

**Egg Yolks and Other Goo:
Patriarchal Control and the Female Body in
Emerald Fennell's 2026 film**

WITHERING HEIGHTS



THESIS

Emerald Fennell's *Wuthering Heights* reimagines Brontë's novel as a feminist body horror text in which fluids, decay, and tactile imagery expose the violence of patriarchal control and social isolation.



BODY HORROR

Body horror is a subgenre of horror focusing on the grotesque, visceral violation, decay, or unnatural transformation of the human body.

To truly understand this film, you have to put it in the context of body horror as a narrative device.

What makes body horror so effective is the visceral reaction it provokes—an instinctive, bodily response that bypasses intellect and goes straight to sensation.

It doesn't simply ask the audience to understand suffering; it forces them to feel it in their own skin.



The movie begins with the distinctive sounds of a male voice grunting and moaning in what sounds like sexual gratification. But, as the first of many bait-and-switch moments in the film, we soon discover that the sounds are actually coming from a man being hanged in a public square.

Around him is merriment and revelry as the crowd watches. The man suffers from a postmortem priapism, or terminal erection, which young Cathy takes great interest in. She seems traumatized and curious, unable to look away.

This brings us to the evolution of body horror in the film to something sexual. This is not unheard of, and is, in fact, often an intrinsic element of the body horror genre. From an early age, Cathy sees death and sex as codependent. This becomes crucial when we get to the ending of the film.



BLOOD AND OTHER FLUIDS



Wetness and goo feature heavily in the film... from snail slime to fish jello to egg yolks.

None of these are subtle references to bodily fluids, specifically sexual fluids. But then they are turned and corrupted.

By starting off with a close up of something slimy and flesh colored, making the audience think about slick sexual body parts, and then panning out to reveal it's a snail sliding down the glass, you create that dissonance in the viewer's brain that doesn't know if it should be aroused or disgusted.



Blood



- Blood is a common symbol for life and passion. Also, violence.
- We see the blood red walls of the house, the blood red colors Cathy wears. All of this signifies her own drive and passion.
- Blood is shown on young Heathcliff's back after he protects Cathy.
- Cathy walks through pig's blood, which gets on her skirt.
- Cathy's death is marked by her bleeding out. The blood is seen from an overhead perspective. It is dark, nearly black, and continues to pour from her body, pooling on the ground in such an amount that it leaves no question that she is dead.
- In the end, all of that life and passion drains out of her in a visceral way.

Sweat



- Like blood, sweat signifies life, but it also shows frustration and strain.
- The corset scene, in particular, shows the constraints and confinements Cathy experiences.
- Tightening the corset in other stories is seen as humorous. In this version, we see the brutality of it, the literal sweat on her skin as the pain and pressure build.

Rain

Rain is the only honest intimacy in the film.



- Sets the mood. This is not a happy story. This is not a sunshine story.
- Charts the progression of Cathy and Heathcliff's lives from their time as children to friends to lovers, to Heathcliff riding through the misty moors to get to Cathy.
- Washes away all other fluid or goo. It cleanses. These brief interactions in the rain are the most real, the most raw, and the most transformative for Heathcliff and Cathy.

Tears

- Tears as bodily rebellion.
- Repeated imagery of Cathy crying.
- Expression in a world that silences her.
- Release of suppressed sorrow and longing.



Arousal

- Most obvious sexually explicit fluid
- Cathy doesn't get to keep or take ownership of her own pleasure.
- Heathcliff interrupts her masturbation. She doesn't even get to finish.
- He literally consumes the evidence of her sexual pleasure. In the end, she gets to keep nothing for herself.
- This continues the thread of Cathy's lack of control over her life.



The Semiotics of Goo

- Snail slime
- Fish jelly
- Egg yolks



Arousal + disgust = destabilization

SOCIAL ISOLATION AND TOUCH STARVATION

- Physical confinement mirrors emotional confinement.
- Cathy is surrounded by people, yet deprived of intimacy.
- The film visualizes isolation as both spatial and bodily.



Architecture as Confinement

- Low ceilings at Wuthering Heights → physical oppression low ceilings
- Thrushcross Grange → controlled, sterile elegance
- Both estates function as prisons in different forms



Thrushcross Grange

A Gilded Cage:

- Social isolation disguised as refinement
- Emotional and physical touch starvation
- Miniature dollhouse imagery → infantilization and control
- Goldfish in glass vases → beauty contained



There's plenty of food,
but is it appetizing?

The Hands Reaching



- Fireplace built of stacked hands
- Wall sconces shaped like reaching hands

Grotesque and desperate —
a visual metaphor for longing and denied touch.

Blood and Bone



- Thrushcross Grange is a female body
- white bone
- red blood
- skin walls
- It represents Cathy's female body and how she's trapped in it



Cathy Trapped in Her Own Skin



- Bedroom walls printed with her skin
- Veins visible in carpet
- Latex “flesh” walls sweat
- Leeches suck both walls and Cathy → Her body becomes the site of confinement.

