Wuthering Heights as Cosmic Allegory

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In opposition to much criticism of Wuthering Heights, I believe that Emily Brontë's novel is a carefully planned allegory of a cosmic view. Typically commentaries have praised the book's emotive power, the intensity of which, it was generally claimed, compensated for a supposed lack of organizational discipline. Several critics, however, have discovered evidence of care in the novel's design.[1] Most notably, Lord David Cecil argued that Wuthering Heights is indeed an allegory constructed with order and symmetry.[2] The principles of storm, represented by Wuthering Heights,

and of calm, represented by Thrushcross Grange, are initially in harmony. The order is disrupted by the introduction of an extraneous element, Heathcliff, and the novel details the pendulum-like effects upon the system as that element is finally assimilated and equilibrium reestablished. Cecil's is a stimulating interpretation and one that accounts successfully for the novel's form.

Like Cecil I believe that the novel depicts a cosmos which is characterized by the interplay of two forces, which he calls the principles of storm and calm, but which are a complex of many symbols (as I will explain in detail below) and which can best be described as the forces of nature, represented by the Heights, and of civilization, represented by the Grange. The interaction of the two houses in the novel corresponds to the interaction of those forces in the cosmos. Hence in a carefully planned, symmetrical, and orderly novel, Heathcliff and the elder Catherine, residents of the Heights, can be passionate, violent, and spontaneous, precisely because those are the characteristics which that house represents. Many of the same critics who praise the novel's "spontaneity" criticize the Grange characters' tepidity, which they regard as an inevitable lapse

in a tour de force. On the contrary, the traits of both sets of characters are intentional and have symbolic significance.

The plot, then, in outline is as follows: the two houses represent the two principles of the cosmos: nature and civilization. They exist in harmony, with each house moderated by partaking to a degree of the characteristics of the other. (The Earnshaws are aristocratic -- a "civilized trait"-- and the Linton children are occasionally argumentative -- a "natural" trait.) A purely natural element, however, is introduced into the Heights in the person of Heathcliff, thus causing the accentuation of that principle and the rejection of civilized traits. The Grange, in interacting with the Heights, becomes similarly polarized, with its principle accentuated. Interaction continued until the forces can regain equilibrium. But the result is not the assimilation of the extraneous element, as Cecil maintains, but the rejection of the two extremes, in the persons of Heathcliff and Linton Heathcliff, with the result being a purer, more stable and harmonious equilibrium.

My conclusion, then, differs from Cecil's in its moral interpretation of the book. Because each house has both appealing and unattractive aspects,

Cecil concludes that no value judgments are made concerning them. (The Heights, for example, is characterized by both selfless love and ruthless revenge, the Grange by both courtesy and peevishness.) He mistakenly assumes that if moral polarities existed, they would coincide with other polarities in the work. But it is precisely the polarities themselves which are evil; it is in harmony that goodness lies. When the houses are polarized their worst aspects become emphasized, although their good qualities still remain. The book concludes, as we shall see, with the most polar (and hence most evil) aspects rejected and with the remaining qualities brought into a closer, purified union. If Wuthering Heights is to be taken as an allegory of human history, then Brontë's is ultimately an optimistic view. The strife of the modern world is part of an ongoing dialectical process which is destined in the future to culminate in order and harmony.

The nature of that process might best be understood by the modern metaphor of a chain reaction after the introduction of a catalyst, and we can note in the novel alternating stages of reaction and unstable equilibrium -- the chain which culminates in the final, stable state. In

Wuthering Heights a state of equilibrium exists whenever two forces are in harmony. When a third force is introduced a disruption occurs and one force must be expelled. Hindley, for example, "had room in his heart for only two idols -- his wife and himself."[3] When Hareton enters, Frances must depart to maintain equilibrium. At the outset the Heights and the Grange are in harmony, each in turn with its own pair of harmonious children. When Heathcliff enters, however, the Heights is disrupted. In the consequent rearrangement of elements Catherine pairs with Heathcliff and Hindley is expelled until he can return united with a bride. Hareton is born and Frances dies. The instability of the Heights causes it to react inharmoniously with the Grange, thereby again rearranging the elements. Catherine pairs with Edgar, causing Heathcliff's expulsion. When he returns he disrupts the harmony of Catherine and Edgar and attracts Isabella. Both unions of opposites are unstable and cannot exist permanently.

