

"Wuthering Heights" - Relationships

- How is the relationship introduced?

Cathy and Heathcliff's introduction to one another is hardly a good one. Mr. Earnshaw arrives home from a business trip to Liverpool and foists the young orphan boy on his family without any warning. Catherine, on learning that her father has lost the present he had promised her – a riding whip – because he was taking care of the boy, loses her temper and spits in Heathcliff's face. Catherine and Heathcliff seem to have nothing in common when they first meet, and their future together does not look promising.

However, despite this poor start, Catherine and Heathcliff soon become fast friends. Both couples are lonely and isolated in their own way, and both couples feel that they have found a kindred spirit in the other. Mrs. Earnshaw, Hindly and Nelly are far from kind to young Heathcliff, but he and Cathy become very close. They are not well-liked or understood by the others around them, so they turn to each other for comfort. Soon, the pair becomes inseparable. Nelly says that, "She was much too fond of Heathcliff. The greatest punishment we could invent for her was to keep her separate from him".

However, we soon realise that both Heathcliff and Cathy have personalities which will make a harmonious relationship unlikely. Cathy's temper makes her unpopular, even in her own family. She inadvertently comes between Mr. Earnshaw and Heathcliff, when the old man is ill. Mr. Earnshaw resents the fact that Heathcliff will do anything Cathy asks, but will only obey him when it suits him. Nelly tells Mr. Lockwood that, "After behaving as badly as possible all day, she [Cathy] sometimes came fondling to make it up at night. 'Nay, Cathy, the old man would say, 'I cannot love thee, thou'rt worse than thy brother.' "

- Does the relationship change or develop as the narrative progresses? Is it through a series of small events? Do we see situations developing that we know must lead to a crisis of some sort? How does the author interest us in the theme? Is it through a central character with whom we can empathise?

As Cathy and Heathcliff grow older, they grow closer. They are like wild creatures, running on the moors to play whenever they get the chance. Their behaviour isolates them from the other inhabitants of Wuthering Heights, but they don't seem to care. When Hindley brings home his new wife, Frances, life becomes even harder for Heathcliff. He is only concerned with his wife's happiness and when she tells him of her dislike for Heathcliff, Hindley

becomes tyrannical. He stops Heathcliff's education with the curate and forces him to work outdoors on the farm. This has no real impact on the relationship between Cathy and Heathcliff, because she teaches Heathcliff what she has learnt and even helps him with his work on the farm or at least plays with him out there. Ellen tells Lockwood, "They both promised fair to grow up as rude as savages". No matter what punishments Hindley and Joseph dream up for the youngsters, they don't care. As Ellen says, "But it was one of their chief amusements to run away to the moors in the morning and remain there all day, and the after punishment grew a mere thing to laugh at. The curate might set as many chapters as he pleased for Catherine to get by heart, and Joseph might thrash Heathcliff till his arm ached; they forgot everything the minute they were together again: and many a time I've cried to myself to watch them growing more reckless daily, and I not daring to speak a syllable, for fear of losing the small power I still retained over the unfriended creatures."

Heathcliff and Catherine's independence leads them into trouble. Heathcliff and Catherine make an ill-advised attempt to spy on the Lintons in Thrushcross Grange. They are spotted, and try to escape the Lintons' servants who give chase. Heathcliff gets away unscathed, but Cathy is not so fortunate. She, having been injured by the Linton's dog, is kept at Thrushcross Grange for five weeks, and when she returns to Wuthering Heights, she has adopted the manner and dress of a young lady. This places a distance between her and Heathcliff, as he is not shown to good advantage when compared to the Linton children. When they meet again, Cathy exclaims, "Why, how very black and cross you look! And how – how funny and grim! But that's because I'm so used to Edgar and Isabella Linton."

The arrival of the Lintons into Cathy's life precipitates a chain of events which sees her becoming ever more distanced from her former companion. She is enchanted by the elegance and grace of the Lintons and their house, and she has the sense to realise that if she is to retain her place as a young lady of the neighbourhood, she must distance herself from Heathcliff, at least in public. Nelly says that Cathy was "full of ambition" from the start, and that she became two different people in many ways, acting the lady when with the Lintons and never saying anything positive about Heathcliff, and acting more like her old self in Wuthering Heights, where politeness and good manners "would only be laughed at".

The relationship between Cathy and Heathcliff becomes ever more strained as he is brought lower and lower by Hindley's ill-treatment. Ellen says that, "he acquired a slouching gait and ignoble look; his naturally reserved disposition was exaggerated into an almost idiotic excess of unsociable moroseness; and he took a grim pleasure, apparently, in exciting the aversion rather than the esteem of his few acquaintances."

Heathcliff's behaviour towards Cathy changes too. When she shows him affection, he pulls away with "angry suspicion" and thus unwittingly increases the gap between himself and Cathy. Heathcliff reacts by behaving worse than usual and in so doing, drives a wedge between himself and Catherine.

