



E-Content

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DEVELOPMENT TEAM

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UNIT 3 'GIFT OF GOD' : HEATHCLIFF

Structure

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3.1 OBJECTIVES

Heathcliff is one of the most discussed characters in literature. Intensely passionate, wild and revengeful he nevertheless forces a sympathetic response from the readers. There has been a debate on Heathcliff's status in the novel as villainous or heroic. Both these standard categories do not seem to fit Heathcliff. I have always been impressed by Heathcliff as a rebel. He consciously resists acceptability on any other terms other than his own. He will neither be 'good' nor 'cultured' in the way the society of his time demands. He defines his own moral universe and asserts it and sharply exposes the unnaturalness and hypocrisies of the social practices around him. He is potentially *subversive* and in that sense anti-heroic. In this unit we will also discuss the notion of sin and redemption as is understood in Christian doctrines and evaluate how through the character of Heathcliff, Emily Bronte intellectually engages herself with the Christian moral universe. After reading this Unit, you will be able to understand why despite Heathcliff's revengefulness, we never really condemn him and how Emily Bronte, in this sense, is helping to extend our sympathies.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

"See here, wife ! I was never so beaten with anything in my life : but you must e'en take it as a gift of God; though it's as dark almost as if it came from the devil"

One late summer evening on his return from Liverpool, this is the manner in which Mr. Earnshaw introduces Heathcliff, a little boy he had found on the streets of the industrial city, to his family at Wuthering Heights. As the story unfolds we realize the deep irony that is replete in Mr. Earnshaw's introduction. Before his departure for Liverpool, Mr. Earnshaw had asked his children what gifts he should get for them on his return. Hindley, his elder son, had asked for a fiddle and Catherine, his daughter, who was a good rider even at the age of six, had asked for, significantly, a whip. For Nelly, the house keeper, he had promised a pocket full of apples and pears which made Mr. Earnshaw not only a caring father but also a compassionate master, an ideal patriarch.

The 'gift' that Mr. Earnshaw actually gets, does not impress the family. 'Mrs. Earnshaw was ready to fling it out of doors', but Mr. Earnshaw's explanation that he had seen the little boy 'starving and houseless, and as good as dumb,' probably strikes a chord of sympathy and Heathcliff is washed, given clean things to wear and allowed to sleep with the children. But Heathcliff is 'it'. A thing. Hindley searches his father's pocket for the promised fiddle and on seeing that it had been crushed to bits, he 'blubbered aloud' and when Catherine understands that her father had lost the whip in 'attending to the stranger', showed 'her humour by grinning and spitting at the stupid little thing'. This notion is later pursued in the novel. For example, in Chapter 13, Isabella writes to Nelly Dean about her disastrous marriage to Heathcliff, and enquires, 'I beseech you to explain, if you can, what I have married...' suggesting that Heathcliff to her is a creature, hardly human.

Mr. Earnshaw's introduction equivocates both God and the devil simultaneously. To the 'good' Christian, which Mr. Earnshaw surely wanted to be, any living creature is divine in origin, but the circumstances and the condition in which he finds Heathcliff, something that completely 'beats him', makes him associate Heathcliff with the Devil. A product as well as a victim of the evil that is in society. The fact that this 'gift' will grow up to become a tormentor and usurper and generally a man consumed with hate and revenge, will make us question if the notion that human life is 'God's gift' is really applicable to Heathcliff. Further, if human life is at all 'God's gift'. If we keep in mind that in the mid-nineteenth century, *Darwinian* assertions of the non-divine origins of the human species had ignited passionate debates between religious belief and scientific empiricism, then Heathcliff, is indeed a symbolic character.

