

# The Formation of Heathcliff's Tragic Character in the Film "Wuthering Heights"\*

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**Abstract**—This thesis first introduces the main content of the film "Wuthering Heights", then discusses the performance of Heathcliff's tragic character, and then interprets causes of his tragic character and at last the thesis draws the conclusion that it is the imbalanced development of Heathcliff's id, ego and superego that leads to the formation of his tragic character, which is of great enlightenment for people to shape a healthy personality.

**Keywords**—Heathcliff; tragic character; id; ego; superego

## I. INTRODUCTION

The film "Wuthering Heights" is an adaptation of Emily Bronte's only novel of the same name which is known as the only works that isn't drowned by the dust of time and it is regarded as the works of genius that is comparable to Shakespeare great drama. The film tells the story of heathcliff's crazy revenge on wuthering heights and Thrushcross Grange after he is treated unfairly by Hindley. This thesis will analyze the performance of Heathcliff's tragic character and causes of this kind of tragic character.

## II. PERFORMANCE OF HEATHCLIFF'S TRAGIC CHARACTERS

### A. Being Weak and Resigned — Tragic Character's Beginning

Heathcliff is a dirty, ragged, homeless, seven-year-old waif picked up in the street of Liverpool by Mr. Earnshaw. Nobody knows where he comes from or to whom he belongs. Out of sympathy, Mr. Earnshaw brings him to Wuthering Heights. Indeed, his coming is not welcomed except Mr. Earnshaw. At Wuthering Heights, he is an outsider from the very first moment. From his arrival at the Wuthering Heights then on, he is viewed as a thing rather than a human being. He meets with contempt and rejection from the other members of the house hold. Everyone refers to him out of mind, and all hopes him to disappear.

When Mr. Earnshaw brings him home to the Heights, he protects himself from the hostility he meets by trying to become invulnerable. However, after Earnshaw died, Heathcliff was insulted by Hindley, he makes Heathcliff into a servant. People may easily sympathize with him when he is

powerless. However, Heathcliff always keeps silence for Hindley's cruelty. He would rather roll with the punches than resist. For him, it seems that what Hindley does has nothing to do with him since he does not value Hindley's existence. When Hindley blows him, he doesn't wink or shed a tear, by which he disguises to hurt himself by accident in order to make nobody be blamed. His only way of gaining a sense of control in a hostile world is by not reacting to what is done to him, which leads to the formation of his weakness and resignation.

### B. Being Infatuated — Tragic Character's Development

Heathcliff and Catherine's love isn't like the love between ordinary men and women. Their love is beyond life and death, which can simply startle the universe and move the gods, like the storm roaring across the wasteland. Its ferocity is beyond people's understanding and imagination.

Catherine, a woman occupies Heathcliff all life, who Heathcliff loves from childhood. He gives all his love, even the dignity, to Catherine. For a person living in such an environment, Catherine is almost his life and all hope in his life. For the love of Catherine, he tolerates not only Hindley's ill-treatment and twist, but also Edgar Linton's jeer and contempt.

People could not deny Heathcliff's eternal faithfulness to Catherine. Even though she marries Edgar Linton, Heathcliff continues to love her. When Heathcliff knows Catherine is dead, he dashes his head masochistically against the knotted trunk, and lifting up his eyes, he howls like a savage beast getting goaded to death with knives and spears. After that, there are several splashes of blood about the bark of the tree, and his hand and forehead are both stained. In those days of Catherine's death, Heathcliff becomes a stranger in Wuthering Heights and has not had a meal for almost a week. He just comes back at dawn, goes up stairs to his chamber and locks himself in and prays for Catherine till he grew hoarse, and his voice was strangled in his throat — he would be off again; always straight down to the grange!

Why does Heathcliff love Catherine very much, but he can't gain love? Why may people be moved by Heathcliff's undying love for Catherine, but we don't support this love? It is because his love is morbid, selfish and extreme. This kind of love, to the person he loves is not a kind of happiness, but

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a disaster. Catherine can't breathe in his love, finally in a hurry to leave this beautiful world. Catherine love him all life, but finally died in his heavy love. It is a fatal blow to Heathcliff seeing the person he loves the most die for his love, which also adds a deep imprint in his tragedy's formation.

### *C. Being Crazy and Cruel — Tragic Character's Peak*

The betrayal of Catherine is the turning point of Heathcliff's transformation. Heathcliff becomes a monster: what he does to Hindley, to Catherine, to Linton, to Isabella, even to the new generation Hareton and young Catherine is cruel and inhuman beyond normal degree. He ruthlessly revenges when he returns as a rich man. In this stage, there's nothing in addition to hate in his heart. Revenge is all his life and it even becomes his instinctive need. There's a phrase revealed his sick need to revenge: "I have no pity, I have no pity, the more the worms writhe, the more I yearn to crush out their entrails! It is a moral teething, and I grind with greater energy, in proportion to the increase of pain." Heathcliff's revenge and cruelty are unique. He is not only to destroy his adversary's flesh in a general sense, but to make himself gradually become the master of the adversary's grange.

