Seeking Wild Eyre: Victorian Attitudes Towards Landscape and the Environment in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

Jennifer D. Fuller
Warner University

Abstract

Applying techniques from the growing field of ecocriticism, this article uses *Jane Eyre* to explore a growing environmental awareness among middle-class Victorians and demonstrate how their need to preserve a "wild" or "natural" landscape coincides with ideas of liberty and freedom prevalent in the novel. By looking at Jane's changing interactions with and interpretations of the natural world, we can gain a better understanding of the value and interpretation of landscape to the Victorians. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane's journeys continually lead her to finding a way to balance her human wants and needs with the "wildness" of the natural world.

Keywords: Nature, *Jane Eyre*, Victorian, landscape, freedom

Resumen

Aplicando técnicas del creciente campo de la ecocrítica, este artículo utiliza *Jane Eyre* para explorar una conciencia ambiental cada vez mayor entre los victorianos de clase media y demostrar cómo su necesidad de preservar un paisaje "salvaje" o "natural" coincide con las ideas de libertad en la novela. Al observar las interacciones cambiantes de Jane con el mundo natural y sus interacciones con éste, podemos comprender mejor el valor del paisaje y cómo se interpretaba en la época victoriana. En *Jane Eyre*, los viajes de Jane continuamente la llevan a encontrar una manera de equilibrar sus deseos y necesidades humanos con el "salvajismo" del mundo natural.

Palabras clave: Naturaleza, *Jane Eyre,* Victoriano, paisaje, libertad

ECOZON@ | *Vol 4, No 2*

Introduction

Any cursory survey of criticism of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* will reveal a myriad of approaches to the topic of landscape. Studies address the artistic merits of landscape, feminism and landscape, animals and landscape, as well as describe the impact of landscape on character and plot.[1] Within this vast body of excellent scholarship, the impetus has always been to examine landscape as a way to generate insight about the novel or its characters. This article will instead reverse that traditional

[1] As a representative sample, consider: Bewell, Flaxman, Gilbert and Gubar, Hagan and Wells, Locy, Nockolds, Roy, and Taylor.

order and use the novel as a way to conceptualize Victorian interpretations of landscape and the larger perception of nature as a whole. By applying techniques from the growing field of ecocriticism,[2] this article uses *Jane Eyre* to explore a growing environmental awareness among middle-class Victorians and demonstrate how their need to preserve a "wild" or "natural" landscape coincides with ideas of liberty and freedom prevalent in the novel. I argue that while Jane seeks a connection to the mythic "wildness" of England, she must balance this desire with the human need for protective boundaries and must learn to find harmony between liberty and safety.

At first glance, the idea of the Victorians as environmentally considerate seems farfetched. After all, this was the age of railroads, mills, coal mining, the exponential growth of industries and cities, and territorial expansion abroad. As ecocritic John Parham explains, this last development was especially problematic as it produced "a colonial attitude toward the environment: a ruthless exploitation of natural resources and the arbitrary transformation of the environment with no regard for regional traditions and experiences[. . .] As the modern age unfolded, the colonial attitude shaped the treatment of the environment not only in the colonies but sometimes also in the colonial motherlands" (Parham, *The Environmental Tradition* 153) In the "motherlands," however, these radical changes also brought with them a new awareness of

> ecological problems—sanitation, air quality, disease, [and] deforestation. Consequently, it became an age of observation, investigation, and social responsibility, in turn, prompting campaigning, political intervention, and legislation. This impulse to intervene, to say and do something, permeated Victorian literary culture, for instance in the great Victorian social novelists, Dickens, Gaskell, Kingsley, and so on. (Parham, *The Environmental Tradition* 163)

Scholars of American literature have been quick to explore the connections between the need to preserve the "wildness" of the landscape and the human need to create boundaries for protection and self-interest, but across the Atlantic these developments have been less clear.[3] While literary ecocritics have recently begun to explore the connections between Victorian writers and environmental awareness, especially in relation to urban conditions or in the landscape-centered novels of Thomas Hardy or nature poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, many take the view of Scott Russell Sanders that "In the work of British novelists from Defoe and Fielding through Austen, Dickens, [and] George Eliot [. . .] the social realm—the human morality play—is a far more powerful presence than nature" (Sanders 183).[4] It is true that social interactions

[2] I use this term broadly, as John Parham does when he explains, "The project of ecocriticism might be summarized as, 'the examination of nature through words, images, and models for the purpose of foregrounding potential effects representation might have on cultural attitudes and social practices which, in turn, affect nature itself'" (*The Environmental Tradition* 211).

[3] Lawrence Buell's landmark ecocritical study inspired a number of fruitful articles on the role of the environment in American literature. Nineteenth-century American ecocriticism has thus far proved more prolific than British, with recent studies of Thoreau alone including Barron, Howarth, McTier, Nichols, and Schulz.

[4] Victorian ecocriticism has gained popularity over the last decade with recent examples including Carroll, Gold, Christopher, Martell, and Parham, "Green Man Hopkins."

 ISSN 2171-9594

separate domestic works like *Jane Eyre* from the urban center where Victorian attention on environmental issues often centered, yet this does not necessarily imply that an ecocritical reading is unprofitable.

