“Why am I So Changed?":
Witnessing the hysteric’s trauma narrative through movement in place
in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*.

Abigail Moeller
English Senior Conference
Professor Laura McGrane
April 9, 2015
Place is as social as it is personal. It is essential to our identity: the way we view ourselves and others view us. Thus, when we lose our place, it can induce panic – like a traveler lost in a snowstorm. One way to get at the emotional intensity of displacement is through the visual work of dioramas. The artist and critic Julia Callon uses expressive dioramas to represent a variety of rooms in nineteenth-century novels where female protagonists suffer mental distress ranging from delusions to suicidal ideation. The particular depiction below of Catherine Linton’s room in *Wuthering Heights* offers the observer two views: from the perspective of how society sees a respectable nineteenth-century room, and from the prisoner of that room, the female protagonist (Callon 2012). The two different descriptions represent how, depending on one’s personal connection to place, there can be different emotional responses.

The scene on the left is orderly and rational with each object in its place – calm. In contrast, the scene on the right is one of chaos with objects hurled about. The body inhabiting the space becomes unable to align itself logically to the objects in the room. The feathers are like snow, swirling about the body, distorting the space the body inhabits. The protagonist absorbs a feeling of disorientation, wildness, even madness. The sensory overload of the feathers is difficult to process.
These starkly different configurations question how Catherine, the haunted protagonist of Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), moves from the rational space depicted on the left into the chaotic scene on the right. One also wonders if this transition is merely a linear movement or whether Catherine may move multiple times between these two viewpoints. During one of Catherine’s hypnotic fits in the novel she asks; “Why am I so changed? Why does my blood rush into a hell of tumult at a few words?” (Brontë 140). She cries this phrase after she has locked herself in her room for days, protesting her husband Edgar’s mandate that her childhood friend Heathcliff no longer visit her at her home, Thrushcross Grange. In this moment, Catherine poses one of the most crucial questions in the novel: not just why is she so changed, but how is her transformation articulated on both a personal and cultural level? Specifically, what propels Catherine’s self-perception of her shift from a hearty girl into a hysterical young woman whose “blood rush[es] into a hell of a tumult at a few words?” Why does her body become disoriented and confused, and how does the novel frame her condition for a nineteenth-century readership?

While others may share a common feeling towards objects in the room, Catherine is unable to orient her body and mind within the normative view. She is an “affect alien,” a term coined by theorist Sara Ahmed to describe one’s rejection of and from the dominant social sphere.¹ While those conforming to societal norms experience “place” like the diorama on the left, neat and orderly, Catherine becomes unable to regard objects as society teaches, which creates tension between what she is expected to desire and what she wants. She acts out this frustration through her body’s increasingly agitated movements. Her body’s gesticulations parallel and enhance her mental distress as she realizes that she cannot have what makes her

---

¹The “affect alien” is a term defined by Ahmed to describe individuals who “refuse to share an orientation toward certain things as being good because she does not find the objects promised happiness to be quite so promising” (Ahmed 39). An affect alien describes an individual who find objects the rest of the society sees as unhappy as happy or vice versa. This orientation puts them outside dominant thinking, and their disturbance is a threat to society’s power structure.
happy. Her cruel disillusionment leads to a condition characterized as hysteria within the cultural milieu of the early nineteenth century. Her narrative diagnosis points to a larger debate in the mid-nineteenth century over how society portrays bodies that refuse to orient themselves within conventional models of happiness. In medical discourse, the hysteric body becomes the site of analysis rather than its agent. The language of disease takes the focus away from the patient’s perspective and subjectivity. The hysteric’s voice is often silenced.

In Brontë’s portrayal of Catherine’s hysteria, the protagonist’s feelings and actions become amplified to excess. This process is not an instant transformation, but rather a gradual one that parallels her awakening to the social restraints placed on her. The narrative points to Catherine’s growing frustration in her exaggerated movement. This movement suddenly ceases, and the subsequent swift undercutting of this excess points to the physical and emotional wounds inflicted on the body and mind when she is ostracized. Ultimately, the text depicts hysteria in its historical context as both a source of fleeting agency and a cultural imposition that engenders enduring trauma.

I: A Genealogy of Nineteenth-Century Hysteria

In Brontë scholarship, critics have tended to consider the novels in isolation from nineteenth-century psychological discourse, a trend especially evident in work on Catherine from Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*. This is not to say that critics do not psychologize the characters. In fact, the difficulty in explaining the three central characters in the novel, Lockwood, Heathcliff and Catherine, has led to multiple essays that employ both Jungian and Freudian readings.

---

2 In her critical work, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, Sally Shuttleworth discusses how Brontë scholarship has tended to view Charlotte’s works with psychological terminology that originated years if not a century after publication. The lack of historical context brought to bear in literary analysis is especially pronounced in Emily’s works because she was more private than Charlotte and has left scholars less information on her life and sources of literary inspiration (Miller 185).
Bernard Paris defines Heathcliff in the nomenclature of Karen Horney as an “arrogant vindictive personality” (Levy 158). Annis Pratt similarly links both Heathcliff and Catherine with the Jungian "dying-god archetype” (Levy 158). In both discussions, however, there is a double erasure of history. Framing *Wuthering Heights* with Freudian and Jungian discourse from the twentieth-century, critics give Brontë powers of prophecy, while endowing Freud with supreme originating authority. This conflation erases a rich history of Victorian psychology, specifically the period’s work on female hysteria.

To ground *Wuthering Heights* in this mid nineteenth-century medical context, one first has to understand cultural concerns surrounding health and sickness. Brontë was raised in Haworth, a Yorkshire Village where disease and death were rife and hence were regular conversation topics. Literary scholar Beth Torgerson conducted research both on Reverend Brontë’s involvement in improving health in Haworth and on the family’s connection to illness. Torgerson writes of Reverend Brontë’s numerous letters to London requesting a formal visit from the inspector of health due to the high mortality rates of his parishioners: the Babbage Report (1850) was a result of his insistence (1). The Babbage Report stated that the “mortality rates in Haworth rivaled those in the worst districts in London” (General Board Of Health 96).

Health was an issue not just central to the area Emily lived in, but in the Brontë household itself. The deaths of Emily’s sisters, Maria and Elizabeth Brontë, at the young ages of eleven and ten from consumption at the Clergy Daughter’s School, as well as their mother’s early death from uterine cancer, had a lasting impact on the Brontë household (Torgerson 2). Unsurprisingly, representations of illness pervade the seven novels written by Anne, Emily and Charlotte Brontë from 1847-1853. The list of diseases they narrate includes consumption, rabies, rheumatism, fevers, alcoholism, hypochondria, hysteria, monomania, and madness – among others.

---

3 Reverend Brontë is Emily’s father.
Emily Brontë learned about many of these diseases, including hysteria, during her upbringing. A favorite medical text of the Brontë household was Thomas Graham’s *Modern Domestic Medicine* (1927), which has an entire section on “Hysteria.” The section on nervous disease was especially well annotated by Reverend Brontë, who was concerned with mental health. As well, there is a notation on Charlotte’s “tic douloureux,” a painful affliction of the nerves of the face, a suggestion that Reverend Brontë turned to medical texts to understand his daughter’s condition. He believed that it was attributed less to physical causes than to mental stress, aligning it with hysteria (Shuttleworth 27). In addition, prominent medical expert Thomas Pridgin Teale was known to have visited the Brontë household (Shuttleworth 78). He wrote *Treatise on Neurologic Disease* (1829), which features hysteria prominently and describes it as a medical disease that should be taken more seriously by the medical establishment (Teale 73). In short, the Brontë family’s encounters with contemporary popular and medical theories of hysteria and the female body were expansive: from contact with numerous medical men who trailed through the house to a compendious collection of domestic medical texts, and accounts in local newspapers, including the *Tory Leeds Intelligencer* and the *Whig Leeds Mercury* (Shuttleworth 19).

