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TITLE: Childe Harold and Heathcliff: The Super-Byronic Heroes

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Resumen

Este trabajo realiza una comparación valorativa entre dos de los personajes más importantes de la literatura inglesa: Heathcliff—el protagonista de Cumbres Borrascosas, de Emily Brönte—y Childe Harold—Pertenece a la obra Las Peregrinaciones de Childe Harold, de Byron—. Compararé dos tipos de este héroe byroniano. Partiré de la definición del arquetipo creado por Lord Byron que será continuado por muchos otros autores como Emily Brönte. Investigaré las características byronianas que están presentes en Childe Harold y en Heathcliff señalando sus diferencias y similitudes: sus relaciones con la sociedad, su personalidad, pasado y conciencia de clase. También exploraré algunos periodos poco claros en sus vidas, su dependencia de otros personajes y su relación con las fuerzas de la naturaleza. Childe Harold pertenece a la clase alta mientras que Heathcliff proviene de una baja; Harold lleva a cabo una peregrinación mientras que Heathcliff se queda en los páramos; normalmente los héroes byronianos tienen algún secreto oculto, Harold tiene un misterioso pecado en su pasado, sin embargo, el misterio de Heathcliff está contenido en su nacimiento. En las peregrinaciones de Childe Harold encontramos potenciado el espíritu del individualismo, mientras que Heathcliff depende obsesivamente de Catherine. Además, Childe Harold se identifica a lo largo del poema con la naturaleza. En Cumbres Borrascosas, la naturaleza y sus elementos son utilizados para reflejar carácter y acciones de los personajes. Por otra parte, mientras que Heathcliff se ve diferente al resto de personajes, Harold está cansado y decepcionado con las personas que han estado a su alrededor durante su vida.. Finalmente, la pasión de Heathcliff no tiene límites (ni siquiera el de la muerte), mientras el estilo de vida de Harold le llega a cansar y aburrir.

Palabras clave: Héroe Byroniano, Childe Harold, Heathcliff, Lord Byron, Emily Brönte, diferencias, parecidos, venganza, aislamiento, rebelión, libertad.

Abstract

This study establishes a comparison between two of the most important characters in English literature: Heathcliff—the protagonist of Emily Brönte’s *Wuthering Heights*—and Childe Harold—the protagonist of Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*—. I will compare two types of Byronic Heroes. I will depart from the definition of this archetype created by Lord Byron, who will be followed by many other authors such as Emily Brönte. I will investigate Child Harold’s and Heathcliff’s Byronic characteristics and point out their similarities and differences: their relations with society, their personality, background and class consciousness. Also, I will explore the unclear stages in their life, dependence on other characters, and their relation to natural forces. Childe Harold belongs to a high social class while Heathcliff belongs to a low one. Harold undertakes a pilgrimage while Heathcliff stays on the moors. Usually, Byronic Heroes have a hidden secret, Harold has a mysterious sin in his past, and Heathcliff’s mystery is contained in his birth. In *Childe Harold* independence is emphasized by going alone on a journey, but Heathcliff obsessively depends on Catherine. Furthermore, Childe Harold identifies himself with nature all along the poem. In *Wuthering Heights*, nature and its elements are used to reflect the characters’ actions and feelings. On the other hand, while Heathcliff sees himself different from the other characters, Harold is tired of and disappointed with people who have been around him during his life. Finally, Heathcliff possess a boundless passion (even beyond death), while Harold lifestyle bores and tires him.

Keywords: Byronic Hero, Childe Harold, Heathcliff, Lord Byron, Emily Brönte, similarities, differences, revenge, isolation, rebellion, freedom.

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1. Introduction

In this paper I will approach the figure of the Byronic Hero as he appears in two different masterpieces: *Wuthering Heights*¹ by Emily Brönte and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*² by Lord Byron. My main goal consists in analyzing the Byronic characteristics in Heathcliff and in Childe Harold. Many authors have analyzed both works but few have tried to establish a parallelism and comparison between Lord Byron's Byronic Hero, the creator of the archetype, and Emily Brönte's version of it.

