Heathcliff's Freedom in Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights

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Heathcliff’s Freedom in Emily Brontë’s
_Wuthering Heights_

Freedom seems to be a fantasy for Heathcliff in _Wuthering Heights_ according to some critics. Yet, in the light of Jean-Paul Sartre’s philosophical ideas on freedom, Heathcliff is always free and the whole novel delineates how a free man overcomes various obstacles through constant choices rather than how a man pursues freedom. This essay, employing Sartre’s relevant theory, will outline Heathcliff’s freedom, through which we might detect some hidden beauty of this controversial novel.

**KEYWORDS** freedom, Heathcliff, Sartre, _Wuthering Heights_

**Introduction**

Many critics hold that Emily Brontë’s _Wuthering Heights_ deals with the idea of freedom in one way or another. Yet not everyone agrees that Heathcliff finally achieves freedom. Jamie Crouse claims that Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw are confined by traditional gender roles and only ‘with their death, they finally achieve freedom’.1 Some critics hold that only the moors in the novel can bring them freedom, which becomes a reality through death: ‘the moors come to represent the freedom from the acculturated body found only in death’.2 It seems that Heathcliff does not achieve his freedom except when he is a ghostly presence. However, it is not the case when Heathcliff is viewed from the perspective of Sartre’s views on freedom.

What is freedom? Jean-Paul Sartre contends that ‘to be free’ does not mean ‘to obtain what one has wished’ but rather ‘by oneself to determine oneself to wish [choose]’.3 In other words, success is not important to freedom. A man’s freedom lies in his choice and the choice is not limited by external factors. Human beings do not choose to be free. ‘We are condemned to freedom’ (_BN_, p. 485). Therefore, freedom is human beings’ destined state.

Yet, freedom does not exist in our imagination. The prerequisite condition is the existence of things. Just as a person cannot escape from a prison in which one is not imprisoned, freedom is the escape from the things or ‘the given’.4 Thus, Sartre presents an emphatic view of freedom in a relation to ‘the given’, based on which he presents the concept of ‘situation’. ‘Situation’ is the result of working on ‘the brute given’ (_BN_, p. 508) by freedom. One step further, Sartre reveals the relationship between ‘situation’
and freedom: ‘There is freedom only in a situation, and there is a situation through freedom’ (BN, p. 507). In order to realize his freedom, man has to overcome his obstacles and resistances in the ‘situations’. For Sartre, there are five ‘situations’— ‘my place’, ‘my past’, ‘my environment’, ‘my fellowman’ and ‘my death’ — that seem to be the limitations of ‘my freedom’. To conclude, in terms of the concept of freedom, we can see that there are two levels of the meaning. One is the necessity of freedom that is not determined by all the social and historical factors and the other is the ‘situations’ that freedom has to surpass.

As once pronounced as an amoral novel,5 Wuthering Heights, which describes a lot of Heathcliff’s designs, goals and choices, could be viewed from such a revolutionary philosophy on freedom. Based on Sartre’s views, Heathcliff, as a human being, always enjoys his freedom if he freely projects his future in all the situations. In this essay, Heathcliff is viewed through Sartre’s ideas on freedom in five ‘situations’. As a ‘Gothic version of the self-made man’,6 Heathcliff rebels against all the forces in his ‘situations’ that have rejected him in his life and thus vividly embodies Sartre’s concepts of freedom in the five ‘situations’.

‘My place’

According to Sartre, ‘my place is defined by the spatial order and by the particular nature of the thesis that are revealed to me on the ground of the world. It is naturally the spot in which I live’ (BN, p. 494). ‘My place’ is provided with a meaning in relation to a certain not-yet existing goal that one wants to attain. It is from the standpoint of a chosen future that ‘my place’ appears to a man with characteristics of impotence, contingency, weakness or absurdity. Therefore, there is no point in saying that a man is free or not free in his ‘place’. On the contrary, it is his freedom that determines his ‘place’ as an obstacle or not. And he must escape the restrictions caused by ‘places’ in the midst of the world. In Wuthering Heights, Heathcliff seems to be potent in surpassing the restrictions caused by his ‘places’ and he even avails himself of his ‘places’ to realize his freedom, thus successfully defying the limit of his ‘place’.

