A fellowship of spiritual needs: the religious aesthetic of Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights

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A fellowship of spiritual needs: The religious aesthetic of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*

by

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This is to certify that the master's thesis of

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has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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Dedications

To my thesis committee: Sheryl St. Germain and Paul Griffiths, and especially Kathy Hickok, whose courses inspired this thesis, whose encouragement sustained it and whose patience saw it to completion. Si aliquid fieri valet, valet fieri male.
1. Introduction

"Oh, I am sick of holy pictures and statues," she said, turning her head away. "You can't blame us if we've found Man stronger than God."

- G.K. Chesterton, "The Insoluble Problem," 1935

"[I]ndividual artists cannot be reviewed without reference to their traditions and creeds," English author and literary critic G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936) wrote in 1913. "[W]ith other creeds they would have been, for literary purposes, other individuals [...] It is useless to urge the isolated individuality of the artist, apart from his attitude to his age" (The Victorian Age In Literature 423-424). Emily Brontë's attitude to her age – Victorian England – is expressed literally in her only novel Wuthering Heights, published in 1847 just one year prior to her death at age 30. The "creed" of Emily Brontë, the daughter of an anti-Catholic Methodist minister, Patrick Brontë, is also revealed in Wuthering Heights. Patrick Brontë's involvement in the religious issues of his day aroused passions in his children (Barker, Life 157) which found expression in their writing. Emily Brontë's creed has attracted critical attention and comment since the novel's publication. A review in Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper of 15 January 1848 proclaimed to its readers that Wuthering Heights "is a strange sort of book, - baffling all regular criticism" (Barker, Letters 178) and emphasized Heathcliff's "diabolical hate" and Cathy's "fiendish-angelic nature" (Barker, Letters 178).
The Atlas of 22 January 1848 called the novel “a strange, inartistic story” and characterized Heathcliff as “a creature in whom every evil passion” is expressed (Barker, Letters 178).

In 1966, Muriel Spark published Emily Brontë: Her Life and Her Work, which echoes the sentiments of early reviewers who were at once attracted to and baffled by the “spiritual mysteries” (Bloom 74) of Wuthering Heights. Spark concludes “that Wuthering Heights is a tale written according to a mystic’s conception of the universe. Most mystics possess a religion to which their vision can be safely referred. But Emily Brontë was without this interpretive framework” (Spark 266). In 1979, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar published their landmark study The Madwoman In The Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination (re-issued by Yale University Press in 2000). Gilbert and Gubar’s critical focus is feminist theory, but they too find Wuthering Heights “enigmatic, puzzling, even in some sense generically problematical” (Gilbert and Gubar 249) and express confused uncertainty over the novel’s “metaphysical intentions” (Gilbert and Gubar 249) though they do conclude that Wuthering Heights is about “heaven and hell” (Gilbert and Gubar 253).

More recent criticism avoids addressing the novel’s religious aspect and context and instead focuses on psychology, gender, race and economics. It is my contention, however, that a consideration of Emily Brontë’s religious environment does reveal an interpretive framework to which the creed of Wuthering Heights can be referred, and that other critical interpretations find their greatest resonance in the larger context of the religious attitudes of Emily Brontë’s time as they are expressed in her early ‘Gondal’ poems and Wuthering Heights. Gondal was an imaginary world created by the Brontë children which served as the setting for many of their childhood writings: poems, plays, stories. Gondal was a mix of
fantasy and reality so indistinguishable in the minds of the Brontë children “that the two frequently became confused” (Barker, Life 156), a world populated with imagined emperors and empresses alongside real figures of Brontë’s time such as Napoleon Bonaparte and the Duke of Wellington. Wuthering Heights re-presents “a typical Gondal scenario: an orphan girl [Cathy] lamenting the fact that the beauties of nature [the moors surrounding Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange] no longer have the power to soothe her troubled spirit [Cathy’s spirit appears as a child at the beginning of the novel]” (Barker, Life 259).

Emily Brontë’s concern over “the state of [her characters’] souls, even if it is a state of damnation” (Chesterton, Dickens 271) has its genesis in “the Evangelical teaching” (Barker, Life 44) of her father Patrick. Brontë biographer Juliet Barker records an excerpt from a sermon by Patrick Brontë which exemplifies the morality of sin and redemption “which was the cornerstone of Patrick’s own life” (Life 44) and which are at the core of Wuthering Heights: “There may be outwardly moral conduct whilst the heart is unchanged, & the soul under sentence of eternal damnation” (Life 44). This tension between outward civility and inward damnation is represented in Wuthering Heights by the juxtaposition of the two estates, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. Wuthering Heights remains haunted, dark, mysterious; Thrushcross grange is throughout the novel merely a residence, a place of civility. Mr. Lockwood, the novel’s secondhand narrator, reads in Cathy’s childhood diary how she longs to escape from Wuthering Heights to the moors with Heathcliff, which she does, only to be taken in to Thrushcross Grange by the Linton family, who proceed to improve – outwardly – Cathy’s manners. But Mr. Lockwood soon encounters Cathy’s spirit, still the child on the moors, a soul still under sentence of damnation despite her outwardly moral conduct – still haunting Wuthering Heights.
The conflict between outward and inward morality is one of the primary concerns of artists and authors of Victorian England who reacted to the “influence of Utilitarian and Evangelical biases” (Altick 272) which were behind this conflict, a conflict Chesterton refers to as iconoclasm and what Oxford educated author Arnold Lunn refers to as “the fallacy of Victorian rationalism” (Pearce 51). Iconoclasm (from the Greek, “destruction of images”) refers to the response of the Eastern churches to Islam (7th century) and in the West to Luther (16th Century). Both iconoclasm were the result of particular interpretations of the Jewish prohibition against the creation of images of any living thing. Iconoclasts believed the Roman Church had lapsed into paganism in its efforts to become “catholic (universal)” in its use of statues, icons and relics and “smashed religious art as idolatry and sensualism” (Crocker 257). The utilitarian commodification of art in the Victorian period represents a similar removal of religious expression in art, and artistic expression in religion. Scientific discoveries, technological advances and social reforms had shifted the focus of Victorian Man’s faith from God to himself. Not only did the Victorian Man lack “the idea of sacredness as compared to his own Christian forefathers” he “did not see any special significance, artistic or religious, in the Victorian furniture around him” (Chesterton, Sidelights 511-512).

Reacting against Victorian commodification of art were such politically disparate but aesthetically kindred groups as the Pre-Raphaelites, founded by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1848, and the neo-Pagans, represented by poet George Meredith, and Catholic artists such as Jesuit poet G.M. Hopkins. Rachel Barnes identifies the Pre-Raphaelite Movement as an effort “to rescue art from the triviality and sterility into which they believed it had fallen” (Barnes 7). The primary subject for Pre-Raphaelite art was a romantic mix of the real Roman
Catholic tradition and mediaeval myth, including author Dante Alighieri (Purgatorio, Paradisio, Inferno) and his beloved Beatrice and the legendary Lancelot and Guinevere.

"[T]he Pre-Raphaelites put to fresh use the [...] Middle ages" and “all things presumably ‘Romish’ in tendency and allusion” (Altick 289). The reaction to this aspect of their aesthetic reflected the “ultra-Protestant loathing of Catholicism” (Altick 289), a loathing expressed by Patrick Brontë. Designer William Morris (1834-1896), founder of the Arts and Crafts Movement, created designs in “furniture, stained glass, tiles, tapestry, wallpaper, embroidered hangings and metal work” (Barnes 93) which he believed would return art to the role it had held for centuries as “an expression of social and political comment” (Barnes 92). Morris “shared [with the Pre-Raphaelites] a passion for everything mediaeval” (Barnes 92).

