

THE HUMAN-ANIMAL RELATIONSHIP

in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

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Many of the assumptions about animal-human boundaries and relationships, pets and pet-keeping, or animal cruelty that we take for granted today in North American society took shape in the nineteenth century, in Victorian Britain. Erika Woolgar draws adeptly on the rapidly growing body of scholarship on this subject in her analysis of the use of dogs and canine imagery in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Erika principally focuses, as Lisa Surridge and several critics do, on cruelty to dogs as a metaphor for obliquely representing violence against women and children in each novel, whether it be Heathcliff hanging a spaniel in *Wuthering Heights* or Huntingdon hurling a book at one in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. A great strength of Erika's essay, however, is that she very capably situates this analysis within a more multi-faceted consideration of differing types of animal-human relationships in the two novels, in the process posing thought-provoking questions about the contrasting artistic visions of Emily and Anne.

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Animals, and particularly dogs, serve a number of thematic functions in Emily and Anne Brontë's novels *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of*

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Wildfell Hall. Both Brontës use canine imagery to reveal and emphasize aspects of their characters and to question the nature of the human-animal relationship, drawing attention to the idea that violence toward animals signifies a tendency toward violence against women and children. An acute awareness of the changing Victorian sentiments toward animals informs their critiques of society's attitudes toward the rights and status of women. Victorian England observed a rise in pet-keeping and a growing public interest in issues of animal welfare and domestic violence (McDonnell 18; Kreilkamp 89; Surrige, "Dogs" 2; Surrige, "Animals" 166). The literature of the time reflects this growing awareness, with writers like Anne and Emily Brontë reacting to sentimentalism, animal cruelty, pet ownership, and the nature of the human-animal bond in their novels. Dogs, as a result of their rapidly evolving role in Victorian households, became a particularly rich subject through which to explore these issues, because "pawing at the edges of both nature and culture, dogs push the limits of the animal/human divide" (McDonnell 33).

In her discussion of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's relationship with her dog, Flush, Jennifer McDonnell points to the difference between the humanized pets like Flush and animalized portrayals of working dogs

developing in Victorian society (31). This distinction between “curs” and lapdogs is an issue raised in *Wuthering Heights* (E. Brontë 41). As Lisa Surridge points out, the “status of animals – as working beasts, prey or pets – underscores the class and property differences between the two houses” (“Animals” 166). Similarly, in Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the role of animals is related to the social status of their owners: Huntingdon has pets and hunting dogs (as opposed to working dogs), which associate him with the aristocratic class. Gilbert, on the other hand, representing the rising middle-class gentleman, has a dog who, as Gilbert’s ever-present and loyal companion, challenges the division of canines into house-pets and working animals. In both novels, dogs play an important role in driving the development of the plot, the characters, the relationships between characters, and their associations with power and violence.

Anne Brontë’s portrayal of animals in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has been seen as more sentimental than Emily’s in *Wuthering Heights*. Surridge argues that Anne sees “kindness to animals as a crucial moral trait” on the basis of the “anthropomorphic idea that the treatment of animals served to predict social responsibility in human relationships,” while Emily breaks away from this

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“Victorian sentimentality concerning animals” (“Animals” 161-62). Nevertheless, while Emily certainly challenges the traditional human-animal hierarchy and the legitimacy of “ownership,” she too participates in the discourse examining the treatment of animals with regard to human relationships, often blurring the line between human and animal.

Anne Brontë demonstrates her sentimental attitude toward pets in her portrayal of Sancho, Gilbert’s “beautiful black and white setter” (A. Brontë 52). While dogs and dog imagery are more pervasive in Emily’s novel, Sancho’s role in Gilbert’s life is explored in far greater and more affectionate detail than the roles of dogs in *Wuthering Heights*. Sancho not only serves a practical purpose - in befriending little Arthur and thus providing an opportunity for Gilbert to approach and become acquainted with Helen - but he also serves to illustrate the developing relationship between humans and animals in a positive light. Arthur’s natural, childlike affinity for dogs leads to the incident when Helen and Gilbert first meet (52). In fact, it is primarily because of Arthur’s pleasure in Sancho’s company that Helen (at least initially) continues to tolerate Gilbert’s presence (73). Anne develops the relationship between little Arthur and Sancho in great detail, even to

the point of placing Sancho among the ranks of Arthur's human friends: Arthur "did not like being in the carriage with strangers, while all his four friends, Mamma, and Sancho, and Mr. Markham and Miss Millward, were on foot" (82-83). Even Gilbert's attempts to separate Sancho from the human sphere are sentimental, referring to Sancho as a "good-natured animal" (52). Pets' roles in the human-animal dichotomy are explored in Sancho's character, blurred by anthropomorphic descriptions, little Arthur's friendship with the dogs, and even his concern for the "welfare of [his own dog's] father Sancho" at the end of the novel (400). Sancho's elevation to the status of man's *friend*, his breaking down of the human-animal divide, and his role in facilitating Gilbert's friendships with Helen and Arthur are reflected, but also challenged, in the portrayal of dogs in *Wuthering Heights*. In *Wuthering Heights*, dogs facilitate human interaction¹² and are used to explore the ways domesticated animals challenge the hierarchy of the human-animal relationship.

