

Heathcliff's revenge on the two generations in Wuthering Heights

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Abstract: Owing to his early suffering and Catherine's betrayal, Heathcliff starts to revenge on the two generations in Wuthering Heights. After the death of his targets, Heathcliff finally comes to see the pointlessness of his fight to revenge himself on the world of power and property through its own values. His change from wickedness to temperance is the result of his own eagerness to get inner balance and comfort.

1. Introduction

Wuthering Heights, "a humanist work"^{[1]138} is a powerful novel of critical realism, and it gives a faithful record of human relationships between the oppressor and the oppressed in Victorian England. Heathcliff's revenge on Wuthering Heights and Lintons' family is determined by many factors, but it also has a close tie with his savage personality.

Catherine's diary provides a clue to his early suffering and causes of his savagery and hatred, "Poor Heathcliff! Hindley calls him a vagabond, and won't let him sit with us and eat with us anymore... and swears that he will reduce him to his right place"^{[2]16}. Nelly's comments about Heathcliff's ability to withstand pain support this point of view, "He would withstand Hindley's blows without winking or shedding a tear"^{[2]29}.

Marriage with Catherine is still Heathcliff's aim although he leaves the Heights because of Catherine's temporary betrayal; and with this hope in view, he has the strength to "fight through a bitter life"^{[2]76} during the three years of which he never gives any fuller account. Then he unexpectedly returns civilized in appearance with money at his command. It is not until the unexpected return that he learns of Catherine's marriage to Edgar Linton. Both Hindley's previous ill-treatment and Catherine's infidelity disturb the natural harmony of Heathcliff's nature and turn him from an alien element in the established order into an active force for its destruction. Therefore, the whole strength of Heathcliff will become concentrated on revenge not only on Catherine but also on Hindley Earnshaw and the Linton family. Without Catherine, for Heathcliff the world becomes only an abyss. So he is trying to change the world as merciless as he himself feels.

2. Heathcliff's revenge on the first generation

The role of the usurper leads to Heathcliff's suffering at the hands of Hindley, and it is the treatment neated out by Hindley to Heathcliff after the death of Mr. Earnshaw, which arouses in Heathcliff a deep and abiding hatred and an all consuming passion for revenge. Heathcliff never forgets the injury inflicted on him during his childhood and on his return to Wuthering Heights, after a three-year-absence, the impulse to revenge on all those he regards as having wronged him becomes his overpowering passion.

By his ruthless cleverness, Heathcliff comes to dominate Hindley Earnshaw through Hindley's besetting sin such as drinking and gambling, finally gathers the estate of Hindley into his own control, which drives Hindley to death.

In chapter 17, Hindley wants to keep Heathcliff out of the house one night and "do you (Isabella) a kindness in spite of yourself, and Hareton justice"^{[2]140} after Catherine's death, but he fails and Heathcliff "kicked and trampled on him, and dashed his head repeatedly against the flags"^{[2]140}. Six months later, Hindley dies "drunk as a lord"^{[2]148}. But according to the old servant, he might be murdered by Heathcliff.

Heathcliff never ceases his revenge after the death of Hindley. His revenge is also directed towards Edgar Linton, whom he sees as having stolen Catherine from him. He devises a series of schemes to wrest the ownership of the Grange from the Linton family and secure it for himself. He marries Isabella to "gain a foothold in the Grange"^{[2]116} and to take revenge on Edgar: "Edgar's proxy in suffering"^{[2]116}.

Actuated not by love but by hatred for the Lintons, Heathcliff himself makes another "unnatural" marriage with Isabella, Hindley's sister. Certainly, this is a cruel retaliation to Edgar Linton even to Catherine. Moreover, Heathcliff is merciless in his treatment of Isabella even when she is in his power at the Heights.

Isabella is attracted to Heathcliff when he comes back from absence and looks at her. She decides to marry him, in spite of the warning by Catherine that Heathcliff does not like her. On the other hand, the reason Heathcliff decides to marry her is because she is the member of the Linton's. He is curiously attracted, of course, yet what attracts him is not love but his greed for wealth, status and power. He hopes to satisfy his greed through this "repulsive animal"^{[2]65} since, according to Nelly in Chapter 10, Edgar's property, in default of a male heir, might pass into his hand if he marries her. This can be further proved by his question to Catherine: "She's her brother's heir, is she not?"^{[2]85} It is only when he is sure what he will get if he accepts her that he "had the impudence to embrace her"^{[2]88}. Besides satisfying his greed, Heathcliff also uses his marriage with Isabella as a tool to take revenge on Catherine and Edgar. His marriage makes Catherine crazy, because it is intended to return his anger of being betrayed by Catherine. In terms of his revenge on Edgar by marrying Isabella, we can clearly identify it by Isabella's letter to Nelly "(Heathcliff) promising that I should be Edgar's proxy in suffering, till he could get hold of him"^{[2]116} and by what she says to Nelly face to face: "he says he has married me on purpose to obtain power over him."^{[2]121} Obviously, the main reasons for Heathcliff to marry Isabella are to capture Linton's property, to torture Isabella, and to revenge Catherine's betrayal.

At no point in the novel can we doubt Heathcliff's eternal faithfulness to Catherine. His love survives after her rejection of him: "It would degrade me to marry Mr. Heathcliff"^{[2]63} and despite her marriage to Edgar, Heathcliff's love for her continues undaunted. Heathcliff suffers much emotional rejection, but at no point does he waiver in his loyalty to her: "I seek no revenge on you...the tyrant grinds down his slaves and they don't turn against him; they crush those beneath them"^{[2]89}. His genuine concern for Catherine prevents him from exacting direct revenge on Edgar. He says to Nelly: "I would have died by inches before I would have touched a single hair of his head."^{[2]119} When hearing of Catherine's illness, he exclaims: "Existence after losing her would be hell"^{[2]119}. In this statement, we can see the extent of Heathcliff's dedication and loyalty to Catherine and the sense of desolation her death would bring to him.

