"O God Within My Breast": The Religion of Emily Brontë

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“O God Within My Breast”: The Religion of Emily Brontë

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by

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Chapter 1

Emily Brontë: A Religious Rebel?

“The impulse which urged her to create was not her own suffering or her own injuries” but the “gigantic ambition” to say something about relations between “the whole human race” and “the eternal powers” — Virginia Woolf

In a commonly told tale of Emily Brontë’s adolescence, Mary Taylor, in conversation with the Brontë sisters, vocalized her belief that religion was a private matter, the business of no one but herself and God. Emily Brontë replied, in a manner characteristic of her taciturn style, “That’s right” (Gezari 2). In doing so, she concisely and poignantly articulated what was to become her own religious creed: faith is personal, not doctrinal. Emily Brontë, as the daughter of a minister of the Church of England, knew the Bible intimately and most certainly discussed some of its precepts with her deeply religious sisters in conversations such as this. Her mother, Maria Branwell, “came from a Cornish Methodist family and, thus, introduced a nonconformist presence into the family that would endure after her death in 1825 in the form of her sister, Elizabeth Branwell, who lived in the Haworth parsonage until her own death in 1842” (Marsden, “Vain” 237). Patrick Brontë encouraged his children, through the education and reading material he provided for them, to freely explore matters of religion for themselves. This freedom encouraged Emily Brontë’s already inquisitive nature and was vital for the development of both her religious attitudes and her narrative voice as a female artist. The Bible became a foundational tool in order to explore her own religious beliefs, her “religious self-consciousness” (Marsden, “Vain” 242). The art she created is an expression of this self-
exploration. It reflects a tension between orthodox religion and natural, or pagan, spirituality while also presenting a duality of the sacred and the supernatural, where the two concepts are not mutually exclusive. Rather than outright rejecting orthodox Christianity, she is able to transform and adapt her foundation of Biblical imagery and central tenets of the Christian faith into a deeply personal spirituality rooted in the natural world and her individual relationship with God.

*Wuthering Heights* is a novel obsessed with religion. In this novel, Emily Brontë creates a duality between orthodox religious imagery and supernatural or Gothic imagery, yet undermines this duality with a powerful argument for personal faith. She creates an independent female character able to transcend the boundaries of orthodox religion, just as Emily Brontë herself does through the writing of *Wuthering Heights*. She uses traditional biblical allusions to the Pharisees, Noah, Lot, Jonah, and passages of forgiveness in the Gospels, but she also mimics the very syntax of the Bible, relying on the “authority of language connoting sacramental truth and ethical obligation” (Davies, *Emily Brontë* 123-124). These allusions are used in conjunction with, as well as contrasted with, Romantic and Gothic images of the supernatural world to describe Catherine and her love of the moors. Both the profane and the sacred can exist simultaneously for Emily Brontë since, in the world of *Wuthering Heights* especially, “what seem to be the most unlikely opposites coexist without, apparently, any consciousness on the author's part that there is anything unlikely in their coexistence” (Gilbert & Gubar 259). Through this juxtaposition of the religious and profane, Emily Brontë demonstrates that the supernatural can be inherently spiritual.
through a dismantling of traditional dualities and articulates the importance of modifying traditional religious themes to form an individualized relationship with God.

Emily Brontë began writing poetry as a child, and the vast majority of her poetry was written before she wrote *Wuthering Heights*; however, J. Hillis Miller argues that Emily never left the realm of poetry when she wrote *Wuthering Heights*. Her poetry, both the Gondal saga poems and the non-Gondal poems, reflects these same themes of personal faith and the spirituality of nature. However, it is in the poetry that Emily Brontë first explored these themes. Her poems consider the nature of spirituality and an individual’s relationship with God, especially the female-artist’s relationship with the Creator, through an exploration of the power of the imagination and attempt to navigate her own identity as an artist and a spiritual individual. Through these poems, Emily Brontë internalizes her poetic power and, in doing so, internalizes God as the divine source of her imaginative powers.

Despite Rosalind Miles’s assertion that “Emily Brontë repels rather than invites critical attention” (69), scholars continue to disagree on how exactly to define the religion of Emily Brontë. There are those who believe that Emily Brontë, although influenced by her father’s piety and role as a minister of the Church of England, rejected patriarchal Christianity in her works. These scholars, such as Stevie Davies and Sandra Gilbert, point to *Wuthering Heights* as a fundamentally profane text full of the supernatural, which spurns orthodox religion in favor of a female spirituality deeply rooted in the natural world. Gilbert, in “Emily Brontë’s Bible of Hell,” makes the radical argument that *Wuthering Heights* is a retelling of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, where the novel is structured
around the central fall from Hell (in this case, Thrushcross Grange and the orthodox Heaven) into Heaven (Wuthering Heights), rather than Heaven into Hell. She further argues that Catherine is doomed to fall in the novel because, “Given the patriarchal nature of culture, women must fall — that is, they are already fallen because doomed \(sic\) to fall” (Gilbert 277). Stevie Davies, one of the most well known Emily Brontë scholars, stresses the tension between orthodox Christianity and women in the novel and claims that Emily Brontë rejects a patriarchal God and Christian religion in favor of a female deity rooted in nature. Other scholars examine the tension between Christian and pagan elements, rather than between women and God, in *Wuthering Heights*. They argue that the novel is most influenced by folk sources and elements of an ancient, pagan tradition, rather than Christian themes, and so come to the conclusion that *Wuthering Heights* is

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1 Gilbert’s work is one of the most radical interpretations of Emily’s novel. Gilbert also argues that *Wuthering Heights* is a “deliberate copy of *Frankenstein*” (250) by Mary Shelley as well as “an elaborate gloss on the Byronic Romanticism and incest fantasy of Manfred, written…from a consciously female perspective” (Gilbert 258).

2 Stevie Davies initially argues that Emily Brontë is fundamentally heretical in her writings and bases this argument on a feminist analysis of *Wuthering Heights* (see *Emily Brontë: Heretic* and the beginning of *Emily Brontë*) However, her argument evolves throughout her career. She eventually comes to argue that Emily Brontë is not a heretic, but a deeply spiritual person who only rejects the patriarchal aspects of the Christian religion while embracing an underlying faith (see *Emily Brontë*).

Emily Brontë has a history of rebelling against patriarchal influence. When Branwell and Charlotte controlled Angria, the world of the Gondal poems, with a male military figure, Emily and Anne create their own fictional kingdom ruled by Queen Augusta Geraldine Almeda.

3 Peter Grudin argues that several motifs of ancient folk tales are present in the novel such as the demon-lover, the changeling, the “fetch” (one’s double whose appearance predicts death), and the dead rising “to pursue earthly passions” (Grudin 390). He argues that there are three parallel supernatural scenes in *Wuthering Heights*—Lockwood’s girl ghost dream, Catherine’s delirium and death, and Heathcliff’s death—which create a pattern of the supernatural in the novel that adds up to a novel that is, at its core, profane.
far more pagan than it is Christian. Still others claim that Emily Brontë fundamentally rejects the notion of salvation and man’s subordinate position in the universe in favor of hope in life on Earth rather than in an afterlife. However, the arguments of these scholars tend to focus on *Wuthering Heights* and specific Gondal poems, rather than the entirety of Emily Brontë’s work and neglect the historical context in which Emily Brontë wrote.

The other primary body of scholarship on this subject argues that Emily Brontë is fundamentally Christian, even if she strays from or rejects elements of orthodoxy. These scholars, such as Simon Marsden and Marianne Thormählen, analyze the Biblical intertextuality of *Wuthering Heights* in conjunction with Brontë’s poetry as evidence that Emily Brontë was challenging orthodox religion while still espousing its main principles. In light of her deeply religious poetry, they argue, *Wuthering Heights* becomes a sacred continuation of this poetry. They attempt to place Brontë’s work within the broader religious context of the nineteenth century in order to anchor her body of literature within a larger conversation about the role of traditional religious practice and tenets during this period. However, these scholars, especially Thormählen, tend to focus too much on historical context as a justification, rather than focusing on the work itself, and so overlook images and scenes in *Wuthering Heights* which are very clearly un-Christian.

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4 Jill Ghnassia points to Brontë’s poetry as evidence of this hopelessness in an afterlife. She argues that Emily Brontë’s characters are “in open rebellion against all traditional Christian moral values” (Ghnassia 3), and reject Christian tenets, such as salvation through suffering, as inadequate for explaining human experience.

5 Michael Wheeler argues that “the language of Revelation” is a fundamental part of Emily Brontë’s poetry, and novel as an extension of that poetry (Wheeler 112). He classifies Catherine and Heathcliff’s view of Heaven as “revisionary,” and a rejection of “orthodox judgmental thinking,” rather than radical (Wheeler 117).
I argue that neither of these depictions of Emily Brontë is entirely accurate. *Wuthering Heights* itself can be seen as containing profane or heretical elements, such as the rejection of patriarchal Christianity and the profusion of the supernatural; however, when combined with Emily Brontë’s poetry a much fuller picture emerges. When analyzed together, in conjunction with the limited biographical details of Emily’s life and the religious currents of the nineteenth century, her corpus of literature is in fact fundamentally faith-based. Her writings rest on a juxtaposition of profane and sacred imagery which in some ways rejects, and in other ways celebrates, the Christian faith. The supernatural, for Emily Brontë, is not inherently profane since it too can be seen as part of creation. The natural world and the imagination, which can both reflect elements of the supernatural, are vital components of Brontë’s individual spirituality since both come from a divine God. Emily Brontë transforms and critiques, rather than rejects outright, traditional religious attitudes in order to mold her own personal faith, which is rooted in nature rather than a physical Church or specific doctrine.

**Chapter 2**

**Fathers, Scholars, and Poets:**

**Emily Brontë and the Church of England**

“No leading Brontë character experiences a moment of Heaven-sent illumination attending Church” — Marianne Thormählen (67)

Emily Brontë, as an artist, “remains extraordinarily remote from us” (Miles 68), and so it is difficult to determine her motivations in writing *Wuthering Heights* or her
poetry. So little is known about her life due to the value she placed on privacy. It is well known she did not like strangers or anyone outside of her family, which explains why so many of the biographical details scholars have collected come from Charlotte Brontë, rather than sources outside the family. In fact, “There is no recorded instance of Emily ever having befriended anyone outside the family” (Barker 181). Charlotte even edited some of Emily’s work before it was published in order to “protect” her sister, whom she deemed “a native and nursling of the moors” (Charlotte Brontë, Editor’s Preface to the 1850 ed. of *Wuthering Heights*). Thus, Emily Brontë’s religious motivations can be better understood by constructing the nineteenth-century attitudes, including those of her own family, which influenced her own. Growing up in nineteenth-century Britain, the Brontë children were exposed to the “enormous complexity and variety” (Thormählen 2) that characterized religious life during this time as the orthodoxy of the Church of England was continuously challenged, and so this complexity was a major influence on Emily Brontë.

