

2018 Wuthering Heights | Sample Essay

“The development of characters is influenced by a variety of personal, social and cultural factors in texts.”

Discuss the factors in the novel, Wuthering Heights, that you think are most influential in the development of Heathcliff’s character. Support your answer with reference to the text.

Emily Brontë’s ‘Wuthering Heights’ was the only novel she ever wrote and one of which many people, including her sister Charlotte, disapproved of. It was regarded as fundamentally immoral, especially in the creation of one of its central characters, the brutal Heathcliff. The novel depicts Heathcliff’s struggle with his identity, due to various traumas from his childhood. His character develops extensively over the course of the novel and the concluding Heathcliff is far removed from the mute boy we meet in chapter four. Heathcliff’s presence at Wuthering Heights overthrows the prevailing habits of the Earnshaw family, as he exacts his oppressive retaliation on them for the fury and humiliation he suffered throughout his life. In this essay, I will be discussing how certain factors in the novel are influential in the development of Heathcliff’s character and how he is established as somewhat of a Byronic hero.

Heathcliff is introduced in Nelly’s narration as a seven-year-old foundling, adopted by the kind spirited Mr Earnshaw, who welcomes him into his home at Wuthering Heights. Brontë illustrates a starving and homeless child who, upon being introduced to the family, “*bred bad feelings in the house.*” We know little of Heathcliff’s early childhood and I think that this is the first crucial factor that influenced him. Certainly, his treatment at the hands of Hindley shaped his cruelty towards others. Heathcliff wasn’t a saint by any means, but the constant abuse inflicted on him in during childhood, influenced his still developing personality. I believe that the abandonment and turmoil he suffered as a child, ultimately contributed to his overall downfall. Initially, Hindley and Catherine seen him as an imposter, a cuckoo who “*usurped*” their father’s attention and affection. While Catherine grew fond of him, Hindley remained a jealous bully and was physically violent

towards Heathcliff. Hindley was eventually sent away to boarding school by Mr Earnshaw for his despicable behaviour. However, the damage had already been done. Heathcliff never fought back against Hindley, as he was aware that his “brother” was older and much stronger than he was. This aroused a deep and abiding hatred in Heathcliff and an all-consuming passion for revenge, as he never forgot any of the injuries inflicted upon him. He was deprived of love, sociability, education and according to Nelly, the abuse he suffered was “*enough to make a fiend of a saint.*” Revenge became Heathcliff’s driving emotion and when he returned to Wuthering Heights some years later, his determination to punish Hindley shocks the reader, “*I’m trying to settle how I shall pay Hindley back. I don’t care how long I wait, if I can only do it at last. I hope he will not die before I do!*” Heathcliff encouraged Hindley’s fledgling drinking and gambling addiction, which is what kills him in the end. Still not satisfied, Heathcliff turned his attention to the young Hareton, Hindley’s son. These acts of vengeance continued over the years. He sabotaged Catherine’s relationship with Edgar Linton, married Isabella Linton to prove a point and forced his son to marry Catherine’s daughter. It could be argued that these toxic traits were engrained in Heathcliff’s DNA, but I would contest that he was distorted by the wrongs done to him.

An additional factor that influenced Heathcliff’s development throughout the novel, was his pernicious relationship with Catherine Earnshaw. As mentioned before, Bronte established Heathcliff as a Byronic hero. He was a Romantic hero with dark characteristics. He was brooding, ostracized from society, intelligent but arrogant. Throughout his life, he was possessed by the passion that was Catherine. At no point in the novel, can we doubt Heathcliff’s eternal faithfulness and love for Catherine. His love survived her rejection of him for Edgar Linton’s hand in marriage, “*It would degrade me to marry Mr. Heathcliff.*” Heathcliff departed Wuthering Heights after her initial rejection but returned some years later, like a faithful dog returning to its owner. It was this love that prevented him from exacting revenge on Edgar Linton. The degree in which Heathcliff is tormented by Catherine is reflected when he eventually confronted her about their accursed love, “*Why did you betray your own heart, Cathy?.... You love me, what right had you to leave me?*” His fractured relationship with Catherine, influenced every decision he made, good and bad. After learning of Isabella Linton’s unfortunate admiration of him, he courted her and convinced her to marry him. This was to, once again, exact revenge on both Catherine and Edgar Linton. The marriage didn’t last, as Isabella fled to London with their unborn child. It was simply impossible for Heathcliff to love anyone but Catherine. She

tormented him until her very last breath and even from beyond the grave. When physical union was made impossible by her death, Heathcliff strived to achieve a mystical union with her and was perpetually haunted by the ghost of an impossible happiness. Heathcliff's troubled spirit tortured him to the point of madness and eventually to his own death. It makes us wonder how different Heathcliff would've been if he had married Catherine or indeed never returned to Wuthering Heights after his departure, "*Catherine, you know that I could as soon forget you as my existence!*"

The final factor that I believe influenced Heathcliff's development, was the social discrimination he experienced. From the beginning of the novel and most likely from the beginning of his life, Heathcliff had suffered pain and rejection. Mr Earnshaw found him on the streets of Liverpool, deserted and homeless. When he was first brought to Wuthering Heights, he received a less than warm welcome. He was viewed as a thing or "it", rather than a frightened child. Mrs Earnshaw was prepared to turn him away, Nelly put him on the landing in the hope that "it" would be gone the next morning and Catherine and Hindley wept for their gifts lost in the process of saving Heathcliff. Without having done anything to deserve such treatment, Heathcliff was made to feel like an outsider and different to his so-called siblings. Throughout his childhood, he received constant reminders of his lesser status. On his first visit to Thrushcross Grange, Catherine was taken in by the Linton's and treated for her injuries whereas Heathcliff was turned away. When the Lintons' arrived at Wuthering Heights, he was not considered fit to join the party. After Mr Earnshaw's death, Hindley took charge and reduced Heathcliff to the status of a servant and forcibly separated him from Catherine. I think that the personality Heathcliff developed in his adult life, was formed in response to the deprivation of his childhood. It could be said that it was the deprivation of love but perhaps it was how he felt society looked upon him. Heathcliff was a foundling, not a "true" Earnshaw and once he lost the protection of Mr Earnshaw, all subtleties were gone. Those around him no longer had to pretend to either like him or treat him with respect. He considered Catherine's marriage to Edgar a betrayal of her love, in favour of the social status and civilised existence of Thrushcross Grange. After realising this, he disappeared for three years and returned in the guise of a gentleman. "*A half-civilized 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 stern for grace.*" The social injustice Heathcliff faced for the entirety of his life made him spiteful, with a capacity for hatred of those who had wronged him.

In conclusion, there are several factors that influenced the development of Heathcliff. His abusive upbringing shaped his fiery temper and overpowering desire for revenge, while his relationship with Catherine both tormented and fulfilled him. Their love was so deeply rooted that he could not survive without her and was haunted by her ghost for the remainder of his life. The social discrimination Heathcliff experienced from a young age tainted his view on the world and those around him. He bitterly drove Hindley to his death, married Isabella Linton in spite and eventually forced the marriage of the young Cathy Linton and his son Linton. By doing this, he secured both Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange as his own. The ultimate revenge in Heathcliff's eyes, but it didn't make him happy. His development from the timid, mute boy to a malevolent savage, shocked readers but given the circumstances and influential factors, it was hardly unexpected. Heathcliff was abused and ostracised but most importantly, he was wronged by the only person he could ever truly love.