

Love in the Brontës

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Lord David Cecil calls Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) "the one perfect work of art amid all the vast varied canvasses of Victorian fiction" (181); Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), incredibly popular in the nineteenth century, provides the quintessential romantic novel with many writers taking off from it: Elizabeth Barrett Browning in *Aurora Leigh* (1857), Victoria Holt in *Mistress of Mellyn* (1960), Jean Rhys in *The Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Patricia Beer in *Reader I Married Him* (1974), Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* are widely read and taught. Like thousands of other teenage girls, I read them before I finished high school and in so doing learned to desire romantic love. This spring I chose Anne Brontë's lesser-known *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) as a text in a graduate course in Victorian Literature, supposing most of the students would already have read *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. Happily, I discovered that my students were delighted with Anne's novel. Of course Brontë scholars know the novel, but it lacks the readership of *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. I believe that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has been greatly undervalued and that it is time to bring it to scholars' attention. The crux of the matter is the treatment of romantic love. A part of the same household, the three sisters watched their brother Branwell fall into degradation and die young. Branwell, after being dismissed from his position as a tutor, abused alcohol and opium and died in 1848 at the age of thirty-one. Emily

and Charlotte put fantasies about romantic love into their famous novels, but Emily in her poetry and Charlotte in *Shirley* (1859), *Villette* (1853), and *The Professor* (1857) show that they did not believe those fantasies. Anne depicts a sensible love in her lesser known work *Agnes Grey*, but in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* she paints a love gone sour and the waste of debauchery, something all three of the women had seen firsthand. The picture of love as overwhelming passion in *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* is not true to life; neither is it true to the Brontë's own view of reality.

As this is a conference on Christianity and Literature, and the guide for living successfully of Christians is the Bible, a look at its treatment of erotic love is in order. After all, Jesus says in John 10:10, "The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." The Bible treats marriage, lust, sex, adultery, incest, and rape, frowning on the type of love we find in novels such as *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, showing that passion leads to death. Amnon pants after his half-sister Tamar, rapes her, and then is murdered by her brother Absalom. David sees Bathsheba bathing and sends for her, but then must murder her husband. Shechem's passion for Dinah leads to rape and the death of his entire community. Sounding something like falling in love at first sight is Samson's seeing the woman of Timnath and demanding that his parents get her for him, but the wedding festivities end in death as the young woman betrays him by worming the answer to his riddle out of him and telling it to his enemies. In retaliation Samson slays thirty Philistines to obtain the suits of clothing needed because he loses the wager. Samson's submission to Delilah, who is apparently a prostitute, has even more disastrous consequences. The one real love story in the Old Testament is that of Jacob, who loves so much that he "served seven years for Rachel and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he

had to her” (Gen. 29.20). Of course, Laban tricks his wily nephew, giving him Leah instead, so Jacob works another seven years for Rachel (but gets her after Leah’s first week). God does not honor Jacob’s favoritism of Leah over Rachel as verse 31 says, “And when the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren.”

On the side of life, Ruth, following Naomi’s advice, offers herself to Boaz, who makes an honest woman of her because he admires her character. Through Obed they are in the lineage of Christ. Hosea’s love for Gomer seems an allegory of Christ’s forgiving love for man rather than a love story. Isaac is comforted by Rebecca and comes to love her after his father’s servant finds her and brings her home. Proverbs 5 warns a man to be ravished with his wife’s love and not that of a stranger, and Song of Solomon presents a metaphorically rich picture of physical desire (somewhat nullified by the reader’s awareness that Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines). The closest the New Testament comes to treating the love a man has for a woman is in comparison with Christ. Paul says “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it. . . . So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church” (Eph. 5.25, 28-29). This seems an admonition for husbands to take care of their wives and not harm them rather than a statement on romantic love. In the Bible only Jacob has a love such as is commonplace in plays, novels, and movies of the last five hundred years, and we don’t find God approving of his passion.

As C. S. Lewis points out in *The Allegory of Love*, “the coming of Christianity did not result in any deepening or idealizing of the conception of love” (8), yet our literature, especially popular literature and film, is full of romantic love. Lewis maintains that our idea of “happiness [is] grounded on successful romantic love” (4). He finds our current view of passionate love

stemming from courtly love, which developed in Languedoc in Southern France in the eleventh century (2). Denis de Rougement, also starting with courtly love, shows convincingly in *Love in the Western World* that “passion means suffering”; “Romance only comes into existence where love is fatal, frowned upon and doomed by life itself” (15). Courtly love is of necessity adulterous because a love consummated loses its extreme passion, the intense emotion being based on longing for the unavailable: “The spontaneous ardour of a love crowned and not thwarted is essentially of short duration. It is a flare-up doomed not to survive the effulgence of its fulfillment” (45). It is thus antithetical to marriage. A life-giving love (agape) considers the needs of the spouse, is a love of one’s neighbor, while a passion (eros) is a death-wish (70-71).

