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The representation of nature in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*

Hiromi Kanenaka

When we see a subject or book title such as “Brontë and nature,” we tend to assume that the work under consideration is the novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Brontë (1818-48) rather than the works of her elder sister Charlotte (1816-55). In fact, the entry on “Natural history and the Brontës” in *The Oxford Companion to the Brontës* points out that while “Charlotte’s pervasive references to natural phenomena in her novels reflect her close observation and symbolic use of nature,” “[i]t is in Emily Brontë’s writing, however, that we find the greatest impact of natural history theory. Her passionate love for the natural world is expressed in such poems as ‘The linnet in the rocky dells’ [. . .].”¹

In spite of this emphasis on nature’s influence on Emily as opposed to Charlotte, and in spite also of many readers’ (and movie viewers’) impression that *Wuthering Heights* is full of nature scenes, there are, in fact, few descriptions of nature in the novel. On the other hand, there are many nature descriptions and much use of nature as a symbol or a background in *Jane Eyre* (1847). However, we are less impressed with the role of nature in this work than when we read *Wuthering Heights*. Why does this happen?

In this paper I will examine this aspect of the two novels by comparing and contrasting the representation/scenes of nature in passages related to moors and heaths, which *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* have in common, and exploring how the discrepancy arises between our expectations (or impressions) referred to above and the reality.

I

In *Bearing the Word*, Margaret Homans starts the fourth chapter, which is about *Jane Eyre*, with a citation of the novel’s opening passage, from “There was no possibility of taking a walking that day” to “I was glad of it: I never liked long walks, especially on chilly afternoons” (p. 7). On the basis of this passage, Homans points out that Charlotte’s novel is rooted in Jane’s skepticism about the experience of nature, but that “[d]espite Jane’s dislike for taking walks, parts of *Jane Eyre* take place in the landscape of *Wuthering Heights* — the Yorkshire moors — but to different effect. Each novelist transforms the moors into a symbolic system, but while Emily Brontë undertakes this project ambivalently, her sister accepts it far more wholeheartedly.”

As Homans points out above, it is curious that *Jane Eyre* also includes moor scenes, given the strong links between that landscape and *Wuthering Heights* in Brontë readers’ minds.

Through her exploration of this “different effect,” Homans elaborates a feminist and psychological analysis. For instance, she considers the moorland landscape in which Jane wanders after she leaves Thornfield, and reads in it the author’s (Charlotte’s) conventional attitudes with regard to the identification of Nature/nature and Mother,

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3 As for the opening paragraph, Eithne Henson points out that “[it] exemplifies the pathetic fallacy, simplest of all traditional landscape uses, where the desolation of scene and season simply echo the emotional desolation of the child, recalled by the adult narrator.” *Landscape and Gender in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy: The Body of Nature* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011) p. 29.


5 Barbara T. Gates also sees the divergences not only in the sisters’ views of nature but in their novels and picks up this moor scene as a representative case. “Natural History” in *The Brontës in Context*, ed. Marianne Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012) pp. 253-256.

6 It is significant that before the curtain went up on a Japanese musical version of *Jane Eyre*, one of the audience members observed that the set was “like a set for *Wuthering Heights*.” There was a big gaunt tree in the center on stage and the backdrop was dark and desolate, which reminded her of *Wuthering Heights* rather than *Jane Eyre*. (Musical *Jane Eyre*, Japanese version, trans. Mie Yoshida and Naoyuki Matuda, dir. John Caird, 2009; Nissay Theatre, Tokyo, 20 Oct. 2012.)
and its dangerous association with death. However, she is too much focused on this Mother Nature/nature-daughter relationship in her argument and seems to omit another important presence to Jane in this scene, that of God as Jane’s guide, comforter, and reliever from fear, as well as “my Maker” (329). (Though Jane doesn’t call God “Father” in this scene and apparently assigns God as her protector mainly by night while Mother Nature is her protector by both night and day, she describes Him like this: “[. . .] it is in the unclouded night-sky, [. . .] that we read clearest His infinitude, His omnipotence, His omnipresence” (pp. 328-329). In this light, it seems safe to say that God in this scene carries the aspect of a Father to Jane.)

Keeping in mind the discussion above, I would like in the next section to read this moorland scene and its counterparts in Wuthering Heights from the perspective of another dichotomy, that of human/nature, and taking the narrative style of each author into consideration.

II

As Patsy Stoneman points out in her Introduction to the Oxford edition of Wuthering Heights, “[s]o strong is this sense that Wuthering Heights is ‘about’ the landscape and the weather that it comes as a surprise to discover how very little direct description there is”;7 the discrepancy between what we expect of the novel and the reality is unexpected and large. In this section, by comparing and contrasting the moor scenes in the two novels, we will work out the reason for this discrepancy.

