

Emily Xu

English 45B

7 December 2015

Nature and Civilization in *Wuthering Heights*

When stripped down to its core, *Wuthering Heights* is a novel about the triumph of the eternal over the ephemeral. The book is a study of contrasts; it follows fragile, fleeting human lives as they play out against the harsh, unchanging moors. It draws attention to the encroaching of time and the things that are and are not vulnerable to its inevitable passage. Emily Bronte uses the characters Edgar Linton and Heathcliff to epitomize the transient and the constant. It is through these agents that she expounds on the relationship between nature and civilization and demonstrates how the immortal prevails over the temporary.

Heathcliff is consistently characterized as something other than human. Throughout the novel, he is described in three distinct ways. First, he is often viewed as a demon. Heathcliff is distinguished by his sadistic and remorseless violence towards other characters and living beings. His wickedness and inhumanity are also apparent in the epithets applied to him. He is cursed as “a hellish villain”(100), “a divil of a gispy”(64), and “a lying fiend, a monster, not a human being”(112). His wife, Isabella Linton, asks, “Is Mr. Heathcliff a man?...Is he a devil?”(100) and Nelly Dean wonders, “is he a ghoul, or vampire?”(242). Bronte uses this diction to relentlessly remind the reader of Heathcliff’s fiendishness and firmly establish him as a villain. Moreover, this deliberate language implies that Heathcliff *is* a demon, and suggests that he should possess supernatural powers and more importantly, immortality. Therefore, the purpose of relating Heathcliff to the supernatural is to anchor him closely to deathlessness and eternal life.

This attribute also carries over into Heathcliff's relationship with Catherine. Their love is supernatural and everlasting, extending beyond the bounds of human life. Upon Catherine's death, Heathcliff declares:

Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest, as long as I am living! You said I killed you—
haunt me then! Be with me always—take any form—drive me mad! I cannot live without
my life! I cannot live without my soul! (124)

Heathcliff refuses to allow mortality and death separate him from his love. And if Mr. Lockwood's account is to be believed, Catherine indeed remains on Earth to haunt Heathcliff as a ghost. Their love, though condemned and perhaps wicked, is nevertheless immortal and superhuman as well.

The second manner in which Heathcliff is described is as a wild beast. From the moment that he arrives at Wuthering Heights, Heathcliff is marked as subhuman and referred to by the impersonal pronoun, "it"(26). He is repeatedly charged with brutish traits; Nelly recounts him "howling, not like a man, but like a savage beast"(124) and Catherine pronounces him "an unreclaimed creature, without refinement, without cultivation"(75). Here, the diction draws attention to Heathcliff's wildness and brutality, and identifies him as an embodiment of nature. He is heedless of and untethered by the confines of civilization, social norms, and morality. Heathcliff is also violent and powerful like a storm. He is a force of nature and the other characters are helpless in the face of his persistent pursuit for revenge. This association of Heathcliff with the barbaric also serves another purpose. His name recalls the word 'heathen', one who is uneducated and lacks moral principles. However, his deficiency is not of his own choosing, but due to his mistreatment at the hands of Hindley. Consequently, this dehumanizing

portrayal renders Heathcliff a sympathetic character, despite his unquestionable standing as an antagonist.

The tempestuousness and ferocity of Heathcliff and Catherine's relationship can also be likened to elements of nature. Their passion for each other is unrestrained, fervent, and animalistic in its possessiveness. Nelly tells of an embrace between Heathcliff and Catherine, "He gnashed his teeth at me, and foamed like a mad dog, and gathered her to him with greedy jealousy. I did not feel as if I were in the company of a creature of my own species"(119). Their mutual infatuation brings out base and bestial instincts in both (though carnal desire is noticeably absent). Such insubstantial human notions as social convention and class can hardly contain the raging typhoon that is Catherine and Heathcliff. Their love too is an unstoppable natural force.

Finally, Heathcliff's most apparent comparison is with rocks. The name "Heathcliff" exhibits a lack of surname, which reflects the absence of roots and heritage, though all living things must have an origin. There is also the obvious significance behind the name, 'Heathcliff'. Catherine describes him as "an arid wilderness of furze and whinstone"(75). Her particular choice of words is a play on his name: furze being a type of gorse that grows on the heath, and whinstone being a type of rock found in Northern English cliffs. She is remarking that Heathcliff is as rough and unyielding as his name suggests. His coarse appearance, hard personality, and inhospitable nature all further corroborate this claim. Heathcliff is also as constant as the cliffs. Nelly marvels, "though his exterior was altered, his mind was unchangeable, and unchanged"(p74). Heathcliff is able to maintain the same attitudes, grudges, and alliances over the course of the book. His hatred for Edgar Linton and Hindley is able to transcend time and carry over onto the next generation. Instilling Heathcliff with rock-like traits thus presents him as a symbol of the constant and the unrelenting.

Catherine and Heathcliff's love is also marked by permanence. The strength of their devotion, first established in childhood, never wavers throughout the novel. Catherine states, "My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath—a source of little visible delight but necessary"(60). She calls their love "eternal"; it is steadfast and unmovable. Catherine is well aware of Heathcliff's many faults, and he of hers, and still their love does not change. It remains constant, unaffected by the condemnation of others and even the trials of time.

