

Vol. 6, Issue-1  
February 2015

ISSN: 0976-8165

# The Criterion

An International Journal in English



*6th Year of Open Access*

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## Reassessing Heathcliff: A Tortured Soul/ A Vindictive Monster

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### **Abstract:**

Women writers always created great literature which later became classics. From Enheduanna to Virginia Woolf, women as writers are always prominent. The Bronte Sisters in the Victorian Age was at the centre of attraction. They catered to the taste of the reader with different kinds of works. Emily Bronte with her only novel *Wuthering Heights* touched the golden Streak. At the centre of the novel lies the passionate love-affair between Catherine and Heathcliff, often considered a 'Byronic Hero'. Pain and isolation became his only companion. Emily Bronte Composed him as a character possessing darkness and light, positive and negative, good and evil. Thus Heathcliff, with his affinity to Manfred; appeared as the anti-hero of the novel.

**Keywords:** Enheduanna, Virginia Woolf, Bronte Sisters, Heathcliff, Byronic Hero, Manfred

Creativity is a process where each and every individual can lend a hand without being type casted in terms of gender bias. But it is most evident through ages of literary activity that authorship or literary creation is mostly a male-centric business. But from the times of Enheduanna, who was probably the first woman writer, who wrote in Sumerian; to the present times there are ample proofs that women too are involved in creating finer literary specimens which later became hallmarks in their own capacity. If we closely study the history of English Literature we can find many talented female authors who were no less than their male counterparts. Writers like Aphra Behn, who was the first woman writer to earn a living by her pen and Maria Edgeworth, popularly known as the 'Great Maria' during her time, were the forerunners of writers like Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters and Virginia Woolf. In her book, *A Literature of their Own* (1977), Elaine Showalter has brought forth the view that, "In the atlas of the English novel, women's territory is usually depicted as desert bounded by mountains on four sides: the Austen peaks, the Bronte cliffs, the Eliot range, and the Woolf hills"(vii). If we consider the novels of Jane Austen, we may say that whether we imitate them or extend them- they will always remain novels of Jane Austen.

After Austen the wheel comes next to the Bronte sisters, the most prominent women writers of the Victorian age. The Victorian Period was mostly known as the highest point of development which lead England to become a world power. Industrial revolution played a big role in this achievement. In 1837 when Queen Victoria was crowned to 1901, the time of her death, lot of changes took place. It was a time of change, but at the same time it was also a time of great literature. In the plethora of Victorian writers, the name 'Bronte sisters' makes a special mention; though there were women writers like George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell who wrote extensively, it was the Bronte sisters who attracted the spotlights of attention. The

Bronte sisters enjoyed a very short span of life and it imitated the type of fiction which they wrote.

The tragic lives of the Bronte sisters resemble the gothic romances written by them. The Bronte's were a family of six children living on the bleak Yorkshire moors, raised by their distant father and a strict aunt. Charlotte, Emily and Ann were the younger three daughters born to Patrick and Maria Branwell Bronte. The moors was their playground, the effect of which can be felt in their later works. Reading and making up stories to tell one another was their favorite pastime. In 1846, they published a book of poetry entitled *poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell*. Next came Charlotte's novel *The Professor*, which was rejected by many publishing houses but was eventually posthumously published in 1857. Then in the year 1847 all the three sisters published the novels for which they would become famous forever. Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*, which was a kind of bildungsroman, gained instant success. Emily's *Wuthering Heights* depicted the passionate love affair between Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw. Anne's novel *Agnes Grey* dealt with the life of a young, unmarried woman. Emily died in 1848 of tuberculosis. Also in that same year Anne's second novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was published. Anne died in 1849. Charlotte, the remaining sibling, published *Shirley* in 1849 and *Villette* in 1853. She died while carrying her first child in 1855.

Emily Bronte's only novel *Wuthering Heights* was published in the year 1847 and with its publication she faced both positive and negative criticism. Romantic love and revenge or destruction plays a pivotal role in the corpus of the novel. Two families: the Earnshaws, inhabitant of the Heights, near the moors and the more refined Lintons, who live at Thrushcross Grange, are at the centre of the novel. Complexity arises as the story unfolds and continues through two generations of characters. Web of relationship leads us to the psychological forefront and there we find as if all the characters are portrayed through a series of mirrors.

