

## Heathcliff: A Byronic Challenge

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Many consider Emily Brontë's masterpiece *Wuthering Heights* as one of the greatest love stories of all time. For readers who agree with this notion, Heathcliff undoubtedly fits the role of hero in spite of his violent and sadistic nature. Such a dark and troubling, yet nonetheless attractive character is no unique creation of Brontë's. Rather this literary figure, the Byronic hero, arose out of the Romantic Movement, deriving its name from Lord Byron and his poetic heroes. Descriptions of the Byronic hero include "a young man, prematurely sated by sin, who wanders about in an attempt to escape society and his own memories," as well as a man "complex in his history and inner conflict" ("The Satanic"). During the course of the story, the Byronic hero usually becomes involved in a romance, which naturally turns him into a figure of romantic and erotic attraction. Readers often develop sympathy for him precisely because of the love he shares with a woman that proves he is "capable of deep and strong affection" ("Byronic"). The notion that Heathcliff is one of "the descendants of this figure" explains how Brontë's disturbing character has become famous as a passionate lover as well as, or even rather than, a revengeful villain ("The Satanic").

Yet this notion hero ignores a vital episode in *Wuthering Heights*: his marriage to Isabella. Tucked within Brontë's novel and overshadowed by the passion of Catherine and Heathcliff lies this easily passed over relationship between Heathcliff and Isabella

Linton. Their brief courtship, elopement, and horrific marriage provide a sharp criticism of the love stories with Byronic heroes that became so popular in literature of the nineteenth century. Brontë exposes the danger of romanticizing a man like Heathcliff by examining what happens after the romance, that is, during the marriage. For in sentimentalizing him as a brooding and erotic hero, the reader falls victim to the same fraud as Isabella. Even Heathcliff and Catherine's relationship that contributes to the idea of him as a hero proves deceptive by not quite fitting the Byronic model either. Clearly, Brontë makes Heathcliff very Byronic in appearance in order to challenge this literary figure and emphasize the way that fantasy underlies it.

The relationship between Isabella and Heathcliff parodies the romances in Gothic and Romantic works that often included a Byronic hero. Isabella fits into a cliché female role: young, pretty, and trapped within the boring society of her brother's house. Heathcliff provides the necessary contrast as dark, mysterious, and tantalizingly forbidden by her elder brother. The image formed by the "dainty elegance" (Brontë 77) of Isabella next to the "half-civilized ferocity" (Brontë 75) of Heathcliff resembles the cover of a Harlequin romance novel. This modern reference bears testimony to the way that this dark, smoldering, hero type has become so typical in the romance genre. Yet such conventionality feels misplaced in the pages of a novel as unique as *Wuthering Heights*, which truly signals the impending doom of Heathcliff and Isabella's union. Clearly Isabella thinks of Heathcliff as fitting into a heroic role, fancying that he will rescue her from her dreary life. Heathcliff picks up on this misconception and uses it to, rather easily, set his plans for revenge in motion. He speaks truthfully when he tells Nelly that Isabella left her old life "under a delusion . . . picturing me a hero of romance, and

expecting unlimited indulgences from my chivalrous devotion,” which she imagined to exist underneath his dark, Byronic appearance (Brontë 118). The harsh reality that Isabella takes too long in discovering indicates that Brontë wishes to criticize the romantic element of the Byronic hero that emphasizes courtship rather than marriage, or expectation rather than consequence.

Significantly, the potential for tragedy lurking behind the Heathcliff-Isabella romance eludes only Isabella. Heathcliff, Catherine, Edgar, Nelly, and even the reader all sense that this union will cause major problems. Heathcliff admits that he dislikes Isabella and makes it clear that he would abuse her with his prediction of “turning the blue eyes black, every day or two” (Brontë 84). The painful irony exposed in this romance comes as the reader realizes that Isabella succumbs to her own delusions and not the trickery of Heathcliff, for as he later assures Nelly, “she cannot accuse me of showing one bit of deceitful softness” (Brontë 118). Both Catherine and Nelly tell Isabella that Heathcliff does not have honorable intentions. Also Catherine recognizes that her sister-in-law hopes to uncover in Heathcliff that “deep and strong affection” associated with a Byronic hero, giving Isabella the warning, “pray don’t imagine that he conceals depths of benevolence and affection beneath a stern exterior!” (Brontë 80-81). Even on the night of her elopement Isabella remains blind, for, as Heathcliff says, “the first thing she saw me do, on coming out of the Grange, was to hang up her little dog,” and although “she pleaded for it,” Isabella leaves with him anyway (Brontë 118). To the dismay of the reader, who can only witness the story and not intervene with advice, Isabella buys so deeply into the romantic notion accompanying the Byronic hero that even an outwardly vile man holds inner greatness requiring only love to surface. She refuses to see

Heathcliff truly until she has trapped herself within his power through marriage.

