Life on the edge

opposition and fragmentation in wuthering heights

Central to Emily Brontë’s passionate and violent novel is the setting up and pulling apart of oppositions. Andrew Green suggests that in this way Brontë challenges the very rules and boundaries on which society depends.

**Gothic: a genre of opposition**
As has repeatedly been observed by critics, the gothic is a genre that resides on the borders and extremes of experience; it thrives on opposition and division and has, at its heart, uncertainty, the unsettling and the indefinable. Wuthering Heights is no exception. It deals with questions of moral, social, religious and personal doubt. To explore these questions, Brontë presents her readers with a novel of mirror images, doubles and oppositions. Wuthering Heights violently juxtaposes good and evil; innocence and guilt; freedom and imprisonment; the pursuer and the pursued; the moral and immoral; the natural and supernatural, and the living and dead. A novel in which such oppositions remained distinct would present a reassuring, morally certain world. This is not the world of the gothic and is not the world of Wuthering Heights: Brontë subjects these oppositions to intense pressure, until they are revealed to be unstable, each implicated in the other: not only does it become difficult to tell the difference between good and evil, moral and immoral but even between living and dead.
The impact of such oppositions and their collapse is profoundly unsettling for the reader. The ambiguities in the novel lead to an ambivalence in the readers’ attitudes towards the characters and events. This encapsulates the essentially contradictory and fragmentary nature of the gothic genre. As David Punter argues in The Literature of Terror:

Gothic writers work – consciously or unconsciously – on the fringe of the acceptable, for it is on this borderland that fear resides. In the best works, the two sides of the border are grafted onto each other.

As a result, he suggests, gothic works are ‘fragmentary, inconsistent, jagged...’ If Gothic works ‘do not come out right’, this is because they ‘deal in psychological areas which themselves do not come out right.’ That is the form through which the gothic novel enacts its themes. The growing complexity of the relationships, motives and actions of the characters is both generated by and reflected in the central structural methods: the cycles of repetition, the echoes set up across and down the generations and the collapsing oppositions.
The behaviours and characteristics descending through the generations of Earnshaws and the Lintons, create an inescapable vortex of violence and hatred, exaggerated through the repetition in naming. In conjunction with the complex time scheme, Brontë’s manipulation of the names ensures that the reader, like Lockwood, is repeatedly destabilised.

**The doppelganger and oppositional pairs**
A frequent motif in gothic novels is the double or doppelganger. While the English term double suggests exact repetition – a twin – the doppelganger is far more sinister, used to suggest the possibility of the evil side of a character: the monster in Frankenstein, for example, can be understood as the destructive forces at work within Victor Frankenstein’s psyche; Mr Hyde, in Robert Louis Stevenson’s novella Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, is the dark uncontrolled force of science within the respectable Dr Jekyll; in James Hogg’s dark tale of obsession The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner, the double is recognisably satanic in provenance.

In Wuthering Heights, Brontë exploits the motif of the double and the doppelganger, not only in the character but in her presentation of oppositions as inextricably linked.

Lockwood – a narrator we quickly come to recognise as self-absorbed and wholly unreliable – begins by greeting Heathcliff as his double. He is delighted to meet another man who is weary of the world:

Mr Heathcliff and I are such a suitable pair to divide the desolation between us.

However, it is immediately apparent to the reader that this ‘pair’ have little in common; where Lockwood constructs himself within a literary stereotype – sensitive, disillusioned, bored with society and misanthropic – Heathcliff is the real thing, fuelled by a burning hatred of society. The reader, like Lockwood himself, shifts to interpret the two men as opposites: indeed they might be seen to ‘divide’ the world between them, an interpretation reinforced by their names (wood v. heath). Lockwood represents acceptable gentility; Heathcliff, of unknown parentage, is brutal without the patina of civilisation and polished society.

The ease with which it is possible to attribute opposite personal characteristics and social values to the two men, makes the collapse of these oppositions all the more shocking. Throughout the first three framing chapters this oppositional relationship is questioned and blurred. Through the character of Lockwood the values of civilised society – the society which sets itself up in opposition to the raw, uncultivated world of Wuthering Heights – are compromised, revealed as implicated in the violence it apparently shuns. We see this in Lockwood’s brutal treatment of the dogs; the violence of his response to his humiliation; the verbs and adverbs used to describe his second visit to the Heights (‘ejaculated’, ‘grasped’, ‘knocked’, ‘shook’, ‘vehemently’) and most particularly in his rubbing of the waif’s wrists until they bleed.

I pulled its wrist onto the broken pane and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bedclothes

It is an opposition which is repeatedly established throughout the novel only to be undermined: young Edgar and Isabella Linton fight over the dog, pulling it apart; the dogs protecting the superficially civilised Thrushcross Grange attack and seriously injure Cathy; Linton ‘winks’ at the violent treatment of Catherine by Heathcliff; Frances is encouraged to pull the hair of Heathcliff as he passes. All of these examples of violence are taken from the ‘civilised’ world: domestic violence is seen and accepted by all the characters including the ‘gentlemanly’ Lockwood as a normal part of everyday life.