Let us begin with the “very little direct description” of the landscape in Wuthering Heights. This observation holds up; to cite Stoneman again,8 “[b]ecause we think of Catherine and Heathcliff in particular as denizens of the moor, it is astonishing to realize that there are only three brief descriptions of them together out of doors.” This comes about partly because, unlike Jane Eyre, which as the subtitle says is “An

8 Stoneman, p. xiv.
"Autobiography" and narrated in the first person by Jane, the story of Catherine and Heathcliff and their children in *Wuthering Heights* is told by Nelly Dean, who is not a protagonist but one of the first-person narrators. Nelly also wants to finish her narration quickly ("you must allow me to leap over some three years," she tells Lockwood [p. 102]), and thus limits the description of nature to the minimum necessary.

These narrative differences and limitations lead to the recognition that in fact *Jane Eyre* is more full of nature descriptions than *Wuthering Heights*; thus, it might be expected that the landscapes of the moors represented in it would also impress us and remain longer in our hearts. Contrary to this, however, we have "[t]he impression that the moor is all-present" in *Wuthering Heights*. (Stoneman finds the main origin of this impression in the frequent use of metaphors related to the moor and heath.)

To compare representations of the moor (and the associated heath) as one example of nature in each novel, I will look at these moor scenes more closely below.

As we have already noted above, in *Jane Eyre*, the moor and the heath are especially remarkable in the scene in which, after leaving Mr. Rochester, Jane wanders alone without knowing what to do in "a north-midland shire, dusk with moorland" (p. 327).

There are great moors behind and on each hand of me; [. . .]. They are all cut in the moor, and the heather grows deep and wild to their very verge [. . .]. I have no relative but the universal mother, Nature: I will seek her breast and ask repose.

I struck straight into the heath: I held on to a hollow I saw deeply furrowing the brown moor-side; I waded, knee-deep in its dark growth; I turned with its turnings, and finding a moss-blackened granite crag in a hidden angle, I sat down under it. High banks of moor were about me [. . .]. (p. 327)

9 Stoneman, p. xiii.
10 For example, Stoneman points out that Catherine describes Heathcliff's mind as an "arid wilderness of furze and whinstone." p. xiii. Of course, Charlotte also makes a metaphorical use of nature. For example, after the first unexpected meeting of Jane and Rochester, she describes the way he and the animals depart thus: "'Like heath that in the wilderness / The wild wind whirls away.'" (p. 116). However, these lines are from Thomas Moore's poetry ('Fallen is thy Throne'), as noted by Margaret Smith (*Jane Eyre*, p. 463), so this metaphorical use of heath would not seem so unique to readers as to impress them.
In this scene, the moor and the heath exist not only as a part of the landscape but as something like Jane’s protector, her “mother” Nature, and seem to have an influence on her reflection and decision. Nature/nature, including the moor and the heath, is personified as a mother figure in this landscape.

On the other hand, Jane says further, “The population here must be thin, and I see no passengers on these roads. [. . .] Not a tie holds me to human society at this moment” (p. 328). She is also lonely on the moor, cut off from human society. At first, Jane is satisfied with her sense of unity with Mother Nature: “Nature seemed to me benign and good: I thought she loved me, outcast as I was; and I, [. . .] clung to her with filial fondness. To-night, at least, I would be her guest—as I was her child: my mother would lodge me without money and without price” (p. 328). And as we have seen above, she finds a parallel solace in God on the moor too. However, this sense of unity, the respite-offering mother-daughter relationship with Nature/nature, is only symbolic, and tentative—threatened by a realistic physical problem (hunger) even during this time of contemplation. “I had one morsel of bread yet [. . .]. I saw ripe bilberries gleaming here and there, [. . .] and [ate] them with the bread. My hunger, sharp before, was, if not satisfied, appeased by this hermit’s meal” (p. 328).

However, this relationship quickly collapses the next day.11 After waking from her sleep in nature, Jane gives voice to an exclamation of joy: “What a still, hot, perfect day! What a golden desert this spreading moor! Everywhere sunshine. I wished I could live in it and on it” (p. 329). At the same time, however, she notices that her hunger is more urgent than the previous day:

Want came to me, pale and bare [. . .]. I would fain at the moment have become bee or lizard, that I might have found fitting nutriment, permanent shelter here. But I was a human being, and had a human being’s wants: I must not linger where there was nothing to supply them. (p. 329)

11 From a feminist and psychological point of view, Homans (pp. 96-97) points out the danger to Jane that this relationship implies.
Until reaching this conclusion, Jane has even hoped for death and rest, but after struggling with that desire, she decides to live. ("Life, however, was yet in my possession"; p. 398) After all, hunger is at the very core of animal life. Jane’s decision to live emerges from her immersion in and subsequent withdrawal from the moor and the heath. To Jane, nature is no longer the place where a human being can live as a daughter, but home to bees and lizards.