When Heathcliff finally confronts Cathy with the amount of time she has been spending with the Lintons compared to the amount of time she has been spending with him, she reacts angrily and tells him that he is no sort of company for her at all, because he knows nothing and says nothing.

Our sympathies are divided at this stage. While we can feel sorry for Heathcliff, who has been denied the advantages that Cathy has enjoyed, we can also understand Cathy's longing to better herself and her situation. But it is worth noting that even at this early stage, there is little desire in either Cathy or Heathcliff to consider the feelings of the other. They both want what they want, and take no heed of the practicalities or the way in which their behaviour might hurt the other party in the relationship.

- Is there a crisis or complication in the relationship? Does the central character have to make a difficult decision? Does the character do the right thing? How is this decision linked to the theme?

The moment of crisis in Cathy and Heathcliff's relationship is precipitated by Edgar Linton's proposal. Cathy, in typically selfish mode, has decided that it would benefit her to marry Linton as this would make her, in her own words, "the greatest woman of the neighbourhood". In her heart of hearts, Cathy knows that she does not love Edgar in the same way she loves Heathcliff, yet she vainly thinks that by marrying Edgar she will be able to make both men happy. Edgar, obviously, will be pleased to have her accept his proposal, and Heathcliff will be pleased that Cathy will be in a position to help him out once she has Edgar's money and influence. It does not seem to have occurred to her that Edgar might be less than happy to have his new wife use his wealth to further the career of his rival for her affections, nor that Heathcliff might be unhappy that she has married another, whether or not this ultimately helps him. She is either naïve or incredibly self-centred if she believes that either her husband or her lover will accept this plan. As it happens, her plan is not put to the test because Heathcliff, overhearing only part of her conversation with Nelly, leaves Wuthering Heights and vanishes for several years. When he returns, however, Cathy is just

as selfish as ever, insisting to Edgar that, "I know you didn't like him [...] Yet, for my sake, you must be friends now".

Cathy behaves abominably when Heathcliff comes back into her life. She sees no reason why she should not pick up their friendship where they left off, and she disregards her husband's feelings in this matter. She is also astonished when Heathcliff accuses her of treating him "infernally" and swears that he will have his revenge. At no stage in the narrative does Cathy accept responsibility for the grief and suffering her actions have caused. Instead, she thinks only of her own sorrow, petulantly telling Heathcliff on her deathbed that if she has done any wrong, she is dying for it. She accuses him and Edgar of breaking her heart and says that "You have killed me". She is full of self-pity and recriminations and seems not to care if Heathcliff and Edgar suffer once she is gone. Cathy, when she is near death, says to Heathcliff, "I wish I could hold you [...] till we were both dead! I shouldn't care what you suffered. I care nothing for your sufferings. Why shouldn't you suffer? I do! Will you say, twenty years hence, 'That's the grave of Catherine Earnshaw. I loved her long ago, and was wretched to lose her; but it is past. I've loved many others since: my children are dearer to me than she was; and at death, I shall not rejoice that I am going to her: I shall be sorry that I must leave them!' Will you say so, Heathcliff?"

- Does the relationship end well?

The main problem with Cathy and Heathcliff's relationship is that it is not a practical one. Their love is on a higher plane and they are soul mates. However, they are both self-serving, and their relationship cannot withstand the pressures of real life. Charlotte Brontë said that Heathcliff's feelings were "perverted passion and passionate perversity." Catherine's claim that, "I am Heathcliff" may be moving, but it is not realistic. They seem to have no way to take their love to the next level and to make their relationship a functioning, happy one. Instead, they destroy each other with their fierce longing and insatiable desires. The book ends with the promise of a happy marriage between Hareton and young Catherine, and we feel that in them we have a couple who have managed to transcend the problems that excessive passion can bring, and in so doing, live a contented life where they both concern themselves with the other's needs. There is no sense that either Heathcliff or Cathy are willing to do this. They are both headstrong and implacable and they are both too self-centred to make a real relationship work.

When Cathy dies, Heathcliff is distraught. He continues in his vindictive plotting against both the Earnshaw and the Linton families, and the legacy of his and Cathy's relationship is one of pain and suffering. Heathcliff is tormented by the memory of an unfulfilled

relationship and begs the ghost of Cathy to haunt him. This is in stark contrast to Michael and Rory's farewell. Like Heathcliff with his memories of Catherine, Michael carries Rory forever in his heart, but unlike Heathcliff, Michael is bettered by this, not lessened and tortured by longing.

Heathcliff and Cathy's relationship is a destructive one which brings misery not only to themselves, but to two generations of the Earnshaws and Lintons. Their need for one another is a primal, irresistible impulse, but it is not a healthy one. It is more like an addiction than anything else. Catherine herself says that her love for Heathcliff is, "a source of little visible delight, but necessary." Their love is not a one in which the needs of the other party in the relationship are put first, but rather it is an addict's burning need which takes no heed of the consequences.