RELIGION, METAPHYSICS, AND MYSTICISM IN

*WUTHERING HEIGHTS*

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**Wutheirng Heights as a Religious Novel**

**Wuthering Heights as a Metaphysical Novel**

**Emily Brontë as a Mystic**

The passionate yearning of Catherine and Heathcliff for each other, their desperate striving for union, and their intransigence in pursuing that quest suggest transcendent meanings; as a result, the novel has been read as a religious novel and as a metaphysical novel and Emily Brontë has been called a mystic. Brontë's reputation as a mystic is also based on her poetry.

**Wuthering Heights as a Religious Novel**

Wuthering Heights is not a religious novel in the sense that it supports a particular religion (Christianity), or a particular branch of Christianity (Protestantism), a particular Protestant denomination (Church of England). Rather, religion in this novel takes the form of the awareness of or conviction of the existence of a supreme being or spirit-afterlife.

An overwhelming sense of the presence of a larger reality moved Rudolph Otto to call Wutheirng Heights a supreme example of "the daemonic" in literature. Otto was concerned with identifying the non-rational mystery behind all religion and all religious experiences; he called this basic element or mystery the numinous. The numinous grips or stirs the mind so powerfully that one of the responses it produces is numinous dread, which consists of awe or awe-fullness. Numinous dread implies three qualities of the numinous: its absolute unapproachability, its power, and. its urgency or energy. A misunderstanding of these qualities and of numinous dread by primitive people gives rise to daemonic dread, which is the first stage in religious development. At the same time that they feel dread, they are drawn by the fascinating power of the numinous. Otto explains, "The daemonic-divine object may appear to the mind an object of horror and dread, but at the same time it is no less something that allures with a potent charm, and the creature, who trembles before it, utterly cowed and cast down, has always at the same time the impulse to turn to it, nay even to make it somehow his own." Still, acknowledgment of the "daemonic" is a genuine religious experience, and from it arise the gods and demons of later Gothic fiction originated primarily as a quest for numinous dread, which Otto also calls the mysterium tremendum. religions. It has been suggested that

For Derek Traversi the motive force of Brontë's novel is "a thirst for religious experience,"which is not Christian. It is this spirit which moves Catherine to exclaim, "surely you and everybody have a notion that there is, or should be, an existence of yours beyond you. What were the use of my creation if I were entirely contained here? (Ch. ix, p. 64). Out of her–and Brontë's–awareness of the finiteness of human nature comes the yearning for a higher reality, permanent, infinite, eternal; a higher reality which would enable the self to become whole and complete and would also replace the feeling of the emptiness of this world with feelings of the fulness of being (fullness of being is a phrase used by and about mystics to describe the aftermath of a direct experience of God). Brontë's religious inspiration turns a discussion of the best way to spend an idle summer's day into a dispute about the nature of heaven. Her religious view encompasses both Cathy's and Linton's views of heaven and of life, for she sees a world of contending forces which are contained within her own nature. She seeks to unite them in this novel, though, Traversi admits, the emphasis on passion and death tends to overshadow the drive for unity. Even Heathcliff's approaching death, when he cries out "My soul's bliss kills my body, but does not satisfy itself" (Ch. xxxiv, p. 254), has a religious resonance.

Thomas John Winnifrith also sees religious meaning in the novel: salvation is won by suffering, as an analysis of references to heaven and hell reveals. For Heathcliff, the loss of Catherine is literally hell; there is no metaphoric meaning in his claim "existence after losing her would be hell" (Ch. xiv, p. 117). In their last interview, Catherine and Heathcliff both suffer agonies at the prospect of separation, she to suffer "the same distress underground" and he to "writhe in the torments of hell" (XV, 124). Heathcliff is tortured by his obsession for the dead/absent Catherine. Suffering through an earthly hell leads Healthcliff finally to his heaven, which is union with Catherine as a spirit. The views of Nelly and Joseph about heaven and hell are conventional and do not represent Brontë's views, according to Winnifrith.

**Wuthering Heights as a Metaphysical Novel**

Metaphysics is the "branch of speculative inquiry which treats of the first principles of things, including such concepts as being, substance, essence, time, space, cause, identity, etc.; theoretical philosophy as the ultimate science of Being and Knowing" (OED). Dorothy Van Ghent finds evidence, at one level of Wuthering Heights, of metaphysical exploration:

the book seizes, at the point where the soul feels itself cleft within and in cleavage from the universe, the first germs of philosophic thought, the thought of the duality of human and nonhuman existence, and the thought of the cognate duality of te psyche.

