



**UNIVERSIDAD  
DE SALAMANCA**

CAMPUS DE EXCELENCIA INTERNACIONAL



**DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOGÍA INGLESA  
FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA**

UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

# **The ‘Byronic Hero’ in *Wuthering Heights***

Autora: Teba Villar Rodríguez

Tutora: Viorica Patea Birk

**Salamanca, 2016**



**VNiVERSiDAD  
D SALAMANCA**

CAMPUS DE EXCELENCIA INTERNACIONAL



**DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOGÍA INGLESA  
FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA**

UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

# **The ‘Byronic Hero’ in *Wuthering Heights***

This thesis is submitted for the degree of English Studies

Date:

Tutor: Viorica Patea Birk

Vº Bº

Signature:

## Resumen

El propósito de este trabajo es comparar a Heathcliff, el protagonista de la novela *Wuthering Heights* escrita por Emily Brontë en 1847, con el prototipo de héroe creado por Lord Byron conocido como “Byronic Hero”. El estudio estará basado en las características y rasgos comunes en ambos personajes, a saber: un marginado social con un pasado difícil y emocionalmente conflictivo, con un alto nivel de inteligencia y elevado poder de atracción, un idealista con comportamiento autodestructivo y personalidad misteriosa, magnética y carismática pero también arrogante y rebelde.

**Palabras Clave:** Byronic Hero, Lord Byron, Heathcliff, Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, amor, pasión, Catherine, venganza, muerte.

## Abstract

The aim of this dissertation is to compare Heathcliff, the main character in Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847) with the ‘Byronic Hero’, a prototype created by Lord Byron. The study is based on the common traces that both characters share, i.e.; an outcast with a troubled past, emotionally conflicted, with a high level of intelligence and a strong power of attraction, an idealist with self-destructive behaviour and a mysterious, enigmatic and charismatic but rebellious and arrogant nature.

**Keywords:** Byronic Hero, Lord Byron, Heathcliff, Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, love, passion, Catherine, revenge, death.

## **Table of Contents**

1. Introduction	5
2. The Origin of the Byronic Hero	6
3. Heathcliff as a Byronic Hero	7
4. Conclusion	14
5. Works Cited	16

## 1. Introduction

Along with her sisters Charlotte and Anne, Emily Brontë has been captivating and inspiring readers from all over the world since the early nineteenth century. Although she only wrote one novel, *Wuthering Heights* (1847), it became a pivotal writing in the history of literature. It was the break with the kind of literature produced in the Victorian Period. When *Wuthering Heights* was first scrutinized by the critical opinion, it was branded as immoral and sinful because of the numerous polemical issues treated in the novel. Emily Brontë was considered the independent soul in the Brontë family. There were several people who helped her shape her brilliance and genius, among them, one of her most important literary influences, Lord Byron, who was a highly significant figure in the Romantic Movement and creator of the so-called “Byronic Hero”.

After 1824, the year of Byron’s death, the Byronic Hero became very popular in the literary world. Over the years, he has been altered and adapted to the new times but he has always conserved his definitive characteristics: insubordination and resistance. It is possible to find examples of the Byronic hero either in a literary, film or television production such as Mr Rochester from Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Erik from Gaston Leroux's novel *The Phantom of the Opera*, Severus Snape from J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series or James Dean from ‘Rebel without a Cause’.

The archetypal hero created by Byron provided a model for Heathcliff, the protagonist of *Wuthering Heights*. He, who is arguably the most decisive characters of the story, is depicted as a dark, complex and authentic individual. This contrasts with the unreal but pleasant characters that tended to appear in the great majority of works at the time. His troubled past, emotional conflict and self-destructive behaviour make the perfect embodiment of the Byronic Hero. Heathcliff proves himself to be a perfect

example, since he is deceitful, malicious and scheming but at the same time he demonstrates a high level of intelligence, sensitivity and capacity to adapt to changes. The aim of this essay is to analyse the main characteristics and traces that Heathcliff and the Byronic hero have in common.

## 2. The Origin of the Byronic Hero

The literary predecessors of the Byronic Hero can be tracked back to Milton's Satan or the villains in the Gothic classics. The Gothic Villain appeared for the first time in 1791 with the novel *Castle of Otranto* written by Walpole. The pre-Byronic sentimentalizing of the Gothic Villain shows the transformation from villain to hero especially with the figures of Cain, Satan or Prometheus. These heroes became true Romantic rebels. The Gothic Villain shares his major characteristics with the Noble Outlaw of Byron. Cain, Faust, Prometheus or Satan are categorized by Peter L. Thorslev as "The Noble Outlaw [who] is, roughly speaking, the first of the Romantic heroes in point of time." (66) They are willingly lonely, isolated and antisocial people who rebel against civilization, themselves, Nature or even a divine being. Cain, the Biblical character who murders his brother Abel out of rage and envy, is punished with becoming an eternal and restless wanderer on the Earth. By being "too coward to admit his crime" he demonstrates "the transformation a typical hero undergoes when he is caught up by the spirit of Romanticism" He becomes more sinister and therefore, more Gothic. (Thorslev, 107)

