

IMAGES OF RACE AND THE INFLUENCE OF ABOLITION
IN *JANE EYRE* AND *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*

by

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ABSTRACT

Charlotte and Emily Brontë's masterpieces, *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, respectively, reflect the sisters' life-long investment in the abolitionist movement. Despite being written over a decade post-abolition, the novels' retrospective settings lend weight to the sisters' usage of distinctive language associated with the rise of slavery in the British West Indies and the subsequent push for its elimination. This language, largely centered around the characters of Bertha Mason and Heathcliff, seems to support an antislavery stance on the part of the Brontë sisters. A conflict arises, however, when considering that Bertha and Heathcliff are racially-Othered within the texts, and their aggressive and immoral behavior does nothing to redeem or flatter their characters. Indeed, the language in both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* leave the novels supporting the antislavery discourse of the early nineteenth century while also unsympathetically portraying stereotypical and derogatory representations of racially-Othered individuals. The Brontës' antislavery sentiments, it seems, are not necessarily free of racial prejudice, but neither is the abolitionist rhetoric that influenced the novels. This project draws upon historical context to trace the major developments in abolition into the nineteenth century, including various sides of the debate and how rural areas throughout England influenced how the movement came to be organized on a national level. Furthermore, biographical information on the Brontës helps contextualize their personal involvement in the abolitionist movement, while an analysis of select works from their juvenilia shows how their knowledge of the movement inspired their writings from an early age. This background lays the foundation for a reading of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* that details how the conflicting sentiments of these novels are

ultimately indicative of Charlotte and Emily Brontë's awareness and participation in the abolitionist movement.

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1. INTRODUCTION

An article entitled “The Missions of Christianity,” published in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* in July 1828, states that “To abolish slavery at once, or even to abolish it at all, until the negroes are fit for freedom, would be to expose the whole white population to massacre, and throw the negroes themselves into a state of wretchedness, bloodshed, and incurable ignorance that no rational man...can contemplate without abhorrence” (34). As unsettling as this language must be to modern readers, this vehement pre-abolition attitude concerning the savagery of African slaves is not unique to this article. This same sort of language shows in up in a wide variety of nineteenth-century publications, including novels that take place during the period when slavery and abolition were hotly debated topics throughout Britain and its colonies.

Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and her sister Emily’s *Wuthering Heights* are two such novels. Though written in the 1840s, the primary setting of the narratives is around twenty to thirty years earlier, before abolition was enacted by Parliament. This places the novels in the middle of the debate over slavery and allows them to actively participate in the discourse surrounding that debate, which includes an awareness of the fight for abolition throughout the British territories. Both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* are filled with references to these territories that seem to reflect the novels’, and their authors’, intense curiosity and concern with Britain’s relationship to its colonies and to the institution of slavery. The colonial imagery used throughout the novels is reminiscent of abolitionism, yet continues in a tradition of derogatory representations of enslaved African people, showing that being pro-abolition is not the same as being pro-slave. I argue that two important figures from the novels, Bertha Mason and

Heathcliff, read as racially other, show how the novels' interaction with antislavery sentiments and the use of still-racist language is a literary example of Charlotte and Emily Brontë's participation in the discourse surrounding the abolitionist movement of nineteenth-century Britain.

Even though there is nearly 175 years worth of criticism surrounding the Brontë sisters, scholarship primarily concerning the colonial influence in their novels, specifically *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* did not really start to gain traction until the last quarter of mid-twentieth century. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's well-known *The Madwoman in the Attic*, published in 1979 and notably referring to Bertha Mason, was arguably the first in a long line of critical texts to show an interest in the underlying racial or colonial elements of the Brontë novels.

Madwoman dedicates a individual chapter to both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, and though it does a thorough analysis, noting Heathcliff's "foreign swarthinness" and Bertha's place as "Jane's dark double," it ultimately stops short of claiming a connection to colonialism. Six years later, Gayatri Spivak addressed that connection in her article "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," claiming that it is impossible "to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English" (Spivak 243). For Spivak, it was clear that Bertha Mason is a figure meant to represent colonialism. This idea seemed to spawn a whole new critical interest in the Brontë novels, concerned with not only how imperialism was represented in the text, but with how imperialism influenced it.

Following Spivak's influential article, Firdous Azim's *Colonial Rise of the Novel* and Jenny Sharpe's *Allegories of Empire*, both published in 1993, examine the imperialist influence on a wide selection of novels, including *Jane Eyre*. Azim takes a more wide-ranging approach to

the novel by using Charlotte's juvenilia to establish her interest in the British colonial project, noting how the depictions of African characters in the juvenile writings "follows the patterns established in the contemporary colonial discourse" (Azim 118). Azim then uses this background to help establish Bertha's development as a character representative of "the obliteration and obfuscation of the Other woman" (Azim 107). Sharpe, on the other hand, does not take the same time to delve into Charlotte's background. Instead, she spends a significant amount of time discussing how *Jane Eyre* uses African oppression to make a larger statement about the place of women in Victorian England, as well as Bertha's place as an outsider on the grounds of both gender and race. In an important move, Sharpe, unlike others, is careful to note that *Jane Eyre* is a product of its time, arguing that her "reading does not extend to charging Brontë with racism. By contemporary standards, all Victorians would stand accused" (Sharpe 28-29). This line of thinking allows Sharpe to maintain a well-balanced argument that does not feel accusatory, yet provides room for noting the unflattering ways in which the racial other, Bertha Mason, is depicted as "a beast," "a fiend," and "a monster" (Sharpe 45).

Though all three of these authors provide well-informed analysis that draw upon thoroughly historicized readings, the attention given to Charlotte's novel is only a small piece of each critic's larger project. Furthermore, *Wuthering Heights* is essentially ignored. Therein lies the problem with much of the postcolonial criticism of the Brontës' texts; though in recent years scholarship has begun to catch up, paying more attention to the imperial elements in Emily's novel, there still remains a discrepancy between the amount of work done on Charlotte as compared to Emily. Fortunately, the extensive analysis on *Jane Eyre* provides enough information about the sisters and the circumstances of their writing that it can often help inform readings of *Wuthering Heights* as well.

In the broad field of Brontë criticism, there are two texts that particularly influence this thesis. The first is Susan Meyer's *Imperialism at Home*. Published in 1996, this book expands Spivak's argument and focuses on the Victorian tendency to define Englishness by opposing it to colonial subjects, claiming that Bertha specifically is "a representative of the nonwhite races subjected to British imperialism" (Meyer 25-26). Meyer addresses both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* and turns to the Brontë juvenilia to trace the influence of imperialism on their writing from a young age and to analyze how that influence shaped their adult novels. The other essential text is *Imperialism, Reform, and the Making of Englishness in Jane Eyre* (2008) by Sue Thomas. On the whole, Thomas does much of the same thing as Meyer, drawing from both biographical and historical information to inform her argument, and though Thomas primarily focuses in on Charlotte and her novel, she realizes that it is nearly impossible to do a thorough reading of one sister without referencing the other and does not fail to do so. In addition to this, Thomas also is quite explicit about the purpose of her argument, stating that "[she] recognized in *Jane Eyre* a very precise allusion to a particular moment in the history of slave rebellion in Jamaica and of the British campaign for the abolition of slavery" (Thomas 3). Meyer and Thomas' awareness of the Brontë novels' relationship to race and colonialism, as well as their detailed descriptions of Victorian attitudes toward these topics when these novels were written, helped form the critical approach to these novels by emphasizing the cultural implications of colonial language and imagery.

Despite the important work of Meyer and Thomas, as well as the countless other critics who have written about the Brontës, I believe that the field is still missing an important part of the Brontë puzzle. The vast amount of postcolonial approaches to *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* discuss in detail the novels' racial and colonial influence and representation, but many

do so in a way that ignores the impetus for this Victorian concern: the development of the abolitionist movement. In the Brontës' early writings, traces of the colonial project were evident. But as time went on, and the impact of the abolitionist movement became more and more apparent, Charlotte and Emily's writing began to reflect that impact. I argue that, by the time the sisters wrote their respective masterpieces, they were fully participating in a discourse that was primarily influenced by abolitionism. Others, such as Thomas, Meyer, Spivak, and Azim, have gotten close to making this claim, but have ultimately stopped short of it. With this project, I hope to address and re-situate the Brontë novels within a critical conversation that has overlooked the elements of abolition within the texts. Doing so will highlight the Brontës' awareness and familiarity with the movement and will establish that the novels are actively involved and invested in the abolitionist discourse, therefore adding another layer to their literary and cultural significance.

Jane Eyre and *Wuthering Heights* are filled with moments where the text seems to contradict itself. Examining the abolitionist influence and undertones of the novels leads to one of these moments. Postcolonial criticism of these novels is arguably divided into two camps: those who believe the authors are progressive and have an anti-imperialist motive and those who believe that the sisters are guilty of the literary oppression of minorities. Rather than continue in this pattern, I believe that addressing the Brontës' connection with abolitionism can turn the "either/or" approach to a "both/and" approach. As I will later detail, the abolitionist movement was notoriously conflicted, particularly towards the enslaved people it was fighting to free. Thinly-veiled words filled with disingenuous sympathy often led to representations and descriptions of the slaves as pitiful and simple, brutish and savage, and often did nothing to improve the British opinion of the enslaved African race. One such example comes from

William Wilberforce in his “Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade,” where he states that Africans are “uncivilized men” and that Africa is a “[wretched] and [dark]” place, full of “ignorance and superstition” (34, 41, 42). This same type of sentiment can be found in varying degrees in the Brontës’ writing, but rather than condemning these moments for their blatant racism or ignoring them for the sake of the sisters’ imperial critique, I shall connect their at-times uncomfortable racial condescension to their active participation in the abolitionist debate. In explaining how the Brontës were actively engaged with abolitionism, I plan to show how the Brontës were simply reflective of the time and society in which they were living, for better *and* for worse.

To approach the Brontë sisters and their novels, I believe it is of the utmost importance to consider their historical and biographical context. Thomas’ model for reading the Brontë sisters’ novels was particularly influential in the early stages of this project. In her introduction, she discusses “worlding,” a strategy which “connects texts to their ‘local’ and ‘particular’ historical contexts...[locating] and [situating] the historical consciousness of authors and the historical consciousness given to their characters, and to disclose the way in which that consciousness has been shaped” (Thomas 2). It is obvious, then, how necessary it is to read the Brontë sisters in the proper context of the world they were living in. For this project, I use the timeline of historical events surrounding the abolition of slavery in British territories, as well as biographical information about the Brontës themselves, to form the basis of my readings of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. My belief that the sisters were influenced by abolitionist rhetoric is dependent upon tracing the commonalities found between the national debate on slavery, the Brontës’ local exposure to abolitionist materials, and the literary manifestations of that knowledge.

The way in which these novels both appear to take an antislavery stance while continuing to use disparaging language to discuss racially-Othered characters is not an unusual literary occurrence. Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and William Earle Jr.'s *Obi; or The History of Three-Fingered Jack* both use unflattering racial stereotypes to tell the story of an intelligent, righteous, unfairly enslaved African man who unsuccessfully attempts to lead a rebellion against the Caribbean slave masters. Though the main plot of both of these stories seems promising in that there is a recognition of the atrocity of slavery, the novels ultimately end with the humiliation and death of both men and a lasting impression of the beastly savagery associated with African peoples. These novels show that an antislavery opinion is not the same as having a sympathetic reaction to the plight of the enslaved. In this way, *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* fit into the same literary tradition as *Oroonoko* and *Obi*. The usage of abolitionist-related language proves to be a double-edged sword in these novels, creating the idea of abolition without sympathy. This, of course, is not meant to imply that these authors, or abolitionists on the whole, were all heartlessly racist and completely unfeeling. What I mean to suggest, rather, is that while a majority of British subjects may have been "antislavery," they were not necessarily "pro-African." The desire to end slavery was perhaps more driven by a need to civilize and educate the enslaved populations, which is predicated on the superiority of European races, rather than to end the horrendous treatment and violence done unto Africans on the basis of sympathy for human life.

It is into this complicated conversation that Charlotte and Emily Brontë were placing themselves by using overtly racialized language paired with antislavery sentiments. By focusing primarily on the characters of Bertha Mason and Heathcliff, the two racially-ambiguous characters in their respective novels, I show how the conflicting abolitionist sentiments are at

work in the texts. Both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* support the idea of independence and freedom for characters who rebel against oppressive, controlling forces. Yet, Bertha and Heathcliff are certainly portrayed in the way described above, cast as “monstrous” and “heathen,” unable to fit in with civilized, British society. The sympathy that readers feel when they first meet Bertha and Heathcliff mirror abolitionist texts by portraying them as pitiful creatures in need of help, but of course, it is that very notion that undercuts the abolitionist sentiments of the texts. The sympathy relies on Bertha and Heathcliff being “less than” the other characters in the novel; as soon as they assert their own power, whether violently or not, that sympathy diminishes and is replaced by the stereotypical representation of the savage Other.

From their juvenile writings to their adult novels, everything the Brontë sisters wrote was deeply personal, written as a way for them to reflect and react to the complicated world around them; they quite literally put their lives *into* their work. Because of this, it is not enough to simply provide close readings of the novels, not is it enough to read them solely in the context of their historical moment. A successful reading of the Brontës requires a personal approach, one that attempts to reach outside the boundaries of the existing postcolonial criticism by addressing the personal experiences of the Brontës, including the abolitionist influence that they were exposed to their entire lives. To begin to do so, it is necessary to divide the body of this project into three primary parts, beginning broadly with historical context, then narrowing in to biographical information about the Brontë sisters, their juvenile writings, and ultimately to an analysis of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*.

Understanding the political happenings that the Brontë sisters read about in the periodicals is key to understanding the historical events that informed Brontë texts. In chapter one, I discuss the state of the British slave trade and its impact, both economically and socially,

in the early to mid-nineteenth century. This, of course, includes the abolition of slavery in British territories in 1834, an act which the Brontë texts appear to be deeply concerned with. It is here that I will also address both the content and the consequences of the abolitionist rhetoric that both Brontë sisters seem to take an interest in and subsequently include in their novels.

