

To what extent do we
feel sympathy
towards the character
of heathcliff?



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Heathcliff through out 'Wuthering Heights' is a very secluded character. He is introduced as a seven-year-old orphan, probably an Irish famine immigrant. Mr. Earnshaw brings him back to Wuthering Heights. His story, in the words of Nelly Dean, is a "cuckoo's story", his presence in Wuthering Heights overthrows the rightful role of the rightful heir, Hareton. The reader's sympathies towards Heathcliff change at different stages, at one point feeling angry with Heathcliff for being so cruel, and then the next feeling sympathetic for his treatment.

This talent of Bronte's keeps the reader undecided on Heathcliff, even at the end of the novel the argument exists on whether we as the reader do and should feel sympathy towards Heathcliff. Even on the first night of Heathcliff's arrival he caused jealousy and resentment. He being the reason that Mr. Earnshaw breaks the toys that he has brought for the children. Nelly recorded 'From the very beginning he bred bad feelings in the house'.

Heathcliff usurps the affections of Mr. Earnshaw to the exclusion of Hindley:- 'The young master had learnt to regard his father as an oppressor rather than a friend. However, just because Hindley is jealous and striving for attention this does not mean it was Heathcliff's fault that Mr. Earnshaw felt favour towards him. In another incident Mr. Earnshaw gives both Hindley and Heathcliff a colt. When Heathcliff's colt goes lame he threatens to blackmail Hindley if he does not swap with him. He then vows 'I'm trying to settle how I shall pay Hindley back,' he continues 'I don't care how long I have to wait, if only I can do it at last. I hope he will not die before I do! '.

From the beginning Heathcliff has interrupted a calm family and turned affections upside down, although Hindley is not completely welcoming to Heathcliff the reader can understand him being threatened by a stranger. However, Heathcliff is an innocent child just an orphan. He is viewed as a thing rather than a child; Mrs. Earnshaw was ready to fling it out of doors, he is described as 'a dirty, ragged, black haired child;' Nelly even claims 'I put it on the landing of the stairs, hoping it might be gone on the morrow. '

Following the death of Mr. Earnshaw Heathcliff is abandoned to him suffering at the hands of Hindley, this arouses in Heathcliff deep hatred and passion for revenge. Heathcliff is deprived of love, a social life and education; according to Nelly this treatment was 'enough to make a fiend of a saint. ' He is separated from the family, reduced to the status of a servant, forced to become a farmhand, undergoes regular beatings and separated from his one love, Catherine. The personality that Heathcliff develops in adulthood is a result to the deprivation of his childhood. On the other hand Heathcliff becomes consumed with revenge.

He never forgets an injury sustained on him at Wuthering Heights, after a three-year absence, this impulse for revenge becomes his overpowering passion. He ruins Hindley by encouraging excessive drinking and gambling, after this he turns his attention to the innocent Hareton; - 'We'll see if one tree won't grow as crooked as another with the same wind to twist. '

Heathcliff intends to achieve revenge on Hindley through his son Hareton by treating the boy in the same way he was treated. Heathcliff even states 'I've got him faster than his scoundrel of a father had me, and lower,'

However even though Hareton is brought up as a ploughboy and treated worse than Heathcliff he does not turn to revenge, he has innate goodness. 'the trees do not 'bend as crooked as one another' even though they 'have the same wind to shape it'. So even though it could be argued the audience cannot blame Heathcliff for wanting to seek revenge, Hareton learns to manage. The excuse of revenge is not good enough, as this could not be acceptable for everyone doing this. Heathcliff becomes consumed in regret against Edgar Linton, who in his eyes has stolen his Catherine from him.

He devises a plan to seek revenge on Edgar. When doing so Heathcliff feels no remorse for the fact he uses Edgar's sister Isabella to his advantage and even torturing her. After marrying Isabella she writes in a letter 'Is Mr. Heathcliff a man? ' 'If so he is mad? And if not he is a devil? ' This being a common feature of Gothic novels, the presentation of the plot through multiple narrators, another being Frankenstein by Mary Shelley, one novel within many stories.

The book 'The Rise of the Gothic Novel' criticises this claiming, '... characters and devices being recycled from one text to the next. ' However, in argument to this using different types of narration such as letters or diaries enhances the different viewpoints and experiences of every character, a feature in another successful Gothic Novel 'Dracula'. Heathcliff goes on to destroy Isabella; she is just a pawn in his game. Heathcliff even admits what he has done and showing no regret. 'I don't care who knows that the passion was wholly on one side; and I never told her a lie about it. She cannot accuse me of showing one bit of deceitful softness.

The first thing she saw me do, on coming out of the Grange, was to hang up her little dog; and when she pleaded for it, the first words I uttered were a wish that I had the hanging of every being belonging to her. 'The way he treats Isabella is of great enjoyment for him. 'The more the worms writhe, the more I yearn to crush the entrails. 'This is very graphic for someone who is innocent; he finds it thrilling seeing Isabella in despair. He takes a young and impressionable girl who does not understand and then marries her and taking her away from her home and family to a very secluded and depressing way of life.

