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Other Bodies and Their Other Worlds:
Reimagining the Victorian Femme Fatale

Tess LaMontagne Gordon
The Other Victorians
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Preface

Out of mere coincidence, I happened to watch *Poor Things* in theaters within the first week of my senior capstone class, ‘The Other Victorians.’ I walked away from the film amazed and filled with a multitude of questions that I couldn’t seem to put words to, all the more heightened by our focus in the seminar. As a piece of media so newly released, this film left me with little to no refuge in other scholarly works and opinions. And having Foucault and Marcus’s works on Victorian sexuality fresh on my mind, this curiosity informed the rest of my academic endeavors for the semester. I found the same themes leaping out of almost every text we encountered in class, but their executions were starkly different somehow. As a NeoVictorian rendition, Yorgos Lanthimos’ *Poor Things* offers fascinating parallels to as well as deviations from the Victorian era. I chose to bring the film into conversation with two Victorian works, Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* and Vernon Lee’s ghost story, “Oke of Okehurst.” The female protagonists of these works evoke Bella and her fantastical world, but I sensed a divergence in the ultimate objectives – particularly in tone and ending. Slowly but steadily, my argument developed, and I realized that I was being called towards a realm that had no name past ‘the otherworldly.’

Yorgos Lanthimos' film *Poor Things* (2023) brings Alasdair Grey's 1992 novel to life through a fantastical, exaggerated, and whimsical reimagining of the Victorian era. The use of magical realism as a framework for its provocative ideas immediately made its mark on audiences. Brought to life by an outcast scientist, Bella Baxter (Emma Stone) experiences the world for the first time through the brain of an infant in the body of a young woman. Bella's body and mind are unconventional, or 'Other.' She is fueled by pure curiosity and self-discovery, remaining unhindered by outside intervention along her journey. Historical understandings of sexuality and socialization are seemingly inapplicable to Bella in her alternate Victorian reality. This extraordinary predicament is mirrored by a visually shocking surrealist environment. Lush gardens, intricate, embellished architecture, and dramatic, colorful skies are just a fraction of what we see in the film's striking aesthetic. In an interview for *Frederic Magazine* (2024),¹ Lanthimos explains: "There needed to be a world created for Bella to inhabit...It couldn't just be something realistic." And otherworldly it is. Bella's refusal to be categorized, restrained, or subservient, particularly surrounding sexuality, is incompatible with the conventional Victorian environment. The imaginative realm of *Poor Things* allows the audience to believe in her empowered – albeit whimsical – path of independence. While she does assume the role of the Other in this film, her environment creates the space necessary for her to live as the seemingly liberated Other.

Bella's story echoes many of those crafted by the women writers of the Victorian era, yet their narratives of individual liberation differ. Where Bella is able to maintain overall autonomy, the characters of these Victorian works of fiction experience extreme turmoil and downfall. This

¹ For more about the fantastical environment of *Poor Things*, see Cathy Whitlock's article, "Dive Into the Surreal, Stylized World of 'Poor Things': The Oscar-nominated team behind the film pulls back the curtain" in *Frederic Magazine*, 16 Feb. 2024.

calls into question some of the fundamental grounds that allow Bella's narrative to 'succeed.' Catherine Earnshaw of *Wuthering Heights* and Alice of "Oke of Okehurst" are both othered figures that utilize the otherworldly as an alternative space to fully embody themselves. The contemporary rendering of the Victorian in *Poor Things* calls attention to the importance of the otherworldly to the figure of the Other in this collection of texts, though they have poignantly different manifestations. The Other, existing untamed and undefinable by societal standards, requires the otherworldly to become the liberated Other. Within the conventional Victorian environment, the Other is sanctioned and cast as the femme fatale, a corrosive label that identifies them as malicious and dangerous. These otherworldly locations enable the Other to be empowered in their identity; they serve to reflect and heighten their wildness. In this collection, the Other is dependent on Other worlds – worlds removed from the sanctions of convention.

Michel Foucault deconstructs modern views of Victorian sexuality in his groundbreaking work, *History of Sexuality* (1976), asserting that the Victorians were not, in fact, repelled by sexuality, but instead fascinated by it. Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst (2000) write that Foucault suggested "there was a positive injunction, an incitement to discourse endlessly about sex, discernable in policy debates on prostitution and contagious diseases" (291). Through the use of medical language, the Victorians were able to discuss sexuality at length in a socially acceptable format. While these records suggest a societal fixation on sexology, they also convey a villainization of 'unconventional' sex, and work to regulate what was considered normal. In *A Dictionary of Psychological Medicine* (1892), Gustave Bouchereau defines 'nymphomania,' the first sentence reading: "Under this term we understand a morbid condition peculiar to the female sex, the most prominent character of which consists in an irresistible impulse to satisfy the sexual appetite" (Ledger and Luckhurst 293). The idea of sexual normalcy was extensively discussed in

both male and female bodies, but the female body represented something more inherently deviant. Here, an overt sexual inclination in women is labelled as ‘morbid’ and uncontrollable. In *Poor Things*, Bella quickly develops curiosity in an array of sexual matters. Engaging in a vast series of sexual explorations, Bella destabilizes the reality of a conventional Victorian environment. Bouchereau explains the attributes of nymphomania, writing, “As a general rule, the man solicits and the woman complies, but it may be that she is the one to solicit” (295). He has established that, as a ‘general rule’ of heterosexual relationships, the man must be the one to take interest in and initiate sexual activity. If a woman was to do so, it would raise flags, possibly serve even an indication of nymphomania. Bella’s promiscuous activity would be regarded as a medical ‘condition’ by Victorian standards – a “mental derangement” (293) requiring treatment. Thus, as Lanthimos indicates, Bella requires an alternate world to exist in – one where she can defy the boundaries of realism.

Bella Baxter stuns audiences with her unbelievable and medically impossible construction, immediately signaling a split from reality. After discovering the corpse of a pregnant woman, the eccentric scientist and surgeon, Godwin Baxter (unironically shortened to “God”), reanimates Bella in a dramatic Frankenstein-adjacent scene. We are told that in her previous life, Bella had attempted suicide, nearly killing her unborn child with her. After her resurrection, God keeps Bella in his home as his ward and science experiment, treating her with care while still closely observing her. Though shot in black and white, God’s home is nothing short of fantastical. Bella, adorned in extravagant puffed sleeves and swooping skirts, plays among his other bizarre creations, such as chicken-dog hybrid creatures. While we may be distracted by Bella’s beautiful appearance, we are reminded of her psychological predicament by

her every move. Bella speaks in blunt, broken sentences, acts solely on impulse, and stumbles around as she learns basic human functions.

Stereotypes surrounding the child-like capabilities of women² make her depiction of extreme immaturity precarious, but we soon discover that Bella develops rapidly, adding a variety of new words to her vocabulary every day. God selects one of his medical students, Max, to observe and monitor Bella's behavior as she progresses. He notes her curiosity and recklessness, sometimes manifesting in a fascination with destruction, and he quickly falls in love with her despite her infantile demeanor. In congruence with her swift development, Bella soon outgrows her provincial setting and yearns for the outside world. Around the same time, she becomes increasingly sexually curious and, having no societal understandings of her newfound inclinations, she finds no shame in her exploration. God, Max, and the housekeeper attempt to sanction her curiosity, but Bella cannot be dissuaded. Conveniently presented with the opportunity of travel, she sets off on a journey with a new suitor, Duncan. When Bella leaves, the shots become suddenly and vibrantly flooded with color, revealing a world even more fantastical than before.

