

Religious Reflections from the Life of Emily Bronte: The Number Three and its Significance in Wuthering Heights

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ABSTRACT

Nineteenth-century British author Emily Bronte makes nearly fifty references to the number three in her only novel, *Wuthering Heights*. With such an overwhelming use of this specific number, it seems unlikely that Bronte used it merely by coincidence. Forty-seven instances where the number three is used are in reference to lengths of time, while other references indicate numbers of particular items or characters. It is of interest that the number three is a highly significant religious number. Since Emily Bronte was raised in a religious household, by a father who was a pastor and by an extremely religious aunt, the spiritual significance of three is the best answer to the question of why Bronte would have reflected upon and chosen to use this one number almost exclusively in *Wuthering Heights*.

INTRODUCTION

Emily Bronte's only novel, *Wuthering Heights* contains many allusions to God and the religious influences that surrounded much of Bronte's life. The major religious influences from her upbringing and surroundings are reflected in the themes evident in her writing as well as in the actions of her characters. These include the importance of God in an individual's life, blessings from God, punishment from God, birth, life, death, and the afterlife.

The focus of this paper is the lesser spoken of religious themes behind Bronte's use of the number three in *Wuthering Heights*. This paper offers a brief look at some of the meanings, spiritual and otherwise, upon which Emily Bronte may have reflected as she wrote and how these are apparent in her abundant use of three. This is followed by an analysis of how these meanings may have applied to the three most prominent examples of the number three in Bronte's novel. The remaining examples are displayed in a Table, listing where the specific uses of the number three can be found in *Wuthering Heights*, which character(s) are involved, and a brief description of the event(s) or circumstance(s) involved.

BRONTE'S BACKGROUND

Nineteenth-century British author Emily Bronte lived in a small town in the rural Yorkshire area of England during the early to mid-1800s. The fifth of six children, Bronte was no stranger to hardship and grief. At only one year and nine months old, Emily moved with her family to the rural town of Haworth. The Bronte family lived in Haworth for less than a year when Emily's mother fell seriously ill. Within a year, she was dead. Emily Bronte was three years old. Her

youngest sister, Anne, was not yet a year old. Only a few years later would come the deaths of Emily's two oldest sisters, Maria and Elizabeth. Significant or not, this would now make Emily Bronte the third child of the family.

RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES UPON EMILY BRONTE

After the death of her mother when Emily was little more than a toddler, Emily, her one brother, and four sisters were raised by their father, Pastor Patrick Bronte. As the town's minister, his beliefs were made known to his children through his teachings, by their attending Sunday school, and by their listening to his sermons. Patrick Bronte wrote his own sermons, many of which were published. One such sermon emphasizes the need for "personal commitment to Christ," and the need for each individual "to live, as well as preach, his word" (qtd. in Alexander & Smith, 2006, 123). Emily was taught that the only source for true happiness was religion and that sinners had to be punished. Yet Patrick Bronte followed a more middle-of-the-road outlook than some members of the Church of England, emphasizing repentance and conversion that would lead to sinners being granted eternal life, rather than dwelling upon some form of eternal punishment, a prevalent belief by many during Bronte's time.

Emily Bronte was also under the influence of her Aunt Elizabeth Branwell, who had been helping to raise the Bronte children since the death of their mother, Aunt Branwell's sister. Elizabeth Branwell's religious beliefs differed from those of Emily's father, as she was a Wesleyan Methodist. According to the religious teachings of Emily's father, if a sinner was to be saved, he must first reflect upon his life and his actions, then take the steps needed for self-improvement. This would guarantee God's acceptance and a person's entrance into heaven in the afterlife.

One recurring theme in Emily Bronte's upbringing (and later in her writing) is the influence of death and the afterlife. This seems reasonable as more than forty percent of the people born in Haworth during the time when the Bronte family resided there died before they were six years old. The average age at death was twenty-five (Whitehead, 2007). Emily's father himself tells the world that from 1820 on, he presided over more than 111 deaths annually. From 1824 to 1830, the number of deaths rose to 140 per year, in just this small rural area of Haworth in northern England (Barker, 1995, p. 101). During her short lifetime, Emily Bronte wrote more than 120 poems. At least thirty of Bronte's poems deal with the afterlife, or eternity, as their primary theme. This would appear to be evidence, at least in part, of the religious influences she experienced during

her upbringing.