Next, I will turn to the Brontës' childhood, examining the books they read, the people they encountered, and the stories they wrote. Even a cursory glance at the Brontë juvenilia proves their active engagement with the implications of imperialism, implications that are at full force in their later novels. These early traces of imperialism give way to the sisters' later interest in abolition, even though their tendency for stereotypical representations of Africans remains in their mature works. In addition to the numerous periodicals they read, their interest in abolition was also influenced by their familiarity with local people who were involved in the abolitionist movement, as well as those who were part of notorious slave-owning Yorkshire families. This helped the sisters, particularly Emily, to connect their antislavery sentiments to a personal interest in their nearby surroundings. In considering all of these elements, it will be easier to begin to contextualize the personal details that abound in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*.

In the final chapter, I turn to the content of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* to perform a close reading of each text, carefully detailing moments within the novels that connect the information recounted in the first two sections, finally tying the historical and biographical strings to their corresponding points in the texts. In doing so, I hope to show how the Brontës appear to be using their writing to actively participate in the historical moment in which they were living. This participation is evidenced in direct references to locations and people, such as the mention of popular slave-trading city of Liverpool in *Wuthering Heights* where Mr. Earnshaw finds the racially-ambiguous Heathcliff wandering the streets, Bertha Mason's

Jamaican roots, as well as in more subtle moments that seem to reflect the author's personal efforts to process their own feelings. This section will also get to the heart of my argument, which ultimately concerns the complicated relationship between the Brontë sisters and the antislavery rhetoric that held their lifelong interest and influenced their work.

2. HISTORY

In an effort to lay the proper groundwork for positioning the Brontë novels within the abolitionist movement, I will first need to provide a bit of information and history surrounding movement itself. Abolition was a national issue with countless advocates, and though it may initially seem like the argument was two-sided, pro- and antislavery, it was never quite that simple. As we shall see, even within the antislavery movement, there were often conflicting ideas of what abolition should look like. With this bit of historical background, I hope to convey the complicated nature of the argument for abolition and provide details concerning the numerous laws and attempts to end slavery in Britain and its territories.

As far back as the mid-sixteenth century, Britain, as well as other European powers, particularly Spain and Portugal, were actively involved in the transatlantic slave trade. Although the settlement of St. Christopher and Barbados, in 1624 and 1625 respectively, opened the door for Britain to expand its empire and the slave trade into the West Indies, the islands were initially a harbor for those trying to escape the political and religious turmoil of Europe (Williams, “Golden Age” 60). Over time, the Caribbean colonies ceased being a “refuge for poor whites and fortune hunters,” and became the center of the British slave trade, constantly cycling in enslaved Africans and churning out valuable exports such as sugar and tobacco (Williams, “Golden Age” 61).

Despite evidence that slavery was opposed in Britain from the start, that opposition did not occur on a widespread legal level until the early- to mid-1700s. The legality of slavery in England had only been brought into question prior to this time in terms of dealing with runaway

slaves. When English citizens who resided in the West Indies would return to Europe with slaves as servants, many of these slaves, “seeing the freedom and the happiness of servants in this country, and considering what would be their fate on their return to the islands, frequently absconded” (Clarkson 54). In these cases, the owners would advertise for the capture and return of their escaped slaves. However, many of these cases were disregarded in light of the English laws that held that “all persons who were baptized became free,” and many of the enslaved had indeed sought out baptism not long after escaping (Clarkson 55). Not likely to give up their property so easily, members of the plantocracy approached the Attorney-General York and Solicitor-General Talbot and received the declaration in 1729 that a slave in England “does not become free, that his master’s right and property in him is not thereby determined or varied, and that baptism doth not bestow freedom on him” (qtd. in Clarkson 56).

Granville Sharp, a prominent antislavery activist, challenged this with the Somerset case in 1772. Sharp had previously taken issue with political rulings in favor of slave masters rather than the baptized slaves, and in an attempt to right those wrongs, he dedicated two years to study English law in hopes of better defending the newly freed Africans (Brown 93). When faced with the case of an escaped slave, James Somerset, Sharp used his studies to argue for the right of the free and baptized under English law. Over the course of five months, the case was argued three separate times in an attempt to thoroughly investigate the laws. Eventually, the English laws were upheld; “Chief Justice Mansfield tried desperately to avoid giving a judgement but eventually was forced, reluctantly, to admit that slavery was not approved or allowed by the law of Britain” (Williams, “Golden Age” 103).

This ruling motivated those who were advocating for abolition. Up until this point, “neither the public nor the slave traders appeared to have been particularly impressed by

abolition's political potential" (Drescher, *Abolition* 211). The movement seemed disconnected, lacking any sense of collective organization. But by the late-1780s, the once-isolated voices of abolition, political figures like Sharp and religious groups like the Quakers, had finally joined forces. Abolition had become organized with the creation of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, otherwise known as the London Committee (Drescher, *Abolition* 213). More religious groups "rallied to the movement—Unitarians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, and evangelical Anglicans added their support...on the grounds of morality, justice, and religion" (Drescher, *Abolition* 214). Abolitionism quickly gained supporters from all across Britain. People from all backgrounds signed petitions to be sent to Parliament in opposition to slavery and many more circulated abolitionist materials to the public. Support for the movement grew so quickly that advocates of the slave trade were caught off guard, "stunned by the speed and breadth of the national mobilization" (Drescher, *Abolition* 215).

Included in the pro-abolition population were the typically-marginalized voices of women and freed slaves. As early as 1787, public lists of abolition supporters included the names of several women, and within the next few years, more women were significant figures of the movement, including poet Hannah More and her friends and philanthropical contributors, Elizabeth Bouverie and Margaret Middleton. In 1824, a Quaker woman, Elizabeth Heyrick, published one of the earliest pamphlets advocating for immediate emancipation and "attacked the government for acting as a buffer for colonial slaveholders" (Drescher, *Abolition* 249). Along with women, former slaves were also lending their voices to the cause. The narratives of Ottobah Cugoana and Olaudah Equiano were incorporated in abolitionist discourse; the men openly spoke out against the slave trade in support of abolition, quickly becoming "shapers of opinion rather than voiceless victims" (Drescher, *Abolition* 218). Even writers like Phyllis Wheatley,

who remained enslaved at the time her poems were published, became popular with the cause, “[serving] primarily as celebrated evidence of Africans’ potential for moral uplift and cultural achievement” (Drescher, *Abolition* 218).

Within a short time, abolitionism had garnered enough attention to be “formally introduced into the House of Commons as part of an implicit dialogue between Parliament and the people” by William Pitt in 1788 (Drescher, *Abolition* 216). In a famous speech from May 1789, William Wilberforce, perhaps the most outspoken abolitionist leader at the time, laid before Parliament detailed and factual reasons for the total abolition of the slave trade, including economic and political factors. In this speech, Wilberforce also acknowledges the moral crime of participating in the slave trade and in doing so, he emphasizes to Parliament the importance of righting this sinful action: “the nature and all the circumstances of this trade are now laid open to us; we can no longer plead ignorance...this House must decide, and must justify to all the world, and to their own consciences, the rectitude of the grounds and principles of their decision” (“Speech” 54). Wilberforce’s powerful words came to no avail at that time, yet despite repeated parliamentary rejections, the movement continued to propose bill after bill. Seymour Drescher notes that over the “the next eighteen years, bills for the abolition for the British slave trade would be moved twelve more times in Parliament, but always as an open question and not a government measure,” several of which passed in the House of Commons, only to be “stymied in the upper house” (Drescher, *Abolition* 216).

The massive mobilization and public support of abolition finally yielded results in 1807, when Parliament passed the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act. Abolitionists were thrilled, for it was indeed a significant step towards emancipation. However, they rightly understood that there was still work to be done. The Act only abolished the trading of slaves from Africa; slavery itself

was still considered legal. Slave trading was “made a felonious offense,” in 1811, “with the qualification, whether deliberate or not, that slaves could be transported from one British colony, settlement or island in the West Indies to another,” which meant trading between colonies still frequently occurred, as well as “slave breeding on a large scale” to help supply labor to other struggling colonies (Williams, “British West Indian” 175-176).

Though it was a positive step, the Act of 1807 did little to no good in the everyday lives of the enslaved. The brutality continued in the Caribbean, and to some extent, worsened, even after 1807. In response to this treatment, slave rebellions became common occurrences. The scale of the revolts, particularly the revolts of 1816 in Barbados, 1823 in Demerara, and 1831 in Jamaica, is a testament to the widespread and overwhelming opposition to the inhumanity of those in power (Campbell 147). Slavery supporters blamed many of the revolts on the inflammatory language of some abolitionists. In the case of the 1816 Barbados rebellion, William Wilberforce was blamed for the violence, to which he responded that it was only the violence of the slave owners that inspired the rebellion (Drescher, *Abolition* 231-232). This logic, that rebellions would continue as long as slavery itself did, outweighed the pro-slavery attempts to blame it on the abolitionist camp. Drescher notes that “it is clear that slave mobilizations and massive resistance was of great significance in determining the pace of, or even the metropolitan decision for, some Caribbean emancipations” (Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery* 97).

Abolitionists once again made a call for public support with the proposition of The Treaty of Paris in 1814. The “Additional Article” of the Treaty would have “reopened the French slave trade, with British sanction, for five years” (Drescher, *Abolition* 229). William Wilberforce openly condemned it, and the London Committee, as well as its mass of supporters, began to organize once more in opposition. Drescher notes that “the national response was resounding,”

and that “it was the most impressive campaign of the entire struggle,” resulting in 1,370 petitions with an estimated 750,000 signatures (Drescher, *Abolition* 229). The government took notice of such a widespread public investment in the cause. Abolitionism was no longer a small, religiously-inclined cause; it was a nationwide movement with extensive support from well-known and influential figures. It had forced its way into the national spotlight of British politics, and “spawned the first human rights organization and altered much of the Western world’s perspective on the future of slavery as an institution” (Drescher, *Abolition* 230).

The Consolidated Slave Act of 1825 was another small, but positive attempt, at moving towards abolition. The intercolonial slave trade had been consistently active under the premise of domestic servitude, where a planter or merchant might travel to one island with two domestics, leave with zero, then return again with two more to repeat the process. The Consolidated Slave Act addressed that by prohibiting the removal of domestic servants, with only a few exceptions. Eric Williams argues, “Whatever the Consolidated Slave Act did or was meant to do, it did not nor was meant to abolish this slave trade. Only the emancipation of the slaves could have checked it...” (“British West Indian” 179). It would be another eight years before that occurred.

What abolitionism had been working towards for the better part of fifty years was finally accomplished when Parliament passed the Abolition of Slavery Act in 1833. Not enacted until the next year, the Act ended slavery in many of the British territories. Yet, despite their victory, members of the movement were still concerned with some details of the Act. The Act ensured that slave owners would receive “compensations amounting to about 40 percent of the calculated market value of their slaves”; this compensation fund, valued at around twenty million pounds, was provided for by higher taxes on sugar and near exclusive usage of colonially-sourced sugar in Britain (Drescher, *Abolition* 264). Along with this, the Act freed the slaves “without any

provisions for special racial constraints,” and gave them a “new status as Apprentices [that] would bind them to work for their ex-masters for a fixed portion of each working day, and for four to six years” (Drescher, *Abolition* 264). The apprentice system and the financial reparations paid to plantation owners provided further proof to many abolitionists that the Parliamentary holdout on emancipation was directly tied to some members’ profitable involvement in the trade. Even though emancipation had been achieved, in the eyes of many abolitionists, the financial outcome was less than ideal; the plantation owners still profited while British citizens suffered under higher taxes for sugar—“In other words, civil liberty was to come at the expense of limited free labor for the ex-slaves, increased prices for consumers, and higher taxes for metropolitans” (Drescher, *Abolition* 264).

Arguing that the Act only ended slavery on paper and that the apprentice system was just another way to preserve slavery, abolitionists organized one final campaign. Five years later, the apprentice system was abolished. Putting an end to an institution that had been in place two hundred years and had, at one point, been essential to the economic well-being of the British Empire was not done quickly or easily. It was a movement that the English government resisted, yet it was unwillingly dragged along by its subjects for half a century until emancipation was ultimately achieved. The movement to achieve abolition was truly “the act of a nation and not of its rulers” (Drescher, *Abolition* 265).

As I mentioned at the outset, antislavery support, though it may have come as a surprise to those in power, had been mounting in the general population since Britain’s involvement in the slave trade began. Most scholars agree that there are two primary factors, the first of which is rooted in economics. Drescher notes that the “essential rationale for British-sponsored slavery, from first to last, was its apparent contribution to the collective wealth and power of the empire”

(*Capitalism and Antislavery* 20). The ever-expanding British empire meant an equal growth of the slave trade; the acquisition of new territory meant a need for a labor force to work the land, and the goods that came from that land helped provide the economic means to acquire more territory. The financial benefit that came from participating in the slave trade was undeniable on a national level. The exports coming out of the colonies were providing tremendous amounts of income for the country, and the demand for ships brought growth to ports such as Liverpool, a city that eventually became the premier slave trade center of England (Williams, “Golden Age” 68). On an individual level, participating in the slave trade only benefitted those who had the financial means to do so. When abolition became a legal issue, many members of Parliament who had personal and financial ties to the West Indies were not remotely interested in seeing those ties severed, and vehemently rejected the cause on the grounds of imperial economic benefit. It was due to the persistence of the public, those who were not financially benefitting from the slave trade, that emancipation occurred.

Defending slavery on economic grounds is an argument that only works, however, if one views enslaved Africans as less than human. Describing the slave trade in terms of trading “commodities” completely takes away the human status of those being bought and sold, and the moment one refers to the “commodities” as what they truly are, humans, the argument essentially becomes null. Eventually, even some of those who defended slavery came around to support the abolitionist cause. “No business could be good, it seemed to some, if it led masters to treat men and women like brutes” (Brown 48). This reasoning was an essential element of the second, and arguably most well-known, reason for the abolitionist movement: religion.