Between 1800 and 1850, there were three major currents which characterized religious life in Britain, and so were deeply important for the Brontë siblings’ religious upbringing. Movements were emerging to transform the life of the Established Church. These movements followed and built upon the Evangelical revival of the eighteenth century, wherein the Church of England was challenged for its extravagance and for the neglectfulness, indifference, and nepotism of its clergymen. Patrick Brontë himself was an advocate for reforming the practices of eighteenth-century clergymen (Thormählen),

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6 Barker even argues that “we are almost totally dependent on Charlotte’s pen for a portrait of Emily” (Barker 392).
and so presented his children with their first example of religious disobedience.

Additionally, a major new Nonconformist community was created during this period, “as Methodism formally separated from the Church of England” (Thormählen 13), demonstrating that the Church of England was no longer the single arbiter of “true” religious doctrine.

Emily Brontë capitalizes on this idea in *Wuthering Heights*, where she rejects the idea of a doctrinal “truth” emanating from any one church. Catherine, in her delirium, dares Heathcliff to follow her to Wuthering Heights: “Find a way, then! not through that Kirkyard” (*Wuthering Heights* 112). Even in her delirious state, she acknowledges that what will ultimately reunite her with Heathcliff is not the church or Heavenly communion, but spiritual communion. At the end of the novel, Lockwood describes the metaphoric deterioration of the local kirk:

> My walk home was lengthened by a diversion in the direction of the kirk. When beneath its walls, I perceived decay had made progress, even in seven months — many a window showed black gaps deprived of glass; and slates jutted off, here and there, beyond the right line of the roof, to be gradually worked off in coming autumn storms. (*Wuthering Heights* 300)

The deterioration of the kirk reflects the perceived decline of the Church of England during this period, but is also a metaphor for Emily Brontë’s view of physical church spaces. For Emily Brontë, spirituality cannot be contained within the four walls of a church, hence the common Brontëan theme of, “[t]he absence of spiritual satisfaction in connexion with church attendance” (Thormählen 163). After finishing *Wuthering*
*Heights*, the reader should no longer assume that doctrine and traditional religious beliefs are the only paths to salvation, resurrection, and a relationship with God. Emily Brontë therefore erodes the power of the Church through her narrative without destroying the faith for which the Church stands.

The nineteenth century also saw increased tensions between the Church of England and Roman Catholicism. The “Papal Aggression” of 1850 and the increase in the population of Roman Catholics in Britain during this period, “resensitised [sic] the historically painful area along the boundary between the Anglican Church and Roman Catholicism” (Thormählen 13). Catholics, as members of British society, were largely distrusted since their allegiance seemed to be to a “foreign potentate” (Thormählen 27), rather than with Britain. For the Brontë sisters, however, the main problem with Roman Catholicism was its institutionalized hierarchy and its rejection of spiritual liberty, problems that were potent within the Church of England as well (Thormählen 25). Although Charlotte vehemently expressed her hostility towards the Roman Catholic church, Emily does not specifically critique Catholicism. This is presumably due to her “robust unconcern with dogma” (Thormählen 47). Her problem, therefore, was not with the Churches themselves but with the entire concept of organized religion and dogmatic practice.

More than these religious currents however, the writings of prominent religious thinkers of the period drastically impacted Emily Brontë’s view of religion to the point that she “resembled some of the leading religious thinkers of [her] time” (Thormählen 47). Despite growing up as a child of a Church of England minister, she was allowed a
“wide latitude for spiritual enquiry” (Thormählen 7), and so most likely devoured books and articles to supplement her study of the Bible and Milton. *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* and *Fraser’s Magazine*, popular nineteenth-century magazines, were both common sources for contemporary theological views. These magazines, together with books and other sources, exposed Emily to the religious currents of the nineteenth century, which had a strong impact on her writing. Thomas Erskine and F. D. Maurice, who were often featured in these magazines, asserted that religion was “the concern of the individual soul guided by God” (Thormählen 49, 47). This was echoed by Isaac Watts, who argued that religion should be based on a link between human affection and love of God. For Watts, faith necessitated “close and living communion with God” that “involves the whole human personality” (Thormählen 53). His ideas contributed to the emergence of the idea of Universal Salvation, which argued that a God of love could not possibly damn Creation to Hell. This idea was the core of the Brontë children’s religious upbringing since, “Patrick Brontë appears to have made the love of God, rather than the fear of hell, the ruling motive for obedience” (Thormählen 22) in his household.

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7 Anne and Charlotte often wrote of the doctrine of Universal Salvation, although that term had not yet become commonplace. They believed in a God who is fundamentally forgiving—one who loves all people and so would not condemn anyone to Hell since, “the idea of a God who marks a majority of human beings out for damnation from the outset is irreconcilable with belief in a God who is love itself” (Thormählen 87). Their interest in this new belief of salvation for all is best espoused by Helen Huntington in Anne’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, who strongly believes in and even prays for, the salvation of her abusive husband after his death: “[T]hank God I have hope—not only from a vague dependence on the possibility that penitence and pardon might have reached him at the last, but from the blessed confidence that, through whatever purging fires the erring spirit may be doomed to pass—whatever fate awaits it, still, it is not lost, and God, who hateth nothing that He hath made, will bless it in the end!” (*Tenant* 382). Anne and Charlotte even believed that the worst sinner could be made fit for Heaven through grace and God’s love.
Although she seems to have believed in a forgiving and loving God (since forgiveness is a major theme of her writing), and so would most likely support Universal Salvation, Emily Brontë does not advocate for any specific doctrines in such terms in her writings. As she expressed to Mary Taylor, religion was something deeply personal and unique to each person. Faith for Emily Brontë was not something that could or should be indoctrinated, and so it is not surprising that she did not advocate for any specific doctrines, in contrast to her sisters.

Thomas Arnold, another thinker of the period, believed that the priesthood was the “antichrist” (Thormählen 50). He argued that Christ should be the only mediator between humanity and God, which makes the priesthood unnecessary and antithetical to the position of Christ as mediator. Emily Brontë deeply respected her devout and hardworking father as a priest of the Wesleyan tradition (Barker) within the Church of England. However, Emily Brontë’s portrayal of Anglican priests and religious figures in *Wuthering Heights* demonstrates her awareness that the Anglican priesthood had become problematic for many Christians in the nineteenth century, and also demonstrates her belief that religious practice should not be based on dogma but on personal communion with and love of God. The local priest in the novel is lazy and unresponsive following the death of Mr. Earnshaw, refusing to come bless the body and assist the family until the next day. Dr. Kenneth, however, comes immediately. Even the priest’s “flock would rather let him starve than increase the living by one penny from their own pockets” (*Wuthering Heights* 19). This indicates that this priest does not have a personal
relationship with the congregation, but, rather, sees himself as separate from them, only emerging to perform absolutely necessary duties.

Emily Brontë’s views of the Anglican priesthood were also influenced by the leaders of Methodist Separatism. The Brontë sisters were less concerned with the beliefs of the Methodist “dissenters” than with the sectarianism which plagued the Church. This “severance of ties between the followers of Wesley and the Anglican establishment,” was particularly troubling to the Brontës since Patrick Brontë was a “follower of Wesley within the established church” (Heywood 54). In both an attempt to decipher the ideas of the separatists and to mock the idea of Separatism in and of itself, the Brontë sisters represented certain separatist leaders through caricatures in their works. In *Wuthering Heights*, Isabella Linton describes Heathcliff’s desperate “prayers” to the dead Catherine as “praying like a methodist” (*Wuthering Heights* 153), apparently associating certain practices (of separatists, not Wesleyan Methodists) with those of irrational people.

Emily Brontë’s anti-separatist attitudes are also reflected through her creation of Jabes Branderham, a character in Lockwood’s first dream while staying at Wuthering Heights. This Anglican priest, who embraces the fire-and-brimstone methods of the Old Testament over the theme of forgiveness in the New Testament, is most likely modeled after the Reverend Jabez Bunting (1779-1858), the main leader of the Separatist movement (Thormählen 17, Heywood 54). Bunting was a colleague of Patrick Brontë’s—they were both examiners at the Woodhouse Grove School—and so Emily would have heard of him through her father. Bunting’s preaching techniques and beliefs, especially
his advocacy of predestination, stood in stark relief to those of Patrick Brontë, who was a firm believer in forgiveness and the importance of enquiry. In the novel, Branderham incites violence and condemns Lockwood to damnation for daring to question his authority in a scene which may be modeled after “the rampage at St. Michael and All Angels, Haworth, against the Revd Samuel Redhead, Patrick’s rejected precursor as Perpetual Curate” (Heywood 54).

It is not only Branderham who is at fault for the violence of Lockwood’s dream, but Lockwood as well, who ignores Christ’s call to forgive and so perpetuates the separatist attitude Brontë is criticizing through Branderham. What incites Branderham to exclaim, “Brethren, execute upon him the judgment written!” and the congregation’s violent attack of Lockwood, wherein “the whole assembly, exalting their pilgrim’s staves, rushed round me in a body” (Wuthering Heights 19-20), is Lockwood’s resistance to Christ’s injunction to forgive one’s enemy “seventy times seven” times. “Seventy times seven” is repeated throughout the scene by both Lockwood and Branderham. However, neither man uses the quote as it is meant by Christ in the Gospel of Matthew: “Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:21-22). Both men misuse the quote to criticize each

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8 Arminianism was a theological current that developed in the Church of England which rejected the doctrine of predestination, among other things. Bunting is described as anti-Arminian by Christopher Heywood in his introduction to Wuthering Heights. Heywood also argues that Brontë also attacks Bunting’s anti-Arminian support for slavery with this scene—he saw slavery as a part of the Divine plan and predestination, while the Quakers and Wesleyan Methodists were some of the originators of the Emancipation movement in England.
other, illustrating their fundamental misunderstanding of Christ’s teachings of forgiveness. Lockwood’s dream then, “dramatis[e]s the alarm sounded by Henry Nelson Coleridge…” who “attacked the disruptive influence of Methodist Separatism” by claiming, “parent and child are watches on each other, sister is set against sister and brother against brother; each is on his guard against all, and all against each” (Heywood 54). Emily Brontë, therefore, anchors Lockwood’s dream in historical events to draw attention to both the ridiculousness and very real dangers of Separatism for the Church and faith.

Each of the Brontë sisters attempted to draw attention to the dangers of Separatism in her works, with Anne and Charlotte instead embracing a vision of a “Holy Protestant Alliance” which would encompass all Protestants (Thormählen 40). Unlike her sisters, Emily Brontë’s problem was not with specific practices but with regulated “practicing” altogether and with disputes over which sect’s doctrines and dogmas encompassed “true” faith. She therefore does not offer the same vision of an alliance of religious sects since she believed “true” faith was personal to each individual and so should not be indoctrinated, and certainly not disputed on a national scale.

