



THE PARADOX OF LOVE IN EMILY BRONTË'S WUTHERING HEIGHTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the complex interplay between love, trauma and revenge in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, focusing on the character of Heathcliff. It shows how desire for vengeance against the offenders intertwines with strong love. Through a psychoanalytic lens and close reading of the text, the investigation demonstrates that Heathcliff's trauma and self-immolation – both emotionally and physically – serve as a manifestation of his obsessive longing for Catherine. Ultimately, the study found that revenge, rather than being a mere act of malice, can be a misguided attempt to reclaim lost love, highlighting the tragic consequences of intertwining passion with vengeance. It indicates that vengeance against those who hate us does not attract human heart, but it only leads to one's own destruction. Therefore, the article upholds that patience, redemption and mutual understanding remain the bedrocks of any truthful and lasting human relationship.

Keywords: revenge, love, psychoanalytic, self-immolation, redemption

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article analyse l'interaction complexe entre amour, traumatisme et vengeance dans *Wuthering Heights* d'Emily Brontë en se concentrant sur le personnage Heathcliff. Il montre comment le désir de vengeance contre les offenseurs s'entremêle avec l'amour profond. À travers une approche psychanalytique et une lecture attentive du texte, l'étude démontre que le traumatisme et l'immolation de soi de la part d'Heathcliff – tant sur le plan émotionnel que physique – constituent une manifestation de son désir obsessionnel pour Catherine. En définitive, l'analyse a révélé que la vengeance, loin d'être un acte de malice, peut constituer une tentative malavisée pour reconquérir l'amour perdu, soulignant ainsi les conséquences tragiques du mélange de la passion et la vengeance. Il ressort que la vengeance contre ceux qui nous haïssent n'attire pas l'affection humaine ; elle ne fait que mener à notre propre ruine. Par conséquent, cet article maintient que la patience, la rédemption et la compréhension mutuelle demeurent les fondements de toute relation humaine authentique et durable.

Mots-Clés : vengeance, amour, psychanalytique, immolation de soi, rédemption

INTRODUCTION

'Actions speak louder than words' is a dictum that poignantly describes the superficial love that the main characters in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* entertain for each other. Heathcliff and Catherine vow love for each other from the outset of the novel, but their words explicitly contrast with their actions through the development of the plot. Since its publication in 1847 as Emily Brontë's single novel, critics have explored many topics and themes in *Wuthering Heights*, ranging from love, violence, child abuse, vengeance, hatred. Yet, the irony of love is barely dealt with. Scholars such as Fonseca Dias (2007), Alonzo (2010), Steinhagen (2025) found that Heathcliff and Catherine's romance is profound and real regardless of their social class. Drawing out the limitations of their findings, this article claims that at the heart of *Wuthering Heights* lies the paradox of love. It undertakes an in-depth exploration of the vagueness of Heathcliff and Catherine's romance, culminating in their depression and ultimate demise. The romantic bond that Heathcliff and Catherine proclaim is not deep, but perfunctory. Generally, love is supposed to be based on trust, confidence, forgiveness and sacrifice between lovers. However, in *Wuthering Heights*, this is not the case between Heathcliff and Catherine as both characters have grown apart because of their unreliable personalities. In its gothic¹ style, the novel adopts the frame narrative perspective to relate Heathcliff's bitter experience of love with Catherine at Wuthering Heights. Raised by the Earnshaw family in which jealousy, hatred and conflict reign, Heathcliff and Catherine who, once loved each other ended in depression as a result of their separation. The complexity of their love is the springboard of Heathcliff's trauma, suffering and villainess in the novel. His self-immolation stands as his intense yearning for love.

