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## Wuthering Heights: A Critical Probe in the View of the Present Time

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Abstract: “Wuthering Heights” has intrigued the critics since its inception, even in the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century the

novel still holds importance. Apart from its socio economic and psychological aspects, which have mostly been discussed upon, the novel is relevant in the context of life itself as can be perceived in the present situation. Although the plot seems to dwell on the personal problems involving two families and a stranger (Heathcliff), its reflective of the less spoken matters of life and society as well. The cruelty is indeed symbolic; the characters though bearing symbolic and allusive significance appear to be flesh and blood at least in the present context of time.

Keywords: Wuthering, Heights, socio-economic, psychological, life, society, cruelty, symbolic, present.

## Introduction

To call Emily Bronte's novel, "Wuthering Heights" a sue generis, won't be an exaggeration. It may not be an epoch making work of literature but it definitely holds a point of interest for those readers who love to venture beyond the limits of the ideal and the sublime. The horrors of obsession have seldom found a less melodramatic approach than that in the 'Wuthering Heights'. The work of fiction in question doesn't necessarily pose any challenge to the accepted concepts of principles and morality, nor does it stand in rebellion to the conformity of love and compassion, it rather presents an alternative portrait of a world which is definitely a part of reality. A world which is not guarded by the sentries of beauty, restraint and empathy, a world where silver curtains do not cover up the mess but rather reveals the truth, however bitter or sweeter it may be.

It's needless to say that the novel has its heart in Heathcliff and its soul in Catherine. However, the fact that the blossom of romance and passion is lacking in the novel, makes it a bit

toxic to readers who love the idea of a soothing yet titillating love story. Interestingly enough, the novel has a lot to tell in the context of life and society. If a reader is able to put aside the preconceived notions of life and existence, then the novel will open up as a way more revealing study of humanity than most popular works of fiction have claimed to do before. Even the characters like Nelly Dean, Edgar Linton or Isabella can emerge more meaningful and relevant than they are mostly considered to be.

## Not a Love Story

Though apparently it seems that the whole plot of “Wuthering Heights” is born out of the unfulfilled love story of Catherine and Heathcliff, it is definitely not so. Heathcliff lacks the sincerity and finer sensibilities of a lover. In Nelly’s words Heathcliff “was not insolent to his benefactor” (Mr Earnshaw) but “was simply insensible”. (33) In his conflict with Hindley, Heathcliff initially finds an ally in Catherine. After Earnshaw’s death, Heathcliff finds a new shelter in the companionship with Catherine. As Nelly states that Catherine and Heathcliff “promised fair to grow as savages” and Nelly also adds that “they forgot everything the minute they were together again.” (40) It will be a wrong notion to consider that Heathcliff wouldn’t have been vengeful if Catherine had not married Edgar Linton. Owing to his mistreatment at Hindley’s hands, Heathcliff burnt in his latent anger. From his early youth his vindictive nature becomes evident in his utterances. He tells Nelly gravely that “I shall pay Hindley back. I don’t care how long I wait, if I can only do it, at last.” (53) Heathcliff’s jealousy towards Edgar Linton, though understood, bears in it the tokens of his vengeful nature. Heathcliff tells “But, Nelly, if I knocked him (Edgar Linton) down twenty times, that wouldn’t make him less handsome or me more so.” (50)

To call Catherine unfeeling won't be right, but her whimsical approach to life does contribute to the troubled love blossoming between her and Heathcliff. She is never certain as to what she wants from life or wants in life. She moves between a strange aloofness (or coldness) and strong fits of passion (at times bordering on hysteria). She does what in Nelly's words "what her father" hates "the most" and on the other hand she is inconsolable at his death. (36) She finds proper consolation in Heathcliff. Although she knows that Edgar Linton can never be a suitable match for her and she doesn't love him either, she resolves to marry him. She cannot bear separation from Heathcliff either and yet she decides to marry Linton just to 'aid Heathcliff' and place him out of her 'brother's power'. (72) In this thought Linton appears nothing more than a means to an end.

