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THE DOGS OF WUTHERING HEIGHTS
by
Ann Thompson

To those familiar with Wuthering Heights, the idea of dogs doesn't immediately come to mind in connection with the novel. However, Emily Bronte, by using dogs and other animal images, keeps violence and the potential for violence, an ever-present undercurrent of this story. When it was written, the kind of violence seen in Wuthering Heights must have been an unknown and shocking new dimension for Victorian literature. Throughout the book, dogs are used as foils for characters, most notably for Heathcliff.

We are introduced to the dogs who live at Wuthering Heights in the first chapter of the book. One, in the arch of a dresser, “a liver-coloured bitch pointer, surrounded by a swarm of squealing puppies,” was provoked to a “long guttural snarl” by Mr. Lockwood’s friendly caress, and “a pair of grim, shaggy sheep-dogs” were joined by six more in an assault on the visitor. In this way Mr. Lockwood and the reader are first introduced to the inhospitable Wuthering Heights and to the churlish Heathcliff, whose personality the misanthropic curs seem to reflect.

In fact, when Heathcliff first appears in the story as a youngster, Mr. Earnshaw brings him home like a frightened stray pup. On that occasion, when Mr. Earnshaw opened his coat, he produced a bundle which,

When it was set on its feet...only stared round. The master told a tale of seeing it starving, and houseless, and as good as dumb, in the streets of Liverpool; where he picked it up and inquired for its owner. Not a soul knew to whom it belonged (61-62).

From that time on we are told, “he bred bad feeling in the house.” And for the rest of his life it seems, Heathcliff lives by an animal code, loving only one person who loves him, and seeking revenge on the others, who he feels have in one way or another mistreated him.

Catherine, in her diary written at Wuthering Heights twenty years before Mr. Lockwood’s visit, describes how she and Heathcliff “made [themselves] as snug as [their] means allowed in the arch of the dresser.” Could it be the same dresser which Mr. Lockwood describes as protecting the mother pointer and her puppies? In chapter three, Catherine describes her brother’s reaction to Heathcliff and her as one would describe the disciplining of dogs. “Hindley hurried up from his paradise on the hearth, and seizing one of us by the collar, and the other by the arm, hurled us both into the back kitchen.”
In another instance of cruel animal imagery, consider how Edgar Linton and his sister, Isabella, are introduced to the reader in chapter six. Heathcliff and Catherine have sneaked away from Wuthering Heights together to observe the Linton children through a window. Edgar and Isabella are fighting over a puppy, "practically pulling the animal in two in an effort to possess it." Returning from the Lintons', Catherine is attacked by the bulldog, Skulker, who seems to have been sent out from Wuthering Heights to drag her home. "His huge purple lips streaming with bloody slaver," the dog is pulled away by a servant.

Later in the story, when the young Hareton refuses to kiss his drunken father, Hindley tells Nelly to crop the boy's hair. "It makes a dog fiercer, and I love something fierce, get me the scissors." Hareton, growing up at Wuthering Heights with Hindley and Heathcliff, becomes defiant, wild, and fierce. In fact, he acts very much like the young Heathcliff. On the night Isabella arrives at Wuthering Heights after her marriage to Heathcliff, Hareton threatens to set the half-bred bulldog, aptly named Throttler, on her. Then on the day Isabella escapes from Wuthering Heights, "she knocks over Hareton, who was hanging a litter of puppies from a chairback in the doorway." In direct parallel, one of Heathcliff's most brutal acts is hanging Isabella's little dog, Fanny, in a tree on the night they elope. The dog's innocence and vulnerability seem to reflect those same qualities in its mistress.

Heathcliff continues to be seen as a crazed and vicious dog. In chapter fifteen he is holding Catherine, who he realizes is dying, when Nelly approaches:

He flung himself into the nearest seat, and on my approach . . . he gnashed at me, and foamed like a mad dog, and gathered her to him with greedy jealousy. I did not feel as if I were in the company of a creature of my own species; it appeared that he would not understand, though I spoke to him (190).

So distraught is Heathcliff over Catherine's death in chapter seventeen, that Isabella tells him, "Heathcliff, if I were you I'd go stretch myself over her grave and die like a faithful dog." Later Isabella recalls to Hindley how Heathcliff had attacked him the evening before: "...his mouth watered to tear you with his teeth; because, he's only half a man" (210).

In contrast to the fierce and vicious dogs at Wuthering Heights, the dogs of Thrushcross Grange are a friendly bunch, reflecting the atmosphere at the Grange. In chapter nineteen Cathy, Catherine's daughter who lives at the Grange, sets out on her horse for Penistone Crags with several dogs, "when Hareton happened to issue forth, attended by some canine followers, who attacked her train. They had a smart battle before their owners could separate them: that formed an introduction." Thus, the second generation is introduced to the reader in terms of dogs.
In the end, after Heathcliff’s death, the tension and violence have gone. So too has the mention of dogs. On his final visit to Wuthering Heights, Mr. Lockwood isn’t met at the gate as usual by a pack of dogs. As the need for violence in the story ended, so did the need for dogs.

Edition Cited: