Animal Imagery in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*

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Wuthering Heights by Emily Brontë is a novel which the reader remembers a long time after it has been put back on the shelf again, but it is also a novel to return to, over and over again, and still find something new everytime. Strong, passionate feelings are abundant, and even at the first reading it becomes obvious that nature imagery is important to the understanding of the novel, and more so if we look at the imagery closely.

Animals and animal behaviour are often mentioned in connection with the characters in the novel, and they usually have a symbolical function. Dogs, for example, are mostly shown in violent situations, attacking people – e.g. when Lockwood visits Wuthering Heights the first time (48), or when Catherine (I will refer to the elder Catherine with Catherine, and the younger with Cathy) is bitten by the Lintons' dog Skulker (90). Obviously they have been put there to underline the fieriness of the situation. Cats are more passive, just lying about sleeping. Horses, at least Minny, are active animals, symbolically representing a "projection of some powerful inner drive" (Laar 189). Birds seem to be a more complicated matter. One illustrative example is the madscene, where Catherine is arranging feathers from a torn pillow:

> 'That's a turkey's,' she murmured to herself; 'and this is a wild duck's; and this is a pigeon's. Ah, they put pigeons' feathers in the pillows – no wonder I couldn't die! Let me take care to throw it on the floor when I lie down. And here's a moor-cock's; and this – I should know it among a thousand – it's a lapwing's. (160)

According to Allott, these birds belong to a "northern, moorland countryside" and suggest feelings of "violence, vanished childhood, winter and death" (40). Compare this with Cathy's description of her ideal heaven: "not only larks, but throstles, and blackbirds, and linnets, and cuckoos poring out music on every side" (280). These birds certainly make us think more of life and happiness than death and violence. They also belong to a more southern landscape.

Animals used metaphorically, as a characterizing comparison of a person's qualities, range in size from a centipede to a bear, in wildness from a lamb to a tiger. From the examples mentioned above it is easy to presume that he Linton characters are connected with mild, meek animals, and the Earnshaws with wild, fierce ones. But it is not always this easy as we will see from the following analysis.

In this essay I will restrict my investigation to an analysis of animal imagery used metaphorically. The purpose is to see what imagery is used, if it is used in different ways for different characters, and if the imagery helps us to understand them. I have chosen to leave out Nelly, Lockwood and Joseph here, because the examples associated with them are too few to draw any conclusions from.

Hindley

a) I /Nelly/ felt that God had forsaken **the stray sheep** there to its own wicked wanderings, (146)

b) We /Heathcliff etc./ broke in this morning, for we heard him **snorting like a horse**; /.../ I sent for Kenneth, and he came, but not till **the beast** had changed into carrion (221)

c) Hareton was impressed with a wholesome terror of encountering either **his wild-beast's** fondness, or his madman's rage (114)

d) I /Isabella/ might as well have struggled with **a bear**, or reasoned with a lunatic. (212)

e) 'Is he /Heathcliff/ come back, then?' asked the hermit, **glaring like a hungry wolf**. (175)

As we see here, the animal imagery connected with Hindley is mostly of a rather wild nature, the exceptions being those of a sheep and a horse. But the sheep is *stray*, with no master to guide it,as Hindley is without fatherly guidance. He has no power to control his feelings. When he wants to bestow his fondness on Hareton, he does it with such energy that it frightens the young lad. Rage, too, is let out with no restraint at all, which makes Isabella compare him with a bear. Hate makes Hindley glare at his enemy like a hungry wolf, wanting to get at his prey and tear it apart. He may be compared to a horse – generally seen as a rather tame animal – but this is a *snorting* horse, fighting for his life. This, and the beast-image in (b), as I see it, are more a question of Heathcliff's feelings for Hindley, thann a characterizing trait of Hindley's nature. According to Laar, the "quotations certainly bring out the animal, instinctive side of Hindley's nature, which, uncontrolled by the powers of his will, will destroy his personality" (171).

