



The Effects of Past Lives on Males in *Wuthering Heights*: A Comparative Analysis of Heathcliff and Hareton

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Abstract— This article focusses on the past lives of two prominent males in *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff and Hareton. It particularly highlights the challenges that they have encountered in the past, especially those that involve how they have been treated by those in whose care they had been intrusted, namely parents and guardians. It follows how these behaviours have shaped and influenced the habits of the characters and the extent to which these behaviours have been internalised and embraced. In the instance of Hareton, the article underscores the fact that negative circumstances do not have to necessarily engender negative attitudes. They can be used to create uplifting and creative possibilities.

Keywords— past, class, society, prejudice, identity, revenge.

Bronte's classic novel, *Wuthering Heights*, tells many stories in one. The non-chronological re-telling of the interlocking stories that make up the novel point to the author's obsession with time. Harris (1980) argues that, "The different perspectives or levels of time, one enclosing another in rings expanding from an emotional vortex, have remained a crux for interpreting the novel" (p. 1). The past lives of the characters of *Wuthering Heights* can be classified into two contrasting poles: the stormy and unfortunate past of the occupants of Wuthering Heights and the socially acceptable structured past of the occupants of Thrushcross Grange. This is reflected even in the description of the house at Wuthering Heights, given by Mr. Lockwood, which states "'Wuthering' being a significant provincial adjective, descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its station is exposed in stormy weather" (Brontë, 2005, p. 4). This reflects the psychological reality of its occupants. It is as though the very physical atmosphere was infused and entwined into their psyches, reflecting and affecting their experiences. This dark, tumultuous pessimism pervading *Wuthering Heights* is diametrically opposed to the atmosphere in Thrushcross Grange which Heathcliff described as "beautiful a splendid place carpeted with

crimson" (Brontë, 2005, p. 60) and of which he further commented of their time there, "We should have thought ourselves in heaven" (Brontë, 2005, p. 60).

Thus, *Wuthering Heights* presents a complex story of two physically and spiritually opposed realities of life, one of peaceful tradition and the other of distorted rebellion. According to Rogers (2014), "The ways characters fragment, oppose and mirror each other are analogous to the ways the dual plots dismantle and correct one another" (p. 1). In this tumultuous setting, one encounters characters who have experienced successes and disappointments in the past, both socially and psychologically. They have had to reconcile these experiences in order to move forward with their lives, while seeking to utilise contrasting energies from various philosophical angles to cope with their struggles. The characters are constantly stalked and overshadowed by their pasts as they attempt to negotiate and manipulate the present and future challenges. This perpetual presence of their pasts, especially for the male characters, holds their minds captive and compels their actions and reactions. The ever-present experiences particularly hold sway over present and future

actions in the lives of Heathcliff and Hareton, two male characters that emanate contrasting energies in the text.

As the Byronic hero of the novel, Heathcliff's past is shrouded in mystery; according to the novel, his origin is unknown. Rodriguez (2016) asserts that "[h]is past remains secret because it is never explicitly told, which helps to reinforce the mysterious aura that surrounds him" (p. 9). The very fact that he is only known by his Christian name reflects the lack of affiliation to the past. He is something of a mysterious Phantom of the Opera, inviting speculation and suspicion. It was even reported by Nelly Dean that Mr. Lockwood declared, "not a soul knew to whom it belonged" (Brontë, 2005, p. 46). Van Ghent (1953) submits that Emily Brontë insists on Heathcliff's origins remaining unknown, and she is determined to highlight his ignorance of social norms having never been introduced to that world. This lack of social status and identity set the stage for the suspicion with which Heathcliff was viewed and was a key factor in the prejudice and enigma surrounding Heathcliff from his childhood.

