

Marxism and Bronte: Revenge as Ideology

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Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* was published a mere four months before Marx and Engels's *The Communist Manifesto*. Even so, one is more likely to think of Byron and Scott in relation to Bronte than Marx. With Bronte's rich educational heritage of the Romantics, it is tempting to picture *Wuthering Heights* in all the glory of a gothic romance, rather than in the context of social and economic forces.

Even so, such a view of the novel actually helps to expand our understanding of it, and specifically, of characters' motivations throughout the novel. Such an investigation also provides a perspective on why Bronte wrote the novel as she did.

Heathcliff's motivation throughout *Wuthering Heights* is obsession with taking revenge on his old enemies, Edgar Linton and Hindley Earnshaw, as well as their descendants. Marxist theory provides a perspective on the way in which he goes about seeking his retaliation: social and economic hegemony. Heathcliff's method of taking revenge on his enemies is to degrade them socially and dominate them economically.

The Marxist notion of ideology provides readers with a basis for perceiving Heathcliff's behavior. Louis Althusser explains that "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."ⁱ He goes on to say that this imaginary reality is usually imposed on a population by a small group of people who use the false reality to oppress that population.ⁱⁱ

In the case of *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff is at once the deceiver and the deceived. His hegemony puts him in the seat of power, but in using his power, he

deceives himself, not others. He convinces himself that vengeance will bring him satisfaction; vengeance is the ideology by which Heathcliff fools himself into believing he can find contentment in life. Such is not the case, as he admits later—after causing much grief to his enemies, he avoids another opportunity (that of separating Hareton and young Catherine), saying: “I have lost the faculty of enjoying their destruction.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Heathcliff’s obsession with taking vengeance blinds him to the realities and possibilities of the world around him. This idea is best described by the way in which he views others:

‘I am afraid, Nelly, I shall lose my labor,’ he muttered to me. ‘Miss Catherine, as the ninny calls her, will discover his value, and send him to the devil. Now, if it had been Hareton—do you know that, twenty times a day, I covet Hareton, with all his degradation? I’d have loved the lad had he been some one else. But I think he’s safe from *her* love. I’ll pit him against the paltry creature, unless it bestir itself briskly. We calculate it will scarcely last till it is eighteen. Oh, confound the vapid thing!’ (194).

Heathcliff regards his son in humiliating and dehumanizing terms: “the ninny”, “the paltry creature”, “the vapid thing.” Even Linton’s personal pronoun changes from a human “him” to an inhuman “it.” Such references demonstrate the social hegemony that Heathcliff wields over his enemies. Linton, because he is connected with Edgar, is a target of Heathcliff’s retaliation, which he exerts by reducing him in social importance from person to object.

Such a demotion of status is in keeping with Heathcliff’s purpose for his young son: to use him as a commodity to augment his economic power. Heathcliff thinks of Linton in terms of “his value”—his usefulness as a pawn in a marriage scheme by which

means Heathcliff can gain control of the Grange. He even talks about his anticipation of Linton's future in materialistic terms, saying he "calculate[s]" his life expectancy.

Heathcliff includes Catherine in his world of materialism. Assuming that Catherine will think as he does, Heathcliff worries that she will "discover [Linton's] value" and decide not to marry him, at which point Heathcliff will "lose his labor." Heathcliff supposes that others will take the same pragmatic view of the situation as he does.

Perhaps, Heathcliff's assumptions about Catherine's materialistic tendencies are based on his prior experience of his own marriage to Isabella. Heathcliff marries for purely mercenary reasons. Hoping to gain control of the Grange by marrying into the Linton family, he woos Isabella and allows her to believe he loves her (143).

Catherine's motivations for marriage, on the other hand, are not darkened by materialism. Although naive, she does genuinely seem to love Linton. There is sincerity in her attempt to explain her feelings to Nelly. When charged with forwardly pursuing a connection with Linton, Catherine exclaims: "I didn't! I didn't! I didn't once think of loving him till—" (201). Presumably, she meant to say that she didn't love Linton until he pursued her. In any case, the distress expressed by Catherine conveys an air of frankness.

Catherine's involvement with Linton could not be further removed from thoughts of money. She has a "capacity for intense attachments", as Nelly tells us, which she demonstrates by her treatment of Linton (171). She tells Nelly that she is "certain Linton would recover quickly if he had me to look after him" (213). Such a demonstration of (naive) selflessness immediately places Catherine in another sphere than that of

Heathcliff, who was obsessed enough with the idea of vengeance to use the institution of marriage to reach his goals.

While Heathcliff's life revolves around the idea of attaining retribution at the cost of any and all in his way, Catherine's outlook on life is much more compassionate. Therefore, it is wrong of Heathcliff to assume that Catherine would automatically leave Linton due to his peevish behavior; instead, it is quite possible that she would take it on herself to remedy his attitude by care and attention. Heathcliff's way of seeing everything in the tainted light of economic power is not the way of young Catherine.

Heathcliff's treatment of Hareton also reflects his fixation on economic and social power. He explains to Nelly that he "covet[s] Hareton, with all his degradation." First of all, "covet" brings to mind the idea of jealously desiring something that belongs to another. In fact, Heathcliff has only himself to blame for the divide between that which he covets and himself. The reason for Heathcliff's separation from Hareton is Heathcliff's overpowering drive for vengeance on the Earnshaws. He has retaliated against Hindley by degrading his son, denying him an education and relegating him to the position of a servant in what is, by tradition, his own household. Desire for revenge overpowers Heathcliff's desire to befriend Hareton and even look upon him as his own son. Thus, while in one sense Heathcliff has power—to take revenge—he is left powerless to form emotionally satisfying relationships.

