STAR
Research Journal

Available online at www.starresearchjournal.com (Star International Journal)
ENGLISH

Heathcliff: A Human or a Demon? An Exploration of the Complexities of Character in Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights

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Abstract

Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* presents a character of profound complexity, Heathcliff. This research article examines whether Heathcliff should be interpreted as a human or a demon, analyzing his actions, motivations, and relationships within the novel. By exploring Heathcliff's behavior, his interactions with other characters, and the novel's gothic elements, this study aims to illuminate the dubious nature of him and the ways in which Bronte's characterization challenges conventional boundaries between the human and the supernatural. In this context, Arnold Kettle examines how Heathcliff rebels against the capitalist temperaments of the bourgeois family, like those of Lintons and Earnshaws. He emerges as an evil element due to the cruel treatment meted out to him by Hindley and Edgar Linton, the members of the high born society (Kettle, 1951). However, He, being the wild outcast is fortunate enough to gain the company of Catherine who shows him a kind of human understanding and goodwill. She joins him in his rebellion against the hegemony and tyranny of Hindley and Frances, an upper class people.

Key words: Complexity, conventional boundaries, human or demon and supernatural element.

ISSN: 2321-676X

Introduction

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* has fascinated readers and critics alike since its publication in 1847. Central to the novel's enigmatic quality is the character of Heathcliff, whose actions and motivations provoke intense debate. Heathcliff is often portrayed as a villain or an anti-hero, leading to questions about his true nature. Is he a human driven by revenge and suffering, or is he a supernatural being whose malevolence transcends human limits? This article explores Heathcliff's character through a dual lens of humanity and demonology, seeking to understand the essence of his nature.

Heathcliff as a Human

To argue that Heathcliff is human, one must consider the psychological and social factors that influence his behavior. His life is marked by trauma, isolation, and a quest for vengeance, all of which contribute to his complex persona.

Background and Trauma:

Heathcliff's back story is crucial in understanding his humanity. Brought into the Earnshaw family as an adopted child, Heathcliff faces immediate social and psychological challenges. His treatment by Hindley Earnshaw, who degrades and abuses him, plays a significant role in shaping his character. The novel reveals Heathcliff's feelings of abandonment and betrayal, which fuel his later actions. His human experiences of suffering, loss, and rejection drive his desire for revenge.

Motivation and Behavior:

Heathcliff's actions, though often cruel, can be seen as extensions of his emotional wounds. His pursuit of vengeance against those who wronged him, especially Hindley, Edgar Linton, and even Cathy Earnshaw reflects a deep-seated need to reclaim power and dignity. His intricate plans to manipulate and control the Earnshaw and

Linton families are driven by personal grievances rather than supernatural impulses.

Relationships and Redemption**:**

Despite his vengeful behavior, Heathcliff exhibits moments of vulnerability and longing, particularly in his relationship with Catherine Earnshaw. His profound love for Catherine, which persists even after her death, highlights his humanity. Heathcliff's sorrow and despair in the face of Catherine's loss suggest that his emotions are rooted in genuine human experience.

Though Heathcliff expresses and often enacts violence against everyone in the two houses, he would never hurt Catherine. However, his love for her is violent in the sense that it is extremely passionate and stirs a brutal defensiveness. Importantly, by the end of the novel Heathcliff admits to Nelly that he no longer has any interest in violence. As he tells her:

> *It is a poor conclusion, is it not . . . an absurd termination to my violent exertions? I get levers and mattocks to demolish the two houses, and train myself to be capable of working like Hercules, and when everything is ready, and in my power, I find the will to lift a slate off either roof has vanished! My old enemies have not beaten me; now would be the precise time to revenge myself on their representatives: I could do it; and none could hinder me. But where is the use? I don't care for striking. I can't take the trouble to raise my hand! (Bronte, Emily 398).*

Heathcliff as a Demon-The Supernatural Interpretation:

In contrast to the human interpretation, Heathcliff can also be viewed through a supernatural lens. The gothic elements of *Wuthering Heights* contribute to the

perception of Heathcliff as a demonic figure. (Smith H.L, 2011)

Gothic Atmosphere:

Wuthering Heights is steeped in gothic imagery and themes, including dark, foreboding settings and an atmosphere of moral ambiguity. Heathcliff's association with the dark and stormy moors, his eerie presence, and his seemingly supernatural resilience contribute to his portrayal as a demonic figure. The novel often blurs the line between reality and the supernatural, enhancing the perception of Heathcliff as otherworldly. (Daughtery, 2000)

Supernatural Encounters

Several instances in the novel suggest Heathcliff's connection to the supernatural. For example, the ghost of Catherine Earnshaw appears to Lockwood, and Heathcliff himself exhibits a spectral quality. His ability to influence events from beyond the grave and his seemingly unending energy in pursuing vengeance can be interpreted as demonic traits.

Symbolism and Allegory:

Heathcliff's character can be seen as a symbol of dark forces or demonic influence. His name, which can be associated with the heath, a desolate and untamed landscape, and his actions, which disrupt the natural order of the families he encounters, align with demonic symbolism. Heathcliff's ability to defy social norms and moral boundaries further suggests a supernatural essence.

