**Fractured Identity and Destructive Self-Interest**By Paul Baxter

It has been suggested that Wuthering Heights is a "romance of metaphysical passion" (Gilbert and Gubar 249). Yet once we truly understand Heathcliff and the nature of his strange relationship with Catherine, it is obvious their connection can in no way be described as romantic love. Whereas Catherine seems capable of existing independently from Heathcliff (though in a kind of truncated state), Heathcliff is not a complete being without Catherine. Rather, separation from her only causes him to acquire a collection of attitudes and methods needed to pursue reunion with her. Because being without Catherine is like being bodily unwhole, Heathcliff seeks their reconvergence with a ferocious, narcissistic intensity, and it is this intensity that has so often been mistaken for love, "romance," or "a grand passion" by readers (Gilbert and Gubar 249, Schorer 44). Furthermore, this unhealthy, unindividuated relationship (a kind of chimeric existence, where the loss of one half threatens the existence of the entire organism) is definitively placed in opposition to authentic love by the counterexample of Cathy and Hareton, who each exist as self-contained beings external to their relationship.

In establishing Heathcliff and Catherine as two halves of the same being (though cloven in two for the majority of the novel), it is revealing to peer into Heathcliff’s character as it appears before Catherine’s influence, the changes it then undergoes due to their friendship, and finally how it is expressed in the context of their separation. Upon arriving at Wuthering Heights, Heathcliff is “a sullen, patient child” (Bronte 52). He barely speaks and surprisingly does not even display violent tendencies. In a sense he is a non-character, a space waiting to be filled. He suffers “Hindley’s blows without winking or shedding a tear,” and survives when Nelly “put it on the landing of the stairs, hoping it might be gone on the morrow” without even crying out (52). There is a very short leap between this latent Heathcliff and the Heathcliff of the “hard constitution” who demands Hindley “trade horses with me,” and that gap is bridged by his friendship with Catherine (277, 53).

Indeed, though we may see Heathcliff as the looming villain of the novel’s later years, in childhood it is Catherine who is constantly troublesome and unconstrainable, as revealed in Nelly’s description of the girl:

Certainly, she had ways with her such as I never saw a child take up before; and she put all of us past our patient fifty times and oftener in a day: from the hour she came down stairs, till the hour she went to bed, we had not a minute’s security that she wouldn’t be in mischief. (55)

These aspects only emerge in Heathcliff upon the first hints of separation from her, when she learns manners and proper dress from her neighbours the Lintons. Though the two often act as a pair before this time, once Heathcliff must get along separately, he only does so in pursuit of reunion with Catherine, asking Nelly to “make me decent” (66). In this sense Heathcliff’s individuality is merely an artifact of their sundering, a fact reinforced by the effects of his absent adulthood. While Catherine begins to change and grow in his absence, Heathcliff only seems to become better equipped in the same personality traits and social skills he needs to pursue his reunion with her. Without her influence he is nil, merely a possibility, the latent Heathcliff.

This is why, logically, Catherine’s death initially only sustains Heathcliff’s violent reaction to their separation. Indeed, his raging demand to Catherine that she “not rest, as long as I am living! You said I killed you – haunt me then!” demonstrates both the mortal need he has of coalescence with her and the indifference this urgent essentiality breeds toward Catherine’s wellfare (155). Instead it is actually Catherine’s spectral reappearance that seems to initiate Heathcliff’s death via a kind of spiritual wasting – yet her haunting never occurs until Heathcliff begins to relax his grip on revenge. His hatred (arguably his most defining emotion up to this point) slowly drains away by the novel’s end, creating what Schorer identifies as an “antithetical chorus … a contrapuntal warning, which, usually but not only in the voice of Nelly Dean, says, “Hush! Hush!”” (Schorer 47). Indeed, Heathcliff seems aware of his own dematerialization, commenting on the apparent “absurd termination to my violent exertions” via his own relinquishment: “I get levers and mattocks to demolish the two houses … and when everything is ready, and in my power, I find the will to lift a slate off either roof has vanished!” (Bronte 276). Only once Heathcliff has “lost the faculty of enjoying their [Cathey and Hareton’s] destruction” does he begin to see the spectral Cathy (276). He has spent the time of their separation “train[ing] myself to be capable of working like Hercules” in order to avenge the separation and repair it, yet once Cathy has died these methods are no longer relevant to accomplishing his goal of reattachment. He abandons the old, inapplicable tools and takes up the unfamiliar new ones of withdrawal and abstinence (notably, these are the very tools of Catherine’s final illness): He “take[s] so little interest in my daily life, that I hardly remember to eat, and drink,” and “solicited the society of no one more,” and when Nelly attempts to intervene and enter his locked room, “Heathcliff bid us be damned. He was better, and would be left alone” (276, 285).

Before his relationship with Catherine Heathcliff is merely a potentiality. In separation from her, either through marriage or death, he is terrifyingly ruthless and violent. Yet in her spectre he finally senses the possibility of reattachment, though he must become spectral himself to complete it. In doing so he reifies (ironically, since they are both incorporeal) the boundaryless intermingling he foreshadows when he “struck one side of the [Catherine’s] coffin loose” and “bribed the sexton to pull it away when I’m laid there, and slide mine out too” (248).

This connection between Heathcliff and Catherine is strange and urgently necessary, but Heathcliff’s need does not bare the hallmarks of romantic attraction. In fact, Heathcliff never directly states that he loves Catherine a single time in the novel. There are two utterances that could be interpreted as such, first "Hareton’s aspect was the ghost of my immortal love" (277). The sentence certainly uses odd syntax. Not only is this "love" twice removed, the ghost of an aspect, but the object of that action is never stated – and so we are only able to make assumptions about who it is directed toward. The second is contained in a passage whose meaning, upon detailed analysis, is labyrinthine. The quotation is lengthy but crucial:

“You deserve this. You have killed yourself ... you, of your own will, did it. I have not broken your heart—you have broken it; and in breaking it, you have broken mine. So much the worse for me that I am strong. Do I want to live? What kind of living will it be when you—oh, God! would you like to live with your soul in the grave?”

“Let me alone. Let me alone,” sobbed Catherine. “If I’ve done wrong, I’m dying for it. It is enough! You left me too: but I won’t upbraid you! I forgive you. Forgive me!”

“It is hard to forgive, and to look at those eyes, and feel those wasted hands,” he answered. “Kiss me again; and don’t let me see your eyes! I forgive what you have done to me. I love my murderer—but yours! How can I?” (150-151)

Heathcliff states "I love my murderer," using once again an odd and indirect phrasing. He loves his murderer, not Catherine specifically, so we must again infer, this time from the previous sentences ("You have killed yourself"), that he refers to Catherine. Yet even if this is the case, he negates the expression immediately: "but yours! How can I?". If Catherine has murdered herself and Heathcliff, then at best Heathcliff has stated a paradox. To paraphrase, "I love you, who has murdered me. But I cannot love you, who has murdered yourself". As readers we have had to go through quite a bit of work to construct a simple phrase ("I love you") which is never stated in the text itself, and we can see that even this is immediately negated.

Perhaps even more revealing is how often Heathcliff replaces this absent declaration of love with a claim that Catherine loves *him*. He rages at Catherine "You loved me—then what right had you to leave me?," strange not only that it is an accusation of love, but also for the fact that in the whole of the text, Catherine only admits her love of Heathcliff to Nelly, never to him directly, and there is never an instance of Nelly informing Heathcliff of the admission. Heathcliff doesn't so much love Catherine as he makes the desperate, enraged claim that she *must* love *him*. In effect, it is an obscured mirroring of Catherine's definitive statement that "I *am* Heathcliff," a way of communicating his mortal need of fusion with Catherine which is not actually love (88). This is reinforced separately in the text when Heathcliff exclaims of Catherine's relationship with Edgar Linton: "the sea could be as readily contained in that horse-trough as her whole affection be monopolised by him ... It is not in him to be loved like me: how can she love in him what he has not?" (141). Once again, the emphasis is on Catherine's vital reserves which are deserved only by Heathcliff, a precious resource which he demands for himself. Of Heathcliff's love there is only a repetition of his merely implying it: "If he [Edgar] loved with all the powers of his puny being, he couldn’t love as much in eighty years as I could in a day" (141). It is as if Heathcliff goes out of his way to avoid a direct declaration of love – perhaps evidence of an unconscious knowledge that he does not understand the term or that it simply does not apply.

