

Gothic Structures of Being in Emily Brontë's 'Wuthering Heights'

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Abstract

The current study attempts to uncover Gothic structures of being in Emily Brontë's novel 'Wuthering Heights'. The Gothic could be seen as illustrating a comeback to the mystery of the Middle Ages. We see mystery as a search for the unknown, unconscious part of the being. According to Jung, our past is always underlying the structure of our being, lurking beneath the rational, conscious mind. It is a pivotal part of our spirit, as, '...Without these inferior levels, our spirit is left hanging in the air' (Jung, 1997: 41). Jung states that there is a sort of primitive fear regarding the possible contents of the unconscious, a secret terror towards the 'perils of the soul' (Jung, 1997: 20). It is these 'perils' we are trying to shed light on in the current paper, in the hope of presenting a reading of the novel that will enrich its meaning and clarify some of the mythical patterns which form the basis of the story.

Keywords: Gothic; Jungian interpretation; animus; anima; unconscious

DOI: 10.24818/DLG/2022/39/13

Introduction

The Gothic represents a return to the mystery of the Middle Ages, a search for the unknown, nocturnal part of the being. 'Our modern attitude completely forgets that we carry all our past within us at the lower levels of our rational. Without these inferior levels, our spirit is left hanging in the air' (Jung, 1997: 41). People are afraid to become conscious of themselves, as there might really be something hidden underneath the veil. There is a sort of primitive terror regarding the possible content of the unconscious, which is why it is preferable to give 'thorough consideration' to factors outside consciousness.

There is a secret terror towards the 'perils of the soul' (Jung, 1997: 20). And there are good reasons for that, as we permanently live on a volcano that can destroy everything around it.

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The Victorian tension between *Romanticism* and *Rationalism* can be translated in terms of tension between the *unconscious* and the *rational* part of the being.

Methodology and critical objectives

In the current paper, we shall be applying Jungian concepts, related to the mythical /archetypal structures which can be found in all literary texts and which can contribute to a deeper understanding of the works of art. It will be a form of textual analysis, drawing on Jung's findings and hoping to provide a more complete image of a novel whose interpretation has often stopped 'at the surface', the novel being initially seen as nothing more than an outrageous attempt at challenging Victorian morals and boundaries. We aim at uncovering deeper meanings of the characters, situations and symbols in the novel and to contribute to a more nuanced and complex picture of what we deem as one of the most original and underrated novels in literary history.

The critical reception of 'Wuthering Heights'

'Wuthering Heights' (published in 1847) was not well-received by its early reviewers. Published under the pseudonym of Ellis Bell, the novel presented a challenge for contemporary readers. It gave Victorian audiences 'a sense of moral complexity that was probably difficult to process at that time' (<https://transitionspostgradjournal.wordpress.com/2021/02/06/exploring-themes-transitions-as-shifting-receptions-wuthering-heights-1847/>).

Victorian reviews of the novel in question, which were "impressionistic rather than systematic" (Jadwin, 2016: 50), were harshly criticizing its characters from a moral point of view. 'Wuthering Heights' was not very well received in the United States, either (Thompson, 2016: 30).

Between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, the critical fortunes of 'Wuthering Heights' began to change. Critics looked at it from fresh perspectives and with novel sensibilities. The aesthetic, as well as formal aspects began to be considered more attentively. The critical treatment of Emily Brontë's novel in the 20th century marks an important shift in how novels were interpreted. The character of Catherine Linton was read in what may now be defined as a 'feminist' light (Ingham, 2006: 219-20). Due to formalist and poststructuralist theories of the novel, 'Emily

Brontë's brilliant novel was finally recognized as such in the twentieth century, being seen as a 'highly ambiguous rather than morally irreprehensible text' (<https://transitionspostgradjournal.wordpress.com/2021/02/06/exploring-themes-transitions-as-shifting-receptions-wuthering-heights-1847/>).

The Gothic Novel

The first English Gothic novel was Horace Walpole's 'The Castle of Otranto' (1765). It was fast copied by other novelists and it soon became a genre in itself, taking its name from Otranto's medieval – or Gothic – setting.

Gothic novelists set their novels in times like the Middle Ages and in faraway places like Italy (Matthew Lewis's 'The Monk', 1796) or the Middle East (William Beckford's 'Vathek', 1786) (http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel_19c/wuthering/gothic.html).

What makes a novel Gothic?

We should have a mix of at least some of the elements that follow: a castle, ruined buildings, dungeons, crypts, or spooky basements or attics, extreme landscapes, omens and ancestral curses, magic, supernatural manifestations, a villain, horrifying events, and so on.