The corresponding counterblast to Catherine's marriage, coupled with the conflict induced in her by her own betrayal of her true nature (the same nature as Heathcliff's) for the sake of worldly refinement, is too much for Catherine; eventually this leads to her madness.

In her madness, Catherine tears her pillow with her teeth, begs Nelly to open the window and "seems to find childish diversion in pulling the feather from the rents she just made"^{[2]97}; she imagines her own trip back across the moors to Wuthering Heights which is her genuine paradise, especially imagines her early rambles across the moors with Heathcliff, her true self. Essentially, it is Heathcliff's cruel revenge that motivates her stormy madness. Ultimately, Catherine dies; and of course, this is the inevitable consequence of her betrayal to her innermost nature. Such betrayal brings about not only her own inner conflict but the conflict between Heathcliff and Edgar Linton. No doubt, after Catherine's death, the conflict between Heathcliff and Edgar Linton still exists and her death further disturbs the stability of Linton's family. The natural harmony is more destroyed. Heathcliff, further maddened by the loss of his life's object—marriage with Catherine, becomes more destructive, and proceeds to pursue a murderous revenge against the next generation. He is exerting himself to turn the world into an abyss as he feels. Such an abyss torments himself as well as others. Doubtlessly, Heathcliff's brutality is seen at its starkest when after a lapse of years he attacks the younger generation who are innocent of offence against him. In reality his attacks of the

younger generation are his further revenge against Hindley Earnshaw and Edgar Linton. Heathcliff's revenge against the younger generation makes the chaos of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange and it lasts on the younger generation. He, as a representative of storm and savagery, is trying to thoroughly change the world into merciless.

3. Heathcliff's revenge on the second generation

As a means of revenge, Heathcliff has imbruted Hareton Earnshaw and kept Hareton ignorant as Hareton's father Hindley imbruted him when they are young. For Cathy Linton, Heathcliff is even more savage. Because she is Edgar's daughter, he shows no pity for her. In spite of Edgar Linton, the broken and dying father, Heathcliff lures Cathy Linton to the Heights again and again by taking advantage of her affection for his ailing son Linton Heathcliff whom he knows to be dying. Certainly what Heathcliff did is to secure his mastery of the Grange, which is substantially the revenge against Edgar Linton. Afterwards, when Cathy Linton virtually becomes a prisoner at the Heights, Heathcliff treats her brutally. Even when she attempts to defy him, Heathcliff administers "a shower of terrific slaps on both sides of the head"^{[2]215} and says he will be her father and chastise her like this. Simultaneously, he teaches Linton Heathcliff to regard such "chastisement" as a husband's prerogative, promising that Linton Heathcliff will be able to "pay her back present tyrannies, with a vigorous hand"^{[2]218} once they get married. Besides, Heathcliff also takes a sadistic pleasure in terrifying Linton Heathcliff, whom he despises as a weakling although Linton Heathcliff is his son. After all, they are not manifestations of the same principle and Linton Heathcliff is only the outcome and the tool of the revenge. At last, under the intervention of Heathcliff, Cathy Linton is married to her natural antipathy, Linton Heathcliff, and grows antagonistic to her natural affinity—Hareton Earnshaw. In brief, Heathcliff literally takes the place of one legitimate heir after another, supplanting both Hindley Earnshaw and Hareton Earnshaw at the Heights and eventually Edgar Linton at the Grange through Cathy Linton. Certainly, the mastery of the Heights and the Grange means control of the owners of them; thereby Heathcliff obtains the power over three children, the younger generation: Hareton Earnshaw and Cathy Linton. Heathcliff is gradually changing the world into an abyss. Undoubtedly, it is up till now that the natural harmony is wholly subverted. Heathcliff's revenge is being carried out step by step.

4. The change of Heathcliff from wickedness to temperance

Because of the ill-treatment in Wuthering Heights and Catherine's betrayal, Heathcliff becomes a devil. However, in the last pages of the book, he gradually changes. When Cathy quarrels with him, he is so upset that he wants very much to tear her into pieces, but he stops chiding her by violence. This is an act beyond imagination in his past experience.

What is the reason for this change? According to Nelly's description, it is Hareton's and Cathy's similarities with Catherine that disarms Heathcliff, but this inference is negated by Heathcliff himself: "his (Hareton's) starting likeness to Catherine connected him fearfully with her. That however which you may suppose the most potent to arrest my imagination, is actually the least..."^{[2]258} In fact, Heathcliff changes because he finds himself in Hareton. "Hareton seemed a personification of my youth," he said^{[2]258}. Hareton has the similar experience with the young Heathcliff: both are degenerated by being uneducated and wronged. Because of their identification of the lower class, Heathcliff perhaps does not want Hareton to repeat his dark and hard life. When he regards Hareton as a personification of his youth, he seems to have seen from Hareton his own pursuit of a happy life when he was young. This is something absolutely natural for Heathcliff, but it proves only an outlet of his own self-comfort. That perhaps is why he does not interfere much when Hareton and Cathy are together.

After the death of his targets, Heathcliff finally comes to see the pointlessness of his fight to revenge himself on the world of power and property through its own values. His change from wickedness to temperance is the result of his own eagerness to get inner balance and comfort, which eventually results in helping Hareton and Cathy to obtain a smooth and successful development of

friendship which reveals a bunch of hope^{[3]2} and that love unites and starts everything^{[4]3}.

References

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