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CLAIMED BY NATURE, BROKEN BY SOCIETY: LUCY GRAY AND CATHERINE EARNSHAW THROUGH ECOCRITICAL AND ECOFEMINIST LENSES

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Abstract

*This paper presents a comparative ecocritical and ecofeminist analysis of William Wordsworth's Lucy poems from *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) and Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847), focusing on how both texts explore the relationship between women, nature, and patriarchal social structures. Wordsworth's Lucy poems depict a female figure whose identity and existence are inseparable from the natural world, presenting nature as a formative and enduring force that shapes human life beyond the constraints of social recognition. Similarly, Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights* embodies an intense and disruptive connection to the landscape of the Yorkshire moors, articulating a form of ecological identity that resists social containment and cultural expectations of femininity. Through an ecocritical reading, the study examines how both works challenge anthropocentric perspectives by presenting nature not as a passive background but as an active force that shapes identity, love, and belonging. At the same time, an ecofeminist framework reveals how the association between women and nature functions within patriarchal discourse to both idealise and marginalise female existence. By comparing Lucy's quiet absorption into natural cycles with Catherine's passionate resistance to social constraints, the paper demonstrates how both figures reveal the consequences of separating women from the landscapes that sustain them. This comparative reading highlights the ecological and gendered dimensions of Romantic and Victorian literature, ultimately arguing that both texts advocate a rethinking of human relationships with nature that recognises ecological interdependence, challenges patriarchal structures, and foregrounds alternative modes of belonging within the natural world.*

Keywords

Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Romanticism, Victorian Literature, Nature and Gender, Ecological Identity, Patriarchal Structures, Environmental Ethics, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

William Wordsworth's Lucy and Emily Brontë's Catherine Earnshaw are literary figures whose existence resists social definition and whose identities are rooted instead in the natural world. Though separated by form, genre, and historical moment, Lucy, who appears across a small group of lyric poems in *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), and Catherine Earnshaw, the central female presence in *Wuthering Heights* (1847), share a fundamental affinity with landscape that shapes their love, individuality, and fate. Neither woman can be fully understood through conventional social roles



such as daughter, lover, or wife. Instead, both are claimed by nature and, in different ways, broken by society.

This article reads Lucy and Catherine together through the combined frameworks of ecocriticism and ecofeminist theory. Ecocriticism allows nature to be read as an active, formative force rather than a passive background for human emotion. Ecofeminism reveals how women and nature are similarly marginalised, idealised, and controlled within patriarchal systems. Through these lenses, Lucy and Catherine emerge as figures who expose the ethical limits of anthropocentric and patriarchal structures. Lucy represents a vision of ecological belonging achieved through withdrawal from society, silence, and continuity. Catherine represents ecological belonging denied, producing conflict, fragmentation, and resistance.

The contrast between these figures also reflects the difference in authorship. Wordsworth, writing as a man within the Romantic lyric tradition, imagines ecological femininity as quiet, harmonious, and absorbed into natural cycles. Brontë, writing as a woman within Victorian society, exposes the psychological and physical violence produced when such ecological identity is suppressed. Read together, Lucy and Catherine reveal not opposing visions, but complementary truths about the cost of separating women from the landscapes that sustain them.

Nature as the Ground of Identity:

In both the *Lucy* poems and *Wuthering Heights*, nature is not a decorative setting but the ground upon which identity is formed. Lucy is never given a detailed personal history. She is introduced spatially rather than socially. In *She dwelt among the untrodden ways*, Wordsworth situates her away from centres of human movement:

“She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove” (lines 1–2).

Lucy’s identity emerges through geographical marginality. The “untrodden ways” suggest spaces untouched by social circulation, aligning her existence with ecological preservation rather than human recognition.

She is later compared to “a violet by a mossy stone, / Half hidden from the eye” (lines 5–6), a metaphor that emphasises both her obscurity and her natural belonging. Lucy matters not because she asserts herself, but because she exists in harmony with her environment.

Catherine Earnshaw’s identity is similarly inseparable from landscape, though articulated with far greater intensity. The Yorkshire moors are not simply where Catherine lives; they are what she is. Her most famous declaration collapses boundaries between self and other:

“I am Heathcliff” (Bronte, *WH*, Ch. 9).

