REBELLION AGAINST SOCIAL NORMS AND CONVENTIONS- CLASS, MARRIAGE AND GENDER ROLES IN *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*

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ABSTRACT

Published in 1847, Emily Bronte's novel Wuthering Heights has been a subject of various interpretations and criticisms. However, in the abundance of analyses, one can notice that there is universal consent that the novel is a powerful and unique work of art. It can be established that the novel was written ahead of its time. It has to be emphasized that through the characters and their intertwined stories, the novel presents an exceptional description of human nature and emotions which are almost superhuman in strength and capacity. Above all, the novel *Wuthering Heights* presents unconventional perceptions on the issues of class and social status, their impact on relationships and marriage, as well as gender roles. The following article addresses and attempts to analyze the issues related to rebellion against social norms and conventions customary for the time the novel was written. Of course, *Wuthering Heights* is by no means a typical Victorian novel, written by a woman writer in the 19th century. In fact, the novel itself cannot be placed in any category which would completely describe it or evaluate it. It has to be analyzed as a masterpiece which is unique in structure, themes and intensity and which does not fit any of the rules or literary conventions.

Keywords: *Wuthering Heights*, novel, class and social status, relationships and marriage.

1. INTRODUCTION

The novel *Wuthering Heights* was published in 1847. At the time the novel was published, the author, Emily Bronte, used the pseudonym Ellis Bell. According to the articles detailing her biography (Encyclopedia Britannica, contributor Joyce M.S Tompkins), the records of Emily's life are scarce and there is no correspondence or written evidence that can provide details about her personal life.
A daughter of a clergyman who was educated, for the most part, at home, Emily spent a brief time working as teacher in Halifax and learning foreign languages in Brussels, before returning, this time forever, to Haworth, where her father was a pastor.

Wuthering Heights was the only novel Emily wrote, and in itself, the novel presents more mysteries than solving any of them. Publishing of the novel *Wuthering Heights* was delayed until the completion of their sister Charlotte's novel *Jane Eyre, Jane Eyre* was an immediate success. In contrast, *Wuthering*

Heights, when published in December 1847 was not accepted at all. On the contrary: the novel was dismissed by the critics and the audience at the time. *Wuthering Heights* was described by Emily's contemporaries as cruel, savage and clumsily written, perhaps due to the fact that it was entirely different from the other literary works written in that period. Unusual in structure and powerful in intensity, it probably shocked the readers at the time of its publication. Indeed, some of the reviews at the time show that many critics found the novel to be exceptionally appalling and intriguing.
Emily's health deteriorated after the novel was published. She suffered from tuberculosis, the symptoms of which worsened in 1848. In December the same year, she died at the age of 30. She never lived to see the novel she wrote being praised and well-received. *Wuthering Heights* was only recently acknowledged as a masterpiece and one of the most powerful novels written in English language.
We cannot see traces of Emily's life- as we know it- that is, in the narrative of the novel *Wuthering Heights.* Unlike her sisters, Charlotte and Anne, she never referred to her career (albeit short) as a teacher/ governess, or her private life, as an unmarried, single woman in early 1840s in England. Instead, in her novel she described, throughout the course of a very extraordinary storyline, relationships of love, hate, passion and revenge which spanned generations and went against traditions.

The novel is even more unusual in context of Emily's private life and the meager details related to her character traits. One has to ask a number of questions while reading the novel, taking into consideration the personality of the author and the circumstances of her personal life. How could a person who was, even by the standards of the time, very reserved and silent, who never had a significant love relationship (at least according to her official biography), write about passion, hate and love in such depth?

The paper will examine, in more detail, some of the themes which appear in the novel. It will focus on two different aspects which contribute to the power of the novel and its timeless qualities. One aspect is the complexity and the mysterious elements of the love and marriage relationships among unique characters depicted in the novel. The second path of the analysis will focus on the social issues related to social status and power presented in the novel. The paper will try to shed some light on the effects that these elements create throughout the novel and contribute to its significance.