In this paper, I outline the prototypical hero created by Lord Byron which is a source of inspiration to many other authors. After that, a parallelism is established between Childe Harold and Heathcliff, both considered for the scholars to be Byronic Heroes. In order to establish a comparison I will be looking to many aspects : their social class, mysterious past, attitude, their relation on other characters, dependence to others and passion in life.

2. How Byronic Heroes are Constructed

Many authors and essayists have attempted to give a definition of the Byronic Hero, who has become a very important archetype in literature. One of the most complete and accurate descriptions can be found in Peter Thorslev's excellent study called *The Byronic Hero, Types and Prototypes*. This archetype was well seated by Lord Byron in the Romantic literary period in England and later on in Gothic Victorian literature. However, he is not a hero in the usual sense. He is commonly a rebel and has gloomy characteristics. In his study, Thorslev states that the Byronic hero in general, is a compendium of the characteristics of three pre-Romantic types. One of them is the child of nature, who is naïve and unsophisticated. This

¹ E.Brönte, *Wuthering Heights*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1992. All references are to this edition.

²Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Chicago: W.B.Conkey Company, 1900. All references are to this edition.

hero is also impulsive and sometimes even aggressive because his origin is close to nature. The second type is the Hero of sensibility who is a sophisticated cultivator of feelings. He is different from common men because of his sensitivity. The last one is the Gothic villain who is characterized by his rebellion against society and against moral codes. He perseveres in evil to the end. There is a mystery connected to his birth and his personality.

According to Thorslev, these pre-Romantic heroes will give way to three different hero types in the Romantic era, according to Thorslev. The noble outlaw tends to be a victim of society against which he rebels. He is fiery and passionate, a natural leader. A halo of mystery surrounds him but he is never cruel or sadistic. Another one is Faust who is aggressive, analytic and has an eternal thirst for knowledge and for the absolute. The third type is to which Cain and Ahasuerus belong. They rebel against God and are wandering heroes because they are outcasts of society. They are usually isolated because they have been cursed by God. He has committed a murder but without a real motive. Finally, Satan-Prometheus is a man who fights for liberty and against oppression, he is an aggressive and witty spirit, but his sins are easily forgiven due to his sublimity.

Furthermore, Thorslev explains also the characteristics of the Byronic Hero in a more general way. He states that this prototype usually shows high intellectual capacities, as well as self-respect and hypersensitivity (187). Also this hero feels isolated from society, is exiled from his country or even is in a journey. Thorslev makes in addition a comparison between the heroes and their creators:

Both, romantic poets and their heroes considered themselves alienated and isolated from society because of their great sensibility, and closeness to nature or to God, or merely because of their radical ideas in the areas of

social, theological, or moral reform, so also they alienated and isolated their heroes.(17)

They have in common some degree of rebellion or feeling of being outsiders. For that reason, Byronic heroes are normally considered to be outcasts. Nonetheless, he is “arrogant and confident. (...) Also they tend to have a guilty memory of some unnamed sexual crime. (Thorslev,195).

According to Lord Macaulay in Rupert Christiansen's *Romantic Affinities: Portraits from an Age, 1780- 183*:

The Byronic hero is a man proud, moody, and cynical, with defiance on his brow, and misery in his heart, a scorner of his kind, implacable in revenge, yet capable of deep and strong affection. (...) He feels strong passions but they tend to be bipolar and change emotions radically. They react in non-accepted socially ways, and have enormous internal conflicts. (210)

However, the Byronic heroes do have a moral code although different from the conventional. Mario Praz gives a specific and very interesting definition of a Byronic hero who comes from the vampiric tradition. He states that the type of satanic hero of the Vathek-Byronic tradition is a majestic figure with a beautiful look although he is sad at the same time, overshadowed by an expression of pride. (76). As Sólrún Helga concludes, the appeals of the Byronic hero are its flaws everyone can relate to in some aspect and will empathize with. (21).

