

# Love and revenge in bronte's "wuthering heights"

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



## Overview

The novel, which features an unusually intricate plot, traces the effects that unbridled hate and love have on two families through three generations. Ellen Dean, who serves both families, tells Mr. Lockwood, the new tenant at Thrushcross Grange, the bizarre stories of the house's family, the Linton's, and of the Earnshaws of Wuthering Heights. Her narrative weaves the four parts of the novel, all dealing with the fate of the two families, into the core story of Catherine and Heathcliff.

The two lovers manipulate various members of both families simply to inspire and torment each other in life and death.

Heathcliff dominates the novel. Ruthless and tyrannical, he represents a new kind of man, free of all restraints and dedicated totally to the satisfaction of his deepest desires no matter what the cost to others or himself. He meets his match in Catherine, who is also his inspiration. Her visionary dreams and bold identification with the powers of storm and wind at Wuthering Heights are precisely what make Heathcliff worship her.

When Catherine betrays Heathcliff by marrying Ralph Linton, Heathcliff feels she has betrayed the freedom they shared as children on the moor. He exacts a terrible revenge. However, he is no mere Gothic villain. Somehow, the reader sympathizes with this powerful figure who is possessed by his beloved.

Introduction In 1801, Mr. Lockwood became a tenant at Thrushcross Grange, an old farm owned by a Mr. Heathcliff of Wuthering Heights. In the early days of his tenancy, he made two calls on his landlord. On his first visit, he met <https://assignbuster.com/love-and-revenge-in-brontes-wuthering-heights/>

Heathcliff, an abrupt, unsocial man who was surrounded by a pack of snarling, barking dogs. When he went to Wuthering Heights a second time, he met the other members of the strange household: a rude, unkempt but handsome young man named Hareton Earnshaw and a pretty young woman who was the widow of Heathcliff's son.

During his visit, snow began to fall. It covered the moor paths and made travel impossible for a stranger in that bleak countryside. Heathcliff refused to let one of the servants go with him as a guide but said that if he stayed the night he could share Hareton's bed or that of Joseph, a sour, canting old servant. When Mr. Lockwood tried to borrow Joseph's lantern for the homeward journey, the old fellow set the dogs on him, to the amusement of Hareton and Heathcliff. The visitor was finally rescued by Zillah, the cook, who hid him in an unused chamber of the house.

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Form and Content Wuthering Heights is a story of passionate love that encompasses two generations of two families, the Earnshaws and the Lintons. It is a framed tale narrated by two different characters, one with intimate knowledge of the families (Nelly Dean) and one unacquainted with their history. The first narrator is the stranger, Mr. Lockwood. A wealthy, educated man, Lockwood has chosen to rent a house in the isolated moors, saying that he has wearied of society. Yet his actions belie his words: He pursues a friendship with Heathcliff despite the latter's objections and seeks information about all the citizens of the neighborhood. Lockwood is steeped in the conventions of his class, and he consistently misjudges the people he meets at Wuthering Heights. He assumes that Hareton Earnshaw, the rightful owner of Wuthering Heights, is a servant and that Catherine Linton is a demure wife to Heathcliff. His statements, even about himself, are untrustworthy, requiring the corrective of Nelly Dean's narrative.

Lockwood cultivates Nelly Dean's friendship when a long illness, brought on by his foolish attempt to visit Heathcliff during a snowstorm, keeps him bedridden for weeks. Nelly has been reared with the Earnshaws and has been a servant in both households. She has observed much of the central drama between the two families, but her statements, too, are colored by prejudice. Nelly dislikes Catherine Earnshaw, who behaved selfishly and

treated the servants badly at times, and she supports Edgar Linton because he was a gentleman.

Patterns of dualism and opposition are played out between the first and second generations as well. Heathcliff, the physically strongest father, has the weakest child, Linton Heathcliff. By dying young, Linton dissolves the triangular relationship that has so plagued the older generation, undermining Heathcliff's influence. Hareton Earnshaw, abused like Heathcliff and demonstrating surprising similarities of character, nevertheless retains some sense of moral behavior and is not motivated by revenge. Catherine Earnshaw's daughter, as willful and spirited as her mother, does not have to make the same difficult choice between passionate love and socially sanctioned marriage. Instead, Catherine Linton and Hareton Earnshaw are left to help each other and inherit the positive legacies of the past, enjoying both the social amenities of Thrushcross Grange and the natural environment of Wuthering Heights.