The novel presents the collision between two types of reality, restrictive civilization and anonymous unrestrained natural energies or forces. This collision takes the form of inside/domestic versus outside/nature, human versus the "other," the light versus the dark within the soul. The novel repeatedly shows efforts to break through or cross the boundary of separation of the various dualities, like Lockwood's breaking the window in his dream or the figure of two children who struggle for union (Catherine and Heathcliff, Cathy and Linton, Cathy and Hareton). The two kinds of realities are, in Van Ghent's reading, both opposed and continuous There is a continuous movement to break through the constraint of civilization and personal consciousness and also a movement toward "passionate fulfillment of consciousness by deeper ingress into the matrix of its own and all energy." In other words, the impetus of life is toward unifying the dark and the light, the unknown and the known, the elemental and the human.

Catherine and Heathcliff, Van Ghent explains, are violent elementals who express the flux of nature; they struggle to be human and assume human character in their passion, confusions, and torment, but their inhuman appetites and energy can only bring chaos and self-destruction. The second generation presents the childish romance of Cathy and Linton and the healthy, culturally viable love of Cathy and Hareton. The adult love of Cathy and Hareton involves a sense of social and moral responsibilities in contrast to the asocial, amoral, irresponsible, and impulsive child's love of Catherine and Heathcliff. Van Ghent calls their love a "mythological romance" because "the astonishingly ravenous and possessive, perfectly amoral love of Catherine and Heathcliff belongs to that realm of the imagination where myths are created"; a primary function of myth being to explain origins, practices, basic human behavior, and natural phenomena. The two kinds of love (childish and adult) and the two generations are connected by Heathcliff in his role first as demon-lover and finally as ogre-father and by the two children figure.

**Emily Brontë as a Mystic**

Though the word mysticism is often used vaguely to indicate occultism or spiritualism, it has a very specific meaning in Christianity and Western culture. Evelyn Underhill defines mysticism as "the direct intuition or experience of God" or "the life which aims at union with God" and a mystic as "a person who has, to a greater or less degree, such a direct experience–one whose religion and life are centered, not merely on an accepted belief or practice, but on that which he regards as first-hand personal knowledge." If her use of "God" is expanded to include a higher presence or force and spiritual reality, her definition includes most discussions of Brontë as a mystic. The mystic traditionally goes through three stages–purgation, a purification of the individual and disengagement from worldly affairs; illumination, conviction of God's power and surrender to His will; and union with God. Typically mystics experience oceanic feelings during union with God. Ellen Moers defines oceanic feelings as alluding "to the sensation of selflessness and release from the flesh and to the comprehension of the universal Oneness that are often experienced on the open seas." Moers believes that for Brontë the expanse of the moors created oceanic feelings, as can be seen in her poems and novel.

Claims that Brontë is a mystic are often based primarily–and even entirely–on her poems. Lines like these from "High waving heather, 'neath stormy blasts" are cited to prove her mysticism or at least her mystical leanings:

Earth rising to heaven and heaven descending,

Man's spirit away form its drear dungeon sending,

Bursting the fetters and breaking the bars.

Relying entirely on the poems, Caroline F.E. Spurgeon identifies Emily Brontë as an unusual type of mystic:

In her poems her mysticism is seen principally in two ways: in her unerring apprehension of values, of the illusory quality of material things, even of the nature she so loved, together with the certain vision of the one Reality behind all forms. This, and her description of ecstasy, of the all-sufficing joy of the inner life of one who has tasted this experience, mark her out as being among those who have seen, and who know. In The Prisoner, the speaker, a woman, is "confined in triple walls," yet in spite of bolts and bars and dungeon gloom she holds within herself an inextinguishable joy and unmeasured freedom brought to her every night by a ‘messenger'.

Other ideas that also qualify her, in Spurgeon's eyes, as a mystic are the fact that Brontë knows that ordinary things hold the secret of the universe and that she has a sense of the continuousness of life and the oneness of God and man, as expressed in "No coward soul is mine":

O God within my breast

Almighty ever-present Deity

Life, that in me hast rest

As I Undying Life, have power in Thee!...

With wide-embracing love

Thy spirit animates eternal years

Pervades and broods above,

Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates and rears

Though Earth and moon were gone

And suns and universes ceased to be

And thou wert left alone

Every Existence would exist in thee

Similarly, Winifred Gerin reads "On a sunny brae alone I lay" as a description of a mystical experience in which every detail is sharply defined in terms of sight, sensation, and hearing. The "glittering spirits," who sing to the poet of the ecstasy of being, reveal that death, far from being the tragedy of life, is its one certain bliss. Some of the mystical ideas that Spurgeon and Gerin identify can also be found in Wuthering Heights, particularly in the speeches of Catherine and Heathcliff, and critics regularly support claims of mysticism in the novel by referring to the poems.

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