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HEATHCLIFF – A HERO FALLEN BY REVENGE

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ABSTRACT

Emily Brontë's "Wuthering Heights" is best known for its gothic scenery, romance and violence. The novel has portrayed Heathcliff as both a hero and a villain. He was a hero who was driven by vengeance at the middle of the novel and became a villain. He was not a born villain but a villain made. While all the retaliations in the English Literature were seen in favour of the one who retaliated, Heathcliff's retaliation was regarded as a villainous act. Heathcliff was portrayed as a gypsy and I assume that the kind of racism in the novel against Heathcliff would be a primary reason why he was projected as a villain. It was Hindley who sowed the seeds of hatred and vengeance in the mind of Heathcliff. He tortured him and created space where Heathcliff would be tortured. When Mr. Earnshaw sent his son out of town for studies, everyone might have felt a sigh of relief, expecting Hindley to change his attitude towards Heathcliff after his education outside. But surprisingly, it had multiplied and the real suffering began upon Hindley's return. Catherine made it worse by abandoning Heathcliff for a better status in the society. Hindley's hatred, Catherine's betrayal, Mr. Earnshaw's death and Heathcliff's gypsy nature that held him away from everyone contributed in turning Heathcliff the Hero into Heathcliff the villain, consciously. This paper examines the circumstances that projected Heathcliff as one of the terrible villains in the history of English Literature and tries to justify that it was circumstances that made him a villain.

Key words: Heathcliff, Racial Discrimination, Wuthering Heights, Fallen Hero.

KY PUBLICATIONS

1. INTRODUCTION

Emily Brontë is one of the gifted authors among the nineteenth century novelists who left this world baffled with her one and only novel "Wuthering Heights". She was born on 30th July 1818 and died at her 30th age in 1848. Wuthering Heights was written in the year 1846. Her full name was Emily Jane Brontë and she is one of the three famous Brontë sisters. All the three sisters, Charlotte, Emily and Anne were well known as poets

and novelists. Because of the strict male dominated British society, they, like the other contemporary female writers, originally published their poems and novels under male pseudonyms. Charlotte under Currer, Emily under Ellis, and Anne under Acton Bell. "Wuthering heights" was her only novel that is still not understood fully by the readers and attracts different interpretations from various readers across the globe. By any means or literary standards, Emily Brontë's "Wuthering Heights" is a classic. People still

believe that she came to this world to gift her only novel and then leave the earth.

Through "Wuthering Heights", she presented us Heathcliff who still poses a great challenge in understanding his character fully. So far, he has been regarded as the cruellest person ever seen in the literature world but in this work a positive approach towards his character is attempted from an oppressed, deceived and common man's point of view.

Emily Brontë's sister, Charlotte explains: [Heathcliff] exemplified the effects which a life of continued injustice and hard usage may produce on a naturally perverse, vindictive and inexorable disposition. If he was carefully trained and kindly treated, the black gipsy-cub might possibly have been reared into a human being, but tyranny and ignorance made of him a mere demon. (Charlotte Brontë, cited by Drew 376). So it was possible for the other characters to help Heathcliff to become a normal person instead the white superiority complex and the supremacy prevented all the other characters from acting kindly towards Heathcliff.

Hagan justifies Heathcliff's behaviour saying that his behaviour arose from "eminently human frustration" (Hagan 317) and this clearly suggests that anyone if treated in this manner would react just like Heathcliff. So I would like to establish that Heathcliff was not a born villain but a villain made.

In this work, six different reasons are given to prove that these circumstances made Heathcliff a villain and he was not a born villain. The six reasons are,

- i. Heathcliff's Gypsy Nature
- ii. Initial Affection
- iii. Hindley's hatred
- iv. Mr. Earnshaw's death
- v. Catherine's love and abandonment
- vi. Mysterious wealth

2. Heathcliff's Gypsy Nature

Heathcliff was one of the characters that was hated for its hatred character in the history of English Literature so far. Although retaliation was not new to the English audience, Heathcliff fell prey to the devouring white skinned British audience because of his Gypsy nature. This is evident from Mr. Lockwood's description of Heathcliff from his

first impression that "Mr. Heathcliff forms a singular contrast to his abode and style of living. He is a dark-skinned gipsy in aspect, in dress and manners a gentleman" (P 6). Although he didn't like Heathcliff's Gypsy nature, he is forced to admit that Heathcliff was a gentleman.

James Hafley in his article titled The Villain in Wuthering Heights, writes that Nelly is the true villain (199) and an unreliable narrator. Since she is the one narrating the story she decides how the reader is supposed to perceive Heathcliff and the other characters. This is evident from Brontë when Nelly introduces Heathcliff in the following manner, "Nelly initially refers to him as *it*, "I put it on the landing of the stairs, hoping it might be gone on the morrow" (31-32). Although Hafley states that Lockwood, the other narrator is innocent (201), Hillis Miller, in his article titled "Wuthering Heights" and the Ellipses of Interpretation, states that the whole narration is unreliable considering the story being so vast and full of hidden meanings (43) and that Lockwood, too, is an unreliable narrator. This is because he has to decipher all the confusing information that he tries to put in order (43).

