

# Character analysis of Heathcliff

The character of Heathcliff doesn't fit the billing of a literary romantic hero. Yet, some argue, he may be conceded that position for his undying love for Catherine. In fact his villainous acts are driven by his revenge for being denied the love of Catherine and the rough treatment meted out to him by Hindley after Mr Earnshaw's death. From a literary perspective, he is more the embodiment of the byronic hero, a man of stormy emotions who shuns humanity because he himself has been ostracized. He is a rebellious hero who functions as a law unto himself. His one soul passion is Catherine, yet his commitment to his notion of higher love does not include forgiveness. It is to be determined whether his revenge is focussed on his lost position at Wuthering Heights, or driven by the loss of Catherine to Edgar or if it is his assertion of his dignity as a human being.

As an orphan kid, Heathcliff joins the household of Earnshaw when Mr Earnshaw picks him up from Liverpool and brings him to his home, Wuthering Heights. Catherine and Heathcliff grow up to be inseparable. Heathcliff is well taken care of until the death of Mr. Earnshaw. His death turns his comfortable life into a life of miseries as Hindley treats him no better than a servant. He also suffers betrayal at the hands of Catherine when she chooses Edgar Linton over him and gets married. We meet Heathcliff for the second time, when he comes back as a wealthy man, he is a completely changed person. The rest of the novel is his villainous maneuvers in order to exact revenge on the family of Lintons and Earnshaws. Despite his villainy, Heathcliff succeeds in engaging the readers as the plot is entirely driven by his vicious acts leading to awful complications in the story.

In the very first paragraph of the novel, we learn about Heathcliff's "black eyes" withdraw suspiciously under the brows as Lockwood describes him. Nelly's story begins with his introduction into the Earnshaw family, his vengeful machinations drive the entire plot, and his death ends the book. The desire to understand him and his motivations has kept countless readers engaged in the novel.

The novel teases the readers with the possibility that Heathcliff is something other than what he seems- that his cruelty is merely an expression of his frustrated love for Catherine, or his sinister behaviours serve to conceal the heart of a romantic hero. We expect Heathcliff's character to contain such a hidden virtue because he resembles a hero in a romance novel. Traditionally, romance novel heroes appear dangerous, brooding, and cold at first, only later to emerge as fiercely devoted and loving. One hundred years before Emily Brontë wrote *Wuthering Heights*, the notion that "a reformed rake makes the best husband" was already a cliché of romantic literature.

However, Heathcliff does not reform, and his malevolence proves so great and long-lasting that it can not be adequately explained even as a desire for revenge against Hindley, Catherine, Edgar, etc. As he himself points out, his abuse of Isabella is purely sadistic, as he amuses himself by seeing how much abuse she can take and still come cringing back for more. Except for his love for Catherine, it's difficult to find a single redeeming quality in him. Frustrated he may be in love, there is no way one can justify his devious stratagems in adding layers of misery to the lives of inhabitants of Thrushcross Grange and *Wuthering Heights*. Evil, sinister and cynical, the character of Heathcliff churns the mind of readers who are in an everlasting conundrum to understand what this thing is, Heathcliff?

