Analysis on “Window and Two-Children” Motifs in Wuthering Heights

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Abstract—Emily Bronte is considered one of the most important yet elusive figures in the nineteenth century English literature. She led a brief and circumscribed life, spent in relative isolation in a parsonage on the Yorkshire moors, however, she left behind a literary legacy that includes some of the most passionate and inspired writing in Victorian literature. Bronte’s overall reputation rests primarily on her only novel, Wuthering Heights. Wuthering Heights is a story of superhuman love and revenge enacted on the English moors, what I analyze are the window and the two-children motifs, the rusticity of the language, and also the characterization of it. The novel has attracted generations of readers and critics alike, and has been elevated to the status of a literary classic.

Keywords—Analysis, motif of window, motif of two children, Wuthering Heights, Emily Bronte

I. INTRODUCTION

Emily Bronte is considered one of the most important yet elusive figures in nineteenth century English literature. Although she led a brief and circumscribed life, spent in relative isolation in a parsonage on the Yorkshire moors, she left behind a literary legacy that includes some of the most passionate and inspired writing in Victorian literature. Today, Bronte’s poems are well regarded by critics, but they receive little attention, and her overall reputation rests primarily on her only novel, Wuthering Heights, a story of superhuman love and revenge enacted on the status of a literary classic. At the same time, Bronte’s writing have raised many question about their author’s intent Unable to reach a consensus concerning the ultimate meaning of her works and reluctant to assign them a definite place in the English literary tradition, critics continue to regard Bronte as a fascinating enigma in English letters.

II. THE GENERAL IDEA OF WUTHERING HEIGHTS

Wuthering Heights is the only novel by Emily Bronte, first published in 1847. The story is told from the viewpoint of Lockwood, a fashionable gentleman visiting the York shire moors where the novel is set, and of Mrs Dean, servant to the Earnshaw family. Heathcliff, a foundling, is picked up on the streets of Liverpool by Mr Earnshaw and brought home by him to Wuthering Heights to be treated like his own children Catherine and Hindley. But after Mr Earnshaw’s death, Heathcliff is bullied and degraded by Hindley, now married and head of the household. Heathcliff, of a passionate and ferocious nature, falls in love with Catherine, who returns his affection even though she feels it would be humiliating to marry him. Upon learning this Heathcliff slips quietly away. Meanwhile Hindley’s wife has died leaving him a son, Hareton. Catherine, for all her affinity with Heathcliff, is attracted to the soft, luxurious life of the Lintons of Thrushcross Grange, and by the time he returns, after three years abroad, she has married Edgar Linton, master of the house.

Heathcliff remains at Wuthering Heights and his vengeful nature begins to assert itself. His first victim is his beloved Catherine, whose death he hastens by incessant and vehement accusations of betrayal, of contempt for himself, and of cruelty; weakened by her pregnancy and unable to withstand such an emotional battering, she dies giving birth to a girl, another Catherine. A further victim is Isabella Linton, sister of Edgar, with whom Heathcliff, consumed with revenge and malevolence, contracts, a loveless marriage. Their son Linton Heathcliff, is claimed by his father and returned to horrors of Wuthering Heights. Heathcliff also effects the destruction of Hindley, a heavy drinker and gambler, so that when the later dies at the age of 27 he is deeply in debt and the mortgage of Wuthering Heights belongs to Heathcliff. As for Hindley’s son, Hareton, he is not so much as taught to read and write, is allowed to develop brutishly and, despite glimmerings of kindness, is little more a country lout.

Then through trickery, Heathcliff engineers more havoc by forcing a marriage between young Catherine and his son, Linton, “an ailing, peevish creature “and thus securing the Linton family property. But with the death of Linton Heathcliff the young widow develops an interest in Hareton, he reciprocates and she undertakes his education. By now Heathcliff, all passion spent, longs for death and union with Catherine. Increasingly alienated from daily life, he experiences visions and supernatural portents of reconciliation with his beloved Catherine. He dies having failed to extirpate the Earnshaws and the Lintons, and leaves to the younger generation, Catherine and Hareton, hopes of a richer life.

