ABSTRACT

ALEXANDRA CAIN OLNEY. Portents of Darwinism: Evolution and Regression in Wuthering Heights. (Under the direction of Professor Leila May.)

The publication in 1859 of Charles Darwin's On the Origin of Species presented many Victorian thinkers with a new paradigm from which to approach not only the biological sciences but also some of the social problems confronting an increasingly industrial Britain. While religious objections to Darwin's theory of natural selection and evolution encapsulated some of its most obvious difficulties for many Victorians, troublesome implications regarding the fate of material and intellectual progress were also raised by Darwin's theory. However, discussions of adaptation and transformation did not begin with the publication of Darwin's theory; questions about human development were part of a long intellectual conversation beginning no later, certainly, than the eighteenth century. This essay examines Emily Brontë's novel Wuthering Heights, with particular focus on its portrayal of regression as exemplified in the effects of civilization on the inhabitants of a rural moor. Tracing attempts by Brontë's characters' to become “civilized”—that is, polite, prosperous, and patriarchal—I will show that the novel anticipates many of the tensions arising from Darwin's theory later in the nineteenth century.