This section opens with a bold, sexually explicit scene, setting the tone for the rest of the film. Duncan and Bella have travelled to Lisbon, and while clearly inspired by the real city, elements such as suspended cable cars zip-lining through the air serve to intensify the fantastical feel. Along her journey, she meets various eccentric intellectuals and becomes enthralled by philosophy and social justice. Duncan wishes to keep Bella for himself, but she breaks off their companionship in pursuit of her own independent exploration, marked by a momentary career at a brothel in Marseilles. She discovers the complexities of prostitution, and both the

² See Tavisha Sood's investigation of this issue in her article "The Infantilization of Women in Mainstream Media and Society" in *The Verdict Online* (2021).

empowerment and oppression that the commodification of one's body can hold. During this process, Bella dabbles in a sexual and emotional relationship with a woman, conveying her sexuality as fluid, or solely seeking to escape the bounds of heterosexuality. And the environment continues to reflect her wild journey, featuring Art Nouveau architecture with phallic undertones (Whitlock 2024). Out of the assorted individuals that Bella meets along her journey, none seem to be taken aback by her strange demeanor. But in this fantasy film, we subdue our tendencies to question the reality of situations, even when the film concludes with a 'happy ending,' in which a male villain receives a whimsical punishment. When Bella embarks on a rediscovery of her past life, seeking to understand the truth behind her suicide, she is reintroduced to her sadistic husband, Alfie. He aims to confine her to his home and, holding her at gunpoint, attempts to subject her to genital mutilation. Although exaggerated and brief, this story arc is likely the most grounded in reality out of the entire film. The vein of comedy is disrupted, and Bella is met with terrifying patriarchal ideals. By the grace of incredible luck, Bella escapes the situation; she wounds Alfie and brings him back to God's house to perform a recreation of her own reanimation. Replacing Alfie's brain with that of a goat, Bella reinstates the comedy of the film, rendering him harmless and simple-minded. Her world has returned to lighthearted fantasy, allowing us the satisfaction of a 'happy ending,' with Bella living in God's mansion alongside Max and her female sexual partner.

The foundational grounds of Bella's Other world differ significantly from those of the Victorian texts. The expansiveness of it allows her to travel, explore, and learn new things. Unlike the other worlds in the texts, it is not a single Other world located in a greater conventional one; rather, it is an entire alternate reality where anything is seemingly possible. Bella can freely move throughout the world of *Poor Things*, her otherness remaining almost

entirely unquestioned and unrestrained. While redolent of a Victorian world, Bella's setting is altered through fantasy and comedy to enable her unlikely success. By contrast, the works of Brontë and Lee are built in realistic Victorian worlds that contain specific sites of otherworldliness. In these environments, the otherworldly is provincial; it is restrained to a singular area that allows the Other an extent of embodiment that wouldn't be possible in the Victorian orthodox environment. And while these sites of otherworldliness reflect the untamed female protagonists of the Victorian texts, they do not allow them full liberation. Catherine Earnshaw and Alice Oke require realms more powerful and expansive than the physical to become the liberated Other. Consequentially, the tones of these works are starkly distinct; where *Poor Things* relies on comedy, the Victorian texts are grounded in sobriety. Like the film, they surpass the femme fatale label through the use of the otherworldly, suggesting the potential of a liberated Other. Yet all three figures fail to find liberation in the realm of convention, serving to critique the strict sanctions on Other bodies in the Victorian era.

I. Sanctioning the Other

Sanctioning the Other in the Victorian era is a multifaceted act. The Other serves to create a binary for societal understandings – the 'normal' and the Other. At a time of rampant scientific advancements, bodies were placed under medical scrutiny. In this context, othered bodies specifically become a site of societal fixation, their unconventionality both dangerous and fascinating. We can see this anxiety reflected in an abundance of Victorian literature; and it is a theme that *Poor Things* explicitly pulls from, presenting Bella Baxter as a Frankenstein-type medical anomaly. Timothy Verhoeven unpacks this phenomenon in his work through the example of the othered male body: "But whatever the nature of his deviancy, he served an

important function by throwing into relief the virtues of the normal man. This helps to explain the medical preoccupation with the abnormal rather than the normal” (28). The emergence of the freak show in mid-Victorian Britain is an extreme example, as the Other body is placed on display for the entertainment of mass audiences.³ The commodification of the Other is one strategic way of sanctioning and regulating difference. As their elusiveness helps to define the acceptable, the Other bears great responsibility to those around them. They are depended upon, necessary, for the wellbeing of others.

The woman, in particular, is an inherently othered body that helps to define the masculine by what it should not be. The ideal Victorian female body would serve to supplement and maintain the male body, both sexually and psychologically. In his foundational 1964 work, Steven Marcus examines records of sexual discourse in the Victorian era, noting: “we can observe how sexual responsibility is being projected onto the role of woman; she is being required to save man from himself; and conversely if she is by some accident endowed with a strongly responsive nature, she will become the agent of her husband’s ruin” (32). This is playfully portrayed in *Poor Things*, its exaggerated and ridiculous depiction calling attention to itself. Bella, determined to fulfill her own needs rather than those of others, poses an issue to the men around her. Duncan becomes infatuated with her, largely due to her indifference, and when she discontinues their sexual relationship, he blames her for his downfall. He makes intermittent comedic reappearances in the film to plead with her, accuse her, or attempt to hinder her journey—each time more disheveled and ‘ruined.’ Here, the Other is expected to cater to those around them, as the failure to do so has consequences for the patriarchy.

³ For further reading, see Nadja Durbach’s “On the Emergence of the Freak Show in Britain,” in *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*.

This comedic commentary in *Poor Things* reminds us of the femme fatale figure, a trope seen in many Victorian texts written by men that works to vilify and “other” the female. Rudyard Kipling, one of the leading literary figures of the Victorian era, paints a picture of the dangerous, uncaring female figure in his poem ‘The Vampire’ (1897). In this piece, a man strictly referred to as a “fool” places his love and best intentions onto a woman who uses him and leaves him, without ever understanding the impact she’s made. Throughout the poem, Kipling reiterates the phrase, “Even as you and I,” beckoning all readers to relate to the fool in a seemingly universal predicament. And while he is a fool for trusting this woman, he is allowed sympathy for his situation because of his mistreatment. He is the victim of this narrative – because of her, “some of him lived but the most of him died.” In the end, he has lost everything, including most of his life, hence the title “The Vampire.” The woman is capable of destroying him, but the most poignant aspect is that she cannot and will not ever know or understand the sacrifices he has made for her. There is an immediate sense of resentment upon her introduction to the poem; Kipling describes her as “a rag and a bone and a hank of hair / (We called her the woman who did not care) / But the fool he called her his lady fair” (Kipling, lines 3-5). She is not referred to as a human, but as a set of objects and attributes, unworthy of the dedication the man has shown her. Such language has explicitly othered the female, rendering her body inhuman. The poem takes the narrative of male heartbreak and thwarts it to villainize the female, turning her into a monster (‘vampire’) that has nearly killed her male victim. And not just this woman, but *all* women. Bella and her almost ‘monstrous’ body are embedded in the lines of Kipling’s poem. Over the course of their relationship, she takes Duncan’s money, “thr[ows] him aside” (Kipling), and ‘ruins’ him.

