A Nameless Urge that Cannot Rest: Catherine's Self-Starvation in *Wuthering Heights*

While Chapter 12 of Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights seems, from Nelly's perspective, to portray a self-absorbed Catherine faking an illness for attention, it in fact reveals Catherine to be truly afflicted by a very real ailment, desire, and mired in pursuit of her own cure— escape through starvation.

The first crime of the female sex was an act of eating. Eve, dissatisfied with all the love given to her by her husband, dared to desire more. She consummated her desire by eating of the forbidden tree and spent the rest of her life suffering penance for her sin, separated from Eden. Feminist scholars of eating disorders have often positioned Eve as the progenitor of the *guilt* of eating. For women, the canon goes, consumption has always been followed by shame, and the surest way to undo this shame is to make the action null— to not eat. As seen in the cases of the "holy anorexic" medieval female saints[1], starvation is an antidote for the guilt of desire. Feminist writer Kim Chernin writes in *The Hungry Self* that self-starvation, even when not motivated by religious fervor, can still be an act of penance. Of anorexic women she writes that the "starvation… of her female body," is an act "of undoing this primal crime that haunts and obsesses her" (Chernin, 132)[2]. In the case of Catherine Earnshaw, the sin for which she atones is that of loving Heathcliff. Like Eve, she is haunted by the sin of desire, and punished with separation from that which she most wanted. Starvation, then, is Catherine's penance and her plea. It is her attempted escape from guilt and the punishment for guilt.

[1] E.g. St Catherine of Siena (Ellman, 46)

[2] For Chernin, who builds on Freudian tradition, the woman's "primal crime" is semi-sexual "eating of the mother" through nursing in infancy, but for Catherine, it is the entirely sexual desire of Heathcliff.

However, like many modern anorexics, Catherine's ailment is initially dismissed as a performance. According to the Inside Out Institute for Eating Disorders, one of the most common and harmful myths about self-starvation is that it is "a cry for attention" motivated by the expected reactions of others rather than any internal tumult (Inside Out). Nelly perpetuates this misconception throughout the chapter, directly "compromis[ing]" the possibility of "early detection and treatment" (Inside Out).

Nelly calls Catherine's self-starvation a "fast" carried out "under the idea, probably, that at every meal Edgar was ready to choke for her absence" (Brontë, 1915) and maintains that Catherine "act[s] a part of her disorder" (Brontë, 1844). As the narrator, Nelly has a responsibility to tell the truth of the story's events. Lockwood, the stand-in for the audience, never questions the honesty of her account, and relays it as fact, thus establishing Nelly as an authoritative narrator within the text. Her account, therefore, must be true. However, certain choices in diction belie an uncertainty to her retelling.

Whenever Nelly describes Catherine's "performance," she uses uncertain and frustrated language. Her use of the word "probably" in the above quote reveals a perhaps conversational slip of the tongue. It reveals that, at the time of Catherine's illness, Nelly was not so sure of Catherine's motivations as she now hopes to seem to Lockwood. When she claims that Catherine was "acting," she uses the words "a part of her disorder," suggesting that though she thought "part" of the ordeal was an act, she did in fact have some suspicions at the time that Catherine's illness was in earnest. In addition, Nelly describes her view of Catherine's motivations with derisive, almost joking intensity— "Edgar was ready to choke for her absence, and pride alone held him from running to cast himself at her feet (Brontë, 1915)" — suggesting that her

longtime frustration with Catherine's actions— as seen throughout the novel, even from Catherine's childhood— clouded her judgment of Catherine's health.

Furthermore, Nelly does have a motive to skew her story of the past, as it was partially her fault that Catherine did not receive treatment for her illness, whether physical or emotional. Though Nelly admits that Catherine pleaded with her that "she was dying," (Brontë, 1835) Nelly did not tell Edgar, directly depriving Catherine of early treatment. However, in her retelling to Lockwood, she repeats three times that she, an established rational narrator, had no reason to believe Catherine was being truthful. "I believed no such thing," she says, "so I kept it to myself" (Brontë, 1835). The words "no such thing" conjure an image of scolding, painting Catherine as an irrational child. This further positions Nelly as the rational one in the situation and makes Nelly a victim of either an honest mistake on her part or an intentional lie on the part of Catherine. Since Nelly has established herself as the rational actor and Catherine as the "mad" woman (Brontë, 1861), she includes in her tale a transcription of Catherine's words throughout her illness. Her aim, as she describes Catherine's pleadings as "speech[es]" (Brontë, 1835) — insinuating rehearsed drama— and "nonsense" (Brontë, 1955) — insinuating madness— is to discredit Catherine and paint her as both crazy and motivated by revenge. However, when reading between the lines of Nelly's narrative it becomes clear that Catherine has not made herself ill solely to vex Edgar. Catherine explains directly that her starvation is not motivated by revenge. "To starve at once," she says, "would be no punishment" for Edgar (Brontë, 1846). If she wanted to hurt Edgar, she explains, she would "kill [herself] directly" (Brontë, 1853). If she is to be believed, then, she has another reason for starving herself.