2. THE IMPLICATIONS OF CLASS AND SOCIAL STATUS IN *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*- REBELLION AGAINST SOCIAL NORMS AND REVENGE

Although written in 1840, the novel *Wuthering Heights* presents an unusual, almost revolutionary for the time it was written, point of view on the aspects of hierarchy, systems of power and class. The society depicted in the novel followed the strict social class divisions. It was difficult, almost unattainable, to change the social standing and the prejudices which inevitably came with it. The novel *Wuthering Heights*, rebellious and unconventional in almost every aspect, challenges the systems of power, social and racial divisions and gender roles. The novel's main characters evolve around their desire to defy the established norms and to break the conventions, to change their status and to gain.
Cory (2005, p.6), discussing class and systems of power depicted in *Wuthering Heights*, argues the following:" The novel reproduces and disseminates the momentary resistances to class and gender-based systems of power that were part of the social milieu of the era. It reflects contemporary ideas about undermining the institutions of state and about subverting class and gender-based hierarchies".
Indeed, the novel depicts several micro-realms of rebellion and upheaval against the norms and standards of the time. The most revolutionary presentation of the novel's characters in terms of class and rebellion against class divisions is definitely Heathcliff. Cory (2005, p.1) defines Heathcliff as "revolution from below". The orphan found on the streets of Liverpool, is introduced to the family by the father and head of the family- Mr. Earnshaw. Immediately, he seeks the same treatment for the orphaned child as for his own children- a moment depicted in Nelly's story:

> *Not a soul knew to whom he belonged, he said, and his money and time being both limited, he thought it is better to take it home with him at once…because he was determined he would not leave it as he found it.*
> (*Wuthering Heights,* p.36)

The focus and unusual characterization on Heathcliff do not stop there. His status in the family, especially while Mr. Earnshaw is alive, is similar to the one of Hindley and Catherine, or even more privileged. He is Mr. Earnshaw favorite and at times even more loved in comparison to his own biological children- a status detailed in novel written at the time or about a time when this was considered to be highly unusual. Dias 2008, p.256) points out the following:

> The basic conflicts of Wuthering Heights are deeply linked to the controversial relationship of Cathy and Heathcliff. The first one is linked to the idea of social class division, and in fact, it is this one that triggers all the others, for as a woman in a XIX century patriarchal society, Cathy's only "choice" for her future — marriage — is made based on reason, considering the cruel condition of her sex in an age of absolute lack of female power, where the conflicts between reason and emotion ended up in an everlasting feeling of incompleteness, anxiety, repressed desires, madness and death, the natural course of life for women who a little later in life dared feeling alien needs, different from those of the established social order.

This unconventional position that Heathcliff has in the Earnshaw family is even more obvious through the prism of his relationship with Catherine. Their closeness, especially after Mr. Earnshaw's death, results in Cathy's and Heathcliff's rebellion against Hindley. Catherine constantly challenges Hindley's authority when he is trying to revert to more traditional conformity, by trying to reduce Heathcliff, as he describes it, to his right place, thus confirming her role as a rebel.
This unusual and unconventional status is obvious in Catherine's Earnshaw love for Heathcliff, prior to her marriage to Linton. Their closeness, their disregard for anything and anyone outside of their world and their defiance towards the established societal view on proper behavior as teenagers, germinate the passion which exists between them. Despite her emotions, she decides to marry Linton. Dias (2008, p. 256) argues that this decision stems from Catherine's desire to establish order and to distance herself from the chaos in her life and her relationship with Heathcliff. Dias (2008, p.256) , states the following: "However, when Cathy, as a teenager, meets the Lintons, the social conflict is intensified, for in an act of self-betrayal, she decides not to marry Heathcliff because of his inferior social condition."
Heathcliff manages to change his social class and position and returns to Wuthering Heights as a wealthy individual. The readers are not acquainted with the means Heathcliff accomplished his ends- but even his physical transformation illustrates the change in his status. Nelly, astonished to see him back and visiting the Lintons at Thrushcross Grange, describes his changed appearance – the first hint that his status has been changed:

> *I was amazed, more than ever, to behold the transformation of Heathcliff. He had grown a tall, athletic, well-formed man; beside whom my master seemed quite slender and youth-like. His upright carriage suggested the idea of his having been in the army. His countenance was much older in expression and decision of feature than Mr. Linton's; it looked intelligent, and retained no marks of former degradation.*
> (Bronte, Wuthering Heights, p.122)

Heathcliff uses his changed financial and social status as a path to revenge. Among his motives to become rich, is his desire to show Catherine that she wouldn't be degraded in any way if she had married him. However, this is the least sinister one: he also uses his financial power to ruin Hindley financially and to establish his power over little Hareton.