Heathcliff moves a lot from the perspective of the whole story in Wuthering Heights. First, he starts from the birthplace, although his birthplace is somewhat unclear. Once he appears on the stage, he is a deserted child on the streets of Liverpool without any reference to his birthplace. The whole story never refers to it either except in Nelly’s imagination regarding the affluence of his parents. Yet, Heathcliff must take a ‘place’ when he is born. His birthplace does not restrict his freedom and in order to reach some ‘place’, he needs to start from somewhere.

However, from another perspective, since one’s birthplace as the original ‘place’ relates to how one shall occupy new ‘places’, it seems that Heathcliff’s obscure birthplace or his homelessness restricts his subsequent freedom. Yet, Sartre theorizes that freedom follows restrictions. While being homeless, Heathcliff develops several qualities, such as endurance and optimism that are helpful afterwards to realize his aims. For example, young Heathcliff has learnt to stand other’s blows without blinking or shedding a tear if he thinks it is useless to rebel. In addition, on account of homelessness, there is more room for him to imagine where his home is, just as Nelly encourages him: ‘Who knows but your father was Emperor of China, and your mother an Indian queen […] And you
were kidnapped by wicked sailors and brought to England. Nelly’s words immediately cheer him and he takes homelessness as a potential for richness and nobility. In conclusion, notwithstanding the conventional underlying factors of his birthplace, such as inferiority and lack of power, Heathcliff endeavours to surpass those unfavourable associations freely and defies their limits.

Wuthering Heights is the second place where Heathcliff lives and he enjoys a period of happiness there. However, this once homeless child is destined to be despised, maltreated and driven to work on the farm after Mr Earnshaw passes away. He is even driven to ‘the servants’ quarters’ (WH, p. 35) by Hindley, his foster brother. It is obvious that he is temporarily living in Wuthering Heights because of Hindley’s mercy. Moreover, he is later deserted by his lover because of his lack of a decent ‘place’ such as his rival, Edgar, has. All those bitter experiences are mainly due to his lack of a defined ‘my place’ within the patriarchal system: ‘he has no defined place within its biological and economic system’. However, later on, Heathcliff, by his own free will and efforts, changes the roles of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. Originally, they are ‘places’ where he undergoes humiliation and maltreatment. Since he takes possession of them from Hindley and Edgar, he turns them into fortresses where he carries out several plans to revenge on his enemies.

Besides his unknown birthplace, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, there is a special ‘place’ worth mentioning: the moors that mean much more than natural surroundings away from two houses. For young Heathcliff and Catherine, the moors become their common playground to have fun, grow together and develop personalities. ‘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’ (WH, p. 35). On the moors, Heathcliff and Catherine can enjoy their infinite freedom. Yet, things are different when he is away from the moors. In Wuthering Heights, Heathcliff is ill treated by Hindley and cursed by Joseph after the death of Mr Earnshaw. He cannot find his freedom there. However, it is Thrushcross Grange that makes him gradually separate from his lover after crossing the moors with her to get a view of the Lintons, living in decency and affluence, through its window. There seems to be a boundary between the inside house, a refined and gentrified world in which he has to lose his love, and the outside moors, a forever wild and free world to which they really belong. In some way, there seems to be a boundary between the social world that means having to deal with the lack of freedom for him and the moors where he can enjoy infinite freedom. Thus, crossing the moors symbolizes crossing the boundary of freedom, which ordains his alienation from Catherine since, in the view of Sartre’s philosophy, a person cannot transcend his own freedom. For the adult Heathcliff, his crossing of the moors to the social world in order to get wealth and manners is another transcendence of the boundary of freedom, which does not help him win back his lover but, contrary to his expectation, leads to the death of his lover. Fortunately, after he dies, his ghost finally returns to the moors with Catherine’s, which symbolizes a return to the inside boundary of freedom.

