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Man As Monster: Heathcliff and His Legacy

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I first read *Wuthering Heights* at a relatively young age. In this idyllic first reading, I viewed Heathcliff as Catherine did in the immaturity of her youth: as a faultless, godlike creature, his company vastly preferable to any other male of the species. In later readings, my opinions changed; I rebelled against instinctive romanticism, protesting to anyone who would listen my disgust that entire generations had been fooled by a misogynistic, abusive paragon of vice. I alone saw the truth! But to my chagrin, I still found myself drawn to the perfect intensity of a character more beast than man, filled with original sin and uncontestable charm. At present, I have learned to accept Heathcliff as I have many other characters of fiction and reality: as a flawed human being who could no more be put on a pedestal than drawn and quartered as an unforgivable heathen. I love to read about him because he is more human than a true human, in all the definitions of the word, and so is more familiar than anyone I have ever known.

Even within the literary canon, Heathcliff reaches the status of an urban legend within his lifetime. It is dangerous to know him, to befriend him, or even to live in the same general area as him. His vengeful rage seems to spill over onto people entirely unconcerned with the events of his life; one of the best examples of this is when he manipulates Isabella Linton into eloping with him, attempting to hang her dog with a handkerchief in the process. He is shown to have an almost vampiric control over women; almost every woman he comes into contact with falls in love with him to some measure, even while cursing his unpleasant demeanor and countenance. Catherine “was much too fond of Heathcliff. The greatest punishment we could invent for her was to keep her separate from him (40)”. Isabella conceives “a sudden and irresistible attraction (97)” towards him. Cathy, upon first meeting him, declares that she will love him as an uncle even though he scolded her for poaching moments before, and even Nelly praises his physical beauty, calling him “fit for a prince in disguise (55)”. Many literary analysts have imagined that Heathcliff inspired Dracula, James Dean, and Jay Gatsby, among many others. The clearest comparison, in my opinion, is to the Beast from the 1991 Disney film, *Beauty and the Beast*. The Beast’s deformity parallels Heathcliff’s difficult personality, which, as befits the maturity of *Wuthering Heights*, cannot be cured cartoonishly by Catherine’s love. She does not exist solely to redeem Heathcliff; on the contrary, her barely restrained emotions threaten to surpass his.

When modern characters attempt to emulate Heathcliff, they fall short because Heathcliff’s actions were explained but not justified; his abuse at the hands of Hindley, which would “make a fiend of a saint (64)”, mirrors his own abuse of Isabella, Linton, Cathy, and Hareton but does not excuse it. Modern anti-heroes are written alternately with all of Heathcliff’s cruelty but none of his rare kindness or with some overblown Freudian excuse, condemning any reader who dares to protest. Any character, hero or villain, can become sympathetic to the reader when it is clear that he has worked hard for what he achieved, which Heathcliff surely has. His mysteriously acquired wealth is not the greatest part of his appeal; even while poor and serving as a stable boy, making an “impression of inward and outward repulsiveness (65)”, he makes competitors for Catherine’s affections look weak and mundane in comparison to himself. His destruction of Hindley, while arguably justified, is inarguably masterful, and he displays a remarkable intuition, seeming to predict and almost cause the actions of people who he opposes. At the time of writing, Heathcliff was seen as monstrously unattractive, not in the least because he was described as a ‘gypsy’, a term commonly used for anyone who was not white: “He is a dark-skinned gypsy in aspect, in dress and manners a gentleman (3)”. Emily Bronte was famously believed to have never been associated with any man in any capacity, but the passion of her only novel was so intense that it sparked argument that she had been involved in a secret romance with a variety of men. This never surpassed the classification of rumor, and it is not difficult, based on our knowledge of Emily, to believe that the incidents of *Wuthering Heights* came entirely from her own imagination. Her invention of a character who was “not a rough diamond— a pearl-containing oyster of a rustic (99)”

but instead “a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man (99)”, who promises to turn Isabella Linton’s “blue eyes black, every day or two (102)” for no other reason than because they resemble her brother’s, caused immense debate at the time. One magazine review declared, “How a human being could have attempted such a book as the present without committing suicide before he had finished a dozen chapters is a mystery.” But just as Heathcliff’s character contained unimaginable evils, he also took his love for Catherine to almost laughable lengths. This was a woman who was so aware of his shortcomings that, at the height of her passion for him, she told Isabella Linton honestly that she would “as soon put that little canary into the park on a winter’s day as recommend you bestow your heart on him! (99)”. She did not imagine, as Isabella and so many modern readers did, that he was “a hero of romance (147)”. Heathcliff could provide something that Catherine sorely needed and that no one else was willing to give her: a world of absolute truth. He provided an environment in which the silly requirements of society and manners could be laughed at as they deserved, in contrast to the Linton’s company, in which “she had no temptation to show her rough side (64)”, or her true character.

The character of Heathcliff symbolizes pure instinct, a person destroyed by both nature and nurture and determined to tear down the suffocating world around him, leaving only one undamaged spot of light. He never repented for his sins against anyone except for those that inadvertently hurt Catherine. It cannot be said that Heathcliff was an evil man, because he was not equipped to do anything but evil. His inhumanly sacrificial and unconditional love for Catherine comes to the brink of redeeming him for this, but does not quite achieve it, a failure which I can only believe was intended. Only near the end of the book, when all his old enemies have died, do we catch a glimpse of the real Heathcliff: mourning a long-dead friend, searching the faces of children for pieces of those he knew, and speaking familiarly to a maid as if to the reader, laughing at his own foolishness while seeming to protest that it had to be done. This is the man that Catherine and millions of readers loved, and the monster that as many writers have tried in vain to recreate.