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The Splitting of the Self: Catherine's Crisis of Identity in *Wuthering Heights*

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The relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is one of the most striking in Victorian literature. The sheer unbridled passion that the two have for each other goes beyond any kind of romantic lust, or indeed, beyond any kind of separation of the soul to begin with. Catherine's famous declaration that "I *am* Heathcliff" (Brontë 64) is not metaphorical. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest in their essay "Looking Oppositely: Emile Brontë's Bible of Hell," he is the embodiment of her masculinity. And so, because Victorian patriarchy attempts to strip control from women by both removing their access to masculine power and teaching the women themselves to internally spurn and disregard that power as a means of maintaining control, Catherine's losing Heathcliff is a physical and social rending alike. She loses with him an important piece of herself, her ability to interact with the world, and her ability to seek control, both over herself and her surroundings. Emily Brontë uses the conflict between patriarchal norms and Catherine's true, undivided self to make the mental fragmentation of Victorian women literal. By placing Catherine's masculine half into Heathcliff, and then removing him from her as she's pushed into the role of a proper lady, Brontë catalogues the inevitable destructive descent as her identities—first as an unorthodox but complete person and later as the split, "proper" woman she's forced to become—collide and ensnare her physically and mentally. As she throws herself against the bars of this cage and gradually deteriorates, Brontë presents a potent warning about the violent damage oppressive structures do to those they trap.

Growing up, Catherine is anything but proper. She is belligerent towards the restrictive expectation that little girls be sweet, tame, and obedient. She seeks ways to both rebel against this notion and access a

masculine form of control that will grant her a way out of its norms. But because *Wuthering Heights* physically splits Catherine's masculinity and femininity in the forms of herself and Heathcliff, she has only her feminine self and no masculine half: an incomplete identity. Her goal of control is constantly out of reach—not that it stops her from trying. In a telling example, when her father asks her what she'd like as a gift from his travels, Catherine requests a whip. (By contrast, her brother Hindley makes the much tamer request of a fiddle.) In their essay, Gilbert and Gubar note the symbolic significance of Catherine's unorthodox answer (362). Nelly, Catherine's lifelong maid and the narrator, attempts to lampshade the abnormality of Catherine's wish by insisting it's simply for horseback riding, but the connotations that whips carry point to something deeper. Whips are associated with dominance, whether physical or sexual or social. It is always the master—a typically masculine person—who wields the whip as a means of control over others, fitting with Catherine's greater desire to take command of her own life. Gilbert and Gubar thus agree that "symbolically, the small Catherine's longing for a whip seems like a powerless younger daughter's yearning for power" (362). While Catherine is gifted no physical whip from her father, they point out that she receives one nonetheless: Heathcliff (362).

Heathcliff arrives ragged, sullen, and nameless, with an unknown origin and plucked straight off the streets. At first, the characters refer to him as "it"—so othered that he is, at this point, ungendered. But Catherine recognizes that this new, male presence could be exactly what she's looking for. In "The Double Vision of *Wuthering Heights*: A Clarifying View of Female Development," Helene Moglen notes that "It is Catherine who gives him his identity and he—named for her dead brother—becomes an extension of her" (394). Moglen understates the fact that this extension is not just an expansion: Catherine and Heathcliff completely merge their identities. More specifically, Catherine subsumes Heathcliff's identity into hers because he really has no identity before he comes to the Heights, and, by doing so, she absorbs the power of his maleness. He "functions just as she must unconsciously have hoped [the whip] would, smashing her rival-brother's fiddle and making a desirable third among the children

in the family so as to insulate her from the pressure of her brother's domination" (Gilbert and Gubar 362). Now, commanding both the masculine and the feminine, Catherine becomes a usurper backed by Heathcliff, shifting the power dynamics in the family. Hindley, the archetypal male heir, loses influence over his father when Mr. Earnshaw makes Heathcliff his favorite child—and, through Heathcliff, indirectly grants Catherine that privilege as well (even if he criticizes her wayward behavior).

With Catherine's newfound masculine power embodied by the favored son, she has an unprecedented amount of possession over "the kingdom of Wuthering Heights, which under her

rule threatens to become... a queendom" (Gilbert and Gubar 362). Nelly notes that "In play, [Catherine] liked, exceedingly, to act the little mistress; using her hands freely, and commanding her companions," and later adds that Heathcliff "would do *her* bidding in anything, and his only when it suited his own inclination" (Brontë 34). To Catherine, in her new kingdom, it's clear that this "play" is, in fact, very real. She rules the house, and although her dominance remains unspoken and inexplicit, she makes no secret of it. She takes the blame for Heathcliff's behavior, seeing as "she got chided more than any of us on his account" (Brontë 34), because his actions are hers, with him at her command.

