“Heathcliff is Me!”: 
Wuthering Heights and the Question of Likeness

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What is it that Catherine Earnshaw sees in Heathcliff, anyway? Many readers of the novel, following the heroine's own lead, have suggested that the attraction is based on an extraordinary affinity. The central statement is her famous assertion, “Nelly, I am Heathcliff”—a sentiment she rephrases variously in the same conversation as “he's more myself than I am” and “[he is] my own being.”¹ This claim that she and Heathcliff share some identity of being has been taken largely at face value. Critics have differed in the language they use to describe that likeness, but almost all have tended to see these lovers as united on one side of a polarity that opposes nature to culture, or the inhuman to the social, or the energetic to the placid.² Wuthering Heights, however, is a novel in which we

¹Emily Brontë, Wuthering Heights, ed. Hilda Marsden and Ian Jack (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 102, 100. Further references are to this edition and are noted in parentheses in the text.

²I have in mind here the readings of the novel offered by Terry Eagleton, and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (all of whom pair up these lovers on the natural side of the nature/culture opposition); Dorothy Van Ghent (who also uses the term “nonhuman” to describe their love); and David Cecil, whose suggestion that the novel is a mystical one, focusing on the relations between principles of storm and calm, has proved attractive to many (for instance, Walter Allen and David Daiches). Two critics I have found who suggest that Heathcliff and Catherine are not necessarily alike are Leo Bersani and Evelyn Hinz, and the latter still
are abnormally suspicious of practically everything that everybody tells us, and I am not sure that we should accept Catherine’s description of her relationship with Heathcliff uncritically, or with a privilege we do not normally assign Nelly or Lockwood, especially in the light of Catherine’s own doubts about the precise meaning of her statements. As she confides to Nelly, “I cannot express it” (p. 101). Can we really do any better as readers? Can we describe with any confidence how Catherine and Heathcliff are alike? And why is likeness an issue in this novel?

The issue of likeness runs throughout the narrative and through both generations of lovers (we remember, for instance, Catherine II and Linton Heathcliff’s discussion about how best to spend a hot July day), but I want to focus almost exclusively on the triangular relationship of Heathcliff, Catherine, and Edgar Linton, both because I think the issues are clearest here, and because like many others I find the novel most interesting in its treatment of these relationships. We can begin by examining a couple of representative speeches by Catherine and Heathcliff, and what we first notice is that neither of them speaks of affinity alone; rather, considerations of likeness emerge in the context of a simultaneous assertion of difference.

In her long speech to Nelly (the one that climaxes with “I am Heathcliff”), Catherine insists: “Whatever our souls are made of, [Heathcliff’s] and mine are the same, and Linton’s is as different as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire” (p. 100). Later, Heathcliff tells Nelly,

“If [Edgar] loved with all the powers of his puny being, he couldn’t love as much in eighty years, as I could in a day. And Catherine has

a heart as deep as I have; the sea could be as readily contained in
that horse-trough, as her whole affection be monopolized by
him . . . It is not in him to be loved like me, how can she love in
him what he has not?" (p. 182)

The speeches are very similar, mixing the abstract and the meta-
phoric in a way that makes any specifiable content very hard to
pin down. Catherine uses metaphor in an odd way: she does not
say that she and Heathcliff are like fire, Edgar like frost; rather
she says that the difference between them is like the difference
between frost and fire. She refers, that is, not to two essences, but
rather to a gap on the one hand, and a coincidence on the other.
If we return to the beginning of her statement, we see that she
cannot really say what their souls are made of, she can only assert
that they are made up of the same thing. Heathcliff is hardly more
illuminating. The metaphoric humiliation of Edgar is certainly
memorable—how can any reader feel much sympathy for a man
with a heart like a horse-trough? But if we step back from the
rhetorical power of the statement, what we see is an assertion that
he and Catherine share "depth," as distinguished from Edgar's
shallowness. But what is depth, emotionally speaking? Heathcliff
does not specify what he means, and like Catherine, he falls back
on abstraction: "how can she love in him what he has not?" There
is a positive and a negative principle invoked here—the "has" of
Heathcliff and Catherine versus the "has not" of Edgar Linton—but
it is hard to specify what the content of those principles is.

My scrutiny of these two speeches may appear arbitrary, but
I would argue that they are exemplary of the problems we en-
counter in trying to track down the source of Heathcliff's likeness
to Catherine. The lovers are certainly alike in behaving violently,
self-indulgently, self-destructively—as indeed, at one time or an-
other, does almost every character in the novel.3 But the actions
we see them take, the words we hear them speak, always come to
us as effects, not causes of their love. Catherine grinds her teeth,
or publicly humiliates her husband, Heathcliff runs away or stays

3Bersani makes the shrewd point that when Heathcliff and Catherine pay their
first surreptitious visit to Thrushcross Grange, they view "a scene worthy of Wuth-
ering Heights" (A Future for Astyanax, p. 201). Cecil's popular opposition of storm
and calm hides the fact that virtually everybody in the novel, whatever house they
inhabit, behaves badly most of the time.
out all night, but we always understand that these often dramatic expressions are actions their love produces, not qualities of being that produce love. Indeed, no one complains about the behavior of these two characters more than they themselves do.

