Charlotte Brontë
as a Critic of
Wuthering Heights

PHILIP DREW

The faults of Wuthering Heights proceed, not from defective knowledge of human nature, but from inferior technique, from an insufficient acquaintance with the craft of fiction. The story is in general ill constructed, and in its detail often complicated and obscure. In parts it is uncertainly conceived, the pattern of it haunted by bad example—the "novel of edification" and the "Tale of Terror" both lend to it vicious elements.*

Emily Bronte's technique has not lacked defenders in recent years; one may feel that Garrod's objections have been answered in full and that in addition there is now general recognition of the positive virtues of Emily Bronte's style and of the powerful effects of her complex system of narration and of her peculiarly tightly-woven plot, economizing in characters, dispensing with them ruthlessly as soon as they have served their purpose by bearing a child, and generally concentrating the story to a few personages in a single place. The most obvious example of the care with which Emily Bronte works is the ironic correspondence between the two halves of the novel. The younger Catherine, Hareton, and Linton re-enact the parts of Cathy, Heathcliff, and Edgar at Heathcliff's bidding. Catherine's marriage to the sickly and malicious Linton is Heathcliff's bitter caricature of Cathy's

Philip Drew is a member of the department of English Literature, University of Glasgow.

1 For example, The Structure of Wuthering Heights, by C. P. S(anger), (Hogarth Essays, XIX); David Cecil in Early Victorian Novelists (1934); D. Traversi (Dublin Review, CCXXII); J. K. Mathison (NCF, XI); Carl Woodring (NCF, XI); Miriam Allott (Essays in Criticism, VIII).

[365]
marriage to Edgar. This is why the idea of Cathy's ghost is so plausible: in a sense her life is being lived over again.

The effect of this critical preoccupation with Miss Brontë's technique has been to withdraw attention from a direct consideration of the moral implications of the book, although clearly such a consideration is necessary for a judgment of its success or failure, especially of Heathcliff's fitness to stand as the central figure.²

Of the critics who comment explicitly on the book's subject and its moral import one of the earliest is Charlotte Brontë. Although her critical powers are disabled by Garrod, the points she makes in her preface to the edition of 1850 are so different from those which trouble modern critics that they are worth careful attention on their own account, to say nothing of their unique value as the comments of an intelligent and informed contemporary, who was peculiarly well placed to understand the nature of the authoress's achievement.

At the beginning of her preface, Charlotte Brontë apologizes ironically to those too delicately brought up to enjoy the story of unpolished moorland people and to those who are offended by seeing words (presumably "damn," "devil," and "hell") written out in full. She continues by apologizing in the same vein for the rusticity of Wuthering Heights, although she is in fact defending it as authentic and inevitable.

With regard to the rusticity of Wuthering Heights, I admit the charge, for I feel the quality. It is rustic all through. It is moorish, and wild, and knotty as the root of heath. Nor was it natural that it should be otherwise; the author being herself a native and nursling of the moors. . . . Had Ellis Bell been a lady or a gentleman accustomed to what is called "the world," her view of a remote and unreclaimed region, as well as of the dwellers therein, would have differed greatly from that actually taken by the homebred country girl. Doubtless it would have been wider—more comprehensive: whether it would have been more original or more truthful is not so certain.

This point established, she explains how Emily became obsessed with the more "tragic and terrible traits" of Yorkshire life, and how her character was such that she could not understand why anyone should object to the depiction of scenes so vivid and so fearful. Charlotte's next step is to discuss the characters of the book in the light of her knowledge of her sister's imagination and

² Mrs. Allott's article is a notable exception.
of the atmosphere of the Yorkshire moors: it is here that she is most at variance with modern criticism.

