

May 2016

"Mother, I will": Female Subjectivity and Religious Vision in the Brontës Novels

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.34917/9112179>

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“MOTHER, I WILL”: FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY AND RELIGIOUS VISION IN
THE BRONTËS’ NOVELS

by

Amanda N. Scott

Bachelor of Science – English
Dixie State College
2007

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Doctor of Philosophy— English

Department of English
The College of Liberal Arts
The Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas
May 2016



Dissertation Approval

The Graduate College
The University of Nevada, Las Vegas

April 8, 2016

This dissertation prepared by

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entitled

“Mother, I Will”: Female Subjectivity and Religious Vision in the Brontës’ Novels

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ABSTRACT

“Mother, I will”: Female Subjectivity and Religious Vision in the Brontës’ Novels

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Anne, Charlotte, and Emily Brontë have long attracted sustained critical attention, in large part because of their strong female protagonists. These strong-willed women self-assuredly reject oppression and model new paradigms for the Victorian woman to empower her subjectivity. This subjectivity serves, in turn, not only as the ability to form and express views counter to outworn social prescriptions, but it also serves as the centralized interior focus that allows their protagonists to think of themselves as the foremost subjects of their lives, rather than see themselves as pawns to be moved about in the games of patriarchal hierarchy. This study reads their female subjectivity as a form of religious belief to be understood in visual as well as verbal terms. In the chapters that follow I have tried to show how the various heroines of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (1849), and *Villette* (1853); Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847); and Anne Brontë’s *Agnes Grey* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) draw upon their sense of vision to assert their spirituality and express their religious faith through subjectivity. At times these women employ iconography to identify and subvert religious tyranny. At other times, the narrator shows us how the divine iconography of the natural world directs humanity away from error with a power and directness that language simply cannot reach. We also see how these images may serve to reinterpret the myth of essential female origin, arguing that women’s reproductive function is the driving force of

civilization. In some of the Brontës' more complex novels, like *Villette* and *Wuthering Heights*, images clarify a convoluted story of faith. At times their narrators can even promote a straightforward code of ethics that, through visual means, acknowledges and clarifies instances of domestic violence otherwise represented with euphemistic vagueness, for example. Drawing upon W.J.T. Mitchell's theory of the *imagetext* as a mixed form of visual-verbal representation, and the post-structuralist theories of French feminists, I want to argue that the textual vision of the Brontës typically finds bodily expression.¹ I also want to explore Christian spirituality as the force by which these women sanction their vision as subjects. In sum, my belief is that the Brontës have proven to be such immovable fixtures for studying religion and gender in the Victorian era because their heroines serve as distinctive voices that question women's secondary place in society in order to take the full measure of their imaginative and moral possibilities. They shine as particular models of Victorian womanhood not only by rejecting patriarchal control but also by affirming their self-reflective religious faith. Across all the major works of all three authors, we may recognize highly nuanced views of morality and faith, and through these narrative lenses, new and meaningful paths for individualized feminine faith.

¹ See W.J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994). Also see Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 4: (Summer 1976): 875-893.

DEDICATION

To my daughter, Emmeline, may your vision be strong and your faith lead you on. To my son, Hudson, may you listen to women's stories, and then engrave them on your heart.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my heartfelt appreciation, first and foremost to my chair, Dr. Timothy Erwin. Without his guidance and encouragement, I could not have finished this dissertation. Thank you for challenging me in the kindest way. To the rest of my committee, Dr. Evelyn Gajowki, Dr. Christopher Decker, and Dr. Michelle Tusan, thank you for investing your time and energy in a student who is a virtual stranger. I also wish to thank Dr. Kelly Mays for her indelible impact on my graduate career. Thank you for inspiring me, pushing me, and holding me to the refiner's fire.

I also wish to thank my mother, Dr. Nancy Hauck, and my grandmother, who cheered me on each step of the way and cared for my children so I could write. A special thank you also to my husband, Shaye. While he knows next to nothing about the world of literature and academia, he knows how to make me laugh even on the worst of days. Finally, I wish to express gratitude to my Creator, who blessed me with a voice to speak my mind, the opportunity to earn an education, and the strength to write late into the night.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND SHORT TITLES

- AG* *Agnes Grey (Clarendon Edition of the Novels of the Brontës)*, edited by Hilda Marsden and Robert Inglesfield. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- JE* *Jane Eyre (The Clarendon Edition of the Novels of the Brontës)*, edited by Jane Jack and Margaret Smith. New York: Oxford University Press, 1969.
- Sh* *Shirley (Clarendon Edition of the Novels of the Brontës)*, edited by Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- TP* *The Professor (Clarendon Edition of the Novels of the Brontës)*, edited by Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- TWH* *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (The Clarendon Edition of the Novels of the Brontës)*, edited by Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- WH* *Wuthering Heights (Clarendon Edition of the Novels of the Brontës)*, edited by Hilda Marsden and Ian Jack. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.
- Vil* *Villette (Clarendon Edition of the Novels of the Brontës)*, edited by Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

INTRODUCTION

The Brontës' nuanced moral voices have long attracted scholarly interest, and during the second wave of feminism, or from about 1961 to 1989, critics focused on the way moral imperatives tend to suppress the heroines of their novels. In the seminal *The Madwoman in the Attic*, for example, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar regard the sisters as literary examples of subjugated female anger. On this view, domesticated women like Jane Eyre are often paired with what they call "dark double[s]," fallen characters like Bertha Mason, who openly rebel against patriarchal control.¹ They describe this relationship between the two as "the book's central confrontation. . . . Not with [Jane's] own sexuality but with her own imprisoned 'hunger, rebellion, and rage,' a secret dialogue of self and soul" manifested in her *doppelgänger* Bertha.² Critics following in the tradition of Gilbert and Gubar seem to see the Brontës as revolutionary, in part because their writing subverts Victorian morality. These critics assert that feminine liberation in their novels occurs inherently in challenging women's reverence to a patriarchal God.³ This critical vantage point has persisted in Brontëan studies, but more recently critics also recognize that the novels not only subvert patriarchal notions of morality but also serve as models for how women can counter their oppressive realities and live fulfilled lives of

¹ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed., (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 360.

² Ibid., 339. Furthermore, they read *Wuthering Heights* and *Shirley* as fixated upon issues of female hunger and starvation in their treatments of Catherine Earnshaw and Shirley Keeldar, and they read *Villette*'s Lucy Snowe as a nun-like figure buried alive beneath the crushing weight of patriarchal expectation.

³ Some examples include M.A. Blom's "Charlotte Brontë, Feminist Manqueé," *Bucknell Review* 21, no.1 (1973): 87-103; and Linda Hunt's "Charlotte Brontë and the Suffering Sisterhood," *Colby Library Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (1983): 7-17.

individualized belief. Among the most articulate of these critical explications is Lucasta Miller's *The Brontë Myth*. One of the main aims of her book is to assert that the Brontës created a new myth about being a Victorian woman, "a positive concept of the emerging female self in a society whose predominant models of middle-class femininity were self-denying, dutiful, and passion-free."⁴ It is through this new myth that we see female characters resist objectification as domestic and moral creatures and substitute an active interpretation of themselves as subjects in their secular and spiritual lives.

While these heroines do not inspire radical social reform in terms of gender inequality, these women do emphasize that the limitations of their gender sphere are social creations rather than biological facts or divine proclamations. The paradigm shift fostered by Miller and others finds a parallel in the growing feminist sentiment of the early Victorian era—that women were the weaker sex because of what one early commentator called "vicious circumstances," rather than because of innate qualities.⁵ The resistance to biology as an explanation for misogyny is given eloquent expression in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), whose views began to inflect the works of female authors such as the Brontës in the Victorian era. Knowing the unfair restrictions on their gender, women in the Brontës proceed through their lives with sustained composure, which moderately—and sometimes radically—subverts injustice. We see this new paradigm for women through both first-person narrators and outspoken female protagonists. Strong female subjects appear as narrators in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* as well as in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

⁴ Lucasta Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, (New York: Random House, 2001), 18.

⁵ William Thompson argued this in his 1826 article in *The Co-Operative Magazine*. Cited in Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century*, (New York: Random House, 1983), 25.

In novels where protagonists are not primary narrators, we find the modeling of this new myth in the dialogue of outspoken characters. The strongest instances of these forthright women include Charlotte Brontë's Shirley Keeldar of *Shirley* and Emily Brontë's Cathy Earnshaw of *Wuthering Heights*.

I must carefully qualify my use of the term *subjectivity*, for though it was a term used in the Brontës' day, it was not endowed with the psychoanalytic complexity that we give the word today. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides this as a definition for *subjectivity*: "The quality or condition of viewing things chiefly or exclusively through the medium of one's own mind or individuality; the condition of being dominated by or absorbed in one's personal feelings, thoughts, concerns, etc."⁶ The dictionary references the earliest citation of *subjectivity* in this sense to 1838, but the most telling citation for this definition is from W.G. Ward's *The Ideal of a Christian Church*. Ward was an English convert to Roman Catholicism, and his tract argues that the remedy for the divided Church of England was to surrender to the Catholic Church. In this treatise, Ward argues that the systemic religious corruption he saw in the Anglican church was becoming more outrageous to his country because there was a shift toward individuality in European thought. He notes "[t]he vast increase of what is called subjectivity; the very much greater portion of man's life and interest which is occupied in observation of his own thoughts, feelings, and actions."⁷ It is extremely unlikely that any of the Brontës would have read Ward's treatise because it was carefully censored, but his observation of the growing inclination toward subjectivity on religious matters is certainly present across the Brontës' work.

⁶ "subjectivity, n.". *OED Online*. March 2016. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com> (accessed April 02, 2016).

⁷ W.G. Ward, *The Ideal of a Christian Church*, (London: James Toovey, 1844), 79. Accessed via *Google Books*. 02 April 2016.

Though I do wish to use the term *subjectivity* according to the definition above, I also find it important to define my use of this term further. For while the Brontës do concern themselves with subjectivity in the sense that their female characters privilege their own thoughts and feelings over the norms of society, this *subjectivity* of which I write should not be misunderstood only in this more colloquial sense. In my exploration of subjectivity I wish to not only show that the Brontës' female characters privilege their individual perceptions and feelings, but I also wish to show that it is their understanding of themselves as the *subjects* of their narratives— and their very worlds— that enables them to champion their individual perspectives. This notion of the female subject is crucial to my study and a characteristic of the Brontës' that sets them apart from their historical period. In much of Victorian literature it seems that women, and most particularly spiritual women, take on a more objective position by considering themselves to be the passive recipients of religious teaching or the passive beneficiaries of divine guidance. In the Brontës, however, women see themselves as active subjects who earnestly pursue an individual connection with God and an intuitive understanding of truth through their thoughts and sensory perceptions. Throughout this study, then, *subjectivity* will denote not only individualized thought, but more precisely, individualized thought that is enabled through women's understanding of themselves as active subjects and the creators of their own spiritual identity.

Subjectivity, as I present it here, also bears significance in terms of women's civic involvement, a duty that the Brontës present as being inextricably linked to women's moral purposes. Twelve years after the publication of the Brontës' first wave of novels in 1847, John Stuart Mill wrote his controversial *On Liberty*. In it, he advocates for free speech and individuality in thought, urging that a truly educated person:

[m]ust use observation to see, reasoning and judgment to foresee, activity to gather materials for decision, discrimination to decide, and when he has decided, firmness and self-control to hold to his deliberate decision. And these qualities he requires and exercises exactly in proportion as the part of his conduct which he determines according to his own judgment and feelings is a large one.⁸

This freedom to *see* and think for oneself was central to Mill's idea of individuality. He also recognized, however, that in order for true individuality to exist that liberty must also thrive. And though there is no escaping the conventional male pronoun in the paragraph above, we know that Mill was exceptionally aware of the misogyny of his day, as he articulated it in his essay "The Subjection of Women," written in 1861 and published in 1869. Of course, Mill's writings come after the majority of the Brontës' novels were written, but I argue that the sisters were contributors to the movement for individuality because of their protagonists' careful consideration of—and often rejection of—the customs, morals, and limitations of their world.

For an example of a decidedly strong female subject, we can look to Jane Eyre, who works to counter oppression from her childhood on. She stands up to injustice at the hands of her cruel aunt, at the hands of Edward Rochester, and finally at the hands of St. John Rivers, and her narrative remains centered on her individualized perception of her moral responsibilities throughout, even when such knowledge comes at great personal cost. In a particularly low moment, she retains her sense of worth and moral vision, narrating: "*I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself*" (*JE*,

⁸ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism, On Liberty* (New York: Everyman, 1993), 117.

404). Unsurprisingly, Jane's visual imagination strengthens her subjectivity, allowing her to see the world and her social existence, not as it is, but as it might be. Jane becomes an astute register for deciphering visual meaning. This visual capability proves central to speaking her mind and surviving adversity with her sense of interior centrality intact. Across the entire corpus of the Brontës' work, we see similar moments of self-knowledge revealed through visual interiority. For example, Lucy Snowe of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* relies on her subjectivity to navigate through confusing sightings of a ghostly nun, and we come to understand her interior essence most reliably through the visual rhetoric she expresses. Anne Brontë's Helen Graham of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is another narrator who models this mode of visual subjectivity. She maintains her quiet virtue even as her community misunderstands and shuns her in the wake of her marriage collapsing and living as a single mother. She expresses the spectacle of drunken violence in frank visual terms, and she also relies on her imaginative vision when she paints, an act that she seems to find therapeutic.

When female protagonists are not first-person narrators, we hear the strength of their voices in spirited dialogue. Charlotte Brontë's Shirley Keeldar rejects political disenfranchisement and advocates for fairer marital relationships throughout the *Shirley*. Even though her advocating for women's rights seems to fall on deaf ears, she remains undaunted and expresses her hopes for womankind through visual rhetoric. In one moment, she visualizes Mother Eve in the beauty of a sunset and affirms her views that women serve as the progenitors of civilization through their reproductive and creative might, and as such have no business submitting to their husbands and abstaining from public involvement. As in Charlotte Brontë's other novels, visual rhetoric serves to articulate Shirley's views and express the power of her intellect. We also see bold subjectivity in both narration and dialogue through Emily Brontë's

Cathy Earnshaw of *Wuthering Heights*. Though the structure and style of this novel prove different from Emily's sisters', we see a common thread in that Cathy's strongest thoughts are conveyed through visual rhetoric. She expresses her love for Heathcliff and relative indifference toward Edgar Linton through visual language, and her most profound statements about her spiritual worldview are conveyed through dreams. She relates one dream to Nelly Dean in which heaven and hell seem to be inverted, illustrating her attachment to Heathcliff more than her desire for a pious heaven. Most strikingly, she also influences a vision for Mr. Lockwood, and he intimately experiences her distaste for organized religion through reading her journal. In these instances, we see that Cathy's distinct perspective and her ability to privilege her desires above others', reside in her vision. Whether through striking narrators or purposeful dialogue, the Brontës present us with women who know themselves and filter morality and religious meaning through their subjectivity.

The Brontës' Religious Voices

In undertaking a study related to Victorian religion, it is essential to acknowledge the theological ruptures within Christianity at the time. These ruptures were the result of outside pressures, like Europe's growing secularism and more pronounced scientific inquiry, and the result of divisions within Protestantism. Because of these outside pressures and inward divisions, there was a steady decline in church attendance and decreased sectarian involvement. Part of the distaste with religion was because it had become a function of the state that offered privilege to the English unevenly. The Church of England enjoyed privileges not afforded to other faiths, mainly in terms of freedom from taxation. In addition, all births, marriages, and burials had to be registered through the church. Burial rites in particular had to be performed either in

Anglican ritual or else in complete silence. It wasn't until late in the century that dissenting faiths were granted more equal treatment. Even within Anglicanism, there were many variations of doctrine and practice. The lack of uniformity occurred because of social differences inspired by industrialization, and this variation was of some concern to high Anglicans, who pushed for increased unity through the Oxford Movement; low Anglicans, by contrast, often referred to as evangelicals,⁹ promoted a more individualized interpretation of the Bible. The latter is the category to which the Brontës belong. Aside from orthodox Anglicanism, there were dissenting faiths such as Methodists, Baptists, Unitarians, and Quakers, all of which were distinguished from one another in a variety of ways. Some sects were fairly uniform, while others, particularly the Congregationalist sect, made the important distinction of being autonomous from centralized hierarchy. Doctrinal issues varied as well. For example, Baptists believed in baptism by immersion and Quakers believed in the centrality of Inner Light (a completely individualized and spontaneous interpretation of Christianity). Sects also varied in their emotional flavor. While some sects, like Unitarians, were Enlightened rationalists, sects like Calvinist Methodists were extremely dramatic about their fallen state and were ecstatic about redemption.¹⁰ As we shall see, however, there were a plethora of attitudes about how to best worship Christ, to whom his saving power extended, and how one could attain salvation and avoid eternal punishment. Each of these groups drew on the Bible as their central source of doctrine, though their interpretations of it varied widely, and this flexibility brought into question the stability of religious texts to define Christian doctrine and practice.

⁹ The use of the term "evangelical" is not to be confused with the use of "Evangelical," of course. The former indicates a freer form of Anglicanism, while the latter indicates a dissenting group distinct from Anglicanism.

¹⁰ See further Laura Ingham, *The Brontës: Authors in Context* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 191, for more detail.

When we consider the milieu of their upbringing at Haworth, it's no wonder that the Brontës rendered such self-knowing heroines who yet have so many preoccupations with religious faith. Mr. Brontë served as a low-Anglican clergyman for 41 years, and his appointment at Haworth followed a significant heritage within the evangelical Anglican tradition. As Emily Griesinger reports,

The fathers of British evangelicalism, John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, and William Grimshaw, were all ordained ministers in the Church of England. They all preached from the pulpit of Patrick Bronte's church in Haworth during the previous century, and the Yorkshire moors, known today as "Brontë Country," were famous then for the spiritual legacy of these men.¹¹

With this rich heritage, Patrick certainly brought up his daughters in the evangelical tradition. We can see the influence of evangelicalism, with the emphasis on the interior life of faith within the Brontës' works, rather than rigid adherence to religious dogma. This has proven an often misunderstood nuance of the Brontës' upbringing, perhaps because Elizabeth Gaskell portrayed the Brontë patriarch as a repressive father.¹²

Through Charlotte's letters we can learn more about the family's religious habits. They participated in morning and evening prayer as well as frequent church attendance, but these habits in no way impinged on her leisurely pursuits. She read and wrote when she wished, and, when she was willing to put on her glasses to combat her severe near-sightedness, even enjoyed

¹¹ Emily Griesinger, "Charlotte Brontë's Religion: Faith, Feminism, and *Jane Eyre*," *Christianity and Literature* 58, no. 1 (2008): 40.

¹² *Ibid.*, 33.

dancing.¹³ There is essentially no evidence that the Brontë sisters clashed with their father on religious matters, though many critics have conflated Charlotte and Emily's resistance against organized religion as a rebellion against their father.¹⁴ On the contrary, there is evidence that Mr. Brontë was unusually open-minded for his day about his daughters' religious observance, as is evidenced in his allowance for Emily—the least religious of his daughters—to avoid teaching Sunday school, even when her sisters were away.¹⁵ Patrick Brontë, though decidedly evangelical, was also sympathetic to various doctrinal points of view. He attended Methodist services and collaborated with other ecclesiastical leaders on many occasions. With growing secularism across Europe, these groups slowly began to focus more on their commonalities rather than differences, and with the growing cooperation between Protestant groups, there was an increased allowance for individual interpretation of Christian doctrine. In the case of Patrick Brontë, however, interfaith cooperation had its limits. He adamantly rejected Calvinist doctrines of predestined salvation, as did his children.¹⁶ In addition, Charlotte and Emily are known to have ridiculed their mother's sister, Aunt Branwell, in her attempt to indoctrinate the children in Methodist beliefs about salvation.¹⁷

It should be noted that with the emphasis on Christian beliefs at Haworth also came a careful attention to promoting the daughters' education and intellectual advancement in a way unusual at the time. As pedagogic theorist Sue Lonoff argues through studying the Brontës' letters, we learn that though Mr. Brontë certainly stressed the importance of academics to

¹³ Ibid., 45.

¹⁵ Winifred Gérin, *Emily Brontë: A Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 148-49.

¹⁶ Michael Baumber, "William Grimshaw, Patrick Brontë, and The Evangelical Revival," *History Today* 42, no. 11(November 1992): 30.

¹⁷ Griesinger, "Charlotte Brontë's Religion," 459.

Branwell more than to his daughters, he allowed them to participate in Branwell's tutoring sessions as well. Lonoff assesses their education: "the stimuli at home for learning far exceeded the stimuli at any school for girls." She observes that Mr. Brontë led them in "active learning, motivated study, collaborative projects, cooperative engagement, a sense of ownership over the material, and emphasis on creativity."¹⁸ So it would seem that Mr. Brontë's religious convictions were in no way at odds with providing a strong intellectual upbringing for his daughters.

The Brontës' curiosity about the wider world of learning and religion is evident when their fiction addresses issues of morality and faith, as is their upbringing in a heterodox cultural milieu. Charlotte represents a consistent concern about idolatry in romantic relationships, and also reflects anxieties about Roman Catholicism while paradoxically balking at the Victorian tendency to segregate religious sects. Emily Brontë's spiritualism proves strongly personal, and at certain moments rather contradictory. The speakers of her poems struggle with religious doubt, and sometimes even long for death to satisfy their hopes for salvation. Her *Wuthering Heights* decries religious hypocrisy and presents a Blakean inversion of heaven and hell, while also implicitly preaching the doctrine of universal salvation.¹⁹ Anne Brontë sometimes adopts a mainstream Anglican attitude, and while her novels generally reflect a didactic dimension, her stance holds men and women to the same moral standard. Because of the many spiritual concepts touched upon in the sisters' works, many critics try to situate them in a particular religious tradition, but as Marianne Thormählen has pointed out, the "enormous complexity and variety"

¹⁸ Sue Lonoff, "The Education of Charlotte Brontë: A Pedagogical Case Study," *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture* 1, no. 3 (2001): 459.

¹⁹ See Emma Mason "The Clue to the Brontës: Methodism and *Wuthering Heights*," in *Biblical Religion and the Novel, 1700-2000*, Eds. Mark Knight and Thomas Woodman, (London: Ashgate, 2006), 69-78; and also her "'Some God of Wild Enthusiast's Dreams': Emily Brontë's Religious Enthusiasm" *Victorian Literature and Culture* 31, No. 1 (2003): 263-277.

of Victorian theology “often threaten[s] an investigator's foothold.”²⁰ Because of the Brontës’ fluid and personalized spirituality, I will avoid placing too strong an emphasis on their sectarian leanings, as other critics have attempted to do, and will instead focus on the way their individualized religious notions works in the fiction. In this way we can explore the relationship between femininity and religious faith most productively.

Victorian Morality and Female Empowerment

Victorian religion has long been understood as an oppressive force over women, and there is much historical basis that corroborates this belief. The male-centeredness of the Bible and Christian hierarchy is indisputable. The Bible was written under the sanction of a male God to male prophets, and translated by male clergy for a male audience. The major figures of the Bible are largely male. Christian models of goodness are nearly always men. While there are notable female figures such as Eve, Miriam, Ruth, Deborah, and Esther in the Old Testament and the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene in the New Testament, many women are described as “Manoah’s wife” or “Jephthah’s daughter” and not as actual self-contained identities.²¹ When we add to this the many overtly misogynistic notions about women as subservient to men and as being particularly susceptible to temptation, ideas found in the Bible and expounded on across countless pulpits, then present-day feminist dissatisfaction with Christianity seems justified. Furthermore, women were not permitted into leadership positions or allowed to preach at the pulpit in most Christian sects.²² Church hierarchy ultimately proved to be a patriarch’s dominion.

²⁰ Marianne Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 2.

²¹ Julie Melnyk, *Victorian Religion: Faith and Life in Britain*, (London: Praeger, 2008), 125.

²² I would be remiss not to note, however, that the Quaker and Methodist Christian minorities did allow women to preach in some cases. For more detail, see Ingham, *The Brontës*, 191.

With more careful consideration, however, we can see that the orthodox Anglican hierarchy was not, as other scholars have argued, wholly and completely anti-feminist.²³ The church provided many areas for leadership and public involvement that would not likely have been available through any other means. As Julie Melnyk puts it, religion provided women with “an official place and recognition within the church; opportunities to participate in meaningful public work; professional training with a chance to assume leadership roles; and an alternative to domestic life in a patriarchal family.”²⁴ Indeed, religion provided women with public roles as Sunday school teachers, community organizers, and trusted moral voices. We see historical evidence that women were not only regarded as docile followers but also as proselyting soldiers for Christ in their role as missionaries abroad.²⁵

The public influence of women’s moral authority was not limited to religious institutions, however. Women activists served as irreplaceable advocates for universal abolition in 1833, and British activists had a transatlantic influence in American abolition as well.²⁶ Female activists utilized their moral duty to lift up the downtrodden in their philanthropic efforts and effect political change on a broader scale.²⁷ As Melnyk puts the matter: “Christian women could use evidence from the Bible as claims of divine vocation to override traditional restrictions on

²³ For the most famous example of this, see Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic*, 387. Gilbert and Gubar saw Jane’s morals as suppressing her wild sexuality and asserted that religious devotion undermined Shirley’s independent spirit.

²⁴ Melnyk, *Victorian Religion*, 133.

²⁵ Michelle Tusan, “Gleaners in the Holy Land: Women and the Missionary Press in Victorian Britain,” *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 6, no. 2 (Summer 2010): para 19, accessed June 14, 2015, <http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue62/tusan.htm>.

²⁶ Claire Midgley, *Women Against Slavery*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 121-22.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.

women's public roles."²⁸ Women could actually use the Bible to counter patriarchal oppression within evangelical thought, fighting inequalities that extended far beyond their own self-interest. Women's moral power also affected other political causes, such as Chartism and Owenist socialism. In these endeavors, women appropriated their involvement "as a militant extension of their family role, thus reproducing divisions of labour and power found within the plebeian household."²⁹ These forward-thinking women expanded their moral authority primarily through women's societies, organizations that became widespread in the Victorian era. Such groups probably seemed harmless to the patriarchal establishment, for they largely worked in charitable causes, but these societies' doctrine of philanthropy was actually inspired through the radical ideal of female messianism as it originated from the French revolution. This radical doctrine argued that women would function as saviors, both morally and biologically, and save the world from degeneration. Though the conservative nature of these women's societies was far removed from the groups' ideological origins, women's societies enacted covertly powerful feminist influence much akin to their roots.³⁰ It is within these arenas of female leadership, so emboldened by moral purpose, that many feminist causes were brought forth.³¹ In surveying women's moral authority, it is clear that the societal prescription for them as moral exemplars both stifled their sexual freedom in holding them to a much higher standard than men and promoted their public and domestic influence.

²⁸ Melnyk, *Victorian Religion*, 125.

²⁹ Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, 267.

³⁰ Barbara Taylor, "The Woman-Power: Religious Heresy and Feminism in Early English Socialism," *Tearing the Veil: Essays in Femininity*, Ed. Susan Lipshitz (London: Routledge and Paul, 1978), 122.

³¹ Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, 14-15.

Understandably, women's moral power was used for both anti-feminist and feminist causes. On this matter, Barbara Taylor comments that,

[I]n the hands of anti-feminists, [women's moral authority] usually served merely to buttress sentimental dogmas of domestic womanhood ('the Angel in the house'), but even among feminists it led to a celebration of female specialness and moral superiority which jostled uneasily with arguments against the concept of an innate femininity.³²

It is precisely with this sense of uneasy ambiguity that the Brontës navigate the connection between women and morality. Indeed, we can see that the sisters, though committed to writing for moral causes, were also decidedly selective on what they considered truly moral. As Charlotte writes in her introduction to the second edition of *Jane Eyre*: "Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last. To pluck the mask from the face of the Pharisee, is not to lift an impious hand to the Crown of Thorns" (*JE*, xxix). It is with this ideology that Brontë rendered what Maria Lamonaca calls "a message of radical spiritual autonomy for women" in *Jane Eyre*.³³ In sum, the Brontë sisters became moral writers on their own terms. Raised within the tradition of liberal evangelicalism, the Brontës were perhaps not as radical as critics like Lamonaca would like to believe, but were part of a larger shift toward individualized religious interpretation within Victorian Christianity.

Rather than adhere to Christian dogma, these women operate within a sort of biblical hermeneutics, a concept defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "the study or analysis of

³² Ibid., 30.

³³ Maria Lamonaca, "Jane's Crown of Thorns: Feminism and Christianity in *Jane Eyre*," *Studies in the Novel* 34, No. 3, (2002): 247.

how texts, utterances, or actions are interpreted...Such study typically addresses the plurality of possible interpretations arising from factors such as cultural, social, or historical context, linguistic imprecision or change, multiple witnesses, etc.”³⁴ Our modern definition of hermeneutics is far removed, in some ways, from Friedrich Schleiermacher’s theories, the early nineteenth-century German philosopher who is recognized as the father of the modern study of hermeneutics. Schleiermacher was interested in describing a universal method for which a person could interpret texts. For him, the end goal of interpreting texts, most particularly religious texts, was a transcendent level of understanding. He was interested in the psychological aspects of interpretation, and this is an interest that has evolved significantly over the years in the scholarly tradition of hermeneutics.³⁵ Here I will employ Schleiermacher’s notion of hermeneutics, but with some more modern inflections that I have observed in other critical commentary pertaining to the Brontës. While Schleiermacher was concerned with a universal methodology for interpretation, my study of hermeneutics in the Brontës will prove much more individualized for each particular female subject. Another departure from Schleiermacher is that these women rely on divine inspiration to interpret truth, while Schleiermacher suggested that no such supernatural aid should be needed to interpret messages soundly. The Brontës are centrally concerned with a transcendent form of understanding, just as Schleiermacher was, but for them this was necessarily personal—and divine, in many cases— rather than universal and systematic.

Biblical hermeneutics are prevalent in the sisters’ works in that we can recognize ideological echoes of the Bible in the texts when overt biblical allusions may not be employed.

³⁴ "hermeneutics, n.". *OED Online*. March 2016. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com> (accessed August 04, 2015).

³⁵ For a good collection of Schleiermacher’s lectures, see Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, ed. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

The biblical hermeneutics that are most important to my argument are visual manifestations of Christianity that often serve as implicit links to biblical precepts and traditions. Many instances of these visual biblical hermeneutics occur as women draw meaning from natural images that can be linked to clear biblical contexts and when women view or create art that contains biblical images. Though the Brontës' novels may not always contain clear didacticism about Christian precepts or explicit commentary on women's place in the religious institution, we can infer a clear theme across their works through their use of visual biblical hermeneutics. Women's engagement with these images in the Brontës is enabled through their vision as subjects. In turn, their subjectivity enables them to individualize Christian precepts through the interior workings of the conscience — as projected onto both the natural world and the man-made world of art and architecture.

Religion and the Visual Field

In his 1847 review of *Jane Eyre*, G.H. Lewes noted the “strange power of subjectivity” in which the “internal effects” of the protagonist's consciousness reflected in the “external experiences” of the outside world.³⁶ Simon Cooke builds on Lewes's remark in saying that “the Brontës use a type of distortion in which the outward becomes the register of the inner. . . . ‘Objective’ and ‘subjective’ are fused into one, and images of the physical world become mirrors of the inner world of feeling and thought.”³⁷ These critics tend to think of the fiction in the tradition of the pathetic fallacy, in which the emotional quality of the narrator is projected into characteristics of the outside world. John Ruskin first coined the term in his *Modern Painters*

³⁶ Cited in Allott, *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, 86.

³⁷ Simon Cooke, “‘The Ever-Shifting Kaleidoscope of the Imagination’: Modern Illustrations to the Brontës,” *Brontë Studies* 31 (2006), 9.

(1856) as a means of criticizing emotional falseness in late 18th century poetry. The famous example Ruskin created to illustrate his critique is, “They rowed her in across the rolling foam-- / The cruel, crawling foam.” He continues to point out, “the foam is not cruel, neither does it crawl. The state of mind which attributes to it these characters of a living creature is one in which the reason is unhinged by grief.”³⁸ Ruskin’s critique became an important facet of Victorian criticism, though many Modernist poets would employ the pathetic fallacy in future years deliberately and effectively.³⁹ Both these nineteenth-century critics and their current critical heirs recognize the permeability of the subject’s consciousness between inner and outer realities, and both suggest that the protagonists of the Brontës are the passive absorbers of outside stimuli. What I would like to show instead is that these protagonists serve as active forces by which outward forms receive inward meaning. The Brontë sisters do not fall within the tradition of the pathetic fallacy in which they write to transfer their emotions onto images; rather, exterior images operate for them as a system of meaning that can only be interpreted through their heroines’ subjectivity.

The dynamic relationship between the image and meaning in the Brontës might best be delineated by the theories of W.J.T. Mitchell, who argues that “writing, in its physical, graphical form, is an inseparable suturing of the visual and the verbal, the ‘imagetext’ incarnate.”⁴⁰ In other words, language itself is already quasi-visual, and in several different ways. The visual aspects of reading range from book illustration, to allusion to familiar iconography, to forming new pictures to entertain the mind’s eye. Although writers use language to convey meaning, fiction

³⁸ John Ruskin, “Of the Pathetic Fallacy,” *Modern Painters*, vol. 3, pt 4 (London: Knopf, 1988), 156.

³⁹ The Modernist writers most famous for their use of the pathetic fallacy are Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, and it was Eliot who coined the term “objective correlative” to describe a similar phenomenon.

⁴⁰ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 95.

and poetry are often shadowed by vision. The fusion of the two is undeniably present in the Brontës' fiction, where images and imagery regularly speak to characters in ways that transcend language. While the imagetext is something Mitchell finds to one degree or another in all literary works, the Brontës are particularly apt for visual reading because the fiction is visual in such a wide variety of ways. The novels not only represent the same imagery that fiction in general tends to do but also recast the Romantic lyric in terms of visual sensation. Appearance and its relationship to reality, as well as the purpose of art and women's role as artists, are ongoing themes throughout the sisters' works.

We also know that the Brontës themselves were amateur artists and quite interested in painting and sketching. As Juliette Wells and Sandra Hagan note, the Brontë sisters were not unusual in either their artistic pursuits or in the use of artistic themes; however, they are exceptionally ripe for scholarly exploration because of how well their artistic influences have been catalogued.⁴¹ Christine Alexander and Jane Sellars's *The Art of the Brontës* has proven particularly instrumental by carefully cataloguing the Brontës' amateur art and by providing excellent analyses of their known works. In fact, they help us to determine the distinct artistic interests of each of the Brontë siblings.

Branwell Brontë was perhaps the most serious artist. He actually began to pursue a career as a portraitist until self-destructive behavior interfered. Even though no contemporary art critics consider him a great artist, he was notable for his potential if not for his perseverance.⁴² Charlotte also cherished wishes of becoming a professional artist, exhibiting two of her drawings at the Royal Northern Society for the Encouragement of the Fine Arts in Leeds in 1834. Her

⁴¹ Juliette Wells and Sandra Hagan, *The Brontës in the World of the Arts* (London: Ashgate, 2008), 2.

⁴² Jane Sellars, "The Art of Branwell Brontë," in *The Art of the Brontës*, eds. Christine Alexander and Jane Sellars (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 78-80.

talent was so apparent that her publisher suggested that she illustrate the second edition of *Jane Eyre* in 1848.⁴³ Emily Brontë's art is lesser known, but it is in some ways more intriguing on that count because it aligns with the introverted qualities often associated with her. Of her 29 existing works, 20 contain natural subject matter, which she insisted on painting from nature rather than copying existing works, as her sisters often did.⁴⁴ Her best-known works are watercolors of her beloved dogs. Such subject matter would seem to be in keeping with her anti-social quality and with that closeness to nature so often referred to in biographical discussions.⁴⁵ If Anne's art has traditionally been overlooked, we may assume that she possessed an ability not far below Charlotte's, who treasured Anne's sketches after her death.⁴⁶ Most notable about Anne's work is that two of her surviving works—ones that were drawn from her own imagination—are strikingly paralleled in Helen Huntingdon's art in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Because of the way the Brontës' art reveals their visual sensibilities, I will incorporate and analyze their art on occasion in this study, and as an extension of this inter-disciplinary aspect of my study, will also include select illustrations from the Brontës' novels in effort to show how the visual aspects of their texts have been manifested in other artists' imaginations.

Feminist Theory and the Woman Writer

To explain how my study relates to existing feminist theory, I will lean on the theories of French post-structural feminists. All of the four major figures in this theory—Julia Kristeva,

⁴³ Christine Alexander, "Charlotte Brontë: the Earnest Amateur," in Alexander and Sellars, *Art of the Brontës*, 36.

⁴⁴ Winifred Gérin, *Emily Brontë*, 43.

⁴⁵ Christine Alexander, "The Art of Emily Brontë," in Alexander and Sellars, *Art of the Brontës*, 100-101.

⁴⁶ Jane Sellars, "The Art of Anne Brontë," in Alexander and Sellars, *Art of the Brontës*, 100-101.

Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig, and Hélène Cixous agree that phallogentrism, or fixation on the penis as the source of power, extends not only into religion and philosophy, but also into language in general. These theorists advocate for the women writer's responsibility to write with their bodies, and to undermine the centrality of the phallus by asserting their own concept of female pleasure that is not arrived at through men. Perhaps the most influential of these critics is Hélène Cixous. In the opening of "The Laugh of Medusa," she proclaims: "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing. . . . Woman must bring herself to the text." She further defines this women's writing as informed by cyclical sexual instincts rather than according to exacting male-centered literary traditions.⁴⁷ Cixous calls this writing *l'écriture féminine* (or "female writing"), a concept Elaine Showalter explains as "the inscription of the feminine body and female difference in language and text."⁴⁸

Female writing is inherently about sexuality for Cixous, but she also extends the rarely expressed intensity of female pleasure or *jouissance* to a more visionary dimension. She explains female autoeroticism as "prolonged or accompanied by a production of forms, a veritable aesthetic activity, each stage of rapture inscribing a resonant vision, a composition, something beautiful."⁴⁹ She further expresses the power of what Sigmund Freud conceived as the dark continent of female sexuality as "burst[ing] with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune."⁵⁰ So, though Cixous' theory is not explicitly couched in vision, her very explanation of *jouissance* suggests its visual properties as being

⁴⁷ Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa," 875.

⁴⁸ Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1986), 249.

⁴⁹ Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa," 876

⁵⁰ Ibid.



Figure i.i. Sculpture by Gian Lorenzo Bernini. *L'estasi di Santa Teresa*. Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome. The sculpture was completed from 1647-1652 and was chiseled from white marble. Interestingly enough, this sculpture recounts St. Teresa's mystical experience when an angel pierced her repeatedly with a fiery spear that brought her exquisite religious pleasure.

manifested in resonant visions and beautiful forms. This visual aspect also suggests that *jouissance* is not a purely physiological sensation but is also a deeper spiritual force.

Kristeva and Wittig prove less fixated on *l'écriture féminine* as purely libidinal and conceive of this pure women's writing as expressing anything intuitive to female experience, rather than only being a manifestation of sexual functionality. I will adopt a looser application than Kristeva and Wittig still, in linking *l'écriture féminine* to women's religious experience. Though these French feminists never explain *jouissance* as being spiritual in a traditional sense,

this is a notion that the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan mentioned in his remarks about Bernini's statue of St. Teresa, as is seen in Figure i.i: "You need but go to Rome and see the statue by Bernini to immediately understand she's coming. There's no doubt about it. What is she getting off on?"⁵¹ Slavoj Žižek reacts to Lacanian notions about *jouissance* by pointing out that religions themselves often suggest that they provide a spiritual pleasure that secular sources cannot. He describes the Catholic Church's stance in particular: "not only is religious spirituality not opposed to earthly pleasures, but it is ONLY this spirituality that can provide the frame for a full and satisfied pleasurable life."⁵²

While male philosophers seem to recognize the possibility of *jouissance* as a religious ecstasy, this seems to be an idea that feminist post-structuralists generally ignore, and Luce Irigaray in particular apparently rejects. In her later theoretical work, Irigaray contends that God functions as the ideal masculine that men both relate their identity to as an infinite or impossible ideal of masculine perfection and also distance themselves from because they do not see themselves as divine.⁵³ This dynamic becomes particularly troublesome to Irigaray because men view women as a sort of negative alter-ego for masculinity.⁵⁴ She argues that this occurs because men are severed from the divine and must create an inferior for them in their hierarchy of power. She urges that women should find their own feminine divine and insists that this divinity must be severed from its traditional emphasis on hierarchical authority in order for it to truly benefit

⁵¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, Vol. 20. (New York: Norton, 1999), 76.

⁵² Slavoj Žižek, "Religion between Knowledge and *Jouissance*," <http://www.lacan.com/zizsmokeonthewater.html>. Accessed on August 15, 2015.

⁵³ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 314, 356.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

women. She hopes for “perception of a divine that was not opposed to them, perhaps? That was not even distinct from them.”⁵⁵ The divine should not be located in a transcendent power, but rather, in the earthly and familial history of womankind. When women can find a feminine divine within themselves instead of relying on men or their projected ideals of a masculine supreme being, this will deconstruct the myth that the feminine is nothing but atrophied masculinity.

Irigaray also sees subjectivity as integrally tied to the divine. She relates, “No human subjectivity, no human society has ever been established without the help of the divine.”⁵⁶ This is one point Anglophone feminists find problematic about Irigaray’s theories because she insists that to assume a subject’s stance is to channel masculinity, and she doesn’t offer a truly feminine version of subjectivity. A concept of female divinity, however, is one mode that women might embrace to break away from the notion of the ideal masculine. She professes that, “man is supposedly woman’s more perfect other, her model, her essence. The most human and the most divine goal woman can conceive is to become man. If she is to become woman, if she is to accomplish her female subjectivity, woman needs a god who is a figure for the perfection of her subjectivity.”⁵⁷ Irigaray’s theories seem limited, however, in that she does not identify any concrete paths to empowered female subjectivity. Ofelia Schutte, however, offers this possible application of Irigaray’s ideas in suggesting that women can function as subjects “by imagining a region prior to language, a space prior to the knowledge of the Law of the Father, a source out of

⁵⁵ Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 173.

⁵⁶ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and genealogies*, trans Gillian C. Gill. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 62.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

which she can draw her own figures of speech.”⁵⁸

Irigaray finds the Christian God as the embodiment of idealized phallic power and the real enemy of female empowerment, but I will aim to prove that the Brontës’ imaginings of the divine are not directed to a unilaterally masculine God, but a transcendent figure who bears both masculine and feminine qualities. It is through visual and spatial perception of the religion that women come to connect to a higher power that transcends worldly patriarchal institutions to focus on a more raw and primitive realm of knowledge. Here I apply Lacanian understanding of the *jouissance* that is manifested in *l’écriture féminine* as not only a sexual pleasure but also as a bodily pleasure in connecting to God. Throughout this study, I will illustrate how moments of visual and bodily religious fervor suggest how women experience spirituality in a sensual way and how living as subjects who employ their vision and bodies brings them heightened spiritual self-knowledge.

In my analysis of the Brontës’ bodily spirituality, I will also draw upon Diane Agrest and Elizabeth Grosz’s feminist theories about space. Across the fiction, spirituality often resonates with the gendered nature of the spaces in which women reside. Jane Rendell perhaps summed up the feminist preoccupation with space best in her suggestion that, “The role of place in gender politics is important in determining relations between knowledge, position and vision. In theorising subjectivity, identity and experience, feminists suggest that positioning is integral to knowing.”⁵⁹ The way woman in the Brontës receive spiritual intuition is strongly tied to the gendered realities of their spaces—whether they be churchyards, attics, art galleries, or

⁵⁸ Ofelia Schutte, “Irigaray on the Problem of Subjectivity,” *Hypatia* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 72.

⁵⁹ Jane Rendell, “Introduction: ‘Gender, Space’” in *Gender Space Architecture: Interdisciplinary Introduction*, ed. Iain Borden, Barbara Penner, and Jane Rendell (London: Routledge, 1999), 107. See, for example, Liz Bondi and Mona Domosh’s “Other Figures in the Other Places: on Feminism, Postmodernism and Geography,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 10, no.2 (1992): 199–213.

bedchambers. Through my analysis, I hope to illustrate how the Brontës spatially represent their gendered realities. Just like their social situation, the architecture around them evidences gender divisions, as Shirley Ardener theorizes. She sees western architecture as decidedly masculine and as being filled with “levels and territories with invisible fences and platforms,” and she sees these territories and barriers as needing “to be scaled by abstract ladders and crossed by intangible bridges with as much trepidation and exultation as on a plank over a raging torrent.”⁶⁰ For Ardener and Grosz, the gendered nature of architectural spaces is a tangible example of women’s limited sphere, and also a physical invitation to transgress these boundaries.

In a study like mine, it also becomes important to reflect on modern theories like these in historical context, that is, to consider at the same time how notions rooted in the Victorian era contributed to the presentation of religion. Counter to the common critical notion that the Brontës stood as radical feminist anomalies in regards to religious subjectivity,⁶¹ this individualized spirituality that they show occurred widely in the period. I will suggest that the Brontës’ bodily form of writing can be best probed at through visual and spatial theories, but in the end these theoretical actualities are intimately tied to the evangelical notion of a personalized connection with God. The reason that we see such striking visual religion and a strong spatial influence in the novel is because the body is so linked to women’s spirituality. We should not regard the Brontë sisters as radicals, for their religious themes certainly align with liberal,

⁶⁰ Shirley Ardener, *Women and Space* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), 11–12.

⁶¹ See, for example, John Maynard’s “The Brontës and Religion” in *The Cambridge Companion to The Brontës*. Ed. Heather Glen (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002); Micael M. Clarke’s “Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*, Mid-Victorian Anti-Catholicism, and the Turn to Secularism.” *ELH* 78, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 967-989; Leila S. May’s “Lucy Snowe, A Material Girl? Phrenology, Surveillance, and The Sociology of the Interior.” *Criticism* 55, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 43-68; and Michael O’Neill’s “Emily Brontë’s Visionary Religion” *Brontë Studies* 37, No. 4 (2012): 366-72.



Figure i.ii. Painting by Holman Hunt, *The Light of the World*, 1859, 760 x 545 cm. Keble College, Oxford. Holman Hunt joined Dante Gabriel Rossetti and others to found the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848. His earliest subjects were of an historical nature, but increasingly he also created increasingly religious art, even traveling to Palestine several times in effort to paint biblical art in its original setting.

forward-thinking evangelicals who conceptualized their creed as “a religion of the heart,” as Elisabeth Jay calls it.⁶² In this ideology, a personal relationship with God was of utmost importance.

One representative piece of mass-produced Victorian art that attests to this importance is Holman Hunt’s *The Light of the World*. In this well-known image, Christ stands in a doorway with a lantern, symbolically enacting Revelations 3:20.⁶³ Hunt’s portrayal suggests the

⁶² Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism in the Nineteenth Century Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 40.

⁶³ “Behold I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear my voice, and open the door,

individuality of the Brontës relationship to their savior, or as Frances Knight explains, "a new closeness between Christ and the believer, and a readiness on the savior's part to enter the human realm as guest rather than as a judge."⁶⁴ It is from within some such imagined space of humble communion with deity that the Brontës draft their fictions. In sum, an evangelical notion of a personal relationship with Christ undergirds their female subjectivity, reflecting the personal and merciful aspects of Christianity and deemphasizes its harsher, judgmental side.

Evangelical sentiment is also reflected in the Brontës' privileging of visual hermeneutics over biblical mandate. Barbara Taylor reminds us that the Victorian era was a time in which many Christians began to question the trustworthiness of the Bible, in part because of their recognition of the slippery nature of language in general. They asked questions like this: "How could words whose meaning changed over time or varied between nations be said to carry a single sacred truth?"⁶⁵ One product of these shifting attitudes was a hermeneutics that gleaned kernels of faith from Christian morality and transferred its traditions into visualizing nature and the world around in a more experiential way. It is to this growing tradition of biblical hermeneutics that the Brontës contributed.

In Chapter 1, "Architectural Imagery and the Threat to Religious Subjectivity in Charlotte Brontë," I explore how Brontë employs architectural imagery to both identify and subvert the tyranny of Mr. Brocklehurst and St. John Rivers. Jane describes Brocklehurst as a dark pillar and Rivers as a white column, and this imagery indicates that both men possess institutional power but ultimately fail to embody true Christian leadership. Furthermore, this

I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me."

⁶⁴ Frances Knight, *The Nineteenth-Century Church and English Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 47.

⁶⁵ Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, 144.

pillar iconography bears an important spatial property in that the men loom over Jane as vertical markers of impasse in her otherwise horizontal journey of progress. Here I also examine religious structures across the Brontës' opus as spatial representations of male dominance, and I argue that these spaces stifle women's imaginative spirituality.

