

An analysis of the causes of Hithcliff's revenge in Wuthering Heights

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Abstract: Wuthering Heights, written by Emily Bronte, mainly focuses on the love story between Heathcliff and Catherine. This paper will chiefly analyze the causes of Heathcliff's revenge which not only destroys himself but also others. His low status in the family, Hindley's cruelty to him, the Lintons' lack of sympathy, and more importantly, Catherine's change of love to him, all these make him to take revenge on this ruthless world.

1. Introduction

Emily Jane Bronte was born on 30 July in 1818 and died in 1848. She is perhaps the most gifted writer of the three Bronte sisters - Charlotte, Emily and Anne. "Emily Bronte published only one novel, Wuthering Heights (1847), a story of doomed love and revenge. But that single work has its place among the masterpieces of English literature."^{[1]27}

Wuthering Heights was published in 1847, which was the only novel written by Emily Bronte. Upon the first appearance of the novel and for some years afterwards, it was dismissed as a "disagreeable story" by H.F.Chorley and received fierce attacks because of its coarseness, but it began to be valued more highly in the last years of the 19th century and recent criticism has placed it as among the great novels of the Victorian age.

Wuthering Heights deals chiefly with the story of Heathcliff, a gipsy waif of unknown parentage, picked up by Mr. Earnshaw, the host of Wuthering Heights, in the streets of Liverpool and brought home and brought up with his own children. "Heathcliff in the novel is at first the oppressed person and he decides to have his revenge and then he becomes himself the oppressor, but at the end of the book the oppressed-turned-oppressor weakens and breaks down."^{[2]263} This paper will chiefly focus on the analysis of the causes of his revenge which not only destroys himself but also others.

2. The causes of Heathcliff's revenge

From the beginning of the novel and most likely from the beginning of his life, Heathcliff has suffered pain and rejection. When he is brought to Wuthering Heights by Mr. Earnshaw, he is seen as a thing rather than a child. Mrs. Earnshaw is ready to throw it out of doors, while Nelly, a servant of the house and the narrator of the novel, puts it on the landing of the stairs hoping that it would be gone the next day. Without having done anything to deserve rejection, Heathcliff is made to feel like an outsider in Wuthering Heights. Following the death of Mr. Earnshaw, he suffers cruel mistreatment at the hands of Hindley (Mr. Earnshaw's son), Catherine's (Mr. Earnshaw's daughter) change of love and the lack of sympathy of Lintons (the owners of Thrushcross Grange).

Heathcliff's status in the family determines his attitude toward every member of family. Nelly records "From the very beginning he (Heathcliff) bred bad feelings in the house"[3]29. He is regarded as a usurper by Hindley who then degraded him as a servant, and an outsider by Nelly and others in the family. Although Catherine regarded him as her company, she thinks "it would degrade me to marry Heathcliff"[3]63. The Lintons show little kindness toward him and regards him as a servant all the time before his absence. Heathcliff receives constant reminder of his lower status. For instance, on his first visit to the Grange, Catherine is taken into the Linton household, whereas Heathcliff is rejected, made fun of, and alienated. Later, when Catherine returns to Wuthering Heights, her changed appearance further alienates Heathcliff, which is emphasized during the visits of the Linton children, when Heathcliff is not considered fit to join the party. It

makes Heathcliff realize that he is different from the other family members. His status in the house is no better than a servant. This humiliation is so great that he bears his hatred deep in his heart and expects to find change to revenge.

Another reason which forces Heathcliff to take revenge is Hindley's cruelty to him. When old Mr. Earnshaw brings Heathcliff home instead of the presents his children have expected, his children are jealous of this orphan. Hindley regards "his father as an oppressor rather than a friend, and Heathcliff as a usurper of his father's affections and his privileges"[3]29, so he thrashes the poor orphan repeatedly. After Mr. Earnshaw's death, Hindley becomes the young master of Wuthering Heights. He is further intensified to enslave Heathcliff, "drove him from their company to the servants, deprived him of the instructions of the curate, and insisted that he should labor out of doors instead; compelling him to do so as hard as any other lad on the farm"[3]35. After his wife's death, Hindley becomes aggravated for his tyrannical and evil conduct toward Heathcliff, as Nelly comments: "His treatment of the latter was enough to make a fiend of a saint"[3]51. Moreover, Hindley separates Heathcliff from Catherine, because he understands that the passion of Heathcliff with Catherine is the only comfort for Heathcliff, so this is the greatest punishment for Heathcliff.