This chimeric interweaving and its existential necessity has been given some explanation by Philip Wion’s convincing theory that the two characters express a “displaced version of the symbiotic relationship between mother and child” (Wion 366). Lacking parental figures for much of their childhood, both characters attempt to create in each other the unqualified acceptance and lack of individuation/separation inherent in the early mother-child bond (366). Indeed, this may explain how and why Heathcliff mistakes the necessity of Catherine’s force as love.

This intermingling of identity already sets the novel far astray from a romantic relationship, but it is Heathcliff’s own actions, finally, which expose his antipathy toward even Catherine herself. A romantic interpretation is simply too contradictory to accept when Heathcliff berates Catherine for her separateness: “I *know* you have treated me infernally” and “if you fancy I’ll suffer unrevenged, I’ll convince you of the contrary, in a very little while!” (Bronte 112). It is only when Catherine catches his inconsistency, noting that despite his supposed care “you’ll take revenge! How will you take it, ungrateful brute,” that Heathcliff realizes his mistake and contradicts himself (112). This narcissistic self-interest, so opposed to the love Heathcliff seems to at once claim and avoid stating, again emerges when he refuses to stop visiting Catherine despite Nelly’s assertion that it will mean her death.

The passage is revealing in what Heathcliff consistently ignores. Nelly claims that “another encounter between you and the master would kill her [Catherine] altogether,” yet Heathcliff doesn’t even acknowledge his own role in that scenario, simply moving immediately to Edgar: “should he be the cause of adding a single trouble more to her existence – why, I think, I shall be justified in going to extremes” (141). Again, Nelly interrupts to say that Heathcliff disregards “ruining all hopes of her perfect restoration ... when she has nearly forgotten you” (141). True to form Heathcliff once more ignores his own agency in Catherine’s health, moving immediately to address only the second part of the accusation: “You suppose she has nearly forgotten me? … Oh, Nelly! You know she has not!” (141).

Rather than a romantic partner seeking reunion with his lover, his actions suggest a person evincing a kind of confused self-preservation, the frenzy of a cornered animal lashing out. His concern is entirely selfish, and only upon the appearance of Catherine’s spectre does his mistake become clear: in his rage to preserve his unindividuated selfhood he has in fact brought about the necessity of his own death.

Even from Catherine’s perspective, the relationship is less one of romance than of vicarious actualization. Lyn Pykett makes a convincing argument in this arena, reinforcing this theme of fractured selfhood. Rather than relinquish the patriarchal power she has tenuously grasped in Heathcliff, Catherine becomes ill and “regresses to a childhood state, to the Edenic unproblematic period of undivided and undifferentiated selfhood before she became a battleground for conflicting versions of womanhood” (Pykett 473). Only in the intermingled combination of the two characters can Catherine possess that masculine power which her society disallows women, and so she rebels against its absence, even when doing so puts her relationship with Edgar at risk.

In the end, as an unavoidable consequence of Catherine’s incorporeal resurrection, Heathcliff becomes undifferentiated once again. And it is no accident that his departure is paralleled with the relationship between Hareton and Cathy. Both of these second generation characters are each developed as separate entities with competing desires and tendencies before they settle into love. The characters only begin to associate with frequency once the reach courting age, and each has formed under the circumstances of entirely different houses. Catherine, sheltered and educated in Thrushcross Grange, and Hareton, honest, hardworking yet ignorant under the tutelage of Heathcliff. No doubt it is for these reasons the two characters are so reactive initially, unlike Catherine and Heathcliff who were an undifferentiated milieu of id. Perhaps this is a central lesson of their relationship as an opposition to Catherine and Heathcliff: they end in quiet domestic bliss, yet begin as fierce antagonists. Perhaps this functions as a proposal for conflict as a vital act of boundary-making. Their difference makes the relationship perhaps less satisfying, less all-consuming than Heathcliff's oceanic metaphors for Catherine's capacity for passion. Yet in the end they can exist together while alive precisely because of their fully individuated personalities, enacting a less strident but more stable rapport. Such a contrast highlights Heathcliff’s ultimate mistake, a profound misunderstanding of the concept of love which has in fact never applied to his relationship with Catherine. The two characters are instead a single entity, one whose body is only made whole by death.

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