Catherine

a) **The little monkey** had crept by the skylight of one garret, along the roof, into the skylight of the other, and it was with the utmost difficulty I /Nelly/ could coax her out again. (101)

b) We /Catherine & Isabella/ were **quarrelling like cats** about you, Heathcliff; (144)

c) 'You are **a dog in the manger**, Cathy /Catherine/, and desire no one to be loved but yourself!' (141)

d) 'you look as **dismal as a drowned whelp** (126)

e) '**Quietly as a lamb**.' I /Nelly/ answered, aloud. (203)

If we look at the animals mentioned, and not at the situations they are depicted in, we see that they do not suggest too much wildness. In fact it is only the monkey that is not a tame animal. But one cannot, of course, exclude the surrounding situations and, therefore, we must see the cats in (b), for example, however tame and mild they may be in general, in the described situation of controversy, baring their teeth and claws. This is certainly an image of wildness. Catherine's and Isabella's fight, however, is a battle with words as weapons, and though the words may be sharp, they do not inflict mortal wounds. We must also remember that it is Catherine herself who utters the sentence, and that she probably intended a slight mockery with it.

The monkey in (a) is an illustration of Catherine's agility, her activeness. it is not the fieriness of a wild animal that is stressed here, but the lack of suppression of free will. Catherine lets no obstacles hinder her from doing what she wants to do.

In (c) a common idiom is used. It is Isabella who utters this, and Laar claims that her "metaphorical use of animal names is limited and not very colourful" (182). I am prepared to agree with her, but that does not mean the idiom is an accurate description of what Isabella feels – that Catherine is grudging.

When Hindley compares Catherine to a drowned whelp, it is not to characterize her nature, but to describe what a sorryful figure she cuts, sitting all wet and pitiful before the fire.

Catherine dying quietly as a lamb means that she does not struggle, does not protest. She submits to death with joy, waiting to be"incomparably beyond and above" (197) all the others. To get an explanation of what this utterance means, we may turn to David Cecil and his theory of Emily Brontë's metaphysical cosmos in *Wuthering Heights*. He states that it is

> the expression of certain living spiritual principles – one the one hand what may be called the principle of storm – of the harsh, the ruthless, the wild, the dynamic; and on the other the principle of calm – of the gentle, the merciful, the passive and the tame. (152)

He also says that if these living spiritual principles within the human body are obstructed in any way from being lived out, or are in conflict with the other principle, they become negative forces, "the calm becomes a source of weakness, not of harmony, in the natural scheme, the storm a source not of fruitful vigour, but of disturbance" (Cecil 152). it is this dissonance, this "shattered prison" (196) that Catherine leaves as quietly as a lamb.

1 Heathcliff

a) **an evil beast** prowled between it /the sheep, Hindley/ and the fold, waiting his time to spring and destroy. (146)

b) I /Isabella/ was not going to sympathize with him – **the brute beast**. (207)

c) and, lifting up his eyes, **howled**, not like a man, but **like a savage beast** getting goaded to death with knives and spears. (204)

d) he's a fierce, pitiless, **wolfish man**. (141)

e) and on my /Nelly's/ approaching hurriedly to ascertain if she had fainted, he **gnashed** at me, and **foamed like a mad dog**, (197)

f) 'Off, **dog**!' cried Hindley, (80)

g) Heathcliff, if I /Isabella/ were you, I'd go stretch myself over her /Catherine's/ grave and **die like a faithful dog**... (213)

h) Don't get the expression of **a vicious cur** that appears to know the kicks it gets are its desert, and yet hates all the world, as well as the kicker, for what it suffers. (97f)

i) **his basilisk eyes** were nearly quenched by sleeplessness (215)

j) I /Isabella/ assure you, **a tiger**, or **a venomous serpent** could not rouse terror in me equal to that which he wakens. (181f)

k) 'He's **a bird of bad omen**; (142)

l) Do you /Nelly/ know anything of his history?'

'It's **a cuckoo's**, sir (76)

m) I /Nelly/ noticed he **breathed as fast as a cat**. (357)

n) It's like **a colt's mane** over his eyes!' (99)

o) *he* was **as uncomplaining as a lamb**, though hardness, not gentleness, made him give little trouble. (79)

Heathcliff is also linked with animal life in having "cannibal teeth" (212), a "ferocious gaze" (54), he is growling (48), "grinding his teeth" (68) and his mouth waters (216). Jacques Blondel points out that "imagery reveals how the wild prevail over the tame in the first part of the book" (5), and we can also say that in the imagery around Heathcliff the wild animals are more frequent than the tame ones. He is not one to rouse tender feelings of any kind in people he meets, but he evokes passion. Even Isabella, usually a mild and timid girl, is animated with passionate feelings towards Heathcliff. They are later turned into hatred, equally passionate, and this is reflected in the imagery used (b, g, i, j).

