

Characters, Settings and Theme in *Wuthering Heights*

HUI Jingrui^{[a],*}

^[a]School of Foreign Languages, Northeast Petroleum University, Daqing China.

*Corresponding author.

Received 28 October 2014; accepted 4 January 2015

Published online 26 February 2015

Abstract

This paper rereads *Wuthering Heights* and analyzes the characters, settings and the relation between these elements and the theme. The paper points out that the greatness of the novel lies in that Emily Bronte picks up a broader theme, that is, human nature to deal with.

Key words: *Wuthering Heights*; Human nature; Characters; Settings

Hui, J. R. (2015). Characters, Settings and Theme in *Wuthering Heights*. *Canadian Social Science*, 11(2), 1-3. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/6369>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/6369>

INTRODUCTION

When *Wuthering Heights* was published, it could only be accepted as a horror story but not a classic. It was often compared with *Jane Eyre*, but regarded far worse than the latter. Until last century, *Wuthering Heights* came to be regarded as one of the greatest novels in western literature. When we read the novel carefully, we can find a special relationship between characters and the settings. It seems that all these elements are plotted deliberately to realize the female writer's idea, a broader theme than that of *Jane Eyre*'s. In the following text, a discussion will be made around the relationship among characters, settings and the theme.

The story took place in two manors: Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. The other day, Mr. Earnshaw, the master of Wuthering Heights came back home with

a homeless little boy. He regarded the boy as his adopted son and called him Heathcliff who became the best friend of his daughter Catherine's but received mistreatment from his son Hindley. Catherine and Heathcliff spent their happy but wild childhood. In fact, sometimes they just behaved like gypsies. Once the two teenagers happened to come to the nearest manor Thrushcross Grange and received the best treatment from the host of the manor, the Lintons. The young master fell in love with beautiful Catherine who finally married him. Heathcliff disappeared from the family but returned many years later with money and hatred. He took mad revenge on the two families. Almost all the people involved died sadly but the union of the young generation brought some hope to the ending.

1. CHARACTERS

There are three main characters in the first generation of the story and Heathcliff is the absolute hero of the novel. He was found on the street as an orphan, poor and homeless, and then adopted by the good Mr. Earnshaw. Later, he fell in passionate love with Catherine, who had always treated him as a bosom friend. But after he happened to overhear a conversation between Catherine and her maid servant Nelly that she was to marry Mr. Linton, the young master of Thrushcross Grange in spite of her devoted love to Heathcliff, he fled away from home. When returning to the house many years later, he had made rich mysteriously and Catherine had become Mrs. Linton. He took mad and cruel revenge on Hindley, the elder brother of Catherine, who had treated him badly when the latter was still a boy. He snatched *Wuthering Heights* under his own hand by gambling with Hindley who died later miserably. He won the heart of Mr. Linton's younger sister Isabella and eloped with her, but he changed soon after and treated her rudely. After Catherine's death, he cheated her daughter Cathy into his house, confined the girl in Wuthering Heights, now

Heathcliff's house already, and forced her to marry his dying son. At the end of the novel, after all the involved people had died, Heathcliff seemed to get tired of life and died soon. Little Cathy and her cousin, Hindley's son, got married and the story came to a happy ending in spite of all the sufferings before. In the story, Heathcliff behave just like a devil, cruel but powerful.

Catherine is the heroine of the story although she died in the first half of the novel. Somehow she had a hysteric character and seemed always to struggle on the verge of self-contradictions. She loved Heathcliff so passionately that she did not want to give him up even after she got married. She met him again and again despite her married status. She described her unreasonable love to her maid servant Nelly about this.

But surely you and everybody have a notion that there is, or should be, an existence of yours beyond you. What were the use of my creation, if I were entirely contained here? My great miseries in this world have been Heathcliff's miseries, and I watched and felt each from the beginning: My great thought in living is himself. If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger: I should not seem a part of 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. 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. So don't talk of our separation again: It is impracticable... (Bronte, 1981)

In spite of such wild love, she betrayed Heathcliff and herself, and chose Mr. Linton as her husband for the sake of money and social status. Finally she could not endure the sufferings from the heart and died young after giving birth to a baby girl.

Mr. Linton is the poorest victim of the love story. In contrast to wild Heathcliff, he is gentle, generous and easy-going. His wealth and social status helped him to win a beloved wife but not love. After the marriage, he had to endure his wife's spiritual betrayal. Faced with the mad revenge from Heathcliff, he seemed helpless and powerless. He had to suffer the pains of losing sister, wife and finally even daughter. After having had continuous spiritual attacks, he died sadly and quietly.