While literary critics reference hysteria in their work on Emily Brontë, the term generally lacks historical specificity. Critic Patsy Stoneman mentions that Catherine shows an extreme form of hysteria, but fails to explain how “hysteria” was defined in the early nineteenth century or how a hysteric’s body can be read through a literary lens (xxi). Peter Grudin describes Catherine as a hysteric when she asks to have her window flung open in a late scene. He does not, however, use the word “hysteria” correctly in terms of how it was defined in Brontë’s period. Rather, he blithely describes Catherine’s usual demands as “gratuitous and merely the
hysteria of a proud lady” (394). Contrary to his description, in the mid 1800s, hysteria was not seen as a disease of rich entitled women bent on attention. That connotation of the hysteric comes about in the 1870s and 1880s with Jean-Martin Charcot’s research on hysteria and later with Freud’s work.⁴

These pieces that use modern definitions of hysteria anachronistically both gloss over the term and fail to recognize the role *Wuthering Heights* plays in the contemporary discourse of the disease. During the 1840’s when the novel was composed, there was an extensive debate on the origin of hysteria, with medical writers promoting two different theories. The dominant theory was that female hysteria was caused by a woman’s lack of internal control over her body and mind. This concept is grounded in the centuries-old belief that hysteria is an innate problem of the female body arising from the uterus. Found in an ancient Egyptian city, the “Kahun Paprus” (1900 B.C) first mentions female illness originating from the uterus (Veith 2). Later in the Greco-Roman period, writings of Hippocrates show a very loose collection of symptoms characterized adjectivally as hysterics, meaning “of the womb” or “from the womb” (Micale 42). Rooted deep in these texts is a recurring theme that female hysteria is innately related to lack of control over female biology.

In the early nineteenth century, hysteria as a lack of control over the female body was further contextualized within a shift in how bodies were disciplined. In the Victorian era, there was a move from external to internal policing of bodies, which is represented in Michel

⁴ Jean-Martin Charcot and Freud worked together for a period. Charcot published *Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière* (1876). The text included lurid descriptions of patient’s sexual fantasies and images of women in varied stages of hystero-epilepsy and undress. This is an example of one of the texts that created much fanfare and helped spur the image of a hysteria as rooted in a sexual disturbance, particularly in upper-class women. Freud hypothesized hysteria originated in unconscious conflicts, specifically repressed sexual desires or traumas (Shovron 3346). Due to their showmanship and proliferation of publications, their work dominated the conversation of hysteria by the late nineteenth-century moving it away from its earlier nineteenth century connotations.
Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Foucault writes about the rise of “discipline” where the state controls bodies through educating the public to conform to social norms. Within a particular cultural context, the citizen’s body regulates itself to accept dominant norms, customs and ideologies. The rise of social control theory meant that psychological illness became a question of internal emotional regulation absorbed through social engagement. This idea of self-control as related to madness originated in part from John Barlow’s *On Man’s Power Over Himself to Prevent or Control Insanity* (1843). Barlow breaks down the strict divide between abnormal and normal psychological states, suggesting that the difference between the two rested in the degree of self-control exercised. Thus, to teach women self-control, physicians used treatments like “moral management” (Showalter 29). In this context, hysteria was thought to reside in the female mind unleashed by a lack of self-control over her monstrous nature.

A contrasting medical theory, however, situated hysteria in social contexts that exerted too much external control over female bodies. As early as the eighteenth century, in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one can see the beginning of narratives about social restraints and their relation to hysteria. Rousseau writes in *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) that hysteria arises due to a woman’s “predicaments of her social position” and that he believes many doctors have not “read deeply enough into her heart” to see the “agitators and torments” that the everyday woman must face (Rousseau 131). This emphasis on the predicaments of women’s social position increases later in the nineteenth century. Horatio Bryan Donkin, who wrote the essay on hysteria for the *Dictionary of Psychological Medicine* (1892), states that hysteria is a disease related not only to a woman as “organism” but also to her social conditions: “All kinds of…barriers to the free play of her power are set up by ordinary social and ethical customs. 'Thou’ shalt not' meets a girl at every turn” (619). Similar to the Donkin analysis, Dr. Robert
Brudenell Carter in an influential study of hysteria called *On the Pathology and Treatment of Hysteria* (1852) adds that women are liable to hysteria because “the woman is more often under the necessity of endeavoring to conceal her feelings” (21). These arguments foreground women’s fraught social positions and inability to access what they desire. Unfortunately, as Rousseau suggested a century earlier, many doctors did not understand how social and cultural restrictions on a woman’s ability to feel and act could lead to mental distress.

A common treatment option espoused by physicians who supported this external model was to lessen the restrictions on women. Dr. Graham wrote that he believed the social condition of women, specifically “inactivity and a sedentary life,” pre-disposed women to hysteria (351). Consequently, he supported treatments that would allow a woman’s body to move more freely. He advised hysterical women to get “regular exercise on horseback, with a variety of scene, and early rising” (359). With this treatment, women could escape the domestic entrapments of the house for the freedom of the outdoors. Yet, while having more time outdoors would allow more physical freedom, Graham does not go deeper than this surface level solution to analyze the deep psychological trauma that goes along with these pervasive social restrictions. Brontë’s novel extends this analysis by showing how social restrictions pervade every physical action of a woman’s body and how these limitations can lead to increasing mental distress that cannot be overcome by a quick jaunt outdoors.

*Wuthering Heights* is historically situated at the crux of this debate on the source of hysteria. The novel is particularly relevant to hysteria studies because it was written from a female perspective in a period when male doctors wrote most texts on hysteria. The male-dominated discourse on a female malady made it especially hard for female authors of the
Victorian era to approach this topic. Famously, Charlotte Brontë was sent a letter by Robert Southerby stating, “Literature is not the business of a woman's life, and it cannot be” (Gilbert and Gubar 8). One can presume that Emily was under the same pressures as her sister in trying to become a female author and creator, so it is no surprise that the Brontë sisters used pseudonyms, Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell, in their first publication to disguise their gender.

Women were still gaining a place as novelists and the male medical discourse on hysteria exacerbated the issue. A writer who famously wrote on women’s mental health, Florence Nightingale, wrote a semi-autobiographical story, Cassandra (1860), that sought to give a patient perspective on female madness. In Cassandra, Nightingale writes: “The accumulation of nervous energy, which has had nothing to do during the day, makes them feel every night, when they go to bed, as if they were going mad….” (221). The feeling of “going mad” is the result of an “accumulation” of nervous energy, an excess store of desire from a limited domestic sphere. Her nervous energy is not the result of one experience, but a gradual layering of frustration. This emotion breaks out when women have enough time to themselves to awaken to the extent social expectations play in their lack of autonomy. Nightingale’s critique of female madness correlates with the view that female hysteria originates from external control. While this viewpoint was tolerated when promulgated by male doctors, it was condemned in Nightingale’s work.6

---

5 Gilbert and Gubar in Madwomen in the Attic, write on the difficulty faced by female writers during the nineteenth century. In Western patriarchal culture, they argue a text’s author is the father: “a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis” (Gilbert and Gubar 6). The male author in Western culture makes its quite difficult for women to validate their own creative works.

6 Nightingale’s work was written in the late 1840’s and early 1850s, and it was not until 1858 that Nightingale tried to get it published. Nightingale’s original copy underwent extensive revisions in order to soften its feminist rhetoric; she had to eliminate first person statements and dramatic scenes. Even then, this gutted work was privately published in 1860 and not formally published until 1928 as the appendix to Ray Stratchey’s history of the English women’s movement, The Cause (Showalter 66).
In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë works to subvert a masculine medicalized understanding of hysteria. The novel both assimilates and challenges the Victorian construct of the female hysteric, breaking the bounds of contemporary discourse in the complex structure of her fiction, while acknowledging the reality of social constraint. The narrative looks at how Catherine’s body reacts in and moves through the social spaces and natural places of her habitus. *Wuthering Heights* bridges the central medical theories, those emphasizing both internal and external control, suggesting that Catherine’s hysteria is an internal feeling that originates in her complex interaction with the external world. Hysteria is related to sex, but not necessarily because women are biologically predisposed to become mad monsters. Rather the interaction between women’s minds and their external world leads to a visceral realization of and response to suffocating social restraints.