In *Wuthering Heights*, Joseph is the most explicitly religious figure. However, he is simultaneously the most vocally religious of all the characters and the most violent. Joseph is both physically and verbally violent, and his words are usually hate-filled and threatening. He spews dogma in an attempt to indoctrinate his followers (Catherine and Heathcliff) through fear rather than cultivate in them a love of God. He is “misogynistic, patriarchal, caste-bound and of rancorous humour” (Davies, *Emily Brontë* 128). Joseph is
particularly aggressive in his attempts to force Catherine and Heathcliff to study the Bible. He yells at them repeatedly to read their Bibles, saying, “sit ye dahn, ill childer! they’s good books eneugh if ye’ll read ‘em; sit ye dahn, and think uh yer sowls!” (Wuthering Heights 17). However, Joseph’s fear tactics, which suggest that the children’s “sowls” will be damned if they do not read the Bible, have the opposite effect, leading Catherine to dramatically hurl her Bible “into the dog-kennel” (Wuthering Heights 17). Catherine records another of these attempts in her “diary”:

An awful Sunday!…All day had been flooding with rain; we could not go to church, so Joseph must needs get up a congregation in the garret… Heathcliff, myself, and the unhappy plough-boy, were commanded to take our Prayer-books, and mount — we were ranged in a row, on a sack of corn, groaning and shivering, and hoping that Joseph would shiver too, so that he might give us a short homily for his own sake. A vain idea! The service lasted precisely three hours. (Wuthering Heights 16)

The language Emily Brontë uses to describe this scene is forceful and aggressive, depicting a scene which could be a scene of kidnapping. The children are “commanded” to “mount” the stairs, and then sat only on a “sack of corn” in a strict row. Because of the rain flooding the moors, the “garret” is cold and damp, causing the children to shiver and groan with discomfort. The thought that Joseph, who advocates the religious creeds created by men, would let them leave out of sympathy is as “vain” as the creeds to which he subscribes. Since Emily Brontë believed in “the freedom of the individual to pursue truth and goodness unencumbered by restraints imposed by earthly institutions and their
human representatives” (Thormählen 52), she would consider any attempt to force religious belief onto others a violent action. Therefore, Sunday Bible study, when led by someone like Joseph, becomes a scene of torture and commands rather than a spiritual, personal experience with God.

Joseph represents an aspect of Christianity which is distasteful to Emily Brontë. He is violent, ignorant, and antagonistic towards the main female characters of the novel, especially Catherine. But more importantly, he attempts to push his own faith onto the children in the novel. Emily Brontë sees faith as deeply personal, an individual recognition of one’s relationship to the Divine, rather than something which can be indoctrinated. The only moment where Christian worship of the Divine is depicted as a “warm and shared” experience is between Catherine and Heathcliff following the death of Mr. Earnshaw: “The little souls were comforting each other with better thoughts than I could have hit on; no parson in the world ever pictured Heaven so beautifully as they did” (Wuthering Heights 38). True worship is not being forced to read the Bible in a cold, damp garret, but shared empathy based on the recognition that God is present in each individual. Emily Brontë’s depiction of worship, then, is a personal faith that comes naturally, in different forms for different people; therefore, the dogma and doctrine of the Christian Church are an attempt to repress this natural faith and individualistic recognition of God.

In addition to the influence of religious thinkers of the time, Emily Brontë also draws upon, and challenges, the poets of the Romantic period, especially Wordsworth. The characters of Wuthering Heights cling to nature as a source of spirituality, rather than
in contrast to spirituality, since, for Emily Brontë, the natural world of the moors is a source of solace and comfort: “When God consoles the Brontë characters…he does not transmit aid and guidance through Jesus Christ. His chosen vehicles of hope belong to…Nature as part of the cosmos…No leading Brontë character experiences a moment of Heaven-sent illumination attending Church” (Thormählen 66-67). The idea of a faith rooted in the natural world is reflective of Romantic poets, and some scholars even classify Emily Brontë as a “Romantic novelist” (Wheeler 112). However, the “Wordsworthian trope” many scholars apply to Emily Brontë, stemming from Charlotte Brontë’s 1850 preface to *Wuthering Heights*, is far too simple. Although Emily Brontë utilizes the ideas of natural faith and the spirituality of the natural world espoused by Wordsworth, she also challenges his Romantic pastoral ideal in favor of a more Darwinian landscape (Morse, “The Mark of the Beast”; Helsinger).

For Wordsworth and Coleridge especially, “religion” was not defined as a set of beliefs or precepts from the hierarchical Church of England but, rather, it was a feeling of spirituality brought on by reflection on the writer’s relation to the natural world. Emily Brontë’s portrayal of Catherine’s relationship to the moors as her Heaven reflects this Romantic belief. Catherine’s “substitution of the heath for an orthodox Christian heaven,”

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9 Charlotte wrote of the novel that it was “moorish, and wild, and knotty as a root of heath. Nor was it natural that it should be otherwise; the author being herself a native and nursling of the moors” (1850 Preface), leading many people to characterize Emily Brontë as Romantic.

10 Coleridge’s *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, published in 1840, contributed to the debate on Biblical authority among Protestants of the nineteenth century. In this work he argued that the Bible should be read as any other book — it has authority, but every word should not be read as literal truth since it is composed of books that were written across centuries, “under different dispensations, and for different objects” (Coleridge qtd. in Wheeler 14).
“displaces a…spiritual transcendence in favor of a consolation which is rooted in natural process” (Wheeler 62). In Wordsworth’s “Michael,” storytelling is able to strengthen “the cultural links that create a larger community of ‘natural hearts’” (Helsinger 178), that is, souls connected through commonality and through ties between a poet and readers. Emily Brontë draws upon this notion particularly in *Wuthering Heights*, where Catherine and Heathcliff’s souls are intertwined. In “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth describes the transcendence of “motion and a spirit, that impels/All thinking things, all objects of all thoughts,/And rolls through all things,” which figures prominently in Brontë’s depiction of an “Almighty ever-present Deity,” who is present as “Being and Breath” throughout creation, in her poem “No Coward Soul Is Mine.”

However, “[a]lthough Brontë is attracted by the romantic transcendence of individual consciousness that Wordsworth claims for poets and readers” (Helsinger 204), she rejects Wordsworth’s model of “a singular authorial identity,” which can use rural scenes to create one distinct national consciousness (Helsinger 204). Emily Brontë’s version of the natural world is also deeply Darwinian (Davies, *Heretic*), reflecting the predatory and destructive side of nature, in which humans can be complicit. This is best reflected through Heathcliff’s violent destruction of the lapwings during one of his and Catherine’s outings on the moors. Catherine recalls this event during her delirium: he “set a trap” over the lapwing nest, deterring the mother and so causing the starvation of the babies. All that was left was a nest, “full of little skeletons” (*Wuthering Heights* 108). Therefore, although Emily loves the natural world, her world is not the same as a Wordsworthian pastoral world; however, “to love Nature with this destructive reality
incorporated into the understanding rather than censored out, is the greater and more fulfilling love” (Davies, *Heretic*, 109). Emily Brontë’s depiction of the natural world in *Wuthering Heights* is therefore inflected by, but not akin to, the Romantic world portrayed by Wordsworth.

**Chapter 3**

Undermining the Duality of Profane and Sacred in *Wuthering Heights*

“But the country folks, if you asked them, would swear on their Bible that [Heathcliff] walks” — *Wuthering Heights* (299)

In crafting *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë relies on both profane and spiritual imagery in order to transform Christian faith into something personally relevant and individually powerful. She reinterprets Christianity in a subjective framework which stresses “individual consciousness above doctrinal or biblical theology” (Marsden, “Vain” 242). In doing so, she “undermines dualities such as God/Satan, Christ/anti-Christ and heaven/hell in order to emphasize that the consciousness of the infinite is a matter for personal vision and cannot be determined by systematic theologies” (Marsden, “Vain” 246). By undermining traditional dualities, Emily Brontë also undermines the distinction between what is profane and what is sacred in order to stress the importance of individual consciousness and personal faith in determining what is deemed either sacred or spiritual. The combination of profane and sacred imagery in *Wuthering Heights* thus showcases Emily Brontë’s ability to modify traditional religious themes to form a personal faith, one
which is based in the natural world and human relationships with each other and with the Divine.

In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë “excitedly snatches the pen from the right hand of the Almighty and makes left-handed amendment for his stories” (Davies, *Emily Brontë* 108). Her characters, then, become the mouthpieces for Emily Brontë in her novel:

She deployed her characters with a powerful flourish, but the conviction with which they move and speak is Emily Brontë’s, rather than their own…her creations are truly hers, they speak in her voice…Truly she played the ‘baby god’ with the inhabitants of her created world. (Miles 76)

Although Rosalind Miles was referencing the characters in Emily Brontë’s poetry, her assertion that Brontë’s characters “speak in her voice” is especially applicable to Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*, who becomes a mouthpiece for Emily Brontë’s exploration of spirituality in the novel. Catherine, like her Creator, Emily Brontë, takes the pen from the Almighty into her own hands by using her Bible for her own version of a testament. Catherine’s testament then, “can be viewed as metonymic for *Wuthering Heights* itself” (Morse, *Blackwell Companion*). Catherine’s diary is, “a Testament, in lean type…scarcely one chapter had escaped a pen-and-ink commentary — at least, the appearance of one — covering every morsel of blank that the printer had left…Some

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11 The phrase “baby god” is taken from Sydney Dobell’s review of *Wuthering Heights*, which was the only review of Emily’s novel which Charlotte liked (Barker).
were detached sentences; other parts took the form of a regular diary, scrawled in an unformed, childish hand” (*Wuthering Heights* 16). Her entries, “scrawled” into the margins of “a Testament,” symbolize her struggle to find a place in the world in which she lives, a world of strict religion and duty. Davies argues that, “The story with which she invades the Good Book is not only a signal act of disobedience to the omniscient and omnipotent Author but a pointed comment on the value of his account of how things stand in the world. Her story in practice marginalizes His” (*Emily Brontë* 108). However, Catherine is not fully defying God in this scene. Rather, she is utilizing God’s Word for her own purposes, thereby transforming the text from impersonal doctrine to a personalized account of her own relationship to others, the natural world, and God. The diary is inscribed, “Catherine Earnshaw, her book” (*Wuthering Heights* 16), demonstrating Catherine’s ability to take the religion Joseph has attempted to force on her and personalize it for her own spiritual experiences on the moors with Heathcliff; however, Lockwood describes Catherine’s journal as “well used, though not altogether for a legitimate purpose” (*Wuthering Heights* 16), indicating that he, as an outsider, cannot possibly understand Catherine’s personal faith, nor should he.