III. ANALYSIS ON MOTIF OF WINDOWS

Wuthering Heights exists for the mind as a tension between two kinds of reality, a restrictive reality of civilized manners
and codes, and the anonymous unregenerate reality of natural energies. The poetic structure which, in Emily Bronte’s novel, associates these two kinds of reality is a structure of variations on the possibility of a break-through from one mode of being into the other. The present paper considers certain metamorphic patterns by which the break-through and conversion are suggested.

Our first contact with the Catherine-Heathcliff drama is established through Lockwood’s dream of the ghost child at the window. Lockwood, you will remember, is a vacationer from the city, who has no prime-connection with the events but who serves as narrator. He has been forced by a storm to spend the night at Wuthering Heights, and has fallen asleep while reading the dead Catherine’s youthful diary. During his sleep a tempest-blown branch is scratching on the windowpane, and he hears it as the scratching of a child’s hand. But why should Lockwood, the well-manured urbanite, dream of giving this treatment to the ghost child? He says: “I pulled its wrist on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bed-clothes.” The image is probably the most cruel one in the book. The novel is full of inflicted and suffered violence, but except in this instance the violent act has always a set of emotionally motivating circumstances—revengefulness, or hysterical frustration, of the savagery of despair. The peculiar cruelty of Lockwood’s dream lies not only in the idea of bloody hurt wrought on a child, but more especially in the dreamer’s lack of emotional motivation for dreaming it: the cruelty is in the gratuitousness of the dreamed act. The bed in which Lockwood lies is an old-fashioned closet bed with a window set in it; its paneled sides he has pulled together before going to sleep. The bed is like a coffin; at the end of the book, Heathcliff dies in it, behind its closed panels; it had been Catherine’s bed, and the movable panels themselves suggest the coffin in which she is laid, whose “panels” Heathcliff has bribed the sexton to remove at one side. Psychologically, Lockwood’s dream has only the most perfunctory determinations, and nothing at all of result for the dreamer except to put him uncomfortably out of bed. But poetically the dream has its reasons, compacted into the image of the daemonic child scratching at the pane, trying to get from the outside “in” and of the dreamer in a bed like a coffin, released by that deathly privacy to indiscriminate violence. The coffin-like bed shuts off any interference with the wild deterioration of the psyche.

The windowpane is the medium, treacherously transparent, separating the “inside” from the “outside,” the “human” from the alien and terrible “other.” Immediately after the incident of the dream, the time of the narrative is displaced into the childhood of Heathcliff and Catherine, and we see the two children looking through the drawing room window of the neighboring Lintons. Heathcliff relates their adventure to the nurse, Nellie, thus:

“But both of us were able to look in by standing on the basement, and clinging to the ledge, and we saw—ah! It was beautiful—a splendid place carpeted with crimson, and crimson-covered chairs and tables, and a pure white ceiling bordered by gold, a shower of glass-drops hanging in silver chains from the center, and shimmering with little soft tapers. Old Mr and Mrs Linton were not there; Edgar and his sister had it entirely to themselves. Shouldn’t they have been happy? We should have thought ourselves in heaven!”

Here the two unregenerate waifs look in from the night on the heavenly vision of the refinements and securities of the most privileged human estate. But Heathcliff rejects the vision: seeing the Linton children blubbering and bored there (they cannot get out!), he senses the menace of its limitations: while Catherine is fatally tempted. She is taken in by the Lintons, and now it is Heathcliff alone outside looking through the window:

“The curtains [he says] were still looped up at one corner, and I resumed my station as a spy; because, if Catherine had wished to return, I intended shattering their great glass panes to a million of fragments, unless they let her out. She sat on the sofa quietly—the woman-servant brought a basin of warm water, and washed her feet; and Mr. Linton mixed a tumbler of negus, and Isabella emptied a plateful of cakes into her lap... Afterwards, they dried and combed her beautiful hair...”

Thus the first snare is laid by which Catherine will be held for a civilized destiny—her feet washed, cakes and wine for her delectation, her beautiful hair combed. The motifs are limpid as those of fairy tale, where the changeling in the other world is held there mysteriously by bathing and by the strange new food he is given.