The younger Catherine is born, causing the death of her mother. The new Grange couple of Edgar and his daughter is sufficiently "Lintonized" so that they form a strong enough attraction to draw Isabella from the Heights. But she cannot

remain as a third element and is expelled: "I wish to remain . . . because the Grange is my right home. But I tell you he wouldn't let me." (p. 167). Isabella goes to London where she forms a pair with her newly born son. When she dies young Linton is isolated and attracted by his affinity with the Grange, where he forms an unstable third element and is hence forced to unite with the lone element of the Heights, Heathcliff. The death of Hindley has left Hareton an unstable element, whose natural affinity for young Catherine draws her away from the Grange toward the Heights. Heathcliff perverts the natural course of her affections, however, from Hareton to young Linton. Edgar, thus isolated, dies, and Hareton is altered from his true course into an unnaturally close union with Heathcliff. When Linton dies, however, he is able to form a permanent, stable union with his true affinity, young Catherine. Heathcliff, now isolated with no living proximate element to attract him, is drawn to his true affinity, the spirit of the elder Catherine, with whom his spirit forms a parallel stable union. Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange are again, at the close, in harmonious equilibrium.

A closer examination can now be made of the

forces or principles represented by the Heights and the Grange and of the symbols associated with them. Cecil and others[4] have extensively explored the storm-calm symbolism, but there are several other symbols connected with the two houses, most notably that of heaven and hell. Demons are associated with the Heights, angels with the Grange. In general, as "wuthering" implies, the Heights is connected with the forces of nature; its inhabitants are workers, dark in coloring, healthy, and denizens of the outdoors. The Grange is associated with the refinements of civilization; its residents are aristocrats, fair in coloring, sickly, and often shut-ins. They experience life through books while the Heights people experience it through nature.

At the beginning of the story, however, the two houses have only the germs of these tendencies. Gentry live at the Heights, for example, and the Grange residents are in good health. It is the introduction of Heathcliff, as we have seen, which causes the divergence of complementary elements. His entry impels the element of the Heights to its extreme. While the Earnshaws are brown in hair color, he is a "dark-skinned gypsy," with "black hair," "black eyes," and "black tempers." Mr. Linton wonders whether it would not be wise "to

hang him at once before he shows his nature in acts as well as features..." (p. 53). Because of Heathcliff the Heights becomes an "infernal house," whose residents seek to cause the damnation of themselves and each other. Hindley says, "I shall have the greatest pleasure in sending (my own soul) to perdition, to punish its maker...Here's to its hearty damnation." (p. 78). His "treatment of Heathcliff was enough to make a fiend out of a saint. And truly, it appeared as if the lad were possessed of something diabolical at that period" (p. 68). Throughout the book nearly every character refers to Heathcliff as the devil: Hindley calls him "hellish villain"; Edgar: "a most diabolical man"; Isabella: "accursed, incarnate goblin"; Hareton: "devil daddy"; and Joseph: "that fahl, flaysone devil of a gipsy, Heathcliff!" In observing his son's revulsion Heathcliff himself comments scornfully, "You would imagine I was the devil himself. . ." (p. 256). As a result of his presence Hindley allows the young pair to "grow up in absolute heathenism" (p. 53).

In their wanderings Heathcliff and Catherine come to the Grange, where, in contrast to the Heights, they "should have thought (them)selves in heaven" (p. 51). Catherine, the brown-haired creature corrupted from righteousness, is admitted.

Heathcliff, the cursing black devil, is expelled. The cursing which causes his dismissal is a Heights trait, practiced only by the three H-characters. The Lintons' exclamations are angelic, such as Isabella's "For Heaven's sake..." It is significant that this first glimpse of "heaven" is narrated by Heathcliff, the "devil," just as later the descent of an "angel" into "hell" is related by Isabella.

Throughout the novel the heaven-image has no exclusive connection with good nor has hell any with evil. Edgar and Isabella display the unheavenly trait of selfishness in quarreling over a lapdog, causing Heathcliff to snear, "When would you catch me wishing to have what Catherine wanted?" (p. 52). It is the extremes in both houses that are evil. Linton Heathcliff, the most angelic character in appearance, is both selfish and peevish and far less admirable than even his devilish father whose love for Catherine is entirely selfless.

