

Wuthering Heights and *The Secret Garden*: A Response to Susan E. James*

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The time was long overdue within literary and cultural criticism for a thorough comparison of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) with Frances Hodgson Burnett's classic novel for children, *The Secret Garden* (1911). Although I analyzed representations of motherhood in both texts in an earlier essay, Susan E. James has finally written an extended essay about the many ways that *The Secret Garden* echoes Brontë's work.¹ James's discussion of character development, setting, plot, and structure in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Secret Garden* conclusively demonstrates the depth of Burnett's debt to Brontë, as well as the many ways that Burnett "rewrites" the themes and concerns of her literary mentor, telling a new tale in addition to revising an older one. James makes a strong, even undeniable, case for *Wuthering Heights* as a sort of palimpsest over which Burnett wrote *The Secret Garden*, on the whole softening the harsher and more disturbing edges of Brontë's controversial novel. My response will offer some critiques of James's work, as well as some avenues for future scholarly exploration.

James several times alludes to nature in her essay and to its central role in *The Secret Garden*. She discusses at length the Yorkshire settings of both texts, noting that Burnett creates a "safer environment for her child readers" (61) than Brontë's moors by setting the action of her novel within a sheltered, enclosed garden. James contrasts the

*Reference: Susan E. James, "Wuthering Heights for Children: Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*," *Connotations* 10.1 (2000/2001): 59-76; see also Lisa Tyler, "Brontë and Burnett: A Response to Susan E. James," *Connotations* 12.1 (2002/2003): 61-66.

"gloomy, glooming presence of the Yorkshire moors" in *Wuthering Heights* (a bit of a misreading, since Brontë does not *solely* represent the moors as gloomy; they are also sunny, full of birds and flowers) to the life-giving walled garden in which Mary and Colin play.² James views the garden, the symbolic heart of Burnett's work, as a refuge from the unpredictable and frightening natural world, a world with which Brontë was more familiar than Burnett and with which she sympathized more deeply. Though a longer discussion of nature was beyond the scope of James's essay, more could be done here in future work. How do the authors, implicitly, define "nature"? How do Burnett's and Brontë's visions of human nature differ? How are these conceptualizations of human goodness or evil reflected in the landscape; in other words, how do the authors conflate or distinguish "nature" from "human nature"? Phyllis Bixler explores the Romantic linkage, posited by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, between the growth of a child and the growth of a plant. In such a paradigm, "human nature" and "nature" are closely paralleled, and therefore the metaphors of the garden and the moor becomes central to the wider analysis of maturation, mothering and nurturance in both novels.³ As James indicates in her assertion that "Heathcliff mirrors the destructive aspects of nature" and Mary "the constructive aspects which nurture life," both Brontë and Burnett consistently conflate "human nature" and "nature" (63). Catherine describes Heathcliff, for instance, as "an arid wilderness of furze and whinstone."⁴ How, then, do Burnett and Brontë represent the child differently, and how is a particular child's maturation linked to his or her environment? These questions remain open for exploration.

James's comparison of characters in *The Secret Garden* and *Wuthering Heights* is illuminating of both texts. While she does not propose a rigid one-to-one correlation between specific characters in the two novels, James analyzes some striking parallels. For example, both Mary and Heathcliff begin the respective novels as orphans and outcasts, and both are selfish and passionate; however, Heathcliff, according to James, destroys the family that adopts him while Mary

brings unity to Misselthwaite Manor by helping to reunite her brooding and tormented uncle Archibald Craven with his son Colin. James also calls the reader's attention to similarities between Mary and Catherine Linton and between Colin and Linton Heathcliff. Mary and Catherine, for instance, share several characteristics, including a "sullen streak of stubbornness" and their attraction to the "nature boys" Dickon and Hareton, whom James describes as "rough illiterates at home on the moors" (64). Mary's and Catherine's cousins Colin and Linton, on the other hand, are both sickly, whining weaklings. Of course, the boys' fates are very different, as Colin thrives under Mary's and Dickon's care, while Linton grows more cruel and selfish under Heathcliff's mistreatment and eventually dies: Burnett clearly paints Colin's character affectionately, while Linton is perhaps the most irredeemable character in *Wuthering Heights*. Heathcliff's character finds echo also in Archibald Craven. Like the adult Heathcliff, bitter and friendless after Cathy's death in childbirth, Archibald mourns the death of his wife Lilies, unable to endure a relationship with the son who reminds him too much of his beloved wife, afraid in part that Colin will "become the same physical and emotional cripple that Craven fears himself to be" (65). James persuasively suggests that each of these characters echoes in some manner one or more characters in *Wuthering Heights*.

