

Psychological Time in *Wuthering Heights*

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The complexity and emotional power of *Wuthering Heights* can be attributed at least partly to the powerful "internal movement of time in all dramatic literature under the intense imaginative reality of the characters" which contrasts a complex temporal universality with the "static quality of Time in the social novel."¹ The different perspectives or levels of time, one enclosing another in rings expanding from an emotional vortex, have remained a crux for interpreting the novel. Since David Cecil first suggested that the world of *Wuthering Heights* dealt with universal forces, an orderly, comprehensible "calm" and an otherworldly, inhuman "storm," critics have frequently distinguished between the two clear-cut, quite disparate realities of the narrators, Ellen Dean and Lockwood, and the lovers, Catherine and Heathcliff. Dorothy Van Ghent's "inside" and "outside" worlds and Mark Schorer's "impermanent world of self" and his "something larger" call attention to this basic split. Similarly, Thomas A. Vogler finds an opposition between a social, prosaic time moving toward stasis or resolution and a cyclical time, visibly changing, but ultimately fluid and unfixable.² The first is sturdily rooted in the calendar time of a practical world, and the latter suggests the timelessness of myth. However, time in *Wuthering Heights* is not just this simple dichotomy. A multiplicity of vision, an awareness of simultaneity, is the ideal perspective from which to view the characters—both narrators and lovers. Of all the characters in *Wuthering Heights*, only Catherine and Heathcliff approach this complexity of vision, and their tragedy stems partly from their refusal to recognize the different demands posed by each temporal level.

In a 1969 study Robert Glechner argues that Heathcliff's response to time is "peculiarly complex. . . . He denies the past as past and powerfully affirms its presentness. And the Heathcliff that is created out of rage and revenge learns, as Proust has shown us, that it is impossible to recapture a 'pure' past because its purity has been flawed by the worlds of experience between the event and its recall, and because the past itself suffers change in the very act of passing through the labyrinthine ways of the human mind."³ However, Glechner's article limits itself to the present, past, and future of chronological time. Heathcliff "squanders the present" in order to regain a lost past, his childhood with Cathy.⁴ Perhaps chronological time itself, whether past, present, or, as Mr. Glechner puts it, the presentness of the past cannot explain the main characters' attitudes toward time. Only when Catherine and Heathcliff abandon the timeless demands

¹Edwin Muir, *The Structure of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1929), p. 62.

²David Cecil, "Emily Brontë and *Wuthering Heights*," *Victorian Novelists: Essays in Reevaluation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), pp. 136-81. Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1953), pp. 156-58. Mark Schorer, "Fiction and the 'Matrix of Analogy,'" *Kenyon Review*, 11 (1949). Thomas A. Vogler, "Time and History in *Wuthering Heights*," *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Wuthering Heights*, ed. Thomas A. Vogler (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), pp. i-vi.

³Robert F. Glechner, "Time in *Wuthering Heights*," *Criticism*, 1 (1959), 337-38.

⁴On Heathcliff's inability to deal with the present, see also David Sonstroem, "*Wuthering Heights* and the Limits of Vision," *PMLA*, 86 (January 1971), 51-62. Irving H. Buchen ("Emily Brontë and the Metaphysics of Childhood and Love," *NCF*, 22 [June 1967], 63-70) also comments that the past and the future are so widely split that there is no sense of the present.

of their love for chronological time do they try—and fail—to manipulate time. By considering the time-sense of the lovers as different in kind, not just in degree, from that of the narrators, we come nearer to understanding some of the persistent problems in the novel: the distance the confusing chronology imposes between reader and tale; Catherine's "unforgivable sin" in renouncing Heathcliff for Linton; and the difference in stature of the two generations of lovers.

