

Clashes between Nature and Culture in Wuthering Heights

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Abstract: This paper is to explore the clashes between nature and culture in Emily Bronte's novel *Wuthering Heights*. The conflicts between nature and culture have been long argued and the social norms and expectations of the 19th century have influenced Bronte's portrayal of the two conflicting forces. By employing a comparative studying of the lifestyles, the characters and their interactions in the novel, the research method highlights the symbolic representation of nature and culture through a close reading supported by thematic analysis. The inhabitants at *Wuthering Heights*, which is a symbol of nature, are setting in contrast to and conflict with those at *Thrushcross Granges*, which is a symbol of culture and pose conflicts. And the different ways of life and varied loves between the lovers of the two generations at *Wuthering Heights* and at *Thrushcross Granges* can be interpreted as natural and cultural force respectively. Hareton Earnshaw's transformation from a coarse country boy to an educated civilized man symbolizes that eventually nature and culture reach a time of equilibrium by culture's triumph over nature.

Keywords: Emily Bronte; *Wuthering Heights*; Nature; Culture; Clashes

1. Introduction

Wuthering Heights is a story written by English novelist Emily Bronte. It is about the love and hatred between three generations in Yorkshire moors. Heathcliff, a homeless warf, is brought up by Mr. Earshaw, the owner of *Wuthering Height*. After the latter's death he is degraded as a servant of the house when Mr. Earshaw's son Hindley becomes the master. Catherine, daughter of Mr. Earnshaw, has a passionate love for Heathcliff, however, after meeting Edgar Linton, a young gentleman from *Thrushcross Grange*, she feels it

degrading for her to marry the penniless orphan, though she loves him fiercely. Overhearing this confession, Heathcliff disappears and is not heard for a long time. Grief-stricken for the loss of Heathcliff, Catherine falls ill and soon marries Edgar Linton. When he comes back to the moors, Heathcliff is surprisingly improved in manners and wealth. Now torn between her lover and husband, Catherine becomes very ill and dies in childbirth after a last tender meeting with her lover. Heathcliff, after cruelly revenging himself on the two families, finds life unbearable without his dear Catherine. He finally dies.

Throughout the twentieth century, critics have agreed on the greatness of *Wuthering Heights*, which has remained baffling to them. Some critics view *Wuthering Heights* as symbols of storm while *Thrushcross Grange* of calm, two different ways of life-style and spiritual condition. As Cecil points out, "the whole created cosmos, animate and inanimate, mental and physical alike, is the expression of certain living spiritual principles---on the one hand what may be called the principle of storm---of the harsh, the ruthless, the wild, the dynamic; and on the other hand, the principle of calm---of the gentle, the merciful, the passive and the tame". However, "storm" and "calm" can be interpreted as "nature" and "culture", or two different ways of life-style and spiritual condition.

According to *The Hutchinson Encyclopedia*, the definition of "culture" is the way of life of a particular society or group of people, including patterns of thought, beliefs, behavior, customs, traditions, rituals, dress, and language, as well as art, music and literature, while "nature" refers to the living world, including plants, animals, fungi, and all microorganism, and naturally formed features of the landscape, such as mountains and rivers. In short, nature means a man's life close to the natural environment and indicates a simple life before

