Wuthering Heights: A Hybrid that Rejects Classification

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ABSTRACT

Much has been said about *Wuthering Heights* and Emily Bronte. Literary criticism that surrounds the work and its author, however, still continues to haunt the situations of both the novel and the novelist. Rejecting the formal tone and abstract subject matter of the criticism produced so far, I, in this article, analyze the text and its author from deconstructive, biographical, and reader response perspectives.

Bronte wrote *Wuthering Heights* in the Victorian Age, when literary trend was concerned with the urban life. Despite being much discussed in literary circles and appreciated for its out-of-tradition themes, the work is neither the product of the age, nor does it belong to the anterior romantic (or gothic) tradition. The novel is down to earth within the unique conditions it was written, and this is because the writer was a unique personality to produce such an unclassifiable masterpiece.

Key Words: *Deconstruction, Biography, Victorian Age, Romanticism, Gothic*

ÖZET

Wuthering Heights (*Uğultulu Tepeler*) adlı roman ve yazarı Emily Bronte'yle alakalı şu ana kadar pek çok şey söylenmiştir. Eser ve yazarının üzerine yapılan eleştiriler durumu daha da karmaşık hale getirmek üzere devam etmektedir. Bu yapay ve karmaşık eleştirel yaklaşımı reddederek, makalede eseri ve yazarını yapıbozumcu, biyografik, ve okuyucu odaklı bir yaklaşımla tekrar ele alıyorum.

Bronte *Uğultulu Tepeler* adlı romanını Victoria Çağı'nda, edebiyatın daha çok şehir yaşamıyla ilgilendiği dönemde yazmıştır. Edebiyat çevrelerinde gelenek dışı temalar kullanması sebebiyle çok tartışılıyor ve değer veriliyor olmasına karşın, bu eser ne kendi çağına ne de bir önceki romantik (ya da gotik) geleneğe aittir. Roman, yazıldığı olağan dışı şartlar dahilinde dünyevi olanı yansıtmaktadır çünkü Emily Bronte'nin yaşamı ve kişiliği böylesi tanımlanamaz bir başyapıt ortaya çıkaracak olağandışılık sergilemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Yapı Bozumu, Biyografi, Viktorya Çağı, Romantizm, Gotik*

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Although for some years I have taught Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, I never dared to write an article on this novel on account of its unique stance among other works of English Literature. The idea flourished at a weekend, while I was alone at home, and looking up the shelves of my library. I saw the novel on the shelf not having been classified: I had neither put it among the works of the Victorian novelists, nor among the collection of the romantic poets, or the gothicists of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It was there, all alone, "unique and unclassifiable." I then remembered the first time I read this novel, and this remembrance made me recall the famous lines from Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood":

It is not now as it hath been of yore-

Turn whereso'er I may,

By night or day,

The things which I have seen I now can see no more. (VI-IX)

I had loved the novel when I first read it because I was unaware of the critical reaction I *had to* give to this work! I had put it *nowhere* in the library of my mind. The diagnostic approaches I later on applied to this novel softly killed the pleasure of spontaneity.

Not knowing that there is no fixed, final, and correct meaning, I tried hard to attribute a meaning to it; and the dialogic experience that came as a result of the guidance initiated by the text assumed different tones throughout the years. Let me confess that I even attempted to classify *Wuthering Heights* as half gothic and romantic, and half Victorian, and these halves never made a whole. Yet, life goes on and human struggle for classification never ends. Now I recite the lines from Wordsworth: "The things which I have seen I now can see no more," and feel that I have never been the "ideal" interpreter of this work.

Already a sophisticated reader, and my vision already spoiled, in this article, *however*, I will, like Wordsworth, *try to* get the simple pleasure from re-reading and re-interpreting the novel, and attempt to reveal this pleasure to the "implied reader" of this article. Since I am against categorization, I know that writing an article on this novel will be another futile attempt at classification.

I believe that the best response is the most unsophisticated. I will not, therefore, look for something extreme in the work, or assert far-fetched ideas concerning the nature of both the novel and the writer. As Charlotte Bronte wrote for Emily in her "Biographical Notice," Emily was

stronger than a man, simpler than a child, [and] her nature stood alone. Under

> an unsophisticated culture, inartificial tastes, and an unpretending outside, lay a secret power and fire that might have informed the brain and kindled the veins of a hero; but she had no worldly wisdom. (W.H. 35)

The elder sister defined the writer as a loner and as having no "worldly wisdom," and this is true because "worldliness" for Charlotte meant "urban life" which Emily had refused to be a part of. Instead, she chose *home* for spending her life; starting with Gondal poems, she produced "home-made" works in which she revealed her unsophisticated, and idealistic worldview about life.

The home-made nature of *Wuthering Heights* requires, after all, a home-made interpretation. Therefore, I will sometimes use the personal pronouns "I" and "we." In short, I will try to be as natural and unsophisticated as possible, and strive not to spoil this masterpiece of Emily Bronte.

I agree with the idea that

> *Wuthering Heights*, like all the greatest works of art, is at once concrete and yet general, local and yet universal. Because of so much nonsense has been written and spoken about the Brontes and because Emily in particular has been so often presented to us as a ghost-like figure surrounded entirely by endless moorland, cut off from anything so banal as human society, not of her time but of eternity, it is necessary to emphasize at the outset the local quality of the book. (Kettle, 200)

Wuthering Heights emerged as a result of substantial inspiration that comes not from the "never never land," (Kettle, 200) but from Yorkshire itself. Since nothing springs fully developed *ex nihilo*, analysis of the socio-cultural and individual processes behind this work may prove revealing, and relevant to a fuller appreciation of not only the novel itself, but also of the *rationale* behind it. The characters are not the demonic (or angelic) beings that appear in human forms, but real human characters with their vices and follies. There is no need to elaborate them through abstractions, and to attribute to them metaphysical or paranormal characteristics. This is perhaps the most fatal mistake the critics have committed so far. "The story of *Wuthering Heights* is concerned not with love in the abstract but with passions of living people, with property ownership, the attractions of social comforts, the arrangement of marriages, the importance of education, the validity of religion, the relations of rich and poor." (Kettle, 200) Therefore, the criticism that leads the reader's mind to some vague phenomena is what I will avoid, and criticize.

I do believe that Emily Bronte had a well-knit plan while writing the novel because she constructs the novel's psychological and cultural matrix to penetrate into the hidden and thus rejected side of existence which is, for the writer, the

undeniable essence of human life. Emily does not go deep into the workings of the human psyche. Yet, her main concern is with the emotional element. Although her style leads the reader to emotional involvement, it creates the problematic situation for critics as they tend to interpret the novel through elaborating the psychological make-up of the novel. Her concern with the human psychology stems from her interest concerning the impact of Victorian taboos that affect characters' lives and make them assume some "abnormal" personality traits.

Emily dotes on the taboos of the Victorians: She consciously lampoons in her work the "constructed nature of traditions," (Schock, 11) and sees these as contraptions that hinder man from perceiving the "other" dimensions of life. The isolated landscape and the strange characters in the novel make the reader, at first, a stranger to the world introduced, but later this "alien" world charms the reader, urging him to take a step further into the whirlpool or quicklime of the hostile setting. Emily must have seen the problem of interaction between the reader and the text as she knew that the reading public consisted of middle class people, and she bridges this gap by a technique called "nested narrative." The breach between the reader and the strange world of the Heights is thus bridged by the first narrator, Lockwood, a Victorian gentleman. He is the representative figure for those who have no idea about the grotesque rural world. The first narrator, after being acquainted with the Heights, transfers his mission of reporting to Ellen Dean, the servant and the local historian of the two families, who takes the reader into the depths of the "weird" dimension. Though Nelly represents "common sense" in the story, it is, at first, Lockwood, who seems to be the "only normal" character for the bourgeois reader of the novel for he comes from the "civilized and ordered" world. As an observer like all other narrators, (Nelly Dean, and the characters' reports of what they have experienced) Lockwood reports his first experience at Wuthering Heights:

> 1801-I have just returned from a visit to my landlord-the solitary neighbour that I shall be troubled with. This is certainly a beautiful country! In all England, I do not believe that I could have fixed on a situation so completely removed from the stir of society. A perfect misanthropist's Heaven: and Mr Heathcliff and I are such a suitable pair to divide the desolation between us. (Bronte, 1)

Lockwood is one of those people living alone in the stir of society, who has turned, as a result, into a misanthropist. We know such types, and we immediately recognize him: He, as a misanthropist, is weary of keeping his relations in check and at bay. He has lost or dried up his natural "masculine abilities" among the

coquettish middle class women; he assumed an asexual (and perhaps slightly a homosexual) manner. Emily presents him as an impotent character that has been much influenced by the dandyish saloon life of the Victorians. So fragile and weak, he easily submits to a blunt and rough character like Heathcliff at his first encounter; he instinctively recognizes in him the brute, intruding male power, and its great attraction, for he is a product of the recessive, feminine Victorian decorum:

