**death in Wuthering Heights**

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Of the 13 characters introduced in the novel *Wuthering Heights*, excluding servants and the two narrators, 11 are dead by the end, nearly all prematurely. Emily Brontë's own life was ravaged by the untimely death of loved ones, and this experience inevitably surfaced in her fiction. Her mother died when Emily was three, and two older sisters died when she was seven; she herself would die of tuberculosis by the age of 30. In the early 19th century, this was not uncommon—life expectancy was short—but for a modern reader, so many premature deaths are difficult to comprehend.

Death as a theme in this novel is therefore of paramount importance. For the characters, it is frequently viewed as either a punishment for earthly wrongdoing or a merciful release from pain and suffering. The deaths of certain characters also aid the plot and provide narrative structure to a densely woven novel. Some of the dead even reappear as ghosts, both at the beginning and at the end of the novel, death seemingly bringing no release to the tortured souls in *Wuthering Heights*.

The first death is that of Mrs. Earnshaw, mother to Catherine and her older brother, Hindley. Mr Earnshaw cares more for the foundling Heathcliff than for his own children, and this creates deep-seated resentment in Hindley, who moves away. Mr Earnshaw then dies, leaving Catherine an orphan, alongside Heathcliff. Her brother returns to look after them, bringing a wife, Frances, who "felt so afraid of dying!" and who then proceeds to do just that a year later, after giving birth to a son, Hareton. The parents of Edgar and Isabella Linton, who live close by, both die from a fever also caught by Catherine.

In their turbulent, passionate, yet unconsummated love affair, both Heathcliff and Catherine use the notion of death or dying continually within their lexicon of love. Catherine says, "I wish I could hold you ... till we were both dead." Heathcliff, in turn, cannot contemplate life without Catherine, thinking, "What kind of living will it be when you—oh, God! would you like to live with your soul in the grave?

Catherine dies two hours after giving birth to a daughter. Her husband Edgar's sorrow and pain are overwhelming, yet dignified: "His young and fair features were almost as deathlike as those of the form beside him, and almost as fixed; but his was the hush of exhausted anguish, and hers of perfect peace." Conversely, Heathcliff's reaction to the death of his soulmate is one of anger and bitterness: "Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest as long as I am living! You said I killed you—haunt me, then!" Her death leads him further down the path of self-destruction, transgressing the boundaries of acceptable behavior and leaving the reader unable to sympathize with his position. In direct contrast to Edgar's restraint and dignity, Heathcliff opens Catherine's coffin to look upon his lost love.

Edgar's sister, Isabella, who becomes Heathcliff's wife, dies 12 years after giving birth to their son, Linton, who in his turn dies at age 17, not long after his arranged marriage to Cathy, Catherine's daughter. Hindley dies a mere six months after Catherine, drinking himself to death, unable to come to terms with the death of his wife.

Edgar eventually dies when Cathy is 17, followed less than a year later by Heathcliff. On his deathbed, Edgar declares to Cathy: "'I am going to [Catherine]; and you, darling child, shall
come to us!' ... None could have noticed the exact minute of his death, it was so entirely without a struggle."

Heathcliff would rather Catherine was present as a ghost than not present at all. At the beginning of the novel, Catherine’s ghost appears at Wuthering Heights, begging to be allowed through the bedroom window. Heathcliff's dead body is found by the same window: "The lattice [window], flapping to and fro, had grazed one hand that rested on the sill." Heathcliff is buried next to Catherine as he had requested, his hope being that in death, their bodies will conjoin, as they never did while alive, with the body of Edgar on her other side—a macabre ménage à trois. Nelly makes the claim that people have seen the ghosts of Heathcliff and Cathy walking the moors. Thus, the theme of death underpins the passionate relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine—their union ultimately transcending death itself.

Citation Information