Heathcliff often falls back on violence as a means of expression, both of love and hate. He receives warmth and kindness from Mr.Earnshaw alongside harshness from Hindley. But the kindness of Mr.Earnshaw has no impression on him. On the contrary, the harshness of Hindley has a great impact on him. He grows to be revengeful as a result of cruel and inhuman treatment meted

out to him by Hindley. His rage is tied to the revenge he so passionately seeks, but he also exhibits his violent nature while hanging Isabella Linton's dog. Whether he is capable of sympathy from anyone is highly questionable. As Nelly recounts,

> *He seized, and thrust her from the room; and returned muttering – 'I have no pity!*
>
> *I have no pity! The more the worms writhe, the more I yearn to crush out their*
>
> *entrails! It is a moral teething; and I grind with greater energy in proportion to the*
>
> *increase of pain*. (Bronte, Emily 188).

These lines from the original text clearly depict the demonic nature of Heathcliff, which is ambiguous whether it is his inborn mindset or the diabolic nature out of the bestial treatment meted out to him by Catherine's brother, Hindley and the society.

Eagleton describes how Heathcliff is disastrous to the established order since he is uncomfortable and enjoys no equal status. His analysis turns on the issue of liberty and oppression. The choice of freedom and opportunity for refinement are denied to the socially oppressed due to the attitude of bourgeois society. When Heathcliff understands that culture is a way to oppression, he uses it as a weapon to eliminate the established capitalists and emerge as a destructive force to capitalism. Heathcliff mocks the capitalist nature but he himself becomes a victim and an active carrier of it. He, on the contrary, becomes embodiment of capitalism after destabilizing it in his territory in the Victorian society. (Eagleton, 1975). This revengeful nature of Heathcliff casts him into a male typological mould.

The purpose of education is to provide reason to steer the course of turbulent life. But both Heathcliff and Cathy do not

possess the reason on account of their being not exposed to education, a grave fault on the part of parents. As a result, they grow as beings of wild imagination without any room for radical reasoning power. In the case of Catherine senior, she has, at least a home of comfort, a father to look after her, a brother to share emotions with, and servants to tend on her. But Heathcliff has no element of human touch of warmth right from his birth. For some time, he is basking under the warmth of Earnshaw who has taken pity on him out of his beggarly state. But this is deprived even before he fully realizes the essence of human warmth on account of the sudden death of Earnshaw. The rest of the family members are products of culture and not products of reason oriented education. Their exposure to religion is only skin deep. Of course, Mrs.Earnshaw's hatred for Heathcliff is not elaborated in the novel as she too died early. But in the case of Hindley, the hatred is deep rooted and it is his driving force to derive maximum delight out of injuring and inflicting Heathcliff physically, mentally and emotionally. Therefore, Heathcliff's growth has become truncated without any room for evolving into a person of positive values bordering on love, affection, and culture. Society and culture here seem responsible in moulding people into types and non types.

The Interplay between Human and Demon

A comprehensive understanding of Heathcliff requires acknowledging that his character embodies both human and demonic qualities. This duality reflects the complexity of human nature and the ways in which personal and societal factors can intertwine with darker, almost supernatural elements.

Psychological Duality

Heathcliff's character represents the intersection of psychological trauma and moral ambiguity. His actions are driven by a profound psychological need for revenge, but his extreme methods and the manner in which he seems to transcend human limitations suggest a demonic quality. This duality highlights the novel's exploration of the darker aspects of human nature. "I cannot live without my soul." (Bronte, Emily 188). In this line, Heathcliff speaks to his deep and abiding connection to Catherine Earnshaw, which simultaneously reveals his profound capacity for love and his sense of emptiness and despair. This statement underscores the duality within him—his intense emotional depth and the destructive consequences of his obsessive love. The dual nature of his attachment illustrates the tension between his vulnerability and his capacity for vengeance, which fuels much of the novel's drama.

This quotation encapsulates the inner conflict Heathcliff experiences, revealing how his profound love and loss contribute to his darker impulses and ultimately shape his actions throughout the novel.

Moral Ambiguity:

Brontë's portrayal of Heathcliff challenges clear moral distinctions between good and evil. His capacity for both profound love and extreme cruelty blurs the boundaries between human and demonic qualities. Heathcliff's actions often defy conventional moral judgments, reflecting the novel's exploration of the complexities of human behavior.

Symbolic Representation:

Heathcliff's character functions symbolically to represent the forces of darkness that can reside within individuals and society. His behavior reflects the potential for human nature to exhibit

demonic qualities when subjected to extreme conditions and motivations.

Conclusion

Heathcliff's character in *Wuthering Heights* cannot be neatly categorized as either purely human or demonic. Instead, he embodies a complex interplay of both human and supernatural elements. His profound psychological trauma and quest for vengeance drive his actions, while the novel's gothic atmosphere and supernatural occurrences enhance his demonic aspects. Bronte's portrayal of Heathcliff challenges readers to consider the multifaceted nature of human behavior and the ways in which personal and societal factors can intersect with darker, almost otherworldly forces. Heathcliff remains a compelling figure whose character defies simple classification, reflecting the novel's rich exploration of the human condition and its capacity for both light and darkness.

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