Despite many historians today gradually moving away from attributing the true success of abolition to the efforts of religious organizations, most of the prominent leaders of the

movement grounded much of their rhetoric in religious ideology. By most accounts, it was a religious organization, the Quakers, who were the first and most prominent group to organize in support of abolition, forming the “first network of local agents in England to distribute antislavery propaganda on a national scale,” and the first to “[petition] Parliament on the slave trade in 1783,” which was five years earlier than Pitt and Wilberforce’s proposition, and they “constituted three-quarters of the original 12-man membership of the London abolition committee in 1787” (Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery* 62). The Quakers, as well as other religious organizations that joined the cause, relied on Christian morality and biblical texts to support their arguments against slavery. The idea that all of humanity is created in God’s image, that all people are related in Christ, emphasized the immorality of slavery and allowed abolitionists to “claim that the English were weakening and enslaving themselves by enslaving Africans” (Kees 875). Philip Gould expands on this, noting that “passages from Exodus, Matthew, Acts, and Paul’s epistles facilitated the antislavery moral critique and, to a lesser extent, the argument for African humanity” (16). He continues his point by arguing that the religious case against slavery “was founded upon the opposition between civilization and savagery,” that the Christian individuals of British society should rise above the sinful nature of the slave trade and be the civilized Christians they are called to be (Gould 19). By supporting abolition, British citizens would also be performing the dutiful act of a faithful Christian. Indeed, Thomas Clarkson, in his well-known *History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, states that “in whatever way Christianity may have operated towards... a diminution of human misery, it has operated none more powerfully than by the new views, and consequent duties, which it introduced on the subject of charity, or practical benevolence and love” and that “no country has shone with more true lustre than” Britain, “there being scarcely any case of acknowledged

affliction, for which some of her Christian children have not united in an attempt to provide reliefs” (13-14).

As convincing as the benevolence of this argument may have been to much of the British public, this rhetoric also presents problems. There was often an underlying conflict between the speech that religious abolitionists were promoting and the true sentiment behind it. The civilized Christian argument detailed by Gould is one such example. By arguing that Christianity made Britons civilized, the abolitionists promoting this rhetoric were also suggesting that Africans were inherently *not* civilized because they were not Christian. Methodist missionaries sent to the West Indies were given instructions to “promote moral and religious improvement...without in the least degree, in public or private, interfering with their civil condition” (qtd. in Thomas 15). Antislavery supporters were insistent upon the mental betterment of enslaved Africans, which would, they surely hoped, promote the spread of Christianity. As Brown notes, “What mattered to [Evangelicals] was the promotion of the Evangelical religion, both within the British Isles and across the British Empire. [They] not only had religious *motives*. They also had religious *objectives*” (335). Margaret Middleton, one of the prominent women involved in the movement, was primarily concerned with “the moral and religious obligations of the slaveholders, on the masters’ responsibility to care for the spiritual welfare of his servants”; even in advocating for abolition of the slave trade, she seems to have no problem with slavery itself, stating that religion “would be the most profitable means to making slaves diligent and faithful” (qtd. in Brown 350). To this end, the religious reasoning behind abolition seems to be primarily concerned with freeing British Christians from the guilt that comes from being involved with the trade of human life rather than freeing those lives from slavery.

Furthermore, it was not just the religious rhetoric of the abolitionists that proved problematic. Many leaders, though wholeheartedly advocating for abolition, used degrading language to describe enslaved Africans. Wilberforce, in the aforementioned Parliamentary speech, repeatedly refers to Africans as “wretched objects” or “wretches” (“Speech” 12, 13). He continues on to say that it is an awful by-product of the slave trade that these Africans are “dissolute,” and that the African kings who participate in the trade are victims of the vices of “avarice and sensuality,” “the most powerful and predominant in natures thus corrupt” (26, 7). Though Wilberforce acknowledges that the horrors of the slave trade have taken a toll on these people, he continues to cast them in a negative light by using derogatory and reductive language in his descriptions. In yet another Parliamentary speech in 1791, Wilberforce is noted as saying that Africa’s “state of civilization was in general very imperfect, their notions of morality extremely rude, and the powers of their government ill defined” (“Debate” 3). James Ramsay, another prominent abolitionist, also shares this line of reductive thinking. In his *Essay on the Treatment and Condition of Slaves*, he states that “Oppression makes the wretches stupid, and their stupidity becomes their crime, and provokes their farther punishment,” before continuing to say that some slaves are of “the simpler sort,” and “so lazy that nothing but the whip... can make them work” (Ramsay 68, 77). Thinking about enslaved Africans as poor, pitiful creatures in need of help paints them as simple and uncivilized, and ultimately lacks any genuine attempt at sympathy, and this language is evidence of the abolitionist desire to mentally and morally improve the slaves while freeing them comes as a secondary thought.

It now seems apparent that the pro- and anti-abolition camps were not mutually exclusive, or at the very least, one could be pro-abolition and anti-African. However, these sentiments were not uniquely characteristic of the religious abolitionist rhetoric. Even John

Locke “pronounced slavery so vile an estate that no Englishman would plead for it” at the same time as he “was subscribing to the Royal African Company and prescribing slavery for the constitution of Carolina” (Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery* 23-24). The abolitionist movement presented itself as sympathetic to those enslaved, selflessly working to improve their condition in the world, yet against the context of both economics and religion, it seems that the abolitionist argument was deeply rooted in self-interest, not just sympathy.

3. BIOGRAPHY AND JUVENILIA

Charlotte and Emily Brontë were born during the high point of British abolitionism, and they were raised around people and had access to publications that advocated for the end of slavery. It comes as no surprise, then, that the same rhetoric they were exposed to at a young age is deeply intertwined with their writings. However, it was not only the abolitionist movement that informed the sisters' knowledge of colonialism and slavery in the British West Indies. Their experiences with people who were directly connected to the Caribbean colonies played a part in shaping their writings, both as children and adults, as did access to a vast and varied collection of books, newspapers, and periodicals that provided them with a well-rounded political and social awareness. As we shall see, the Brontës were deeply invested in the implications of colonialism, implications that would later lead to abolitionism, long before they wrote *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*.

Charlotte and Emily were raised in a lively home in Haworth, alongside their two older sisters, Elizabeth and Maria, younger sister Anne, and brother Branwell. The town was relatively remote, which meant the family relied on each other for entertainment and on their surroundings for inspiration. At the encouragement of their father, Patrick, the children were avid readers of all kinds of publications, especially newspapers and periodicals, which the family would often read together. Because of this, the children were “advanced in their tastes and judgements” at a young age “and had already read so widely, especially the political news of the day which was their father’s passion that [Patrick] could make of them...intellectual companions whom he considered his equals...and treated with the consideration due to adults” (Gerin 5).

The Brontës were a tight-knit family, and despite their extensive reading repertoire and sharp minds, when the sisters were sent to school, they only ever achieved moderate success on their own. Sent to Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge, Charlotte was one of the first siblings to be separated from her family. The school was sponsored by William Wilberforce, as well as other notable figures who openly advocated for abolition such as the poet Hannah More and the Reverend Charles Simeon (Gerin 2). Though Charlotte was more likely to be an observer than a participant, which is a trait shared with her sisters, she did interact with people who made lifelong impressions on her at the school, such as the Hayne sisters, Charlotte and Mellany, who were West Indian orphans and were being sponsored at school by a brother. As Winifred Gerin asserts, the Haynes "were certainly Charlotte's first contact with people from that part of the world," which surely shaped her young opinion of the West Indian population and culture (9).¹ Charlotte's time at Cowan Bridge came to an abrupt halt when she was withdrawn by her father due to the failing school's unfortunate living conditions. The experiences that Charlotte gained at Cowan Bridge remained with her for the rest of her life, most notably reincarnated as Lowood School in *Jane Eyre*.

Though Charlotte's experience at school was decidedly unhappy, Emily fared worse. When sent to Roe Head school, she "became so ill...that Charlotte feared for her life" (*Glass Town* xxiii). It was her Haworth home, alongside her family, that provided the most educative and beneficial environment for Emily. As her juvenile writings show, she was much more attuned to the natural landscape that surrounded her there and she channeled much of the inspiration she got from that into her writing, and, like Charlotte, she used her knowledge of the people around her to influence her own stories. Christopher Heywood, in his article "Yorkshire

¹Gerin also states that the Haynes were likely the inspiration for the Mason family in *Jane Eyre*. However, that point is up for debate, as shown in Christopher Heywood's research.

Slavery in *Wuthering Heights*,” claims that well-known families in the nearby Yorkshire area that were linked to slavery in the West Indies inspired both sisters, stating that two families in the area “the Sidgwicks and the Caruses, were readily identified as originals for caricatures in *Jane Eyre*. They appear there as the ‘Reed’ and ‘Brocklehurst’ families” (184). Another prominent family, the Sills, finds a place in both Charlotte’s and Emily’s novels, the Masons in *Jane Eyre* and the Earnshaws in *Wuthering Heights* (189-190, 192).² Heywood also expands and details how examples from *Wuthering Heights* ground the novel solidly in Yorkshire history, noting that, in her preface to the novel, Charlotte herself “hinted that the Lintons, the Heathcliffs, and the Earnshaws had originals in the ‘secret annals’ of a ‘rude vicinage’ among the ‘outlying hills and hamlets of the West-Riding of Yorkshire’” and that the names Lockwood, Earnshaw, and Penistone Crag all show up in Haworth records (185, 188).

To this end, the sisters’, particularly Emily’s, inclination to use familiar landscapes as settings and real families as the basis for characters situates these novels into the tradition of antislavery writing. “A principal feature in the widespread writing against slavery in the heyday of Abolition and Emancipation,” Heywood states, “was accuracy in pinpointing the names of localities of the English families with plantation links” (186-187). In connecting the Brontës to this tradition, Heywood references William Howitt’s *The Rural Life of England*, which was published in 1838, and shows how Howitt’s survey of these families overlooks “the essential names, family relationships, and (in the case of *Wuthering Heights*) topographical relationships”

² Heywood notes that the Sidgwicks and Caruses “had links with the plantation economy across four generations involving several of the principal slave trading houses of Lancaster and Liverpool,” and that the Sill family’s colonial connections were well known in the area (186). Furthermore, Heywood also notes minor details, such as “essential names [and] family relationships,” that align with the Sill family appear in *WH*.

that were necessary in linking these families to their slave-owning interests, information which the Brontës subsequently provide (186).³

Though the sisters were clearly influenced by their own personal experiences, it appears as if nothing was more valuable to their creative development than their passion for reading. Their father may have ignited the children's curiosity and fueled their imaginative flame, but when it came to learning, they did not solely rely on him for their information. Gerin states in her biography of Charlotte Brontë that their "familiarity with the events and great names in current affairs was not derived at second-hand from [Patrick's] reading of the weekly press; it came from the children's own enchanted reading over an unlimited field of literature, beginning with the monthly numbers of *Blackwood's Magazine*" (24). Knowing that the Brontës had access to *Blackwood's* is essential when tracing their early exposure to colonialism. When discussing Charlotte, Firdous Azim also realizes the importance of *Blackwood's* in shaping the young Brontës' knowledge of British colonialism: "Nearly every issue [of *Blackwood's*] during the late 1820s and early 1830s contained articles dealing with the colonial question: debates regarding the efficacy of British territorial expansion, trade, slavery, on the phenomenon of displaced and mixed races and people and explorations in natural history and geography" (115). Articles such as "The West Indian Controversy" (December 1824), "The British Colonies" (February 1830), "The West Indian Question" (February 1832), and "Plan for the Gradual Abolition of Negro Slavery" (July 1832) are just a small example of the sort of material that the Brontës were reading nearly every time they picked up an issue of *Blackwood's*.

³ Howitt was a prominent abolitionist and Heywood suggests that the Brontës had been in contact with him, passing along information about these families (186). Another connection between Howitt and the Brontës comes via Elizabeth Gaskell, who was friends with Howitt as early as 1838, and who later became friend and biographer of Charlotte (Gerin 327).

Along with *Blackwood's*, the Brontë children also seem to have had access to a wide variety of publications with opposing opinions, such as the *Leeds Intelligencer* (a Tory-inclined publication), the *Leeds Mercury* (a Whig-inclined publication), *Punch*, *Fraser's Magazine*, and *John Bull*, which was a pro-slavery paper (Shuttleworth 19; Kees 876; *Glass Town* xvii, Thomas, "Christianity" 60). An article published in the *Leeds Mercury* in 1824, entitled "Abolition of West Indian Slavery," calls "slavery...a state of society in its inherent nature and character, so revolting to every dictate of justice, and every principle of religion, that no appeal to argument can be requisite in the present age to stamp it with reprobation" ("Abolition"). On the other hand, an issue of *John Bull* published in the same year attempts to shrug off the "gross and shameless falsehoods with which the West Indian planters [have been] libelled," and claims that they "are prepared to show...from the declarations of the rebel negroes themselves upon their trials, that they were well used, well fed, well clothed, and happy: and [that one slave], more intelligent than the rest adds [that] 'if there had been no Methodists, there would have been no rebellion'" (*John Bull* 92). Such an exposure to the widely varied opinions and information surely made an impact on the Brontë children's world view. Yet, it was not just the sentiments of the public that were conflicting over the issue of slavery; the abolitionist movement also faced conflicts within itself.