Not only do Catherine and Heathcliff upset these family dynamics, but also the two escape them by leaving the domestic space altogether. In this way, "The childhood which Catherine and Heathcliff create for themselves belongs, in some sense, to the moors" (Moglen 394). The land beyond Wuthering Heights is as wild and untamed a space as the children themselves, and it is a place to which Catherine can now escape using the masculine freedom of Heathcliff. They share a pure, elemental passion outside of society (either Wuthering Heights or Thrushcross Grange) that surpasses social understandings of identity all together. They are a fusion, neither normative nor non-normative because they are outside anything that would label them as either. Catherine is anything but a proper Victorian girl, and Heathcliff is similarly abnormal; as Steven Vine notes in "The Wuther of the Other in Wuthering Heights," "Cathy and Heathcliff identify with each other

in their mutual otherness" (345), and they both embrace it in full. It is during this time, between the queendom of the household and the genderless freedom of the moors, that we see Catherine's true self: high-spirited, insolent, lively, with "her tongue always going—singing, laughing"; she is a "wild, wick slip" while still being caring and empathetic, doting on her ailing father in the same breath that she teases him (Brontë 33-34). Catherine balances her masculinity and femininity, and, by doing so, is both in power and enabled to express her full personality.

But Catherine's free, wild girlhood is abruptly ended with an disastrous twist of fate. Her father dies, the now-vengeful Hindley repossesses the house, and, in an unfortunate turn, Catherine and Heathcliff's antics lead them to the normatively proper, genteel Lintons at Thrushcross Grange. When they gaze through a window from the outside position of their "otherness" to the inner normativity of the family's parlor, the Lintons take notice and chase the children out. In her frenzy to escape, Catherine is seized by a male bulldog and subsequently by the Grange itself (Gilbert and Gubar 364). Heathcliff, meanwhile, is banished for being too strange, too grubby, too uncivilized, and too *masculine* to be caught with Catherine, which he accurately identifies when he reflects that "she was a young lady and they made a distinction between her treatment and mine" (Brontë 41). The Lintons are shocked by the "absolute heathenism" of Catherine's childhood spent "scouring the country with a gipsy" (Brontë 40), and they agree to take her in for the next five weeks as the dog's bite heals. Thus, Catherine's identity is fractured, separated from her human whip and other half.

At the Grange, which serves as a symbol of socialization in the story, Catherine experiences unprecedented rewards for her actions and an appeal to her vanity. These create a new system of incentive to replace that of punishment (and never praise) at the Heights. With Catherine enticed by the opulence of the Grange and lulled by the stroking of her newfound ego, the Lintons pet, groom, and "reform" her with "fine clothes and flattery" (Brontë 41). They repress her desire for a masculine half and stifle her autonomy, excessively feminizing her.

She loses the elemental bond between herself and Heathcliff, and her access to the society-less space of the moors. Though Catherine might think that, by becoming ladylike, she is gaining influence in genteel society, she has unknowingly cut off her only connection to masculine power and real control in her male-dominated world. What she has added in shallow respectability, she has lost in true agency, because what it means to be a "respectable" woman is to be powerless.

Catherine returns to the Heights "a very dignified person" instead of "a wild, hatless little savage jumping into the house, and rushing to squeeze us all breathless" (Brontë 41). This appearance is so unlike her, so removed from the true, wild self of her girlhood, that Hindley even remarks, "I should scarcely have known you—you look like a lady now" (Brontë 42). She is now trapped within a normative cage that socialization has taught her not to fight and not to sully in any way, whether with physical affection—she refuses to hug Nelly for fear of getting flour on her dress, because "it would not have done" (Brontë 42)—or in the passion she previously exhibited, rendering her a bland and curtailed version of her former self. Her time with the Lintons has not just splintered her identity but neutered and cauterized it as well.

In fact, she has been so changed by her "insertion into a socially-sanctioned femininity" (Vine 346) that she can barely relate to Heathcliff anymore, and Heathcliff himself is distraught at "beholding such a bright, graceful damsel enter the house, instead of a rough-headed counterpart to himself" (Brontë 42). Her "otherness," instead of separating her from the normative household and aligning her with him, now rends the balance of masculine and feminine that the two of them once forged. She looks at him with a pitying scrutiny that comes from the same place that everyone else regards him: worried that his dirtiness will sully her, laughing at his gloom, and ultimately driving him out (however accidentally). As Vine puts it, "her loss of Heathcliff figures her violent separation from her earlier, rebellious self" (346). She can no longer create space for herself: by rejecting the masculine part of her

identity that allows for self-definition in a repressive society, she has unknowingly set herself on the path to crisis.