> A capital fellow! He little imagined how my heart warmed towards him when I beheld his black eyes withdraw so suspiciously under their brows, as I rode up, and when his fingers sheltered themselves, with jealous resolution, still further in his waistcoat, as I announced my name. (Bronte,1)

The feminine overtone is apparent in Lockwood's words. He is also the foil of Heathcliff and what he represents. The existence of Lockwood makes Heathcliff the "other," a *counterpart* (or countertpoint) to Victorian standards. This major figure occupies the bulk of the narrative: "The known span and compass of Heathcliff's life at Wuthering Heights is the span and compass of the novel. When he is not there, there is no story. . . Heathcliff is, therefore, the structure of the story." (Craik, 159-160) The so called mystery that surrounds him stems from his unpredictability. He is impulsive, fretful, morose, restless and defying. He challenges everybody, including himself. Lockwood naturally glorifies his personality for this is the first time he has come across with such a *man* who despises the fragile bourgeois characters and their norms.

The sense of queerness is hinted in the introductory chapters of the novel: Lockwood's heart warms towards a male character. He instinctively recognizes in him the libidinous potential which he, as a male, lacks. He is, therefore, hardly influenced by young and beautiful Cathy. It is for the sake of Heathcliff that he pays his second visit to Wuthering Heights. As he is not used to the rural ways, there he confuses everything: He sees the pile of dead rabbits as cats belonging to Cathy; he thinks that Cathy is either Heathcliff's or Hareton's wife; since he went out in such a foul weather and never thought of the difficulty of reaching back at the Grange, he is obliged to spend the night there.

After reading Catherine's diary, Lockwood goes to bed to have two dreams. The child in his second "dream" terrifies him: "Terror made me cruel" (Bronte, 67) says Lockwood, and he rubs (in his dream) the wrist of the little child to the broken pane till blood runs down and soaks the bedclothes. Emily shows that even in such a "civilized" man there exists an essential potential for violence. She, therefore, asserts the duality of human existence, showing that the "illogical," the anti-social side of existence is what the bourgeois society denies, but must eventually accept.

This diffident *and* ignorant man, however, is the key to the core of the novel. Through this defamiliarized figure, the reader is dipped into the "perverse, unknown, mysterious, dark, and masculine" world of the Heights. That the castle-like building is on the hilltop is not a coincidence. Bronte compares and contrasts Wuthering Heights with Thrushcross Grange, and shows that the former is superior in terms of the values attached to it: The setting is away from the unnatural "civilized" life; there is no hypocrisy there; the characters are unceremonious, plain and tactless. They are able to assert their passions. And the major concern of the author is with the "incestuous" relation between Catherine and Heathcliff, who were brought up as sister and brother. In Lockwood's world, however, there is no place for the "abnormal" phenomena like passion, illness, death, violence and cruelty, hatred and incest. The society he belongs to has already denied the existence of these human aspects: it suppressed them into silence, and hence, into non-existence. For any "normal" character of the Victorian literature, Wuthering Heights would be no different from an asylum, and Emily must have well observed one-dimensional people like Lockwood, the product of impotent Victorian society.

What makes Emily different from the Victorian authors is that she reveals the solid existence and influence of the repressed dimension in the civilized man. Her target is the bourgeois reader. Since the phenomena have already been denied, in reference to them, she uses symbols, for concrete words fail to make the suppressed come to the surface. She speaks with symbols, and these symbols connote to the other side of human existence, the world of instincts and emotions, which is, for Emily, the "real" domain of existence. Although she avoids "the cold words of logic" (Kettle, 201), this does not mean that she is illogical. On the contrary, she consciously uses symbols in a logical way and achieves an effect that the cold, concrete words would not create.

Neither Dickens and Thackeray, nor Eliot uses such a language. These Victorians have their own merits in dealing with the social issues of their times like class, injustice, family, marriage, and individual relations in an industrial (or communal) setting. If we consider the novels of these writers as works transmitting some concrete messages to the reader, Emily's work is just more symbolic by comparison, and "the symbolic novel is an advance on the moral fable just in the sense that a symbol can be richer-can touch on more of life-than an abstract moral concept." (Kettle, 201) Though at first the novel looks perverse on account of the high degree of violence and cruelty, later, however, this perversity disappears as the reader gets used to the "abnormal," and the novel takes its "normal" course; it gradually becomes worldlier. Like the other Victorian writers, Emily, too, deals with themes

like class distinction, marriage, (industrial) brutality, materialism, etc. Even the ending of the novel is in accordance with the examples of Victorian novel. The happy ending achieved through the union of Hareton and Cathy accords with the Victorian attitude to life. Do these aspects of the novel make it a product of the mainstream? Not really! Emily tries to say something else and something new; therefore, she creates a different contexture. Remembering the points discussed so far, let us now proceed with an analysis of why this novel stands as a distinct example; why we are caught by a strange and "immoral" pleasure, and go on reading this somewhat "incest" story in which violence prevails.

