

For the Darkly Curious Child

Katherine Rosa

Writer's comment: I think childhood reading affects us more deeply than any reading we might do later in life because our minds have not yet learned to be skeptical or critical; we absorb it and it shapes us. Throughout Dr. John Boe's Children's Literature class, these ideas were constantly in mind, but it wasn't until dangerously late in the course that I narrowed my ideas and decided to focus on *Jane-Emily*, a scary children's story that had haunted me for over a decade. Rereading it after all that time with a mind honed and shaped by eleven years of English classes was a very interesting experience. I was able to relive the memories of that fateful first reading as well as critique and analyze it with skills that I had acquired since. And my paper *For the Darkly Curious Child* is the result. I would like to thank Gretchen Braun, a TA for the class, for not only taking time to read *Jane-Emily* so that I could write my paper, but also for encouraging and guiding my progress.

—*Katherine Rosa*

Instructor's comment: Katherine Rosa's essay about Patricia Clapp's children's novel *Jane-Emily* and its roots in the women writers' gothic tradition (especially Du Maurier and Emily Brontë) is obviously the work of someone who knows how to write a literary paper. But it is also the work of someone who knows how to write with a human voice. I love how she uses her own childhood experience with the novel to guide her analysis of its structure and its literary roots, how she seamlessly talks out of her childhood as well as her adult reading experiences, how her genuine literary sophistication is informed by a genuine personal voice. And I especially like how there is a payoff at the end of this essay, how the discussion of the tradition *Jane-Emily* derives from finally leads me to appreciate how childhood reading can effect adult reading and also to appreciate the 'risk' (as Katherine describes it in her fine final paragraph) Clapp took in writing her book.

—*John Boe, University Writing Program*

The delight of terror in literature can be a great incentive for children. Now I'll read anything for the simple sake of reading, but as a kid my intellectual palate was restricted to only what was sure to give me nightmares. Just over ten years ago, I happened upon *Jane-Emily* in my meandering search through the library for something scary. This children's novel written by Patricia Clapp in 1969 had a curiously strong effect on me. Even now holding it in my adult hands, I feel like I'm nine years old again, afraid to go to sleep, afraid to turn the light out. Its affect on me was so curious and so strong that its essence sank to some lower level of my mind, and everything specific about the book was promptly forgotten. While reading Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* in high school English classes, recollections surfaced of some strange and forgotten book I'd read a lifetime ago; I had the rather staggering feeling that I must have seen these two books somewhere else before. Various scenes and characters were strangely familiar to me, and I was able to welcome these two books like old friends. I eventually pieced together the puzzle and realized that in a way I had read these books before, in the form of *Jane-Emily*. Clapp owes much to the gothic genre, having borrowed heavily from *Wuthering Heights* and *Rebecca*, as well as other gothic romances to lesser degrees. As a nine-year-old reader, *Jane-Emily* made a palpable impression on me simply as a scary story, and now, a decade later, I can appreciate that Clapp wasn't just writing a scary story; she was manipulating a genre and reinventing it for children.

Jane-Emily, a compelling, weird little story about a ghost girl and her living niece, is markedly similar to *Wuthering Heights*; Clapp took her cues from Brontë, using many of the same authorial devices in setting up her story and borrowing major character traits. She even named her main characters after this great writer, whose full name was Emily Jane Brontë, and her sister, Charlotte, is the namesake of Jane's mother. Clapp also adapted Brontë's generation-spanning story line for use in *Jane-Emily*, employing her own Nelly Dean character, the maid Katie, as a useful storyteller. While Clapp's plot is certainly original, she employs many of the same techniques that Brontë found so effective; for example, both stories open with startling otherworldly occurrences. In a harrowing scene, *Wuthering Heights'* bumbling Lockwood is awoken by the ghost of Catherine at the window; he then proceeds to drag her wrists across the broken window glass and ends in believing that it was all a dream, a fact left purposely ambiguous to the reader (20-21).

Brontë's early description of the foreboding atmosphere and darkly mysterious characters doesn't disappoint her readers as the suspense is fulfilled in the Lockwood and Cathy scene. Likewise, Clapp peppers her introductory pages with cryptic insinuations, such as the very first sentence: "There are times when the midsummer sun strikes cold and the leaping flames of the hearth fire give no heat" (7). Slasher flicks often employ the same device, engaging the viewers with a dramatic and bloody opening scene. Here, the suspense and the promises implied are also promptly fulfilled in Louisa's relation of Jane's parents' deaths: "No one has ever been able to understand what the horse shied at, what frightened him so that he must have reared and turned, tipping the buggy and throwing Charlotte so hard against a great tree trunk that she died instantly. John grasping the reins and striving to control the animal, was dragged quite horribly for some distance" (7). The reader isn't allowed to pass this off as an isolated accident because Clapp portentously recalls its mysteriousness repeatedly in succeeding chapters.