According to Stanton Peel what we find in the novel is that the passionate attachment between Catherine and Heathcliff is akin to addiction. In such a state a person addicted to another lacks appreciation for everything around and rather depends on that experience of addiction for satisfaction. Heathcliff keeps a note of the days he gets to spend with Catherine and of the days she spends with Edgar. In an addictive relationship or bond, the addict desires to merge with the identity of the partner and emerge as a single identity. While Catherine says "I am Heathcliff" (73), he on the other hand often refers to her as part of his soul. An addict clings to the partner for sustenance. Catherine herself recognizes her relationship with Heathcliff as unhealthy and yet feels the need for it. It is out of this strong and queer sense of addiction that Heathcliff doesn't hesitate to even call upon the spectre of Catherine, he feels an urgent need to unite with her, even after her death.

Even when we find a strong bond blossoming between Hareton and the Catherine the second (Catherine and Linton's daughter) it only appears sketchily towards the resolution of the novel. To consider it has a happy and peaceful ending

won't be really logical. There is definitely a sense of calmness as Lockwood comes across the headstones; however, it doesn't promise anything vastly positive. With so many untimely deaths taking place in the course of the novel, there's hardly any person left to carry forward the beacon of life and love. Essentially the novel is concerned with the ruins of life. This decadence is an inherent part of life for many. The setting of the story – the moor, only serves to highlight this aspect more glaringly. So, the whole idea or notion of a failed love or love – revenge plot doesn't hold any significance whatsoever as far as the novel's approach to life and society is concerned.

## Idea of the Sublime

In considering the novel's approach to life, the setting must also be given due significance, as has already been mentioned earlier. The terrifying moors in the story bring out poignantly the idea of the sublime. Although this is an overtly discussed issue, yet we often fail to realize that life itself reflects vividly the concept of sublime in its most pristine form. Indeed life is beautiful, because it puts forth the idea of progression and celebration of the sense and sensibility that guides life forward. However, life has its terrorizing aspects as well. They are bound to life as life is bound to certain uncertainties. In being both pleasurable and appalling at once, life itself encompasses all the theorizations and conjectures of beauty and the sublime.

What intrigues the readers in the novel is that the moor itself shows a striking resemblance to the decadent phases of life. In the 21 Century this becomes all the more relevant, as the world itself appears to be a celebration of *The Waste Land* of Eliot. The two houses in question that are located in the moors, the Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, also contribute significantly in bringing out the duality of life. In life, contrasting qualities do appear, like light and darkness.

However, to classify them always as good or bad is a primitive approach. Everything in life does not always follow the simplicity of binaries, as is often thought. Similarly, in the novel, though, Wuthering Heights stands for the sinister or negative characteristics of life like decadence, jealousy, anger, revenge, hatred, it must not be forgotten that it is this Wuthering Heights that the resolution of the novel is ultimately achieved.

The Wuthering Heights is never short of tumult as the name itself is suggestive (the word 'wuthering' signifies a weather characterized by strong winds). There's never dearth of emotional turbulence in the house. It resonates with the major actions in the novel. It is the abode that gives shelter and an identity to an orphan Heathcliff. The soulmates in the truest sense of the term are born here through the forging of the undying bond between Catherine and Heathcliff. Hindley's love for his wife is again witnessed within the walls of Wuthering Heights. The demolition of class barrier also takes place in this house. The generosity shown by Hareton to Heathcliff is also a significant point that finds expression in this house. Finally, the bond of Catherine the second and Hareton is again forged in this house.