She begins, "For a specimen of true benevolence and homely fidelity, look at the character of Nelly Dean." A feature of recent criticism of the book has been the suggestion that Nelly is far from an adequate character—that Emily Brontë wishes us to set her uncultivated, undemanding, homespun, conventional morality in unfavorable contrast to the passion of Heathcliff and the elder Catherine. In support of this, one may observe that she plays a crucial part in the action and that this part is often weak and temporizing. So that Nelly-as-actor often annoys us and disposes us to distrust and even to resist the explicit judgments of Mrs. Dean-as-narrator. There are three reasons for supposing that this is not a deliberate effect contrived by Emily Brontë to cast doubt on Mrs. Dean's value as a source of moral standards. First, she is honest about her own failures, admitting her errors of judgment and her complacency; in fact she so often reflects ironically on her own inadequacies that James Hafley is able to suggest, in a most entertaining article, that she is the villain of the book. Second, many of the foolish things she does are required by the necessities of the plot, and are more accurately seen as clumsiness or obviousness of contrivance than as deliberate devices to discredit her. Third, Lockwood is already set up as the source of conventional urban judgments and Joseph as the source of narrow moral judgments. If we must choose either Mrs. Dean's morality or Heathcliff's, there is no doubt which we are to prefer. Nelly Dean is of the moors: Heathcliff is an incomer. She is shown to be fairly perceptive, kindly, loyal, and, in particular, tolerant. Thus she finds many good things to say about Heathcliff, but on balance she feels bound to condemn him. Since we see the story through her eyes and she is not presented ironically, her verdict carries great weight with the reader. But for her the book would hardly have any point of normal reference. Isabella uses a significant phrase in her letter to Nelly in chapter xiii, "How did you contrive to preserve the common sympathies of human nature when you resided here?"

Charlotte's preface continues, "For an example of constancy and

---

3 For example, by Garrod (Introduction to World's Classics edition, p. x), and by J. K. Mathison (op. cit.).
4 NCF, XIII (Dec., 1958).
tenderness, remark [the character] of Edgar Linton.” This view of Edgar is more favorable than that of most modern critics, who generally regard him as “a poor creature,” but there is good warrant for it in the novel. For example, in chapter xviii Nelly describes Linton’s demeanor after Catherine’s death: “... he was too good to be thoroughly unhappy long. He didn’t pray for Catherine’s soul to haunt him. Time brought resignation and a melancholy sweeter than common joy. He recalled her memory with ardent, tender love, and hopeful aspiring to the better world, where he doubted not she was gone.” A little later she contrasts him favorably with Hindley: “Linton ... displayed the true courage of a loyal and faithful soul. He trusted God, and God comforted him. One hoped, and the other despaired. They chose their own lots, and were righteously doomed to endure them.” I find it impossible to believe that Emily Brontë intended either of those passages to be read as ironical.

Charlotte Brontë’s comments on Joseph and young Catherine are unremarkable, but of the older Catherine she has this to say: “Nor is even the first heroine of the name destitute of a certain strange beauty in her fierceness, or of honesty in the midst of perverted passion and passionate perversity.” This surprising judgment must be considered in conjunction with Charlotte Bronte’s verdict on Heathcliff, which may be summed up by the beginning of its first sentence: “Heathcliff, indeed, stands unredeemed; never once swerving in his arrow-straight course to perdition.”

This is the crucial point in her criticism of the novel. Her assessment of Heathcliff depends on a recognition of his superhuman villainy, whereas modern critics, if they move away from a consideration of the book’s mechanism to a consideration of the moral relations of the characters, usually choose to minimize or justify Heathcliff’s consistent delight in malice in order to elevate him to the status of hero. An article by E. F. Shannon (NCF, Sept., 1959) represents this kind of criticism at its strongest. In the course of his article, Shannon says, “Within the ethical context of the novel, he [Heathcliff] is paradoxically accurate when, near death, he replies to Nelly’s exhortation to penitence ‘As to repenting of my injustices, I’ve done no injustice, and I repent of nothing.’” To decide between these conflicting views, the first step is to see whether or not Charlotte bases her judgment on an accurate
A Critic of *Wuthering Heights*

In the early part of the book, we are led to suspect him of nothing worse than a hot temper, a proud nature, and a capacity for implacable hatred. Indeed until he is sixteen the balance of sympathy is with him, since he has been treated so ill. The worst that Nelly says of him is, “. . . without having bad features, or being deficient in intellect, he contrived to convey an impression of inward and outward repulsiveness that his present aspect retains no traces of” (chapter viii). But all this (except perhaps the word “inward”) could be laid at the door of Hindley’s cruel treatment of him.