In Chapter 2, "Images as Divine Guidance in Charlotte Brontë," I explore another pattern of visual hermeneutics in *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and *Villette*. These novels operate within the Wordsworthian tradition in that their heroines draw strength and inspiration from nature. In their observations of natural wonders, women perceive individualized messages of warning and comfort that transcend biblical textuality. For example, in *Jane Eyre* the setting sun and rising moon both impart warnings to Jane that she should forsake Rochester after she discovers he is a married man. After her flight from Thornfield, the natural image of the Milky Way provides providential comfort and a connection to God. In *Villette* Lucy Snowe has a similar moment of direction when the *aurora borealis* directs her to go to London to seek employment rather than northward as she had planned. This guidance leads her to work as a governess in Belgium, where she is able to reconnect with childhood friends and meet her future fiancé. The most striking moment of divine guidance occurs in *Shirley* when the novel's heroine perceives the divinity of Eve as she views the sunset. In her feminist speech during this natural spectacle, Shirley exclaims that Eve's reproductive power and physical strength more than compensate for her culpability in the fall. This is a moment that speaks directly to the two greatest myths that nineteenth-century feminists sought to dispel—first, that women were inferior to men because of their vulnerability to moral deception, and second, that women's reproductive nature mandated influence exclusively in the home. Conversely, Brontë argues that Eve's part in the fall reveals her strength as a daring advocate for human knowledge, and that the reproductive abilities that

she passed down to womenkind are the exact reason why women should be so involved in politics and the public sphere. For Shirley, the natural iconography of the sunset attests to the nobility of women in a way transcendent and subversive to biblical traditions. I argue that this larger trend of receiving guidance and comfort from natural iconography suggests that when language fails these women in being an adequate vehicle for their visions of feminist progress, that iconography within their writing can serve as a purer mode of expressive subjectivity.

In Chapter 3, “Female Artistry and Spectatorship in Anne and Charlotte Brontë,” I explore several heroines’ artistic capabilities to create art that reveals their bold desires and self-assured subjectivity in a way that runs counter to the Victorian notion that visual art was only a domestic refinement for women. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane’s three surrealistic paintings serve as visual foreshadowing for some of the novel’s main themes and reveal her capability to create surrealistic, sublime art. In a different way, Helen Graham of Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* paints to reveal her progression from naïve innocence to a stronger empowered identity. Aside from these heroine’s roles as artists, I also examine the role of women as spectators of art, both in the home and in the gallery. Jane Eyre carefully views a tapestry depicting Christ’s last supper when she cares for the wounded Richard Mason. This tapestry provides a sense of forewarning and a moral mandate to forgive deception, as Christ did. In *Villette* we see the most striking moment of female spectatorship when Lucy scrutinizes several paintings in a gallery unaccompanied by a man, much to M. Paul’s shock and outrage. She views a giant portrait of a rotund Cleopatra, a portrait that Lucy despises because she associates it with the vice of female vanity and the grotesqueness of orientalized female sexuality. She also views a series of religious paintings called *La vie d'une femme*, which categorize the main phases of a woman’s life: life as a young girl who is gaining a moral education, life as a young wife who is

learning to submit to her husband, life as a young mother who is enduring the travails of childrearing, and life as a widow who is paying respect to her husband even in death. In her analysis of these paintings, we see an outright rejection of patriarchal and religious myths about women. In sum, here I argue that the way the Brontës' protagonists create and view art suggests that though they possess striking artistic and imaginative abilities, they are still confined by the notion that they themselves are objects of the male gaze. Thus, within Victorian culture, these women cannot create or view art as empowered subjects but only as ornamental objects. The problematic nature of women's roles as artists and spectators of art in some ways attests to the ideal nature of the *imagetext*. Highly visual writing bypasses traditional phallogentric language because it is imbued with *l'écriture féminine* that expresses women's bodily experience, and this visual language is also an ideal form of expression because it bypasses the obstacles surrounding women's roles as artists by avoiding the public gallery where women's appraisal was still stunted.

In Chapter 4, "Supernatural Vision and Religious Power in Charlotte and Emily Brontë," I examine how women serve as prophetesses of sorts through the dreams they experience and the dreams they inspire in others. In *Jane Eyre*, our heroine's dreams serve as visionary forewarning of her impending heartache, much in the same way that her other visual capabilities do. Her intuitive power proves to be the oracle of her own life, though she can only vaguely comprehend her visions before difficulties befall her. In *Wuthering Heights* we see a rather different use of dreams when Cathy Earnshaw's diary, which recounts one Sunday's religious drudgery, inspires Mr. Lockwood to have a strange dream about religious hypocrisy. Cathy serves as a prophetess in sending a clear message to Lockwood, even from beyond the grave, after he reads her account. After his haunting dream, she furthers her influence when she visits him as her ghost. Cathy's

dreams serve as a religious commentary elsewhere when she dreams about a Blakean reversal of heaven and hell in which she finds herself in heaven only to wish to be in hell or *Wuthering Heights*. In the Brontës' use of dreams, we see the strength of the female psyche as women foresee their paths and work through dreams to haunt other people's subjectivity. We see a similar psychological vividness in the waking dreams or apparitions that Brontë heroines experience. In *Villette* Lucy sees the recurring apparition of a nun, and she questions whether this may be the ghost of a local nun who died after forsaking her vow of chastity. This apparition, which we later learn is actually Ginevra's lover dressed as a nun to avoid detection, first reveals Lucy's strongest concerns about Catholic culture and then later challenges Protestant superstitions about Catholicism. Apparitions carry religious significance in *Wuthering Heights* when Nelly reports sightings of Heathcliff and Cathy's ghosts. These sightings serve to clarify the convoluted message about religion in the novel by asserting the actuality of universal salvation. Both of these apparitions are visual manifestations that embody religious ideologies in a way that clarifies the religious themes in these novels. Furthermore, these dreams and visions privilege women's intuitive visual nature as the central source of meaning.

Finally, in Chapter 5, "Gendered Morality and Didactic Spectacle in Emily and Anne Brontë," I focus on how *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* present visual ethics that straightforwardly illustrate several problems pertaining to women and morality: the actuality of marital violence as pervasive across social strata, the imbalanced standards for morally educating boys and girls, and the impossibility of women's roles as both moral saviors to their families and subordinates to their husbands. We see straightforward instances of violence and Christian vices widely represented in both of these novels, and the explicitness of these texts bears a distinction from the wider realm of didactic Victorian literature in which violence and sin

were often portrayed euphemistically. By allowing these novels to serve as clear exhibitions of female abuse and the negative effects of sin, *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* allow for a potent alternative to the polite moral tract fiction of the Brontës' day.

In my study of these visual aspects of the Brontës' novels, I hope to prove how intrepid they were in modeling a new way for women to privilege their vision over societal prescriptions for their lives. This study evidences the validity of moral power in furthering women's rights in the nineteenth century, a positive influence that many critics often overlook. And while Brontë protagonists do not effect radical social change in their novels, they present a mode for reinterpreting Christianity and subverting the gender essentialism of their day. The relationship of vision and subjectivity not only has religious implications but also suggests that women do not necessarily need to reinvent their social roles to be powerful, only envision new paradigms surrounding these roles. Within the Brontës' works, infusing their language with vision and feminine bodily experience proves the strongest way that they can profess their views and the strongest way for their protagonists to function as the centers of their lives and faith.

CHAPTER 1: ARCHITECTURAL IMAGERY AND THE THREAT TO RELIGIOUS SUBJECTIVITY IN CHARLOTTE BRONTË

Although we may think of religious institutions as emphasizing collective adherence to an outward standard, liberal evangelicalism also suggested a personal internalization of Christian precepts. Writing about Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, John G. Peters points out an evangelical aspect of individual faith that might well be applied across her fiction more generally.

[T]he novel presents an individualized Christianity—not one necessarily opposed to Anglicanism—but one possible within Anglicanism. This individualized Christianity is not a relative Christianity that changes from one individual to the next but is instead an individual incorporation of Christ's teachings, those that society accepted in doctrine but rejected in practice. Jane advocates internalizing Christ's teachings through a literal reading of such basic doctrines as simplicity, frugality, charity, modesty, and humility, especially as manifested in the doctrine of human equality.¹

As Peters suggests, evangelical individualization doesn't mean establishing a relative morality of high church *versus* low, or of women *versus* men, but instead allows for an internal accountability that is less concerned with judging others than impressing Christian tenets upon one's own heart. The inwardness of Brontë's faith doesn't mean that she wanted her heroines, or her readers, to turn a blind eye to male interference or oppression; in fact, one of Jane Eyre's

¹ John G. Peters, "'We Stood at God's Feet, Equal:' Equality, Subversion, and Religion in *Jane Eyre*," *Brontë Studies* 29 (2004): 60-61.

most meaningful challenges is to assert her agency and live what she believes is a moral Christian life in the midst of controlling men.

The Threat to Individual Faith in *Jane Eyre*

If any character represents Jane's early struggles, it would be Mr. Brocklehurst, the schoolmaster Mrs. Reed summons to take her difficult orphan niece away to a life of humble education at Lowood school for girls. When Jane first meets Brocklehurst, she discerns his sternness and darkness while he and Mrs. Reed establish that she is a naughty child. They believe this because Jane doesn't enjoy the Psalms, is deceitful (according to Mrs. Reed), and is furthermore prideful. Mr. Brocklehurst immediately reminds Jane that naughty children go to hell. With passionate resistance, she replies that she must "keep in good health, and not die" (*JE*, 34). Her defiance, of course, only magnifies her superiors' distaste for her. Before departing Gateshead for Lowood, Jane confronts her aunt Mrs. Reed with similar defiance because she has consistently dismissed Jane as an immoral child. In fact, Jane was the one marginalized and brutalized at the hands of her relatives. She assures herself, "*Speak*, I must" and then berates her aunt for the cruel way she has treated her (*JE*, 38). Mrs. Reed is taken aback by Jane's directness and tries to explain her actions, saying that "children must be corrected for their faults." When Jane insists that deceit is not her fault, Mrs. Reed retorts, "But you are passionate, Jane, that you must allow" (*JE*, 40). Despite the continuing message that her passionate subjectivity is an impious trait, the friendless young Jane remains internally powerful, her self-worth unmoved.

When Jane settles into Lowood, her environment proves even more threatening to her passionate nature. She and her classmates live in frigid conditions, and Brocklehurst often scrimps on their food and clothing costs in order to instill humility in them. For example, he

demands that Mrs. Temple feed the girls bad porridge on one occasion in order to save money and to combat their carnal natures.² The conditions cause widespread disease that ends many young lives. Jane is a particular target for Brocklehurst's lessons because of the passionate and self-assured way that she lived at Gateshead with the Reeds. When Jane accidentally breaks her lesson slate, Mr. Brocklehurst defames her in front of the entire school, implying that her passionate nature evidences demonic possession:

God has graciously given her the shape that He has given to all of us. . . Who would think that the Evil One had already found a servant and agent in her? . . . Teachers, you must watch her . . . scrutinize her actions, punish her body to save her soul—if, indeed, such salvation be possible. . . . [She is] worse than many a little heathen who says its prayers to Brahma and kneels before Juggernaut. (*JE*, 72-3)

Clearly Brocklehurst frowns upon her trait of passionate subjectivity, for he governs his school under the doctrine of total depravity, a Calvinist idea that Karen Cubie Henck describes as “the view that all human beings are inherently and incurably sinful, and that while some are mysteriously predestined to a salvation they do not deserve, others are predestined to a hell they cannot escape.”³ Intertwined with Brocklehurst's understanding of this doctrine seems to be a particular concern about young girls. A passionate young girl is a likely agent for Satan, in his mind, for surely empowering feminine desires could not lead to Godly ends. For this reason, he

³ Karen Cubie Henck, “‘That Peculiar Voice’: *Jane Eyre* and Mary Bosanquet Fletcher, an Early Wesleyan Female Preacher,” *Brontë Studies* 35, no. 1 (2010): 15.

aims for his pupils to understand themselves as objects under moral tutelage rather than active moral agents.

The humiliation Jane faces from Brocklehurst's persecution begins a series of scenarios in which she learns to trust her conscience over her schoolmaster's lessons. In the aftermath of her classroom mortification, when Jane is at her lowest point, her new friend Helen Burns steps in to mitigate Brocklehurst's false judgments by reminding Jane of a heavenly power mightier than Brocklehurst, with his misguided authority: "Mr. Brocklehurst is not a god. . . . Besides this earth, and besides the race of men, there is an invisible world and a kingdom of spirits . . . and those spirits watch us . . . [and] recognize our innocence" (*JE*, 80). Helen helps Jane to recognize that though Brocklehurst assumes religious authority, he is not sanctified in his treatment of the Lowood pupils, and an entire "kingdom of spirits" knows the true goodness in her heart. Helen employs her personal faith to counter Brocklehurst's treatment and becomes a role model of internal resistance in the process.

In another instance, Jane again takes issue with what Nicholas Armitage calls Brocklehurst's "toe-curlingly hypocritical" nature.⁴ Just as he demands that a pupil's naturally curly hair be cut because it is too ornate, his daughters and wife parade in, "splendidly attired in velvet, silk, and furs" and atop their heads "a profusion of light tresses, elaborately curled" (*JE*, 74). In this disparity between the moral requirements for his pupil and his own family members, we see Brocklehurst hypocritically judging the same feature as wanton in his poor pupil and admirable in his darling daughters. The notion reflects Brocklehurst's belief that while his poor

⁴ Nicholas Armitage, "Melting Miss Snowe: Charlotte's Message to the English Church," *Brontë Studies* 34, no. 3 (2009): 211.

pupils are in need of special moral correction, his own wife and daughters are destined for salvation, and thus not as susceptible to the vice of vanity.

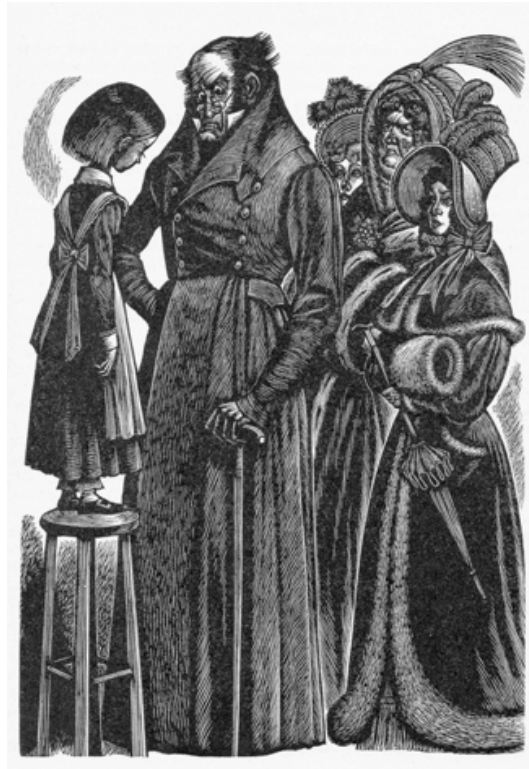


Figure 1.1. Illustration by Fritz Eichenberg for Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Random House, 1943). Fritz Eichenberg (1901-1990) was a German-American who immigrated to the United States with the rise of Nazi power in Germany because he and his young family were secular Jews. He primarily worked in wood engraving and often his art served as political commentary on his pacifist views. He illustrated several other novels by Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Poe, and Swift—all novels that particularly emphasize social injustice.

The hypocritical disparity is rendered in Figure 1.1, Fritz Eichenberg's 1943 illustration for the novel. Eichenberg fuses together the two moments mentioned, both Brocklehurst's public excoriation on Jane's character and the ornate appearance of his wife and daughters. The conflation of these separate events reflects the way these moments support each other in illustrating Brocklehurst's inconsistent suppression of female beauty and desire. The haughty finery of Brocklehurst's wife and daughters stands in stark contrast with Jane's impoverished

plainness. As J. Jeffrey Franklin argues, through the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, Brocklehurst worships a selectively “stingy God” who is looking for reasons to punish those within his power,⁵ a religious concept that renders personalized religious faith inconsequential. Brontë connects the doctrine of total depravity with injustice, misery, and death. As this illustration would suggest, some critics regard Brocklehurst as a caricature. Elisabeth Jay criticizes Brontë for rendering him as an absurdly “tyrannical ogre.”⁶ Likewise, Marianne Thormählen sees Brocklehurst as a “grotesquerie,” extreme in his nature because Brontë based him on their childhood schoolmaster, who was in part responsible for the ill health that led her sisters to their deaths.⁷ We can see Brocklehurst’s extreme nature in this illustration, evidenced in his cartoonish scowl and his disproportionate form. Even if Brocklehurst proves a hyperbolic antagonist, the way he decries Jane’s passion as inherently sinful threatens her development as a spiritually sovereign individual. In fact, Nicholas Armitage views Jane’s encounter with Brocklehurst as not only bearing significance in her journey, but as a clear message to the Church of England to discourage fanaticism and to promote instead religious moderation, without clerical reliance upon manipulative emotional fervor.⁸

This doctrine of predestined salvation is one that the Brontës clearly rejected, and the way the doctrine informs Brocklehurst’s selective persecution renders him truly tyrannical. Marianne Thormählen notes that Brocklehurst’s “worst offence is his utter lack of the Evangelical virtues: charity, warmth, and humility. The would-be exponent of the religion of the

⁵ J. Jeffrey Franklin, “The Merging of Spiritualities: Jane Eyre as Missionary of Love,” *Nineteenth-century Literature* 49, no. 4 (1995): 465.

⁶ Elisabeth Jay, *Faith and Doubt*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986), 21.

⁷ Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion*, 184.

heart, who upbraids a child for possessing a ‘heart of stone’, himself has no heart at all.”⁹ As Thormählen argues, Brocklehurst’s advocacy of selective punishment is the sort of inconsistency that evangelicals would have resisted. The evangelical mindset rejected the notion that leaders could judge others by unequal standards and promoted personal interpretation between the believer and God. John G. Peters adds that the other problem that evangelicals found with the belief in total human depravity is that it “denies the physical part of human experience, affirming only spiritual life.”¹⁰ The view figures heavily in the degradation of women’s lives at Lowood: indeed, Brocklehurst seems to recognize the bodily quality of subjectivity in his call to Jane’s teachers to punish her body.

A different but equally dangerous threat to Jane’s passionate subjectivity comes through her cousin, St. John Rivers. She meets Rivers later in the novel after fleeing Thornfield to escape her fiancé, Edward Rochester, after learning that he is married. St. John saves her life and gives her a new home and a sense of belonging in the world by employing her as a teacher at his small country school. Perhaps because of his kinship, Jane has a difficult time rejecting his authority. St. John is moreover a dutiful Christian living in accordance to the biblical¹¹ letter of the law, even to the point of becoming a figure of comedy.¹² One moment that illustrates St. John’s self-denial is when he rejects the friendly affection of Rosamond Oliver, a pretty heiress. Rivers is deeply attracted to Rosamond but discourages her interest by speaking to her “like an

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Peters, “‘We Stood at God’s Feet, Equal:’,” 59.

¹¹ Throughout this study, all citations from the Bible are from the King James Version.

¹² See Corinthians 3:6 on the difference between the spirit and the letter of divine law. God “hath made us able ministers of the New Testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.” The “letter of the law” refers to an attitude that exact application of written prescriptions, while “the spirit of the law” allows for more individualized and nuanced application of Christian precepts.

automaton,” Jane tells us—further insisting that only Rivers himself “knew the effort it cost him thus to refuse” (*JE*, 466). While Brontë presents him as morally righteous, he only becomes so by making himself completely self-denying, it would seem. Even the least chance of temptation is too risky for St. John.

St. John’s control of his emotions is not constrained to living his own faith, however; he wishes to control Jane’s passion as well. In asking her to become his missionary wife, he admonishes: “You are formed for labour, not for love. A missionary’s wife you must—shall be. You shall be mine: I claim you—not for my pleasure, but for my Sovereign’s service” (*JE*, 514). The proposal is most unsettling for Jane, and all she can say in response is: “My heart is mute,—my heart is mute!” Perhaps she is particularly conflicted because St. John is a good man and has done much to help her. As Marianne Thormählen describes Jane’s dilemma: “His powers of persuasion are uniquely for his purpose: he is highly intelligent and learned of the divine, . . . and he is her precious cousin, too, part of the love-starved orphan’s new-found family. No wonder Jane’s inner self . . . cannot provide the sure guidance it always gave her before.”¹³ Being a stalwart Christian but knowing that she could only marry for love, Jane agrees to serve as a missionary with St. John but as his friend rather than his spouse. To this alternative, St. John retorts: “We *must* be married—I repeat it: there is no other way. . . . [Take] time to consider my offer; and do not forget that if you reject it, it is not me you deny, but God” (*JE*, 521). The moment reveals the layer of self-interest beneath St. John’s piety. Although he claims complete duty to God, there is also a sense of egotism that comes with his self-denying state, and for this reason, he likewise proves to be an oppressor.

¹³ Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion*, 206.

When Jane refuses Rivers and tells him that she would like to investigate the fate of Mr. Rochester, he disparages her as a potentially lost soul: “It remains for me, then . . . to remember you in my prayers, and to entreat God for you, in all earnestness, that you may not indeed become a castaway. I had thought I recognized in you one of the chosen. But God sees not as man sees: *His* will be done” (JE, 529). The comment further reveals three related doctrinal views: that (1) as a pious man his understanding of God is necessarily superior to that of a woman’s, that (2) he believes in the Calvinist doctrine of predestined salvation, and that (3) he considers himself an agent qualified to recognize a chosen person. In St. John’s ultimate judgment of Jane, we see that though his withdrawn temperament may be quite different from Mr. Brocklehurst’s sharp demeanor, the two are alike. St. John may not condemn Jane as wholly as Mr. Brocklehurst does, but her passionate nature brings both men to a similar judgment. In his parting conversation with her, St. John once again asks Jane to go to India and become his wife, as if her former refusal were a sin: “repent—resolve, while there is yet time” (JE, 533). In his mind, her course of action cannot be righteous if it empowers her own heart and denies his authority, but Jane is once again immovable. Recognizing her victory over patriarchal manipulation, Karen Cubie Henck argues that this proves “another example of Jane claiming a subject rather than object position for herself.”¹⁴ Yet another similarity that St. John shares with Brocklehurst is his caricatured nature. Mary Taylor, for example, tells us: “I do not believe in Mr. Rivers. There are no good men of the Brocklehurst species.”¹⁵ Marianne Thormählen likewise says that she has never “met a nincompoop who felt that... Jane should have married St.

¹⁴ Henck, ““That Peculiar Voice,”” 16.

¹⁵ Mary Taylor, *The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondences*, 2 vols., Ed. T.J. Wise and J.A. Symington (Lake County, Illinois: Porcupine Press, 1980), 2: 236-39. Letter dated 24 July 1848.

John instead of Rochester.”¹⁶ These critics are onto something. *Jane Eyre* could never have enjoyed its wide readership across more than one-hundred and fifty years if Jane had relinquished her passion to die with St. John as a missionary in India. Pious as he is, St. John represents an object lesson for the feminine interpretation of Christianity, the lesson that extreme selflessness and self-denial may well lead to misery.

The Black Pillar and the White Column

Jane’s denial of her oppressors’ authority can be further ascertained in the novel’s iconography of architectural motifs, most particularly, the image of the pillar or column. Jane describes Brocklehurst as a black, looming pillar and St. John as a cold, prostrate column, and these images can tell us much about how Jane both connects these two oppressive men to each other and how she distinguishes between them. As we examine Brontë’s use of this motif, we can further understand its spatial qualities in that both men are signified as vertical markers in Jane’s otherwise horizontal journey. Both men represent formidable challenges to her progression that she must overcome in her journey to greater self-knowledge. In examining Brocklehurst and Rivers through the icons attached to them, we come to better understand their threats to Jane’s subjectivity and the lessons that she learns in overcoming them.

Several critics have recognized the connection between Brocklehurst and Rivers through the column image. Marianne Thormählen describes them both as “forbidding, column-like Calvinists” who “attempt to break down Jane Eyre’s integrity.”¹⁷ Like Thormählen, J. Jeffrey Franklin argues that the column motif that runs between St. John and Brocklehurst equates the

¹⁶ Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion*, 204-05.

¹⁷ Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion*, 204-5.

Calvinists dogmas of the two. He concludes that through these men, Brontë outrightly rejects evangelicalism.¹⁸ Maria Lamonaca makes a more general conjecture, that “Despite St. John’s apparent sincerity and sterling virtue, both he and Brocklehurst preach a religion of the Letter, or Law. Their God is a supernatural magistrate who damns sinners for disobeying the Word.”¹⁹ These scholars illuminate Brontë’s careful criticism of Calvinist concepts of salvation, but to say that her portrayal rejects evangelicalism goes much too far. As is often true for the Brontës, the criticism is doctrinal rather than sectarian. Both Franklin and Lamonaca establish the thematic link between Brocklehurst and Rivers as rigid pillars of oppression in Jane’s journey, but no critic has recognized the iconography of the column or pillar image for their function as biblical hermeneutics as I will. From this context, I hope to show that Brontë demonstrates an aversion to Calvinism, but more importantly, she questions the reliability of patriarchal leadership in general.

When Jane first meets Brocklehurst, she calls him, “a black pillar! . . . such, at least, appeared to me, at first sight, the straight, narrow, sable-clad shape standing erect on the rug; the grim face at the top was like a carved mask, placed above the shaft by way of capital” (*JE*, 33). Jane signifies Brocklehurst’s quest for tyrannical power even in this first meeting through the phallic properties of this image. She describes his “shape standing erect” with his head placed above the “shaft,” and in endowing this image with phallic properties suggests the sexual nature of Brocklehurst’s authority. His power has a pronounced darkness about it; his “grim face” at the top of this shaft resembles a “carved mask,” which lends him a gargoyle-like presence. The black pillar image, then, not only represents phallic dominance but also Gothic darkness. We can see

¹⁸ Franklin, “The Merging of Spiritualities,” 469.

¹⁹ Lamonaca. “Jane’s Crown of Thorns,” 253.

the stark darkness of his personage as is represented in Figure 1.2, M.V. Wheelhouse's 1911 illustration. In this image, Brocklehurst's figure seems to suck all the light out of the scene. As he stands with his back to the hearth, we can imagine his lecture to Jane about hell and the pit of fire where naughty children burn. When Jane first sees him at Lowood, she again refers to him



Figure 1.2. Illustration by M.V. Wheelhouse for Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: G. Bell & Sons, Ltd., 1911). M.V. Wheelhouse (active 1895-1947) was a native of Yorkshire who studied in Paris for three years and primarily illustrated children's books in pen and ink with color washes. She also illustrated novels by George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Louisa May Alcott, and George Sand.

as a “black pillar” and a “piece of architecture...looking longer, narrower, and more rigid than ever” (*JE*, 70). Later, when Brocklehurst publically insults Jane, she refers to him as a “black

marble clergyman” (*JE*, 76). Jane is nothing if not emphatic about his architectural and pillar-like features as well as the ominous darkness he creates.

As persistent as Jane is in referring to Brocklehurst as a black pillar, she is equally as consistent in linking St. John to the imagery of a white column. If Brocklehurst is a caricature of hypocrisy in Jane’s childhood, St. John proves a much more paradoxical tyrant in comparison, one that Jane seems to strongly reject in some ways and revere in other ways. Appropriately, Jane’s use of the column image proves much more nuanced as well. The first characteristic of St. John that the image attests to is that despite his self-denial, his suppressed phallic desire for



Figure 1.3. Illustration by F.H. Townsend for Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Service & Paton, 1897). F.H. Townsend (1868-1920) studied at Lambeth School of Art and was known for his versatility by age 19. He contributed to many magazines and became the first Art Editor of *Punch*.

dominance is partly responsible for his obedience. After Jane denies St. John's marriage proposal, she relates, "there he lay, still as a prostrate column; his face turned to me: his eye beaming watchful and keen" (*JE*, 517). This image contains phallic properties, but unlike the black pillar of Brocklehurst that seems to stand erect at every turn and loom over Jane, here she describes St. John as a fallen column—still rigid, but turned on its side. Her hesitation to marry St. John and join him in his missionary efforts has rendered him impotent, in a sense. The significance of this moment of St. John's impotence can be further explored in analyzing Figure 1.3, F.H. Townsend's 1897 illustration. St. John appears on higher ground, and though he is lying down, is still rather rigid. He looks down awkwardly at Jane, who is propped against a rock. This illustration suggests what is also apparent in the novel—that St. John elevates himself above Jane, and though his reclined position may be a mark of humility, he still remains rigid. The direction of Jane's gaze in this illustration is also significant, for rather than apologetically looking toward St. John, she looks straight ahead. This illustration suggests what proves all too clear in the text—by St. John elevating himself as Jane's moral authority and one who should dictate her fate, he must necessarily look down at her in judgment rather than up to the heavens in humility. St. John's impulse to control keeps him from living the precepts of Christianity in an internalized and self-reflective way.

The second criticism of St. John that the column image reveals is his notion of Christianity as a heroic quest, one of duty rather than emotional fervor. Marianne Thormählen recognizes that his emphasis on duty amounts to the notion of Christianity as a heroic quest. She points out that "All his ambition . . . is geared towards winning the good and entering Heaven a hero. Enjoying eternal bliss seems less important than achieving victory, and being rewarded by

Jesus Christ more desirable than being near him.”²⁰ John G. Peters makes a similar conjecture, stating that, “For St. John, religion is a duty, and he understands only the rigour, not the heart.”²¹ Though he does deny his human desires, he is at the same time self-aggrandizing because of his heroic concept of Christian duty. Jane explains his idea of Christian conquest in evoking the column image when she describes St. John sitting awkwardly with his sisters by the hearth: “he was of the material from which nature hews her heroes—Christian and Pagan—her lawgivers, her statesmen, her conquerors: a steadfast bulwark for great interests to rest upon; but, at the fireside, too often a cold cumbrous column, gloomy and out of place” (*JE*, 502). His concept of rigid duty is the kind of mindset that has built nations and influenced history, but this heroism makes him more fit for lofty aspirations than the realities of his everyday life at home. In this instance we can again see how St. John’s piety may be directed to God but ultimately functions as a self-indulgent heroism in some ways—more linked to civic exceptionalism than Christian morality. Brontë’s criticism of him suggests that true morality must ultimately flourish in a natural way and be subject to interpretation around individual family’s firesides.

The third criticism that the column image facilitates is that St. John ultimately fails to grasp the internal power of Christianity because he refuses to invest his emotions into his belief. The visual rhetoric surrounding St. John is always cool and white. In one moment Jane describes him as emerging from a storm: “his tall figure all white as a glacier” (*JE*, 481). Brontë further stresses St. John’s similarity to a column in describing him as statue-like or made of marble. Observing him in meditation, Jane muses that he could have “been a statue instead of a man.” Later, she describes that his face looks like “chiseled marble,” and he has a “pale brow and

²⁰ Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion*, 98.

²¹ Peters, “‘We Stood at God’s Feet, Equal’,” 59.

cheek” (*JE*, 482). St. John’s statue-like nature is not limited to his appearance but extends to his demeanor as well. Speaking of his cousinly kisses, Jane questions whether to call them “marble kisses or ice kisses” (*JE*, 509). His behavior becomes even more tense after Jane refuses him. In one of her last encounters with St. John before returning to Rochester, Jane observes his distant manner: “To me, he was in reality become no longer flesh, but marble... his tongue a speaking instrument—nothing more” (*JE*, 524). We might attribute St. John’s coldness to a personality trait or social incompetence, but we also know that he is disconnected from nature. Jane describes this trait,

Nature was not to him that treasury of delight it was to his sisters. He expressed once, and but once in my hearing, a strong sense of the rugged charm of the hills, and an inborn affection for the dark roof and hoary walls he called his home; but there was more of gloom than pleasure in the tone and words in which the sentiment was manifested; and never did he seem to roam the moors for the sake of their soothing silence—never seek out or dwell upon the thousand peaceful delights they could yield. (*JE* 448-49)

Jane recognizes that in the rare occasion that St. John recognizes the beauty of home and the world around him, that he does so with reluctance. These earthly gifts are to him a distraction from the higher law of devotion to God. As he cuts himself off from the world and focuses on removing human passions, he becomes increasingly robotic. Maria Lamonaca recognizes the connection between St. John’s cold removal from nature as part of his rigid adherence to the letter of the law, arguing, “While Jane has learned to seek God in Nature, as well as in the

stillness of her own heart, St. John can look no further than the ‘letter [that] killeth.’”²² St. John’s emphasis on the letter of the law, then, privileges rigid adherence to the Bible rather than nuanced interpretation through the heart. Tellingly, Jane attests to this fact by infusing textuality with her vision.

The image of the white column ultimately attests to Jane’s paradoxical feelings about St. John. Unlike Brocklehurst, who is rendered decidedly dark and abject, the whiteness assigned to St. John attests to a redeeming aspect in his staunch oppressive qualities. Marianne Thormählen recognizes Brontë’s paradoxical rendering of St. John and reads him as fallen from grace. She remarks, “the images of light that surround him and his striking physical beauty recall the leader of the angels who fell by the sin of ambition.” She considers, “is St John, the man with the name of an angel and the face of a pagan god, some kind of Lucifer?”²³ Here I will attempt to account for Brontë’s nuanced treatment of St. John as both holy and tyrannical by examining the icon of the pillar or column in the Bible. In doing so, we can gain further insight as to the theological implications Brontë makes in connecting these men through this image.

Because of Charlotte’s religious upbringing at Haworth, which consisted of careful and long-term biblical study, it is likely that Charlotte would have been well-acquainted with the biblical implications of her imagery. In the Bible, pillars are often used metaphorically to emphasize authority, particularly in the New Testament. After Christ’s death, the book of Galatians describes that the apostles James, Cephas, and John “seemed to be pillars, [and] perceived the grace that was given unto them” as they embarked in missionary efforts (Gal 2:9). Here their pillar-like nature signifies strength and patriarchal authority. The image is again used

²² Lamonaca, “Jane’s Crown of Thorns,” 253.

²³ Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion*, 209.

in regards to establishing bishops and deacons; the author of 1 Timothy describes, “[T]he church of the living God” as “the pillar and ground of all truth” (1 Tim 3:15). Here the pillar represents a sense of stability that the church provides in a wayward world. In Revelations, a book that seems particularly central to concepts of deliverance in *Jane Eyre*, as Keith Jenkins argues in detail,²⁴ St. John describes salvation: “Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out” (Rev 3:12). The nature of this reference is particularly important, having come from the apostle St. John, the namesake of our white column. This verse indicates the sort of hero’s rest that St. John so desires, a stationary place in God’s favor from which one cannot depart. Here, the pillar image is linked to a heavenly strength and structure, components that were essential to support the formation of early Christianity.

In reviewing this pillar image within the Old Testament, however, we can perceive an older tradition that attests to how the omnipotent God can shake even righteous earthly authority. Job recognizes the power of God above all earthly power when he describes that he “shaketh the earth out of her place, and the pillars thereof tremble. . . . *If* God will not withdraw his anger, the proud helpers do stoop under him” (Job 9:6, 13). Later, Job again utilizes the pillar image to correct his friend Bildad, who questions what Job has done to deserve his numerous well-known afflictions. Job explains God’s all-knowing power, in part: “The pillars of heaven tremble and are astonished at his reproof” (Job 26:11). Here pillars continue to indicate earthly constructs of righteousness, but these structures are weak in comparison with God’s purposes. A psalm uses the image in a similar sense: “The earth and all the inhabitants thereof are dissolved: I bear up the pillars of it” (Psalms 75:3). In this verse, the pillars serve as architectural support for the

²⁴ See Keith Jenkins, “*Jane Eyre*: Charlotte Brontë’s New Bible” in *Approaches to Teaching Jane Eyre*, ed. Diane Long Hoeveler and Beth Lau (New York: Modern Language Association, 1993).

earth itself, which God can adeptly shift. All of these references indicate how what may seem authoritative on earth is inconsequential in comparison to God.

The Old Testament also mentions pillars frequently in connection to the Israelite tabernacle and Solomon's temple. The image first bears metaphysical properties to describe Jehovah's²⁵ guidance in moving this structure as the Israelites wandered in the wilderness: "the Lord appeared in the tabernacle in a pillar of a cloud: and the pillar of the cloud stood over the door of the tabernacle" (Deut 31:15). This scripture explains the concentrated nature of Jehovah's presence as a pillar. This metaphysical use of the image is accompanied with a more literal use of it to explain the measurements of pillars and the precision with which the Israelites were instructed to build the temple. In both the metaphysical and literal use of the pillar, it takes on a connotation with The Law of Moses and the ancient emphasis on precision and exactness. This spirit of exactness is an attitude that Protestants would have rejected, for in Christ's ministry, he subverted some rigid rabbinical interpretations of the Torah, which would later become the Old Testament of the King James version of the Bible, and emphasized the importance of interior practice over rigid public display of religiosity. For example, while the Jews of Christ's day adhered to the rabbinical interpretation of the Law of Moses in being limited to 3,000 steps on the Sabbath and being forbidden from any sort of labor, Christ himself transgressed this law to heal a sick man (Luke 14:15-16). For evangelicals like Charlotte Brontë, the Old Testament prescriptions for exactness were replaced with a nuanced spiritual law. They

²⁵ In the Christian interpretation of the Old Testament, the mentioning of Jehovah or "the Lord" is seen as distinct from the use of "God". Jehovah is understood as the spiritual presence of Jesus, a separate entity in the Trinity from God.

considered the latter was to be a higher law because it emphasized a self-reflective association with God rather than adherence to laws that employed rationality but not the heart.²⁶

Perhaps the most telling biblical reference is the mention of a pair of pillars in 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles, books that describe the construction of Solomon's temple. The pillars mentioned are named Jachin and Boaz, Hebrew for *in him is strength*, and they stood at the north and south sides of the temple's porch. Though these pillars appeared to be crucial to the temple's structural integrity, they were likely purely ornamental in nature (1 Kings 7:21; 2 Chron 3:17). This reference to two pillars in particular resonates succinctly with our pillar-like tyrants in *Jane Eyre*. Like the pillars of Solomon's temple, these men take on the appearance of being necessary to bear the weight of God's purposes, but they are in fact inessential, particularly to Jane in carrying out her moral purpose. Thus, in looking at Brontë's architectural imagery through the lens of biblical hermeneutics, we can see the recognition that these men evoke earthly authority through their roles, and both certainly pride themselves in exactness in some way, yet this exacting mentality is not the root of true Christianity for Brontë.

It is in this light that we can read the homage to St. John at the close of *Jane Eyre*. The turn to St. John at the novel's close has startled many critics. Maria Lamonaca calls this ending, "perhaps the most perplexing ending of any Victorian novel,"²⁷ and Emily Griesinger calls it "odd and bewildering."²⁸ However, when we consider it in the context of the iconography that I explored above, we can better understand Jane's partial rejection of St. John and partial reverence toward him. She ruminates on his missionary life and impending death:

²⁶ For the most well-known example of Christ replacing the Law of Moses with a newer, higher law, see Christ's Sermon on the Mount as is found in Matt 5-7.

²⁷ Ibid., 245.

²⁸ Griesinger, "Charlotte Brontë's Religion," 55.

I know that a stranger's hand will write to me next, to say that the good and faithful servant has been called at length into the joy of his Lord. And why weep for this? No fear of death will darken St. John's last hour: his mind will be unclouded, his heart will be undaunted, his hope will be sure, his faith steadfast. His own words are a pledge of this—"My Master," he says, "has forewarned me. Daily He announces more distinctly, "Surely I come quickly!" and hourly I more eagerly respond, "Amen, even so come, Lord Jesus!" (JE, 578-79)

Brontë ends her novel on a clearly religious note; in fact, the final words are the same that close the final chapter of Revelations, written by none other than St. John the Divine. However, perhaps because of the novel's feminist spirit, some earlier critics read this ending as ironic. Gilbert and Gubar, for example, referred to the novel's close as "a half-ironic apostrophe to that apostle of celestial transcendence."²⁹ However, more recent critics read the novel's close as an earnest tribute to St. John, despite his domineering nature. Emily Griesinger offers the possibilities that Jane is willing to forgive him because she is so happy with Rochester, or that she pities Rivers, or that she "gives the last word to St. John to remind herself (and the reader) that there is or could be a higher calling than earthly delights in marriage."³⁰ All of these are notable considerations when we reflect on the ending of *Jane Eyre*, but I posit that rather than making an apology for her choices, Jane is exhibiting her security in the life she has chosen with

²⁹ Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic*, 370.

³⁰ Griesinger, "Charlotte Brontë's Religion," 55.

Rochester, her calling as a “missionary of love,” as J. Jeffrey Franklin calls it.³¹ Marianne Thormählen argues that Jane’s homage notes the credence of personalized worship in that both Jane and Rivers “have sought and received Divine guidance and been faithful to the claims of their God-created selves.”³² This satisfaction with their different callings speaks to what Susan VanZanten Gallagher describes as the novel’s “religious assertion of a woman’s right to self-identify.” For her, the novel’s “depiction of marriage as a relationship of equality anticipate[s]



Figure 1.4. Illustration by Bernice Oehler for Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Laidlaw Brothers, 1947). Bernice Oehler (1881- 1955) also illustrated novels by Dickens and wrote and illustrated several children’s readers. She also published several instructional books on drawing, most notably *Figure Sketching* (1929).

³¹ Franklin, “The Merging of Spiritualities.”

³² Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion*, 218.

twentieth-century Christian feminism.”³³ Several other critics have recognized this same self-assuredness in Jane’s choices by mentioning St. John at the novel’s close.³⁴ Her choice to marry Rochester evidences the way she embraces her individualized understanding of Christianity, while affording others respect in pursuing *their* personalized missions.

We can see the implied differences of Jane and St. John’s spiritual choices reflected in Figure 1.4, Bernice Oehler’s 1947 illustration. St. John stands erect and looks out on the horizon, implying his view of himself as a heroic foot soldier for Christ. Jane, contrastingly, bows her head, looking toward her heart. Her Christian mission is one tied to her desire to make a life with Rochester, where she will spread goodness within her domestic realm rather than abroad as Rivers will. We can thus see that Jane’s homage to St. John is not a submissive retreat but an indication of the inner peace her self-knowledge affords her. It is in this spirit of forgiveness at the close of the novel that we can come to understand one reason why Brontë renders Brocklehurst dark and St. John white. This stratification can partly be understood because Brocklehurst’s oppressive control yields misery and even death for some of his pupils,³⁵ but St. John’s fanatical control results in misery, but mostly for himself. St. John’s efforts also foster some positive results, like supposed conversions in India.

We can gain more clarity on the light and dark imagery attached to these men by considering their presence in the novel in spatial terms. The spatial quality of the dark pillar and

³³ Susan VanZanten Gallagher. "Jane Eyre and Christianity," in *Approaches Teaching Jane Eyre*. Eds. Diane Long Hoeveler and Beth Lau. (New York: Modern Language Association, 1993), 68.

³⁴ For example, see Jerome Beaty’s *Misreading Jane Eyre: A Postformalist Paradigm* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996), 211; and Barbara Gates’s “‘Visionary Woe’ and Its Revisions: Another Look at Jane Eyre’s Pictures,” *Ariel* 7 (October 1976): 44.

³⁵ We can see another instance of a dark column being connected to death and destruction in Charlotte Brontë’s poem “Pilate’s Wife’s Dream” in which another woman uses her subjectivity to identify a misuse of authority to a tragic end—Pilate’s reluctant allowance for Christ to be crucified.

white column reveals how the men are important markers in Jane's journey, for these images signify vertical moments of impasse in Jane's otherwise horizontal journey.³⁶ Sharon Locy sheds light on the novel's spatial power by asserting that Jane's movement throughout the novel results in a masculine sort of *Bildungsroman* progression for Jane. For Locy, Jane's movement from confining patriarchal spaces (like the red room, Lowood, and Thornfield) to more open natural landscapes correlates with her choice to not conform to her traditional sphere.³⁷ However, nowhere does Locy consider Brocklehurst and Rivers as vertical elements in Jane's spatial journey. Melodie Monahan, however, does recognize the importance of a pillar in Jane's journey—that of the fork at Whitcross. Jane described this landmark as, “a stone pillar set up where four roads meet: whitewashed, I suppose, to be more obvious at a distance and in darkness. Four arms spring from its summit” (*JE*, 412). Jane's moment at Whitcross is one of decision, for she must make a decision as to which way to continue her journey. Of this moment, Monahan argues, “The crisis at Whitcross is pivotal: it reenacts the helplessness and ostracism Jane experienced at Gateshead and Lowood: it juxtaposes absolute separation with the duplicitous networks at Thornfield; and, more important still, it provides the necessary space Jane requires in order to imagine her future.”³⁸

Monahan does not extend this spatial distinction to Brocklehurst and Rivers, but through the vertical imagery that Brontë assigns to them, Monahan's application can be aptly applied. First, Jane must overcome years of control in the shadow of the dark pillar Brocklehurst at

³⁶ For some examples of Jane's horizontal perception of her journey, see (*JE* 88, 100, 311).

³⁷ Sharon Locy, “Travel and Space in Charlotte Brontë's ‘Jane Eyre,’” *Pacific Coast Philology* 37, no. 1 (2002): 116.

³⁸ Melodie Monahan, “Heading Out is Not Going Home: *Jane Eyre*,” *Studies in English Literature* 2, no. 8 (Autumn 1988), 602.

Lowood, years in which she realizes that her passion is not depraved as her oppressor would have her believe. This victory, however, can only occur within the quiet obscurity of Jane's own consciousness because of the controlling institutional space in which she lives. So while Jane does gain a personal victory in not internalizing Brocklehurst's false judgments of her, her resistance to this oppression and his doctrines of total depravity are inward and obscure. Contrastingly, Jane's overcoming of St. John, the white column, marks a more enlightened victory in her journey. Jane, now a free agent in the world because of her surprise inheritance from an unknown uncle and her increasing confidence in her self-knowledge, can openly contests St. John's controlling vision for her life and assert her own will. It is in crossing these rigid men that Jane ultimately privileges her passion for a life of devoted domesticity with Rochester, where she will privilege her visual power by literally seeing for her blind husband. What's more, the notion of crossing these vertical markers spatially replicates the most sacred symbol of Christianity: the cross. The patriarchal authority of these men alone cannot bring Jane religious fulfillment, but when she crosses these men and transgresses the boundaries they have established for her, therein she finds true individual faith.

We can further understand the significance of Brocklehurst and Rivers as vertical markers in Jane's horizontal journey when we consider Luce Irigaray's theory on the female divine. She argues that women have a horizontal notion of femininity through their homosocial interactions with other women—mothers, sisters, daughters, and friends— but they lack the privilege of looking to a feminine supernatural being for a vertical concept for inheriting their divine qualities. Irigaray notes, "In some way, the vertical dimension is always being taken away from female becoming. . . . Female genealogy has to be suppressed, on behalf of the son-

Father relationship, and the idealization of the father and husband as patriarchs.”³⁹ It is notable then, that Brontë attaches vertical imagery to these men, who are self-professed conduits for divine judgment over Jane. She decidedly rejects this vertical authority and instead privileges her own horizontal concept of herself as experiencing God through her heart and the natural world.

Religious Spaces, Surveillance, and Discomfort

Aside from the potency of the pillar or column image in *Jane Eyre*, visual rhetoric also serves to present a strong message concerning religious spaces in general. Broadly speaking, women in the Brontës’ novels do not receive inspiration within religious structures, but rather, in nature or in their everyday lives. Here I will focus on Charlotte and Emily Brontë’s fiction primarily; for, while Anne’s novels do not present religious spaces in a positive sense, they also refrain from any overtly negative commentary about these spaces. In Charlotte and Emily’s novels, religious spaces that are meant to provide spiritual fortification instead prove to be stifling and uncomfortable for women. This is a phenomenon that feminists working within spatial theory have noticed. Diana Agrest argues that phallic imagery is ever-present in Western architecture in general, and that “The male body is projected, represented, and inscribed in the design of buildings and cities and in the texts that establish their ideology. The female body is suppressed or excluded.”⁴⁰ For Agrest the architectural realities of religious structures mirror the institutional neglect toward women. Elizabeth Grosz bears an even more pointed view of the

³⁹ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 108.

⁴⁰ Diana I. Agrest, “Architecture from Without: Body, Logic, and Sex,” *Assemblage* 7, no. 1 (October 1988): 35.

detriment of male-created spaces in women's lives. She sees all man-made structures, including religious and civic buildings, but most especially the home, as evidence of the patriarchal desire to erase and contain female power. She relates,

The containment of women within a dwelling that they did not build, nor was even built for them, can only amount to a homelessness within the very home itself: it becomes the space of duty, of endless and infinitely repeatable chores that have no social value or recognition, the space of the affirmation and replenishment of others at the expense and erasure of the self, the space of domestic violence and abuse, the space that harms as much as it isolates women.⁴¹

Though Grosz focuses most specifically on the home, I see this notion as applicable to religious spaces as well. In this mindset, any religious architectural space would become oppressive rather than inspirational, for religious observance therein would amount to tutelage under male authority rather than an interpretive relationship with the divine. This is a dynamic that we see across the Brontë's works. Through a more distant reading of the Brontës' novels, we can see a wider use of religious spaces as a visceral and sensual representation of how individualized feminine religiosity can be stifled through the patriarchal institution. I argue here that these spaces, and more importantly, the gendered nature of the authority they represent, is the reason women do not receive inspiration and enrichment within them.

In *Jane Eyre*, we see a considerable weight lifted off Jane when she leaves the "convent-like" and "church-like" Lowood for the wider world (*JE*, 54). She describes her new situation,

⁴¹ Elizabeth Grosz, "Women, *Chora*, Dwelling" in *Gender Space Architecture: Interdisciplinary Introduction*, ed. Iain Borden, Barbara Penner, and Jane Rendell (London: Routledge, 1999), 218.

