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The Theme of Revenge in “Wuthering Heights”

Abstract: Considered the age for the growth of novels, the Victorian Era saw the emergence of new themes in literary writing, while novelists wrote more about the “condition of England” during the time caused by the predominance of Industrialisation and utilitarianism, focus was more on the characterization and later on intellectualism. The theme which got the least attention during this period was revenge. Being one of the oldest topics in English Literature, revenge in Victorian novels ceased to be the driving force. In this plethora of novels been written during the time, Emily Bronte created her only work “Wuthering Heights” that explored the theme of revenge. This paper aims to analyse the theme of revenge as portrayed in the novel and how the impulse of revenge drove Heathcliff to manipulate the lives of practically all the characters in the novel, but especially the second generation.

The Victorian Era saw the growth of novels as a genre, these novels were thickly plotted, crowded with characters where the emphasis was on the problems of the age. With rapid industrialisation came great miseries of child labour, poor working conditions of the people, where the rich flourished rapidly and exploited the work force. It was in this era of industrialisation and increasing imperialism that Emily Bronte composed her work. She placed her theme of revenge amidst a gothic landscape analysing passionate but anxious love between Heathcliff and Catherine, and the panic and jealousy that springs out of it. But somewhere

down the events we see an influence of Victorian value system as well as the class consciousness. The class consciousness is manifested when Catherine's love does not meet the need for her social and economic status as she remarks,

"It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now" (chapter 9)

While Heathcliff is her love, her desire for refinement is met when she meets the Lintons. The extent for this desire is so much so that she chooses Edgar over Heathcliff, as she speaks about Edgar,

"I love the ground under his feet, and the air over his hair, and everything he touches, and every word he says. I love all his looks and all his actions, and him entirely and altogether."

(chapter 9)

This clearly portrays that her 'love' if one may call it for Edgar was not love at all but just an infatuation for his manners and class. She somewhere develops "double character" where on one hand her desire for class makes her marry Edgar but she justifies her action by saying that it is her love for Heathcliff that made her marry him. Somewhere she feels that Edgar won't have any objections to her love for Heathcliff; that she could marry Edgar and "keep" Heathcliff to herself as well.

"Edgar must shake off his antipathy, and tolerate him, at least. He will, when he learns my true feelings towards him. Nelly, I see now, you think me a selfish wretch; but did it never strike you that if Heathcliff and I married, we should be beggars? Whereas, if I marry Linton, I can aid Heathcliff to rise, and place him out of my brother's powers." (chapter 9)

Somewhere though naive, this desire to be with Edgar but keeping Heathcliff to herself counts for Catherine's rebel against the society where on one hand she will fit in the social norms, yet on the other she will not lose her identity in the process as she affirms to Nelly

"Nelly, I am Heathcliff!"

Heathcliff is Catherine's window with which she sees the world. He is the medium through which she experiences the world while Edgar is a mere infatuation.

Nearly every action in the novel springs out from the characters' inclination for revenge. It all starts somewhere when Hindley takes his revenge from Heathcliff for taking his place in the family by denying him education and separating him from Catherine. This results in an unending cycle. Next Heathcliff takes his revenge from Hindley by dispossessing him to the Wuthering Heights, but he does not only stop here, Heathcliff sought his revenge from all the characters of the two generations. His revenge on Hindley is complete when he denies his son Hareton of education, making him do ill jobs.

He seeks his revenge from Edgar for marrying Catherine by marrying his sister Isabella and then abusing her. Here the next generation is affected when in order to punish Edgar and take possession of Thrushcross Grange, Heathcliff makes Cathy marry Linton.

The novel uses hatred to create tension and distress in the plot. The seeds of hatred are sown in Heathcliff somewhere by Hindley since childhood and this mutually scornful attitude between the two spreads out to other characters as well. Emily Bronte here shows that children who are bred in hatred are more likely to spread hatred as adults.

Soon after Mr. Earnshaw dies, Hindley teaches Heathcliff the true meaning of hatred.

"Hindley became tyrannical. A few words from her, evincing a dislike to Heathcliff, were enough to rouse in him all his old hatred of the boy. He drove him from their company to the company of the servants, deprived him of the instructions of the curate..." (chapter 6)

But his major crime was his attempts to separate Heathcliff from Catherine. The effect this had on Catherine is spoken about by her during the beginning of her final illness when she speaks about the anguish it caused her. Though the separation was on the physical level when they were not allowed to share the same bed, the trauma was mental. Hindley finally produced a

Heathcliff whom Catherine no longer found compatible. This made her prefer the Lintons over him.

As Heathcliff grew up he is filled with hatred towards Hindley and a desire for revenge stems within him. It is this hatred of his that makes him form a diabolical plan to possess both the Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange upon his return.

Heathcliff's first object of revenge is Isabella Linton. For us she serves as an important link between the two generations while for him she is a means to possess the Grange. He marries her and abuses her in order to punish Edgar for marrying Catherine.

While Hindley's son Hareton is tortured causing him the same degradation as Hindley had subjected him to. As Heathcliff remarks

"Now, my bonny lad, you are mine! We'll see if one tree won't grow as crooked as another, with the same wind to twist it!" (chapter 17)

He finally succeeds in his mission to possess the Grange by making young Cathy marry his son Linton. Somewhere Heathcliff's cruel ways of torture seems to have sprung out from Hindley's treatment towards him and this is evident when he beats young Cathy making her almost senseless as she refuses to marry Linton, saying

"I know how to chastise children, you see"

-reflecting the same treatment as he received by Hindley almost a generation ago during Christmas.

Another significant aspect of the novel is Heathcliff's obsession to recreate the past circumstances that makes him see Hareton, Cathy and Linton as materials suited to recreate his distorted destiny, where in Hareton he sees his mirror image, Cathy becomes Catherine while Linton becomes Edgar.

Though Heathcliff's revenge is affective, it gives him little to no joy, as later in the novel young Cathy notices that no matter how miserable Heathcliff makes her life, at the end it is Heathcliff

who is more miserable. Though revenge is what draws the novel forward, it is only after Heathcliff loses his desire for revenge that he can actually reconnect with dead Catherine. The story reaches its conclusion when Hareton and Cathy find love and marry and in return Heathcliff and Catherine also reunite. And as Heathcliff confesses to Nelly,

“Those two who have left the room are the only objects which retain a distinct material appearance to me; and, that appearance causes me pain, amounting to agony”

Thus in her novel, Emily Bronte brings to us a story driven by the theme of “revenge”. It is “revenge” which converts an otherwise mediocre love story into something passionate, leaving the reader always on the edge, but also portrays it to be somewhat chaotic rather than calming which renders the avenger anxious and sleepless. Bronte actually has despised revenge in her novel by showing how devastating it can be, leading to nothing but self hurt and annihilation. What happens to both Heathcliff and Hindley at the end, they die somewhat miserably, what happens to the people they loved, they all die. Somewhere we feel that Emily Bronte was concerned with life as it is in her novel, which is not always intellectual but harsh, cruel and wild. Thus in its own way, the novel is a romance briefly challenging previous romances and gothic tales.

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