Generally, it is considered that at the heart of the novel *Wuthering Heights*, lies the tumultuous Heathcliff-Catherine relationship. Most studies of the novel discuss these two characters in unison. We have decided to study them separately. One of the reasons why we wish to do this is to study the novel by consciously distancing ourselves from the idea that there is one central relationship in the novel. Our impressions about these two important characters are formed by the subjective responses of several characters. Different characters view different things and what and how they perceive, tells us as much about themselves as about what they see. To designate something as central is essentially to prioritize it and make it more important than the others. This may prejudice and make our views biased and we could miss out on another point of view. From Nelly's perspective all the events in her narration seems to revolve around Heathcliff and Catherine. But from another perspective, the events could be seen as the tragic story of Edgar Linton. We could have another perspective which sees the story, from say, Hindley's perspective. Therefore, perhaps we should not look at Heathcliff-Catherine as the central relationship, or what is categorized as the 'heart of the novel', because by doing so we may be unconsciously imposing a closed circular structure of periphery and centrality in a novel that, consistently and consciously, displaces and confronts any kind of structuring. Secondly, I think, Heathcliff and Catherine have aspects to their characters that ought to be studied independent of their relationship. Particularly Catherine's rebellion against what was considered conventionally as the 'feminine' and Heathcliff's challenge not only to the standard definitions of the heroic and villainous, but also to the religious as well as secular discourses on the divine and the non-divine.

3.2 THE HERO : BYRONIC AND ROMANTIC

Significantly, Heathcliff is dark. This immediately evokes in the mind of most readers the metaphysical idea of dark powers, both natural and supernatural. It provides the background for Heathcliff's association with classic Christian principles of duality; God and Devil, light and darkness, good and evil. For most part of the story, Heathcliff is associated with diabolic forces, which Earnshaw hints in his initial introduction. He is christened Heathcliff and that is also his surname. Heathcliff was the name of a son, of Mr. Earnshaw, who had died in childhood. But Heathcliff does not have Earnshaw as his surname and this makes him both a part of as well as an outsider not only to the family but to society in general. An outsider/insider who will be instrumental in creating disorder and chaos and subverting the very principles and ideals on which society functions. Heathcliff evokes both the idea of the 'heath', a barren desolate landscape and the 'heathen', the primitive, the pagan or the pre-Christian. His name also evokes the ragged, tantalizingly edgy geographical feature of the cliff. Comparisons with the Byronic hero, a melancholic mysterious man, beautiful but damned, perpetually brooding and generally on a path of self destruction, does put Heathcliff in the same tradition as that of the 'romantic rebel'. But unlike the typical Byronic hero, there is no masochism, rather we can see shades of the sadist in Heathcliff. The Byronic hero created a cult of 'separateness', but Heathcliff feels no need to set himself apart from the rest. The romantic hero suffers because he finds the society too crass and moribund to appreciate or even understand his creative and emotional longings, but Heathcliff's suffering is a manifestation of real loss, the death of his beloved Catherine, and he feels no urge to explain himself to anyone, his acute consciousness of the injustices perpetuated on his self is enough for him to plot the destruction of others. As Hindley's dead body is being carried out of *Wuthering Heights* for burial, Heathcliff lifts Hareton, Hindley's son, and places the child on the table. Then he 'muttered with peculiar gusto', 'Now my bonny lad you are mine! And we'll see if one tree won't grow as crooked as another, with the same wind to twist it!' (*Wuthering Heights*, p.222. Hereafter, *WH*)

Heathcliff's dark colour also calls into question his parentage. Is it possible that one of his parents is non-European, may be of African or Asian origins? The nineteenth century imperial and colonial preoccupations with both these continents resulted in the formulation of various stereotypes and codes which were used to interpret and understand the different and varied cultures and societies of these continents. While Africa was the 'dark continent', Asia and the east was the 'orient'. Europe and white races were contrasted with the African and Asian races. One of the classical polarity was that the white races represented the coldness of scientific intellect and reason whereas the dark races were predominantly the representatives of the warmth of emotion and passion and the mystery of magic and mysticism. This symbolic structure represented the west as ice, the sky, and father, whereas the east was fire, earth and mother. This kind of discourse provided the European intellectual of the late 18th and 19th centuries, many of who were otherwise disturbed by the colonial expansion and imperial methods, with the rather comforting idea that there were things that the master races could never be master of. The darkness was impenetrable as Adela Quested was to learn in the Marabar caves. So from Rudyard Kipling to E.M. Forster and beyond we have a number of novelists and writers who allude to this seemingly-incomprehensible and mysterious power of the dark and the warm that is chiefly characteristic of the 'orient'. Is Heathcliff from the 'orient'? Incidentally, there is another dark tragic hero, African in origin, whose grip on the white European consciousness for four centuries is no less powerful than Heathcliff's: Othello. You will find more on 'orientalism' in the blocks on *Heart of Darkness* and *A Passage to India*.