Thus, Heathcliff was clueless in the norms and mores of the social world, having no status or connection. Just as it is in today's society, this lack of connection to his roots and sense of belonging was influential in shaping Heathcliff into his temperamental and brooding self. This lack of social status and identity also led to his being shunned by what was considered polite society. This ostracizing, according to Stein (2009), sets up Heathcliff as "a victim of society who returns to take revenge, by using the very institutional powers that originally failed him" (p. 44). Based on this psychoanalytical perspective, Heathcliff's psyche was saturated with a clear thirst for revenge, and he meant to exact thus slowly and savagely.

Consequently, Heathcliff came to Wuthering Heights as a foreign entity in terms of customs and outlook, which led to prejudiced behaviour from the occupants of the house. The prejudice was reflected in Mrs. Earnshaw referring to him as a "gipsy brat" (Brontë, 2005, p. 46). It was also punctuated by Nelly herself referring to him using the pronoun "it" (Brontë, 2005, p. 46), which is reserved for neuter genders and reveals the extent to which Heathcliff was viewed as an outcast of society. This dehumanizing of Heathcliff was a precursor to the debasing treatment that would have been meted out to Heathcliff, which he must have clinically registered from the inception of his occupation of the house. It can be speculated that this reference to 'it' is also linked to his race, especially as he is referred to alternately as a "dark-skinned gipsy" (3),

"vagabond" (15), "dirty, ragged, black-haired child" (25) or "imp of Satan" (27) among other [racially-charged, derogatory] titles" (Rodriguez, 2016, p. 9).

Heathcliff was forced to endure the ramifications emerging from what was regarded as an inferior social class and race. This deduction is reflected in Larsson's (2013) assertion that social class significantly affected how a person was regarded and treated during that era of colonialism wherein the "colonised were perceived as to belong to the lower – or lowest – social class, [and] they were treated as such" (Larsson, 2013, p. 3). Heathcliff's racial and social origins would be judged by the ideals of this society, since, according to von Sneidern (1995), the inhabitants are "Anglo-Saxons, yeoman and gentry" (p. 174), who were perceived as the upper echelons of society. Furthermore, she posits that by virtue of Heathcliff's appearance, he was treated with disdain and scant courtesy. By extension, both his appearance and treatment contributed to his worldview and, ultimately, to a vicious cycle of violence and revenge. This judgement based on race and class still prevails in society today, whereby differences are viewed with suspicion, and sometimes scorn, especially when stereotypes have been formulated about the unknown.

Even when Heathcliff received some level of affection, there was resistance. It was more so looked upon with jealousy as Hindley saw him as a "usurper of his parent's affections and his privileges" (Brontë, 2005, p. 48) when Mr. Earnshaw showed Heathcliff kindness. This jealousy was so intense that it was declared that "Hindley hated him" (Brontë, 2005, p. 47). The hatred materialised when Hindley kept Heathcliff away from formal education after Mr. Earnshaw's death. This level of hatred was particularly marked because it worked towards keeping Heathcliff socially stunted and, eventually, antisocial. Hindley's hatred of Heathcliff could be easily invoked. In fact, "a few words from her [Hindley's wife], evincing a dislike to Heathcliff, were enough to rouse in him all his old hatred of the boy" (Brontë, 2005, p. 57).

This Hegelian Master-Slave dialectic, in which Hindley asserts his superiority and subordinates Heathcliff, is a significant driving force of the novel (Wong, 2014). Heathcliff was not even allowed to fraternise with the servants, nor was he allowed to be instructed by the curate. The perpetuation of unkindness was reflected in him only being allowed to labour outdoors. In essence, there was nothing, apart from Mr. Earnshaw's kindness, that demonstrated to Heathcliff that the world was a kind and sympathetic place. There was nothing done to undo the

unknown past, which in its mysteriousness had subjected Heathcliff, the child, to a life of hardness. Unknown to the perpetrators, Heathcliff was developing the self – consciousness common among Hegelian “slaves”, where the formidable young man would plot and exact revenge at some future time. His apparent patience with Hindley’s treatment even misled Nelly. She later told Mr. Lockwood, “He complained so seldom, indeed, of such stirs as these, that I really thought him not vindictive: I was deceived completely” (Brontë, 2005, p. 50).