This statement is not merely romantic excess. It reveals a relational and ecological sense of self that resists individualism. Catherine understands identity as something rooted in shared being, landscape, and elemental force. Ecocritically, this challenges anthropocentric notions of autonomous subjectivity. Like Lucy, Catherine’s identity is formed through environment rather than culture.

The crucial difference lies in social intrusion. Lucy remains outside society and therefore remains whole. Catherine is forcibly incorporated into social systems of class, inheritance, and marriage, producing an irreconcilable split between her ecological self and her social role.



Love beyond Social Order:

Love in both texts operates outside conventional social frameworks. It is not grounded in marriage, domestic stability, or moral respectability. Instead, it is articulated through endurance, necessity, and natural force.

In the *Lucy* poems, love is never directly voiced by Lucy herself. Instead, it is expressed through absence and grief.

In *She dwelt among the untrodden ways*, Lucy is described as a figure whom “there were none to praise / And very few to love” (lines 3–4).

Yet the poem itself becomes an act of love, one that mourns not social loss but ecological absence. Lucy’s death alters the speaker’s relationship with the world, revealing how deeply attachment is tied to presence within the landscape.

This acceptance reaches its fullest expression in *A slumber did my spirit seal*:

“Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees” (lines 7–8).

Love here does not resist Lucy’s transformation into nature. Instead, it affirms it. Ecocritically, this represents a non-anthropocentric ethic of love, one that does not demand preservation of human form but accepts ecological continuity.

Catherine Earnshaw’s love is far more explicit and disruptive, yet it follows a similar ecological logic. When she explains her feelings for Heathcliff, she rejects sentimental language, “My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath: a source of little visible delight, but necessary” (Bronte, *WH*, Ch. 9).

Love is measured through geology rather than pleasure or propriety. Catherine aligns love with endurance rather than comfort. Ecofeminist theory reveals the danger of such love within patriarchal society. Catherine’s ecological love cannot be legitimised. Her marriage to Edgar Linton represents an attempt to survive socially, but it requires the repression of her true self. Lucy never faces this conflict because she never enters society. Catherine is broken precisely because she does.

Silence, Voice, and Gendered Expression:

Lucy and Catherine differ sharply in how they express individuality, yet both are constrained by patriarchal structures. Lucy never speaks directly in any of the poems. Her existence is mediated entirely through the speaker’s voice. Ecofeminist theory recognises this silence as part of a broader cultural pattern in which women and nature are spoken for rather than allowed to speak. Yet Wordsworth does not present Lucy’s silence as suffering. Lucy’s being does not depend on articulation. Her presence is complete without voice. Ecocritically, this suggests an alternative mode of existence in which presence matters more than assertion.

Catherine, by contrast, is intensely vocal. She speaks passionately, contradicts herself, and asserts her desires openly. Yet her voice does not grant her agency. Instead, it marks her as excessive and unstable within patriarchal society. Her refusal to moderate her ecological identity leads to social rejection and psychological collapse. Lucy’s silence protects her from conflict. Catherine’s speech exposes the violence of a system that cannot accommodate ecological femininity.

Nature as Educator and Moral Authority:

Wordsworth presents nature as a moral guide in Lucy’s life.

In *Three years she grew in sun and shower*, nature claims Lucy and undertakes her education:



“This child I to myself will take;
She shall be mine” (lines 1–2).

Lucy’s learning occurs through sensory engagement rather than discipline:

“Her eyes and ears were things
Which Nature made her love” (lines 13–14).

Ecofeminist readings recognise the radical nature of this education. Lucy is not shaped for domestic obedience or social utility. She is shaped for ecological awareness. Nature offers an alternative to patriarchal instruction based on hierarchy and control.

Catherine’s education moves in the opposite direction. Her time at Thrushcross Grange exposes her to refinement, class consciousness, and social aspiration. This education distances her from the moors and from herself. The result is illness, alienation, and despair. Where Lucy’s ecological education produces harmony, Catherine’s social education produces fragmentation.

Death, Resistance, and Posthuman Existence:

Both Lucy and Catherine transcend social containment through death, though in radically different ways. Lucy’s death results in peaceful absorption into natural cycles. She loses human consciousness but gains ecological permanence. Her existence continues materially, without conflict.

