

Study Note

## Ambivalence about Christian Morality in *Wuthering Heights*

Elena Taralunga TAMURA

### SUMMARY

Emily Brontë created two impressive figures united by an eternal passion: Heathcliff holds Catherine, a married woman and this union is adulterous in spirit and in fact. He twines a lock of his hair with hers and removes the coffin panels that would separate them in death. Heathcliff openly rejects the church and its values. Of the language he uses, Heathcliff is associated with a symbol of diabolic hierarchy and with hell. How could Emily Bronte write such a novel?

It is known that Patrick Brontë's influence on his children was predominant. His way of life and his values influenced more or less their development and thinking as writers. Emily was born at her father's parsonage in Thornton, lived her life at the parsonage of Haworth and so in a Christian context. No doubt, her father taught his children the traditional Christian values. And yet Emily wrote her only book, which, unlike *Jane Eyre* where one can sense moral behavior, shows clearly ambivalence about Christian morality. This paper aims at drawing attention to the reason why Emily created this novel, which is otherwise a powerful writing, where the incidents refer to moral collapse. Crucial moments, highlight points from her childhood that includes Branwell's miserable experiences and failure are to be discussed. Also I would like to discuss the hypothesis on the meaning of soul mates, and Emily's awareness of it.

“ What may be the moral which the author wishes the reader to deduce from the work it is difficult to say, and we refrain from assigning any, because, to speak honestly, we have discovered none but glimpses of hidden morals or secondary meanings. There seems to us great power in this book, but it is a purposeless power, which we feel a great desire to see turned to better account. ”  
(Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper, 15 January 1848)

Early reviews of *Wuthering Heights* let us know what Victorian readers searched, what they were interested in. What the writer could not offer her readers was the moral theme. What she could offer was her ambivalence about traditional Christian values and morality. Her chief character is in love with a woman who is another man's wife. In chapter 15 the show of passion is of great intensity. On a Sunday when everyone, including Edgar, was at church, Heathcliff enters Catherine's room and clasps her in his arms. She indicates her longing to escape from her "shattered prison". He sees her wasted state and tears and agony torment him. He grinds his teeth, gnashes like a "mad dog" refuses to allow Ellen near her and keeps kissing her and weeping. Catherine, who is pregnant and carries Edgar's child, clings to him sobbing that she would die if he went. She weeps and says:

' I wish I could hold you,' she continued, bitterly, ~ till we were both dead'....'I only wish us never to be parted.'<sup>(1)</sup> to which Heathcliff replies: " misery, and degradation, and death and nothing that God or satan could inflict would have parted us..."<sup>(2)</sup> These passages remind us of Paul's letter in which describes the power of God and its implications for the lives of Christians:

' For I am certain that nothing can separate from his love: neither death nor life, neither angels nor other heavenly rulers or powers, neither the present nor the future, neither the world above nor the world below-there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God. (Romans 8: 38-39)'

No doubt that Emily knew very well how Christian life should be lived, especially about the way of love in relations with others. She had totally different ideas concerning love and unity between a woman and a man. Heathcliff doubtlessly believes in the prophecy that he and Catherine will never be parted and that Catherine will haunt him until the moment of his death. Immediately after her death, Heathcliff who awaits in the garden, is distressed and says:

Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest, as long as I am living!.. haunt me ....Be with me always ~ take any form~ drive me mad! Only *do* not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you! Oh, God! It is unutterable! I *cannot* live without my life! I *cannot* live without my soul!

He dashed his head against the knotted trunk; and lifting up his eyes, howled, not like a man, but like a savage beast getting goaded to death with knives and spares.<sup>(3)</sup>

This paragraph surely reminds us of Branwell's misery. It cannot be said, though that Heathcliff

and Branwell are one and the same: there is a big difference between the two regarding their characters.