Another image which is important throughout the book is that of "eyes," the windows through which the true nature of a character's guiding principle can be seen. Nelly speaks of "the fiend which usually looked out" of Heathcliff's eyes, "the clouded windows of hell" (p. 176). Isabella's,

by contrast, are "dove's eyes -- angel's" (p. 107). When Catherine returns from the Grange transformed into a Lintonic angel, Nelly urges Heathcliff to transform his eyes, his nature: "Change the fiends to confident, innocent angels." Heathcliff replies, "In other words, I must wish for Edgar Linton's great blue eyes...I do -- and that won't help me to them" (p. 60). He is an extreme element with only black traits. He cannot change his nature.

Catherine on the other hand is brown in coloring, midway between the Linton blond and Heathcliff's black (just as the Lintons are between Earnshaw brown and Linton Heathcliff's near albinism). Caught between the attraction of the two forces she comes "to adopt a double character without exactly intending to deceive anyone" (p. 69). Upon her deathbed she sees her mirror image, in fact as another person. Although her closer affinity is with Heathcliff, the Heights character, she chooses Edgar and splits her nature. She thus violates her true principle in marrying Edgar, as a dream which she related to Nelly made clear:

> ...Heaven did not seem to be my home...and the angels...flung me out, into the middle of the heath on top of Wuthering Heights, where I woke sobbing for joy...I've no

more business to marry Edgar Linton
than I have to be in heaven (p. 82).

Marriages between opposite elements are unnatural and lacking in the true love of affinity. Catherine marries Edgar for his looks, his wealth, and other surface attractions. Young Cathy marries Linton Heathcliff out of a misguided sympathy, and Isabella marries Heathcliff because of deluded "romantic" notions. Although in Heathcliff's absence Catherine is sufficiently freed from polarization to be conventionally happy with Edgar, Heathcliff recognizes his own stronger attraction: "It is not in (Edgar) to be loved like me, how can she love in him what he has not?" (p. 147).

Such marriages are disastrous for both sides. But when Heathcliff returns from exile, exhibiting the bearing of an aristocrat -- and hence of a Grange character -- Catherine is deluded into believing that the three can live in harmony. She believes herself "reconciled to God. . .I'm an angel!" (p. 100) and she makes "the home a paradise for several days" (p. 101). Heathcliff's nature is not Lintonized, however. "Though his exterior was altered, his mind was unchanged" (p. 101). He is again expelled from the Grange, and Catherine is tormented with longing. Edgar places before her a

book, a Grange symbol, yet instead of reading she stares outward toward the Heights. She wonders, "Why am I so changed?. . .I'm sure I should be myself again once among the heather on those hills" (p. 124). As she dies she expresses the yearning of her soul: "They can't keep me from my narrow home out yonder . . .There it is, not among the Lintons, . . .but in the open air" (p. 126). Edgar has gained only the external; her true self is part of the Heights. "What you touch at present," she tells him, "you may have; but my soul will be on that hill-top. . ." (p. 127).

When Edgar dies he does so peacefully. True to the nature of Heights people, however, Catherine dies cursing and tormented by her true affinity, Heathcliff. "May she wake in torment" (p. 163), he curses, and he complains that she treats him "infernally" (p. 112). Are you possessed with a devil," he asks, "to talk in that manner with me, when you are dying?" (p. 156). Separation increases the intensity of the hellish principle with which they are connected or, as Heathcliff puts it, "Existence after losing her would be hell" (p. 147). He tells her, ". . .While you are at peace I shall writhe in the torments of hell." The separation, however, is equally hellish for her:

"I shall not be at peace" (p. 156).

As a result of her loss, Heathcliff and Edgar are affected characteristically. In their attendance upon her coffin, Edgar Linton watches indoors while Heathcliff gazes from outside through the window. Both are driven "hell"-wards by her loss. Edgar "ceased even to attend church" (p. 178), but his true nature soon reasserts itself as he is attracted into harmony with his angelic daughter. Upon Heathcliff, the true "devil," the effect is more serious. He is impelled to even further lengths of tormenting others. Nelly compares him in his treatment of Hindley to an "evil beast" threatening "the stray sheep" whom "god has forsaken" (p. 108). Heathcliff blames Edgar for Catherine's illness and promises Isabella that she "shall be Edgar's proxy in suffering" (p. 143). As Catherine had predicted, "It is as bad as offering Satan a lost soul" (p. 112).

After her marriage Isabella soon learns that her angelic nature cannot possibly find harmony with Heathcliff. Heathcliff had always known no union was possible and intends only to torment her. The Heights becomes a hell for Isabella: "Far rather would I be condemned to . . .the infernal regions . . .than Wuthering Heights" (p. 177).

