# Domestic vs. Wild Spaces: Determining Characterization in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Andrea Arnold's Film Adaptation

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This essay explores space as a narrative presence in literature, further expressed through film, and examines how settings act as living presences that shape the inner worlds and conflicts of their characters. In Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Andrea Arnold's film adaptation, the domestic spaces of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange embody and construct identity, which is reinforced or challenged by the moor. Perspectives from spatiality like bell hooks's "The Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," Michel Foucalt's concept of heterotopia and Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* explain how environments reflect psychological depth, social position, and emotional confinement. The contrast between the rugged Heights and the refined Grange reflect oppositions of passion and civility, which are central to characterization. Arnold's adaptation reinterprets these spatial dynamics through a realist view that utilizes physical texture, weather, and isolation.

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Before a single word of dialogue is spoken in *Wuthering Heights*, the reader already knows the kind of world they have entered from its descriptions. There is a house battered by wind, a landscape that refuses comfort, and interiors that feel more like battlegrounds than homes. Literary and cinematic narratives often use physical spaces not only as settings, but as active forces that shape the identities, emotions, and social relations within them. In works where landscape and architecture are closely tied to character psychology, domestic and exterior spaces become sites of meaning that mediate power, belonging, and exclusion.

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is especially invested in this relationship between environment and self, as characters repeatedly return to houses and landscapes to express passion and belonging. Through the lens of spatial theory, the original 1847 novel and Andrea Arnold's 2011 film adaptation of the novel reveal how the narrative spaces established through the households of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange embody and construct character identity which is reinforced or at times challenged by the outside space of the moor. Perspectives from spatial theory like bell hooks' "The Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," Michel Foucalt's concept of heterotopia, and Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, "The House, From Cellar to Garret: the Significance of the Hut," support how interior and exterior environments reflect the psychological depth of social position and emotional confinement of the characters.

In Brontë's novel, the architectural contrast between the

rugged, storm-beaten Heights and the manicured, refined Grange are reflected thematic oppositions of passion and nature versus civility and culture. Arnold's adaptation reinterprets these spatial dynamics through a realist view that utilizes physical texture supported by fluctuations in weather and social isolation. The film establishes the homes as extensions of the characters' internal struggles rather than outside symbolic spaces.

This spatial framework reveals the significance of space as a narrative and psychological presence by tracing how both the novel and the film use domestic spaces to establish identity and social boundaries. The domestic space of Wuthering Heights comes to embody both Heathcliff's feral intensity and Catherine's divided self. Their turbulent bond ultimately manifests through their shared passion for one another. Thrushcross Grange, by contrast, reflects the cultivated restraint of the Linton siblings, Edgar and Isabella. Its polished domesticity also reinforces the rigid social hierarchies that limit emotional freedom in Victorian England. In both text and film, the settings act not just as backdrops but shaping presences that come to define the inner worlds and conflicts of their characters. Through the lens of spatial theory, both Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Andrea Arnold's film adaptation depict domestic spaces as active influences in shaping character identity and social hierarchy, while the moor functions as a liminal, heterotopic, and marginal space that exposes and destabilizes the emotional and social boundaries imposed by the home.

*Wuthering Heights* follows the intertwined lives of the Earnshaw and Linton families, centering on the intense and destructive bond between Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw. After Heathcliff is adopted into the Earnshaw household, his social marginalization and later mistreatment shape his obsession with revenge and possession. Catherine's decision to marry Edgar Linton for social stability rather than following her passion divides her identity and fuels lasting conflict. The novel's nonlinear structure, framed through the perspectives of Mr. Lockwood, the tenant in the neighboring house leased out by Heathcliff, and Nelly Dean, the Earnshaw maid, reveals how class, inheritance, and environment determine the fates

of the novel's central characters. The opposing spaces of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange reflect emotional extremes and social order. Ultimately, the novel traces how unresolved passion and resentment perpetuate suffering across generations.