The third reason for Heathcliff's revenge against the family is the Lintons' lack of sympathy. In chapter 6, we see Heathcliff and Catherine ramble to the Thrushcross Grange and peek the Lintons. When they are discovered, Edgar whispers to his mother who the girl is. "Miss Earnshaw? Nonsense!" cried the dame, "Miss Earnshaw scouring the country with a gipsy!"[3]38 Obviously, Mrs. Linton infers from Heathcliff's appearance that he is a gipsy who has no social status. Moreover, from Mrs. Linton's tone, we find that this lady absolutely could not believe that Miss Earnshaw could have befriended a gipsy of the lower class. Knowing that this boy is the "strange acquisition" that Mr. Earnshaw has made in his journey to Liverpool, she remarks, "A wicked boy, at all events," considering him "quite unfit a decent house!"[3]63 As a member of the upper class, Mrs. Linton discriminates the lower class. She is selfish and shows no sympathy even to a child. A further proof of this is her precondition for answering Hindley's invitation for Edgar and Isabella to Wuthering Heights: "Her darlings might be kept carefully apart from that 'naught swearing boy',"[3]41 indicating her deep concern that contacting with the person from the lower social stratum would harm her status and degenerate her children.

In chapter 10, after Heathcliff's return from Gimmerton, when Nelly tells Linton that Heathcliff has come, Linton shows great disdain to him. " 'What, the gipsy—the plough-boy?' he cried[3]74 " When Catherine is ready to invite Heathcliff to the parlor, " 'Here?' he said, 'into the parlor?' and he 'looked vexed, and suggested the kitchen as a more suitable place for him'.[3]75 "Although Edgar finally gives way, but he is still unsympathetic, thus he says "Catherine, try to be glad, without being absurd! The whole household need not witness the sight of your welcoming a runaway servant as a brother."[3]75 It is clear that like his parents, Edgar looks down upon Heathcliff who has no social status. Their attitude toward Heathcliff becomes indirect reason for Heathcliff to take revenge.

The fourth important reason for Heathcliff's revenge is that Catherine has changed her love to Heathcliff which used to be a comfort and hope to the latter. Heathcliff, an outsider in the family, is really proud and determined. He does not cower when confronted by those who consider themselves to be superiors. His determination is evident when taking advantage of Mr. Earnshaw's favoritism and exchanging horses with young Hindley. Though his situation and position is somewhat worsened after the death of Mr. Earnshaw, Heathcliff's pride nevertheless remains intact. When Catherine returns to the Heights after her five week stay at the Grange, she has much changed in appearance and begins to prefer Edgar's refinement to Heathcliff's roughness. What is worst is that she begins to dislike and cold-shoulders Heathcliff for his slovenliness and dirtiness. "Why" said Catherine to Heathcliff, "how very black and cross you look! and how-how funny and grim! But that's because I'm used to Edgar and Isabella Linton."[3]41 When ordered to shake hands with Catherine by Hindley, Heathcliff refuses, saying: "I shall not stand to be laughed at, I shall not hear it."[3]41 Even when she realizes her toughness and tries to gain his forgiveness, she still can not

restrict herself from prejudice, “I did not mean to laugh at you. I could not hinder myself. Heathcliff, shake hands, at least! What are you sulky for? It was only that you looked odd—if you wash your face and brush your hair, it will all right. But you are so dirty!”[3]41 Similarly, when insulted by Edgar during one of his visits to the Heights, Heathcliff empties a tureen of applesauce over him. Although Catherine knows well that she loves Heathcliff, she marries Edgar. She marries the one she does not love instead of the one she loves, because her choice of Heathcliff would mean frustration and waste, as she says herself: “it would degrade me to marry Heathcliff, now,”[3]63 while her choice of Edgar would mean something very different: “he is handsome, and pleasant to be with.” “And because he is young and cheerful.” “And because he loves me.” “And he will be rich, and I shall like to be the greatest woman of the neighborhood, and I shall be proud of having such a husband.”[3]61 This explanation by Catherine shows, in a British critic Arnold Shapiro’s words, that “she will marry Edgar ‘because he is rich and handsome and because he loves her cake and eat it too’”[4]109. Finally, when Heathcliff realizes that Catherine has chosen status, wealth and position in preference to him, he disappears for three years and returns in the guise of a gentleman, and begins to take revenge.

3. Conclusion

From the above analysis, we can see that there are some obvious reasons for Heathcliff’s revenge in the novel. His low status in the family, Hindley’s cruelty to him, the Lintons’ lack of sympathy, and more importantly, Catherine’s change of love to him, all these make him to take revenge on this ruthless world.

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