The children were reading abolitionist arguments in the newspapers and periodicals, but the impact and influence of the abolitionist movement was also active within the context of the Brontë household itself. Their father had been sponsored by William Wilberforce while at Cambridge, and Patrick's position as an Anglican priest allowed him access to other religious figures who were active within the abolitionist movement (Heywood, "Slavery" 78). Patrick Brontë himself even publicly spoke out against slavery in an 1820 letter to the *Leeds Intelligencer*, claiming that abolition is a "reasonable and scriptural" demand and the

“duty...[of] a christian and enlightened people” (qtd. in Thomas, *Imperialism* 15). It seems that, like much of the British population, most of the Brontë siblings’ exposure to abolitionist rhetoric, especially throughout their childhood, was through the filter of religion, which also included ministers and abolitionists traveling on a circuit, speaking in small towns such as Haworth.⁴ But publications like *John Bull* would also have used religious language to justify slavery, arguing that “Christianity ‘permits and sanctions slavery’” and that it emphasizes the need for “‘good-will and obedience in the slave’” (Thomas, *Imperialism* 15). They also would have been aware of the rhetoric that promoted abolition while simultaneously degrading the enslaved Africans that was easily found in their beloved *Blackwood’s*. “The West India Question,” published in 1832, states repeatedly that slavery is “unquestionably an evil,” yet continues to refer to Africans as simple people incapable of freedom until “savage indolence [can be] overcome, and barbaric violence restrained, and rude depravity covered” and the enslaved populations become well-versed in the Christian religion (415, 418). The conflicting elements of abolitionist arguments, as well as the usage of religious language and imagery to both condemn and support slavery, might have made the young Brontës wary of both sides of the slavery debate and pushed them to create an outlet that would allow them to express and process their thoughts.

The juvenile writing of the Brontë children is evidence of just how concerned they were with the effects of British colonialism, which included slavery and the push for its abolition. Charlotte, Branwell, Emily, and Anne collectively created an enormous body of writing in their childhood, an in-depth discussion of which unfortunately lies beyond the scope of this project. The most significant bit of information needed before continuing is to note that, at some point,

⁴ There is sufficient evidence to suggest that Moses Roper, a freed slave advocating for abolition, and William Howitt came to or near Haworth in their respective antislavery campaigns.

the siblings stopped writing collectively and separated into pairs: Charlotte and Branwell continued to write about Glass Town, the fictional city they all created, while Emily and Anne broke away to create Gondal.⁵

Speaking of Charlotte, Susan Meyer states that “it is not difficult to demonstrate that Brontë was actively engaged, both intellectually and imaginatively, with issues of racial conflict and imperialist history,” as “both preoccupations are very evident in Brontë’s” juvenilia (29). This is indeed immediately evident when looking at the Glass Town tales. The central location for all of these stories is in Africa, where “at the delta of the River Niger,” the Great Glass Town was settled by British colonizers (*Tales* xvi). This choice of location for their mighty fictional city is undoubtedly a side effect of their childhood awareness of British colonialism. Similarly, the Brontë were also acting as “colonizers—both literally imaginatively—imitating and reconfiguring the political and social world of nineteenth-century England that they encountered in their extensive reading” (*Tales* xvi).

Throughout Charlotte’s juvenile writings, there are countless representations of race and colonialism that seem to exist as echoes; some images are similar to those in publications she read as a child while others show up again in later works like *Jane Eyre*. One such example is Lady Zelzia. In “Albion and Marina,” written in 1830, when Charlotte was fourteen, Zelzia, though never stated as being black, resides in Africa and is constantly described in dark terms. Upon initial meeting, she is described as such: “In figure she was very tall, and both it and her face were of a perfectly Roman caste. Her features were regular and finely formed; her full and brilliant eye[s] jetty black, as were the luxuriant tresses of her richly curled hair... She was the

⁵ As Christine Alexander explains, “the Glass Town and Angrian saga centered first on the Glass Town Federation and its principal city Verdopolis,” but in 1834, Charlotte created a new kingdom, Angria, which was located to west (xxvii). The stories of Glass Town and Angria are connected; there is no real distinction between the sagas.

most learned and noted woman in Glass Town” (*Glass Town* 60). Firdous Azim notes that Zelzia’s “dark, sensuous sexuality” and “fascinating and challenging” character are traits that are similar to descriptions of the African continent itself (123). Azim also notes that Zelzia is perhaps characterized as non-African in an effort to make her “more recognisable and palatable,” as black women “cannot be incorporated within representational forms” (122). This is interesting considering Zelzia is contrasted with Marina, who lives in England and is “more homely and tractable, [symbolizing] comfort and familiarity” (123). Concerning this distinction between Zelzia and Marina, Azim argues that the “racial contrast gives a sexual dimension to political domination, where notions of racial difference and inequality play a central part” (123). Though she is referencing a story written nearly twenty years before *Jane Eyre*, the comparison between Zelzia and Marina surely serves as a precursor to the contrast between Jane and Bertha Mason.⁶

More evidence of Zelzia as a prototype for Bertha appears in a later story, “The Bridal,” which was published two years later. Renamed Lady Zenobia, the former Zelzia has lost the striking gracefulness from “Albion and Marina.” Instead, she, “possessed by wild sexual jealousy” due to an “impending marriage, figures in the classic pose of a mad woman, with tattered clothes, dishevelled hair, and emaciated features” and speaks in ““wild, maniacal accents”” (Shuttleworth 103). Brontë’s description of a dark, wild, and corrupted figure again surely calls to mind Bertha, hidden away in the innermost confines of Thornfield Hall as a result of her decidedly un-English sensuality and immoral behavior. The representations of race, or at least racialized characteristics, in these two short stories seem to prove that Charlotte was well aware of the attitude of superiority that the English were embodying concerning Africa and her

⁶ Zelzia’s characterization is also connected to Blanche Ingram in *Jane Eyre*, who is described as being “straight and tall,” with “dark eyes and black ringlets,” as well as sharing the same “Roman features” as her mother (*JE* 172).

inhabitants and was participating in it. Though she does not portray a mad, black woman, she creates instead a madwoman with black characteristics, a figure which is representative of the belief that Africans were uncivilized and the tendency to attribute the unfortunate corruption of white Europeans to exotic passions.

Another significant example in Charlotte's juvenilia of colonial racial representation is seen in the character of Quashia Quamina. Quashia's presence connects three stories, *The African Queen's Lament*, *The Green Dwarf*, and *Leaf from an Unopened Volume*, stories which are perhaps better examples of Charlotte's concern with slavery. Quashia is the son of the native Ashantee king, the king that has been overthrown by the Glass Town colonizers. "Resentful, recalcitrant and rebellious, Quashia continues to disturb the peace of the Angrian kingdom," representing Charlotte's version of the revolted slave (Azim 125). His existence in these stories suggests her attempt to process the conflict between duty to empire and inhumane treatment of conquered peoples, and indicates her ambiguous representations of enslaved individuals, despite her awareness and probable support of the abolitionist rhetoric that advocated for sympathy for the enslaved and freedom for all people.

As Susan Meyer asserts, Charlotte moves "from an unambiguous celebrations of imperialist conquest to a growing affirmation of various forms of rebellion against authoritarian control" (29). This transition is most easily seen within the context of Quashia's development throughout the stories. Raised throughout childhood with the colonizing European rulers of Angria, he eventually rebels against them, leading a "revolution of the oppressed Angrian blacks against the white Angrian aristocracy," (Meyer 45). In this role, Quashia represents Brontë's own acknowledgement of the need for change, the need to break the ties that bind, especially given Charlotte's certain awareness of the slave revolts that had taken place in the colonial Caribbean.

This portrayal of Quashia as a strong, empowered, rebellious leader carries a positive connotation with it, yet there is still negative language surrounding his character. Brontë's description of him in part of her Roe Head Journal is less than inviting: "[He was] weary with wassail and stupified with drunken sleep...lying in his black dress on the disordered couch, his sable hair dishevelled on his forehead, his tusk-like teeth glancing vindictively through his parted lips, his brown complexion flushed with wine and his broad chest heaving wildly as the breath is issued in snorts from his distended nostrils" (*Glass Town* 160). What Brontë presents here is a beast-like man, from his "tusk-like teeth" to his wild, heavy breathing. Furthermore, as Meyer notes, his very name, "Quashia," is reminiscent of "Quashee," a term used as a derogatory racial slur (47). Considering this information against the backdrop of rebellion, Quashia becomes a less appealing character, making "Brontë's representation of [him both] celebratory and hostile" (Meyer 47). It seems, then, that Brontë indeed plays into stereotypical representations of Africans with Quashia and effectively undercuts any potential attempt at progressively portraying a fully-humanized black man. In doing so, she is essentially mimicking much of the abolitionist material she was reading at the time by using reductive language to make him appear simple and uncivilized.

Charlotte, of course, was not the only Brontë sister to show an interest in race and colonialism. Emily, too, was invested in these issues. Reading Emily's juvenile writings and searching for connections between the text and her own life is a bit more difficult than doing so for Charlotte's work. Compared to her sister, Emily left little evidence concerning her own reasonings behind her work. There is a lack of scholarship on Emily's early writing, which is simply a symptom of the lack of primary material. Regardless, I believe that enough evidence

exists to suggest that Emily was just as concerned with the colonial dependence on slavery, and perhaps more invested in the impact of that dependence on British society.

From the start, it seems that Emily was just as independent and creative, both in spirit and in writing, as her sister Charlotte. In one of the earliest of the Brontë siblings' creative collaborations, after Charlotte "[grew] tired" of it, "it was Emily who took the lead," and used the opportunity to start a rebellion," an act that is echoed throughout much of Emily's writing (*Glass Town* xxxv). After the siblings' creative split, she created Gondal, an island in the North Pacific, far from the African landscape of Angria. Christine Alexander, in her introduction to an anthology of the Brontës' juvenile writings, states that Emily lifted "much of the Glass Town formula" in the creation of Gondal: "the concept of islands, the wild moorland scenery, a powerful princess, [and] the struggles of a predominately royalist world" (*Glass Town* xxxv). Despite the similarities, it is clear that Emily avoided the elements of romance that appeared in Charlotte's writing, and the contrast between the worlds, and their authors, is stark. Emily, as Alexander argues, "[preferred] the thrust of politics and war, and the mundane Yorkshire landscape of moorland, factories, and canals rather than love affairs, palaces, and exotic settings" (*Glass Town* xx-xxi). In a move that proves Emily's own penchant for rebellion, Gondal became an arguably darker, wilder world than Angria. "Dungeons proliferate in Gondal. Savage passion, imprisonment, murder, and rebellion were to be the hallmarks of" Emily's new world (*Glass Town* xxxvi).

Though many scholars are concerned with the obvious similarities between Emily's Gondal tales and *Wuthering Heights*, I believe there is another equally significant comparison to be drawn, one between these early writings and antislavery texts. A primary feature of many abolitionist publications was the attempt to humanize the enslaved Africans in the Caribbean

colonies, which included details on their unfortunate living conditions, attempts to convey the physical, emotional, and spiritual pain that comes with being enslaved, as well as occasional graphic descriptions of violent punishments. All of this, of course, was done in an effort to create sympathy for the slaves' condition, which would feed the need for abolition. Alexander notes that "the Gondal poetry is dominated by situations of isolation, exile, revenge, and death" and that "characters lament their separation and imprisonment, often from a loved one as a result of death" (*Glass Town* xli). Later, she again reiterates that "life in Gondal is dominated by a pervading sense of confinement, sometimes physical and sometimes spiritual, where the speaker is chained by powerful emotions [and] memories... In such a world, death becomes a liberating alternative" (*Glass Town* xlii). Though Alexander stops short of connecting the Gondal tales with slavery, I believe that Emily purposefully imbued her writing with the same themes that stem from abolitionist writing, as well as slave narratives.⁷

The traces of colonialism are more subtle in the Gondal poetry than in the Angrian short stories. Yet, even though Emily's language is less explicitly concerned with colonial conquest than Charlotte's, it nevertheless addresses it and does so in a more emotionally-charged way. In a poem written in 1837, the lines "But thou art now on a desolate sea—/Parted from Gondal and parted from me—/All my repining is hopeless and vain,/Death never yeilds [sic] back his victims again—" seem to reflect the Middle Passage, where slaves were transported from Africa to the Caribbean colonies (*Glass Town* 396). Other poems also echo the resentment and pain of being removed from one's home country: "And I confess that hate of rest,/And thirst for things abandoned now./Had weaned me from my country's breast/And brought me to that land of woe"

⁷ As previously mentioned, slave narratives had become a useful part of antislavery arguments. Slave narratives in the context of the abolitionist movement gave a voice to those enslaved to speak out against slavery and created a more realistic and developed picture of those enslaved.

and “I doubly cursed on foreign sod/Fought neither from my home nor God” (*Glass Town* 431, 438). In these two poems, which are connected, Emily seems to be channeling the emotional turmoil of the enslaved, but she also shows a keen awareness of the unjustified nature of slavery by emphasizing that there is no good reason, no war being fought for land or religion, to warrant enslaving thousands of people. Though much of the Gondal writing focuses on the inner pain of bondage, Emily does not forget the physical cruelty that the enslaved endure: “Week after week, from noon to noon,/September shone as bright as June/...The crops were gathered in the field—/Trod out, and ground by horses’ feet/While every ear was milky sweet;/ And kneaded on the threshing floor/With mire of tears and human gore” (*Glass Town* 430).

The emotion that Emily packs into her writing results in her poetry having a more distinctive abolitionist tone than perhaps Charlotte’s does. There are moments in the Gondal saga that feel too similar to antislavery rhetoric to brush off as coincidence. The speaker in a poem dated 1 March 1841 shares a mournful reflection on their current state: “And if I pray—the only prayer/That moves my lips for me/Is —‘Leave the heart that now I bear/And give me liberty’—/Yes,—as my swift days near their goal/’Tis all that I implore—/Through Life and death, a chainless soul/With courage to endure!” (*Glass Town* 409). Even well into adulthood, Emily’s poetry continues to emphasize the need for emancipation; a cry for liberty is repeated once more in a September 1846 poem: “One race, beneath two standards fighting,/For Loyalty, and Liberty—/When kindred strive, God help the weak!” (*Glass Town* 431). This moment particularly seems rife with abolitionist sentiment, repeating the common rhetoric that emphasizes liberty and freedom, as well as a bond between all people.