Clapp again borrows from Brontë's opening scene in another ambiguously supernatural incident later in her story:

The candle flame reflected in the mirror that hung over the dresser, a small flickering light that showed me my own face, and—suddenly I gasped and pressed my hand hard upon my mouth to stifle a scream. Behind me, looking over my shoulder, dim in the shadowy room, was another face—a face so contorted with hatred that I could feel the prickling of my hair against my scalp. Dark eyes glared into mine in the glass, lips were drawn back over teeth in a snarling grimace, black hair caught loosely from the face on either side, falling in long curls—Emily! (90)

The similarities between these two scenes are too numerous to be dismissed. Both Lockwood and Louisa are retiring for the night in their darkened and empty rooms; one looks into the mirror, the other out the window, and suddenly Cathy and Emily, both dead for decades, appear. Thus borrowing and adapting from Brontë, Clapp is able to first engage her reader's attention and then pique it later in the plot. Scenes like these are what lend books a rich feeling of atmosphere; Clapp is able to glean that same atmospheric feel that Brontë had instilled in *Wuthering Heights* for use in her story. While scary story devices can be altered, adapted, and arranged in varying degrees of originality, the character similarities between these two books align the stories even more closely.

Wuthering Heights gave the literary world two of the most compelling characters ever written in Heathcliff and Catherine. Catherine is described throughout *Wuthering Heights* many different times and in many different ways, all of which are exceedingly strong, dark, and passionate: "It was nothing less than murder in her eyes for any one to presume to stand up and contradict her. From Mr. Earnshaw and his companions she kept aloof; and ... [because of] serious threats of a fit that often attended her rages, her brother allowed her whatever she pleased to demand, and generally avoided aggravating her fiery temper" (75).

The elder Catherine Earnshaw was instantly one of my favorite heroines, and I think it was because of my childhood reading of *Jane-Emily* that I was able to accept her so familiarly. Though Emily isn't granted the amount of depth that Cathy is, she is essentially a carbon copy of Brontë's famous heroine. Emily, who was only eleven years old when she died, is described as "a hellion" and "ruthless" (38, 89). Adam tells Louisa that when he once didn't do what Emily wanted, "she picked up a pair of scissors from her bedtable and aimed for my face..." (137). But Emily is similar to Cathy in more ways than just her temper; "Emily was so charming—so irresistible—when things went as she wished" (67). And both tempestuous girls were raised with a certain amount of paternal indulgence, as Mrs. Canfield tells Louisa, "[Emily's father] adored her... It was only Emily, you see. From the moment she was born she was the center of my husband's life. There was nothing he would not do for her" (67-68). The appeal of this dark heroine is reflective of the appeal of power, will, and decision, especially, as in Brontë's lifetime, women were generally encouraged to be either subservient or idle. More than just the ideal of feminine prowess, however, the dark lady, which has figured very strongly in all forms of literary tradition, is enigmatic and therefore, capable, and culpable, of all things. This character is perhaps Clapp's largest debt to Emily Brontë, but it is just one her many borrowings from the classic gothic romance novel.

Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* comes rather late in the gothic tradition, but from the opening sentence, "Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again," to the final scene in which Mrs. Danvers, the macabre housekeeper, sets fire to the manor, burning it to the ground, *Rebecca* is all gothic. It was also a prolific source for Clapp's *Jane-Emily*. Like *Wuthering Heights*, *Manderley* maintains a gravitational pull on

the plot of *Rebecca*. Indeed, the foreboding house full of secrets is important in many gothic novels, and almost universally the house is large, dark, and both stifling and drafty at once. Mrs. Canfield's house is described early on in the story: "It stood tall and dark gray, with gables and half-hidden dormers, its several brick chimneys soot-stained almost to black. In most of the rear windows the shades were drawn halfway down, rather like heavy-lidded eyes ... but the attic probably hasn't seen a ray of sunshine in years (15)."

This personification of the house is also commonly found in the genre; *Jane Eyre*, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, and *The Turn of the Screw* all describe their central houses in personified terms. *Wuthering Heights*, of course, is aptly described in its name alone, and *Manderley* is described throughout *Rebecca* always as beautiful, forbidding, and full of secrets. I think the idea of the house is so important in gothic novels because it can be a physical manifestation of the more ethereal atmosphere of a story. Perhaps the best example of this idea is in *Wuthering Heights*; Emily Brontë writes of the house: '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. (2)

Jane-Emily follows suit when Louisa talks about the "heavy, driving summer rain, chilling the air and enclosing fear and panic within four walls" (160). These passages tie the atmosphere to the physical house itself, crediting one's qualities to the other, and as the house is central to the plots of these stories, the house becomes the physical atmosphere.