Heathcliff's mental disorder also appears as the outcome of being abandoned by his beloved, Catherine. In a culture in which "marriage across class lines was still considered taboo, and any movement across classes seems to have unsettled Victorians greatly" (Purchase, 2006, p. 23), Catherine's act is seemingly justified. Although she loves Heathcliff, she is obliged to let him down and search for a right suitor in her social class, turning the latter into a traumatic, furious and vengeful character. Focusing on Heathcliff's revolting attitude towards his wrongdoers, this paper argues that revenge, rather than being a mere act of malice, can be a misguided attempt to reclaim lost love, highlighting the tragic consequences of intertwining passion with vengeance. Heathcliff's example shows that vengeance does not attract human heart, but it only leads to one's own "destruct[ion]" (Nadaf, 2019, p. 99). Through Freud's (2007) psychoanalytic lens, attempting to understand Heathcliff's 'psyche', his 'desire' and ultimate 'trauma', the investigation leans on 'Social Semiotic' ground of Halliday

¹ "Gothic (broadly defined) might almost be described as the paradigmatic form of the fantastic in Victorian fiction. In its various mutated forms, it remained a significant presence in the nineteenth-century novel long after the waning of the vogue for gothic romances in the years around the turn of the eighteenth to nineteenth-century." (L. Pykett, 2001, p. 192).

(1978). The theory requires due attention to culture, society and tradition to make texts speak again leaning on how the corpus text made up of words, textual sounds and structures contribute to meaning creation, probing the anti-hero's self-immolation as a manifestation of his obsessive longing for Catherine. In this framework, the article firstly discusses love as destruction in *Wuthering Heights*. Subsequently, it focuses on the interplay of passion, trauma and vengeance, then concludes with analysing duality as a classless aesthetic tip to meeting human needs.

1. Love as Destruction in *Wuthering Heights*

In anything, only excess leads to one's downfall. In *Wuthering Heights*, loving excessively a woman seems to be the source of Heathcliff's predicament. His passion for the woman he loves is shown without restraint. Catherine, Heathcliff's conquest, proves to be immaculate in the story. However, her character stinks. Heathcliff who is ardently in love with her does not pay attention to her flaws, but a woman embodying traits of ambivalence and indecision in a relationship must be feared and early cast off by a thoughtful man. Heathcliff is seemingly gullible, causing his gradual psychological deterioration. His attitude shows that he is ready for carrying loads provided that he gets Catherine's attention in the final process. Regarding his poor status, his desire to marry Catherine seems to be impossible as Shanley (1989, p. 15) substantiates the socio-cultural expectation: "In order to provide a daughter with some economic security independent of her husband's fortunes, wealthy fathers were accustomed to establishing trusts or 'separate estates' in equity for their daughters at marriage." Being poor means that Heathcliff will only live on Catherine's property granted by her rich family. That is why Catherine under the instigation of her brother becomes odd with him. The more efforts Heathcliff puts in their relationship, the more complex it becomes, culminating in their separation. To a great extent, Catherine's inability to love Heathcliff back is due to her brother's contempt for the latter. Indeed, Hindley scorns Heathcliff because he intrudes in their family to ruin them. He cannot then allow his sister's relationship with him to flourish since he perceives him not as a relative, but as an interloper, a usurper who gains his father's affection at his expense. As evidence, he tells Heathcliff "Take my colt, gypsy, then! [. . .] you beggarly interloper!" (*Wuthering Heights*², p. 85). Catherine cut the debate short when she told her brother Hindley about her love whatsoever for Heathcliff, refusing her brother's interference in the love affair. Doing so, she would prove that true love survives all hostilities. But, listening to Hindley and subsequently leaving Heathcliff are striking proofs of Catherine's ambivalent affection for her partner.