It seems abundantly clear how heavily the issues of slavery, race, and colonialism weighed on the Brontë sisters’ minds. Those themes are scattered throughout their writing, but

the appearance of them in their juvenile writings prove how invested the sisters were in these topics at an early age. It was something they encountered through both reading and personal experience, and though both Emily and Charlotte were exposed to much of the same antislavery rhetoric in their youth, it is remarkable at the different impacts it had on them and their writing. Charlotte's childhood considerations of colonialism seem vastly more active and lively, focusing on the characters and the story more than anything else and imitating that which she read in her stories of empire and rebellion in exotic places with wild, mysterious people. This suggests that, at least at an early age, Charlotte's creativity overpowered a critical approach. Though abolitionist writing clearly seems to have shaped the content of her juvenilia, the true purpose of it, which begs for sympathy for and consideration of the state of the enslaved, is clouded by her unflattering representations of racially-Othered characters like Zelzia and Quashia, representations that fuel the entertainment value of the plot rather than the critique of slavery and colonialism. Charlotte's antislavery sentiments do not come through quite as clearly in her stories as Emily's do in her poetry. The Gondal poetry largely lacks the same level of action as the Angrian tales. Instead, it seems to be pondering on the colonial question, invoking both abolitionist rhetoric and sympathy in an attempt to humanize those in bondage. As we shall see, Charlotte and Emily's intellectual and creative investment in abolitionist issues re-emerges in an arguably more complex way in their most famous work.

4. LITERARY ANALYSIS

As suggested in the previous chapter, Charlotte and Emily Brontë's respective masterpieces, *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, are heavily influenced by the stories the sisters wrote as children and by their exposure to abolitionist rhetoric. But as the sisters grew older and their skills as writers developed, so did their interest in abolition. Though both novels were published in 1847, years after the abolition of slavery in most of the British territories, the topic of slavery is a prominent feature of these texts, evident in the imagery and language that the Brontës use to frame their two primary, and notably racially ambiguous, problematic characters, Bertha Mason and Heathcliff. In these characters, the sisters address their own anxieties over the British slave trade as well as those who were enslaved. Furthermore, the sisters' decision to provide a retrospective setting for their novels allows the colonial element to become a more overt influence rather than a passing side note and opens the door for their own active involvement in the discussion of slavery and abolition.

Jane Eyre

Of the two, Charlotte seems to have been more involved with the relationship between Britain and its colonies. From youth to adulthood, Charlotte's work is significantly more explicit in its invocation of colonial imagery and language. Charlotte's juvenile writings, as we have seen, reflect the imperial spread of Britain into the fictional Glass Town, setting the "civilized" British colonizers at odds with the "savage" and "exotic" native peoples. Similarly, *Jane Eyre* uses colonial imagery to depict how the imperial project had become an everyday part of British life, the colonial seeping into the domestic. This imagery and language is prevalent throughout the

novel: Jane sits “cross-legged, like a Turk” at the beginning of the novel; Miss Temple feeds Jane and Helen with a “good-sized seed-cake,” which was surely sweetened with West Indian sugar; Lady Ingram visits Thornfield wearing “gold-wrought Indian fabric,” giving her “a truly imperial dignity”; and of course, St. John Rivers goes to India as a missionary, “firm, faithful, and devoted...he labours for his race” (8, 72, 172, 452).⁸

Though evidence of the novel’s relationship with the colonial is fascinating and plentiful, I regret that I do not have the space to discuss all of these moments at length. Instead, I will focus on the connection to the West Indies, a place that, for most of the novel, helps define British identity. It is where Rochester lives as a young man, where he meets his first wife, Bertha Mason, and most importantly, it is where these characters, as well as eventually Jane herself, derive most of their wealth. Yet, despite this, “Brontë’s text nowhere explicitly refers to the institution of British slavery or the colonial project with which, for the early Victorian reader, the West Indies would still, in 1847, be strongly associated” (Plasa, *Textual Politics* 62-63). Instead, Charlotte uses racialized language and colonial imagery strategically placed in a novel set in pre-abolition England to structure her novel’s imperial interest. This interest is best embodied by Bertha Mason, who gives us the best glimpse into Charlotte’s seemingly conflicted attitude towards the racial Other and abolitionism.

The question of Bertha’s race remains a hotly debated topic in the scholarship surrounding this novel. Her racial ambiguity stems from her vague origins in the West Indies, as she is described as being the “daughter of Jonas Mason, a merchant, and of Antoinetta Mason his wife, a Creole” (*JE* 290). Many scholars, particularly Meyer, have pointed out that “creole” was a broad term in the nineteenth century, used “to refer to both blacks and whites born in the West

⁸ I reference here the Oxford World Classics edition of *Jane Eyre*, which I will refer to throughout the rest of my citations as simply *JE*.

Indies,” as well as those born of a mixed-race heritage (Meyer 253). Some, like Thomas, Spivak, and McKee read her simply as a white woman. Jenny Sharpe also reads Bertha as a white character but notes that “In Jamaica, the term creole may have designated all native-born population, but in England it was a derogatory name for the West Indian sugar plantocracy,” of which Bertha would have been a member (Sharpe 45). This description is a particular problem for Sharpe who recognizes the implications of Creole-ness in Jamaica: “Due to the long history of racial mixing in Jamaica, the scandal the creole presented to the British was the possibility of a white person who was not racially pure...[Bertha] shows that ‘whiteness’ alone is not the sign of racial purity” (Sharpe 46). Furthermore, abolitionists believed that, since slavery was considered an immoral crime, slaveowners were thus immoral people, engaging in cruelty and suffering from degeneracy. Thomas expands on this angle and claims that Bertha is a “stereotype of depraved self-indulgence” and “stands for the domestic excesses of recalcitrant despotism” (*Imperialism*, 32, 49). Even though Bertha may be read as white, her position as a member of the Jamaican plantocracy nevertheless leaves her with traces of corruption and savagery that she is never able to wash away.

Other critics, however, such as Meyer, Azim, and Carl Plasa argue that it seems likely Bertha is a mixed-race Creole. The racial intermixing that was commonplace in the West Indies resulted in “mulatto offspring that could and sometimes did pass as Caucasian members of West Indian society,” owning slaves just as many others did (Watson 465). Rochester initially finds her to be a “fine woman...tall, dark, and majestic”; he is chosen as a husband for Bertha because he is “of a good race” (*JE* 305). Meyer takes this moment to suggest this is because “Bertha herself may not be of as ‘good’ a race” as Rochester is, and their marriage would be a way to somehow legitimize the European part of her heritage (68). Furthermore, this specific episode

recalls Lady Zelzia from Charlotte's juvenilia, from their shared physical descriptions to Rochester's introduction to her at a party, which is also where Zelzia is initially introduced. In this context, Zelzia's African ties carry over to Bertha's physical and behavioral traits in the novel, which eventually become reflective of conventional colonial representations of the savage African.

When we are finally introduced to Bertha Mason, it is on Jane and Rochester's intended wedding day, nearly two-thirds of the way through the novel. Until this moment, Bertha's identity is unknown; she is a vague, dark figure, slinking through Thornfield's shadows at night, being mistaken for a ghost or a "Vampyre" (*JE* 284). On the day that should be Jane's happiest moment, she is instead faced with the terrible truth of Rochester's past when she meets Bertha: "In the deep shade, at the further end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sign, tell; it grovelled, seemingly on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face" (*JE* 293).⁹ Everywhere Jane looks, she sees a darkness surrounding Bertha, a darkness that is a by-product of Jane's uncertainty and fear. The darkness that "Jane consistently associates with Bertha" is, as McKee notes, "mostly metaphorical"; nevertheless, it comes to define who Bertha is, the "metaphorical implication" of this darkness "is re-enforced by the material evidence of Bertha's body and of the space she lives in" (McKee 70).

In the above description, Jane cannot see past Bertha's animality, completely stripping her of any humanity. Moments later, Jane refers to her as a "clothed hyena," who "stood tall on its hind feet" (*JE* 293). Even though Jane is well aware of who this person is, she seemingly

⁹ Here again we see remnants of Zelzia/Zenobia, who, as detailed in the previous chapter, appears much in the same way in "The Bridal."

refuses to acknowledge it during this scene, continually referring to her as “a maniac,” “the lunatic,” and most simply as “it” (*JE* 293). In fact, no one uses Bertha’s name in this scene; those who even acknowledge her humanity barely grant her any femininity. Grace Poole and Richard Mason use female pronouns to refer to her, while Rochester only venomously spits out, “That is my wife” (*JE* 293). The apparent inability of these characters even to utter Bertha’s name speaks to their opinion of her as less than human or, at the very least, less than themselves.¹⁰

Furthermore, Rochester on various occasions refers to Bertha as “a demon,” “a wild beast,” and a “goblin,” while describing her speech as having a “tone of demon-hate,” and her cries as “wolfish” (*JE* 294, 309, 308). Her monstrous animalistic nature is emphasized even more when she attacks her brother, Richard; the doctor who examines him observes that “the flesh on the shoulder is torn as well as cut...there have been teeth here!” (*JE* 212). These descriptions of Bertha further emphasize her apparently inherent savage nature as a “cannibalistic beast who chews her brother’s flesh to the bone” (Sharpe 45).

Bertha’s inner depravity is also manifested in her outward physical appearance. She is described as having a “discoloured” and “savage face,” with purple skin, “swelled and dark” lips, and “black eyebrows widely raised over [her] bloodshot eyes” (*JE* 283-284). Here, her physical appearance reflects the stereotypical traits used in representations of black slaves. But this description is not an unusual one for Brontë, as it calls back to Quashia Quamina of her juvenile writings. Meyer also sees this similarity, noting that “Jane’s use of the word ‘savage’ underlines the implication of her description of Bertha’s features, and the redness that she sees in Bertha’s rolling eyes suggests the drunkenness that, following the nineteenth-century convention,

¹⁰ In Jean Rhys’ novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette is Bertha’s original name. Rochester, who is Antoinette’s unnamed husband in the novel, renames her Bertha in a move that is reminiscent of the tradition of slave masters renaming their African slaves, giving them more European or Christian-sounding names.

Brontë has associated with Africans since her childhood” (69). This association with drunkenness was found in abolitionist writing as well, with Wilberforce stating in his *Essay* that “The love of spiritous liquors, is a passion” for many Africans (34). Similarly, Plasa argues that *Jane Eyre* “engages in an act of revision,” consciously “[recycling] the images of a feral blackness [that is] elaborated in the Angrian narratives” and using Bertha as a reincarnated and reimagined Quashia, whose love of alcohol, as we may recall, leaves him drunkenly passed out on a sofa (“Prefigurations” 7).

Though “none of these descriptions quite [assign] Bertha a biological blackness,” they do “assign her grades of cultural, emotional, and intellectual development deemed primitive on Victorian scales of civilization; and all of these conditions are attached, within Victorian racial discourse, to biological darkness” (McKee 70). As a slave figure, she embodies the conventional assumptions of African inferiority, framed with language that strips her of her humanity and agency. As a slaveowner, she represents the corrupting effect of British engagement in slavery. Thomas argues that “What becomes epidermalized in the swollen and discoloured featured of Bertha as she...crosses from the human to the animal is the moral depravity associated with the dissolute white Creole” (*Imperialism*, 43). Bertha is undoubtedly representative of the consequences of colonialism, inherently “darkened” as a result of her association with slavery.

Rochester emphasizes the distinction between Bertha and himself, a wholesome British subject: “I found her nature wholly alien to mine; her tastes obnoxious to me; her cast of mind common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher...What a pigmy intellect she had” (*JE* 306).¹¹ These words, of course, seem to echo the sentiments of many

¹¹ As defined by the OED, “pigmy” refers to “a member of any several peoples of very short stature inhabiting parts of Africa and S.E. Asia,” as well as a secondary definition meaning “a person (or something personified) of very little importance, ability, etc.” Rochester’s use of this word in this context,

abolitionists, who insisted that it was their task to educate and civilize the simple-minded, enslaved population.¹² But the fact that Rochester believes it is impossible for Bertha to achieve that improvement positions him as a colonizing figure, one who is closely aligned with the pro-slavery arguments of the nineteenth century.¹³

With this in mind, it seems that, if Rochester embodies a pro-slavery stance, Jane opposes him with an antislavery one. Despite her remarks concerning Bertha's appearance, Jane refrains from echoing Rochester's insistence concerning Bertha's inherent moral depravity. Sally Shuttleworth states that "It is significant that Jane explicitly demurs from Rochester's condemnation of Bertha: she remains for her 'an unfortunate lady' who 'cannot help being mad.' Nowhere does she endorse Rochester's statements of disgust" (167-8). This is an important element of Jane's character, one that can be seen as an attempt at establishing equality between marginalized figures and those who have marginalized them. This attempt ultimately fails, however, because of the dehumanizing language that Jane uses to describe Bertha. Jane's attitude towards her acts as a microcosm of the conflicting attitudes of abolitionists towards enslaved Africans. Though she never openly condemns Bertha, Jane nevertheless continues unsympathetically to use derogatory and racialized language to describe her, and her opinion of Bertha as a pitiful creature invokes the abolitionist opinion of slaves as "poor" and "wretched objects" (Wilberforce, "Speech" 35, 12).

then, carries more racial meaning that it initially seems. Furthermore, *Gulliver's Travels*, a book which the Brontës are believed to have been quite fond of, features the Lilliputians, a race of pigmies, which are described in similarly uncivilized and overly-simple terms.

¹² Wilberforce claims that, "slaves, considered as cattle, left without instruction, without any institution of marriage, so depressed as to have no means almost of civilization, will undoubtedly be dissolute; and, until attempts are made to raise them a little above their present situation, this source of mortality will remain" ("Speech" 26).

¹³ Gilbert and Gubar state that "Rochester... had married Bertha Mason for status... [and] for money," which are linked to Britain's colonizing efforts (355-356). Thomas, in her article "The Tropical Extravagance of Bertha Mason," also notes "the imperial masculinity which Rochester embodies" (6).

