

Wuthering heights and jane eyre essay sample



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BUSTER**

It was in the early 1800s, after Lord Byron's work 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage' was published, that the Byronic hero was introduced to Britain, sweeping up the Romantic and Gothic Movements and irrevocably changing the face of the English novel. Characterised by Caroline Lamb, an ex-lover of Byron, as 'mad, bad and dangerous to know'¹, the phenomenon's most famous products are Emily and Charlotte Brontë's characters, revealed in 1847 to public outcry in their respective novels 'Wuthering Heights' and 'Jane Eyre': the passionate Heathcliff, tormented to the point of madness by the loss of his true love, and the brooding Mr.

Rochester, running from the dark secrets of his past. It is arguable that Heathcliff demonstrates one of the most powerful Byronic traits, self-destruction, as he 'destroys the beautiful woman he pursues'². His ceaseless pursuit of Catherine, desperately trying to prove her choice of husband to be wrong, results in her descent into madness and death; however, in destroying Catherine, he destroys himself. Earlier Catherine proclaims 'I am Heathcliff' with this blunt simple sentence presenting it as an indisputable fact and its layers of emotion suggesting that no one could deny them their connection, transcending boundaries even in death.

The pair share a soul and neither could survive without the other's sustenance. Realising this is what drives Heathcliff to his grave – he loses his will to live due to the futility of his revenge, crying 'but where is the use?' as he sees that however much pain he causes, it will not return Catherine to him: he must continue in his 'earthly hell', representing his inner-turmoil until the reunion of his soul's halves. Terry Eagleton describes this downfall as Heathcliff's 'self-destructive decline'³, evident in the character of

Rochester as he pursues Jane despite his marriage to Bertha, bringing about his ruin.

However, even if Catherine had lived it is possible that she and Heathcliff could never have been together due to Edgar Linton, Heathcliff's 'angelic' foil – a device employed in these novels to emphasise the heroes' darker traits. Described by Eagleton as 'the crucial, pivotal event of the novel'⁴, how Catherine is torn between the two is even shown in her appearance as she sports Linton's pale skin but Heathcliff's dark hair and eyes.

Gothic imagery surrounds Heathcliff, like the description of him as a 'savage animal' upon Catherine's death, suggesting his violent, uncontrollable nature; whereas, the imagery focussed upon Edgar highlights purity like his 'great blue eyes', emphasising his cherubic innocence. This implies that they symbolise the Devil and an angel and therefore good and evil's struggle within everyone. This could be an example of Bronte revealing her beliefs as she scorned religion and here she is almost mocking it by suggesting that the Devil can be a romantic hero.

The 'angelic' foil is also present in 'Jane Eyre' in the form of St. John Rivers; however, his character produces the opposite effect. Whereas Catherine cannot live without both halves of herself, St. John's cold feelings – wanting Jane simply for her qualities as a missionary's wife despite his love for Rosamond Oliver – show Jane that she needs Rochester. Paradoxically, it is arguable that Heathcliff and Edgar represent nature and society, allowing Heathcliff to display the Byronic traits of outcast status and disliking rank.

He symbolises nature as through the pathetic fallacy the moors represent him, like the storm 'in full fury' when he runs from the Heights. This highlights his frenzy, with 'fury' suggesting an intensity of emotion that cannot be contained. Eagleton describes this as 'a depth inexpressible in routine social practice'⁵, suggesting Heathcliff's outcast status as society cannot deal with his emotional power, shown through the reader's disgust when he exhumes Catherine. Contrastingly, Edgar emphasises society's constraints by conforming to the gentlemanly stereotype; possessing money and power but without passion.

Separation from society is even forced upon Heathcliff by the Earnshaws: referred to as 'it' by Nelly, de-humanising him, and as 'fatherless boy' by Mr. Earnshaw, showing that he is never fully accepted into the family, robbing him of social status. Later he begins to impose his own barriers as he embraces misanthropy, with *Wuthering Heights*' 'gaunt thorns' suggesting his isolation, and 'gaunt' foreshadowing his descent into madness and death. Rochester demonstrates the opposite as he shuns his right to society at the beginning of the novel, imposing isolation upon himself and creating barriers by locking himself in his study.