Moreover, unlike Catherine, Jane cannot find in this nature scene a person who corresponds to her Heathcliff, Mr. Rochester. When she leaves Thornfield, she “[thinks] of him now—in his room—watching the sunrise” (p. 325). And after that, alone on the moor,

[Jane’s heart] trembled for Mr. Rochester and his doom: it bemoaned him with bitter pity; it demanded him with ceaseless longing; and, impotent as a bird with both wings broken, it still quivered its shattered pinions in vain attempts to seek him. (p. 328)

Rather than nature, Jane seeks a link to humanity in Rochester—to human society, for to live means to be with Rochester, not alone in the isolation of nature. In Jane Eyre, nature (the moor) is only a pass point “before [Jane] could reach human habitation” (p. 328).

In the next section, I will consider nature descriptions associated with the moor and the heath in Wuthering Heights and consider their differences from those in Jane Eyre.

III

As we have seen hitherto, and as pointed out by Homans, Jane is not a creature of the natural world and solitude but of human society. In addition to the ambivalently negative feelings and attitude to nature expressed above, Jane expresses her dislike for the moor more directly on the way back from Moor House, where she had stayed after rescued by the Rivers family (the Rivers sisters “clung to the purple moors behind and around [this] dwelling” [p. 354]), to Thornfield after she receives
Rochester's "mysterious summons" (p. 453): "in the midst of scenery whose green hedges and large fields, and low, pastoral hills (how mild of feature and verdant of hue compared with the stern north-midland moors of Morton!) met my eye like the lineaments of a once familiar face. Yes, I knew the character of this landscape: I was sure we were near my bourne" (p. 427). She not only contrasts the two landscapes, positive/negative, but she describes her preferred landscape as if it is a human face. This sums up and symbolizes her wish for a link with human society, not with nature (which means, to her, being cut off from it).

The function of the autobiographical novel *Jane Eyre* is to reflect its protagonist's feelings, likes, and dislikes directly, because it is narrated from her point of view only. Thus, Jane's discomfort out of doors and rejection of a life alone on the moors define and set the terms for the quite strikingly negative way in which the novel ultimately deals with nature. In fact, the novel gives such a negative view of nature as to very likely leave a negative association with it in the reader's mind. (And insofar as it is autobiography, the first-person narrative, by means of which Jane can maneuver and direct her readers' impressions whichever way she likes, we might say that nature's "bad impression" is exactly what Jane intends.)

In this way, *Jane Eyre* prejudices our reading with the negative meaning it ascribes to nature. On the other hand, despite the only very few descriptions of nature in *Wuthering Heights*, we can see that nature as again most prominently represented by the moor and the heath is not dealt with in a negative way, as in *Jane Eyre*, because nature is what the protagonists wish to experience.

In the first place, compared to the representation of nature in *Jane Eyre*, nature/God as described in *Wuthering Heights* is not conventional. For example, we have Catherine's famous speech, "I was only going to say that 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" (pp. 120-121). This sets the tone for the contrast between "heaven" and "earth" in *Wuthering Heights* — and the latter, including the heath and the moor, is vehemently preferred by the protagonists. (In
her diary, Catherine writes, "my companion [Heathcliff] proposes that we should appropriate the dairy woman's cloak, and have a scamper on the moors, under its shelter. A pleasant suggestion — and then, if the surly old man come in, he may believe his prophecy verified — we cannot be damper, or colder, in the rain than we are here" [p. 64]). The moor is the place where Catherine and Heathcliff can enjoy a freedom from other people and in some sense from their own humanity, evade the "adult" control of "the surly old man," and be together, without lamenting over the other's absence; in contrast to Jane, only in nature is there communion for them.

In *Wuthering Heights*, the moor and the heath represent the main characters' most cherished feelings and exist as a part of the (favorite) landscape. Moreover, unlike in *Jane Eyre*, these landscapes are not associated with a conventional God because, as we saw above, they reject a conventional heaven. Rather, as Heathcliff says towards the end of his life, "I tell you, I have nearly attained my heaven" (p. 363); each character creates his/her own heaven in the world of *Wuthering Heights*. So, contrary to Jane's case, nature in *Wuthering Heights* is associated with each (main) character's own personal God and described in a positive way as their heaven.

