ISABELLA LINTON’S COURAGE IN WUTHERING HEIGHTS: A STUDY

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ABSTRACT
Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights is one of the greatest love stories of all time. The novel published a year before her death in 1848, is a complex piece of work. The book contains so many troubled, tumultuous, and rebellious elements of romanticism. It is the story of two opposing families, the Earnshaws and the Lintons and an outsider called Heathcliff. The Earnshaw family consists of Mr. and Mrs. Earnshaw and their children, Catherine and Hindley, and the Linton family consists of Mr. and Mrs. Linton and their two children Isabella and Edgar. In the course of the novel Heathcliff elopes with Isabella and later on marries her. She is a naïve girl when she first comes in contact with Heathcliff. After the elopement she undergoes a radical change. Heathcliff’s brutality and mockery of love for her transform her into a brave woman. Though she is not a major character, she is a recognizable individual. Despite her appearance in eight chapters in a novel of thirty-four chapters, her presence is enough to get a better understanding of Heathcliff’s true character. This paper aims to show Isabella as a courageous woman.

Wuthering Heights is a novel of revenge, with Heathcliff the revenger. The subsidiary themes of passion, social status, adultery and violence have been intertwined with the main theme of revenge. When the novel first appeared it was called ‘devillish’ as the passions involved in it are exceptionally violent. In the words of David Dichess: “There is nothing quite like Wuthering Heights anywhere else in English literature” (Daichess, 1066). When the second stage of the story begins we see Heathcliff becoming a villain who “… wreaks his vengeance on Hindley, Edgar and Isabella” (Watson, 91). Heathcliff’s arrival to Thrushcross Grange disturbs the happiness of Catherine, Edgar and Isabella. Upon his return he acquires power by taking control of the Heights. Soon after he reappears, Nelly, one of the narrators of the novel, compares him “to a bird of bad omen” and “… an evil beast prowled between it and the fold, waiting his time to spring and destroy” (146). Heathcliff hates Edgar as he has robbed him of Catherine who was the bliss of his life. When Edgar refused to treat him as a social equal his hatred intensifies. Hence: “He not only acts and suffers, but causes others to act and suffer” (Watson, 88). During his regular visit to the Grange, Heathcliff attempts to win Edgar’s sister Isabella. He encourages her foolish infatuation for him to take revenge on Edgar whom he hates. Heathcliff’s pretended love tempts Isabella to marry him. Despite being conscious of her breeding and social class, she
makes an unconventional match with him. She wants a husband to gain independence and the status of a married woman. But Heathcliff degrades her atrociously. It is she who sees and experiences the worst part of his revenge. Later on she exhibits some spirit to get rid of him.

