

The Theme of Duality and Epiphanic Moments in the Works of Emily Brontë

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Abstract: "Navigating through Dublin in 1904, Dickens would have lost his way, but trying to read Ulysses, he would have thought he had lost his mind," (3) says Stephen Kern while distinguishing between Victorian writers and the modernists. He further adds, "Modernism is about a new way of interpreting the world more than the substance of that world" (3). Little wonder that while looking at the realist novels of H. G. Wells, John Galsworthy, and Arnold Bennett, Virginia Woolf ponders over the purpose of their characters. She admits that their novels are well-made, and yet she accuses them of "making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring" (Common Reader 210). Rather than branding something as tragic or comic, Woolf's focus is on an artist's capability of making life appear as it truly is, as she proposes with Emily Brontë's characters that are filled with "such a gust of life that they transcend reality" (227). Using Woolf's argument as the basis, I argue that in both her novel and poems Emily Brontë depicts that spirit of transcendence that aligns her with modernist writers. The nature of Emily's power lies in her ability to thematize the metaphor of duality. In both her poetic works and novel she explores the dualistic aspects of life as fundamental. For her it was not a matter of choice, and she embraced both as can be seen through the struggles of her characters who continually strive to find a gap between love and the self. The sense of duality that is introduced in the Gondal poems is explored in a much more complex manner in Wuthering Heights, and Brontë "saw these dualities as cosmic" (Chitham 203). This paper examines some of the motifs of Emily Brontë's art that I would claim make her a precursor to the Modernists.

For as men have found themselves putting less and less trust in the truths and absolutes of the past, they have more and more come to stress the trivia of existence. They have sought meaning in what they could see, all around them, in the apparently inconsequential objects and events of everyday life.

(Morris Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* 17)

Emily Brontë has been mostly identified as a writer following the Romantic and Gothic traditions. It is only since the late nineteenth eighties that critics like Lyn Pykett and U.C. Knoepfelmacher have often alluded to the modernist aspects in Brontë's writing, even though the first person to note the quality of transcending reality in her writing is Virginia Woolf who also criticized her contemporary writers like John Galsworthy and Arnold Bennett for "making the trivial and the

transitory appear the true and the enduring” (*Common Reader* 210). A good story, of course, is supposed to be a well-made story leaving a lasting impression on a reader, but when dealing with literature, the early twentieth-century modernists had something very specific in mind. Stephen Kern observes the difference between Victorian writers and the modernists succinctly: “Navigating through Dublin in 1904, Dickens would have lost his way, but trying to read *Ulysses*, he would have thought he had lost his mind” (3). While explaining her rationales on the philosophy of her peers, Woolf refers to James Joyce, who is “concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain” (*Common* 214). Once again this is an allusion to Joyce’s moments of epiphany. Rather than branding something as tragic or comic, Woolf focuses on an artist’s capability of making life appear as it truly is, by which she does not imply that life should be sketched literally, engaging in trivial details of everyday life. What she means is that a particular moment of reality should be able to capture the significance of an entire lifetime.

For Woolf, Emily Brontë’s characters are filled with “such a gust of life that they transcend reality” (*Common* 227). Heathcliff may not behave like any regular farm-boy in real life, says Woolf, but his existence is more vivid than any such other character in literature (*Common* 226). In *Women and Writing* Woolf furthermore suggests a kind of “power” behind the creation of *Wuthering Heights*, “underlying the apparitions of human nature and lifting them up into the presence of greatness” (131). In this paper I argue that in both her novel and poems Emily Brontë depicts that spirit of transcendence that aligns her with modernist writers. The nature of Brontë’s power lies in her ability to thematize the metaphor of duality.

Edward Chitham observes that Brontë poses “contradictory thoughts or feelings in adjacent poems” (202), notably seen in her treatment of life after death. Many of Brontë’s poems dwell on varying human emotions and conditions, and on the transient and ever-shifting human mind and life. In the Gondal collection, the poem “At such a time, in such a spot,” A.G.A., or Augusta Geraldine Almeda cries out in anguish for the inconsistency of love:

O could it thus forever be
That I might so adore
I’d ask for all eternity,
To make a paradise for me,
My love – and nothing more! (137. 42–46)

She laments not because her lover has betrayed her, but because she knows that the love she feels for Alfred Sidonia is only a fleeting passion. She has had lovers before Sidonia and when the time comes, he will be gone just as Lord Elbë or others before him went. This poem, however, shows Augusta’s deep understanding of the transitory emotions of life, her wishful longing for a static stage, but more important, her acceptance of life as it is.

