



Social class and class ambiguity in Wuthering Heights



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ABSTRACT

Wuthering Heights is a classic work of English literature .The novel is like a Chinese box. It can be interpreted in many different ways. This paper aims to present in a humble manner how social class and class ambiguity presented in the novel is unique and forms the basic structure for the understanding of the novel .This complex novel explains two families-the Earnshaws and the Lintons –across two generations and their homes – Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange . The socio economic political and cultural environment of mid nineteenth century England is of immense importance to understand this novel.

Keywords - Class, feudal, industrialization, conflict, revenge.

INTRODUCTION

Emily Bronte was born on July 30, 1818 in Yorkshire, England . She lived a quiet life in Yorkshire .Her father was a clergyman. Her two sisters were Charlotte and Anne .Bronte sisters enjoyed writing poetry and novels. They published their work under pseudonyms. “Wuthering Heights” is Emily’s only published novel. The novel was published in 1847. She wrote it under pseudonym Ellis Bell. The novel challenged Victorian ideas about religion, morality, class and women’s place in society. The novel was influenced by Romanticism. Emily was influenced by the novels of Walter Scott, gothic fiction and Byron .

Within the hierarchy of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century British Society the Earnshaws and the Lintons occupy a somewhat precarious place. At the top of the British society was the royalty, followed by Aristocracy, then by the gentry and then by the lower classes. The lower classes made up the vast majority of the population .Aristocrats had official titles. Members of the gentry had no titles .Their status was subject to change. Considerations of class status tells the reader the characters motivation in Wuthering Heights.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Wuthering Heights gradesaver.com

“Heaven is an important concept for each of these characters and their idea of a perfect world reveal their true personalities .Catherine admits that she would rather be on the moors than in heaven, and Heathcliff rejects the idea of a traditional heaven in favor of his remains mingling with Catherine’s beneath the earth”.

Sparknotes.com Main Ideas Themes “Consideration of class status often crucially inform the characters motivations in Wuthering Heights. Catherine’s decision to marry Edgar so that she will be the greatest women of the neighborhood is only the most obvious example”.

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“Cathy’s desire to incorporate or fuse with the other in the figure of Heathcliff brings her into tension with the boundrie’s of identity .So, w hen she makes her most fundamental yet extravagant claim – Nelly I am Heathcliff Vol 1 Ch 9 – she is clearly challenging conventional notions of selfhood and individuality”.

ANALYSIS

In the Victorian era, social class was not solely dependent upon the amount of money a person had. The source of income, birth and family connection played a major role in determining ones position in society. Most people accepted their position in hierarchy. A persons class was revealed by money, manners, speech, clothing, education and values. The three main classes were the elite class, the middle class and working class .Further division entered within the three class distinction.

This class structured society was revealed by the characters in Wuthering Heights. The Lintons were the most elite family in the novel. Thrushcross Grange was a superior property to Wuthering Heights. However, they were not members of the upper class of society. They were the profound middle class.

Wuthering Heights was a farm house. However, the Earnshaws were not members of the working class because they were landowners who had servants. Their status in society was below the Lintons but not significantly below. Servants were superior to manual laborers. This explains the problems created by Heathcliff .

Heathcliff is an orphan. His status is below everyone in Wuthering Heights. It was unheard of to raise someone from the working class to a member of the middle to upper middle class. Nelly understood her place in the house. When Mr Earnshaw elevates the status of Heathcliff eventually favouring his own son,this goes against social norms .

Hindley returns Heathcliff to his previous low position after the death of Mr Earnshaw . Heathcliff takes revenge when he reduces Hindleys son to the level of a common uneducated labourer .

When Heathcliff returns, he is rich. However, Edgar does not consider him a part of acceptable society. Heathcliff uses his role as the outcast to encourage Isabella's infatuation. Catherine and Isabella both love Heathcliff who belongs to lower class. Catherine loses the favour of Hindley and Isabella loses the favour of Edgar. Hindley and Edgar can't bear to see Catherine and Isabella developing relationship with Heathcliff. When women betrays her class, she is betraying her family.

Hindley does not believe servants should be educated. He never lets them read. This shows the difference in social class in Wuthering Heights. Difference in social class and class ambiguity is the source of all that is negative in the novel. Catherine decides to marry Edgar because of class difference. She says about Heathcliff "If my brother has not brought Heathcliff so low I would not have thought of it". She also says "It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now". When Heathcliff comes back to Wuthering Heights, he is wealthy and has acquired the manners of upper class. Catherine now regrets her decision of marrying Edgar. She cares for Heathcliff more than she cares for Edgar. However, she refuses to leave Edgar because she does love him. Heathcliff takes revenge in the form of marrying Isabella Linton. This breaks the heart of Cathy. She ultimately kills herself. Heathcliff had his heart broken all over again from grief and regret. Edgar too is heartbroken to lose his beloved wife. Misery haunts every character in some form or another for the rest of the novel.

At several points in the novel there is a class ambiguity. Hindley's son does not really have a class. Heathcliff raises the boy as a poor servant. His status and identity in the novel is decided by this. Heathcliff treats him as a poor orphan. This was just like he himself was treated in the novel. Nelly is the principal narrator in the novel. Her character shows the difference between the social classes in Wuthering Heights. She has responsibilities that resemble a mother. However, she has to work for her place in the manor.

Nelly recounts what Heathcliff told her about how the Lintons treated him when he and Catherine were trespassing. Lintons immediately looked down on Heathcliff because he was not of their social class. They did not give Heathcliff a chance to explain anything. They judged him and cast him aside. They welcomed Catherine and cared for her despite the fact that she too was equally responsible for the crime. This event explains the beginning of Heathcliff's hatred towards the Linton and highlights his sudden awareness of his social class separated from Catherine.

The Victorian society was male centric. It tried to balance the new roles of women with the traditionally defined role of her being essentially domestic. She played faithfully the part of the daughter, sister, wife and mother. Education was a necessary prerequisite for upward social mobility. Wealth was shifting away from landowners to the captains of the Industry. Victorian bachelor would have been happy to look for a spouse who was educated and had refined manners. To become a Lady was the aim behind Catherine choosing Edgar as her husband. Her refusal at being domesticated is a rebellion against the patriarchal system. She does not rebel against her father or husband openly. Her spirit refuses to accept the codes of discipline that are to be obeyed without a question. In Wuthering Heights, it is evident that the controlling power rests with the patriarch of the home.

Emily Bronte and Karl Marx might lead to a similarity in thought born out of the socio political issues of the Victorian England. The novel gives the reader enough space and scope to evaluate it from the class conflict perspective. The readers understanding of the novel relates to class conscious praxis to see through the age old binary oppositions that exist in the society between the rich and the poor, the master and the slave etc. In Victorian society there was a conflict between the bourgeois and the proletariat that made the society fall apart.

CONCLUSION

Thus we see that the theme of social class and class ambiguity is central to the understanding of the novel. The novel challenges the conventional view of class system of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century British society in a way which is unique and revolutionary.

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