Although the focus of this paper is on time as defined by and defining the lovers themselves, one must briefly stand outside the story and work in, passing through the levels of time Emily Brontë weaves through her narrative to the innermost, psychological one. On the perimeter is the authorial *primum mobile*, the deceptively confusing chronology with which Brontë distances her audience from the story. Although the chronology is meticulously, if seldom visibly, worked out,⁵ the elaborate time scheme serves two purposes beyond setting up the tale-within-a-tale framework. The reader is removed from the semi-involvement of Ellen Dean and Lockwood, narrators who are outside some events but still caught up in others. The jumbled chronology also makes the reader conscious of the precarious and limited "reality" that strict chronology offers. Ordering events sequentially does not bring order out of the confusion that is *Wuthering Heights*; logic and causality fall sadly short of interpreting the characters or explaining their emotions. In telling a story where the past is as immediate as the present of 1801-1802 and where ghosts and visions have all but solid substance, Emily Brontë illustrates the simultaneous awareness of temporal levels that is the proper perspective for her narrative—not just the linear understanding of straight chronological past, present, and future but also an understanding of natural time which is cyclical, circular and endless.

One of the narrators' chief functions is to make us skeptical of any overly simplistic interpretation of time. Ellen Dean and Lockwood are faced with the disparity between their logically ordered and prosaic outlook and the larger-than-life, almost mythic quality of their subjects. Since they cannot understand time-concepts different from their own, their collaborative history demands that they order, cull, and interpret their memories as accurately and as factually as they can. Both narrators try to impose meaning and causality on events by viewing time chronologically. In this way, Nelly's retrospective explanation of her own actions, or lack of action, gives her a social and moral matrix, a foothold on reality, from which she can reconstruct, explain, and justify the confusion she had felt when confronted by emotions and perspectives she could not—and still cannot—understand.

However, Brontë keeps the simplistic view of the moral historian from prevailing by introducing hints of non-prosaic time and reality. Just as the confusing chronology makes chronology itself untrustworthy, so the limited perspective of her would-be moral historians makes a strict moral interpretation impossible. Vogler points to the "simultaneity" of the diary Lockwood finds at *Wuthering Heights*. Catherine Earnshaw is to "become Catherine Linton who will become another Catherine Earnshaw."⁶ The diary is not just Lockwood's inability to see beyond the written word without dreaming or a lonely little girl's doddling. Thematically, Brontë hints that Catherine can see herself simultaneously as Earnshaw-Linton-Heathcliff. Brontë thus suggests the eventual chronology of the novel, but she also shows Catherine's ability to extend present alternatives into future coexistence.

⁵See C. P. Sanger, "The Structure of *Wuthering Heights*," *A Wuthering Heights Handbook*, ed. Richard Lettis and William E. Morris (New York: Odyssey Press, 1961), pp. 143-69.

⁶Thomas A. Vogler, p. v.

Only through dreams and visions can the time schemes of the narrators touch the quite different reality of the lovers. Yet even in his dream Lockwood is preoccupied with the clock time as a gauge for reality: "I seemed to keep them shutters closed above a quarter of an hour, yet, the instant I listened, again, there was the doleful cry moaning on!"⁷ Similarly, after his cry arouses Heathcliff, Lockwood turns to his watch as a symbol of orderly, normal routine: "I looked at my watch, and soliloquized on the length of the night: 'Not three o'clock yet! I could have taken oath it had been six—time stagnates here—we must surely have retired to rest at eight!'" (p. 23). The twenty years of the dream-Catherine's exile have passed, but clock-and-calendar time has not aged the child-spirit. Yet for Lockwood her eternal childhood is horror and entrapment rather than movement into a different time.

Nelly, too, is clock-and-calendar oriented. She tries to tell her story sequentially, but more important is her complete ignorance of—one might almost say her fear of—any time-sense besides her own. She misses the significance of Catherine's fevered outpourings after her self-imposed starvation. Catherine claims she has reawakened after a seven-year hiatus. She wants to reenter the time before Hindley first separated her from Heathcliff; she says, "I thought as I lay there, with my head against that table leg, and my eyes dimly discerning the grey square of the window, that I was enclosed in the oak-panelled bed at home; and my heart ached with some great grief which, just waking, I could not recollect—I pondered, and worried myself to discover what it could be; and most strangely, the whole last seven years of my life grew a blank! I did not recall that they had been at all. I was a child; my father was just buried, and my misery arose from the separation that Hindley had ordered between me, and Heathcliff . . ." (pp. 106-07). However, Nelly says flatly that Catherine has been shut in her room from Monday to Thursday, or more exactly, to Friday morning. All she can offer after this outpouring and Catherine's assertion that she can see the Heights from her window is a fear for Catherine's sanity.