Bronte's only novel, *Wuthering Heights*, also appears to reflect her upbringing and surroundings in its evident themes and in the actions of her characters. *Wuthering Heights* contains many allusions to God and the religion that surrounded much of Bronte's life. One primary example is Bronte's servant character Joseph, the religious fanatic who forces the young Earnshaw children to spend hours sitting in the cold memorizing religious texts and listening to his seemingly endless sermons. Joseph remains a constant in the story from its beginning until its end, marking an ever present religious influence upon Bronte's characters.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NUMBER THREE

Spiritual Completeness, Creation, and Change

Very practically speaking, the number three encompasses all: the beginning, the middle, and the end. Also, man is often thought of as being comprised of three parts: mind, body, and spirit. Human capabilities might be summed up as consisting of three things: thought, word, and deed. The number three represents spiritual completeness, the perfection of God. There are three acts of existence from God: birth, life, and death.

Bronte reflects upon teachings such as that found in Genesis 1:13, which says that the earth was made to rise out of the water on the third day of God's creation. This belief would have been taught by Emily Bronte's father and its use in Bronte's writing shows self-reflection in action. Emily Bronte uses a process of creation and presentation of new arrivals in *Wuthering Heights* to demonstrate the power of three in bringing about great change. Heathcliff seems to be a strong exemplar of the power of three. Heathcliff's first arrival at Wuthering Heights comes about when Mr. Earnshaw returns after having been away for three days, bringing with him a new son, Heathcliff. The family is now forever changed. This "creation" of a new son, named after the first-born son who had died years previous, now brings the number of children in the Earnshaw household back to its previous number, three. It may not be the fact that Earnshaw was gone away for three days that makes this such a powerful example of Bronte's use of three. It is the chain of events that this three day journey has now put into action. It cannot be stopped and establishes the basis for Bronte's entire story line.

Heathcliff's first introduction to *Wuthering Heights* is embedded within a paragraph where Bronte uses the number three, three times. The third day as the day of Mr. Earnshaw's return and,

therefore, Heathcliff's arrival at the Heights is mentioned as twice. This is then followed up by the thoughts of Mr. Earnshaw and Bronte's third reference to three. "He threw himself into a chair, laughing and groaning, and bid them all stand off, for he was nearly killed—he would not have such another walk for the three kingdoms" (Bronte, 1847, p. 32). Thus, early on in his creation, Bronte connects her religious background to her character Heathcliff. According to religious belief, the three kingdoms refer to the kingdom of mankind [earth], the kingdom of heaven [God's realm], and the kingdom of the spirit [God's laws].

The change in position for Hindley Earnshaw, watching as his father shows favoritism towards this new-found son, produces a hatred between the two boys that lasts until Hindley's death. The extreme closeness of the bond that quickly develops between young Catherine and Heathcliff leads to an obsession on Heathcliff's part that haunts him throughout his entire existence. For Catherine, it produces a conflict between what she loves and what she comes to desire. There can be no more powerful change than this beginning, the events following that life-changing trip, of only three days.

Heathcliff's role in Bronte's novel also quickly merges her beliefs in death and the afterlife with possibilities of the number three. "Emily [Bronte] always looks out to a fuller life; death, to her, is metamorphosis, the freeing of a person's essence" (Hanson, L. & E., 1967, p. 232). Bronte again reflects upon her Christian belief that change or transformation was evident following a three day wait in the case of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus was dead for three days; on the third day, he rose (Matthew 17:22). Upon his being resurrected, according to Christian belief, Christ was now transformed out of his previous human body into a spiritual body to live forever. "Jesus' human body was transformed into something new and wonderful, a glorified body with all effects of sin and the curse removed" (Graves, D. & J., 1995). Luke 24, 31 and 36 also speak of this transformation of Jesus' human body. When Jesus was transformed through resurrection, he had to prove to his disciples that this new personage really was him. This belief would have been part of the religious teachings of the Reverend Patrick Bronte, and as such, it would also have been a teaching familiar to Emily Bronte. The idea that Jesus went away and returned so totally transformed that even his disciples did not at first recognize him, might very well correspond to the departure, transformation, and return of Bronte's Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. It does not

seem presumptuous to say that Emily Bronte may have reflected upon such beliefs as she wrote.