In regard to Thrushcross Grange, many critics and avid readers have shown a favourable and positive attitude. It has been associated with positive qualities like goodness, peace, kindness, morality, etiquettes and stability, and it has also been hailed as a marker of social class and nobility. However, if we observe closely it can be found that its existence is rather passive in the context of the action of the novel. Initially, the house and its inmates almost appear to have a catalytic function. It is only after Catherine marries Linton, the house appears in a more prominent manner in the novel. The visit to Thrushcross Grange changes the lives for Catherine and Heathcliff forever. It creates a rift and adversely affects the equation between Catherine and Heathcliff. Isabella, a well

mannered girl, elopes with Heathcliff, the sworn enemy as it were of her brother Linton. It is from this house that she betrays the trust of her brother and hurts him in the manner of doing so. The untimely death of Catherine of Catherine after a considerable span of suffering occurs in Thrushcross Grange. Even Linton meets an untimely death in this house leaving Catherine the second in the care of Nelly Dean.

## **Socio --Economic Concern**

In continuing with the contrasting phases of life, the idea of the sublime, the point of distinctions between the two houses – Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, we gradually come across the socio-economic concern of the novel. The social organism is an integral part of life especially after centuries of civilizations. In the novel, *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff remains the outsider till the very end. His position does shift from being the oppressed to the role of an oppressor, but nonetheless he is never accepted whole heartedly. He represents the ‘other’ to some extent who takes his revenge against the oppressor. Though initially at the fringes of the social set up he gradually moves into the centre and takes the reins in his hand, but only to find himself waging a lonely battle against none. In trying to take down his opponents, either his oppressor Hindley or his rival in public and personal front, Linton, all that Heathcliff manages to do is alienate himself further from the social organism. The Wuthering Heights though originally owned by the Earnshaws undergoes a phase of transition, when Heathcliff takes control and lords over it. Hindley and then his son Hareton, the successors of the class of the landed gentry are pushed to a mere pitiable state of existence by Heathcliff. Hindley gets beaten up by Heathcliff, whereas Hareton is treated almost like a servant by Heathcliff. Well, this predominantly happens due to the melancholic carelessness shown by Hindley after

the death of his wife. Instead of parenting his son properly, he rather creates a rift between himself and his heir. Heathcliff, on the other hand with his new found wealth and power simply exploits the situation to take his revenge. No wonder, the lack of unity among landed gentry has paved the way for capitalists.

The Thrushcross Grange belonging to the Lintons, reflects the refined state of the capitalist class with its self assumed air of superiority in comparison to the class of the landed gentry. Even Heathcliff's eyes find the Grange 'beautiful', when he first comes across it. He describes the house to Nelly as "a splendid place carpeted with crimson, and crimson-covered chairs and tables, and a pure white ceiling bordered by gold, a shower of glass-drops hanging in silver chains from the centre, and shimmering with little soft tapers. Edgar and his sister had it entirely to themselves; shouldn't they have been happy? We should have thought ourselves in heaven!" (41-42) The Lintons try to incorporate the essence of their class culture in Catherine, but it is only after Catherine's marriage to Edgar Linton does he realise that Lintons have altogether failed to realise the free spirited ways of Catherine. Heathcliff on the other hand attempts to elevate his social status to that of the capitalist, ironically the class which he perhaps despises and equally envies the most. This feeling is somewhat discernible when Heathcliff tells Nelly referring to Edgar Linton "But, Nelly, if I knocked him down twenty times, that wouldn't make him less handsome or me more so. I wish I had light hair and a fair skin, and was dressed and behaved as well, and had a chance of being as rich as he will be!" (50)

The contrast between the two gentlemen and the not so well bred men of the moors forms another intriguing part of the storyline. Edgar Linton, a well behaved, respected gentleman fails to create a lasting impression upon the readers not because he is meek and mild but because he is passive by nature and it is his inability to act properly in accordance to