The understanding of Emily Brontë’s ethics through her aesthetic is, as with the Pre-Raphaelites, the key to overcoming the bafflement critics from the beginning have expressed over Wuthering Heights’ religious creed. Of all the concerns addressed by Victorian novelists, none “held their attention as much as religion. And of all the subjects, none is more obscure to the modern reader” (Wolff 3). The neglect of the religious context in reading Wuthering Heights becomes all the more problematical when we remember that the Brontë household was a religious household, and that that household comprised Emily Brontë’s world for most of her life. Modern critics, starting from Gilbert and Gubar, have drawn attention to various aspects of Victorian life as presented in Wuthering Heights, but “almost all Victorian novels – even those dealing with far different subjects – touch upon religious matters” (Wolff 3). I maintain that a religious understanding of Emily Brontë and her work is not simply yet another critical approach, but the most comprehensive context within which to read Brontë and other seemingly unrelated criticism. The modern critic is well-versed in
issues of gender, economics and race; it is to religious matters that “we are usually not alert. As a result, we miss a great deal” (Wolff 3). Literary historian Gillian Avery reminds modern readers of Victorian literature that “Victorian England was religious [...] a great deal of thought was given to religious matters [...] and the customs of society were greatly affected by religious practices” (Avery 137). And, it must be said, that religious practices were affected by the changes in other areas of Victorian society, whether the theories of speciation proposed by Charles Darwin which challenged a literal interpretation of the Biblical creation story or the influence of technology and economics – “Puritanism combined with Industrialism” as Chesterton put it (Sidelights 514).

A reading of Gilbert and Gubar’s chapter on Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* validates my argument. Titled “Looking Oppositely: Emily Brontë’s Bible of Hell” and contained within the section concerning women authors identified as “Milton’s Daughters,” Gilbert and Gubar’s analysis presents *Wuthering Heights* as a rejection of the patriarchal Christianity Emily Brontë grew up with. After his wife Maria died in 1821, Patrick Brontë’s Methodist Evangelicalism was supplanted in their home by the even more strict and stern version of Christianity of his deceased wife’s sister, “Aunt Branwell” to the children. Aunt Branwell is often criticized by Brontë biographers -- including Brontë family friend and novelist Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) -- for “dogmatically expounding her Methodism as a religion of fear rather than of love” (Barker, Life 281-282). This was the type of Christianity “caricatured so mercilessly”( Barker, Life 282) by the Brontë sisters – Anne, Charlotte and Emily – in their adult fiction. Their letters as well reveal a rejection of the increasingly Puritanical Christianity they were familiar with and an attraction to the aesthetic and ethics of Catholicism, an aesthetic shared by the Pre-Raphaelites and neo-pagans.
Patrick Brontë remained a committed anti-Catholic throughout his life, despite his reluctant support of political compromises like the Roman Catholic Emancipation Act (1829), which he saw as necessary to preserve the British Empire against Irish rebellions such as he had witnessed in 1798. Charlotte Brontë (Jane Eyre) found herself in the grips of an attraction to the Roman Catholicism her father Patrick so vehemently rejected (a sentiment Charlotte professed to share) upon her first exposure to a Catholic liturgy. Charlotte and Emily attended a private school in Brussels, Belgium (a predominantly Catholic country) in 1842, and one evening Charlotte "almost accidentally found herself in the great Cathedral of Ste. Gudule where vespers was taking place. She sat through the service but then could not find the will to leave" (Barker, Life 423). Charlotte confessed to Emily "I took a fancy to change myself into a Catholic and go and make a real confession" (Barker, Letters 116). Charlotte did speak to the priest but did not convert, and told Emily "I think you had better not tell papa of this. He will not understand [...] and will perhaps think I am going to turn Catholic" (Barker, Letters 117)). I will argue in my thesis that Emily too expressed an attraction to the Catholic aesthetic rejected by her father, and that Wuthering Heights is a record of this, even if no extra-literary documentation of her literary "near-conversion" exists. But, as with Charlotte's reconsideration of her own near-conversion, Emily Brontë expressed sentiments in her writing she may have otherwise concealed from her father.

Gilbert and Gubar do acknowledge that Wuthering Heights is a rejection of "Miltonian" Christianity, and see in the novel Brontë's "Blakeian [poet William Blake] and radically political commitment" (255) but do not position Brontë's "revisionary mysticism" (255) in the Protestant-Catholic religious context of Emily Brontë's time. Instead, Gilbet and
Gubar interpret *Wuthering Heights* as evidence of "the feminist nature of her [...] mythologies" (256), an interpretation they assert "has generally been overlooked by critics" (256). Joseph Pearce, professor of literature at Ave Maria University and author of literary biographies of G.K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc and C.S. Lewis, does present an analysis (Saint Austin Review. Vol. 4, No. 3, May/June 2004) of Milton which provides the religious context Gilbert and Gubar overlook. "As a fanatical Puritan, Milton had rejected the mediaeval vision of Heaven and Purgatory [...] the Puritans condemned the Catholic veneration of saints and rejected the very existence of Purgatory. Milton could not write of saints, not of repentant souls being cleansed of their sins. He was left with Hell" (1-2). Milton is best known for his poem *Paradise Lost*, which is the basis for Gilbert and Gubar’s characterization of the Christianity Bronte rejected. But, as Joseph Pearce reveals, what is missing from Gilbert and Gubar’s approach which precludes them from rooting Milton’s "patriarchy" in his Protestantism is the Catholic side of the debate: "Perhaps it takes a Catholic sensibility," Pearce writes, "to understand [...] William Blake’s assertion that Milton was ‘of the Devil’s party without knowing it’" (1). Gilbert and Gubar see in Brontë’s "Blakeian" mysticism only gender politics.

It is my contention that *Wuthering Heights* provides ample evidence of an aesthetic and ethic which is rooted in the Protestant-Catholic debate Emily Brontë was so familiar with through her father Patrick. And, I will argue, the novel reveals which side of the debate Emily Brontë came down on literarily. For example, the presence of ghostly apparitions and spirits throughout the novel – an element Gothic in its presentation but Romantic in its sentiments (hence Gilbert and Gubar’s assessment that *Wuthering Heights* is “generically problematical”) – sets the novel firmly within the Catholic sensibility: "The Protestant denial
of ghosts as spirits of the dead was caught up with their rejection of Purgatory [...] mediaeval ghost stories [...] feature ghosts as a soul from Purgatory asking for prayers” (Marshall 16).

Brontë scholar Pauline Nestor writes in her “Introduction” to the Penguin edition (1995) of *Wuthering Heights* that the novel “seems out of place in its historical moment” and “can perhaps be better understood in terms of its relation to earlier works” (xiii). This is further testimony that *Wuthering Heights* exhibits an aesthetic and ethic of Pre-Reformation Christianity, whether Brontë was fully aware of this relation or not. But the novel’s opening chapters, I contend, do stand as evidence that Emily Brontë was aware of the creeds she was rejecting and embracing to a larger degree than other critics have found or acknowledged.

The first four chapters of *Wuthering Heights* are a protest and parody of the self-styled Evangelism of the elderly servant Joseph, and of the “private manner of interpreting” the Bible (a foundation of the Protestant reformation’s rejection of Church authority) and the “Pious Discourse” of the Reverend Jabes Branderham (22). The relationship at the heart of the novel – the undying love of Cathy and Heathcliff – is presented in a way opposed to the Protestant aesthetic and ethic and its rejection of “ghosts as spirits of the dead.” Cathy speaks of “dreams that have shaped me ever after, and changed my ideas [and] altered the colour of my mind” (79). Nelly rejects such thoughts: “Oh!, don’t, Miss Catherine [...] We’re dismal enough without conjuring up ghosts, and visions to perplex us” (79). Cathy and Nelly represent in this exchange Brontë’s awareness of the difference between the Protestant and Catholic ideologies: one which embraces spirits and visions (Cathy) and one which rejects – even fears – such “ideas” and wants to remove them from the debate (Nelly). The novel ends with continuing reports of Cathy’s and Heathcliff’s spirits walking together once again upon their beloved moors.
I will next present a biographical portrait of Emily Brontë in her familial and religious context. Her earliest ‘Gondal’ poems will reveal that she was aware, primarily through her father Patrick, of the larger socio-religious world she lived in. I follow with a chapter which analyzes *Wuthering Heights* as a full exposition of Emily Brontë's “interpretive framework” and creed and as a work which places Emily Brontë, along with the Pre-Raphaelites and neo-pagans, as one of “the generation in revolt” who “fled a cold hearth and a godless shrine” (Chesterton, *Sidelights* 514). I conclude with a review of recent Brontë criticism in light of my thesis. I will draw a comparison in the trend in criticism away from religion in favor of more modern or “scientific” interpretations not only to the “fallacy of Victorian rationalism” but to iconoclasm.
II. Emily Brontë in Her Time and Place

“Our prejudices seem to cut opposite ways,” said Father Brown.