In (a), (k) and (l) we see examples of Nelly's ability to summarize in a few words what is going on. The beast in (a) and the vicious cur in (h) are both incarnations of Heathcliff's vindictiveness. He wants to get back at his childhood's suppressor with animal vehemence. Regarding the two bird images in (k) and (l) we may once again consult Cecil's theory. He means that Heathcliff, though he belongs to the principle of storm, is an "extraneous element" and therefore, "a source of discord, inevitably disrupting the working of the natural order" (164). Heathcliff is the bird that brings bad feelings into the households of first Wuthering Heights, then Thrushcross Grange. He is also the cuckoo that casts out the lawful heirs of the two estates in order to put his own offspring – or rather himself – in their place.

But Heathcliff has not always been this destructive. He was never a charming child, but he had to endure more ill-treatment than he ever bestowed on anybody else at that time. He could stand Hindley's cruelty and derisive epithets (f) and weather an illness with no complaints (o), but when his conscience of the advantages of grooming is evoked, Edgar's innocent remark on his looks in (n) makes him attack the unfortunate speaker. The remark points out that Heathcliff still looks roughish, and that rising from the low level into which he had sunk was not to be done in an hour or two. According to Cecil, Heathcliff's destructiveness is due to the fact that he is "a natural force which has been frustrated of its natural outlet, so that it inevitably becomes destructive" (165).

When Catherine discovers that Isabella is infatuated with Heathcliff, she tries to warn her off (d) by saying he is a wolfish man, not "a pearl-containing oyster of a rustic" (141). By this she means that he does not possess a hidden honourable soul behind a fierce mask, he is what he looks like. Isabella soon finds that out, as we see in (b) and (j). She describes the deadly fear she now feels for him, comparing him to a beast of prey, supposedly ready to jump at her. The venomous serpent-image could possibly also refer to his poisonous remarks to her.

In (c), (e) and (i) Nelly and Isabella describe very vividly Heathcliff's animal sorrow when Catherine falls ill and dies. He defends his charge like a mad dog, avariciously, wanting her all for himself. When she finally dies, he does not cry – he *howls*, putting no restraints whatsoever to his feelings. Heathcliff's usually killing – basilisk – eyes have lost their former power by lack of sleep. Isabella, feeling neglected and having no pity, scornfully advises him to die like a faithful dog (g). Near the end when he sees his heaven – his union with Catherine – coming nearer, he is excited, but lack of food and sleep has made him weak, and in (m) Nelly compares his breathing with a cat's.

Edgar

a) he possessed the power to depart, as much as **a cat** possesses the power to leave a mouse half killed, or a bird half eaten. (112)

b) Never a day ut yah're off, but yon **cat** uh Linton comes sneaking hither (127)

c) He is scarcely a degree dearer to her than her **dog**, or her **horse** (186)

d) 'Cathy /Catherine/, this **lamb** of yours **threatens like a bull**!' he /Heathcliff/ said. (153)

e) Heathcliff would as soon lift a finger at you as the king would march his army against **a colony of mice**. /.../ Your type is not a lamb, it's **a sucking leveret**. (154)

Most of these quotations show the Earnshaws' and Heathcliff's contempt for Edgar's timidity. As Mark Schorer points out "the domestic and the gentler animal are generally used for purposes of harsh satire or vilification" (547), and passages (d) and (e) are certainly scornful enough. When Edgar's tolerance of Heathcliff's intrusion has reached a climax, he requires Heathcliff to leave the house. The latter does not believe Edgar would dare lift a finger against him all alone, and he is right. Catherine discovers the servants Edgar has brought with him, and this turns even her against him. She compares him to such pathetic animals as mice and a sucking leveret.