The stereotypical romantic hero who dominates much of popular romance fiction even today is tall, dark and handsome. Portrayed as a character who is difficult to understand and even more difficult to control and contain, he is beyond the ambit of reason and reasonableness. It is fascinating as well as dangerous to encounter such characters. Nelly - Lockwood's response towards Heathcliff in many ways is the standard and stereotyped understanding as one would expect in romance novels. But that Heathcliff is not the impetuous and unpredictable hero of a standard romance novel is made apparent by the contrast that is provided by Heathcliff's unnatural and intense bonding with Catherine and his cold, calculated and dubious relationship with the infatuated Isabella. Nelly's description of Heathcliff on his return shows his transformation from an unkempt and rude young boy to a handsome man, 'tall, athletic, well formed'. He has an intelligent look and his manner is dignified. It is not surprising that Isabella, a sixteen year old girl, leading a protected life within the social, moral and ethical confines of the landed aristocracy should developed an 'irresistible attraction' towards a mysterious outsider who was a 'friend' of her sister-in law. In fact the setting is perfect for a 'romance' or an 'affair' to take place. Only the affair ends in disastrous results. Heathcliff himself demolishes the hero of romance in his analysis of Isabella's infatuation. He tells Nelly:

...picturing in me a hero of romance, and expecting unlimited indulgences from chivalrous devotion. I can hardly regard her in the light of a rational creature, so obstinately has she persisted in forming a fabulous notion of my character, and acting on the false impressions she cherished. (WH, p.187)

This is a very strong indictment of the cult of the romance hero and the unrealism of it. If Heathcliff is not totally a Byronic hero he is certainly not a romance hero, though he seems to possess all the externally requisite qualities for it. What kind of a hero is Heathcliff? It is obvious that it is not possible to define or estimate Heathcliff within the normal moral framework of the conventional society with its standard categories of the heroic and villainous. Even the concept of the dissenting hero, as was provided by the ideology of mid-Victorian society does not encompass Heathcliff fully. It seems Emily Bronte is trying to create a hero without any heroic qualities. The reader is told of the various damnable actions that Heathcliff initiates but at the same time the reader's sympathy is drawn towards Heathcliff who even while he is being treated shabbily as an outcast tells Nelly 'Nelly, Make me decent, I am going to be good'. The problem is that one cannot define Heathcliff as a hero or villain in moral terms. Concepts of good and bad, evil and virtue, the noble and the damnable do not seem adequate to define Heathcliff. So Heathcliff is a character who is pitted not only against social exploitation and injustice but also against the moral universe that society believes in and which the readers share.

3.3 HEATHCLIFF JUDGED: SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS

In the novel, Heathcliff is described in a variety of ways by the other characters. Mostly they are derogatory. They are '*the evil beast*', the 'unclaimed creature', 'uncivilized', 'without refinement', 'an arid wilderness of furze and whinstone', 'naughty swearing boy', 'sullen, patient child, hardened to ill-treatment', '*Judas*', 'traitor', 'deliberate deceiver', 'black villain', 'monster', 'ungrateful brute', 'low ruffian', 'blackguard', eyes that are '*clouded windows of hell*', '*incarnate goblin*' and '*fiend*'. If an analysis of these descriptive terms is made, we will recognize that most of them are to do with Heathcliff being uncivilized and socially unacceptable. The other terms (italicized) are moral censors, that emerge from Christian beliefs.

Heathcliff's socially unacceptable behavior can be explained from a number of perspectives. Physiologically, we may see him as a traumatized child who grows up feeling neglected and bullied. A deeply hurt psyche, which on adulthood seeks not only revenge but is obsessed in an infantile way with the object of his love. Frustrated in love, he unleashes hatred. Heathcliff has a fractured psyche, and the strange circumstances of his childhood, makes his adult personality deformed and perverse. He is also the third angle to the love triangle of Catherine, Edgar and himself. He is deprived of his love, not because he is rejected by Catherine, but because he lacks social status and sanction and this is something he rebels against with vengeance. In spite of the fact that Catherine chooses to marry Edgar he knows that it is he whom she loves, because the factors that prompted her choice, had nothing to do with their love.