More specifically similar to du Maurier's *Manderley*, however, Mrs. Canfield's house is haunted by the memories of a very powerful dead character. "Emily doesn't go skittering around the garden like a white cloud, and she doesn't make funny noises in the night, or anything scary like that. She's just *here*," Jane tells Louisa early in their visit to Mrs. Canfield's house (29). As both du Maurier's and Clapp's works have eponymous dead characters, both plots (and both heroines) are controlled simply by this weird character residue that lingers about the house. Moreover, both Jane and the nameless heroine of *Rebecca* arrive at these ominous houses essentially as replacements of the recently dead; "'This was made for Emily,' Jane said. 'This was her room'" (12). In *Rebecca*, almost everything Maxim de Winter's second wife has was once Rebecca's, which is accented by the fact that while

"Rebecca" is the title of the book, the heroine goes nameless. And just as in *Rebecca*, the characters in *Jane-Emily*, as well as the reader, are not allowed to forget about the dead; neither Emily nor Rebecca rest peacefully. The second Mrs. de Winter, the narrator of the book, is constantly comparing herself to the beautiful and captivating Rebecca, the first Mrs. de Winter, and thus Rebecca can never be far from the reader's mind either. Likewise, Clapp suffuses her story with the presence of Emily; "Emily" comes up over 300 times in the 160 pages, which is quite a lot for a character that never speaks and the reader never meets. This helps create a more psychologically haunting feel and align the reader's experience with the character's. Instead of telling the reader that Jane couldn't stop thinking about Emily, the reader is also thinking constantly about Emily simply because of reading her name on every page.

Patricia Clapp didn't simply cut and paste clichés, but rather she blended the best ideas of others and her own innovation to create something new in a genre in which originality is scarce. Just as Clapp wasn't simply writing a scary story for kids, she also wasn't simply writing a gothic novel. To accommodate an audience short on attention and language, she had to simplify without sacrificing anything of entertainment value. Her plot is simpler and progresses through successive incidents of increasing mystery and terror. After being placed in Emily's old room, Jane sees a weird reflecting light, then Jane writes Emily's poem even though she couldn't possibly have seen it before, the doll mysteriously breaks, the dress is mysteriously ruined, and so on until the story climaxes that stormy night Jane has to fight for her life. Exposition isn't as delayed as it is in the more adult novels. Clapp seems to favor comprehension rather than suspense, but I remember reading it for the first time and thinking it was plenty suspenseful. Everything's explained thoroughly and set up far in advance. For example, that Emily might not be resting so peacefully, that she might be connected to Jane some way is first introduced in Louisa's refutation of the idea. Before it ever occurred to me to think otherwise, she says to Jane, "You are you and Emily was Emily and you are two different people and don't ever forget it!" (57). In this way, Clapp insures that even a young reader is aware of a possible connection between Jane and Emily. And in a genre in which multiple narrators were apparently thought to be far better than one, as in *Wuthering Heights*, *Frankenstein*, *The Turn of the Screw*, and *Dracula*, Clapp gives the reader a single, trustworthy narra-

tor. Some of these techniques felt a bit inelegant next to the construction and development of *Wuthering Heights*, but as a child it was much better that the language didn't interfere with the story.

Reading *Jane-Emily* as a child had a far-reaching effect on me. Because of the evocative story, it stayed with me; rather than forgetting it, I absorbed it. I read more because of the mystery and suspense and understood more because of the foundational knowledge of gothic literature that I gained. I like to think that it further directed my interest in reading, leading me to read and enjoy other scary mysteries and gothic literature in years to come, from Agatha Christie novels to *Jane Eyre*. But I know that it at least lent me an easy familiarity with the genre, so I was predisposed to like *Wuthering Heights* and *Rebecca* and other such novels. What could have been tedious was instead delightfully exciting, and I think *Jane-Emily* is the reason why. When I fell in love with *Jane-Emily*, I fell in love with the whole genre.

Patricia Clapp took a risk with *Jane-Emily*; she credited her audience with more interest and comprehension than other children's authors have. While R. L. Stine was turning out book after book, filled with cheap thrills and recycled plot lines that all blur together, Clapp created a distinctive story and a different type of children's book altogether. Her *Jane-Emily* is a tribute to the great ladies of the gothic romance tradition. The mysterious and malevolent presence of the late Rebecca and the wonderfully willful and spiteful Cathy Earnshaw now enjoy an audience that they wouldn't have without *Jane-Emily*. Conversely, the use of the gothic tradition in this children's book lends it a major source of influence and staying power that it would not have otherwise had.

Works Cited

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