In (c) Heathcliff tells Nelly how shallow he thinks Catherine's love for Edgar is. It is an everyday love with no great passion, but for Edgar this means more than a silly infatuation. She gives him the warmth and energy he lacks, and he is driven to her by instinct, as we see in (a). Laar sees this cat-image as a "weakness of character" (180), as him giving in to Catherine's will. I think he is acting out of free will, imagining how his life would be without her. He does not want to leave his prey behind without getting something out of its nourishment. But Edgar would not risk a confrontation with Hindley, so he comes sneaking like a cat, when Hindley is gone.

Isabella

a) 'There's **a tigress**!' exclaimed Mrs Linton, setting her free, and shaking her hand with pain. 'Begone, for God's sake, and hide **your vixen face**! How foolish to reveal those **talons** to *him*. (145)

b) 'You are **an impertinant little monkey**.' exclaimed Mrs Linton. (141)

c) Now was it not the depths of absurdity – of genuine idiocy, for **that pitiful, slavish, mean-minded brach** to dream that I /Heathcliff/ could love her? (188)

d) 'We /Catherine & Isabella/ were **quarrelling like cats** about you, Heathcliff; (144 see under Catherine)

e) 'They are **dove's eyes** – angel's!' (145)

f) I'd /Catherine/ as soon put **that little canary** into the park on a winter's day as recommend you to bestow your heart on him! (141)

g) and he'd crush you, **like a sparrow's egg**, Isabella, if he found you a troublesome charge. (141)

h) And you conspire with him against me /Heathcliff/, do you, **viper**? (214)

i) And he /Heathcliff/ stared hard at the object of discourse, as one might do at **a strange, repulsive animal, a centipede from the Indies**, for instance, which curiosity leads one to examine in spite of the aversion it raises. (144)

j) The more **the worms** writhe, the more I /Heathcliff/ yearn to crush out their entrails! (189)

If the remarks associated with Edgar were full of contempt, these are even more so. Though Isabella is as timid as Edgar and not a threat to anybody, Laar points out that "she evokes in some of the people around her intense feelings of dislike and even repulsion" (Laar 183), as we see in (c), (h) and (i). The revulsion is exemplified with a viper, a centipede and worms, all animals which provokes disgust in many people. The most abominable picture of this hatred is (j), where Heathcliff shows that he does not even think the Lintons and their equals are worthy of being alive, the more they suffer under him, the more he scorns them, and he gets satisfaction from tormenting them.

Catherine compares Isabella's fragility to that of a small bird and a bird's egg in (f) and (g). She would be totally defenceless if she got into the hands of Heathcliff. But Isabella would not take Catherine's warning – she thinks Catherine acts out of selfishness – and attacks her with the wildness of a tigress in passage (a). She has turned from a fragile bird into a bird of prey, using her talons wildly. Love has put her on fire and made her active and impertinent. The monkey-image is often connected with naughtiness in English idioms (Gulland 63), and example (b) is no exception.

Catherine tries to tone down her criticism of Isabella's sudden burst of passion by saying she "wished to punish her sauciness" and that she likes her too well to let Heathcliff "absolutely seize and devour her up" (145). She now compares her to a dove – the absolute peace-symbol. Otherwise Isabella's, and Edgar's, positive qualities are not too obvious in connection with metaphorical animal imagery.

Hareton

a) his whiskers encroached **bearishly** over his cheeks, (53)

b) Heathcliff smiled again, as if it were rather too bold a jest to attribute the paternity of **that bear** to him.

'My name is Hareton Earnshaw,' **growled** the other; (56)

c) **Unnatural cub**, come hither! I'll /Hindley/ teach thee to impose on a good-hearted, deluded father – Now don't you /Nelly/ think the lad would be handsommer cropped? It makes **a dog** fiercer, and I love something fierce (114)

d) and accompanied me /Lockwood/, **in the office of watchdog**, not as a substitute for the host. (330)

e) 'He's just like **a dog**, is he not, Ellen? she /Cathy/ once observed, 'or **a cart-horse**? (341)

f) but he was as **obstinate as a mule**, (342)

g) Hareton, you **infernal calf**, begone to your work. (243)

h) I /Nelly/ went into the kitchen and sat down to lull my **little lamb** to sleep. (116)

i) And Hareton has been **cast out like an unfledged dunnock** (76)

j) and you gathered them /the books/, **as a magpie gathers silver spoons**, for the mere love of stealing. (332)