Key to Brontë’s diorama of hysteria is the emphasis on the woman’s experience living with hysteria – her happiness, orientation in place, and self-identity. Brontë’s own representation of hysteria does not treat the woman’s body as that of a patient who needs to be labeled and neatly categorized into an orderly diagnosis. Instead, in *Wuthering Heights* Catherine’s body is complex and multi-faceted in its movements and expressions, defying easy categorization. Her body becomes an interface between mind and place that acts out its desires. Indeed, the body moves excessively to express its emotions, as seen in Catherine’s hysteric fits. Her world is that of chaos and a disoriented body struggling to understand its displacement in space. The narrative language reflects the hysteric’s internal confusion by gradually building on top of itself until it

---

7 Despite the pressure on women writers, from the end of the eighteenth century into the nineteenth century there was an increase in works that dared to rethink patriarchal constructs. Gilbert and Gubar write that women as authors were “not only writing, they were conceiving fictional worlds in which patriarchal images and conventions were severely, radically revised” (Gilbert and Gubar 44).
reaches a heightened level of movement and emotion that is then cruelly undercut as Catherine and the reader realize the futility of the protagonist’s position.

II. From Ruffian to Lady, Catherine’s Distressing Movement Into Womanhood

Catherine’s mind and the world around her are made up of visceral forces that influence her body and emotions. It is these forces, that come from the nearby environment, that drive her to action as seen through her body’s movement in space towards or away from certain objects or places. A name for these “forces” is affect, which is a phenomenon that ties internal feelings to the world around a body. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg discuss how affect is found in intensities that can “sometimes stick to bodies and worlds” driving people to “movement, toward thought and extension” (1). In delineating this connection between mind and place, affect theory bridges internal and external theories on the origin of hysteria. The body can be a place, an “interface” (12), where one reads the intersection between feeling and action.

Catherine’s hysteria manifests in an intersection of internal and external forces. The language used to describe her body is highly descriptive, a montage of metaphors and sensory images that encourage the reader to engage with the portrait of the hysteric. The narrator of Catherine’s fits is the housekeeper Nelly, who gives us a personalized description of Catherine that shows the dynamic between the patient and her caretakers in a way that medical texts often fail to portray. Through Nelly’s eyes, one gets to see the extent of how the external world can influence the hysteric’s feelings and actions. The housekeeper faithfully records Catherine’s delusions giving us the hysteric’s voice in all its confusion and illuminating Catherine’s disorientation. Through these descriptions Brontë shows how Catherine’s body becomes
detached, how she becomes a mere shell unable to sustain the dissonance between her feelings and the world around her.

One of the origins of Catherine’s hysteria is her displacement from places or people that make her “happy.” Ahmed discusses how certain objects promise happiness, a positive force that directs individuals towards those objects, whether people, places, or inanimate things. The multitudes of objects that make up a space constitute a specific landscape. As the body interacts with this landscape it creates memories. This formation of memory rooted in connection with various objects in place is key to shaping one’s identity. Place theorist, J.E. Malpas comments; “the very identity of subjects, both in terms of their own self-definition and their identity as grasped by others, is inextricably bound to the particular places in which they find themselves and in which others fine them…” (176). Catherine’s literal movement from one place to another is connected to her own construction of her identity and how the world judges her character. How her body moves in these places and the interactions she has with and across social spaces shape a key part of her identity: what makes Catherine happy. By looking at how Catherine interacts with the places in her life, the moors, Wuthering Heights and the Grange, the reader understands how she begins to associate certain places with the promise of happiness, while others come to represent the social restraints that prevent it.

Catherine’s story is one of transformation from a “wild, wicked slip” into a lady (Brontë 69). As she outgrows her wilder youth, she also loses hold of her past associations with people and places. This displacement is gradual and for a long time Catherine believes she can still retain her childhood identity. Malpas, however, writes that in the binding of persons and place in memory “one recalls, not just the person, but person and place, and both as part of the same image, part of a single remembrance” (176). Catherine is then displaced both literally from
place, but also from her past relationships with people in those spaces. Through tracing Catherine’s upbringing, focusing on her transition from places and her movement while in those places, we can see how social expectations alienate her from the objects and places that make her happy. This gradual separation with its emotional highs and lows leads to Catherine’s psychological distress.

Brontë had her own harrowing experiences with social restraint at the Clergy Daughters School where women were supposed to expose feminine virtues like modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, chastity, affability, and politeness (Gérin 110-111). Her troubled childhood is represented in her juvenilia where she incarcerated her young heroines in Palaces of Instruction that used rigid means to produce their young leaders (Alexander, xxxvi). In the Brontës’ juvenilia, “Islanders’ Play,” it was Emily who kept the keys to the cells for ‘naughty children’: “The cells are dark, vaulted, arched and so far down in the earth that the loudest shriek could not be heard by any inhabitants of the upper world, and in these, as well as the dungeons, the most unjust torturing might go on without any fear of detection” (C. Brontë et al., 24). The Palace of Instruction is isolated and there is no fresh air as the inhabitants are trapped deep below earth. The “loudest shriek” shows that the horrors the young face in this institution are difficult to process into audible speech, existing as mere animalistic utterances of those kept inside. *Wuthering Heights* shares this stifling atmosphere as the reader witnesses Catherine’s futile attempts to be understood as she grows up. She faces her own “Palace of

---

8 This tradition of becoming a “lad[y]” can be seen in conduct books, like *The Booke of Curtesye* (1477), which date to well before the eighteenth century and continue through the nineteenth century. In *The Lady’s Preceptor* (1745) ladies were assured: “There are Rules for all our Actions, even down to Sleeping with a good Grace” (d’Auncourt 8).

9 The theme of female leaders is most exhibited by Emily who had a fascination with woman rulers, including Princess Victoria, born only 10 months before herself, a figure who informed her Gondal saga setting it apart from the male dominated Glass Town (Alexander, xxxv).
Instruction,” in a way, when she is forcibly pulled into Thrushcross Grange, injured by the dog, Skulker.\textsuperscript{10} Wounded in body, Catherine learns how to act as a young woman.

Her transformation from a ruffian to a young lady is reflected in her movement from the moors and Wuthering Heights to the contained rooms of the Grange. As a child, Catherine defies social conventions and chooses to scamper about the moor – a place that is wild and dangerous. For Catherine, the nebulous space of the moors becomes a “place.” The philosopher Edward Casey writes that a space or “site” is an open area that is specified by means of cartographic representation (\textit{Getting Back Into Place} 185). A site is thus indifferent to what might occupy it. In contrast, a place is “personal, it is a space of one’s own, ‘chez-moi.’ The appropriation of familiar places happens through the lived body” (\textit{Getting Back Into Place} 192). The moors become part of a Catherine’s “attuned space” where she feels sympathy at some basic level.

Catherine often escapes to the moors when the cruel old caretaker Joseph makes her study bible verses. She discusses one of her adventures after being relegated into the back kitchen at Wuthering Heights for rebelling against the Joseph. In the margins of an old book, she writes;

I reached this book, and a pot of ink from a shelf, and pushed the house-door ajar to give me light, and I have got the time on with writing for twenty minutes: but my companion [Heathcliff] is impatient and proposes that we should appropriate the dairywoman’s cloak, and have a scamper on the moors, under its shelter. A pleasant suggestion…we cannot be damper, or colder, in the rain than we are here. (Brontë, 51)

Catherine has been forced to sit in the corner, and in this confinement she reflects on her emotions through the process of writing. The physical process of writing is a rebellion as she sneaks open the house door just “ajar” enough to get light. Opening the door is symbolic of her larger desire to go outside with the totality of her body and not just witness the small ray of light.