Elements of the Gothic are found in Sir Walter Scott's novels, Charlotte Brontë's 'Jane Eyre' and Emily Brontë's 'Wuthering Heights', as well as in Romantic poetry (for example, in Samuel Coleridge's 'Christabel', Lord Byron's 'The Giaour', and John Keats's 'The Eve of St. Agnes', http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel_19c/wuthering/gothic.html)

Wuthering Heights as a Gothic novel

The novel definitely contains Gothic elements. Love crosses the boundary between life and death. Moreover, 'Brontë follows Walpole and Radcliffe in portraying the tyrannies of the father and the cruelties of the patriarchal family' (http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel_19c/wuthering/gothic.html).

More Gothic elements in the novel include: imprisonment and escape, flight, the persecuted heroine, ghosts, suggested necrophilia and revenge. 'Like the conventional Gothic hero-villain, Heathcliff is a mysterious figure who destroys the beautiful woman he pursues'

(http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel_19c/wuthering/gothic.html).

We can, thusly, conclude that the novel is unquestionably a Gothic one, although a much more original version of the genre than most of its similar 'brothers and sisters'.

1. Main characters: Heathcliff

In Emily Bronte's novel, Heathcliff stands for the unconscious, and he finds his counterparts in the rational presence of Mr. Lockwood or of Nelly Dean. The relations Heathcliff establishes in the novel are far more complicated than that, but the observation that he represents the unknown is essential.

Starting with his name, made up of 'heath' – meaning 'wilde herbs' and suggesting 'heathen' – pagan and 'cliff' – the rough edge of a hill, Heathcliff announces his presence as a terrifying one. He stands for nature, or rather for the dark natural powers, for the chaotic forces lying underneath the rational surface of the being.

Freud argued that, in the Genesis, the world was made out of chaos, so there is still chaos in it. This leads to the conflict between *conscience* – the super-ego, the metaphysical self and the *subconscious* – the id – an amalgam of dreams, desires and instincts that continually undermine the efforts of rationality (Freud, 'Conscious, preconscious, and unconscious', quoted in BOAG, 2020: 20). We would find it hard to disagree with Freud's views on the matter.

When Ghilgamesh provokes the Gods – Jung says (Jung, 1997: 20) – through his pride and hubris, they invent and create a man who equals Ghilgamesh in strength, in order to end the unlawful ambition of the hero. When subjecting everything to the inflexible law of reason, nature somehow breaks loose and takes her revenge, in the form of nonsense. That is what happens in 'Wuthering Heights'.

When choosing Edgar Linton – the civilized, rich gentleman, a dignified representative of reason and rationality, Catherine upsets the powers of nature, so Heathcliff's revenge starts destroying the lives around him.

To give just an example of lives being destroyed, Heathcliff treats Hindley's son exactly in the same manner in which he was treated, as a

child. Hareton is never taught to read and write and becomes a rude, short-tempered adult.

Dreams

Gilgamesh escaped the Gods' revenge. He had warning dreams, and he took them into consideration. They showed him how to defeat his enemy. But how can an intelligent man be so superstitious as to take dreams seriously?

'The general prejudice against dreams is only one of the symptoms of a much graver phenomenon – underestimating the human soul, taken as a whole' (Jung, 1997: 20).

Another representative of rationality – Mr. Lockwood – has a dream he attempts to interpret in rational terms. According to Pererius, there are four causes for dreams: physical illness, a powerful emotion, the power and cunning of demons – of a pagan God or of the Christian devil –and God's will' (Jung, 1997: 22).

Mr. Lockwood states the cause of his dream to be 'bad tea, drunk in a terrible disposition' (Bronte, 1995: 27) and the branch of a tree beating against his window-pane. He cannot accept that dreams are the voice of the unknown, and, even in his dream, he tries to fight the powers he cannot understand. The mystery and darkness of the night frighten him, and he attempts to block the window (in his dream) with books. The books represent the rational against the unknown, but they do not prove to be effective. Blood and the desperate call of the ghost invade the room, and Lockwood's mind.

One of the perils of the soul is, for instance, losing one's soul. This happens when part of the soul re-becomes unconscious – that is, during sleep. The Talmud says to 'take the dream for what it is', to recognize its special value. Lockwood prefers to escape, to 'lock' his mind to the perils of the unknown. Throughout the book, he remains an outsider; he is 'the stranger' in the story. The image in his dream, Catherine's childish face – the image he does not want to accept, may be seen as his 'anima' – the feminine image of his soul.

'Homo Adamicus'

In myths, there is the idea of the coexistence of a masculine and a feminine principle in the same body – the idea of the divine couple, or of the hermaphrodite nature of the Creator. The inner androgynous being,

'homo Adamicus', appears in a masculine shape, but carries always with him Eve, his woman, hidden inside his body' (Jung, 1997: 40).

