



## Antithetical emotions: Exploring internal dissonance in *Wuthering Heights*

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### Abstract

This paper examines the intricate emotional dynamics portrayed in Emily Bronte's novel *'Wuthering Heights.'* While commonly perceived as a love story between Catherine and Heathcliff, the novel diverges from traditional notions of love, depicting it as a destructive force driven by obsession and revenge rather than empathy and endearment. Through qualitative textual analysis, this research paper challenges prevailing interpretations and delves into the underlying emotions that drive the characters' actions. Catherine's decisions, driven by self-interest rather than genuine affection, fuel Heathcliff's destructive tendencies, highlighting the absence of true love's benevolent qualities. The narrative's non-linear structure enhances the exploration of intertwined themes, contributing to its gripping portrayal of drama, twists, and heartbreak. By interrogating these emotional complexities, this paper seeks to deepen our understanding of human nature as depicted in Bronte's timeless work.

**Keywords:** Emily Bronte, *Wuthering heights*, love, obsession, revenge, destruction

### Introduction

Emily Bronte was born in Thornton, West Riding of Yorkshire. She grew up in an environment where education of women was not encouraged although her father ensured that she along with her other two sisters receives education at home. It marks the time when women writers found it tremendously challenging to publish their work therefore, they were forced to adopt pseudonym. Emily Bronte's surroundings and gender dynamics of the era shaped her personality which earnestly reflect in her work. She produced a single yet uncompromising work that ended up occupying a prominent place in literary canon. *Wuthering Heights* was a true testament of class segregation and apparent discrimination that existed in Victorian society. According to Terry Eagleton as asserted in *Myths of Power*, Emily Brontë has the imagination capable of confronting [a] tragic duality which has the power to produce the aesthetically superior work—which can synchronise the most shattering passion with the most rigorous realist control (100-101).

*Wuthering Heights* is a tale of two families residing in West Yorkshire moors, *Wuthering Heights* where Earnshaws reside and *Thrushcross Grange* is home to Lintons. In a major turn of events, a boy named Heathcliff enters into their lives when Mr. Earnshaw introduces him to his family. Although Heathcliff gets to enjoy the luxuries which come as a part and parcel of becoming a member of a wealthy family, his fortune turns out to be short lived. Soon after Mr. Earnshaw's death when the responsibilities are bestowed upon his son Hindley, who despises Heathcliff, he loses his position as a family member and made to live like a servant. Heathcliff's education and standard of living suffer most. In the most difficult times Heathcliff's friendship with Catherine also witnesses a spike like never before. Catherine, as well after her father's death becomes a victim of Hindley's stringent rules and regulations. She finds solace in Heathcliff.

The bond between Catherine and Heathcliff is considered to be a bond of love. *Wuthering Heights* is often termed as love story of a lady from aristocratic family and an orphan

black man Heathcliff. The novel was published in the year 1847, and had created ripples in Victorian society as they presumed it to be against their value system on the grounds that it was perceived as a love story of two distinct worlds, invigorating non-conformity and rebellion. Glimpse of the discourse is found in the following quote. 'George Henry Lewes presciently stated in a review in the *Leader* in December 1850: [Cathy loves Heathcliff] with a passionate abandonment which sets culture, education, the world, at defiance (quoted in Allott, 2003)

The deeper investigation of the novel reveal's antithesis of the popular opinion. Several instances occurring at different levels guide us towards a perspective different from the widespread one as it has internal dissonance making it a tale of obsession combined with societal obligations and revenge. The protagonists Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff are forced to face the repercussions of their choices, which are tragic and agonizing.

Bronte's aim, according to Professor Elliot Gose is to make her readers and her characters acknowledge within themselves both dark and light, low and high, body and soul.

Wade Thompson calls the world of *Wuthering Heights* ... a world of sadism, violence and wanton cruelty.

Heathcliff and Catherine's pursuits of pleasure and material wellbeing demand a high price in the form of sickness and death. Their self-betrayal paves path for downward spiral of destructive actions. Catherine's illness yields her nothing but death while Heathcliff endures abandonment wilfully manifested in aggression towards others eventually re-directing it on himself. (Karjohn, 2012)<sup>[8]</sup>.

Nevertheless, right from her childhood Catherine was assumed to be having deep bond with Heathcliff, specifically after the death of Mr. Earnshaw. Catherine and Heathcliff's friendship gets strengthened; however, a small incident brings a paradigm shift and upheaval in their lives. When Heathcliff and Catherine sneak into Linton house and Catherine gets bitten by their dog, they offer to provide care to her. She ends up spending five weeks in Linton house.

When Catherine comes back from Linton house, she is transformed into altogether a new person. Her outlook completely changes and with that changes her attitude towards Heathcliff, making their relationship complex. Catherine was no more a wild hatless little savage jumping into the house she came into sight as a dignified person, with ... long cloth habit she [is] obliged to hold up... so that she might sail in (Brontë, 1847, Chapter 7, p.60)

The following words by Catherine, where she resents the demeanour of Heathcliff is a testament of her opportunistic tendencies. Societal expectations and aristocratic hierarchies begin to dominate her mature personality as a grown-up woman. She starts a journey of pretension to influence Isabella, Edgar Linton to achieve acceptance in their hearts, aiming to become an integral part of their family.