Heathcliff's behaviour can be explained sociologically if we consider the kind of injustices that are perpetuated on him. By birth he is a social outcast for no fault of his. Catherine is accepted at the Grange but Heathcliff is not. In the Earnshaw household he is repeatedly demeaned and wronged. As a child no one except Mr. Earnshaw protected him against Hindley's hatred which was often violent. It can be argued that such victimization would beget violence of the kind that Heathcliff uses as an adult. Social oppression was tolerated by the 'sullen patient child' who was 'hardened perhaps due to ill treatment', and could stand Hindley's blows 'without winking or shedding a tear'. When Heathcliff wreaks his revenge, it is the pent-up anger of past injustices that makes him do what he does. The society, does not accept such individualized retribution and our narrator, Nelly does not approve of it. The artificiality of the civilized world as represented in the well-nurtured potted plants and flowers at the Grange is contrasted with the wild naturalness of the moors where Heathcliff and Catherine can abandon themselves, liberated from the oppressiveness of the same artificial and structured civilized society.

The judgments against Heathcliff which emerge from Christian mythology of the beast and the fiend, of the devil and Judas are I think more problematic. Heaven, hell, sin, purgatory, redemption, death and after-life are important aspects in the novel. Time and again Heathcliff is associated with Hell. He seems to have come from the depths of Hell and his destination also seems to be Hell. Fire and burning, are also associated with Heathcliff to suggest the tortures of Hell. As a newly married wife, Isabella's opinion about her husband, as expressed in her letter to Nelly, makes him out more like an unworldly evil beast than just a cruel man. What position does Heathcliff have in the Christian moral scheme? Is he a Judas? Whom has he betrayed? What are Emily Bronte's view on the matter.

A detailed biographical study of the religious influences on the Brontes is provided by Tom Winniffrith in the book *The Brontes and Their Background: Romance and Reality*. In chapters titled 'Heaven and Hell' and 'The Brontes' Religion,' Winniffrith traces the influences of Calvinism, Methodism and Evangelical ideas on the Brontes and also how they consciously challenged and dissented from these influences. The Victorian society, fractured by the increasing economic disparity between various economic classes was plagued by poverty, disease and death. The urban slums were regularly visited with cholera and tuberculosis and many people died. With poverty, there was a rise in crime, alcoholism and prostitution. These essentially political and social concerns were given religious significance. Suffering, damnation, salvation were ideas that became both relevant and urgent from the point of view of a theological debate. The main issue seemed to be to explain the lot of the human being on earth. Was suffering a kind of pre-ordained punishment for sin committed. Did suffering ensure salvation? Who was worthy of heaven and who was to be condemned to hell?

The majority of books that the Brontës possessed were theological in nature. Mr. Brontë was a man who had strong faith in the Church of England, and the Brontës derived their religious influences from many sermons, conversations and arguments that must have been a part of their life at home. Mrs. Branwell, the aunt, was a Methodist. When Branwell, the Brontë brother, was dismissed from service by the Reverend Mr. Robinson in 1845, it came as a blow to the family. Branwell had shown great academic and literary promise and his going first to London and then his employment as a tutor at Throp Green was seen as the beginning of a promising career. But it all ended in disaster, partly because of Branwell's alcoholism and mainly because Branwell was unable to face up to the reality of his life. The next three years saw the steep moral and physical decline of the young man. Branwell's 'fall' had a deep effect on his sisters, who were sympathetic to him. They watched with horror and helplessness as their brother wallowed in self-pity and degradation. What kind of a punishment was this? What was Branwell's sin? Could he be saved? It was not easy to make a moral judgment and none of the Christian doctrines, of Methodism which concerned itself with salvation through faith, or the Evangelicals who believed in salvation through work, provided any answers to this tragic and personal problem.

