

## Romanticizing Abuse: Comparing the Depiction of Violence in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Meyer's *Twilight* Series.

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# **Romanticizing Abuse: Comparing the Depiction of Violence in Brontë's Wuthering Heights and Meyer's Twilight Series**

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## Abstract

When *Wuthering Heights* was first released in 1846, readers were horrified by the relentless violence which the characters use to communicate hatred, passion, and obsessive love (Baldellou, 148). Although Brontë's book was first perceived as monstrous, the text is now widely regarded as an epic love story. This shift has largely occurred because of the adaptations of *Wuthering Heights* which depict the violence within the novel as a feature of idyllic love. This paper examines the differences between the authors' treatment of domestic violence in *Wuthering Heights* and Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series. I argue that in *Wuthering Heights* Catherine and Heathcliff are denied access to the language of power because of gender and race, causing them to communicate through violence. Their violent communication is a means of survival for the characters, and an exploration of the way marginalized individuals can communicate and align themselves against dominant British culture. By contrast, I contend that *Twilight's* adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* champions violence as attractive—upholding heteronormative gender roles and glamorizing domestic violence. Through investigating the response of adolescents and scholars alike, my paper reveals how *Twilight* and other adaptations have caused *Wuthering Heights* to be taught as a romance. To prevent the romanticization of domestic abuse in literature and teen relationships, *Wuthering Heights* must be read and taught as a revenge novel, not a romance.

## Introduction

“It is impossible that you can covet the admiration of Heathcliff—that you can consider him an agreeable person! I hope I have misunderstood you, Isabella?”

“No, you have not,” said the infatuated girl. “I love him more than ever you loved Edgar; and he might love me if you would let him!” (Brontë 102)

In Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, Isabella Linton’s feelings for and views of Heathcliff are depicted as delusional. In this passage, Catherine finds Isabella’s romanticized perception of Heathcliff to be “impossible” (102) and tells Isabella explicitly that Heathcliff is “a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man” (103). Isabella’s blinkered view of Heathcliff is emphasized throughout the novel; Heathcliff himself notes that “[Isabella] picture[d] in me a hero of romance and expect[ed] unlimited indulgences from my chivalrous devotion [...] obstinately has she persisted in forming a fabulous notion of my character, acting on the false impressions she cherished” (149). Isabella holds these false notions of Heathcliff so strongly that she willfully ignores what is now considered one of the most telling harbingers of domestic abuse: violence towards animals. When Heathcliff hangs Isabella’s dog from a tree, Isabella responds with heightened attraction: “she had an innate admiration of it” (150). Many characters, critics, and readers point out the delusions and folly of Isabella’s actions, yet readers themselves still romanticize Heathcliff.

When *Wuthering Heights* was first published, readers were horrified by the relentless violence in the text; however, today’s audiences frequently view these acts as romantic displays of love and passion, glamorizing abuse in a way that is not unlike Isabella’s desire to see Heathcliff’s violent demeanor as index to an “honourable soul” (Miquel Baldellou 148; Brontë 103). Though it is important to recognize Heathcliff’s abusive treatment of Isabella, this paper focuses more broadly on the way readers themselves excuse and adore abusive actions. With that in mind, Isabella’s fetishization and misinterpretation of violence has ironically become the lens that readers adopt, as they hold the violent obsession between Catherine and Heathcliff as a paragon of epic love. This shift has occurred in no small part because of book and film adaptations that portrayed Catherine and Heathcliff as star-crossed lovers. Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series, four young adult novels indebted to *Wuthering Heights*, has been particularly influential in reframing Catherine and Heathcliff as iconic lovers. It is thus noteworthy that in Meyer’s novels the character that romanticizes an abusive relationship is also named Isabella: Bella Swan.