Even in Bertha's final moments, Brontë uses colonial imagery that would have struck a chord with her readers. This imagery, of course, is that of the slave rebellions that were widespread throughout the Caribbean in the early nineteenth century. Bertha's violent outbursts recall these rebellions, particularly since her two primary acts of violence are both acts of arson: setting both Rochester's room and later Thornfield ablaze. Meyer, who primarily focuses on Bertha as a rebel slave, notes that "slaves used fires both to destroy property and to signal to each other that an uprising was taking place" (69). Given Bertha's background as the daughter of a wealthy slave-owning merchant in Jamaica, it is quite likely she would have been all too familiar with this symbol of rebellion. Her actions against Rochester, the colonizing and oppressive force in the novel, "symbolically [enact] precisely the sort of revolt feared by the British colonists in Jamaica" (Meyer 71).

The moment of Bertha's death, in particular, is heavily weighted with the influence of abolitionism. The abolitionist apology for slave rebellions was predicated on the fact that they were a "savage response to an even more barbaric system for extracting labor power" (Sharpe 42). Bertha's penchant for arson, then, can be seen as a result of Rochester's cruel attempt to control her. He continually perceives her as a savage lunatic and locks her away, never attempting to treat her with much dignity, and projects his hatred and disgust on her, which she then seems to turn back on him with her violent behavior.¹⁴ But insofar as abolitionists believed that rebellion was a natural response to the cruelty done unto slaves, they also believed there was a limit to that response. Sharpe notes the argument that "once blacks are free they no longer have the right to revolt," and that "unchecked rebellion is particularly identified as the savage

¹⁴ This particular occurrence feels reminiscent of James Ramsay's argument mentioned in a previous chapter, which suggests a cycle that begins with oppression leads to savage behavior which results in more oppression.

response of uncivilized nations” (42). Bertha, however, is never given the opportunity for freedom; instead, she stands atop Thornfield, “shouting out till they could hear her a mile off,” before flinging herself off the building (*JE* 428). Meyer argues that “Brontë creates a character of the nonwhite races to use as the vividly embodied signifier of oppression in the novel, and then has this sign, by the explosive instability of the situation it embodies, destroy itself” (92). This destruction, I believe, is rooted in Charlotte’s return to the familiar conventional depictions of slave rebellions as manifestations of some inherent savagery. Despite using Bertha to make a powerful statement about the cruelties of colonization, Charlotte ultimately presents her suicide as a way of eliminating the exotic savage from the civilized domestic setting of England.¹⁵

With all of this information at hand, it seems clear that the abolitionist movement informed and shaped the character of Bertha Mason, who acts as a synecdoche for colonialism and abolitionist conflict within the novel. Much like the way Rochester shuts Bertha away, “out of sight, out of mind” as it were, the good people of England would surely have preferred to ignore their involvement with slavery. Abolitionism forced the issue into the public eye and made clear that the problems of the English West Indian colonies were the problems of all England. Rochester’s continual cruel treatment of Bertha stands in stark opposition to abolitionist ideals, and Brontë seems to want to use Bertha as a way to acknowledge the injustice and oppression of enslaved peoples. But against the derogatory racialized language to describe and dehumanize her, there does not seem to be any sympathy for Bertha, and as Heywood points out, “Charlotte’s novel makes no attempt to denounce the view that the Creole or pale Black anti-heroine, Bertha Mason, deserved her fate” (“Slavery” 82). Instead of becoming a triumphant rebellious figure, Bertha becomes an unfortunate-yet-necessary consequence of the preservation

¹⁵ Watson argues that Bertha can be read as a Tragic Mulatto figure, saying “She is, in a sense, only an abstract figure... a tragic symbol of evil and infidelity” (453).

of idealized English identity as seen embodied by Jane and Rochester.¹⁶ Considering that Bertha seems to represent both the enslaved and slave-owning populations, this idea feels particularly indebted to the antislavery argument since many abolitionists viewed emancipation as a way to rid England of the shameful stain of slavery and restore a wholesome national identity. As we have seen, the abolitionist movement at times seemed more concerned about maintaining civilized Englishness than about the state of the slaves, using their plight to draw sympathy and pity from the public and promote Christianity. In this way, some would say that Brontë seems to use the language and imagery of slavery as a metaphorical crutch to prop up a larger argument about English identity based on gender and class, two other problematic social divides that were the sources of Victorian anxiety.¹⁷ But where potential critiques of gender and class in the novel are resolute in their intention, “Charlotte Brontë’s seemingly negative attitudes and possible suspicions about the ‘purity’ of the white creole” that are focused on Bertha “only helps reinforce, not destroy, the stereotypes of black people in the period” (Watson 468). Nevertheless, Brontë’s usage of antislavery ideals paired with unsympathetic racialized language in *Jane Eyre*, no matter how conflicting, appears to have resulted from the abolitionist rhetoric that she was exposed to throughout her life.

Wuthering Heights

Emily Brontë was arguably much more subtle in her references to colonialism and abolitionism in her novel *Wuthering Heights* than her sister was in *Jane Eyre*. Because of this, a familiarity with the overt references in Charlotte’s novel helps create a more detailed reading and

¹⁶ It is notable that Bertha’s death mirrors that of the protagonists of *Oroonoko* and *Obi; or the History of Three-Fingered Jack*, two novels that, as I mentioned in the introduction, seem to engage in the same complicated relationship between abolition and racist imagery/language.

¹⁷ Many critics, particularly Jenny Sharpe and Carl Plasa, have more detailed and expansive arguments concerning how Brontë’s use of slavery underscores her larger feminist concerns.

awareness of colonial and racial imagery and language in *Wuthering Heights*. Furthermore, *Wuthering Heights*, which was published two months after *Jane Eyre*, at times seems to interact with the earlier novel, whether consciously or unconsciously. This is not to say, however, that Emily's novel is directly responding to Charlotte and *Jane Eyre*; I only suggest that Emily, who was notorious for drawing heavily on personal experiences, may have crafted similar yet purposely different approaches to the same topics. To this end, Emily's *Wuthering Heights* is packed with references and language that seem to position it in relation to nineteenth-century colonialism and abolitionism, as well as perhaps Charlotte's own novel.

Whereas Charlotte's interest in colonialism and race is apparent in the various inheritances, possessions, and characters throughout *Jane Eyre*, Emily's preoccupations with these issues in *Wuthering Heights* are focused on a central figure: Heathcliff. Everything that is foreign and alien to proper British society is personified in him. His racial ambiguity and his mysterious absence halfway through the novel, along with his equally mysterious acquisition of wealth, suggests connections to British colonial ventures. From the beginning, Heathcliff is associated with British colonialism, as Mr. Earnshaw finds him wandering the streets of Liverpool, notorious for its slave-trading connections to the West Indies. Later, Nelly conjures an imagined parentage for him, saying "your father was Emperor of China, and your mother an Indian queen" (*Wuthering Heights* 56). Lastly, his three-year absence, as Meyer points out, coincides with the American Revolution. Meyer suggests that perhaps America is where Heathcliff spent those years, "[associating] him with the archetypal war of successful colonial rebellion" (115). "Because the West Indies were dependent on the American colonies for food" and "at some points during the Revolutionary War it seemed likely that they would join the American colonies in the revolt against Britain," this moment in the novel carries particular

weight, as Heathcliff already has an (assumed) racial connection to the West Indies (Meyer 115). What I believe is the most important unifying factor in all of these moments is the violent threat to the British imperial project and, therefore, to British society as a whole. Brontë purposefully aligns Heathcliff with colonial rebellion in these moments, which, when paired with the racialized language she uses to describe him, creates the same sort of conflicted colonial narrative that also appears in abolitionist texts.

From the beginning of the novel, Heathcliff's racial ambiguity forces him into a perceived darkness, one that he is never truly able to escape. When Mr. Linton brings the child home to his family, he declares that they must "take it as a gift of God, though it's as dark almost as if it came from the devil" (*WH* 34). This statement creates a connection between the color of one's skin and evil that nearly the entire family, within a moment, seems to internalize and project onto Heathcliff, even though Mr. Earnshaw's intentions in bringing him back to *Wuthering Heights* were rooted in kindness. Nelly's recollection of the event details their instant uneasiness about him: "I had a peep at a dirty, ragged, black-haired child...I was frightened, and Mrs. Earnshaw was ready to fling it out of doors: she did fly up—asking how he could fashion to bring that gipsy brat into the house" (*WH* 35). Like Jane with Bertha, Nelly is aware that this child in front of her is a little boy, yet she repeatedly refers to him as "it" and calls him a "stupid little thing," even leaving him "on the landing of the stairs, hoping it might be gone on the morrow" (*WH* 35). She, as well as Mrs. Earnshaw and Hindley, dehumanizes him from the instant she lays eyes on him, admitting that she and Hindley "hated him...and the mistress never put a word in on his behalf, when she saw him wronged" (*WH* 36).

Even as Heathcliff grows up, his racial Otherness is continually emphasized by the proper English characters. Upon his meeting the Linton family at Thrushcross Grange, he is "pulled

under the chandelier, scrutinized through spectacles, and pronounced upon as if he were a specimen of some strange animal species...subjected to the potent gaze of a racial arrogance deriving from British imperialism” (Meyer 97). He is once again called a “gipsy” by the lady of the house, and Mr. Linton recalls that he must be “that strange acquisition my late neighbour made in his journey to Liverpool—a little Lascar, or an American or Spanish castaway” (*WH* 48).¹⁸ In the wake of Catherine’s transformation from a “wild, hatless little savage” into a “very dignified person,” Heathcliff seems to become all too aware of the difference between himself and the others, especially since Cathy now notices the difference too: “Why, how very black and cross you look!” she tells him upon their reunion before noting that “[she was] used to Edgar and Isabella Linton” (*WH* 51-52). Heathcliff tells Nelly, “if I knocked him down twenty times, that wouldn’t make him less handsome, or me more so. I wish I had light hair and a fair skin, and was dressed and behaved as well,” to which Nelly responds by telling him that “a good heart will help [him] to a bonny face...if [he] were a regular black” (*WH* 55-56). From here on out, Heathcliff is hyperaware of who he is, or rather, who is he not. Throughout the remainder of the novel, he is called “savage,” “a vulgar young ruffian,” “worse than a brute,” and a “monster” (*WH* 44, 66, 172). To this end, Heathcliff begins to internalize these assumptions and eventually to embrace them, understanding that he will always be seen as irreparably darkened in both appearance and behavior.

His marginalization on account of his racial ambiguity is what provokes his hatred and vengeance upon the Earnshaw and Linton families and allows him an outlet for his animalistic violence. Upon his return to the Heights and the Grange, Heathcliff appears to be a “tall, athletic,

¹⁸ “Lascar” is a term used to refer to someone from the East Indies, specifically an East Indian sailor (OED). Though not connected to West Indian slavery, this term, along with Nelly’s reference to China and India, nevertheless create more colonial connections to Heathcliff.

well-formed man,” who “looked intelligent, and retained no marks of former degradation,” and “reformed in every respect, apparently—quite a Christian” (*WH* 95, 98). But even though he maintains the illusion of civility, there remains a “half-civilized ferocity [lurking] yet in the depressed brows and eyes full of black fire,” and “that, though his exterior was altered, his mind was unchangeable, and unchanged” (*WH* 95, 100). Like Bertha, Heathcliff seems to have such an inherently savage nature that he is unable to be truly civilized. Cathy is aware that he is “an unreclaimed creature, without refinement—without cultivation...he’s a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man” (*WH* 102). Even Nelly, though she maintains some level of sympathy for him, realizes that his presence is like “an evil beast...waiting his time to spring and destroy” (*WH* 107). Isabella, once she becomes Heathcliff’s wife, also becomes all too familiar with his savagery. She writes and asks Nelly “Is Heathcliff a man?,” a question which she later answers in Nelly’s presence after running away from the Heights: “He’s not a human being” (*WH* 136, 172). Isabella then proceeds to compare him to a “bear,” a “dog,” and a “basilisk” (*WH* 175, 176, 177). This animalistic description of Heathcliff both dehumanizes him and emphasizes his behavior as an innate component of who he is.

Connected with the animalistic language is the repeated association between Heathcliff and cannibalism. Cathy tells Heathcliff that she “[likes Isabella] too well” to allow him to “absolutely seize and devour her up” (*WH* 106). Later, when speaking to Nelly, Heathcliff admits that, if Cathy’s feelings for Edgar ever faded away, then he “would have torn his heart out, and drank his blood!” (*WH* 148). Matthew Beaumont details the cannibalistic references throughout the novel and notes that this moment “carries vampiric overtones of course, but it also underlies the racial identification of Heathcliff as a savage that runs throughout Nelly’s

narrative” (146-147).¹⁹ For Beaumont, Heathcliff’s cannibalistic characterization is Brontë’s way of dissecting some of the “ideological myths that sustain the culture of colonialism” (146).

The way in which Brontë introduces Heathcliff to the novel appears intentionally to establish him as a representative slave figure. “Heathcliff is from the start referred to as a human commodity, an item of property” (Beaumont 142). Mr. Earnshaw claims that he found the boy “starving, and houseless, and as good as dumb, in the streets of Liverpool, where he picked it up and inquired for its owner” (*WH* 35). Alongside Liverpool’s notorious association with the transatlantic slave trade, this statement allows for a certain interpretation of Heathcliff’s “gipsy” appearance as a mixed-race or African child.²⁰ Another telling moment comes when the family names him Heathcliff, which acts as both his first and last name. This certainly seems reminiscent of the slave-owner tendency to rename their slaves with a sole name. Like enslaved Africans, “Heathcliff’s missing surname marks his unknown ancestry” and “[deprives him] of his history by British imperialism” (Meyer 108). When Mr. Earnshaw dies and Hindley takes control of the Heights, he “[drives Heathcliff] from their company and to the servants...[insisting] that he should do the labour out of doors instead, compelling him to do so as hard as any other lad on the farm,” and severing his familial ties to the Earnshaw family (*WH* 44). I believe that this is what completes Heathcliff’s transformation into a slave figure. As a nonwhite character, he is socially separated from the pure, white Englishness of the Earnshaws and the Lintons. Once he becomes a manual laborer on the grounds of the Heights, he is

¹⁹ Beaumont also includes an excerpt from *Colonization and Christianity* (1848), in which Howitt uses cannibalism as a primary marker of “barbaric values”: “We talk of other nations, in all other quarters of the world, as savages, barbarians, uncivilized... We shudder at the warcries of naked Indians and the ghastly feasts of Cannibals; and bless our souls that we are redeemed from all these things” (as quoted in Beaumont 146).