Catherine's affirmation, 'I am Heathcliff' obtains, in this light, a special meaning, and their love becomes an archetypal romance (the demon lover). Nelly Dean is making frequent comparisons between Heathcliff and the devil. Cathy (the second Catherine) makes, though, the most appropriate comparison when she says: 'You are miserable, are you not? Lonely, like the devil, and envious like him' (Bronte, 1995: 37).

The devil is seen as a prisoner, suffering the most damnable tortures, and merely consoling himself by finding fellow-sufferers.

'Like Marlowe's Mephistophilis, Emily Bronte seems to favour the devil's being the chief prisoner, and like Marlowe, too, she places hell on earth:

*'Hell has no limits, nor is circumscribed
In one self place, but where we are is hell
And where hell is, there must we ever be'* (Winnifrith, 1988: 50).

2. Can salvation be won by suffering?

Much of the sacrifice and despair of Emily Bronte's poems seem purposeless, just as much of the grimness and of the brutality of her novel seem to have no message of hope. However, 'Wuthering Heights' seems to suggest salvation (not in its religious sense) can be won by suffering. The attraction of the Byronic hero, beautiful but damned, leads to the image of Heathcliff, who refuses a Christian burial, or Christian values, and is in a perpetual state of rebellion. He seems to take delight in his suffering, to live through his pain.

The Victorians talked openly of hell and damnation. Religion channeled off sexual feeling. 'In the twentieth century the marriage bed is openly discussed and the death bed has become a taboo; in the nineteenth century the roles were reversed' (Winnifrith, 1988: 52).

The fear modern people feel towards death is an expression of the Gods' disappearance. 'The modern spirit has forgotten those old truths that speak about the death of the Old Adam, creating a new man and spiritual rebirth' (Jung, 1997: 41).

Emily Bronte held the following set of axioms: Hell exists only on earth, and no soul suffers torment after death. A soul that has suffered sufficiently on earth attains its heaven. A soul that has not suffered is in

limbo for a time, but is redeemed by others' sufferings if not by its own, after enduring 'the poena damni', deprivation of the desired heaven:

*'No promised Heaven, these wild Desires
Could all or half fulfil;
No threatened Hell, with quenchless fires,
Subdue this quenchless will.'* ('The Philosopher' – Poem by Emily Bronte, quoted in Winnifrith, 1988: 53)

'Heaven' and 'Hell'

In 'Wuthering Heights', 'Heaven' and 'Hell' are used as images of earthly joy and discontent. Heaven can be different for different people, as each man carries in him his own heaven and hell. For example, Linton and Cathy have theirs:

'He wanted all to lie in an ecstasy of peace; I wanted all to sparkle and dance in a glorious jubilee. I said his heaven would be only half alive; and he said mine would be drunk.' (Bronte, 1995: 20)

From the quoted fragment, we can entail that Catherine seems to be closer to a more joyful version of life (or after-life), while Linton is more partial to a bleaker representation of these.

Place and identity

The heaven Catherine imagined (seen through the window at Thrushcross Grange) does not seem to be her home. Place is closely linked with identity in 'Wuthering Heights'. Thrushcross Grange is a place where nature is not allowed, a civilized, tamed place. It is not suited for either Heathcliff, or Catherine – who are kindred-spirits – as it does not allow the full expression of their freedom.

'Wuthering Heights', on the other hand, is much closer to nature; it is characterized by a fire always burning, which suggests Heraclitus's symbol of life – 'pyr aei zoon'; it is isolated and anti-social, intruders are not welcome there (for instance, Lockwood); it is a primitive, wild place.

3. Conclusion

The old naturalist philosophers² represented Trinity through the three 'volatilia' – water, air and fire. The fourth element was 'somaton' – the earth – which represented both the feminine component and the evil one. We think, taking the cue from the ancient Greek philosophers, that Catherine and Heathcliff do not belong in a Christian heaven. As she says: 'Heaven did not seem to be my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth' (Bronte, 1995: 57). They are organically parts of Earth, older than Christianity, heathen and free.

In the study, we applied Jungian concepts, uncovering mythical /archetypal structures. The textual analysis, drawing on Jung's theories, provided a more complete image of the novel, as well as deeper meanings of the characters, situations and symbols in one of the most original and underrated novels in literary history.

A lot of the sacrifice and despair of Emily Bronte's poems seems purposeless; also, much of the grimness of her novel seems to have no message of hope. However, 'Wuthering Heights' seems, in our view, to suggest that salvation (though, not in its religious sense) can indeed be won by suffering.

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3. http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel_19c/wuthering/gothic.html, retrieved 29 July 2022

² Pre-Socratic philosophers, in particular the Milesians (Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes), as well as the atomists (Leucippus and Democritus), were named by their peers and followers "the physikoi" (the term comes from the Greek φυσικός or physikos, which means "natural philosopher", because they looked at natural causes, often overlooking any role of the gods in the creation or workings of the world (O'Keefe, 2010: 11-13).

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