a man becomes civilized, or the simple state of a thing's or person's innate or essential qualities or character, whereas culture refers to development through training, exercise, treatment, etc. or the customs, civilization, and achievements of a particular time or person. Here in the novel, when nature is mentioned, it means the violence of the natural world and the heart's desire while culture the violence of a society struggling to suppress its humanity, or the emotional control. Similarly, natural love refers to the case when lovers are governed by their passions, which is spontaneous, original, natural or "the stormy", not by reflections or ideals of civility. And the civilized or cultural love points to the polite, refined and reserved relationship or "the calm". Accordantly, the house the characters live in -- Wuthering Heights--serves as a symbol of a similar wildness, whereas Thrushcross Grange suggests a similar refinement in its inhabitants. In Wuthering Heights, the region of the wild Yorkshire moors forms a closed society, which includes two much smaller dual topographical structures. They stand on the defensive against all the outsiders, Wuthering Heights, a symbol of nature, wild, original and untamed, while Thrushcross Grange, a symbol of culture, civilized, tame and moral. As Leavis points out, "This novel, which could be extracted by cutting away the rest, was deliberately built, to advance a thesis, on the opposition between Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, two different cultures of which the latter inevitably supersedes the former" [1]. Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange always stand on opposite sides in terms of settings, lifestyles, characters, and ways of love. And yet, no matter how fierce the conflicts are between them, there will be a time of equilibrium, with one defeating the other.

2. Different Ways of Life at Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange

Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange are more than houses in the novel. They serve as symbols of nature and culture, two different ways of life.[2]

The setting, lifestyle, and characters of its inhabitants at Wuthering Heights are supposedly natural, original, wild and violent. Thus, the house is considered as a symbol of nature. "Wuthering", a Yorkshire word for "weathering", is "a significant provincial

adjective, descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its station is exposed in stormy weather and indicate the powerful north wind blowing over the edge". In fact, Wuthering Heights, located on the wild moors of Yorkshire, deserves its appropriate name. The exterior shape is built to prevent the wind: "the narrow windows are deeply set in the wall and the corners defended with large jutting stones". The interior furniture is suitable for a homely, northern farmer. According to Duthie [3], "Once the threshold is crossed, however, a single step leads to the 'house', a 'huge, warm, cheerful apartment' lighted by an immense fire of coal, peat and wood. The firelight is reflected in the shining pewter on the shelves of a vast oak dresser, and a wooden frame suspended overhead and 'laden with oatcakes and clusters of legs of beef, mutton, and ham,'"... "Upstairs are the bedrooms, reached by narrow lobbies from which wooden ladders lead to the garrets." The interior setting here is different from that of luxury one in the Linton's house.[4]

The Earnshaws are farmers who have farmed their own land and they are not likely to have possessed any investments. People of Wuthering Heights, impress the readers with a feeling of the production of the storm from the very beginning. They use "violence" to express their fierce love and hatred. As a review named "Humanity in Its Wild State" from the Britannia says, "The uncultured freedom of native character presents more rugged aspects than we meet with in educated society. Its manners are not only more rough but its passion are more violent. It knows nothing of those breakwaters to the fury tempest which civilized training establishes to subdue the harsher workings of the soul. Its wrath is unrestrained by reflection; the lips curse and the hand strikes with the first anger". The review is right, the inhabitants in Wuthering Heights lack civilized manner because of the harsher working environment. They act according to their instincts. Heathcliff, owner of the Wuthering Heights in the previous chapters, gives readers a sinister impression: he is not in a hurry to call off his dogs that savage his tenant Lockwood. Then he apologize to his guest, which identifies himself actually with his natural words "Guests are so exceedingly rare in this house that I and my dogs, I am willing to own, hardly know how to

receive them” [5]. His apology is an implication that the outsiders are not welcome in his small closed society.

