The Wild and the Not-So-Wild: Environments, Settings, and Narrative in Middlemarch and Wuthering Heights.

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In Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, environments cultivate a general sense of commonality and a 'way of life' between each novel's characters, which shapes their interactions, lifestyles, and prospects. However, to reshape specific characters, aside from how the general environment shapes them, each author employs the use of settings – specific places that produce a psychological change in particular characters that is not possible in the wider, universal environment. For example, '[t]here is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it' closes George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, the narrator rounding off their 'Study of Provincial Life' with an affirmation of the communal and shared over the individual.[1] However, Eliot's novel also contains specific locations that differ in usage, and impact the characters in a way that is unique to them, rather than impacting all the characters. If the universal can be considered as a text's *environment*, then these more specific spaces can be seen as *settings*. Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights* also makes this distinction but challenges its application by virtue of its narrative aims. For Brontë, the environment is a dramatic feature in itself, whereas Eliot conceives of it as a

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[1] George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. by Rosemary Ashton (Great Britain: Penguin Books Ltd, 2003), p. 838. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

unifying, but a less active and drastic feature of the characters' lives. In *Middlemarch*, the environment facilitates a web of connections that those individuals interact with and exist within, but does not govern or change them to the same extent as in *Wuthering Heights*. To achieve this change, Eliot sets the characters into specific settings that produce the intensity required for a shift in characters' inner lives.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'environment' as '[t]he physical surroundings or conditions in which a person or other organism lives, develops, or in which a thing exists; the external conditions in general affecting the life, existence, or properties of an organism or object.'[2] The environments of these texts are the provincial town of Middlemarch and the Yorkshire moors in *Wuthering Heights*. These environments encompass the lives of all the characters – the 'external conditions in general', not the specifics. But as well as general environments, these novels also contain separate, distinct settings which produce a particular outcome, change, or realisation key to the plot that could not have occurred in the general environment of the novel. The *OED* defines 'setting' as '[t]he action of *set* in various transitive senses; putting, placing, planting. Also, the fact of being set', which implies a character being set somewhere for a specific purpose.[3] Unlike environment, it is not general. As 'set' itself suggests, someone must be placed there, rather than the more general 'physical surroundings or conditions' of environments. Whilst Eliot, in her 'Study', is writing as a realist novelist to truly represent the everyday realities of her town, Brontë utilises the moorland environment to show extremes and the power of nature over all human life. While this does not challenge the distinction, it reveals how the different writers' aims and literary movements or moments can impact their application.

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[2] 'environment', in *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
<https://oed.com/view/Entry/63089?redirectedFrom=environment#eid> [accessed 14 May 2020].
[3] 'setting', in *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/176859?rskey=f92uPM&result=3&isAdvanced=false#eid> [accessed 14 May 2020].

Beginning with environment, that of *Middlemarch* is the town of the title, the subject of Eliot's 'Study of Provincial Life', removed from London and urban life. In *The Ecological Plot*, John MacNeill Miller claims that, in *Middlemarch*, there is an awareness in the narration of a connectivity that being in a natural environment cultivates. Miller states that in this environment, there are 'relations that really, universally stop nowhere, and [that the narrator focuses] instead on some manageable section of the web' of ecological and social connection.[4] The narrator shows this awareness by associating community and rurality with nature, saying that '[s]cenes which make vital changes in our neighbours' lot are but the background of our own, yet, like a particular aspect of the fields and trees, they become associated for us with the epochs of our own history' (Eliot, p. 326). By describing the human relations in the town through the natural imagery of 'fields and trees', Eliot's narrator affirms the environment's importance in cultivating a sense of interconnectedness in the social world. As Miller states, the narrator chose a 'manageable section of the web', as to narrate it all would be 'like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat' (Eliot, p. 194). Provincial life, by virtue of its inherent connection with nature, is more connected in every sense – as Miller writes, this web's connections 'stop nowhere', socially or ecologically.

Urban life, without ecology, is therefore less connected. GK Chesterton wrote of urban and rural living that in 'a large [urban] community we can choose our companions. In a small [rural] community our companions are chosen for us.'[5] *Middlemarch* shows that, just as the narrator discriminates against parts of the web to focus on others in the rural town, by the end of the novel, characters have moved out of that environment and into the city; they can then apply that same selective method that the narrator demonstrates, but in their own lives. Ian Duncan defines a provincial location 'by its *difference from the metropolis* – by the fact that it

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[4] John MacNeill Miller, 'The Ecological Plot: A Brief History of Multispecies Storytelling, from Malthus to Middlemarch', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 48 (2020), 155–85 (p. 174).
[5] GK Chesterton, *On Certain Modern Writers and the Institution of the Family*, April 1996, <http://www.gkc.org.uk/gkc/books/heretics/ch14.html> [accessed 16 May 2020].

is not London.'[6] Hence, if to be in a rural environment means one must live in a web, connected to nature and everyone around you, conversely, Miller's conception of the web is lost when the rurality is swapped for the urban, human, and individualistic metropolis.