She seeks refuge first in prayer -- "I pray that he may forget his diabolical prudence and kill me!" (p. 149) -- and finally in a return to the heavenly Grange, "blest as a soul escaped from purgatory" (p. 177).

Because the members of the elder generation belong primarily to either the Heights or the Grange, their attempts at union cause violent reactions. A different mixture of the principles is found among the younger children. Hareton, brown in coloring, is the true son of the Heights, where his name is carved above the door. Catherine is a Linton blond, yet from her mother she has inherited characteristics of the Heights which will enable her to form with Hareton the perfect, harmonious union that was impossible for her parents. She has "the Earnshaws' handsome dark eyes, but the Linton's fair skin" (p. 183). She combines as well the Lintons' love of books with the Earnshaws' fondness for the outdoors.

If she has lost some of the Grange qualities, they are gained in the extreme by young Linton. Although Heathcliff's son, he has inherited nothing whatever from his father, as Heathcliff scornfully admits, "Thou art thy mother's child entirely! Where is my share in thee. . .?" (p. 200). His

father is all Heights, pure black, but he has all the Grange features. His hair is white and his complexion "whey-faced." Whereas Heathcliff is robust, works outdoors and scorns servants, Linton is sickly in the extreme, a shut-in who can do nothing for himself. Both the black father and the white son possess evil traits, such as vindictiveness and cruelty, which reside at the extremes. They are the dross and impurities -- to use the chemical analogy -- which must be expelled from the mixture in the process of creating the bond of pure elements.

These four remaining characters now react in accordance with their natures. Despite her father's efforts to keep her isolated and "Lintonized" at the Grange, Catherine's Earnshaw side and her natural affinity for Hareton draw her to the Heights. Both children have been sufficiently nurtured to the extremes by their isolation, however, so that they are at first repelled. Accustomed to being waited on at the Grange, Catherine demands service of Hareton. His devilish response, "I'll see thee damned, before I be thy servant!" (p. 189), is shocking to Cathy who was always "'angel' with everyone at the Grange" (p. 192).

Thus repulsed on her Heights side, she is

drawn by her Grange affinity to Linton. The pull of books overcomes the attraction of the outdoors. Yet a marriage is still not possible without the diabolical contrivance of Heathcliff, who fears she will "discover (Linton's) value and send him to the devil" (p. 209). Heathcliff's distance from heaven is evidenced by the false oath he utters to win her sympathy for Linton: "I swear, on my salvation, . . . none but you can save him!" (p. 224).

But Linton, the Pure Grange element, cannot survive at the Heights and his deterioration is rapid. Just as the unnatural environment of the Grange had previously shown in the eyes of the elder Catherine ("the flash of her eyes had been succeeded by a dreamy and melancholy softness") (p. 153), so does Linton's transplantation to the Heights cause his eyes to display the opposite, but equally fatal, effect: ". . . the hollowness round them, transforming to haggard wildness, the languid expression he once possessed" (p. 249).

As a result of the marriage Hareton has drawn closer to Heathcliff, who attempts to remake him in his own likeness, as a "personification of my youth" (p. 307). If Heathcliff "were the devil, it didn't signify; he would stand by him" (p. 304).

As a result of her torments, the hellish Earnshaw traits of Catherine are exaggerated. She who had been "angel" to Nelly at the Grange is now called "witch" by Heathcliff, and Lockwood observes, "She's a beauty, it is true; but not an angel" (p. 284). She now announces her progress "in the Black Art," and just as Hareton is "damnably fond" of Heathcliff, she becomes "damnably afraid" of him.

With Linton's death Hareton continues for a time to oppose Catherine. He burns her book, although against his true inclination. He swears, "I'll go to hell . . . before I look sideways after you again!" (p. 297), but he cannot resist her eyes, in which her true nature shines, whose affinity with his own is irresistible. Joseph laments that she has "witched ahr lad, wi' her bold een. . ." (p. 302).

When Heathcliff sees her eyes his reaction is diabolical at first: "What fiend possesses you to stare back at me, continually, with whose infernal eyes?" (p. 301). The fiend behind the eyes, of course, is the elder Catherine, and he slowly loses his powers of opposition. With the harmonious union of Hareton and Catherine, Heathcliff is isolated. Against them both all his satanic

powers are impotent. "They lifted their eyes together, to encounter Mr. Heathcliff. Perhaps you have never remarked that their eyes are precisely similar, and they are those of Catherine Earnshaw. . . I suppose this resemblance disarmed Mr. Heathcliff" (p. 305). He remarks, "I have lost the faculty of enjoying their destruction . . . ." (p. 306).