Brontë’s portrayal of Isabella’s character is to be found in the first half of the novel. “She is introduced as part of the Linton family and Edgar’s younger sister” (www.shmoop.com/w-h/l.html). She is young, pretty and trapped within the boring society of her brother’s house. She thinks of Heathcliff as fitting into a heroic role, fancying that he will rescue her from her dull life. “She is one of Heathcliff’s many victims and as such demonstrates the cruelty of his nature” (Gardiner, 93). He pretends to return her love, though inwardly he detests her as she is the sister of Edgar, whom Heathcliff hates for marrying the woman he loved. Isabella’s sister-in-law Catherine tries to dissuade her from Heathcliff by telling her: “He is not a rough diamond – a pearl-containing oyster of a rustic: he’s a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man” (141). Isabella does not want to believe her and mistakes Cathy’s warnings against Heathcliff as a sign of jealousy. The beautiful and fair girl is raised to be a delicate lady for whom he cannot be a match. She disregards Cathy’s warning, accusing her thus: “You are a dog in the manger, Cathy, and desire no one to be loved but yourself” (141). She also goes on to say: “I love him more than ever you loved Edgar; and he might love me, if you would let him” (141). Cathy still tries to restrain Isabella from falling into Heathcliff’s trap. To this Isabella angrily replies: “For shame! for shame! ...You are worse than twenty foes, you poisonous fiend! ” (142). She even ignores Nelly’s advice. Her brother Edgar also warns her that if she elopes with Heathcliff, he will cut off all relationship between the two of them. In spite of the advice, “She becomes infatuated with Heathcliff ... ignores Edgar’s request ...” (http://www.megaessays.com/viewpaper/71146). Nelly also urges Isabella to banish Heathcliff from her mind because he is no mate for a girl like her. Isabella turns to Nelly for support, saying: “Heathcliff is not a fiend; he has an honourable soul, and a true one, or how could he remember her?” (142). Both Cathy and Nelly want to warn Isabella against Heathcliff as they know it very well that he does not have any feelings for her. His only object is to flirt with her and to grab the property which she might inherit as her brother’s heir. But “She is easily mislead by his act, and becomes infatuated with Heathcliff ...” (94) and gladly elopes with him and estranges herself from her only brother and home. One night it is revealed to Nelly by a servant that Isabella eloped with Heathcliff. She was at that time a charming young lady of eighteen, immature in manners. On the night of her elopement she is blind and this elopement causes her transformation later on. All human beings pay little attention to what is right in a given situation. Men are sometimes fated to do the very thing that is wrong for them. She is no exception. She is “… an emotional, giddy girl who had no knowledge of men or their motives, she felt only the physical attraction of a dark, handsome, well-dressed newcomer to her small circle of acquaintances” (91).

By her elopement with Heathcliff she shows sign of her courage for the first time as young women of the eighteenth-century were expected to agree with their parents’ choice regarding husbands. The women of the time are portrayed by most writers as naïves, docile creatures with strong concerns about living up to the prescribed social ideas for respectable women. For her boldness she even leaves her loving brother.

Despite the rigid society: “… runaway marriages were common enough …” (Trevely, 344) in the eighteenth-century England. But it is a bold decision for a woman who lacked courage in her childhood. Since the actions of the novel began in late eighteenth-century England and ended in the early nineteenth century in the year 1802, we have to judge her bravery from the point of view of the society of that period.

Despite her wild nature, Catherine could not dare to elope with her soul mate because of her lack of courage. But the sensitive, weak and
foolish Isabella dares to flee with Heathcliff by disregarding society just for love’s sake. Thus, they come into contact and conflict. She becomes strong in response to the demand of the situation. But on the other hand, Heathcliff takes advantage of her blind affection, and traps her in a tormenting marriage. As a result she is reduced to the status of an abused, hurt and degraded wife. His brutality is so obvious that it seems implausible that Isabella should remain blind to them for long. She receives a sheltered upbringing at Thrushcross Grange and then endures a miserable, uncomfortable life in the hands of her own husband at Wuthering Heights. Actually, this match is impossible as they were brought up in different environments. After the marriage she pays dearly for her cour-age and infatuation and becomes an instrument of revenge by Heathcliff, who treats her like a slave denying all comforts and abusing her frequently. So, he utters to Nelly: “I have no pity! I have no pity! The more the worm writhes, the more I yearn to crush their entrails! It is a moral teething, and I grind with greater energy, in proportion to the increase of pain” (189).

Once a victim of the cruelty and callousness of others, he now likes to inflict suffering on a girl who not only believes him blindly but also left her family for him.

Isabella imagined Heathcliff to be a romantic hero and a strong man. She loved him on the mistaken assumption that he was a thorough gentleman. She soon finds him different, and realizes that he is brutal all through, with no spark of humanity to temper his savage hatred of those whom he considers his enemies. Now she also understands that Heathcliff hates her for just being a Linton, and also knows that his having her in his power will cause her brother Edgar considerable pain and will wreck her life. His abuse of Isabella is purely sadistic as he amuses himself by seeing how much abuse she can take. As soon as Heathcliff begins to ill-treat Isabella, she realizes her folly: “I do hate him— I am wretched” (182).