“now I remembered that the *real* world was wide, and that a varied field of hopes and fears, of sensations and excitements, awaited those who had courage to go forth into its expanse, to seek real knowledge of life amidst its perils” (*JE*, 100). Jane does not flourish at Lowood, a harsh institutional space on which Brocklehurst—the black pillar—casts his shadow. When she is able to escape its boundaries, she can then seek real knowledge and spirituality based in her own subjectivity rather than the directives of the institution. We see similar concepts in the religious boardinghouses in Charlotte Brontë’s *The Professor* and *Villette* when the female attendants within these Catholic institutions spy on governesses and pupils. In these moments, female characters define their oppressive atmosphere again through visual rhetoric. In *The Professor*, the governess Frances Henri relates her displeasure at working and residing in a Roman-Catholic school to William Crimsworth:

I long to live once more among Protestants; they are more honest than Catholics; a Romish school is a building with porous walls, a hollow floor, a false ceiling; every room in this house, monsieur, has eyeholes and ear-holes, and what the house is, the inhabitants are, very treacherous; they all think it lawful to tell lies; they all call it politeness to profess friendship where they feel hatred. (*TP*, 297)

We can see in this passage Brontë’s apparently anti-Catholic fear of surveillance. The treachery Frances perceives is most palpable through the architectural space of the school, which is presented as rather insidious. Nothing is stable or trustworthy about this space to her, and she conveys a visual impression of her severe discomfort in an institutional space that mandates religious regimen at odds with her Protestant beliefs.

We see a similar moment in *Villette* when Lucy Snowe describes the school she teaches at in Belgium as “ruled by espionage” and that after Madame Beck “had been plotting and counter-plotting, spying and receiving the reports of spies all day, she would come up to my room,” and repeat Catholic prayers as a certain reprieve from her exhausting lifestyle of espionage (*Vil*, 64). As Heather Glen relates, this surveillance is ironic and diminutive, and Brontë parodies Gothic tropes of espionage in *Villette*.⁴² The critique of this espionage, though hinted with irony, is still a rebuke. Women like Madame Beck, who seek to judge and control, are only able to perceive the outer, rather than the inner life, as Diane Long Hoeveler argues.⁴³ The school is a place of surveillance, but in Lucy’s room, the space of a Protestant woman, Madame Beck pauses from her social rituals of spying and connects back to some of the more heartfelt aspects of Catholicism. Though Lucy does not seem to fear surveillance at the schoolhouse as much as Frances does, we can again see how the school as a whole, which bears a Catholic ideology, is a place of control. In these moments, it is easy to see the intense English fear of national surveillance at the hands of Catholics, whom Brontë certainly saw as hindering an individualized experience of God in nature because of their more structured, ornamental religious practices and their reliance on the Pope and other clergy as definitive sources of doctrine.⁴⁴ Though these schoolmasters are women, it is clear that they serve the patriarchal hierarchy of Catholicism, and thus Brontë perceives them as religious subordinators who quell individual interpretation and personal liberty.

⁴² Heather Glen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 203.

⁴³ Diane Long Hoeveler, “The Obscured Eye: Visual Imagery as Theme and Structure in *Villette*,” *Ball State University Forum* 19, no. 1 (1978): 25.

⁴⁴ Micael M. Clarke, “Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*, Mid-Victorian Anti-Catholicism, and the Turn to Secularism” *ELH* 78, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 972.

Furthermore, we also see religious spaces as synonymous with discomfort, and even physical harm at times, in the Brontës. In *Villette*, when Lucy becomes profoundly depressed about her lot as a governess, she visits a Catholic priest, Père Silas, in search of comfort, despite her Protestant views. After she speaks with him in the cold, drafty church, he invites her to return and speak with him again but insists that his church is not a safe place. He warns her, “I see you are ill, and this church is too cold; you must come to my house” (*Vil*, 149). In this moment, even the priest himself recognizes the unsuitability of his religious space for the fragile Lucy and the more appropriate warmth of his home. From this dichotomy, we can infer the separation between the priest as an institutional leader and as a human being. His institutional space and his leadership are unhelpful and even dangerous to Lucy, but his human capability for warmth and compassion can help heal her. We see in this distinction the criticism that the institutional leader and the human being need not be so far removed from each other; an ideal leadership would allow for human warmth within the institution.

The portrayal of religious spaces as cumbersome and uncomfortable does not only extend to foreign Catholic spaces; we see a similar portrayal of English Protestant places of worship as well. In *Shirley*, Shirley Keeldar relates to Catherine Helstone the stifling discomfort that the space of the church will bring to them should they attend services. “How hot it will be in the church,” she says, “And what a dreary long speech Dr. Boulton will make! And how the curates will hammer over their prepared orations! For my part, I would rather not enter” (*Sh*, 358). Here, rather than the religious space being a freezing cold cathedral in the unfriendly Belgian winter, the religious structure is a stifling, hot country chapel in the English summer. Shirley does not find the curates’ lectures to be spiritually nourishing, but rather, domineering and uncomfortable.

So it would seem that regardless of the proximity of the church or even the ideology it furthers, these are uncomfortable and uninspiring spaces for women.

The transcendent spirituality that *Shirley* exhibits in the pages that follow, however, indicates that Christian architecture can be empowering in a certain context. In this moment, Shirley reflects on the beauty of the sunset as it reflects on the chapel and churchyard, and she proclaims the virtue and power of the biblical Eve and all the women who have descended from her. Shirley, it seems, can appreciate the role of the religious institution when it is put in proper scope with the larger natural world, but she cannot receive spiritual comfort and guidance when she is completely swallowed up in the religious space itself. Susan VanZanten Gallagher makes a point about *Jane Eyre* that I would certainly apply to *Shirley* as well. She argues,

Brontë thus may be participating in an alternative Christian tradition . . . [which suggests that] although the Christianity professed by the powerful males in the novel is destructive to, and exploitative of, women, the novel might embody a Christian feminism that sees God as both masculine and feminine and advocates the values of love, sexuality, and a marriage partnership.⁴⁵

We can see this transformative attitude about Christianity in Brontë's rejection of male-dominated hierarchy yet reverence toward personal Christian practice. This distinction suggests a new marriage between male-authored biblical mandates and feminine interpretation of these ideas in the natural world. While attendance within the building itself may not afford Shirley the natural feminine experience she desires, when she is able to appreciate religious worship from

⁴⁵ Gallagher, "*Jane Eyre* and Christianity," 67.

afar, and within nature, she experiences greater fulfillment. This proves an apt comparison for how biblical hermeneutics operate; they are devoid of official unification with the institution of Christianity, yet the tenets of the faith take on new life in outside secular experience.

Another instance of a religious space as a stifling, uncomfortable place occurs within Lockwood's dream in *Wuthering Heights*. Here we have a male narrator, but I argue that this dream is largely inspired by Cathy's thoughts as they are represented in a journal entry that Lockwood reads just before going to sleep. He describes the Chapel of Gimmerton Sough as foreboding for its dark, stagnant nature: "[I]t lies in a hollow, between two hills: an elevated hollow, near a swamp, whose peaty moisture is said to answer all the purposes of embalming on the few corpses deposited there" (*WH*, 28). This image is quite unlike Charlotte Brontë's renderings of churches in that it is stagnant and accompanied with yonic symbols. Here the church lies "between two hills," or between two breasts, and in a sense, over the heart of the natural landscape. Abandoned without the presiding power of patriarchy, the earth seems to absorb this structure and cause it to decay into something stagnant and useless. From this imagery we can see Lockwood's perception that the religious institution has become decrepit and abandoned in *Wuthering Heights*—just like this religious space. The felicity Shirley experiences in viewing the churchyard and the natural world is not present in *Wuthering Heights*. In Emily Brontë's novel, feminine notions of spirituality oppose male-authored Christianity more aggressively than in Charlotte's novels, where gendered understandings of God can often be more complementary. Through this wider reading of Charlotte and Emily Brontë's novels, we can see how religious spaces are generally negative visual signifiers of either oppressive surveillance or stifling discomfort and stagnation. The negative connections with these buildings reveal the main problem with religious institutions for the Brontës—that they often limit

spirituality and emphasize a sequestered unity with other patrons rather than mobilizing Christian principles to be palatable and accessible to women in their everyday lives.

CHAPTER 2: IMAGES AS DIVINE GUIDANCE IN THE WORKS OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË

Just after Jane flees Thornfield upon learning that Rochester is a married man, she calls out to nature in her greatest hour of need. She describes her feelings:

I have no relative but the universal mother, Nature: I will seek her breast and ask repose... Nature seemed to me benign and good; I thought she loved me, outcast as I was; and I, who from man could anticipate only mistrust, rejection, insult, clung to her with filial fondness. Tonight, at least, I would be her guest, as I was her child: my mother would lodge me without money and without price. (*JE*, 413)

In this moment, Jane relies on nature as a form of Providence in a world where all of her closest human associations have rejected and wronged her. When she learns that Thornfield Hall is a dangerous place for her physically,¹ and perhaps even more so for her spiritually, she sees nature as the only real dwelling that she can count on. She relies on her connection with nature to help her transition into a new life. In fact, a similar relationship with nature occurs for female protagonists across Charlotte Brontë's novels and throughout all three Brontës' works. With this strong reliance on nature, it is unsurprising that a substantial amount of criticism has been

¹ For an in-depth exploration of dangerous patriarchal spaces in *Jane Eyre*, see Susan Lydon's "Abandoning and Re-Inhabiting Domestic Spaces in *Jane Eyre*, *Villette*, and *Wide Sargasso Sea*" *Brontë Studies* 35, no. 1 (March 2010): 23-29.

dedicated to exploring the Brontës as Romantics in their relationship with nature.² Here I hope to contribute to this large body of thought by tracing the biblical hermeneutics that inform the Brontës' Romanticism.

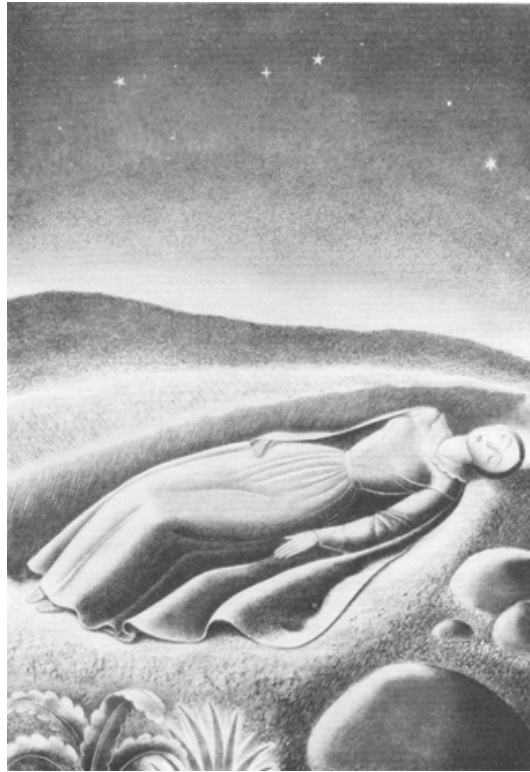


Figure 2.1. Illustration by Helen Sewell for Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1938). Helen Sewell (1896-1957) was an American illustrator who primarily worked in children's books, most famously Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* series.

We can see a visual representation of Jane's refuge in nature in Figure 2.1, Helen Sewell's 1938 illustration. We see Jane nestled in a crag of a hill. She in some ways resembles a baby in her mother's womb, nestled in a curved crag beneath the yonic, curved horizon. This illustration renders the notion that pervades Jane's thoughts—that nature is intimately connected

² For example see Enid Lowry's *The Brontës and Nature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986) and Eithne Henson's *Landscape and Gender in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy* (London, Ashgate: 2011.)

to providential protection and maternal nurturing. Because of moments like these when nature is central to guiding women's lives, several critics have formed some assumptions about Charlotte Brontë's ideology. The first critical assumption about Brontë is that her rendering of nature is largely Romantic and subverts Christian discourse in her work. One of the most notable arguments on this point is J. Jeffrey Franklin's essay, "The Merging of Spiritualities: Jane Eyre as Missionary of Love." Here he argues that though the novel is imbued with what he terms the "discourse of Christianity," it is truly invested in a sort of natural supernaturalism.³ Anne Williams describes this supernaturalism as the "tendency to reformulate theological ideas (the Fall, redemption) within the realm of the mind and nature alone—the human imagination becoming our means of salvation."⁴ Critics like J. Jeffrey Franklin see Brontë's work as championing the imagination over religion, and they view divine guidance from nature as evidence of a Romantic rejection of religion. Conversely, other critics see Brontë's treatment of nature as an amalgamation of Romanticism and Christianity. Barry Qualls, for example, argues that Brontë "attempts to discover new modes by which the soul may be realized through the self, indeed a new synthesis of the old religion and Romanticism."⁵ Here I will support Qualls's argument about Brontë's ideology. In my view, her Romantic imagination strongly informs her individualized application of religion, and it in no way undermines her female characters' faith.

Brontë certainly was a post-Romantic in many senses, and we can see the strong influence of nature on women's imaginations in her fiction. Some critics, such as Simon Cooke,

³ Franklin, "The Merging of Spiritualities," 466.

⁴ Anne Williams, "Natural Supernaturalism in 'Wuthering Heights,'" *Studies in Philology* 82, no. 1, (Winter 1985): 105-6. Also see M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism; Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (Norton: New York, 1971) for a much more detailed exploration of the concept.

⁵ Barry Qualls, *The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Fiction: The Novel as Book of Life*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 58.

see nature as an outward reflection of protagonists' consciousness and see Brontë's use of nature as falling within the tradition of the pathetic fallacy.⁶ I argue, however, that Brontë's heroines are not passive receptors of outside elements. Even so, she does not present nature as a passive force that her protagonists can preside over and enliven with their subjectivity. The novels do not promote nature as, what Coleridge termed, an "inanimate, cold world,"⁷ a world only enlivened by the human imagination. Rather, in Brontë's novels, the Wordsworthian notion of the imagination flourishing "in the strength of nature"⁸ abounds. Rather than imagination superseding nature, then, it draws inner meaning from the self-supporting virtues of the natural world. Both the human imagination and the natural world are divine for Brontë, and one does not seem to outshine the other.

Some critics perceive Brontë's reliance on nature as a subversion of Christianity. Perhaps John Maynard argues this most boldly, claiming that she advocates for a "pagan and female new religion"⁹ in *Jane Eyre*, and that Brontë advocates for "dethroning masculine religion and creating a new female gospel, the life of Jane."¹⁰ He supports his theory with moments in the novel when Jane draws upon nature for inspiration, a relationship he assesses as pagan. Where Maynard's argument is lacking, however, is that he seems to dismiss the potency of nature within the biblical tradition, and he does not recognize the larger Romantic influence on Victorian

⁶ For example, see Simon Cooke's "'The Ever-Shifting Kaleidoscope of the Imagination': Modern Illustrations to the Brontës," *Brontë Studies* 31 (2006).

⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Dejection: An Ode," iv, line 5. In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 8th ed, vol. D., edited by Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 2006), 466-7.

⁸ William Wordsworth, *Prelude* iii, line 193 in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 8th ed, vol. D., Ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 2006), 352.

⁹ John Maynard, "The Brontës and Religion" in *The Cambridge Companion to The Brontës*. Ed. Heather Glen (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), 196.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 204.

evangelicalism. One critic, Essaka Joshua, picked up on Maynard's oversight, and countered his analysis of *Jane Eyre* by suggesting the expressive power of nature in many biblical stories.¹¹ We need look no further than Brontë's words on the subject to know how nature related to religion in her eyes. When G.H. Lewes asked her what the best book was, she replied, "The Bible." When he asked her what the second best book was, she replied, "The Book of Nature."¹² As is implicit in her ranking of the Bible over the complementary Book of Nature—which was a Puritan idea that God's goodness reflected in natural beauty—we find biographical details that corroborate her literary choices. Brontë does not use natural images to subvert Christian discourse; rather, the two are very often fused. This suggests the inseparability of religious fervor from the visual power of natural images. What Joshua cursorily observes, I will develop substantively here: that Brontë's female characters experience nature in a Romantic way, but that biblical tradition informs these experiences as well.

Jane Eyre and Celestial Images

In all the ways that Jane is visionary and imaginative, she shows this affinity most strongly in pivotal moments when natural images provide spiritual guidance to her. She is clearly rooted in the traditions of Christianity, as is evidenced by her frequent biblical allusions, yet it is the power of the image in nature that proves most pivotal in guiding her through several crucial moments. The first strong instance of this is when Jane asks the sun for guidance as it sets the evening after her canceled wedding: "Some time in the afternoon I raised my head, and looking round and seeing the western sun gilding the sign of its decline on the wall, I asked, 'What am I

¹¹ Essaka Joshua, "'Almost My Hope of Heaven': Idolatry and Messianic Symbolism in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*," *Philological Quarterly* 81.1 (2002): 81-107.

¹² Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, (New York: Penguin, 1998), 48.

to do?’ But the answer my mind gave—‘Leave Thornfield at once’—was so prompt, so dread, that I stopped my ears” (*JE*, 379). Here Jane intuitively senses a new direction for her life as she processes the spectacle of the falling sun in the sky. Later that evening, she receives even more pronounced guidance from a celestial image as she lies in bed after Rochester pleads for her to stay and be his mistress. She observes the moon as it rises in the sky:

I watched her come—watched with the strangest anticipation; as though some word of doom were to be written on her disk. She broke forth as never moon yet burst from cloud: a hand first penetrated the sable folds and waved them away; then, not a moon, but a white human form shone in the azure, inclining a glorious brow earthward. It gazed and gazed on me. It spoke to my spirit: immeasurably distant was the tone, yet so near, it whispered in my heart—

“My daughter, flee temptation.”

“Mother, I will.” (*JE*, 407)

This moment is powerful in displaying just how visual divine guidance is for Jane. She has prayed and recited biblical allusions to both Rochester and herself before this moment, but it is only after this pure communication with an image, the moon, that Jane is resolved to leave Thornfield. Upon seeing the moon, she expects inspiration in a textual form, thinking that some “word of doom” will be “written on her disk.” However, it is an intuitive message that she receives instead. She sees the moon, not as a natural force, but as a human-like form. It gazes on her and she recalls the tenor of the message as both distant and intimately near. When the image commands her to “flee from temptation,” there is no hesitation and no narrative explanation;

there is only the immediate agreement: “Mother, I will.” The image of the moon solidifies the spiritual foundation that her prayers and biblical knowledge have fostered.

Even with Jane’s clear evocation of help from her Christian God, critics have analyzed this passage as pagan. John Maynard again proves particularly articulate on this matter. For him, the moon is the essential evidence of what he calls Brontë’s “pagan and female new religion.” He sees this moment with the moon as a remnant of “pagan vitalism,” and “self-realisation for the negative religion”¹³ that Brontë grew up with. He dismisses the validity of individualized faith, positing, “If God begins in self, God may very well end in a world of spirits all manifestation of godhead, or indeed in a kind of pantheism or paganism.”¹⁴ He denies that the feminine adaptation to Christianity could be categorized as Christian at all and sees it as a slippery slope to paganism. Maynard may well have been responding to Robert B. Heilman’s 1960 essay where he painstakingly analyzes the presence of the moon in *Jane Eyre* as evidence of Brontë’s struggle between Reason and superstition.¹⁵ He explains that Brontë “wanted to abjure hallucination and the self-indulgent dream and to discover transcendent truth,” but that “her ultimate reliance on feeling recurrently brings the lunar symbol into play.” For Heilman, then, the moon indicates a moment when female irrationality clouds truth; for this reason, he concludes, “[W]e cannot finally assign an explicit symbolic value to Charlotte’s moon.”¹⁶ In his view, the intuitive adaptation of Christianity is an example of women’s irrationality, not a legitimate form of belief.

¹³ Maynard, “The Brontës and Religion,” 204.

¹⁴ Ibid., 205.

¹⁵ Robert B. Heilman, “Charlotte Brontë, Reason, and the Moon,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 14, no. 4, (March 1960): 293.

¹⁶ Ibid., 302.

This stringent view of Brontë's mysticism as necessarily pagan has been challenged several times. For example, Gail Turley Houston argues that the moon serves as an emblem of an evangelical "gynomorphic God" that has qualities that Victorians would have gendered as both masculine and feminine.¹⁷ Houston argues that Jane's inspiration through the sun and moon is one example of Brontë's liberal evangelical ideology in the novel. The sun represents the male Reason instated in Christianity and the moon represents the intuitive femininity of increasing importance within evangelicalism. She explains, "The moonlight mystifies and brilliantly radiates the world in ways the sun's light cannot, revealing a heightened, sacred state... The vision may facilitate a brief merging of the mortal with a supernal entity that brings knowledge of supernal love."¹⁸ Houston recognizes how *Jane Eyre* reflects the evangelical leaning toward internalization, and thus, the legitimacy of experiencing God through nature. Barbara Taylor explains that this notion of a gynomorphic God was becoming more widely understood as religion became increasingly emotional in the Victorian era and women's role as moral saviors was increasingly emphasized. According to Taylor, Godly goodness transformed through "a dialectical progression through stages in which these masculine and feminine principles diverged, warred, and finally united."¹⁹ This isn't to say that the concept of a gynomorphic God was accepted as a literal doctrine in mainstream Christianity; rather, this was a notion upheld largely by radicals invested in the idea of feminine messianism and Owenite socialism. There was a much more subdued religious current across liberal evangelicalism of this same flavor, however. This current grew with women's involvement in philanthropy and missionary work in

¹⁷ Gail Turley Houston, *Victorian Women Writers, Radical Grandmothers, and the Gendering of God*, (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2013), 32.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

¹⁹ Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, 170.

recognizing Godly qualities in women that served to bolster their moral and political power.

Ultimately, Brontë renders the Christian God gynomorphic in her use of natural imagery that is infused with both biblical significance and mythological distinction.

Whereas Gail Turley Houston comments on the Greco-Roman significance of the sun and moon, I will further investigate their significance through assessing *Jane Eyre's* biblical hermeneutics. By doing so, we can understand how Brontë drew on a long tradition of the sun and moon as signs of divine will and guidance. Within the Bible, the sun and moon do not take on gendered significance, but they are frequently mentioned in both the Old and New Testament as symbols of God's power and signs of divine mandates. The psalms in particular emphasize how God has appointed astronomical wonders as signs of his glory (Ps 8:3; 89:37; 104:19). In a similar vein, many Old Testament prophets presented celestial bodies as harbingers to Christ's second coming; for example, that the sun's light would cease to shine out and the moon would appear red as blood (Isa 13:10, 24:23, 60:19; Joel 2:31; Acts 2:20). This notion was repeated in the New Testament through apostolic testimony (Matt. 24:29; Luke 21:25; Rev. 6:12).

Interestingly, the sun and moon are nearly always mentioned together and sometimes in combination with the stars. Though the polarity between these two natural forces is clear, the Bible often presents them as having a unity in purpose. The moon in particular often stands as a cyclical indicator in the Bible, as it of course did for many ancient civilizations. One of the most common references concerning the moon is that the new moon in the lunar phase indicated when a sacrificial lamb was necessary under the Law of Moses (Num 10:10; 1 Sam 20: 5-6, 29; 2 Kgs 4:23; Amos 8:5). Interestingly enough, Jane receives her divine warning from a full moon, which is furthest phase away from the new moon phase. In this way, we see a clear contrast from the ancient signal for animal sacrifice. Jane makes a profound sacrifice and leaves Thornfield, not in

the absence of the moon (a new moon); rather, the full moon itself commands this sacrifice. Such a binary opposition from sacrifice under the Mosaic Law suggests that Jane's reflective decision to leave is motivated from a more enlightened and individualized application of sacrifice.

While Brontë likely drew on the biblical tradition of celestial bodies as evidence of God's glory and signs of warning, it was undoubtedly her knowledge on the larger Western pagan tradition that inspired her gendered rendering of the moon. It is important to note that Brontë's understanding of Greek mythology was necessarily second-hand. Though Branwell was educated in Greek and Latin, the Victorian standard for young men, Charlotte was most invested in learning French.²⁰ However, we do know that Mr. Brontë allowed his daughters to sit in on Branwell's tutoring sessions, and so Charlotte may have learned a bit about the classics through this exposure.²¹ Furthermore, Christine Alexander suggests that Brontë was likely well acquainted with Greek mythology through reading Dryden and Pope's translations of Homer.²² Within Greek mythology, the sun and moon serve as polar complements. The Greek God Helios is sometimes seen as synonymous with Apollo, the God of Light who chariots the sun across the sky. He is often utilized to show moral strength and goodness.²³ Greeks perceived Helios' power as essential to life on earth, as is evidenced in Homer's depiction in *The Odyssey* when Odysseus' men eat the sun God's cattle when they run out of supplies on Thrinacia.²⁴ He vows to shine the sun in the underworld instead if he does not receive vengeance. The moon goddess,

²⁰ Victor A. Neufeldt, ed., *The Poems of Charlotte Brontë: A New Text and Commentary* (New York: Garland, 1985), 397.

²¹ Sue Lonoff, "The Education of Charlotte Brontë," 459.

²² Christine Alexander, *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1983), 22.

²³ A bust of Alexander the Great was made in the likeness of Helios and Plato's *Republic* strongly links Helios with moral goodness.

²⁴ Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book 12.

Selene, possesses a much different sort of power than her brother Helios. She is a Titan strongly linked to the goddesses Artemis and Hecate, and all three of these goddesses are linked to intuition, sexuality, and fertility. Like Helios, Selene chariots the moon across the sky, as is described in the Homeric “Hymn to Selene.” Between Helios and Selene we can see a clear delineation of what the sun and moon signify. The sun signifies moral might and goodness, the moon signifies more fluid and vulnerable forces like sexuality and fertility. To some extent, we can see the patriarchal influence within this tradition and its extension into Christian conceptions of gender essentialism. In Brontë’s use of the sun and moon image, it is easy to see how she draws from both the Bible and pagan mythology to render these images. Though Brontë never assigns the sun a masculine signifier, it does appear to be diametrically opposed to the moon. In the sun’s message to her, we see linguistic clarity. The falling sun inspires direct Reason in admonishing her to leave Thornfield, and the sharpness of this message freezes her in her tracks, and she is too frightened to act. Jane’s experience with the feminine moon is contrasting to her moment with the sun. The image of the moon directs her to leave in a gentler, more gradual way. The difference resonates strongly with Cixous’s notion of *l’écriture féminine* in that while the sun’s message resembles male sexual function—singular and direct—the message from the moon is much more nuanced, cyclical, and nebulous—just like Cixous’s concept of female sexual pleasure or *jouissance*. In her experience with the moon, Jane connects with the emotional and familial quality of spiritual whisperings rather than the absolutism of Reason she associates with the sun.

Despite how Brontë’s references are clearly informed in pagan mythology, these images inspire Jane to adhere to a Christian moral mandate. Brontë uses the sun and moon within not only a biblical context but also a mythological context to illustrate that the Christian God can be

understood in both masculine and feminine terms—as both a God of Reason and a God of emotion and intuition. However, Brontë did not only mean to inform her writing with the gendered essentialism of Western culture, but she also meant to make a theological statement about the Christian God in representing different gendered characteristics of Godly attributes. As controversial as we might imagine this notion of a gynomorphic God to be, we can see roots for such interpretations in some Bible verses. One striking moment in Revelation describes Christ's church before his second coming: "And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars" (Rev 12:1). In this moment, we see celestial entities utilized in a way similar to how Brontë represents them. The woman here is emblematic of the church, and the sun and moon are used in tandem to represent an overarching power. In this reference we see the church as a female, and the images that accompany her as containing both feminine and masculine connotations within the Western tradition. Because we are well aware of Brontë's fascination with the book of Revelation²⁵ and her persistent use of this book in *Jane Eyre*, it is quite possible that she would have been aware of this verse and even deliberate in evoking celestial images in a similar way. It was references like this that bolstered women's ability to understand themselves as more akin to God and gave them stock to interpret the Bible in new and exciting ways. In *Jane Eyre*, then, we see the sun and moon represent different facets of God's power—being both full of forthright Reason and sensual intuition. Both are characteristics that He manifests through the "Book of Nature," but it is the latter sensuality that resonates with Jane's spiritual sensibilities and intuitive subjectivity.

²⁵ Jenkins, "Jane Eyre: Charlotte Brontë's New Bible," 73-75.

Later, after Jane leaves Thornfield, we see celestial images provide inspiration again, not so much to advise and warn Jane, but to inspire and comfort her. As she passes her first night out in the open air, she prays for comfort and for Rochester's well being. When she rises from her knees, she expresses how the night sky strengthens her faith:

We know that God is everywhere; but certainly we feel His presence most when His works are on the grandest scale spread before us; and it is in the unclouded night-sky, where His worlds wheel their silent course, that we read clearest His infinitude, His omnipotence, His omnipresence... Looking up, I, with tear-dimmed eyes, saw the mighty Milky-way. Remembering what it was—what countless systems there swept space like a soft trace of light—I felt the might and strength of God. Sure was I of His efficiency to save what He had made: convinced I grew that neither earth should perish, nor one of the souls it treasured. I turned my prayer to thanksgiving: the Source of Life was also the Saviour of spirits. Mr. Rochester was safe; he was God's, and by God would he be guarded. (*JE*, 414)

This instance is a prime example of how Brontë amalgamates traditional Protestant notions of God's omniscient power and mercy as well as the Romantic notion that nature can inspire the imagination. Here we see that the image of the Milky Way holds visceral meaning that no textual recitation of the biblical could for Jane. In a sense, the image answers her prayer and brings a visual knowledge to her mind. Jane recounts that she feels God's presence most strongly through *seeing* His omnipotence in the night sky. The visual manifestation of the vastness of the universe, though it is hundreds of thousands of miles away, cuts to the quick of Jane's heart and

relieves her fears. This dynamic corresponds with her conviction that God is a vast and powerful being who is transcendent and physically removed from her, yet he can speak intimately to her heart with a personalized nearness.

An image again guides Jane later in her journey when she is near starvation and desperate. When she is about to give up, for people have begun to shun her and call her a beggar, she sees a light in the distance that seems to call to her. At first she describes the light as “one dim point,” but then she sees that it “sprang up” in the night. Tellingly, she first wonders if this hopeful image is an *ignis fatuus*, a natural source of light from marshy gasses breaking up in the cold air, but then she realizes that it is from a little cottage. She continues to fall because of her exhaustion, but she finally resolves, “This light was my forlorn hope: I must gain it” (*JE*, 422). Here, again it is an image that gives Jane hope. She first assumes that this hopeful light is from nature. Society has wronged her on so many fronts that she expects hopeful signs from nature but not from civilization. Later, perhaps in the most metaphysical moment in the entire novel, Jane hears Rochester calling out to her, “Jane! Jane! Jane!” and then resolves to go and find out what has become of him. Understandably, critics have focused on this moment as a manifestation of mysticism in the novel. This is one event when it is metaphysical language that pierces Jane’s subjectivity rather than an image. However, what seems to be largely overlooked is how germane vision is to this moment as well. Indeed, before Jane hears Rochester’s voice, she entreats God: “*Show me, show me the path!*” Jane sees nothing, but then hears the voice (*JE*, 535; italics mine). Jane’s movements have been guided by inspirational images, and she expects that they will be again.

John Maynard explains this metaphysical moment and her hearing Rochester's voice as "a patriarchal God's intervention."²⁶ It seems to me that this is indeed a patriarchal intervention, but perhaps one that emphasizes the linguistic nature of Rochester's spiritualism in drawing Jane to him rather than God's influence over Jane as decidedly linguistic. Perhaps Jane experiences this guidance through language because Rochester, unlike God, cannot speak to Jane's pure subjectivity in imagery; he instead must adhere to the system to which he has been acculturated to—language. The mode of pure visual inspiration belongs to God, who—according to evangelical doctrine—knows her heart as no man can. *Jane Eyre*, then, utilizes astronomical and natural imagery to convey several crucial ideas about women's spiritual subjectivity—that the natural world is alive with signs of Providence and that natural images can speak to feminine intuition because of the gynomorphic nature of His characteristics, both male and female by Victorian standards. It is through these images that we can understand that Brontë writes within the tradition of biblical hermeneutics. *Jane Eyre* exhibits hints of both Romanticism and progressivism, but evangelical Christianity largely informs these natural references rather than subverting the Christian tradition.

Villette and the Aurora Borealis

Just as *Jane Eyre* exhibits the power of visual subjectivity, we also see this power in *Villette*. The novel's protagonist, however, proves quite different from the emotional and articulate Jane; in fact, critics squarely regard Lucy Snowe as cold, elusive, and mysterious. Gilbert and Gubar argue that she is a parody of Wordsworth's Lucy Gray; they posit: "Far from

²⁶ Maynard, "The Brontës and Religion," 204.

being nature's favorite, she seems to be one of those chosen for adversity."²⁷ It may well be true that Lucy struggles to thrive in her marginalized status as an unmarried governess, but she is not entirely disconnected from nature and its gifts. In one moment in the novel that critics have largely ignored, nature functions as a form of divine guidance for Lucy Snowe in a way quite akin to the wider Brontë tradition. This moment reveals a more relatable and Romantic Lucy who reaches beyond her stoic façade for aid. When Lucy loses her position with Mrs. Marchmont as a caregiver after the woman passes away early in the novel, she is friendless and penniless. Not knowing where to go, she experiences a moment rather comparable to Jane Eyre's moment of crisis when she looks to the skies for guidance:

I should have quailed in the absence of moonlight, for it was by the leading of stars only I traced the dim path; I should have quailed still more in the unwonted presence of that which to-night shone in the north, a moving mystery—the Aurora Borealis. But this solemn stranger influenced me otherwise than through my fears. Some new power it seemed to bring. I drew in energy with the keen, low breeze that blew on its path. (*Vil*, 36)

Here we can see the spectacle of the northern lights influencing Lucy's mood and emotions in a similar way to how celestial bodies affect Jane. The spectacle is not only beautiful, but it also brings "power" and an "unwonted presence" to Lucy. She personifies the natural phenomenon, much as we saw with Jane Eyre and the moon. Though the spectacle is not gendered like Jane's moon is, it clearly has both a human quality and a self-supporting power. Also like Jane's moon,

²⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 402.

it has a metaphysical quality, and Lucy can draw in its energy. The outer elements permeate her inner subjectivity, and in this moment, she is not so evasive.

The *aurora borealis* does not only metaphysically influence Lucy's mood, though. It also speaks to her much as the moon speaks to Jane. Lucy explains,

A bold thought was sent to my mind; my mind was made strong to receive it.

"Leave this wilderness," it was said to me, "and go out hence."

"Where?" was the query.

I had not very far to look; gazing from this country parish in that flat, rich middle of England—I mentally saw within reach what I had never yet beheld with my bodily eyes:

I saw London. (*Vil*, 36-7)

Here we see the image send a striking thought to her mind, not relayed by language, but by pure visual knowledge from the natural wonder. The *aurora borealis* deters her from going north and directs her south to London, and this is a journey that will ultimately lead her to a new life in the continent. As is evidenced in this episode, Lucy bears a strong sense of visual subjectivity. This is a trait that many critics find problematic to the narrative's reliability because Lucy purposefully withholds details from the audience at other points in the novel. What's more, Lucy's subjectivity is faulty in moments and visual messages tend to shift in their meaning throughout *Villette*, particularly in connection with the strange nun figure she encounters repeatedly. Amidst the many shifting images in the novel that she grapples with, the image of the *aurora borealis* proves to be a stable one.

We see this trait again later on in her journey after she has traveled to the continent by sea and is in Belgium, unsure of what to do next: “Breakfast over, I must again move—in what direction? ‘Go to Villette,’ said an inward voice; prompted doubtless by the recollection of this slight sentence uttered carelessly and at random by Miss Fanshawe, as she bid me good-by” (*Vil*, 52). This moment is not as metaphysical as is Lucy’s connection with the *aurora borealis*, but we can see here that she has subjectivity within her. Furthermore, she is spiritually guided with a sense of intuition rather than a verbal directive as to where she should go. Lucy’s “inward voice” is the force that directs her journey. This voice not only represents her conscience, as the traditional “still small voice” of the Holy Spirit in English Protestantism does,²⁸ but this voice is also potent on practical matters, like where to secure employment. Though we know that Lucy considers herself to be an ardent Protestant, God can only be said to work through her and her intellect. Her subjectivity, impressed upon by nature, as well as her ability to call forth the passing suggestion of Miss Fanshawe, is what leads her on. It is in these moments too that we can see a glimpse into Lucy’s inner being. Though she may seem passive on the surface, she makes pivotal decisions, not through outer societal prescription, but—like other Brontë protagonists—through her own inner compass. These moments matter in our overall reading of *Villette* because they reveal an intuitive spiritual life that is under the surface of Lucy’s stoic façade.

Shirley’s Vision of the Titan Eve

We see Charlotte Brontë’s use of visual biblical hermeneutics to revise and feminize Christian spirituality again in *Shirley*. This was Charlotte’s second major novel. It follows

²⁸ We can see evidence of such dialect about the Holy Spirit in many places. For example see “Christian Controversy,” *The Protestant Quarterly Review* 4.1 (January 1847): 4. Reprinted in *Protestant Quarterly Review*, Vol. 1-2 (London, Ulan Press: 2012), 382.

Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar as they navigate through the industrial depression of 1811 and 1812. The novel also critiques the religious sectarian contention of the Yorkshire village of Spen Valley, and many things are criticized from traditional Anglican hierarchy to disharmony between Dissenters and Anglicans. The feminist spirituality of the novel is an element that some critics regard with scorn. Most famously, Terry Eagleton criticizes its “maundering rhetoric of...embarrassing feminist mysticism.”²⁹ Even critics sympathetic to Brontë’s feminist aims take issue with the novel’s structure and style. Brontë intended *Shirley* to be a serious social novel that countered some critics’ complaints about her romantic notions in *Jane Eyre*. Though she succeeded in colorfully depicting Yorkshire life and many early nineteenth-century social issues, the novel’s sprawling structure and tonal inconsistencies make it an “idiosyncratic experiment,” as Lucasta Miller calls it.³⁰ Historians have long attributed *Shirley*’s inconsistencies to the tragedies that befell the Brontës as Charlotte wrote it. Early in her composition efforts, both Branwell and Emily Brontë passed away, and Charlotte paused her writing to mourn. During the latter part of her composition efforts, her third and only surviving sibling Anne died as well.³¹ Indeed, as we can see in comparing early manuscripts of *Shirley* to the final text, Brontë revised this novel much more extensively than her other novels. Her extensive changes suggest a “greater uncertainty of composition,” as Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith explain.³²

Despite the novel’s inconsistencies, it contains moments of feminist social commentary much more daring than in any of Charlotte’s other fiction, in my estimation. She takes on several

²⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Myths of Power* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1975), 58.

³⁰ Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, 195.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 23-29.

³² Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith, “Introduction” in Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, xxvi.

women's issues—from advocating for political involvement, to questioning women's place in religion, to arguing for more equal marital relationships. In contrast to Eagleton's distaste for its feminist mysticism, many feminist critics and historians find *Shirley* to be an accurate portrayal of women's increasing desire to more zealously engage in politics and religion. Patricia Ingham relates that *Shirley* explores the "English woman question," or how English women in particular were expected to behave and provide domestic services.³³ She posits that the novel is "a challenge to the idea of womanliness as selflessness."³⁴ In a similar vein, Miller believes that the novel "embodies the feminist argument for the expansion of women's lives beyond the home."³⁵ Other critics have picked up on how Brontë links gender issues to other class issues. Houston sees *Shirley* as merging the traditions of the Condition of England novel and the Woman Question novel.³⁶ We certainly see Brontë bait her audience with this connection; in fact, she titles her most profoundly feminist chapter, "Which the Genteel Reader is Recommended to Skip, Low Persons being Here Introduced." This chapter title suggests the appearance of working class characters or even immoral characters. Brontë aims to both intrigue the reader and make a connection between Chartist efforts and women's rights. This chapter, dedicated to exploring the divinity of Eve—and by extension, women's divine and moral characteristics—serves as an entr'acte between two lower-class conflicts in *Shirley*. Houston argues that Brontë did this strategically in order to let the Luddite radicalism defuse the feminist radicalism.³⁷

³³ Ingham, *The Brontës in Context*, 133.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

³⁵ Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, 194.

³⁶ Houston, *Victorian Women Writers*, 44.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

Within Brontë's treatment of social problems, *Shirley* also sheds light on Brontë's religious mentality. She reveals the Church of England's quirks through the novel's bumbling curates, and she shames Dissenters who resort to violence. Perhaps the novel's clearest message about religion is that divisive sectarian involvement is centrifugal to a Christian mindset of charity and compassion. On this point, Nicholas Armitage points out that the novel argues against religious fanaticism and advocates for finding common ground between different sects.³⁸ On a similar note, J. Russell Perkin argues that *Shirley* is a "broad church novel" because "it examines the religious controversies of the 1840s from the perspective of a woman loyal to the Church of England yet versed in the questioning spirit characteristic of the novel of doubt."³⁹ Here Brontë plays the peacemaker, revealing quirks of various groups in order to make them more sympathetic to each other. The novel as a whole proves to be much more religiously pragmatic than *Jane Eyre*'s emotional spiritualism, though there is a similar emphasis on individual interpretation of the Bible and of Christian faith in general, as Sally Greene notes.⁴⁰ We may not see widespread Romantic lyricism through *Shirley* as we do in *Jane Eyre*, but it does occur in a few significant moments, particularly in Shirley's speech to Caroline about Eve. Shirley revises biblical and Miltonic portrayals of the first mother in ways that may seem altogether radical and pagan at first glance; however, upon further inspection, we can see that *Shirley* presents the same Christian Romanticism that we've seen in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. As

³⁸ Armitage, "Melting Miss Snowe," 209.

³⁹ J. Robert Perkin, "Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* as a Novel of Religious Controversy," *Studies in the Novel* 40, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 390.

⁴⁰ Greene, "Apocalypse When?" 351-2.

Lucasta Miller notes, in this scene in particular, Shirley serves “as the mouthpiece for... [Brontë’s] most explicit expression of her Christian-Romantic credo”.⁴¹

This moment of lyrical feminist thought occurs when the novel’s protagonists, Shirley Keeldar and Caroline Helstone, neglect attending Sunday services on Whitsuntide⁴² because they suspect the meeting will be boring, hot, and stifling. This is a reaction against what Houston calls “the communal norms of patriarchal Christian society.”⁴³ The women sit beyond the boundaries of the churchyard and observe the natural beauty around them instead. As they wait for the service to let out, Shirley envisions Eve as a glorified Titan who reverences God but is glorious in her own right. The lyrical depiction of Eve that follows proves to be Brontë’s most explicit moment of feminist revision, but Houston argues that we would be wrong to see her message here as more radical than in her other works, for she “wrote against the grain of Christian patriarchy, calling forth the ‘goddess-story’ in one form or another all her life.”⁴⁴ Brontë reinterprets the myth of Eve by defining her, not as the instigator of Original Sin who brought death and the fall on humanity, but as the reproductive progenitor of civilization. Shirley expresses her sensual experience of Nature to Caroline at length:

The gray church and grayer tombs look divine with this crimson gleam on them. Nature is now at her evening prayers; she is kneeling before those red hills. I see her prostrate on

⁴¹ Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, 194.

⁴² Whitsuntide is a holiday that marks the beginning of the Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended on Christ’s disciples. A similar spirit of empowerment and inspiration descends upon Shirley as she interprets the sunset.

⁴³ Houston, *Victorian Women Writers*, 33.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

the great steps of her altar, praying for a fair night for mariners at sea, for travellers in deserts, for lambs on moors, and unfledged birds in woods. Caroline, I see her, and I will tell you what she is like. She is like what Eve was when she and Adam stood alone on earth. (*Sh*, 358-59)

In this striking moment, Shirley perceives God in nature in a way she seems to find impossible to do within the confines of the church. The church and churchyard do play an important part in this sublime scene, as they reflect the beauty of the sunset, but the church's beauty seems to be "in the strength of nature," to quote Wordsworth's *Prelude*.⁴⁵

In a striking turn, Shirley links Eve not only to the biblical tradition but to pagan tradition as well. She relates, "[T]he first men of the earth were Titans, and that Eve was their mother; from her sprang Saturn, Hyperion, Oceanus; she bore Prometheus" (*Sh*, 359). Caroline is rather scandalized by these pagan references, but Shirley responds by referencing Genesis 6:4 to corroborate her interpretation: "I say, there were giants on the earth in those days—giants that strove to scale heaven" (*Sh*, 360). In this way, I perceive that Brontë unites pagan and Christian tradition, suggesting that Eve is the unifying force between the lofty ideals of the church and the realities of the world around them.

This revision of Eve is one that has left many feminists dissatisfied, however, both because of the content of Brontë's message and its failure to effect change within the novel. Kate Lawson in particular finds Shirley's conception of Eve problematic, in large part because it does not modify the biblical myth in a radical enough way. She argues that "Brontë abandons the attempt to produce a myth rooted in an idealist version of the feminine and instead makes do

⁴⁵ William Wordsworth, *Prelude* iii, line 193 in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 352.

with a myth which explains the terrible limitations placed on women's roles, limitations of which the novel is acutely aware."⁴⁶ Lawson seems to find the novel's fixation on women's limitations depressing and Shirley's notion of Eve unhelpful. She contends, "rather than imagining a feminine power which is truly *different* from masculine power, she simply inverts the traditional view of Eve—making her sinless instead of sinful."⁴⁷ Conversely, Gail Turley Houston briefly recognizes *Shirley* as playing into Brontë's tendency across her works, most particularly her Gondal juvenilia, to empower women by presenting their goddess-like power.⁴⁸ I will build on Houston's suggestion to argue that Shirley revises the myth of Eve in a positive and transformative way, and in the process of revising this myth reveals the considerable obstacle women writers face in furthering their feminist ideals.

Brontë revises the notion of Eve's culpability through the way she inextricably links her to the natural world. Gilbert and Gubar go as far as to argue that Eve *is* nature in *Shirley*.⁴⁹ We can see from Shirley's spiritual intuition about Eve, that for Brontë, the earth is not a reminder of the depravity of humankind compared to God, but rather, an indicator of how the ordinary can aspire to the divine. Shirley conveys her sensual experience of perceiving Eve through the sunset with concerted lyricism:

I saw—I now see—a woman-Titan. Her robe of blue air spreads to the outskirts of the heath, where yonder flock is grazing; a veil white as an avalanche sweeps from her head

⁴⁶ Lawson, "Imagining Eve," 411.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 416.

⁴⁸ Houston, *Victorian Women Writers*, 24-48.

⁴⁹ Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic*, 384.

to her feet, and arabesques of lightning flame on its borders. Under her breast I see her zone, purple like that horizon; through its blush shines the star of evening. Her steady eyes I cannot picture. They are clear, they are deep as lakes, they are lifted and full of worship, they tremble with the softness of love and the lustre of prayer. Her forehead has the expanse of a cloud, and is paler than the early moon, risen long before dark gathers. She reclines her bosom on the ridge of Stilbro' Moor; her mighty hands are joined beneath it. So kneeling, face to face she speaks with God. That Eve is Jehovah's daughter, as Adam was His son. (*Sh*, 360)

Brontë utilizes her Christian-Romantic point of view here to argue an important point about secular life. Though Eve's actions may have caused her and Adam to be banished from Eden, the earth as a whole still shines with goodness, and perhaps life is not as fallen as many would believe. In this way, Shirley asserts Eve's equality to Adam, and thus women's equality to men, through this vibrantly lyrical passage. Brontë further emphasizes this point when Caroline interrupts Shirley's spiritual *jouissance* to remind her, that Eve "coveted an apple, and was cheated by a snake" (*Sh*, 360). Caroline finds Shirley's impressions of Eve "very vague and visionary" and urges that they "ought to go into church" after all. Shirley squarely rejects Caroline's notion, proclaiming, "Heaven may have faded from her brow when she fell in paradise, but all that is glorious on earth shines there still" (*Sh*, 361).

Shirley's insistence that Eve's redemptive role outshines her instigation in original sin parallels a trend that historian Barbara Taylor recognizes. Taylor argues that the single most important patriarchal doctrine that feminists had to combat was that Eve was the weak-minded transgressor who brought sin and death into the world. She explains, "At stake in the myth of the

Fall was not merely female culpability for the exile from Paradise but the issue of Eve's innate inferiority to Adam. In rejecting the doctrine of original sin, feminists were also rejecting the equation of femininity with innate sinfulness and depravity."⁵⁰ While Taylor writes specifically about Owenite feminists and how they challenged the myth of Eve, this was a trend that Brontë clearly participated in as well. *Shirley* revises the mythology of Eve's culpability and emphasizes her Promethean genius, for she contended with God after the fall to keep humankind regenerating, and this is an act that Gilbert and Gubar believe makes her a "potentially Satanic interlocutor with God."⁵¹ By embracing her rebellion as a form of intellectual and biological redemption for the human race, Brontë undercuts the angel/demon dichotomy that women could either be the asexual, moral angels of their households or fallen, sensual transgressors. Nina Auerbach explores this trend extensively in her *The Woman and the Demon*, and argues that this dichotomy was especially pervasive during the Victorian era.⁵² Brontë's defense of Eve does not only pertain to theological issues, however, but also extends to women's public influence. Part of Brontë's championing of Eve's part in the fall proves, "an act of self-defense," as Kate Lawson posits, because she shows "that there is scriptural authority to prove that the purifying force of divine genius is as likely to be found in women as in men."⁵³ Just as Eve, the first mother, was genius in her part of bringing about humanity, so can her descendents be geniuses—civil, domestic, literary, and otherwise.

