



**How are *Wuthering Heights* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*'s settings bound up with
their Gothic effects?**

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'the moon hung low in the sky like a yellow skull' (Wilde 176)

In the exploration of Gothic literature, the settings serve as more than mere backdrops; they become active agents, intricately interwoven with the narrative's atmosphere, themes, and character developments. This is profoundly evident in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), where the setting is pivotal in amplifying the Gothic effects inherent in both novels. Brontë's untamed Yorkshire moors and the brooding estate of Wuthering Heights stand as an inextricable part of the eerie and haunting atmosphere, reflecting the intertwined supernatural elements and the tumultuous psychological states of the characters. Meanwhile, Wilde's portrayal of a stark geographical dichotomy within the streets of London in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* becomes a canvas for the protagonist's moral duality and psychological complexity. Both authors write within the context and as a response to fears surrounding the turn of the century wherein a 'period of cultural decline was imminent both in England and on the Continent' according to 'trends in contemporary scientific theory' (Navarette 3). Brontë set her novel in 1801 whilst Wilde wrote as part of the fin-de-siècle Gothic movement, both taking advantage of contemporary anxieties regarding industrialisation, scientific advancements, and social and political turmoil to inscribe an atmosphere of terror. In this examination, I delve into the symbiotic relationship between these settings and their respective Gothic effects, unravelling how they contribute to the depth and resonance of these classic works.

Brontë's utilisation of the untamed Yorkshire moors and its erratic, ever-changing weather as the setting for *Wuthering Heights* intricately intertwines with the novel's Gothic effects. The setting not only mirrors the supernatural elements within the narrative and the psychological states of the characters but amalgamates them to a point where human existence and nature become indistinguishable. The eerie and ominous ambience of the moors originates from its geographical remoteness, characteristically rural and northern,

making the setting unfamiliar to the primary readership in London. Robert Mighall states that 'the Gothic is a process, not an essence; a rhetoric rather than a store of universal symbols; an attitude to the past and the present, not a free-floating fantasy world' (Mighall xxv).

Therefore, Brontë's 'Yorkshiring' of gothic conventions is a process, adapting haunting and fear to the Yorkshire landscapes and their cultural and historical context. However, I contend that the tumultuous nature of Yorkshire, ingrained in Brontë's upbringing, dictated the inevitable Gothic essence of the novel, even if unintentional. The intertwining of Gothic elements is further exemplified through Catherine's portrayal as 'half-human' and 'half-spirit of nature,' symbolising her spiritual exile and internal purgatory (Defant 42). Catherine's emotional turmoil, madness and passion are reflected in the weather, which sympathises with her emotional state and embodies her tumultuous relationship with Heathcliff. In chapter nine when Heathcliff leaves Catherine and vanishes on the moors, the weather is described as, 'the storm came rattling over the Heights in full fury. There was a violent wind, as well as thunder' (Brontë 91). Brontë's landscapes 'not only depict but also behave like living people' (Radu 36). The weather is an effect of the troubled equilibrium and can be seen as tempestuous when the world is off-kilter and as pleasant when the world is balanced. The novel closes with a peaceful description of nature, no longer are there 'bitter, northern skies' (Brontë 97). Lockwood states 'I lingered around them [the graves] under that benign sky...listened to the soft wind breathing through the graves and wondered how anyone could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth' (Brontë 360). The dynamic landscape transcends temporal and spatial constraints, occupying a 'liminal space mid-way between traditional dichotomies of life and death, the material and spiritual, the imminent and the divine' (Brazelli 245). In summary, Brontë harnesses the liminal space to animate the moors, not just as a haunting setting but as a universe that reacts to the characters' mental

states, interweaving the setting and weather with Gothic effects of psychological turmoil, isolation, the supernatural, and duality.

Embedded within the cosmic order of the moors, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange serve as entities whose settings encapsulate the domestic sphere interwoven with Gothic effects of isolation and a sense of otherness. Wuthering Heights stands as the novel's titular character and the central axis of Brontë's world. It exists as a liminal space that transforms those who dare to enter, exhibiting a dual nature of repelling intrusion while simultaneously acting as a confining space. Positioning the house in complete isolation, at least four miles away from its nearest neighbour Thrushcross Grange, creates a microcosm that defies the constraints of time, space, and conventional norms, evoking the haunted house trope. The house itself presents a sense of uncanny and strange as, 'Brontë's representation of domestic space in the novel challenges the Victorian ideal of the home as a female domain that is harmonious, moral and safe' (Brazelli 237). Instead, it is characterised by patriarchal dominance and corruption stemming from male authority in economic, political, and social realms. Lockwood's initial portrayal of the house 'epitomises Gothic space' as it is situated on 'barren, inhospitable terrain' (Brazelli 237). He declares 'Wuthering' as 'being a significant provincial adjective, descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its station is exposed in stormy weather' (Brontë 4). This prompts the query: whose soul could inhabit such a prison-like place? The narrative action pivots around outsiders seeking to breach the barriers of Wuthering Heights. Lockwood, an outsider from the south, frames the story, while Heathcliff, brought in as an orphan of 'gipsy' descent, embodies the concept of 'terror from elsewhere,' illustrating an imperial displacement and wielding power in the novel (Khair 161). Heathcliff's ascension can be interpreted as an 'inverted colonisation,' contributing to the imperialist context of Victorian Britain; 'Wuthering Heights exploits conflicts between domestic, cultural spaces and natural uncivilised spaces; through the character of Heathcliff

the novel questions the patterns of cultural imperialism and social inequality occurring in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Britain' (Brazelli 237). Heathcliff's portrayal epitomises the otherness so prevalent in Gothic literature, exploiting society's genuine fears of the foreign, the different, and the culturally estranged. The setting of the house is profoundly entwined with its Gothic effects, depicting themes of isolation, the uncanny, and otherness, alongside a distinctive duality within domestic spaces.