With the intention of giving fire to the human race, Prometheus stole it from the sky and thunder god, Zeus. The Greek Titan condemned the precursor of the Byronic hero

to eternal punishment, a fate shared with Cain. Nevertheless, unlike the latter, Prometheus “is pure allegory; there is nothing in him of the Gothic, nothing of the dark mystery or taint of sin of the other Romantic heroes.” (Thorslev, 112) The admiration and attraction that Lord Byron felt for Prometheus and Cain was widely acknowledged. He wrote poems on each of them in 1816 and 1821 respectively. In these poems he exhibits his profound fascination with these myths and admits the insufficiency of human knowledge vis-à-vis the power and supremacy of the divinities.

The Byronic hero as it is known nowadays was conceived by the brilliant Romantic poet Lord Byron, from whom it takes its name. Emily Brontë along with her two sisters was an enthusiastic admirer of his work and it is no wonder that she decided to emulate him in her novel *Wuthering Heights*. Heathcliff presents similar characteristics to the protagonist of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. In this semi-autobiographic epic, Byron relates the adventures of a young man who, being sick of society, decides to embark on a series of journeys across Europe. The poem is divided into four cantos published on different dates. The first two cantos, thanks to which Byron gained his first poetic fame, were published in 1812, while the third and the fourth, respectively appeared in 1816 and 1818.

### **3. Heathcliff as a Byronic Hero**

A traditional hero is expected to possess several virtues in order to prove his *heroicity*, such as courage, justice or prudence. This does not apply to the Byronic hero since his characteristic traits are dark qualities similar to the figure of the Romantic hero. Both usually behave as rebels who defy standard modes of behaviour and thought.

Nevertheless, the hero created by Lord Byron possesses a higher stage of psychological and emotional complexity. Byronic heroes tend to isolate themselves from civilization either because of external forces or because of their own volition. They are socially maladjusted individuals who feel they do not fit in or belong anywhere.

Similarly, Heathcliff also alienates himself from social life. Emily Brontë thoughtfully chose an environment “completely removed from the stir of society.” (Brontë, 1) The novel takes place in two different settings, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, both situated in the moors of Yorkshire, in the north of England. They are symbolic of the temperament and attitude of the characters in that the two residences represent opposite panoramas. While Wuthering Heights is cold, dull and enigmatic, Thrushcross Grange is placid, bright and friendly and so are the people who dwell there. Therefore, we also find a dichotomy between Heathcliff and Edgar Linton. The first is described as “the solitary neighbour” (Brontë, 1) who tends to get irritated by the presence of someone else. As Mr Lockwood says: “It is astonishing how sociable I feel myself compared with him” (5). These words are pronounced by a character who considered Heathcliff to be “a capital fellow” (1) when he first arrived at Wuthering Heights. On the other hand, Edgar Linton and the rest of the people who live in Thrushcross Grange are portrayed as the perfect hosts who know how to treat their guests with kindness and respect. Consequently, as can be seen, the distance between the two houses is not just physical; it also represents the separation between both families.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M Gilbert and Susan Gubar state that the archetypal Byronic hero, Satan, features in the bildungsroman *Wuthering Heights*:



Satan too, however – at least Satan as Milton’s prototypical Byronic hero – has long been considered a participant in *Wuthering Heights*, for ‘that devil Heathcliff’, as both demon lover and ferocious natural force. (253)

The main character, Heathcliff, is described throughout Brontë’s novel as a “dark-skinned gipsy” (3), “vagabond” (15), “dirty, ragged, black-haired child” (25) or “imp of Satan” (27) among other titles. Heathcliff is an orphan child who is brought by Mr Earnshaw into his home. His past remains secret because it is never explicitly told, which helps to reinforce the mysterious aura that surrounds him. Heathcliff is accepted and loved by his new father and Catherine, his new sister. However, this would be not the case of Hindley, Catherine’s brother. Hindley feels threatened by Heathcliff’s presence because he sees him “as a usurper of his father’s affections and his privileges.” (Brontë, 26) When Heathcliff discovers that Hindley’s beloved sister plans to marry Edgar Linton because of his economic and social position, he decides to leave *Wuthering Heights*. Heathcliff, therefore, is not only mistreated by his brother but by the society of the time. As Stein points out in *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction and Television*: “[Heathcliff] is a victim of society who returns to take revenge, by using the very institutional powers that originally failed him” (44). According to this reading, Heathcliff returns with a clear thirst for revenge and he is going to take it slowly and in a savage way.