Edmund Burke claims in *Philosophical Enquiry* that our moral feelings, like our "good taste," are not in the least involved, while dealing with the concept of pleasure, that no passions seem excite us as fear and awe. He says "The ideas of pain, sickness, and death fill the mind with strong emotions of horror; but life and health, though they put us in capacity of being affected with pleasure . . . make no such impressions" (Burke, 34). *Wuthering Heights* bears this out. Both despising and adoring Heathcliff, we go on reading the novel. Besides violence and cruelty, the novel is full of scenes where pain and sickness shake off the characters. Illness pervades the whole story. The scenes of ill and dying characters increase the awe.

The deaths of the first generation do not give way to strong pathos. The deaths of the younger ones, however, are revealed as quite pathetic. Frances, for instance, is the first character to depart from the world of the novel. What makes her death tragic is due to the great human tragedy of losing the loved ones. She leaves behind her baby and her husband, Hindley. Nelly's report of the event is thus:

> I was very sad for Hindley's sake; he had room in his heart only for two idols-his wife and himself-he doted on both, and adored one, and I couldn't conceive how he would bear the loss. . . He told his wife the same story, and she seemed to believe him; but one night, while leaning on his shoulder, in the act of saying she thought she should be able to get up tomorrow, a fit of coughing took her-a very slight one-he raised her in his arms; she put her two hands about his neck, her face changed, and she was dead" (Bronte, 105)

Her death is just the beginning of deaths of the characters that we, as readers, come to know and accept. We do not make any discrimination between good and evil characters when they face up the great human tragedy. Hindley's death, for instance, is as tragic enough as Heathcliff's death as they both lie defeated in the face of death. Besides, the characters are all alone in their final struggles with love and death.

Death and love are described in parallel structures in the novel. Perhaps it is

because in love and death everybody is all alone. Although Catherine tells to Nelly "he [Heathcliff] is more myself than I am" (Bronte, 121) and later "Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff" (Bronte, 122), she cannot be in his place: She has betrayed Heathcliff, and he is the sufferer. For Bronte, love is no different from death. Almost all the major characters (except Hareton and Cathy) fall victims to love: Catherine dies on account of her dilemma between the two loves: In Denying Heathcliff she has chosen death; Hindley goes mad after losing his wife and kills himself off with alcohol and gambling; Isabella suffers and dies because of her love for Heathcliff; Edgar wants to die (though a staunch Christian and a father), and dies hoping that he will meet with his wife; and Heathcliff dies to unite with Catherine. Each scene of death is as tragic as each scene of love in the novel: the characters love the ones only to lose them later, an absurd task (quest) to end up in total failure and devastation. Emily deals with this loss. She shows that there is no eternal bliss in this world. Man belongs to somewhere else. . .

Cold reason is absent in this work; the dramatic construction, the mimetic principle, and the characters' psychologies all display asymmetry, even grotesqueness. Yet, there is unique logic in its structure. Taking its themes from among the Victorian motifs, but refusing the "rationalist" discourse of the Victorians, the work seems to rely more on the Romantic (and Platonic) ideas and ideals. By this way, Bronte creates a profound interest: She bridges the anterior literary tradition (Romanticism) with the present one (Victorianism) and creates a multi-dimensional work. The interaction of the two distinct traditions, consequently, covers more of human nature. While in the novel one may come across with the "disproportionate or monstrous," one also encounters the Victorian values though denounced and criticized. The best representative of this amalgamation is Catherine Earnshaw (Catherine Heathcliff, and Catherine Linton). When Lockwood finds Catherine's diary, he sees three names written on it: "This writing, however, was nothing but a name repeated in all kinds of characters, large and small-*Catherine Earnshaw*; here and there varied to *Catherine Heathcliff*, and then again to *Catherine Linton*" (Bronte, 61) This quandary of the character (Catherine) is in accordance with the dilemma of the critic. On account of this conflict, dies the heroine: She has to make a choice between Romantic (Heathcliff) and Victorian (Edgar). She "unfortunately" follows the dictates of "reason" and Edgar is the "victorious" one in the battle to win Catherine, and Heathcliff, as the "loser," leaves Wuthering Heights just to learn the rules of the game. He returns to take revenge.