However, at the end of the work his blindness forces him into isolation, with the description of Ferndean's 'close ranked trees' representing how he is trapped in his perpetual darkness. He then marries Jane, flouting Victorian social convention due to their class divide, showing his rejection of society's values. A further Byronic trait manifested by the characters is mysterious pasts. Nelly creates questions as to Heathcliff's rightful place in the Earnshaw family by describing his history as like 'a cuckoo's'.

These birds steal the nests of others, suggesting that Heathcliff has obtained a position that was not rightfully his and pushed others out in the process. This point is emphasised as Heathcliff was named after a dead first son, suggesting a right to inheritance and status under Georgian custom, which could be seen as him stealing a position that is truly Hindley's. The mystery continues with Heathcliff's return after fleeing the Heights, bringing with him his new money and status which unbalances the social structure.

No explanation is given for his new wealth but due to newly-wealthy capitalists and industrialisation, money, rather than family, was quickly becoming the key to status. Nicholas Marsh argued that it is only when Heathcliff describes opening Catherine's coffin that we see 'the core of [his] nature'⁶, with its erratic punctuation creating caesuras, suggesting the speech's mania as he recounts his thoughts. However, it is arguable that the reader can never know if they are seeing the 'core' of Heathcliff's being.

The layered structure of the narrative is such that it enhances the mystery, suggesting hidden depths of forgotten, or omitted, truth. There is also an air of mystery surrounding Rochester, particularly due to the existence of his wife Bertha, described as a 'strange wild animal', suggesting exotic foreign travels, and Adele as evidence of his relationship with Varens, possibly hinting at other relationships which would have been more normal for a man in the 1800s, compared to the disgrace which they would have brought upon a woman.

Finally, Byronic heroes were a common feature of the Romantic Movement to which both novels belong, a powerful force at the time with its belief that

society placed corrupting restrictions. This idea could suggest that nurture, rather than nature, is to blame for the heroes' Byronic traits. Heathcliff's 'tyrannical persecution of the innocent'⁷ has been often cited as evidence for his ruthlessness, yet it is arguable that in his eyes Hareton, Linton and Cathy are not innocent.

He associates them with their relatives – Hindley, Edgar and Catherine – and their cruelty towards him, and this is why he persecutes them. If he had not been abused, he would perhaps not have grown into the abuser. This can also be seen, yet not to such a destructive extent, in Rochester as his rejection of society could be blamed on his past bad experiences, particularly with Varens and Bertha, the former having abandoned him after being unfaithful and the latter having disgraced him with her descent into madness.

This idea could be developed with another view of the Romantic Movement – 'the concept of the beautiful soul in an ugly body'⁸. This is relevant to Byronic heroes as they are not classically handsome, yet the idea of a 'beautiful soul' could suggest that they are intrinsically good. This is shown through the character of Rochester as it is arguable that he shows his true self at the end of the novel, when he is reunited with Jane and freed from the constraints of his marriage, with the names of his homes reflecting this change.

Thornfield' sounds sharp and violent, suggesting the harsh exterior that he created, yet 'Ferndean' sounds softer, showing his true character beneath. In Heathcliff, this good is harder to see, yet it can still be seen through his

portrayal as the Devil. The Devil is believed by many Christians to be an angel who rebelled against God and was thus condemned to Hell, suggesting that Heathcliff was in fact originally good, with his rebellion against the class system being to blame for his downfall.

Overall, I believe that, through their characters, the Bronte were actually shedding the stereotypical view of the Byronic hero. Heathcliff and Rochester are portrayed as displaying all of the classic traits yet these appear to be simply a charade: a guard against the society that has betrayed them. The message really seems to be of their search for final peace, a peace which can only be achieved when they present their true selves: Rochester finds this at the novel's conclusion yet for Heathcliff this only exists in death.

Reference

http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel_19c/wuthering/gothic.html