Just as Catherine uses the Bible as a framework for her own testament, Emily Brontë frames profane, often Gothic or Romantic, images in *Wuthering Heights* with religious imagery, and so ultimately presents them as not incongruous with spiritual faith. Lockwood, an outsider like the readers of the novel, is the arbiter of many of these images. During his first, and last, stay at Wuthering Heights, Lockwood manages to
conjure up Catherine’s spirit, which appears as if a ghost in response to his repetition of her name:

In vapid listlessness I leant my head against the window, and continued spelling over Catherine Earnshaw—Heathcliff—Linton, till my eyes closed; but they had not rested five minutes when a glare of white letters started from the dark, as vivid as spectres—the air swarmed with Catherines. (Wuthering Heights 15)

However, this image of ghostly Catherines is followed by an image of Biblical sacrifice. Lockwood awakens to find his “candle wick reclining on one of the antique volumes, and perfuming the place with an odor of roasted calf-skin” (Wuthering Heights 15). It is almost as if Lockwood has taken Catherine’s name in vain, for it is her testament which his candle scorches, and her spirit appears to his in a dream—a highly spiritual experience.

One of the most profane and violent scenes in the novel is Lockwood’s girl-ghost dream. Following Lockwood’s “conjuring” of the spirit of Catherine, Lockwood dreams again, and in doing so, encounters the ghost of Catherine Linton. When he attempts to stop the scraping of branches on his window, Lockwood feels the “fingers of a little, ice-cold hand,” and hears a young girl crying, “Let me in—let me in!” (Wuthering Heights 20). Claiming that, “Terror made [him] cruel” (20), Lockwood reacts violently in a scene which could have been taken straight from a Gothic novel:

[F]inding it useless to attempt shaking the creature off, I pulled its wrist on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and
soaked the bed-clothes: still it wailed, ‘Let me in!’ and maintained its tenacious gripe… ‘Let me go, if you want me to let you in!’…The fingers relaxed, I snatched mine through the hole, hurriedly piled the books up in a pyramid against it, and stopped my ears to exclude the lamentable prayer. (Wuthering Heights 20-21)

Lockwood’s reaction, some scholars have argued, stems from his innate inability to interact with women. The girl’s blood “soaked the bed-clothes,” indicating that this could also be a scene of sexual violence perpetrated by Lockwood. His refusal to help the girl, who is, disturbingly, only a child, is unsurprising given his inability to forgive “seventy times seven” times. He is unable to sympathize or understand, but, more than that, he reacts violently to that which he does not understand.

There is a burst of supernatural energy into the domestic space of Wuthering Heights as the girl-ghost seeks to come inside the bedroom, and the very bed she shared with Heathcliff as a child until they were separated by Hindley on the night of old Mr. Earnshaw’s funeral, and to Heathcliff who is her lost soul. In a response almost more eerie than the violence of the scene itself, the girl-ghost replies, “twenty years, I’ve been a waif for twenty years!” and “the pile of books moved as if thrust forward” (Wuthering

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12 Beth Newman argues that Lockwood’s reaction stems from “a relation between a gazing female ‘creature’ and castration anxiety,” brought about because the girl-ghost, like the girl at the sea-shore, challenges the traditional construction of the male gaze “as the privilege of a male subject, a means of relegating women…to the status of object” (Newman 1031). His attempt to cut off the girl-ghost’s hand, then, draws upon images of the beheading of Medusa, who embodies the supposed “dangers” of inverting the male gaze.

13 It comes as no surprise, after reading this scene, that Emily Brontë had a deep distrust of strangers who, she believed, could not understand her or her beliefs.
Heights 21). This scene foreshadows Catherine’s delirium where she dreams that she is back in Wuthering Heights in this very room:

I was laid alone, for the first time, and rousing from a dismal doze after a night of weeping—I lifted my hand to push the panels aside, it struck the table-top! I swept it along the carpet, and then, memory burst in…

supposing at twelve years old I had been wrenched from the Heights, and every early association, and my all in all, as Heathcliff was at that time, and been converted at a stroke into Mrs. Linton, the lady of Thrushcross Grange, and the wife of a stranger; an exile, and outcast, thenceforth, from what had been my world. (Wuthering Heights 110-111)

The girl-ghost who comes to Wuthering Heights is the fulfillment of Catherine’s delirium dream, bursting into Wuthering Heights just as Catherine’s memory bursts in during her delirium. Her hand striking the table top after attempting to “push the panels aside” becomes the girl-ghost’s hand against the glass pane, bleeding that she may attempt to reach into Wuthering Heights. Catherine’s soul and her physical body are intimately connected to place in the novel (Jarvis 35), since it is Wuthering Heights that is her true Heaven. She is able to transcend traditional boundaries since “personal power lasts after death” through “personalities that imagine themselves as constituted of both physical and metaphysical facets” (Jarvis 37). It is only through returning to Wuthering Heights, her Heaven, that her soul can be at peace, but Lockwood refuses to let her enter.

The girl-ghost embodies Catherine’s vision of herself as “an exile, and outcast,” wandering the moors for twenty years in search of her lost identity in Wuthering Heights
and Heathcliff. During her delirium, Catherine declares that the church may be thrown
down on top of her, but she “won’t rest till you [Heathcliff] are with me…I never
will!” (Wuthering Heights 112), and so gives rise to her own ghost, wandering the moors
in search of her soul and the self that she abandoned when she married Edgar Linton. She
seeks to return to her identity as Catherine Earnshaw, when she was “half savage and
hardy, and free” (Wuthering Heights 111), but she is unable to reunite with her soul, her
true identity, until her daughter marries Hareton at the end of the novel (Jarvis).14

Lockwood is terrified by this scene, due to sexual anxiety as much as his fear of
the unknown. However, Heathcliff responds to this scene by crying out for Catherine to
come to him “once more” (24), indicating his belief that Catherine really was present in
Wuthering Heights that night. Emily Brontë introduces this scene with the conjuring of
Catherine’s spirit, which is described in spiritual and Biblical terms. The girl-ghost scene
is, therefore, transformed from simply a ghostly encounter to a spiritual experience—the
attempted resurrection of Catherine’s spirit to her Heaven at Wuthering Heights.

When Catherine chooses her own version of heaven, the Heights, over Biblical
Heaven, she reflects the idea that a deep connection to the natural world can be a form of
faith in and of itself, since the idea of heaven is profoundly personal. She tells Nelly Dean
about a dream she had that she had been to Christian Heaven. However, she says,
“heaven did not seem to be my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to
earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out into the middle of the heath on

14 Claire Jarvis argues that the plot of Wuthering Heights “charts the elder Catherine’s movement
from Earnshaw to Linton, and the younger Catherine’s return to her mother’s original name
through marriage” (33).
the top of Wuthering Heights; where I woke sobbing for joy” (Wuthering Heights 71).

Catherine proclaims that she “should be extremely miserable” (Wuthering Heights 71) in Heaven, since the natural world, specifically the heath with Heathcliff, is the only place she can be truly happy. She rejects the orthodox version of Heaven in favor of her own heaven on the moors. Although this rejection could be read as deeply heretical, it is anchored within the Romantic spiritual tradition and of natural faith. Catherine’s choice of the natural world is not a choice against Heaven, but a recognition that the natural world, as part of creation, is spiritual and that the traditional Heaven is not the only choice in a narrative which stresses the importance of personal faith. A connection to the Earth is a higher principle than dogmatic religious creeds, raising the natural and supernatural to the level of spiritual and sacred.

Emily Brontë also frames this scene with familiar religious imagery. Before Catherine explains her dream to Nelly Dean, she remarks that, “I’ve dreamt in my life dreams that have stayed with me ever after, and changed my ideas; they’ve gone through and through me, like wine through water, and altered the colour of my mind” (Wuthering Heights 70). This phrasing alludes to several passages from the Bible, especially that of Jesus transforming water into wine at the wedding at Cana in the second chapter of the Gospel of John. The wine, representing Catherine’s dreams which include Heathcliff himself, in Catherine’s reference forever alters the color of the water, her mind, just as Jesus is able to forever alter the water at the wedding into wine.

Although it is a heretical dream to joyfully be banned from Heaven, since Catherine finds joy in her Lucifer-esque fall, Catherine considers it, and Heathcliff who
inspired the dream, the wine which has altered the color of her mind, thereby fixing this dream in the Christian tradition, and, by extension, her version of natural spirituality. Emily Brontë uses traditional religious imagery to describe this profane scene, underscoring that choosing an alternative Heaven is not contradictory to religious faith, but is in fact a profound assertion of personal faith. The allusion to wine going through water can also allude to images of blood and water in the Bible, particularly from Jesus’s crucifixion: “But when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out” (John 19:33-35). The wine in this sense can be the blood of Christ, thereby relating Heathcliff, the wine which alters Catherine’s mind, to Christ, and Catherine to God. This is deeply profane since it constructs human beings as divine; however, for Emily Brontë, human beings could be divine because God lives within creation, including human beings. Although seemingly incongruous to an outsider, Emily Brontë would have had no qualms about constructing her human characters as divine.

Throughout the novel, Catherine is made into a God-like figure, while Heathcliff and the moors complete this trinity as Christ and Holy Spirit. The natural world of the moors is inherently spiritual for Emily Brontë, and the characters of the novel cling to the natural world as a source of spirituality just as Christians rely on the Holy Spirit. It is the natural world which informs Catherine and Heathcliff’s relationship with divinity (and with each other) and so anchors their spirituality. In one of the most famous speeches in the novel, Catherine argues:
If all else perished, and *he* remained, I should still continue to be; and, if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the Universe would turn to a mighty stranger…my love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath—a source of little visible delight, but necessary. Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff. (*Wuthering Heights* 73)

The first segments of this speech indicate the inseparability of the trinity of Catherine, Heathcliff, and the natural world. This trinity is foundational for not only Catherine’s Universe, but the Universe of the novel. Their love is like the eternal rocks, an allusion to the rock of the Church, Peter. It is their relationship to one another and to the natural world that is the rock of Catherine’s personal faith. Just as God is ever present through the Holy Spirit, yet not visible, the foundational eternal rocks of Catherine’s spirituality are necessary although they are “a source of little visible delight.” Catherine’s use of the phrase “I am” in this passage alludes to Exodus 3:14, in which God tells Moses that his name is “I Am who I Am.” Again, at the end of the novel, Catherine’s name remains unspoken when a young boy claims to have seen the ghosts of “Heathcliff and a woman” (*Wuthering Heights* 299). As “I Am who I Am,” her name cannot be spoken out loud like the name of God.