Through her marriage to Edgar Linton, Catherine yields to that destiny, but her yielding is uneasy, her resistance tormented, and she finds her way out of it by death. Literally she “catches her death “by throwing open the window. During a feverish illness, she cries to Nellie, “Open the window again wide: fasten it open! Quick, why don’t you move?” “because I won’t give you your death of cold,” Nellie answers “you won’t give me a chance of life, you mean,” Catherine says; and in her delirium she opens the window, leans out into the winter wind, and calls across the moors to Heathcliff... On the night after her burial, unable to follow her into death... he returns to the Heights through the window—for the door has been barred against him—to wreak on the living the fury of his frustration. It is years later that Lockwood arrives at the Heights and spends his uncomfortable night there, dreaming of the dead child scratching on the pane. Lockwood’s outcry in his dream brings Heathcliff to the window, Heathcliff who has been caught ineluctably in the human to grapple with its interdictions long after Catherine has broken through them. The treachery of the window is that Catherine, lost now alone in the “other ness,” can look through the transparent membrane that separates her from humanity, can scratch on the pane, but cannot get “in,” while Heathcliff, though he forces the window open and howls into the night, cannot get “out.” When he dies, Nellie Dean discovers the window swinging open, the window of that old-fashioned coffin-like bed where Lockwood had had the dream. Rain has been pouring in during the night, drenching the dead man. Nellie says: “I hasped the window; I combed his black long hair from his forehead; I tried to close his eyes: to extinguish, if possible, that frightful, life-like gaze of exultation before any one else beheld it. They would not shut...” Earlier, Heathcliff’s eyes have been spoken of as “the clouded window of hell” from which a “fiend” looks. The refusal of his lids to shut (the “fiend” had not got “out”, leaving the window open) elucidates with simplicity the meaning of the “window” as a separation between the daemonic depth of the soul and lucidities of
consciousness; a separation between the soul’s “otherness” and its humanness.

The imaginary of the window is metamorphic, suggesting a total change of mode of being by the breaking-through of a separating medium.

We are led to speculate on what the bounty might have been, had the windowpane not stood between the original pair, had the golden child and the dark child not been secularized by a spelling book. In the two patterns we have spoken of, there is a double movement always, not only a movement to get “outside”—that is, to break through the limitations of civilized life and of personal consciousness—but also a movement to get “inside”—a movement toward passionate fulfillment of consciousness by deeper ingress into the matrix of its own and all energy. Together, these two movements represent an attempt to identify in a unity the “outside” and the “inside”, the dark world of the unknown powers with the bright world of the known, in such a way that they could freely assume each other’s modes of revelation.

IV. ANALYSIS ON THE MOTIF OF “TWO CHILDREN”

The boldest and most radiant figuration that Emily Bronte has given to her subject is the two-children figure, also a metamorphic figure of break-through and transsubstantiation. Here the separating medium is the body and personality of another. The type or classic form of this figure is a girl with golden hair and a boy with dark hair and shadowed brow, bound in kinship and in a relationship of charity and passion; the dark boy is to be brightened, made angelic and happy, by the beautiful golden girl. But the dynamics of the change are not perfectly trustworthy.

In the relationship of Catherine and Heathcliff, the fantasy has its typical form. She is golden, he is dark. His daemonic origin is always kept open, by reiteration of the likelihood that he is really a ghoul, a fiend, an offspring of hell, and not merely so in behavior. And Catherine is the same: she has furious tantrums, she lies, she bites, her chosen toy is a whip. They are raised as brother and sister; there are three references to their sleeping in the same bed as infants. She scolds and orders and cherishes and mothers him. The notions of somatic change and discovery of noble birth, as in fairy tale, are deliberately played with, as, when Catherine returns from her first sojourn at the Linton’s and Heathcliff asks Nellie to “make him decent,” he says, comparing himself with Edgar: “I wish I had light hair and a fair skin, and was dressed and behaved as well, and had a chance of being as rich as he will be!” and Nellie answers: “you’re fit for a prince in disguise…Were I in your place, I would frame high notions of my birth…” Some alluring and astonishing destiny seems possible. What that phenomenon might be or mean, we cannot know, for it is frustrated by Catherine’s marriage to Edgar. Catherine’s decision dooms her as well as Heathcliff, for she is the same daemonic substance as he, and a civilized marriage and domesticity are not sympathetic to the daemonic quality.

