**SOME THEMES IN WUTHERING HEIGHTS**

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The concept that almost every reader of Wuthering Heights focuses on is the passion-love of Catherine and Heathcliff, often to the exclusion of every other theme–this despite the fact that other kinds of love are presented and that Catherine dies half way through the novel. The loves of the second generation, the love of Frances and Hindley, and the "susceptible heart" of Lockwood receive scant attention from such readers. But is love the central issue in this novel? Is its motive force perhaps economic? The desire for wealth does motivate Catherine's marriage, which results in Heathcliff's flight and causes him to acquire Wuthering Heights, to appropriate Thrushcross Grange, and to dispossess Hareton. Is it possible that one of the other themes constitutes the center of the novel, or are the other themes secondary to the theme of love? Consider the following themes:

Clash of elemental forces.

The universe is made up of two opposite forces, storm and calm. Wuthering Heights and the Earnshaws express the storm; Thrushcross Grange and the Lintons, the calm. Catherine and Heathcliff are elemental creatures of the storm. This theme is discussed more fully in Later Critical response to Wuthering Heights

The clash of economic interests and social classes.

The novel is set at a time when capitalism and industrialization are changing not only the economy but also the traditional social structure and the relationship of the classes. The yeoman or respectable farming class (Hareton) was being destroyed by the economic alliance of the newly-wealthy capitalists (Heathcliff) and the traditional power-holding gentry (the Lintons). This theme is discussed more fully in Wuthering Heights as Socio-Economic Novel.

Striving for transcendence [transcendence: passing beyond a human limit, existing above and independent of this world].

It is not just love that Catherine and Heathcliff seek but a higher, spiritual existence which is permanent and unchanging, as Catherine makes clear when she compares her love for Linton to the seasons and her love for Heathcliff to the rocks. The dying Catherine looks forward to achieving this state through death. This theme is discussed more fully in Religion, Metaphysics, and Mysticism.

The abusive patriarch and patriarchal family.

The male heads of household abuse females and males who are weak or powerless. This can be seen in their use of various kinds of imprisonment or confinement, which takes social, emotional, financial, legal, and physical forms. Mr. Earnshaw expects Catherine to behave properly and hurtfully rejects her "bad-girl" behavior. Edgar's ultimatum that Catherine must make a final choice between him or Heathcliff restricts Catherine's identity by forcing her to reject an essential part of her nature; with loving selfishness Edgar confines his daughter Cathy to the boundaries of Thrushcross Grange. A vindictive Hindley strips Heathcliff of his position in the family, thereby trapping him in a degraded laboring position. Heathcliff literally incarcerates Isabella (as her husband and legal overseer), and later he imprisons both Cathy and Nellie; also, Cathy is isolated from the rest of the household after her marriage to Linton by Healthcliff's contempt for and hatred of them.

Study of childhood and the family.

The hostility toward and the abuse of children and family members at Wuthering Heights cut across the generations. The savagery of children finds full expression in Hindley's animosity toward Heathcliff and in Heathcliff's plans of vengeance. Wrapped in the self-centeredness of childhood, Heathcliff claims Hindley's horse and uses Mr. Earnshaw's partiality to his own advantage, making no return of affection. Mr. Earnshaw's disapproval of Catherine hardens her and, like many mistreated children, she becomes rebellious. Despite abuse, Catherine and Heathcliff show the strength of children to survive, and abuse at least partly forms the adult characters and behavior of Catherine and Heathcliff and forges an important bond between them.

The effects of intense suffering.

In the passion-driven characters–Catherine, Heathcliff, and Hindley–pain leads them to turn on and to torment others. Inflicting pain provides them some relief; this behavior raises questions about whether they are cruel by nature or are formed by childhood abuse and to what extent they should be held responsible for or blamed for their cruelties. Is all their suffering inflicted by others or by outside forces, like the death of Hindley's wife, or is at least some of their torment self-inflicted, like Heathcliff's holding Catherine responsible for his suffering after her death? Suffering also sears the weak; Isabella and her son Linton become vindictive, and Edgar turns into a self-indulgent, melancholy recluse. The children of love, the degraded Hareton and the imprisoned Cathy, are able to overcome Heathcliff's abuse and to find love and a future with each other. Is John Hagan right that "Wuthering Heights is such a remarkable work partly because it persuades us forcibly to pity victims and victimizers alike"?

Self-imposed or self-generated confinement and escape.

Both Catherine and Heathcliff find their bodies prisons which trap their spirits and prevent the fulfillment of their desires: Catherine yearns to be united with Heathcliff, with a lost childhood freedom, with Nature, and with a spiritual realm; Heathcliff wants possession of and union with Catherine. Confinement also defines the course of Catherine's life: in childhood, she alternates between the constraint of Wuthering Heights and the freedom of the moors; in puberty, she is restricted by her injury to a couch at Thrushcross Grange; finally womanhood and her choice of husband confine her to the gentility of Thrushcross Grange, from which she escapes into the freedom of death.

Displacement, dispossession, and exile.

Heathcliff enters the novel possessed of nothing, is not even given a last or family name, and loses his privileged status after Mr. Earnshaw's death. Heathcliff displaces Hindley in the family structure. Catherine is thrown out of heaven, where she feels displaced, sees herself an exile at Thrushcross Grange at the end, and wanders the moors for twenty years as a ghost. Hareton is dispossessed of property, education, and social status. Isabella cannot return to her beloved Thrushcross Grange and brother. Linton (Heathcliff's son) is displaced twice after his mother's death, being removed first to Thrushcross Grange and then to Wuthering Heights. Cathy is displaced from her home, Thrushcross Grange.

Communication and understanding.

The narrative structure of the novel revolves around communication and understanding; Lockwood is unable to communicate with or understand the relationships at Wuthering Heights, and Nelly enlightens him by communicating the history of the Earnshaws and the Lintons. Trying to return to the Grange in a snowstorm, Lockwood cannot see the stone markers which outline the road. A superstitious Nellie refuses to let Catherine tell her dreams; repeatedly Nellie does not understand what Catherine is talking about or refuses to accept what Catherine is saying, notably after Catherine locks herself in her room. Isabella refuses to heed Catherine's warning and Nellie's advice about Heathcliff. And probably the most serious mis-communication of all is Heathcliff's hearing only that it would degrade Catherine to marry him.

The fall.

Recently a number of critics have seen the story of a fall in this novel, though from what state the characters fall from or to is disputed. Does Catherine fall, in yielding to the comforts and security of Thrushcross Grange? Does Heathcliff fall in his "moral teething" of revenge and pursuit of property? Is Wutheirng Heights or Thrushcross Grange the fallen world? Is the fall from heaven to hell or from hell to heaven? Does Catherine really lose the Devil/Heathcliff (this question arises from the assumption that Brontë is a Blakeian subbversive and visionary)? The theme of a fall relies heavily on the references to heaven and hell that run through the novel, beginning with Lockwood's explicit reference to Wuthering Heights as a "misanthrope's heaven" and ending with the implied heaven of the ghosts of Heathcliff and Catherine roaming the moors together. Catherine dreams of being expelled from heaven and deliriously sees herself an exile cast out from the "heaven" of Wuthering Heights–a literal as well as a symbolic fall. Heathcliff, like Satan, is relentless in his destructive pursuit of revenge. Inevitably the ideas of expulsion from heaven, exile, and desire for revenge have been connected to Milton's Paradise Lost and parallels drawn between Milton's epic and Brontë's novel; Catherine's pain at her change from free child to imprisoned adult is compared to Satan's speech to Beelzebub, "how chang'd from an angel of light to exile in a fiery lake."