the need of the situation that takes away his dignity. He is unable to realise the fact that he can never be a suitable groom for Catherine. He is too taken in by her appearance and conduct, rather 'infatuated' by Catherine.(79) It was soon, however Heathcliff's return to the moors after some years of absence, did Edgar realise that he has been living in a fool's paradise and that he can never possibly enjoy a happy conjugal life with Catherine. He fails to provide proper counsel to his sister Isabella and therefore is unable to prevent her from taking a self destructive decision of eloping with Heathcliff. When Nelly informs Edgar Linton that Isabella has went away with Heathcliff, then instead of worrying about his sister's whereabouts, he coldly responds: "Hereafter, she is only my sister in name: not because I disown her, but because she has disowned me."(117) He even instructs Nelly to send Isabella her share of property. This coldness in attitude stems from the pride of class consciousness. It's his concern for social reputation which makes him almost immune to his sister's terrible plight. Even when he comes to know that Isabella is suffering tremendously under Heathcliff's watchful eyes, Edgar Linton shows no interest to aid his sister. His coldness stems from his inability to face dangers and his constant attempt to maintain his pseudo gentlemen like aloofness.

Similarly like Edgar Linton, Lockwood is characterized by a gentleman's vanity. Lockwood thinks highly of himself and rather provides comic relief at times in an otherwise grim tale of life. He is often too quick to jump to conclusions. He takes it for granted that women find him as an attractive gentleman. He mistakes Catherine the second initially as Heathcliff's wife. He considers himself as 'gentlemanly'. (267) He even harbours dreams of a union between himself and Catherine the second, as he reflects: "What a realization of something more romantic than a fairy tale it would have been for Mrs Linton Heathcliff, had she and I struck up an attachment, as her good nurse

desired, and migrated together into the stirring atmosphere of the town!” (270) Lockwood is unable to fathom the equation between Catherine the second and Hareton, and hence his imaginary castles of romance quite typical for a young city bred gentleman like him, are nonetheless shattered.

It is however, in connection with the above mentioned traits of class consciousness and the unbridled energy of the rustic life that the allusions, associations and psychological consideration do come to the purview as regards the context of *Wuthering Heights*. Just as in life, the progression though apparently linear, in fact never goes out of the circle, similarly the novel, though written during the Victorian era, shows a complicated approach to time. Needless to say, the novel’s psychological intricacies are the most intense and thought provoking. In this consideration too, it is tale of life.

## Psychological Perspectives

If it is asked as to what would be the most difficult think to fathom. The answer would undoubtedly be the psyche. Although it has no concrete existence, yet in its abstract form, it controls all that is concrete in the phases of life. The complications of life have their origin in the mind. The chaos, the peace all emerge from the mind and soul. “Wuthering Heights” bears testament to the complexities of the psyche. Viewed from psychological standpoint the novel is extremely intriguing and thought provoking.

Linda Gold considers the novel from a Freudian perspective. Heathcliff stands for the id, expressing the most primitive drives based on the pleasure-pain principle. His origin remains unknown. Catherine represents the ego, interacts with society and controls the id to some extent, until there is any dramatic possibility in the fulfilment of his urges. Edgar stands for the superego, and hence embodies morality and civility in the sincerest of manners. Catherine is asked to

choose between Heathcliff (id) and Edgar (superego). Although she chooses Edgar on the prospects of material benefits and orderly life, yet she cannot for once forsake Heathcliff. Confronted by the hopelessness of psychological integration and overwhelmed by agony due to her fragmented self, Catherine finally embraces death. In regard to Catherine the second, she is finally able to assimilate successfully what her mother had failed. Her marriage with Heathcliff's son and finally her reunion with Hareton help to bring the separate elements of the mind in harmony.

In accordance to Jungian interpretation, Heathcliff represents the shadow or darker side of Catherine, marked with vindictiveness, wildness and a sense of detachment from social connections. She tries to suppress this side by matrimonial alliance with Edgar but Heathcliff again comes back into her life. However, she fails to integrate him into her life and her marriage with Edgar is doomed. At last she herself meets an untimely death. For Catherine, Heathcliff can be considered as the animus (the male qualities lacking in the female) and for Heathcliff, Catherine is the anima (the female qualities lacking in a male). So in this regard for Catherine, anger, hostility, freedom, command and rebellion is expressed through Heathcliff. On the other hand, Catherine embodies love, beauty, status and a sense of belonging for Heathcliff. The projection of Heathcliff's anima on Catherine and the projection of Catherine's animus on Heathcliff create a "soul-image" in the personal unconscious. This conception is exemplified by Catherine's famous lines "I am Heathcliff- he's always in my mind" (73) and Heathcliff's reference to Catherine as his soul and life. The element of transcendence in the projection is felt in Catherine's vision of something beyond the realm of life and in Heathcliff's yearning to see Catherine's spectre.