In objection to this idea perhaps Isabella is not very innocent. She is warned of Heathcliff by Cathy and what he wants her for. 'he'd crush you, like a sparrow's egg, Isabella ,' This example that Cathy gives could be related to the lapwings that Heathcliff keeps and ends starving to death waiting for Cathy to come back to him, perhaps Isabella will be another lapwing, being trapped in Wuthering Heights. Also Cathy tells 'I know he could not love a Linton; and yet he'd be quite capable for your fortunes and expectations,' So Isabella was warned but carried on with the infatuation regardless.

In argument to this Heathcliff does go to the dramatic and violent extent of turning 'her blue eyes black' when beating Isabella. One reason for this act on Heathcliff's behalf is because of the way he is treated by the Linton's and the alienation from the life of the Grange. He is reminded of his lesser status when Catherine is welcomed into the Linton household where as he is rejected, made fun of and alienated. His love Cathy has been changed and transformed by the Grange.

'Why, how very black and grim you look! and how-how funny and grim! But that's because I'm used to Edgar and Isabella Linton. Heathcliff has to cope with the dramatic change of his wild and passionate love, returning and finding him funny compared to her new high class associates. When Catherine marries Edgar this is the breaking point for Heathcliff, he cannot bear to live near them. He then disappears for three years. After over hearing a conversation between Nelly and Cathy where she explains that she cannot marry Heathcliff because of his low status. This leads Heathcliff to believe if he can become a gentleman with wealth he would be acceptable. However this is not the case.

To become an important figure at this time the status symbol was property. This is what becomes very important to Heathcliff later, when he tries to marry into the Linton family, to have Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. When he returns with wealth he is still seen as a lower class. On his return Edgar remarks, 'What, the gypsy- the ploughboy? ' This is a typical view of Heathcliff that cannot be changed by wealth. The reader feels very sympathetic for Heathcliff at this point as he was even prepared to change his wild ways and become a sophisticated man for the love of Cathy.

Heathcliff then uses Linton to try and gain property. He has no fatherly feelings but is just using his son. His main consideration lies in calculating whether Linton lives long enough to marry Cathy so acquiring Thrushcross Grange-; 'We calculate it will scarcely last 'till it's eighteen. ' Once the marriage has taken place, Linton's life is seen as worthless to Heathcliff-; 'His life is not worth a farthing, and I won't spend a farthing on him. ' Linton like

Isabella has just become a pawn in Heathcliff's revengeful game, sympathy is lost for Heathcliff when he can treat others like this.

He continues this abuse of Linton when calling his mother a 'slut' in his presence. A great reason for the reader to feel contempt towards Heathcliff would be his treatment of Cathy. He blames her for Catherine's death, 'He cursed you, I dare say, for coming into the world (I did, at least.)' He continues to treat Cathy horrifically. He wants to marry Linton to Cathy so arranges for him to meet her and beg her to accompany him to Wuthering Heights by telling her he is scared of Heathcliff. With streaming face and an expression of agony, Linton had thrown his nerveless frame along the ground; he seemed convulsed with exquisite terror. ' When Cathy does accompany her cousin Heathcliff imprisons Cathy with Nelly.

'He shut and locked it also. ' Referring to the kitchen door. Cathy then struggles with him for the key, Heathcliff loses his temper and 'pulling her on his knee, administered, with the other, a shower of terrific slaps on both sides of the head, sufficient to have fulfilled his threat, had she been able to fall. Even though this is the daughter of the woman he claims to live for, he has no compassion for her because she is a Linton, a very selfish attitude to an innocent sixteen-year old. Cathy even begs for her release to be with her dying father, 'If Papa thought I had left him, on purpose; and if he died before I returned, could I bear to live? ' even after pleading to him, Heathcliff continues to keep her prisoner until the next morning. There is however another side of the character of Heathcliff. At no point in the novel can the reader doubt his eternal love and wild passion for Catherine.

His love survives her rejection of him-; 'It would degrade me to marry Mr. Heathcliff' and despite her marriage to Edgar, Heathcliff's love for continues undaunted. Heathcliff suffers much emotional rejection, but at no point does he waiver in his loyalty to her-; 'I seek no revenge on you... the tyrant grinds down his slaves and they don't turn against him, they crush those beneath them. ' His genuine concern for Catherine prevents him from exacting direct revenge from Edgar. He comments to Catherine-; 'I would have died by witches before I would have touched a single hair of his head. When hearing of Catherine's illness, he exclaims-; 'Existence after losing her would be hell. ' Even though she has another husband and left him for the sophistication of Thrushcross Grange he could still not bear to live without her in his world. Catherine also torments Heathcliff even in death, although her spirit remains Heathcliff's ability to love life is gone.

