**Terror and Horror in Wuthering Heights**

Quite alone both as a novel and as a piece of terror-literature stands the famous Wuthering Heights (1847) by Emily Brontë, with its mad vistas of bleak, windswept Yorkshire moors and the violent, distorted lives they foster. Though primarily a tale of life, and of human passions in agony and conflict, its epically cosmic setting affords room for horror of the most spiritual sort. Heathcliff, the modified Byronic villain-hero, is a strange dark waif found in the streets as a small child and speaking only a strange gibberish till adopted by the family he ultimately ruins. That he is in truth a diabolic spirit rather than a human being is more than once suggested, and the unreal is further approached in the experience of the visitor who encounters a plaintive child-ghost at a bough-brushed upper window. Between Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw is a tie deeper and more terrible than human love. After her death he twice disturbs her grave, and is haunted by an impalpable presence which can be nothing less thin her spirit. The spirit enters his life more and more, and at last he becomes confident of some imminent mystical reunion. He says he feels a strange change approaching, and ceases to take nourishment. At night he either walks abroad or opens the casement by his bed. When he dies the casement is still swinging open to the pouring rain, and a queer smile pervades the stiffened face. They bury him in a grave beside the mound he has haunted for eighteen years, and small shepherd boys say that he yet walks with his Catherine in the churchyard and on the moor when it rains. Their faces, too, are sometimes seen on rainy nights behind that upper casement at Wuthering Heights. Bronte's eerie terror is no mere Gothic echo, but a tense expression of man's shuddering reaction to the unknown. In this respect, Wuthering Heights becomes the symbol of a literary transition, and marks the growth of a new and sounder school.

**TERROR VS. HORROR**

Gothic fiction arouses–and is intended to arouse–terror and horror in the reader. On this point there is

agreement, but here agreement ends and a host of questions arise:

• How, exactly, do terror and horror differ? Is one a physical response, like revulsion, and the other a

mental response? Is one a response to the other, for example, does horror cause terror? Is one a response to an immediate or present danger and the other to a danger further away? Is one a response to what we see or hear and the other to what we imagine or think? Does one sensationalize? Is either an emotional response? Or, does either involve emotions, such as fear or hatred?

• Do terror and horror arouse the same kind of pleasure as we read Gothic tales? Alternatively, if we don't feel pleasure as we read them, what do we feel? and is what we feel the same for both responses?

• Is there ambivalence in our horror or terror? For example, are we both attracted and repelled to one or both? Is our attraction and repulsion to experiencing horror and/or terror safely why we read Gothic fiction?

(Remember: our motives and responses are often complex and involve conflicting emotions and desires;

Aristotle identifies pity and terror as part of the audience's response to tragedy).

• Is one response of a higher order than the other?

• Is it significant that we call the genre of Gothic films horror movies?

To return to the topic of Wuthering Heights’ relationship to the Gothic novel: does the novel arouse horror and/or terror in the reader?

**Examples of Terror and Horror in WH**

Throughout the novel effects of cruelty and sadism multiply. The ‘horror’ here is anything but delightful. Heathcliff is portrayed as a “fiend”, a “devil”, an “unredeemed” creature who will stop at nothing. In her book, Sexual Personae, Camille Paglia has listed some of the “outbreaks of violence and lurid imaginings which permeate the novel. She goes on to say “we witness or hear of whipping, slapping, thrashing, cuffing, wrenching, pinching, scratching, hair-pulling, gouging, kicking, trampling, and the hanging of dogs. Hindley hopes his horse will kick out Heathcliff’s brains. Catherine, bitten by a dog, would not cry out even ‘if she had been spitted on the horns of a mad cow.’ Isabella shrieks ‘as if witches were running red-hot needles into her.’ Heathcliff ponders ‘flinging Joseph off the highest gable, and painting the house front with Hindley’s blood.’ He throws a tureen of hot applesauce in Edgar’s face. Hindley shoves a carving knife between Nelly’s teeth and threatens to push it down her throat. Nelly fears Heathcliff ‘smashing Hareton’s skull on the steps.’ Heathcliff says of Edgar, ‘I’ll crush his ribs in like a rotten hazel nut!’ The moment Catherine ceased loving Edgar, ‘I would have torn his heart out, and drunk his blood!’ ‘I have no pity!’ Heathcliff cries. ‘The more the worms writhe, the more I yearn to crush out their entrails!’ Isabella says Heathcliff is adept at ‘pulling out the nerves with red hot pincers’; he seized her heart, ‘pinched it to death’, and flung it back to her. He hurls a dinner knife at her, cutting open her neck” (pp449-450Paglia). And you could go on to find more examples. But for all that, Heathcliff is a villain-hero who excites some sympathy for his years of suffering. Even considering the influences of the mass of Gothic heroes who preceded his creation, Heathcliff is an amazing literary achievement. His attraction is as fascinating as the mysteries with which Emily Brontë surrounds him.