This spirit is once again echoed in “There shines the moon,” when Augusta comes back to visit the grave of her first love, Lord Elbë:

How wildly time has altered me!
Am I the being who long ago
Sat watching by that water side
The light of light expiring slow
From his fair cheek and brow of pride? (9. 16–20)

More than mourning her lover, in these lines Augusta regrets the time lost and the changes incurred in her life. Just as Elbë had predicted, she has moved with glorious prospects of a new life. Though her story is not fully revealed in the fragmentary pieces of the Gondal saga, it is clear that through time and experience she transforms from a young inexperienced woman into a seasoned politician and pitiless lover. However, at heart, she is also a poet and philosopher, much more than the mere licentious and thoughtless monarch she is often accused of being. Critics like Chitham and Pykett have noted that this sense of duality introduced in the Gondal poems is explored in a much more complex manner in *Wuthering Heights*, and Brontë “saw these dualities as cosmic” (*Life* 203). This dualistic aspect of life was not a matter of choice, as is evident in her work where she makes a conscious effort to embrace both.

The famous back-kitchen is one of those rare momentous occasions when Emily Brontë interposes her idea of dualism in life with the complex web of possibilities. Catherine Earnshaw, the heroine of *Wuthering Heights*, tells Nelly that she has accepted Edgar Linton's marriage proposal, but feels that it is not the correct decision: "In whichever place the soul lives – in my soul, and in my heart, I'm convinced I'm wrong" (62). She further asserts, "I've no more business to marry Edgar Linton than I have to be in heaven" (63). Yet while she admits that she and Heathcliff are made out of the same material and Edgar completely different, she still chooses to marry the latter because he is rich and handsome, and because it would shame her to marry Heathcliff in his degraded situation. On the one hand, she claims that she will not be happy even in heaven being separated from Heathcliff and *Wuthering Heights*, and on the other, she makes the conscious choice to leave them both behind to be the mistress of Thrushcross Grange. It throws light on the two minds of Catherine – a mind that loves unflinchingly, and another that surrenders to the demands and expectations of society, and succumbs to the allures of a comfortable life.

Moreover, since there is no direct way of doing what she does, she chooses to be diplomatic, and sure enough, Nelly accuses Catherine of duplicity for not "show[ing] her rough side in their [Lintons'] company" (52), and displaying a sweet and sunny aspect. Clearly, Nelly refuses to acknowledge that the sweetness in Catherine is also an essential part of her nature. When she gets her way, she feels content and is willing to make others happy, as it happens when Edgar allows her to be friends with Heathcliff after his return:

Mr. Linton had not only abjured his peevishness (though his spirits seemed still subdued by Catherine's exuberance of vivacity), but he ventured no objection to her taking Isabella with her to *Wuthering Heights* in the afternoon; and she rewarded him with such a summer of sweetness and affections in return, as made the house a paradise for several days; both master and servants profiting from the perpetual sunshine. (79)

She is an elemental being who wishes to see the world happy with her own happiness and unhappy when she is disturbed.

In some ways Catherine's struggles to become a lady are similar to Jane Eyre's efforts to move from a peripheral space to a central one. The significant difference is that Jane is never really bought into the frivolous and fashionable world that Rochester associates with while the young Catherine is smitten with it. Hence she cannot retain her gypsy ways, run wild on the moors, or mention her preference for Heathcliff in "civilized" company. In her ardent wish for advancing herself in social circles, Catherine becomes devious and what Nelly terms as deceitful. When Nelly warns her of the impending separation between her and Heathcliff if she chooses Edgar, she retorts vehemently: "Who is to separate us, pray? They'll meet the fate of Milo! ... I shouldn't be Mrs. Linton were such a price demanded!" (64). When she tells Nelly of her resolution, she is absolutely certain of her own power over the two men and the course of her life. But slowly it dawns on her that the price of becoming Mrs. Linton is to give up her identity of Catherine Earnshaw, the girl who claimed to love Heathcliff more than herself. In her social craving to become Mrs. Edgar Linton she deserts her other self; but again during her illness when she tells her husband to bury her by the moors, for once she chooses her rightful place – the peripheral space beyond polite society and its imperatives.