Clear connections can be made between the *Twilight* series and *Wuthering Heights*. Along with parallels in gothic form, Meyer explicitly references Brontë’s text in *Eclipse*, and calls

that novel her “*Wuthering Heights* homage” (“Stephenie Meyer”). This is mentioned by the characters themselves when Bella and Edward read *Wuthering Heights*. Bella notes that “I was like Cathy” (Meyer, *Eclipse* 159), and Edward begrudgingly admits that “I can sympathize with Heathcliff in ways I didn’t think possible before” (64). Due to these references to Brontë’s text, HarperCollins printed an edition of *Wuthering Heights* with a jacket design similar to the *Twilight* series, advertising it as “Bella and Edward’s favorite book,” which quadrupled the sales of *Wuthering Heights* after the reissue (Wallop). In her article “Context Stinks!” Rita Felski argues that texts must be “sociable” to survive (185). Drawing on Felski, I would go so far as to argue that *Twilight* solidified *Wuthering Heights*’ prominent status in Western cultural consciousness through casting Catherine and Heathcliff as idyllic lovers and romanticizing their abusive relationship. This essay holds as its central premise that Meyer radically misinterprets *Wuthering Heights*: where Brontë employs domestic abuse to critique patriarchal, imperialistic British culture, Meyer glamorizes domestic abuse and upholds gender roles through toxic masculinity and feminine self-sacrifice. Meyer’s twenty-first-century couple is white and middle-class, unlike their nineteenth-century counterparts. Thus, Bella and abusive beau Edward’s story erases the trauma caused by class-, gender-, and race-based oppression that is central to Catherine and Heathcliff’s conflict. Catherine is denied full personhood because she is a woman and therefore cannot be financially or legally independent; Heathcliff is similarly denied his humanity by British society, likened to an animal innumerable times throughout the novel, and denied legitimacy as a human being because of his race. Therefore, Catherine and Heathcliff’s abuse of each other is neither the calculated domestic abuse that Heathcliff enacts on Isabella (but never vice-versa), nor is it the sexualized, violent male-to-female domination displayed in Bella and Edward’s relationship. Instead, the abuse between Catherine and Heathcliff is a result of societal oppression and an attempt to communicate that manifests as violence rather than language.

Although there are many readers who look at Isabella Linton’s initial devotion to Heathcliff and scoff at her blindness, Meyer’s adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* has caused many of these very readers to recreate Isabella’s false notions of romance through viewing Bella and Edward, then later Catherine and Heathcliff, as idyllic lovers. Through the adoption of (Isa)Bella’s consciousness, young readers fall in love with Edward, and actively desire the violence between Catherine and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. In turn, both adolescents and critics have begun to view *Wuthering Heights* as a romance novel. Through investigating the response of adolescents and scholars to the domestic abuse in the novels, this paper argues that *Twilight* and other adaptations have reframed *Wuthering Heights* as a romance, ultimately perpetuating the dangerous notion that abuse is desirable.

## Catherine and Heathcliff: Abuse as Communication

The term “domestic abuse” did not exist until the twentieth century; in the nineteenth century, violence between partners and families was called “wife-beating” or “wife-torture” (Hancock 66). For the purposes of comparing the domestic violence in modern literature to the violence in *Wuthering Heights*, I will be using the term “domestic abuse,” while noting that this is twentieth-century terminology (defined by the US Department of Justice). Although the domestic abuse in Brontë’s novel can initially appear to promote violent relationships, a closer look reveals that the abuse in the novel is, in fact, critiquing the patriarchal system and the treatment of those labeled as racially “Other.” In the nineteenth century, British law and society actively marginalized individuals based on gender and race. British property laws oppressed women and colonized races by favoring white males as heirs. As a result, it was the sons of wealthy European men who were able to inherit property and wealth, simultaneously providing white men with power while excluding women and people of color from financial independence (SurrIDGE 113-118). Women would lose their inheritance to their brothers, husbands, or sons; consequently, Catherine is left without a claim to property or a way to support herself financially.

At the time Brontë wrote *Wuthering Heights*, Victorian marriage law upheld the common law doctrine of coverture. Coverture refers to the legal status of married women in the nineteenth century where, as Blackstone wrote in his 1828 Commentaries, “in marriage the husband and wife are one person in law: that is the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage” (130). Therefore, once a woman married, not only were her property and inheritance subsumed by her husband, but her very existence became her husband’s possession. In effect, British law revoked individuality and personhood from women, viewing them as “one person” (Blackstone 130) with their fathers or husbands. Brontë’s critique of these laws crystallizes when Catherine states, “if Heathcliff and I married, we should be beggars” (Brontë 82). In this phrase, Catherine—and, by extension, Brontë—emphasizes the cultural norms and property laws that prevent both Heathcliff and Catherine from having inheritance and autonomy.