Growing up as daughters of a clergyman, the Brontë sisters were certainly exposed to a lot of religious ideas. Human actions in life, its moral judgment and the resulting punishment or reward were thoughts that must have been deeply thought about by the intellectually alert sisters. Emily Brontë's view on these matters can be guessed from this statement she makes in an essay she wrote :

God is the God of justice and mercy; then, assuredly, each pain that he inflicts on his creatures, be they human or animal, rational or irrational, each suffering of our unhappy nature is only a seed for that divine harvest which will be gathered when sin having spent its last drop of poison, death having thrown its last dart, both will expire on the funeral pyre of a universe in flame, and will leave their former victims to an eternal realm of happiness and glory.¹

Winniffrith suggests that Emily's religious beliefs may be seen as the following sets of 'axioms':

- (1) Hell exists only on Earth, and no souls suffer torment after death.
- (2) A soul that has suffered sufficiently on earth attains its heaven.
- (3) A soul that has not suffered is in limbo for a time, but is redeemed by others' sufferings if not by its own.²

Emily Brontë was able to move away from the conventional theological beliefs of heaven and hell; salvation and damnation, to the human condition as it was in life on earth. She understood human suffering with greater understanding and sympathy. The struggles and pains of this life were not to be carried on after death or into the next life. Sin and evil must spend itself completely here on earth and in life, for after death there is no sin and no evil, there is only happiness and glory. Heathcliff's hell is on Earth and he suffers sufficiently. After his death, it seems all hatred has spent itself, a quiet peace descends on *Wuthering Heights*. When Lockwood visits his grave, there is the 'benign sky', fluttering of moths among the heath, and the soft wind breathing through the grass. The storm and the soul's torment is over and Lockwood ponders how 'one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers, for the sleepers in that quiet earth.' One can safely guess that the sleepers in the quiet earth do not have unquiet slumbers, for *Wuthering Heights* has now been overwhelmed by the 'fragrance of stocks and wall flowers' while Hareton and Cathy kiss each other before they go out for a walk on the moors. The moors are no longer inhospitable.

Just before his death, Heathcliff has a rather interesting conversation with Nelly about repentance, happiness and salvation. Let us mark some pieces of the conversation :

Heathcliff : But you might as well bid a man struggling
in water, rest within arm's length of the shore ! I must
reach it first, and then I'll rest.... as to repenting of my
injustices, I have done no injustice, and I repent of
nothing- I am too happy, and yet I am not happy enough.
My soul's bliss kills my body, but does not satisfy itself.

Nelly

You are aware, Mr. Heathcliff, that from the time you were thirteen years old, you have lived a selfish, unchristian life; and probably hardly had a Bible in your hands, during all that period.... how far you have erred from its [the Bible's] precepts, and how unfit you will be for its heaven, unless a change takes place before you die?.

Heathcliff

I tell you, I have already attained *my* heaven; and that of others is altogether unvalued and uncoveted by me! (WH, pp.362-363)

Nelly views about death are conventional and emerge from Christian beliefs of repentance leading to salvation. But for Heathcliff, there is no need of repentance as he feels he has already attained heaven. One may interpret that as death uniting Heathcliff finally and eternally to his beloved Catherine, but it could also mean that Heathcliff has been purged of all the evil and sin and that beyond death he will suffer no more nor will he inflict any suffering. We may argue that Emily Brontë's theological belief of suffering leading to salvation, is essentially Calvinistic and masochistic. But often this suffering is not for one's own self but for others. Also with the rejection of Christian notions of the promised Heaven and the threat of Hell, Emily was, through her characters, defining a sympathetic understanding about human suffering and its relation to class prejudice, greed, property and money. Before the arrival of Heathcliff, *Wuthering Heights* is a place where everyone seems to be happy and quite unaware of the world outside. With Heathcliff's introduction, it would seem as if the suffering and torment of the outside world has been introduced into the hitherto secluded world. It seems to me that Emily's consciousness of the injustices of the social world, make her view life with a certain sadness. All suffer. There is no escape. Significantly, Catherine complains about Edgar, 'What in the name of all he feels, has he to do with *books*, when I am dying'. The dying here is both literal as well as symbolic of suffering. There can be no 'philosophical resignation'. The books do come back, at the end of the novel, when Cathy is teaching Hareton how to read, but by then everybody has suffered enough.