After her marriage she wrote Edgar an apology and a plea for forgiveness, to which he gave no reply. As a result, she sends a long letter to Nelly, detailing her displeasing ‘welcome’ at Wuthering Heights. The critic Judith Pike has pointed out: “Isabella’s narrative surfaces in a letter to Nelly Dean, offering a highly unorthodox portrait … of the domestic abuse of a young bride from the gentry class” (Pike, 347). In her case she found Wuthering Heights dirty, uncivilized, undesirable. “Isabella describes the ‘inhospitable hearth,’ the ‘dingy,’ untidy hole of a kitchen …” (Saunders, 24). The servant Joseph was rude to her, Catherine’s brother Hindley-a wreck, and his son Hareton was disobedient to her. The contrast from Isabella’s prim and proper lifestyle at the Grange to the more unstable lifestyle at Wuthering Heights leaves Isabella feeling lost. She also finds that: “Desire and social reality are tragically at odds” (Eagleton, 311). Hence, she writes to Nelly: “You’ll not be surprised, Ellen, at my feeling particularly cheerless, seated in worse than solitude, on that inhospitable hearth … where must I turn for comfort?” (176). At Wuthering Heights she sought a secure shelter under the protection of her husband. Unfortunately, she is deprived of the desired security and love from Heathcliff.“Their connection literally produces only destruction”(http://www.online-literature.com/forums/showthread.php.8633)

Wuthering Heights reflects the nature of Heathcliff … Severe, gloomy and brutal in aspect and atmosphere …” (Traversi, 256). His brutality and his delight in his own savagery reach such extreme that at times he seems to her a monster rather than a credible human being. Therefore, her marriage acts as a self-education for her and she decides not to tolerate Heathcliff’s torture any more. For this reason, she writes about her hatred and regret in marrying Heathcliff. In the letter “ … Isabella speculates in terror: ‘Is Mr. Heathcliff a man? If so, is he mad?’ (Cheetham, 35). Actually: “Marriage to Heathcliff toughens her” (93). Hence, she regrets her marriage wholeheartedly.

Though she was a woman of that society which gave much importance to family life, marriage and children, she wants to leave Heathcliff permanently as she finds in this match that love exists only on one side. Although Heathcliff courted and married her, the feelings he
displayed for her were purely hypocritical. He actually hates her. The “love” he pretends to have for her is completely false, the product of deliberate deceit. Earlier, Isabella refused to see Heathcliff in his true character even when he hung her little dog before their elopement. Now she realizes she does not love him, but earlier she loved an image of him which she had created in her own mind. So, Isabella calls him a ‘fiend’ and describes his eyes as ‘the clouded windows of hell’ and is left to rebuild a better world from the ruins of the old. She is soon obliged to give up her silly fancies about him and face the reality.

Hatred in Wuthering Heights is simply the individual’s natural reaction to being deprived of his/her disappointment in love. Thus, Isabella ultimately becomes hateful and courageous. As she gets strong when Heathcliff returns her love for him with cruelty, she decides to go away from him. In the past, by her elopement with the same man she had showed some courage. Before her final escape from Wuthering Heights forever, she engages in a bitter repartee with Heathcliff: “She (Cathy) wouldn’t have borne your abominable behaviour quietly; her detestation and disgust must have found voice” (217). We see her marriage and her disillusionment open her eyes to Heathcliff’s true nature and she gets tough. Ill-treatment from her husband embitters her life and she is not afraid to proclaim her hatred towards her husband in front of him. By deserting Heathcliff she wants to prove that out of mere infatuation she once left her family but for betrayal’s sake she is now forced to leave him. Thus, she also proves that she does not embody the worst traits of the Linton family-physical and emotional weaknesses. If Heathcliff could have been kind and dutiful to her, she would not have showed her rebellious nature by fleeing from him.