However, in spite of the negative attitudes that prevailed towards him, Mr. Earnshaw, his guardian, while he lived, was a source of humane treatment. Mr. Earnshaw treated him with generosity and affection. In fact, he introduced him as a gift after having asked his children and Nelly Dean what they desired from Liverpool. Needless to say, this served as a shock to them and an irritation to Mrs. Earnshaw, who displayed her displeasure and behaved as one whose husband had committed adultery, because it felt to her that Heathcliff had to be the illegitimate son of Mr. Earnshaw (Solomon, 1959). Mr. Earnshaw’s treatment of Heathcliff could have been construed as an affront to his wife and as a possible signal of a preference for Heathcliff’s mother. His persistence and nonchalance in his favouring of Heathcliff were also symbolic of the importance the society placed on the patriarchal system of that time, (Wong, 2014) such that a man’s actions were not questioned by his wife, even if that man brought home a possible outside child.

According to Mambrol (2019), “Heathcliff is, first of all, an emblem of the social problems of a nation entering the age of industrial expansion and urban growth” (para. 4). He, therefore, represented change and the unknown. This inspired fear in those who were accustomed to the status quo. He, however, found a kindred spirit in Catherine. Polar opposites, Catherine’s initial hatred of the waif Heathcliff cools into an inseparable connection that transcends life. Rogers (2014) posits that it is clear “that Cathy and Heathcliff are souls entwined, and their love is supernatural, extending beyond the boundaries of life and death. Indeed, it cannot even be fully captured in writing; ... private and the “unutterable” pain their separation causes cannot be described” (p. 6).

As poorly treated as Heathcliff was by Hindley, though, it was not he who pushed Heathcliff away and caused him to embrace his darker nature more thoroughly. It was actually Catherine Earnshaw’s words that drove him from *Wuthering Heights*. Catherine’s overheard comment, “It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now; so he shall

never know how I love him” (Brontë, 2005, p. 102), misunderstood as the sole expression of her heart, shattered Heathcliff and changed the trajectory of their connection. These words reflected the social conventions of eighteenth-century England. As a woman, it was expected that Catherine would marry someone of similar or higher class. Eagleton (2006) asserts that Catherine attempted to embrace two realities of life; she tried to embrace her authentic self while embracing society’s convention. Likewise, Wasowsky (2000, p. 72) posits that:

[She] is the symbol of free spirit that wants to cross the barriers and she is torn between two worlds. On the one hand, she tends to be with Heathcliff, her childhood soul mate ... On the other hand, she aims at the privileges which her marriage to Edgar would give her.

Her choice of Edgar over Heathcliff signals to the latter that he is without wealth, status or any other social standing. This led to Heathcliff’s utter dejection which was captured by Nelly Dean who shared that “he staid to hear no farther” (Brontë, 2005, p. 102).

According to Hillegass (1991), *Wuthering Heights* is a novel that highlights class structure and the role of women in society. For Catherine, who is from a lower class, social class is a major factor in determining her choice for a husband. Thus, getting married to Heathcliff was not an option for upward mobility. Consequently, when she stated that it would degrade her to marry Heathcliff, the words were particularly hurtful to him, because he naïvely considered Catherine to be his equal, his ally. Based on the novel, they were “now very thick” and their desire for each other was deep. Catherine made a deliberate effort to dispense with the passion for social purposes, but in reality her love for Heathcliff was unmovable. She declared,

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 ... I am Heathcliff! He’s always, always on my mind. (Brontë, 2005, p. 104)

In fact, it was soon apparent that Catherine was not compatible with Edgar whom she chose over Heathcliff, because her psyche is not in tune with Edgar’s philosophy. Nevertheless, for the sake of social advancement, she felt that it was necessary to reject her soulmate. Yet, it was this very rejection that “pushes forth Heathcliff’s discovery of his own consciousness and sense of self-determination that then

leads to the later struggles of characters within the Novel” (Wong, 2014, p. 3).