The difficulty we face in specifying the nature of their affinity is underlined by the way their triangular relationship with Edgar forms a sort of miniature language of the erotic, in the terms of structural linguistics. Catherine and Heathcliff, as we see in the speeches above, can assert that their likeness has a meaning only within a system of differences. In a sense, the gap between them and Edgar establishes what they are; there is literally no language for their love until they visit the Grange and view the "has not" that the Lintons represent for them. This analogy has the virtue of pointing to the difficulties we face in discovering the beginning point, the prior and irreducible meaning of the likeness these lovers insist they share. Our need to find an essence is a real one, but here again, the search for that essence is futile, more stumbling after a will-o’-the-wisp.⁴

After Catherine's death, Heathcliff wails "I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!" (p. 204), a statement that is, in effect, his version of "I am Heathcliff!" We find ourselves in something like a hall of mirrors here. Catherine is Heathcliff, and what is Heathcliff? Why, Catherine, of course. Catherine's statement to Nelly is beginning to look rather tautological. She is him, and he is her, and that little copula "is" asserts a likeness it is hard to find. The First Mover in this passion remains unseen, a force of causation we recognize only by the destruction it leaves in its wake.

But perhaps the triangular conflict of Catherine, Heathcliff, and Edgar is not the best place to look for the nature of the

⁴J. Hillis Miller makes a similar point, although he is speaking of the function of names in the novel, and not about the love-triangle, when he says, "Each character in Wuthering Heights seems to be an element in a system, defined by his or her place in the system, rather than a separate, unique person" (Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982], p. 57). Miller's overall reading of the novel describes the way Wuthering Heights both invites us to look for origins and frustrates that desire. Both Miller and Bersani have usefully redirected our attention to what is not in this novel, and thus have changed the way it appears. While my interests are different, I have been much influenced by both their readings.
likeness that these lovers share. A better place to search for both the source and the nature of this affinity is their childhood, a period the older Cathy, the hopelessly torn Mrs. Linton, describes as the time when Heathcliff was her “all in all” (p. 153). Dorothy Van Ghent has made the valuable observation that the bond between two children is the primary model of love in the novel, so our question becomes, what is this childish love? What brings these people together as children in such a powerful way that they feel an identity of being that their adult lives, their deaths even, cannot alter?

When Heathcliff first arrives at the Heights, Catherine’s reaction is to grin and spit at him, and she and Hindley refuse to take the stranger into their bed, as their father commands. But soon—typographically speaking, within two paragraphs (Nelly gives us no exact timing)—Catherine and Heathcliff are “very thick” (p. 46). Why? We see the seeds of their adult willfulness and bad temper, but we are even less inclined here to see rotten behavior as the root of deathless love. We learn that Catherine has a power over the young Heathcliff that no one else enjoys (“the boy would do her bidding in anything, and [old Earnshaw’s] only when it suited his own inclination” [p. 52]), but again this is already an effect, not a cause. After the old man’s death, they have in common their rebellion against Hindley and Joseph, but this is not the event that brings them together—they have been close since soon after Heathcliff’s arrival.

Besides identifying herself with Heathcliff, Catherine also insists on her status as creature of the natural world. In the same speech to Nelly where she claims to be Heathcliff, she also recounts a dream of being flung out of “heaven [which] did not seem to be my home,” and awakening on “the heath . . . sobbing for joy” (pp. 99–100). Later, as she nears her final crisis, she says, “I’m sure I should be myself were I once among the heather on those hills” (p. 153). Do such statements provide us a way to understand the affinity between Catherine and Heathcliff as children? After all, we are told twice that one of their “chief amusements” was to run away from the house and “scamper on the moors” (pp. 56, 26). In fact, other than what we learn of their rebellion against

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5The English Novel, p. 156.
Hindley, this is virtually the only thing we do know about their mutual activity as children. And the importance of the natural world to them is emphasized at the end of the novel, when we hear the story of the little boy who claims to have seen their ghosts walking on the moors once again.

But there is something vague about this too. It is certainly easy to perceive setting as substance, and many readers of Wuthering Heights have seen Catherine and Heathcliff as representative of forces of nature, and that “nature” is somehow at the center of their bond. The critical language they employ, however, betrays how elusive the nature of “nature” can be. When Van Ghent says that their love is non-human as opposed to social, or when Daiches says it is “natural” as opposed to Linton’s “artificial” affection, or Eagleton says it embodies a “primordial moment of pre-social harmony,” we long to know just what pre-social or non-human or natural love is. The confusion engendered by taking their love to be “natural” can be clearly seen by juxtaposing the readings of David Cecil and Evelyn Hinz. In a famous formulation, Cecil argues that both Catherine and Heathcliff are “children of storm” (the affinity, he says, that “makes them fall in love with each other”), and that their marriages to the “children of calm,” the Lintons, are “unnatural” and hence destructive. In other words, according to Cecil, in the realm of nature like must mate with like—that is what is “natural.” But Hinz, in a much more recent interpretation, insists that the true “natural” marriage is the hieros gamos, the holy union, not of like, but of opposing natural forces, such as the earth and sky. Which then is “natural”—the pairing of like or of unlike? Both of these readings, it seems to me, are rooted in the same frustration: we do not really know much about why Heathcliff and Catherine come together. It is hard to imagine what they talk about (contrast, for instance, Rochester and Jane, whose love seems almost founded on verbal intimacy), or what they do, so we tend to fall back on a category like the “natural,” which seems reassuringly self-evident.