\textsuperscript{10} Gilbert and Gubar note that the dog drawing Catherine’s blood is symbolic of a young woman’s transition into adulthood through menstruation (272). They also write on the phallic representation of the dog’s huge tongue, “hanging a half foot out of his mouth,” a representing of patriarchal culture.
that comes through the crack. There is rebellion in their plan to steal the dairywoman’s cloak, a forbidden fruit. Catherine acts out by writing and then increases this movement by “scampering” about the moors. Catherine’s freedom - the moors, her games and adventures under the dairywomen’s cloak - transform the moors from “site” to a “place” essential to her identity.

This passage also narrativizes the importance of specific people within those places. Casey writes that “in becoming implaced, we emerge into a larger world of burgeoning experience, not only by ourselves but with others” ([Getting Back Into Place](#) 111). In the moors Catherine frolics with a “companion,” Heathcliff, who shapes her identity. For Catherine, Heathcliff promises happiness: he is the “metaphorical whip” that allows her freedom to do what she wants.\(^\text{11}\) As we see here, it is his impatience that prompts Catherine to act out further by escaping outdoors. Heathcliff is her partner in wayward activities and gives her the ability to escape the stifling male domain of the Heights, first run by her father and then her brother. It is no wonder that she moves violently through Wuthering Heights, throwing the bible in a fit, in order to leave her confinement for the moors where she can be closer to Heathcliff and the promise of happiness he represents.

In becoming implaced, Catherine’s identity takes on attributes of the space around her. The moors are dangerous as the gusty wind slants the firs and the thorn bushes. The area is accustomed to “stormy weather” (Brontë 38). Years after Catherine’s death, Heathcliff comments to Lockwood, a new tenant of Thrushcross Grange, that “people familiar with these moors often miss the road on such [stormy] evenings” (Brontë 44). This anecdote shows that the moors can be deadly, even to those who know the area best. Yet, Catherine defies social

\(^{11}\) The idea of the “whip” comes from Catherine’s childhood when her father asks what she wants when he goes into town and she asks for a whip (Brontë 65). Her father does not come back with her desired object, but he comes back with orphaned Heathcliff. As Gilbert and Gubar write, he becomes the metaphorical whip that functions just as she must unconsciously have hoped it would, smashing her rival brother’s fiddle and giving her another object, Heathcliff, to protect her from the pressure of her brother’s and father’s domain (Gilbert and Gubar 264).
expectations for a young lady and spends time there becoming part of them. Casey states that the individual “very suddenly becomes invisible, dissolved in its own luminosity, disintegrated as a discriminate object” (“Place Memory” 200). Catherine merges into the nearby world, becoming inseparable from this place, the moors, wild, untamed, and free. Over time, her associations with the particular place and its objects translate into powerful memories that shape long-term identity. Heathcliff and Catherine have formed a habit of going out onto the moors: it was “one their chief amusements to run way to the moors in the morning and remain there all day” (Brontë 73). These outdoor adventures persist from the time Mr. Earnshaw, Catherine’s father, is head of the house until the period that Hindley, Catherine’s brother, takes over. Catherine’s pattern of activity habitually includes Heathcliff and thus there is a strong association with him and Catherine’s happiness. Through memory, Catherine will hold onto these feelings of happiness that stem from her power to move through space as she wishes.

When she is dragged injured into Thrushcross Grange, Catherine is separated from more than just her childhood. Her displacement from the moors marks a traumatic loss of her identity. Initially, Catherine views Thrushcross Grange as a new exciting adventure, but over time she starts to realize the new limitations being placed on her body as she starts to align herself with cultural expectations. Since place and identity have a strong relationship, Catherine starts to take on the qualities of the culture that surrounds her. Right from the start, a servant washes her feet and she is given a warm drink and little cakes. The children of the Grange, Isabella and Edgar, take an interest in her and comb her hair and give her slippers to wear by the fire (Brontë 77). Catherine eats her food and chats with her new found friends actively engaging with their customary practices. She is now symbolically enrobed in slippers, a soft fabric that represents the

---

12 Ahmed writes that in order for objects to have strong associations, the people who interact with the objects must do so repeatedly. She states, “the association between objects and affects is preserved through habit, the affect becomes literal: we assume we experience delight because ‘it’ is delightful” (35).
comfortable and plush lifestyle of the Grange. It is also the first of many pieces of new clothing that will seek to restrict her movements. She will later re-enter Wuthering Heights wearing “a feathered beaver, and a long cloth habit, which she was obliged to hold up with both hands that she might sail in” (Brontë 79). Her habit restricts her movement so much that she has to use two hands to lift it a little to walk slowly forward. She is not even allowed to take off her own hat because she might “disarrange her curls.” Catherine goes from being able to race with Heathcliff, to barely being able to walk into the house. She can no longer move easily through place.

The literal restriction of her clothes parallels the more metaphorical restrictions that are starting to take over, as she becomes a lady. The conflict between what is expected of Catherine and what Catherine wants becomes a central tension throughout the rest of the novel. This tension can be seen when Catherine returns to Wuthering Heights. She glimpsed Heathcliff and “flew to embrace him” (Brontë 79). She gives him “seven or eight kisses on the cheek.” As Ahmed states, people move closer to the objects that make them happy, and clearly Catherine embodies these movements. She also, however, takes a moment to look at her “dusky fingers” from embracing Heathcliff and worries that she has gotten her dress dirty. She then puts space between herself and Heathcliff. While she does not hesitate initially to embrace him, Catherine is becoming increasingly aware of social conventions that dictate action in a way that increases separation, physically and metaphorically, between her and Heathcliff. Catherine’s interaction with her once purely happy object has now become troubled. She feels conflicted because while, to her, Heathcliff is a source of joy, to the rest of the community he is to be avoided. Hindley’s degrading treatment of Heathcliff marks his status as that of a servant. When Heathcliff and Catherine are caught at the Grange initially, Heathcliff is sent away. The Linton family and curate call him, “thief,” “frightful thing,” an “acquisition,” “an American or Spanish castaway,”
and a “wicked boy” in the span of a couple pages (Brontë 76-77). He is seen as a mere object that can be “acquired,” but also as a foreign other and a dangerous corruption.

Consequently, for those at the top of the social ladder like the Earnshaws and the Lintons, Heathcliff is quite clearly an “unhappy object.” Ahmed describes how others judge an individual’s “taste” based on the objects she likes: “this affective differentiation is the basis of an essentially moral economy in which moral distinctions of worth are also social distinctions of value” (Ahmed 35). Since Hindley and the Lintons are “worthy” pillars of the community who help prescribe the moral economy, their decree that Heathcliff is dangerous marks Heathcliff as a social pariah. In other words, associating with Heathcliff is “in bad taste.”

As Catherine starts conforming more to mainstream culture, she is supposed to adopt “good taste.” While she is able to assume, in the words of Nelly, a “double character” for a span of a few years, this is not a permanent solution because ultimately Catherine will have to marry and cut off ties with Heathcliff, the vulgar ruffian (Brontë 90). One can see Catherine’s distress over her identity in the artifacts the new tenant of the Grange, Lockwood, finds years after her death. In Wuthering Heights, on the ledge near the windowsill, Lockwood sees remnants of Catherine’s writing. The words are scratched on the paint of the ledge. Lockwood describes how the writing was “a name repeated in all kinds of characters, large and small—Catherine Earnshaw, here and there varied to Catherine Heathcliff, and then again to Catherine Linton” (Brontë 50). Leading up to her decision of which man to marry, Catherine is trying out what her name could look like and the feel of writing each of those names. Her painstaking task shows her acute deliberation over who she wants to become. It’s the physical process of carving out these names that allows Catherine the space where she can play with her identity. There is freedom in this action, even if this movement is minute. This repetitive and excessive gesture, the multiple
iterations of Catherine, is representative of how Catherine will continue to try physically to understand her identity throughout the rest of the novel.

