

# The presentation of masculinity in winter's bone and wuthering heights



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In her essay “Dispelling the Myth of Strong Female Characters,” Megan Leigh deconstructs the phrase “strong female character”, and argues that it is too often a positive attachment given to two-dimensional female characters. The stereotypical female in literature is emotionally vulnerable, caring and weak, “while the strong woman is aggressive, abrasive, violent and has difficulty connecting emotionally with others”. When critics call for more “strong female characters”, what they really are calling for, Leigh says, is a masculine warrior stereotype in the form of a female character, or as she calls it, the “shedding of femininity”. Superficial readings of both *Winter’s Bone* and *Wuthering Heights* often come to the comparison that the female protagonists of the novel are “strong female characters”. This is often the case with modern feminist readings of many texts, as too often, female characters are considered “strong” due to their tendency towards traditionally masculine traits. In this essay, I hope to explore the presentation of masculinity in both texts, as well as examining the “strong female characters” within *Wuthering Heights* and *Winter’s Bone*.

Most critics of *Wuthering Heights* agree that Bronte’s intention was to create an anti-social genderless world, where characters behave regardless of societal pressures. This idea is most embodied in Cathy and Heathcliff who both proclaim to be the other’s half, despite their differing social statuses and genders. Inga-Stina Ewbank describes the polarity of Bronte’s work, “traditionally masculine and feminine qualities and attitudes are entirely subordinated to the complex of opposites formed”. Heathcliff and Cathy transcend their physical states, and behave outside the norms of their genders, as Terry Eagleton states “they seem to transcend the personal into

some region beyond” . Heathcliff mainly embodies masculine virtues, but sometimes exhibits a more well-rounded romantic version of masculinity, that involves intense emotions and passions. Charlotte Bronte explains that her sister creates this gender confusion because “ Nothing moved her more than any insinuation that ... esteemed virtues in the daughters of Eve, become foibles in the sons of Adam” . Unlike many other writers of her time, Bronte’s intent was not to uphold strict gender roles, but to question the toxicity of gender within her society through the subversion of traditional gothic roles. To reflect this, Bronte creates an intensely violent world, where primal, masculine characters cause the downfall of their own microcosm of society.

In contrast to Bronte’s world, it isn’t the masculine characters that enforce toxic masculinity within Woodrell’s novel, but the harsh landscape and society of the Ozarks. Within Woodrell’s modern southern gothic tale, the inherent violence within Ree’s male-driven society stems from her anti-social, violent surroundings. As much as Bronte creates a gender-less society, Woodrell’s intent is to create a masculine society, where all female traits are erased, as hyper-masculine violence is the only way to survive. Niall Griffiths warns of Woodrell’s society “ Here live brutal women” , as the women within the story are forced to inhabit the “ strong female character” role for the sake of survival. Although Woodrell inhabits the same message as Bronte, he faced much less criticism for his take on gender. Woodrell uses a female perspective to experience the “ harrowing world ”, but Ree’s perspective is authenticated through Woodrell, just as Lockwood gives credibility to Nellie’s narrative voice. Not only is Woodrell writing from the

privileged position of a male writer in a male-dominated field, but he also has the privilege of 159 years of progress, as far as discussions of gender. Much like Cathy writing on the margins of her bible, Bronte was forced to adopt a male pseudonym to even publish her works. The criticisms given to both works at the time of publishing reflect this, Woodrell receives immediate praise, whereas Bronte's reception is lukewarm at best and judgemental at worst, best shown in the Anonymous review of *Wuthering Heights* " We detest the affectation and emotional frippery which is but too frequent in the modern novel, and willingly trust ourselves with an author who goes at once fearlessly into the moors and desolate places" .

The " Emotional frippery" referred to by Anonymous in the previous quote, refers to the male characters in *Wuthering Heights* that together, represent changing attitudes towards masculinity in Victorian society. The evolving representation of masculinity was a side-effect of the industrial revolution, and the newly emerging middle class, who represented hard physical labour, and contribution to society through productivity. This was in direct contrast with the eighteenth-century ideals of masculinity that idealised power, status and property in favour of emotional or physical attributes. Faced with two extreme ideals of masculinity, Victorians found the construction of an ideal man nigh impossible. " The idea of the gentleman could never have fascinated the Victorians .... If it had been limited by caste ... a strict sense of heraldry ... {or} moralized concept. It was the subtle and shifting balance between social and moral attitudes that gave gentlemanliness its fashion ". Two characters that best represent these traditional and changing values are Edgar and Heathcliff, who are in constant competition and comparison within

the novel. Edgar Linton clearly represents the traditional, status-based forms of masculinity. Cathy is superficially attracted to him, as he would make her “ the greatest woman of the neighbourhood”. Edgar is not only characterised through his power and property, but through his effeminate, eighteenth-century standard of upper-class masculinity. Lockwood describes Linton’s portrait as “ soft featured” and “ resembling the young lady at the Heights ... almost too graceful”. The connotations of the adjectives used, of softness, youth and grace are all highly feminine, and emasculating.