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There are several problems with such a classification. In the first place, it is a kind of contradiction in terms to speak of natural love, although it is a contradiction many readers have not hesitated to believe in. Eagleton says, “In loving Heathcliff, Catherine is taken outside the family and society into an opposing realm which can be adequately imaged only as ‘Nature.’” Any love, however, whether or not we know much of the social context in which it unfolds, is by definition a social bond—it takes place between people, even if it is “anti-social” in the sense of “rebellious.” Yet because the social context seems to be missing from Wuthering Heights, and because what little we do know seems associated with the natural world, the conclusion has followed that their love must be “natural.” “Nature” fills the void created by the apparent absence of the usually detailed novelistic social context.

Another danger exists as well, one Eagleton himself points out in a book later than his work on the Brontës: “It is one of the functions of ideology to ‘naturalize’ social reality, to make it seem as innocent and unchangeable as Nature itself. Ideology seeks to convert culture into Nature, and the ‘natural’ sign is one of its weapons.” Our tendency to see the love of Heathcliff and Catherine in natural terms, that is, may not only be more or less meaningless, it may perhaps blind us to another reality, a very social one, that their relationship embodies. As I hope the preceding discussion has established, however, we cannot understand their affinity by trying to describe it in the terms that have typically been employed. The novel asserts their likeness, but it never clearly defines it in specific terms—we cannot discover where it

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9Myths of Power, p. 103.

10I cannot resist here the observation that virtually every healthy child in rural England in the nineteenth century must have spent a great deal of time outdoors—as indeed we learn that Nelly and Hindley had their own rambles and were close as children, but developed no overwhelming passion. Gilbert and Gubar note the difficulty of describing the childhood harmony of Heathcliff and Catherine, but then make the curious concession that “we are obliged to use the paradoxical and metaphorical language of mysticism” in order to say anything at all (Madwoman in the Attic, p. 264). Certainly, many critics have done just that, but my purpose here is to try to see what we can discover if we do not fill in this void with mystical or “natural” terminology, but leave the blank empty instead and see what conclusions such a maneuver might achieve.

comes from, nor do we know, to put the point most simply, what they have in common. But I think that we can approach the question of likeness in another way, one that may serve to restore it to a social context. That approach will center on the character of Heathcliff, for if we do not know much about what exists between these lovers, we do have plenty of opportunity to observe this character whose soul is so tied to Catherine’s. What I hope to show is that we know no more about Heathcliff than we do about the extraordinary likeness Catherine claims to share with him, but that ironically his opacity is the key to a new way to understand what their love is and how it works.

The remarkable indefiniteness of Heathcliff is established the moment he arrives at Wuthering Heights: “[Old Earnshaw opened] his great-coat, which he held bundled up in his arms, ‘See here, wife; I was never so beaten with anything in my life; but you must e’en take it as a gift of God, though it’s as dark almost as if it came from the devil’” (p. 44). Here we have Heathcliff’s birth narrative. His emergence from old Earnshaw’s coat is like a childbirth, but the apparent father (and mother too) denies that he has anything to do with the child’s origin and insists instead on a kind of radical indeterminacy for the foundling. Heathcliff, Earnshaw says, is simultaneously from God and the devil, from heaven and hell, from, by implication, everywhere and nowhere.

Heathcliff has, according to Earnshaw, been found, “starving, and houseless, and as good as dumb, in the streets of Liverpool” (p. 45), but that tentative clue only serves to emphasize this orphan’s lack of origins. In a suggestive comment, Richard Sennett has defined the modern city as a “milieu in which strangers are likely to meet”—precisely as Earnshaw meets Heathcliff. By transporting the child from the city, where his strangeness is not, as it were, so strange, and placing him in the rural setting of the Heights, Earnshaw introduces into his own apparently stable and stratified society a figure who is doubly alienated from it. Heath-

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cliff is both an outsider, and an outsider in a place specifically unaccustomed to strangers. Years later Nelly will tell Lockwood, another urban stranger with a fancy for a girl named Catherine, "We don't in general take to foreigners here" (p. 56). All we know about Heathcliff is that he was found on a city street, unmarked except by his dirt and his hunger. That illegibility would not be remarkable in Liverpool, a city like others of its time filling up, Sennett says, with people who were "cut loose, [without] the marks of a past life"—a collective estrangement. But it is this kind of stranger that Earnshaw brings into a house where the same family has lived for three hundred years.