⁵⁰ Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, 146.

⁵¹ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 256.

⁵² Nina Auerbach, *The Woman and the Demon* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

⁵³ Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, 196.

In addition to Eve's desire for knowledge, Brontë also emphasizes her ability to regenerate humanity as overshadowing her culpability in the fall. Shirley explains,

The first woman's breast that heaved with life on this world yielded the daring which could contend with Omnipotence, the strength which could bear a thousand years of bondage, the vitality which could feed that vulture death through uncounted ages, the unexhausted life and uncorrupted excellence, sisters to immortality, which, after millenniums of crimes, struggles, and woes, could conceive and bring forth a Messiah. The first woman was heaven-born. Vast was the heart whence gushed the well-spring of the blood of nations, and grand the undegenerate head where rested the consort-crown of creation. (*Sh*, 361)

Within Brontë's ideology, Eve's role as the first mother crowns her with unparalleled nobility. In fact, in earlier drafts of the manuscript there was even more emphasis on Eve's maternal capabilities. In examining these earlier manuscripts of *Shirley*, Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith believe that she emphasized women's ability to lactate, and that Eve "yielded [with milk (?)] the daring which could contend with Omnipotence" (*Sh*, 361). In this moment, Brontë rejects what Grace M. Jantzen calls the necrophiliac tendencies of Christianity, which emphasize punishment and death to using Eve as a symbol of how women and humankind in general can ascend to divinity through their own humanity.⁵⁴ What's more, mother's milk has an important place in Cixous's notion of *l'écriture féminine*. She describes women's bodily writing,

⁵⁴ Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, (Bloomington, IN; Indiana University Press, 1999), 95.

“There is always in her at least a little of that good mother’s milk. She writes in white ink.”⁵⁵ In both Brontë’s early manuscript and Cixous’s theory, mother’s milk is the unacknowledged power in the history of thought. This notion of women’s value being rooted in their reproductive function is a trait of Shirley’s vision that Lawson took issue with, but I argue that Brontë in no way replicates patriarchal notions of women as solely reproductive creatures. I agree with Houston in finding Brontë’s notion of reproduction to be forward thinking because it challenges the innate authority of patriarchy, for as she puts it, “no father, even a God, could procreate without a woman.”⁵⁶

We can further appreciate the intrepidity of Brontë’s presentation of Eve’s reproductive capabilities by considering how Irigaray commented on women’s reproduction as power more than a century later. In her *Elemental Passions*, Irigaray inverts Freud’s theory of females having penis envy by arguing that it is men who have biological envy of women. She argues that the root of phallogentric thought is really a projection of male insecurity that they do not have a womb. In her view, men have created a civilization that excludes women as a means to build an exterior world because they do not have power to create life within their interior. It is in this spirit of lack that men seek to erase women’s cultural, artistic, and maternal influence on the world. Irigaray contends, “In order to recapture that whole sensation of the inside of a body, he will invent a world. But the world’s circular horizon always conceals the inner movement of the womb. The imposition of distinctions is the mourning which their bodies always wear.”⁵⁷ For Irigaray, the erasure of women from politics and discourse on civilization is evidence of

⁵⁵ Cixous, “The Laugh of Medusa,” 81.

⁵⁶ Houston, *Victorian Women Writers*, 35.

⁵⁷ Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, trans. Joanne Collie and Judith Still (New York: Routledge, 1992), 15.

women's profound strength and threat to men and not indication of their cultural inferiority; such was the case in Brontë's novel as well. Brontë sees women's reproductive capabilities as ennobling in their own right, and this is a trait that qualifies women to every realm of society because they are so essential to its continuance. Rather than adhering to a phallogentric notion of what power and strength look like, Brontë argues that nurturing and reproduction are powerful, and that these innate roles women possess make them apt to participate in the public realm of civilization and politics, and not just within the home. Shirley visualizes women's cultural, political, and spiritual power in imagining Eve prostrate on her own "circular horizon," to borrow Irigaray's term, and this natural scene seems to invoke pride and wonder at the reproductive power women bring to the world. Clearly for Brontë this life force is much more powerful than any patriarchal institutional effort to demonize and subordinate Eve and her female offspring.

Just as Lawson takes issue with the usefulness of Brontë's notion of Eve, Gilbert and Gubar question the potency of her feminist vision if it cannot even effect social change within her novel. Gilbert and Gubar recognize the power and centrality of the Eve figure to Shirley and find Shirley's "capacity for joy" related to "her intimate awareness of the fertility, the felicity, and the physicality of her own Titan-Eve,"⁵⁸ but they also argue that Shirley's vision of Eve ultimately fails because she and Caroline, "cannot escape the confinement of the biblical myth"⁵⁹ and that though Shirley is the freer double of Caroline, Shirley ultimately "is shown to be as confined by her gender, as excluded from male society, as her friend."⁶⁰ They see the novel as a

⁵⁸ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 384.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 386.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 383.

failure because both Shirley and Caroline end up in traditional marital relationships, and Brontë doesn't allow them any notable public influence.

I disagree with critics' dismissal of Shirley and Caroline as conventional women. Despite their conventional roles at the novel's close, we see that even in adhering to their prescribed roles they still undermine oppressive patriarchal notions in notable ways. Despite Shirley's, and sometimes Caroline's, clear and articulate female perspectives, the men in the novel seem to automatically reject their notions. The first moment of this that we see is directly after Shirley's speech about Eve when a field worker, Joe Scott, happens to come upon the women as they are enjoying the sunset. In the course of their conversation, he defends his view that women should not be involved in politics by citing 1 Timothy 2:11, "Let the woman learn in silence, with all subjection." For Scott, this subjection is more than warranted because, as he explains, "Adam was not deceived; but the woman, being deceived, was in transgression."⁶¹ In this moment of belittlement, Caroline admonishes Scott to come to "the right and private judgment" concerning the matter.⁶² Gilbert and Gubar point out that "neither Shirley nor Caroline can really make any headway with the man," and all there is left for them to do is insist on a problem with the translation from the original Greek.⁶³ Indeed, there is a "confusion of tongues here,"⁶⁴ as Gilbert and Gubar call it. The women perhaps fail to speak as boldly as they could because Scott is

⁶¹ Ibid., 247.

⁶² It is important to note also that Caroline does have moments of feminist clarity later in the novel in which she argues, "Let the woman speak out whenever she sees fit to make an objection...it is permitted to a woman to teach and to exercise authority as much as may be. Man, meantime, cannot do better than hold his peace" (323). She may seem to have an anti-feminist voice in this moment, but later in the novel, she becomes Brontë's mouthpiece in a sense as well.

⁶³ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 353.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

clearly set in his opinion of women. There seems to be a linguistic disconnection between Caroline and Joe that we see persist with other men later in the novel.

Shirley even more boldly seeks to convey her vision of women's rights when she writes a *devoir* for her French tutor Louis Moore, the man whom she will eventually marry. Though it strongly conveys Brontë's feminist notions, this is a part of the novel that critics have surprisingly neglected. Shirley's depiction of Eva, the hearty first mother, clearly calls upon the biblical myth of Eve. The *devoir* emphasizes the same points that Shirley makes clear in her earlier vision at sunset—that Eva is redemptive and forgiven, rather than fallen and outcast. In her *devoir*, Christ comes to return Eva to her place in heaven. He rhetorically questions, "Did I not give from the altar the very flame which lit Eva's being? Come again into the heaven whence thou wert sent" (*Sh*, 552). This moment revises the myth of Eve, from a plebeian handmaiden by which the world of men is regenerated, to having a divine spark and intimate relationship with Christ. Rather than Eve being posited as a misguided and carnal woman who is disconnected from God, Brontë emphasizes her spiritual nearness to him, even after her choice to partake of the forbidden fruit.

Shirley's *devoir* marks an important moment in expressing Brontë's spiritual feminism because of its explicit imaginings of Eve's relationship with God. It is also a crucial moment in terms of my study, for in Shirley's churchyard vision, we do not necessarily have a moment of true *l'écriture féminine* because Shirley is actually relaying her thoughts to Caroline through dialogue, which the novel's third person omniscient narrator relays to the reader. This *devoir*, on the other hand, is a moment of deliberate and organized writing, which re-imagines women's origins to a skeptical male audience. Critics seem to have missed how this moment serves as a striking analogy to Brontë's act of writing. It should come as no surprise that Shirley's *devoir* is

endowed with strikingly bodily, visual language. She describes the first mother Eva's communion with God:

That Presence, invisible but mighty, gathered her in like a lamb to the fold; that voice, soft but all-pervading, vibrated through her heart like music. Her eye received no image; and yet a sense visited her vision and her brain as of the serenity of stainless air, the power of sovereign seas, the majesty of marching stars, the energy of colliding elements, the rooted endurance of hills wide based, and, above all, as of the lustre of heroic beauty rushing victorious on the Night, vanquishing its shadows like a diviner sun. (*JE*, 552-53)

In this expression of spiritual communion, we can see the spiritual lyricism of *Jane Eyre*, but perhaps in an even more indulgent form here. This language, in my mind, is strikingly feminine, for it employs a bodily concept of divinity rather than a rational one. Eva's "eye received no image," but her mind is filled with a visual of power like the power of the sea, "marching stars," the "rooted endurance of hills", and the "luster of heroic beauty" of night. This *devoir* describes a visual communion with God that we can see reverberate through Charlotte Brontë's work; the strongest spiritual communication is not auditory or verbal, but visual and imaginative.

This sensual spirituality, however, is a force generally inaccessible to men in Brontë's novels. Shirley complains about Louis's imprecise rejection of her *devoir*. She tells him, "I never could correct that composition. . . . Your censor-pencil scored it with condemnatory lines, whose signification I strove vainly to fathom" (*JE*, 554). When she presses him further as to what he disagrees with, he admits that nothing is wrong with her French grammar and is elusive about why else he would have harshly corrected her work. Moore does not explicitly correct

Shirley's feminist notions, likely because of her high social class, but it is clear that her tutor finds her mythology of empowerment inappropriate in a way that he won't even dignify with a discussion. In this sense, Brontë illustrates why Shirley has a difficult time mobilizing her feminist values, and by extension, why many feminist writers like herself have this problem as well in effecting social change. As much as they might strive to imbue their writing with visionary possibilities of their own feminine power, without the collective vision and power of more women to dignify these visions, little could happen. Thus we see again how the visionary knowledge of female power effectively stays in Shirley's imagination, though it is transmitted to her audience as a model for female spirituality and subjectivity. Shirley's failure to overcome misogyny should not be seen as an ideological failure but as a historically accurate constraint of Brontë's world.

This disconnection not only makes men unreceptive to feminist sensibilities, but it also apparently creates a problem with male authorship in Brontë's eyes. We can see this clearly in Caroline and Shirley's discussion concerning Milton's depiction of Eve. After Shirley's initial description of Eve in the sky, Caroline recognizes the disparity between Shirley's vision and the worldly conception of women as domestic, submissive beings. Caroline reminds her, "that is not Milton's Eve." Recognizing the disparity, Shirley replies, "No, by the pure Mother of God, she is not! . . . Milton was great; but was he good? His brain was right; how was his heart? . . . Milton tried to see the first woman; but, Cary, he saw her not. . . . It was his cook that he saw" (*Sh*, 359). In this moment, Caroline seems to subscribe to Milton's notion of Eve as a simple domestic who didn't understand the repercussions of her choice, and Brontë protests that she is willing to challenge even the most revered Christian writer—Milton. Kate Lawson contends that Brontë's criticism rests in her estimation that Milton lacked "power of imaginative vision. . . .

He could not imaginatively combine femininity with greatness and nobility of character.”⁶⁵

Shirley infers that his logic and intellect were sound, but his intuition and feeling were amiss, and this made him unfit to render Eve in her true likeness.

In my mind, the key to Brontë’s feminist ideology in *Shirley* is a notion that critics have not yet recognized—her visual mode of inspiration and the way this visual knowledge is rendered in the text. Shirley envisions a new paradigm for female power in a symbolic way, but literal vision also plays an essential part in this powerful moment. On Shirley’s visionary nature, Sally Greene posits that her “interpretive transformations of Christian themes often bring the reader to the limits of language itself, with the result that he or she must participate in creating the utopian space that can as yet only be imagined—the space in which women are the equal of men before God.”⁶⁶ While Greene recognizes how *Shirley* undercuts textuality, she stops short of articulating precisely how language is limited and what the alternative method for expression is. For Shirley, the most accurate doctrine about Eve and about women’s nature in general cannot be found in the chapel through a clergyman’s voice; instead, inspiration comes through her own eyes in living in the larger world. Indeed, Shirley’s passionate description of the sunset and her imaginings of the fertile first mother suggest a self-assured ontology about the origins of femininity and women’s natural right to power in civilization. Yet, as many feminists have lamented, this vision of power doesn’t enjoy full realization within *Shirley*. For though there are moments of feminist ecstasy, the novel is not quite as subversive against male rejection of female empowerment as some of the Brontës’ other novels. It is my view that Shirley’s feminist message ultimately proves incompatible because Shirley’s perspective is infused with a bodily

⁶⁵ Kate Lawson, “Imagining Eve,” *Women’s Studies* 24, no. 5, 1995: 414.

⁶⁶ Greene, “Apocalypse When?” 361.

feminine intuition about the world and a sort of religious *jouissance* that proves inaccessible or unpalatable to some of the men of *Shirley*.

CHAPTER 3: THE FEMALE ARTIST AND SPECTATOR IN ANNE AND CHARLOTTE BRONTË

Many readers have commented on the highly visual nature of Charlotte and Emily Brontë's lyrical narratives,¹ but only recently have critics recognized the importance of the dialectic of artist and spectator in their works. In previous chapters I've explored architectural imagery as a visual manifestation of religious patriarchy and natural images as sources of divine guidance for women. In the pages that follow I will try to show how Victorian visual culture threatened female subjectivity by controlling artistic expression. Victorian visual culture encouraged artistic refinements in women but strongly defined the appropriate parameters for their art in subject matter, style, and mode. W. J. T. Mitchell reminds us that although "amateur painting was a respectable undertaking for proper Victorian ladies, when writing was still regarded as a province of masculinity." In this way, painting often serves as a gateway for female expression. Mitchell argues that we often see art objects in Victorian fiction because they allow women writers to include a more accepted art form to offset their transgressive authorship.² Clear boundaries were set for the woman artist. On the one hand, drawing and painting were considered worthy domestic refinements, largely for the sake of the ornamental pleasure they provided; on the other hand, cultural norms discouraged women from drawing and painting as forms of passionate expression, on the other hand, or as means of professional employment. The educational theorist and Congregationalist reformer Sarah Stickney Ellis argues against women

¹ See for example, Rhoda L. Flaxman, *Victorian Word-Painting and Narrative: Toward a Blending of Genres* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), who writes that their "visually oriented descriptions . . . emulate pictorial methods" (9).

² W. J. T. Mitchell, "Space, Ideology, and Literary Representation," *Poetics Today* 10, no. 1, Art and Literature (Spring 1989): 98.

becoming professional artists, for it was not “an object of desirable attainment that they should study the art of painting to this extent.”³ Despite this gender prescription, women artists were on the rise in Britain, as Pamela Gerrish Nunn reports. The 1851 census shows that 548 women considered themselves professional artists. That number jumped to 853 in the 1861 census and 1,069 in the 1871 census.⁴ This trend suggests that though society’s views on the female artist had not necessarily progressed in the Brontës’ day, more and more women were still finding their artistic voices. It is in this light that more recent scholarship has recognized the reciprocal relationship between the Brontës’ lyrical style and their preoccupation with art. The result is not only a statement about art production and art appreciation, but perhaps more importantly, an extended illustration of how society controls and limits women’s visual expression. Through presenting female artists in their novels, the Brontës promote women’s artistic participation in a way subversive to the norms of their time.

Victorian prescriptions for the female artist also restricted them as to what modes of representation were appropriate. It was most proper for women to paint *from nature* rather than *from life*. Only natural subjects were appropriate models for reproduction; studying a human figure, whether draped or nude, was considered indecorous. Imitation rather than invention was the ideal for the woman artist. They were encouraged to copy other prints rather than create new art, a standard that reflects the value of mimicking an ideal rather than fostering women’s own artistic and visual perspectives. Christine Alexander shows how the Brontës resisted these restrictions, not only in their “letters, early writings and novels,” but also in “the sheer number of

³ Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Daughters of England: Their Position in Society, Character, and Responsibilities* (London: Fisher, 1845), 112.

⁴ Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Problem Pictures: Women and Men in Victorian Painting* (Aldershot, England: Scolar Press, 1995), 23, n. 5.

their surviving illustrations.”⁵ The prolific body of their artwork does suggest a subversive attitude toward the restrictions on women in the art world; however, the content and style of their art is rather conventional. Stylistically, they drew or painted from nature and their art was nearly always a copy of a print. When we consider their characters’ artistic efforts, however, we see a much more intrepid attitude about women artists. Their characters, most notably Helen Graham of Anne Brontë’s *Wildfell Hall* and Jane Eyre, create art that is original, passionate, and even supernatural at times. The characters both use art to express their desires and reflect their points of view, and this expression extends to their spiritual sensibilities as well. In examining Helen Graham and Jane Eyre’s artwork, it becomes clear that the Brontës’ do not only employ biblical visual hermeneutics in their writing but also in the art their narrators describe. In this way, art works serve as a *mise en abyme* for female characters’ individualized spiritual journeys.

Art and Helen’s Spiritual Progression in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (*Wildfell Hall* hereafter) is Anne Brontë’s second and final novel. It is known for being one of the most important feminist novels of its time, though its contemporary audience received it with a good deal of scorn.⁶ Many critics have examined its Christian ethics, particularly its argument against spousal abuse, alcohol abuse, and gambling addiction. More recently the novel has drawn critical attention for its depiction of the female

⁵ Christine Alexander, “Introduction,” *The Art of the Brontës* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 11.

⁶ The most famous example is Charles Kingsley’s unsigned review in *Fraiser’s Magazine* 39 (London, April 1849): 417-32 who states: “The fault of the book is coarseness—not merely that coarseness of subject which will be the stumbling-block of most readers, and which makes it utterly unfit to be put into the hands of girls...[English] society owes thanks, not sneers, to those who dare to shew her the image of her own ugly, hypocritical visage”.

artist. The novel's protagonist, Helen Graham, is an artist who suffers many travails during her courtship with the vivacious gambler, Arthur Huntingdon. The two then struggle through further travails during an unhappy marriage, infidelity and attempted rape among them. Huntingdon deserts Helen and their young son for months at a time, often to rendezvous with his mistress, Lady Lowborough. He becomes increasingly dangerous, and at one point even inspires his friend to attempt to rape Helen. After a few foiled attempts to leave Grassdale, she and her son escape Huntingdon's abusive control. The two must live in hiding and Helen supports them by selling her oil paintings. Helen's painting is far beyond a domestic refinement, and because she endows her art with all the complexity of her changing consciousness, it proves central to examining her subjectivity.

Early in Helen's narrative she describes her prolific body of art, and we see that many of the works are centered on her amorous desires for Huntingdon. She sketches several portraits of him and paints a romantic piece of a young girl looking in adoration at a pair of turtledoves. Alexandra Wettlaufer comments on how these paintings convey her desires:

These works of art . . . reveal aspects of Helen's inner life—her love and her past—against her conscious will. Even where she erased her sketches, pentimenti remains, and Helen's art expresses thoughts, desires, and meanings at odds with social expectations that she hopes to keep hidden. In this sense, the art works function as metonymies for their creator, rendering visible and concrete precisely that which cannot be seen.⁷

⁷ Alexandra K. Wettlaufer, *Portraits of the Artist as a Young Woman: Painting and the Novel in France and Britain, 1800-1860* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 235.

What Wettlaufer recognizes, and I aim to make even more clear, is that Helen's art becomes a tangible manifestation of her visual subjectivity. This is especially true in Helen's younger years when she pointedly renders her desire for Huntingdon through her artwork. In one sense, Helen's art is a liberating form of expression and a means for self-sufficiency for her; however, in another sense, visual art lays bare her strongest desires, making them accessible for unwanted male surveillance.

Helen's art functions to convey her romantic desires early in the novel, but as she becomes proverbially sadder and wiser, her art reflects a greater appreciation for realism rather than idealism. Wettlaufer sees the changes in Helen's art as evidence of her maturation, and the point is confirmed by Antonia Losano, who argues that Helen's increasing realism make her more professional and disinterested in her craft.⁸ We see ample support in the novel for this idea when Gilbert Markham observes a landscape painting Helen has made of Wildfell Hall, and he notes the sophistication of her work in comparison with her earlier paintings. He describes the painting like this: "It was a view of Wildfell Hall, as seen at early morning from the field below, rising in dark relief against a sky of clear silvery blue, with a few red streaks on the horizon, faithfully drawn and coloured, and very elegantly and artistically handled" (*TWH*, 42). Unlike Helen's earlier paintings, which are romantic and idealistic, here Wildfell Hall is realistically rendered with such precision that Markham can identify the exact vantage point from which Helen has painted it. Wettlaufer comments on this change: "Implicitly, independence has improved, rather than diminished her art. Both then and now, the very act of representation has

⁸ Antonia Losano, "Reading Women/ Reading Pictures: Textual and Visual Reading in Charlotte Brontë's Fiction and Nineteenth-Century Painting." In *Reading Women: Literary Figures And Cultural Icons From The Victorian Age To The Present*, edited by Jane Badia and Jennifer Phegley (New York: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 47.

allowed Helen to take the subject position, giving her at least a vestige of power over the object of her gaze.”⁹ Helen’s subjectivity and her visual expression enjoy cooperative strength. Her art allows for a financial means of leaving Huntingdon, and as her independence grows, her artistic ability also improves. Deborah Denenholz Morse makes a similar argument and views Helen’s art as evidence of “her maturing consciousness as they move from the beatific vision of Nature and human nature embodied in her early, conventionalized allegorical painting and decorative miniatures to increasingly realistic portraiture. . . . Helen’s art—like Anne’s—now witnesses to the truth of her perceptions.”¹⁰ While Helen’s earlier art can be viewed as idealistic projections, her later more realistic work is evidence of her ability to faithfully interpret reality.

Though there is clear consensus that Helen progressively becomes more realistic and skilled as an artist, Nóra Séllei argues that the art also reveals Helen’s artistic progression from rendering beautiful aspects of nature to sublime aspects of nature. Edmund Burke made this idea a prominent topic in nineteenth-century criticism and culture. He divided art and literature into these two clear categories: the beautiful, art that was aesthetically pleasing, sweet, and pure; and the sublime, art that was compelling because of its grandeur and danger.¹¹ The first major description of Helen’s art clearly renders Burke’s concept of the beautiful in its idealistic scene of the maiden and the turtledoves, and we get every indication that this painting is an analogy for Helen’s amorous aspirations for union with Huntingdon. Later in Helen’s artistic development, we see Burke’s concept of the sublime clearly at work when she sketches the seascape. Gilbert

⁹ Wettlaufer, *Portraits of the Artist as a Young Woman*, 233.

¹⁰ Deborah Denenholz Morse, “‘I speak of those I do know,’ Witnessing as Radical Gesture in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*” in *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë*, ed. Julie Nash Barbara and Ann Suess (Farnham, United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2001), 109.

¹¹ See Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: L.L. Tournissen, 1792). Accessed via *Google Books*. 27 Dec 2015.

Markham describes the scene of Helen painting the seascape when she travels with him and some friends to the coast. He finds Helen alone sketching on “a narrow ledge of rock at the very verge of the cliff, which descended with a steep, precipitous slant, quite down to the rocky shore” (*TWH*, 64). Helen’s audacious position matches her daring ideological stance in employing the sublime, and Séllei reads this as a moment of feminist transcendence over Victorian restrictions because she defies the notion that only male artists should attempt to depict the sublime.¹²

Although critics have strongly established the progression in Helen’s art from idealism to realism and from rendering the beautiful to rendering the sublime, they have neglected to consider Helen’s art as indicative of her spiritual progression. *Wildfell Hall* is nothing if not explicit about its religious tenets, and so it is reasonable to infer that Helen’s art might also embody spiritual precepts. When we examine Helen’s description of her early painting, we can see her naiveté at work, not only in the painting’s lack of realism and its adherence to Burke’s notion of the beautiful, but also in its biblical iconography. Helen describes the painting at length:

The scene represented was an open glade in a wood. A group of dark Scotch firs was introduced in the middle distance to relieve the prevailing freshness of the rest; but in the foreground was part of the gnarled trunk and of the spreading boughs of a large forest-tree, whose foliage was of a brilliant golden green—not golden from autumnal mellowness, but from the sunshine and the very immaturity of the scarce expanded leaves. Upon this bough, that stood out in bold relief against the sombre firs, were seated

¹² Nóra Séllei, “Female Desire and Romantic Art in Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,” *Gender Studies* 8 (2009): 11.

an amorous pair of turtle doves, whose soft sad-coloured plumage afforded a contrast of another nature; and beneath it a young girl was kneeling on the daisy-spangled turf, with head thrown back and masses of fair hair falling on her shoulders, her hands clasped, lips parted, and eyes intently gazing upward in pleased yet earnest contemplation of those feathered lovers—too deeply absorbed in each other to notice her. (*TWH*, 156)

This painting serves as a clear indication of young Helen's hopeful view of her future with Huntingdon. There is an interesting likeness to this painting in Anne Brontë's surviving art. She



Figure 3.1. Pencil drawing on card by Anne Brontë, "What You Please" 182 x 214 mm. July 25 1840. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Brontë Parsonage Museum. Analysis on this sketch suggests that it was mimetic of an existing print.

sketched a piece titled, "What You Please" (Figure 3.1) when living in Scarborough and employed as a governess. Jane Sellars speculates that this must have been a time of great

excitement for Anne,¹³ and Edward Chitham further argues that the female subject in this sketch could represent Anne, ready to embark on a new life.¹⁴ From the biographical information surrounding Anne's sketch, we can gather that Helen's idealistic painting of a similar nature may bear some autobiographical inflection for Anne. In Helen's painting, we find a similar scene with a maiden near a young tree in an otherwise gnarled woodland, but in Helen's painting, two turtledoves bear an important presence. The young girl gazes up at the amorous doves, and in so doing looks toward a harmonious union. Aside from its implication of Helen's idealism, we see in this painting a clear manifestation of the Burkean concept of the beautiful; the painting invites pleasure for its portrayal of romance and harmony.

When we view this painting's images in biblical terms, we see the sweetness of this painting corroborated. Turtledoves are a notable symbol in Western tradition because they mate for life and are thus seen as symbols of love and fidelity. This iconography is also reflected in the Bible's use of the dove as a symbol of peace and holiness. Psalms 74:19 explicitly links this icon to peace in a prayer: "O deliver not the soul of thy turtledove unto the multitude of the wicked: forget not the congregation of thy poor for ever." The dove is also an important symbol in Christ's ministry. After Christ is baptized St. John describes the Holy Spirit as being like a dove: "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him," and Matthew makes a similar comparison (St. John 1: 32; Matthew 3:16). It is perhaps this connotation that influenced Russell Poole when he argued that the idealism in the painting sharply contrasts Huntingdon's violent imposition on the scene.¹⁵ Huntingdon certainly proves an intrusive and

¹³ Sellars, "Anne Brontë," 142-43.

¹⁴ Edward Chitham, *A Life of Anne Brontë* (Oxford and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 79.

¹⁵ Russell Poole, "Cultural Reformation and Cultural Reproduction in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 33, no. 4 (Fall 1993): 861.

violent presence in this scene; however, I argue that when we inquire into the turtledoves icon more deeply, we can see how the painting presents a more ambivalent vision of ideal love—one that mirrors Helen's situation as much as it contrasts it.

The Bible not only utilizes turtledoves as a symbol of peace and fidelity, but it also recounts the Jewish custom that employed turtledoves as makeshift sacrifices. A pair of turtledoves could be used in lieu of a pure white lamb under the Mosaic sacrificial system, but only when the worshipping family was poor (Genesis 8:8-12). These turtledoves were not laid upon the altar the same way a sacrificial lamb would have been; instead, their blood was sprinkled around the altar. From this perspective, then, we can see that when the female subject in the painting idealizing these turtledoves, she is also idealizing a makeshift fulfillment of a religious ordinance. Just as turtledoves are an imperfect substitute for the sacrificial lamb, so is her union with Huntingdon a makeshift substitute for an ideal marriage. This ambivalent nature of the turtledove symbol is supported in Helen's description of their "sad-coloured plumage" and her recognition that they "afforded a contrast of another nature" to the scene. Perhaps this sadness and contrast indicate that there is something forced and contrived about these love birds. By probing deeper into the biblical hermeneutic, we can see that though these turtledoves are conventionally a symbol of peace and holiness, that they may also serve an ironical purpose here. Helen's idealized painting, then, also reflects the implicit knowledge that her relationship with Huntingdon is destined for trouble.

When we look to Helen's later art, and particularly her sketch of the seascape, we can see a progression away from her ambivalent depiction of ideal romance. Gilbert Markham narrates this scene of the novel, and though he does not provide any description of Helen's sketch, he does provide his own perspective of the scene she is sketching. This scene portrays Burke's

concept of the sublime because of the grandeur and danger of the ocean, but this scene also represents Judeo-Christian sublimity because the sea was so often involved in miracles. In the Old Testament, Moses famously parts the Red Sea so that the Israelites can escape slavery from the Egyptians (Exodus 14:13-31). In the New Testament, Christ performs two miracles on the sea. The first occurs when he meets several of his future disciples at the Sea of Tiberius where they are fishing with little success, and he then miraculously fills the men's nets with fish (St. John 21). Later, Christ walks on the surface of the Sea of Galilee to his disciples on a boat and asks Peter to walk to him, and though Peter's faith fails him temporarily, Christ saves him from sinking into the sea and they walk together (Matthew 14). All of these biblical stories are ones that Anne would have been familiar with because of her extensive study of both the Old and New Testament as is notated in her surviving Bible.¹⁶ In each of these instances, people are suffering from the realities of life—enslavement, poverty, and fear—yet in the most volatile of landscapes, the sea, God can create miracles to soothe these maladies. This biblical context suggests the possibility of deliverance from Helen's present challenges. Just as she daringly faces this sublime seascape—on the edge of the cliff, no less—so has she come to face the harsh realities of her world as a single parent and marginalized member of society as an apparently fallen woman. In her spiritual journey, she seems to accept the possibility of deliverance by painting the scene that has been the backdrop of so many miracles. We can see a spiritual progression in that the first painting idealizes a problematic ideal and the later sketch implies both an acceptance of reality but also a hope of deliverance from difficulty. These moments of *Wildfell Hall* suggest that art serves as an important outlet for Helen, translating her emotional and spiritual state into visual expression.

¹⁶ See Maria Frawley, "Contextualizing Anne Brontë's Bible" in *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë*, edited by Julie Nash Barbara and Ann Suess (Farnham, United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2001), 1-13.

As Wettlaufer and Séllei have noticed, however, the meaning and power of female art in the Brontës is always infected by outside surveillance, and we see this very clearly in these two moments in *Wildfell Hall*. To shed some light on this surveillance, I will utilize Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze as it is described in her "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." This essay has proved a foundational text in examining women's issues within visual culture. Though her essay is dedicated to analyzing classic cinema, Mulvey's theories have since been applied to a wide variety of media. She theorizes that the male gaze is inextricably linked with voyeuristic pleasure, and that it is ever-present in cinema. She recognizes the male gaze in three ways: first, from the male director behind the camera; second, from the male character gazing upon the objectified women within the film; and third, from the male audience that experiences pleasure in watching male characters play out their romantic conquests on the screen.¹⁷ I will utilize Mulvey's notion of the male gaze to analyze the relationship between female art and the male spectator in *Wildfell Hall* and *Jane Eyre*, where men see themselves as authorities who can validate women's art, and where they view the female artist as an object of their gaze rather than a creative subject.

The intensity and danger of Huntingdon's gaze is clear when he enters Helen's chambers and spots her painting. Helen recounts, "setting his gun against the wall, [he] threw up the sash and sprang in, and set himself before my picture" (*TWH*, 56). The irony of this scene is clear. Huntingdon has just returned from hunting birds to find Helen painting an ideal scene of love birds. He approaches her hopes and ideals, as they are rendered in this painting, with a predatory aim. In the exchange that follows, Helen learns that Huntingdon returns her affection, but their newfound infatuation is swiftly followed by his aim to penetrate her subjectivity when he tries to

¹⁷ See Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.

look at a portfolio full of her rough sketches. She begs him not to look at them, saying “those are my unfinished sketches. . . . I hate them to be seen,” but he rummages through her portfolio anyway, demanding, “Let me have its bowels then” (*TWH*, 157). She insists on his returning one particular miniature: “It is mine, and you have no *right* to take it. Give it to me directly—I’ll never forgive you if you don’t!” Huntingdon taunts her for valuing her art so much, and to spite him, she throws this miniature into the fire. Frustrated with his inability to control her, he retorts, “Humph! I’ll go and shoot now” (*TWH*, 158). From this interchange we can see how directly Helen’s art connects with her subjectivity and how deeply Huntingdon wishes to penetrate it. Russell Poole understands these instances of Huntingdon’s disrespectful gaze upon Helen’s art as “sublimated violence.”¹⁸ Certainly his intrusion into her art can be seen as a foreshadowing of the marital rape that the novel implies.

Later in the novel, we see another man intrude on Helen’s artistic space. Despite Gilbert Markham’s overall benevolence in comparison with Huntingdon, he too serves as an intrusive gazer. When he and his sister visit Helen at Wildfell Hall, Markham recognizes his intrusion as a male spectator on Helen’s workspace all too well. He tells her, “I see your heart is in your work, Mrs. Graham. . . I must beg you to go on with it; for if you suffer our presence to interrupt you, we shall be constrained to regard ourselves as unwelcome intruders” (*TWH*, 156). Helen is disturbed by their presence, especially Markham’s probing questions about her paintings as he strives to uncover her past. The most striking moment of his intrusive gaze comes later at the seashore. Markham sneaks up on Helen as she is sketching: “She did not hear me coming: the falling of my shadow across her paper gave her an electric start.” He tells her he wants to watch the sea below, but his real intent is to watch Helen sketch: “I could not help stealing a glance,

¹⁸ Poole, “Cultural Reformation and Cultural Reproduction,” 861.

now and then, from the splendid view at our feet to the elegant white hand that held the pencil, and the graceful neck and glossy raven curls that drooped over the paper.” As he watches her in adoration, it is clear that he sees her as a spectacle for his gaze. He seems more interested in observing her figure than in observing her perspective. Helen gently asks him to leave her alone several times, but he won’t. In the process, he seems to wear her down a bit to the point that she asks for his validation of her sketch: “she somewhat appeased me by consulting my taste and judgment about some doubtful matter in her drawing” (*TWH*, 64-65). Helen exhibits a sense of daring in painting the sublime seascape, yet her efforts are still shadowed—in the literal sense, here—by Markham, the male spectator who sees her as an art object herself. Under his gaze, she seems to find it necessary to secure his approval of her work.



Figure 3.2. Pencil on paper by Anne Brontë, “Woman gazing at a sunrise over a seascape.” 182 x 226 mm. 13 November 1839. Reprinted with the kind permission of the Brontë Parsonage Museum.

Perhaps it is not coincidental that, like Helen's first painting of the maiden in the wood, this second moment of Helen's artistic expression bears similarity to yet another art work of Anne Brontë's. Her pencil sketch, "Woman gazing at a sunrise over a seascape" (Figure 3.2) features a scene quite similar to Helen's visit of the seashore. Christine Alexander and Jane Sellars point out that "the image of the girl is reminiscent of the melancholy figures often found in nineteenth-century [sic] northern European romantic landscapes," and we have reason to believe that this sketch was from Anne's imagination, perhaps an adaptation of an existing print.¹⁹ We can see the similarity between Helen and Anne in that both ventured to depict a sublime scene, but we can also see the sketch as an artistic rendering of empowered female subjectivity. Writing of this sketch, Losano points out that, "the woman's eyes and her visual activity are foregrounded by her gesture with her right hand: the viewer is forced to realize that figure is *looking*, that she has positioned herself for a view of the sea and does not seem at all concerned with what is behind her (i.e., the viewer)."²⁰ As is reflected in Losano's observation, both Helen as a character and *Wildfell Hall* as a whole portray a woman looking out as a subject. In her misogynistic milieu, Helen manages to maintain the vision of a subject even though she suffers from marginalization and spousal abuse. When we consider the biblical significance of the sea, we again find clear irony in Markham's surveillance over Helen's work. He wishes to deliver her from hardship by becoming her male protector, and this is an ambition that the novel presents as noble but problematic; Helen shuns Markham's gaze in this moment just as she shuns his love for most of the novel. It is divine deliverance that she seeks, rather than Markham's

¹⁹ Alexander and Sellars, *The Art of the Brontës*, 406.

²⁰ Antonia Losano, "The Professionalization of the Female Artist in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 58, no. 1 (2003): 40.

deliverance from her problems. She waits for what she perceives is God's timing and allows every chance for her estranged husband to reform, even to his deathbed. It is only through his death, which Helen understands to be divine intervention that ends her marriage, that she finally allows Markham into her life. Thus, despite Markham's protective and curious gaze over Helen as she sketches, she looks to the sea—the backdrop of so many miracles—and in doing so, symbolically looks to divine deliverance from her difficulties.

Religious Concerns and Art in *Jane Eyre*

If scholars are just beginning to give due attention to *Wildfell Hall*'s treatment of the female artist, their attention to *Jane Eyre* rests on the opposite end of the spectrum. For decades scores of critics have examined Jane's role as an artist and the purpose of her art. Some critics have gone to work tracing Brontë's artistic influences and the specifics of her art education within Jane's artistic tendencies.²¹ Critics have also linked art to Jane's subjectivity. Peter J. Bellis and Kathleen Miller both suggest that Jane begins her narrative as an absorber of outside stimuli and concludes it as a strong subject who sees for her blind husband. For them, her art illustrates her progression as an artist, but more importantly, her progression as a subject.²² When it comes to the iconography of Jane's art, several critics have read into the importance of the three watercolors she shows Rochester. Barbara Gates recognizes the symbolism of Jane's art

²¹ See, for example, Jane Kromm, "Visual Culture and Scopic Custom in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 26, no. 2: 369-394.

²² See Peter J. Bellis, "In the Window Seat: Vision and Power in *Jane Eyre*" *ELH* 54, no. 3: 648. Also See Kathleen A. Miller's "'Well, that is beautiful, Miss Jane,'" *Jane Eyre* and the Creation of the Female Artist," *Brontë Studies* 35, no. 3 (November 2010): 248-66.

and describes it as “thoroughly naïve and natural surrealism, a spontaneous dream-like art.”²³ She and Thomas Langford see these three watercolors as supernatural because they foretell Jane’s upcoming heartaches.²⁴ Conversely, M.B. McLaughlin argues that if Brontë meant these paintings to foreshadow Jane’s fate, then this was a “clumsy and disturbing” device.²⁵ Instead, McLaughlin reads the paintings as reflecting Jane’s childhood trauma.

Despite the exhaustive criticism on this topic, critics have not examined Jane’s art for its biblical hermeneutics, a surprising lapse in the criticism considering the novel’s clear preoccupation with biblical references. I wish to contribute to existing scholarship by highlighting the biblical iconography within Jane’s three watercolors. Though we can certainly understand these paintings as instances of *mise en abyme* that parallel plot events, I argue that it is less important whether the watercolors represent the wounds of Jane’s past or the sorrows of her future because both the past and future events are rooted in her same ongoing concerns. Christine Alexander argues as much when she states that, “Her ‘pictured representation’ must contain ‘Truth’ — an imaginative truth that may not always reproduce the physical world, as in the case of Jane’s surreal pictures, which capture a psychological reality.”²⁶ I would argue, however, that these paintings foremost reflect Jane’s religious psychology, rather than more general psychological impressions about her past or future life. Jane describes her first painting:

²³ Barbara T. Gates, “‘Visionary Woe’ and Its Revisions: Another Look at Jane Eyre’s Pictures,” *Ariel* 7 (October 1976): 37.

²⁴ Thomas Langford, “The Three Pictures in *Jane Eyre*,” *The Victorian Newsletter* 31 (Spring 1967): 97-98.

²⁵ M.B. McLaughlin, “Past of Future Mindscapes: Pictures in *Jane Eyre*” *The Victorian Newsletter* 41 (Spring 1972): 23.

²⁶ Christine Alexander, “‘Educating “The Artist’s Eye’: Charlotte Brontë and the Pictorial Image,” in Hagan and Wells, *The Brontës in the World of the Arts*, 29.

The first represented clouds low and livid, rolling over a swollen sea: all the distance was in eclipse. . . . One gleam of light lifted into relief a half-submerged mast, on which sat a cormorant, dark and large, with wings flecked with foam; its beak held a gold bracelet set with gems. . . . Sinking below the bird and mast, a drowned corpse glanced through the green water; a fair arm was the only limb clearly visible, whence the bracelet had been washed or torn. (*JE*, 153)

In her analysis of this passage, Barbara Gates links Jane's painting to her ensuing love affair with Rochester and his eventual betrayal. In her estimation, the dark bird is strongly linked to Rochester, who is repeatedly referred to as an eagle or raven. The corpse in the water is Jane, and the jewelry is similar to the necklace that Rochester offers her as a wedding gift.²⁷ McLaughlin, in contrast, argues that this painting signifies the death of Mr. Reed and the trauma Jane experiences in the red room when she hears the rushing of wings.²⁸ Though I see Gates's analysis as much more plausible, her analysis is perhaps too exacting.

When we examine this first watercolor for its biblical hermeneutics, we can see several notable icons: the shipwreck scene, the cormorant, and the bracelet. Shipwreck or the threat of it occurs several times in the Bible, and always as a punishment for disobedience. The most famous example appears in the Book of Jonah when God asks Jonah to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh, but he sails to Tarshish instead (Jonah 1).²⁹ During his journey, God sends a tempest, and fearing that God will cause the ship to sink, Jonah jumps overboard and is

²⁷ Gates, "'Visionary Woe' and Its Revisions," 40.

²⁸ McLaughlin, "Past of Future Mindscapes," 22.

²⁹ The story of Jonah also appears in the Qur'an with some notable differences, which makes this story a world-archetype rather than a Judeo-Christian story.

swallowed by a whale, which spits him out 3 days later on dry ground. Here the tempest is a mark of God's wrath against those who disobey him. Shipwreck also occurs in Acts 27 when a centurion takes St. Paul to Rome as a political prisoner. The crew stops several places from Caesarea to Crete because of bad weather. St. Paul receives inspiration that the ship should not travel from Crete to the nearby port town of Fair Havens, lest they become shipwrecked, but the crew continues onward anyway because the weather is good at the time, and the company indeed suffers shipwreck (Acts 27:10-11). They lose all of their cargo and their ship, but all 267 souls aboard survive because of St. Paul's holiness. In this instance, the shipwreck also occurs as a means of punishment against those who have disobeyed God in holding St. Paul captive and ignoring his inspiration.

The cormorant and the stolen bracelet can both corroborate a fear of God's punishment. The image of a bird upon a submerged vessel bears a strong similarity to the birds that Noah sends out to survey the earth for dry land after the great flood. First he sends a raven to survey the land, and he later sends a dove, who brings back an olive branch to signify that the flood is over (Genesis 8:8-11). Jane's painting draws upon a similar scenario, but rather than a dove we have a cormorant, a bird that has negative connotations in the Bible and is listed as forbidden for human consumption under the Mosaic Law (Lev 11:17). Bettina Knapp recognizes another religious inflection of this image, Milton's use of the cormorant as an incarnation of Satan when he tells Adam and Eve that they must leave the garden of Eden.³⁰ Brontë clearly draws on the Miltonic tradition in using the cormorant as the messenger of punishment. Tellingly, the cormorant is carrying a jeweled bracelet in its mouth rather than an olive leaf. The icon of the bracelet in the Bible is sometimes presented as a symbol of romantic union, but its most striking

³⁰ Bettina L. Knapp, *The Brontës: Branwell, Anne, Emily, Charlotte*. (New York: Continuum, 1992), 292.

reference occurs in Isaiah when the prophet describes the “daughters of Zion,” who are symbolic of God’s church on the earth. He describes the fallen worldliness of these once chosen daughters, and defines their worldliness through their ornamental apparel. The warning is clear: God will punish Zion, and Isaiah signifies this by suggesting it through taking away this jewelry. In Isaiah we read: “In that day the Lord will take away the bravery of their tinkling ornaments about their feet, and their cauls, and their round tires like the moon, the chains, and the bracelets” (Isaiah 3:18-19). According to this reference, the removal of an ornamental object like a bracelet signifies chastisement for worldliness. Seeing that the cormorant is carrying a bracelet from off the corpse here, we can see the biblical dynamic of punishment for wrongdoing. The unclean fowl collects the “tinkling ornament” from the female corpse who has seemingly been shipwrecked in punishment for disobedience. When we combine the hermeneutics in this way, we can see that Jane’s first painting reflects a fear of God’s vengeance against disobedience. This fear of God’s vengeance is one that Jane is definitely immersed in. Early in the novel, Brocklehurst tries to instill a fear of God in her, a trend that continues throughout her Lowood education. As Jane matures into an adult, she still fears that her passion and imagination make her worldly. These traits are reflected in the plot events Gates and McLaughlin have linked to the painting, both Jane’s childhood trauma in the red room when she is punished for passionately standing up for herself against her bully cousin and also her romantic temptations to be with Rochester.

Jane’s second painting describes an altogether different scene and implies a wholly different religious theme. This watercolor features a grassy hill in the foreground, and a woman’s figure touched with moonlight:

Beyond and above spread an expanse of sky, dark blue as at twilight: rising into the sky was a woman's shape to the bust. . . . The dim forehead was crowned with a star; the lineaments below were seen as through the suffusion of vapour; the eyes shone dark and wild; the hair streamed shadowy, like a beamless cloud torn by storm or by electric travail. On the neck lay a pale reflection like moonlight; the same faint lustre touched the train of thin clouds from which rose and bowed this vision of the Evening Star. (*JE*, 153)

Here we see less precise iconography than in the first painting, but critics have still found much to say about this watercolor. Barbara Gates suggests that it parallels Jane's escape from Thornfield because she is captivated by the horizon and the world beyond during this escape, and she ventures out of her physical and emotional comfort zone when she flees. Gates further sees the light imagery as comparable to the light of the Moor House at the end of Jane's journey.³¹ In contrast, McLaughlin argues that the painting features Miss Temple, arguing that she is the source of goodness and light that leads Jane through her childhood.³² Other critics have read the painting as having broader thematic significance. Both Knapp and Conover see this as an indication of Jane's split personality. Conover relates, "the duality found in this composition signifies the indecisiveness Jane feels when she is enticed to sin and become Rochester's mistress rather than his legal wife."³³ Once again, I would submit that the biblical icons in these paintings offer a more insightful way to read this passage.

³¹ Gates, "'Visionary Woe' and Its Revisions," 41.

³² McLaughlin, "Past of Future Mindscapes," 23.

³³ Robin St. John Conover "Jane Eyre's Triptych and Milton's *Paradise Lost*: An Artistic Vision of Revisionist Myth-Making," 22, no. 2 (Winter 1996): 181. Also see Bettina Knapp, *The Brontës*, 152-3.

Jane's first painting describes a jeweled bracelet being torn away from a corpse, but in the second painting the woman's "dim forehead was crowned with a star" and "On the neck lay a pale reflection like moonlight; the same faint lustre touched the train of thin clouds from which rose and bowed this vision of the Evening Star." While the first woman is stripped of her worldly jewelry, this woman's figure is endowed with light. Light accents her form similar to how jewelry would, and the woman is illuminated with the same luster of light as the Evening Star. We can read the theme here as consistent to Brontë's idea of women's spirituality strengthened by nature, as I have described in Chapter 2. Celestial light reflects on this woman's figure and crowns her, and the Evening Star is featured here as well, which is in fact the rise of the planet Venus in the sky. Because it is this light that illuminates the female figure in this painting, we can understand it as a visual manifestation of Jane's passionate and Romantic sensibilities. In some ways, then, the second painting can be read as a counter to the first painting. The icon of the evening star should be perceived in biblical terms as well, for the image of the stars often evokes God's capacity to be aware of all of his children (Daniel 12:3; Numbers 24:17; Jude 1:13). One psalm in particular articulates the power of this icon: "He telleth the number of the stars; he calleth them all by their names" (Psalms 147:4). Surely the starlight reflecting on this female figure can be understood as a visual rendering of God's cognizance of her. So again the biblical hermeneutics of this painting point to another aspect of Jane's spirituality, her notion that despite her fear of punishment for her shortcomings, that she experiences God as a loving and nurturing being. The iconography of the stolen bracelet, as well as its insinuation of Godly punishment, is here replaced with patterns of light that represent heavenly comfort.