Heathcliff's romantic life is ironically marked by loneliness and unhappiness in *Wuthering Heights*. Throughout the novel, love has a dark connotation, compelling characters engaged in romance to isolate themselves. Rather than uniting partners, it

² Hereafter referred to as '*WH*'

often shapes distance between them. To a great extent, Heathcliff's intense love for Catherine is unchecked; and the outcome is catastrophic as Catherine chooses to follow her passion, neglecting him because of his poor status. In this vein, Baldellou (2012, p. 161) points out that it is "the disparity of social origins which keeps Heathcliff and Catherine apart." In the development of the story, Catherine's statement that she is 'Heathcliff' is hyperbolic. It is a contradictory, odd and metaphysical announcement made to flatter her lover because her words contrast with her actions. Though she proves to be in love with Heathcliff, she decides to marry Edgar Linton, a nobleman living at Thrushcross Grange. Catherine's attitude demonstrates that she is more interested in wealth than love as she selects the rich Linton over the destitute Heathcliff. Wang (2023, p. 372) recognises that "Though she [Catherine] clearly knows from the bottom of her heart that it is a wrong choice to marry Linton, she is compelled to do so, for Linton is the only man who is capable of matching her rank and fortune in her little world." Catherine's act heavily weighs on Heathcliff's psyche and turns him as an introverted and a sort of mad man. Halliday's social semiotics contributes to the rise of the reader's awareness of how, taking into account the Victorian love aesthetics and social expectations in the context, characters' attitudes towards the principles of marriage are moulded on material wealth and social rank. The interpretation is carried out "within a sociocultural context" (Halliday, 1978, p. 2). After Catherine's union with Linton, Heathcliff feels so desperate that he chooses, for the first time, loneliness over companionship. His decision to settle in a remote place away from Catherine justifies his choice of solitude. At the same time, it must be underlined that his pain is deep. Seclusion is stressful. It is associated with fear, despair, sadness, anxiety and potential self-negation; and these seem to be the companions of Heathcliff after enduring heartbreak from Catherine. Gilbert and Gubar (2007, p. 59) confirm that "imprisonment leads to madness, solipsism, paralysis." Of course, after being abandoned by his loved one, Heathcliff is paralysed to the point that he no longer feels taste in life.

The odd thing Heathcliff does in *Wuthering Heights* is starving himself to death because of love. Despite being betrayed and let down by Catherine in their heydays, he keeps loving her. The cruellest part of the matter is that when Catherine dies, he chooses to end his own life by not eating. Heathcliff's sacrifice justifies that his love for Catherine is real; yet he appears as a pathetic and an unlucky man because love is often unrequited. His dark experience with Catherine is evidence of unrequited love. In essence, true love overcomes hardships such as economic inequality, hatred, jealousy, but through the development of the plot, the reader realises that Catherine is not ready to make any sacrifice for Heathcliff. She chooses another man over him when they are both faced with Hindley's fierce opposition. Conversely, Heathcliff is the symbol of loyalty, true love, frankness, forgiveness and sacrifice. Regardless of Catherine's dark side, he still sticks to her as if she is the single woman in the world. Even after her death, he craves after her. To concretise his wish, he decides to stop eating and die so that he can meet his beloved in the afterlife. He narrows his life down to a "love or

die" paradigm. Rehman et al. (2026, p. 62) rightly note, "After Cathy's death, Heathcliff's whole life is concentrated on the suffering caused by his loss, and the violence of his desire to get Cathy back." Dying for the sake of uniting with Catherine in Heaven is a way for Heathcliff to fulfil his desire and recover from his repressed self.