Moreover, Brontë compounds Heathcliff's shadowy origin by doubling it. He makes not one, but two, mysterious appearances—and at opposite ends of the social scale. The child who first appears as a starving waif off the city streets of Liverpool returns after his disappearance at eighteen as a polished gentleman—and with no clue either time where he came from. Is he Cinderella, a child wrongfully degraded and made to dwell in the ashes, or is he Dick Whittington, the poor boy who made good? It is difficult to tell what fairy tale we are reading. Speaking of another novel about orphans, Daniel Deronda, Cynthia Chase remarks on the pervasiveness of the idea that origins have a "unique generative power," what she calls the "metaphor of birth as destiny." But of the many, especially the many Victorian, novels about orphans, Wuthering Heights must be almost singular in its refusal to solve the mystery it establishes around both Heathcliff's birth and his rebirth. And not knowing where he comes from, we are already at a profound disadvantage in trying to understand him as we conventionally understand characters in novels—or life.

The novel does bear out Chase's assertion, however. If Brontë herself stubbornly refuses to assign Heathcliff an origin, the characters she creates demonstrate how intolerable his indefiniteness is to them. They almost all set about filling the void he represents with a meaning, based on an origin, that they assign him. For in-

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13 The Fall of Public Man, p. 52.
stance, Nelly, trying to comfort the young Heathcliff, imagines for him a genealogy worthy of the most typical romance:

“You're fit for a prince in disguise. Who knows, but your father was Emperor of China, and your mother an Indian queen, each of them able to buy up, with one week's income, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange together? And you were kidnapped by wicked sailors, and brought to England. Were I in your place, I would frame high notions of my birth.” (p. 72)

Who knows, indeed? But Nelly’s speculation here is self-consciously imaginary, while all other attempts in the novel to place Heathcliff, to make his meaning intelligible, are assumed to be somehow “real.” Old Earnshaw gives him the name of his dead son, Hindley forces him into service, and Edgar calls him “the gipsy—the plough-boy” (p. 117). Heathcliff himself seems aware of the tendency, but he is in a sense unfair to his wife when he tells Nelly, “I can hardly regard her in the light of a rational creature, so obstinately has she persisted in forming a fabulous notion of my character, and acting on the false impressions she cherished” (p. 183). But who in the novel—except, perhaps, Nelly—has not formed and believed a “fabulous notion” of his character? Given his mobility—orphan then son, plough-boy then master—and given the way that mobility seems tied to his absolute lack of origin, how are we to distinguish between “false impressions” about him and true ones? Everybody ridicules the hapless Lockwood’s inability to read the situation at Wuthering Heights on his first arrival, but the contradictions he sees in Heathcliff’s appearance are the same ones that face every reader of his character, inside and outside the novel: “But Mr. Heathcliff forms a singular contrast to his abode and style of living. He is a dark-skinned gypsy in aspect, in dress and manners a gentleman—that is, as much a gentleman as many a country squire” (p. 6). Heathcliff does not fit his “abode,” but neither do his “dress and manners” fit his looks. In one sense, as Lockwood’s comment reminds us, Heathcliff is a type of the self-made man, and Wuthering Heights does have about it a grotesque Horatio Alger quality, with Heathcliff as Yorkshire’s Ragged Dick. But for this novel the more significant meaning of Heathcliff’s indeterminate origins is not that he is free to define himself, but that every character he comes
in contact with (and every reader) is forced to mark him with a meaning they give.

The difference between the self-made man and what we might call an unmade man like Heathcliff is made clear if we look at his behavior in the second half of the novel. He has taken on a role, that of revenger, and a revenger who works specifically by assuming the identity of landowner and "master." But the whole edifice of this identity is a sham. He does not become master because he thinks he really "is" or should be one. Contrast him with Faulkner's Thomas Sutpen, another character who attempts to achieve revenge through acquisition. Sutpen, however, must fully become the self he aspires to be in order to authenticate his existence.\(^\text{15}\) But Heathcliff becomes a landowner only so he can "demolish" the houses. His role is part of a plot, not an act of self-fashioning or assertion. And even the revenge itself is inessential, as the end of the novel shows. "A strange change," as he puts it (p. 393), comes over him just as everything is finally ready for him to take his complete revenge. This "change" (some sort of ghostly visitation by Catherine) does not so much overturn twenty years of plotting, as render it void, empty it of meaning: "when everything is ready, and in my power, I find the will to lift a slate off either roof has vanished! ... where is the use? I don't care for striking, I can't take the trouble to raise my hand!" (pp. 392–93). Revenge, it seems, has been a kind of distraction from his only goal, Catherine herself. As he puts it, "I have a single wish, and my whole being and faculties are yearning to attain it" (p. 395). Revenge, which dominates Heathcliff's activity for half the novel, has nothing to do with him, and he remains at the end what he was at the start, an almost invisible character who is "like" Catherine, and who wants nothing more than union with her.

Heathcliff's mystery is summed up well by Nelly, in a reverie she has shortly before his death, one that underlines the absolute futility of the search for either his origin or his identity:

But where did he come from, the little dark thing, harboured by a good man to his bane? ... And I began, half dreaming, to weary

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myself with imaging some fit parentage for him; and . . . I tracked his existence over again, . . . at last, picturing his death and funeral; of which all I can remember is being exceedingly vexed at having the task of dictating an inscription for his monument . . . ; and, as he had no surname, and we could not tell his age, we were obliged to content ourselves with the single word, "Heathcliff." (p. 403)

Nelly knows all anyone can do with Heathcliff is "imagine"; he has no date or place of birth, no surname, and even the name he is known by, his brief and only epitaph, is a borrowed one, a hand-me-down from a dead boy he never knew.