‘My past’

Concerning ‘my past’, Sartre maintains that every man has a ‘past’. Freedom is the choice of an end in terms of the ‘past’; conversely, the past is what it is only in relation to the
end chosen. The meaning of the ‘past’ is strictly dependent on a man’s present project, just as Sartre says: ‘It is I, always I, according to the ends by which I illuminate these past events’ (BN, p. 498).\textsuperscript{9} Besides, a man decides on either sticking to or refusing the past in the light of his project. For an individual, the order of choices of the present is going to determine an order of the ‘past’. There will be the ‘living past’ which is always confirmed, for example: ‘my promise of love, a certain picture of myself to which I am faithful’. There is also the ‘ambiguous past’ which has ceased to please me and to which I still hold indirectly. For example, ‘the suit which I am wearing, and which I bought at a certain period when I had the desire to be fashionable, displeases me extremely at present’ (BN, p. 499). All these ‘pasts’ are organized according to present projects. For a man, he has his own right to decide and explain his ‘past’ as a ‘living past’, an ‘ambiguous past’ or not at all. And this is the proof of freedom of the ‘for-itself’.\textsuperscript{10} In \textit{Wuthering Heights}, Heathcliff experiences a complete journey which starts from facing the ambiguity of the ‘past’, to suffering the cruel revelation of another ‘past’ with an ultimate fidelity to the ‘past’ where his freedom resides.

When Heathcliff is brought home by Mr Earnshaw, the other Earnshaws are disgusted by him. He is depicted as a ‘dirty, ragged, black-haired child’, ‘gypsy brat’, speaking ‘some gibberish’, and even nameless (WH, p. 28). Having to deal with people who do not like him, Heathcliff does not worry about his ‘ambiguous past’. Instead, he asserts his right as a member of the Earnshaw family at Wuthering Heights. Moreover, he successfully wins Mr Earnshaw’s favour. As a result, ‘he had only to speak and all the house would be obliged to bend to his wishes’ (WH, p. 30). Even if temporarily distressed, he will soon pull himself together. When confronted with Edgar Linton’s handsome features and wealth, he feels embarrassed and ashamed. However, after Nelly fancies an explanation for his ‘past’, he immediately cheers up. The ambiguity of ‘my past’ does not pose as big a threat for Heathcliff: he surpasses the obscurity of ‘past’ by being indifferent to it rather than by submitting to the haunting ‘ambiguity’, which implies that he has more faith in his freedom than in the fetters of his ‘past’.

When reaching adulthood, Heathcliff experiences the revelation of a past truth when he overhears Catherine’s famously poetic comparison between him and Edgar as well as her plans to marry Edgar as well as her plans to marry Edgar. At that moment, Heathcliff realizes that their past relationship of being happy together turns into a joke. The ‘past’ of being poor and ill-mannered brings him so much misery that he has to overcome it. Thus, he then chooses to flee from his lover, to break away from his ambiguous ‘past’ in order to ‘affirm […] total freedom’ (BN, p. 503).

However, the ambiguous ‘past’ is connected with his freedom and ‘the past consequently has the function of requiring of them a fidelity’ (BN, p. 504). After three years of absence, Heathcliff comes back totally different. He is now wealthy, refined and assertive, and his vengeance is well planned. Obviously, he earlier had left because of the fact that he had neither money nor social status. Not being treated well by others, he has decided to get back at those people who have treated him badly. He has prepared a plan of revenge on them. Finally, he succeeds in his plan and becomes the landowner of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. However, when he continues his plan of revenge on the two descendants of his old enemies (Hareton, the son of Hindley; and Cathy, the daughter of Edgar), he suddenly realizes how meaningless his ‘violent exertions’ really are (WH, p. 257). Both Cathy and Hareton bear so much likeness to Catherine that the
vengeance cannot be continued. At the same time, he perceives the alarming existence of Catherine’s image everywhere. This is a constant reminder to him that he has lost her and vengeance is meaningless without her. After years of struggle, he has come to the realization that unity with Catherine is his freedom. He cannot cast away his past experience with her and continues his frenzied revenge. In the end, he gives up his plan of revenge and reunites with her after four days of starvation, which exhibits fidelity to his ‘past’ with Catherine. This portion of the novel depicts a terrifying picture of a living man gradually dying because he forgets to eat and rest due to the fact that he is haunted by his lover’s ghost. He explains to Nelly: ‘It is not my fault that I cannot eat or rest […] I assure you it is through no settled designs’ (WH, p. 265). His actions in this connection are not controlled by his mind but by his inner force. This inner force drives him to strive for his freedom of unity with Catherine. He cannot choose to be united with Catherine just as he cannot choose his freedom.