AnalysisAn essential element of Wuthering Heights is the exploration and extension of the meaning of romance. By contrasting the passionate, natural love of Catherine and Heathcliff with the socially constructed forms of courtship and marriage, Emily Brontë makes an argument in favor of individual choice. Catherine and Heathcliff both assert that they know the other as themselves, that they are an integral part of each other, and that one's death will diminish the other immeasurably.

This communion, however, is doomed to failure while they live because of social constraints. Heathcliff's unknown parentage, his poverty, and his lack of education make him an unsuitable partner for a gentlewoman, no matter

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how liberated her expressions of independence. Brontë suggests the possibility of reunion after death when local residents believe they see the ghosts of Heathcliff and Catherine together, but this notion is explicitly denied by Lockwood's last assertion in the novel, that the dead slumber quietly.

The profound influence of Romantic poetry on Brontë's literary imagination is evident in her development of Heathcliff as a Byronic hero. This characterization contributes to the impossibility of any happy union of Catherine and Heathcliff while they live. Heathcliff looms larger than life, subject to violent extremes of emotion, amenable to neither education nor nurturing. Like Frankenstein's monster, he craves love and considers revenge the only fit justice when he is rejected by others. Catherine, self-involved and prone to emotional storms, has just enough sense of self-preservation to recognize Heathcliff's faults, including his amorality. Choosing to marry Edgar Linton is to choose psychic fragmentation and separation from her other self, but she sees no way to reconcile her psychological need for wholeness with the physical support and emotional stability that she requires. Unable to earn a living, dependent on a brother who is squandering the family fortune, she is impelled to accept the social privileges and luxuries that Edgar offers.

Yet conventional forms of romance provide no clear guide to successful marriage either; both Edgar and his sister, Isabella, suffer by acting on stereotypical notions of love. Edgar does not know Catherine in any true sense, and his attempts to control her force her subversive self-destruction. Isabella, fascinated by the Byronic qualities with which Heathcliff is so richly

endowed, believes that she really loves him and becomes a willing victim in his scheme of revenge. What remains is a paradoxical statement about the nature and value of love and a question about whether any love can transcend social and natural barriers.

Another theme that Brontë examines is the effect of abuse and brutality on human nature. The novel contains minimal examples of nurturing, and most instruction to children is of the negative kind that Joseph provides with his lectures threatening damnation. Children demonstrably suffer from a lack of love from their parents, whose attention alternates between total neglect and physical threats. The novel is full of violence, exemplified by the dreams that Lockwood has when he stays in Wuthering Heights. After being weakened by a nosebleed which occurs when Heathcliff's dogs attack him, Lockwood spends the night in Catherine Earnshaw's old room.

He dreams first of being accused of an unpardonable sin and being beaten by a congregation in church, then of a small girl, presumably Catherine, who is trying to enter the chamber's window. Terrified, he rubs her wrist back and forth on a broken windowpane until he is covered in blood. These dreams anticipate further violence: Hindley's drunken assaults on his son and animals, Catherine's bloody capture by the Lintons' bulldog, Edgar's blow to Heathcliff's neck, and Heathcliff's mad head-banging when he learns of Catherine's death.

Heathcliff never recovers from the neglect and abuse that he has experienced as a child; all that motivates him in adulthood is revenge and a philosophy that the weak deserve to be crushed. Hareton presents the possibility that degraded character can be redeemed and improved through

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the twin forces of education and love, yet this argument seems little more than a way of acknowledging the popular cultural stereotype and lacks the conviction that Brontë reveals when she focuses on the negative effects of brutality.

A third significant theme of *Wuthering Heights* is the power of the natural setting. Emily Brontë loved the wildness of the moors and incorporated much of her affection into her novel. Catherine and Heathcliff are most at one with each other when they are outdoors. The freedom that they experience is profound; not only have they escaped Hindley's anger, but they are free from social restraints and expectations as well. When Catherine's mind wanders before her death, she insists on opening the windows to breathe the wind off the moors, and she believes herself to be under Penistone Crag with Heathcliff.

Her fondest memories are of the times on the moors; the enclosed environment of Thrushcross Grange seems a petty prison. In contrast to Catherine and Heathcliff, other characters prefer the indoors and crave the protection that the houses afford. Lockwood is dependent on the comforts of home and hearth, and the Lintons are portrayed as weaklings because of their upbringing in a sheltered setting. This method of delineating character by identifying with nature is another aspect of Emily Brontë's inheritance from the Romantic poets.