_Wuthering Heights_ has been read by various critics as presenting Emily Brontë’s attitude to her age regarding social issues such as gender and class. Such an historical approach serves as a model for my reading of _Wuthering Heights_ as a revelation of Brontë’s religious ethic. Terry Eagleton, professor of literature at Oxford University and a leading Marxist critic, finds Marxism – a reaction to Victorian industrialized society – as the means by which to interpret the tensions in Brontë’s novel, such as the juxtaposition of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange: “The delicate spiritless Lintons in their crimson-carpeted drawing-room are radically severed from the labour which sustains them; gentility grows from the production of others, detaches itself from that work (as the Grange is separate from the Heights), and then comes to dominate the labour on which it is parasitic” (Eagleton 105). Eagleton concludes that _Wuthering Heights_ is a comment on the “world of working relations” (107) in Victorian England. Eagleton’s reading of _Wuthering Heights_ does address real concerns addressed by Karl Marx, who saw capitalist industrialism as “enslavement of the masses by the capitalist bourgeoisie” (Altick 46). Marx published _Das Kapital_ a few
years prior to publishing the *Communist Manifesto* with his friend Friedrich Engels (*The Condition of the Working Class in 1844*) in 1848, a year after the publication on *Wuthering Heights*. Marx and Engels represent the changing attitude of Victorian England to the effects of industrialization and its effects on class structure, a change in attitude which soon became official. “Parliament passed Lord Ashley’s Act (1842) which forbade the employment of women in mines” (Altick 46). This Act was followed by The Factory Act of 1844, which set the hours women could be forced to work at twelve per day and a child’s daily working hours at six and a half. “The most bitterly opposed of the series [of Acts passed by Parliament], The Ten Hours Act of 1847, limited women and children alike to ten hours a day” (Altick 47).

Victorian literature also began to portray the effect industrialization was having on society. The works of Charles Dickens are perhaps the best known. Such works as *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Hard Times* (1854) stand as an artistic record of Dickens’ reaction to the change he saw in industrialized England, as Marx’s works do in the realm of political manifesto. Thomas Carlyle, Benjamin Disraeli, Elizabeth Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë also published novels in the mid-19th Century which “protested the human cost of industrialism” (Altick 47). Literature eventually began not only to address the same issues as Parliamentary Acts, but to refer to them. The Poor Law of 1834 was one such law “to which constant reference is made in the Victorian novel” (Avery 211). Even as late as 1912, literature was serving as “a definitive critique of modern industrial society, its evils and its origins” (Pearce 60) when Hilaire Belloc – Catholic apologist and Liberal Member of Parliament – published *The Servile State*. He later founded, along with G.K. Chesterton, the Distributist Movement which put forth Catholic social and economic teaching as an alternative to laissez-faire industrial capitalism as well as atheistic Socialism. Belloc
penned a poem in 1928 which sarcastically express these same sentiments: “Our civilization/
Is built upon coal./ Let us chaunt in rotation/ Our civilization/ That lump of damnation/
Without any soul./ Our civilization is built upon coal” (Pearce 69).

Terry Eagleton and Hilaire Belloc both acknowledge the religious aspect – the aspect
I focus on -- to the economic crisis of industrialized England, Eagleton when he calls the
wealthy Lintons “spiritless” and Belloc when he characterizes coal as “that lump of
damnation/ Without any soul.” As exemplified by her father Patrick, the religious aspect of
Emily Brontë’s time and place was the Protestant-Catholic debate. This debate in England
began in the 1530s when Henry Tudor (Henry VIII) declared himself head of the Catholic
Church in England after Pope Clement VII would not annul Henry’s marriage to Catherine of
Aragon. Henry sought the annulment so he could marry his pregnant mistress Anne Boleyn.
King Henry employed Thomas Cromwell to enact and enforce his “reformation” of the
Church. Catholics retaliated, first Henry and Catherine’s daughter “Bloody Mary,” and then
Henry and Anne’s daughter Elizabeth I. Both executed opponents on the other side. The
violence continued through the 17th century in such “Papist plots” against the monarchy or
Parliament as those of Guy Fawkes (1605) and Titus Oates (1678).

The iconoclasm visited upon Catholic churches during the Reformation reversed a
trend begun in England as early as the 6th Century when Augustine of Canterbury wrote Pope
Gregory about incorporating “the pagan customs of the Angles” (Greeley 11) into Christian
worship. Pope Gregory approved Augustine’s efforts: “Thus while some outward rejoicings
are preserved, they will be more easily to share in inward rejoicings. it is doubtless
impossible to cut everything at once from their stubborn minds” (Greeley 12). So Augustine
set out to “raise Anglo-Saxons from worshipping rocks to worshipping God” (Crocker 107),
inspired perhaps by Christ’s comment to the Pharisees who rebuked his jubilant disciples as Christ entered Jerusalem for his final Passover: “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out” (Luke 19:38-40). Physical iconoclasm necessitated a doctrinal iconoclasm denying the Catholic teachings which permitted or justified such idolatry, as the previously cited Protestant denial of ghosts being linked to the Protestant rejection of Purgatory reveals. The presence of such rejected elements in *Wuthering Heights* not only places the novel within the Protestant-Catholic debate, it gives evidence of Brontë’s seeing a unification of aesthetics with ethics (as did the Pre-Raphaelites). We can, then, read her religious ethic in her religious aesthetic.

The relationship at the heart of *Wuthering Heights*, the undying love of Cathy and Heathcliff, also tends the novel toward one side of the Protestant-Catholic debate. Much mediaeval Catholic sculpture and painting “dares to portray [religious] ecstasy as orgasmic (Greeley 57). The iconoclasts’ “fear of senousness extended to the arts” (Altick 272) led Protestantism to become Puritanism – the “Miltonian” Christianity Gilbert and Gubar argue Emily Brontë is rejecting in *Wuthering Heights*. An appreciation of the aesthetics of the relationship between Cathy and Heathcliff serves as the understanding of the ethics Brontë is presenting in *Wuthering Heights*: “This book [Wuthering Heights], as earthy a piece of Victorian fiction as there is, grounds grand romantic passions in the gross texture of everyday life” (Polhemus 81). The natural setting of the novel, how its characters relate to that setting and how nature “acts as an empathetic participant” (Bloom 76) in the lives of *Wuthering Heights*’ characters are all elements which reveal not only a Romantic sentiment in Brontë, but a sympathy to the Catholic side of the religious debate Brontë was exposed to through her father. “If I were in heaven,” Cathy tells Nelly Dean, “I should be extremely miserable” (80).
Cathy confides to Nelly a dream she had in which “heaven did not seem my home, and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth” (80). Gilbert and Gubar read this passage as Brontë rejecting Milton’s version of Christianity, even Milton’s heaven. But what Gilbert and Gubar do not present in their analysis is that the vision Brontë puts forth in *Wuthering Heights*, a vision they portray as Brontë “looking oppositely,” is not merely a rejection of Puritanism but a return to Catholicism, aesthetically and, I argue, ethically. The novel also shows that Brontë was well-aware of which side her opposite view put her on. In the passage cited above between Cathy and Nelly, Cathy’s opposite view on matters of heaven and earth, sin and redemption, heaven and hell cause Nelly to characterize Cathy as “the blasphemer” (79). From her earliest literary works, the Gondal poems, Emily Brontë was engaging in and exploring the religious debate brought into the Brontë home by her father Patrick. In 1910, Charles Morgan published *The Great Victorians* (London: Ivor, Nicholson and Watson) in which he addressed the debate of his day regarding the authorship of Brontë’s works, many of which were either just being published or had been published – as *Wuthering Heights* originally was – under a pseudonym. Morgan concluded that “whoever wrote the poems wrote *Wuthering Heights* […] The poems and the novel are twins of a unique imagination” (69).