The ambiguous attitudes and dual aspects are reflected through the different perspectives of Edgar and Heathcliff, and Lockwood and Nelly too, one viewpoint not necessarily negating the other. For Emily these dualities actually capture the essential nature of the world. So, while Edgar can dream of a peaceful reunion with his Catherine when he dies, Heathcliff can still claim that his Cathy's spirit roamed on earth to be mated with him. After her death neither of the two men can stand the sight of the other because they continue to blame one another for the loss of the woman they both loved. Their lives are wasted in totally different ways: while one becomes a hermit, resigning from public service, the other becomes a ghoulish, vengeful soul committing each of his days to plotting to make his enemies suffer. The essential dissimilarity between two such worlds is expressed by young Cathy when she tells Nelly how differently she and young Linton Heathcliff feel about spending a happy day:

He said the pleasantest manner of spending a hot July day was lying from morning till evening on a bank of heath in the middle of the moors, with the bees humming dreamily about the bloom, and the larks singing high up over head, and the blue sky and bright sun shining steadily and cloudlessly. . . . Mine was rocking in a rustling green tree, with a west wind blowing, and bright, white clouds flitting rapidly above; and not only larks, but throistles, and blackbirds, and linnets, and cuckoos pouring their hearts out music on every side, and the moors seen at a distance, broken into cool, dusky dells; but close by, great swells of long grass undulating in waves to the breeze; and woods and sounding water, and the whole world awake and wild with joy. He wanted all to lie in an ecstasy of peace; I wanted all to sparkle, and dance in a glorious jubilee.

I said his heaven would only be half alive, and he said mine would be drunk; I said I should fall asleep in his, and he said he could not breathe in mine. (189-90)

A cautious reader would invariably remember the differences Nelly pointed out between young Catherine and Heathcliff, and the Linton children. While the children of *Wuthering Heights* roam in thunder and storm upon the heath, the children of Thrushcross Grange play with poodles in an opulently decorated parlor. Consequently, while young Cathy and Linton argue over the best option (to which there is no wrong answer), the question we have on hand is whether such differences can coexist, and if such attractions can be sustained.

The idea of such a gap or space is indeed disturbing and enforces the multi-faceted aspects of life in *Wuthering Heights*, and the most interesting of these gaps is the one lying between the narration and the actual story. Maggie Berg observes that in *Wuthering Heights* the most important location is “neither inside nor outside, but that highly-charged and ambiguous space in between” (24). With Brontë’s narrative technique it almost seems as if she tests her readers’ intelligence and understanding of what they see and read. As Woolf notes after her reading of *Wuthering Heights*, “words are not bricks, and reading is not seeing” (*The Second Common Reader* 235). Just as many of the important events happen in marginal spaces, there are also occurrences that might be reported in different ways. Catherine’s use of the Bible as her diary and the writings in between the tomes are suggestive of her moving into a space denying her entry at the forefront. Berg sees her writing in the margins of revered revealed texts as “Catherine’s repression by patriarchal society,” while also representing her rebellion against that establishment (24).

In *Modernism and the Ordinary*, Liesl Olson perceives how modernist trends made deliberate attempts to move away from Victorian realism and naturalism to attain an “aesthetic of self-conscious interiority” (3). These extraordinary moments concentrate not so much on the difficulties one faces at a social or external level, but an awareness of the self, or as an understanding of the workings of individual minds and an ability of understanding beyond the surface. Strictly speaking, however, epiphany is not a conception invented by the modernists. In his *Prelude* William Wordsworth refers to “spots of time,” which he explains as a process of the elevation of the ordinary through the use of imaginative powers when past experiences affect the person in question in the present. The focus is not so much on the actual event, but the influence it has on the mind of the poet. Another Romantic poet who was much concerned with spots of time is Shelley. It is from Shelley’s comments in “A Defence of Poetry” on the transitoriness of poetic inspiration that Joyce drew his image of the “fading coal” to refer to the state of mind during the “mysterious instant” of *claritas*— that is, the moment of epiphany (*Portrait* 231). The Modernist idea of epiphany, or moment of being, of course, is somewhat different from the Romantic notion of spots of time, as Virginia Woolf attempts to explain in *The Second Common Reader*: “the rapid passage of events and actions; the slow opening up of single and solemn moments of concentrated emotion” – two levels which are recorded, respectively, by “smooth narrative” and passages in which “time stands still” (139).