This restless movement starts to take over her entire body as her displacement becomes more profound. After she has accepted Edgar’s marriage proposal, Catherine chafes her hands together and frowns (Brontë 99). David Trotter writes that characters in novels often reflect their inner feelings in their physical movement. The gesture, “supplements speech, and it fills a lack in speech. It does what speech cannot do: occupy, or take possession of space. It enacts force; the force of feeling….” (Trotter 56). When Catherine rubs her hands together, she is physically enacting her inner feelings. By reaching out in her “near-space,” she hopes to take control of her environment, even if she cannot take control of the conflicts in her life (Ahmed 31). Catherine’s movement reaches a crescendo in this scene when “striking one hand on her forehead and the other on her breast,” she states; “‘in whichever place the soul lives – in my soul, and in my heart, I’m convinced I’m wrong!’ ” (Brontë 100-101). Again, Catherine enacts her own feelings in physical movement, highlighting her distress. In this situation, she is specifically pointing to parts of her body. Casey states that place can be thought of in different ways in relation to the body, but that “here in part” represents how within the lived body one can “distinguish a corporeally localized here from the here that is coextensive with my body as a whole” (Getting Back Into Place 52). In this moment, Catherine is treating her body as a place and her body-place, her head and heart, is at odds with what the rest of her body is telling her she should do. No matter how the external world influences Catherine’s dress and lady-like behavior, her affect, her soul, cannot be persuaded to go along with what is culturally acceptable. This scene sets up Catherine’s erratic large motions as a form of communication in moments of distress when she cannot find the words to vocalize why she is feeling particularly wretched.
III: The Painful Process of Disillusionment, Catherine’s Movement into Hysteria

Even in crisis, Catherine still believes she has the power to force her future husband Edgar and her childhood friend Heathcliff to become friends. This fantasy is the basis for her “cruel optimism,” a term coined by theorist Lauren Berlant. Catherine is attached to the idea that she and Heathcliff will not be separated, which is an impossible fantasy. Berlant terms this fantasy cruel when whatever the person is attached to “provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep living on and to look forward to being in the world” (94). The content of the fantasy is essential to the imaginer’s identity and ability to live happily. Catherine is a friend with Heathcliff in her imagined future, and she believes his presence is necessary for her “living on” and looking forward to being in the world. Her fantasy is as cruel as it is impossible, but she clings to this hope that she can have friendships with both men, even when Heathcliff leaves Wuthering Heights for several years.

When, Heathcliff finally does return, Nelly, narrates the chaotic moment:

Ere long, I heard the click of the latch, and Catherine flew upstairs, breathless and wild, too excited to show gladness; indeed, by her face, you would rather have surmised an awful calamity. ‘Oh, Edgar, Edgar!’ she panted, flinging her arms round his neck. “Oh Edgar, darling! Heathcliff’s come back – he is! And she tightened her embrace to a squeeze. (Brontë, 114)

In this passage, Catherine’s two separate worlds collide as her past childhood friend is now present in her husband’s home. The language of Catherine’s actions points to how this meeting of two people, who represent alternate parts of her identity, causes her to become frantic, distancing her from happy affect. Catherine’s actions have become more animated as she is

---

13 Cruel optimism is defined as a “relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered…to be impossible” (Berlant 94). The impossible future the person is attached to is essential for their happiness and well-being, which is obviously problematic because the future cannot come true.
described as “breathless and wild” and her movements increase as she throws herself onto Edgar. Her body seems to escape her conscious actions as she turns her embrace into a squeeze. One reason why her body may be so frantic is because of her inability to process what she is feeling into speech. Her words in this scene are a repetition of Edgar’s name, conveying little content, and she seems to have trouble narrating, forcing out “– he is!,” which is added superfluously to the original statement “Heathcliff’s come back.” This excessive, labored language parallels Catherine’s large movements. She acts out her excitement at the cost of being able to process what those feelings mean to her. She cannot show “gladness.” Rather, in an ominous foreshadowing line, she looks like she has “surmised an awful calamity.” The physical reminder of Heathcliff has caused Catherine to become distressed as it brings up past memories of him and her in a very different setting, the moors. This space used to allow her a bodily freedom that she no longer has as a properly married wife living within the domestic sphere of the Grange.

Edgar quickly dispels Catherine’s fantasy of return, when he demands that Heathcliff leave the Grange forever. He states that Heathcliff’s presence is a “moral poison that would contaminate the most virtuous” (Brontë 131). He is afraid that Heathcliff will influence Isabella and Catherine. For Ahmed, transmitting “affect” is akin to sharing orientation to certain happy objects: “to share such [happy] objects would simply mean you would share an orientation toward those objects as being good” (38). Edgar worries that Heathcliff’s continued presence in his household and the active-engagement he has with Catherine and Isabella, walking in the garden, seeing them for tea etc., will lead those women to orient themselves towards the object, Heathcliff.

Edgar’s ultimatum finally awakens Catherine from her cruel optimism. This disenchantment sends her into a mental decline that she will not survive. Edgar asks Catherine to
choose between a friendship with Heathcliff or him. Edgar states, “I absolutely require to know which you choose” (Brontë, 134). This is the first time that Edgar outright demands a choice, and the italics show the vehemence of his statement. Confronted with a black and white proposal, one that she knows she really has no choice in, she becomes hysterical. As Berlant writes, of one female figure, “to protect her last iota of optimism she goes crazy” (115). This line can also be applied to Catherine. Such moments of “disillusionment” are common in many nineteenth-century female writers. Literary critic Barbara Hardy writes that female characters often undergo disenchantment where the poetry of their fantasies becomes converted into prose that dispels a dream. For Catherine, “the poetry of girlhood vanishes” (Hardy 61). Catherine has to accept that the possibility of her life with Heathcliff is over. Her childhood dream has been stripped away, and she is forced to look at reality. It may surprise the reader that it took this long for Catherine to reach this epiphany, but her attempts to cling to this dream show the power that her past experiences have had on shaping her identity.

In this moment of disenchantment, Catherine becomes a hysteric. After Edgar’s ultimatum Catherine demands that he leave the room. She yells, “I require to be let alone!...I demand it! Don’t you see I can scarcely stand? Edgar, you-you leave me!” (Brontë 134). Edgar ignores Catherine’s decree, which she states three times. Right before her fit, the text gives her a voice, but the reader sees how the powerful figures in the room, Nelly and Edgar, do not respond.

---

14 Catherine legally does not have a choice, as she is technically Edgar’s property by marriage. John Stuart Mill’s work, *The Subjection of Women*, which is not published until more than twenty-years after Brontë’s death, states that a wife is “the actual bondservant of her husband,” and that women “do no act whatever but by his permission” (Mill 55). Edgar phrases his decree as a question, but in looking at the actual laws and social conventions of the time, Catherine really does not have a choice.

15 Berlant gives an example of a character, Dodo, in *Was*, which is based on the encounters of the *Wizard of Oz* narrative. Dodo constructs a fantasy that is false and is finally faced to confront it. After admitting she is helpless in her situation and her fantasy is not real, she goes crazy.
to the demands. This complete lack of agency moves Catherine into expressing her pent up feelings through her body’s movement – her hysteric fit. Nelly describes this episode:

She rang the bell till it broke with a twang: I entered leisurely. It was enough to try the temper of a saint, such senseless, wicked rages! There she lay dashing her head against the arm of the sofa and grinding her teeth, so that you might fancy she would crash them to splinters! (Brontë 134)

Catherine ringing the bell violently is a direct demand for someone to obey her, in this case Nelly. It is an attempt through action to gain back agency. Yet, the bell’s fatal toll is juxtaposed with Nelly strolling “leisurely” into the room. The colon allows for a structural comparison between how desperate Catherine’s actions are and the useless effect they have on the affect of those around her. Catherine’s actions are again undercut by Nelly’s suggestion that Catherine’s rages were “senseless” and “wicked” as these adjectives condemn Catherine and allow her no sympathy.