This most prominent use of three denoting both time away and a time of change, happens early in Bronte's book when Heathcliff leaves Wuthering Heights after overhearing Catherine Earnshaw, his childhood love, tell Nelly that she [Catherine] would be degraded to marry Heathcliff now. Catherine says, "I have no more business to marry Edgar Linton than I have to be in heaven; and if the wicked man in there [Hindley] had not brought Heathcliff so low, I shouldn't have thought of it. It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now" (p. 73). Such degradation injures Heathcliff greatly and he leaves Wuthering Heights, but this same degradation inspires Heathcliff to rise and transform himself into a different form.

Transformation

At the age of only sixteen, Heathcliff flees his home on the heights during a tumultuous storm. His whereabouts remain unknown, and the residents of both Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange view Heathcliff as dead, at least as far as his involvement in their present lives are concerned. Three years pass and a transformed Heathcliff returns. When he first appears to Nelly Dean, she does not immediately recognize him; he is so changed. "I heard a voice behind me . . . It was a deep voice, and foreign in tone; yet there was something in the manner of pronouncing my name which made it sound familiar" (p. 84). When Jesus first appeared to his disciples, his transformation created doubts. He had to show them the gash in his side to prove that it was really he who had returned. Heathcliff too is so transformed upon his return as to create an aura of doubt. Heathcliff asks of Nelly, "You do not know me? Look, I'm not a stranger!" (p. 84). Even though Nelly does not recognize Heathcliff's initial appearance, she says there was something familiar in his eyes. "I raised my hands in amazement. 'What! You come back? Is it really you? Is it?'" (p. 84).

Previous to Heathcliff's departure, he had been lowered to the class of servant by his step-brother, Hindley Earnshaw, left without an education, and growing worse every day. This is not the case when he returns. It takes a more thorough description of Heathcliff for Bronte to make clear how extreme a transformation had taken place during Heathcliff's three year absence. Bronte gives her reader the following list of changes in Heathcliff. He is now tall and athletic. "His upright carriage suggested the idea of his having been in the army" (p. 85). She says that his expression looked intelligent and "retained no marks of former degradation" (p. 85). Heathcliff clearly has

been educated, risen within society, and is now considered to be a gentleman. His ferocity has been subdued, even in his eyes, and his manner is now dignified, “quite divested of roughness” (p. 85).

The transformation of Jesus from human being to spiritual being took three full days to come about. “The transformation of Heathcliff” (p. 87) from plowboy to gentleman took a full three years to come about. Both return to their homelands and to those who had known them best. Jesus affected the lives of all those who knew him and has influenced many religions and religious individuals for centuries to come. Although on a much smaller scale, Heathcliff affects the lives of all those who knew him before his return, as well as all those who come to know him after his transformation and rise to society. His three year absence sets in motion the second half of Bronte’s novel. It is only through the changes he has been able to bring about during this three year absence that he is able to buy the mortgage to Wuthering Heights, thus allowing him to once more live close to Catherine. It is his metamorphosis that attracts the interests of Edgar’s sister, Isabella, thus giving Heathcliff the fuel he needs to accomplish his great revenge upon Edgar Linton, now husband of Heathcliff’s beloved Catherine. Heathcliff’s rise out of degradation and transformation to wealthy gentleman reignites the interests of Catherine Earnshaw Linton. Heathcliff’s highly developed intellect gives rise to his plotting all aspects of his life-long desires for revenge against all his enemies. This three-year absence and transformed return has set into action everlasting changes for all inhabitants of both Wuthering Heights, home of Hindley Earnshaw and once again home to Heathcliff, plus Thrushcross Grange, home of Catherine and Edgar Linton. Even the next generations of Linton, Earnshaw, and Heathcliff are forever affected as Heathcliff’s return evolves and continues to influence Catherine’s daughter, Heathcliff’s own son, and the son of Hindley Earnshaw. It took only three years to put this powerful process into motion.

