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Love Spelled Backwards Is Almost Evil

Nietzsche posits that “what is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil” (Comte-Sponville 222). Indeed, love can seem to be a concept which transcends black and white morality; the love of a murderer’s mother for her son is still love, for example, even if her son commits heinous acts. However, this does not mean that the concept of love is itself entirely separated from good and evil. Charlotte Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* examines the relationship between love and morality. The passion of Heathcliff for Catherine the elder is the root and principal focus; from this love stems a chain of manipulation and violence. Heathcliff’s obsessive love for the unattainable Catherine compels him to commit acts which manipulate the love of others. Spurned, he even utilizes the institution of marriage, widely considered a sacred expression of love, and uses it instead to inflict pain. His actions, motivated by his obsession, illustrate an argument that seems to disagree with Nietzsche’s idea: in *Wuthering Heights*, what is done out of love does in fact take place in the domain of evil.

Several relationships exist in *Wuthering Heights*, each with a different type of love. Not all the marriages involve love; in fact, most do not. The union of Edgar Linton and Catherine the elder, for example, is a union of convenience, not passion. While it is true that Edgar, for his part, exhibits signs of love toward Catherine, she does not return his emotion. He is attentive, as “no mother could [nurture] an only child more devotedly

than Edgar [tends to] her” (Brontë 138). He speaks of his “longing” and uses the “fondest words” (139). When Heathcliff shows up again, Edgar exhibits distaste for the man rooted in his jealous affection for Catherine. In short, Edgar possesses the signs of love for Catherine, even if it is not intense. Catherine, for her part, only marries Edgar because of the degradation which Heathcliff has been subject to at the hands of the “wicked man” (81) Hindley. For her to marry Heathcliff would be folly, as the younger Heathcliff is virtually no more than a petty servant, would be a poor provider, and would have a reduced social status. Catherine feels she is elevating herself and escaping Heathcliff’s fate by her engagement to Edgar. She does not love him and does not feel she suits him, proclaiming, “I’ve no more business to marry Edgar Linton than I have to be in heaven” (81).

Another one-sided marriage is between Heathcliff and Isabella Linton. Heathcliff displays no interest in Isabella initially; he is alerted to her affection by Catherine. Isabella, however, is attracted to Heathcliff. She tries to get close to him and approaches Catherine about it. Initially, Heathcliff spurns her, but he marries her in an effort to gain control of Thrushcross Grange. After the union, she realizes his true nature and views him as a “lying fiend” and a “monster” (157) rather than the esteemed man she had thought. Heathcliff’s love for Isabella is non-existent and even contrary; Isabella’s love is merely a fleeting impulse of *eros*. The impulse, however, is strong enough to ruin her.

Linton’s marriage to Catherine the younger is a twisted, loveless situation as well. The two do share an awkward, juvenile courtship, complete with letter writing and covert messaging, but it is not a courtship fueled on passion. Catherine is capricious and apt to love; Linton is merely a “peevisish creature” (188) and his acts must be fueled by

Heathcliff's ambition. Furthermore, their love for each other does not develop at a natural pace as might be expected for adolescent lovers; instead, Heathcliff rushes them into a forced union in order to gain control of Catherine – and, subsequently, Thrushcross Grange – before her father Edgar's inevitable death. Following their marriage, Linton becomes a brute controlled by Heathcliff's malevolent hand, speaking of Catherine's unhappiness as "shameful" and asserting the last and only bit of authority he can before his own death. Any opportunity for love between Catherine the younger and Linton is vanquished by Heathcliff's influence.

The only example of true, realized love in Brontë's novel is the love of Hareton Earnshaw and Catherine the younger. The two end the novel happily united. Their love is not an adolescent crush, nor a manipulative scheme, nor a consuming passion. The two are well-suited, and their "minds [tend] to the same point—one loving and desiring to esteem, and the other loving and desiring to be esteemed" (326). Their love emerges slowly, evolving from a state of antagonism between the two. The antagonism between the two, which is for years both intense and separating, is generated by Heathcliff's design. He hinders the relationship because it reminds him and parallels of his own unrealized love for Catherine the elder. Therefore, he seeks to mitigate this parallel by limiting the link they have—Hareton's desire to be educated.