It is, in fact, precisely this sort of novel that provides a glimpse into the views that rural Victorians, seemingly disassociated from the sweeping changes taking place in cities or in colonies abroad, held towards the landscapes that influenced their lives on a daily basis. As Victorian ecocritic James Winter explains:

> When Victorians used the word *environment* (and this would have been rare), they would probably not have had in mind a general setting to which all the world's inhabitants must adjust. Neither would they be thinking of an interacting global system where every human intervention must have some wide-ranging consequence. In the nineteenth century, connotations would have been closer to the etymological roots of *environment*: the country around, the neighborhood, the environs, the stretch of topography that gave definition to a place, one's own surroundings. (Winter 19)

In a novel like *Jane Eyre,* the focus is indeed rather narrow, with the environment limited to the few locations Jane travels to on her journeys.[5] This focus is, however, one of the great strengths of the domestic novel, as it allows us a glimpse into the "everyday" Victorians' perception of the connection between self and nature, as enacted through the English landscape. By looking at Jane's changing interactions with and interpretations of the natural world, we can gain a better understanding of the value and interpretation of landscape to the Victorians. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane's journeys continually lead her to finding a way to balance her human wants and needs with the "wildness" of the natural world.

Beginnings: Jane at Gateshead

The opening line of *Jane Eyre* immediately connects Jane with the natural environment, but also separates her from it with an unnatural boundary. Jane tells the reader, "There was no possibility of talking a walk that day. We had been wandering, indeed, in the leafless shrubbery an hour in the morning; but since dinner [. . .] the cold winter wind had brought with it clouds so somber, and a rain so penetrating, that further outdoor exercise was now out of the question."[6] These two images, of Jane walking in a desolate enclosed natural world or living in a world where cold prevents such walks, dominate her early life at Gateshead. Jane finds herself born into a highly unnatural world, where nature is both contained and frozen. Looking out at a "drear November day" which offered only "a pale blank of mist and cloud [. . .] with ceaseless rain sweeping away wildly before a long and lamentable blast," it is not surprising that Jane is "glad" to have missed a walk (8). Jane also reminds the reader that the panes of glass through which views this day "were protecting, but not separating" her from the

[5] There is also, of course, Bertha Mason's association with the West Indies, but the topographical descriptions of Jamaica in the novel are highly limited and thus of less interest to this particular environmental study.

[6] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 7. Further references to *Jane Eyre* are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text

 ISSN 2171-9594

cold, blank, vision (8). Thus, from the opening paragraphs, nature is intimately connected to Jane's vision, even while its violence makes interaction impractical. Jane can escape her imprisonment through reading leaving nature to rage, cold and loud.

Prevented from seeking nature by the harsh weather, Jane instead seeks out images of natural landscape in her book, Bewick's *History of British Birds*. Yet even in the pages of fiction, nature appears cold and forlorn. Jane finds herself drawn to Arctic regions, "the bleak shores of Lapland, Siberia, Spitzbergen, Nova Zembla, Iceland, Greenland" where nothing seems to exist but ice and snow (8). Jane does not view these frozen landscapes, both indoors and out, as a reflection of her inner torment, but instead treats them as an inspiring and moving spectacle. She notes, "Of these death-white realms I formed an idea of my own; shadowy, like all the half-comprehended notions that float dim through children's brains, but strangely impressive (8)." Unlike Jane's world, which is bounded by drawing rooms and panes of glass, the Arctic is wild and free, a place where strange and dark figures exist that Jane can neither fully describe nor fully understand. Sidney Dobrin and Kenneth B. Kidd, critics of children's literature, note that "In depictions of Arctic regions, humanity is dwarfed and yet ennobled by its hubristic attempt to penetrate the sublime Arctic realms. At the same time, the lifeless, frozen landscape, littered with the detritus of human effort, compels. Northernness seems beyond human capacity yet is the key to heroic identity" (Dobin and Kidd 202).[7] Though the walls of Gateshead and the icy realms beyond enclose Jane, it is this very enclosure that inspires her to act and impels her to journey on and find new versions of herself. Brontë critic Catherine Lanone also comments on the connection between the North and heroism stating, "For Charlotte, and for English people at the time, the North was a concept, not a mere geographical area, all the more so as the discourse of polar exploration was a gendered discourse, casting men as heroic discoverers and women as complacent admirers endlessly waiting for their return—and their stories" (118). As Jane cannot explore the frozen landscapes of Gateshead, she instead casts herself as the "heroic discoverer" in her fictional world, defying the enclosure of the domestic space, and melding Bewick's images of the North with exciting and terrifying English stories. She connects her imaginings to "the tales Bessie sometimes narrated on winter evenings [. . .] passages of love and adventure taken from old fairy tales and older ballads" (9). She connects her visions to the spirit of "Old England," a place of magic and terrible beauty inhabited by uncontrollable and unpredictable spirits, rendering those visions inhospitable and frightening. In essence, Jane combines the Arctic with a vision of England, a place barely remembered as if from a dream, where wild creatures and fantastical ideas live. Jane has no power in the domestic world she inhabits, so she claims power through imagination and the power of storytelling.

Jane is awakened from her fantasy, however, by the cruel actions of John Reed and thus by the realities of confinement that dominate her life. Suffering the physical assaults of her cousin John and the verbal assaults of Mrs. Reed, Jane begins to doubt

[7] Dobrin and Kidd not only connect *Jane Eyre* with spiritual and physical pilgrimages in the Arctic, they also note that 1818-1859 was the "height of British Arctic exploration" 201.