While at Thorp Green Hall, Branwell became involved in a passionate love affair with his employer's wife. " In Branwell's words Lydia Robinson, his employer's wife, and he had exchanged ' declarations of more than ordinary feeling. ' (4) When he received a letter of his dismissal from Mr. Robinson Branwell had no choice but to return to Haworth and with this occasion his illness began. This sudden dismissal and some details of what actually took place at Thorp Green Hall, of which nobody is really clear, brought misery and mental breakdown to Branwell. No one is sure if Branwell was really in love with Lydia Robinson or whether he simply brought grief to his heart, plunging into fantasy and self-pity. And yet we are inclined to believe that he, the only Bronte, a hopeless man died of a broken-heart. Ambivalent letters accompanied by morbid sketches of himself, tormented descriptions of devils, drawings of "the Lady of Grief" (Mrs. Robinson), all depict him as "utter wreck". We see him as a man pushed to the point of despair. His need for affection made him feeble. Branwell, who actually found peace at Haworth offered no prospects of hope, though. His picture remains that of a drunkard and of a lost soul. Every night Emily could clearly see how Branwell was destroying himself, however, she could obviously do nothing to stop the circumstances. Or, perhaps the only thing she could was to ponder on the subject of love and suffering, looking for an answer.

When Mr. Robinson died and Branwell daily expected his beloved by his side, he got the news that Mrs. Robinson did not wish to see him again, otherwise she would not get her inheritance. In sorrow and in torment Branwell continued his decline and Emily was the one that witnesses every day the unpleasant, the sad experience of the human nature. The belief in her dream to write, made her strong enough to endure the distress of living with a drug~addict and a drunkard, and what seemed to be a disaster and anxiety for Branwell as well as for his father, Patrick, later became the outcome of her own writing. Ann, too, witnessed her brother's anguish and destructiveness and like her sister, Emily, she explored her deep and disturbed religious beliefs. Emily, who took care of Branwell, never offered a glimpse of her innermost feelings. However, she lived in a period of despair and she decided inward she would not die with life's problems unresolved. These feelings translated in her book and in a ritual of discussing the writing with Ann, who was also dreaming of authorship. Later, in December 1847 their books already in print, were placed before the public.

Emily's *Wuthering Heights* attracted attention but at the same time alarmed most of the readers. In *Jane Eyre* Jane was at least morally decent enough to leave Rochester when she understood that he was married. Heathcliff, on the contrary, passionately holds Catherine, a married woman, carrying another man's child. Also, Catherine's behavior, the brutal cruelty of Heathcliff's revenge,

the language he uses are neither of social ethics nor Christian values.

In *Wuthering Heights*, the reader is shocked, disgusted, almost sickened by details of cruelty, inhumanity and the most diabolical hate and vengeance, and even some passages of powerful testimony to the supreme power of love~even over demons in the human form. The women in the book are of strange fiendish~angelic nature, tantalizing and terrible, and the men are undesirable out of the book itself....<sup>(5)</sup>

Emily felt nothing but sympathy for Branwell's misery. Every generous feeling she had, rose in response to his unhappiness. Emily and Branwell were very close, they spoke the same language, they shared the same views. Nevertheless, Branwell's wish to write crushed. That was not the case with Emily. She lived at the parsonage and although a woman who used to help Tabitha in the kitchen, Emily lived in contact with 'masculine mind'. She listened how a man talked, she noticed his emotions, his pain and suffering Winifred Gerin says about her:

From Branwell, Emily learnt more about the devastation of love, of its destructive power, than from all her sister's sorrows stoically born. It was Branwell's frenzy of grief that showed her the potential of love as opposed to amiable flirtation, such as she had witnessed in the time of Willie Weightman and Mr. Smith, when Ellen Nussey was their object. The comparison between the two states of love was only made possible for Emily by Branwell's conduct and sufferings.<sup>(6)</sup>

Without doubt, Emily was inspired and influenced by Branwell in creating Heathcliff and Hindley. Branwell's drunken series served Emily in creating the character Hindley, his language, his gestures, his rage when he was drunk. Heathcliff just like Branwell is in torment, his soul is in hell for Catherine Earnshaw rejects him only to marry Edgar whom she does not really love.

Mrs. Robinson rejects Branwell and also she is instrumental in her daughters' loveless marriages. Branwell wrote to friends mentioning his torment: 'My appetite is lost my nights are dreadful, and having nothing to do makes me dwell on past scenes; on her own self, her voice, her person. What I shall *do* I know not ... I am too hard to die and too wretched to live.'<sup>(7)</sup> In her novel Emily says through Heathcliff after Catherine's death: 'I *cannot* live without my life! I *cannot* live without my soul!<sup>(8)</sup>

However we cannot say that Branwell is Heathcliff. They are dissimilar characters. The main difference between the two is that only one is hurting deeply and strikes out against others in little or great ways, while the other has no desire of striking at others. However, both of them are

desperate for love, both of them are deeply wounded when rejected. Without doubt, Emily felt compassion for the wounded boy in the man Branwell. When Emily chose the character Heathcliff, she did nothing but to step into Branwell's shoes, so to say, and be overwhelmed by the feeling of anger and disdain, of pain and judgment. Very ingeniously Emily understood that beneath the mask of mismanaged manhood and vicious anger there was a boy who did not believe he was lovable.