Heathcliff’s nature is “simultaneously attractive and horrifying” (Stein 4), deliberate features given by Emily Brontë in order to depict him as a dominant person who challenges power. Heathcliff is the master of his own destiny but the readers are informed that he is everything but a good example to be followed. When Heathcliff returns, his appearance seems to be completely transformed. He is no longer a servant but the master of the house, owing to the money earned while exiled and he plans to take his

revenge. With this unexpected reappearance, Heathcliff surprises the rest of the characters. Nelly Dean is the first to be bewildered when she finds him at the entrance hall:

“What! I cried, uncertain whether to regard him as a worldly visitor, and I raised my hands in amazement. What! You come back? Is it really you? Is it?” (Brontë 67).

Nelly is confused and barely able to recognize Heathcliff even though she had practically raised him from a very early age. It is at this point that we notice a change in the way Heathcliff is addressed. He is no longer a *dirty gipsy* or a *demonic creature* but “a tall, athletic, well-formed man” (Brontë 69). Moreover, he is given a title of respect: “Heathcliff – Mr Heathcliff I should say in future” (72). This would have been inconceivable three years before. However, in spite of his successful metamorphosis and the consequent climbing of the social ladder, it is still possible to find some traces of his former personality, which has now softened but has not been completely removed:

Looked intelligent, and retained no marks of former degradation. A Half-civilised ferocity lurked yet in the depressed brows and eyes full of black fire, but it was subdued; and his manner was even dignified: quite divested of roughness, though too stern for grace. (Brontë 69)

Heathcliff is aware that the only way of achieving his vengeful purpose is by following the already established rules of the privileged class. Heathcliff deceives people and plays dishonest mind games. He manipulates everyone without making any kind of distinction between the innocent and the betrayers. His intention is to individually destroy them on a personal and/or economic level. Nevertheless, once he has achieved this he

rejects it because his only aim is to get Catherine's love. Heathcliff is an idealist who gives preference to love rather than material goods.

Stein points out that Heathcliff embodies the type of "satanic Byronic hero [who] has been modified into an avenging angel who achieves justice with purgative violence." (45) Therefore, there is a reversal of position and the oppressor becomes the oppressive. This behaviour is evident in his relationships with Hindley and Isabella. She is Edgar Linton's spoiled little sister. Like her brother she was raised at Thrushcross Grange. Isabella starts to feel attracted to Heathcliff when he comes back a *gentleman* whereas previously, he was essentially treated as a servant. She feels a girlish infatuation for him and she eventually marries him in spite of the warnings given by her sister in law: "he's not a rough diamond, [...] he's a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man. [...] I should, perhaps, have held my tongue, and let you fall into his trap" (74). She finds herself involved in a possessive, oppressive and manipulative relationship where each is cruel to the other. Isabella does not feel any sympathy for her husband when Catherine dies, rather she is pleased by his suffering:

I've recovered from my first desire to be killed by him: I'd rather he'd kill himself! He has extinguished my love effectually, and so I'm at my ease. I can recollect yet how I loved him; and can dimly imagine that I could still be loving him, if – no, no! Even if he had doted on me, the devilish nature would have revealed its existence somehow. Catherine had an awfully perverted taste to esteem him so dearly, knowing him so well. Monster! (Brontë, 125)

Isabella considers the idea of him not being human but a devilish creature: “Is Mr Heathcliff a man? If so, is he mad? And if not, is he a devil?” (99). She deeply regrets her choice of having married him because, among other reasons, it has cost her -her relationship with her brother. In the words of Edgar Linton himself: “hereafter she is only my sister in name: not because I disown her but because she has disowned me” (97). This is the main reason why Heathcliff weds Isabella, through his determination to wreak his revenge on Linton for taking away from him the love of his life, Catherine. His only target was Mr Linton and not Isabella nor even Catherine: “I seek no revenge on you [...] that’s not the plan” (Brontë, 81).

On the other hand, Heathcliff not only arouses hatred but sympathy among the readers and even a certain tenderness. Brontë wisely portrays him as both despicable but charming and seductive at the same time. His rebel spirit, along with his exceptional attachment to Catherine, make the readers feel sympathy for him in spite of his violent nature. Moreover, the readers feel compassion for the unfortunate events in his life. First of all, he is an orphan who was brought into an unfamiliar home and besides he was intimidated and tormented by his foster brother during his childhood. Nonetheless, as happens with Isabella, roles are reversed and the bully becomes the bullied, the abused the abuser. After his wife passes out giving birth to their child, Hindley develops an alcohol addiction which has a negative impact on his ability to reason and socialize:

For himself, he grew desperate: his sorrow was of that kind that will not lament. He neither wept nor prayed; he cursed and defied: execrated God and man, and gave himself up to reckless dissipation. The servants could not bear his tyrannical and evil conduct long: Joseph and I were the only two that would stay. (46)

Heathcliff takes advantage of his delicate and critical situation and carries out his vengeance by involving him in gambling, with the sole objective of taking all his assets. Eventually, Heathcliff achieves his intended aim and becomes the only owner of Wuthering Heights.