The passionate love-affair between the two main characters of *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine and Heathcliff, forms the central part of the story. Mr. Earnshaw found Heathcliff on the streets and brought him to live with his own family at the Heights. Though everybody especially Hindley treated him most badly it was Catherine, the daughter of Mr. Earnshaw, who enjoyed the company of Heathcliff and soon a deep bond developed between them. This bond gradually became a soulful alliance and though, at first it seemed that it will withstand all odds, when Catherine decided to marry Edgar Linton, Heathcliff leaves believing that he has been rejected by Catherine. Upon his return Heathcliff eventually marries Isabella and decides to take revenge on all. Catherine falls ill and before death gives birth to her daughter, Young Catherine. Isabella on the other hand soon flees Heathcliff and gives birth to their son, Linton. Later Heathcliff forces Young Catherine to marry Linton. Linton, being very ill soon dies as well and Young Catherine and Hareton, the son of Hindley begin to fall in love. Heathcliff sees in the young lovers the reflection of him and Catherine and loses all desire to destroy the two houses and dies later.

Heathcliff is the central character of this novel and we first meet him when Lockwood begins the novel by retelling his first visit to Wuthering Heights, a dark skinned gypsy with black eyes who was well dressed and was intelligent and reserved. During his second visit, he describes Heathcliff as a person who might be bad natured and repulsive, as well as morose. After that it was Nelly, who told the entire story of Catherine and Heathcliff at Lockwood's request. The transformation of Heathcliff's character from a likable and sympathetic person to a man whose only aim in life is to bring misery and destruction in the

lives of others makes him the anti-hero or the villain. Melvin Watson argued the novel “is a study of the development and issues of evil, of anti-social passions, of hate and malice, working freely, based and unfolded by exceptional strength and ability” (254). Readers of the novel sympathize with Heathcliff as he is introduced an orphan whom Nelly described “I put it on the landing of the stairs, hoping it might be gone on the morrow” (31-32). Later, though Mr. Earnshaw favours him it is only for a short span of time. After the death of Mr. Earnshaw it is Hindley who becomes the master of the Heights and it seemed his only duty was to degrade his former competitor. Heathcliff, now at the mercy of Hindley is treated most badly. He is tortured and abused, and this evokes a sympathetic attitude in the hearts of the readers. Later when Catherine announced “it would degrade me to marry Heathcliff” (Bronte 71), we can’t suppress our compassion for him. This statement of Catherine marks the beginning of change in the character of Heathcliff. Drew has observed, “In the early part of the book, we are led to suspect him of nothing worse than a hot temper, a proud nature, and a capacity for implacable hatred. Indeed until he is sixteen the balance of sympathy is with him, since he has been treated so ill” (369).

As Catherine decided to marry Edgar, Heathcliff left the Heights and remained absent for three years, only to return as a living nemesis. Nelly described the transformed Heathcliff as:

Now fully revealed by the fire and candlelight, I was amazed, more than ever, to behold the transformation of Heathcliff. He had grown a tall, athletic, well-formed man, beside whom my master seemed quite slender and youth-like ... his countenance... looked intelligent, and retained no marks of former degradation. (Bronte 85)

Heathcliff is now metamorphosed from being a man hated and maltreated by everybody to a man feared and respected by all. But Edgar revealed the true nature of Heathcliff, “though [Heathcliff’s] exterior was altered, his mind was unchangeable, and unchanged. And he dreaded that mind” (Bronte 89). The very sense these lines convey is that, Heathcliff with his intention to hunt down those who have wronged him, actually affect every single character of the Heights and the Grange. But Marianne Thormahlen is of the view that his degradation already started in his childhood.

While the boy Heathcliff’s wrongs at Hindley Earnshaw’s hands at least foster a feeling that he is the victim of harshness and injustice, the growth of true sympathy for him is checked by several circumstances, such as his lack of discernible affection for his benefactor, old Mr. Earnshaw; the realization that Hindley has cause to be jealous, having had his nose cruelly put out of joint by the sudden arrival of the new favourite; Heathcliff’s blackmailing effort over the colts; and his intractable sullenness, even to Catherine, during his years of degradation. (184)

It is only because of Hindley’s interference and envious conduct with him that Heathcliff seems closer towards the sympathy of us.

After the death of Mr. Earnshaw, Heathcliff was turned into a servant By Hindley. Heathcliff tolerated this pain as long as he was with Catherine. They used to run off together to the moors and though they were punished for their action they used to forget the pain whenever they were together. Catherine, though she has lived always at the Heights, was in nature more close to Heathcliff than to anyone else. Disobeying of orders, going along

with Heathcliff are symptoms of her inclination towards him. The wild-child Catherine found her match in the savage Heathcliff. Thus it can be said, Heathcliff was an emblem of Catherine's own hidden savage nature. By Marrying Edgar Linton, the more refined one, she separated herself from her true self and that is the main cause of her suppressed nature.