Throughout her novel, Emily Brontë repeatedly draws connections between Heathcliff and animals, specifically

¹² Lockwood is detained at the Heights (E. Brontë 49), Cathy is detained at the Grange (75-77), and young Cathy discovers the Heights (199) as a result of "canine intervention."

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dogs. Not only does Heathcliff keep dogs for hunting and security, but his character and nature are also developed as explicitly animalistic, savage, and dog-like. Isabella's question, "Is Mr. Heathcliff a man?" resonates throughout the entire novel (E. Brontë 149). For instance, Heathcliff is continually on the receiving end of dehumanizing appraisals of his character as "fierce, pitiless [and] wolfish" (121).¹³ When we are first introduced to Heathcliff, Lockwood notes his "under-bred pride" (39) and how he grows "in unison" (40) with the bitch pointer, Juno - introducing us to what Ivan Kreilkamp calls the "insistent animalization of Heathcliff" (97). Further on, when Nelly narrates Heathcliff's arrival at the Heights, she sees him as "virtually indistinguishable from an animal" (Tytler 125). Not only is he given a single name, like a dog, but Nelly also repeatedly refers to him as an "it" when he arrives (E. Brontë 65-66). Mr. Earnshaw finds Heathcliff "starving, and houseless, and as good as dumb, in the streets of Liverpool" (65), a state reminiscent of the Victorian "lost dog" trope (Kreilkamp 99).¹⁴ This connection is further

¹³ In other examples of his animalistic behaviour or appearance, he is referred to as a "brute" (E. Brontë 84, 90), "ferocious" (115, 174, 184, 255), and "savage" (175, 311).

¹⁴ Kreilkamp explains that the lost pet represents an opportunity for human characters to "demonstrate their sympathy and kindness, or

underscored by Hindley's cruel treatment of Heathcliff and his derogatory reference to him as a "dog" (E. Brontë 67).

In their final meeting and in his behaviour after Cathy's death, Heathcliff is further animalized. When Cathy swoons, Nelly explains that, as she approached to help, "he gnashed at [her], and foamed like a mad dog . . . [She] did not feel as if [she] were in the company of a creature of [her] own species" (E. Brontë 170). He loyally remains outside in the garden all night and, in his agony over her death, "dashe[s] his head against the knotted trunk; and, lifting his eyes, howl[s] not like a man, but like a savage beast being goaded to death with knives and spears" (175). Isabella, still maintaining that Heathcliff is "not a human being" (179), taunts, "Heathcliff, if I were you, I'd go stretch myself over her grave, and die like a faithful dog" (182). This image of Heathcliff as a loyal, mourning dog is effective because, as David Clark notes, "we have already become accustomed to seeing the characters defined through a multitude of references to dogs right from the beginning" (99). Heathcliff, like the Victorian pet, challenges the neat divide between humans and animals and, as Kreilkamp points out, "Heathcliff becomes

lack of those qualities" (99). In this way, Emily moralizes characters' reactions to Heathcliff.

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inhuman both in his own animality and in his cruelty to animals” (105).

Cruelty toward animals is particularly prevalent in *Wuthering Heights*, where dominant male figures, Heathcliff and Hindley, are associated with animal abuse.¹⁵ As Emily carefully points out, however, animal abuse is not limited to the realm of the savage. For example, the scene in which Isabella and Edgar fight over the lapdog challenges the “civilized’ habit of pet-keeping” (Surridge, “Animals” 167), and exposes the Lintons as selfish, pampered, and “petted” (E. Brontë 75). According to Surridge, *Wuthering Heights* “anatomizes the social habit of pet-keeping, laying this bare as a mechanism for enacting power – the power of owner over property, and by extension, of ownership or control in the human sphere” (“Animals” 163). *Wuthering Heights* dissects the uncomfortable element of domination inherent in domestication and ownership and, like *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, relates it to the condition of women and children, over whom a man also had exclusive legal control.

¹⁵ For example, we see Heathcliff kicking Juno (E. Brontë 40), hanging Isabella’s spaniel (143), we hear of his trapping the lapwings (137), and how he strikes dogs and horses “hard” (265). We also hear of Hindley abusing Throtter (157).

Hindley's treatment of Nelly and young Hareton in his drunken rage conflates the bodies of women and children with the idea of the Victorian pet. Hindley's treatment of Nelly, "pulling [her] back by the skin of [her] neck, like a dog" illustrates the connection between animal and human ownership (E. Brontë 95). As Surridge explains,

by implication, then the conflation of dogs' bodies with women's bodies . . . invites the readers to reflect on a man's 'ownership' or control over his spouse, an issue which was crucial in the legal arguments concerning the husband's traditional right to confine and/or physically discipline his wife. ("Dogs"⁴)

Hareton, too, is treated like an animal when Hindley, the tyrannical master of the house, attempts to "crop" his ears like a dog (E. Brontë 95). The treatment Hareton receives from his father is reminiscent of the precarious position occupied by Victorian house-pets, "for in [Hindley's fondness] he ran a chance of being squeezed and kissed to death, and in [Hindley's rage] of being flung into the fire, or dashed against the wall" (95). This passage recalls not only Isabella and Edgar's treatment of the "little dog" (75) and the "delicate lady, who has murdered a half-dozen lapdogs through pure affection" in Emily Brontë's essay, "The Cat" (314), but also the episodes of violence toward

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animals and humans in both novels, and the Victorian “discourse of animal suffering and of cruelty to animals” (Kreilkamp 89).