Despite Nelly’s bias against Catherine’s rages, her account does offer a dramatic description that shows how far Catherine has been separated from happiness. Catherine is animalistic, as seen by the description of her grinding her teeth. The poetry of Catherine’s childhood has vanished only to be replaced by a text that increases the excessive movements of Catherine’s body through detailed snippets of Nelly’s faux panic - “you might fancy she would crash them to splinters!” In her animal state, Catherine cannot process the world around her and her own emotions. She is caught up in the motions of “dashing her head against the sofa.”

Hitting her head as an interaction with the external world validates her internal suffering by giving her a source of physical pain. Bridging her internal feeling of suffering with an external world filled with pain, Catherine’s body is an interface that amplifies her traumatic experience.

This excessive movement is swiftly undercut, however, as Catherine starts to accept that Edgar has won and her resistance is futile. Medical texts often gloss over the patient’s view of
hysteria\textsuperscript{16} and only briefly describe the end of a hysteric fit. In *Modern Domestic Medicine*, Dr. Graham states, “the patient, after appearing for sometime quite spent, recovers the exercise of sense and motion” (351). In Graham’s reading, the patient’s voice is absent and there seems to be no lasting trauma as the patient returns to normal function. Such medical descriptions miss the extent of the trauma marked on a hysteric’s body. In contrast, Catherine’s condition is treated with a great deal more concern than in the medical text. As her fit momentarily subsides, Nelly states, “I brought a glass full; and, as she would not drink, I sprinkled it on her face. In a few seconds she stretched herself out stiff, and turned up her eyes, while her cheeks, at once blanched and livid, assumed the aspect of death” (Brontë, 134). Her body is described as having an “aspect of death.” It is “stiff,” her eyes have rolled back, and she is very pale: the physical description of a corpse. In this moment of disenchantment, Catherine has already died metaphorically as she realizes she cannot have what makes her happy. Her body will go through subsequent fits and will eventually wear itself down to an actual death. Here though, the narrative marks the body as becoming separated from the desire to live. As her eyes roll back and she refuses to drink, Catherine registers her desire no longer to be actively engaged with the world around her.

The scene demands a more nuanced look at how Catherine’s hysteria physically affects her relation to her body and place. Trotter comments on how actions in space relate to character metamorphosis: “It is not space that constitutes new form - the form made possible by metamorphosis - but movement through or into space: a space that is itself constituted or reconstituted by movement” (Trotter 55). Catherine’s futile movement heightens into a crescendo and crashes into stillness - the ringing of the bell, dashing her head on the sofa,

\textsuperscript{16} For example, in *The Medico-Chirurgical Review, and Journal of Practical Medicine* (1833), Dr. Davis describes the hysteric episode and consequent death of a young woman, and nowhere in this account are the woman’s own words represented (191).
stretching her body out stiff—which completes her metamorphosis into that of the living dead. As an invalid in her sickroom, Catherine locks herself in and refuses food and drink for a few days. The loss of appetite is a staple of the condition. She is forced into having her choices defined by Edgar’s demands. Her actions mimic her internal realizations as she literally moves from the center of the house, the parlour, into her bed. Hardy writes that female heroines’ interactions with household rooms often show the extent of their restrictions. The bedroom in particular is “the physical enclosure, the daily life, the women’s place. For all the heroines the forcible reduction is in part at least the realization of the woman's lot, and the image of the room is the appropriate feminine image of the shut-in life” (Hardy 65). Catherine flees to her room, the only space in the house that is hers, even though it technically is not under law, attempting to go to a space where she feels some control.

While in her room, Catherine insists on the window being open, articulating a desire to feel the fresh air again. She tells Nelly, “that wind sounding in the firs by the lattice. Do let me feel it—it comes straight down the moor—do let me have one breath!” (Brontë 139). She wants to feel the air of the moors. Literary critic Elizabeth Napier comments on the boundaries in Wuthering Heights, the walls, windows, hedges, gates, and doors. These boundaries act as a literal reminder of emotional boundaries, whereby “the difficulty of moving physically…becomes reflective of a larger emotional entanglement” (Napier 97). Napier’s sentiment echoes my own argument. Catherine’s frustration with her confinement and the fact no one listens to her leads to hysteric outbursts. In this scene, similar to when she asks Edgar multiple times to leave the room, Catherine has to plead with Nelly merely to open the window. The “do let me feel it” repeated twice, just for “one” breath, shows Catherine’s desperation and

---

17 A symptom of hysterics was their lack of interest in food. In a case study (1813) of a hysteric girl by Philippe Pinel, he describes how “there was a complete absence from food” that went three to four days during an episode of hysteria (290).
the fact that no one is listening to her words. In order to regain some agency, she wishes to open
the window to cross this boundary of confinement, even if her action is merely performative and
a metaphorical representation of what she wishes to do with the totality of her body.

Quite symbolically, Edgar comes into the room minutes later and demands that Nelly
“Shut the window” (Brontë 141).

It is no surprise that the male head of the household is the one
who takes the air away from Catherine. Returning to an earlier moment, Heathcliff had this same
effect of robbing Catherine of air when she flew about the parlor room breathless at his return.
This initial scene now has larger significance, as it is a moment of warning that Catherine’s
position between these two men is one that will suffocate her from both sides. Her symptoms of
madness tie directly into a hysteric fit that seems to originate from these “emotional
entanglements,” a growing awareness of her metaphorical and literal restriction.

IV: Affective Separation, Catherine’s Movement into Spectral Death

There is a common misconception in literary analysis of *Wuthering Heights* that Catherine goes
crazy and dies simply because she is separated from Heathcliff. That analysis falls flat because it
does not address the complexity of Catherine’s displacement. In a crucial moment in the
narrative, Heathcliff visits Catherine and she exclaims: “That is not my Heathcliff. I shall love
mine yet; and take him with me: he’s in my soul” (Brontë 169). The possessives “my” and
“mine” are crucial because they mark the separation between the Heathcliff that is present in the
room and the Heathcliff that Catherine has created in her mind. This imaginary Heathcliff is not
real, but in her soul. Catherine has undergone significant change since she last saw Heathcliff,

---

18 Catherine desiring to have the window open, so she can breathe is another symptom of hysteria. Hysterics were thought to have two main symptoms during a hysteric fit - convulsive movement of the body, which we have already seen with Catherine, and the *globus hystericus*, or a sensation of suffocation (Showalter 130). Dr. Graham writes how hysterics have a “sense of a suffocating ball in the throat” (Graham 350).
and this process of becoming a lady has alienated her from the certain childhood spaces. There is an absence in her life, so she conjures this “my” Heathcliff to fill the void. While she will attempt to reconnect with this version of Heathcliff, increasingly through delusional memories, she can never fully return to this earlier self. Catherine becomes increasingly caught up in a web of affect that does not allow her to move forward from her trauma. In fact, it only wears down her physical body and mind to a point where she can no longer act out the emotions stemming from her position as an affect alien.

In her hysteric fits, Catherine actively engages with the objects around her as a way to return to place. Her body becomes increasingly frantic as she moves into the fit linked to her desire to open the window: “tossing about, she increased her feverish bewilderment to madness, and tore the pillow with her teeth, then raising herself up all burning desired that I [Nelly] would open the window” (Brontë 138). Her animalistic actions of tearing the pillow show how her body exceeds the language available in this oppressive domestic space. She pulls the feathers from the pillow and arranges them in their different species. This scene evokes the imagery of Ophelia in Hamlet who hands out flowers by type in a scene of her madness (Shakespeare 4.5.175-186).