C.W. Hatfield edited the Columbia University edition of *The Complete Poems of Emily Jane Brontë* (new York: 1941) which includes a chronological re-arrangement of Emily Brontë’s Gondal poems. The section concerning the birth and childhood of Augusta Geraldine Almeda, the orphan girl who voices Emily Brontë’s in the poems, is a literary version of Brontë’s own: “1. A girl child is born under the planet Venus 2. Her early years are happy 3. Sudden misfortune clouds her life” (Hatfield 17). The sudden misfortune which
befell Emily Brontë and which she then inflicted on Augusta was the death of her mother, Maria, when Brontë was only 3 years old. The sense of loss her mother’s death brought to the Brontë home was exacerbated in Emily by her exile three years later to Cowan Bridge boarding school, where all the Brontë daughters were sent – or sentenced. One of Emily Brontë’s Gondal poems reveals not only her feelings about this disruption to her happy childhood, but how her writings were from the beginning a record of such feelings. “Why, when I hear the stormy breath/ Of the wild winter wind/ Rushing o’er the mountain heath/ Does sadness fill my mind?/ For long ago I loved to lie/ Upon the pathless moor/ And hear the wild wind rushing by/ With never ceasing roar;/ Its sound was music then to me;/ its wild and lofty voice/ Made my heart beat exultingly/ And my whole soul rejoice./ But now how different the sound?/ It takes another tone,/ And howls along the barren ground/ With melancholy moan” (Barker, Life 259-260).

Juliet Barker echoes Hatfield’s conclusions about Emily Brontë’s “obsession with Gondal” (Life, 829) and how Brontë did not distinguish between her imagined literary worlds and works and the reality she experienced. This confusion of imagination with reality in Brontë “made her almost incapable of leading a life outside [...] her home but led her to the creation of the strange and wonderful world of Wuthering Heights” (Life 829). Whether her childhood love of nature or her interest in literature or the experiences and events of her life which found expression in her writing, the primary influence in Emily Brontë’s life – positively and negatively – was her father, Patrick.

The Wesleyan Conference, or Methodists (named for the methodical approach to holiness of its founder John Wesley), split from its parent Anglican Church in 1812, the same year Patrick Brontë married Maria Branwell. Like many evangelical movements, the
Methodists rejected the trappings of the “high church” – the priesthood, the sacraments, liturgical rituals – to concentrate on conversion of heart and salvation of soul, which they believed did not require priests, sacraments or rituals. 1812 was also the year of Napoleon Bonaparte’s retreat from Russia just three years before his final defeat by the Duke of Wellington at Waterloo in Belgium. That same year, 1815, Patrick Brontë “had been nominated and appointed [...] as the new perpetual curate of Thornton” (Barker, Life 63) and he and Maria and their growing family moved. “one of Patrick’s first services at Thornton [...] was dedicated to a thanksgiving for [Wellington’s] victory at Waterloo” (Barker, Life 63). ‘Bonaparte’ and ‘Wellington’ were characters in Gondal, and “warfare and politics were the backdrop for all the stories” (Barker, Life 273). Gondal was a mix of fantasy and reality often indistinguishable: “So real were their imaginary characters and worlds to the young Brontës that the two frequently became confused. Emily, writing one of her occasional diary papers in November 1834, places equal emphasis on both; she moves from describing the practicalities of daily life to her imaginary world of Gondal as if there is no discernible difference between the two” (Barker, Life 156). An actual entry from such a diary of Brontë’s for the evening of June 26, 1837 specifies this (misspellings are Emily Brontë’s): “A bit past 4 o’clock Charlotte working in Aunt’s room Branwell [their brother] reading to her and I in the drawing room [...] papa – gone out. Tabby in the kitchen – the Emperors and Empress of Gondal [...] preparing to depart [...] to prepare for the coronation” (Barker, Letters 53).

The Duke of Wellington was so impressed by his Irish Catholic soldiers that he introduced the Roman Catholic Emancipation Act (1829) to Parliament. Patrick Brontë discussed the Act in front of his family and eventually voiced public support for it. Patrick
Brontë had harbored anti-Irish feelings since witnessing the Irish rebellion of 1798 but saw Roman Catholic Emancipation as a pragmatic measure to avoid such revolts by Catholic Ireland which threatened to “dissever forever Ireland from Great Britain” (Barker, Life 158). “Though Patrick later changed his mind [to favor] Roman Catholic Emancipation, he never lost his dislike of Catholicism itself [...] He [did not think] Catholics should be allowed to vote or sit in Parliament because their loyalty to the king would be continually compromised by their loyalty to the Pope” (Barker, Life 157).

The Catholic Emancipation Act was also the genesis of the Oxford Movement, led by John Henry Newman. The Oxford Movement began as a protest against political circumstances like Catholic Emancipation. The Oxford Movement did not, as Patrick Brontë did, want the Church of England to compromise with the Irish Catholics for political expediency. Newman sought to reaffirm the Anglican Church as “the Catholic Church in England [...] the consecrated receptacle and exposition of truth” (Altick 211). But “the result of all [Newman’s] study of ecclesiastical history was in essence to nullify the Protestant Reformation” (Altick 213). Newman wrote Apologia Pro Vita Sua and converted to Roman Catholicism in 1845. This ended the Oxford Movement. “Newman came to realize that the Church that he sought, a divine Church that spoke with an infallible voice and that was linked to no secular state, was not to be found within the Church of England” (Avery 153). In “ultra-Protestant” Victorian England, such singular Catholic voices as Cardinal Newman’s engendered immediate and vehement denunciation. Some notable responses, however, were supportive. Novelist George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans, 1819-1880), despite the fact that “she did not think that Christianity was true in any objective sense” and whose own religion was a “non-conformist, non-creedal, non-practicing form of Christian belief” (Robinson 13) read
Newman’s *Apologia* and found it “the revelation of a life – how different from one’s own, yet how close a fellowship in [...] its spiritual needs” (Robinson 14). Emily Brontë was also exposed to Catholicism through her father and then in Belgium and, I argue, *Wuthering Heights* is her testament to feeling a fellowship in her spiritual needs in the catholic aesthetic and ethic.

Patrick Brontë expressed many of his religious and political ideas in his own writing, beginning with poetry and short stories and ultimately publishing a novella, *The Maid of Killarney* in 1818. “In all his poems, whatever their subject, Patrick’s love of the natural world shown through” (Barker, *Life* 59). “Maria [his wife], let us walk, and breathe the morning air, / And hear the cuckoo sing- / And every tuneful bird, that woos the gentle spring” (Barker, *Life* 58). And: “With heart enraptured, oft I have surveyed/ The vast, and bounteous works, that God has made” (Barker, *Life* 59). “the beauties of the natural world were, to Patrick, the manifestation of God; it was a belief he was to pass on to his children,” an influence that “can be traced through to their work” (Barker, *Life* 59).

Patrick’s pamphlet *The Cottage in the Wood* contains a Preface which seems to characterize Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*: “The truth is, that happiness and misery have their origin within, depending comparatively little on outward circumstances. The mind is its own place. Put a good man anywhere and he will not be miserable – put a bad man anywhere and he cannot be happy” (Barker, *Life* 68). “Mr. Heathcliff,” Catherine Linton says in the second half of *Wuthering Heights*, “you have nobody to love you; and, however miserable you make us, we still have the revenge of thinking that your cruelty rises from your greater misery! You are miserable, are you not? Lonely, like the devil, and envious like him?” (285). Patrick Brontë describes, as Catherine Linton does, a bad man’s mind as “a source of
unruly desires, vain expectations, heavy disappointments, and keen remorse” (Barker, *Life* 68). The heroine of *The Cottage in the Wood* is “pious young Mary” who resists the attentions of a “drunken rake [...] who was both immoral and, more importantly, an atheist” (Barker, *Life* 68).

