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HEATHCLIFF IN EMILY BRONTE'S *WUTHERING HEIGHTS* : DEVIL OR A WRONGED  
HERO

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ABSTRACT

Heathcliff has been a point of debate and discussion since its oeuvre, however, none has come forward with a satisfactory explanation of his persona. The question of Heathcliff being a wronged hero or a character with sinister and sadistic overtones remains unanswered till today. The present paper portrays the character of Heathcliff as a symbolic representation of society corrupting the natural goodness in humans. His character is a manifestation of a staunch portrayal of love, a cut-throat criticism of society and a perceptive and trenchant exploration of humanity.

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**Minutae:** Is Mr Heathcliff a man ? If so, is he mad ? And if not, is he a devil ?

Isabella's question remained unanswered for the readers throughout the course of the eerie, extraordinary and sensational narrative even after 167 years when the character of Heathcliff was first vouchsafed on the reading world which made *Wuthering heights* a quintessential and exemplar narrative to this day, still worth reading. The character, whose blazing vehemence, passion and ardour makes other characters of the narrative imperceptible, appear to be an incarnate devil, diabolical and brute to every other character in the novel and even to the readers but to Catherine and Hareton.

From a literary perspective, Heathcliff swerves from being a traditional hero of any typical tragedy and becomes the personification of the Byronic hero ( accredited to the writer Lord Byron, George Gordon), a hero who is wronged by circumstances. He deviates from the stereotypical qualities of a traditional hero and comes out to be an anti- hero with an unsettling and troubled past, tumultuous emotions, a high level of intelligence, a loathing for rules and social constraints, a thirst for revenge and most importantly the capacity to love up to the endth degree ;the characteristics required by the character to be classified as a Byronic hero. "Heathcliff's enduring appeal is approximately that of Edmund, Lago, Richard III, the intermittent Macbeth : the villain who impresses by way of his energy, his cleverness, his peculiar sort of courage; and by his asides, inviting, as they do, the audience's or reader's collaboration in wickedness. Bronte is perfectly accurate in having her villain tell us, by way of Mrs. Dean and Lockwood, that brutality does not always disgust; and that there are those persons- often of weak, cringing, undeveloped characters-who innately admire it, provided they themselves are not injured."<sup>1</sup> Heathcliff had the potential to be one of the greatest heroes of

English literature but he, being the outcome of numerous trials and tribulations, had been blinded to his true potential. If things and circumstances had been different for Heathcliff or we may say favourable, he would have been one of the greatest romantic figures of English Literature.

At the very outset of the novel, we meet the character of Heathcliff, through Mr. Lockwood's narrative and he describes him as a "solitary neighbor that I shall be troubled with"<sup>2</sup> and he calls the place "a perfect misanthropist's Heaven."<sup>3</sup> Heathcliff's initial statements as recorded by Mr Lockwood, "I should not allow anyone to inconvenience me,"<sup>4</sup> "Guests are so exceedingly rare in this house,"<sup>5</sup> paint him as an unloved, isolated and unaccompanied creature which definitely is heart aching for readers.

Heathcliff, throughout the narrative, has not spoken anything in his defense. He has never tried to explain his pain and agony behind his behavioral patterns. When Nelly narrates events, we believe her and do not question the authenticity of her statements. We see Heathcliff through Nelly's eyes, through Catherine's eyes, through Linton's eyes, through the younger Cathy's eyes and the devoted Hareton's eyes as well. "Within the book, both Lockwood and Nelly Dean call Heathcliff reserved, and many critics have echoed this assessment. But Heathcliff is not naturally reserved. This is a trait he has tried to develop in response to his difficult life."<sup>6</sup> and Emily Bronte should have given Heathcliff voice before painting him as a villain. He was not at all a villain but a wronged hero.

Heathcliff's suffering and torment lay the first stone when old Mr Earnshaw finds him starving and homeless on the streets of Liverpool. He was named after an Earnshaw son who died in childhood, but he never becomes an Earnshaw. His single name stood both for Christian and surname throughout his life. Even when he died, his headstone, bears no other inscription but Heathcliff and the date of his death. What a pain! What a grief! He must have suffered an identity crisis throughout his life. What else could be expected from a child, except tempestuous emotions, with an unknown origin, already injured to hardship, starvation and blows when subjected to rejection, ill-treatment and humiliation. He was seen as a thing rather than a child. "Not a soul knew to whom it belonged."<sup>7</sup> Without having done anything to deserve rejection and knock-back, Heathcliff was made to feel like an interloper. Nelly, in fact, consistently addressed Heathcliff "it" as though he were an animal, not human.

It's as dark almost as if it came from the devil. We crowded round, and over Miss Cathy's head I had a peep at a dirty, ragged, black-haired child.<sup>8</sup>

Catherine Earnshaw even spits at him when she learns that her father has lost the whip she told him to bring from Liverpool, because he needed to attend on Heathcliff. Both Hindley and Catherine gave him a rough welcome and didn't allow him to lie in their bed. Mrs. Earnshaw was ready to fling it out the doors, while Nelly put it on the landing of the stairs hoping that it would be gone the next day.