As a woman, Catherine is also oppressed linguistically; Brontë shows that language prioritizes male narratives and upholds patriarchal principles through legal doctrines. Although in childhood Catherine has “ready words” (43), language does not serve her or give her power. This is seen when Lockwood stays the night in Catherine’s old bedroom, finding her “writing scratched on the paint” of the windowsill (19). Without access to the power of language, carving words into the paint becomes the only way that Catherine can form her own identity, for she carves her “name repeated in all kind of characters, large and small” (19). Although Catherine

continues to try to gain control of her own life through writing her narrative, she is left with only the margins of dominant male texts to tell her story, “covering every morsel of blank that the printer had left” (20). Through portraying young Catherine scribbling her thoughts and story into old books, Brontë is depicting Catherine’s words, and therefore herself, as marginalized. Once she hits puberty (marked by her symbolic bleeding from being violently bitten by the neighbor’s dog, Skulker, and her entrance into Thrushcross Grange) Catherine is viewed by society as a lady, and through the social construction of womanhood, she loses any autonomy she previously created through language. Catherine’s writing is not seen in the remainder of the novel; instead her words are conveyed through Nelly’s perspective and retelling. Moreover, as critic Susan Meyer notes, the education and indoctrination into language Catherine receives is an assimilation into patriarchal ideologies and oppressive society (112). During her formative weeks at Thrushcross Grange, Catherine is kept “in due restraint” through “art, not force” (52), her education becoming a way to condition her to abide by British social norms. Ultimately, language and education reinforce Catherine’s reliance on a husband for economic wellbeing, and the necessity of her marrying a financially stable man to survive.

Where Catherine is excluded from what Susan Meyer calls the “language of power” (108) because she is a woman, Heathcliff is excluded because he is a person of color. Although Heathcliff is male, he is denied access to language and an inheritance of the Earnshaw fortune because of his race and outsider status. From his first moments at *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff is marginalized by colonial language, his native tongue being depicted as “gibberish” (37) by the Earnshaws and Nelly. He is promptly given the name of the Earnshaws’ dead son—Heathcliff—a hand-me-down that exemplifies Heathcliff’s disempowering relationship to language, for he lacks a surname and the power of inheritance that comes with it. Thus, he is denied access to property and wealth because of his race, which renders him illegitimate in the eyes of white, European colonizers. This concept is reiterated in the crucial scene where Catherine is assimilated into Thrushcross Grange, while Heathcliff is pulled under the light and examined by the Lintons. Susan Meyer notes how this examination portrays Heathcliff’s relationship with the English language, finding that the passage “reveals the force of the imperialist gaze wielded against Heathcliff,” where he is “silenced by the relentless gaze and commentary of the Lintons” (100). While Catherine’s wound is being attended to, Heathcliff is told to “hold [his] tongue,” called “foulmouthed,” and dragged out of the house (Brontë 50). After his physical removal, Heathcliff’s position—outside the Linton manor looking in—symbolizes his location in British culture and marks a breaking point; Heathcliff loses “the benefit of his early education” (68) and gives up any attempts of finding communication or liberation through language. Additionally, just as British law delegitimizes Catherine’s existence because she is a woman, cultural power structures question Heathcliff’s very humanity because of his race. Victorian colonizers viewed themselves (white Anglo-Saxons) as racially superior to people of

color—an ugly, damaging mindset that lingered from the times of legalized slavery in Britain. It is this societal mindset that caused people to view Heathcliff as inferior because of his race and to ostracize and oppress him.

The fact that British society and law strips Catherine and Heathcliff of their personhood pervades all aspects of their lives and the novel. This oppression impacts them both on a concrete level; Hindley desires to “degrade” (64) Heathcliff and “restrain” (52) Catherine, and it pushes both characters to madness. Because of their social locations, the pair is not meant to interact; both are expected to marry someone of identical race and class to themselves. Thus, Catherine and Heathcliff’s socialization intentionally renders language an ineffective form of communication. Catherine’s absorption into Thrushcross Grange and Heathcliff’s corresponding rejection from the house marks a crystallizing moment in the novel where language is inadequate, not only for the characters individually, but for communication between the pair. Heathcliff “ceased to express his fondness for [Catherine] in words” and Catherine critiques Heathcliff’s speech, feeling that he “kn[ew] nothing and s[aid] nothing” (68-70). Hindley, Linton, and even Nelly emphasize the failure of language by reinforcing the societal roles that Catherine and Heathcliff hold, punishing the duo when they stray from these roles by preventing them from speaking to one another. This punishment is seen after Catherine and Heathcliff have strayed from the domestic sphere to play in the moors. Heathcliff is threatened that “the first word he spoke to Miss Catherine would ensure a dismissal” (51); later, when Heathcliff has endangered racial norms by kissing and pursuing Isabella, he is forbidden from coming to Thrushcross Grange and speaking to Catherine (146). It is no wonder that the majority of Heathcliff and Catherine’s connection occurs “off-stage” in the moors rather than in the text—genuine emotion and connection between the duo cannot be conveyed through words.