Now locked in by the gilt bars of polite society, social obligations, and propriety of the gentry, Catherine has no choice but to marry Edgar Linton. As Gilbert and Gubar recognize, "she cannot do otherwise than as she does, must marry Edgar because there is no one else for her to marry and a lady must marry" (365). Yet Catherine finds she cannot justify why she's yielding to its expectations. In an anxious conversation with Nelly, she attempts to rationalize the engagement, saying, "'he will be rich, and I shall like to be the greatest woman of the neighbourhood, and I shall be proud of having such a husband'" (Brontë 61). None of these reasons involve Edgar himself; they are all about what social and material benefits Catherine will gain. When Nelly presses, Catherine again grasps at straws, adding, "'I love the ground under his feet, and the air over his head, and everything he touches, and every word he says—I love all his looks, and all his actions, and him entirely, and altogether'" (Brontë 61). Her words are despairing and evasive; she avoids mentioning Edgar himself as anything but an afterthought and instead focuses on the objects around him as though desperate to look anywhere but at him. Her assertions of love are false and forced, "a bitter parody of a genteel romantic declaration which shows how effective her education has been in indoctrinating her with the literary romanticism deemed suitable for young ladies" (Gilbert and Gubar 365). It's clear that Catherine does not really want to marry Edgar. But, since she sees this marriage as her only choice (though really it is only an illusion of choice), she tries to talk herself into it. Ironically, her act of self-naming with the famous line, "I *am* Heathcliff" (Brontë 64), happens in the same conversation wherein she forces herself permanently towards Edgar and away from Heathcliff and drives Heathcliff from the Heights in the process. She knows that her identity has been rent, but socialization has taught her to keep herself caged, and she sees union with Heathcliff as something that would

"degrade" her when, in fact, such a thing would make her whole, were it not for the persecution that would follow.

      With her marriage to Edgar, however, Catherine becomes disillusioned and overcome with resentment towards her husband. At first, on the outside, "she accepts the level of existence which the Grange represents—Christian morality, adult sexuality, maternal duty, aristocratic culture," while, on the inside, "her soul cries out for the existence of the moors" (Moglen 396). These cries don't remain silent for long. The backlash of splitting her identity gradually hits, bringing with it the realization that her identification with the values of Thrushcross Grange are superficial (Moglen 395) and that her constructed identity as Edgar's wife is similarly false. Her life at the Grange is shallow and dishonest to herself—at her core, she's still a social outcast; she's only been pretending to be a proper Victorian wife and woman. By putting on the ladylike façade that led her to this marriage, she's also invalidated and spurned her identity as it's connected to Heathcliff. But it's been so long since her childhood, and she has spent so long acting the part of Victorian lady, that Catherine has lost the sense of the boisterous and unapologetic identity that she proudly bore as a girl. Who is she now? Catherine can't answer. When Heathcliff's absence sends her into a delirious fever, this loss of identity is strikingly revealed as Catherine fails to recognize her own face in a mirror. "Don't you see the face?" she asks Nelly desperately (Brontë 96), gazing at herself. Her identity "has been so radically divided that it has been destroyed" (Moglen 397). She "othered" herself from Heathcliff when she married Edgar, but now she is "othered" from Edgar, as well—and, crucially, from the person she once was.

      Her destruction doesn't result just in madness. It first becomes a desperate viciousness, rejecting all the normativity that she's trapped in and trying to create masculine freedom for herself—but she can't, because in her society, you must be a man to have that, and she's lost the person that "makes" her one. She returns from her illness an angry, manipulative woman. With her former identity now in tatters, she pulls

together the threads of her anger to reconstruct a shaky, unstable personality for herself by it. She turns from aloof to antagonistic and abusive towards Edgar, making him the subject of her violent outbursts and faulting him for her premeditated illnesses. Her viciousness repels him; "it was nothing less than murder, in her eyes, for any one to presume to stand up and contradict her" (Brontë 70). She carefully cultivates the effects of her dangerous rages on those around her, observing that "[Edgar] has been discreet in dreading to provoke me," and she attempts to make Nelly her co-conspirator in maintaining this stranglehold on her husband by telling her to "represent the peril of quitting that policy, and remind him of my passionate temper, verging, when kindled, on frenzy" (Brontë 91). Her wild aggression leaves the gentle Edgar, who's supposedly the head of the family and thereby expected to be in control of his wife, unsure of how to deal with Catherine except by walking on eggshells around her—just as she desires. If she can't have freedom, she'll make sure no-one else can.