²⁰ Meyer notes that “in 1769, the year in which Mr. Earnshaw found Heathcliff in the Liverpool streets, the city was England’s largest slave-trading port, conducting seventy to eighty-five percent of the English slave trade” (98).

physically separated from them as well, deprived of any connection to the social and economic benefits becoming an English gentleman. Meyer argues that, in this position, “forced to labor in the fields, deprived of literacy, and beaten by his ‘master’ (one who certainly, despite their upbringing, never treats him as ‘a man and a brother’), Heathcliff is little better off than if he has remained on a Liverpool slave ship” (108).²¹

Reading Heathcliff as a tormented slave takes a turn once he becomes the master of *Wuthering Heights* in retaliation for the cruelty done unto him by Hindley. In the midst of his plan, he declares to Cathy that “The tyrant grinds down his slaves and they don’t turn against him, they crush those beneath them” (*WH* 112). This statement suggests that Heathcliff does indeed see himself as a slave, but also suggests that, even in that position, he is more powerful than the tyrant that rules over him. This is his excuse for usurping the remaining Earnshaws at the Heights. But once Hindley is dead, Heathcliff does not stop tormenting those around him. He becomes the tyrant figure he once hated so much, treating Hareton much like he, himself, was treated by Hindley. Maja-Lisa von Sniedern notes that during Heathcliff’s three-year absence, he “acquires a rudimentary gentleman’s education, speech and manners, [and] cash enough to ‘pass’” (179). His return to the Heights, then, feels like an attempt to beat those who mocked and degraded him at their own game, imparting on them the same savage treatment that he suffered at their hands.

This shift in his character, from oppressed to oppressor, appears to be a deliberate move by Brontë as a critique of slavery. Meyer sees Heathcliff’s revenge as an act of “reverse colonization,” where “physical force and economic power—coming from a mysterious external

²¹ One of the most identifiable images of the abolitionist movement was a carved wooden medallion with the image of a kneeling African man in chains with the words “Am I not a man and a brother?” printed underneath it. These medallions were mass-produced and sold throughout England and America to antislavery supporters.

source—take the place of law or local standards of morality. His actions hideously mimic the ugly brutality of British imperialism” (112, 116). Though I agree that Heathcliff’s brutal takeover of *Wuthering Heights* and subsequent barbaric treatment of the inhabitants is part of Brontë’s critique of colonialism and slavery, I believe that his plan for revenge is equally reminiscent of slave rebellions. Heathcliff’s actions can be interpreted as a response to his oppression throughout his youth, and the unchecked violence with which he enacts his plan mirrors the conventional depictions of slave rebellions that I discussed with *Jane Eyre*. His fervor in completing his quest for revenge is a manifestation of his savage “passion and lack of self-control,” qualities which he displays throughout the novel and “were often associated with primitive peoples during the period” (Tsao 99). Reading Heathcliff in this way also recalls Quashia, who was raised alongside white colonizers before rebelling against them.²² Heathcliff, even as he rebels and achieves a position of power, is still linked to unfavorable images and language associated with nonwhite people, forever unable to escape the degradation and corruption associated with racial Otherness.

Elsie Michie asks whether “Heathcliff [becomes] brutish because of Hindley’s neglect...or is he inherently savage?” (129). Knowing Brontë’s familiarity with the discourse surrounding slavery and abolition, it seems clear that the answer is a mix of both. From his youth, Heathcliff appears to have inherently savage qualities, but it is ultimately the abuse at the hands of Hindley and the Linton family’s utter disrespect that drive him to rebellion and revenge. This, of course, is a commonly-expressed belief in abolitionist rhetoric, that slaveowners are

²² The similarity here between Heathcliff and Quashia of the Brontë juvenilia is not lost on critics, even though Quashia is primarily Charlotte’s creation. Meyer remarks that it’s “possible that Emily Brontë’s Heathcliff owes something to the African Quashia Quamina,” and adds that “Brontë biographer Winifred Gérin believes that Quashia finds an echo” in Heathcliff (*Imperialism* 105). Carl Plasa and Sally Shuttleworth also mention the similarities, particularly since Bertha also shares these traits.

responsible for the (naturally and inherently) violent rebellions and behavior of their slaves. In one of Wilberforce's Parliamentary speeches, he stated that slavery "blackened [the Africans'] character and sunk them so low in the scale of animal beings, that some think the very apes are of a higher class" ("Speech" 48). Connected to this perception is the extent to which many abolitionists believed they could successfully civilize African slaves, which is mirrored in Heathcliff's façade of educated civility. Upon his return, he appears reformed, having improved himself, mentally and financially; however, he maintains the mask of civilized behavior for only so long before retreating back to his apparently naturally savage state of being, a state that, as Gilbert and Gubar explain, "[tests] the boundaries between human and animal, nature and culture" (293).

This mixing of opposing qualities is, of course, apparent in Heathcliff's uncertain racial status as well. This ambiguity is what drives the anxieties surrounding his character and makes him so important to the novel's larger point about slavery and colonialism. But von Sniedern notes that, while Brontë uses Heathcliff to "[critique] racialist presuppositions about Anglo-Saxon superiority," she also uses the question of his race to suggest the dangers of miscegenation (186). As with Bertha, Heathcliff's savage and uncivilized nature is associated with the corrupting influence so often attributed to racial mixing. His son Linton is, as von Sniedern argues, the novel's main example of miscegenation, embodying "most of the worst accidents and mistakes mixed blood could represent for mid-century England: disease, viciousness, treason, cowardice, duplicity, unmerited power, [and] shiftlessness" (184). Regardless of Brontë's generally progressive antislavery stance in the novel, in this moment she specifically "reimposes the taboo against miscegenation" and reinforces a clear racial separation (von Sniedern 186). This is evident at the end of the novel, where Hareton and Cathy the Second are the ones left

standing in a romantic union. Heathcliff, along with Linton, are eradicated so the novel can ultimately end with a relationship between two pure (read as: *white*) English characters. Just as in *Jane Eyre* and many of the texts that inspired it, *Wuthering Heights* draws clear and unsympathetic lines of demarcation between people of different races, which emphasizes the prevalent racist beliefs held by many at the time, including abolitionists.

The fact that Emily Brontë puts so much ideological weight on Heathcliff's character is perhaps the strongest evidence of abolitionist influence on *Wuthering Heights*. He is both a hero and villain, the tormented and the tormentor, enslaved and slavedriver. To this end, Heathcliff is remarkably developed, as Meyer argues, and allows the nonwhite races he represents to possess "an exceptionally fully realized status" (107). It seems that Brontë is invested in depicting a complex character, one who happens to be racially Other, in a way that is not reductive. For the most part, I believe Brontë was successful in this task. In contrast to *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* gives more credit and agency to its primary nonwhite character and Brontë allows her own sympathy for Heathcliff, and therefore all those who he stands in for, to creep into the development of his character. His racial difference forces him to lead a marginalized life, and he is left always on the outside looking in on a happy domestic life, just as he was left peering in the windows of Thrushcross Grange as a child. This, of course, invites readers to feel sympathy for him as well. As an apparent product of the cruel treatment during his childhood, there is a desire for Heathcliff to get justice and freedom from that oppression.

Sympathy for Heathcliff, however, does not come quite so easily. His violent tendencies become overwhelming and undermine any attempt to excuse his actions or feel sorry for him. In particular, his attitude towards Isabella is startlingly brutal. Responding to news of Isabella's feelings for him, Heathcliff warns Cathy of the potential outcome of their union: "You'd hear

odd things, if I lived alone with that mawkish, waxen face; the most ordinary would be painting on its white the colours of the rainbow, and turning the blue eyes black, every day or two” (*WH* 106). When they do eventually marry, Heathcliff’s hateful behavior is downright atrocious, calling her a “mere slut” and a “pitiful, slavish, mean-minded brach” to Nelly, adding that “the first things she saw me do, on coming out of the Grange, was to hang up her little dog, and when she pleaded for it the first words I uttered were a wish that I had the hanging of every being belonging to her” (*WH* 150-151). This does nothing to help Heathcliff’s character; it only works to prove that he is a reprehensible figure, framed by animalistic traits and savage violence. And because Brontë has so inextricably linked Heathcliff with racialized imagery and language throughout the course of her novel, she has also emphasized the connection between this barbaric behavior and nonwhite persons.

When considered alongside the abolitionist discourse in which Brontë was so invested, this monstrous description of Heathcliff seems terribly conflicted. Even as a child, her writing reflected sympathy for enslaved populations; at times, the same sentiments are present *Wuthering Heights*, potentially working to create a critique of colonialism and slavery. I agree with Meyer that “the novel does not morally endorse Heathcliff’s actions, and indeed it suggests the brutality of the imperialist project in part through them” (123). But Brontë’s critique is potentially undermined by the brutish depiction of Heathcliff, the one who is meant to carry the weight of her argument. Perhaps Brontë’s unsavory characterization of Heathcliff is an attempt to emphasize the danger of pro-slavery arguments, which could result in the sort of terrifying and brutal rebellion Heathcliff embodies. Maybe it is rooted in the abolitionist tendency to portray the inhumanity of slaveowners as beastly, much like it seems Charlotte did with Bertha. Both of these seem like valid and entirely possible options and are proof of Brontë’s familiarity and

engagement with abolitionist rhetoric. Meyer even suggests that “*Wuthering Heights* is more convincing than *Jane Eyre* in according an independent, more fully realized status to the people of the ‘dark races’ ...and in calling into question the oppressive might of the British empire” (123). However, Brontë, while promoting abolition, does so at the expense of Heathcliff’s character and in a way that engages in an unsympathetic and exaggerated portrayal of a oppressed, nonwhite character. Even Charlotte, who is equally guilty of such a portrayal, fails to register sympathy for Heathcliff. In her preface to *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte admits that, though characters like Catherine are “lost and fallen,” there are redemptive qualities; Heathcliff, however, “stands unredeemed; never once swerving in his arrow-straight course to perdition...,” a “child neither of Lascar nor gipsy, but a man’s shape animated by demon life—a Ghoul—an Afreet” (*WH* 369-370).²³ As we have seen, this approach to abolitionism may appear conflicted but is nevertheless a product of the abolitionist discourse itself.

Charlotte and Emily Brontë’s usage of racialized imagery and language to drive home their larger argument about the negative consequences of slavery, as I hope I have shown, is clearly an echo of the abolitionist rhetoric that they were exposed to for much of their lives. Bertha and Heathcliff are the center of the Brontës’ anxieties and emotions concerning British colonialism; the presence of these racially-ambiguous and colonially-contaminated characters in domestic English settings allow the sisters to bring their critiques of imperialist ventures closer to home. Much like the prominent abolitionist writers of the time, the Brontës use their stories to present a pointed argument about the potential degradation of a British society with a continued involvement in the institution of slavery. All abolitionists, however, were not as intentional about the degradation of Africans as they were the British, and many continued to use racist and

²³ “Afreet” is defined by the OED as “a powerful jinn or demon” based in “Arabian and Muslim mythology.”

reductive language to describe the enslaved in their writing. In a moment that captures the conflicting feelings towards Africans, Thomas Clarkson's *History* details the "miseries endured by the unfortunate Africans [that] excite our pity" while also pointing out the "vices, which are connected with them, [that] provoke our indignation and abhorrence" (21).²⁴ The savage and animalistic descriptions of both Bertha and Heathcliff appear to conform to this convention, despite their creators' active antislavery interest, and their deaths at the end of the novels do not allow room for these racially-Othered characters to exist in a civilized English world, resulting in abolitionism-informed texts that are relatively absent of any sympathy for the nonwhite characters. To this end, I believe that *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* are literary manifestations of the nineteenth-century abolitionist discourse and are artifacts of the complicated balance in that discourse between religious-based antislavery reasoning and stereotypical representations of enslaved African people.

²⁴ The vices which Clarkson was likely referring to are greed and lust, two things which were constantly associated with African people. Within the novels, these two vices are defining elements of Bertha, whose "vices sprang up fast and rank," and Heathcliff as well (*JE* 306).

5. CONCLUSION

My aim for this project was to show how Charlotte and Emily Brontë were actively engaged with the abolitionist cause for the majority of their lives by following the rhetoric of early nineteenth-century abolitionism as it appears throughout their works. Interest in abolition was not, for the Brontës, a passing fad; their lifelong exposure to the cause is evident in their writing from some of their earliest texts to their last.²⁵ Approaching these texts, particularly *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, with the abolitionist cause in mind allows for a reading which many critics have mentioned, but none have necessarily expanded upon. My argument, I hope, has provided enough detail and explanation to show why critical interest in this approach to the novels is warranted and important.

One of the primary benefits of reading the Brontës through an abolitionist lens is that it expands the cultural context of British abolition. It is a historical fact that the movement was widespread across England, but the extent to which it showed up in the lives of the general population can be found in the novels. Seymour Drescher states that “abolitionism progressively deepened its base and intensified its appeal far beyond the affluent and educated urbanites who always constituted the majority of local committees” (217). People from all backgrounds in both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* seem familiar with images and language commonly associated with colonialism and abolition. And indeed, this feels like a fairly accurate representation of the

²⁵ Many critics have noted how similar elements of colonialism and race appear in Charlotte’s other novels as well, such as *Shirley*, *Villete*, and the unfinished *Emma*. Christopher Heywood also points to Anne’s *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and Branwell’s *And the Weary are At Rest* as possessing equally complicated elements of colonialism, evidence that interest in this subject was indeed a family affair.

demographics of the abolitionist movement. Those who staunchly defended slavery were financially invested in the institution, leaving the rest of the British population with no metaphorical dog in the fight. What *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* accomplish by having characters that span such a broad socioeconomic spectrum is reflecting the equally broad and varying status of those involved in the abolitionist movement.