Jane describes her third watercolor, a painting that perhaps proves the most surrealistic of the three, and consequently the most difficult for critics to pin down:

The third showed the pinnacle of an iceberg piercing a polar winter sky: a muster of northern lights reared their dim lances, close serried, along the horizon. Throwing these into distance, rose, in the foreground, a head,—a colossal head, inclined towards the iceberg, and resting against it. Two thin hands, joined under the forehead, and supporting it, drew up before the lower features a sable veil, a brow quite bloodless, white as bone, and an eye hollow and fixed, blank of meaning but for the glassiness of despair, alone were visible. Above the temples, amidst wreathed turban folds of black drapery, vague in its character and consistency as cloud, gleamed a ring of white flame, gemmed with sparkles of a more lurid tinge. This pale crescent was “the likeness of a kingly crown;” what it diademed was “the shape which shape had none.” (*JE*, 153-54)

Gates says of this painting that “it is quite possibly St. John's cold, bloodless, and dogmatic version of Christianity that Jane prefigures in her polar landscape.”³⁴ Indeed, St. John is linked to whiteness and coldness throughout *Jane Eyre*, and the white imagery we see surrounding him is rather similar to this iceberg standing erect on the horizon. Catherine Lanone reads this imagery as symbolic of his colonial ideal of conquest. She claims that “ice metaphors . . . connote the grid of national, masculine domination.”³⁵ In her psychoanalytic reading, Conover argues that the iceberg can only be understood as relating to St. John and the colossal head, with the turban suggesting a link to Rochester's masquerading as a gypsy. For her, this painting prefigures Jane's

³⁴ Gates, “‘Visionary Woe’,” 42.

³⁵ Catherine Lanone, “Arctic Spectacles in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*,” *Brontë Studies* 34, no. 2 (July 2009): 121.

decision to be with either Rochester or Rivers.³⁶ Even McLaughlin admits that this painting seems prophetic of St. John, but he insists that it is really indicative of her grief for losing her classmate Helen Burns, though he does not really explain this conjecture.³⁷

As is evident in the more varied critical responses, this painting is a bit of an enigma. When we examine its biblical hermeneutics, we can perceive from the extreme contrast of white and black, the polarized notion of good and evil that is widespread in Judeo-Christian thought. However, in getting caught up in finding plot similarities in the painting, critics seem to miss the strongest image—that of this metaphysical crown that Brontë borrows from Milton. In *Paradise Lost*, Death is portrayed as a shadowy and nuanced figure. Just as Milton commits to one metaphor to describe death, he shifts to another one to avoid commitment to a concrete idea, and the colossal head is one of these images he employs. The central image of this painting is Milton's crown of death. It lurks over the polarized images of severe arctic cold and orientalized blackness, suggesting that over all human concepts of evil and goodness lurks impending death and an unknown spiritual destiny beyond. If the first two paintings present God's relationship to his children, the final painting seems to suggest the sublime opaqueness of God's ways and the obscurity of human knowledge of what lies beyond. Early in the novel, we see that Jane is preoccupied with death and links it to her spiritual identity, and this dynamic continues throughout the novel. It is an issue that she struggles with after Helen's death, after Mrs. Reed's death, and at the end of the novel when she predicts St. John's death. It should come as no surprise, then, that Jane would paint a watercolor reflecting this concern as well. The biblical

³⁶ Conover, "Jane Eyre's Triptych and Milton's *Paradise Lost*," 183.

³⁷ McLaughlin, "Past of Future Mindscapes," 23.

hermeneutics in these watercolors convey her individualized spirituality that evades language in some moments but proliferates in visual terms.

Critics have not only concerned themselves with the deeper meaning of the icons in Jane's paintings but also with Rochester's viewing of them. Kromm sees Rochester's disbelief that Jane painted these art works as an example of what she terms Victorian scopic custom, men's condescending approach to female art "which looks for signs of tutelage and source, and thereby assumes an omniscient stance about the artistic process."³⁸ For her, Rochester is the enforcer of male-centered aesthetics in the novel. In line with Kromm's reading, Bellis sees Rochester's blindness at the end of the novel as cosmic justice for the way that his eagle-like vision prevails over Jane earlier. For Bellis, Jane and Rochester's happy union is "based on the fact of his blindness."³⁹ Interestingly, critics who have concerned themselves with setting up parallels between Jane's paintings and the overall plot are also concerned with whether Rochester understands the way her paintings prefigure the novel's events. On one end of the spectrum, we have McLaughlin, who scoffs at the possibility of Rochester deciphering the meaning of these paintings, and who seems to measure Jane's rationality based on how the authoritative man can understand her work. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Conover seems entirely sure that Rochester sees the significance of these paintings: "He sees the future through Jane's creative works, which corresponds with his later playing the role of gypsy fortune teller, demonstrating his ability to predict the fates of all those single women occupying his drawing room."⁴⁰ Regardless of their belief as to whether or not Rochester understands the paintings,

³⁸ Kromm, "Visual Culture and Scopic Custom," 380.

³⁹ Bellis, "In the Window Seat: Vision and Power in *Jane Eyre*," 647-48.

⁴⁰ Conover, "Jane Eyre's Triptych and Milton's *Paradise Lost*," 184.



Figure 3.3. Illustration by Edward A. Wilson for Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Random House, 1944). Edward Wilson (1886-1970) was born in Glasgow, Scotland, but was raised in Chicago. He received training at the Chicago Art Institute. He became well-sought after in the mid-1920s, and again rose to prominence in the mid- 1940s as part of a movement to reawaken interest in illustrations following World War II. He is particularly well known for his woodcuts, though he did work in lithography as well.

these comments clearly model a fixation with the male gaze as the measuring-stick of Jane's artistic merit. We can see this same catering to the male gaze in Edward A. Wilson's 1944 illustration of this moment of the novel (Figure 3.3). The illustration contains a harmonious symmetry of the two future lovers with two bright flames nearby. Central to this harmony is Rochester's privilege as the center of visual culture and the center of the illustration, while Jane the artist is halfway out of the frame. Thus we can see inequality in terms of spectatorship presented in this illustration. Rochester's gaze over the paintings, rather than suggesting any

reaction to the paintings being prophetic of his future with Jane, attests to his disconnection with the moral themes of these paintings. He calls the art “peculiar” and “elfish” and asks Jane if she was happy when she painted them, and through his comments we can see that the watercolors disrupt his notion that women’s art should be ornamental and disinterested.

Despite the exhaustive criticism on *Jane Eyre*, the topic of Jane as a spectator of art has been rather neglected. Many critics are quick to reference Jane’s perusal of a picture book *Bewick’s Birds* early in the novel as an indicator of her visual nature, even in childhood, but there is one striking moment of Jane surveying art that has escaped attention. This moment occurs when Rochester solicits her help in the middle of the night after Bertha injures her brother Richard Mason. The details of the attack are unknown to Jane, for Bertha is still concealed in Thornfield’s attic, but she nurses Mason while Rochester disappears for a few hours. As she waits and struggles to keep Mason conscious, she observes an old tapestry of the last supper. She describes how the tapestry ripples in her sight:

According as the shifting obscurity and flickering gleam hovered here or glanced there, it was now the bearded physician, Luke, that bent his brow; now St. John’s long hair that waved; and anon the devilish face of Judas, that grew out of the panel, and seemed gathering life and threatening a revelation of the arch-traitor—of Satan himself—in his subordinate’s form. (*JE*, 264)

This tapestry certainly adheres to the grim atmospherics of the moment, but like Jane’s watercolors, it strongly exhibits a biblical theme that resonates with her. The flickering candlelight and movement of the tapestry suggest an unstable and enlivened visual, and this lends the tapestry a supernaturalism outside of the normal realm of art. Jane sees Luke the

physician with his bent brow, and her mention of his occupation seems to imply that Jane understands how she is emulating him in this moment as she tends to Mason. She also sees St. John and mentions only the physical attribute of his hair, prefiguring description she will later render about her cousin St. John, who is a saint-like figure and is particularly noted for his appearance and hair. Jane also sees Judas, the betrayer. His image is less static and more alive. The insidious threat of betrayal in the tapestry is analogous to the way Rochester is betraying Jane in that very moment. Though his betrayal is shrouded in the secrets of this Gothic mansion, she seems to reflexively intuit these themes through this image. The last supper is also momentous for the way it began to test the level of the apostles' loyalty to Christ with the mounting pressure around them. When Rochester wakes Jane to help him care for Richard Mason, he tests her in a similar way. Though art spectatorship is not emphasized in *Jane Eyre*, here we see a moment of reflective spectatorship that suggests that Jane's visual imagination registers the ominous nature of this tapestry and perceives it as a changing and living image—perhaps because the tension and impending betrayal of the tapestry are paralleled in her own experience. Thus it seems that the novel employs both the art that Jane creates and the art that she views as visual manifestations of her spiritual concerns.

The Pictorial Woman Question and Spectatorship in *Villette*

Female spectatorship of art bears a strong presence in Charlotte's final novel *Villette*, a novel that critics have widely regarded for its visual themes. With an attitude that I perceive as tongue-in-cheek, Lucy Snowe admits, "an ignorant, blind, fond instinct inclined me to art" (*Vil*, 185). Rather than regarding art with blindness, however, Lucy derives clear meaning from it, and she subverts the dominant ideology about female spectatorship in the process. The Victorian

visual culture of female spectatorship was somewhat nuanced. On the one hand, the art world regarded women as sound critics, and, as Losano relates, there was “a prevailing cultural belief in woman’s greater powers of perception, [and] their potent aesthetic sensibility.” Even so, there was also a widely-held concern that women were susceptible to visual corruption and that viewing art could be one means of this. Losano explains: “The positioning of the female spectator is highly regulated in the period, as viewing was seen as conferring a certain power on a spectator.”⁴¹ Losano sees *Villette* as an important commentary on female spectatorship because there is one instance in the novel when Lucy visits an art gallery with Dr. John and the men around her seek to control her exposure to the art. Lucy analyzes the art around her in a way consistent with her overall worldview, for, as Petermann relates, Lucy’s is the notion that “surfaces should give insight into the depths they conceal, the physical should reflect the spiritual.”⁴² This would be one means of explaining Lucy’s clear disgust with the paintings of women that she sees, for rather than reflecting reality, they reflect patriarchal myths about women.

⁴¹ Losano, “Reading Women/ Reading Pictures,” 40.

⁴² Emily Petermann, “‘These are not a whit like nature’: Lucy Snowe’s Art Criticism in *Villette*,” *Brontë Studies* 36, no. 3 (September 2011): 283.



Figure 3.4. A lithograph *The Sultan's Favourite Songstress* (1878) derived from Édouard De Bièfve's painting *The Almeh* (1842). Printed in Georg Ebers. *Egypt: Descriptive, Historical, and Picturesque*, 2 vols. (New York: Cassell & Company, 1878), 1: 285. Édouard De Bièfve (1808-1882) was a leading Romantic painter in Belgium. He was known for painting historical subjects on exceptionally large canvases. His most famous work is his orientalist painting *The Almeh* because of the uproar it caused when it was exhibited in the Brussels Salon of 1842.

The first image that Lucy contemplates is a large painting of Cleopatra. Gustave Charlier notes that Brontë herself observed a painting by De Bièfve titled *The Almeh* (see Figure 3.4), in her time in Brussels. He remarks that it does not exactly resemble the painting she describes in *Villette*, though I would argue that it bears some striking similarities in that we have an exotic woman in a reclining position with flowers and draperies within the painting. While in Brussels, Brontë also saw a set of paintings that very much resemble the religious "La vie d'une femme" portraits Lucy describes.⁴³ It must have been a memorable event for her, for the likenesses of

⁴³ Gustave Charlier, "Brussels life in *Villette*," *The Bronte Society Transactions* 5 (1955): 386-90.

these paintings are well documented in *Villette*. In Lucy's outing with Dr. John, she is left alone for a time and comes upon the large portrait of Cleopatra, which she is both drawn to and repelled by. Lucy recounts that

It represented a woman, considerably larger, I thought, than the life. I calculated that this lady, put into a scale of magnitude, suitable for the reception of a commodity of bulk, would infallibly turn from fourteen to sixteen stone. She was, indeed, extremely well fed: very much butcher's meat—to say nothing of bread, vegetables, and liquids—must she have consumed to attain that breadth and height, that wealth of muscle, that affluence of flesh. She lay half-reclined on a couch . . . [S]he ought to have been standing, or at least sitting bolt upright. She, had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa. (*Vil*, 186)

This description connects thematically to the historical Cleopatra figure in that she is alluring and seductive in her own way;⁴⁴ however, it does not contain any real iconography associated with Cleopatra.⁴⁵ Jill Matus suggests that this image reflects Lucy's opinion of the most manipulative woman she knows—Ginevra Fanshawe. By criticizing Cleopatra and the flirtatious Ginevra, Lucy is criticizing the social prescription for women to behave as sexual objects. Though the flaxen Ginevra does not resemble the Cleopatra painting, Matus argues that Ginevra is similar to

⁴⁴ In historical writings of Cassius Dio, he reported that Cleopatra, “being brilliant to look upon and to listen to, with the power to subjugate everyone, even a love-sated man already past his prime, she thought that it would be in keeping with her role to meet Caesar, and she reposed in her beauty all her claims to the throne”. See Cassius Dio, *Roman History: The Reign of Augustus* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1987), 30.

⁴⁵ Jill L. Matus, *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity*, (London: Manchester University Press, 1995), 134.

the Cleopatra in that she is “material, self-indulgent, voluptuous, and driven by appetite.”⁴⁶ In one exchange, after Ginevra mocks Lucy for her lack of connections and admirers, Lucy agrees with those truths but then retorts, “sixpence I would not give to purchase you, body and soul!” (*Vil*, 133). She holds this opinion because Ginevra is a careless coquette. Lucy is apparently preoccupied with the Cleopatra’s largeness and laziness—two traits that she cannot afford to have. Unlike the alluring bourgeois Ginevra, who may court and lounge as she wishes, Lucy is destined for a life of educational service. She lacks the ease of attracting male attention and, by extension, the prospect of a comfortable domestic existence.

Lucy is also struck by Cleopatra’s immodesty and indecency. She critiques the image: “She ought likewise to have worn decent garments; a gown covering her properly, which was not the case: out of abundance of material—seven-and-twenty yards, I should say, of drapery—she managed to make inefficient raiment” (*Sh*, 186). The portrait depicts clear excess of fabric upon the ground, but Cleopatra cannot make use of it to cover her voluptuous body. Through this criticism, as Hoeveler suggests, we see a “critique of the patriarchy’s stultifying construction of ‘woman’” as an objectified and monstrous sexual creature.⁴⁷ Matus strongly links the reclining pose and her Eastern nationality to the nineteenth-century trend “in which a great many painters expressed their fantasies of harem life and Eastern sexuality.”⁴⁸ The painting seems to boast a hyperbolic objectification of female sexuality from which Lucy recoils. We can see this similarity in de Biéfvé’s painting. Though his Cleopatra is neither rotund nor scantily clad, she

⁴⁶ Ibid., 142.

⁴⁷ Diane Long Hoeveler, “Gothic Technologies: Visuality in the Romantic Era Smoke and Mirrors: Internalizing the Magic Lantern Show in *Villette*,” *Praxis Series, Romantic Circles*, www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/gothic/hoeveler.html, para 11, accessed 11 June 2014.

⁴⁸ Matus, *Unstable Bodies*, 135.

certainly bears an alluring gaze and represents Orientalist notions of female sexuality. Lucy continues to iterate the laziness and carelessness represented in this picture in assessing the domestic articles in the background: “Pots and pans—perhaps I ought to say vases and goblets—were rolled here and there on the foreground; a perfect rubbish of flowers was mixed amongst them, and an absurd and disorderly mass of curtain upholstery smothered the couch and cumbered the floor” (*Vil*, 187). These scattered household images evoke disharmony, but we also see an allusive link to Ginevra. Earlier in the novel, de Hamal brings Ginevra flowers, and she carelessly tosses them aside. When Lucy asks her if she likes all of these men with whom she flirts, she states that she likes them “as I like sweets, and jams, and comfits, and conservatory flowers” (*Vil*, 134). Just as we see Lucy discard the flowers that de Hamal brings her, we also see flowers abandoned on the floor in the portrait.

This portrait of Cleopatra, a well-fed and promiscuous figure, is a striking foil to Lucy’s concept of herself as a forthright and genuine woman who rejects coquetry and insincere social practice. Though she seems to find artistic value in the painting with its “roses, gold cups, jewels, etc... very prettily painted, it was on the whole an enormous piece of claptrap” (*Vil*, 187). In short, she finds it vulgar, vapid, and insincere. Jill Matus sees the contrast between this image and Lucy’s nature as evidence of the impossible patriarchal prescriptions for women to be both alluring *and* demure. She states that Lucy “articulates here the difficulty of envisaging a representation of female desire and sexuality that is not tantamount to looseness and ‘giant propensities’” (*Vil*, 146-47). Lucy finds this exaggerated sexuality not only offensive but also silly and insincere.

It seems to me that the visual revelations of this scene extend much further than other critics have suggested, however. Lucy sits down and surveys the art around her for a time. She

not only views the “huge, dark-complexioned gipsy-queen,” but also, “some exquisite little pictures of still life: wild-flowers, wild-fruit, mossy woodnests, casketing eggs that looked like pearls seen through clear green sea-water.” These works of still life suggest a contrast with the social insincerity of the Cleopatra portrait to the natural beauty and admirable likeness of natural items. Like her, these still lifes are situated “modestly beneath that coarse and preposterous canvas” (*Vil*, 146-47). The spatial nature of this arrangement is notable. The large Cleopatra painting is hung high in the gallery, and its height suggests its idealistic elevation over other images for the on-looking male viewer. In contrast, the still lifes are painted on small canvasses and are understated by comparison. They are placed lower to the ground below the alluring portrait, suggesting a closeness to nature that the outrageously large canvas escapes. While the Cleopatra painting is unrealistically large, Orientalist, and objectifying, the still lifes aim to reproduce natural subjects as they truly are. In comparing these paintings, we can see the difference between the “rubbish of flowers” tossed on the ground in the Cleopatra painting and the centrality of what is wholesome and natural in these still life paintings. Lucy’s assessment of this art speaks to her rejection of objectified female sexuality. She recognizes that Ginevra’s flirtatious and flippant behavior is a result of pandering to men’s notion of her as an object. Just as Lucy compares the sexual Cleopatra with the simple still lifes, so does she recognize that Ginevra’s actions are not her natural state, but they enact her role of a sexual product for male conquest. Tellingly, some of the deepest musings on gender that we can locate in the novel reside in these pictures. Lucy does not utilize traditional methods of narrative reflection to express the important connection between this painting and its relation to her own life, but she includes Lucy’s reaction to these paintings as evidence of her awareness of the restrictions on her gender.

This moment in which Lucy observes art, however, is not only important in terms recognizing the power of the picture. It is also crucial for what it reveals about the gendered nature of spectatorship. When M. Paul finds Lucy looking at this painting, he approaches her with “a frowning, almost a shocked face.” M. Paul asks Lucy who showed her the portrait, and she replies that she found it of her own accord. He replies, “Astounding insular audacity! . . . How dare you, a young person, sit coolly down, with the self-possession of a garçon, and look at *that* picture?” (*Vil*, 188) Even in the face of his shocked response, Lucy remains defiant that there is no reason she shouldn’t look at it. In M. Paul’s sense of scandal, he directs Lucy to paintings that he deems more appropriate— four depictions of domestic female life. This scene in the gallery not only reveals Lucy’s inner turmoil in how she interprets this art, but it also reveals how she feels about the culture of observation and interpretation. Losano posits that by contemplating an image in public, a woman herself is a spectacle. She explains, “Female spectators of art are always threatened with the possibility of becoming metaphorically nude—vulnerable, looked at, absolutely available in a way that women readers never are, with their interiority upheld by their tightly circumscribed relation to the book.”⁴⁹ We can see M. Paul’s sense of scandal when he asks why Lucy would view these works alone. As Losano suggests, he finds it improper that Lucy would observe this painting without others simultaneously inspecting her, and he also seems fearful of her welfare as to what devious thoughts might befall. Losano views Lucy’s reaction to M. Paul’s censoring attitude as rebellious, in a way, but ultimately she also sees her social behavior as submissive. As she writes:

⁴⁹ Losano, “Reading Women/ Reading Pictures,” 34.

Viewing offers Lucy Snowe a chance to exercise her powers of social rebellion, but also forces her to submit, at least in part, to the public middle-class codes of female spectatorship. . . . Lucy is forced, because of the public nature of spectatorship, into direct conflict with masculine control of the visual realm in the figures of the tyrannical M. Paul and the more conventional Dr. John. Both attempt—and to a certain extent are able—to force Lucy to accept (or at least countenance) their aesthetic interpretations.⁵⁰

While I agree with Losano that Lucy does not outwardly defy M. Paul when he redirects her vision to the other paintings, her interpretation of these paintings is certainly subversive.

Lucy's defiance in the face of M. Paul's shock is especially striking, then, when we consider how she privileges her subjectivity and visual power, even when it is socially unacceptable to do so. Losano says that "Lucy, being a Brontë heroine, is naturally perverse: she wishes to treat picture-viewing like reading. . . . Lucy cares little for the publicity of viewing. She longs for the privacy of reading, and attempts to transform the visual experience into a solitary interpretive moment."⁵¹ I might qualify the remark to note that Lucy is presented as perverse in many ways, and yet I think this critical concept of her as perverse is gendered. Just as M. Paul is scandalized by Lucy's solitary contemplation of the nude Cleopatra because she cannot be observed in her spectatorship, so have critics exhibited the same sense of entitlement in reading *Villette*, for they seem annoyed that they cannot look on our narrator and study her interior as she experiences events.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 45.

⁵¹ Ibid., 44.

We gain a more profound appreciation for Lucy's transgressive sense of spectatorship when we examine her critique of the paintings M. Paul directs her to. This set is called "La vie d'une femme," or *The Life of a Woman* and is comprised of paintings titled "Jeune Fille," "Mariée," "Jeune Mère," and "Veuve."⁵² Lucy describes these paintings as being, "painted rather in a remarkable style—flat, dead, pale, and formal." She describes the specific vignettes of each picture in a succinct ekphrasis:

The first represented a "Jeune Fille," coming out of a church-door, a missal in her hand, her dress very prim, her eyes cast down, her mouth pursed up—the image of a most villainous little precocious she-hypocrite. The second, a "Mariée," with a long white veil, kneeling at a prie-dieu in her chamber, holding her hands plastered together, finger to finger, and showing the whites of her eyes in a most exasperating manner. The third, a "Jeune Mère," hanging disconsolate over a clayey and puffy baby with a face like an unwholesome full moon. The fourth, a "Veuve," being a black woman, holding by the hand a black little girl, and the twain studiously surveying an elegant French monument, set up in a corner of some Père la Chaise. (*Vil*, 188)

We see in this set of paintings precise and tidy pictures of how women's lives should be. The collection's title, "La vie d'une femme," suggests that there is one normal path for women and little variety from this prescribed role. Each painting portrays docility toward this social norm. As Gilbert and Gubar point out, "the paintings are meant to examine the ridiculous roles men assign women, and thus the chapter is arranged to maximize the reader's consciousness of how

⁵² In English: "Young Woman," "Bride," "Young Mother," and "Widow."

varying male responses to female images are uniformly produced by the male pride that seeks to control women.”⁵³ Though Gilbert and Gubar as well as Losano suggest the misogynist nature of these paintings, they do not examine the specific features of these images in terms of religious patriarchy, as I will now do.

The first portrait of the young woman suggests propriety and reticence in the image of the girl’s downcast and tight-lipped face. The painting seems to prescribe that the young girl live as a pious and subdued creature, signified by the missal she holds, which would have catalogued different Catholic masses. We can surmise that Lucy’s vicious response to the girl is because she sees in her the deceitfulness and feigned propriety of her pupils. In rejecting this Catholic schoolgirl, we also see a rejection of Catholic moral education, which seems to breed “she-hypocrite[s]” from Lucy’s perspective. The second portrait of the bride exhibits a pure and submissive woman kneeling in prayer. Lucy seems to find something put-on and unnatural about the way she prays with such ceremony. The whiteness of her wedding veil and the whites of her eyes as she prays emphasize the bride’s purity, traits which Lucy describes as “exasperating” (*Vil*, 188). The whiteness of these two images seems to suggest a continuity between the marriage vow and the woman’s inner vision, which must remain forever submissive to her husband’s wishes. Lucy decidedly rejects this image for its prescriptive representation of the domestic ideal, a life centered on marital sacrifice. Indeed, we can see a striking similarity between this bride and the romantic painting that Helen Graham paints early in *Wildfell Hall*. Both present a young woman subservient to the marriage ideal. The third portrait presents young motherhood as a most disagreeable stage of life. The mother is bent downward, unhappily tending to a baby who looks neither delightful nor wholesome. There is a sense of drudgery that

⁵³ Gilbert and Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 420.

attaches to this image. Within the succession of images in the collection, it implies that the only roles of importance she serves between her attachment to a man and his death is bearing his offspring. Counter to the idealized notion of infants as joyful and rejuvenating creatures in Romantic thought,⁵⁴ here the infant is sallow and bloated—not representing new life but perhaps a weight on the woman’s life. Finally, the fourth image of the widow suggests ongoing devotion to one’s husband, even after his death. The widow and her supposed daughter look up at a grave marker in a cemetery. This image suggests that even after the death of the patriarch, the woman should still regard him as the center of her existence. Though the marriage vow may only extend until death, the woman’s life must still be devoted to his memory thereafter, and she must be defined by his absence as a widow. Only the final picture depicts death, but Lucy refers to the set of paintings as a whole as “grim and grey as burglars, and cold and vapid as ghosts” (*Vil*, 188). In this comparison, we can see that Lucy regards the paintings as unrealistic and offensive.

In fact, Lucy finds nothing redeeming about these domestic visions: “What women to live with! insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless nonentities! As bad in their way as the indolent gipsy-giantess, the Cleopatra, in hers” (*Vil*, 189). Lucy is a bit tantalized by the obvious sexuality of the first painting, but she is clearly peeved with the piety and submission of other paintings. It is true that Lucy recognizes the patriarchal prescriptions touted in each of these paintings and this angers her, but she also resents these images because she cannot relate to these prescribed roles of wife and mother and cannot see herself arriving at these stages of life. It seems that she resents especially the young, and seemingly naïve, bride. Lucy recognizes that she is not like these women; she is of a different caste. While others may fall effortlessly into

⁵⁴ For more information, see Hugh Cunningham’s *The Invention of Childhood*, (London: BBC Books, 2006).

domestic roles, Lucy seems destined for a life of work outside the home. In many senses, she is a creature of clever intellect and keen observation and does not regard herself as a companion or nurturer in her solitary existence.

When we observe the spatial orientation of the subjects in these paintings, we can see the visual manifestation of just how different Lucy is from the norm. In the young woman and the young mother, we see their faces downturned in submission, either to the societal role as a pious young girl or the maternal role as a young mother. Lucy rejects the patriarchal prescription of women as docile, and purely maternal, creatures. In the second and fourth images, women's roles as wives are at the forefront. The bride looks up from her *prie-dieu*, looking to deity for guidance, and perhaps for the goodness to submit to her husband as she begins her marriage. In the painting of the widow, both the widow and younger girl look up to the monument of the husband and father's life, still turning to his authority after his death. With the directional emphasis of these pictures, we see that the young woman and young mother are diminutive, partly because of their age and lack of experience. They are presented as subservient to God and patriarchy and seem to take on passive aggression and drudgery. In the portraits in which the subjects look up, we can see emphasis of the woman's smallness in the context of patriarchal hierarchy. She is small in comparison to the marriage institution, and she is small in comparison to the husband's dominion over her life, even when he ceases to walk the earth. In none of these pictures do we see a woman looking straight forward. Lucy finds these women so "bloodless" and "brainless" because they cannot see for themselves. They are not real women to her but are illustrations of patriarchal standards.

It is my suggestion that the directional quality of these pictures hints at just how different Lucy is from the women around her and the myth of woman as is prescribed by society. Lucy's

gaze is forward facing, never cowering to authority and never seeking approval from a hierarchical entity. She knows that she is not an object of adoration who can afford to scurrilously toy with men's affection nor is she a domestic creature who can devote her life to being a cog in the domestic patriarchal system, robbed of her own vision. Religious as she may be, she privileges her subjectivity and her observation—in all its complexity and paradox—above all else. We can see Lucy's careful rejection of misogynistic extremes in female behavior in her careful contemplation of these images. She rejects both the sexually promiscuous caricature of Cleopatra, and the a "bloodless, brainless" domestic creatures of "*La vie d'une femme*." Rather than verbally expounding on the problematic myth of woman as either a dangerous seductress or angelic domestic as so many later women writers in the Victorian era will do, here Brontë comments on this difficult Woman Question in pictures. Lucy stands as an active visual agent, for she does not passively absorb the visual arguments that are fed to her, but instead she analyzes and rejects the notions they further of how women should behave.

CHAPTER 4: SUPERNATURAL VISION AND RELIGIOUS POWER IN CHARLOTTE AND EMILY BRONTË

The Brontës, most particularly Charlotte and Emily, are well known for the supernatural visions in their novels. Counted among these are the dreams and ghostly apparitions seen, reported, and influenced by female protagonists in Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* as well as Emily's *Wuthering Heights*. There is a long history of critics reading these visual aspects of the novels as Gothic tropes.¹ While these supernatural visions certainly do resonate within the Gothic tradition, here I aim to consider these dreams and apparitions in a religious light as well. In this chapter I hope to illustrate how the supernatural images of women's consciousness exact a religious power over men. Women influence the men around them through their visual experiences, and this influence seems to occur at times without these men even realizing it. Here I will explore how supernatural visual experience serves to prophesy future events, indoctrinate others with particular theological views, and argue for reform in religious institutions. In earlier chapters, I focus on how exterior elements inspire women's spirituality, but here I focus on how women utilize the images of their interior consciousness as a form of powerful persuasion to share their ideological views with others. When we consider the notion of a Victorian writer endowing female characters with ecclesiastical powers like prophecy, indoctrination, and reform, the notion may seem far-fetched because of women's very limited authority within Christianity. Olive Anderson explains Victorian views on women as religious leaders:

¹ See Robert B. Heilman, "Charlotte Brontë's New Gothic." *From Jane Austen to Joseph Conrad*, ed. Robert C. Rathburn and Martin Steinmann, Jr. (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1958): 118-32; Alison Milbank, *Daughters of the House: Modes of the Gothic in Victorian Fiction*. St. Martin's Press, 1992; and Kathleen Ann Miller, "Haunted Heroines: The Gothic Imagination and the Female Bildungsromane of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and LM Montgomery." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 34.2 (2010): 125-147. Many other sources categorize Charlotte and Emily as gothic writers as well.

By about 1862 large numbers of women were working on a voluntary and part-time basis with both sexes in Sunday schools and Bible classes, and had formed their own ladies' prayer meetings, missionary societies, maternal associations, temperance committees and sewing circles attached to their churches and chapels. Within the next few years full-time, paid and finally trained women religious workers appeared in Great Britain, first as Bible women and Scripture readers, then as parish visitors, 'mission ladies', and deaconesses. All these women, however, worked exclusively among the poor or among other women and children; none of them assumed the position of a spiritual leader in a large mixed gathering of the respectable.²

Despite women's growing involvement in religion in England, then, women were still not allowed to preside over a man or allowed to preach to a man. Anderson goes on to point out, however, that women preachers were becoming more accepted. There was a marked change from the so-called female ranters earlier in the century to more official Methodist female preachers later in the century.³ But even as female authority grew later in the Victorian era, the notion of a woman exercising religious power over a man was still quite a radical notion. While women were called upon for moral influence, which was prescribed as a softer suggestive power, the notion of women as authorities was out of the question to most. It is for this reason that Charlotte and Emily Brontë's use of supernatural vision is so notable.

² Oliver Anderson, "Women Preachers in Mid-Victorian Britain: Some Reflexions on Feminism, Popular Religion and Social Change," *The Historical Journal* 12, No. 3 (1969): 469.

³ Ibid., 470-74. For an insightful literary representation on the female Methodist preacher, see Thomas Hardy's *Jude, the Obscure* (1894).

Prophetic Dreams in *Jane Eyre*

The female protagonist who is the most obvious source of prophetic warning in the Brontës' work is Jane Eyre. There are many eerie indicators that lead up to her discovery of Bertha Mason—a strange laugh, a candle left outside her doorway, and Rochester nearly burned alive in his bed. Of these instances, Jane muses, “Presentiments are strange things! and so are sympathies; and so are signs; and the three combined make one mystery to which humanity has not yet found the key” (*JE*, 276). Robert Heilmann interprets Jane's privileging of signs as superstition,⁴ and John Maynard even reads her dreams as Gothic tropes that seem to rebel against Christianity,⁵ but other critics have connected these presentiments to her religious sensibilities. Stevie Davies astutely notes that Jane's notion of forewarning references Puritan views in which *presentiments* refer to moments of intuition, *sympathies* refer to messages transmitted by affinity for emotions, and *signs* refer to writings in the Book of Nature. This Book of Nature, as I explained in Chapter 2, is the Puritan concept of how natural phenomena bear Godly messages.⁶

We can see evidence that Charlotte understood the notion of presentiments in this way when we consider her comment to Lewes as Elizabeth Gaskell recounted it in her biography of Brontë. When he asked her what the best book was, she responded that it was the Bible, and when he asked her what the second best book was she replied that it was the Book of Nature.⁷ The probable link between Jane's allusion to presentiments, sympathies, and signs and Puritan

⁴ Robert B. Heilman, “Charlotte Brontë, Reason, and the Moon.”

⁵ Maynard, “The Brontës and Religion,” 196-98.

⁶ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Steven Davies (New York: Penguin, 2006), 559, note 1.

⁷ Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 48.

theology falls in line with my argument. The Puritan notion of nature serving as a book in which humanity could read God's goodness and will is precisely the attitude Jane espouses to interpret natural images as divine guidance; moreover, she extends the mystical power that the Puritans find in nature to the God-formed beauty of her own mind.

We can see Jane's psychological presentiments most clearly in two dreams that she relays to Rochester. These dreams serve as prophecies for events that lie ahead. To understand the significance of Jane's dreams, it is important to consider the notion of prophecy within the Victorian context. Prophecy held an important place within Protestant thought. John O. Waller calculates that "nearly one thousand English clergymen, including some hundred Anglicans, were preaching on the prophecies" of the Bible.⁸ Though there were many variations in sermon-style and content, there was an especial trend for eschatological prophecy in the Brontës' day, and many believed that the Christian apocalypse was imminent due to the changing scientific and social climate of the region. Robert H. Ellison and Carol Marie Engelhardt explain that there was a pride particularly in evangelical circles about "prophecies fulfilled."⁹ This notion understood all present-day shifts of power and technological advancement as biblical fulfillment. Of course, the act of prophesying was an unequivocal male privilege. There was a counter-culture of prophetesses much later in the century,¹⁰ but to the general public the notion of female seers was linked with silly mysticism rather than legitimate Christian belief.

⁸ John O. Waller, "Christ's Second Coming: Christina Rossetti and the Premillennialist William Dodsworth," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 73 (1969): 476.

⁹ Robert H. Ellison and Carol Marie Engelhardt, "Prophecy and Anti-Popery in Victorian London: John Cumming Reconsidered," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 31, No. 1, Victorian Religion (2003): 376.

¹⁰ For more information see Charles LaPorte, "Atheist Prophecy: Mathilde Blind, Constance Naden, and the Victorian Poetess" *Victorian Literature and Culture* 34, no. 2, Fin-de-Siècle Literary Culture and Women Poets (2006): 427-441 as well as his "George Eliot, the Poetess as Prophet," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 31, no. 1, Victorian Religion (2003): 159-179.

Dreams were a topic of particular note when it came to female mystics. There were some scientific studies conducted about dreams in the era that represent a certain apprehension about the imagination. Dr. Robert MacNish, a Scottish physician, concluded in his *The Philosophy of Sleep* (1834) that sleep was “apt to lead the imagination” and that the potency of dreams could be compounded by “the fertility of the fancy” the dreamer possessed.¹¹ Walter Cooper Dendy, a surgeon at the Royal Infirmary for Children, argued in his *The Philosophy of Mystery* (1841) that within the passivity of sleep, dreams could corrode moral values and cause the dreamer to forget past experiences.¹² The rational school of thought seemed to caution against taking much stock in dreams because they were visual manifestations of the imagination and the fancy.

Aside from medical thought about dreams, however, there were also some prominent notions about dreams that were furthered through popular women’s literature. Two writers in particular gained notoriety for their ideas in the early Victorian era: a Mrs. Blair and Catherine Crowe, both of whom were considered to be female mystics. In her *Dreams and Dreaming Philosophically* (1843), Mrs. Blair declares that God created dreams for the “comforting of his tired people.”¹³ Her book details several examples of cases in which God uses dreams to foster lessons and help people deal with unexpected challenges in their lives.¹⁴ In a similar vein, Catherine Crow argues that dreams can restore spirituality in her *The Night-side of Nature* (1848). She suggests that, “man has lost his faculty of spiritual seeing; but in sleep, when the

¹¹ Robert MacNish, *The Philosophy of Sleep* (Glasgow: W.R. McPhun, 1838), 5. Accessed via *Google Books*. 12 Oct 2015.

¹² Walter Cooper Dendy, *The Philosophy of Mystery* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1841), 208. Accessed via *Google Books*. 12 Oct 2015.

¹³ Mrs. Blair, *Dreams and Dreaming Philosophically and Scripturally Considered: Illustrated by Several Remarkable Instances, All Well Authenticated*. Intro. Samuel Blair. (London: Groombridge, 1843), i. Accessed via *Google Books*. 15 Oct 2015.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 60-77.

body is in a state of passivity and external objects are excluded from us by the shutting up of the senses through which we perceive them, the spirit, to a certain degree freed from its impediments, may enjoy somewhat of its original privilege."¹⁵ While it is rather unlikely that the Brontës would have been aware of medical conjectures about dreams, it is quite likely that they would have been aware of the popular mysticism surrounding dreams, for these two women's works were widely circulated and frequently reviewed in the 1840s. Though Crowe's book was published after *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, it along with Mrs. Blair's book gives us a strong idea of what sort of popular discourses were circulating around the time the sisters were writing their famous novels. This popular mysticism, of course, also corroborated the evangelical tenet that a meaningful religious life could best be brought about through a personal relationship with God.

When we examine *Jane Eyre* within its Victorian context, it seems clear that dreams operate according to this mystical understanding. Alison Searle describes Jane's dreams in terms that quite closely resemble the explanations of these mystical women writers. She suggests, "her dreams at Thornfield evidence a perceptive imaginative apprehension of dangers to others and troubles that lie ahead; her appreciation of nature, as mentioned earlier, enables her to draw near to the God to which it bears witness."¹⁶ Her visions, then, should be distinguished from Gothic tradition in that they do not only provide an eerie indication of what is to come in the plot, but they also draw her nearer to God. Jane describes her first dream to Rochester:

¹⁵ Catherine Crowe, *The Night-Side of Nature or Ghosts and Ghost Seers*, (London: T.C. Newby, 1848), 48. Accessed via *archives.org*. 15 Oct 2015.

¹⁶ Alison Searle, "An Idolatrous Imagination? Biblical Theology and Romanticism in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*," *Christianity and Literature* 56, no. 1 (Fall 2006): 54.

I was following the windings of an unknown road; total obscurity environed me; rain pelted me; I was burdened with the charge of a little child: a very small creature, too young and feeble to walk, and which shivered in my cold arms, and wailed piteously in my ear. I thought, sir, that you were on the road a long way before me; and I strained every nerve to overtake you, and made effort on effort to utter your name and entreat you to stop—but my movements were fettered, and my voice still died away inarticulate; while you, I felt, withdrew farther and farther every moment. (*JE*, 355)

We see in this first dream a sense of great struggle and loneliness. Critics often pay particular attention to the child in this dream. For example, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar understand this dream as a visual artifact of Jane's childhood trauma. They read the child as the burden of abandonment residual from her difficult years at Gateshead and Lowood, stating that "until she reaches the goal of her pilgrimage—maturity, independence, true equality with Rochester (and therefore in a sense with the rest of the world)—she is doomed to carry her orphaned alter ego everywhere."¹⁷ For Gilbert and Gubar, this dream with the child provides another avatar for Jane, in addition to Bertha Mason, and represents another layer of her consciousness. Margaret Homans reads the dream a bit differently as manifesting Jane's anxiety about having to devote her life to Rochester. She reads the heavy child as Jane's "intimation of what it would be like to become other than herself."¹⁸ All three critics have recognized the similarities between this dream and the plot details of Jane leaving Thornfield and estranging herself from Rochester.

¹⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 358.

¹⁸ Margaret Homans, "Dreaming of Children: Literalisation in *Jane Eyre*," In *Jane Eyre*, ed. Heather Glen. (New York: St. Martin's P, 1997), 155.

It is interesting that the child figure seems to dominate scholarly thought about this dream because there are several other aspects of it that strike me as equally important. In terms of space, this dream has several notable characteristics. The spatial aspect of the dream's subjects is striking. As the two lovers become farther and farther apart on this winding road, Jane is burdened with obscure vision. This obscurity seems to be a sore punishment for her visionary mind. As Rochester disappears on this winding road, Jane cannot call out to him; "my voice still died away inarticulate," she reports (*JE*, 355). Not only is Jane inarticulate, however, but the entire dream seems soundless. Jane's dream is entirely visual and experiential rather than cognitive and linguistic. After hearing about this first dream, Rochester aims to diffuse Jane's melancholy and doubt. He commands her, "Little nervous subject! Forget visionary woe, and think only of real happiness!" In his reaction, we can sense his fear of Jane's vision. He asks her to abandon her doubts: "You say you love me, Janet: yes—I will not forget that; and you cannot deny it. *Those* words did not die inarticulate on your lips. I heard them clear and soft" (*JE*, 356). His resistance to Jane's dream is rather different from his reaction to her surrealistic paintings. I suggest that one reason for the difference in his reaction is the simple fact that Jane does not explicitly link the paintings to Rochester while the dreams are clearly inspired by him, and Jane relates her fears to him straightforwardly. However, there is another contrast between the two situations that strikes me as important. While Rochester can partake of Jane's visual imagination when he views her paintings, he is not privy to the images of her sleeping consciousness.

Thus, her visionary dreams are more threatening to him because he cannot survey her subjectivity as he can with her art. Rochester clings to Jane's words of affection over her vision of estrangement; for him, language is what roots them in reality, and it is the power by which he

can control Jane. Despite his aggravation, Jane relates another dream to him, which proves perhaps even more prophetic than the first:

Thornfield Hall was a dreary ruin, the retreat of bats and owls. I thought that of all the stately front nothing remained but a shell-like wall, very high and very fragile-looking. I wandered, on a moonlight night, through the grass-grown enclosure within: here I stumbled over a marble hearth, and there over a fallen fragment of cornice. Wrapped up in a shawl, I still carried the unknown little child: I might not lay it down anywhere, however tired were my arms—however much its weight impeded my progress, I must retain it. I heard the gallop of a horse at a distance on the road; I was sure it was you; and you were departing for many years and for a distant country. I climbed the thin wall with frantic perilous haste, eager to catch one glimpse of you from the top: the stones rolled from under my feet, the ivy branches I grasped gave way, the child clung round my neck in terror, and almost strangled me; at last I gained the summit. I saw you like a speck on a white track, lessening every moment. The blast blew so strong I could not stand. I sat down on the narrow ledge; I hushed the scared infant in my lap: you turned an angle of the road: I bent forward to take a last look; the wall crumbled; I was shaken; the child rolled from my knee, I lost my balance, fell, and woke. (*JE*, 356-57)

The spatial nature of this dream is again important. The architectural remnants of the Gothic mansion are not only symbolic, like the infant in Jane's arms, but they reveal the literal future of Thornfield Hall. We see in the remnants of the marble hearth and cornice a vertical collapse of this structure. The lowness of the hearth and the headiness of the ornamental cornice is

effectively leveled on an even plane. This deconstruction mimics the fire that eventually consumes Thornfield and leaves Rochester blind, effectively leveling his masculine power. This dream suggests Jane's hope against hope that Rochester will truly love her and relieve her of her decades-long struggle of loneliness and orphanhood. Just as Jane climbs frantically on the last remaining wall of the collapsed Thornfield, so does she rely upon Rochester, perhaps as the last conceivable chance she has for belonging in the world of her present circumstances.

In fact, Jane does wake from this dream to an even more nightmarish reality. When she wakes, she finds that Bertha has entered her quarters to rend her bridal gown and sneer in her face. It seems that the physical danger of Bertha, unbeknownst to Jane, finds its way into Jane's subconscious mind, and the liminal space between fancy and reality are blurred. When Jane describes these events, Rochester again refutes her vision with logic: "And your previous dreams, were they real too? Is Thornfield Hall a ruin? Am I severed from you by insuperable obstacles? Am I leaving you without a tear—without a kiss—without a word?" (*JE*, 359). Jane answers, "Not yet," but she seems to know her impending heartache. Rochester goes on to belittle Jane's visions, when he calls them "mental terrors" and when he insists that her judgment is tainted by her "feverish" and "delirious" state of sleep (*JE*, 359-60), though he knows all too well that Jane has reason to fear their upcoming wedding. Ultimately Rochester's belittlement seems to work to a point, for Jane concedes to marry him, despite her doubts. Oppressed and misled by her fiancé, she ignores her own vision and relies on his words. When his lies are revealed, however, her visual presentiments prove all too revelatory. We can perhaps understand Jane's first dream carrying the child as only imitative of her inner turmoil rather than prophetic; however, her dreaming of Thornfield Manor serves as undeniable prophecy. Were Rochester to have internalized Jane's concerns and acknowledge the danger he and the entire household were

in, perhaps the fire could have been avoided. In this sense, this dream functions as a potent spiritual warning. We also see here an important message for Jane: when she fails to make decisions based on her intuitive vision, knowledge that stems from her body, she suffers. It seems to me that Jane learns an important lesson after Rochester's betrayal. She learns to tune into her intuitive authority as a subject, and it is this instinct that prompts her to listen to the counsel of the moon, and later, the sound of Rochester's voice in her mind, calling to her. This notion of dreams as heavenly messages is also present in the Bible.

Dreams hold an essential place when it comes to the prophecy in the Bible. Perhaps the most well-known example is that of Joseph, the son of Israel, who dreams several symbolic dreams and knows how to interpret other's dreams. His visual power makes him a favorite for his father, and so his brothers sell him into slavery out of jealousy. This same power later earns him great favor with the Pharaoh when Joseph can interpret his dreams (Gen 37:9-36; 41: 1-57). These dreams concern both Joseph's fate and the fate of the larger House of Israel. The prophet Daniel finds himself in a similar predicament when he interprets the dreams of Chaldean king Nebuchadnezzar II (Dan 1-4). Daniel predicts the rising and falling of world powers as well as the king's seven-year bout of insanity. Jane's dreams relate to this tradition in that imagery foretells future events. While these dreams seem to pertain to Jane herself most, they are also spiritual warnings to Rochester. Jane is charged with the duty to pass on these prophecies to him. In the Bible, when people reject visionary dreams, they suffer dire consequences, such as the suffering of Jacob and his sons from famine after selling Joseph into slavery. Conversely, we see spiritual reward when people internalize supernatural warning. Dreams secure safety for Christ as an infant. Joseph of Nazareth is called upon to be Christ's father in a dream (Matt 1:20). Christ is also protected through the wise men's dreams. They had originally planned to return to

King Herod and tell him where the Christ child resided, the child who is prophesied to be the King of Kings. When they are warned in a dream that Herod will kill the child, they refuse to return and report to him. Joseph is further inspired through a dream to flee to Egypt with Mary and the child to ensure the infant Christ's safety (Matt 2:12-13). Through these examples in the New Testament, we can see that when visionary dreams are heeded that catastrophe is averted. In this regard, we see that Rochester is punished not only for his misogyny and dishonesty, but also for failing to heed to Jane's prophecy.

Jane's power as a seer, however, is also counter to the biblical tradition in a critical way, for God seems to only give these visions to men. Any time that women are endowed with supernatural power, they are presented as practitioners of the occult arts. For example, we see this stigma in Saul's encounter with the so-called Witch of En-dor to summon the prophet Daniel's spirit (1 Dan. 28:7-25). There is, however, one empowering scripture about women as receptors of prophecy. The scripture is identical in both the Old and New Testament and foretells that close to Christ's second coming, both men and women shall righteously prophesy, "I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17). So, though the Bible sees female vision as occult, it also presents the possibility of woman as a sanctioned prophetess in the last days. In a novel that ends with the words, "even so come, Lord Jesus!" (*JE*, 579), we cannot doubt that as Jane closes her narrative with St. John's invitation for the apocalypse that she believes the end could be nigh and could perhaps see her vision as being appropriated in the Bible. Brontë further cements Jane's status as a prophetess of sorts in the outcome of the dream. Because of how Jane's dream aligns with the biblical heritage of the prophetic dream, we can perceive that Brontë has positioned this dream as much more of a revelation than a mystical moment or the mimicry of a Gothic trope. Jane's prophetic dreams,

then, just serve as one more way that Brontë privileges spiritual subjectivity—this time, as a product of Jane’s intrinsic consciousness and not just as a sign of Jane’s ability to read the divinity of natural wonders outside of herself in the “Book of Nature.”