With the second generation, the two-children figure is distorted and parodied in the relationship of Catherine’s daughter and Heathcliff’s son. Young Cathy, another “child of delight, with sunbright hair,” has still some of the original daemonic energy, but the subject of her compassion is a pale-haired and pallid little boy whose only talents are for sucking sugar candy and torturing cats. Her passionate charity finally finds her “married” to his corpse in a locked bedroom. With young Cathy and Hareton Earnshaw, her cousin on her mother’s side, the “two children” are again in their right relation of golden and dark, and now the pathos of the dark child cures the daemon out of the golden one, and the maternal care of the golden child raises the dark one to civilized humanity and makes of him a proper husband.

In these several pairs, the relation of kinship has various resonances. Between Catherine and Heathcliff, identity of “kind” is greatest, although they are foster brother and sister only. Catherine says she is Heathcliff, and when she dies, Heathcliff howls that he cannot live without his “life,” he cannot live without his “soul”. But one does not “make” with oneself, with one’s own life, with one’s own soul. Catherine and Heathcliff are unthinkable in adult domestication as lovers…The foster kinship between these two provides an imaginative reason for the unnaturalness and impossibility of their mating. In Emily Bronte’s use of the symbolism of the incestual motive, it appears as an attempt to make what is “outside” oneself identical with what is “inside” oneself, a performance that can be construed in physical and human terms only by destruction of personality bounds, by rending of flesh, and at the last by death. With Catherine daughter and young Linton, who are cousins, the implicit incestuousness of the two-children figure is suggested morbidly by Linton’s disease and by his finally becoming a corpselike husband. With young Cathy and Hareton Earnshaw, who are also cousins, Victorian meliorism finds a way to sanction the relationship by symbolic emasculation; Cathy literally teaches the devil out of Hareton, and “esteem” between the two takes the place of the old passion for identification. With this successful mating the daemonic quality has been completely suppressed, and though humanity and civilization have been secured for the “two children,” one feels that some magnificent bounty is now irrecoverable.

We are led to speculate on what the bounty might have been, had the windowpane not stood between the original pair, had the golden child and the dark child not been secularized by a spelling book. In the two patterns we have spoken of, there is a double movement always, not only a movement to get “outside”—that is, to break through the limitations of civilized life and of personal consciousness—but also a movement to get “inside”—a movement toward passionate fulfillment of consciousness by deeper ingress into the matrix of its own and all energy. Together, the two movements represent an attempt to identify in a unity the “outside” and the “inside”, the dark world of the unknown powers with the bright world of the known, in such a way that they could freely assume each other’s modes of revelation.

V. LANGUAGE, SETTING, AND CHARACTERIZATION

With regard to the rusticity of Wuthering Heights, I admit the charge, for I feel the quality. It is rustic all through. It is
moorish, and wild, and knotty as a root of heath. Nor was it natural that it should be otherwise; the author being herself a native and nursling of the moors. Doubtless, had her lot been cast in a town, her writings, if she had written at all, would have possessed another character. Even had chance or taste led her to choose a similar subject, she would have treated it otherwise. Had Ellis Bell been a lady or a gentleman accustomed to what is called ‘the world’, her view of a remote and unreclaimed region, as well as of the dwellers therein, would have been differed greatly from that actually taken by the home-bred country girl. Doubtless it would have been wider—more comprehensive: whether it would have been more original or more truthful is not so certain. As far as the scenery and locality are concerned, it could scarcely have been so sympathetic: Ellis Bell did not describe as one whose eye and taste alone found pleasure in the prospect; her native hills were far more to her than a spectacle; they were what she lived in, and by, as much as the wild birds, their tenants, or as the heather, their produce. Her descriptions, then, of natural scenery are what they should be, and all they should be.