Much of the discourse surrounding the Other hints towards the threat of their power to ruin, which manifests itself as a kind of contagion. In his work “Women Writing Disability” Michael Davidson argues, “Female biology often becomes the site for fears of contamination, both national and theological. Cotton Mather’s account of the Salem witchcraft trials is filled with references to the physical disabilities resulting from contact with women heretics and freethinkers” (2). This brings us back into the medical world, connecting female bodily power with danger and illness. As demonstrated by Kipling’s poem, the conversation is no longer about heartbreak, but actual death. So the Other has the responsibility to define the normal, to prioritize the wellbeing of those around them, all the while posing an incredible threat to kill. This becomes an exceedingly difficult balancing act, and also where Bella’s trajectory strays from those written during the Victorian era. Conflating the female with murderous tendencies raises the stakes of their narratives, which is an urgency clearly reflected in the works of Brontë and Lee.

Poor Things, unlike the Victorian texts, relies on comedy to explore a woman’s path of self-discovery. While certainly fantastical, Bella’s otherworldly realm is informed by a whimsical, comedic tone. Because of Victorian standards, this reimagining is what allows her trajectory to be made possible. Similarly, Catherine and Alice’s otherness is framed within contexts outside of Victorian conventions. Their otherness is conveyed to us by outside narrators, bridging the gap between society and the Other. They are characterized by many of the same traits that inform Bella; they are beautiful but strange, wild, untamed, and even dangerous at times – overarchingly undefinable. Brontë and Lee are able to place these women in contexts that hint towards the power of the Other when left unrestricted. While our perspectives of Catherine and Alice’s otherness are mainly informed by the outside narrators, Bella’s othering largely

occurs by way of the audience. Though *Poor Things* is based on a novel, we cannot ignore the effect of film as a storytelling device. Lanthimos frequently interjects shots through an emphasized fisheye lens, inviting us to view Bella from a God-like position. This perspective renders Bella a specimen, small and under observation. On this note, we also cannot ignore the purpose behind Bella's creation. God reminds Max why they must keep Bella inside the house, telling him, "She's an experiment and I must control the conditions or our results will not be pure" (18:35:00). As an experiment set within a comedy, Bella's story is almost a mockery of the strange and impossible. The experiment goes awry, the results of which place the location of liberation in the Other in sexual freedom. We watch her eagerly explore, unashamed of her difference, and are beckoned to laugh at her odd tendencies. In this way, Lanthimos allows us to Other Bella. Like the Victorian fixation on the freak show, *Poor Things* can also function as the commodification of othered bodies for mass entertainment.⁴

II. The Other in Victorian Text

Catherine and Alice are both untamed Others, and like Bella, they fascinate the men who encounter them. But while these women have complex romantic relationships with the men in their lives, their focuses are not on explicit sexual exploration. Their relationships with men reflect the depth of power that the Other holds, beyond matters sexual. Catherine's and Alice's otherness is not easily definable. They are ghostly at times, but never true 'ghosts.' They are self-involved, but not uncaring. They are destructive, but never intentionally harm others. These characters have an interest in the strange, even the macabre at times – similar to Bella – but their

⁴ This sentiment goes hand in hand with ablism, which a variety of critics have brought attention to. See Smith, Digby, and Clifton's article, "Oscar contender *Poor Things* is a film about disability. Why won't more people say so?" (March 2024) in *The Conversation*.

interest points towards something less definable by reality. On Bella's first expedition outside of the house, Max holds his hands out, presenting to her a toad, which fascinates her. But we soon realize her fascination lies in its destruction; "kill it" are the only words she utters before slapping Max's hands together and laughing in satisfaction. This interaction touches on the Other's interest in a realm that surpasses the living, but does so in a crude, harmful, and ultimately inaccurate manner in comparison to the texts. Our world as we know it does not encompass the lens required to understand the Other as presented by Brontë and Lee. In these texts, our perspectives are formed by outside narrators, who are equally grappling with the inconceivability of the Other. They are our guides, though they are just as lost as us.

The outside narrators that present to us Catherine Earnshaw and Alice Oke provide us with a societally grounded view of the Other and their Other worlds. These texts require an external visitor to tell the tale in order for us to understand the strangeness from a point of view that has a connection to the 'normal.' The narrators function as a bridge between worlds, both in the worlds of the text and in the world of the reader. Seeking an isolated refuge, Lockwood of *Wuthering Heights* occupies the neighboring estate, Thrushcross Grange, and experiences the odd atmosphere of *Wuthering Heights* first-hand. While Lockwood never meets Catherine in person, he encounters her ghost early in the novel, hinting towards her location as an unstable, Other character. Most of the plot takes place in the past, revolving around Catherine's, Heathcliff's, and Edgar Linton's dramatic love triangle, which is then recreated in the next generation of their children. Heathcliff, the tormented adopted son of the Earnshaw family, is the only living character from this dynamic whom Lockwood directly interacts with. Luckily, Lockwood is given extensive background on the situation by way of Nelly, a servant of *Wuthering Heights* now working at Thrushcross Grange. Functioning as a bridge to the past,

Nelly recounts crucial insider information. We understand these sections of the text to be direct quotes, unbiased by Lockwood's perspective, although his subsequent commentary is interjected throughout.

Similar to Lockwood, the narrator of "Oke of Okehurst" travels away from society to the far-removed Okehurst estate. After being socially scorned for his unflattering portrait of a well-to-do woman, the narrator is commissioned by Mr. Oke to paint his eccentric wife, Alice Oke. This story, too, takes place in the past, and begins with the narrator speaking directly to the reader, who assumes the role of an unknown recipient. In this one-sided conversation, he hints towards an ominous event associated with Okehurst, mentioning, "I suppose the newspapers were full of it at the time. You didn't know that it all took place under my eyes?" (106-7). Although we don't know what the alleged 'it' is, we conjecture that it must be important, and that his intimate connection to the subject matter might shed some light on it. Through the narrator's story, we learn about the odd proclivities of the Oke couple, particularly Alice Oke and her obsession with a legendary murder. The eerie tone that prefaces the narrator's story continues throughout, building up to the final catastrophic event. Alice's character parallels this ghostliness, with the narrator habitually ruminating over her strange and undefinable nature.

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*

In a preface to an 1850 edition of *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë's sister, Charlotte, writes an explanatory notice on her sister's behalf posthumously. As the original publication of the novel was met with criticism, this note serves to contextualize the content with the background; it is addressed to those "to whom the inhabitants, the customs, the natural characteristics of the outlying hills and hamlets in the West-Riding of Yorkshire are things alien

and unfamiliar” (Norton 306). While the atmosphere is ‘natural’ to her, it is distanced from the reader – ‘alien’ and ‘unfamiliar’, signaling the Other. The novel takes place in a wild environment removed from society; it is a replication of the Brontë sisters’ own childhood environment in the moors of north England. Charlotte emphasizes the importance of understanding the inspiration behind the work, and details in depth the strangeness of it. In the concluding paragraph, she paints a vivid metaphor for the process of construction:

“Wuthering Heights” was hewn in a wild workshop, with simple tools, out of homely materials. The statuary found a granite block on a solitary moor: gazing thereon, he saw how from the crag might be elicited a head, savage, swart, sinister; a form molded with at least one element of grandeur–power. He wrought with a rude chisel, and from no model but the vision of his meditations. With time and labor, the crag took human shape: and there it stands colossal, dark, and frowning, half statue, half rock in the former sense, terrible and goblin-like; in the latter, almost beautiful, for its coloring is of mellow grey, and moorland moss clothes it; and heath, with its blooming bells and balmy fragrance, grows faithfully close to the giant’s foot. (Norton 309-10)

Rather than unpacking the nature of her sister’s novel, Charlotte uses her own literary talent to hint towards the abnormal, undefinable power that informs *Wuthering Heights*. Noting some of her word choice, ‘savage, swart, sinister,’ ‘terrible and goblin-like’ but ‘almost beautiful,’ she encapsulates the contradicting balance evident in the work, all existing under the framework of the natural environment. The course of production takes place in nature, but it is a nature so ‘wild’ that, as a ‘workshop,’ it is capable of generating a ‘giant.’ The figure that emerges is, like the environment, both natural and unnatural, both ‘wild’ and ‘beautiful.’ It is of ‘human shape,’ yet ‘half-statue,’ ‘colossal, dark, and frowning.’ This is a clear illustration of otherness, a force so difficult to define. But, distilling a tone of sensitivity, Charlotte adorns the image of the creature with ‘moorland moss,’ ‘blooming bells and balmy fragrance.’ The rendering is beautiful; though its body may be monstrous, the surrounding natural environment does not leave

the creature's side. The two are united, 'faithfully close,' mirroring the relationship of the characters and the environment in *Wuthering Heights*.