Duncan's definition and its implications for the web of ecology correspond to the ending of the novel when Lydgate and Rosamond leave for London in order to pursue individual goals (and to escape the enclosed community's gossip of Lydgate and the Bulstrode scandal). Away from Middlemarch, Lydgate 'gained an excellent practice, alternating, according to the season, between London and a Continental bathing-place' (Eliot, p. 834). The narrator thereby directly associates personal success with a lack of rurality in London's urban and selective community. Miller's assertion that *Middlemarch* chooses to focus 'on some manageable section of the web' since the connections are so indefinite, is true of the narrator in the bulk of the novel. But by the end in 'Finale', Lydgate assumes this power and controls his own web by leaving Middlemarch's environment of connectivity in favour of the opposite environment of London where he can form his own, individual community or web, as Chesterton outlined. The difference, then, between these environments is a matter of choice. The rural environment of Middlemarch limits characters' independence, but they are still free to leave at the end and choose their company. It is not so great as to limit them. Eliot is measured and scientific – fitting in with the novel as a 'Study' – in her presentation of environment, showing how it impacts characters without turning it into a dramatic feature of extremes. Characters exist within it, are free to leave, and therefore understand its limitations.

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, unsurprisingly, does not use the universal environment in the same measured way as Eliot. Charlotte Brontë wrote of her sister Emily that the moors 'were what she lived in, and by', which seems to be true, by choice or not, of

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[6] Ian Duncan, 'The Provincial or Regional Novel', in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) pp. 318–55 (p. 322).

the characters in *Wuthering Heights*.[7] Like Middlemarch, the Yorkshire moors are separate from London and urban life, but also from provincial life, towns, society, and civilisation. It is a natural environment that encompasses everything in the novel – nothing that is narrated takes place directly outside it, the narration only ever hinting at events in London and the neighbouring towns. In his *Signs of the Times* (1829), Thomas Carlyle wrote that his contemporary age 'is the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense. […] We war with rude Nature; and, by our restless engines, come off always victorious'.[8] There, Carlyle associates the emerging industrial 'Age of Machinery' with human power over nature, and that there is an 'outward and inward' awareness of this dominion and efficiency. By setting her novel in the late 18th Century, narrated in 1801, Brontë can be seen to be avoiding the age Carlyle outlines and its power over nature, reversing it in favour of one where humans are at the mercy of nature. Since Carlyle's believes that there is an inward aspect to the Age of Machinery, there must be, conversely, an inward aspect to the age of nature. *Wuthering Heights'* environment of indomitable nature (the term 'Wuthering' defined by Lockwood as 'descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its station is exposed in stormy weather'), is powerful, dangerous, remote, and shapes its characters to reflect this 'tumult' in, as Carlyle writes, 'every outward and inward sense.'[9]

Butler Wood wrote that the characters in *Wuthering Heights* 'are intended as human embodiments of those fierce and relentless powers of nature', which is highlighted when Lockwood, an urban, civilised figure, first meets Heathcliff – the archetypal rural, roughened figure.[10] After seeing Lockwood struggle with a dozen nibbling sheepdogs, Heathcliff tells him

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[7] Currer Bell, 'Editor's Preface to the New [1850] Edition of Wuthering Heights', in *Wuthering Heights*, ed. by Pauline Nestor (England: Penguin Books, 2003), p. ii. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
[8] Thomas Carlyle, *Signs of the Times* (1829) <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/carlyle/signs1.html> [accessed 17 May 2020].
[9] Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. by Pauline Nestor (England: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 4. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
[10] Butler Wood, 'Influence of the Moorlands on Charlotte and Emily Brontë', *Brontë Society Transactions*, 32 (1922), 79–87 (p. 82).