 ISSN 2171-9594

that freedom exists in the natural world and wonders if the wild and fantastic only exist in the landscapes of books. Jane seeks solace in *Gulliver's Travels*, stating, "I had at length made up my mind to the sad truth that [the elves] were all gone out of England to some savage country, where the woods were wilder and thicker, and the population more scant" (21). Even imaginary landscapes provide no comfort, and Jane finds her books sadly changed: "all was eerie and dreary; the giants were gaunt goblins, the pigmies malevolent and fearful imps, Gulliver a most desolate wanderer in most dread and dangerous regions" (21). Like Jane herself, the wild spaces of England have lost their "magic," which Jane argues in her statement about the "elves" is due to the destruction of the woodlands and overpopulation. Unless Jane, and by extension the people of England, can recover the links to the "wild" magic of old, they are doomed to remain forever frozen in cold boundaries. There is no hope at a traditional manor house like Gateshead, for Jane or for England, and thus, like Gulliver, she must travel into realms unknown in order to reclaim what has been lost.

Freedom and enclosure: The landscape of Lowood

As Jane departs from Gateshead and begins her journey to Lowood, she experiences a moment of pure joy as "we ceased to pass through towns; the country changed; great grey hills heaved up round the horizon: as twilight deepened, we descended a valley, dark with wood, and long after night had overclouded the prospect, I heard a wild wind rushing amongst the trees" (14). The journey, away from the industrial and domestic trap of towns into a natural world untouched by man or harvest, deep within a forest, advances Jane's hopefulness that this next living situation will be better than the cold, enclosed life she has known. After waking from a deep slumber, however, Jane finds her dream of escape to a wild wood transformed when she arrives at Lowood where "rain, wind, and darkness filled the air" (14). After passing through a door that is quickly locked behind her, Jane finds herself in another domestic trap where all she can see is "a house or houses—for the building spread far" (14). The woods promise freedom, but Jane quickly discovers that the humans at Lowood have transformed yet another wild space into an endless span of buildings. It seems Jane is doomed to repeat her experiences at Gateshead, where nature is frozen and Jane is separated from any connection to it. Yet, the teachers do allow Jane walks in the garden, a pleasure denied to her at Gateshead.

The garden at Lowood proves not to be an Arcadian idyll, as Jane quickly discovers. She reports:

> The garden was a wide enclosure, surrounded with walls so high as to exclude every glimpse of prospect; a covered verandah ran down one side, and broad walks bordered a middle space divided into scores of little beds: these beds were assigned as gardens for the pupils to cultivate, and each bed had an owner. When full of flowers they would, doubtless, look pretty; but now, at the latter end of January, all was wintry blight and brown decay [. . .]It was an inclement day for our-door exercise; not positively rainy, but darkened by a drizzling yellow fog (48).

 ISSN 2171-9594

While Lowood does offer Jane a chance to interact with nature outside the pages of books, her experience is highly regulated. Walls and beds control natural instinct, with plants allowed to grow only when and where the school decides. Thus, at Lowood, the garden quickly becomes associated with cold, decay, and death. The idea of a decaying and dying garden would have resonated strongly with the Victorian readership. As Brontë critic Eithne Henson notes, the garden was "often defined as a woman's space, a safe boundary between the domestic and the wider world" where the girls "are continually under surveillance indoors and out, night and day, walking in crocodile on their only excursions outside the spiked walls, 'protected' from wild nature and its possible male inhabitants" (7, 35). The garden was also important for female education, as historian William M. Taylor explains, "Home improvement, gardening and interior decoration were important modes of imaginative play, self-expression and discovery, whereby a belief in the spontaneous order of the natural world informed practices aimed at transforming residents into 'better'—that is, more responsible, more productive—citizens through the care of their domestic environs" (124). Victorians, then, connected the garden with the idea of protecting and educating women, but they also viewed the garden as deeply connected to environmental concerns. As ecocritic Richard Grove has argued, the garden acted as a "metapho[r] of mind. Anxieties about environmental change, climatic change and extinctions and even the fear of famine, all of which helped to motivate early environmentalism, mirrored anxiety about social form [. . .] and motivated social reform. At the core of environmental concern lay anxiety about society and its discontents" (14). Parham agrees adding,

> There is little doubt that the garden, especially in conjunction with fruit trees, is one of the most elementary forms of human Interaction with nature all over the world, from the earliest times to the present. In the garden was born a sense of sustainability as well as an ideal of beautiful nature. Ian Tyrrell has shown that garden idylls in the nineteenth century stood at the beginning of environmental politics in Australia as well as in California. (*The Environmental Tradition* 55)

Since the Victorians generally viewed the garden as a safe, enclosed, educational space for women, and often connected the garden with larger concerns about society and its place in nature, then Brontë's choice to depict Lowood as a cold, diseased garden when Jane arrives is a highly subversive act. Brontë calls into question any benefits Jane might receive at the charity school, but more importantly, argues that the "natural" space Victorian women inhabit is corrupted and unstable.