As a home, Wuthering Heights is an otherworldly location on the border of danger and protection. By the third sentence of the opening paragraph, we are told of the home's extreme isolation. Lockwood reports: "In all England, I do not believe that I could have fixed on a situation so completely removed from the stir of society" (3). Detached from society, the atmosphere is free to exist without traditional Victorian conventions. We are also soon informed of the meaning behind the name of the home, followed by a description of its significance:

'Wuthering' being a significant provincial adjective, descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its station is exposed in stormy weather. Pure, bracing ventilation they must have up there, at all times, indeed: one may guess the power of the north wind, blowing over the edge, by the excessive slant of a few stunted firs at the end of the house; and by a range of gaunt thorns all stretching their limbs one way, as if craving alms of the sun. Happily, the architect had foresight to build it strong: the narrow windows are deeply set in the wall, and the corners defended with large jutting stones. (4)

Wuthering Heights is both a product of and a shield against the harsh conditions of the moors. It is named after the powerful weather that the environment creates, aligning the home with the wild nature of the vicinity. The untamed state is consistent 'at all times,' highlighting the permanence of the ruthlessness; so extreme that even the location's tough flora ('gaunt thorns') seems to be 'craving alms of the sun.' While the construction was built 'strong' to protect the inhabitants and the home from the outside, elements such as the 'large jutting stones' also serve to mirror the severe external environment. The lines between the two realms become blurred in this context, the only probable indication of separation being the physical walls of the structure.

Before entering the threshold between the home and the outside, Lockwood observes "a quantity of grotesque carving lavished over the front" (4), creating a precedent for that to come. Inside, Lockwood notes: "One step brought us into the family sitting-room, without any

introductory lobby or passage: they call it here ‘the house’ preeminently” (4), consisting of the kitchen and parlor. The inhabitants of the home deem the most important area to be this removed section, calling it ‘the house,’ a seemingly odd place to call home. Lockwood finds it important that there is no sign of cooking in the kitchen; there are “sundry villainous old guns” above the chimney (5), and an assortment of dogs around. He writes, “In an arch under the dresser, reposed a huge, liver-colored bitch pointer surrounded by a swarm of squealing puppies, and other dogs haunted other recesses” (5). The dogs ‘haunt’ the home, and upon being left alone with them, they attack Lockwood, the outsider. This hints towards the lack of freedom the characters have to easily come and go from the home. Before the dog attack, Lockwood is accompanied by Heathcliff, who he believes “forms a singular contrast to his abode and style of living.” He describes Heathcliff as “a dark-skinned gypsy in aspect, in dress and manners a gentleman, that is, as much a gentleman as many a country squire: rather slovenly, perhaps, yet not looking amiss with his negligence, because he has an erect and handsome figure – and rather morose” (5). Heathcliff is ambiguous in race and class, and Lockwood, combining many contrasting traits, struggles to label him with a singular definition.⁵ Lockwood’s premature impression of Heathcliff leads him to believe that he ‘contrast[s]’ his environment, but we soon discover that he is an incredibly complex character that evades definitions. In actuality, his untamed nature and existence as a liminal character connect him to *Wuthering Heights* as well as to his Other counterpart, Catherine Earnshaw.

Born in *Wuthering Heights* and raised there her entire life, Catherine Earnshaw is a product of her otherworldly location. Like the realm that she inhabits, she is depicted as a headstrong, beautiful young woman, bent on doing things her own way. She is consistently

⁵ For a provocative understanding of Heathcliff as a liminal, conflicted character, see Steven Vine’s “The Wuthering of the Other in *Wuthering Heights*” (1994) in *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, University of California Press.

characterized as wild, unpredictable, and even uncaring at times. Nelly recalls an interaction in which she refuses Catherine's command and is met with a burst of violence: "She stamped her foot, wavered a moment, and then, irresistibly impelled by the naughty spirit within her, slapped me on the cheek a stinging blow that filled both eyes with water" (56). There is an uncontrollable element of Catherine's character – very similar to Bella's – a spiritual urge that she cannot seem to deny; her characterization reflects the wild environment of the moors, and specifically Wuthering Heights. Brontë takes this connection and deepens it, rendering Catherine and her environment as inseparable. Catherine describes a dream she once had where she was in heaven: "I was only going to say that heaven did not seem to be my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out, into the middle of the heath on the top of Wuthering Heights; where I woke sobbing for joy" (63). This moment speaks to both the strange climate of Wuthering Heights and Catherine's inability to leave it. The environment already exists outside of societal normality, and here, it is placed as an alternative to heaven as well. And Catherine does not wish to be in heaven, nor is she allowed to be. She is 'flung' out of a traditional Christian environment for her otherness. Catherine does not fit into the real world, tying her to Wuthering Heights. In fact, she is so tied to this home that anytime she leaves, there are fatal consequences.

Catherine experiences bodily harm when she spends time away from Wuthering Heights, but these consequences have different manifestations when she is accompanied by Heathcliff. Heathcliff serves as an extension of Wuthering Heights and thus a protective force. As a similarly othered character, he and Catherine are intertwined. Catherine explains, "he's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same" (63). This quote reminds us of the concluding sentence of Charlotte Brontë's preface – the image of the creature,

or the Other, in their environment: “and heath, with its blooming bells and balmy fragrance, grows faithfully close to the giant’s foot” (310). Heathcliff, named after the heath of the moors,⁶ connects him to the environment and allows him to ‘grow faithfully close’ to Catherine. Naturally embedded together, their separation is consequential. When he and Catherine are young, Nelly recounts, “it was one of their chief amusements to run away to the moors in the morning and remain there all day, and the after-punishment grew a mere thing to laugh at. The curate might set as many chapters as he pleased for Catherine to get by heart, and Joseph might thrash Heathcliff till his arm ached; they forgot everything the minute they were together again” (37). Their union creates a shield against the explicit or implicit punishments she may receive, from Hindley or greater powers. Heathcliff absorbs the extremity of punishment when they’re together. While Catherine must endure consequences such as rigorous academic challenge, Heathcliff is physically beaten. As they begin to separate on their excursions, Catherine faces more severe penalties.