Heathcliff's return to *Wuthering Heights* demonstrated that he had not forgotten the past. In fact, he sought revenge by first influencing Hindley to gamble and drink with him until Hindley became a drunkard and started “borrowing money on his land” (Brontë, 2005, p. 132). This behaviour was noted by Joseph, who stated, “This is t’way on ‘t-up at sun-dahn; dice, brandy, closed shutters, und can’le lught till next day, at nooin,” (Brontë, 2005, p. 132) while Heathcliff tells Dame Catherine how, “hor fathur’s goold runs into his pocket” (Brontë, 2005, p. 132). Consequently, Hindley died, in Joseph’s word, as “drunk as a lord” (Brontë, 2005, p. 236) still indebted to Heathcliff, the whole property having been mortgaged.

As the second phase of the novel began, in addition to having taken Hindley’s fortunes, Heathcliff ingratiated himself into Hareton’s affection by feigning aggravation towards Hareton’s father. Hareton shared with Nelly that Heathcliff “curses daddy for cursing me. He says I mun do as I will” (Brontë, 2005, p. 140). This elicited from Hareton childish loyalty towards Heathcliff, while referring to his own father as “devil daddy” (Brontë, 2005, p. 140). Heathcliff’s revenge was not sated after the death of Hindley. He continued his corruption of Hareton, declaring to him, “Now, my bonny lad, you are MINE! And we’ll see if one tree won’t grow as crooked as another, with the same wind to twist it” (Brontë, 2005, p. 238). Heathcliff was determined to cause the same sordid corruption of Hareton’s life that was inflicted upon his own life.

Heathcliff also carried with him the injuries that were inflicted upon him by Catherine. Upon his return he stated, “I heard of your marriage, Cathy ... I meditated this plan – just to have one glimpse of your face ... settle my score with Hindley; and then prevent the law by doing execution on myself,” (Brontë, 2005, p. 123). His feelings about her treatment of him were displayed when he added, “I want you to be aware that I KNOW you treated me infernally infernally!” (Brontë, 2005, p. 143). He asked her later on, “WHY did you despise me? WHY did you betray your own heart, Cathy? I have not one word of comfort. You deserve this. You have killed yourself” (Brontë, 2005, p. 205). These words, although they were meant to inflict pain, did not mean that Heathcliff did not love Catherine. They were uttered because he still felt the sting of the pain that she inflicted on him, which no amount of revenge could erase. Heathcliff’s connection to Catherine is not time-bound, and even after her death, his obsession with the ghostly

apparition persists as “the cyclical time of nature ... binds Catherine and Heathcliff to their beloved moor” (Harris, 1980, p. 114).

While Heathcliff’s dealings with the past might have changed his status in society, they did nothing to alter his personality. He was quite determined to have Hareton raised as a brute. When Heathcliff brought his son, Linton, to *Wuthering Heights*, one realized that his intentions remained the same with regard to carrying out his revenge. He declared, “I want the triumph of seeing MY descendent fairly lord of their estates: my children hiring their children to till their fathers’ land for wages” (Brontë, 2005, p. 264).

Moreover, Heathcliff’s ascent on the social ladder and his conquests were not enough to keep him happy and satisfied for the rest of his days, because Catherine was not with him. By placing the blame of her death on him when she stated, “You have killed me and thriven on it, I think” (Brontë, 2005, p. 202), she further drove him into irreversible depression. This is underscored when he declared after her death, “I CANNOT live without my life! I CANNOT live without my soul!” (Brontë, 2005, p. 213). This depression was compounded further when Heathcliff eventually started to miss his appearances at meals with Cathy Linton Heathcliff and Hareton Earnshaw at *Wuthering Heights*. He rarely ate thereafter and seemed uninterested in the affairs of the house, fancying himself to be happy with the thought of going to see Catherine in death.