Of all the relationships in *Wuthering Heights*, one is by far the most important. Heathcliff and Catherine the elder share an intense, consuming passion. Their love begins in childhood. Heathcliff, the outsider with his dark and wild behavior, is inexplicably disproportionately favored by Mr. Earnshaw, a favoritism that provokes feelings in both Catherine and Hindley. The feelings are not identical, by any means; Catherine and her

brother dichotomize. Catherine grows plainly attracted to the “gypsy” boy, while Hindley sports a festering resentment. Catherine and Heathcliff spend increasing amounts of time together. Their relationship, however, is damaged after Catherine is bitten by a dog at the Linton estate, and she must stay there to recover, becoming accustomed to Edgar and Isabella’s style of living. Edgar and Catherine’s relationship builds and finally Heathcliff becomes intensely jealous when overhearing Catherine speak of him and Edgar. He realizes his lack of value, and although he proclaims, “I shall be as dirty as I please” (54), his worthlessness pains him and he leaves to improve himself. This, however, does not end his relationship with Catherine. He is not merely in love – he is passionate. Catherine, his “heart’s darling” (28), occupies his thoughts. She shares a similar passion with him, he feels, and he insists that “for every thought she spends on Linton, she spends a thousand on me” (154). Nor does his passion end with Catherine’s death. He becomes, if anything, further obsessed; he insists on being buried near her, sees and speaks to her ghost, and is tormented by her memory. The world becomes, to him, painful reminders of his loss. He exclaims:

I cannot look down to this floor, but her features are shaped on the flags!
In every cloud, in every tree—filling the air at night, and caught by
glimpses in every object by day, I am surrounded with her image! The
most ordinary faces of men and women—my own features—mock me
with a resemblance. The entire world is a dreadful collection of
memoranda that she did exist, and that I have lost her! (334).

As is the danger with any passion, his love for her becomes an unhealthy obsession. From this obsession, he causes pain and evil.

Nearly all the acts of evil in Brontë's work may be attributed to Heathcliff's love as a root cause. When he returns from his time abroad, he schemes. He loans Hindley money to repay a debt, but this is not an act of benevolence but an assertion of control. Heathcliff, knowing Hindley's frequent financial troubles, basically grants himself control of Hindley's estate and guarantees he may stay in proximity to Catherine. He hangs a puppy at Thrushcross Grange, perhaps pushed by the memory of the dog bite that separated him from Catherine. He treats Hareton just as he was treated by Hindley, and he tries to ruin Hareton's relationship with Catherine the younger; his love for the elder Catherine makes the possibility of a parallel relationship too painful. He treats Isabella with malice, seducing her and then behaving malevolently to the point where she flees him. His own son he treats particularly "tyrannically and wickedly" (267), urging the frail Linton to capture Catherine the younger and becoming more and more brutal as Linton approaches his death. The forced marriage, a violation of the basic rights Catherine would seem to have, makes her no more than a servant, and her isolated life becomes dreary as Heathcliff deprives her of any happiness she could gather at Thrushcross Grange. The use of marriage as a malicious tool is evil in itself, since marriage is traditionally an expression of the intense, singular love couples feel for each other. Instead, Heathcliff wields it as a vehicle of manipulation. It is evil of Heathcliff to manipulate Edgar's will, but he does, bribing the Linton lawyer not to arrive at the Grange in time to change the inheritance.

Heathcliff is driven by the torment of his passion for Catherine. His love for her is intense and motivates him to commit evil. This love, therefore, is not outside the circle of black-and-white morality. Heathcliff does not heed what Comte-Sponville names

morality's maxim to "act as though you loved" (266). He does love—that much is certain. But he does not act the part. Love cannot justify the imprisonment of a young woman by an ailing, tyrannical husband. Love cannot justify the brutality exhibited toward a wife married for vile purposes. Love cannot justify tyrannical mistreatment of one's own offspring, however peevish and worthless the offspring may be. Love cannot excuse Heathcliff for his actions—even though he is motivated by his passion for Catherine. His passion may not be by his own volition, as we "do not love what we want to love" (Comte-Sponville 222), but he is nevertheless a reprehensible agent of evil.

Works Cited

Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*. Austin: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Comte-Sponville, Andre. *A Small Treatise of the Great Virtues*. New York: Holt, 1996.