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DESIRE'S DREAMS: POWER AND PASSION IN WUTHERING HEIGHTS

by Susan Jaret McKinstry

Freud claimed that we seek in literature compensation for the poverty of life. The imaginative richness and satisfying endings of much Victorian fiction certainly indicate a desire for a world of compensating certainty and closure, a world of moral, social and sexual absolutes and just rewards. Yet the Victorian novel—like Freud—focuses on digressions and regressions, recurrences and transferences. Many Victorian writers reveal not the world that rewards and punishes according to social law, but a richer world of the imagination, where desire equals act. And as Freud so convincingly proved, the world of desire is as dangerous as it is rich.

Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights (1847) presents just such a world. This work articulates the issues common to even the most traditional of Victorian novels—the frustration and attainment of sexual and financial desire, frequently through marriage. Yet Bronte goes beyond the convention of life-and-death romances, or love-and-danger Gothics, as representations of adult desire mediated by social realism. Instead, Wuthering Heights is a book in which children's desires—based like those of adults on power, sexuality, and mimetic violence—come true.

J. R. R. Tolkien claims in Tree and Leaf that "fairy stories are plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability." Unlike the conventional fairytale in the Victorian novel, such as the rags-to-riches Cinderella story of Dickens' Great Expectations, Bronte's study of desire strips the social significance from maturation and success—money and marriage—and represses and distorts the more personal success of romantic love. Thus Bronte's novel becomes an imaginative attempt to understand the process of maturation from childhood to adulthood in a world that allows the expression of personal desire at the expense of social values, where whatever is desired is possible. Thus Wuthering Heights portrays a world of dangerously powerful children, where fantasy and desire overcome the
adult laws of reality and order. And this triumph over adulthood turns the novel, finally, into a Victorian childhood nightmare that uses the traditions of the ghost story, Gothic, fairytale, nightmare, and romance—genres that do not demand obedience to the conventions of realistic fiction—to show the horror of eternal childhood: Heathcliff, like a demonic Peter Pan, obsessed with childhood desires that result in death.

The initial problems for the children in the world of *Wuthering Heights*, common to all children, is power. Conventionally, children gain power only through becoming adults, as illustrated by the *Bildungsroman*, which chronicles the growth of a character to adulthood and, usually, the attainment and containment of desire through marriage. As Bruno Bettelheim points out in *The Uses of Enchantment*, the fairytale imaginatively illustrates the child's difficult path to adulthood:

> [The fairytale] symbolizes the difficult battle we all have to struggle with: should we give in to the pleasure principle, which drives us to gain immediate satisfaction of our wants or to seek violent revenge for our frustrations, even on those who have nothing to do with them—or should we relinquish living by such impulses and settle for a life dominated by the reality principle, according to which we must be willing to accept many frustrations in order to gain lasting rewards?

In *Wuthering Heights'* world of children's desires, the answer is simple: fulfillment of desire is worth any price.

As Freud and the *Bildungsroman* both illustrate, patience is the simplest means of gaining adult power to fulfill desires. Through outgrowing the inferior position of child—the third in a parental couple—the child eventually attains the powerful, desired position of adult in a couple. But children—and certainly the orphaned children in *Wuthering Heights*—have no patience, and they refuse to be defined as the product of two seemingly powerful adults. They fight fiercely for the individuation denied them, according to Rene Girard's model of mimetic desire: desiring an unattainable possession of the other—in this case, adult power—we imitate the other even as we resent the other for being the victorious possessor of the desired object.

Cathy clearly discovers both the limitations of childhood and the power of desire. As a child she controls the parental figures, her father and Nellie; as an adult she rules her lovers Heathcliff and Edgar. She is both delightful and demonic, according to her observers, as she manipulates mimetic desire and uses her central position in two love triangles to keep for herself the desirable roles of mother, sister, and lover to both men (and thus keep her sister-in-law Isabella in the undesirable position of powerless child and third in both triangles). And yet Cathy's powerful position is inevitably destroyed
by her choice of conventional adulthood: acting out her interpretation of
the romantic role of Victorian heroine, she marries Edgar without love and
loses Heathcliff when she chooses material desire over emotional desire. Ex-
cept in the most heartlessly social terms, this marriage is no success. Unable
to keep both men or fulfill both desires, Cathy dies.

But it is an oversimplification to assume that Cathy is the source of all the
trouble in the novel. Many readers have claimed that Heathcliff is the dis-
ruptive character, a wild boy of unknown parentage who destroys the fam-
ily unity; certainly his introduction to the family circle destroys any peace
there may have been, and opens the novel. But Heathcliff’s “demonic” be-
havior is at first the conventional fairytale struggle of an outsider to find a
place in a family that rejects him: Cathy and Hindley are jealous of him,
and Nellie leaves him on the staircase in the hopes that he will be gone in the
morning. Like Cathy, he interprets mimetic desire as the means of attaining
the power of adults without waiting for adulthood. His self-identity is
formed through an imitation of Hindley’s cruelty and Edgar’s love for
Cathy; his desire for Cathy escalates as her positive response to Edgar in-
creases.

Catherine and Heathcliff’s frustrated desire becomes demonic precisely
because it is mimetic. With Edgar’s loving interference, they create one
another as objects of love as surely as they recreate themselves through the
recognition and manipulation of that triangular desire. “I am Heathcliff,”
exclaims Cathy; “He’s more myself than I am.” Heathcliff
agrees: “Existence, after losing her, would be hell. . . . I am surrounded
by her image” (126). Desire creates its own objects in the “mind-forg’d”
world of the novel; by transforming desire from love to imitation, Cathy
and Heathcliff become the objects in one another’s childlike struggle for
power.