Through these allusions to “I Am who I Am,” Emily Brontë connects Catherine to the Divine as well as to the trinity since God and Christ are one in the same, just as Catherine *is* Heathcliff. He is her “own being” (*Wuthering Heights* 73), “an existence of yours beyond you” (*Wuthering Heights* 72), in other words, her soul. Catherine does not just wish to have an existence beyond herself. She also wishes to be “incomparably above
and beyond” everyone and everything. She argues, “What were the use of my creation if I were entirely contained here?” (*Wuthering Heights* 141, 72). Through her statement of “I am,” Catherine is able to “transgress boundaries of gender, race, class, and nationality” (Morse, *Blackwell Companion*), since she is identified with a God who is above all boundaries and dualities. Catherine becomes a deity for Heathcliff in particular, but her God-like qualities are not reliant on Heathcliff as worshipper since her divinity stems from the God who lies within her. For Catherine, she is Heathcliff, but Heathcliff, since he sees Catherine as a deity, “never thinks that he is Catherine” (Helsinger 175).

If Catherine is the God of Emily Brontë’s narrative trinity, Heathcliff is a sort of perverted Christ figure as a follower of Catherine, his deity, just as Jesus was a follower of God. As Catherine is dying, Heathcliff keeps a vigil for “his idol” outside her window, during which he “dashed his head against the knotted trunk” of a tree, leaving “splashes of blood about the bark of the tree” (*Wuthering Heights* 148). This imagery, combined with the image that Heathcliff “wept tears of blood for Catherine” (*Wuthering Heights* 153), alludes to images of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane and the crucifixion. Before his crucifixion, Jesus experienced a vigil of torment where, “being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground” (Luke 22: 44).\(^{15}\) Heathcliff’s drops of blood follow his fervent prayers to his own deity, as he says, “Be with me always — take any form — drive me mad! only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you!” (*Wuthering Heights* 148). He implores, as Jesus did,

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\(^{15}\) Christopher Heywood argues that, like Christ, Heathcliff makes a pilgrimage towards his tragic self-recognition or *anagnorisis* as a slave, not of the explicitly identified God and Redeemer of the sacred texts, but of love” (Heywood 53), meaning his love for Catherine who is his deity.
for God to take away his pain and suffering and to remain with him always through
crying out to Catherine, and the blood which runs down his face suggests images of the
Crown of Thorns (Morse, “The Mark of the Beast” 186). However, unlike Jesus,
Heathcliff loses touch with his deity after she dies physically, resulting in his reliance on
cruelty and his inability to forgive Catherine. Heathcliff therefore becomes
simultaneously a demonic and Christ figure in the novel, but these are not “mutually
exclusive categories” (“Vain” 246), for Emily Brontë. At the end of the novel,
Heathcliff is reunited with his deity, and his soul, through death in his own version of
Heaven: “I have nearly attained my heaven” (Wuthering Heights 297). Heathcliff starves
himself to death, and so, building on the novel’s “distorted christology” (Marsden, “Vain”
244), he sacrifices himself to Catherine just as Christ sacrificed himself to God, in the
hopes of resurrection.

Heathcliff’s death, since he is a Christ figure in the trinity of Wuthering Heights, is both profane and highly spiritual. Nelly finds him dead the morning after he
announces, “I have nearly attained my heaven” (Wuthering Heights 297):

Mr. Heathcliff was there — laid on his back. His eyes met mine so keen
and fierce, I started; and then, he seemed to smile.

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16 Marsden argues that they are not mutually exclusive since the narrative undermines traditional
dualities in order to stress the importance of individual “consciousness of the infinite” (“Vain”
246).

17 Christopher Heywood, in his introduction to Wuthering Heights, discusses Christ as “a slave of
slaves to the passions,” and argues that Heathcliff embodies this specific image of Christ:
“Heathcliff dispenses with the redeemer’s faith, but still embodies his destiny…he is judged by
all who meet him to be a son of Ham, child of the devil, a useful laborer and slave” (Heywood
53).
I could not think him dead — but his face and clothes were washed with rain; the bed-clothes dripped, and he was perfectly still. The lattice, flapping to and fro, had grazed one hand that rested on the sill...I tried to close his eyes — to extinguish, if possible, that frightful, life-like gaze of exultation...They would not shut. (Wuthering Heights 298)

This scene is filled with profane references to the ghost of Catherine, coming to take Heathcliff with her through the open lattice. The open window and Heathcliff’s grazed hand harken back to Lockwood’s girl-ghost dream, where Catherine attempts to cross over into her and Heathcliff’s childhood room. However, this time, Heathcliff’s hand does not bleed like Catherine’s ghost’s does, since he is already dead. The absence of blood, then, suggests that it was Catherine’s spirit, or his, which opened the window or else his hand would have bled from the lattice “flapping to and fro” across it. The presence of Catherine’s spirit, coming to take Heathcliff’s, is also indicated by Brontë’s use of the phrase, “gaze of exultation.” This invokes Biblical language, and so further depicts Catherine as a deity whom Heathcliff lives, and dies, to worship and praise.

Heathcliff seems to smile with “parted lips and sharp, white teeth,” because he has finally been reunited with Catherine, and he therefore seems to “sneer” at Nelly’s attempts to close his eyes (Wuthering Heights 298), leading her to call for help from Joesph.

In juxtaposition to the profane imagery used in this scene, Emily Brontë frames the scene with religious imagery, as she does throughout the novel. Heathcliff’s face and the bed-clothes on which he rests are drenched, indicating a kind of baptismal rain. He has been baptized through Catherine, his deity, and therefore his spirit is resurrected and
able to walk the moors with her. Hence, his “gaze of exultation” is reflective of his personal faith in Catherine and their relationship. Their reunion in death, therefore, underscores the importance of spiritual communion, rather than doctrinal Heavenly communion.

The ending to Catherine and Heathcliff’s narrative itself contains a duality of profane and sacred imagery. The local people, “the country folks…would swear on their Bible” that Heathcliff and Catherine’s spirits continue to walk the moors after their deaths:

There are those who speak to having met him near the church, and on the moor, and even within this house —Idle tales, you’ll say, and so say I. Yet that old man by the kitchen fire affirms he has seen two on ‘em, looking out of his chamber window, on every rainy night since his death.

(Wuthering Heights 299)

Nelly Dean even tells of an encounter she had with a young boy and his sheep. The young boy “was crying terribly” and the “lams were skittish” after seeing “Heathcliff and a woman yonder, under t’ Nab” (Wuthering Heights 299). This is evocative of ghost stories or horror stories wherein the animals always know when a ghost is present or something dangerous is nearby, and so lends an element of folk tale to the ending of Heathcliff and Catherine’s story. However, the image of a shepherd boy with his sheep also invokes images of Christ, the shepherd of his “flock.” These two contrasting images would not have been incongruous for Emily Brontë since her goal is to undermine the duality of profane versus sacred. Lockwood’s bewilderment that “any one could ever
imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth” (Wuthering Heights 300), is intended, not to undermine the possibility of a resurrection of Catherine and Heathcliff’s spirits, but to demonstrate his inability to understand “the revisionary nature of their idea of heaven” since he is “[c]aught up in the bonds of orthodox judgmental thinking” (Wheeler 117).

This scene is also contrasted with the culmination of the marriage plot, “in a union that promises to be loving and fertile, an emblem of the civilized Christian values represented by Cathy’s education of Hareton, her gentle, forgiving kiss, and the garden they plant, displacing Joseph’s currant bushes” (Morse, Blackwell Companion). In these two scenes, therefore, the juxtaposition of sacred and profane continues between a civilized Christian ending and the profane ending of the ghosts of Catherine and Heathcliff walking the earth. Many scholars have been disappointed by this ending that, “involves the domestication…of a potent male figure (Hareton), not the release of the woman from the domestic sphere. Catherine’s efforts to claim kin with a reluctant Hareton even suggest…the persistence of the repressive familial structures underwriting domesticity” (Newman 1036). It appears to be a continuation of patriarchal norms and, therefore, contrary to Emily Brontë’s attempted overthrow of these norms throughout the novel. However, the relationship between Cathy and Hareton at the end of the novel actually “revises domestic relations to suggest mutuality, not the unequal power relations of male dominance” (Newman 1036). It is Cathy who teaches Hareton how to read and use language “in socially meaningful ways” (Newman 1036), and, in response to Cathy’s teasing, Hareton is able to laugh back at her, rather than ignore her gaze as Lockwood
does. Emily Brontë uses this scene, then, as an example of the possibility of “a destruction of the hierarchical positioning of male and female” (Newman 1037). Through this ending, which at first seems incongruous with the rest of the novel, Emily Brontë is therefore able to undermine not only the distinction between the profane and the sacred, but also the traditional hierarchical power structures of domestic life.

Emily Brontë therefore subverts traditional dualities by presenting the reader with two alternate endings. One, if Nelly is to be believed that “the dead are at peace,” is true to traditional Christian values of the afterlife and focuses on the marriage of Hareton and Cathy. The other, if the “country folks” are to be believed that the spirits of Heathcliff and Catherine continue to walk the earth, presents a second option for an afterlife that is not orthodox, but is still spiritual, since it is reliant on a faith rooted in the natural world and human relationships, including the community formed through shared stories and superstitions.

Chapter 4:
The “Biblical Hermeneutics” of Wuthering Heights

*Nelly, I am Heathcliff — Wuthering Heights (73)*

*Wuthering Heights* is anchored in Biblical themes and imagery, and so is, at its core, “sacred poetry” (Davies, *Emily Brontë* 120). The novel “has a theory of biblical hermeneutics embedded within its narrative structure;” therefore, although there are relatively few direct Biblical allusions in *Wuthering Heights*, Biblical text and themes are incorporated into the very narrative structure and syntax of the novel itself (Marsden,
“Vain” 237-238; 247). The very language Emily Brontë uses is thus vested with
“sacramental truth and ethical obligation” (Davies, *Emily Brontë* 123-124). One of the
opening scenes of the novel, in which Lockwood has an unfortunate encounter with
Heathcliff’s dogs, parallels Chapter 8 of the Gospel of Luke:¹⁸

> Half-a-dozen four-footed fiends, of various sizes and ages, issued from
> hidden dens to the common centre. I felt my heels and coat-laps peculiar
> subjects of assault; and, parrying off the larger combatants as effectually
> as I could with the poker, I was constrained to demand, aloud, assistance
> from some of the household in re-establishing peace…the hearth was an
> absolute tempest of worrying and yelping.
>
> Happily, an inhabitant of the kitchen made more dispatch; a lusty dame,
> with tucked-up gown, bare arms, and fire-flushed cheeks, rushed into the
> midst of us flourishing a frying-pan; and used that weapon, and her
> tongue, to such purpose, that the storm subsided magically, and she only
> remained, heaving like a sea after a high wind, when her master entered on
> the scene.
>
> "What the devil is the matter?" he asked, eyeing me in a manner that I
> could ill endure after this inhospitable treatment.