Racial discrimination from all the angle, from the author, audience and the characters in the novel pushed Heathcliff to become the character which he didn't intend to become. Racial discrimination and suppression of the oppressed class was always part and parcel of the English History.

As Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs í ensku points out in his paper Destruction and Sympathy in Emily

Brontë's Wuthering Heights that "the revelation of a poor past, of a past with no carers, of a past of loneliness and sorrow, serves to awaken the reader's sympathy with him which is in turn reinforced by the initial indifferent and cruel reception he receives from several of his new family members" (p 3) confirms that Heathcliff suffered brutally in the hands of almost everyone for a long time.

I couldn't see anyone other than Mr. Earnshaw having humanness because everyone else was talking about civilization and social advancement and it was a mere materialistic thing. I could recall the cruelty that was unleashed upon many human beings on this earth by the so called

cultured and civilised people during the colonial period. Heathcliff stand tall as a proof of all those oppressed and suppressed by the colonial brutality and the labourers who were removed from their motherlands to work in plantations, constructions, and as household servants. On one hand, they were preaching Christianity and the other hand they were crucifying CHRISTs from different lands because they were not white. Heathcliff, unfortunately was living among them and so he was tortured.

3. Initial Affection & Mr. Earnshaw's death

When Mr. Earnshaw found Heathcliff in Liverpool, he didn't abandon him there. Although Mr. Earnshaw visited places on business purpose, the decision to bring Heathcliff back home may have other reasons. One such reason could be that Heathcliff might be his own son born of an illegitimate relationship because the English public was not ready to accept any other race as equal to them during the time of Emily Brontë or he brought him as a slave. Heathcliff might have felt very lucky and happy but his happiness was short lived when he arrived Mr. Earnshaw's house. Heathcliff was ready to work even as a labour in Mr. Earnshaw's house out of gratitude but that was what happened anyway.

Heathcliff always kept his gratitude high for Mr. Heathcliff and his family as long as Mr. Earnshaw was alive. He maintained his dignity and bore all the trouble that Hindley brought on him. Mr. Earnshaw by all means was his world, consolation, motivation and friend. Mr. Earnshaw had to protect Heathcliff even from his own son, forget about the rest of the society.

Mr. Earnshaw was one human being in the entire novel who continuously supported Heathcliff and protected him from the hands of other white skinned people. He loved Heathcliff more than his own son Hindley because of the good nature of Heathcliff. One can understand that Heathcliff was more civilized and polished than Hindley when he started torturing Heathcliff and when Mr. Earnshaw sent him away for studies. This twist in the novel is more than enough to certify Heathcliff's character. Heathcliff suffered a big blow when Mr. Earnshaw died and when Hindley returned to continue with his torture. Despite his shouting, yelling and

threatening, Heathcliff remained strong and calm. Unfortunately Mr. Earnshaw forgot to allot a fortune for Heathcliff from his property and this led Heathcliff to become more dependent on Hindley. He treated Heathcliff far worse than a household animal and at times even the animals got better treatment in the hands of Hindley than Heathcliff.

Hindley's hatred

When we look at the entire novel's animation, we will understand that it is Hindley not Heathcliff was the villain. Hindley represented the entire British population of his time. He made Heathcliff suffer like an animal whenever possible as the line proves "the Earnshaw children detested the dark-skinned Heathcliff". When Hindley's treatment towards Heathcliff increased, Mr. Earnshaw sent Hindley away for education. Was it for Hindley's education or to protect Heathcliff and if he tried to protect Heathcliff, on what grounds? The mystery shrouding this part is that why should Mr. Earnshaw send his own son away just to safe guard an orphan? Is it because he was very kind or is it because Heathcliff was his own son?

Vargish thus outlines in his article, "Revenge and *Wuthering Heights*" (10), it is during the Christmas party at the Heights from which Heathcliff is excluded, that the notion of destruction between him and Hindley is introduced. Emily Brontë elaborates, "When the former sits with precocious dedication ... and studies how to pay Hindley back, the thought of revenge dulling his physical pain" (Brontë 53).

Every reader might have expected a repented Hindley when he returned after his education outside but to everyone's surprise his cruelty had increased multifold. The torture that Heathcliff underwent in the hands of Hindley was heavy enough for Heathcliff to become the character he turned in the later part of the novel. Although Hindley seemed to be strong, in reality he was very weak as Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs í ensku observes in his paper Destruction and Sympathy in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (P 13), "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". Heathcliff had decided to destroy Hindley

but it was Hindley's fragility that paved the way for Heathcliff to act.

It's true as Watson observes, "Heathcliff finishes the ruin of Hindley by catering to his taste for drink and gambling and secures mortgages on *Wuthering Heights*" (97). Hindley was weak and he was destructing himself long ago even before Heathcliff's arrival after three years. Heathcliff utilised every single opportunity to exploit and retaliate Hindley.