Laertes comments that Ophelia’s actions are a “document in madness, thoughts and remembrance fitted” (Shakespeare 4.5.178-179). Laertes choice of the word “remembrance” has certain significance in Catherine’s scene as well. There seems to be a strong connection between delusional actions and memory, specifically in enacting past memories. This active-engagement, though futile, shows there is still a desire for her to be able to move in the way she used to, even as it presents now as a hysteric fit.

19 Another example of active-engagement being crucial in memory is from an iconic figure of the early nineteenth-century, Crazy Jane. This myth is based on a woman who goes mad after losing her lover. In her delusions, she would wander in the places she used to walk with her lover and would dress her head with willow straw, wild flowers, disposed in a fanciful style (Munch-Pederson 56-73).
In her delusions, Catherine seems fixated on memories of her childhood. After she tears the pillow open, she reflects on a childhood experience with Heathcliff. She is in a dream world where a sense of time collapses. She picks up a feather, which is that of a lapwing, and reflects,

‘Bonny bird; wheeling over our heads in the middle of the moor. It wanted to get to its nest, for the clouds had touched the swells, and it felt rain coming. This feather was picked up from the heath, the bird was not shot: we saw its nest in the winter, full of little skeletons. Heathcliff set a trap over it, and the old ones dared not come. I made him promise he’d never shoot a lapwing after that, and he didn’t. Yes, here are more! Did he shoot my lapwings, Nelly? Are they red, any of them? Let me look.’ (Brontë 138)

Brontë was quite knowledgeable about birds from her own experience on the moors, and from folk tales and books. In her library she had a copy of Thomas Bewick’s *A History of British Birds*. The lapwing is described by Bewick as a “lively, active bird, almost continually in motion” (Bewick 80). The bird is quite reminiscent of the young active Catherine who ran across the moors as a child. The baby birds that Heathcliff traps, those “little skeletons,” are reminiscent of Catherine locked up in her room. It is interesting to note that it is Heathcliff who sets up the trap. In this point in the text, Catherine is trying to reconcile the fact Heathcliff has returned, but she still is unhappy. The process of Catherine growing up has led her to realize how much the men in her life have dictated her choices, and its from this adult perspective that she can return to specific childhood moments with new insight. Heathcliff promised he would not kill any more lapwings, yet there are more feathers. This prompts her to ask, “Did he shoot my lapwings?” Her physical interaction sorting the feathers prompts her to wonder if he had broken his promise, and killed others: “are they red?” If neither the real Heathcliff who has returned nor the Heathcliff in her mind can fix her fragmented state, it leaves her in this highly traumatic moment of not knowing what she can possibly do to return to a state of happiness.

---

20 Malpas states that places and things of the past can be a point for “intense self-reflection,” which is “particularly evident in cases of childhood memories and in relation to childhood places” (Malpas 182). This could be why Catherine’s memories seem centered on the moors and the Heights were she spent the most time as a child.
After this disturbing realization about Heathcliff, her delusions become even more severe. When there is disorientation, there is a loss of self that heightens the overall sense of chaos the hysteric experiences. While in her bedroom in the Grange, Catherine first states, “‘I’m conscious it’s night, and there are two candles on the table making the black press [a wardrobe] shine like jet’” (Brontë 138). Catherine believes she is back in her bedroom in Wuthering Heights where there is the black press. Looking into the mirror she asks Nelly, “don’t you see that face” (Brontë 138). Catherine is unable to recognize her own face in part because she cannot identify with the image of herself in the present as Edgar’s wife or Heathcliff’s friend. The part of her identity associated with the Grange and Edgar as well as the returned Heathcliff feels alien to her. Thus, she goes back to the memories that remind her of an identity that is comforting, her childhood bedroom. Her bedroom is a feminine space as only she and Nelly visited it. It is in this isolated memory that she can separate her thoughts from the men in her life who have not lived up to expectations of the future. Torgerson writes how Catherine loses childhood land that she knows as “home” in her marriage to Edgar: “since a sense of identity is connected to ‘home’ and thus with a sense of geography and landscape, the dispossession of land begets one level of dispossession of identity” (Torgerson 109). Her assertion parallels what place theorists believe about displacement. As Casey notes, this displacement can cause “anxiety that is intense, recurrent and all but unbearable. Not to know where we are is torment, and to not have a sense of place is a most sinister deprivation” (“Memory Place” 195). Catherine’s increasing anxiety about her displacement manifests in her hysteric fit as a futile process to work through this trauma.

In becoming entangled in this web of affect, Catherine perceives the world around her as chaotic, echoing Callon’s diorama. In her hysteria, where she is physically and temporally displaced, it becomes difficult for her to locate her trauma in a specific historical moment.
Catherine states in this bedroom scene that she “supposes” she was wretched from the Heights at a young age. There is no “supposing” in this scenario; this actually happened to her and this upheaval from her childhood home to Thrushcross Grange is at the heart of her trauma. Catherine is unable to locate her trauma in a historical past, which leads her to ask Nelly, “why am I so changed?” (Brontë 140). Catherine’s hysteric confusion leads her to conjure a vague absence. In “Trauma, Absence, Loss,” Dominick LaCapra defines absence as a transhistorical event, which does not imply tense (past, present or future). By contrast, loss is connected to a specific event that may be narrated and has specific possibilities that may be re-activated, reconfigured, and transformed in the present and future. Catherine mentions that her removal from the Heights to Thrushcross Grange against her will makes her an outcast from her previous world. This is a specific historical event that has caused her trauma because she feels like an “exile and outcast.” In her hysteria, however, Catherine is unable to fully internalize that her movement from a freer space (the moors and Heathcliff) to one that confines her in a domestic space (Thrushcross Grange and Edgar) causes the loss of her childhood identity. Her inability to locate her trauma in this historical event leaves her in a free fall of absence.

The problem with Catherine’s conflation of absence with loss is that while loss can be worked through absence cannot. The inability to process this trauma manifests itself in her hysteria. Moving on from trauma involves the process of mourning in which, LaCapra states, there needs again to be the “recognition of the difference from past and present while simultaneously remembering and taking leave of or actively forgetting it, thereby allowing for critical judgment and a reinvestment in life” (716). Catherine cannot undergo the process of mourning where she can remember, but also forget these traumatic events. Instead, Catherine becomes haunted by the past; she becomes “stuck” in memory (“Memory Place” 201). During
her delusions, Catherine remarks that she wishes she was: “a girl again, half savage and hardy and free” (Brontë 140). Catherine’s perception of her identity either as a “lady” or “savage” is built on memories formed of active-engagement with the external world, and these are the memories she finds the most clear in during her hysteria. The narrative demonstrates that one cannot easily forget past experiences and move forward, especially with an illness that disorients the patient from locating her body in a temporal and spatial present.

In her hysteria, Catherine’s body excessively acts out her feelings creating an environment of chaos that intensifies her own confusion; however, this level of heightened emotion and movement cannot be sustained indefinitely. Despite her numerous attempts, her voice and body have failed in their ability to communicate. When she recognizes that her actions do not get her what she desires, she becomes a picture of defeat. Her body shuts down, manifesting what LaCapra calls “melancholic paralysis or manic agitation” (712). Catherine experiences both emotional states simultaneously at various times throughout the novel. There is a cyclical pattern of excessive motion that is undercut by moments of still defeat. However, as hysteria wears on, there are fewer episodes of manic agitation and more representations of melancholic paralysis. Nelly describes Catherine after she has had at least two episodes of hysteria: “Mrs. Linton sat in a loose, white dress, with a light shawl on her shoulders, in the recess of the open window, as usual” (Brontë 166). Catherine is dressed as an invalid, sitting in front of the window, probably stuck in memory reflecting on another past world. This seems to have become a habit because Nelly says her placement is “as usual.” Her eyes have also changed, as Nelly recounts:

The flash of her eyes had been succeeded by a dreamy and melancholy softness: they no longer gave the impression of looking at the objects around her; they appeared always to gaze beyond, and far beyond – you would say out of this world. (Brontë 166)
Catherine’s gaze is a classic symptom of a hysteric. Literary analyst of hysteria Eve Ender describes how a hysteric’s gaze is “typically blank, or unfocused” (Ender 44). Catherine’s feisty spirit, exhibited as a child when Nelly used to call her a “wild, wicked slip,” is gone. Instead of focusing on the external world, Catherine has decided to collapse into herself as a last resort of self-preservation.