‘My environment’

‘My environment’ is different from ‘my place’. Sartre’s definition is: ‘my environment is made up of the instrumental-things which surround me, including their peculiar coefficients of adversity and utility’ (BN, p. 504). For example, a man wishes to arrive on his bicycle as quickly as possible at the next town, but then he finds that he has a flat tyre, the sun too hot, the wind blowing against him, etc; all these environmental factors that he has or has not foreseen belong to ‘my environment’. Of course those factors manifest themselves in and through the man’s principal project. It is through this project that the wind can appear as a head wind or as a ‘good’ wind. The sun is revealed as propitious or inconveniently warm (BN, pp. 504-05). It is freedom that reveals the things in ‘my environment’ as obstacles or tools by its free choice. Our freedom causes the ‘environment’ to be labelled with adversity or utility. We should surpass adversity; we can take advantage of utilizable instruments to realize our freedom. In Wuthering Heights, the fact that Heathcliff makes use of or even manipulates things well in his ‘environment’ implies the dominance of his freedom over the ‘environment’.

After mentioning the natural environment at the beginning of the text, Wuthering Heights seldom deals with ‘my environment’, despite the fact that the title will fill the readers’ imaginations with the natural ‘environment’. Nevertheless, the novel as a whole devotes little to either natural or human ‘environment’. The most particular natural ‘environment’, the moors — the ‘Garden of Eden’ in Heathcliff’s childhood — are seldom described and the novel never mentions what exactly Heathcliff and Catherine do on them. For example, in Catherine’s diary, she says: ‘my companion is impatient, and proposes that we should appropriate the dairywoman’s cloak, and have a scamper on the moors, under its shelter’ (WH, p. 16). However, Catherine does not reveal details of their adventure on the moors. Later on, Heathcliff arranges the meeting of his son and Cathy on the moors. However, we are not told what the ‘environment’ is really like there. Lastly, the most outstanding reference to the moors is the ‘place’ where Heathcliff’s and Catherine’s ghosts wander and there is no description of its ‘environment’ either. Neither is there any description of rain or storm, the typical characteristics of the weather there, apart from the fact that Heathcliff disappears in the storm after he overhears Catherine’s confession. In addition to the little description of Heathcliff’s involvement in the natural
‘environment’, the novel once in a while refers to things in the human ‘environment’, such as a horse on which he rides with Isabella when they elope, the Bible that he treads on the ground, and a dog named Fanny suspended by a handkerchief that later proves to have been done by Heathcliff. No matter how detailed the cases are, the descriptions are given to either natural or human ‘environment’. All of these scenarios are strongly dependent on Heathcliff’s activities. It is Heathcliff’s freedom that confers the title ‘environment’ on these things. All in all, the meaningful existence of these things reflects the expansion of his freedom.

Owing to the inadequate description of the interaction between ‘environment’ and Heathcliff, we cannot infer his attitude towards his ‘environment’. Nevertheless, the absence of detail means something more subtle and intriguing. Take the absence of any description of Heathcliff in the storm and roaming with Catherine on the moors as examples. In contrast to his weak son, Linton, who is afraid of going out to the moors, young Heathcliff loves the moors. The lack of the description of his struggle in the storm and his roaming on the moors highlights the total control of ‘my environment’ to the extent that it is unnecessary to show how the struggle goes, which suggests that the hero somehow will conquer his ‘environment’. The moors have even been hinted as a bridge to Heathcliff’s growth because after he accidentally overhears Catherine’s words ‘It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now’ (WH, p. 63), he leaves the moors, and returns a few years later, surprisingly fully mature, refined and calculating. Also, the novel does not present a detailed description of how Heathcliff hangs Isabella’s dog. Instead, it just tells the story of when it occurs. All those details seem to have implied Heathcliff’s firm manipulation of what is going on around him. Thus, for him to tackle his ‘environment’ is to take advantage of, surpass and control the ‘environment’, which demonstrates great strength and total freedom of a ‘for-itself’.

‘My fellowman’

Every man is living in a world haunted by his ‘fellowmen’ and there is also ‘the Other’ who might have influence on his ‘situation’. Even so, every man is compelled to make the existence of ‘the Other’, manifest to himself in the form of choice and he is also destined to surpass ‘the Other’s’ in order to realize his freedom. Besides, the Other’s freedom cannot limit a man’s freedom because he can opt for the Other as an object that he appropriates and uses instrumentally. Thus, ‘the Other’ cannot really limit him. Yet, if he voluntarily submits to ‘the Other’, he will be held captive by ‘the Other’ and lose his freedom. Thus, it is his own choice that limits his freedom. Consequently, freedom has no limits but itself. ‘Thus on whatever level we place ourselves, the only limits which a freedom can encounter are found in freedom’ (BN, p. 525).