¹⁸ Marsden’s “Vain Are the Thousand Creeds” initially brought this parallel to my attention, and I
drew on his analysis to form my own.
"What the devil, indeed!” I muttered. "The herd of possessed swine could have had no worse spirits in them than those animals of yours, sir.” (Wuthering Heights, 4-5, emphasis mine)

Lockwood describes the assault and his rescue in terms which allude to Jesus’s calming of the storm in Luke 8: 22-25. When the disciples, in great danger of drowning from a storm, appeal to Jesus for help: “He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm.” The reference to a “herd of possessed swine” is an allusion to Luke 8: 26-39, when Jesus exorcizes demons from a possessed man, sending them instead into a herd of pigs who go on a violent rampage before drowning in the nearby water. However, what is most interesting about these allusions is that they follow the exact narrative order of chapter 8 of the Gospel of Luke, despite the fact that the two stories are only related by virtue of placement in the Biblical text. Emily Brontë is able to not only reference the Bible through allusions, but mimic its very structure, reworking the Bible in the actual text of Wuthering Heights.

Besides mimicking the structure and syntax of Biblical stories, the plot of Wuthering Heights “confirm[s] fundamental Christian tenets” (Thormählen 6), through themes of forgiveness and resurrection. Forgiveness is one of the most important tenets of Christianity. When asked how many times an individual must forgive someone who has wronged him, Jesus replies, “seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:22). Emily Brontë does allude to this passage in order to mock self-righteous priests through the character of Jabes Branderham;¹⁹ however, it is clear that Brontë believes forgiveness is vital to

¹⁹ See page 13 of this text
experiencing a relationship with others and with God, since Heathcliff’s torment throughout the novel is due to his inability to forgive. Heathcliff’s life in the novel illustrates that an unwillingness to forgive leads to unhealthy hatred, closing “the heart to love, human and Divine, received and bestowed” (Thormählen 134). Even when Catherine is dying, Heathcliff berates her for abandoning him:

[Y]ou deserve this. You have killed yourself. Yes, you may kiss me, and cry; and wring out my kisses and tears. They’ll blight you — they’ll damn you. You loved me — then what right had you to leave me?…Because misery, and degradation, and death, and nothing that God or Satan could inflict would have parted us, you, of your own will, did it….It is hard to forgive. (Wuthering Heights 142)

Heathcliff, although he loves Catherine, declares that he cannot forgive her for leaving him for someone she did not love. It was entirely her fault — he believes that she has betrayed her very soul. He says, “I love my murderer—but yours! How can I?” indicating that he can forgive her for what she has done to him (separating him from his soul), but can never forgive her for what she has done to herself. According to Heathcliff, nothing could have parted them, not even death or any action of God, since their lives were so intertwined as to constitute a spiritual relationship in the eyes of Emily Brontë.

After Catherine’s death, Heathcliff continues to take his revenge through his treatment of her daughter, Cathy. While Cathy’s father is dying, Heathcliff locks her in Wuthering Heights with Nelly, and forces her to marry his son, Linton: “Go to Linton now, as I told you; and cry at your ease! I shall be your father to-morrow — all the father
you’ll have in a few days” (Wuthering Heights 239). When Cathy refuses to do as he says, and demands to go home, Heathcliff “administered with a shower of terrific slaps on both sides of the head, each sufficient to have fulfilled his threat” (Wuthering Heights 239). Before her death, and especially during her childhood, Catherine had acted as a moral restraint on Heathcliff. This restraint is best indicated by Catherine’s description, during her delirium, of Heathcliff’s treatment of the lapwings:

It [the lapwing] wanted to get to its nest, for the clouds touched the swells, and it felt rain coming. This feather was picked up from the heath, the bid was not shot — we saw its nest in the winter, full of little skeletons. Heathcliff set a trap over it, and the old ones dare not come. I made him promise he’d never shoot a lapwing, after that, and he didn’t. (Wuthering Heights 108)

Although Heathcliff has the ability for cruelty inside of him, Catherine is able to restrain him; however, with Catherine’s death, Heathcliff loses the spirituality which came from a relationship with Catherine because, as he says, “I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!” (Wuthering Heights 148). With Catherine’s death, he has lost his soul, and so lost the ability to forgive and to love, resulting in his cruel and immoral behavior throughout the second volume of the novel. Although his actions seems inexcusable, Emily Brontë, through Heathcliff’s cruelty, portrays the dangers of a soulless existence. Heathcliff therefore lives this soulless existence until he is reunited with Catherine, and therefore his soul, through death. Only then, can he can regain a sense of morality and die with a “gaze of exultation” (Wuthering Heights 298).
While the narrative often centers on themes of forgiveness, the cyclical nature of the plot of *Wuthering Heights* is based upon a Christian theme of resurrection. The second volume reworks and retells the first since the original generation — Mr. Earnshaw, Hindley and Frances, Catherine, Edgar and Isabella Linton — have now all died, with the exception of Heathcliff, “[t]he guest was now the master of Wuthering Heights” (*Wuthering Heights* 165), and Nelly, who is perpetually both inside and outside the narrative. Despite her death in the first volume of the novel, Catherine’s spirit lives on both through her resurrection in Cathy and Hareton and through her image, which Heathcliff sees everywhere he turns: “I cannot look down to this floor, but her features are shaped on the flags! In every cloud, in every tree — filling the air at night, and caught by glimpses in every object by day, I am surrounded with her image!” (*Wuthering Heights* 288). Therefore, Catherine’s resurrected spirit is present throughout the rest of the narrative.

Catherine and Heathcliff rise from the dead to walk the earth together in the most literal sense of resurrection. However, Catherine is also resurrected through Cathy and Hareton. For the Victorians, the eyes were not only the window to the soul, but the embodiment of the soul. When, therefore, Nelly Dean observes of Cathy and Hareton that, “their eyes are precisely similar, and they are those of Catherine Earnshaw” (*Wuthering Heights* 286), this is Emily Brontë telling her Victorian audience that Catherine’s soul and spirit live on through the next generation in a kind of resurrection. She further underscores this point by setting Cathy and Hareton’s wedding date on New Year’s Day, a symbol of new birth and regeneration. This is also a biological
resurrection since the union of Hareton and Cathy reflects their inheritance of Catherine’s spirit through their bodies.20

In the very last line of *Wuthering Heights*, Lockwood remarks that he “wondered how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth” (*Wuthering Heights* 300); however, Emily Brontë has done everything in her power as an artist and Creator of narrative, to ensure that the reader can very much imagine an ending which does not fall under traditional religious views of death and the afterlife. Since faith is personal and subjective, the meaning of death espoused by the Church may not be the meaning espoused by individuals. It most certainly was not espoused by Catherine and Heathcliff, whose faith is rooted in the natural world rather than in a traditional conception of Heaven. Therefore, the prevalence of the profane in *Wuthering Heights* is not incompatible with the Biblical intertextuality of the novel. In fact, its abundance indicates Emily Brontë’s transformation of traditional Christianity into something deeply personal and spiritual, just as Catherine transformed the Bible into her own Testament.

*Wuthering Heights* is anchored in fundamental Christian tenets and a strong belief in personal faith through an individual relationship with the Divine. Emily Brontë constructs the novel using a duality of profane and sacred imagery in order to undermine the validity of such dualities in the face of individuality. Faith is personal for Emily Brontë, and so no one but herself can determine what is sacred and what is profane for

20 This scene is also a disarming of Heathcliff. He is taken aback by his realization that Catherine’s spirit lives on through Cathy. This realization then provokes his self-starvation and death.
her own personal beliefs. Because of the inherently personal nature of faith, it is especially not the job of the Church to determine this through doctrine or creeds. Faith is determined through individual consciousness of one’s own relationship with God, and a recognition that God lives within individuals and within the natural world. *Wuthering Heights* is both an exploration of these principles and Emily Brontë’s own Testament, and so it is, at its core, a spiritual text.

**Chapter 5**

**The Sanctity of the Imagination in Emily Brontë’s Poetry**

*The world within I doubly prize...*

*Where thou, and I, and Liberty,*

*Have undisputed sovereignty — “To Imagination”*

Emily Brontë’s juvenilia and her poetry began the literary exploration of spirituality and imaginative power which culminated in her creation of *Wuthering Heights*. The narrative world of Angria, and then Gondal when Emily and Anne split to create their own female-ruled kingdom, was created by the Brontë children as a literary kingdom for their “Young Men:” 12-inch wooden toy soldiers Patrick Brontë brought his children. The poetic stories they created centered on themes of the power of the imagination, nature, religion, love, imperialism, imprisonment, and betrayal, and Emily continued writing elements of the Gondal saga well into her young adulthood (Barker). Emily had two separate poetry notebooks. The notebook entitled *Gondal Poems* contains forty-four poems of the over one hundred and eighty poems she wrote during her short
life (Barker). However, because the Gondal saga was such a large part of Emily’s literary life, it is often difficult to determine which of her poems are from the Gondal series and which are not. Rosalind Miles, in a direct reference to a passage from *Wuthering Heights*, argues that the “Gondal saga must have gone through Emily Brontë like wine through water, and altered the colour of her mind” (Miles 70). The themes of Angria and Gondal permeate the rest of her poetry that intensely reflects the ideas of poetic power and imagination in relation to divinity that would later inform the creation of the spirituality of *Wuthering Heights*.

The spirituality and emotion of Emily Brontë’s poetry evoke a “sense of a vast existence beyond the individual” (Hardy 115), yet at the same time advocate for the presence of divinity within oneself. Many of these poems focus on the power of the imagination and the natural world rather than on explicit spirituality or religious beliefs; however, just as the natural world and the supernatural are spiritual because they are a part of creation, for Emily Brontë, the imagination emanates from the divine, and is therefore inherently spiritual. Imagination, nature, and spirituality are so intertwined for Emily Brontë that she “can only imagine spirit through nature” (Hardy 115). However, the opposite is also true wherein the divine emanates from both the imagination and the natural world—the act of imagining is a divine act.

Like *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë’s poetry was deeply influenced by the Romantic poets who saw nature and the supernatural as divine elements of creation which enable individuals to connect with God on a personal level. This view, however, was in direct contrast to many poets of the Victorian period who viewed God as “out of
reach,” since they saw no “room for God in the city” (Miller 207, 209). Emily Brontë’s poetry, although it does reflect the themes of isolation and alienation which were prominent in poetry of this period, mainly belongs to the Romantic spiritual tradition. This tradition attempted “to re-establish communication” with God, through the creator-poet who, in order to re-establish this connection, often had to be “more extreme, more extravagant, as the gap between man and the divine power seems greater” (Miller 211, 212), for the nineteenth-century poets.