Still passion, full fledged, is what we get from two of these curate’s daughters. *Wuthering Heights* is Emily’s only novel, so we have just that and her poetry to guess what she really wanted to say about romantic love. Anne Williams says the theme of *Wuthering Heights* is “the paradoxical power of human love to create a heaven or hell of earthly experience” (107). Peter Miles gives it a place in the Western tradition:

That visual myth of *Wuthering Heights*, embodied in those yearning figures on the moors, has entered twentieth-century popular memory not only as shorthand for Emily Brontë’s novel, but as a sign for romantic love itself—for a love which survives all difficulties and which through its strength and vision, and through the overriding value accorded it by the protagonists, transcends time and space to testify to the spiritual potential of humanity. (10)

This novel provides a myth for young men and women teaching that love is everything. Catherine Earnshaw says that Heathcliff is her very soul; he spends his entire adult life grieving for her after she dies in childbirth and seeking revenge against her brother and her husband for

keeping them apart. His obsession leads him to seek Catherine's ghost and to starve himself to death to be joined to her in the grave. The ending of the novel suggests that their spirits wander the heath together after both are in the grave. Such a view of love is indeed touching, but it is a sick obsession. Healthy people get over the loss of a love, especially a young unconsummated first love.

Emily shows though in her poetry that she does not truly subscribe to such notions of romantic love. She has one speaker say (in a poem beginning "I am the only being whose doom") that sometimes she "longed for one to love me here," but troubles have lessened those feelings, "And they have died so long ago, / I hardly now believe they were" (36). In another (a poem beginning "All day I've toiled, but not with pain") the speaker is grateful for the experience of "eventide" and "winter" that has brought peace and has taught her to "turn away from passion's call" (35-36). A third says, "Love I laugh to scorn" (in the poem beginning "Riches I hold in light esteem," 163). Emily apparently doesn't subscribe to the overwhelming passion she describes so movingly in *Wuthering Heights*.

Passion is also the key to *Jane Eyre*. Cecil says that "The final—and the pre-eminent—characteristic of [Charlotte's] personality is its passion" (120). He continues, "Love, indeed, is the central theme of her stories, for it was inevitably the main preoccupation of so passionate a temperament" (127). *Jane Eyre* contrasts the hot passion of Rochester with the cold obsession of St. John Rivers. Certainly St. John, ambitious for martyrdom as a missionary to India, would make a poor husband because he wants only someone he can force to his will. Still one wonders if Jean Rhys (in *The Wide Sargasso Sea*) has not hit upon something in suggesting that Rochester has driven his wife Bertha Mason crazy. Though Bertha, as a representative of unbridled passion,

is not someone to emulate, neither is Rochester. Charlotte must realize the overbalance of passion in his character as she disempowers him before she lets Jane marry him.

Jane Eyre is not Charlotte's only word on love, however. Her next published novel is *Shirley* (1849), which the narrator declares on the first page is not a novel about passion:

If you think, from this prelude, that anything like a romance is preparing for you, reader, you never were more mistaken. . . . Do you expect passion, and stimulus, and melodrama? Calm your expectations; reduce them to a lowly standard.

Something real, cool, and solid, lies before you; something unromantic as Monday morning, when all who have work wake with the consciousness that they must rise and betake themselves thereto. (7)

The novel itself somewhat belies the warning for Caroline Helstone, from whose vantage point most of the novel is seen, nearly dies of unrequited love. When she believes Robert Moore loves someone else, she says, "I *have* loved, *do* love, and *must* love him. I would be his wife, if I could; as I cannot, I must go where I shall never see him. There is but one alternative—to cleave to him as if I were a part of him, or to be sundered from him wide as the two poles of a sphere" (292-93). Normal people have other alternatives, such as learning to love someone else. At one point Shirley, of the novel's title, speaks of love as "living fire, seraph-brought from a divine altar" (357). But the novel presents another view through the lips of Caroline's mother Mrs. Pryor, who says of love,

My dear—it is very bitter. It is said to be strong—strong as death! Most of the cheats of existence are strong. As to their sweetness—nothing is so transitory: its date is a moment,—the twinkling of an eye: the sting remains for ever: it may

perish with the dawn of eternity, but it tortures through time into its deepest night.