Wuthering Heights correctly represents mimetic desire as the means by
which children attempt to escape from their powerless position: they learn
to imitate the adults who control them. But since the novel sets up only un-
healthy adult relationships, the children’s corresponding relationships are
equally manipulative, triangular and, finally, destructive. Bronte explores
the fairytale’s internal destructions—the monster within the family, evil
stepmothers, unnatural family relationships, and the violent struggle for
self-identity—as they are reflected in the external horrors of the Gothic: the
harsh weather, the pleading, bleeding ghost of Catherine in Lockwood’s
nightmare, the haunting of Heathcliff. By combining the child’s nightmare
genres of the fairytale and the Gothic horror tale, yet refusing to complete
either form with the predicted, satisfying ending that rewards the good with adulthood and punishes the evil with death, Bronte utilizes all the psychological and linguistic power in both forms to create a terrifying narrative of possession manipulated through mimetic desire.

Indeed, Cathy and Heathcliff become the linguistic objects of desire as they are transformed into a tale told by Nellie Dean to entertain the ailing Mr. Lockwood. But even the adults, Nellie and Lockwood, imitate the powerful desires of the original threesome—Heathcliff, Cathy, and Edgar—and their less passionate offspring, Linton, Cathy II, and Hareton. Nellie’s power over the characters in her tale—which validates her claim that “we must be for ourselves” (p. 112) because she ends up in possession of the house, sole survivor of the original family—extends to a desire to imitate the passion of Catherine and Heathcliff through matchmaking: she encourages a love between Lockwood and Cathy, and Hareton and Cathy. And Lockwood responds with passion. The tale of triangular desire is, effectively, reenacted in this second generation through Nellie’s narration and Lockwood’s periodic interruptions: he obediently tries to insert himself into the story he is hearing by plotting a romantic “fairytale” with Cathy—even as he hopes the daughter won’t turn out “a second edition” (130) of the mother.

The scene where Lockwood meets Cathy’s ghost clearly illustrates the mimetic violence—indeed, gruesomeness—of the world wherein the infectious desires of children come true. The outsider, Lockwood, has forced his way into Heathcliff’s house, Wuthering Heights; he is rewarded with a cold bed and a series of nightmares, the first comic, the second terrifying. In the second, he dreams that the child-ghost, Cathy, begs admittance to the house after wandering for 20 years on the moors. Her ice-cold hand clutches at his wrist, and this ostensibly rational outsider in the violent world of the novel responds violently:

“Terror made me cruel, and finding it useless to attempt shaking the creature off, I pulled its wrist on the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bed-clothes: still it wailed, “Let me in,” and maintained its tenacious grip, almost maddening me with fear. . . . “It’s twenty years,” mourned her voice, “twenty years, I’ve been a waif for twenty years.” (30)

Cathy’s desire to be let in is fulfilled: she is admitted, through the tale that follows, to the world of the readers and Lockwood. That bloody window becomes a representation of the window through which she enters Thrushcross Grange and is “converted at a stroke into Mrs. Linton, the lady of Thrushcross Grange, and the wife of a stranger; an exile, an outcast,
thenceforth, from what had been my world” (107); it becomes the window through which her spirit escapes “this shattered prison . . . I’m wearying to escape into that glorious world, and to be always there” (134). She gets her wish—at least for twenty years. But the visceral violence of Lockwood’s nightmare obviously warns of the dangers of Cathy’s attempt to escape her childhood home through a fashionable marriage, and her escape from that marriage back to the eternal childhood of her love for Heathcliff. Cathy’s wishes do come true; but, like the character in many a fairytale, she is forced to discover the danger of fulfilled wishes. The childhood dream of eternal love and freedom, translated by her vengeful desire to haunt Heathcliff, becomes permanent exile from the world of the living, permanent imprisonment on the moors, and permanent powerlessness. And Lockwood’s nightmare proves that Cathy can, even as a ghost, suffer the pangs of desire without satiation. Her romantic eternal love of Heathcliff has indeed become an eternal hell.

The novel does not celebrate the containment of desire but, rather, its power, overthrowing the traditional obstacles of love—family, status, misinterpretation, marriage to rivals, and even death. Desire turns lovers into mimetic demons, it transforms houses into prisons, and it translates romantic conventions into children’s fairytales. But in the process of fulfilling desires, the fairytale becomes a nightmare. Wuthering Heights is a chaotic novel in which the rules of social life are never fully in force. Instead, wishes come true—violently, and with vengeance. Obstructive parents and lovers die with remarkable rapidity, and passion equals power to transform the world.

The novel’s relatively peaceful ending—with Cathy and Hareton in love and the ghosts of Catherine and Heathcliff quietly wandering the moors—indicates that the differences that caused conflicts have been erased, that literary, social, and personal desires have been fulfilled, and that romance has triumphed. Yet readers seldom find the ending lovers as interesting as the first pair; they seem diluted and domesticated. And Lockwood’s final question about “how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth” (266)—returns us to the central question of the novel, the meaning of desire translated into the unconventional reality of Wuthering Heights. But that conventionally moral closure to the novel represents Lockwood’s desire—and perhaps the reader’s—for an ordered, adult world. And even Lockwood cannot ignore what he has seen and heard in the tale of Cathy and Heathcliff’s passionate childhood desires. Like Lockwood, Bronte’s reader is left with the vision of walking ghosts and, thus, an expression of the power and danger of fulfilled desire in the chil-
dren's world of a Victorian nightmare fairytale. Who can imagine unquiet sleepers? We all can, for the world of *Wuthering Heights* refuses, like the ghosts of Cathy and Heathcliff, to be quietly laid to rest.

**NOTES**