3.4 LET US SUM UP

Early critical evaluation of *Wuthering Heights*, in general, explained Heathcliff's character in metaphysical terms highlighting the Gothic fascination with evil and the romantic urge towards isolation and self-destruction. Uncomfortable questions about social and economic injustices perpetuated on Heathcliff, his origin and parentage, as well as the powerful contrast he presented to the rather structured and oppressive patriarchy as represented by Thrushcross Grange were sidelined to the view that *Wuthering Heights* was in tune with Shakespearean tragedies and that Emily Brontë 'might have been Shakespeare's younger sister!' in the poetic way she fascinates the imagination with the 'fresh dark air of tragic passion'.³ In this sense Heathcliff was not seen as a disrupter, or even a dissenter or rebel, only as a primitive, uncontrolled and pure form of energy that had been unleashed with tragic consequences. Some critics admired him for this energy and vitality and some agreed with Catherine's observation that Heathcliff is 'a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man', a bird of bad omen and concentrates on the injustices he perpetuates on his victims.

Later critics, contextualised the text within historical and biographical frameworks and worked out a *rationale* for Heathcliff's behavior. A more sympathetic and realistic appraisal of Heathcliff was made from social and cultural analysis as well as from psychological insights. Studies from the theological angle were also made. Heathcliff can be seen from a purely realistic position but he can also be seen as unreal, and non-human. That is not to dismiss him as the Devil's agent but to state that such a character is not possible as a normal part of everyday reality but rather as the symbol of the elemental.

Nevertheless, it may be prudent not to strive towards a unified and singular understanding of Heathcliff or for that matter any character in the novel. That was precisely the author's intention. The fact that all explanations to explain Heathcliff remain inadequate need not be seen as a sign of weakness but on the contrary, that is the novel's strength; that it provides

space for many interpretations and perspectives. By not conforming to any set pattern of ideas, or structures of belief, by not seeking the one ultimate truth about Heathcliff, it is possible to be closer to many truths.

'Gift Of God' ·
Heathcliff

3.5 GLOSSARY

Subversive	:	to work against a system of government or authority or ideas
Darwinism	:	Ideas that emerged from the anthropological and sociological work of Charles Darwin, particularly the notion of natural selection and adaptation.
Calvinism	:	evolved out of the powerful preaching of John Calvin (1509-1564). As a part of the Reformation movement Calvinism opposed the practices of the Catholic Church and stressed that only the Grace of God could save an individual and that Christianity was intended to reform all of society.
Methodism	:	This Christian religious movement was founded by John Wesley in the late 1720's. The Methodists worked for a Christian life-style in the world. In the nineteenth century Methodism influenced the trade union movement in England and the abolition of slavery in the USA.
Evangelicalism	:	The fastest growing wing of the Anglican Church, also known as the Low Church. It emphasized the personal and Biblical basis of faith.

3.6 QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of Heathcliff's dark complexion? What similarities can you draw between Heathcliff and Othello? Can you think of any other character with similar features? Do you know of any popular romance writing where the hero is often depicted as 'tall dark and handsome'?
2. Heathcliff is often associated with Christian symbols of evil. What are Emily Bronte's views on religion and what do you make of Heathcliff from that perspective?
3. Heathcliff brutalizes Hareton the same way that he was brutalized by Hindley. But Hareton does not go the Heathcliff way. Why? Give reasons for your answer.
4. What do you understand by suffering? Does Heathcliff suffer or does he inflict suffering? Discuss.
5. Do you think Heathcliff is real? Does the novel present him as a realistic character or is he only symbolic?

3.7 SUGGESTED READING

Winniffrith, Tom. The Brontes and their Background : Romance and Reality, London: Macmillan, 1973.

References

¹ Tom Winnifrith. *The Brontes and their Background : Romance and Reality*. London: Macmillan, 1973. p 63. From 'Five Essay Written in French' by Emily Jane Bronte, trans Lorine White Nagel (Austin, 1948.), pp18-19.

² Ibid. pg.64

³ Angus M. Mackay, Westminster Review, 1898. in Emily Bronte : *Wuthering Heights*, ed. Miriam Allott, CaseBook, Macmillan, 1970, 1992, p.94

⁴ A.C. Swinburne 'The Fresh Dark Air of Tragic of Tragic Passion' 1883, in Emily Bronte *Wuthering Heights*, ed. Miriam Allott, CaseBook, Macmillan, 1970, 1992, p.88