On one occasion, Heathcliff and Catherine voyage to Thrushcross Grange, hoping to find out what the Linton family is like behind closed doors. Heathcliff says, “we thought we would just go and see whether the Lintons passed their Sunday evenings standings shivering in corners, while their father and mother sat eating and drinking, and singing and laughing, and burning their eyes out before the fire” (38). The Linton family distinctly contrasts the inhabitants of Wuthering Heights. Unable to fathom the idea of a ‘normal’ family, Heathcliff and Catherine predict to find an inhospitable scene. Yet they are met with a warm environment: “We should have thought ourselves in heaven!” (38). Upon seeing the Linton children upset and fighting with one another within this privileged space, Catherine and Heathcliff deem them ungrateful and,

⁶ ‘Heath’ is a British term meaning “An area of open land covered with rough grass or heather and with very few trees or bushes,” *Collins Dictionary*.

becoming jealous, try to scare them with “frightful noises” (39). The family sends out their guard-dog in response, and while they run away hand in hand, Catherine falls and is bitten by the dog. She urges Heathcliff to continue on without her, and she is taken into Thrushcross Grange for rehabilitation by the kindly Linton family. As one of the initial interactions between Catherine and Thrushcross Grange, it sets the precedent for her incompatibility with the environment. She and Heathcliff bring with them the wildness of Wuthering Heights, attempting to incite terror within a safe space. As consequence, she and Heathcliff are separated, and her body is physically harmed. Just as Lockwood is initially rejected from Wuthering Heights by a dog attack, Catherine is rejected from Thrushcross in the same manner.

When she leaves Wuthering Heights without Heathcliff, Catherine poses an even greater threat to herself and those around her. She spends time recovering at Thrushcross Grange after the incident with the dog, during which Mrs. Linton attempts to transform her into a proper young woman. And while she is able to undergo certain changes to her look and manner, she is unable to be fully suppressed. She becomes torn between her suitors, Edgar Linton and Heathcliff, and treats them both unfairly, unleashing her own inner turmoil onto them. At the end of chapter IX, Heathcliff overhears Catherine deciding that she must marry Edgar, and becomes so upset that he runs away from Wuthering Heights. Catherine spends the night searching for him in the rain and catches an illness that almost kills her. The Linton family finds her, takes her in, and rehabilitates her for the second time. In an easily overlooked sentence, we discover that she spreads this illness to Mr. and Mrs. Linton, effectively killing them: “But the poor dame [Mrs. Linton] had reason to repent for her kindness; she and her husband both took the fever, and died within a few days of each other” (70). Catherine, in her untamed emotional state, leaves Wuthering Heights and falls ill, illustrating her own bodily consequences of parting with her

environment. Because she is searching for Heathcliff but doesn't find him, she is left with the brunt of the penalty. Finally, she is taken back to her foil environment, Thrushcross Grange, where her consequences are spread to infect innocent bystanders. Catherine's body is connected back to the idea of a dangerous contagion, all the more heightened when she is separated from her environment.

When Catherine marries Edgar Linton and permanently moves to Thrushcross Grange, she becomes sickly, eventually dies in childbirth, and her ghost returns back to her original home. We witness her deterioration as she turns progressively incoherent in chapter XII: "Tossing about, she increased her feverish bewilderment to madness, and tore the pillow with her teeth" (95). Catherine's illness contains some of her wild traits, but because she is in the context of Thrushcross Grange, they are the reason for her decline. Catherine yearns to be back at Wuthering Heights, where she believes she can exist in her othered state without hindrance. She discloses: "I wish I were out of doors – I wish I were a girl again, half savage, and hardy, and free; and laughing at injuries, not maddening under them! Why am I so changed? why does my blood rush into a hell of tumult at a few words? I'm sure I should be myself were I once among the heather on those hills" (98). The 'injuries' or penalties she references for being 'savage,' 'free,' and Other are tolerable, even laughable in the environment of Wuthering Heights. She acknowledges that she has been changed by Thrushcross Grange and asserts that, if she were to be reunited with her otherworldly counterpart, she would be able to fully embody herself again. Her sickness is worsened when she is revealed to be pregnant – a symbol that explicitly marks the end of her childhood and further attaches her to Edgar and Thrushcross Grange. She dies within two hours of giving birth to her daughter, cementing the fact that she cannot physically survive when taken away from her wild environment.

A one-dimensional reading of Catherine might cast her as a femme fatale, but Brontë complicates the trope. In congruence to this archetype, she is given the power to tempt, mistreat, and influence men without much of a second thought. Both Heathcliff and Edgar are in love with Catherine and depend upon her for their wellbeing. Their individual trajectories are influenced by her; Nelly notes of Edgar, “Ah, I thought, there will be no saving him—He’s doomed, and flies to his fate!” (57). This assessment of Edgar portrays Catherine as the siren figure, using her otherworldly forces to coax him to both a ‘doomed’ and unbreakable fate. It renders Edgar powerless, as well as anyone who might try and ‘save’ him. Catherine marries him, virtually ‘saving’ him from his destiny, yet he still lives his life in service to her. This power over men is located the most intensely through Heathcliff. As the denied suitor, Heathcliff allows his obsession with Catherine to ruin his life. So destroyed is Heathcliff that his depiction of passion and mania has made him one of the most famous characters in English literature. And while Catherine is the source of anguish in these men, she is not blamed by Brontë for her actions. Brontë takes care to represent the difficulties that Catherine experiences as an othered character and doesn’t define her with one singular trait, but a variety of conflicting and elusive characteristics.

Brontë even hints towards a happy ending for Catherine, but the environment that enables this is unexpected. A little after Heathcliff’s funeral, Lockwood finds a crying young boy unable to guide his lambs forward. The boy tells him what he and the lambs had come across: “They’s Heathcliff and a woman, yonder, under t’ Nab” (255).⁷ The boy believes that he and his lambs have seen the ghost of Heathcliff, accompanied by a woman who we believe is Catherine. Before Heathcliff’s death, Lockwood encounters Catherine’s ghost haunting Wuthering Heights,

⁷ Brontë uses broken words to convey the deep Northern accents of some of the characters. This line can be interpreted as: “They saw Heathcliff and a woman yonder, under the Nab.”

unhappy and lost in the afterlife. With the indication that Catherine and Heathcliff's ghosts have finally been reunited, we can assume that she may be at peace, no longer isolated by her otherness. But unlike the dream she once had about *Wuthering Heights* and heaven, Catherine does not choose her original home as her final resting place; it is ultimately a different otherworldly realm that enables her happy ending. Lockwood inspects the environment surrounding their conjoined graves in the concluding sentence of the novel. He notes: "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 slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth" (256). The beautiful environment that finishes the novel contrasts the harsh one that we are introduced to. The wind is not wuthering any longer, it is 'soft[ly]' 'breathing.' The fauna and flora of the area are also soft and gentle, and the atmosphere is quiet. Lockwood believes that it would be impossible to imagine that those buried under this peaceful earth could ever be in turmoil. While it exists in the context of the physical environment, the space that Catherine and Heathcliff inhabit is more liminal than tangible. They have finally found a realm where they can exist peacefully united in their otherness, even if they had to die to get there.

The conclusion of *Wuthering Heights* is difficult to digest; though Catherine finds a form of happiness and liberation, it is not by way of the same otherworldly environment we have come to know. The realm that Brontë hints towards in the ending is one accessed through death, and it exists in a space past the tangibility of *Wuthering Heights*. Throughout the novel, Catherine's environment serves to both protect and harm her. It reflects her wildness but does not allow her to exist as a truly liberated Other. As Deirdre d'Albertis explains in "Dark Nature: A Critical Return to Brontë Country," the world of *Wuthering Heights* presents us with a variety of

conflicting features that seemingly disprove each other. As an unreliable narrator, Lockwood struggles to encapsulate these vast traits and stumbles over his preemptive conclusions. While he provides a definition of the term “wuthering,” d’Albertis calls attention to the multitude of alternative meanings he leaves behind. She regards these definitions as equally important; they each work to embody the contrasting nature of the novel’s environment and characters – ultimately indefinable. She writes: “Brontë shows us how to endure haunting, to live in awareness of what is and is not there...[She] gives us a word for watching and feeling “both/and” and “neither/nor” in contrast to the flawed narrative certainties that bookend our experience of the pathless interiors we traverse in her fiction: *wuthering*” (139). In Brontë’s novel, all these contradicting factors exist at once, rendering the environment as a borderland. Wuthering Heights and the surrounding moors encompass a liminal space, but Catherine does not have access to it until she leaves her physical embodiment. And once accompanied by Heathcliff, she is liberated – free from the bounds of isolation. So, it is not the physical otherworldly that liberates Catherine; it is the liminal one that Brontë hints towards in her conclusion.

