



HARDENED TO THE CORE: ANALYZING HEATHCLIFF'S CHARACTER IN BRONTË'S *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*

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Abstract

This research paper seeks to carry out a close textual analysis of Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights, focusing on Heathcliff's character as a product of social conditioning rather than inborn vortex of primordial passions that guide his actions. The paper maintains that his behavior is conditioned by his formative early experiences that marginalized him and experienced othering within the Earnshaw family, and Hindley's incessant cruelty towards him. These early formative experiences made him susceptible to the development of his intense, often baser displays of emotions, which can be accounted for as lashing out because of exclusion and emotional deprivation. By viewing Heathcliff's actions within the context of his rearing within the Earnshaw family, this study furnishes a nuanced understanding that goes beyond the simplistic dichotomy of villain or hero, by regarding him as a figure conditioned by the forces of environment and social rejection beyond his control.

Keywords: Heathcliff, Wuthering Heights, conditioning, othering, Victorian fiction

Introduction

First published in 1847, Emile Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is arguably one of the greatest novels of English literature. Despite the cold reception at the time of its publication, *Wuthering Heights* has since been showered with due critical acclaim and is widely regarded as a towering work of genius and phenomenally accomplished piece of literature. It has bewildered critics how a young girl in her twenties could pen such a classic of this emotional depth and complexity (Sutherland, 2008). *Wuthering Heights* is a passionate tale of love and revenge and meanders through themes of excessive passion, wild dark human nature as well as a vivid portrayal of contrasts of nature and culture, class and vindictive revenge. The central character the novel, Mr. Heathcliff, has polarized critics and defies the confines of a fixed unilateral defining classification. Read as a probable ethnic and class outsider, Heathcliff's ferocity is a reaction to systemic dispossession rather than innate malice (Eagleton, 1995). Heathcliff epitomizes the dark and evil side of human nature and exhibits boundless cruelty to those who have hurt him. Cast as a heretical outsider resisting hypocritical norms, Heathcliff's destructiveness emerges from—and exposes—the culture that injures him (Davies, 1994).

He suffers a string of injustices from the time he is brought into the Earnshaw family after having been found on streets of Liverpool by Mr. Earnshaw. He is met with strong aversion from the family. Mr. Earnshaw's son, Hindley subjects him to scorn and leaves no opportunity to

demean and humiliate him. Later in the novel, when they are caught near Thrushcross Grange, the Lintons discriminate against him and believe hanging him would be “kindness” to the country and call him a ‘frightful thing’ (Brontë, 2003, p. 40) while treating Catherine like a young lady. Their son Edgar Linton looks down upon him and showers him with scorn and contempt at every opportunity. As a racialized “other” within the Victorian home, Heathcliff’s transgressions reflect domestic imperial hierarchies that deform him (Meyer, 1996).

In the view of the above, the paper at hand argues that Heathcliff’s vengeance filled cruelty and the dark side of his nature as an embodiment of evil stem from a series of ill treatment and abuse early on in his life. He learns to bottle up his feelings by keeping his passions to himself. A number of factors force him to develop a siege mentality. Heathcliff fights back when he encounters obstacles that keep him apart from Catherine Earnshaw, who is kind to him and has treated him with affection from the beginning.

Heathcliff’s ordeal begins from the moment he is introduced to the Earnshaws. There was no love lost between Hindley and Heathcliff from the very onset. The former believed Heathcliff to be an intruder and a usurper who got all the affection from his father which rightfully belonged to him. He treats Heathcliff with utmost cruelty, ordering him around and calling him a ‘vagabond’ and does not want him to sit or eat with the rest of the family and threatens to turn Heathcliff out of the house if his orders are broken. Following the death of Mr. Earnshaw, Heathcliff was deprived of a benefactor and Hindley’s ill treatment of Heathcliff was much intensified. He quarters him with servants, stopping his tuition and forbids his sister Catherine Earnshaw from spending time with Heathcliff at all. Hindley’s cruelty towards Heathcliff continues well into adulthood. Edgar Linton does not consider Heathcliff a social equal and Edgar does not want Catherine Earnshaw to continue her friendship with Heathcliff.

Theoretical Framework

This paper grounds its analysis through the analytical lens of close reading of the text to reveal latent shades of meaning in Brontë’s work. This is achieved through the character analysis of the protagonist of the novel. Heathcliff’s character, with its intensity of passion and capacity for love, evades a superficial classification and any attempt to do would border on oversimplification. The incongruity of his inner storm vis a vis his outward calm and reserved persona make critics question his very humanity (Bloom, 2008). After Isabella Lintons elopement and marriage with him, she writes to Mrs. Dean, the family servant, wondering “Is Mr. Heathcliff a man? If so, is he mad? And if not, is he a devil?” (Brontë, 2003, p. 106). Furthermore, as she escapes from Wuthering Heights, her impressions of Heathcliff are very telling. She sees in him an “incarnate goblin” and a “monster” and would rather be rid of his very existence praying that “he could be blotted out of creation” (Brontë, 2003, p. 133).