These quotations suggest that Hareton has been raised to an animal, instinctive level of life (a, b, d, e), and that he knows nothing about cultivation until he meets Cathy. He is touchy and growles when offended. In this he much resembles the young Heathcliff, but the relation between them is far from the relation Heatchcliff and Hindley had before. Hareton looks up to Heathcliff as a father, and does not see him as the suppressor he really is. His real father, Hindley, sees him as an unnatural cub, that will not love its biological father, but is afraid of him. Heathcliff does not pour affection over the lad, but he does not hit him either, though he orders Hareton around and calls him an infernal calf among other things. The young boy does what he is told to, as in (b). He is unaware of Heathcliff's treacherous plan to cheat him out of his hereditary estate. As we have already seen, Nelly compares Heathcliff with a cuckoo, and now she makes the comparison between Hareton and an unfledged dunnock.

Although Hareton lives on an animal level, he is not as wild and ruthless as Heathcliff used to be. Nelly calls him her little lamb, first of all because she is his nanny and he is her favourite, but also because he bears no evil thoughts. He may behave as an uncouth boor, but he does not intend to hurt anybody. When Cathy compares him to a dog and a cart-horse, Laar interprets it as implicating "subjection (not freedom) and being weighed down" (191), but I believe Cathy wants to point out what a poor, dull life he leads, he "does his work, eats his food, and sleeps, eternally" (341), that is his mind is always asleep, even when the rest of him is awake. Now, when Cathy knows he did not steal her books to get back at her (j), but because he wanted to rise from his ignorance to a higher level, she wants to tease him into friendship again, making peace-offers. But, to begin with, he is sulky, and Nelly uses the common idiom, obstinate as a mule, to describe his behaviour. However common it may be, in this sequence it is efficient, not only depicting Hareton as stubborn, but also connecting him with a farm animal as farm and earth imagery is often mentioned when Hareton is described.

Cathy

a) do you hear, **damnable jade**?' (72)

b) To think how Mr Linton charged me /Nelly/ to keep you in; and you stealing off so; it shows you are **a cunning little fox**, (228)

c) I /Nelly/ entered and beheld my **stray lamb**, (228)

d) She bounded before me /Nelly/, and returned to my side, and **was off again like a young greyhound**; (247)

e) 'Keep your **eft's fingers** off; and move or I'll kick you! cried Heathcliff, brutally repulsing her. I'd rather be hugged by **a snake**. (307)

f) she commenced capering round the room; and on my /Nelly's/ giving chase, **ran like a mouse**, (229)

g) Never did any **bird** flying back to a plundered nest which it had left brimfull of chirping young ones, express more complete despair in its anguished cries and flutterings, than she by her single 'Oh!' and the change that transfigured her late happy countenance. (259)

h) 'And you, you worthless –' he /Heathcliff/ broke out as I /Lockwood/ entered, /.../ and employing an epithet as harmless as **duck**, or **sheep**, but generally represented by a dasch. (72)

i) 'Will *you* come, **chuck**? I'll /Heathcliff/ not hurt you. (364)

j) That capacity for intense attachments reminded me /Nelly/ of her mother; still she did not resemble her; for she could be **soft and mild as a dove**, (224)

These quotations paint a picture of a small (young), agile and lively being, a nice person, but no angel – she can be as cunning as a fox and she will "snap at the master himself" (328) if she needs to. Cecil points out that the good qualities of the Earnshaws and the Lintons are combined in her – as they are in Hareton. The good qualities being "the kondness and constancy of calm, the strength and courage of storm" (166). Cathy's Linton traits evoke Heathcliff's contempt, he thinks they are repulsive, as we see in (a), (e) and (h), but he also sees her likeness to Catherine and softens his attitude towards her. He would even accept her company when he does not want to be alone in (i). The chuck-epithet only "half-sneeringly" (364) refers to her fear for him.

Nelly, on the other hand, appreciate Cathy's Linton qualities. She gives the softness and mildness a positive value compared to Catherine's harsh and fierce character. But Cathy is not always high in Nelly's favour, as when she has run away to make an excursion to the Penistone Crags on her own, and Nelly finds her at Wuthering Heights. Nelly is glad to find her stray lamb, but angry with her for the worry she has caused, and she calls Cathy a cunning fox and a mouse. Laar points out that "Nelly's use of metaphor varies considerably with her moods" (168). Cathy's agility is compared to a mouse's when Nelly is angry with her, and to a young greyhound's, when Cathy is taken into her favour again. As we have seen before, Nelly is not the only one to vary her imagery according to her mood, all the characters do it. Metaphors help us to understand the characters not only in direct description of their traits, but also indirectly in showing the relations between the persons, and in that way reflecting the speakers' characters as well.