It is in the light of this remarkable indefiniteness that Catherine's love for Heathcliff becomes clearest. And I think that we can understand the way his blankness makes him, as it were, available for her love in two different ways, one having to do with the psychology of empathy, the other with the anthropology of mate-selection. I believe that these perspectives can give us what are perhaps more suggestive models for describing the bond between Heathcliff and Catherine than the more traditional explanations based on either simple affinity or "natural" love. Moreover, the anthropological model can help restore a properly social context for understanding how their love works.

As we have seen, being nothing in himself, Heathcliff is uniquely available to everyone else's powers of projection, and this is true of no one so much as Catherine. But of course, we rarely perceive projection for what it is, and may in fact mistake it for its opposite. Some remarks by Stephen J. Greenblatt about Iago are suggestive here: "Empathy . . . may be a feeling of oneself into an object, but that object may have to be drained of its own substance before it will serve as an appropriate vessel."16 Heathcliff is an especially appropriate vessel for this kind of empathy, since he seems to lack even a prior substance to be drained. Instead, he appears to the world as a blank screen, ready for Catherine

and the other characters to fill with an image of their own creation. And unlike the others, the image that she projects is simply her own. Her need for Heathcliff may be centered in the difficulties she has in seeing herself as her self, a problem we see clearly in the scene where she fails to recognize her own reflection. Nelly says, “I was incapable of making her comprehend [the image] to be her own” (p. 151). But Heathcliff’s empty visage presents no such problem: “Nelly, I am Heathcliff!” She might just as well say, “Heathcliff is me!”

Such egocentricity raises another issue. The insistence on likeness that we have been examining tends also to imply equality, but in the light of Heathcliff’s indefiniteness, we can see more clearly just how profoundly unequal these lovers are, and not just in the obvious class terms. The independence is all Catherine’s; she chooses whom she will love, and when, and how. Heathcliff, however, always follows a lead that she establishes—he becomes a gentleman to please her, and marries her sister-in-law to aggravate her. Even his revenge-plot, as we have seen, is bound up more deeply with his love for her than with any pain independent of their relationship. In a sense, then, we can say something about the origin of Heathcliff’s identity: more than any place else, his self seems to originate in Catherine. She, in turn, has not so much recognized her self in Heathcliff’s, as she has taken him over, and it is probably she, more than Heathcliff, who deserves the “vampire” label that Nelly speculatively bestows on Heathcliff near the end of the novel (p. 403). Heathcliff’s lament after her death—“I cannot live without my life!”—takes on a new urgency in this context. This is not mere amatory hyperbole, but a quite literal sentiment for this empty vessel.17

17 In saying this, I disagree with Nina Auerbach, who says that such expressions represent “the conventional idioms of romantic love.” See Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), p. 102. Heathcliff indeed uses such language, but means something much more urgent by it. Gilbert and Gubar comment that Heathcliff realizes that, without Catherine, he is “the soulless body of a vanished passion” (Madwoman in the Attic, p. 293); Auerbach makes a similar point, speaking of the ability of the women in the novel “to half-create Heathcliff in their image” (p. 102). Bersani goes farther and insists that the nature of characterization in the novel as a whole constitutes an attack on the traditional notion of a “coherent, describable, unified self” (p. 214).
From this perspective, what Heathcliff and Catherine have in common is, quite simply, Catherine herself. Their likeness is less a matter of some mutual recognition than of reflection—a reflection made possible by Heathcliff’s indeterminate character. But we can see another effect of this indeterminacy, for not only does it make him susceptible to the kind of “empathetic” projection that Greenblatt describes, it also enables him to represent—even for Catherine—a combination of likeness and difference that is quite extraordinary if we think of it in the context of the way mate-selection works in most cultures.

The combined desire for likeness and difference in a mate is not, in itself, peculiar, but is in fact the normal expectation if we look at typical patterns. There are, of course, almost infinite variations in these practices, but if one were to abstract a thread common to most societies, it would be the combination of an incest taboo on the one hand, and a restriction of the search to a group that is in some way “like” the person seeking a mate. In other words, the marriage partner should be different from the family, but like the group. Variations arise because neither family nor group is a self-evident concept, and the marriage customs of most cultures evolve to answer two questions: who is family (a question, of course, in which knowledge of origins is all-important) and thus unavailable for marriage, and who is group and thus marriageable. Most people, then, are faced with not one, but two taboos—that of closeness and that of distance, and a potential mate can be either too alike (family) or too different (in terms like class, caste, religion, totem, color, language, nationality, or whatever the standard of “likeness” is). This Goldilocks compromise is not always easy to work out, and the effect of this double demand can be, I would argue, a double bind—the structure, in a sense, prohibits and demands the same thing. Likeness and difference are both enjoined and impossible.