Another obvious contrast is that *Wuthering Heights*, unlike *Jane Eyre*, does not represent a first-person narrator's feelings about nature alone. Catherine and Heathcliff's assertions cited above are always framed by the narrator who is not a heroine, Nelly. And Nelly's attitude toward Catherine and Heathcliff is generally critical — she often refuses to listen to what they say or upbraids them for their behavior as well as their speeches about their own heaven. For example, she says after hearing the motives that Catherine has expressed for marrying Edgar Linton rather than Heathcliff: "I was out of patience with her folly! 'If I can make any sense of your nonsense, Miss,' I said, 'it only goes to convince me that you are ignorant of the duties you undertake in marrying; or else, that you are a wicked, unprincipled girl." (p. 122).

12 As an example of "[t]he analogy established by the text between a certain landscape and a character-trait," Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan gives Catherine and Heathcliff who are similar to the wilderness in which they live, [. . .]." *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002) pp. 69-70.
In addition to Nelly’s role as a character who takes a negative view of the protagonists’ speeches expressing love of nature, nature in *Wuthering Heights* is not only associated with freedom (though it is only in this freedom from human society that Catherine and Heathcliff can have each other’s [human] society), but, as critics have noted, with death, specifically, Heathcliff’s and Catherine’s deaths. Thus, nature has not a totally positive meaning but an ambivalent one.

However, we cannot deny that nature, as represented by the moor and the heath, is an idealized place, something the main characters want to (re)gain. Their strong desire for it is seen in the scene in which they discuss wanting to be outdoors. Catherine says

“I wish I were out of doors—I wish I were a girl again, half savage and hardy, and free [. . .] I’m sure I should be myself were I once among the heather on those hills . . . Open the window again wide, fasten it open! Quick, why don’t you move?”

“Because I won’t give you your death of cold,” I [Nelly] answered.

“You won’t give me a chance of life, you mean,” she said sullenly. “However, I’m not helpless yet, I’ll open it myself.” (p. 163)

Catherine’s desire to open the window distills her desire to be in the world outside the house, in nature (“among the heather”) and, contrary to Nelly’s assertion (“your death”), to live (“a chance of life”) for herself.

On the basis of all this, it can be seen how significant it is that the window is open in Heathcliff’s death scene. It is toward the end of the novel that Nelly finds him dead:

I could not think him dead—but his face and throat were washed with rain; the bed-clothes dripped, and he was perfectly still. The lattice, flapping to and fro, had grazed one hand that rested on the sill—no blood trickled from the broken skin, and when I put my fingers to it, I could doubt no more—he was dead and

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stark!

I hasped the window; [. . .]. (pp. 364-365)

Nelly says that she “could not think him dead,” and indeed, Heathcliff’s life does not really come to an end here. As Dorothy Van Ghent has noted, “the window-pane is the medium, treacherously transparent, separating the ‘inside’ from the ‘outside’, the ‘human’ from the alien and terrible ‘other.’”14 Passing through the window, Heathcliff goes out of doors: he leaves the human world and enters the moors and heaths, and, it seems, continues to live there with Catherine as ghosts, “the alien and terrible ‘other.’” It is reported that the villagers, including “the surly old man,” have seen Catherine and Heathcliff moving around, indoors and outdoors (“near the church, and on the moor, and even within this house,” p. 366). We can say that they have found a way to live in nature, cut off from the humans in a very different way from Jane.

Wuthering Heights ends with the words of another narrator who is not a protagonist, Lockwood: “[I] wondered how anyone could ever imagine unquiet slumbers, for the sleepers in that quiet earth” (p. 367). He denies the villagers’ testimony, but as we have seen, the protagonists’ desire to dwell in their ideal place, in nature, is expressed so strongly throughout the novel that this last testimony sounds conventional and frivolous. (Indeed, Lockwood’s weakness and inability to interpret the situation have often been pointed out.) As a result, we are more deeply impressed with the protagonists’ affinity to nature, and we feel that the moor is all-present in Wuthering Heights.

As we have seen, even if both novels contain moor and heath scenes, they give them different meanings and associations: while in Jane Eyre they are related to Jane’s negative feelings and attitude toward nature, in Wuthering Heights they are related to the main characters’ longing for it. And these differences have a great influence over readers’ impressions of nature in the novels.

14 Dorothy Van Ghent, Emily Brontë: Wuthering Heights, ed. Miriam Allott, (London: Macmillan, 1970) p. 178. She also mentions this death scene as an example showing the meaning of the window as “separation” (p. 181).