Indoctrinating Visions in *Wuthering Heights*

If the Brontës were rather unorthodox within the realm of mainstream Anglicanism, this was especially true for Emily Brontë, who believed that a person’s convictions should only be between herself and God.¹⁹ Critics have puzzled over Emily’s body of work ever since her death and have tried to uncover the specifics of her beliefs through her poems in particular, but this effort has proved futile because Emily’s writings represent such varied views. Some critics have speculated that Emily’s views simply varied throughout her short life; others suggest that her poems and novel take on their own distinct voices and are separate entities from Emily entirely.²⁰ This variation in her tone has enabled critics to draw selectively from her poetic voices to try to piece together a cohesive impression of her belief system. For example, critics who wish to emphasize the rejection of organized religion in *Wuthering Heights* may look to “Faith and Despondency” for corroboration; conversely, those looking for a sympathetic understanding of faith might look to “No Coward Soul is Mine” or “Speak, God of Visions” for support. No matter how we may try, there is no simple box in which to contain Emily Brontë’s religious themes.

Wuthering Heights lacks an explicitly well-drawn religious aim and the language of the novel does not moralize about the characters in a unified way. Indeed, critics have read the novel

¹⁹ Alcott, *The Brontës*, 434.

²⁰ Michael O’Neill. “Emily Brontë’s Visionary Religion,” *Brontë Studies* 37, no. 4 (November 2012): 369.

as bearing many belief systems: namely Wesleyan Methodism, Calvinism, paganism, and atheism. Simon Marsden, however, reads *Wuthering Heights* as residing within the liberal Protestant tradition. He recognizes the relationship between in the Bible and *Wuthering Heights*:

The novel reinterprets biblical narratives, finding new meanings in the sacred Christian texts and making all external religious authorities secondary to the personal God-consciousness. It draws upon Evangelical approaches to the Bible, but its final position is one more akin to that of thinkers such as Schleiermacher and Blake, each of whom sought to reinterpret, not reject, Christianity. The novel's theology is neither orthodox nor systematic, but it, nevertheless, belongs within the history of early nineteenth-century Protestantism.²¹

I aim to corroborate Marsden's assessment by illustrating how biblical textuality is primarily reinterpreted through bodily vision in *Wuthering Heights*. His mention of Schleiermacher is especially notable, for he recognizes the presence of hermeneutics here that I recognize throughout the Brontës' opus. Just as Jane Eyre exercises a visionary power through her dreams, we can see a somewhat similar power through Cathy's dreams and the dreams she inspires. Cathy's dreams do not foretell future events as Jane's do, but instead they profess her theological views in a way that indoctrinate others at times. She uses her power of vision to pose her views, most particularly on universal salvation, to a world that seems to be in ideological chaos.

²¹ Simon Marsden, "'Vain are the Thousand Creeds': *Wuthering Heights*, the Bible, and Liberal Protestantism," *Literature & Theory* 20, no. 3 (September 2006): 248.

There are several striking episodes in the novel when dreams and ghostly apparitions comment on the issue of salvation. Cathy tells Nelly about a dream in which she dies and goes to heaven but then wishes to return to the hellish Wuthering Heights to be with Heathcliff instead. After Cathy's death, Mr. Lockwood reads Cathy Earnshaw's diary entry about the wearisome Bible study that her father's Calvinist servant Joseph forces her and Heathcliff to engage in. After reading this, he has a vivid dream that bears a similar attitude about religion. The other visionary aspect of the novel that has been widely analyzed is the apparition of spirits, specifically Cathy and Heathcliff's ghosts as they visit Lockwood, Nelly, and unnamed country folk. These incidents in the novel have been widely explored, but scholars seem reluctant to recognize the importance of the visionary acts themselves. Michael O'Neill and Tom Winnifrith have called Emily's presentation of religion "visionary," but they seem to mean this in the metaphorical sense in that *Wuthering Heights* is ahead of its time in recognizing the complicated nature of belief and the clashing of multiple worldviews.²² Despite the large body of criticism on the novel, however, no one has fully recognized the power of bodily vision to manifest the novel's nuanced spirituality.

The first instance within the novel's chronology that illustrates the relationship between vision and spirituality is in a dream that Cathy has after Mr. Earnshaw dies. Directly following his death, his children imagine him in heaven with the saints. Nelly recalls "The little souls were comforting each other with better thoughts than I could have hit on: no parson in the world ever pictured heaven so beautifully as they did, in their innocent talk; and, while I sobbed and listened, I could not help wishing we were all there safe together" (*WH*, 49). Sometime later, Cathy recounts a dream in which she is in heaven. Before she gives the specific of the dream, she

²² O'Neill. "Emily Brontë's Visionary Religion," 368; Winnifrith, *The Brontës and Their Background*, 68.

relates her overall notion of dreams: “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.” From this we can gather how central dreams are to her imagination and how much they affect her perception of the world. She recalls, “If I were in heaven, Nelly, I should be extremely miserable. . . . I dreamt once that I was there . . . 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 the top of Wuthering Heights; where I woke sobbing for joy” (*WH*, 99-100). This is one instance that supports Marsden’s notion that *Wuthering Heights* is based on the liberal evangelical tradition; the dream does attest to the existence of heaven and the afterlife, but as he also suggests of the novel, this dream interprets some biblical hermeneutics in a subversive way.

The first hermeneutical distinction we see here from the Bible is that the location and spatial hierarchy of heaven as being higher sphere than earth is abandoned. Contrastingly, in the dream, Cathy presents heaven as being on a neutral spatial plane to earth. In the Bible, we can see a clear spatial message about the relationship between heaven and earthly existence. God is repeatedly referred to as being “on high” throughout the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, and the spatial relationship between heaven and earth is also stressed. Isaiah related the following analogy for God’s ways, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa 55:9). The apostle Paul describes his experience of being “caught up into paradise” (2 Cor 12:2). Later Paul describes the resurrection as “all who are alive and remain shall be caught up together” with God into the clouds (1 Thes 4:17). We can see in Cathy’s dream a subversion of spatial hierarchy between the earth and heaven, for she describes being “flung into the *middle* of the heath” rather than down

from heaven (*WH*, 100; italics mine), which suggests that she rejects religious authority about salvation. When we consider the ideological significance of Cathy's dream, we can see that she effectively reverses heaven and hell. Simon Marsden connects this notion of divine reversal to William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.²³ This poem, in effect, inverts traditional notions of good and evil to draw attention to the slippery nature of religious hierarchy. As contemporary critics now argue, Blake sought to complicate nineteenth-century Protestantism rather than totally undermine it.²⁴

Some critics see this dream as the perfect manifestation of Cathy's moral relativism. O'Neill argues that heaven is domestication for Cathy, and she resists it and embraces her wild worldliness.²⁵ Winnifrith also sees the novel as furthering relative moralism because it deconstructs religious hierarchy: for Cathy and Heathcliff, heaven is being together, "Even if it were not a tranquil heaven," in his estimation.²⁶ These critics' assessments are justified because it is clear that conventional morality does not sit well with Cathy. Indeed, she subscribes to an earthly worldview that privileges the wildness of her home in the moors. David Sonstroem sees Brontë's uses of the terms "heaven" and "hell" in an even more complex way. He suggests that she uses these terms in diverse ways to show the various ideological points of views within the novel that she refuses to reconcile:

²³ Marsden, "'Vain are the Thousand Creeds,'" 245-48.

²⁴ See also *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* for Blake's contrasting of the innocence of childhood and the bitterness of world-weary adulthood—themes that are also dichotomized in *Wuthering Heights*.

²⁵ O'Neill, "Emily Brontë's Visionary Religion," 369.

²⁶ Winnifrith, *The Brontës and Their Background*, 72.

Linton's heaven is a sleepy "ecstasy of peace"; the second Cathy's is "the whole world awake and wild with joy." Nelly Dean's "heterodox" heaven is, like herself, "untroubled," "shadowless," dull, and uniformly pleasant, with amorphously liberal entrance requirements. . . . Heathcliff—who redefines Catherine's heaven as her hell—holds his heaven to be simply union with Catherine, and his hell, separation from her. . . . The several heavens of *Wuthering Heights* are merely the characters' antagonistic points of view raised to a higher power and projected into eternity.²⁷

As Sonstroem suggests, we see no neat consolidation of these ideas. Brontë allows divergent concepts of heaven and hell to run unfettered throughout the novel. Catherine's dream suggests the strength of her subjectivity and her privileging of her own desire over patriarchal religious prescriptions. Her position decidedly rejects Christian dogma but embraces a personalized spirituality. Tellingly, it is again through vision that individualized faith is recognized. Though the nature of this spirituality may be markedly different from *Jane Eyre's*, the mode of expressing this internal faith proves rather similar.

Of all the critics who have addressed this dream, none has strongly articulated the personal impact of it for Cathy. It seems that it not only sends a doctrinal message to Nelly, but it also teaches Cathy something important about herself. After experiencing this visceral difference between heaven and hell, she can also draw distinction between her feelings about Heathcliff and Linton. Though Heathcliff may torment her, she is drawn to him: "Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same; and Linton's is as different as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire" (*WH*, 100). Emily utilizes natural imagery in a similar way to Charlotte Brontë's use

²⁷ David Sonstroem, "Wuthering Heights and the Limits of Vision," *PMLA* 86, no. 1 (January 1971): 56.

of it, and here it expresses a sensual—and yet, spiritual—attraction. While Linton’s soul lacks vibrancy and power, hers and Heathcliff’s resonate on an elemental level. The natural resonance of their souls is something eternal for Cathy: “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: I should not seem a part of it.” She goes on to use more images to express the difference in her feelings: “My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods: 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” (*WH*, 101). Cathy’s visual explanation here utilizes biblical hermeneutics in an important way; she contrasts the changing foliage with the eternal nature of rock.

The image of the rock, of course, bears clear Christian significance. Christ spoke in a parable in his Sermon on the Mount comparing the foolish man who built his house on the sand and the wise man who built his house on the rock, stressing the importance of foundational faith (Matt 7:24-27, Luke 6:47-49). The rock bears metaphoric significance even more strongly in Matthew 16:18, which reads: “thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” This scripture serves as the main support for the primacy of Simon Peter, a Catholic doctrine that successively endowed the bishops of Rome with power and essentially led to the Church’s hierarchy. However, here Cathy subverts this image that is so clearly linked to Catholic authority by involving it in her personal definition of heaven.



Figure 4.1. Illustration by Rovina Cai for Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (London: The Folio Society, 2014). Photo courtesy of Rovina Cai. Rovina Cai (1988-) is an Australian-born illustrator who received an MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York City. She specializes in illustrating myths, fairytales, and Gothic novels.

Rovina Cai's illustration (Figure 4.1) of the *Wuthering Heights* love triangle represents the visual nature of Cathy's comparison of the two. We can see the Lintons' domesticated Grange as the setting for this sketch, with the fine mantle and wallpaper in the background. Both men seem to take the visual stance of masculine conquest. Heathcliff leans toward Cathy invitingly and Linton stands in a stout and honorable air. The most striking aspect of this illustration is how Heathcliff brings the wildness of the moors into this domestic setting. The pencil strokes of the moor winds suggest an influence that pulls Cathy toward Heathcliff. Rovina Cai has mimicked Brontë's prose in a subtle but clear way. Just as Brontë compares Cathy's

feelings toward Linton with the changing nature of the woods, here Linton and the tree above Heathcliff bear similar linear qualities of poise and sophistication. Lower in the drawing, however, the dark pencil strokes suggest a grassy bedrock. The darkness of Heathcliff and the foreground draw the eye to the left side of the drawing. Heathcliff seems to be the central focal point of this sketch, though he is spatially in the margins, and this is an appropriate description of his place in Cathy's life as well. She recognizes that while she is choosing to cling to Linton for the social and class benefits he can provide, Heathcliff is the clear intrinsic partner for her. These are important revelations for Cathy, and they seem to develop in response to this dream. Indeed, on this point Graeme Tytler argues that Cathy and Heathcliff's visual conceptualization of their souls creates an erotic spiritualism in which they function as each other's religion, in a sense.²⁸ Cathy is not drawn to a Godly revelation but to the realization that Heathcliff is the center of her universe. Though her position is completely unorthodox, she still relies on the vehicle of personal visionary experiences to arrive at her notions of her earthly heaven. Furthermore, this dream exerts special power over the men in her life, whom Cathy toys with mercilessly. Her unorthodox vision of heaven pulls these men into a tempestuous life in which she is torn between her socially expedient decision to marry Linton and her spiritual connection to Heathcliff.

As important as Cathy's dream is along with the inspiration it inspires, there is another dream that is perhaps even more important to the overall dynamic of *Wuthering Heights*. When Lockwood's dream reflects Cathy's ideas about religion, this is a notable change from Charlotte Brontë's portrayal of dreams. Here, dreams not only reveal Cathy's views, but they also reflect the way Cathy's account of her worldview influences a man's consciousness. When Lockwood lodges in Cathy's quarters after becoming stranded at Wuthering Heights, he reads her journal

²⁸ Graeme Tytler, "The Role of Religion in *Wuthering Heights*," *Brontë Studies* 32 (2007): 45.

entry entitled “An Awful Sunday” about a night as a child when she and Heathcliff were supposed to be reading their Bibles but grew weary of their study. When Joseph finds Cathy doing needlework, he admonishes her, “Shame on ye! sit ye down, ill childer! there’s good books eneugh if ye’ll read ’em: sit ye down, and think o’ yer sows!” (*WH*, 26) The two obey Joseph for a while, but then they end up throwing their Bibles onto the floor, and for this disrespect Hindley locks them in the kitchen. Cathy’s childhood impression of religion is clear; it is an exasperating imposition on her time, and it encroaches on her creativity and productivity. Perhaps most telling of her feelings is the ghoulish drawing of Joseph in the margins of her Bible, a pictorial satire of her dogmatic disciplinarian (*WH*, 27).

After reading this account, Lockwood soon falls asleep and Cathy’s annoyance with religion seems to invade his slumber. In a dream, Lockwood endures a lengthy sermon from Reverend Jabez Branderham, the author of the tract Cathy was supposed to be reading. This sermon details 490 sins, many of them strange and trivial. When Branderham continues on to the 491st sin, Lockwood loses his composure: “The four hundred and ninety-first is too much. Fellow-martyrs, have at him! Drag him down, and crush him to atoms, that the place which knows him may know him no more!” (*WH*, 29). To this outburst, the reverend replies in a most comical and overstated tone, “*Thou art the Man!* . . . Seventy times seven times didst thou gapingly contort thy visage—seventy times seven did I take counsel with my soul—Lo, this is human weakness: this also may be absolved! The First of the Seventy-First is come. Brethren, execute upon him the judgment written. Such honour have all His saints!” (*WH*, 29). This dream bears clear biblical irony on several fronts. The numbers used in the dream directly reference St. Matthew 18: 22-23, which reads, “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.” The number seven occurs repeatedly in the Bible and is often presented as a number of wholeness and perfection, but Branderham’s sermon creates chaos and violence. While Lockwood perceives the reverend as sinning because of his egregiously long sermon, the reverend judges Lockwood’s impatience as sinful. When the two begin to outwardly decry each other, the congregation converges on Lockwood and “every man’s hand was against his neighbour.” Comically, the churchgoers listen to the reverend preach about 490 different sins and are tolerant of this sermon, yet when the congregation has one opportunity to forgive, it is too much to take. The permission of their leader to conspire against a sinner fosters immediate scorn.

Thus the spirit of Cathy’s exasperation with Joseph’s Sunday night Bible study is reflected in Lockwood’s bizarre dream. Cathy questions the rigidity of biblical textual imperatives in her diary, and this revolt against language registers in Lockwood’s dream as well, both in his rejection of Branderham’s long speech and the visual medium of this experience in itself. While this dream relays an important religious critique about the cumbersome nature of piety and the limitations of a black-and-white system of prescribed moral dichotomy, it is not entirely anti-religious. It seems to parody biblical hermeneutics as a method of criticizing institutional practice but at the same time this dream implicitly argues to restore Christian values of love and forgiveness. In this regard, the dream critiques fanaticism, most particularly Methodist fanaticism, as Mason argues,²⁹ and leans implicitly toward a more liberal Evangelical ideology of universal salvation, charity, and empathy—traits that we also see Nelly further in her interaction with the Earnshaws and the Lintons. This dream, then, is an exceptional moment in

²⁹ Emma Mason, ““Some God of Wild Enthusiast’s Dreams’: Emily Brontë’s Religious Enthusiasm,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 31, No. 1 (2003): 267-69.

the realm of visual religious experience because rather than Cathy experiencing this dream for herself, her account creates a visionary experience for Lockwood. We see in this instance a strong moment of indoctrination in which Cathy overreaches the gender prescriptions of her day to impose her philosophies on a man in a supernatural way, a feat she manages even from the grave.

The full realization of Cathy's power occurs in what some critics consider a second, more wakeful dream, one which most consider a ghostly apparition as often seen in the Gothic tradition.³⁰ A rustling at the window interrupts the dream, and Lockwood transitions into a second dream-like state. Suddenly, he sees Catherine, who begs to come in because she has been wandering the moors for 20 years. He is not compassionate to her pleas: "Terror made me cruel; and, finding 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 bedclothes." Initially, Lockwood seems too shocked to connect Cathy's textual account with her visual presence. When she continues to beg to be admitted, he stacks "books up in a pyramid against [the window], and stopped my ears to exclude the lamentable prayer" (*WH*, 31). Cathy's subjectivity and presence has clearly troubled and frightened him. His encounter with Cathy ends when Heathcliff barges in at the sound of Lockwood's screams and heartbrokenly calls to Cathy to return. Despite the potency of this episode, many critics have failed to make sense of it. For O'Neill, this dream signifies Lockwood's limitations as a narrator. He posits, "This is Emily Brontë's powerfully revisionist account of seeming to look through a glass darkly, while Lockwood's phrase, 'I discerned, obscurely' comes close (for all his evident limitations) to defining the mode in which

³⁰ Dennis Humphrey, "Uncanny Visions in *Wuthering Heights*," *The Philological Review* 29, no. 1 (2003): 48.

visionary apprehension takes place in the novel.”³¹ Indeed, this dream, and Lockwood’s limited ability to sufficiently ponder on what he sees, is indicative of the larger dynamic of the novel.

As is characteristic of men in the Brontës’ novels, though he comes into contact with women’s vision, he lacks the willingness or conceptual apparatus to allow it to influence him. Gilbert and Gubar argue that Lockwood fights to keep Catherine at bay to preserve his male authority.³² Linda Gill builds on this notion further when she argues the “unpardonable sin” that Branderham references in the dream is one that Lockwood committed just before going to sleep—allowing a woman’s position as a subject to be heard and understood. Gill posits that,

He dreams he is ushered by Joseph a representative of the law of the father (Earnshaw) and the Father (God), to church (the Father’s house) to be cudged for committing what is deemed the “unpardonable” sin...He has read a woman’s text. He has granted her subjectivity. . . . It is hardly surprising in the ensuing chaos of the dream where lawlessness and disorderliness reign . . . that Cathy, as if invited, asks him to let her in the window.³³

Gill goes on to read Lockwood’s action of piling up books in front of the window as his assertion of phallocentric textuality to contain her subjectivity. “He *has* heard her prayer, and no amount of subsequent reordering can blot out the moment of intersubjectivity he and Cathy share . . . the

³¹ O’Neill. “Emily Brontë’s Visionary Religion,” 369. Here O’Neill references Corinthians 13:12, which details Paul’s message privileging God’s will when human vision fails: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as almost I am known.”

³² Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary*, 306.

³³ Linda Gill, “The Unpardonable Sin: Lockwood’s Dream in *Wuthering Heights*,” 104.

walls of patriarchy prove to be as penetrable as Lockwood fears.”³⁴ Because of his treatment of Cathy’s ghost in his dream, Gill sees him as an intense antagonist. She revels in the fact that he is so marginalized in modern film adaptations of the novel: “Lockwood barely manages a bit part. Cathy is the star.”³⁵



Figure 4.2. Illustration by Fritz Eichenberg for Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (New York: Random House, 1943).

Fritz Eichenberg’s woodcarving of this moment (Figure 4.2) visually suggests the potency with which Cathy’s attitudes penetrate Lockwood’s psyche in this episode. Cathy looks

³⁴ Ibid., 105.

³⁵ Ibid., 106.

in at Lockwood with a woeful expression, and her hand is clenched around his outstretched arm. Her ghost invades his space here, and he carefully averts his eyes from her figure, even as Cathy has a hold of him. We get a sense of a spatial relationship in this image. Eichenberg puts particular detail into the woodgrain of the windowsill to emphasize the height and depth of this liminal space between Cathy's ghost and Lockwood. Her twisted hand protrudes into the foreground to suggest her penetration through this threshold space and her penetration into Lockwood's psyche. The way in which Lockwood averts his vision is telling here. He does not want to see the way she is knocking down the books, his only barrier, and he certainly does not want to acknowledge the reality of her visual presence. This illustration suggests a point that rings true to me in the text as well. Rather than this episode posing Cathy as weak and oppressed, it suggests her strength and centrality to the novel, even in death. Here, though Lockwood tries to shut Cathy out, she is successful in penetrating him. We do not get an explicit indication that Lockwood's dream changes his religion beliefs, but we do know that his experience with Cathy that night causes him to be quite invested in the current issues going on at Wuthering Heights. Perhaps it is the criticism of judgment in his dream, inspired by Cathy, that fuels him to observe the savage characters of the moor with a bit more sympathy. Though Cathy's indoctrination may fall upon a somewhat foppish candidate in Lockwood, her power to affect him in the instance of this dream is a clear, if implicit, empowerment of female vision.

Ghostly apparitions make several other appearances within the narrative layers of *Wuthering Heights*. With the way plot events are relayed as hearsay nearly all throughout the novel, we do not get another direct account of seeing ghosts; rather, the rumors of ghosts surface several times after both Cathy, and, later, Heathcliff die. Though Nelly wants to present herself as a sensible narrator who dismisses the folkloric superstitions about Cathy and Heathcliff's

ghosts wandering the moors, she hints at her belief in these rumors as well.

[T]he country folks, if you ask them, would swear on the Bible that he *walks*: there are those who speak to having met him near the church, and on the moor, and even within this house. Idle tales, you'll say, and so say I. 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. (*WH*, 412)

Perhaps the most important sighting that Nelly reports here is when she sees a shepherd boy on a country road. The boy is crying: "There's Heathcliff and a woman yonder . . . 'un' a darnut pass 'em." Nelly describes, "I saw nothing; but neither the sheep nor he would go on, so I bid him take the road lower down. . . . I don't like being out in the dark now; and I don't like being left by myself in this grim house" (*WH*, 412). Despite her dismissal of superstition, Cathy and Heathcliff seem to haunt Nelly as well. She may not want to admit it outright to Lockwood, but she seems to be somewhat convinced by the country folks' sightings.

Though some critics, such as Winnifrith and Tytler, maintain that the ghosts in *Wuthering Heights* adhere to the Gothic tradition and are not religious images at all,³⁶ I see them as unorthodox manifestations that fit into the tradition of liberal Protestant hermeneutics. Both the palpable understanding of Cathy and Heathcliff's spiritual connection in life as well as the visual sightings of them in death point to the pervasive theme of the soul as an everlasting entity. While Brontë does not put forth an authoritative explanation for these images, her complicated novel is essentially bookended by visual sightings of Cathy. In what several critics have referred to as a

³⁶ Winnifrith, *The Brontës and Their Background*, 69.

cyclical narrative, the eternal nature of souls is iterated at the beginning and ending of this novel. It is my estimation that Brontë included these glimpses of visual spirituality as a way of maintaining ambiguity and also informing it with subtle Christian hermeneutics. The religious notions here prove undogmatic because rather than the novel being overtly didactic, it requires careful consideration. The multi-faceted nature of the novel's narrative structure leaves us with no clear answers, but it does amount to an introspective statement on judgment and suffering as centerless and convoluted as our own secular world. Emily Brontë, then, seeks not to put the world as she knows it into a neat narrative; rather, she wishes to represent the perspectives of various characters in an unconsolidated way. By doing so, she preserves her audience's ideological subjectivity in a way quite ahead of her time.

Heretical Vision in *Villette*

Charlotte Brontë's final novel *Villette* also presents the images conceived in the female consciousness as bearing spiritual power, but this novel does so in a more sophisticated way than any other Brontë novel. In Chapter 3 I reflected on the power of the art object to visually portray the woman question in *Villette*, but here we see the much more complex suggestion that inward female vision and the epistemological power that sight can bring is perhaps the most powerful form of subjectivity. *Villette*'s narrator Lucy Snowe is unusual in many ways. Her dominant tendency is to scrutinize others carefully but also evade readerly scrutiny herself. Though she is the central protagonist of the novel, we know nearly nothing about her past. We can see Lucy's inclination to visually scrutinize others from a young age. She recalls that as a young girl she was content to inhabit "the watch-tower of the nursery" to observe the Brettons and Polly (*Vil*, 67). Years later, when she teaches at Madame Beck's school in Belgium, she retreats to a corner where "unobserved I could observe...all passed before me as spectacle" (*Vil*, 130). Lucy may be

equally as visual as *Jane Eyre*, but her subjectivity works in an entirely different way. While Jane is fanciful and imaginative in her vision, often evoking strong emotional experience, Lucy's vision seems cold and predatory by comparison. Heather Glen recognizes the contrast between Brontë's first and last major novels, reading *Jane Eyre* as a more naïve novel in which "Jane's vision is empowering, retributive, prefigurative," and, in contrast, reads Lucy's narrative sight as more provisional to "simply help her to bear her lot."³⁷ Several critics have analyzed the unusual notions of vision in the novel. Katherine Inglis calls the novel "hyper-visual," pointing to the many explicit references to the anatomy of the eye and visual apparatuses.³⁸ Inglis makes the conjecture that vision was perhaps especially on Charlotte's mind when she composed the novel, for she wrote it shortly after Mr. Brontë underwent cataract surgery while she nursed him back to health.³⁹ Lucy seems bent on her vision as is typical of the Brontës' protagonists, but Lucy is invested in vision in a seemingly detached way—a real paradox in the novel. She makes keen judgments but her reflection is often abbreviated by self-censorship in her narration.

Lucy's detachment is complicated by her evasiveness of readerly scrutiny; in fact, we get the sense that Lucy is a manipulative narrator. Heather Glen, for example, reads Lucy's vision within the context of the Victorian popularity of toys that tricked one's vision, like the kaleidoscope. For Glen, *Villette* counters the notion of vision as straightforward, collective, and unifying; rather, she sees the novel's vision "not as objective and normative, but as subjective, embodied, and fallible."⁴⁰ There is no doubt that Lucy selectively retells the truth. In several

³⁷ Glen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History*, 235.

³⁸ Katherine Inglis, "Ophthalmoscopy in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 15, no. 3 (December 2010): 348.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 352.

⁴⁰ Glen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History*, 227.

instances in *Villette* we witness deliberate evasion—moments when Lucy admits to seeing the truth but withholds it from the audience until a later time. Diane Long Hoeveler refers to Lucy as a *camera obscura*,⁴¹ and Behdad agrees with this assessment, explaining, “Lucy tells very little about her feelings, background, and ‘self.’ Instead she focuses like a camera on people and objects around her, thus distancing herself from us.”⁴² In Lucy Snowe, we see a narrator with designs upon us, one who illuminates and eclipses truth as she wishes.

The first moment of clear evasion that we see is when Dr. John has recognized Ms. Lucy the schoolteacher as his childhood friend, Lucy Snowe, after the two have worked together for several months. Lucy then admits in this moment to having recognized Dr. John as Graham Bretton when she first saw him. She admits: “This Graham Bretton, *was* Dr. John...I ascertained this identity scarcely with surprise” (*Vil*, 162). She admits that she had realized this the first time that she met him, but she had neglected to admit this in her narration. She confesses:

To *say* anything on the subject, to *hint* at my discovery, had not suited my habits of thought, or assimilated with my system of feeling. On the contrary, I had preferred to keep the matter to myself. I liked entering his presence covered with a cloud he had not seen through, while he stood before me under a ray of special illumination which shone all partial over his head, trembled about his feet, and cast light no farther. (*Vil*, 162)

⁴¹ Diane Long Hoeveler, “Gothic Technologies: Visuality in the Romantic Era Smoke and Mirrors: Internalizing the Magic Lantern Show in *Villette*,” *Praxis Series, Romantic Circles*, www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/gothic/hoeveler.html, accessed 11 June 2014, para 9.

⁴² Ali Behdad, “Visibility, Secrecy, and the Novel: Narrative Power in Brontë and Zola,” *Literature Interpretation Theory* 1, no. 4 (1990): 259.

We can see the height of Lucy's evasive nature here. Unlike Jane Eyre, who famously addresses the reader and divulges the deepest feelings of her soul, Lucy describes her emotions and thoughts as "habits of thought" or a "system of feeling." Her narrative divulging of the truth is just as calculated. She shields her identity from Dr. John because she enjoys anonymity and the voyeuristic pleasure of making a connection that he does not. This same attitude, of course, extends to her audience. She takes pleasure in omitting details and presenting them later at her leisure. The "ray of special illumination" that falls upon Dr. John in her visual awareness is an apt visual expression of Lucy's narrative personality. She describes that the light "trembled about his feet, and cast light no farther" because her instinctual visual knowledge remains in her personal realization about Dr. John and this realization does not appear in the narrative until Lucy decides to disclose it at a later time. We see an essential discrepancy between the visual knowledge Lucy perceives and what she chooses to relate in her account.

We see another moment when Lucy evades clear and truthful narration at the end of the novel when she provides a cryptic explanation of what happens to M. Paul on a voyage. There seems to be critical consensus that he dies in a shipwreck, though Lucy never says so definitively. Lucy describes a terrible tempest in the Atlantic and the worries of "a thousand weepers" on shore, and then she abruptly shifts to a meta-narrative mode:

Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life. (*Vil*, 462)

It seems clear that M. Paul and Lucy never enjoy a blissful reunion, however much Lucy would like her audience to imagine it. Yet, to fret over Brontë's intention with this ending, as many critics have, seems to be a bit beside the point to me. In fact, in a letter to Ellen Nussey, Brontë herself stated that the ending was "designed that every reader should settle the catastrophe for himself."⁴³ However, many critics have taken issue with the novel's ambiguities, and most particularly this ending. Earl Knies faults the novel for its "unreliable narrator"⁴⁴ and Robert B. Martin describes it as having an "odd structure."⁴⁵ Behdad relates that at the conclusion of *Villette*, "We realize the impossibility of unearthing these secrets--for they are buried with their holders—the narrator's secrecy can appear only as an exercise of narrative power."⁴⁶ I find it important to complicate these negative views of the novel's ambiguous closing, however, that this flawed notion of vision proves the novel's most important theme. Lucy dearly values her own vision and often cloaks her real conjectures about what she sees from her audience. It is her parting gesture to her audience to allow them this same privilege to decide their own vision for her story, despite her strong hints of M. Paul's tragic death.

Another aspect of Lucy's vision that has troubled critics is her sense of confusion and short-sidedness in her observations, particularly in her sighting of a nun. She sees "an image like-- a NUN" several times in *Villette* (*Vil*, 229). At first this figure frightens her, but then she grows indignant and determined to understand this nun as the novel wears on. She wonders if this figure is the apparition of a nun who was buried under a pear tree in the pensionnat garden

⁴³ Margaret Smith, *Selected Letters of Charlotte Brontë* (London, Oxford University Press, 2007), 205. Letter dated August 25, 1852.

⁴⁴ Earl A. Knies, *The Art of Charlotte Brontë*, (Athens: Ohio U P, 1969), 77.

⁴⁵ Robert B. Martin, *The Accents of Persuasion*. (New York: Norton, 1966), 208.

⁴⁶ Behdad, "Visibility, Secrecy, and the Novel," 259.

after dying of grief for breaking her vow of chastity, and this mystery is the main source of Gothic tension in the novel. However, this nun figure that she sees ends up being Count Alfred de Hamal, a love interest of Lucy's student Ginevra Fanshawe. Hamal dresses in drag to avoid detection as he visits his lover within the walls of the school. Lucy sees the nun three different times in the novel—once in the attic and twice in the garden. On each occasion, she is trying to evade surveillance in some way. The first time she sees the nun, she is hiding to read a letter that Dr. John has sent her. She recounts, "I saw in the middle of that ghostly chamber a figure all black and white; the skirts straight, narrow, black; the head bandaged, veiled, white...this I vow—I saw there—in that room—on that night—an image like—a NUN" (*Vil*, 229). The melodramatic pacing signified here with these long dashes elicits suspense and drama, and this is a stylistic choice that channels Matthew Gregory Lewis' depiction of the bleeding nun in *The Monk* (1796). It seems to me that Brontë takes pains in this first sighting of the nun to link her to the Gothic tradition.

Lucy sees the nun a second time, and this time she is in the pensionnat garden, enjoying the night air and meditating on the direction of her life. She wonders to herself what plan God has for her, "what road was open?—what plan available?" (*Vil*, 277). Just then, the moon illuminates a strange figure: "I looked more narrowly, to make out the cause of this well-defined contrast appearing a little suddenly in the obscure alley: whiter and blacker it grew on my eye: it took shape with instantaneous transformation. I stood about three yards from a tall, sable-robed, snowy-veiled woman." This time, Lucy speaks to the nun and asks the figure what she wants. Of course, there is no answer, "She stood mute. She had no face—no features: all below her brow was masked with a white cloth; but she had eyes, and they viewed me" (*Vil*, 278). We see a clear frustration on Lucy's part that this figure seems to know exactly where to find her. The nun can

observe her, but she cannot decipher the nun's identity, which is a clear reversal for Lucy's decided scrutinizing nature. After the sighting, Lucy fears running into the nun again. Dr. John laughs about her concerns, dismissing her vision just as Rochester had dismissed Jane's. He says that he will continue to write to her "to keep away the nun" (*Vil*, 237). In Lucy's final sighting of the nun, M. Paul sees the figure as well, and he validates Lucy's fears. M. Paul is more invested in the nun figure than Lucy is and suggests that perhaps it is the ghost of the nun buried within the garden. When Lucy professes that she has seen the figure also, he continues, "I anticipated that. Whether this nun be flesh and blood, or something that remains when blood is dried, and flesh is wasted, her business is as much with you as with me, probably" (*Vil*, 344). Following this sighting, M. Paul and Lucy define their attachment to each other more than ever; the bonding experience of seeing this nun seems to facilitate this bond. However, the next day, Lucy finds the nun habit in her bed and destroys it. She discovers in due time that this nun figure was Alfred de Hamal.

Because of the powerful nature of this nun figure as well as the powerful affect she has on our otherwise stoic narrator, these sightings have been the subject of much scholarly debate. So many ambiguities within the novel's overall structure can be illuminated through this figure: the novel's precise religious theme, Lucy's feminist views, and the question of Lucy's reliability as a narrator. Several critics have mused over *Villette*'s overall message about Roman Catholicism. Around the time that Brontë composed the novel, anti-Catholic sentiments were particularly high, in part due to the Pope's ordination of English bishops in 1850 as well as John Henry Newman's high profile conversion from Protestantism to Catholicism.⁴⁷ The English

⁴⁷ D. G. Paz, *Popular Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 211.

feared surveillance from this Roman entity, and they feared the dilution of their pure national identity.⁴⁸ For this reason, popular literature referred to Catholics as “snakes,” “pests,” “poisonous microbes,” and “emissaries of Satan.”⁴⁹ Kathleen Vejvoda argues that *Villette* adheres to a well-known fear in Brontë’s time that women could be easily seduced by Catholicism “because they were perceived as being more vulnerable than men to religious proselytism and conversion, to the attractions of ritual, and—a subject treated with particular scurrilousness in the press—the seduction of the confessional.”⁵⁰

There is some evidence that Brontë held anti-Catholic views. She expressed disapproval for the religion in a letter to Ellen Nussey, probably in July 1842, and berated all kinds of religious fanaticism and most especially Catholicism: “I consider Methodism, Quakerism & the extremes of high & low Churchism foolish but Roman Catholicism beats them all.”⁵¹ Tom Winnifrith posits that she considered all these strains of fanaticism as false because of their elaborate system of works necessary for salvation, which had nothing to do with true morality, in her mind.⁵² Brontë also referred to Catholicism as, “a most feeble childish piece of humbug;”⁵³ however, as Thornmählen suggests, Brontë wrote of the Church in this way when she lived in Brussels and was infatuated with a Catholic man, and this situation may have caused Charlotte to speak especially negatively about Catholicism to disarm her concerned father.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Ibid., 279.

⁴⁹ Margaret M. Maison, *The Victorian Vision: Studies in the Religious Novel* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), 171.

⁵⁰ Kathleen Vejvoda, “Idolatry in *Jane Eyre*,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 31, no. 1 Victorian Religion (2003): 241.

⁵² Winnifrith, *The Brontës and Their Background*, 50.

⁵³ Smith, *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, 289-90.

⁵⁴ Thornmählen, *The Brontës and Religion*, 29.

It's fair to say that if Charlotte was strongly against Catholicism that she was also intrigued with the Church's people and practices. We can see this same attitude in Lucy Snowe. Vejvoda points out this resemblance between Brontë and Lucy and says of both of them: "Even though [Brontë] continued to view Roman Catholicism negatively, she also saw in its alleged fatuity and 'extremes' her own weaknesses, specifically her capacity for extreme emotional—indeed, for idolatrous—attachments."⁵⁵ We can spot this inconsistent view of Catholicism throughout *Villette*. It is impossible to miss Lucy's prejudice against the Catholics she encounters, whom she roundly judges to be superstitious, dishonest, and materialistic. She sees the entire of Madame Beck's school as corrupt, taking particular issue with the doctrines taught to the young pupils, for in her view they did not foster their individualized interpretation of Christian life. She laments,

great pains were taken to hide chains with flowers: a subtle essence of Romanism pervaded every arrangement: large sensual indulgence (so to speak) was permitted by way of counterpoise to jealous spiritual restraint. Each mind was being reared in slavery; but, to prevent reflection from dwelling on this fact, every pretext for physical recreation was seized and made the most of. There, as elsewhere, the CHURCH strove to bring up her children robust in body, feeble in soul, fat, ruddy, hale, joyous, ignorant, unthinking, unquestioning. "Eat, drink, and live!" she says. "Look after your bodies; leave your souls to me. I hold their cure—guide their course: I guarantee their final fate." A bargain, in which every true Catholic deems himself a gainer. Lucifer just offers the same terms:

⁵⁵ Kathleen Vejvoda, "Idolatry in *Jane Eyre*," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 31, no. 1 Victorian Religion (2003): 242.

"All this power will I give thee, and the glory of it; for that is delivered unto me, and to whomsoever I will I give it. If thou, therefore, wilt worship me, all shall be thine!" (*Vil*, 116)

Here we can see the popular Protestant idea that Catholics were enslaved in a hierarchical system. Thormählen sums up the Protestant lament for Catholics as: "What could have been the children of God are thus merely the members of an imperfect terrestrial organisation."⁵⁶ Lucy refers to the structure of Catholicism as hiding "chains with flowers" because in her view security within this hierarchical system robs its followers of a natural connection with God. What appears natural and pleasing is true bondage in her eyes.

Despite the apparent anti-Catholic nature of *Villette*, however, there are moments when Lucy strongly gravitates toward Catholicism. For example, she goes to Père Silas, a Catholic priest, for comfort in a time of depression; not to mention, the love of her life, M. Paul, is a self-proclaimed "lay Jesuit."⁵⁷ In Lucy's attraction toward Père Silas and M. Paul, we see a somewhat contradictory attraction to Romanism. Tonya Edgren-Bindas and Diane Hoeveler take their assessment a step further and see *Villette* as decidedly pro-Catholic in some notable ways. Edgren-Bindas relates that, "Lucy is actually drawn to the Catholic faith and even models her life to fit a Catholic mould."⁵⁸ For her, Lucy's relationship with M. Paul bears likeness to Christ's relationship with Catholic nuns. She suggests, "[t]he two, prevented from marrying in this world,

⁵⁶ Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion*, 34

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 343.

⁵⁸ Tonya Edgren-Bindas, "The Cloistering of Lucy Snowe: An Element of Catholicism in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," *Brontë Studies* 32 (November 2007): 253.

are thus wed in another sense.”⁵⁹ Hoeveler also reads M. Paul as having a Christ-like impact on Lucy.⁶⁰ While these two critics find some interesting details to support their ideas, other critics make what I consider more compelling arguments that the novel proves to be either neutral towards Catholicism or even pro-Catholic by parodying Gothic stereotypes of the church.

Tellingly, Diane Long Hoeveler seems to amend her 1978 analysis of *Villette* that I referenced above in a 2005 essay. She makes a very convincing argument that Lucy’s unreliable vision, most especially with the nun sighting, mimics a very specific Victorian supernatural practice, the magic lantern show. This was a Victorian form of entertainment that employed early projection to trick an audience into thinking they had summoned spirits through a séance. For Hoeveler, the ultimate falsity of this image suggests the silliness of Protestant fanaticism that denigrates Romanism. Through the dissolution of the nun image, she posits that Brontë “slyly suggests that the fears and fantasies that the gothic has produced exist ultimately within the imagination and nowhere else.”⁶¹ Nicholas Armitage agrees with this notion that while the nun image may seem like a piece of anti-Catholic propaganda, it in fact reveals that English Protestants may possess perhaps even a greater degree of religious superstition in their stigmas about the Catholics than the Catholics themselves hold in their religious observance. In his estimation, Armitage relates that it is

by no means clear that we should see *Villette* as anti-Catholic. It would perhaps be nearer the mark to say that Charlotte is telling us that some elements in the Evangelical

⁵⁹ Ibid., 258.

⁶⁰ Diane Long Hoeveler, “The Obscured Eye: Visual Imagery as Theme and Structure in *Villette*,” *Ball State University Forum* 19, no. 1 (1978): 27, 30.

⁶¹ Hoeveler, “Gothic Technologies,” para 27.

movement in the Church of England, arrogating to themselves the rights of social control over the ravages of humanity's inescapable depravity, were exhibiting a "fanaticism" no less enslaving than Rome's sentimental attachment to self-denial and submission.⁶²

I agree with Hoeveler and Armitage that the nun functions to parody the Gothic trope of the bleeding nun. Though the figure is fearsome to Lucy, it is completely harmless. The dissolution of the image actually points to universal susceptibility to superstition and the inherently unspooky nature of the Catholic nun, who had been sensationalized in a disrespectful way.

Lucy's sighting of the nun has not only fueled discussion about Brontë's views on Catholicism, but it has also proved an important image of female oppression for many feminist critics. Gilbert and Gubar see Lucy's misreading of the nun as proof that "she cannot employ the narrative structures available to her, . . . so she finds herself using and abusing—presenting and undercutting—images and stories of male devising."⁶³ For them, Lucy is a helpless, objectified and socially exploited woman who is entombed within a religious patriarchal family, and so she begins to try to make sense of how this patriarchal entity conceives of women's roles. They suggest: "Living inside this tomb, she discovers that it is anything but imageless; it is a chamber of terrible visions, not the least of which is that of being buried alive."⁶⁴ Gilbert and Gubar understand Lucy's vision as inextricably linked to the fear of nunnery and oppression. For them, the nun is the *Doppelgänger* of Lucy's lonely existence and an emblem of her powerlessness. By their estimation, her vision and reliance of the image are symptomatic of her inability to express

⁶² Armitage, "Melting Miss Snowe," 217.

⁶³ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 419.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 401.

her imagination, a trouble that they assess Brontë must have faced within a male-dominated literary culture. Evasive narration and unstable images, for them, are literary artifacts of a crippled female artist. They continue, “The nun is also symbolic for Lucy of the only socially acceptable life available to a single woman—a life of service, self-abnegation, and chastity.”⁶⁵ This reading explains why the nun appears when Lucy reflects on her desire to be loved and find clear direction for her life. Micael Clarke notes that the nun is the central image of repressed female desire in the novel and that Lucy fears that the nun may be “the harbinger of madness.”⁶⁶ Certainly in the first two moments that Lucy sees the nun, she is contemplating her loneliness and marginalized position in society. For these critics, the nun incarnates the fears she has concerning her isolation and disconnection from the world.

More recent critics have departed from Gilbert and Gubar’s tradition of viewing Lucy as an isolated, oppressed woman. Rosemary Clark-Beattie suggests that this nun image does serve as double for Lucy earlier on but then becomes the force that ties her and Paul Emanuel together. Though he “will not respect a woman who expresses passion directly,” Clark-Beattie suggests,⁶⁷ the nun speaks to M. Paul’s consciousness as an effective glimpse into Lucy’s desire. We see in this nun icon a powerful enough image that it bridges gender, in a sense. Rather than Lucy accepting masculine Reason, as would be typical in many courtship dénouements in Victorian literature, instead M. Paul is reconciled with Lucy’s visual imagination. In this, we see an important reversal. Following this sighting, he comes to understand Lucy’s love for him. His

⁶⁵ Ibid., 426.

⁶⁶ Clarke, “Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*,” 978.

⁶⁷ Rosemary Clark-Beattie, “Fables of Rebellion: Anti-Catholicism and the Structure of *Villette*,” *ELH* 53 (1986): 838.

alignment with Lucy's vision facilitates this union, and the nun's dissolution coincides with the partial fulfillment of Lucy's desire.

In this way, Lucy is not a buried nun who is powerless to the world around her, as Gilbert and Gubar suggest. While Lucy is marginalized, she possesses unique vision and a masculine sense of surveillance in the world around her. She may not have social status or affability, but she does have her subjectivity. Though her vision (or at least her retelling of it) is unreliable at times, she privileges her perspective and tactically evades any deep narrative transference of her own interiority. On this point, Hoeveler posits that Lucy—rather than being a suppressed and invisible woman—is actually liberated:

By tracing the journey of progressive self-realization, Lucy is both a character and her creator. She is another exemplar of the Romantic artist who creates his own reality in an ambiguous universe. In Lucy's ability to unify the mimetic and projective, reason and imagination, past and present, appearance and reality, she becomes the supreme novelist, the heroine of her own created universe."⁶⁸

Hoeveler may oversimplify the unity that Lucy is able to create, for, in the end, the novel still leaves many apparent incongruities and unanswered questions. However, Lucy certainly does embrace ambiguity and tells her story on her own terms, which is a mark of empowerment above and beyond the typical Victorian narrator.

Ruth Robbins recognizes this empowerment, positing: "Unlike the standard feminine ideal of the time, Lucy Snowe does not passively accept how others view her, but takes a

⁶⁸ Hoeveler, "The Obscured Eye," 30.

masculine, autonomous, predative view of others.”⁶⁹ This concept of the powerful male gaze in terms of the *camera obscura* in both literature and cinema has been strongly explored by E. Ann Kaplan and Laura Mulvey, who both argue that an unapologetic subject perspective is indeed gendered male by western social norms.⁷⁰ Brontë recognized how Lucy differed from the norm, calling Lucy “cold” and relating that she deliberately chose her name of Snowe to illustrate her “external coldness.”⁷¹ This calculated coldness, then, assumes a masculine air of unapologetic scrutiny. Lucy’s tone suggests her extraordinary self-centeredness in her narrative, though she is operating in a world that has clearly marginalized her.

The epistemological complexity in Lucy’s vision has attracted a lot of scholarly interest, and it is a point that several critics have considered in terms of narratological theory as well. For many critics, this instance of the nun seems to be the element of the novel that determines Lucy’s true dependability as a narrator, and in turn, the stability of the narrative in general. For Heather Glen, Lucy’s inability to identify this nun figure suggests her inability to process the testimony of her own eyes. In this view, Lucy’s inconsistent vision suggests that “self is experienced less as subject than as object” and perpetuates the “deep-rooted sense of vision as provisional, uncertain, unreliable; indicative less of power than of vulnerability.”⁷² Jessica Brent takes a similar though less developed reading of the novel, seeing Lucy’s use of imagery as indicative of her losing

⁶⁹ Ruth Robbins, “How do I Look?: *Villette* and Looking Different(ly),” *Brontë Studies* 28 (2003): 215.

⁷⁰ E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983); Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 6-18.

⁷¹ Smith, *Selected Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, 210. Charlotte wrote this letter to W.S. Williams, dated 6 November 1852.

⁷² Glen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History*, 226.

narrative control.⁷³ The notion seems to be that in the 6 years between her publication of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* Charlotte Brontë learned to discredit vision and straightforward supernaturalism as she presented it in her debut novel. These critics seem to see complex vision as an objective outlook that fails to situate one's perspective within the larger world.