Also depicting Gothic tropes of isolation and the uncanny, the setting of London and Dorian's home in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is deeply entrenched in the Gothic effect of duality and the concept of the double, as outlined in Cavallaro's interpretation of the Gothic as a representation of 'disorder, obsession, psychological disarray and physical distortion' (Cavallaro vii). Wilde's portrayal of London echoes this sentiment, creating an atmosphere steeped in brooding gloom and pervasive terror. Wilde shifts the Gothic focus from the archetypal mediaeval castles and far-off monster-filled domains to the heart of London, suggesting that horror can emerge unexpectedly and lurk closer to home. The protagonist's psychological state is vividly reflected in the setting, notably through his act of secluding the hideous painting within his own home, symbolising the compartmentalisation of his darker side within his mind. In chapter thirteen Dorian reveals the painting in the attic to Basil who exclaims 'It has the eyes of a devil' to which Dorian responds 'Each of us has heaven and hell in him' (Wilde 150). Much like *Wuthering Heights*, this Victorian home becomes tainted by male power and desire, ushering the Gothic into the domestic sphere. Although the amalgamation of nature and man as a singular entity is not as pronounced as in *Wuthering Heights*, Wilde employs descriptions of nature and pathetic fallacy to infuse the narrative with Gothic elements. The flowers are vividly portrayed in the opening chapter as a 'rich odour of roses', and with a 'heavy scent of the lilac' serving as both tangible elements and

metaphors, appearing as artificial and out of place, symbolising a false sense of security in a narrative fixated on appearances, aesthetics, and superficial facades (Wilde 5). Furthermore, the ‘dimly lit streets, past gaunt, black-shadowed archways and evil-looking houses’ following Dorian's disillusionment with Sybil, fosters a duality between man and his environment, mirroring the narrative's volta and tonal shift steeped in sin (Wilde 86). Here, a multitude of Gothic effects come to the fore bound up with the setting, including the veneer of London itself, the protagonist's psychological state, and the intrusion of the uncanny into the domestic realm.

In a broader geographical sense in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the London setting becomes a stage for the morality and duality of Dorian Gray, as portrayed through the contrasting physical geography of the east end and west end. The west end epitomises high society and the rich veneer of London, while the east end represents a darker underbelly, marked by crime, corruption, and poverty; this directly aligns with his double life and the painting as his demonic other half. Dorian's dichotomous nature as a man unfolds through his interactions within these two distinct spaces. Supernatural and macabre occurrences and psychological turmoil often unfold within the safety of his home and the houses of his associates in the west end, juxtaposing his public image as a respected and attractive individual. In contrast, the east end portrays a stark reality of crime and destitution, events that, although prevalent, are less feared due to their transparency. Wilde describes the east end as ‘the only place where people do not wear masks upon their faces, but I have told her that I live in the west end because nothing interests me but the mask’ which marks the Victorian era as inseparable from duplicity (Yeats 165). Notably, Dorian's visit to the opium dens signifies a turn towards more dramatic crimes and psychological aberration, escalating eventually to the murder of Basil. Wilde's description presents a grotesquely threatening world as ‘the moon hung low in the sky like a yellow skull’ (Wilde 176). This alludes to

impending doom and links to addiction and transgressive behaviour (Robinson 3). The moral compass of his mind finds expression through these physical landscapes. This dual existence and the boundary-blurring between the demon portrayed in his hidden painting and Dorian's outward golden-boy persona exemplify the moral decadence depicted in this allegorical tale. Freud's concept of the double, characterised by a 'loss of committed self in the presence of a double and an ensuing temptation to flout social responsibility by blaming the double for all transgressions' finds a parallel in the geography and setting of the novel (Freud 142). The dual nature of the setting can be likened to Chiaroscuro, 'Dorian is of both light and dark worlds; he is the living embodiment and symbolism of the dualism of the light and shadow elements of existence' (Riquelme 610; Robinson 3). Thus, Wilde masterfully employs the contrasting and juxtaposed setting of London to mirror the protagonist's moral decay, psychological complexity, and decadent state, vividly illustrating the interplay of duality within the narrative.

In conclusion, the settings in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* serve as integral components intricately entwined with their respective Gothic effects, shaping the narratives and characters. Brontë's untamed Yorkshire moors in *Wuthering Heights* symbolise a fusion of the supernatural elements and characters' psychological states, blurring the boundaries between nature and humanity. The house itself becomes a pivotal character, reflecting a Gothic-infused domestic sphere tainted by male power and desire, alongside mirroring the dualities within the landscape. Similarly, Wilde's portrayal of contrasting west and east ends in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* orchestrates a moral and psychological dualism, manifested through the protagonist's experiences in high society and the underbelly of crime. The geography acts as a reflection of the protagonist's inner turmoil, paralleling the Freudian idea of the double, accentuated through the chiaroscuro-like

portrayal of Dorian Gray. Both novels deftly employ their settings to emphasise the underlying themes of psychological disarray, moral corruption, duality, and the macabre, which are all emblematic of the Gothic genre. In *Wuthering Heights*, the untamed purgatorial landscapes, and the haunted house merge with the characters' inner turmoil to an inseparable point, while in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the dichotomous settings of London serve as a canvas for the protagonist's moral decay and psychological complexity. Ultimately, both settings become integral and active components, reflecting and reinforcing the Gothic effects, solidifying the setting as a significant narrative device.

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