(427)

Talking about the treatment of love in novels. Mrs. Pryor judges them: “They are not like reality: they show you only the green tempting surface of the marsh, and give not one faithful or truthful hint of the slough underneath” (427). Though Charlotte joins the two pairs of lovers at the end, the comments she puts in the mouth of Mrs. Pryor indicate she is aware that romantic love such as that in *Jane Eyre* is not life.

In her other two novels Charlotte also rejects passionate love. In *Villette* she kills off Lucy Snowe’s unromantic intended on the last page. In *The Professor*, the hero says of his wife: “It is true Frances’ mental points had been the first to interest me and they still retained the strongest hold on my preference, but I liked the graces of her person too” (227). Their love begins in mutuality of thought rather than passionate and sudden attraction. Such a relationship has more to do with life than the overwhelming passion of Jane and Rochester. Stevie Davies explains, referring to the Angrian tales Charlotte as a girl created with Branwell, “that the tiny seed of fantasy planted in childhood has become a fruitful and sustaining myth” Charlotte can cheer herself with in adulthood. The problem is, however, “that she did not really believe it” (14).

Even from the beginning Anne, unlike her sisters, does not mislead young readers. Her first novel, *Agnes Grey*, once called “the most ‘perfect prose narrative in English letters’” (George Moore, quoted in Jackson 198), presents another governess like *Jane Eyre*, but this one is not overwhelmed with passion. She ends up marrying the man she loves at the end of the novel though theirs is not an overwhelming love at first sight but a growth of mutual esteem and respect. Agnes and Edward Weston both visit the poor and sick in their neighborhood and

behave with self-control and decorum, but Weston says nothing to Agnes of his feelings until he can support a wife. He proposes to the one who “will suit me for a companion” (819).

In her second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne presents the negative side of her proposition. Her heroine, Helen Huntingdon, falls in love with and marries a dissolute young man, whom she plans to reform with her love, but she is forced to flee his abuse with her four-year-old son. Helen is warned by her aunt of Arthur’s character; but determined to follow her feelings, she marries Arthur and lives to rue the day as he brings his mistress into the house, deprives her of freedom, takes her money, and scornfully teaches their son to love wine. The novel employs a frame with a second love, much closer to the romantic ideal, perhaps intended to appeal to readers and sell the book, but the central portion, the heart of the novel, presents a realistic picture of unwise love. Marianne Thormählen writes that “the passion of love between man and woman is the core of the novel” but adds that “Happiness in love is associated with determined resistance to forces that militate against the laws of God, whereas the flouting of divine decrees breeds misery” (153-54). Like *Agnes Grey*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* avoids espousing as normal, healthy behavior a passionate love at first sight that the lover cannot live without.

Fiction, even if a fairy tale or a fable, presents a view of human life. An unspoken assumption is that the characters represent the human condition, that the reader might learn vicariously from following their paths. Catherine Earnshaw and Jane Eyre represent teenage girls longing for a mate after reaching sexual maturity. In our society teenagers are brainwashed to believe love is the fantastic high, the uncontrollable feeling, the eternal flame without which life is dull and unfulfilled. Needing its newly mature to pair up, committing to permanent liaisons that produce and raise offspring, our society uses novels such as *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane*

Eyre, movies, and television to teach youth that being in love is essential to happiness and wellbeing. Unfortunately, once married, people so acculturated feel that if they fall out of love, divorce is justified. The problem is that *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* present infatuation as real love. Such intense passion cannot be maintained, and therefore divorce runs rampant in our society. According to Debra Goodlett, the sort of love in *Wuthering Heights* is not healthy: “A healthy love affair demands well-balanced, mature individuals who have the capacity to want the best for the other partner. Catherine and Heathcliff do not display these qualities. Addictive love differs from a healthy attachment by the lover's need to possess the other being, regardless of the effect this might have on the latter.” According to Francine Prose, “there's nothing in the least comforting about a Bronte novel. The love that shatters the peace of "Wuthering Heights" is the enemy of marriage and brings its lovers only undying grief. *Jane Eyre* ends with its heroine united with her Mr. Rochester, but their union has exacted an awful cost.” Charlotte and Emily, though apparently they were writing romantic novels to sell and make money, bear some of the responsibility for the erroneous view of love in our society, but Anne corrects this error. Agnes Grey and Helen Huntingdon, as representative young women, teach by example that one needs responsibly to choose a suitable companion with whom to live out one's days. Teenage girls need to read *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* instead of *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* to learn about love. With a more realistic view, they wouldn't be so ready to bail out of a marriage when the infatuation wears thin. After all, infatuation is longing for what a person does not have. Once a marriage is consummated, the infatuation is doomed to extinction because one no longer longs for what one possesses.

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