Despite this one-woman crusade against all who surround her, revenge is incapable of satiating Catherine, and she only turns more volatile. Since her abuse of others has failed to placate her, she turns it maliciously inward instead. At this point, she's got power only over herself, and she can harm the male characters by harming herself. Edgar and Heathcliff above all others must share in the misery she creates for herself, being so deeply linked to her. She decides that "if I cannot keep Heathcliff for my friend, if Edgar will be mean and jealous, I'll try to break their hearts by breaking my own" (Brontë 91). She even goes so far as to consider retribution by way of suicide: "If I were only sure it would kill [Edgar], ... I'd kill myself directly" (Brontë 94). Her frenzied attempts at self-punishment distance her further and further from those around her until she is beyond saving.

Catherine's manipulativeness and seeming lack of morality during this stage of her life strike most modern readers as shocking, senseless, and reprehensible. Around the time *Wuthering Heights* was written, however, proto-feminist writers had identified the patterns in

society that led women like her into this crazed cycle of destruction, and their perspective makes Catherine's actions more understandable. Mary Wollstonecraft, in *A Vindication on the Rights of Woman* (originally published in 1792), lays a harsh critique on the socialization of girls to suppress their rationality and instead put up a false exterior to please others, leading to an inclination for deceptiveness and trickery. "From the tyranny of man," Wollstonecraft writes, "I firmly believe, the greater number of female follies proceed; and the cunning, which I allow makes at present a part of their character, I likewise have repeatedly endeavored to prove, is produced by oppression" (280). In other words, because women are groomed to play up thingsthought to be pleasing to get what they want, they become adapted to fraudulence—which of course they use to subvert the authority oppressing them. The tension between these states of mind is evident in how Catherine oscillates between two forms of manipulation. At times she presents a pleasing, ladylike, false exterior to charm others into tending to her; at others, she throws violent tantrums and threatens self-harm. The latter takes advantage of the expectation that women are physically and emotionally weak: in women, physical violence is seen as harmless, and emotional outbursts as inevitable. This means that others around her—*including* those whom she abuses—are inclined to excuse or discount her outright cruelty more readily and thereby further enable it.

Her erratic behavior, to Wollstonecraft, is entirely expected. "To laugh at [women] then," she says, "or to satirise the follies of a being who is never to be allowed to act freely from the light of her own reason, is as absurd as cruel; for, that they who are taught blindly to obey authority, will endeavor cunningly to elude it, is most natural and certain" (272). This is exemplified in Catherine using what limited tools are at her command—cutting words, crazed tantrums, her own body—to try to regain any amount of control over and freedom within her circumstances. What's more, trapped women lash out to grasp at any modicum of that freedom, which might be read as overly extreme and

irrational. But Wollstonecraft explains that this reaction is only natural, likening it to how "The bent bow recoils with violence, when the hand is suddenly relaxed that forcibly held it" (111). So, while Catherine might not be likeable, she is understandable. The causes of her actions are far from arbitrary, and her aggression ultimately comes from a place of repression, not intrinsic cruelty. Catherine is what happens when a woman is caged within a social structure that orders her subservience and mandates her powerlessness.

Catherine's vicious self-abuse results in a rapid descent into delirium. She has no identity anymore: she's now defined herself only by her relationships to those she can harm—and no longer by anything to do with her as a person. Her connection to Heathcliff has been so split that it's been destroyed; even his return can't save her. She dies senseless and unconscious, as insensible to her mourners as she is to herself.

Emily Brontë's depiction of Catherine shows how easily a sexist, restrictive society like that of the Victorian era can lead women trapped within it to desperation and abuse. Catherine was not born a half-mad abuser. Her toxicity is simply "the natural consequence of [her] education and station in society," as Wollstonecraft explains. "Let woman share the rights," she adds, "and she will emulate the virtues of man" (281). Because Heathcliff represents Catherine's connection to masculinity and thereby "the virtues of man," Brontë suggests that to be truly virtuous, women should hold tight to their masculinity and use it to assert themselves morally and socially. It could grant them freedom they desperately need in Victorian patriarchy. In a utopia where women were vindicated and free to begin with, they would become virtuous without masculinity, because subjugation due to their femininity is what drives them to folly and vice. In other words, Catherine's spiral was never inevitable—and without oppressive Victorian society, she never would have lost the buoyant spirit of self she had in her youth. Catherine is horrible, but it is society that shaped and exacerbated her

worst impulses. And to build a better society, one that won't drive its members to violence, readers should learn from her example.

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