Wuthering heights and the marxist critique

Literature, British Literature

From the very first pages of Wuthering Heights, Heathcliff is introduced to readers as a surly and exotic figure. It is ambiguous as to what his unpleasant demeanor and behavior can be attributed. Is it his exoticism, the mistreatment he suffered as a child, or a bit of both? When prompted to give an explanation for Heathcliff's character, or lack thereof, the text seemingly provides two options. The first suggests that Heathcliff has bad blood, and that the introduction of this foreign street urchin to Wuthering Heights is the sole catalyst for the hardships that befall its inhabitants. The second asserts that Heathcliff is simply a victim of circumstance. Of course, this text is far from explicit, and this nature versus nurture dilemma is more complicated than the two choices listed imply.

Prolific literary critic Terry Eagleton elevates the nature versus nurture debate to a debate between nature and society. He endeavors to put the seemingly remote setting of this novel in a societal context, focusing on the social and economic structures at play. His discourse is particularly concerned with the ways in which Heathcliff's disruption of this social order colors his relationships with the other characters, specifically Catherine and Hindley. He explains these relationships primarily through performing a Marxist criticism of the text. When seeking an explanation for Heathcliff's behavior that does not entirely blame him for or absolve him of his moral crime, Eagleton's marxist exploration provides a more definitive answer than can be found in the text alone.

Initially, the scene toward the beginning of the novel that depicts an altercation between Heathcliff and Hindley over Hindley's colt asks readers to speculate as to whether or not Heathcliff's behavior could be related to his

foreign origins. In this passage, Bronte juxtaposes Hindley's abuse toward Heathcliff, with dialogue rife with racially derogatory diction. However, though Hindley's words are offensive and potentially detrimental, they also almost foreshadow Heathcliff's revengeful future behavior. When Heathcliff attempts to retrieve Hindley's colt, his adoptive brother strikes him, referring to him as a " Gipsy" and a " beggarly interloper" (Bronte 54) The language Hindley uses appears to be cruel and unfounded when directed toward a little boy however, perhaps Heathcliff is in fact the " imp" Hindley claims he is (54). It is confusing as to whether or not the author holds Heathcliff's foreign presence, and perhaps an inclination for destruction, or Hindley's abuse as the cause of the tragedy that befalls this family and their estate.

Eagleton almost absolves the child Heathcliff of any intentional destruction, but he does assert that the introduction of the boy to the Heights disrupts an already tenuous social order. He states that Heathcliff is " inserted" into the family structure as an " alien", emerging from an " ambivalent domain of darkness" outside of the domestic system of the Heights (397). Eagleton theorizes that it is not Heathcliff's otherness itself that disrupts the Earnshaw family but the fact that a foreign presence is being introduced into a defined, yet fragile social structure.

Though Earnshaw tries to incorporate Heathcliff into the fold, Hindley does his best to ensure that his adoptive brother is made an outcast. He does this using violence which later transforms into neglect. The violence that Heathcliff " unwittingly triggers is turned against him: he is cast out by Hindley, culturally deprived, reduced to the status of farm-labourer." Hindley

deliberately seeks to diminish Heathcliff's status, forcing him to resort to his own devices to elevate his standing. This is evident in the very scene between Hindley and Heathcliff that has been discussed. Heathcliff is attempting to steal Hindley's horse in an attempt to acquire some capital. This is confirmed when Nelly describes the way that Heathcliff " coolly…went on with his intention" after the confrontation (54). Furthermore, Nelly claims that although she did not find Heathcliff " vindictive" at the time, she was " deceived completely" (54). Eagleton insists that the only way that Heathcliff can " avenge" the punitive system he has been thrust into is by " battling it with its own hated terms" (112). Hindley predicts the later manifestation of these behaviors when he describes a future in which Heathcliff will " wheedle" his father out of " all he has" (54). While Heathcliff does not directly " wheedle" Earnshaw, he does end up owning Wuthering Heights and wheedling others, like Hindley, out of their money and manipulating and deceiving nearly everyone that crosses his path, effectively fulfilling Hindley's prediction. He " acquires culture as a weapon" in order to " re-enter the society from which he was punitively expelled" (104). Heathcliff's true motivation is revenge for the abuse and neglect he suffers but the only way to succeed in this endeavor is to reintegrate himself into the very society that he abhors. Unfortunately, this task necessitates Heathcliff becoming a vindictive, surly, and abusive tyrant. He is unable to avenge his mistreatment without transforming into his abuser, as shown in the way he treats Hareton and the other members of the next generation.

According to Eagleton, it is Heathcliff's arrival that is responsible for the series of unfortunate events that ensues henceforth however, this does not

mean that these events are necessarily Heathcliff's fault. In fact, Eagleton largely portrays Heathcliff and a victim of the social system in which he is entrenched. He gives a more victimizing and sympathetic view of Heathcliff, and justifies it with the assumption that social climbing is a necessary survival tactic for even the most estranged individual.

Returning to debate on whether or not Heathcliff's villainous ways are the result of his nature or his circumstances the latter is victorious. Heathcliff is the victim of a system that necessitates social stratification and creates oppressive relationships. Eagleton affirms that, for farming families like the Earnshaws, " work and human relations are roughly coterminous: work is socialized, personal relations mediated through a context of labour" (106). In this society, even familial relationships are decidedly economic.

Though Heathcliff's life as a classless individual should have existed outside of the economics of the Heights, his introduction into society can never be undone. His presence unravels this already unstable society and its relationships, and it becomes his own job to create a new social order. However, the new order that he creates is undeniably similar to its predecessor and perhaps even more dysfunctional. Is Heathcliff a victim or is he a villain? Both the text and Eagleton's analysis suggest that he is both. He is the victim of a capitalist society that transforms those who seek advancement into villains. This premise gives this older and often overread text new contemporary relevance, perhaps explaining why people are still fascinated by this work today. The same economic and familial dynamics

that exist in this text can be found in the present. Heathcliff, with all of his faults, teaches his readers the disadvantages to " getting ahead."

Works Cited

Bronte¨, Emily, and Linda H. Peterson. Wuthering Heights: Complete, Authoritative Text with Biographical and Historical Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Five Contemporary Critical Perspectives. 2nd ed. Boston: Bedford, 2003. Print.

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