Arnold's adaptation reimagines *Wuthering Heights* through a raw, realist perspective. This is emphasized physically through the bodies of young Catherine and Heathcliff, particularly in the outdoor scenes. The natural landscape of the moors becomes the film's true backdrop, making a point of showing the full extent of their isolation and suggesting that outside influence is almost nonexistent. Further, the sensory experience felt in the shifts between house and wild provides the viewer with another point of distinction when moving from the closed-up house to the expansive wilderness. The film focuses primarily on the early relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine, portraying their bond as primal and shaped by the harshness of their environment, the moors. Heathcliff stands out as being fully personified by the moors as he doesn't fit in with the culture defined by the Earnshaw and Linton households.

Heathcliff's otherness along with his intentional racial background in this film means that his brutal treatment is foregrounded which in turn highlights systems of exclusion and violence often subdued in other earlier film adaptations. Arnold minimizes dialogue and narrative exposition; she lets silence stand in place of words so that background pieces like weather or bodily presence are used to convey meaning. Domestic spaces appear oppressive and decaying, while the moors function as a site of fleeting freedom. The film presents the tragedy as an embodied experience rather than a purely symbolic or moral one.

## The Novel

From its earliest descriptions in the novel, Wuthering Heights is introduced as a home inseparable from the characters within. Lockwood's initial encounter with the house emphasizes its exposure and defiance, "Wuthering Heights is the name of Mr. Heathcliff's dwelling; 'Wuthering' being a significant provincial adjective, descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its station is exposed" (Brontë 4). The house's harsh exterior mirrors Heathcliff's emotional intensity and resistance

to social refinement. Critics have long observed that the Heights functions as an extension of Heathcliff himself. Steven Vine argues,

> If Wuthering Heights wuthers, there can be no stable distinction between the inside and the outside of Heathcliff's dwelling. (340)

The house's enclosed brutality results in identities that are passionately fighting for space to define themselves individually. In an unruly household without proper guidance, children are raised to resist social discipline and instead follow the household's own culture.

The brutality shapes the characters' emotional vocabularies so thoroughly that escape from the house also becomes an escape from the selves it has helped create. The otherness becomes inseparable from Heathcliff's character and, reinforced by his environment, it compels him to leave the Heights and go out into the world to mature and make his own money. This movement directly shapes the rest of the novel and places Heathcliff at the forefront of the action. However, Heathcliff is not the only character whose identity is produced by the Heights. The house, a space characterized in spatial theory, also imprints itself on Catherine Earnshaw, whose inner life becomes the most visibly fractured by its competing spatial demands.

While Heathcliff most visibly embodies the Heights' spatial otherness, the house's formative power extends beyond him, shaping the psychological interiors of those who grow up within its walls. Gaston Bachelard explains that houses shape inner life, arguing that the "house is our corner of the world… our first universe" (4). Rather than functioning as a neutral shelter, the house in Bachelard's formulation becomes a site where memory, imagination, identity, self, etc. are first formed and continuously reinforced. At Wuthering Heights, this "first universe" is a dark and shadowy environment where violence forces its inhabitants to become enclosed within themselves and isolated from the outside world, producing an inner life defined by intensity rather than stability. Catherine Earnshaw's psychological fragmentation is inseparable from this space. Her famous insistence, "Nelly, I am Heathcliff" (Brontë 84), grounds her identity not only in emotional union but in their shared environment, suggesting that

selfhood at the Heights is relational and spatial rather than autonomous.