Even though Sartre emphasizes the greater dominance of ‘the for-itself’ over ‘the Other’, he modifies his views on the relationship between ‘the for-itself’ and ‘the Other’ when he discusses the responsibility of ‘the for-itself’. In his later work, L’existentialisme est un humanisme,11 he holds that we are not only responsible for ourselves but also for others. Responsibility12 is crucial in exercising one’s freedom. ‘When a man commits oneself to anything, in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility’ (Humanism, p. 30). For this statement, he means that we have to take on our responsibilities once we make choices, and we cannot simply sacrifice
HEATHCLIFF'S FREEDOM IN WUTHERING HEIGHTS

the freedom of others. To some extent, Sartre’s theory can give us an explanation about
the life story of Heathcliff and his life experiences could be taken as a process of ‘freedom
invaded by other freedoms — freedom surpassing other freedoms — sharing freedom’
— a clear demonstration of panoramic Sartrean freedom.

The novel revolves around the idea that to be together with Catherine is Heathcliff’s
ultimate freedom. However, two ‘fellowmen’ separate his sweetheart from him: Hindley
Earnshaw and Edgar Linton, which results in them being his greatest enemies.

First, Hindley takes away all of the material possessions from Heathcliff, which makes
Catherine reluctant to associate herself with him. Consequently, after returning from
being absent for three years, Heathcliff begins to carry out his vengeance plan on Hindley,
who is at last stripped of his property by mortgaging every yard of land he owns for cash
to supply his mania for gambling, leaving his son Hareton little else than a beggar in
the control of Heathcliff. After careful calculation, ‘Heathcliff moves from being at the
mercy of this patriarchal system to assuming the role of the patriarch himself’.13 After
the death of Hindley, Heathcliff immediately appropriates Wuthering Heights for him-
self. He even takes vengeance on Hindley’s son, Hareton, making him suffer everything
that he once did, except physical ill treatment, to ‘cultivate’ a new ignorant boy just as
he was. Heathcliff seems to succeed in doing so, because Hareton highly respects him;
even when Cathy wants to ridicule Heathcliff, he defends him. Heathcliff makes Hareton
attached to him ‘by ties stronger than reason could break — chains, forged by habit,
which it would be cruel to attempt to loosen’ (WH, p. 256). Thus Heathcliff successfully
overcomes Hindley and his representative Hareton by depriving the former of everything
and the latter of his selfhood.

Edgar Linton is the second person whom Heathcliff has to defeat in that Edgar liter-
ally takes Catherine away from him by marrying her. After three years of absence, when
Heathcliff, with his genteel manners, deprives Edgar of his past superiority, the latter is
‘at a loss how to address the ploughboy, as he had called him’ (WH, p. 76) and is forced to
accept him as a guest. Heathcliff now opposes Edgar with the same qualities that Edgar
once had as an advantage over him: manners and wealth. He seems to be successful in
dwarfing Edgar because of Catherine’s affection for him and Isabella’s infatuation with
him. Yet, after Isabella marries him, Heathcliff abuses her physically and spiritually.
Sixteen years later, Heathcliff even tricks Edgar’s daughter Cathy Linton into falling in
love with his ailing son Linton Heathcliff, who looks like Edgar. Partly because of this
likeness to his uncle, Linton cannot escape his father’s manipulation. Heathcliff brings
up Linton not with the love and responsibility of a father but because ‘I [Heathcliff]
want the triumph of seeing my descendant fairly lord of their estates: my child hiring
their children to till their father’s lands for wages’ (WH, p. 166). Heathcliff obviously
succeeds in taking revenge on Edgar’s family members. Before his death, Edgar tries to
get something back for his daughter Cathy, intending to amend his will, but Heathcliff
has bribed the lawyer to remain away until Edgar is dead. Edgar’s past power within
the patriarchal system compared with Heathcliff’s has completely vanished. Thus, in
order to defend his freedom, Heathcliff successfully trounces others who might possibly
deprive him of his freedom or have done so. There seems to be no limit to his freedom.