Not surprisingly, Olson sees these moments as revealing “an awareness of the self, a coming into being of the individual, and an opening up of interior states of knowing” (3). For the modernists, such moments of revelation may occur anywhere; unlike the Romantics it does not necessarily involve nature and solitude. Joyce uses epiphany to capture a phase when a character realizes that one particular moment of life is more real than the rest of all that has been. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, for example, Stephen Dedalus sees this young

woman standing midstream gazing out to sea. She holds her skirts high displaying her legs and he experiences a strange sense of intense joy and feels that his life is forever changed. Later on he identifies this moment as a calling to be an artist. The chapter ends beautifully only to reopen in the next with “his third cup of watery tea,” a “box of pawn tickets,” and “the lid of the box, speckled with lousemarks” (188). Most often epiphanic moments in the Joycean world drown in the triviality of everyday activities, and do not really alter the course of everyday events. And as Robert Langbaum observes, “epiphanies are sometimes negative – insights into the abyss” (339). It is indeed a point of argument if epiphanies actually help in making life easier, or they make one question the various gaps one encounters between idealization and reality.

In *Wuthering Heights*, an epiphanic conviction erupts from the mouth of Catherine Earnshaw as she tries to explain to Nelly the nature of her feelings for Heathcliff:

I cannot express it; but surely you and everybody have a notion that there is, or should be, an existence of yours beyond you. ... If all else perished and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained and he were annihilated, the Universe would turn to a mighty stranger. I should not seem part of it. (64)

In that one moment of baring her soul, the selfish, whimsical, and arrogant Miss Earnshaw shows an understanding of love and human capacity that elevates her to a level above the ordinary. Moreover, such a proclamation comes from a sixteen-year-old girl growing up in a Yorkshire farmhouse, whose education to a certain degree is sketchy in the traditional sense. As far as the novel portrays, she is hardly seen reading, and actually has a disdain for books, and therefore, we may assume that her understanding comes from her assimilation of life around her and a lasting attachment to Heathcliff. And yet she does show a self that is capable of feeling deeply and looking beyond polite conversation, domestic activities, child-care, and romance. However, in spite of such a deep understanding, she fails to sustain it in the real world. A deeper understanding of the mechanics of the universe does not alter anything significantly in Brontë’s world. Catherine herself distinguishes between the two loves of her life, the romantic love she feels for Edgar and the elemental love she has for Heathcliff. For her both of these loves are real and impossible to choose between. Unfortunately for her, she is faced with that choice, and thereafter steps into the limbo she tells Nelly about.

The modernist epiphany mostly operates at a present moment when the person is overcome with a sudden jolt of realization. For both Joyce and Woolf it is often grotesque and bizarre, taking place in the middle of nowhere and affecting no one else but a particular mind. It is as Ashton Nichols states:

The open-ended nature of the concept derives from the fact that a central aspect of epiphany occurs in the reader. ... There is no need to demand any absolute truth or falsify from experience. Our judgment is suspended while we receive a description of a mental event. The literary epiphany becomes one way of deriving meaning from experience in the modern world. (32)

Reclaiming Morris Beja, Nichols’ idea reinforces the fact that there is no ultimate truth in the modern world. The trend is to look at things from various perspectives, and decipher their meanings and hidden implications. That brings us back to the multitudinous interpretations of the same event offered by different characters in Brontë’s novel.

According to Thomas Linehan, modern life is characterized by “an overwhelming and disconcerting sense of the transient, fleeting, ephemeral, contingent, and fragmentary” (11). The task of the modern being is to navigate through that ever-changing world and try to make sense of it all. In Brontë’s poetry and novel Woolf observes a disturbing universe that is “half thwarted but of super conviction, to say something through the mouths of her characters which is not merely ‘I love’ or ‘I hate,’ but ‘we, the whole human race’ and ‘you, the eternal powers ...’” (*Common* 225).

John Cooper thinks that because there is little exercise of precise verbal expression of such emotions in *Wuthering Heights*, they find outlets through “exaggeration, hysteria, and the combustible energies we see pent-up in the preverbal world of the infant or in the internalized antagonism, frustration, and self-loathing in the thwarted or the limitless rages of the oppressed” (134). Such expressions are rare in Victorian novels, but in

modernist writings manifestations of this type are not unusual at all. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* demonstrates behavior that can only be termed as eccentric. The strange death of Fresleven over some chickens, or dying Kurtz crawling out into the bushes at the dead of night can hardly be explained in rational terms. Kurtz himself is an epitome of all these complexities that Cooper refers to. The difference between Brontë's novel and Conrad's is that whereas the latter stands as a pioneer of modernist complexities and ambiguities, the former is looked upon as an anomaly among Victorian writers, a "sphinx," as Clement Shorter long ago called her (144), whose secrets have never been fully understood.

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