James's compelling analysis does, however, elide some key distinctions between characters in the two novels, and particularly in terms of social class. For example, James's comparison of the "nature boys" Dickon and Hareton does not take into consideration the important ways in which these characters differ, ways that reverberate throughout the plots of the novels. Dickon belongs to what could be called the rural poor; his mother, Mrs. Sowerby has "four places to put every penny."⁵ Dickon is clearly Mary and Colin's social inferior, although his knowledge of the ways of nature also make him, within the boundaries of the unkempt garden, a knowledgeable and respected authority. However, though Dickon is a likeable character—many readers and critics in fact find him much more appealing than Colin—

his class identity remains in tact throughout the novel, leading to the diminution of his role towards the end of the narrative. At the end of the novel, when Colin triumphantly meets his father, restored to full health, he declares proudly, "It's *my* garden now [...] Dickon and my cousin have made it come alive."⁶ Colin implies, nor does Burnett dispute elsewhere, that Dickon and the unnamed Mary have served and worked for Colin, but that Colin is, by virtue of his social class, the natural lord of the manor. Dickon's role in the second half of the novel becomes less important once Colin's health renders him inessential. In his essay on class in *The Secret Garden*, Jerry Phillips, after analyzing Dickon's role as Wordsworthian child of nature, concludes that

Far from being an independent spiritual hero, Dickon is a creature of a ruling elite fantasy, a secret desire of the more reactionary face of the British class system—a rank domestic subaltern. No master could ever find Dickon wanting; the 'common cottage boy' is the perfect trusty retainer, a mirror in which a master might find a fair reflection of himself, a prime worthy.⁷

Ultimately, Dickon is important to the narrative primarily in relation to Colin and, less so, to Mary. Moreover, although Burnett's novel is concerned only with her characters' childhood, the reader could assume (in distinction to Catherine and Hareton) that no future romance will take place between Mary and her friend. It is worth noting, in addition, that Colin also overshadows Mary's importance by the novel's end: U. C. Knoepfelmacher writes that Burnett "cedes the garden to her little Adam" and "suddenly becomes more interested in Colin's silly push-ups and acts of physical prowess than in Mary's instinctual need to actualize the imaginary gardens she had built in India."⁸ In short, the proper class and gender hierarchy has been restored with the return of Archibald Craven to Misselthwaite Manor and the recovery of the son who will one day take over its ownership.

While Burnett romanticizes rural poverty through figures like Dickon and the crusty but loyal and dependable Ben Weatherstaff, Brontë does not. The young Heathcliff and Hareton's poverty, lack of

education, and hard work are presented as examples of injustice and cruelty: in Heathcliff's case, after Hindley throws the boy out of the home, he "deprived him of the instructions of the curate, and insisted that he should labour out of doors instead, compelling him to do so, as hard as any other lad on the farm."⁹ Similarly, Hareton's illiteracy is a source of humiliation, evidence of his degradation by Heathcliff. Rather than admiring his ignorance, Cathy's first attempt at friendship consists of teaching him how to read and, shortly after Cathy and Hareton form their alliance, they together plan "an importation of plants from the Grange" at Wuthering Heights, indicating that they will humanize and "civilize" the now violent and asocial house.¹⁰ While it is true to some extent, then, that Hareton is a "man of the soil," he integrates his fondness for the moors with a very strong desire (seemingly not felt by Dickon) to educate himself by reading classic literature; he is not merely an unreflective "child of nature" (64, 69). Unlike Dickon, who is born into a poor family, Hareton is poor and uneducated only because Heathcliff deviously steals his inheritance. At the end of the novel, rather than being ignored and overshadowed, as Dickon is in *The Secret Garden*, Hareton takes center stage, becoming master of Wuthering Heights and eventually winning back his just birthright. Ultimately, as in Burnett's novel, proper social relations are reestablished at the end of *Wuthering Heights*, since Hareton (as evidenced by the name "Hareton Earnshaw" carved above the door) is its rightful owner. However, while Burnett minimizes Mary's role, Brontë does not erase Cathy at the end of the novel, emphasizing instead the partnership and equality between the two cousins.