Finally, Patrick Brontë published *The Maid of Killarney*, which “is actually a love story [...] though the Evangelical teachings from his earlier works feature prominently” (Barker, *Life* 76). *Wuthering Heights* is just such a story, though the heroine and hero (and the author) reject most of the Evangelical teaching of the other characters. The novella presents the authority of the Catholic Church on Bible interpretation as “totally repugnant” (Barker, *Life* 77). *Wuthering Heights* describes young Cathy feeling similar repugnancy at the “private manner of interpreting” the Bible of the reverend Jabes Branderham (22). SO, again and again, *Wuthering Heights* shows the influence of Patrick Brontë while standing as Emily Brontë’s own evaluation of his form of Christianity. Charlotte as well seems to have maintained such reservations about the Catholicism her father despised. In 1854, Charlotte visited Ireland; her trip included a visit to Killarney. While describing the Irish Catholics as “idolatrous” in their veneration of the Blessed Mother and their devotion to Irish saints such as Patrick, Kevin and Brigid (Patrick’s sister), Charlotte had to admit, as she had in the cathedral in Brussels, that she “cannot help feeling singularly interested in all about the place” (Barker, *Letters* 390).

In 1819, Patrick Brontë was nominated to curacy at Haworth, Yorkshire, “what was to be [the Brontë’s] final home” (Barker, *Life* 89). In Yorkshire “the moorland grew wilder [...] and the hills grew steeper” (Barker, *Life* 93), a landscape that would find its way into *Wuthering Heights*. The Brontë children began “as soon as they could read and write [...] to
invent and act little plays of their own, in which the Duke of Wellington was [...] the conquering hero” (Barker, Life 109). The setting for these little plays was, of course, Gondal, which "was a large island in the north Pacific” (Barker, Life 275 and which "had a setting which owed at least something to the moorlands around their beloved home” (Barker, Life 260). And, most importantly, “Heathcliff and Catherine are prefigured in Gondal stories some ten years before Wuthering Heights” (Barker, Life 275). Among the literary works the Brontë children had access to were classics of Western civilization such as Virgil’s Aeneid and Greek tragedies (Barker, Life 289) and the novels of Sir Walter Scott, who “had always been one of Emily’s passions” (Barker, Life 274) and who influenced Heathcliff and Catherine who, “like Scott’s lovers, are brave, passionate and faithful unto death” (Barker, Life 275).

There is one final element of Emily Brontë’s childhood that was to influence her writing; her exile to Cowan Bridge Clergy Daughter’s School in 1824 at the age of 6 years. “The regime at Cowan Bridge was undoubtedly strict and austere, but this was by no means unusual at the time” (Barker, Life 122). Patrick Brontë seems to have imposed this “regime” in his home as well through Aunt Branwell, a circumstance which casts the Brontë children’s love of reading Greek classics and their escapist imaginations in a different light: “Their childhood was no childhood: no toys, no children’s books, no playmates, only newspapers to read and their own precocious, vivid imaginations to amuse them” (Barker, Life 106). Charlotte confirmed this lack of a childhood in her Biographical Notice to Wuthering Heights when she wrote that she and her siblings “were wholly dependent on ourselves and each other, on books and study” for enjoyment and that “the liveliest pleasure we had known from childhood upwards, lay in attempts at literary composition” (Nestor xxxvi). Charlotte also
recorded her experience at Cowan Bridge in her writing, particularly her 1848 novel *Jane Eyre*. “For Charlotte, the change in circumstances was traumatic [...] Even though her elder sisters were there it must have seemed like a perpetual banishment from [...] home and family” (Barker, *Life* 129). Jane Eyre was an orphan confined to Lowood Boarding School who endured a regimen identical to that of Cowan Bridge – rise before dawn, prayer, study, exercise and poor meals; beds and wash basins were shared and all the girls wore uniforms which identified them as “charity-children” (Barker, *Life* 122). “In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily too seems to have created an orphan world – virtually every child, including Heathcliff, Catherine and Hindley [...] loses at least one parent, usually the mother. Though the effect is less crucial on the development of the personalities of her characters than in Charlotte’s novels, the motherless state of them must be significant” (Barker, *Life* 139). Maria Brontë’s death, then, marks a sea-change in the lives of the Brontë children from one of a close-knit home and family sharing a love of nature and reading to a sense of loss, banishment and exile. Aunt Branwell’s residence in their home also changed the religious tone from one of love to one of fear. And both Charlotte and Emily seem to have recorded not only the outward changes in their lives, but their innermost feelings about these changes in their literary works. Their personal correspondence as well documents the depth of their feelings about their childhood, so that it is difficult to assert that the worlds presented in their novels were merely fictional exaggerations. Charlotte wrote of the lingering sentiments Emily had about boarding schools in a letter to a friend. Emily had taken a teaching position at Law Hill Boarding School to contribute to the family finances; teaching was one of the only careers open to women in the mid-19th Century. Teachers were treated no better than the “students,” and hardly any different. “My sister Emily is gone into a situation as a teacher [and] gives an
appalling account of her duties – hard labor from six in the morning until eleven at night, with only one half-hour of exercise between. This is slavery. I fear [Emily] will never stand it” (Barker, Life 294).

Charlotte Brontë’s letters reveal something of her sister Emily’s attitude toward the events of their life, an attitude Charlotte shared in large part. And critics have noted that Charlotte’s Jane Eyre and Emily’s Wuthering Heights share a similar attitude regarding their boarding school experience. But lacking extra-literary sources from Emily Brontë, we are left with the aesthetics of her novel Wuthering Heights to discern Emily’s attitude toward religion. Again Charlotte expresses an opinion, but critic Donald Stone acknowledges that in Emily’s case, we must read her literary works to find her moral point of view. “Whether Emily Brontë intended her hero [Heathcliff] to be judged from the moral point of view that her sister [Charlotte] applied to Rochester has never been satisfactorily resolved,” Stone writes. “Charlotte Brontë had no doubt about Heathcliff’s ‘unredeemed’ nature, but she suggested […] that Emily ‘did not know what she had done’ when she created him, that her sister had acted under force of a creative inspiration that had rendered her passive during the act of writing […] where Charlotte deliberately put her characters into a moral context, her sister seems to have thought less in terms of conventional morality than of aesthetic logic” (Stone 42).

Stone supports my thesis that Emily Brontë’s ethics can – and must, lacking extra-literary sources – be found in the logic of her aesthetics. Stone draws some distinction between morality and aesthetics, and I will maintain this distinction. My analysis of Wuthering Heights will reveal that Emily Brontë was rejecting more than just a morality; she was rejecting the religious aesthetic and ethic behind that morality. Time and again in her
novel, we read Emily Brontë having characters (Joseph or Nelly, for example) pronouncing moral judgments on Heathcliff or Cathy or their relationship. But these judgments are couched in religious rhetoric, rhetoric echoing the Evangelism of Patrick Brontë. Emily Brontë does not merely have Heathcliff or Cathy disagree with the judgment or present plot details which have her hero and heroine escape such judgments, but present an “opposite” aesthetic vision which justifies her opposite ethical vision, a vision I argue is Catholic. And, I argue, through her exposure to Catholicism through her father and then in Belgium, I argue that Emily Brontë is intentionally utilizing the Catholic aesthetic to put forth her “opposite” ethic.

I will begin my analysis of *Wuthering Heights* with quotes from two other Victorian authors who also commented on the connection of morality, religion and the underlying aesthetics of religious ethics: Charles Dickens and G.M. Hopkins.
III.  *Wuthering Heights*

"As for saints and angels - " began the priest.
"It's all nonsense," repeated Fenner. "Ghosts can't get through a locked door."