Vernon Lee’s “Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover”

In her short story collection, Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales (1890), Vernon Lee focuses on the Other in the form of the ghost, reflecting much of her own elusiveness. Lee was herself an explicitly othered author of her time; she was excluded from intellectual social circles by the surrounding Decadent authors and artists, as her “strong personality and strongly held opinions seem to have aroused the hostility of a number of male writers and thinkers” (Broadview 10). Until recently, Lee had been lost in history, her impact on literature going

largely unacknowledged. In this context, Lee echoes the ghosts she writes about. In the 2006 Broadview introduction to Lee's short story collection, Maxwell and Pulham critique previous attempts to define Lee and attempt to provide a more three-dimensional depiction. They note important background on one of Lee's stances: "Replying to [Burdette] Gardner's request to write a biography of Vernon Lee, Irene Cooper Willis replies: 'In her testamentary instructions to me she prohibited absolutely any biography and added 'my life is my own and I leave that to nobody'" (20). In agreement with the elusive subject matter she writes about, Lee's intimate life story is inaccessible. This is certainly a strong and valid sentiment, yet it allows room for misinterpretation of her character as well as her work. *Wuthering Heights* amassed a variety of criticism after its publication, likely heightened by the similar nature of elusiveness that both Emily Brontë and her work posed. Luckily, Charlotte Brontë's preface aimed to clarify the context behind her sister's work rather than define it, which leaves it untamed.

Being denied direct resources capturing Vernon Lee's life story, Burdette Gardner took what he could find, and effectually thwarts Lee's image through his categorization of her. Maxwell and Pulham briefly analyze his work in *The Lesbian Imagination* (1986): "While not technically a biography, it nevertheless works in much the same way, and it represents Lee via a process of "re-membering," of pulling together distinct parts, for its own ends, to create a picture of a fascinating, cold, mannish woman and destructive lesbian "monster"" (21). Lee continued to be othered far past her death, with critics constructing an image of her as the 'monstrous' and 'destructive' Other. By "pulling together distinct parts" and cherry picking select information to reinforce an idea, Gardner and others were able to 're-member' the undefinable force of Vernon Lee. This reminds us of some of the medical discourse around the Other, as well as Bella's origin story in *Poor Things*: the assembly of an idea of a woman through the hands of a man.

In dealing with the figure of the ghost and the spectral to contextualize depictions of the Other, Lee critiques attempts to define the Other. In her essay “Faustus and Helena: Notes on the Supernatural in Art” (1880-81), she writes, “For the supernatural is necessarily essentially vague, and art is necessarily essentially distinct: give shape to the vague and it ceases to exist” (Broadview 295). By trying to grasp the supernatural, it loses its core meaning. Lee believes that it is a mistake to attempt to contain something that cannot be contained – especially with an incompatible net. *Wuthering Heights*’ Catherine becomes trapped within Thrushcross Grange, which brings about her decease; it is only *Wuthering Heights* that allows her to remain wild and undefined, and only a liminal space that can fully liberate her. The sanctioning of the othered female body is directly connected to this idea. Maxwell and Pulham explore the complexity of the female in Lee’s texts: “In extending and complicating definitions of gender and sexuality in these stories, Lee fuses femininity with the spectral to suggest something that resists simple categorization and that leaves everything open and without resolution” (11). The spectral allows the female to surpass definition and convention, including the femme fatale label.

The form of the ghost story enables Lee to place her characters in an environment that reflects their power as the Other. Like Catherine and Bella, these figures of force require a compatible, Other world. Maxwell and Pulham write: “Lee’s enigmatic, elusive yet compelling women transcend the often reductive misogynistic limitations of this type as they defy being fixed and defined by those around them, even seeming to cross the boundaries of time and space” (11). Lee portrays the Other in a way that reflects their power and the requirements needed to contextualize them. She does the undefinable justice in her work by leaving much of her information up for interpretation, translating the figures and realms greater than ‘time and space,’ much like the undefinable world of *Poor Things*. The environment of “Oke of Okehurst”

revolves around an old Gothic-style family home, Okehurst, seemingly haunted by the lineage of the past. Existing in almost a time loop, the couple who lives there are destined to repeat the actions of their long-dead relatives. This rendering of place, in addition to the estate being isolated and removed from society, casts Okehurst in a very similar light to *Wuthering Heights*.

The descriptions of the Okehurst environment suggest its ability to surpass time and reality. On the long journey to the estate, the narrator notes of the landscape, “the country seemed intolerably monotonous” (109). He believes that the area surrounding Okehurst will predict its state, but instead, he is met with an environment frozen in time within the dull, far-off country. He describes it as “the most perfect example of an old English manor-house that I had ever seen; the most magnificent intrinsically, and the most admirably preserved” (111). It is not only the structure of the house that is well preserved, but the history and elusive ghosts that haunt it. We soon discover that the Okes are cousins,⁸ and Okehurst once housed their shared ancestors – a couple that, according to legend, united forces to murder a man. The lasting effects of this haunting story are palpable; the narrator senses something spectral from the very beginning of his time there. Maxwell and Pulham frame his perception: “The painter in ‘Oke of Okehurst’ reports himself ‘very susceptible’ to the ‘imaginative impression’ (112) of the house Okehurst, especially ‘the yellow room, where the very air, with its scent of heady flowers and old perfumed stuffs, seemed redolent of ghosts’ (142)” (14). The yellow room, in particular, is a fixation of Alice Oke’s, and the site of the text’s most otherworldly activity.

The yellow drawing-room serves to connect Okehurst to both the past and the future. Despite the narrator finding it “one of the most charming rooms in the house” (125), Mr. Oke is

⁸ It is notable that both Catherine and Alice have romantic relationships with men connected to their families. Heathcliff is raised as a ‘brother’ beside Catherine and the Okes are cousins. This detail further underscores that the Other is not compatible with forces that are far removed from their Other worlds.

convinced that it has “an evil reputation” and that “no member of [their] family...can bear to sit there alone for more than a minute” (125). Mr. Oke is horrified by both the story of the murder and the yellow room, but Alice is enthralled by the two. The room contains poems and songs written by Christopher Lovelock, the man who was murdered by their ancestors. Alice tells the narrator that he had written them for the first Alice during their supposed affair and exhibits almost an obsession with the matter – both with the forbidden romance and the nature of Lovelock’s death. The narrator watches her, telling us: “She evidently knew the verses by heart, and her eyes were mostly fixed with that distant smile in them, with which harmonized a consistent tremulous little smile in her lips” (127). The expression that she wears in this room is how the narrator wishes to paint her, he says to himself. It is in this location that Alice embodies a glimpse of the demeanor that the narrator has been trying so hard to capture. But despite his attraction to it, he still feels something off about the yellow room: “This woman’s husband could not bear the room, and it seemed to me vaguely as if he were right in detesting it” (126). Leaning further into this ominous tone, Alice is bent on viewing the room with a kind of power to influence: “Perhaps something is destined to happen there in the future” (125). In her prophetic theorizations, Alice wraps the narrator into her Other world.