The motives which fuel his revenge are not limited to his financial wellbeing. Akcesme (2017, p.28), for instance, connects Heathcliff's motive for revenge with his love for Catherine and some physical resemblance between Catherine and her daughter and nephew.

> Heathcliff`s hatred for Hareton and Cathy is also immeasurable since he sees Catherine in both of them: *"They lifted their eyes together, to encounter Mr. Heathcliff - perhaps you have never remarked that their eyes are precisely similar, and they are those of Catherine Earnshaw"* (244). Hareton is deliberately left illiterate and turned into a rough, coarse, unsophisticated farm worker as Catherine observes him in the kitchen: *"He`s just like a dog, is he not, Ellen? ... He does his work, eats his food, and sleeps, eternally! What a blank, dreary mind he must have!"* (235)

He proceeds with his revenge when he marries Isabella Linton and controls the future of his son, using the weak and feeble boy to lure young Catherine Linton into marriage with him, so that he could control her estate and inheritance as well. However, in Catherine Linton, Heathcliff does not see the daughter of his beloved Catherine. Instead, he sees Edgar Linton's child, the fruit of Catherine's marriage and another reminder that she has abandoned him. He hates the girl utterly- perhaps because she reminds him of Cathy and Edgar, perhaps because Cathy died after giving birth to her. Although he never provides an explanation or reasons for his hatred towards Cathy Linton, his treatment of her shows his hostility. In his mind, she is a weapon, which will put the final destructive blow to Edgar Linton's estate, inheritance and family name. His status, his power, and his revenge collapse towards the end of his life. The futility of his revenge becomes apparent. His social status means nothing to him. Above all, with his desire to revenge being over, his desire to live has ended as well. At one point, he says to Nelly:

> *'It is a poor conclusion, is it not?'* he observed, having brooded awhile on the scene he had just witnessed: *'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, Wuthering Heights, p.40)

3. FEMALE CHARACTERS, GENDER ROLES, LOVE AND MARRIAGE IN WUTHERING HEIGHTS-REBELLION AGAINST ESTABLISHED MARITAL CONVENTIONS

Among the reasons / arguments which support the claim that Wuthering Heights was unconventional, almost shocking for the time it was written, is the treatment and the presentation of traditional gender roles and personality traits of female characters in the society where marriage and marriage rites and conventions were considered as pillars. Taking into consideration that feminism was almost non-existent and not acceptable according to the standards and norms in the time the novel was written, it is important to analyze the female characters in the novel from this perspective. It can be argued that the novel portrays unconventional female characters whose behavior and personality traits defy the stereotypes presented in the literary works of the period

Both of the main female characters in *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine Earnshaw and Catherine Linton, challenge their assigned gender roles and norms of behavior and beliefs expected from women of their class. Both Catherine Earnshaw and Catherine Linton defy the norms of female domesticity, devotedness, submissiveness and calmness, qualities traditionally expected from women and girls then, and sometimes now, qualities defined as female ideal behavior.

Dias (2008, p.255) points out the following regarding the gender roles in Wuthering Heights:"Observing the gender relations in Wuthering Heights from a psychoanalytic perspective, it can be seen that those relations are built through the importance that the role of Catherine has upon the other characters".
Catherine Earnshaw is described by Nelly with a certain amount of dislike, as a troublesome child:

> … 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. Her spirits were always at high-water mark, her tongue always going singing, laughing, and plaguing everybody who would not do the same (Wuthering *Heights*, p.52).

As a child and a teenage girl, her behavior described in the novel challenges the traditional gender roles, possessing both feminine characteristics (outlined in her looks) and masculine characteristics outlined in her behaviors, described by Nelly as "haughty," "headstrong," and "proud" (65, 67). Almeida (2011) argues that: Catherine is a strong, passionate and deeply flawed character. She is a curiosity in her defiance of the role society has prescribed for her, her secret, alluring sexuality, and her uncontrollable ambition.

