abroad, and he undoubtedly embodies many of the vices described by Benedict. Neighbors wonder about Heathcliff’s foreign origins, musing whether he is “a little Lascar, or an American, or Spanish castaway.”<sup>55</sup> The vagueness of Heathcliff’s origins makes him a curiosity to the characters around him and also to the reader. Aside from the mystery of his birth, race and parentage, Heathcliff disappears various times throughout the novel, such as his three-year absence as he makes his fortune, and his frequent nighttime roving on the moor. Margaret Homans makes the argument that Heathcliff’s persona is more clearly defined by his absences in the novel than by his presence.<sup>56</sup> His absences are another mechanism which defines his position as a natural element. Since Brontë never alludes to the exact whereabouts or purpose of Heathcliff’s mysterious forays, the reader is left with the impression that Heathcliff has temporarily vanished into the wilderness.

Heathcliff is one of the most brutal, savage characters in *Wuthering Heights*. He is vengeful and lacks compassion, as well as being completely devoid of warmth or kindness. He lures Isabella Linton into marrying him only so that he can torture her and get perverse revenge on Edgar and Catherine. Likewise, he tortures Hareton, the son of his own tormentor, as retribution for the way he was treated as a child and young man. Heathcliff has little sympathy for the misery and suffering he causes either Isabella or Hareton. Heathcliff describes the first day he brings his new wife to Wuthering Heights: “The first thing she saw me do, on coming out of the Grange, was to hang up her little dog; and when she pleaded for it, the first words I uttered were a wish that I had the hanging of every being belonging to her.”<sup>57</sup> This is not an isolated incident—Heathcliff commits cold and callous acts of violence throughout the text. Arnold Kettle explains the deviation into vengefulness: “Heathcliff becomes a monster: what he does to Isabella, to Hareton, to Cathy, to his son, even to wretched Hindley, is cruel and inhuman beyond normal thought. He seems to achieve new refinements of horror, new depths of degradation.”<sup>58</sup>

Of course, perpetrating cruelties and seeking revenge does not make a person an object of curiosity. However, Heathcliff *is* a curiosity in the way he advocates a certain moral passion, and thus inspires the reader’s sympathy in spite of all his ruder qualities. No matter how repugnant the actions of Heathcliff have become, “we continue to sympathize with Heathcliff—not, obviously, to admire him or defend him, but to give him our inmost

sympathy, to continue in an obscure way to identify ourselves with him *against* the other characters.”<sup>59</sup> Despite Heathcliff’s malicious tendencies, Brontë suggests that Heathcliff is morally superior to his adversaries. The Lintons are demanding that Cathy stifle her natural passions, while Heathcliff encourages them. The Lintons adhere to a version of perfect Bourgeois principles, while Heathcliff advocates a more brutal, passionate sense of morality. Although he is kind, Edgar Linton is cold, ineffectual and weak in his convictions, and while Heathcliff is harsh and demanding, he upholds a strict moral code, never compromising what he believes is right. When Catherine observes that Edgar and Heathcliff are “as different as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire,”<sup>60</sup> Brontë shows the spirit of Heathcliff as striking and blazing, while Linton’s lightless and cold. The scene of Catherine’s death exemplifies Heathcliff’s unique sense of morality. He is inhumanly ruthless as he scolds her dying form:

*Why* did you betray your own heart, Cathy? I have not one word of comfort. You deserve this. You have killed yourself. Yes, you may kiss me, and cry; and wring out my kisses and tears: they’ll blight you—they’ll damn you...Because misery and degradation, and death, and nothing that God or Satan could inflict would have parted us, *you*, of your own will, did it. I have not broken your heart—you have broken it; and in breaking it, you have broken mine.<sup>61</sup>

The speech, passionate and viciously honest, seems a heartless way to address a woman on her deathbed. However, Heathcliff is committed to his values. Catherine has betrayed her own spirit and her own passions when she chose to marry Edgar Linton. She has opted for a life of material wealth and societal convention, rather than a life of spiritual wealth at Wuthering Heights. By discounting her own emotions, Catherine has committed a deplorable betrayal in the eyes of Heathcliff. Although most readers have a different set of moral standards than Heathcliff, and realize that his words to Catherine are unjustifiably harsh considering the circumstance, we continue to root for him. Kettle explains that “What he is asserting with such intense emotional conviction that we, too, are convinced, is that what he stands for, the alternative life he has offered Catherine is more natural, more social and more moral than the world of Thrushcross Grange.”<sup>62</sup> Therefore, through an unforgivably violent and callous character, Emily Brontë makes a statement about morality and society. The wild, passionate freedom of Wuthering Heights is a more natural setting for humans than Thrushcross Grange, an environment of restraint and conformity. Heathcliff is a curiosity because he goes against all the apparent rules of society, yet at the same time represents a powerful moral force. The strange tension within Heathcliff wins the reader’s sympathy and curiosity.