The concept of monomania which is associated with the obsession of one thing was considered as a particular disorder

with the specific symptoms in the nineteenth century. Graeme Tyler has used the idea of monomania as it was considered in the nineteenth century and has applied it in regard to Heathcliff. Monomania has its origin in the heart of man and is attached to the overwhelming passion that often enfolds the individual. Tyler states that Heathcliff shows a gradual inclination towards monomania in his desire to remain with her, even after her death. This however, takes the shape of insanity towards the later stages of the novel, when Heathcliff suffers from hallucinations or insomnia, and is haunted by Catherine's image. He recedes from life as it were bearing in his soul isolation, before he finally dies.

All the three above interpretations are the most widely discussed and are undoubtedly complete in themselves. Still, certain areas are left untouched. The interpretations do not encompass the psychological aspect in its wholeness. Though we get an insight into the major characters of the novel, but the entire novel is not scrutinised upon. Moreover, the interpretations do seem gendered to some extent. As mentioned earlier, the relation of psyche to life being unfathomable, it is not possible to provide a wholesome idea at most times. "Wuthering Heights" being reflective of slices of life itself as is the case with almost any work of fiction, contains psychological issues which have not received much attention. If we consider the case of Hindley Earnshaw, then we find psychological concerns too. When Mr. Earnshaw brings Heathcliff home, then Hindley, a boy of fourteen is extremely disgusted with it. Hindley visualizes Heathcliff as a usurper of his parent's affections and his privileges and breeds hatred against Heathcliff. Hindley looks upon his father rather as an oppressor than as a friend. After Mr. Earnshaw's death, Hindley seizes the opportunity to treat Heathcliff cruelly and unjustly. He creates an enemy out of Heathcliff and ironically enough Hindley's fears turns out to be true as Heathcliff eventually becomes the lord of the house. Hindley dotes on his

wife but is not bothered much about his sister. It seems as if he is not truly concerned about his blood relations. After his wife's death, he sinks to complete psychological and moral degradation swearing oaths against others, drinking, and spending a reckless life. Even the servants are unable to bear with his conduct and leave except Joseph and Nelly. Hindley's mindless fury even drives him to the point of almost killing his own child. It is this state of mental anxiety, restlessness coupled with chronic depression and wrath that brings about Hindley's untimely demise at the age of twenty seven.

Isabella dies untimely too, and it is her own immaturity and lack of perception regarding Heathcliff's cruel motives that she imagines him to be a romantic figure. However, we do find that she too, driven by necessity acts way out of her league. It is evident from her own words when she says "I 'm not going to act the lady among you, for fear I should starve."(124) Again, we also find that ill treatment can even lead a kind hearted person to harbour destructive thoughts. Isabella at one point wishes for Heathcliff's death. She says that it will be a blessing for her if Hindley is able to "send Heathcliff to his right abode!" (156) She even escapes from Wuthering Heights and flees to London, where she gives birth to her son. Lockwood, in every aspect a gentleman, shows cruelty in the face of terror on encountering Catherine's child like spectre. In Lockwood's own words "Terror made me cruel; and, finding it useless to attempt shaking the creature off, I pulled its wrist on to the broken window pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bed-clothes". Throughout the novel, it is mostly Nelly, who appears to be sane and balanced in her life. Through her sense of duty and perception, she speaks about the various characters of the novel. She almost emerges as an embodiment of insight through which the readers are able to understand and at times relate to the characters of the novel. She is the force which does give a proper view of the entire novel and serves as the

essential link both throughout the course of the novel and between the readers and the characters of the novel. In terms of mental state, Joseph presents an almost contrasting picture to Nelly. He is peevish in true sense of the term and hardly bears any sense of care and duty.

