

Human Nature and Confinement in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*

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Catherine Earnshaw's well-known statement, "...I am Heathcliff" in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, has often been thought to signify the depth of the passionate love between Catherine and Heathcliff (73). However, one notes often Heathcliff's attitude towards Catherine seems to be one of a pawn rather than a lover. At one point, Catherine callously states to Heathcliff, "I wish I could hold you...till we were both dead! I shouldn't care what you suffered. I care nothing for your sufferings. Why shouldn't you suffer? I do!" (140). Heathcliff, though Catherine's selfish disregard for his well-being is clearly demonstrated in this statement and in many other instances serves Catherine as a slave would their tyrant, regardless of the cost it affords him. I argue that Heathcliff instead of a simple lover to Catherine, but is instead a manifestation of Catherine's hidden savage nature. When Catherine marries the symbol of cultivation—Edgar Linton—she, in effect, separates herself from Heathcliff and thereby causes the suppression and imprisonment of her own nature. When Catherine comes to realize that Heathcliff can never be hers again in life while she remains the cultivated wife of Edgar Linton, she imprisons herself in her room for three days without food or water. Though separated from her true nature in life, she may hope to achieve oneness with Heathcliff by causing the extinction of the symbol of her cultivated identity --her physical body. Thus, Heathcliff and Catherine's relationship may have more to do with symbolic imprisonment, possession, and control than romance.

In their famous feminist work, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar make a well-known assertion about the relationship between the characters of *Jane Eyre*, a novel written by Emily Bronte's sister, Charlotte Bronte. They suggest Bertha, the deranged and malicious wife of Edward Rochester, can be considered a symbol of the rebellious spirit raging inside the seemingly quiet female protagonist, Jane Eyre, against the constraints of her class and gender role in society (356-367). I suggest, similarly, Heathcliff is not a "devil" who possesses Catherine and inflicts misery on her, but conversely, like Jane Eyre's Bertha, Heathcliff is a symbolic manifestation of the raging spirit trapped inside *Wuthering Heights*'s socially confined protagonist—Catherine Earnshaw. Though Heathcliff is the most directly observable source of rebellion and evil throughout the novel, he fulfills Catherine's wishes. Catherine's famous declaration "...he's always, always in my mind—not as a pleasure, any more than I am a pleasure to myself—but, as my own being" could signify, therefore, not love, but Heathcliff's function as a manifestation of Catherine's trapped raging spirit—the one which longs to break free from her prison in the role of Edgar Linton's cultivated wife (Bronte 73).

If Heathcliff is the manifestation of Catherine Earnshaw's hidden savage nature, his nature and decisions necessarily result not from autonomous desires but those of

Catherine, his master. Catherine demonstrates again and again a marked disregard for the well-being of Heathcliff, while egotistically demanding his constant adoration and attention. Heathcliff, conversely, seems to submit to Catherine regardless of the level of her abuse. Catherine's selfish treatment of Heathcliff throughout the novel suggests that Heathcliff is not so much her paramour as her tool or pawn. Catherine callously states to Heathcliff during one of their visits, "What now...You and Edgar have broken my heart, Heathcliff! And you both come to bewail the deed to me, as if you were the people to be pitied! I shall not pity you, not I. You have killed me..." (Bronte 140). Heathcliff responds to this statement by trying to embrace Catherine and Nelly then narrates, "he attempted to rise, but [Catherine] seized his hair, and kept him down" (Bronte 140). Thus, Catherine cares more that Heathcliff be hers, completely than that he be cared for and loved in return as lover or even another human being. Heathcliff neglects to take revenge on Catherine, instead bitterly reassuring her in a later scene that though "...the tyrant grinds down his slaves...they don't turn against him..." and sardonically stating "you are welcome to torture me to death for your amusement" (Bronte 100). When Catherine later piteously cries to Heathcliff to spare her his biting remarks about the way in which she has effectually caused their separation, and as a result her own death, through her marriage to Edgar, Heathcliff responds, "It is hard to forgive...I forgive what you have done to me. I love my murderer—but yours! How can I?" (Bronte 142). We see here that Heathcliff readily submits to Catherine's egotistical abuse of his love; he resents Catherine's willingness to disregard his devotion only because of the disastrous effect it has wrought on her health.