Branwell as well as Heathcliff belong to that group, that part called untouchables in the society. Not many people want to look at their lives and many do not want to hear about their pain or deal with them. Along the history of the society this has been the way things worked, people would not deal with these kind of people the mentally ill, the homeless, those in pain. That is because people do not feel the responsibility for love towards others, or accepting them. However, the traditional Christian teaching is "love your brother and your enemy." That means without loving your brother and your enemy you cannot learn to love and accept yourself. Only forgiveness brings light in the darkness. Above I mentioned that the one who are hurt deeply strike out against others. Those who strike out at others do that because they feel they have no other choice. The desire for vengeance centers mainly on Heathcliff. He seeks revenge on Hindley for his unbearable treatment during his childhood. He seeks revenge on Edgar for marrying Catherine, but mostly he seeks revenge and strikes because of "loss of Catherine".

However, those who know they have a choice do not strike out. Those who do not strike out at others, have no desire of vengeance on others. Branwell did not strike out at others, but he did strike at himself. He committed a crime against himself. A crime is a form of self-punishment, unconsciously chosen to address unconscious guilt. No doubt though, his vices and errors caused misery and bitterness to his family. Branwell had morbid fantasies and his melancholy became macabre. He drove himself to all kinds of excesses and those who took care of him were sometimes on the brink of despair. Branwell was convinced that even his family despised him and that there was no love for him. He says:

... and the inability to make my family aware of the nature of most of my sufferings makes me write:

Home thoughts are not, with me

Bright as of yore

Joys are forgot by me,

Taught to deplore.<sup>(9)</sup>

The deep and painful experiences Emily felt at home, seeing her brother, had great effect on uninitiated and innocent Emily, however Branwell's anguish impregnated her thoughts. ' ...

derived from very tarnished sources, Emily accepted Branwell's tale as typical of the evils of society, and liked the world even less than before'.<sup>(10)</sup> What must have she felt when Emily read the excerpt in Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper saying: 'what may be the moral which the author wishes the reader to deduce from the work it is difficult to say ...' or the unsigned review found in Emily's desk after her death: In *Wuthering Heights* the reader is shocked, disgusted, almost sickened by details of cruelty, inhumanity and... hate... ' <sup>(11)</sup> Being born and brought up in traditional Christian environment, Emily must have had lots of questions on human existence, on the suffering and pain mankind goes through. She did not say clearly what she really thought of love, hate, punishment Christian love for your enemy. Perhaps she stopped at the door of the sanctuary of life, real life, wondering if it was proper to count sins, moments of despair and recalcitrance, of struggle and obstructions. Did she believe the door to all answers of human questions was locked? Did she ever think of opening the door, of going past the threshold and seeing the truth? No doubt that she was taught about the forgiveness of sins. Or was she taught that God would bring the man down, that God would have His revenge?

Patrick Brontë taught his children about nature and he taught them to see God in everything, in the beauty of trees or flowers, even in the strong winds sweeping the moors. Everything is a part of God. Patrick Brontë was known as a man with a reputation for common~ sense and strongly held principles, which he taught to his children. However, Emily created Heathcliff and Catherine, characters who were hysterical, demonic creatures. Passion and the pain of unfulfilled desire are central in her novel. Weather or not it is right to create such diabolical characters like Heathcliff, is a question that Charlotte Bronte also voiced. Heathcliff opens the grave of her beloved Catherine in the hope of holding her once more. Some scenes like this one shocks even now. He opens the coffin after eighteen years and looks at her decaying corpse and he says:

' I dreamed I was sleeping the last sleep, with my heart stopped, and my cheek frozen against hers'.

' And if she had been dissolved into earth, or worse, what would you have dreamt of then?' I said.'

Of dissolving with her and being more happy still!<sup>(12)</sup>

The end of the story cannot be made acceptable in terms of Christian evaluation. What could be the reason of Emily not following the traditional Christian principles concerning love and marriage?