As his own death approaches, he confesses to Nelly the extent of Catherine's hold over him, even though she has been dead eighteen years. 'I cannot look down into the floor, her features are shaped in the flags... in every cloud, in every tree. ' He is angry at the fact that Catherine can abandon him in a world without her he feels no love, 'Why did you betray your own heart, Cathy?... you love me, what right do you have to leave me? ' The sense of despair Heathcliff feels as a tormented unnatural and hopeless existence, 'I cannot live without my love, I cannot live without my soul. ' He and Cathy are one, they are the natural existence of the Moors, and neither can survive without the other or the natural environment they require to live.

This wild and arid landscape for the setting of Heathcliff's and Cathy's love being due to the upbringing of Emily Bronte. Charlotte, Emily and Anne grew
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up in Haworth Parsonage, an area of Pennine upland in West Yorkshire. This gives reason for the wild and rugged landscape in 'Wuthering Heights', as this is where Emily grew up and was all that she knew. Nelly later describes Heathcliff's grieving as 'he howled not like a man, but like a savage beast being goaded to death with knives and spears. Heathcliff feels he belongs with Cathy in both body and spirit and arranges with the Sexton to be buried beside her. Life for him is 'like bending back a stiff spring'. This typical natural imagery is used through out this book describing the passionate and wild love of Catherine and Heathcliff. Perhaps the key quote of this variety being, 'my love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath... Nelly I am Heathcliff -he's always in my mind-'. These two characters echo constantly comments of their love for each other.

However, Heathcliff is obsessed in Catherine, he should not punish innocent characters for the bitterness he feels for being abandoned by Catherine. Perhaps it could be argued that he is unrealistic about his love for Catherine. It is incestuous, and would be harshly looked upon in terms of class. It could be viewed that Catherine was just realistic that the relationship would be illegitimate. When discussing this with Nelly she asks 'did it never strike you that, if Heathcliff and I married, we would be beggars? Or perhaps if Catherine loves Heathcliff as much as she claims, social status would not make a difference to her, especially as their love is so wild and un- tamed. According to an article in the 'Scots Magazine' of June 1797 this is a common fault found in gothic love stories. 'women in these novels tend to form an attachment to persons unworthy of their affection, and thus to hurry them into marriages terminating in their unhappiness. ' This theme of social

powerlessness and females not being able to inherit was felt very strongly for Emily, Charlotte and Anne Bronte.

They would not be married, as this would rob them of their personal and property rights. Branwell, their brother would inherit everything there was even though he wasted all his and the family's money on drink, drugs and gambling. (Perhaps a reflection of him in the character Hindley.) This injustice can be noted in many of the sister's texts, highlighting their objection to this social rule. Charlotte in 'Jane Eyre' and 'Villette' discusses the unattractive opportunity of a female trying to make a living through education, as does Anne in 'Agnes Grey'. This being of a Marxist Feminist approach.

Women being dominated and oppressed through property and wealth. Fran Ansley and Margaret Benston, two Marxist feminists agree that through the power that men had at this time, women had no power or no other ways to be successful other than to be married. However the haunting and gothic image of Heathcliff the reader is left with, of his death, does not cause sympathy. 'Those deep black eyes! That smile and ghastly paleness! It appeared to me not Mr Heathcliff, but a goblin;' This is a typical gothic description, darkness and pale skin, a haunting vampire like description.

Also, eyes through out this novel are often described. Eyes are seen as windows into the soul, this is supported by Dorothy Van Ghent who has 'famously argued the various windows and barriers serve both to separate and connect polar opposites: inside and outside; human and ghost. ' Also, this could apply to different eyes for the Earnshaw's, 'the Earnshaw's

handsome dark eyes' and Linton's. 'vacant blue eyes of the Linton's'.

Heathcliff being described as a 'typical Gothic Protagonist' means the reader must feel sympathy towards him, as this is a critical ingredient.

He is dark, demonic, mysterious and cruel, with his dwelling of Wuthering Heights echoing his personality. He has a mysterious past, often compared to a demonic figure, 'lying fiend', with typical dark hair, eyes and features. The final quality needed being in spite of his cruelty and destructiveness, he generates a degree of sympathy. After never being taught love, being abused and losing his loved ones, Catherine and Mr. Earnshaw, who the only people to ever show him affection it could be claimed that Heathcliff could not be blamed for the way he was.

The passionate and violent environment shaped him into the fiend that he was. However, this can only be an explanation to a certain extent. When Heathcliff returns after his three-year absence he has become a super-human villain driven by revenge. This later Heathcliff is callous with incapacity to love and eventually being consumed with hatred and revenge. In summing up every individual reader will decide on his or her own opinion of Heathcliff, the argument is so balanced it is impossible to judge.

Perhaps he is innocent and tortured of love out of his control, but the argument then falls onto the innocent characters such as Isabella and Cathy. Emily Bronte manages with great complexity to keep the compassion of the reader up and down. She manages to transform Heathcliff from a villain to a victim in a chapter, which keeps the character alive; otherwise he may have come across as desperate and then monotonous. Heathcliff is a character of

depth and complexity and cannot be judged, therefore the sympathy of the reader varies so much.