Does the first half of the novel invite or suppress our sympathy for Heathcliff?

The critic David Daiches argues that the central question in Bronte’s Wuthering heights is “who and what is Heathcliff?” Indisputably, Heathcliff is a complex character, who evokes both feelings of sympathy and antipathy, and the reader is unsure how to respond to his character. In her creation of his character, Bronte has defied the rigid “saint” or “sinner” character stereotypes of the Victorian novel and instead has produced Heathcliff, a completely unconventional character who holds both characteristics. Bronte’s portrayal of Heathcliff in fact conforms to many aspects of the typical gothic villain as defined by David Punter as “always the most complex and interesting character” and “awe-inspiring... resourceful... evil...mysteriously attractive”.

AO4: Detailed consideration of contexts of production – typical characters in Victorian period and how this is challenged

AO1: Clear written expression and detailed consideration of task and text. Logical argument made

As we first meet him, the childhood Heathcliff is in a situation of destitution; a ‘dirty, ragged, black-haired’ foundling from the streets of Liverpool, he is immediately disregarded as ‘gypsy brat’ and is referred to as ‘it’. This creates a feeling of sympathy towards Heathcliff; as a deserted child, he is vulnerable and requires compassion rather than the hostility that the Linton family shows. The impression that Heathcliff is an outcast is further emphasised by the fact that the name ‘Heathcliff’ is singular. In the Victorian era, the family name was an object of prestige, honour and identify; to bring disrepute on the family name was unthinkable. It is symbolic, therefore, that Heathcliff owns no family name. This inferiority adds to Heathcliff’s status as an isolated gothic protagonist who faces entrapment at the beginning of the novel.

AO4: Specific and relevant contexts of production made – detailed and embedded into analysis

AO2: Some consideration of language features here and relevant, specifically chosen quotations

The ill treatment of Heathcliff is not only found in the confines of the Earnshaw household. When he and Catherine journey to Thrushcross Grange to observe the Sunday routine of the Linton family, Catherine is attacked by a bull-dog. Heathcliff acts courageously, striving to save his true love Catherine and ‘got a stone, thrust it between [the dog’s] jaws, and tried with all [his] might to cram it down [the dog’s] throat’. Despite this loyalty to Catherine, Heathcliff is sent away in disgrace, having been categorised as an ‘out-and-outer’ and a ‘foulmouthed thief’. Mrs Linton also remarks that he is ‘quite unfit for a decent house’. This emphasises the social class system that was so prevalent in the Victorian era; Heathcliff was far below the Lintons and Earnshaws in the social hierarchy, so once again was disregarded. Particularly for a modern reader, this injustice causes further feelings of sympathy for Heathcliff.

AO3: Some consideration of different interpretations – e.g.: the modern reader vs the Victorian reader.

AO1: Fluent style. Confident expression and clearly kept sharp focus on task and text.

Even in the strong love relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine, it is the social caste system that divides. Catherine reveals her dilemma to Nelly in the presence of the concealed Heathcliff: ‘it would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now.’ It is at this betrayal that Heathcliff leaves, feeling an utter sense of worthlessness and dejection. The reader empathises with Heathcliff; the one person who truly loves him has now deserted him for the social status and his mortification is evident at the three year absence that follows. Bronte highlights Heathcliff’s characterisation as gothic protagonist here as he is further removed from society and becomes the isolated wanderer, and all the time, building up his resented, anger and hatred in preparation of seeking revenge. As Watts has suggested, Heathcliff fits the archetype of “brooding...ruthless” and eventally “tyrannical” gothic hero-villain.

AO2: Some consideration of structure and development of character across the text

AO3: Exploration of links between character and the gothic genre – confident use of critical material.

There is a change in Heathcliff as he returns; as Donna Woodford denotes in her essay examining the recurring patterns in Wuthering Heights: “Heathcliff, the former victim of tyranny, becomes yet another tyrannical man ruling Wuthering Heights.” Indeed it is ironic that Nelly considers him to be ‘reformed in every aspect...quite a Christian-offering the right handoff fellowship to his enemies all round’, when Heathcliff has just voiced his plan to ‘settle [his] score with Hindley’. This is a clear sign of his plan of revenge, and also reveals the deceiving nature that Heathcliff has.

Catherine discloses Heathcliff’s true character as a ‘fierce, pitiless, wolfish man’ to Isabella. This animal imagery shows the rough and inhuman side to Heathcliff, revealed later in the novel in his mistreatment of Isabella, Linton and Cathy. Catherine warns ‘he’d crush you like a sparrow’s egg’ and exposes his love for money and wealthy: ‘Avarice is growing with him a besetting sin.’ Here the reader is less sympathetic towards Heathcliff, and the words ‘pitiless’ and ‘crush’ show Heathcliff’s callous nature.

AO1: Clear, logical argument addressing both parts of the question “supress” and “invite”

AO2: Precisely chosen quotations from the text

This callous nature is further emphasised in Heathcliff’s words to the dying Catherine. He reminds Catherine that it was by her own will that their love which ‘misery, and degradation, and death, and nothing that God or Satan could inflict would have parted’ has ended in misery. He also implores the dead Catherine to haunt him: ‘may you not rest, as long as I am living! You said I killed you. Haunt me then!’ Such words are shocking to the reader and evoke feelings of indignation that Heathcliff could torment the mind of a dying woman. However, his motive is love; he cannot bear to live without his ‘soul’, and the reader is compelled to feel sympathy at the situation he is in. As Woodford states: “[Catherine’s] death...orphans him for the second time’, and this makes Heathcliff vulnerable and incomplete once again.

In conclusion, the complexity of Bronte’s writing means that despite Heathcliff’s tyrannical nature in the later part of the novel, the reader still sympathises with him. Winnifrith notes that: “Heathcliff’s cruelty and Cathy’s selfishness do not prevent them from being attractive.” No matter how Heathcliff, in particular, acts we sympathise because of his rejection at the beginning of the novel, and the injustices that he suffers as a child at the hands of Hindley and the Lintons.

**WWW:**

AO1: Confident written expression, logical argument and appropriate vocabulary used throughout

AO2: Some consideration of language and structure, with excellent use of quotes.

AO3: Exploration of critical material was confident and different considerations of Heathcliff’s character throughout essay.

AO4: Stated off strong with specific link made to relevant contexts and links to the gothic genre.

**Target:**

AO2: More detailed exploration of language, form and structure needed