Much scholarly work reveals how Catherine and Heathcliff are denied access to language. Susan Meyer’s reading of Catherine and Heathcliff’s “mutual exclusion [...] from the language of power” initially illuminates how language is an ineffective form of communication for the pair, but ultimately focuses on Heathcliff’s exclusion from language, arguing that Brontë is more concerned with Heathcliff’s (racial) oppression and resistance to British imperialism than the treatment of women in the novel (108). To Meyer, Catherine assimilates into culture and language, leaving Brontë to follow Heathcliff’s storyline and “resistant energies” (102) against British society after Catherine’s death. Meyer is speaking to an argument originally posed by Gilbert and Gubar, who claim that “the power of the patriarch [...] begins with words” (281). Where Meyer’s interpretation argues that Brontë is largely concerned with Heathcliff’s racial oppression and violence, Gilbert and Gubar pose that Brontë is instead primarily focused on the oppression of white women, viewing Heathcliff as an embodiment of Catherine’s inner desires. Although both critical standpoints are persuasive, neither Meyer nor Gilbert and Gubar acknowledge the intersection of both gendered and racial oppression in British society, where

subjugation results in death for both Catherine and Heathcliff. Ultimately, Brontë is interested in the relation between white women and people of color, and how these individuals can communicate, have affinity, and resist dominant British culture.

Objectified and restricted by British society, Catherine and Heathcliff are constantly seeking a mode to share and relate with one another. Throughout the text their mutual soul is emphasized, Catherine famously claiming, “I *am* Heathcliff,” and that “whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same” (Brontë 81). Heathcliff echoes these sentiments at the prospect and aftermath of Catherine’s death, crying out “would *you* like to live with your soul in the grave?” (163) and “I *cannot* live without my soul!” (169). The italics here emphasize Catherine and Heathcliff’s yearning to connect through their mutual soul, and their straining to convey this need through words. Their connection and communication culminates in Heathcliff’s deconstruction of Catherine’s casket. Heathcliff’s violent disruption of Catherine’s grave and breaking of the physical barrier between where their bodies will be buried allows the pair to finally be absorbed into one another in death, decomposing together so that it is impossible to “know which is which” (288). This image exemplifies the intersectional reading of *Wuthering Heights*, where the fight for racial and gender equality (embodied in Heathcliff and Catherine) unites. Therefore, it is violence, not language, that creates the only successful modes of communication in the novel. Their abuse most often takes the form of “seiz[ing]” (97) and “grasp[ing]” (159) at one another as they forcibly drive inward to escape external societal pressure and control mechanisms. Strange as it may seem, Catherine and Heathcliff resist hierarchal power between them—ironically and counter-intuitively—through mutually, equally abusing one another.

This violent communication is seen when Nelly helps Heathcliff sneak into Thrushcross Grange to see sick, pregnant Catherine; the pair emotionally and physically abuse each other to communicate their desire for one another. Catherine displays both psychological abuse by threatening violence, stating she “wish[ed] she could hold [Heathcliff] [... ]’til [they] were both dead,” and physical abuse through “seiz[ing] [and later tearing out a chunk of] Heathcliff’s] hair, and ke[eping] him down” (160). Heathcliff returns this abuse with physical violence of his own, for he grabs Catherine’s arm hard enough that “four distinct impressions left blue in [her] colorless skin” (161). Further, their interactions are depicted as violent and desperate, for they “strained,” “grasped,” and “seized” one another, and are described as “wild,” “desperate,” and “frantic” (191-194). These violent actions and descriptions communicate these characters’ thwarted desires. Brontë emphasizes the culmination of the characters’ pain and oppression throughout the novel through word choice, repeating “suffered,” “torment,” “wild,” and “cruel,” as well as describing the characters as having “agony,” “despair,” “anguish,” “distress,” “misery,” and “agitation” (159-163). Thus, Catherine expresses “the violent, unequal throbbing of her heart” (161) via abuse; Heathcliff shares how he is “livid with emotion” (162) for Cather-