Thrushcross Grange, by contrast, is a symbol of culture. It is nestled in a sheltered valley. The upstairs library is a sign to prove that the Lintons are more civilized than the Earnshaws. Different from *Wuthering Heights*, Thrushcross Grange has a park with flowers and the drawing-room window is bright, a sign of elegance. It also has the material luxury of the interior. As is shown in the novel, “it was beautiful—a splendid place carpeted with crimson, and crimson-covered chairs and tables, and a pure white ceiling bordered by gold, a shower of glass-drops hanging in silver chains from the centre, and shimmering with little soft tapers”. They are landed gentry with tenants. Inhabitants there are more tender, moral and gentle. Mr. and Mrs. Linton, who die shortly after poor sick Catherine Sr. convalesces at their home, show their kindness and gentility, a result of their civilized training. When the inhabitants of the two houses meet, they will surely come into conflicts. *Wuthering Heights* thus has some gentle and civilized signs brought by Catherine Jr., while Thrushcross Grange has been injected some savage energy by Catherine Sr. Catherine Sr. and Catherine Jr. serve as a bridge between *Wuthering Heights* and Thrushcross Grange. Culture, Thrushcross Grange, and nature, *Wuthering Heights*, have eventually to come into a period of equilibrium. Sooner or later the equilibrium will break out, and the stronger one, culture, will defeat the weaker, nature. That the bushes which are planted by Joseph in *Wuthering Heights* long ago are replaced by the flowers which are brought by Catherine Jr. from her civilized home “Thrushcross Grange” suggests the defeat of nature. Another example is the new married couple Catherine Jr. and Hareton go back to their civilized home Thrushcross Grange after they finish Hareton’s cultivated journey, leaving *Wuthering Heights* to the ghosts as choose to inhabit it.

3. Varied Ways of Love: Natural Love and Civilized Love

As it’s known from the above, *Wuthering Heights*, symbol of nature, and Thrushcross Grange, symbol of culture, experience conflicts, and sooner or later, the latter will suppress the former. That is to say, culture

defeats nature. The varied ways of love between the two generations are thus explored. To begin with, let’s compare the first generation’s love with the second generation’s love as a whole. Then we will talk about the lovers within the first generation and the second generation in a more specific way.

Generally speaking, the first generation’s triangle love of Heathcliff-Catherine senior-Edgar is regarded as a natural way of love while the second generation’s triangle love of Hareton-Catherine Jr.-Linton Heathcliff is treated as the civilized love. As we have mentioned that the natural love is governed by passion while the civilized love is determined by the reflections or the ideals of civility, we can know that the love between Heathcliff and Catherine Sr. is passionate love whereas the love between Edgar and Catherine is governed by the civility, so we can call the former pair natural love while the latter pair civilized love. Among the three people in the first generation, Heathcliff-Catherine Sr.’s love, which is civilized, gentle and moral. Heathcliff and Catherine Sr. love each other violently, ignoring the moral standard of the society. They are not afraid of death, but frightened by their separation. As Catherine Sr. says in her last meeting with Heathcliff before she dies, “I wish I could hold you, till we were both dead”. Even death will not separate them. The union of Heathcliff and Catherine Sr. through death, which is seen by a little boy herding a sheep and two lambs: “They’s Heathcliff and a woman, yonder, under t’Nab, un Aw darnut pass’em.”, means the final triumph of the first generation’s natural and original way of love. That the newly married couple Hareton and Catherine Jr. moves back to Thrushcross Grange, after Hareton finishes his civilized training, suggests that the second generation’s civilized and gentle love has defeated part of Linton Heathcliff-Catherine Jr.’s natural way of love and Hareton-Catherine Jr.’s love at their early stage. From the first generation’s natural way of love to the second generation’s civilized love, we can come to a conclusion that human race will finally advance towards the civilization. Civilization will defeat nature eventually.

Next, let’s analyze the first generation’s triangle love: Heathcliff-Catherine senior-Edgar detailedly. As is mentioned in the previous paragraph, Heathcliff-Catherine Sr.’s

love is violent, fierce, original, wild, and natural. “Much of the wildness of Heathcliff and Catherine can be traced to this period when they ran free upon the moors”. Heathcliff and Catherine Sr.’s spiritual bond is formed firmly in their childhood, especially during the period when they sleep together in their childhood and their hearts become close when they fight against Hindley and his wife. When they come to their teenage, a new kind of love occurs between Catherine Sr. and Heathcliff. “It is not a vaguely spiritual relationship but, in some ways, is sharply defined: for example, Heathcliff becomes very jealous when any other man pays attention to Cathy—he shows a very definable and normal human reaction; in Cathy’s case, her feelings about him become very clear, particularly when he comes physically near her—she becomes agitated and is jealous for his presence, wanting it strictly for herself alone. When he is not there she is always looking for him—her possessiveness, like his, is strongly natural and human” [6].