Enclosed spaces stifle Jane and only when she discovers the world outside the garden does she begin to take pleasure in a burgeoning Spring. Jane explains that along with walks and flowers, "I discovered, too, that a great pleasure, an enjoyment which the horizon only bounded, lay all outside the high and spike-guarded walls of our garden: this pleasure consisted in a prospect of noble summits girdling a great hill-hollow, rich in verdure and shadow; in a bright beck, full of dark stones and sparkling eddies" (75). Jane's happiness comes from her discovery of the world outside the walls of Lowood, a world she can for the first time truly see and appreciate. She finds great joy in the wood

 ISSN 2171-9594

surrounding Lowood as "It became all green, all flowery, its great elm, ash, and oak skeletons were restored to majestic life; woodland plants sprang up profusely in its recesses; unnumbered varieties of moss filled its hollows, and it made a strange ground-sunshine out of the wealth of its primrose plants [. . .]All this I enjoyed often an fully, free, unwatched, and almost alone: for this unwonted liberty and pleasure, there was a cause" (76). It is the not the flowers that grow in the organized gardens of Lowood that please Jane, but the wild moss, trees, and plants that live outside the boundaries of the school. Yet while she appreciates the chance to interact with the natural world, Jane quickly learns that humanity must pay a price for settling a community in the fog-filled forest: infectious disease. Alan Bewell argues "The 'unwonted liberty' that underlies [the] Romantic appreciation of nature has been made possible by the appearance of epidemic typhus at Lowood, caused [Jane] believes by these surroundings" (773). Of course, the "fog-bred pestilence" is dangerous only to the human interlopers, the invaders of an otherwise sunny and joyous forest. Lowood's attempts to keep the forest at bay with walls, or tame it with gardens, only lead to the spreading of illness and decay. The infection, however, provides Jane with her first taste of liberty as she "and the rest who continued well, enjoyed full the beauties of the scene and season: they let us ramble in the woods, like gipsies[sic], from morning till night; we did what we liked, went where we liked: we lived better too" (77). Jane, who appreciates the wildness and freedom of the woods, is not affected by disease but instead strengthened by her time in nature. For Victorians like Brontë, escaping from the boundaries of towns and schools was essential for the health and wellbeing of children.

New boundaries: The orchard of Thornfield

Jane's time of liberty in the woods, combined with the loss of childhood friend Helen Burns, leads her to long for freedom from the walls and gardens of Lowood. As she relates, "I went to my window, opened it, and looked out. There were the two wings of the building; there was the garden; there were the skirts of Lowood; there was the hilly horizon. My eye passed all other objects to rest on those most remote, the blue peaks: it was those I longed to surmount; all within their boundary of rock and heath seemed prison-ground, exile limits" (85). Like the explorers in her childhood stories, Jane needs to break established boundaries. Inspired by the seemingly boundless landscape at the end of her vision, Jane longs for liberty or "at least a new servitude!" (85). She seeks both with her new position at Thornfield. As she journeys she remarks, "I felt we were in a different region to Lowood, more populous, less picturesque; more stirring, less romantic" (95). Examining her new surroundings, Jane records, "Farther off were hills: not so lofty as those round Lowood, nor so craggy, nor so like barriers of separation from the living world; but yet quiet and lonely hills enough, and seeming to embrace Thornfield with a seclusion I had not expected to find existent so near the stirring locality of Millcote" (99). As Jane predicts, at Thornfield she has found a new servitude in a new landscape, not within the prescriptive walls and gardens of Lowood, but within

 ISSN 2171-9594

the warm and comforting "embrace" of the hills that enclose Thornfield. Kadish reads this depiction as a word painting, stating "As may be expected in a prospect, this landscape stresses the property's artistic design, its rich if somewhat neglected plantings, its spaciousness and ancient look, its integration into the surrounding community, which it both crowns and complements. In this landscape, everything about the property bespeaks order, tranquility, and prosperity" (Kadish 175). While this description is all true, it also foreshadows Jane's discovery of a new type of boundary at Thornfield, one so comforting and familiar that she does not at first recognize its restrictions.

Free from the constraints of Lowood's gardens, Jane glories in her new freedom, taking walks in the wild spaces of Thornfield, including "a lane noted for wild roses in summer, for nuts and blackberries in autumn, and even now possessing a few coral treasures in hips and haws; but whose best winter delight lay in its utter solitude and leafless repose" (111). It is in this wild lane between Thornfield and the dark wood beyond that Jane first encounters Rochester. At first he appears a wild spirit, associated with the Gytrash and other characters from Bessie's stories, a frightening figure from an older, untamed England. Upon recognizing Rochester's humanity, however, Jane quickly becomes disillusioned, stating, "The man, the human being, broke the spell at once. Nothing ever rode the Gytrash: it was always alone; and goblins, to my notions, though they might tenant the dumb carcasses of beasts, could scarce covet shelter in the common-place human form" (112). Despite his connection to wildness and freedom, Rochester is still just "a man," a human being, connected like Jane to the landscape, but also unable to experience its true "wild" nature.