*Wuthering Heights* includes a plethora of supernatural elements. The supernatural and elements of horror are traditionally objects of curiosity, a subject of which many people are drawn to inquire. Although the supernatural evokes fear and trepidation, people take pleasure in reading about ghosts, vampires and magic. A.L. Aikin explains that a reader's curiosity supersedes any sensation of fear: "The pain of suspense, and the irresistible desire of satisfying curiosity, when once raised, will account for our eagerness to go quite through an adventure, though we suffer actual pain during the whole course of it."<sup>63</sup> She describes readers of the supernatural using the image of a "poor bird which is dropping into the mouth of the rattlesnake—they are chained by the ears, and fascinated by curiosity."<sup>64</sup> This representation shows readers as being completely consumed by their curiosity, and helps elucidate the attraction readers felt (and still feel) to the more curious supernatural characteristics of *Wuthering Heights*. *Wuthering Heights* includes frequent references to black magic, ghosts and demons. Ghosts, which are simultaneously dead and alive (thus, curious), are the most common supernatural creature to appear in *Wuthering Heights*, and are introduced into the narrative very early, when Lockwood spends the night in Wuthering Heights to avoid a terrible storm. After he catches sight of the ghost outside his window, Lockwood recalls, "I tried to draw back my arm, but the hand clung to it, and a most melancholy voice sobbed, 'Let me in—let me in!'" Next, he hears a "doleful cry moaning on!...'It is twenty years,' mourned the voice: 'twenty years. I've been a waif for twenty years!' Thereat began a feeble scratching outside, and the pile of books moved as if thrust forward."<sup>65</sup> With the early introduction of the supernatural into the novel, Brontë immediately creates a unique reality, in which the spiritual and physical worlds are not necessarily disconnected. Lockwood, a stranger to the world of *Wuthering Heights*, is terrified and alarmed by the appearance of Catherine's ghostly form, and proclaims that the house is "swarming with ghosts and goblins!"<sup>66</sup> However, Heathcliff, accustomed to the ways of the Heights, does not seem at all surprised or disturbed when he hears of the presence of a specter in his home. Rather, he is distressed he was not the man to encounter it. Lockwood observes Heathcliff shout out the window to Catherine's ghost: "'Come in! come in!' he sobbed. 'Cathy, do come. Oh, do—once more! Oh! my heart's darling! hear me *this* time, Catherine, at last!'"<sup>67</sup> The fact that Heathcliff begs Cathy to come "once more" indicates that this is not an unusual occurrence, that Cathy has appeared before, and confirms the definite fact of the existence of ghosts. One of the most interesting things about Brontë's use of the supernatural elements is that she "treats them not as something intrusive or abnormal, but as an integral aspect of a realistically presented social world."<sup>68</sup>

Since childhood Catherine and Heathcliff have believed in the presence of ghosts, and the existence of an afterlife. At the death of Mr. Earnshaw, when Heathcliff and Catherine are young children, Brontë introduces the idea that

the two share a distinct vision of the afterlife. Nelly observes the children: “The little souls were comforting each other with better thoughts than I could have hit on: no parson in the world ever pictured heaven so beautifully as they did, in their innocent talk.”<sup>69</sup> While the pair becomes undoubtedly less “innocent” over time, they never stop sharing an idea of the afterlife, and the belief in ghosts. After the death of Catherine, Heathcliff declares, “Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest as long as I am living; you said I killed you—haunt me, then! The murdered *do* haunt their murderers, I believe. I know that ghosts *have* wandered on earth. Be with me always—take any form—drive me mad!”<sup>70</sup> Heathcliff’s absolute certainty in the existence of ghosts again emphasizes the feeling that the supernatural is an *accepted* part of their universe. In some instances in *Wuthering Heights*, ghosts have a true physical presence in the text. They do not just appear in someone’s vision, hovering lightly and specter-like in the air. The apparitions evoke sensory responses from the haunted, further demonstrating the way in which Brontë suggests the natural and supernatural are all part of the same realm. For example, when the ghost of Catherine grabs Lockhart’s hand, he *feels* the coldness and the brittleness of her hand. Even more emblematic of this sensation is the scene when Heathcliff digs up Catherine’s grave:

