

## **Healthcliff: The victimised villain of ‘wuthering heights’**

**Nivedita Dutta**

Student, Department of English, Tezpur University, Tezpur, Assam, India

### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to analyse one of Victorian era’s most complex character named Heathcliff from Emily Brontë’s novel ‘Wuthering Heights’ who is often regarded as an archetype of the tormented antihero whose all-consuming rage, anger and jealousy destroy both him and those around him. His mesmerizing, complicated, consumable, and altogether bizarre nature throughout the novel has garnered the attention of many critics and scholars to ponder over his character. This paper analyses his psyche and the reason behind his malignant attributes.

**Keywords:** malignity, heathcliff, victorian age, victorian novel

### **1. Introduction**

Wuthering Heights; written in 1847 by Emily Brontë is an epic love story and revengeful narrative. It tells the story of an obsessive, isolated and vindictive character hopelessly enthralled to accomplishing revenge. Inspired by Romanticism and the novels of Walter Scott, it challenged Victorian ideas about religion, morality, class and woman's place in society. It centers on the relationship between two families, the Earnshaws and the Lintons focusing on the passionate love of two central characters namely Catherine and Heathcliff. The story is told by two narrators, the first and last chapters by a tenant named Lockwood and the middle part by the servant Nelly Dean. This paper analyses the psyche of Heathcliff one of the major characters in Wuthering Heights.

### **2. Heathcliff: The Victimised Villain**

Heathcliff is one of the Victorian era's most complex characters. When Heathcliff enters the Earnshaw family, their hostile reaction towards him resolve into hatred and vindictive actions that Heathcliff undertakes later in the novel. His race and lack of social status are the main reasons for their reactions. Heathcliff has no identity. Before his metaphorical birth in the Earnshaw family, he just happened to be a gypsy foundling discovered on the streets of Liverpool. He is the ultimate outsider, with his dark “gypsy” looks and an unknown background. The contrast with his new family placed him in isolation because he was viewed as a “dirty, ragged child”. Mrs. Dean even goes on to the extent of describing him as a “ghost, monster and vampire”. As a result of this feeling of ‘otherness’, Heathcliff begins to develop anger and frustration and ends up despising the people of the social class that hold him back. Heathcliff may have lived in Wuthering Heights, but he did not belong there and Hindley made that apparent whenever he could. Initially Mr. Earnshaw’s treatment of Heathcliff results in him gaining some social status within the family, albeit temporarily. This provokes Hindley because he views Heathcliff as an intruder in the family and believes that he should be treated better than Heathcliff. When Mr. Earnshaw dies and Hindley becomes the head of the family, Heathcliff’s situation deteriorates. Hindley treats him like a

servant and deprives him of education and burdens him with hard labour. Hindley would not only verbally abuse Heathcliff but do so physically and mentally as well. Hindley boasts about his higher social status and does everything to remind Heathcliff about his lower status. Hindley’s treatment of Heathcliff was enough to make a fiend out of a saint and fuel the malignity in him.

As the tale progresses, Heathcliff transforms from a victim into an oppressor and is determined to make Hindley pay. He gets his revenge on Hindley by escaping the moors and acquiring a mysterious fortune. He comes back to an alcoholic Hindley and claims that he wishes to “help” him with his gambling debts. By lending Hindley money that he cannot pay back, Heathcliff, in turn, ends up owning Wuthering Heights.

Heathcliff vents out his hatred for Hindley on his son Hareton as well. He abused young Hareton and prohibited him from receiving an education and condemned him to servile labour. As a result, Hareton grew up as a barbarian; he behaved rudely and was ill-mannered. In a sense, Hareton’s suffering was a reflection of Heathcliff’s childhood and Heathcliff’s way of avenging himself.

Heathcliff’s plots revenge on Edgar and Catherine by marrying Isabella. He manipulates her to elope with him. However, marriage to Isabella was only the first step of his revenge. He confides to Nelly that he wants his son, Linton and Catherine and Edgar’s daughter, Cathy to get married. This would give him access to Thrushcross Grange and help him climb upward in the social hierarchy. It is evident that Heathcliff’s desire for revenge resulted in a lot of collateral damage as it wasn’t just his direct oppressors who suffered, but also those related to them.

### **3. The Forlorn Lover**

Heathcliff’s ill-fated love for Catherine Earnshaw was another significant factor for his malignity. As a child, Heathcliff falls madly in love with Catherine Earnshaw. The two of them are inseparable. Initially, Catherine didn’t view Heathcliff as others do because of his class or race.

However, after her accident at the Grange, Catherine stays to heal and it is here that Catherine’s transition from being a little girl wanting to be free of the demands her social status

put upon her, to a representative young lady takes place. She becomes more aware of her social status and starts viewing Heathcliff as others do.

When Catherine meets Heathcliff again after her five weeks of absence, it is evident how different the two are in terms of their social status. Catherine's awareness of this disparity contributes to making Heathcliff aware of the differences between him and Edgar, both in social standing and in racial attributes.

It is this consciousness of his status in society that forces Heathcliff to think of how he "shall pay Hindley back" because it was his actions that placed Heathcliff in a low social class and took away his chances of being with Catherine. Naturally, when Catherine chooses to marry Edgar instead of him, Heathcliff sees it as a betrayal of his love and her true nature: "Why did you betray your own heart, Cathy!"

#### **4. Conclusion**

Thus it becomes clear that Heathcliff's actions towards the other characters are clearly influenced by the ill-treatment he received from the Earnshaws and the Lintons. It is also apparent that the complex issues of social class and race had a strong impact on him and, in many ways, his revenge was not aimed at particular people in so much as it was directed against their class and race. After all, it was these differences in status that caused them to mistreat him and prompted Catherine to leave him in favour of Edgar.

Whether Heathcliff can be called a victim or villain is a matter of perception. While we can all sympathise with his childhood, it is hard to ignore how his desire for revenge negatively affected everyone around him, including, his son. At the same time, we have to acknowledge the role social class and race played in shaping Heathcliff and his future actions.

#### **5. References**

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