Jane finds a great deal of liberty in the grounds of Thornfield, but for Rochester they represent as much of a prison as Jane's garden at Lowood. For Jane, Thornfield and its environs contain all the romanticism of nature in England's golden age. She explains:

> A splendid Midsummer shone over England: skies so pure, suns so radiant as were then seen in long succession, seldom favour, even singly, our wave-girt land. It was as if a band of Italian days had come from the South, like a flock of glorious passenger birds, and lighted to rest on the cliffs of Albion. The hay was all got in; the fields round Thornfield were green and shorn; the roads white and baked; the trees were in their dark prime: hedge and wood, full-leaved and deeply tinted, contrasted well with the sunny hue of the cleared meadows between. (247)

While Jane's vision of the glories of Thornfield in the height of summer rivals a Constable painting in its verdant depiction of the English landscape, Rochester is surprisingly absent from the idyllic view. Instead, Jane finds Rochester smoking his oft-remarked upon cigar not in an open field or wild wood, but in an orchard. She describes the orchard as "Eden-like; it was full of trees, it bloomed with flowers: a very high wall shut it out from the court, on one side; on the other, a beech avenue screened it from the lawn. At the bottom was a sunk fence; its sole separation from the lonely fields: a winding walk, bordered with laurels and terminating in a giant horse-chestnut [. . .] led down to the fence" (248). Intriguingly, Jane sees Rochester in an "Eden," a garden, a

 ISSN 2171-9594

feminized landscape she has recently rejected. Nonetheless, Jane finds comfort in enclosing herself and Rochester in a garden at Thornfield. This choice is perhaps not surprising considering that "In the nineteenth century, gardens [. . .] carried with them the most pleasing aspects of the rural; they represented a Nature that was homely, not savagely appetitive, but pastoral gentle and green. Situated between the sublime landscapes of the Romantic past and the disordered-but-cultured city of the Victorian present, gardens functioned at the level of "humanized landscape", as "knowable havens that could soothe and delight" (Dowler, Carubia, and Szcygiel n.p.). In placing Rochester in a garden, Jane works to enclose and "humanize" him, separating him from his wild, and thus frightening, associations. Despite her early longings for the wildness and freedom of the untamed, in both landscapes and companionship, Jane opts for safety while living at Thornfield. With a burgeoning relationship developing with Rochester, Jane places her personal need for liberty and freedom aside, a sign that Thornfield is not destined to be Jane's permanent home.

Despite Jane's choice to associate the garden with Eden, it is important to remember that Rochester is not actually in a garden, but an orchard. A great deal of critical attention has been paid to gardens, yet few have commented on the image of the orchard. I would argue that in *Jane Eyre* the orchard functions as a masculine equivalent to the garden. Instead of the female/flower, the male/tree is bound by walls and cultivated only for pleasure or profit. Rochester is constantly associated with trees, especially with the horse-chestnut grown in the orchard. This association played well with Victorian perceptions, as "nostalgia for an imagined *gemeinschaft* of communal institutions, affective ties, and local loyalties attached itself, easily and by a kind of symbolic logic, to oak, beech, elm, and chestnut woods in particular and old mature forests in general" (Winter 95). Rochester is a strong and virile tree, but the walls of, and his duties to, Thornfield trap, restrain, and confine him. Thus it is no surprise that the horse-chestnut strongly reflects the moral questionability of his choice to find freedom with and marry Jane. Jane remarks, "What ailed the chestnut tree? it writhed and groaned; while wind roared in the laurel walk, and came sweeping over us" (256). On the one hand, Rochester needs to be free to make his own choices, free from the boundaries of Thornfield, but on the other hand he cannot escape the legacy of Bertha. Rochester's personal dilemma has a profound effect on the landscape of Thornfield, proven in the morning when Adele shares that "the great horse-chestnut at the bottom of the orchard had been struck by lightning in the night, and half of it split away" (257). While the violent split of the chestnut is, as many have noted, a symbol of Rochester's tormented soul divided between Jane and Bertha. Its environmental significance, however, is equally important—the destruction of the tree is the loss of one of the great natural treasures of Thornfield. Nature abhors the choices made by Rochester and Jane and literally tears itself in two, destroying something beautiful and irreplaceable.

The death of the chestnut-tree is only the beginning of nature's wrath. As at Gateshead, Nature responds to the unnatural human relationships by cursing Thornfield with endless winter. As Jane reports:

 ISSN 2171-9594

> A Christmas frost had come at midsummer: a white December storm had whirled over June; ice glazed the ripe apples, drifts crushed the blowing roses; on hay-field and corn-field lay a frozen shroud: lanes which last night blushed full of flowers, to-day were pathless with untrodden snow; and the woods, which twelve hours since waved leafy and fragrant as groves between the tropics, now spread, waste, wild, and white as pine-forests in wintry Norway (295).

Nature strikes the human invaders at Lowood with disease for their arrogance in attempting to settle an unnatural community in the natural world and responds to Jane and Rochester's choices by turning verdant woods and pastures into barren, dying wastelands. However, this destruction is not merely an expression of nature's rage at the death of the artificial constructs and boundaries of Thornfield, it is necessary for Jane's journey to liberty. After seeing the truth of Rochester's situation, Jane explains that the moon came to her in human form and "gazed and gazed on me. It spoke to my spirit: immeasurably distant was the tone, yet so near, it whispered in my heart—'My daughter, flee temptation!'" (319). [8] The moon, or as Brontë critic Elizabeth Imlay has argued the Mother Goddess Diana, urges Jane to the Morton moors, yet Imlay also notes that "the protective aspect of Diana merges into something larger: that of Nature itself." (88). Nature itself tells Jane she cannot remain at Thornfield Hall and must try yet another form of interaction. Up to this point, boundaries have always mediated Jane's interactions with the natural world, the gardens at Lowood or her love for Rochester and Thornfield Hall, but for the first time she faces the wilderness with no protection.