18This “thread” that I have abstracted is my own formulation. The anthropological literature on the subject is vast, but I have relied particularly on two studies by Robin Fox, *Kinship and Marriage: An Anthropological Perspective* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), and *The Red Lamp of Incest* (New York: Dutton, 1980). I am also much indebted to Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).
Heathcliff represents for Catherine an escape from this double bind, not so much by mediating the contradiction, as by encompassing it. This is the other primary effect of his indefiniteness. Heathcliff is in a unique position to satisfy the demand for likeness and difference—since he is nothing, he can be perceived as both familiar and strange, and at the same time.\textsuperscript{19} More interestingly, because he can be perceived as representing such extremes of likeness and difference, he also simultaneously violates both taboos at once. He is both the forbidden outsider \textit{and} the forbidden brother—a combination that may go a long way towards explaining his devastating powers of attraction, if (as virtually every psychologist of the erotic from Ovid to Lacan has testified) prohibition creates desire. How, then, does Brontë achieve this impossible synthesis?

Many have noted that there is something distinctly incestuous about Catherine and Heathcliff's passion for each other.\textsuperscript{20} This belief is nourished by the insistence on an identity of being that we have been discussing. Catherine and Heathcliff do not say they are alike; they say they are the \textit{same}. If the incest-taboo is meant to be a guard against \textit{excessive} likeness, the assertions of affinity by these lovers, extreme as they are, appear as a violation of the spirit of incest prohibitions. And this kind of emotionally incestuous coloration is underlined by the novel's overt details. Heathcliff's adoption is of course informal, not legal, but old Earnshaw does give the orphan the name of his deceased son, and it is clear

\textsuperscript{19}In passing, James H. Kavanagh speaks of Heathcliff's "incestuous/exogamous seduction of Cathy," but his own interest in the novel is almost exclusively on the former impulse. In fact (and here he acknowledges his debt to Jane Gallop's reading of Lacan), he sees exogamy itself as a violation of the incest taboo, since both crimes introduce otherness or "heterogeneity" into the family circle, incest by making a family member into an other, exogamy by turning an other into family. The point is clever, but it collapses what is for me a valuable distinction. See Kavanagh, \textit{Emily Brontë} (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985), p. 64, and Gallop, \textit{The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis} (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982), p. 145.

\textsuperscript{20}Those who have spoken of the incest theme in \textit{Wuthering Heights} include, beside Kavanagh, Daiches, Eagleton (\textit{Myths of Power}), Eric Soloman, and Q. D. Leavis. The latter three readers, in fact, all wish to literalyze the incest, as all raise the possibility that Heathcliff may be old Earnshaw's illegitimate son. See Soloman, "The Incest Theme in \textit{Wuthering Heights}," \textit{Nineteenth-Century Fiction}, 14 (1969), 80–83, and Q. D. Leavis, "A Fresh Approach to \textit{Wuthering Heights}" in \textit{Lectures in America} (New York: Pantheon, 1969).
that he wishes Hindley, Catherine, and Heathcliff to be raised as siblings—with the newcomer treated as *primus inter pares*. And while Heathcliff loses this sibling status after Earnshaw's death, years later Edgar senses a family, not lover-like, bond between Catherine and Heathcliff, as his sarcastic comment after the runaway's return reveals: "The whole household need not witness the sight of your welcoming a runaway servant as a brother" (p. 118).

Yet virtually every character in the novel comments on Heathcliff's foreignness, a response that seems to be centered in his coloration. He is introduced to us as being "as dark almost as if he came from the devil"; Nelly imagines him to be the son of an "Indian queen"; and when the transformed Catherine returns from the Grange, he himself tells Nelly, "I wish I had light hair and a fair skin" (p. 71). All of which is to say that Heathcliff is unusually dark, a darkness suggested most emphatically by his typical epithet, "the gipsy." We have already seen Edgar and Lockwood's comments to this effect, and, to add one more example, the Lintons at first refuse to believe that Catherine is one of the trespassers at the Grange because they cannot believe that "Miss Earnshaw" would be "scouring the country with a gipsy!" (p. 61). "Gipsy" is derived from "Egyptian," reflecting the popular belief that the gypsies were descended from Egyptian stock.21 In other words, Heathcliff does offer one clue to his "true" identity. If there are no marks on him of family, or name, or class, or history, there is the fact of his dark skin, which is a source of constant comment for the rural Yorkshire society in which he finds himself—it is strange to them. Even Catherine, after her return from the Grange, tells Heathcliff, "Why, how very black and cross you look! . . . But that's because I am used to Edgar and Isabella Linton" (p. 67).