## **Significance of the Novel in the Present Century**

Apart from its great entanglements in the domain of the psyche, the novel by Emily Bronte is in many other ways significant in the present century. The problem of isolation as depicted in the novel especially through the characters of Heathcliff and Hindley and partly through Catherine and Isabella, is a dominant aspect of the present century. Almost every individual goes through the trauma of isolation and loneliness. This results in depression and other graver psychological complications. The ironic representation of love and relationship crisis as portrayed in the novel is glaringly evident today. The bonds between family members, lovers and friends are turning toxic by every passing hour. Revenge, jealousy and hatred have been a part of human civilization. The novel shows ample evidences of these three evil forces in operation. In the present century these evils have evolved further through the machineries of horror and terror. The love for hatred and the hatred for love is plaguing the society every now and then.

Discrimination and prejudices based on class differences were prevalent in the nineteenth century and the situation hasn't changed drastically since then. Even now, power is enjoyed by the rich and the privileged in most spheres. The equation of power and position also brings forth another significant evil of the novel. This is the issue of patriarchy. Whether be it Linton's treatment of Catherine in forcing her to choose between him and Heathcliff or be it Heathcliff's inhuman

treatment of Isabella to exact revenge on Edgar, it is the women who have been misunderstood, neglected and ill treated. It is the women who have suffered. The yoke of patriarchy leading to male domination and gender discrimination are correlated and are still prevalent to a large extent in the society. Though women are not anymore confined to the domestic sphere only and they are competing with males in all fronts, yet the society at large does not have enough respect for the woman, she still has to fight for her dignity, and that is where the society is still patriarchal at heart.

Death, is an integral part of the novel, it doesn't seem that at least the major characters of the novel treat death as alien; they are rather preoccupied with the idea of death. In the present century, death has become intertwined with existence. Depression and isolation can be attributed as the two major factors behind this. The cruelty and inhumanity associated with the character of Heathcliff is representative of the state of mankind at present. The house Wuthering Heights itself is symbolic of the chaos in which the world has been caught up after the two World Wars. The phase of post-traumatic stress continues being triggered every now and then by planned or uncharted means of violence and destruction. However, there's a possibility of redemption. Catherine the second and Hareton try to build up the future through the message of love and understanding by slowly gathering together the pieces from the ruins and putting them into harmony. Mankind too, must patiently progress through the paths of love and concern by shunning violence and hatred. The novel deals with the personal problems of two families of the nineteenth century England. The novel itself shows that how devastating and harmful personal problems can be if not attended carefully and calmly. If we consider the whole world as a family (in the era of globalisation this concept has resurfaced with renewed energy) then every problem faced by any country shall be

considered as a problem of the family member. In this manner any trouble or cause of worry becomes a personal issue which can only be solved by peaceful cooperation of all the members of the family.

## Conclusion

Whatever has been discussed may give rise to further questions and speculations. This in turn may rise to further scrutiny of the novel. Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* tells the story of life through the aid of some characters and perspectives. It is for this reason that the novel still holds immense significance and shall continue to do so in the days to come. Life with all its intricacies and complexities forms the core of the novel. Although often been marked as too violent and extreme in its presentation of emotions, the novel is in fact most close to those aspects of life which have always been there but discussed less in social circles. In the present century the novel is an indispensable read as has already been discussed earlier. It doesn't preach or generalize, it doesn't state anything directly, but through its narrative and series of events it appeals to the mind and soul of the readers. It defies being happily conventional and hence emerges as the most remarkable and authentic slice of life.

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Suryendu has qualified for NET and is pursuing MA in English (from English Dept. at the University of Calcutta.

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