Resigning himself to the methods of retribution, Heathcliff decides to "pit [Hareton] against the paltry creature [Linton]." Hareton, whose emotional claims on his master are brushed aside, has once again been designated a weapon in Heathcliff's arsenal.

Yet, it is important that Heathcliff describes Linton as “paltry”, which means “contemptible” or “petty”, but also can mean “of worthless nature.”^{iv} As has been discussed, Linton is certainly not worthless economically; his value as a trading object for the Lintons’ property is great. Perhaps, Linton’s worthlessness is an emotional one; his father can never have regard for him. Such an idea returns readers to Heathcliff’s comment that he would have loved Hareton had circumstances been different. Heathcliff simultaneously respects and exploits Hareton, while all he can do to his son is exploit him, since he can never respect him. Heathcliff’s overriding desire for retribution blinds him to the possibility of a meaningful relationship with a son-like figure.

Thus, the influence of vengeance as an “ideology” on Heathcliff’s actions—where vengeance will supposedly make all right—has led him to several grievous errors. He views people not as humans but as commodities (Linton), is blinded to the true intentions of people (like Catherine), and suppresses his own better feelings (like his regard for Hareton). Such misconceptions of reality result from, as Terry Eagleton puts it, the “delusory freedom of exploiting others.”^v

Other characters base their actions on vengeance, but not to the same extent as Heathcliff. For these characters, vengeance is useful, but not deluding. Unlike Heathcliff, they realize that revenge will not actually satisfy them.

The older Cathy, for example, willingly revenges herself on Heathcliff for his part in her sufferings. When she is dying, she verbally tortures him, accusing him of having essentially killed her and of being liable to forget her after she dies. Heathcliff responds, pointing out that she will have the peace of the grave while he suffers from her cruel words for the rest of his days. Cathy’s response: “I shall not be at peace” (149). Even as

Cathy retaliates against Heathcliff for his desertion of her and his part in the development of Cathy's illness, she realizes that such retribution will not bring her peace.

The younger Catherine likewise prides herself in being able to take revenge while still realizing its fruitlessness. After marrying Linton and discovering the true horror of her situation, she speaks to Heathcliff of the dark joy she can derive from her bleak situation. She explains that she loves Linton despite his bad attitude, and that this fact gives her the joy of knowing that she has the ability to love, unlike Heathcliff, who loves no one. Catherine enjoys Heathcliff's misery as a form of revenge while simultaneously recognizing that she has nothing much ahead of her but the cruelty of her father-in-law and the bad temper of her husband. Revenge is a consolation, but not a solution to her afflictions.

Thus, other characters are not blinded by vengeance, but instead recognize its downfall: it may maim an enemy, but in the end it will not solve the problems of the avenger.

The notion of ideology is not only useful for delving into the characters' motivations, but also becomes important when considering why Bronte wrote *Wuthering Heights* as she did. The society into which Bronte brought her novel was steeped in ideologies which presented problems for the writer. The ideological power found in Victorian society's morals, for example, was influential on Bronte's writing techniques. The reviews of *Wuthering Heights* expressed the offense caused by the novel to those who upheld such morals. One reviewer called the book a "disagreeable story" and denounces the author for seeming to "affect painful and exceptional subjects."^{vi}

Emily Brontë's sister, Charlotte, assessed the situation succinctly in her preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre*: "Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last."^{vii} What society approves is not always right and what hypocritical religious devotees believe is not necessarily right, either. Thus, to attack conventionality and self-righteousness (which Emily does implicitly in *Wuthering Heights*) is not the same as being immoral or irreligious.

In the light of such ideology, it is interesting to consider the very structure of *Wuthering Heights*. It is composed in a way that attempts to shield the author from guilt due to too close an association with the events of the novel.

The nested narratives remove the author from the action of the novel; readers are told the story by Mr. Lockwood, who hears it from Nelly Dean, who sometimes has her version of the story from another source. Mr. Lockwood is an outsider from the city; Nelly is a cool-headed observer of events. Nelly's detachment from the highly emotional nature of various events is particularly striking. For example, Nelly witnesses Heathcliff violently bashing his head against an oak tree with the words: "It hardly moved my compassion—it appalled me" (155).

The fact that these two characters are emotionally detached from the events of the plot—and therefore not culpable for any social conventions those events may ignore—makes them less objectionable to readers. By distancing her narrators from the action of the novel, Brontë is consequently protecting herself by not linking herself too closely with the unconventional and even revolutionary nature of her novel.

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ⁱ Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1998, pp. 294-304), p. 294.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. p. 295.

ⁱⁱⁱ Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights*, second edition (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003), p. 276. All further references to this text will be from this edition.

^{iv} 'paltry, a.' *Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition, edited by J.A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 114.

^v Terry Eagleton, 'Myths of Power: A Marxist Study on *Wuthering Heights*' in *Wuthering Heights* (second edition), edited by Linda H. Peterson (Boston: Bedford Books, 2003 pp.394-410), p.402.

^{vi} 'Review of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* from the *Athenaeum*, 25 December 1847' in *The Brontes: A Life in Letters*, by Juliet Barker (New York: The Overlook Press, 2002), pp. 175-176 (p. 175).

^{vii} Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 3.