2. The Interplay of Passion, Trauma and Vengeance

In *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine's duality is revealed. She embodies the conflict between passion and societal expectations. Her love for Heathcliff is intense but ultimately leads to her emotional turmoil, which contributes to Heathcliff's vengeful actions. Indeed, being initially hesitant to make a choice between her two lovers sheds light on Catherine's double-crossing nature. It is at that very moment that Heathcliff should have made up his mind about her, but he remains, trying to make her change. When analysing the character of Catherine, she is not as pure as the ideal Victorian woman who is expected to be clean and prudish. She seems to joke with the feelings of two men: Heathcliff and Edgar Linton. Although Heathcliff deeply loves her, she later settles for Linton. When Catherine reveals her dark side, impurity and heartlessness, Heathcliff turns out as a maniac, attempting to take revenge against Hindley who initially opposes his union with her. In this vein, Terry (2005, p. 108) observes that "Catherine, of course, is absorbed: she enters the civilised world of the Lintons and leaves Heathcliff behind, to become a 'wolfish', pitiless man." As a traumatized lover, Heathcliff can use any means available to do justice for himself. That is probably why when he returns to *Wuthering Heights* after his depression; and the roles are reversed, he takes revenge. He is now wealthy and Hindley becomes a poor and an alcoholic man engaged in gambling. To make him suffer, Heathcliff buys *Wuthering Heights* and *Thrushcross Grange*. Unable to overcome this pain and humiliation, Hindley falls into depression, which ultimately entails his demise. In that way, Heathcliff seems to have carried out his vengeance against Hindley who was cruel to him since childhood, calling him "a vagabond" (*WH*, p. 45).

The plot of *Wuthering Heights* turns around a cycle of revenge. In the rising action, the story illustrates how passion can lead to vengeance. Heathcliff's revenge on the Earnshaws and the Lintons perpetuates suffering, affecting subsequent generations, particularly Hareton and Cathy. Having undergone so many trials and tribulations caused by his haters and competitors, Heathcliff sets out to identify them and return their evil deeds. A person against whom he seriously takes revenge is Edgar Linton. Unable to confront him directly, he plans to marry Edgar's sister, Isabella Linton. After the marriage, Heathcliff tortures Isabella. According to Armstrong (2007, pp.93-94), "Heathcliff's character includes features besides those of a romantic hero [. . .] [he] proves true to the worst implications of the type." The torment Isabella endures seems to be understandable. In fact, the only woman Heathcliff truly adores is Catherine Earnshaw without whom he is unsettled. If Isabella was able to read between the lines,

she could have rejected Heathcliff's proposal, seeing him as a potential threat to her peace of mind. Yet, she is too young that she is unable to perceive his evil scheme. Their marriage becomes a spectrum of violence, hatred, beating and suffering due to the fact that both of them do not truly love each other. They just marry for flattery and view.

The novel further unearths the destructive nature of vengeance. Indeed, the devastating nature of revenge is blatant in the narrative as it consumes Heathcliff. By trying to retaliate the wrongdoings of others, Heathcliff becomes a foil, a true anti-hero constrained to live alone at Wuthering Heights. His unfulfilled love is seemingly the origin of his solitary life. Betrayal is a painful experience that is hard to overcome. When Catherine breaks Heathcliff's trust and confidence, he loses compassion for mankind. All his evil deeds in the story emerge as an attempt to reach reparations, heal and regain his selfhood. On this matter, Boone (2007, p. 138) concurs that "Heathcliff transforms himself after Catherine's death into [. . .] a prototypically 'masculine' oppressor who unfeelingly appropriates people's lives and possessions as a way of avenging himself on the social caste system responsible for his initial separation from Catherine." Seemingly, Heathcliff does not realise that the more wrongs he carries out, the more complicated the situation becomes. There is a divine teaching that one should replace a bad deed with a good one. On surface, Heathcliff does not seem to embrace this theology. For him, it is better to carry out Talion's law, which is based on the principle of an eye-for-an-eye and a tooth-for-a-tooth, meaning one must receive the same evil deed he performs on another person. Heathcliff must grow to understand that good always triumphs over evil. No matter the number of wrongs he performs on his haters, those are likely to harden his heart instead of repairing it. Therefore, the need for redemption is urgent for him to overcome the pain inflicted on him by his loved one and others.