Apart from that, Heathcliff and Catherine senior both feel that, there exists another self in the universe. Another self for Heathcliff is Catherine senior while another self for Catherine Sr. is Heathcliff. In a way, Catherine Sr is Heathcliff, and Heathcliff is Catherine Sr. Catherine Sr.’s love for Heathcliff is much stronger than that of her love for Edgar, as she explains to her nurse Nelly: “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—he’s always a pleasure to—not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself—but as my own being—so, don’t talk of our separation again—it is impracticable”; “he shall never know how I love him; and that, not because he’s handsome, Nelly, but because he’s more myself than I am. Whatever our souls” . This is Catherine Sr.’s open confession of her fierce and strong love for Heathcliff. Heathcliff also has the same strong feelings towards Catherine Sr. He sees Catherine senior as his life, saying in a world without Catherine Sr. he only leads his life in hell.

They love each other passionately and fiercely. And “only by giving and receiving pain can they express their love”, which show in

Heathcliff’s bitter words, “Don’t torture me till I’m as mad as yourself”. They use violence to torture each other to show their great love for each other. “The difference between the feeling that Catherine has for Heathcliff and the one she has for Edgar Linton is that she responds to Edgar only on the more superficial and shallow level, while the deeper and more spiritual side of her nature is reserved for Heathcliff. She is aware that this love is far more important than the civilized and worldly advantages that Edgar offers”. Yet, Catherine Sr. and Edgar’s love is more superficial. In Catherine Sr.’s eyes, being Edgar’s wife is no more than being a stranger’s wife. While Edgar, who is imprisoned in class and for all his civilized virtues, loves savage-like and energetic Catherine Sr. in his civilized way, which not so strong and fierce as Heathcliff’s. In the scene when Catherine senior locks herself, Heathcliff and Edgar in and she throws the key away, humiliating Edgar by her insults, disloyalty and indifference to what happens to him, it’s known that, between Heathcliff and Edgar, obviously she chooses Heathcliff. So, natural love defeats civilized love of the first generation. Actually, Catherine Sr. has many chances go into Linton’s world, making her become a real lady. actually She is a civilized in Linton’s house after she is seized and wounded by the Linton dog. But she, like Heathcliff, is unable to be assimilated and unable to transform her natural and wild spirit, or to accept completely the imposed politeness and repression of the Lintons, because she will not or can not deny her own nature. This proves that natural love defeats civilized love.

As for the second generation, there exists the same triangle love. At the early stage of their meeting, Hareton and Catherine Jr. love naturally, at least Hareton does. As Pykett says, “the Cathy-Hareton plot may be seen as a repetition of the Catherine-Heathcliff plot, in which the younger Catherine acts out her mother’s unfulfilled relationship with Heathcliff” [7]. Hareton is attracted by Catherine junior at the first sight, and Catherine Jr. also has the same feeling as his cousin. “Cathy has visited Wuthering Heights and has met Hareton Earnshaw. Despite their initial clash, it is obvious that they have found pleasure in one another’s company as they explored the Fairy Cave. While Cathy rejects the idea that the rough Hareton is her cousin,

her interest in him and Wuthering Heights is obvious". But Catherine Jr. refuses to make deeper communication with her cousin out of misunderstanding. Gradually, especially after the death of Linton Heathcliff, Catherine Jr. changes her wrong attitude towards her cousin and helps him to read and write---the symbol of the process of civilization for Hareton. "The fact that Hareton is trying to improve himself shows his growing love for Cathy, and while she repulses him, there are signs she returns his love. It is also obvious that when Hareton hands Nelly's note back to Cathy, rather than giving it to Heathcliff, he is transferring his loyalty to her" [8]. Then the novel resolves by the marriage of Hareton and Catherine Jr.