We cannot help sympathizing with Heathcliff despite his malevolent nature. It

is because Emily made us believe "what Heathcliff stands for is morally superior to what Lintons [and the other characters] stand for." (Kettle, 207) Even after his marriage with Isabella, and despite the great amount of torture Heathcliff practices on his wife, our sympathy for him continues. With the return of this "demonic" character, Emily changes her tone from the crude Romantic discourse to Gothic or to dark Romantic address. Emily is on the side of Heathcliff and wants us to develop a different moral judgment concerning his violent deeds. She makes use of the Gothic tradition: She creates a dark setting to make Heathcliff take revenge on the "spoiled" characters.

The colors Emily uses in the novel assume darker tonality, and they constitute the dark gist, and hence the Gothicism in the work. As a loner, Emily must have enjoyed the dark side of her own existence. Lockwood's nightmare, the implied existence of Catherine's ghost, the bleak moors and howling dogs, the castle-like building on the Heights all help her create the setting for the most memorable, the phallic-like character, Heathcliff. The passionate yearning of the two women in the novel (Catherine and Isabella) seems to be Emily's own yearning, or an expression of her repressed sexuality. Although the relation between Catherine and Heathcliff is asexual, the great potency for sex is too apparent. Even in death Heathcliff's body is erect, suggesting both the immense libidinous potential in the character, and *perhaps* the necrophilia of the author who was living in a house near the cemetery, and who never had a "relation."

Charlotte Bronte defines her sister as "Stronger than a man, simpler than a child." This definition, however, does mean that she was thoroughly ignorant about the natural (sexual and violent) impulses in herself. Despite her asexual and gentle life, we see, through her work, that Emily needed sex and violence. The rough man he created can be taken as the Byronic hero, who has his concrete roots in English literature. Because of the cultural isolation of Britain from Europe, "Goethe's devil [Mephistopheles] did not influence English Romanticism. (Schock, 26) It was rather Milton's Satan "that answered the artistic and ideological demands of English writers. In particular, the stance Satan assumes-that of an autogenous rival to Milton's God-offered them a mythic base for the attitudes and values they embodied in their replicas of the fallen angel. (Schock, 26) Yet, the yearning of the author for a strong rough male seems to be more dominant an effect in creating this Heathcliff character. Emily, who has never been out of her psychological seclusion, could not have created someone more real than this phallic-like brute character, and Heathcliff is not an enigmatic personality as critics take him to be. He is the product of Emily's "unconscious mind" through whom she asserts that "to be human is a catastrophic condition [and] Creation and Fall [are] one and the same event." (Bloom, 106) The

daughter of a strict priest, and having lost mother and three sisters, she must have encountered the dilemma of life and death in her environment which embodied in itself the two opposites: the lively Yorkshire moors, and the awe inspiring cemetery near their house. As having lost many of the family members because of tuberculosis, she must have become to death, and this reconciliation seems to have made her a social and psychological outcast to her age.

The narrative voice turns back to Lockwood in the final chapter. Discovering the "three headstones on the slope next the moor" (Bronte, 367) he meditates on the tombstones of Catherine, Edgar, and Heathcliff: "I lingered round them, under the benign sky; watched the moths fluttering among the heath and hare-bells; listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass; wondered how anyone could ever imagine unquiet slumbers, for the sleepers in that quiet earth." (Bronte, 367) Finally, love and death are intertwined in the novel and this is in accordance with the philosophy of a loner who feels that death is coming and inevitable. She is thinking of finding peace and tranquility by the quiet slumber in the bosom of mother earth.

The human (not always humane) sides of all the characters make them memorable, and their deaths tragic. Emily creates in her novel a more appealing aura. The amount of the "sublime" in the novel is greater when compared with its Victorian counterparts. Still, however, there is no definition of the novel, and we had better not make any concrete classification. True, the novel carries in itself the motifs of both anterior traditions and the Victorian convention. Yet, the novel is neither Victorian, nor Romantic or Gothic. It is an amalgam merging in itself all the distinct traditions and creating the novel genre anew in the nineteenth century. Fortunately, critics have not yet found a definition for this hybrid. I hope they will not be able to. I like the book to stand all alone on the shelf of my library because I am afraid that anything defined loses meaning.

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