Okehurst is an isolated, ghostly environment, and like Catherine, Alice Oke cannot physically leave it. Her body and mind are deemed sickly by doctors and her husband, reminding us of the feminine contagion. Mr. Oke explains: “My wife... does not enjoy very good health – a nervous constitution. Oh no! not at all ill, nothing at all serious, you know. Only nervous, the doctors say; mustn’t be worried or excited, the doctors say; requires a lot of repose, – that sort of thing” (110). Her labelled physical state both restricts her to Okehurst and regards her as fragile, demanding her to balance precariously between being neither ‘worried or excited.’ The potential

of her feminine power must be subdued by rendering her incompetent, which ties her to the family home. The few times Alice does leave, she poses a threat to herself and those around her, much like Catherine. On the first occasion that she and the narrator journey away from Okehurst, she takes him on a treacherous horse-ride to visit the site of the fabled murder. On the way there, she recklessly drives the cart, saying, “Oh, don’t you think it delightful, going at this pace, with the idea that any moment the horse may come down and we two be killed?” (113). Alice views death in a very different way than most; she believes it to be ‘delightful’ to think about not only her own demise, but that of her companion as well. She is an othered woman with a sickly body and a preoccupation with death – all the more reason for her dangerous body to be kept sequestered at Okehurst.

Alice’s connection to Okehurst extends further than location; she assumes a crucial role in the house’s framework by emulating her predecessor of the same name. She meticulously curates her presentation in congruence with the original Alice’s; the narrator notes: “Mrs. Oke distinctly made herself up to look like her ancestress, dressing in garments that had a seventeenth-century look; nay, that were sometimes absolutely copied from this portrait” (119). This ancestral doubling ties Alice to the history of the home, and also works to depict her as a ghostly entity, more than human. Like the haunted nature of Okehurst, Alice’s character is spectral. The narrator is perplexed by her and attempts to describe her repeatedly, yet his characterizations consistently revert to her undefinable affect. He portrays her as beautiful, but undeniably unusual, in both appearance and character. He states: “There was a waywardness, a strangeness, which I felt but could not explain – a something as difficult to define as the peculiarity of her outward appearance, and perhaps very closely connected therewith” (117). In

one of his first analyses of Alice, the narrator endeavors to encapsulate the conflicting features she displays, as well as her self-interest:

I became aware, not merely that I had before me the most marvelously rare and exquisite and baffling subject for a portrait, but also one of the most peculiar and enigmatic of characters. Now that I look back upon it, I am tempted to think that the psychological peculiarity of that woman might be summed up in an exorbitant and absorbing interest in herself – a Narcissus attitude – curiously complicated with a fantastic imagination, a sort of morbid day-dreaming, all turned inwards, and with no outer characteristics save a certain restlessness, a perverse desire to surprise and shock, to surprise and shock more particularly her husband, and thus be revenged for the intense boredom which his want of appreciation inflicted upon her. (116)

The narrator notes Alice's 'enigmatic' quality and struggles to narrow it down to an obsession with oneself ('a Narcissus attitude'), acknowledging that it is 'curiously complicated.' Seeking more from her isolated life, Alice turns inwards, which heightens her 'fantastic imagination.' She also entertains her 'restlessness' with a 'perverse desire to surprise and shock,' particularly fixating on her husband. This characterization reminds us of Catherine and her early interactions with the inhabitants of Thrushcross Grange – both women take an interest in prodding and scaring those who do not share their inner wildness. While Catherine taunts those who are not othered, Alice taunts a man who is seemingly conventional, but also Other.

Where Alice's strange and elusive otherness reflects her divergence from societal norms, Mr. Oke's depiction of otherness reflects a critique of the conventional. He struggles to assert his masculinity and is eventually given a feminine label in his marital dynamic, while Alice assumes a masculine one. He is scared of ghosts and morbidity, the unconventional and undefinable, while Alice is drawn to them. As Alice progressively becomes more lost in her obsession with the murder fable, Mr. Oke grapples with keeping her attention. The narrator explicitly casts him as a woman in this process: "He was growing perfectly unstrung, like a hysterical woman" (144). Though Alice's indifference towards her husband might conjure the image of the femme fatale,

the reversed roles that they embody in their relationship further complicates this depiction. The narrator notes their irregular dynamic, observing: “The gentleness and affection of the poor fellow had evidently not touched her – she seemed almost to recoil from it” (135). Alice has no interest in her husband and exhibits the same kind of disdain for emotion associated with masculinity. In Mr. Oke’s struggle between femininity and masculinity, he expresses his attempt at masculine ‘love’ through continued efforts to understand and sanction her.

As Lee indicates, to love the Other is not to understand them – the attempt to do so can only lead to their destruction. The narrator sheds light on Mr. Oke’s predicament: “This woman had shocked and pained him more than was possible to say, and yet it was evident that he could neither cease loving her nor commence comprehending her real nature” (139). Mr. Oke’s wellbeing depends on Alice; his inability to stop loving her or begin to understand her torments him. He tells the narrator in a frantic theorization: “I don’t think a woman can really dishonor her husband; dishonor is in our own hands, and depends only on our own acts. He ought to save her, do you see? He must, must save her, in one way or another” (148). Mr. Oke attempts to regain masculine control by asserting that it is in his power to ‘save’ Alice from her untamed nature, but Alice is uncontrollable. Whereas his inner turmoil leads to a violent and catastrophic event, the narrator is fascinated by his own fixation with Alice. His inability to understand and depict her in his portrait manifests itself in a passionate obsession. He says, “I pursued her, her physical image, her psychological explanation, with a kind of passion which filled my days, and prevented my ever feeling dull” (117). In these two instances, Alice’s elusiveness becomes a contagion to the men around her, just like Catherine and Bella. They seek to understand Alice’s otherness and her strange, macabre fixations.

Mr. Oke, though conventional on the surface, holds a destructive nature underneath, reflecting the harm that normality poses for the Other. The narrator is intrigued by Mr. Oke's doubleness, both his traditionalism and what lies beneath it. Looking at him from an artistic standpoint, the narrator describes Mr. Oke's affect: "and that odd puzzled look on his good healthy face, that deep gash between his eyebrows, which my friend the mad-doctor calls the *maniac-frown*. It was with this expression of face that I should have liked to paint him; but I felt that he would not have liked it, that it was more fair to him to represent him in his mere wholesome pink and white and blond conventionality" (117). Unlike Alice, Mr. Oke is 'healthy' – his body abides by medical standards. But this is complicated by a certain 'odd puzzled look,' which presents itself in a 'maniac frown' – a term coined by an unconventional 'mad-doctor.' There is something unpredictable behind Mr. Oke's 'wholesome pink and white and blond conventionality,' something that only an unconventional medical perspective (a 'mad' doctor) could take note of. In the face of the complex, undefinable Other, Mr. Oke retreats into a 'puzzled' state of confusion that suggests a threatening edge. The narrator is interested in painting this side of him, but senses that it wouldn't be well-received. He finds it better to 'represent' him in his surface-level conventionality, which would conceal the dangerous true nature of supposed normalcy.