Many of Emily Brontë’s spiritual poems, especially those within the Gondal saga, are often “extreme” in that the characters who reflect on Romantic themes of spirituality, rediscovering God, and discovering the imagination and poetic identity are often imprisoned or experiencing deep feelings of isolation or loss. For example, in “The Prisoner,” Emily Brontë creates a narrative where her speaker wanders idly into “the dungeon-crypts” (1) of some unknown place, and commences a conversation with one of the prisoners. The speaker asks the prisoner why she has been “Confined in triple walls” and bound down with fetters (11-12), when she does not look fearsome. The prisoner replies, however, that the “bolts and irons strong,” even if they were “forged in steel,”

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21 The Prisoner is a fragment of the Gondal story of Julian M. and A.G. Rochelle. In this story, Julian encounters Rochelle, a childhood friend in his own dungeons. He manages to get her released, and the two fall in love. When Emily Brontë revised the Gondal poem for publication in 1846, she “removed twelve lines that open the poem and connect it to other poems about visionary experience” as well as twelve lines from the middle and 62 lines from the end of the poem, replacing these with the current final stanza which is much less hopeful and romantic since the visitor leaves the prisoner in the dungeon, believing she is beyond help (Gezari 73). Interestingly, the original Gondal poem posits Julian as the main character and so, by removing the lines that tell his story, Emily Brontë places the female prisoner and her powers of imagination at the forefront of the poem.
could not hold me long” (19-20). She has the power of imagination, which comes to her every night “with western winds, with evening’s wandering airs, / With that clear dusk of heaven that brings the thickest stars” (37-38), and he offers her “eternal liberty” and “Hope” (36, 35), through visions created by the imagination:

Then dawns the Invisible; the Unseen its truth reveals;

My outward sense is gone, my inward essence feels:

Its wings are almost free — its home, its harbour found,

Measuring the gulf, it stoops, and dares the final bound. (49-52)

Imagination for the prisoner is her means of escape, even if it means death, because existing in “the Unseen” and eternal prevents her from experiencing the agony which comes with being “flesh” (56). Her soul is her means of escape through the divine visions it can create through her imagination. However, it is only when she allows her soul to release into “the Invisible,” “the Unseen,” or death — an extreme state of non-being — that she can connect with the eternal and with the Divine.

Emily Brontë’s spiritual poetry explores the power of nature and the power of the imagination in an attempt to navigate her own poetic and spiritual identity. These poems, which include “To Imagination,” “Plead for Me,” and “The Visionary,” reflect Emily Brontë’s “internalization of poetic power” (Homans 105). She recognizes that this power stems from a “God of visions” (“Plead for Me” 39), but it is contained within herself as her own divine power. Her poems, then, are “negotiations for poetic identity” (Homans

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22 Most of these titles come from Charlotte, who edited Emily’s poems for publication (with input from Emily on any textual modifications).
108), as well as an exploration of spiritual identity and the relationship between her own imagination and creative power and God from whom her imagination originally stems.

The poem “To Imagination” is one of the clearest instances where Emily Brontë attempts to internalize poetic power. She addresses her own imagination and poetic capabilities as her muse, rather than any sort of external source. Her imagination is personified as a “true friend” (5), with a “kind voice” (4), that can call the speaker back from despair. The power of the imagination creates an internal world, where the hatred and darkness of the external world cannot reach the “bright, untroubled sky/Warm with ten thousand mingled rays/Of suns that know no winter days,” within her own soul (15-18), and where Emily Brontë’s imagination has “undisputed sovereignty” (12). In this poem, “the moments of greatest power occur when this imagination voids the distinction” between these internal and external worlds (Homans 113). Emily Brontë associates her own imagination with the “real worlds” it is able to create, giving it even more poetic power (30). For Emily Brontë, the imagination is “a voice divine” (29), a creative force, but also a powerful spiritual presence that is “ever there” (25), to give her hope and allow her to create as if by divine power.

As in Wuthering Heights where the natural world is the Holy Spirit of the trinity Emily Brontë creates, nature is the spirit muse for the poet-creator in the poem “Stars.” It is a very specific form of nature which can act as this spiritual muse: it is only the nighttime, moon-lit and starry sky which, as a feminine force of nature, can inspire Emily Brontë, the female artist. The nighttime sky in the poem is put in stark contrast with the masculine and aggressive sun-lit sky of the daytime. The stars are divine, “solemn light,”
with “glorious eyes…gazing down” (29, 5-6), and the night itself is “gentle” (39). At the other extreme, the sun is depicted as “Blood-red,” a “fierce” and “hostile light”/That does not warm, but burn” (21, 22, 41-42). Emily Brontë here is advocating for a personal, feminine Spirit as the source of poetic power.

This feminine form of nature can then act as a muse for the female artist. She is able to be “at peace,” at night, and she is sustained by the stars, “As they were life” (9, 10). The comfort which comes from being surrounded by feminine nature becomes a spiritual experience for the female-poet:

Thought followed though, star followed star,
Through boundless regions, on;
While one sweet influence, near and far,
Thrilled through, and proved us one! (13-16)

The power of the imagination is reliant on the power of the natural world with which Emily Brontë becomes “one.” However, in contrast to other poems such as “To Imagination,” the masculine sun is able to “break/So great, so pure, a spell” (17-18), because this connection between imagination and nature externalizes her poetic power.

In “Plead for Me,” Emily Brontë wrestles with her relationship as an artist-Creator, with the divine power of imagination, to the “God of visions” (39) who grants her this power. She pleads with God to tell her why she should believe in Him\(^{23}\) and choose Him over “Stern Reason” (6), “glory’s wreath and pleasure’s flower” (15), and even her own divine soul:

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\(^{23}\) I write God as masculine here, but Emily Brontë would probably be just as happy to use “Her” rather than “Him,” when referring to her God.
And am I wrong to worship, where
Faith cannot doubt, nor hope despair,
Since my own soul can grant my prayer?
Speak, God of visions, plead for me,
And tell why I have chosen thee! (36-40)

In this last stanza, the feelings the speaker has been wrestling with throughout the poem come to a climax. She directly addresses God, asking for clarity about her relationship to Him. Emily Brontë argues that there is a presence of the Divine in her individual soul. However, she cannot understand her relationship to God given that presence. Emily Brontë knows she has been told to pray to God for blessings and hope, but, since she also knows that God is present within her own soul, she wants to grant her own prayers and blessings through her own divine powers of imagination. Although she is challenging God’s authority through a form of rebellion — which she declares in line 35 — she wants God to plead for her to remain with Him. Emily Brontë wants God to fight for her.

This poem also conflates God with imagination itself. The poet, after once pursuing wealth, power, and glory as “Beings Divine,” decides to turn away from seeking these things. Instead, she “gave [her] spirit to adore/Thee, ever-present, phantom thing” (24). This “phantom thing” could be God or imagination, which she pursues for her own sake rather than for glory or praise. She then addresses God as imagination, which is her slave, comrade, and king:

A slave, because I rule thee still;
Incline thee to my changeful will,
And make thy influence good or ill:

A comrade, for by day and night

Thou art my intimate delight (26-30)

It would be disturbing to think of God as a slave whom Emily Brontë could rule; however, if she is addressing God as imagination, which is suggested by the phrase “God of visions,” then this stanza becomes more clear. It is her own imaginative power, which represents the Divine within her, that she is able to rule and use for either “good or ill.” It is her imagination, as well as its Divine source, which is her “intimate delight” as a Creator. If Emily Brontë is addressing God as imagination as I argue here, then in the final stanza in which she begs God to plead for her, she is asking to be reminded of the source of her power. Although she is able to grant her own prayers through her poetic powers, these powers only derive from the presence of the Divine within her and she has to be assured of their efficacy: “Her soul may be synonymous with her God of visions, but without certainty of her power over language visions are of no use for poetry and she is alienated from her poethood” (Homans 115). The source of her poetic power and imagination is still an internal source, but it is an internal source granted and made possible by an external God.

The idea of individualistic spirituality and the notion of an internal divinity is made most explicit in the poem “No Coward Soul Is Mine.” The first stanza of the poem advocates a God who is ever-present in the natural world:
No coward soul is mine
No trembler in the world’s storm-troubled sphere
I see Heaven’s glories shine
And Faith shines equal arming me from Fear (1-4)

The God of this poem is one of “wide-embracing love” (17), who contains “Every Existence” (24), and all “Being and Breath” (27), including that of the speaker. The knowledge that God is personally present within the speaker gives her power. Her faith “shines equal arming [her] from Fear” (4), which is why there is no cowardice in her soul, the root of her faith. Emily Brontë continues to explore this notion of God, who is not only present in the natural world, but within Emily Brontë herself:

O God within my breast
Almighty ever-present Deity
Life, that in me hast rest
As I Undying Life, have power in Thee (5-8)

Emily Brontë boldly declares that God is not “out of reach,” but exists within her “breast,” and within her soul. Her Deity is ever-present, protecting her and giving her “Faith,” because God is “Deep down, concealed within [her] soul” (“My Comforter” 6). She never has to look externally to find God, just as her “own soul can grant” her prayers in “Plead for Me.” This “God within [her] breast,” therefore, gives her power, both the power of the imagination and the power of “Faith.” This power however, is active rather than passive, as indicated by her choice of syntax: “As I…have power in Thee.” She does not receive power from God — she has power in God. Since she is in a sense divine,
since God is present within her very soul, her power also comes directly from herself and her own divinity.

Despite advocating for an “ever-present Deity,” Emily Brontë rejects orthodoxy in this poem, and instead advocates for a natural faith based solely on a personal connection with God through her own internal divine soul:

Vain are the thousand creeds
That move men's hearts, unutterably vain,
Worthless as withered weeds
Or idlest froth amid the boundless main (9-12)

It would be easy to take “Vain are the thousand creeds” out of the context of the poem to argue that Emily Brontë rejects Christian faith itself, since she rejects the creeds on which it is based. However, in the context of the poem as a whole, this line does not advocate for an outright rejection of Christian faith. Rather, it rejects the patriarchal and hierarchical doctrines of the Church of England, which she later continues to explore and reject in *Wuthering Heights*. Emily Brontë, therefore, “doesn’t rebel against Christianity so much as press beyond it” (Gezari 3). This is made clear by what immediately follows the “Vain are the thousand creeds” stanza syntactically:

To waken doubt in one
Holding so fast by thy infinity
So surely anchored on
The steadfast rock of Immortality (13-16)
These two stanzas are one complete thought. When the phrase is taken in its entirety then, it recognizes that the creeds of orthodox religion are vain and worthless but that, despite their futility, the speaker’s personal faith is undeterred and remains firmly “anchored on/The steadfast rock of Immortality.” The creeds are vain because of the way orthodox Christianity attempts to put faith, which should be personal, into dogma, not because the inherent principles underlying the creeds are “worthless.” This poem reflects Emily Brontë’s complete “impatience with received doctrine and conventional belief” (Gezari 3-4). She is making the argument that, “[b]y attempting to assign a fixed meaning to the concept of ‘God,’ and by encouraging the believer to approach God through intellectual assent rather than self-conscious feeling, the creeds act as handicaps to true faith” (Marsden, “Vain” 241). She does not reject faith but rather the controlled and dogmatic means of practicing faith that are advocated by the Church of England.