Catherine's display of selfishness reinforces the idea that she is not the victim of Heathcliff's control, but rather she is his tyrant and jailor. In her work "Acts of Custody and Incarceration in *Wuthering Heights* and the *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," Laura C. Berry notes the way *Wuthering Heights* seems to have an obsession with imprisonment. Even seemingly innocent characters like Lockwood and Isabella at times act as jailors, imprisoning both themselves and others in seemingly endless cycles (39). As feminist Jaimie S. Crouse states in her piece, "'This Shattered Prison': Confinement, Control and Gender in *Wuthering Heights*," imprisonment does not only play out on the physical level. Emotional and psychological confinements add their force to the literal captivity which pervades almost every interaction between the characters of *Wuthering Heights* (179). This confinement is the central means by which the characters of the *Wuthering Heights* society attempt to control the individuals around them (Crouse 179). Catherine, I maintain, is the primary source of imprisonment throughout the novel. By committing the central confining act of the novel's plot—imprisoning her true savage nature, Heathcliff's nature, within herself—Catherine

lays the groundwork for the rest of the imprisonment we see as the novel progresses. This theme of imprisonment is so central to the way in which the characters of Wuthering Heights function Catherine must eventually perform self-confinement to escape her misery. Though imprisonment on a physical level, this self-confining action enables her savage nature to accomplish metaphorical prison or spiritual liberty.

Catherine's imprisonment of Heathcliff is seen in the language used when Heathcliff comes for the last time to see Catherine before her death. Edgar Linton is at a Sunday morning church service, and his return is anticipated at any moment. When Edgar comes within sight and Heathcliff determines to leave, Catherine cries for Heathcliff to embrace her and he acquiesces. Nelly narrates, "they were locked in an embrace from which I thought my mistress would never be released alive. In fact, to my eyes, she seemed directly insensible" (Bronte 141). Though Nelly narrates Heathcliff is the one who needs to "release" Catherine, it is Catherine who in reality imprisons Heathcliff. When he attempts to "extricate himself" from Catherine's arms, she "hold[s] him as firmly as her strength allows" and "cl[in]g[s] fast, grasping...[with] mad resolution in her face" (Bronte 143). Nelly, growing more and more alarmed at Edgar's impending return from church, tells Heathcliff, "Get up! You could be free instantly" (Bronte 143). Catherine's seeming imprisonment in Heathcliff's arms, then, results not from Heathcliff's own motivation, but Catherine's imprisonment, in effect, of Heathcliff's will. It is her will that forces Heathcliff to act as her jailor.

Heathcliff responds to Catherine's imprisonment of his will in resignation, signifying the control she wields over him: "Damn the fool. There he [Edgar Linton] is...I'll stay. If he shot me so, I'd expire with a blessing on my lips" (Bronte 143). Catherine effectually imprisons Heathcliff through demanding from him a self-sacrificial devotion he is unable to deny. In keeping herself in Heathcliff's embrace, Catherine selfishly prevents Heathcliff from escaping the impending threat of Edgar's return and puts him in considerable danger. Thus, one can see that Catherine's whims wield complete control over Heathcliff; he is her slave and prisoner, and she is his jailor.

Throughout the novel, it is clear that Heathcliff's evil actions result not from his own corrupt and evil nature, as is commonly thought in the contemporary world of popular criticism, but instead from the control wielded by his childhood playmate and adult paramour. This circumstance demonstrates further that Heathcliff's nature is not autonomously derived, but in reality inspired by the trapped, hidden nature of Catherine Earnshaw-Linton. Heathcliff's submission to Catherine's authority is evidenced early on in their relationship at the Earnshaws. It is stated when Heathcliff and Catherine are young children that Hindley or Nelly's physical blows or pinches "moved [Heathcliff] only to draw in a breath and open his eyes, as if he had hurt himself by accident and nobody was to blame" (Bronte 32). Catherine, on the other hand, is described to be always acting the tyrant, "using her hands freely [and] slapping and ordering" those around her (36). Thus, while Catherine is bossy and arrogant, Heathcliff does not demonstrate a rebellious or malicious attitude in his childhood; instead he seemingly ignores wrongs done to him and the resulting opportunities he could take to justify mistreating his