By virtue of the simultaneous facts of Heathcliff's position as sibling and his foreign coloration, he is able to perform a paradoxical double-role, both brother and other. And *Wuthering Heights* best dramatizes his doubleness by the way it demonstrates the dangers of both incest and excessive exogamy. We can see the

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consequences of these “crimes” quite clearly in the novel, a contradictory set of disasters that all flow nonetheless from Heathcliff alone. He enters what is essentially a stable world, and proceeds to disrupt it in two different ways. This world consists of two households, Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights, and together they make up a kind of rudimentary society. Indeed, far from being anti-social or “natural,” the novel creates for us a very specific social world, which both conditions the love of Heathcliff and Catherine, and is, in turn, profoundly affected by that love. Certainly there are a number of contrasts between the houses, and these have been well-documented by critics like Cecil and Leavis, but the ways in which they are alike may be even more significant. Their likeness, in fact, consists in exactly the kinds of terms often used to determine appropriate marriage partners. The Earnshaws and the Lintons, whatever their differences in style, are at least compatible in class terms. In this regard, we remember details like the case with which Catherine is accepted at the Grange after Skulker bites her, or the Christmas dance the two houses share. Lévi-Strauss’s theory that the origin of the incest-taboo is the necessity of exchange has been disputed, but no one denies that an exchange of women between allied men, an exchange that promotes social bonding, is one effect of an incest taboo. If you cannot marry your own women, you had better have other families you get along with, so you can marry theirs. In this sense, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange make up a perfect social situation: they each have a son in need of a wife, and a daughter to give up in marital exchange. The pattern is not only convenient, it is virtually necessary, as Catherine reminds us when she tells Nelly that Edgar seems to be her only choice, “If there be any [others], they are out of my way” (p. 98).

Heathcliff’s appearance, of course, upsets the neat symmetry of all this, and the ideal exchange of daughters between the

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22 As we have seen, Cecil’s principles of calm and storm are embodied in the two houses (Victorian Novelists, pp. 153–54); in her essay, Q. D. Leavis gives us what amounts to a sociological version of this, seeing the Grange as representative of emerging Victorian gentility, while the Heights takes its identity from the disappearing farm culture of the area. As note 3 above would suggest, Bersani believes that the contrast between the houses has been exaggerated; he wants to see both houses as existing outside the social world; see A Future for Astyanax, p. 201.
houses never takes place. Instead, a parody of it occurs, with disastrous consequences, consequences that are dependent on Heathcliff's dual incestuous/exogamous identity. The problems begin with Heathcliff's displacement of Hindley, who subsequently leaves home, and marries an outsider, the sickly and childish Frances. Ultimately, the neat exchange does appear to take place—Edgar marries Catherine, while Heathcliff takes Isabella. If we view this pattern in the abstract, we could say that the two households "exchange" daughters, with each woman going to the other home to live. But of course, the exchange does not take place in the abstract, and thanks to Heathcliff, there is nothing very orderly about it. This disorder is created by the fact that Heathcliff is both excessively like and excessively different. First of all, despite his positioning in the Earnshaw household and his temporary displacement of Hindley as son, Heathcliff can marry Catherine, as Hindley cannot. We are reminded just how real a possibility this is when Catherine implies to Nelly that she would have married Heathcliff if he had not been degraded. And if that marriage never takes place legally, the bond of these lovers has some of the practical effects of an actual wedding between them, effects that mirror the dangers of incest as Lévi-Strauss describes them. Their love for each other encloses them in Wuthering Heights, making it impossible for the Earnshaw household either to give or receive. It is no accident that Catherine actually marries Edgar while Heathcliff is away, or that, upon his return, she perceives herself to be "the wife of a stranger; an exile, and outcast" (p. 153). Her brother/lover has enclosed her heart, if not her body, in Wuthering Heights, and she finds herself unable to participate in that process of separation from the household of her parents and incorporation into the family of her husband that constitutes marital exchange.

But at the same time that Heathcliff embodies this incestuous threat, he also remains a foreigner, and as a husband of either Catherine or Isabella, he will violate the boundaries of the group, those terms of likeness that make Linton-Earnshaw intermarriage possible. Marrying Heathcliff, both women become "the wife of a stranger." The threat here is not enclosure (the starvation of society), but the explosion of social bonds, an explosion that does take place when he elopes with Isabella. That exogamous "crime"
at once destroys the internal harmony of the Lintons ("we are eternally divided," says Edgar [p. 178]), and upsets the relations between the houses ("My communication with Heathcliff's family . . . shall not exist!" [p. 178]). Isabella herself, echoing Catherine's sentiments, speaks of the foreignness of Wuthering Heights (a house, we must remember, now under Heathcliff's control): "I cannot recognise any sentiment which those around share with me" (p. 166). Yet Heathcliff's marriage to Isabella remains also a literalization of the other side of his relation to Catherine; for her too, he is the dark alien, the stranger attempting to steal what belongs already to somebody else. The union of Catherine and Heathcliff, then, is a paradoxical double crime in terms of conventional marriage customs, at once a hoarding and a theft.

"Likeness" is thus no simple issue in Wuthering Heights, no matter of two tortured lovers fighting to continue a soul-communion that they first achieved as children and that death itself cannot alter. Instead of taking likeness for granted, Brontë powerfully raises the question of what likeness is, and she offers us no single answer. I would like to conclude this essay by suggesting some reasons why this issue might concern her, and what the significance of her complex consideration of this question might be.