After a long period of time, Sartre comes to realize that the ‘for-itself’ is responsible
for others when he asks for his freedom. Sartre’s reconsideration on freedom can help us
understand the following significant step taken by Heathcliff. With careful planning and
pragmatic use of every change in circumstances, he finally ‘has mastered the traditional
trade in middle and upper classes’. Obviously, he succeeds in besting his ‘fellowmen’. However,
after years of struggle, Heathcliff arrives at an absurd ending. ‘I get levers and mattocks
to demolish the two houses, and train myself to be capable of working like Hercules,
and when everything is ready and in my power, I find the will to lift a slate off either roof
has vanished!’ He cannot really account for this but resorts to the excuse that ‘I have lost
the faculty of enjoying their destruction, and I am too idle to destroy for nothing’ (WH, p. 257).
Nevertheless, according to Sartre, it is due to the fact that the ‘for-itself’ cannot
realize its freedom by simply sacrificing other ‘freedoms’. Originally Heathcliff is a victim
whose freedom is invaded by others. Later on he turns into the one who invades others’
freedom, which in turn prevents him from enjoying his freedom. Fortunately, he finally
stops hindering others from enjoying their freedom because of Catherine’s ghost. Two of
his enemies, Hareton and Cathy, can finally enjoy their idyllic life freely. After surpassing
other ‘freedoms’ for many years, Heathcliff finally learns to share freedom with others.
Only in this way can he really enjoy his freedom of being together with Catherine in
the world of the moors. In a word, Heathcliff represents a free man who learns how to
enjoy his freedom. He encounters many setbacks and successes, which allow him truly
to understand the real meaning of freedom.

‘My death’

Everyone will experience death. Death is ‘the nihilation of all my possibilities, a nihilation
which itself is no longer a part of my possibilities’ (BN, p. 537). It belongs to
the compass of ‘in-itself’, while we human beings are ‘for-itselfs’. Then what are circum-
cumstances of the dead life? The unique characteristic of a dead life is that it is a life
of which others make themselves the ‘guardians’ in that they can reconstruct the dead
life or not bother to do so. When others do not reconstruct our dead life, we will be
in a state of being forgotten. To be forgotten is ‘to be resolutely apprehended forever
as one element dissolved into a mass’, such as the ‘great feudal lords’ of the thirteenth
century and the ‘bourgeois Whigs’ of the eighteenth century. Thus, to be forgotten is to
define a man by ‘collectivization’ because of his dissolving into a mass. Besides, it is also
possible to define a man by the area of ‘individualization’ if others reconstruct his dead
life rather than leaving his dead life into oblivion (BN, p. 542). It is others’ possibilities
that determine our dead life. Does this fact mark the limit of our freedom? The answer
is negative. Death is ‘nothing other than the given’. How can ‘the given’ mark the limits
of our freedom? The freedom which is our [the for-itselfs’) freedom remains total and
infinite. Death is not a limit to our projects because our freedom ‘never encounters this
limit’ in that ‘the for-itself’ [our freedom] and ‘the in-itself’ [death] like two objects move
on two parallel lines (BN, p. 547).

Since death is ‘the nihilation of all my possibilities’ (BN, p. 537), when death really
comes, it will be a terrible thing. Thus, how a man behaves himself before death reveals
a lot about him. In the novel, Heathcliff never gives a second thought to ‘my death’
that is, it never comes. When Nelly is wondering about his possible dread of death, Heathcliff illustrates
his views on death: ‘I have neither a fear, nor a presentiment, nor a hope of death. Why
should I?’(WH, p. 258). His attitude towards death is nonchalant, neither anxious for
death nor afraid of it. When he finally starves himself in his middle age, it is because
he is enchanted by the idea of the existence of Catherine’s ghost rather than that he voluntarily gives himself up to death. He seldom indulges himself in the idea of death to be together with his love; instead, his freedom compels him to forget the physical need; as he explains to Nelly: ‘My soul’s bliss kills my body’ (WH, p. 265). Heathcliff never forgets his freedom. He does not view death as a road to freedom despite the fact that he is finally liberated through death apparently. Heathcliff’s attitude towards death shows he is a determined believer of his individual freedom even in the face of death.

Heathcliff dies in the novel eventually and his dead life or rather ‘the unsettled spirits set loose in the natural world by the strong-souled passionate feelings’ bothers the villagers a lot. Several versions of stories concerning his dead life or his ghost are mentioned in the novel. Consequently, an illustration of his death is necessary.