3. The Particular Cases of Heathcliff and Child Harold

In the novel written by Emily Bronte, Heathcliff is an excellent example of this archetype. Brönte makes her character enticing by portraying him as a powerful individual

that defies authority and forges his own path but still warns the reader that this character is neither a good role model nor a leader (Stein, 13). According to Winifred Gérin, author of *Emily Brönte*:

Heathcliff is the Byronic hero per excellence. He embodies the sin of pride to a satanic grade. His own feeling of grandeur (...) is frustrated by a love not realized. He becomes a demon. (...) Heathcliff is the absolute owner of his destiny; he alone prepares the exit of his tormented life. (19) [My translation]

In the case of Childe Harold, he is one of the best examples of the Byronic Hero.

To begin with, he refers to him as Childe Harold by the author. In many cases the Byronic Hero has a notable position in society. He usually is part of high social class. “Childe”, as the Oxford English Dictionary defines it, is a youth of noble birth who will inherit the title. Heathcliff in contrast belongs to the lowest possible classes. We learn this when Mr. Earnshaw explains how he saw him starving and houseless and “as good as dumb” in the streets of Liverpool. (25)

Byronic Heroes often travel somewhere or are obliged to exile themselves. In this case, Harold starts a pilgrimage, as the author remarks in stanza 6: “And from his native land he resolved to go” (I, 6). This pilgrimage will take him to different European countries. Harold is journeying in a historic and literary tour through Europe. (Bruffee, 674) First, he goes to Portugal, after that he continues to Spain, then to Greece and to Albania, after this, he goes from Dover to Waterloo and then he follows the Rhine into Switzerland. Finally, he continues the pilgrimage into Italy, ending in Rome.

In comparison, Heathcliff remains during the major part of the novel in *Wuthering Heights*, at the moors, except for a mysterious journey after which he comes back as a rich man and wearing wealthy clothes.

Byron usually adds another complement to the life of his heroes: They have a troubled past that haunts them throughout their life. Nonetheless, Childe Harold keeps it as a secret that never is revealed. We learn that Harold's past is darkened by a sin which is a mystery. "As if the memory of some deadly feud/ Or disappointed passion lurked below/ But this none knew" (I, 8) and "Through many a clime 'tis mine to go, / With many a retrospection curst." (I, 84)

What is the worst? Nay, do not ask-
In pity from the search forbear:
Smile on-nor venture to unmask/Man's heart,
And view the hell that's there. (I, 84)

Afterwards, Byron comes back again on the subject of Harold's mysterious and sinful past: "I look upon the peopled desert Past, /As on a place of agony and strife, / Where, for some sin, to Sorrow I was cast." (III, 73)

In the case of Heathcliff, his birth is shrouded in a mysterious atmosphere. Heathcliff is an orphan. We don't know where he came from, he has a past that we do not know. At the beginning of the book we find a description that makes us realize that he has a controversial racial background. When Lockwood arrives to the house he gives us the first impression that Heathcliff causes on him: "Mr. Heathcliff forms a singular contrast to his abode and style of living. He is a dark-skinned gipsy in aspect, in dress and manners a gentleman: that is, as much a gentleman as many a country squire." (3).

Later on we learn that he was adopted. Actually, he is described as belonging to a different race. Mrs. Earnshaw reacts by rejecting him when her husband brought the child home, “asking how he could fashion to bring that gipsy brat into the house, when they had their own bairns to feed and fend for?” (25). Mr. Earnshaw explains he picked him up from the streets of Liverpool. Many authors point out that Liverpool was a place with many ports and it was a place where people from many countries met so, we can deduce that he is probably of a mixed race. Other authors conjecture that he was an illegitimate son of Mr. Earnshaw, and this is the reason why he insisted on keeping him with them in the house and integrating him in the family.