They entirely refused to have it in bed with them, or even in the room; and I had no more sense, so I put it on the landing of the stairs, hoping it might be gone on the morrow.<sup>9</sup>

What a brutal dance of inhumanity! Hindley's hatred towards Heathcliff never actually found a disguise and resulted in inhuman behavior and ill-treatments. In these tender years, when a child's mind is supposed to take a shape, he was deprived of love, friendship, education and was subjected to cruelty, rejection, hatred and discrimination. Hindley was barbaric towards him and disrupts his mental and psychological growth. Though he was embittered and toughened at the hands of Hindley, he endured his ill-treatment with stoic patience and remained uncomplaining. As Nelly also puts it, "he was as uncomplaining as a lamb; though hardness, not gentleness, made him give little trouble."<sup>10</sup> He had stood Hindley's blows without shedding a tear or raising his voice because he had Catherine at his side. Catherine's sympathy towards the boy developed into a deep and uncommon sort of love between the two. Heathcliff had nobody else but Catherine to pour out his love and devotion and she became the only ray of hope for him during those hard times.

Heathcliff should not be blamed for that peculiar flavor of vengeance and anger, which was by that time deep soaked within, but rather be seen as a victim. The seeds of revenge and hatred which were sown by

Hindley became the key points both in the novel and in the negative development of the character of Heathcliff. As a judicial reader, one should not disburden Hindley of the blame as his barbaric treatment became the trigger to everything that went so wrong in the end. Heathcliff's unconscious desire to be understood becomes central to his character and morally justifies his behavioural patterns at different stages of his life and makes the reader to delve deeper and the introspection allows us to fully explore our wronged hero.

Heathcliff and Catherine were inseparable and to a reader's eye, their bond represented the spirit of love and freedom which wanted to break all bonds of cruel and unfair authority manifested in Hindley but the visit to Thrushcross Grange changed the scenario altogether. She was introduced to a all new elite world which she embraced with open arms and that world contained Edgar Linton. Lintons were fine and cultivated creatures and they made a lady out of Catherine who stood in sharp contrast to the black-haired and dirty Heathcliff. Catherine superficially fell for Edgar Linton and resolved to marry him as she started feeling shame for Heathcliff's rough exteriors and unpolished manners. Heathcliff was far more sinned against than sinning.

The character of Catherine and her selfishness was not questioned anywhere by the readers or critics when she demanded the best of both the worlds. A moral sin she has committed. She resolved to marry one man who suited her in dignity and wanted another as a lover who complemented her in personality.

And he will be rich, and I shall like to be the greatest woman of the neighborhood, and I shall be proud of having such a husband.<sup>11</sup>

Why Heathcliff was given the title of a villain when he demanded something for himself; why was he regarded as a demon when he wanted to assert his dignity as a human being? What was wrong in his avowal of taking revenge against everybody who wronged him after his final rejection by Catherine in favour of Edgar? Had he received a loving treatment by Catherine and an acceptance of his love, he might have become a human being but the tyranny at the hands Hindley and rejection at the hands of Catherine made a devil of him. Personification of dark powers, he became.

Revenge, being his strongest emotion, never left him till the end of the novel and guided him to act against all those who prevented his union with Catherine. Though, on his return, after three years, he was changed in physiognomy, treasure, wealth, sophistication and urbanity, social contempt and disparity was another burden he was bequeathed with. Catherine betrayed him for her superficial attraction for social status and superiority. Heathcliff was just a darker side of Catherine. He remained, throughout his life, the slave of his love for Catherine, ever brooding over her, and married Isabella only to be close to Catherine. Unlike Catherine, he never thought to love anybody else. Heathcliff's love for Catherine transcended the physical plane and appeared to be a kind of spiritual craving. He was haunted by Catherine's spirit day and night after her death. He died with his hand outstretched as if stretching out to hold someone else's hand.

By outpouring his poison, by wreaking his vengeance on Hindley, Edgar, Isabella and on their children: Hareton, young Cathy and Linton, for seventeen years, he just wanted his assertion of dignity as a human being. Readers should have been somehow sympathetic to Heathcliff, given what he had to deal with, in his life, seeing his horrific situation as a child and as a young boy. Though Heathcliff chose a wrong path to win over Catherine's love but he should have been credited for fighting for what he believed in. Our wronged hero personified strength, perseverance and unswerving commitment to Catherine which should be seen as a heroic art. He only tried to find comfort in seeking revenge and his revenge knew no boundaries. It must be kept in mind that while destroying others, Heathcliff was destroying himself throughout the narrative. Wouldn't it be unfair to call him a devil, when all he wanted sadly was justice which was denied to him?

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