Into the wild: Jane on the moors

Brontë's choice to send Jane out on the moors and away from the protection of Thornfield echoes a new trend in visions of English landscape. As historian Simmons explains, "In Britain perhaps the biggest change was in the revaluation of the wild places. Before the late eighteenth century, the heathlands, moors and mountains were regarded as objects of fear, scorn and avoidance [. . .] The shift to our present-day reverence and valuation of such places started when others tried to revalue these places: Gray and Gilpin were both influential, as were (at a remove, so to speak) painters like Claude, Poussin and Rosa" (184). While Romantics and painters began the trend, it was authors like Brontë who helped inspire a love for wild and untamed landscapes. Brontë's depiction of Jane's wandering the moors is neither idealized nor trivialized. Critic Rod Giblett argues, "Jane's striking into the heath is no mere elitist pastoral return to nature indulged in by the jaded middle and upper classes, no facile picnic in the country, no day-tripping tourist excursion into a picturesque landscape, but, as in the occasional explorer's expedition into the wild(er)ness within and without, a return to the Great Goddess, even a return to a womb-like space in the heath" (35). Jane seeks comfort in the embrace of a wild and untamed nature, yet Brontë never relinquishes the reality that

[8] The moon is a dominant image in *Jane Eyre*. As Nockolds notes, the novel "refers to the moon or moonlight in half of the thirty-eight chapters" (157).

 ISSN 2171-9594

nature is cold and harsh.[9] Even as Jane suffers from cold and hunger, she is pleased with her surroundings stating, "Nature seemed to me benign and good: I thought she loved me, outcast as I was; and I, who from man could anticipate only mistrust, rejection, insult, clung to her with filial fondness" (323). Jane wishes to live in this "golden desert" and remarks, "I would fain at the moment have become a bee or a lizard, that I might have found fitting nutriment, permanent shelter here. But I was a human being, and had a human being's wants" (324). Unlike the animals, which Jane sees as born with the innate ability to live in harmony with Nature, humans must learn how the balance their wants with Nature's demands. On the one hand, the moors provide Jane what she has been seeking, a true liberty unrestricted by walls, and one with pure access to nature. Yet she quickly recognizes that as a human she is set apart from the natural ecosystem of the moors: what sustains the bees and lizards cannot sustain her. Jane cannot solely depend on Mother Earth, or the Great Goddess, for life, even though it provides her a moment of pure liberty. She must seek "wildness" in another form than pure connection with the natural world.

A new hope: Jane at Moor House

Despite recognizing a need for the basics of human society—food, shelter, and companionship—Jane is unwilling to return to the same stifling confines she has only recently escaped. Her first sight in each of the villages she enters is that of a garden and each of these villages can offer Jane no employment and no hope. At "a pretty little house [. . .] with a garden before it" Jane asks for employment and is denied (326). In another town "near the churchyard, and in the middle of a garden, stood a well-built, though small house" owned by a clergyman who also fails to assist her (327). Finally, Jane is drawn to the wildest village she can find, one where "the very cultivation surrounding it had disappeared[. . .]Only a few fields, almost as wild and unproductive as the heath from which they were scarcely reclaimed, lay between me and the dusky hill" (330). The house she finds in this village seems to grow directly out of the moors, surrounded by "something like palisades, and within, a high and prickly hedge" (331). Inside lies a gate and "on each side stood a sable bush—holly or yew" (331). Instead of man-made barriers, natural defenses guard and protect the occupants of the house. The house itself appears organic, with the small window covered by "the growth of ivy or some other creeping plant, whose leaves clustered thick over the portion of the house wall in which it was set" (331). Unlike at Gateshead, where windows defend Jane from the harshness of nature, at Moor House nature almost climbs through the window to embrace the house's inhabitants. In Moor House, Jane finds true happiness with female companions Diana and Mary. Unlike the invasive Lowood or the manor house of Thornfield, Moor House grows in harmony with and echoes its environment. Jane loves its "mouldering

[9] The idea of an unforgiving natural world resonated with the mid-Victorian era, as in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, where he famously refers to "Nature, red in tooth and claw." See Tennyson 130-224, st. 57, line 15.

 ISSN 2171-9594

walls, its avenue of aged firs—all grown aslant under the stress of mountain winds; its garden, dark with yew and holly—and where no flowers but of the hardiest species would bloom" (349). This is not a mild, well-ordered garden, but a wilderness where flowers and trees grow where they will. Jane has found a natural paradise where trees and flowers decide their boundaries, not their human counterparts.

Yet for all that Moor House seems like Jane's true home, the cold and austere St. John Rivers compromises her idyllic paradise. Unlike sisters Diana and Mary, St. John rejects the natural world. According to Jane, "Nature was not to him that treasury of delight it was to his sisters. He expressed once, and but once [. . .] a strong sense of the rugged charm of the hills, and an inborn affection for the dark roof and hoary walls he called his home: but there was more of gloom than pleasure in the tone and words [. . .] never did he seem to roam the moors for the sake of their soothing silence" (351). While Jane, Diana and Mary are able to embrace and appreciate the unique balance Moor House maintains between human necessity and the natural world, St. John is separate from and antagonistic towards the balance between humanity and nature. For St. John, devotion to God means a rejection of natural, possibly pagan, sympathies. Unable to reject his feelings for the lovely Rosamond completely, he takes out his anger on the landscape, looking at a "tuft of daisies" and "crush[ing] the snowy heads of the closed flowers with his foot" (363). Yet again, human choice has a negative impact on the natural environment.