Her protestations even make Mrs. Dean to reproach her for her assertions and proclaims “Hush, hush! He’s a human being”, telling Isabella to “be more charitable.” Heathcliff’s obtains a modicum of humanity when Mrs. Dean, despite her own doubts cannot help but maintain that he is human after all after seeing his condition after Catherine’s death. she exclaims, "Poor wretch!" ... "you have a heart and nerves the same as your brother men! Why should you be so anxious to conceal them"? (Brontë, 2003, p. 134). There are times, however, when even Nelly has second thoughts about Heathcliff being a human at all. She is led to rid him of his humanity and engages

thoughts that Heathcliff may be “a ghoul, or a vampire” before assuring herself that she need not be afraid of him since she tended him in his infancy (Brontë, 2003, p. 252).

There is, however, reason in his madness. Despite Heathcliff’s multiple monster like avatars, there is always a motive or motivation behind his actions. Brontë keeps telling us that he has been victimized and that his savagery stems from his misery and abuse. Heathcliff’s ‘monstrosity’ of nature is emanates from the travails in his course of life and the kind of treatment that he received at their hands. Given that abuse and cruelty can have a transformative effect, Brontë’s provides a contrastive foil through the character of Isabela. She demonstrates a savage and vindictive side to her following her ill treatment at the hands of Heathcliff. Isabella, despite her comfortable life and high birth before the ill-fated marriage with Heathcliff, wants revenge for her bad treatment exclaiming that she wants to “take an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth; for every wrench of agony [to] return a wrench, [to] reduce him to my level” (Brontë, 2003, p. 140). The housemaid Zillah makes a just observation with regards to young Cathy that “the more hurt she gets, the more venomous she grows” (Brontë, 2003, p. 227), essentially mirroring the life trajectory of Heathcliff.

Discussion

Keeping in view the deprivation that Heathcliff had to endure early on in life, his passionate love and longing for Catherine Earnshaw drive him to such measures of animosity and revenge towards both the Earnshaws and the Lintons that seem to shed any veneer of humanity from him.

The depth of Heathcliff persona has evaded critics perspicacity to such an extent that they regard Heathcliff to be a very unrealistic character beyond the normal domain of comprehension. However, it is not uncommon for ardent human passion to elude a just analysis while avoiding the notches of our conceptual grasp. Heathcliff’s deprived childhood coupled with his love for Catherine Earnshaw and inordinate abuse he received after his arrival in Wuthering Heights had an inuring effect on him, shutting out his emotional side.

Author Abraham Maslow states that all humans require a certain basic needs and if unmet they manifest themselves in unhealthy ways. These basic needs range from survival needs, needs for safety, for love and belonging, for esteem, and for self-actualization. Frustration of the basic needs arrests development and leads individuals to develop defensive strategies for making up their deficiencies (Brontë, 2003). A closer look at Heathcliff points to us that his early life was severely deprived as Mr. Earnshaw happened to come across him when Heathcliff was only 06 years of age and “starving and houseless, and as good as dumb in the streets of Liverpool” (Brontë, 2003, p. 29).

Heathcliff’s life before Mr. Earnshaw finds him is not known. It wouldn’t be amiss to conclude that his early years were laced with severe hardship, devoid of basic needs of comfort. He does not have a family that would provide a sense of safety, love and self-respect. Even after Mr. Earnshaw brings him into his family. He has to suffer at the hands of Earnshaw’s son Hindley who treats him with contempt, never missing a moment to belittle to and subjecting him to ridicule.

His very first entry is met with utter disgust and the refer to him as ‘it’ i.e. “when it was set on its feet, it only stared round and repeated over and over again some gibberish that nobody could understand” (Brontë, 2003. p. 29). Mrs. Earnshaw is filled with anger and ready to fling it



out of the doors as she was exasperated how Mr. Earnshaw could bring in a gypsy when when they had their own children to feed and fend for.