Instead Heathcliff is attracted by his true affinity, the spirit of Catherine, and he now bends all his energies toward their union. "I have a single wish, and my whole being, and faculties are yearning to attain it" (p. 308). Like Catherine he wills his death and like her, starves himself to effect it. Close to death, he opens the window facing her (just as she had done) and dies in an ecstasy of fulfillment.

Before his death he tells Nelly, "Last night I was on the threshold of hell. Today, I am within sight of my heaven. I have my eyes on it. . ." (p. 311). It is in the reunion with the spirit of Catherine that his paradise consists: "No minister need come; nor need anything be said over me. I tell you, I have nearly attained <u>my</u> heaven; and that of others is altogether unvalued and uncoveted by me!" (p. 316).

The novel ends, then, in universal harmony. In young Catherine are combined the moderate Linton traits with the Earnshaw eyes and love of nature. When she imparts the Lintons' literacy and love of books to Hareton both sides are drawn sufficiently close so as to form a unity of inseparable harmony. Through the window Lockwood glimpses them united, "her light shining ringlets blending . . . with his brown locks" (p. 292). They take up residence at the Grange, leaving the Heights to the spirits of Heathcliff and Catherine. Once again the two houses are both in harmony in themselves and in equilibrium with each other; the cosmos of the novel is at peace.

In working themselves out these principles have formed a structure of the most pleasing shape. But despite the extraordinary symmetry of all its elements, the form of Wuthering Heights, much like a Greek vase, derives its beauty from its slight deviations from geometrical perfection. In the careful parallels of the geneological table, for example, Frances Earnshaw is a force in no degree equal to her counterpart, Heathcliff. And despite the deliberate contrasting of elements between the Heights and the Grange, the title of the novel is, after all, Wuthering Heights. If the Grange

extreme, Linton Heathcliff, is utterly rejected, the extreme of the Heights, Heathcliff, is rejected only from the world of the living. And the perfected couple, although uniting the traits of both houses, is predominantly of Earnshaw blood. The catalyst which initiated the reaction was introduced to the Heights element so we may expect that element to predominate in the reaction's final state. Perhaps it is for the sake of counterbalancing this bias that the couple takes up their final residence at the Grange.

Despite the interest of the themes of love and of revenge and despite the attraction of the psychological power of individual characters, I believe it is clear that powerful allegorical forces underlie these themes and form, by their operation, the work's essential plot. Moreover, the operation of these forces of nature and civilization corresponds to their operation, in Emily Bronte's view, in the universe at large. Underlying this passionate tale of love and revenge is a complex, dialectical vision of the cosmos which is ultimately synthesized in the union of the lovers at the Grange, as well as that of the "sleepers in that quiet earth" (p. 320) of the Heights.

Notes

1 C. P. Sanger's article, "The Structure of Wuthering Heights," Hogarth Essays, No. 19. (London: Hogarth Press, 1921), however, noted the striking "symmetry of pedigree" and the care and accuracy of the dating of events throughout. A number of structural studies followed, including the extreme structuralist position of Dorothy van Ghent, namely that the "form of the book. . . is the content," in "On Wuthering Heights," from The English Novel: Form and Function, (New York: Harper and Row, 1961). Like many critics, she sees a "dual" structure in the novel, corresponding to the two generations. The first part of the book, according to her, presents a "mythological romance" and the second both a "parody romance" and a "domestic romance," with Heathcliff as the element uniting the two parts.

2 "Emily Brontë and Wuthering Heights," Early Victorian Novelists, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1935).

3 Emily Brontë, Wuthering Heights, (New York: Signet, 1959), p. 67. All further references are to this edition.

4 Including Allott and especially Mark Shorer in "Introduction," Wuthering Heights, (New York:

Rinehart Editions, 1950). Unlike Cecil's view of a co-existent equilibrium of these elements, Shorer concludes that an alternation of elements is needed, such as in the alternation of the seasons, and that Heathcliff destroys all, including himself, by the unaltered regularity of his storminess. Shorer does not take structure into his consideration and he concludes that the "moral" forced itself unwittingly upon even its author.