3. Duality as Classless Aesthetic to Meeting Human Needs

Aesthetics is a sum total of narrative techniques, clues, symbols, signs that enable the writer to successfully convey his message to his readership. Duality is possibility to stand two realities as a compensational attitude to end radicalism. Duality argues on the belief that nothing is totally negative into having no lesson to teach; no human being can belong to a class for ever and that classes exist but belong to each is a matter of time. Thus, praising class bond is a dead end to human chances to grow, a dead end to exchanges as a flavour to qualitative progress. In Emily Brontë's novel, Heathcliff embodies frankness and mysteriousness. His directness is unveiled through his attachment to Catherine. In their relationship, it is only Heathcliff who opens up his heart to her. One may note that she is lucky enough because she seems to be the only one whom Heathcliff trusts among all the people living at Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. Sabah (2015, p. 9) acknowledges that "only Catherine exercises control over this 'fierce man'." Except for Mr. Earnshaw, all the people Heathcliff

passed his childhood with proof to be different from him in terms of social class. At this point, he feels hurt and unwanted in a household where an orphan like him is not welcome, especially by a peer of his age, Earnshaw. Concomitantly, Heathcliff's strangeness is displayed through his tendency to act as a social outcast. It can be assumed that his harshness and vulgar conduct stem from his sad childhood as Fabdriah (2017, p. 32) notes, "Heathcliff is a foundling taken in by Mr. Earnshaw and raised with his children. Of unknown descent, he seems to represent wild and natural forces which often seem amoral and dangerous for society." Based on Fabdriah's note here, Halliday's brand of "Social Semiotics" stands connoting Victorian people's perception, interpretation, of how human beings go about social morality and responsibility of their time. Presumably, Heathcliff's deep connection to the moors exemplifies his retreat from society. Thus, his whole life seems to be shaped by his mysteriousness. Despite his internal wounds caused by his haters, Heathcliff still incarnates the symbol of forgiveness on the condition that he reunites with his sweetheart Catherine. The main reason why he becomes a foil is the death of his loved one. For him, regaining her in the hereafter is finding his half self, his peace of mind and the possibility of regeneration. Thus, for Dias (2007, p. 260), "Death is the last way of dissolution for both characters, especially to Heathcliff after Cathy is dead who wants the physical merging of his corpse with hers. His plan is to be buried so close to her, that nobody would identify which corpse belongs to whom if one day their tomb was opened." Death is seen fulfilling unity and marriage bond Heathcliff failed to secure with Catherine because of his poor social rank. The process leading to this conclusion corroborates Halliday's opinion that "Language" that carries social markers stands as a "Social Semiotic". Again, through death, the two lovers symbolically escape the ban of their love through a potential 'merging' of their corpses.

In the narrative, Heathcliff develops as a hero and a villain. Amal and Ibrahim (2017, p. 349) rightly comment, "His [Heathcliff's] complicated, mesmerizing, consumable, and altogether bizarre nature makes him a rare character, with components of both the hero and villain." Heathcliff's heroism is essentially revealed through his resilience to overcome social vices and the traps set by his wrongdoers. Although most of the people turn against him, he stands firm and never changes his conduct to fit into Victorian social expectations. By proposing to Catherine, he bravely attempts to break Victorian social boundaries, which require class matching when it comes to marriage. Heathcliff subsequently becomes a villain, inflicting suffering on others because they reject his relationships with Catherine. On this occasion, Hayder (2023, pp. 23-24) observes, "the mental illness affected his [Heathcliff's] psyche, he has an extravagant view of himself, a strong need for attention and praise, a strained romantic connection, and little sympathy for others." Remarkably, Heathcliff mood consistently shifts throughout the novel. He is both kind and rude, demonstrating the complexity of his character. In a sense, Brontë coins this odd character called Heathcliff to part with Victorian social conventions and the romance style. Her writing is dense, gloomy and evocative of the restrictions placed on women during her time. Duality reads here as

an attempt to render gender justice. Thus, by creating unconventional characters such as Heathcliff and uncommon romantic relationships, Emily Brontë distinguishes herself from her own sister Charlotte Brontë whose novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847) culminates in happy ending, complying thus with the conventionality of Victorian romanticism. This is why Cronin (2002, p. 3) finds that "There are divisions between [Victorian writers:] those who confine their attention to the traditional literary genres and those who wish to bring into notice other kind of writing." Rochester-Jane's love is quite different from Heathcliff-Catherine's romance in that the former has a happy ending and the latter results in death and sadness. According to Peter (2019, p. 4), "[Emily] Brontë adds a twist to Heathcliff's character by introducing a most puzzling paradox: the incredible 'passionate love' he [Heathcliff] and Catherine share."