However, when he returns after three years absence to find Catherine married to Edgar, it is clear that his character has changed. Catherine herself says (chapter x) “He’s a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man,” and Nelly confirms that he is leading Hindley to perdition. The remarkable thing about this is that Heathcliff has been back at Wuthering Heights for at most four months (September, 1783–January, 1784) and has not yet quarrelled with Catherine: yet she describes his nature so.

He courts Isabella not so much for her property as for revenge on Edgar. That he does not love her he makes plain in chapter x, when he says of her, “You’d hear of odd things if I lived alone with that mawkish waken face. The most ordinary would be painting on its white the colours of the rainbow, and turning the blue eyes black, every day or two.” Later Catherine says to him, “I won’t repeat my offer of a wife. It is as bad as offering Satan a lost soul. Your bliss lies, like his, in inflicting misery” (chapter xi). She goes on to say that Heathcliff is destroying her happiness with Edgar: his conduct in the succeeding chapters bears this out. He runs off with Isabella through malice, despising her as he does so, and before he leaves, hangs her pet spaniel. He says himself, “The first thing she saw me do on coming out of the Grange was to hang up her little dog, and when she pleaded for it, the first words I uttered were a wish that I had the hanging of every being belonging to her, except one.” Isabella writes of him, “He is ingenious and unresting in seeking to gain my abhorrence. I sometimes wonder at him with an intensity that deadens my fear; yet I assure you a tiger or a venomous serpent could not rouse terror in me equal to that which he wakens” (chapter xiii). It may be held that Isabella is not an impartial witness: the point is that her letter,
written a bare two months after marriage, expresses nothing but bitter hatred of her husband, and is itself testimony to his treatment of her. Of this treatment Heathcliff says, "I've sometimes relented, from pure lack of invention, in my experiments on what she could endure and still creep shamefully cringing back" (chapter xiv). Later in the same chapter he says, "I have no pity! I have no pity! The more the worms writhe, the more I yearn to crush out their entrails! It is a moral teething; and I grind with greater energy in proportion to the increase of pain."

Even in his grief for Cathy's death he still behaves cruelly to Isabella; when she has fled from Wuthering Heights after Heathcliff has thrown a dinner-knife at her, she remarks temperately, "Catherine had awfully perverted taste to esteem him so dearly, knowing him so well." Heathcliff must also fall under strong suspicion of murdering Hindley Earnshaw, whom he has already ruined and driven to the brink of madness. He has also knocked him down and kicked him in the course of a quarrel. Nelly asks herself, "Had he [Hindley] fair play?" and Joseph implies that when he set off for the doctor Hindley was far from dead. Heathcliff says that Hindley was "both dead and cold and stark" before the doctor came, but this must be wrong, since Kenneth reached Thrushcross with the news while it was still early morning (chapter xvii). Nelly comments on Heathcliff's bearing after Hindley's death, "He maintained a hard, careless deportment, indicative of neither joy nor sorrow; if anything, it expressed a flinty gratification at a piece of difficult work successfully executed." Thus, having ruined Hindley and made himself master of Wuthering Heights and of young Hareton, and having driven away Isabella and his own child, Heathcliff has completed the first stage of his revenge, much of it during the lifetime of the elder Catherine.

There is then a gap of twelve years while the younger generation grows up. During this time, Heathcliff carries out his plan to degrade and pervert Hareton. Later he insists on possession of his son, Linton, and treats him with notable callousness. Finally he lays his plans to trap the younger Catherine into marriage with his son, first prompting Linton into a correspondence with her, and then telling her that Linton is dying for love of her. He uses his son, who is close to death, simply as a bait for Catherine, not because she will have money (all she will bring Linton is what Edgar has set aside for her, although this is referred to as a "for-
A Critic of *Wuthering Heights* 371
tune”), but to make her wretched. When Linton is very ill, Heathcliff compels him by terror to lure Catherine into Wuthering Heights. “What was filling him with dread we had no means of discerning; but there he was, powerless under its gripe, and any addition seemed capable of shocking him into idiocy.” When they are in the house and the door is locked, Heathcliff says of Linton and Catherine, “It’s odd what a savage feeling I have to anything that seems afraid of me. Had I been born where laws are less strict and tastes less dainty, I should treat myself to a slow vivisection of these two as an evening’s amusement” (chapter xxvii). He seizes Catherine and administers “a shower of terrific slaps on both sides of the head”; he then imprisons her for four or five days, although her father is on his deathbed. “Miss Linton, I shall enjoy myself remarkably in thinking your father will be miserable; I shall not sleep for satisfaction.” He thus forces her to marry his son (exactly how this was done is not made clear) and then sets him against her: he knocks Catherine down and takes her locket. After Catherine’s escape he punishes Linton.