Alternatively, Heathcliff is characterised as masculine and primal.

Throughout the novel, Heathcliff behaves violently towards his surroundings, and exhibits outbursts of uncontrollable emotion. Even as a small child, Heathcliff is capable of extreme violence, when first introduced by Mr Earnshaw, “ And at the end of it to be flighted to death...I was never so beaten with anything in my life...though it’s as dark almost as if it came from the devil”. The hyperbole used by Bronte here establishes Heathcliff’s innate, primal masculinity, despite his understanding that Mr. Earnshaw intended on helping him. Bronte also establishes here a supernatural element to Heathcliff’s masculinity, thought by many to represent the “ contradictory, transitional definitions of maleness” , which often manifests itself in indescribable, supernatural characters. This constant comparison to otherworldly, supernatural elements convey the inability of society to understand how masculinity takes its form. Despite this, Heathcliff’s interest remains in becoming more like Edgar, he laments to Nellie “ I wish I had light hair and fair skin ... and had a chance of being as rich as he will be”. The use of “ light” and “ fair” here, are also clear nods to how class and race based

the ideals of masculinity within Bronte's society were, as both adjectives convey the unspoken requirement of being white.

Despite reflecting the more modern aspects of masculinity, Heathcliff is fixated on the statutory power Edgar possesses, and not the physical power inhabited by himself. "A half-civilised ferocity lurked yet in the depressed brows and eyes full of black fire, but it was subdued: and his manner was even dignified: quite divested of roughness, through stern for grace". In this extract, Heathcliff's uncontrollable energy is conveyed through his transformation into a "gentleman". Though he attempts to appear transformed, he cannot fully become the eighteenth-century man, as this is an unfair, class-based ideal of masculinity. The verb "lurked" hints at the underlying primal nature apparent in Heathcliff.

We see a similar dichotomy in *Winter's Bone*, in the form of Ree's younger brothers, Sonny and Harold, and in the two brothers, Woodrell conveys the societal pressure to conform to a hyper-masculine stereotype. The older of the two, Sonny, despite his young age, portrays the idealised physical form of masculinity, he is "seed from a brute, strong, hostile and direct". The metaphorical "Seed" is often used surrounding Sonny, and is a biblical association with family, and within *Winter's Bone*, a more sinister way of referring to the inheritance of violence and masculinity. While Sonny correctly adheres to societal views of masculinity, his brother Harold struggles to commit acts of violence; "Harold trailed Sonny and tried to do as he did but lacked the same sort of punishing spirit and muscle and often came home in need of fixing, bruised or sprained or humiliated". This tripling portrays how unusual Harold's weakness is in the Dolly society. Not only <https://assignbuster.com/the-presentation-of-masculinity-in-winters-bone-and-wuthering-heights/>

does Harold lack the physical power of masculinity, but he also displays empathy and emotional intelligence, unlike Sonny. When faced with a pack of coyotes, the brothers' adverse reactions re-enforce their differing personalities. Sonny's reaction is to "just shoot 'em 'tween the eyes", whereas Harold wants to give food to them, as they "look like dogs".

Harold's empathy outlines how extreme the impulsive violence of Sonny is, emphasised by his speedy contractions, "'em" and "'tween". Harold is less affected by his society at first but is pressured to assimilate into the hyper masculine society, mainly by his sister, Ree, who forces him to kill and butcher a squirrel. "She pulled him down...He crouched on his knees with his eyes held shut and she guided his hand inside the squirrel. He made the sort of face that generally breaks into tears but squeezed with his hand and pulled...until the guts lay on the board... He said, "That really ain't no biggie, is it? His insides sure was good'n warm on my fingers". We see here through Ree's forceful, authoritarian physicality in "pulled" and "guided" and Harold's morbid enjoyment how although Ree cares for both her brothers, she still enforces the societal implications of masculinity; violence and apathy, on Sonny and Harold.