In (g) Nelly gives an elaborate picture of Cathy's feelings of loss, when she understands that Nelly has discovered her love-letters from Linton. The plundered nest brings with it a sense of destruction and death. Laar points out that this is "the end of Cathy's carefree happiness of youth" (187), and she may be right in the sense that it is a foreboding of Linton's death.

Linton

a) And do you imagine that beautiful young lady, that healthy, hearty girl /Cathy/, will tie herself to **a little perishing monkey** like you? (304)

b) she /Cathy/ had resolved to make **a pet** of her little cousin, (236)

c) the latter achieved his exit exactly as **a spaniel** might, which suspected the person who attended on it of designing a spiteful squeeze. (305)

d) That is the sole consideration which can make me /Heathcliff/ endure **the whelp** (243)

e) Has **the whelp** been playing that game long? (300)

f) Where is *my* /Heathcliff's/ share in thee, **puling chicken**? (242)

g) Rise, and don't degrade yourself into **an abject reptile** – don't.' (299)

h) Show his resemblance to yourself /Heathcliff/; and then, I /Nelly/ hope, Miss Cathy will think twice, before she takes **the cockatrice**.' (306)

i) Her /Cathy's/ cousin had shrunk into a corner of the settle, **as quiet as a mouse**, congratulating himself, I /Nelly/ dare say, that the correction had lighted on another than him. (303)

As we see from these quotations, Linton is not exposed to too much fondness from people in his surrounding. He is described in degrading pictures of smallness, fear, weakness and repulsion. Heathcliff wonders what traits Linton has inherited from him (f). He only sees Linton's weakness at first, and contemptuously calls him a whelp. In Linton the bad qualities from his parents have turned into "the cowardice and wekness of calm, the cruelty and ruthlessness of storm" (Cecil 166) – he is as weak as cobweb, "a pinch would annihilate him" (318), and he is snappish (244, 280).

Even Cathy, who has some tender feelings for Linton, recognizes his cowardice (g), but she has capacity to feel pity for him. Nelly, on the other hand, has taken a particular aversion to the poor lad, and *she* shows no pity, but is rather cruel, though apt, in her metaphors when she describes him (a, c, h, i). In the latter she combines his cowardice and selfishness in one picture.

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As we have seen, the kind of animals used in the imagery varies. It is not so, as one may easily suppose at first, that wild animals are reserved for the Earnshaws; they are used to desribe members of the Linton family as well. I think Emily Brontë meant wildness in an animal to be the image of instinctive life. And it is because the Earnshaws live a more instinctive life that wild animals are more frequent in association with them. This life has its positive and negative sides, as has the Lintons' more cultivated life, but I do not think that Emily Brontë intended to hold one way of life up as a model. She wanted to show us what could happen if these antipoles met, and how their qualities could be combined.

The marriage between Edgar and Catherine eventually clashes, and the marriage between Heathcliff and Isabella was doomed from the start. The result is a feeling of contempt on Catherine's and Heathcliff's side, and suppressed anger on Edgar's and Isabella's. Heathcliff and Catherine use tame animals, small wild ones, reptiles and insects in their imagery to show their contempt, and as they are more active, they do most of the talking, and therefore their eractions are more observable. In the younger generation, where the qualities are blended, the imagery is more mixed, positively for Hareton and Cathy, negatively for Linton.

Farm animals, such as dogs, mules, calves, are also used to suggest an instinctive life, but there is a sense of suppression implied, too. Hindley bullies

Heathcliff, and deprives him of education and culture when old Mr Earnshaw dies. Heathcliff, in his turn, takes revenge on Hindley's son, Hareton. The latter, however, is unaware of being suppressed. The animal imagery in *Wuthering Heights* is not, as we see, in any way used haphazardly, but is used very consciously to add to the understanding of what the characters are like, how they react in different situations, and what they think of the other characters.

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