Emily Brontë continues her argument in favor of a personal faith by describing her own version of a Creator and Sustainer God in the final stanzas of the poem:

With wide-embracing love

Thy spirit animates eternal years

Pervades and broods above,

Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates and rears

Though Earth and moon were gone

And suns and universes ceased to be

And thou wert left alone

Every existence would exist in thee
There is not room for Death
Nor atom that his might could render void
Since thou art Being and Breath
And what thou art may never be destroyed. (13-28)

Her God is not contained within creeds or dogmas, but is an active participant in the world and within individual consciousness. For Emily Brontë, “God cannot be known through systematic theology but, rather, must be experienced within the individual consciousness” (Marsden, “Vain” 241), or within the natural world of creation. Emily Brontë’s use of active verbs in this section indicates the importance of an active, Creator God. God “pervades, broods, changes, sustains, dissolves, creates, and rears.” God is metamorphic, unceasing and steadfast but also constantly changing and creating. This creation, importantly, includes both the natural world and the world of individual consciousness, where imagination is a vital component of creation and in the artist’s ability to create.

If God is active rather than passive, then encountering God must also be an active process. Rather than watching a Church service, robotically reciting prayers that contain predetermined words, this poem “affirms that by openness to spiritual and imaginative perception the subject might know itself as a participant in the creative life of the eternal” (Marsden, Emily Brontë 72). For Emily Brontë, spiritual experiences do not take place in a church, but within one’s own consciousness through the power of the imagination and outside in the natural world that God is actively creating. Importantly, since God is within her breast, Emily Brontë is also actively creating the world in which she lives.
“No Coward Soul Is Mine” greatly influenced the language and themes of *Wuthering Heights*, and the poem can also be read as an outline of Heathcliff and Catherine’s relationship. They blatantly defy Joseph’s authority as a “teacher” of the Gospel, rebelling against his form of Christianity. Heathcliff, at the time of his death, continues this rebellion by declaring, “No minister need come; nor anything be said over me — I tell you, I have nearly attained my heaven, and that of others is altogether unvalued and uncoveted by me!” (*Wuthering Heights* 297). Catherine and Heathcliff embody and advocate for the kind of personal faith espoused in “No Coward Soul Is Mine,” which declares the creeds of men vain and “worthless as withered weeds” (11). Catherine is Heathcliff’s deity, the God within his breast. Their faith is in each other, the natural world of creation, and the Divine Creator who is present in human relationships and creation. When Catherine tells Nelly, “I am Heathcliff” (*Wuthering Heights* 73), she recognizes that her soul and Heathcliff’s are not only connected but shared. Just as God is present within the speaker of the poem, “arming [her] from Fear” (4), Heathcliff and Catherine’s souls are the “Almighty ever-present Deity” (6) for one another, giving them power in and through each other. Since they are divinely connected, Catherine’s love for Heathcliff “resembles the eternal rocks beneath” (*Wuthering Heights* 73), which parallels the declaration by the speaker of the poem that she is, “So surely anchored on/The steadfast rock of Immortality” (15-16). Heathcliff is Catherine’s rock, and she is his, just as God is the rock for the speaker of the poem.

The God of the poem is “ever-present,” the “Being and Breath” of life and therefore the very foundation of the universe. This God, then, “may never be
destroyed” (27-28), because God’s spirit animates all of creation for all time. God is present everywhere and in everything, and so “There is not room for Death/Nor atom that his might could render void” (25-26). This idea of a transcendent, ever-present Spirit of God is paralleled in *Wuthering Heights*, which was published around the same time but was actually written later than the poem. In the novel, Catherine argues that there must be some sort of “an existence of yours beyond you” (*Wuthering Heights* 72), which would enable her to transcend the physical world. Her declaration that she “shall be incomparably beyond and above you all,” not just the characters in the novel but everyone and everything of this world (*Wuthering Heights* 141), is itself a statement of Romantic transcendence. However, she is able to follow through on her promise, since Catherine’s spirit continues to pervade the novel. Even when she is ultimately reunited with Heathcliff, their spirits continue to walk the earth since, “There is not room for Death,” in God’s creation.

In the novel, Catherine desperately attempts to explain to Nelly that her existence is intimately tied to Heathcliff’s existence since their souls are intertwined and, even, one in the same: “If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the Universe would turn to a mighty

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24 *Wuthering Heights* was written in 1845, published in 1846. The collection of poetry, which included “No Coward Soul is Mine,” was published in 1846, but only after Charlotte discovered Emily’s poetry much earlier (Wheeler). Although there is no exact date for when Emily wrote the poem, it can be assumed that she wrote it before *Wuthering Heights* since she did not write any poetry while writing the novel (Barker), and because Emily took the time to edit her “discovered” poetry before allowing Charlotte to publish it.
stranger” (*Wuthering Heights* 73). Catherine’s statement echoes, almost exactly, the following stanza from “No Coward Soul Is Mine”:

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Though Earth and moon were gone
And suns and universes ceased to be
And thou wert left alone
Every Existence would exist in thee (21-24)
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Catherine, in fact, is predicting her own delirium which is the result of her abandonment of Heathcliff for Edgar Linton, and therefore, the abandonment of her true soul as Catherine Earnshaw. Her world is, in fact, destroyed and turned “to a mighty stranger” without Heathcliff, who is just as much her eternal rock as she is his. Emily Brontë uses this same language purposefully to tie Catherine and Heathcliff’s relationship to the spiritual and divine since their relationship, and their relation with the natural world, is the anchor of their personal faith.

Through her poetry, Emily Brontë explored and scrutinized her understanding of spirituality, oftentimes through dramatic scenes of imprisonment or loss in the Gondal saga, in order to understand her relationship to God. In these poems, she advocates for the power and sovereignty of the imagination which gives her the ability to create as an artist; however, she also acknowledges that the imagination and, therefore, her poetic power, comes from God. Rather than promoting her own sovereignty above that of God, Emily Brontë recognizes the God within her breast, which gives her power and allows her to participate in acts of divine creation. The God of Emily Brontë is ever-present in both the natural world and within herself, since her soul is itself divine. Her imagination,
which is a gift from God, is fundamentally spiritual since it is what allows her to
contemplate her own existence, that of creation, and her relationship to God.

Chapter 6:

Conclusions

Arguably, Patrick Brontë’s “greatest gift to Emily Brontë” was intellectual
freedom. He gave her “the capacity to reject what he stood for” (Davies, Heretic 19,
emphasis mine). She used this freedom to explore her own relationship to God as well as
her vexation with the Church of England. Drawing upon, and challenging, the Romantic
poets and religious thinkers of the nineteenth century, Emily Brontë’s corpus of literature
is a narrative exploration of religious attitudes, themes, and ideas which were circulating
during this period. However, although this exploration is anchored in existing
philosophies of faith, Emily Brontë’s conclusions about her own personal faith and the
relationship between herself, as an artist-Creator, and divinity are entirely her own.

Emily Brontë’s religious exploration began with her poetry, which is therefore
more exploratory than Wuthering Heights. Many poems of the Gondal saga, which are
often not included in analyses of Emily Brontë’s religious beliefs due to the dramatic and
extreme narratives of the poems, are in fact based in spiritual exploration and use
dramatic narratives and characters to navigate the seeming gap between the poet and
God. In later poems, Emily Brontë collapses this gap, acknowledging that God is present
within her and is the giver of divine imagination and inspiration, although the source is
often the natural word of creation. In doing so, she internalizes both poetic power and
divinity, which is profoundly spiritual and feminist. Emily Brontë’s power comes from God, but God is actually a part of herself. Her power then comes from within her own consciousness.

After navigating this relationship between the internal and external and between the poet-creator and God, Emily Brontë was able to create *Wuthering Heights*, a narrative masterpiece and a powerful statement for personal faith which is both rooted in the natural world and in the recognition of one’s own divinity. In this way, *Wuthering Heights* can also be read as an extension of Emily Brontë’s collection of poetry. J. Hillis Miller even argues, “When Emily Bronte began to write *Wuthering Heights*, she did not leave the world of the Gondal poems” (*Disappearance* 157). Emily Brontë did not write any other poetry while creating *Wuthering Heights*, to which she directed all of her poetic power, and it is a culmination of the themes she explored within the poetry. In *Wuthering Heights*, she has fully embraced the power of her own imagination, as well as the recognition that this imagination is rooted in her own personal spirituality. She has internalized poetic power and divinity, which she had only grappled with in earlier poetry, and so is able to create Catherine, a character who becomes a deity in her own right through her own imaginative powers and personal faith. In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë takes the themes which she explores through her poetry and creates a narrative, which is based on her belief in personal faith and the presence of divinity within her own soul, through the spiritual power of her imagination.

*Wuthering Heights* is anchored in the themes and language of the Bible and Christian faith, but it staunchly rejects the established church as patriarchal and ignorant.
Faith for Emily Brontë, and for the characters in *Wuthering Heights*, is extremely personal, based on an individual consciousness of the Divine. The established dogma and practice of the Church both hinders this relationship and opposes the notion of individual faith in general, and so cannot be the arbiter of “true faith.” In fact, there is no such thing, according to Emily Brontë. Although Catherine and Heathcliff rebel against human figures, who claim to understand “truth,” they cling to the Earth as their own source of spirituality and hope. Emily Brontë’s rebellion, as articulated through her characters, is not against all salvation and faith in something beyond oneself, but against “vain creeds” and dogma which cannot encompass true human experience.

*Wuthering Heights* is profoundly religious. In the novel, Emily Brontë “probes but does not prescribe” (Thormählen 142): She presents her readers with an alternative to mainstream Christianity without arguing for its efficacy as ultimate “truth,” since it is then up to the reader to explore his or her own relationship with God. In this way, *Wuthering Heights* is full of a “bizarre religious joy,” which “belongs not to a vestigial Romantic Satanism but to the mainstream radical Protestant tradition” (Davies, *Emily Brontë* 126), which had already begun to advocate for personal faith over and above prescribed dogma. Although the notion that *Wuthering Heights* contains a “bizarre religious joy” is a radical statement due to the profusion of profane images in the novel, “bizarre” is the best way to describe the religion advocated in *Wuthering Heights*. It encompasses the paradox that is the religion of Emily Brontë: her personal faith and consciousness of her own divine nature in some ways rejects, and in other ways celebrates, Christian faith. Through this paradox, Emily Brontë allows herself to question
and to explore her relationship with God, rather than accept given doctrine. Emily Brontë’s literature is, therefore, a powerful affirmation of faith.
References


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