Catherine’s death, by contrast, is unresolved. She returns as a haunting presence on the moors, refusing containment even in death. Her ghost unsettles social order and refuses closure. Ecocritically, this suggests that suppressed ecological identity does not disappear but resurfaces disruptively. Ecofeminist theory reads Catherine’s haunting as resistance. Lucy’s absorption is peaceful but passive. Catherine’s return is violent but defiant.

Conclusion:

Bringing Lucy and Catherine Earnshaw together through ecocritical and ecofeminist lenses reveals not merely two memorable literary figures, but two distinct responses to the same cultural and ecological condition. Both women are profoundly shaped by the natural landscapes they inhabit, and both resist full assimilation into the social structures that seek to define them. Yet the outcomes of their resistance differ sharply. Lucy is claimed by nature and preserved within its cycles, while Catherine is claimed by nature but broken by society’s refusal to accommodate her ecological identity. Read together, their lives and deaths expose the ethical consequences of separating women from nature and of privileging social order over ecological belonging.

At the heart of both representations lies a shared rejection of anthropocentrism. Wordsworth and Brontë refuse to position human consciousness as the ultimate measure of value. In the Lucy poems, human life is consistently framed as fragile, transient, and subordinate to ecological processes. Lucy’s existence gains meaning not through speech, achievement, or social recognition, but through her participation in natural rhythms. Her death is not presented as annihilation but as transformation, a return to the material cycles that sustain all life. This vision aligns closely with ecocritical ethics that emphasise interdependence, humility, and acceptance of ecological limits.

Catherine Earnshaw embodies a more conflicted form of this same ecological truth. She recognises instinctively that her identity is inseparable from the natural world, particularly the moors. Her language repeatedly equates love, selfhood, and endurance with natural forces rather than social structures. Yet unlike Lucy, Catherine is not permitted to remain within this ecological mode of being. Social expectations of class, marriage, and femininity demand that she sever her



connection to the landscape that sustains her. The result is psychological fragmentation, illness, and ultimately death. Through Catherine, Brontë exposes the violence inherent in social systems that deny ecological belonging.

Ecofeminist theory provides a crucial framework for understanding why Lucy and Catherine are treated so differently, despite their shared alignment with nature. Both figures are feminised in ways that mirror the cultural treatment of the natural world itself. Lucy is idealised as pure, quiet, and beautiful, yet marginalised, silenced, and ultimately absorbed.

Catherine is passionate, excessive, and uncontrollable, and is therefore disciplined, contained, and pathologised. In both cases, the association between woman and nature becomes a means of control. Lucy is preserved precisely because she does not challenge social order. Catherine is destroyed because she does.

This contrast highlights a central ecofeminist insight. Patriarchal culture tolerates ecological femininity only when it remains passive, silent, and non-threatening. Lucy's silence allows her to exist without conflict. She never articulates desire, never resists, never demands recognition. Her ecological belonging is therefore framed as harmonious. Catherine's refusal to silence herself exposes the limits of this harmony. Her voice, her desire, and her insistence on defining herself through nature rather than society make her intolerable within patriarchal structures. She becomes, in effect, a problem to be managed rather than a being to be understood.

Yet it would be reductive to read Lucy simply as an idealised victim and Catherine as a failed rebel. Wordsworth's portrayal of Lucy, while gentle and reverent, raises troubling questions about agency and erasure. Lucy's absorption into nature is framed as continuity, but it also entails the dissolution of individuality. She becomes indistinguishable from rocks, stones, and trees. From an ecofeminist perspective, this reflects a long-standing cultural tendency to resolve the problem of female autonomy by dissolving it into symbolism. Lucy survives, but only as a landscape. Her existence is affirmed, but her subjectivity remains inaccessible.

Catherine's fate, by contrast, refuses such resolution. Even in death, she does not become still. Her haunting presence on the moors disrupts social order and refuses closure. She cannot be fully absorbed, fully silenced, or fully explained.

Ecocritically, this suggests that ecological identity, when violently suppressed, does not disappear but returns in destabilising forms. Ecofeminist readings interpret Catherine's haunting as resistance, a refusal to be contained by the very structures that sought to discipline her.