In their famous feminist work, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar make a well-known assertion about the relationship between the characters of *Jane Eyre*, a novel written by Emily Bronte's sister, Charlotte Bronte. They suggest Bertha, the deranged and malicious wife of Edward Rochester, can be considered a symbol of the rebellious spirit raging inside the seemingly quiet female protagonist, Jane Eyre, against the constraints of her class and gender role in society (356-367). In the same spirit it can be said that Heathcliff is not the 'devil' but the raging force within the contours of Catherine Earnshaw. But during her five week stay with the Linton's at the Thrushcross Grange she had meet with another side of herself, a side which was totally opposite to that of Heathcliff. She never understood how to handle these two worlds when they are coming at clash-point. She confessed that

I've no more business to marry Edgar Linton than I have to be in heaven; and if the wicked man in there had not brought Heathcliff so low, I shouldn't have thought of it. It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now; so he shall never know how I love him; and that, not because he's handsome, Nelly, but because he's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same, and Linton's is as different as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire. (p. 63).

And again in that great expression of the depths of passionate love as she said,

What were the use of my creation if I were entirely contained here? My great miseries in this world have been Heathcliff's miseries, and I watched and felt each from the beginning; my great thought in living is himself. If all else perished, and *he* remained, I should still continue to be; and, if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the Universe would turn to a mighty stranger. I should not seem part of it. My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods. Time will change it, I'm well aware, as winter changes the trees my love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath a source of little visible delight, but necessary. Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff - he's always, always in my mind- not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself- but, as my own being impracticable; (p. 64).

After all these great expressions of sincere and passionate love Catherine choose to marry Edgar and the reasons behind this action can be explained by the suggestion of Christianity. Christianity tells us to cover ourselves and to hide our nakedness but Heathcliff made his passion public and may be for that very reason Catherine chose Edgar over Heathcliff. (Nussbaum 407-408). Heathcliff's ferocity is evident as Nelly described, a "half-civilized ferocity lurked yet in the depressed brows and eyes full of black fire, but it was subdued"(Bronte 75). He wanted to marry Isabella; it is not because he loved her, because he wanted to take revenge on her brother Edgar who snatched away his most dearest and priceless possession, Catherine. Nelly was sure that Cathy was delirious when the latter opened the window and looked towards the Heights and spoke to Heathcliff, even though he was not there, and said: "But Heathcliff, if I dare you now, will you venture? If you do, I'll



keep you. I'll not lie there by myself they may bury me twelve feet deep, and throw the church down over me, but I won't rest till you are with me. I never will" and she waited and listened for his reply, saying that he wanted her to come to him, and she exclaimed: "Be content, you always followed me" (pp. 98-99). Perhaps Cathy realized at that point that her decision to marry Edgar over Heathcliff, to choose wealth over love was wrong. Cathy at this point longed to be at the Heights with Heathcliff, but it was much too late.

This unfulfilled longing made Catherine weak and ill. Great changes became evident in the appearance of Catherine. Her eyes turned dreamy, she became pale and as Nelly said, she looked "as one doomed to decay" (122). When Heathcliff secretly went to meet up with her she argued that both of them (Edgar and Heathcliff) had broken her heart and killed her. Ultimately Catherine died after giving birth to her daughter Young Catherine. When Heathcliff got the news he prayed one single prayer: "Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest, as long as I am living! You said I killed you, haunt me, then! The murdered do haunt their murderers, I believe-.../ Be with me always -take any form -drive me mad! Only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you" (130).

The main instigator of Heathcliff's vengeance is undoubtedly Hindley, who later becomes the primary victim of his anger. Though Nelly once advised him that "it is for God to punish wicked people" and he "should learn to forgive" (53), there was no room for genteel attitude and saint like quality in Heathcliff's mindset where day by day the burning desire to destroy Hindley became more blazing. It was evident that he was possessed by some savage ferocity and sullenness, almost diabolical in nature. Thus, upon Heathcliff's return" This physical destruction of Hindley's apparently frail character, although only 27 years old, is an addition to Heathcliff's exploitation of Hindley's weaknesses, alcohol, and gambling. As such, like Watson explains, "Heathcliff finishes the ruin of Hindley by catering to his taste for drink and gambling and secures mortgages on Wuthering Heights" (97). Further, Watson maintains earlier that Hindley is "as cruel as Heathcliff without Heathcliff's strength" and as such "prepares for his own destruction by his inhumanity to Heathcliff and the other inhabitants of the Heights" (90).