Although his revenge is remorseless he is still able to feel intense and sincere affection. In the novel, the only two characters he truly cares about are Mr Earnshaw and Catherine, they are also the only ones who care about him. The former dies shortly after adopting Heathcliff, leaving him vulnerable and unprotected. This will not be the only loss that Heathcliff will suffer: he also loses Catherine, twice. The first time, he loses her to another man, Edgar Linton, and then to death. Catherine and Heathcliff's special and unusual love story is very destructive but Platonic. They rarely touch each other so it is not something physical but is strictly emotional. They are so madly in love that "they forgot everything the minute they were together again." (Brontë, 32) Theirs is a very powerful love that goes beyond the essence of the being. They do not conceive life without the other, as Heathcliff begs:

May you [Catherine] not rest as long as I am living! You said I killed you – haunt me, then!" [...] Be with me always – take any form – drive me mad! Only *do* not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you! Oh God! It is unutterable!" (122)

They even lose their own being when they lose their significant other, "I *cannot* live without my life! I *cannot* live without my soul!" (Brontë, 122). Their union goes beyond human understanding, and beyond death or life. Here is where we find another major difference between Heathcliff and Linton. Catherine loves both of them but in extremely different ways. What she feels for Linton is categorized as an ordinary and common

human attachment, while what she feels for Heathcliff is a kind of supernatural and eternal passion. As Catherine herself claims:

My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods: time will change it, I'm well aware, as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath: a source of little visible delight, but necessary. Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff! He's always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being. (59)

Catherine and Heathcliff's love is oddly overwhelming to the extent that they complete each other. They do not know how to survive without the other because it seems they are made of the same substance. It is as if they both formed a single being "because he's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same; and Linton's is as different as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire" (Brontë, 57). It is an amoral and generous love that cannot be understood by the human mind.

#### **4. Conclusion**

What is fascinating about the Byronic hero are his imperfections, which make him human. Not being flawless as the traditional heroes were, helps the readers to connect with him and even, somehow, feel empathy. It is a character of a very complex nature and with a beautiful but damned soul. His mysterious but magnetic and charismatic personality has "all the perverse charm of a Byronic hero" (Praz, 77). Moreover, Byron created a hero that represented the type of individual people desired to be because he was brave enough to defy social rules and choose his own path.

Nevertheless, the Byronic hero does not achieve his aspirations but rather, he is devastated by his own emotions. In *The Romantic Agony*, Mario Praz claims that this archetype “is a hero fatal to himself and to those around him; his love is accursed; he drags to destruction the woman to whom he becomes attached” (77). This idea is clearly reflected in *Wuthering Heights*, where Heathcliff’s love for Catherine and vice versa is so strong that it has the power of destruction. Indeed, it is the main trigger for the drama in which the whole story is based. Catherine loses her being when she loses Heathcliff, leading her to death. However, their union goes beyond understanding, beyond death and life because each is the other’s essence. Heathcliff is haunted by Catherine’s ghost and neither of them will rest in peace until they can be reunited in the afterlife.

The strong influence of the Byronic hero is noticeable in the creation of Heathcliff. Emily Brontë was a great admirer of Byron’s work and she honours him by emulating perhaps his greatest legacy. Nevertheless, Heathcliff is not just a simple copy of Byron’s creation. Brontë was able to brilliantly develop her character in a moral and psychological way that Heathcliff, as Peter L. Thorslev wisely asserts in *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes*, “is not only Byronic, but a great literary achievement.” (192)

## 5. Works Cited

Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited. 1992.

Print.

Gilbert, Sandra M. And Gubar, Susan. *The Madwoman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984. Web.

<https://archive.org/stream/TheMadwomanInTheAttic/The%20Madwoman%20i%20the%20Attic#page/n0/mode/2up>

Praz, Mario. *The Romantic Agony*. Great Britain: Oxford University Press. 1951. Print.

Stein, Atara. *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction and Television*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009. Google Books. Web.

[https://books.google.com.au/books?id=xV616xTewWMC&printsec=frontcover&hl=es&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com.au/books?id=xV616xTewWMC&printsec=frontcover&hl=es&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false)

Thorslev, Peter L. *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1999. Print.