4. Catherine's love and abandonment

Catherine, just like Hindley hated Heathcliff because he was not white. Later when Hindley was sent away for studies, Catherine for want of a companion became closer to Heathcliff and Heathcliff returned the love hundred fold. Heathcliff believed that he and Catherine are going to be together. He enjoyed his life most when he spent his time with Catherine. Catherine kept her affection alive even in the presence of Hindley after their father's death. Catherine's love kept Heathcliff alive and when she was around his face was glowing with hope and love. Everyone might have believed that Catherine had brought sun shine to Heathcliff's life. Everyone might have thought she had kindled a fresh spark of hope in Heathcliff's mind to live long. He was bearing all the suffering without any protest. In a way he was enjoying his suffering. He remained a hero amidst all his sufferings.

As Bell, Vereen M. observes in his paper "*Wuthering Heights* and the Unforgivable Sin", "Heathcliff spends all his time by Catherine's side before his departure, but it is eventually her carelessness and disrespect towards her good friend and potential soul mate, as well as a betrayal of her true feelings, that turns the tide and sets Heathcliff in opposition to Catherine, as the destructive consequences of thwarted love (Bell 188) are set in motion". It is very obvious that it's Catherine's infidelity that took toll of Heathcliff. The time came and it exposed the weakness of the society and Catherine alike. Catherine remained close to Heathcliff until she was bitten by the dog and forced to stay away from Heathcliff. Mrs. Linton influenced Catherine to a great extent in creating a gap between her and Heathcliff by making her believe

that Heathcliff is not equal and she could have a better life if she was away from Heathcliff.

If this was a one-time lecture, Catherine might have forgotten and got back to Heathcliff but the lecture continued for five weeks and even stone would have gone to powder by that time and Catherine was after all a girl developing into a woman. Heathcliff found Catherine behaving differently after returning from her treatment. She didn't want to talk to him although her heart yearned for his love. It's the struggle between social advancement Vs real love in Catherine's mind. Zhao Juan in his paper titled *Female Consciousness in Wuthering Heights* says that "in Catherine's eyes, everything related to Linton is superficial, unimportant to her; and her real, underlying life is permanently stuck to Heathcliff's" (P 3). Catherine utters these words and confirms 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" (P 129).

One thing that was the entire reason for Heathcliff's total character transformation from hero to villain was Catherine's betrayal. A man won't tolerate the betrayal from a woman who treated him like a husband and made him believe that she was his wife. This happened when Catherine married Edgar Linton. Although she married Linton she is possessed with Heathcliff as his love was pure and she confirms it when she says to Nelly "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" (P 130).

She, by doing this, literally drove Heathcliff mad. He became a mad man but he never wanted to hurt Catherine till that moment. Heathcliff's love for Catherine should be recorded in the history of literature world as one of the highest. He reveals this by saying, "Oh, God! it is unutterable! I CANNOT live without my life! I CANNOT live without my soul!" (P 268). Please notice that the word CANNOT is written in capital letters. This reciprocal love without any maturity has spoiled and ruined both of them for which Catherine should be held responsible more than Heathcliff. As Drew outlines,

"Heathcliff and Catherine's passion for each other is so compounded with jealousy, anger, and hatred, that it brings them only unhappiness, anguish and eventually death" (Drew 374).

5. Mysterious wealth

Heathcliff disappeared for three years after the engagement of Catherine and Edgar Linton. This time he has got lots of money and the source of the money is still a mystery. Hindley by this time had become a drunkard and started getting money from Heathcliff as loan and Heathcliff was more than happy to lend him money. When the debt became enormous, Heathcliff started acquiring the properties from Hindley and drove him to alcohol addiction. For every reader it might seem to be a cruel act but not more than what Hindley did to Heathcliff. If anyone feels that Hindley is of a high society, remember there are no drunkards who are considered as highly civilized, besides Hindley was brought up in that civilization but Heathcliff was not allowed to. Everyone might be wondering from where he amassed such a wealth. Well my point here is that he might have helped someone like Mr. Earnshaw and he in return gave a fortune to Heathcliff.

Financial independency is always considered to be the top needs of any human being. The domination towards other human beings begin because wealthy people think they could buy anything to use against the poor if they resist. Hindley was using it against him and at the end he received the same from Heathcliff.

6. Conclusion

The whole world is still torn to pieces by race, religion, caste, class and language even in the 21st century. No wonder, the 19th century British who were colonising the whole world made Heathcliff a villain and if we have to consider Heathcliff a villain, the British Empire was a villain too. I could only see the positive side of Heathcliff who was an eternal lover and brave man who bore all the sufferings without reaction. His character is characterised by the cruel behaviours of Hindley and Hindley sowed and nurtured retaliation in Heathcliff's mind. Heathcliff is only the result of what Hindley and the so called civilised British population of that time. Catherine was also a prey to the seductive attitude

of the civilised world. Had she not turned her affection from Heathcliff, Heathcliff would have become the best lover in the world.

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