Then, after Hindley's death, Nelly relates Heathcliff's disposition: "He maintained a hard, careless deportment, indicative of neither joy nor sorrow; if anything, it expressed a flinty gratification at a piece of difficult work successfully executed" (Bronte 165). Hence, having completed his destruction of Hindley and gained possession of the Heights and of young Hareton, "Heathcliff has completed the first stage of his revenge" (Drew 370).

Heathcliff spared nobody, not even his own son Linton Heathcliff. Along with Hareton, Linton faces the most ruinous effects of his dark deeds. From the very beginning he faced the wrath of his biological father as Heathcliff denounced him: "Thou art thy mother's child, entirely! Where is my share in thee, puling chicken?" (Bronte 182-183). He terrorizes Linton and breaks his mental strength and this is prominent as he confessed to Young Catherine

You are so much happier than I am, you ought to be better. Papa talks enough of my defects, and shows enough scorn of me, to make it natural I should doubt myself--- I doubt whether I am not altogether as worthless as he calls

me, frequently; and then I feel so cross and bitter, I hate everybody! I am worthless, and bad in temper, and bad in spirit, almost always. (233)

But for Heathcliff “his life” was “not worth a farthing, and ... a farthing” would not be spent “on him” (259). Heathcliff created a living hell for Linton and because of this inhuman torture both physical and mental, Linton speedily moved towards his demise and total ruination. Even after his death there was no change in the attitude of his father, cold and bitter as he always was, Heathcliff acted further harshly just to inflict more injury.

Though Linton dies literally because of Heathcliff, Hareton somehow manages to escape from him. We must remember that it was never his desire to kill Hareton. After completing the target of destroying Hindley, his chief ambition was to make Hareton a brute. If he wanted to kill Hareton there are many instances in the novel where he could have achieved that but after Hindley’s death he started to behave in such a manner that it became evident, now “nature will be denied and perverted in Hareton’s as she was in Heathcliff’s degradation” (Vargish 13). Heathcliff acted harshly towards Hareton but Hareton was very fond of his master. Despite the cruel treatments he received from Heathcliff, he continually defended his master. After Heathcliff’s death it was only Hareton who suffered the most, as Nelly described, “Poor Hareton, the most wronged, was the only one that really suffered much. He sat by the corpse all night, weeping in bitter earnest” (298). Drew elaborated this observation as he stated:

The crucial difference is that Hareton does not allow his ill-treatment to make him bitter; he even acquires a kind of fondness for Heathcliff. But this tells in his favour, not Heathcliff’s, for it shows that Heathcliff was not necessarily brutalized by his environment, but rather that Hindley’s ill-treatment of him encouraged a vindictiveness which he later deliberately fostered. (376)

Watson has also argued that, “Hareton is saved by the absence of hatred in his heart, and the fondness between him and young Cathy blossoms in time to prevent his becoming just an animal” (94).

In the Victorian Period Murray’s Edition of Byron’s works was most notable influence behind similar kind of literary productions by other writers. Byron became famous for his representation of taboo, things not natural to the spirit of the age, but Victorians appreciated this greatly. The Bronte sisters were greatly attracted to the works of Byron and their main focus was on the Byronic hero. Several Critics have argued on the favour of Heathcliff’s being a Byronic Hero. Emily Bronte was fascinated by *Manfred*, and in the portrayal of Heathcliff and Catherine she has used the elements of Manfred’s supposedly incestuous bond with Astarte. Like the Gothic romances where the woman becomes victim of her demon lover and finally gets annihilated by the suppressed passion, Emily in *Wuthering Heights* creates a similar world of necrophilia.

Byron in his creation of Manfred was indebted to his own troubled past and anxieties, though some critics have put forth the view that Byron took the idea from Goethe’s Faust, as both of them had similar kind of superhuman aspirations; Byron never acknowledged this fact. On the contrary, he said Manfred “had a better origin” (Byron 19). Another similarity between these two characters which attracts our attention is that, both of them are troubled because of a spiritual burden, which is unstoppable and never ending. When Manfred said

My slumbers--- if I Slumber--- are not sleep,  
 ...There is a vigil, and these eyes but close  
 To look within ... (I i 3-7)

We see the same echo in Heathcliff also, as Nelly says; Heathcliff is “going blind with loss of sleep” (Bronte 262). Both the characters struggle hard to find a cure of their troubled past. But they cannot do so because, their mind is always filled with those thoughts and there is no way to divert the attention. They are eternally bound to their thoughts and for that very reason they can never find peace and solace, they will always strive for the oblivion but can never reach there. Both Manfred and Heathcliff was different from their fellows and they acted as self-exiled persons, isolation came to them naturally and they were doomed to always remain in that state.