ine through violence. These displays of abuse culminate in the two characters being “locked in an embrace from which [Nelly] thought [her] mistress would never be released alive” (162). Because of the heightened emotion and violent embraces, Catherine faints and becomes a “lifeless-looking form” (164). Catherine does survive the embrace, but she does not survive the chapter; after Heathcliff leaves and the chapter ends, Catherine delivers baby Cathy and dies. Although Victorian culture attempts to isolate Catherine and Heathcliff through the denial of economic and linguistic power, this societal pressure ultimately forces the pair together in a violent fusion.

Throughout the text, violence becomes a way for Catherine and Heathcliff to communicate, to share a soul, and to resist the cultural norms that work to separate and marginalize them. Their inability to unite through language is reminiscent of poet Audre Lorde’s renowned quote “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (110). The patriarchal tool of language cannot enable Catherine and Heathcliff to connect and destabilize British society’s oppressive structures. Consequently, Heathcliff and Catherine’s violence is a subversive reflex, working against the institutionalized racism and sexism of Victorian society. Catherine and Heathcliff’s inward violence—though shocking and harmful—is mutual: both characters are abusing one another as a result of the gender, class, and race barriers that create a hierarchal power structure between them. Their violence is a reciprocated attempt to find equality: an effort to literally beat the racist, sexist socialization out of one another. Recognizing Catherine and Heathcliff’s joint exclusion from language and overarching oppression is essential to move towards an understanding of the novel (and society) that is intersectional. The novel recognizes both racial and gendered oppression without holding these forms of subjugation in competition with one another. Instead, the experiences of various forms of oppression are revealed to happen alongside and in connection with one another. Ultimately, Brontë does not promote violence as communication, but reveals the harsh methods and mechanisms marginalized peoples must adopt to survive subjugation in Britain.

Though some may read the ending of Brontë’s novel as a return to British cultural norms through Hareton and Cathy’s union, resistance lingers in Catherine and Heathcliff’s ghosts haunting the moors. These apparitions are the final manifestation of Catherine and Heathcliff’s shared soul—a shared existence that disrupts the expected marriage plot and instead imagines future resistance through their haunting of the moors, the novel, and the consciousness of English readers who are complicit in the perpetuation of patriarchal, imperialistic structures.

## Bella and Edward: Abuse as Passion

As previously noted, the public's perception of *Wuthering Heights* shifted due to adaptations of Brontë's novel. William Wyler's 1939 film in particular has shaped the way society understands *Wuthering Heights*. The adaptation portrayed the novel as a love story; it responded to the pre-WWII political and historical context and attempted to make the film more marketable through an empathetic portrayal of Catherine and Heathcliff. In the film, Catherine's body is depicted as a site where, in the face of "war and economic hardships [...] societies negotiated their ideals and material realities" (Shachar, *Cultural Afterlives* 54-55). Heathcliff is depicted as a "spectacle of pain" (54-55); his body simultaneously becomes an analogy for the body of soldiers and reflects romantic, heterosexual ideals. Thus, Catherine is objectified and sexualized by the camera, while Heathcliff embodies the romantic hero. Ultimately, Wyler's depiction of Catherine and Heathcliff immortalized them as iconic, star-crossed lovers in the eyes of the public. Therefore, when Stephenie Meyer claimed she was inspired by *Wuthering Heights*, her inspiration—whether or not she was aware of it—drew from cultural notions of Catherine and Heathcliff created by Wyler, as much as by Brontë's original novel. In creating a young adult romance series indebted to and referencing *Wuthering Heights*, Meyer perpetuated the idea of Catherine and Heathcliff as idyllic lovers. This is extremely harmful to Meyer's (often adolescent) audience, for she not only rationalizes but also idealizes Bella and Edward's domestic violence. Unlike Catherine and Heathcliff's abuse, the abuse in Bella and Edward's relationship is not a form of mutual communication. Instead, Meyer frames Edward's violence as masculine displays of passion, and Bella's passive, submissive, and self-sacrificing response as a feminine ideal. Thus, Bella and Edward's actions romanticize and enforce abuse in relationships, upholding patriarchal structures and power imbalances.