In her essay, James assumes that Heathcliff is a Gypsy who speaks Romany, probably basing this assumption on Mrs. Earnshaw's comment that the newly-arrived Heathcliff is a "gipsy brat."¹¹ However, Heathcliff's genealogy is left unclear in the novel. Mr. Linton, for instance, refers to the boy Heathcliff as "that strange acquisition my late neighbour made in his journey to Liverpool—a little Lascar, or an American or Spanish castaway."¹² Later, Nelly comforts Heathcliff by

playfully suggesting that "Who knows, but your father was Emperor of China, and your mother an Indian queen."¹³ The reader knows that Heathcliff is dark and evidently not of Anglo descent; however, other than that, Brontë does not reveal his parentage. Perhaps an Irish immigrant, perhaps Creole or Spanish, Heathcliff's ambivalent ethnicity makes him from the outset of the novel a marginal figure in the Yorkshire Moors, immediately hated by the Earnshaw family even before he reveals, or develops, his personality.¹⁴ James claims that "Both [Mary and Heathcliff] speak words the locals cannot understand—Heathcliff, Romany and Mary, Hindi—although Mary has the advantage of speaking English as well" (62-63). Besides the fact that the reader does not know whether Heathcliff is initially speaking Romany or some other language, or merely speaking incomprehensibly (Nelly mentions only that he "repeated over and over again some gibberish that nobody could understand"), Heathcliff does speak English.¹⁵ Brontë notes that only "a few days afterwards," Heathcliff and Catherine are "now very thick," and although Heathcliff "said precious little," Nelly notes that he generally tells the truth.¹⁶ Finally, in terms of Heathcliff's character, James mentions that his "ungovernable passions" initiate the action in *Wuthering Heights*. This, too, seems to be a misreading of Heathcliff's character. While I agree wholeheartedly with James's reading of Heathcliff as destructive and violent (a reading that wisely counters earlier romanticized and overly-sympathetic readings of his character) Heathcliff's emotions are not wholly "ungovernable." Rather, from childhood, he displays a remarkable control over his emotions that Catherine and Mary do not. For example, shortly after he arrives, he reveals both his stoicism—"he would stand Hindley's blows without winking or shedding a tear, and my pinches moved him only to draw in a breath"—and, more importantly, his capacity for calmly and successfully manipulating others, as when he manages to blackmail Hindley to give him his new colt.¹⁷ I would contrast Heathcliff's behavior most clearly with Mary's. Mary has far less self-control than Heathcliff, for while Heathcliff is patient and quiet even in illness, Mary screams, throws temper

tantrums, and slaps servants' faces. In part, again, the differences in Heathcliff's and Mary's behaviors stem from power dynamics: though both children are outsiders, as James observes, Heathcliff is essentially a poor servant while Mary is kin to the Cravens and waited upon by servants. To conflate Heathcliff's and Mary's situations thus ignores some important differences in their social contexts.

James has written a fascinating essay that links two beloved books set in the Yorkshire moors. Readers of both texts will learn much from her research, and will better understand Burnett's children's novel when they consider it next to Brontë's text. Just as the ghost of Lillias calls Archibald Craven back to the garden in *The Secret Garden*, so does Burnett call her reader back to *Wuthering Heights*, asking us to revisit themes, images, and tropes that Brontë developed so masterfully in her novel.

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NOTES

¹Anna Krugovoy Silver, "Domesticating Brontë's Moors: Motherhood in *The Secret Garden*," *The Lion and the Unicorn: A Critical Journal of Children's Literature* 21.2 (1997): 193-203. For other literary influences on Burnett, see Juliet Dusinger, *Alice to the Lighthouse* (London: Macmillan P, 1997). I would also recommend the following essay: Elizabeth Lennox Keyser, "'Quite Contrary': Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*," *Children's Literature* 11 (1983): 1-13.

²James 61.

³See Phyllis Bixler, "Gardens, Houses, and Nurturant Power in *The Secret Garden*," *Romanticism and Children's Literature in Nineteenth-Century England*, ed. James Holt McGavran (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1991) 208-24. Bixler also discusses other literary influences on Burnett, including Dickens.

⁴Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (Oxford: OUP, 1995) 102.

⁵Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden* (New York: Apple, n.d.) 71.

⁶Burnett 199; emphasis mine.

⁷Jerry Phillips, "The Mem Sahib, the Worthy, the Rajah and His Minions: Some Reflections on the Class Politics of *The Secret Garden*," *The Lion and the Unicorn: A Critical Journal of Children's Literature* 17.2 (1993): 183-84.

⁸U. C. Knoepfelmacher, "Little Girls Without Their Curls: Female Aggression in Victorian Children's Literature," *Children's Literature* 11 (1983): 24-25.

⁹Brontë 44.

¹⁰Brontë 317. For good discussions, see Anita Levy, *Other Women* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991) and Linda Peterson, "A Critical History of *Wuthering Heights*," *Wuthering Heights: Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Linda Peterson (Boston: St. Martin's P, 1992).

¹¹Brontë 35.

¹²Brontë 48.

¹³Brontë 56.

¹⁴Maggie Berg, *Wuthering Heights: The Writing in the Margin* (New York: Twayne, 1996) 6.

¹⁵Brontë 35.

¹⁶Brontë 36.

¹⁷Brontë 36.