On the contrary, Catherine Jr. loves Linton Heathcliff in a different way, with a kind of spontaneous and sympathetic love, an instinctive maternal desire love to protect the weaker Linton Heathcliff. "Cathy has dedicated herself to helping Linton and she loves him despite his weakness and tyranny. Her love takes the form of pity rather than passion. The divergence in their temperaments is indicated by their different opinions on what constitutes a perfect day" [9]. They hold different ideas and they can not be each other's self. As Catherine junior tells to her nurse Nelly, "One time, however, we were near quarrelling. He said the pleasantest manner of spending a hot July day was lying from morning till bees humming dreamily about among the bloom, and the larks singing high up over head, and the blue sky, and bright sun shining steadily and cloudlessly. That was his most perfect idea of heaven's happiness---mine was rocking in a rustling green tree, with a west wind blowing, and bright, white clouds flitting rapidly above; and not only larks but throistles, and blackbird, and linnets and cuckoos pouring out music on every side, and the moors seen at a distance, broken into cool dusky dells; but close by great swells of long grass undulating in waves to the breeze; and woods and sounding water, and the whole world awake and wild with joy. He wanted all to lie in an ecstasy of peace; I wanted all to sparkle and dance in a glorious jubilee;" (198). Catherine Jr. feels that in Linton Heathcliff's heaven, she would be only half asleep, while Linton Heathcliff says that in Catherine Jr.'s heaven, he would be drunk and could not breathe. From their quarrelling, we can

understand that they can only be cousins and friends, and no more. On the other hand, it also reflects their different opinions of love. Catherine Jr., like her mother, is eager to pursue the fierce and strong love, while Linton Heathcliff lacks passion to endure or to catch Catherine's passion of love. The love between them is a complicated one, the mixture of the natural love and the civilized love. Their natural part is based on Catherine Jr.'s maternal desire to protect the weak Linton Heathcliff, while weak Linton needs her maternal tender love to comfort his, especially after receiving his father's bad treatment. When Catherine Jr. gets the news that Linton is at the Wuthering Heights, she is more than excited, which shows in the novel, "'What, Linton!' cried Cathy, kindling into joyful surprise at the name. 'Is that little Linton? He's taller than I am! Are you Linton?'" 'That Catherine Jr. runs to Wuthering Heights to see her cousin Linton Heathcliff without listening to her nurse's advice is her unconscious and spontaneous desire to protect her fragile Linton Heathcliff. Their civilized love springs from their civilized education. They are both educated. They show their tender and gentle love in their re-meeting, "The youth stepped forward, and acknowledged himself: she kissed him fervently, and they gazed with wonder at the change time had wrought in the appearance of each". So their natural love will be unconsciously added with civilized love. They can express their love in their civilized, gentle and moral way, because after their marriage they move to Thrushcross Grange, a place "From an internal perspective, it embodies a warm and tender, graceful and peaceful artistic conception" [10].

In fact, "The same relationship that existed between Heathcliff, Catherine, and Edgar is being repeated between Hareton, Cathy and Linton". From what have mentioned in the previous paragraphs, we can know that the same plot appears again: natural way of love is defeated by civilized way of love.

4. Conclusion

Emily Bronte loved her hometown and its people deeply. So she used her only way to express her love to them---writing of their strong love and hatred. Although she herself did not have love experience, yet she witnessed and saw from her brother and

sister's. So she knew love, knew the love characterized by the violent weather and wild characters of the inhabitants of the moors. Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange in Bronte's story are represented as different ways of life; they are symbols of nature and culture separately. Catherine senior at the beginning serves as a bridge between these two different ways of life. She tries to bring them into a whole by marrying the young master of the Thrushcross Grange, but fails, even at the expense of her life. This task is fulfilled by her daughter Catherine Jr., who has to bring a certain kind of equilibrium between nature and culture, and finally defeat in her natural way. The final triumph belongs to culture and civilization in the war between nature and culture, which seems to be the message left by Emily Bronte.

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