In *Reading Like a Girl: Narrative Intimacy in Contemporary American Young Adult Literature*, Sara Day details the particular impact that young adult novels have on female-identifying adolescents. Day describes the relationship between young adult romance novels' narrators and readers as "narrative intimacy," where readers are encouraged to "seek and understand similarities between themselves and the narrator in question" (19). The use of a first-person narrator minimizes the distinctions between the narrator and reader, for the first-person singular pronouns (I, me, mine) cause readers to emotionally, vicariously experience the affect of the plot alongside the narrator. In the case of *Twilight*, Bella is a first-person narrator who relies on the reader as a confidante and signals them to supplement her story with their own emotional response. Through narrative intimacy, readers are co-creators of the emotional impact of the *Twilight* series and are "voyeur[s] and participant[s] in [Bella's] physical relationships with Edward and Jacob" (72). Hila Shachar addresses the harm in this association, noting that Meyer's novels teach young readers "that 'true love' is only attainable for women once they give up something,

most commonly, themselves" ("A Post-Feminist Romance" 153). This narrative messaging is distinct from the first-person narration in *Wuthering Heights*, where Nelly and Lockwood's narration creates separation between readers and Catherine. Bella, however, repeatedly models sacrificial behavior, culminating in her surrendering her life for her daughter and her humanity for an eternal existence with Edward. Bella's narrative intimacy becomes dangerous for readers, who can absorb her sacrificial mindset and become attracted to Edward's abusive actions and nature.

The series' most violent passages reveal how Meyer packages and vends Edward's violence as passion. The morning after they have consummated their marriage, the state of the room and Bella's body signal the brutality of the night before. When Bella wakes she soon realizes "there was stiffness, and a lot of soreness, too" in her muscles, and scanning her body finds "large purplish bruises were beginning to blossom across the skin of [her] arm [...] to [her] shoulder, and then down across [her] ribs" (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 89). The bruises Edward leaves on Bella in this scene are reminiscent of Heathcliff's bruising Catherine. The key difference is that the portrayal of Edward's physical abuse shores up patriarchal structures and conflates sex and violence. For instance, in response to this battery, Bella exclaims "I can't imagine life gets any better than that" (92). Bella further mitigates Edward's violence—and frames it as a masculine display of passion—when she reflects, "I couldn't recall a moment when his hold had been too tight, his hands too hard against me. I only remembered wanting him to hold me tighter and being pleased when he did" (89). Bella's reaction sends the message that male dominance and violence are justified if they are arousing. When Bella wakes surrounded by feathers from pillows that Edward bit and ripped apart, Edward indicates how close he came to murdering her when he notes, "we're just lucky it was the pillows and not you" (95). Moreover, the emphasis on Bella's injuries highlights their visual appeal and minimizes their harm through artistic language: in addition to the "blossoming" above, "there was a faint shadow across one of [her] cheekbones" and "the rest of [her] was decorated with patches of blue and purple" (95; emphases added). Meyer's word choice depicts Bella's bruises as beautiful embellishments to her skin, aestheticizing Edward's abuse as enhancing Bella's body instead of injuring it. Furthermore, when Bella sees her own beaten body, her response is to justify Edward's actions and to contemplate how to hide her bruises.

Although there is a BDSM community that desires a combination of sex and pain, the *Twilight* series does not portray consensual BDSM sex. In fact, in response to the *Twilight* saga—and its still more violent spawn, the *50 Shades* series—many BDSM groups and individuals came out with statements distancing BDSM from these novels' portrayals of sex, finding Edward's (and later *50 Shades*' Christian's) non-consensual control and abuse inaccurate and harmful not only for readers but for societal perceptions of the BDSM community ("5 Things"). The key difference is unlike those who partake in BDSM, Bella's life truly is at risk. Female sexuali-

ty, BDSM, and kinks are not problematic; rather, Edward's inherent threat to Bella's life and his exercising potentially lethal battery towards Bella during sex makes this scene—and particularly its romantic portrayal—harmful.