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, we witness a similar incident of direct violence by Huntingdon against his cocker spaniel, Dash, and of indirect violence against his wife, Helen. Huntingdon is lying down on the couch after taking “an unusual quantity of wine” when

his favourite cocker, Dash . . . took the liberty of jumping upon him and beginning to lick his face. He struck it off with a smart blow; and the poor dog squeaked, and ran cowering back to [Helen]. When he woke up half an hour after, he called it to him again; but Dash only looked sheepish and wagged the tip of his tail. He called again, more sharply, but Dash only clung closer to [Helen], and licked [her] hand as if imploring protection. Enraged at this, his master snatched up a heavy book and hurled it at its head. (A. Brontë 196)

This scene exemplifies what Surridge calls “the deflection of marital violence from the body of the woman onto the body of a domestic animal” (“Dogs” 4). While marital violence was becoming a more prominent social issue, it remained a contentious topic, unacceptable for literary discussion. Instead, Victorian authors depicted the violence of a husband toward animals, which they would use to suggest similar violence toward his wife (Kreilkamp 105;

SurrIDGE, “Dogs” 4). When the book Huntingdon throws at Dash grazes Helen’s hand, she makes this connection explicit for the reader by wondering if, “perhaps, it was intended for [her]” (A. Brontë 196). Huntingdon’s behaviour, “alternately petting, and teasing, and abusing his dogs,” is reminiscent of his treatment of Helen throughout their marriage, reinforcing the suggestion that he is, under the layers of narrative, physically abusive toward her (196).

Anne Brontë’s decision to use a spaniel to represent Helen is significant because of the breed’s association with women in popular sayings and literature. As SurrIDGE notes, “spaniels have traditionally been associated with the ‘feminine’ qualities of gentleness, submission, subservience – and a willingness to be beaten” (“Dogs” 6). It is important to recognize, however, that Dash’s behaviour, while meek and pitiful, indicates his *unwillingness* to be beaten. Helen stands up for the dog and, in this way, Anne delicately protests the violence and abuse that goes on behind closed doors. In her use of a spaniel, Anne provides a recognizable symbol for marital violence, which serves to make the connections between physical abuse and Helen’s anecdote unambiguous to her readers.

Similarly, Heathcliff’s violence toward Isabella throughout the novel manifests itself in his hanging of her

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spaniel. Clark explains, “As Isabella has been constantly identified with her lapdogs, the reader has no difficulty in relating Heathcliff’s astonishingly cruel treatment of Isabella’s dog, Fanny, to what will be his treatment of the hapless Isabella” (97). Fanny is discovered by Nelly hanging from a “bridle hook” on the side of the road, “suspended to a handkerchief, and nearly at its last gasp” (E. Brontë 143). Unlike the sentimental, anthropomorphic language used by Anne to describe Dash’s response, designed to incite a moral or emotional reaction in the reader,¹⁶ Emily’s scenes of violence toward animals, while equally suggestive, are given to us from the position of a “cool spectator” (168).¹⁷ Nelly’s response does not betray any feelings for the dog besides wondering “how it could have got out there, and what mischievous person had treated it so” (143). Instead, Nelly is set up as an observer against whom we can measure our own emotional response to the incident.

¹⁶ Consider Anne’s use of evocative language such as “the *poor* dog squeaked,” “[Dash] licked my hand as if *imploping protection*,” and “the *poor* dog set up a *piteous* outcry” (A. Brontë 120, emphases added).

¹⁷ Kreilkamp also sees Nelly Dean as a “cool spectator,” not “sufficiently sympathetic” in her appraisal of Heathcliff’s suffering (in the final meeting between Heathcliff and Cathy), arguing that it allows us to “distinguish ourselves as being in that category of affective readers who shrink from brutality and suffering” (104).

Dogs in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* not only serve to reflect and delineate characters' natures and behaviours, but are also central to both novels' explorations of the nature of the human-animal relationship. In *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff's association with dogs and his cruel treatment of and violence toward animals, women, and children expose pet and animal ownership "as a mechanism for enacting power" (Surrige, "Animals" 162). In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Gilbert's treatment of Sancho places him in opposition to Huntingdon's violence against his spaniel, Dash, which echoes Heathcliff and Hindley's violence toward both animals and their dependants. By connecting the treatment of women with the treatment of animals, Emily and Anne Brontë critically engage in Victorian debates about pet ownership and society's attitude toward women.

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