Francesca Kazan describes the unstableness that Lucy's vision creates as a heresy of a plot, in which truth shifts.⁷⁴ Paul Wotipka argues in a similar vein that Brontë turns the dependability of visual perception on its head when we find out that Lucy's conjectures about a mysterious nun figure prove faulty. He relates:

Bronte thus represents the eye in terms of its essential duplicity, its diverse and contradictory functions. It is an instrument of penetration and projection, an organ that mediates between external and internal worlds, a medium of silent communication, a vessel or container of sensory impressions - but always subject to the distortions and refractions of an endless variety of lenses or frames, whether they are "literal" or "conceptual" or somewhere in between.⁷⁵

Wotipka recognizes that the eye in *Villette* functions as a warped filter by which truth is refracted and distorted, and it is the elemental boundary between the external and the internal. Where my view differs from Wotipka's is that while he seems to see Lucy's misunderstanding of the nun as

⁷³ Jessica Brent, "Haunting Pictures, Missing Letters: Visual Displacement and Narrative Elision in *Villette*," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 37, no. 1/2 (2003): 92.

⁷⁴ Francesca Kazan, "Heresy, the Image, and Description; or, Picturing the Invisible: Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 32, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 542-3.

⁷⁵ Paul Wotipka, "Ocularity and Irony: Pictorialism in *Villette*," *Word and Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry* 8, no. 2 (1992): 103, 105.

a physiological and psychological phenomenon, I see this misunderstanding as the inarticulation of two ways of knowing: first, the intimate realm of visual understanding that can only be fully recognized by the one internalizing this vision, and second, this knowledge translated into communicable terms. Because of Lucy's habit of evasion in the novel, we are left to wonder how much she knows about this nun figure through vision that she is not imparting to the audience through words.



Figure 4.3 Illustration by C.E. Brock of *Villette* for May Clarissa Gillington Byron's *A Day with Charlotte Brontë* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1911). This book was part of the "Days with Great Writers" series, which catalogued writers important to British national heritage. C.E. Brock (1870-1938) was one of a family of illustrators. His work was widely published and he illustrated novels by Jane Austen, William Thackeray, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot. He is best known for his line work as a drawer, but as we can see from the illustration above, he was also a talented colorist.

As her earlier evasion about Graham Bretton/Dr. John suggests, we can come to realize that vision is the most intimate form of knowledge for Lucy, but translating sight into language is where problems can occur. Lucy seems to recognize this problem of translation when she calls her account a “heretic narrative” (*Vil*, 149). This is true in the literal sense in that she is a Protestant writing about mostly Catholic characters and in a location under the jurisdiction of Catholic authority; however, Lucy’s narrative is heretical also in the sense that she is purposefully abnormal in her narrative style. I would go one step further to say that Lucy is also heretical in the sense that she privileges vision in a most odd and curious way—making her truly an anomaly, certainly within Victorian literature. When we look at Lucy’s narrative personality as a whole, it does seem that Lucy is aware of the falsity of the nun image from the beginning but is hiding this from the reader.

On the topic of Lucy’s narratological relationship to the reader’s truth, C.E. Brock’s 1911 depiction of the final nun sighting (Figure 4.3) in *Villette* is most ironic. In this image, we can see Lucy Snowe and M. Paul huddled together in fear, seemingly brought together through this strange sighting. In the foreground, Hamal also faces forward in his nun habit. His face bears a decidedly masculine appearance, much different from the bandaged face that Lucy describes. This illustration reflects the narrative norm of the audience being in on dramatic irony. Often, the reader is aware of realities that the characters of a text are not yet aware; yet, in *Villette* we have strong reason to believe that the opposite is true, that Lucy is aware of truths that are not yet revealed to the audience. In this way, she brings the artifice of narrative to life. By nature, one who has experienced the plot’s events and is relaying them after the fact is withholding information for the pleasure of the audience, and Lucy does so here in a decidedly deliberate way.

We see from Lucy's very first sighting of the nun an indication that she questions and doubts what she sees. She does not call the figure a nun but "an image *like*—a NUN" (*Vil*, 229; italics mine). In introducing the nun in this way, Lucy allows for skepticism. Francesca Kazan views Lucy's unsure view of the nun as "a gesture of extraordinary willfulness." For her, Lucy's inability to recognize the nun's definitive identity "point[s] to more than a repressed desire" a detail that many feminist critics have noticed. For Kazan, "[s]ight has become a matter of will, and refusing to see is the ultimate expression of power. By 'blinding' herself Lucy preserves her inner vision. Her closed eyes in no way represent an impotency--quite the opposite."⁷⁶ Kazan seems to see Lucy as intentionally unaware of the nun's identity, in denial in some way. Katherine Inglis presents a somewhat different argument, that Lucy's use of optical anatomy is evidence of her desire to present a carefully refracted narrative and also avoid detection herself. She emphasizes that when an observer makes eye contact with another person, it is impossible to avoid detection because of the information that can be passed from the observer to the observed.⁷⁷ I think Inglis's argument is the closest to the mark in assessing Brontë's notions of visual knowledge. To borrow Inglis's metaphor, Lucy sees the truth about the nun but avoids eye contact with the reader so as not to transfer an inkling of this visual knowledge. She eclipses her interiority for her own privacy while exerting a version of the narrative that reserves truth for another time—if and when she wishes to divulge it.

Lucy's evasiveness raises interesting questions about the nature of narrative in general. Her exaggerated lapses in vision and failure to divulge her discoveries as they occur highlight the unreliability of language itself. Furthermore, despite the clear differences between *Villette*'s

⁷⁶ Kazan, "Heresy, the Image, and Description," 552.

⁷⁷ Katherine Inglis, "Ophthalmoscopy in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," 360.

narrator compared to Brontë's earlier ones, Lucy does espouse vision as a form of intimate knowledge. She seems to mistrust patriarchal conventions in language, as other Brontë women do. When we look at Charlotte Brontë's overall canon, we do see a clear progression from female protagonists seeing images that function as veritable prophecies as in *Jane Eyre*. This visual prophecy is a bit tempered in Charlotte's second major novel *Shirley*, for though Shirley expresses vibrant visions, she lives in a world that does not necessarily honor them. *Villette* departs even further from the idealism in *Jane Eyre* for not only does the world of the novel fail to uphold Lucy's visions, but she avoids articulating the truth about her visions to her audience—thus the notion of the veritable connection between vision and text is even more convoluted in *Villette*. What's more, we can see a clear difference between the ghostly apparitions in *Wuthering Heights* and the false apparitions in *Villette*. While the apparitions in *Wuthering Heights* are far from parodic and are to be taken in earnest as Gothic devices, the false apparitions in *Villette* serve as subversive images. Brontë seems to suggest that when it comes to all the most important topics—religion, social practice, personal direction—that there is an essential discrepancy, and even a disjunction, between the visual recognition of truth and the translation of that pure intuitive knowledge into narrative truth. In my mind, she crafts Lucy as a blatantly unreliable narrator to suggest that the translation of pure visual knowledge into textual veracity is perhaps even more unlikely when we have a narrator who is less than forthcoming. We have no indication that Lucy recognizes de Hamal right off, but we also know that she knows more than she is letting on throughout this narrative, and so we are thus left with a verbal screen in front of her cognitive world, a visual world that can perhaps never quite make it onto the page.

The nun is the central image of the novel, and it does serve as a double for Lucy, as the feminist theoretical tradition of the novel suggests. The nun is also a symbol for the doctrinal peculiarities of Catholicism and the opportunity for single women to belong to a patriarchal family within its structure. These are both realities that Lucy faces as a single woman who works for a Catholic institution and thus she is both repulsed by and drawn to this nun figure. However, the nun does not only serve as a manifestation of Lucy's anxieties about Catholicism or her entrapment within a patriarchal religious institution, it also functions on a more fundamental epistemological level. Just as Lucy perceives the falsity of this nun image and hints at this falsity without fully disclosing her suspicions to her audience, so do we perceive Brontë's broader suggestion that there may be many who are observing the falsity within systematized religious patriarchy but are either unwilling to impart their visual knowledge into language or are unable to do so. As we see in Lucy's narrative, it is all too easy for the visual realities to become convoluted in a story with a less than forthright narrator. Thus Brontë calls into question our ways of knowing in general. *Villette* proves to be a darker and more complex novel to cap off her trilogy of decidedly visual novels. It is my view that Lucy does not struggle with unreliable vision; rather, her vision bears a power so intimate to her that she hoards her visual knowledge for her own purposes and allows her audience to stay in the dark and try to decipher their own reconstruction of truth. This may be an epistemology that seems much more existential than Christian, but we can again trace this complex idea of vision and truth to the liberal evangelical doctrine that one can visually and intuitively experience religion. One of Brontë's main points in *Villette* seems to be that this visual truth is often fettered by the forthrightness of its receptors and their ability to transpose it into language.

CHAPTER 5: GENDERED MORALITY AND DIDACTIC SPECTACLE IN EMILY AND ANNE BRONTË

In all of my exploration of the Brontës' religious themes thus far, I have abstained from writing about religious ethics in any substantive way. Here I will reflect on how Emily and Anne Brontë present Christian morality and, more particularly, women's role as moral exemplars. As it turns out, their methods are unorthodox in some respects, for they use visual forms to construct an implied ethics. In *Wuthering Heights*, this visual didacticism completely replaces straightforward morality, and in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (henceforth *Wildfell Hall*), visual lessons occur alongside traditional textual didacticism. These visual aspects typically take the form of didactic spectacle. Emily and Anne unflinchingly present negative modeling, or the spectacle of what not to do. The novels portray immorality in many forms: domestic violence, animal cruelty, attempted rape, severe emotional abuse, infidelity, gambling, and alcoholism. Unsurprisingly, this is content that Victorians often found shocking and in bad taste. Elizabeth Rigby, for example, called *Wuthering Heights* "odiously and abominably pagan,"¹ and another reviewer recognized "the brutalizing influence of unchecked passion" in the novel.² An even greater outcry arose against Anne Brontë's *Wildfell Hall*. One critic for *The Spectator* wrote, "there seems in the writer a morbid love for the coarse, not to say the brutal."³ Another critic for *The Rambler* saw the book's realism as an "uncalled-for and unhealthy representation of the vilest phases of human life."⁴ *Sharpe's London Magazine* was perhaps most outraged, calling

¹ A review from Elizabeth Rigby (Lady Eastlake) in *Quarterly Review* (December 1848), and excerpted in *Wuthering Heights: A Casebook*, ed. Miriam Allot (London: Macmillan, 1970), 48.

² Anonymous review of *Wuthering Heights* in *Britannia* dated 15 January 1848, and reported in Allot, *The Brontës*, 225

³ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 268.

Wildfell Hall "unfit for perusal . . . we will not believe any woman would have written such a work [containing such] disgustingly ruthless minuteness."⁵ We can better understand this contemporary outcry against *Wuthering Heights* and *Wildfell Hall* when we situate the novels within Victorian notions of morality and compare the novels to the popular conventions of the conduct novel.

The Victorians were by and large a morally earnest people, and they saw values such as cleanliness, self-sufficiency, honesty, and sexual purity as central to upholding their civilization. When we consider the specifics of moral culture, we see another aspect of Victorian morality that seems to be commonly understood but is not often articulated adequately—the notion of the manners that must accompany morality. As Gertrude Himmelfarb reports, the Victorians used a common turn of phrase to show how both “manners and morals” were important. By this they meant that while ethical observance was paramount, when people fell short of their moral potential, it was important to maintain their manners or the appearance of virtue. The result was not necessarily a hypocritical value system, as present-day stereotypes about the Victorians suggest.⁶ Rather, Victorians were generally expected to admit to their faults openly and then take every precaution to avoid evil, and indeed the very appearance of it, through good manners, or religious virtues in motion.

However, as critics of Victorian morality would be keen to point out, the notion of manners and keeping up appearances sometimes eclipsed genuine application of religious ethics. As Himmelfarb suggests: “The Victorians thought it no small virtue to maintain the appearance,

⁵ Ibid., 263-4.

⁶ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 26.

the manners, of good conduct even while violating some moral principle, for in their demeanor they affirmed the legitimacy of the principle itself.”⁷ In short, Victorians saw it important to keep up the appearance of morality so that they could further the cultural importance of Christian ethics, even if they were unable to live according to these standards themselves. When we consider this notion that morality and manners are inextricably tied, we can better understand why the Brontës’ contemporaries took issue with their novels. This didactic spectacle and the negative modeling that presented immoral behavior was a breach of Victorian manners, and in my view, this was the main factor that rendered these novels so unpalatable to some reviewers. I believe that this breach in Victorian manners has also resulted in confusion for many modern-day critics.

Scholars have never really placed the Brontës within the tradition of the conduct novel, and I believe that this is the case for several reasons. First, they have been excluded from this tradition because they were not tied to a well-defined religious sect in the way that many didactic writers were: for example, Charlotte Mary Yonge was a High Anglican and proponent of the Oxford Movement, Hesba Stretton was a Congregationalist, and Grace Aguilar was an English Jew. These women and their literary markets were defined in part by their sectarian allegiance, and the values of these particular sects bore a strong presence in their work. Scholars also seem more comfortable tracing religious themes in their works because they can tie them back to certain theological tenets. The Brontës’ espousal of liberal evangelicalism and its theological views is comparatively untethered. As a result, they are much more difficult to link to a standardized ideology in any methodical way. Secondly, I believe that critics have not considered the Brontës as didactic writers because their works reveal a complexity and merit that

⁷ Ibid., 23.

many conduct novels lack. This is not to say that works of didactic fiction lack literary merit, for their simple plots are well-suited to the moral instruction of a young audience, as a wealth of scholarship attests.⁸ The Brontës' complex religious themes are a far cry from this tradition, yet they bear an important commonality—they both dwell on the importance of moral goodness, though they may define moral goodness differently from their more conservative contemporaries, and they may convey their message in very different ways.

To establish a point of reference between Emily and Anne Brontë's work in comparison with the broader scope of conventional conduct fiction, I wish to look to Charlotte Mary Yonge's *The Daisy Chain, or, Aspirations* (1856), a novel that has earned increasing critical appreciation. This novel chronicles the May family's struggles after their mother dies and Etheldred must step in to educate her ten siblings as well as the disadvantaged children of their village. The novel preaches the value of self-sacrifice through positive modeling as we watch Etheldred sacrifice her intellectual curiosity and marriage prospects so that she can care for her father and the children at the school she runs. Time and again, we see Etheldred act unselfishly, and she is then rewarded with intangible, spiritual benefits. When temptations of marriage or any self-centered desires come into play, they are rendered so benignly that it would satisfy the most puritanical critic.

We can see another method of presenting morality in Hesba Stretton's bestseller, *Jessica's First Prayer* and its sequel, *Jessica's Mother*, which catalogue the evangelizing of a street urchin who has fled from her abusive mother. These novels do portray some negative

⁸ To list a few conduct novels that have attractive considerable scholarly interest as of late: Grace Aguilar's *Home Influence* (1847) and its sequel *A Mother's Recompense* (1850); Hesba Stretton's *Jessica's First Prayer* (1866) and *Jessica's Mother* (1866); and Emma Jane Worboise's *Thornycroft Hall* (1864), *Crystabel* (1873) and *A Woman's Patience* (1879).

modeling through characters who are living sinfully. In certain passages Jessica makes mention of the cruel abuse, but in highly euphemistic terms. Jessica's mother makes an appearance in the second book, proving to be cold and depraved, but the immoral characters in these novels are much like the immoral figures in Sunday School scenarios—simplified to a dehumanizing end. Even in novels like Stretton's where there is some negative modeling, never is immorality given so much display and so much personality as it is in *Wuthering Heights* and *Wildfell Hall*.

I believe that Emily and Anne chose to insert such clear violence in their novels for several reasons, perhaps the most important of which was their intimate personal knowledge of the terrible consequences of moral downfall. Their brother Branwell dabbled in illicit drugs and allegedly had an affair with his employer,⁹ and these choices sent him on a downward spiral that resulted in his death in 1848, just a few months after the sisters published their novels. We can read the violence and depravity in both of these texts as reflective of the family's experience. This comes through especially clearly in *Wildfell Hall* in Helen's musings about salvation and her hope that her wicked husband will repent. As Ian Jack notes, Anne Brontë was moved by "the spectacle of Branwell's despair."¹⁰ However, I aim to prove that the Brontës not only included this graphic material because of their personal connection to it but because their notion of morality takes on visual expression, as we have seen with so many other aspects of their religious subject matter. Much of the spectacle of immorality may reveal how men act violently toward women and children, and I believe that the Brontës render this graphic violence in an effort to show the negative effect of this abuse and how gender inequalities complicate women's

⁹ For more information about Branwell's alleged affair see Daphne du Maurier, *The Infernal World of Branwell Brontë* (London: Gollancz, 1960), chapters 13-16. Also see Joan Rees, *Profligate Son: Branwell Brontë and His Sisters* (London: Hale, 1986), 115-36.

¹⁰ Ian Jack, "Introduction," to Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*, xiv.

prescribed role as moral exemplar. These novels seem to posit the question: how can women be expected to serve as effective moral forces when they have such limited social and religious power?

The Spectacle of Hereditary Male Violence in *Wuthering Heights*

As I noted earlier in this chapter, Emily Brontë's contemporaries found *Wuthering Heights* shockingly violent and crude. Though later critics have widely recognized its literary merit, most critics persist in the general notion that the novel furthers an amoral agenda. It is important to address the general estimation of *Wuthering Heights*' moral content before I explain my notion of Emily's didactic spectacle. Many critics have suggested that the novel is so important because it avoids operating within moral ideology. Robert Barnard, for example, argues that Emily Brontë "looked at the developing tradition of the English novel, from Fielding to Scott, and determined she was going to do something that had never been done before: dispense with explicit or implicit moral codes. . . . The proposition is this: what would the world be like without moral codes? The novel is her answer."¹¹ Barnard is not suggesting that the novel is subversively amoral or that it displays the need for morality, but rather, that it is a progressive rejection of morality. John E. Jordan sees *Wuthering Heights* in a similar way, remarking on "the amazing quality of innocence" that Emily must have had to write free of morality¹²—an ironic vantage point, to be sure. To cite another example, Tom Winnifrith believes that Brontë resists

¹¹ Robert Barnard, "What does *Wuthering Heights* mean?" *Brontë Society Transactions* 23, no. 2 (October 1998): 118-19.

¹² John E. Jordan, "The Ironic Vision of Emily Brontë," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 20, no. 1 (June 1965): 2.

writing with moral aims because she herself had risen above them.¹³ Laura Inman also concurs, finding Emily's moral makeup similar to the purity of John Keats and what she identifies as his idea of negative capability in which a person is secure and comfortable with being in an agnostic state of not knowing truth from illusion.¹⁴ For Inman, then, Brontë's ambiguous moral message is a sign of sophisticated Romantic ideology that foils Christian notions of truth. Finally, Marianne Thormählen suggests that *Wuthering Heights* "resists every extraneous rationale, be it secular or religious."¹⁵ It comes as no surprise that so many critics consider the novel amoral when we consider how several characters reverse the notions of heaven and hell, which I examined at length in Chapter 4. Reflecting on Cathy's¹⁶ dream in which she rejects heaven and wishes to return to Wuthering Heights, Gilbert and Gubar make the comparison that, "like Blake's metaphor of the lamb, Nelly's pious alternative [of heaven] has no real meaning for Brontë outside of the context provided by its tigerish opposite."¹⁷ For them, the topsy-turviness of heaven and hell displays an outright rejection of Christian systems of morality.

For others, the unorthodox ideas about heaven and hell as well as the variety of religious ideas that characters hold present a more nuanced moral landscape. For this group of critics, *Wuthering Heights* presents a cacophony of ideologies and does not privilege one over the other. David Sonstroem argues that Brontë does not give her reader the proverbial "back door," but

¹³ Tom Winniffrith, *The Brontës and Their Background*, 67.

¹⁴ Laura Inman, *The Poetic World of Emily Brontë: Poems from the Author of Wuthering Heights* (London: Sussex Academic Press, 2014), 44.

¹⁵ Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion*, 142.

¹⁶ I will distinguish between the two Catherines by referring to the first generation woman as Cathy and her daughter as Catherine.

¹⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 254.

instead “presents him with a veritable labyrinth of alternatives. . . . The stumbling shortsightedness that she presents in her characters and induces in her reader is in fact her own experience of the world and the burden of her message.”¹⁸ Sonstroem sees this moral complexity as a sort of authorial wisdom, to dare to tell the truth about life that is free from comforting myths about the victory of good over evil. He explains: “As an operative force, Christianity is at best invisible to mortal eye, and as theory, transformed into ranting or canting by its professors. It serves in the novel as the most conspicuous example of a schema that fails to do justice to things as they are.”¹⁹ For Sonstroem, *Wuthering Heights* strongly subverts religion as a whole.

In some ways, these critics’ notions of the novel are perfectly understandable, for religion bears a negative presence in the novel in many ways. The decrepit Chapel of Gimmerton Sough architecturally manifests how the people of these Yorkshire moors have neglected religion and the way in which the religious organization has given up on them. In fact, when Mr. Earnshaw dies, the parson does not come until the next morning and the curate doesn’t come at all (*WH*, 81). The constructs of religious society seem to hold little influence at Wuthering Heights. The curate finds it such an unsuitable place that he gives up on preaching to Linton Heathcliff when Heathcliff chases him away from the property (*WH*, 142). The Lintons’ home, The Grange, seems to be a more moral setting, but for critic Helene Moglen, the Lintons’ civil morality is a negative force in the novel because it is centrifugal to Cathy’s imaginative and passionate demeanor. Moglen argues that the Grange’s culture upholds “Christian morality, adult sexuality, maternal duty, aristocratic culture—but her soul cries out for the existence of the moors.”²⁰

¹⁸ Sonstroem, “Wuthering Heights,” 60.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 52-3.

²⁰ Helene Moglen, “Double Vision in *Wuthering Heights*: A Clarifying View of Female Development,” *The Centennial Review* 15, no. 4 (Fall 1971): 396.

Perhaps the most distinctively unflattering portrayal of religiosity is through Joseph, Heathcliff's servant, who is a hypocritical Calvinist. Nelly hates the man, calling him, "the wearisomest self-righteous Pharisee that ever ransacked a Bible to rake the promises to himself and fling the curses to his neighbors" (*WH*, 51). As John E. Jordan speculates, any comparison between the biblical Joseph of Egypt and Heathcliff's servant must be tongue-in-cheek.²¹ The first forgave his brothers and saved their lives after they sold him into slavery; the second shows no forgiveness or even friendliness to his neighbors. Joseph turns his dogs loose on Lockwood for stealing his lantern and terrorizes the Earnshaw and Linton children throughout the novel. For this reason, Moglen considers him to be "the persistent representation of repressive forces,"²² and she sees his foul nature as evidence of how religion represses and thwarts the "masculine urge of the soul for freedom and primeval love."²³

In these various critical views that see *Wuthering Heights* as amoral or anti-religious there seems to be one major element on which these critics rest their arguments. Critics all see the novel's main narrators, Mr. Lockwood and Nelly Dean, as unreliable, but in another sense than was the narrator of *Villette*. Where in *Villette* we have an evasive proto-Modern narrator in Lucy Snowe, who purposefully and openly censors her account, in *Wuthering Heights* our narrators exhibit a less self-conscious sort of unreliability. Charlotte Brontë renders Lucy as perfectly aware of the truth in several moments, but Emily Brontë's narrators prove unreliable because of their quirks as well as the second or third-hand nature of their knowledge about the plot's most important moments. *Wuthering Heights* functions as a box narrative in which all

²¹ John E. Jordan, "The Ironic Vision of Emily Brontë," 17.

²² Helene Moglen, "Double Vision in *Wuthering Heights*," 404.

²³ *Ibid.*, 394.

ideas filter through Lockwood as the primary narrator, though the majority of the story is his record of Nelly's oral account of what she witnessed while working for the Earnshaw family. Within Nelly's account, there are additional narrators who fill in the gaps of her vision: Isabella Heathcliff, Zillah, and Catherine Linton. Because of the communal nature of the narrative, the events of the novel are reduced to reliance on gossip, and there are many limits to narrative vision.

Lockwood is a fascinating choice for the outermost narrator of the novel because he is arguably *Wuthering Heights*'s laughingstock. Brontë takes pains early on to reveal how unperceptive he is and how incompatible he is with the characters he is observing. Allan R. Brick, David Sonstroem, and John E. Jordan all suggest that Lockwood's peculiarity as a polite gentleman in an otherwise sordid environment stresses how removed *Wuthering Heights* is from ideal Victorian manners.²⁴ Lockwood is far from being a fool, but he certainly proves misfit for the passion and drama of *Wuthering Heights*, and his incongruity with the Earnshaws and Lintons provides acknowledgment that these characters are removed from the Victorian norm. As these critics have suggested, Lockwood's narrative vantage point is complicated in that he is removed from the culture of *Wuthering Heights* and looks in at these characters as crude country folk who are marginalized from society. Nelly seems to recognize her otherness from the people of *Wuthering Heights* too, when she tells Lockwood that he'll judge the past events that she describes to him "as well as I can, all these things; at least you'll think you will, and that's the same thing" (*WH*, 227). Nelly's judgment of the Earnshaw and Linton families is another complicated matter, for critics find her self-righteous and hypocritical. Because Nelly lies to her

²⁴ Allan R. Brick, "*Wuthering Heights*: Narrators, Audience, and Message," *College English* 21, no. 2 (Nov. 1959): 81; Sonstroem, "Wuthering Heights and the Limits of Vision," 52; Jordan, "The Ironic Vision of Emily Brontë," 6.

superiors in the narrative, some critics have questioned her trustworthiness. Graeme Tytler, for example, suggests that, “truthfulness for her is at best a convenience or an expedient rather than a habit to be strictly adhered to at all times. On the other hand, when it is a question of truthfulness in general, Nelly seems to have no doubt whatever that it should be sedulously observed by everyone else.”²⁵ In addition, Tom Winnifrith goes as far to consider her morality as a “series of half truths.”²⁶ In the eyes of these critics, Nelly’s moralizing is worthless because she herself is flawed. A few critics like Gilbert and Gubar see Nelly as a legitimate moral agent, but nonetheless view her as a problematic narrator because she is Cathy’s oppressor. With their typical rhetorical flair, Gilbert and Gubar suggest that she is the domestic who wants to cook or spiritualize Heathcliff, and who sees Cathy’s wildness as a “raw kind of femaleness that . . . has to be exorcised if it cannot be controlled.”²⁷

Even fewer seem to see Nelly as a largely positive influence, as I will argue. In her 1850 preface to *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Brontë apologizes for the novel’s shocking violence and suggests that though much of the novel “broods [with] a horror of great darkness[,] . . . For a specimen of true benevolence and homely fidelity, look at the character of Nelly Dean.”²⁸ A few modern-day critics seem to see Nelly in a more positive light as well. For example, Jacqueline Viswanathan argues that Nelly provides “balance, the soundness of her judgment and her common sense,” and that these qualities run counter to Cathy and Heathcliff’s “passionate,

²⁵ Tytler, “*Wuthering Heights: An Amoral Novel?*,” 197.

²⁶ Winnifrith, *The Brontës and Their Background*, 71.

²⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 290-92.

²⁸ Charlotte Brontë, “Editor’s Preface to the New Edition of *Wuthering Heights* (1850),” in *Wuthering Heights*, xxi.

impulsive and unpredictable” natures.²⁹ Viswanathan sees Nelly as the moral center of the novel, and one that effects goodness on the Earnshaw and Linton families, despite their natural tendencies.

I agree with Charlotte Brontë and Viswanathan in regarding Nelly as a positive force in *Wuthering Heights*. The negative view of Nelly’s morality, which Gilbert and Gubar inarguably set as a precedent, privileges Cathy’s wildness as true femininity while rejecting Nelly’s concerted morality. Of course, Cathy’s temperamental nature has been favored in really all illustrations and film adaptations of the novel. These positive portrayals of Cathy take into account her best traits while ignoring her worst ones. While her raw sensual nature is certainly a trait to be admired, I find it backwards that Nelly’s role as reconciling nurturer is disparaged and Cathy’s manipulation of everyone in her path and her suicidal demeanor after her mistake of marrying Edgar are so often romanticized and viewed as some version of feminism. I suggest, rather, that both Nelly’s conventional morality and Cathy’s passionate self-involvement are legitimate feminist traits. Nelly is not anti-woman because she is an Evangelical Christian; the two are not mutually exclusive, as Gilbert and Gubar and Linda Gill seem to insinuate. This is where much of *Wuthering Heights*’s moral complexity lies because Brontë does not consistently uphold one ideology over another.

In fact, several critics have recognized Brontë’s refusal to explicitly consolidate ideological views. David Sonstroem, for one, suggests Brontë’s notion of authorial ideology is quite unusual because she did not see herself as a beacon of philosophy: “far from pretending to see beyond the sight of other men, she stresses the faults and limited scope of all human sight.

²⁹ Jacqueline Viswanathan, “Point of View and Unreliability in Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, Conrad’s *Under the Western Sky*, and Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*,” *Orbis Literarius* 24 (1974): 54.

Her final vision—epistemological, fragmented, negative—is a very earthly one, very close to home.”³⁰ This lack of philosophical consolidation is undeniable. The novel features “Joseph's stern evangelicalism, Nelly's pragmatic preservation of the norm, Edgar's code of gentility, Heathcliff's . . . law of the jungle, [and] Linton's pure egocentrism;” all without negotiating between these views.³¹ Graeme Tytler recognizes the ethical nuance of *Wuthering Heights* in a different way, arguing that the novel upholds the ethic of relative morality—that certain things are moral or right depending on the situation at hand. Tytler recognizes moments when the characters commit sins, but because of their circumstances, they are actually acting morally. He cites Catherine's dishonesty to her father to benefit Linton's health and Hareton disrespect toward Heathcliff to comfort Cathy as his major examples. For Tytler, these moments display a “remarkably perspicacious understanding of human nature, thereby enabling us to see . . . that *Wuthering Heights* is an intrinsically moral novel.”³² In another article, Tytler argues that the novel seeks to humanize religion for a country that Brontë believed had become too invested in the religious institution and too far removed from religion's true function to facilitate individual faith. He notices that despite the wealth of Christian hermeneutics in the text, the mention of Christ himself is notably missing, and for him this suggests Brontë's criticism of the religious institution for forgetting an essential part of Christianity—Christ's humanity and compassion.³³ In a similar vein, Richard Dellamora argues that *Wuthering Heights* stresses the importance of

³⁰ Sonstroem, “Wuthering Heights and the Limits of Vision,” 61.

³¹ Ibid., 57-8.

³² Graeme Tytler, “*Wuthering Heights*: An Amoral Novel?” *Brontë Studies* 35, no. 3 (November 2010): 205.

³³ Tytler, “The Role of Religion in *Wuthering Heights*,” 52.

what he calls the “Good Samaritan ethic,” and that the novel relates how important it is to try to “walk in another’s shoes,” so to speak.³⁴

These critics who recognize an ethical message in *Wuthering Heights* seek to make sense of a very ideologically convoluted story, and I wish to offer yet another suggestion of how Emily Brontë presents an ethical message. Through demonstrating the cause and effect of immoral conditioning, specifically on the novel’s young characters, *Wuthering Heights* does, in fact, function as a conduct novel, albeit an incredibly unconventional one. The novel, in all its complexities, is centrally concerned with one phenomenon, the outcome of moral conditioning and how it affects the human character. This may seem an overly methodical lens to use in considering a largely lyrical and emotional novel, but I believe it is a notion that can give shape to the novel’s otherwise arbitrary narrative system. I wish to suggest that Nelly Dean and Lockwood are the novel’s main narrators because they provide two important lenses by which we can assess the violent spectacle of the plot: and the notion of bourgeois manners, which Lockwood represents; and the notion of conventional Christian morality, which Nelly Dean represents. Through these narrators’ judgments, we can see the devastation of two families in a new light. From their vantage points, civilized manners and Christian morality could have helped to prevent the downfall of these families. We see the effects of immorality and neglect at the beginning of the novel when Lockwood stumbles upon the fearsome master of Wuthering Heights and all of its other depraved inmates: Catherine, Linton, Joseph, and Hareton. We see the unsociable misery of these people before we understand the events that have led up to this depraved state. As Nelly Dean reveals the history of these families, we come to see what brought

³⁴ Richard Dellamora, “Earnshaw’s Neighbor/ Cathy’s Friend: Ethical Contingencies in *Wuthering Heights*,” *ELH* 74, no. 3: 535-55.

on their downfall. In my eyes, the cause of this degradation is clear—the tradition of violent patriarchy, which is passed down through generations with increasing severity.

The novel presents two main patriarchal ideologies in the upbringing of children, and these camps fall squarely in line with genealogy. The Earnshaw patriarchs enact oppressive force to both preach religion, and conversely, morally deprave young children; in contrast, the more genteel and civilized Linton patriarchs exercise their patriarchal control to shelter their children from evil. We can first see the Earnshaws' method of oppression in play through Cathy's diary entry about how Joseph forces their Bible study all Sunday evening. When the children become chatty, Joseph yells at them, and when he finds Cathy doing needlework, he hits her. They later throw their Bibles on the ground and for this Cathy's older brother Hindley locks them in the kitchen. After some time of writing, they escape through the backdoor and go explore the moors (*WH*, 25-27). We can see that Joseph's efforts to oppress the children into holiness are largely unsuccessful. This pattern continues on into Joseph's interactions with the next generation of Earnshaws and Lintons, in a moment Lockwood observes early on in the novel. Catherine is wasting matches by placing them in the fire, and Joseph tells her "yah're a nowt, and it's no use talking—yah'll niver mend o'yer ill ways, but goa raight to t' divil, like yer mother afore ye!" (*WH*, 16). Catherine does not apologize after his rebuke but instead meets Joseph's scorn with several jesting threats of witchcraft that he seems to take very seriously (*WH*, 17). He later calls her "worthless," "idle," and a "damnable jade" (*WH*, 34). When we examine the visual properties of this scene, we can see that the act of Catherine burning matches in the hearth is strongly symbolic of the feistiness and passion that can be attributed to her mother, Cathy. Just as was true for Cathy, Catherine is unmoved by Joseph's condemnations of hell and brimstone. Her

fiery personality and strong will are unchanged, and the fire of her passion is not diminished by fear of a fiery hell.

Through these two examples we can see that the main problem with Joseph's religious influence is not only that it is based in fear, but that it is denigrating to children as well. On many occasions he refers to the children as "nowts" or nobodies, and he seems to be perpetually cursing them. Sonstroem sees this pattern as evidence of the novel's refusal to negotiate between varying viewpoints, and posits that Joseph calls the children "nowts" because he refuses to see the value in any perspective but his own.³⁵ While I believe that this is true, I think this pattern of dismissing others is even more important from the practical standpoint of analyzing the implications of patriarchal dominance as a form of moral control. Brontë uses this repetitive didactic spectacle with Joseph to emphasize that oppressive condemnation is an impotent form of moral education, and furthermore, that it can poison people against religion.

Brontë also uses didactic spectacle to suggest that oppressive fathers can pass on a culture of violence to their offspring. This begins with Mr. Earnshaw. Nelly remembers that Hindley, "had learned to regard his father as an oppressor rather than a friend" (*WH*, 31). Mr. Earnshaw is also oppressive in his relationship with Cathy. When she seeks Mr. Earnshaw's forgiveness, he will not overlook her follies, replying, "I cannot love thee, thou'rt worse than thy brother. Go, say thy prayers, child, and ask God's pardon. I doubt thy mother and I must rue that we ever reared thee!" Nelly recognizes the effect of this rejection on Cathy: "That made her cry, at first; and then being repulsed continually hardened her, and she laughed if I told her to say she was sorry for her faults, and beg to be forgiven" (*WH*, 52). This account illustrates how rejection can destroy a person's desire and ability to seek forgiveness or make amends.

³⁵ Sonstroem, "Wuthering Heights and the Limits of Vision," 51.

We see the patriarchal tradition of controlling and subjugating continued onto the second generation of Earnshaws, particularly with Hindley. When his wife Frances dies of consumption shortly after childbirth, he completely rejects his newborn son Hareton, and Nelly essentially becomes his only caretaker. In Hindley's disturbed grief, he contemplates disfiguring the child, "Now, don't you think the lad would be handsomer cropped? It makes a dog fiercer, and I love something fierce—get me a scissors—something fierce and trim! . . . By God, as if I would rear such a monster! As sure as I'm living, I'll break the brat's neck" (*WH*, 91). Nelly reports that Hareton is in constant danger, and in one moment, Hindley drops Hareton off a balcony when Heathcliff startles him, fortunately, Heathcliff miraculously catches the baby (*WH*, 92). Brontë certainly renders patriarchal violence here in blatant visual terms. Just as Mr. Earnshaw was an oppressive patriarch to Hindley, we see him continue on this tradition in a more extreme form in his violence toward Hareton.

In contrast with the fearsome Earnshaw patriarchs, we see a different dynamic with the Linton family. The pattern that we observe with the Lintons is that their strongest method of moral control is not in oppressive Bible study sessions, as the servant Joseph fosters, but in controlling their children's contact with the outside world as much as possible. When Heathcliff and Cathy are children, they trespass onto Thrushcross Grange just to observe how this sheltered and genteel family observes their Sabbath (*WH*, 31). The children are physically weak and unsure of how to respond to the wilder passions of the Earnshaws. Later in the novel, Edgar articulates his protective stance when he orders Heathcliff to leave for fear of contaminating the house with evil: "Your presence is a moral poison that would contaminate the most virtuous: for that cause, and to prevent worse consequences, I shall deny you hereafter admission into this house, and give notice now that I require your instant departure" (*WH*, 142). The Lintons do not

know how to interact with those who have different values from their own, and so they just avoid outside contact as much as they can. The main problem with this attitude, of course, is that one cannot avoid evil completely. For example, despite the Linton children's sheltered upbringing, Heathcliff is able to easily trick Isabella into marrying him, but after being married to him just a day, she discovers his true nature and that he had only married her to spite her brother and Cathy (*WH*, 202). For all her sheltered gentility, it proves unhelpful as a moral education because she is unable to defend virtuous truths in the face of evil. Isabella has little power to make lucrative choices for herself for she is bound in a relationship with a man who despises her. Essentially, while the Earnshaw patriarchs rule with oppression and violence, the Linton patriarchs rule with excessive protection, another dominant feature in traditional patriarchy.

Just as we see inter-generational patterns with the Earnshaws, we see this with the Lintons as well. Isabella and Heathcliff's son Linton seems weak from his infancy, and is described as an "ailing, peevish creature" (*WH*, 227). And though Catherine inherits some of her mother's vivacity, Edgar raises her to be even more secluded than he was raised, which makes her weak in some regards. Catherine doesn't leave the Grange, except to attend church, until she is thirteen years old. Her father absolutely dotes on her. Nelly recounts, "I don't believe he ever did speak a harsh word to her. He took her education entirely on himself, and made it an amusement" (*WH*, 269). Catherine's sheltered moral education does very well for her until her father and Nelly become ill and she discovers the outside world, and then her father's sheltering and doting proves to be another sort of damaging patriarchal control that makes her especially susceptible to Heathcliff's deception and her ultimate capture. We can see Edgar persist in his desire to shield Catherine when he finds out that she has been sending secret letters to Wuthering Heights for her cousin and love-interest Linton. He vows that he would rather see Catherine dead

than in a bad marriage with Linton (*WH*, 313). Though his patriarchal reign may be well meaning, Brontë illustrates its deficit in that he carries out his duty to protect to an unhealthy level.

Just as the Earnshaws' oppressive control proves unsuccessful in promoting morality, the Lintons' excessive protection is also impotent in safeguarding their children from evil. We can see how Heathcliff overtakes Edgar's protective aims when he detains Linton and Catherine. His aggression and control can easily overpower Edgar Linton's sheltering patriarchy. In fact, we see the two ideologies clash in Linton Heathcliff. Both families' blood runs through his veins, but he ultimately takes on his father's abusive behavior, suggesting that the father-son pattern holds strong. We see that Linton, upon his first real encounter with evil, is still removed from this culture, but a culture that he will participate in after his initiation. We can see the spectacle of conditioning to patriarchal violence more succinctly when Linton watches Heathcliff beat Cathy, and he admits to Nelly that, "she deserved punishing for pushing me . . . her cheek cut on the inside, against her teeth, and her mouth filling with blood . . . I sometimes think she can't speak for pain. I don't like to think so; but she's a naughty thing for crying continually; and she looks so pale and wild, I'm afraid of her" (*WH*, 387). Catherine is brutally beaten for a small wrong she commits, but Linton, who has been the subject of much physical abuse at the hands of Heathcliff, is glad Catherine is the one being attacked this time. Because Linton is a powerless young male who is abused within the system of patriarchal violence, he seeks to fulfill his role in this system by finding someone else to oppress below him, even if he isn't the one throwing the punches.

This recognition that violence and oppression is a system rather than isolated evil may explain why the novel fails to negotiate between points of view in any straightforward way. We

are, in fact, made to feel a measure of sympathy for the man who would be the traditional villain—Heathcliff. Brontë seems to emphasize that even Heathcliff’s pronounced violence does not come from a vacuum. Though he was transplanted into the Earnshaw home with very little social power, he too adopts the culture of patriarchal violence once he earns enough wealth to wield patriarchal oppression. Heathcliff himself falls victim to oppression in his childhood, and as soon as he has the social power to do so, he eagerly participates in this culture. We are left to wonder: had Heathcliff been treated with kindness in the Earnshaw home, could he have been a good man rather than a violent oppressor? Brontë does not discount Heathcliff’s accountability *per se*, but we are made aware of how he is also a product of an oppressive tradition. Tellingly, it is young Catherine, precariously imprisoned at the hands of Heathcliff, who has this epiphany, saying:

Mr. Heathcliff *you* have *nobody* to love you; and, however miserable you make us, we shall still have the revenge of thinking that your cruelty arises from your greater misery. You *are* miserable, are you not? Lonely, like the devil, and envious like him? *Nobody* loves you—*nobody* will cry for you when you die! I wouldn’t be you!”
(*WH*, 393)

Brontë makes a point through Catherine here well before her time, that though women and children are most affected by patriarchal violence, it also burdens the abusers themselves.

It seems to me that part of Brontë’s visual ethic here is that the women of the novel operate rather differently from the men. The primary female characters—Cathy, Nelly, Catherine, and Isabella—are no angels. They certainly exhibit flaws and inconsistencies, but we

do see in them what I perceive as a Christian virtue: the ability to love the men that hurt them. Brontë seems to suggest that female virtue is exploited as a weakness when oppressive men manipulate these women. We see this quality in Cathy's love for Heathcliff. She finds herself in the difficult situation of having to decide between social expediency in her choice of marrying Edgar Linton and her spiritual connection to Heathcliff. Her choice to marry Edgar incites the wrath of Heathcliff, and even after he seeks his retribution by ruining her sister-in-law, Isabella, Cathy still gravitates toward him. She loves him despite his worst traits, and through her ghostly apparition, we get the notion that she continues to love him, even as her spirit wanders the moors and she perhaps witnesses the terrible abuse he commits against her offspring. This love may seem more romantic than it is Christian, but I join with Barnard in seeing Cathy's love for Heathcliff as a sort of spiritual eroticism. When Heathcliff discovers Cathy's death after she gives birth to Catherine, he seems to acknowledge the vitality of her love as a spiritual force. He cries out, "Oh, God! it is unutterable! I *cannot* live without my life! I *cannot* live without my soul!" (*WH*, 204). We see in Cathy's love a spiritual dimension, and when Heathcliff loses her—the one person who loved him—the loss is not only personal but deeply spiritual. Analyzing this passage, Barnard argues, "the final word has a force that takes it out of traditional lover's verbiage and transforms it into a spiritual statement."³⁶ This moment does not only suggest the novel's theological message of universal salvation, as I mentioned in Chapter 4, but it also makes a more specific point—that Cathy's love for Heathcliff was his one chance of redemption.

No woman in the novel functions as a source of more Christian love than Nelly Dean. Nelly clashes with the Earnshaw children because of their rebellious natures, but her love for them runs deeper than the moral expediency that she seeks to uphold. In terms of her moral

³⁶ Barnard, "What does *Wuthering Heights* mean?," 113.

power, I suggest that she acts as a direct foil to Joseph's degradation. Rather than dismissing the children as "nowts" and seeing their eternal fates as decided, as Joseph does, she looks for their virtues amidst their vices. We can see that she tries her best to guide the children to make good choices. For example, she asks Cathy to carefully consider her decision to marry Edgar if she really loves Heathcliff (*WH*, 104-6). She looks for the good in Heathcliff and tries to spare him from being hurt when Cathy disparages him (*WH*, 102). Perhaps her most well-wrought moment of Christian love is when she sees the good in Hareton that no one else does. Though Hareton is illiterate, profane, and violent, Nelly recognizes that these were traits brought on by Hindley and Heathcliff's cruelty. She argues that in his character there were

Good things lost amid a wilderness of weeds, to be sure, whose rankness far over-topped their neglected growth; yet, notwithstanding, evidence of a wealthy soil, that might yield luxuriant crops under other and favourable circumstances. . . . he was never taught to read or write; never rebuked for any bad habit which did not annoy his keeper; never led a single step towards virtue, or guarded by a single precept against vice. (*WH*, 288)

Nelly acknowledges that while Hareton has acculturated to the male violence around him, there is good within him, and she has seen goodness from his infancy when she nursed him.

Though Hareton may seem to be a peripheral character, he is certainly not in regard to tracing the influence of male violence. We find that Nelly is often unsuccessful in saving the people she loves from this tradition of violence and oppression because she herself falls victim to it, especially when Heathcliff imprisons her, but once all of her masters are departed, she facilitates a positive ending in wedding Hareton to Catherine (*WH*, 409). Nelly is a force of

considerable goodness, but her power is largely thwarted because of this tradition of male violence that oppresses her. Once that is removed, she is unstinting in her attempts to help Catherine to esteem Hareton as a loveable person. The dark and disturbed novel ends on the note of Cathy and Heathcliff's spirits being reunited and haunting country folk on the moors and Hareton and Catherine being in an odd but potentially peaceful union. Both actualities suggest the eminence of love as a force that may be limited by social control and violence but in the end can have a spiritual transcendence over it.

Thus, I would argue that *Wuthering Heights* not only suggests the theological notion of universal salvation, as I developed in Chapter 4, but it also sheds light on the problems of living morally in a world that promotes masculine dominance, on the one hand, and patriarchal protection from this evil, on the other hand. Both traditions prove dangerous to both the women controlled under this system as well as the men who usurp this power. I suggest that *Wuthering Heights* operates as a multi-generational spectacle of how patriarchal culture is at odds with morality, whether it operates to enforce Christian virtues in the case of Joseph's dominant role, or to destroy and plunder virtue in the case of Heathcliff. In either role, the dominance of the man robs the oppressed of a true religious experience because it is all coerced. The role of the protective patriarch, which is really presented as passive control, also proves harmful, for this passive moral method has little potency once a child encounters violent patriarchy. The transcendent force above this oppression and violence is love, but this didactic spectacle also makes clear how easy it is to exploit this force. *Wuthering Heights* suggests that this love can only really abound in a spiritual dimension far removed from Brontë's reality—a world where women can function as sovereign forces for goodness and not as the objects of patriarchal control.

Gendered Morality and the Spectacle of Spousal Abuse in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

In all the collective fervor about “the Brontë sisters” across popular culture and scholarship, Anne seems to be marginalized as the *other* Brontë. Worse than unknown or forgotten, she has been largely ignored. From all of my investigation, it seems to me that Anne has been cast aside in part because she is more orthodox and conventional than Charlotte and Emily. However, this notion that Anne was conventional and did not share in her sisters’ progressive messages is false. In fact, Anne was quite intrepid in her day and wrote one of the most important feminist novels of the nineteenth century. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, *Wildfell Hall* outraged contemporary critics. The public outcry is understandable when we consider the shocking immorality of Huntingdon’s behavior, but Charlotte’s sharp criticism of her sister’s novel is perhaps more surprising. She suggested that the novel was “an entire mistake,” and explains the novel’s graphic violence as a reaction to Branwell’s downfall. She explains that Anne “believed it to be a duty to reproduce every detail. . . she hated her work, but would pursue it.”³⁷ Charlotte sought to counter the adverse criticism about the novel by situating it biographically within the Brontës’ experiences, and in doing so she seemed to undermine Anne’s literary merit in the process.³⁸ Though Charlotte may have meant well and intended only to protect her sister’s reputation, the resulting disservice to Anne’s literary capability has had negative repercussions to this day. Anne’s work is still by far the least read of her sisters, and much of the scholarship surrounding her continues to focus on biographical and contextual readings of the novel, rather than exploring its literary merit, a trend that Charlotte certainly

³⁷ Brontë, Charlotte. “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell.” In *Wuthering Heights*, xix.

³⁸ Wettlaufer, *Portraits of the Artist as a Young Woman*, 224.

began.³⁹ So while in Chapter 3 I focused on how art operates within biblical hermeneutics to suggest Helen's progression from naiveté to empowerment, here I will focus on Anne's use of didactic spectacle. While the moral aims of *Wildfell Hall* are undoubtedly clearer than the convoluted moral messages of *Wuthering Heights*, Emily and Anne's methods to implicate the perils of patriarchal violence prove quite similar.

