gender in *Wuthering Heights*

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The roles of men and women in *Wuthering Heights* frequently defy the social conventions of the day. While the men superficially appear to have power and authority over the women in their lives, the women are, nevertheless, frequently the strongest characters in any given situation, with the will and ability to alter the lives and fortunes of the male characters in their circle. Brontë uses the novel's isolated setting to symbolically highlight the fact that most women at that time lived in a cultural "wasteland."

Brontë reveals several times in this novel that women tended to be self-educated, since it was not considered necessary—or even desirable—to spend money on their education: "[Heathcliff] struggled long to keep up an equality with Catherine in her studies." Catherine's mentality is that of a girl superior to those around her: "She esteemed herself a woman, and our mistress." She learns to play her love rivals, Edgar Linton and Heathcliff, off one another: "Though I humour both, I think a smart chastisement might improve them all the same." The character traits that Brontë gives her are much more indicative of early 19th-century conventional masculinity than a typical female from the same era.

Even Heathcliff, who believes himself to have been badly treated by Catherine, states, "I seek no revenge on you.... The tyrant grinds down his slaves and they don't turn against him; they crush those beneath them." This sentence explains much of Heathcliff's subsequent brutish behavior in the novel. Rather than taking revenge on Catherine for her perceived misdemeanors toward himself, he instead takes his revenge on others around her.

Although her heart belongs to Heathcliff, Catherine understands that her place in society will only be assured if she marries someone with position and wealth, and Heathcliff has neither. Brontë is reminding us that at the time she was writing, a woman was only as socially prominent as her husband. A "good" marriage was therefore essential in order to be able to command respect in society and gain power.

Heathcliff's treatment of his wife, Isabella (whom he married purely for revenge), is cruel in the extreme: "He seized, and thrust her from the room.... 'I have no pity! I have no pity! The more the worms writhe, the more I yearn to crush out their entrails!'" Once she is dead, he calls her "a wicked slut." Cathy, the daughter of Catherine and Edgar, is very much spoiled by her doting widower father (whose character is presented in direct contrast to Heathcliff's): "She who was always 'love,' and 'darling,' and 'queen,' and 'angel,' with everybody at the Grange."

A more comfortable relationship between the genders comes at the end of the novel between Cathy and Hareton, her rough, uneducated cousin: "He had been content with daily labour and rough animal enjoyments till she crossed his path. Shame at her scorn, and hope of her approval, were his first prompters to higher pursuits." Cathy takes the lead in this relationship, showing her cousin that they might have a future together. She teaches him to read: "His brightening mind brightened his features, and added spirit and nobility to their aspect." Brontë dwells significantly on the importance of education for both men and women throughout the novel, with a particular focus on reading, since this was the main
route to self-education in her day. Hope for the future, says Brontë, rests in egalitarian relationships as exemplified by Cathy and Hareton, with mutual understanding, respect, and trust; the blind passions of the previous generation of lovers in the novel lead only to unhappiness and destruction.

Incorporated within the broad theme of gender are discussions on love and marriage, education, wealth, and the ownership of property. Brontë herself was a victim of this patriarchal society she describes. Wuthering Heights was first published under the male-sounding pseudonym Ellis Bell, since publication of such a dark and difficult novel by a woman would have been impossible in an overwhelmingly male-dominated literary culture. In addition, many of the novel's themes, specifically those relating to the issues of gender, were not acceptable topics for a female writer, nor was it deemed appropriate for a woman to challenge the rules of the society in which she lived. This is, of course, a foreign concept for today's reader.

Citation Information

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