Ree is another figure in the novel that embodies masculinity, and the "strong female character" stereotype. Ree displays the same violence and selfishness; despite her role as caregiver to her family, she "snatched {Sonny's} ear and twisted" and shouts "Would you please, please, please, put the fucking socks on". The violent verb snatched as well as her use of violent language indicates not only her frustration at her situation, but her use of violence as a form of care. This female violence is reflective of the <https://assignbuster.com/the-presentation-of-masculinity-in-winters-bone-and-wuthering-heights/>

subversive values and taboo experiences in *Wuthering Heights*, that Ellen Moers refers to as “female perversities”. Moers points at gothic violence as being a truer reflection of Victorian “woman’s fantasy”, as opposed to nature, and following the domestic and serene. The violence exhibited in both *Wuthering Heights* and *Winter’s Bone* is said by Moers to be an actualisation of the middle-class Victorian experience, where women’s freedom lay in their childhood with their male siblings. As male siblings were given more freedom as they aged, women’s lives became more restrictive: “Girls clung to this early freedom and equality and displaced them into their writing”. Ree’s journey into the Ozark landscape, and Cathy’s entrapment to the moors, both as young women are indicative of the female wish to remain in their childhood, and the physical violence apparent in both women reflects children’s physical teasing. Cathy’s and Ree’s metaphorical and literal imprisonment outside of the domestic home is also a subversion of traditional Victorian spheres. The domestic and public spheres represented where the influence of both genders lay. Men dominated the world outside the home, whereas women ruled what lay within the home. The domestic spheres played into the Victorian idea of “the angel in the house”, of the ideal woman, expected to be devoted and submissive to her husband.

Both Bronte and Woodrell challenge these ideals. Bronte challenges this by creating a lack of conventionally private or public spaces, therefore her novel evades traditional separation of men and women. Bronte exhibits this breakdown of separation through the extract: “We ran from the top of the Heights to the park, without stopping – Catherine completely beaten in the race, because she was barefoot ... We crept through a broken hedge, groped



our way up the path, and planted ourselves on a flower-pot under the drawing-room window. The light came from thence; they had not put up the shutters, and the curtains were only half closed ... and clinging to the ledge, and we saw – ah! it was beautiful – a splendid place”. Cathy and Heathcliff exist here outside of the domestic space of Thrushcross Grange, they are more a part of the wilderness. The collective language used by Bronte “ we”, “ both of us” and the possessive pronoun “ our” connect the two, as they are drawn into the socialized space, that eventually Cathy is taken into and feminized by the “ reform”, implying that her change is a social construct, and is re-enforced by the Linton’s rather than a quality that is naturally ingrained in all women. The change in Cathy is an unnatural one, and she compares her separation from her true self, and Wuthering Heights as being cast out of heaven. “ Heaven did not seem my home ... I’ve no more business to marry Edgar Linton than I have to be in heaven” and rejects the “ angel in the house” role.

Woodrell simultaneously rejects the ideals of the “ angel in the house” role, and the ideals of “ domestic spheres”. Ree is first established in the novel outside the domestic space, on the front steps of her house, as she watches meat hanging from the trees. In the cold weather, Ree stands alone amongst the “ carcasses, hung pale of flesh with a fatty gleam from low limb”. The absurd image of the hanging, phallic meat and the indifferent reaction of Ree convey stoically how she rejects the ideals of femininity. Whilst she inhabits the traditional female caregiver role within her family, it is not by choice. Ree would much rather “ get away from her family, as planned, off to the U. S. Army, where you got to travel with a gun”. Through Ree, Woodrell conveys

the role that young women must inhabit in a brutal, masculine society. As Nataliya Lee says, “ For men in Ree’s world there seem to be two options – meth and prison. For women it’s even less. There is obedience, loveless marriages, violence, and hard work” . Ree is set in contrast with the other young people in her community, who she describes using animalistic verbs, “ huddled” “ crouched” and “ sated” in “ she saw pregnant girls she knew huddled by their special side entrance holding textbooks and bumping bellies. She saw boys she knew sharing smoke, crouched beside their pickup trucks. She saw lovers she knew kissing back and forth with enough wet kisses to hold each sated and faithful until the lunch hour”. The animalistic behaviour re-enforces how Ree’s hyper-masculine society causes the people around her to react primally and impulsively. Woodrell’s society is so gendered that “ Most places still had two front doors in accordance with certain readings of Scripture, one door for men, the other for women”.

Despite this, Ree exhibits some emotional traits, especially with her friend Gail, who also furthers the exploration of the “ angel in the house role” in *Winter’s Bone*. Gail was “ required by pregnancy to marry” the man who impregnated her at 16, and Ree constantly questions her decision, and how restricted she is by her husband; she describes how she’d “ overnight become glued to her spot”. The subversion of this role, is presented not through Ree or Gail, however, but through Mrs Thump Milton, and the older women of her town. Mrs Milton, at first appears to be the perfect embodiment of the “ angel in the house”. When she first meets Ree, she brings her a cup of hot soup, and appears to give her advice on how she shouldn’t ask questions about her father. When Ree returns, having

exhausted all options, Mrs Milton and the older woman knock her unconscious: “ Mrs. Thump’s white hair was done up in big pink rollers held in place by a mostly yellow scarf. the world flushed upside down in her eyes while her ears rang, and she staggered ... One of Mrs. Thump’s rollers had jerked loose and dangled springy around her head ... Ree swung a fist at those blunt teeth in a red mouth but missed ... the mutters of beasts uncaged from women and she was sunk to a moaning place, kicked into silence”.

Throughout the extract, overly feminine symbols are used to contrast the heavy violence used by the older women upon Ree. Mrs. Thumps “ rollers” her “ red mouth” are all sinister signs that their true intentions were hidden underneath their feminine guises. The adjective “ uncaged” is effectively used by Woodrell to convey how, despite their attempts to appear composed, the women’s animalistic violence is uncovered as they give into their primal urges. This is foreshadowed earlier in the novel, when Ree hides guns behind feminine clothes “ She reached behind the rank of skirts and dresses hanging, into a far hidden corner, and retrieved two long guns”. Woodrell portrays here how overt femininity can be used to disguise your true, inherent violence, emphasised by the militaristic noun “ rank”. It is through this experience that Ree learns whereas the overtly masculine males appear to be in control of Ree’s life and her community, it is the women of the town who secretly and subtly control the matriarchy.

It is implied by Woodrell that male primal instincts force them to behave irrationally, and unintelligently. This is what allows the calculating women of her town to take power, whilst allowing the violent, physical men to feel as <https://assignbuster.com/the-presentation-of-masculinity-in-winters-bone-and-wuthering-heights/>

though they're in charge. "The most villainous mountain women can be felled not by gunshot but by that most subtle and feminine of weapons - round and round of righteous gossip" says Carolynn See on how Ree is treated by her elders. The climax of the novel appears when these same women finally lead Ree to her father's resting place and force her to commit a violent act - to saw his hands off. "The ice gave as she stretched, and she fell into the pond. She felt Dad with her legs, bent into the water and raised him by pulling on his head. His skin felt like pickled eggs. She found the good hand and pulled it toward the chain saw. Her body was gone, she could not feel it below the neck, and a glow spread in her mind." The extract is a parallel to how Ree forced her brother to kill and butcher a squirrel, from her slow "stretched hand" to the "warm" feeling felt by Ree, both are examples of how society enforces violence.

Similarly to *Winter's Bone*, the resolution to the thematic build-up of masculinity comes not from the expected source of Heathcliff or Edgar, but from Hareton. Hareton is treated as a lower-class figure throughout the novel, because of his harsh treatment at the hands of Heathcliff. But with the help of Catherine, he removes the privilege of upper-class education from Catherine and Linton, and the class-constrictions on masculinity and is able to establish a fully-formed vision of masculinity through humility, and not brutality, as Heathcliff tries. In doing so, Hareton begins a chain reaction that leads to him coming to fully inhabit the traditional masculine figure of the gentleman that he was entitled to from birth, as he Catherine and presumably will inherit *Wuthering Heights* and *Thrushcross Grange*.

Lockwood describes Hareton as "a young man, respectably dressed, and

seated at a table, having a book before him. His handsome features glowed with pleasure”, which contrasts Lockwood’s initial description of Heathcliff: “in dress and manners a gentleman” and contrasts the resolution to Heathcliff’s arch in *Wuthering Heights*.

Gothic literature, both contemporary and Victorian, allows gender to be explored through extreme circumstance. Through extra-ordinary situations, women and men are allowed to traverse and break the lines between genders. In *Winter’s Bone* and *Wuthering Heights*, our gothic novelists create circumstantial societies to evaluate and subvert traditionally masculine and feminine roles. Bronte explores the strong female character as a reaction to the Victorian ideal of the “angel in the house” and it’s effect on Victorian masculinity, whilst Woodrell deconstructs the inherent violent masculinity within the strong female character and exposes it’s shortcomings.