Through the character Heathcliff, the novel also highlights the themes of destruction and redemption. While Heathcliff's actions lead to destruction and despair, there are moments when his love for Catherine and his dualistic survival strategy suggest a potential for redemption of the society. This makes it complex to label him as a purely antagonistic figure of his time. Indeed, it seems that Heathcliff cannot find peace unless he forgives his offenders. By staying away from others' company because of Catherine's death fractures his mind and emotional well-being. Horribly, he gives up on taking care of himself when he hears about Catherine's demise. Mourning over the loss of one's lover to the point of losing interest in life is the worst choice Heathcliff seems to have made in *Wuthering Heights*. Self-starvation is the process by which he comes to end his own life just to meet with his beloved Catherine in the afterlife. A tragedy that calls for a perpetual need to change rules and regulations just as human beings do change classes in their life span. Zhao (2023, p. 4) clarifies that "Heathcliff gladly allows himself to die at the end of the novel. He demands to be left in solitude and refuses to eat and sleep." He could make such a sacrifice if Catherine lives up to his expectations, but during her lifetime Catherine did all to break his heart. Forgiving her and thereafter unearthing her dead body to reunite with her prove that Heathcliff is a truthful, reliable and compassionate person. He is faithful to Catherine; yet she betrays him, culminating in their gloomy ending. Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is a pathetic and horrific work because it is laden with death scenes, causing S. Purchase (2006, p. 36) to state that "most Victorian novels feature at least one death."

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that Heathcliff and Catherine's love in *Wuthering Heights* is ironic because it is shaped by societal expectations rather than true feelings. Although Catherine is in love with Heathcliff, she is obliged to align with Victorian traditions that require equality between partners in terms of social class. Being an orphan and an adopted child, Heathcliff does not meet the criteria to tie the knot with Catherine, resulting in his 'unfulfilled desire', to borrow Freud's (2007) term. In the story, the only man suitable for Catherine is the aristocrat, Edgar Linton whom

Hindley chooses for his sister rather than the destitute Heathcliff. This discrimination that infuriates Heathcliff and turns him into a violent and evil character, trying to make justice for himself through vengeance. The analysis further proved that revenge is not the solution to any problem. The way Heathcliff performs his vengeance can only harm him instead of regaining his selfhood. He must grow to know that other people are not responsible for Catherine's loss of interest in him, but it is a decision that comes from her heart to choose Edgar over him. His revenge is thus senseless and destructive. Betrayal is extremely painful, especially in romantic relationship; yet Heathcliff can win only if he forgives Catherine and moves on. Asnani (2024, p. 166) agrees that "rather than achieving justice, revenge often perpetuates a cycle of retaliation, as individual interpretations of moral equilibrium seldom align." Choosing to win Catherine's heart and connecting with her by all means lead to Heathcliff's own downfall. The moral lesson that emerges from this story is that in the end everyone is retributed with their deeds; whether they are good or bad. Catherine's ambivalence leads to her death after giving birth to Edgar's son. Hindley dies from alcohol dependence and gambling. Heathcliff passes away in the process of taking revenge against his wrongdoers and haters. Heathcliff's approach demonstrates that vengeance against those who hate us does not attract human heart, but it only leads to one's self-annihilation. Therefore, the article maintains that patience, redemption and mutual understanding stand as the bedrocks of any truthful and lasting human relationship.

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