Despite its marginalized status, critics have recently come to appreciate *Wildfell Hall*'s feminist significance. Elizabeth Langland recognized that the novel "rewrites the story of the Fallen Woman as a story of female excellence."⁴⁰ Alisa M. Clapp recognized Anne Brontë's departure from the tradition of the Fallen Women and asks, "what other Victorian novel actually recounts an oppressed wife's escape—not through death or suicide, the closure that many feminist writers use—but by defying her husband, packing her bags, and leaving?"⁴¹ *Wildfell Hall* presents a brave new path for women enduring unjust marriages, and this is one major reason the Victorians found it to be so scandalous. Far from upholding the moral manner of keeping up appearances of a strong marriage, this novel reveals all of the faults in the marital system and the legal process surrounding it.

Anne published the novel in 1848, positioned between two of the biggest legislative bills concerning women in the Victorian era—the Custody of Infants Act of 1839, having come a decade before, and the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, which wouldn't come for nearly a decade after. The novel's events begin in 1827, well before a series of legal battles that provided modest civil rights for women, and the novel especially reacts to the Custody of Infants Act.

³⁹ The Brontë's artwork is also subject to this sort of contextualization rather than scholars looking at its merit, as is noted in Losano, "The Professionalization of the Female Artist," 2-3.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Langland, *Anne Brontë: The Other One* (London, Macmillan, 1989), 119.

⁴¹ Alisa M. Clapp, "The Tenant of Patriarchal Culture: Anne Brontë's Problematic Female Arist" *Michigan Academician* 28 (1996): 114.

Prior to this bill, a father had sole ownership over his offspring and could retain even young infants from their mothers at whim. After the Custody of Infants Act came into play, mothers could petition the courts for custody of their children under seven and gain access to their older children thereafter.⁴² Because of this context, Laura C. Berry views *Wildfell Hall* as a custody narrative.⁴³

Wildfell Hall is also strikingly political in referring to the flaws in divorce law. Until the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, divorce proceedings were only allowed in ecclesiastical courts where women had even fewer rights than in national courts. Even after this Act, however, women could only obtain a divorce if they could prove gross physical abuse or sexual misconduct like bestiality, while men could seek divorce on much lesser grievances.⁴⁴ Furthermore, throughout the era, women's dowries and earnings belonged to the husband both in marriage and after divorce. Frighteningly, with marriage the court actually had the right to order the wife to subject herself to conjugal relations against her will.⁴⁵ Women had essentially no sovereignty from their husbands in the eye of the law; a woman would have to take great personal risk to escape a violent marriage, as Helen does. Unfortunately, alleviation from these imbalanced divorce procedures didn't improve for decades. In fact, *Wildfell Hall* perhaps displays one of the most unflattering portrayals of marriage in Brontë's time because it gives voice to a social ill Victorians were pervasively silent about: marital abuse. As Meghan Bullock

⁴² See Joan Wroath, *Until They Are Seven, The Origins of Women's Legal Rights*, (Sherfield Gables, Hook: Waterside Press, 1998).

⁴³ Laura C. Berry, "Acts of Custody and Incarceration in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," *A Forum on Fiction* 30, no. 1 (1996): 40.

⁴⁴ Melnyk, *Victorian Religion*, 16-18.

⁴⁵ Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 177.

relates, women brave enough to relate their stories were typically met with indifference, if they were working class, and disbelief, if they were middle or upper class. In fact, Bullock believes that when Brontë refers to the “delicate concealment of facts” in Victorian culture in her Preface to the novel, that she is referencing the taboo of spousal abuse as part of this concealment.⁴⁶ This trait of the novel, which many feminists have found to be so important in recent years, is the same trait that Victorians certainly found unpalatable.

When we compare *Wildfell Hall* and *Wuthering Heights*, we see similar themes of marital violence. Both novels drew contemporary scorn for their violent spectacle, but *Wildfell Hall* has garnered stylistic scrutiny from modern critics while *Wuthering Heights* has been largely acclaimed stylistically. It is my estimation that this is the case, at least in part, because *Wuthering Heights* is rendered in a more heightened artistic style with no straightforward moral code while Anne’s novel strikes critics as bearing a heavy-handed and straightforward morality in comparison. Critics have disparaged against her more straightforward approach. Algernon Charles Swinburne, for example, scathingly referred to the novel as, “ludicrously weak, palpably unreal, and apparently imitative,”⁴⁷ and Tom Winnifrith sees Anne’s moralism as the “most obvious and crude” of her sisters.⁴⁸ Though Swinburne and Winnifrith find Anne tritely didactic, and conversely, Charlotte Brontë found *Wildfell Hall* morally misguided, both reactions come with an unwillingness to engage with the novel’s mode of didacticism.

This polarized view of Anne proves revealing of the paradigm shift regarding didactic fiction between the Brontës’ time and now. Anne Brontë certainly was the most

⁴⁶ Meghan Bullock, “Abuse, Silence, and Solitude in Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,” *Brontë Studies* 29 (July 2004): 135.

⁴⁷ Cited in Rikky Rooksby, “Swinburne and the Brontës,” *Brontë Society Transactions* 22 (1997): 93.

⁴⁸ Winnifrith, *The Brontës and Their Background*, 116

straightforwardly religious of her sisters. P.J.M. Scott was spot on when he called her “first and foremost a Christian writer.”⁴⁹ She writes with an explicit morality, but she does so in a way that is rather intrepid when we consider her within the tradition of the conduct novel. *Wildfell Hall* operates quite similarly to *Wuthering Heights* in that it engages the spectacle of immorality to further its moral message. In fact, Anne explains her methodology in her preface to the novel, in which she defends its graphic violence:

I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it. But as the priceless treasure too frequently hides at the bottom of a well, it needs some courage to dive for it . . . [W]hen we have to do with vice and vicious characters, I maintain it is better to depict them as they really are than as they would wish to appear. To represent a bad thing in its least offensive light is, doubtless, the most agreeable course for a writer of fiction to pursue; but is it the most honest, or the safest? Is it better to reveal the snares and pitfalls of life to the young and thoughtless traveller, or to cover them with branches and flowers? Oh, reader! if there were less of this delicate concealment of facts—this whispering, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace, there would be less of sin and misery to the young of both sexes who are left to wring their bitter knowledge from experience. (*TWH*, xxxvii-iii)

Though Anne does not exactly use my term of didactic spectacle, she recognizes that there is a problem with traditional didacticism that preaches against immorality but doesn’t allow the audience to witness it in all of its gravity. With this visual display of injustice and immorality,

⁴⁹ P.J.M. Scott, *Anne Brontë: A New Critical Assessment (Critical Studies Series)*, (Totum, New Jersey: Vision Press, 1983), 32.

we see in *Wildfell Hall* a different sort of *l'écriture féminine* in which Helen writes the story of marital abuse and reveals problems of women's moral roles, not through the polite euphemisms that society appropriated in her day, but through raw demonstrative spectacle of where vice and abuse can lead. Her sensual use of language, then, is not primarily concerned with a spiritual connection to God or nature, as I have explored earlier, but is a manifestation of the problematic gendered notions of Christian ethics.

Despite pejorative estimations of Anne's work from critics like Swinburne and Winniffrith, other critics view the explicit morality in *Wildfell Hall* as part of its feminist mission. Alexandra Wettlaufer argues that the novel "must be read in a socially corrective vein, providing readers with images or models of marriage, of art, and of gender."⁵⁰ Lee A. Talley also posits that, "One can see how Anne Brontë is working to instruct her readers so that they can learn without having to experience first-hand what her protagonists do."⁵¹ In a similar vein, Antonia Losano argues that the text stands in as a moral artifact, which substitutes for Helen's presence as a moral teacher. She states that Brontë "continually removes her heroine's body from the fray, allowing visual images or written text to speak for Helen."⁵² These critics do well at recognizing the notion of visual ethics in the novel, but where their observations are more general, I aim to qualify the visual nature of Anne's ethics through particular examples. Anne certainly upholds the Bible more fervently than Charlotte and, of course, Emily do. As Stevie Davies relates, the

⁵⁰ Wettlaufer, *Portraits of the Artist as a Young Woman*, 240.

⁵¹ Lee A. Talley, "Anne Brontë's Method of Social Protest in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," In *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë*, eds. Julie Nash Barbara and Ann Suess, (Farnham, United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2001), 133.

⁵² Losano, "The Professionalization of the Female Artist," 34.

novel has a biblical purpose; he believes that “Helen’s words build on the Word.”⁵³ Deborah Morse also sees the novel as having the purpose “to stand up for Christ, to testify to the truth of the Word made flesh. Davies and Morse seem to have recognized this in a pejorative light because they point to the Bible as context but pay little attention to Anne’s style and execution of her moral aims. Siv Jansson writes about *Wildfell Hall* and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth* in comparison, and acknowledges some literary complexity on Anne’s part in his belief that she “used images of religious women as a ploy to write into their texts their own radical reassessments of the dominant culture.”⁵⁴ Jansson reads *Wildfell Hall*’s morality as a ploy, suggesting that Brontë’s feminism was in spite of her religiosity. I argue, conversely, that Brontë’s morality and her reliance on the Bible are directly supportive of her feminist ambitions.

Anne Brontë’s Bible has been a source of interest in the past decade for the interesting evidence it provides about Anne’s religious subjectivity.⁵⁵ Maria Frawley reveals that the book of Job was of particular interest to her.⁵⁶ This book retells the gruesome spectacle of a man who loses everything and still lives with profound gratitude to God all the while. Frawley relates a thematic similarity between the book of Job and *Wildfell Hall* in that both muse about salvation, but I see a more fundamental stylistic connection. We see in the book of Job an effort to illustrate suffering as spectacle. The gruesome details of Job’s agony are recounted to emphasize the fallen state of earthly life, and Brontë’s didactic spectacle in *Wildfell Hall* is not altogether different.

⁵³ Stevie Davies, “Introduction” for *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (New York: Penguin, 1996), xiii.

⁵⁴ Siv Jansson, “*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: Rejecting the Angel’s Influence,” In *Women of Faith in Victorian Culture: Reassessing the Angel in the House*, eds. Anne Hogan and Andrew Bradstock, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 32.

⁵⁵ Marianne Thormählen, “Anne Brontë and her Bible,” *Brontë Studies* 37, no. 4 (November 2012): 343-45.

⁵⁶ Maria Frawley, “Contextualizing Anne Brontë’s Bible,” In *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë*, eds. Julie Nash Barbara and Ann Suess. Farnham, United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2001), 11.

Just as the book of Job illustrates the many pestilences of life in detail rather than just cautioning about them, *Wildfell Hall* employs the same sort of aesthetic in moralizing against drinking, gambling, and infidelity. This tendency to focus on the spectacle of sin, draws not only on the book of Job but the Old Testament more generally, which presents sin, suffering, and punishment without euphemism. Christ's beatitudes in the New Testament, in contrast, are much more figurative than demonstrative. For example, we can look to the Old Testament spectacle that admonishes against a sin in contrast with a New Testament narrative commandment to avoid sin. On the subject of adultery, for example, Christ taught: "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart" (Matt 5:27-8). Where the New Testament contains clear, and more figurative, yet straightforward methodology, in 2 Samuel in the Old Testament, we see this same lesson taught through a didactic spectacle in which King David commits adultery with Bathsheba and then effectively murders her husband Uriah by placing him on the front lines of a battle (2 Sam 11). 2 Samuel presents David's downfall as simple spectacle, recounting his transgressions as they occur in plain detail. We see this same method in *Wildfell Hall* when Brontë exhibits a daring didactic spectacle, which is at odds with her contemporary didactic writers that Davies and Morse seem to group her with.

We do witness a clear evocation of visual biblical ethics in *Wildfell Hall*, but I also find it important to note that Anne still seems to mistrust textuality in a way consistent with her sisters. In one moment, Helen subverts textuality when she sets up her studio in the Grassdale library. Morse sees this action as rebellious in that Helen takes over a decidedly masculine and literary

space with her visual expression.⁵⁷ By working in the library, we see Helen's cognizance of how her artistry operates within a world of textuality and male-controlled discourse. Morse does well to recognize Helen's subversive behavior, but she neglects a moment that I see as an equally important. Helen exhibits her rejection of textuality as a form of courtship exchange when she rejects Gilbert's gift to her of Walter Scott's *Marmion*. She explains that she cannot accept the book, "because [she doesn't] like to put [her]self under obligations that [she] can never repay" (*TWH*, 71). The choice of Scott's book is hardly random, for *Marmion* is an epic poem featuring the nun Constance, who is ultimately immured alive in a convent for breaking her vows because of her affair with Marmion and her acts of dishonesty to gain his favor. In the moment of Helen's denial of Gilbert's gift, she is wrestling with the vices Constance is condemned of. She can never marry again lest she commit adultery, and she faces the impossible task of living as an honest Christian and also lying about her identity to protect her son from Huntingdon. In denying the gift of this book, Helen avoids participating as an object of patriarchal exchange in the way that Constance of *Marmion* does. In rejecting Gilbert's gift, she also rejects the idealization of a woman compromising her moral stance for social expediency. Helen again rejects compromising her values by refusing to write to Gilbert after they have established their mutual affection. She warns him, "[W]e are both deluding ourselves with the idea of keeping up a spiritual intercourse without hope or prospect of anything further—without fostering vain regrets and hurtful aspirations, and feeding thoughts that should be sternly and pitilessly left to perish of inanition. . . [N]o letters can pass between us here" (*TWH*, 408-09). Her rejection certainly stems from a social need to maintain respect for her legal husband, but it also manifests her fear of how language can ensnare women and bind them in contracts of romantic exchange. Textuality, then,

⁵⁷ Morse, "'I speak of those I do know,'" 14.

is connected to men's space and entitlement, and Brontë recognizes that participating in the act of exchanging writing can put a woman in great danger when her words end up in the wrong hands.

As it turns out, the instances that I mention above are not the primary way that *Wildfell Hall* comments on the perils of textuality for women. Rather, the novel's overall structure is the most important commentary on this point. Jan B. Gordon describes its structure as "the longest single-narrative, enclosing epistolary novel of the nineteenth century."⁵⁸ Because the novel is narrated by Gilbert Markham overall and Helen's journal is just inserted with this overall narrative, some feminist scholars read the narrative structure as a means of mitigating and containing Helen's story. Elizabeth Langland argues that, "The woman's story must, it seems, be subsumed within the man's account, which is prior and originary."⁵⁹ Elizabeth Signorotti goes as far as to paint Gilbert Markham as Helen's formidable oppressor, and she reads his deceit and dishonor through minute moments in the novel.⁶⁰ Rachel Carnell views the narrative structure as an insult to Helen's perspective in yet another way. Because *Wildfell Hall* is truly an epistle between Gilbert Markham and his brother-in-law Haslam, recounting his courtship, Carnell sees the entire novel as a homosocial exchange boasting about romantic conquest.⁶¹ Elizabeth Langland finds Gilbert's authority as the narrator of the outer frame of *Wildfell Hall* particularly problematic because she sees him as what she calls the main "focalizer" of the novel. In her

⁵⁸ Jan B. Gordon, "Gossip, Diary, Letter, Text: Anne Brontë's Narrative Tenant and the Problematic Gothic Sequel," *ELH* 51, no. 4 (Winter 1984): 719.

⁵⁹ Langland, *Anne Brontë*, 111.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Signorotti, "'A Frame Perfect and Glorious': Narrative Structure in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," *Victorian Newsletter* 87 (1995): 20-25.

⁶¹ Rachel K. Carnell, "Feminism and the Public Sphere in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 53, no. 1 (June 1998): 5.

view, the novel privileges his subjectivity and Helen's experience collapses into his. For her, the structure falters in this way because "this collapse generates a narrative transgression—a confusion of outside and inside, primary and secondary, subject and object."⁶² Clapp finds Gilbert's position as the outside narrator troubling as well because he admits to editing Helen's journal. She argues that though he only omits "a few passages here and there of merely temporal interest to the writer, or such as would serve to encumber the story rather than [sic] elucidate it." For her, Brontë subverts female perspective through Gilbert's possession over Helen's narrative.⁶³

These critics bring to light some important points. Gilbert Markham is indeed the exterior narrator, and Helen's narrative is certainly framed by his male gaze. She is the object of his affection in roughly half of the novel rather than the subject who relates her own vision. In this way, we cannot take Helen's narrative as a freestanding expression of female empowerment; it is unavoidably tangled up in her value to him as our chief narrator and his textual system. Even so, I disagree with these critics who argue that the structure wholly subjugates Helen's perspective, for despite Gilbert functioning as the outermost narrator, it is Helen's voice that provides the central action of the entire plot and even Gilbert's progression. I am not alone in this estimation; several critics have recognized the centrality of Helen's voice in the novel. Inga-Stina Ewbank argues of Helen's diary: "What is officially an interlude becomes the guts of the work, displacing the framework that surrounds it."⁶⁴ This is an assessment that Julie McMaster shares,⁶⁵ and

⁶² Langland, *Anne Brontë*, 117.

⁶³ Clapp, "The Tenant of Patriarchal Culture, 118.

⁶⁴ Inga-Stina Ewbank, *Their Proper Sphere: A Study of the Brontë Sisters as Early-Victorian Female Novelists* (London: Edward Arnold, 1966), 136.

Wettlaufer sees Gilbert and Helen's perspectives as complementary to understanding the thematic heart of the novel. For her, "only through the contrast between the two voices and their constructed representations of self and the other does a clear 'picture' emerge of the two characters."⁶⁶ Furthermore, Talley argues that Gilbert learns the most important lessons of his adult life through carefully reading Helen's account. After reading Helen's narrative, he transforms from a coddled young person to a patient and self-sacrificing man who is dedicated to Helen's best interest.⁶⁷

Siv Jansson argues that Brontë employs this manuscript tradition in part to make the violence of the novel more palatable and believable,⁶⁸ and I share this opinion. However, I believe this enclosed manuscript epistolary structure is especially significant in terms of measuring the impact of the didactic spectacles in Helen's account. N.M. Jacobs makes the strongest case for Helen's narrative being the central perspective of *Wildfell Hall* when she recognizes the transformative power of her words on Gilbert. She argues that Helen's "revelations force him outside the restricted boundaries of an ego that defines itself through its difference from and superiority to someone else. His concluding description of the mutuality of his relationship with Helen suggests that Gilbert's consciousness now incorporates hers, just as his narrative encloses her narrative."⁶⁹ Edith Kostka also relates the transformative power of the man truly embracing a woman's narrative. She suggests, "Gilbert does not develop as a human

⁶⁵ Julie McMaster, "'Imbecile Laughter' and 'Desperate Earnest' in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 43 (1982): 363.

⁶⁶ Wettlaufer, *Portraits of the Artist as a Young Woman*, 226.

⁶⁷ Talley, "Anne Brontë's Method of Social Protest," 133.

⁶⁸ Jansson, "*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," 34.

⁶⁹ N.M. Jacobs "Gender and Layered Narrative in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" *Journal of Narrative Technique* 16 (Fall 1986): 213.

being because he has embraced human courage, but rather because he has undertaken the reading act. What has launched him into adulthood has not been the experience of male order and reason, but rather the reading of male disorder and unreason as written by a woman.”⁷⁰ Thormählen also picks up on this transformation, arguing that the shift of power undoubtedly goes to Helen at the novel’s end. In the end she marries “a man who has to suffer the loss of *his* vanity first, a man who loves and benefits from her spiritual force rather than wishing to conquer it.”⁷¹ In this regard, the novel’s odd structure is in no way an oppression of Helen’s voice; rather, here *Wildfell Hall* models an outcome that no other Brontë novel accomplishes—a man reads our heroine’s innermost thoughts, catches the vision of her pleas, and loves her all the more. Gilbert’s outer frame of the narrative becomes a measuring stick for the compelling power of Helen’s plight in that her narrative exacts a transformation on her beloved, who—immature, selfish, and judgmental before—progresses into an empathetic and supportive husband. Furthermore, this outer frame of the narrative, which is an epistle to Haslem, is even more noteworthy because it involves a man sharing what he has learned from a woman with another man. Rather than reading this epistolary exchange as an indication of homosocial exchange about conquest, as Carnell does,⁷² I read it as a further elevation of Helen’s perspective—that it is not only instructive to the man who marries her, but he sees it as potentially beneficial from men further removed from her abusive past. The novel’s enclosed epistolary structure, then, makes

⁷⁰ Edith A. Kostka, “Narrative Experience as a Means to Maturity in Anne Brontë’s Victorian Novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,” *Connecticut Review* 14, no. 2 (1992): 47.

⁷¹ Marianne Thormählen, “The Villain of *Wildfell Hall*: Aspects and Prospects of Arthur Huntingdon,” *The Modern Language Review* (Oct. 1993): 841.

⁷² Rachel K. Carnell, “Feminism and the Public Sphere,” 5.



Figure 5.1. Frontispiece illustration by Alfred Pearce for Anne Brontë *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (London: W. Nicholson & Sons, 1884). Alfred Pearce (1855-1933) was fourth-generation artist and was quite prolific as a political cartoonist and illustrator. He is best known for designing posters that campaigned for women's suffrage.

Brontë's ethics especially and unusually visual because we get the scopic effect of seeing Gilbert understand the truth in the narrative and seeing his behavior attest to the didactic power of her narrative. Alfred Pearce's 1884 illustration (Figure 5.1) visually suggests what I have argued: that Helen is the central figure of the novel. In this sketch we see Helen descending the staircase and looking down to Markham, and Markham looks nervously back at her. Helen is undoubtedly elevated above Markham, not only spatially but also metaphorically, and he looks up at her adoringly. This sketch suggests a visual dynamic that proves central to the moral method of *Wildfell Hall*. We as the audience observe the narrative exchange between Helen and Gilbert and

the way that Helen is elevated in his eyes. As he seeks to celebrate and uphold her goodness, we observe how the entire point of Gilbert's narrative to his brother in law is to do just that—to uphold Helen's perspective as the greatest catalyst of his adult life.

The most striking and pervasive message within Helen's narrative and the immorality that she demonstrates most keenly in her narrative is the act of spousal violence. *Wildfell Hall* is acutely occupied with the dangers of violence and subjugation for women, but it also makes the clearest argument of any Brontë novel as to the root of misogyny and how to counter it. Anne's didactic spectacle most elucidates the peril of having different moral standards for men and women, and like the didactic spectacle of *Wuthering Heights*, it suggests that male dominance and violence poses great danger to the Victorian family and quashes a woman's moral influence and individualized spirituality. Victorian women were expected to be the angels of their households and were expected to endow their children with morality and spirituality. However, *Wildfell Hall* suggests, in a way quite similar to *Wuthering Heights*, that this moral mission is quite difficult for women to fulfill because of their lack of power in the social system. Through a series of juxtapositions and visual suggestions of deeper social issues, we can see that though Anne Brontë's theology may have been straightforward in the novel, her social aims were much more implicitly and artfully rendered. The novel elucidates the perils of women's appointed moral role through a series of spectacles.

Before their marriage, Helen and Huntingdon both seem to rely on her moral influence to reform his waywardness. He exclaims, "She will save me, body and soul, from destruction. Already, she has ennobled me in my own estimation, and made me three times better, wiser, greater than I was" (*TWH*, 198). However, soon after their marriage, Helen quickly realizes that Arthur will be very difficult to change, and after a few years of marriage, she realizes that she is

incapable of effecting change. What should be a fruitful role of the moral wife then only yields tension at Grassdale Manor. Laura Berry points out that “Helen's ‘torturing’ of Arthur senior resembles her ‘tutoring’ of Arthur junior,” and that though she has some success in teaching young Arthur, her role as moral authority proves “perilously unstable.”⁷³ This instability lies in the clear imbalance of power that makes women’s role impotent when it can be stifled by male dominance.

Brontë doesn’t stop here with rendering the imbalance between men and women, but she also presents the taboo issue of spousal abuse. N.M. Jacobs believes that one reason contemporary critics took such issue with *Wildfell Hall* was because they believed that education and civilization could erase violence from marital relationships, and they rejected the notion of marital violence being a widespread issue because it was posed as such a working-class problem.⁷⁴ In this way, *Wildfell Hall* serves to break down the elements of class and privilege that were concealing the pervasive nature of marital violence in the Victorian era.⁷⁵

Arthur Huntingdon is an abusive husband. His emotional offenses against Helen are clearly spelled out, and I recounted his control over her artistic expression at length in Chapter 4. Besides this, Helen recounts his emotional abuse in that he frequently abandons her for a life of excess and philandering in the city, shamelessly flaunts his affair with Lady Lowborough, and tries to turn young Arthur against her. His sexual and physical abuse, though less explicitly

⁷³ Berry, “Acts of Custody and Incarceration,” 51.

⁷⁴ Jacobs, “Gender and Layered Narrative,” 210.

⁷⁵ For more information on women’s marital rights, see Allen Horstman, *Victorian Divorce* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1985); Anna Clark, *Women's Silence, Men's Violence: Sexual Assault in England, 1770-1845* (London: Routledge, 1987); and A. James Hammerton, *Cruelty and Companionship: Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Married Life* (London: Routledge, 1992).

drawn, is also strongly implied through spectacle in Helen's narrative. Early in her marriage, Helen suggests that Huntingdon exploits her sexually. She complains that he "is very fond of me, almost too fond. I could do with less caressing and more rationality. I should like to be less of a pet and more of a friend, if I might choose" (*TWH*, 203). Helen never explicitly implicates him in marital rape—a notion that, I might add, wasn't exactly legitimized in the nineteenth century—but it is clear that Huntingdon's sensual fixation is offensive to her. She later laments his carnal nature: "God might . . . remove the film of sensual darkness from his eyes, but I could not" (*TWH*, 261). Helen recognizes that no matter how virtuous she may be, she cannot influence her husband; she is powerless to effect change in him.

Furthermore, Helen shows us, through spectacle again, that the only way she can have any choice in Huntingdon's sexual behavior is by physically removing herself from his presence. After a particularly bad argument, Helen slams her door on him. When he tries to enter, she tells him, "you have displeased me, . . . and I don't want to see your face or hear your voice again till the morning" (*TWH*, 211). The implication here is clear. By locking herself in her quarters, Helen is denying her husband his conjugal right to sex, which was a rather bold act in Brontë's day. It strikes me as rather important that Helen includes no narrative explanation for this action, but she only offers the dramatic scene in its place. In her refusal to verbally articulate her denial, we see a primitive rebellion against patriarchy; instead, she enlists a spatial divide to enact her resistance. Helen makes another stand in denying Arthur his conjugal right to sex when his affair is found out. She declares, "henceforth we are husband and wife only in the name...I am your child's mother, and your housekeeper, nothing more" (*TWH*, 307). His extramarital affair makes any sexual union between Helen and him dubious to a modern audience, to be sure, but Helen's rejection of him here is still provocative within the context of Victorian marital law. The sexual

tenure of the marriage seems to suggest an unequal dominion in sexual conquest, if not outright abuse. Never does Helen explicitly speak out against the assumption that women are the sexual property of their husbands, but through a series of spectacles, she illustrates that Helen is justified in denying her unfaithful and abusive husband sex.

Though Helen never explicitly narrates any physical abuse in her marriage, we again see strong indication of it through spectacle. We see Huntingdon lose his temper several times, but the most striking moment occurs when he abuses his dog. Helen narrates the incident:

[H]is favourite cocker, Dash, that had been lying at my feet, took the liberty of jumping upon him and beginning to lick his face. He struck it off with a smart blow, and the poor dog squeaked and ran cowering back to me. When he woke up, about half an hour after, he called it to him again, but Dash only looked sheepish and wagged the tip of his tail. He called again more sharply, but Dash only clung the closer to me, and licked my hand, as if imploring protection. Enraged at this, his master snatched up a heavy book and hurled it at his head. The poor dog set up a piteous outcry, and ran to the door. I let him out, and then quietly took up the book. (*TWH*, 213)

Lisa Surridge examines *Wildfell Hall* along with several other novels and recognizes a parallel between them in that there are instances when men abuse their dogs and these moments indicate marital abuse. She argues that, “In such cases, violence between husband and wife is not represented directly. Instead, the beating or wounding of an animal by the husband indirectly

suggests the presence of abuse in the marriage. . . . [T]his paralleling of beaten women and beaten dogs suggests an analogy between the position of a wife and that of a domestic pet.”⁷⁶

Indeed, we can see several parallels in that Dash wants to be with Huntingdon, who does not requite the feeling. The book may only graze Helen, but her stoicism in this spectacle of violence suggests violent outbursts are all too familiar to her. Surridge analyzes this episode:

The altercation contains several significant elements. First, dog and woman are identically positioned as recipients of the husband's verbal abuse. Secondly, there seems to be a transfer of physical violence from one to the other: while the man throws objects at and beats the dog, the woman is the one who is injured. Ostensibly, the wounding is accidental. . . . The scene, however, is fraught with suppressed meaning.⁷⁷

This moment serves as a suggestive spectacle to communicate an issue that is altogether unpalatable to her audience—that even gentlewomen are in abusive marital bondage. Surridge’s essay brilliantly traces the literary trend of animal abuse as a euphemism for marital abuse, yet she stops short of recognizing this instance as a moment of visual rhetoric that undercuts traditional textuality. In this instance, perhaps Anne knew that a verbal recognition of physical abuse would reveal too much to make her novel marketable to a Victorian audience, and Huntingdon’s violent nature must be conveyed through relational spectacle.

Wildfell Hall does present violent spectacle in a way consistent with *Wuthering Heights*, but there is one pointed difference between these two novels that I wish to point out. While

⁷⁶ Lisa Surridge, “Dogs’ Bodies / Women’s Bodies: Wives as Pets in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Narratives of Domestic Violence,” *Victorian Review* 20, no. 1: 5.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

Emily's novel mostly presents a problematic reality of immorality and the uselessness of sheltering people against it, *Wildfell Hall* not only poses this problem, but also provides a solution for improving conduct by stopping unbalanced gendered notions of morality. In matters of moral education, one might expect Anne Brontë to focus on how to bring up girls to be more wary of potential mates or how to better defend themselves against immorality. Brontë does have a clear message for young girls, but she is surprisingly intrepid because she does not only view so-called "women's issues" as problems that women must work to eradicate and overcome but also as problems that are instigated by men and even affect men's well-being.⁷⁸ Helen's narrative suggests that the biggest problem with gender imbalance is with the upbringing of young boys. Marion Shaw suggests that Anne's experience with her brother must have caused her to think about, "What constitutes true manliness and womanliness in the formation of Christian character during childhood, and what mistakenly passes for these attributes."⁷⁹

The culture surrounding moral education, particularly the educating of boys, was of a great concern in Brontë's time. In Sarah Lewis' 1840 tract *Women's Mission*, she primarily concerns herself with encouraging masculinity in boys that is both strong and moral. She stated, "Let every woman then engrave upon the heart of her son such an image of feminine virtue and loveliness, as may make it sufficient for him to turn his eyes inward to draw then a power sufficient to combat evil and to preserve him from wretchedness."⁸⁰ For Lewis, this masculinity

⁷⁸ Many third-wave feminists now see women's right this way. For a few examples, see Jackson Katz, "Advertising and the Construction of Violent White Masculinity: From BMWs to Bud Light," in *Gender, Race and Class in Media: A Critical Reader*, 2nd ed., eds. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2011): 261-69; and Aviviah Wittenberg-Cox, "Gender at Work is Not a Women's Issue," *Harvard Business Review*. *HBR.org*. Accessed Feb 15, 2016.

⁷⁹ Marion Shaw, "Anne Brontë: A Quiet Feminist," *Brontë Society Transactions* 21.4 (1994):126.

⁸⁰ Sarah Lewis, *Women's Mission*, 4th ed. (London, John W. Parker: 1839), 129-30. Accessed via *Google Books*. 15 Nov. 2015.

must be endowed with feminine virtues to be moral in a resilient way. John Stuart Mill shared a similar concern. He feared that young boys' sense of superiority to women would cause them to shun important moral teachings. He laments, "how early the notion of [a boy's] inherent superiority to a girl arises in his mind; how it grows with his growth and strengthens with his strength; how it is inoculated by one schoolboy upon another; how early the youth thinks himself superior to his mother, owing her perhaps forbearance, but no real respect."⁸¹

Helen seems to speak in accordance to these tracts when Mrs. Markham encourages her to not be so doting on young Arthur and to limit her nurturing influence so as to facilitate his masculine toughness. Mrs. Markham admonishes, "You should try to suppress such foolish fondness, as well to save your son from ruin as yourself from ridicule...He ought not to be always tied to his mother's apron string; he should learn to be ashamed of it" (*TWH*, 25). She later articulates her concerns about gender and morality with Mrs. Markham, relaying that she sees grave danger in the notion that young boys may "seek danger, rather than shun it, and feed . . . virtue by temptation" (*TWH*, 28-9). Helen takes issue with sheltering girls from the actualities of temptation. Society sees a young girl as "so vicious, or so feeble-minded, that she cannot withstand temptation . . . though she may be pure and innocent as long as she is kept in ignorance and restraint" she will be "destitute of real virtue" (*TWH*, 30-31). This imbalance in morally educating children is one point that Brontë poses in a mostly textual way. Where we see Brontë's didactic spectacle come into play is when she illustrates the grave consequences of indulging boys' temptation and curiosity while overprotecting girls.⁸²

⁸¹ John Stuart Mill, "The Subjection of Women" in *Essays on Sex Equality*. ed. Alice S. Rossi (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 219.

⁸² For another example of Anne Brontë's treatment of moral education, see *Agnes Grey* in which Agnes strives to guide the Bloomfield children under her tutelage, specifically Tom, who is prone to "masculine"

We see a demonstration of this double standard in the way that Huntingdon seeks to defile young Arthur as a form of masculine initiation. Helen notes how

his father and his father's friends delighted to encourage in all the embryo vices a little child can show, and to instruct in all the evil habits he could acquire—in a word, to 'make a man of him' was one of their staple amusements . . . learned to tipple wine like papa, to swear like Mr. Hattersley, and to have his own way like a man, and sent mamma to the devil when she tried to prevent him. (*TWH*, 339)

Huntingdon's pursuit to introduce these vices to their son is Helen's breaking point. She is willing to put up with her husband's abuse and infidelity, but her son's defilement is more than she can bear. She takes every action to correct Arthur's behavior, including adding a vomiting agent to the young boy's alcohol so that he learns to hate it (*TWH*, 341). She soon makes her first attempt to escape with the boy, though she will only be successful on her second attempt. Helen's position on moral education in some ways complies with popular tracts that boys should be kept close to their mothers to inherit their virtuous qualities, but Helen argues for more frank education for young girls that can help prevent them from making the same mistakes that she made. Thus, *Wildfell Hall* seems to elucidate the same gender complications that we see rendered through didactic spectacle in *Wuthering Heights*—that the cultural norms of morality, particularly in allowing for dominance and violence in men, negates women's moral purity. With

immorality. On this connection, also see Mary Summers, "Anne Brontë on How to Bring up Children," *Brontë Studies* 28 (March 2003): 85-87.

the acute imbalance in power, the vices that are ascribed to masculinity naturally overtake the virtues that are ascribed to the infantilized and subjugated female.

Several critics join with me in seeing Helen's ideology about moral education as forward-thinking. Morse posits that Helen "fervently argues for a new mode of childrearing that acknowledges the minds and spirits of male and female children are equal, and equally susceptible to influence from the fallen world of experience."⁸³ On a similar note, Gruner suggests that in *Wildfell Hall*, "Novelist and mother come together, then, as moral teachers—but moral teachers in disguise."⁸⁴ What is perhaps most important to remember about Brontë's didactic spectacle in *Wildfell Hall*, however, is that the novel certainly does aim to shed light on the unfairness of moral influence falling squarely on the woman within the family. This is a reality of the novel that some critics estimate proves that women should not be charged with the moral sanctity of their homes. In fact, Jansson notices similar didactic points to what I detailed above, but casts them as proof that women's moral power is socially impotent. She argues,

several truths are inscribed in *Tenant*: the truth of the ignorance in which young girls are raised, and the inadequacy of the information upon which they base marriage choices; the truth of the power relations between the sexes; and, finally, the ineffectuality of "woman's influence", that mysterious and nebulous power to which so much was ascribed and by which so little is achieved, at least in this novel.⁸⁵

⁸³ Morse, "I speak of those I do know," 113-14.

⁸⁴ Elizabeth Rose Gruner, "Plotting the Mother: Caroline Norton, Helen Huntingdon, and Isabel Vane," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 16, no. 2 (Autumn 1997): 311.

⁸⁵ Jansson, "The Tenant of Wildfell Hall," 33.

This is a conclusion that other critics, like Colón, come to as well.⁸⁶ They see Helen's failure as an argument that women should not be charged with moral idealism. I see *Wildfell Hall* as presenting the danger of this idealism as well, but not because women are incapable of it but because men should share this moral charge as well. Helen makes her point clear in arguing for the moral equality of girls and boys, and through the novel's broadest demonstration—Gilbert's growth from a self-involved bachelor to a considerate husband to Helen and role model to Arthur—we catch Anne Brontë's vision that the best conditions for true morality would be balanced social power and unbiased notions of morality in terms of gender.

It is important to recognize, however, that Brontë does not only present the peril of male dominance as a problem because it limits women's moral influence on her husband and children, but perhaps the most important recognition is how it effects women's personal spirituality. The greatest threat to Helen's spirituality is undoubtedly Huntingdon during their marriage, and Brontë demonstrates that his control over her is at odds with her living to her full spiritual potential. Once Huntingdon realizes that Helen's moral admonishments would exact a kind of control over him, he discourages her religious devotion. He tells her,

you are too religious. Now I like a woman to be religious, and I think your piety one of your greatest charms; but then, like all other good things, it may be carried too far. To my thinking, a woman's religion ought not to lessen her devotion to her earthly lord. She should have enough to purify and etherealise her soul, but not enough to refine away her heart, and raise her above all human sympathies. (*TWH*, 205)

⁸⁶ Christine Colón, "Enacting the Art of Moral Influence: Religion and Social Reform in the works of Charlotte Brontë," *Women's Writing* 11, no. 3: 407.

Huntingdon clearly articulates the problem in this passage. He desires Helen's moral influence because he subscribes to the ideal of women serving as the "angel in the house." However, her moral reach has simply gone too far if it interferes with his power as her "earthly lord." Brontë's issue with Huntingdon's control over spirituality insinuates that when women must submit to a man, and in particular an immoral man, her social roles come in direct conflict with the first of the Ten Commandments, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). Helen's moral power may be stunted because she is in an abusive relationship, but she cannot live her beliefs because her social roles come into conflict with her spirituality. Brontë seems to argue that rather than a woman's submission to her husband being an inspired divine mandate, that it actually had quite negative spiritual consequences for women's spiritual well-being.

Helen suffers in a spiritual sense because she fears for Arthur's soul and the penitence he'll have to pay in the afterlife because of his wrongdoings (*TWH*, 435-38), but her own spirituality also suffers as a result of society's view that she should honor her husband even before God. In her time at Grassdale, Helen and her son are exposed to immoral behavior, but even after she escapes Grassdale, Helen must avoid attending church services because she wants to hide young Arthur from his father. Even though Helen expresses her beliefs many times throughout the novel and we don't get any indication that her challenges result in a crisis of faith, she clearly lacks the spiritual felicity of receiving social support through her religion, and Brontë indicates this through the way the people of Linden-car judge her as an immoral person because she lives as a single mother and does not attend church (*TWH*, 42-46). Helen still maintains a faith-centered life in her difficulties, but it is clear that she is unable to live as a true subject when she is under the restraint of her awful marriage. Thus, *Wildfell Hall* relates the social ills of imbalanced marital power in its visual suggestions of spousal abuse, and it elucidates the

problems with viewing moral expediency in such gendered terms. Though the novel details the problems of biased moral education through Helen's didactic dialogue in a way quite consistent with the conduct novel, when we examine *Wildfell Hall* more carefully, we can see that Anne supports her arguments for women's empowerment through didactic spectacle, most particularly in relating the difficult realities of sexual and physical spousal abuse. Her reliance on visual rhetoric to express her feminist concerns about women's rights and spiritual well-being is a quality that links *Wildfell Hall* to a larger pattern within the Brontës, which utilizes vision as a more primitive and authentic method of writing: text inspired by the woman's body and vision, or *l'écriture féminine*.

CONCLUSION

If I were to choose one moment in the Brontës' novels that best represents my study, it would be Jane Eyre's communion with the moon. Jane describes this image as "a white human form shone in the azure, inclining a glorious brow earthward." The moon reveals a spiritual message to Jane, urging her to leave Thornfield and the married Rochester, and Jane faithfully replies, "Mother, I will" (*JE*, 407). In this moment Jane perceives a spiritual message through her vision alone, and her visual knowledge proves both individualized and particularly feminine. This moment is just one example of a larger trope that may be traced throughout the writings of the Brontës. Time and again we see women understand and express spiritual matters most powerfully through vision. As I have argued, the visual aspects of the Brontës' novels are notable because they undercut the notion that spiritual self-realization most readily occurs through reading and understanding the Bible, a text that is undeniably couched in the patriarchal tradition. By privileging profound moments of visual spirituality, the Brontës write texts that are particularly feminine. For rather than privileging the religious institution and the masculine authority so inextricably tied to it, they endow their novels with what Cixous calls *l'écriture féminine*, writing that is distinctly feminine and reflective of the female body. This visually intuitive aspect of the novel reimagines women's spiritual capacity as much more sensual and individualized than the religious norms of the time suggest.

One trait of the Brontës' works that has made them so important for the last century and a half is that the novels bring together a poignant enactment of Christian faith with concerns about women's inequality in the religious institution and women's inequality in society as a whole. Most women in their novels seem to express their spiritual empowerment through vision; however, these women identify religious misogyny and tyranny through vision as well. We see a

bodily reaction from women in religious spaces throughout the novels. The church in *Shirley* is boring and stifling, the chapel in *Wuthering Heights* is depressing and foreboding, and the cathedral in *Villette* is downright insalubrious. Women's marginalization from the institution is strongly conveyed through sensory reaction to space. *Jane Eyre* also critiques the religious institution through her depiction of religious spaces but does so through imagery. Jane describes her two main oppressors, Mr. Brocklehurst and St. John Rivers, in terms of the architectural images of the dark pillar and the white column. These images can be strongly linked to biblical tradition, yet they undercut both textual and architectural components of the religious institution by suggesting that these powerful men may assume an air of religious authority over Jane but their patriarchal power is superficial in comparison to God's empowering love.

Another way that the Brontës reveal injustice through vision is in displaying the relationship between the novels' female characters and the images that they interpret. We can see this relationship most pointedly in *Villette* when our unreliable narrator Lucy reports repeated sightings of "an image like—a NUN" (*Vil*, 229). Lucy, probably the most sophisticated narrator across the Brontës' works, reports seeing this nun to the reader, but the narrative suggests that perhaps Lucy knows the falsity of this image from the start, and includes it in her narrative to express the severe limitations that she faces as a single woman who is marginalized in society. Lucy reports this false apparition, not only as a religious commentary on institutional religion but also as an epistemological recognition that many may see injustice and falsity in religious institutions but redirect other's attention through altering the truth, just as Lucy does. Lucy also implicitly objects to the embedded misogyny in religion when she observes polarized notions about women in a Brussels art gallery. On the one hand, she observes the rotund Cleopatra, a woman who is grotesquely sexualized, and on the other hand, she observes a set of idealized

religious women in the collection “La vie d'une femme.” She observes these paintings—which depict the phases in women’s life as young girl, bride, young mother, and widow— with clear scorn, and she recognizes that these idealized women are no closer to reality than the grotesque Cleopatra is. Though Lucy is fed misogynistic notions through this art, she roundly rejects these images of womanhood, and her rejection empowers her subjectivity. Even though the Brontës’ protagonists may be unable to remedy the injustices of their day, they can wholeheartedly reject misogynistic visual rhetoric in disputing it through their own interpretation.

Apart from these visual recognitions of religious tyranny and misogyny, however, spiritual vision is largely positive and empowering. In all three sisters’ works, women’s vision helps to define and ennoble their personal beliefs. The first way that we can see this empowerment is through their interpretation of natural wonders. In *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* our narrators receive profound spiritual comfort through seeing celestial bodies in the night sky. These images reflect biblical hermeneutics, clearly, but they also convey a highly personal inflection of the biblical tradition. Both Jane and Lucy receive guidance and comfort from viewing these natural wonders. In their moments of need, God reaches them—not through language but through sensual vision. The most profound moment of this throughout the Brontës is in *Shirley* when the sight of the sunset reflecting on a nearby churchyard prompts Shirley to deliver a speech that powerfully re-imagines Eve’s role in Christian mythology. Shirley sees Eve as a mother-Titan and as an advocate for human knowledge rather than as a feeble-minded domestic who misunderstood the gravity of eating the forbidden fruit. In this critical moment, Charlotte Brontë utilizes the Bible’s founding myth to argue that women are not only domestic creatures but are the progenitors of thought and the mothers who prevent human extinction; this, of course, is a striking reversal from the way Christian religious institutions in the nineteenth

century utilized this myth to implicate women as vulnerable to temptation and subservient to men.

The second way that women are empowered through spiritual vision is by infusing their self-expressive art with biblical hermeneutics. Helen's art in *Wildfell Hall* suggests her progression from a naïve young girl to an insightful and sophisticated woman. A painting early in the novel and a sketch late in the novel create clear contrast, and both paintings rely on biblical hermeneutics to convey this change. Jane Eyre's art also functions to portray an important part of her subjectivity, but it serves a much more mystical purpose than Helen's does. Jane's three watercolors that she paints early in her time at Thornfield seem to thematically align with her estrangement from Rochester, but they also manifest several concerns in her consciousness—her fear of punishment for her passionate temperament, her belief in divine guidance and comfort through nature, and her recognition that the vastness of God's ways cannot be easily understood. Her watercolors convey these notions largely through the biblical hermeneutics imbedded in the mystical scenes she portrays.

The third way women find empowerment in their vision is through dreams. In *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, dreams serve as prophecies. Jane relays two frightening dreams to Rochester, both of which foresee their separation and one of which implies the destruction of Thornfield, but he dismisses her fears. Though Rochester chooses not to heed these warnings, we see the power of Jane's prophetic vision in due time. In *Wuthering Heights*, Cathy prefigures how her spirit will haunt the moors when she recounts her dream of being cast out from heaven because she prefers her turbulent home over a peaceful afterlife. This dream helps her realize that her turbulent love for Heathcliff is authentic while her peaceful relationship with Linton is not her true desire, though she paradoxically marries Linton anyway. In an even more striking

moment in *Wuthering Heights*, Cathy infects Lockwood's subjectivity when he reads her diary, an entry in which she complains about being oppressed into studying the Bible. His reading of Cathy's account propels Lockwood into a strange and powerful dream where he is subjected to an egregiously long sermon that ends with all of the patrons inflicting violence on him. Cathy's ghost haunts him after this dream. We can see in this sequence of events that Cathy's ideas intrude upon his subjectivity and fill him with a feminine perspective of patriarchal oppression. Though the message of this dream may be negative, the tenor of Cathy's influence is decidedly empowering. She enjoys power that Jane does not, for while Rochester is seemingly unmoved by Jane's mystical paintings, Lockwood is affected by Cathy's written point of view in a strikingly visual way.

Finally, the Brontës present women's vision as empowering by filling some of their novels with didactic spectacles. Emily and Anne in particular depart from the trends in didactic literature in their time, and fill their novels with negative modeling, or examples of what not to do. This didactic spectacle supplants traditional textual didacticism and allows for a visual ethical system that proves much more forthcoming and practical. In *Wuthering Heights*, we can see the pattern of patriarchal dominance and how it is passed through the men of the Earnshaw family through several generations. Brontë undoubtedly condemns this oppression through the didacticism of constructed spectacles, but she also advocates for the Christian precepts of forgiveness and empathy in demonstrating that, though men are the clear perpetrators of violence, they too suffer because of their immorality. *Wildfell Hall* also presents didactic spectacles of immorality in which Huntingdon abuses Helen and disrespects his family. Anne Brontë suggests a very clear remedy for the tradition of violent patriarchy: treat young boys and girls as moral equals and do not glorify temptation as a rite of passage for boys while

unreasonably and unconscionably sheltering young girls from the realities of life. The visual frankness in both of these novels suggests that polite euphemisms about immorality are ineffective and that demonstrating immorality is perhaps the best way to produce reform.

My study resonates with many important scholarly discussions about the Brontës, as I have detailed throughout the dissertation. However, in my mind, it also makes some broader suggestions about women and Victorian Christianity that could extend to future study. One suggestion is that, while the centrality of the Bible in Christianity is indisputable, the feminine internalization of faith occurs most strongly through mobilizing the Bible into visual hermeneutics. Through spiritual *l'écriture féminine*, women can personalize their faith and make it more authentic to their sensual lived experience. When they mobilize their faith in this way, we see women's remarkable ability to delineate the patriarchal tradition of religion from the empowering essence of Christian spirituality. It seems that despite the limitations that the religious institutions bring for women in the Brontës, personal reflection on spiritual matters outweighs the oppressive aspects of religion for them. Throughout the Brontës we see the suggestion that God is polymorphic rather than patriarchal in that He bears traits that Victorian culture would have deemed both masculine and feminine. Though the love of this God does not remedy the social injustice of the Brontës' day, it emboldens these women with a sense of self-respect that transcends the injustices of their time.

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Date: May 2016

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