Another prominent scene that glamorizes violence occurs when Bella delivers baby Renesmee. The chapter in which Bella gives birth reads more like a scene from a slasher flick than a passage from a paranormal, young-adult romance novel. As Bella bends to retrieve a dropped cup of blood, there is a “muffled ripping sound from the center of her body” (346) and from there Meyer implements a barrage of violent imagery to describe Bella's labor. Jacob details the horror as Bella's screams burst the blood vessels in her eyes and her convulsions crack and break her bones—including her spine—while gushes of blood choke her and prevent her from speaking. Matching the violence of Bella's “natural” labor is the violent delivery through a C-section. Edward reasserts his place as the gatekeeper and conductor of Bella's body as he uses his teeth to bite through her womb, tearing open the placenta to deliver the baby. This simultaneous devouring and decimation of Bella's body is described by Jacob as “terrifying;” “Edward's face pressed against the bulge” creates a sound “like metal being shredded apart” (351). Meyer's use of simile creates distance from Edward's violence to Bella, but it is important to emphasize that Bella—not metal—is being “shredded apart” by Edward's teeth. Jacob justifies Edward's cannibalistic moment as a necessary means to deliver Renesmee, instructing readers on how to react to the scene when he reflects that vampire teeth are “a surefire way” to cut through the vampire skin of the placenta (351). This paints Edward as a baby-saving hero and diminishes the fact that he gutted Bella and left her open on the table, a “broken, bled-out, mangled corpse” (355). Edward bites Bella all over her body to inject his venom into her heart. This is another violent ravaging that is romanticized through simile; Jacob reduces it from abuse to a loving gesture when he says that the act was “like [Edward] was kissing her, brushing his lips at her throat, at her wrists, into the crease at the inside of her arm” (354). Thus, Jacob provides a voyeuristic perspective to Bella's death, gaining erotic pleasure from looking on as violence is enacted on the passive female body. Be it Bella or Jacob's narration, the characters inform readers that Edward's violence is blameless, and the description of his actions further reinforces his role as a desirable, masculine hero.

Although some may assume that contemporary texts present more progressive ideas than their historical counterparts, the *Twilight* novels include much more reactionary and harmful depictions of heterosexual relationships than those in *Wuthering Heights*. Meyer purports to draw from Brontë, but through whitewashing the romantic leads and subscribing to patriarchal gender norms, the *Twilight* series directly contrasts *Wuthering Heights'* critique of hierarchal conceptions of gender and race. Nevertheless, the connection between these texts continues to cause readers to conflate Brontë's negative view of violence with Meyer's positive portrayal of abuse. Through enforcing binary gender roles, Meyer has created a novel whose audience

accepts Edward's perpetual abuse of Bella. Where *Wuthering Heights* condemns violence and the institutionalized oppression that creates it, *Twilight* glorifies such violence as an integral part of the relationship between two contemporary romantic heroes.

## Impacts on Readers: Abuse in Real Life

To comprehend the impact of Stephenie Meyer categorizing *Wuthering Heights* as a romance, it is first necessary to understand what the romance genre is and does. Michael Cart refers to romance as a form, and pulls from Romance Writers of America to note the two factors all romance novels share: "a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending" (103). To return to Felski, books can be understood as "non-human actors" that shape and change readers' self-concepts and world views, influencing the way individuals think about and interact with their environments (189). The influence of romanticizing abuse is addressed by Melissa Miller, who found that "romance novels act as beginner's manual[s] for adolescence," ("Maybe Edward is the Most Dangerous Thing" 173) teaching young people how to meet one another, flirt, and act in romantic relationships. The way readers internalize *Twilight*'s eroticization of domestic abuse is evidenced in their positive reactions to Edward's character and the hyper-masculine role he holds. On a *Twilight* message board, fan Yulia writes "Bella was all smacked up with bruises and still begging for more, must have been better than I imagined," and t-shirts were made proclaiming, "Edward Can Bust my Headboard, Bite My Pillows, and Bruise My Body...Anyday [sic]!" (qtd. in Parke 213).