The first object of Heathcliff's revenge is Hindley Earnshaw. His revenge upon Hindley is much more than what Hindley did on him. He ruins Hindley through the way of encouraging his excessive drinking and gambling. Heathcliff retaliates by contributing to Hindley's degradation and gaining control of his possessions, rendering Hindley as powerless and frustrated as he had been. Later in a fight Heathcliff disarms Hindley of his knife, slitting up the Mesh as it (the knife) passed on, and when Hindley fallen senseless with excessive pain and flow of blood, Heathcliff kicked and trampled on him, and dashed his head repeatedly against the flags.

After the death of Hindley, Heathcliff abuses and tortures Hindley's son Hareton just like how Hindley treats him, make gold become floor stone. He wouldn't let Hareton receive education, but blinds him, humiliates him, and teaches him to say dirty words, also often teaches him to curse his own father. He seems to use all his bad heart to develop Hareton into a beast. Finally he puts the enemy's son from a little angel into a folly, rude, no knowledge, and no accomplishment person. What a big satire this is!

As for Edgar and Catherine, Heathcliff breaks into their original peaceful life and tries to stir up discord between them. He conflicts with Edgar for Isabella, and Catherine has a recurrence of heavy diseases even for this, but he still wants to meet with Catherine regardless of her life safety. Catherine finally dies for the huge mental stimulation from Heathcliff. His aim is to make Edgar use whole life time to experience the pain of lost love.

Isabella, his wife, who suffers severely from his cruelty, even puts forward such a question, "Is Mr. Heathcliff a man? If so, is he mad? And if not, is he a devil?" Yet what shocks the readers most is that he is a ruthless savage even to his own son Linton and his beloved Catherine's daughter Cathy.

During Linton's critically illness, he refuses to send for a doctor until the son died. Linton's life is seen as worthless by Heathcliff. Still more, he forces Cathy to marry his delicate and dying son with a scheme to inherit Grange. He should say what nonhuman can say: "Had I been born where laws are less strict and tastes less dainty, I should treat myself to a slow vivisection of those two, as an evening's amusement." All these suggest Heathcliff' psychology has developed to such an abnormal step. It can be said that this kind of character is his tragic character's peak because he has completely changed into a devil from a kind person at this moment.

### *D. Being Dual and Contradictory — Tragic Character's Formation*

Through the emotional clue of Heathcliff, it can be seen that he changes from a kind boy to a revengeful man with distorted heart, and to final revival of kindness of his heart. He shows people the tense conflict of love and hatred, kindness and cruelty. Love and revenge make up Heathcliff's life, so he is both a victim and a destroyer. It's hard to judge whether he is bad or not in essence, because his character isn't single and unchanging. Indeed, he is really a complex soul.

At his young age, Heathcliff is thought as a quiet child who could bring happiness to Mr. Earnshaw. Though he is not accepted by other family members, the warmth he brings to old Earnshaw is indicative of his realism. From this, people could find that he is not a monster, for such happiness could not come from such a cold-hearted character. The shock of Catherine's betrayal and Hindley's ill treatment on him make his character changed. He runs away with anger at the age of sixteen and three years later he returns to Wuthering Heights as an upstart. From them on, he turns to be a cold, cruel and crazy avenger. He begins to revenge on all those that did harm to him before. Over a series of revenge and destruction, he seems to win, but he loses his sincere love and becomes so lonely in soul. At last, he stops the revenge and fulfills Cathy and Hareton's love.

Critics are difficult to determine Heathcliff is a hero or a villain. If his behavior is simply evaluated, Heathcliff is undoubtedly a cruel man. But if people can see his suffering, Heathcliff is undoubtedly worthy of sympathy. He has many virtues, such as dignity, sincerity and loyalty to the love, and these virtues make him become an admirable hero. His addictions to love and revenge also belong to human normal emotions, although these feelings with a great destruction. His undying love for Catherine is famous to people, but his cruel revenge, deep hatred and cruel torture on others also make him with some characteristics of the devil. So it can be said that Heathcliff is a combination of human virtue and evil. It's the dual and contradictory characters that make him strenuously struggle in the whirlpool of love and hate all the life. Therefore his tragic character finally comes into being.

## III. THE CAUSES OF HEATHCLIFF'S TRAGIC CHARACTER

According to Sigmund Freud's personality structure theory, a complete personality structure is composed of three

parts, namely, id, ego and superego. These three parts are always in the contradiction of conflict and coordination and work together to create complex human behaviors. These three factors can explain the formation of Heathcliff's tragic character.

#### A. Heathcliff's Id

Id expresses the most primitive drives, seeks pleasure, and avoids pain. The id is not affected by time and remains in the unconscious. According to Freud, "id is the inborn part of the unconscious mind that uses the primary process to satisfy its needs and acts according to the pleasure principle." The core of id is to obtain enjoyment and to do what he wants to do. In the beginning of *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff is described as dark almost as if it came from the devil. The primary traits Freud ascribed to the id apply perfectly to Heathcliff: "the source of psychic energy, the seat of instincts...the essence of dreams, and the archaic foundation of personality: selfish, social and impulsive." And his unconscious impulse had driven him do all the things to make him feel satisfied and happy.