From the opening chapters of the book, Mr. Lockwood’s account revealed that Heathcliff believed Catherine to be present beyond her death in the spirit. This was revealed when he stated, “Cathy, do come. Oh do ONCE more! Oh! My heart’s darling! Hear me THIS time, Catherine at last!” (Brontë, 2005, p. 36). His obsession with her over the eighteen years after her death gradually consumed his passion for anything else until he eventually willed himself to die. According to Nelly Dean, “Mr. Kenneth was perplexed to pronounce of what disorder the master died. I concealed the fact of his having swallowed nothing for four days ... It was the consequence of his strange illness, not the cause” (Brontë, 2005, p. 426).

Another character whose dealing with the past can also be examined is Hareton. As Hindley’s son, Hareton was unfortunately caught up in the revenge plot that Heathcliff devised for Hindley. Having lost his mother when he was a baby, he was cared for by Nelly Dean until she left for Thrushcross Grange with Catherine. His situation was unfortunate, because “Heathcliff has imbruted Hareton

Earnshaw and kept Hareton ignorant as Hareton's father Hindley imbruted him when they are young" (Ri, 2018, p. 3). According to Nelly Dean, although Heathcliff had not treated him physically ill,

He appeared to have bent his malevolence on making him a brute: he was never taught to read or write; never rebuked for any bad habit which did not annoy his keeper; never led a single step toward virtue, or guarded by a single precept against vice. (Brontë, 2005, p. 250)

Hareton's lack of education and his lack of fine clothes caused Catherine Linton to be distressed by the prospect of him being her cousin. Upon discovering this she wept outright and said, "my cousin is a gentlemen's son," and, subsequently, "He's not he's not my cousin, Ellen!" (Brontë, 2005, p. 246). While Catherine lived at Wuthering Heights, she made fun of Hareton and mocked his attempt to better himself through learning to read.

Hareton dealt with how he was treated with remarkable patience and humility. In fact, he remained loyal to Heathcliff to the very end. Catherine Linton Heathcliff tried to get him to join in revolt against Heathcliff by saying, "He'll not obey you wicked man, any more! And soon he'll detest you, as much as I do!" (Brontë, 2005, p. 405). Hareton responded by saying, "Wisht! Wisht! ... I will not hear you speak so to him. Have done" (Brontë, 2005, p. 405). Even in Hareton's dealing with Catherine, when she was trying to make up for the wrongs she had done, one can perceive a good and forgiving spirit in Hareton. Nelly said, "I could detect in his physiognomy a mind owning better qualities than his father ever possessed. Good things lost amid a wilderness of weeds, to be sure... yet, notwithstanding, evidence of a wealthy soil" (Brontë, 2005, p. 250). As the mirror to Heathcliff, Hareton was "the personification of [Heathcliff's] youth" (Brontë, 2005, p. 409) and in some small way served to disarm Heathcliff.

Hareton's patient dealing with the past was rewarded with happiness eventually. His satisfaction did not come from Heathcliff's death; in fact, he was the only one who was sorrowful. It came from the realization that Catherine loved him and was willing to repent and be his friend. Ki (2014) declares that

The rite of passage of Hareton and Cathy denotes a block of contrary coexistence — to become themselves they first lose their original identity (including their family/social standing); they become what they do not want to become; they

overcome their feelings to love or at least understand their enemies. (p. 210)

This alliance eventually led to them being married and being in possession of what belonged to them by heredity. Having endured the worst savageries in their collective pasts, their New Year's Day marriage signals the start of a new time-frame, one which while influenced by the past, will surely not be shaped by it.

Based on the experiences of Heathcliff and Hareton, it is clear that the past is directly linked to the present circumstances of one's lives. However, it also depends on how prevalent and significant these issues have been. It does mean though that the individual does not have any input into how his/her present circumstances will turn out. In fact, some persons who make a concerted effort to dictate their destiny can be successful. They would not be able to emotionally, and physically cut all ties with the past but they can ensure that their lives are not just swept along by past hurts and disappointments.

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