Also, we find that the name given to him, Heathcliff, “was the name of a son who died in childhood” (26). As Athlyn Green points out, “Mr. Earnshaw lost a son in death by the name of Heathcliff and when he brings a strange child home, he chooses to give him this same name, which has led to the speculation that the boy was really his own child.”(3)

Another remarkable characteristic in the character of Child Harold is his strong sense of individualism that rises from a sense of isolation and estrangement. The Byronic spirit of individualism is widely reflected in the text. In stanza LXIX (Canto III), he explains that he does not hate humanity, he just feels that he has nothing to do with people and does not fit in society: “To fly from, need not be to hate, mankind; /All are not fit with them to stir and toil” (Byron, 164). He also states that being around human beings would have bad consequences in his soul and heart: “There, in a moment, we may plunged our years /In fatal penitence, and in the blight/Of our own soul, turn all our blood to tears.” (III, 70)

In Heathcliff we find the opposite feature. His dependence on his connection with Catherine is the leitmotiv of his vital journey. His obsession (with Cathy and carrying out his revenge) is very characteristic of him and of the Byronic hero. This characteristic is more

noticeable when it is related with Catherine's presence in his imagination. He is so obsessed that he thinks Catherine's ghost is haunting him. In chapter 33 he is becoming insane and sees Catherine's face everywhere:

I cannot look down to this floor, but her features are shaped in the flags! In every cloud, in every tree—filling the air at night, and caught by glimpses in every object by day—I am surrounded with her image! The most ordinary faces of men and women—my own features—mock me with a resemblance. The entire world is a dreadful collection of memoranda that she did exist, and that I have lost her!
(235)

Lastly, Childe Harold in his estrangement from society finds comfort in nature. He feels identified with natural elements and his environment. Considering that humanity has nothing good to offer he prefers the natural world as his confidant: "Where rose the mountains, there to him were friends; Where rolled the ocean, thereon was his home." (III, 13) Byron had a view of natural world as a celebration of men's greatness but also of their vulnerability, that are perfectly pictured in this Canto.

In Brönte's novel, nature and natural elements reflect the complex psychology of Heathcliff and Catherine. Their relationship parallels the weather at the heights. There are other similarities between the main characters and nature, as well. Heathcliff, like the landscape of the novel, is often violent and cruel. Catherine is as changeable as the weather, with unpredictable moods. Both, Heathcliff and Catherine, love the moors which is the space of ultimate freedom, and want to escape their homes.

Furthermore, Heathcliff has a continuous feeling of being different from the other characters of the novel. This estrangement is reflected in the way in which some relatives and neighbours receive him in the house, and later on mistreat and insult him. Nelly Dean depicted this situation in the following words:

So from the beginning he bred bad feeling in the house; and at Mrs. Earnshaw's death, (...) the young master [Hindley] had learnt to regard his father as an oppressor rather than a friend, and Heathcliff as a usurper of his father's affections and privileges. (26)

Afterwards, we see that Heathcliff is treated like an interloper even by his neighbours at Thrushcross Range, in Mrs. Linton's words: "A wicked boy, at all events (...) and quite unfit for a decent house! Did you notice his language, Linton? I'm shocked that my children should have heard it." (35) There are many passages in the text where Heathcliff is being humiliated or tortured: "Hindley threw it, hitting him on the breast, and down he fell. "Take my colt, Gipsy, then!" said young Earnshaw. "And I pray that he may break your neck: take him, and he damned, you beggarly interloper! (...) afterwards show him what you are, imp of Satan." (27) Even Nelly Dean, admitted that she never loved him: "Hindley hated him, and to say the truth I did the same", but she also admitted that "he was uncomplaining as a lamb; though hardness, not gentleness, made him give little trouble." (27)

He feels rejected and most people make him feel different and strange. Cathy also prefers marrying Edgar Linton instead of him. As a consequence he will turn into a kind of monster who seeks revenge and hurts every person around him. At the same time Heathcliff tries to win Catherine's heart. Consequently, Heathcliff becomes of a tyrant, being a violent and revengeful person. However, this does not make him a villain. His troubled and horrible past that makes readers feel pity towards him. Having this kind of existence is another typical characteristic of the Byronic hero.