At that time, Heathcliff is alone and only cares about what he desires to own, but he soon has the company with Catherine. After Mr. Earnshaw's death, Hindley becomes the authority of the whole family and treats Heathcliff even worse. His intended degradation and ill treatments do not beat Heathcliff because what Heathcliff cherishes now is his friendship with Catherine. Since Heathcliff is content with his friendship with Catherine, he has fulfilled his aim and the sufferings from Hindley mean little to him. He does not care about his position as a servant or feel shameful about his poor knowledge; he even refuses to improve himself by reading. The sufferings he has suffered change into amusements when he runs away to the moors with Catherine in the morning and stays there all long. Both of them laugh at the punishments they have endured from Hindley. For Catherine's love, although he suffers the torment on the body and spirit from Hindley day and night, Heathcliff still silently endures and rolls with the punches. Freud holds that the id is the expression of man's vital feelings, which is motivated by the pleasure principle. The pleasure principle drives man to pursue happiness and avoid pain and unhappiness. For Heathcliff, he chose to ignore the repression from Hindley, what he cares is only the happiness he has when he stays with Catherine, it is his id that makes him do this. It is also his id that causes his weakness to Hindley and infatuation to Catherine.

#### B. Heathcliff's Ego

According to Freud, Ego in the personality structure represents a reason, which is an adult thinking mode. Ego plays a hard role in the three aspects of personality, which owes service to three masters and is menaced by three dangers: "from the external world, from the libido of the Id, and from the severity of the Superego." On the one hand, it must manage to meet id's pursuit of happiness; On the other hand, it must make behavior conform to the requirements of the superego. So ego's power must be strong to coordinate the conflicts and contradictions between them, otherwise the

personality structure is in a state of imbalance, and then lead to the formation of healthy personality.

Throughout Heathcliff's life, the reality-checking ego constantly struggles with the pleasure-seeking id. His ego occasionally operates in a virtual and efficient way, but can't give him a positive effect all the time. His id's blind efforts for the immediate satisfaction bring in conflicts and impulses, which lead to his immoral development of personality traits. By answering the calls of his id again and again, he fails to mediate and to keep a balanced personality structure. His cruel revenge probably results from a weak ego that cannot restrain the insatiable demands of the id and succumb to it in the end. The desire for real happiness is out of human nature completely, and it belongs to the natural areas. Social reality often inhibits the desire of people, so that these repressed desires grows to deformity which is destructive for society. This is also a kind of expression of ego to protect id in the personality. Heathcliff is such a typical. After experiencing the cruelty and ruthlessness of the society, the rational force of his personality is already so weak that it almost cannot be pulled back him the world of revenge. Through the pathological destruction to the entire manor, he wants to meet his unsatisfied id demand.

In dealing with the conflict between the reality and inner world, Heathcliff doesn't control over the development of id, so in order to gain happiness; he carries on a series of ruthless revenges. He is addicted to revenge and get joy and satisfaction from this. He feels happier when he sees his revenge objects are more miserable. Therefore, it can be seen that his weak ego results in his crazy and cruel character.

#### C. Heathcliff's Superego

According to Freud, the superego is a symbolic figure of the father or other authorities in the society. It operates on the ideal principle and works as the conscience which helps maintaining a human being's sense of morality. It stands in the opposite position of the id and functions as a justice system that helps people making judgments between the right and the wrong. In Heathcliff's case, his superego appears in the final period of his life.

For instance, after the death of Edgar, Heathcliff becomes the master of *Wuthering Heights* and *Thrushcross Grange*. And he gets the property of the two manors, but he can't feel any happiness. He realizes the revenge is meaningless day by day, so he no longer brings misfortune to others around him. He even can't help having a strong love for Hareton, because he looks like Catherine Earnshaw. Moreover, when Heathcliff watches the love of Cathy and Hareton, he knows that his revenge is meaningless anymore, so he chooses to stop his ruthless revenge and fulfills their love.

After a series of revenge, everything is back to the original peace state of harmony. Catherine's and Heathcliff's soul is no longer alone in the desert. They are eternal because of death. As a result, death is the best end-result of Heathcliff. Here, his human nature that has ever been twisted finally gets the liberation. In this sense, the death of the body means the spiritual rebirth and the returns of human nature.

Heathcliff finds his spiritual home in death, and achieves the transformation from ego to superego. This final resurrection makes Heathcliff eventually become the embodiment of the superego.

His superego makes his humanity return and help him turn back to people from the demon. It is his last awakening weak superego that makes people not so dislike him. It is also the last return of human nature that lets people feel it's really hard to judge what kind of person he is. If his superego doesn't work at the end, people won't hesitate to say Heathcliff is a cruel avenger, but now people may think he is a complex person who has duel and contradictory characters.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the above, it is easy to get the conclusion that it is the imbalanced development of Heathcliff's id, ego and superego that leads to the formation of his tragic character. This thesis not only provides people with a chance to get a better understanding of Heathcliff and the film "Wuthering heights", but also helps people shape a healthy personality.

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