playmates. The idea that Heathcliff instigates rebellion and vicious behavior, therefore, is apparently unsubstantiated. A scene which clearly shows Heathcliff's willingness to submit to the anarchical tendencies of his playmate is the event of Heathcliff and Catherine's first rebellion against the Hindley's tyrannical behavior. The reader is offered an account of the revolt through Catherine's diary, which the character Lockwood peruses during his first visit to Wuthering Heights. Catherine writes in her diary one day, "An awful Sunday!...H. and I are going to rebel—we took our initiatory step this evening" (Bronte 16). Later, Catherine adds a description of her instigation of the rebellion, "I took my dingy volume [a prayer book] by the scroop, and hurled it into the dog-kennel, vowing I hated a good book...Heathcliff kicked his to the same place" (Bronte 17). Thus, Catherine is the primary leader in the rebellion against Hindley. It becomes clear furthermore that Catherine enjoys demonstrating her ability to exercise unlimited power over Heathcliff's will; Nelly narrates how Catherine loves to taunt her father by showing him "the boy would do her bidding in anything" (Bronte 36). Thus, Catherine is not the victim of a corruptive or contaminating influence that is Heathcliff, but is rather the source of his corruptive nature.

Catherine, therefore, suppresses within herself her true nature of savagery, and uses Heathcliff, the representation of her hidden nature, as a pawn in the natural world. As the contemporary literary sphere has often recognized, Heathcliff seems to function throughout the novel as a symbol of human nature which is fierce, uncivilized, and completely without the marks of sympathy or compassion. When first brought to Wuthering Heights by the elder Mr. Earnshaw, he is described as a dirty gypsy child who seems to have come "from the devil" (Bronte 31). Heathcliff's seemingly unnatural, inhuman, and even ghoulish qualities become a common theme for comment throughout the novel. Isabella demands after being married to him for a short while, "Is Mr. Heathcliff a man? If so, is he mad? And if not, is he a devil?" (Bronte 120). Catherine, in addition, describes Heathcliff's lack of human sympathy, calling him a "fierce, pitiless, wolfish man" (Bronte 90). Catherine expands further upon Heathcliff's lack of civilized qualities in her well-known comparison of his savage nature to the barren, uncultivated nature of the moorlands, terming him "an unreclaimed creature, without refinement—without cultivation; an arid wilderness of furze and whinstone" (Bronte 90). Thus, depraved enough to cause even Catherine—the playmate and lover who should seemingly defend his nature out of a desire to keep Heathcliff safe from those around her—to designate him vindictive and unrefined, Heathcliff can safely be said to function as a symbol of uncivilized savagery in *Wuthering Heights*.

Early, we can also surmise the Linton family, specifically Edgar Linton, appear to symbolize the influence of cultivation in the novel of Wuthering Heights just as Heathcliff symbolizes uncultivated savagery. Edgar, like his father, is a magistrate, and both Edgar and his father maintain relations with the local curate, visiting church on a regular basis (43, 142). Catherine and Heathcliff are first exposed to the Linton family's cultivation when they scamper across the moors and stare through a window into the interior of the Lintons' home, Thrushcross Manor. The scene which confronts them is a picture of wealth and refinement.

Heathcliff later describes it as, “a splendid place carpeted with crimson, and crimson-covered chairs and tables and a pure white ceiling bordered by gold.” Concerning refinement and material wealth, then, the Lintons seem to lack nothing. Edgar, in addition, seems to be the very model of courteous and refined behavior, constantly treating Catherine with generous and self-sacrificial kindness, even when she later abuses his kindness as his wife (Bronte 69, 81, 118). Nelly states her preference of Edgar over Heathcliff, describing him as “kind, trustful, and honourable” in contrast to Heathcliff. Edgar’s delicate appearance, with “light hair and a fair skin...great blue eyes and [an] even forehead” also evince his identity as the model of culture and refinement (Bronte 50).

Catherine is repeatedly faced with a choice between cultivation and savagery, symbolized by Edgar Linton and Heathcliff. Throughout the novel, her attempts to reconcile these forces and the human natures associated with them end in only failure. Catherine’s first encounter with the Linton family evicts her savage nature—Heathcliff, at the time her playmate—onto the moors, alone and embittered, to fend for itself. When the Lintons first visit Catherine at Thrushcross Grange, a filthy and surly Heathcliff is imprisoned in his chamber away from Catherine for brutish behavior. As Catherine’s relationship deepens with Edgar, Heathcliff becomes more and more embittered and aloof towards Catherine (Bronte 49, 58-60). When Catherine decides to marry Edgar—wedding herself, in effect, to a civilized identity, Heathcliff flees from her life for several years, stung by her rejection (79). Finally, Catherine’s marriage to Edgar—the symbol of cultivation—causes Catherine in effect to imprison and cast away her true nature—Heathcliff and the savagery he symbolizes.