Delusion lies at the heart of Brontë's attack on the Byronic hero, for it provides the basis for Isabella's infatuation with Heathcliff, and possibly the reader's as well. For while all readers of *Wuthering Heights* become aware of the disgusting violence lurking in Heathcliff that arises in his treatment of Isabella, many still see him as a great romantic hero due to his passionate feelings involving Catherine. Isabella's own early notion that Heathcliff "has an honorable soul, and a true one, or how could he remember [Catherine]?" substantiates this idea that some inner capacity to love negates Heathcliff's disturbing qualities (Brontë 81). Isabella imagines that the love Heathcliff shares with Catherine makes him a good person regardless of his appearance, words, and actions that suggest otherwise. She then obviously wishes to somehow obtain this love for herself, as she accuses Catherine of essentially hoarding Heathcliff, saying you "desire no one to be loved but yourself" (Brontë 80). Yet just as Isabella later drastically changes her opinion about Heathcliff and tells Nelly that "Catherine had an awfully perverted taste to esteem him so dearly, knowing him so well," the reader also has to reevaluate him in light of his increasingly disturbing actions (Brontë 134). To forgive Heathcliff his sins for the sake of his love works only for one as innocent and ignorant as Isabella; ultimately any "deep and strong affection" in Heathcliff remains impenetrable to all but Catherine.

Indeed, the naïve desire that Isabella feels for Heathcliff contrasts significantly with Catherine's feelings for him. Catherine admits to loving Heathcliff, yet her love is not an idolization of him as an attractive rebel who will sweep her off her feet. Rather, Catherine appears grounded in reality with her love for Heathcliff. For one, she recognizes its limitations and that "it would degrade [her] to marry Heathcliff" (Brontë

63), for they “should be beggars” (Brontë 64). Isabella, however, disregards such practicality when she elopes with Heathcliff. Although he possesses wealth by this point and her risks are different than in Catherine’s situation, in marrying Heathcliff, Isabella accedes to exile from Thrushcross Grange and a dissolution of “all bonds of relationship between herself and [Edgar]” (Brontë 93). Thus when each woman faces an obstacle in choosing Heathcliff, Catherine picks the pragmatic path, and Isabella picks the dangerous one. Certainly indulging in rather than scorning a forbidden liaison fits with the defiant character of the Byronic hero, which would suggest Heathcliff as more of a hero for Isabella than Catherine, although her tragic story proves otherwise.

Furthermore, in its equality and inevitability, Catherine’s love for Heathcliff lacks the element of infatuation associated with a Byronic hero. Catherine says: “I love him; and that, not because he’s handsome, Nelly, but because he’s more myself than I am” (Brontë 63). Later on in this scene, when Catherine says, “my love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath – a source of little visible delight, but necessary,” the reader realizes that Catherine does not place Heathcliff on a pedestal (Brontë 64). Catherine also never describes her love for Heathcliff in terms of eroticism or desire. She willingly gives up the chance to be his wife or lover in order to marry Linton, again citing a pragmatic, although misguided motivation of being able to “aid Heathcliff to rise” (Brontë 64). The lack of idolization in the feelings Catherine professes for Heathcliff hardly evokes the cult-like following of Byron and his heroes, who enjoyed “the yearnings of emancipated young women” across Europe in the nineteenth century (“Satanic”). Isabella’s love is built on fantasy, while Catherine’s love is more practical in nature.

If Catherine does not see Heathcliff as a romantic figure, why should the reader do so by designating him a Byronic hero? Indeed this problem is exactly what Brontë addresses through the failed romance between Heathcliff and Isabella. This episode provides a necessary contrast to the relationship of Heathcliff and Catherine. It shows that Heathcliff is “implacable in revenge” not generally, but most disturbingly and specifically in the areas of love and romance that his supposed attractiveness stems from (“Byronic”). Thus neither of the two romantic entanglements in Heathcliff’s life supports the notion of him as a Byronic hero, for the one with Catherine lacks romance and the one with Isabella is too fictitious. To make this criticism apparent, Brontë gives Heathcliff enough Byronic characteristics for Isabella, and possibly the reader, to consider him as such, only to then reject this interpretation of her creation and comment on the danger of romanticizing. For Heathcliff becomes the hero only as a fantasy, and in pointing this out Brontë urges her readers to shed their romantic ideals and reconsider popular conceptions of romance so as not to impose those expectations on *Wuthering Heights*.

### **Works Cited**

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