When discussing the driving force behind why women engage in self-starvation and other disordered eating behaviors, Chernin describes a "nameless urge that cannot rest, and will give one no peace, and that compels one to act in a way abhorrent to one's dignity… to impose severe penance upon one's flesh" (Chernin, 133). Chernin proposes that it is this *nameless urge that cannot rest,* not a desire for attention, that motivates and strengthens a woman's resolve to starve. Maud Ellman, in her book of literary criticism *The Hunger Artists*, goes a step further to explain what a self-starving woman might do "penance" *for*. These "female saints," she writes, often "deprive themselves of food to discipline their sexual desires" (Ellman, 7).

For Catherine, the nameless urge, the driving force to starvation, is twofold: both Ellman's desire— for Heathcliff— and the agony of being separated from the object of her desire. Even from childhood, Catherine exhibits self-starving behavior whenever she is separated from Heathcliff. When Heathcliff is removed from the dinner party early in the novel, Catherine cries out tearfully, "I can't eat my dinner!" and Nelly observes that Catherine seems to be "in purgatory… and wearying" (Brontë, 875) until she manages to "hold communion" with Heathcliff "through the boards" of the garret door (Brontë, 896). Here, Nelly has no ulterior motive to conceal the cause of Catherine's starvation, and readily owns that Catherine's separation from Heathcliff is what drove her to do it. Why not, then, during Catherine's starvation in Chapter 12?

During her adult period of starvation, Catherine, though seemingly delirious due to hunger, describes the source of her pain as a "great grief," and a "burning," (Brontë, 1912). She says she has been "tormented," "haunted" (Brontë, 1853) and made "miser[able]" by "the separation… ordered between [herself] and Heathcliff" (Brontë, 1914), specifically citing the

above moment when she was separated from him in childhood. All of these adjectives— burning, tormented, haunted— seem to be working together to conjure that nameless urge that cannot rest, that deep motivation responsible for her actions. Not revenge at all, she pleads, but agony. For Catherine, the only way out of her guilt, away from the consequences of her sin of desiring Heathcliff, is to die. For when she dies, she says, she will be able to be with Heathcliff. She says to Heathcliff on the brink of death, "I won't rest till you are with me. I never will" (Brontë, 1935), echoing Chernin's depiction of restlessness. Starvation is merely the means to Catherine's end— through death, she will escape the guilt of desire and overcome the agony of separation. Her sin of wanting to be with Heathcliff even though she is married to Edgar will not be a sin once she is dead— she will be cleared of guilt. She will have undone her "primal crime."

Then it all comes down to whether Catherine is to be believed over Nelly. In *The Hunger Artists* Ellman describes self-starvation as "a self-defeating protest, since it is women who become the victims of their own revolt" *(*Ellman, 2). That is, self-starvation becomes a complete exercise only upon the death of its master and sufferer. For Catherine, death comes quickly, and with death comes vindication, as it proves not only that she was not fasting for the attention of Edgar, but also that her actions were motivated by her desire for Heathcliff.

If, as Nelly believes, Catherine's starvation was for Edgar's attention only, she would have had no reason to continue fasting after Edgar began to dote on her again. Her death, and the self-completion of her protest, shows that she was willful enough to carry on even after Edgar ceded to her, even to the point of death. Secondly, the proof of her motivation comes after her death. Catherine spends her afterlife haunting Heathcliff through the window of his study, and

then roaming with his ghost on the moors (Brontë, 5124). This shows the completion of her intent to “not rest” until she is with him.

Though Nelly, for her own self-preservation, attempts to portray Catherine as motivated by revenge and manipulation, her own wording shows a flawed attempt at covering up Catherine’s true affliction. Catherine, however, through the distortion of Nelly’s narrative, begs to be heard, pleading to be believed for what she is. Catherine is an agonized sinner paying for her desire with separation, and attempting, through starvation, to escape to a world where the barrier between them has been removed. Catherine’s death is not a tragedy, but a fulfillment of her goals. She is successful where Eve could not be: Catherine, through death, can return to her Eden, and is free to wander the moors with Heathcliff forever.

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> "It seems to me that our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so… entwined that we cannot straightly think of one without the others. So it happens that when I write of hunger, I am really writing about love and hunger for it."

"Myths and Misconceptions." *Inside Out Institute for Eating Disorders Resource Library*, https://insideoutinstitute.org.au/resource-library/myths-and-misconceptions. Accessed 9 April 2024.