A clear example of the conflict that results between the savage and cultivated identities Catherine is offered can be found in her first encounter with the Linton family. The separation which follows may be said to signify the beginning of a symbolic separation Catherine creates between herself and Heathcliff. When Catherine is taken under the cultivating influence of the Lintons for the first time after her foot is bitten by their dog, Heathcliff is threatened with confinement and effectually separated from Catherine. Though both Heathcliff and Catherine exhibit uncivilized savagery in scampering about on the moors and spying together on the inhabitants of Thrushcross Grange, the Lintons still “ma[k]e a distinction between” the treatment given to the two children in a way that is markedly apparent (Bronte 44). When Catherine’s foot is bitten by the Linton’s dog outside the Linton’s cultivated home and the Linton family comes out to ascertain the cause of the noise, the Lintons threaten to either confine Heathcliff in their cellar, or completely rid society of his contaminating influence by hanging him, though Heathcliff has done nothing to exhibit his depravity but curse at the unfortunate event of Catherine’s injury (43). He is termed a “gypsy,” a “robber,” and a “frightful thing” (Bronte 43). Catherine, on the other hand, is carefully taken into the Linton’s house and soon becomes “as merry as she could be, dividing her food between the little dog and Skulker [the dog who had bit her foot]” (Bronte 44). Thus, it appears Heathcliff suffers as the true victim of the episode; while Catherine sits comfortably inside, playfully teasing the dog who bit her foot, Heathcliff is rejected and thrown out into the moors. The Linton’s hostility towards Heathcliff symbolizes

the threat civilization poses to the savagery of the moors. The Lintons’ threat to confine the brutish Heathcliff in the cellar of their cultivated home therefore symbolizes the threat Catherine’s new identity of cultivation poses to her brutish nature—the threat of confinement into the deepest cellars of her being.

Catherine attempts to reconcile the savage Heathcliff’s and cultivated Edgar’s loves in her life by assuming a cultivated identity on the outside that is completely at odds with the savage nature she holds on the inside. Before Catherine and Edgar’s marriage, Nelly notes Catherine’s double character with the Lintons and Earnshaws, stating Catherine takes “care not to act like” Heathcliff when the Lintons point out his brutish behaviors, but “had small inclination to practice politeness” at home where it would get her no credit or praise (59). Catherine, in describing her feelings regarding her possible future marriage to Edgar, distractedly exclaims, “I’ve no more business to marry Edgar Linton than I have to be in heaven... [Heathcliff] is more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same” (Bronte 71). Though she marries Edgar, Catherine is aware of the fact she cannot truly adopt this role forever. When Catherine is confronted by Nelly with the possibility of her separation from Heathcliff as a result of her marriage to Edgar, she states in anger and denial, “Time will change [my love for Edgar], I’m well aware, as winter changes the trees...Heathcliff [is] always, always in my mind...as my own being” (Bronte 73). Catherine is thus unable to deny the fact that her own true nature is Heathcliff’s nature. In deciding to marry Edgar, Catherine knowingly sacrifices her real nature (Bronte 71-73).

Catherine reacts towards her permanent confinement as a cultivated woman by endeavoring, to achieve revenge on the Linton family through Heathcliff. This aim can be clearly seen in Catherine’s attitude towards Heathcliff’s malevolence towards Isabella later in the narrative. When Heathcliff states his intentions to mistreat Isabella, Catherine states to him, “I like her too well, my dear Heathcliff, to let you absolutely seize and devour her up” (Bronte 94). Here, Catherine seems to feel very little real fear for Isabella’s sake and seems to simply provide the necessary scolding without earnestly desiring the benevolence she requests from Heathcliff. Catherine further demonstrates her identity as an accomplice in Heathcliff’s schemes to trap Isabella through the behavior she adopts in warning Isabella of Heathcliff’s base motives. After describing Heathcliff’s depraved and evil nature to Isabella, Catherine states, “There’s my picture; and I’m his friend—so much so, that had he thought seriously to catch you, I should, perhaps, have held my tongue, and let you fall into his trap” (Bronte 91). Thus, while Catherine does provide the required discouragement of Heathcliff’s evil intentions as well as the warning remarks to Isabella, Catherine leaves little to be surmised in the real nature of her will.