I brought him down one evening, the day before yesterday, and just set him in a chair, and never touched him afterwards. I sent Hareton out, and we had the room to ourselves. In two hours I called Joseph to carry him up again; and, since then, my presence is as potent on his nerves as a ghost; and I fancy he sees me often, though I am not near. Hareton says he wakes and shrieks in the night by the hour together . . .” (chapter xxix).

When Linton is dying, Heathcliff refuses to send for the doctor (“His life is not worth a farthing, and I won’t spend a farthing on him”), and his son dies. When Heathcliff is himself on the point of death, he says, “As to repenting of my injustices, I’ve done no injustice, and I repent of nothing” (chapter xxxiv).

His whole career from the time of his return (September, 1783) to his death (May, 1802) is one of calculated malice: during this time he does not perform one single good or kindly action,* and continually expresses his hatred of all the other characters. So extreme is his malevolence indeed that one might expect him to impress critics as a grotesque villain, like Quilp in *The Old

---

* But notice that E. F. Shannon (op. cit.) makes the following point in Heathcliff’s favor: “Although a reluctant host, he provides Lockwood with a glass of wine, tea and dinner on separate occasions; and during the narrator’s illness he sends him a brace of grouse and chats amiably at his ‘bedside a good hour.’”
Curiosity Shop. But this is far from the case. Melvin R. Watson’s article on “Wuthering Heights and the Critics” (NCF, March, 1949) provides a convenient conspectus. He speaks approvingly of the opinion of Mrs. Robinson: “She insists rightly that Heathcliff is the central figure and that he harms no one seriously who had not either harmed him or asked for trouble.” One can see that this is simply an inaccurate account of the novel, but as Watson’s article shows, it may fairly be taken as representative of much recent criticism of Wuthering Heights. How are we to account for the fact that, although Charlotte Brontë describes Heathcliff’s conduct accurately, her judgment of his character has commanded virtually no support from later writers, and the very transactions on which this judgment is based are ignored? Why, in short, have critics responded so readily to Heathcliff as the hero of the novel and paid so little attention to his more conspicuous qualifications to be considered the villain?

Most obviously, the characters set in opposition to him are gentle to the point of weakness. Isabella, the younger Catherine and his own son are powerless to resist him, Hindley seems a frail old man, Edgar is not a man of action, and Nelly herself, who is Heathcliff’s most persistent opponent, often behaves foolishly at vital points in the action. The reader is thus tempted to admire Heathcliff, as the Romantic critics admire Satan, for his energy and decisiveness, even his ruthlessness. A closer parallel to this attitude to Heathcliff may be found in Sanditon, where Sir Edward Denham speaks approvingly of “the high-toned machinations of the prime character, the potent pervading Hero of the Story,” and contrasts them with “the tranquil and morbid virtues of any opposing characters.” Of course Jane Austen is here satirizing Sir Edward’s modish taste for the extravagances of the Gothic novel. If we discount such highly-charged romantic views of the Hero, what is to be found in Wuthering Heights itself which may be supposed to influence the reader in Heathcliff’s favor?

It is frequently argued that Heathcliff is redeemed by his passionate love for Catherine Earnshaw. This is Charlotte Brontë’s comment:

... his love for Catherine... is a sentiment fierce and inhuman: a passion such as might boil and glow in the bad essence of some evil genius; a fire that might form the tormented centre—the ever-suffering
soul of a magnate of the infernal world: and by its quenchless and ceaseless ravage effect the execution of the decree which dooms him to carry Hell with him wherever he wanders.

In the rest of this article, I shall hope to show that this is a literally accurate description of Heathcliff’s passion for Catherine.

The facts as given by Mrs. Dean are these. When Catherine is fifteen and Heathcliff sixteen, he hears her say that it would degrade her to marry him. She has in fact already accepted Edgar Linton. Heathcliff leaves Wuthering Heights then for over three years: the implication is that he is in love with Catherine. Before she knows that he has left, Catherine makes an impassioned declaration of her feelings for him.