At the very end of "Oke of Okehurst," the narrator finally discloses the highly anticipated catastrophic event: overcome by his self-inflicted torment, Alice's husband murders her in the yellow drawing-room. This abrupt and horrifying event is not taken lightly by Lee's use of tone, but she embeds an odd sense of hope within the closing paragraphs. The narrator describes the scene of the murder; he scans over Mr. Oke and lands on Alice's countenance as she leaves the physical world: "Her mouth was convulsed, as if in that automatic shriek, but her wide-open

white eyes seemed to smile vaguely and distantly” (152). As a primal ‘automatic’ reaction, Alice is shocked by her husband’s shift in persona (though Lee has hinted towards its presence all along). But despite Mr. Oke’s egregious actions, Alice’s eyes have a ‘vague’ and ‘distant’ smile to them. Quite possibly, Alice is satisfied to leave the world as we know it. While Okehurst, especially the yellow drawing-room, allows Alice more freedom than she would have in an orthodox society, she is still held back from true liberation. Yet here, in these last few lines, Lee caringly eases Alice into another realm. In this scene, Lee never once uses ‘death’ to refer to Alice’s ending.⁹ Based on the provided description, we may assume that Alice has been killed by her husband, but Lee frames it as something more spectral and elusive. The narrator tells us that “there was a loud report, a sharp cry, and the thud of a body on the ground,” and Alice, at the feet of Mr. Oke, has “a pool of red forming in her white dress” (152). Lee leaves Alice’s ‘death’ indefinite, which complicates the concept. It may be a ‘death’ as we know it by conventional standards, but it has the ability to transport Alice into another realm.

In this alternate realm, Alice has the potential to be free and even happy; she is no longer isolated in her otherness. The narrator concludes his story with the mention of a locket found around Alice’s neck “all stained with blood” (153) and containing a lock of hair. The hair, being much darker than Mr. Oke’s, leads him to surmise: “I am quite sure it was Lovelock’s” (153). Throughout the story, Lee never provides us with concrete evidence of Lovelock’s presence as a ghost. He is an elusive, undefined entity, possibly existing only in Alice’s mind. But upon her ‘death,’ Alice leaves behind a token that solidifies the unfathomable connection between the two. This connection is made possible through a world that transcends death, a world in which Alice

⁹ The only concrete evidence provided is when the narrator tells us that after the event, a series of “legal inquiries” resulted in the conclusion that “Mr. Oke had killed his wife in a fit of momentary madness” (153). Lee still eludes the direct concept of ‘death’ here by detailing a verdict made by traditional law proceedings rather than her own assertion.

can be united with Lovelock, where they are tied by their otherness. As Maxwell and Pulham write of Lee's female characters, the story's brief last line similarly "seem[s] to cross the boundaries of time and space" (11). Through her elusive storytelling and the ultimate indication of another realm, Lee removes Alice from isolation and constriction and into a state of freedom. Alice's 'vague' and 'distant' smile upon her release places her in a space far away from the physical and distills a sense of happiness. In this way, Lee has finally liberated Alice Oke, just as Brontë has liberated Catherine.

The tones of Lee and Brontë differ significantly from the tone of *Poor Things*, further than comedy and fantasy. These Victorian authors wrote their female protagonists with a kind of tenderness, sensitivity, and love – especially in their endings – that isn't as apparent in Bella's narrative. They acknowledge the ways that the Other is plagued by the conventions of orthodox society. Ultimately, understanding that true liberation is not possible within these confines, even within their fictional otherworldly environments, Brontë and Lee release Catherine and Alice into a space where they can be free. And they are not alone. In this distant, elusive space, they can experience love and companionship. The final ghostly unions of Catherine and Heathcliff and Alice and Lovelock signal a place where the Other is no longer isolated in their otherness. Death is not the end for Catherine and Alice, but a new beginning. Bella demonstrates this concept in *Poor Things*, as her suicide attempt results in a new freeing existence, one on the border of life and death. Yet this existence is a comedic experiment brought forth by a male scientist. And the liberation she experiences is widely grounded in sexuality, rather than something undefinably greater. But – whether we can call it 'true' liberation or not – Bella's story challenges the Victorian femme fatale and imagines a world where she might be able to exist happily, accompanied by people who accept her otherness. In this way, her otherworldly

environment is similar to those that Brontë and Lee hint towards, even if the film doesn't ultimately treat this realm with the same sensitivity that the Victorian works do.

All three of these works create otherworldly realms to provide the space needed for their powerful, othered female protagonists. The Other cannot exist in their true state within the bounds of the conventional world; because they do not adhere to definitions, their elusiveness becomes a site of fixation, even mockery. In these works, the attempts to sanction the Other range from rendering them contagious and evil, to comedic experimentation and commodification, to murder. No matter the scale of the sanction, it contributes to the Other's destruction. The otherworldly spaces of these texts serve to critique the world as we know it, and to suggest an alternative location where the Other is not viewed as harmful, a place where they can exist wild and untamed. As female authors who lived through the era they wrote about, Brontë and Lee understood the difficult realities of existing as the Other in the orthodox Victorian world. Their sensitivity is translated through their texts, most notably in tone and ending. The Other is unable to be physically free, even in their wild environmental counterparts. So Brontë and Lee imagine a realm even more distant and strange, only accessible through a departure from the physical world. Catherine and Alice must experience death in the tangible world in order to exist as the liberated Other in these Other locations. Brontë and Lee locate death as the pathway to liberation, reflecting the severity of the Other's living conditions. But in congruence with the work's unconventionality, death is not a negative concept in the way we understand it; rather it is a route to happiness.

Bella, portrayed in a fantastical, modern interpretation of the Victorian era, does not receive the same tenderness or urgency in her narrative. Unlike the texts, Bella's story was written by a male author at the end of the 20th century and made into a film by a male director in

2023. Whereas Brontë and Lee lovingly embed themselves in their female protagonists, Bella has no kinship with her creators. This context, in addition to the comedic tone, works to isolate Bella and her otherness, despite the film's narrative ending. The audience is not beckoned to respect Bella's otherness, but to be shocked and laugh at it. While similar in many aspects, the otherworldly realm of *Poor Things* does not ultimately serve the same purpose as those in the Victorian texts. It serves to question, prod and challenge some of the same issues that Brontë's and Lee's do, but it does not create the space for the same kind of liberation that these authors are searching for.

Epilogue

Vernon Lee's elusive, creative nonfiction essay entitled "Limbo" revolves around a liminal space that she describes as "the Kingdom of Might-Have-Been." This essay suggests a multitude of traits, forces, and inhabitants – all existing and not existing at the same time – surrounding this power she calls Limbo. This 'location' is reminiscent of the liberating realms alluded to in the conclusions of *Wuthering Heights* and "Oke of Okehurst." It imagines a beautiful yet bittersweet alternative space. Though brewing with potential, Limbo's power to liberate is cut short within the bounds of reality. Or so it seems.

Born deaf in one ear, I was incredibly insecure as a child – I wished to be 'normal.' This situation was medically referred to as an 'impairment,' but my mother quickly shifted the narrative. She told me it made me special, that it allowed me to hear into Other worlds. Though it is small, I have carried that sentiment with me throughout my life, and it has truly made me feel special. There is power in the non-conventional, and a liberation closer than we might imagine. Otherness is a powerful framework for understanding and reimagining the traditional. Through attempts to understand, define, and sanction the elusive, we destroy it – we cannot ignore the heartbreaking reality of death in Brontë and Lee's works. Though these reimagined realms are written and treated with care, they are ultimately tragic. Yet the contemporary efforts that *Poor Things* makes in reimagining the traditional feel like a signal of movement. This shift in narrative, though it misses the mark, places us closer on the path to Lee's Limbo.

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