Where delineation of human character is concerned, the case is different. She had scarcely more practical knowledge of the peasantry amongst whom she lived, than a nun has of the country people who sometimes pass her convent gates. “My sister’s disposition was not naturally gregarious; circumstances favored and fostered her tendency to seclusion; except to go to church or take a walk on the hills, she rarely crossed the threshold of home”. Though her feeling for the people round was benevolent, intercourse with them she never sought; nor, with very few exceptions, ever experienced. And yet she knew them: knew their ways, their language, their family histories; she could hear of them with interest, and talk of them with detail, minute, graphic, and accurate; but with them, she rarely exchanged a word. Hence it ensued that what her mind had gathered of the real concerning them, was too exclusively confined to those tragic and terrible traits of which, in listening to the secret annals of every rude vicinage, the memory is sometimes compelled to receive the impress. Her imagination, which was a spirit more somber than sunny, more powerful than sportive, found in such traits material whence it wrought creations like Heathcliff, like Earnshaw, like Catherine. Having formed these beings, she did not know what she had done. If the auditor of her work, when read in manuscript, shuddered under the grinding influence of natures so relentless and implacable, of spirits so lost and fallen; if it was complained that the mere hearing of certain vivid and fearful scenes banished sleep by night, and disturbed mental peace by day, Ellis Bell would wonder what was meant, and suspect the complainant of affection. Had she but lived, her mind would of itself have grown like a strong tree, loftier, straighter, wider-spreadings, and its matured fruits would have attained a mellower ripeness and sunnier bloom; but on that mind time and experience alone could work: to the influence of other intellects it was not amenable.

Having avowed that over much of Wuthering Heights there broods ‘a horror of great darkness’; that, in its storm-heated and electrical atmosphere, we seem at times to breathe lightning: let me point to those spots where clouded daylight and the eclipsed sun still attest their existence. For a specimen of true benevolence and homely fidelity look at the character of Nelly Dean; for an example of constancy and tenderness, remark that of Edgar Linton…There is a dry saturnine humor in the centre— the ever suffering soul of a magnate of the infernal world: and by its quenchless and ceaseless ravage effect the inhuman: a passion such as might oil and glow in the bad essence of some evil genius; a fire that might form the tormented enclosed bed, with wide-gazing eyes tat seemed ‘to sneer at her attempt to close them, and parted lips and sharp white teeth that sneered too’.

Heathcliff, indeed, stands unredeemed; never once swerving in his arrow-straight course to perdition from the time when ‘the little black-haired swarthy thing, as dark as if it came from the Devil’, was first unrolled out of the bundle and set on its feet in the farmhouse kitchen, to the hour when Nelly Dean found the grim, stalwart corpse laid on its back in the panel of the little black-haired swarthy thing, as dark as if it came from the Devil’, was first unrolled out of the bundle and set on its feet in the farmhouse kitchen, to the hour when Nelly Dean found the grim, stalwart corpse laid on its back in the panel of the farmhouse kitchen, to the hour when Nelly Dean found the grim, stalwart corpse laid on its back in the panel enclosed bed, with wide-gazing eyes tat seemed ‘to sneer at her attempt to close them, and parted lips and sharp white teeth that sneered too’.

Heathcliff betrays one solitary human feeling, and that is not his love for Catherine; which is a sentiment fierce and inhuman: a passion such as might oil and glow in the bad essence of some evil genius; a fire that might form the tormented center—the ever suffering soul of a magnate of the infernal world: and by its quenchless and ceaseless ravage effect the execution of the decree which dooms him to carry Hell with him wherever he wanders. No; the single link that connects Heathcliff with humanity is his rudely-confessed regard for Hareton Earnshaw—the young man whom he has ruined; and then his half-implied esteem for Nelly Dean. These solitary traits omitted, we should say he was child neither of Lascar nor gipsy, but a man’s shape animated by demon life—a Ghoul—an Afreet.

VI. CONCLUSION

‘Stronger than a man, simpler than a child:’—these words [taken from Charlotte Bronte’s “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell”] are Emily Bronte’s true epitaph, both as an artist and as a human being. Her strength of will and imagination struck those who knew her and those who read her as often inhuman or terrible, and with this was combined a simplicity partly of genius partly of a strange innocence and spirituality, which gives her a place apart in English letters. At the same time, Bronte’s writings have raised many questions about their author’s intent. Unable to reach a consensus concerning the ultimate meaning of her works and reluctant to assign them a definite place in the English literary tradition, critics continue to regard Bronte as a fascinating enigma in English letters.

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