The "Hut Dream": Jane, Rochester, and Ferndean

On an ecological level, Jane cannot find peace at Moor House as long as St. John disrupts her connection with the natural world. She also cannot marry him and leave the freedom she has discovered for the enclosure of marriage and missionary settlements. Instead, she follows a voice, a voice "which did not seem in the room—nor in the house—nor in the garden: it did not come out of the air—nor from under the earth—nor from overhead [. . .] It was the voice of a human being" (419-20). While St. John's artifice clearly separates him from the natural world, this voice, Rochester's voice, comes neither from the human world nor the natural world, but a place in-between. Both Jane and Rochester reside in limbo, unable to find a perfect balance between human need and the natural world. Jane finds Rochester at his new home of Ferndean, "a building of considerable antiquity, moderate size, and no architectural pretensions, deep buried in a wood" (429). The novel celebrates the journey to Ferndean; as Sharon Locy notes, "To reach this isolated and remote place, some thirty miles from Thornfield, Jane winds her way through a thicket of woods, much in the same way the knight approaches his sleeping beauty in the fairy tale" (Locy 118). As in a fairy tale, Jane finds her prince deep within a perfect castle, or as Brontë critic Pamela Roy writes, "Ferndean is more an outgrowth of the woods than a manmade architectural construct. This is the realization of what Bachelard calls the 'hut dream,' a primitive ideal of a private and protective space" (725). Ferndean, like Moor House, is Jane's vision of how a man-made dwelling

 ISSN 2171-9594

should exist in the natural world. In Ferndean, "there were no flowers, no garden-beds; only a broad gravel walk girdling a grass-plat, and this set in the heavy frame of the forest [. . .]The whole looked, as the host of the Rochester Arms had said, 'quite a desolate spot.' It was still as a church on a week-day: the pattering rain on the forest leaves was the only sound" (430). It is precisely this "desolate" feeling, of a house growing directly out of a dark wood, that Jane seeks. Ferndean is a house with no boundaries, no gardens, no orchards, separate from, yet protective of, humanity. Its placement in the woods is also significant, as Victorians

> responded ardently when Ruskin advised them to seek beauty of form in leaf and branch. Among the educated, articulate classes nostalgia for forest blended together with the rich variety of other emotions: romanticism, patriotism, preservationism, political and social conservatism, varieties of radicalism, concern about losing one's sense of place, a generalized unease about a world that seemed to be moving too fast. Self-proclaimed preservationists were not the only ones to feel these longings. (Winter 96)

While the moors retained a sense of wildness, the forest re-appropriated those feelings into a very English nostalgia for woodlands. In the woods, Jane finds everything necessary to her happiness without any of the artificial boundaries or structures imposed upon her by English society.

Brontë portrays St. John as nature's antagonist, in conflict with his home Moor House; however, Jane and Rochester, like Ferndean, find themselves inseparable from the surrounding woods. Jane immediately sees Ferndean as a place of hope, but Rochester is unsure about his surroundings. Like Jane, Rochester was trapped by boundaries at Thornfield and is forced to new, more natural, surroundings by the fire which destroys Bertha. Rochester views this move, and his subsequent injuries, as God's punishment, but Jane sees it as the first signs of a new age. Denying darker readings that portray Ferndean as a place of disease or decay,[10] Jane tells Rochester, "You are no ruin, sir—no lightning-struck tree: you are green and vigorous. Plants will grow about your roots, whether you ask them or not, because they take delight in your bountiful shadow; and as they grow they will lean towards you, and wind round you, because your strength offers them so safe a prop" (444). Jane transforms from a garden flower to a "budding woodbine," a wild honeysuckle native to England. No longer trapped by the walls of the orchard, Rochester grows wild in the woods near his home. Ecocritic Gary Snyder defines "wild" as "a process of self-organization that generates systems and organisms, all of which are within the constraints of [. . .] larger systems that again are wild, such as major ecosystems [. . .] Wildness can be said to be the essential nature of nature. As reflected in consciousness, it can be seen as a kind of open awareness—full of imagination but also the source of alert survival intelligence" (Snyder 128). In order to thrive, Jane and Rochester must embrace the wildness within themselves, not by fully rejecting humanity to live upon the lonely moors, but by slowly changing themselves and their environs to both fit within and reflect the larger environment in which they live.

[10] Henson and Bewell provide negative readings of Ferndean. See Henson 54-55, Bewell 802.

 ISSN 2171-9594

Conclusion

There have been readings of the landscapes in *Jane Eyre* and readings that explore the tropes of liberty and wildness, but in ignoring the overlap between the two scholars have lost a vital way to understand the complexities of the novel. While the novel does portray the struggle for a female to escape the confines of Victorian society, it also illuminates the struggle to find a harmonious balance with the "wildness" of nature. Following Jane's progression through her various environs of house, garden, orchard, moor, moor house, and finally house in the woods, we can see Brontë's attempts to balance humanity's needs with those of the natural world. While Jane comes to recognize the artificial boundaries imposed on her by Gateshead and Lowood, she is temporarily seduced by the false impression of freedom she finds at Thornfield. It is only when Nature rejects the union of Jane and Rochester at Thornfield and forces her out onto the moors that Jane recognizes true "wildness." Unable to survive in pure wild nature, Jane seeks out a possible middle ground between the boundaries necessary for human survival and her need to embrace nature.