Death

One last instance of the power behind three to be considered here is not a positive change, although the previous examples definitely may not be thought of as positive in all aspects either. This example is totally negative in nature, and it begins through the actions of Catherine Earnshaw Linton. Just as with Catherine’s experience, not all instances of the power of three presented in the Bible are positive ones either. When the prophet Jonah refuses to follow God’s order to go to Nineveh to preach, God has him swallowed up by a large fish, or whale. Jonah remains in the

belly of the whale for three days. After the three days have passed, the whale spits Jonah out exactly where God wanted him to be.

Catherine's experience also involves location and her negative transformation after being locked away for a period of three days. Unlike Jonah, however, Catherine's imprisonment is self-inflicted. After arguing with her husband over whether or not she will be forced to give up her friendship with Heathcliff, Catherine rushed from the room and locked herself upstairs in her own room. Earlier in the evening, she had confessed to Nelly that she wanted to frighten Edgar into giving her what she wanted. "I want to frighten him...If I cannot keep Heathcliff for my friend—if Edgar will be mean and jealous, I'll try to break their hearts by breaking my own" (p. 107).

Catherine refuses to come out of her room for three days. Only on the third day is she willing to open her door and take something to eat and drink. Nelly has not informed Edgar of Catherine's refusal to eat or drink up until this time, so he is not at all worried about her staying in her room until her anger at him has passed. Since Catherine assumes that Nelly has told Edgar that she is deathly ill, she becomes even angrier over what she perceives to be his neglectful attitude towards her. This the point at which Catherine declares that she would kill herself if she were only sure such action would indeed kill Edgar. She asks, "What in the name of all that feels, has he to do with books, when I am dying?" (p. 111).

Catherine's transformation is one of madness. She tears her pillow with her teeth, then pulls out the feathers and sorts them according to kind. She then appears to hallucinate about her childhood at Wuthering Heights, imagining that she sees the candle in the window of her old bedroom, far beyond the view from Thrushcross Grange. Catherine cannot believe the face she then sees in her mirror is her own; she has so changed from her tantrum filled days and nights in seclusion. This three day re-birth, or death, is so vital to Bronte's story because it gives credence to the wandering lost waif who haunts Lockwood's stay in Catherine's bedroom at Wuthering Heights, begging to be let in at the window. Bronte asks her readers to accept this haunting as a true event, not merely a nightmare. Catherine here reinforces that belief: "But, supposing at twelve years old, I had been wrenched from the Heights, and every early association, and my all in all, as Heathcliff was at that time, and been converted at a stroke into Mrs. Linton, the Lady of Thrushcross Grange, and the wife of a stranger: an exile, and outcast, thenceforth, from what had

been my world” (p. 115).

Catherine’s physical change is so great that her husband is shocked and speechless upon entering her room and seeing her there. Edgar says, “Months of sickness could not cause such a change” (p. 117). Some final words used to describe the transformation incurred during this three-day seclusion are “maniac’s fury” (p. 118). The other power behind this three-day event is that it begins Catherine’s decline, later leading to Catherine’s’ biggest transformation, her death.

An analysis of Emily Bronte’s decision to incorporate the number three as a significant element in her writing shows her writing talents and creativity, but it primarily shows her self-reflective nature. It provides evidence of Bronte’s voice and self-reflection upon family beliefs and values. Bronte uses the number three many other times in her story, as shown in the table that follows. This practice could not have been made by chance, but only after a thorough reflection upon her religious upbringing and consideration of what values she wanted to mirror in her writing.