The Brontës' usage of abolitionist language in these novels, however, also represents two more selective groups of individuals who were vitally important to the success of the cause. The first of these groups is, of course, women. Historians have addressed how women provided invaluable support to the movement, appearing on public lists of abolition supporters as early as 1787, and eventually becoming what Drescher deems "an independent organizational component of the British antislavery movement" (217, 249). With their countless signatures on Parliamentary petitions and efforts to create and disseminate antislavery pamphlets, women were active participants in the public sphere and in promoting abolition; their presence and influence was certainly creating a noticeable effect. Drescher also notes how the movement "welcomed [women] to add their voices and pens to the abolitionist cause," to which they "responded dramatically as poets and public speakers" (218). To this end, Charlotte and Emily's own interest and involvement in abolition becomes a notable example of female support given through novels rife with antislavery sentiments. Though it is questionable whether or not the sisters were involved in the more common ways of supporting and furthering the movement, the novels can be seen as lengthy and far more complex versions of traditional abolitionist publications.

If we consider the Brontë novels as an example of female participation in the abolitionist movement, then they can also represent the involvement of rural communities as well. Though much of the abolitionist buzz was centered in and around larger cities, the message was

spreading rapidly through the rural English towns. Circuit speakers traveled “from town to town, urging audiences to circulate petitions, organize auxiliaries, and prepare for national elections” (Drescher, *Abolition* 252). The Brontës’ Haworth, as well as other nearby rural towns, had exposure to these speakers, who drew sympathy and support for the movement with their intense descriptions of the horrors of everyday life for a slave, as well as powerful messages about religious implications of continuing slavery. The large, condensed populations of London and other economic hubs such as Manchester and Liverpool drew the attention of leaders like Wilberforce, but the success of the movement was equally reliant on the support from the residents of the tiny towns that dot the English countryside.

The Brontës’ writings serve as evidence of the pervasiveness of abolition in nineteenth-century England. It is easy for modern readers to register abolition on a surface level, recalling a few important leaders and their accomplishments, but the movement was much more than that. It was an overwhelming national organization that reached every part of British society. The Brontës, living in Haworth, were removed from the Parliamentary proceedings in London, but their isolation did not mean they were disengaged. As I’ve previously detailed, their familiarity with colonial influence, both on a national and local level, is apparent in their writings, manifesting as veiled references to Yorkshire families with colonial interests while mirroring the language and ideas of William Wilberforce. It is necessary to remember this when reading the Brontës in the context of abolitionist rhetoric, as it shows how abolition affected various social groups, like women and rural communities, and how those groups showed support for the cause despite never being at the center of the movement.

The sisters’ inclusion of images and language reminiscent of the abolitionist discourse in their writings is, as I have mentioned, evidence of a lifelong exposure and interest in the cause.

The existing scholarship that addresses this key element in the Brontës' works often does so in a way that steers the conversation away from a postcolonial/abolition-informed reading and towards a reading concerned with gender or class. Critics like Elsie Michie and Maryanne Ward argue that the Brontës use the metaphor of slavery as a vehicle for their critique of the oppression of women and the working class in Victorian England. Even Meyer, Thomas, and Sharpe, while conscious of the Brontës' own interest in abolition and detailed in their analysis of the novels' racialized imagery and language, seem to ultimately link those elements to a larger debate on gender and/or class. Though I do believe there are connections between race, gender, and class in both novels, I hesitate to attribute all of the references to slavery and abolition as a means to some other end. Instead, I argue that the Brontës' usage of abolitionist language should be considered as a legitimate critique of colonialism and slavery. Reading the novels in this manner, alongside the other critiques of gender and class, positions *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* as social problem novels that address multiple problematic elements of Victorian society. In doing so, the significance of these texts can extend beyond the boundaries of Gothic romance which have contained them for so long. These novels are more than creepy and mysterious happenings and Byronic heroes; the implications of reading the Brontë novels as serious statements on social issues could even extend to non-academic audiences that often see these novels as girlishly romantic.

An abolitionist reading of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* also provides a new approach to the conflict between the Brontës' progressive attitudes about oppression and slavery and their unflattering depictions of people of color that has been an issue of debate in Brontë scholarship and postcolonial criticism for years. With abolitionist rhetoric in mind, the two sides of that debate do not have to be mutually exclusive. The conflicting attitudes of the novels can be

seen as a unified example of the abolitionist discourse of the early nineteenth-century. Abolitionist rhetoric, as we have seen, was simultaneously unsympathetic in its opinion of enslaved Africans while also being unrelenting in its goal of complete emancipation. It is essential to start with the sisters' juvenilia in this approach because from there, their interest and attitudes towards British colonialism and colonial subjects can be traced throughout their lives and develops along with the changing social opinion towards the topic. By the time *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* were published in 1847, over a decade post-abolition, the sisters had been using colonialism and subsequent colonial anxieties in their writing for years, and because of this, the imagery and language used in the novels should be acknowledged as products of lifelong interest and awareness, not just convenient metaphors for class and gender oppression.

Given all of this information, it seems that the Brontës were quite serious and intentional about crafting stories that would certainly remind readers of Britain's involvement with slavery and the tremendous effort to abolish it, especially given the novels' retrospective settings.²⁶ The moral conflict presented in the novels between pro-abolition attitudes and anti-racial Other language, then, is not their downfall; on the contrary, it likely reflects the same feelings many British subjects felt at the time. In reading the novels, and certainly in reading through the juvenilia, there is a distinct element to the texts that feels like the author's genuine attempt to use their writing as a space to ruminate and respond to social problems. Unlike Wilberforce's stately speeches, or even other popular social problem novels such as those written by Dickens, which feel propagandistic and preachy, *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* seem like genuine efforts to

²⁶ Thomas, in her article "Christianity and the State of Slavery in *Jane Eyre*," carefully tracks the dates of major events in the novel. By her accounts, Bertha and Rochester marry in 1819, Jane initially arrives at Thornfield in 1832 and returns in 1834, which places Bertha's death sometime in 1833. This is quite important considering Bertha's death then aligns with the abolition of slavery in British territories and lends weight to the argument that the Brontës were intentional about the specific slavery critique by using this specific time frame.

process the complex conversations surrounding abolition and other social and political problems of the Victorian era.

Though I am not suggesting excusing or overlooking their usage of degrading racialized language throughout the novels, Charlotte and Emily's attempts to create novels informed by abolitionist rhetoric should not necessarily be considered failures because of the language used to describe the racially-Othered Bertha and Heathcliff, who act as representative slave figures. The confused and conflicted attitudes towards these characters are mirrored in the conflict that also appears when reading the novels as gender or class critiques. The Brontës' use of abolitionist rhetoric in concordance with still-racist language, then, ultimately does not, and should not, discredit their critique of colonialism and slavery. Many leaders of the abolitionist movement were still praised as antislavery advocates despite continuing to portray enslaved Africans as pitiful, helpless, and uncivilized creatures, and these novels can certainly be seen as products of that sort of thinking. The popularity of these novels ensures that those outside of the field of Brontë criticism have something to gain from reading them in an abolitionist context, as they speak to the diverse support for the abolitionist movement and provide sharp critiques of Victorian social problems, and yet still stand as a reminder of ever-progressing rhetoric surrounding those who have been Othered. *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, though adhering to conventional unsympathetic depictions of the enslaved, are nevertheless novels that promote abolition and exemplify the complicated nature of the abolitionist discourse of the early nineteenth century.

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APPENDIX A

Brontë Chronology

- Charlotte born—21 April 1816
- Emily born—30 July 1818
- The Brontë family moves to Haworth—20 April 1820
- Charlotte and Emily go to Cowan Bridge School—1824
- The two oldest Brontë sisters, Elizabeth and Maria, die—1825
- The Brontë children are gifted tiny wooden figures by their father, which later inspires the Glass Town saga—1826
- Charlotte's earliest existing manuscript, "There once was a little girl named Ane"—Jan. 1828
- Charlotte arrives at Roe Head School—17 Jan. 1831; Returns to Haworth—20 June 1832
- The creative split between the siblings occurs; Branwell and Charlotte create Angria, an extension of Glass Town, while Emily and Anne break away to create Gondal—1834
- Charlotte returns to Roe Head as a teacher, brings Emily along as a student—29 July 1835
- Charlotte sends poetry to Robert Southey, who responds by telling her that "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be"—Dec. 1836
- Emily becomes governess of a school in Halifax, only staying six months before returning home to Haworth—1838
- Charlotte writes "Farewell to Angria"—Sept. 1839
- The sisters travel to Brussels—8 Feb.-8 Nov. 1842
- Charlotte finds a collection of Emily's poetry, persuades her to work on a joint collection—1845
- *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell* is published—May 1846
- *The Professor*, written by Charlotte, is rejected by publishers—July 1846
- Emily writes her final Gondal poem—1846
- *Jane Eyre* is published—19 Oct. 1847
- *Wuthering Heights* is published, along with Anne's *Agnes Grey*, in three volumes—Dec. 1847
- Emily dies—19 Dec. 1848
- Charlotte meets William Makepeace Thackeray, to whom she dedicates the second edition of *Jane Eyre*—1849
- *Shirley* is published—26 Oct. 1849
- Charlotte meets Elizabeth Gaskell—Aug. 1850
- Charlotte's edited versions of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* published—10 Dec. 1850
- *Villette* is published—28 Jan. 1853

- Charlotte marries Arthur Nicholls—29 June 1854
- Charlotte dies—31 March 1855
- *The Professor* is posthumously published—1857
- Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Bronte* is published—1857

APPENDIX B

Brontë interaction with abolition

- In the Brontës' private library at Haworth, they owned books written by Hannah More and William Paley, notable anti-slavery supporters.
 - The copy of More's *Moral Sketches of Opinions and Manners* (1819) is annotated by Patrick Brontë, and the book makes clear More's anti-slavery stance: "...the African slave-trade should be effectually abolished—not in promises, and on papers, but in very deed and act" (22).
 - Though William Paley's *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785) was not one of the books in the Brontës' library, it is still likely they had exposure to it. In it, Paley refers to slavery as "an institution replete with human misery" and an "odious institution" (163, 164). He also, however, believes that "the emancipation of the slaves should be gradual" and refers to the "savage inhabitants...upon the coast of Africa" (164, 308).
- One of Charlotte's letters acknowledges a list of books sent to her by her publishers. These included William Hazlitt's *Essays on Men and Manners* (1822) and essays by Thomas Babington Macaulay, two more dedicated abolitionists.
 - Macaulay's father, Zachary, worked side by side with William Wilberforce in an effort to abolish slavery.
- There is evidence that Charlotte (and perhaps Emily) was in contact with William Howitt, a Quaker who supported abolition.
 - Charlotte mentions Howitt in multiple letters, referring to his favorable reviews *Jane Eyre*.
 - Christopher Heywood claims that Howitt's *The Rural Life of England* (1838) influenced, at least partially, *Wuthering Heights*, particularly concerning the perception of mixed-race individuals in the English countryside.²⁷
- There is evidence that anti-slavery meetings regularly took place in Keighley, which is about four miles from Haworth, and the Keighley Mechanics Institute, which Patrick Brontë was a member of and the family borrowed books from, hosted George Thompson and J.J. Gurney, two abolitionist speakers, sometime in the late 1830s to early 1840s.
 - Anti-slavery meetings also frequently occurred in Bradford, Halifax, and Huddersfield, all of which are within twenty miles of Haworth. Meetings were advertised in newspapers like *The Leeds Mercury*, which the Brontës read

²⁷ Heywood, Christopher. "Yorkshire Slavery in *Wuthering Heights*." *Review of English Studies*, vol. 38, no. 150, May 1987, pp. 184-198.

APPENDIX C

Why 1847?

Why, over ten years after the abolition of slavery in British territories, would the Brontë sisters choose to use these ideas to support their novels? There are several significant events in the years before the publication of these novels that may have rekindled the national (and the Brontës') interest in the slave trade.

- World's first Anti-Slavery Convention (1840)
 - Attended by many popular abolitionists from both the UK and America, including Thomas Clarkson. Several American women also attended, which caused a bit of an uproar. Many believed the work British women did to achieve abolition earned them a place at the table.
 - George Thompson also attended, as well as the Rev. Benjamin Godwin, a Baptist minister from Bradford who gave several anti-slavery lectures in and around the town.
- Repeal of Corn Laws (1846)
 - The mobilization of the Anti-Corn Law League in the wake of abolition utilized many techniques made popular by the abolitionist movement, like lecture circuits and pamphlet distribution. The push for free trade won over the middle-class and soon the remaining anti-slavery societies, like the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, were overlooked in favor of organizations working towards free trade.
 - The BFASS held that free trade would encourage slavery, while the ACLL argued that maintaining regulations on things like colonial sugar only benefitted the West Indian planters and accused abolitionists of caring more about freed slaves than the “white slaves’ suffering under the economic bondage of the corn laws” (Morgan 93).
- Sugar Duties Act of 1846
 - In the wake of abolition, the British government increased duties on foreign (slave-grown) sugar, essentially ensuring that the British colonies maintained a monopoly on the sugar consumed in their country. However, the production of sugar in the West Indies went down tremendously and the price of sugar went up. Advocates of free trade believed that equalizing duties on foreign and colonial sugar “could promise moral progress as well as cheaper sugar,” by allowing people to “have their conscience, their sugar, and eat it [too],” instead of being forced “to pay for their morality” (Huzzey 361).
 - In Parliament, Sir George Clerk claimed that “the depression to which the West Indian interest had been subject for some time” was the result of abolition and that the damage done “afforded a fair claim to legislative protection” by the government (50).²⁸ Edward

²⁸ Quoted from *The Annual Register*.

Cardwell defended this idea and took it a step further in a bold statement: “It was all well to say that slavery was the bane of the West Indies; but if it were so, who authorized the

existence of slavery in those islands? And if the supply of sugar had fallen off after the abolition of slavery, who had caused that abolition? Re-enact slavery [and] license the importation of slaves” (53).

- In 1846, the same year that the Corn Laws were repealed, the Sugar Duties Act was finally enacted, which equalized the duties on foreign and British colonial sugar.