Catherine can be said to instigate Heathcliff’s confinement of the civilized Isabella as his wife. When Isabella refuses to be mocked by Catherine in front of Heathcliff, Catherine forcefully detains her, clamping her hand onto Isabella’s wrist. Nelly narrates Catherine decides to “set [Isabella] free” only after Isabella resorts to clawing at her “detainer’s” wrist, and causing “crescents of red” blood to appear on Catherine’s skin (Bronte 91). Heathcliff,

meanwhile, watches Isabella “as one might...a strange repulsive animal” after Isabella leaves, states, “You’d hear of odd things, if I lived alone with that mawkish, waxen face,” implying physical abuse (Bronte 94). Catherine, then, does not demonstrate discouragement or aversion to Heathcliff’s barbarity, but rather a marked encouragement of his savage intentions, keeping Isabella “trapped” by Heathcliff’s stare and intimating that Heathcliff could easily justify his mistreatment of her because of Isabella’s ridiculous infatuation. Heathcliff was only aware of Isabella’s infatuation through Catherine’s insistence on degrading Isabella’s regard for Heathcliff in his presence. Catherine’s actions inspire Heathcliff’s marriage to Isabella and Isabella’s resulting confinement at Wuthering Heights, where she suffers greatly and soon comes to hate Heathcliff as the “devil” himself.

The savage Heathcliff’s imprisonment of the cultivated Isabella effects a reversal of roles which achieves an ironic vengeance for Catherine. Catherine achieves vengeance for the imprisonment of her nature through the manifestation of her hidden identity—Heathcliff. In effect, savagery captures and imprisons the symbol of cultivation—Isabella—just as cultivation had captured and imprisoned the savage nature of Catherine when she married Edgar Linton. But Catherine, though she has achieved revenge on the Linton family both through these acts and through the evil schemes Heathcliff carries out against Edgar and Cathy Linton as well as Linton Heathcliff after her death, Catherine’s savage nature is still held captive by her identity of cultivation. Catherine describes to Nelly during her delirium before her death how she dreamed about the first time Hindley ordered “separation between [her] and Heathcliff” (Bronte 110). Catherine then relates to Nelly how upon awakening from the dream to remember that she was forever separated from Heathcliff as the Lady of Thrushcross Grange, she was thrown into “a paroxysm of despair” (111):

You may fancy a glimpse of the abyss where I grovelled...[upon remembering how I was] converted at a stroke into Mrs. Linton, the lady of Thrushcross Grange, and the wife of a stranger; an exile, and outcast, thenceforth...Oh, 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?...Open the window again wide, fasten it open!...[it is my] chance of life (Bronte 111).

Catherine’s dream and reaction evince her belief that life on earth to her is a prison, while her only hope for life is the

ability to re-embrace the savage nature she had as a child. When Edgar forever bans Heathcliff—and thereby her uncultivated nature—from Thrushcross Grange after Heathcliff visits Catherine one day, Catherine is unable to handle the separation.

After Heathcliff is banished forever from Catherine’s presence by the symbol of cultivation—Edgar Linton—Catherine confines her physical body—the symbol of her cultivated identity as Edgar’s wife—in her room for three days without food or water (105-110). This brings on a state of delirium which eventually leads to Catherine’s death. Though her savage nature is separated from her in life, she can achieve unity with him in death. She remains locked in her room for three days, refusing food and water, and afterwards is so changed that Nelly barely recognizes her (137-138). Catherine states to Nelly after her self-confinement, “...the thing that irks me the most is this shattered prison, after all. I’m tired, tired of being enclosed here” (Bronte 141). Thus, knowing that life on earth to her is a prison, she looks to the freedom she can achieve when her earthly chains—her body—are no longer in existence. Thus, Catherine’s imprisonment and suppression of her own nature through her marriage to the symbol of cultivation, Edgar Linton, brings her to eventually starve and inflict self-confinement on her own physical body. Catherine’s statement, “I am Heathcliff” could be said to signify, not a passionate relationship of love, but rather a literal truth (73). Catherine, in order to allow her true nature—Heathcliff—to be free, must first destroy the prison of cultivation she created by marrying Edgar Linton. To achieve unity with her true nature, Catherine must act as her own jailor and then extinguish the symbol of her cultivated identity—her physical body.

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