In Bachelardian terms, Catherine's sense of being is rooted in a house that allows no clear boundaries between interior and exterior, self and other. As a result, when she is removed from this formative space and exposed to the ordered domesticity of Thrushcross Grange, her identity fractures, revealing the incompatibility between the wild psychic universe shaped by the Heights and the social discipline demanded by polite Victorian interiors. Catherine's tragedy feels less like a failure of choice and more like a failure of spatial belonging. The Heights forms her inner world so completely that no alternative domestic space can fully contain her without distortion. In this sense, Brontë suggests that when a "first universe" is built on violence and excess, it produces identities that cannot survive translation into socially regulated space without breaking apart. Nicoletta Brazzelli notes that Brontë's novel is

> dealing with a closed group of characters living on their self-destructive passions, with no sense of a society beyond Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. (234)

Catherine's inability to balance her two sides, the wild freedom of the Heights with the social order of the Grange, ultimately results in her collapse, which further illustrates how incompatible spaces can fracture identity.

Contrasting with the Heights, Thrushcross Grange represents refinement, containment, and social performance. When Catherine stays with the Lintons, her physical transformation reflects the spatial ideology of the Grange: "her manners were much improved," Nelly Dean observes, as Catherine adopts civility and restraint (Brontë 53). Herbert Goldstone reads this transformation as evidence of what he calls "Catherine's deepest values...a rejection...of a reasonable, common-sense acceptance of the dictates of society," arguing that the Grange draws characters into social conformity at the cost of emotional integrity (178). The house produces a version of Catherine that appears polished but is fundamentally at odds with the intensity cultivated at the Heights. This spatial dissonance reveals that her "improvement" is less a maturation than a performance demanded by the architectural and social codes of the Grange.

The Grange becomes a space that sustains hierarchy while presenting itself as order and

comfort. Edgar Linton's identity is produced by this environment. Lorraine Sim argues, "a character's experience is largely determined by their exclusion from, inclusion or imprisonment within, different spaces" (32). Spatial critics emphasize that the Grange does not simply reflect civility but actively enforces it through boundaries that regulate who may belong. As Jan Albert Myburgh notes, the boundaries between Heights and Grange function as ideological borders, producing belonging on one side and exclusion on the other (41). Heathcliff's exclusion from the Grange reinforces his social marginalization and fuels his desire for revenge, exposing the conditional nature of its civility. In this way, Brontë reveals that the comfort promised by such domestic order depends on the continual policing of bodies through the regulation of emotions, producing competent individuals who can properly manage relationships. Together, these pressures make the Grange as psychologically restrictive as it is socially elevated.

Between these two houses lies the moor, a space untethered from social expectation where movement is free for those willing to resist containment. Being too closely associated with it means accepting the potential dangers of existing outside the protection of social influence. Foucault's concept of heterotopia translates to this environment, as heterotopic spaces exist outside normative social structures while simultaneously reflecting and destabilizing them. In "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," Foucault describes heterotopias as sites that "juxtapose in a single real place several spaces that are in themselves incompatible" (25), a formulation that mirrors the moor's function between Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. The moor is neither fully wild nor socially ordered, but instead a shifting space where domestic boundaries temporarily dissolve.

Within this heterotopic landscape, Catherine and Heathcliff are able to exist outside the rigid identities imposed by the houses, experiencing a form of freedom unavailable indoors. Catherine's recollection of childhood freedom on the moors evokes a time before social division, revealing how space structures both memory and desire. The structure of power in the moor is flipped so that children or the socially inadept (the ones within Victorian society that hold

no power) are the ones in control in the sense that those finding power within the social order would have no place there. Yet, like Foucault's heterotopias, the moor offers no permanent refuge. Instead, it exposes the instability of domestic order without providing an alternative structure to replace it. The moor becomes a spatial threshold that intensifies emotional truth while underscoring the impossibility of sustaining such freedom within Victorian social constraints.

While the moors momentarily suspend the social logics enforced by both the Heights and the Grange, their freedom is defined as much by instability as by liberation. Alice Sukdolová identifies the Victorian landscape as heterotopic, arguing that it disrupts "the sphere of influence of the Victorian society and does not succumb to their rites" (108). This disruption is essential to the novel's emotional logic where passion flourishes on the moor, while repression dominates indoors. The open expanse allows Catherine and Heathcliff to inhabit a relational identity untethered from Victorian society's expectations that define class hierarchy, gender expectations, and domestic surveillance. Yet the moor is not purely emancipatory. Its potentially dangerous environment renders it incapable of sustaining the forms of belonging it briefly enables.