- G.K. Chesterton, "The Miracle of Moon Crescent," 1924

"Evangelical religion was potentially divisive, not least in its insistence that the majority of the human race was doomed [...] Charles Dickens objected strenuously to evangelical teaching on depravity" (de la Oulton 95). John Calvin (1509-1964) built on Martin Luther's teachings about "election" and "predestination" and put forth the idea that a person's soul was either saved or damned from its conception, and that our actions in this life had no effect upon that state. Both Luther and Calvin based their teachings on their own personal interpretations of Biblical passages, in contradiction to the Catholic Church's catechetical teaching and tradition. But much of Lutheranism and Calvinism was not simply an alternative interpretation of Catholic teaching, but specifically anti-Catholic. And we can again see the relationship between Protestant aesthetics and ethics versus the Catholic, a relationship found throughout *Wuthering Heights*.

For example, Lutheran and Calvinist doctrine was rejected by the Catholic Church; Luther and Calvin, in turn, rejected the Church's teaching authority (magisterium) on scripture, papal authority which enforces such teachings and "clericalism," or the restrictions
on who could present Church teaching to the laity, and when and where. The Catholic
Church limits this role to ordained clergy during the Mass or in catechetical instruction. As
well, the Catholic Church maintains seven sacraments, including Confession. Luther limited
himself to the two – Baptism and the Eucharist – he could find in the Bible. Luther
eventually modified even the Eucharist to be merely a symbol, rejecting yet another Catholic
dogma, the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist through transubstantiation effected by an
ordained priest. More importantly, however, to matters concerning “depravity,” Luther
rejected the Catholic doctrine of *ex opere operato*, which teaches that the sacraments
themselves actually impart the grace they symbolize. No matter how depraved one may
become, the sacrament of Confession has the power to absolve a person of that sin; no one’s
soul is predestined to either Heaven or Hell, at least not as long as they are drawing enough
breath to confess “Forgive me father, for I have sinned…”.

Even Charlotte Brontë, an avowed anti-Catholic, felt the power and attraction of such
teaching when she had the impulse to “go and make a real confession” to the priest in
Brussels. This doctrine is derived from the Catholic teaching on free will, one of the
casualties of the Protestant Reformation of Christianity. “What was at stake in the
[Protestant] Reformation was freedom […] the [Catholic] Church nurtured the artistic
freedom of the Renaissance and the Baroque. It was the Protestants who smashed religious
art as idolatry and sensualism […] It was the [Catholic] Church that affirmed Man’s free will,
and the Protestants who insisted every man’s fate was determined before he was born”
(Crocker 275).

*Wuthering Heights* reveals that Emily Brontë was well aware of not only the
Protestant side of this theological debate but the Catholic side as well. Charles Dickens, like
Charlotte and Emily Brontë, also presented a bleak but realistic picture of boarding school life, exemplified by his novel *David Copperfield*. Dickens “was strongly opposed to a religious ethic that presumed to treat children like criminals” (de la Oulton 105), a religious ethic deriving from Calvinist teaching on predestination and depravity. In Victorian England, this teaching combined with Darwin’s theory of evolution to produce “social Darwinism,” which held that not only were people’s moral states determined from birth, but their economic and social state as well. In *Wuthering Heights*, both judgments are pronounced upon Heathcliff while he is still a boy—a “wicked boy” (50)—and his treatment by others as well as his social status reflect this predetermined judgment. Although Emily Brontë died before Charles Darwin published his theory on speciation, *Wuthering Heights* does explore ideas which Darwin’s theory raised to the forefront in Victorian England. “Surely,” Cathy tells Nelly Dean, you and everybody have a notion that there is, or should be, an existence of yours beyond you. What were the use of my creation if I were entirely contained here?” (81). Darwin himself confessed suffering the consequences of his own theory at the end of his life in that “art no longer evokes any of the old aesthetic tastes [...] the loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect” (Nixon 165).

The Jesuit poet G.M. Hopkins (1844-1889), with whom Emily Brontë shared a “sacramental approach to nature” (Muller 72) and a “spirituality grounded in the senses” (Muller 73), was on of the “Catholic intellectuals [who] made strenuous efforts to reconcile scientific discoveries with religious orthodoxy” (Muller 80) and who in their art attempted to show how “aesthetic reactions to nature could be ethically justified” (White 78). These are all aspects, I maintain, of what Emily Brontë is attempting in *Wuthering Heights*, an effort begun in her earlier Gondal poems. Another important element in Hopkins’ poetry shared by
Emily Brontë is the union of rhetoric and the poetic as “two necessary activities to achieve a single creative work” (Fennell 143), a unity threatened by Darwinism during Hopkins’ time. Hopkins wrote “indeed all nature is mechanical, but then it is not seen that mechanics contains that which is beyond mechanics” (Nixon 137). Hopkins here echoes not only Wuthering Heights, but Darwin’s own feeling of loss of “the old aesthetic tastes.”

A brief comparison of a Gondal poem to Hopkins’ poem “May Magnificat” can reveal some of the aesthetic affinity shared by Emily Brontë, an affinity re-presented in Wuthering Heights. In the Gondal poem quoted earlier, Emily Brontë shows more than just an appreciation of the beauties of nature as God’s creation as did the poems of Patrick Brontë, but a relationship to it, a relationship which affects her emotions. Her poem reveals Nature personified, a Person she can ask “Why, when I hear the stormy breath/ Of the wild winter wind/ Rushing o’er the mountain heath/ Does sadness fill my mind?/ For long ago I loved to lie/ Upon the pathless moor/ And hear the wild wind rushing by/ With never ceasing roar” (Barker, Life 259-260). Hopkins puts forth a similar personification of Nature in the person of the Blessed Mother, Mary: “Ask of her, the mighty mother/ Her reply puts this other/ Question: What is Spring/ Growth in every thing/ Cluster of bugle blue eggs thin/ Forms and warms the life within;/ And birds and blossoms swell/ In sod or sheath or shell/ All things rising, all things sizing/ Mary sees, sympathizing/ With that world of good,/ Nature’s motherhood” (Hopkins 46). As C.W. Hatfield has outlined, this change in Emily Brontë’s mood was the result of the death of her mother, exacerbated by her exile to boarding school. Wuthering Heights reaffirms Brontë’s turning to Nature for Motherhood after her own mother’s death. It is to the “pathless moor” that the young Cathy longs to escape, a sentiment repeated during another confinement occasioned by her difficult pregnancy. “The
first time she left her chamber, was at the commencement of the following March [...] her
eye, long stranger to any gleam of pleasure, caught [golden crocuses brought by Edgar] in
waking, and shone delighted as she gathered them eagerly together [...] ‘They remind me of
soft thaw winds, and warm sunshine [...] I shall never be [upon the moors] but once more,’
said the invalid; ‘and then [...] I shall remain for ever’” (132-133).

Emily Brontë does not wait long to reveal to us that Cathy’s spirit does remain upon
the moors forever. She appears to Mr. Lockwood, the novel’s secondhand narrator in the
opening chapters. Mr. Lockwood arrives at Wuthering Heights in the winter of 1801 to rent
Thrushcross Grange (Chapters 1-3) and remains until January of 1802 (Chapter 31). Chapters
4-30 are Lockwood listening to Nelly Dean tell of the forty years prior, though the present
interrupts the narrative from time to time. Mr. Lockwood describes Wuthering Heights and
its surrounding moorlands as “A perfect misanthropic Heaven” (3). After meeting the
misanthrope inhabiting that Heaven, Heathcliff, being attacked by dogs and becoming
stranded by a snowstorm Mr. Lockwood is provided a bedroom he discovers to be Cathy
Earnshaw’s. Her name is carved in the bed and a portion of her childhood diary remains in a
drawer. Cathy’s diary records the misery she feels under the judgmental gaze of the servant
Joseph, being forced to memorize Bible passages and enduring the violent moods of her
older brother Hindley. Disobedience results in Cathy being confined to the washroom, and so
her only means of expressing her true feelings are in her diary. This parallels what I argue
about Emily Brontë – that she had similar resentments and resistance to her childhood
confinement to boarding school but only expressed them in her writing. Cathy’s diary reveals
that her only reprieve is when she can “escape” to the moors to play with the “gypsy”
Heathcliff, who her father has adopted and who is likewise mistreated by Hindley. Like
Emily and Charlotte Brontë and Charlotte’s fictional heroine Jane Eyre, Cathy is orphaned: upon her mother’s death before the novel begins and by her father’s death at the beginning of the story. Her father’s death necessitates Hindley’s tyrannical rule. There are obvious parallels in this fictional circumstance to Brontë’s real life as well. After her mother died, Aunt Branwell came to their home and instituted a similarly harsh rule.