Themes and Meanings Few books have been scrutinized as closely as *Wuthering Heights*. It has been analyzed from every psychological perspective; it has been described as a spiritual or religious novel. Broadly speaking, it is the story of an antihero, Heathcliff, and his attempt to steal

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Wuthering Heights from its rightful owners, Catherine and Hindley Earnshaw. Thus, in this complex story of fierce passions, Heathcliff is portrayed as a cuckoo, who succeeds in dispossessing the legitimate heirs to Wuthering Heights. His revenge is the driving force behind the plot, though he betrays occasional glimpses of affection for Hareton, the young man whom he has ruined.

“ Wuthering” is a dialect word descriptive of the fierceness of the Yorkshire climate, with its “ atmospheric tumult.” The title of the novel refers not only to the farm house and its inhabitants but also to the effect that Heathcliff’s desire for Cathy has on him and those around him. As the story progresses, his nature becomes successively warped, and he loses Cathy. After Heathcliff returns from a self-imposed exile-educated and wealthy-the meetings with Cathy further lacerate his soul and bring ruin to all those around him. Heathcliff’s ultimate revenge is to make Hareton, Hindley’s son, suffer as he did. “ Wuthering,” “ tumult,” and “ stunted growth” apply equally to nature and humans in this novel. Yet no hatred as powerful as Heathcliff’s can sustain itself; it burns too fiercely. When his desire for vengeance has run its course, Heathcliff achieves his greatest wish-to be united with his beloved Catherine. This reunion can take place only in the grave and the spirit world beyond it.

During Heathcliff’s life, Wuthering Heights was a hell; it will never become a heaven, but as the second generation of Earnshaw and Linton children grow up free of Heathcliff’s corrupting influence, Emily Brontë suggests, a spiritual rebirth is possible. Optimism peeps through her dark vision.

ConclusionThe meaning of Heathcliff's exultation in death can be clarified by the one occasion when he displays that same emotion in life: Hindley's funeral. At that time, Nelly observes " something like exultation in [Heathcliff's] aspect" (p. 230), and the reason for it is obvious: triumphant revenge against the pain and humiliation that Hindley made him suffer in childhood. This link between exultation and revenge implies that Heathcliff's own death also concerns revenge against pain and humiliation that he has been made to suffer.

But this time, the victim of revenge is none other than himself-or, more precisely, as we shall see, his own life. By allowing obsession with the Ghost to usurp the awareness necessary to sustain his own life, Heathcliff avenges himself on the humiliating sense of neglect that life made him suffer. He makes death signify his rejection of life as unworthy of attention. His " life-like gaze" (p. 411) in death views the living with the same " sneer" of contempt with which Unlove once regarded him.

The relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine thrives as long as vulnerability to the same domestic source of Unlove (i. e., Hindley) unites them. Entry into adulthood frees them from that environment, yet even greater discord follows. Each meets the other in mere oppugnancy. Heathcliff reproaches Catherine for abandoning him: " Catherine . . . I know you have treated me infernally-infernally!" (p. 138). Catherine is just as convinced that Heathcliff has abandoned her: " You have killed me and thriven on it" (p. 195). Yet in the midst of this embittered opposition, each protests passionately that he or she loves the other-and only the other. It could not be otherwise.

Even as a married couple, the result would have been the same. Without a third party on whom to blame the pain of rejection, Heathcliff and Catherine are doomed both to love and resent each other with equal intensity. For, as we have seen, their love is founded on a paradox: no love unless they share the pain of rejection. In childhood, Hindley inflicted that pain on them. In adulthood, they must inflict it on each other. That is what love formed by Unlove means for them.

Hindley's failure to kill Heathcliff must be understood as a success. Even more than revenge against Heathcliff, Hindley wants pity for his own suffering—and this is exactly what he achieves. After succumbing to the onslaught of his opponent whom he himself has enraged, Hindley, now unconscious and wounded by his own weapon, is tended by Heathcliff, whose solicitous action, though rough and hasty, underscores the relief implicit in the extremity of pain. Thus, in their desperate struggle on either side of the window, Heathcliff and Hindley are mirror images of the same mentality of Unlove. The violent cruelty of each derives from preoccupation with the loss of love he himself has been made to suffer. On the surface in both cases, revenge for that loss of love seems to be the dominant motive, but actually the most profound one is the wish to end the pain by increasing its intensity.

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