No doubt Heathcliff is the soul of the novel. From the beginning to the end, it seems that he never attempted to control himself. He loved passionately just as he hated wildly, and even Catherine called him "an unreclaimed creature, without refinement, without cultivation: and arid wilderness of furze and whinstone". (Ibid) Because of his selfishness and paranoia, so many people ended with sadness and misery. After reading the novel, we should have hated such a devil, but somehow we cannot. Something from his inner heart has made us attracted and fascinated. At the end of the novel, the narrator expressed his puzzlement, "But where did he come from, the little dark thing, harbored

by a good man to his bane?" (Ibid) Likewise the inscription for his monument also made people bewildered, "as he had no surname, and we could not tell his age, we were obliged to content ourselves with the single word, "Heathcliff". That came true: We were. If you enter the kirkyard, you'll read on his headstone, only that, and the date of his death." (Ibid) In fact, the man who hasn't a certain identity symbolizes a universality of the problem. This man is not you, not me, but everybody among us. In him, we can find something that everyone has, which is the impulsive and irrational side of human beings. The word "Heathcliff" made up of "heath" and "cliff" reveals the wild but true side of human nature. Human beings create civilization which is the great improvements that they have made. Yet while human beings enjoy the fruits of modern civilization, they also lose the natural gaiety they have had. The fetters made of laws and moral disciplines sometimes suffocated human beings. In the novel, Mr. Linton is the embodiment of modern human who has been sighing under the shadows of modern civilization while the library where he often stayed is the symbol of modern civilization.

If Heathcliff represents the irrational side of human while Mr. Linton represents his rational side, Catherine is the miniature of modern human who has been struggling on the verge of rationality and irrationality. Love represents her irrational side while marriage represents her rational side. Her unreasonable love towards Heathcliff reveals her passionate longing for the return of nature. So when she fell seriously ill, she said to Nelly, "I'm burning! I wish I were out of doors! I wish I were a girl again, half savage and hardy, and free... and laughing at injuries, not maddening under them! Why am I so changed? Why does my blood rush into a hell of tumult at a few words? I'm sure I should be myself were I once among the heather on those hills." (Ibid) At her deathbed, what she longed for is in fact, not just the childhood life, but the one nearest to nature and most faithful to herself. When she passionately loved Heathcliff, the one she loved so much is actually her true self. The struggle between rationality and irrationality really shortened her life and made her die at such a young age.

When we pay much attention to the names of the characters in the novel, we can find an interesting phenomenon. Before getting married, Catherine's full name is Catherine Earnshaw. After she got married, her name became Catherine Linton which was just the name of her daughter. After marrying Hareton Earnshaw, little Cathy will have a name Catherine Earnshaw which was just the name of her mother. The strange coincidence may reveal a fact that life is just like a circle while the struggle of human nature will be eternal as long as the human race exists.

2. SETTINGS

In the novel, the figures' activities are confined to two manors: Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. The

two manors are so near that the two teenagers Heathcliff and Catherine can run to the other manor easily. However, the descriptions are quite different from the two settings. In *Wuthering Heights*, it was always gloomy, full of storms, heavy rains. There lived bad-tempered people: the little uncontrollable Catherine who spent her childhood here, the drunk Hindley who indulged himself in gambling, cruel Heathcliff who tried every means to torture his rivals and take revenge, tough servant who seemed always to be cursing, uncivilized little Hareton. Even some gentle people who came here would change their temper, such as Isabella and little Cathy. Before they came here, they were ladies indeed. However, after they became the hostess of the manor, they learned to curse, to be indifferent towards others' sufferings. Not only people, the animals and plants were different, too. The furious dog was ready to attack any people. The trees were twisted and strange. Anyhow, it is a place where some gothic stories would take place.

Although Thrushcross Grange lay very near to *Wuthering Heights*, the weather seemed to be quite different. It seemed that it was always mild and sunny in Thrushcross Grange. When little Catherine happened to come here, she found that the Lintons were hospitable and civilized. After she lived here for a time, she has turned from a gypsy-like girl into a gentle and beautiful lady. The servant was considerate and polite, and the life was quiet here.

Why are so different between the two manors? Just as Heathcliff represents the irrational side of human nature while Mr. Linton represents the rational side, so are the two manors. The title of the novel is "*Wuthering Heights*" which hints that the female writer focuses her attention on the irrationality of human nature. She seems deliberately to plot such a special setting where people could do anything at their pleasure. It is a place where reason does not work and laws never tread. People living here could murder, take revenge, kidnap innocent girls. However, in the struggle between rationality and irrationality, rationality seemed to get upper hand just for a while because at the end of the novel everything came to a peaceful end.

3. THEME

Emily Bronte chooses a broader theme than her sister does in *Jane Eyre* which mainly deals with feminism. In *Wuthering Heights*, she discusses the problem of human nature, a struggle between rationality and irrationality. She takes the example of a woman, Catherine's choice in love and marriage to express modern human's contradiction. Under her pen, human beings in modern civilization are miserable because they have lost their true self. The longing for the true self and nature is so earnest that the female writer invents such a place as *Wuthering Heights* to vent. At the end of the novel, little Cathy taught her tough cousin Hareton to read, who is another Heathcliff indeed. Yet reading is the process of receiving civilization. The union of the couple has brought hope to the story. However, at the end of the novel, the shepherd boy cried and said that he had seen the ghosts of Heathcliff and Catherine. This maybe hints that the struggle between rationality and irrationality will be everlasting. The temporarily controlled rationality is just like a dormant volcano which may erupt at any time in the far future. The greatest enemy of human is himself.

SUMMARY

Through a perfect arrangement of characters and settings, the woman writer plotted an exciting story about love and revenge which has once made the novel be regarded as a common novel. However, when a deeper analysis is made, a serious theme that the author wants to express has been found. The study of the work will go on, so will that of human nature.

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