Edgar Linton is presented not only as a foil to Heathcliff, but also as his inferior in almost every aspect of comparison. As Heathcliff is powerful and supernatural, Edgar is human and weak. Whereas Heathcliff represents nature, Edgar represents mankind and civilization. Edgar is the product of human society: he is a refined and gentle, but also timid and delicate. He is disdainfully called "pitiful, silly"(50), "a milk-blooded coward"(85), and Catherine tells him scornfully:

Heathcliff would as soon lift a finger at you as the king would march his army against a colony of mice. Cheer up, you sha'n't be hurt! Your type is not a lamb, it's a sucking leveret. (85)

It is clear to everyone that Edgar is no match for Heathcliff, neither physically nor mentally. When they get into an argument, Edgar, cowed and helpless, needs to call three armed men to back him up (85). And because he is unable to defeat Heathcliff, he is forced to suffer through sharing his beloved Catherine with a man whom he detests. Edgar is powerless again each time that Heathcliff comes to snatch away his sister, his nephew, and finally his daughter. These conflicts can be seen as the incarnation of nature triumphing over man. In the face of the awesome and timeless power of nature, man is ultimately defenseless.

In comparison to her love for Heathcliff, Catherine's relationship with Edgar is painfully evanescent. Their marriage lasts only a year. Towards the end of it, Edgar reminisces, "Last spring at this time, I was longing to have you under this roof" and Catherine responds, "Next spring you'll long again to have me under this roof"(99), foretelling her imminent death and the rapidly approaching end of their brief relationship. Catherine's actual love for Edgar is even more fleeting, which is unsurprising considering its shallow roots. She marries him because he is "handsome", "pleasant", "young", "cheerful", and "rich"(57). Nelly reminds her that, "He won't always be handsome, and young, and may not always be rich," and to that, Catherine says, "He is now; and I have only to do with the present"(57). Strangely, this is said four years before her death, so it is uncertain whether she is prophesizing or if she simply does not care how long her fondness for her husband lasts. Either way, it is clear that Catherine's relationship with Edgar represents the transient. Their "love", like youth and handsomeness, is ephemeral and secured only in the present. This can be contrasted with Catherine's reasons for loving Heathcliff, "I love him and not because he is handsome, but because he is more myself than I am"(59). Their love, on the other hand, does not depend on temporary qualities, but upon fundamental and inextricable pieces of themselves. This is why Catherine and Heathcliff's enduring love is superior to her and Edgar's fleeting marriage.

Edgar and Catherine's relationship is affected by the passage of time. Catherine unflinchingly admits, "My love for Linton like the foliage in the woods. Time will change it, I'm well aware, like winter changes the trees"(60). This again alludes to Edgar's association with the mortal and the living, opposite Heathcliff's connection to the immortal and nonliving. It also suggests that the Lintons' relationship will wax and wane with the seasons. It begins in March of 1783 when Catherine and Edgar marry. Their union is born in the spring, a season of love, hope,

youth, and beginnings. Nelly confesses, “I believe I may assert that they were really in possession of deep and growing happiness”(67). In the absence of Heathcliff, their love grows strong and reaches its peak in the summer:

[Catherine] rewarded him with such a summer of sweetness and affection, as made the house a paradise, both master and servants profiting from perpetual sunshine. (73)

Summer typically represents passion, romance, and the prime. It is no mistake that this is when the Lintons’ daughter is conceived, at the height of their marriage. Next, fall comes, bringing change, tiredness, decline, and decay. Heathcliff returns to Catherine in September, marking the beginning of the end. Autumn is also a time of personal harvest, and Edgar reaps the fruits of months of doting on and patiently humoring Catherine. She is fed up with his monotonous tenderness and seeks out Heathcliff’s turbulent passion. In January, Catherine has a heated argument with Heathcliff and Edgar, then provokes herself into sickness. She says to her husband, “I don’t want you, Edgar; I’m past wanting you. Return to your books. I’m glad you possess a consolation, for all you had in me is gone”(94). This signals the demise of what love Catherine had left for him. She remains sick for the rest of the winter, a season of anger, resentment, loneliness, and death, never fully recovers, and dies in March 1784. Spring comes once again, but this time it symbolizes new life and birth, or in this case, re-birth. As one Catherine expires, another Catherine comes forth to replace her, marking the beginning of a new chapter. Over the course of a year, Edgar and Catherine’s relationship buds, blooms, withers, and dies with the turning of the seasons. Their love is undeniably mortal, easily crumbling to the erosion of time.

A focus of *Wuthering Heights* is the contention between Heathcliff and Edgar Linton, a conflict that runs parallel to the clash between nature and civilization. Heathcliff represents

nature and what is eternal and constant. His love for Catherine is so powerful that it transcends social norms, class, morality, and time. Meanwhile, Edgar embodies civilization and the ephemeral, and his love is always inferior to Heathcliff's. In the end, Heathcliff succeeds in taking everything from Edgar, in the same way, the book insists, that nature and the immortal will always triumph over man.

Works Cited

Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*. N.p.: Dover, 1996. Print.