The difference between Lucy's peaceful absorption and Catherine's restless haunting also reflects the difference between Romantic and Victorian engagements with nature. Wordsworth's poetry imagines a world in which withdrawal from society can enable harmony with the natural world. Brontë's novel exposes the historical reality in which such withdrawal is not equally available, particularly to women. Lucy can remain outside society because she is already marginal. Catherine cannot escape society without consequence because she is deeply embedded within its hierarchies of class, property, and gender.

This distinction underscores the importance of authorship in shaping ecological representation. Wordsworth, writing as a man, imagines ecological femininity as something that can be observed, preserved, and mourned without threatening social order. His Lucy poems aestheticise marginality and render it ethically meaningful. Brontë, writing as a woman, reveals the cost of living such marginality from within. Catherine's suffering exposes the limits of Romantic idealisation and insists on the material consequences of social constraint.

Yet despite these differences, Wordsworth and Brontë converge in their recognition that nature remains the truest measure of existence. In both texts, social structures are shown to be unstable, restrictive, and ultimately destructive.



Marriage, inheritance, and respectability offer no lasting fulfilment. What endures instead are hills, storms, seasons, and geological time. Lucy's presence persists through earth's diurnal course. Catherine's spirit lingers on the moors. In different ways, both women exceed the social frameworks that seek to define them.

From an ecocritical standpoint, this convergence challenges the assumption that literature must centre human progress, mastery, or control. Both texts decentralise the human and foreground ecological continuity. Human life is shown to be meaningful precisely because it is finite and embedded within larger systems. Lucy's death gains meaning through integration, not resistance. Catherine's death gains meaning through disruption, not acceptance.

Together, these responses suggest that ecological ethics cannot be reduced to a single model. Belonging may take the form of quiet continuity or violent refusal, depending on the conditions under which it is lived.

Ecofeminism further clarifies that these differing outcomes are not simply matters of personality or temperament, but of structural constraint. Lucy is allowed to belong to nature because she poses no threat to social hierarchy. Catherine is punished because her belonging exposes the artificiality of that hierarchy. In both cases, women's proximity to nature becomes a site of cultural anxiety. It must either be aestheticised and contained, or disciplined and destroyed.

Ultimately, Lucy and Catherine Earnshaw reveal that the question is not whether women belong to nature, but whether society is willing to accommodate that belonging without violence. Wordsworth imagines a poetic solution in which harmony is achieved through silence and withdrawal. Brontë insists that such solutions are inadequate for lived experience. Her novel demands that the reader confront the suffering produced when ecological identity is denied.

Together, these texts anticipate modern ecological and feminist concerns with striking clarity. Contemporary environmental crises are rooted in the same anthropocentric logic that privileges human dominance over ecological balance. Similarly, ongoing struggles for gender justice reveal the persistence of systems that seek to control bodies, voices, and relationships to land. Lucy and Catherine stand at the intersection of these concerns. They remind readers that ecological harm and social injustice are not separate issues, but interconnected expressions of the same worldview.

In reading Lucy and Catherine together, it becomes clear that neither figure offers a complete solution. Lucy's quiet absorption risks erasure. Catherine's resistance risks destruction. Yet within this tension lies the enduring power of both texts. They refuse to offer comfort through simplification. Instead, they demand attentiveness, humility, and ethical reflection.

Lucy teaches the value of coexistence, restraint, and acceptance of natural limits. Catherine teaches the cost of denying ecological selfhood and the necessity of resistance when harmony is impossible. Together, they articulate a complex vision of ecological womanhood that acknowledges both peace and pain, continuity and conflict.

In the end, Lucy and Catherine are not opposites, but echoes. Both are claimed by nature. Both are shaped by landscapes that exceed human control. Both reveal, in different ways, what is lost when society refuses to recognise the legitimacy of ecological belonging. Their stories continue to resonate because they speak not only to Romantic or Victorian contexts, but to ongoing questions about how humans live with the natural world and with one another.

Through ecocritical and ecofeminist lenses, Lucy and Catherine emerge as figures who challenge readers to rethink the foundations of value, identity, and belonging. They remind us that nature is not merely where life happens, but what life is made of. And they warn that when society denies this truth, it does so at great cost.

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