Only once does Nelly experience any multiplicity of vision similar to Lockwood's experience with the diary. When she goes to Wuthering Heights after Heathcliff's return, she sees her "early playmate seated on the withered turf; his dark square head bent forward, and his little hand scooping out the earth with a piece of slate . . . I started—my bodily eye was cheated into a momentary belief that the child lifted its face and stared straight into mine! It vanished in a twinkling; but, immediately, I felt an irresistible yearning to be at the Heights. Superstition urged me to comply with this impulse—'supposing he should be dead!' I thought—'or should die soon!—supposing it were a sign of death!'" (pp. 92-93). The past has projected a vision into the present, and she is dimly aware of a foreboding future.

Moving finally from the narrative frame directly into the tale of the lovers, we pass to the central level of time, the cyclical time of nature which binds Catherine and Heathcliff to their beloved moor. The old paradox of the constantly changing yet ageless rhythms of the seasons determines Catherine's and Heathcliff's unique time-sense. Through their rejection of simple chronology, they respond psychologically and emotionally to cosmic forces. For the lovers, time of generation, normal cyclical time leading to death, is not as threatening as the emotional sterility of separation. The end of generational time, death and decay, is only one facet of natural time, and neither of them

⁷Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. V. S. Pritchett (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951), p. 21. All citations are from this edition and will be given by page references in the text.

fears death: “‘Oh, you see, Nelly! he would not relent a moment, to keep me out of the grave! *That* is how I’m loved! Well, never mind! That is not *my* Heathcliff. I shall love mine yet; and take him with me—he’s in my soul. And,’ added she musingly, ‘the thing that irks me most is this shattered prison, after all. I’m tired, tired of being enclosed here. I’m wearying to escape into that glorious world, and to be always there; not seeing it dimly through tears, and yearning for it through the walls of an aching heart. . . . I thought he wished it. Heathcliff dear! you should not be sullen now. Do come to me, Heathcliff’” (pp. 136-37). Of course Heathcliff comes to her and accuses her of making him live apart from her, the only death and hell he acknowledges, demanding “what *right* had you to leave me? What right—answer me—for the poor fancy you felt for Linton? Because misery, and degradation, and death, and nothing that God or Satan could inflict would have parted us, *you*, of your own will, did it. I have not broken your heart—you have broken it—and in breaking it, you have broken mine. So much the worse for me, that I am strong. Do I want to live? What kind of living will it be when you—oh God! would *you* like to live with your soul in the grave?” (pp. 137-38). Clearly it is not death that is feared. In the plainest terms, Catherine and Heathcliff ignore and escape the straightforward calendar time of Nelly and Lockwood through their emotional tenacity.

However, this last statement introduces the much more complex problem of their faults through time. Only Catherine and Heathcliff can perceive and move through the two kinds of time. Paradoxically, their failures stem from this multiplicity of vision; recognizing the conflicting demands of strict chronology and deep cyclical time, they nonetheless try to control chronological time and bend it to their whims.

At a key point in her explanation of the different kinds of love she feels for Linton and for Heathcliff, Catherine says she has “only to do with the present” (p. 67). In this present she recognizes that she *is* Heathcliff and to remain herself must continue to be with him and to be him. She knows that this love is not subject to the decay which will inevitably overtake her love for Edgar Linton: “Time will change it, I’m well aware, as winter changes the trees—my love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath—a source of little visible delight, but necessary. Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff, he’s always, he’s always, always in my mind” (p. 70). Catherine realizes that the appeal of Edgar Linton’s cultured, refined, and orderly world will fade. She expresses this time in terms of the natural cycles leading to human death rather than through abstract depiction of eternal time. While one love fades, the other endures as the rocks endure. Catherine’s failure is in wanting both Edgar’s social, calendar-oriented world and Heathcliff’s timeless love simultaneously. Her unforgivable sin is her willful confusion of the two levels of time—the chronological present of Thrushcross Grange and the timeless “present” of Heathcliff and her love.