“If all else perished and he remained I should still continue to be. And if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger—I should not seem a part of it. My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods; time will change it, I’m well aware, as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath—a source of little visible delight, but necessary. Nelly, I am Heathcliff.”

This speech is a fine one; it is quoted ad nauseam, and part of its power is transferred to Heathcliff. He is supposed to reciprocate Catherine’s selfless love for him and to be redeemed by it. In fact, he reveals to Nelly and Isabella the selfishness of his love for Catherine and of the means he uses to convince himself that he is actually behaving more nobly than Edgar. This is especially plain in chapter xiv, and culminates in Heathcliff’s derisory comment on Edgar, “It is not in him to be loved like me.” Yet Catherine declares her love for Edgar: “I love the ground under his feet, and the air over his head, and everything he touches, and every word he says. I love all his looks, and all his actions, and him entirely and altogether.” When Heathcliff leaves and stays away for three years, Catherine gives no sign that the universe seems empty to her. On the contrary, she marries Edgar Linton, and Nelly comments, “I believe I may assert that they were really in possession of deep and growing happiness.” Or as Catherine puts it herself, “I begin to be secure and tranquil.” Catherine dies when she is eighteen and Heathcliff nineteen. As adults they are together for barely a sixth of the novel: they meet seldom and when they do
they usually quarrel, until finally Heathcliff is goaded into marrying Isabella.

There is no doubt that this bond between Catherine and Heathcliff is extraordinarily powerful, but it is not a justifying bond. To describe it as “a love that springs from an elemental and natural affinity between them” and to imply that they act as they do merely through a pardonable excess of love, which is the prime virtue, is to fail to recognize its nature. On Heathcliff’s side at least, it is selfish, which should warn us not to confuse it with love; it expresses itself only through violence—notice, for example, the extraordinary series of descriptions of violent physical contact during and immediately after Heathcliff’s last meeting with Catherine; their passion for each other is so compounded with jealousy, anger, and hatred that it brings them only unhappiness, anguish, and eventually death; it is described as the instrument of Catherine’s damnation by Mrs. Dean when she says, “Well might Catherine deem that heaven would be a land of exile to her, unless with her mortal body she cast away her mortal character also.”

In short, while we must recognize that the forging and breaking of the bond between Catherine and Heathcliff provides the novel with all its motive energy, it is fallacious to argue that this proves that Emily Brontë condones Heathcliff’s behavior and does not expect the reader to condemn it. Charlotte’s phrase “perverted passion and passionate perversity” is exact.

We must consider next the argument, as advanced by Cecil, for example, that it was not Emily Brontë’s intention that the reader should condemn Heathcliff, since he dictates the whole course of the novel, brings his schemes to a successful conclusion, and dies happily. A bitter remark of the younger Catherine’s is relevant here. In chapter xxix she says:

“Mr Heathcliff, you have nobody to love you; and however miserable you make us, we shall still have the revenge of thinking that your cruelty arises from your greater misery! You are miserable, are you not? Lonely, like the devil, and envious like him? Nobody loves you—nobody will cry for you when you die! I wouldn’t be you!”

Later in the same chapter, Heathcliff himself admits, talking of the older Catherine,

“She showed herself, as she often was in life, a devil to me! And, since then, sometimes more and sometimes less, I’ve been the sport
of that intolerable torture—infernal!—keeping my nerves at such a stretch that, if they had not resembled catgut, they would long ago have relaxed to the feebleness of Linton’s. . . . It racked me. I’ve often groaned aloud, till that old rascal Joseph no doubt believed that my conscience was playing the fiend inside of me. . . . It was a strange way of killing—not by inches, but by fractions of hairbreadths—to beguile me with the spectre of a hope through eighteen years!”

“Strange happiness,” as Nelly says. At the end of the book, Heathcliff’s domination over the other characters fails, and he finds himself unable to plan further degradation for Catherine and Hareton.