As David Punter suggests, the gothic novel explores its themes through its structure and this is seen particularly clearly in the destabilising of conventional oppositions in Wuthering Heights. So too is the marginal position that the gothic occupies both in terms of its place among literary genres and its exploration of liminal spaces – the places on the edge, at the boundary. In Wuthering Heights Brontë repeatedly ensures these boundaries are crossed or broken: Cathy declares that Heathcliff is more herself than she is, destabilising the boundary between the self and other; she continues to exert influence after death; windows are shattered violating the limits society establishes between the inside and outside, nature and culture, civilised and natural and so on. In this gothic novel the rules by which we expect the world and society to operate are not simply broken, they are shown not to apply; appropriately for a novel of collapsing oppositions, this is both frightening and liberating.

**Wuthering Heights and King Lear – a literary doubling**
The doubling and oppositions which pervade Wuthering Heights thematically and structurally extend outwards beyond the limits of the novel, not only to the gothic novel but to Shakespeare. The number of connections between Wuthering Heights and King Lear suggests Brontë is deliberately echoing themes, characters, relationships, motifs and even names. It is therefore worth spending some time exploring the allusions.

Thematically the two texts share a good deal of common ground. The senseless and self-perpetuating violence and self-interest of Shakespeare’s play relates directly to Brontë’s world. Like King Lear, Wuthering Heights is marked by apparently senseless and extreme brutality, wild veering between sanity and insanity, and familial jealousy. In addition, both texts closely consider the implications of such individual behaviours and emotions on the society. In the case of King Lear, these are worked out on national, international and personal levels, while in Wuthering Heights the effects are explored in a crushingly domestic scenario.
The connection is explicitly made by Lockwood when like the hapless King Lear in his daughter’s house, he is imprisoned and maltreated by the servants at the Heights. Lockwood observes:

then, hatless and trembling with wrath, I ordered the miscreants to let me out – on their peril to keep me one minute longer – with several incoherent threats of retaliation that, in their indefinite sense of virulency, smacked of King Lear.

While alerting the reader to the possibility that this novel will also explore conflict between the generations, greed, power, alienation and madness, it also draws attention to the difference between Lear’s and Lockwood’s situations, pointing up the melodramatic, self-aggrandising character of our narrator. As has been suggested before, Brontë employs doubles as much to draw attention to difference as similarity.

**Stormy heaths**
The storm is a common motif in literature, and particularly the gothic novel – with which Shakespeare’s play shares many features – symbolising uncontrolled power, the world gone mad, the expected order violated. In Lear and Wuthering Heights storms can be read as symbolising and externalising the inner turmoil of the characters, familial division, insanity, anger, hatred, brutality and social upheaval.

The motif of the storm is inextricably linked to the setting (and motif) of the barren heath. In both King Lear and Wuthering Heights a barren heath is used to symbolise both the barrenness of the characters’ lives and the wildness of passion and brutal emotion motivating their actions. It is significant, however, that the wilderness also proves a place of recognition in both the novel and play: through his insanity and privations on the heath, Lear works his way back towards a truer sense of value and tragic reconciliation with Cordelia; through the frightful ‘madness’ of their lives on the moors, the Earnshaws and the Lintons finally come to realise (in the figures of Catherine and Linton) the need and potential for true union between the families, untainted by ambition or revenge.

**Naming**
Brontë’s novel also shares two important coincidences of name with Shakespeare’s play. The first is the name Edgar: in both play and novel Edgar is a basically well-meaning, loyal (and frequently naïve) character caught up in a whirlwind of passionate events beyond his control. In King Lear, Edgar suffers at the hands of his younger, illegitimate brother Edmund, whilst Brontë’s Edgar is the victim of Heathcliff. Like Edmund, Heathcliff is an outsider, an interloper in the family (‘that strange acquisition my late neighbour made in his journey to Liverpool – a little Lascar, or an American or Spanish castaway’), a man who has to fight for his social standing, all situations and disadvantages he shares with Edmund. Neither Edmund nor Heathcliff is ever fully accepted or acceptable, and, as a result, each brutally seeks to establish himself by underhand and violent means.

Heathcliff’s name echoes two of the play’s most significant locations – the ‘heath’ where Lear degenerates into madness and repents of his foolishness, and the ‘cliff’, where the blinded Gloucester realises his misplaced trust in the faithless Edmund. Not only are the heath (the moors) and the cliff (Penistone Crags or the Heights) significant places of realisation in Wuthering Heights, but it is through Heathcliff himself that the characters come to a true and painful understanding of themselves. He is like a barren landscape, as Cathy points out; a place of harshness and unforgiving brutality; a place of exposure and desolation. Like the novel itself he is a character who strips away the comfortable hypocrisies of a character like Lockwood and the society he lives in, exposing painful, violent truths.

**Resisting closure, collapsing oppositions**
Both gothic novel and Shakespearian tragedy might be interpreted as cathartic: within the confines of the drama or novel, the values and power structures of society are turned upside down; the frightening possibilities of a world without law and convention are experienced; the supernatural and abnormal stalk the stage and the page and in the final lines, order is restored. Except that in the case of both Lear and Wuthering Heights, the audience is left with questions. When, after the confessions, the agonising realisations, reconciliations and deaths, Edmund, the heir apparent, declares ‘The wheel is come full circle’ there is surely a moment when the audience fears that nothing has been learned and that this conveniently imposed order and calm cannot last. Wuthering Heights refuses to come to a tidy conclusion resisting the closure imposed upon it by the frame narrative; the thwarted endings draw attention once again to the breaching of boundaries and the collapse of oppositions.

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This article was first published in emagazine 31.