In contrast, Childe Harold feels bored with his acquaintances. In stanzas 2 and 3 of the first Canto we find a description of him. He is a young man tired of his licentious life, “shameless” and only pleased by concubines and carnal “companie” (I, 2) and surrounded by “wassailers”. But although he was in every moment surrounded by them, he wasn’t satisfied and was feeling alone. He knew that those “fellows” were with him just because of his money, as he reveals in stanza 9: “And none did love him.” (I, 9) “He knew them flatterers of the festal hour; The heartless parasites of present cheer, Yea, none did love him-not his lemans dear.” (I, 9) He has lived within this environment during all his life but now he feels that it does not make him happy anymore. He has realized that many of his party friends did not really love him. “In stanza 4 Byron says “He felt the fullness of satiety. /Then loathed he in his native land to dwell, /Which seemed to him more lone than eremite’s sad cell.” (I, 4) “And now, Childe Harold was sore sick at heart, /And from his fellow bacchanals would flee. (...) Apart he stalked in joyless reverie.” (I, 4) Since he is feeling like this, he decides to undertake a pilgrimage in order to know different realities and to find his own place in the world. “And from his native land he resolved to go.” (I, 6)

Furthermore, Heathcliff has a boundless passion. His love for Catherine goes beyond death. As Meg Harris describes in his talk “Reversing Perversion: the Byronic Hero in Wuthering Heights”:

Heathcliff’s agony (...) is not that he is haunted, but that he is not haunted (...) the lover is relentlessly pursued by a ghost which never takes material form. Heathcliff finds himself shut out from the world of ghosts and consequently unable to make any personal contact or onward movement. (...) for the past eighteen years he has struggled to see Catherine’s ghost but she has always eluded him (...) acting like a „devil“ in death as she did in life. (10)

On Harris“ it is pointed out that the night of Catherine’s funeral he forced open her grave and was consoled by the sight of her face, and her spirit „led him home“ to the Heights.

Conversely, we find Harold, whose life is passionless. His tiredness and boredom of his life moves him to undertake the pilgrimage.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, the Byronic Hero has turned into a very famous archetype and he is a recurrent character in literature. After comparing Heathcliff and Childe Harold it is possible to highlight some characteristics: On one side, Childe Harold belongs to a higher social class while Heathcliff was picked up from the streets of Liverpool. Harold undertakes a pilgrimage but Heathcliff spent most of his life at Wuthering Heights. Also, we learn that Harold has a secret and dark past to which he referred several times. Heathcliff has also a mysterious past but it is related to his birth. Moreover, Lord Byron stresses Harold’s individualism while Heathcliff shows an obsessive love on Catherine. Yet, he is also an individualist despite his love for Catherine. Additionally, Harold identifies with nature, and in Wuthering Heights nature is often used as an instrument to reflect the way of being of the characters. Heathcliff’s life is characterized by the feeling of estrangement. This characteristic together with the mistreatment received from other characters turned him into a violent and revengeful person. In the case of Childe Harold, he is bored by the people around him because they do not really love him. This is what impels him to go on a pilgrimage. Finally, Heathcliff possesses a boundless passion that goes beyond death. Harold is described as tired and bored of his life.

We can conclude that although Child Harold is a “first hand” Byronic Hero (that is to say, a hero created by Lord Byron himself) and Heathcliff is an imitation of this character

type. They are both excellent examples of the Byronic Hero. However, by comparing these characters we find more differences than similarities between them. This fact can be due to the many kind of Byronic Heroes to what Thorslev referred at the beginning (Faust, Cain and Ahasuerus the Noble Outlaw and Satan-Prometheus). All of them have the common source in the Byronic hero but at the same time they are very different. Maybe this relative freedom at the moment in which an author chooses the characteristics of his hero is the cause of its multiple imitations of this hero by other authors. In the future it can be a good idea to investigate the ways in which the Byronic hero has evolved until the models created in present days.

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