Claes Lindskog emphasizes that the novel's open skies and sweeping landscapes generate a spatial vastness that destabilizes identity rather than resolving it (66). The same boundlessness that permits emotional authenticity also erodes the possibility of permanence, foreshadowing the destructive trajectory of Catherine and Heathcliff's bond once it is forced back into domestic structures. In this sense, the moor operates as a threshold space by revealing the artificiality of social boundaries without offering an alternative system through which identity might endure. This connection is emphasized by the film adaptation as weather and the environment is key in its storytelling.

## The Film

Andrea Arnold's adaptation translates these spatial dynamics into a physical and sensory cinematic language. Dialogue is sparse, and meaning is carried through mud, wind, rain, and touch. The camera lingers on Heathcliff's body in space, showing him running across the

moors, pressed into the earth, or trapped within the decaying interiors of Wuthering Heights. The house in the film appears dark and animalistic, reinforcing the sense that identity is produced through physical endurance rather than symbolic meaning. Arnold's portrayal of Heathcliff foregrounds race and bodily marginalization, aligning with bell hooks' claim that the margin is a space produced by domination but capable of becoming "the site of radical possibility" where new ways of being can be imagined (20). Heathcliff's position outside the social interiors of power renders him simultaneously vulnerable and defiant. The moor is shot in wide, disorienting frames and it becomes a fleeting space of bodily liberation where Catherine and Heathcliff exist without speech or social restraint. Where the novel relies on architectural symbolism, the film insists on spatial immersion.

For hooks, the margin is not chosen freely but imposed, and it is precisely this condition that gives it political and experiential significance. Heathcliff's repeated return to the moors reflects this imposed marginality from being excluded from the interiors of power and respectability. He inhabits a space where identity is shaped through bodily endurance rather than social recognition. Arnold's emphasis on touch, breath, and physical proximity aligns with hooks' insistence that marginal spaces privilege lived, embodied knowledge over abstract authority.

From this perspective, the moor does not simply function as an escape from oppression but as a space where resistance is enacted through presence itself. Heathcliff's body is racialized and marked as out of place within the domestic interiors of the Heights and the Grange, so he gains a form of agency in the openness of the landscape. Yet, as hooks warns, the margin remains a space of vulnerability as well as possibility. It allows critique of the center without guaranteeing safety or permanence. Arnold preserves this tension by refusing to romanticize the moor as a stable refuge. The film frames marginal space as necessary and precarious, underscoring how freedom for characters like Heathcliff can exist only temporarily at the edges of a social world structured to exclude them.

This unique spatial and social structure also allows for a reversal of gender roles. Importantly, in

the film more scenes of Catherine and Heathcliff running through the moors are included than in the novel. Instead of imagining the dynamic, the adaptation extends the narrative through visual interpretation. In these scenes, Catherine is the one leading the pair and Heathcliff is struggling to catch up with her. They don't touch each other, but once Heathcliff catches up, his distance remains. She's usually running far ahead from him, showing her control of the situation and the dynamic out in the moors, a margin without social structure. This situation that would not come about naturally in the Linton's home or in their yard. The moor is able to exist as a female-dominated margin. It is a space where freedom and strength are celebrated, and the expected gender norms reversed. Heathcliff becomes the one who is unsure and following in this dynamic that, once they both grow up, is never seen again. The pair's youth likewise contributes to the creation of this specific margin.

Another point of adaptation in the film is the lack of emphasis on interior furnishings. In the novel, a great chunk of time is spent with Lockwood describing all the odds and ends in the Wuthering Heights household, but in the film that focus is absent. Summer J. Star notes that Brontë's furnishings and interiors function poetically (649). Arnold strips this away, replacing symbolic furniture with dirt, flesh, and weather. The result is a spatial experience rather than a narrative explanation, emphasizing how space is lived rather than interpreted.