After her departure from Wuthering Heights she arrives at Thrushcross Grange to pay her last visit to her childhood home. She arrives at the Grange in a state of physical disarray. She experienced a hatred and fear so powerful that, when she fled from the Heights, she was full of masculine energy and courage. Actually, she attempted to wrest a better world from the harsh conditions which beset her. Without showing any timidity or lack of self-confidence she bravely faces the harsh reality by escaping from Wuthering Heights as well as her terrifying marriage forever. Since she flees running she arrives in a breathless condition. She was almost killed by Heathcliff. When she reaches there she had “... a deep cut under one ear, which only the cold prevented from bleeding profusely, a white face scratched and bruised, and a frame hardly able to support itself through fatigue...” (207). Therefore, we can realize her plight at Wuthering Heights, where she was surrounded by only hatred. Escape from that place is the only solution to her painful marriage. She arrives at Thrushcross Grange but does not want to prolong her stay because that will bring trouble to her brother Edgar. She is not seeking refuge, just assistance. Thrushcross Grange, after her separation from Heathcliff, could have been her safe shelter. But she refuses to remain with her brother, as she knows Heathcliff cannot stand Edgar and may come to disturb him. Consequently, she says to Nelly: “He’d be capable of coming to seek me, to tease Edgar” (207). As she has already created problems for her brother by her elopement with Heathcliff, she does not want him to suffer anymore. For this reason, she decides to go to an unknown destination to restart her life leaving a life of comfort at Thrushcross Grange. By this decision she again shows her amazing willpower and courage.

As a critic has observed: “Emily Brontë’s attitude to human emotion is equally different from that of her contemporaries. Her characters have extremely intense emotions, the most intense in English fiction” (Cecil, 124). So has Isabella. People try to get perfect companions. Marrying without knowing the person fully, Isabella regrets her marriage heartily. It fails because of neglect and jealousy of Heathcliff. It is always necessary, if one is to fully understand the literature of another time and place, to develop a historical perspective, to judge any book’s characters within the context to which they properly belong. Wuthering Heights reflects English society of the late eighteenth-century “... where women were regarded firstly as the
property of their fathers and after marriage, of their husbands" (Reynolds, 89). So, certainly Isabella’s decision to live alone in a pregnant state is a bold decision for a woman of that period considering the rigid moral codes of the then English society. We see a change in her character. When she eloped with Heathcliff she was an emotional, weak, and impractical type of woman. But after her marriage she becomes experienced, mature and spirited. She also acquires the strength not to depend on anybody mentally as well as financially. Thus, in *Wuthering Heights* "Brontë brings in a whole new perspective on love. It isn’t the ballad in tales, or the beautiful quiet bloom between spouses" (http://www.online-literature.com/bronte/wuthering). Before her departure to an unknown destination, she shows her hatred towards Heathcliff as well as courage against him by telling Nelly: “Oh! give me the poker! This is the last thing of his I have about me …I’ll smash it …And then I will burn it! and she took and dropped the misused article among the coals” (207). Heathcliff has made her so bitter that she does not want to have anything, which will remind her of him. As a result, she destroys the memorabilia, as it is a gift, which is given by a man who is to her now no more than ‘that incarnate goblin.’ So, it is evident that power of love changes as quick as time and it can be altered by other powerful emotions.

Isabella withstands her separation alone and does not try to keep her life alive. Thus, she reveals that she is a human mixture of strengths and weaknesses. She takes the decision of leaving her husband forever when it was the convention to expect heroine in a novel “... in white muslin, the immaculate creature who was of sweetness and goodness all compact” (Basu, 315). From Thrushcross Grange she goes to London and there she gives birth to a boy whom she names ‘Linton.’ She shows her bravery and continues to despise her vengeful, tyrannical husband by christening the baby after her paternal surname. Actually, after her disappointment with Heathcliff, in her eyes: “He’s a lying fiend, a monster, and not a human being!” (188), to name the baby after a “monster” is out of the question for her. Even the weak child has been raised in ignorance of his father’s identity. She does this deliberately for the same reason.