Marriage was considered to be a fundament of the society described in Wuthering Heights. In the novel, several different marriages are described- none of them is happy, harmonious or a reflection of love. Catherine's Earnshaw attitude towards marriage is illustrated on various instances through the novel. It can be concluded that for her, marriage is an escape, a mean to an end, a punishment or a compromise-but not a happy ending of a traditional kind. When asked to explain her motives to marry Linton, Catherine says to Nelly:

> *Nelly, I see now, you think of me as a selfish wretch, but did it never strike you that if Heathcliff and I were married, we should become beggars? Whereas, if I marry Linton, I can aid Heathcliff to rise, and place him out of my brother's power*
>
> (Bronte, *Wuthering Heights*, p.79)

This statement illustrates Catherine's role as a rebel- even her marriage is motivated by the possibility to help Heathcliff to destroy the perpetual wheel and overturn the hierarchy. This unconventional overturn of a conventional role of a woman, as a supporter and standing behind her man, shows that Catherine uses her marriage prospects to aid, in a way, Heathcliff's rebellion.

In some aspects, Catherine's marriage to Edgar Linton can be seen as punishment and suffering. Two factors definitely contribute to it. Her choice is the primary reason for her unhappiness, since even from the beginning, she is aware that she does not love Edgar. When she compares her feelings for Edgar with the almost destructive passion that she feels towards Heathcliff, Cathy utters a statement unthinkable for a woman of her time:

> *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, Wuthering Heights, p.105)

Another personality trait of Catherine's also explains her feelings towards Edgar and her marriage. As a child, Catherine exhibits her love of freedom which is described by Nelly as "savage". Her marriage represents the end of her childhood, but also the end of her freedom. Although she is calmer in comparison to her state of mind while she lived in Wuthering Heights, due to the fact that she escapes the tumultuous life in her brother's home, she also changes. She fits, or she is made to fit the stereotype of a domestic ideal, almost passive and definitely more fragile.

Almost simultaneously with her altered behavior, a change in Catherine's health is evident- the strong girl in her childhood becomes a fragile, anxious woman, whose nervous breakdown brings physical illness and eventually death. She describes this change to Nelly: "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?" (Bronte, *Wuthering Heights*, p.125). Perdones Canas (2019, p.62) points out the following: "In some way, this is the price that Catherine had to pay because of having been born as a woman in a patriarchal society. She is loved by what she represents and not by what she really is or wants to be."

Catherine Linton bears some resemblance to her mother's personality and appearance, although her traits and conduct fit more in the established and expected norms. However, she also challenges some of the established norms of behavior, especially after being forced to marry Linton and kept as a prisoner in Heatcliff's household. Although a metaphor for a lot of women then, and many now, marriage for Cathy Linton is in fact captivity. She hates her father-in-law, Heathcliff, with a passion similar to her mother's love for him, and at one point, she proves her intelligence, her insightfulness and her defiance, again character traits which are not commonly associated with female characters presented in literary works at the time:

> *Mr. Heathcliff YOU have NOBODY to love you; and, however miserable you make us, we shall still have the revenge of thinking that your cruelty arises from your greater misery. You ARE miserable, are you not? Lonely, like the devil, and envious like him? NOBODY loves you NOBODY will cry for you when you die! I wouldn't be you!*
>
> (Bronte, Wuthering Heights, p. 363)

Still, similarly to her mother, she uses her influence to stir a rebellion and to raise Hareton's awareness of his position in Heathcliff's household and family. Although she cannot undermine completely Hareton's loyalty towards his captor, she manages to obtain Hareton's love and protection. Above all, she makes Heathcliff aware of the futility of his revenge and that the end of his cruelty is near. 'He'll not obey you, wicked man, any more,' said Catherine; 'and he'll soon detest you as much as I do (Wuthering Heights, p.405).

We do not know if Catherine Linton marries Hareton – the novel ends indicating the probability of this marriage. Yet, we can conclude that this will be the only marriage which will be a result of love or at least closeness between Hareton and Cathy. Still, it can be concluded that Cathy, unlike her mother, decides to build her future with a man she is inclined to- one way of empowerment and escape from misfortune and suffering. Again, this is not a perfect, ideal union- it comes after months of despise and derision on Cathy's behalf. But it is not an artificial, lifeless, conventional union that Cathy's parents had.

4. CONCLUSION

In retrospection, it can be concluded that Emily Bronte created her only masterpiece with desire to portray the real women and men, real standards and issues, real emotions in her society and real rebellion in her society. She did not want the artificial standards and norms depicted in the traditional literature. We can argue that she wanted to create female and male characters that really represented women and men of that age. Her characters had the strength to change their lives and status. The motives for their rebellion were passion, love or revenge- all of them created this unique, unprecedented and unsurpassed novel.

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