PATRIARCHAL CONTROL OF FEMALE BODILY AUTONOMY

- Women's bodies are treated as sites of ownership, not autonomy.
- Silence, sexual regulation, and confinement reinforce male authority.
- Control extends beyond circumstance and shapes identity itself.



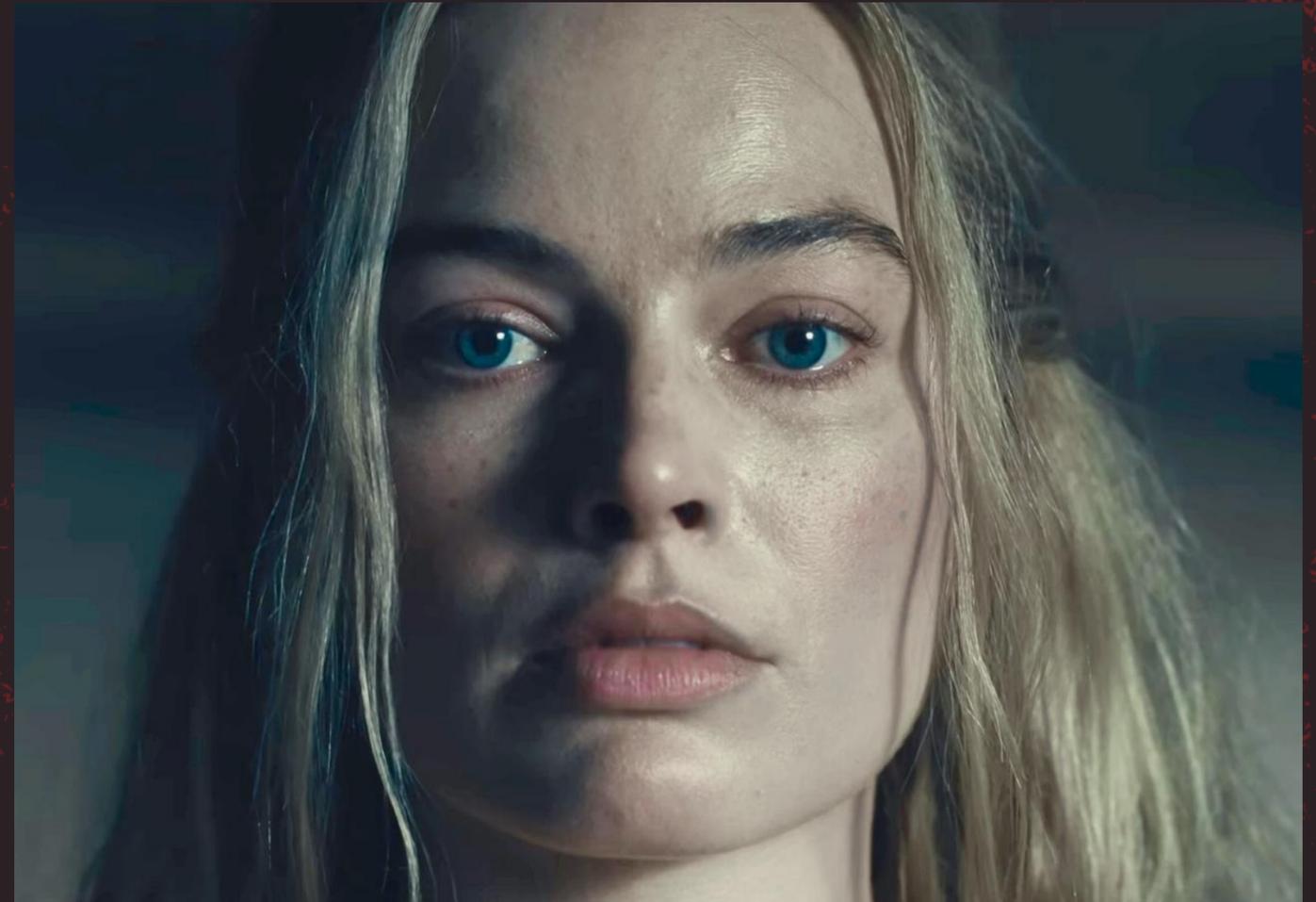
The Barn Scene: “Protection” as Control

- Heathcliff silences and blinds Cathy under the guise of protection.
- Control is framed as care.
- Later, Cathy recreates the gesture during sex with Linton- on the surface to pretend it's Heathcliff, but...
- Patriarchal control becomes internalized.
- She cannot access intimacy without reenacting silencing.



Women's Agency Is Constrained to Self-Destruction

Cathy's only option to rebel in the end is to isolate herself further, to refuse food, to refuse to be happy. She cannot control anything else in her life, who she's married to, where she lives, who she can see, but she can control if she eats and her mood.





All three women in
the movie eventually
turn on each other.

But why?

Nelly

- As the “bastard” child of someone important, she is relegated to the sidelines of society as a “companion.”
- She doesn’t get to choose her “friends”
- She cannot move above her station.
- She is dependent on the whims of the aristocracy, a part of it, but removed.