Isabella dies thirteen years after the death of her sister-in-law, Catherine. When she dies her son Linton is twelve years old. So, we can understand that she has brought him up all by herself, which is a sure sign of her bravery. Before her death she sends a letter to her brother that she wants him to be the custodian of her son, Linton. Even at her death she does not want to leave her son to his father. She thinks that even to his son Heathcliff will prove to be a devil. Thus, again by this wish she shows her strength of character.

There is great pathos in the fate, largely undeserved, that engulfs the luckless woman Isabella. She becomes a tool in Heathcliff’s plan of revenge. Her love for him is totally killed by his brutal treatment and she is driven to say: “I gave him my heart, and he took and pinched it to death, and flung it back to me ...” (209). The treatment which she receives from him is almost awful and depressing. After she has been corrupted by Heathcliff’s cruelty, she expresses a positive longing for revenge on him by keeping herself away, not by inflicting pain on him. Her desire to personally avenge all her disappointments in romantic love was always keen. Unlike Hindley - who attempted to murder Heathcliff - she decided to torment him verbally. For this reason, we hear a strong voice within her say: “... pulling out the nerves with red hot pincers, requires more coolness than knocking on the head” (209).

The novel was written during the Victorian era where married women had to be obedient to their husbands. That is why it definitely is a gallant decision for her to fight back against him. Isabella is deceived by her husband and is rejected by her only brother, Edgar. Anybody in her position could have been destroyed out of frustration. She is not. On the other hand, she undergoes transformation and shows her amazing will power and great courage in her battle of life. But at the beginning of the story she lacks complexity and her role in the novel was a passive one. Her courageous activities are justifiable. First she takes a bold decision to elope with Heathcliff as her love is not
acceptable to her brother and her sister-in-law. She also does it for her inexperience and lack of maturity. Later on, she paid for her courage as her married life proved hurtful. After her married life she runs away from her husband’s house. But this time the decision is not whimsical as she has been disillusioned and ill-treated by her husband. She takes the decision with her eyes open and by this she shows unusual strength for a woman of her age. From the beginning of their married life Heathcliff had proved satanic. She experienced the worst part of his revenge at Wuthering Heights. When she eloped with Heathcliff she picked a dangerous path like a bold woman. After her horrific marriage she followed the same path. This decision is not fanciful as they did not live in an atmosphere of mutual love, trust and harmony. Rather she was surrounded by hatred and violence. At one point of their married life he had proved himself to be so devilish that he does not care to throw a knife at his wife. Actually, Isabella’s very life is threatened by him. Her pride is wounded and she realizes that to protect her life and to lessen her mental agony she needed to leave Heathcliff forever. Due to her protected life, she had not become emotionally strong before her marriage. But after her terrible experience about her marriage she faced all problems individually and independently. She could have divorced him. But she knew he would not permit her to go as he proclaimed in front of Nelly that he wanted to retain her in his custody as legal protector to inflict pain on her.

As a historian has pointed out, in eighteenth-century England: “Divorce was almost unknown” (Trevelyan, 331). So, we can understand that she does not do the bold things just to claim herself to be a brave woman or for getting unfair advantage. She proves herself a woman of courage out of compulsion and to get rid of her disastrous marriage and the brutality of her husband. Thus, she breaks out of male tyranny and yet earns our respect. Isabella dies pathetically but she works as an active force in the plot of the novel. Her courage has been expressed through her transformation and various events. We learn from Wuthering Heights that if situation compels a person and if he or she gets ill-treated and is deceived, a self-respecting individual can be courageous at any time of his/her life for self-preservation and to seek peace. Thus, Brontë paints a powerful portrait of the radical transformation of Isabella from the pampered and infantile Miss Linton to the hardened Mrs. Heathcliff.

Notes: All quotations of Wuthering Heights are from the text: Brontë, Emily: London: Penguin Classics, 1965

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