When Heathcliff dies, his death is left to be constructed by the living people. Clearly he is not sent into oblivion by others. Thus he is the person defined by the area of ‘individualization’ according to Sartre. Emily Brontë lets his and Catherine’s ghosts roam on the moors. While they wander around, they terrify a lot of villagers. The ghost itself, whether real or fanciful, proves that Heathcliff is an influential person and his freedom has impressed many people. If the ghost really exists, why do people talk about it and not classify him as a ‘phantom from thinking’ (WH, p. 268) and consign it to oblivion, in the way they treat other ghosts? The only reasonable explanation is that Heathcliff has once strongly asserted himself before others and he has successfully overcome others and in doing so they simply cannot let go of his influence, which exactly proves his freedom when he is alive. If the ghost is just people’s fantasy, why then does Emily let so many people say that they have seen him, including ‘the country folk’, ‘the old man by the kitchen fire’, ‘a little boy with a sheep’, and even Nelly, the major narrator (WH, p. 268)?

The possible explanation is that even if his ghost is not real, people would rather believe that it is, which exactly proves the overwhelming influence of his freedom in his lifetime.

However, just as in Sartre’s theory about the freedom enjoyed by all ‘the for-itselfs’, Heathcliff’s ghost does not bother all the people. At the end of the novel, Hareton and Cathy will soon get married. Marriage in novels is symbolic and it usually alludes to a new life. ‘They are afraid of nothing […] Together they would brave Satan and all his legions’ (WH, p. 269). They are not afraid of the ghost and they have not seen him. Heathcliff is ‘forgotten’ by them and the world goes back to the right track. Now other ‘freedoms’ go onto the stage. In the meantime, Heathcliff’s ghost continues to wander on the moors, which symbolizes that Heathcliff also enjoys his freedom by making room for others’ freedom. Thus, Emily gives us a complete picture of freedom in the five ‘situations’, which implies that she believes in the total freedom of individuals even when they are in the face of death.

Robert Barnard once commented on Wuthering Heights: ‘Emily produced before she was thirty the one English novel that in scope, grasp and dramatic force begs comparison with the greatest plays of Shakespeare’. Why was the novel so highly commended? Of sundry reasons, one of the most important might be her insightful views on unlimited freedom demonstrated through Heathcliff. From Heathcliff, we come to realize that man is always free, in whatever ‘the situations’, through constant choices. Human freedom has been brought to an unprecedentedly high level in this novel. Thus Wuthering Heights displays a depth which novels written 170 years later cannot.
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Notes

1 Jamies Crouse, “‘This Shattered Prison’: Confinement, Control and Gender in Wuthering Heights’, Brontë Studies, 33 (2008), 171-91 (p. 189).
2 Beth Torgerson, Reading the Brontë Body: Disease, Desire and the Constraints of Culture (Gordonsville: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 95.
3 Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 483; hereafter BN.
4 See Nicholas Bunnin and Yu Jiyuan, Dictionary of Western Philosophy: English-Chinese (Beijing: People’s Press, 2001), p. 413: ‘The given’ is roughly understood as something that is presented immediately to consciousness, the direct content of sense-experience. For Sartre, it could be equalled with ‘the fact’.
7 Emily Brontë, Wuthering Heights (Shanghai: Shanghai World Publishing Corporation, 2003), p. 44; hereafter WH.
9 ‘Project’ is Sartre’s term.
10 According to Bunnin and Yu (pp. 482-84), Hegel contrasted ‘in-itself’ with ‘for-itself’. ‘In-itself’ ‘is essentially or intrinsically potential, unreflective and underdeveloped, while for-itself is actual, reflective and developed.’ A baby is rational in itself but not for itself until its rationality is actualized. If we consider a thing to be in itself, we take it not to be related to our consciousness. A thing usually develops from being-in-itself to being-for-itself because of man’s action.
11 This book is translated as Existentialism and Humanism or Existentialism is a Humanism, trans. by Philip Mairet (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973); hereafter Humanism.
12 In a definition of responsibility, Stephen Priest, in Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 191, explains that ‘To say that someone is responsible for what they do is to say that they do it, they could have refrained from doing it, and they are answerable to others for doing it’.

Notes on Contributor

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