Sin begets sin in *Wuthering Heights*, and Catherine’s determination to exchange deep time for the chronological present precipitates Heathcliff’s perverse attempt to dominate chronological time. Just as Catherine’s true present is bound to Heathcliff, he is aware that his reality is defined through her; he has no verifiable past distinct from Catherine and *Wuthering Heights*. The years before he arrived at *Wuthering Heights* and those when he disappeared following Catherine’s marriage remain murky and unfocused. To Nelly he suggests that the years of his wanderings were real to him only insofar as he thought of Catherine.

In contrast to Catherine, his effort to thwart time is to ignore the present; after her death he channels his violent energies into the future, denying the present in his stubborn belief that he can shape and control coming events. His "plan" for revenge is an obsession projected into the future, ignoring the present for his own inexorable design: "I seek no revenge on you [Catherine]," replied Heathcliff less vehemently. "That's not the plan . . ." (p. 96).

At first, Heathcliff's obsession with revenge denies the second generation of lovers narrative development and interest. Only as Heathcliff grows increasingly responsive to the omnipresent other world and to Catherine's spirit can Cathy and Hareton free themselves and become important characters in their own right—not just pallid offshoots of the first generation's loves and conflicts.⁸ Young Cathy Linton is a child of light and warmth compared to her mother's storms and passions. Her mother's heaven was with Heathcliff, and anywhere without him was exile. Cathy's heaven is the harmonious interaction of natural forces—but as seen from a safe nest in the treetops: "That was his [Linton's] most perfect idea of heaven's happiness—mine was rocking in a rustling green tree, with a west wind blowing, and bright, white clouds flitting rapidly above; and not only larks, but throistles, and blackbirds, and linnets, and cuckoos pouring out music on every side, and the moors seen at a distance, broken into cool dusky dells; but close by great swells of long grass undulating in waves to the breeze; and woods and sounding water, and the whole world awake and wild with joy" (p. 210). Just as she spent her childhood secluded and protected within the walls of her father's gardens, so her view of heaven is vital but peaceful and protected. Emily Brontë has not simply created a new heroine on a different scale from the first Catherine but has shown that full integration into human time means an inevitable return to human dimensions. Young Cathy and Hareton deal with cyclical time not as eternal forces but as domestic and agricultural cycles. Hareton is the rustic where Heathcliff is the gypsy—the farmer and the almost Byronic demon-hero.

The novel's conclusion throws us back into a confusion of temporal perspectives which, again, need sifting and reanalyzing. The ideal teacher-pupil relationship, in which the pupil eventually overtakes his teacher, is understood and approved by the narrators.⁹ Once they shake off the intellectual and emotional sterility of Heathcliff's control, Cathy and Hareton form a relationship which accepts the past and the present but always emphasizes the future. It is no coincidence that they get married on New Year's, starting their life together at the conventional time for beginning afresh. They open all the windows of the Heights, and, when Lockwood returns in the spring, the Heights has been tamed, brought into the domestic cycle of flower gardens and housewifery.

However, in their complacent approval of this neat resolution, both Lockwood and Nelly continue to misread the willfulness which caused the deaths of Heathcliff and Catherine twenty years earlier. Their deaths not only released the primitive forces flowing through them to mingle together but also reclaimed time, that eternal present that first Catherine and then Heathcliff had jeopardized. Only by dying can they cancel their mistakes in confusing the timeless and the temporal. On one level, then, their deaths admit an inability to cope with the simultaneity of vision they glimpsed in childhood. However, the

⁸For an interesting discussion of the relationship of the second generation of lovers to Heathcliff, see Walter E. Anderson, "The Lyrical Form of *Wuthering Heights*," *UTQ* (Winter 1977), 112-34. Among other points, Anderson argues that Heathcliff's malevolent control has been much overrated.

⁹See Robert C. McKibben ("The Image of the Book in *Wuthering Heights*," *A Wuthering Heights Handbook*, pp. 232-34) for a fuller discussion of the importance of books and learning in the novel.

report of their ghosts out on the moor suggests the true meaning of their time-sense. The children's world of union and oneness which was destroyed by Catherine's marriage is regained beyond chronological time—in the midst of natural time, yet not subject to cyclical decay. Although the second generation triumphs in time, Heathcliff and Catherine break through it.