When her movements are no longer a form of communication, Catherine’s body becomes viewed more intensely based on mere physical appearance, as that is what her body offers to the world around her. Her eyes are visible signs of the injuries done to her body in her illness, but they ominously show how little agency she now possesses. As Torgerson writes on medical anthropologist Arthur Frank, the “body” can be seen theoretically as the bridge between the “self” and the “social world,” making the body a battlefield for ideological conflicts. In such a position, the body carries wounds, the signs of conflict, when there are discrepancies between what the self desires and what culture allows it (Torgerson 5). The change in Catherine’s eyes can be seen as a “wound” inflicted by the larger ideological conflict around how a woman should act and behave. Instead of her body being a site of agency through her passionate movement, Catherine’s body is merely a one-dimensional surface to be viewed and pitied. From looking at this changing representation of her body - from lively to passively wounded - the narrative marks Catherine’s disassociation from her own flesh.

Separated from her affect, Catherine becomes the “a picture of death” foreshadowed in the earlier hysteric fit in the parlor. She soon dies after this scene and her character then becomes a ghost. For that matter, most of the significant women in the novel become ghosted. Frances, who is Catherine’s brother’s wife, dies of tuberculosis, a disease of social “consumption” where one wastes away. Catherine’s childhood friend Isabella dies of ill health. Nelly describes her as
“dwindling and fading before our eyes” (Brontë 120). Isabella also strongly acts out her emotions, as she runs away with Heathcliff in rebellion. The ghosting out of female bodies marks how the narrative hints at the danger of not fully listening to the emotional desires of women.

While this ghosting is ominous, however, it does not completely erase Catherine from the text. In mid-Victorian literature, historian Jennifer Bann writes, ghosts become “characters rather than…plot devices and moving scenery” (683). Viewing Catherine’s ghost as a character, gives her a lingering presence in the entirety of the text. When Lockwood is staying in Wuthering Heights in Catherine’s old bedroom, he has a nightmare and imagines; “I tried to draw back my arm, but the [Catherine’s] hand clung to it, and a most melancholy voice sobbed, ‘Let me in—let me in!’” (Brontë 56). This ghostly hand is a bridge between the past and future. She clings onto him, causing a moment of violence where Lockwood cuts himself on the jacked windowpane to free himself. Even in her ghostly presence, Catherine tries desperately through her dramatic actions – even drawing blood – to be noticed. Wuthering Heights is its own form of spectral hand, reaching out to the reader to not forget Catherine’s trauma, willing us to let her voice in.

VI: From Medic to Witness, Catherine’s Ghostly Presence Prompts Cultural Reflection

Even in ghost form, Catherine refuses to have her voice silenced or disappear completely from the text. Affect aliens like Catherine have profound lessons to teach modern society, as Ahmed points out:

Affect aliens can do things, for sure, by refusing to put bad feelings to one side in the hope that we can 'just get along.' A concern with histories that hurt is not then a backward orientation: to move on, you must make this return. If anything we might want to reread melancholic subjects, the ones who refuse to let go of suffering, who are even prepared to kill some forms of joy, as an alternative model of the social good. (Ahmed 50)
To grapple with Catherine’s story is not only a way to understand the past perspective of female hysterics, but also a way to move forward. Let’s re-read Catherine as a melancholic subject. One troubling aspect remains: Why can Catherine only “suppose” at her narrative of trauma instead of directly knowing it? Catherine’s trauma happens in a specific nineteenth-century milieu and relates to a transition into womanhood and the social restrictions it brings that take her away from people and places that make her happy. This is a historical trauma as it is “specific” to a certain point in time and “not everyone is subject or entitled to the subject-position associated with it” (LaCapra 723). Catherine, however, understands her historical loss as a structural trauma because she cannot consciously locate it in history. Her hysteria was seen at the time as a generic because every woman was subject to experiencing it. Mark Micale summarizes Thomas Sydenham’s *Epistolary Dissertation* (1681). Sydenham believed women were “constitutionally predisposed to hysteria due to their fragile nervous apparatus” (22). In Ender’s introduction to nineteenth-century hysteria, she comments that Brachet wrote in his treatise, *Traite de l’hysterie* that “l’hysterie, c'est la femme” (Brachet 74). To be a woman was to be hysterical or on the verge of hysterics. Dominant cultural perception was that hysteria was an inherent condition of womanhood. At the same time, as this essay suggests, many doctors also recognized the external pressures that caused hysteria. This seemingly contradictory interplay between body and environment marks the histospecificity of hysteria as both a physiological state and a broader cultural narrative. This could explain in part why hysteria is no longer part of the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual of Mental Disorders, DSM. It was deleted from DSM-III in 1980. Our cultural perception of hysteria has changed over the years to a point where it is no longer considered a legitimate diagnosis. Catherine did not have the vantage point of the future to see that her trauma was historically constructed to some extent. The readers of her narrative, however, can recognize
that her trauma was caused in part by a historical context, which is essential to making sure our present culture does not embrace the same social factors that engender hysteria.

Brontë took a daring chance in writing a character like Catherine who refuses to put her unhappiness aside and suffer in silence. Catherine’s character challenges the reader to shift his or her orientation from that of medic to witness. Not all nineteenth-century critics viewed this unsettling novel kindly. Reviewer George Washington Peck warned lady readers against reading the novel due to the “general roughness and savageness in the soliloquies and dialogues” (Allott 235-6). In addition, after critics realized in 1848 that Wuthering Heights’ author was a woman, they tended to retract their comments on its literary power. The Eclectic Review now found that Wuthering Heights had “little more power….than…the ghost stories which made our granddames tremble” (Allott 298). This new literary perspective echoes the struggle Florence Nightingale had in publishing her own work on hysteria. Knowing that the author was female, Cassandra like Wuthering Heights was considered neither creative nor powerful, merely coarse.

While the nineteenth-century criticism was harsh, it shows too how Wuthering Heights has the ability to spark debate. The novel has lived on to become one of the most frequently read books in English literature. Popular culture has regularly revived the book over the years, most recently with the hit Twilight series by Stephanie Meyer. It has also been the focus of other creative works like Callon’s dioramas and Anne Carson’s “The Glass” essay. In Carson’s work, she recreates Catherine’s ghostly presence in the form of images, “Nudes,” that possess her. Carson describes Nude #2, “Woman caught in a cage of thorns. / Big glistening brown thorns with black stains on them / where she twists this way and that way” (17). The themes of external restriction, seen by the cage of thorns, physical struggle, and violent trauma are all compacted in this one snapshot that echoes Catherine’s experience. Wuthering Heights is indeed a ghost story,
but it does not lack power. Catherine’s ghost lives on to haunt the minds of the present day reader. Her character possesses an eerie power that prompts self-reflection and cultural observations about our troubled world. Through such an enduring narrative, one hopes there can be a continued conversation about nineteenth-century hysteria in order to work through its legacy. Through acknowledging histories of hurt, one hopes to create more desirable social and political institutions in relation to women’s mental health in the present day.


Bann, Jennifer. “Ghostly Hands and Ghostly Agency: The Changing Figure of the Nineteenth-Century Specter.” Victorian Studies 51.4 (Summer, 2009):


Other Works Consulted

Crouse, Jamie. “‘This Shattered Prison’: Confinement, Control and Gender in Wuthering Heights.” *Brontë Studies* 33, (Fall, 2008): 180-191