There was another sigh, close at my ear. I appeared to feel the warm breath of it displacing the sheet-laden wind. I knew no living thing in flesh and blood was by; by, as certainly as you perceive the approach to some substantial body in the dark, though it cannot be discerned, so certainly I felt that Cathy was there: not under me, but on the earth...I could almost see her, and yet I could not!<sup>71</sup>

Again, a physical response is evinced by a ghost. Heathcliff can feel Catherine’s breathe, sense her presence, and practically see her. This ghost seems to be very much present in the earthly world, rather than an apparition from the spirit world. Glen Cavaliero calls this phenomenon the “depiction of the familiar world not as being distinct from spirit but as being porous to it.”<sup>72</sup>

Using realism, Emily Brontë presents supernatural elements as being an inherent part of the world of the novel. The text offers subtle explanations which could explain away all of the supernatural elements, but ultimately advocates the existence of the supernatural. For example, in the instance of Lockwood’s encounter with Catherine’s ghost, Brontë includes Lockwood’s awareness that “the branch of a fir-tree that touched my lattice as the blast wailed by, and rattled its dry cones against the panes.” She also tells us that Lockwood has been dreaming “disagreeably.”<sup>73</sup> Therefore, one could rationalize the ghostly appearance by deeming the occurrence a result of Lockwood’s overactive, fearful imagination paired with the sound of the tree rattling the window pane. However, Catherine’s hyper-physical

presence in the scene and Heathcliff's absolute certainty in the validity of Lockwood's experience suggests that the supernatural is a valid part of the reality of *Wuthering Heights*. Another example of a rational explanation for the supernatural occurs at the end of the novel, when townspeople swear the ghosts of Catherine and Heathcliff wander the moors. Lockwood relates the chatter of the people who have looked on the ghost of Heathcliff: "But the country folks, if you ask them, would swear on the Bible that he *walks*: there are those who speak to having met him near the church, and on the moor, and even within this house. Idle tales, you'll say, and so say I."<sup>74</sup> Lockwood, a character ultimately not connected with the spiritual estate of Wuthering Heights, dismisses the ghost sightings as idle gossip. In a culture which is inherently drawn to curiosities, it is unsurprising that the townspeople would turn Heathcliff, a man who in life violated every category of natural human behavior, into a ghost who restlessly wandered the earth. However, Brontë again provides more evidence which implies that the ghosts on the moors are *not* simply the invention of curious country people. One day, Lockwood encounters a distressed boy on the moors: "There's Heathcliff and a woman yonder, under t'nab,' he blubbered, 'un' I darnut pass 'em." Again, it would be possible to justify this sighting as a product of a frightened little boy's imagination, yet Lockwood notices the sheep will not go near the spot where the ghosts had been observed.<sup>75</sup> The fact that sheep, animals that lack the capacity to imagine or envisage fake ghosts, will not go near the place, implies that there *is* in truth a physical presence of ghosts. By providing two possible explanations for the supernatural phenomena, Brontë increases the ambiguity and curiosity of the text, and naturalizes the supernatural by ingraining it deeply into the landscape and setting of the text.

In a narrative motivated completely by the curious inquiry of one man, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* exemplifies several aspects of the tradition of curiosity. She employs curiosity in an attempt to comment on spirituality, society and class. Her two main protagonists, Catherine and Heathcliff, violate natural human categories, societal expectations and traditional gender roles. Through the inhumanly brutal nature of the two central figures, Brontë advocates the importance of nature, passion, spirituality and an independent spirit, while denigrating the necessity of conformity, proper etiquette and material wealth. In her commentary on *Wuthering Heights*, Virginia Woolf considers that Brontë wants "to say something through the mouths of her characters which is not merely 'I love' or 'I hate,' but 'we, the whole human race' and 'you, the eternal powers.'"<sup>76</sup> Using the extreme and sometimes contemptible behavior of the curious characters, Brontë is able to convey important lessons about the world and universe as a whole, rather than just the lives of the characters themselves. As explained by Barbara Benedict, Brontë herself in her role as a female author is an object of curiosity, yet she becomes even more of a curiosity in her brilliant ability to create a completely



unique reality. Woolf describes Brontë as almost possessing magical powers: "It is as if she could tear up all that we know human beings by, and fill these unrecognizable transparencies with such a gust of life that they transcend reality. Hers, then, is the rarest of all power."<sup>77</sup> Brontë embodies curiosity and creates curiosity in countless ways; she transgresses her own role as a woman and an author, she refuses to conform to the strict constraints of any literary genre, and she creates a world which simultaneously offends, frightens, and compels readers. *Wuthering Heights*, with its numerous representations of curiosity and endless avenues for interpretation, is and will continue to be an attractive text for curious inquirers.

### ENDNOTES

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