“It is a poor conclusion, is it not?” he observed. . . . “an absurd termination to my violent exertions? I get levers and mattocks to demolish the two houses, and train myself to be capable of working like Hercules, and when everything is ready and in my power I find the will to lift a slate of either roof has vanished! My old enemies have not beaten me. Now would be the precise time to revenge myself on their representatives. I could do it, and none could hinder me. But where is the use? I don’t care for striking; I can’t take the trouble to raise my hand. That sounds as if I had been labouring the whole time only to exhibit a fine trait of magnanimity. It is far from being the case. I have lost the faculty of enjoying their destruction, and I am too idle to destroy for nothing” (chapter xxxiii).

This passage leads on at once to Heathcliff’s death. It is clear that his thwarted love of and vain grief for Catherine became perverted into the sadistic desire for revenge which sustained him for so many years. As soon as cruelty lost its savor, he lost all that was keeping him alive. At the end of his life, Nelly reproaches him for his wickedness (chapter xxxiv), and her remarks are clearly just. They accord precisely with the spirit of Charlotte Brontë’s preface.

The only point which Charlotte urges in Heathcliff’s favor is what she calls “his rudely confessed regard for Hareton Earnshaw—the young man whom he has ruined.” There is a strong resemblance between Hareton and Heathcliff, for both were poor dependents—half servant, half adopted son. Heathcliff perceived the likeness at the time of Hindley’s death. “Now, my bonny lad, you are mine! And we’ll see if one tree won’t grow as crooked as another with the same wind to twist it” (chapter xvii). He takes full advantage of the position.
“I’ve a pleasure in him,” he continued, reflecting aloud. “He has satisfied my expectations. If he were a born fool I should not enjoy it half so much. But he’s no fool; and I can sympathize with all his feelings, having felt them myself. I know what he suffers now, for instance, exactly. It is merely a beginning of what he shall suffer though. And he’ll never be able to emerge from his bathos of coarseness and ignorance. I’ve got him faster than his scoundrel of a father secured me, and lower, for he takes a pride in his brutishness. I’ve taught him to scorn everything extra-animal as silly and weak” (chapter xxi).

The crucial difference is that Hareton does not allow his ill-treatment to make him bitter; he even acquires a kind of fondness for Heathcliff. But this tells in his favor, not Heathcliff’s, for it shows that Heathcliff was not necessarily brutalized by his environment, but rather that Hindley’s ill-treatment of him encouraged a vindictiveness which he later deliberately fostered.

These are the strongest arguments I have found in justification of Heathcliff’s conduct, and, as I have shown, none of them is of sufficient force to avert the reader’s natural censure of his consistent malice and cruelty. The problem therefore is to reconcile our condemnation of his behavior with his dominant place in the novel and in the reader’s sympathies. Clearly, our attitude to the main character of a work of fiction need not be one of moral approval (e.g., Macbeth, Giles Overreach, Tamburlaine, Giovanni, Beatrice-Joanna, Becky Sharp, Pincher Martin), but he must in some way act with the reader’s understanding and sympathy. In the remainder of this article, I should like to suggest one way in which Emily Brontë powerfully develops the reader’s feelings in Heathcliff’s favor.

In the earlier chapters our sympathies go naturally to Heathcliff (i.e., Lockwood’s narrative and the first part of Nelly Dean’s story—up to chapter ix) since he is seen only as the victim of ill-treatment. As Charlotte wrote to W. S. Williams,

“[Heathcliff] exemplified the effects which a life of continued injustice and hard usage may produce on a naturally perverse, vindictive, and inexorable disposition. Carefully trained and kindly treated, the black gipsy-cub might possibly have been reared into a human being, but tyranny and ignorance made of him a mere demon.”

7Letter to W. S. Williams, August 14, 1848, quoted by L. and E. M. Hanson, The Four Brontës (p. 260).
Heathcliff vanishes for three years, and these years are wrapped in mystery. Lockwood makes some historically plausible conjectures about them. “Did he finish his education on the Continent, and come back a gentleman? Or did he get a sizar’s place at college, or escape to America, and earn honours by drawing blood from his foster-country, or make a fortune more promptly on the English highways?” (chapter x). Mrs. Dean has to admit that she does not know: all she can say is that between the ages of sixteen and nineteen Heathcliff converted himself from an ignorant penniless servant to a man with money and black whiskers, a man of whom Catherine says, “It would honour the first gentleman in the country to be his friend.” The mystery remains throughout the book.