'They won't meddle with persons who touch nothing', implying guilt on Lockwood's part (Brontë, p. 7). Immediately, Heathcliff, in the tumult of Wuthering Heights that sits beyond 'heath and mud' on a 'bleak hill top [where] the earth was hard with a black frost', is described as embodying those same frosty, unfriendly qualities, uninterested in politeness or consideration, as Butler implied (Brontë, p. 9). This effect of the environment is also demonstrated in the customs and lifestyle at Wuthering Heights. On his second visit, Lockwood's attempts at conversation are rebuked by Miss Catherine:

> 'Were you asked to tea?' she demanded, tying an apron over her neat black frock, and standing with a spoonful of the leaf poised over the pot.
>
> 'I shall be glad to have a cup,' I answered.
>
> 'Were you asked?' she repeated.
>
> 'No,' I said, half smiling. 'You are the proper person to ask me.'
>
> She flung the tea back, spoon and all; and resumed her chair in a pet, her forehead corrugated, and her red under-lip pushed out like a child's ready to cry.
>
> (Brontë, p. 11)

Not only do the servants not make the tea, but she, the most senior woman of the house if all was in order, is expected to do it. Cathy does not abide by Lockwood's civilised customs – him telling her, 'you are the proper person to ask me', at which she sulks and insults her guest. Like the snowstorm that later means Lockwood must stay overnight at Wuthering Heights, she pays no attention to his ideas or plans, but rebukes them with the same indifference that nature has towards humans. Before Carlyle's 'Age of Machinery' where humans are at the behest of nature, at Wuthering Heights, Lockwood is at the behest of people whose indifference to him is shaped by that of the natural environment.

When he stays the night, he too is altered by the environment's roughening force. When the ghost of young Catherine Earnshaw crashes her arm through the window, Lockwood 'pulled its wrist on to the broke pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bed-clothes' – a considerable transformation from lecturing Catherine on tea etiquette earlier that evening (Brontë, p. 25). Butler's statement does not specify whether it is only those who live in Wuthering Heights who embody nature's fierceness. It might be added that those who enter the Heights and the moors risk becoming shaped to embody these qualities due to the power of the environment. Eliot's representation of environment, in a realist novel that is posited as a study, shows environment to impact every character, but not overpower them completely. Brontë is showing, in this period before human dominance, how she conceives of nature. It is more impressionistic than *Middlemarch*, relating to her personal view of wildness and brutality. As Charlotte Brontë said of her, she 'lived in, and by' the moors, encompassed completely by them, and that attitude seems to be represented in *Wuthering Heights*, especially seen in Lockwood's transformation (Bell, p. ii). Eliot is observing and studying the universal impact of environment, whereas Brontë is creating a Romanticised impression of it. Either way, both stick to the OED definition of environment being general and impacting or interacting with everyone indiscriminately.

So, while both texts' environments affect everyone in the novels, however severely, Brontë and Eliot place characters in separate settings to trigger a certain change that was not possible in the general environment. As outlined, the OED definition of 'setting' implies a more active placing, to set someone somewhere, and the authors choose specific, crafted settings to change characters. The term 'spaces' is perhaps too coincidental or passive for this use, as settings are more akin to scenes in a play – a structured device to help the author reach a narrative goal. Thrushcross Grange is a setting which is walled off from the uncivilised harmony of nature and humans at the Heights and the environment of the moors, and it has a

great impact on Cathy. After a dog attack, she 'stayed at Thrushcross Grange five weeks, till Christmas. By that time her ankle was thoroughly cured, and her manners much improved' (Brontë, p. 53). Heathcliff says of seeing it, '[w]e should have thought ourselves in heaven!' (Brontë, p. 48). The Grange is recognisably more civilised and to Heathcliff, who has known nothing but the cruel environment of Wuthering Heights, it seems heavenly, such is its difference. This is significant for the narrative as Cathy's 'much improved' manners turn her away from the Heights and its uncivilised customs, and thus Heathcliff who embodies them. She remarks famously, 'It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff, now', which in turn sets up their reunion as Cathy dies, and Heathcliff's bitterness and revenge in volume two (Brontë, p. 81). As a setting rather than an environment, Brontë can ensure that change occurs in only Cathy rather than everyone, and in a separate location to it, meaning the Heights retains the same roughness, allowing for the later contrast and conflict with Cathy.

However, there are exceptions to the moors' natural environment being all-powerful. Surely, Cathy would revert to her old, roughened ways as soon as she leaves the setting of the Grange, as the environment is so powerful. Albeit not immediately, in her dying moments she does revert after seeing Heathcliff again, and is reminded of her past love for him in the moors environment, contrasting her civility at the grange. Realising this, she says, "I wish I were out of doors – I wish I were a girl again, half savage and hardy, and free […] Why am I so changed? […] I'm sure I should be myself were I once among the heather on those hills" (Brontë, pp. 125–26). Helen Small sees *Wuthering Heights* and Cathy's arc in particular as being centred on degradation, writing '[i]f we are what we are, by nature, degradation and elevation are 'merely' superficial'.[11] This passage shows that Cathy's nature, the thing Small sees as the foundations above which those superficial civilised or degraded aspects are constructed, is