Jane's search for a balance between wildness and safety reflects a larger Victorian conservationist impulse to protect nature from misguided human boundaries such as gardens and orchards. *Jane Eyre* exposes these enclosures as human folly stemming from the need to control liberty and connecting them to disease and decay. Instead, the novel offers up Ferndean as an idyllic space that connects the untamed beauty of nature with the human need for comfort and companionship. Rather than attempting to bend the landscape to fit constricting cultural norms, *Jane Eyre* argues that humans can only find true liberty and peace when they reflect the natural environment, connecting themselves with the mythic past of a wilder England. By treating the portrayal of nature as an individual category, as worthy of study and focus as character or plot, scholars can gain a much deeper understanding of how the Victorians conceived of and related to their environment and how this knowledge impacted their writing.

Received 10 April 2013 Revised version accepted 14 September 2013

Works Cited

Barron, Patrick. "Spatial Knowledge in "the Dispersion of Seeds": Thoreau as Geographer." *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies 8.1* (2006): 94-109. Print.

Bewell, Alan. "Jane Eyre and Victorian Medical Geography." *ELH 63.3* (1996): 773-808. Print.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Print.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995. Print.

 ISSN 2171-9594

Carroll, Joseph. "The Ecology of Victorian Fiction." *Philosophy and Literature* 25.2 (2001): 295-313. Print.

Christopher, Hamlin. "Charles Kingsley: From Being Green to Green Being." *Victorian Studies 54.2* (2012): 255-81. Print.

Dobrin, Sidney I., and Kenneth B. Kidd, eds. *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004. Print.

Dowler, Lorraine, Josephine Carubia, and Bonj Szcygiel, ed. *Gender and Landscape: Renegotiating Morality and Space*. London: Routledge, 2005. Print.

Flaxman, Rhoda L. *Victorian Word-Painting and Narrative: Toward the Blending of Genres*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987. Print.

Giblett, Rod. *People and Places of Nature and Culture*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011. Print.

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. "A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress." *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. 336-71. Print.

Gold, Barri J. "Energy, Ecology, and Victorian Fiction." *Literature Compass 9.2* (2012): 213-24. Print.

Grove, Richard H. *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Print.

Hagan, Sandra and Juliette Wells, ed. *The Brontës in the World of the Arts.* Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008. Print.

Henson, Eithne. *Landscape and Gender in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy: The Body of Nature.* Wensley, Yorkshire: Ashgate, 2011. Print.

Howarth, William. "Thoreau and the Cultural Construction of Nature." Isle: *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment 2.1* (1994): 85-89. Print.

Imlay, Elizabeth. *Charlotte Brontë and the Mysteries of Love.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989. Print.

Kadish, Doris Y. *The Literature of Images: Narrative Landscape from Julie to Jane Eyre*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986. Print.

Lanone, Catherine. "Arctic Spectacles in Jane Eyre and Villette." *Brontë Studies 34.2* (2009): 117-26. Print.

Locy, Sharon. "Travel and Space in Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre." *Pacific Coast Philology 37* (2002): 105-21. Print.

Martell, Jessica. "The Dorset Dairy, the Pastoral, and Thomas Hardy's Tess of the D'urbervilles." Nineteenth-Century Literature 68.1 (2013): 64-89. Print.

McTier, Rosemary Scanlon. *'An Insect View of Its Plain': Insects, Nature and God in Thoreau, Dickinson and Muir*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013. Print.

Nichols, Ashton. "Thoreau and Urbanature: From Walden to Ecocriticism." Neohelicon: *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum 36.2* (2009): 347-54. Print.

Nockolds, Peter. "Midsummer Moon: The Lunar Structure of Jane Eyre." *Brontë Studies 29* (2004): 157-63. Print.

 ISSN 2171-9594

Parham, John, ed. "Green Man Hopkins: Gerard Manley Hopkins and Victorian Ecological Criticism." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts 25.3* (2003): 257-76. Print.

---. *The Environmental Tradition in Literature*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002. Print.

Roy, Pamama. "Unaccomodated Woman and the Poetics of Property in Jane Eyre." *SEL 29* (1989): 713-27. Print.

Sanders, Scott Russell. "Speaking a Word for Nature." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Ed. Glotfelty, Cheryll and Harold Fromm. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996. Print.

Schulz, Dieter. "Thoreau's Excursions, Science, and Hermeneutics." *Literature, Ecology, Ethics: Recent Trends in Ecocriticism*. Eds. Timo Müller and Michael Sauter. Heidelberg, Germany: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2012. 203-13. Print.

Simmons, I.G. *An Environmental History of Great Britain: From 10,000 Years Ago to the Present*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001. Print.

Snyder, Gary. "Language Goes Two Ways." *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*. Ed. Coupe, Laurence. London: Routledge, 2000. 127-31. Print.

Taylor, Susan B. "Image and Text in Jane Eyre's Avian Vignettes and Bewick's History of British Birds." *Victorian Newsletter.101* (2002): 5-12. Print.

Taylor, William M. *The Vital Landscape: Nature and the Built Environment in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004. Print.

Tennyson, Alfred. *Selected Poems*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991. Print.

Winter, James. *Secure from Rash Assault: Sustaining the Victorian Environment*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. Print.

 ISSN 2171-9594