The house is often too dark to make out definitive furniture shapes. The focus isn't on those details, and little verbal confirmation is provided to explain away the particularities. This is the prime form of information delivery in the novel. Visual disrepair instead shows viewers that Joseph, one of the few domestic servants left, isn't prioritizing the appearance of the Heights. So, instead of seeing how strong the doors are to hold up against the wuthering winds or showing the variety of guns, the film dedicates the most interior attention to a single piece: Catherine's oak-paneled bed, spanning floor to ceiling in her room. It is the biggest piece of furniture and the one shown the clearest. The panels create a new walled off space separated by curtains, where Catherine is shown to spend a great deal of time hiding when not out

running in the moors. Furniture, in this case, is vital to depicting Catherine's personality in the film which uses environment to make meaning that isn't expressly shared in the novel. By isolating Catherine within the towering oak bed, an interior space that is both shelter and confinement, the film visualizes how architecture and objects articulate emotional states without dialogue, allowing environment to function as a form of expression.

Across both works, space produces "spatial voice," a term Kevin von Duuglas-Ittu uses to describe how *Wuthering Heights* allows environment to speak emotional truth where language fails. For von Duuglas-Ittu, landscape and architecture function as expressive systems that externalize psychic conflict; the moor's vastness registers desire and grief that the rigid grammar of domestic interiors cannot contain. Heathcliff's identity, fractured by domestic exclusion, therefore finds articulation through movement across thresholds rather than through dialogue.

This spatial expressiveness is not neutral but structured through competing environmental regimes that shape the significance of how bodies feel and move. Huang Xiuqin argues that the novel stages a continual clash between nature and culture that are "two different ways of life" (63), and this instability is spatially organized. Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange do not simply house characters but impose competing modes of embodiment, one rough, exposed, and permeable to weather, the other regulated, polished, and disciplinary. Arnold's film intensifies Huang's claim by minimizing social interiors and privileging elemental textures like the noise of howling wind or the thick mud stuck to animal bodies, so that identity appears less socially constructed than environmentally conditioned. The camera's proximity to surfaces transforms space into a sensory force that acts upon the body.

Taken together, these spatial regimes refuse synthesis, producing a geography of selfhood defined by incompatibility rather than development. As Steve Vine observes, the novel's power lies in its refusal to resolve spatial contradictions (340), and this irresolution persists in the adaptation. Neither text offers a stable site where Catherine or Heathcliff can exist without conflict. Each location demands

the renunciation of some aspect of the self. The moor promises freedom yet produces exposure and loss, while domestic interiors offer structure at the cost of psychic fragmentation. Spatial movement becomes a tragic mechanism rather than a path to liberation.

Seen through this spatial lens, Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Andrea Arnold's adaptation refuse the comforting idea that tragedy is simply the result of bad choices or doomed love. Instead, they expose a world in which every environment scripts the body and narrows the self. The Heights breeds intensity but traps it in cycles of violence. The Grange polishes identity into something socially legible but hollow, and the moor offers a fleeting margin where freedom can only be felt because it cannot last. By translating Brontë's architectural symbolism into the raw components of mud, breath, wind, and touch, the film makes visible what the novel already knows, that space is not a backdrop but a system that produces a hierarchy by exclusion where desire breeds resistance. No character can move between these environments without losing something essential, and no house can hold the whole of who they are. What emerges is a geography of identity defined by incompatibility, not through belonging, where the cost of survival is self-division and the promise of freedom is always exposed to collapse. In this landscape, the tragedy of *Wuthering Heights* is not written in the stars or in the heart; it is built into the walls, carved into the thresholds, and carried in the distance between one place and another within the hope of a second chance generation.

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