Love can be classified into three major types, using the Greek words *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*.

*Eros* refers to love that is passionate, intense and sexual. However, there isn't anywhere in the novel, a hint of sexual love between Catherine and Heathcliff.

*Philia* love is fondness and appreciation of the other, it is friendship and loyalty. While Heathcliff was loyal to Catherine, she betrayed him by marrying somebody else.

*Agape* refers to God's love for His children and it is stated many times in the New Testament and throughout the Bible as most important and powerful. Many biblical passages teach that of all the things a person can learn and do in the world, reflects nothing but Godliness. Paul describes it beautifully: love is patient, love is kind, and not jealous. Peter's love advice is: "Above all things, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins."(Peter 4:8) The love between Catherine and Heathcliff seems no more than passion and yet unlike her love for Edgar Linton, which has the meaning of happiness, richness and status, the love for Heathcliff is impersonal, "not as a pleasure". Although they behave like strange creatures, hysterical and demonic, their love leads to communion after death. Or this is what they wanted to believe.

What strikes one greatly in *Wuthering Heights* is the statement, the portrayal of love. Cathy's love for Heathcliff has nothing to do with that one she describes as love for Edgar. "My love for Linton is like 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... So don't talk of our separation again: it's impracticable." I am inclined to think that Emily, by saying through Catherine: "Nelly, I am Heathcliff!", meant that Catherine could fully be herself in existing beyond herself as Heathcliff and he existing beyond himself, as Catherine. The love between them is clearly more than an earthly attachment, it is that kind of love one can experience in the subconscious world.

Perhaps unconsciously Emily Brontë understood that the sexual love does not offer supreme satisfaction, it is just a bodily communion. Physical love is not lasting. The real, longstanding love is only that unity between the two souls after death. Branwell's words: " my nights are dreadful... (I) dwell on past scenes on her (Mrs. Robinson) own self her voice, her person, her thoughts, till I could be glad if God would take me. In the next world I could not be worse than I am in this <sup>(13)</sup> must have had a great influence on Emily. She must have had some insights on human love, full of imperfections and unwholesome. Only the unity of souls after death can hold each other 's innocence, can bestow the greatest and perfect intimacy into a space of innocence: the unity of spirits, and that is what Heathcliff seeks. He could not be with his beloved Catherine in the physical life, however his only wish was to be united with her in the world beyond. Both Catherine and Heathcliff say about their relationship that they are one identical and inseparable being, and that neither is complete without the other.

There is no doubt that in Emily Brontë's mind and heart this unity of the souls beyond earthly life is what she felt as an answer to the mystery of love and union. Perhaps this is how she could see inward the human desire for love and not attaining it. Nevertheless, this is my opinion on her

ambivalence concerning traditional Christian teachings in regard with love and morality. We can never know any of the dreams she must have dreamed and wished for love herself, however her weak constitution did not allow her to experience and really know the meaning of love. She died on the sofa in her room where she created her passionate love story of Catherine and Heathcliff, their union and not their marriage, thus both openly declaring their rejection of the Church.

(Lecturer, Takasaki City University of Economics)

#### Notes

1. Brontë, Emily, *Wuthering Heights*, Ed. David Daiches. Penguin Books. 1965, pp.195-196
2. Brontë, Emily, p.197
3. Brontë, Emily, p.204
4. Wilks, Brian, *The Brontës*, The Hamlin Publishing Group Limited, London, 1975, p.102
5. Wilks, Brian, p.118
6. Gerin, Winifred, *Emily Brontë*, A Biography, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1971, p.198
7. Wilks, Brian, *The Brontës*, The Hamlin Publishing Group Limited, London 1975, p.110
8. Bronte, Emily, *Wuthering Heights*, Ed. David Daiches, Penguin Books, 1965, p. 204
9. Wilks, Brian, *The Brontës*, The Hamlin Publishing Group Limited, London, 1975, p.103
10. Gerin, Winifred, *Emily Brontë, A Biography*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1971, p.200
11. Wilks, Brian, *The Brontës*, The Hamlin Publishing Group Limited, London, 1975, p.118
12. Brontë, Emily, *Wuthering Heights* Ed. David Daiches, Penguin Books, 1965, p.
13. Wilks, Brian, *The Brontës*, The Hamlin Publishing Group Limited, London, 1975, p 110