It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now (Brontë, 1847/1992, Chapter 9, p.92)

Catherine relentlessly starts chasing her ambition. Heathcliff's only friend and well-wisher, well aware of his vulnerable personality chooses to trade him for status, elevation of social class and a life of luxury. Upon receiving a proposal of marriage from Edgar Linton, Catherine happily obliges citing the reasons that:

And he'll be rich, and I shall like to be the greatest woman of the neighbourhood, and I shall be proud of having such a husband. (Brontë, 1847, Chapter 9, p.89)

She also blames her brother for treating Heathcliff in a manner so dishonoured, that his association with her could drown her image as well. Catherine quite apparently confesses her feelings to Nelly, she rejects the idea of becoming beggars by marrying Heathcliff as he is an orphan without any possession of wealth and it would degrade her to be called as his wife. Aristocratic families follow the traditional value system where they only have their sons as heirs and hence inherit the wealth leaving daughters penniless. Catherine's dissent as well as greed to withhold the stature provided by her father truly reflects in her own admission. She celebrates the affluent ranking of Lintons, this reflects in her own admission.

She cites the reasons for marrying Edgar as becoming a woman of status and gaining the acceptance of the world. Catherine was well acquainted of the patriarchy laced rules that daughters do not succeed anything from father's wealth yet she was attracted to elite society's way of living. The only hope for her comes in the form of Edgar Linton. Determined to accomplish all her aspirations, Catherine chooses a path that seemed easier yet ironically turned out most challenging.

Arnold Kettle sums up Catherine and Heathcliff's relationship in his essay *Emily Brontë: Wuthering Heights* as they in their revolt ...discover their deep and passionate need of each other. He, the outcast slummy, turns to the lively, spirited, fearless girl who alone offers him human understanding and comradeship. And she, born into the world of *Wuthering Heights*, senses that to achieve a full humanity, to be true to herself as a human being, she must associate herself totally with him in his rebellion against the tyranny of the Earnshaws and all that oppression involved.

Catherine's decision forces Heathcliff to move away from everyone. He was already a victim of the harshness of Hindley and endured every possible humiliation at his hands. The bitterness seeps into the deeper layers of his heart and he disappears for years. Heathcliff with a clear strategy of ruining and venging Hindley arrives to Moors

after 3 years of his disappearance. Hindley after losing his wife resorts to addiction and falls into the pit of alcoholism and gambling subsequently losing his senses. He proves himself to be an easy target for Heathcliff. The true feelings of Heathcliff explicitly mirror in his own words.

I'm trying to settle how I shall pay Hindley back. I don't care how long I wait, if I can, only do it at last. I hope he will not die before I do. (Brontë, 1847, Chapter 7, p. 69)

He also adopts an obsessive personality and causes huge currents in Catherine's life. His arrival and involvement with Catherine make Edgar react and their relation loses its charm and importance. Due to the tactics of Heathcliff, Catherine becomes sick and falls into depressed state.

Love is considered a pious emotion embedded with purity and is almost sacred, but Heathcliff's obsession makes everyone's life a nightmare. Undeniably, Catherine suffers the most, the very person Heathcliff claimed to love the most. Love is not about winning, as it is not a game but rather a sentiment to cherish and does not come with the burden of any conditions. Heathcliff achieves success in destroying Hindley and also Catherine. Isabella Hareton, Edgar's sister also becomes victim of the war that was never hers. She elopes from the house to marry Heathcliff only to regret it all through her life.

Catherine dies after giving birth to her daughter and Edgar leads a life of eternal gloom. Isabella as well meets same fate as Catherine as she also dies in extreme suffering and pain. Heathcliff, gets the blessing of fathering a child, but never fulfils his responsibility as a parent and continues to walk on the path of revenge and obsession.

Heathcliff forces his son to get romantically involved with young Cathy, Catherine's daughter aiming to annex the property of Hareton family and accomplish himself as an ultimate winner. He gets his son married to young Cathy but unfortunately, he dies of illness after some time. Cathy also faces the wrath endured by her mother, father and aunt and she is forced to live the life of a servant in the moors.

Heathcliff unable to imagine his life without Catherine prays her soul to remain on earth. He contents himself with the idea of being around her even though she is a ghost. Heathcliff's tale of obsession comes to an end with his death. He dies after refusing to eat food for days and is found lying near the window. He hugs the death in solitude.

A fateful dawn brings the news of the departing of Heathcliff. Nelly Dean, the second narrator of the novel elucidates the encounter by surveying the lifeless body of him. The doors of the windows were flapping "to and fro", symbolising emptiness of the house that was left. They were open all through the night. It was observed that the previous night was indeed stormy, as a result Heathcliff was drenched in water, and presumably had been there the entire night. Heathcliff's earthly or unearthly spirit had left the world.

The characters and their untimely painful end leave a lasting impact resonating with destructive force that obsession is. Love is considered as the force capable of melting stone hearted humans as well as taming wild animals. In the world of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, it becomes the source of a storm that wipes out everything it touches.

## Conclusion

*Wuthering Heights* paints a picture of what revenge and obsession in the guise of love appear like. Heathcliff and Catherine, although considered to be in love with each other

when given an opportunity chose an unexpected path other than that of endearment. Catherine complying with the perception of the society ventures in search of ascension with regard to her place in the society. Heathcliff on the other hand walks on the path that is condemned, that is of destroying everything that he contends to love specifically Catherine. He fails to acknowledge the love of Mr. Earnshaw and destroys his legacy, burning in the fire of vengeance. His insane behaviour crosses the boundaries and reaches Linton house only to deprive them of everything that they rightfully owned. Edgar, who was never involved in any decision making was also not spared. Heathcliff annihilates everything including his own son and Catherine's daughter's happiness. The account ends on a tragic end when all the prominent character die immersed in pain including Heathcliff who perpetuated all the suffering. The narrative deviates heavily in terms of its position as a love story as the close analysis of events and main characters contradict the assumption. It is indeed a tragic tale of rapaciousness, obsession, revenge and destruction.

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