

Love in the childhood period english literature essay

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



"Wuthering Heights" is essentially a novel about children. The bulk of the story concerns itself with the infancy and early years first of Heathcliff, Catherine, Edgar and Isabella; and later of Linton, Cathy and Hareton. And even when each generation grows up they are not so much adults as arrested children. Indeed, when Heathcliff and Catherine are reunited, Catherine appears to regress toward childhood. Her tantrums lead Nelly to say that Catherine seemed "to find childish diversion in pulling the feathers from the rents she had just made in the pillow" (p. 105). Nelly pleads with Catherine to "Give over with that baby-work" (p. 105) and soon after describes her behavior by saying "our fiery Catherine was no better than a wailing child" (p. 106). Even the civilized Isabella evidences similar fits. Visiting Nelly, she throws off her wedding ring and cries out, "I'll smash it!" she continued, striking with childish spite." (p. 142). And much later when love flowers between Hareton and Cathy, Nelly's reminder that she is eighteen and he twenty-three comes as a surprise; for their actions seem more like those of children than adults. The only real adults in the novel are the original Mr. and Mrs. Earnshaw and Mr. and Mrs. Linton. But they are shadowy figures and depart soon after the novel begins. Joseph and Nelly exist on the periphery of the story; moreover, they give the impression of being ancients or always old. Thus, although the novel conveys the sense of progress because of its complex forward movement and its span of three generations, it never really moves away from its preoccupation with childhood. This recurrent focus, in fact, is primarily responsible for the novel's special achievement of timelessness. Or to put it another way, because the novel is polarized between a constant revelation of the past and

a constant anticipation of the future, there is no real sense of the present. The focus on paradise lost and paradise regained is so total and tyrannical that, just as there are no genuine moments of temporality, so there are no conditions of secularity. As an unexpected but logical correlation, there is no sex. To be sure, there is love - an uncompromising, agonized yearning of one soul for another - but it is never corporeal just as it is never temporal. It is at this point that the connections between childhood and love may be suggested. Consistently, Brontë speaks of the disuniting of lovers or the loss of love. The separation of Heathcliff and Catherine from each other reenacts the initial exile from God and the initial state of being born. That such divorce in fact occurs in their childhood is not just a coincidental but a symbolic reinforcement. Nowhere is this more dramatically presented than when the married Catherine tries to indicate to Nelly the extent of the gulf she now feels in her life: " But, supposing at twelve years old, I had been wrenched from the Heights, and every early association, and my all in all, as Heathcliff was at that time, and been converted at a stroke into Mrs. Linton, the lady of Thrushcross Grange, and the wife of a stranger; an exile, and outcast, thence-forth, from what had been my world..."(p. 107) Catherine's description of the loss both the Wuthering Heights and of Heathcliff's love could be applied without any revision to the child's loss of heaven and the event of birth. The notion of traumatic discontinuity with all that was as well as all the terms the lovers use to describe it - hell, exile, imprisonment, death - are precisely the familiar terms employed by the author to describe the child's entry into this dungeon world. The aim of love is to bring about such a total coincidence of souls that they are interchangeable. Heathcliff

becomes Catherine's life, and she is. When the soul discovers his otherness residing in a beloved, the desire is not just to be or come together with the other but to become the other. The two halves unite to create and to make one whole, for the love of Heathcliff and Catherine is the search for the soul's complement - it's twin - it's childhood's mate. Catherine's error - almost her crime - is in believing she can separate her body and soul, or exist partly in time and partly in eternity. Her justification is that she will give the former to Edgar and reserve the latter for Heathcliff. But the search for the other half of oneself is an all-or-nothing affair, and Heathcliff will not be content with half of a half. The criteria of heaven and childhood are so absolute and uncompromising that they will admit of no adjustment. And yet in a sense such love has to fail or become unattainable because in many ways it is heretical. The blasphemy of love appears in the fact that the search for one's soul mate is a quest for immortality - in this world, now as well as forever. It seeks not merely to echo or imitate heaven but to dispossess it. The clearest expression of this substitution appears in the dream Catherine relates to Nelly. Conventional heaven without Heathcliff is hell to Catherine and she becomes an outcast from that paradise because she already has found her home and achieved "mutual immortality" with her lover. Their interchangeable soul's other partner, God; for one of Brontë's key justifications for the soul incompleteness and imprisonment is that it will magnetically be drawn to God for fulfillment and release. But Heathcliff and Catherine have by-passed God by finding in love a total antidote to the world. And yet because such love violates the precepts of earthly existence and attempts to secure an immortality that is permissibly only after death, a

tragic irony is released. Love which initially makes life bearable ultimately incapacitates the soul for life. Early in the novel, Nelly says of Heathcliff, "The notion of envying Catherine was incomprehensible to him, but the notion of grieving her he understood clearly enough." (p. 53) Nelly mistakenly contrasts feelings that are merely the inverse equivalents of each other. Although Nelly notes that "The greatest punishment we could invent for her was to keep her separate from him..." (p. 43), she fails to realize that Heathcliff and Catherine understand this punishment as well as the means of inflicting it. Each tortures the other by finding means to inflict painful separation. And yet at the same time the fact that the pain is mutually endured serves as a negative testimony of positive love. And just before Catherine dies, the common legacy they leave each other is pain: Heathcliff says that without her he will be "in the torments of hell". She counters by saying that she "shall not be at peace" (p. 133). Thus, love, which should temper the partiality and restlessness of existence, ironically begets intense fragmentation and gives the lovers no peace. The mortal sees in the child's loss of heaven the rehearsal for the lover's loss of paradise. The immutable looks toward a point of total and permanent recovery. In the novel that latter possibility appears near the end when the shepherd boy believes that he sees Heathcliff and Catherine reunited on the top of the moors (p. 265). And sometimes the loved and the loving shall meet on the mountain again. Although the question of the second story and of its relationship to the first is beyond the scope of this study, and indeed requires separate consideration, what can be rapidly noted is that this final hopeful vision in which Heathcliff and Catherine are finally reunited is anticipated and prepared for by the love

between Hareton and Cathy. That is, if the childhood love of Heathcliff and Catherine serves as an image of heaven before birth, the love of Hareton and Cathy serves as a prefiguration of heaven after death. Together, the two stories form a complete span. And does not Brontë force the recognition of that continuity by blurring the generations into each other?