Mr. Lockwood also discovers a “Testament [New Testament], in lean type and smelling dreadfully musty” (26). Cathy Earnshaw’s diary records how she and Heathcliff “long to rebel” against being “commanded to take our Prayer-books” (20). This is yet another fictional expression of Brontë’s true feelings about her childhood confinement to boarding school and the strict religious dogma preached in her home by Aunt Branwell. As Charlotte’s letters testify and critics have noted, the Brontë sisters’ letters correlate with their fiction in regards to their feelings about their childhood, and both their letters and fiction reveal things they did not reveal otherwise, especially to their father. And, as she did with Augusta in her Gondal poems, Emily Bronte inflicts a childhood upon Cathy much like her own, and the fictional characters then voice Brontë’s otherwise repressed feelings. Lockwood reads on about how Cathy and Heathcliff also face Joseph’s evangelizing as he rails at them about Salvation and Destruction. Lockwood now represents Brontë’s feelings about such preaching as she has him “nod drowsily” over a “Pious discourse delivered by the reverend Jabes Branderham” (22). Lockwood soon begins to dream about the characters and scenarios from Cathy’s diary. He finds himself sitting through a sermon by Reverend Branderham concerning four hundred and ninety separate sins: “Where he searched for them, I cannot tell; he had his private manner of interpreting the phrase” (23). This passage is a complete rejection and reversal of Patrick Brontë’s presentation in The Maid of Killarney of the
Catholic Church’s teaching on Bible interpretation as “totally repugnant;” Emily Brontë presents the Protestant teaching on private interpretation as totally repugnant.

Mr. Lockwood continues dreaming, and soon stands up and urges the congregation to attack the Reverend Branderham and “crush him to atoms, that the place which knows him may know him no more” (24). But the congregation, which includes Joseph, falls upon Lockwood at the reverend’s urging, and Lockwood is soon “grappling with Joseph” who is heeding the Reverend’s command to “execute upon him {Lockwood} the judgment” (24). Mr. Lockwood awakens to find the commotion in the chapel is actually a wind-whipped fir bough scraping his window. He breaks through the glass only to grasp not the annoying branch but “the fingers of a little ice-cold hand!” (25). The child claims to be Cathy: “I’m come home, I’d lost my way on the moor! Let me in – let me in!” (25). Heathcliff responds to the noise, and is at first only concerned with who allowed Mr. Lockwood to stay in Cathy’s room. But he is soon at the broken window, crying for Cathy’s spirit to return.

In Chapters 4 through 30, Lockwood, who has become ill on his journey from Wuthering Heights to Thrushcross Grange, is bedridden. He listens to and records Nelly’s telling of the story of Cathy and Heathcliff and Wuthering Heights. Nelly picks up the narrative where it left off in Cathy’s diary: Cathy and Heathcliff fleecing their confinement to the wild freedom of the moors. They race to Thrushcross Grange, then the Linton household but in the present narrative also owned by Heathcliff. Cathy and Heathcliff peer through the windows to observe what would be considered the ideal Victorian household but which to Cathy and Heathcliff are spoiled brats: Edgar and Isabella Linton. The Linton dogs alert the family to the two and they are caught. Heathcliff is described as a “Frightful thing” and is thrown out (50). “Cathay stayed at Thrushcross Grange five weeks, till Christmas” (52),
during which time “her manners much improved” (52). Heathcliff being thrown out onto the moors – where he seems to remain at home, indeed embody them – represents not only the banishment of Cathy’s soulmate but of her soul. Cathy exhibits a change when she first again sees Heathcliff: “Why, how very black and cross you look! and how – how funny and grim! But that’s only because I’m used to Edgar and Isabella Linton” (53). The novel has already revealed its conclusion about all this in the way it begins with Heathcliff yearning for Cathy’s soul to reunite with him, and the fact that Cathy’s soul remains as a child “lost on the moors” all these years, and into eternity. Cathy’s exile to the respectable Linton home and her marriage to Edgar only affect her outward status. Emily Brontë shows she is aware of this when she has Cathy say that Heathcliff appears different only in comparison to the Linton children. Here again we have evidence of Emily Brontë rejecting a certain ethic and aesthetic as only superficial, and identifying her innermost self with what that ethic and aesthetic rejects. Gilbert and Gubar characterize this aspect of *Wuthering Heights* as an “authentic instance of novelistic myth-making […] in the functional sense of problem solving” (Gilbert and Gubar 256). But a reading of the “metaphysical intentions” of *Wuthering Heights* from a Catholic perspective reveals what the problem Brontë is solving really is – not patriarchy, but Protestantism.

Heathcliff’s character and behavior begin to exhibit the effects of exile after his separation from Cathy becomes – seemingly – permanent upon Cathy’s marriage to Edgar Linton. This is but one example in the novel of Emily Brontë yet again looking oppositely at her father Patrick’s beliefs. Patrick’s novella *The Cottage in the Wood*, as previously noted, contained a Preface which asserted a belief in predestination: “happiness and misery have their origin within, and depend very little on outward circumstances” (Barker, *Life* 68).
Emily Brontë clearly indicates that it is almost entirely outward circumstances which affect Heathcliff’s character, and that these circumstances are created by those characters in the novel who hold to the view that Heathcliff had been born dark and wicked. Predestination in *Wuthering Heights* becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

From Cathy’s prison-like confinement as a child in *Wuthering Heights* and her subsequent “beneficial” confinement in the Linton household, Brontë continues this theme in *Wuthering Heights* so that the ultimate spiritual freedom Cathy and Heathcliff find after death has even more impact. Cathy’s marriage to Edgar Linton is described as “prisonlike” (Bloom 78), and Cathy locks herself in her room at Thrushcross Grange to “escape”, a scene which emphasizes Cathy’s increasing sense of confinement. Nelly overhears her, in a state of delirium, murmuring about “wild-ducks” and “moorcocks and lapwings” – birds Cathy knew as a child upon the moors with Heathcliff. Cathy tells Nelly “I’m sure I would be myself were I once more among the heather on those hills... Open the window again wide [...] I wish I were out of doors – I wish I were a girl again, half savage and hardy, and free” (124). Meanwhile, “Joseph remained to hector over tenants and laborers; and because it was his vocation to be where he had plenty of wickedness to reprove” (65). Joseph’s “treatment of [Heathcliff] was enough to make a fiend of a saint. And, truly, it appeared as if the lad were possessed of something diabolical at that period. He delighted to witness Hindley degrading himself past redemption” (65). But Emily Brontë again rejects the religious aesthetic and ethic Joseph represents because she does not send Heathcliff to Hell, where most of the characters in the novel assume he had been destined from birth, but reunites him with his beloved Cathy. Perhaps Heathcliff, like Charlotte Brontë in Brussels, found a Catholic priest and made a “real confession” and received absolution from the sins the likes
of Joseph would have condemned him for. Or perhaps Cathy’s and Heathcliff’s spirits walk upon the moors seeking prayers as part of their Purgatorial purification before entering their final Heaven. But by whatever means it is affected, Brontë shows us that the Protestant vision of Heathcliff’s ultimate fate is not what occurs.