Cathy

- Confined to her role
- Without her father's support, is forced to marry Linton or face poverty.
- Her body is her own currency



Isabella



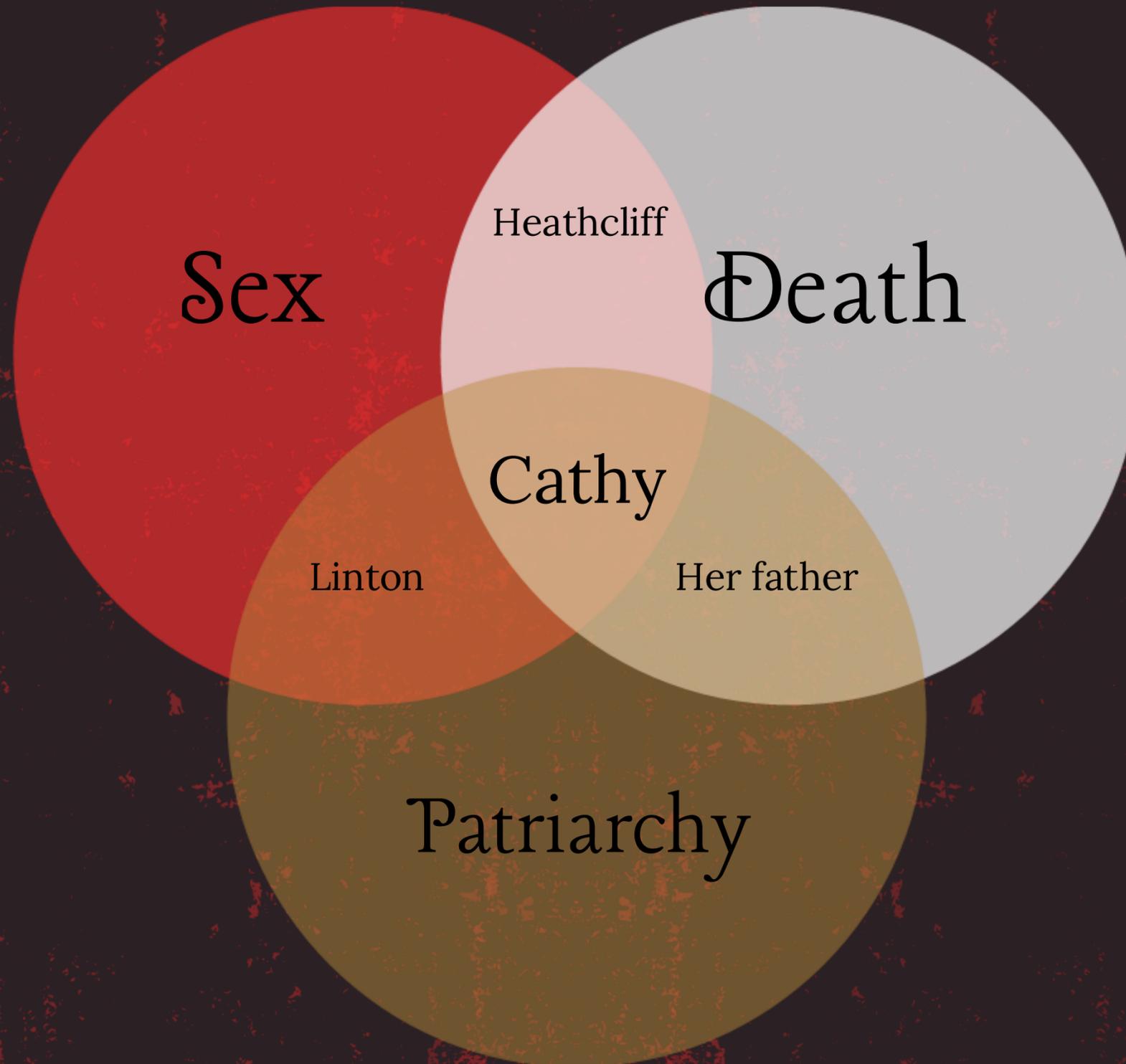
- She is a sheltered ward of Linton's
- Finds her only escape through defying her guardian and marrying Heathcliff.
- Given the illusion of choice



They hurt each other because they cannot hurt their true oppressors. One could argue that they take out their frustrations on the only other people who are at their level, who ultimately cannot hurt them back.

Example: Nelly betrays Cathy, Cathy fires Nelly, but ultimately, Linton is the one who decides and he keeps Nelly. Cathy has no power, but neither does Nelly.

CATHY AT THE INTERSECTION OF SEX, DEATH, AND PATRIARCHY



Cathy is caught between these three forces.

For Cathy, Sex is regulated, interrupted, or controlled by men.

Death and Sex have become co-dependent, leading to the natural conclusion that once sex with Heathcliff ends, the next logical step is death.

The Patriarchal structure of her society means that Cathy will never have agency of her own.

Cathy does not die because she is heartbroken. She dies because she is suffocated at the intersection of these overpowering forces.

CONCLUSION

Wuthering Heights is not a romance.

It never has been.

It is a critique of the social pressures, the patriarchal control, and physical isolation that are slowly killing the female protagonist.



Questions?