

# Class ideology in wuthering heights

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



The characters in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* treat class hierarchy as if it is something natural and immutable, but the author shows that the way characters treat each other is largely based off the class they come to identify with. This identity is gained through the way characters are raised, not something they are truly born with. While Heathcliff is mistreated due to his origin, he manages to remove himself from this position and gain a position of power. On the other hand, Hareton, son of the esteemed Earnshaw family, becomes an illiterate servant through Heathcliff's manipulation. While other characters treat them like they belong in these positions, Brontë uses these characters to show that class is a construction, a matter of nurture rather than nature.

The first clear instance of class construction is when Mr. Earnshaw brings young Heathcliff back to *Wuthering Heights* after his trip to Liverpool. The immediate response to him is overwhelmingly negative. Nelly, who narrates the story to Lockwood and is herself a servant, initially describes him as a “dirty, ragged, black-haired child” who speaks “in some gibberish that nobody could understand” (26). Nelly also continually refers to Heathcliff as “it,” speaking of him in statements such as “They entirely refused to have it in bed with them, or even in their room... so, I put it on the landing of the stairs, hoping it might be gone on the morrow” (27). Referring to his speech as “gibberish” denies him language and reduces him to the level of an animal, but referring to him as “it” denies him even a gender and thus reduces him to a mere object. Her previous quote also shows how Heathcliff is mistreated by many of the house's residents. Nelly later relays to Lockwood that Heathcliff was “hardened, perhaps, to ill-treatment” because

he would “stand Hindley’s blows without winking or shedding a tear” (27). This suggests that Heathcliff, as a child, had already learned to internalize certain class roles and societal expectations, and acts upon them in his new home, believing that there is nothing to be done about the abuse he faces from Hindley, perhaps even seeing himself as the object others see him as, something to be used and abused without objection.

These characters do not treat Heathcliff this way out of a direct desire to assign him to a lower social class. Nelly never mentions exactly why they react so poorly to Heathcliff and treat him in this manner. Their actions are simply presented as natural reactions to Heathcliff’s appearance, or his perceived status: orphaned, classless, and with darker skin than they normally see. The Linton family reacts similarly when he and Catherine arrive at Thrushcross Grange. While Catherine is accepted by the family, Heathcliff is rejected. They initially describe him as a “gypsy,” then as “a little Lascar, or an American or Spanish castaway,” again bringing up the issue of his skin color. After this, Mrs. Linton says he is a “wicked boy... and quite unfit for a decent house!” before forcing him to leave (36). While they speak as if they are expelling him from the house for acting badly, Catherine was trespassing as well. It seems, rather, that they reject Heathcliff while they accept Catherine because she is of a family they recognize and respect, while Heathcliff seems to be nothing more than a dark skinned troublemaker.

Even Catherine, who becomes Heathcliff’s close friend, is still unable to escape the influence of class expectations. Nelly recounts a conversation she had with Catherine about the reasons she would want to marry Edgar Linton

instead of Heathcliff. Among the reasons Catherine lists is the fact that Edgar “ will be rich, and I shall like to be the greatest woman of the neighbourhood” (57). In contrast, she later says “ It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff, now; so he shall never know how I love him” (59). Despite her love for Heathcliff, she too has certain class roles and societal expectations ingrained in her mind, believing that she ought to marry someone of a closer social class rather than a “ gypsy” orphan, despite what she may feel about them as individuals. Catherine elaborates, though, saying that her “ love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods” and that her “ love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath” (60). Both loves are compared to natural imagery, implying that it would not be any less natural for Catherine to love Heathcliff than it would be for her to love Edgar. Her perceptions of what would be more proper, which are treated as natural, are shown to be constructions.

Heathcliff ultimately shows his class to be a construction when he returns after having run away. Nelly, who once described him negatively, says she was “ amazed to behold [his] transformation” into “ a tall, athletic, well-formed man” whose countenance “ looked intelligent, and retained no former marks of degradation” (70). He shows class to be malleable by working his way up from being a subservient child to the master of the house, a position that other characters would believe unavailable to him because of his origin.

He uses this powerful position to further display the unnatural, constructed nature of the class system. When Nelly goes to visit Wuthering Heights after

his rise to power, he tells her about his plans for Hareton, the son of Hindley, the man who abused him as a child. “ I can sympathise with all his feelings, having felt them myself,” he says. “ I’ve got him faster than his scoundrel of a father secured me, and lower” (161). Here, he explicitly states that he intends to bring Hareton down to a level lower than his own to have revenge on those who mistreated him. Brontë directly shows the construction of a character’s class.

Readers see the results of this construction in the way Cathy interacts with Hareton. Despite the fact that he is her cousin, son of the same esteemed family as her mother, she treats him as a member of the lower class Heathcliff has designated Hareton to by the way he raised him. When Hareton attempts to raise himself out of the position he has been lowered into by reading Cathy’s books, she reacts negatively. “ I have no wish to limit his acquirements,” she says, but “ he has no right to appropriate what is mine, and make it ridiculous to me with his vile mistakes and mispronunciations... I hate to have them debased and profaned in his mouth!” (221). She criticizes his manner of speaking as Nelly did with young Heathcliff. She acts as if his lack of education is something intrinsic to his position. Rather than attempting to help him, she criticizes his attempts to better himself, implying that he belongs in that position, outright stating that she believes the value of her own possessions is diminished by Hareton’s use of them.

Brontë uses these characters to show that class is more of a construction than a fact of nature, no matter how natural the characters of Wuthering

Heights may believe it to be. She shows the ways characters can be brought down and assigned to a certain class, regardless of the position they were born into. The fact that a child of a higher class such as Hareton was able to parallel to the experiences of Heathcliff proves that class is a matter of nurture, not nature. Brontë seems to have introduced this unexpected situation to criticize the rigidity of class systems, giving readers an example to demonstrate how absurd it is to consider such a harmful and malleable system as “ natural.”