The temporal setting and plot of the second half of the novel are the consequence of all that has taken place during the first: inheritances, marriages, children. This is exemplified in the names of the children – Cathy Earnshaw-Heathcliff-Linton bears Catherine Linton who refuses to marry Heathcliff’s son Linton Heathcliff. But all this superficial confusion belies the spiritual truth and simplicity at the heart of the novel: the state of spiritual union between Cathy and Heathcliff and their ultimate bliss. Heathcliff’s tortuous efforts to reunite with Cathy prior to his death culminate in his exhumation of her body, an act he confesses to Nelly. Nelly replies “You were very wicked, Mr. Heathcliff!; were you not ashamed to disturb the dead?” (287). But, of course, we are shown that this was not as perverse an act as Nelly believes, because after Heathcliff dies, his spirit and Cathy’s are seen walking together once again upon the moors. But not by all. Hareton Earnshaw, Cathy’s cousin, tells Nelly he “encountered a little boy with a sheep and two lambs” (333) who reports seeing “Heathcliff and a woman, yonder” (333) Hareton dismisses the boy’s account of such an apparition: “He probably raised the phantoms from thinking [...] on the nonsense he had heard his parents and companions repeat” (333).

Parents and companions who likely pray the Rosary, believe in the Real Presence, invoke the intercession of Saints, cross themselves with Holy Water – Catholics, in other words.
IV. Conclusions

"You see, the Dark Ages tried to make a science about good people. But our own humane and enlightened age is only interested in a science about bad ones."

- G.K. Chesterton, "The Man With Two Beards," 1925

Recent literary criticism of Emily Brontë and Wuthering Heights continues the trend I have identified as beginning with the iconoclasms of the mediaeval period and gaining new strength in the Victorian era, a trend away from religion in artistic expression and towards a more "modern" or scientific approach to understanding both art and religion. My assertion is backed up by the fact that much modern literary criticism still derives from and identifies itself by the names of the theoretical cornerstones of modern thought: Darwin, Marx and Freud. Criticism focusing on biology (including gender and sexual orientation), economics (usually industrial capitalism), and psychology (including Post-Modernism) are the rule in literary academics; religion -- particularly Christianity -- no longer rises even to the level of the exception. Religion is left out of the discussion altogether, unless, as with Gilbert and Gubar, it is denounced as symptomatic of some other problem such as patriarchy.

The Victorian era religious crisis was the result of the earlier iconoclasms, particularly the Protestant Reformation with its belief in the Bible as the sole source of
Christian faith and doctrine (sola scriptura). The Creation account found in the Book of Genesis is read literally by most Protestants; therefore, if the Bible says the Cosmos was created in six days, that is interpreted to mean literally 144 hours. This theology precipitated a crisis in the 19th century when Sir Charles Lyell published Principles of Geology (1830-1833), which contradicted the explanation Bible literalists put forth to explain fossilized extinct species – the “catastrophe” theory. Catastrophe theory holds that fossils and extinct species and geological strata are the result of Biblical catastrophes: floods, earthquakes, et cetera, not the passage of eons of time. Lyell argued for a “uniformity” in geological formation, a process observable across time and which requires eons – not hours – for Creation. In 1859, Charles Darwin published On The Origin Of Species, which theorized that biological speciation was the result of a similar lengthy and uniform process, what has come to be known as Evolution. Denying themselves any extra-Biblical context such as the literary history of the Bible itself or Catholic or Jewish tradition which may reduce the literalness of the Bible (and therefore its truth it is feared), sola scripturalists were faced with a real crisis, a crisis not resolved to this day. School districts across the country still have to strike a balance between teaching evolutionary or other scientific theories and Creationism.

The Catholic Church does not teach sola scriptura and places equal emphasis on tradition and scripture. This, in fact, continues to be one of the criticisms of Catholicism by Protestants. In the 5th century, Augustine of Hippo found the Bible an impediment to his complete conversion to Christianity because he had difficulty accepting or following certain Bible passages. Augustine eventually came under the instruction of Bishop Ambrose of Milan, who emphasized allegorical and metaphorical readings of the Bible. Augustine
converted and authored texts – *Confessions, City of God* – which are foundations of Western civilization and thought.

In the 17th century, the Catholic Church’s claim to a non-literalist interpretation of the Bible was put to the test by Galileo. Galileo used the recently perfected telescope to conclude that the Sun was the center of the heavens, not Earth as the Bible seems to indicate. Galileo also argued that the re-discovered ancient Greek theory of atomism disproved transubstantiation. The Church censured Galileo, confining him to a Cardinal’s apartment (in lieu of actual imprisonment) and even threatened him with Inquisition-like torture if he did not renounce his assertion that the Church must change its teaching based on science. This was the real issue in the dispute: Church authority. The Church eventually compromised with Galileo. The Church’s teachings on scientific matters, whether based on the Bible or Tradition, were to be received as literally true until some physical truth incontrovertibly revealed otherwise. And the Galileo affair is balanced by the Church’s patronage of scientific inquiry and experiment, as exemplified by its canonization of such founders of modern science as Anselm, Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas. The Church still emphasizes, as Ambrose had, that it is the spiritual truth of its teachings which are paramount. If God took centuries to create and perfect species, even Man, so be it. That the Bible records this as “six days” is to be read as allegory, or perhaps a metaphor for the difference in the sense of time of Man versus that of the Eternal God. But, as with Luther’s theses, the Church maintains that it has the duty and authority to debate and decide such matters, not an individual with a telescope or a copy of the Bible. Victorian authors such as George Eliot, Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin were among those who suffered a crisis in their personal faith as a result of scientific theories such as Lyell’s and Darwin’s. John Ruskin, who had been an inspiration to
G.M. Hopkins, gave up literature and religion altogether and became a proponent of publicly funded education in a time when schools and universities were still founded and maintained by churches. So, over three centuries, the Church had been replaced by the individual, creation by evolution and Christian charity by social welfare. This trend is reflected in literary criticism of the past several decades.

In 1970, Denis Donoghue, Irish-born professor of literature at NYU, compared Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights as representing rational civilization versus imagination and superstition, respectively (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970). I have already addressed Terry Eagleton’s 1975 Marxist study of the Brontës which, like Donoghue, focuses on Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights as symbols of socio-economic classifications. More recent criticism has moved away from such larger contexts and historical considerations and focused on more individualistic theories: “Feminist Criticism and Mary Ward’s Reading of the Brontës” (Beth Sutton-Ramspeck, Victorian Studies, Autumn 1990); “The Female Gaze and the Construction of Masculinity” (Kevin Goddard, The Journal of Men’s Studies, Fall 2000). The re-issue of Gilbert and Gubar’s The Madwoman in the Attic in 2000 caps this trend.

But like Gilbert and Gubar, some critics do touch upon the religious aspect of Wuthering Heights. In 1992, Sheila Smith published “‘At Once Strong and Eerie’: The Supernatural in Wuthering Heights and Its Debt to the Traditional Ballad” (The Review of English Studies, November 1992) which does acknowledge Emily Brontë’s rejection in Wuthering Heights of the “morality of Calvinist sects such as Joseph’s,” a morality Smith characterizes as “individualistic materialism.” But Smith says this version of Christianity is “orthodox” and that Brontë’s vision is akin to “paganism.” Smith is partly correct. I have
argued in my thesis that Miltonian or Calvinistic Christianity is not traditional or orthodox, and that much of the Protestant rejection of Catholic orthodoxy and orthopraxy ("right belief" and "right practice") is based on Catholicism's incorporation of pagan rituals, and that the "opposite" view Emily Brontë presents in Wuthering Heights is not feminist or even pagan, but Catholic. And even the patriarchal tendencies in Protestantism can be traced to the Reformation's rejection of Marian dogma and devotion as pagan idolatry. Bereft of the female presence, Protestantism emphasized the increasingly disgruntled patriarchy of God the Father.

But the absence or ignorance of the Catholic perspective in considering the religious aesthetic of Wuthering Heights is itself a result of the Reformation. As G.K Chesterton wrote in 1908, "Protestants accuse the Catholic Church of hiding the Bible. This, of course, is not true. But even if it were, it would be a less remarkable accomplishment than the Reformation, which succeeded in hiding everything else" (Orthodoxy 207).

An understanding of the Protestant-Catholic debate in England since the Reformation can shed light on not only Emily Brontë's life and work, but on critical appreciations seeking to understand the religious aesthetics of both.
V. Works Cited