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[11] Helen Small, 'Degraded Nature *Wuthering Heights* and the Last Poems of Emily Brontë', in *The Brontës and the Idea of the Human*, ed. by Alexandra Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 147–67 (p. 155).

associated with 'the heather on those hills' not the civility of the Grange. Crucially, here she begins to realise her 'superficial' shaping by the setting, and in questioning 'Why am I so changed?' realises that her true self, her nature, is one with her environment, not setting, a realisation prompted by Heathcliff's return. Nelly Dean potentially challenges this supremacy of environment, as she is presented as rational and caring, unlike the environment, despite also existing within it. However, it must be remembered that Nelly narrates most of the novel, so can present herself as she wishes, and does so whilst inside the separate, heavenly, and civilised Grange setting, and with the civil-minded Lockwood. She does not challenge the superficiality of her setting, whereas due to her love for Heathcliff, Cathy does. Nelly can therefore be seen to be sheltering from the environment's power, rather than being an exception to it.

Dorothea undergoes something similar to Cathy at the Grange when she is in Rome, but unlike Brontë, Eliot presents this setting as more powerful than the novel's environment. Adam Wright, in discussing Dorothea when she sees her room at Lowick Manor, states that she 'is perfectly content with the place or, more precisely, with her interpretation of the place.'[12] In the environment of Middlemarch, Dorothea can form an opinion of the surroundings, such is its neutrality on matters of opinion and interpretation. Later, Eliot sets Dorothea in Rome, which is described as 'the city of visible history, where the past of a whole hemisphere' exists around her (Eliot, p. 192). Dorothea is placed in a location that does not allow an interpretation of itself other than the one it embodies. Wright does not note that the room at Lowick Manor, as well as being associated with her idealised vision of married life with Casaubon, does not inherently represent anything – it is a blank canvas in terms of ideas, which allows Dorothea to impose her ideals upon it. Eliot's narrator grasps that a setting, not an environment, embodies

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[12] Adam Wright, 'The Representation of Place in Middlemarch', *The George Eliot Review*, 41 (2010), 51–9 (p. 52).

ideas, just as Thrushcross Grange embodies heaven and civility, and shows that Dorothea's ideals cannot be imposed upon Rome's visible history:

> But let them conceive one more historical contrast: the gigantic broken revelations of that Imperial and Papal city thrust abruptly on the notions of a girl who had been brought up in English and Swiss Puritanism, fed on meagre Protestant histories and on art chiefly of the hand-screen sort; a girl whose ardent nature turned all her small allowance of knowledge into principles, fusing her actions into their mould, and whose quick emotions gave the most abstract things the quality of a pleasure or a pain; a girl who had lately become a wife, and from the enthusiastic acceptance of untried duty found herself plunged in tumultuous preoccupation with her personal lot.
>
> (Eliot, p. 193)

Whereas before her 'small allowance of knowledge' had allowed her to embody her opinions without fear of them being challenged, when Dorothea meets the grandeur of an 'Imperial and Papal city' and all its cultural strength, this now becomes impossible for her to sustain. Those 'meagre Protestant histories' she based her acceptance of Casaubon on are suddenly opposed by this setting. Rome as a place of ignorance for Dorothea is solidified when she admits to Will Ladislaw, 'I am seeing so much all at once, and not understanding half of it' (Eliot, p. 206). Like *Wuthering Heights*, this setting has significance for the plot as it is where she sees Will Ladislaw again, and the inklings of attraction begin developing as remorse at her marriage grows. This is vital for the end of the novel and Casaubon's cruel will, dictating that she cannot marry him. Cathy also changes her mind on marriage in a setting, deciding fatally on Linton. However, Brontë's conception of environment eventually overrules the setting's impact once it is left, whereas Eliot allows Dorothea to keep her changed conclusions as she returns to a less offensive, more neutral environment.

That distinction reveals the ultimate difference between *Middlemarch* and *Wuthering Heights*' conceptions of environment, setting, and how they shape their characters. Brontë presents environment as more powerful, shaping those who enter it into its own image with its brutal, untameable nature. For Eliot, environment is synonymous with a way of life; to be provincial is to live by certain rules and considerations – but all of which are escapable. The fact that environments are not based on choices but force all the characters into a certain lifestyle, and that settings are built upon producing a particular decision, realisation, or attitude that is opposed to the general environment, reveals how each function in the novels. The point of difference is that Brontë allows environment to overrule and shape everything, acting more like a universal, indiscriminate setting, or at least with similar power. Whereas Eliot has an altogether subtler approach, allowing characters to eventually reverse the premise of the question and shape their own environments by setting themselves where they wish. Environments and settings, then, have narrative significance that can be used to different extremes, but still operate in each text within similar definitions – the universal environment and the opposing, individual setting.

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