Mr. Earnshaw is the only one who gives him genuine affection and following his death, all hell breaks loose on Heathcliff. Mr. Hindley who never hid his contempt for Heathcliff, makes life living hell for him with his cruel and inhuman treatment of Heathcliff. Catherine, overcoming her initial dislike, grows to like him and spends most of her time with him. She accepts him for who he is without judgments. In Catherine, Heathcliff has finally a found a friend and soulmate albeit with its fair share of opposition. Mr. Edgar never misses a beat to remind Heathcliff of his social inferiority and inequality. The cumulative effect of having of bitter childhood coupled with the kind of treatment he receives from Hindley, and the younger Linton forces him to turn against them. The anger is gradually reared and finally manifests itself as his vindictive dark side. Reception history shows demonizing readings ignore class/gender dynamics; seen socially, Heathcliff appears as culture's product rather than pure fiend (Stoneman, 2013).

Heathcliff not only bottles up his deep emotions but takes uncanny pleasure and contentment in making his victims suffer. The novel's violence grows out of concrete social antagonisms; Heathcliff's vengefulness is historically embedded in class oppression (Kettle, 1951).

The history of harsh treatment and veritable casting out as a social pariah make him inured to human pariah as he is bent upon destroying those who fail to recognize his humanity and make him synonymous with demonic attributes of being a demon, a ghoul and not a human at all as referred above. Said in this regard remarks that The struggle over property and space in the novel refracts wider imperial logics; Heathcliff's drive to repossess is structurally induced, not merely villainous (Said, 1993).

Early on in life after his arrival at the Heights, Heathcliff bears it all with stoic solidity and detachment. He does not let any emotion betray him, leading Mrs. Dean remark that "He seemed a sullen, patient child," says Nelly, "hardened, perhaps, to ill-treatment: he would stand Hindley's blows without winking or shedding a tear, and my pinches moved him only to draw in a breath, and open his eyes as if he had hurt himself by accident, and nobody was to blame" (Brontë, 2003, p. 30). Heathcliff struggles to hold onto a sense of control in the face of the cruel treatment that he receives by masking his reactions. Even when he falls ill, Heathcliff demonstrates the same attitude of exterior invulnerability making Ellen to believe that he was "as uncomplaining as a lamb, though hardness, not gentleness, made him give little trouble" .

He is so resigned to a situation of complete neglect and lack of solicitude that he does not want to expose himself to further hurt and pain by exposing his true feelings. The only means left for Heathcliff to avoid suffering is through obviating the need for any kind of dependency. The harsh lessons of life have taught him to be self-reliant without much external help. His total resignation to his situation and state of life makes him inured to that kind of hurt. It is his way of taking measures for his survival. Given the fact the circumstances of his life have afforded him no relief, he is more prone to be morose, bottling his true emotions and feelings instead of coming clean with them. Nelly observes him to be excessively aloof displaying "almost idiotic excess of unsociable moroseness" (Brontë , 2003, p. 53). Heathcliff is, however, never at peace with himself. Even by the time of his death, his inner conflict is juxtaposed with the raging weather outside. He is torn asunder with uncontrollable passions and only pacified with his death at the end. Brontë's



religious milieu complicates moral judgment; Heathcliff's spiritual desolation and the community's punitive ethos contextualize his sins (Thormählen, 2009).

Conclusion

The ending of the novel with Heathcliff lying outstretched before an open window is very suggestive i.e. that he is finally with the person that he loved with all the strength of his emotions i.e. Catherine Earnshaw. By the end, Heathcliff does not intervene in the love twist of Hareton and young Catherine Linton. The marriage of young Cathy with Hareton mirrors the falling in love of Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff himself and here Hareton's state of wildness is eerily reflected in Heathcliff's coarseness towards him. As noted by Cecil, the tragedy arises from wounded passion and early maltreatment, which elicit measured sympathy for Heathcliff's excesses (Cecil, 1934).

What they could not do, may at last materialize in the love of Hareton and Catherine Linton. The first Catherine could not have Heathcliff in this life, but her daughter can hope to build a satisfying life with Hareton. Although Heathcliff and Catherine's passion cannot survive in this life, Brontë leaves the audiences with the implication that the lovers are finally united beyond the grave. Sangar opines that The novel's legal/chronological architecture reveals entrenched injustices (inheritance, guardianship) that provoke Heathcliff's retaliation (1926).

To sum up, there is method in Heathcliff's madness. Although he is demonized for his dark and demonic behavior and his capacity of vindictiveness that borders on insanity and unnatural, a closer look at his troubled childhood and the cruel treatment he received subsequent upon his introduction to 'civilization' by Mr. Earnshaw reveals another side of his personality. Seen in this context, within the Gothic mode, Heathcliff's transgression answers repression and boundary-policing, complicating simple moral blame (Botting, 1996).

He had learned to master the art of keeping his emotions and feelings to himself to avoid cruelty. He is, by the end, redeemed by his capacity to love Catherine and in that he betrays his human side.

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