Heathcliff with his troubled past and humble origin stood storm-tossed and bifurcated between his distrust for everybody and his incapacity to engage in social relations. Heathcliff showed signs of becoming good natured, but his background and failures in life turned him into a devilish persona. As Astarte looked into the heart of Manfred, in *Wuthering heights* it was Catherine, who delved deep into the nature of Heathcliff and found that there is love; but it turned fatal and destruction soon followed. Catherine while advising Isabella aptly stated: “[He is] an arid wilderness of furze and whinstone... He’s not a rough diamond --- a pearl containing an oyster of a rustic; he’s a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man” (Bronte 141).

As the damned hero both Manfred and Heathcliff after failing to unite with their alter ego, their beloveds, begins a journey to go far away from the familiar places, to forget all those known faces. This, as an attempt to break free from the past is not always successful. The more the lover goes away from his beloved, the more the desire burns to see her again; and this is much stronger than to forget her. Manfred asked for oblivion and at the same time a last glimpse of Astarte and Heathcliff, time and again returned to Catherine, as she was his true self, his true identity. Like a pure Gothic character, both of them only followed their own will and as a result of it, they received only pain. There is no redemption for them. Manfred willingly rejected the consolation of the abbot and Heathcliff, on his part refused to prey as he was a total stranger to religious practices.

The Byronic hero is always confined within his own mindscape and his efforts to go away are paradoxical. In his attempt to reunite with the beloved he creates his own mental prison and from it there is no escape. Deborah Lutz pointed out that

The subjectivity of the lost wanderer is more closely related to [...] what Kant himself called “transcendental idealism” [...]. The “thing in itself” must always be filtered through our sense of time and space—forms of our sensibility with which we perceive the world. [...] Holderlin feels that the essence of tragedy is that we can never have immediate experience, that as soon as we think we have already lost immediacy. [...] The Byronic figure’s tragedy, similarly, is that consciousness itself always brings [...] loss of immediacy, loss of presence... But because he fails, the relationship between the travelled world and the mind does not bring a sense of the “whole”, but rather of the irrevocably lost. (58-59)

Emily Bronte in order to cater to the taste of the readers created something different, which is not similar to the love stories typical of that age. *Wuthering Heights* is neither a



realistic tale of horror nor an entirely romantic saga, but something in between, comprising elements from both worlds.

While its treatment of *Manfred* pushes against the restrictions of realism, it does not idealize Byronic romance. Instead, Heathcliff's story suggests the consequences of taking Manfred's narcissism to an extreme within a realistic setting. Underneath Heathcliff's greater fidelity to Catherine lies an egoistic violence far more aggressive than that of Manfred, Zamorna, or Crimsworth. (Elfenbein 154)

Heathcliff refuses to be destroyed by other superior powers. In his world he is the ultimate ruler, it is he who decides whether to live or to die, whether to go far away or to come back. From the very moment of Catherine's death; all his actions are directed towards total annihilation of others as well as his own self. Isabella rightly said that "Treachery and violence are spears pointed at both ends. They wound those who resort to them worse than their enemies" (Bronte 155). Drew further voiced "each act of wanton Brutality is a further maiming of himself" (380).

Thus it can be aptly said that, Heathcliff as a protagonist lies at the heart of the novel. Though he is brutal, cruel, we can't altogether hate him for his behavior. Pent-up frustration from childhood and Catherine's decision to marry Edgar creates this devilish persona of him whose sole desire is to take revenge. He takes revenge in such way that not only all things associated with Catherine get destroyed but he himself gets ruined in that process. The traditional hero with his goodness and endearing qualities and above all his moral superiority is absent in Heathcliff. On the contrary he is immoral, possessive and always acts with a sadistic pleasure. But we as readers remain sympathetic with him. A man who would lose everything for his passion, but never wanting sympathy of others, a vile personality, enforces our sympathy. In him there are traits of both a hero and a villain. He is a hero because he rises against all odds, gains social position and tries to avenge the wrong doers. But he is also a villain because in trying to do so he not only destroys Catherine, he also destroys others and ultimately his own self. And these shades of darkness and light, good and evil, Positive and negative makes him the anti-hero of the novel *Wuthering heights*.

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