This paper offers only an overview of how and why the number three in Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* might have been designed with specific religious significance. Each use of three should be further studied in detail for its possible religious connections. The examples examined within these pages deserve further study and analysis as well, especially concerning the religious interpretations offered.

Wuthering Heights ends with one final reference to three. Bronte’s primary narrator, Mr. Lockwood [tenant of Mr. Heathcliff], creates this conclusion to Heathcliff’s story:

“I sought, and soon discovered, the three headstones on the slope next the moor: the middle one [Catherine’s] grey, and half buried in heath; Edgar Linton’s only harmonized by the turf, and moss creeping up its foot; Heathcliff’s still bare” (p. 308).

“I lingered round them, under that benign sky: watched the moths fluttering among the heath and hare-bells; listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass; and wondered how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumber for the sleepers in that quiet earth” (p. 308).

REFERENCES

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APPENDIX

Table 1 Use of 3 in Wuthering Heights

Page*	Character(s) Involved	Event or Example
2	Lockwood	3 canisters on the shelf at WH
17	Joseph	Sunday service last 3 hours T
17	Cathy	[use of 3 names]
31	Mr. Earnshaw	gone 3 days to Liverpool T
32	Mr. Earnshaw	3 kingdoms
34	Heathcliff/Hindley	Hindley gives Heathcliff 3 thrashings
40	Hindley	away at college for 3 years T
47	Heathcliff	3 months service in the same clothes T
55	Nelly	Leap 3 years in her story T
56	Nelly	To avoid leaping 3 years in her story T
80	Dr. Kenneth/Catherine	2 – 3 miles between houses
81	Catherine/Edgar	Marry 3 years after his father's death T
82	Heathcliff	Gone with no word for 3 years T
84	Heathcliff	Return after 3 years [calculated] T
88	Catherine	Speaks of Heathcliff gone for 3 years T
101	Isabella	Did not speak to Catherine for 3 days T
105	Edgar/Heathcliff	3 minute delay T
106	Heathcliff/Edgar	3 underlings to beat Heathcliff
110	Catherine	Locks herself in her room –opens door on 3 rd day T
111	Catherine	3 awful nights T
117	Edgar/Nelly	Discovers Catherine's illness – scolds Nelly for having known for 3 days T
142	Heathcliff/Nelly/Catherine	Nelly waits 3 days to deliver Heathcliff's letter to Catherine T
152	Heathcliff/Catherine	3 feet away
155	Isabella	3 weeks of summer have passed T
159	Hindley	2 – 3 hours T
175	Edgar	Away 3 weeks to get Linton T
176	Cathy	Dogs as 3 camels
184	Linton	All 3 enter – at Linton's arrival
190	Linton	Faces of the 3
191	Heathcliff/Linton	Engaged a tutor 3 times a week
194	Cathy/Linton	[3 years since the last sequence of events] T
194	Linton	Hurt for 3 or 4 days T
196	Cathy/Nelly	3 hours from home T

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Page*	Character(s) Involved	Event or Example
210	Nelly	Spare 2 – 3 hours to be with Cathy T
214	Heathcliff/Cathy/Linton	2 -3 months since Cathy wrote to Linton T
224	Nelly	Sick 3 weeks in her room T
226	Cathy/Nelly	Would rather be ill 3 months (Nelly) T
228	Cathy/Linton	Cathy sings 2 – 3 pretty songs
232	Cathy	Visit Linton after 3 days T
233	Cathy	3 times she and Linton were happy
254	Nelly	Held captive 3 hours before hearing Heathcliff T
258	Nelly	2 or 3 sent to rescue Cathy
279	Area farmers	3 weeks behind in harvest – Gimmerton T
279	Lockwood	3 hours walking T
281	Cathy/Hareton	Reads a passage 3 times while practicing
283	Nelly/Linton/Hareton	Heathcliff died 3 months prior T
294	Heathcliff	Had view of the 3 individuals
300	Heathcliff	Near death – 3 feet away
308	Lockwood	3 headstones

*All page references in this table are taken from the 1983 edition of *Wuthering Heights*, published by Bantam Books.

T stands for references specifically involving time.