After Heathcliff’s return, he dominates the other characters, but, although he is now strong and his enemies weak, his life is one of continual torment. His sufferings engage the reader’s natural sympathies, the more so as he suffers in a particular way, and one that accounts for, even if it cannot excuse, his wickedness. For Emily Brontë implies very strongly that if Heathcliff during his absence has not in fact sold his soul to the devil, he has effectively done so. Every description of him reinforces this implication, starting from Nelly’s first meeting with him on his return. He appears suddenly in a patch of shadow, startling her.

“I have waited here an hour,” he resumed, while I continued staring; “and the whole of that time all round has been as still as death. I dared not enter. You do not know me? Look, I’m not a stranger!”

A ray fell on his features; the cheeks were sallow and half covered with black whiskers, the brows lowering, the eyes deep-set and singular. I remembered the eyes.


“Yes, Heathcliff,” he replied. . . . “I want to have one word with her—your mistress. Go, and say some person from Gimmerton desires to see her.”

“How will she take it?” I exclaimed. “What will she do? The surprise bewilders me. It will put her out of her head. And you are Heathcliff, but altered! Nay, there’s no comprehending it. Have you been for a soldier?”

“Go and carry my message,” he interrupted impatiently. “I’m in hell till you do” (chapter x).
Thereafter, hardly a chapter passes without some indication that Heathcliff is suffering the torments of a lost soul; from the moment of his return he is referred to as “ghoulish,” “a devil,” “a goblin,” “Judas,” and “Satan.” Edgar says that his presence is “a moral poison that would contaminate the most virtuous.” After his marriage Isabella writes to Nelly, “The second question I have great interest in; it is this—Is Mr Heathcliff a man? If so, is he mad? And if not, is he a devil?” Hindley calls Heathcliff “hellish” and “a fiend.” “Fiend” or “fiendish” is applied to him some seven times thereafter. Hindley is a powerful instrument for stressing the damnation of Heathcliff. He says,

“Am I to lose all without chance of retrieval? Is Hareton to be a beggar? Oh, damnation! I will have it back, and I’ll have his gold too, and then his blood, and hell shall have his soul! It will be ten times blacker with that guest than ever it was before!”

Heathcliff himself makes a revealing comment when he learns of Catherine’s illness. He says that if he were ever to lose her, if, for example, she forgot him completely, “Two words would comprehend my future—death and hell; existence after losing her would be hell.” Shortly afterwards Isabella introduces the other word commonly used to refer to Heathcliff—“diabolical.” Heathcliff is described as “diabolical” or “devilish” no fewer than six times: some comment on his infernal powers is thus made virtually every time he appears. Heathcliff’s own outbursts to Catherine have a similar effect.

“Are you possessed with a devil,” he pursued savagely, “to talk in that manner to me when you are dying? Do you reflect that all those words will be branded in my memory and eating deeper eternally after you have left me? You know you lie to say I have killed you; and, Catherine, you know that I could as soon forget you as my existence! Is it not sufficient for your infernal selfishness that, while you are at peace, I shall writhe in the torment of hell?”

Similarly, shortly afterwards:

“Yes, you may kiss me, and cry, and wring out my kisses and tears; they’ll hit you—they’ll damn you. . . . So much the worse for me that I am strong. Do I want to live? What kind of living will it be, when you—O God! would you like to live with your soul in the grave?” (chapter xv).
This idea of souls being separated from bodies and its extension into the idea of ghosts walking the earth because there is no peace for them in the grave are pervasive in the book, and do much to reinforce the suggestion that evil powers are abroad. Heathcliff is particularly given to a belief in ghosts (chapter xxix).

For the rest of the book, Heathcliff is referred to variously as “an incarnate goblin,” “a monster,” “not a human being,” and “a hellish villain”; Isabella refers to his “kin beneath,” and talks of Hell as “his right abode.” She says to Hindley, “His mouth watered to tear you with his teeth, because he's only half man—not so much—and the rest fiend!” (chapter xvii).

Other characters refer to him as a “devil” (twice) and “a goblin.” Nelly wonders whether he is wholly human. “'Is he a ghoul or a vampire?’ I mused. I had read of such hideous incarnate demons.” He says of himself to Catherine, “To you I’ve made myself worse than the devil.” All through his adult life he undergoes what he describes as “that intolerable torture—infernal!” He says to Nelly when he is near death, “Last night I was on the threshold of hell,” and when he dies Joseph exclaims, “Th’ divil’s harried off his soul.”

