



## TRANSCENDENTAL LOVE IN WUTHERING HEIGHTS: CROSSING VICTORIAN FRONTIERS

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The Victorian novel *Wuthering Heights* is a tale of tempestuous and unabashed passion unlike the story of *Jane Eyre* by the other Bronte sister which was largely limited by the Victorian mindset. Nevertheless the zeitgeist of Victorian England looms large in the Yorkshire moors where the romantic melodrama is played out. The very arrival of the gypsy boy fatally named Heathcliff by the elder Earnshaw marks a turning point in flouting the norms of the age. And more fatal are the tenancy and ascendancy laws in this queer landscape that facilitate unhindered oppression of individuals and easy gratification of inborn revenge. Against this backdrop of unfair punishment calling out for revenge, usurpation and vindictive romance, the love of the Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff, which has metamorphosed from childhood fellow-feeling to a hysterical and metaphysical love, is forever constant. Mr. Lockwood, who discovers the true emotional and psychological status of his misanthropic landlord, does not hesitate to believe the epic of unearthly love related by the loyal housekeeper who was witness to three generations of life in *Wuthering Heights*.

This epic of supra-terrestrial affinity has not been without its handicaps. Cathy who ran around and played with the boy Heathcliff who was anathema to her brother Hindley chose Edgar Linton for her husband, momentarily disentangling herself from her alter ego. She was no exception to the typical Victorian conditioning exemplified as much by the servants of the household as by Hindley himself. The manservant Joseph was the stern moraliser who took it upon himself to save Cathy's soul from the dark life of Heathcliff who was equated with the devil himself. His dark hair bore a moral contrast to the blonde hair of the fair Catherine. The very stereotypes in the household were a legacy of the times. The accident in the moors that led Cathy to sojourn in Thrushcross Grange paved the way for a new chapter in the love life of Cathy and Heathcliff. Cathy temporarily suspended her fearless espousal of Heathcliff and wantonly turned to Linton, agreeing with everyone else that he was an eligible bachelor and Heathcliff a mere lout. She wishes to be "the greatest woman of the neighbourhood" (Bronte 104). Abandoning Heathcliff to the stables she sets out for her new residence in Thrushcross Grange while the soul of Heathcliff, seething with humiliation and revenge, leaves with his physical self for the valley of Gimmerton to devise a new life.

According to sociological critics like Arnold Kettle, the basis conflicts in the novel are bred in contemporary society. In *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Wuthering Heights* published in 1968, Kettle makes his point very exhaustively (37). In her adherence to Victorian ideals of life and domesticity, Cathy hopes to settle down to the comfort of her new home with a fawning husband, but soon realizes that she has been deceiving herself all along. Linton who was ever attentive to her seems much weaker in comparison to Heathcliff who was the fountainhead of brute energy and divine life force rolled in one. She loses her physical and emotional poise at the time of giving birth to her child and pines for Heathcliff. Heathcliff, who is back from Gimmerton, has now had his revenge in part assisted by destiny, for Hindley has become reduced to a wretched state after the death of his wife and turned into a dipsomaniac. Heathcliff finds him ready prey for his onslaught. When he visits Cathy at Thrushcross Grange his long denied happiness returns in a limited measure, now that Cathy has confirmed her love. He gets vicarious pleasure from the humiliation of Linton. Compounded by strange unconscious psychic impulses he plays out a double game of spiting Cathy and Linton at the same time. Having floored Cathy he entices Edgar's sister Isabella to elope with him to *Wuthering Heights*. That being done, he treats her cruelly and boorishly to make up his sum for all that he had suffered from the Linton family, and also Cathy. The enigma of it all is in the fact that he tried to inflict pain on Cathy for whose sake he went through the worst of both worlds. He tells the dying Catherine quite ruthlessly indeed, with all the rancour of one who believes in social propriety and who feels wilfulness must be punished,

Why did you betray your own heart, Cathy? I have not one word of comfort. You deserve this. You have killed yourself. Yes, you may kiss me and cry; and wring out my kisses and tears: they'll blight you—they'll damn you....Because...nothing that God or Satan could inflict would have parted us, *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. (Bronte 188)

Heathcliff's love is highly ambivalent after his reunion with Cathy just as hers was before her marriage. The map of relations is fraught with many lines going across apart from parallel. Being the godless and kinless gypsy that he is, the high notes of current religion do not go past him in his distress.

In the final analysis it would seem that the society in the background is something like a Nemesis surfacing at the wrong moments in the lives of both these individuals. Coming to the next generation, Heathcliff fulfils the thirst for revenge by



victimising Hareton Earnshaw, son to Hindley, by meting out to him similar treatment that he received at the hands of Hindley as a boy, but with less physical violence. His greatest revenge was in disinheriting Hareton. The others of the generation of Hareton are Linton, the son of Heathcliff with Isabella, and the junior Cathy, daughter of Catherine Earnshaw and Edgar Linton. Linton and Cathy Junior are actors in the game of resuscitated love. Now the romance is between these two who are proxies of time for their passionate parents who were inseparable but star-crossed. Thus the two-children myth remains the continuous plot for romance in the novel. The glass window pane through which Lockwood experiences the feel of the other world becomes the membrane that separates the past from the present, observes Dorothy Van Ghent in her essay "On Wuthering Heights" in *Modern Critical Interpretations of Wuthering Heights* published in 1987. She discusses the timeless property of this mythical bond (19-25). The horror and the pathos mean only when read against an age which was highly prescriptive and judgemental.

Catherine says, "I am Heathcliff," (Bronte 189) to Nelly Dean when she cannot bear the smarting she received when questioned about her love for him. This story which abounds in the danger of pure love testifies that danger is the quintessence of romance. The greatest challenge to love at all time has been from society because all great love stories from Romeo and Juliet showcase love among non-equals. It is against the difficult terrain of love symbolically suggested by the wild moors that season the great romantic adventure.

Today the novel interests more for its social critique than for its Gothic substance or quasi-medieval romantic culture. Arnold Kettle along with Terry Eagleton or Raymond Williams would search for germs of proletarian revolt in such a tale that at once is a swan-song of the gentry and ascent of the downtrodden of society. This class revenge may perhaps be the only retribution Marxian thinkers believe in. But the plot of class change has been beautifully worked out not by pamphleteering or indoctrination as, say, in Gorky's *Mother* (1906), but through the agency of a metaphysical terrestrial bond of love. It is love untrammelled because it does not know its brutal power which nothing but the moors can recognize and echo. These aboriginal archetypes of primitive love are eternal wanderers in the moors keeping rhythm with the wild winds on the moors. These are untamed unlike Wordsworth's Lucy who was lost in parental love. These two unite generation after generation as their descendants illustrate, carrying the same wild love in their genes.

But then, the question is, how does the timeless and boundless become typically English and Victorian? The pair's leaping over limits that are typically of English origin in the Victorian mould is the key to the answer. Victorian society created a mould into which the two creatures outside the planet were made to remain and they escaped like curls of smoke to blend with the moors and the forces of the universe. The subatomic attraction that held them together despite their diverse origin and habitat finally took them where they belong, the single world of their unified selves. When the innocent Lockwood finally becomes prescient the catharsis is complete.

#### Works Cited

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