While fans' belief that Edward's abusive actions are romantic is alarming in and of itself, *Twilight*'s connection to *Wuthering Heights* and the growing cultural understanding of *Wuthering Heights* as a romance is further problematic. What makes *Wuthering Heights* romance categorization so harmful is that unlike *Twilight*, where fans are romanticizing abuse, literary scholars and teachers are upholding the perception of Catherine and Heathcliff as romantic idols. In a variety of articles, literary critics reference Catherine and Heathcliff as idyllic lovers. Notable among these is prominent young adult scholar Michael Cart, who notes that the romance genre "dates to the eighteenth century and [...] the novels of Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters" (103). It is telling that a young adult scholar classifies Brontë novels as romance, specifically in that he defines romances as having "a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending"—two things *Wuthering Heights* arguably doesn't have and at times actively resists (103). Classifying *Wuthering Heights* as a romance is harmful because it implicitly informs students that Heathcliff and Catherine's violent actions are romantic. By distinguishing *Wuthering Heights* as a romance, teachers and scholars—trusted guides and models for students—ultimately (and unintentionally) take part in the larger cultural movement that glamorizes and reinforces domestic abuse.

With one out of every three high school students experiencing the trauma of sexual or physical abuse (the one out of every three, it is essential that teachers and scholars do not present *Wuthering Heights* as a romance. Teachers must explain the contextual nuances of Catherine and Heathcliff's relationship and help students interpret *Wuthering Heights* in a way that does not trivialize or romanticize abuse. This requires a separation from the *Twilight* series and an investigation into the current cultural understanding of both Brontë and Meyer's novels. Moving forward, proponents of young adult literature must write, edit, and publish pieces that create space for feminine sexuality and desire without relying on tired, harmful gendered tropes. Young adult readers need texts that imagine romance outside of heteronormative, patriarchal, and abusive restrictions. Comparing these two texts and readers' responses to them reveals the urgent need to provide adolescents with the skills to analyze literature that addresses sexuality, desire, and romance. Given the tools to investigate characters' actions, narrative structure, and stereotypes, young readers will be able to identify romanticized portrayals of abuse and resist the conflation of novels such as *Wuthering Heights* and *Twilight*.

## Conclusion

Felski's conclusion that time is not a linear march towards progress, but instead is a "crumpled handkerchief" of affinities (576), illuminates how Brontë can present more progressive ideas through Catherine and Heathcliff's relationship in *Wuthering Heights* than Meyer does in *Twilight*. If Brontë could read the *Twilight* series today, its association with her own novel would appall her. As established throughout this paper, Bella vastly differs from Catherine; further, Bella's fate differs even from her own namesake, Isabella Linton. In crafting Isabella Linton, Brontë depicts a woman who fell in love with the idea of a man (Heathcliff) instead of his actual demeanor, and then endured the full force of patriarchal power through his legalized abuse. Yet Brontë imagines a story where Isabella shatters her illusions of Heathcliff and successfully runs away, living as a fugitive from her husband and his legal right to her and their child. Bella's ending could not diverge from Isabella's radical actions more: Meyer writes Bella as happily conforming to an eternity with her abuser. Despite the two texts' "sociability" with one another, Meyer's depictions of abuse as romantic and white men as dominant heroes uphold the societal notions Brontë works to deconstruct (Felski 185). Comparing these two novels reveals that modern readers and writers hold both limiting and liberating views of gender, race, and class. If we accept Felski's definition of "non-human actors"—that every individual is an amalgamation of the narratives they ingest—then as a society we must create stories that do not equate passion with violence and love with abuse (189). Though *Twilight* was first published in 2007, its impact—and the prevalence of harmful stories marketed to young adult readers—is

just as visceral today. This past year, the #MeToo movement has exploded dominant narratives that minimized and silenced the rape and battery of women around the world. The courageous individuals speaking up in this movement demand a change in society's conversations around domestic abuse, rape, and violence. Our stories must not endorse abuse or reduce dynamic individuals to racial and gendered stereotypes, but instead must recognize varying positionalities and create space for healthy conceptions of relationships. Just as Brontë's text ends not with the marriage plot of Hareton and Cathy, but with the destabilizing haunting of the moors, narratives today must also move beyond portrayals of abusive relationships as the desired, fairytale ending. Only once young adult authors, teachers, and critics produce narratives that envision resistant, subversive figures—phantoms with “unquiet slumbers”(Brontë 337)—will society be able to disrupt the romanticizing of white men's domestic abuse as a “small but perfect piece of our forever” (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 754).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For an examination of Isabella’s plight that renders her relationship with Heathcliff an example of mid-Victorian domestic abuse, see Hancock, Pike, and SurrIDGE.

<sup>2</sup>Domestic abuse is a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner. Domestic violence can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, hurt, injure, or wound someone (“Domestic Violence”).