This network of references and comment serves to mark out Heathcliff as a possessed soul. If the story were expressly narrated on a supernatural level, his career could be described by saying simply that he sells his soul to the devil in exchange for power, power over others, and specifically power to make himself fit to marry Catherine. When however he attempts to claim his share of the bargain he finds that the devil is, as always, a cheat. He has the power he asked for but loses Catherine herself. He is left simply with power, the exercise of which he finds necessary but intolerably painful. Thereafter, he is consumed inwardly by hell-fire and the knowledge of his own damnation.

This would be a metaphorical way of describing what in fact happens. Heathcliff's personality begins to disintegrate when he allows himself to become obsessed by a physical passion for Catherine and deliberately fosters this passion to the point of mania. He sacrifices every other part of his personality to the satisfaction of his passion, until by its very violence it destroys its own object. Once Catherine has gone, Heathcliff is left with no possible emotions except those into which he can pervert his previous obsession with Catherine. He finds that he can demon-
strate that he has feelings only by expressing them as cruelty. This brings him no happiness: on the contrary his power for wickedness is his punishment, rather than his prize, just as his passion for Catherine was not a blessing but a curse. In short, he is destroying himself throughout the book: each act of wanton brutality is a further maiming of himself. “Treachery and violence are spears pointed at both ends. They wound those who resort to them worse than their enemies” (chapter xvii). Time moves swiftly on the moors, and senility sets in very early (Hindley is only 27 at his death), but nobody else ages as fast as Heathcliff. Toward his death, he seems to be consuming his life ever more rapidly, as if the processes of nature had been accelerated by the fires within. He acts like a fiend incarnate, but his actions torture him as much as they torture his victims: they are a part, and the worst part, of the torments of the damned which Heathcliff suffers during his life. When he finds himself capable of a good act, even one so neutral as not persecuting Hareton and Catherine, it is as though his sentence had been at last worked out, and he dies almost joyfully.

The sympathy that we give to him is thus not the sort that we give to the noble tragic hero, nor is it the same as our reluctant admiration of a powerfully defiant villain like Vittoria. It is more nearly akin to the compassion we feel for those who are fated to work out their doom in torment and despair, characters such as Satan himself, Marlowe’s Faustus and Mephistopheles, the Wandering Jew, Vanderdecken, or even Captain Ahab.* It does not lead us to approve of Heathcliff’s actions or even to condone them. Emily Brontë’s achievement is to arouse our sympathy for a lost soul while making it quite clear that his actions are damnable.

All this is comprehended in Charlotte’s preface. She sees that Heathcliff is embarked on an “arrow-straight course to perdition,” and that his love for Catherine is a fire “that might form the tormented centre—the ever-suffering soul of a magnate of the infernal world” doomed “to carry Hell with him wherever he wanders.” She concludes her remarks on his character by saying that but for one or two slight redeeming features “we should say he was child neither of Lascar nor gipsy, but a man’s shape ani-

---

* Mrs. Allott (op. cit.) suggests that Heathcliff sometimes reminds us of Byron’s Manfred or Cain. Muriel Spark and Derek Stanford (Emily Brontë, London, 1953) note this also, but as a major weakness in the drawing of Heathcliff who, they say, “is Byron in prose dress.”
mated by demon life—a Ghoul—an Afreet.” She thus identifies the novel’s main source of evil energy and its central metaphor, which is the parallel between diabolical possession and embittered passion. Her concluding paragraph expresses with some subtlety the extent of Emily Brontë’s achievement in liberating this terrifying energy and yet controlling it.

*Wuthering Heights* was hewn in a wild workshop, with simple tools, out of homely materials. The statuary found a granite block on a solitary moor: gazing thereon, he saw how from the crag might be elicited a head, savage, swart, sinister; a form moulded with at least one element of grandeur—power, . . . With time and labour, the crag took human shape; and there it stands colossal, dark, and frowning, half statue, half rock: in the former sense, terrible and goblin-like; in the latter, almost beautiful, for its colouring is of mellow grey, and moorland moss clothes it; and heath, with its blooming bells and balmy fragrance, grows faithfully close to the giant’s foot.