As the anthropological model outlined above suggests, likeness is always an issue in any examination of marriage—and Wuthering Heights, with its many real (at least four weddings occur) and possible matings is certainly that. But it may also be that the novel reflects certain changes that had taken place in English thinking about the relation between likeness and marriage choices. Lawrence Stone has argued that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries England moved from a climate of thinking about marriage largely dominated by "interest" (meaning family interests, typically financial, with little regard for the feelings of the prospective mates) to one based on free choice and the mutual affection of the husband and wife—what Stone calls the "companionate marriage." Stone's idea has been controversial, and he has been criticized in some circles by those who insist that affectionate
marriages were not as unusual before the seventeenth century as he implies. The question seems to me to be essentially irresolvable, simply because it is very hard ever to reconstruct what people felt. Where Stone is useful is for an understanding of the changes that took place in the way people talked about marriage and marriage choices between 1500 and 1800. In the light of the anthropological model I have been using, what Stone's work uncovers is no revolution in the basic structure (like, but not too like; different, but not too different), but rather a change in the definition or understanding of the concepts of likeness and difference. To use a rough distinction, likeness ceases to be defined primarily in terms of external considerations like class or property interests, and is redefined largely as a matter of internal and subjective concerns, like temperament or emotions. To recall a couple of novelistic examples, Solmes and Clarissa Harlowe are considered by Richardson and his audience to be grotesquely mismatched because their personalities are so dissonant, whatever economic or family interests they may have in common; on the other hand, Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet are well-suited temperamentally, and we approve of their match, despite the disparity of their positions in the world.

From one perspective, Wuthering Heights can be read as a direct expression of such a companionate ideology. Catherine is like Edgar, but what they have in common is all a matter of externals—family equality, physical characteristics, geographical propinquity. Moreover, there is a rather nasty mercenary strain evident in Catherine when she comments to Nelly that the union of the two houses will make her "the greatest woman of the neighbourhood" (p. 97). On the other hand, Heathcliff apparently represents a bond based on internal likeness. When Nelly asks where there is an "obstacle" to Catherine's marrying Edgar, she strikes herself on "her forehead" and "on her breast" (p. 98). The head and the heart, of course, are two primary metaphors for what is "inside" us—feelings, thoughts, identity itself. It is internally that these

lovers are joined. But this simple opposition—an external affinity to Edgar, an internal likeness to Heathcliff—collapses under scrutiny.

First of all, in many ways, Catherine’s marriage to Edgar is most like the companionate union that Stone describes. Charlotte Brontë’s characterization, in her 1850 preface to the novel, of Edgar as a “model of constancy and tenderness,” as well as Nelly’s (possibly suspect) insistence that the Lintons “were really in possession of deep and growing happiness” (p. 114) before Heathcliff’s return sound very like the companionate ideal and the language used to describe it. On the other hand, the stormy relations between Catherine and Heathcliff seem illustrative of the dangers that the companionate ideology saw lurking in passionate love. By these lights, passion (meaning sexual passion) was inherently unstable, and destructive of just those qualities of “settled” affection potential mates were properly to seek. The undeniable train of destruction that Heathcliff and Catherine leave behind them only proves that passion is bad, a feeling devoutly to be avoided.

What is going on here? Is Brontë—as her sister seems to imply—writing a cautionary tale about a foolish woman who throws away the good and right thing for the gaudy lure of passion, or is she—as so many modern readers have felt—trying to demonstrate what happens when you betray your “heart” for the superficial considerations of interest and position? Or is the historical perspective simply irrelevant to this novel, so often considered anomalous or found to be mystical and timeless? Rather than assume too glibly that any one of these answers is the “right” one, I would suggest instead a perspective that reads Wuthering Heights as a dramatic enactment of the complexity of the issue of likeness.

Most importantly, perhaps, we see in the novel that there are various ways to define likeness. Because we are the heirs to the changes in the ideology of marriage that Stone describes, it is easy to see “internal” likeness as somehow more valid, more “natural” than definitions based on more externalized sorts of considerations. It is especially easy to be controlled by these assumptions because Catherine herself appears to subscribe to them, and thus

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insists on a hierarchy that will always validate Heathcliff as a “truer” kind of love than Edgar. But I am not sure that the novel allows us to accept a hierarchy that celebrates internal affinity uncritically. As we have seen, the character of Heathcliff is susceptible to other kinds of interpretation, because his indefiniteness makes him available as both a screen for projection and as a kind of fantasy, a wish-fulfillment dream that allows Catherine—and readers—to enjoy a delicious and quite impossible combination of likeness and difference. In other words, Wuthering Heights tells us both that we can understand likeness in various ways, and that what we perceive as likeness may be something else, such as our own reflected needs.

Implicit in such a vision, finally, is a need to remind us that “internal” definitions of likeness may be inherently problematic. Far from being “natural,” internal affinity is another construction, a construction that we can understand specifically in cultural/historical terms. Seen in this light, Wuthering Heights is no affirmation of the companionate ideology, nor is it a metaphysical love-story unfolding outside the constraints of time and place. Instead, the novel wants us to wonder what we mean when we say that two people are alike, and makes us need to question what such an assertion might conceal. As such, it is an important document in the discourse about love and marriage that is so central to the development of the English novel. “Nelly, I am Heathcliff!” is a remarkable assertion of the love many of us want to believe real affinity can bring, but one effect of the novel is to leave us wondering what “real affinity” might be.

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